

MASONIC IGNORANCE

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Judging from the number of times we find references to *Masonic ignorance* in books, essays, articles, and Grand Lodge Proceedings from the mid-1800s through the 1900s, one can reasonably conclude that there was much of it. The same conclusion may be drawn with respect to the first two decades of the 2000s.

Some voice a concern that the term *Masonic ignorance* is offensive, inappropriate, and unacceptable language today, which sounds like an affirmation to others that there is an ignorance about what it is that the term itself actually refers and describes. Would a softened version of the term like “un-apprenticed Masons,” “unconversant Masons,” or maybe “Masons of Lesser Light,” appease? If so, we would still need to ask why men who are given the title of Mason would be un-apprenticed or unconversant about Masonry or thought of as having “lesser light” in the first place. Using a different term does not change the fact that ignorance about Masonry exists in Masonic ranks, which should automatically lead to the question, *why?*

In spite of the lure that doublespeak may have to some, a “lack of knowledge” remains the orthodox definition of the word “ignorance.” When “Masonic” is placed in front of that word, there is no intention to cause offense, but to correctly describe a problem and identify the consequences it creates.

Incorrect decisions stem from the effects of ignorance in all areas of society along with what might be called second-order effects, which include not understanding why many decisions made are incorrect. Poor decisions can lead to even worse outcomes because they are ultimately accepted as the way things have always been done, and, therefore, thought of as the best (or only) way to do things.

William H. Upton, Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Washington State in 1898, may have given us the starting point through which we may trace the origin of Masonic ignorance. Upton said the causes of Masonic ignorance in the Craft were too numerous to be specified, but that it was imperative that it be remedied. He went on to say that “Perhaps the trouble began soon after 1723 as a Master was able to excuse himself for not properly instructing an initiate by saying, “Explanation of these points” may be found in ye book printed by Brother Anderson, “with which it is hoped you will make yourself familiar.”¹



¹ William H. Upton's, "A Plea for the Teachings of Freemasonry," in L.S. Myler's *Jewels of Masonic Oratory*, in 1898. An oration delivered before the Grand Lodge of Washington on June 14, 1893.

He was referring to page forty-seven of Andersons Constitution (both the 1723 and 1738 versions) of *The Charges of a Freemason* in which we find not only the Charges, but thirty-nine *General Regulations* adopted by the Grand lodge (with an eleven paragraph Postscript at the end) outlining the steps in constituting a new Lodge. The preamble to these sections state: "To be read at the making of New Brethren, or when the Master shall order it."² The final seven words of that sentence (*or when the Master shall order it*) unintentionally provided Masters with a loophole and established the mistaken presumption that *all* initiates would read and embrace "ye book" on their own, and understand it.

There are many parts of Andersons Constitution that are not followed today, of course, but Upton may be on to something with regards to Masonic ignorance. If a candidate then, or now, is merely ushered through the degrees and then left to his own devices to further educate himself about Masonry, should we expect a wide-spread (much less uniform) awareness within our membership about all aspects of the fundamental mechanics and the philosophical lessons of Freemasonry?

Much has transpired in Masonry and in the world since Anderson's Constitution was written and adopted. The stewardship of the Fraternity and Craft has been passed on, and through, the hands of many men of varying skills and talents, who, regardless of well-intentioned tinkering, allowed appropriate Masonic instruction and education to be consigned to the back burner once a candidate is initiated, passed, and raised.

So, today the fatal cause of Masonic ignorance points to one thing, or perhaps, a combination of three things. *First*, the Fraternity allowed the unbridled rapid expansion of its membership to repeatedly occur without benefit of a rational assessment of the consequences of substituting quality candidates with mere quantity. *Second*, the Fraternity failed to provide consistent and appropriate fundamental Masonic instruction to all admitted into its ranks, regardless of whether it was during periods of rampant expansion. *Third*, the Fraternity failed to produce the widespread qualified leadership necessary to ensure that the first two circumstances did not occur.

We find in Masonry today, as we have in the past, enthusiastic Masons, who are not ignorant about Masonry in one sense, yet they are in another. They have committed to memory the ritual, so they can confer almost any degree, and yet they know so little of the history, literature, and jurisprudence of Masonry, that any profane would make them blush for shame if he asked them very elementary questions.³ This category of member may even foster ignorance, by opposing the efforts of everybody in the Order whose ideas about Masonry are not as narrow as their own.

We find, too, that there are today (as in the past) pockets of Masons who are sufficiently versed in Masonry and who are much better informed, instructed, and committed to the historical idea, aim, and purpose of the Craft. We can also more easily determine today, because of those who have devoted study to Masonry and their much-needed leadership, that the character of the Institution (as

² The Constitutions of the Free-Masons (1734). An Online Electronic Edition. James Anderson, Paul Royster (editor & depositor), Anderson, James A.M.; Franklin, Benjamin; and Royster, Paul (editor & depositor), "The Constitutions of the Free-Masons (1734). An Online Electronic Edition." (1734). *Faculty Publications, UNL Libraries*. Paper 25. <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libraryscience/25>, accessed, November 2020.

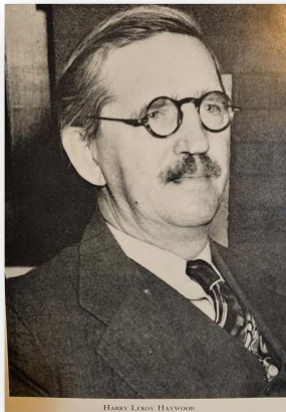
³ John Edwin Mason, "Is Ignorance In Masonry A Crime?" *National Freemasonry*, 1872.

distinguished from Freemasonry itself) is elevated only in proportion to the amount of the vast majority of membership's knowledge of its ritual, symbolism, philosophy and history.

To say that we have exhausted our efforts to properly instruct and educate our membership would be preposterous and serves as an additional indicator that Masonic ignorance continues.

SELF-EVIDENT PROPOSITIONS

H. L. Haywood was one of the Fraternity's most prolific writers of the 20th century. Haywood was one of those Masons who devoted his life to the exploration of Masonry. He examined the issue of Masonic ignorance in a way that many have not.



Haywood provides a clear and self-consistent understanding of what is meant by “Masonic ignorance,” and why its existence is actually a violation of the moral obligation every Mason freely makes.⁴

He points out that a physician who lacks knowledge about agriculture would not be considered an ignorant physician. That can be taken farther. We would not consider an attorney, architect, musician, physicist, therapist, banker, air traffic controller, pharmacist, or astronaut to be ignorant if they did not know how to change a flat tire.

His assessment takes Masonic ignorance to the level of understanding it belongs. He also points out that Masonic ignorance is easily exacerbated when those who ascend to leadership positions who are among those who are poorly instructed about Masonry.

Haywood contends that Masons should be held to self-evident propositions as are men of other professions who are held in high regard. He notes that when a man comes to Masonry, he does so after he has filled out a petition in which he has made a number of solemn promises over his signature. “During the process of his being made a Mason he more than once pledges himself to be and to do certain things, which comprise what is meant by saying that he is a Mason. Henceforth he is under a moral obligation to possess himself of whatever knowledge those pledges require of him.”⁵

Importantly, Haywood explains that if a man has never read the six-volume *History of Freemasonry* by R. F. Gould, has not read all the writings in all the Masonic Encyclopedias ever published, has never analyzed the hundred or so versions of the ancient written Masonic documents which are called The Old Charges, is not an authority on Masonic jurisprudence, or has puzzled out the intricacies of Pike's *Morals and Dogma*, “he is not for such reason to be stigmatized as an ignorant Mason; because he is under no moral obligation to have such knowledge.”⁶

⁴ H.L. Haywood, “Masonic Ignorance: A Variation On An Old Theme,” May 1951, *The Masonic Essays of H.L. Haywood*, Transactions of the Missouri Lodge of Research, Volume 20, William R. Denslow, editor, 1963.

⁵ *IBID.*

⁶ *IBID.*

On the other hand, membership in itself requires of a man that he have other kinds of knowledge. He must know how to attend his own Lodge, how to visit other Lodges, how to respond to a call for relief, have a working knowledge of that to which he has obligated himself, adequately prepared to hold higher office should he pursue it, learn to manage his time, understand completely what he can and cannot communicate about Masonry to those who are not Masons or of his degree, know his duty to other members and to his Lodge, and know, understand and abide by all by-laws, rules and regulations of his or any other Lodge. As Haywood writes, “So it is not unjust or harsh verdict upon him to call him ignorant if he does not have knowledge for such things, because he is under a moral obligation to know such things.”⁷

To carry on Masonry as it was designed and intended calls for various kinds of knowledge, and such knowledge is, therefore, *necessary* knowledge. The tenets and principles of the Order are what he has obligated

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At this point, Masonic instruction and education clearly enters in the mix of what is necessary to remedy Masonic ignorance. Lodges that primarily rely on the ushering of candidates quickly through degrees and then bid them to be fruitful with little but scant memory work (performed to the satisfaction of a Lodge, which could be at any level) to acquaint them with the depths and profundity of Masonic lessons and philosophies, contribute to the levels of Masonic ignorance in our Fraternity. And under this approach, poor leadership and the continuation of admitting those who are

made members for quantity purposes (not quality), only aggravates the problem – the problem of embracing a status quo practice that has worn a path into a rut.

Masonry was never designed to make erudite scholars out of Masons but rather to guarantee that Masons should have at least the fundamental knowledge of Craft practices, law, custom, and its factual history which is necessary if the Fraternity is to maintain itself.⁸

IF THE SHOE FITS

It is not uncommon in organizations to find people who overestimate their ability and knowledge with regard to their work. We are told, and common sense affirms, that this tendency may occur because gaining a small amount of knowledge in an area about which one was previously ignorant can make some people feel as though they are suddenly virtual experts. Only after continuing to explore a topic, if they do at all, do they realize how extensive it is and how much they still have to master.

Whether we choose to learn from our mistakes or succumb to them is what will actually determine whether Masonry perishes or prospers in the coming decades. Considering the decline of many in the greater culture

⁷ *IBID.*

⁸ *IBID.*

to embrace the values of the Enlightenment Era in just the past two decades alone, that time may come sooner than later. Masonry has been feeling the pangs of this period in history for decades.

When we find that there are so many young and veteran Masons alike who cannot speak with any certitude or offer even speculative meanings of images on our tracing boards, the discovery should be accompanied by multiple red flags. When members can deliver flawless ritual or ceremonial roles but are unable to explain their meanings to new or veteran members, the situation requires special attention. When ritual or other official Masonic ceremony is burlesqued, it is a clear signal that other alarms and red flags have been ignored.

There is no shame in being wrong. There's no shame in making mistakes. But there is shame in refusing to correct ourselves when we get things wrong.

It has been wrong to carry forward generations of members who can be legitimately characterized as Masonically ignorant. The emphasis on philanthropy and fellowship in Masonry, and the practice of relegating all other aspects of the Craft to second chair, simply fails to address the messiness of the real problems that have faced, and continue to face, American Freemasonry since the 1800s. That emphasis can carry the fraternity only so far. And the Fraternity has stretched the margins of that approach to its maximum extent.

American Freemasonry is beset by the consequences of its long-deferred attention to the more substantive elements of the Craft.

The delicate state of Freemasonry is an indicator that the obligation to develop an informed and engaged body of Craftsman can be deferred no longer. Failure to meet the present crisis may result in the death of Freemasonry in North America. If that occurs, its epitaph may simply be, "Masonic Ignorance."

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