

ODE TO THE WAY IT WAS

American Freemasonry and Operational Planning

COMMENTARY

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Since at least March of this year, we have learned just how incompatible Masonic assemblies are with the new practice of social distancing.

As the alarm increased across throughout the nation about the spread of the coronavirus, the Institution of Freemasonry was unceremoniously introduced to the true extent of the long-standing but often ignored reality that the culture and society of our nation does indeed directly affect the attitudes of existing and future generations of Freemasons as well as our practices.

While our philosophies - the features that make up the Doctrine of Freemasonry - are not in jeopardy of changing because of the pandemic, it appears that, for some time to come, the delivery side of our Doctrine will not be able to build on the fraternal aspects of Freemasonry in the way it always has. We know this will seed change in our operations.

Many Masons are eager to resume meetings and Masonic events and simply return in all respects to “the way it was” prior to the pandemic. Others are not confident that returning quickly is a good idea at all, but are not adamantly opposed to a return to “the way it was.” Yet, there are others who are far from confident that we should return exclusively to “the way it was” no matter how and when we return to lodge.



That third group seems to be made up of those searching for ways to remain involved during this time. The explosion of non-tyled Masonic Zoom meetings and discussions made up of members from around the nation and world is the most conspicuous characteristic of this group. A wide range of perspectives are shared at these meetings. Some believe that many of such virtual meetings (none tyled for degree work at this time) create an air of more thoughtful introspection about the direction of Freemasonry in the post-covid world. These meetings fuel fresh ideas and measures that might be worth at least exploring (if not actually taken) in the hopes of constructively advancing the Order to keep up with what may most interest prospective candidates, as well as hold the attention of as many current members as possible.

No doubt this sort of discussion and earnest examination should be taking place now, but there are those who say that since we are unable to meet and examine such ideas in open lodge, they will have to wait. The fact that many officials and members of Masonic jurisdictions are informally meeting during this period by using virtual technology (as well as that antiquated technology... telephone conference calls), suggests that the tendency to kick the can down the road, something often seen in all organizations, certainly remains alive and well in our Institution.

It would be possible for grand jurisdictions, conferences of grand everything, appendant bodies leadership, and other groups associated with American Freemasonry to jointly cooperate in some semblance of an operational study at this time about the future of the fraternity this country. After all, many lodges are looking at how they will have to operate in the short run, as well as in their long-term future. Perhaps following each state's respective government guidelines makes it seem too complex to collectively examine such issues. The idea, however, of gathering leadership, scholars, and others (clearly the technology exists to do so) to thoughtfully examine,



with sensible balance, the long over-due introspection of the status of our Fraternity is hardly too difficult to execute. At the minimum, one might wonder why respective sovereign jurisdictions don't just do this on their own. Well thought out plans are not only called for but expected.



In the future, there is no doubt there will be scores of papers, conferences, and some writings that pass for research and study about how Freemasonry reacted to the pandemic and eventually resumed labor no matter when that

may happen. That sort of after-action, retrospective approach is going to be the history of American Freemasonry during the 2020 pandemic. Those examinations will tell us about the leadership of the period and what premiums were or were not placed on our operations practices. If there is no context offered providing the factual condition the Institution was in prior to the pandemic and the reasons why that condition existed, then those reviews may fall into the style of other self-congratulatory writings we often find in our archives. Without planning beyond following the lead of other sensible and safe returns to operation, there is little reason to expect that institutional freemasonry will do anything other than follow the path of least resistance and, to the extent possible, resume business as usual.

Subordinate lodges look toward their grand lodge for guidance. Masons who keep up with what is going on around the country in our multiple sovereign jurisdictions see that has.

THE LAST TIME

When was the last time there was such an event in America that called for a centralized collective examination of our fraternity? The 1843 Baltimore Convention may have been that “last time.”

The results of the convention did not meet the expectations of many of the organizers and not every jurisdiction even sent a representative, but there has been nothing like it since in American

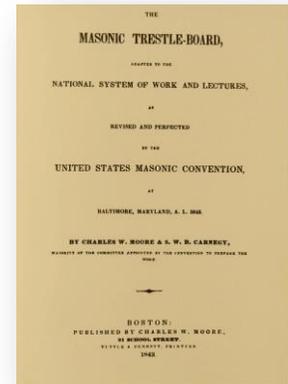
Freemasonry that had such long-lasting effects. Following the nine-day convention, a book titled, *Trestle-Board*, was published with the recommendations stemming from the convention for jurisdictions to consider adopting. Most eventually adopted the majority of those recommendations.



Regardless of one’s assessment of the value of the 1843 Baltimore Convention, it remains the only model of its kind we have that illustrates how such an examination of the fraternity can happen – and it took place without the benefit of those participants employing modern communication technology that permits

men today to conduct such an assembly without ever leaving their homes. To

consider the likelihood that the several bodies of institutional Freemasonry might do something like this may be too foreign to our contemporary views, but universities began using the platform over thirty years ago. Corporations, government, and most levels of business, have been using developed platforms for almost as long.¹ Where has institutional Freemasonry been?



While many Freemasons are familiar with the platform and its benefits, Institutional Freemasonry did not encourage its use, or begin to integrate the technology and witness its growth in popularity among its members until the pandemic occurred – then it happened within months. The wide-spread use left many jurisdictions scrambling to answer questions about to what extent lodges could use technology to assemble in ways that would not conflict with constitutions or the decrees of local governments.

THIS TIME

¹ NOTE: Widespread use of video conferencing began with the computer revolution of the 1980s. Webcams began to appear in the early 1990s on university campuses. The first commercial webcam introduced on the market in August 1994. CU-SeeMe video conferencing software played an important role in the history of video conferencing. It was developed by Cornell University IT department personnel for Mac in 1992 and Windows in 1994. One of the most popular video conferencing platforms has been Skype. Although it has professional limitations, Skype is popular because it is a free cross-platform service. The video chat service first appeared on the market in 2003. “The history of Video Conferencing, *Business Matters*, Technology, January 2015, <https://www.bmmagazine.co.uk/tech/history-video-conferencing/>, accessed, May 5, 2020.

A topic of considerable discussion in the previously mentioned groups is the concern that many card-carrying members will not return when lodges are reopened no matter the precautions taken or requirements still in place making it safer, at least under government guidelines, to do so. Exacerbating that concern is facing the reality that, on the average, somewhere around only six percent of members in good standing were attending and participating in lodge prior to the spread of the virus in the first place. Often injected into the conversations, predictably, is the hopeful thinking that more men than ever expected will cheerfully return, even in spite of an often-neglected consideration that will have more impact today than in the past: families discouraging men from returning to assemblies.

There are grand jurisdictions taking this pause-time to more broadly examine how the influence of all the new societal practices will continue to affect the fraternity, and those conducting such deeper examinations should be commended. The number of subordinate lodges doing the same is unknown, however, it should be no surprise that some are engaged in the same studies and are not waiting for someone else to examine and assess the situation for them.

As easily predicted, members frequenting Facebook pages, Twitter, blogs, and some Masonic sites offer a great deal of opinion-based forecasts on the matter. Some of the fundamental, as well as the more penetrating, questions now facing all Freemasonry in America are found in Dan Kemble's powerful and thoughtful commentary paper, *Who's Left Standing? Freemasonry After Covid-19*, posted on the William O. Ware Lodge of Research website in May 2020.² Brother Kemble comments on the issues but does not pretend to have answers that resolve the questions. The matter of who will be left standing in the months and years ahead is yet another approach to examining what Masonic journeys will entail and provides another question for currently committed Masons, and those who are prospective candidates, to ponder.

As we travel into and through the weeks, months, and possibly years of our national society changing to whatever degree from the pandemic, we will read and hear plenty of opinion, be exposed to questionable models wearing the cloak of science, and see and hear elected leaders exhibiting their personal styles and varied beliefs of what leadership is. We will be barraged with "breaking news" from all media outlets claiming exclusive reports and stories, and continue to float in a sea of speculation and personal views that also influence others through each form of social media and from what is offered on the Internet that can appear to be little more than an assault on reason.

At his Installation as Master of Colonial Lodge No. 1821 address in December 2019 in the District of Columbia, Quardricos Bernard Driskell characterized the public discourse in our country as "the systematic decay of the public forum," and an "assault on complex thought."³

² Dan Kemble, *Who's Left Standing? Freemasonry After Covid-19*, William O. Ware Lodge of Research, <https://williamowarelodgeofresearch.com>, accessed, May 11, 2020.

³ Quardricos Bernard Driskell, "On the Question of Relevance," *The Voice of Freemasonry*, Vol. 37, Issue 1, 2020, Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia, p.29.

He observed how Masons are exposed and encouraged to learn the importance of liberal arts and sciences – specifically, Grammar, Rhetoric, Logic, Arithmetic, Geometry, Music and Astronomy – and use them as part of the process Freemasonry offers in making a member wiser, better, and consequently happier. Unfortunately, as Driskell points out, “few Freemasons today take this instruction with any degree of seriousness and make no further effort to examine the nature of these arts” once they pass through the degrees.



There are many good men in American Freemasonry who are active and engaged in their lodges and grand lodges. There are also many who are good men but who are non-participative and unengaged. Some may be extraordinarily motivated to study and learn in solitude to make up for what the three ceremonies of our ritual, as delivered, did not offer over the typically short period of time required to be raised to the degree of Master Mason. Can these men reasonably be expected to remain anything other than just card-carrying members if they do not at least engage in one of the root features of the Craft: *fraternalism*? Expecting to experience a worthwhile journey through Freemasonry in solitude is like reading a ten-chapter mystery novel with nine chapters missing. A close look at our records tells us that this is the group that ultimately fades away. ***One of many wise things said about our Craft is that if Freemasonry is to mean anything to a man, and he to it, he must spend some time with it.***

Not all the good men in our fraternity see eye-to-eye on everything about Freemasonry. We know seeing eye-to-eye is not a requirement that defines whether a man has or is becoming a Freemason in his journey. We do teach and encourage tolerance for the point of view of others. Also, we attempt to instill the principle of how important it is to hold in high regard the internal part of a man and not the external (and, no, brothers, contrary to the mistaken belief of many, that term was never intended to be stretched to provide an excuse for slovenly appearance or dress in lodge). It is indeed the internal spirit of a man that guides and ultimately determines a member’s level of true interest and commitment to the principles of Freemasonry, not the rings, license plates, lapel pins, titles, and regalia.

PLACING BLAME THE NEXT TIME

To the astonishment of many Masons at some point in the late 1960s, what we considered to be a measurement of the success of American Freemasonry, its membership levels, was in a state of steady decline. By the end of the 1970s, the increasingly falling numbers began the hand wringing exercises that consumed the fraternity and extended throughout the 1980s and into the next century. There is no question such a decline should have been troubling for financial reasons alone, but also for the reason that none of the well-intended quick-fixes that have emerged since has proven to replace members at a rate great enough to offset the continued, steady losses.

We lost a decade or more blaming the accelerating decline exclusively on the notion that society and our national culture was changing. So, with little balanced examination to offset that widely accepted idea as the primary reason, we did not bother to carefully examine or more fully take into account how the periods of unbridled growth combined with what we were offering through our operations had affected this irreversible decline as well. *We are beginning to see and better understand today that the internal had a lot more to do with membership decline than did the external.*

Today, we find our Institution in a similar position. It is likely, based our embedded thinking, that should the formerly active and involved men choose not to return in mass after this pandemic, then it will likely become a convenient explanation to claim that it is exclusively the fault of the pandemic. If that occurs, then we have once again failed to consider that what we have been offering and doing in our lodges, may, after a pause away from it, not be all that alluring even to those were formerly active and involved. Yes, the possibility has to be accepted that some may simply have no wish to return to “the way it was.”

The decline in Masonic membership during the years of the Great Depression (following a steady and impressive increase starting prior to and after World War I) was not exclusively the fault of the economic downturn, even though the accepted Masonic narrative tells us it was. In fact, Freemasonry in American had slowly been transforming into service-oriented clubs offering even less Masonic education than it had for previous decades and undertaking the construction of grand structures that projected a strong, ever-lasting nature that would endure with ever-growing membership. It was not uncommon for lodges at the beginning of the Great Depression, during and through the early 1940s, to reduce and even forgive dues for years, but not all men remained members or returned to lodge in the post-Depression years. Over one-million members left the fraternity.

The membership increased again beginning in 1943, and through 1959 continued a steady increase each year. Multiple factors played into the reasons including another World War and a

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jubilant period that followed that brought many into the ranks -- for a while. As generations, interpretations, leadership, offerings, and our methods of delivering the promise of Freemasonry slowly changed again, men were not impressed enough with, much less sufficiently committed to, what Masonry offered. And so, the decline we are in today began in 1960.

If we pay attention to factual numbers and look at the external and internal factors, we can more easily see today that all periods of rapid expansion of membership are followed by lengthy periods of membership decline.

This has been the case since the first rapid expansion of lodges and members that started in late 1780s.

The membership decline prior to the pandemic had nothing to do with the pandemic. If membership continues to decline following the pandemic, hopefully we will not see institution Freemasonry attempt to spin the losses as exclusively fault of the pandemic. It will have an effect, of course, but not to the degree that causes that factor to be blindly accepted by current or future Masons to be the sole reason for further membership losses.

While the sentiment of people, cultures and societies in every era is taken into consideration by trained, historians, balanced facts will ultimately guide their assessments, and the fact we need to face today is that our Institution has changed, continues to change and has not always offered or provided what the men we allowed into our fraternity expected to find. Furthermore, we have, under the influence of the adventurous notion of always pushing for more members, then claiming that the more members that appear on our rosters is evidence of the successful of our fraternity, admitted many over the decades were committed, perhaps unsuited as well, to pursue the promise of Freemasonry. We can see more clearly today that the lack of organization introspection has led many members to believe that our fraternity is not accountable for any decline in membership, loss of once held prestige, and the plunge of exceptionalism for which the Institution was once known.

Membership Totals since 1924 (MSA)
92 Years

The Masonic Service Association has compiled the following table of totals of Master Masons in the United States Grand Lodges for the fiscal years indicated. These figures are based upon M.S.A. records and do not necessarily correspond exactly with those published by other sources.

| YEAR | U.S. TOTAL | YEAR | U.S. TOTAL | YEAR | U.S. TOTAL |
|------|------------|------|------------|------|------------|
| 1924 | 3,077,161 | 1955 | 4,009,925 | 1986 | 2,839,962 |
| 1925 | 3,157,566 | 1956 | 4,053,323 | 1987 | 2,763,828 |
| 1926 | 3,218,375 | 1957 | 4,085,676 | 1988 | 2,682,537 |
| 1927 | 3,267,241 | 1958 | 4,099,928 | 1989 | 2,608,935 |
| 1928 | 3,295,872 | 1959 | 4,103,161 | 1990 | 2,531,643 |
| 1929 | 3,295,125 | 1960 | 4,099,219 | 1991 | 2,452,676 |
| 1930 | 3,279,778 | 1961 | 4,086,499 | 1992 | 2,371,863 |
| 1931 | 3,216,307 | 1962 | 4,063,563 | 1993 | 2,293,949 |
| 1932 | 3,069,645 | 1963 | 4,034,020 | 1994 | 2,225,611 |
| 1933 | 2,901,758 | 1964 | 4,005,605 | 1995 | 2,153,316 |
| 1934 | 2,760,451 | 1965 | 3,987,690 | 1996 | 2,089,578 |
| 1935 | 2,659,218 | 1966 | 3,948,193 | 1997 | 2,021,909 |
| 1936 | 2,591,309 | 1967 | 3,910,509 | 1998 | 1,967,208 |
| 1937 | 2,549,772 | 1968 | 3,868,854 | 1999 | 1,902,588 |
| 1938 | 2,514,595 | 1969 | 3,817,846 | 2000 | 1,841,169 |
| 1939 | 2,482,291 | 1970 | 3,763,213 | 2001 | 1,774,200 |
| 1940 | 2,437,263 | 1971 | 3,718,718 | 2002 | 1,727,505 |
| 1941 | 2,451,301 | 1972 | 3,661,507 | 2003 | 1,671,255 |
| 1942 | 2,478,892 | 1973 | 3,611,448 | 2004 | 1,617,032 |
| 1943 | 2,561,844 | 1974 | 3,561,767 | 2005 | 1,569,812 |
| 1944 | 2,719,607 | 1975 | 3,512,628 | 2006 | 1,525,131 |
| 1945 | 2,896,343 | 1976 | 3,470,980 | 2007 | 1,483,449 |
| 1946 | 3,097,713 | 1977 | 3,418,844 | 2008 | 1,444,823 |
| 1947 | 3,281,371 | 1978 | 3,360,409 | 2009 | 1,404,059 |
| 1948 | 3,426,155 | 1979 | 3,304,334 | 2010 | 1,373,453 |
| 1949 | 3,545,757 | 1980 | 3,251,528 | 2011 | 1,336,503 |
| 1950 | 3,644,634 | 1981 | 3,188,175 | 2012 | 1,306,539 |
| 1951 | 3,726,744 | 1982 | 3,121,746 | 2013 | 1,246,241 |
| 1952 | 3,808,364 | 1983 | 3,060,242 | 2014 | 1,211,183 |
| 1953 | 3,893,530 | 1984 | 2,992,389 | 2015 | 1,157,987 |
| 1954 | 3,964,118 | 1985 | 2,914,421 | 2016 | 1,117,781 |

Pre-Civil War (1858)
446,000 members

1932 – First Decline in 75 years

1943 – Next Increase

1959 – Final Peak

1932 – 3,069,645
1858 – 446,000
650% increase

1933 – 2,901,758
1959 – 4,103,161
148% increase

1959 – 4,103,161
2016 – 1,117,781
73% decrease

In 21 years (2037), at the same rate of decline since 1960 (57 years - 1.28%), membership will be at 301,282 - an average loss of 14,307 per year.

All numbers represent dues paying members in good standing. No central repository exists that collects, on a national basis, member deaths, demits, suspensions, expulsions, failure to advance or distinguishes between active or non-active members.

This has been especially true during times when we saw our standards lessened and opened wide the West Gate to keep the numbers up but doing little to better ensure the retention of those admitted. The opportunity to improve that historical trend may be upon us today. While we have this time to pause, we are, perhaps, striving to become more introspective and seeing if the internal can rise to a level that can offset some of the effects of the external on our fraternity, in addition to better ensuring what we offer is of more long-term interest to those whom we do allow to become members and hope to retain.

As Worship Brother Driskell said in his Installation Address last year, the public discourse in our country is systematically decaying. Perhaps, in some ways, the same may be said of the discourse in Freemasonry. He added that the lack of suitable discourse, particularly on matters and areas that directly affect the future of our country is an “assault on complex thought.” That too might apply to Freemasonry when we consider that we have long-ignored our factual organizational history and produced generations of members making decisions using information that has little to do with how we arrived at where we find ourselves today.

Any worthy examination, whether a joint-collective effort or one only conducted at the respective jurisdictional level, would be quite a challenge but, if coordinated properly, could prove an assault on complex issues – issues on which we have not always devoted complex thought.

Will the idea of cross-sovereign, multi-jurisdictional, with inter-related bodies of American Freemasonry arise from this period to pursue a worthwhile, balanced introspective examination emerge? Can one unfold that earnestly uses the reality that *history is who we are and why we are the way we are* as the principle to examine ways that may best constructively advance the fraternity through the following decades? Or, will we merely return to “the way it was,” with words not backed by deeds and claiming that addressing our needs can all be done later, once we return to assembling and “the way it was.”

The only thing for sure is that there is no time like the present for such an effort to happen if it is going to happen at all in the foreseeable future.