

The Master Builders is something of a paradox. Commissioned by the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania to commemorate its two-hundredth anniversary of independence from the English Grand Masonic Lodge, the book is intended both to relate the history of the Lodge and place "the development of the Craft within the context of the broader society." To this end the Lodge engaged Dr. Wayne A. Huss, a professional historian and non-Mason, to write the book, allowing him unrestricted access to all Lodge records as well as "freedom of approach and interpretation." The purpose of this unusual degree of trust in a non-Masonic scholar is to produce a scholarly work which would "have an impact not only within Masonic circles, but also within the academic world as a whole." In light of this intention and approach it is surprising that The Master Builders bears a strong resemblance to standard Masonic histories.

In fairness to Dr. Huss, The Master Builders is a solid, well-written, organizational history which skillfully and methodically relates the development of Freemasonry in Pennsylvania. Of particular interest is his account of the mutually destructive conflict between "Modern" and "Ancient" Masons in the mid-eighteenth century. Dr. Huss does an excellent job of explaining doctrinal and philosophical differences within the fraternity which might otherwise remain opaque to non-Masons. In addition, the sections on relations between the Pennsylvania Grand Lodge and those in other areas provide useful information on the internal dynamics of Freemasonry. Far from the conspiratorial monolith of its critics' portrayals, Freemasonry emerges as a relatively flexible association of fraternities well able to accommodate dissent within a general framework of doctrinal uniformity.

These accomplishments, however, are those of narrative ability, not of historical analysis. Though The Master Builders does offer much of interest to non-Masonic scholars, it falls far short of placing the fraternity in socio-historical context. Appendices containing member-
ship, occupational and organizational information and statistics are interesting and useful, but they fail to clarify the position of the Lodge in relation to Pennsylvania society. Occupational data, for example, are presented such that further analytical work would be difficult: the social character of the Lodge is unclear because the occupational categories chosen provide no information on socio-economic status. This makes comparisons of the Lodge's occupational structure with those of other groups less than enlightening. Despite the avowed intention of placing Pennsylvania Freemasonry in its social context, a coherent analytical and conceptual framework suitable to this goal is lacking. The only notable exception is a cursory effort to compare the magnitude of Masonic charity to that of other voluntary associations.

This lack of analytical rigor is especially apparent in the chapter on the Antimasonic period. Rather than explore the social and political dynamics of the attack on the fraternity in the 1820s and 1830s, The Master Builders adopts a simplistic view of the causes of Antimasonry and focuses on the Grand Lodge's difficulties in collecting dues from financially-troubled local lodges. Though some of the political events of the period are discussed — Thaddeus Stevens' attempts to destroy Pennsylvania Freemasonry through legislative action, for example — little new information is presented. The accessibility of data on Lodge membership could shed considerable light on the social basis of Antimasonry's remarkable if short-lived success in Pennsylvania. Thus the result closely resembles other Masonic accounts of the era. In essence, this is The Master Builders's major weakness. Though based on previously unavailable data it makes little use of the new information, adding few fresh insights to the body of scholarship on Pennsylvania Freemasonry.

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In the years after the American Revolution, the Northwest Territory offered virtually unlimited space for settlement. It also provided, according to Andrew R. L. Cayton, a battleground for warring ideologies in the new republic.