

# BURLESQUING FREEMASONRY

## THE WORKING JACKET OF A MASTER MASON AND THE AGE OF FRIVOLITY

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### ABSTRACT

The institution of Freemasonry does not have rules prohibiting members from touching hot stoves because the understandable reasons to not touch one, and conspicuous evidence of the consequences of doing so, makes it unnecessary to regulate. That is not the case when it comes to burlesquing our rituals.

The perception that someone, something, or a particular activity is fun or funny differs from person to person. Circumstances and surroundings naturally influence what may be thought of as humorous. Burlesque and slapstick comedy, for example, may have their place, but are inappropriate when they occur where they do not belong. The idea of levity, roughness, horseplay, and laughter in places where reverence and a level of high etiquette is expected is frowned upon, yet it happens. And yes, one of those places it happens, and continues, is in lodge rooms – worse yet, during ritual. Fortunately, it does not happen in all lodges.

Members who may claim that it has not happened are simply uninformed. Those who may claim it does not happen at all are not well traveled. In a cursory review of grand lodge regulations throughout the United States, we find that hazing, *horseplay*, levity, roughness, audible laughter, physical mistreatment of any kind, or other noise, which could distract the attention of a candidate are all forbidden. Prohibitions like these appear because they were once deemed necessary, and remain so.

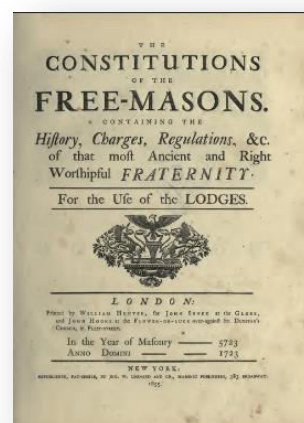
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We find in 1723 an attempt to set the behavioral tone for the newly organized institution of Freemasonry in *The Constitutions of the Free-Masons, Containing the History, Charges, Regulations, &c. of that most Ancient and Right Worshipful Fraternity, For the Use of the Lodges*.

The 1723 edition of the Constitutions was edited and reprinted by Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia in 1734, becoming what is believed to be the first Masonic book printed in America. A second edition appeared in England in 1738 and the same regulations pertaining to behavior remained effective.

In Section VI - Of BEHAVIOR, we find:

You are not to hold private Committees, or separate conversation, without leave from the Master, nor to talk of anything impertinent or unseemly, nor interrupt the Master or Wardens, or any Brother speaking to the Master, nor behave yourself ludicrously or jestingly while the Lodge is engaged in what is serious or solemn; but to pay due Reverence to your Master, Wardens, Fellows and put them to worship.



Bearing this in mind, the Master of a Lodge must be particular to see that nothing boisterous creeps into the ceremonial work of his Lodge. The Degrees must be conferred not only in as perfect a ritualistic form as is possible, but also with impressiveness. The impression made upon a candidate in his First Degree will remain with him throughout his life. Hums of conversation, or restless moving about, have no place in the ceremonial work of any Lodge. Particularly in the conferring of the Master Mason Degree must all crudity and ruffianism must be cut out. Neither has any place there.<sup>1</sup>

Can we simply dismiss out of hand what these and other early Masonic documents tell us about our behavior and how we should conduct ourselves in lodge? Yes, we apparently can, and do. So, it becomes necessary to formally implement such regulations outlining the behavior expected of Freemasons.

We find examples of how we dismissed such expected behavior in early Freemasonry even before it was organized. Masonic historian, Robert L.D. Cooper, Curator of the Grand Lodge of Scotland Museum and Library tells us that, from the Dublin Manuscript of 1711, we can form an idea of the ritual of an operative lodge at the end of the 17th century. On taking the oath of an Entered Apprentice, a Mason was entrusted with appropriate signs, a "Mason's Word," and a catechism. This was accompanied by much horseplay, which was probably excised as the craft became more gentrified.<sup>2</sup>

We find example after example in early American Masonic journals and publications railing against the casualness, frivolity, and lax approach to ritual work. Grand lodge proceedings also provide us with information that shows great concern about levity, horseplay, and roughness in our ceremonies.

One such journal article in 1900 notes:

... the necessity of reformation is very apparent. The great and underlying purpose and principles of the institution are rapidly being obscured and rendered secondary by the disposition to levity and superficiality. Horseplay has no part or lot in the symbolic teachings of wise traditions of Freemasonry and should be relegated to the rubbish heap."<sup>3</sup>

Another article from 1923 reports, "Many Masonic publications at the present time are publishing stories about horseplay during initiations." One story is noted about a candidate seriously injured during an initiation and how the Grand Master of Michigan evidenced his refusal to tolerate such "foolish intrusions" that "distract from the lesson the degrees are designated to convey." It was reported the Grand Master stated, "that any Worshipful Master who will let such actions take place in his lodge room is not the type of man to fill the East."<sup>4</sup>

The condemnations found in other journals and Masonic writings are equally acerbic, if not more so. It is easy to recognize that such problems we might find today have a heritage.

## THE WORKING JACKET OF A MASTER MASON?

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<sup>1</sup> The Masonic Trowel, Masonic Etiquette And Scottish Usage, [http://www.themasonictrowel.com/education/others\\_files/masonic\\_etiquette.htm](http://www.themasonictrowel.com/education/others_files/masonic_etiquette.htm), accessed June 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Robert L.D. Cooper, *Cracking the Freemason's Code*, Rider 2006

<sup>3</sup> "The Super Excellent Degree, A Strong Protest Against the Introduction of Levity and Burlesque," *The Masonic Standard*, Vol. IV, No. 13, New York, January 1900.

<sup>4</sup> The American Tyler-Keystone, James G. Frey, Managing Editor, January 1923.

Tracing the existence and use of a “working jacket of a Master Mason” in Kentucky is not so much of a challenge as is piecing together the information as to why it was introduced and why such an item (whatever it was originally) was allowed to be used during ritual. Any lodge ever using one has its own story about it, of

course, but few have written or noted in their histories, if mentioned at all, how

its use came about, how its design was chosen, or how it was specifically

used when introduced. Today, there are members who have seen it

used and members of this generation of Masons who were

restrained in what is called the “working jacket of a Master

Mason.” Accordingly, there remains no doubt of how it was

used, at least over the past ninety-years or more. Fortunately,

most of these jackets seem to have been dispatched to

storage.



Putting into context what was going on in the country, and

in other fraternal organizations in America, once records

appeared introducing the working jacket, helps to better

understand why such a garment appeared in Kentucky

Freemasonry.

## TOOLS OF BURLESQUING

For those who may remain skeptical that any burlesquing took place in fraternal lodges, much less Masonic lodges, anytime and anywhere in the past should take some time and read William D. Moore’s, 2007, *Riding the Goat: Secrecy, Masculinity, and Fraternal High Jinks in the United States, 1845–1930*.<sup>5</sup> In his in-depth research, Moore, a professor and Director of Public History at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, chronicles the evolution of high jinks and pranks in American fraternities during an eighty-five-year period.

Importantly, Moore points out how Freemasonry was not the core of the burlesquing yet carries much of the stigma from it. Some of that disapprobation is deserved, and some not. Consistent with Moore’s work we find a number of scholarly books and other publications that document not only what those “tools of burlesquing” were but how they were put to use in many organizations during the Age of Fraternalism (latter third of the 19th century and continuing into the first part of the 20th), and why.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> William D. Moore, *Riding the Goat: Secrecy, Masculinity, and Fraternal High-Jinks in the United States, 1845–1930*, Winterthur Portfolio 2007 41:2/3, 161-188.

<sup>6</sup> Gary Growth, Charles Schneider, Catalog No. 439: Burlesque Paraphernalia and Side Degree Specialties and Costumes Paperback, Fantagraphics, 2010, Julia Suits. *The Extraordinary Catalog of Peculiar Inventions: The Curious World of the DeMoulin Brothers and Their Fraternal Lodge Prank Machines - from Human ... Goats to Electric Carpets and Smoking Camels*, Perigee Books, 2011, Craig Heimlichner and Adam Parfrey, *Ritual America: Secret Brotherhoods and Their Influence on American Society: A Visual Guide*, Feral House, 2012, Mark C. Carnes, *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989); Mary Ann Clawson, *Constructing Brotherhood: Class, Gender and Fraternalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); Lynn Dumenil, *Freemasonry and American Culture, 1880–1930* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984); Jason Kaufman, *For the Common Good? American Civic Life and the Golden Age of Fraternity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); John Hamilton, *Material Culture of the American Freemasons* (Lexington,

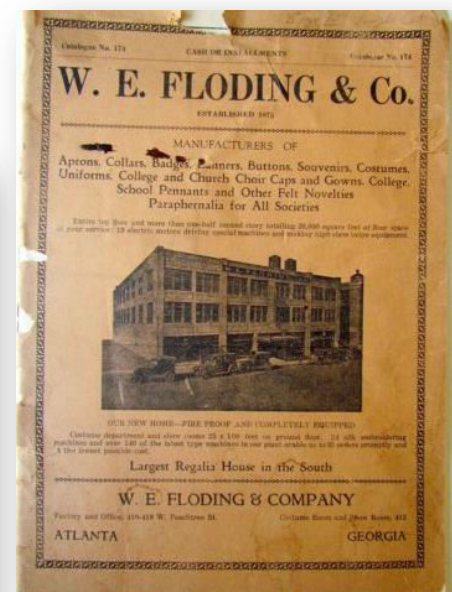
Harriet McBride's well researched 2005 essay, *The Golden Age of Fraternalism*, offers valuable insight to the period.<sup>7</sup> It is quite clear that men who were members of some fraternities using "burlesque tools" were also Freemasons, or afterwards became members of the fraternity while belonging to another fraternal organization in that era who adopted horseplay as a standard practice. It is folly to think the influence of high jinks and frivolous entertainment was not carried back into Masonic lodges or affected these members who provided the lingering perspective and idea that Freemasonry was all about having fun in lodge.

The DeMoulin Bros. & Co., Greenville, Illinois (founded in 1892), the Pettibone Manufacturing Company, Cincinnati (1882 circa), and W.E. Floding & Co. of Atlanta, Georgia (1920s-30s) - were the largest purveyors of burlesquing tools. Their extensive and far from subliminal marketing declared that having fun in any fraternal organization at the time was a good thing.

Although these three companies dominated the market, there were



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many smaller supply houses scattered across the nation. As one writer noted, the big three companies are what would have happened if the Three Stooges had gone into the furniture business. Wares, however, did not stop at prank furniture. Products included caps, band uniforms, costumes, art, posters, jewelry, swords, badge embossing, and a variety of unique novelties like exploding cigars, the joy buzzer, trick mirrors, uniforms, squirting cameras, electric chairs, aprons, tracing boards, hoodwinks, ballot boxes, flags, and banners, to list but a few of the items in their inventories.

MA: Museum of Our National Heritage, 1994); Barbara Franco, ed., *Fraternally Yours: A Decade of Collecting* (Lexington, MA: Museum of Our National Heritage, 1986); Barbara Franco, "The Ritualization of Male Friendship and Virtue in Nineteenth-Century Fraternal Organizations," in *The Material Culture of Gender: The Gender of Material Culture*, ed. Katharine Martinez and Kenneth L. Ames (Winterthur, DE: Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1997), 281-97.

<sup>7</sup> Harriett W. McBride, "The Golden Age of Fraternalism," *Heredom*, Vol. 13, 2005.



No matter the size of the burlesque tool supply companies, they had no problem identifying buyers or their prime market audience. In 1897 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*, estimated that 40 percent of the adult male population held membership in a fraternal order.<sup>8</sup>

Regardless, the “working jacket of a Master Mason,” at least by that description, is not found in the catalogs of the major manufacturers of such supplies of this genre of merchandise. So, back to the original question: How did the working jacket come about and how was it used in Masonic ritual?



## THE TRAIL OF THE WORKING JACKET

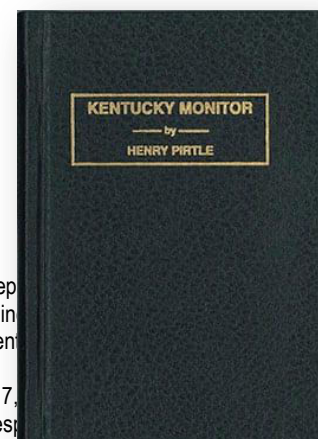
While no specific date or location can be identified as to exactly when the working jacket of a Master Mason was first introduced, we can follow the trail of the times in which the jacket began to appear in writings.

### FINDING 1

A sixteen-page, four inches by six-inch pamphlet sold by the Grand Lodge of Kentucky at its 220<sup>th</sup> Annual Communication in 1919, was a surprising find. There is no author noted, date of publication or publisher. The pamphlet is clearly the floor work of the second section of the third Degree — the Legend of the Temple, also known as the Hiram Legend. Although the cover of the pamphlet is blank, a paper taped to the cover for purpose of identifying it for sale, read: “Degree Team.”

At the top of page five of the pamphlet we see a line for the Senior Deacon, “I will now invest you with the working jacket of a M.M.”

One theory of the origin of this booklet suggests it is from 1919 and originated in Louisville, Kentucky.<sup>9</sup> This would have been only a few years after the period recognized as the Age of Fraternalism (1870-1910).<sup>10</sup> The booklet is also suspected to have been written by Henry Pirtle, a Kentucky Mason who also authored *The Kentucky Monitor: Complete Monitorial Ceremonies of the Blue Lodge*, published in 1921.<sup>11</sup>



<sup>8</sup> NOTE: Moore, p.162. In an article in the *North American Review* from 1897, the writer H. S. Harwood reported 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*, estimated that 40 percent of the adult male population held membership in a fraternal order.

<sup>9</sup> Carroll M. Curtis, Past Grand Master of Kentucky, (69-70), in discussion with the authors on November 7, 1978. Orten (1923-24) informed him the pamphlet may have originated from Louisville and that Pirtle may be responsible.

<sup>10</sup> McBride, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Henry Pirtle was a judge in Louisville, Kentucky, one of the founders of the Kentucky Historical Society, Past Master of Falls City Lodge No. 376 Louisville, a president of the Louisville City National Bank, professor of equity jurisprudence and commercial law in the University of Louisville, associate editor of the *Masonic Homes Journal* in 1918.

While we do not have any further description from the author as to what a “working jacket of a M.M.” was, one may surmise that it was the same items that is occasionally still found in some Kentucky lodges.

## FINDING 2

The records of a certain lodge in Kentucky (that asked not to be identified in this writing) had extensive minutes for review. Although in operation prior to 1924, minutes of this lodge prior to that time reflect no mention of a working jacket. It is theoretically possible that the working jacket could have been used prior to 1924. Regardless, the trail of the search for the origins of the working jacket in lodge records starts here.

The 1924 records show that the secretary was directed to order a “working jacket to be used in the Master Mason degree.” It is not known if this was the first “working jacket” for the lodge or a replacement.

In 1939 we find “a new one [working jacket] was purchased,” to replace the one used since at least 1924, suggesting, perhaps, that the one acquired in 1924 was unsuitable or had simply been worn out from repeated use. Records do not reflect where the jacket was purchased. Interestingly, 1924 was the same year the Master of that lodge called for members to offer suggestions for programs the lodge might develop that “entertained” and “kept members interested” in Freemasonry. Apparently, the work of this lodge was dull and listless at the time, or they forgot the intended purpose of meeting as Freemasons. No matter, the notations correspond with the times when much of Freemasonry was a casualty of the influence of the Age of Fraternalism; where attending lodge meant performing ritual and the idea of having fun while doing it lingered. Equally as interesting, is that nineteen years later, in 1943, the minutes tell us the lodge was still having discussions at stated communications about what different forms of “entertainment” might increase attendance among its over 500 members. Only one meeting in the preceding eight years was devoted to a Masonic Education presentation. The topic was not included in the minutes.

## FINDING 3

At a 1947 anniversary celebration dinner with 185 Masons from around the state in attendance, the same lodge was the recipient of a gift from a Louisville Mason. That gift was described as a “Master Mason’s working jacket.” This entry makes one wonder again, if the jacket from 1939 wore out in just nine years, or was otherwise unserviceable. Perhaps a new design was introduced.

In 2016, at least 92 years since the jacket’s first known reference and use in the lodge - perhaps longer - a motion was made at a regular stated communication in that lodge to put an end to the use of the jacket. The motion was unanimously approved. The Master, following a motion, renounced the “working jacket of a Master Mason,” and instructed that it be relegated to a closet and packed in storage box with other unnecessary remnants of the past.

## MORE BACKGROUND

In the section of the 1940 Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky titled, *Decisions*, we find a report on the actions of Grand Master Boswell B. Hodgkin. The report offers other clues relative to

### NUMBER 9—

The following ruling was made in answer to the question of Bro. John Weldon Hall, Key Man for District No. 2, with reference to how the apron should be worn.

The apron should be worn in all degrees as prescribed by the Constitution, which is as follows:

“Regulation 18. The apron is to be worn in full view, flowing freely, and as follows: First degree, bib up; second degree, bib down; third degree, bib down; except that when worn as a mark of distinction, the left lower corner should be tucked up.”

With reference to a straight jacket for a degree team, will state that I do not approve of a straight jacket but recommend that an overall coat or its equivalent be used to protect the clothing.

not only the use of a jacket but the apparent unruliness of degree work found at the time in some lodges. Although he could not answer whether the grand lodge had ruled on what he called “phases of dramatizing the third degree,” he was quite clear when he wrote, “Burlesquing the degree should be absolutely prohibited.”<sup>12</sup> Later, in the same section and in response to a question posed to him, Hodgkin wrote, “With reference to a straight jacket for a degree team, [I] will state that I do not approve of a straight jacket but recommend that an overall coat or its equivalent be used to protect the clothing.”<sup>13</sup>

That idea of a straight jacket (much less using one in Masonic ritual) even came up as a question is troubling, but so was the last part of Hodgkin’s sentence in which he recommends an overall coat or its equivalent be used “to protect the clothing,” begging the question: Why would a candidate’s clothes need to be “protected” to start with during conferral of a Masonic degree? There is no justifiable reason. Apparently though, the Grand Master saw the question as legitimate enough to have the query, and his answer, published in the Annual Proceedings, which hints that more than one lodge was either using the jacket or familiar with it.

We can speculate on the answer to that question, but it is plausible that a candidate needed to wear something other than his regular clothing because of the prone position he assumes at one point in the ceremony on the floor of the lodge. That consideration makes sense since suits were considered appropriate dress in lodges, at least prior to the late 1960s, and few would want to lie down on a floor in their best clothes. That, of course, suggests another consideration: lodge floors were dirty. If the jacket were used for that lame reason, perhaps the first solution would have been (then and today): sweep and clean the lodge floor or make use of a clean rug.

Obviously, that is not why such a garment was used.

The reason may be found in the success of Pettibone Manufacturing, the DeMoulin Bros., the Floding Co., and many other fraternal supply shops that did so well during the Age of Fraternalism: many members of fraternities were looking for fun and saw no harm in roughhousing with the candidates in their respective Orders.

Grand Master Hodgkin’s comments tell us something else: the grand lodge relied on the good, common sense of its members to regulate behavior during degree work, so there were no written guidelines to follow or enforce when it came to burlesquing rituals. It seems there was an ill-founded expectation that appropriate reverence for the purpose of degree work would simply be present in all lodges. Such an expectation of mature, adult behavior, especially in an institution like Freemasonry is quite reasonable. It is laudable that leaders who are responsible for ensuring such behavior possessed that character. It is, however, not as pragmatic as it may seem.

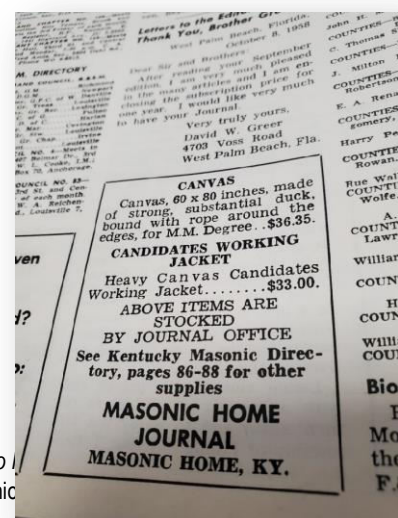
An advertisement in the *Masonic Home Journal*, the oldest continual published Masonic newspaper, confirms the availability of the working jacket still being offered to Kentucky Masons (and others) in the 1960s.<sup>14</sup>

Still requiring a regulation that governs behavior during the conferral of degrees, we find in the Twelfth Edition of the 1975 Kentucky Constitution, a new regulation in Section 142 under the title, *Degrees*—specifically, *Third Degree*.<sup>15</sup> It reads:

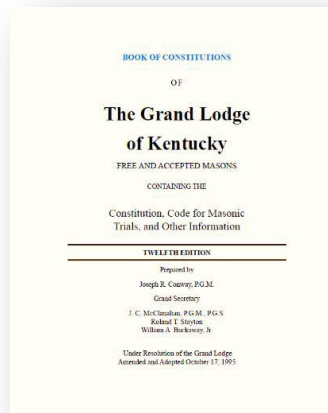
<sup>12</sup> 1940 Proceeding of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky, Decisions, 66.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 64.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Snow Guthrie, *Kentucky Freemasonry, 1788–1978: The Grand Lodge and the Men Who* 215. First published in 1883, The Masonic Home Journal is the oldest continually published Masonic



“The Second Section of the Third Degree constitutes a most solemn and impressive portion of our ritualistic work. In it we are taught the ultimate lessons of Masonic philosophy—victory over death and the immortality of the soul. Nothing must be allowed to impair the deep impression which



should be made upon the mind of the candidate. The Grand Lodge forbids any unnecessary levity, roughness, horseplay, talking, audible laughter, or any other noise which could distract the attention of the candidate. Failure to comply with this provision, or any action by any officer or member in violation or inconsistent with this provision shall constitute grounds for Masonic discipline. Any part of the third degree may be conferred on more than one candidate at the same time, except the Second Section of that degree, which can be conferred on but one at a time.”

**Masonic Home Journal  
Circa 1964**

Since there was no context in the 1975 document explaining its appearance, it can be reasonably assumed that behavior in some lodges was not acceptable, so a written rule had to be adopted that spelled out appropriate behavior. It is foolish to think this Section was adopted for no reason.

## BURLESQUING IN THE 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY: THE BOOSTER SHOT

Research affirms that as it stretched into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, The Age of Fraternalism, found itself sliding effortlessly into the period of America’s history when society was beginning to place a growing importance on the pursuit of leisure activities and conviviality. Freemasonry began to reflect the same and began seeking ways to make being a member, “more fun.”<sup>16</sup>

Concerns about poor attendance and Masonry’s failure to offer men the fraternity it promised during this period led to the concentration on schemes for revitalizing lodges that de-emphasized ritual in favor of a wide range of organized social activities.<sup>17</sup>

Although using lodge attendance as a measuring stick has been criticized as no way to gauge the value men actively receive from their membership, it certainly remains a suitable meter to tell us the value men place on what does or does not attract them to attend.

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The rapid swelling of membership in urban lodges aggravated the problem of poor attendance. In such lodges, where men were members, but never met each other, the conspicuous

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**of pursuing and restoring heritage.**

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The Grand Lodge of Kentucky is noted as Section 5, p.39. On October 17, 1995, the Revised Edition of the Book of Constitutions of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky, F.&A.M. was presented to the delegates at the One Hundred Ninety Sixth Annual Communication of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky, Code for Masonic Trials, and Other Information Jurisprudence (William G. Hinton, P.G.M., Chairman; Elroy Johnson, P.G.M.; and Barber L. Shelton, P. G.M.). It was adopted as presented and amended (Grand Lodge Proceedings 1995, pg. 208) as the Twelfth Edition and is

<sup>16</sup> Lynn Dumenil, *Freemasonry and American Culture, 1880-1930*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1984.



lack of fraternity did not advance brotherhood. Large lodges set themselves up for failure when their members cannot become acquainted and cannot cultivate the social amenities and fraternal relationships they are called upon to create as one of the purposes of their existence. It is not possible for a man to love a name in a roster, nor pour out the generousities of friendship and brotherhood to one he has never seen, does not know, or does not try know.<sup>18</sup>

Worsening the problem, attempts at Masonic education through plans that dealt only with Masonic philosophy, history, and symbols met with a lukewarm response. Most Masons were unconcerned about the origins of ritual or the trivial points of Craft history; much of its symbolism no longer sparked enthusiasm, being too loaded with esoteric features. Soon, a Master's attempts to rejuvenate interest began to reflect the belief that a major function of the Masonic lodge was to entertain its members.

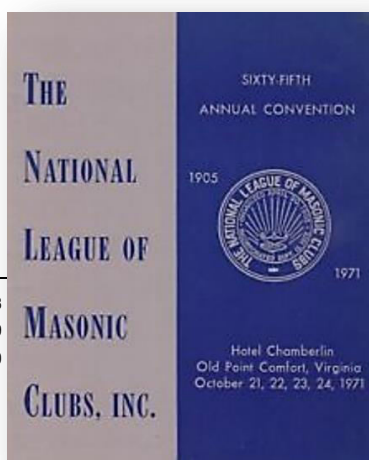
In many lodges today, we continue to see officers trade both open and under-the-breath quips that perhaps serve to not only mask their insecurity in their roles during meetings, but perhaps also fills a sense that, in their positions, they are supposed to behave as farcical characters entertaining the body of the Craft. Ultimately, Masonry reached a state where, in the mind of many members, it was necessary to establish card games, bowling alleys, game rooms, fish fries, and pancake breakfasts instead of pursuing and restoring heritage. Yet this transformation did not solve the problem; it has been suggested in various writings that the efforts to transform Masonry into this style of club had little effect in solving attendance issues.<sup>19</sup> A common refrain from older members was the question, "Why don't men come to lodge anymore?"

Interestingly, the larger, cold urban lodges were often compared to sentimental accounts of rural lodges where friendliness to visiting Masons, readiness to provide relief and concern for brethren and their widows and orphans were paramount. It is difficult to determine, of course, if a rural lodge was more "Masonic" than a larger one. Some writers asserted that the rural lodges, being distant from the multiple distractions of the city, were simply able to develop their seemingly more "Masonic" character with better focus. The increase in anonymity at the larger lodges made serious students of the Craft long for the days when Masonry, while always having its festive features at the right times, was thoughtful about its purpose.<sup>20</sup>

## ALONG CAME THE CLUBS

As this period ended at the time of the Depression, special social clubs within the fraternity created to promote sociability and fraternalism were going strong.

The so-called "Masonic Clubs" were so popular that in 1905 the National League of Masonic Clubs (NLMC) was formed to federate them. The organization was headquartered in Cranford, New Jersey. By 1920, there were



Members of National League of Masonic Clubs, New York  
Public Library, Digital Collections  
"Old Tiler Talks (Washington, DC: Temple Publishers, 1925), 204-7.

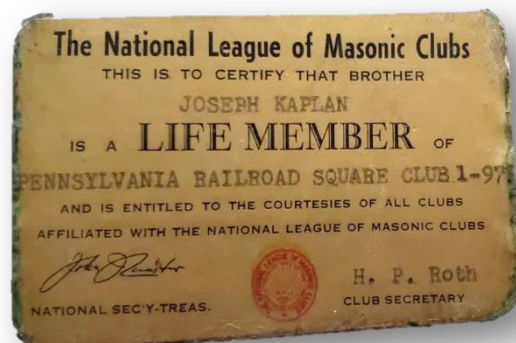
250 such clubs, with one-tenth of all Masons in the United States as members (reportedly over 600,000 members by 1922).<sup>21</sup> The NLMC had primarily an East Coast presence and sponsored large conventions, along with a club magazine called *Kraftsman*.<sup>22</sup> These clubs influenced not only the generations of Masons who belonged to the NLMC, but those who followed, indoctrinating them with the notion that these clubs were necessary in Freemasonry, as they offered men an opportunity to meet and relax “without the distraction of lodge work.” Out of these clubs came new degrees designed to “instruct and amuse at the same time.”<sup>23</sup>

The National League of Masonic Clubs disappeared after 1971—at least in the form it enjoyed in its first 70 years of existence. Apparently, the “instruct and amuse” theme had worn itself out or perhaps had completely taken over the mainstream approach as Masonic membership in 1971 was in its 12<sup>th</sup> year of what would be a 60-year, non-stop, annual decline of members in American Freemasonry.

The term “traveling degree team” was used in Masonic publications at the time to refer to groups of Masonic Club members who performed degrees in other areas for their fellow lodges. Many wore festive costumes for all three degrees to add to their dramas. Some of these teams when performing the third degree for a lodge, often added a fictitious “fourth degree” intended to be an amusing ritual with a fair amount of horseplay.

The “made-up” or “fun degrees” seen today, especially in certain areas of American Freemasonry, have elements of boisterousness completely contrary to the solemnity and dignity that Masonic ritual work is designed to project. Some who have witnessed these types of events find them far from the purpose of Freemasonry, and commonly characterize them as a costumed carnival of rowdy antics, replete with unnecessary rough and tumble behavior.

The predictable defenders, then and now, maintain that the clubs of the past and the made-up degrees today illustrate that regular degree work does not always maintain the interest of busy men; according to these apologists, what was and is needed is an emphasis on social features that make gatherings attractive. A frequent criticism from conservative Masons appears in writings from the 1920s and much of the discussion of the time was colored to fit the wishes of both sides of the question as to whether these social clubs were helpful or detrimental to Freemasonry.



A close look at the two sides comes directly from Masons. The May 1917 issue of *The Builder* published letters in a section called “Department of Personal Opinion.” In that issue, several Masons weighed in on the question, “Shall Masonic Lodges encourage the formation of local Masonic social clubs and the establishment of Masonic club rooms dedicated to amusements and social meetings?”

One commentator wrote that, “[t]he ‘Masonic Club’ is pregnant with dangers must be obvious to all thinking Masons.” Another remarked, “I do not expect any Masonic lodge to serve me either as a commercial association or as a social club.” Yet another responded, “No. The stated and special communications of the Lodge should meet all such demands. We need more brains and less mediocrity in candidates.”

Although most of the letters published were negative responses, there were some Masons who fully supported the encouragement of social amusements and Masonic club rooms. One such supporter was J. W. Norwood, Past Master of Lexington 1 in Kentucky. He wrote:

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Digital Public Library of America, Members of National League of Masonic Clubs, [dp.la/item/Oddbc441d56343007d07afd0cd65d373](https://dp.la/item/Oddbc441d56343007d07afd0cd65d373), accessed 30 October 2015, see *The Builder*, 8, May 1922, 158, and *New Age Magazine*, “Annual Convention of the National League of Masonic Clubs,” January 1920, 423.

<sup>23</sup> Dumenil, 201.

The National Federation of Masonic Clubs, I think, has done a great work in creating more social interest. I was instrumental in founding one club in Lexington that now has more than one thousand members and is the only one in Kentucky that belongs to the National Federation. Also, most lodges in Louisville where social clubs are attached have made wonderful improvement in social intercourse. We need this department of Masonic life almost more than any other, as, of course, in the lodges there is little time to give to anything save the conferring of degrees.<sup>24</sup>

It was likely that the thousand members to which Norwood referred came from various counties surrounding the city, not just Lexington proper. Grand lodge proceedings that year note that Norwood's lodge, Lexington 1, reported 295 members, and the other two lodges in Lexington had collectively only 155 members, so in 1917, there were only 450 Masons in Lexington. The remaining 550 of the thousand club-goers must have been members outside of Lexington-Fayette County, which helps explain why the idea that Freemasonry was supposed to be "fun" was passed on to so many subsequent generations in various other areas of the state.

The train of events from over 60 years of thousands of Masons belonging to the NLMC and subscribing to the idea that lodge work was some sort of "distraction", and they could "instruct and amuse at the same time" by performing side degrees and making Freemasonry "fun," took a very high toll. Many in the organization over the years were also holders of high offices in the fraternity. To believe the influence and thinking of the NLMC theme did not spill over into Freemasonry for decades is absurd. Any serious student of American Masonic History can easily see how these years planted seeds that would germinate and cast-off more seeds into the decades ahead and find a comfortable place in the culture of many Masonic lodges.

The club's theme certainly presented a new marque for the fraternity but not the one expected. Masonry was increasingly perceived by the public and many new members alike as an organization that primarily emphasized the sharing of good times with good fellows. The Order was beginning to change its brand as it further, and more

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conspicuously, drifted from its philosophical heritage.

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Apologists continue to claim that the "fun" side of Masonry promotes friendship and a brotherly spirit among Masons. While the made-up degrees (and their performances), then and today, which are often held outside, in barns or places that add to the "fun," may promote some fellowship, they would make non-casual Masons of the eighteenth century and much of the nineteenth century grimace. Challengers of this notion argue that there is plenty of room in Freemasonry for events that also promote friendship and brotherly spirit, but that made-up degrees that burlesque Freemasonry in any way, present nothing but a caricature (some a literal cartoon) of the Craft

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<sup>24</sup> J. W. Norwood, Master, Lexington Lodge 1, 1915, personal notes, Special Collections, Frankfort Historical Society, Frankfort, Kentucky, examined in 2013.

that is decidedly, if not unintentionally, unflattering.

Then as now, without the restrictions of the lodge room, the question was often asked: Why do we even call such events Masonic?

Changing Masonic activity, regardless of the good intentions behind such change, helps to explain in part why allegiance to the heritage and aim of Freemasonry slowly dwindled in this era, and in later years continued to weaken. The Masonic culture and the character of its membership changed over the decades because of periods of rapid expansion, less fundamental instruction and Masonic education for candidates, and fading emphasis on the system of Freemasonry as it began mirroring society, rather than offering a mirror for society.

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

There are men who are members today that, during the Master Mason degree, were placed in a “working jacket of a Master Mason.” We know from various descriptions of this garment that some were made of heavy canvass material with handles or loops sewn to the sleeves, chest area, and back. Some had an industrial size work belt around the waist. Most who say they placed in one describe the jacket as uncomfortable and bulky, and, to one extent or another, that they were pulled, pushed, shaken, and, distracted by the boisterous environment that seemed to be created when they were placed in that garment. We also know that members who have visited lodges using such a garment witnessed candidates “handled” far beyond being simply guided or ushered that led to unnecessary levity, laughter, and the distraction contributed nothing to the occasion.

Those accounts indicate that the use of the jacket was nothing more than intended entertainment of attendees rather than for the purpose of appropriate Masonic instruction of the candidate. The mere presence of such a garment in a lodge room, much less its use during a ritual, signals and suggests an atmosphere of levity and

casualness exists and will take place in that lodge room, contrary to the gravity expected in such a setting.

**Changing Masonic activity, regardless of the good intentions behind such change, helps to explain some of why allegiance to the heritage and aim of Freemasonry slowly dwindled in this era and in later years continued to weaken.**

Those in lodges that use such a jacket may say, the use is “tradition” and has “always been used” in their lodge. It is doubtful, however, if they could find a reference in their records of their lodge that would prove such “tradition” was in use prior to the Age of Fraternalism (latter third of the 19th century and continuing into the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup>). The fact that such a garment is not mentioned in the most popular of the Masonic exposes` of the 18th and 19th century where one would expect to find such a disclosure or reference, is another reason to

point the finger to other reasons that allowed the idea that the rituals of Freemasonry should include levity and horseplay or merely entertain the attendees.

No Mason who reports that he was invested with such a jacket says he was ever told why it was used, they presumed it was a practice sanctioned by the Institution, illustrating how practices (right or wrong) are passed on from generation to generation without much thought of origin or actual purpose.



Serious minded Masons agree that the only value of the jacket today is as a relic – a reminder of a time when the philosophical features of Freemasonry were eclipsed by behavior that had no place in a Masonic lodge.

Some believe that the absence of the solemnity and appropriate Masonic protocol and behavior during the conferment of any degree, especially all sections of the Master Mason degree, is linked to poor instruction, inadequate Masonic education, and mediocre leadership. When the issue is discussed in some Masonic circles, we hear the argument that

horseplay, innocent frivolity, and even light hazing endured by a candidate during ritual makes a candidate feel more a part of the Lodge and fosters Brotherly Love and Affection. If there was an ounce of logic in that thinking, then all in a jurisdiction would likely be mandated to do that rather than requiring rules against it.

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One might expect such boisterous or rambunctious carryings-on and carefree antics of this or other similar behavior to exist in some college fraternity or a run-of the mill or good-old boys club, but there is a dearth of evidence that Freemasonry was ever intended to reflect that behavior while conferring a degree. The presence of such behavior, especially when clear rules exist to prohibit it, speak not only to poor instruction but mediocre leadership.

Make no mistake, there were many lodges in the past and today that conduct their meetings and ritual with dignity, solemnity and without the “ruffianism” and “crudity” to which the 1723 Constitution of Freemasonry refers.

It is in the lodges that do conduct their work and ritual in that way that we also find more evidence of efforts to provide appropriate, fundamental instruction and Masonic education beyond ritual, and *lead* men who seek Freemasonry—which is precisely that to which each candidate is entitled when admitted into the ranks of a Masonic lodge.