

NEWTON'S LAW

THE RESTORATIVE WORK OF JOSEPH FORT NEWTON

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This presentation is styled in your programs as, “Newton’s Law: The Restorative Work of Joseph Fort Newton.”

The “Newton's Law” part is a play on words. Joseph Fort Newton would have never presumed to regard any of his thoughts or opinions on Freemasonry to be “law,” but, as I think we will see later, some of his observations occur just as surely as the Law of Gravity attributed to enlightenment era scientist Isaac Newton.

Calling the work of Joseph Fort Newton “restorative,” however, is firmly rooted in fact.

Doing anything more than very superficially discussing the work of this brilliant and prolific writer within the hour allotted this morning is impossible. So we will try to look very briefly at the work of Newton at two levels. At the larger level, we will look at how Newton viewed the mission and ministry of Freemasonry as being “restorative” in its very essence.

At the somewhat smaller level, we will look at some of Newton’s opinions and suggestions with respect to the delivery of Masonic education, and, indeed, Freemasonry.

But, first, let’s get acquainted with the man – Joseph Fort Newton.

The best way to get acquainted with Newton is by allowing him to tell his own story, which he does, eloquently and honestly, in his 1946 autobiography, **River of Years**. Written in the most compelling prose, **River of Years** is available through online booksellers.

It is easy to conclude, after reading Newton's autobiography, that if any man could be said to have Freemasonry hard-wired into his being, that man would surely be Joseph Fort Newton.

Newton was born on July 21, 1876, in Decatur, Texas. His father was Lee Newton, and his mother was Sue Battle Green Newton. Lee Newton served as a Confederate soldier in the Civil War. Taken captive during the War, Lee Newton became gravely ill while interned in a Union prison camp. Upon learning that Lee Newton was a Mason, the commanding officer of the camp ordered the apparently dying soldier removed from the prison and transferred to his own quarters. In more comfortable surroundings, and benefiting from effective medical care, Lee Newton recovered his health. At the end of the War, the camp commander furnished the elder Newton with the funds necessary to return to his Texas home.

In **River of Years**, Joseph Fort Newton recalled how, as a boy, he would listen as if mesmerized to the story of his father's illness and recovery while a prisoner of war. Always, the point of the story was the heroic action of a Brother-Mason who acted to save his father's life.

Sadly, in 1883, Lee Newton died at a relatively young age, and the image of Masons gathered around his father's open grave was burned deeply into six-year-old Joseph's mind. Joseph later recounted how the local Masons quietly rendered aid to his widowed mother following Lee Newton's death.

Lee Newton had been a Baptist minister, but left the ministry and became a lawyer. In 1890, fourteen-year-old Joseph also felt the call of the divine, and, in 1895, at the age of nineteen, was ordained as a Baptist minister. Newton recounts feeling conflicted at the time of his ordination, due to his inability to accept Baptist doctrine as being authentically scriptural. Immediately after his ordination, he accepted the pastorate of a small, rural Baptist Church. He quickly came into conflict with members of his congregation for not being, in his words, a "damnationist."

In examining Newton's later career as a Freemason, it is important to remember this example of Newton's general outlook. As we will see, Newton's orientation was one of conciliation and reconciliation. He viewed Freemasonry as a vehicle to promote friendship among men; or, if you will, the restoration of friendship among men. That attitude was replicated in the theological course that he followed.

Although he had little formal schooling, in 1895, at the age of 19, he enrolled as a student in Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

Four things occurred while Newton was at Southern that had profound effect on his life.

First, and most obviously, he met his future wife, Jennie Mai Deatherage, of Sanders, Kentucky (to whom he referred as “Lady Brown-Eyes”).

Next, he served as an associate chaplain for a state prison in Indiana, just across the Ohio River from Louisville. This served as Newton’s first prolonged exposure to society’s criminal element. No bleeding heart, Newton described the prisoners as being “not immoral, but amoral,” and as being exactly where they needed to be.

Third, he worked for a brief period of time for the “Courier-Journal,” the Louisville newspaper edited by the renowned Henry Watterson. Newton was the paper’s reporter for religious news. He recounted several conversations that he had with Watterson, and credited Watterson with helping him develop his style of writing and speaking. Watterson told him, “A minister is often content to get ideas out of his own mind. A journalist must them into the minds of others.” Newton’s later writings exhibit the extent to which he took Watterson’s advice to heart.

Finally, as a result of theological disagreement between a faculty member and the administration at Southern, Newton began to seriously question his own understanding of God, and started on the path that would eventually re-define his own theological beliefs.

In 1897, Newton left Southern Seminary without having graduated, and made his way back to Paris, Texas, where he became pastor of First Baptist Church. His theological differences with rigidly sectarian Baptist doctrine finally became too much, and in 1899, he resigned his pastorate, left the Baptist Church, and moved to St. Louis where he became affiliated with the Non-Sectarian Church of St. Louis. He maintained a long-distance romance with Jennie, and the two of them were married in Louisville on June 14, 1900.

After serving for a brief period of time as an itinerant preacher in New England, Newton and Jennie headed for Dixon, Illinois, where in 1902 he became pastor of People’s Church. As pastor of People’s Church, Newton distinguished himself in at least three respects.

He began a series of Sunday night talks called “Great Men and Great Books.” These proved to be very popular, and attracted large crowds to People’s Church. Newton was clearly nurturing what would prove to be his life-long love for the written word.

Further, Newton became known as the “Actor’s Chaplain.” Being a professional actor in the early years of the 20th century was not a respectable vocation. Newton agreed to christen the children of actors (no other minister would do so), and thus found a new group to whom he could extend his ministry. He was later formally appointed a chaplain of the Actors’ Church Alliance.

Finally, Newton became a somewhat controversial figure when he was denounced by evangelist Billy Sunday, who came to Dixon for a revival. Sunday announced that there was one pastor in Dixon for whom he would not pray, and went on to say, “The doctrine of the universal Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man is an infernal lie.” This was a contradiction and a condemnation of the core of Newton’s religious beliefs. Newton considered Sunday’s pulpit theatrics “a ghastly caricature of religion.”

While in Dixon, Newton became a Mason, being initiated passed, and raised in Friendship Lodge No. 7.

As we will see later, Newton’s initial experience in Freemasonry did not foreshadow the great contributions he would later make to the Fraternity. Writing in **Short Talks On Masonry** (1928), Newton described how, because he could find no one to guide him in his search for the history and philosophy of Freemasonry, he gradually drifted away from the Lodge.

In 1908, Newton moved to Cedar Rapids, Iowa, where he became pastor of Liberal Christian Church (Universalist). While in Cedar Rapids, he affiliated with Mt. Hermon Lodge No. 263.

In Cedar Rapids, Newton published his first two books. The first of these was biography of Chicago preacher David Swing (1909). The second was the product of Newton’s tremendous admiration for Abraham Lincoln. Newton was able to make the acquaintance of the man who had served as physician to Lincoln’s former law partner, William Herndon. The young pastor was provided with original source documents related to Lincoln and his early law practice. Newton’s book, **Lincoln and Herndon**, was published in 1910.

The success of these two books, coupled with Newton’s growing notoriety as a preacher, indirectly led to his next book, **The Builders, A Story and Study of Masonry**, which, although published in 1914, is still considered a classic Masonic text.

Newton told the story of how he went to a Lodge in Iowa (perhaps Mt. Hermon), and was so “rusty” that he was barely able to convince the Lodge members that he was, in fact, a Mason. He began to ruminate on whether there was a “little book” that newly made Masons could be given to help acquaint them with the history and philosophy of the Order. Hearing Newton’s questions about such a book, Iowa Grand Master Louis Block suggested that Newton, himself, was the right man to write such a book.

In **The Builders**, Newton wrote:

“Manifestly, since love is the law of life, if men are to be won from hate to love, if those who doubt and deny are to be wooed to faith, if the race is ever to be led and lifted into a life of service, it must be by the fine art of friendship. Inasmuch as this is the purpose of Masonry, its mission determines the method not less than the spirit of its labor.”

Reviewer and William O. Ware Research Fellow William J. Lorenz wrote of **The Builders**, “Throughout the book, the reader will find Joseph Fort Newton’s belief that Freemasonry’s role is to unite men of every country, sect and opinion; and the Freemason’s duty is to be gentle in controversy as well as harmony, to display brotherly love and honor to those around him, and then be grateful to God for the opportunity to do so.”

In 1915, Newton became the first editor of “The Builder” magazine, widely believed to be the best Masonic publication of all-time. His editorship of “The Builder” was short lived, however, because in 1916 he accepted the pastorate of City Temple in London (Anglican, Non-Conformist). Newton was the first American to be called to the pastorate of the church.

Newton went to London in the midst of the horrors of World War I. In his autobiography, *River of Years*, he recounts his experiences as a wartime pastor, and as an American sojourning in Europe.

While pastoring in London, the call of Freemasonry continued to prove irresistible to Newton. Upon the invitation of Scots Mason, Andrew Sommerville MacBride, Newton went to speak to Lodge Progress in Glasgow. Although Newton and MacBride likely met in person only the one time, MacBride’s influence on Newton was significant. MacBride had recently published his renowned work, **Speculative Masonry**. Newton later caused it to be reprinted in the United States (he wrote the Foreword for the American version) and frequently referred to MacBride in his later writings.

While in England, he wrote Modern Masonry, published in 1917. Modern Masonry was a very brief restatement of the salient facts as set forth in The Builders. Modern Masonry was published as a part of The Masonic Service Association's "Little Library Series."

In 1919, following the end of World War I, the peripatetic Newton, returned to the United States to become pastor of the Church of the Divine Paternity (Universalist) in New York City.

His Masonic writing continued during this time, as he published The Men's House (1923) and The Great Light in Masonry (1924).

Writing in The Men's House, Newton said:

"Amidst bitterness and strife Masonry brings men of capital and labor, men of every rank and walk of life together as men, and nothing else, at an altar where they can talk and not fight, discuss and not dispute, and each may learn the point of view of his fellows. Other hope there is none save in this spirit of friendship and fairness, of democracy and the fellowship of man with man."

Here, Newton continued to advance his most closely held point – that Freemasonry's mission was to restore men to friendship with each other.

It is worth noting that Newton's writing spanned an era that began on the eve of World War I, witnessed the carnage of the First World War, saw the devastating effects of worldwide economic depression, and then survived the horror of the second World War. Through all of the upheaval and tragedy, Newton never lost his faith in the power of Freemasonry for good, or his optimism that men could be restored to unity under its banner.

Continuing in The Men's House, Newton offered his thoughts on how Freemasonry could directly be a source of improvement to a scarred and anxious United States.

"There are three services which Masonry should render to America:

- **To help heal it of its racial rancor;**
- **To free it of religious bigotry;**

- **To build a bulwark against materialism.”**

His view of the brotherhood offered by Freemasonry is expressed in another quote taken from The Men’s House.

“Practical brotherhood, if it has any meaning at all, means that all men, regardless of race, rank, or creed, shall have an opportunity to live and to live well – that even the humblest child, to the measure of its capacity, shall be admitted to the full inheritance of humanity. It will not merely be friendly to, but will help forward every wise effort in behalf of a full, free, happy, useful life for all classes, and will seek to organize civilization to that end. Masonry, in its organized capacity, may not formulate or support definite political and social programs; but it will create and cultivate in its members the will and the passion to be champions of every cause which endeavors intelligently to build a better human order.”

In his 1924 work, The Great Light in Masonry, Newton again returned to his theme of Brotherhood.

“It is as if all the voices of the world had united into one voice of high command: ‘Be Brothers, be Builders; live and let live; think and let think; do justly, love mercy; and know that the men of the four seas are kinsmen.”

As always, Newton viewed Masons as Builders and Brothers, and his call for unity was nothing less than a call for the restoration of the family of man.

Expanding on the ideas expressed in The Great Light in Masonry, Newton, again in 1924, published The Religion of Masonry, offering a larger view of his analysis of the spiritual nature of the Fraternity.

“As some of us prefer to put it, Masonry is not a religion, but Religion – not a church but a worship, in which men of all religions may unite, unless they insist that all who worship with them must think exactly and in detail as they think about all things in the heaven above and in the earth beneath. It is not the rival of any religion, but the friend of all, laying emphasis upon those truths which underlie all religions and are the basis and consecration of each.”

It is frequently said that fools rush in where angels fear to tread. Newton was certainly no fool, and it can hardly be said that he rushed into this project, but clearly he was able to navigate the hazardous waters of illuminating the religious qualities of Freemasonry without tying it to any one specific religion.

In 1925, Newton moved to Philadelphia to become pastor of Memorial Church St. Paul (Episcopal). He would spend the remainder of his life in Philadelphia.

In 1926, Newton was ordained as a priest in the Episcopal Church.

Newton's writing was not limited to Freemasonry. He published several volumes of his own sermons and edited various editions of **Best Sermons of the Year**. His personal notoriety increased when he was named as one of the top five protestant preachers in America.

His Masonic writing continued apace, with the publication of **Short Talks On Masonry** in 1928.

It is, perhaps, in **Short Talks On Masonry**, that Newton is at his most eloquent. It is also here that we begin to consider on the more immediate question of his views on how and when to educate Freemasons.

Listen as he poses a question to his readers:

“As the Gavel sounds in the East, calling us to another year of Masonic labor, each of us ought to ask himself such questions as these, and answer them honestly with his soul. What kind of a Lodge would my Lodge be if all its members were like me? What value would Masonry be to the world, if every one of its sons made the same use of it as we do? Do we answer the signs and summons sent us by the Lodge, as we vowed to do at its Altar? If no, what is a Masonic obligation worth, and what does it mean – nothing? Such questions tell us where we are in Masonry, and why we do so little with it.”

He wrote of Masonic education as an obligation, not only of men to Freemasonry, but of men to each other.

“Let us remember that a Cable-tow has two ends. If it binds a Mason to the Fraternity, by the same fact it binds the Fraternity to each man in it. The one obligation needs to be emphasized as much as the other. Happily, in our day we are beginning to see the other side of the obligation – that the Fraternity is under vows to its members to guide, instruct and train them for the effective service of the Craft and of humanity.”

Again, writing in *Short Talks*, Newton felt compelled to restate the ultimate aim and purpose of Freemasonry.

“Here lies, perhaps, the deepest meaning and value of Masonry; it is a fellowship of men seeking goodness, and to yield ourselves to its influence, to be drawn into its spirit and quest, is to be made better than ourselves.”

It is in **Short Talks On Masonry** that he again recounts his visit with Andrew Sommerville MacBride in Scotland.

MacBride’s conversation with Newton about the employment of “intenders” and mentors made a deep impression on Newton. MacBride’s influence is clear in Newton’s declaration that there could be no defensible claim that Masonry had been imparted in a manner “pure and unimpaired from generation to generation.” He not only called more attention to the consequences of the deficiency in adequate Masonic instruction, but offered a sensible solution that had begun to formulate as early as 1915, while he was editor of the increasingly successful *Builder Magazine*.

He wrote that *The Builder Magazine*, “had hold of a big idea, but that we had it by the wrong end.” Newton saw that while the magazine was able to assemble a “goodly company of brethren who were students of Freemasonry, as readers of and writers for *The Builder*, yet in comparison with the number of Masons in America, they were very few and ‘hardly a drop in the bucket.’”

With MacBride’s assistance, Newton recognized that the issues surrounding inadequate (or absent) instruction were not going to be resolved by books and journals; and that Research Societies could never do the thing that needed to be done simply because too many members were already insufficiently instructed in the fundamentals of Masonry. And, as previously pointed out and making matters worse, those who were insufficiently instructed held leadership positions at all levels of the Fraternity thus, perpetuating the problem.

He proposed a way out of what had become a routine practice deeply embedded in the Fraternity, and he spent the next several decades (and his influence as one of the most widely read Masonic authors in the first half of the century) encouraging grand jurisdictions and their subordinate Lodges to explore *and* employ the idea.

His solution called simply for a commonsense approach. If there was inadequate instruction about Masonry, instruct it sufficiently as men entered the ranks and passed through the degrees, giving them sufficient time to learn and absorb the meaning of each degree before passing them on to the next – or presuming that once made a Master Mason they would automatically pursue the understanding of the degrees necessary to *become* Freemasons, as opposed to merely being members.

Writing in **Short Talks On Masonry**, Newton said:

“There it is, beyond doubt, the plan and method we need. It takes a young man at the time when he is ready to know; it links the study of Masonry with the ritual, as it should be; and it is done in an atmosphere in which not only the facts, but the spirit, the ‘feel’ of Masonry, can be communicated.”

Newton called for a collective agreement between jurisdictions, not to establish a uniform ritual, as many before and after him would do, but to make a concerted and collective effort to establish and use a functional, fundamental course of instruction for each degree of Masonry beyond what was offered by merely being exposed to the ritual. That was something the mass of our culture believed then, in the multiple decades preceding Newton, and still today that is *already* done through the long-standing, customary, practice of advancing men through degrees with a minimum of 30 days between them.

Like other learned Masons of his period, he voiced the folly of presumptuously bestowing upon candidates the title of Master Mason, and then simply bidding them to be fruitful and become Freemasons – pointing out that if that approach worked well, there would have been no recurring calls to address the matter since the middle of the 1800s.

Such an essential instruction process as Newton proposed has worked in businesses, corporate America, the military, and the field of academics for centuries. Although Masonry is none of those categories, no legitimate reason has yet been put forth that indicates the practice would not work for the Institution of Freemasonry. Those who may claim the approach cannot work, demonstrate their lack of awareness of what has

been happening in lodges since the 1990s that have adopted even a modest effort to the approach as proposed by Newton.

Newton was committed to the idea and wrote in his work that the plan was “neither impossible nor impractical” *if* Grand Jurisdictions and their subordinate Lodges would be “wise enough to use it.” Blending early optimism with a hint of doubt, he slyly noted too that, “Surely a Grand Lodge ought to be as eager to have at least an elementary knowledge of what Masonry is imparted to its young men, *if* they really meant business in the matter of Masonic education.”

Hear Newton, once again, in his own words (from **Short Talks on Masonry**):

“Such a plan is neither impossible nor impractical, if we really mean business in the matter of Masonic Education.”

Newton’s career as a pastor continued apace with his involvement in Freemasonry.

In 1930 he became the rector of St. James Church in Philadelphia, where he remained for five years.

From 1935 to 1938, he was a Special Preacher to the Associated Churches of Philadelphia.

In 1938 he accepted the rectorship of the Church of St. Luke and the Epiphany in Philadelphia. He remained in this position until his death from a heart attack on January 24, 1950, at the age of 73 ½ years.

One of the true Masonic luminaries of the 20th century, Joseph Fort Newton, added his name to the long list of Masons who equally recognized the consequences of our absence of adequate, vital instruction throughout Freemasonry, and, negligence in guarding the Gate.

Newton found that convincing jurisdictions to adopt such a dramatic diversion from that to which the Masonic culture is accustomed is like bending granite. The opposition to the recommendation and replacing the “all you need is ritual” approach proved unsurmountable – at least collectively.

Newton's Law, as applied to contemporary Freemasonry, may be expressed in two thoughts:

First, that Freemasonry is, has always been, and will forever be, a vehicle for the restoration of friendship and brotherhood among men.

Second, that restoration of the vitality of the Fraternity rests on its determination to address the issue of educating and engaging its Brethren from "the right end," as they move through the degrees at a measured pace.

Again, allowing Newton to have the last word, such a determination is "neither impossible nor impractical" and indeed, it is essential if our institutions "really mean business in the matter of Masonic education."

Thank you for your time.