

Masons have been in Tahlequah since 1848

Though they started without a formal meeting house, and a war between the states clouded a bit of their local history, the Ancient Free and Accepted Masons have enjoyed a lengthy and robust presence in Tahlequah.

The Cherokee Lodge is the oldest in Oklahoma, dating to 1848. W.W. Hastings was a mem-

ber, as were several members of the Ross family. The lodge is home to a number of artifacts, many carried by former members. Among the treasures is the bell from the Old Moravian Church, erected in 1835. Also included is the sword presented to Chief John Bowles by Gen. Sam Houston after the Treaty of Bowles Village was signed between the Texas Cherokees and the Texas Commissioners in 1836.

Masonic lodges are normally numbered by order

of establishment within a state, but Oklahoma's oldest lodge is numbered 10 because it was chartered through the Grand Lodge of Arkansas. Most records at the grand lodge were destroyed during the Civil War, and today's lodge numbers were assigned after the conflict. Oklahoma's lodge No. 1 is in Eufaula.

In the early days, the Tahlequah

Masons had no lodge.

"The chartering ceremony was on Nov. 8, 1848, and they installed officers at the Cherokee Nation Supreme Court building in July 1849," said Tahlequah historian Beth Herrington. "But they didn't have a building until the Cherokee Nation council gave them some land in 1852. It was a very plain, wood frame, two-story building."

The lodge stood on what is now the alley between Keetoowah and Choctaw streets in the 100

block. It was on the west side and faced east.

"The Masons met upstairs, but there were other meetings on the ground floor," Herrington said. "The Sons of Temperance met there before the Civil War, and a public school was housed there after the war."

In 1872, there was a shooting at Cherokee Masonic Lodge No. 10, when someone fired at a man named Dick Halfbreed during one of the regular Moravian services. Herrington said she heard the story from two sources: James Wilson, who was present, and Dr. Tom Ballinger.

"Wilson was a kid attending that meeting," she said. "He said he didn't remember how he got out of the building or got home. Halfbreed lived, but he lost an eye. He claimed that, when he was shot, he saw his spirit hover around his head, then go back in."

In 1889, the Masons moved to a new building.



File photo

Inside Cherokee Masonic Lodge No. 10, the chapter displays portraits of its worshipful masters, dating back to the lodge's establishment. Pictured are Walter S. Adair, N.B. Dannerburg and William Potter Ross.

The first lodge was sold for \$500, and became home to a school run by the Methodist Conference. The new lodge was built on the southwest corner of Choctaw Street and Muskogee Avenue. The lot was purchased for \$300. The lodge and the Masonic Opera House were built on the space for \$4,123.50.

Herrington did not know when the opera house was taken down, but said, "it wasn't there when I arrived in 1947."

In 1955, the Masons moved to their current lodge on the southeast corner of Choctaw Street and College Avenue. It cost \$24,324.35 to build. The annex was added later.

Being a Mason means being charitable. Lodge No. 10 hosts benefit breakfasts every third Saturday of each month. Beneficiaries have included Help-In-Crisis, Relay For Life, the Special Olympics, Save a Senior, the Salvation Army, Energy Aid, and the Sorop-

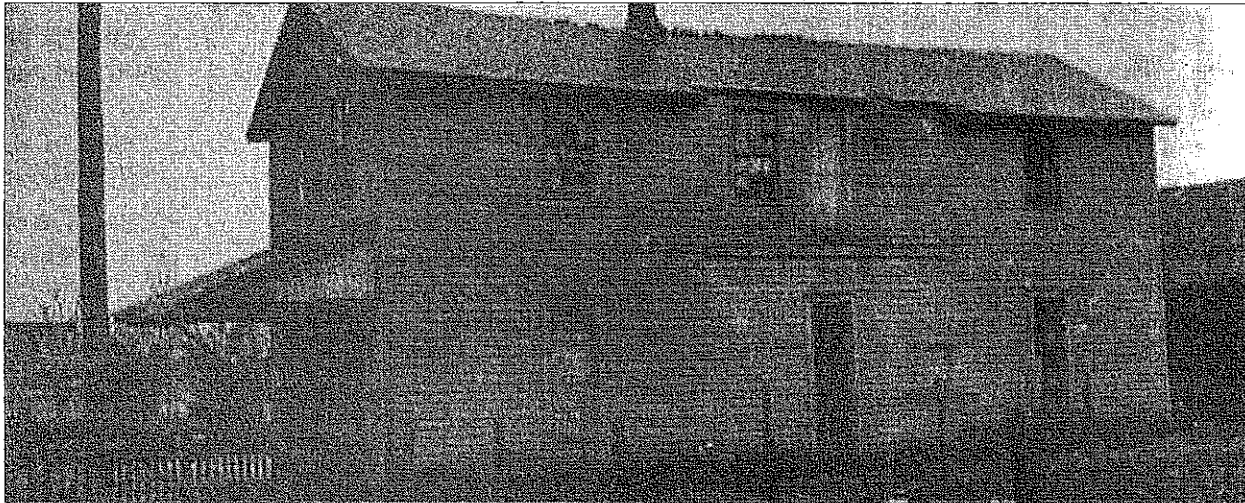
tomists Club.

"We put about \$20,000 into projects around Tahlequah every year," said member Tom Mooney, who served as worshipful master for No. 10 in 1998. "Proceeds are matched by the lodge with another fund. I enjoy the fellowship of the guys and we all work together. It's a great organization that helps a lot of people."

Lodge members staff the concession stands during the annual Cher-O-Dair Shrine Club rodeo and the Shrine Circus. The Masons also organize the Students of Today and Teachers of Today awards in Cherokee County. Winners are honored at a dinner event each year.

Masonic members are male, at least 19 years old, and must express faith in a supreme being. The organization does not recruit. Those interested in joining must contact a member. Cherokee Masonic Lodge

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Courtesy photo/Cherokee Masonic Lodge No. 10

This photo shows Tahlequah's first Masonic Lodge as it looked in 1922. The photo dates the building to 1851, but Tahlequah historian Beth Herrington said the structure was built in 1852. It stood on the alley that runs along the 100 block between Keetoowah and Choctaw streets.

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No. 10 maintains a website at cherokee10.com.

There is an unhappy historical tale associated with the sword in the Masonic collection. At its 1836 convention, the Republic of Texas tabled the Bowles Village treaty, which was intended to cement Indian neutrality during Texas' war for independence from Mexico. The war ended before the convention, and delegates did not want to forfeit the lands promised.

In 1837, the treaty was deemed invalid over the objections of Houston, who was then president of Texas. He repeatedly tried to resurrect it, without success, during his first administration. The nullification led to the Cherokee War of 1838-'39, during which many Texas Cherokees were pushed across the Red River into the Choctaw Nation.