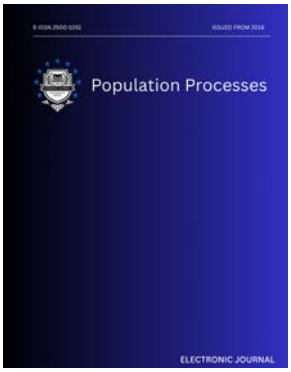
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Articles

Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the USA: Membership Dynamics in 1816–1899

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Abstract

The paper examines the membership dynamics of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the USA in 1816–1899. The aim of the study is to examine the quantitative development of American Masonic Templarism, identify the main stages of changes in the organization's membership, and reveal the characteristics of its growth during different historical periods. The source base of the study consists of three groups of sources: proceedings of the triennial conclaves of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar, proceedings of the annual conclaves of the Grand Commanderies, and publications in the American Masonic periodical press. The study employs historical-chronological and statistical methods, as well as the method of information comparison.

The study established that in 1816–1899, the membership of the Grand Encampment increased from approximately 500 to 118,550 people, that is, by 237.1 times. Five main stages of the organization's quantitative development were identified: 1816–1859, 1859–1870, 1870–1880, 1880–1889, and 1889–1899. Particular attention is paid to the period of the American Civil War and the first postwar years, when a significant increase in the number of Knights Templar was observed. It was established that in 1894, the organization's membership exceeded 100,000 for the first time. In addition, a feature of the terminology of statistical reporting was identified: beginning in 1892, the term *Swords* was used in the examined materials of the Grand Commandery of Illinois to denote the number of members of commanderies.

It is concluded that the membership of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the USA demonstrated long-term positive dynamics throughout the period under consideration, with uneven intensity of growth.

Keywords: Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the USA, American Freemasonry, Knights Templar, commanderies, 19th century, 1816–1899, membership, historical statistics, membership dynamics.

1. Introduction

If the second half of the 18th century was the period of the emergence of American Templarism, the 19th century became a key period in the history of the formation and development

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of this organization. It was during the 19th century that the organizational structure of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the USA, which was established in 1816, was formed. Subsequently, the network of commanderies expanded, and the number of Knights Templar also increased. The development of the organization took place against the background of significant political, economic, and social changes in American society, including the Civil War of 1861–1865 and the subsequent reconstruction of the country. Under these circumstances, the study of quantitative changes in the membership of the Grand Encampment is of particular interest, as it makes it possible to trace the main trends in the development of American Templarism.

It is generally known that one of the most important indicators of the development of any public or fraternal organization is the number of its members. Studying the dynamics of this indicator makes it possible to identify periods of the most intensive expansion of the organization, reveal the characteristics of membership changes during different chronological periods, and assess the stability of its quantitative growth. With regard to the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the USA, such a study is of particular interest, since the surviving materials of the Triennial Conclaves and the annual conclaves of individual Grand Commanderies contain a considerable amount of statistical information that makes it possible to reconstruct the number of American Knights Templar throughout the 19th century.

Thus, the aim of our study is to examine the membership dynamics of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the USA in 1816–1899. Particular attention is paid to determining the absolute and relative increase in membership, identifying the main stages of the organization's quantitative development, and comparing growth rates during different historical periods.

2. Materials and methods

The source base of the study consists of three groups of sources:

The first group consists of the Proceedings of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar, which were published following the Triennial Conclaves, respectively, once every three years.

The second group consists of the proceedings of the annual conclaves of the Grand Commanderies of Knights Templar.

The third group consists of materials from the periodical press.

Let us examine these sources.

The main source for our study was the Proceedings of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar, which were devoted to the Triennial Conclaves during the 19th century.

As additional information, the proceedings of annual conclaves were used, for example, those of the Grand Commandery of Illinois (Twenty-third Annual Conclave..., 1879; Thirty-Sixth Annual Conclave..., 1892). Most of the materials used are available in the digital library of the George Washington Masonic Memorial (Alexandria, Virginia, USA) (Figure 1).

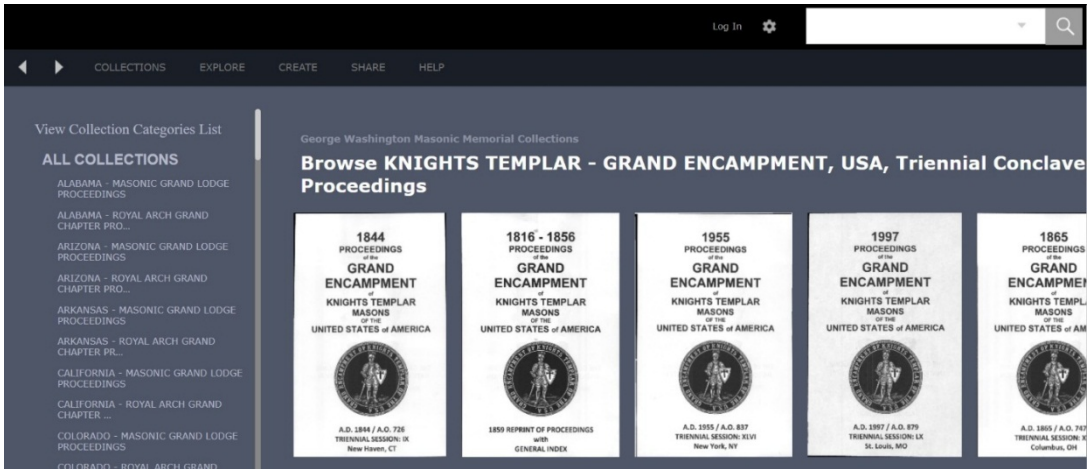


Fig. 1. Interface of the George Washington Masonic Memorial Digital Library

Materials not found in the George Washington Masonic Memorial Digital Library were also obtained from the P. A. Cherkasov Fundamental Library (Houston, Texas, USA). In particular,

the Proceedings of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar 21st Triennial Conclave for 1880 were used (Proceedings..., 1880).

No statistical data on the number of Knights Templar were found in the Proceedings of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar 22nd Triennial Conclave (Proceedings..., 1883). Therefore, statistical information on the Knights Templar from the periodical *Masonic Token* for 1881 and 1883 was used (Masonic Token, 1881: 127; Masonic Token, 1883: 201-202).

The methodology is traditional for this type of research and is based on the historical-chronological and statistical methods, as well as the method of information comparison. Thanks to the historical-chronological method, we were able to examine the membership of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar in the United States in chronological sequence from 1816 to 1899. In turn, the statistical method made it possible to collect and analyze a body of statistical information and draw the corresponding conclusions. The method of information comparison was used to clarify the number of Knights Templar during certain periods of the Grand Encampment's development, for example, in 1856 and 1884–1895.

3. Discussion

The topic of our study has already been addressed in various aspects in historiography on numerous occasions. Thus, for example, Konstantine V. Taran, in his work *The materials of the General Grand Encampment of Knights Templar serve as a statistical source for the number of Knights Templars in 1856*, suggested that the membership of the Grand Encampment in 1856 was not 4,710 but 4,826 (Taran, 2025: 22-23). Airin Cherkas examined the membership of Winchester Grand Encampment No. 1, Knights Templar (Winchester, Virginia), based on materials from 1821 (Cherkas, 2026a: 16-25).

Alexander Cherkas published a study on rare publications of the Grand Encampment from the first half of the 19th century (Cherkas, 2025). In addition, Alexander C. Cherkas conducted a systematic study of the Grand Commandery of Pennsylvania, examining its constituent commanderies, their locations, and dates of establishment (Cherkas, 2026b: 183-189).

Thus, we can see that interest in this topic has not diminished in recent years, which, in fact, determined the subject of our study.

4. Results

Thus, as already noted, statistical information on the membership of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the USA was published in numerous Proceedings of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar, compiled following the Triennial Conclaves. Special officers, the Grand Recorders of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar, were responsible for preparing such reports. Among the most prominent Grand Recorders of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar, we can mention Benjamin Brown French (1800–1870), a well-known American politician who served as Grand Recorder in 1850–1859 (Proceedings..., 1901: 271), and in 1859–1865 was the sixth Grand Master of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the USA (Proceedings..., 1901: 263). A portrait of Benjamin B. French in the uniform of the Grand Master of the Knights Templar is currently exhibited at the Museum of the History of the American Knights Templar in Houston (Figure 2).

It is noteworthy that, beginning in 1892, the term *Swords* was used in some materials from the second group of sources (Proceedings of the Grand Commandery of Illinois) to denote the number of members of commanderies. Thus, the membership of Jacques De Molay Commandery No. 2 was presented as a number of swords (Figure 3). At the same time, an examination of earlier reports of the Grand Commandery of Illinois showed that this designation of commandery membership was not used in them. Thus, the materials from 1892–1899 make it possible to identify a change in the terminology of statistical accounting, probably associated with the use of military and chivalric symbolism in American Templarism. At the same time, 1899 is exclusively the upper chronological boundary of the present study and does not indicate that the use of this term ceased in the subsequent period (Thirty-Sixth Annual Conclave..., 1892: Appendix, 49).



Fig. 2. Portrait of Benjamin Brown French (1800–1870). Oil painting. 16 × 24 inches. Artist Lyudmila N. Bogutskaya. 2025 (MHAKT CGU. Collection 7. Portrait Gallery. Exhibit No. 005)

Statistical: Commanderies, 3; members, 284; largest Commandery, Jacques De Molay No. 2, New Orleans, 143 swords. Roster of membership with proceedings.

Sir SAMUEL ALSTON, R.E. Grand Commander, New Orleans.

Fig. 3. Members of Jacques De Molay Commandery No. 2 are represented as swords (Thirty-Sixth Annual Conclave..., 1892: Appendix, 49)

Thus, the information from all three groups of historical sources used in the preparation of this publication was compiled in Table 1.

Table 1. Membership of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the USA in 1816–1899 (Twenty-Third Annual Conclave..., 1879: xxxvi; Proceedings..., 1880: 129; Growth of Knighthood, 1881: 127; Templar Statistics, 1883: 201-202; Proceedings..., 1886: 80-81; Proceedings..., 1889: 122-123; Proceedings..., 1892: 76-77; Proceedings..., 1895: 109; Proceedings..., 1898: 96-98; Proceedings..., 1901: 130)

Years	Membership	Notes
1816	500	
1848	1200	

Years	Membership	Notes
1856	4710	In 2025, Konstantine V. Taran suggested that the membership of the Grand Encampment was 4,826 (Taran, 2025: 22-23).
1859	7344	
1865	10000	
1866	11602	
1867	14414	
1868	20118	
1869	22522	
1870	25844	
1871	30351	
1872	34468	
1873	37294	
1874	39364	
1875	44018	
1876	46235	
1877	48539	
1878	49260[1]	
1879	49924[2]	
1880	50894	
1881	53083	
1882	54510	
1883	59125	
1884	63387	+1985 number of Subordinate Commanderies and Membership (Proceedings..., 1886: 81)
1885	65227	+2075 number of Subordinate Commanderies and Membership (Proceedings..., 1886: 81)
1886	67300	+2186 number of Subordinate Commanderies and Membership (Proceedings..., 1886: 81)
1887	70746	+2103 number of Subordinate Commanderies and Membership (Proceedings..., 1889: 123)
1888	73471	+1851 number of Subordinate Commanderies and Membership (Proceedings..., 1889: 123)
1889	76986	+1932 number of Subordinate Commanderies and Membership (Proceedings..., 1889: 123)
1890	81802	+2031 number of Subordinate Commanderies and Membership (Proceedings..., 1892: 78-79)
1891	85584	+2204 number of Subordinate Commanderies and Membership (Proceedings..., 1892: 78-79)
1892	90306	+2572 number of Subordinate Commanderies and Membership (Proceedings..., 1892: 78-79)
1893	95912	+2938 number of Subordinate Commanderies and Membership (Proceedings..., 1895: 110)
1894	100134	+2951 number of Subordinate Commanderies and Membership (Proceedings..., 1895: 110)
1895	103541	+3129 number of Subordinate Commanderies and Membership (Proceedings..., 1895: 110)
1896	109704	
1897	112036	
1898	114540	
1899	118550	

[1] These numbers include the Canadian Templars, hence these figures are in excess of ours on previous page.
[2] These numbers include the Canadian Templars, hence these figures are in excess of ours on previous page.

Analyzing Table 1, it can be concluded that throughout 1816–1899, the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the USA demonstrated a steady trend toward increasing its membership. While in 1816 the organization had only about 500 Knights Templar, by 1899 their number had reached 118,550. As a result, during the period under study, membership increased by 118,050 people, or 237.1 times.

At the same time, membership growth was uneven, which makes it possible to distinguish several stages in the organization's development.

The first stage covers the period from 1816 to 1859 and is characterized by the gradual formation and expansion of the organization. In 1816, the Grand Encampment had 500 members, in 1848 – 1,200, and in 1856 – already 4,710. By 1859, membership had reached 7,344. As a result, from 1816 to 1859, the number of Knights Templar increased almost 15 times. Particular attention should be paid to the acceleration of growth in 1848–1859, when membership increased more than sixfold.

The second stage is associated with the period of the American Civil War and the first postwar years. Despite the military events of 1861–1865, the membership of the Grand Encampment continued to increase. While in 1859 the organization had 7,344 members, by 1865 it already had 10,000 members. It is important to note that the period of the Civil War coincided with the period when Benjamin Brown French (1800–1870) served as Grand Master of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the USA. During the following five years, particularly intensive expansion of the organization was observed. Already in 1866, membership reached 11,602, in 1868 – 20,118, and in 1870 – 25,844. Consequently, in 1865–1870 alone, the number of Knights Templar increased by 15,844 people, or 158.4 %.

The third stage covers the 1870s and is characterized by continued growth, although its rates gradually slowed. In 1870, the Grand Encampment had 25,844 members, in 1875 – 44,018, and in 1880 – 50,894. Over the decade, the absolute increase amounted to 25,050 people, or 96.9 %. At the same time, a noticeable slowdown in growth was observed in the late 1870s. Thus, in 1878, membership amounted to 49,260, in 1879 – 49,924, and in 1880 – 50,894. This indicates that the organization continued to expand, but annual absolute increases became significantly smaller than at the beginning of the decade.

The fourth stage falls within the 1880s. It was during this period that the membership of the Grand Encampment increased from 50,894 in 1880 to 76,986 in 1889. The absolute increase amounted to 26,092 people, or 51.3 %. Thus, in the 1880s, the Grand Encampment continued to increase its membership, although annual growth rates remained uneven. At the same time, positive membership dynamics were maintained throughout the decade.

Finally, the fifth stage covers the 1890s and is characterized by a further significant increase in the number of Knights Templar. While in 1890 the Grand Encampment had 81,802 members, in 1895 it already had 103,541, and in 1899 – 118,550. At the same time, the threshold of 100,000 members was exceeded as early as 1894. During 1890–1899, the absolute increase amounted to 36,748 people, or 44.9 %.

Thus, the data presented in Table 1 indicate that throughout the period under study, the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the USA went through five stages of development, which were characterized by different degrees of growth intensity (see Table 2). The highest relative rates of membership growth were observed during the initial expansion of the organization, as well as in the first years after the end of the Civil War. In subsequent decades, relative growth rates gradually declined, although the absolute membership continued to increase (Figure 4).

Table 2. Membership Dynamics of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the USA by Major Historical Periods, 1816–1899

Period	Initial Membership	Final Membership	Absolute Increase	Increase, %
1816–1859	500	7344	+6844	+1368 %
1859–1870	7344	25844	+18500	+251,9
1870–1880	25844	50894	+25050	+96,9
1880–1889	50894	76986	+26092	+51,3
1889–1899	76986	118550	+41564	+54,0

We should also draw attention to the fact that the statistical data presented do not record a single decrease in the membership of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar compared with the preceding reported date. This allows us to speak of long-term positive dynamics in the development of American Templarism in the 19th century.

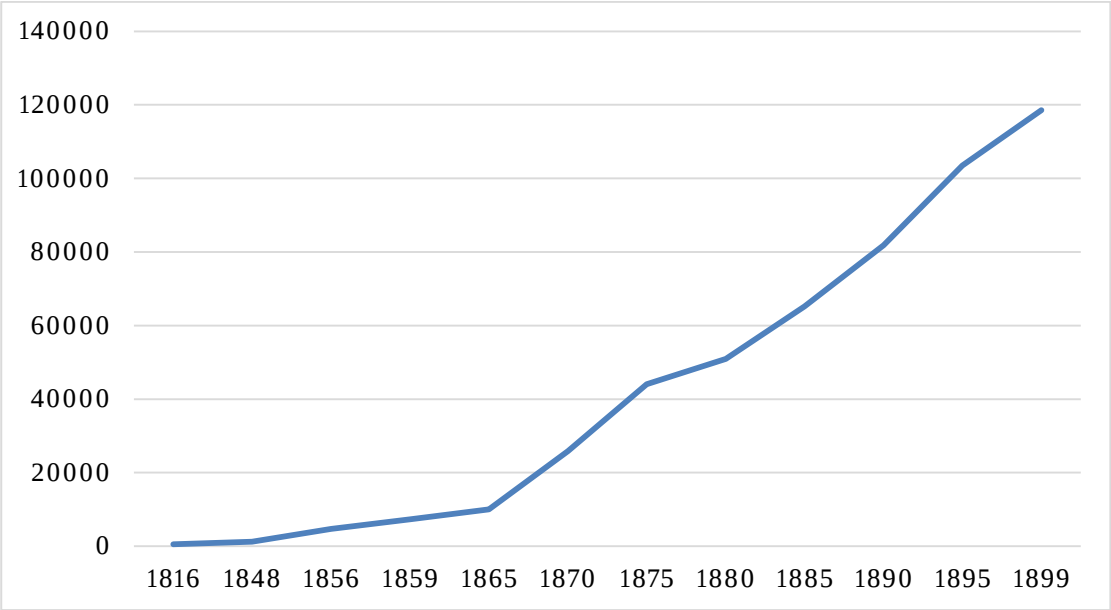


Fig. 4. Membership of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the USA in 1816–1899

5. Conclusion

Summing up the results of our study, we can draw the following conclusions.

First, throughout the period under consideration, the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the USA demonstrated steady positive membership dynamics. While in 1816 the organization had about 500 knights, by 1899 their number had reached 118,550. As a result, over 83 years, the absolute increase amounted to 118,050 people, and the total membership increased 237.1 times. This indicates the large-scale expansion of American Templarism during the period under study.

Second, the increase in the membership of the Grand Encampment was uneven, which made it possible to identify five main stages in the organization's development: 1816–1859, 1859–1870, 1870–1880, 1880–1889, and 1889–1899. Each of these stages was characterized by a different intensity of growth. The most significant relative increase in membership was observed during the initial formation of the organization, when the number of members increased almost 15 times in 1816–1859. Subsequently, relative growth rates became lower, although the absolute membership of the organization continued to increase.

Third, the period of the Civil War and the first postwar years occupies a special place in the history of the Grand Encampment. Despite the military events of 1861–1865, the membership of the organization continued to increase. While in 1859 the Grand Encampment had 7,344 members, by 1870 their number had reached 25,844. Thus, over 11 years, the absolute increase amounted to 18,500 people, or 251.9 %. At the same time, the most intensive increase in membership occurred after the end of the Civil War: in 1865–1870 alone, the number of Knights Templar increased from 10,000 to 25,844, or by 158.4 %.

Fourth, in the last third of the 19th century, the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the USA continued to expand steadily. While in 1870 the organization had 25,844 members, in 1880 it had 50,894, in 1889 – 76,986, and in 1899 – 118,550. Of particular significance is the fact that in 1894 the membership of the Grand Encampment exceeded 100,000 for the first time. At the same time, the statistical materials presented do not record a single case of a decrease in the total membership of the organization compared with the preceding recorded date. This indicates the long-term and steady nature of the quantitative growth of American Templarism throughout the historical period under consideration.

Thus, in 1816–1899, the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the USA developed from a relatively small association of Knights Templar into a large organization of nationwide scale. The results obtained make it possible not only to trace the quantitative dynamics of American Templarism but also to identify the main stages of its development and establish the characteristics of membership changes during different historical periods.

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