

# PLEDGING BROTHERHOOD: AN INTRODUCTION TO FRATERNAL, BENEVOLENT AND SECRET SOCIETIES

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*During the 1800's, one in every seven people in the US was a member of a fraternal society. There is a good chance your ancestor was one of them!*

If the first thing you picture when you think of fraternal societies is a scene from *The Da Vinci Code* or *National Treasure*, you may want to reconsider. Understanding the fraternal part of our ancestors' life could lead to incredible genealogical discoveries.

Historically, these organizations are the keepers of history – they did more than just take meeting minutes. Local chapters often recorded important events in the community and those of their membership. These include marriages, births, and certainly deaths, especially in relation to benefit societies that provided financial support. Many organizations maintained their own cemeteries, or sections within cemeteries.

There is also an endless list of possibility for the researcher – thousands of these organizations pop up through United States history, and thousands more when you consider the global impact. They existed in urban and rural areas, had various objectives and goals, and an individual could certainly be a member of more than one.

The first known organization was in the 14<sup>th</sup> century (perhaps earlier) with the establishment of the “operative” (stone working) masons. “Accepted” Masonry began in about 1600, and really became important to society a century later.

## **What is a fraternal society?**

There are many definitions of these groups, however there is a legal view on the definition of a fraternal society, originally produced as the court's opinion in *National Union v. Marlow*, and it reads as follows:

“A fraternal-benefit society would be one whose members have adopted the same, or a very similar calling, avocation, or profession, or who are working in union to accomplish some worthy object, and who for that reason have banded themselves together as an association or society to aid and assist one another, and to promote the common cause. The term ‘fraternal’ can properly be applied to such an association, for the reason that the pursuit of a common object, calling, or profession usually has a tendency to create a

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**“Nothing in life is to be feared. It is only to be understood.”**

~ Marie Curie

Refer to pages 3-4 for essential vocabulary on this topic.

brotherly feeling among those who are thus engaged.


... Many of these associations make a practice of assisting their sick and disabled members, and of extending substantial aid to the families of deceased members. Their work is at the same time of a beneficial and fraternal character, because they aim to improve the condition of a class of persons who are engaged in a common pursuit, and to unit them by a stronger bond of sympathy and interest.”

National Union v. Marlow 374 F.775, 778 (1896)

Other definitions are much more simple, as seen in [Fraternally Yours](#): “... a fraternal organization is defined as one that holds meetings, elects officers, has a distinctive ritual, and wears a unique badge.”

For purposes of genealogical research, it is generally easiest to break down the various groups into seven main categories:

1. **Social Societies:** A society organized in order to provide social engagement with like-minded people. Eighteenth century drinking clubs would be categorized in this manner, as would the Freemasons, Odd Fellows, Elks, and today’s standard genealogical society.
2. **Benevolent (or service) Society:** Benevolent organizations are established to “do good,” both with their own members and in the general community. Examples include Rotary Club, the Lions and the Templars.
3. **Ethnic Society:** Also referred to as a Cultural society, ethnic organizations were generally formed as people felt the need to band together with their countrymen when they were outside of their origin country. This is one reason why they/are so prevalent in the United States; it is the result of the great waves of immigration. They typically provide three things: the chance to reminisce of the “old country,” the opportunity to preserve the “old country” especially in a new generation, and to act as an insurance or benevolent organization; a formalized and organized way of helping your neighbor.
4. **Trade Society:** Began as associates of craftsman, such as Freemasons; represented less skilled trades (charcoal burners), and merchants and artisans. These organizations eventually evolved into trade unions and trade fraternal benevolent organizations, such as the Fraternal Order of Police.
5. **Mystical (or religious) Society:** Largely found to be inherently incomprehensible for an outsider to truly understand. Members must generally go beyond a basic belief; there must also be a massive and complex edifice of thought. Religious organizations – when deemed as such from the beginning – tend to be more organized than their Mystical counterparts, and are united by an unwavering belief in the chosen religion or sect. Typically heavy in regulations and ritual, they are largely Christian, however pagan groups are active throughout the United States and Europe.
6. **Political Society:** Historically, much more common as individuals fought against a reigning government. In today’s more democratic world, the need for a political society ceases to exist unless their views are so far out of the mainstream that it cannot attract mass support. In both cases, political organizations are typically secret by necessity. Modern technology also means that political societies no longer have the need to exist solely inside the country they are working against.
7. **Criminal Society:** Although the line between “political” and “criminal” can waver, criminal organizations need very little explanation, thanks to the well-known Mafia. There are others, such as the Garduna in Spain, but they essentially all strive for power, follow a recognized hierarchy, and seek influence and control through criminal means.



## Good to Know

**Record Types:** potential paper records that can be identified in the collections or archives of a fraternal organization.

- Applications: may have been limited to the name of the applicant and references, but can also be quite extensive, including information such as date and location of birth, parents and/or siblings, residency and dates of residency (especially when entering a new Lodge after relocating), and so on.
- Meetings: Officers lists, voting results, meeting minutes, volunteer roles, or individuals involved in society projects, such as holiday event planning or cemetery responsibilities.
- Daily Life: generally referring to items such as newspaper clippings that mention members, photographs, published annuals or text, programs from special events and holiday celebrations and so forth.

In every case, the quantity and quality of preserved records will vary greatly with each organization and again within each Lodge of an organization. These records are almost always location dependent. As a result, most are not online, and must be sought out individually.

### Essential Vocabulary:

- Assessment: a means of raising money from a fraternal or mutual aid organization; a sum paid in expectation of a financial return. Similar to an insurance premium. Example: death benefit, sickness benefit, or old-age pension.
- Auxiliaries: A term generally used to refer to a women's branch of an all-male society or organization, as in "Ladies' Auxiliary."
- Confraternities: Analogous institutions aligned with the Catholic Church; they developed in the late medieval period.
- Friendly Societies: A mutual organization for the purposes of insurance, pensions, savings or cooperative banking. Sometimes referred to as a mutual society, benevolent society, or benefit society. The Independent Order of Odd Fellows (I.O.O.F.) and the female counterpart, the Independent Order of Rechabites (I.O.O.R.) are examples.
- Grand Lodge: In most fraternal structures, the Grand Lodge is the primary lodge of a specific area, whether it is a large metropolis, state, territory, or country.
- Guilds: An association of artisans who control the practice of their craft in a particular town. Sometimes referred to as the precursor of modern day trade unions; in reality they were more comparable to small business owners. Still an active system in London, England, for example.
- Luncheon Club: Flourishing in the United States, these organizations generally meet weekly or monthly for business purposes, networking and community service. Lions International is one example.
- Lodge: The basic unit of fraternal orders and secret societies; functioning as a meeting room, library, recreational facility, and commonly a bar or tavern. Historically, they offered members a place to stay while traveling or looking for work. Alternatives to the word "Lodge," include camp, aerie, nest, shrine, temple, wigwam, and grange, among others, varying with the society in question. The term can also be used simultaneously to describe the group of members, as in, "I am meeting with my Lodge tonight."

- Regalia: Historically, “regalia” referred to the adornments and ornaments of royalty. In more modern times, the term loosely defines any kind of ornament, and the apron, collar and jewel, and fez of multiple organizations are categorized in this manner.
- Rites and Rituals: The methods in which the government of the organization is maintained and historic procedures are followed. The origins of these practices are often obscure, and the acts are commonly used as instruction on the basic operation of the lodge itself. Within most societies, these are an important oral tradition, and are not easily or frequently found in written form within the organization.
- Side Degrees: Usually a society or other “fun” club within a society; membership is optional and they are typically not organized in the traditional hierarchical method. May also be used for a special interest group within the larger organization, such as those interested in history.
- Splinter Society: A society formed due to an internal dispute or conflict. One example would be the Woodmen of the World Life Insurance Society, which was founded after a dispute caused the ejection of two leaders within the original Modern Woodmen of America. Unlike a side degree, a splinter society is a completely new organization, but often with a very similar (or nearly exact) organizational structure.
- Symbolism / Symbols: Symbolism is an essential element to nearly every fraternal society, and can be commonly found on buildings, literature, and grave markers. The latter is often one of the first clues to a genealogist that their ancestor was involved in a fraternal society.
- Temperance Societies: Organizations formed to advocate the practice of abstinence from alcohol. By 1828, there were 11 major temperance societies in the United States, with membership of more than 100,000 in total, and many smaller, local organizations.

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