

# Grand Delusions

One of the Great What Ifs in  
American Freemasonry

John W. Bizzack, Ph.D.



## ABOUT “THE PETITION”

The cover of this writing is a painting titled, "The Petition" that portrays the December 27, 1779 meeting of American Union Lodge No. 1 assembly at Arnold's Tavern, Morristown, New Jersey. A Petition was read by Continental Army General Mordecai Gist, who proposed an immediate departure from the current oversight of the Grand Lodges of England, Ireland, and Scotland, and in their place establish a National Grand Lodge in the emerging nation. The Petition was unanimously approved, and a committee named to coordinate a convention to enlist all existing Grand Lodges in the colonies to adopt the petition.<sup>1</sup> A Convention was held in February 1780, but the measure failed. This was but the first of nine attempts between 1779 and 1859 to form a National Grand Lodge in America. Each attempt failed.<sup>2</sup>

*The Petition* was painted by Freemason, John Ward Dunsmore in 1926. He depicts Alexander Hamilton as in attendance in American Union Lodge. Hamilton was not a Mason. There were several other non-Masons appearing in the image. Dunsmore, using his license as an artist, unintentionally started the myth that continues to this day claiming Alexander Hamilton a Freemason. American Union Lodge was chartered by Connecticut. It was the military lodge George Washington reportedly attended on several occasions.<sup>3</sup> Today, the lodge is located Marietta, Ohio. *The Petition* measures 59 x 43 inches and is on permanent exhibition in the Revolutionary Room, Historical Park of the Historical Museum of the Morristown - being on indefinite loan from the New York Historical Society.



Outline Key to Personages in "The Petition"

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|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| 1. Jonathan Hart, WM, CT.        | 13. Surgeon Jonathan Graham, CT   | 27. Col. Thomas Proctor, PA            |
| 2. Rev. Dr. Baldwin, CT.         | 14. Brig. Gen. Modecai Gist, MD   | 28. Surgeon Nichola Schutlen, NY       |
| 3. Surgeon John R. Watrons, Sec. | 15. Sergnt. Hunnington, CT        | 29. Col. O.H Williams, MD              |
| 4. Rev. Wm. Rogers, MS           | 16. Major Moses Clark, CT         | 30. Brig. Gen. Wm. Maxwell, NJ         |
| 5. Col. John Brooks, MASS        | 17. Captain Andrew Fitch, CT      | 31. Captain Caleb Gibbs, MASS          |
| 6. Captain Jacob Arnold, NJ      | 18. Lt. Col. Ebon Grey, CT        | 32. General George Washington, VA      |
| 7. Lt. Col. Anthony White, NJ    | 19. Captain John Wyllys, CT       | 33. Lt. Col. John Lawrence, NY         |
| 8. Capt. Samuel Craig, PA        | 20. Captain John Warner, JW, CT   | 34. Lt. Col. Alexander Hamilton, NY    |
| 9. Captain Leonard Bleacher, NY  | 21. Lt. Col. Wm. Sherman, CT      | 35. John Pierce, DPM                   |
| 10. Private Loraine Morehead, CT | 22. Col. Samuel Wyllys, CT        | 36. Lt. Trinity Whiteny, Asst.PM       |
| 11. Captain Elias Stillwater, CT | 23. Gen. Jeremy Bruen, NJ         | 37. Lt. Col. Richard Butler, PM        |
| 12. Ensign Wm. Higgins, CT       | 24. Col. Harvey Sherburn, RI      | 38. Col. Henry Jackson, MASS           |
|                                  | 25. Col. Elias Dayton, NJ         | 39. Captain Wm Richards, Treasurer, CT |
|                                  | 26. Lt. Col. Francis Meuntyes, PA | 40. Lt. Col. Thomas Gressuemur, SD, C  |

**About the Artist** - The world-renowned painter John Ward Dunsmore (1856-1945) was born near Cincinnati, Ohio in 1856 and studied in New York and Paris. In the 1890's he taught painting and was for several years Director of the Art Museum in Detroit, Michigan. The latter part of his life was spent in New York City where he specialized in portraits and historical subjects. Many of

his paintings are hanging in the Headquarters of the Society of the Cincinnati in New York, and in Museums throughout the country. Dunsmore was a member of Puritan Lodge No. 185 in Hoboken, New Jersey.

<sup>1</sup> Mark A. Tabbert, "George Washington, General Grand Master of the U.S.A. or Not?" Reflections on 300 years Of Freemasonry," ed. John S. Wade (London: Lewis Masonic, 2017), 208.

<sup>2</sup> A United Grand Lodge: The American Freemason's New Monthly Magazine 4, no. 1 (July 1859).

<sup>3</sup> The Petition: New Jersey Edition of Master Mason Magazine for Freemasons 2, no. 9 (March 1927): 137.

# GRAND DELUSIONS

## ONE OF THE GREAT WHAT-IFS IN MASONIC HISTORY

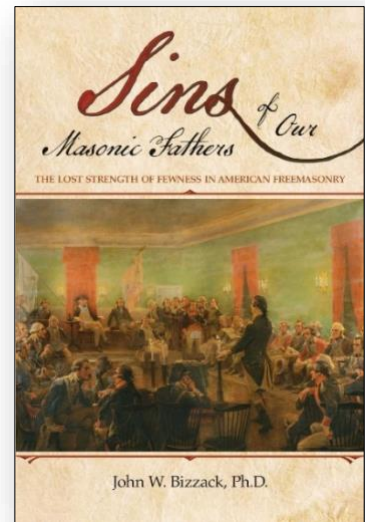
JOHN W. BIZZACK, PM

Excerpt from

### *Sins of Our Masonic Fathers*

*The Lost Strength of Fewness in American Freemasonry*

BSF Foundation, Lexington, Kentucky 2018



The organizational structure and its culture consequences inherited by twenty-first-century Freemasonry often seems immovable to the point that even the suggestion of a balanced examination of other possibilities involving our structure evokes robust, sometimes heated, opposition. This is not a recent characteristic found in American Freemasonry, but one that settled in only decades following the formation of lodges. Scottish Freemason and writer, Peter Taylor, describes the reason for this stemming from unintentionally imposing a “horrendous superstructure on a very elegant organization.”<sup>4</sup> The superstructure he refers to is grand lodges.

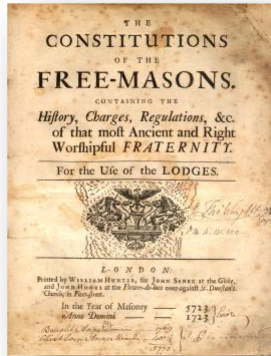
We became used to the idea very early in American Freemasonry that each state is a Masonic jurisdiction entitled to its sovereignty over all regularly chartered lodges within the sphere of their authority. Any American Mason who believes that will change in the distant future shows his unawareness of the deeply embedded authority Masons have vested in their grand lodges since the first was formed.

Masons created grand lodges and remain its only source of fuel; they are not some massive bureaucracy that just mysteriously appeared and brought with them a surplus of rules, regulations, edicts, and guidelines. The institution—a democratically-governed body—is a product of the intelligence of its members, who, through the power of the ballot and majority vote, elect its representatives. It is a fair process, but not always one with a consistent track record of balance nor is it a process that pleases every Mason. The men elected to lead and manage grand lodges have different levels of skills, Masonic knowledge and experiences, perspective, and commitment affecting their levels of effective leadership and administration. Expecting that not to vary in one, or all lodges, much less grand lodges, is naïve.

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<sup>4</sup>. Peter Taylor, “Membership Problem,” *Pietre-Stones Review of Freemasonry*, accessed January 3, 2018, <http://www.freemasons-freemasonry.com/taylor.html>.

The first detailed regulations for governing lodges and controlling the grand lodge were those found in Anderson's original constitution in 1723. Ireland and Scotland soon followed with some variations all establishing many precedents that continue in American Freemasonry today. Lodges outside the British Isles and, to some extent, those within, were under the immediate direction of provincial Grand Masters. At the outbreak of the revolution in 1775, the Moderns had provincial grand lodges in New England, New York, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia; the Ancients had the Provincial Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania and, in 1781, warranted one in New York; and the Grand Lodge of Scotland had the Provincial Grand Lodge for Boston.<sup>5</sup> Grand lodges in South Carolina and Virginia were formed during the revolution. Following the Treaty of Paris in 1783, establishing the independence of the thirteen states of New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia, grand lodges were formed—each proclaiming full sovereign power within their defined jurisdictions.



The spirit and interests of the people in the new nation were predominately local. States viewed themselves as fully independent entities making up the country. Freemasons, at the time, being only a part of that general community, were inclined to conform to that trend; and, when it came to the formation of grand lodges, Masons saw themselves as state and not as a national entity.<sup>6</sup> Local Masonic pride asserted itself, marginalizing the idea there should be one national grand lodge.

Concerns about increasing irregularities and the lack of unanimity to more universally extend and strengthen American Freemasonry were apparent at least five years prior to the 1783 Treaty of Paris.<sup>7</sup> In 1779, in the middle of a political revolution, a handful of New England Masons believed one general grand lodge of American then and for the future was a better solution. Their movement resulted in an idea that took seven decades to run its course—the idea that American Freemasonry would be better off with one grand lodge overseeing the Craft instead of one in each state.

Local Masonic pride, seasoned by the taste of state sovereignty, doomed early whatever merit such an early idea may have offered. The condition of Freemasonry in America depicted by proponents of that idea did not sway the majority of existing grand lodges to embrace it. Even the enormous popularity of two men—although decades apart—who were thought by many to be the best man to head such a proposed general grand lodge, George Washington and later, Henry Clay—did not persuade that majority either.

The decades-long periodic movement to form a general grand lodge started with and in American Union Lodge 1, which was first chartered in Massachusetts in 1776, and functioned as a military lodge for seven years. It should be no surprise the idea of a national grand lodge—a central command, as it were—would be a natural and comfortable structure for a lodge largely made up of members who were military men (as depicted in the painting, *The Petition*).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>7</sup> David McGregor, "Contribution to the Early History of Freemasonry in New Jersey: Freemasonry at Morristown during the Revolutionary War," *Master Mason Magazine for Freemasons* 2, no. 9 (March 1927).

On December 27, 1779, American Union Lodge 1 met in Arnold's Tavern in Morristown, New Jersey. The lodge master, Colonel Jonathan Heart, noted that one of the purposes of meeting was to take into consideration "some matters respecting the good of Masonry." Mordecai Gist, a continental army general from Maryland, was given the floor where he presented a petition to form a general grand lodge for the United States.



Gist eloquently outlined the case, reading the petition to over eighty Masons reportedly present that evening, many of whom were distinguished officers in the Continental Army. Some reports of the evening, which began to appear with regularity in Masonic journals in the latter years of the 1800s, note that Washington was in the room.

The petition depicts, at least in the eyes of those involved and supporting it, the state of Freemasonry portraying its condition as lacking "a source of Light to govern their [Freemasons] pursuits and illuminate the path of happiness." The petition notes "many irregularities and improprieties," and related how they had manifested into the "present dissipated and almost abandoned condition of our lodges in general, as well as the relaxation of virtue amongst individuals."



In the final paragraph, Gist called for an immediate departure from the current oversight of grand lodges [in America] to "save us from the impending dangers of schisms and apostasy." In closing, the petition stated: "To obtain security from those fatal evils, with affectionate humility, we beg leave to recommend the adopting and pursuing the most necessary measures." Gist went on to say the most effective way to correct these "impending dangers" was to appoint a Grand Master in and over the Thirteen United States of America."<sup>8</sup>

Gist's use of the words "in and over" suggested to some historians the proposed Grand Master might also be authorized to create a Grand Lodge of America. However, later research untangles that notion and determines that such a proposed position of Grand Master would only have the authority to preside over and govern Masonic conventions and the warranting of lodges in new territories, but no authority to oversee sovereign grand lodges.<sup>9</sup>

Contrary to Masonic myth, Washington was not nominated that evening for the position of Grand Master of a Grand Lodge of America.<sup>10</sup>

A committee was appointed to take the subject into consideration; and as might be expected because of the nature of the lodge itself, Masons from each division of the army were appointed members. Gist was

<sup>8</sup> The Petition: New Jersey Edition of Master Mason Magazine for Freemasons 2, no. 9 (March 1927): 140.

<sup>9</sup> Mark A. Tabbert, "George Washington, General Grand Master of the U.S.A, or Not?" Reflections on 300 years Of Freemasonry," ed. John S. Wade (London: Lewis Masonic, 2017), 208, and discussion with author on October 22, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

elected president when the committee was called in convention and documents were drafted to send to the different Grand Masters in the United States. The convention “delicately forbore” in the document to mention Washington as their choice for general Grand Master, but it was well understood that such was their wish.<sup>11</sup>

Interestingly, 147 years later, the seed of another Masonic myth was planted after a painting that commemorated the debut of the American Union Lodge meeting, and later appeared in Masonic publications. Renowned artist John Ward Dunsmore—a New Jersey Mason—created the fifty-nine by forty-three image in 1926 he named “The Petition.” The image first appeared in the March 1927, issue of the New Jersey edition of *Master Mason Magazine for Freemasons*.<sup>12</sup> Dunsmore, exercising his artistic license, identified men in the painting as present who, in fact, were not. He also inserted and identified Alexander Hamilton, Washington’s chief staff aide during the revolution and later first secretary of the treasury, sitting in the Northeast Corner of the lodge that evening. Hamilton’s image in the painting contributed to the unsubstantiated belief he was a Freemason.<sup>13</sup>

The well-deserved allegiance of distinguished military Masons of the period when it came to Washington cannot be ignored, of course. It should hardly be surprising that they offered a solution of a centralized grand lodge with him at the helm to address the troubles facing the fraternity. Washington’s popularity was considerable, but not at its peak with everyone in the newly declared independent nation. Historians will have to continue to guess at whether this movement would have gained momentum at a later time with Washington’s name attached, or if he had openly accepted the nomination at some particular point.

The movement started by these loyal military officers did not gain traction, but the 1779 event would not be the last time Masons in America proposed such a model. Over the next seventy-four years, the idea of establishing a general Grand Master of the United States, grew into the call for a General Grand Lodge of America. Such a movement was put forth another nine times—the last occurring in 1859, with an average of nine years between them.

The average number of times such a proposal arose during those seven decades and the passing of at least three generations of Masons offers insight into the perceived state of American Freemasonry during those years by a segment of its members as a result of the individual sovereignty practiced by multiple grand lodge jurisdictions. The fact that each serious proposal failed also affirms the deeply rooted power of established Grand Lodges.

- The 1779 proposal led to a convention in February 1780 in Morristown, New Jersey, with delegates from that state, New York, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Maryland. In January 1780, Pennsylvania passed three resolutions to pursue the matter and organize a formal committee to draft a plan. By this action, Pennsylvania co-opted and superseded the military’s Masonic proposal. Pennsylvania’s prerogative to take the lead was

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<sup>11</sup>. Henry R. Rugg, ed., *The Freemason’s Repository* 4 (Providence R. I. Freeman and Co., 1884–1885), 290.

<sup>12</sup>. Ibid, *The Petition: New Jersey Edition of Master Mason Magazine for Freemasons* 2, no. 9 (March 1927): 137.

<sup>13</sup>. Masonic writer and the historian of the Grand Council of Connecticut Royal and Select Masters, James R. Case, ended the belief Alexander Hamilton was a Mason in 1955. Case reported in his essay, “The Hamilton Bi-Centennial” that a man named Hamilton did indeed visit the American Union Lodge in 1779 and 1780, but it was Lieutenant John Hamilton of the first Maryland regiment and member of Lodge 6 in Maryland. Hamilton was a later member of Military Lodge 29. Case also noted in his essay, “Since the appearance of the Halsey story, the identification of Alexander Hamilton as a Freemason has been made a matter of record in many articles and publications. The 1946 edition of *Mackey’s Revised Encyclopedia of Freemasonry* goes so far as to state that it was Alexander who was present at Morristown, ‘identified because [he was] the only one of that name then holding a commission in the army.’ This broad statement can readily be refuted by reference to Heitmann’s Register of Continental Officers where no less than twenty-two Hamiltons are listed. The DAR [Daughters of the American Revolution] Ancestral Register contains at least forty Hamiltons and SAR [Sons of the American Revolution] records have more than twice as many. The Hamiltons were extensively patriotic.” Denslow in *10,000 Famous Freemasons* also discredits information about Hamilton being a Mason, but aptly points out that Phillip Hamilton, Alexander Hamilton’s youngest son who was an assistant district attorney in New York, was indeed a Mason—a member of Albion Lodge 26, and Master of the same in 1829.

affirmed by the convention and soldiers who participated.<sup>14</sup> However, the purpose of the convention failed.

- In 1790, the matter was renewed by the Grand Lodge of Georgia, but “Pennsylvania became an opponent of the measure, and declared it to be impracticable,” which again led to the failure of the proposal.<sup>15</sup>
- Again in 1799, the Grand Lodge of South Carolina proposed and recommended a convention to be held in Washington for the purpose of forming a “Superintending Grand Lodge of America.” Interestingly, the reasons assigned in their proposition were printed in a circular to all other Grand Lodges “to draw closer the bonds of union between the different lodges the United States and induce them to join some systematic plan whereby the drooping spirit of the Ancient Craft may be revived and become more generally useful and beneficial.” Apparently sympathetic to the cause, several Grand Lodges acceded to the proposition for holding a convention for that purpose, but did not express wide support, although they committed to send delegates. The convention, however, did not assemble.<sup>16</sup>
- In 1803, the proposition was made again—this time by the Grand Lodge of North Carolina—and was met with “a like want of success.”<sup>17</sup>
- In 1806, the subject of a general grand lodge was presented to all Grand Lodges for a convention in Philadelphia to be held in 1807, and again in Washington in 1808. Although widely discussed, neither was convened.<sup>18</sup>
- In 1811, another proposition was presented by the Grand Lodge of North Carolina for a convention in Washington. It too was unsuccessful, and there was no convention.<sup>19</sup>
- In 1812, North Carolina, “which seems to have been earnest in its endeavors to accomplish its favorite subject,” made the same proposal again. But the effort, like all that preceded it, proved abortive; and no convention was held.<sup>20</sup>
- In 1822, Maryland recruited the famed orator and statesman, Henry Clay, as their champion, and to preside over a convention that year [Clay was Grand Master of Kentucky in 1820]. The appeal “fell upon unwilling ears” of only seven Grand Lodges that were represented by fourteen delegates. Despite its eloquent and well-known president, the movement failed again; and the idea of what was called a “Supreme Grand Lodge of the United States” never went into operation. The formation of its constitution was its first, last, and only act [Clay demitted from the fraternity in 1824]. The Grand Lodge of Ohio was the first to declare opposition at this convention when their representative exclaimed that their grand lodge “would in no event consent to a Supreme Grand Lodge of the United States.”<sup>21</sup>
- In 1848, the Grand Lodge of New York recommended each grand lodge “should frame the outline of a General Grand Lodge Constitution, such as would be acceptable to it, and send it with a delegate to a convention to be held in Boston in 1850.” New York and Rhode Island submitted such an outline along with the Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia. The convention never met.<sup>22</sup>

In 1850, a strong statement from the Grand Lodge of Texas numbed the movement when it expressed what they believed the general sentiment of Grand Lodges and said: “The formation of a General Grand

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<sup>14</sup> Mark A. Tabbert, “George Washington, General Grand Master of the U.S.A, or Not?” *Reflections on 300 years Of Freemasonry*, ed. John S. Wade (London: Lewis Masonic, 2017), 208, and discussion with author on October 22, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> *A United Grand Lodge: The American Freemason's New Monthly Magazine* 4, no. 1 (July 1859).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

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

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

Lodge will not accomplish the desired end. The same feeling and spirit than now lead to difficulties between the different Grand Lodges would produce insubordination and disobedience of the edicts of a General Grand Lodge.”<sup>23</sup>

- In 1853, Lexington, Kentucky, hosted a convention attended by friends of the proposal and its measures during a session of the General Grand Chapter and Encampment. The meeting did little except to invite a meeting of a “fuller convention whose delegates should be clothed with more plenary powers to assemble at Washington in January 1855.” That meeting occurred, and nine propositions styled as Articles of Confederation were accepted and put forth as ratified, and to take effect as soon as they were approved by twenty Grand Lodges —“and the concurrent decision thereon two-thirds of the whole number would be held authoritative and binding.” This would have made the ratification of Masonic law if only thirteen of the twenty Grand Lodges voted for its adoption. With no principle of vitality to keep it together, the approbation was never received, and the proposed confederation failed to assume a permanent form.<sup>24</sup>
- In 1857, the Grand Lodge of Maine made their proposal and called for a convention to be held in Chicago in 1859. Courteously responded to, several Grand Lodges planned to attend. The convention was held but resulted in another failure.<sup>25</sup>

What would have happened had two-thirds of the Grand Lodges ratified the 1855 convention? First of all, the confederation league had no power to enforce its decisions, and was a voluntary organization expected to oversee voluntary organizations—never a good mix. The debility of its premise would likely have led to its early death. Second, even with this weakness, had all Grand Lodges that voted fallen in line with it, the seven that did not may have eventually joined too, or possibly have formed their own grand lodge to oversee the ones who did not ratify the proposal.<sup>26</sup>

*What if* there had been a Grand Lodge of America from the beginning instead of the formation of sovereign state Grand Lodges? Would ritual have evolved with uniformity? Would Masonic education be consistent and focused on development of men and leadership within the fraternity? Would a national Grand Lodge have created a practical plan through which to realistically address expansion rates and enforce an assurance of lofty standards?

Some may argue it would have done all those things, and the state of American Freemasonry today would be different and perhaps would have circumvented some or much of the anti-Masonic era and handled the rapid influx of members following World War I and II in a more constructive way.

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<sup>23</sup>. *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup>. *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup>. *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup>. Although the 1843 Baltimore Convention carried no authority over all grand lodges or power to enforce its decisions, every grand jurisdiction in America ultimately adopted the convention’s recommendation that all business be conducted only in the Master Mason degree—changing the practice that had been in place for over a century. The premise, however, that all grand jurisdictions would become subservient under one national grand lodge was a much different issue.



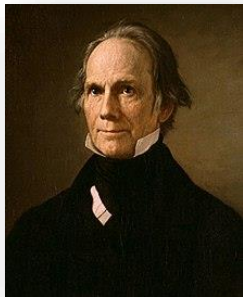
No matter the various tentacles of speculation stemming from the hypotheticals, the effects of the Civil War on the mood of the Masons and their Grand Lodges for nearly five years of national conflict cannot be discounted as a principle reason the movement, after 1859, did not continue with its previous regularity. The ravages of the war along with the divided consciences of men whose patriotic duties split the nation offered no time for Masons to dwell on the virtue or need for one or dozens of grand lodges in America.

*The sin of our Masonic fathers is not failing to form a general grand master or national grand lodge in the early days of the fraternity in this country, but the seeming indifference to acknowledge and recognize the underlying issues that spurred movements to form one.*

The same reasoning may apply to the ill-fated attempt during the early days of the revolution in 1779. In any event, membership increased with a great rapidity following the Civil War through early twentieth century, and there is no record of any similar movement spoiling the glee of seeing the fraternity proliferate and prosper as it did.

George Washington supposedly declined the offer.<sup>27</sup> Clay may have wanted it too much in 1820. The question of “[w]hat if Washington had accepted the nomination?” leads to an interesting conversation, and sometimes a more impassioned debate among Masons.

Regardless, due to suspicions of Grand Lodges (jealous for their own prerogatives and influenced by the early ideas and later political doctrine of states’ rights), the appetite for an overarching, central Masonic authority was an unlikely initiative from the start. The real or perceived condition of American Freemasonry nor even the nomination of a prestigious and widely respected man like Washington, and later Clay, added momentum to such an idea.



Henry Clay  
PGM, Kentucky

Envisioning the formation today, much the less the acceptance of a national grand lodge against the backdrop of over two-and-three-quarter centuries of culturally embedded sovereign authority, is, in every aspect, implausible. As if that was not enough, we look at such an idea in the past through the eyes of presentism today. Peters’s definition of Grand Lodges as a “horrendous superstructure,” and Richard A. Graeter’s comparison of their bureaucracy to that of a giant hair ball, serves to magnify the scope of the missteps one national grand lodge would likely had had or later created.<sup>28</sup>

If such a grand lodge was ever going to have a chance to offer and accomplish what its proponents claimed it would, the birth would have taken place as a result of the first maybe second or third attempt to form one. The perceived solution to the problem of “restoring ancient principles and discipline of Masonry, correcting “many irregularities and improprieties,” and the “present dissipated and almost abandoned conditions” of lodges, “relaxation of virtues,” to “save” Freemasonry from the “impending dangers of schisms and apostasy,” simply came too late in the evolution of the organizational structure of

<sup>27</sup>. Tabbert notes that there is no evidence that Washington was ever asked about the position of General Grand Master, and no evidence that he ever declined the opportunity; Tabbert, “General Grand Master,” 203–13.

<sup>28</sup>. Richard A. Graeter, in his 2007 “Reform Freemasonry” essay, explains how policies and procedures in grand lodges have built up over time based on the lessons of past successes and failures, and then become the accepted model, pattern, or standard of the corporate mindset making every new policy another hair for the bureaucratic hairball—hairs are never taken away, only added. The fundamental weakness is that there is no room in the corporate hairball for original thinking or primary creativity; Richard A. Graeter, “Reform Freemasonry,” *Reform Freemasonry*, accessed August 2017, <https://reformfreemasonry.com/>.

American Freemasonry. The fundamental premise of the past and often heard today that a national grand lodge would ostensibly “draw closer the bonds of union between the different lodges the United States and induce them to join some systematic plan” did not then or today incite enough interest of the body of the Craft to do so.

The sin of our Masonic fathers is not failing to establish a general grand master or to form a national grand lodge in the early days of the fraternity in America, but rather the seeming indifference to acknowledge and recognize the underlying issues that spurred movements to form one. As each of the clumsy attempts failed, the reasons they surfaced in the first place and continued to do so for decades, were ignored. Perhaps, instead of conventions to form a national grand lodge there should have been a well-planned convention to examine *why*, even after being repeatedly quashed, any movement at all continued for the next seventy-three years.

This deficit of any judicious assessment, or even a call for one for almost three-quarters of a century, suggests American Freemasons continued to wear the hoodwink that often caused them to step on rakes. The blindness to rippling effects and unintended consequences was and continues to be a distinctive characteristic of Masonic organizations. Judging the effectiveness of lodges and Grand Lodges in delivering the promise of Freemasonry by what they profess versus the results of what they practice is found in the story of movements to form a national grand lodge. Whether a rake is still lying on the ground ready to be stepped on again will be clearer to serious historians in the future.

While we like to think of the Masonic fraternity as being a “great world-wide international, closely-related group of men, bound together by solemn vows, with the sole idea of their advancement,” we know that is not the case. Missouri’s Past Grand Master, Ray Denslow, an outspoken, independent thinker conditioned by his deep understanding of, and wide connections in Freemasonry, believed that what we like to think the Masonic fraternity as being was far from the truth. Denslow’s writing and influence did much to keep the rank and file of Masonic leadership from accepting error in place of truth.<sup>29</sup>

Through his often painful but necessary criticisms, he pointed out many times how Freemasonry, while worldwide, was not that closely-knit group, but an organization of several hundred individual sections separated by state and national boundaries, by religion, creeds, and racial issues—its work no more done than that of a newly raised Master Mason.<sup>30</sup> As he also pointed out, that means there will always be a field for Masonic endeavor. He noted with clarity that while there are reasons for not having a national grand lodge, there is no reason why Freemasons cannot unite as a national organization for the consideration of things vital to Masonic life and policy—not doing so falls well into the category of a Masonic sin.

Some argue that American Freemasonry is united as a national organization. However, the debate continues about whether “some systematic plan” ever existed or later emerged as a result of those nine movements to establish either the position of General Grand Master or form a national grand lodge, or through the official recognition standards/practices and work of today’s conferences and associations.

Regardless, the idea of a General Grand Master and or national grand lodge, no matter the factual condition or complex issues that continue to confront Craft as a whole, lies moldering in its grave.

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<sup>29</sup>. Lewis C. Cook, preface to *The Masonic World of Ray V. Denslow* (Missouri Lodge of Research, 1964), xii.

<sup>30</sup>. *Ibid.*, 9.

## COMMENTARY

~ Dan M. Kemble, Past Master, William O. Ware Lodge of Research, Covington, Kentucky <sup>31</sup>

John Bizzack traces well the several attempts to establish a national grand lodge in the United States. The hostility to such a proposition has been so strong that no serious effort to address the matter has occurred since 1859. The Conference of Grand Masters of Masons of North America dates to roughly 1925. While the Conference can make recommendations, it has no binding authority on the participating jurisdictions. Its sister organization, the Conference of Grand Secretaries in North America, which dates to 1928, similarly has no power to bind any participating jurisdiction. These organizations serve as clearing houses for positions on grand lodge regularity and the occasional program offered to reverse Freemasonry's waning fortunes.

Henry Wilson Coil, in *Conversations on Freemasonry*, described the early efforts to form a national grand lodge. Coil observed that such an effort was doomed from the beginning. In Coil's view, the thirteen original states distrusted each other almost as much as they distrusted Great Britain, from whom they had won their independence. Asking the Grand Lodges of those states to trust each other enough to form a national grand lodge and cede to it their sovereignty was an immediate non-starter.

If a student of American history posed the question, "What would the United States be like today, had it continued to be governed under the Articles of Confederation," one response would be to point in the direction of American Freemasonry. The chaos that marked American government under the Articles is replicated in the uncoordinated, piecemeal and parochial acts of the Grand Lodges operating in the United States.

It is often said that power corrupts. Fortunately, that statement is not always true. In every instance, however, power reveals. In the instance of North American Freemasonry, the revelation is that no grand lodge, as currently constituted, has any intention of willingly surrendering any of its sovereign authority.

The differences that exist between grand jurisdictions are striking. Arkansas and West Virginia are essentially rogue jurisdictions that, at one time, competed for the title of "the North Korea of American Freemasonry." Georgia and Tennessee have expelled Masons for exercising their lawful rights as citizens as guaranteed by a decision of the U. S. Supreme Court. A handful of grand jurisdictions from states once a part of the Confederate States of America still refuse to recognize the regularity of Prince Hall Masonry. Not every grand lodge in the United States recognizes every other grand lodge. Establishment of a national grand lodge in 1779 would have, perhaps, prevented such incongruities. Their existence at this time make the likelihood of a national grand lodge remote in the extreme.

Will shrinking membership rolls bring about a climate change in North American Freemasonry, making the idea of a national grand lodge more palatable? Only time will answer that question. The Grand Lodge of Kentucky saw 46 lodge consolidations in the ten-year period beginning in 2009 and ending in 2018. If that trend is representative of what is happening in other grand jurisdictions, and if it continues into the future, it is certainly reasonable to expect that there may come a time when Grand Lodges will at least consider consolidating.

Should the unlikely occur – if the loss of membership on a national level forces a reconfiguration of Grand Lodges – how will American Freemasonry move forward? American Freemasonry desperately needs strong and capable leadership to redirect its path. There are few signs that such leadership now exists throughout the current landscape. North American Grand Lodges jealously guard their sovereignty there is no reason to believe they would surrender until no other option remains.

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<sup>31</sup> Commentary from the Masonic Perspectives Series, William O. Ware Lodge of Research website, <https://williamowarelodgeofresearch.com>, accessed January 2021.