

# **Fraternal Organizations: The Original Social Network**

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## **Definition**

“A fraternal order is generally defined as an organization wherein a group of men, women or men and women are bound together for the purposes of advancing their educational, social or other benefits; also the relation of persons associating on the footing of brothers; also, a body or class of persons having common purposes and interests; brothers including sisters and sisters including brothers.”

*(Source: USLegal.com)*

While many people refer to all fraternal organizations as secret societies, this is often not the case and many fraternal organizations are happy to discuss their organizations with non-members. They are only “secret” in that parts of their ritual are known only to members. This is typically only to promote a sense of belonging among their members. Some of these organizations are truly secret in that they try to keep everything, particularly membership lists, from public view.

There are seven types of fraternal organizations/societies:

1. Social
2. Benevolent/Service/Friendly
3. Ethnic
4. Trade
5. Religious/Mystical
6. Political
7. Criminal

References to fraternal organizations your ancestor might have belonged to may be found in obituaries, funeral notices, and emblems on their tombstones. You may also see fraternal organizations referred to as friendly societies (primarily in Europe).

## **Well-Known Fraternal Organizations**

**Freemasons:** The best known of all the fraternal organizations, Freemasonry can trace its roots back to 1700s England. The original masons were stonemasons and the original secrets may have actually been trade secrets. Most other fraternal organizations are based on the Freemasonry principles and structure. Masonic records will rarely contain any information other than dates of initiation, additional lodges or Masonic organizations the person may have been associated with, and the date of death. Records of high ranking officers may contain some additional information. Appendant bodies include (but are not limited to) Shriners, Order of the Eastern Star, Knights Templar, York Rite, Scottish Rite, Jobs Daughters, Rainbow Girls, DeMolay, and Sojourners.

**Knights of Columbus:** Founded in 1882, the Knights of Columbus is open to Catholic males 18 years of age and older. Its primary goal was to give mutual aid and assistance to its members and families. Auxiliary groups include the Coumbiettes, Squirettes, Columbian Squires, Daughters of Isabella, Catholic Daughters of the Americas, Daughters of Mary Immaculate, and Squire Roses.

**Knights of Pythias:** Older than the Knights of Columbus, the Knights of Pythias was founded by a member of the Freemasons and the Red Men, two other fraternal organizations. The Knights of Pythias stresses friendship, charity, and benevolence. Auxiliary groups include the Pythian Sisters, the Pythian Sunshine Girls, and the Junior Order of Princes of Syracuse for boys. Appendant bodies include the Dramatic Order of the Knights of Khorassan, which also has a female auxiliary, the Nomads of Avrudaka.

*Independent Order of Odd Fellows:* The IOOF originated in England, as the United Order of Odd Fellow. The beginnings of the IOOF are not clear. The Odd Fellows claim to be the first mutual benefit society. Auxiliary groups include the Daughters of Rebekah (also known as the Rebekahs or the International Association of Rebekah Assemblies), The Ancient Mystic Order of Samaritans (AMOS) *note: this is an unofficial auxiliary*, the Junior Lodge or Loyal Sons of the Junior Order of Odd fellows, and Theta Rho Girls Clubs.

*The Grange:* Officially known as the Order of Patrons of Husbandry, The Grange was established in 1867; the founder was a Mason with a desire to have a fraternal organization for farmers. The Grange ended up being more of a union for the farmers to help them band together for protection against being taken advantage of by merchants, farm suppliers, railroads and warehouses. The Grange was the first fraternal organization to admit women as full-fledged members. They are also the fraternal organization that probably has the youngest age of admission, allowing people as young as 14-years-old to join. While originally, this society was intended for farmers, membership today is allowed for farmers and anyone with an interest in farming.

*Woodmen:* Woodmen was one of the first fraternal societies created for benevolent reasons. Today Woodmen is one of the largest fraternal benefit societies, claiming membership of more than 845,000. The Woodmen of the World organization is best known for its gravestones. From 1890 to 1900, WOW's life insurance policies had a provision that provided free grave markers for members. From 1900 to the mid-1920s, members could purchase a \$100 rider to cover the cost of the monument. WOW designed a four- to five-foot-high tree trunk monument pattern for adults and three stacked logs for children. Local stone carvers were to use this pattern so all WOW stones would look uniform, but markers soon became distinctive with the additions of other symbols by families. By the mid-1920s, the organization had discontinued the grave marker benefit due to increased cost. Woodmen of the World is still in existence today and is one of the largest fraternal benefit societies with open membership in the U.S. They provide insurance, investments, bonds, real estate, and mortgage loans to its members. Auxiliary groups include the Supreme Forest Woodmen Circle, the Women of Woodcraft (also known as Neighbors of Woodcraft).

*Benevolent Protective Order of Elks:* Also known as the BPOE, the Elks Lodge, or The Elks and was originally founded as a New York City social club in 1868. Today it's one of the largest fraternal, charitable, and service orders in the United States, with a membership of nearly one million members. The Elks have a charitable foundation called the Elks National Foundation. Any auxiliaries that exist are unofficial and may include the Emblem Club, the Lady Elks and the Benevolent Patriotic Order of Does.

*Fraternal Order of Eagles:* Also known as the FOE, the Eagles were founded in 1898 by six theater owners and the membership was originally made up of those engaged in the performing arts. Performers sharing the story of the organization is what provided the Eagles their initial means of growth with membership benefits such as funeral benefits and aerie physicians contributing to continued growth. The FOE raises millions of dollars to combat heart disease and cancer, help children with disabilities, and uplift the aged and infirm. Auxiliary groups include the Grand Auxiliary.

*The Improved Order of Red Men:* Established in the U.S. in 1834, this fraternal organization was formed solely for (and by) Caucasian men and can trace its history back to the Sons of Liberty and the Boston Tea Party. Appendant organizations include National Haymakers' Association, the Knights of Tammany, and the Chieftains League. Auxiliary groups include the Degree of Hiawatha, the Degree of Pocahontas, and the Degree of Anona. This organization still exists today and even has a museum and library located in Waco, TX.

*Loyal Order of the Moose*: Founded in 1888, the Loyal Order of the Moose was intended purely as a men's social club. The organization floundered until 1906 when its membership began to rebound and by 1912 it had approximately half a million members. The Moose support many charitable and community projects and they maintain a children's school and a retirement facility as well. Auxiliary organizations include Women of the Moose.

*Kiwanis*: Founded in the United States in 1914, the original name of the Kiwanis was the Supreme Lodge Benevolent Order Brothers. The name was changed to Kiwanis in 1916. Kiwanis has an emphasis on business and professionalism.

## **Access to Records**

The records for all of these organizations are private records and the organization is not required to provide access to them to anyone outside of the organization. The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) does not apply to these records. Many of these organizations are not staffed for genealogical research, however, these groups will do their best to respond to genealogical inquiries when the inquirer is courteous and patient. For genealogical inquiries, depending on the organization, you may not have much success at the national or state level, unless your ancestor happened to be an officer in the organization.

Fraternal organization records are rarely indexed so tracking down an ancestor may be a difficult and time-consuming process. Some organizations have published histories in which your ancestor *may* be mentioned. Organizational histories may have been published at the national, state, or local level so be sure you check for all types. Many fraternal organizations also published member updates in newsletters or newspapers. If the organization closed down the records may have ended up in a local library, educational institution, or at a local genealogical society. Records located in repositories are not always indexed so make sure you browse the collections fully.

Some Masonic lodge records have been lost due to fires, natural disasters, and disappearance into a lodge secretary's personal belongings. Few records from the 1700s and 1800s still survive or are complete. To inquire about your ancestor's records, write to the Grand Lodge where your ancestor resided when he was a member and include your ancestor's full name, the town, and county in which he resided and the dates he lived there. Once you know the local lodge, also inquire with the local lodge as they may have more complete records about an individual.

The IOOF has provided a webpage with information about genealogical inquiries at <https://odd-fellows.org/history/genealogy-research/>.

The BPOE has provided a webpage with some great examples of Elk History at <https://www.elks.org/history/>. Here you can find links to photos, documents, multimedia, and magazine archives. Submissions of Elks History is encouraged on the webpage.

Cyndi's List has a very good page on Societies & Groups: Fraternal Organizations at <https://www.cyndislist.com/societies/fraternal/>.

**Additional fraternal organization resources can be found on my website at <https://talkingboxgenealogy.com/resources-and-reading/>**

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