

# What Seemed Like a Good Idea at the Time

## *Shooting Ourselves in the Foot*

**Presentation at the District 20 Meeting, March 31, 2017 – Lexington, KY  
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**F**rom 1793-1805, England's growing concern and fear of invasion by Napoleon's enormous army and navy resulted in Parliament authorizing several watch stations to be built along the English coast and manned by civil servants.

The purpose of these watch stations and duties of the lookouts was to serve as the early warning system to an invasion fully expected to arrive by way of the English Channel.

Napoleon's plan to invade England, however, was sidetracked in 1805 as he became more focused on his military campaigns in Austria and Egypt. In 1815, the English army defeated Napoleon once and for all at the Battle of Waterloo and the threat of an invasion completely disappeared.

In 1939 – a 124 years later - England was again preparing for and mounting defenses against a possible invasion, but this time the threat of invasion came

from Hitler. A close review of existing defenses brought to the attention of the Parliament a small and long forgotten group of civil servants who still maintained a lookout for Napoleon's invasion fleet.

What seemed a good idea at the time in 1805 to the King and Parliament had obviously outlived its original purpose, but somehow that "good idea" became lost in the mire of governmental bureaucracy and the lookouts for Napoleon's invasion fleet – long after his defeat and surrender at Waterloo – continued.

This story is similar to what happens in Freemasonry when we continue to do something but forget the original purpose of why we started it in the first place. When that occurs, there's a tendency in subsequent generations for things like that to become thought of as something we've always done.

And when we think we've always done it - even when that's not true - we also tend to think it is still a good idea.

I'm going to tell you about something this evening that has happened in Freemasonry- much like the lookouts in England.

England built watch towers to keep Napoleon out - when an invasion never came - they forgot why they built the watch towers and allowed them to exist for 124 years.

Freemasonry adopted a non-binding suggestion from a convention that held no authority over grand lodges, yet every grand lodge adopted the suggestion. The suggestion kept Entered Apprentices and Fellow Crafts out of lodges for 144 years. What may have seemed a good idea at the time outlived its alleged need and purpose. Strangely, that perceived need and purpose, even when it was proposed in 1843 was a half-baked idea at the time.

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There are 2 primary and pivotal historical events in American Freemasonry that continue to influence the way our fraternity operates today.

One event caused the other - and the purpose of the first event was long forgotten by the time most of the grand lodges in American realized the reasons we did one thing was no longer needed or effective at all.

Both events are inescapably connected - and while it serves all Masons well to be aware both occurred is helpful - knowing the details surrounding why they occurred at all is essential - if we are to understand why we do what we do today in our practice of Freemasonry because of that 1843 "good idea."

This story begins on a gusty, but warm rainy evening on September 11, 1826, when William Morgan - a transient, drunkard, suspected coward, an operative stone mason with a reputation and track record of deceitful braggart - was forced against his will into a carriage by several men known to be Freemasons - and never heard from again. Morgan had previously lived in VA, KY and in parts of NY before moving to upstate NY to Batavia.

Eyewitnesses and later confessions offered enough proof to place the responsibility for kidnapping William Morgan - subsequently causing him to never to be seen again - squarely on the shoulders of Freemasons.

Five years of legal investigation and prosecution on the matter of Morgan's disappearance left a trail of:

- 20 grand juries and 15 trials;
- 54 Freemasons indicted, 39 brought to trial;
- 10 were convicted, but none of the charge of murder.

Each of the defendants confessed to abducting Morgan and holding him against his will for days – but no one confessed to killing him.

The trials added to the anti-Masonic sentiment that already existed in the country - opposition stemming largely from the pulpits of many churches. Hearing details reported in dramatic news accounts of the Morgan Affair fanned those flames.

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For nearly 14 years following the disappearance of William Morgan, waves of charges of illegal and immoral activities levied against all Freemasonry were rampant across New England and spread to other states.

- Masons were accused of subverting political and religious institutions/and corrupting the criminal justice branch of our government.
- Women and the church joined in against Freemasonry -unifying the call for Masonry to be abolished – a call that turned into a movement.
- Eventually, Anti-Masonry spread more or less extensively into all the states - denouncing first the institution and then the men, as unfit for any public office, and unworthy of any respect.
- Not only were men who were Masons denounced, but also denounced were those who would not denounce them.

- Masonic clergy were dismissed from their churches.
- Lodges were burnt - and public Masonic participation at funerals; cornerstone laying, and parades immediately waned and, in some places, completely disappeared.
- Anti-Masonic committees were established in practically every state. Anti-Masonic books, pamphlets, and speeches were common and consistent. Masonic meetings were disrupted.

Ultimately, Freemasonry was discredited as an intellectual society - and portrayed as a dangerous subversive organization - thus men no longer were eager to join or even be known as Freemasons.

As an institution, the reputation of Freemasonry was utterly decimated in America.

The number of Masons in the United States during the acknowledged hay-day of the Anti-Masonry hysteria, dropped from 100,000 to 40,000. Six of every ten Freemasons left their lodges – many who moved to new towns and states claimed they'd never been Freemasons.

New York alone went from 20,000 members to 3,000 and from 480 lodges to eighty-two. The Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania surrendered its charter in 1834, conveying its property to trustees, and did not reincorporate until 1859.

Kentucky saw its membership rolls cut in half and the number of lodges dropped from sixty-six to thirty-seven.

The Grand Lodge of Kentucky fell into considerable debt and barely survived – a fact verified by the historical writings of Kentucky Past Grand Master Rob Morris, who wrote in his 1859 book, *The History of Freemasonry in Kentucky*, “A continuation of these circumstances would have extinguished Masonry in Kentucky.”

Today we can easily trace the fraternity’s reaction to that event and the subsequent anti-Masonic hysteria that rapidly spread through America to answer why we adopted a non-binding suggestion that unintentionally – but ultimately – further weakened American Freemasonry.

For decades following the Morgan Affair, Freemasonry seemed to work very hard to become fluent in apologizing for Freemasonry.

As a result, we observed practices and traditions – all an integral part of the system of Freemasonry, begin to vanish and fall out of practice following the Morgan Affair and anti-Masonic hysteria that ensued across the nation.

Freemasonry adopted the strategy that the institution must curry favor with all of society to regain the lost prominence once enjoyed.

Following the thirteen years of attempts to stamp out Masonry in North America-

- Masons began to assume and practice a cautious attitude in the hope of dispelling the misapplied public label of secretive and subversive.
- Masonic temples were no longer called such, and we began instead calling our facilities lodges.
- The study of esoteric subjects and practices like the Reflection Room along with other parts of our heritage began to slowly vanish from our traditions so not to alarm those did not understand or seek to appreciate the value of men searching for Light.
- Other traditions easily fell by the wayside so not to make Freemasonry look like it was anything more than a convivial, private get together by members behind closed doors.
- Traditions and practices in place since 1737 in America began to die - even music was believed to be unnecessary since so much of it played on an organ sounded too much like religious hymns.
- Formality and protocols were watered down and Freemasonry across the nation began to rely strictly on ritual as the only Masonic education necessary.
- We curtailed, and in some cases banished fraternal feasts and gatherings altogether – again to the extent that many today who have been Masons for decades have never attended or even know what a Festive Board or Table Lodge involves.

- And in many states, even the definition of proficiency has been diluted to simply knowing the grips, steps, and passwords of each degree before moving along to another degree.
- We slowly began to embrace the notion that fundraising and promotion of charitable giving outside of our membership not only occupied members, but pleased outside society, making the institution appear less threatening and more mainstream – perhaps even shielded from public criticism to some degree.
- The years of Anti-Masonry had taken its toll on the quality of the ritual. Many of the strong ritualists had either left the Craft during the anti-Masonic years or died. Of those that remained Masons -- the decade and a half of inactivity had caused the ritual to escape their memories and, thus, new members received poor instruction as to the workings of the fraternity.
- After a generation or more passed, many lodges had forgotten they'd done in anything other than what they had seen in their lifetime as a Mason.

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The 2nd part of our story begins in 1842 after these attitudes had taken deep root in what was left of Freemasonry during that time.

That year, the Grand Lodge of Alabama, passed a resolution inviting and

requesting all American Grand Lodges to send a delegate to Washington, D.C., for a convention to “fix” many of the problems facing Freemasonry in America. Too few lodges attended for any business to be conducted, so they decided to attempt another convention in the next year.

One of the purposes stated for both conventions was to establish "a uniform mode of work throughout all the Lodges of the United States.”

Another was "to make other lawful regulations for the interest and security of the Craft.”

It was widely believed that the Morgan Affair would not have happened, and Freemasonry would not have undergone the storm of Anti-Masonry as it had, if had there been better safeguards that prevented suspected cowans and eavesdropper from sneaking or faking their way into a lodge – capturing the secrets of all three degrees – and then revealing them to the public. The question was how that might best be prevented.

In 1843, the second attempt to coordinate a convention of Grand Lodges was held in Baltimore.

Only sixteen of the twenty-three grand lodges in the United States participated. Kentucky did not participate.

The convention did influence and established some uniformity, but not in our rituals.

Dues card and letters of good standing were recommended practices to be adopted – and they were. You carry a dues card today because of the Baltimore Convention.

- The due guards of the Fellow Craft and Master Mason degree were changed to correspond to that of the First Degree.
- The movable and immovable jewels were changed - six Jewels belonging to the Lodge, three immovable and three movable. The moveable Jewels were established as the Rough Ashlar, the Perfect Ashlar, and the Trestle-Board. The Immovable Jewels were identified as the Square, the Level, and the Plumb.

And then there was one final suggested change made at the eleventh hour from the Grand Lodge of Missouri.

It might have seemed like a good idea at the time. All states in attendance voted for it except New York. By the time of the Civil War (18 years later), that idea was already proving to have outlived whatever usefulness it was thought to have in 1843.

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<sup>1</sup> Grand Lodge of Kentucky Proceedings, Thursday, August 28, 1851, p.83, Wednesday, September 1, 1852, p. 33 documents that Dempsey Carrel, Past Master of Confidence Lodge 52, Maysville, Kentucky, made the motion “That all business of the Subordinate Lodges shall be transacted in the third

The change suggested by Missouri was to prohibit lodges from opening and doing any business except on the MM degree thinking that would prevent eavesdroppers/cowans (as William Morgan was suspected to be) from finding into our lodges- see all three degrees - gain our private information - and then reveal it all to the public. They referred to opening in any degree but the Master Mason degree to conduct business was an “impropriety.”

This was strange, since all lodges in the world opened and conducted business on the Entered Apprentice Degree since Freemasonry was first organized in 1717.

Some Masons called the change an innovation. Others simply called it for what it was: a knee jerk reaction to a problem that could have easily been addressed by requiring men to either prove themselves Freemasons or reject their request for admittance into lodge. Despite disagreements, every grand lodge in America eventually adopted the “good idea.”

Kentucky was one of the last jurisdictions to adopt that practice. Seven years later, the practice was adopted and continues today with even less purpose than it was thought to have in 1843. <sup>1</sup>

degree of masonry, except the initiation or passing of candidates.” In the case of Kentucky, this affirms that as of 2018, Kentucky has been conducting business on the Master Mason degree for 166 years. The first fifty-two years of its existence, the Grand Lodge of Kentucky followed the practice of all American

What William Morgan intended to do in 1826 was making some money from the sale of his exposure, poke Freemasonry in the eye, perhaps embarrass those men who had rejected and humiliated him by not making him a part of not only the prestigious Masonic community in Batavia, but a member of a newly formed Royal Arch Chapter.

He didn't accomplish the first goal of making money because he was kidnapped before the book was published. His book, however, was published anyway.

But he did, however, achieve his second goal and poked Freemasonry in the eye more than any exposure could.

The kidnapping further ignited and re-fueled the anti-Masonic movement which continued to cast a long-lasting, negative shadow on Freemasonry in America to this day.

### **In Closing Brethren-**

We can easily see today how the actions of a few Freemasons in 1826 who took their oaths literally, were so poorly led and instructed in the tenets and profound lessons of our Craft that they changed the course of Freemasonry in America once they made their disastrous decision to kidnap William Morgan.

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lodges prior to 1843 which permitted subordinate lodges conduct business on any degree.

And, as a result, we clearly see today how the Baltimore Convention – an incomplete representation of Grand Lodges in America - took it upon themselves to put forth an unbinding idea that lodges should open and do business only on the Master Mason Degree - causing the adoption of that poorly thought out idea and changed the face of Freemasonry in this county for the next 174 years.

Twenty-six American Grand Lodges today continue to deny Entered Apprentices and Fellow Crafts participation in lodge in a way that the rest of the Masonic world would never dream of.

Twenty-four grand lodge jurisdictions have, since 1988, reject the absurdity of the Baltimore Convention idea and allow their lodges to open and conduct business on the Entered Apprentice Degree.

Believe it or not, there are Masons who still contend that opening and doing business only on the Master Mason Degree is the way we've always done it from time immemorial.

As you can tell brethren, those who believe that today are simply wrong and grossly misinformed.

If Freemasonry is to be re-invested of what it has been divested, it must get used to the idea that our fraternity is going to be much smaller in the future. The average retention rate of Entered Apprentices and Fellow Crafts is low now. Continuing to keep them out of lodge does not contribute to stabilizing our membership.

How can we genuinely integrate Entered Apprentice and Fellow Crafts into our lodges if we do not allow them to attend and participate in lodge?

An Entered Apprentice is referred to as “brother” fourteen times in ritual. We refer to a Fellow Craft as “brother” nineteen times in the ritual – yet we do not offer or allow either of them a seat in our lodges until they are made a Master Mason.

The world is full of good ideas that seemed a good idea at the time, yet eventual proved they were not.

We can add to that list of things the 175-year-old notion that it was a good idea to keep Entered Apprentices and Fellow Crafts out of our lodges and exclude them until they were raised to Master Mason.

But we must remember, that it probably would not have happened at all if the Masons in Batavia and the surrounding lodges in that area had educated their members about the true aim, purpose, and heritage of the Craft.

If they’d done so, the likelihood of the subsequent storm and public hysteria that surrounded the disappearance of William Morgan may not have occurred as it did.

There is no question in the minds of historians and Masonic scholars that the kidnapping and disappearance of William Morgan, ultimately led to the Baltimore Convention. The Morgan Affair shook the foundation of American Freemasonry to point of near collapse, and the recommendation from the Baltimore Convention that all lodges open and conduct business only the Master Mason degree consequently and unnecessarily altered the course of the fraternity.

The vengeful ghost of William Morgan continues to haunt American Freemasonry – at least in those jurisdictions that refuse or disregard the wisdom of returning to the real tradition of allowing lodges to open on the Entered Apprentice Degree.

## **POSTSCRIPT – October 2018**

**BACKGROUND:** The belief that Masonic Lodges have always opened and done their business only on the Master Mason Degree is one of the most ridiculous myths lingering in American Freemasonry. In fact, the opposite is generally true. Historically, Lodges throughout the world open and conduct their business on the E. A. Degree. In fact, in America, prior to the 1843 Baltimore Convention, all Lodges opened and transacted their business on the Entered Apprentice Degree. Today, only 24 American Grand Lodge jurisdictions cling to this outdated practice.

In response to the 1843 Baltimore Convention from which this unmerited practice originated, Dempsey Carrell, a Past Master from Confidence Lodge No. 52 in Maysville, made the motion on September 1, 1852 at the Grand Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky, that all lodges in Kentucky transact their business only on the MM degree. The motion passed without noted discussion or debate.

Since 1987, twenty-four American grand lodge jurisdictions rejected this innovation that weakens American Freemasonry and now allow their lodges to open and do business on the Entered Apprentice degree if a lodge chooses to do so.

**UPDATE:** Legislation to reject the motion made by Dempsey Carrell in 1852 has come before the body of the grand lodge four times between 2009 and 2015. Each time the legislation failed to be held over for consideration and vote the next year. In 2016 the fifth such legislation was

submitted and passed, then held for vote the following year. Despite considerable education throughout Kentucky lodges to the contrary, much of the opposition was based on the belief that Kentucky has always only opened and conducted business on the Master Mason degree. The 2016 legislation, when considered for final approval in 2017, failed.

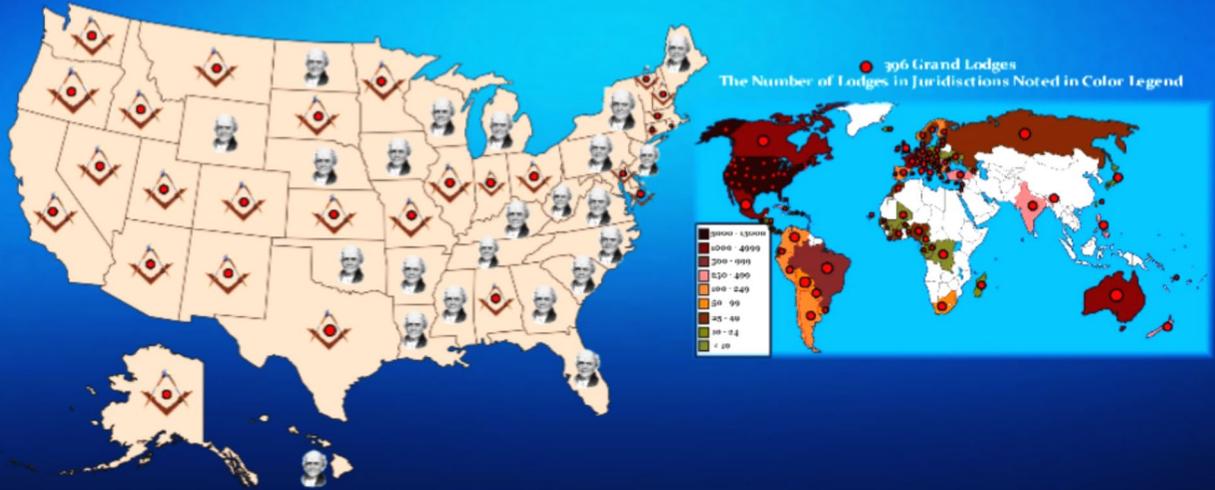
At the October 15, 2018 Annual Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky, new legislation was introduced. That legislation gave lodges the option of opening and transacting business on the degree of their choice. The legislation failed.

The vote was 195 (60%) delegates against allowing any lodge the option of a choice, and 135 (40%) delegates were in favor of giving all lodges the option of a choice. Votes were cast by all 330 lodge delegates.

The most common opposition remarks since the first legislation was proposed includes: that by passing the legislation other doors would then open to change Kentucky Freemasonry; such legislation removes incentive for an Entered Apprentice to progress to the other two degrees; only Master Masons are informed enough to vote on business (although legislation proposed did not give the right to vote to Entered Apprentices or Fellow Crafts); “The legislation “doesn’t feel right:” and, “We’ve done it this way for thousands of years.”

## As of April 2017: 396 Grand Lodges in the World

Until after the Baltimore Convention in 1843, all American Freemasonry jurisdictions opened lodge and conducted business in the Entered Apprentice Degree. In 1987, American jurisdictions began to reject the non-binding premise of the Convention that it was an "impropriety" to open and do business in any degree other than the Master Mason Degree. Over the past 30 years, 26 American grand lodges have rejected this premise and returned to the original practice of opening and doing business in the Entered Apprentice Degree. The remaining American jurisdictions continue to follow that non-binding premise of the 1843 Convention that stemmed from the anti-Masonic aftermath of the kidnapping and disappearance of William Morgan in 1826 in Batavia, New York even though the intent of the of the non-binding premise has since outlived its original purpose. No Masonic jurisdiction outside the United States ever adopted the non-binding premise of that Convention.



● 94% of all Masonic Jurisdictions can practice opening and doing business in the Entered Apprentice Degree



● Only 6% of all Masonic Jurisdictions do not open and do business on the Entered Apprentice Degree