

CHANGES IN THE MASONIC RITUAL IN VIRGINIA

By Stephen W. Law

NOTES BY THE AUTHOR

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Thank you for your time and interest.

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INTRODUCTION

Brethren, as you might expect a person on the Grand Lodge Committee on Work to do, this morning I am going to talk about Masonic Ritual. We often hear the comment that the ritualists including the Grand Lecturer and members of the Grand Lodge Committee on Work never change anything and that they are not receptive to changes or perceived improvements in the ritual. Today I will prove that statement to be incorrect. My presentation is titled "Changes in the Masonic Ritual in Virginia" and in it I am going to discuss various changes that have occurred over the years concerning our ritual. I will discuss specific word changes, procedural changes, and words that have been omitted over the years. I find the deletion of certain ritual phrases to be the most interesting aspect of the many changes that have occurred in the Masonic ritual. I will also discuss changes to our statutes or Masonic laws that have affected the structural organization of our ritual. Interwoven in this discussion will be some historical highlights on the evolution of the Masonic ritual in Virginia.

Much of this presentation is derived from *The Freemason's Monitor* of 1797 by Thomas Smith Webb, which is based on William Preston's *Illustrations of Masonry*. Without going into a long explanation, I will say that Webb's *Freemason's Monitor* is the basis for our modern day lectures. The 1797 Monitor is almost identical word for word to the ritual that the Committee on Work teaches today. The notable exception is the fact that some ritual in the Monitor has been deleted from present day use. Today I am going to give you some of that lost ritual.

I will also reference the 1866 version of *The Virginia Text-Book* by John Dove, then the Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Virginia. *The Virginia Text-Book*, as it was known then, contained our present day Methodical Digest, Manual of Work, Manual of Ceremonies, and History of the Grand Lodge of Virginia. This material

was graciously provided to me by Most Worshipful Donald Maynard Robey.

RITUAL STATUE CHANGES

I will begin by providing some historical highlights on the evolution of the ritual statues or Masonic Law in the Grand Lodge of Virginia.

1. The requirement for an examination in open Lodge " . . . in the degree from which he is to be advanced . . ." was approved by Grand Lodge in 1798.
2. The Committee on Work was founded in 1800 and was originally called "The Working Committee."
3. The Committee on Work was eliminated in 1801 because the members had been unable to agree. The Committee was reestablished in 1802.
4. In 1821 the Working Committee exemplified the three degrees in open Grand Lodge. After which the Grand Lodge passed a resolution that "the mode of working, as this night exemplified by the Working Committee, is the proper mode of working, and that it accordingly be recommended to the subordinate Lodges, for their adoption and that the District Deputy Grand Masters be requested to instruct them accordingly." Thus, the first Grand Lodge approval of a standard ritual in Virginia.
5. The first Grand Lecturer was elected in 1822 to " . . . visit such Lodges as may request his attendance . . ." James Cushman was the first Grand Lecturer of the Grand Lodge of Virginia.
6. The 1823 session of the Grand Lodge saw the abolishment of the position of Grand Lecturer. The position did not re-emerge until 1841 and at that time it was held by a minister.
7. Also, in 1841 a resolution was passed that required the Subordinate Lodges to hold all sessions in the third degree, except for purposes of working and lecturing in the First and Second Degrees.

8. The Baltimore Convention was held in 1843 and was attended by Dr. Dove, Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Virginia. This was an attempt to establish a uniform ritual in the United States.

9. In 1843 the Grand Master appointed two Grand Lecturers, one each for the Eastern and Western Districts.

10. The Virginia Text Book written by Dr. Dove was approved at the 1845 Grand Annual Communication. This was a precursor to the Manual of Work used today.

11. In 1856, the Grand Lodge passed a resolution forbidding the Subordinate Lodges from conferring any portion of any degree, except the Explanatory Lectures, upon more than one candidate at a time."

12. The questionable practice of more than one Grand Lecturer was brought to an end in 1859. Grand Lodge agreed, "that it is inexpedient to have more than one Grand Lecturer in the State of Virginia." and in 1861 the Committee on Work was identified as the "Custodians of the Work" and was authorized to consist of five members. Today it contains 26 members.

13. In 1874, it was determined that it is contrary to Masonic Law and usage to require a Master Mason to be proficient in the Third Degree before he can be received into membership in a Lodge.

14. In 1929, Grand Lodge passed a resolution stipulating that "Effective at the annual election of officers in December 1931 and thereafter, no brother shall be installed Master of a Lodge unless he is able to confer the three Degrees, including the lectures, and has a certification from the Grand or Division Lecturer showing him qualified." In 1935 the Grand Lodge eliminated the part which required the lectures in order to qualify for the certificate.

15. In 1947, it was decided that "No Lodge shall, without dispensation from the Grand Master, make more than five Entered Apprentices, or Fellow Crafts, or Master Masons at one Communication."

16. After some experimentation by the Committee on Work concerning conferring degrees on multiple candidates simultaneously of no more than three, the procedure was enacted in 1999.

17. Also in 1999, an alternative method of advancement was introduced that effectively alleviated the mandatory requirement of the memorization of the Catechisms.

18. It is interesting to note that with the exception of Virginia's participation in the Baltimore Convention, the Grand Lodge has refrained from entering into ritualistic arrangements with other jurisdictions. In 1906 for example, the Committee on Propositions studied a communication received from the Grand Lodge of Colorado, the primary thrust of which was a proposal to establish a collegium of Grand Lecturers for the purpose of unifying the esoteric and exoteric work of the several Grand Lodges of the United States. The Committee reported that such action was not feasible or desirable, and it therefore recommended that no action be taken in regard to this matter.

19. It is also interesting to note that there have been only 25 Grand Lecturers in the Grand Lodge of Virginia since its founding. During the same period, there have been 155 Grand Masters.

A DISCUSSION OF SPECIFIC RITUAL CHANGES

Now I will discuss changes that have occurred over the years in the prayers, the Installation of Officers ceremony, the Masonic Funeral Service, and the Funeral Ode in the Degree of Master Mason.

THE PRAYERS

Although the wording has remained nearly exact for over 200 years, the arrangement of the prayers has changed. The prayer recited during the circumambulation in the Entered Apprentice's degree was originally used to open a Lodge. Also, some of you will remember the time when the Chaplain remained at his place when citing the scriptures during circumambulation in the three degrees.

INSTALLATION OF OFFICERS

Many of our present day brethren remember the time when during an installation of officers, the officers to be installed formed a semi-circle in the West instead of two lines West of the altar. It was Right Worshipful Charles Armisted Sinclair, Grand Lecturer during the 1960s and early 70s who formalized the mechanics of this ceremony. Also this ceremony has been adopted to include our modern ways. In fact it was Most Worshipful Robey who was instrumental in updating the Grand Lodge Installation of Officers ceremony to include proper wording for the installation of the Administrative Assistant to the Grand Master, a relatively new Grand Lodge position.

THE MASONIC FUNERAL SERVICE

Alexandria-Washington Lodge, No. 22 recently re-enacted the Masonic Funeral Service given to our late President and Brother, George Washington. Everyone present at that occasion surely recognized that that service had substantial differences to the service used today. Here are some additional words that have been dropped since the documented 1866 version:

"What are all the externals of majesty, the pride of wealth, or charms of beauty, when Nature has paid her just debt? Fix your eyes on the last scene, and view life stripped of her ornaments, and exposed in her natural meanness; you will then be convinced of the futility of these empty delusions. In the grave all fallacies are detected, all ranks are levelled, and all distinctions are done away."

"Perfection of earth has never been attained – the wisest as well as the best of men have erred."

"Then, with becoming reverence, let us seek the favor of the Eternal God, whose goodness and power know no bounds, and prosecute our journey, without dread or apprehension, to that far distant country from whose bourne no traveler returns. By the light of the Divine countenance we shall then pass without trembling through those gloomy mansions where all things are

forgotten; and at that great and tremendous day, when arraigned at the Bar of Divine and Unbiased Justice, judgement shall be pronounced in our favor; we shall receive the reward of our labor and virtue, and acquire the possession of an immortal inheritance, where joy flows in one continued stream, and no mound can check its course."

"And though the body of our deceased brother, now clothed in the habiliments of the dead and deposited in the silent grave, will soon mingle with the common mass of senseless matter, yet his spirit has ascended to God who gave it. And we hope and trust hath ere this passed the portals of the Grand Temple of Jehovah, and before the Grand Tribunal of unbiased Justice in the presence of myriads of intelligent beings, received the heavenly plaudit of "well done, good and faithful servant, enter thou into life eternal."

"From time immemorial it has been the custom among Free and Accepted Masons, at the request of a brother, to accompany his corpse to the place of interment, and there to deposit his remains with the usual formalities. In conformity to this usage, and at the request of our deceased brother, whose memory we revere, and whose loss we now deplore, we have assembled in the character of Masons to offer up to his memory before the world, the last tribute of our affections."

A more recent change was the addition of the words "and friends" to the opening of the ceremony. That is, the Committee on Work now teaches that the service should begin, "My brethren and friends". This is the rare case of a recent change in the ritual words.

There was a time not too long ago, when a Lodge first opened a Master Mason's Lodge each time a Masonic Funeral Service was held. The brethren would open a Master Mason's Lodge, go to the gravesite to perform the service, then return to Lodge in order to close the Master Mason's Lodge. Also, the service was only performed at the gravesite, not in a funeral home as is typically done today. In past times, every member present would deposit a leaf or pedal in the

grave. Today, only the Worshipful Master performs the last rites if not done so by the clergy.

As is evident, the Masonic Funeral Service has been continuously modified over the years in Virginia. The most recent revision occurred in 1994 when an attempt was made to clarify the instructions contained in the manual. I am not sure this was achieved and I wonder if a comprehensive revision is in order to accommodate modern times while reverting back to a simpler version of previous years.

FUNERAL ODE IN THE MASTER MASONS DEGREE

Over time, the following verse has been dropped from the Funeral Ode in the Degree of Master Mason:

*“Mortals now indulge a tear,
For mortality is near;
See how wide her trophies wave
O’er the slumbers of the grave!”*

This was the traditional second verse. The Funeral Ode used to be called the Funeral Dirge. The definition of Dirge is a funeral hymn or lament and a slow, mournful musical composition or poem.

These examples are but some of the many changes that have occurred in the Masonic Ritual in Virginia. I am sure that there are many, many more. It is interesting to note that most of the changes that have taken place over the years pertain to that portion of the ritual that is printed. That is the Masonic ceremonies printed in our Manual of Work and Manual of Ceremonies seem to have changed the most. Of course it is the written material that can be more easily tracked through time. Of course, any recollection of a change made to an unwritten section will surely be lost over time as the knowledgeable individuals pass away.

Now I will provide examples of items that used to be contained in the Degrees but have been eliminated over time.

THE FIVE SENSES OF HUMAN NATURE

We learn in the Senior Deacon's Lecture in the Degree of Fellow Craft of the five senses of human nature to wit: hearing, seeing, feeling, smelling, and tasting. The first three of which hearing, seeing, and feeling are most . . .

Here is a sample of what has been omitted in Virginia Ritual from Webb's Monitor concerning the five senses of human nature:

HEARING

Is that sense by which we distinguish sounds, and are capable of enjoying all the agreeable charms of music. By it we are enabled to enjoy the pleasures of society, and reciprocally to communicate with each other our thoughts and intentions, our purposes and desires; while thus our reason is capable of exerting it utmost power and energy.

The wise and beneficent Author of Nature intended, by the formation of this sense, that we should be social creatures, and receive the greatest and most important part of our knowledge by the information of others. For these purposes we are endowed with hearing, that, by a proper exertion of our natural powers, our happiness may be complete.

SEEING

Is that sense by which we distinguish objects, and in an instant of time, without change of place or situation, view armies in battle array, figures of the most stately structures, and all the agreeable variety displayed in the landscape of nature. By this sense we find our way in the pathless ocean, traverse the globe of earth, determine its figure and dimensions, and delineate any region or quarter of it. By it we measure the planetary orbs, and make new discoveries in the sphere of the fixed stars. Nay, more: by it we perceive the tempers and dispositions, the passions and affections, of our fellow creatures, when they wish most to conceal them; so that though the tongue may be taught to lie and dissemble, the countenance would display the hypocrisy to the discerning eye. In fine, the rays of light which

administer to this sense, are the most astonishing parts of the animated creation, and render the eye a peculiar object of admiration.

Of all the faculties, sight is the noblest. The structure of the eye, and its appurtenances, evinces the admirable contrivance of nature for performing all its various external and internal motions; while the variety displayed in the eyes of different animals, suited to their several ways of life, clearly demonstrates this organ to be the masterpiece of nature's work.

FEELING

Is that sense which we distinguish the different qualities of bodies; such as heat and cold, hardness and softness, roughness and smoothness, figure, solidity, motion, and extension.

These three senses, HEARING, SEEING, and FEELING, are deemed peculiarly essential among Masons.

SMELLING

Is that sense by which we distinguish odors, the various kinds of which convey different impressions to the mind. Animal and vegetable bodies, and indeed most other bodies, while exposed to the air, continually send forth effluvia of vast subtilty, as well in the state of life and growth, as in the state of fermentation and putrefaction. These effluvia, being drawn into the nostrils along with the air, are the means by which all bodies are smelled. Hence it is evident, that there is a manifest appearance of design in the great Creator's having planted the organ of smell in the inside of that canal, through which the air continually passes in respiration.

TASTING

Enables us to make a proper distinction in the choice of our food. The organ of this sense guards the entrance of the alimentary canal, as that of smelling guards the entrance of the canal for respiration. From the situation of both these organs, it is plain that they were intended by nature to distinguish wholesome food from that which is

nauseous. Everything that enters into the stomach must undergo the scrutiny of tasting; and by it we are capable of discerning the changes which the same body undergoes in the different compositions of cookery, chemistry, pharmacy, etc.

Smelling and tasting are inseparably connected, and it is by the unnatural kind of life men commonly lead in society, that these senses are rendered less fit to perform their natural offices.

On the mind all our knowledge must depend; what, therefore, can be a more proper subject for the investigation of Masons? By anatomical dissection and observation, we become acquainted with the body; but it is by the anatomy of the mind alone we discover its powers and principles.

To sum up the whole of this transcendent measure of God's bounty to man, we shall add, that memory, imagination, taste, reasoning, moral perception, and all the active powers of the soul, present a vast and boundless field for philosophical disquisition, which far exceed human inquiry, and are peculiar mysteries, known only to nature, and to nature's God, to whom we and all are indebted for creation, preservation, and every blessing we enjoy.

THE SEVEN LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES

We also learn in the Senior Deacon's Lecture in the Degree of Fellow Craft of the seven liberal arts and sciences to wit: grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. We discuss the fifth science, or geometry, in great detail but fail to mention anything about the other six.

Here is a sample of what has been omitted in Virginia Ritual from Webb's Monitor concerning the other six liberal arts and sciences:

GRAMMAR

Grammar teaches the proper arrangement of words, according to the idiom of dialect of any particular people; and that excellency of

pronunciation, which enables us to speak or write a language with accuracy, agreeable to reason and correct usage.

RHETORIC

Rhetoric teaches us to speak copiously and fluently on any subject, not merely with propriety alone, but with all the advantages of force and elegance; wisely contriving to captivate the hearer by strength of argument and beauty of expression, whether it be to entreat and exhort, to admonish or applaud.

LOGIC

Logic teaches us to guide our reason discretionally in the general knowledge of things, and directs our inquiries after truth. It consists of a regular train of argument, whence we infer, deduce, and conclude, according to certain premises laid down, admitted, or granted; and in it are employed the faculties of conceiving, judging, reasoning, and disposing; all of which are naturally led on from one gradation to another, till the point in question is finally determined.

ARITHMETIC

Arithmetic teaches the powers and properties of numbers, which is variously effected, by letters, tables, figures and instruments. By this art, reasons and demonstrations are given, for finding out any certain number, whose relation or affinity to another is already known or discovered.

MUSIC

Music teaches the art of forming concords, so as to compose delightful harmony, by a mathematical and proportional arrangement of acute, grave and mixed sounds. This art, by a series of experiments, is reduced to a demonstrative science, with respect to tones, and the internals of sound. It inquires into the nature of concords and discords, and enables us to find out the proportion between them by numbers.

ASTRONOMY

Astronomy is that divine art, by which we are taught to read the wisdom, strength and beauty of the Almighty Creator, in those sacred pages the celestial hemisphere. Assisted by astronomy, we can observe the motions, measure the distances, comprehend the magnitudes, and calculate the periods and eclipses, of the heavenly bodies. By it we learn the use of the globes, the system of the world, and the preliminary law of nature. While we are employed in the study of this science, we must perceive unparalleled instances of wisdom and goodness, and, though the whole creation, trace the glorious Author by his works.

This lost ritual is just as beautiful and meaningful as the ritual used today. For whatever reason, possibly brevity, this ritual is no longer used. While it is not as visible as it once was, it should not be forgotten.

CONCLUSION

Finally my brethren, at the upcoming Grand Annual Communication, it is expected that there will be resolutions to address that pertain to the ritual. The first is a statute change that would require balloting as a Warden's Certificate requirement. This would include balloting on a petition or an application and balloting on Masonic proficiency. The second resolution clearly identifies that the Catechisms are Ancient York Ritual as taught by the Committee on Work. There has been much behind the scene discussion on this issue and it is not clear how this resolution will be received. The simple purpose is only to state that the Catechisms are Ancient York Ritual, which they clearly are. It in no way infringes upon a Grand Master's clear authority to implement an alternative method of advancement as we have today through Executive Order.

Surely the examples that I have provided today will convince you that there has been change to the Masonic ritual used in Virginia. Change has happened in our ancient history, change has happened in our recent history, and change will certainly happen again. The particular challenge is to manage the ritual change so that it is meaningful,

methodically and thoroughly researched, comprehensive, meets our short-term and long-term goals and expectations, and is properly implemented. Change must not be made just for the sake of change but rather to meet a real and specific need.

It is evident to me that the question of how to make ritual changes needs to be addressed. Should changes merely be announced from the Committee on Work or should they, like changes to our Masonic Law, be presented, discussed, and voted upon by the delegates of the Grand Lodge. Often changes in ritual are based on the particular whims of a Grand Master. This is not as it should be.

I thank you for your time and attention and I hope that I have provided meaningful information for you to analyze. If you have any opinions on this subject, I am always available. Thank you.