

# Ruffianism & Other Things We Ignore

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**A**t the beginning of things, before Grand Lodges were in existence, Freemasons discovered the necessity of decorum. Among the Old Charges, to which every candidate was required to swear obedience, a prominent place was given to the portions dealing with 'Behaviour'.

The oldest of our known records—the Regius Manuscript, written about 1390—emphasizes the necessity of paying due respect to the Craft. James Anderson, in his Book of Constitutions, published by the Grand Lodge of England in 1723, says:

*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", that is, pay them the respect due to them. 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, 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 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.

Contrary to the guidance from these and other early documents that provide us with the original operating manual outlining Freemasonry's complete system, we don't always elect men on their merit to the chairs as the operating manual states ("All preferment among Masons is grounded upon real worth and personal merit only.")<sup>2</sup> We certainly do not follow what we learn from *The New Ahiman Rezon* of 1791 – that is to say the particular edition of the *Constitutions of the Free-Masons*

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<sup>1</sup> 1966 Year Book an article entitled Masonic Etiquette and Scottish Usage, by Brother George Draffen, was published Grand Lodge of Scotland Year Book 2011.

<sup>2</sup> "The Constitutions of the Free-Masons. Containing the History, Charges, Regulations, &c. of that most Ancient and Right Worshipful Fraternity. For the Use of th Lodges." London: Printed by William Hunter, for John Senex at the Globe, and John Hooke at the Flower-de-luce over-against St. Dunstan's Church, in Fleet-street.



When Anderson wrote, “Particularly in the conferring of the Master Mason Degree must all crudity and ruffianism be cut out. Neither has any place there,” we may presume he was either making an attempt to pre-empt the opportunity for crudity and ruffianism to creep into our ritual or grave problems of behavior already existed at the time in some form.

Perhaps, he believed by directly noting the behavior in the constitution of 1723 that was unacceptable in Freemasonry, crudity and ruffianism would be prevented altogether.

Of course, if his writing was intended to scold those whose behavior was to the contrary and admonish those who chose ruffianism and crudity over solemnity, respect, and dignity, then that didn’t work as well as he may have hoped it would down through the ages.

Having witnessed the Master Mason degree delivered and the Legend of the Temple performed in several jurisdictions, it must be noted that solemnity and appropriate Masonic protocol *is* followed today. There are many lodges that conduct their meetings and ritual with dignity, solemnity and without ruffianism. However, there also exists performances easily characterized as holdovers from the Golden Era of Fraternalism when pranks, references to goats, and a light-hearted environment endorsed, thus reinforced many forms of rampant horseplay.<sup>4</sup>



## The Working Jacket of a Master Mason

Nothing produces the potential for roughness and levity in ritual more than what is referred to as the “working jacket of a Master Mason.” In fact, the very presence of the jacket signals an atmosphere of levity and can certainly lead to rowdy behavior.

This jacket, typically made of a canvass material reminiscent of a strait jacket, minus the arms crossed and tied in the back, often appears with leather or thick handles or straps sewn onto specific locations on the garment.

Unsurprisingly, there is no mention of “the working jacket of a Master Mason” in any grand lodge constitution that has allowed or tolerated their use. The term does not appear in Anderson’s constitution, or writings by Masonic scholars of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Furthermore, the jacket is not mentioned in the most popular of the Masonic exposes` of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century where one would expect to find such a disclosure. In fact, this writing may be the first time anything about “the working jacket of a Master Mason” has ever been published.

Most Masons in jurisdictions that employ this jacket acknowledge, often with a wink and a grin, the existence, perceived purpose, and how it is used. However, aside from the explanation that “we’ve always done it that way,” no one has yet produced evidence that this jacket is anything more than a prop to inspire what Anderson calls “ruffianism,” even though ruffianism, has no place in Masonic ritual.

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<sup>4</sup> William D. Moore, Riding the Goat, Secrecy, Masculinity, and Fraternal High Jinks in the United States, 1845- 1930, The Strange Case of the Mechanical Goat in the Fraternal Lodge, Winterthur Portfolio, A Journal of American Material Culture, vol. 21, no. 2/3, summer-autumn, 2007. The strange and true

story of how early 20th-century American men became obsessed with mechanical animal pranks, The Atlantic, December 2, 2011.

The jacket is presented to the candidate prior his introduction to the character of Hiram Abiff, and before Abiff is waylaid by the three ruffians. Bestowing this preposterous jacket disrupts the flow and sequence of events in this section of the ritual, and since it has no other purpose than to allow the manhandling of a candidate, the ambiance of the lodge room and ritual is defiled.

The very act of placing the jacket on a hoodwinked candidate signals an implicit license to some that levity and ruffianism are sanctioned. The only things preventing such a license from being exercised, aside from common sense, is an admonition from the Master prior to this part of the ceremony during which he cautions against levity and horseplay - if such a statement is given at all.

There are lodges conducting their ceremony with dignity, proficient ritual delivery, proper decorum, and treat their candidates with respect by never laying an inappropriate hand on them, yet for some reason continue to use this jacket. If there is no intent of jerking, pulling, shoving or unnecessary manhandling a candidate in a ceremony, the question has to be asked as to why is the jacket donned at all?

The reason falls into the same explanation of why some parts ceremony and ritual we see performed today continues as it does, as opposed to as it was originally intended or as specifically prescribed - we've become casual. In doing so, we've allowed what was done in the past, regardless as to whether it was correct, to continue and become what we think is the way it's always been done.

The belief that the use of the "working jacket of a Master Mason" is *the way we've always done it*, has a certain truth to it though, if that is, you consider the "way we've always done it" extends only as far back as the previous three, four or maybe five generations of Masons.

According to some veteran Masons, the jacket, in some jurisdictions, was in use prior to the 1950s. These same men report, however, that the origins of the jacket was never explained to them, so it was assumed its use was part of the sanctioned practices of Freemasonry. So, the practice continued as the design of the jacket became even more utilitarian over the years - most certainly for the exclusive benefit of those who played the roles of ruffians in the degree, and for the amusement of the lodge.

Interestingly too, is a recent comment from another veteran Mason in one jurisdiction where the jacket is used. The brother was asked why candidates were approached in such a physically aggressive manner by the brothers playing the roles of three men who confront the character of Hiram Abiff. His response was that candidates "needed" to be put "on edge" by being treated roughly. Furthermore, he continued to express the rationalization that such treatment was warranted by claiming "our ritual says those three men were "ruffians" - so they are supposed to be treated rough."

While our fraternity certainly encourages speculation by its members, it does not encourage oblivious guesswork.

The word ruffian has nothing to do in that sense with being "rough." The word originates from Italian (*rofia, ruffiano*) meaning scab or scurf, which is thought to be of Germanic origin. In Middle French (*rufien*), the word describes one who is a panderer, swaggerer, turbulent and unsettled. The word in early Scottish Gaelic refers to a low, worthless fellow or one of valueless character. Later our understanding of the word evolved into a fitting description of a ruthless fellow, ready for any desperate enterprise or crime.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> James Stormonth, James Phelp, Etymological and pronouncing dictionary of the English language. P. H. 1874.

## In the End

There's much talk today about returning to traditions in Freemasonry, perhaps as much as the frequently voiced concerns about the lack of protocol, etiquette, and Masonic



education in our fraternity. While changing a few things here and there that may seem to stay within the limits of our responsibility not to introduce innovations into the Craft, we have done just the opposite for decades. Moreover, those little things (i.e., the working jacket of a Master Mason) have the potential to ripple slowly into what many think and ultimately believe is regular practice and a part of Freemasonry.

If we were serious and committed to proper decorum, solemnity in our ceremonies, and appropriate behavior during the preferment of our degrees, the ruffianism and levity we too often witness would not exist. Every brother either contributes to such a setting by doing nothing, thus tacitly allowing ruffianism and levity to occur or they participate in such behavior - or they assume a voice of responsibility that calls an end to it and stops it.

The talk we hear at Masonic lodges, conferences, and other events about returning to traditions and reintroducing

fitting practices, protocols and etiquettes, is likely to continue for some time to come, especially as more men enter the Craft who arrive already better educated about the history and certainly the intent of our institution. Many of those same men bring with them assumptions and expectations of how Masons behave and act. When those expectations fall short, we see one of the reasons men exercise their option to disengage from lodge.

The accelerated proliferation of lodges during particular eras in the history of North American Freemasonry brought with it an unintended consequence. Those periods of rapid growth, especially into what was considered the backwoods, and later the rural areas of the nation, did not fully take into account and consideration what might happen when there is little accurate history, structured education, and a steady level of enforcement of our rules and regulations was uneven and inconsistent. The system of Freemasonry, as it was originally designed, intended, and was envisioned to be offered, did not spread evenly across the nation. In the absence of appropriate instruction and monitoring of rules and regulations about anything in any organization, there's always going to be a tendency for creativeness.

Some say the diversity of our rituals, practices and customs, even the ones that are clearly in contrast to the system and original intent of the fraternity, should be celebrated – because they represent a large cross-section of men in *collective bond*. While attracting men from all walks of life in such a collective bond is indeed an accomplishment to be celebrated, the splintering of practices, the questionable level of competency of ritual delivery, the vanishing of the non-casual approach to such an important undertaking as what the Craft offers can hardly be considered Ancient

Freemasonry as it was intended, and therein we find a rub.

Some men are content with Freemasonry as the casual men's club it has evolved into in many places. Some are not and seek a Masonic experience closer to that of days past when non-casual practices were more customary than not.

Regardless of whichever "system" of Freemasonry a man chooses and with which he becomes content, there is still no place in our fraternity for levity, crudity, frivolity, and boisterous behavior during ceremony or ritual - and certainly no room for the invention known as "the working jacket of a Master Mason."