In the 1719’s second edition of The Book of Constitutions, Anderson asserts: "Within certain Lodges, certain valuable documents regarding Masonry, such as regulations, legislation, secrets and custom were burnt by scrupulous brethren so they may not fall into foreign hands". Fortunately, there was no complete destruction. A few manuscripts remained and were subsequently found in the archives of various Lodges or even in British Museum. Later on, they were published by those who discovered them and, among these, we can count brother William James Hughan, a real master of the antiquaries. In 1872, he published The Old Charges of British Freemasons, an extremely valuable collection of manuscripts which, until then, had been considered lost.

Generally speaking, all documents published by brother Hughan, brother Woodford or by other brethren in that period have been generically named The Old Constitutions. The oldest of this kind is the manuscript of a poem called Constitutiones artis geometriae secundum Eucleydem, preserved at the British Museum and published in 1840 by Mr. Halliwell in his work — Early History of Freemasonry in England. It is assumed that this manuscript was conceived around 1390.

A second English manuscript was published in 1861 by brother Matthew Cooke. It was preserved in the British Museum and had been purchased in 1859 from Caroline Baker by the curator of the museum. Its date of conception is assumed around 1490. All Mason antiquaries agree that this is chronologically the next after Halliwell's manuscript, although there are one hundred years running between them. But again, this is more like an assumption, supported mostly by the idea that no other intermediary document had been found. Cooke's manuscript is more elaborate than Halliwell's and contains a more detailed Legend of The Guild.

In 1815, James Dowland published in Gentleman's Magazine the copy of an old manuscript which he described as "written on a long parchment roll by an unfaltering hand, apparently at the beginning of 17th century - a copy, probably, of an earlier manuscript". Although its old age does not stand comparison with Halliwell's or Cooke's manuscripts, its value is undeniable, as it is the first from a long series that had been subsequently discovered.
Taking into account the fact that the following manuscripts resembles it largely, one may easily presume that they are nothing else but more or less faithful copies of it. The original, whom Dowland published in the magazine, could not be found, but it is assumed to have been written around 1550.

Here it is a list of the main old manuscripts with the certain or assumed data of their conception:

- MS Halliwell: assumed 1390
- MS Cooke: assumed 1490
- MS Dowland: assumed 1550
- MS Landsdowne: assumed 1570
- MS York no.1: assumed 1600
- MS Harleian, no. 2054: assumed 1625
- MS Grand Lodge: assumed 1632
- MS Sloane no. 3848: certain 1646
- MS Sloane no. 3323: certain 1659
- MS Harleian no. 1942: assumed 1660
- MS Aitcheson-Haven: certain 1666
- MS Edinburgh-Kilwinning: assumed 1670
- MS York no. 5: assumed 1670
- MS York no. 6: assumed 1680
- MS Ancient Lodge: certain 1686
- MS York no. 2: certain 1693
- MS Alnwick: certain 1701
- MS York no. 4: certain 1704
- MS Papworth: assumed 1714

All these manuscripts, except for Manuscript Halliwell, start by calling forth the aid of The Holy Trinity, followed by the description of the Seven Arts and Liberal Sciences, among which the fifth, Geometry, is considered to be The Masonry. Then, there is the traditional history of Freemasonry from the days of Lameh to the present day, and the manuscripts end with a series of operative regulations and legislations.

The traditional history contains enough anachronisms and obvious absurdities and yet, its value cannot be contested, as it contributes to the development of the History of Masonry, followed later on by writers such as Anderson, Preston and Oliver. They attempted to make adjustments to the historical errors and, consequently, the Institution of Masonry has been permanently trying to perfect
itself rationally, by line and level. The traditional history can be found, apart from little differences as far the language is concerned, in all manuscripts and it testifies on a common source, either oral or written, shared by all freemasons.

Out of the eagerness with which a lot of manuscripts containing The Legend of the Guild were destroyed in 1719 by scrupulous brethren, one may conclude that this legend was part of the esoteric instructions contained in The Guild of Operative Masons. If this may be so, its secret character was lost in 1772, when The Constitutions were published in Roberts edition.

There is no mentioning about the The Legend of the Guild in the early Masonic writings (such as Ordenung der Steinmetzen, in Strassburg, 1462, or Réglements sur Arts et Métiers, in Paris, in the 12th century), but this does not mean that The Legend did not exist among the German or French Masons. More than that, there are indications of German and French sources for the English manuscripts. Anyway, the reference to the Legend of Charles Martel connects this legend to the 12th century French Freemasonry.

The importance and influence of the Legend upon the Craft as authorized history of the Institution promotes it as an essential work for anyone's study of Masonry. Manuscript Dowland will remain the essential reference point, as it is the first out of a long series of manuscripts which has moulded the traditional history of Masonry.