

“The Consistory”
presented to
Alexandria Scottish Rite Valley
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In recent years, you and I have been the beneficiaries of efforts by our Supreme Council and by our own Valley to give us several new educational resources. Both the Supreme Council’s and our own Strategic Plans emphasize the creation or implementation of new training publications and courses and the use of new technologies. For example, the Supreme Council hosts the “Freemason Network” web-based and social networking community to share useful and interesting information about our Craft among all Masons. The Supreme Council has also introduced the popular Master Craftsman correspondence courses and its excellent Scottish Rite Ritual, Monitor and Guide. Here in Alexandria Valley, we have implemented our Master Craftsman part I and II study and discussion groups to support our members’ participation in and successful completion of the programs.

We’ve gone even further in our Valley. Over the last three years, we have conducted training for the top two Officers of each of our Bodies, focusing on their specific roles and responsibilities. We’ll now extend this training to the other elected and appointed officers, and we have tailored a version of that material that will be made available to all our members. We’ll even soon be presenting an abbreviated introductory version to our Candidates during the Reunions. In a related activity, we have posted our Valley Procedures Manual on the alexandriascottishrite.org website. The Manual presents historical information about the Scottish Rite, information on our Rite’s founding documents and governing regulations, frequently asked questions and answers, and, of particular interest, our own Valley’s rules, procedures, activities, and opportunities to participate. Anyone who wants to know more about how Alexandria Valley works should start by reviewing the Procedures Manual.

When preparing for the update to, or periodic presentation of these materials, I usually review the historical beginnings and evolution of our Scottish Rite. When doing so, I

often discover some interesting fact that I previously either overlooked or simply did not understand well enough to recognize its full importance. This has happened so frequently, I now just assume that every time I re-read our Constitutions and our Statutes, or read another of the many books and papers that have been written on the development and contributions of the Scottish Rite, I will learn another new bit of information.

Sometimes, I find that when I read about a subject, I'll tend to focus on the details and ignore the larger, and more straightforward facts. I'm usually reminded of this when someone asks about the meaning of some word or the name of one of our organization's several parts, and I find myself at a loss, having simply accepted the word or name and not wondered about its origin.

I was recently asked by one of our newer members about the origin of the name of our senior Body: the Consistory. I had no good answer, but in today's internet based world, no question need go unanswered. "Google" quickly led me to many online sources which reported that the word "Consistory" was used beginning around the year 1300, to mean "secular tribunal", from the French *consistoire* and the Latin *consistorium* that meant "waiting room, meeting place of the imperial council". I learned that in the Roman Catholic Church, "the consistory is a formal meeting of the Sacred College of Cardinals ... held in Vatican City for taking care of the business of the college," and that the name consistory was used in the 16th and 17th centuries by Protestant churches as the name of the administrative office, but as religious and state functions became officially separated, many churches dropped the name "consistory".

As interesting as this information from the internet might be, it really doesn't speak fully to our own needs. For more relevant background, and as we are admonished in the 32nd Degree, we must "...read and study the books that have been written for instruction in the Rite". The *Constitutions and Regulations of 1762*¹ appends "Institutes, Statutes and Regulations" and states the following at the opening of the Institutes:

¹ Albert Pike, *A.A.S.R. of Freemasonry. The Constitutions and Regulations of 1762, Statutes and Regulations of Perfection, and Other Degrees. Vera Instituta Secreta et*

Article I. The Grand Inspectors General of the Order and Presidents of the Sublime Councils of Princes of High Masonry, are by imprescriptible title the Chiefs of High Masonry.

Article 2. The Tribunal that directs the administration of High Masonry, and constitutes the different dependent degrees thereof, is styled the GRAND CONSISTORY.

The remaining Articles 3 - 10, detail the membership qualifications, officers, representation, and quorum required for the conduct of business in a meeting of the Grand Consistory. This governing body was the original form of what was restyled the nine-member Supreme Council by the *Grand Constitutions of 1786*².

In his book *Lodge of the Double-Headed Eagle*, William Fox states that in 1850, the Supreme Council was establishing subordinate bodies outside South Carolina, and notes that a Grand Consistory was established at New Orleans “to regularize the Rite in Louisiana”. Subsequently, in 1852 Grand Secretary Albert G. Mackey issued a warrant for a Consistory at Louisville, KY. Following the reorganization of the Supreme Council from 9 to 33 members (per the *Statutes of 1859*), “the Grand Consistories were replaced as the administrative body in each state by a Sovereign Grand Inspector General or a Deputy, except for Kentucky and Louisiana, which were allowed to keep the Grand Consistory in name and body but which gave up their authority as Deputies of the Supreme Council.”³

The Statutes of 1859, Article XXXIV, stated that “Only one Consistory shall be established in each State within this jurisdiction; and the title of each shall be: “The M.:

Fundamenta Ordinis of 1786. The Secret Constitutions of the 33rd Degree (New York: Masonic Publishing Co., A.M. 5632 [1872]; New Edition Printed by L.J. Little, &c., 5664 [1904]; reprint ed. Np., n.d.)

² Ibid, pg. 217.

³ William L. Fox, *Lodge of the Double-Headed Eagle: Two Centuries of Scottish Rite Freemasonry in America’s Southern Jurisdiction* (Fayetteville, Ark.: University of Arkansas Press, 1997), p. 52.

Puissant Sovereign Grand Consistory of Sublime Princes of the Royal Secret, 32d Degree, of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite, in and for the State of A.....”

Fox quotes from a March 23, 1944 letter from Grand Commander John Henry Cowles to Elbert H. Bede, (Cowles Correspondence, TSC, 4-1000.65). “The original form of organization of the Scottish Rite was to have one Grand Consistory in each state or Orient or sub-jurisdiction, whatever you want to call it. Then these Grand Consistories would issue the charters for the Lodges of Perfection 4°-14°; for the Councils of Princes of Jerusalem, 15°-16°; for the Chapters of Rose Croix, 17°-18°; for the Councils of Kadosh, 19°-30°, but the Grand Consistories retained the 31° and the 32°. The subordinated bodies would be scattered over the state but the members would have to come to the Grand Consistories to get the 31° and 32°. Originally, the Grand Consistory membership was limited to 81 Active Members [not the Active Members of the Supreme Council], and if anyone of them, who only had the right to vote, was absent ... two or three meetings of the Grand Consistory, then he was dropped from the Active Membership and a 32nd Degree Mason elected to take his place.”⁴

On March 17, 1897, the Grand Consistory of California requested that it be permitted to give up its Charter as Grand Consistory and to be re-chartered as San Francisco Consistory No. 1. The request was approved by the Supreme Council at the October 1897 Biennial Session. Fox speculates that “Perhaps the elimination of the Grand Consistory in California reflected a growing belief that a Sovereign Grand Inspector General ought to be “an active, working administrator in his Orient and not confined to actions in the Sessions of the Supreme Council.”⁵

Today, the Consistory of Masters of the Royal Secret is the senior Body in each Scottish Rite Valley, and is still comprised of the 31st and 32nd Degrees. In keeping with its heritage of senior leadership and administrative management responsibilities, the Consistory’s Master of Kadosh receives no specific charges of prescribed duties at his

⁴ Ibid, pp. 64-65.

⁵ Ibid, pp. 133-134.

installation, rather he is reminded that “[w]herever there are dignity and honor in office, there are also labor, perplexities, and grave responsibilities”. The Installing Officer notes that “In Masonry, as in every other order or in the state, peace and harmony, the progress and prosperity of the whole, will, in the greatest measure, depend upon the capacity and fidelity of those who govern.”⁶⁶

So; that is our Consistory. For the good Brother who posed that question, thank you for asking.

⁶⁶ John W. Boettjer, 33°, G. C. & Arturo de Hoyos, 33°, G. C., ed., *Forms and Traditions of the Scottish Rite* (Washington, D.C.: The Supreme Council, 33°, for the Scottish Rite Research Society, 2000), p.110.