

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 three papers: *The Decline Of Freemasonry In America*, W. E. Gutman – 2008, *Adapt or Die: On the Decline of Membership in the Masonic Fraternity*, Michael Harding – 2017, and *Two Trajectories for American Freemasonry: Consolidation Or Implosion*, Lance Kennedy – 2018



COMMENTARY ON PAPERS

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PAPER I

The Decline Of Freemasonry In America - W. E. Gutman – 2008

http://www.skirret.com/papers/decline_of_freemasonry.html

In an article entitled, *The Amazing Shrinking Fraternity*, published in the winter 1993 edition of the *Connecticut Square & Compasses*, then Grand Master Ken Hawkins warned against the alarming decline in Masonic membership in America. His admonition was long on conjecture, short on remedies. He merely echoed with disquieting glibness the oft-invoked defense that the practice of "non-solicitation" and the failure to engage in "aggressive recruitment" are at the root of the problem.

The causes for such nationwide erosion, in this writer's opinion, are far subtler and more complex, and may require an earnest reappraisal of our collective rationale, our practices, our self-image, indeed our very reason for being.

I responded to Bro. Hawkins's article with an essay of my own. Entitled, *The Amazing Well-Worn Alibi*, it was first barred from Connecticut's *Square & Compasses* (but promptly published by *The Trowel* in Massachusetts). Clearer heads prevailed, as did First Amendment principles, and it eventually ran in the *Square & Compasses* when a member of the Connecticut Grand Lodge Publications Committee threatened to resign if it didn't. A few diehards were appalled by the title of my article. Many more found my diagnosis, not to mention the bitter antidotes I prescribed, hard to swallow. Eventually, the clamor died down. Those who had found merit in my arguments retreated behind a cloak of silence and indifference. And membership continued to drop.

Fifteen years later, membership is down nationwide. Participation in Masonic activities is in decline. Attendance is low or spotty in most Lodges. A shortage of worthy and well-qualified candidates has inhibited the orderly flow of succession from chair to chair, thus forcing the "recycling" of past masters to keep the chairs suitably warm. We've become a refuge for the geriatric set.

Attempting to revive a comatose organization by boosting membership alone is tantamount to dispatching freshly recruited and untrained reinforcements to a battle-weary unit that has lost its will to fight. Imagine applying a Band-Aid to a severed jugular. In the long term, a successful transfusion depends far more on the wholesomeness of the plasma than on the volume of blood pumped into the veins.

While I agree that a stronger fraternity can exert a more positive influence on society, I reject the notion that strength can only be derived from numbers. If a chain is as strong as its weakest link, then strength must be equated with quality, not quantity.

More recently, as he prepared to ascend to the Grand East, Connecticut Grand Master-to-be Charles Yohe wrote me, pleading that I join the Publishing Committee. In his letter, Bro. Yohe lamented the

sharp decline in Masonic membership and appealed for a unified, energetic statewide effort to remedy the problem. He asked me for ideas.

I responded, offering a candid analysis of the situation and outlining specific steps which I thought would help re-energize American Freemasonry from an anemic and sluggish band of brothers into a strong and energetic force for world good. I added that Freemasonry in America had lapsed into irrelevance, that it had become an anachronism when it ceased to be an instrument for social reform, when it turned inwardly and changed from an alliance of enlightened illuminati to a bastion of religious and political conservatism out of tune with Freemasonry's roots and fundamental philosophy.

I further commented that, inspired by the nobility and true Masonic spirit of America's founding fathers, I yearned for a dynamic Fraternity, a body of men committed to enriching their intellects, feeding their minds, not just their bellies. I said that I looked to an organization dedicated to upholding holistic principles, eager to get involved, not afraid to speak out against injustice, corruption and political chicanery. I warned that so long as Freemasonry remained an insular, closed circuit, self-serving institution, it would not thrive. I asserted that unless we attract men who are truly interested in helping improve society, the Fraternity would slowly fritter away. I suggested that Blue Lodge, Scottish Rite and Royal Arch Masonry should be fused into a single Masonic educational process — as they are in Europe and much of the world — and not three separate bodies. I suggested that it ought to take a year between degrees and that elevation to a higher grade should be based — like in operative lodges of yore — on performance and the completion of a master work — not merely on rote memorization of the ritual. I contended that every Temple should be its own Lodge of Research and Lodge of Instruction, and that every Brother should be encouraged to write and deliver lectures that stimulate the gray matter. Lastly, I dared propound the notion that medals, certificates, citations, ribbons, plaques and other accolades of which Masons are so fond, ought to be reserved for extraordinary service to community, nation and the world — not for such intra-mural distinctions as longevity as a Mason, a spotless Lodge attendance record or cooking a great spaghetti dinner....

Predictably, Grand Master Yohe never replied.

As I see it, the issue is not attracting more Masons but making Masonry more attractive to Masons. This requires turning Masonic proceedings into meaningful, stimulating, relevant happenings in Lodge, while extending Masonic principles and objectives beyond the Lodge. There is nothing more baffling to an Entered Apprentice or a Fellowcraft, or even a newly-raised Master Mason than to sit in a nearly empty Lodge, however impeccable the ritual might be. Nor is there anything more disconcerting than a Lodge solely dedicated to mass-producing Masons but which is otherwise afflicted with inertia and ritualized boredom.

If there is a correlation between diminishing visibility and decreasing membership, it is perhaps because, after having been initiated, new Brothers are often left suspended in a vacuum. They've paid their dues. They've become small cogs in an immense engine laboriously engaged in keeping its own wheels turning, a sort of Rube Goldberg perpetual motion contraption out of sync with its own driving force. But the intellectual nourishment, spiritual stimulation, social and philosophical dimensions so vital to Freemasonry, are virtually nowhere to be found.

Since I was raised, 20 years ago, I have seen many Brothers elevated to the Sublime Degree. Many attended a couple of meetings then discreetly vanished, never to be seen again. Did these men fail to find in the Masonic experience what they sought — or were led to believe they would find? Or were

they simply unfit? Were they disillusioned or utterly uninspired? Is there further light at the end of Hiram's resurrectional tunnel or just a faint glow of what was?

Owing a European Masonic heritage (my father was raised in one of the Temples of the Grand Lodge of France) I admit to having been imbued with a different perspective when I applied for membership in America. I came armed with the belief that there must be a more glorious aim, a higher purpose, a loftier calling, a grander design in Freemasonry than a couple of monthly meetings, a slate of swiftly adjourned Stated Communications and a belabored and half-hearted degree conferral or two. What I sought was a challenge, a journey toward self-fulfillment and higher learning shepherded by able guides, in the company of neophytes eager to apprehend the history, lore and character of the Craft. What I hoped to find was a body of men willing to take a stand on issues of cosmic importance, brave enough to speak out against injustice, to share ideas, to impart knowledge, to foster true universal brotherhood, to shed Light — not just to receive it — to vie for new insights, not just bask in the brilliance of yesteryear's Masonic constellation.

Yes, we are in good company: George Washington, Ben Franklin, John Hancock, Paul Revere, Lafayette, Mozart, Bolivar, Garibaldi, Jonathan Swift, Goethe, Roosevelt, Truman, etc. We seem to venerate these men as though their notoriety, wisdom, creative genius and courage were "Masonically" transferable through some generational osmosis. THEY ARE NOT! If a child should not bear the burden of his ancestors' misdeeds, nor should he revel in his father's fame. He must seek his own paths of glory. The Brothers I name were men of action, builders, shakers, movers, mavericks, gadflies, thinkers and creative geniuses long before they were asked in whom they put their trust. It is they who enriched Freemasonry — not the other way around. They all believed in a better tomorrow, a more just, progressive and nobler human society. All were inspired by other thinkers and mavericks and revolutionaries — Moses, Isaiah, Amos, Solomon, Jesus. The revolution is not over. So long as there is injustice and suffering, inequity and persecution in the world the spiritual revolution must go on. No one, in my view, is better equipped to wage it than Freemasons.

Produce more Masons? Go forth and multiply? We are Masons, not rabbits. No man should father children he cannot love, protect, educate, guide and inspire. No organization should recruit more members until it can satisfy the needs and aspirations of its present constituency. No institution should place its own corporate welfare above the welfare of each individual member.

A sustainable and thriving membership should be the culmination, NOT the basis for a healthy Masonic family. Fellowship should be the consequence NOT the motive for joining the Craft. A passionate quest for truth should be, at all times, the inspiration and vocation of every Freemason. Yes, the club needs more members. Let's first spruce up the clubhouse — from the inside. And let the faithful breast, the attentive ear and the instructive tongue be the true measure of our eminence.



PAPER II

Adapt or Die: On the Decline of Membership in the Masonic Fraternity – Michael Harding – 2017

http://www.phoenixmasonry.org/adapt_or_die.htm

As all Masons are acutely aware, membership throughout the masonic organization has been declining for some time. Blue lodges are closing or consolidating with other area lodges, Scottish Rite Valleys are selling their large buildings and moving to much smaller buildings or are going mobile by conducting meetings in area blue lodges or hotels and event venues. The York Rite and even the much-heralded Shrine temples are downsizing as well.

My own lodge once boosted a membership of over 400 members. Today membership rests just under half that number and is declining by 5 members per year on average. Estimates show my lodge will cease to be financially viable by 2030 if not sooner. The state Grand Lodge as a whole is declining by 1200 members per year and will cease to be financially viable by 2050 if not sooner. Since the year 2000, nearly 20 lodges have either closed or consolidated with other lodges, due to declining membership.

To date, no one at the local, state, or national level has presented any real solutions, ideas or plans to resolve the issue or at least curb the tide of the accelerating membership decline. The few solutions that have been proposed tend to only deal with current membership retention rather than a solution or even recognition and acceptance of the problem.

However, this problem is not unique to masonry. All membership-based organizations, from churches, sports leagues, scouting, professional associations, labor unions, chambers of commerce and other civic groups are all experiencing accelerating membership declines with numbers of new members not keeping pace with aging memberships and a general lack of relevancy in today's ever-increasing time starved lifestyles.

Long time lodge members constantly complain about how the new members are not attending lodge regularly, participating in degree work and their overall lack of involvement. They gripe about how the members of the current generation lack the same sense of duty and responsibility to the lodge that they had.

In short, time is running out and the best time to fix a problem is before it becomes an emergency. We need to accept the realities of the needs and interests of today's generations and those to follow. If we

don't meet their needs, someone else will. "Educating" them on our causes will not work. As much we may disagree, they are not concerned about our causes. They are only concerned with what will benefit them and how they can make an impact that they view as beneficial to the causes they support and care about.

They are not interested in joining an organization because it is the right thing to do. Their primary motivators are benefits for themselves and the community. They want to be part of something bigger than themselves and want to make a difference in world and have a personal impact on it. Nothing is more important to them than their family, friends, and the social network they have developed due to similar interests. Given the opportunity, they will choose to spend their precious time within their network than in ours.

Any organization that attempts to separate the man from his family, his community or his social sphere and does not engage with the man in those environments and activities will be met with resistance, complacency and will soon have no place in their world. They have little interest in spending hours away from their family and their other interests to pursue learning rituals, lectures, degree work or even our traditional fundraisers.

Faced with this dilemma, we have we have only two options: *adapt or die*.

Our only option is to embrace this changing environment as an opportunity and not view it as an obstacle to be beaten back so we can return to the good ole days.

Faced with this opportunity, how should we best advance into this new era and connect with new potential members? How do we reach them when they are ready to explore new opportunities to better serve their community and expand their network?

1. Embrace technology

This is a generation that gets the news from Facebook and Twitter. They watch Netflix and YouTube instead of television. They do not have a newspaper subscription and have no home phone. They use their smart phones to connect with the world and have never used a phone book or even written a check. They do their banking online. They order pizza and pay for it over the internet all while tracking its delivery in real time. This is a connected generation that expects information to be available when they want it. They refuse to be tied to a specific place and device to consume knowledge and information. They connect to their social network within minutes of waking and remain connected until minutes before retiring in the evening.

2. Improve communications

We need be more connected to our members and our communities with information of value, using whatever communication technology is available. We need to connect often and more transparently. This generation is used to getting their news from the internet. They discover new activities and events on the internet. They connect and share ideas with others using internet-based communications. If we are not where our customers are, we will not reach them.

3. Engage the membership

I once heard a wise past grand master say, "the problem with young Masons is they are always wanting to do stuff".

That axiom could not be more true of today's generation. Today's crop of younger masons and potential members are more socially active in different ways than generations past. They crave relevance and meaning all while staying active and ever changing. We need to find ways to engage new members with their entire families and their friends in meaningful activities and bring everyone together as a community, not just a group of men working to bring in other men into our never-ending circle of lodge degrees and stated meetings.

We need to segment our membership into groups and tailor our vast offerings to those different segments in ways that best suits that group.

4. Rethink everything

From our initial contact with a new candidate to their raising, we need to rethink our processes and find new and exciting ways to make the experience of the Masonic initiation more rewarding and meaningful. A newly raised Master Mason should not be left to their own initiative to seek ways to be more involved in the lodge, engaged with the membership and active in the community. We need to be sure new members, their families and their friends find our lodges to be not only inviting, but also beneficial in their lives...spiritually, intellectually, and socially.

Summary

We do not have much time left before our ship takes on more water than we can successfully bail out. With the accelerating pace of decline, the time to act is now. We need to start embracing, communicating, engaging, and rethinking at the local, district, state and national level.

I have heard many respected members convey the notion they would rather focus on quality than quantity and I couldn't agree more. However, they fail to recognize the basic laws of nature, economics, and statistics and that without sufficient quantity, there will be no pool of quality individuals from which to develop the next generation of masonic leaders.

The institution of Masonry has faced challenges in the past with declining membership and was forced to fundamentally transform in order to survive.

We are facing another such event horizon. I think we would be well advised to embrace this opportunity to guide its transformation into a better, stronger and more inclusive fraternity that we can all be proud to call our own.

In the end, it ultimately remains our decision to evolve and progress or to ignore and stay the course. Either way, the status quo will not hold, and our beloved fraternity will be transformed. We can only hope that our actions will create an organization that is thriving in future years rather than one that our children read about in the history books as the great fraternity that once was.



PAPER III

Two Trajectories for American Freemasonry: Consolidation Or Implosion - Lance Kennedy – 2018

<http://freemasoninformation.com/2018/12/two-trajectories-for-american-freemasonry-consolidation-or-implosion/>Two Trajectories For American Freemasonry: Consolidation Or Implosion

Once upon a time, there were two cities. One city was called Detroit and the other Pittsburgh. Both cities experienced untold prosperity during the first half of the twentieth century. Detroit became the nation's automotive manufacturing hub while Pittsburgh was "Steel City," America's forge. For decades the two cities prospered, but in the late-1960s the global economy changed, and the cities and their region, the Steel Belt, began a rapid decline.

The Steel Belt became the Rust Belt as its population dwindled and economy dried up. Detroit lost over 56 percent of its population between 1970 and 2016 while Pittsburgh lost 42 percent during the same period. The two cities were dying, that is declining at a rapid pace that left unabated would result in total ruin. Their citizenries wondered what could be done to reverse the trend. One city chose one path, while the other chose another, and the results tell the tale of their respective implosion and redemption.

I promise to return to this tale, but in the meantime, I ask your leave to venture back into our ongoing discussion regarding the decline of Freemasonry.

...any organization that is struggling with its identity, losing members, and bleeding revenue must immediately focus on excelling at its most basic function.

I am writing this article on the heels of my recent piece entitled "Freemasonry is Dying." In the first week after being released the article received over 20,000 individual views and hundreds of shares across Facebook and other social media platforms. am humbled by the numerous messages sent to me from like-minded brothers from around the world. I wish to thank every brother who read the article and helped begin a conversation about what must be done to reverse our downward trajectory.

More than a few brothers replied to my analysis one way or another, many writing articles of their own, which I applaud. Some agreed with my contention that "Freemasonry is dying," while others argued that the Craft will hit an equilibrium and level off in terms of absolute membership, so there is really no need to fret. Still others claim that I am incorrect in my assertion that the Craft may be on a terminal decline and in fact, we have already hit our nadir.

I find it hard to argue that an institution that has lost 75 percent of its membership in fifty-nine years is not dying, but others may disagree. In 2044 there might be a handful of Masons left, but I would not consider the Fraternity to be really living, but rather walking dead. All, there are numerous historic examples of mystery traditions that thrived for a period then disappeared without a trace, two examples being the Eleusinian Mysteries and the cult of Mithras. Why think Freemasonry is immune from their fate?

Now that the dust is settled, voices have calmed, and passion subsided, I wish to clarify what I wish to achieve by writing my last article as well as address the two trajectories before us as a Fraternity, one of intentional consolidation and another of haphazard implosion.

My clarion call that “Freemasonry is dying” was intended to shake the reader to his core with the raw data gleaned from the Masonic Service Association of North America’s (MSANA) database. The MSANA’s data, comprised of roughly three-thousand data points, show a steep decline in our membership since our numerical apogee in 1959. Not only has the absolute number of Masons declined, but the percentage of the population claiming Masonic membership has declined as well.

While I warn of the dangers of our shrinking membership, I have also been blunt about my aspirations for a smaller, more elite Craft that has shed itself of the excesses of the post-World War I and World War II eras (see “10 Propositions for Texas Freemasonry”). This seeming contradiction is not one in the slightest. I am not concerned that there are fewer Masons today than in 1959 or any time for that matter. My concern lies with the fact that we are attempting to hold together an aging infrastructure with fewer and fewer men, and wasting our time and treasure in the process.

As our numbers decline, which will continue to do so for the next decade or more, we must come to terms with the fact that an organization built to function with over four million Masons cannot do so with less than one million men. Not only an organization that requires many men to operate, but one that has largely refused to recalculate its pricing and overhead since the mid-twentieth century. We cannot maintain the infrastructure of 1959 in 2018 let alone in 2030. We certainly cannot do so with dues based on incomes from the 1960s (e.g. \$120 per year) and endowments (i.e. lifetime memberships) priced in the \$500 to \$1000 range.

Now that I have smashed my data-encrusted sledgehammer over your head, and the heads of tens of thousands of other readers, I want to impart my honest conviction that the way to Masonic deliverance is by rapid and intentional consolidation.

As promised at the onset of this article, and since I am a man of my word, I will return to the tale of the two cities called Detroit and Pittsburgh, which holds important lessons for our fair institution. In 2013 New York Times columnist Paul Krugman asked the following question in an article titled “A Tale of Two Rust-Belt Cities”: “[I]s the crisis in Detroit simply a function of the industrial decline of the U.S. heartland, or is it about internal developments within the metro area that have produced a uniquely bad outcome?”

The author states that both Detroit and Pittsburgh possessed “iconic monolithic” economies and both cities’ metropolitan areas experienced comparable declines in their labor markets from 1970 to 1990. From 1990 to as late as 2006, “the eve of the Great Recession — you could argue that there wasn’t a whole lot of difference in aggregate performance between greater Pittsburgh and greater Detroit.” However, after 2006, Detroit’s economy plummeted while Pittsburgh weathered the storm.

Krugman concludes his column with the following statement, “It’s hard to avoid the sense that greater Pittsburgh, by taking better care of its core, also improved its ability to adapt to changing circumstances... If you like, sprawl killed Detroit, by depriving it of the kind of environment that could incubate new sources of prosperity.”

A study released by the Brookings Institute in 2013 substantiates Krugman’s thesis. Greater Detroit topped the list of metro areas with the most decentralized, that is sprawling, labor forces. In 2013, only 7.3 percent of greater Detroit’s non-farm workers were within 3 miles of its central business district (CBD), while 77.4 percent of its workers were over 10 miles from its core. In comparison, 25.2 percent of Pittsburgh’s workers were within 3 miles of its CBD while 45.2 percent were over 10 miles away. “Now, Lance,” you may ask, “what about other sprawling cities like Dallas or Los Angeles? They haven’t seen the same decline as Detroit.” You are correct, however, unlike Dallas or Los Angeles, Detroit was hemorrhaging people as it sprawled. To quote one writer, “[Detroit] was drawing existing residents from the center to the periphery. Homes in the central city were abandoned — and the tax revenues that came from those households evaporated. Detroit, unlike some of its wealthy suburbs in Oakland County, only saw one side of this migration — the losing side. And it was poorly equipped to deal with the fallout.”

What I glean from these articles is that after a period of long-term decline sets in, or rather the beginning stages of death, which we call dying, a city or an organization is left with the paths of Detroit or Pittsburgh. We can choose to be like Detroit and attempt to maintain a sprawling edifice, figurative or literal, while simultaneously experiencing a shortage of revenue. The alternative is to follow the path of Pittsburgh and take care of our core at the expense of the periphery. In short, any organization that is struggling with its identity, losing members, and bleeding revenue must immediately focus on excelling at its most basic function. In Masonic terms, the initiatic process, or rather, making Masons.

What I will now prescribe is the bitter pills of truth that so many refuse to swallow:

1. We must accept the fact that Freemasonry is in extremely unhealthy condition, losing membership at a rapid pace, and attempting to maintain an infrastructure designed for a much larger membership base. In other words, accept that we are dying, though we are not yet dead. Any attempt to soften this conclusion is a practice in euphemism.
2. We must make the difficult decision to cut off and remove recognition from any and all organizations that do not make Masons or support the initiatic experience, namely the Order of the Eastern Star, DeMolay, Rainbow Girls, and the like. These institutions must stand or fall on their own merit. Other appendant bodies must be evaluated on an individual basis.
3. We must consolidate lodges in areas experiencing rapid decline. Such consolidation must occur in urban as well as rural counties. Most counties need only one lodge. In most areas multiple adjacent lodges saturate the market and create negative competition for fewer and fewer initiates.
4. We must sell off buildings requiring millions of dollars to repair, especially those that are used once or twice a year, and when used are filled at half-capacity. For example, if a Grand Lodge’s building is in disrepair and requires \$18,000,000 to restore, the Grand Lodge should make the determination that the building is a liability on its balance sheet and cut its losses. The Grand Lodge could purchase a smaller structure for its administrative uses and rent a hotel and conference center for its communications.
5. We must demand that our constituent lodges meet certain minimum standards of dress, ritual, and general decorum. Our populations are increasingly professional and urban. They demand a certain

level of formality and rigor. For example, Texas' population is roughly 85 percent urban and 15 percent rural. It is essential that we meet the needs of the areas where we can see the greatest potential growth.

6. Finally, we must understand the needs of the men of Generation Z. So much focus has been placed on what Millennials want, and rightly so, since they are the largest generation in the United States. However, the oldest members of Generation Z are now eighteen years old and are now eligible for membership in our Fraternity. After hundreds of conversations with young Masons, my guess is that the next crop of initiates will want similar things out of the Fraternity as Millennial men, namely the mysteries delivered in a formal, mystical, and demanding manner.

Our Fraternity may be dying because of external factors, but our condition was clearly exacerbated by internal ones. While we may be dying, we are not yet dead, and there is a way out of our present malaise. The way is to follow the example of the City of Pittsburgh by acknowledging our decline, consolidating down to our most basic core, and doing our most simple functions extremely well. The alternative is to be the fraternal version of Detroit, sprawling, mismanaged, constantly experiencing budget shortfalls, and failing to deliver the most basic services.

We have two paths before us. Which shall we choose? I echo what Dickens wrote in his *A Tale of Two Cities*, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way..."



COMMENTARY

Awakening From A Long Nap

~ **John W. Bizzack, PM**

The decline in Masonic membership in America has, since the 1960s been the source of much handwringing. The steady decrease since 1959 has been referred to as "alarming" so many times in writings and presentations that it has become part of the Masonic lexicon. Considering the reality that each time membership has rapidly accelerated it also followed a pattern of decline, is it really all that "alarming" today? Only a cursory review of Masonic literature, writings, and presentations since 1875 alone is necessary to see the real alarm that begs sounding. That alarm is not the decline itself, but the reasons for it. The reasons have been examined, observed, talked about and warnings so often sounded that phrases like "we must," "we should," "it is imperative," "we have to," and "we can no longer," has lost their punch.

Is it possible American Freemasonry could be so inobservant? When considering that when attention is given today to what has been happening for nearly 150 years causes a stir, the answer is, yes. The answer suggests too many today are unfamiliar with the story of our past or have been nonchalantly napping, waiting for someone else to do something on a matter that has been warned about for multiple decades.

When it comes to the rise and fall of membership, the story of American Freemasonry's past is not a complex puzzle. We can, if we look, identify the fundamental causes for the eras of decline: an obsession with counting names on a membership roster and allowing that obsession to become a false measurement of the success of the fraternity; loss of exclusivity from opening too wide the West Gate, and failure of lodges to instruct.

Gutman, in his 2008, ***The Decline Of Freemasonry In America*** was certainly not the first to complain that the topic of declining membership is always long on conjecture but short on remedies. He offered remedies, but there were no takers even after he was asked to provide them. Chances are his remedies were seen as too radical for the hand-wringers – probably because he firmly rejected the notion that strength can only be derived from numbers. As he pointed out, *the intellectual nourishment, spiritual stimulation, social and philosophical dimensions so vital to Freemasonry, are virtually nowhere to be found*. Many would say that his point remains painfully accurate. Gutman also points out, *No organization should recruit [employ] more members until it can satisfy the needs and aspirations of its present constituency, strongly suggesting Freemasonry should have stuck with Section V. of Andersons Constitutions of 1723: A Master should take not an apprentice unless he has sufficient employment for him*. It's quite a challenge to substantiate the claim more members are needed today when we see 56% of all men currently on the rolls of subordinate lodges have never meaningfully participated in the activities of their Lodge since having received their most recent Degree.¹

In the 2017, ***Adapt or Die: On the Decline of Membership in the Masonic Fraternity***, Michael Harding tells us, *To date, no one at the local, state, or national level has presented any real solutions, ideas or plans to resolve the issue or at least curb the tide of the accelerating membership decline*. A look at the **Notes** section following these Commentaries, is a very short list of books, articles, essays, observations, commentary, and presentations that have told us since 1875 not only the problem, but the solutions to not only the declines, but the reasons they occur and continue. The list in the **Notes** section is only a taste – a small portion of what has been offered in the past - and after they were given momentary attention, most were relegated to dusty Masonic library shelves (if they ever made there in the first place). So, it should not be surprising there are Masons today who are starting to pay attention but think this issue is something recent. It's been a long nap.

Harding offers his remedies to “best advance into this new era and connect with new potential members.” He's right. Those are certainly of fundamental importance. Ignoring them or only providing

¹ *Characteristics Of An Ideal Lodge Survey Results & Analysis*, October 1, 2019 William O. Ware Lodge of Research, Covington, Kentucky.

what was provided to the previous generations offers American Freemasonry merely more of the same of what has occurred for the past multiple decades.

Lance Kennedy in his 2018, *Two Trajectories for American Freemasonry: Consolidation Or Implosion*, returns to the theme of his sister writings which trumpets alarm by declaring, “Freemasonry is dying.” He notes that his intent with such trumpeting was “intended to shake the reader,” which it did for what he says is at least 20,000 who viewed his previous article along with “hundreds of shares across Facebook and other social media platforms.” Kennedy is to be applauded for what he refers to as his “clarion call.” A lot of nappers do need shaking. Those writings, however, to which he refers also suggest a couple of other things.

It appears there’s many in the Craft who are unaware of the factual data collected by the MSANA since 1924 and believe that declining membership leading to a smaller fraternity means Freemasonry itself is *dying*. Regrettably, this suggests many still subscribe to the notion that the success of Freemasonry, perhaps its very existence, is dependent on the size of its membership roster – the same old false standard of measurement infecting mainstream thinking since the early 1800s, accounting for most of the eras of rapid expansion, resulting in, as previously mentioned, loss of exclusivity from opening too wide the West Gate, and failure of lodges to instruct.

Kennedy’s strongest point is made when he writes, *I am not concerned that there are fewer Masons today than in 1959 or any time for that matter. My concern lies with the fact that we are attempting to hold together an aging infrastructure with fewer and fewer men and wasting our time and treasure in the process.*

His six remedies are certainly a welcome addition and offers a much-needed contemporary perspective. In the **Notes** section of this papers there are many writers and observers from the past who agree with his remedies in one way or the other. The problem is, as it was the late 1800s and through the 20th century, that much of the Craft is still napping. Many who are not napping have found the practicality in learning about the past and finding the reasons *why* we are in the state we are in, which makes the topic of declining membership neither surprising nor alarming. In fact, working to become a smaller fraternity with more members committed to the aim and purpose of Freemasonry may be the new *laudable pursuit* underwriting those constructive labors of the Craft now occurring in a number of jurisdictions and organizations like the Masonic Restoration Foundation offering a rudder for the future.

Washington Irving’s *Rip Van Winkle* is an interesting symbolic tale similar to what may be construed as what has and is finally happening in American Freemasonry (waking up). When Van Winkle awakens after twenty-years of sleeping high on a mountain, he discovers shocking changes: his musket is rotting and rusty, his beard is a foot long, his clothes tattered, and his dog is nowhere to be found. Freemasonry has been napping at least ten times longer than Van Winkle but shows promising signs that it is slowly starting to come out of its slumber.

The Internet and other social media platforms today help awaken many more Masons to the fact that American Freemasonry is on the road to a reckoning in the not too distant future. A reckoning - an involuntary restructuring of how we deliver the promise of Freemasonry with no other option except to allow the fraternity to continue to drift into the kind of institutional coma from which it may never awaken - is where the remedy so long sought will most likely be found. It is certainly reasonable to anticipate such an era of reckoning to arrive in stages. The first stage begins to exhaust the fiscal capabilities of lodges and many grand jurisdictions as redundant programs and a variety of projects become impractical to continue at past and current levels. That stage is simply Economics 101. Some believe we are already in that stage and witnessing, although at glacial speed, the paradigm shift.

Regardless, as the era moves forward, there's no reason to believe suspensions, demits, and those prone to fade away will not continue to do so for much the same reasons as in the past. Cultures change slowly, but as the fraternity gets small in number, shifts will eventually occur in members attitudes along with long-standing mainstream thought. Writers, researchers, scholars, and observers will turn to past literature, records, and documents to seek the reasons *why* American Freemasonry is where it will find itself. Perhaps, this time, at least under the circumstances, doing so will help prevent further seeding the idea that the fraternity needs millions of members to be successful. Should solid leadership arise from that era, American Freemasonry will find its intended strength in a structure that better ensures its votaries are more educated about the Craft and Lodge rooms a place for training men in character with more of a chance, in due time, to find the strength intended to be found in fewness.

Trumpet sounding today, clarion calls, and broadcasting legitimate alarms, about the future of American Freemasonry should be welcome, but we should keep in mind that it is not the idea Freemasonry itself that has the problem but the institution that surrounds it.

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~ **Dan M. Kemble, PM**

Brothers Gutman, Harding and Kennedy are at least forty years late to the party, but it's nice to know that others, outside of the institutional Grand Lodges, are finally paying attention to the uninterrupted loss of members experienced by American Freemasonry in the past sixty years.

Here's a question that very few have asked, including the Brothers identified above: As our membership has declined, what is it that we have really lost? The harsh reality is that, except for money and skilled tradesmen, the answer is probably not much.

It is unarguably true that the 1940s and 50s saw unprecedented growth in the Masonic Fraternity. What did the massive increase in members bring to Freemasonry? First, more members meant more money. As membership grew, revenues from dues grew as well. Lodges and Grand Lodges could afford to go on prolonged building sprees (which they did), never expecting the dramatic reduction in membership levels. Second, within the large increase of members were tradesmen who could (and did) perform such labor for the Lodge as carpentry, plumbing, roofing and electrical work. Lodges and Grand Lodges benefitted from such labor, either receiving the services at no charge or at greatly reduced rates. Again, the benefit of increased membership was financial in nature.

Lodges and Grand Lodges in this period were beehives of industry, with never ending projects to expand and improve physical surroundings. But the industriousness was without proper foundation. Masonic education, beyond learning ritual parts, was not a part of the expansion of Freemasonry in the middle of the 20th Century. Consequently, the men who came into the Fraternity, who paid dues, built buildings,

fried fish, flipped pancakes and delivered ritual all did so without ever holding a genuine understanding of the ultimate aim and purpose of Freemasonry.

In truth, Masonic education was not a priority of Masonic leaders of the 1940s and 50s. All of the Fraternity's energy and resources was funneled into Degree work and building maintenance. In terms of being grounded and well educated in the history and philosophy of Freemasonry, we are probably no worse off than we were in 1960.

As the members that we gained in the 1940s and 50s have passed from the scene, what we miss most is their annual dues payments and their skilled tradesmanship. We do not miss their intellectual and philosophical insights because, in general, they neither possessed nor imparted any.

Alarms are being sounded now because membership has dropped to the point that Lodges (and Grand Lodges) can no longer afford the costs associated with building maintenance. Lodges once noted for the pageantry of their ritual now struggle to find enough men to fill the required chairs for the opening and closing ceremonies. It is the absence of warm bodies and the decline of revenues that has caused institutional Freemasonry to take notice of the Fraternity's fragile state.

For much of the 20th Century, the practice of Freemasonry has been a hollow experience. The frenzy of activity masked the emptiness of the core. As the pace of the activity has slackened, the extent of the emptiness of the core has been revealed.

Freemasonry has become hollow because it has become unmoored from its philosophical and spiritual foundation and has thus drifted along with the current of the times. It has become fixated on form, but offers very little substance. When newly raised Masons discover the dearth of substance offered by their Lodges, their interest in the Fraternity is generally extinguished. The evidence of this is apparent in contemporary Freemasonry's low membership retention rates.

The paradox, of course, is that Freemasonry as it was designed to be practiced, is anything but hollow. The power of the philosophy of Freemasonry to transform lives is just as vital now as it was 300 years ago. It is indeed dismaying to view the extent to which American Freemasons have reduced this robust institution to a pale shadow of itself, all brought about by the failure to understand the potential that they held in their hands.

If Freemasonry is to be revived, it will not be through the addition of well-meaning programs, technological development or embracing social causes. The only avenue for the revival of Freemasonry is to practice it as it was intended – and that is as a philosophical and spiritual Order intended to improve men, one man at a time. Those men so improved, in turn, improve the communities in which they live.

The question facing Freemasonry at this critical point is whether it has the will to address the hollowness that exists at its core. The leadership of institutional Freemasonry probably has neither the inclination

nor the ability to implement any significant changes to the status quo. Attempts to cause institutional Freemasonry to address any of its apparent failures is likely to elicit the ham-handed response that Bro. Gutman experienced following the release of his essay, “The Amazing Well-Worn Alibi.” Institutional leadership is far too entrenched in self-importance, grandiose titles and the perception of power, to ever willingly sacrifice any of its prerogatives, even if such sacrifice is necessary for survival. Just as Freemasonry improves men one man at a time, institutional Freemasonry will likely only be improved one Lodge at a time.

In the meantime, membership rolls will continue to decline, revenues will decrease and Lodges will be forced to consolidate. Lodges and Grand Lodges will find themselves in the position of having to do less with less. As overall membership approaches pre-Civil War levels, those men, and those Lodges, who now practice Freemasonry as it was intended will be in the best position to shape the future of Fraternity.

Alarms about Freemasonry’s shrinking membership are appropriate, and all Freemasons should be gravely concerned about the future of the Fraternity. Freemasonry’s future lies in its historical, philosophical spiritual foundation. To look elsewhere merely perpetuates the mistakes of the last sixty years.