

Sins of Our Masonic Fathers

Keynote Address Presented During Harmony, at the Masonic Restoration Foundation
Symposium August 10-12, 2018 at Montezuma Lodge No 1, Santa Fe, New Mexico

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By the time the first lodges in America had been warranted and formed, organized British Freemasonry had been in existence for no more than fifteen years.

American Freemasonry did not merely take over from where the grand lodges of England, and later the grand lodges of Scotland, and Ireland left off. Freemasonry in the United States is a child of the Revolution—several generations removed from a more mature British society of the time that influenced the shape of *and* initial organization of Freemasonry in England.

In the 1730s when Freemasonry began to appear in the colonies, it collided with local cultures and began transforming what was created in Britain into a different kind of system influenced by yet another set of cultural stimuli.¹

As a result, American Freemasonry today is neither self-made, nor a mere carbon copy of European forms.² For this reason alone, American Freemasonry was destined to evolve differently from the rest of the Masonic world's understanding and appreciation of it, however, its evolution to where we find it today is primarily because of the way in which it organized itself following the Revolutionary War and allowing the unbridled spread of its lodges and too rapid of an increase in membership.

The scale on which this unique proliferation occurred has never taken place in any other nation.

Almost from the moment grand lodges emerged in colonial America, and later in our united states - many rules and regulations to govern their subordinate lodges were introduced. Creating a well-thought-out plan for how Freemasonry might most successfully be spread throughout the colonies, and later the states and territories was not one of them.

A cart full of the seeds containing the genius system of Freemasonry was given to America, but the horse pulling that cart did so at such speed the seeds were hastily and hurriedly planted. They were not uniformly nurtured and nourished.

As the seeds were haphazardly broadcast, lost was the assurance that all those who became part of the fraternity received consistently the good and wholesome instruction or guidance on the aim, purpose and practices of the genius system Freemasonry was designed to cultivate and harvest.

Once the early Provincial Grand Lodges of England, Scotland and Ireland were replaced with Grand lodges formed in each state - each claiming and asserting their respective sovereignty following the Revolution - the horse pulling that cart was repeatedly spurred as it raced up and down the Eastern Seaboard

¹. Alexander Piatigorsky, *Freemasonry: A Study of a Phenomenon* (London: Harville Hill Press, 1997), 164

². Ibid.

and then, by 1778, into the territories of the West, rapidly expanding and scattering Freemasonry with more haste *and* without benefit of a well-organized infrastructure necessary to guarantee its aim and purpose was understood and practiced as designed.

In the late 1780 we find evidence of concern about that rapid expansion expressed in some Grand Lodge Proceedings – words of caution and alarm of inadequate oversight and instruction became common over the next 100 years in those records. However - despite early warnings and legitimate concerns about the Craft growing too quickly, the passion and zeal to spread Masonic Light exceeded the ability of early grand lodges to consistently deliver on the promise of Freemasonry - and over the next 40 years, around 75,000 men were made members, many of whom received lesser instruction about the aim and purpose of Freemasonry than the generations before them.³

In the end, what rapidly expanded with great success was the *romantic idea* of Freemasonry – not its true aim, purpose, and practices - our history makes no mistake about that, and plainly illustrates the good and wholesome instruction required and necessary to uniformly nourish and sustain such rapid growth of the precious seeds of Freemasonry simply did not occur.

So, while the *idea* of Freemasonry steadily grew and brought men together, it's no secret that a vast number of members who were then *and* are today admitted to our fraternity were not then *nor* today all truly interested in what Masonry is supposed to be. The doors of American Freemasonry were flung open widely and never really closed again. We've made it a practice of initiating many men who had no idea what they were joining.⁴

³ There were approximately 5,000 members following the Revolutionary War in America. There were 80,000 by 1826 (1,500% increase).

⁴ Robert J. Johnson, *Shadows Burnt on the Wall*, <http://www.midnightfreemasons.org/2018/06/shadows-burned-onto-walls-addressing.html>, accessed July 1, 2018.

As a result, American Freemasonry unmindfully adopted what might be called a *Doctrine Of Unintentional Consequences* as its members began measuring the success of the fraternity by a false standard – a false standard to which they became not only accustomed, but addicted – a dependency giving birth to the counterfactual and flawed notion that *the success of Freemasonry in America can be measured by the number of names on our membership rosters*.⁵ We see the first national consequence of this doctrine in the 1820s, then again just before and following the Civil War, the early 1900s, and the years during and following WWII.⁶

What has this misshaped doctrine accomplished?

Well, we can dance around the answer - and many do - but I sense you'd much rather hear straight-talk about it.

If we expect to be successful with say, a football team, we don't hand a man a football who has never seen one and then tell them they are a football player – with a game next week, and then *expect* them to play proficiently as part of the team, much less skilled at the activity. But that is what was and is still done with many new members of our fraternity. We hand him a white apron. We tell him he is a Freemason, and then too often, as well, find he is soon offered an office in lodge with little to no coaching, guidance, or a working knowledge of the rules of the game to beyond ritual to prepare him and perfect his skills.

The rapid expansion of lodges and members too often resulted in Masonic teachings being replaced by... *well, nothing*. We made members, put them in the game, as it were, and accelerated many men in positions of

⁵ John W. Bizzack, *Island Freemasonry: The Final Bastion of the Observance Lodge*, Macoy, 2017.

⁶ As of 2018, thirty-five jurisdiction authorized and conducted, in one form or another, One-Day Classes to increase membership.

leadership. Too many lodges became a place just to visit with friends.⁷

Many of those new Masons who became leaders were unable to provide to others anything beyond what was provided to them. Masonic lodges evolved into social clubs, with a mysterious sounding history. We read minutes, paid bills, talked of the sick, who died – and that was about it. And yet we tried to impress others with our mysterious past – and well-meaning members came to believe this was all there was to the true Masonic experience. It was an imprudent plan and remains a bad fix for something seriously broken.⁸

Joining a Masonic lodge has never made a man a Freemason any more than joining a music club makes a man a musician.⁹

So, the answer to what this doctrine has accomplished is clear: *we've made more members than we have ever made Freemasons.*

Today, the role of factual history as a tool for influencing how we think does not receive prime billing in the sphere of American Freemasonry.

Generations have allowed the IDEA of Freemasonry to govern and set the course of the fraternity instead focusing on its practices and intended aim and purpose.

We cannot possibly understand (perhaps do anything about) the multitude of dynamics responsible for the current state of mainstream American Freemasonry without knowing and weaving context into what created it.

And, without understanding at least some of those fundamental dynamics we should not be surprised that Mainstream American

Freemasonry remains on the path is been traveling and will for decades to come.

Like it or not, we are all historians. Everyone, not just Freemasons, is called on to engage in historical thinking – called on to see human motive in the words we read; called on to mine truth from the quicksand of legends, innuendo, half-truths, the imaginative writings, and especially the folly from those who may simply be poorly instructed.¹⁰

In the waning years of the Roman Empire, the Roman statesman, orator, lawyer and philosopher, Marcus Tullius Cicero drew the attention of the Roman senate to their lack of awareness of the early history of Rome. His warning is fitting as it applies to our institution and members today. Cicero told the senate that *Not to know what happened before one was born is always to be a child.*

The problems facing Freemasonry in our country are not difficult to identify. We are hobbled by recycled programs. We bemoan, lament, wring hands, fret, stew, take umbrage, mope, and reminisce about perceived glory days, famous Masons – many of whom were not – and way too often see the Masonic journey of many men consumed with seeking solutions to matters without knowing how or why many of those matters *became matters* in the first place.

This approach to problem solving in Freemasonry without benefit of knowing *how and why* a problem exists - is like trying to repair the damaged engine of a ship by merely changing the propeller.

Freemasonry was never intended to be anything other than a profound quest by man for participation in the nature and purpose of God and the universe.¹¹ If, in wisdom, we are

⁷ Michael A. Poll, *Measured Expectations: The Challenge Today's Freemasonry*, Cornerstone, New Orleans, LA, 2917. 44.

⁸ *IBID.*

⁹ *IBID*, Henry Pirtle, *An Address to a Newly Raised Brother*, The Kentucky Monitor, Grand Lodge of Kentucky, 1990, 154.

¹⁰ Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 83.

¹¹ Bill Stemper, *Freemasonry and the Future*, *The Masonic Trowel*, last modified March 22, 2014, <http://www.themasonictrowel.com/Articles/Freem>

to understand the Masonic fraternity, we should first be absolutely clear that *we were not* designed to be just another club, community service organization or merely a loosely confederated group of volunteers.

So, perhaps before rushing to replace the propeller of the ship that has a damaged engine, we should examine and come to understand what caused the engine to be damaged in the first place - and focus our labor on assuring that we don't continue to allow, play host, or become a prisoner to the thinking that caused that damage.

The fraternity is not a victim of the circumstance of a changing and evolving society – the institution of Freemasonry in America is a victim of its decisions in response to a changing and evolving society - and its obsession with increasing membership without the assurance of wholesome nourishment and instruction to sustain that growth.

Failing to embrace that understanding only diminishes the promise of our institution. And, since Freemasonry arrived in this country, it has been visibly moderated to the point that the perpetuity of its intended aim and purpose was questionable only a handful of decades after the first regularly chartered lodge was formed, and rapid membership expansion became the common practice.¹²

When we closely examine the facts, the trail explaining how American Freemasonry unfolded simply fell victim to the fallacy that *bigger is better*.

Brothers, if American Freemasonry ever steps off the “that’s-the-way-we’ve-always-done-it” treadmill AND steps away from and rejects the preposterous notion that bigger is better, it becomes possible for us to accept the truth staring our fraternity in the face today. That

asonry/society_files/freemasonry_and_the_future.htm.

¹². William H. Upton, *A Plea for the Teachings of Freemasonry*, in *Jewels of Masonic Oratory*, ed. L. S.

truth is *that bigger is not better, only better is better*.

Now, straight talk about American Freemasonry is nothing new – many have and continue to offer it - heeding it, however, is another matter.

Those who brush the reality of our history aside or choose to ignore the lessons from it, reserve a special place in the history of American Freemasonry for themselves, for they will be noted among the ranks of those who contributed most to the dilution of our institution.

Embracing only the *idea* of Freemasonry while ignoring the fact the genius idea itself demands it be judiciously led, aptly managed, and rightly administered, is a recipe for mischance, miscalculation, and in the end, stagnation. Ignoring this requisite is certainly one of the reasons, American Freemasonry has a track record of stepping on rakes and shooting itself in the foot.

Now, those who may think my straight-talk tonight bashes our institution or the laudable work many men have committed to it – be clear that you are laboring under the wrong impression.

For some time and in many presentations around the country, I have referred to some easily identified benchmarks in our fraternity that altered the way Freemasonry unfolded in American. I've referred to those benchmarks as “sins of our Masonic fathers.”

That term often causes eyebrows to arch, but the non-casual Masons among us easily understand that the term *sins of our Masonic fathers* is a metaphorical term and not used in the standard religious sense or unrighteous connotation, but the explanatory sense

Myler (Akron: William H. Upton, 1898), 78; John Bizzack, *Island Freemasonry: The Final Bastion of the Observant Lodge* (Richmond: Macoy, 2017), 20.

referring to an error in action, miscalculation, and often a poverty-stricken vacuum of situational awareness in which many previous decisions and choices about the fraternity were - and continue to be made.

That, in itself, is a timeless paradox because Freemasonry, as a system, is perfect, but it's entrusted to men, who by nature, are not perfect.¹³

The term *is not* an indictment of the Institution nor a universal criticism of the men who came before us - or of some men today. It is an acknowledgement that we are an institution of men - men who can *and* do fall prey to errors in action, miscalculations, and a lack of situational awareness - and men who can and do, for various reasons, fail to embrace the reality that we *do not* have to play host to those errors in action, miscalculations or lack of situational awareness.

It can be said today there was an *original sin* committed in American Freemasonry - a single sin from which others later stem.

That original sin occurred as we began discounting the consequences of gratuitous rapid expansion without attention to how it would infect the fraternity and lead to the narcotic-like obsession of measuring the success of Freemasonry by the number of names on our membership rolls.

Each of the six times over the past 230 years American Freemasonry experienced a gratuitous rapid expansion in membership; the character of the fraternity was conspicuously altered. Each of those six times, the rapid influx of members undermined the order's ability to offer its members a sense of community its ideals promised.¹⁴

We do not have to play host to the sins of our Masonic fathers. We do have a choice. We can either repeat or expel the sins of those

who came before us. Expelling them has nothing to do with changing our tenets, philosophies, great moral lessons, and the fundamentals of our Craft. It has everything to do, however, with our knowledge and understanding of it - and the manner in which it is intelligently led, aptly managed, and rightly administered - and yes, proficiently practiced. We are all charged in one way or another to learn and strive for what is best for the good of the Order. Today, *what is best* for our Order is not to allow members to remain in a darkness about its factual history and what led us to where we are today.

Today, the problem facing American Freemasonry is much more troubling than membership decline. The problem is rooted in the challenge of not attracting more Masons but making Freemasonry more attractive to the members we have.¹⁵

Many remedies that appeared at various times as American Freemasonry unfolded, have long-proven ineffective, and, in some cases, destructive. Their rippling effects passed on unintended consequences that infected the fraternity with a virus that would *and* continues to steer the literacy of much of its membership in uncalculated directions.

Several times in our history as an organization though, we missed that point and succumbed to the artless idea and subsequent misplaced audacity to embrace the notion there was success and strength to be found in largeness when all along success and strength in Freemasonry was and is best realized in fewness - fewness that amplifies *exceptionalism*.

Who among us can truthfully claim it is easy to love *a name* on a roster - a name of a man who may carry a dues card, but never participates, attends, or engages in the labor

¹³ Dan Kemble, Master, William O. Ware Lodge of Research, Covington, Kentucky, Past Master, Elvin Helms Lodge No. 926, Kentucky, correspondence with the author, July 12, 2018.

¹⁴ Lynn Dumenil, *Freemasonry and the American Culture* 1880-1930, Princeton, NJ, UP, 1984.

¹⁵ Thomas W. Jackson, conversation with author at The Masonic Society Annual Conference, Lexington, Kentucky September 2017.

required to *BECOME* a Freemason – not just be made a member?

There's not enough time this evening to review in detail a list of all the sins that can be compiled, or those all those to which we continue to play host and perpetuate, but we can touch on a few of the most damaging.

We should remain cautiously mindful that while many of these primary sins came from those before us, allowing them to continue to circumvent the intended aim and purpose of our fraternity, makes Masons today as culpable as the generations of men who allowed them to emerge in the first place.

Let's look at five of these sins.

NUMBER 1 is the rapid expansion of lodges and membership in haste without suitable infrastructure to assure members appropriate and adequate instruction about the aim, purpose, and heritage of the fraternity, was the first unintended, but clear genesis of all sins that followed. This is the original sin – that gave us the “Masonic yardstick” that molded the thinking that the mere number of names on membership rosters would *and* could effectively measure the success of Freemasonry in America.

NUMBER 2: The reliance on the practice of progressive line advancement of officers has never proven a better approach than the original approach of electing men on merit. In fact, assuming men who automatically progress through an officer line and wind up in the East are, by virtue of that mechanical process alone, well-equipped to lead, manage, open and rule their lodge, is as noted by Past Grand Master Dwight Smith of Indiana, “a foolish custom.”¹⁶

¹⁶ Dwight L. Smith, *The Level of Leadership: Whither Are We Traveling?* The Indiana Freemason (Indianapolis: The Indiana Masonic Home Printing Office, 1962), 12.

¹⁷ From the time many members walk in the door to receive the EA Degree until the time they are raised to

Although a laudable notion, the progressive line is not a proven, effective management, much less a leadership principle. At best, the progressive line, *as widely administered*, is nothing more than a roll of the dice with much the same odds as a winning guess on where the ball will land on a spinning roulette wheel.

NUMBER 3. For the first 112 years of Freemasonry in America, lodges opened and conducted their business on the Entered Apprentice degree – a practice that allowed all members to dwell together in unity during stated communications. Then, in 1843, the Baltimore Convention recommended, with no authority to impose or enforce the notion, the idea that lodges should open and do their business only on the Master Mason Degree – excluding all who were not Master Masons from meetings. Regardless, every jurisdiction in America eventually adopted the recommendation. Rushing men through degrees, which was *already a problem at the time*, became more embedded and customary so that new members could quickly be allowed to sit in lodge as Master Masons – it also continued to contribute to the already over-reliance on ritual as the primary Masonic education a member received.¹⁷ Fortunately, even though it took 155 years for it to occur, jurisdictions began rejecting this pointless innovation. Today, 26 jurisdictions have rejected the practice and are no longer haunted by this practice – but 24 jurisdictions continue to play host to this sin preventing lodges from pursuing *what may be best for their respective lodge and members*.

NUMBER 4. Relaxing standards and qualifications for membership and the Laissez-faire, ill-conceived notion that casual dress, protocol, and practices would not cause Freemasonry to become casual in several other ways – calls to mind the clear truth found in an

MM, it is only 60 days between those times. (assuming that everything proceeds with one lunar month between degrees). We don't “duly and truly” prepare men to receive the EA Degree, much less prepare them to be passed on to the remaining Degrees.

old saying that no matter how good the contents, few will buy something wrapped in a "brown paper bag."¹⁸ Casual *anything* in Freemasonry does not lend itself to making the fraternity exceptional. In fact, it has contributed to making the idea and purpose of Freemasonry virtually indistinguishable from service clubs apart from our aprons and ritual.

NUMBER 5. In 1779, came the first call for a General Grand Master of America with the authority to call and over Masonic Conventions and warrant new lodges in new territories. A national convention to create the position was held, but the measure failed. Over the following 74 years the call for a either the same or a national grand lodge was made nine more times. Conventions were held and each time the measure failed. Brothers, the sin was not the failure to establish the position of General Grand Master or a national grand lodge (*and this is not another call to form one*). No, the sin was the conspicuous, abject failure of American Freemasonry and its leadership of the time, to at least examine with balance and attempt to address the real, the factual and substantial reasons those recommendations were made (on the average) every nine years for the seven decades following the Revolution. History shows us the majority of Grand Lodges over those seventy-four years and four generations of Masons, did not wish to deal with the bothersome, uncomfortable truths about what was *and* was not happening in American Freemasonry for almost a century, much less attempt to correct, adjust and effectively address those issues.¹⁹

We cannot say that we need a national grand lodge in America today, but we can certainly say there remains a need for a legitimate, collective, and well-balanced examination of the bothersome, uncomfortable truths directly

influencing the current state of mainstream American Freemasonry.

Reality is a formidable opponent, brothers - it never loses. Neglecting to heed and take into consideration the relationship of that statement to the current state of American Freemasonry is a Masonic sin itself and keeps open the opportunity for the fraternity to find yet another rake on which it can step.

Allowing the illusion that the success of American Freemasonry can be measured by the number of dues-paying-card-carrying members affiliated with it erased the opportunity to engrain its aim and purpose with any degree of uniformity and unswerving success. Today, the price is being paid for allowing that to happen.

While we were busy counting numbers, our understanding of the aim and purpose of the Craft evolved into a kaleidoscopic maze of interpretations and practices—now more clearly seen for what it is: *a consequence of hasty proliferation*.

In due course, the common “let’s measure our success by the number of names on a membership roster” created a unique Masonic mirage. That peculiar mirage imparts the allusion that all members are learned craftsmen simply because their name appears on such roster or has appeared for decades without them being the least bit involved in their lodge, much less Freemasonry.

None of the labor, however, by those so inaptly focused on membership numbers prove to have uniformly advanced the fraternity’s aim, purpose and heritage. Although it may still take a while longer for the Mainstream American Masons who cling

¹⁸ Kent Henderson, A Prescription for Masonic Renewal, 2001, <http://www.masonicdictionary.com/european.html>, accessed July 4, 2018.

¹⁹ NOTE: Number 1-5 from unpublished manuscript, *Sins of our Masonic Fathers: The Lost Strength in Fewness in American Freemasonry*, John W. Bizzack, Lexington, Kentucky 2018.

to the bigger-is-better mirage to realize it, their jubilee is over.

The institution of Freemasonry itself, however, is not the least bit distraught. While much of its delivery system is contaminated with poor leadership and too many members whose Masonic knowledge is often characterized as cloudy, American Freemasonry sails steadily on a self-correcting course today, *slowly converting itself* on the way to a much smaller and more refined version—a calculable, natural, and certainly predicable shift toward its inevitable, current paradigm – a paradigm that will result in American Freemasonry becoming a much smaller fraternity.

Notwithstanding the fact American Freemasonry is only about two-and-three-quarter centuries old, the institution itself is still experiencing what might be thought of as growing pains.

The mainstream American version of our institution today has, for the past half-century of more, started the lengthy process of slowly disentangling itself with its bloated past and overextension, and the rippling, unintended consequences of well-intended but unnecessary tinkering with its aim and purpose. This is not to say all Masons have not been good stewards of our fraternity, but neither is there a reason to continue the folly behind the uncomfortable truth that all have either.

It was not Freemasonry that caused the institution to become bloated with men who were not offered good and wholesome instruction about its aim, purpose and heritage – NO - men who were made members instead of Freemasons allowed this to occur. American Freemasonry today, brothers is merely in an inevitable, self-correcting mode.

And, as with the laws of natural selection, the institution's path of self-correction will inevitably identify and ultimately have the final say on what remnant of the original aim and purpose of Freemasonry is the fittest as this century ends.

Growing large, especially in haste, just to become smaller may prove the most valuable lesson of truth for Freemasons in the United States – *if we can face and accept the truth behind the reasons it's happening.*

As troubling as it may seem to some, the reality that strength in Freemasonry is found in fewness cannot be ignored. As previously mentioned, reality is indeed a formidable opponent, and no matter how long it takes, *it never loses.*

Many Masons today show less and less interest in playing host to the sins of our Masonic fathers. Their ranks are undeniably small, but the new models born of different names practicing what is now more thought of as “heritage observance” or “best practices” seem less affected by the institution's self-correcting scale back. There is no reason to believe, however, the heritage observance model will be anything but a small segment of the mainstream for decades to come. Only the overenthusiastic believe this new model will soon become a majority.

But the model does not need majority status to constructively influence the future path of the fraternity—it only needs to attract and welcome men of quality, and not a large quantity of them to preserve and perpetuate itself.

As our institution continues to self-correct, the mainstream may find it helpful to work on getting used to the extremely low odds it will be successful in replacing enough new members in the seats of those who will drop off and fade from the rolls over the next several decades.

Now, those who do not agree with a book or a presentation usually finds the section noted or announced as the *Conclusion* is its finest feature. Well, brothers... we are approaching the *Conclusion*...

In ancient Rome, when the scaffolding was removed from a completed Roman arch, the law read that the Roman engineer who built

the arch had to stand beneath it. The point was that if the arch came crashing down, he would experience first-hand the responsibility, as it were, for its poor design and construction. As a result, the Roman engineer knew that the quality of his work was crucial and would certainly have a certain and direct impact on his life.

The quality of the work by American Masons to engineer a mainstream arch is certain to be discussed in detail and length in the twenty-second century. Today, some believe those discussions will take place as more scaffolding is put up to continue the work of strengthening the quality of the arch. Some say they would stand tall beneath it as it is today —others say they would too, *but duck*.

While the institution gets on with its business of self-correction and scale back, the strength of the arch in American Freemasonry will continue to depend on the quality of what we instruct, practice and pass on today—that quality will be determined largely by the extent of bright or cloudy leadership and their administration of the genius system of Freemasonry.

As all in this room are certain to agree: Freemasonry is not suitable to or for every man, even every good man. I sense from this crowd tonight, you also agree there is simply no substitute or assurance the intended aim, purpose and heritage of Freemasonry will extend itself into perpetuity unless exclusivity and exceptionalism are built into its future.

The strength, and certainly the spirit of American Freemasonry in the future, will be found in its fewness.

If Mainstream American Freemasonry was delivering on its promise, brothers, I venture to say most of the men in this room tonight would not be in attendance – nor would the Masonic Restoration Foundation necessarily be in existence.

I applaud each of *you* this evening – *you* are “constructionists” and counted among the men

in American Freemasonry who have committed to the labor required to preserve the intended aim, purpose, and heritage of our honorable institution.

My thanks to my friend and brother Andrew Hammer for the invitation to speak at Harmony this evening, and I wish the Masonic Restoration Foundation, this year’s presenters, and all in attendance, the most successful 2018 symposium.

It is my hope, this presentation, and my comments this evening *fuel constructive thinking* about the critical importance of knowing and understand the *how* and *why* of what came before us.

As Cicero warned – *without knowledge about that which occurred before we were born, is to always be a child*.