

Rob Morris and the Conservator Movement

On the Development of Masonic Ritual in the United States

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I N THE AMERICAN COLONIES THROUGHOUT THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY FREEMASONRY had spread as the country expanded and various new states were created. The formation of Masonic lodges, and many other friendly societies, provided support to an often isolated and self-sufficient population. Freemasonry developed under the influence of military regiments and also of the three competing British Grand lodges, with the Irish having a significant influence in this.¹ Thus at least three variations of the Masonic ritual influenced Masonic development, and there was also a French and German influence as well. The isolation of the population, spread over a large area, also meant that variations of ritual and practice developed. The greatest cause of this, however, was the

¹ See R. A. Berman, *From Roanoke to Raleigh, Freemasonry in North Carolina 1730* (Goring Heath: Old Stables Press, 2018). There are also several papers in *AQC*: See D. I. Smith, 'The First Charge: Its Slow Acceptance in the United States', *AQC* 97 (1984), 155–75.

injunction, imported from Britain, that the ritual was not to be printed but was to be learned by heart from listening to another Mason. Under these circumstances it is not surprising that differences developed and, further, that the brethren were often uncertain as to what the true ritual might be. Later, as the population spread westwards and more new states were formed each new state eventually created its own Masonic Grand Lodge² and each differed in its structure, organization and procedures.

Understandably, some brethren would look to Britain for possible clarification. The situation in Britain, however, was little better for there, as well, the ritual was not allowed to be officially printed. A number of exposures had provided their own versions; the three Grand Lodges still operated in the same areas; traces of other ritual stories other than the Hiram legend still persisted; the degree structure varied as some accepted or rejected many other degrees; all of this was compounded by the presence of two competing English Grand Lodges, the Moderns and the Antients. This would not be regularised until 1813 and the years following the union when a uniformity of ritual was attempted through the Lodge of Reconciliation, under Bro Dr Samuel Hemming.³ It was not until the 1850s, however, that rituals were finally allowed to be printed. It was a bit late, for even today around 60 published variations of the ritual are in use in English lodges.

In 1760 William Preston was made a Mason, in London, under the Antients Grand Lodge, though he later transferred his membership to the Moderns or Premier Grand Lodge. He immediately became active in the production of Masonic lectures and various aspects of the Masonic ritual, basing these on the various forms then available and from fragments of earlier rituals which he 'discovered'. He named his reformed, blue lodge rituals 'Harodim'.

In 1772, only four years before the American colonies declared their independence from Britain, Preston gave a banquet at his own expense in the Crown and Anchor Tavern (the headquarters of the Antients Grand Lodge) at which he promoted his Harodim rituals and lectures, and soon these became very popular and the principal activity conducted in many lodges. Preston was subsequently offered the position of Deputy Grand Secretary with the Moderns.

These lectures were later taken up by Thomas Smith Webb of Albany, New York, who, in 1797, issued a 'Freemason's Monitor' which was a system of lectures, corresponding to those of Preston, and which also presented a plan for the dissemination of these rituals throughout the United States, but outside of Grand Lodges' authority. He created a

² In most states a second Grand Lodge, the Prince Hall Grand Lodges, were also formed exclusively for brethren of African descent, many former slaves. These first started as African Lodge under the Irish Constitution, then transferred to the UGLE before establishing their own Grand Lodge system.

³ M. Kearsley, 1814: *Consolidation and Change: The First Year of the United Grand Lodge of England*, The Prestonian Lecture for 2014 (Long Eaton: Carfields Publications, 2014), 55ff.

group of lecturers, published editions of the rituals, travelled extensively promoting the same, and introduced into his scheme many more new degrees. He seems to have escaped any censure, whereas Preston fell foul of the Moderns Grand Lodge and, particularly, its Grand Secretary, Bro Heseltine. A bitter dispute between Preston and Heseltine came to a head after Preston had resigned over intellectual rights with regard to a new publication, and a reported public procession by Preston's Lodge, the Lodge of Antiquity No. 1, and the ensuing altercation was the excuse for Heseltine to have Preston expelled. It would be ten years before Preston could return.⁴ In the United States, however, the Preston & Webb rituals were considered, by many, to be a correct, purer form of Masonry and these brethren wondered how the rituals might be generally accepted throughout the country. Some considered that this could not be achieved when there were so many disparate Grand Lodges and that the only way forward was for the creation of a united, or General Grand Lodge.⁵

From the time of George Washington, who was proposed as a good prospect for General Grand Master of Masons in America, until the present day, there have been movements for the establishment in the United States of a national 'General Grand Lodge'. Mostly, such movements were primarily designed to bring uniformity to the ritual, and in Masonic organization and procedures, throughout the country.⁶

In Washington on 9 March 1822 a convention was held with the avowed purpose of laying the foundation for a General Grand Lodge. Although the much-respected Henry Clay of Kentucky was behind the movement, his own Grand Lodge, as well as many others, turned a deaf ear to the proposal.

The next major convention took place after the 'Morgan Affair' had passed from the Masonic scene.⁷ It was the Baltimore Convention of 1843. Its results were moderately successful, for it did manage to set up a uniform standard or 'work' (based on the Preston & Webb rituals) which some Grand Lodges adopted, most of them, however, with some reservations. Two years later a young Rob Morris of Boston (or New York) became a Freemason in Oxford, Mississippi.⁸ He was 26 years old. Morris was destined to become a very active and prominent Freemason. In 1858, at the age of 39, he became Grand Master of Kentucky. During his year of office he found that the Grand Lodge procedures were

⁴ Kearsley 1814: *Consolidation & Change*, 14ff.

⁵ R. V. Denslow, *The Masonic Conservators* (Missouri: Masonic Services Association, 1931), 26ff.

⁶ Denslow, *The Masonic Conservators*, 25.

⁷ M. Kearsley, *On the Square: The Reflections of a Masonic Orator*, the ANZMRC Tour Book (Jackett Pty Ltd, 2019), 104; see also S. Dafoe, *Morgan: The Scandal that Shook Freemasonry* (New Orleans: Cornerstone, 2009) for an extensive account.

⁸ For a fuller biography see S. H. Terry, *A Brief History of the Order of the Eastern Star* (Chicago: Charles T. Pownier, 1995).

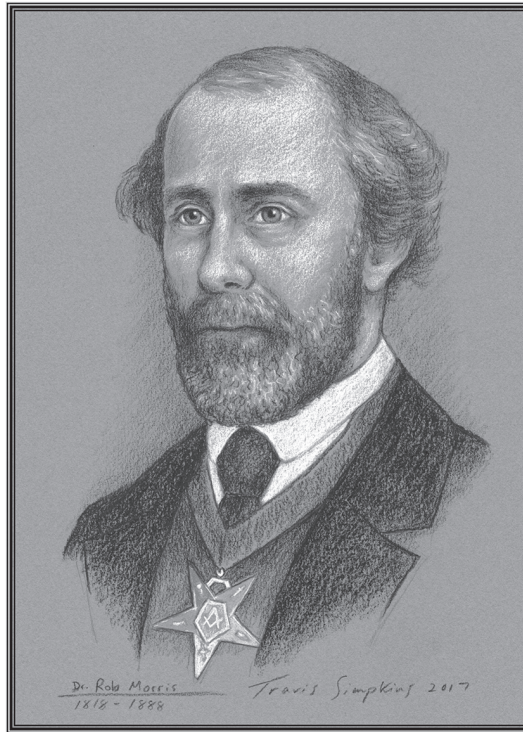


Fig. 1. Dr Rob Morris (1818–88), founder of the Conservators and the Order of the Eastern Star.
Drawing by Travis Simpkins, 2017, used with permission of the artist

often ‘the very worse that could be practiced’.⁹ He noted that he was shocked by the vast differences among lodges: ‘literally every Master of a Lodge in Kentucky does what seemeth good in his own eyes’.¹⁰ He began by creating weekly schools of instruction and also inviting neighbouring states to send delegates to the school. The proceedings of each meeting were published in pamphlet form, then distributed and soon forming the foundation of a ‘Monitor’. He sent his Deputy Grand Lecturer, Elisha D. Cooke, to England and Scotland to compare rituals and to present the Kentucky version of the lectures for comment. He became convinced that the Thomas Smith Webb lectures were more authentic and should, therefore, be adopted throughout the state.

From this developed another idea, one of his many initiatives, for the founding of an organization devoted to promoting the idea of a standardised ritual for the whole of the United States. The movement created by him, was to become known as the Conservators.

⁹ J. L. Baderstadt, *The Grand Luminary: A Look at the Life of Rob Morris* (Mich.: Coffee Time Press, 2003), 25ff.

¹⁰ Baderstadt, *The Grand Luminary*, 26.

Morris was very detailed in all his planning for his various endeavours, but his obvious entrepreneurial skills were sometimes clouded by ill-conceived judgement. Such was to be the case with the Conservators. He created the Conservators Association 24 June 1860, planning that it would last for exactly five years, at which point all ambitions would have been achieved and the Association could terminate. He nominated himself as the Chief Conservator. He also created The Conservators Association journal to record and inform his fellow Conservators and even devised his own Conservator countdown calendar. This was based on the five years as 1825 days from 24 June 1860 to 24 June 1865 and the current day being the number of days remaining – day one was 1825, day two was 1824, day three 1823 and so on.

Morris wrote, in his customary verbose and flowery style, what his intentions were in his paper *Uniformity of Work*:

No proposal made the Masonic fraternity ever receives such favour as that of communicating to them correct rituals leading to uniformity of work. The establishment of Masonic libraries, building of Masonic Halls, endowing of Masonic Colleges and the like, each of which in its turn has occupied the minds of the Craft, and the attention and resources of the Grand Lodges of America, fail to command permanent interest, because they do not reach what the Brotherhood deem the essential want of Masonry. But when the offer is that of something which will enable every Brother 'to travel into foreign countries and receive wages' as a Mason; when, in other words, it is proposed to instruct the brotherhood in those essential technicalities which distinguish this from all other institutions, and give the key to higher attainments, if we choose to seek them, the avidity with which the proposal is accepted by the body of the craft, proves that the tenderest chord of Masonic desire has been touched.¹¹

Morris clearly felt that his was a noble cause. However, Ray V. Denslow, in his book, *The Masonic Conservators*, records a different view of Morris:

Rob Morris, the founder and 'Chief Conservator', was initiated in Oxford Lodge No. 33, Mississippi, on March 3, 1845, at the age of 26. Three years later, according to one of his friends, he started to inquire, 'either personally or by correspondence, with every elderly Mason known to have been bright in his early days.' In all, he 'conferred with 50,000 Masons ... [and] visited nearly 2000 lodges.' He was elected Grand Master at Lexington, Kentucky, on October 11, 1858 and less than two years later started his 'Conservator' movement, for which he was to be condemned by his Grand Lodge, as well as many others throughout the United and Confederate States.¹²

¹¹ R. Morris, 'Uniformity of Work', *The Voice of Masonry and Tidings from the Craft* (Illinois: Bailey Publishing, 1868), 7.

¹² Denslow, *The Masonic Conservators*, 35ff. Taken from Morris's own accounts and suggesting a level of exaggeration.

Denslow supports the need brethren then felt for aid in learning their particular ritual when printed versions were not permitted. Previous attempts at providing an official printed ritual, through the use of a cipher, had not been very successful.¹³ Morris was determined that there should be a standardised, printed ritual and, to overcome the printing censure of any ritual, devised his own cipher, which was referred to as 'Mnemonics'. Unfortunately, the key that untangled the complicated Mnemonics system aroused the ire of most of the Grand Lodges. Leverett B. Englesby, the Grand Master of Vermont, on 14 January 1863, stated: 'To no man's sleeve should Masonic or any other faith be pinned. Our traditions are verbal – not written – transmitted from mouth to ear, and so handed down.'¹⁴

In Vol 4 of *The Conservator* journal for May 1861, Morris laid out his plan of action for his Conservator movement:

Absolute secrecy in all matters regarding the Conservators.

Conservators will support each other directly and through a journal (*The Conservator*)

Absolute harmony and unity of the ritual in every detail according to the Preston & Webb system.

A special degree just for Conservators.

A Deputy Chief Conservator to attend every Grand Lodge annual communication to bestow the Conservator degree and demonstrate the Preston & Webb degree if asked.

Conservators will follow the same mode of dissemination as of the past (i.e. Preston & Webb).

A \$10 contribution is required of all Conservators which will cover the degree fee, a copy of Webb-Preston, a copy of the Mnemonics book and the Cipher, a copy of the Conservator journal, a share of lecture expenses to Grand Lodges.¹⁵

Morris' demand for absolute secrecy was explained in a second article in which he explained:

The reasons for this were thus given: We have a frightful accumulation of flaky, imperfect materials in the Masonic temple, totally uninformed in all Masonic learnings. Webb and Preston performed their work through private instrumentalities, as we will do.¹⁶

Morris would surely have realized that few leaders in their Grand Lodges, or individual lodges, would take kindly to being described as 'flaky, imperfect material ... totally

¹³ S. B. Morris, 'The Folger Manuscript: A Paper on Cryptanalysis', a paper given at the Canonbury Masonic Research Centre, 8 September 1999. See also R. Morris (Ed.), *The Miniature Monitor: Containing All the Monitorial Instructions in Blue Lodge Masonry of Thomas Smith Webb* (New York: Maynard, Merrill & Co., 1872), 8.

¹⁴ Beaderstadt, *The Grand Luminary*, 27; Denslow, *The Masonic Conservators*, 4off.

¹⁵ Denslow, *The Masonic Conservators*, 100.

¹⁶ Denslow, *The Masonic Conservators*, 99. To write this publicly suggests either naivety or intemperance from one who was a former Grand Master, responsible for standards.

MNEMONICS. 7

DIVISION I.—MORAL PHILOSOPHY.

TABLE I.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
1	177	18	46	×	93	24	74	24	9	21	94	30	4	1	17	11	60
2	23	58	87	40	-	20	7	41	10	17	102	92	59	55	-	80	×
3	56	116	10	80	20	116	-	10	72	30	75	21	35	21	24	4	72
4	89	40	59	21	56	24	59	74	9	20	22	37	×	36	9	1	1
5	101	-	49	70	24	116	51	9	10	55	-	43	51	93	10	1	10
6	17	41	68	32	32	3	24	10	28	123	75	50	125	74	38	74	59
7	×	5	74	24	21	24	55	85	72	-	22	26	101	55	24	57	56
8	19	59	31	74	18	20	80	8	24	9	59	41	35	42	87	54	145
9	74	75	20	64	40	77	116	12	8	10	9	42	79	59	×	30	1
10	73	22	74	1	28	17	59	74	37	59	10	68	74	51	17	8	43
11	69	75	87	61	24	26	32	133	14	75	34	10	4	=	21	54	64
12	9	22	28	1	75	16	75	24	+	22	23	75	8	24	55	30	1
13	74	56	22	64	22	8	68	41	8	59	96	78	39	80	113	1	85
14	5	89	17	30	79	33	58	48	80	33	34	18	29	20	14	19	55

A portion of a page of cipher ritual from Rob Morris, *Written Mnemonics* (1860).
Pencilled annotations have been added to show the "flow" of the cipher.

uninformed in all Masonic learnings.' As secondary plans, subordinate to the one great object of uniformity, the following are given by Morris:

The dissemination of the Ancient and genuine Work and Lectures of the first three degrees of Masonry, as arranged by William Preston and taught by Thomas Smith Webb.

The discountenancing of all changes, and innovations and errors of any sort, introduced into the first three degrees since the death of Webb in 1819.

A perfect uniformity in the means of recognition, the ceremonies, the language of the Lectures, and everything that is secret in Symbolical Masonry.

The building up of Schools of Instruction in every Lodge, in which the same Work and Lectures shall be taught that are taught everywhere else.

Instructing intelligent and ardent Masons for the work and responsibility of Masonic Lecturers.

Affording travelling brethren the opportunity to pass themselves with honor and credit into every Lodge they may visit.

Strengthening the ties that bind Masonry generally together by the additional ties of Conservators of the Work

The detection and exposure of imposters
 Mutual acquaintance, conference, counsel and sympathy amongst the Conservators.
 Opening the way for a more intimate communication between the Masons of
 Europe and America.¹⁷

Morris started to attract supporters but what these made of the *Mnemonics* book is debateable. It was a thin, hard cover, 135-page book printed in 17 columns across and 25 rows deep. Its full title was '*Written Mnemonics, illustrated by copious example from moral philosophy, science and religion.*' It was thus divided into three divisions of Moral Philosophy (4–37), Science (38–59) and Religion (60–87) with addenda (90–135). The cipher is composed of letters, numbers, mathematical symbols, and occasional capital letters with all words then having a number in alphabetical order. It is almost impossible to read and cannot cope well with minor variations such as there/their/they're/they are/there are. Also, it does not cope well with such variations as Freemason/Freemasonry/Freemasons/Freemasonic/Free Masons/masons/ masonry etc. The Iowa Masonic library holds one of the few copies of the *Mnemonics*. Many others must have just been thrown away.

Morris' structure and organization also aroused deep suspicion. During 1863, for example, a committee of nine, appointed by the Grand Lodge of Michigan, conferred with Morris on several occasions, and on 14 January 1864, submitted a lengthy report which indicated it had made an exhaustive search for the facts about the Conservators, and, more particularly their methods. It concluded that the scheme was unlawful, un-Masonic, and opposed to the real interest of Masonry.¹⁸ The committee then listed a summary of 12 points which they claimed were part of the obligation of a full Conservator, much of which they found objectionable. These were:

1. To secrecy.
2. That every document furnished the candidate as a member of the Conservator's association, whether written or printed, is to be considered as between himself and the Chief Conservator
3. To answer and obey all summonses by the Chief Conservator, and of such as may be duly accredited to him, without question as to the object or intent thereof.
4. To aid and help all Conservators in distress or in need of help, with advice, money, information, service, or in any other way,
5. That the great end of the Association shall be constantly kept in view, and uniformity of work, upon the basis prescribed by the Chief Conservator, commonly called the Webb-Preston system, shall be strenuously urged, to the exclusion of all other systems.
6. Every Conservator is bound to use all his influence to obtain and hold the first three offices in his lodge; to teach the Morris system and no other, and to seek by every

¹⁷ Denslow, *The Masonic Conservators*, 100.

¹⁸ *Grand Lodge of Michigan proceedings 1864*. Personal communication from J. L. Baderstadt.

available means to obtain possession of the Grand Lodge so as to compel all Lodges to adopt and use the above-named system of work.

7. To root out all the old Masons who adhere to any other system from office; to depreciate and diminish their influence, to seduce them to their support, when necessary or advisable, by giving them unimportant offices; to create divisions and jealousies among them; to attack them and drive them from all participation in the business or counsels of the Craft.

8. To menace and threaten all brethren who will not submit to their terms; to aggravate and persistently annoy them until they commit some indiscreet act so that they may take advantage of the same.

9. To make use of power when obtained to propagate the system of work dictated by the Chief Conservator, and to break down every Lodge that stands in its way.

10. To keep all secrets communicated by Conservators, without exception, let their character or objects be what they may.

11. To insist everywhere, and at all times, that the system of the Chief Conservator is the only true system, and that all other systems are illegitimate.

12. Not to assist in the making of a Conservator, who had not previously declared, in writing, that he will fully conform to all the rules of the order.¹⁹

If these allegations are substantiated, and they do not appear to have been made by any other person or body, then these would fly in the face of everything that Masonry stands for and could put Morris, and his movement, in a completely untenable position. It makes no sense that Morris would attract the support he did, a support which Morris himself said included 28 Grand Masters and Past Grand Masters, many Grand Secretaries and other dignitaries of the Order, if he was advocating in any way the approach suggested above. Morris also reports that he had demonstrated the Webb & Preston proposed rituals to the Grand Lodge of Michigan two or three years before this investigation and received a positive response. Of course, many of the senior positions may have changed during that time. Was Morris being disingenuous? Was he revealing, in secret, a different side to his personality and methods? Morris responded to these accusations in a third article in the *Conservators' Journal*:

The origin of this attack upon Conservatism may thus be explained. There are in the city of New York various Sunday papers One of these journals, however, employed as "Masonic Editor" a person long expelled from the Order of Knighthood, a literary Bohemian, ready to write on either side, or both sides for pay. This person . . . found his interest in attacking it [The Conservators]. Securing some of the documents published by that society, he published them, accompanied by denunciatory and inflammatory comments.²⁰

¹⁹ Baderstadt, *The Grand Luminary*, 26ff.

²⁰ *Conservator Association Journal*, 493.

Morris then continues to explain how he was able to answer all these charges in places which allowed him to do so. Others, however, reacted to this misrepresentation and began to forbid the Conservators from their territories. Morris notes that the 3000 Conservators remained as members, knowing the allegations to be false, but that for the sake of peace and harmony they agreed to dissolve the Conservators Association before its allotted period of five years. Morris does not specifically say that he has never said, or even implied, points 6, 7, 8, and 9 of the allegations above – but they are so foolishly brutish as to be highly questionable in the light of everything else Morris had written. Further, to refer to the proposed changes as the ‘Morris system’ also contradicts everything else Morris had written in describing his proposals. If the accusations were false, as appears likely, but were made as an attempt to stall both Morris and the Conservators, for whatever personal motives, then they seem to have worked. Also, some Conservators may have been left bruised by the experience. As Morris notes:

No man of sensitiveness who joins the Masonic order expects to be called a liar, a villain and a thief, and it is not strange when such language is employed by those elevated to high places, that he should turn away wounded, insulted, silent and disgusted. To impartial history we consign these attacks and the character and motives of our assailants.²¹

The report of the Michigan Grand Lodge committee was, however, adopted as was the following resolution:

Resolved; That, any attempt, by any person or body of men, to introduce or teach any change of our long-established lectures, is unconstitutional, un-Masonic, and deserves the most severe reprehension, and is by this Grand Lodge strictly forbidden within its jurisdiction.²²

Morris was not alone in the history of Freemasonry in finding that Masonry and change, in any form, are not comfortable bedfellows. Why Morris had chosen such a secretive, indeed subversive, approach with the Conservators requires explanation. As a past Grand Master, he should have understood the likely reaction from Grand Lodges, or more precisely, the senior members of Grand Lodges. Even the words used, if correct, are highly confrontational and threatening. Morris gives some explanation for his approach in another later article:

On the other hand, a combination led by a few office holders, upon information furnished them from an illegitimate source, denouncing in language as unmasonic as it is unchristian, the names, Aims, purposes and Masonic standing of the Conservators, vilifying their motives, falsifying their history and the principles of the Conservators’

²¹ Denslow, *The Masonic Conservators*, 103.

²² Denslow, *The Masonic Conservators*, 75.

Association, and in the cloud thus raised concealing their own official delinquencies and short comings – starting a *quasi* Masonic periodical as the organ of their abuse, and filling Grand Lodge proceedings for four years with statements as false in matter as abusive in manner – this on the other hand.²³

The predictable result was that the majority of Grand Lodges fought Morris and his movement. However, he was not without his defenders. Members of every Grand Lodge then in existence, except Colorado, District of Columbia, Oregon, and Virginia, had anywhere from one to more than one hundred Conservators among them. Indiana had by far the most members of the movement, and Illinois, Iowa, New Jersey, and New York had more than 100 each. The states with only one or two included Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Maine, Maryland, Rhode Island, and Washington, according to the partial listing of membership. The adverse publicity kept the full list from ever being published. If Morris' figures are correct, this must have created a severe disruption throughout US Masonry and had a major impact on Morris' reputation.

In the *Conservator Journal* Vol. 2 for November 1861 Morris reported on progress. He recorded that Indiana, North Carolina, Alabama, Kentucky, Vermont, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and Connecticut were already using the Webb work and Michigan, Wisconsin, and Tennessee had demonstrations and were considering it. He also recorded that there was opposition. Some Masonic publications were against the movement and one publication (from the Michigan Grand Lodge) had already made slanderous comments against the movement. *The Boston Magazine* and *The Cincinnati Review* had also attacked the Conservators. He then listed the complaints being made by them:

1. The Conservators are being presumptuous
2. The Conservators are mercenary and ambitious
3. The sealed secrecy is evidence of some guilt
4. The Conservators are disobedient to their Grand Lodges
5. The Webb work is not in fact genuine²⁴

Interestingly, the first four of the five criticisms could be seen as a direct condemnation of Morris himself and will be discussed shortly in this paper. Morris noted that Pennsylvania had 'gone out of its way in a thrust at us.'²⁵ Massachusetts had issued an edict to all lodges which was hard lined and implied ulterior motives. Also, Massachusetts had said of the Webb ritual that 'its language is baarborous [*sic*] and has not an ancient mak [*sic*] of the Craft about it.'²⁶

²³ Denslow, *The Masonic Conservators*, 101.

²⁴ *The Conservator Journal* 1861, Vol. 2., 16.

²⁵ *The Conservator Journal* 1861, Vol. 2., 40.

²⁶ Ibid. Note the spelling of an edict from a Grand Lodge at the time.

Shortly after the close of the Civil War, the life of the Conservator association ended, but its influence went on for several years. Ray Denslow believed there are, today, many states that follow closely the ritual of the *Mnemonics* (without using the cipher), although the movement did not accomplish its avowed purpose, which was complete uniformity of ritual. Some Grand Lodges, which during the Civil War condemned Morris and his coded ritual, used the methods they then rejected to teach the Masons of their jurisdictions today.

On reflection, the movement, born on 24 June 1860, could not have picked a more inopportune time for its purpose, for less than a year later the country was embroiled in the Civil War. Masons were uprooted from their homes and sent from state to state. Those who had become Conservators, or who leaned toward Morris, were unacceptable to those who felt he was trying to become a Masonic dictator. Some said that the unkind feelings between those for and against Morris were sharper than they were between the Masons of the North and South.

Interestingly, some Grand Lodges adopted a resolution forbidding the Masons from either the North or South to meet in Masonic fellowship. A few Grand Masters did try to have this resolution enforced, but did not, however, succeed. Far more Grand Masters rebuked individual lodges and Masons for refusing to admit members on the opposite side of the conflict. Many Grand Lodges, however, did adopt resolutions forbidding their members to associate with Conservators. For example, the reunification oath of the Grand Lodge of Missouri noted the following:

I do solemnly declare, on my honor as a Master Mason, that I have never belonged to the so-called Conservators Association; that I do not now belong, to the same; and that I do, and will, forever denounce and repudiate the system, and all connected therewith.²⁷

In 1861 Rob Morris had been elected an honorary member of the Grand Lodge of Michigan; in 1864 that Grand Lodge rescinded its honour of three years earlier. From Maine to Oregon, Robert Morris was condemned. Thousands of unkind words were written about him.

The attacks on him stemmed not only from his activities with the Conservators, but also because Rob Morris had a reputation. Some insights into comments about Morris both before and after the Conservators might give some flavour as to how he was perceived by many others.

For example, when he first became a Mason, he was eventually appointed as Grand Chaplain of Mississippi where he styled himself as Reverend Morris – though he was never ordained as a clergyman. He joined and ran an enormous number of Masonic organizations during his life. One of them was the Masonic University, which began life as the Funk Seminary in 1842. In 1844 it was renamed the Masonic College and then took the

²⁷ Denslow, *The Masonic Conservators*, 70.

title of the Masonic University in 1852. It was owned by the Grand Lodge of Kentucky. It was a small building around the corner from where Rob Morris lived and was never recognised as a proper tertiary, educational institution. At the Masonic University he headed a faculty of one – himself – and was awarded, among other things, a Doctorate in Law and a Doctorate in Philosophy from himself as President of the University. There were other teachers, but the faculty and University disappeared in under two years. A house fire that same year supposedly (and conveniently) destroyed all his (and the colleges) papers and certificates.²⁸

Andrew Prescott's paper 'Rob Morris and Scottish Freemasonry' also provides an interesting insight into Morris. He writes:

The legend that Robert Burns was Poet Laureate of Canongate Kilwinning Lodge is not minuted in lodge records – only that he became a member in 1787. However, the Lodge later decided to try and link itself to Burns's reputation by appointing James Hogg as his successor as Poet Laureate in 1835 – 39 years after Burns's death and 52 years after his affiliation to the lodge. After Hogg's death, the lodge continued to appoint further Poet Laureates including, in 1905, Rudyard Kipling. In 1876, the American Masonic adventurer, Rob Morris, visited Edinburgh. Morris, who had a self-awarded doctorate from the Masonic university started by him in Kentucky, is best known as the founder of the Order of the Eastern Star. He was also a turgid Masonic poet. In 1876, he visited Lodge Canongate Kilwinning, and lapped up the traditions of Burns as Poet Laureate. Morris saw an unmissable opportunity for self-promotion. In 1884, he persuaded the Grand Lodge of New York that he should be appointed as the Poet Laureate of Freemasonry – presumably of all Freemasonry. He claimed that there had been no such appointment since Burns's death – what the fourteen men who had held the office of Poet Laureate in Canongate Kilwinning Lodge since Burns's death would have thought of this claim is difficult to imagine. Letters were supposedly sent to prominent Masons throughout the world to see whether Morris was worthy of being crowned as the successor to Burns, and hundreds of replies supposedly received in his favour. It was said that from every quarter came back the cry that Morris should be crowned as poet laureate because he had earned it. Morris was crowned with the laureate's wreath in an extravagant ceremony in New York, which was widely reported in the press with the claim that a successor to Burns had at last been found.²⁹

Morris's claim that he was promoting an older, purer form of the ritual was also damaged by the fact that in 1850 one of his schemes had been to invent a new order for the womenfolk of Masons to become known as the Order of the Eastern Star. His intention was that every Masonic lodge would, one day, have an Eastern Star Chapter attached

²⁸ Morris suffered several fires during his lifetime. One of these supposedly destroyed a large sum of money while he was having dinner elsewhere. Another fire supposedly destroyed all the papers from the questionable Masonic University. See Kearsley, *On the Square*, for a fuller description.

²⁹ For fuller detail see A. Prescott & S. Somers, 'Hidden in Plain Sight', *The Square*, Vol. 42. No. 4 December 2016, 12–14.

to it. Morris openly wrote that he had sat down one day, entirely alone, and created a new Order with a new ritual supposedly based on bible stories involving women.³⁰ He had, however, introduced characters who did not exist in the bible and set scenes for which there was no biblical support. Spurious claims were later to be made that the ritual had originated in France, or some other uncertain place in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, and that Morris had discovered them and then consolidated them into a comprehensive system.

Morris was a prolific writer, but he also had many things written about him. *The Freemason's Monthly Magazine* produced by Charles Moore as Deputy Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts, has a number of mentions of Morris. In the 1868 issue XXVII Morris is mentioned. The editor noted: 'we learn from our intelligent contemporary *The Keystone* that the American Cagliostro, Rob Morris, has published a so-called *Dictionary of Freemasonry*.'³¹

The writer then continued to mock the LLD after Morris' name: 'a title which he conferred on himself ... and which distinction he sent broadcast throughout the United States, merely asking in return the fee of \$10 from those who were selected by him to be the recipients of such honorary(!) distinction.'³²

Morris was also a prolific writer of religious songs and poetry; 'turgid poetry' in the view of Prescott (and also this author). Over 400 poems with a Masonic theme were written by him. They do not impress the modern readers, who are largely unaware of their existence, and seem to have had their detractors also at the time.

Morris revealed something of the ham actor (and vanity?) in him when speaking about his own poetry:

Twenty years since, before a brilliant assembly of Masons and their lady guests at Indianapolis, Indiana, I expressed, in effect, the following thoughts upon 'The Poetry of Masonic Literature': If Masonic literature may justly be divided, like other branches of human knowledge, into departments, then we may style one of those divisions Poetry ...

As compared with any other theme, I would give the preference to Symbolical Masonry as the richest in poetic thought, and I can only hope that the day is not distant when a great poet will arise who will be to Freemasonry what Scott was to chivalry, Moore to patriotism, Burns to rustic love.

My attention was early turned, as a Masonic student, to the department of poetry, and whatever grade of merit may be attached to my own effusions, I may justly claim to have searched with assiduity the gems of poetic thought buried in the mines of Masonic literature and brought them to the public eye.³³

³⁰ See Baderstadt, *The Grand Luminary*, 94.

³¹ Baderstadt, *The Grand Luminary*, 60.

³² Ibid.

³³ L. V. Rule, *Pioneering in Masonry, the Life and Times of Rob Morris, Masonic Poet Laureate, Together with The Story of Clara Barton and the Eastern Star* (Louisville, Kentucky: Brandt & Connors, 1922), 244.

Morris is noted, also, for his expedition to the Holy Land and the creation of the first Masonic lodge there. Morris developed the idea of venturing to the Holy Land and while there to visit places linked with Freemasonic history, such as the temple at Jerusalem, Tyre (home of King Hiram), Mt Lebanon, Gebal (home of Hiram Abiff) and many other places. This idea grew to a fully financed two-year expedition (fully financed by others, of course) which he described in his book *Freemasonry in the Holy Land*. Morris's pilgrimage to the Holy Land is covered by the *Freemason's Monthly Magazine* thus:

it is doubtful, or rather it is not doubtful at all, that a more absurd and ridiculous enterprise was never undertaken by a sane man, and Morris knows it. He knows he is fooling his friends and making a laughing stock of himself by his wild and extravagant pretensions ... it is enough for him that he has succeeded in making the requisite number of dupes ... to start him on his journey; and it would not be a matter of surprise to those acquainted with his peculiar characteristics, if he should also succeed in begging or borrowing off his foreign brethren additional means enough to continue him on his way ...³⁴

There followed a letter from a German brother advising that they were well aware of Rob Morris and his tricks and would not be associated with him, noting: 'he will find not the least aid for his hopeless mission in Germany.'³⁵

Later, when Morris was in the Holy Land the magazine noted the following: 'this erratic brother who, as our readers well know, is pursuing one of his Quixotic speculations in the Holy Land writes home that, as usual with him, he is low in funds.'³⁶

Morris was seeking a donation of \$3 or \$5 from anybody and in return was promising a collection of artefacts on his return – less for \$3 and more for \$5. The magazine responded with:

we are at a loss to determine whether the fool, or the knave, predominate in this promise. It is the most impudent piece of humbuggery and mountebankism that we have ever met with ... And it is with such contemptible and insane promises, that this notorious charlatan expects to replenish his exhausted finances to enable him to wander like a vagabond around the world, at the expense of his befooled and credulous victims.³⁷

Morris's return was treated with equal contempt: 'he has placed before us a piece of white composition said to be a stone from the Temple [of Solomon] but by judges here pronounced to be Plaster of Paris.'³⁸ This was seen, by the editor, as further evidence of 'the twaddle he has furnished one of our western contemporaries with.'³⁹

³⁴ Rule, *Pioneering in Masonry*, 178.

³⁵ Rule, *Pioneering in Masonry*, 179.

³⁶ Rule, *Pioneering in Masonry*, 262.

³⁷ Rule, *Pioneering in Masonry*, 262.

³⁸ Rule, *Pioneering in Masonry*, 262.

³⁹ Rule, *Pioneering in Masonry*, 262. The above comments belie the considerable efforts he went to in collecting

Many American Masons will be aware of the Morgan Affair which almost destroyed Freemasonry in the North East United States in the late 1820s. It centred on the abduction and supposed murder of one William Morgan who was planning to reveal all the secrets and rituals of Freemasonry in a published book. It resulted in the formation of an anti-Masonic party, mass defections from lodges, the imprisonment of several Freemasons, and the closure of many Grand Lodges for over a decade. They may not realise, however, that almost all that was written about this event came from Rob Morris, and this many years after the events themselves. Morris was living in the area where the events first took place and would have been around ten years old at the time. Morris wrote a number of books and papers about the affair which largely exonerated Freemasonry.

Stephen Dafoe's comprehensive book, *Morgan, the scandal that shook Freemasonry*, tells a somewhat different story to Morris. Dafoe describes Morris as a master of telling his audience what they wanted to hear. It is important to remember that Freemasonry had only recently returned from a period of Masonic darkness that ran for nearly two decades and was only now beginning to grow to strength after the conclusion of the American Civil War. But it was also a time when The National Christian Association, assisted by a passionate anti-Mason, Thurlow Weed, were rekindling anti-Masonic feelings with the erection of the Morgan monument in 1882 and Weed's death-bed support of the same. Dafoe felt that one could hardly blame Morris for wanting to defend Freemasonry, an institution he loved, and whose book *William Morgan* was released within months of the erection of the Morgan monument. But is it a true account of what happened? As much as we would like to believe every word of Morris's account, Dafoe's conclusion is very clear – it was a lie.⁴⁰ Dafoe then detailed where Morris had rewritten history and added unsupported supposition in order to present his views.

The picture of Morris is thus tainted by a number of initiatives which others have considered dubious. However, the charge of Morris being mercenary is not an easy one to substantiate. Morris made very little money from many of his schemes and often found himself in financial difficulty. If indeed some 3000 Masons may have been Conservatives, as Morris claimed, then this might imply that Morris collected \$30,000 from the scheme. This would have been a substantial sum at the time. However, he recorded that 400 members were not asked to pay for various reasons, that others never paid anyway. Furthermore the printing of *Mnemonics* and other publications, the administration and travel expenses, and the fact that some fees were paid in Confederate money, which soon became worthless, suggests that he did not benefit much personally from the scheme at

and recording thousands of artefacts and then in writing copious notes about them and about his journey. His literary output was at least prodigious.

⁴⁰ See also S. Dafoe, 'The Lie Rob Morris Told', *The Square* Vol. 42 No. 4 (December 2016), 7.

all. When he died, for example, his entire estate was valued at about \$4,500 and he had only \$79.98 in the bank.⁴¹

His greatest challenge, and one which has defeated many others before and since, was the entrenched parochialism and commitment to position and power which characterises many organizations such as Freemasonry. Morris may have been concerned about purity of ritual and dissemination of Masonic philosophy but many others in senior positions (some of whom were paid) were more concerned with rank and authority and their own pockets. It was inevitable that those in command would resist him and see him as subversive and indeed dangerous.

In a fourth article Morris reflected on what the Conservators had achieved.⁴² Firstly, it had established that there was an older system of ritual, the Webb & Preston rituals (which, of course, should be adopted by all American Masons). Secondly, that the Conservators had driven out many of the spurious rituals formerly being used. Thirdly, it had revealed what dangerous powers lay in the hands of Grand Secretaries and how these could be abused. Fourthly, that a group of dedicated Masons had expressed their view by confronting their own Grand Lodges; common sense had assured their individual rights as members of the Craft. Fifthly, that the Conservators had established a national uniformity of ritual which was now being widely adopted.

Writing from LaGrange, Kentucky in 1866 Morris penned his last article for the *Conservator Journal* and thus for his supporters:

The writer, being poor in fortune, not having a Grand Lodge salary to keep him up, having a large family and being much encumbered with debts, could not travel and visit his brother Conservators, as he would like to have done and as it was contemplated he should do. He has not even been able for want of time and means to visit the Grand Lodge of his own State, alas for several years. Such visits would have animated the Conservators and given him an opportunity to make explanations before Grand Lodges where they were needed. This will ever be a cause of regret.

The writer, in conclusion, tenders the farewell hand to the large and noble band who have stood by him during all these trials. While such a moral support was extended him, he could bear with patience, fortitude, and even cheerfulness, the utmost malice of the anti-conservators. He has no cause for regret in anything he has suffered, and has but one favour to ask of old friends, viz, to allow no man unanswered to vilify his Masonic reputation. Let the animosities of the past be forgotten. With this article he bids farewell to the subject. His maligners, who have fattened upon the opposition they have made against us, are welcome to their earnings. Let the matter rest between them and their own consciences. But from old friends, who have been associated with him in this 'Holy war', he asks and expects a generous vindication. And now, farewell.⁴³

⁴¹ Inventory of Morris estate, courtesy J. L. Baderstadt.

⁴² See Denslow, *The Masonic Conservators*, 104.

⁴³ Denslow, *The Masonic Conservators*, 104, also *The Conservators Association*, 543.

He stayed in LaGrange, Kentucky for the rest of his life, keeping a lower profile while continuing his research and writing, notably about the Morgan Affair. Gradually the furore against him with regard to the Conservators abated over time. He died at his home on 31 July 1888, a month before his 70th birthday and was buried not far from his home where the tallest monument in the cemetery marks his final resting place. Few Freemasons today bother to visit it.

J. A. Glidewell (2010) when speaking of Morris, and, specifically, the failure of Morris' plans to have an Eastern Star Chapter attached to every Masonic lodge and his aspirations for the Conservators movement, might be given the last word as summary for this paper:

While the older conservatives were still in the positions of power and commanded the greatest respect in the Fraternity they were – as is usually the case – less vociferous and outspoken than their younger brethren. A skilful organizer would have recognized this at once, and laid his plan, and made his campaign accordingly. He would have created a favourable opinion among the liberal Masons before taking the matter to the more conservative leaders in the Fraternity. The failure of Dr Morris to recognize this, and take it into his plans, may have defeated the very thing he hoped to accomplish. His zeal for Masonry knew no bounds, and his efforts to introduce a modified system of lectures into American Masonry in 1861, may have had much to do with defeating his effort to secure recognition of the Eastern Star ... There were two important results from the controversy: the older conservatives were called out of their retirement to defend Masonry against innovation; and there was developed a deeper general interest in the history, traditions and landmarks of Freemasonry ... Dr Morris ... never saw his dream fulfilled. Nor is it probable that we will ever see it. American Masonry is far too conservative for any such innovation.⁴⁴

Acknowledgement

Special thanks to the Revd Jan Baderstadt, without whose collected papers on, and by, Rob Morris this paper would not have been possible.

⁴⁴ J. A. Glidewell, 'Rob Morris and the Eastern Star', Chapter 3 from *We Have Seen His Star* (Kessinger Publishing, 2010), 4 off.

Henry Harford: Last Proprietor & Provincial Grand Master of Maryland

Barry Hoffbrand

THE MINUTES OF SOMERSET HOUSE LODGE NO. 2 OF 12 MAY 1783 READ 'HENRY Harford Esq was Initiated into the first Degree of Masonry and, by Dispensation from his Royal Highness the Duke of Cumberland, Grand Master, signified to the Lodge by the Grand Secretary, was passed to the second Degree & raised to the Degree of Master Mason, on account of his intending in a short time to go to Maryland.'¹ (Fig. 1.)

The Minutes of the Grand Feast of 3 May 1783 listed amongst those present 'Henry Harford Esq^r P.G.M. for the Province of Maryland', nine days *before* his initiation into Freemasonry. (Fig. 2.) The Grand Secretary was James Heseltine, who also officiated as Right Worshipful Master of Somerset House Lodge on the occasion Harford was made a Mason. The similarly multi-tasking Thomas Dunkerley was minuted as present on both occasions, as Provincial Grand Master of Wilts and Dorset at the Grand Feast and as Provincial Grand Master for Essex at Somerset House Lodge. Henry Harford sailed

¹ A. W. Oxford, *No. 4: An Introduction to the History of the Royal Somerset House and Inverness Lodge* (London: Bernard Quartich, 1928), 41. The original Minutes indicate that Harford paid his fees despite Oxford's assertion to the contrary.