

Freemasonry in South Africa The beginnings

**By Rodney Grosskopff, P Asst Dist GM.
2011 ANZMRC Touring Lecturer.**

The Dutch East India Company, (DEIC: also known also as The VOC – *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie*) sent Jan van Riebeeck at the head of a small delegation to The Cape of Good Hope to establish a refreshment station in 1652.

It soon became one of the most important stopovers en-route from one end of the earth to the other. Travellers from all corners of the Earth found themselves in Cape Town, this benign and comfortable harbour, bristling with ships of every navy. It enjoyed fresh food in abundance, the best wines in the world flowing freely in all the taverns and was aptly known as *The tavern of the Seas*.

As the population grew; slowly at first and then in a rush, culture found a fertile community in which to take root; Churches, Schools and Theatres were established. There were Balls at the Castle, fine manners became the order of the day. So Freemasonry started. Though many nations added ingredients to the melting pot, the source of the culture was Dutch and it is there that we must look for South African Freemasonry's birth.

Freemasonry blossomed in Holland in a curious way.

A young nobleman at the age of 23 found himself at The Hague in 1731. His name was Francis Stephen and he had succeeded his father Leopold as the Duke of Lorraine some two years earlier.

He decided that he wanted to be a Freemason. Where he got this notion from, we have no idea, but we do know that he got in touch with the Grand Master of The Grand Lodge of England, Lord Loyal.

Loyal was not going to let this catch get away: Francis was the first European Prince to be initiated into Freemasonry, if that was not enough he was already betrothed to Maria Teresa (then aged 14, the eldest living child of Charles VI of Germany). Lord Loyal sent a delegation of six very senior masons to The Hague, headed by no less than Dr Theophilus Desaguliers, the third Grand Master; credited with drawing royalty and noblemen into the Order and, with him, The Earl of Chesterfield.

Young Francis Stephen was initiated and raised between 14 May and 24 June 1731. he was passed (made Master Mason) later in the same year when on a visit to London.

His influence on Masonry was immense: not only in Holland but in the whole of Europe. He became a staunch supporter of Freemasons. Lodges started to be formed in Holland with noblemen taking the helm; Count Vincent de la Chappelle was the first Grand Master.

In 1735 Francis surrendered his Dukedom of Lorraine under the treaty of Vienna to King Stanislaus who was crowned on 24th September 1736 so that he could marry Maria Teresa. This may seem like an enormous sacrifice for love, but there were grand plans a foot.

On the death of Gaston de Medici, he succeeded to the Grand Duchy of Tuscany in 1737. He immediately declared himself The Protector of Masons and put his money where his mouth was. He freed the Masons arrested by the Inquisition and refused to let Pope Clement's bull against Freemasons be promulgated in his Duchy. His wife Maria Teresa was Crowned Empress of Austria in 1740 and she made him Regent. In 1745 he was crowned Francis I of Germany.

He and Maria Teresa were a powerful couple and very happily married, in spite of the fact that they disagreed strongly over Freemasonry. Family dinners must have been fun; often she and her ministers would clamp down on Masonry and Francis would have to undo the damage. More often than not he won, but on a few occasions he did not.

You can guess that he did not get to Lodge much, but masons were glad to point to him as one of their own and included him when ever they could. In the midst of this family life they had nine children of which one was the unfortunate Marie Antoinette, guillotined as Queen of France on 16 October 1793.

At first, Lodges in Holland were granted warrants from the Grand Lodge of England; a situation that continued until 1770. the Lodges in Holland acted almost as if it were a Province of English Freemasonry. After The Convention of 2 March 1770 The Grand Lodge of The United Netherlands was formed and they took control of their own destiny. The Dutch East India Company was a trading and colonising organisation founded under a charter granted by the Government of the United Netherlands in The Hague on March 20, 1602. it was run by The Heeren XVII (Council of 17) as a private company. They established a refreshment station at the Cape in 1652 as a private enterprise. It was not their intention to develop it into a fully fledged colony: this happened almost in spite of their intentions.

The Cape was lush, the climate gentle and held so much promise it was inevitable that it would blossom and grow. This growth started in 1657 when nine company servants *were allowed their freedom to establish private farms*. A few years later, The Governor, Simon van der Stel, granted land to a further 20 settlers and then a further 180 in 1689. Adriaen van der Stel, who succeeded him, was less enthusiastic and the process slowed down almost coming to a stand still. In 1750 the company started a new drive and was so successful that by the time that The Company's rule came to an end in 1795 there was a population of 15,000 in The Cape.

The Company knew exactly what it was there for: to make money; and they were not too fussed how and from whom. The British and the French at this time were forever bickering; sometimes they broke out into open warfare, mostly they were simply abrasive to one another. Nevertheless The Company served them both, as well as the ships of any other nation who stopped in Cape Town and every one was comfortable with this arrangement.

Britain was fairly relaxed in its relationship with Holland and saw no need to interfere with arrangements at the Cape even though The Company employed French and Swiss Mercenaries to guard and police its interests. Many of these mercenaries stayed on to make homes for themselves; they brought families out to join them. Although the administration was very definitely Dutch, the Community was becoming decidedly French; they added elegance to the society to such an extent that for a while, it was often called Petit Paris du Sud.

The first suggestion of Freemasonry in the Cape came from one Jacobus Cornelis Matthews Rademacher, a senior merchant with the company who called in at Cape Town when homeward bound from Java. Impressed with the possibilities of a Lodge being started, he recommended on his return to Holland in 1764 that steps be taken to form a Lodge in rapidly expanding port city.

A young man named Abraham Chiron arrived in The Cape five years later and came to the same conclusion, but did some thing about it. Even though he was very new in Freemasonry he started to gather masons around him and started working a Lodge without any authority or experience.

As a result of Rademacher's recommendation or perhaps because of reports of Chiron's efforts filtering back to Holland or simply because the time was ripe, one of the early moves made by the new Grand East of the Netherlands in Holland was to appoint a ships captain, one Bro Abraham van der Weijde, as a roving ambassador for Freemasonry in the colonies. He described himself as Second Deputy Grand Master and Plenipotentiary.

When he arrived at The Cape on 24 April 1772, he did not allow grass to grow under his feet; he immediately set about forming a Lodge. Eight days after landing he held his first meeting. On 2 May ten masons attended, three of whom were employees of the VOC. Two days later he issued a Provisional Warrant for Lodge De Goede Hoop to hold meetings. The next day he drew up the formal petition for the establishment of the Lodge. The Charter was approved and received in Cape Town a few months later dated the first day of the ninth month of the year AL 5772 (1772). Abraham de Mist took this to mean 1 November 1772, working from the Masonic year beginning, on the 1st March.

Abraham Chiron was a young man; he was sent by The VOC to the Cape for a five year stint and arrived in 1769. He was born in Frankfurt-on-Maine and initiated in the Lodge Zur Einigkeit which met there in 1765 and held the Rose Croiz degree. Even though he was comparatively young he had been rounding up masons and had even started conferred degrees on brethren. A real go-getter.

A year after his arrival, on 23rd September 1770, he married Marie Philippe Roger of Sedan and they had four children.

He brought in two fellow employees of the Company into his group: Van Schoor and Christoffel Brand. OG de Wet, the Landrost (magistrate) of Stellenbosch was a mason from Europe and with six other masons formed a sort of Lodge. There were no formal elections: they simply settled into various offices and started working as best they could: Chiron was a German mason; the others were probably Dutch but had been away from their lodges for many years. One can only imagine what a mish-mash of assorted degrees from assorted origins the ritual must have been.

Van der Weijde's arrival brought some regularity to their organisation and to their work. The ten brethren that attended his first meeting were the Petitioners. Two more names were added a little later to the Charter: Van Oudshoorn and Snyders; the latter was in fact the Captain of De Paauw, the ship that brought Van der Weijde to the Cape. The first meeting was held on the 9th May 1772, getting the Lodge off to a flying start. They opened an Entered Apprentice Lodge and three candidates were proposed and balloted for. That Lodge was closed and a Master Masons' Lodge was opened, Brother Mathinus Adriaan Bergh, who was described as a 'Compagnor' was raised to the 'Sublime Degree of a Master Mason'. They then closed the Lodge and reopened an Enter Apprentice Lodge and JH Stammer was initiated gratis and was promptly employed by the Lodge for two rixdollars a month as the equivalent of out Tyler. A watchman on the outer door.

They held eight meetings before July 1772; on many occasions two or three workings at a meeting, often two meetings on one day. Then the minutes stopped and a gap of 20 blank pages was left. The secretary, M van Oorde, resigned his office; the Lodge voted on the matter and it was agreed by 7 votes to 4 not to accept his resignation. Why? We don't know; but it did not help that he simply did not write minutes, a compromise was reached by the appointment of CF German as assistant secretary. He wrote the next entry in the minute book, on 21 January 1774. The Lodge had not stopped working in this period: we know this because we encounter new names on the roll and old names in different positions.

Early in the New Year van der Weijde called in again at the Cape to see how his fledgling Lodge was faring. He was invited to dinner at the castle by the acting Governor van Plettenberg and after the dinner was accompanied back to his lodgings by Captain Philip Cassel. Somehow they fell out: we don't know the reason that they took issue with one another but we don't know they crossed swords and van der Weijde was wounded. He was rushed to The Company's new hospital in the Heerengracht (today's Adderley Street) but he died of his wounds on 31st January 1773; in all probability his was the first Masonic Funeral in the new Lodge.

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This paper was presented at the September meeting of the Research of Otago No. 161, by Bro Rodney E Grosskopff. He was brought to NZ as the 2011 ANZMRC Touring Lecturer. Bro Grosskopff is from near Johannesburg, South Africa and is involved in many Orders in South Africa. He is Past Assistant District

Grand Master, South Africa North. Also, Past Senior Grand Deacon EC.

The Lodge acknowledges the generous support of Lodge St Patrick IC, which sponsored the visit by Bro Grosskopff, and the ready co-operation of United lodge of Otago No 448, and The Hiram lodge No 46 for rearranging their meeting and practice schedules to accommodate this lecture.

