

1833

HOW THE ABOLISHMENT OF A RESOLUTION FUELED A MASONIC EPIDEMIC

In 1820, Lexington, Kentucky was one of the largest and wealthiest towns west of the Allegheny Mountains. So cultured was its lifestyle that the city gained the nickname, “the Athens of the West.”

The exceptionally warm temperatures and rainfall in the spring of 1833 left large pools of standing water in the downtown area of the community that did not yet have a sufficient sanitary water supply or run off disposal system.¹ The town’s drinking water was soon contaminated. A brief but devastating cholera epidemic ensued.²

Although many citizens fled the town as the sickness spread, in less than ten days, 1,500 persons were “prostrated and dying at the rate of fifty a day.”³ By mid-August, 502 of Lexington’s 7,000 citizens had died from cholera.⁴ The disease struck swiftly; a person might go to bed well at night,



and be dead by the next noon.⁵ One historical account reports that an “indescribable panic seized the citizens, half of whom fled from the city, and those who remained were almost paralyzed with fear. Intercourse between the town and country was suspended for six weeks; farmers had to abandon their grain to the stock for want of laborers; the market-houses in the city were empty and desolate.”⁶

William Solomon, known in those year as, “Old King Solomon,” was said to be “given to drink a great many years, and yet was inoffensive and of great integrity.”⁷ He claimed to be a childhood friend of Henry Clay, to whom he

¹Cheryl Truman, “Lexington’s 1833 Cholera Epidemic Chronicled in New Book,” *Lexington Herald Leader*. October 27th, 2014. <https://www.kentucky.com/news/health-and-medicine/article44518221.html>, accessed 2019, (“Lexington’s porous underground system of limestone caves and sinkholes leaves the area with a low-quality water that is dangerous enough on its own.” The danger was heightened by the further contamination caused by a recent flood. “With no organized waste collection, the waste of households and manufacturers was tossed into the streets. Outdoor privies overflowed during flooding,” and all of these “health risks” were lifted from the streets and Drained back into the wells, At the time of the outbreak drinking well water was a sure death sentence”).

² John E. Cooke, “Remarks on Cholera, As It Appeared In Lexington In June 1833,” *The Transylvania Journal of Medicine and the Associate Sciences*, vol. 6, 3, 1833.

³ George W. Ranck, *History of Lexington, Kentucky, Its Early Annals And Recent Progress, Including Biographical Sketches and Personal Reminiscences of the Pioneer Settlers, Notices of Prominent Citizens, Cincinnati, Etc., Etc.* Robert Clark, 1872. (From Ranck’s account: “The streets were silent and deserted by everything but horses and dead-carts, and to complete the desperate condition of things three physicians died, three more were absent, and of the rest scarcely one escaped an attack of the disease (Observer and Reporter). The clergy, active as they were, could not meet one-third of the demands made upon them. Business houses were closed, factories stopped, and men passed their most intimate friends in silence and afar off, staring like lunatics, for fear the contagion was upon them. The dead could not be buried fast enough, nor could coffins be had to meet half the demand. Many of the victims were consigned to trunks and boxes or wrapped in the bedclothes upon which they had just expired, placed in carts, and hurried off for burial without a prayer being said and no attendant but the driver. The grave-yards were choked. Coffined and uncoffined dead were laid at the gates in confused heaps to wait their turn to be deposited in the long, shallow trenches, which were hastily dug for the necessities of the occasion. Out of one family of nineteen persons, seventeen died.”

⁴ Cooke.

⁵ Burton Milward, *William “King” Solomon – 1775-1854*, Larkspur Press, Monterey, Kentucky, 1990.

⁶ Ranck.

⁷ *IBID*.

often referred to as "Harry."⁸ What Clay thought of Solomon is not known, and no mention of him has been found in the tens of thousands of Clay documents at the University of Kentucky.⁹ Lexington Reverend William M. Pratt wrote in his diary that Solomon was a substantial and industrious citizen in his early days. Samuel Woodson Price, a well-known Kentucky artist who immortalized Solomon by painting his portrait in 1849, said the death of Solomon's wife may have caused him to become an inebriate.¹⁰

Local history credits the former carpenter, water wells and digger of cellars, who came to Lexington as a young man from Powhatan County, Virginia, for saving Lexington from the continued spread of the disease by volunteering his services to the town in 1833 "with no expectation of reward."¹¹ As the epidemic spread, Solomon, accustomed to hard work, collected bodies and buried them at the Lexington Cemetery where often no one was there to lay the dead in their graves.¹² He died at age 84 in 1854 when Lexington experienced its second cholera epidemic and he fell prey to the same disease. His body was buried near where lay the remains of his friend, "Harry."

The Grand Lodge of Kentucky Annual Communication was scheduled in Lexington for the last week of August 1833. Consideration was given to postponing the meeting until later that year, or until the next, because of the epidemic.¹³ As the spread of cholera and the death rate began to decline in July, the decision was made to meet as planned in Lexington.

As one public epidemic was in decline, another kind of epidemic inside the Masonic Fraternity was about to breakout and spread. This one would not be as brief, nor would it prove easy to eradicate over the next 192 years.

THE SEVENTH YEAR

In 1833, the American Freemasonry was in the seventh year of a seemingly endless national torrent of anti-Masonic sentiment energized by the kidnapping of William Morgan by Masons in upstate New York in late September 1826. Morgan's disappearance and presumed murder led to numerous indictments and trials of the Masons involved, thus inflaming the long-smoldering anti-Masonic sentiment that began in 1798 and ultimately turned into a political, religious, and wide-spread social movement.¹⁴ Once news spread about what became known as The Morgan Affair, the embers of that sentiment sparked a wildfire. During the storm, the Craft was discredited in the eye of the public and shunned as a supposed intellectual society making it no longer attractive to many current or potential members. The course of American Freemasonry was altered, and, with its former prestige blemished, the high perch upon which society placed it, faded.

⁸ *IBID.*

⁹ Milward.

¹⁰ J. Winston Coleman, "Samuel Woodson Price: Kentucky Portrait Painter" *The Filson Club History Quarterly* Vol. 23, No. 1, Louisville, Kentucky, January 1949

¹¹ From the diary of Reverend William M. Pratt, *William "King" Solomon's Residence, 1859*, https://sites.rootsweb.com/~kyfayett/dunn/solomon_william.htm, accessed January 2022,

¹² Milward.

¹³ J.W. Norwood, Master, Lexington Lodge 1, 1915, Personal Notes, Special Collections, Frankfort Historical Society, Frankfort, KY, examined in 2013.

¹⁴ J.W. Bizzack, *Bending Granite: Taking Stock in American Freemasonry*, "The Past Is Always Present: Connecting The Dots Of The Banquet Of Foolishness," BSF Foundation, Lexington, Kentucky, 2023.

When the public and political hysteria began to subside in the late 1830s, the number of Masons in the United States had dropped from 100,000 to 40,000.¹⁵

By 1833, the Kentucky jurisdiction was well on its way to losing half of its chartered Lodges and half of its members.¹⁶ Only fourteen of the sixty-six chartered Lodges in Kentucky in 1826 attended the 1833 Annual Communication in Lexington. At the time, the Grand Lodge of Kentucky was under a “mountain of debt,” many Lodges were described as “laggard” and most did not meet.¹⁷ An 1859 book about the history of Kentucky Freemasonry tells us that had the anti-Masonic movement continued another ten years, the Institution of Freemasonry in the state would have disappeared.¹⁸

The overcast, gloomy weather in Lexington on August 27, 1833, was befitting what would take place after Grand Master John Payne opened the annual meeting. A veteran of the War of 1812, Payne was a well-known attorney, and involved in the politics of Bracken County. He called for a vote that day on a resolution that, according to the Proceedings, had laid over from the 1832 Annual Communication and which would abolish a certain existing By-Law. Curiously, the 1832 published Proceedings do not reflect the resolution. No matter, what the resolution abolished in 1833 clearly existed or there would have been no call to abolish it.

The published Proceedings from 1800, and through the next decade and some years beyond that, significantly vary in their reporting consistency. In point of fact, the Grand Lodge Proceedings are notoriously sterile and void of much context in those years (through today) and did not often, if ever, note any discussion, opposition, support, or reasons behind resolutions, motions from the floor, or legislation.

Awareness of what was happening, or had occurred, in the larger society, however, adds context to what is missing in the Annual Proceedings. By examining the years following various resolutions, motions, and proposed legislation that passed or failed, a picture emerges that tell us about recurring problems and the overall state and condition of the Fraternity.

The 1833 resolution is mentioned but not discussed in two of the four books about the history of Kentucky Freemasonry that were written in 1859, 1900, 1933, and 1980.¹⁹ Aside from specific sections of 1859 book, the later books, which were certainly important histories, did not examine all issues that occurred up to the

¹⁵ Erik Mckinley Eriksson, “Effects of Anti-Masonry on The Masonic Fraternity, 1826 1856,” *The Builder Magazine*. February 1927, Volume 13 - Number 2, David Barrett, “The Morgan Affair,” *Pietre-Stones Review Of Masonry*, 2009, [Http://www.freemasons.com/morgan_affair.html](http://www.freemasons.com/morgan_affair.html), Accessed November 2010, 1936 Published By The Grand lodge of Missouri, The Genealogy Of Our Missouri Ritual, A Study Prepared For The Masonic Research Council Of Missouri and Presented at its Annual Meeting, Saint Joseph, Missouri, September 23, 1935, Henry C. Chiles, Herbert T. Singer, Ossian Lang, New York *Freemasonry, A Bicentennial History, 1781-1981*, Grand Lodge of New York, 1981, Edward S. Ellis, *Low Twelve*, published by F.R. Niglutsch, 1907, reprint, Stone Guild Publishing, Plano, Texas, 2009, Chris and Melissa Hoffman, *An Anti-Masonic Newspaper, Anti-Masonic Intelligencer* (Hartford, Connecticut) Nov. 18, 1828. Oct. 6, 1829, American Antiquarian Society, <https://www.americanantiquarian.org/3123.htm>, Accessed January 14, 2020.

¹⁶ Rob Morris, in *The History of Kentucky Freemasonry* (1959), reports that Kentucky lost 769 of its 1,538 members and 37 of its 66 Lodges by the time the anti-Masonic years subsided in the early 1840s, but reports vary on those numbers, yet later notes that in 1828 here were 2,600 members in 63 Lodges. Charles Snow Guthrie, in *Kentucky Freemasonry: 1788-1978, The Grand Lodge and the Men Who Made Its* (1980), reports that in 1801 there were 181 Masons in Kentucky Lodges and in 1825 members totaled 1,788. Despite the variances in these sources, Grand Lodge Proceedings in those years and records from which Morris extracted data in 1859, confirm that in 1840 there were 1,300 members and 37 Lodges. and by 1859 the Grand Lodge had chartered 280 additional Lodges with over 10,000 members with little to no instruction about Freemasonry by Lodges beyond that which is presented by ritual and lectures.

¹⁷ Grand Lodge of Kentucky, Annual Proceedings, 1832.

¹⁸ Rob Morris, *The History of Kentucky Freemasonry*, Louisville, Morris, 1859.

¹⁹ Rob Morris, *Kentucky Freemasonry*, Louisville, Morris, 1859, H.B. Grant, *The Doings of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky: 1800-1900*, Masonic Home Book and Job Office, Louisville, 1900, J. Winston Coleman, *Masonry in the Bluegrass*, Transylvania Press, 1933, Charles Snow Guthrie, *Kentucky Freemasonry – 1788-1978: The Grand Lodge and the Men Who Made it*, Masonic Printing, 1981.

date of their publication, nor did they always offer a clear account for the direction and course of Masonry in the state.

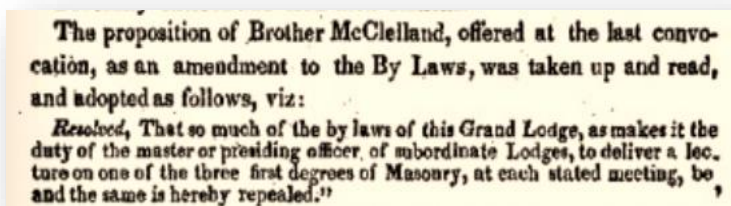
Notwithstanding, the unintentional effect of the 1833 abolishment of one rule was only one of two actions by the Craft in the 19th century that proved pivotal and set the course for Kentucky Freemasonry for almost two centuries and counting.

The other action was also a resolution to “postpone indefinitely,” the findings of and recommendations from a year-long inspection report of Kentucky Lodges that was authorized by the Grand Master in 1898.²⁰ That resolution passed immediately after the report was read to the Craft at the Annual Proceedings in 1899. By the end of the century The bulk of Kentucky Masons proved not to be interested in addressing irregularities or advancing Masonic instruction and education beyond what was found in most Lodges.

THE RESOLUTION IN CONTEXT TO THE TIMES

The resolution abolished an 1802 section of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky By Laws that for thirty years required the Master or presiding officer of subordinate lodges to deliver a lecture on one of the three first degrees of Masonry at each stated meeting.²¹

Strange as it may seem that a specific rule was necessary to require Lodges to explore Freemasonry, nevertheless, the rule existed. When we examine the times, geography, and disparate practices in American Freemasonry already in existence, we find context to help explain why the rule was made.



The proposition of Brother McClelland, offered at the last convocation, as an amendment to the By Laws, was taken up and read, and adopted as follows, viz:
Resolved, That so much of the by laws of this Grand Lodge, as makes it the duty of the master or presiding officer of subordinate Lodges, to deliver a lecture on one of the three first degrees of Masonry, at each stated meeting, be, and the same is hereby repealed."

From the 1833 Annual Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky

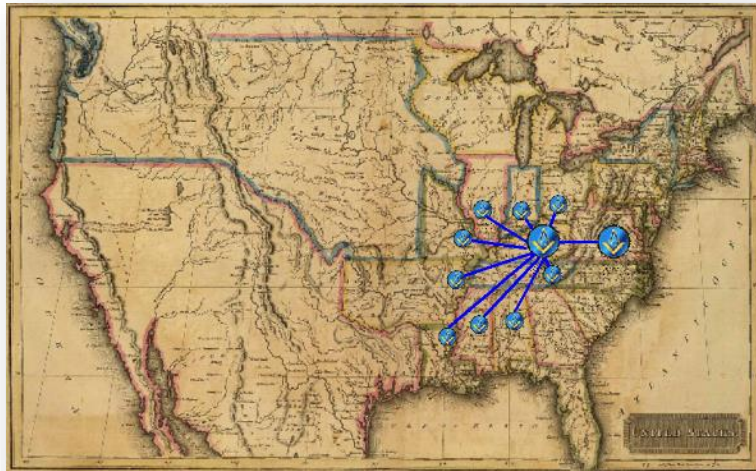
When the Grand Lodge of Kentucky was formed in 1800 there were 150 Masons in Kentucky, meeting in five Lodges chartered by the Grand Lodge of Virginia.²² Kentucky did not become a state until 1792. The earliest members in these lodges that began to be chartered in 1788 in Kentucky were made Masons in at least eight other existing jurisdictions at the time, in addition to being made Masons in traveling military Lodges during the French and Indian War and the American Revolution. The earliest members of the Kentucky Lodges assisted other Kentucky Lodges in their formation. It was no uncommon for officers in previously chartered Lodges to serve as initial officers in those chartered in later years.

²⁰ John W. Bizzack, “The Postponement: Masonic Misstep or Squandered Opportunity?” *Plumbline, The Quarterly Bulletin of The Scottish Rite Research Society*, May 2021, *The Transactions of The Rubicon Masonic Society*, Vol. 1, Spring, 2023.

²¹ Grand Lodge of Kentucky, *Annual Proceedings*, 1832 and 1833.

²² Rob Morris, *History of Masonry in Kentucky*, Louisville, Kentucky, 1859.

The practices and manner in which Freemasonry was conveyed to initiates and members were uneven, so it should be no surprise that the practices and the level of understanding and instruction imparted in the Lodges would have been far from uniform. Five of the Lodges chartered by the Grand Lodge of Virginia in Kentucky were within a 50-mile radius of Lexington, where the Kentucky' Grand Lodge first met from 1800-1833 – an eight-to-twelve-hour journey. One Lodge, chartered by Kentucky in 1802, however, was located 700 miles away and at the time, a journey of at least a week.²³ History declares the Grand Lodge of Kentucky “the venerable mother of the Craft in the Mississippi Valley” by chartering lodges not only in the state of Kentucky, but territories later to become states such as Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Arkansas,



Tennessee, and Mississippi.²⁴ Also noted in history is the concern that practices, protocols, etiquette and in particular, ritual, was “slovenly,” and lodges operated largely in a make-shift manner.²⁵ The description of the Fraternity as producing “semi-manufactured Masons in semi-manufactured lodges,” heard first in 1859,²⁶ would be echoed in other words and ways by Grand Masters and Masonic scholars through the end of the 1800s.

In an effort to curb what was already seen as a problem, one of the first actions of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky came from realizing the need to mirror the 1798 order from the Grand Lodge of Virginia to send Inspectors to subordinate Lodges and “to instruct officers in the proper mode of working and established a uniform method of work and protocol throughout the jurisdiction.”²⁷ A resolution was passed authorizing the Grand Master to “appoint some well-skilled brother or brothers” to inspect what the Kentucky

Yet another resolution was adopted that authorized the Grand Lodge to employ a “competent lecturer” to instruct lodges at the one-year salary of \$2,500, but no one would take the job.¹

²³ Charles Snow Guthrie, *Kentucky Freemasonry: 1788-1978 – The Grand Lodge And The Men Who Made It*, Grand Lodge of Kentucky, Louisville, The Grand Lodge of Kentucky, 1981.

²⁴ Morris.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *IBID.* (By 1810, there were fifteen lodges and 300 Masons in Kentucky. (By 1814, nine additional lodges had been chartered. That year, the Grand Lodge divided the 24 lodges into five districts and created the position of inspector to “superintend and instruct” concerning the proper methods of working, suggesting again either common sense management was in play, or the practices and work performed in these lodges continued to be of concern. At the time, unfortunately, the districts were so vast in geography, the appointed inspectors, according to the records, “could not function.” By 1822, another 38 lodges had been chartered, making a total of 62 lodges in Kentucky. While this proliferation illustrates the growing interest in the Craft with the burgeoning commonwealth, it also marks the period in which

Lodges were doing “ritualistically.”²⁸ Later proceedings tell us this approach was repeatedly used for years with lackluster results. By 1913, the problem of disparate practices and deficit of Masonic instruction and education continued its decay. Yet another resolution was adopted that authorized the Grand Lodge to employ a “competent lecturer” to instruct lodges at the one-year salary of \$2,500, but no one would take the job.²⁹ Some believed those who might be considered among the likely qualified were simply not willing to accept the position because of the unwelcoming attitudes found in many Lodges in the state. Kentucky Masons consistently expressed their opposition to a representative from the Grand Lodge lecturing them about, or how to practice, what they believed Freemasonry to be.³⁰

There was no clear institution-wide consensus and understanding in Kentucky in its earliest years about how to best convey Masonry and administer the work of the Fraternity to ensure that all new and veteran members received proper instruction. The 1802 rule was established as a promising management tool that would better ensure that the exploration the lessons, customs, philosophy, and purpose of Ancient Craft Masonry continued in Lodges, beyond the mere performance a ritual. The wisdom of making such a rule mandatory was not a problem at the time, and well founded, but, proved futile.

Later Proceedings reveal the rule was not consistently enforced nor were the Inspectors able to make their appointed rounds thus, the tumbled house condition in which we find Kentucky Freemasonry by the early 1840s should be no surprise.

WHY WAS THE RULE ABOLISHED?

A repeal or abolishing of a rule without replacement usually occurs when the rule is no longer effective, or it is shown that it has a far more negative consequence than originally envisioned. Another reason may be that the abolishers simply failed to any longer see the value of the rule. In this case, there may have been another reason: the inability of the organization to comply with the rule.

The loss of members by that seventh year of the anti-Masonry tempest that affected most all of Freemasonry in the United States would be expected to have included those who were considered the most well-versed and capable of delivering lectures at every Stated Communication about the three degrees. If the rule had been consistently followed and enforced since 1802, careful reasoning tells us that there would have remained some members who were competent enough to step in and fill the void and continue to comply with the rule. This was not the case, and we find that by 1843, there was not only poorly conveyed ritual in Kentucky Freemasonry, but little to no instruction beyond ritual provided by the bulk of rapidly expanding Lodges.³¹ We learn about that from Grand Masters who addressed the Craft at each of the Annual Proceedings beginning in 1843, and from recommendations made by specific Grand Lodge committees.

That there was no discussion or stated intent to replace the rule, or stipulation that its abolition in 1833 would sunset at a future date, suggests that the Craft must have believed the rule to be impossible to enforce.

Masonry spread at such an accelerated rate that effective and suitable oversight of the administration of practices was even more difficult to achieve.

²⁸ *IBID.*

²⁹ Grand Lodge of Kentucky, Annual Proceedings, Grand Master's Address, 1913.

³⁰ *IBID.*

³¹ John W. Bizzack, *Canker Worm on the Rose: The Struggle to Find Observance of Freemasonry in Kentucky from 1800-2020*, BSF Foundation, 2023.

Because of the weak condition of the Fraternity at the time (and later), however, it cannot be discounted that complacency and administrative ineptitude played a substantial role.

Why did not the later Grand Masters in the 1840s through the remainder of the 19th century who railed about the lack of instruction in Lodges not order, coordinate legislation or take action that would reinstitute the rule to address the problem? Fourteen Grand Masters from 1843-1899 tried,³² and close, contextual examination of decades of Proceedings show that the lack of continuity of effective leadership, driven by the unbridled expansion of members with less instruction and education than even the previous generations who believed all that is necessary to *become* a Freemason is ritual, prevented their efforts from taking root. The majority of Kentucky Lodges, and the members in them, saw no reason to change the deleterious effects of the long-embedded practice of producing semi-manufactured Masons.

THE ERA OF REVERENT LIP SERVICE

Effective or not, the 1802 rule was created for the obvious reason of making sure that Freemasonry was explored in Lodges beyond ritual, and to pursue more effectively what had already been found to be the difficult labor of constructively advancing the knowledge of Masonry in its members.

The lack of enforcement of the rule made it merely symbolic due to the lack of consequences for non-compliance. The loss of members who may have been competent enough to perform what the rule required, or enough competent members left to execute it after the enormous membership losses during the anti-Masonic years, suggests that aside from rushed, poorly conveyed ritual, there was not only a deficit of Masonic instruction in Kentucky Lodges, but, apparently a shortage of members possessing what we might consider today to be the “right stuff” to pick up the slack.

Predictably, once the rule was abolished, Lodges were no longer held (even symbolically) to a sensible minimum, and were released from what was apparently a burden to do more in the way of instruction and education than to merely initiate, pass, and raise those admitted into its ranks. The responsibility of Lodges to pursue and explore enlightenment through the lessons, customs, philosophy, and the purpose of Ancient Craft Freemasonry at each Stated Communication was, in effect, expunged. As a result, the consequence of the purge over the decades that followed led only in one direction: implanting the unreasoned presumption that being made a Master Mason was an event instead of a process.

What would have happened had the rule remained in effect but strictly enforced? In light of what we learn from a close study of later Kentucky Proceedings, it is reasonable to believe that, eventually, a broader curriculum, as it were, would have been devised. And Masters, or their designees, then bound by a consistently enforced rule would, at least in theory, have produced a more competent corps of Masons knowledgeable about what they all professed they came to Freemasonry to do. Outside of sheer opinion, it would be extremely difficult to claim and defend that such a situation would, in the arms of equally qualified and consistent leadership throughout the Fraternity, have failed.

³² *IBID.*

What is the primary business of Masonic Lodges if not the exploration of Freemasonry? A neglect to adhere to that primary business means simply that we are not teaching and practicing Freemasonry³³ although we find ample lip reverence that claims we are.

*What is the primary
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The sheer logic of the idea of taking the time to appropriately instruct candidates as they pass through degrees is a convincing remedy to combat the epidemic deficit of appropriate fundamental Masonic education. What justifiable reason is there for candidates who move through the degrees are eventually raised a Master Mason to not be able to identify and explain the relevance of symbols on our tracing boards? Why do they find it necessary to ask questions like, “Why does the Master wear a hat? Why should there exist even a small cadre of members who are unacquainted with the lessons, customs, philosophy, and the purpose of Ancient Craft Freemasonry?

Those who might choose to argue that all members are, by mere exposure acquainted with the principles of Freemasonry live on the roster in the category of those members who are not. How did exploring Freemasonry’s degrees come to equate with the belief that struggling to open and close Lodge as prescribed in our monitors, the inability to perform inspiring ritual and lectures, orchestrating lengthy business meetings, steadily failing to retain member or attract more than a small and meager percentage of member to Lodge meetings and activities, and devoting more time to fund raising and marketing programs than anything else is the primary business of the Lodge?

The remedy to this deeply embedded, casualized, and imperfect practice has been recommended since the early 20th century.³⁴ When coupled with the long-standing reality that at each Stated Communication it is already the duty the Master or his designee to provide good and whole instruction, or cause the same to be done, the non-Masonically challenged easily see that to lessen, perhaps one day even cure, the cause of the epidemic and its worst flair ups, the solution has been and remains before us: effectively instruct candidates as they pass through the degrees, and continue to explore Freemasonry at each our stated communications. After all, the exploration of Freemasonry is our primary business. All else is secondary.

When it comes to the pursuit of excellence in Freemasonry there will always be two choices: lip service paid to it or authentic action toward achieving it. The distinction has become more apparent in the first two decades of the 21st century.

³³ Dwight L. Smith, “Wither Are We Traveling,” *Indiana Freemason*, 1964.

³⁴ John W. Bizzack, “Hardly A Drop In The Bucket,” Joseph Fort Newton And Masonic Education, *Bending Granite: Taking Stock of American Freemasonry*, BSF Foundation, 2023.