

THE MASONIC CONSERVATORS

By: Ray V. Denslow

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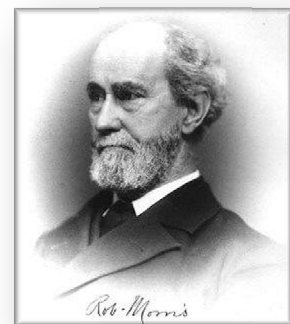
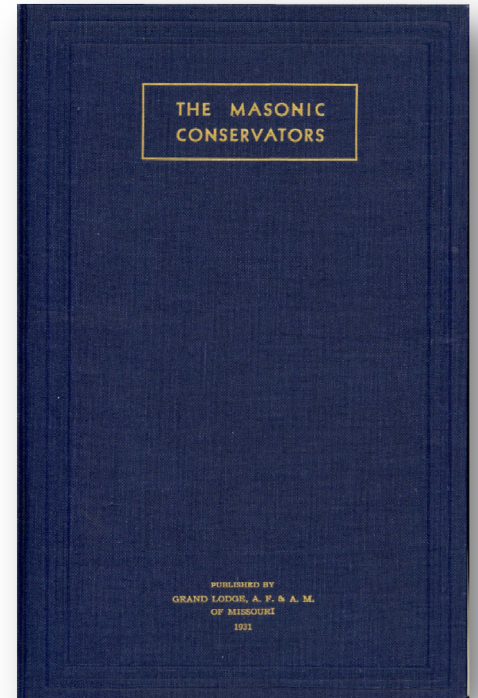
Ray V. Denslow, who served as Grand Master of the Grand Lodge, A. F. & A. M. of Missouri in 1931-1932, offers in *The Masonic Conservators* a rare review and critique of the work of another Past Grand Master, Rob Morris, who served as Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky, F. & A. M. in 1858-59.

Rob Morris made himself well-known in many ways over the course of his Masonic career. In addition to presiding over the Grand Lodge of Kentucky, he is credited with founding the Order of the Eastern Star, as well as holding the title of “Poet Laureate of Freemasonry.” A frequent author, and more frequent lecturer, he wrote as if with authority on topics about which he actually knew very little (the Morgan Affair) and those about which his store of knowledge was quite large (ritual). It was his knowledge of the Masonic ritual that led to his denunciation by practically every Grand Lodge in the United States; and that is the story that Ray Denslow tells in *The Masonic Conservators*.

Rob Morris was born Robert Williams Peckham on August 31, 1818, in New York City. His parents separated in 1821 and young Rob and his brother continued to live with their father. Following his father’s death 1825, he went to live with his mother, and, before finishing school, for reasons that are unclear, assumed the surname of Morris. (Morris was purportedly the surname of a foster parent with whom he lived.)

Rob Morris moved to Mississippi, where he married and settled in Oxford. In was in Oxford, Mississippi that Morris joined the Masonic Order. Later moving to Kentucky, he affiliated with Neville Lodge No. 200 in Moscow (Hickman County). It was out of this Lodge that he was subsequently elected Grand Master.

In the late 1850s Morris moved to Louisville, where he published and edited a Masonic newspaper, “The American Freemason.” Morris’s writings, including his 1859 work, *The History of Freemasonry in Kentucky* (reviewed elsewhere on this site), along with available Grand Lodge proceedings, consistently reflect Morris’s concerns about the quality of the ritual being performed (to which he commonly referred as “the Work”). Generally critical of the poor quality of ritual performance, Morris, as a Past Grand



Master, resolved to take action to improve the quality and uniformity of the Work. This brings us to the point where Past Grand Master Denslow takes up the narrative in *The Masonic Conservators*.

Denslow uses Morris's correspondence to describe and explain the brief life span of the Conservator movement. Morris began by soliciting those whom he believed to be like minded to join with him in an effort teach what he deemed to be "the true Webb-Preston Work," first in individual Lodges, and then at the Grand Lodge level. In his view, such a plan would establish a uniformity in the manner in which ritual was delivered, nationwide, and would further serve to properly instruct men in how to deliver such ritual.

Morris's letters reveal a complex, grandiose, and, ultimately, delusional plan (closely corresponding to his own personality). His initial letters went to those men whom he believed would be receptive to the idea of a uniform and improved ritual. By his own account, the recipients of those letters eventually numbered more than three thousand men. Naively, Morris insisted on absolute secrecy from the recipients of the letters, directing them not to discuss the matter with anyone else. One is tempted to think that anyone familiar with the behavior of Masons would find this unlikely proposition at best. Morris went on to describe an organization, national in scope, that he designated as "The Conservator Association," with himself as "Chief Conservator."

Morris's initial letters, posted in June of 1860, contained several key points. First, Morris identified ten objectives of the Conservator Association. After establishing the ten objectives, Morris then posed seven questions to each recipient, each of which required an answer in the affirmative. He then insisted that, to become a member of the Conservator Association, each prospective member return their letters, indicating their intent to join the movement, within ten days.

For those who returned their letters, Morris promised the conferral of a new degree (the "Conservator Degree," complete with grips and signs, and fully described by Denslow), and a special monitor that he titled, "Mnemonics." Mnemonics was, actually, a coded monitor of the first three degrees of Freemasonry. To decipher Mnemonics, one also had to have possession of a separately provided spelling book. As Denslow points out, to master Mnemonics required a great deal of time and patience.

Morris envisioned a movement that would rapidly change the course of American Freemasonry. By his own timetable, the Conservator Association would complete its work and dissolve itself by June of 1865.

By 1862, any secrecy that may have surrounded the Conservators had evaporated. Morris was under fire from several Grand Lodges for effectively attempting to usurp the prerogatives of the Grand Lodges in establishing their own standards for the performance of ritual in their respective jurisdictions. Prickly, priggish, and self-righteous, Morris engaged in lengthy correspondence with the various Grand Lodge officers who were critical of the Conservator Association. He also posted several "open letters" defending his actions to the Brethren in various states, which served

only to further open him to criticism from Grand Lodges. Denslow faithfully reproduces Morris's correspondence in such instances.

In answering the criticisms, Morris used certain tactics that he would later employ when writing his history of the Morgan Affair. First, he claimed that he had been searching for the "true work," as arranged by William Preston and taught by Thomas Smith Webb, for over twenty years. For that to be true, he would have had to begin his search shortly after becoming a Freemason. While that is theoretically possible, it is unlikely that one with so little grounding in Freemasonry would quickly realize the deficiencies in the ritual, much less know where or how to look for the "true" work.

Morris claimed that having found the "true work," he reviewed it with New Hampshire Past Grand Master Philip C. Tucker, who confirmed its authenticity. Morris does not explain what would have made Tucker competent to issue such a confirmation, and, conveniently, Tucker had died by the time that Morris was citing him in his defense.

As the year 1863 passed, Grand Lodges began to ban membership in the Conservator Association. Some required that those men who had become Conservators take an oath renouncing their membership. By the end of 1863, Morris was engaged in vitriolic correspondence with a number of Grand Lodge officers in different states who opposed the Conservator movement.

In what must have been a painful moment for Morris, in 1864 the Grand Lodge of Kentucky passed a resolution "banishing" the Conservator Association from the state. The Grand Lodge published a list of members who renounced their support of it. Heading the list was Past Grand Master Hiram Bassett, an early supporter and member of the Association.

In June of 1865, Morris, in accordance with his own timetable, formally dissolved the Conservator Association and defiantly declared the movement to have been a success.

The Masonic Conservators describes a movement that, while likely well-intentioned, failed to take into consideration the obstacles it would naturally face in such an endeavor. Rob Morris was, in all likelihood, factually correct in his analysis of the flaws that existed in the determination and delivery of Masonic ritual at that time. His personality and his thought processes, however, were too rigid to allow for the debate and compromises that would have been necessary for his proposed system to have had even a chance of implementation.

Ray V. Denslow rendered Freemasonry a valuable service by offering a candid and revealing window into American Freemasonry in the middle of the 19th Century. The Conservator Association was a brief, but momentous, period in the history of American Freemasonry. *The Masonic Conservators* conscientiously and reliably brings that era into focus for us.

The Masonic Conservators, published in 1931, is available from on-line booksellers.