

The Five Ages of Masonic Ritual Development

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When I was made a Mason and first began to study the ritual I quickly learned – as I am sure that all of you did – that our ritual, down to the least minutiae, never was supposed to change. But I also quickly learned from first hand experience that it does change. Grand Lodge issues “clarifications” every year, and my more senior brothers have pointed out to me some significant changes in New Jersey ritual that have been made, particularly dating to the early 1970’s. Moreover, from traveling and attending lodge in other jurisdictions, I have found that Masonic ritual is not uniform from place to place, and in fact can vary considerably. I collected as many ritual ciphers as I could find from different jurisdictions, and now possess a couple dozen different versions of Blue Lodge ritual. I found that there are Masonic jurisdictions recognized by our grand lodge whose ritual contains different procedures, different symbols, different explanations for the same symbols, and even different signs and words. And the brothers in those places also will tell you they perform the ritual exactly as it has always been done.

It seemed obvious to me that there must be a story or history to our ritual, some reason why there is such wide diversity despite a presumed common source. I consulted my more knowledgeable brethren as young masons are urged to do. But they had no clear idea why this was so – or sometimes even that it was so. So I consulted books and Masonic publications such as papers from research lodges. But much to my surprise, I could find very little written about how our ritual came to be the way it is. There was a little bit here and there in bits and snatches, but no comprehensive overview of the whole topic. I did find, however, that Masonic scholars over the years have collected and published nearly all of the antique documents and manuscripts containing ritual material. So I found I had no choice but to examine for myself these primary source documents of Masonic ritual history in order to satisfy my desire for light in Masonry.

I am presenting to you today the high points of the story of Masonic ritual history as I have come to understand it from my studies. This includes not only the particulars of Masonic ritual history, but more importantly, some of the reasons and thought processes behind the changes. There is a great deal of detailed back-up to everything I am about to say, which I will be pleased to cover if you wish in questions after my presentation. I will

do my best to keep things brief even though there is more to be said on this topic than we could possibly cover in the time available.

Just as archaeologists divide human history into convenient time periods, such as the Stone Age, the Bronze Age, and the Iron Age, in order to describe the path of our cultural development, I think it might be handy to apply this same technique to the history of Masonic ritual as well. Accordingly, as I see it, there are five ages in the history of Masonic ritual: the Operative Age, the Tavern Age, the Moralizing Age, the Age of Lecturers, and finally the Age of Standardization or Unity. I select these names to describe the principal influences or concerns of the successive eras as it affected our ritual. These ages are not firm divisions, but rather they overlap and blend into each other more as successive influences, each contributing something to our ritual heritage.

The Operative Age, as the name suggests, refers to that time when ritual was in the hands of operative Masons. No matter what your favorite theory about the ultimate origin of the fraternity might be, all agree that there was some connection with operative Masonry. And whatever the nature of that relationship might be, it is clear that the direct lineal ancestor of our ritual was worked in Scottish operative lodges in the late 1600's and into the early 1700's. This ritual was much simpler than ours, but it contained several crucial elements that mark it as definitely Masonic in the sense we know it today. These elements include the pillar words, an obligation to not reveal, the OB posture, the FPOF, and the rudiments of lodge form, contents, and symbolism. The operatives also gave us a legendary history and a reservoir of non-ritual lore that we drew upon in developing our ritual in successive ages.

The Tavern age refers to that period when speculative masons met in rented rooms of taverns to enjoy a feast and work a question and answer lecture punctuated by elaborate toasts. It was, if you will, the age of the table lodge. In this Masons were not terribly different from many groups of the 18th century that also had initiation ceremonies and met for the purpose of socializing over a feast. The first Grand Lodge was formed in this period, initially for the sole purpose of organizing an annual feast. Other ritual

developments of the age include the basic floor work and much of lodge imagery and layout that we use today. It was a fertile time for degree development. Such developments include the Master Mason degree and many degrees now used in the York Rite. Freemasonry also spread to France and continental Europe where it underwent further modification leading to the Scottish Rite degrees that we know today.

The Moralizing Age of the mid-18th century saw the introduction of moral symbolism and instruction into our ceremonies. Many existing symbols were extended to include moral and scientific lessons, and others simply invented. The imagery of Solomon's temple began to spread to EA and FC degree symbolism. Our lectures expanded accordingly, and morally oriented charges were introduced. While Masonry may well have been speculative for quite some time, it was in this age that our ritual itself became speculative in the way we understand the word speculative today. This expansion of the ritual also added greatly to the diversity of ritual contents and practices which had existed since the Operative Age. Additions and reinterpretations spread because they appealed to the craft at large. Even Grand Lodges in those days did not consider it their business to dictate to individual lodges how they should conduct their work, and especially did not dictate the symbolism or contents of the dialogue lectures.

The Age of the Lecturers saw a number of influential, self-appointed teachers of ritual promulgate their particular versions of the work, and generally raise the language of ritual to the level of elegance that we enjoy today. These men included Preston, Browne, and Finch in England; and Webb, Cross, and Morris in the United States. They legitimized and contributed to the new moralistic rituals, and inspired a desire for uniformity in ritual practice and symbolism. Since the ritual had expanded well beyond what most men could learn strictly mouth to ear, these lecturers began to record portions of it in code, particularly the lectures, and to publish monitors or guides to the work.

The Age of Standardization or Unity was principally marked by efforts – only partially successful – to create a uniform ritual. The principal branches of Masonry, the Antients and Moderns, were unified early in this period, both in England and the United States.

American Grand Lodges began to appoint Grand Lecturers and to adopt particular versions of ritual as official model rituals. In 1823 New Jersey adopted the Cross ritual as its official work, and appointed one of Cross' students, James Cushman, as our first Grand Lecturer in 1824. Reading between the lines of our official history, it took about half a century to finally make a single uniform ritual stick in all lodges. There were also sporadic attempts to create a uniform national ritual – often going hand in hand with efforts to create a national Grand Lodge. There were national Masonic Conventions, including the Baltimore Convention of 1843, which attempted to create a standard national ritual, but with very limited success. Masonic ritual reformers, notably Rob Morris with his conservator movement in the 1860's, continued to push for a uniform national ritual, but only succeeded in influencing the ritual of states whose grand lodges were just forming at the time. By the mid 1800's Masonic ritual in established American jurisdictions was, for all intents and purposes, the same as at the present day. But the addition of new states to the union with their own independent Grand Lodges led to the continuing establishment of slightly different rituals from the mix of practices new settlers brought from their places of origin.

The preceding overview gives a basic timeline of the key developments in ritual history. I am sure you will want to hear some illustrative examples of the changes in each age. And I have not yet touched on the reasons behind the changes. Also up to this point I have spoken about ritual as a single thing where in reality it has several parts. Each of these parts or classes has their own peculiar history.

As I see it, the three different classes of Masonic ritual are operational ritual, degree ritual, and lectures.

The first class of ritual, the operational ritual, most particularly consists of the opening and closing rituals, but also installations, lodge dedications, cornerstone layings, and funeral services. Opening ceremonies contain some of the widest variation in wording and procedures to be found in our ritual, preserving a wide variety of practices we have inherited from our forbears. I will not have time to discuss these tonight. But I will leave

you with a question to illustrate the point. At what point in our opening ritual is the lodge actually open? Consider that there are two different places where the master declares it open, and a third where all is complete and business can begin. Here is a hint. Our current opening ritual is a composite of several old opening procedures. Each of these three points were once independently used as “the point” when the lodge was open.

The second class of ritual is the degree conferrals proper, by which I mean the first section of the degrees as we perform them in New Jersey. These I will discuss presently and in some detail. But since nowadays we tend to think of lectures only as a part of the degree ceremonies, I have decided to emphasize the distinct nature of the third class of ritual, the Masonic Lectures, by discussing them separately and “out of order”, as it were.

One of the things that surprised me the most in my study of ritual history was the slow realization that the lectures are a distinct form of ritual, rather than simply a part of the degree ceremonies. In this day and age we tend to think of the degree ceremonies as the essential ritual of Freemasonry and the lectures as simply a part of the degree ceremonies. But in the Tavern Age, degree ceremonies were brief with a minimum of explanation, and only served to entitle a man to participate in the core of Masonry, which were the lectures. Both then and now, the lectures were the repository of Masonic lore and mysteries, including the symbolism of the preceding degree ceremony.

The table lodge meetings of the Tavern Age consisted of working a question and answer lecture – lecture was the word used at the time – punctuated by elaborate toasts, and often songs as well. The lectures were worked by the Master asking the questions and the brethren answering each in turn around the table. This, rather than shaping stone was considered to be the “work” of a speculative Mason while at labor in the lodge. As with any work, refreshment breaks are necessary, hence the toasts. The rehearsal of dialogue lectures was called a communication, since the secret lectures were “communicated”. This usage is the reason we today often call our meetings “communications”.

We are already intimately familiar with the lectures of this age. Our current long form proficiencies are no more than a portion of these catechism or dialogue lectures. We use them as proficiencies simply because a Mason needed to know them in order to answer properly in Lodge. The practice undoubtedly had its origin in the Operative Age since question and answer catechisms from that age do exist.

Since the catechisms were worked at every meeting the ability to give the correct answers was an additional proof of Masonic membership. Indeed a number of early dialogue questions were phrased as “catch questions” to trick impostors. One of my favorites was “how much money did you have when you were made a Mason?” The correct answer, of course, was “none at all.”

Let me repeat. The lectures were not the set-piece speeches, or narratives, that we use today in our degree ceremonies in New Jersey and many other places. Our current lectures are no more than the dialogue lectures with the questions removed or converted to transitional statements. A number of American jurisdictions retain some or even all of this older form in their ceremonies, and not just as proficiency exams. New York ritual, for instance, contains lectures very similar to our own. After these are given, the candidate is told “there is also a lecture associated with this degree” a portion of which he will have to learn to prove his proficiency. Then the question and answer is given as a dialogue between the master and the SD, or between some other designated brothers. Iowa, under the influence of Rob Morris who I mentioned earlier, gives lectures primarily in question and answer form interspersed with stretches of monitorial narrative as additional explanation. I will discuss how we came to change the form of the lectures after I have discussed the development of the degree ceremonies themselves.

But before moving on to the degrees, there is one last item relating to the lectures that I think you might find interesting. The importance of these lectures to early masons is further evidenced from one of the obligations of a Master of a lodge upon his installation. The new Master promises, “never to open or close the lodge without giving or causing to be given all or a suitable part of the lecture appropriate thereto.” The meaning of this

clause in the obligation poses a bit of a mind bender to us today. I have heard all sorts of forced and contorted explanations for this clause based on the way we currently do and use lectures. But its' meaning is perfectly clear once we know what our forbears meant by the term "lecture", and how it was used when that obligation was established. Just to reassure you that we still adhere to this point, however, I will mention that the lodge opening dialogue that includes "What first induced you to become a Master Mason?" was the beginning of the long-form Master Mason proficiency – in other words, the lecture – that we officially stopped using in the early 1970's. Since we no longer use the long-form MM proficiency, no New Jersey Mason raised in the past 40 years would have any way of knowing the source of this material. Also since we only open lodge on the MM degree – unlike most Masonic jurisdictions – we do not hear the EA or FC proficiency lecture in our lodge openings and therefore no longer make the connection between dialogue, lecture, and opening.

Now that we understand the lectures as something distinct from the degree ceremonies, we turn our attention to the degree ceremonies themselves. The central feature of the degree ceremonies from time immemorial has been the administration of an obligation and the investiture of those matters the candidate was obligated to keep and conceal, namely the means of proving himself a Mason. The earliest records of these rituals indicate that there was not much more than that involved in making a mason. The earliest description of degree ritual, a "making", is from England of the late 1600's. The ceremony was said to be "very dignified" and involved a reading – yes, reading – from "a large scroll which they have" along with an obligation agreeing to the articles and points contained in the scroll.

The scroll evidentially was a manuscript constitution, or what are called today the "Old Charges" or Gothic Constitutions. Over a hundred different examples of these manuscripts survive to the present day. These manuscripts contained a legendary history of Masonry, generally beginning with its invention by the pre-flood Biblical character Jabal, half-brother to Tubalcain, and continuing to its establishment in England under the Saxon king Athelstain. These manuscripts also contained a list of articles and points

governing the conduct of the craft, hence the name “constitutions”. The reading of this history evidently served the same function as the later lectures did. They gave some reason or background for the proceedings. The conferral of “secret” matters is not mentioned, but we may assume that this occurred since it is frequently remarked upon by non-Masonic sources of the period that Masons had mysterious ways of identifying each other not known to the general public.

A very different flavor of degree work was practiced north of the border in Scotland at about the same time. The Edinburgh Register House Manuscript of 1696 along with two other very similar documents of slightly later date describes in some detail the procedure for making an operative Mason. I use the word procedure rather than ceremony since the proceedings described have more the flavor of a fraternity hazing than a dignified ceremony.

The candidate is put “upon his knees” and “after a great many ceremonies to frighten him” he is threatened with death and damnation and then given the obligation. He is removed from the company with the youngest Mason, “where after he is sufficiently frightened with 1000 ridiculous postures and grimaces, He is to learn from the said mason the manner of making his due guard which is the sign and the postures and words of his entry.” He then returns to the lodge, and after making a “ridiculous bow”, proves his proficiency and is given the word.

This style of ceremony, while certainly strange to us today, is fairly typical for that time and place. The hazing, then called brothering, was the accepted Scottish practice when welcoming any new member to a work group or organization. Some echoes of this style ceremony are with us today in our preparation, reception, and obligation – and in some places even our raising – although they have been given serious and dignified symbolic meaning.

From these and other early documents, mostly dialogue lectures containing questions on the manner of making, it is apparent that some aspects of candidate preparation and

obligation posture we know today were already in use in Scotland by 1700, although how widespread is not known. These include the cable-tow (then described simply as a rope around the neck), kneeling on the left knee, and the position of the hands. The divestiture is documented in Scotland by the 1720's. It seems that some aspects of Scottish operative ritual practice, fortunately without the rough pieces, began to travel south to England in the late 17th century.

This southward migration is evidenced by one of the earliest English Masonic documents, the Sloane Manuscript #3329 dated to about 1700. It is said by the experts to reflect peculiarly Scottish terminology, indicating contact, if not actual borrowing. Other English Tavern Age records dating from 1700 to 1729 contain most of the rest of the missing pieces of the initiation procedure. Interestingly enough, English procedure then and now had a different posture for the obligation. Also, the cable tow was not a universal part of English work until much later. On the other hand, the use of the hoodwink; the divestiture; the procession around the lodge; the presentation of aprons (and gloves!); and placement in the NE corner all are first documented in English records, although that is not to say that these features necessarily originated in England. The initiation ceremony, both then and now, was the general model for passing and raising as well, with minor variations for each.

By the third decade of the 18th century all the basic points of a degree ceremony were in place, with a couple of exceptions, although they sometimes looked a bit different from the way we perform them today. The procession consisted only of a candidate and his conductor. The conductor rather than the candidate knocked at the door. The circumambulation made no stops in the south and west, and sometimes was only a simple advance from west to east between two rows of brothers. The hoodwink was sometimes removed before the obligation, and was only used in the EA degree. Finally, another difference in English work is that the lesson of the reception was included in the obligation posture. Two items considered essential in present day ritual had not yet been invented, namely the working tools, and the demand to teach an important lesson in charity. These appear later in the Moralizing age.

As I mentioned earlier, the Tavern age saw the development of other degrees. As many Masonic historians have pointed out, including Claudy in his blue books, at one time there were only two degrees, Apprentice and Craft or Fellow. The ERH of 1696 that I mentioned earlier (and which had not yet been discovered when Claudy wrote his blue books) uses the terms Fellowcraft and Master interchangeably. The two degrees' ceremonies were identical, with only a minor difference in the obligation. That manuscript also documents a peculiar embrace called the five points of fellowship as the particular sign of a fellowcraft. In fact, it was a common practice among speculatives later in the 18th century to confer both degrees the same evening. While the ERH describes masters and fellows as the same thing, other documents of the period reserve the term Master to refer only to the master of the lodge.

The first Masters degree conferral mentioned in a lodge minute book was in 1724. The first documentation of the actual contents of a masters degree, including the earliest documented raising, is found in the Graham manuscript dated 1726. The story behind this degree is nothing like what we know today. The Graham manuscript has Noah's body being raised by his three sons, Ham, Shem, and Japeth, who are looking for a magic word to keep "infernal squandering spirits" from shaking down the structures that Masons built. They decide that if they cannot find it, then the first word spoken would be a substitute.

The first documentation of a fully developed three degree system including the Hiramic legend pretty nearly as we know it today appeared four years later in 1730 with the publication of the exposure *Masonry Dissected* by Samuel Pritchard. This particular exposure is probably the single most significant publication in the history of Masonic ritual, both for the positive impact it had, and for the trouble it caused. It contained a complete dialogue lecture for all three degrees with some introductory discussion. A slightly earlier manuscript, *The Wilkinson Manuscript*, with very similar contents largely verifies the dialogue lecture it contains. *Masonry Dissected* was so complete that it was the last English language exposure to be published for a period of thirty years. It was

immensely popular, being reprinted in a dozen editions during the 1730's and 1740's, not so much because of sales to the general public, but because Masons themselves purchased it to use as a study guide. In this, it probably had much to do with the popularity of the Hiramic legend version of the Master Mason's degree, and is thought to have given certain stability to the ritual of the period when there was no standard work. The earlier version of the Master's degree featuring Noah did not disappear entirely, though. Some aspects of this degree survive in the Past Master's qualification, or as the English call it, the Inner Working. So in this sense, there are still two different Master's degrees in Craft Masonry.

No discussion of ritual history could be complete without some mention of the Antients and the Moderns. These were the two main branches of Masonry during the late Tavern Age and into the Moralizing Age, both in England and its North American Colonies, which later became the United States. A discussion of *Masonry Dissected* is the right place to begin the story. *Masonry Dissected* was apparently accurate enough that the premier Grand Lodge, the first grand lodge founded in London in 1717 and later called the Moderns, was so concerned about imposters passing themselves off as Masons and gaining admission to lodges (and possibly access to lodge charity funds), that they issued what may be their first ruling on matters of ritual, namely to switch the EA and FC words, among other changes. Until that point, GL did not consider themselves to be the arbiters or keepers of ritual. That was a matter for the craft at large, or individual lodges. That change, however, set off a chain of events that affects how we think of ritual to this very day, particularly in the US.

In the later 1730's and into the 1740's Masons from Ireland who had moved to England found themselves excluded from attending English Lodge meetings because of that change of words. In reality, this exclusion had more to do with a certain amount of social prejudice against the Irish, who also tended to be "clerks and tradesman" thus of a significantly lower social class than the general run of English Masons of that time, who tended to be upper middle-class professionals, government functionaries, wealthy upper class, or nobility. In 1751, after some years of such exclusion, these Irish Masons

organized a grand lodge of their own in London. Their particular point of pride was that they maintained what they thought were the old traditions, which in reality were simply the rituals forms of their native country. They nicknamed themselves the Antients and derisively referred to the adherents of the older English Grand Lodge as the Moderns because of their supposed ritual innovations. These nicknames stuck.

While the difference that caused this breach of brotherhood had at its core nothing to do with ritual, on the surface the issue appeared to revolve entirely around ritual. The idea that ritual purity is somehow the touchstone of Masonic legitimacy had its birth in this dispute, and is still with us today. It is the fundamental assumption behind attempts to impose absolutely uniform ritual practices. This notion was imported to this country along with Antient Masonry in the mid to late 18th century. Since American Freemasonry largely derives from the so-called Antients, including the Scottish and Irish, whose ritual was very similar to the English Antients, this idealization about ritual purity, or at least uniformity, became one of the peculiarities of American Masonry. This peculiar notion, along with the now established prerogative of Grand Lodges to be arbiters of ritual eventually led to the homogenization of ritual in most American Masonic jurisdictions later on in the Age of Standardization.

Some Masonic scholars, most notably Roscoe Pound in 1915, attributed the differences in ritual between American Masonic jurisdictions to the different mixes of Modern and Antient rituals, along with the occasional seasoning of French or German rituals. For nearly a century this has been the leading explanation for such differences, and is probably true so far as it goes. But it presupposes that the Antients and Moderns had absolutely uniform rituals as we understand uniformity today. My own reading of original sources leads me to believe that there was considerable variation in ritual practices among lodges of the same obedience. Moreover, this intramural variation had at least as much to do with State-to-State differences as the larger differences – which were actually few in number – between the Antients and Moderns.

I find it interesting that the Antients' focus on ritual purity did not stop them from making plenty of innovations on their own. The entire series of York Rite degrees up to the Royal Arch were devised by the Antients in the mid 18th century, and were even worked by them in regular lodges as well as in separate bodies. The Antients also gave us the working tools, the names of the ruffians, the emblems of the MM lecture, and most importantly used the term TGL to refer to the HB, S&C.

The Moralizing age began in the mid 18th century, and gave rise to further developments in ritual and symbolism among both Antients and Moderns. In examining any Masonic ritual material from the earliest up through Pritchard in 1730 you will be hard pressed to find any references to moral instruction or symbolism of any sort. There were a number of religious Biblical references of a distinctly Christian nature, which we no longer use. The Holy Bible, compasses and square respectively belonged to God, the Master, and the Fellow-Crafts, with no more symbolism than that. The smooth and rough ashlar were respectively for the Fellowcrafts to prove their jewels upon, and for the Apprentices to learn their work upon. Not even an intimation of a moral lesson is applied to the ashlar. There were no working tools. Jacobs ladder and the circle bound by parallel lines did not exist. All the early symbolism was entirely operative, self referencing, or sectarian religious in nature, except for a nod here and there to the virtues of secrecy and charity.

In examining the ritual changes in the Moralizing Age, I notice that as the moral symbolism developed, the sectarian religious symbolism diminished. But even while sectarian religious references became fewer, the number of historical Biblical references in Masonic ritual actually increased during this period, especially as Solomon's temple increasingly became to be considered as the origin of Masonry. There are some who suggest that this trend away from Christian ritual references was due to the development of a more Universalist and Enlightenment oriented attitude toward religion, perhaps even with the purpose of increasing non-Christian membership. But in my mind it could have been equally due to efforts to prevent religious arguments among various Christian denominations.

Impetus for the Moralizing Age began in the 1740's when there appeared a number of books and pamphlets written by speculative Masons expounding on possible moral symbolic meanings for Masonic artifacts and practices, and the general beneficial effects of Masonry. Others ruminated on the symbolism of Solomon's temple, and extended the story of Masonry and Solomon's Temple with other Biblical and extra-biblical references. Still others drew parallels with ancient beliefs and philosophies supposedly held by other Masonic characters of the past mentioned in the legendary histories found in the manuscript constitutions, or old charges. These books sold widely among Masons. Lodges often invited speakers on such topics to address the brethren. They proved to be quite popular. Undoubtedly such topics were discussed at meetings during dinner or breaks in the lectures. Eventually this new understanding of Masonic symbolism began to appear in the question and answer lectures, and from there, even extended into the degree work.

For instance, William Preston, the noted English lecturer reworked (with attribution) an earlier essay by a Scottish author and included it in his commentaries first published in 1772 under the title *Illustrations of Masonry*. Parts of this essay can now be found, almost verbatim, in the introduction to the Middle Chamber Lecture ("Masonry is understood under two denominations") and in the "G" lecture (Geometry, the first and noblest of the sciences...). This was never "mouth to ear" material, which is why it and similar types of material are found in plain language in our ritual cipher and lodge officers' manual. Likewise Preston's openly published descriptions of the senses, orders, and sciences are also contained almost verbatim in our present lecture.

That the moral dimension of our symbolism was spreading into our ritual is evidenced further in the first major exposure of ritual since Pritchard, namely *Three Distinct Knocks*, published in 1760. From this series of question and answer lectures, evidentially a description of the Antient or Irish work as practiced in the London area, we find that the Holy Bible, square, and compasses have finally acquired their familiar moral significance. Moreover, the EA working tools are seen for the first time, along with the now familiar moral lessons. The religious symbolism had not entirely disappeared, but

neither had the moral symbolism become as developed as we find today. Interestingly enough the Fellowcraft and Master Mason working tools are not mentioned in these lectures. Whether this absence is because they were not used or because of simple oversight is not known, but there is some suggestion that they might not have been invented by 1760.

It is known that the working tools were used by the Antients, but generally not by the Moderns. The working tools only became a standard part of English work with the union of the Antients and Moderns in 1813, and the subsequent rewriting of English ritual to satisfy the tastes of both parties – including undoing the word swap that caused all the fuss, I might add. The now United Grand Lodge of England largely adopted a slightly different suite of working tools, including the chisel, pencil, skerrit, and compasses, but no trowel. Use of the Trowel as a working tool does persist in English Masonry, however, being used in many old lodges in the west of England.

The last third of the 18th century saw the beginning of the Age of Lecturers, and with it further developments in Masonic symbolism as contained in the question and answer lectures. The earlier usage of the Antients had an Apprentice's lecture of three sections, namely the recapitulation of the ceremony, the symbolic reasons for the ceremony, and the form of the lodge. We continue these same basic sections in our lectures today, although in New Jersey we now merge together the first and second sections. In other American rituals, these three are sometimes maintained as separate sections. Beginning with William Preston, however, the lectures for each degree grew to seven or more sections with multiple clauses in each. The symbolism also became richer, and the density of the verbiage increased. Preston's lectures were still in question and answer form, but his questions were often mere prompts for long paragraphs of answer that sound more like the set-piece, narrative speeches used as lectures today in many places, including New Jersey.

William Preston's name often comes up in any discussion of Masonic Ritual. He was the first and perhaps most influential name of the Age of Lecturers. Preston was English, and

a member of the so-called Moderns, although he first took his degrees in an Antients lodge. Preston set about the task of perfecting the lectures, ultimately devising his own lecture system, which he advertised by publishing *Illustrations of Masonry* in several editions from 1772 through 1812. Preston's *Illustrations* included a great deal of commentary on the symbolism of Masonry that has since found its way into our lectures, one such example I have already mentioned.

It is frequently asserted that Preston invented nothing, that he merely assembled the best material from lodges all over the London area. In some respects, this is true. A number of questions and symbolic items found in Preston's lectures were last documented in the early and pre-grand lodge period over fifty years before. Evidently these items survived in some lodges. But it must be clearly understood that Preston usually mistook the later additions for the original material. Preston was alarmed by the "rude and imperfect state of the lectures" to use his exact words. He believed that the lecture questions and answers must have become corrupted since King Solomon's day. So he tended to choose the version with the most elegant phrasing or noble symbolic sentiment – in other words the more recent interpretations of the old symbols, as we have seen – which he further rearranged, polished, and sometimes expanded until the lectures were "restored" to a state he deemed worthy of King Solomon.

The leading American lecturer, as I mentioned earlier, was Thomas Smith Webb. In some quarters Webb is considered the father of American Masonic ritual. In the 1790's through the early 1800's Webb traveled widely as a Masonic lecturer, although his principal concern was to establish encampments of Knights Templars, and eventually became Grand Master of Rhode Island. He inspired many followers, and taught a version of provincial Antient ritual embellished with symbolism and phrasing borrowed from the English Modern, William Preston. In fact, in 1797 Webb published the first American Masonic monitor, which was largely an un-attributed borrowing from Preston's *Illustrations*. Webb is responsible for the large amount of Prestonian wording in our current FC lecture. His monitor, also titled *Illustrations of Masonry*, was the forerunner of all subsequent American monitors, including our own *Manual for the Use of Lodges*, or

lodge officer's manual. Jeremy Cross, whose ritual and monitor were adopted by New Jersey in 1823, was a student and close associate of Webb's.

The Age of Standardization or Unity begins with the union of the Antients and Moderns. In England they eventually merged to form the United Grand Lodge of England in 1813. By that time the social differences between the two obediences had essentially disappeared, and the difficulties of maintaining two competing Grand Lodges in the same territory became too great to sustain for either party. In The United States, this union effectively occurred a generation earlier in the 1780's after American political independence was won. But it occurred state by state in a piecemeal fashion, rather than as a coordinated event.

As I mentioned earlier, American Ritual is largely the work of the Antients. The reason being that the Moderns, given their still largely military, governmental, and higher class membership in the 1770's, tended to be Loyalists. The Antients tended to be Patriots. The Patriots ultimately won the war, and the Loyalists largely moved to Canada or back to England. Those few remaining Modern lodges and Provincial Grand Lodges eventually found their best option for survival was to join with the Antients. From that point Masonic ritual in the United States proceeded on its own separate course of development.

The final developments in the evolution of ritual on both sides of the Atlantic occurred during the Age of Standardization. These developments stem from the moralizing influences on the outward form of ritual, and not just its symbolism. As the moral pitch of the fraternity was raised in the moralizing age, many brothers became concerned that the table lodge form of meeting was prone to abuse in the matter of toasts. Strict sobriety as opposed to simple moderation was becoming viewed as an essential aspect of moral behavior. So as the freewheeling and hard-drinking 18th century gave way to the teetotal and high-tone Victorian age, the dialogue lectures and their natural home, the table lodge, also fell out of favor. Differing approaches to the elimination of this perceived vice from Masonic practices led to different forms of ritual practice on each side of the Atlantic, as well as the elimination of the dialogue lectures worked around the festive board.

Before we can understand the changes that occurred, we must first recognize how ritual was performed prior to these changes. In the late 1700's and up to the early 1800's the typical form of a Masonic degree night was as follows. The brethren assembled in their feasting room and opened the lodge. While seated at the table, the Master sat at the head of the table with the TGL on the table before him. Both Wardens sat at the other end of the table opposite the Master with their columns on the table in front of them representing the two pillars. Three candles were placed on the table either together near the TGL, or one each by the Master and Wardens. The table was usually decorated with two globes and various other tools and implements of Masonry. The other officers took their places at the table in roughly the same places relative to the Master and Wardens as we find them today.

If there were candidates that evening, they were prepared while the ritual space itself was prepared – if not already prepared in advance – either in that room, or increasingly in another room. The principle preparation involved drawing the symbolic lodge on the floor or spreading the floor cloth with that drawing, as well as the placement of candles and other articles. Some lodges even did their degree ritual around the table! Most typically, however, the degrees were conferred with all officers and brethren standing in their assigned places around the floor drawing. Standing rather than sitting for degrees was another incentive to keep degree ceremonies short.

The principal officers, the candles, and a table or chair holding the Bible were all relatively close together around and within the floor drawing. The candidates were then received, introduced, circumambulated, obligated, and invested. The symbolic floor drawing was then explained before it was washed out and the ceremonial room restored. The brethren returned to the feasting room while the candidate was re-invested with that of which he had been divested before joining the rest of the company.

Upon his return to the feasting room, the candidate was placed in the NE corner of the room, given a charge, and seated at the Master's right at the table. The Master presented

him with an apron and explained the working tools, after which a feast was served, the question and answer lecture worked, and toasts were drunk. The meeting was closed, symbolic items put away, and those who wished to continue their festivities in the company of their like minded brethren would stay and run their own separate tabs with the innkeeper. Such was a typical meeting in the late tavern age.

The elimination of drinking ritual involved both the removal of lodge meetings from taverns and the elimination of toasting or drinking during meetings. Both of these changes necessarily led to modifications, and hence differences, in the outward form of the rituals as well as lodge rooms layouts. Let me begin by discussing the impact on lodge room layouts.

Since there was a long tradition of having degree ceremonies in a different room from the festive board and lectures, it seemed a natural step to have the entire lodge meeting in a separate facility not connected with a tavern. This change required the introduction of seating in the lodge room, both for the brethren and the officers since nobody expected everyone to stand for the duration of an entire meeting. The position of seats duplicated as far as possible the arrangements formerly used when everyone stood during degree ceremonies, rather than while seated at the table. Differing interpretations of how a lodge symbolically represented by a floor drawing should be scaled up for a purpose built lodge room led to differences in lodge room arrangement. It is, if you will pardon the pun, a problem of Geometry.

So when you scale up the drawing to fill an entire room, where do you put everything? Do the candles go with the officers or with the table holding the TGL's? Moreover, does that table holding the TGL's go with the master to the east, or does it stay in the center of the room? Does a room adjoining the lodge mean that it should have its own separate entrance to the lodge room? Do you leave the principal officers slightly out into the room so that candidates can still walk behind them as they once did, or change the procession to walk inside the officers? If candidates walk inside the officers rather than behind them,

do you still have the candidates knock on the officers shoulders, or devise some other method for knocking?

In some jurisdiction, notably in the British Isles, the Wardens' stations generally protrude more into the lodge room allowing passage behind rather than being flush against the wall as we have them. This is particularly important for the Senior Warden since there is typically only one door to the lodge, usually either right behind the SW's station, or to his left (north). The Treasurer and Secretary sit side by side in the North, rather than flanking the Master in the East. English lodges do not have an altar. Obligations are taken instead at the master's pedestal where the TGL's are placed. Scottish lodges do have an altar in the center of the room.

Placement of candles also varies. In Massachusetts and most British jurisdictions, the candles are placed by the master and wardens, rather than by the altar. In England and some American jurisdictions an attempt still is made to have candidates "knock" on the shoulders of the Wardens during the circumambulation. This requires the Wardens to lean toward the candidates, or simply have the candidate touch the Wardens' extended hand. Most American jurisdictions have the conducting officer, usually one of the deacons, knock for the candidate by rapping on the floor with his long rod. (The short rods or "wands" often found in English lodges are unknown in US lodges.)

It seems that all possible combinations of lodge room arrangements have been tried, all of which can be rationalized by appeal to tradition, and in some cases, differences in symbolism. All of these differences arise from the geometrical difficulties of scaling up a floor diagram to fill a whole room. There is one universal advantage to having a dedicated ceremonial space, however, namely that all the symbolic items, from pillars to pavement, once represented only by a floor drawing or floor cloth, can now be physically represented in a lodge room. Moreover, there is no longer a table, so the distractions of the feasting table cannot intrude into the lodge meeting. This solved the "problem" of drinking during meetings. It introduced, however, a new problem of how to convey to the

new brother the necessary information contained in the dialogue lectures if the lectures could no longer be worked as they once were.

Two general approaches to this problem were developed, the English and the American. The English approach was to include more explanation in the degree itself, and de-emphasize the lectures. The standard ritual worked out between the Antients and Moderns when they merged to form the United GL of England in 1813 was just of this form. The narrative explanation of the “Form of the Symbolic Lodge” diagram was retained as the Tracing Board Explanation of each degree. By this time the floor diagrams were painted on framed Tracing Boards rather than drawn on the floor. No standardized lectures were established. Instead the lectures were assigned, appropriately enough, to the supervision of the Grand Steward’s Lodge – consisting of Past Grand Stewards – which never formally determined an official set of lectures.

Later English Grand Masters mandated that alcoholic beverages could not be consumed in tyled lodges, or while working Masonic Ritual. This was finally the death knell of English lectures. English Masons had to choose between Toasts or Lectures at their festive boards. They chose Toasts. Even to this day, English festive boards are not tyled, but the table arrangement is maintained and non-masons are excluded from the room while the ceremonial toasts are drunk with ritualistic (but not ritual) embellishments. The question and answer, or catethetical lectures remain a recognized part of English masonry, however, but are rarely worked, and even more rarely learned. Most English Masons have never heard them.

Americans took a different approach to the problem of what to do with the lectures. Instead of embellishing the degree conferrals with explanations and ignoring the lectures, we expanded, reformatted, and emphasized the lectures. The beginning and ending points of American lecture development are clear, but the details of the development process are not well documented. It seems likely that at first we simply worked the lectures in the lodge room as they would have been worked in a table lodge, but without the table and toasts. The lectures were expanded by the addition of monitorial (i.e. openly published)

material as further explanation for certain of the questions and answers, as I have previously described. As the lectures became longer it seems natural that they came to be delivered by trained lecturers rather than by all brothers in turn around the room. William Preston himself used designated speakers with his extensive lecture system beginning as early as the 1770's. Altogether this shift away from table lodge meetings did solve the perceived problem of drinking in lodge, but as with our English brethren, it appears to have made us much less interested in working traditional lectures. These longer and more specialized lectures eventually came to be worked only during degree nights. This method of work, namely catechism with monitorial elaborations performed by designated lecturers, is preserved in a number of American rituals.

The use of trained lecturers performing only on degree nights also may have led to the final reformatting of the lectures in many jurisdictions – including our own – as set-piece, narrative speeches addressed specifically to the candidate. These replaced the question and answer, or catechism lectures. We find in Morgan's exposure of 1827 – which started the so-called Morgan Affair – that both narrative speeches and dialogue lectures covering the same material were in use at the same time. So it appears that American narrative lectures must have developed sometime in the last decades of the 18th century or the first decade of the 19th century.

Although it is hard to say with certainty, but I suspect that narrative lectures developed as an expansion of the form of the lodge explanation, or the tracing board explanation as the English call it. Recall that this explanation was given before the floor diagram was washed out after degrees. This material was also a key part of the Q&A lectures from the earliest records. Indeed, it is necessary to include some explanatory speeches in the degree. But the exact contents of such speeches have varied over time and from place to place. At a minimum they would include the investiture of the means of identification and where appropriate, a description of Masonic Light. Explanation of the form of the lodge was also necessary since the symbolic lodge drawn on the floor had to be washed out immediately after the degree. But, everything that a candidate might see upon being brought to light, or experience as part of the degree itself, potentially could be included in

an explanatory speech. The only limitations were the ability of the Master, and the patience of the Candidate and the brethren who were standing the whole time while waiting for their feast in the next room. Even the form of the lodge lecture was necessarily brief. But since the lecture was delivered without so much demand on the limitations of physical comfort, much more detail and lengthy explanation could be included in lectures than were practical in explanatory speeches during the degrees.

With the degree and the lecture now being performed in the same room, there must have been a natural tendency to eliminate duplication in order to keep meetings a reasonable length. Since there was no longer a need to wash out the floor drawing in a fully outfitted lodge room, there was no need to retain the summary explanation in the degree, especially when a more detailed explanation would be given later as part of the lecture. Since there were now trained speakers who could give this part of the lecture as a speech, it made sense adapt the rest of the lecture as a narrative speech as well. In this way, all the material, both traditional and expanded, could be delivered more quickly and elegantly as speeches than as dialogue or catechism.

This is as far as I can take ritual history in broad terms. There are many details, each of which is an interesting and informative study by itself. But I have just given you the broad outline of Masonic ritual history as I have come to understand it from my study of the primary sources available to me. In the course of undertaking this study, I have learned some surprising things that disturbed my pre-conceived notions.

For one thing, I learned that for as far back as we have documentation, there has been variation in ritual. Even our earliest documents sometimes contain two or three different catechism lectures in the same manuscript. Practices were not absolutely uniform, and symbolism varied even more greatly. Strangely enough, up until the conflict between the Antients and Moderns, so one seemed to think twice about it. Variation in ritual was so firmly established from so early a time that a good case can be made for diversity in ritual being an unacknowledged landmark of the fraternity. This longstanding variation in ritual is a significant departure from all my previous assumptions.

I also learned that amid all the variation in ritual, there is a core of initiation procedures and symbolism contained in all versions of ritual. But much to my surprise I also found that this core is very small compared to the totality of ritual as practiced today. Despite our tradition of an unchanged ritual going back to the dawn of time, most of our ritual consists of innovations made between two and three hundred years ago. From what I can see, we would not want to return to the original core ceremonies as they existed before that period of innovation. That original ritual does not contain any of the moral or philosophical embellishments that make our current ritual so appealing to us today. This absence of moral teaching in early ritual is perhaps the biggest surprise of all. And it certainly goes against all our traditional assumptions as enshrined in the ritual itself – at least in the parts that were of later origin.

The insistence on uniformity was a pardonable misapprehension, I think, on the part of our forbears. In part it was born of a desire for unanimity and universality. But an understandable ignorance also had a part to play. Most of the documentation we now have regarding the earliest forms of Masonic ritual simply was not known in the early 19th century when the move to establish a uniform ritual began. Most of the private manuscripts only came to light in the 20th century, as did much of the earliest published material which lay long forgotten in newspaper archives or obscure corners of libraries until alert brothers recognized them while pursuing other matters. If all we had were just the four or five widely circulated exposures of the 18th century, we would never be able to piece together even this much of Masonic ritual history. So it is little wonder that our forbears in this country thought as they did.

Now, however, it appears that a centrally mandated, uniform Masonic ritual is itself an innovation. Moreover, as much as uniformity was intended as a way to preserve ritual, it turns out to have been as much a destroyer as a preserver of ritual traditions. The diversity of ritual from state to state in the US can now be seen as adding to our understanding of Masonry, rather than as a divisive force. Sadly we must still travel long distances to enjoy a different flavor of ritual, rather than simply to a different lodge in the

same area. The travel is well worth the effort, however, for those who wish to experience the universality of Masonry beneath the veil of differences in its' ritual.