

Monthly Lodge Program – June 2008  
**History of our Virginia Ritual**  
By R.W. Samuel T. Atkinson

In a previous talk we discussed the development of our Masonic ritual first in Europe and then in the United States. This time we want to focus on the history of the ritual in Virginia.

Given our traditions, not much has been written about the development of the ritual in Virginia. Accordingly, much of the knowledge we do have comes from Grand Lodge records where information pertaining to our ritual was often mentioned in passing in the context of other events that took place.

For example, the first indication as to which Degree a session of the Grand Lodge had been conducted in was found in an account that noted that Grand Lodge had been convened for the purpose of laying the foundation stone of a bridge on June 13<sup>th</sup>, 1795. The account went on to say: “In ample form the Grand Lodge was opened in the **first degree** of Masonry.”

Similarly, we find the first written concern about the variation in the ritual from one Lodge to another in an entry at the 1796 session of Grand Lodge, where the District Deputy Grand Masters

(who were then called Grand Lodge Inspectors) were directed “not only to report on the proceedings of Lodges, but also to instruct the Officers of each Lodge in the proper mode of working, in order that a uniform method may be established throughout this Jurisdiction.”

In 1798 Grand Lodge further sought to standardize requirements by decreeing that a candidate must be examined in open Lodge in order to advance from one degree to the next. The resolution further required that a condition of his advancement would be the majority ballot of those present.

In 1800, Grand Lodge continued its efforts to standardize the ritual as practiced in Virginia when it formed what would later evolve into the Committee on Work. The resolution adopted in 1800 directed the Grand Master to appoint not less than five expert Masons, who after having conferred together, and agreed upon the mode of working, which in their judgments, shall most conform with the ancient usages of Masonry, shall appoint one of their number to exemplify the three degrees of Masonry in open Lodge.

Grand Lodge next sought to bring greater consistency and uniformity to the several lectures. Thus, a resolution passed in

1806 specially recommending to the subordinate Lodges that at two or more specified regular meetings in the year a lecture on each of the three degrees of Masonry was to be given. The reason for this Grand Lodge action was recorded in rather unflattering terms: “the different subordinate Lodges are far from being expert in the mysteries, which must no doubt be owing to the want of regular lectures in the Lodges.”

There were a number of attempts to increase the amount of ritual that had to be memorized.

You may wonder, for example, why we require the catechism of the Degree of Entered Apprentice and the Degree of Fellow Craft be learned, but not that of the Degree Master Mason. In fact, some Lodges sought to make this a requirement. But in 1874, the Grand Master rendered a decision “That it is contrary to Masonic Law and usage to require a Master Mason be proficient in the Third Degree before he can be received into membership in a Lodge, consequently the enactment of a By-law to that effect would be improper.”

Nevertheless, the importance of the Master Mason’s catechism continued to be recognized. And in 1923, Most

Worshipful James H. Price, then Grand Master, recommended: “That the Committee on Work, in conjunction with the Committee on Jurisprudence, provide some means of making it obligatory of newly made Masons, the mastery of the Catechism in the Masters’ Degree, and report their recommendations to the next Grand Lodge.” He continued: “The average Mason, in his anxiety to pass to so-called higher things, makes no effort to familiarize himself with the climax and conclusion of our Masonic structure, and knows nothing of the Masters’ Degree.” Grand Master Price further added: “It might be made the duty of the Master to see that every Mason is required to learn this catechism, and...the Secretary,...would be required to include this in his annual report.”

Requiring mastery of the catechism of the Third Degree was a bridge too far, but encouraging the Brethren to learn it was acceptable, and the 1924 Grand Lodge adopted a resolution to that effect and directed it “To be read to every Brother who is raised to the sublime Degree of Master Mason, at the conclusion of the charge, by the Master of each Subordinate Lodge.” This resolution is still read today to the newly raised Master Masons.

The most aggressive attempt to mandate ritual proficiency occurred in 1931 when at the Grand Annual Communication, the delegates voted that “Effective at the annual election of officers in December 1931, and thereafter, no Brother shall be installed Master of a Lodge unless he is able to confer the three Degrees, including the lectures, and has a Certificate from the Grand or Division Lecturer showing him qualified.”

But, after several years of reconsideration, the Grand Lodge, in 1935, eliminated the requirement that the lectures had to be learned in order to qualify for a certificate.

Virginia also played a significant role in the various national efforts to standardize the ritual. One such effort started in 1842, when a convention was held at the request of the Grand Lodge of Alabama to consider standardization of the ritual in the United States.

Due to a lack of representation of Grand Lodges, the convention recommended that each Grand Lodge appoint a Grand Lecturer to meet in Baltimore in 1843 to establish a standardized ritual.

The Virginia Grand Lecturer, James D. McCabe, and the Grand Secretary, Dr. John Dove, reported to Grand Lodge on the 1842 convention, and introduced a resolution that the Grand Lodge of Virginia appoint a skillful Brother as a Special Grand Lecturer to attend and participate in the 1843 Baltimore Convention.

The resolution was approved and John Dove attended the 1843 Baltimore Convention, held from 8 to 20 May. The Convention attempted to agree on a mode of work so the Masonic ritual might become uniform throughout the nation. And at the next communication of the Grand Lodge of Virginia in 1843, Dr. Dove exemplified, on the floor of Grand Lodge, the ritual adopted by the Baltimore Convention. And our Grand Lodge, by resolution, adopted this work as its standard ritual.

Given how important the Hiramic Legend is to the Degree of Master Mason; let me conclude with a few thoughts about its significance from Dr. Joseph Ford Newton, a renowned Masonic scholar and teacher of the spiritual aspects of Freemasonry.

He said: Ritual is the dramatization of belief, hope, and the spiritual dream. It assists imagination by giving form to what

otherwise would remain formless, presenting vivid mental images, which lend reality to what is often abstract and unreal. It is a picture philosophy - truth visualized.

With this in mind, did you ever wonder why it was that the three enemies of Hiram Abiff came from his own circle and not from the outside?

It is because the enemies to be feared by the soul are always from within, and are nothing other than its own ignorance, lust, passions, and sins. As the Volume of the Sacred Law reminds us, it is not that which has power to kill the body that we need most to shun, but that which has power to destroy the spirit.

Did you wonder why it was that after Hiram Abiff was slain, there was so much confusion in the Temple?

It was because the Temple is the symbol of a man's character and, therefore, breaks and falls when the soul, its architect, is rendered helpless. Because the craftsmen are symbols of our powers and faculties, they fall into anarchy when not directed and commanded by the will at the center of our being.

And finally did you wonder why the Lodge appeared to neglect to explain this ritualistic drama to you at the end of the Degree?

It was because it is impossible for one man to explain the tragedy of Hiram Abiff to another. Each must learn it for himself. And the most we can obtain from others are hints and scattered suggestions.

Print the story of Hiram Abiff indelibly upon your mind and ponder upon it.

When you yourself are at grips with your enemies, recall it, and act accordingly to the light you find in it.

By so doing, you will find that your inner self will give to you in the form of first-hand experience that which the drama gave to you in the form of ritual. You will be wiser and stronger for having received and then pondered the guidance and the light that was inherent in the Hiram drama in the Master Mason's Degree.