

HISTORY OF THE LOS ANGELES MASONIC SERVICE BUREAU



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Who Are We?

We are Your Partners in Service To Our Craft



We have been around since 1881. So, how did we start? It all started with the California Gold Rush on January 24, 1848.

CALIFORNIA GOLD RUSH (January 24, 1848 - 1855)

The gold rush of 1848 brought many people to California, many of whom were Freemasons, culminating in the birth of the Grand Lodge of California in 1850. On October 7, 1850 the ship “California” arriving in San Francisco from Panama had 22 cases of cholera on board, 14 of them fatal. Those passengers then boarded the ship “New World” bound for Sacramento. Within one month, 1000 people were dead. This was the start of the cholera epidemic in California and, unfortunately, infected many of our brethren and their families who came to California looking for gold.^{i ii} When people learned of the growing calamity, about 80 percent of the population of almost 7,000 fled, spreading the disease. In Hangtown (Placerville) about 700 died; even more died in Marysville. San Francisco lost 5 percent of its population; San Jose, 10 percent. As many as 5,000 cholera deaths may have occurred in northern California.ⁱⁱⁱ Additionally, cholera was transmitted along the California, Mormon and Oregon Trails, killing people that were believed to have died on their way to the California Gold Rush during the cholera years of 1849–1855.^{iv}

At that time, the great cholera outbreak of 1850 in Sacramento and San Francisco was one of the most rapid, deadly, and grisly contagions ever - a horrific episode in California state history, but one in which California’s early Masons left an indelible mark through their commitment to relief.^v

In 1855, based on the Boards of Relief programs of grand lodges on the east coast, five San Francisco lodges joined together to form the first **Masonic Board of Relief** in California^{vi} as a voluntary organization to relieve the heavy burden on our Craft resulting from the lingering effects of the epidemic. The idea was to pool the resources of lodges in metropolitan areas and make it easier to spot freeloaders and imposters. Where lodge jurisdictions overlapped, as they did in the larger cities, it was also difficult for any single lodge to know who should be responsible for sojourner relief, and those “boards of relief” made it easier to make that determination. Those Boards of Relief were recognized by the Grand Lodge and reports were routinely made during Annual Communication.

HISTORY OF THE LOS ANGELES MASONIC SERVICE BUREAU

About the same time, the **Masonic Relief Association of the United States** was formed as a "clearing house" for boards of relief. California, like most Grand Lodges, supported this Association. The Association, headquartered in New Orleans, kept the various Boards of Relief/Masonic Service Bureaus in contact with each other, arranged for bi-annual meetings (paid by the hosting group), issued warning of scam attempts, and other information believed necessary. They would exchange information amongst themselves and help individual boards discover imposters and freeloaders. All boards of relief would extend temporary relief to Masons whom they believed to be genuine brethren, and then send the bill to the brother's home lodge for reimbursement.^{vii}

In 1867 a Grand Lodge Standing Committee was established to monitor and coordinate the growth of new Masonic Boards of Relief.

On page 48 of the 1875 Proceedings, the Los Angeles Board of Relief is first mentioned and in March of 1881 the Masters of Los Angeles Lodge No. 42 and Pentalpa Lodge No. 202 formally established the **Los Angeles Board of Relief**, which later became the **Los Angeles Masonic Service Bureau (LAMSB)**.^{viii} By 1890, all other lodges then existing in Los Angeles had been invited to join the Bureau in providing relief, be it financial, mental anguish relief, or graves. The Bureau was a court of first resort in providing service to the sojourning Mason. This service was expensive and required financial assistance from the local lodges. This assistance took the form of contributions from our brethren supplemented by a voluntary per capita charge per lodge member.^{ix}

Here is a picture of the San Francisco Masonic Board of Relief during the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, which leveled over 80% of the entire city with its estimated 7.9 magnitude.



On March 19, 1906, Brother Honorable Dr. Charles Wilson Bush^x, a former District Inspector and State Senator from the mid-1870s, bequeathed a \$45,000 endowment (*equivalent to \$1,281,970 in the year 2020*) to provide relief to any distressed Mason in the Los Angeles area. The Los Angeles Board of Relief (now called the Los Angeles Masonic Service Bureau) has been a recipient of that endowment since 1906. This endowment took the form of the "Bush Masonic



HISTORY OF THE LOS ANGELES MASONIC SERVICE BUREAU

Relief, Incorporated,” a private corporation independently managed by three Master Masons. This relief endowment has continually provided the funds with which the Los Angeles Masonic Service Bureau operates today. It should be noted that in the past the Bush Masonic Relief, Inc., has also provided relief to several other Masonic Service Bureaus and to other Masonic organizations.

Over many decades, charitable contributions from the Bush Foundation severely reduced its principal account to the point where it could no longer provide the same level of traditional support to the Bureau. Consequently, in 2024 the bureau found it necessary to seek from each member lodge a voluntary annual \$2 per member assessment. This assessment provided nearly 30% of the Bureau’s operating funds, thus, allowing the Bush Foundation the ability to not only continue to contribute charitable funds to the Bureau, but to also improve its principal account, thus, allowing it to continue well into the future.

In 1919 the **Masonic Service Association** (MSA) of the United States was formed for an entirely different purpose, and continues to perform some of the original services. During World War I, grand lodges offered to be of assistance to American troops overseas in Europe, but the United States Government refused to take them up on this offer, complaining they could not deal with 49 separate entities. Grand lodges then formed the Masonic Service Association of the United States of America (now of North America) to coordinate the relief sent overseas, and the government was satisfied with this arrangement. It was out of this effort that the Veterans' Hospital Visitation Program arose, and soon began publishing the "Short Talk Bulletin." The MSA also coordinated internal relief requests from grand lodges which had experienced natural disasters in their jurisdictions, and that is probably the origin of the confusion between the MSA and the Masonic Relief Association.^{xi}

In the 1920’s, the Grand Lodge of California authorized the formation of private **Boards of Relief** and **Employment Bureaus** to provide employment services to our members.^{xii} Employment Bureaus emerged when the employment work became too much for the local Boards of Relief – although Boards of Relief continued to provide employment services even after the Employment Bureaus were created.

These Masonic Employment Bureaus were established to provide employment rather than monetary relief to distressed sojourning Masons and their families. In the course of time their services were extended to Masons of this jurisdiction as well as sojourners. Both in concept and performance these Bureaus exemplified the finest traditions of our Craft and established an imposing record of service.^{xiii} These Boards and Bureaus agreed to recommend to potential employers only members of the Craft as they were tried and true men who passed the moral requirements of our Order.^{xiv}

HISTORY OF THE LOS ANGELES MASONIC SERVICE BUREAU

Up to this time it should be noted Boards of Relief were clearly voluntary associations operating autonomously.^{xv}

Between 1924 and 1926, Grand Lodge began to use the term “**Service Bureau**” to describe a consolidated view of the Boards of Relief and Employment Bureaus.^{xvi}

In 1926 the Grand Lodge **Board of Control** was established to monitor the existing Masonic Service Boards of Relief. In 1927 the Grand Lodge Special Committee on Sojourner Relief and Boards of Relief was established.^{xvii}

In 1932, Brother Walter L. Berger, P.M. [Pentalpa Lodge No. 202], decided that the Board of Relief should organize a Masonic Breakfast to honor all of the employers that used the Agency to provide their employees. This breakfast continues today, but instead of honoring employers it honors our Grand Master and other Masonic leaders (*see March 1967 event below*).

By the 1950s, the terms Boards of Relief and Employment Bureaus were no longer in use and the combined services were provided by Masonic Service Bureaus.^{xviii}

In 1955, the Grand Jurisdiction of California had eighteen Masonic Service Bureaus (Boards of Relief).^{xix} Some Bureaus were set just to provide funerals while others were only able to provide canes, walkers, wheelchairs, etc., to the member lodges.

In 1956,^{xx} recognizing the great work of the Masonic Homes of California and other related relief entities that extended relief to individual brethren, the Bush Masonic Relief, Inc., modified its mission to focus on the relief of lodges and other masonic bodies as necessary.

On March 8, 1967, pursuant to a recommendation of the Board of Control and after a detailed review of the history and experience of the Masonic Employment Bureaus, the Grand Master issued a directive that all Employment Bureaus be discontinued as of June 30, 1967. In his direction he stated, “The directive did not, nor was it intended to, preclude Boards of Relief from making job referrals where available in lieu of financial assistance in relief cases properly coming before them.”^{xxi} Sometime later, the Los Angeles Masonic Service Bureau breakfast changed its focus from honoring the area employers to honoring the Grand Master and other Masonic leaders.

In 1969, the Special Committee on Sojourner Relief and Boards of Relief^{xxii}, and subsequent discussions on the subject in the Proceedings over the next few years, discovered an important pivot in our Fraternity’s approach to organized Masonic relief. In 1971 the name of the Masonic Service Boards of Relief was changed to **Masonic Service Bureaus**.¹

¹ 1970 Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of California (pages 256-262)

HISTORY OF THE LOS ANGELES MASONIC SERVICE BUREAU

The change in name of the Board of Relief to Masonic Service Bureau was a rebranding effort in support of a new focus. There was recognition that government had supplanted the need for Masonic relief in many instances and new functions needed to be emphasized by the Boards of Relief if they were to continue. Those newly emphasized functions were set forth in our current Masonic Code provisions on Service Bureaus.

In 1991, the California Masonic Code^{xxiii} identified the responsibilities of Masonic Service Bureaus as follows. They shall be for the purpose of:

- A. Properly relieving the distress of Masons who are members of Lodges of this or any other Jurisdiction, their widows and orphans, while residing or visiting in the area assigned to the Masonic Service Bureau;
- B. Arranging and conducting funerals of such deceased Masons;
- C. Making investigations requested by Lodges of this or any other Jurisdiction;
- D. Visiting sick sojourning Masons;
- E. Operating a clearing house as to applicants for the degrees and for dual or plural membership by affiliation of Lodges in the area assigned to that Masonic Service Bureau; and
- F. Such Masonic activities as may be provided in this Code or authorized by the Grand Secretary, subject to appeal and review of the Grand Master or Grand Lodge

In 1992, due to increased liability insurance costs, several Masonic Service Bureaus were struggling financially and considered closing.^{xxiv} This was resolved when the Bureaus came under the control of the Grand Lodge of California; however, some bureaus began to close.

In 1996, the Grand Lodge Committee on Masonic Service Bureaus published an updated Operational Guideline with Rules and Regulations that included a *requirement* that all Lodges join a MSB nearest its meeting place. In 2002 the Grand Lodge Committee on MSBs was eliminated and its duties assigned to the Grand Secretary.^{xxv} By that time, lodge membership in such MSBs became optional.

As of 02/28/2024, it was confirmed with the Grand Secretary that the operating guidelines produced in 1996 can be a good guideline for the Los Angeles Masonic Service Bureau. Despite what it says in Article II of the California Masonic Service Bureaus' Operating Guidelines, Rules and Regulations, changes to the guidelines do not require approval of the grand lodge, and therefore do not need a resolution to be presented at the Annual Communication.

In his role to assist the Masonic Service Bureau to formulate rules and amendments necessary for your effective operation, the Grand Secretary defers to the good judgement of the leadership of the service bureau to determine the fees and assessments necessary for the administration of the Masonic Service Bureau.

HISTORY OF THE LOS ANGELES MASONIC SERVICE BUREAU

On March 31, 2015, the Long Beach Masonic Service Bureau (LBMSB) transferred its operation to the Los Angeles Masonic Service Bureau.²

Between 2002 and 2020, the number of MSBs dwindled to only two: The Greater Sacramento Area MSB and the Los Angeles MSB and became another of our Fraternity's best kept secrets.³ The need for the kinds of investigations and the other services, which were seen as needed in the 1970's, were not as important in 2020 as they once were with the advent of contemporary means of communication and may have contributed to the current reduction in the number of MSBs.

As of 2020, the Los Angeles Masonic Service Bureau consisted of 71 Lodges located in Los Angeles County (and a couple on the border in Ventura and San Bernardino Counties). Its purpose today is basically to act as a supplemental management organization for you; not an entitlement agency. They work primarily to help your lodges and Masons to meet your own obligations.

Communication technology did not deter the members of the Los Angeles Masonic Service Bureau. Our officers and members continue to follow through with providing the following services as "Your Partner in Service" to our beloved Craft:

1. Properly relieve the distress of Sojourning Masons
2. Visit sick sojourning Masons
3. Provide funeral service assistance
4. Conduct investigations for other Grand Lodges
5. Provide a Clearing House of Degree applicants
6. Provide an annual:
 - Grand Master Breakfast Reception
 - Deputy Grand Master Reception
 - Discussion of Grand Lodge Resolutions
 - Youth Order Leaders' Recognition Reception
 - Clothing drive for the Midnight Mission
 - Support for the Child ID booth at the Los Angeles County Fair
7. In 2020, the Los Angeles Masonic Service Bureau partnered with the Masonic Homes of California's Masonic Outreach Services (MOS) in support of providing services to our brethren.

² The Bush Foundation informed them that it no longer had funds available to continue supporting their operations.

³ As bureaus closed, their funds were transferred to the grand lodge and maintained in a separate account. As of 2020, the amount was \$219,941.00.

HISTORY OF THE LOS ANGELES MASONIC SERVICE BUREAU

You can also follow us on Facebook^{xxvi} in order to keep up with the great work we do and to participate in our unifying events.

In 2019 your LAMSB created several videos to publicize our work and posted them on the Member Center. They are ...



- (1) The “Booth Video,” which we play when staffing booths at various events;



- (2) The “Who Are We” video, which summarizes our mission;



- (3) The “At Lodge with a Representative” video, which we show when invited to an event; and



- (4) The “At Lodge where no Representative is present” video, which we provide to a lodge when a representative is unable to attend.

Please follow the following link trail to view and share the videos:

Open “Freemason.org”, in the “Today we make a profound difference” bar, click on “Member Sign In”, use you email and password to sign into the Member Center, select “Resources,” under ‘Masonic Assistance’ select “Masonic Service Bureau,” then select one of the following Masonic Service Bureau Video Links. Copy and paste the desired link into YouTube to view and share.

HISTORY OF THE LOS ANGELES MASONIC SERVICE BUREAU

01. Masonic Service Bureau Video ("Booth Video")

02. Masonic Service Bureau Video ("Who Are We")

03. Masonic Service Bureau Video ("At Lodge - With Representative")

04. Masonic Service Bureau Video ("At Lodge - No Representative")

You can also watch our "Who Are We" video by searching "Masonic Service Bureau Filer" on YouTube.

For additional information, please contact our Executive Secretary at (818) 366-3572, email office@lamsb.org, or check out our website at <http://lamsb.org/>.

Remember, *We Are Your Partners In Service To Our Craft.*

ⁱ Charles E. Rosenberg (1987). *The cholera years: the United States in 1832, 1849 and 1866*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. ISBN 0-226-72677-0.

ⁱⁱ <https://28218290.weebly.com/cholera-comes-to-california.html>.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/de052557-7a43-46e8-9303-38b62fb8f825/downloads/0104-west.pdf?ver=1689095181829>

^{iv} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diseases_and_epidemics_of_the_19th_century

^v <https://www.bing.com/search?q=Sacramento+and+San+Francisco+was+one+of+the+most+rapid%2C+deadly%2C+and+grisly+contagions&FORM=ANAB01&PC=U531>

^{vi} 1855 Proceedings, page 42-43. LAMSB notes indicate the first California Board of Relief officially started operation on January 1, 1856.

^{vii} MW Donald Krueger, PGM, Wisconsin, http://www.themasonictrowel.com/masonic_talk/stb/stbs/90-01.htm

^{viii} According to an IRS letter dated 4/26/2021, it states, "Although we are unable to provide copies of these documents, our records indicate a determination letter was issued in January 1938 recognizing (this) organization as exempt from Federal income tax under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Our records also indicate this organization is a private foundation within the meaning of Section 509(a) of the Code."

^{ix} California Masonic Code §1100.020.

^x *Born on 11/16/1824, member of Pentalpha No. 202, Master in 1874, Inspector in 1874, Passed away on 6/8/1905, and a California State Senator.*

<https://books.google.com/books?id=gHcHAQAIAAJ&pg=PA329&lpg=PA329&dq=dr+charles+w+bush+death&source=bl&ots=HKXa9Tgpbq&sig=ACfU3U23VuqhipyVvTgg2bavyGZ0eVcJg&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewjm24uir4fqAhXKJzQIHxJ0AMwQ6AEwDHoECA8QAQ>

^{xi} MW John Cooper <https://www.msana.com/whoweare.asp>

^{xii} VW Allan Casalou.

^{xiii} 1967 Proceedings, page 33

^{xiv} WB David Patterson, LAMSB Executive Secretary Emeritus.

^{xv} 1967 Proceedings, page 34.

^{xvi} VW Allan Casalou.

^{xvii} It is unknown when this committee disbanded.

^{xviii} VW Allan Casalou.

HISTORY OF THE LOS ANGELES MASONIC SERVICE BUREAU

^{xix} 1955 Proceedings, page 163.

^{xx} According to WB Steve Johnson, the President of the Bush Masonic Relief, Inc.

^{xxi} 1967 Proceedings, page 33.

^{xxii} Page 242 of the 1969 proceedings

^{xxiii} §1100.010

^{xxiv} 1992 Proceedings, Page 367.

^{xxv} 2002 Grand Master Whitaker's Recommendation No. 2.

^{xxvi} <https://www.facebook.com/masonicservicebureauoflosangeles>