

THE UNACQUAINTED

ALL YOU NEED IS MASONIC RITUAL?

John W. Bizzack

Without much instruction, and more exercise no man can be skillful in any art; in like manner without an assiduous application to the various subjects treated in the different lectures of masonry. No person can be sufficiently acquainted with the true value of the institution. ~ **William Preston, 1774**

As American Freemasons, it is time we were making up our minds what it is we have come here to do. If we are here for the noble purpose we once proclaimed so readily, then we must face the sobering fact that our assignment is the improvement of ourselves—not Freemasonry.” **Dwight L. Smith, 1964**

This essay is about origins, but not the origins of Freemasonry. This writing is about the cause and origin of a phrase found in Masonry for at least the past 180 years: *Masonic ignorance*.

Abraham Lincoln was supposedly fond of asking, “If you call a dog’s tail a leg, how many legs does a dog have?”

“Five,” his listeners would invariably answer.

“No,” he would politely respond, “the correct answer is four. *Calling* a tail a leg does not make it a leg.”¹

Like Lincoln’s audiences, who were willing to call a tail a leg, many Masons subscribe to similar thinking: calling all members of the Fraternity Freemasons actually makes them Freemasons.

By the 1890s, a general view in American Freemasonry, held by many who were high in office, but not deep in Masonic knowledge, had taken root. Decisively entrenched in the culture was the belief that the whole curriculum of Masonic science and philosophy was embraced within the narrow limits of the ritual and lectures and that the learning of Masonry could be confined to a mere recital of the ritual and an acquaintance with monitorial lectures. Thus became entrenched the fragile idea that mere exposure to all of our ceremonies and lectures is all that is necessary for a man to not only be entitled to be called a Mason, but to actually *become* a Freemason.

That general view was like the unthinking response often given to Lincoln’s riddle. The generations exposed to what at first may have appeared to be an innocuous abbreviation of learning the science and philosophy of Freemasonry gave rise to the phrase, *Masonic ignorance*. Repeated warnings about the consequences of this

¹ Quote Investigator. <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2015/11/15/legs>, accessed June 2022. (This riddle was in circulation by 1825 when a version was told by the legislator John W. Hulbert as reported in several newspapers. During his presentation Hulbert used the phrase “reminded him of the story” which signaled that he was not the creator of the riddle. Hence, the originator remains unidentified. There is substantive evidence that Abraham Lincoln did employ this comical riddle by 1862, and detailed. But Lincoln was referring to a conundrum that was already in circulation).

abridged approach to Freemasonry began early in the 1800s, but ostensibly fell on many inattentive ears. The concern continued to be voiced, but remained largely ignored.

It requires only a brief tour of the past 179 years of factual history to affirm the cause and origin of Masonic ignorance in the Fraternity.

By the turn of the 20th century, the proposition that “all you need is ritual” was so firmly ingrained in the Masonic culture that it flowed largely unimpeded into the 21st. It would have been virtually impossible for the Fraternity to admit and pass through the degrees an average of 150,000² new members a year during the 1943-1959 membership explosion, had the proposition not become standard practice.

Although widely accepted for generations as the way to construct a Freemason, if we bother to look and examine the consequences, the wisdom of relying on ritual as being all a man needs to become a Freemason is farcical.



A STROLL THROUGH THE HIGHLIGHTS

We do not have to mine the Annual Proceedings of Grand Lodges too deeply to learn that many Grand Masters have been among those who sounded alarms about failing to properly instruct and educate members about Freemasonry beyond exposure to ritual and lectures. This is particularly true of Kentucky Freemasonry, if we bother to look.

From 1843 through 2020, thirty-six Kentucky Grand Masters cautioned, even railed, against that process in their Address to the Craft at the Annual Communication. Often recommendations were made to abate the problem; some Grand Masters took action they believed appropriate to re-calibrate the long-taken course throughout the jurisdiction.³ Unfortunately, for many reasons, no significant, lasting shift from the hardened, embedded process took place, no matter what was recommended.

In 1891, we find the assertion that the Fraternity in general was “accursed” by a large number of so-called “bright Masons,”⁴ whose entire conception of Masonic elevation was limited to the idea of holding some high office. “Studying not themselves,”⁵ these leaders, through their example, dissuaded others from further study. The writer notes that as long as a “Mason be in good standing,” —that is to say, one who pays regularly his

² Masonic Services Association of North America “Membership Totals since 1924,” <http://www.msana.com/msastats.asp>. accessed January 5, 2018.

³ John W. Bizzack. *Canker Worm on the Rose: The Struggle To Find Uniformity In The Observance Of Freemasonry*, BSF Foundation, Lexington, Kentucky, 2023.

⁴ The term “bright Mason” fell out of use in Masonry after the 19th century (Henry W. Coil, *Coil’s Encyclopedia of Freemasonry*, Macoy, 1961. Another term used in the 19th century to refer to those Masons who were not versed in Masonic ritual, lecture, or Masonry in general, was “the lesser lights of Masonry” (William L. Stone, *Letters on Masonry and Anti-Masonry, Addressed to Hon. John Quincy Adams, Hosted*, New York, 1832, also noted in *The Bright Mason: An American Mystery*, Robert Berry, Bookroom, 2008). Other publications: “The Bright Mason,” *The Freemason’s Chronicle*, March 18, 1899, *The Masonic Review*, No. 65, 1886 Henry D. Moore, Louisville, Kentucky, reprinted from the *Florida Herald* we find a writing about what constitutes a “bright Mason, titled, “A Bright Mason.” In *The American Tyler-Keystone*, Volume 29, July 1915, we find another writing, “The Bright Mason.”

⁵ Thomas Piction, “Is Masonic Ignorance Bliss?” *The Masonic Review, A Monthly Magazine for the Craft*, Vol. 74, Henry D. Moore, 1891.

dues, he is “considered a standard” of what was referred to as, “Masonic perfection,” however “ignorant he may exhibit himself about matters regarding Freemasonry.”⁶

The number of members who cannot pass a perfunctory examination that prove they are Masons when visiting a Lodge where they are not known, or who cannot explain more than a couple of symbols on tracing boards that are directly connected to the lessons of Masonry, indicates there is reason to believe the Fraternity remains accursed.

An epoch event had taken place three generations earlier that contributed to accursed status. In 1833, the Grand Lodge of Kentucky shot *itself* in the foot when a paragraph from the original 1802 By Laws was abolished. That paragraph required that Lodge Masters give a lecture about one of the three degrees of Masonry at each stated communication. The Proceedings do not explain why the removal of that paragraph was recommended and then passed. But it has been suggested that in the aftermath of the anti-Masonic years, when Kentucky lost half of its membership and lodges,⁷ the regulation had to be abolished because of the inability of Lodges to comply with it. The reason: there were too few well-versed Masons left to present such lectures.

If that was the case, then we are left to understand that the half of the lost membership were (in the language of the time) “bright Masons,” which left only the ignorant Masons to comply with the By-Law. More likely is that not all “bright Masons” left the Kentucky Lodges at that time, but there just were not enough of them to expect those Lodges still active to comply. That in itself tells us that there were too many Masons who were unacquainted with basic Masonry, and, thus, were unable to step up and fill the void.

Unflattering, however, is the fact that the regulation was never reinstated, even when, ten years later, in 1843, Kentucky had regained its membership losses and added forty-one Lodges to its roster, exceeding the 1826 level.⁸

During those ten years, Lodges enjoyed free reign to marginalize and even eliminate discussions or presentations about Freemasonry at stated communications. Relying on the “all you need is ritual” proposition, Kentucky Freemasonry produced another generation of what Grand Master Rob Morris would call, “semi-manufactured Masons in semi-manufactured Lodges.”⁹

Relying on the “all you need is ritual” proposition, Kentucky Freemasonry produced another generation by 1859 of what Grand Master Rob Morris would call, “semi-manufactured Masons in semi-manufactured Lodges.”

An example of that leeway distracting from the business of Freemasonry is an account of a Kentucky Lodge that had, over the years, drifted from any form of discussion about Freemasonry. According to the minutes of that Lodge, only one notation is found in 29 years that confirms any discussion, instruction, education, or

⁶ *IBID.*

⁷ Rob Morris, *History of Freemasonry in Kentucky and Its Relationship to Symbolic Degree*, Louisville; self-published, 1859. (During the Anti-Masonic years that followed the scandal surrounding the kidnapping of William Morgan by Masons in upstate New York in 1826, six of ten Masons in the United States left their Lodges. Kentucky lost 769 of its 1,538 members and 37 of its 66 Lodges.)

⁸ Annual Proceedings, Grand Lodge of Kentucky, 1843.

⁹ Morris.

presentation about Masonry, other than ritual, at a Stated Communication.¹⁰ Did the Lodge so effectively deliver its ritual and lectures during those years that nothing remained to be added?

By 1873, a Masonic scholar, evidently disgusted by widespread ignorance of Masons about Freemasonry, wrote, “The Mason who does not study the nature, the design, the history and character of the Institution, but from the hour of his initiation neither gives nor receives any ideas [about Masonry] is no more advantage to Freemasonry than Freemasonry is to him.”¹¹ He was onto something that would be further elaborated on in 1915 by another prominent Masonic scholar who would provide the obvious remedy.

Perhaps because his two-volume Encyclopedia of Freemasonry published in 1873 did not widely appeal, and was, presumably, not read, Albert Mackey published an excoriating and stinging essay in late 1875 that has become a timeless classic. In that essay he provides a solid reason for the level of Masonic ignorance in the Craft. He concluded that too many Masons [and their leaders] believed that the Masonic obligation not only made a man a Mason, but a *learned* Mason at the same time. Moreover, that a member “often imagines that the mystical ceremonies which induct him into the Order were all that are necessary to make him cognizant of its principles.”¹² He went on to declare that “The ignorant Mason is a drone and an encumbrance in the Order.”¹³ The unsurprising point that he makes was that too few Masons bother to read and study Freemasonry.

His astute observation at the conclusion of that essay will forever apply: “The ultimate success of Masonry depends on the intelligence of her disciples.”¹⁴

In the years prior to that scolding 1875 essay, the question, “Is ignorance in Masonry a Crime?” was asked of the Fraternity by yet a different scholar.¹⁵ The likelihood is that many did not hear or read about that question because, as noted in Mackey’s 1875 essay, too few Masons bother to read, or study Freemasonry.

We learn that many passed through the degrees, but never participated in Lodge and their ignorance of Masonic knowledge was referred to by the author as a “crime” in Masonry.

Nevertheless, that paper tells us that there were too many drones in the Masonic hive before 1875 whose “negligence was only surpassed by their ignorance [about Masonry].”¹⁶ We learn that many passed through the degrees, but never participated in Lodge and their ignorance of Masonic knowledge was referred to by the author as a “crime” in Masonry. The writer was speaking to the fact that since members, of their own free will and accord, take and shoulder the responsibilities of an obligation and are charged to acquire knowledge (and then practice what us is learned). Failing to uphold that moral obligation to possess oneself of the knowledge that the pledge

demands (much less practice it) makes one guilty of a moral crime.

¹⁰ *A Summarizing History of Lexington Lodge No. 1—1789–2017, Showing the Spirit of the Work in Lexington from 1788–2017*, Lexington: Preservation Committee, John W. Bizzack, Chair and Editor, 2019.

¹¹ Albert G. Mackey, *Encyclopedia of Freemasonry And Its Kindred Sciences*, Moss & Co. and Albert G. Mackey, 1873

¹² *IBID.*

¹³ Mackey.

¹⁴ *IBID.*

¹⁵ John Edwin Mason, “Is Ignorance in Masonry a Crime?” *National Freemason*, 1872.

¹⁶ *IBID.*

We find in the 1840s, three decades before that 1875 expositive essay, that Lodges had already become wholesale makers of Masons. In Kentucky, for example, 280 Lodges were chartered between 1840 and 1859, increasing the membership from 1,300 to close to 10,000 – nearly 500 new Masons each year.¹⁷ By 1866 Kentucky had over 380 Lodges chartered or operating under dispensation with a total of 15,157 members.¹⁸ Three year later, in 1869, membership stood at 20,000, then dropped in 1880 to 15,974. In 1909 the membership in Kentucky was reported at 35,983.¹⁹ Nowhere in the history of Kentucky Freemasonry in these periods do we find a noticeable increase in instruction offered by Lodges beyond ritual or, an observable change from what the 1875 essay noted: too few Masons bothering to read and study Freemasonry. The same applied from 1909 through the 1990s.

We find, too, in 1860, twelve years before that 1875 expositive essay, Lodges had already become wholesale makers of Masons, another reason for Masonic ignorance that was highlighted by Masonic scholars. “I have not the time,” for Freemasonry was the “puerile cry of many a worthy man, who might otherwise become a bright and intelligent Mason.”²⁰ The observer was referring to the now age-old claim that men are just *too busy* for Freemasonry; a claim that would eventually wear itself out in the last decades of the 20th century as it was given so frequently as the rationale (or excuse) by the Fraternity to explain the steadily declining names on membership rosters throughout the United States.

By itself, the assertion was a faulty and weak diagnosis. Never widely examined was an underlying question: what is it about Freemasonry that attracts so many busy men who do not have time for it? Moreover, could it be that such men simply have no time for pursuing Masonry because of the way it is presented or conveyed? Is it remotely possible that what Lodges do — their ambience, and the way they communicate Freemasonry — is not as inspiring to candidates as they may think? Might it be that Lodges have done a poor job of guarding the West Gate were admitted too many who were not suited or qualified for membership? Why have our Lodges routinely admitting too many men who really do not have time or are not interested in engaging, participating, studying, and learning? Is it possible that Lodges are simply not capable of subduing their long-standing, seemingly irrepressible passion to increase its membership rolls under the poorly thought-out notion that bigger is better, and that more members somehow provide a realistic effective measurement of the success of Freemasonry?

In 1889, two years before his death, Albert Pike, reportedly expressed his concern in a letter to British historian and Masonic scholar, Robert Freke Gould (both considered eminent Freemasons then and today) that the requisites for the perpetuity of mainstream American Freemasonry were, at the time, questionable.²¹ We have not learned the context of that reported statement, but Pike, whose Masonic career spanned over forty years, would certainly have observed the changes in the Fraternity, its members and leaders, prior to, during, and following the Civil War, and through the early years of the Age of Fraternalism. It would be difficult to put forth evidence without that letter that he was not talking about the level of Masonic ignorance in the Craft. As Masonry entered the 20th century, the hangover from the “all you need is ritual” proposition continued and the Fraternity continued to suffer.

¹⁷ Grand Lodge of Kentucky Annual Proceedings, 1840-1859.

¹⁸ Charles Snow Guthrie, *Kentucky Freemasonry 1788-1978 And The Men Who Made It*, Grand Lodge of Kentucky, 1981.

¹⁹ The Grand Lodge of Kentucky Annual Proceedings from 1920-1990 report: 60,021 members and 600 lodges in 1920; 60,750 members and 579 lodges in 1930; 42,348 members and 508 lodge in 1940; 81,936 members and 470 lodges in 1950; in 1960, 100,643 members and 469 lodges' 1970, 99,275 members and 472 lodges in 1980, and 80,059 members and 456 lodges in 1990.

²⁰ Charles M. Moore, “Application and Lethargy Contrasted,” *The Masonic Review*, 22, Cincinnati, Moore, 1860.

²¹ William H. Upton, “A Plea for the Teachings of Freemasonry,” in L.S. Myler, ed., *Jewels of Masonic Oratory*, (Akron, OH: self-published, 1898.

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W e learn that in 1903 a problem identified in the early decades of the 1800s was still being experienced. The first line of that writing declares: “Masonic ignorance is inexcusable.”²² The concern was that the special requirement that a candidate be advanced from one degree to another only after he is able, in open examination in the Lodge, to prove that he has learned the lessons of the proceeding degree, was being “overlooked.”²³ The writer also called a Master’s failure to enforce the requirement a “crime” and called for “Schools of Instruction” in the Lodge, requiring every member to attend and participate.²⁴ While this was believed a remedy and some Grand Jurisdictions adopted a form of the idea, it was more than a century too late and continued to attack the problem from the wrong end: after men were raised as Master Masons. And since most of the “schools” put into place did not mandate attendance, those who may have benefited from it most were not always the members who participated. Today, the concept continues but no valid research as to its effectiveness is known to exist. Regardless, there is no valid argument that Schools of Instruction are not needed.

In 1915, after only one year of publication of what is considered by many reading Masons as the finest American Masonic journal ever published, the editor of *The Builder* recognized that educating Masons beyond ritual was of little interest to the majority of members *after* they were raised as Master Masons. Although successful, the number of subscriptions to the magazine in the United States was insignificant when compared to the number of Masons in the country at the time. Joseph Fort Newton went on to write that “books, journals, and Research Societies could never do the thing that needed to be done.”²⁵

The opposition to replacing the “all you need is ritual” approach proved insurmountable. Although some subordinate lodges made advances using the concept he proposed, the progress was, in scale, hardly a drop in the bucket.

Newton saw that the problem of Masonic ignorance had to be attacked from the right end: grounding men in the history, philosophy and symbolism of Freemasonry *as they move through the degrees* — abandoning the expectation that ritual alone will afterward spur members to advance in their Masonic knowledge.²⁶ He also believed that such men, properly equipped and engaged as they pass through degrees, would be less likely to later drift away from Freemasonry. His idea led to a curriculum that he proposed to Grand Jurisdictions. The obstacle that had to be overcome was convincing jurisdictions to adopt such a dramatic diversion from that which the culture was accustomed. The opposition to replacing the “all you need is ritual” approach proved

²² “Masonic Ignorance,” *Masonic Standard*, Vol. VIII, No.8, New York, January 1903. (attributed reprint of the *Palestine Bulletin*. The following is taken from A.G. Pitts, Secretary of Palestine Lodge, Detroit, Michigan, The Large Lodge Question, published in *Builder Magazine*, August 1919, Vol, 5., No. 8. “The Palestine Bulletin, a twenty-page monthly which also has an international reputation and which while primarily reporting the activities of Palestine Lodge has frequently printed original articles equal to the best of Masonic literature anywhere. Reported was that “Lodge will hail her plan and system as a new and useful invention, the harbinger of a new era in American Masonry, the remedy for the worst faults of American Masonry.”

²³ *IBID.*

²⁴ *IBID.*

²⁵ Joseph Fort Newton, *The Builders*, Grand Lodge of Iowa, First Printing, 1914.

²⁶ *IBID.*

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In 1924, William L. Wilmshurst, another Masonic luminary who explained that Freemasonry “undeniably suffered” because of the “ignorance” of its members with respect to the true principles of Masonry.”²⁷ He wrote that the Fraternity had “become debased and overrun with members lacking alike the intellectuality, the temperament, and the desire to appreciate those principles.”²⁸ Widely respected, then and today, this author may have been the first to write about the effect that resulted from the Fraternity’s obsession with growth and the rapid escalation of membership. The clarity of his reasoning emerged later in the 20th century, and tied back to Mackey’s 1875 essay that revealed that Masons in that era, too, were not academically inclined in their daily lives; and that they were more often driven by the acquisition of titles and baubles, personal aggrandizement, and recognition within the confines of the Fraternity that had also shifted in the professional quality of membership.

In 1925, William H. Gallagher, a widely known Episcopal Priest and Grand Chaplain of the Grand Lodge of Michigan, authored an article in which he employed a catchy metaphor to describe “a shameful neglect no brother can successfully deny.”²⁹ He wrote about the ignorance he encountered from Masons with little or no instruction or education about Freemasonry and gave plenty of examples. He said the majority of Masons were like eating apple dumplings without the sauce: *an only half prepared and incomplete dish*. He summarized his writing saying, “For nearly a century, the Institution of Masonry has neglected its devotees. There was little thought given to the equally necessary qualification—growth in knowledge [and] consequently, individual jurisdictions are responsible for the wide-spread ignorance of the great mass of Masons concerning the history, ritual, symbolism, philosophy, and underlying principles of our beloved Order.”³⁰ He went on to say that, “After ten, fifteen or nearly a lifetime of years in the Order, there are brothers who know no more of the history, ritual, symbolism philosophy and underlying principles of Masonry than they did when they were raised to the sublime degree. Nor is it hardly their fault! The Lodges have devised no plan to awaken the desire for knowledge, nor satisfy that desire when aroused.”³¹

It might be argued that the absence of many writings about the condition of American Freemasonry during the years of The Great Depression and World War II was because of those two world-changing events. It may be argued too, that the Fraternity in that era did not produce members who were interested in examining much of Freemasonry and sharing it with others in the Craft. Regardless, we also see that phenomenon manifest again in the 1960s.



²⁷ W.L. Wilmshurst. *The Masonic Initiation* (Wilmshurst’s sequel to *The Meaning of Masonry*), Percy Lund, Humphries & Co. Ltd. 1924.

²⁸ *IBID.*

²⁹ William H. Gallagher, “Apple Dumpling Without,” *Masonic News*, Detroit Masonic Temple, Vol. VI, No. 1, January 1925.

³⁰ *IBID.*

³¹ *IBID.*

Historians interested in learning about the condition of the Fraternity in the middle of the 20th century can start with two early 1960s essays by Past Grand Master of Indiana, Dwight L. Smith.

Smith submitted for publication in the *Indiana Freemason Magazine*, a critical article to be followed by ten chapters. It was *Whither Are We Traveling?* Within a matter of weeks his barking proved he had a varmint or two treed. The reaction throughout the Masonic world was convincing evidence that he was not alone in his beliefs.³²

In 1964, Smith published, *Why This Confusion at the Temple?* This booklet was about the decline of Freemasonry in America and how to rebuild it. The work reads as if it was examining what we find in Freemasonry today. His questions and observations are as valid in 2022 as they were when he wrote them, perhaps more so, given the current atmosphere within Freemasonry concerning 70 years of steadily declining membership. Smith's universal answer to the problems of Freemasonry as an institution was to "Try Freemasonry." That is, return the Fraternity to its most basic tenets, strip it of its innovations, and get back to the business of concentrating on making men better, one man and Mason at a time.

Smith's work may be the hardest hitting of all previous writers, including those not noted in this essay. In *Why This Confusion at the Temple?* he writes: "At the risk of offending some of my friends, I submit that in American Freemasonry today too many fertile minds are having too many bright ideas. And those bright ideas--if we can dignify them by calling them bright--bear little or no evidence of a sense of purpose or direction. It is as if each workman were attempting to take the place of the Master Builder and making a sorry job of it. If taken seriously and followed to their logical conclusion, they would indeed mark the beginning of the end of Speculative Freemasonry in the United States."

"As American Freemasons it is time we were making up our minds what it is we have come here to do. If we are here for the noble purpose we once proclaimed so readily, then we must face the sobering fact that our assignment is the improvement of ourselves—not Freemasonry."

He continued to describe how Masons are "working overtime devising stunts to 'modernize' Freemasonry, to put it in line with ten thousand other organizations that clamor for the attention of the Tribal American." He referred to these stunts as "gimmicks" but went on to note they were more than that, and described them as Prescriptions of the Masonic Medicine men. He goes on to list ten prescriptions that he viewed as mere "gimmicks," putting them to the acid test through the following questions: "Does the prescription comply with the fundamental usages, customs, philosophy and purpose of Ancient Craft Freemasonry, or would it necessitate a change in the character of our Craft which would make it something other than Freemasonry?" None of the "prescriptions" pass the test, so he warns, "We better think it through."

His straight-talk approach pin-points each issue that has unseated Masonry in the eyes of the public and outlines the reasons the Fraternity was unable to retain the majority of the members it had admitted. In short, he took no

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³² Dwight L. Smith, *Whither are we Traveling?* Foreword by W. Jack Estill, Managing Editor, The Indiana Freemason, Indiana Masonic Home Printing Center, Franklin, Indiana.

prisoners and gave no quarter to legions of members and their leaders who were Masonically ignorant, asserting that not only do Master Masons need to be shocked, but they need to be shocked often. Smith poignantly points out that “As American Freemasons it is time we were making up our minds what it is we have come here to do. If we are here for the noble purpose we once proclaimed so readily, then we must face the sobering fact that our assignment is the improvement of ourselves—not Freemasonry.”

In balanced consideration of where the Fraternity is sixty years after Smith’s publications, careful reasoning tells us that we have fallen prey to the pitfalls Smith outlined.



Never completely recognizing or accepting any culpability for the relentless annual decline in members from 1959 through today, the Fraternity showed signs for the next 40 years of an organization managing decline. Standards and qualifications for admittance were lowered. The long-standing no-solicitation rule was skirted as much as dared. Despite targeted efforts, Lodge attendance and participation continued to drop along with the once enjoyed high stature of the Fraternity in the eye of the public. Although men were still knocking on the door for admittance, Lodges proved unable to add members as fast as they were being lost.

A long-standing notion was persistently battered in those decades. The stance that high membership was a measurement of the success of Freemasonry and the effectiveness of the Fraternity administering it was no longer a leading boast by many members and leaders; now the situation was reversed.

As the toll of membership losses ate away at the image of Masonry and its coffers, one of the more spectacular and bold moves emerged: orchestrating One-Day Classes where men could be moved through all three degrees and be called Freemasons in the shortest amount of time possible.

Promoted as a way for “busy men” to still have an opportunity to become members was evidence of employment of very fragile logic. The “men are busier these days” excuse was one of the primary explanations the Fraternity and its leaders had been giving for decades to explain why, after being made Master Mason, so few members participated in the life and care of their Lodges, or pursued Masonry.

As would be determined by valid research in 2021, the thousands of members admitted and made Master Masons through One-Day Classes showed no more improvement in retention than did making members the customary way.³³ Thus, this strategy to admit as many as possible into the ranks in one day, and the hope that all will learn more about Freemasonry

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³³ Mikel J. Stoops, “Masonic Retention: A Matter of Value,” The Rubicon Masonic Society Virtual Education Series, *21st Century Conversations About Freemasonry*, October 29, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4UBdbv9J84>, accessed October 2022.

(Stoops, Past Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Kansas, used 25 years of membership data and found the following: 66% of One-Day participants dropped out of Masonry. 60% of C2A participants (2 degrees in one day) dropped out of Masonry. 49% of Standard Path participants dropped out of Masonry. (still a horrible retention rate). It is 2.5X more likely for C2A or One-Day participants to drop out within the first 12 months. It is 13% more likely within the first 5 years for C2A or One-Day participants to drop. Even after 22 years as a Master Mason, it is two times more likely for C2A or One-Day participants to drop. 2.5X less likely for C2A or One-Day participant to serve as Master of their Lodge.)

after they are raised as Master Masons proved no different than the regular way, except for a couple of things. One, is that after admitting hundreds at a time in a one-year period, leaders were able to return to promoting the notion that higher numbers *is* a measurement of success of their jurisdiction. Two, One-Day Classes resulted in an immediate financial infusion into the coffers.



By the 1990s, writing on the subject of Freemasonry slowly began to appear in the academic world and what few academic writings that previously existed, re-emerged.³⁴ Factual history was slowly taking the place of the romantic and imagined versions created largely by Masons. Old and new voices from within the Masonic ranks became more thoughtful in their writings about Masonry. A crack in the granite-hard culture that had formed around the “all you need is ritual” concept, was observable, albeit small.

A few forward-thinking members emerged and shared their views through a new communication platform that had not been available to any earlier forward thinkers: The Internet. This platform helped awaken and increasingly arouse the desire of many for knowledge. The Internet offered a way to satisfy that desire.

Connecting faster with Masonic audiences -- even in the then primitive platform of the Internet of the 1990s -- accelerated the widening of the crack in the hardened culture, and by the end of the first decade of the 2000s it was clear that the work of the early forward thinkers, particularly Dwight L. Smith, was sinking in.

Thirty-years after their initial appearance, in the largely non-reading world of Masonry, it was doubtful if many Masons had ever heard of Smith much less his two timely and important essays. But Smith’s work was made new again in the early 2000s because its concerns continued to ring true. Moreover, his recommendations stood out as valid solutions as well.

An extended paper in 2006 that was widely disseminated anonymously in Masonic chat rooms, forums, and elsewhere online, brought Smith back to the attention of a new generation of Masons. Titled, *Laudable Pursuit: A 21st Century Response to Dwight Smith* and written by more than a dozen authors calling themselves the “Knights of the North,” the publication became both notorious and praised throughout Fraternity. Crafted out of Internet conversations held between 2003 through 2004, *Laudable Pursuit* was based on Smith's 1960s collected essays and explored modern answers to the vexing questions posed by Smith that had largely gone unaddressed by the American fraternity in the decades since they were published.



During the final decade of the 20th century and into the first two decades of the next, many Masons were awakened to the names and works of William Preston, Cornelius Moore, W. L. Wilmshurst, Joseph Fort Newton, Roscoe Pound, *The Builder Magazine*, Harry Carr, H.L. Haywood, Henry W. Coil, Ray V. Denslow, Bruce H. Hunt, the Baltimore Convention of 1843, certainly Dwight L. Smith, the research of Quatuor Coronati Lodge No. 2076, and a host of other important past constructive contributors to Freemasonry.

³⁴ Lynn Duminel, *Freemasonry and American Culture, 1880-1930*. Princeton Legacy, 1984, Margaret Jacobs, *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, Oxford Univ. Press, 1991, Douglas Knoop, G.P. Jones, *The Genesis of Freemasonry: An Account of the Rise and Development of Freemasonry in its Operative, Accepted, and Early Speculative Phases*, Manchester University Press, 1947. John Morris Roberts, “Freemasonry: Possibilities of a Neglected Topic,” *The English Historical Review* 84, no. 331, 1969, Frances A. Yates, *Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, New York, Routledge, 1972, David Stevenson, *The Origins of Freemasonry*, Cambridge University Press, 1988.

Leaving their footprint on a new generation and into the next with presentations, writings and research, was a new corps of Masonic authors and scholars, the constructive influence of which cannot be understated. Among those in this category of new voices, heard by serious-minded Masons, we find, Pierre G. 'Pete' Normand, S. Brent Morris, Arturo de Hoyos, Robert G. Davis, John Mauk Hilliard, L.L. Walker, Jr., Jerry Marsengill, Richard E. Fletcher, Michael R. Poll, John M. Hamill, George Peter, Christopher L. Hodapp, Robert L.D. Cooper, Alexander Piatigorsky, Shawn Eyer, Jasper Ridley, Van P. "Mac" McAnulty, Rex R. Hutchens, David Stevenson, Tony Pope, Peter Taylor, Ric Berman, Charles Porset, Richard A. Graeter, Mark A. Tabbert, James T. Tresner II, Walter M. Callaway, Michael J. Stoops, Nelson King, Jack Black Vrooman, Julian Reese, Thomas W. Jackson, and significantly, Andrew Hammer, again to name only a few on a now regularly expanding list.

The late Thomas W. Jackson, one of the most well-known and traveled Masons in the world, delivered one of his literally hundreds of addresses to the Grand Lodge of Canada in the province of Ontario at their Grand Lodge Communication in 2011. He delivered an updated version of the address to The Rubicon Masonic Society, Heritage Observance Night, in Lexington, Kentucky in 2016. The presentation was titled, *Looking to the Future*.

He began his address, "Before going further, my brothers, let me clarify and emphasize that when I speak of ignorance, it does not mean stupidity; it means a lack of Masonic knowledge."

Jackson went on to capture the ill-effects of the "all you need is ritual" process. Below are excerpts:

There can be no question but that we sold North American Freemasonry far more cheaply than probably any other Grand Jurisdiction in the world.

With all of the changes that we have made in North America to alter the image of the Craft and to change the direction that we have been traveling, we have done precious little to educate our membership and thus, we remain the most ignorant Freemasons in the world, and we have done little to alter *that* fact.

There is no one factor upon which to place the blame for the ongoing decline of the interest in Freemasonry in North America but there can be no question concerning the lack of an educational commitment as being a major contributing factor. How can we possibly expect there to be an interest in an organization in which so few of the membership itself even knows what we are or our purpose. For the last thirty-five years, very few major programs conducted by the leadership in North American Freemasonry have been for programs other than to increase numbers or to raise monies to give away to charity.

One glaring feature about the Freemasonry as it is practiced in most of the rest of the world is that their members are required to learn. The acquisition of knowledge as has been universally professed in our Craft has not become a lost art as we have made it in North America. I find nothing in our Freemasonry to compare with the stimulus for intellectual discussion that tends to permeate Freemasonry in most of the world. Sadly, this lack of challenge to our members tends to diminish the intellectual quality for which Freemasonry has been historically known. As a result, we have lost much of our allure to a segment of society that structured and gave Freemasonry its societal image.

Regretfully, today only a relatively small percentage of our members truly understand the significance of the purpose of the Craft. They may understand the words, but words are simply words. Understanding must transcend the words and today this may be the greatest failure on

the part of North American Freemasonry. Unless we understand the meaning of the words how can we possibly understand the purpose for which we exist?

My friends, in the name of political correctness today we live in a society where our leaders feel that everyone should have the same as everyone else regardless of initiative or ability. We live in an environment that rewards mediocrity so well that there is little incentive to rise above it. We live in a society that desperately needs a stimulus to excel beyond the norm. We live in a society that needs an infusion of civility and logic into our lives.



IN CONCLUSION

Joseph Fort Newton, one of the few true Masonic scholars in the early 20th century, would certainly agree that although there have been advances (at least in some circles) in Masonic education, it is still, in scale, *hardly a drop in the bucket*. Although some advances have taken place and some minds have changed about the effectiveness of the “all you need is ritual” concept, much of the Fraternity continues the practice, admitting as many men as possible through a West Gate that seems to have just been propped open.

In addition to that long-standing problem, the Fraternity today faces a new predicament with a broader scope of uncertainty than it has in the past. The slow but steady unmooring by the larger society from the values of the Age of Enlightenment that underpins Masonry’s lessons, threatens to make the pool of qualified candidates shallower than ever before. Of course, the quest for instant gratification is greater today than in the past, so the “all you need is ritual” concept will continue to appeal to some in today’s generation and future generations.

No matter. We find an irony in that while Lodges cannot control the outcome of a man’s journey into and through Masonry, they are completely in control of the effort that produces the outcome: perpetuation of Masonic ignorance or development of bright Masons.

The good that Freemasonry has done in the world is not in question. The work that Masons do in many Lodges that only produce “semi-manufactured Masons” remains the core of the problem. Imagine for a moment the constructive result if, Fraternity-wide, men were uniformly and consistently grounded in the

No matter, we find an irony in that while Lodges cannot control the outcome of a man’s journey into and through Masonry, they are one-hundred percent in control of the effort that produces the outcome and that too is what contributes to either the perpetuation of Masonic ignorance or development of bright Masons.

history, philosophical depth, and symbolism of Freemasonry as they are moved more slowly through the degrees with a required, fundamentally appropriate curriculum beyond the ritual, and with qualified members to instruct them. To those who might claim that approach cannot work better, the response can only be, Have you actually tried it?

It is not difficult for well-versed Masons, those who may have experienced “all you need is ritual” but who continued to pursue and advance their knowledge of Freemasonry anyway, to immediately grasp the reality that the right end from which to attack Masonic ignorance is to properly explore Freemasonry with candidates as they pass through degrees, and not rush the process. But again, qualified instructors are vital.

Those who continue to believe that the “all you need is ritual” and the on-the-job training style approach to learning about Freemasonry works in the best interest of the Fraternity, may want to re-read this paper, pick up a few books about Masonry and devote some time to study them. A visit to Lodges around the United States that have abandoned that practice (and other similar unproductive, passed-down practices) and then speaking with men who have experienced well-designed, structured learning as they pass through degrees, would prove enlightening.

No matter what has been, or will be produced by the abbreviated and adulterated way of making members, the power of the *idea* of Freemasonry will endure and will continue at the hands of many men of varied minds and talent. The condition of much of the Fraternity in the past stands as a reminder that to move beyond where much of it has languished for decades, a doctrinal shift in the way Masonry is conveyed and a way to inspire its votaries is necessary to establish an effective offensive against Masonic ignorance.

Some believe improving the way the West Gate is guarded accomplishes that particularly when implemented alongside a strict adherence to the practice of progressive lines of leadership. Others believe that all that is necessary is more members or advancing the profile of the Fraternity to the public as an organization whose primary purpose is public charity. Seemingly always present are those who believe social activities are the answer: more picnics, fundraisers, sponsoring community events, conferring fun and side degrees, banners, advertising, and mass raisings. These events, they somehow believe, counters Masonic ignorance.

If the majority of members concur with those beliefs, then they will persist. And such persistence proves the axiom that *we learn from history that we do not learn from history*.³⁵

The only hope for a doctrinal change that can become an effective offensive against Masonic ignorance though, rests with the annual ballot box and the commitment by and from elected leaders to the required continuity of leadership that is willing to mount and maintain the offensive.

Dwight Smith told us in 1964 that “As American Freemasons it is time we were making up our minds what it is we have come here to do. If we are here for the noble purpose we once proclaimed so readily, then we must face the sobering fact that our assignment is the improvement of ourselves—not Freemasonry.”

He also noted that if all the prescriptions for what ails the Fraternity do not comply with the fundamental usages, customs, philosophy and purpose of Ancient Craft Freemasonry, we are not practicing Freemasonry. The “ritual is all you need” is outside compliance.

As Smith cautioned in 1964, we had better think it through.



³⁵ K. Rosenkranz and G. S. Hall, “Hegel's Phenomenology Of Mind,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 6, No. 1, Penn State University Press. January 1972. (the axiom is attributed to German philosopher Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831).

CODA

As well instructed Masons know, the beehive is a symbol on the most well-known tracing boards produced in the mid-1800s.

The image appears on the Master Mason board as an emblem of industry and recommends the practice of that virtue. It teaches that as we come into the world rational and intelligent beings, so we should ever be industrious ones. In the early lectures of William Preston in the later decades of the 18th century, the beehive also served as a caution against intellectual laziness.

There is no charge that accompanies the beehive symbol in Freemasonry, but if there was one to be used, the following charge would be recommended by many well-versed Masons. Although reading like many of the early writings in Freemasonry, the charge was actually written in 2020 by Shawn Eyer.

THE BEEHIVE CHARGE

Extend no token to the ruthless hand of ignorance. Labor at a safe distance from those who desire unearned wages and any who daub with mortar untempered. Sincerity and plain dealing distinguish the true Entered Apprentice, the arts and sciences the engaged Fellow Craft, and unfeigned piety the honest and worthy Master Mason. Seek those qualities out and be cautious when you do not observe them in the character of one who wears our apron. Reflect further that, where silence and circumspection are not, those things that silence and circumspection are intended to preserve and guard will never be found. Though we are all imperfect ashlar, endeavor to befriend brothers who will truly meet you on the Level and who strive to make their lives actually reflect the teachings of Freemasonry. Do not become overly entangled in the machinations of those who have elected not to take the wise truths of our Art seriously. Have compassion for them and know that ones like this have always gathered near us—for even the earliest brethren wrote admonitions regarding them, both in their literature and in the very ceremonies themselves. Wish all men well, but remember the hourglass, and focus resolutely on that which you came here to do. There is no shortage of work in this Temple. Our labor is not to be concerned with the recumbent drone, but to gather what is scattered so that the hive will have honey, and the lodge greater Light.³⁶

³⁶ Shawn Eyer, *The Beehive Lecture*, 2020. (This lecture was written by Shawn Eyer, Past Master of Academia Lodge No. 847, Oakland, California. He researches the history, ritual, iconography, symbolism, philosophy, and praxis of Freemasonry. He has lectured widely at both academic conferences and Masonic symposia and considered an expert in the early text and literature of Freemasonry. He is the author of dozens of articles on the subject and is the editor of *Ahiman: A Review of Masonic Culture and Tradition*, and of *Philaethes*, North College, and Harvard University. He resides in the Washington, D.C., area, where he is the Director Marketing and Communications Professional with special interest in applying AR&VR technologies to cultural institutions at the George Washington Masonic National Memorial.