

Treading on Soft Ground: Invented Landmarks

The Early List-Makers

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There are multiple rabbit holes in which to tumble down and back again when studying Freemasonry. One topic, however, that has never come close to bringing order out of chaos is Masonic Landmarks. If there was ever a subject in Freemasonry worthy of a grand prize for wholly neglecting the use of scientific methods of research, Masonic Landmarks is the nominee on which to wager.

Among masons, there is no-term more common, and less understood, than that of “landmarks.” The importance of knowing they exist is acknowledged by all; a knowledge of them is held but by a few.”¹ That statement was made by Masonic author, A.S. McBride in 1914, and it remains accurate today, although his assertion that “a knowledge of them is held but by a few” is questionable.

The landmarks of Masonry are most commonly accepted as those principles by which the Craft is bounded, that is, marked off from all other societies and associations and without which it would lose its identity. In 1720 George Payne, Grand Master of England, compiled the General Regulations, which were approved by the Grand Lodge of England in 1721 and published by Dr. James Anderson in 1723. Regulation XXXIX reads "Every Annual Grand Lodge has an inherent power and Authority to make new Regulations, or to alter these, for the real benefit of this Ancient Fraternity; provided always that the old Land-Marks be carefully preserved."

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¹ A. S. McBride, *Speculative Masonry: Its Mission, Its Evolution, and Its Landmarks* (Glasgow: D. Gillan & Co., 1914), 188.

The Landmarks were not defined by Anderson. The term "Landmark" may possibly derive from Proverbs 22:28, "Remove not the ancient landmark which thy fathers have set." ²

Moreover, these Landmarks are often connected to the Old Charges. 'Old Charges' is the name given to certain manuscripts having more or less the same contents. It is a term which is used to characterize 131 manuscripts, the oldest of which is "Regius" dated 1390. These manuscripts contain 'Charges' in the sense of rules which all Masons [operative Masons] are obliged to keep. Most of these Charges are concerned with the operative building craft and with its regulation. The York legend is part of these manuscripts. Antient Charges & Regulations have nothing to do with the Old Charges. They are a set of fifteen regulations which appear in the first pages of the Book of Constitutions of the United Grand Lodge of England. Though they are said to be "Summary of the..." - they are the only ones and not a summary of any other set. Every Master-Elect has to promise to keep them before he is obligated as the Worshipful Master of a lodge. Landmarks are commonly thought of as basic principles of Freemasonry similar to axioms in mathematics. Essentially, they are boundary lines or marks between what is inside the boundaries of Freemasonry and what is outside of them.

It appears that landmarks support the Transition Theory at least partly.³ When operative lodges started to accept non-operative Masons, and the building of a spiritual and moral temple became the central target, there arose the need to set agreed-upon boundaries. In other words: only Landmarks which serve the goals of speculative Masons were chosen from among the usages and customs already existing in the (operative) lodges. Just as the need of a lodge for the builders, before actual building was started, so do we need a set of rules before a human temple is erected for the building of a spiritual temple; for shaping the human rough ashlar in accordance with moral principles. Still, there is no definition of what those landmarks were written down in the early years of organized Freemasonry.

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Perhaps if those who attempted to enumerate and create lists of such Landmarks had simply suggested them for consideration rather than presenting them in a manner to most Masons that made them appear as if they were already universally codified, the topic might have enjoyed a debate driven by some level of collective rationalism.

² History of Landmarks, Grand Lodge of British Columbia and Yukon, http://freemasonry.bcy.ca/grandlodge/landmarks_history.html, accessed August 5, 2018.

³ The transition theory of Masonic history holds that men not actively involved in the operative mason's trade were admitted to operative masons' lodges and, as the mason's trade declined, these outsiders took control of lodges.

⁴ Daniel Doron, Freemasonry: Landmarks And Old Charges, Pietre-Stones, Review of Freemasonry, <http://www.freemasons-freemasonry.com/doron.html>, accessed June 30, 2018.

The Parade of the “Landmarkers”

Creating Landmarks was, for all intent and purpose, an American invention that started with the greatest pretensions, producing considerable dissension and dispute and ended in fiasco.⁵ The rest of the Masonic world gave little heed to the haughtiness.

The first published lists of Masonic Landmarks invented by American Masons began to appear in the 1850s, so it is clear they materialized on the heels of the hysteria surrounding the anti-Masonic era, which was further fueled and aggravated in 1826, when Masons in Batavia, New York, kidnapped William Morgan, who threatened to publish an exposure revealing the rituals of Freemasonry and the recently-developed Royal Arch Degree. Morgan was never seen again. Four defendants were sentenced to lenient terms, ranging from two years to one month in prison, convicted only of forcibly moving Morgan from one place to another against his will. The scandal, along with other events depicting all Freemasons and their institution as dangerous, further spurred the outrage of the anti-Masonry movement that came close to extinguishing the fraternity in America. The outrage from those opposed to Freemasonry painted Masons as despicable for the unforgivable actions of those in the state of New York who committed them. Another exposure about Freemasonry was not welcomed, of course, but had the errant Masons of Batavia been informed or somewhat well-read about their fraternity, they would have known the rituals—along with those of the relatively-new Royal Arch Degree—were already in print and for sale long before Morgan threatened to write and publish his account. The deeds of those irresponsible Masons in Batavia who were responsible for Morgan’s kidnapping and disappearance accomplished nothing except to further flame the already smoldering fire of the anti-Masonic sentiment of the era that came close to extinguishing American Freemasonry. The Landmark mania is another response to Morgan that lingers in American Freemasonry, perhaps to its detriment.

As question often pondered in Masonic discussions is how the history of American Freemasonry may have changed if the Morgan Affair had not taken place. Although anti-Masonic sentiments were in place well before Morgan was kidnapped, it was the incident itself and subsequent trials that stoked and fueled the sentiments giving birth to the Anti-Masonic Party. The political party strongly opposed Freemasonry as a single-issue party and later aspired to become a major party by expanding its platform to take positions on other issues. After emerging as a political force in the late 1820s, most of the Anti-Masonic Party's members joined the Whig Party in the 1830s and the party disappeared after 1838. The Anti-Masonic Party conducted the first presidential nominating convention in the United States history for the 1832 elections, nominating William Wirt (a former Mason) for President and Amos Ellmaker for Vice President in Baltimore. Wirt won 7.78 percent of the popular vote and the seven electoral votes of Vermo. ⁶ Soon the Democrats and Whigs recognized the value of holding a political convention in managing parties and

⁵ Henry W. Coil, *Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia*, Macoy Publishing, Richmond (1961):358.

⁶ Haynes, Stan M. (2012). *The First American Political Conventions: Transforming Presidential Nominations, 1832–1872*. McFarland & Company, Inc. p. 27.

campaigns and began to hold their own. All of that occurred primarily because of Morgan kidnapping. Had he not been kidnapped, never to appear, it might be safe to assume he would have published his expose and it would have ended in the dustbin of history as other exposures did until later “rediscovered” for its historical value to later generations. Most likely, Freemasonry would have kept on expanding as it had over the past three decades with little to offset that expansion.

What seems linked, although two decades later, was the emergence of written Landmarks that began to appear in American Freemasonry in the 1850s – around the time the hysterics of the anti-Masonic movements had mostly run their course.

The mania to create lists of Landmarks in American Freemasonry starting in that decade was conceivably an outcome of writers, scholars, and the leading literary craftsmen of the day seeing a need for more standardization and uniformity in the governance of the Craft. The cause for these lists beginning to appear around the same time also affirms the bedraggled state of American Freemasonry from the 1820s through the 1840s.

By the 1850s, the consistently-assaulted and bruised public reputation of the fraternity stemming from that anti-Masonic era started showing signs of recovery. Those still committed to Masonry continued to try and find a clear and readily-understandable jurisprudence that could explain the existence of Freemasonry to the rest of society that did not appear as threatening as it had been portrayed, and generally accepted as such by the public due to the frenzy surrounding the years of anti-Masonic sentiment.

While there is no shortage of written criticisms about the lists and the makers of those early lists, Albert Mackey’s attempt to deduce the fundamental principles governing the Craft by publishing his list of twenty-five Masonic Landmarks tops the critical reviews surrounding this debate. His list is not only the one with which Masons are most familiar or have at least heard of, but also the one most squabbled about since publication.

While previous authors had tried to establish just what the Landmarks actually were, it was Mackey who attempted to definitively chisel them in stone in 1858. He did not offer his list as ideas to only *consider* as Landmarks, nor did he bother to parse his words in his controversial twenty-fifth-invented Landmark—the one that may have lit the fuse to more contentious debates than the other twenty-four he created.

His twenty-fifth and crowning Landmark claims none of the Landmarks on his list could ever be changed, and nothing could be subtracted from them. Nothing can be added to them—not the slightest modification can be made to them. He asserts, “As they were received from our predecessors, we are bound by the most solemn obligations of duty to transmit them to our successors. Not one jot not one tittle of these unwritten laws can be repealed; for in respect to them, we are not only willing, but compelled to adopt the

language of the study of old barons of England—*Nolumus leges mutari*. Let the law abide.”⁷

“Can never be changed” and “[n]ot one jot not one tittle of these unwritten laws can be repealed” carries a certain despotic tone, and paints members into a corner giving rise to the belief that there is nothing connected to Freemasonry that can change. His proclamation that “[n]othing can be subtracted from them [Landmarks]—nothing can be added to them—not the slightest modification can be made to them” implies the same.

And so, the members who know this list exists often cite only the popular abbreviated version of Mackey’s twenty-fifth Landmark: *nothing in Freemasonry can be changed*. Mackey’s luminary status made his list of Landmarks transcend from the regular jurisprudence articles of his day to a perceived level of commandments from on high.

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When the equally, if not more venerated, Albert Pike weighed in on Mackey’s entire list, he wrote with an acerbic tone that sounded like a poke in Mackey’s eye for even putting forth such anecdotal, self-proclaimed presumptions of accuracy because Mackey’s list did indeed seem to carry the weight of edict, a universally-binding canon—Masonic law.

Even today, many who blindly subscribe to these lists remain unaware that most grand lodges either rejected or never bothered to adopt all of Mackey’s Landmarks. Many just adopted their favorites on his list that were not in such dispute, or were from later lists.

Pike, who was certainly in a school of his own as well, published his “sledgehammer paper” against most all of Mackey’s Landmarks, which made some believe that no one would be bold enough to pretend to believe in ancient Landmarks again.⁸ But they did.

7. Albert G. Mackey, *American Quarterly Review of Freemasonry* 2 (October 1858): 230.

8. Albert Pike, *Freemasons Chronicle* (July 1889): 56; Pike believed there are other principles, which—although difficult to reduce to a precise formula to which the whole Craft could assent, yet, whenever the case arises for their application—are perceived and acted upon as matters clear to the mind as Landmarks of the Craft. His position was that no man is authorized to lay down, *ex cathedra*, but they are general apparent as cases arise in the course of Masonic work or business transactions; *Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of New Hampshire* (Milford: 1891), xxxvii, accessed November 8, 2017, Google Books; “Report of the Special Committee on Landmarks,” *Grand Lodge of British Columbia and Yukon*, last modified May 4, 2012, accessed January 2, 2018, http://freemasonry.bcy.ca/grandlodge/reports/1982_landmarks_report.html; Mackey’s twenty-fifth Landmark reads: “The last and crowning Landmark of all is that these Landmarks can never be subtracted from them—nothing can be added to them—not the slightest modification can be made in them. As they were received from our predecessors, we are bound by the most solemn obligations of duty to transmit them to our successors.”

Theodore Parvin, past grand master of Iowa, is believed by many Masonic historians and scholars to be as important of an influence on American Freemasonry Pike and Mackey. He was not only founder of the celebrated Iowa Masonic Library but served as Grand Secretary of Iowa for forty-years. He is also credited with taking Freemasonry into Nebraska and the Dakotas.

An occasional coauthor of Pike's, Parvin wrote, "Save the subject of the history of Freemasonry, there has been more nonsense written upon the topic of ancient landmarks than upon any other Masonic subject." His criticisms appeared in the seminal essay, "Old Landmarks of Freemasonry," which was reprinted in the *Builder* in 1915, illustrating the mania surrounding Masonic Landmarks continued. The absurdity surrounding the various lists and claiming they are official and unalterable Landmarks is that so many are in total disagreement with each other.⁹

Consequently, many of the early compilations are still argued today. The predisposition of too many Masons is to blindly accept as true that any change in Freemasonry is in violation of some published Landmark. Any change in the least is somehow an intolerable innovation and violation of someone's list as if any of these lists were universally accepted or Masonic law. The widespread misconception that absolutely nothing in Freemasonry can be changed led to jokes within the fraternity about not changing light bulbs or the mailing addresses of a lodge because it would be a *change*—a violation of Landmarks. Changing a single word or adding one to a prescribed ritual also offered an opportunity to some to kiddingly accuse another of introducing an innovation into Freemasonry.

Many other Masons and counterparts of the luminaries who prescribed their enumerated lists did not spare their criticisms either. Some were rather harsh, but writers on Masonic jurisprudence and of ancient Landmarks of the Oliver and Mackey school were, by the 1890s, regarded as being either a "pack of cranks," or "charlatans."¹⁰

Boston Mason, Jacob Norton—a prolific Masonic writer—never missed a day of class at the rationalism school of Masonry. In the latter part of nineteenth century, he was not a universal favorite with the luminaries of the Masonic world – most of whom were not rationalists.

Many of the nineteenth-century lists were derived from romanticized allegories and their authors' subjective biases and were not grounded in rigorous historical analysis.

⁹ Dwight L. Smith, "Of Landmarks and Cuspidors," *The Philalethes* 26, no. 1 (February 1973): 6, 22.

¹⁰ Jacob Norton, "About Our Philadelphia Landmark Sticklers," *Masonic Review* 76, no. 2 (September 1891): 8.

The *Freemasonry Chronicle* reported Norton as “far too outspoken to suit the mass of goody-goody Craftsmen whose chief aim seems to be to sing the praises of each other and bring the best principles of the Craft into ridicule by their absurd and fulsome flattery.”¹¹ Proving the accuracy of the *Chronicle’s* assessment, Norton wrote that the lists of Masonic Landmarks were often used as a “sort of Bogey to frighten naughty children and to discountenance audacious student-enquirers and sceptics.”¹²

Exasperated with Landmark mania, he also penned “About Our Philadelphia Landmark Sticklers,” which was published in the September 1891 issue of the *Masonic Review*. His title was not referring to the city. He used the word “philadelphia” in its root meaning: “brotherly love.” At the end of his powerful and lengthy essay he wrote, “I think, therefore, that it is now high time for even our orthodox philadelphia Masonic writers or orators to feel ashamed of writing or talking about Masonic Landmarks after so many well-informed Masons have admitted that ‘Masonic Landmarks’ is a mere Masonic delusion, —and, comparatively speaking it is a recent manufactured delusion besides.”¹³

Apparently, no challenge was made to Norton’s essay since none appeared in any later issues of the *Masonic Review*.

There is no question the Craft was in dire need of more structure and guidance during the years that followed the Morgan Affair and aftermath of the anti-Masonic movement. The Grand Lodge of Missouri in 1850, the Grand Lodge of Minnesota in 1856, and then Rob Morris and Mackey contributed their ideas, which offered what they thought might serve as such a structure. Later, the Grand Secretary of Kentucky, H. B. Grant outdistanced them all by enumerating fifty-four Landmarks published in the *Masonic Home Journal* of 1889.

There is no reason to doubt each person who attempted to establish lists of Masonic Landmarks did so to promote the best interest of the fraternity, but why these lists (with the exception of Grant’s) started appearing all in the same decade of the nineteenth century is valid question history has overlooked.

Morris, an ever-astute and progressive apologist for Freemasonry saw that in writing their lists in 1859 and 1856, the Grand Lodges of Missouri and Minnesota were on to something. In late 1856, Morris offered his list of seventeen Masonic Landmarks, carrying with them a more influential weight because of his stature and reputation.

Brilliant and indefatigable in his prolific writings, Mackey was not one to sit idle and be outdone by contemporaries. In October 1858, he published his invented list of twenty-five

¹¹ *Freemasons Chronicle: A Weekly Record of Masonic Intelligence* XXXIV, no. 868 (August 1891): 1.

¹² “The Landmarks of Masonry,” *Freemasons Chronicle: A Weekly Record of Masonic Intelligence* 26 (October 1887): 227.

¹³ Norton, “Philadelphia Landmark Sticklers,” 72.

Masonic Landmarks, which almost immediately were accepted as having more authority than those previously published. Illustrating his ability to not only out-publish his contemporaries, but in apparent haughtiness about the Landmarks he created, he claimed in his massive 1874 *Encyclopedia of Freemasonry* to be the first to enumerate the Landmarks. He also claimed his twenty-five were the “unwritten customs,” which had been in use from “time immemorial,” and further declared their universal acceptance. He provided no proof for his assertions because there was none.¹⁴ Mackey was not only one of the best-known Masons, but one of the best read of his time. Believing Mackey was unaware of the other lists is naïve; believing he believed he knew best is not naïve. Masonic scholars and luminaries in America and Europe then and since, have, in their own writings, debunked point-by-point Mackey’s claim that his Landmarks have any antiquity or universal acceptance.¹⁵ Although considered a was a Masonic luminary, what is less well known is that his creative genuine often overshadowed his quest for historical accuracy and truth. ¹⁶ As S. Brent Morris points out in *Radical in the East*, “Mackey was simply wrong. Some of his so called “Landmarks “are universally agreed upon, but most are just creatures of his fertile imagine. ¹⁷ No less than eleven of the brightest Masonic scholars from 1856-1973 repeatedly disagreed with Mackey’s “Landmarks.”¹⁸

As highly respected as these men were, and as laudatory their efforts, their enumerated lists have restricted value for twenty-first-century Freemasons. Many of the nineteenth-century lists were derived from romanticized allegories and their authors’ subjective biases and were not grounded in rigorous historical analysis. While these lists still help to form the bedrock of our fraternal upbringing, they do not assist us in fully defining Freemasonry for our day because of their intellectual starting point, which is different from ours.

Of course, there was no list of Masonic Landmarks anywhere in what might be considered organized Freemasonry in, or prior to, Anderson’s Constitution of 1723. In 1774, William Preston wrote much about the Landmarks without bothering to define them other than as granting the original four lodges in London the prerogative to ignore the dictates of Grand Lodge.¹⁹

To what may be a surprise to many American Masons today, the first attempt by any Grand Lodge to define Landmarks was not in America, but England (a significant detail and fact Mackey certainly ignored) during the union of the English Grand Lodges in 1813,

¹⁴ Trevor W. McKeown, “The Landmarks of the Order,” *Grand Lodge of British Columbia and Yukon*, accessed November 7, 2017, <https://freemasonry.bcy.ca/history/landmarks.pdf>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ S. Brent Morris, *Radical in the East*, Iowa Lodge of Research No. 2, Sigler Printing & Pushing, Ames, Iowa, 1993, 94.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 95.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 1856, Rob Morris, PGM Kentucky, 1858, J.W.S Mitchell, PGM Missouri, Robert Freke Gould, PM Quatuor Coronati Lodge 2076, Albert Pike, Sovereign Grand Master Southern Masonic Jurisdiction, 1910, George Fleming Moore, Albert Pike, Sovereign Grand Master Southern Masonic Jurisdiction,, 1919, Roscoe Pound, Dean, Faculty of Law in Harvard University, 1923, Joseph D. Evans, PGM New York, 1924, Melvin M. Johnson, PGM Massachusetts 1931, E.W. Timberlake, Jr., PGM North Carolina, Henry Wilson Coil, Fellow of the Philalethes Society, 1973, Dwight L. Smith PGM Indiana, 95.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

when they defined them as making, passing, raising, and instructing candidates. In 1823, the short-lived Wigan Grand Lodge of England adopted fifteen Landmarks—the first time a list was attempted. That list, however, limited itself for defining the right and authority of the grand lodge, lodges, and the grand master. George Oliver continued the pursuit in 1846 but failed to clearly define Landmarks.²⁰ His later work on the topic was as fog-bound as his earliest. The Grand Lodge of England has never adopted Landmarks.

Pike and Parvin were correct in that no man has the full authority to lay down Masonic Landmarks—they are generally apparent as cases arise in the course of Masonic work or business transactions. In fact, Parvin summed it up rather neatly when he wrote, “A Landmark, to be a Landmark, must command the universal respect and observance of all Masons. The fundamental principles of the Ancient Operative Masonry were few and simple, and they were not called landmarks.”²¹ Gaining universal respect was not something any of the lists managed to accomplish.

Regardless, the phrasing and words Mackey selected to frame his twenty-fifth Landmark is a rake upon which many American Freemasons stepped. Mackey’s assertion in the twenty-fifth Landmark he created that nothing about Freemasonry could ever be changed - gave birth to a regrettably misunderstood notion.

The question about Landmarks that must be asked is: If Freemasonry was growing and prospering for more than a century without anyone knowing what Landmarks were or whether there were any at all, what importance can they have? ²²

The importance may be that the writers of those lists affirm the deficit of Masonic education during the period in which they were offered, as well as illustrating a level of hubris found in some past luminaries. In addition, the continued disputes about the Landmarks on the lists further illustrates that much of the Craft today remains unschooled about the context necessary to understand why such lists emerged when they did. The first lists offered by American Masons, now closing in on two hundred years since their publication, has led many a Mason down the path of at least thinking about Freemasonry.

²⁰. *Ibid.*

²¹. Theodore S. Parvin, *Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Iowa* (Des Moines: Grand Lodge of Iowa, 1889), 106.

²². McKeown, “Landmarks of the Order.”

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Without knowing more than what a previous generation handed down based on the interpretation of that twenty-fifth Landmark, there is no reason American Freemasonry should be surprised today that change (of any kind) is considered a dirty word. If nothing about or in Freemasonry were incapable of change, then our Masonic practices today would be as outlined in Anderson's 1723 Constitution.

Henry Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia is an underused Masonic reference today. First published in 1961 and released in its second edition in 1996, the over 700-page compendium illustrates how accurate Coil was almost six decades ago about literally thousands of topics muddled and puzzling about the Craft prior to that - many of which seem to remain as such. His work states that some of Masons may not like either from prejudice or because of wishful thinking his treatment of the thirteen pages he dedicates to the topic of Landmarks. His penetrating examination concludes with all the rationalism, logic, and reason one would expect from such a learned, notable scholar, and analytical mind. His final two pages list "the seven deadly sins of the landmarkers" - landmarkers meaning those who had compiled lists. He performs an historical, factual, and logical-based autopsy on all claims of written landmarks in his encyclopedia. He concludes by writing:

Therefore, those who are predisposed to general idea of venerable, valuable, and basic principles, practices and dogma of the Craft (and the existence of something of that kind must certainly be admitted) should try to determine what it is that really comprise Freemasonry and is indispensable to its existent and posterity. ²³

Clearly, Coil saw no justifiable reason within the realm of logic to accept past landmarkers' the lengthy lists. In typical Coil fashion, however, he encouraged those predisposed to the general idea, to continue the search for truth about Masonic Landmarks.

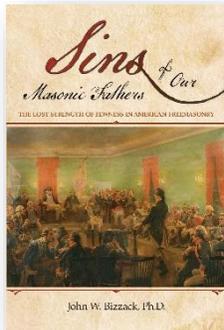
²³ Henry Wilson Coil, Landmarks, Coils' Encyclopedia of Freemasonry, Macoy Publishing, 1961, 370.

As S. Brent Morris writes in *Radical in the East*, “The Grand Lodge of England, which ought to know something about the matter, has no adopted Landmarks.”²⁴ Landmarks are uniquely American, a response to the Morgan Affair and represent misspent energy.

If we accept the long-standing conviction that a Landmark should be something so fundamental, so basic to the fabric of Freemasonry, that any deviation merits immediate condemnation, then perhaps thinking about what would be needed to create a precise equivalent organization would be helpful – if necessary, at all. In other words, what exactly defines Freemasonry in a way that if one of the elements was not present it would not be considered Freemasonry?

Without the ritual, the precise equivalent organization would not be Freemasonry. Without the Constitution and By-Laws, it would not be Freemasonry. Without grips and passwords, it would not be Freemasonry. Without a requirement that its votaries have a belief in a Supreme Being, it would not be Freemasonry.

If the principle of Occam’s Razor (one should not make unnecessary assumptions, and the answer to a problem is often the simplest) is applied to determine what fundamentals and basics are required to make up the fabric of Freemasonry, then it seem appropriate and judicious for a list, if one is needed, to be quite short.²⁵



This essay is an excerpt from *Sins of our Masonic Fathers – The Lost Strength of Fewness in American Freemasonry*, BSF Foundation, Lexington, Kentucky, 2018, John W. Bizzack.

²⁴ S. Brent Morris, *Radical in the East*, Iowa Research Lodge No.2, 1993.

²⁵ *Supra*, 45.