ATLANTIC BROTHERHOODS: 
FRATERNALISM IN TRANSCONTINENTAL PERSPECTIVE, 
1770-1930

Workshop at the GHI Washington, December 4-5, 2015. Conveners: Jessica Harland-Jacobs (University of Florida) and Jan C. Jansen (GHI Washington). Participants: Joachim Berger (Institut für Europäische Geschichte, Mainz), John Garrigus (University of Texas, Arlington), Peter P. Hinks (New Haven), Bonnie Huskins (St. Thomas University, Fredericton), Elizabeth Mancke (University of New Brunswick, Fredericton), S. Brent Morris (Supreme Council, 33°, Scottish Rite of Freemasonry, SJ), Andreas Önnerfors (University of Gothenburg), Cecile Révauger (Université de Bordeaux III — Montaigne), Hans Schwartz (Clark University), María Eugenia Vázquez-Semadeni (UC Los Angeles).

The workshop explored the intersecting histories of the Atlantic world and fraternalism. Its main purpose was to examine the role that large-scale fraternal networks and other forms of cross-border sociability played in connecting — and disconnecting — the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Atlantic. What was the place of fraternalism within or across different Atlantic empires? How did it relate to Atlantic migration and mobility, both in its voluntary and involuntary (e.g. slavery) forms? How did it intersect with other Atlantic networks, such as networks of merchants, slave traders, and diasporas? What role did it play for the African American diaspora and their transatlantic connections?

The first panel (“Spaces”) examined several geographic scales of fraternal expansion and interaction. In her paper “The Masonic Triangle in the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean, 1810-1820,” María Eugenia Vázquez-Semadeni looked at how masonic affiliations intersected with professional and commercial networks across the Gulf of Mexico in the early nineteenth century, a period of profound political and economic transformation in this region. Based on a prosopographic study of lodges in Louisiana, New Mexico, and Cuba, Vázquez-Semadeni emphasized the high proportion of groups engaged in trade and movements between these places: ship owners, sailors, merchants, and military men, including a high proportion of migrants, such as French refugees from Saint-Domingue (later Haiti). In this specific context lodge membership fulfilled a great variety of functions, ranging from a source of trust between
strangers and a means to reduce the uncertainties of maritime connections to an infrastructure for cross-border contacts and social aspirations. Joachim Berger’s paper “The Great Divide: Transatlantic (br)othering and masonic internationalism, c. 1870–1930” analyzed the broader transatlantic dimensions of international relations between (territorially, in general nationally defined) masonic bodies. Various conflicts and struggles over masonic and “profane” topics — such as rituals, organization, jurisdictions, religion, and race — complicated these transatlantic interactions. Taking the example of lodges in New York City, however, Berger also demonstrated how masonic internationalists sought to circumvent certain sensitive issues (such as the non-religious orientation of French lodges) in order to close the ranks within transatlantic freemasonry, particularly during the First World War. In his comment, S. Brent Morris pointed to several new research questions that arise out of Vázquez-Semadeni’s analysis, such as the question whether freemasonry affected clandestine trade. With regard to Berger’s paper, he emphasized the importance of conflicts around territorial jurisdictions and the US obsession with ritualistic uniformity.

The second panel (“Race”) focused on how fraternalism intersected with race relations, slavery, and anti-slavery movements. Cécile Révauger’s paper “Freemasonry, slavery, and abolition: A transcontinental perspective” provided an overview of the complex interrelations between the slave trade, abolitionism, and freemasonry in the Atlantic context. While slavery was not a major concern for the founders of English freemasonry, it became a central and contentious issue with the expansion into the colonial Atlantic world and the considerable role the brotherhood started to play in slave-holder societies in the West Indies and the United States. Even if it claimed to be open to all men, race was in practice a fundamental criterion for the admission into masonic lodges into colonial lodges. Looking at individual members and lodge practices in the United States and the British and French Caribbean, Révauger stressed the varying and changing positions towards racial exclusion and slavery. In his paper “The African Lodge, the Columbian, and the Republic of Masonry: Print Culture in the Creation of the African Masonic Diaspora,” Hans Schwartz revisited the first decades of the first African American lodge under the leadership of Prince Hall in late eighteenth-century Boston. Based on a close reading of articles in one Boston newspaper, Schwartz showed how African American freemasons made use of print culture to establish transatlantic connections and to propagate
a new African-centered reading of masonic traditions. Commenting on the panel, Peter P. Hinks pointed out that there was no intrinsic relationship between an individual’s stance towards slavery and the masonic affiliation. Instead, he posed the question whether a close relationship between anti-slavery and freemasonry emerged with the founding of Boston’s African Lodge.

The third panel (“Revolutions”) further delved into the interactions between fraternalism and the sphere of politics during the Age of Revolutions. In his paper “A Secret Brotherhood? The Question of Black Freemasonry before and after the Haitian Revolution,” John Garrigus provided a systematic discussion of the idea that masonic lodges constituted an important factor in the revolutionary events in France’s most important Caribbean colony, Saint-Domingue (later Haiti), at the turn of the eighteenth century. While prerevolutionary Saint-Domingue constituted one of the most “masonized” societies of its time, there is only scarce evidence for the alleged masonic affiliation of Haitian leader Toussaint Louverture. Symbolic markers of signatures, often labelled as “masonic” and considered a proof for Louverture’s masonic identity, Garrigus argued, were rather an ambiguous symbolic assertion of social and cultural respectability used by an aspiring class of free men of color. Bonnie Huskins turned to the role masonic connections played among those who had opposed the American Revolution. Her paper “Liberty and Authority: Loyalist Freemasons in Shelburne, Nova Scotia and Saint John, New Brunswick in the Aftermath of the American Revolution” compared lodges in late eighteenth-century British North America as places for loyalist sociability. Retracing the various conflicts that accompanied their foundation and insertion into Canadian masonic hierarchies, she found proof of the fundamental tension between liberty and authority that marked loyalist exiles. Elizabeth Mancke’s comment pointed at major geopolitical shifts at the time of freemasonry’s emergence and expansion in the Atlantic world. The masonic brotherhood, Mancke argued, played a role in mediating periods of dislocation by providing a certain form of social structure in the absence of one.

The fourth panel (“Diasporas”) focused on the role fraternal organizations played in the social life of diaspora groups. Jan C. Jansen’s paper “Becoming Imperial Citizens: Freemasonry and Jewry in the British Caribbean (18th–19th century)” sought to shed new light on the fact that Jews constituted one of the major distinct groups within masonic lodges in North America and the West Indies. Based on empirical
evidence from primarily Jewish lodges in Jamaica, Jansen argued that freemasonry functioned as locus of a “transitory sociability” (Eric Saunier) in a period of fundamental transformation for the Sephardic diaspora in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British Caribbean. With the gradual weakening and dissolution of trans-imperial diasporic ties, they turned toward an institution that promised to support their becoming “citizens” of the Empire, while at the same time allowing them to retain and refashion certain networks beyond the British imperial realm. In his paper “Freedom in Fraternity? The German Lodge Pythagoras No. 1/86 in New York/Brooklyn and Its Transatlantic Connections in the Antebellum United States,” Andreas Önnerfors used a masonic lodge of German immigrants as an entry point into the role of freemasonry in one of the major American immigration hubs, mid-nineteenth century New York City. While tracing the lodge’s development and self-fashioning vis-à-vis US freemasonry, he argued that the democratic and universalist pathos of German “Forty-Eighters” collided with local masonic realities, territorial jurisdictions, and the crucial issue of race and the admission of free people of color. Jessica Harland-Jacobs’ comment stressed the need for studies of fraternalism that focus on local contexts, while not losing sight of the various transregional, imperial, and global entanglements. She also pointed to the common phenomenon of (ethnically, religiously, and socially) exclusive lodges and to the gradual waning of fraternal cosmopolitanism in the course of the nineteenth century.

The conference concluded with a roundtable that pulled together the major methodological and conceptual threads of the four panels. A focus on fraternalism sheds new light on Atlantic history and the way people coped with the challenges of modernity. The central position of freemasonry, that is, one specific fraternal organization, in scholarship was also reflected in the papers presented at the workshop. Several ways of explaining this preponderance were discussed: the fact that freemasonry stands in between eighteenth-century clubs and the later friendly societies; its extremely flexible and elastic organization; and its potential to function as a kind of meta-network, a network of networks.

Jan C. Jansen (GHI)