

# 1868-1869

## THE TIPPING POINT FOR KENTUCKY FREEMASONRY

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Two and half years after the end of the Civil War the Southern economic market remained bankrupt. Reconstruction of the South (1865-77) was in its infant stage. Redressing the inequities of slavery and its political, social, and economic legacy was an extremely slow process, not to mention the efforts to solve the problems arising from the readmission to the Union the eleven states that had seceded.<sup>1</sup>

Kentucky was forced to compete with the North for trade after the War. Most of Kentucky's virgin timber was still standing, and only a small portion of its mineral resources had been tapped so the state was ripe for future development, but the state was no longer in the path of migration but was being bypassed as settlers moved beyond the Mississippi River.<sup>2</sup> Only seventeen towns out of the over 1,200 towns and communities in Kentucky had more 2,500 residents.<sup>3</sup> Lexington and the Ohio River cities of Louisville, Owensboro, Paducah, and Covington, however, grew rapidly and ultimately fueled the involvement of more rural agricultural areas of the state.<sup>4</sup>

In 1860, before the outbreak of the War, Kentucky's population was 1,155,684. The 1870 Census reports a 1,321,01, an increase of 154, 684 (14%).<sup>5</sup> Kentucky was far from as war-torn by the Civil War than other states that were considered, at least geographically, as southern. This could account for the increase in population although many migrating from the other states bypassed Kentucky. But to find reasons why there was such an explosive increase in the number of Masonic Lodges and Masons in Kentucky during the 1860s beyond a population increase and the common idea that Masonry was again popular, requires deeper research and context.

Records show that 78,257 Kentuckians were recruited into the Union Army and 37,917 into the Confederate forces (total 116,174).<sup>6</sup> Union recruits were typically from coal-producing areas of the state, specifically in the lower portion of the eastern mountains and coalfields, and in the western coalfields. There were relatively more Confederate enlistees from the northeastern agricultural region and around the Mississippi Plateau in the southwest portion of the state, which is also an agricultural region. There was also a concentration of Confederates in the eastern part of the state along the border with Virginia.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas D. Clark, "Civil War and its Aftermath," John E. Kleber Editor, *The Kentucky Encyclopedia*, University Press, of Kentucky 1992.

<sup>2</sup> *IBID.*

<sup>3</sup> Aaron Astor, *Rebels on the Border: Civil War, Emancipation, and the Reconstruction of Kentucky and Missouri*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Louisiana University Press, 2012, Shari Eli, Laura Salisbury, Allison Shertzer, "Ideology and Migration after the American Civil War," *The Journal of Economic History*, Editors: Eric Hilt Department of Economics, Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts, published also by Cambridge University Press, September 2018,

<sup>4</sup> *IBID.*

<sup>5</sup> Statista, Population of the Border States before and after the American Civil War in 1860 and 1870, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1010475/population-border-states-1860-1870>, accessed November 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Eli, Salisbury, Shertzer.

<sup>7</sup> *IBID.*

Many who served in both the Union and Confederate armies from Kentucky migrated elsewhere after the War, in fact, nearly half of surviving Kentucky veterans moved to a new county between 1860 and 1880, which begins to account for shift of population in the state.

Union recruits were more likely to move north, and Confederate recruits were more likely to move south and west. Union veterans from Kentucky were more likely to leave counties dominated by their ideological (and wartime) adversaries and move to places that had supported the Union. Confederate veterans were left with less productive farmlands who found their options for improving their circumstances by moving to be comparatively limited.<sup>8</sup>

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In 1866, the Grand Lodge of Kentucky reports 15,157 members.<sup>9</sup> There were 63 Lodges more in 1867 than in 1859, and by 1869, an additional sixteen Lodges were added for a total of 79 new lodges with a reported membership of 20,000.<sup>10</sup>

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## **STORM WARNINGS**

Grand Lodge of Kentucky leaders had expressed concerns about the rapid increase in Lodges and members in the stated prior to the 1860s. The first published report of the concern was in 1843 and voiced by the Grand Master at the Annual Stated Meeting of the Grand Lodge in the first Address to the Craft known to be published in the Annual Proceedings. Six more Grand Masters before the Civil War would express the same concern and warning in their Addresses about the increases and the lack of appropriate instruction and irregularities taking place in Kentucky Lodges.

In 1866, Kentucky Grand Master Myrix J. Williams was the first Grand Master after the War to caution the about the hasty expansion of Lodges and members, declaring that the “rapid and unnatural increase” of the number of Lodges had place the Fraternity in “imminent peril.” He characterized the increase and likened it

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<sup>8</sup> Eli, Salibury, Shertzer.

<sup>9</sup> Rob Morris, *The History of Freemasonry in Kentucky*, Louisville, 1859, and *Grand Lodge of Kentucky Proceedings*, H.B. Grant, *Doings of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky, 1800-1900*, Masonic Homes, 1900, Charles Snow Guthrie, *The History of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky and the Men Who Made It*, Grand Lodge of Kentucky, 1980 (By 1867 the number of Kentucky Masonic Lodges had increased from 317 in 1859 to 380 and membership stood at 20,000. Thirty additional Lodges in the state were under dispensation in 1867).

<sup>10</sup> *IBID.*

to a “canker worm on the rose” and would ultimately decay Masonry from the inside.<sup>11</sup> No matter, there were 30 dispensations granted to new Lodges that year.

The next year, Grand Master L.T. Martin became the eighth Grand Master since 1843 to warn the Craft about the delirious effects unbridled expansion. He concluded that Masonry was “not intended for the million, but a select few.”<sup>12</sup> He made recommendations to curb the increases, but they were tabled by a committee assigned to examine them. Nineteen more dispensation for new Lodges were granted that year.<sup>13</sup> The Craft began to appear incapable of responsibly regulating its frenzied growth.

In 1868, Elisha Seaman Fitch, an attorney from Flemingsburg was elected Grand Master. Fitch was part of the Law Office of Henry Clay and served as a state legislator. His command of language won him the nickname of “The Silver-Tongued.”<sup>14</sup> Fitch later became the first superintendent of the Masonic Homes as well as the first Grand Master since 1817 in Kentucky to be elected to consecutive terms.



ELISHA S. FITCH

When Fitch stepped down from Grand East, he left a gift for historians: a nearly 28-page Address that he delivered to the Craft at the 1869 Annual Communication.

That Address was not only the longest delivered by a Grand Master but serves as a marker that tells us the “highly deleterious” effect of canker worm to which Grand Master Williams referred in 1866 had already too deeply burrowed its way into the Craft and its leadership. Instead of the prosperity most seemed to believe the increases heralded, the hasty expansion of Lodges and memberships since the early 1840s had only further reduced the Fraternity to a roster of too many semi-manufactured Masons in

semi-manufactured Lodges.<sup>15</sup> Oblivious to the scale of decay and what it would mean to future leadership of the Fraternity, the majority of the Craft and too many of its leaders were riddled with the misguided notion that the rapid expansion was a sign and a gauge of effectiveness of the strength of Masonry and its historic purpose.

In reality, four generations of Masons by 1870 were produced under a system that was (and remains) unable to warrant that all admitted to Lodges were

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exposed to more than a skimming of the historical purpose of Masonry, an insufficient foundation of Masonic instruction and knowledge, and even a lack of awareness of the rules governing the Fraternity. Although speaking to this problem as a 20<sup>th</sup> century issue still faced in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Past Grand Master of Oklahoma, Robert G. Davis described what was provided for too long was a “pretend experience.”<sup>16</sup> That

<sup>11</sup> Grand Lodge of Kentucky Annual Proceedings, 1866, Grand Master’s Address

<sup>12</sup> Grand Lodge of Kentucky Annual Proceedings, 1867, Grand Master’s Address.

<sup>13</sup> *IBID.*

<sup>14</sup> H.B. Grant, Doings of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky 1800-1900, Masonic Homes, 1900.

<sup>15</sup> A phrase coined by Past Grand Master Rob Morris in 1859 in his book, *The History of Kentucky Freemasonry*, Louisville, 1859.

<sup>16</sup> Robert G. Davis, “It Is Time We Crossed The Rubicon And Battle Our 20<sup>th</sup> Century Ruffians,” William O. Ware Lodge of Research presentation on November 3, 2022, For Wright, Kentucky.

experience of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, was a bleed-over from the practices of 19<sup>th</sup> century, and something that Fitch noted in his 1869 Address.

By the end of the 1860s, the Kentucky Fraternity had relinquished any provable claim of exclusivity and the seeds of an increasingly bureaucratic and mechanical organization were nourished by that forfeit. The decay and result of continuing to expand a corps of the semi-manufactured gnawed at the Fraternity through the remainder of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the next. In the latter decades of the century, the effects of The Gilded Age and Age of Fraternalism<sup>17</sup> also contributed to the decay.

## THE TIPPING POINT

We find in every decade through 2020 that twenty-six Grand Masters would speak to most of the same problems Fitch reported in 1869. Although plans were offered plans to abate the problems, none met with decisive success. In fact, most failed and failed spectacularly. What the first eight Grand Masters on the record were concerned about came to pass: fewer members with appropriate instruction ultimately ascended to various levels of leadership and ushered the Craft into the future with, in essence, one Masonic arm tied behind their back.

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We learn from the 1868 Proceedings and Fitch's 1868 and 1869 Addresses:

1. It was not the idea that Masonry was making better men out of good men that drove its popularity in following the Civil War. It was the financial charity extended to members to mitigate the miseries of the Civil War and its political, social, and economic legacy impact that was as much, if not more, of the reason for the rapid expansion of Lodges and members. Masonry was cheapened by low dues and fees that could not sustain the charity funds available, resulting in a "disastrous," "depleting influence" upon the Grand Treasury."<sup>18</sup> Lodges were "formed far too rapidly and promiscuously for the general good of Masonry, in the Commonwealth"<sup>19</sup> and "aggregate membership" had no commensurate increase whatever in the general prosperity"<sup>20</sup> of the Craft. The privileges of the Fraternity became "a matter of too easy attainment."<sup>21</sup> Instead of the

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<sup>17</sup> The Gilded Age, usually noted as between the 1870s to around 1900, was a period of mass industrialization and economic splendor in America when there was a transformation in the economy, technology, government, and social customs. This transformation forged a modern national industrial society out of what had been small regional communities that led to a change in demographics in the United States. The Age of Fraternalism. Later known as "The Golden Age of Fraternalism," it was a period when membership in the fraternal societies in the United States grew at a very rapid pace in the latter third of the 19th century and continued into the first part of the 20th. At its peak, it was suggested that as much as 40% of the adult male population held membership in at least one fraternal order. (Harriett W. McBride, "The Golden Age of Fraternalism," *Heredom*, Vol. 13, 2005 (In an article in the *North American Review* 164, May the writer, H. S. Harwood, reported that fraternal groups claimed five and a half million members, while the total adult population of the United States was approximately nineteen million. At about the same time, Albert C. Stevens, the compiler of the invaluable *Cyclopedia of Fraternities*. New York, E. B. Treat, 1907, estimated that 40 percent of the adult male population held membership in a fraternal order. Fraternalism was so appealing to the American public that individuals formed organizations to meet the needs and desires of men of most ethnic, economic, and political characteristics). Lynn Dumenil, *Freemasonry and American Culture, 1880-1930*, Princeton University Press, 1984.

<sup>18</sup> Grand Lodge of Kentucky Annual Proceedings, 1869, Grand Master's Address

<sup>19</sup> *IBID.*

<sup>20</sup> *IBID.*

<sup>21</sup> *IBID.*

well-qualified, Lodges “invited an indiscriminate rush from the inquisitive without.”<sup>22</sup> The standard of qualifications were lowered so by “receiving into Lodge those who are not worthy, but also perhaps more frequently, by retaining in our fellowship those who have become unworthy,” and “who habitually and for years set at defiance the preceptive teachings of the institution and have even become offensive to the moral sense of the general community in which they live.”<sup>23</sup> Lodges elected members to the Master’s Chair who had not served as Wardens. <sup>24</sup> Degrees had been conferred out of time.<sup>25</sup> Degrees were conferred without sufficient time between degrees to learn the previous.<sup>26</sup> Regardless, restraints placed on Lodges from an 1865 resolution to only confer the first section of the second degree, and first section of the third degree on one candidate at a time, had been repealed, demonstrating the increased volume of members admitted taking place in across the state.<sup>27</sup> Fitch scolded the Craft saying that the Fraternity had become a “sad and deplorable perversion of the original design of the Institution,” and declared that “as a Grand Lodge, we should not for a moment tolerate, much less in any way sustain or sanction”<sup>28</sup> what had and continued to take place.

2. There existed an inconsistency in the election of “worthy Grand Masters.”<sup>29</sup> The call was made for re-election of “competent and trustworthy Grand Masters for at least two or three terms so that actual experience in the office would enable such a man to promote the highest welfare of the Fraternity throughout so extended to a jurisdiction.”<sup>30</sup> An issue of past electioneering for higher office had been taking place and was referred to as a “pernicious custom.” The Grand Lodge had rebuked the practice on previous occasions but “the regulation adopted on the subject did not go far enough.”<sup>31</sup> Strongly recommended was that the Fraternity “should take hold of the matter in good earnest.”<sup>32</sup>
3. Presiding officers remained “oblivious of the fact” that there were fundamental governing laws with which they were required to adhere. <sup>33</sup>
4. Members who were supposed to be “good and true, and strictly to obey the moral law,”<sup>34</sup> did not.

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<sup>22</sup> *IBID.*

<sup>23</sup> *IBID.*

<sup>24</sup> Grant.

<sup>25</sup> *IBID.*

<sup>26</sup> Grant.

<sup>27</sup> Grant.

<sup>28</sup> Grand Lodge of Kentucky Annual Proceedings, 1869, Grand Master’s Address.

<sup>29</sup> Grand Lodge of Kentucky Annual Proceedings, 1869, Grand Master’s Address.

<sup>30</sup> *IBID.*

<sup>31</sup> *IBID.*

<sup>32</sup> *IBID.*

<sup>33</sup> *IBID.*

<sup>34</sup> *IBID.*

5. The Grand Lodge had been more than willing even before the Civil War to provide a charter for a Lodge-room within a mile or two those who did not wish to travel to seek Lodge privileges. Far too many Lodges lent a willing ear to every petition that promised to add a few more members to the Order. The physical wants of Masons were addressed, to the detriment, in many cases, to the moral wants.
6. The strength of fewness was divided with lodges scattered throughout the state and the work of the Order continued to be abridged. Many Lodges half-worked the degrees and were left unrecited either by the Masonic ignorance passed on to them, or incompetency.
7. There was, despite the flowery and romantic styled praised heaped on the Fraternity by orators and others of the time, a division and disharmony that brewed from unresolved issues. The Grand Master had to issue a proclamation declaring a convention, held in September 1868, and another proposed for October, to be illegal and unmasonic assemblies, and forbid any Kentucky Mason from meeting or taking part in said conventions.<sup>35</sup> The intent of the convention was to consider forming another Grand Lodge in Kentucky.<sup>36</sup>

Fitch's lambasting-tongue-lashing had an effect. The Committee on Lodges Under Dispensation rejected petitions for eighteen new Lodges,<sup>37</sup> and Charles Edgington, an attorney from Covington, first elected Grand Master in 1869, was reelected to a second term in 1870. However, he would be the last Grand Master elected to two consecutive terms.

That was the lasting extent of Fitch's admonishment and influence on the jurisdiction. The Craft had already become too large to effectively manage itself and became an increasingly mechanical organization. Four additional Grand Masters before 1900 voiced the concerns that were expressed by eleven previous Grand Masters regarding "deleterious" issues and other irregularities that existed in the from 1800 through the 1860s.

In 1899, Kentucky Masons explicitly demonstrated their disregard for the cautions and reproof of Grand Master's no matter the consequences of their findings from valid inspections, nor the recommendations they made that were designed to improve the condition and direction of the Fraternity. In the last months of the last year of the century, the message from the Craft to the Grand Lodge was clear: no matter what Grand

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<sup>35</sup> Grant.

<sup>36</sup> *IBID*, and Grand Lodge of Kentucky Annual Proceedings, 1869.

<sup>37</sup> *IBID*.

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A motion from the floor of the Annual Communication that year to reject a five-page report and recommendations based on the findings of a year-long examination and inspection of Lodges throughout the Commonwealth that had been ordered by the Grand Master was called for vote. The motion to “postpone indefinitely” the report, its findings, and recommendations passed with no discussion.<sup>38</sup> The Proceedings report 18,790 members that year and of the 468 Lodges in the state, 435 (93%) were present for that vote.

Forty years earlier, Past Grand Master of Kentucky, Rob Morris, referring to unbridled rapid expansion of Lodges, membership, and poorly instructed Masons, if Masonry would survive these causes at work to deteriorate it. He also asked if Kentucky Masonry would outlive the bad influences of imitative associations, slackened rules, crowded membership, of doors widely opened? Basing his view on experience and observation of Kentucky Masonry, he wrote that Masonic knowledge in *the few* is all that sustained the Institution at that point as the lack of Masonic knowledge of *the many* brought it down.<sup>39</sup>

Aspects of a seemingly impenetrable mechanicalized version of Masonry continues as the Fraternity continues to try and successfully deal with the long-shadow cast by the circumstances created in the first seventy years of Freemasonry in Kentucky.

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<sup>38</sup> John W. Bizzack, “The Postponement: Masonic Misstep, Squandered Opportunity, or Both?” *The Plumbline, The Quarterly Bulletin of The Scottish Rite Research Society*, May 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Rob Morris, *History of Masonry in Kentucky*, Louisville, Kentucky, 1859.