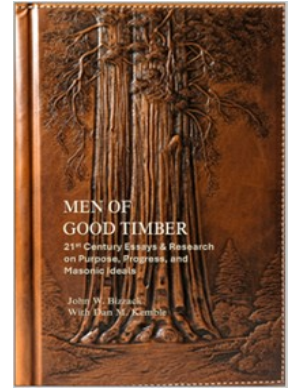


DOINGS OF THE GRAND LODGE OF KENTUCKY 1800-1900

PIECING TOGETHER THE PAST

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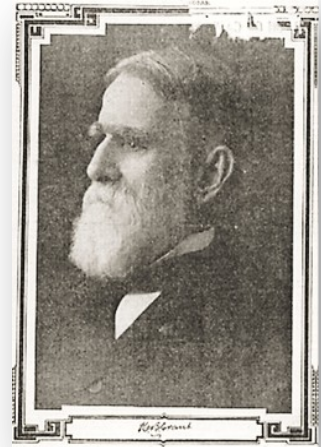
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In October 1859, Henry Bannister Grant attended the Annual Communication of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky for the first time. He was a twenty-two-year-old Master Mason. There were over 233 representatives present at the Communication. He remembered well that Grand Master Rob Morris presided in full dress wearing white kid gloves.¹

At the time of his death in 1912, Grant had served as Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky for thirty-five years. During the Civil War he was a captain in the Union Army. He wrote and published the *Vest Pocket Trestle Board and Working Tools* monitor, published a list of fifty-four Masonic Landmarks that he believed were accurate, was the first editor of Kentucky's *Masonic Home Journal*, wrote a *Tactic and Manual for Knights Templars*, and prepared the book, *Doings of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky 1800-1900*.

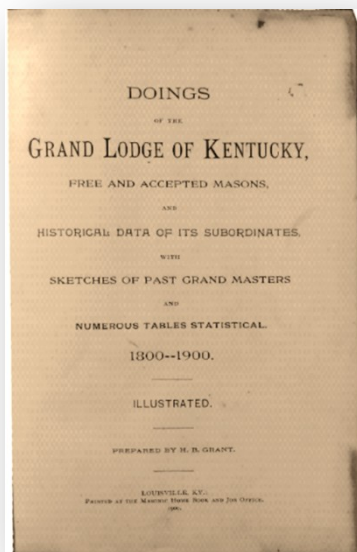


Grant, who went by his initials, H.B. more than by his full name, may have had detractors during his long Masonic career, but if so,

literature and official Masonic writing do not reveal them. In

fact, aside from Henry Clay, who was Grand Master in Kentucky in 1820, and 1859 Past Grand Master Rob Morris, who both had detractors in their era that continue to expand today, Grant may be the most recognized Kentucky Mason at least by members of the Kentucky Fraternity.

Grant's place in Masonic history is secure and there is no reason to suggest that he did not influence the character and machinations of Kentucky Masonry. There is one project, however, in which he was involved that has remained unresearched for 125 years—a project that offers historians a fresh outlook from previous assumptions and understanding about the culture of organized Masonry during and at the conclusion of the 19th century.



¹ H.B. Grant, *Doings of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky 1800-1900*, Masonic Printshop, 1900.

In March 3, 1900, Kentucky's Grand Master appointed Grand Secretary Grant to prepare what he referred to as a "history of the Grand Lodge"² in recognition of the Hundredth Anniversary of the organization of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky.³ At the direction of the Grand Master, Grant was given eight months to prepare and print six hundred copies of what turned out to be roughly 500-pages of *Doings of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky 1800-1900*.⁴

The word "doings" in the book title should tell a reader that this publication is a compilation of activities, actions and their dates and not an analytical history or narrative that interprets activities or actions. Grant never claimed *Doings* was a history and tells us so in the Introduction to the book. He recognized that under the time constraint imposed that he could not to provide much more than a "compendium of the doings of the Grand Lodge."⁵

No matter, since the release of the book many Masons and writers have referred to it as a history—some even cite the book as a primary source, although it is merely a summarized chronology of dates, events, and some, but not all, actions of the Grand Lodge since 1800. Grant's primary source was the Annual Proceeding of the Grand Lodge.

Grant was qualified and able to offer much more to the compilation because he was part of the *doings* of the Grand Lodge for at least fifty years and had a ring-side seat as Grand Secretary for thirty-five of those fifty years. Under that circumstance, he was a primary source himself.

Possibly, for the sake expediency, Grant chose to offer no analysis, interpretation, context—much less firsthand observations—to the compilation, making *Doings* a predictable and rather mechanical journey through highlights of each Annual Proceeding that he believed worth including.

Only addressing the "what," rather than the "why" or "how" necessary for depth and understanding makes *Doings* a quick reference guide similar to Cliff Notes which offer no broader social, historical, or cultural context of the work.

Grant did not need to address every backstory to the dozens of issues faced and struggled with by Lodges and the Grand Lodge but he, along with the abrupt time line set by the Grand Master so that he would have something to commemorate at the Hundredth Anniversary, squandered the opportunity to present to the Craft not only an authentic narrative account of the challenges of a Grand Lodge but to undertake a task that might advance and reaffirm the historical intent of Masonry.

The omission of any mention of the ten decades of Kentucky's struggle with administering an organization rife with the consequences of unbridled growth and rapid expansion of membership is evidence that the consequences of the growth were apparently not seen by 1900 as presenting a problem. But the Annual Proceedings, Grant's primary source, tells a different story.

² *History of Freemasonry in Kentucky 1900-1935*, Foreword by James Garnette, as submitted for publication by H.H. "Judge" Moore and E.D. Swimme and Belle Ford, Ruth Willis, and Adna P. Searce.

³ Grant, Introduction.

⁴ IBID.

⁵ Grant, Introduction.

Grant does not mention the ravages of the anti-Masonic movement in the United States and the toll it took in the 1820s through the 1830s in Kentucky. The absence of any reference to the 1826 Morgan Affair in upstate New York that added fuel to the anti-Masonic hysteria suggests that it had no effect on Kentucky, although there was a loss of half the membership and lodges in Kentucky because of it. The Annual Proceedings tell the story, as does Rob Morris's 1859 *History of Freemasonry in Kentucky*.

The effect of the Civil War on Kentucky Masonry and that of the Golden Age of Fraternalism⁶ received no ink by Grant. And the 1898 summary contained one sentence about an event that was the capstone of the century and that made clear that Kentucky Masons at that time wanted nothing to do with anything that changed the course it had been on for multiple decades, although it was recognized by multiple Grand Masters from 1843 through the end of the century (and beyond).⁷

Grant's only reference in *Doings* was a sentence that reads, "PGM J. Soule Smith presented a five-page report on visitations and inspection of lodges but it failed to pass!"⁸

The exclamation mark Grant ended the sentence with may be taken one of two ways. It is possible that he meant that punctuation symbol to express his surprise at the failure, or it may have been meant to suggest his glee. There are historians today who believe it meant the latter. Smith's report was not a report of mere visits and inspections. They had purpose, and the result was harsh criticism of the decay of lodges and practices that Smith and his committee appointed by the Grand Master found throughout the jurisdiction during their yearlong assignment. His report also included recommendations to effectively initiate foundational work on the long road that would be required to correct the conditions.

Smith gave the full report from the podium at the Annual Communication to the members in the room who were part of the problems outlined in the report. As soon as Smith concluded his presentation, a motion came from the floor to "permanently postpone" any action on the finding. His conspicuous omission of any reference about Smith's assignment and reasons the Grand Master appointed a committee to perform the inspections does highlight and underscore the mindset of Masons in Kentucky at the end of the 19th century.

Finally, the fact that he was present when thirteen of the fifteen Grand Masters spoke out and condemned the recurring irregularities, incompetent leadership, and the consequence of underprovided instruction in Lodges from 1843 to 1899 (and made recommendations to correct the deficiencies),⁹ and he omitted all but two of those reports suggests Grant was picking and choosing. And likely, his selections reflected his views.

When Grant was appointed in March 1900 by the Grand Master to prepare the book, *Kentucky Masonry* was experiencing another anomaly of growth and expansion of membership.

⁶ The Golden Age of Fraternalism is a term referring to a period when membership in the fraternal societies in the United States grew at a very rapid pace in the latter third of the 19th century and continuing into the first part of the 20th.

⁷ See "The Postponement - Masonic Misstep or Squandered Opportunity?" *The Plumbline*, The Quarterly Bulletin of The Scottish Rite Research Society, May 2022

⁸ Grant. p.420.

⁹ See *Canker Worm on the Rose*, John W. Bizzack, BSF Foundation, Lexington, Kentucky 2023 and *The Annual Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky 1800-2020*.

Three years before Grant's death in 1912, the Grand Lodge reported 469 lodges, and membership was tallied at 35,983.¹⁰ Two years before, Grand Masters again began to draw attention to irregularities, lack of instruction and uniformity in practices and processes, degrees conferred out of sequence, and a general incompetence of secretaries and others at Lodge leadership levels in too many subordinate lodges. The scoldings, biting criticisms, and urgings to do something about it diminished by 1920 when Grand Masters and members alike cheered and celebrated the now 60,000 names on the membership rolls and "over 600 lodges."¹¹

The excitement surrounding the notion that more members and lodges were a testament to the success of Freemasonry overshadowed virtually all consequences, as the new century was set on a course that mirrored the mindset of the previous.

For the next several years many Masonic leaders resumed what one Grand Master later called "...rhetoric, verbal pyrotechnics, and other specifics of intellectual athletics, to prove what can be done with the English language to exalt the idea of Freemasonry."¹² It should be noted for the sake of context that the Grand Master then added to his statement that while "the indulgence is not superfluous in some cases, when it is unearned, such an extravagance is cheapened."¹³ As some Masonic historians have pointed out, that was exactly what the Fraternity did with each unbridled expansion in the early 1800s, the Civil War, the Age of Fraternalism, and would do in the mid-1940s and throughout the 1950s: cheapened Freemasonry.

Doings stand as a metaphor that now unintentionally tells another story about Freemasonry in Kentucky from 1800 to 1900.

Bravo to Grant for getting the compilation written and printed in time for the Hundredth Anniversary celebration and for adding a few additional details in the biographies of Grand Masters that do not appear in the Annual Proceedings. Perhaps another favorable remark is in order because he did cast the organizations that surround Freemasonry in the best possible light he could manage at the time, which now appears was the purpose for the publication on the centennial anniversary of the Grand Lodge.

No matter, we do need to continue to ask the question, "Would Freemasonry and the organizations that surround it be better off if the men in positions of respect in them consistently led and demanded constructive paths be taken that move the fraternity in the direction of excellence by actions instead of words?"

While there is certainly value to quick reference guides, *Doings* stands as a metaphor that now unintentionally tells another story about Freemasonry in Kentucky from 1800 to 1900.

¹⁰ Annual Proceedings, Grand Lodge of Kentucky, 1912.

¹¹ Annual Proceedings, Grand Lodge of Kentucky, 1920.

¹² George Allison Holland, Grand Master, Annual Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky, 1926

¹³ IBID.

To the serious researcher and historian familiar with the Proceedings and other Masonic writings, *Doings* reveals the foundational mindset of the mainstream Fraternity in the 1900s. It highlights how deeply ingrained attitudes, beliefs, and mental frameworks shaped members for decades. Following a century of neglecting Masonic education in lodges and placing disproportionate emphasis on the Craft's features rather than its true aim and purpose, the organization's decision-making, problem-solving, and resilience were profoundly influenced for generations.

The outcome was given a name in 2023 by Masonic scholar and Past Grand Master of Oklahoma, Robert G. Davis. He called such circumstances *fake authenticity*.¹⁴ a superficial image meant to appear authentic in its ideal, depth, or substance but lacks real commitment or alignment with the portrayed ideals.

Today, one can safely say that there is more attention paid to education and proper instruction about the historical intent, aim, and purpose of Masonry than in the entire 19th century. But early 20th century Masonic scholar Joseph Fort Newton's assessment is as applicable today as it was when he noted in 1914 that what is taking place in the way of Masonic education is hardly a drop in the bucket.¹⁵

The Doings of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky 1800-1900 expands our understanding of historical narratives, but its failure to explore key aspects of history undermines its overall contribution if used as a primary source. Regardless of the limitations in its analytical depth, the work still offers valuable insights and a worthy resource.

Although long out of print, copies of *Doings* is available in some Masonic libraries, private collections, and occasional reprints found on the Internet.

¹⁴ Robert G. Davis, "It Is Time To Cross The Rubicon And Battle Our 20th Century Ruffians," Presentation Given At The William O. Ware Lodge Of Research, Fort Wright, Kentucky, November 2, 2022, Video of the presentation is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SmMEJErveXU>, accessed January 2025.

¹⁵ Joseph Fort Newton, *Short Talks on Masonry*, "Masonic Education," Masonic Services Association, 1928.