

Frontiers and the Future

The Grand Lodge of Washington, D.C.

Andrew Hammer

THE MAJORITY OF MASONIC GRAND LODGES IN THE WORLD OPERATE WITH one specific ritual or working, which is strictly adhered to by all of their respective lodges. In those jurisdictions that do allow for multiple rituals, in most cases those ceremonies more or less correspond to each other for the majority of the content. It is rare that a Grand Lodge will allow multiple co-existing rituals that are entirely different from the others in terms of their form and language.

The very small Grand Lodge, FAAM, of the District of Columbia, in Washington DC has been in existence since 1811. For most of that time it followed the form of other American Grand Lodges, with a single, strictly enforced ritual, where difference or diversity in the work was frowned upon. In the 1990s, however, things began to change, and over the next two decades, this Metropolitan Grand jurisdiction of only 45 lodges has evolved into what is one of the most forward-thinking Grand Lodges in the world, with four distinct rituals that are used throughout the world, and lodges which operate in nine different languages.

Students of Freemasonry will benefit from an understanding of why this approach was pursued, how it has worked, and why this model of strength through diversity has

not only created a new frontier in the development of Freemasonry, but may also be a way forward for the revitalisation of the modern Craft.

Origins

In the United States, there exist two predominant systems of Freemasonry, each comprised of sovereign Grand Lodges. These are the so-called 'mainstream' Grand Lodges associated with the Conference of Grand Masters of North America, and the Grand Lodges of the Prince Hall Affiliated system, the latter of which was created to serve the desire of African-American men to become Masons who were not admitted to the former system. This former system is the largest and most commonly known of the two, and that is one to which this particular paper refers in regard to Freemasonry in the United States. Given the historical background of this topic, that is a rather important distinction to make at the outset. The Grand Lodges of both systems have all adopted some variation of what is called, for lack of a better term, the American 'Preston-Webb' ritual.

The Grand Lodge, FAAM (Free And Accepted Masons), of the District of Columbia – which will hereafter be referred to as the Grand Lodge of DC – is the only mainstream Grand Lodge in the United States that is based in a city. All other Grand Lodges are formed in correspondence with the boundaries of American states. The Grand Lodge of DC was founded in 1811, just a few years after the creation of the federal District of Columbia in 1801, and its composition was derived from five existing lodges that were already warranted or chartered in the states of Maryland and Virginia from which the district was created. In an historical sense, the idea to create this Grand Lodge was timely, as the creation of it occurred during a time period in Masonry when administrative conventions and territorial boundaries were still being established in the United States. The notion of granting recognition to a newly formed Grand Lodge in a new political division was not considered unusual,¹ as the question of territorial jurisdiction was being made clearer by new states being formed from existing ones during this period of American history (e.g. Kentucky, Alabama, Maine). One could well argue that if the Masons within the District of Columbia had not made the move to form their own Grand Lodge, it may never have occurred, as recognition from other Grand Lodges is not something that would be so easily obtained today, or even a hundred years ago.

As was the case with all other American Grand Lodges at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the question of a standard ritual arose in the Grand Lodge of DC. Most older lodges in the US had been chartered by one of the Grand Lodges of the British Isles, and as a result some of these lodges were still working whatever forms of ritual were originally communicated into the nineteenth century. A strong desire to 'make it our own' was

¹ Whilst the District of Columbia is not a state, its designation was and is such that it is viewed in some symbolic ways similar to a separate state.

apparent as the Grand jurisdictions of the still-new nation sought to gain more control over the operation of the Craft in their respective jurisdictions. In January of 1812, just one year after the establishment of the Grand Lodge of DC from the aforementioned five lodges, whose origins came from not only Virginia and Maryland but before that from the Premier Grand Lodge of England, Massachusetts Moderns, and Pennsylvania Antients, the Grand Lodge established a committee 'for the purpose of devising and adopting a uniform mode of working.' At the next meeting of Grand Lodge in July of that year, the committee reported back, and the Grand Lodge agreed the following resolution:

RESOLVED, In the opinion of the Grand Lodge, that it is now unnecessary to make any change in the long established usages of each lodge, and that each lodge be at liberty to use such rules and ceremonies as they shall see fit: Provided, That they do not infringe any of the ancient land marks of the craft.²

This decision—a perfectly acceptable one at that time, and still the practice in Scotland—in no way settled the matter, but a second committee was formed in 1815 to address the issue. That committee was specifically charged 'to hear the Prestonian Lectures and report the expediency of adopting the same, in order to establish a uniform mode of working and lecturing in, the three first degrees of Masonry in all the lodges under the jurisdiction of this Grand Lodge, and that said committee report at the next grand communication of this [Grand] Lodge.'³ Ten years later, after no further progress had been made, a far more extensive set of resolutions imploring the lodges to cooperate in the quest for a 'uniform mode of opening and closing the lodges,'⁴ as well as other points of working, was agreed in Grand Lodge. By 1829 a report to the Grand Lodge on the progress of *those* resolutions finds the reporter concluding in a clearly exasperated tone:

The complaint of a uniformity of working is not confined to the District of Columbia, of which fact the lodge may be informed by consulting the proceedings of other Grand Lodges now in our archives. It is almost a general complaint . . .⁵

This comment indicates a further development of the question, in that by the reference to other American Grand Lodges, we observe the emergence of the idea of a proposed uniform working not only for the Grand Lodge of DC, but for *the entire United States*.

The Grand Lodge would not come any closer to the goal of a uniform mode of working for its lodges until 1841, when the announcement was made of a convention of Masons to be held in Washington, DC the following year that would address the very issue of a national uniformity of Masonic ritual. That plan fell short of the mark, however; not

² *Organization of the Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia and Extracts from Its Proceedings* (1813), 31.

³ *Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia* (1813–1818), 23.

⁴ *Copies of the Old Papers in the Office of the Grand Secretary, from May 5, 1829 to November 6, 1832*, 7.

⁵ *ibid.*, 9.

enough attendees were deemed to be present and as a result, those gathered resolved to revisit everything the following year. But the location for the next convention was moved, and that event would henceforth become known as the Baltimore Convention of 1843.

This paper will not go further into the details of that event or its outcomes. Numerous tomes have described its successes and failures. Suffice it to say that it is a far more arduous, and possibly undesirable task to attempt to forge one ritual for all Masons, than to allow for the more multi-modal approach to the workings, lessons, and traditions of the Craft that allows a diverse body of knowledge to be experienced by the brethren.

The Grand Lodge of DC did not finally obtain a complete and uniform ritual until 1869. After that date, with the exception of one lodge who worked that same ritual in German (we will revisit this later), all DC lodges worked the 'Preston-Webb' ritual in English for the next 121 years.

The Beginning of Diversity

Until the closing years of the twentieth century, the unique status of the Grand Lodge of DC being a Grand Lodge in one city did not have any effect on its ritualistic direction in relation to other US Grand Lodges.⁶ As far as its customs and adherence to what might be called the conventions and forms of the fraternity in the Union, it functioned very much like its neighbours. It even shared some historical distinctions that would normally be expected to be enjoyed only by larger or older grand jurisdictions. Through the granting of a charter to brothers from Washington who had travelled west during the Gold Rush, the Grand Lodge created California Lodge No. 13, in San Francisco. That lodge, now known as California Lodge No. 1, was instrumental in helping to form the Grand Lodge of California.⁷ The location of the Grand Lodge of DC in the nation's capital afforded it the opportunity to claim a connection to events such as laying the cornerstones of the Capitol building (through two of its founding lodges which pre-dated the birth of the Grand Lodge of DC itself) and the Washington Monument.⁸

If the unique placement of the Grand Lodge of DC in one city instead of a state had any impact on what some would call the 'awakening' that would take place in the 1990s, it might be surmised that the size of the jurisdiction allowed it to take things under consideration more easily than could a state Grand Lodge, with hundreds of lodges in both urban and rural areas. But perhaps more important was the fact that as the nation's capital, Washington, DC was an international city, and as such, was home to people from all over the world, employed not only in the diplomatic field, but in other areas of inter-

⁶ All DC lodges worked the 'Preston-Webb' ritual until 1992. One lodge, Arminius Lodge No. 25, worked that ritual in German.

⁷ K. N. Harper, *History of the Grand Lodge and of Freemasonry in the District of Columbia* (1911), 75.

⁸ *ibid.*, 18, 74.

national affairs and business. Many people come to Washington as students from other countries, and then decide to make the city their home. That being said, the idea of diversity in Masonic practice did not come about through any particular visionary moment of enlightenment. Rather, it arose through a necessity to address political upheaval and racial discrimination.

The acceptance of black men in US Freemasonry is a story fraught with behaviours that most Freemasons would consider to be anything but Masonic. The segregated attitudes which have pervaded every institution in American society since its inception did not spare the Craft. The division of US Masonry into two separate systems established on the basis of race lasts to this day, and whilst the overwhelming majority of American 'mainstream' Grand Lodges now share recognition and fraternal relations with their Prince Hall counterparts (as of 2020 only seven do not), it is this situation that in large part laid the groundwork for new thinking in the Grand Lodge of DC.

Amongst the different communities that comprise Washington DC is a sizable immigrant community from various African nations. Within this group one finds men of letters and significant professional distinction. In the 1980s a few of these men also happened to be Freemasons, raised in lodges working in District Grand Lodges under the UGLE, the Grand Lodge of Scotland, or the Grand Lodge of Ireland. Some of these men were Past Masters or of even some further rank. However, when these brothers attempted to attend lodges in the Grand Lodge of DC, they were not allowed to sit in lodge, despite being distinguished Masons from Grand Lodges recognised by the Grand Lodge of DC. Their *bona fides* were well established, all letters of introduction in order; the issue was their race and their race alone. The embarrassment of such situations took years to overcome, but brotherhood did prevail over intolerance – largely due to the patience and perseverance of these Masons of African origin. Their dignity and intellect would eventually gain them entry into every area of DC Masonry, and would afford them the opportunity to bring the experience of a global Freemasonry into the city Grand Lodge.

The first lodge, however, to work a ritual other than the one adopted in 1869, was born from the kind of political difficulty that Masons have time to time experienced in those nations where governments are hostile to the Craft. The establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 brought a number of Iranian refugees to the United States, and as with the aforementioned African community, among these refugees were Masons from the now banned Grand Lodge of Iran. By 1985 the Grand Lodge of Iran [in Exile] was sponsored by the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts and re-consecrated, and had resumed labours in Boston, but Iranian Masons in Washington took a different approach. Their request was to charter an Iranian lodge under the Grand Lodge of DC, which would serve the needs of these exiled brothers by allowing them to work in the quarries in a way that would be both familiar and rewarding. On December 27, 1990, Mehr Lodge No. 90

was the first new lodge to be chartered in the Grand Lodge of DC since 1947, but more significant was that it was the first lodge since the nineteenth century to be allowed to work a different ritual than the 'Preston-Webb'. Mehr Lodge would continue as its brothers had done in Iran, using the Emulation working in Farsi.⁹

The allowance of a lodge comprised of exiled Masons could easily be understood as an exceptional development, allowed only due to exceptional circumstances. However, the creation of Mehr Lodge as one allowed to work the Emulation ritual was not lost on the African brothers who had come from lodges on that continent, some of which worked the Emulation ritual in English. At this time, the racial atmosphere in the Grand Lodge of DC was not yet where it should be, and there was a strong feeling that one way to move closer to the goal of harmony would be to allow those African brothers who desired to do so to form a lodge that would allow them to work the ritual in which they had already established proficiency, where they would feel fully welcome, and in an atmosphere that would allow them to be not just joiners, but builders of the Craft in Washington.

The catalyst for this crucial next step was Bro. Dr Victor A. Adegbite. He rose to prominence as the chief architect in the newly independent nation of Ghana, moving to Washington in 1974 to become a professor of architecture at Howard University, and was the inspiration behind the idea of multiple rituals co-existing within the Grand Lodge of DC.¹⁰ Adegbite was the key figure in the organisation of the second lodge to work a different ritual, which was to become Sojourner Kilwinning Lodge No. 1798, chartered in May of 1992. According to Adegbite's vision, Sojourner Kilwinning would not merely adopt the ritual he was raised in, which was to be the 'Modern Ritual' of the Grand Lodge of Scotland, but it would also be a Scottish lodge in every way from the regalia, to the office bearers, to the protocol for the Harmony. The die was now cast, and two other lodges, *Alianza Fraternal Americana* No. 92, and *La France* No. 93 were chartered later in the year, working Emulation ritual in Spanish and French respectively. *La France* would then go on to introduce the ritual of the *Grand Loge Nationale Française* to the jurisdiction, the fourth to be used.

After the door had been opened to 'international lodges', the focus shifted from the type of ritual to the freedom to work Emulation ritual in different languages. The desire to re-establish Freemasonry in Armenia led to the creation of Hayastan Lodge No. 94 in 1994, which works Emulation in Armenian, and then five years later to the creation

⁹ The brethren who founded this lodge in DC were exiles who had originally come from different lodges under the Grand Lodge of Iran, where they had worked the Emulation ritual.

¹⁰ The objective of Mehr Lodge was to have an Iranian lodge in DC that would recreate the Masonic experience they enjoyed in Iran. Other brothers then sought to copy that example by working Emulation in more languages. Adegbite's vision was broader, involving the creation of multiple lodges in DC that could work other English, Scottish, and Irish Constitution rituals alongside the traditional 'Preston-Webb' ritual.

of Massis Lodge No. 99, which became Massis Lodge No. 1 of the newly created Grand Lodge of Armenia in 2002.

Three more lodges were chartered in the Emulation ritual from 2000 to 2001; Nur Lodge No. 2000 works in Turkish, Italia Lodge No. 2001 in Italian, and finally in June of 2001, Fiat Lux Lodge No. 1717 was chartered as the first and only lodge in the US to work the Emulation ritual in English. Once again, the prime mover in this endeavour was Victor Adegbite, and once again by his design the lodge would appear as any other UGLE lodge, following its form to the letter. It is the only lodge in the United States that initiates, passes, and raises men as 'English Masons', and is surely one of the few lodges in the world that, in a mere twenty years, has had Masters who hail from every inhabitable continent.

The benefits of this twenty-nine year experiment have gone further than expected. The need to help exiled brothers desirous of Masonic community, coupled with the wish to expand the diversity of the Grand Lodge to help brothers of different ethnicities to feel fully empowered in their Grand Lodge, has had the advantage of introducing to its members an international Masonic experience that is more commonplace and traditional for the rest of the world. It has augmented the role of Masonry in the nation's capital to the point where DC Masons have begun to see themselves having a wider role in communicating with brothers beyond the borders of that city.

A Universal Brotherhood

Although the presence of brothers from many ethnic groups, religions, and nations is not at all unfamiliar to those European Grand Lodges whose influence and even district Grand Lodges have spread geographically throughout the world, such a situation has been much less present in American Freemasonry. In that context, the Grand Lodge of DC has the appearance of being a 'United Nations' of Masonry in a literal microcosm. The establishment of lodges in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Lebanon notwithstanding, the true exceptionality of the Grand Lodge of DC is that one can, with the right timing, enjoy a Masonic tour of the world within an area of 68 square miles.¹¹

This diversity is not passively accepted as a clinical point. The Grand Lodge of DC celebrates its international character every year with a weekend long 'Universal Brotherhood Celebration' that includes an international feast where lodges wishing to participate are encouraged to prepare dishes from their respective traditions or cultures, as well as a 'Universal Brotherhood Lodge'. The latter is an ambitious and fascinating tyled lodge

¹¹ Not all lodges in DC meet every month. Ergo, the timing of a Masonic visit to DC is important. One could achieve maximum benefit as a visitor between February and April, when it would be possible to visit the greatest number of diverse lodges. A brother visiting during July and August would likely be very disappointed indeed, as almost all lodges are dark.

meeting where representatives of different lodges serve as officers, and open a lodge using their own respective ritual in their own language.¹² In so doing, the Grand Lodge of DC demonstrates its continuing commitment to ‘Masonry universal,’ and it has become one of the high points of every Masonic year.

Frontier on the Future

As Masons in this Grand Lodge enter the fourth decade of this universal approach to the Craft, we find that new lodges, different rituals, and a return to the best thinking of our early years are an integral aspect of what it will or will not be at the end of that decade. Presently the spirit of openness enjoyed in the Grand Lodge of DC has led to the chartering of affinity lodges as well as lodges seeking to work different rituals, or translate the traditional ‘Preston-Webb’ work into a different language, or to express a certain part of the Craft in their own way, all without infringing on any of the ancient landmarks of the Craft. Two new lodges are exploring the use of an Irish and a unique Scottish ritual respectively, while two others are seeking to work the ‘Preston-Webb’ ritual in Arabic.¹³ Still another is seeking to work a French-language ritual.

With the presence of these different lodges and rituals, new approaches to the life of older lodges also present themselves. The German-speaking lodge mentioned earlier, Arminius Lodge No. 25, was chartered in 1876 to serve the then substantial German immigrant population of the city. Almost 150 years later, the number of German-speaking Masons living in DC is minimal if not quaint, and the lodge faces a serious question of losing its identity entirely, and even ceasing to exist, as very few brothers are interested in doing the same ritual as most other DC lodges in another language.¹⁴ Even fewer German-speaking postulants live in the city, and fewer men still would ever conceive of becoming a Mason in a language they do not speak. In this case, necessity and possibility have combined to result in a proposal to have this lodge maintain its opening and closing ritual as it always done, in German, but to introduce German Masonry into the jurisdiction by the study, exemplification, and – it is hoped – the eventual working of the Schröder Ritual in English. In this way the expectation is that the lodge can attract

¹² The brethren chosen to open and close this lodge will practice this ceremony beforehand, so that they know what to expect from each other. The lines they use are from their own lodge’s respective language, which makes for a truly different experience.

¹³ In DC any existing or new lodge can petition the Grand Lodge to adopt the working of another ritual, but they must prove their ability to do the work with proficiency before they are allowed to use it.

¹⁴ With the notable exception of those American Masons (primarily immigrants) who still use Spanish as a daily language, one can imagine how unlikely it would be to interest the average American Mason in re-learning a Masonic ritual he already knows in a language he does not. Arminius’ use of German in its opening and closing is enshrined in its charter; its existence is a legacy of earlier trends in immigration to the US. Historically foreign language lodges can be found in other parts of the United States; their vitality and future depends very much on the number of available brothers who are able to speak those languages.

the interest of affiliating brothers and petitioners, by offering yet another, and again very different, type of Masonic experience in the nation's capital.¹⁵

Is there an argument to be made against this approach? If there is, it would be in the rationale of a unified ritual serving a Grand jurisdiction to help all its lodges succeed, and by having a larger number of brothers available to help with degree ceremonies if a lodge cannot manage to confer the degrees on their own. If every lodge is conferring their own unique ritual, then no one will be available to help another lodge in the event they end up short-handed for the ceremonies, because no one outside that lodge will be proficient in that particular work.

Regrettably, this argument implies that there is almost an expectation that no lodge can or should be self-sufficient. If we follow that line of thought, is there not the risk of creating a culture of mutual dependency, which weakens each lodge and provides a disincentive for those strong enough to work independently and autonomously, as was arguably intended for lodges? Do we not hold to the customary position that if a lodge cannot manage to confer the degrees on its own, then perhaps it is time to surrender its charter?

The adoption of multiple rituals, especially in a small geographical area, can create opportunities for Masonic learning that are unparalleled in larger jurisdictions.¹⁶ Optimally, in a situation such as may be found in DC, one has the opportunity to experience the Craft in a variety of forms, and in so doing gain a broader, holistic understanding of Freemasonry, as well as diverse ways of understanding the same Masonic principles through those different systems.

Of course, the primary challenge for any lodge seeking to work an unfamiliar ritual is proficiency, that is competency in *both* understanding and conferring the ritual before it can be approved. Doing so will have the benefit of providing more opportunities for Masonic education by explaining why ritual practice and historical context are related subjects. Beyond that initial establishment of proficiency, the next challenge is that it must be upheld. However, this challenge is less related to any particular ritual than it is to the equal task of any lodge working the standard ritual of any grand jurisdiction. It is

¹⁵ On the other hand, it is easy to see how the prospect of being able to learn a different ritual and set of practices from another nation, which have been translated into English, and which communicate the lessons of Masonry in a different way, might be appealing to Masons and even postulants who have a connection in some way to the culture or national origin of that ritual, or simply would like the option of learning another way to experience the Craft.

¹⁶ It is arguably far easier to obtain an exceptionally wide berth of knowledge about Masonry if (a) one has exposure to totally different lodges/workings within one grand jurisdiction, and (b) if they are all contained within a city, as opposed to having those same lodges dispersed over the geography of a state or nation. Visitation is almost effortless in a relatively small city like Washington, and as a result, the DC Mason would be able to visit a Scottish lodge one evening, a Haitian lodge the next, a French lodge the next, and an American lodge the following evening. The alternative, of one ritual system of Masonry rigidly enforced over a large area, can leave a brother with the impression that the system he knows is 'what Masonry is.' Such a concept is akin to believing that the American idiom is the only correct way to speak English.

a human challenge, the same faced by any lodge since the era of fully developed degree ceremonies. There is no reason why a new ritual is any more of a challenge than it is getting any other lodge to do the work it is supposed to do. Further, it could be argued that a lodge working a unique ritual has a greater incentive to excel because they know cannot rely on anyone else to step in for them. They must do the work if they want their ritual, and even their lodge, to survive.

As we consider what the Grand Lodge of DC's approach symbolises, it would appear to reflect the interest of new minds (possibly young but not necessarily) entering the Craft in an age of increased information, having access not only to printed rituals, but also a degree of access to travel that is unprecedented in history. In such an environment, individual Masons are quickly becoming more aware, more informed, and more advanced as Masons than their Grand Lodges. The Grand Lodges, therefore, are faced with an essential choice: will they dare to serve the interests and needs of their members (and potential members) by allowing for a return to a semblance of the ritual environment during the first 100 years of the Grand Lodge era?

The successful future of our institution, as with society at large, will be contingent upon the attainment of more, not less, knowledge. In our specific instance, in a world that is at once larger and smaller for the curious mind, that means an heuristic, experience-based knowledge about how Masons operate throughout the world. If we are going to ask men to trust us, then at some point we must certainly trust them to learn about and discover more ways of becoming a Mason than the one we have always known. We must trust ourselves to explore the boundaries. That is the definition of being on a frontier.