

WHY OLD IS NEW & NEW IS OLD IN MASONIC RITUAL

How many Vermonters does it take to change a lightbulb? Several: one to change it and the others to talk about how much better the old one was. Vermonters love tradition and Vermont Masons love their traditional ritual. I have often heard the complaint among the Brothers that our current ritual is much altered from the pure ancient form of the degrees, and what a pity that is. My talk this evening will illustrate that not only is this not true, but the exact opposite of the truth.

As many of us know, our kind of Freemasonry began in Scotland when remnants of the Knight's Templar, fleeing from the Pope and French King, aided Robert the Bruce who was engaged in a long war with England. At the famous battle of Bannockburn fought on June 24th, St. John's Day, 1314, mounted Templar knights, in a surprise appearance, broke the English lines and gave the Scottish King one of the few victories the Scots were ever to enjoy. The Bruce in gratitude offered the Templars refuge, and incorporated their degrees into the old Masonic degree worked in the Lodge of Kilwinning, now numbered #0 to indicate its "immemorial" age. Thus to what has become our first degree was added what was eventually to become our Third degree, the Royal Arch degree, and the Order of the Temple.

In England, in the 1600's, as democratic ideas grew the people became unhappy with their Kings, who were the Stuarts, direct descendants of the line of kings founded by the Bruce of Scotland. In 1688 the last Stuart King, James, fled in secret on a fishing boat across the channel to France. Ultimately, the Dutch King William was imported who could not even speak English. The current line of Kings derives from this family, the Hanoverians. Many people bitterly resented the abolition of the true line of Royal blood, and for almost 100 years plotted to overthrow the foreigners, and return the Stuarts to power. This was also the time when Freemasonry was growing exponentially, and the lodges, with their tiled meetings, became perfect places to plot against the foreign King. There was, of course, much more to Masonry than political plotting, but to say such plotting did not exist in the lodges would be naive. The Hanoverians looked upon the Masons as a dangerous rival political force, yet the popularity of the Lodges made their suppression difficult. Their solution was to create a rival "official" Masonry, and so, in 1717, members of the aristocracy loyal to the King created what they called a "Grand Lodge" claiming authority and control over all Masons everywhere, and declaring that without a charter from them, they were not Masons and they could not meet! Naturally, all hell broke loose. Rival "Grand Lodges" were formed, the so called "immemorial" lodges refused to surrender authority to the London Grand Lodge, and the practice of "making" and "unmaking" Masons of various allegiances was begun. That is why there is that language about "irregular lodges" in our Third degree obligation.

After a final invasion of the kin and partisans of the old Stuart line, together with French troops, was defeated in 1745, their side collapsed and the old cause was lost forever. Eventually, it was decided to make it a rule that Masonry could never be involved in politics, and that's why you cannot discuss politics in our lodges even today. With the political division removed, the rival Grand Lodges began to talk truce and were finally united in 1813.

The resultant system was much changed in the long negotiations, and many details and forms of the old ceremonies were altered or lost. That is why, if you visit old England today, you would not recognize the Masonic ritual you might see.

However, in America, Masonry was well established long before the erection of the London Grand Lodge of 1717. Our ritual basically came from traveling lodges of Irish and Scots serving in the British army and navy. Here in Vermont, John Barney regularized the ritual by order of the Grand Lodge session of 1817. That ritual was derived from Thomas Webb, and greatly predated the era of the Modern London Grand Lodge. Besides, when the war of Independence came, the Hanoverian style Masons, who were mostly rich aristocrats, fled back to England. Those old degrees, written down by brother Samuel Wilson upon the dictation of old John Barney himself in 1825 became our State's "Black Book." The original manuscript is in the vault at the Grand Lodge office. The oldest Vermont ritual book I possess is from the year 1866. It is identical, word for word, with the ritual used today. Moreover, Masons from Vermont who have traveled to Scotland and have sat in the old mother lodge Kilwinning #0, report that although the ritual there is not word for word the same as ours, yet it is so similar that whole sections are identical. However, if you travel up into Canada, you will find the ritual in the English speaking lodges different from our own. This is because their ritual is based upon the Modern and altered British system. For instance, besides having a Junior Deacon as we do they also have an Inner Guard, a position dating from the Union of 1813 in London.

So, our ritual work in Vermont has not only not been changed, but represents some of the oldest Masonic work known to exist. It has remained unchanged because Vermonters do love tradition, and have resisted outside influences and innovations. Even errors of grammar, such as "Give it me" when asking for the token's name, have been retained.

And this is why, for Masonic ritual, ours in the new world, and especially in New England, is the old ritual, and the ritual worked in the Old World is the new.

Thank you
Eric Ginette
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