

The Rituals of American Freemasonry

W.: Bro.: Ron Blaisdell, PM
June 16, 2001

Preface

Those of us that spend a great deal of time traveling for our employers have become accustomed to spending many hours in hotel rooms in disparate locations of the country. However, those of us who are active in the Masonic orders have a distinct advantage over our non-Masonic co-workers in that we can find a “home” in almost any city in which we visit. A few quick calls, and soon you are at a wonderful meal, degree work, or maybe even a business meeting – but at least you are not sitting in your hotel room staring at the one-eyed monster.

As you visit these other lodges, you quickly pick up on the “differences” that exist between their ritual and our own. A little digging, and you start to see that there are some word variations, but not “significant” changes in the ritual ... unless of course you are in a few select locations of the country.

Let us briefly examine the “baseline” of American Freemasonry – the “Webb-form” ritual and some of the “other” rituals in which you may come into contact with.

“Webb-Form”

Before I start on this section, let me state that I have no intention on going into the details that have been presented to this Lodge before. Most Worshipful Brother Osborne in his paper – “Our Masonic Ritual, Its Development and History” (Volume I, 1983-1985) – and Most Worshipful Brother Dick Sands’ Lou B. Winsor Lecture – “John Barney, a Broken Column, and You.” However, for those of you who have not read these works, I commend them to your attention.

In 1745 the three-degree system was in place. Splitting the first degree into two degrees, and taking the then second degree and making it the third degree accomplished this. This was not a very effective ritual, so in order to make the work more “acceptable” revisions were begun in 1769 by Wellins Calcutt and William Hutchinson. In 1772 William Preston joined them. In two years, Preston had completed his work, and rewrote the ritual of the three degrees. He was an excellent ritualist, and his original work is some of the most beautiful ever created. There was one small problem ... it was long! In fact, it is said the 12-parts of his lecture of the Master Mason degree actually took a half-day to recite.

Enter the colonial Thomas Smith Webb. Webb loved the Preston rituals ... however, he quickly identified their major flaw. In 1797 he published his first “Freemason’s Monitor, or Illustrations on Freemasonry” – in which he gave full

credit to Preston for all his work – but made sure that the reader’s knew that they were Preston’s work – but with some “necessary alterations.” Webb never really wrote any ritual – he simply rearranged, and shortened some sections of Preston’s work so that it would fit the lifestyle of North America.

In 1839 the Grand Lodge of Alabama called for a meeting of all the “Grand Lecturer’s” to discuss and determine a “common ritual” for the Craft. After a preliminary meeting in Washington DC in 1842, the “Baltimore Convention” was held in that city in 1843. The objective of the convention was to “produce uniformity of Masonic Work and to recommend such measures as will tend to the elevation of this order to its due degree of respect throughout the world at large.” In 1844 the Baltimore Convention published the “Trestle-Board.”

When the Grand Lodge of Michigan was re-activated in 1844 they adopted the work of the “National Masonic Convention at Baltimore,” at their January 1845 communication.

The Webb-Form ritual is used in 50 of the Grand Lodges of the United States. In all but two cases, it is the only ritual sanctioned by the Grand Lodge.

Old Ancients

The exclusive ritual used by the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania. This ritual’s name is actually derived from the fact that it was the ritual of the Ancient’s Grand Lodge during the schism of the Ancients and Moderns (1751 – 1813). Interesting to note here that the original Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania (of which Benjamin Franklin was Grand Master in 1734) was later part of the Modern’s Grand Lodge (and Franklin served as the Deputy Provincial Grand Master of Pennsylvania for the Moderns). The first Pennsylvania lodge to be charter by the Ancients was established in 1758, and their Provincial Grand Lodge was chartered in 1761. The Moderns Provincial Grand Lodge ceased to function in 1785, and the 1786 the Ancients Provincial Grand Lodge declared their independence from England.

The work of the “Old Ancients” ritual can best be compared to the work done by Calcutt and Hutchinson prior to 1772 when Preston started working on the ritual.

Many brethren confuse the “Old Ancients” ritual with that of the Emulation Ritual. This is not possible though, as the Emulation Ritual is a result of the Lodge of Promulgation that worked out the differences between the Ancient’s and Modern’s rituals in 1814, after the reconciliation and formation of the United Grand Lodge of England.

There are 4 lodges in Pennsylvania that do their work in the Pennsylvania Dutch dialect. Including one in Philadelphia that also conducts their business meetings in this dialect.

Scottish Rite

A unique Masonic experience awaits the brethren from the Webb-form jurisdictions if they attend one of the ten lodges in the 16th Masonic District of the Grand Lodge of Louisiana. These lodges, predominately located in and around New Orleans, conduct their work using the ritual for the symbolic degrees as developed by the Scottish Rite.

This ritual was developed in 1807 when three Sovereign Grand Inspectors General of the Supreme Council in Kingston, Jamaica created the “Grand Consistory of Louisiana,” which included not only a Craft Lodge, but also a Lodge of Perfection and a Consistory. The Grand Consistory actually worked all 33 degrees of the Scottish Rite.

(An interesting side note ... the first of the Lodges that works the SR ritual was formed in 1793 – so the SR ritual was not the first ritual they worked.)

Before you ask why a body from outside the country established a Grand Consistory in Louisiana when the Supreme Council was already established in Charleston, understand that in the 1802 “Manifesto” of the new Supreme Council at Charleston they included the first three degrees in their system. The Grand Lodge of South Carolina was not pleased with that decision, so the Supreme Council “traded” their symbolic lodge degrees in order to be able to continue their work.

The work that is used by these lodges is a work that is older than the work created by Albert Pike for the Symbolic Degrees, and is more closely aligned to the work used in the Grand Lodge of France.

(The Northern Masonic Jurisdiction never assumed control over the symbolic lodge degrees. However, the Cerneau Council did, and that may have ultimately lead to their downfall, since they were treading on the ground controlled by the Grand Lodges.)

The work of the Scottish Rite Symbolic Lodge is quiet beautiful, and retains much of the symbolism found in European Masonry. With the permission of the Worshipful Master, and the cooperation of the Lodge Officers, I would hope that the Lodge of Research could “demonstrate” the SR ritual at a future date.

Conservators Ritual

Frequently here in Michigan we hear brothers discussing the “unusual ritual” they have heard while visiting family in Kentucky. While officially, the Grand Lodge of Kentucky uses a Webb-form ritual, there are many local lodges that prefer to use the work of Rob Morris, Past Grand Master of Kentucky.

The Conservators Ritual has a place in Michigan Masonic history as well. It was nearly adopted by our Grand Lodge in 1861. (See Most Worshipful Brother

Osborne's paper "The Masonic Conservators" – Transactions of the Michigan Lodge of Research, Volume II, 1986-1987.)

Rob Morris started the "Conservators of Symbolical Masonry" in 1859. The Conservator movement was based, on a book called "Mnemonics" which was a key to all the Esoteric and Exoteric work. Using this key, the Conservator ritual could be read by anyone. Keep in mind, that at this time, all ritual work was mouth-to-ear, there were few "instructors" of Masonic Ritual, and even fewer Grand Lecturers. Most lodges never received formal instruction in the ritual, so the "rank and file" quickly embraced a system that allowed easier access to learning the ritual.

In reality, the Conservator movement was an attempt to form a "United Grand Lodge" of the United States, with Rob Morris as the Chief Conservator. (For those of you remember your Masonic history, you'll note that Morris also proclaimed himself the "Chief Constellation" of the Order of Eastern Star.) It was the "Committee of Nine" from the Grand Lodge of Michigan that found, and published, Rob Morris' 12-points of the "Charge of True Conservatism," in which he proclaims that all members by obey all summons sent to them by the Chief Conservator, and that all works of the movement were secret, to consider all documents issued by the Conservators to be private correspondence with the Chief Conservator.

That aside, the work of the Conservators is also based on Preston-Webb, with changes that the "Poet Laureate" of American Freemasonry deemed to be necessary.

Other Ritualistic Information

In completing my research on this project, several other important items came to my attention, they have been included in my charts, and I would like to summarize them for you.

Ritual Ciphers

Thirty-eight jurisdictions have published rituals of some kind. These range from "plain text" as published in Connecticut and Illinois, to the frequently used one- or three-letter keys. In two jurisdictions, a cipher ritual is published, but its use is strictly controlled.

Thirteen jurisdictions, however, still do not allow cipher rituals of any kind. These jurisdictions still use the mouth-to-ear method of instruction for their ritual work. Some of these jurisdictions have such strict laws governing the printing of a ritual, that any brother who does such may be removed from the Craft.

Business in the Entered Apprentice Degree

A re-emerging process here in the States, 16 jurisdictions now allow lodge business to be conducted in the Entered Apprentice Degree. This was commonplace until the various Grand Lodges adopted the Baltimore Convention ritual.

Conclusion

So, the next time you find yourself in a different locale, stop on in and check out the ritual. You may feel more at home than you expect ... or you may find yourself invigorated by the experience.

About the Author:

Ron Blaisdell is a Past Master of Capital of Strict Observance Lodge No. 66 of Lansing. He was made a full member of the Michigan Lodge of Research in 1991. He is a Sustaining Life Member of the Scottish Rite Research Society, and the Philalethes Society, which awarded him their Medal of Merit in 2000. He is a member of the Masonic Brotherhood of the Blue Forget-Me-Not (No. 372), a Distinguished Brother of the Order of the Purple Cross, and a Knight of the York Cross of Honor. He is a Life Member of the Royal Order of Scotland, and a Past Sovereign Master of Ionic Council No. 251, Allied Masonic Degrees. He served as Most Illustrious Grand Master of the Grand Council Royal and Select Masons of Michigan from 1998-1999, and their Grand Lecturer from 1999-2001.

Bibliography

Osborne, Robert N., "Our Masonic Ritual, Its Development and History", Transactions, Michigan Lodge of Research, Volume 1, 1983-1985.

Osborne, Robert N., "The Masonic Conservators", Transactions, Michigan Lodge of Research, Volume 2, 1986-1987.

Sands, Richard, "John Barney, a Broken Column, and You," 2nd Lou B. Winsor Lecture, Michigan Lodge of Research.

Bessel, Paul, Web Site of Masonic Information, <http://bessel.org/>

Henderson & Pope, "Freemasonry Universal", Volumes I & II.

Roberts, Allen E., "House Undivided," Missouri Lodge of Research, 1961, Chapter X, "The Conservators."

Denslow, Ray V., "The Masonic Conservators," Iowa Lodge of Research, 1931.

Carr, Harry, "Six Hundred Years of Craft Ritual", QCCC Ltd.

Rituals of American Masonry

Jurisdiction	Ritual		Cipher Ritual	Business EA°
	Webb-form	Other		
Alabama	Yes		No	Yes
Alaska	Yes ¹		Yes	No
Arizona	Yes		Yes	Yes
Arkansas	Yes		No	No
California	Yes		Yes	No
Colorado	Yes		Yes	Yes
Connecticut	Yes		Plain text	Yes
Delaware	Yes		Yes	No
DC	Yes ²		Yes	Yes
Florida	Yes		Yes ³	No
Georgia	Yes		Yes ³	No
Hawaii	Yes ⁹		No	No
Idaho	Yes		Yes	Yes
Illinois	Yes		Plain text	No
Indiana	Yes		Yes	No
Iowa	Yes		No	No
Kansas	Yes		Yes	Yes
Kentucky	Yes	Rob Morris	Yes	No
Louisiana	Yes	Scottish Rite ⁴	No	No
Maine	Yes		Yes	No
Maryland	Yes		No	Yes
Massachusetts	Yes		Yes	No
Michigan	Yes		Yes	No
Minnesota	Yes		Yes	Yes
Mississippi	Yes		No	No
Missouri	Yes		Yes	Yes
Montana	Yes ⁵		Yes	Yes
Nebraska	Yes ⁶		Yes	No
Nevada	Yes		Yes	Yes
New Hampshire	Yes		Yes	No
New Jersey	Yes		Yes	No
New Mexico	Yes		Yes	Yes
New York	Yes ⁷		Yes	No
North Carolina	Yes		Yes	No
North Dakota	Yes		Yes	No
Ohio	Yes		Yes	No
Oklahoma	Yes		No	No
Oregon	Yes		Yes	Yes
Pennsylvania		Old Ancients	No	No
Rhode Island	Yes		Yes	No
South Carolina	Yes		Yes	No
South Dakota	Yes		Yes	No
Tennessee	Yes		No	No
Texas	Yes		No	No
Utah	Yes		Yes	Yes
Vermont	Yes		Yes	No
Virginia	Yes		No	No
Washington	Yes		Yes	Yes
West Virginia	Yes		No	No

Rituals of American Masonry

Jurisdiction	Ritual		Cipher Ritual	Business EA°
	Webb-form	Other		
Wisconsin	Yes ⁸		Yes	No
Wyoming	Yes		Yes	No

Notes:

- ¹ Washington version
- ² Newer lodges are allowed to choose ritual to be used.
To date, this includes, Emulation, Scottish, and several foreign language lodges
- ³ Highly controlled number of copies
- ⁴ One lodge in District 10 works in Spanish
- ⁵ "Vigilante Days and Ways"
- ⁶ "King Solomon and His Followers"
- ⁷ "Ecce Orienti"
- ⁸ "The pure work of M L Young"
- ⁹ Loge le Progres de l'Oceanie worked French SR ritual until accepted into the GL of California in 1859
Lodge Pacific worked Scottish Ritual from 1860 - 1910