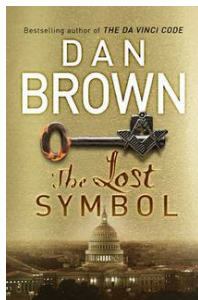


Home What is Freemasonry Freemasonry in NZ Charity Deposit Scheme Articles/Publications Contact Us/More

Articles/Publications News Articles "The Lost Symbol" and the Freemasons: 8 Myths Decoded

## "The Lost Symbol" and the Freemasons: 8 Myths Decoded



Brian Handwerk  
for National Geographic News  
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Novelist [Dan Brown](#)'s new book, [The Lost Symbol](#), is doing for the Freemasons what its predecessor, *The Da Vinci Code*, did for the Catholic Church's *Opus Dei*—showing new fame, and new fictions, on a brotherhood that's already catnip for conspiracy theorists.

Since long before *The Lost Symbol*, Freemasons have been accused of everything from conspiring with extraterrestrials to practicing sexual deviancy to engaging in occult rituals to running the world—or trying to end it. Detractors include global conspiracy theorists and religious organizations, including the Catholic Church.

Released today, *The Lost Symbol* isn't likely to squelch any rumors, beginning as it does with a wine-filled skull, bejeweled power brokers, and a dark Masonic temple steps away from the White House.

But what if Freemasons—the world's largest international secret society—are just a bunch of guys into socializing, non-satanic rituals, self-improvement, and community service?

To separate Freemason fact from *Lost Symbol*-style myth, National Geographic News went inside the centuries-old order with two Masons and a historian of the ancient Christian order from which some claim the Masons sprang in the 17th or 18th century.

### FREEMASON MYTH 1 Masonic Symbols Are Everywhere

It's true that Masonic symbols are anything but lost, said Freemason and historian Jay Kinney, author of the newly released *Masonic Myth*.

(See "[LOST SYMBOL PICTURES: Masonic Symbols Decoded](#).")

Freemasonry is rich in symbols, and many are ubiquitous—think of the pentagram, or five-pointed star, or the "all-seeing eye" in the Great Seal of the United States.

But most Masonic symbols aren't unique to Freemasonry, Kinney said.

"I view the Masonic use of symbols as a grab bag taken from here, there, and everywhere," he said. "Masonry employs them in its own fashion."

The pentagram, for example, is much older than Freemasonry and acquired its occult overtones only in the 19th and 20th centuries, hundreds of years after the Masons had adopted the symbol.

Likewise, the all-seeing eye saw its way to the Great Seal—and the U.S. dollar bill—by way of artist Pierre Du Simitiere, a non-Mason.

The eye represents divine guidance of the U.S. ship of state, or as Secretary of the U.S. Congress Charles Thompson put it in 1782, it alludes "to the many signal interpositions of providence in favour of the American cause."

There was one known Mason on the committee to design the seal, Benjamin Franklin. His proposed design was eyeless, and rejected.

### FREEMASON MYTH 2 Masons Descend From the Knights Templar

Much has been made of the Freemasons' purported lineage to the Knights Templar. The powerful military and religious order was established to protect medieval pilgrims to the Holy Land and dissolved by Pope Clement V, under pressure of King Phillip IV of France, in 1312.

After modern Masonry appeared in the 17th- or 18th-century Britain, some Freemasons claimed to have acquired the secrets of the Templars and adopted Templar symbols and terminology—naming certain levels of Masonic hierarchy after Templar "degrees," for example.

"But those [Knights Templar] degrees and Masonic orders had no historic connection with the original Knights Templar," Kinney explained.

"These are myths or symbolic figures that were used by the Masons. But because the association had been made with these degrees, and the degrees had perpetuated themselves, after a time it began to look like there had been a connection."

Helen Nicholson, author of *The Knights Templar: A New History*, agrees that there is no possibility that Freemasons are somehow descended from the Knights Templar.

By the time of the first Masons, the Cardiff University historian said, "there were no more Templars."

### FREEMASON MYTH 3 Masons Are Hiding Templar Treasure

One of the Templar-Mason theory's many veins suggests that some Templars survived the order's 14th-century destruction by taking refuge in Scotland, where they hid a fabulous treasure beneath Rosslyn Chapel (as seen in *The Da Vinci Code*).

The treasure, and the Templar tradition, were eventually passed down to the founders of Freemasonry, the story goes.

In fact, there was Templar treasure, Nicholson said, but it ended up in other hands long ago.

"The most likely reason [the Templars were dissolved] is that the king wanted their money. The King of France was bankrupt, and the Templars had lots

of ready cash."

#### FREEMASON MYTH 4

##### Washington, D.C.'s Streets Form Giant Masonic Symbols

It's long been suggested that powerful Freemasons embedded Masonic symbols in the Washington, D.C., street plan designed mainly by Frenchman Pierre L'Enfant in 1791.

The Lost Symbol is expected to prominently feature "Masonic mapping," detecting pentagrams and other symbols by connecting the dots among landmarks. Pre-release clues released by author Dan Brown, for example, include GPS coordinates for Washington landmarks.

"Individually, Masons had a role in building the White House, in building and designing Washington, D.C.," said Mark Tabbert, director of collections at the George Washington Masonic Memorial in Alexandria, Virginia. "And [small scale] Masonic symbols can be found throughout the city, as they can in most U.S. cities."

But there's no Masonic message in the city's street plan, Tabbert said. For starters, Pierre L'Enfant wasn't a Mason.

And, Tabbert asked, why would Masons go to the trouble of laying out a street grid to match their symbols?

"There has to be a [reason] for doing such a thing," said Tabbert, himself a Mason. "Dan Brown will find one, because he writes fiction. But there isn't one."

#### FREEMASON MYTH 5

##### Freemasons Rule the World

Maybe it's the impressive list of prominent Freemasons—from Napoleon to F.D.R. to King Kamehameha (IV and V!)—that's led some to suggest the group is a small cabal running the globe. But Kinney, the Masonic historian, paints a picture of a largely decentralized group that might have trouble running anything with much efficiency.

"I think the ideals that Masonry embodies, which have to do with universal brotherhood, are shared by Masons around the world [regardless of] religious, political, or national differences," he said.

"But having shared ideals is one thing—having some sort of shared hierarchy is something else altogether."

Kinney noted that the U.S. alone has 51 grand lodges, one for each state and the District of Columbia. Each of these largely independent organizations oversees its many local blue (or beginner) lodges and has little real coordination with other grand lodges.

Internationally, Masonic lodges not only don't speak with a single voice but sometimes refuse to even recognize each other's existence.

Also, many Masons are independent minded and tend to resist edicts from above, Kinney said. "There is no way that they could be run by a single hierarchy. There is no such entity."

#### FREEMASON MYTH 6

##### Freemasonry Is a Religion—Or a Cult

But Masons stress that their organization is not a religion, that is it has no unique theology and does not represent a path for believers to salvation or other divine rewards.

Even so, to be accepted into Freemasonry, initiates must believe in a god—any god. Christians may be in the majority, but Jews, Muslims, and others are well represented in Masonic circles. At lodge meetings religious discussion is traditionally taboo, Kinney and Tabbert said.

But some religious leaders believe that Masonic rituals and beliefs—with its temples, altars, and oaths—do constitute an opposing faith. And the Masonic refusal to rank one religion above the others hasn't always been popular.

A 1983 Catholic declaration approved by Pope John Paul II, for example, said that "Catholics enrolled in Masonic associations are involved in serious sin and may not approach Holy Communion."

#### FREEMASON MYTH 7

##### Freemasons Started the American Revolution

Prominent Freemasons like Ben Franklin and George Washington played essential roles in the American Revolution. And among the ranks of Freemasons are 9 signers of the Declaration of Independence and 13 signers of the Constitution.

But Freemasonry—born in Britain, after all—had adherents on both sides of the conflict. Tabbert, of the George Washington Masonic Memorial, said Masonic groups allowed men on both sides of the revolution to come together as brothers—not to promote a political view, which would be against Masonic tradition.

"For many years [Masons] claimed in their own quasi-scholarship that all of these revolutionaries and Founding Fathers were Freemasons," Tabbert said. "A fair number of them were, but they weren't doing these things because they were Freemasons."

#### FREEMASON MYTH 8

##### Membership Requires Shadowy Connections

Contrary to The Lost Symbol, you don't have to drink wine from a skull to become a ranking Freemason. In fact, tradition dictates that Masons don't recruit members but simply accept those who approach them of their own free will.

When Freemasonry hit its peak in the U.S. during the late 1950s, Kinney, the Masonic historian, said, almost one of every ten eligible adult males was a member—a total of some four million and hardly a tiny elite.

Today membership numbers, like those of other fraternal organizations, have declined dramatically, and only about 1.5 million U.S. men are Masons.

But with The Lost Symbol already igniting interest in Freemasonry, Masonic centers are bracing for tourists—and maybe a few new recruits.

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Note: This has been re-posted from the National Geographic website.

<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2009/09/090915-lost-symbol-dan-brown-freemasons-book.html>



[Back to Top](#)