

Benicia Lodge No. 5 Biographical/Historical

Extent: 18 linear feet

Biographical/Historical

Date	Event
June 5, 1849	Dispensation granted from the Grand Lodge of Louisiana to open a lodge somewhere in California.
March 6, 1850	First Lodge meeting held in Benicia, California under the name of Pacific Lodge. Days later, lodge was formed under the name Benicia Lodge and Benjamin D. Hyam was elected as Master.
April 24, 1850	Benicia Lodge No. 5 chartered by the Grand Lodge of California.
April 24, 1850	Charter members were Alexander Riddell, first Master and future Grand Master B. D. Hyam, Calvin Gillis, J. H. Saunders, Joseph Colson, L. A. Besancon, Lansing B. Mizner, Robert Semple, S. Bynum, Thomas O. Larkin, and W. B. Nurse.
September 10, 1850	Lot at 110 West J Street sold to the lodge by Sarah and Alexander Riddell for \$1.00.
December 27, 1850	Temple dedication.
1887	Motion to build new lodge hall passes, the deciding vote coming from then-Master E. Estey.
August 18, 1887	Grand Lodge convened in Benicia to lay new Temple cornerstone.
December 20, 1887	Land bordered by First Street and West J Street purchased from brother Max Burkhardt for new Temple.
March 10, 1888	First meeting was conducted in new temple. Old Temple used for community activities, including a schoolhouse, dance hall, church, union hall and American Legion hall.
January 3, 1950	Old Temple bought back for the price of back taxes.
December 1, 1977	Group of Masons working at Mare Island Naval Shipyard applied for dispensation to form a new Lodge in Benicia.
January 27, 1978	Sublime Lodge is constituted at Crocker Lodge.
January 6, 1979	Sublime Lodge No. 831 chartered by the Grand Lodge of California.
1989	Earthquake damage to new Temple ceiling forced Benicia Lodge No. 5 to return to old Temple while repairs were being completed.
1992	Benicia Lodge No. 5 returned to new Temple.
March 1993	Benicia Lodge No. 5 and Sublime Lodge No. 831 consolidated into one lodge, Sublime Benicia Lodge No. 5.
2014	Charter revoked.

Benicia Lodge No. 5 was one of the first Masonic lodges chartered in California. The lodge members also built the first Masonic Hall in the state. The lodge's original dispensation, dated June 5th, 1849, came from the Grand Lodge of Louisiana, created by Lodges originally under the authority of the Grand Lodge of Mississippi, which had illegally invaded the Louisiana jurisdiction. Therefore, the dispensation and the grantor were deemed "irregular" and had no standing in California. However, brethren at Benicia were unaware of this fact, and went forward with their first meeting under the name of Pacific Lodge on March 6th, 1850. Two days later, they formally organized their lodge as Benicia Lodge. Present at the first meeting were Alexander Riddell, B. D. Hyam, Calvin Gillis, J. H. Saunders, Joseph Colson, L. A. Besancon, Lansing B. Mizner, Robert Semple, S. Bynum, Thomas O. Larkin, and W. B. Nurse. B. D. Hyam was elected first Master of the Lodge.

Benicia Lodge was one of five lodges present at the convention to organize the Grand Lodge of California held in Sacramento on April 19, 1850. Benicia lodge was represented by its delegate, B. D. Hyam, who also acted as secretary for the convention. During the proceedings, The Grand Lodge recommended that Benicia Lodge be issued a charter. Soon after, word came that the Louisiana-Mississippi Grand Lodge issue had been cleared up on March 4th, a month and a half earlier. As a result, Benicia's dispensation was deemed regular. On May 7th, at the first semi-annual communication of the Grand Lodge, Benicia Lodge was issued a charter, dated April 24th with the number "5."

Members soon got to work on building a Masonic Hall, the first Masonic building in the state. The building cost \$18,000 to erect, Alexander Riddell furnished the lot, and Robert Semple supplied the lumber. The new temple was dedicated on December 27th, 1850.

By 1887, Benicia Lodge had outgrown its original hall and began building a new one. The Grand Lodge of California convened in Benicia on August 18th, 1887 to lay the cornerstone of the new building, which was erected next door to the original hall. The first meeting was held in the new hall on March 10th, 1888. The old hall had multiple uses, such as a dance hall, a church, and an American Legion Hall. On January 3rd, 1950, the Lodge bought back the old hall. The old hall is now on the National Historic Registry and is currently owned by the Grand Lodge of California as a Historic Lodge. It is the regular meeting place for several local Masonic lodges.

On December 1st, 1977, a group of Masons working at Mare Island Naval Shipyard applied for dispensation to form a new Lodge in Benicia. On January 6th, 1979, the lodge was chartered as Sublime Lodge No. 831 by the Grand Lodge of California. In March 1993, Benicia Lodge No. 5 and Sublime Lodge No. 831 consolidated into one lodge, Sublime Benicia Lodge No. 5. In 2014, Sublime Benicia Lodge No. 5's charter was revoked by the Grand Lodge of California.

Benicia Lodge No 5. has had several notable members over the years: former Grand Master Benjamin D. Hyam; U.S. Army officer and former Governor of California George Stoneman; lawyer, diplomat, and politician Lansing B. Mizner; newspaperman and politician Robert B. Semple; humorist George Horatio Derby; and pioneer and entrepreneur George C. Yount.

Sources

Whitsell, L. O. (1950). *One hundred years of Freemasonry in California, Volumes I & II*. Grand Lodge, Free and Accepted Masons of California.

Scope & Content

The Benicia Lodge No. 5 collection (1850-2014) consists of account and receipt books, applications, a bible, black books, building leases and insurance documents, correspondence, dispensation and charter, ephemera, financial reports, histories, meeting minutes, membership records, newsletters, notices, photographs, receipts and invoices, temple building records, temple by-laws, and tiler's registers.

Account and receipt books (1851-1984) include account books (1861-1951), bank account passbooks (1928-1960, 1978-1984), dues receipt books (1858, 1860), and a treasurer's receipt book (1851).

Applications (1850-1918) include petitions for membership, degrees, and affiliations, and letters of dispensation.

The bible (1834) was presented to the lodge in 1850 by Bro. Thos. C. Stanley, Chaplain, U.S. Frigate *Susannah*.

Black books (1855-1878) contain records of rejections, suspensions, and expulsions.

Correspondence (1850-2011, bulk 1850's – 1870's) includes investigations into charges of un-masonic conduct and inquiries from members' families. Event correspondence relates to St. John's Day celebrations, lodge anniversary celebrations, invitations to and from surrounding lodges, and cornerstone dedication ceremonies. Correspondence about lodge buildings discusses the original temple building and its subsequent renovations. There is also discussion about the construction of a Masonic cemetery in the 1850's. Most notably, the collection includes an 1888 letter from first Master B.D. Hyam containing a history of Benicia Lodge No. 5.

The original dispensation and charter (1849-1850) include an original dispensation from Grand Lodge of Louisiana, a charter from Grand Lodge of California, and a printed charter from Grand Lodge of California.

Ephemera (1930-2002) includes programs and tickets that relate to lodge events, such as anniversaries, installations of officers, and other celebrations.

Financial reports (1857-1877) include yearly examinations of secretary's books and reports of members' financial standing.

Histories (1975-2003) include speeches, pamphlets, and copies of reports about the history of the lodge and building.

Meeting minutes (1850-2014) include written and printed meeting minutes (1850-56, bulk 1850, 1991-1995, 1999-2014) and loose ledgers, including some copy books (1850-1999).

Membership records (1850-1985) include annual membership returns to the Grand Lodge (1851-1867), membership files, membership rollbooks (1860-1920), membership rosters (1850-1985), and printed rosters (1955-1956). Access to membership records is restricted; please discuss access with archivist.

Newsletters (1947-2011), also called "trestle boards," are printed monthly publications that include events and goings-on in the lodge, lists of officers and committees, Masonic education, and requests for dues.

Notices (1850-1922) include death notices, notices of Lodge dispensation, and notices of reinstatement, rejection, and suspension.

Photographs (1850-2009) include group photos of officers (1929-1995), members (1920-1990), and individual portraits of most Past Masters (1850-2009). There are also photos of the original temple (1850, 1955-1970's) and the new temple (1920-70's). Event photography (1930's-2000) includes photos of parades, cornerstone ceremonies, and, notably, includes a photo of former Governor of California Earl Warren at an Army Day celebration in 1949.

Receipts and invoices (1850's-1980) document financial transactions including building materials, charity and aid, furnishings, labor, refreshments, regalia, office supplies, and utilities, among other things.

Temple Building records (1850-1994) include leases and insurance documents. There is also a folder of property taxes for the Temple buildings (1870-86).

Temple by-laws (1850-76) include written by-laws (1850), copies of by-laws (1850's), and printed by-laws (1851, 1856, 1876).

Tiler's registers (1856-1987) are loose ledgers recording members' and visitors' attendance at Lodge meetings and events.

The collection also includes a Masonic Board or Relief folder (1871-1886) documenting members' aid cases and a notice of the formation of the Masonic Employment Bureau. There is also a Sons of Temperance folder (1850's) documenting the fraternal organization's rental of the Benicia Temple building.

Access & Use Information

Please email requests for access to the Museum Collections Manager at the Henry W. Coil Library and Museum of Freemasonry, Grand Lodge of California at hwclibrary@freemasonry.org.

Administrative Information

Processing Information

Processed according to DACS standards by Jennifer Bloom, October 2025.

Source of Acquisition

Found in collection.

Related Materials

See Row 4, range 3, shelf 2, Scrapbook 12 titled "Masonry in Early California Mining Towns" for press clippings and ephemera related to the Lodge. See records for Sublime Lodge No. 831.