

TURNING POINT

The Uncresting of American Freemasonry



When the Story of
American Freemasonry
Turned Into the Story
of Managed Decline

John W. Bizzack, Ph.D



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John W. Bizzack, Ph.D.

Is there an event in the history of American Freemasonry that will clearly mark the time that future historians will consider the turning point — a moment when the fraternity began to clearly transition as an organization that managed decline more than its historical intent?

Counting the grains of sand on a beach may be easier than counting the number of conversations among Masons since the early 1960s about the relentless decline of membership in the fraternity. Perhaps equal to such a task would be counting the opinions expressed since then that offered explanations behind the spectacular steadiness of the drop.

It may be argued that we can find specific times in the factual history of American Freemasonry when many of its members and leaders failed to take into account the importance of situational awareness (simply knowing what is going on around you). A close examination of the period from the 1940s through 1959, coupled with the actions (or lack thereof) and the consequences that followed over the next 60 years, wins hands down in the category called, Scarcity of Situational Awareness.

Now, some may say it is easier to analyze and evaluate situations when we are looking back on them in the past than when we are in the present moment — and that there is no such thing as *perfect vision*. There is, however, a thing called *corrected vision*. That usually comes from learning the lessons (good and bad) that stem from such hindsight. When a person or an organization has not practiced much introspection, or exercised situational awareness to start with, then, yes, it is easier to analyze and evaluate situations. As the more time that passes, the more conspicuous it becomes there was a lack of self-examination at particular time. Thus, we find the organization of American Freemasonry.

This writing is not about the specific details in the increases and declines of the fraternity's membership since it first appeared in the colonies. An abundance of information can be found in other writing dating back to the mid-1850s through 2020; along with detailed accounts as to *why* Masons began to pay less attention to the Craft's historical intent, and how membership statistics alone only measure the number of men who sought, for whatever the reason, the mysteries of Freemasonry.

My interest is in not only seeking factual answers as to *why* American Freemasonry is what it is today, but to also determine when the fraternity began to react to its lack of situational awareness and when its outward appearing vitality was devitalized.

EXAMINING SITUATIONAL CAUSES

Identifying the *why, what, when, where, and how* is an ambitious undertaking but has been often tackled by many Masonic writers. Since the latter part of the 20th century, academics and sociologists too have become more interested in examining the phenomena of Freemasonry, and its effect on the world. There is a slowly growing literature from their research and analysis, as well as conjecture, from both camps.

Well-documented, intriguing, and fact-based articles, presentations, commentaries, valid research, and personal observations exist today about what seems to be every possible topic related to Freemasonry. Few, however, do more than touch upon what effect external influences have on the makeup of the membership and their understanding of the purpose of

Freemasonry. External influences (or situational causes) have much more to do with the course of American Freemasonry than one may think, while internal influences (the makeup of membership, leadership, practices, processes, and interpretation of the purpose of the fraternity) consistently appear to be more of a consequence of the external influence.

Given the fact that the Institution of Freemasonry depends on the external society in which it exists to fuel its membership, it follows that the aspects of Freemasonry, when stirred at widely separated times by men of different abilities and purposes, and without the collaboration one might expect if all worked toward a common goal, would change. Furthermore, it becomes clearer that Freemasonry is a development rather than a creation, and the work of many hands. With those varying hands, each with a different touch and made up of many minds of varying talents, why would we believe the result would be anything other than what has occurred from time to time, and from place to place? ¹

As Freemasonry unfolded in America, the Institutions surrounding it have done well or poorly according to the talents of its members to care for it. ² When situational awareness is not part of

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¹ Coil, Henry W. *Conversations on Freemasonry*, Macoy, 1976. 5. (The Henry Wilson Coil Library & Museum of Freemasonry in San Francisco is named after noted Masonic author Henry Wilson Coil, Sr., the author of eight books on Freemasonry including Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia (1961).

² *Ibid.*

the regimen of the organization's regular care and practice, what we find is American Freemasonry today.

Linking *situational causes* in context— examining an organization's actions according to the situation that they are in— offers penetrating insight and helps identify patterns of the internal behavior of the fraternity's organization in response.

When considering situational causes, it is important to factor in the wisdom that if one's premise is not based on context and fact, one's conclusions will be wrong.

The premise that Freemasonry, and the organizations that surround it, seems to have become more irrelevant to the public today because of shrinking membership cannot be looked at with balance until we consider not only the consequences of the Institution's rigid devotion to the status quo when it comes to its management and leadership, but also changes that have occurred in the world just since the 1950s.

While I have long realized that membership numbers must play an ancillary role in finding a particular time and event that can tell us what marked (*when*) a change in the course of American Freemasonry in the 20th Century, it was not until I had lengthy discussions during the long months of the 2020 pandemic with Dan Kemble, Past Master of the William O. Ware Lodge of Research in Kentucky, that the dots marking social and cultural changes in the world, not just inside Freemasonry, were better connected. Our discussions made it clearer how external situational causes slowly triggered the internal behavior of the fraternity.

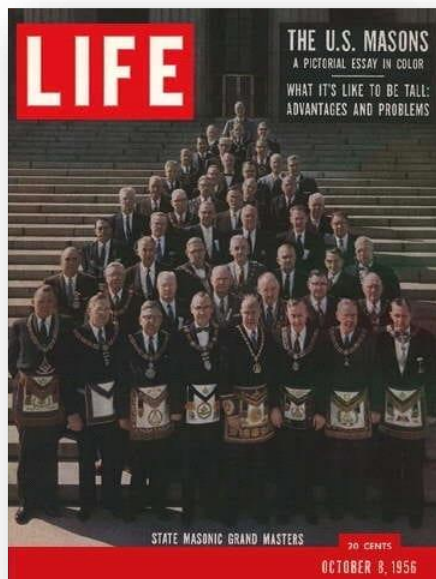
We know that one of the most tumultuous and divisive decades in world history was the 1960s. Marked by the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War and antiwar protests, political assassinations and the emerging "generation gap, those years dramatically and irrevocably changed America. The unraveling of the dominant national consensus in that decade laid bare a far more fragmented society, as various groups resisted the status quo and fought for what they believed to be a more equitable society.

It follows that the decade, and its bleed over influences into the next 50 years, would also change Freemasonry (as an organization), since it draws its membership and much of its cultural attitudes from the larger society in which it exists. Instead of the fraternity being restocked with members during that time who were seeking change, and who might influence the course by reimagining the structure and purpose of Freemasonry as an organization, men simply stayed away — and did so equally to the steady loss of members for the next two (and heading into three) generations. Most of those admitted into the ranks in the 1960s and through the end of the century were more influenced by the existing rigid devotion to the status quo and its practices. The 1990s saw more men admitted who were searching and expecting more than what they found in their lodges. That began to excuse the distinct differences more clearly between what is often thought of today as *Mainstream Freemasonry*, and those who have become thought of as a group of *heritage seekers*. That group, although significantly smaller in membership around the nation, continues to exist and draws more men who are like-minded in their pursuit of Freemasonry.

The handwringing over what seemed unstoppable losses in membership led to the stumbling search for quick fixes that might reverse, or at least stabilize, the losses and consequences. As the fraternity entered the 1990s, it was clear the majority of Institution was stuck in a proverbial rut and was “out of touch” with American’s changing society.³

THE EVENT THAT MARKS THE TRANSITION: THE LAST HURRAH

Recently, I was looking at covers of LIFE Magazine.⁴ The 10.5 x 14-inch magazine was an unusual size for publications of the period, and that size contributed to making it become the first all-photographic American news magazine to dominate the market for several decades, selling more than 13.5 million copies a week at one point in its 91-year run. A pioneer in photojournalism and one of the major forces in that field’s development, today, the covers alone are treasured photographs of people and events that chronicle the 20th Century.



LIFE used a motto in their publishing. It read, “To see the world, things dangerous to come, to see behind walls, to draw closer, to find each other, to see, and to feel.” That is the purpose of *life* [sic].⁵ The motto struck me as being analogous to the purpose of Freemasonry in the past, present and future.

In the October 8, 1956, issue, the cover of LIFE showed the Grand Masters of all 48 Grand Lodges jurisdictions in America at the time. The feature article was titled, *The U.S. Masons: A Pictorial Essay in Color*.⁶

It was the first and last time Freemasonry would appear on the cover of the popular magazine. In 1959, American Freemasonry membership crested at an all-time high of 4,103,161. Freemasonry has not boasted

³ Masonic Renewal Task Force Reports: Phase I Research (Attitudes of Non-Masons towards joining organizations such as Freemasonry.); Phase II Research (Attitudes of Masons toward Freemasonry), produced by, Barton-Gillet Co. of Baltimore, & Opinion Research Corporation, Published by Masonic Service Association, 1989. Singer, Robert. *How Do Non-Masons and Masons View Freemasonry?* Presentation to The Conference of Grand Masters of North America, Salt Lake City, Utah, February 1990.

⁴ Life Magazine was an American magazine published weekly from 1883 to 1972, as an intermittent "special" until 1978, and as a monthly from 1978 until 2000. During its golden age from 1936 to 1972, Life was a wide-ranging weekly general interest magazine known for the quality of its photography.

⁵ Adopted from James Thurber's first short story "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty", first published in The New Yorker on March 18, 1939, Walter James Mitty is a fictional character, who says: To see the world, things dangerous to come to, to see behind walls, to draw closer, to find each other, to see and be amazed and to feel.". Life Magazine adopted the quote as its motto. In Thurber's book, Mitty worked as an asset's manager at Life Magazine. The quote is about taking risks, seeing the world, and being involved with the world. It serves as an inspiration not only to the employees of the magazine, but to Walter in particular, who takes its message to heart.

⁶ Grand Master of Kentucky, Fred Layman, at that time, is featured front row, fourth from left.

about membership since, and for good reason; it has progressively declined over each of the 62 years that followed.

The 1956 LIFE Magazine cover was not the *what* I was looking for, however, it may be considered the prelude to the *when*; the point in time that tells us the year American Freemasonry was publicly acknowledged in this way and in such a platform: the last hurrah.

Since the 1960s, the Institution of American Freemasonry has simply not held the interest of, nor enjoyed the perceived prestige it once had with, the public. As interest shrank, so did the pool of potential candidates, despite the watering down of qualifications for admittance that were thought, at the time, to make the Institution and Freemasonry itself more attractive (and membership easier obtain) to potential candidates.

We find reasons for that lack of interest by examining *situational causes* – those events taking place in our national society that provide us with the context needed to explain the loss of interest, thus decline. One thing that an examination of external situational cause does not offer, however, is an explanation of the reasons that the fraternity failed to look inside itself to see whether what it was doing from the 1950s and 1960s, and through today, as an organization (processes, practices, management, and leadership), may have affected its own decline as well.

The long-standing, rigid devotion to the status quo for which most members and their leadership is known certainly plays into those reasons. Afterall, how could an organization that gained 1,541,317 members in 16 years be thought of as anything other than wildly successful?

One would think that somewhere during those 16 years the organization would have looked closely at what such a rapid influx of members who were rushed through degrees might produce in the long run.

Past Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Indiana, Dwight L. Smith, thought about that question. He wrote about it in 1962 in a feature appearing in Indiana Freemasonry. He wrote:

... there is a tapering off of the membership curve and a dearth of interest. Ill-gotten gains of the nineteen-forties [and nineteen-fifties] are not holding up. Once we rushed men through the degrees with reckless abandon; now they are not lining up to be loaded onto the conveyor belt. Temples that were humming with activity in the 'forties are quiet as a tomb in the 'sixties. Then our Lodge rooms and banquet halls were filled to overflowing with Master. Masons on just about every occasion; now we have to bring in the ladies and children to get a crowd large enough to justify the expense of opening the building. Our sins are catching up with us. We have found that there is such a thing as Masonic inflation as well as inflation of the currency; that the penalty of Masonic inflation is Masonic devaluation —and that the penalty must be paid⁷

⁷ Smith, Dwight L., *Whiter are We Traveling*, Chapter 12, The Hard Way is the Masonic Way, 4th Edition, The Indiana Freemason, 1966.

The years from the end of World War II to the end of the 1950s were dominated by four powerful changes in American life. The first was the birth of the Cold War, and the great fears that it created. The second was the dramatic growth of affluence, which transformed the lives of many, but not all, Americans. The third was a growing anxiety among many Americans who felt that their lives were too constricted by the staid culture of the era. And the fourth was the emergence of a new subversive culture growing beneath the smooth, stable surface of the decade that would explode in the 1960s.⁸

In the 1960s, the new movements for civil rights and liberal efforts to expand the role of government generated a range of political and cultural responses, which were punctuated by a new generation with different styles, tastes in music, entertainment, and dress; and whose new popular culture, strongly influenced the national culture. The political activism during the decade contributed to the unpopularity of the Vietnam War, and a generation stepped away from most anything that suggested association with what was perceived as “the establishment.”

By the 1970s and into the 1980s, a newly prevalent conservative movement achieved several political and policy goals, and continued to strongly influence public discourse into the following decades. Moving through, and into the 21st century, the nation experienced significant technological, economic, and demographic changes.

Today, in our politically divided, cancel-culture plagued, politically correct, overly sensitive, undereducated country with a population that proves on a daily basis its over-reliance on social media for facts, should we be surprised that fewer men seek membership in Freemasonry, or exhibit little interest in what it is supposed to offer? Except for the over-reliance we see today on social media, the similarity with the tumultuous and divisive decade of the 1960s is striking.

Apparently, however, we are as surprised as we were then, and are correspondingly still overwhelmed by the troubling lack of long lines of men seeking admittance into Freemasonry. The goodness of the concept of Freemasonry is not expected to fade entirely away but we are indeed naïve to believe that Freemasonry in our country will see a resurgence of high membership numbers at comparable levels or

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⁸ *The Fifties*, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History was founded in New York City by businessmen-philanthropists Richard Gilder and Lewis E. Lehrman in 1994 to promote the study and interest in American history. The Institute serves teachers, students, scholars, and the general public. <https://artsandculture.google.com/partner/the-gilder-lehrman-institute-of-american-history>, accessed January 1, 2021.

anything close to what it has been at various times in the past.

This is the time to ask certain questions and face the several possibilities. Are there fewer good men today? Were there always fewer good men suitable for Freemasonry, so we admitted more who were unqualified than qualified? If so, will we do the same in the future for the purpose of just trying to keep high membership numbers?

Contrary to the past common belief – a belief that lingers today - what Freemasonry can provide does not require millions of members to be successful when it truly provides the opportunity for good men to become better men. Lowering standards, casualizing process and practices, emphasizing one aspect of the Craft over another, and relying on ritual to provide all the fundamental education a candidate requires are slowly becoming recognized items on the short list of those things that promise to keep the fraternity where it has been for the past six decades.

So, is there an event that represents what might be considered the metaphorical swan song for American Freemasonry— an event that future historians will consider a specific point in time when the American fraternity, as a whole, began to manage its decline more than manage its historical intent? ⁹

History has already referred to one particular event in 1964 as the “final gasp of American innocence.” ¹⁰ That same event seems applicable, as well, to serve as what might be thought of as the final gasp of American Freemasonry or, at the minimum, to mark the time in that decade that afterwards Freemasonry in the United States was devitalized and began its attempt to manage its decline more than manage its historical intent and purpose.

EXPOSITION UNIVERSELLE – THE 1964 NEW YORK WORLD'S FAIR

The idea of a large international exhibition designed to showcase achievements of nations came to fruition first at the French Industrial Exposition of 1844 held in Paris (*Exposition Universelle*). This fair was followed by other national exhibitions in continental Europe, the United Kingdom, and, later, the United States.¹¹

The 1939–40 New York World's Fair, and those that followed, took a different approach, one less focused on the achievement of nations and aimed more at cultural themes and social progress.

⁹ The expression “swan song” is metaphorical phrase for a final gesture, effort, or performance and has long been a part of the English language. At first, “swan song” meant the last work of a poet, musician, or writer. Now, it means the final effort of any person. The phrase refers to an ancient belief that swans sing a beautiful song just before their death, having been silent during most of their lifetime. Arnott, W. Geoffrey (October 1977). “Swan Songs”. Greece & Rome.

¹⁰ Dickie, John, *The Craft: How Freemasons Made the Modern World*, BBS Public Affairs, NY, 2020.

¹¹ Truman, Benjamin Cummings, *History and Culture; Natural and Physical Sciences; Fairs*, Illinois; Chicago; Chicago (Ill.); World's Columbian Exposition, 1893, Smithsonian Libraries, <https://library.si.edu/digital-library/book/historyworldsfa00trum>, accessed January 2021.

For instance, the theme of the 1939 fair was "Building the World of Tomorrow;" at the 1964–65 New York World's Fair, it was "Peace Through Understanding."¹²

The 1964 - 1965 World's Fair was held at Flushing Meadows, in the Borough of Queens on a 600-acre site leased from the City of New York.¹³

One writer described the event like this:

Queens became a kaleidoscope of brilliant colors, fountains of dancing water and mouth-watering Belgian waffles, bringing excitement to a city and a nation still grieving for an assassinated president. The social upheaval of the 1960s was waiting around the corner. But for two summers, visitors indulged in the optimistic flavor of the fair, which embraced the space age and the advent of technology that would forever change American culture. The fair was a beacon of light at a very dark, President Kennedy, a booster of the fair, had been assassinated just five months earlier to the day. The murder of a young woman named Kitty Genovese in Queens just a few weeks before shocked a nation when reports surfaced that neighbors failed to answer her calls for help. The fitting centerpiece was the 140 pavilions, 110 restaurants, for 80 nations (hosted by 37), 24 U.S. states, and over 45 corporations to build exhibits or attractions. The Beatles landed at the fair's Port Authority Heliport for their August 15 concert at Shea Stadium. Pope Paul VI stood in the Vatican Pavilion and blessed the crowd. It was estimated \$1 billion was spent to build the fair, including extensive roadway and infrastructure improvements for miles around. The Fair gave Queens a vast greenspace of manicured lawns, dotted with sculptures left from the fair and amenities like a pitch-and-putt golf course. An 18-acre zoo, now known as the Queens Zoo, would open in the park the next year.¹⁴

¹² Davies, John R. in *Findling and Pelle Encyclopedia of World's Fairs and Expositions*, McFarland & Company; Reprint edition, 2015.

¹³ Stinson, John, The New York Public Library Humanities and Social Sciences Library Manuscripts and Archives Division New York World's Fair 1964 – 1965 Corporation Records, 1959 – 1971, May 1986

¹⁴ Lisa L. Colangelo, "The 1964 World's Fair: When the world came to Queens," *New York City Daily News*, 2014, <http://creative.nydailynews.com/worldsfair>, accessed, January 2021.

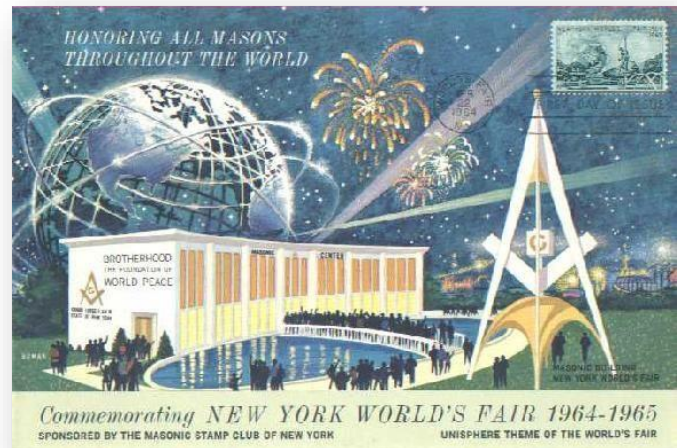
One of the 140 pavilions was The Masonic Brotherhood Center, “a display case of Masonic history and memorabilia going back to medieval times.”¹⁵ The center was a joint effort between the Grand Lodge of New York and the Masonic Brotherhood Foundation, and construction began in August 1963.

The Center was across from a reflecting pool with a 50-foot-high model of the builder's square and compasses, symbols of the fraternity, sponsored by the Grand Lodge of the State of New York. It included a hall for exhibitions, a lounge, office, and outside patio.

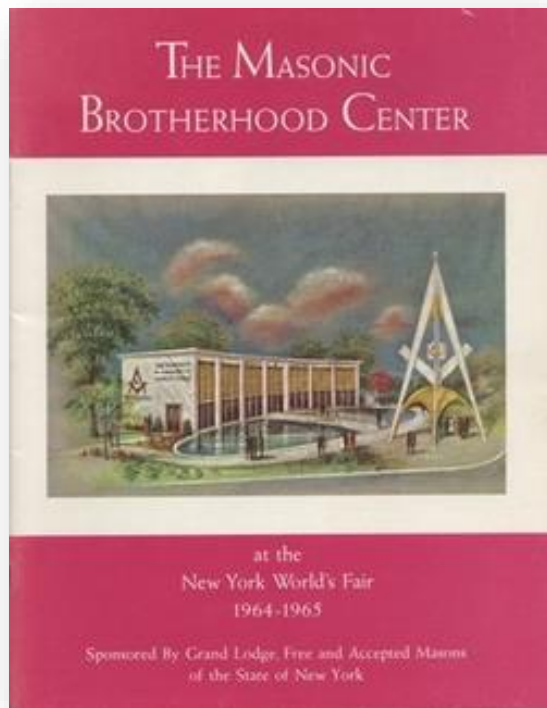
Like many of the exhibits at this World's Fair, even the high arch (the familiar square and compasses) took on a distinctive Space Age look. The Masonic Center had a prime corner location at the intersection of the Avenue of the Americas and the Avenue of Europe.

Dominating the hall was an 11-foot statue of George Washington in

Masonic regalia. Events from his life are portrayed in three-dimensional scenes, and the Bible on which he took the oath of office as President was also on display. Documents on exhibit date back to the 14th Century.



¹⁵ The 1964 New York World's Fair, <https://www.worldsfairphotos.com/nywf64/masonic-center.htm>, accessed January 2021.



Masonic events took place during and over the course of the fair. In the summer of 1964, more than 200,000 Shriners converged on Queens to visit the site for parades and celebrations. In 1965, nearly 3,000 Masons and members of the Knights of Columbus, together with their families, converged to take part in a day of brotherhood and peace.

While most of the buildings and other structures at the World's Fair were demolished within months of closing in 1965, the illuminated "G" from the large fiberglass square and compasses in front of the Masonic Brotherhood Center was moved to the New York Masonic Home campus in Utica, New York, and installed into a smaller sculpture.

The Grand Lodge of New York installed the bronze sculpture by artist Donald De Lue, of George Washington in Masonic regalia, at the fairgrounds after it closed. That statute stands today near the soccer fields.

BACK AGAIN TO THOSE UNAVOIDABLE NUMBERS

The 1964 World's Fair recorded 50 million visitors.¹⁶ The theme of the Fair, "Peace Through Understanding (and dedicated to "Man's Achievements on a Shrinking Globe in an Expanding Universe") was certainly harmonious with the tenets, principles, and philosophies of Freemasonry. However, against the backdrop of everything else at the World's Fair in 1964 that projected technology, picture phones, futurama video rides, color television demonstrations, jetpacks, futuristic transportation vehicles, monorails, the Carousel of Progress for General Electric, and Magic Skyway for Ford, the Masonic Brotherhood pavilion attracted a respectable, but foretelling, 2.5% (1.25 million out of 50 million) of the visitors.



Today the 1964/1965 New York World's Fair is remembered as a cultural highlight of mid-twentieth century America. It represents an era best known as "The Space Age," when mankind took its first steps toward space exploration, and it seemed that technology would provide the

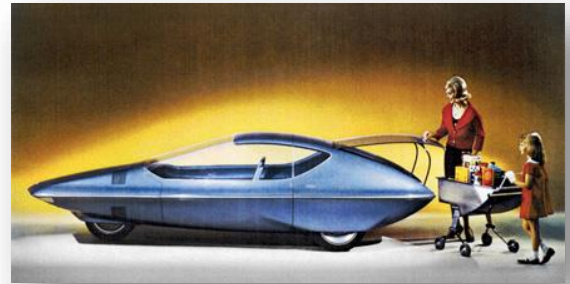
¹⁶ Taylor, Alan, "The 1964 New York World's Fair," *The Atlantic*, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2014/06/1964-the-new-york-worlds-fair/100749/>, accessed January 2021.

answers to all of the world's problems. As one writer put it, “The exhibits at the Fair echoed a blind sense of optimism in the future that was prevalent in the late 1950s and early 1960s.”¹⁷

The optimism that American Freemasonry projected by simply being part of the World's Fair in 1964 was blind, indeed. Since making the cover and feature story of the 1956 LIFE Magazine, by the 1964, membership in the institution had already fallen nearly 48,000 members, and would, by the end of the decade, lose another 188,059 men, and yet another 566,318 by 1980.¹⁸ Membership reports for 2017-2020 are not posted on the website of the Masonic Service Association of North America, an organization that has recorded and reported those numbers since 1924.

The most recent year reported was 2016, when membership was recorded at 1,117,781, a 2,985,381 man drop (72%) since its crest of 4,103,161 men in 1959.

The steep decline clearly demonstrates why it is folly to claim the success of the fraternity can be accurately measured by membership numbers; and explains why boasting of the number of Masons in the



United States is no longer echoed around the nation.

¹⁷ Young, Bill, *The Story of the 1964 New York World's Fair*, http://nywf64.com/fair_story01.shtml, accessed January 2021.

¹⁸ Masonic Service Association of North America, Membership Totals since 1924. Burtonsville, MD.

The numbers, however, do serve a significant purpose and validate the long-considered theory by many Masons and Masonic scholars that the fraternity has similarly fallen from its once prominent perch in the eye of the public and potential candidates. Put simply, few American men are now aware of the existence of Freemasonry, and even fewer find it attractive.¹⁹

It is highly improbable that the Grand Masters appearing on the cover of LIFE Magazine in 1956 were aware of the precipice on which their fraternity was standing that year, much less the path and course their jurisdictions were about to take for the rest of the century and into the next because of it.

Illustrating that point, we find records (and supporting documents) from the 1956 meeting of the Conference of Grand Masters of North America, indicating that part of the included topic questions that demonstrate that some of the Grand Lodge leadership in attendance were hungry to further increase its already ballooning membership in that decade. The Conference, then and today, offers attendees the opportunity to become aware of and familiar with, various issues confronting other Grand Jurisdictions, and the measures they adopt to address them.

Questions were posed to attendees on topics of interest to all jurisdictions. One question was, *should we change our position on non-solicitation of degrees?* The forty-two present held a general discussion, and afterwards, five voted “Yes,” and thirty-seven, showing good sense, voted “No.” Another question was, *should a numerical limit be placed on the membership of our lodges?* (it should be noted that at the time, some lodges in America reported as many as 800-1,000 members). For unreported reasons, only thirty-eight of the forty-two present voted on that question. Seventeen voted “Yes.” Twenty-one voted, “No.”

Such votes, then and now, carry no force of Masonic Law, of course, but the vote on the second question suggests that nearly half of the grand leadership failed to see the reality that lodges having larger membership only meant that those lodges made more members and not necessarily Freemasons. This hints of the mind-set that membership numbers were thought of as a measurement of the success of the fraternity. The vote on the first question suggests that the majority did not see a reason to recommend a change to non-solicitation rule, perhaps because 408,689 new members were admitted from 1950-1956 alone. Another 49,838 would be admitted by 1960, since which time the numbers have fallen each year.²⁰

Since then, through today, many jurisdictions have unevenly embarked on hit-or-miss processes that have watered down qualifications for admittance, encouraged expansions, relaxed no-solicitation rules, and created programs designed to bolster membership more than to boost the historical aim and purpose of the Fraternity.

¹⁹ BMS Survey, *Awareness of the Institution of Freemasonry in the Commonwealth of Kentucky, 2014-2015*. Unpublished survey conducted in Louisville, Paintsville, Frankfort, Owensboro, Paducah, Covington, Lexington, Maysville, Bowling Green, Ashland, K. Schwendeman, Richmond, Kentucky, Masonic Renewal Task Force Reports: Phase I Research (Attitudes of Non-Masons towards joining organizations such as Freemasonry.); Phase II Research (Attitudes of Masons toward Freemasonry), 1990.

²⁰ Masonic Services Association of North America, Membership, 2016. (2016 was the final year that membership statistics were posted by the Masonic Services Association of North America).

Two incredibly important questions were not asked or considered—questions one might think such a Conference would examine during a period of rapid expansion: one, *has the addition of 1,491,479 members since 1943 affected our historical aim and purpose?* The second question might be, *will these membership increases continue?* There is no record in official documents that either question was brought up for discussion.

Nonetheless, by the late 1970s Grand Masters were certainly aware of the answer to those questions and the ramifications of the consistent annual decline in members, retention rates, and general interest inside and outside the fraternity. Since then, through today, many jurisdictions have unevenly embarked on hit-or-miss processes that have watered down qualifications for admittance, encouraged expansions, relaxed the no-solicitation rule, and created programs designed to bolster membership more than boost the historical aim and purpose of the Fraternity. Institutional Freemasonry has yet to demonstrate, again, at least as a whole, that it possesses the slightest idea as to how strength can be found in fewness, and the measure of the success of the fraternity is impossible to measure by merely counting names on membership rosters.

The Masonic Brotherhood Center pavilion at the 1964 New York World's Fair illustrates that even though American Freemasonry stepped up (as it should have) to participate in a worldwide event promoting peace and understanding in the future, the exhibit's premise focused largely on Freemasonry's past and did not resonate with a forward-looking public.

There was certainly nothing wrong with promoting a distinguished past at the 1964 World's Fair, but it was a blinkered approach based on the outward assumption that the anomaly of explosive membership from 1943 through 1959 would last well into the future.

A robust reliance on promoting "Famous Masons," and the influence of Freemasonry and the involvement of members in the founding of our Nation, seemed to only endorse a hollow suggestion that because Freemasonry had been around for so long, it would always be around.

While the historic past of the fraternity is an unparalleled story, the laudable work of those who supported and put together the Masonic Brotherhood Center exhibition did not slow down or stall the inevitable.

There was certainly nothing wrong with promoting a distinguished past at the 1964 World's Fair, but it was a blinkered approach based on the outward assumption that the anomaly of explosive membership from 1943 through 1959 would last well into the future. That

mistaken belief completely ignored the reality that, just as it had in past, the larger society in which the fraternity exists has a far greater history of influencing the course of Freemasonry, than Freemasonry has had in influencing the course of the culture at large – especially in the 20th and 21st Centuries.

So, the story of *when* Freemasonry in America became one of managed (or, perhaps, mismanaged) decline began following the 1964 New York World's Fair. The philosophy and lessons of

Freemasonry, however, retain their tremendous power to elevate and transform the lives of men who seek enlightenment.

How Freemasonry determines how best to deliver that promise, in an era where the pool of suitable prospective members continues to shrink, will determine whether or not decline will be an epitaph or a gateway to renewal.