

THE WAVES AND TIDES OF HISTORICAL CHANGE

Applying Patterns of the Past and Those
Emerging Today to Look at the Future of
American Freemasonry

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THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN FREEMASONRY

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Historical change is not a difficult concept to recognize and comprehend. It takes place through the process of cause and effect — the process by which one thing leads to another, which leads to another, and so on and so forth. Aside from catastrophic events, historical change usually has no single cause, but, rather, a variety of causes that occur over time. This is one reason it is easy to overlook or even ignore emerging patterns that are signals telling us we are in the midst of change—sometimes change that is occurring right beneath our nose—particularly in American Freemasonry. If you are looking for predictions about the future of American Freemasonry built on personal beliefs, anecdotes, opinion, or blinkered speculation commonly found in after-lodge parking lot conversations, this paper will not meet your expectations. If you seek more about where to find, recognize, and consider how both past and current patterns help us to better understand the course of our fraternity, and suggest its future path, this booklet is a suitable primer.

NAVIGATING THE OPEN SEA OF KNOWLEDGE

We live in a world awash with information, but we seem to face a growing scarcity of wisdom. And what is also worse, we confuse the two. We believe that having access to more information produces more knowledge, which results in more wisdom. But, if anything, the opposite is true—more and more information without the proper context and interpretation only muddles our understanding of the world rather than

enriching it.¹ This seems particularly true in American Freemasonry.

When we take a broad look at three centuries of Masonic literature, we find an abundance of writings, suggesting that every conceivable topic to explore, discuss, examine, and contemplate has been put into print. It has not, of course, nor does it further appear that a majority of the available material is regularly read throughout the fraternity; and, in many cases, even known to exist. Some materials are factual. Some are quite the opposite.

¹ Popova, Maria, *Wisdom in the Age of Information and the Importance of Storytelling in Making Sense of the World: An Animated*

Essay, <https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/09/09/wisdom-in-the-age-of-information>, accessed, 30 November 2020.

Many fall prey to arbitrary interpretation and uncultivated understanding.²

Our Masonic culture seems to whirl around the notion that having an *opinion* about Freemasonry (what it is, is not, can be, should be, where it originated, how it is “supposed” to be practiced, delivered, organized, led, managed as an organization, etc.) is more important than having facts on which to back up those opinions.

Countless opinions are commonly reliant on the superficial impressions or the ill-grounded-pass-along-borrowed-ideas of others that are also the result of superficial impressions without benefit of investing the time and thought that cultivating true conviction and valid perspective necessitates. When our views and opinions are formed with little cultivation of knowledge, we end up asserting those donned opinions and clinging to them as anchors to our own reality. When we seek to *understand* those things on which we may have strong opinions, we spur our curiosity, and as we come to understand more about them, we find we slowly detach ourselves from the shallower explanation of things, or those merely borrowed, often narrow, ideas of others, and begin to see context, even patterns, in the behavior of the organization and the men in it.

When individuals and groups place too much of a premium on superficial impressions and ill-grounded, borrowed ideas, about anything—especially when there is an abundance of information otherwise available—we find that such groups carry a partiality that prevents them from recognizing their own lack of real knowledge. In order to accept real

knowledge, it is first necessary to acknowledge that there is real knowledge.³ Real knowledge is that which can be proven or demonstrated through the introduction of facts.

Real knowledge must be cultivated, and it is real knowledge that shatters ill-based opinion and the passed-along superficial knowledge (fake knowledge?) we sometimes confuse with real knowledge. As real knowledge is cultivated, a positive side-effect follows *insight*. A few steps above mere knowledge, insight provides us with more than simply knowing *what*—it provides us with yet another level of real knowledge: knowing *why*.

Cultivating knowledge simply means getting past depthless service-level information and building on education that goes beyond the basics that merely keeps things afloat. Expecting quality output from any collective labor or individual task (as well as whatever an organization attempts to produce) first demands *quality input*. That applies to membership, management, leadership. Identifying patterns also helps explain the *why* about anything. Unless we have an understanding of *why* something has happened in the past, or is happening today, we have little capability to affect, shape, mold, or constructively lead its direction.

Successfully navigating the vast sea of knowledge requires filtering that knowledge. Doing so leads to big picture thinking and best offers the ability to grasp abstract concepts, ideas, and possibilities. Seeing the “big picture” means simply to realistically see the whole; the ability to comprehend the context of the matter. Identifying and correctly assessing patterns is an essential

² *Ibid.*

³ Kruger, Justin; Dunning, David “Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One’s Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments”. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol.77, 1999. (the Dunning–Kruger effect is a cognitive bias in which

people with low ability at a task overestimate their ability. It is related to the cognitive bias of illusory superiority and comes from people’s inability to recognize their lack of ability.

element of cultivating real knowledge and *quality output*.

PART I

American Freemasonry is data-rich and looking at the data as a whole, as opposed to just singular events, makes more visible the trajectory of the fraternity today—a trajectory set decades ago.

Taking a hard look at the state, condition, practices, themes, and organizational behavioral patterns, is something one might think happens naturally and often in an Institution that encourages introspection by its members. Such is not really the case.

There have been plenty of studies, surveys, polls, and questionnaires over the decades, along with external assessments, so the lack of such research is not so much of a problem as is the lengthy pattern of not taking heed of the message that such studies regularly (and consistently) produce. This is the long-standing pattern. Typically, the release and news of what might be thought of as a “hard look” at the fraternity, its models of operation and practices, wanes after its initial period of fanfare. The fraternity soon predictably plods on through another decade that unsurprisingly produces yet another hard look in one form or another that suffers the same fate.

While we cannot fully rely on past data to help us understand what the future might hold in store, the fraternity is consistently inclined to not only regularly repeat patterns but to perpetuate them—even if proven ineffective.

Easily disproven, but always popular, is the idea that all members of the fraternity have placed, and continue to place, a high premium on pursuing and forming a working knowledge of the factual history of the organization and the operational side of the fraternity. How the fraternity has historically responded to external changes in society, made decisions, elected its leadership, and adopted courses that do not always prove constructive, is rarely found at the top of the list of those things that many actively seek to learn. We see this because of past patterns that show how the appetite for outcomes has so rarely been accompanied with reasoned analysis and awareness of our factual history: *real knowledge*.

Irrespective of those patterns, looking to the past (not just what is thought of as successes of the past) is necessary if Freemasonry seeks to prepare for the future simply because there is nowhere else to look.

While we cannot *fully* rely on past data to help us understand what the future might hold in store, the fraternity is consistently inclined to not only regularly repeat patterns but to perpetuate them - even if proven ineffective. Why do we do that? Simply put, we do not look at the past in context (or deeply), if we look at all. Context often shows us that the fraternity may have done the best

they could with what they had at any given time, however “best” back then is not the same as “best” by today’s demands and expectations, especially when it comes to operational practices, if for no other reason that we have so many resources at our disposal today. What justifiable reason exists to continue anything that does not constructively sustain or advance an organization?

Sometimes patterns are conspicuous and spread quickly throughout the American fraternity and unfold quickly and may often seem like a good idea to many—at least at the time. This is especially true about the ideas designed to expand membership (i.e., lowering standards of qualifications for admittance, mass raisings, rushing members through the degrees, and solicitation). Such “good ideas at the time” decisions, create patterns that, over time, cure like concrete, leaving many to accept the notion that whatever is currently done has always been done that way and is unalterable.

The identification of patterns in context with the times when they began to emerge helps us to better understand how we arrived at any point in our history. The importance of knowing and understanding that - especially the importance of leadership knowing and understanding that - should be clear, but that is not always the case—again, particularly in American Freemasonry.

THE PRACTICE OF LOOKING AT THE FACTUAL PAST

At its best, the practice of looking at the factual past is simply about engaging people in thinking deeply about complex issues, performing research, considering new possibilities, connecting signals into larger patterns, linking the past with the present and the future, and making better choices.

One way to think about this is to consider the difference between ocean waves and tides. Waves are what we see on the surface. They are momentary events that come and go, appear, and disappear. But there is something bigger underneath the waves, causing them. Underneath is the tide that causes all kinds of disturbances of which waves are just one sign. Trying to understand those tides, the deeper forces underneath the waves, helps us see more patterns and some of the reasons the trajectory of American Freemasonry is set in the direction we find it today.



Looking at the factual past, especially in context to see what patterns might help us understand where the fraternity is headed has nothing to do with fortune telling, reading tea leaves, horoscopy, conjuring or abracadabra gibberish.

Patterns do not tell us *what is certain* to happen next in American Freemasonry, but rather, shows us how paths taken generally lead to particular outcomes.

Many members rely on the opinions of others about the state the Craft in their respective

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jurisdictions, and these opinion reservoirs overflow. The rah-rah crowd, the living-on-laurels group, and the all-we-need-is-more-members mob regularly contribute to the reservoir. Each, with some bleed-over, have their pet views about the future of the fraternity. Much of the leadership has their particular view, too, that is often seasoned or softened, as should be expected, with a dash of the various flavors of opinion spewed from other groups. In some cases, that approach might carry a hint of leadership striving for consensus, but usually it involves more of the “seeing which way the wind blows” kind of leadership.

The probability of personal bias weighs heavily on views that are opinion and or anecdotally based.

Waves of anecdotal information support many of these views, which is unsurprising and tends to punctuate the mistaken belief that the longer a person has been a member of the fraternity, the more weight their anecdotal views purportedly carry. Membership longevity, however, does not always equal real knowledge about Freemasonry, much less its factual history. Worth repeating is the fact that personal bias always weighs heavily on views that are only based on opinion or anecdote.

Typically, systematic reviews of completed, high-quality randomized controlled trials—such as those published by the Cochrane Collaboration – rank as the highest quality of evidence, above observational studies, while expert opinion and anecdotal experience are at the bottom level of evidence quality.⁴

PART II

LOOKING FOR PATTERNS

Contrary to one-dimensional thinking, searching for and assessing patterns is not a faultfinding process but, rather, good business; some say, *crucial* to business and to organizations that are productive. What successful organization or business remains that way without examining patterns, their factual history, practices and procedures, and the quality of their service or product, as it were, on a regular basis?

So, if one is inclined to seek out and identify patterns that may offer insight about the

⁴ NOTE: Previously known as the Cochrane Collaboration, Cochrane is an international and independent non-profit organization established in 1993 aimed at providing up-to-date, accurate information about the effects of healthcare available worldwide. Cochrane produces and disseminates systematic reviews of healthcare interventions and diagnostic tests and promotes the search for evidence in the form of clinical trials and other interventional studies.

trajectory of American Freemasonry, where does the search start?

The dusty, rarely read pages (of which there are literally thousands upon thousands) of Grand Lodges Annual Proceedings over the past 250 years or so is a good place to start. Most offer and illustrate how issues facing Freemasonry today are not as new as many members of the fraternity believe them to be.

Another good place one might look is in some of the equally dusty lodge libraries around the nation where corresponding illustrations are found in hundreds of more writings. A copious supply of the more contemporary Masonic writings since the 1980s offer yet another source.

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If one dares to do more than merely Google something about Freemasonry, and then bothers to look deeper for authentic and balanced information about the fraternity on the Internet, even more illustrations emerge to affirm that American Freemasonry has long-established patterns that set the course of the fraternity well into at least the next few decades. If one sees that the course does appear to be set, and less constructive than hoped, perhaps the

“question” should be asked, *‘might be done to reset it?’*

Anyone today, however, who believes there is a magic or silver bullet that will suddenly reset the course and direction of the fraternity and simultaneously resuscitate it (especially if they cling to the unproven notion that all that is needed is more members), will be disappointed. To put it more bluntly, there is no fail-safe solution that will arrive on the scene before both membership and interest in the fraternity in America dwindle to levels not seen since well before the Civil War. The course that created many of the issues faced today was set from 1940s through the mid-1960s. Members today had nothing to do with setting them but have everything to do with perpetuating and further nourishing them within the contemporary Masonic culture. When the euphoria from the long lines of men seeking admittance came to an unimagined halt by the mid-1960s, the marathon, but unavailing, efforts to regenerate those long lines, is more easily seen by many today as the fruitless labor it was (and is completely out of context from what the real problem was and is).

The fraternity has been scrambling for the past six decades while laboring under the unproven notion that only with more and more members swelling the ranks will the fraternity be successful – a fragile operational pattern that the past three generations, has neither recognized nor worked through. In spite of the labor, external interest in the fraternity, along with interest within its own ranks, has dwindled and waning interest in Freemasonry will continue as long as the fraternity persists in thinking that counting numbers is more important than creating Freemasons when it comes to “solving the membership problem.” Nothing has been introduced, created, legislated, or mandated by edict that has effectively reset this course or set aside this fossilized, long-standing pattern-cry for more members.

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American Freemasonry.**

The makeup of the members remaining in the current and the following decades, and how they handle this approaching reckoning is what is most likely to actually reset the course of American Freemasonry as an organization—especially its operational practices.

This conspicuous pattern to swell membership is a passion the fraternity has overtly caressed since the 19th century. This is not to say that bigger is inherently bad, only that it is not necessarily better, especially regarding the subject of American Freemasonry.

Rapid growth tends to eclipse *steady* growth and increases the risk of losing of an organization losing its authenticity. Organizations that attempt to scale up too quickly also run the risk of becoming plagued with operational inefficiencies. In such organizations many who are initially interested eventually sense, then experience, the sluggish effects of unmanageable bulk. The value they once placed on being part of an organization then wanes.⁵ The foregoing precisely describes the experience of American Freemasonry since the early 1960s.

Commonly, the organization that consistently mistakes bigness for *growth* typically ends up measuring its success by its bigness. In due course the organization drifts from the reality that *real growth* is about reaching full potential, *not* maximum size. Expansion does not automatically or inevitably equal, much less guarantee, progress, or a stable foundation. Evidence in support of that truth is found in the number of now extinct organizations who believed that bigness was sustainable without the infrastructure necessary to ensure the continued quality and authenticity of what they originally offered.

Rapid growth tends to eclipse steady growth and increases the risk of an organization losing its authenticity.

We find no lack of warnings in our writings and documents since the 1850s indicating that confusing rapid expansion and bigness with progress lead to unintended consequences: members were poorly instructed and received little education about their fraternity outside of quickly passing through half-worked ritual. Occurring repeatedly over generations, the emerging majority merely follows the pattern of passing on the same operational practices. Since fraternity leadership is elected by that majority, the pattern becomes a hindrance, and a hurdle is unintentionally erected.

This pattern and its consequences is first observed and expressed as the fraternity rapidly grew at the turn of the 19th century until 1826, and then again from the 1840s through the late 1800s. The 180-year-old concern and ensuing calls to address it went largely as unheeded in the past as it is today. In 1866 a Kentucky Grand Master gave the problems associated with of rapid expansion coupled with poor instruction a disturbing new label. He called it *a canker worm on the rose*.⁶

One can also learn from examining the outcomes of some patterns the answer to a number of other questions asked today. The question, for example, of why only a small percentage of the reported

⁵ S. J. Karau, K. D. Williams, *Social loafing: A Meta-Analytic Review and Theoretical Integration*, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 65(4), 681, 1993, R. Hoffman, *Social Loafing: Definition, Examples and Theory*. Simply Psychology, June 22, 2020, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/social-loafing.html>, accessed October 1, 2020.

⁶ Annual Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky, October 1866, Grand Master's Address: Myrix. J. Williams.

roughly one-million card carrying Masons in the United States are actively involved, engaged, attend, or participate in some way in their lodges, is found in particular patterns (see Derek John De Solla Price's Law of Social Loafing ⁷).

Another pattern can be found that explains the reason we do not often see lodges pursuing a balanced, purposeful process to determine their future beyond the one-year-at-a-time method. The belief that operating only year-to-year is actually a plan, we find, is a lasting carryover from decades of doing the same.

Grand Lodges have always had the prerogative to make changes in the fraternity, and they have not been shy about exercising such prerogative. Their only restraint is the trepidation that radical change might result in other Grand Lodges withdrawing their recognition from a jurisdiction deviating from what other jurisdictions recognize as Freemasonry. Thus, another pattern emerges.

MARIONETTE MASONRY: DEEPER CONSEQUENTIAL PATTERNS

During a recent discussion about patterns that emerge in the fraternity, an interesting correlation was offered. The term, *Marionette Masonry* was used to describe how patterns can eventually lead to widely accepted organizational practices that are copied by others and ingrained in our behavior, then merely passed on and rarely, if ever, called into question as to their suitability.

Ultimately, at least in terms of how large organizations commonly work, such behavior (and the redundancy of some practices that drive them), become more widely accepted and unthinkingly a part of the choreography used by most of the management of, and leadership in, such organizations. The outcome is the furtherance of the idea or practice suggesting (at least subliminally) that they are irrefutable and formally sanctioned as the best practices, thus adding fuel to their artless, outmoded repetition that just continues to saturate the ranks.

The "Marionette Concept" is applicable to more than just the institution of Freemasonry, of course, and applies to the behaviors of any large organization – especially the ones that do not keep an eye on the model they embrace so to ensure it consistently works and delivers its concept as well as it is intended.



⁷ In the 1960s, scientist and science historian Derek John De Solla Price analyzed the publication of scientific papers and came up with a law that essentially quantifies what is referred to as *social loafing*. He found that approximately the square root of the number of people in an organization is responsible for fifty percent of the work. By considering Price's research and taking the square root of the 1,161,253 Freemasons reported in the United States in 2015, we arrive at the number of members who are responsible for half of the work in the fraternity: roughly 1,000 men. (Jonathan Furner, *Little Book, Big Book: Before and After Little Science, Big Science: A Review Article, Part I*, *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 35:2, June 2003, 115–125, and 2020 Oxford University Press).

Moreover, the term is a nicer way of saying that organizations (like a marionette connected with strings) can easily end up not pay attention to how easily they can fall into a false sense that what they do has worked and will always work best *all the time*. Even more simply put; doing the same old thing over and over again that does not produce the results we expect, suggests (to borrow from another saying), that someone is *asleep at the wheel*.

Even more simply put; doing the same old thing over and over again that does not produce the results we expect, suggests (to borrow from another saying), that someone is asleep at the wheel.

Suffice it to say that each pattern on a complete list would merit more than a few paragraphs to fully explore how each contribute to changing the paradigm and operational model of Freemasonry in America. A comprehensive list of deeper patterns would probably take up the remaining space in this booklet.

A short list of the significant patterns, however, offers the reader the opportunity to consider how the paradigm of Masonic culture has shifted inside their own lodge because of Marinette-like patterns.

If one truly seeks to learn more about how repeated patterns have affected, and continue to affect, the fraternity (specifically their own lodge), consider the following list and see if any items might fit the methods of operation and process of any given lodge.

If one or more bullet point is found in one's lodge, then patterns in the past, still extant today, is its genesis.

Should a lodge be among those with sufficient members to officially open and close a lodge of Master Masons but often finds that there are not the required number of members present (three) to do so on meeting nights, then the lodge is affected by the paradigm shift caused by one or more of the significant patterns noted below.

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- A lodge that opens and conducts business only the Master Mason Degree, thus excluding members who are Entered Apprentices and Fellowcrafts.
- A lodge admits 18-year-olds as members but rarely, if ever, sees them attend or participate in lodge once they are admitted.
- A lodge has numerous members raised in one-day classes on its roster, but such members rarely, if ever, attend or participate in lodge.

- A lodge rushes candidates through degrees within sixty days and relies on ritual as the primary source of Masonic instruction and education.
- A lodge relies on the long-standing habit of advancing men through the chairs to the East, treating the office as if it were an honor to passed around, not as a responsibility that needs the most qualified individual for the job, and consistently operates under the unchallenged assumption that the Progressive Line approach has, is, and will continue to work best.
- A lodge where 50-year members are excused from paying dues and the lodge consistently faces financial difficulties.
- A lodge that budgets just for the current year and not the future.
- A lodge where the current Master has served as Master for *multiple consecutive* terms because other members are not interested in the position.
- A lodge that makes it a common practice to elevate inexperienced, newly raised members to positions before they are prepared to assume and effectively perform in those positions.
- A lodge that does not raise dues and petition fees to a level necessary to ensure financial stability of the lodge.
- A lodge that encourages newly raised members to immediately seek membership in appendant bodies.
- A lodge with no significant and interactive Internet presence.
- A lodge that has many well-meaning Brethren trying to make Freemasonry something other than Freemasonry.
- A lodge that has not initiated, passed, or raised a candidate within the past two calendar years.
- A lodge that does not actively encourage its members to participate in the multiple offering of virtual (non-Tyled) assemblies and educational meetings taking

place around the world since March 2020 and periods in which meetings and Masonic events have been cancelled or postponed for extended times.

In looking around a lodge with these bullet points in mind, an honest assessment may give pause.

These fifteen points did not shift the paradigm of American Freemasonry all at once, at the same time or evenly. Nor are these fifteen the only patterns. It took decades of repetition for each to entrench themselves into the culture of the fraternity all at once, at the same time or evenly.

Since the turn of the 19th century, patterns have clearly emerged to illustrate a number of examples of how American Freemasonry has lost its ways. Paralleling those patterns is yet another one that is also long-standing.

“Can’t-see-the-forest-for-the-trees,” means that we sometimes cannot see situations as they really are while we are in the midst of them. In short, we lose our perspective when we are too heavily invested in a particular approach, process, or operational practice; ergo, American Freemasonry.

As that happened, the idea was fostered and practices simply were accepted on the premise that somehow such patterns contributed to a lodge reaching its full potential, and that the practices were all sustainable, although quality and authenticity of purpose were missing.

As one Masonic author wrote in 1992, “So we follow blindly long, parroting the words [ritual] calling it Masonry, and wondering why Freemasonry has lost its prestige, influence, and dignity.”⁸

PART III

SMALL GROUPS

Since the late 1770s, small groups of members seeking more than what the majority may offer have existed. Their steady presence is found in the writings located in those earlier mentioned libraries, proceedings, the early and later journals, and Masonic bulletins.

There is another observable pattern linked to this small group: many Masons have considered, and continue to consider, the views and operational practices of this small group as elitist; wayward; stuffy; or too formal for that they have come to accept as Freemasonry. Some have even expressed through their actions a level of unwarranted anxiety (or fear) that the small groups found in most all jurisdictions may overly influence the comfortable world of the mainstream. There is palpable irony in the fact that the notion of elitism, in an organization designed to “make good men better,” causes its members to be uncomfortable.

⁸ I. Lewis Langley, “Where Did it Go Wrong?” Transactions, The South Carolina Masonic Research Society, p. 147, 1993.

While little measurable lasting influence on the mainstream is made from one generation to another by these small groups, they persevere in their approach and sustain those interested in seeking a Masonic experience different from that which is commonly found.

Although historically persistent, these small groups have never “changed” the fraternity as a whole. They have, however, served as sort of a string around the finger of American Freemasonry. Their writings and examples are Post-it Note reminders serving to jog, when possible, the memory of the Institution about its historical aim and purpose as a fraternity. While little measurable lasting influence on the mainstream is made from one generation to another by these small groups, they persevere in their approach and sustain those interested in seeking a Masonic experience different from that which is commonly found.

The call for *quality* versus *quantity*, a term used frequently in Masonic writings since the 1840s underscores the viewpoint of small groups since that period. The current small group model was first seen unfolding in the early 1990s. Attire in lodge changed from casual to at least a coat and tie. Masonic education beyond ritual took a front seat as did the focus on delivering consistently proficient ritual and not rushing members through degrees. Constructive revamping of the

investigation committee process took place. Some lodges even placed a ceiling on the number of members they would admit. Also, a more reverent protocol at stated communications was adopted. These are only a few examples of what many, then and still today, view as “radical” or “not Freemasonry.” The lamentable idea that either one of those descriptions is remotely accurate speaks volumes.

No official label neatly fits this small group of lodges, or fully represents what they do. Many of them do not seek or wish to classify or characterize themselves under any the umbrella of the tags used since the 1990s that often refers to them (Traditional Observance Lodges, Observant Lodges, European Concept Lodges, Hybrid Lodges, Heritage Lodges, etc.). Many of them are simply content to practice the style and operational processes under their respective constitutions that work best for the majority of their membership and embrace this approach to their Masonic experience with no specific title at all. There is little question, however, that lodges who do use operational processes different from that which is commonly found in the rest of the fraternity completely recognize that they are indeed doing something different than that which is generally offered.

INDEPENDENT MASONIC VOICES

Thirty years after lodges began to surface in pursuit and practice of what might be thought of as these particular models of Masonic practices, most continue to exist. At first, many were made up of veteran Masons seeking more. Since then, these lodges have admitted new members as well.

Unsurprisingly, we see a pattern and slow uptick of lodges where members (usually the younger generation members) seek to incorporate at least a few of the processes and operational practices of these smaller group lodges into their own lodge, so that much of the influence has widened. Some have been and continue to be more successful in doing so than others.

This has become more of a recognizable pattern over the past ten years and may be attributed largely to the Internet where more writings about these lodges and their operational practices are found. A high exposure on expanding social media platforms contributed to accentuating various lodges around the nation doing something different than what has been the norm prior to the early 1990s.

The Internet is indeed one thing the small group embracing such practices has going for them today. As the Internet evolved, these small groups simply made more use of the technology. Early chat rooms, the posting of old and new writings, and communication in general through email (the newest available media in the early 1990s), spread more information about these lodges, their practices, ideas, research, and over-all awareness of their existence much faster than in previous eras. Masonic podcasts soon contributed as well. The advent of social media platforms (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest, and Reddit) that began to appear in 1997, also advanced the Masonic repository and increased communication between most Masons, not just the small group.⁹

The Internet has also afforded promotion leading to a greater presence of the independent Masonic voice writings, periodical publications, sites, blogs, and podcasts. These voices do not in any way represent the official positions of any particular lodge or Grand Lodge, or any associated organization of which the independent voice may or may not be a member, or the fraternity of Freemasonry as a whole. The increased presence of independent voices shows consistent signs of expansion as a source for those interested in seeking more information and education about Freemasonry.¹⁰

Today, the virtual offerings of most grand jurisdictions or their subordinate lodges cannot fairly be compared to what the media, major retail businesses, and giant corporations have done with their Internet and social media presence. Regardless, the current web presence and offerings of virtual communications in American Freemasonry suggests that the fraternity is edging its way through the door and showing more consistency in efforts to use the Internet and social media to its advantage. This is a welcome emerging pattern, considering the Institution of American Freemasonry does not have a track record of foreseeing, much less staying ahead of, major societal paradigm shifts.

⁹ **NOTE:** The first recognizable social media site, Six Degrees, was created in 1997. It enabled users to upload a profile and make friends with other users. In 1999, the first blogging sites became popular, creating a social media sensation that is still popular today. After the invention of blogging, social media began to explode in popularity. Sites like MySpace and LinkedIn gained prominence in the early 2000s, and sites like Photobucket and Flickr facilitated online photo sharing. YouTube came out in 2005, creating an entirely new way for people to communicate and share with each other across great distances. By 2006, Facebook and Twitter both became available to users throughout the world. These sites remain some of the most popular social networks on the Internet. Other sites like Tumblr, Spotify, Foursquare and Pinterest began popping up to fill specific social networking niches. Jeremy Harris Lipschultz, *Social Media Communication 3rd Edition*, Routledge, 2020.

¹⁰ **NOTE:** The Philalethes Society (although formed in 1928), Phoenixmasonry, and the Masonic Society are major resources *independent resources* today. Supplementing independent voice sources are national associations like the Masonic Restoration Foundation (MRF) and a spectrum of other groups such as The Rubicon Masonic Society. The *Freemasons for Dummies* blog (Christopher Hodapp) with over 11 million visits worldwide since 2010 speaks clearly to the reach of the Internet and its independent Masonic voices, as does the internationally embraced and widely read book, *Observing the Craft: The Pursuit of Excellence in Masonic Labour and Observance*, 2010, (Andrew Hammer).

Along with the good news about this pattern, there comes a downside.

Although many jurisdictions and subordinate lodges have indeed improved their level of presence via the Internet and social media, the improvements are far from uniform. Understandably, some lodges do not have the funds or expertise to create a presence. Some lodges hold the belief that such a presence is of no value to them.

One thing the small group has going for them today that the same small groups did not have going for them prior to the 1990s is the Internet.

Just as the appearance of a building speaks volumes about its tenants and ownership, the same applies to websites, social media pages, and their content. Some may argue and rely on the old axiom that *you can't judge a book from its cover*, and that outward appearance is not an indicator of the value or worth of someone or something. Many Masons are especially inclined to this type of thinking, since it so closely parallels their misunderstanding of the "internal, not external qualifications of a man" that is so often used to justify slovenly appearance. (And by the way, do not books invite us to judge them by their covers?) While it can be agreed that one should not form a judgement or opinion on someone or something based purely on what is seen on the surface, we are not only naïve, but unwise, to think people do not do that. First impressions, especially visual impressions, really do matter!

Masonic offerings on the Internet and social platforms will undoubtedly become even more of a measurement of the fraternity in this technology-driven world, whether grand lodges and their subordinate lodges like it or not. There is no finish line in the labor of keeping up with technology and understanding its effects on an organization when it is used or when it is neglected or ignored.

PATTERN SEARCHING: MISTAKENLY COMPARING APPLES TO ORANGES

As jurisdictions began to suspend Masonic meetings and events in March 2020, an optimistic view was promoted and shared at some of the early virtual gatherings of Masons, in various chat rooms, a few podcasts, lodge communication newsletters, and scattered on social media. The optimism that was shared was more wishful than one based on patterns and researched facts. By May, considerable head-nodding agreement was witnessed in virtual gathering about the idea that once the pandemic was over and "things returned to normal," members would rush back to lodge and find long lines of men seeking admittance into the fraternity.

There has never been a complete “shutdown” of lodges and Masonic events throughout America prior to the 2020 pandemic.

Interruptions, as it were, yes, but never a complete shutdown as the one experienced in 2020.

Running parallel with that unwarranted optimism was an uncertainty about how the pandemic, and the restrictions arising from it, would affect the fraternity in the short *and* long term. So, looking for light at the end of what promised to be a long tunnel ahead was not surprising. Neither was it surprising that the optimistic view was laced with unbridled opinions along with rose-colored, counterfactual interpretations of factual history. There were many who believed American Freemasonry had “shutdown” all meetings and events several times in the past and that when meetings and events resumed, the fraternity always came back stronger.

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The part about the fraternity coming back stronger is only correct if “stronger” is intended to mean that after the interruptions (not complete shutdowns) that actually occurred, more members were admitted. If this is the case, the belief that the fraternity was “stronger” only because it had more members is profoundly more than debatable.

The most common apples to oranges comparison was The Spanish Flu (February 1918 to April 1920) and claims that the pandemic shutdown all of American Freemasonry meetings and events during that period. The large, most populated areas were certainly affected, however, the average interruption of two to four months before they resumed activities at varied levels is not a shutdown comparable to what occurred in 2020. Those months, however, indeed, affected numerous lodges, annual communications, and other Masonic events. In many rural areas, though, we find the Spanish Flu pandemic did not cause all work or meetings to be equally disrupted the way it did in 2020.

Many have pointed to the anti-Masonic period punctuated by the Morgan Affair in 1826 as another time in history during which lodges across the country closed as Freemasonry endured the damaging aftermath of the sentiments against Masonry that lingered throughout the 1830s. Again, this is a comparison of apples to oranges. The breakdown of the organization of the fraternity as a result of the Morgan scandal and anti-Masonic sentiments had nothing to do with restrictions or public health concerns. Many lodges did close and many meetings were cancelled during those years, however, the closings were largely in the New England states and mostly because members stopped attending lodge or ceased to maintain their membership. Grand Lodges and their subordinate lodges did not uniformly shutdown regular meetings or events throughout the United States during that time. That period, however, indeed led to a slow paradigm shift for several other reasons (i.e., the exodus of members and the unbridled rapid expansion of membership prior to, during, and following the Civil War).

A few believe that the Civil War (1861-1865) is a legitimate comparison. It is not. While there were lodges in some states that did not meet regularly or did not meet at all during the Civil War, lodges across the nation were not shut down. Also, there were numerous military lodges on both

sides of the conflict that met throughout the war years. American Freemasonry was disrupted, yes, but there was not a nationwide shutdown.

Some also claim the years of The Great Depression (1929-1933) offer a good comparison. It too, however, is an unsuitable equivalence and an example of comparing apples and oranges. Although the fraternity reportedly lost somewhere around 300,000 members nationwide during the years of The Great Depression, meetings and events continued and men were still being admitted each year (albeit many less than before the Depression).

PART IV

THE MOST RECENT EMERGING PATTERNS

The 2020 pandemic actually shutdown most all events in American Freemasonry and restrictions on were levied in accordance with public health requirements during most of the year. In person fellowship opportunities, a primary feature of the fraternity, have been, and remain in many places, on-hold. Holiday spikes in reported cases and threats of periodic shutdowns and pauses as a result now suggest that pattern will continue even though a much-awaited vaccine is now being introduced into the population.

In 2020 Masonic education, already dim, came to a standstill in most lodges. Initiation of new members could not occur (or be planned) because there were no meetings. Non-Tyled Masonic events were also cancelled due to public health restrictions. Aside from grand lodge and subordinate lodge websites, Masonic podcasts, blogs, newsletters, and grand lodge monthly or quarterly publications, Masons (never known to be read extensively anyway), found outlets for real-time participation, involvement, and Masonic activities unavailable like never before.



Virtual platforms, up to then a widely unexplored technology in American Freemasonry, slowly gained some traction but not in all areas. By July, however, the non-Tyled assemblies were starting to be seen by many as a sort of glue that might hold at least parts of Masonry together during the period when it was uncertain how long the pandemic shutdowns would remain in effect.

While most lodges offered nothing in the way of virtual assembly, those that did found, as it were, a following. Interestingly, many of the virtual assemblies were, and continue to be, well attended by members who are not members of the lodges, associations or jurisdictions sponsoring and conducting them.

Many of these early virtual, non-tyled assemblies were, at least at first, clumsy and awkward. Some offered no protocol at all within the virtual platform, creating a very informal setting that tended to contribute to the awkwardness. Many struggled with the new technology; talking over each other, unable to connect or get their cameras to work, casually approaching conversations; and were filled with repeated warnings to attendees not to discuss or inadvertently “give away” “Masonic secrets.”

Fortunately, although most of the approaches certainly illustrated a lack of experience with the technology, the virtual meetings began to evolve into more purposeful events that focused on education. The considerable pre-planning of many of these meeting was refreshing. A few were well-structured and incorporated simple and effective protocols that gave many virtual meetings a sense of Masonry without the official or more formal observance Masonry is supposed to include, as members were brought together for discussions on a variety of topics. New acquaintances and friendships were formed. Question and answer periods led to extended length of meetings. Masonry was discussed and more than a few attendees regularly noted and called to the attention of others in the virtual meeting how strange it was that a shutdown of regular Masonic meetings led to brothers getting together from all over the world to talk about, of all things, Freemasonry – something many kidded about rarely taking place in their regular lodge meetings.

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The idea that virtual meetings could or should take the place of in-person Masonic meetings or events was never a collectively agreed upon notion in most of these virtual meetings. Regardless, virtual technologies are now more recognized as a legitimate and worthwhile way of uniting Brethren in the interest of fellowship and learning even when regular meetings with less restrictions resume one day. An ancillary benefit arose when many of the officer corps in a number of lodges determined that their monthly planning meetings could more easily be scheduled and attended through the same platform. Even annual Grand Communications and elections have been conducted through a virtual platform.

So, how many out of the supposed million or so card carrying members in United States jurisdictions who had no stated communications or other Masonic events to attend took advantage of virtual assemblies on a regular basis in 2020? Accurately determining that number is challenging, but a responsible estimate from records kept since March 2020, project that less than 5% participated.

While Facebook, Twitter, email, blogs, podcasts, and other social media must be considered in the mix of ways members may have attempted to remain connected at some level or another, those technology vehicles do not facilitate real-time assembly as do the virtual meetings on Zoom, Skype, GotoMeeting, BoardDocs, OfficeSuite UC, WebEx Meetings, and several others.

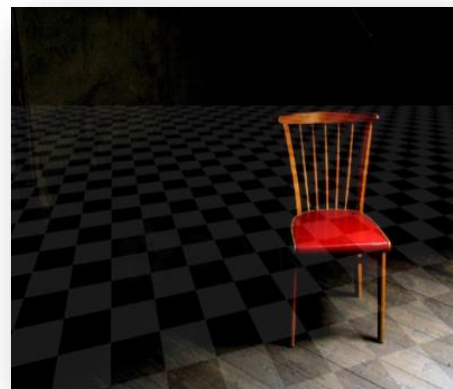
Virtual assemblies during the pandemic restrictions (at least thus far) offer a glimpse of just how seriously (or unseriously as the case may be) many members take their membership and pursuit of involvement in their fraternity at any level. Notwithstanding notice of the fact that older members may have no interest in the technology that offers virtual or social media connectivity, the estimated 5% involvement remains troubling. Furthermore, that low percentage is in close alignment with the fact that involvement and attendance in Masonic meetings and events was, well before the pandemic, troublingly low as well.

Perhaps the most disturbing examination of the pattern at this point is the finding that many of those who might be considered part of the “small groups” who have consistently pursued more of a heritage experience in Freemasonry, also proved to be not as engaged as participants in the many virtual meeting since March 2020.

Those members, including some in leadership, who excitedly asserted during the early to mid-months of the “lockdown year,” that once lodges were permitted to resume their meetings, the fraternity would experience a flood of members returning, supplemented by a hardy wave of petitioners were miles off in their presumptive calculations. Neither of the hopeful but opinion-based notions has yet to show signs of occurring although many jurisdictions have resumed, under various restrictions, their meetings.

In certain instances, the pattern, thus far, has been that, on the average, less than 1 in 12 current members (around 7%) have even returned to lodge. That number includes officers required to officially open lodge and conduct business.

A closer look tells us the inactivity for the majority of 2020 naturally bottlenecked the regular process of what was typically happening anyway each year in many lodges. The number of candidates who may be admitted after months of shutdown does not, on the average, appear greater than those who would have been admitted had there not been a disruption of meetings.



One reason many may not return to lodge at all, and a corresponding reason that some in the small groups did not regularly attend/participate in virtual meetings, is that in the past nine

months away from lodge and distanced from meetings/events, Masonry has been pre-empted or supplanted by something else in the personal lives of many of these members. Never in the lifetime of any member today has their lodge and Masonic events been off the table for almost a full year. When combined with the fact that the average age of members places them most at risk from the pandemic, coupled, with a weak attendance and participation in lodge record prior to the pandemic, the implications cannot be ignored. Simple put out losses due to attrition and non-participation are accumulating far more rapidly than our ability to replace these men.

Also adding to what cannot be ignored is that the families of some members have discouraged, and may continue to rightly discourage, their fathers, husbands, sons, uncles, brothers, etc., from assembling anywhere for any reason beyond what might be absolutely necessary until an “all clear” is given and believed about the pandemic.

As we know, variables influencing involvement and commitment in Freemasonry, even in times of health and prosperity, are numerous. We can agree there are valid reasons men do not remain in or regularly attend lodge, that have been, and continue to be, justified. In the spirit of fairness (and honesty), we also know the opposite is true in some situations.

In one way the belief that there is strength in fewness appears to be approaching its true crossroads. The patterns we are seeing today are flags and signals that something pivotal is again stirring the direction of the existing paradigm.

The question being asked by many today is whether those left standing or the fewness (no matter its cause—pandemic effects or the sixty-year steady decline in membership – or both) will be committed enough to set a constructive course of the Institution for the next decade or more without falling back into the pattern of opening wide the West Gate and admitting as many men as possible as has so often become the pattern since the turn of the 19th century. Perhaps, the larger question looms: *is there anyone interested enough to seek admittance regardless of how widely the West Gate may be opened?*”

HAS THERE BEEN A “HARD LOOK” TODAY?

As always, seeing the picture when you are inside the frame is difficult, but not impossible. The eras in which American Freemasonry experienced the ramifications of the Anti-Masonic period, Morgan Affair, Civil War, Spanish Flu pandemic, and The Depression do have one thing in common with the 2020 pandemic on American Freemasonry.

Each of those periods offered a moment to the grand jurisdictions in this country, and every subordinate lodge, that was squandered: the opportunity for the fraternity to step back, catch its breath, and genuinely assess in a more balanced way than has been its practice, its trajectory, model of delivery, and, of course, the historical intent, aim, and purpose of the Craft. There was always sufficient time to undertake a valid and balanced organizational introspection and there has certainly been time in 2020, just as there will likely be in 2021, to do the same. The pattern of the past suggests that this will not happen.

Instead, the clear pattern we see after each of those eras – and the pattern forming today after nearly a year of shutdown, is the routine rally-cry that all ills can be solved by seeking more members. Grand Lodge Proceedings throughout the United States illustrate that point, and the condition of our fraternity as a whole today reflects the consequences.

Collectively, most grand jurisdictions and their subordinate lodges, regardless of factual history proving the contrary, seem to continuously believe they are always on the right path. Membership usually elects those who embrace, then advance, that thinking.

That opportunity for introspection and meaningful change was misspent in the aftermath of the Morgan Affair, Civil War, and The Great Depression. Freemasonry today is on the same missed opportunity track.

At the conclusion of 2020, we find yet another concern arising from the effects of the pandemic on the fraternity. If it were not for the increased experience of members with virtual meetings, the matter would likely not be any more in the forefront now than it has been in previous years. The issue is growing talk of jurisdictions discussing whether to allow lodges to open and not only conduct business in a Tyled virtual meeting, but to also confer degrees.

Already devaluing the Masonic ritual experience with the concept of one-day classes (not to mention a cheapening of the initiatic experience by rushing candidates through the regular degree process in a sixty-day period) the idea of virtually conferring degrees would be keeping true to patterns of the past.¹¹

Should, at some point in the future, the logical opposition to such a consideration be overshadowed by the lure of the idea that the virtual conferment of degrees might add thousands of members to the rosters and thus gain traction, previous doctrinal shifts will pale in comparison to the one that would follow.

CLOSING

No one has to tell members who, prior to the pandemic, were active and engaged in their fraternity, that social distancing and the public health restrictions accompanying it are hardly compatible with the operational model to which they were accustomed. The same stands true, of course, with businesses, schools, the military, governments, the medical field, the entertainment industry, tourism, and the list goes on. Nevertheless, like other organizations affected by the pandemic, the fraternity has made efforts to carry on.

¹¹ **NOTE:** In 1992 the District of Columbia conferred all three degrees of Craft Masonry over a two-day period. Since then, at least 31 other jurisdictions have adopted some form of mass raising, usually over the span of one day. Just as the action spread into a pattern, once the challenges and difficulties of demonstrating the value of one-day classes beyond the immediate inflation of coffers, most all jurisdictions have moved away from the practice. Michael A. Halleran, *Quality Vs. Quantity: Membership Standards in the 21st Century Let Him Wait With Patience? How Solicitation, Recruitment and One-Day Conferrals Failed North American Freemasonry*, XIV World Conference of Regular Masonic Grand Lodges, Seattle, Washington, 2016, Paul M. Bessel, Statistical Evaluation of Grand Masters Classes, June 19, 2001, <http://bessel.org/gmclass.pdf>, accessed 8 November 2020.

Recognizing repetitious patterns, or ones that may be forming is far from an art. To do so, however, does require that we look for them. The difficult part is putting them in an appropriate perspective and correctly tracing their outcome.

A major outcome from the suspension of Stated Communications and Masonic events in 2020 is how many Masons (although a small percentage) were funneled toward virtual assemblies on a scale that is likely to have never otherwise occurred as quickly as it has.

While most agree virtual assembly for the purpose of fellowship, staying connected, as it were, and education has served surprisingly well, there is no collective agreement that the technology is a suitable, much less fitting, substitute for the in-person labors and benefits of Stated Communications and through in-person Masonic events outside the lodge.

This virtual technology platform is far from being considered an indispensable tool in Masonry by all members. It has, however, proven to be quite a useful tool, and one that has the earmark of a pattern that may further influence the future trajectory of the fraternity.

The pursuit of knowledge is surely at the root of Freemasonry: knowledge of not only ourselves but of the world around us. If our knowledge, as it were, is not cultivated about either, then are

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we not predestined to remain the same as we were before admitted? If we are to expect *quality output* from our labors, how do we not first demand *quality input* regarding the operations and leadership of our fraternity? If we do not have a big picture approach or awareness of the necessity of a consistent, vigilant eye on the patterns that ushered it onto the path we are on today, is our future as an organization destined to the influence of marionette Masonry? If we continue to embrace the fragile contention that since the fraternity is, after all, the oldest in the world, will it persevere based on that claim alone?

A major outcome from the suspension of Stated Communications and Masonic events in 2020 is how many Masons (although a small percentage) were funneled toward virtual assemblies on a scale that is likely to have never otherwise occurred as quickly as it has.

WE SHOULD'VE SEEN THIS COMING

To get an idea of where Freemasonry in America is headed, current patterns, combined with those of the past and those emerging today give us the opportunity to examine that idea and cultivate our knowledge while doing so.

If we do not look at past, current, and emerging patterns and then constructively use what we learn to assess and chart a responsible path, then we are in keeping with many past and current patterns in American Freemasonry.

JOHN W. BIZZACK, PH.D.

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A forty-five-year veteran in the field of policing and criminal justice, John W. Bizzack served over half of his criminal justice career with the Lexington Police Department. He rose through the ranks serving most of his career in the Criminal Investigation Bureau, Commander of Special Investigations, Robbery-Homicide, and later commander of the Bureau. He retired in 1996 from assignment in the Office of the Chief of Police.

He was appointed by three consecutive governors to the position of Commissioner of the Department of Criminal Justice Training in the Kentucky Justice Cabinet. He retired with 20 years of service as Commissioner of that department, where he directed the responsibilities of the department for the hiring and selection practices of Kentucky police officers as well as overseeing certified basic and advanced annual training for over 10,000 law enforcement and criminal justice officials.

Dr. Bizzack is the author of four books and many essays, commentaries, and papers on leadership, criminal investigation, police standards, and the

behavior and management of organizations. In addition, he has written twelve books and numerous essays and articles about Freemasonry. He speaks nationwide on a variety of issues about the criminal justice system, critical thinking, and Freemasonry.

He was elected to consecutive terms as Master of Lexington Lodge No. 1—the oldest Masonic Lodge in Kentucky. He is co-founder and coordinator of the Masonic History & Study Group and served eight years as chair of the lodge Education Committee and member of the 2020 Committee on Education, Grand Lodge of Kentucky. He is a Fellow and Board member of The Masonic Society and Founding Member of the Rubicon Masonic Society where he serves as Vice Chair. Dr. Bizzack is also a member of the Scottish Rite, Philalethes Society, Texas Lodge of Research, a subscriber to the Southern California Lodge of Research, and is a Fellow and member of the William O. Ware Lodge of Research in Covington, Kentucky. He is a member of Fiat Lux 1717, and Alba Lodge No. 222, Washington, D.C., and Honorary Member of Sophia Lodge 767, North Carolina.

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