

GRAND MASTER'S POWERS

By: Unknown

No presiding officer, president or chairman of any secular body possesses the powers of a Grand Master. But it is a mistake to consider this high office as altogether without limitations. In the forty-nine Grand Jurisdictions on the Union the powers of the Grand East widely differ, albeit all have certain powers in common. All Grand Master preside over their Grand Lodges; all can preside over any particular Lodge; all can call Special Communications; all can issue certain dispensations; all can arrest Charters of Lodges for cause. But in many details the powers of the Grand East differ almost as much as their longitudes.

To define and compare the extent and limitation of the powers of Grand Masters requires a complete study of Constitutions, laws, rules, edicts, decisions, landmarks, customs and practices. Masonry has a large body of unwritten law, as binding and as strictly followed as that which is written; he would be a wise student indeed who could claim to be wholly familiar with all the unwritten law of forty-nine Grand Jurisdictions.

Certain powers and limitations of powers of Grand Masters, however, are set forth in Constitutions of forty-seven of America's forty-nine Grand Lodges. It is these which, in the main, are here considered. But it is to be noted that lack of constitutional statement of any power, in any Grand Jurisdiction, does not necessarily mean that the Grand Master does not have it.

All Jurisdictions agree in the inviolability of the Ancient Landmarks. Those Jurisdictions which have adopted compilations of Ancient Landmarks thus regard them as the foundation stone of all Masonic law. More than half of the forty-nine Jurisdictions have such compilations; these are:

Either Mackey's list of twenty-five, or

Special lists adopted in the particular Grand Jurisdiction; most special lists merely amplify Mackey's, contracting or expanding it to a greater or lesser number.

Mackey's fourth to eight Landmarks, concerned with the Grand Master, read as follows:

4. The government of the Fraternity by a Grand Master.
5. The prerogative of the Grand Master to preside over every assembly of the Craft.
6. The prerogative of the Grand Master to grant dispensations for conferring degrees at irregular intervals.

7. The prerogative of the Grand Master to give dispensations for opening and holding Lodges.
8. The prerogative of the Grand Master to make Masons at sight.

In 19 Jurisdictions, no one in Grand Lodge may question a Grand Master's ruling; what he decides is final. In 22 Grand Jurisdictions an appeal from a Grand Master's decision may be made to Grand Lodge. In others the question is undecided, because it has never been tried. Grand Masters have certain suspending powers; in many Grand Jurisdictions these are strictly defined. Twelve Grand Jurisdictions specifically state that the Grand Master may suspend any Master of a particular Lodge; three permit him to suspend the Master and Wardens; three any elective Lodge officer; four, "any" Lodge officer. In all these the Grand Master must report to Grand Lodge, which passes finally on the matter. In certain Grand Lodges which do not hedge the Grand Master with any limiting definitions of power, he may suspend a Master, but it is by common consent, a belief that this is inherent in the powers of the office, not given by written law. Doubtless any Grand Master could, and would, suspend a Master for just cause, whether or not the power is defined in the Constitution of his Jurisdiction. But to suspend a Grand Lodge officer, the Grand Master must, indeed, read his Constitution. In Utah and Missouri this may be done provided the Grand Master has the written consent of the Deputy Grand Master and the Grand Wardens, or any two of them. In North Dakota and Wisconsin the Grand Master may suspend any Grand Lodge officer except the Deputy Grand Master and the Grand Wardens. In Kansas and New Mexico he may suspend any elective officer of Grand Lodge. In Georgia and Tennessee, with the written consent of the Grand Wardens, he may suspend any appointive officer of Grand Lodge. In Idaho the Grand Master may suspend any member of the Grand Lodge. In Florida he may suspend the Grand Secretary and the Grand Treasurer.

Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Hampshire and Rhode Island give the Grand Master the power to suspend any "brother" from Masonry. Tennessee expressly forbids the Grand Master to suspend a brother without a trial and sentence. In the five Jurisdictions in which the Grand Master has his autocratic power over the individual, the suspension is reviewable by Grand Lodge at the next Stated Communication. It is probable that this power might be used in at least 3 more Jurisdictions, without authority of special enactment, merely because of the broad general power conferred in the Constitution, or the silence of that document on any powers. Several Grand Jurisdictions expressly prohibit suspending any law of Grand Lodge; Mississippi permits the suspension of certain by-laws. In the majority of Grand Jurisdictions, where suspension of laws is not permitted, it is doubtful that any Grand Master would assume the power, or that Grand Lodge would uphold him if he did! In several Grand Jurisdictions the general powers are so broad that the Grand Master can do practically anything he desires. In the Third Landmark, as recognized in New Jersey, it is stated:

“He may suspend during his pleasure, the operation of any rule or law of Masonry not a Landmark.”

The right of the Grand Master to “make a Mason at sight,” Mackey’s eighth landmark, has caused much discussion. The term is a misnomer, since the act is generally understood as being in the presence, and with the help, of a Lodge convened for the purpose by the dispensing power of the Grand Master.

16 Grand Jurisdictions expressly permit this in the written law, three of them providing that it must be done in a regularly constituted Lodge. In giving the power Kansas states, “It is one which should never be exercised.” Arkansas permits a Grand Master to communicate “the secrets of Masonry with or without ceremonies., the Grand Master might call to his assistance a Lodge, or Masons, or may act alone.” Arkansas also states “the power should not exercised in any case, except by dispensing with time.” Other Grand Lodges permit the act by their adoption of Mackey’s list of Landmarks. Four Grand Jurisdictions constitutionally forbid the making of Masons “at sight” by a Grand Master.

Can a Grand Master be tried? Most Grand Jurisdictions are silent on the subject, but as few have provided that he may; thus, in South Carolina, any Lodge may impeach the Grand Master on the expiration of his term in office; he is then tried by the Grand Lodge, in which a two thirds majority may convict and pass sentence - what, is not stated. In Texas the “Grand Master may be suspended from office by this Grand Lodge, for sufficient cause, after due notice and a hearing.” Connecticut states that the Grand Master is exempted “from trial during the term of his office and afterwards, for any official act as Grand Master.”

At least four Grand Lodges expressly give the Grand Master a second vote, in the event of a tie. In certain Grand Jurisdictions in which the Masters of Lodges have the privilege of casting a vote in the event of a tie, it is assumed that the Grand Master possesses the same privilege.

Limitations of powers of Grand Masters in various Jurisdictions are at time confusingly contradictory. North Carolina states: “The Grand Master is the creature of the Grand Lodge, deriving all his authority from that body. . . .” Kansas states: “The Grand Master is not the creature of the Grand Lodge; the office existed before the organization of Grand Lodges.” Pennsylvania gives the Grand Master power to “issue edicts, regulating the action of Lodges, or for the government of the same, their officers, and members.” And in Pennsylvania a Grand Master’s edict is Masonic Law. Some Grand Jurisdictions define what a Grand Master may and may not do regarding physical requirements of candidates. When North Carolina and Kansas Lodges determined that a candidate is physically disqualified, the Grand Master may not grant a dispensation for him to get the degrees. In Texas the Grand Master “shall pass upon the physical qualifications of all candidates . . .having any physical maim or defect. . .”

In all Grand Jurisdictions the Grand Master may call the Grand Lodge in Special Communication. In some he must give 30 days notice, in others, reasonable notice, in still others, notice is left to his discretion.

Many interesting restrictions are written in the laws of the several Grand Jurisdictions. New Hampshire specifies that at the semi-annual communications of the Grand Lodge it is the duty of the Grand Master to “give, or cause to be given, exemplification of the Work and Lectures of each degree.” North Dakota says: “he may cause the ritual and lectures of any one of the symbolic degrees in Masonry to be exemplified before the Grand Lodge at the annual communication.” Montana states: “The Grand Master has no authority to legislate by decision when the law is silent.”

Utah permits a Grand Master to “heal” or reobligate a Mason irregularly made in a regular Lodge, but such “healing” must take place in a duly opened chartered Lodge.

In Massachusetts the Grand Master “is requested to make a detailed report of the financial condition of the Grand Lodge in his annual address.” In practically all Jurisdictions, an annual report is “required” of the Grand Master.

Tennessee specifically states that the Grand Master has not the power to allow a Lodge to change any part of the ritual; then adds: “Nor should he answer questions pertaining to changes in the ritual but should refer them to the Board of Custodians.” Texas lays on the Grand Master the duty of seeing that the “three principal officers (of a new Lodge, or a resurrected Lodge, long demised) are proficient in their respective duties and are collectively capable of conferring the three degrees, and that the Lodge is supplied with adequate equipment and a safe and secure lodgeroom and anteroom.”

New York gives her Grand Master authority to withdraw any amount of money from the Grand Treasurer or from the “Trustees of the Masonic Hall and Asylum Fund for the relief of Brethren in this Jurisdiction or in sister Jurisdictions in times of calamity and disaster.” The same power has been assumed time and time again by many Grand Masters, and is invariably upheld by the Grand Lodge. North Carolina forbids a Grand Master to give any decision which “is to be kept secret from the Lodges, or suppressed from his report to the Grand Lodge.”

Tennessee permits a Grand Master “to reverse the a action of a Subordinate Lodge in order to correct a known illegality.” The same Jurisdiction also provides that a Grand Master may “administer exclusion in the Grand Lodge for refusal to submit to its Rules of Order, contumacy to the authority of the Grand Master, or for other conduct not sufficiently lens to require charges and trial, but too much so to be allowed to pass without notice.” Tennessee also provides that “only a Subordinate Lodge, not the Grand Lodge, may be opened for the purpose of laying a foundation stone.” Mississippi forbids her Grand Master to “exercise any of prerogatives to the injury of another person.”

To determine which Grand Master has the most uncontrolled power is beyond the scope of this Bulletin. In Virginia and the Constitution of Delaware the Grand Master’s powers

are not defined or limited; in Pennsylvania a Grand Master's edicts become law; in several Jurisdictions in which a Grand Master may suspend not only a Lodge, its Master and officers, but any individual brother, he possesses a potency as tremendous as it is seldom exercised. It is also to be noted that in those Jurisdictions which content themselves with the shortest and broadest constitutional definitions of a Grand Master's powers, the general conduct of Grand Masters has been an exemplary and as wise as in those Grand Jurisdictions in which the Grand Master's powers, prerogatives, rights and privileges are written in minute detail.

All Grand Jurisdictions regard the Grand Master as the ruler of the whole Craft, as well as the Grand Lodge; a Lodge or a brother who questions the authority of a Grand Master is so infrequent as to be remarked. Lodging great power in the hands of the Grand Master seems to grow occupants of the Grand East who measure up to their tremendous responsibilities. Few, indeed, are they who do not take competent advice on all matters of importance before acting; very few are the Grand Masters who rule in an autocratic manner. Other organizations find it essential to fence presiding officers with rules, laws, inhibitions, reviews, checks, balances - making them more servants than masters. In Grand Lodges the Grand Master is to all intents and purposes as much "master" as is the Worshipful Master of his Lodge "master" in that organization. All of which is a fine tribute not only to the sterling men who work their slow way up to the Grand East, but to the gentle teachings of Freemasonry, which has so much more of "thou shalt" than "thou shalt not" in their philosophy.