

The Steamboat Captain Who Changed The Course of Kentucky Freemasonry

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ABSTRACT

History does not give a us a clear account of what the man who, in August 1851 at the 51st Annual Communication of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky in Lexington, was thinking when he made a motion that continues to affect the course of Freemasonry in Kentucky more than 170 years later.

Recording details about history as it is happening is not often the driving force behind recording Masonic minutes and compiling the Annual Proceedings of many Grand Lodges. As is often found in proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky, the business of the Craft is properly noted for posterity but we commonly find little or no information about the discussion surrounding an issue or topic, its context, or *why* it was brought up, debated, rejected, or passed. Future generations are left to interpret the acts of the Grand Lodge through the examination of other documents and recordings, if they can be located. To better understand what was behind many of the decisions that charted the early course of the fraternity in America, additional research about the era and what was occurring in the rest of the Masonic world is necessary. Context and clarity are needed to help explain and understand why some motions, actions, resolutions, and decisions were made at the time they were made.

We must work harder today than ever before because we are dealing with a generation that is drinking from a well we didn't dig and eating from a tree we didn't plant.

We must educate our members on our heritage [history].

~ James C. Joiner, Chair, Masonic Education Committee, Grand Lodge of Kentucky, 2003.¹

CONDENSED BACKGROUND

he recommendations that came out of the Baltimore Convention of 1843 had long lasting effects on Masonry in the United States. Delegates from sixteen of the twenty-three Grand Lodges existing at the time met in Baltimore, Maryland from May 8 until May 17, 1843. They made a

¹ Proceedings, Grand Lodge of Kentucky, Committee on Masonic Education, 2003, p.198.

series of recommendations that most of the delegates and supporters of the Convention believed would improve the institution of American Freemasonry.

A comprehensive account of their work, and all that stemmed from that Convention, is beyond the scope of this paper. But sources providing complete details of all the work by the Convention can be easily found elsewhere.²

This paper is about only one of the recommendations that sprang from the Baltimore Convention. And as with all the recommendations made at that convention, it carried no weight of Masonic Law, or bound any Grand Lodge jurisdiction to accept it. Nevertheless, this recommendation was slowly adopted by every Grand Jurisdiction in the United States before the end of the century. In 1987, one-hundred and forty-four years later, Grand Lodges began to re-examine their previous acceptance of this particular recommendation. A slim majority of jurisdictions reversed their earlier adoption of it in the hope that doing so would accomplish what they had wanted to do when they first adopted the recommendation, that is, improve the institution of American Freemasonry.³

In 1852, nine years after the Convention, a steamboat captain and Mason from the eastern part of Kentucky introduced a resolution at the Annual Communication of the Grand Lodge that led to the adoption of that particular recommendation. That portion of the Constitution of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky remains in effect today, although there have been several unsuccessful attempts to abolish it.

The recommendation came on the closing day of the 1843 Baltimore Convention — literally at the eleventh-hour of the final session. A delegate from the Grand Lodge of Missouri declared that opening a Masonic Lodge to conduct business on any degree other than the Master Mason Degree was an "impropriety." That recommendation, adopted by the Convention, was to restrict the transaction of Lodge business only to the Master Mason Degree.

It is important to understand that using the word "impropriety" was not intended to suggest that opening a lodge on any degree other than the Master Mason degree to conduct business was in any way *illegal* under Masonic Law. Masons attending that convention most likely understood how the word was meant. But had the delegate said the practice had become *unacceptable* in the face of long-standing problems the Fraternity had failed to effectively address, the recommendation might have later made more sense to many Masons.

The solution put forth was to change an aspect of Masonry that had been the practice of not only all regular Masonic Lodges in the United States since the time that Masonry first arrived in colonies, but of the entire Masonic world. The item to be changed was the practice of opening Lodge and conducting business on the Entered Apprentice Degree, so that all members, regardless of which of the three degrees of Masonry they held, could attend and participate in the life and care of the Lodge and Freemasonry.⁴

² Bob J. Jensen, "The Baltimore Convention of 1843," *The Philalethes,* October 1994, Mack Sigmon, *The Convention that Changed Freemasonry,* Wilkinson College, April 2009, Samuel T. Atkinson, "Historical Foundations of the Masonic Ritual

Masonic Ritual In Virginia.," Phoenix Masonry, http://phoenixmasonry.org/historical_foundations_of_the_masonic_ritual.htm, accessed January 2022, Henry Coil, *Coil's Encyclopedia of Freemasonry*, Macoy, 1961, Charles W. Moore, The New Masonic Trestle-board, Adapted to the Work and Lectures as Practiced in the Lodges, Chapters, Councils, and Encampments of Knights Templars, 1850, Henry C. Chiles, "The Baltimore Convention," *Masonic Bulletin of the Grand Lodge of British Columbia and Yukon*, October 2010.

³ In 1987 the Grand Lodge of Connecticut determined 1843 recommendation they had adopted no longer constructive. They were quickly followed by Missouri and since then a total of 27 Grand Jurisdictions changed their legislation and now allow their lodges to open and conduct on the Entered Apprentice Degree.

⁴ The recommendation did not suggest Lodges outside the United States should adopt this change.

The widespread adoption of that recommended change to the 126 year old practice would have adverse effects on the American institution because it failed to take into consideration what the long-term consequences would be. Because all American Grand Jurisdictions eventually adopted the recommendation, it was —at least at the time — clearly thought to be a good idea.

So, what was the problem that was thought to be so easily solved by simply adopting the Missouri delegate's recommendation? And what made the notion that requiring Lodges to conduct business only on the Master Mason degree as opposed to the Entered Apprentice Degree or Fellow Craft Degree seem like such a good idea at the time?

CONTEXT

The unbridled growth of membership and Lodges throughout American states and territories that began in earnest in the first twenty-five years of the 1800s is well established. The inability of Grand Lodges to assure that all regularly chartered Lodges adequately conveyed the historical intent, aim, and purpose of Freemasonry through instruction and the approved processes contributed to widespread inconsistencies. One Masonic leader later described this reality as "semi-manufactured Masons in semi-manufactured Lodges."⁵

Geography and distance in the 1800s limited regular, much less consistent, inspection and guidance by Grand Lodges. And while the *idea* of Masonry endured, the diversity of practices and the arrogance of some Grand Lodges, due to the sovereignty they enjoyed in their respective jurisdictions, played a role in the creation of many semi-manufactured lodges. In addition, the influence of traveling degree peddlers and the absence — or limited availability — of reliable Masonic literature at the time contributed to the semi-manufacturing process. The dozens of exposures of Masonry, published between 1723 and 1825,⁶ in which were revealed rituals, passwords, the obligation, and the then-accepted practices of Masonry certainly contributed to the diversity of practices and accounted for the myriad ways in which Masonry was conveyed to its expanding membership. Arguably, these factors can be held at least partially accountable for what happened in 1826 in Batavia, New York — a scandal that fueled the anti-Masonic sentiment that had already been fermenting in the young nation since the late 1790s,⁷ and that tarnished the once high pedestal on which the public had placed American Freemasonry.

That scandal surrounded the kidnapping of William Morgan by Masons in what later came to be known as "The Morgan Affair." After being refused membership in an appendant Masonic body, Morgan began work on a Masonic exposure, which led to plans by a group of Masons who were members of Lodges in five different counties to kidnap Morgan in the hope of preventing the publication of his exposure.⁸ No valid account of Morgan ever being seen alive again after 1826 is known to exist.⁹

⁵ Rob Morris, *The History of Freemasonry in Kentucky*, Morris, Louisville, 1859

⁶ See *History of Freemasonry*, by Robert F. Gould, Volume III, page 475, ff., *Encyclopedia of Freemasonry*, by Albert G. Mackey, et al., and "Those Terrible Exposures!", *Short Talk Bulletin Series*, Masonic Service Association, Vol. XXX, No.7, July 1952, Washington, D.C.

⁷ John W. Bizzack, *The Age of Unreason, Dissecting the Infamy of the Morgan Affair, and Its Aftermath*, BSF Foundation, 2020.

⁸ Dafoe, Bizzack,

⁹ Bizzack.

Five years of legal investigation and prosecutions related to the matter of Morgan's disappearance left a trail of twenty grand juries, fifteen trials, and the indictment of fifty-four Freemasons, thirty-nine of whom were brought to trial. There were ten convictions, but none on the charge of murder. Several of the defendants confessed to abducting Morgan and holding him against his will for days — but no one confessed to killing him.¹⁰

No valid evidence is known to exist that proves Morgan was ever initiated into the ranks of Freemasonry, although he did manage to become admitted to the meetings of a New York Lodge.

The widely publicized trials surrounding the Morgan Affair gave the already smoldering anti-Masonic movement a platform to use to further discredit Freemasonry as an intellectual society and portrayed the institution as a dangerously subversive organization. Anti-Masons publicized rituals, passwords, and marshalled support from newspapers and politicians in many communities in almost all the states.

As the anti-Masonic sentiment spread, men were no longer eager to join Masonic Lodges, or even be known as Freemasons. The reputation of the institution of Freemasonry was severely diminished in America. The number of Masons in the United States during the acknowledged heyday of the anti-Masonry period dropped from 100,000 to 40,000. Six of every ten Freemasons left their lodges — many who moved to new towns and states claimed they had never been a Freemason.¹¹

The Grand Lodge of New York alone dropped from 20,000 members to just 3,000, and from 480 lodges to 82. The Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania surrendered its charter in 1834, conveying its property to trustees, and did not reincorporate until 1859. In Kentucky, the number of lodges dropped from 66 to 37 as membership rolls were cut in half.¹²

Kentucky Past Grand Master, Rob Morris, always the apologist, conspicuously attempted to minimize the effect of the Morgan Affair on the state. He wrote in his 1859 book, *The History of Freemasonry in Kentucky*, that "Kentucky did not seem to have much enthusiasm for the anti-Masonic politics that followed the disappearance of William Morgan in Batavia, New York, in 1826 and took little official notice of the Morgan Affair. The state took its losses of lodges and members in stride as they weathered the storm."¹³ As he often did in his later writing, Morris contradicts himself in the same document when he says, "If the torment [the fallout from The Morgan Affair] had not subsided when it did, within another ten years, the Order in Kentucky would have died out from sheer neglect."¹⁴ Those words are hardly a testament supporting his previous statement that Masonry in Kentucky took its losses in stride "as they weathered the storm."

No matter, what Morris did provide was insight into the state of Kentucky Freemasonry at the time. And Masonry in Kentucky found itself in the same condition as some other states within ten years of the Morgan Affair. The majority of experienced lecturers, ritualists, and those who were believed to be the

¹⁰ Stephen Dafoe, *Morgan: The Scandal That Shook Freemasonry,* Cornerstone, 2014.

¹¹ *IBID*.

¹² IBID.

¹³ Rob Morris, *History of Freemasonry in Kentucky*, Morris, Louisville, 1859.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* (The two positions contradict one another, but students of the writings of Rob Morris often find him attempting to minimize the ravaging effects of the Morgan Affair in Kentucky and struggling to explain the losses of members and lodges during the period. Morris may have believed he had to write something about the Morgan Affair in relation to Kentucky because there was no reference of mention of the event in the annual proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky from 1827 through 1842.)

most knowledgeable about the Craft were gone. Lodges lost so many members to resignations and death during and following the Morgan Affair that, by the late 1830s, there were simply not enough members who were proficient in the work, much less the observant practices integral to Freemasonry, to provide the mentoring and instruction necessary to transmit Freemasonry to a new generation.¹⁵

Rather than focusing on reeducating the Masons who were left standing, and correcting the deficiencies that came with unbridled and rapid expansion, as the anti-Masonic mood faded with the public, Kentucky once more embarked on the march toward another round of unbridled and accelerated expansion. The chartering of new lodges and admittance of new members took place at an amazingly fast rate, exceeded only by New York.¹⁶

THE STEAMBOAT CAPTAIN

Dempsey Carrell may have been inspired in 1850 by Grand Master James McCorkel's encouraging address to the Craft at the Annual Communication. In that address, McCorkel declared that Masonry was

making a comeback in the aftermath of the dreadful anti-Masonic hysteria sparked by the 1826 Morgan Affair. Carrell may also have been familiar with the 1843 Baltimore Convention recommendation.

There is no record of Carrell experiencing first-hand the widespread problem of posers pretending to be Masons approaching his lodge in Maysville, Kentucky and seeking relief or the financial assistance that Masons often provided fellow members. It is safe to assume, however, that because he was active in Masonry at the state and local level, he would be aware of that problem in Kentucky, thus providing a reason for a resolution he would make in 1852 to change the Constitution of Freemasonry in Kentucky in the hope that it would effectively address the problem.

But there is more to consider.

Carrell's name is often misspelled in Masonic and local community records, which makes it difficult to locate a great deal of information about



Dempsey Carrell

him. But we do know that his family was from Westmoreland County, Virginia. His father, also named Dempsey, was contracted by the Continental Army from 1780 to 1783 to provide meat to the army in Viginia.¹⁷ Young Dempsey married Calestia Bland in 1847, and his profession, as indicated on the marriage license, was steamboat captain. His brother, Edward, is found in 1839 records to have also been a steamboat pilot.¹⁸

We also know that by 1851, the thirty-eight-year-old captain had already served as Master of Confidence Lodge No. 52, in Maysville, and had been elected to that position twice. He was elected Junior Grand

¹⁷ Nancy Carrell, "My Kindred Families," http://mykindred.com/cloud/TX/getperson.php?personID=I2892&tree=mykindred01, accessed October 2019.

¹⁵ John W. Bizzack, Island Freemasonry: The Final Bastion of Observant Masonry, Macoy, 2017.

¹⁶ *IBID,* The Grand Lodge of Kentucky, Annual Proceedings, Grand Master's Address, 1843 and 1850.

¹⁸ Ohio Valley History, Volume 11, Number 3, Fall 2014, p. 84

Warden of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky in 1836 and Grand High Priest in the York Rite in 1846. He was also a Trustee of the Masonic College of Kentucky in LaGrange and in 1854 served as Chair on the Grand Lodge Committee for Lodges Under Dispensation. There was no progressive line for the elected grand line chairs when he was elected as junior grand warden, so this was the only grand line office to which he was elected to serve. Dempsey Carrell was clearly engaged and active in the fraternity.

At the 52nd Annual Communication of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky, Carrell served as the representative of his lodge. That year, he entered a resolution by way of amendment to the Grand Lodge Constitution and started the process that led to Kentucky adopting the rule that subordinate lodges could open and do business only on the Master Mason Degree. His resolution read: "That all business of the Subordinate Lodges shall be transacted in the third degree of masonry, except the initiation or passing of candidates."¹⁹

Before Carrell's resolution was adopted, several changes were made. A brother identified only as Sumerwell, resolved that:

Article 59, also the amendment to the constitution adopted at the last meeting of this Grand Lodge, on page 33 of printed proceedings, and originally proposed by Bro. Carrell, be stricken out, and the following be adopted in lieu thereof: "All business of, the subordinate Lodge shall be transacted in the third degree of masonry, except the ceremony of initiation or passing of candidates, or acting on a charge preferred against an E. A. or F.C. Mason.²⁰

Sumerwell's resolution was laid over until the next convocation for consideration.

The resolution offered by Sumerwell was taken up in 1854 and rejected. In its place, a resolution was offered by R. G. Stuart, as follows:

Resolved, That, the by-laws of this Grand Lodge requiring all business of the Subordinate Lodge's to be transacted in the third degree be so amended as to-authorize the Subordinate Lodges to receive petitions for initiation and ballot on the same in the first degree; and receive and ballot on petitions for passing in the second, degree; and that any brother-guilty of an offense shall be tried in his respective degree, and that all other business shall be transacted in the third degree.²¹

Sumerwell's resolution was adopted.

Carrell presented one other unrelated amendment to the constitution. Again, there was no record of why he made the resolution, or the extent to which it was discussed. The proceedings offer no real context for the matter. In 1854, he sought to strike the article authorizing past masters "collectively, one vote."²² The amendment was not passed.

On page twenty-four of the 1855 Proceedings, we find Carrell's name mentioned for the final time when a resolution was adopted recognizing his service to Freemasonry. The Grand Secretary was instructed to

 $^{^{\}rm 19}$ Annual Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky, 1852, p 33

²⁰ *Ibid*.p.37.

²¹ Annual Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky, 1854, p.44.

²² Annual Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky, 1854, p. 41)

transmit a copy of the resolution to his family. Carrell died in August 1855, at age forty-four. Kentucky death records from 1855-1865 note his death was due to dropsy. His wife, Calestia, remained a widow for the rest of her life. Their child, Jane, died four years after Carrell.²³

Aside from his elected positions and resolutions made at Annual Proceedings, and because of the lack of any other known records to the contrary, Dempsey Carrell has passed into history carrying the distinction that his resolution changed Kentucky Freemasonry.

PROCESS OVER SUBSTANCE

It can be argued that, had Carrell not done so, some other Mason, at some point, would have presented the same or similar resolution. Carrell, like many other Kentucky Masons, both then and now, was a mechanical Mason. His focus was on the organizational processes, rules, management, and administration of the Craft, and not on pursuing the historical aim and intent of organized Masonry as a philosophical and educational institution. The mechanical side of Masonry is, of course, necessary, as is the philosophical and educational side. But what happens when the value and worth of mechanical processes supersede the philosophy they were designed to protect and deliver? What does it profit a man to merely acquire all the degrees of Masonic rites and learn all the rules of administration without ever learning what it is that the rites and the rules purport to protect and deliver?

Process over substance is the bane of the 1843 Baltimore Convention recommendation that declared that transacting Lodge business on any degree other than the Master Mason degree was an "impropriety."

Instead of simply assuring that Masons would make the effort to ascertain that visitors not known to them as Masons were indeed Masons before allowing them into open lodge, or before providing them any form of assistance or relief solely on the visitor's claim of being a Mason, the Convention recommendation did something else. It prevented untold scores of initiated members from participating with other members as they attempted to pursue Masonry.

The debate about the worth and value of this1843 recommendation continues. Masons who contend that American Lodges have always opened and conducted business on the Master Mason degree demonstrate the absence of a firm grasp on the factual history of the organization. Masons in those jurisdictions that continue to practice the recommendation have yet to provide valid evidence that by doing so they are improving Masonry today.

Opinion, not fact, spurred the 1843 recommendation. And opinion, not fact, keeps it in place in the jurisdictions that continue to govern under the recommendation.

²³ Nancy Carrell, "My Kindred Families."

SINCE DEMPSEY CARRELL'S RESOLUTION IN KENTUCKY

Legislation has been presented in Kentucky seven times to repeal the 1855 rule. The most recent found in records was legislation filed in 2002 by Auburn Lodge No. 374.²⁴ All seven proposals made to repeal the 1855 Constitutional provision have failed.

In 2017, however, a judiciously thoughtful proposal came from Elvin E. Helms Lodge No. 926 that authorized individual lodges to determine if they wished to change or not, thus not imposing the change on any lodge. The proposed legislation read:

Any subordinate Lodge may, at its discretion, with the consent of a majority of the members present and duly noted in its minutes, elect to conduct all Lodge business on any of the three degrees of Masonry (Entered Apprentice, Fellow Craft or Master Mason). Such election shall remain in force until the Lodge, with the consent of a majority of the members present and duly noted in its minutes, shall revoke such election. In all instances, only Master Masons shall have the right to vote. Unless a subordinate Lodge affirmatively acts to elect to conduct its business on the Entered Apprentice Degree or the Fellow Craft Degree, all Lodge business shall be done in a Lodge of Master Masons. The above provisions notwithstanding, conferring Degrees, examination of proficiencies and trials of members shall all be held in a Lodge opened on the Degree corresponding.²⁵

What made this proposal prudent for the time is that it permitted each lodge to make its own decision as to what practice best fit the lodge without imposing restrictions on other lodges that might find it more workable for them to open and do business on the Entered Apprentice or Fellow Craft degree.

By the vote of a simple majority, the legislation was laid over for a vote in 2018. Extensive education was provided throughout the state to Masons about the history that led to the 1843 recommendation and how and why the rule found its way into the Kentucky Masonic Constitution. The vote was 195 delegates (60%) against allowing a lodge the option of a choice, and 135 (40%) were in favor of giving all lodges the option of a choice.

Once again, the Craft in Kentucky declared that it was not prepared to do more than preserve the existing rule on this matter, even if changing it was shown to be in the best interest of the jurisdiction.

²⁴ Note: Auburn Lodge No. 374 submitted legislation in 2003 to allow lodges to conduct routine business in a lodge of Entered Apprentice Masons. The motion to adopt was seconded and rejected. The proposal read: "Section 104. Business. All lodge business shall be done in a lodge of Master Masons, excepting proficiency examinations and approval and work of the first and second degrees or the trial of Entered Apprentices or Fellow Crafts. Amended to read: Section 104. Business. All lodge business shall be done in a lodge of Master Masons, excepting proficiency examinations and approval and work of the first and second degrees or the trial of Entered Apprentices or Fellow Crafts. Amended to read: Section 104. Business. All lodge business shall be done in a lodge of Master Masons, excepting proficiency examinations and approval and work of the first and second degrees or the trial of Entered Apprentices or Fellow Crafts. Upon the recommendations of the Worshipful Master, a Lodge may adopt, by majority vote of its Master Mason members in attendance, an annual resolution to conduct routine lodge business in a lodge of Entered Apprentice Masons. However, only its Master Mason members in attendance can ballot on petitions or cast a vote for an election of officers. SUBMITTED BY: Auburn Lodge No. 374, F.&A.M. I MOVE THAT THIS ITEM LAY OVER. The motion was seconded and rejected. This item will not lay over." Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky, 2003, p. 228.

²⁵ Grand Lodge of Kentucky Annual Proceedings, 2017.

SUMMARY

Interestingly, as early as the 1840s Masons and their leaders saw what rapid expansion of membership and lodges was doing to the historical design, aim, and purpose of the Craft, and certainly to its leadership. And Masons and their leaders in those jurisdictions who have, since 1987, rejected the 1843 recommendation that their jurisdictions later adopted, clearly recognized that repealing the rule was in the best interest of the order.

This suggests that many Masons are casualties today of the truth found in the axiom about how difficult it is to see the picture when you are inside the frame. Standing equally true is that Masons in 1843 were casualties, too, because they failed to step outside the frame they were in and see the long-term, predictable consequences that would occur throughout the institution of American Masonry by this imbalanced, unnecessary, and mechanical-based recommendation.

Grand Lodge Jurisdictions Permitting Lodges to Open and Conduct Business on the Entered Apprentice Degree

Prior to the 1843 Baltimore Convention, all American jurisdictions opened lodge and conducted business on the Entered Apprentice Degree as was the practice elsewhere since 1717. Of the 24 grand jurisdictions in the United States in 1843, 16 participated in the 1843 convention. Kentucky did not participate. The convention declared to open and conduct business on any degree but Master Mason was an "impropriety." Every grand jurisdiction in the United States eventually adopted that non-binding recommendation from the Convention.

In 1987, after 138 years of operating under that unnecessary and non-binding premise, grand jurisdictions began rejecting the assertion. Over the past 31 years, 26 American grand lodges have rejected premise and returned to the original practice of permitting lodges to open and conduct business on the Entered Apprentice Degree. The remaining 24 American jurisdictions continue to follow the recommendation of the 1843 Convention.



6% of all Masonic Jurisdictions do not allow the practice of opening and doing business in the Entered Apprentice Degree' (icon representing these lodges is Willam Morgan).

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