

Masonic Perspectives

**A Second Look at Aspects of Controversial Topics
In American Freemasonry**



ABOUT THIS PROJECT

Masonic Perspectives is a project created by Past Masters John W. Bizzack and Dan M. Kemble intended to bring the writings about controversial topics of the past in American Freemasonry and provide readers a second look and contemporary perspective on the topics to serve as a catalyst for further discussion. This project is a joint venture of Lexington Lodge No. 1, Lexington, Kentucky and William O. Ware Lodge of Research, Covington, Kentucky.

In this edition, a second look at four excerpts from papers
from 1999, 2008, 2010, 2019

COMMENTARY ON PAPERS

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The Decline Of Freemasonry: A Data Analysis - Lance Kennedy - 2019

<http://freemasoninformation.com/tag/death>

Our fraternity is dying. While I will not diagnose the causes or cures for our ailing condition in this article, it is necessary for every Mason to come to terms with our present state. This awareness was the goal of this article and I hope you will take a moment to soberly ponder the very real possibility that Freemasonry in the US will go the way of the Elks or Odd Fellows, that is into the fraternal graveyard.

I want to make it abundantly clear that the body-Masonic is dying. I know you want me to stop waxing poetic and get to the data, so without further ado I will present you with my basic findings. I have taken for my analysis the raw data compiled by the Masonic Service Association of North America (MSANA) of the totals of Masons in United States Grand Lodges for the fiscal years indicated [1950-2020]. According to the MSANA, these figures are based upon the MSANA's records and do not necessarily correspond exactly with those published by other sources.

So What? The Dynamic of Masonic Membership – Greg Stewart 2010

<http://freemasoninformation.com/2010/07/so-what-the-dynamic-of-masonic-membership/>

We can, at this point in time do nothing to turn this trend around. No matter how many open houses, public lectures, marketing campaigns, sports sponsorships, television commercials, radio spots, billboards, or finite programs promoted by individual lodges or Grand Lodges will stem the hemorrhage. Even if the blue lodge started giving away memberships, it's doubtful that we could find enough people who even remembered who the Freemasons are, and even fewer who would want to become one. The damage is already done, and we are now in a free fall that threatens to erase the remains of North American Freemasonry. This means the closure and roll back of individual state Grand Lodges. This will mean the selling of more Masonic properties and assets, and the selling or divesting publicly of our privately funded billion-dollar institutions.

This means the end of Freemasonry as we know it today.

There's a Hole In Our Bucket – Stephen Dafoe -2008

Journal of the Masonic Society Issue 2, 2008

Every mason has heard the expression “but we’ve always done it that way before.” The fact that it is used as the butt of Masonic jokes serves as proof positive of its longevity and power in maintaining a status quo. But, as we have seen by what the MSANA numbers don't show us, the status quo is draining our buckets. As the allegory of my restaurant editorial showed, the reason things suck in many lodges is because the men who show up month after month like things that suck. They do so because they enjoy the bland food; not the shoe-leather roast beef and off-color green beans, but the Masonic meal that is largely comprised of recitation of minutes, tedious debates over how funds are dispersed and arguments over when and how to salute the Worshipful Master. Clearly these are not the things that appeal to the men

who are leaving our ranks. If they were, they'd be with us still. But instead of spending our energies trying to retain them, we devote our efforts to finding their replacements.

For as long as I have been a Freemason, we have been trying to fill a bucket that has a sizable hole in it. Like Henry in the famed children's song, we have whined through the infinite loop of reasons why we can't fix the bucket and like Jack in the classic nursery rhyme, have rolled down the hill, our empty bucket tumbling behind us. Like children on a bus trip we have done our rendition of 99 Bottle of Beer by repeating the same pattern ad nauseam, as one by one our members – like the bottles of beer on the wall – vanish.

Unfortunately, we are not doing a good enough job identifying what it is that the men who are joining are looking for, which is – in almost all cases – that which they cannot get any place else – **FREEMASONRY!** They are looking to be educated in the Masonic Craft, in the art of being a gentleman in a world that has largely forgotten what one was, and in how they can be part of – to quote my jurisdiction's ritual – “the society of men who prize honor and virtue above the external advantages of rank and fortune.” In short, they want to be taught the things about themselves and the world in which they live that only Freemasonry can teach them. If we cannot teach them because we do not know these things ourselves, then we must learn alongside them. Then, and only then, can the hole in our Masonic bucket be truly repaired and we can return to that growth that once allowed us to select men who would most benefit from Freemasonry's teaching and most benefit Freemasonry by their character and their conduct.

It will not be an easy task fixing this half-century old hole in our Masonic bucket; but it will not be possible at all until we accept that a failure to do so is the cause of our decline and the harbinger of our demise.

The Missing Mason – John L. Belton 1999

<http://internet.lodge.org.uk/index.php/research/93-library/research/234-the-missing-master-mason?fbclid=IwAR1XTqKDDFLKyhK-K0Ux3I5ihK8nV2IBGrnkP-xTmEMdfNp5FV53EfzREoQ>

We all need to remember that Freemasonry is a voluntary occupation, that it competes with work, family, partners, television and all those other ways that leisure hours can now be spent, many of which have become more common during the last half century. If those who join do not find it to be "Value for their Time and Money" then they will leave. While things can be suggested and proposed, even forced into Lodges ONLY a wholehearted acceptance by the Lodges members that they have SMART Objectives (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timed) will produce any reasonable chance of commitment and success. This will require "Internal Openness" not only about the scale of the problem itself, but about what has been done and what might be done. The whole matter of the severe shortage of internal openness by Masonic Authorities will require further attention.

Those who do become Masons stay as members of the Craft for a very significantly shorter period of time than they ever did in the past - about 20 - 30% of the time they did half a century ago!!



COMMENTARY

~ John W. Bizzack, PM

Without some knowledge of the past it is impossible to even guess at the future.

Kennedy's remarks and his look at the Masonic Service Association of North America (MSANA) membership record data, offers some knowledge of the past. The hype surrounding his examination as soon as he published it, however, tells us something of the past too -- a lot of Masons act as though this information is something new. Although the MSANA data is often the source of many citations (especially since the 1980s as the membership decline created the undercurrent of alarm in Masonic writings) that suggests few Masons have been concerned enough about it to do more than wring their hands at the worrisome decrease in membership that began in 1959. MSNA, despite the various ways grand jurisdictions report their membership, has collected the data since 1924. Kennedy's review was from 1950-2020.

In the May 1929, Volume XV, No. 5 issue of *The Builder*, R.J. Meekren, wrote *Where Are We Drifting?* His chart-filled paper threw light on an interesting trend that should have alerted modern Masonry but did not. As his study sample he used the jurisdiction of Vermont and found that suspensions were much the same rate as demits but suspensions then began to outdistance demits. His examination covered a sixteen-year period (1913-1929) – twelve years before the MSANA began compiling membership records.

A cursory look at Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky during this period corresponds with Meekren's findings: suspensions and demits exceeded loss of membership by death. The years Meekren examined was punctuated with a rapid increase in membership following World War I, an increase very similar to that which took place just prior to and more than a decade following World War II.

If jurisdictions at that time were losing more members to suspensions and demits than to natural death, what was (or was not) taking place in American Freemasonry that made those members lose interest or fade then disappear from membership? We might speculate on the answer to that question today, but trends like these strongly suggests that rapid expansion of membership into Freemasonry during certain periods of his history in the United States (1800-1826, 1855-1870, 1875-1898, 1900-1926) has never proven a good idea and predictably followed by membership decline. The reasons? Again, pedestrian members may speculated and wring hands but when depth is added to the examination, we find that American Freemasonry has a tendency to become obsessed with numbers to measure its success as if

that is all that is necessary to ensure the perpetuity of its aim and purpose and proclaim fruition of a genius system of self-improvement.

Kennedy tells us it is necessary for every Mason to come to terms with our present state. He's correct, but that opportunity to do so was available early in the last century as well and it was unheeded – just as many previous writers who have encouraged a call to action.

A continued decline in membership into the coming decades is inevitable. It is **the reasons** for the decline with which American Freemasons should be coming to terms if it is to sustain itself and find strength in its fewness. A good place to start would be a collective examination of how the promise of Freemasonry has been offered and delivered in the past, perhaps finding therein the right path for it to return to the philosophical and educational institution as originally envisioned.

Greg Stewart's examination a decade before Kennedy's observations in his 2010, ***So What? The Dynamic of Masonic Membership***, sums it up when it comes to looking at membership decline. He notes, "Even if the blue lodge started giving away memberships, it's doubtful that we could find enough people who even remembered who the Freemasons are, and even fewer who would want to become one. The damage is already done. This means the end of Freemasonry as we know it today."

Stephen Dafoe's, ***There's a Hole in our Bucket***, written a couple years before Stewart's hard-hitting article points out those things that are of little interest to members and makes a list of several offerings we find common in lodges today. He then notes, "Clearly these are not the things that appeal to the men who are leaving our ranks. If they were, they'd be with us still. But instead of spending our energies trying to retain them, we devote our efforts to finding their replacements." Dafoe's point reinforces American Freemasonry's obsession with numbers more than fulfilling the promise of the Craft.

Almost a decade before Dafoe, John L. Bolton offered his 1999 findings and perspective in ***The Missing Mason***. In his writing he notes, "Those who do become Masons stay as members of the Craft for a very significantly shorter period of time than they ever did in the past - about 20 - 30% of the time they did half a century ago!!" Once again, we find data that warns us of the disquieting and beleaguering problem: we cannot retain those members we have for various reasons, which should be telling us that we are either admitting men who are not suited for the fraternity or we are not offering what the fraternity promises. In either event, we've still done very little in a collective fashion today to address whichever problem it is, so we continue to fight our history.

As S. Brent Morris has written, few have heard but nearly everyone knows about the distinctive warning sound of a rattlesnake. So, we can debate the way to read and interpret data. We can argue about the causes and historical influences on the changing membership numbers. We can do many things, except pretending that it is not happening and then passing on the matter to the next generation. But we do.

~ Dan M. Kemble, PM

Texas Freemason Lance Kennedy asserts that, “our Fraternity is dying.” To a great extent, the accuracy of this statement depends on what the word “Fraternity” means. If Kennedy means that Fraternity is defined as organized Freemasonry as we currently know it, he may well be correct. It is well known that Grand Lodges have consistently lost membership, in significant numbers and almost without interruption, for the last sixty years. Clearly, the continuation of this trend will eventually bring an end to our current structure of Freemasonry.

But is Freemasonry dying? If Fraternity is defined as Freemasonry in general, then not only is it not dying, but it is incapable of dying.

Chris Hodapp, author of *Freemasons for Dummies* and host of the blog by the same name, frequently writes that Freemasonry is an idea. Hodapp’s point is that ideas do not die and, accordingly, the idea of Freemasonry will not die. The idea of Freemasonry, obviously, is older than organized Freemasonry. It existed prior to the formation of the Grand Lodge of England in 1717 and will likely outlast the hundreds of Grand Lodges that exist around the world today.

Freemasonry teaches us to observe nature. By doing so, we observe the cycle of life, death and regeneration that occurs around us constantly. The elements of this cycle are not only interrelated, but are interdependent as well. Death is necessary to sustain regeneration and new life. Could it be that organized Freemasonry finds itself in the same cycle? Is it possible that to be born to new and greater life, organized Freemasonry as we know it must first die?

As Occidental College professor Lynn Dumenil points out in her study, *Freemasonry and American Culture* (1987), because of over-lapping membership, the focus of organized Freemasonry was fundamentally altered in the early years of the Twentieth Century by the influence of service organizations such as the Rotary, Elks, Lions Clubs, Odd Fellows and all of the other organizations born in the Golden Age of Fraternalism. Most of those organizations have run their course and exist today, if at all, in a greatly attenuated condition. Organized Freemasonry’s immunity to such a fate has rested, largely, on its spiritual and philosophical underpinnings, which distinguish it from the other organizations. As organized Freemasonry moves farther away from such underpinnings, its immunity is compromised. Its dwindling membership rolls indicate that it, too, is headed for the same destiny as its sister organizations, a point re-emphasized in Greg Stewart’s, “*So What? The Dynamic of Masonic Membership.*”

But is that necessarily a bad thing? The death of organized Freemasonry may well be necessary for the idea of Freemasonry to be reborn in its beauty and splendor.

Stephen Dafoe is unarguably correct when he writes that men coming into Freemasonry

“... are looking to be educated in the Masonic Craft, in the art of being a gentleman in a world that has largely forgotten what one was, and in how they can be part of – to quote my jurisdiction’s ritual – “the society of men who prize honor and virtue above the external advantages of rank and fortune.” In short, they want to be taught the things about themselves and the world in which they live that only Freemasonry can teach them.”

If organized Freemasonry ever had the power to teach such things, it has long since lost it. The idea of Freemasonry, however, possesses the power and the vitality that it has always had and is more than capable of providing men that which they seek. The challenge for Masonic leaders, as the structure of Freemasonry inevitable changes in the coming years, will be to harness the power of the idea of Freemasonry without becoming lost in the entropy that exists to some extent in all institutions.

If, in fact, our Fraternity is dying, let it be the death of a thoughtless and soulless organization that has forsaken its spiritual and philosophical mission. May it be reborn to a new life again as a brotherhood of men who seek improvement, and, in the consequence of such improvement, improve the world about them and draw nearer to their Creator.