



Castle Island Virtual Lodge

A research lodge for Digital Masonry

Abstract:

The Following paper will outline the evolution of Castle Island Virtual Lodge from the beginning of a Manitoba Online Education Lodge to the present day International Research Lodge – conducted online via the Zoom Web Conferencing platform.

W Brother Nicholas Laine
CIVLodge190@gmail.com

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Castle Island Virtual Lodge – A research lodge for millennials

I am pleased to present to you some background and discussion regarding Castle Island Virtual Lodge No. 190 of the Grand Lodge of Manitoba. I have been a member of Castle Island Virtual Lodge since 2014, first in the position of the Lodge Education Officer (LEO). I now am honoured to hold the position of Secretary (IPM) and LEO since 2015.

The Early days of CIV Lodge:

First off, some background on Castle Island Virtual Lodge and why the Grand Lodge of Manitoba brought this concept to reality. In 2012 four Past Grand Masters and the current Grand Master M.W. Brother David Love saw a need to create a new platform for the Brethren of Manitoba. They wanted to ensure the sick, shut-in, and members of the military or Police could attend Lodge from anywhere in Manitoba or Canada. Castle Island Virtual Lodge is a regularly constituted lodge in the Grand Lodge of Manitoba. Our charter is like that of any other lodge in Manitoba; we have the ability to Open/Close and complete all ritual that could be conducted as within a traditional lodge. In my discussions with M.W. Brother C-Rae Haldane-Wilson, our Past Grand Master and Grand Secretary, he described the many hours of debate and discussions which occurred within the Board of General Purpose and the Directors with regards to the set-up and vision of this new venture. The jurisprudence committee discussion took some time to ensure the Virtual Lodge set-up followed the Constitution and By-laws as set forth in Grand Lodge of Manitoba. I have little details on the discussions, but I know they were full of debate and questions. I would point to the fact that the sitting Grand Master and his Deputy Grand Master in 2012 were among the Charter members along with various members of the Board of General Purpose. All founding Members were from the Winnipeg area with the exception of R.W. Brother Mohns in Thompson, some 750 Km away from Winnipeg. R.W. Brother Mohns was a recent Past District Deputy Grand Master within District 1 – the Grand Master’s District, a brother with a zest for Education.

Castle Island Virtual Lodge has conducted a limited number of traditional “Bricks and Mortar” meetings in the Winnipeg Masonic Centre. The first meetings occurred in the Masonic Centre to start the lodge off. Based on the resolutions regarding the

formation of the Lodge it was decided that the Lodge would be set-up in all ways to replicate a traditional lodge. Castle Island Virtual Lodge can hold a physical lodge meeting; if the membership were to request that occurrence. Our lodge is set-up to allow for any degree work to occur, we however have elected from the outset to be an Education Lodge. We only open in the first, complete a brief introduction of the visitors, complete the business portion, into the Educational presentation and Closing utilizing the Manitoba work.

The name Castle Island originates from our first meeting location which occurred in Second Life VR Platform. In 2012 the Lodge owned a virtual island that had a castle as its virtual meeting room and all of this existed within that virtual world. Second Life is a free 3D virtual world where users can socialize, connect and create using free voice and text chat. The system was used for two years with limited success; the founding members continued to seek an improved system for online meeting.

Charter members of Castle Island Virtual Lodge:

Castle Island's Charter Worshipful Master

- M.W. Bro. Dave Love - (Grand Master in 2009 – 2010) *
- M.W. Bro. Chibu Uson (Grand Master 2011 – 2012) - Senior Warden
- M.W. Bro. Steve Kane – Junior Warden & Treasurer (Grand Master 1995 – 1996) current Executive Secretary of Grand Lodge
- M.W. Bro. C. Rae Haldane-Wilsone – Secretary (Grand Master 1997 – 1998, Gr Sec 2001 – 2010)
- R.W. Bro. Bernie Gross – Past Grand Director of Ceremonies and current Grand Historian
- R.W. Bro. Norm Pohl – Chaplain (current Grand Chaplain)
- R.W. Bro. Jake Mohns** - Past District Deputy Grand Master and Past Master of Mystery Lodge #174 Thompson, MB
- R.W. Bro. Fred Heinrichs

Note:

* Deceased while serving as Master

** Served 1 ½ years as Master of CIV Lodge

Since 2014 the lodge has utilized three video conferencing platforms used to bring the brethren together. Our Communication strategy in the early years was very

limited. We used “Empress Notes”; a notice that was provided to all the Past Grand Masters and Senior board members within North America. At this stage the average rank attending our meetings was Right Worshipful or higher. This was the only communication strategy to invite visitors to our meetings. We also used a website under the Northern Freemason – moderated by R.W. Mohns. In addition, we started a Facebook page in 2013 and we have some 85 members in 2018.

With the interest growing in various masonic communities, we explored the discussion with various Podcasters in Upper United States in 2015. I will explore the success of our Journey with other Internet based systems later in this discussion.

My Journey within our Virtual Lodge:

In 2013, I had one of the most interesting Masonic experiences in Freemasonry that changed my course; I visited a virtual lodge. In fact, at the time believe I visited “**the**” virtual lodge, Castle Island Virtual Lodge. The reason I say “the” is because I don't think there is another virtual lodge in the world like ours. My good friend and mentor from my Mother Lodge in Northern Manitoba (North of 55th parallel) R.W. Brother Jake Mohns introduced me to CIV Lodge in September of 2013. At this time the lodge was attempting to establish and test a new Web Conferencing platform. I assisted in the testing of the Adobe Conferencing platform; it was OK – but it had a limit on the number of participants. We then tested the WebEx Conference platform and it was accepted as the next platform for the lodge. Our secretary uses the record function to archive all the meetings in lieu of taking meeting minutes. In March 2014 M.W. Bro. Dave Love passed to the Grand Lodge above, with R.W. Mohns taking over as the Worshipful Master. During R.W. Brother Mohns’ term as Worshipful Master we continued to work the bugs out with Cisco WebEx platform. Brother Mohns suggested that I visit until we get the platform “figured out”; at this time, we were not sure the Lodge would continue. At this time, we needed to stabilize the platform for the lodge to grow and flourish. After many months of “Can you hear me” and set-up of various Brother's PCs, all participants could use the Cisco WebEx platform successfully. Brother Mohns asked if I could assist with the “Tech-y Stuff” for the Lodge. I then requested to join and was appointed as the Lodge Education Officer – Brother Mohns was looking for an active brother with a willingness to research

and provide content for the various meetings; and who could administer WebEx while attending the meeting. I remember the conversations like they were just yesterday; I asked, “What new content could I bring to the likes of Four Past Grand Masters?” The task was a bit daunting, but with Brother Mohns’ support I started to define the Education plan for the 2014 – 2015 year. Within the next year I was installed as the Worshipful Master of Burlington Lodge No. 165. At this time R.W. Brother Mohns had been master of a lodge seven times and he was looking for a new master for CIVL. In the April 2015 meeting in the comfort of my basement I had three Past Grand Masters complete an abridged version of the Installation of the new Master. Interestingly, that I was a Master within two Lodges and jurisdictions. And yes “The Work” is slightly different in Manitoba. The next task was to grow the visitors and attract new members in our lodge.

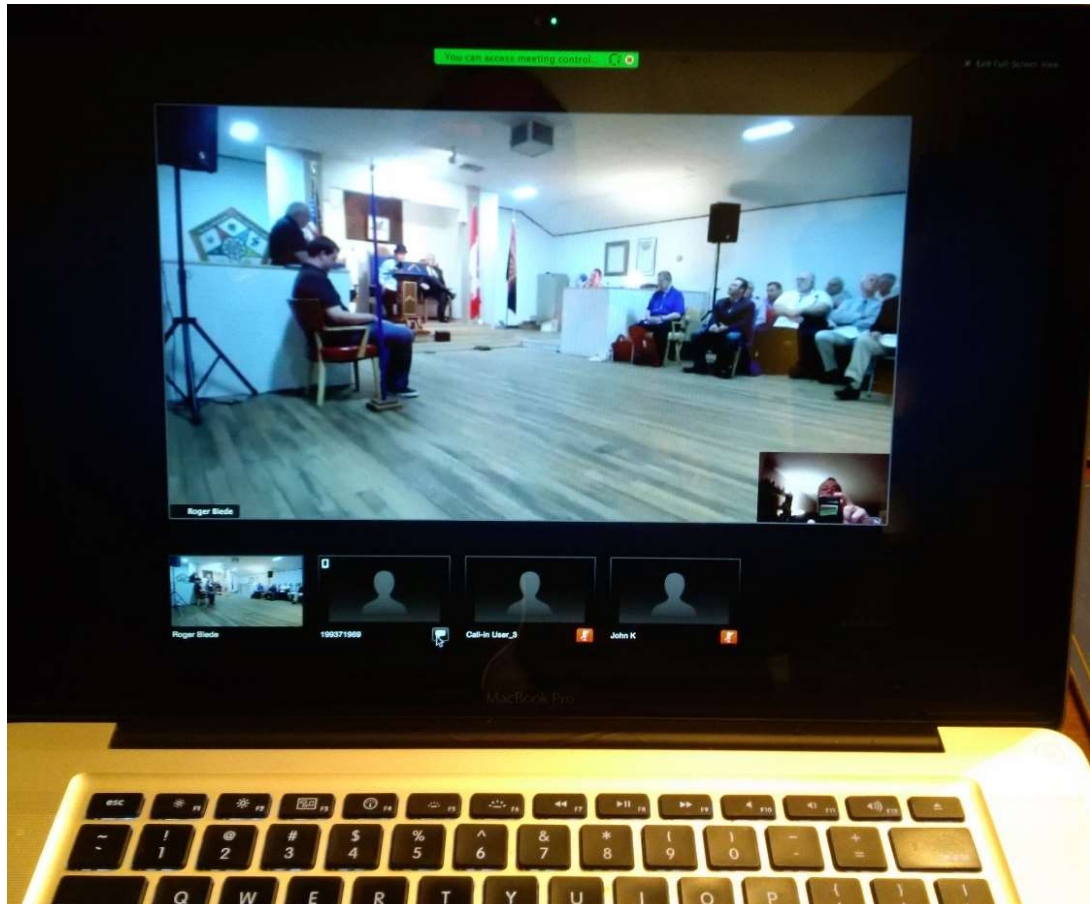
What is a Virtual Lodge?

So, what is a virtual lodge? I would describe it as the next logical step after an Internet Lodge. An Internet Lodge is a lodge that is open to brothers of many jurisdictions. It is oftentimes seeking only brothers to affiliate or subscribe as degree work is not their focus. The lodge is instead a marketplace of ideas and a way for the fraternal spirit to spread across the world. An Internet lodge meets in the physical world but corresponds in a variety of Web based ways, email, message boards, etc. on daily basis. Some examples of Internet lodges are [Internet Lodge No.9659 UGLE](#) and [Lodge Ireland 2000](#).

Our virtual lodge meets online; the brothers assemble online at wherever they are located. As a member I have met while attending a conference in Ottawa at the base of Parliament buildings using only a telephone link for a Committee of General purposes meeting. In 2017 I completed the business meeting from Las Vegas – MGM Grand. All our meetings have a ritualistic opening and closing, and the business of the lodge is dispensed in the same manner that a physical lodge would. It is a lodge in every sense of the word... well, maybe not every sense. This type of lodge begs the question: **“What is a lodge? Is a lodge the people or is the lodge the building? Or is it both?”**

Our Lodge is ritually opened and conduct the business of the lodge in the same recognizable format that thousands of lodges do each and every month. After all

business is dispensed with, the lodge is ritualistically closed. The brothers performed the duties of the lodge as a lodge. We have a Worshipful Master, Wardens, Deacons, Inner Guard, and an Immediate Past Master. We open the lodge with the VSL open with the Square and Compass and display our charter. Every “necessary” component of a lodge is utilized.



Castle Island Virtual Lodge attends Gila Valley Lodge No. 9 – Arizona

Within the growth of the lodge we have experienced some technology and practical driven issues. One of the first challenges we covered was the creation of “WebEx users guide” as well as a “Protocol and Etiquette” within our Virtual lodge. The guide speaks to how to setup the technology of the Video Conference platform – sound, video and bandwidth. With all of the basic technology set-up we remind our participants of the importance of “Lighting” in the room they are in as well as the concept of self-tyling. The concept of self-tyling continues to be a point of discussion when we add a new crop of visitors and visitors in a Lodge room.

The next technology question was that of platform support. How do our brethren connect to the meeting? In this situation we continue to ensure both a laptop and mobile connection platform. Based on the meeting participants the vast majority are using a Laptop (Window and some Mac) to connect to our meetings. Over the years we have learned that the moderator of the Communication platform needs to mute all the participant microphones at the beginning of the meeting. This ensures the Communication platform has the correct focus, on the individual speaking, not the individual joining late.

Participant management processes were developed to ensure all individuals attending were paid Mason's (EAs, FCs, and MMs) in that current year. An email request is sent to the individual seeking to visit with a request of a photo of a dues card or Letter for the Secretary of his lodge (Scotland, Germany, Australia as example do not have dues cards). The process is then tracked on a Spreadsheet and logged for an invite. The requester's Grand Lodge is checked in the listing of all "Lodges Masonic" to ensure the Grand of Manitoba recognizes that individual's Grand Lodge. Within fifteen to twenty days in advance of a meeting a calendar booking is sent.



The WebEx platform did not provide the Moderator a listing of who is attending. This then created a couple of logistical challenges. First the sizing of the WebEx platform account; the original sizing was purchased at a limit of 24 participants. In

the early years we continue to hover over the 17 – 20 total participants. Once we added the Podcast community we continued to gather steam with an increase to an average of 28 – 35 participants. We had a meeting where a Member of CIV Lodge was late and attempting to log in; we needed to ask a guest to leave to allow the member into the meeting to establish quorum and open the lodge. Once this become a regular occurrence we modified the WebEx platform to allow a maximum of fifty users. Cost of the expanded WebEx platform was then a concern. The Senior leaders of the lodge continued the investigation of the cost structure of Cisco WebEx versus other platforms and what impact this would have on our dues structure. We found a solution within the team; one of the brothers had a business license for the VIA3 Web Conference solution and he has offered it to the lodge for our use at no cost. We are now utilizing that platform as we continue into the 2018 – 2019 masonic year.



Castle Island Virtual Lodge – January 31st 2018 Meeting

With the change to our third Web Conference platform we finalize the participant tracking process within MS Office Calendar application. We can now track of who is attending, the maybes, and no acceptance in the form of Excel table. Within a standard invite process, I have some 150 masons from around the world invited.

Castle Island Virtual Lodge is an important first foray into combining Freemasonry and the internet. The internet is redefining our sense of place and our sense of time. We listen to podcasts and use Google Hangouts to educate ourselves. We use telepresence devices to conduct meetings from any place with Internet access or Skype or FaceTime to chat with family and friends. I would describe a Virtual lodge as being a place on the internet, each brother tying his own surroundings and within himself, guarding against the vices and superfluities of his life. Castle Island Lodge is breaking down the conception of what makes us Masons.

How our Virtual Lodge is changing the mode of a meeting place?

Can Speculative Masonry work without a physical meeting place? Can we experience Freemasonry wherever we are so dispersed? I think the answer to both these questions is a resounding yes. Within the past three years our Lodge continues to educate our Brethren while participating on various Podcasts and Reddit.

The following link is an example of a Reddit link posted:

https://www.reddit.com/r/freemasonry/comments/5fuc3a/castle_island_virtual_lodge_190_grand_lodge_of/

The following podcasts have provided growth and visibility to the young millennial masons.

Podcasts with Castle Island Team:

Masonic Round Table – Virginia USA

<http://www.themasonicroundtable.com/2014/08/episode-26-cyber-lodge/>
<http://www.themasonicroundtable.com/2016/10/episode-138-the-cyber-lodge-part-2/>

Masonic Lite – Pennsylvania USA

<http://www.masoniclite.com/2017/07/episode-033-nicholas-laine-wm-of.html?m=0>

Brought to Light – Victoria Australia

<http://podcast.blueloungesc.com/podcast/episode-28-the-worlds-first-virtual-lodge-with-wbro-nicholas-laine/>

<http://podcast.blueloungesc.com/podcast/episode-50-the-importance-of-past-masters-in-lodge/>

The Podcasts mentioned above have made our Virtual Lodge known to the Millennial mason, and continue to drive new visitors to our lodge. Based on our tracking documents we have seen some fifty or so new visitors interested in the Virtual lodge once they hear about CIV on any of these podcasts. My observations are that without this communication channel the Lodge would have not seen the growth and acceptance within Masonic community at large. The question of acceptance of other Grand Lodges is often inquired about. To date we have no issues or challenges based on the acceptance of our Lodge nor its Virtual presence.

I continue to enjoy my time with the brothers. I met Grands, Past Grands, and as well as officers of various lodges from around the world. I've met brothers dedicated to moving our Fraternity forward. I've seen a new route that Freemasonry is taking as she enters the Future world of technology. Today we have officers from California, Arizona, Colorado, Pennsylvania, Florida, Manitoba, Ontario, Roma Italy, and Victoria Australia. We continue to grow with regular attendance from Scotland, Australia, Canada and the United States (primarily the eastern seaboard). The forum allows for like-minded Masons interested in education to meet in virtual environment no where they live. The net effect is our lodge continues to "collect" like-minded masons at a rate of 4 new members per year. A common theme is all of these new members are looking for education medium that meets "their" evolution of knowledge in the Craft.

Feedback from our Visitors

Feedback from the average visitor is always positive here are a couple of quotes from visitors to our lodge:

Brother Joey Boyer, JW, Ascension Lodge, UD, Grand Lodge of Arizona

“CIVL is a unique and wonderful lodge experience. A night of tyled Masonic education and an opportunity to sit with regular Brethren from around the world? It doesn't get much better than that.

I've had the opportunity to sit with friends and Brothers that I've known through the internet in a regular and tyled lodge thanks to CIVL. While I do not feel it can replace a physical Masonic lodge experience, it is a wonderful substitute.”

Brother Dio De Brito, Trafalgar Lodge, Grand Lodge of Canada in the Province of Ontario

“Progress does not and will never come at the cost of the Ritual! Castle Island is a progressive means of reaching dedicated and like-minded Masons around the world in general discussion.”

W. Bro. Jon Ruark, The Patriot Lodge No. 1957, Grand Lodge of Virginia

“Castle Island Virtual Lodge fills a critical void in today's society. As a busy father of four young children, I often have "Masonic guilt" of leaving my kids to travel to other lodges. CIVL provides masonic education and fraternal camaraderie in a new platform that inspires viewpoints from other jurisdictions and creates a sense of community no matter where you are.”

Brother Jordan Cooper – St. Andrew No. 1269 – Grand Lodge of Scotland

“I've always enjoyed being able to partake in Castle Island's virtual meetings. The opportunity to visit with and learn from brothers from all over the world shows that Freemasonry is a truly global organisation and I always enjoy myself.”

R.W. Brother Robert Johnson – Waukegan Lodge No. 78 – Grand Lodge of Illinois

A Direction Forward – The enhancement of Digital Masonry

“I feel that Castle Island Virtual Lodge is a way-point in the direction in terms of this progressive moral science. It's the future of Freemasonry in many respects.”

I believe that all Grand Lodges need to encourage these types of experiments. Evolving doesn't mean discarding or ignoring what once was, is, or will be nor is Castle Island Lodge an innovation. I'm glad to see my Grand Lodge of Manitoba, embracing something like this. I don't think we need to completely dismantle the physical Masonic world and reassemble it. I don't see a virtual lodge as interfering with our practice or the only way that Masonry should be worked. What I do see it as is a new effort at making connections. That is what Masonry is all about. Castle Island Virtual Lodge is all about Education and the Fraternity. Each meeting is conducted like a “normal lodge” we have new challenges to deal with; Time Zones, Bandwidth and the process of introducing new visitors to a Web based education experience.

Our senior leadership team within the Lodge continues to reach out to other Grand Lodges to assist in the adoption of Virtual Lodges across North America. We have had discussions with many officers in Nebraska, Colorado, Ohio and Victoria Australia. In all cases, with the exception of Victoria, none have been able to establish a strategy to introduce a Virtual Lodge in their jurisdiction. The challenge seems to be the first step of the Grand Lodge acknowledging the need for a new platform of education. We continue to offer our team's assistance and knowledge via our Secretary to assist in the processes we used to move this lodge into a reality. Today the Grand Lodge of Victoria (or Freemasons of Victoria – FMV) is the only Grand Lodge willing to emulate CIV Lodge in some form. We have had their Grand line of FMV visit in 2017 and we continue to assist in the set-up of an education lodge online.

Message from RWBro. Bruce Cowie

Grand Secretary

Be Part of Forming a Virtual Lodge

A few weeks ago, I attended the Castle Island Virtual Lodge No.190. This is warranted under the Grand Lodge of Manitoba. This was an online meeting including a ritual for opening and closing the Lodge and the usual elements of a Lodge meeting. Each participant was in his own location. It was the individual responsibility to ensure their space was tidy.

Each participant logged on from their computer with a webcam. A central controller enabled the participants to see who was speaking.

In attendance were our Membership Manager Bro Andrew Power and our Masonic Services Manager WBro Ben Quick. It was pleasing also that a number of other Brethren in our jurisdiction also attended. In fact the work for the meeting was a presentation from Bro Jack Aquilina on the Blue Lounge.

Brethren, I found the whole experience of value as it gave an opportunity to see Freemasonry from another perspective and to meet some Brethren online who were enthusiastic about their Craft. It reinforced comments that Freemasonry is about the man not the physical place where they meet. It enabled fellowship and learning. A virtual Lodge will not replace a traditional Lodge but rather provide a different experience.

The above note was received after the Grand team of Victoria attended on regular meeting in 2017.

FMV is presenting a concept of a Lodge which presents education over a Web streaming system – Zoom. The Lodge would utilize a Lodge at Brunswick-United in Melbourne to Open, present education and Close online. The lodge having a kickoff meeting scheduled for April 9th, our Junior Deacon Bro. Jack Aquilina and others from the Blue Lounge Social Club are assisting with this new lodge setup.

Within our Senior leadership team, we continue to discuss what does growth and expansion look like in the future. How does the work that we are doing today assist other Grand Lodges' growth and expansion? Our team continues to discuss the process of expansion and growth for the lodge as we evolve. CIVL is known to those who are looking for Educational experience online. The real question is when will our Grand Lodges also see and acknowledge the need. As a member of the Grand Lodge of Canada in the Province of Ontario as well as the Grand Lodge of Manitoba, I am not sure the Ontario Grand line is aware CIVL exists. My DDGM and Past DDGM both know we exist. Last year as I travelled with our DDGM in Hamilton District A, I spoke of CIV Lodge often. I would suggest that our model is functioning and it will evolve as the Grand Lodges across North America understand the need for this format and embrace technology. As we look forward could this Lodge become the standard for all new Virtual Lodges and do we expand our services into other Countries (States/Provinces)? Our team continues to discuss a growth and adoption path of services in the future.

When we enter into the lodge door, we enter in the same or similar manner as every other brother of that lodge. Our personal impressions and perceptions belong only to us, but the process is completely set before we enter. We seek new places and new ways to further our light. It's not the third degree as an end but as a beginning. We are a process-driven organization. Technology is something that we need to understand and enable in our masonic journey.

Castle Island Lodge is a new place and a new way for gaining light. The venue may be different but the process is the same. Who knows where this concept will lead except perhaps the Great Architect. But this is something that has to be done. We must investigate new ways of bringing light to brothers. Another lasting benefit is that our infirm brothers may continue to take part in our labors. A brother in a land that is not necessarily hospitable to Freemasonry can still find fraternity. And of course, I know my wife appreciates that it takes me 5 seconds to get home. I am not sure my children understand I need time to consume bandwidth at home while hosting a CIVL meeting.

Of course, some things can never be recreated in the virtual world. You cannot have a festive board with all the brothers assembled around a table. (Although you could each eat dinner and have toasts at each individual location) You cannot use all the modes of recognition and outer lodge chats don't happen at the pub. I think all

these are relative. A virtual lodge, and indeed any lodge with a different take on Freemasonry, will invariably lose one aspect to gain another. The Masonic world, like the profane world, is a series of trade-offs.

This isn't the one single answer to rule them all, but this is an important thread to follow. The lodge will still have to perform the three degrees in the physical world. The lodge will still have to be installed in the physical world. That's okay with me. The idea that brothers from every corner of the globe can and will be available to labor and feel the fraternal bonds of our Craft is revolutionary.

As with all things on the internet, I am reminded that this lodge is still improving. All the parts are working, and only minor tweaks occur as needed. We are a prime-time lodge and we continue to welcome Masons from around the world to our meetings.

W Brother Nicholas Laine
Secretary (IPM)

Castle Island Virtual Lodge No. 190
Grand Lodge of Manitoba

Masonic CV

Worshipful Brother Nicholas Laine
4326 Longmoor Drive, Burlington ON

Organization	Lodge/Chapter
Grand Lodge of Manitoba	Mystery Lodge No. 174 – Thompson, MB (1992) Mother Lodge
Grand Chapter of Manitoba Royal Arch Masons	Pre-Cambrian Chapter No. 17 – Flin Flon, MB 1992 – 1995
Grand Chapter of Manitoba Order of the Eastern Star	Chimo Chapter No. 68 – Thompson, MB 1992-1999
Grand Lodge of Canada in the Province of Ontario	Burlington Lodge No. 165 Worshipful Master – 2015-2016
Grand Lodge of Manitoba	Castle Island Virtual Lodge No. 190 Lodge Education Officer – 2014/2015 Worshipful Master 2015-Present Day
Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons of Ontario	White Oak Chapter No. 104 – Oakville
Grand Chapter of Ontario Order of the Eastern Star	Lakeview Chapter No. 79 Worthy Patron 2018-2019