

Historic Precedent for the Observant Lodge

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The *observant* Lodge is marked by several characteristics that distinguish it from other Lodges: Dress, decorum, an intentional initiatory process, excellence in ritual and floorwork, no presumed progressive line, intellectual labor and contributions from all members, and dues structure to accommodate these.

Dress and decorum is paramount. The *magnum opus* of Freemasonry is the symbolic smoothing of the allegorical ashlar; it is important work, and we ought to dress and conduct ourselves with the correct reverence. All members are expected to come attired in dark suits or tuxedos, and all officers wear tuxedos. The solemnity that exists within an observant Lodge is essential in creating the atmosphere necessary for self-change. The ritual and floorwork are the medium through which the teachings of the Craft are principally taught. Anything short of excellence in this regard is to rob our candidates and ourselves of the Light of Freemasonry. As Bro. Albert Mackey once stated, “The ultimate success of Masonry depends on the intellect of her disciples.” It with this concept in mind, that every member of an observant Lodge is expected to make regular demonstrations of his Masonic scholarship and developing insight. The dues are set at a certain rate, so that the energies of the Lodge are not distracted by fundraising, and we can focus on the true Labors of the Lodge.

Some extant Lodges have some of these characteristics. Some extant Lodges engage in some of these practices. An observant Lodge embraces all of these, and there is currently no Lodge within the jurisdiction of the Most Worshipful Grand Lodge of Vermont that does so.

When discussing these sorts of Lodges, the term “traditional” is often used. This raises the question: if the practices of an observant—or *traditional*—Lodge are beyond the experience of any contemporary Masons within this Grand Jurisdiction, then what “tradition” are you citing? The answer lies in some of the earliest writing of the Grand Lodge era, and in the records of Vermont Masonry in the 1800’s. Here are some examples:

Decorum

The first major writing to come out of Speculative Masonry was the *Constitutions of the Free-Masons, Containing the History, Charges, Regulations &c. of the most Ancient and Right Worshipful Fraternity*. Commonly know as “Anderson’s *Constitutions*”, this 1723 document provides the basis for all Grand Lodges and Lodges that came after.

Charge VI is entitled, “Of BEHAVIOUR”, and “In the Lodge while Constituted,” it reads:

You are not to hold private Committees, or separate Conversations without Leave from the *Master*, nor to talk of anything impertinent or unseemly, nor interrupt the *Master* or *Wardens*, or any Brother speaking to the *Master*: Nor behave yourself ludicrously or jestingly while the *Lodge* is engaged in what is serious and solemn; nor use any unbecoming Language upon any Pretence whatsoever, but to pay due Reverence to your *Master*, *Wardens*, and *Fellows* and put them to worship.¹

Jachin and Boaz, the 1762 exposure, nicely captures how this Charge was applied within the Lodge room:

Master: “This Lodge is open, in the name of Holy St. *John*, forbidding all Cursing, Swearing, or Whispering, and all profane Discourse whatever...”²

This expectation was captured in the “Charge on Masonry” delivered to the newly-Initiated, and printed in 1769—a version very nearly identical to the Charge delivered in contemporary Lodges in Vermont. “In all regular meetings of the fraternity,” Brethren were admonished “to behave with due order and decorum.”³

These were still the expectations in 1772, when Brethren were advised:

No private committees are to be allowed, or separate conversation encouraged, the Master or Wards are not to be interrupted, or any brother speaking to the Master, but the brethren are to observe due decorum, and under no pretence to use any unbecoming language, but pay a proper deference and respect to the presiding officers.⁴

Some Brethren today assert that because early Lodges met, often, in taverns and public houses, those assemblies were therefore social gatherings, lacking in any more noble or glorious motives. It was precisely this false assumption that led one Brother to write, in 1768, “Besides! our meting at the houses of publicans, gives is the air of a *Bacchanalian* society, instead of that appearance of *gravity* and *wisdom*, which our order *justly* requires.”⁵

In Vermont, the motivating sentiment was echoed, 130 years later. Then-Grand Lecturer, later-Most Worshipful Grand Master, Bro.: S. W. Nay, addressed the Brethren assembled for the 1892 Grand Communication, stating, “We need fear no ill results, when the general tone of the Lodge room is elevated and dignified.”⁶

Dress

If membership in the Craft is a privilege, and if the labors of the Lodge are important, and if we are truly “under solemn obligation to ever be reverent to God and to seek to emulate the perfection of the divine Creator⁷,” then it stands to reason that we would want to dress for the occasion.

In 1744, in Dublin, the parading Brethren of the Grand Lodge of Ireland and subordinate Lodges “made a very fine appearance, most of them having new Cloaths proper for the solemn Occasion” wearing “their Aprons, White Gloves, and other parts of the *Distinguishing* Dress of that Worshipful Order.”⁸

Various prints, etchings, and other works of art from the 1700's—from England, France, Germany, and elsewhere—all depict Masons elegantly dressed in the formal wear of the era.⁹ Contemporary Craftsmen can honor this tradition by dressing in the formal wear of our time.

Chamber of Reflection

The Chamber of Reflection is a room into which the Candidate—prior to entering the Lodge room—is placed for a time prior to his Initiation ritual. The process lends itself to quiet contemplation and introspection, as the man seeking admission considers his life, his values, his motives, etc. As Bro.: Gabon Gaedicke wrote, “It is only in solitude that we can deeply reflect upon our present or future undertaking, and blackness, darkness, or solitariness, is ever a symbol of death. A man who has undertaken a thing after mature reflection seldom turns back.”¹⁰

There are some variations on the specifics of the Chamber. In English and French Lodges, a Candidate was placed in a room, in darkness, and allowed time to contemplate his approach to the west gate. References are found in French exposures in 1737, 1744, 1747, and 1751¹¹. A 1762 English exposure described a hoodwinked Candidate left “to his Reflection for about half an Hour. The Chamber is also guarded within and without, by some of the Brethren...”¹² A 1777 exposure notes that the Candidate is told, “it is still in your power to go through with the ceremony, or to relinquish it; I leave you to your reflections.”¹³ In Russian lodges of the 18th century, this room was known as the “black little temple” and was the place wherein the inner virtue was plumbed¹⁴

There is some suggestion that the Chamber of Reflection was in use in Vermont Lodges in the beginning decades of the 19th century. The cover of the 1831 *Vermont Anti-Masonic Almanac* depicts what any Freemason could identify as a Lodge of Entered Apprentices. In the background of this illustrated Lodge room is a closet containing a human skeleton. Such imagery is certainly in keeping with other depictions of the Chamber of Reflection¹⁵.

Progressive Line

An observant Lodge presumes no progressive line. Again from Anderson:

IV. Of MASTERS, Wardens, Fellows, and *Apprentices*.

All Preferent among *Masons* is grounded upon real Worth and personal Merit only... no *Master* or *Warden* is chosen by Seniority, but for his Merit.¹⁶

Dues

As stated above, an observant Lodge is primarily concerned with the improvement of self via a specific form of personalized Masonic expression. Fund raising would distract from that, and so observant Lodges tend to have a dues structure that avoids such division of energy. Also, observant Lodges are designed to have low membership; the dues structure is designed to off-set this financial disadvantage.

When considering dues, it helps to consider Vermont Lodges from the mid-1800's. For instance, in 1824, Social Masters Lodge of Williamstown, had an E.:A.: fee of \$10.00 and a M.:M.: fee of \$3.00¹⁷. In today's dollars, that equates to a \$205.82 Initiation fee and a \$61.74 Raising fee. Additionally, in 1878, at Mount Anthony Lodge No. 13, Bennington, the fees for the Degrees were \$10, \$5, and \$10, respectively¹⁸. In today's dollars, that equates to a total of \$586.27.

Agape

One contemporary view of 18th century Freemasonry is that the in-Lodge experience and the festivities of post-Lodge dinner were somehow conflated; the argument follows, then, that there is no need for an agape, because the Communication was where the fun occurred. There is documentation that demonstrates a clear division.

The dinner follows the Labor, and fellowship follows solemnity. This is the same today as it was in 1725 when, after the “Mystical Ceremonies of the Grand Lodge which are held so sacred” the assembled Brethren had a great feast with “entertainment”, “Huzzas”, and songs¹⁹. This is also shown in a song from c. 1736:

The world is all in darkness,
About us they conjecture,
But little think
A song, and drink
Succeeds the Mason's lecture²⁰

This verse presents a clear delineation between the in-Lodge labors, and the fellowship to follow.

Exposures of the day highlight this practice as well. After a Candidate was made a Mason, he was taught the steps, given instruction, entrusted with an apron, then “all return to the Table to regale themselves,” and toasts and songs ensue²¹.

This was still the custom in 1772. The Grand Gala in Honour of Freemasonry, held on May 21st of that year, began with various lectures and orations delivered. Once the Lodge was closed, the Brethren “adjourned to supper, an elegant entertainment...and the evening was concluded with the greatest joy and festivity”²²

These concepts—no way exhaustive in their listing above—represent a form of Masonic expression prevalent in the earliest stages of the Grand Lodge era; the “primitive luster”²³ as it was described by Bro.: Charles Leslie. By reestablishing ourselves by this early model, we can contrive, support, and adorn a contemporary form of Masonic expression that will bring us again to Masonry's “truly divine”²⁴ source.

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- ¹ Anderson's Constitutions of 1723. Masonic Services Association of the United States reprint. (1924). pp. 83-4 (pp. 53-4 of original text)
- ² Jachin and Boaz; or, an Authentic Key to the Door of Free-Masonry, (1762). W. Nichol: London (p. 6)
- ³ "A Charge on Masonry" (1769), reprinted in Preston, William. Illustrations of Masonry. London (1772). p. 196
- ⁴ "Grand Gala in Honour of Free Masonry. May 21, 1772", from Preston, William. Illustrations of Masonry. London (1772). (pp. 5-6)
- ⁵ Letter from Bro.: James Galloway to Bro.: Wellins Calcott, October 01, 1768, printed in Calcott, Wellins. A Candid Disquisition of the Principles and Practices of the Most Ancient and Honourable Society of Free and Accepted Masons London (1769) p. 118.
- ⁶ Proceedings of the M.W. Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of the State of Vermont at its One Hundredth Annual Communication Held in Burlington June 14th and 15th, A. D. 1893, A. L. 5893. Burlington: Free Press Association (1893). Appendix p. 10.
- ⁷ "Middle Chamber Lecture", contemporary Vermont working
- ⁸ The Dublin Weekly Journal, June 26, 1725. p. 52
- ⁹ See MacNulty, W. Kirk Freemasonry: Symbols, Secrets, Significance. Thames & Hudson Ltd: London (2006) pp. 93, 94, 155, 163, 172, 173, and 278.
- ¹⁰ Mackey, Albert. An Encyclopedia of Freemasonry. Vol 1. Masonic History Company: New York. (1913) p. 141.
- ¹¹ Carr, Harry, Ed. Early French Exposures. The Quator Coronati Lodge No. 2076: London (1971). Various
- ¹² Jachin and Boaz; or, an Authentic Key to the Door of Free-Masonry, (1762). W. Nichol: London (p. 7)
- ¹³ Wilson, Thomas. Solomon in all his Glory: Being a True Guide to the Utmost recesses of Free-Masonry (1777) p. 6
- ¹⁴ Smith, Douglas. Working the Rough Stone. Northern Illinois University Press: DeKalb (1999). p. 98
- ¹⁵ See MacNulty, W. Kirk Freemasonry: Symbols, Secrets, Significance. Thames & Hudson Ltd: London (2006) p. 159 and p. 256; and Allyn, Avery A Ritual and Illustrations of Freemasonry, accompanied by numerous engravings, and a key to the Phi Beta Kappa. London: William Gowans (1853) p. 206a, for examples.
- ¹⁶ Anderson's Constitution of 1723 reprint (1924) p. 81 (p. 51 of original text)
- ¹⁷ Martin, Palmer. "The Workings of an Early Vermont Lodge". Taken from Transactions of the Vermont Lodge of Research No. 110, vol. 1 (2000). P. 15
- ¹⁸ By-Laws of Mt. Anthony Lodge, No. 13 F. & A.M., Bennington, Vermont. Chas. A. Pierce & Co., Printers (1878). p 15.
- ¹⁹ The Dublin Weekly Journal, June 26, 1725. p. 52
- ²⁰ "A Collection of Songs to be Sung by Free-Masons" p.6, from Spratt, Edward. The New Book of Constitutions of the Most Ancient and Honourable Fraternity of the Free and Accepted Masons. Grand Lodge of Ireland (1738)
- ²¹ Jachin and Boaz; or, an Authentic Key to the Door of Free-Masonry, (1762). W. Nichol: London (pp. 12-3)
- ²² Preston, William. Illustrations of Masonry. London (1772). Pp. 50-51
- ²³ Leslie, Charles. "A Vindication of Masonry", as quoted in Preston's Illustrations. (p. 84).
- ²⁴ *ibid*