Freemasonry is driven by heritage. Our Craft looks to various pasts to determine its identity in the present: to sacred history through the Volume of Sacred Law, to the mythopoetic past of the so-called Traditional History, and to our organizational history as traced through regular Masonic institutions and their leaders. Added to all this is the special attention that modern Masonic historians direct toward authentic fragments of the fraternity’s history, for such evidence often sheds much-needed light upon the actions and motivations of early participants. However, there are times when, despite all of these deep concerns with the past, some key evidence is simply overlooked.

This article is the story of one such treasure: a short speech preserved only in a single manuscript, titled A Dissertation Upon Masonry, Delivered to a Lodge in America. A fresh transcription of the text was recently published, with critical annotations by the present writer, in the journal of the Philalethes Society. The Dissertation is an approximately eighteen-minute lodge oration or sermon, and is one of dozens of Masonic orations that survive from the eighteenth century. However, what makes this one so special is its early date. It was, according to the manuscript, given on June 24 (the Feast of Saint John the Baptist), 1734. This makes it the third oldest surviving Masonic speech, the earlier two being the oration of Francis Drake at the York Grand Lodge on December 27, 1726, and the talk delivered by Edward Oakley in London at the Lodge at the Carpenters’ Arms tavern on December 31, 1728. Although the early orations of Drake and Oakley and later ones by Martin Clare (1735) and Chevalier Ramsay (1737) have received moderate to extensive degrees of recognition and analysis within Masonic scholarship, the Dissertation Upon Masonry is comparatively unknown, and thus, unexamined.

1849: A DISCOVERY IN THE LIBRARY

A Dissertation Upon Masonry was discovered in manuscript form in 1849 within the archives of the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts by Charles Whitlock Moore (1801–1873). Moore was a native Bostonian who apprenticed in newspaper publishing, and later established himself as a leading Masonic journalist of his era. For purposes (Continue on pg. 3)
SRSS Bulletin Notes

Although libraries, museums and archives are generally accepted facets of our society, it will shock you to know that such is not the case within the Masonic world. For the most part, they remain the unsung historical collections of not only the fraternal world, but also of civil society. As a result, many of our important Masonic documents and artifacts remain forgotten and even lost forever as we become more and more untrained in the deeper aspects of our past. Not everything is instantly available on the internet, and tech-savvy budding researchers remain lacking in many important resources.

However, much like the stone that the builders rejected, keen eyes do occasionally recognize something—a document, a photograph, or an artifact—for its true worth, and sometimes this discovery can dramatically alter the way we interpret the Craft’s history. In this issue of The Plumbline, Shawn Eyer, Editor of the Journal of the Philalethes Society, introduces us to one of those little known treasures that may indeed shed light upon the early Craft in the fledgling United States. Indeed, it may be the earliest known surviving Masonic oration!

Its rediscovery, or rather its revised redesignation, will show us much about how our early brethren approached their Freemasonry. How many other similar documents are awaiting discovery in our lodge or grand lodge archives? Masonic culture is rich, but fragile. Any loss will invariably leave gaps in the history of our own societies, and not just the fraternity. It’s examples like this that encourage us to better understand history by obtaining for ourselves the intellectual tools needed to conduct our research. Perhaps we can potentially rediscover that rejected stone…

Heredom Mailing Label Error

Attention, SRRS Members: There has been a problem with the address labels for Heredom, and an explanatory email was sent to all SRRS members 3/8/2016. A summary of the message is as follows:

Heredom vol. 23, 2015, was mailed to you from Ann Arbor, MI, 2/29. Due to an error when your mailing label was created, the wrong name was paired with your address. Three things may happen:

1. You receive a copy of Heredom at your address with another member’s name. Please keep and enjoy this volume.
2. The copy of Heredom with your address on it is returned to the SRRS. We will resend this to you.
3. If your copy of Heredom does not arrive by April 1, let us know by emailing srrs@scottishrite.org, and we will send you another.

We apologize for the error and appreciate your understanding.

Letters and Submissions

If you would like us to consider an original, unpublished, scholarly article of between 2,000–6,000 words for publication in The Plumbline, please send us a query via email to AKendall@ScottishRite.org including the following information: name, address, Masonic affiliation (if any), contact information (telephone and email). Please also include a short summary—one paragraph or less—of your article including the title, subject, and the theme of the piece. We will respond to queries promptly, and authors of articles we are interested in will be asked to forward their entire manuscript to us electronically. *Please direct all letters to the editor, comments or concerns to AKendall@ScottishRite.org*
of scholarly reference, the manuscript is properly named the C.W. Moore MS., after its discoverer. According to Moore, the manuscript contained two documents: the previously-unknown 1734 Dissertation followed by a transcript of the so-called Leland MS.

Moore transcribed the Dissertation and published it in the August 1, 1849, edition of his Freemasons’ Monthly Magazine under the headline, “The First Masonic Discourse Delivered in America.” Introducing the item, he offered a number of questionable opinions:

The following is probably the first address ever delivered before a Masonic Lodge in America. The first Lodge chartered in this country was in July, 1733. This address was delivered in Boston, the 24th of June, 1734. Earlier addresses may have been delivered on some particular occasions: but if so, we have no record of them. Nor is such a supposition hardly probable, in view of the condition of the Fraternity prior to 1733. We think, therefore, that it is safe to assume, that this is the first public Masonic discourse ever delivered in America. We discovered it in the archives of the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts. The name of the author is not attached to it. We give the spelling, punctuation, and capital letters, as they appear in the original. The Bodleian Manuscript, with Mr. Locke’s notes, appended to the address by the author, we omit. The address has never before been published; and we give it to the readers of this Magazine, as one of the most interesting papers with which we have recently been enabled to enrich our pages.⁶

This preface makes some presumptions about which we ought to be cautious. Moore matter-of-factly states that the Dissertation was given in the Lodge at Boston, although there is no indication of that in the manuscript itself. He also opines that “in view of the condition of the Fraternity prior to 1733,” it seemed unlikely to him that there could have been any earlier oration given either in the lodge at Boston or any other lodge, and that therefore the Dissertation was “the first public Masonic discourse ever delivered in America.” These interpretations are overeager—but not by much.

Moore’s idea that the oration must have been given in Boston is likely based upon the fact that the manuscript was found in the library of the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts, and reinforced by the fact that there were few lodges operating in America on the Feast of Saint John the Baptist, 1734. But, while it is true that there were few documented lodges operating in America at the time, even the fact that there were several means that we cannot automatically assume the oration was given in the Lodge at the Bunch of Grapes tavern in Boston. It is highly possible that the oration is from that lodge, but it cannot be known for certain at this time.

More unlikely is Moore’s finding that the oration is “the first public Masonic discourse ever delivered in America.” First, a careful review of the language of the oration shows that it was not addressed to the public in any way, but to Freemasons alone. The title of the Dissertation says that it was “Deliver’d to a Lodge in America,” and the text frequently relies upon internal Masonic rhetoric. It is possible that by “public,” Moore simply intended to imply that the address was spoken to the assembled brethren. Even so, it is doubtful that it was the first Masonic oration ever given on the American continent. Orations were a typical feature of many lodges, and lodges that did not have speeches by the brethren elucidating Masonic topics were seen as lacking an important aspect of Freemasonry.⁷

That said, the status of the Dissertation is impressive, despite the document’s obscurity. It is surely one of the earliest American Masonic orations. It is the third oldest Masonic oration that survives in the world. It is the oldest American Masonic speech that is preserved. And we must not overlook the fact that we have the orations of Drake and Oakley in published form alone, both of which, while originally given in private lodge settings, were also intended for, and possibly redacted for, public distribution. The 1734 Dissertation was never intended to be published, which makes it the oldest surviving example of private Masonic instruction in the world.⁸

Thus, Moore’s enthusiasm for the document he discovered is fully justified. Unfortunately, his publication of the oration did not have the impact that he had hoped.

THE MASONIC & ACADEMIC RECEPTION

An extensive literature review reveals that as few as four Masonic writers (excluding the present author) ever wrote anything about the Dissertation after Moore’s initial publication: Rob Morris, Albert G. Mackey, Lawrence Greenleaf, and Henry W. Coil.

Rob Morris mentioned the Dissertation in two of his works, but offered no interpretations of it in either.⁹

In 1865, Albert G. Mackey wrote a short article, “The Eloquence of Masonry,” in which he accepted Moore’s assignment for the Dissertation to Boston, and offered a short assessment: “This address is well written, and of a symbolic character, as the author represents the Lodge as a type of heaven.”¹⁰ This article became the basis for Mackey’s entry, “Addresses, Masonic,” in his classic Encyclopaedia of Freemasonry and Its Kindred Sciences.¹¹

In 1896, Lawrence N. Greenleaf cited the Dissertation as evidence of the antiquity of Freemasonry in general and of the trigradal system in particular.¹²

Henry W. Coil is apparently the only twentieth century Masonic author to refer to the Dissertation, although his reference is derivative of Mackey’s.¹³ In his 1961 Encyclopedia, Coil acknowledged the oration, but was careful not...
to adopt the assumptions made by prior authors, stating: “On June 24, 1734, an unknown speaker delivered to an unknown American lodge ‘A Dissertation upon Masonry,’ which was reprinted in Moore’s Masonic Magazine [sic], Vol. 8, p. 289 (1849).” A review of the cumulative indices of Ars Quatuor Coronatorum from 1886 to 2014 reveals no reference to the 1734 oration. Unless something has been overlooked, the only Freemasons ever to write about the Dissertation between Moore’s discovery in 1849 and the 2015 critical edition in Philalethes are the four mentioned above.

Luckily, the Dissertation Upon Masonry was not quite as neglected within the academic world. The first academic study performed was within a 1968 M.A. thesis by Ross Frank Cooke. Cooke’s thesis attempted to analyze the structure of the address, but was limited by a rather superficial knowledge of Freemasonry.

Steven C. Bullock’s Revolutionary Brotherhood cited the Dissertation repeatedly as evidence of the ideals of Colonial Freemasonry, and illustrations of the social challenges and transformations of which the Fraternity was a part. Bullock found that lodge sermons “often provide the most accessible means of understanding Masonic self-perceptions.”

David G. Hackett’s That Religion in Which All Men Agree noted the Dissertation as evidence of a degree of heterodoxy within Colonial Freemasonry: “Most Saint John’s sermons stressed polite Christianity, yet [the 1734] oration suggests a divergence between it and Freemasonry.”

These examples apparently describe the entire response to the discovery of this important early Masonic speech.

THE CRITICAL SUMMER OF 1734

The date of the address confirms that it was an oration for the Feast of Saint John the Baptist, perhaps the most essential holiday of the Masonic Order. The title indicates that the oration was given to “a Lodge in America.” There is no information available to identify the specific lodge.

The summer of 1734 was a pivotal period for American Freemasonry. Two June 24 lodge meetings are documented. The Pennsylvania Gazette of June 27 recorded that “Monday last, a Grand Lodge of the Ancient Honourable Society of Free and Accepted Masons in this Province, was held at the Tun Tavern in Water-Street, when Benjamin Franklin being elected Grand-Master for the Year ensuing... After which a very elegant entertainment was provided, and the Proprietor, the Governor, and several other persons of distinction, honored the Society with their presence.”

The same day’s events in Boston are recorded as follows: “5734 June 24. Being the anniversary of S’ John the Baptist the Brethren Celebrated the Feast in due manner and Form, and chose Our R’ Worshl Bro: M’ Frederick Hamilton Master of the Lodge.” Both of these are potential locations of the Dissertation’s original delivery.

That summer, Franklin released his edition of Anderson’s Constitutions, which was first advertised on May 16. Franklin shipped 70 copies to Boston in August. A few months later, Franklin applied for a charter from Henry Price in Boston, ultimately bringing the Pennsylvania Masons under the Grand Lodge of England. Thus, this particular Feast of Saint John the Baptist took place during an important time of growth.

A Dissertation Upon Masonry, composed and delivered at the center of all this activity, provides valuable insight into the internal activities and self-conceptualizations of the Masons of that crucial period.

A SUMMARY OF THE 1734 DISSERTATION

The Dissertation begins by invoking aspects of the Traditional History of Freemasonry, including the legend that a “Vast number of Emperors & Princes, Inventors of usefull arts, Divines and Philosophers ... have in all ages voluntarily taken upon themselves, the Badge of our profession.” The speaker then singles out Saint Paul, who he calls “the powerfull propagator of the Gospel, the profound Scholar, the skilfull architect, the Irresistable orator,” as a notable example as such great men who were legendarily part of the Craft. While we are not used to thinking of Saint Paul as a Masonic brother, it was in fact a fairly common theme in eighteenth century Masonic literature, and is obliquely referenced in Anderson’s Constitutions.

While Paul was in darkness prior to his initiation, “he was an Enemy to the Lodge, like some of us before admission, he despis’d the Sacred Institution,
and Ridicul’d it with all his wit and Eloquence, but he afterward became its Glory & Support.” The Dissertation considers Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 13:11: “When I was a child, says he, I understood as a Child … but when I became a man (an Expression Emphatically Significant among us) when I became a man then … I put away Childish things.” The speaker finds a special inference in this transformation from a childish to a manly mental state, connecting it to Masonic initiation.

This pattern continues as he considers another text, paraphrased from 2 Corinthians 12:2–5. Before going into it in detail, the Dissertation makes an assertion that might be startling to a modern reader, but was probably not that unusual within the early Masonic context. The 1734 speaker holds that Freemasons have the advantage of a special insight by means of sharing in an ancient fraternal bond:

...the whole passage is well worth Repeating & I propose therefrom to Continue my present Discourse; only observing by the way, that the learned annotators & Interpreters of Scriptures, however penetrating & clear they have been in other dark places, yet none of them been of ye Lodge, they Could not possibly Conceive the apostle’s true meaning in this mysterious part of his Epistle & I have therefore given the World an unintelligible Explication.

Allusions to the belief that Freemasons could obtain special insight that allowed them to understand esoteric meanings in Biblical passages can be found in other early Masonic literature: the Dissertation is not the only example of this concept.⁴ If we perceive this as a radical idea in the twenty-first century, it was probably no less remarkable in the eighteenth century.

The Dissertation then continues into the hidden interpretation of 2 Corinthians 12:2–5, which is the central theme for the remainder of the oration.

I knew a man, Say’s he, meaning himself, above 14 years ago whither in the body, or out of the Body I cannot tell, but I knew such a one taken up into the third heaven into paradice where he heard unspeakable words which it is not lawful for any Man to utter, of such a one will I Glory. Freemasons know very well why the apostle calls himself a Man, they know why he could not tell whether, when he was made a mason he was in the Body or out of the Body, and what is meant by the body, they know also that by the third heaven or paradice is figur’d out the third & Chief degree of Masonry, & they are very well acquainted with those unspeakable words, which is not lawful for a man to utter, as a particular Explication of these things to the well Instructed Mason would be needless, so to the World it is needless and Improper.

The speaker’s perspective is fascinating, both in terms of his thesis and considering what he is saying about his Masonic audience. The “well instructed” members of the lodge are explicitly identified as a privileged group who have special understanding. The implication is clear both here and elsewhere in the Dissertation that there are both beginning and advanced Freemasons, and this drawn through the amount of instruction received. This demonstrates that what we would today call Masonic education was an established part of American Freemasonry in the 1730s—that is to say, from the beginning. While that Masonic education was of a very different nature, sometimes having a religious character that today’s members would find challenging, the Dissertation and other early orations and writings show that it existed both in English and American Masonry. Yet, we should be cautious about finding a reference to Saint Paul “too religious” while finding a reference to Solomon, Hiram of Tyre, and the Holy Saints John somehow more ordinary and neutral. Such a perception is arbitrary and distorts the intellectual culture of early Freemasonry.

The Dissertation then turns to elucidating the comparison of the tiled Masonic lodge to Paul’s vision of paradise or heaven. Many reasons are given for this celestial identification:

1) The lodge is like heaven in that “it is an absolute Monarchy, in which the Will of the Sovereign is a law, but so wisely Contrived & Established, that the Sovereign can never will nor Command any thing which is not exactly agreeable to the nature & reason of things, & by the Subjects Received and Submitted to with Pleasure; the pecul[i]ar light of Masonry Enabling to discern what is best with Regard to the Lodge…”²⁵

2) The lodge is like heaven “on account of the universal understanding which subsists therein betwixt brethren of vastly different Languages and Countries….”

3) The lodge is like heaven “on account of that human[,] Kind & fraternal treatment of each other which is therein used among the Brethren.” “In Heaven and in the lodge only are to be Seen humility without contempt, and dignity without Envy.”

4) The lodge is like heaven because “it is been Composed of good people of all Religions, Sects[,] persuasions & Denominations, of all nations and countrys, & I might add of all Generations of men in all ages since the Beginning of mankind.”²⁶

The 1734 speaker then shifts his discourse to the “Instruction to younger Bretheren,” and delineates some ways in which Masons ought to strive to make their lodge resemble paradise:

1) The lodge ought to be like paradise because “you that are members thereof of should[,] like the Inhabitants of that happy place, as far as possible, Endeavour to preserve a pure and unblemished life and Conversation....”
2) The lodge “ought to resemble Heaven in the most Cheerfull good humour, and the most perfect love and Charity among the Brethren: let there be no heart burning among us, let evry brother who happens to think himself disoblige[d] by another, open his Soul to the lodge & he shall be made Easy...”

3) The lodge ought to be like heaven “in absolutely refusing admission to improper persons: people of selfish ungenerous illnatur’d dispositions are utterly unfit to be made Masons, tis the Human Benevolent mind only, that deserves & is Capable of this Felicity: Such will naturally desire to join with us, as being pleased with evry thing, that tend to make mankind more happy; and such will apply with a suitable earnestness, of their own Freewill & voluntary motion[,] for by no means should we Invite or Endeavour to entice any-man...

4) The lodge “ought to Resemble Heaven in the most perfect secrecy of all their Transactions”

As the speaker articulates this last point, he distinguishes between two kinds of Masonic secrecy. His advice for the “younger” brethren is not to share the lodge's business with friends and family, echoing Anderson's Constitutions and many other early sources. But his reference to another class of Masonic secrecy is one of the Dissertation's true gems. He says that “The Essential Secrets of masonry indeed are Everlasting Safe, & never can be Revealed abroad, because they can never be understood by such as are unenlightened.”

Although it is commonly suggested by modern interpreters that in early Freemasonry the only secrets were the modes of recognition, this statement shows that the “Essential Secrets” were conceived of as something only attainable by initiates through special understanding. This higher order of Masonic secret was considered secure from exposure in a way that the password, grips, rituals, and catechisms were not.

The Dissertation culminates in some beautiful language based upon the Wisdom of Solomon 11:20:

-Reverencl'd be the memory of the Widow's Son, and Blessed be the name of the all Mighty architec[t]e, son of the virgin: Infinitely honnour'd be the name of the great Geometrican, who made all things, by weight and measure, and let love, peace, and unanimity Continue forever among Masons. Be it So.

MORE LIGHT ON COLONIAL MASONRY

For centuries, a Masonic treasure has been all but overlooked. The 1734 Dissertation Upon Masonry is an exceptionally rare and important document whose obscurity until now is unjustifiable. The Dissertation is, was noted earlier, the oldest extant American lodge oration, and the third oldest surviving Masonic oration in the world. Moreover, unlike the earlier two orations of Drake and Oakley, which have come down to us only published forms which strongly suggest the possibility or probability of an editorial stage between their initial oral delivery and their incarnations as printed artifacts, the transcript of the 1734 American oration was never intended to be published. It is clearly a lecture that could only be given in a tiled lodge, transcribed unedited. That means that it is the oldest surviving unmediated record of the private educational speech of speculative Freemasonry anywhere.

In any field, such a document would be considered a core text, which could not be neglected in any careful study of the subject. Despite this, it has been almost completely ignored since its discovery in 1849, which points to methodological blind spots that can be deleterious to our ultimate task of understanding early Freemasonry. Although academic historians Steven Bullock and David Hackett realized the Dissertation's critical value, the contents of the oration have been all but disregarded by Masonic historians. It has therefore failed to leave a trace in the narratives that Masons tell themselves about the Craft of the 1730s, as though it didn’t exist at all. Few were aware of it, and of those who did mention it, its existence was merely noted: what it had to say was not of interest, despite it being the only surviving example of American Masonic interpretation from the 1730s, the very decade that saw the Craft officially established in the Colonies.

Luckily, now that the importance of this document is becoming acknowledged, we may begin to better understand the American Freemasonry that thrived in the days of Henry Price and Benjamin Franklin. The 1734 Dissertation offers thought-provoking insight into the culture of early American Freemasonry, and cannot be legitimately excluded from any future historical analysis of the Craft in the American Colonies of that time.

While the Dissertation represents a very different style of Masonic education than that to which we are now accustomed, it also shows the longstanding concern with developing a deeper understanding of Masonic tradition, broadly defined, and with improving the lodge experience to conform to the Craft’s inspiring idealism. If we can recapture some of that original spirit, perhaps a portion of heaven will indeed be made discernable through our heartfelt Masonic labors.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shawn Eyre, 32° KCCH, is the editor of Ahiman: A Review of Masonic Culture and Tradition, and of Philalethes, North America’s oldest independent Masonic education journal. He is a Past Master of Academia Lodge No. 847, Oakland, California; Junior Warden of The Lodge of the Nine Muses No. 1776 in the District of Columbia; and a member of the Oakland Valley of the Ancient & Accepted Scottish Rite. Professionally, he serves as the Director of Communications and Development of The George Washington Masonic National Memorial Association.
ENDNOTES


7. See the earlier orations of Francis Drake (1726) and Edward Oakley (1728) in which it is clear that discussions on topics relevant to Masonry were recommended. Drake openly criticizes the York lodge for neglecting such lectures, but emphasizes that the London lodges were regularly engaging in them.

8. This statement applies to the Grand Lodge era.


13. A comparison of the entries on "Addresses, Masonic" in the encyclopedias of each author demonstrates the relationship.


15. This index is not exhaustive, so it may be that the Dissertation has been mentioned in AQC without being featured in the index—although if so, it is likely that such references would be slight.


19. Several commentators have assumed that the location of the address was Boston (Moore, Morris, Mackey, Cooke, Bullock, and Hackett). Although the Dissertation could have been delivered in any of the American lodges—the locations of most of which in 1734 are unknown—it seems likely that it originated either in Boston or Philadelphia.


25. The ability of Freemasons to communicate ideas despite language barriers was a common theme of early Masonic literature, tied to the story of the Masons who labored on the Tower of Babel.

26. Masonic scholars have often interpreted Masonic texts that mention Biblical themes (other than the Temple of Solomon, King Solomon, Hiram of Tyre, the Holy Saints John, and the various Biblical passages found in the degree work) as an indication of the exclusion of non-Christians. The Dissertation’s language here may provide some corrective insight. If the oration did not contain this line about accepting “all Religions, Sects[,] persuasions & Denominations,” many would have tended to interpret the document as exclusively Christian. The association of religious language with intolerance is, in fact, little more than an inappropriate modern bias. While thoroughly Christian in character, the 1734 Dissertation is almost certainly expressing that men of all religions were properly welcome in the Masonic lodge.

27. Although it did, apparently, have some circulation in manuscript form within the Fraternity. See Eyer, “A Dissertation Upon Masonry,” 64.
## Masonic Events Calendar

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<td>April 8–10, 2016</td>
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<td>The Badge of a Freemason: Masonic Aprons from the Collection</td>
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<td>California Masonic Symposium</td>
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If your jurisdiction is sponsoring a Masonic event of national or international importance, please submit the information listed above to AKendall@ScottishRite.org for review and possible publication.

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Indocti discant, ament meminisse periti.

"Let the unlearned learn, let the experts love to remember."

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