

WILLIAM O. WARE LODGE OF RESEARCH

BOOK REVIEW

THOMAS SMITH WEBB: FREEMASON – MUSICIAN - ENTREPRENEUR

BY: HERBERT T. LEYLAND

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Thomas Smith Webb (1771 – 1819) left an indelible mark on American Freemasonry and remains one of the most influential men in the history of the Craft in this country.

Dayton, Ohio attorney Herbert T. Leyland, in *Thomas Webb Smith: Freemason – Musician – Entrepreneur*, gives a revealing account of Webb's life, which began in colonial America, and ended in the uncertain years of the early republic. After reading Leland's work, one is left to contemplate what might have been had Webb's circumstances been more stable throughout his life. Leyland's work is as much a glimpse into life in the early days of the United States, as it is a useful biography of the father of American Masonic ritual.

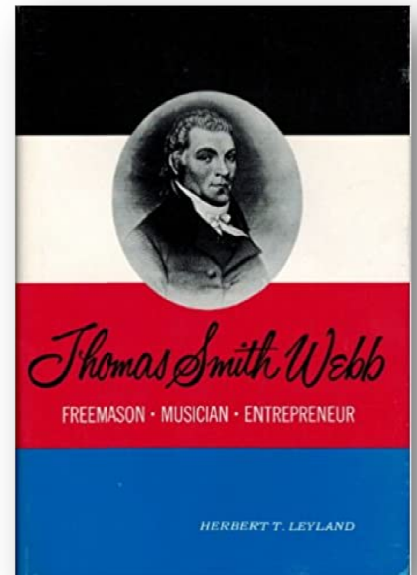
Webb was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1771. The sixth child of Samuel and Margaret Webb, Thomas was named after a maternal great-uncle. His father, Samuel, was a shopkeeper and a bookbinder. Samuel Webb experienced very little success in his business ventures. Leyland posits that available records indicate that Samuel actually put very little effort into his businesses. As a result, the Webb family was frequently in dire financial straits.

As a boy, young Thomas had a front row seat from which to observe the American Revolution. As Boston occupied center stage of the early scenes of the War for Independence, news and conversations about the war and the fledgling nation would have been all around him.

At an early age, Thomas began to help in his father's shop. The bookbinding business appealed to him, and, between the time set aside for his schooling and attending to other chores, he began to learn the rudiments of the trade.

In 1790, Webb, at the tender age of 19, set out for Keene, New Hampshire, where he opened his first bookbindery. That same year, he became a member of Rising Sun Lodge No. 3 in Keene, being raised as a Master Mason on December 27, St. John the Evangelist's Day.

The year 1793 found Webb in Hartford, Connecticut. It was in this city that he became engaged in the manufacturing of wallpaper, which became his primary trade for the remainder of his life. Wallpaper manufacturing melded nicely with bookbinding, and Webb was able to merge his artistic inclinations with his business aspirations. His sojourn in Hartford, however, was quite brief; and he moved to Albany, New York at the end of the year.



In Albany, he affiliated with Union Lodge, and became Secretary of the Lodge in 1794. Webb later was a charter member of Temple Lodge in Albany, eventually serving as Master of that Lodge, and in 1796 he became a Royal Arch Mason during a visit to Philadelphia.

Leyland recounts that 1797 was a pivotal year in Webb's life. In that year, he published the first edition of his *Freemason's Monitor, or Illustrations of Masonry*. Webb edited and revised the ritual compiled by English Freemason William Preston. Webb's *Monitor* included the three Craft Degrees, plus the four degrees of the Royal Arch.

Notoriety from the publication of the *Monitor* added credibility to Webb's involvement in the organization of the General Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons, also founded in 1797. Webb served as the first Grand Scribe of that body.

By 1799, Webb had again moved, this time to Providence, Rhode Island. It was during his years in Providence, 1799 to around 1815, that he experienced the most stable period of his life. Again engaged in the business of manufacturing wallpaper and selling books, Webb achieved a degree of financial success, which enabled him to own his own home and start a family. Webb actively participated in the civic life of Providence, and his business interests expanded to include insurance and milling. Unfortunately, the financial crisis that followed the War of 1812 crushed Webb's several ventures and reduced him to a state of genteel poverty.

One of the more interesting features of Leyland's work is the story of Webb's interest in music, and his efforts as a composer and arranger of music. As a regular churchman in Providence, Webb organized a choir and wrote and directed several musical programs performed for both church and community. Records indicate that Webb also wrote and performed music for Masonic Lodges of the era.

In 1801, Webb became a member of St. John's Lodge in Providence. It was during his time as a Rhode Island Freemason that he lent his name and prestige to the unsuccessful efforts to form a General Grand Lodge of the United States. While in Rhode Island, subsequent editions of the *Monitor* were published, adding to Webb's renown. In 1813, and again in 1814, he was elected Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Rhode Island. Offered re-election in 1815, he declined, as efforts to revive a failing investment in a grist mill caused him to leave Providence for Walpole, Massachusetts.

Following the ultimate failure of the mill, Webb, like many financially distressed Americans following the War of 1812, looked to the west to resuscitate his fortunes. In 1816, he set out for Ohio, scouting the frontier for business opportunities, as well as enjoying Masonic fellowship in newly established Lodges in the west. His travels also brought him to Kentucky, where he visited both Louisville and Lexington. Interestingly, Leyland recounts that while in Lexington, Webb spent a week as a guest at the inn operated by Samuel Postlethwait, an early member of Lexington Lodge No. 1. During his visit, he installed the officers of three Royal Arch Chapters at the Masonic Hall in Lexington.

Webb's visit to Kentucky also had a Masonic purpose. At the time, the Grand Lodge of Kentucky assumed jurisdiction over chartering Royal Arch Chapters. Webb was able to convince the Kentucky Grand Lodge, along with others engaged in a similar practice, to allow the General Grand Chapter to charter Royal Arch Chapters.

During this period Webb was also engaged in the formation of a General Grand Encampment of Knights Templar. Instituted in 1816 in New York City, Webb was named Deputy Grand Master – a position that he held until his death.

Leyland recounts an important story about Jeremy Cross's relationship with Webb. An itinerant Masonic lecturer, Cross sought Webb's stamp of approval as a reliable source of Masonic work. After spending

several days with Webb in August of 1817, Cross eventually received the desired certification that he was, in fact, a capable instructor in the Craft and Capitular Degrees of Freemasonry. Cross traded on this brief, but critical, encounter with Webb for the remainder of his life.

Again traveling west in search of business prospects, Webb was stricken by a cerebral hemorrhage and died on July 6, 1819 in Cleveland, Ohio. Webb was interred with Masonic honors in Cleveland. His body was exhumed and reinterred in Providence, Rhode Island later that year.

By the time of Webb's death, his *Monitor* was in its seventh edition, and included a brief history of Freemasonry in America, the monitorial parts of the "Ineffable Degrees," and several Masonic songs and odes. Following his death, new editions of the *Monitor* continued to be reprinted, until finally falling into the public domain. While a founding father of both the General Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons and the General Grand Encampment of the Knights Templar, it is Webb's restatement of William Preston's ritual that is his most lasting contribution to Freemasonry.

Although an iconic figure in Freemasonry, Thomas Smith Webb remains something of a mystery to most of the Craft. Herbert T. Leyland's work brings Webb into focus and provides a much-needed record of his life and work. After reading Leyland's biography of Webb, one has a sense of a life interrupted.

Thomas Smith Webb: Freemason – Musician - Entrepreneur was published in 1965 by the Chapter of Research of the Grand Chapter R. A. M. of Ohio. Although now out of print, it remains available from online booksellers.