

# On the Trail.. of a Mystery Portrait

By

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**T**raditional American portraiture often depicts subjects with symbolic objects carefully selected to communicate facets of the person's life such as their occupation, hobby, or even character virtues. For example, the Scottish Rite Masonic Museum & Library collection includes some portraits from the 1800s where the sitter has a recognizable Masonic symbol pinned to his lapel. But painted portraits of men in full Masonic regalia from the 1800s are rare, making the painting seen here rather unique. While it shows a man in full Knight Templar regalia, it has frustrated our curatorial staff since it was donated in 1980, because we do not know the name of this man.

Recent research on the painting has turned up a possible identification for this man. By "reading" the portrait, we can better understand what it tells us and even suggest a solution to the mystery of this unidentified gentleman.

Fortunately, the painting was signed and dated by its artist, "A Edmonds / NY 1893." The artist seems to be Abraham Edmonds who was born about 1851 in Russia and came to the United States in 1853 according to United States census records. In 1880, Edmonds was listed as a 30-year-old artist living in Manhattan with his wife, Rose, who was 22 and kept house. The 1890 census records fell victim to a fire, but

in 1900, Edmonds was still living in Manhattan, then aged 49 and still listed as an artist. This evidence, along with the "NY" in the signature on the museum's painting, strongly implies that he was living in New York City when he painted it. Indeed, an 1893 New York City directory lists artist Abraham Edmonds at 925 Broadway. By 1900, Abraham and Rose had five children living with them ranging from 19-year-old Louis, who worked as a draughtsman, to four-year-old son M.J.

The Chancellor Robert R. Livingston Masonic Library at the Grand Lodge of New York owns a portrait of Past Grand Master Joseph J. Couch (1829-1909) that Edmonds painted in 1901. Couch served as Grand Master of New York in 1877. According to the Grand Lodge of New York proceedings for 1902, the portrait was "presented as the gift of the brethren of Joppa Lodge, No. 201, by W. Brother John C. Thomas, Master of that Lodge and was received on behalf of Grand Lodge by M.W. Elbert Crandall, Grand Master."

In 1910, the Edmonds family appeared on the census again, but this time in South Carolina, where both Abraham and his 20-year-old daughter, Esther, were working as artists specializing in "portrait work." The Dialectic and Philanthropic Societies Foundation at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill owns at least four portraits

painted by Edmonds dating from the 1907 to 1909 period. These are all thought to have been commissioned from Edmonds by the Societies.

Another portrait by Edmonds, now in the collection of the Kansas City Museum, depicts Theresa Miller. The portrait was painted in 1907 or 1908 and donated to that Museum by the sitter's daughter. A letter with the portrait from the donor states that Edmonds specialized in portraits and lived in New York City. It also explains that he painted many United States presidents and was living in Washington, D.C. when he died. The letter writer suggests that Edmonds died in 1908 or 1909, but this seems to be in question since he is listed on the 1910 census. According to the donor, Edmonds was "an artist of note – was most modest and unpretentious with it all."

The signature on the Knight Templar painting gives just the briefest of clues about its origin. It was painted in New York, suggesting that the subject was a New York Mason. But in the portrait he wears both a New England style uniform and what appears to be a Scottish Rite jewel signifying membership in Massachusetts Consistent knight templar



Unidentified man in Knight Templar Regalia, 1893, Abraham Edmonds, New York. Collection of the Scottish Rite Masonic Museum & Library, gift of Walter A. Kmiec, 80.58. Photograph by David Bohl.

tory, clues that may mean he was actually a Massachusetts Freemason.

The man is pictured in his Knight Templar uniform from plume to sword. While the elements of his regalia are familiar, the design of his apron is unusual. It shows the cross and crown symbol,

which is not seen on any of the Templar aprons in the Museum's collection. In

addition, a perusal of late-nineteenth-century regalia catalogs, like one from the Henderson-Ames Company or an 1896 edition from The M.C. Lilley & Co., shows only Knight Templar aprons decorated with a skull and crossbones symbol. An apron with a cross and crown symbol does not seem to have been available from commercial regalia houses, although it may be possible that the apron in the painting was custom-made.

Knowing that the portrait was painted in New York seems to imply that the man was a New York Mason and Knight Templar. But he wears a black baldric, part of the "black uniform" primarily worn in the New England states. Indeed, the 1894 regulations for the Grand Commandery of New York state that "the body of the Baldric" was to be "White Moire Antique Silk, bordered with black velvet one inch wide on either side." In addition, the description of the "black uniform" in the 1896 catalog for The M.C. Lilley and Company explains that an apron was "used only in Black Uniforms." So, this gentleman, with his apron and black baldric, seems to be a New England Knight Templar.

Further supporting this identification is what appears to be a Scottish Rite Massachusetts Consistory jewel on his chest. Comparing Massachusetts Consistory jewels in the Museum's collection to the portrait enables us to identify the jewel in the portrait. He also wears a Knight Templar Malta jewel and a Shrine jewel. Comparisons to actual jewels of these types in the Museum's collection conclusively identify them in the portrait. Below the Shrine jewel



Scottish Rite Massachusetts Consistory Badge, 1921, Robbins Company, Attleboro, Massachusetts. Collection of the Scottish Rite Masonic Museum & Library, Harvey B. Leggee Collection of Shrine and Fraternal Material, 96.005.209.

on the uniform is what appears to be another Scottish Rite emblem. It is difficult to tell exactly what kind of jewel it is, but it bears a resemblance to watch fobs in the Museum's collection. The one pictured on page 14 has Knight Templar symbols on one side and Scottish Rite emblems on the other.

Taking all of this evidence together, with the idea that the subject is a Massachusetts Mason, the search to positively identify him was on. Who was the type of man to have a portrait like this painted? This subject needed to be able to afford to have his portrait painted, and his choice to be painted in full Knight Templar regalia suggested a strong connection with the Fraternity – perhaps an officer, or even a Grand Commander. Taking the date of the painting into consideration, the first step was to check the list of Grand Commanders for Massachusetts and Rhode Island. In 1891-1892, Robert H. Chamberlain was Grand Commander. His portrait is reproduced here and he does seem to bear a resemblance to the man in the painting.

Robert H. Chamberlain was born in 1838 in Worcester, Massachusetts. He enlisted during the Civil War, achieving the rank of Captain by the end of the war and was later promoted to Brigadier General in the state militia. He became a Master Mason in 1862 and joined the Knights Templar in 1865 as a member of Worcester County Commandery. From 1892 until his death in 1910, Chamberlain was sheriff of Worcester County.

So, what do you think? Does Chamberlain look like a match to the man in the painting? Until we find conclusive evidence about the subject of the painting – a receipt with the date and the sitter's name, for example – we will not knight templar

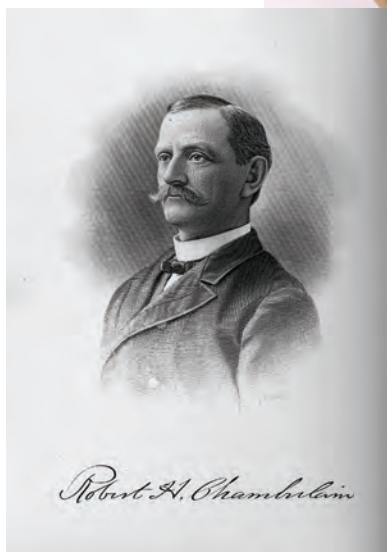
know. Nagging questions remain; perhaps most of all – why did a Grand Commander of Massachusetts and Rhode Island have his portrait painted in New York? Chamberlain seems to have no connections in New York City and might have had his portrait more likely painted by a Worcester or Boston artist. Perhaps this is not a portrait of Chamberlain, but of a different Knight Templar. While we are able to learn more and more about the painting, it also leads us to more and more questions.



Malta Jewel, 1880-1920, probably American. Collection of the Scottish Rite Masonic Museum & Library, gift of Beecher P. Hodgdon, 2000.039.1.



Shrine Recorder's Jewel, 1900-1940. Collection of the Scottish Rite Masonic Museum & Library, Harvey B. Leggee Collection of Shrine and Fraternal Material, 96.005.103. Photograph by David Bohl.



Robert H. Chamberlain, 1892, from *Proceedings of the Grand Commandery of Knights Templars and the Appendant Orders of Massachusetts and Rhode Island*, Central Falls, RI: E.L. Freeman & Son, 1892. Collection of the Scottish Rite Masonic Museum and Library, Van Gorden-Williams Library and Archives, 17.9763 .M414p 1890-92.



Scottish Rite and Knight Templar Watch Fob, ca. 1890. Collection of the Scottish Rite Masonic Museum & Library, gift of Leonel V. Porter in memory of Mrs. Eva Bills, 98.026.2.

*If you have any ideas about the identity of the man in the painting or would like to donate objects to the Scottish Rite Masonic Museum & Library, please contact Aimee E. Newell, Ph.D. at [anewell@monh.org](mailto:anewell@monh.org) or 781-457-4144.*