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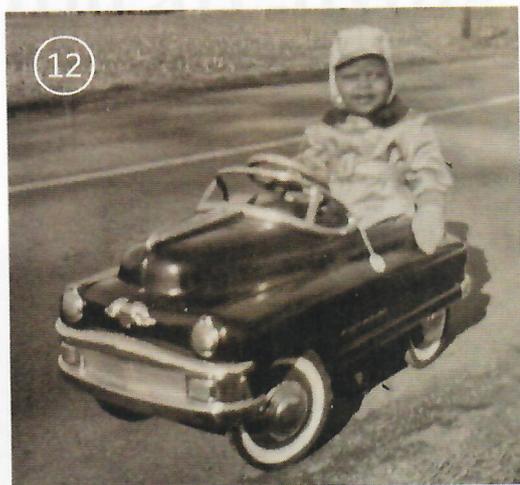


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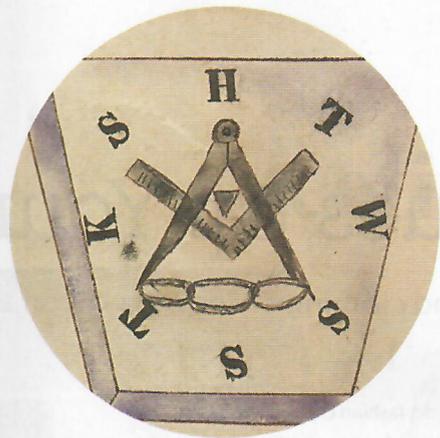
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Fraternal Records



Fraternal records play a fundamental role in genealogical and historical research, offering unique perspectives into both the lives of individuals and the social fabric of historical communities. These records can help trace family connections, illuminate cultural traditions, and provide context for understanding the social networks that shaped people's lives.

Read on for how to tap into these insightful resources.

THE BASICS OF FRATERNAL ORGANIZATIONS

Millions of people from diverse social and economic backgrounds joined organizations during the “Golden Age of Fraternalism” of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These fraternal orders, mutual aid societies, and ethnic and professional societies offered financial support in hard times, networking opportunities, and insurance benefits at the height of the Progressive Era.

Fraternal organizations generally served one of a handful of purposes:

Social: Organizations—including the Freemasons, Elks <www.elks.org> and the Loyal Order of the Moose <www.mooseintl.org>—exemplified and cultivated a sense of brotherhood. These groups encouraged community service and provided leisure activities for members while offering charitable assistance to the public.

Benevolent: Groups such as the Independent Order of Odd Fellows <www.odd-fellows.org> or the Woodmen of the World <www.woodmenlife.org> were dedicated to providing mutual aid and charitable support. These included sick benefits and burial insurance to members and their families.

Ethnic: Groups such as the Sons of Italy <www.osdia.org> or the Ancient Order of Hibernians (Irish Catholics) <www.aoh.com> provided social support, mutual aid, and cultural preservation for immigrants who had a common heritage.

Trade or Business: Professional organizations including the Knights of Labor or the National Grange <www.nationalgrange.org> supported workers and business members of the community. Together, their members promoted economic cooperation, fair labor practices, and mutual aid.

Religious: Some groups were explicitly faith-based, such as the Knights of Columbus <www.kofc.org/en/index.html> (Catholic) or B'nai B'rith <www.bnaibrith.org> (Jewish). These groups integrated religious principles with mutual aid and charitable activities, often fostering spiritual growth, ethical conduct, and community service.

Lineage: Often called hereditary societies, these fraternal organizations typically restricted membership to individuals who can prove descent from a specific progenitor ancestor. Arguably the most-famous is the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) <www.dar.org> for descendants of those who supported Revolutionary War efforts.

Veteran: Not to be confused with lineage organizations, these are composed of former or current service members who promote solidarity and engage in community service. Some are organized around a specific conflict (e.g., the Grand Army of the Republic/GAR for Union veterans of the Civil War) while others are more general (such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars/VFW <www.vfw.org>).

Criminal: While adopting the structures and rituals of some fraternal organizations, these anti-social groups engaged in illicit activities. Membership records for such organizations as the Ku Klux Klan may have been confiscated and turned over to either law-enforcement or archival agencies.

PROMINENT FRATERNAL ORGANIZATIONS

To find fraternal records, you'll first need to determine if your ancestor belonged to a society and (if so) which one.

Over the years, some well-known fraternal organizations have been instrumental in shaping societal progress, providing valuable perspectives on social hierarchies, cultural traditions, and the dynamics of community life. Here are a few that your ancestors may have joined.

Freemasonry

This practice traces its history to 1717 in London, where the first Grand Lodge was founded around a set of shared moral principles. Masonry uses various allegories and symbols to encourage character-building, fraternity, and moral instruction.

When searching historical masonic records, you'll need to understand the *Anno Lucis* (year of light) dating system used in certain ceremonies. This is based on biblical accounts of creation and history, and is offset from the standard Gregorian calendar by about 4,000 years. Find a converter at <www.anno-lucis.com>.

Note that there are various factions and spinoffs of Freemasonry. For example, Free and Accepted Masons (F&M)

were historically distinct from Ancient Free and Accepted Masons (AF&M). And DeMolay International <www.beademolay.org> serves as a youth wing of Masonry, designed for young men ages 12 through 21.

The Order of the Eastern Star

Established in 1850 as a female auxiliary of Freemasons, this practice is now open to both men and women. The five-pointed star used by the order reflects the five biblical heroines from whom its degrees, symbolism, and moral principles are derived.

Other female auxiliaries were formed for junior members ages 12 through 20, including the Order of Job's Daughters (founded in 1920) <www.jobdaughtersinternational.org> and the International Order of the Rainbow for Girls (1922) <www.gorainbow.org>.

The Independent Order of Odd Fellows

Also known as the IOOF, this order was founded by Thomas Wildey in 1819 in Baltimore. Its watchwords are "friendship, love and truth," and the order was meant to be non-partisan and -sectarian. A female auxiliary group, the Daughters of Rebekah <www.odd-fellows.org/about/rebekahs>, was founded in 1851 and named for the biblical figure.

Woodmen of the World

Freemason Joseph Cullen Root believed in fraternal organizations' power to promote human welfare so much that he founded his own—the "Modern Woodmen of the World"—in 1890 in Omaha. The name refers not to the woodworking or carpentry trades, but to a sermon about pioneer woodsmen clearing away trees for their families. Today, the organization supports the principle that life insurance should be available to everyone and operates as the WoodmenLife insurance company.

Fast Facts

Coverage: Varies by organization; most prominent in late 1800s and early 1900s

Jurisdiction where kept: Created by individual lodges or chapters, then sometimes housed by local archives or societies

Key details: Names of members and their spouses; occupation; dates and type of military service; funeral arrangements

Alternates and substitutes: Newspapers and obituaries, tombstones, directories, military records, home sources

National Grange

Minnesota farmer Oliver Hudson Kelley, also a Freemason, was one of a handful who founded "The Order of Patrons of Husbandry" (later known as the Grange) in 1867. He envisioned the organization after reporting on widespread farm destruction in the South after the Civil War. Since then, the Grange has advocated for farmers and their interests.

DETAILS IN FRATERNAL RECORDS

At their core, fraternal records offer researchers an overview of numerous record sets:

- Names of members (and sometimes maiden names of women in auxiliary organizations)
- Dates and/or locations of birth and death
- Occupations
- Religious affiliations
- Military service details
- Beneficiary and insurance information
- Funeral arrangements and memorial services
- Financial contributions and records of dues paid

ACCESSING FRATERNAL RECORDS

Once you've established if and where your ancestor was a member of an organization, determine if that chapter is still active. If so, contact the branch to ask about archival records. For Freemasons, the state's Grand Lodge can help you determine what records are available.

Records from defunct branches (or older records from extant chapters) might be maintained by local libraries and state archives. Check the catalogs of websites such as FamilySearch <www.familysearch.org>, American Ancestors <www.americanancestors.org> and Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com> to learn what each has.

FRATERNAL RECORD SUBSTITUTES

If you can't find original records, use these other resources to learn about your ancestor's membership.

Newspapers: Fraternal orders held regular meetings, initiated new members, and participated in community events—any of which may have been reported in local area newspapers. Society pages might contain event announcements that indicate a person's leadership positions and participation in charitable activities.

Obituaries, in particular, are useful because they frequently mention membership affiliations. Newspapers often reported on funeral rites for deceased members, possibly including ritual ceremonies laid out by the fraternal group.

Tombstones: The tradition of adorning headstones with symbols and markings has endured for centuries. (See the upcoming September/October 2025 issue of *Family Tree* for more on these.) Emblems serve as important

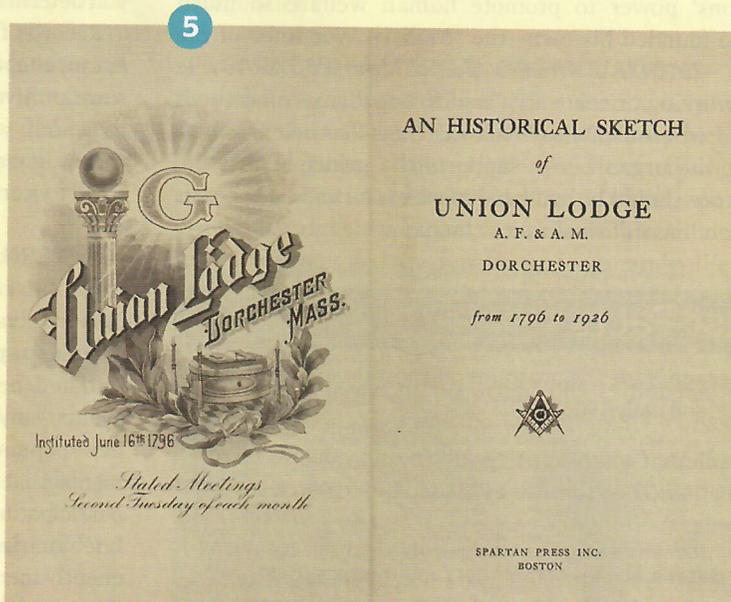
At a Glance: Fraternal Membership Card

Name 1 <i>Savage, Cyrus</i>			
Residence <i>Taunton</i> 1874		Occupation <i>Britannia Worker</i>	Nativity <i>Boston</i> Sept. 2, 1832
Lodge 5 <i>Union</i>	3 Initiated <i>1856-11-11</i>	4 Passed <i>1857-1-15</i>	Raised <i>1857-2-9</i>
Membership <i>Union (Dor.)</i> <i>1857-4-7</i>	Dim. Sus. Dis.	Reinstated	6 Deceased <i>1908-3-25</i>
Remarks: 7 <i>Member 25 yrs +</i>			

Citation: Commonwealth of Massachusetts Freemasons Membership Cards, Cyrus Savage, Initiated 11 November 1856, digital image, "Massachusetts, U.S. Mason Membership Cards, 1733-1990," Ancestry.com (<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/5061>), accessed 28 March 2025.



Cyrus Savage, a Freemason pictured here in uniform in 1862, served in the Civil War as a captain in Company I, 42nd Massachusetts Infantry. Courtesy the Library of Congress.



Savage belonged to Union Lodge in Dorchester, Mass., which was chartered in 1796. Additional research yielded a published history of the lodge, available on the Internet Archive <www.archive.org>.

1 This Freemason membership record lists crucial details about the lodge brother, including his name. Separate fields for Nativity and Residence imply Savage was born in Boston, but moved south to Taunton by 1874. (As we'll see, the lodge he attended is in a neighborhood of Boston.)

2 Occupation doesn't necessarily capture the member's full work history. Savage is listed here as "Britannia Worker"; additional research shows he also served in the Union Army during the Civil War.

3 Savage was initiated into the Masons on this date, when he was conferred the first degree of membership: Entered Apprentice.

4 On these dates, Savage was "passed" then "raised" with the second and third degrees of membership: Fellowcraft, then Master Mason. The boxes below these would contain details of any discharge, suspension or reinstatement, but it seems Savage continued his membership in good standing.

5 The Lodge and Membership boxes indicate which lodge/branch Savage belonged to. "Union (Dor.);" suggests this was a Union Lodge in Dorchester, Mass. <www.unionlodgedorchester.org>. Study the lodge's history; doing so revealed this lodge met at several different locations from its founding in 1796 by Paul Revere. Use contemporary city directories to locate addresses. (Note: Dorchester was annexed by Boston in 1870.)

6 The card includes Savage's death date, helpful for locating additional records such as obituaries.

7 Remarks here confirm Savage was a Freemason for more than 25 years. Other notes in this field could include offices held.

tip

Establish proof of affiliation to a fraternal order or society using obituaries, home sources, icons on tombstones, and more.

indicators of social loyalties, religious identities, and fraternal memberships.

Find reference volumes to interpret icons on tombstones. Common symbols for societies include a tree stump (Woodmen of the World), an elk (Elks) and a beehive (Odd Fellows). An organization's initials may also be carved on tombstones: *FOE* for Fraternal Order of Eagles, *K of C* for Knights of Columbus, *BPOE* for Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, and so on.

Directories: Published fraternal directories, such as *Statistics, Fraternal Societies*, were first accessible in 1895, and *The Encyclopedia of Fraternities* (printed in 1899) is a comprehensive reference work that details hundreds of fraternal organizations. Included are membership rolls, hints to leadership dynamics, and lists of activities.

General city directories, meanwhile, can provide individuals' names, addresses, occupations and business affiliations. Since they were generally published each year, city directories can help you fill in the gaps between census years and track how a neighborhood developed. Look for listings of fraternal organizations, possibly along with meeting location and officer details.

Photographs: Historical photos can illustrate a society's attire, rituals or membership—visual context to help you glean its cultural identity and practices. They can also include insignia you might also see in home sources or on tombstones.

Military Records: Service and pension files frequently include comprehensive personal details, such as birth dates, residential locations, and information about next of kin. Any of that can assist in determining connections to fraternal groups.

Of course, military records (particularly pension files) can also indicate membership in veteran groups. Such connections shed light on an ancestor's social interactions and their engagement within the community during their lifetime.

Home Sources: Pins, badges, ribbons, sashes and photographs found in the home may serve as links to a fraternal organization. These pieces typically display unique symbols, initials, or designs emblematic of specific societies, thus offering concrete evidence of membership. ●



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