

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 the controversial topic of dress codes in American Freemasonry from a source outside the mainstream.



COMMENTARY ON PAPER

John W. Bizzack, PM, Lexington Lodge No. 1

Dan M. Kemble, PM, William O. Ware Lodge of Research



Why A Grand Master's Lodge Dress Code Edict Is A Sign We're Doomed

Karen Kidd

Karen Kidd is Right Worshipful Master of Shemesh Lodge No. 13 under the Honorable Order of American Co-Masonry, and is an internationally recognized author on the history of Co-Freemasonry in America. Her published works include *On Holy Ground: A History of the Honorable Order of American Co-Masonry* and *Haunted Chambers: The Lives of Early Women Freemasons*. She also has published papers in *Heredom*, the *Transactions of the Scottish Rite Research Society*.

If you're planning to show up in Georgia wearing a tank top, short-shorts, and flip flops, better keep it to Stone Mountain Park, Hearse Ghost Tours, Jimmy Carter National Historic Site and other such places. The Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Georgia, the largest male-only Freemasonic obedience in the state, is having none of it.

"No Mason shall attend any Meeting wearing shorts, an uncollared shirt, t-shirt, exercise wear, open-toed shoes, sandals, or flip flops unless medically necessary," Grand Lodge of Georgia Grand Master Michael H. Wilson said in his edict issued late last month.

Nothing herein shall be construed as prohibiting a Brother from wearing jeans or overalls with a collared shirt or any required medical device. Nothing herein shall be construed as requiring a Brother to wear a suit, sport coat, tie, or tuxedo unless the Worshipful Master so directs.

The first thing that caught my attention was the notion that medical situations exist that require the wearing of flip flops (apparently it isn't just a post-mani-ped thing). Once I got over that, it occurred to me just how damning it is that a Grand Master anywhere has to tell Freemasons how to dress in Lodge; that enough Brethren there don't already know.

And if they don't already know that...well, it's yet another sign that we're doomed.

Granted, the Georgia edict inevitably would puzzle a Freemason, such as myself, hailing from an Order where everyone wears pretty much the same thing in lodge (guys wear white suits, gals wear white robes, it's all very standardized).

Something like the Georgia edict just wouldn't come up in the Order to which I belong. It just wouldn't. The Brethren in that Order already know, they don't have to be told. That said . . .

I think Georgia's back story also is relevant as the Grand Lodge of Georgia has long been an outlier in Freemasonry.

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In 2009, a Lodge under that obedience filed suit in DeKalb County Superior Court after the Grand Master of Georgia decreed a Masonic trial would be conducted to hear complaints about the lodge's decision to enter a Brother of color.

That same year, in a more hushed up controversy, the Grand Lodge of Georgia pressured the allegedly independent Order of Eastern Star (OES) to expel its Co-Masonic members or lose the right to meeting in premises owned by Freemasons under the male-only body in that state. The Georgia OES dutifully ferreted out and expelled those members found to be Co-Masons, including one sister who had been a member of the OES for 25 years.

In September 2015, then Grand Lodge of Georgia Grand Master Douglas W. McDonald issued an edict that outlawed homosexuals among its membership.

The following year, then Grand Lodge of California Grand Master M. David Perry declared Georgia's outlawing of Homosexuality to be "a sectarian stand which is inconsistent with and does not support the General Regulations of Freemasonry." With that, the Grand Lodge of California withdrew recognition from Georgia and the Grand Lodge of Tennessee, which had issued its own similar edicts and other paper. The Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia likewise withdrew recognition from the grand lodges in Georgia and Tennessee.

McDonald resigned entirely from the fraternity earlier this year "for religious reasons" and that particular unpleasantness seems to have settled down.

I bring all that up to point out that a dress code edict is a very mild edict to come out of Georgia.

Chris Hodapp, in his always delightful and informative "Freemasons for Dummies" blog, argues that this edict points up a debate between "Exterior" Freemasons and "Interior" Freemasons. The Exterior brethren apparently feel that attire not fit for a visit with the Queen, attending a Nobel Prize event, or a five-star restaurant is an affront to the Craft; while Interior brothers opine that it's what's in a Freemason's heart that counts and are just fine being clothed for Lodge as if they're going to Denny's.

Per usual, I can see a middle ground between the two extremes and how the latest edict out of Georgia might be trying to find it; but I also see something deeper going on here. It seems both extremes have forgotten more than a little history; and what they should already know without being told.

Even in our very casual age, folks still know when they should dress up and when they don't need to. Folks don't have to be told that they must dress up when they attend a wedding or go someplace else they consider very special. They don't need to be told that, they just know.

Apparently in Georgia, enough of the brethren need to be told that the Lodge is a very special place that an edict is necessary.

I imagine those same brothers do know to dress up for their friend's wedding but they are just fine with wearing PT shorts, a club T-shirt, and tube socks to Lodge. Because they don't know the Lodge is very special to them.

If they don't know that, then what else don't they know?

Civilization is slipping and there are many signs of that. This is one of them

Kidd's full post appears at:

<https://masonicmouse.org/2019/09/04/why-a-grand-masters-lodge-dress-code-edict-is-a-sign-were-doomed>.



COMMENTARY

CLINGING TO ALIBIS

~ John W. Bizzack, PM

One would think that a dress code for a Masonic lodge rests on the principle of good taste and to wear such attire as shows respect to the Brotherhood and expresses the dignity of Masonry. We find instead, alibis.

As posted on Chris Hodapp's *Freemasons for Dummies* blog by Jeremy A. Gross, PM, Samuel Crocker Lawrence Lodge, Medford, Massachusetts on October 16, 2013:

Freemasonry is not a PTA meeting, nor is it a hangout space, nor is it an Elks, Rotarian, Kiwanis, or any other type of club. It is a ritually charged discipline that teaches a profound moral and mental technique for improving a man's soul. Lodge shouldn't look or feel like other social environments in a man's life, except perhaps church (and then only slightly). Men should dress as if they are going somewhere very special, or else it won't be very special.

What may have started simply as something as benign as men in un-air-conditioned lodges wanting to cool off and shed their coats and ties, many lodges today have an anything goes dress standard, but that not always been the case, of course. America had to wait for World War II and the immense prosperity that followed before air conditioners were widely affordable even in the residential areas. There were a lot of Masons prior to that who probably wanted to cool off in lodge but dressing for lodge still took precedence. Photographs offer us the best evidence – photographs from many jurisdictions, not just a few. The exact date when dress at lodge became so widely casualized in American Freemasonry will never be known, but it certainly has affected its history and course. We can say with some assurance that it is likely to have crept in somewhere in the late 1960s, and certainly apparent by the late 1970s in more than just one jurisdiction

The list of the common defenses used over the past several decades of the “anything goes” standard are tired, if not completely exhausted. Most were merely pretext rationalizations to begin with which were intended to prove the soundness of waning from a higher standard and eventually progressing into literally “anything goes” in most all jurisdictions.

Probably the most commonly evoked defense is the worn, but ever-popular, *it is the internal not the external that Freemasonry regards* – a phrase taken directly from our ritual and usually declared with a tone of sanctimony by the declarer, perhaps making him think that to quote ritual puts an end to the matter. It doesn't. If a member thinks that particular phrase from our ritual refers solely to attire, he may also be revealing how little time he has spent with, much less how little context he has placed on other parts and phrases of rituals and their meanings. Is it not time we

quit disassembling that phrase and retire such a daffy, misplaced, self-serving slant and call it for what it is: an alibi intended to defend not wearing anything in lodge?

Another rationalization high on the list is *You don't have to be dressed up to practice Freemasonry*. The sentiment is refreshing since Masonry is intended to be practiced all the time, not just in lodge but the statement is centered on not “dressing up” for lodge and leaves open the troubling prospect of classifying and defining what is meant by “dressing up.” Dressing up to some might be a cleaner T-shirt, while to others a suit or sport coat. To some it might even mean a suit with only T-shirt, all of which begs the question of the parameters of dressing up and its opposite: dressing down. Unfortunately, ripped jeans, flip-flops, cargo shorts with combat boots, untucked, wrinkled shirts, and even camouflage outfits are seen by some as equivalent to a past definition of casual dress that may have been khakis and a golf shirt. Once again, we can see how the principle of good taste might be a rule of thumb to consider. Even then, defining “good taste” puts a strain on expectations that it is a universal characteristic of all men -not just Masons - or that all share such a common definition.

Those who claim they have to come from work; therefore, attire should not matter, need to get past the idea that it is impossible to find enough time to change of clothes at work or upon arriving at lodge. There are many who change clothes in their cars and others who keep a change of clothes at their lodge for such circumstances. Clearly, it can be done.

One other is the immortal, *we've always dressed casually*. Maybe that is the case and also a reason, perhaps, we see so many other casual and “dressed down” protocols and practices in many lodges. Casualness about anything has its own unique way of creeping into other things. As noted earlier by Jeremy Gross, men should dress as if they are going somewhere very special, or else it won't be very special.

In her post, Karen Kidd notes, “Folks don't have to be told that they must dress up when they attend a wedding or go someplace else they consider very special. They don't need to be told that, they just know.” Her point is a good one, of course, and suggests that many Masons, under this line of thinking, do not consider lodge meetings very special, which naturally leads into another discussion as to why some members may not consider their lodge and what they do as special.

The power of her post may lie in the way she ends it by asking if Masons don't know the lodge is special, then what else don't they know?

That question is indeed at the heart of the matter when it comes to discussing dress codes in American Freemasonry.

~ **Dan M. Kemble, PM**

Karen Kidd's “Why A Grand Master's Lodge Dress Code Edict Is A Sign We're Doomed” raises one of the most divisive issues in American Freemasonry today. The fact that proper Lodge attire is an issue at all tends to support Kidd's “We're Doomed” warning.

No Mason should ever enter a tyled meeting of a Lodge dressed in anything other than a business suit, a dress shirt and a tie. To do otherwise is a result of either not understanding the fundamental nature of Freemasonry, or to understand it and simply not care enough to make the effort to practice it.

Masonic Lodges, when not at Labor, are ordinary brick and mortar, stone and wood structures. Our ritual is the mechanism by which these ordinary spaces are transformed into a sacred space where the immediate presence of the Great Architect of the Universe is invited among us. The ritualistic ceremony of opening the Lodge is spiritual alchemy whereby an ordinary room becomes Holy ground. If a man lacks the cognitive ability to understand that the privilege of witnessing and participating in such a process deserves the very best that he has to offer in appearance and decorum, he has no business in Freemasonry. Lodges that fail to teach that fact have abandoned the most basic truth of our Order.

American society in the last sixty years is in large part defined by its intellectual laziness. Unfortunately, our Masonic Lodges merely reflect this phenomenon. The use of our ritual's distinction between the "internal" versus "external" qualifications of a man to justify sloppy attire is a prime example of such laziness. A simple examination of the historical context of the ritual is all that is necessary to quash such a ridiculous assertion. The ritual was written at a time when it was beyond the contemplation of anyone that a man would appear at Lodge in anything but his best clothing. The ritual rightly admonishes us to carefully examine the character of a man and not to be deceived by outward appearance. It does not direct us to accept unkemptness.

In *Operative Freemasonry*, Kirk C. White writes that dressing for Lodge (and he means dressing up) is a part of the way in which a Mason prepares himself for the experience of the meeting. The process of dressing affords time for contemplation of the experience that lies ahead. It gives one the opportunity to re-direct one's focus toward the import and meaning of gathering together in Lodge as Masons. The fact that so few Masons bother to dress for Lodge serves as an indicator of the extent to which they otherwise do not prepare for the Lodge experience. That general lack of preparation is made manifest in countless stated meetings lacking in form and purpose.

Appropriate attire (which by now should obviously be interpreted as business suit, dress shirt and tie) is also a measure of respect. Dressing appropriately reflects one's respect for the Lodge as an institution and for one's fellow Masons. More importantly, formal dress reflects one's level of self-respect. Inappropriate attire is one more signal that American Freemasons simply don't care enough about Freemasonry or other Freemasons to undergo the perceived inconvenience of putting on a suit and tie. Under such circumstances, the frequent declarations of the personal importance of Freemasonry and its teachings have a distinctly hollow ring.

Freemasonry is a system of personal improvement that addresses the whole man. It encompasses improvement of the man externally and internally. The simplest area for any man in which to improve is one's external appearance. The truth of the matter is that it requires very little effort to properly groom and dress one's self. When a Mason is disinclined to perform the simple chore of improving his external appearance, one has grounds to wonder just how much effort is going into any internal improvement. No ashlar was ever made smooth from the inside out.

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The subject of attire is one more area in which Freemasonry has failed to hold itself accountable. Leadership on this matter is virtually non-existent. In William O. Ware Lodge of Research's study, "Characteristics of an Ideal Lodge," Kentucky Masons indicated their preference for a dress code that would be announced, but not enforced. The oft repeated fear is that if a dress code is enforced, men will choose not to attend Lodge. We will see progress in Freemasonry when it becomes widely understood that the subtraction of such a man from our number is, in fact, the addition of value to the whole.