



The Overy Papers

Number 8 The History of Our Masonic Ritual

Fraternal Greetings Brethren

This paper is written with the help of Samuel T. Atkinson, PM.

The origin of our rituals has been in contention ever since we first started as Speculative Masons in the early eighteenth Century. There are so many stories, often intermingling with each other each trying to give the origins of our history and explain the rituals we use today.

These stories range from King Solomon and Hiram, King of Tyre, Noah and his three sons and more recent the Knights Templar. One story even stated that Adam was our first Grand Master because he was the first man to wear an apron even though it was a fig leaf.

Today most Masonic Historians only accept those stories of Masonry that have "incontrovertible" written proof.

As of today no records exist that show Masons existed as a Craft Group in ancient times even though it is almost certain that they did and that any history before the cathedral builders of the medieval period, is really just legends.

So where did our rituals come from?

At the end of the 17th Century as the rebuilding of the damage caused by the Great Fire of London came to an end it is thought that the main architects of the new buildings started to visit the lodges of the Masons in London. They did this not as a member but as a visitor that had become close friends over the years.

As the work decreased, people such as Sir Christopher Wren decided that it would be an excellent idea to start a similar "fraternity of lodges" based on the Masons lodges but using a common belief in Friendship, Morality and Brotherly Love.

This fraternity of lodges on 24 June 1717 formed under a Grand Lodge and in 1723 Dr. Anderson produced the Constitutions of Grand Lodge that was revised in 1738, but although the charges at the meetings were based on

that used by the Operative Masons it still it did not include a set standard of rituals.

Reading the early documents of Operative Masons it shows that in fact they did not have any "rituals" as we know them. They had Signs and Words to identify each other and these were strictly secret and never written. We also use these or similar signs and words to identify each other

The other part of their meetings would have been a simple history and the charges. The charges would have listed the rules of a mason and it is thought that this part would not have been secret as there are numerous written copies but they would have been brief and simple and today we can see it is used as a basis for our obligation.

They had no rituals as we do but our rituals were developed from this simple work of the operative masons and of course would never have been a part of their Lodge work.

At the beginning of the Eighteenth Century each Freemasons Lodge was a still a separate unit. They each developed their own rituals and it was up to each Worshipful Master to use his preference as to what words and stories were used to convey the meaning of Speculative Freemasonry to the members.

When it was decided to form the United Grand Lodge it was realized that a standardization of Rituals was badly needed.

So in 1813 a Lodge was formed to examine the various rituals being used and standardize them in preparation of the formation of the United Grand Lodge when the "Antients" and the "Moderns" of the original Mother Grand Lodge came together to become the United Grand Lodge.

The best Freemason Academics came together to produce a combined set of rituals from the many divergent texts and produce ones that were acceptable to all the Lodges and they were very similar to that that we use today.

This creation of our rituals must have been a very difficult task and I think only a very gifted group of Masons could come up with words that would appeal everyone.

To do this they would have drawn on the popular language of the English at that time and emulated the team that produced the King James Version Bible 200 years earlier who came up with a Bible that satisfied all the divergent members of the Church of England and is still used today and is known as the King James Version.

These academics would have drawn on the many stories and legends of Masonry and used them to produce rituals that exemplified our goals as

Speculative Masons in a simple way without any hidden meanings even though the stories and legends had no historical evidence to support them.

In 1816 with their work completed, a Lodge of Reconciliation was established to finalize the rituals that had been accepted by all members of the newly constituted United Grand Lodge.

They were then tasked to demonstrate these new rituals to the individual lodges, which were invited to attend a series of special demonstrations.

However, because it was forbidden to print the ritual, the communication of the work to the various Lodges relied heavily on the ability and memory, of those attending.

They then, had to instruct their own members in the new rituals. In addition to the difficulty of interpretation, there would also have been the desire to improvise, something I am sure we recognize in our own work today even though it is usually unintended and this is why today there are eight variant rituals in use in England alone, all accepted as valid and regular.

Your average Mason today reveres what he has been taught and is fiercely resentful of any material change in that which he has learned, be it rituals, degrees, obligation or customs. This is often because he believes them to have been "from time immemorial". When in fact in all probability they have an antiquity of less than two hundred years and are only 100 years older than our lodge.

To show how difficult it is often to get at the truth there is an interesting book in our library known as the Inigo Jones Manuscript. It is titled "The Antient Constitution Of the Free and Accepted Masons 1607" and it shows where our rituals came. Unfortunately most historians' now think it was written after Inigo Jones, who was a famous architect, had died. Research shows that there are a few different "Title Pages" giving various dates starting with ours in 1607 down to the latest dated 1725. As our Grand Lodge website states that the term "Free and Accepted Masons" was first used in 1722 I think the 1725 date is probably the closest. Still it is a very good but questionable effort and well worth the read.

Thank you and whatever I say may we continue in peace and harmony.

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