

WEBB'S AMERICAN RITUAL

The first thirteen Grand Lodges had been organized and were using rituals which were not only divergent among the different states but among the lodges of each state.

Itinerant lecturers such as Barney, Cushman, Fowle, Wilson, Vinton and Snow traveled widely lecturing and conferring side degrees until the middle of the 19th century. Each lecturer used his own style and source material.

A common unified ritual could probably only have been established and maintained by a Nation General Grand Loge. But American Freemasons have always resisted that idea.

There have been several attempts to promote uniformity of the ritual. The most notable was the Baltimore Convention of 1843. John Marshall and Henry Clay made a serious attempt to establish a National Grand Lodge in 1822 but Grand Lodges turned a deaf ear on the idea. Rob Morris also sought to unify the American ritual. He eliminated what he considered to be errors in Webb's work and published a small volume called *MNEMONICS* in cipher which contained the three degrees in 1858. He too failed.

It is unlikely that there will ever be a uniform ritual in the United States. However, this does not seem to have caused any great inconvenience. In fact one finds that by visiting lodges in various jurisdictions that the work of other jurisdictions is interesting and some times better then the work in our own jurisdiction.

For well over 200 years American Freemasonry has relied on a ritual crafted largely by Thomas Smith Webb. Even though he had an enormous influence on our ritual, as well as that of the Royal Arch and Knights Templar, parts of his life are poorly documented and he is relatively unknown to most of us.

Thomas Smith Webb was born Oct 30, 1771 as the sixth child of Samuel and Margaret Webb. At the age of 15 he graduated from the Boston Public Latin School in 1786 and became apprenticed to a printer and bookbinder. By 1790 he moved to Keene, NH and became a bookbinder and stationer. The records of Rising Sun Lodge show that he was initiated an Entered Apprentice on Dec. 24, 1790 at a cost of £ 3-6. On Dec. 27 he was passed to the degree of Fellow Craft and raised to the degree of a Master Mason. Immediately he was appointed steward. This was in a span of only three days!

On July 6, 1791 records show Bro. Webb requested that he be discontinued as a member. On Aug. 13 he was readmitted. This sequence happened again in Mar. 1792. Why Webb would disassociate himself from Rising Sun Lodge on two occasions has never been fully explained. A partial explanation may lie in the fact that the Grand Secretary of The Grand Lodge of New Hampshire wrote in 1889 that the charter of the Lodge was arrested in 1805 because of many glaring, flagrant and insufferable offenses, errors and irregularities For one thing Webb was only 19 years and two months old at the time he received the degrees.

Next he moved to Boston and opened a book store, stationary and bookbinding establishment. After a year he gave up the business and moved to Hartford, Conn. and formed a partnership to manufacture wall paper. The partnership was quickly dissolved.

Webb then moved to Albany, NY. There his business and book store prospered. In Dec 1793 he was elected secretary of Union Lodge No. 1. Webb and others wanted a Lodge in which the Royal Arch degree could be conferred so he helped form Temple Lodge in Sept. 1796 and was its Senior Warden. He became Master on Dec. 13, 1797.

Webb married Patty Hopkins in 1797. She died in 1807, leaving four children. In 1808 he married Patty's sister, Mehitable.

Again, he moved. This time to Providence, RI where he opened a book and wallpaper store in 1799. Webb affiliated with St. John's Lodge No. 1. He was among those who revised the Constitution of The Grand Lodge of Rhode Island in 1801. Even though he had not held office in St. John's Lodge he was elected Junior Grand Warden of the Grand Lodge of Rhode Island in 1802 and Senior Grand Warden in 1803. On June 6, 1813 he was elected Grand Master. He declined re election in 1815.

Grand Master Webb presided over an extraordinary communication of the Grand Lodge of Rhode Island. On Oct. 3, 1814 a large number of Rhode Island and Massachusetts Masons marched and built a fort called "Fort Hiram" for the defense of Rhode Island. It was presented as a gift to the governor. This

feat of operative masonry is remarkable when the public controversy over the War of 1812 is considered. Webb was able to bring men of divergent views together through out his Masonic career because he knew that a leader must get things done through other people.

For several months he traveled through out Ohio and Pennsylvania on Templary and personal business affairs. But his business enterprises suffered severe set backs and his financial straits were dire.

Sadly, he died on July 6, 1819 at Cleveland Ohio, probably as a result of a cerebral hemorrhage and was buried with Masonic rites. He was re-interred in Providence, RI with Masonic rites by the Grand Lodge of Rhode Island. Again, in 1862 he was re- interred at the Thomas Smith Webb Memorial in Providence.

His role in the structure and ritual of the Royal Arch and the Knights Templar were very significant. But, that is for another time.

Webb's most remarkable and extraordinary achievement was the publication of *The Freemasons Monitor, or, Illustrations of Masonry* in two parts first printed in Albany for Spencer and Webb in 1792. This was the first book to include seven degrees. Webb it clear that this book wasn't only for Masons, but for any one else interested in the society.

Webb sought to embellish, abbreviate and rearrange William Preston's *Illustrations of Masonry*. He knew Preston's original ritual was far to long. Indeed the entire Preston ritual has never been used anywhere. He gave Preston full credit for the ritual of

the first three degrees. Webb's reorganization and adaptation of Preston's lectures became the foundation of the ritual in most of the United States, selling more than 16,000 copies in 10 years. The "Monitor" went through eight editions in his life time.

No Webb texts appeared for thirty years as a result of the Morgan affair. In 1858 and 1859 editions revised by Enoch Terry Carson, Rob Morris and George W. Chase were published. All three were re-issued repeatedly and were explicitly said to be "compiled from Webb." It was clear that in one form or another Webb's "Monitor" has proven useful to American Masonry for over 200 years.

Adapted for the Grand Junction Scottish Bodies from:

1. Webb, T. S., *The Freemasons Monitor, or, Illustrations of Masonry in two parts*, facsimile reprint of the first edition, published in Albany, NY, by Spencer and Webb. 1797, The Masonic Book Club, v 27, 1996
2. Coil, H. W., *Conversation on Freemasonry*, Transactions of The Missouri Lodge of Research, v 32, p 98, 1979
3. Bullock, S. C., *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry And The Transformation of The American Social Order 1730-1840*, The University of North Carolina Press, 1996