

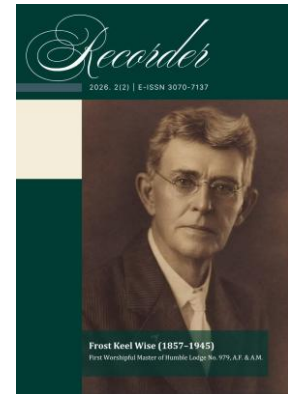
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On the Evolution of the Badges of Commanderies within the Grand Commandery of Illinois of the Masonic Order of Knights Templar (Late 19th – Early 20th Century)

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Abstract

This article examines the evolution of the badges of commanderies belonging to the Grand Commandery of Illinois of the Masonic Order of Knights Templar in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The study is based on an analysis of museum artifacts from the collection of *The Museum of the History of the American Knights Templar at Cherkas Global University*, as well as on a comparison of material sources with the documents of annual conclaves.

The research has established that, prior to the 1880s, commandery badges were most likely not used on the uniform, and that their appearance was associated with the formation of a system of visual identification within the Order. The earliest examples are characterized by an elongated black ribbon connecting the elements of the badge. Later, at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this ribbon was shortened, while the overall composition remained unchanged.

Special attention is paid to the reform of 1913–1914, which resulted in the introduction of a standardized type of badge on a black-and-white ribbon, approved by the Grand Commandery of Illinois. It is shown that the Chicago company R. M. Johnson & Son played a key role in the manufacture of these badges, ensuring the continuity of the visual tradition.

It is concluded that the evolution of the badges reflects a combination of the stability of symbolic form and adaptation to institutional changes. The study demonstrates the significance of material culture as a source for the history of Masonic organizations.

Keywords: Freemasonry, Knights Templar, Grand Commandery of Illinois, commandery badges, material culture, Masonic symbolism, regalia, R. M. Johnson & Son, nineteenth–twentieth centuries, museum collections.

1. Introduction

The study of the material culture of Masonic organizations represents an important direction in modern historiography, making it possible to reconsider the processes of institutional development and symbolic representation of fraternal communities. A special place in this context is occupied by the badges and regalia of the Knights Templar, which performed not only a decorative function, but also served as means of identification, expressions of hierarchy, and indicators of affiliation to specific divisions of the Order.

Within the Masonic Order of Knights Templar in the United States, the state Grand Commanderies played a significant role, including the Grand Commandery of Illinois, formed in the mid-nineteenth century and actively developing in the subsequent decades. Despite the existence of individual works devoted to the history of the Order, the evolution of commandery badges remains insufficiently studied, especially at the level of specific objects of material culture.

The aim of the present study is to analyze the evolution of the badges of the commanderies of the Grand Commandery of Illinois in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on the basis of museum artifacts. Particular attention is paid to changes in the design, structural features, and symbolism of the badges, as well as to the role of manufacturers in shaping stable visual standards. The study makes it possible to identify the main stages in the development of these objects and to determine their place within the system of Masonic symbolism and corporate culture.

2. Materials and Methods

The materials used in this study were artifacts from Collection 3 (badges and ribbons) of *The Museum of the History of the American Knights Templar at Cherkas Global University* (Houston, USA). Among the exhibits in this collection are six badges that belonged to commanderies within the Grand Commandery of Illinois: Elwood Commandery No. 6 – Exhibit No. 090; Galesburg Commandery No. 8 – Exhibit No. 231; Chicago Commandery No. 19 – Exhibit No. 233; Bethany Commandery No. 28 – Exhibit No. 042; Englewood Commandery No. 59 – Exhibit No. 207; Columbia Commandery No. 63 – Exhibit No. 197.

The methodological foundation of this study consists of the principles of historicism, systematicity, and source criticism applied within the framework of the study of material culture and the institutional history of Masonic organizations.

The study is based on a comprehensive interdisciplinary approach combining the methods of history, source studies, museum studies, and visual analysis. In particular, the historical-descriptive method was used to reconstruct the stages in the formation and transformation of the badges of the commanderies of the Grand Commandery of Illinois in the context of the development of the Order of Knights Templar in the United States.

Particular importance was attached to source criticism, within which museum objects are treated as independent historical sources. Their provenance, dating, state of preservation, and context of use were taken into account. Special attention was given to comparing the objects with written sources, above all the materials of the annual conclaves of the Grand Commandery of Illinois, which made it possible to correlate changes in badge design with institutional decisions.

An important role was also played by the comparative-typological method, applied to identify differences and similarities among the badges of various commanderies. This made it possible to distinguish the main types of badges (with an elongated ribbon, with a shortened ribbon, and the 1914 pattern) and to trace their evolution.

In addition, visual-formal analysis was employed, aimed at studying the composition, color scheme, materials, and structural features of the badges. This approach made it possible to reveal the stability of the basic Maltese cross form despite changes in auxiliary elements, above all the ribbon.

Thus, the combination of source criticism, comparative, and visual analysis ensured a comprehensive study of the evolution of commandery badges and made it possible to regard them not only as elements of uniform, but also as important bearers of symbolic and institutional information.

3. Results

The Grand Commandery of Illinois of the Masonic Order of Knights Templar was founded on October 27, 1857 ([46th Triennial Conclave...](#), 1955: 18). At that time it consisted of only three commanderies: Apollo Commandery No. 1 (founded in 1847), Belvidere Commandery No. 2 (founded in 1853), and Peoria Commandery No. 3 (founded in 1856) ([164th annual conclave...](#), 2020: 86–88). In the 1860s–1870s, commandery badges were not used on the uniform. As an illustration, one may cite the uniform of the Eminent Commander of Bethany Commandery No. 28 (Mendota, Illinois) (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Eminent Commander of Bethany Commandery No. 28 in the 1870s ([Cherkas, 2025: 117](#))

In Fig. 1, we may see that there are no badges on the uniform of the Knight Templar other than the badge of the Eminent Commander.

In all probability, the first commandery badges appeared among the Knights Templar of Illinois in the 1880s. This is indirectly indicated by the oldest complete uniform in the museum from Bethany Commandery No. 28, which belonged to the Civil War veteran Casper Ruedy (1835–1896) ([Cherkas, 2025: 102](#)). Casper Ruedy was also elected to the office of Eminent Commander in the 1870s and died in 1896. The uniform set also included the badge of this commandery (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Uniform set of Bethany Commandery No. 28 with the commandery badge (Cherkas, 2025: 27)

Let us examine this badge more closely.



Fig. 3. Badge of Bethany Commandery No. 28 on an elongated ribbon (MHAKT. Collection 3. Badges and Ribbons. Exhibit No. 042)

Thus, we may see that the badge was made of metal and that most of it was coated with gold enamel, while the leaves of the Maltese cross were white. The badge consisted of two metal parts connected by an elongated black ribbon. The manufacturer of the badge was the company R. M. Johnson & Son of Chicago, which had been operating since the 1880s (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. R. M. Johnson & Son hallmark

The badge of another commandery, Englewood Commandery No. 59, was likewise connected by the same elongated black ribbon (Fig. 5). This commandery was founded in 1886 ([164th annual conclave...](#), 2020: 87).



Fig. 5. Badge of Englewood Commandery No. 59 (MHAKT. Collection 3. Badges and Ribbons. Exhibit No. 207)

The presence of an elongated ribbon on the badge of a commandery founded in 1886 indicates that the design of the badge with an elongated ribbon belongs specifically to the 1880s.

The badges of Bethany Commandery No. 28 and Englewood Commandery No. 59 are the earliest commandery badges from the Grand Commandery of Illinois in the collection of the Museum of the History of the American Knights Templar.

At the turn of the nineteenth and in the first years of the twentieth century, the ribbon on the commandery badges was shortened, and a new version of the badge on a shortened black ribbon appeared. The museum collection contains two badges of this type: the Badge of Chicago Commandery No. 19 (Fig. 6) and the Badge of Columbia Commandery No. 63 (Fig. 7).



Fig. 6. Badge of Chicago Commandery No. 19 on a shortened ribbon ([MHAKT. Collection 3. Badges and Ribbons. Exhibit No. 233](#))



Fig. 7. Badge of Columbia Commandery No. 63 on a shortened ribbon ([MHAKT. Collection 3. Badges and Ribbons. Exhibit No. 197](#))

For visual confirmation of the two versions of commandery badges in the Grand Commandery of Illinois, we placed them side by side in Fig. 8.



Fig. 8. Later version of the badge on the left, earlier version on the right.

In Fig. 8, we may see that the length of the black ribbon was significantly reduced. At the same time, the manufacturer of the badges remained unchanged.

In 1913–1914, the Grand Commandery of Illinois undertook steps to change the design of the commandery badge in the state. A special Committee on Designative Badge was created for this purpose, and in 1914 it presented its proposal. We consider it appropriate to quote this document in full:

“REPORT — Committee on Designative Badge.

The report of the Committee on Designative Badge made the following report, which was adopted.

To the Officers and Sir Knights of the Grand Commandery of the Knights Templar, Illinois:

Your committee to whom was referred the matter of selecting a designation badge; an adoption of one having been made by recommendation of the committee on finance at the annual conclave of this Grand Commandery in 1913, recommend that said adoption be now annulled and would now recommend that the adoption of the Maltese Cross badge with two bars made of gold, the upper bar being black enameled, having stamped on it the name and number of the commandery and the lower bar to be of gold, connected by one link with the upper bar and on said lower bar be stamped the word ‘Illinois.’ A sample of said designation badge is herewith submitted (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9. Designative Badge Illinois Commanderies ([Fifty-eighth annual conclave..., 1914: 101](#))

Your committee further report that the Grand Recorder had already received designs of such a badge with bids from several firms and after discussion of the proposition your committee recommend the acceptance of the badge and bid submitted by R. M. Johnson & Son, Chicago, Ill., the cost of the name plate and the furnishing of the designation badges at the rate of thirty cents apiece; that the Grand Recorder be instructed to notify R. M. Johnson & Son of said acceptance. That the officers of the subordinate commanderies be required to place all orders for such number of designation badges as they may require for their Sir Knights with the said R. M. Johnson & Son.

All of which is courteously submitted,
 Albert F. Schoch,
 Thomas Albert Stevens,
 Delmar D. Darrah,
 Committee» ([Fifty-eighth annual conclave..., 1914: 102-103](#)).

The museum collection contains two badges with the design of the 1914 pattern: the Badge of Elwood Commandery No. 6 and the Badge (Fig. 9) of Galesburg Commandery No. 8 (Fig. 10).



Fig. 9. Badge of Elwood Commandery No. 6 (MHAKT. Collection 3. Badges and Ribbons. Exhibit No. 090)



Fig. 10. Badge of Galesburg Commandery No. 8 (MHAKT. Collection 3. Badges and Ribbons. Exhibit No. 231)

Essentially, all the changes in the new badge consisted in the fact that from this time onward the badge was placed on a slightly elongated black-and-white Knights Templar ribbon (Fig. 11).



Fig. 11. From left to right: early badge of the 1880s, badge of the late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries, badge of the 1914 pattern.

The manufacturer of all the badges shown in Fig. 11 was the Chicago company R. M. Johnson & Son, which specialized in the production of Masonic ornaments. Thus, over the course of more than fifty years, from the 1880s to at least the 1930s, the entire evolution of the badges of the commanderies of the Grand Commandery of Illinois produced by R. M. Johnson & Son consisted in changes in the colors and size of the ribbon, while the badge itself remained unchanged.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of the museum artifacts has made it possible to reconstruct the main stages in the evolution of the badges of the commanderies of the Grand Commandery of Illinois in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It has been established that before the 1880s such badges were, in all probability, not used on the uniform of the Knights Templar, and that their appearance was connected with the gradual development of a system of visual identification within the Order.

The earliest examples of badges are characterized by the presence of an elongated black ribbon connecting the metal elements, which makes it possible to date their appearance to the 1880s. Later, at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the construction changed: the ribbon became shorter, although the overall design of the badge remained unchanged. This indicates an aspiration toward standardization while preserving traditional symbolism.

The reforms of 1913–1914, initiated by the Grand Commandery of Illinois, led to the introduction of a standardized badge pattern mounted on a black-and-white ribbon. This stage reflects the transition from local variations to a centralized system of regalia regulated at the level of the Grand Commandery.

It should be especially noted that for more than half a century the key role in the manufacture of these badges was played by the Chicago company R. M. Johnson & Son. Despite changes in the design of the ribbon, the basic composition of the badge remained stable, which underscores the continuity of the symbolic tradition.

Thus, the evolution of the badges of the commanderies of the Grand Commandery of Illinois demonstrates a combination of conservatism in form and gradual adaptations conditioned by institutional and organizational changes within the Order. The results obtained confirm the importance of studying material culture for a deeper understanding of the history of Masonic organizations and their internal structure.

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