

IF AMERICAN FREEMASONRY WAS REBUILT TODAY

A PRIMER FOR THE FRAMERS

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Imagine, for a moment, that membership in the Institution of American Freemasonry has finally fallen to its pre-Civil War level. That level is reported to have been somewhere between 55,000 and 66,000 members, depending on the source records.¹

A little reflection or study would dissipate the belief that such a time and circumstance is unimaginable.

But widespread reflection and study among Masons is not something that has, with any degree of steadiness, much less uniformity, achieved great heights. After all, it is commonplace in the American fraternity to simply accept that if a man is admitted into the ranks, it means that he must be a good man, and that he can be rushed through degrees and that he will easily grasp the profound lessons of the Craft. It is further presumed, then, that when raised to the degree of a Master Mason, he will experience a sudden manifestation of perception, and will immediately understand the essential nature and meaning of Masonry. And from that moment, he will fruitfully integrate into his life all he that learned in his oh-so-brief journey through the degrees; and that, as a matter of course, he will burst forth as a better man, both inside and outside of his Lodge, with little need for reflection or further study.

This approach, and the brittle presumptions that it carries, has baked itself into most of the fraternity for the past two centuries with inadequate exception. Accordingly, this supposedly effective method of making members offers new Mason two choices: they can rely on their lodge to fill in the blanks and provide a further explanation of Freemasonry, or, on their own volition, they can attempt to fill in the blanks by themselves. The former has proven to be the choice most Masons make, even though it has been known for generations that few lodges provide much, if any, further explanation. And passing on this method, and the limited knowledge that it confers, to an entire generation ensures that the following generation will pass on that same thing, or, eventually, a little less to the next generation. Thus, Masons shape Freemasonry,² and even long-discredited practices become deeply embedded.

¹ J.W. Norwood, Master, 1915, Personal Notes, Special Collections, Frankfort Historical Society, Frankfort, KY, examined in 2013, notes that as many as 55,000 Freemasons in America made up the membership rolls at the outset of the Civil War. Michael A. Halleran in *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Freemasonry in the American Civil War*, Tuscaloosa, AL: Univ. of Alabama Press, 2010, notes that American Freemasonry increased its membership from 66,000 in 1861 to 466,000, with more than 7,000 lodges nationwide between 1850 and 1870.

² Ron Motten, *Masons' Experience of Freemasonry: A Phenomenological Study of How Freemasons Experience the Craft*, https://www.academia.edu/25815605/Masons_Experiences_of_Freemasonry_A_Phenomenological_Study_of_how_Freemasons_Experience_the_Craft?email_work_card=interaction-paper, accessed January 2021.

Grand Lodges issue many independent instructions to their subordinate lodges, and ritual performance and ritual requirements vary, that produce different Masonic experiences for members. A new member does not find waiting for him a ready-made, consistent explanation of the ritual, so most men are left, anyway, to think Masonry out for themselves. But to think Masonry out for oneself is no easy task, nor does it become easier if those who a new member is told to ask are incapable of answering his questions. When that happens, it then requires that one find Freemasonry in its own large perspectives; that one knows the main outlines of its factual history; that one knows Freemasonry as it actually is and understands what it is doing; and that one knows Masonry as it has been understood by those who actually can help him see it in its own large perspective, and with a proper foundation.

Pockets of Masonry that are contrary to this commonplace approach and evidence-troubled presumption have always existed in the Order, but such pockets have never been found to be the majority. The common process and the presumptions on which it is based, long baked-in to the Fraternity, have been passed on to generations of members, making it impractical to believe that this style of Masonic parenthood will ever allow the fraternity to exceed its aggregate average ability, or nurture the capacity to conceive and carry out the historical intent and purpose of the Order.

One might think that a with little reflection, or with further study of our long-standing practices and all that has been written about this subject since the 1840s, the faulty presumptions on which our current procedures are based would dissipate.

But that thinking would be wrong, since it is based on yet another faulty presumption that is also baked into the Masonic culture: that there is widespread reflection, and substantial study of Freemasonry, including study of the administration of the institutions that surround it. In reality, those characteristics exist only outside the mainstream of American Freemasonry.

We know that the majority of Masons in good standing do not attend lodge, yet retain full voting rights and other privileges. Many of these inactive Masons pay no dues to support their lodge because of a rule in many jurisdictions that waives the payment of assessments and dues for those who have been members for fifty or more years. An aggravating circumstance to the issue of the lack of committed membership is the finding the 56% of current members have never meaningfully participated in the activities of their Lodge since having received their most recent degree.³ The commonplace method of making members (it manifestly does not make Masons) does little more than subsidize a shotgun approach to perpetuating the revenues necessary for the existence of institutional Freemasonry. Moreover, this common,

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³ William O. Ware Lodge of Research, Characteristics of an Ideal Lodge, Covington, KY, October 2019. (56% of membership have never meaningfully participated in the activities of their Lodge since having received their most recent degree).

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Every period of unbridled expansion in membership and lodges has been followed by a corresponding decline. The current decline in which we find ourselves dates from 1959 to the present (and has been the steadiest and most telling). The shotgun approach to membership, and the application of the Doctrine of Good Enough, merely continues to cause members and leaders to focus their concern primarily on the empty chairs in our lodges, rather than focusing their concern over what it is that makes those chairs empty.

A review of most Proceedings of Grand Lodge Annual Communications for the past couple of centuries tells us that as most Grand Lodges evolved, they became, and largely remained, mired in bureaucratic work, questions arising from their bureaucratic politics. Such Proceedings detail a mind-numbing recitation of numbers, counts, audits, the affairs of the Masonic Homes, reports and findings of poorly performed ritual, irregularities in subordinate lodges, notable deaths, the travels of the Grand Master, and similar official actions. Only on the rarest of occasions do they address the philosophical and instructional aims of the Craft.⁴ Much of American Freemasonry has ended up with more “constitutionalists” and “mechanical”⁵ Masons than philosophical Masons.

Interestingly, a part of the story of Grand Lodges is that when people at the top of organizations like Freemasonry see problems manifested and repeated, they then either create, or urge like-minded lodges to propose, in this case, legislation, resolutions, etc. to add more bureaucratic regulations to control the problems. Occasionally, they use their powers to issue edicts. These practices often lead to cliques, which then leads to politics, leading then to corporate hairballs, which lead to more bureaucracy, and few problems are ever resolved.⁶ Innumerable rules are proliferated and followed until other issues arrive, which “require” more rules. And more often than not, eventually, the people at the top of the pyramid, believing only they have the answers and know best for the organization, then informally form themselves as collective, unofficial superintendents of the organization.⁷ All of this happens as a consequence of trying to resynthesize past perceived successes.

QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS

So, by imagining for a moment that membership has finally fallen to pre-Civil War levels, and a movement arose from within to rebuild the once four-million strong fraternity in America, specific questions quickly arise. If not, they should.

⁴ John W. Bizzack, “Canker Worm on the Rose: The Struggle To Find Uniformity In The Observance Of Freemasonry,” *The Rubicon Masonic Society Transactions*, Vol. 2, 2022.

⁵ Dan M. Kemble, “Mechanical Masons,” *Transactions of The Rubicon Masonic Society*, Volume 1, 2023.

⁶ Richard A. Graeter, *Reform Freemasonry? The Question of the Future of Freemasonry*, 2014, https://www.academia.edu/35643443/Reform_Freemasonry, accessed, June 2022 (Graeter builds on the work of Gordon MacKenzie’s *Orbiting the Giant Hairball* (1998), in which MacKenzie defines the “Hairball” as the collection of policies and procedures that have built up over time based on the lessons of past successes and failures, which form a “Gordian knot of Corporate Normalcy (i.e., conformity with the “accepted model, pattern or standard” of the corporate mind set).103 “Every new policy is another hair for the Hairball. Hairs are never taken away, only added.” The fundamental weakness with the Hairball of Corporate Normalcy is that it “derives from and is dedicated to past realities and past successes. There is no room in the Hairball of Corporate Normalcy for original thinking or primary creativity. Resynthesizing past successes is the habit of the Hairball.”

⁷ *IBID.*

If total membership stood at, say, the high end of the reported pre-Civil War level (66,000), would there still even be over fifty Grand Jurisdictions in existence within the boundaries of the United States? Giving only an idea of how low that pre-Civil War membership is when divided equally, each of the existing jurisdictions would have, at most, 1,320 members on their respective rolls. Faced with such low numbers, would any of our Grand Lodges seek to merged or close their doors?

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An obvious question is whether those left to the task of a rebuild would merely attempt to resynthesize, or worse, fall back on the so-often played ace in the hole, that of seeking a rapid influx of new members, misguided by the thinking that lowering the standards of qualification and opening wide the West Gate provides a path to stabilization and would accelerate a rebuild? If so, then we can only hope that there will be framers who demand irrefutable proof that Freemasonry must have millions of men to survive or be successful.

Should framers head down the road of again thinking that the number of names on a membership roster is the measurement of success, then they will have openly acknowledged that, at least in Freemasonry, quantity is more important and preferred than quality. Like many of the generations before them, they will have turned a blind eye to the hard truth and lessons of our factual history.

Will these new framers call for a convention that is made up delegates from all Grand Jurisdictions, and composed of those who, at the time, might be thought of as the remaining best minds in Masonry to assemble and examine the state of the fraternity and adopt recommendations in hope of constructively rebuilding the Institution? To surprise of some, this happened once before.⁸

Would all Grand Lodges respond to such a movement and participate in a rebuild convention? To the surprise of some, when this happened once before, not all Grand Lodges were interested or participated.⁹

Would the soil be receptive to the seeds of rebuilding? Would the remaining soul of Freemasonry be responsive to recommendations and measures that might stem from such a convention? To the surprise of some, when this happened once before, there were many steadfast detractors within the ranks.¹⁰

⁸ Henry W. Coil, *Coil's Encyclopedia*, Macoy, Robert G. Davis, *The Mason's Words*, Building Stone Publishing, Guthrie, OK, 2013. Charles W. Moore – cite *The Masonic Trestleboard*, Bob J. Jensen, "The Baltimore Convention Of 1843," *The Philaethes*, October 1994, Baltimore Convention, 1843 (This Bulletin is an abstract from the scholarly study made by R. W. Henry C. Chiles, Grand Lodge of Missouri, no date). Albert G. Mackey, "The Baltimore Convention," *Mackey's Encyclopedia of Freemasonry*, Vol. I, 1872.

⁹ *IBID.*

¹⁰ *IBID.*

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Would the majority of those left in the pre-Civil War membership levels be the remnants of the common practices, or would they represent the pockets of lodges and members that pursued a Masonic experience that was contrary to the commonplace? Would the fewer be a youthful corps of members who, at some point in their journey, recognized the potential of strength in fewness, and who hold tightly to the philosophies and principles of the Craft while focusing a productive rebuild around those constructs? Would these men accept the reality that Freemasonry is not for every man, not even every good man?

CLOSING

Because any answer to those questions, and many more ancillary questions, would be only opinion and speculation, perhaps a word of caution serves best no matter which remnant or new corps of members might become the framers. That, however, would require a lengthy book and is beyond the scope of this writing.

Again, a little reflection after the contemplative study of what seems an almost limitless supply of past and current writings, studies, valid research, and presentations that address boundless topics related to Freemasonry, would be a much-needed boost to future framers. They could thus educate themselves before tackling any kind of rebuild, restoration, reformation, redux, adjustment, recalibration, fine-tuning, renovation, re-organization, make-over, reconstruction, or necessary renewal. But that would require a massive reversal of the level of reading and studying with which most Masons bother.

In addition, there are other resources available today: namely, the Masons who have diligently studied, attentively observed, and have spent their Masonic careers laboring in the arena to offset the need for a rebuild. Their work offers enlightenment on many topics, such as the relevancy of Freemasonry in any Era, public awareness issues, the folly of artificially creating and adopting Landmarks, and the detrimental effects from turning blind eyes to “fun degrees” and excessive casualness in an organization that is supposed to be seeking excellence. Studies of how poor instruction, substandard ritual delivery, and the toxicity of the long-term effects of low standards have contributed to the collapse of the current system of delivering Freemasonry are, without question, available and waiting.

Combined, Masons today can, if they choose to enter into the arena and commit to the labor, discover too, and in proper context, the absolute necessity of relying on reason and fact when pursuing the historical aim and purpose of Freemasonry. Doing so now, *before* the American fraternity finds itself nearer to, or actually in, the condition that can make it completely necessary to undertake a sweeping rebuild, seems a rather obvious choice.

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One thing is certain: whatever happens to and in American Freemasonry is in the hands of Masons today. It was in the hands of Masons in past years, too. Were they equipped and prepared in past years to effectively ensure the perpetuity of the historical aim and intent of Freemasonry in America? Are Masons today?