

The Convention That Changed The Face Of Freemasonry

By Allen E. Roberts

We are indebted to Wor. Brother Roberts, a noted Masonic scholar and author, for accepting the challenge of preparing this Short Talk Bulletin. It is another example of his concern for the work of the Masonic service Association.

For more than one hundred forty years many Freemasons have been misinformed. They have not been told the full story of one of Freemasonry's most important events.

This story starts in December, 1839. It began with a resolution adopted by the Grand Lodge of Alabama, which requested all Grand Lodges to send a delegate to the City of Washington on the first Monday in March, 1842, "for the purpose of determining upon a uniform mode of work throughout all the Lodges of the United States and to make other lawful regulations for the interest and security of the Craft." (The emphasis is mine, for this indicates what I mean when I say we have been misinformed.)

The Convention was held on March 7, 1842, "in the Central Masonic Hall at four and a half and D Streets N.W." Ten Grand Lodges were represented. And these representatives refused to seat a delegate from the Grand Lodge of Michigan, declaring that it had not been established under constitutional principles. The report was made by Charles W. Moore, Chairman of Credentials Committee and Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts. The Convention upheld his report.

After due deliberation, it was concluded that not enough Grand Lodges were represented, and there was not enough time to formulate a uniform ritual that would be acceptable to all Grand Lodges. Differences of opinion among the committee selected to develop a uniform mode of work were too many and not reconcilable. The Convention voted to request each Grand Lodge to appoint some well-versed Mason and style him as a Grand Lecturer to report to a Convention to be held the following year.

The report of another Committee was to have important, immediate, and far reaching effects on the Grand Lodges of the country. The "Committee on General Regulations Involving The

Interests and Security of The Craft" reported in several areas. It recommended that the Representative System "already adopted by some of the Grand Lodges" be extended to all Grand Lodges. To protect the Fraternity from unworthy men claiming to be Masons, the Committee recommended that "certificates of good standing of visiting Brethren who are strangers" be made available by the Grand Lodge to which they belong. "These certificates will not only shield the Institution," said the committee, "from the undeserving, but will furnish the widow and orphans of the deceased Brethren the best evidence of their claim upon the Fraternity."

This Committee also considered as "reprehensible" the practice "of receiving promissory notes for the fees for conferring Degrees, instead of demanding the payment thereof before the Degrees are conferred."

The Committee considered it an "impropriety" to transact "business in Lodges below the Degree of Master Mason, except as such that appertains to the conferring of the inferior Degrees and the instruction therein." It credited the Grand Lodge of Missouri for bringing this to the attention of Freemasons everywhere. The Committee went on to say "Entered Apprentices and Fellow Crafts are not members of Lodges, nor are they entitled to the franchises of members."

The suspension of a Mason for non-payment of dues was also considered by the Committee. It believed that uniform legislation should be adopted by the Grand Lodges to protect the Fraternity.

It wasn't long before several Grand Lodges changed their laws to conform to the recommendations of this Committee. Certificates or cards were issued by Grand Secretaries to members of Lodges. And Grand Lodges ordered lodges to set cash fees for conferring degrees. Representatives were appointed by some Grand Lodges that had never done so before. And many Grand Lodges changed from conferring all business in the Entered Apprentice Degree to that of the Master Mason Degree.

Maryland was one Grand Lodge that acted almost immediately on these suggestions. on May 16, 1842, it voted to elect one Grand Lecturer to attend the conference in 1843. It ordered the Grand Secretary to procure certificates to issue to Master Masons in good standing. It ordered all Lodges to conduct their business in the Master Mason Degree. It said "that when a Mason is suspended for any cause whatever, he is for the time of such suspension debarred from all rights and privileges of the order."

In 1842, some Lodges in Virginia started conducting their business in the Master Mason Degree. So it went over the next several years, but it was as late as 1851 before the Grand Lodge of Maine changed from working or conducting its business in the First to that of the Master Mason Degree.

It might be well to consider why some of the leaders of Freemasonry were concerned about the looseness of the ritual, as well as many other facts of the Fraternity.

Looking back to the year 1826, and the two decades that followed, it is found that in 1826, one William Morgan, who had purported to be a Freemason, disappeared. Freemasons were accused of murdering him, although there has never been any evidence that he was harmed in any way. He merely disappeared. This set off a hue and cry against Freemasonry. In many instances, Grand Lodges could not find a quorum to meet. Lodges turned in their charters by the hundreds. Freemasons quit by the thousands. Freemasonry was in deplorable condition.

During this period many of the ritualists and the men who had been dedicated to the principles of Freemasonry were lost to the Craft. Many died. Others quit because of the persecution handed down to their families because they would not renounce their membership in the Order. For these and various other reasons, Masonic Lodges were not operating anywhere near their capacity.

This was the state of affairs in the late 1830s, when Alabama called for a Convention to rectify many of the things that had gone awry. These were some of the things causing the Convention meeting in Washington to make the recommendations it did. These were some of the things carried into the Baltimore Convention of 1843. The Convention which we have heard so much about.

The ritual in its various forms did take much of the time of those attending the Baltimore Convention from May 8 to 17, 1843, meeting in the Masonic Hall on Saint Paul Street with sixteen of the twenty-three Grand Lodges in the United States represented. But many hours were taken to discuss the several points brought out during the convention held in Washington. And it approved everything that had been accomplished in the District.

The evening session was opened with the address of the President of the Convention, John Dove of Virginia. His opening remarks stated the purpose for the Convention: "For the first time in the Masonic history of the United States of North America, the Craft have found it necessary and expedient to assemble by their representatives, to take into consideration the propriety of devising some uniform mode of action by which the ancient landmarks of our beloved Order may be preserved and perpetuated, and by which posterity in all times to come may be enabled to decide with certainty upon the pretensions of a Brother, no matter in which section of our blessed and happy land he may reside; and, finally, and we hope no distant date, to transfer those inestimable privileges to our Brothers throughout the Masonic World." Dove's statement shows that much more than the ritual was involved.

The following day, May 9, the "Committee on the General Object of the Convention" submitted its report. It said: "The objects of the Convention are two-fold, viz.: I. To produce uniformity of Masonic Work; II. To recommend such measures as shall tend to the elevation of the Order to its due degree of respect throughout the world at large."

Four standing committees were appointed:

1. On the work and lectures in conferring Degrees.
2. On the Funeral Service.
3. On the ceremonies of Consecration and Installation.
4. On Masonic Jurisprudence.

It is interesting to note the prominent Masons who were appointed to the Committee on Work. John Dove, at the insistence of the Convention, became the Chairman. John Barney of Ohio, S.W.B. Carnegy of Missouri, Charles W. Moore of Massachusetts, and Ebenezer Wadsworth of New York were the other members.

On the morning of May 10, this Committee recited the lecture of the First Degree. The Convention adopted the work of the Committee by a vote of fourteen to one. Ebenezer Wadsworth of New York, cast the dissenting vote. The following day, the Committee reported "on the opening and closing of ceremonies of the First Degree" and their work was accepted by the Convention. Then the Chairman of the Committee, John Dove, assisted by Charles Moore, reported the lecture of the Second Degree. This work was also accepted by the Convention. But evidently Ebenezer Wadsworth was not happy with the work that had been accepted by the Convention. He "requested to be excused from serving longer on the Committee on Work." He was excused and Brother Edward Herndon, of Alabama, substituted.

At the Friday morning session, "the opening work of the Third Degree was accepted by the Convention with a vote of twelve to one "with New York dissenting."

On Monday morning, May 15, the following was reported: "The undersigned Committee on the Dedication, Consecration and Installation of Lodges, etc., having had the several subjects submitted to them under consideration, beg leave respectfully to report that they have examined and carefully compared all the various authors and systems which they have been able to obtain, and present the following, viz.:

"That the forms in the 'Monitor,' under the authorship of M.W. Thomas S. Webb, republished in 1812, possesses the least faults of any which have been before them, and has a high claim to antiquity, and having been in general use as a standard work for nearly half a century, possess no errors of material as to require alteration, except as follows."

There followed six minor changes that it recommended be made, three of them in the Installation Ceremony.

Concerning the "Certificates of Good Standing," the Convention said that the Washington Convention of 1842 earnestly recommended to the consideration of the Fraternity "such Certificate, and where it has escaped attention in the deliberations of any Grand Lodge, this

Convention call it to their view, as being a check admirably calculated to preserve the Fraternity from unworthy Brethren from a distance, and an additional means of protection to the good and the deserving."

The Convention adopted a resolution that was to have far-reaching and controversial effects: That a Committee be designated to prepare and publish at an early day, a text book, to be called "The Masonic Trestle-Board," to embrace three distinct, full and complete "Masonic Carpets," illustrative of the three Degrees of ancient Craft Masonry; together with the ceremonies of consecrations, dedications and installation; laying of cornerstones of public edifices; the Funeral service, and order of processions. To which shall be added the Charges, Prayers and Exhortations, and the selection from scripture, appropriate and proper for Lodge service. The Committee further report, that they deem it expedient that a work be published to contain archaeological research into the history of the Fraternity in the various nations of the world.

The Committee on Masonic Jurisprudence reported it had considered whether or not "the evils which this Convention has met to rectify and remove, have arisen from any defect or fault in the present system of organizations as adopted by the Fraternity of the United States." It concluded the evils existed, mainly because of the individual action of the numerous Grand Lodges in the United States. Intercommunication between Grand Lodges did not exist. The "purity and unity" of work prevalent in Europe was therefore missing.

"UNITY throughout the whole Masonic family is essential," claimed the Committee. "Any system of polity tending to throw obstacles in its way must be wrong. The simple truth that we are all Brethren of one family, and look up to one common Father, the Lord our God, is the basis of all the ancient constitutions."

To correct the "evils" that prevailed, the Committee said it had considered two plans: "1st A General Grand Lodge of the United States. 2nd A triennial convention of representatives of the several Grand Lodges of the United States."

It went on to state: "Your Committee, without encumbering their report with long arguments, beg to recommend the latter course as being that, which in their opinion, will best attain the end proposed." So, contrary to what many Freemasons have been led to believe, the Baltimore Convention of 1843 did not recommend the establishment of General Grand Lodge. It did recommend "the several Grand Lodges of the United States to enter into and form a National Masonic Convention."

The Jurisprudence Committee had also considered a question about whether or not a Lodge could try its Master. It concluded: "The Master is an integral part of its government, unable to sit in judgment on himself, and yet without whom the Lodge could not act, without, as it were, committing *felo de se* (suicide). The Committee offered the following, with which the Convention concurred "a subordinate Lodge has not the right to try its Master, but that he is amenable to the Grand Lodge alone."

The Committee considered sojourning Masons as "freeloaders." It believed all Masons living in the vicinity of a Lodge and not a member of it should be required to contribute "a sum equal in value to the annual dues per capita of the subordinate Lodge in whose jurisdiction they reside." The Convention voted to recommend that all Grand Lodges take this recommendation under advisement.

In an attempt to bring unity "Throughout the world in all things pertaining to Masonry," the Convention approved a recommendation to send "a Delegate from the Masonic Fraternity of the United States to their Brethren in Europe."

On the evening of May 15 the Committee on Work exemplified the opening and closing of the Lodge in "the Third Degree." The ceremonies for opening and closing a Lodge were exemplified on the morning of the 16th. Then the Convention adopted a resolution thanking the Grand Lodge of Maryland for its hospitality. It was especially appreciative of Maryland assuming all expenses. This was followed by the presentation of the "Lecture of the First Degree."

It was "Resolved, that the interest of the Masonic Fraternity, and the good of mankind may be greatly promoted by the publication of a periodical devoted to Free-Masonry. This Convention, therefore, cheerfully and earnestly recommend the Free-Mason's Monthly Magazine, edited and published by Brother Charles W. Moore, of Boston, Massachusetts as eminently useful and well-deserving the generous patronage, support and study of the whole Fraternity." The Convention concurred.

Each delegate contributed \$5.00 to defray the expenses of printing. It was resolved to hold the next Convention in Winchester, Virginia, "on the second Monday in May, in the year 1846." (This was never held.)

The evening session of May 16th was devoted to the degree work. "The President repeated the first section of the F.C. and M.M. Degrees; and Brother Moore, the second sections of the same Degrees. The Committee then exemplified the work in the Third Degree."

On the morning of the last day of the Convention, the Master Mason Degree was exemplified. Then, while the President was absent from the hall, "Brother Carnegy took the chair," and a resolution praising John Dove of Virginia was unanimously adopted. Albert Case of South Carolina was also thanked for his work as secretary. The concluding session was held in the afternoon of May 17th. The Convention approved a letter, read by the Secretary, Albert Case, to be sent to "the Masonic Fraternity of the United States." Each paragraph contained the flowery language of the day pleading with the Freemasons of the country to unite in love, friendship and brotherhood.

This letter, written immediately following the anti-Masonic craze that began in 1826, called upon all Lodges "to exercise their powers and cleanse the sanctuary" of unfaithful Masons. It

concluded by asking all Freemasons to "Be true to your principles, and the great moral edifice will stand beautiful and complete. Together, Brethren, be true and faithful."

The President thanked the delegates for the compliments paid him, and for their diligent work. He called upon the Chaplain to dismiss them with prayer. The Convention was then adjourned sine die.

The Convention was ended, but its accomplishments would change the face of Freemasonry throughout the United States.

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