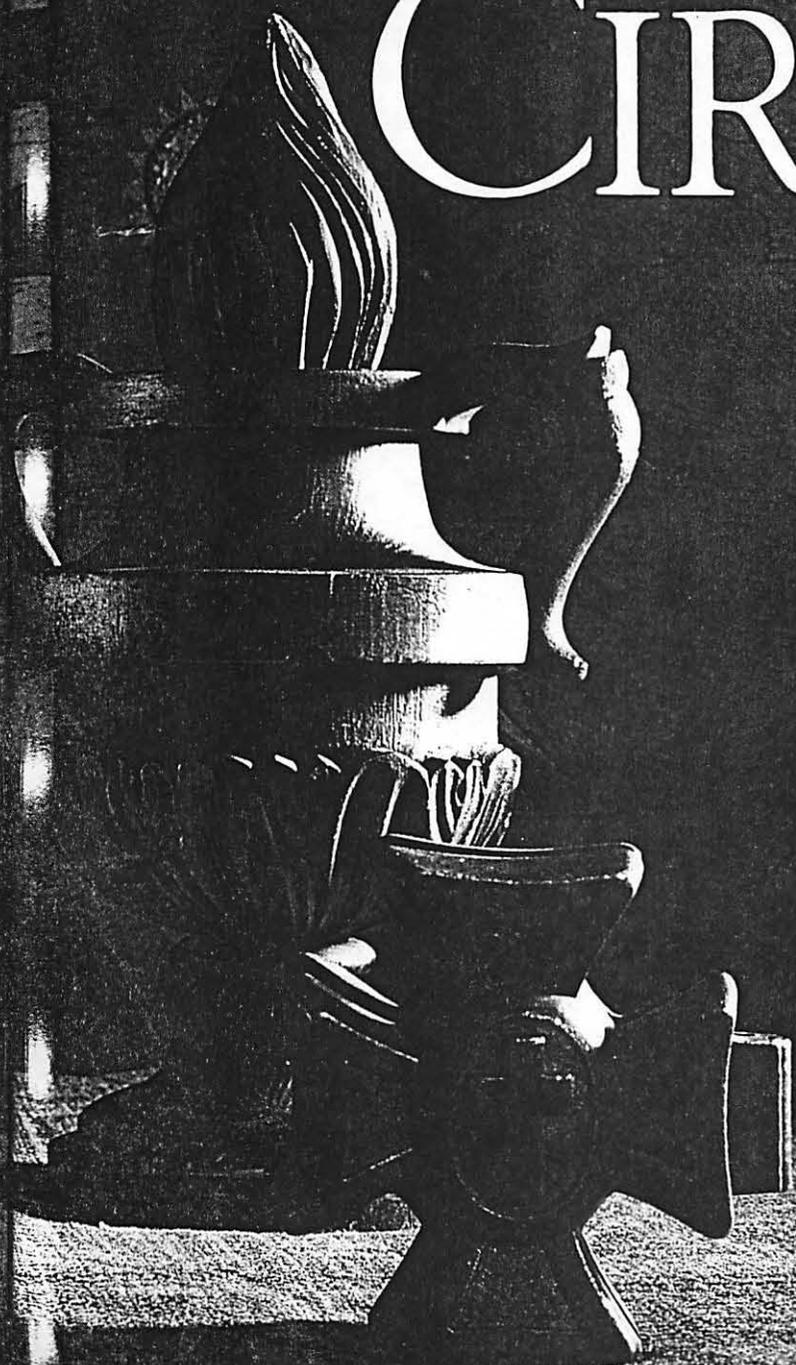
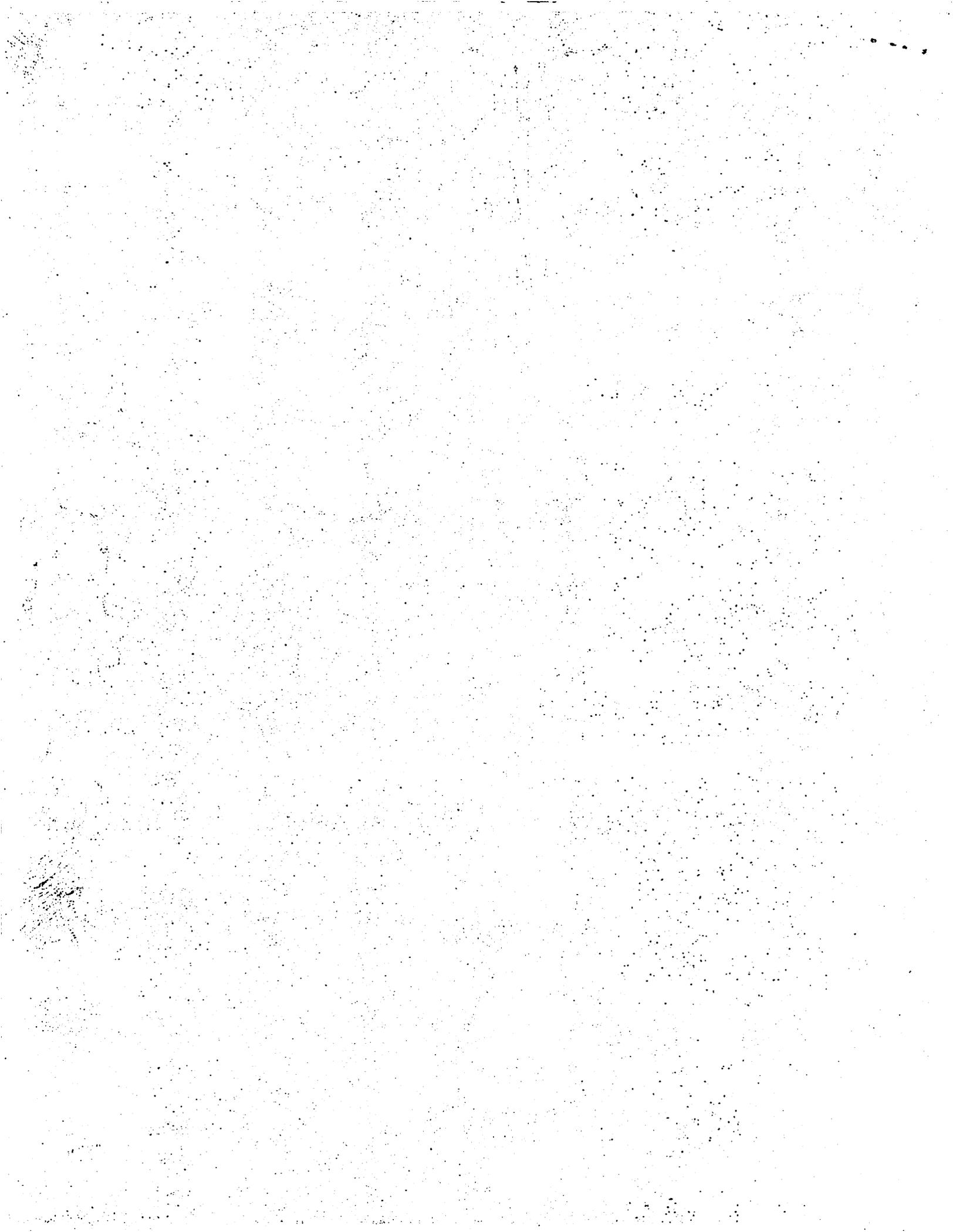


# MOVING IN SECRET CIRCLES



**FROM THE MYSTERIOUS  
MASONS TO THE LITTLE-  
KNOWN IMPROVED  
ORDER OF REDMEN,  
FRATERNAL SOCIETIES  
HAVE LEFT A CRYPTIC  
TRAIL OF ARTIFACTS  
THAT ARE BOTH RICH  
IN SYMBOLISM AND RIPE  
FOR COLLECTING.**

By LINDA JOAN SMITH







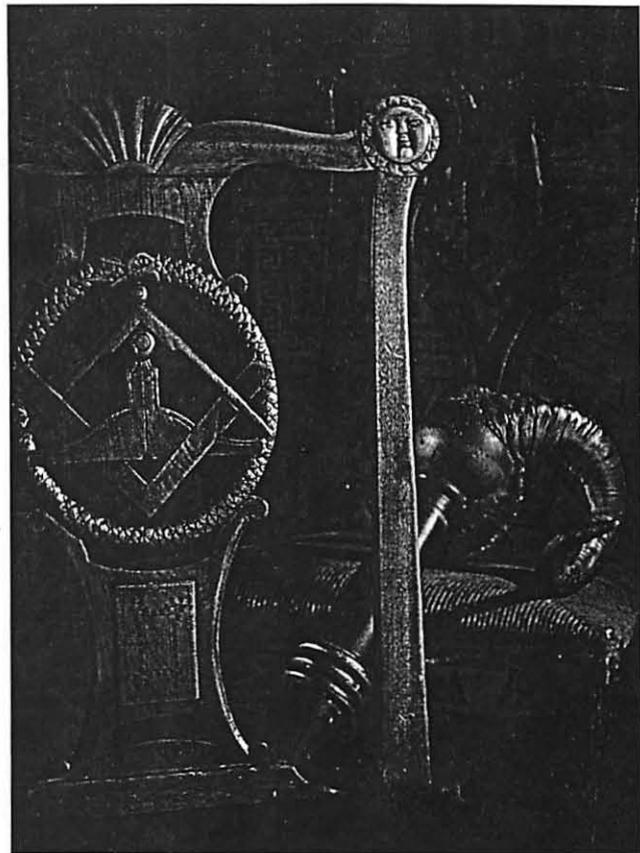
Their strange symbols were once as familiar to Americans as the stars and stripes. They counted among their ranks some of our country's greatest heroes, intellectuals, and artisans: George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, John Hancock, and Paul Revere to name a famous few. They helped foment revolution, found an indivisible nation, and guide both its democratic and moral development. And so successful was their association that it spawned countless imitators who were eager to benefit from similar mystic bonds of brotherhood.

Yet today, the Masons (along with later fraternal orders such as the Odd Fellows, the Elks, and the Grange) seem known more for their curious rituals, secret oaths, and ornate regalia than for their deep-rooted role in our collective history or for the treasury of decorated artifacts they left along the way.

The stonemason guilds of early 18th-century

England now seem an unlikely breeding ground for the seeds of American democracy and decorative tradition. But it was there that Freemasonry was born, nurtured by the sweeping egalitarian and scientific ideals of the Enlightenment.

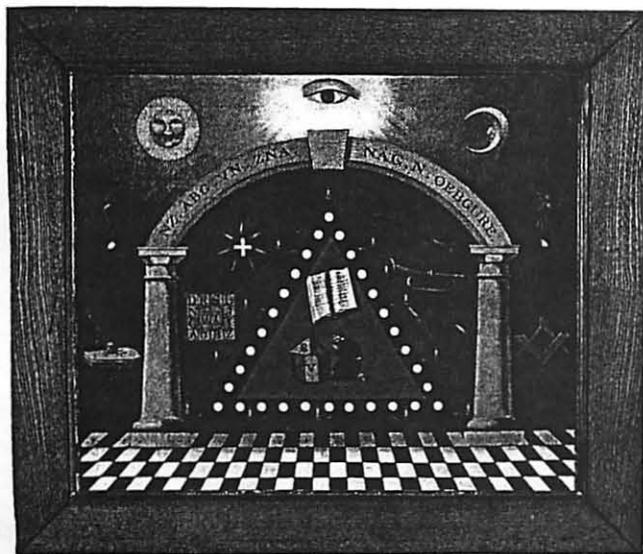
By the time that Freemasonry migrated to these shores in the 1730s, it had developed into a philosophical and social society dedicated to promoting those same democratic ideals and searching for divine truth. Adding to the order's intellectual and social appeal were its secret oaths and rituals, made all the more enticing by the



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plethora of mystical symbols the Masons regularly employed.

For the most part, Masonic symbols were derived from the time-honored tools of the stonemason, homage to scientific thinking (geometry in particular), and the biblical story of the building of Solomon's temple (a masterpiece of stonemasonry). But, along with a familiar outward form, each symbol had a deeper meaning.

"What the mallet is to the workman, enlightened

Preceding pages: *Artifacts include a checkerboard (Masonic), wooden urn (Odd Fellows), ice cream mold (Knights Templar), and grave marker (Order of United American Mechanics). The 1817 Masonic apron (inset) is folk art at its best.*

Opposite: *Early books, photographs, creamware, and regalia are coveted items. Above: These late 1700s chairs bear the Masonic symbols of the square and compasses. Left: Masonic designs often include the mosaic floor of Solomon's temple, symbolizing good and evil.*



reason is to the passions," wrote Masonic author Jeremy Cross in 1819. "[I]t curbs ambition, it depresses envy, it moderates anger, and it encourages good dispositions. . . ." Other symbols revealed similar lessons. The ubiquitous square and compasses, for instance, reminded Masons "to square our actions and to keep them within due bounds," according to early ritual. The plumb rule was the symbol of uprightness, and the trowel symbolically spread the cement of brotherly love.

The iconography was rich, diverse, and—to uninitiated eyes—often hopelessly obscure. But so prominent was Freemasonry in early America that many of its symbols became synonymous with patriotism and soon permeated the very fabric of post-Revolutionary life.

Freemasonry enjoyed nearly a century in North America without competition. But in 1819, the first American lodge of The Independent Order of Odd Fellows was established in Baltimore. Another English import, Odd Fellowship was similar to Masonry in its design, and likewise drew members eager for camaraderie and moral self-improvement. The Odd Fellows' most familiar symbol—three oval links—represented friendship, love, and truth.

In 1826, the Masons suffered a major setback that also slowed the growth of Odd Fellowship. In Batavia, New York, an itinerant worker named William Morgan had threatened to reveal some of the Masons' secrets. When he disappeared, the Masons were blamed. Anti-Masonic sentiments flared, and many lodges, particularly those in New York and New England, closed after their members were pressured to withdraw.

However, Andrew Jackson, a Mason, was elected President in 1828, just two years after the Morgan affair. In 1832, he won handily against both Whig candidate Henry Clay and William Wirt, whose Anti-Masonic Party had hoped to carry the day. By the 1840s, Freemasonry had regained its previous strong position, and Odd Fellowship was flourishing.

Meanwhile, other fraternal orders



*These commemorative Shiner's glasses and exotic pitcher date from the early 20th century.*

had begun to gain members throughout the nation, each group expressing, in part, the prominent concerns or circumstances of the time. There were anti-immigrant groups such as the Improved Order of Redmen and Order of United American Mechanics, temperance organizations such as the Independent Order of Rechabites, and labor groups such as the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers. There were immigrant societies such as the Independent Order of B'nai B'rith (Jewish) and offshoots of established orders formed by excluded African Americans, such as the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows or the Independent Benevolent Protective Order of Elks. In addition, there was the Knights of Columbus, which gave dedicated Catholics an organization of their own to join. (The Catholic church has always been vehemently opposed to the Masons and many related groups because of their quasireligious nature; Catholics are forbidden to join such groups today.)

Many groups were founded by Masons and bore Masonic hallmarks: an emphasis on good fellowship; secret initiation rites, rituals, and symbols; a strong cause or philosophy based on ancient legend; and some sort of mutual benefit or humanitarian focus. The assurance that one would be taken care of by one's brothers in time of need was often these fraternal societies' strongest appeal; many groups offered insurance to back up their brotherly obligation.

Some of these societies thrived, along with the women's orders and youth groups that developed to complement them. Others, whose central themes were too limited or time-specific, soon lost members to other groups and ceased to function.

Few people, for instance, remember the Ancient and Honorable Order of the Blue Goose, whose officers were named Most Loyal Gander, Supervisor of the Flock, and Custodian of the Goslings. Fewer still recall the Benevolent Order of Monkeys, whose branches were called Jungles, or the Exalted Order of Big Dogs, whose branches were Kennels. And, what ever happened to the Concatenated Order of Hoo-Hoo, whose emblem was a black cat?

These short-lived societies left few artifacts behind them—or few that are identifiable as such. But, fraternal symbols from more successful groups appear on thousands of late-19th-century items.

"This is the world of the weird and wonderful," says John Hamilton, curator of collections at the Museum of Our National Heritage in Lexington, Massachusetts. Founded by the Scottish Rite branch of the Masons in 1975 as a bicentennial gift to the nation, the museum has since accumulated an extensive collection of fraternal artifacts from both the post-Revolutionary War period and the Victorian era.

These same sorts of items are increasingly sought by collectors, eager to explore this esoteric facet of our nation's history.

Because of Freemasonry's longevity and widespread success Masonic objects make up the lion's share of most collections. Almost every type of object that received decoration during America's early years can be found bearing Masonic motifs, from Liverpool pitchers imported from England to scrimshaw powderhorns carried on hunting forays. Some items, such as "firing" glasses—pounded on tables during Masonic toasts—were used *only in* early lodges or tavern-room meeting places. Others made themselves at home in the parlors and dining rooms of Masons and non-Masons alike. There were Chinese export tea sets, stoneware jugs, brass trivets,

Staffordshire plates, and more, all incorporating Masonic designs.

Late-19th-century relics are more diverse in fraternal affiliation, though the square and compasses of the Masons and the three links of the Odd Fellows predominate. There are ballot boxes full of black and white marbles, used in voting to accept or blackball potential lodge members. There are hundreds of examples of ceremonial regalia: symbolic "jewels" of office, heavily embroidered sashes and collars, shining swords and scabbards. There are curious items used in initiation rites, from "hoodwinks" (elaborate blindfolds) and mechanical billy goats (which gave initiates a rocky ride) to chairs that exploded with a bang and collapsed to the floor.

Along with lodge artifacts there are innumerable domestic items: ice cream and cookie molds, picture frames and straight razors, sewing boxes and checkerboards, quilts, coverlets, and collar boxes, as well as hooked rugs, pie safes, and bracket shelves. In short, almost anything one might choose to collect can be

found bearing fraternal symbols.

Most coveted by serious collectors are those objects that stand firmly in the realm of folk art and date from before the Civil War: hand-painted Masonic or Odd Fellows' aprons, painted "tracing boards" used to teach members about important symbols, handcrafted lodge furniture, or other early handmade items. Few and far between, such artworks can sometimes be found for as little as \$100 but more often command prices from \$1,000 to as much as \$80,000.

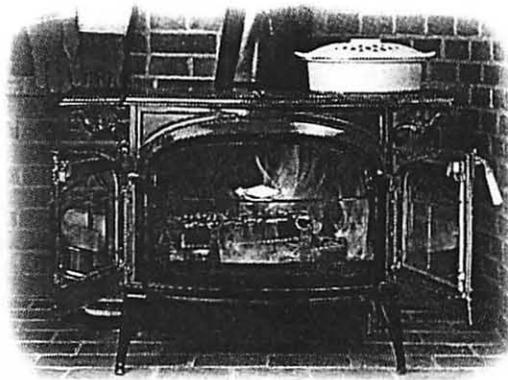
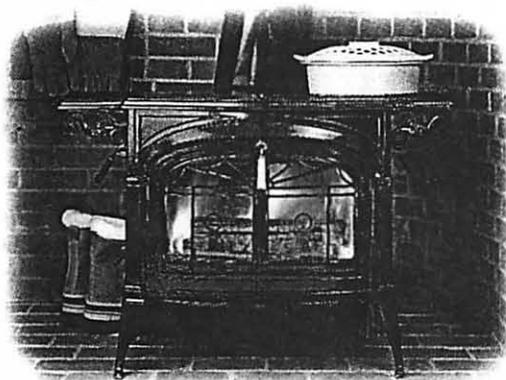
But a Victorian-era Masonic pin or spade-shaped Patrons of Husbandry jewel—lucky finds picked up at a garage sale for \$1—can bring just as much satisfaction to a beginning collector. Both these objects, as well as rarer pieces, spring from the same fascinating fraternal tradition. They are steeped in mystery and magic. And, through the strange symbols they bear and the societies they represent, they illuminate our history: the struggle underlying our independence, the growing pains behind our melting-pot makeup, the divisions that have long plagued us,

and ultimately, the desire for connection and belonging that is shared by us all. □

*Editor's note: The Museum of Our National Heritage is located at 33 Marrett Rd., Lexington, MA 02173. The Museum regularly features exhibits on different facets of American history and culture. An extensive exhibition of Masonic artifacts drawn from the museum's permanent collection is on display through February 20, 1994.*

*Admission to the museum is free. Hours are Monday through Saturday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday noon to 5 p.m. Call 617/861-6559 if you would like more information.*

*Catalogs from the museum's previous exhibitions provide excellent reading on artifacts of fraternal societies. The following catalogs may be ordered from the museum's bookstore: Masonic Symbols in American Decorative Arts (\$7); Bespangled Painted & Embroidered—Decorated Masonic Aprons in America 1790-1850 (\$7); and Fraternally Yours (\$14).*



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