

SHOOTING OURSELVES IN THE FOOT

American Freemasonry:
A Tumbled House

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AMERICAN FREEMASONRY: A TUMBLED HOUSE

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In the Spring 2016 issue, *The Journal of the Masonic Society* published an article titled, “Shooting Ourselves In The Foot.” The article spoke to one particular event in American Masonic history that occurred in the eleventh hour of the last day of the 1843 Baltimore Convention. The delegate representing the Grand Lodge of Missouri recommended that the Convention agree with his claim that conducting Lodge business in any degree other than Master Mason degree was an “impropriety.” The convention adopted the innovation. Although nothing recommended by the Convention carried the force of Masonic Law, this recommendation was implemented by all Grand Lodges in the United States before the end of the century thus, changing what had been common practice in Lodges since the formation of organized Freemasonry.

The article became a presentation that was late made several times. The first times was at the Grand Lodge of Kentucky Annual Communication in October 2016 to a group of thirty-six interested Masons who supported legislation that year to repeal the 1855 adoption of the Convention’s notion by Kentucky that over twenty Grand Lodges had already overturned. That year, Kentucky Masons rejected the legislation. It was the sixth time such legislation had been introduced. Prior to the vote, a comment from the floor to the Craft affirmed the need for more Masonic education when an opponent to the legislation expressed that the rule should remain in place because it “We have been doing it this way for one-thousand years.”

What might have seemed like a good idea at the time to Masons in 1843 and since, has not proven itself to be as constructive as first thought and certainly qualifies as a one of the early self-inflicted foot wounds.

The first time American Freemasonry shot itself in the foot was in the final decades of the 18th century. A December 1779 document tells us the state and condition of the Fraternity and offered a bold recommendation to address the condition: examine the value of forming a National Grand Lodge. The failure of existing Grand Lodges to actually examine the concept cocked the pistol. The failure to do anything about the condition of the Fraternity that led to the recommendation pulled the trigger that led to the limp. The call for Grand Lodges to examine the 1779 recommendation would be made thirteen more times before the end of 1860. Ultimately, each call was rejected. The indifference and failure to recognize and acknowledge the serious underlying issues that caused the recommendations to resurface for decades led to an aggravating, lasting limp.

In late 1788, the Fraternity cocked the pistol again and aimed at the other foot when a young, eastern Grand Lodge chartered the first Masonic Lodge West of the Alleghanies. That Lodge was 500 miles away from the nearest Masonic Lodge in their jurisdiction, and 700 miles away from the seat of the Grand Lodge. This was done at a time when that Grand Lodge was already experiencing problems ensuring that existing distant Lodges in their jurisdiction were capable of successfully practicing the idea and design of organized Masonry. By 1800, the Grand Lodge had chartered four additional Lodges in that distant territory. In late 1800, eight years after that territory became the 15th state admitted to the Union, those Lodges formed their Grand Lodge. Soon, the newly formed Grand Lodge began chartering even more distant Lodges, including one that was nearly 800 miles away. Corresponding with disparate practices existing since 1788, the unevenness of instruction and understanding of Freemasonry, and the processes surrounding it, was exponentially replicated.

This gilded the unreasoned notion that the larger the organization, the more value it has. The Fraternity would not feel the intense pain from this foot-shooting for another twenty-five years, however.

Seeded in 1798, a religious and political anti-Masonic sentiment percolated through the first quarter of the 1800s. Then, in late 1826, Masons in upstate New York kidnapped William Morgan. No convincing report of Morgan being seen alive in the weeks and years following the kidnapping exists. The subsequent indictments, trials, and national publicity that followed, created a raging tempest and scandal known as The Morgan Affair, which threatened to extinguish American Freemasonry. Three presidential election cycles, and the politics and elections of various state and local offices in several states were affected for well more than a decade. Masonic leaders and apologists were so busy defending the reputation of the Order in the years that followed The Morgan Affair, that the proximate causes¹ leading to the event in New York were left unaddressed by the Fraternity, even though 60% of its membership throughout the nation was lost.

Nevertheless, in the aftermath that ensued, foot-shooting continued.

In 1833, one jurisdiction abolished a section of their 1802 By-Laws that required the Master in all Lodges or his designee, to present lectures on one of the first three degrees of Masonry at every Stated Communication. When the practice was no longer required, the instruction and education of members beyond what was gleaned from ritual all but disappeared ²in that jurisdiction.

Another wound was inflicted in 1843 when a national Masonic convention met declaring the objects and purposes of the Convention to be the promotion of uniformity of Masonic work and the recommendations of such measures as should tend to elevate the Order to its due degree of respect throughout the world at large. Owing to the incalculable difficulties, arising from a prepossession in favor of the mode of disparate practices and ritual that each jurisdiction and members had become accustomed, the ritual proposed by the

This time, however, we find the unbridled growth was, as one Grand Master declared in 1866, a canker worm on the rose, making it appear to members that the Fraternity was outwardly flourishing, but bearing in its bosom the cause of its decay

Convention was largely ignored. Although carrying no force of Masonic Law, one recommendation at the Convention (as previously noted), made in the eleventh hour, declared that doing business in any degree other than the Master Mason degree was an *impropriety*. Eventually, all jurisdictions adopted the notion, thus preventing Entered Apprentices and Fellow Crafts from participating in Lodge business meetings. While this may have been seen as a good idea at the time considering the problems American Masonry had with imposters, cowans, and eavesdroppers, the notion eventually backfired and merely encouraged the rushing of candidates through degrees so members could participate and vote in the business of a Lodge.

Eventually, the folly was recognized when Connecticut, in 1987, became the first of 26 Grand Jurisdiction that rejected and retired the practice. But once again, owing to the incalculable difficulties arising from a prepossession in favor of that which jurisdictions and members have become accustomed, especially when

there is little to no understanding of where and why the idea originated, 24 jurisdictions continue to reject legislation that would reverse the hackneyed practice and turn a blind eye to the wound.

By the end of the 1860s, the echo of yet another shot resonated through the Fraternity despite the earlier warnings that the gun remained cocked and loaded. Incontestable is the fact that the Civil War affected how members and the public viewed Freemasonry. The surge of members leading to, during, and following the War years revived the seemingly irrepressible sentiment in the Fraternity that the more men made Masons, the more successful the Fraternity. This time, however, we find the unbridled growth was, as one Grand Master declared in 1866, *a canker worm on the rose*, making it appear to members that the Fraternity was outwardly flourishing, but bearing in its bosom the cause of its decay. The decay from unbridled expansion, along with over-reliance on ritual for instruction, opening wide the West Gate, and the absence of consistently electing leadership on a basis other than merit, continued.

Despite the canker worm warning that was also echoed by multiple Grand Masters in their own way, the century advanced into the next with membership continuing to expand without regard to the obvious consequences on the Institution from a poorly instructed Craft. An even more conspicuous absence of gun safety existed as the influence of frivolity from the Age of Fraternalism (the latter third of the 19th century and continuing into the first part of the 20th) crept into Freemasonry and introduced antics and burlesquing trivialities into the work and business of Masonic Lodges.

In the early decades of the 1900s, the emergence of *The Builder Magazine*, *The New Age*, the official organ of the Southern Jurisdiction of the Scottish Rite, the Masonic Services Association's *Short Talk Bulletins*, and books about Freemasonry began to offer inroads into the prevention of foot-shooting. Although helpful and constructive, the publications and the many recommendations found in them did not significantly reduce self-inflicted wounds, largely because of the scarcity of Masons who bothered to read about Freemasonry and its many aspects. Once more, proving to the incalculable difficulties arising from a prepossession of the way Freemasonry should be practiced (to which jurisdictions and members had become accustomed), the culture of American Freemasonry ignored all calls for significant introspect.

Although toes were missing and the hobbling evident, by 1943 the wounds and limp became temporarily less perceptible for the next sixteen years because of an unforeseen increase in membership (1,541,317 to 2,561,844 in 1943 and to 4,103,161 by 1959). This colossal increase reestablished the misguided perception held by many leaders and embraced by the Masonic culture that the Fraternity was actually spreading Freemasonry. The unfortunate reality was that it was merely making members. Thus, the pistol fired again.

That wound and all that came before were unignorable by the 1970s when membership began to disappear by the thousands. The Fraternity grew desperate and attempted to maintain its massive membership roster. But with little understanding as to why sustaining such a high level of membership or even curbing its rapid decline was impossible, most leaders and members did all they knew how to do. By the final decade of the century, despite aggressive but disturbingly unreasoned attempts, an upright gait did not return, although standards of qualification and instruction were relaxed. Casualness slithered into work that was historically designed to pursue excellence. The long-standing no-solicitation rule was taken to its limit, and the work in much of the Fraternity began to look like many of the deteriorating Masonic facilities. Eventually, increasing the velocity between application and being made a Master Mason by offering one-day classes to offset the steady losses and Masonry's deteriorating relevance and presence in the eye of the public, emptied the pistol.

As has been said many times in different ways by Masonic leaders, scholars, and observers, lonely is the best description of the many writings that foretold the consequences of rapid expansion, poor instruction, and weak leadership in the Craft.

Nevertheless, foot-shooting prevention education was still not a top billing as the Fraternity moved into the 21st century. Demonstrated was the great truth that there is value to attentive ears and in reading and studying Freemasonry. As has been said many times in different ways by Masonic leaders, scholars, and observers, *lonely* is the best description of the many writings that foretold the consequences of rapid expansion, poor instruction, and weak leadership in the Craft — each owing to the incalculable difficulties arising from a prepossession in favor of that which multiple jurisdictions and members had become accustomed when interpreting and conveying the historical intent and purpose of organized Freemasonry.

THE GRAVITY OF ACTIONS: MANAGING DECLINE

The practice of passing men through the first three degrees of Masonry in haste with little to no education or instruction following typically swift inductions has not proven anything but an impediment yet it remains ignored and the consequences are seemingly invisible to much of the Masonic culture and its leadership.

The apparent no-finish-line work of foot-shooting prevention greatly depends on the Fraternity understanding its factual past.

Careful reasoning suggests that those elected to leadership positions cannot be exempt from such understanding. In fact, if it were a requisite and consistently enforced, it would serve as the first concrete step in foot-shooting prevention.

Since the 1960s, the steady decline of membership has led many in the Fraternity to an equally steady gnashing of teeth, wailing, and hand-wringing. The decline, coupled with the corresponding angst that accompanied the fall of the prestige of the Fraternity one held in the eye of the public, led to stunning miscalculations.

Had the same level of energy been devoted to effectually guarding the West Gate and appropriately instructing and educating candidates as they passed through the degrees at a lesser pace, and had Freemasons consistently elected leaders based on merit, one has to wonder whether the Fraternity would have faced the long-bemoaned consequences. Two generation ago, Henry W. Coil described the Fraternity as a patchwork. He wrote that pieces were sewn into the fabric over the years where some were missing, others had not worn well, and some sewn where they do not exactly fit. Today, Coil would quickly see that the Fraternity has not improved its sewing skills.

The deeply embedded notion that swollen ranks and success is one and the same blinds much of the leadership and members to the reasons why so many admitted have not, either in the past or today, remained involved after their admittance, or maintain their membership beyond a few years. Relaxing standards, encroaching on the no-solicitation rule, casually approaching a system designed to create excellence, abbreviating proficiency returns, and propping open the West Gate in hopes of increasing the short lines seeking admission, has yet proven a dazzling strategy. It does bear the earmark of an organization that is managing decline. Thus, from our factual history, it becomes clear that much has been done without contemplation of the gravity of actions.

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OPEN ENDED QUESTIONS

The Masonic Services Association of North America (MSANA) has collected Masonic membership records since 1924. In 2022, although MSANA notes that not all jurisdictions have reported, the number of card-carrying members in good standing in 2020 reflect that reported membership stood at 898,433 – the lowest in 98 years. If the the records are ever collected again, the numbers should be expected to be even lower. At the rate of the consistent pace of of the membership decline since 1959, the American Fraternity is headed for a roster that, depending on the source of the records, will fall below the membership of the pre-Civil War years: around 446,000 members.

Many believe that when membership is high, the number reflects of the success of the Fraternity and Freemasonry. Under that logic, what does a steady, 70-year decline in membership reflect? No matter the reasons claimed and often given by Masons to explain the decline and condition in which the Fraternity is found, one cannot sidestep or escape the reality that the drift from practices stems from a lesser instructed corps of members, a lack of continuity in admittance standards, inconsistent leadership, and men not finding what is professed by the Fraternity to be Freemasonry.

It is the Fraternity that surrounds Freemasonry that has failed to examine, or do what needed to be done regarding the same problems that repeat themselves decade to decade – not the fault of the *idea* of Freemasonry. If looking inward since 1779 was as common as foot-shootings, the Fraternity today would be much closer to its historical design and intent.

Today, the Fraternity is faced with yet another challenge that may prove greater than the internal one with which it has wrestled for generations. The larger culture from which the Fraternity must attract candidates is now further removed from the values of The Enlightenment Era than even the generation of the 1960s and 1970s. The precept of Freemasonry is, of course, grounded in Enlightenment thinking and values. Expecting any increase in membership or interest in Masonry even as experienced in the early 1800s, pre-and post-Civil War years, the World War I and particularly the World War II years, is only embraced by those who do not read or do not have attentive ears.

Success of Freemasonry has never been dependent on, much less measurable by, a high count of names on membership rosters (any more than a low count proves failure). It is the majority of Masons and their leaders who created the careless thinking surrounding this notion that bigger means better, and then passed it on to subsequent generations. The consequence of not seeing the folly of that thinking, and the rush to attain bigness, paved the road for the drift from Masonry's noble purpose that now requires a doctrinal shift to correct.

But the meaningful and productive organization-wide introspection necessary to create such a doctrinal shift seems hardly possible in the culture where the mass of the Fraternity remains set in its ways. The belief that creating and adopting new programs, calling for more ways to attract members, holding more fund raisers, while consigning better-quality instruction and the ongoing exploration of Freemasonry to a subordinate role only assures that institutional Freemasonry, at best, is engaged in an effort to manage decline. Finding that sufficient Masonic instruction has ever been a consistent, Fraternity-wide endeavor embraced long enough by members to make the slightest impact is disturbingly difficult.

The good news is that Freemasonry is an *idea* with no dependence on high membership levels. And ideas live when they are put to work, but, as we see in American Freemasonry, the idea has not been consistently worked.

When ideas are not put to work, or when they become practiced less, the original idea is vulnerable to change, and much of that change is slipshod. While it is possible to remain passionate about the original idea, the less it is put to work, the more it unfolds into something other than its original format, its original appeal is lessened. As appeal lessens, more change is invited. Those changes may be thought to be worthy may be intended to rekindle and restore the original lost idea, but, when managing decline, they too often prove to do the opposite. That cycle does not stop until the majority leading that kind of change becomes the minority.

Organized Freemasonry has a design. The purpose of the design is to improve men, not for men to try to improve Freemasonry.

The failure of keeping the original idea of Freemasonry steadily worked and practiced is what caused the Fraternity to drift from the noble purpose that we once so readily proclaimed that we pursue.

Attempts to make an idea, even the greatest ones, appeal to all is a grievous mistake. The result of the membership increases in the years leading to, during, and following the Civil War years proves that. Should more proof be need, then examine what actually happened in, and to, the Craft following the same

rapid expansion following World Wars I and II. As repeated many times to inattentive ears: Freemasonry was never intended for every man, not even every good man. Moreover, it is not intended to be a rushed or poorly instructed process.

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Organized Freemasonry has a design. The purpose of the design is to improve men, not for men to try to improve Freemasonry. Constructive improvement in the Fraternity that surrounds Freemasonry, however, continues to lie in wait.

The longer that improvement waits, the more it appears the Fraternity will continue to shoot itself in the foot.

THE OPENED ENDED QUESTION

Make no mistake. Freemasonry has constructively affected the lives of many members and its kind offices have touched the lives of many in the world. But make no mistake either, that the Fraternity that surrounds organized Freemasonry can do better than it has.

The idea of Freemasonry has demonstrated that it can survive the pressures of the external society and its influences, politics, wars, economic collapses, other societal upheavals, and in addition, the Fraternity surrounding it that so often shoots itself in the foot.

Yes, the idea of Freemasonry endures but we do have to ask, endure as what?

Much sound advice and wise counsel has been given to the Fraternity over the centuries. And much of the best and wisest advice remains relevant today, because most of the problems begging for it still exist.

Joseph Fort Newton's work and Masonic scholarship is one of the bright lights in the history of early 20th century American Freemasonry. Like other serious Masons that came before and after him, he saw and clearly understood the cause of the neglect that impaired the real power of the idea of Freemasonry.

In 1923, Newton spoke of a duty Masons have to the Craft. Quoting another writer of his era, he gave solid advice to the Fraternity and its leaders regarding the Freemasonry we pass on to the next generation. He advised: *bequeath to them no tumbled house!*

In 1859, Past Grand Master of Kentucky, Rob Morris, asked whether Masonry will survive the causes at work to deteriorate it? Will it outlive the bad influences of imitative associations, of slackened rules, crowded membership, of doors of widely opened? At the same time, he expressed the view that Masonic knowledge in *the few* has sustained the Institution when the Masonic knowledge of *the many* brought it down.

In the grand scheme of things, we find 163 year later, there remains a great deal of housekeeping left unattended and yet to be done, and the answer to Morris's questions regrettably remain open-ended.

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