

John Theophilus Desaguliers (1683–1744)



John Theophilus Desaguliers (pronounced De-zah-gyou-le- a) is far less well known to American Freemasons than his services to and influence upon the Craft deserve. For in spite of the many tales which now seem apocryphal - his supposed labors in writing "The Master's Part" - his alleged endeavors to introduce English Freemasonry into Scotland, via the Lodge at Mary's Chapel - his alleged poverty and death in "a cell" - and all the other fairy tales now discredited - this eminent scientist, educator, minister, writer, lecturer, experimenter, civil engineer, doctor of laws, physicist, Fellow of the Royal Society, and friend of Sir Isaac Newton, did exert a most profound influence upon the Freemasonry of London, and thus of all localities, during the years immediately following the formation of the Mother Grand Lodge in 1717.

Of him our own Albert Gallatin Mackey wrote:

"To few Freemasons of the present day, except to those who have made Freemasonry a subject of especial study, is the name of Desaguliers very familiar. But it is well that they should know that to him, perhaps, more than to any other man, are we indebted for the present existence of Freemasonry as a living Institution, for it was his learning and social position that gave a standing to the Institution, which brought to its support noblemen and men of influence so that the insignificant assemblage of four London Lodges at the Apple-Tree Tavern has expanded into an association which now shelters the entire civilized world. And the moving spirit of all this was John Theophilus Desaguliers."

American Freemasons need no demonstration of the value and importance of the influence of great men who have been Freemasons, in the spread of the Fraternity and the opinion of it held by the general public. We are most rightfully proud of Paul Revere, of Benjamin Franklin of George Washington, of hundreds of other good and great men, including twelve presidents of the Republic, who in turn have been proud to be of the Ancient Fraternity. England is equally proud of a long list of distinguished noblemen, as well as of a King of the Empire, who have held high positions in the Craft, supported it, worked for it, made it useful in the arts of peace, education and benevolence.

Desaguliers appears to have one of the most important, if not the first, man of great scholastic attainments who found in Speculative Freemasonry something which so appealed to him that he gave of valuable time and effort without stint to advance the (then) new Speculative Art.

He appears to have held a position in his world of science at least comparable with those occupied by M. W. Bro. Melvin Johnson, (Massachusetts) in Masonic historical research; Brother Dean Roscoe Pound, famed teacher of Harvard, in law; R. W. Bro. and Dr. Joseph Fort Newton, in the Church. That Johnson (Beginnings of Freemasonry in America) Pound (Masonic Jurisprudence, Philosophy of Masonry) and Newton (The Builders, The Men's House, Short Talks on Masonry, Religion of Masonry) have done yeoman service in winning to Freemasonry thoughtful, high-minded, educated and intelligent men, is a statement none will question. That the American reverence for Revere, Franklin, Washington, has done much to solidify the real importance and dignity of the Fraternity in the public mind, goes without saying. And John Theophilus Desaguliers, in his day and age, had as profound an effect upon the just-formed Grand Lodge.

It is not difficult, even through the mists of more than two hundred years, to see why Freemasonry made so powerful appeal to an intellect already concerned with matters of great importance and abstruse character. It is only necessary to recall the repeal of the Edict of Mantes, the expulsion of Protestants from France, the wicked provision that expelled parents could not take their children with them, but must leave them to be raised as French Catholics, to know that the young John - too young then to understand - smuggled out of France with what difficulty and danger no one knows (some say he was concealed in a barrel!) must have spent all his childhood and young manhood hearing of the flight from France and have grown up to hate intolerance and religious bigotry. His thoughtful mind could not help but grow to man's estate with a reverence for toleration and for the right of every man to worship his Maker as he would.

Naturally, he found in the "new" Freemasonry of the first Grand Lodge an outlet for emotions as great as in science he found outlet for energy.

To visualize just what Desaguliers did for Freemasonry it is necessary to have in mind at least an outline of the picture of his times, and a brief sketch of his attainments.

Desagulier's father was a French Protestant clergyman. Fleeing to England in 1685, when John Theophilus was but two years old, the father took orders in the Established Church, and later opened a school in Islington, in which young John later became an assistant. John gained a Baccalaureate in Arts at Christ Church College, Oxford, and entered Deacon's Orders, in 1710. Later he became Master of Arts and still later Bachelor and Doctor of Civil Law. He was not, as so often stated, "LL.D" but "D.C.L.", as Oxford letters its Civil Law degree.

In spite of these academic and churchly distinctions, the man's mind and bent were wholly scientific; he was a lecturer on Natural Philosophy in Oxford as early as 1710. In 1713 he removed to London, where he was consulted by Parliament on the construction of Westminster Bridge, designed and installed a ventilator in the House of Commons, and began the then novel practice of giving scientific lectures, illustrated by experiments, as a means of making a living. In 1714 he became a Fellow of the Royal Society - the blue ribbon of scientific attainment. Later he became its Curator, and still later, received its Copley Medal.

For fourteen years the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society contain articles by Desaguliers, and, his books, articles and papers, were so numerous that a catalog here would be impossible for lack of space. He experimented with and wrote of electricity, philosophy, fortifications, motion of water and other fluids, mechanics, mathematics, automats, telescopes, optics, ventilation !

It must be remembered that London in the first quarter of the eighteenth century was the center of an educational revival - it was this atmosphere which helped the newly organized Grand Lodge of Speculative Freemasonry to grow and thrive. And here, in a location and time which was ripe for Sir Isaac Newton, his friend and co-worker, Desaguliers embraced Freemasonry, and brought to it the reputation and the veneration which the public gave to a man who had done much to popularize science and to whose efforts in so many lines the noblemen and the gentry of the age gave credit and applause.

There are several accounts of where and when Desaguliers was made a Mason - and no real evidence to support any of them. That it was in London seems highly probable; that it was in one of the "four old Lodges" seems logical. Oliver states that Desaguliers was made a Mason in the old Lodge which met at the Goose and Gridiron Tavern. Gould says "It is highly probable that Desaguliers became a member of the Lodge at the Rammer and Grapes, in Channel Row, Westminster, because its meetings were held in the vicinity of his dwelling." However there is no real evidence to prove or disprove either. Anderson says Desaguliers was elected Grand Master in 1719. As Grand Lodge minutes date only from 1723, there is no documentary evidence contemporary with the event to prove it, but it is not disputed, even though there is no evidence whatever that Desaguliers had then been Master of a Lodge.

But from 1723 the record is clear, and sets Desaguliers forth as an intensely interested, ardent Freemason. He was active in the Grand Charity fund; he acted as Master of Solomons Temple Lodge (this was in 1725) a French Lodge to which, naturally he would give interest and support. He was three times Deputy Grand Master after being Grand Master. He acted as Master of a Lodge in Holland, and there brought into the Craft, entered and passed, the Duke of Lorraine, later to become Emperor of Austria.

The Minutes of Grand Lodge contain more than thirty entries of Desagulier's activities, the last being mention of his presence in 1743 - he died the following year. Mackey states:

"Desaguliers was considered, from his position in Freemasonry, as the most fitting person to confer the Degrees on the Prince of Wales, who was accordingly entered, pass and raised in an Occasional Lodge, held on two occasions at Kew, over which Dr. Desaguliers presided as Master."

An interesting sidelight upon Desaguliers shines from the account of his sons. His first and second sons, the first dying in infancy were both named, for their father - evidently Desaguliers Senior wanted much that form of immortality which comes from keeping the name alive. John Theophilus, Jr., number two followed in his father's footsteps and became a minister and Vicar of Cratfield and Laxfield in Suffolk. Son number three, Jean Isaac, was ushered into life under most favorable auspices, having as godfathers John, Marquis of Caernarvon (son of the Duke of Chandos) and no less a dignitary than Sir Isaac Newton. Son number four lacked the great scientist to stand sponsor for him, but was probably well satisfied later in life to reflect that Thomas Parker, Earl of Macclesfield and Lord High Chancellor of England, and Archibald Campbell, Earl of Islay, joined with Theodora, Countess of Clifton (daughter of Lord Clarendon) in being his godparents.

It is thus evident that Dr. Desaguliers talents, industry, attainments and character were such as to bring him into the best of society, and friends among the great of the England of his time.

Personally, Dr. Desaguliers seems to have been as gentle as he was learned. Of his Masonic and personal character, Dr. Oliver gives, from tradition, the following description:

"There were many traits in his character that redound to his immortal praise. He used a grave lean in his private life, almost approaching to austerity; but he could relax in the private recesses of a Tyled Lodge, and in company with brothers and fellows, where the ties of social intercourse are not particularly stringent. He considered the proceedings of the Lodge as strictly confidential; and being persuaded that his brothers by initiation actually occupied the same position as brothers by blood, he was undisguisedly free and familiar in the mutual interchange of unrestrained courtesy. In the Lodge he was jocose and free-hearted, sang his song, and had no objection to his share of the bottle, although one of the most learned and distinguished men of his day."

In 1900, David Murray Lyon published the History of the Lodge of Edinburgh (Mary's Chapel) No. 1. In it are a number of curious statements, which add up to the effect that Dr. Desaguliers, in Edinburgh on business connected with his civil engineering in relation to the water supply, sought a conference with the Masters and Wardens of Mary's Chapel; that he was received as a brother in the Lodge; that he had been a prime mover in the establishment of the Mother Grand Lodge in London; that he had engaged with other learned brethren in the fabrication of The Master's Part, of the preparation of the Constitution, and the catechetical arrangement of the lectures that in Mary's Chapel he conducted the ceremonies of entering the passing "according to the ritual he was anxious to introduce."

The Mary's Chapel Lodge story is now generally considered to be invention. Undoubted is the fact that Desaguliers visited Mary's Chapel in Edinburgh, but the statements made that he had written a new "Master's Part" that he "introduced it in Scotland" and that he "conferred the degree" in Mary's Chapel seem without any real basis. Of course some one, at some time, probably around 1725, elaborated the old rituals and what we know as the third degree came into existence as a ceremony by itself. It may have been that Dr. Desaguliers had a part in it. But so may have had Anderson and Payne and half a dozen others. Masonry has suffered enough from apochryphal tales - sometimes at the hands of her friends, (Oliver and Anderson, for instance) without attempting to saddle on one of great sons activities for which there is no proof. Dr. Desaguliers did enough for Freemasonry without writing the third degree (Master's part) or attempting to introduce it into Scotland.

This fact is undoubted; up to the time of Dr. Desaguliers entry into, and interest in, Freemasonry, the majority of the members of the Craft were men of comparatively obscure origin and little importance; of no great influence, although doubtless good men and true. But due to the influence of Dr. Desaguliers, into the Lodges came a large influx of men of standing in society, art, literature, science. Men of the peerage joined the Craft, even Dukes became Grand Masters. A large number of Fellows of the Royal Society sought Freemasonry and lent to it the prestige of their names and lives.

For Desaguliers' service as Grand Master, three times as Deputy Grand Master, his interest in and advocacy of charity and benevolence, the Craft should be grateful. But the character of men he led into the Craft, at a time when support in high places was needed as, never since, that the young and struggling Institution be placed upon a high plane and a firm foundation in reputation, makes Freemasonry debtor to John Theophilus Desaguliers in an amount no honor they can give his memory can ever wholly pay.