

THE FLORIDA DEMOLAY ASSOCIATION

*A Brief History of the
Order of DeMolay in
Florida*

1920 - 2017

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2017

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Although there was necessarily some preliminary work in getting permission to establish the first Chapter(s) of DeMolay in Florida, the story officially starts with the Institution of the first Chapter in the state. That was Paul Revere Chapter, in the City of Tampa, authorized in 1920, Instituted in 1921. It was then sponsored by the Tampa Scottish Rite bodies. In the early days the Scottish Rite founded many of the early Chapters, including Mother Chapter.

Disputes have arisen in the past over seniority among Florida's Chapters, based upon dates of issuance of Letters Temporary, and/or issuance of Charter dates, but Florida DeMolay holds that the "Date of Institution" of a Chapter constitutes its birth date and likewise, its seniority in the State Association. During 1921 the first three Chapters were established, being (in order) Paul Revere Chapter (in Tampa), Lake Worth Chapter (later re-named Thomas A. Edison Chapter and moved to West Palm Beach), and American Crusaders Chapter (in the City of Jacksonville).

It was shortly thereafter that Mr. George Elmer Wilbur, then the Superintendent of Schools for Duval County, was appointed as "Deputy of the Grand Council for Florida", the same position we now call "Executive Officer". Through most of the 1920s DeMolay Chapters were popping up like mushrooms all over Florida, in tiny towns and big cities alike. By 1922, there was a beginning of the State Association, the first State Conclave was held, and they were held thereafter, at six month intervals until 1927 or 1928. We have found the names of only the first three State Master Councilors from this period.

In 1928, Dad Wilbur died unexpectedly on a trip out of state, at a rather young age, and for the next two years the State seemingly devolved into chaos. Several men were appointed, one after another, as "Deputy for Florida" only to quickly resign after accomplishing little or nothing of lasting import. One name that appears only in the minutes of a single Chapter is a Mr. Pleasure. Among this group was M.: W.: Judge John Leroy Brandon, PGM of the Grand Lodge F.: & A.: M.: of Florida, who moved out of state only a few months after his appointment, apparently without resigning. His legacy, if he left one, was the precedent for disappearing EOs.

In 1930, seemingly on his own initiative, Dad (Judge) Albert Peter Wiese Sr. of Paul Revere Chapter, called a State Conclave, which was held, and as a result of which he was appointed "Deputy for Florida" by Dad Land. Being a Tampa Judge, and a staunch supporter of DeMolay, he remained in charge of Florida, first as Deputy, later as Active Member, of the Grand Council, until the end of World War II, a 15 year span. Under his leadership State Conclaves became annual events and terms of office nominally one year for State Officers.

As elsewhere, DeMolay in Florida went through difficult times in the 1930's with the economic situation affecting everyone and everything. None the less, DeMolay not only did not disappear in Florida, but after the initial damage in had suffered, slowly regained strength and numbers. During the early 1930's Dad Zoro Dennis Clark, an original member of the Grand Council and the founder of Omaha Chapter (#3), retired to West Palm Beach, and he and his son were active in Florida DeMolay. His son Zoro Jr. served as State Chaplain in 1931-32.

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In the mid 1930s Brother (and Dad) Charles Andrew Scott [LOH] was initiated into Paul Revere Chapter and served as its Master Councilor. In a tale that needs to be told separately, he was then elected State Junior Councilor ... TWICE ... on two successive days!

In recognition of Dad Wiese's responsibility for this survival and re-growth of Florida DeMolay, Dad Land conferred upon him a Founder's Cross, in 1937, shortly after he created it. This became the highest Honor anyone in DeMolay has ever received. Dad Wiese was the only man in Florida to be so honored. Only 137 total Founder's Crosses were presented, and the short list of recipients included Walt Disney, Gorman McBride (the first Master Councilor of Mother Chapter), and President Harry S Truman. The entire subject of the Founder's Cross and its awardees needs an article all of its own. Because he did not give any posthumously, many of the great names in DeMolay, like Frank Marshal, did not receive a Founder's Cross.

During World War II, beginning in 1942, operation of the State Association of DeMolay Chapters was suspended, and annual Conclaves were apparently not resumed until 1946, so far as surviving records can be found. However DeMolay had continued operating at the Chapter level in some places, such as Tampa. Brother (and Dad) Edward K. Walker, [LOH] a member of the Florida DeMolay Hall of Fame, and now the namesake of the Tallahassee Chapter, was Master Councilor of Paul Revere Chapter in 1943. From comments made by Dad Walker, Judge Wiese was still managing Florida DeMolay right through the wartime period.

Because of an inconsistency in the numbering of State Conclaves before and after the World War II hiatus, there has always been some question if a "rump" Conclave may have been held in late 1945, after both "VE" and "VJ" days. No records or mention of such has been found to support the conjecture, and so it remains just a conjecture.

Post World War II, Florida DeMolay entered a period of nearly 20 years where the State was divided into two, and (for a short while) even three, different DeMolay Jurisdictions, with different EOs. Seemingly no one person was willing to be responsible for DeMolay throughout such a large and (in truth) rather ridiculously shaped state.

Imagine driving from Key West to Pensacola, or vice versa, on roads that left a lot to be desired! It is 832 land miles driving distance, almost the exact distance from New York City to Chicago, all within a single state. That's even longer than the maximum E-W distance across the State of Texas which is only 773 miles.

In a very astute action, or so the author feels, the multiple EOs allowed the State Association to remain undivided, under control of the Board of Administration, which had been created by Dad Wiese at some point in the early 1930s. Minutes of a BoA meeting from 1936 were found in the archives of Seminole Chapter, in Sanford, and it did not appear to be a new thing even then. Apparently each EO appointed a share of the Board members during this time. One brief attempt to unify the Jurisdictions came with the

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appointment of M.: W.: Roy Theodore Lord, a Senior DeMolay, in 1959, but he resigned immediately upon learning that he was expected to take "the whole state".

In 1964 the state's DeMolay organization was finally re-unified under a single EO, Dad (and later Rev.) Duncan Laidlaw Gray [HLOH], of Tampa. Dad Gray had been the Chapter Dad of Owen A. Coile Chapter of Tampa for some years and was then President of the State Advisor's Association of Florida DeMolay.

When Dad Gray resigned from the position of EO about three years later, it was to enter the ministry of the United Methodist Church, where he went on to become a living legend in Florida Methodism. Dad Duncan Gray, of the HHS Class of 1953, was inducted into the Hillsborough High School Alumni Hall of Fame in 2007. His HoF Biography for HHS does not even mention his positions as Deputy of the Supreme Council or Executive Officer of Florida DeMolay. It focuses almost entirely on his Church work.

Florida DeMolay's leadership passed over to Dad Glenn Benjamin Wittstruck, of Sarasota. Dad Wittstruck served as EO from 1966 until 1970.

The 1960's may have been the "golden age" of Florida DeMolay, where the number of Active Members, all then paying annual dues at that time, exceeded 5000, Chapters on the rolls hit 101, and attendance at State Conclave topped 1600, including adults. These were the years when we needed a 20 story hotel like the Robert Meyer of Jacksonville (now sadly gone), or a large expanse, like the Diplomat in Hollywood, as a venue to hold a State Conclave.

This time period parallels closely the career of Dad John Welch Bates [HLOH] of Quincy, Florida, who became Chapter Dad of Angus Hinson Chapter "until someone better could be found" in 1948. Thirty-some years later, at his untimely death, no such person had yet been found. For 28 consecutive years, under all manner (and number) of EOs, Dad Bates was the State Chapter Dad, and usually served as a Deputy EO (although the title varied) and for generations of DeMolays he was the very model of what a Mason (and a Dad) should be.

The 1969 DeMolay Year lasted 15 months, because it was being changed to match the calendar year, instead of ending at the end of September. During that "year" 101 Florida DeMolays became RDs (and received their medallions from Dad Bates, his personal gift to each new Florida RD). This was the largest number of new RDs in one DeMolay year ever in Florida DeMolay history.

After his untimely death, due to a house fire in the mid 1970's, Dad Bates was memorialized by the creation of the "John W. Bates DeMolay University" of Florida DeMolay. He had always made a point of teaching "his" DeMolays (and all Florida DeMolays were "his") about DeMolay, Masonry, History and the things "Every young man needs to know". Hence the creation of the University, to carry on his legacy. The very highest honor the University can bestow is the Post-Doctoral Degree of "Fellow of John Welch Bates" upon successful completion of the final "Star Chamber" examination.

Prior to his becoming Florida's EO, Dad Glenn Wittstruck's daughter, Dee Dee, had served a year as the Florida DeMolay State Sweetheart. In 1969, during the 50th Anniversary Pilgrimage to Europe, she met

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Brother Roderick S. Coy, the International DeMolay Congress's first International Master Councilor and International DeMolay Hall of Fame member. It was a fateful meeting for both, as they are married to each other to this day.

1969 was the great 50th Anniversary Celebration in Kansas City and pretty much all of DeMolay participated in some degree, including Florida. New DeMolay awards were created, such as the "Medal for Saving a Human Life" and the Knighthood "Green Honor Key" and "PIKC-MSA", and lots of new initiatives started.

Dad Wittstruck suddenly disappeared after the Conclave of 1970; we learned later that he had been diagnosed with terminal cancer, and he relocated out of state, his on doctor's advice. His abrupt departure took everyone pretty much as a shock. Florida DeMolay was again a ship adrift at sea, with no one at the helm. Shades of the late 1920's after Dad Wilbur died.

Bro. and Dad G. Lawrence Hunt [LOH] , from Rochester Chapter in New York DeMolay, and then living in Hollywood, Florida was appointed as the next EO in 1971 and began his 20+ year tenure. In 1984 he rose to become Grand Master of the International Supreme Council, while remaining EO of Florida (that was a very unusual move). During his GM year, his Deputy EO did a lot of Administration of Florida DeMolay.

Throughout the 1970's, 80's, and early 90s Dad Hunt presided over Florida DeMolay as both membership numbers and the number of Chapters declined. This is not strictly speaking his fault, as the same was happening throughout DeMolay; all states, and in most countries where it was then long established, but his efforts, and those of the State Officers at the time, to "stop the bleeding" failed to bring about the desired renewal in Florida. Even though "Life Membership" meant that DeMolays who had long ceased to be actually active, were still being counted (until they became 21) and in spite of this Florida's 'active membership' dropped below 1000.

Ironically during the late 80's and early 90's DeMolay was expanding rapidly under the new Supreme Councils of Brazil and the Philippines, much as it had originally done in the US. Indeed, it reached the point where the 'most spoken' language in DeMolay was Portuguese, as our Brazilian Brothers outnumbered all others.

Several new South American countries, Peru is one example, began establishing DeMolay Chapters, following the Brazilian model, and new South American Jurisdictions began to multiply. Visitor DeMolays from these countries began to visit Chapters in Florida, and some of them came to attend college here, and be active DeMolays among us.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Empire, Freemasonry had emerged from hiding in Russia and the former 'soviet bloc' countries, and with the passage of a few years, interest in DeMolay began to stir in European countries where we had been absent for decades, as well as in other countries where we had never before been established. Some interest was even shown at one time by the United Grand Lodge of England, and led to placing the Union Jack among the "Flags of DeMolay", but sadly nothing came of

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that ultimately. Italy and France have Chapters once again, and soon we had Romanian, Serbian, and Montenegrin DeMolay Brothers. Albania's Grand Lodge received a Jurisdiction for their country.

Into the new Millennium, under the EO-ships of Dads William Marti [LOH] and M.: W.: Richard Edward Lynn[HLOH] DeMolay had begun to regain traction in Florida. New Chapters were being founded, old ones re-started, and membership began to slowly grow again. A special "Chapter" was created for "Honorary DeMolays" among those Masons who had not been able to be DeMolays growing up.

Attendance at Mini-Conclave (begun in the 1980s, replacing the mid-winter 'State Staff Meeting') and at State Conclave picked up to the point that we had to find larger facilities to house our conventions. The kind of problems are the ones we prefer to have, although we had to leave some very good hotels.

Dad Lynn's retirement as EO, mainly because of his increasing duties as Grand Secretary of the M.: W.: Grand Lodge F.&A.:M.: of Florida, led to his Deputy, Dad Steve Berry ascending to the EO's position. Due to great work by some of the State Officers and Staff we managed to regain DeMolay growth in Florida after briefly stagnating.

But the appointment of Brother and Dad Robert Jordan "Jody" Meguiar of Tampa, [as a 'thirty-something' the youngest EO ever appointed in Florida], part of a wave of "new kids" being appointed as EO's around DeMolay International, supplied the 'jump start' needed and Florida DeMolay took off again, resulting in Dad Meguiar receiving the "Grand Master's Eagle" as 'Executive Officer of the Year' after all of one year in office!

A few retrospective "sidelights" of Florida DeMolay History and politics may be in order. In no particular order:

Rarely have the Brothers of the State seen fit to elect relatives to the office of SMC. In the 1950's the cousins Katibah, of Riverside Chapter in Jacksonville, were so elected several years apart. The brothers Renn, of St Petersburg Chapter were elected back-to-back in the early 80's.

In 1937 state officer elections were held twice, because the newly elected SMC was found in-eligible. This is how we got our "One day SMC". The 'replacement' SMC elected was from the same chapter with the same number of votes. The SSC and SJC then were re-elected with the exact same number of votes as they had the day before. Hmmmm. Masonic Brother Huey Long is said to have telegraphed to Judge Wiese "Understand Conclave very interesting. Stop. All know no politics in Order of DeMolay. Stop. Send me 50 of your best, I need more Senators. Stop."

At the Conclave of 1969 candidate Jack Latvala lost the election by the largest voting margin in surviving records to that point. In 1970 he won, by an even larger margin than he had lost the previous year.

Fernando Ellis Camus, our second SMC, is the only PSMC (yet) to ever have a Chapter named for him. The former Robert E. Peary Chapter of Key West was renamed for him.

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Dads Albert Peter Wiese and M.: W.: John Edwin Larson were the only EOs to have had Chapters bear their names.

John Edwin Larson had the unique honor to have BOTH a Chapter AND a Priory bearing his name, at the same time, but in different cities in Florida. ISC was SO confused by THAT!

Two PSMCs have made it into the Florida DeMolay Hall of Fame. Those are John Hoyt Kirby, 33rd Degree, and Hon. State Senator Woodrow John "Jack" Latvala (see above).

Three Florida Senior DeMolays are, as of this writing, enshrined in the International DeMolay Hall of Fame: Gov. Reubin O'Donovan Askew of Pensacola Chapter, Walter Lanier "Red" Barber of Seminole Chapter, and Christian Rudolph "Buddy" Ebsen of John M. Cheney Chapter.

PSMC James "Ricky" Lyle was International DeMolay Congress Secretary in 1980-81.

Three Florida Advisors have risen to become Grand Master's of the International Supreme Council: M.: W.: Frank Howard Thompson, M.: E.: John Lawton Crofts Sr., K.T., and G Lawrence Hunt.

Brother Paul G. Schneider of Gulf Beach Chapter, Madeira Beach, won the International DeMolay Oratorical Contest in 1971. His topic : "The Limits of Dissent".

Dixie Chapter (10157) of Blountstown, FL won the International DeMolay Softball Championship in 1991.

Two of the Florida winners of the Distinguished Service Award (DSA) have gone on to win the International DSA (IDSA) from ISC: PSMC Roger Clemence Renn and PSMC William Henry Fleming, Jr.

DeMolay Knighthood being a significant part of the whole DeMolay program, since its inception in 1947, I would be remiss in not mentioning it as part of Florida DeMolay's history. Florida Knighthood dates from the first day DeMolay Knighthood officially existed, Knighthood Letter Temporary #6 having been issued to the first Priory in Florida on "day 1". Through various ups and downs Knighthood grew to be 7 Priors, one in each of the (then) seven DeMolay Provinces, and in 1967 saw the creation of the Imperial Priory of Florida. The Imperial Priory was disbanded by the EO after just over 2 years of operation, and Knighthood struggled through more ups and downs until all Priors were consolidated into the Col. James Nicholas "Nick" Rowe State Priory in the early 90's.

The Imperial Priory had created the "Florida Knighthood Grand Cross" as its own supreme honor, and only three were granted by it. That honor remained in abeyance until it was eventually revived by the re-constituted State Priory.

While many Priors were named for significant things connected with Chivalry, such as "Excalibur Priory" it is sad to note that one Priory honored a great man whose name is now lost to Florida DeMolay and Knighthood. Will Rogers Priory in Venice, Florida was sponsored by the Grand Commandery of Knights Templar of Florida.

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Florida Knighthood served as host for the Fifth International Knighthood Triennial Convocation, in 1986, at Jacksonville, FL. This was an “emergency” change in location from New Jersey where it had been scheduled to have been held. The Sixth Triennial should have been held in 1989, but was cancelled due to the planned 70th Anniversary at Kansas City and Knighthood Triennials never were restarted afterwards.

Dad Land had tried his hand at “The Order of Chivalry” as a gateway into DeMolay membership for younger boys. He started it at just the wrong time when “The Great Depression” struck and killed that initiative. Florida DeMolay has joined other Jurisdictions in beginning “Squires of the Round Table” Manors in some locations, and so far they seem to be modestly successful. In the long run, only time will tell.

I am quite happy to imagine that this brief overview of Florida DeMolay’s history will someday be only the introduction to a comprehensive History of the Order in our State. I trust that our Brotherhood and our Tradition will continue to live and grow as long as men revere the memory of our namesake, and choose to ask “*What Would Jacques Do?*” in difficult times, and (stealing from the Harry Potter books) then they will “*do what is right, not what is easy*”.

My profound gratitude goes to Brother and Dad Charles Andrew Scott, LOH, my own Chapter Dad and Mentor; to Brothers and Dads Walter Marnon Hammond and Harry Andrew Rosenthal Jr., both Past Deans of John W. Bates DeMolay University, for all that they taught me over many years, and for encouraged me in studying “all things DeMolay”, and to Dad John Welch Bates, whom I was privileged to know at least casually, for himself ... for setting the Example.

The assistance of too many members of the staff of DeMolay International over many years to adequately name them all, has been beyond price, and thanks seem far too small; most especially to “Ms. Doris”.

About the Author:

For anyone who cares, the author is a Senior DeMolay of Paul Revere Chapter in Tampa, KT, KE, RD, PMC-MSA (1970), *BHK, Chev, COH, LOH, HISC. Of them all, he is proudest of being a Chevalier.

He is a Senior Sir Knight of J. Edwin Larson Priory of Tampa, Honorary PIKC of Col. James “Nick” Rowe Priory of Florida, Florida Knighthood Grand Cross, Knight of Ebon, and technically is still the sitting Priory Dad of Mother Priory, since 1994.

He is a Past Grand Commander of St. Thomas ‘A Beckett Court of Chevaliers, a Past Dean of the Saints John Preceptory of the LOH, a Past Dean of John W. Bates DeMolay University, F.J.W.B., and a Past Master of Pompano Lodge #263, F:. & A:. M:.

He has also served Florida DeMolay (not in this order) as Director of ISC Awards (FL), as Florida DeMolay Scholarship Coordinator, as Assistant Director of Knighthood for Ebon (FL), and now as State Historian.

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Appendix A: The Earliest 25 Chapters in Florida DeMolay

Chapter	Location	Institution Date
Paul Revere	Tampa	2 Apr 1921
Thomas A. Edison *	Lake Worth	27 Sep 1921
American Crusaders	Jacksonville	22 Nov 1921
Fidelity	Bartow	1 Feb 1922
Roy P. Davis	St. Augustine	6 Feb 1922
St. Petersburg	St. Petersburg	33 Mar 1922
Robert E. Peary **	Key West	7 Apr 1922
Pensacola	Pensacola	17 May 1922
Florida	Gainesville	24 May 1922
Haven	Winter Haven	23 June 1922
Ocala	Ocala	17 July 1922
John M. Cheney	Orlando	18 Sep 1922
Palatka	Palatka	9 Feb 1923
Seminole	Sanford	21 Feb 1923
Eustis	Eustis	20 Apr 1923
Tropical	Lakeland	13 Jun 1923
Santa Rosa	Milton	? ? 1924
Osceola	Kissimmee	? ? 1924
Godfrey de St. Omer	Arcadia	12 Mar 1925
New Symrna	New Symrna	? ? 1925
Okaloa	Ft. Myers	27 July 1925

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Chapter	Location	Institution Date
Vero Beach	Vero Beach	30 Dec 1925
Arthur H. Carter	Daytona Beach	13 Oct 1926
Gateway City	Haines City	16 Jun 1927
Tallahassee ***	Tallahassee	22 Sep 1927

* Originally named Lake Worth Chapter, name changed when it moved to West Palm Beach

** Later renamed Fernando E. Camus Chapter after SMC #2

*** Later renamed first to J. Edwin Larson Chapter after M.: W.: J. Edwin Larson, then reactivated and renamed as Edward K. Walker Chapter, after "Doc" Edward K. Walker long time Chapter Dad of J. Edwin Larson Chapter, Florida DeMolay Hall of Fame Member, PMC of Paul Revere Chapter.

Note on unknown dates: ISC records are not perfect and sometimes are unreadable.

Appendix B: ISC Sessions in Florida

April 2 - 4, 1963 (43rd) Tampa, FL (Dad Duncan Laidlaw Gray appointed Florida E.O.)

June 18-21, 1972 (52nd) Hollywood, FL

Apr 6-9, 1975 (55th) Kissimmee, FL

May 6-9, 1984 (64th) Sarasota, FL (Dad G Lawrence Hunt, G.M.)

June 14-17, 2000 (80th) Orlando, FL

June 16-18, 2005 (85th) Orlando, FL

June 12-15, 2015 (95th) Orlando, FL

