

THE GREAT MASONIC CAN-KICKING: 1779-2024

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On December 27, 1779, American Union Lodge 1, which was first chartered in Massachusetts in 1776 and functioned as a traveling military Lodge for seven years, met in Arnold's Tavern in Morristown, New Jersey. The Lodge master, Colonel Jonathan Hart, noted that one of the purposes of the meeting was to take into consideration "some matters respecting the good of Masonry." Mordecai Gist, a continental army general from Maryland, was given the floor where he presented a petition to form a general Grand Lodge for the United States.

Reportedly, more than eighty Masons were present that evening, many of whom were distinguished officers in the American Continental Army. Some reports of the evening, which began to appear with regularity in Masonic journals in the latter years of the 1800s, note that George Washington was in the room.

The Gist petition depicted the state of the Masonic Institution in 1779, while in the infant confederation of colonies that would later become the United States. Gist described Lodges as lacking "a source of Light to govern their pursuits and illuminate the path of happiness," and noted that "many irregularities and improprieties" had manifested into the "present dissipated and almost abandoned condition of our Lodges in general, as well as the relaxation of virtue amongst individuals."¹

In the final paragraph, Gist called for an immediate departure from the existing oversight of Grand Lodges to "save us from the impending dangers of schisms and apostasy." In closing, the petition stated: "To obtain security from those fatal evils, with affectionate humility, we beg leave to recommend the adopting and pursuing the most necessary measures." He went on to say the most effective way to correct these "impending dangers" was to "appoint a Grand Master in and over the Thirteen United States of America."² Gist's use of the words "in and over" suggested to some historians that the proposed Grand Master might also be authorized to create a Grand Lodge of America. Later research, however, untangled that notion and determined that such a proposed position of Grand Master would only have had the authority to preside over and govern Masonic conventions and the warranting of Lodges in new territories, but no authority to oversee sovereign grand Lodges.³

Contrary to Masonic myth, Washington was not nominated that evening for the position of Grand Master of a Grand Lodge of America. A committee was appointed to take the subject into consideration; and as might be expected because of the nature of the American Union Lodge itself, Masons from each division of the army were appointed members. Gist was elected president at the called convention and documents were drafted to send to the different Grand Masters in the United States. The convention "delicately foreborne" in the document to mention Washington as their choice for general Grand Master, but it was well understood that such was their wish.⁴

The movement started by these loyal military officers did not gain traction, but the 1779 event would not be the last time Masons in America proposed such a model. Over the next seventy-four years, the initiative to

¹ "The Petition," New Jersey Edition of *Master Mason Magazine for Freemasons* 2, no. 9, March 1927, 140.

² Mark A. Tabbert, "George Washington, General Grand Master of the U.S.A, or Not?" *Reflections on 300 years Of Freemasonry*, ed. John S. Wade London, Lewis Masonic, 2017, 208, and discussion with author on October 22, 2018.

³ *IBID.*

⁴ Henry R. Rugg, ed., *The Freemason's Repository*, 4, Providence R. I. Freeman and Co., 1884–1885, 290.

establish a general Grand Master of the United States, which grew into calls for a general grand Lodge of America, appeared another nine times and involved thirteen jurisdictions – the last call was in 1859.⁵ The effects of the Civil War on the mood of Masons and their respective Grand Lodges after five years of national conflict cannot be discounted as a principal reason the movement disappeared. Another reason that cannot be ignored is that Masonic membership increased with great rapidity during and following the Civil War. Membership levels continued to rise through the early twentieth century. The glee generated by this unbridled proliferation and prosperity enjoyed by the Fraternity smothered the movement, although rapid expansion was not the panacea to the internal problems that had faced the American Institution since the late 1770s. In fact, the expansion only exacerbated the conditions that prompted the calls for a National Grand Lodge, and crafted a predicament from which the Fraternity has yet to free itself.

While the failure of the movement to establish a National Grand Lodge or create the position of a general Grand Master is a fascinating part of the factual history of the unfolding of the Fraternity in America, the real story is not about whether a national Grand Master or Grand Lodge was a solution to the deficiencies existing in Masonry in the United States. No, the real story is about the continual failure of the Fraternity's leadership to at least attempt to adequately explore *why* such a movement persisted for three generations – the seeming indifference to acknowledging and recognizing the underlying issues that spurred the movements to form a general Grand Lodge.

The mistaken assumption that “bigger is better” merely fed the notion that bigness is a measurement of success, rather than more relevantly measuring what is actually produced. In due course, American Freemasonry adopted the belief that being made a Mason was considered a mere event, rather than a process, and the West Gate was flung open. Candidates were rushed through degrees, and then left with little but exposure to ritual as their basis for Masonic competence. Men introduced to Freemasonry in this fashion eventually ascended into leadership roles at various levels and brought with them that naïve belief. The result was more semi-manufactured Lodges, more semi-manufactured Masons, and, once the norm, the granite-like unbending culture of American Masonry was set.

We do not have to look far to see that this pattern formed in all jurisdictions with little variance. The factual history of organized Freemasonry in America is data-rich, and looking at that data, as a whole, clarifies the trajectory that the Fraternity took then, and on which it continues to travel since at least 1800.⁶

Masons who become familiar with the story of William Preston's work in the 1770s gain considerable insight into that trajectory.⁷ The Great Schism between Ancients and Moderns from 1751 to 1813 also helps to explain what has happened.⁸ Learning about the actual roots of anti-Masonic sentiments in America from the late 1790s through early decades of the 1800s, the Morgan Affair in 1826 and its aftermath, contributes significantly to understanding the condition of the Order today.⁹ In addition, understanding what led to, and the results of, the 1843 Baltimore Convention and the 1860-1866 Conservator Movement are critical to that understanding. It is equally important to have a working awareness of how the Golden Age of Fraternalism

⁵ “A United Grand Lodge.” *The American Freemason's New Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 1, July 1859. Charles W. Moore was the editor of this publication. No author is noted for the article.

⁶ See “Part 1: 1800-1899: The Struggle for Consistency,” *The Canker Worm on the Rose*, John W. Bizzack, BSF Foundation, 2023.

⁷ Colin Dyer, *William Preston and His Work*, Shepperton, U.K, Lewis Masonic, 1987.

⁸ Ric Berman, *Schism: The Battle that Forged Freemasonry*, Liverpool University Press, 2013.

⁹ Stephen Dafoe, *Morgan: The Scandal That Shook Freemasonry*, Cornerstone, 2009, John W. Bizzack, *The Age of Unreason: Dissecting the Infamy of the Morgan Affair and Its Aftermath*, BSF Foundation, 2020, John W. Bizzack, “The Carnivalization of American Culture and Its Effect on Freemasonry,” *Bending Granite*, 2023, John W. Bizzack, *The Past Is Always Present: Connecting the Dots of a Banquet of Foolishness*, *Bending Granite*, 2003, John Dickie, *The Craft*, Public Affairs, 2020.

influenced the American Masonic Institution in ways that linger today.¹⁰ But nowhere is the story made clearer than in our own minutes and Annual Proceedings.

While Freemasonry is a unique and extraordinary concept, its management and administration have always been, and will continue to be, bound by, and tethered to one, humble organizational rule: *the failure to manage growth in any organization consistently leads to later managing decline*. This is not to say that bigger is inherently bad, only that it is not necessarily better, especially when growth overtakes the capability of the organization to manage it. The organization that regularly mistakes “bigness” for growth typically ends up measuring its success by its bigness. In due course the organization drifts from the reality that genuine growth is about reaching full potential, not maximum size. Expansion does not automatically or inevitably equal, much less guarantee, progress, or a stable foundation. Saying that the Fraternity at all levels should have seen this coming is an outlandish understatement.

One would think that Masonic records, research, and warnings from a significant number of leaders and scholars over the nearly three centuries of operation in America, together with the evidence compiled from these sources, would be enough to ensure that the organization would find ways to address its deficiencies. Unfortunately, such has not been the case.

Our records demonstrate that, by 1859, it was the strenuous labor of the few that sustained the Craft, while the lack of Masonic knowledge found among the many served as an equally powerful force to drag it down.¹¹ With the explosion of membership following the Civil War, the uniformed many became the norm. By 1983, one-hundred twenty-four years later, it had become unmistakable that the Institution had become an example of the triumph of procedure over substance.¹² Kicking the core problems it continued to face down the road had become a long-established pastime for the Fraternity.

One other thing has become abundantly clear over the past two hundred forty-five years: never has so much been written that has been read by so few. That is a charitable assessment, because if it is not true, then we would have to say that most Masons and their leaders deliberately ignored the truth about the Fraternity being on the road to obscurity.

Interestingly, though, despite these repeatedly expressed concerns, none of the earlier writers, scholars, researchers, or leaders of the Fraternity since the mid-1800s claimed that Masonry was dying because of the “bigness” of the organization. Eroding, yes. Suffering from decline in interest by its members and the public, yes. Becoming more ordinary by the year, yes. Threatened by the lack of quality work, and the poor caliber of

¹⁰ Henry C. Chiles, “The Baltimore Convention, 1843,” Missouri Lodge of Research, no date, James W. S. Mitchell, “The Masonic Signet and Literary Mirror, March 1852, Samuel T. Atkinson, Masonic Ritual in Virginia, Historical Foundations of the Masonic Ritual, no date (Charles, Mitchell and Atkinson papers found in a Special Collection Folder at the Missouri Lodge of Research, 2017), Charles W. Moore and S.W.B. Carnegie, *The Masonic Trestle-Board, Adapted to the National System of Work and Lectures, as Revised and Perfected by the United States Masonic Convention at Baltimore, Maryland*, Charles W. Moore, Boston, Ray Vaughn Denslow, “The Masonic Conservators” Masonic Service Association of Missouri, 1931, Bob Jensen, “The Baltimore Convention Of 1843,” Lynn Dumenil, *Freemasonry and American Culture, 1880-1930*, Princeton Legacy Library, 1984, *The Philalethes* October 1994, Mack Sigmon, *The Convention That Changed Freemasonry*, presentation at the Masonic Restoration Foundation Symposium, Asheville, North Carolina, April 9, 2011, Harriet W. McBride, “The Golden Age of Fraternalism: 1870-1910,” *Heredom*, Vol.13, 2005, Mary Ann Clawson, *Constructing Brotherhood: Class, Gender, and Fraternalism*. Princeton University Press, 1989, Alexander Piatigorsky, *Freemasonry: A Study of a Phenomenon*, Harvill Press, 1997, William D. Moore, *Riding the Goat, Secrecy, Masculinity, and Fraternal High Jinks in the United States, 1845–1930* http://phoenixmasonry.org/Moore_Riding_the_Goat.pdf, accessed November 2023, John W. Bizzack and Dan M. Kemble, “Burlesquing Freemasonry,” *The Rubiucan Masonic Society Transactions*, Vol. 1, 2023, John Bizzack and Dan M. Kemble, “What Happened When The Band Stopped Playing: The Response In American Freemasonry,” *The Rubiucan Masonic Society Transactions*, Vol. 1, 2023.

¹¹ Rob Morris, *The History of Freemasonry in Kentucky*, Morris, Louisville, Kentucky, 1959.

¹² S. Brent Morris, “The Siren Song of Solicitation – The case Against Easing Masonic Membership Practices,” presented to the Northeast Conference on Masonic Education and Libraries, Newark, Delaware, May 13, 1983.

men admitted, apathy, and lack of Masonic knowledge in too many of its members, absolutely. But we find no one declaring that Masonry itself was on the path to extinction – especially in the period during which concerns were identified. Instead, we find it necessary to distinguish between Freemasonry the idea, and Freemasonry the organization.

The question of the perpetuity of the *organized version* of Masonry in the United States was the actual concern. These concerns were well-expressed and vividly clear by 1843.¹³ In fact, those same issues formed the impetus for the repeated calls for a General Grand Lodge. And since that time, the surplus of writings and research screams the fact that the entire Fraternity should not only have seen the organizational change coming, but should have applied the simple workable solutions repeatedly put forth in our own records and writings. Failing to do so for two centuries and only kicking the problems down the road is embarrassingly shameful. It is much more likely that legitimate Masonic historians will not be writing about how millions of men who were made members as a something that made Masonry wildly successful. Rather, the narrative will be about how allowing millions to be made members, only to have the Craft drift from the historical aim, purpose, and intent, eventually brought organized Masonry to a reckoning.

By the 21st century we begin to find Masons composing funeral requiems and writing eulogies for the Institution in America. Many are based on the generalizing actuarial tables that project the year that there will be no more Masons in America, if the rate of membership decline continues as it has since 1959. As that theme made the rounds on the Internet, on podcasts, in books, and occasionally, the mainstream news, it got attention, of course. But even the breathless reporting of such generalized actuarial tabulations has not caused the Masonic can-kicking habit to downshift.

Now, using arithmetic predictions to forecast the end of our Craft is based on the flawed thinking that in order for the Institution of Masonry to be successful and relevant, its membership roster must reflect a high number of members. That, of course, is utter nonsense and is at the very heart of what plagues Freemasonry today. Many Masons who subscribe to such thinking, for whatever reasons, fall into the same all-we-need-is-more-members trap that so much of our culture and leadership have fallen into since the early 1800s. What a shame and error it is to think that if the Fraternity does not have massive membership numbers, then Masonry has failed.

It cannot be too carefully observed that institutional Masonry will always be, or become, what the great majority of its members think it is or want it to become. We have seen that in each generation since the early 1800s. As pointed out by the classic Masonic authors, researchers, and voices of American Masonry for multiple decades, there is nothing wrong with Freemasonry. It is how we convey it, understand it, weaken it, and drift from its historical intent that has proven abysmal in mainstream circles. But we know that it does seem useless to attempt to teach men any more than they wish to know.¹⁴

One of the more important papers on this matter was published in 2023 in *The Transactions of The Rubicon Masonic Society*. Dan M. Kemble, Past Master of the William O. Ware Lodge of Research in Kentucky, points out how the Fraternity has managed to make members of too many men with no chests and expect them to be virtuous and enterprising. Castrating, and then bidding the geldings to be fruitful, we expect them without heart or conviction to exhibit morality and leadership in their labor and pursuit of Masonry.¹⁵

¹³ Henry Wingate, Grand Master's Address to the Craft, Grand Lodge of Kentucky Annual Proceedings, 1843.

¹⁴ William B. Clarke, *The Genius of Freemasonry: William B. Clarke's Leaves from Georgia Masonry*, ed. Paul Rich, Washington, D.C., Westphalia Press, 2013.

¹⁵ Dan M. Kemble, Masons With No Chests: A Rebuttal To The Assertion That "All Freemasonry Is Local," *The Rubicon Masonic Society Transactions*, Vol. 1, 2023. Kemble's point is taken from a quote by C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, Macmillan, New York, 1947.

Well-intentioned or not, by allowing members to make of Freemasonry what they will, we have turned our precepts and principles into moving targets, and we have effectively removed the very heart of who we are by denying our own elevated purpose. As Kemble observes, we have stripped ourselves of our identity as an organization of morally and intellectually elite men, grounded in the knowledge of absolute truth.¹⁶

But aside from the internal core problems with which the Fraternity has repeatedly struggled, American Freemasonry faces today what is perhaps its most challenging hurdle. And the following question is more pertinent than before.

Can the idea of organized Masonry that arose out of, and was heavily influenced by, the Enlightenment Era (circa 1680-1820), remain relevant to a modern society male (on whom its continued membership is dependent) when modern society itself is unmoored from the values and beliefs of the Enlightenment Era?

Trust in the long-standing belief that every generation produces a ready forest of well-seasoned men of good timber can be readily challenged today more than any other time in the history of our nation. It is often argued that over the past two decades the so-called “pool” of men of good timber on which we are supposed to rely for future membership is looking more like a puddle, and the density of the forest in which good timbered men grow has been thinned out substantially.

It has always proven more difficult for the Fraternity to retain members than it has been to attract them. What will happen when the pool from which we hope to attract future quality members and effective leaders becomes even smaller than we imagine it is today makes this a *very* pertinent question. Will we address the question? Or will we continue to kick the can down the road?

We’ve watched as the high standards of our Craft have been altered, in betrayal of our absolute and immutable characteristics. And by those alterations we continue to make Freemasonry something other than Freemasonry.

We frequently hear the phrase “My Freemasonry” employed to describe an individual’s understanding of Freemasonry. There is no *your* Freemasonry, nor is there *my* Freemasonry. There is *no Kentucky Freemasonry*, nor is there *Indiana, Virginia, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, Missouri, California, Texas*, or any other state *Freemasonry*. There is *only Freemasonry*. It waits for us to practice it.¹⁷

The aim of Freemasonry is indeed the training and development of its adherents as men of character, of square conduct and upright intentions, men of charity of thought and spirit, men of moral fiber and moral courage, and it is these purposes that committed and well-instructed Masons are increasingly anxious to see realized.¹⁸

Perhaps, because the future so often seems far in the distance, much of the Fraternity believes there is ample time to develop fruitful programs that can accomplish what is lacking without changing practices that have proven ineffective. One would think that those who believe that and say, “time will tell,” would consider that almost two-hundred and fifty years is time enough. But, then again, if such members are not well instructed about the historical aim, purpose, and intent of Masonry why would they think that there is need for introspection and change? If we have taught men to kick the can down the road, and we have, why

¹⁶ *IBID.*

¹⁷ *IBID.*

¹⁸ Joseph Johnson, *The Lure of Masonry*, The Masonic Record, London, 1936.

should we expect them to do anything other than what they have been taught?

But there is good news, although there is an ample number of Masons today who will view it to be the opposite. The Fraternity is on a largely uninterrupted path of not only membership decline but an accompanying disinterest felt by many of its members and that of the public. That current indifference to Freemasonry has not been seen since the aftermath years of the anti-Masonic period and the 1826 Morgan Affair.¹⁹ Perhaps those left standing when the Fraternity is at its lowest point will be the men committed to the pursuit of Masonry as it was intended, and such men will realize the strength that Freemasonry *is* intended to have through a new level of fewness of members.

So, let us be clear. There is nothing that needs to change or be modified about the historical intent of Masonry. What the authentic leaders of the Craft, many of its members, and the vast majority of its scholars have noted since the late 1700s is that the change necessary to best assure the perpetuity of Masonry is found in amending much of our organizational processes. What has been most needed in organized Masonry in America is the useful work of actually guarding that West Gate and properly educating those who are truly qualified and admitted in the true purpose and exploration of its the rites.²⁰

Notwithstanding, the loudest sound in American Freemasonry for roughly 250 years has been the sound of a can being kicked down a road. To date, that sound has been heard above the calls for a National Grand Lodge, uniformity in work, and the voices of those who have genuine, legitimate concern about the delivery of Freemasonry to those who seek it.

As S. Brent Morris astutely observed decades ago: change in the manner in which we convey Masonry is inevitable if the institution is to do more than merely survive through the future. Ultimately, the wind and waves are always on the side of the ablest navigators²¹ and the probability certainly exists that only the ablest navigators will be left standing in the decades to come.

Those of us who are more optimistic about the posterity of Masonry than we are about the methods used to administer and convey it, can find solace in the idea that the Freemasonry that was carved out of the rough hard quarries of quarrelling humanity is only passing through a period of youth - - and, thus, its maturity is yet to come.²²

We will know when that maturity arrives because the sound of can-kicking in American Freemasonry will be silenced.

¹⁹ Leon Hyneman's *Worlds Masonic Register*, Philadelphia, 1860, notes the number of Masons in the United States in 1860 was well under 100,000.

²⁰ W. L. Wilmshurst, *The Masonic Initiation*, Percy Lund, Humphries & Co. Ltd., 1924.

²¹ Edward Gibbon. See 84.

²² Andrew Somerville MacBride, *Speculative Freemasonry*, D. MacFillan, Glasgow, Scotland, 1914.