

Voting With Their Feet

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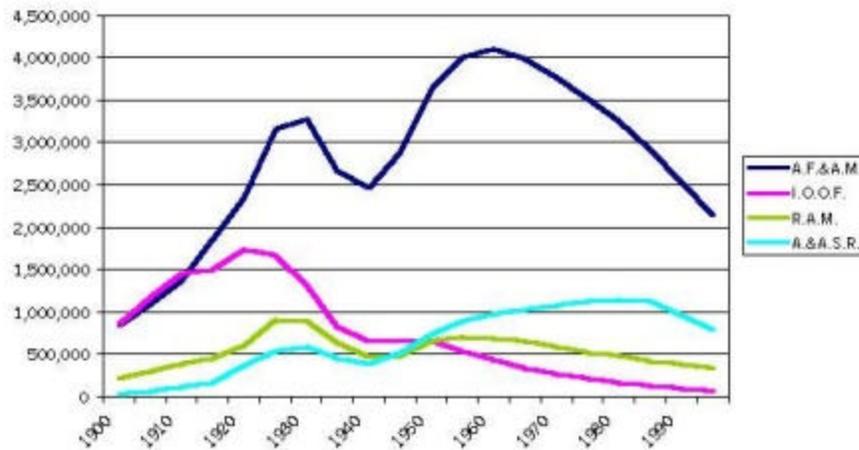
I love humanity. It's people I can't stand.
Linus van Pelt
Peanuts, Charles Schulz

Slow rumble of thunder is an early warning sign of a rain storm. Anyone working in a well-run building should be familiar with the clanging of the fire alarms. Few have heard but nearly everyone knows about the distinctive warning sound of a rattlesnake. These are all obvious warnings of impending danger, warnings which we have been trained to heed or face grave consequences. Other warning signs are more subtle. Radon and carbon monoxide are colorless, odorless, fatal gasses that endanger—one killing quickly and the other over decades. And deformed frogs are being found by the thousands in Minnesota and Wisconsin.^[i] The cause of their birth defects is not well understood, but scientists are taking their appearance as an urgent warning that something is seriously amiss in the environment.

For years I have been interested in the ebb and flow of fraternal memberships in the United States.^[ii] I can state without fear of contradiction that fraternal membership is not now the social norm. All fraternal organizations have suffered during the last half of the twentieth century; some have declined to the point of virtual disintegration. It was while studying fraternal statistics in Maryland that I became aware of what may be a subtle warning sign for Freemasonry, perhaps a harbinger like the deformed frogs of Minnesota and Wisconsin.

I have been interested in explaining the different fortunes of the York and Scottish Rites in this century. In 1900 there were 839,000 Freemasons in the United States; Royal Arch Masons accounted for 27% and only 5% were in the Scottish Rite. By 1995 there were 2,153,000 Freemasons, but by then 37% were in the Scottish Rite and only 15% were in the Royal Arch. The relative strength of the York Rite has declined from 27% to 15% while that of the Scottish Rite has risen from 5% to 37%. This is a significant realignment of American Masonic activity!

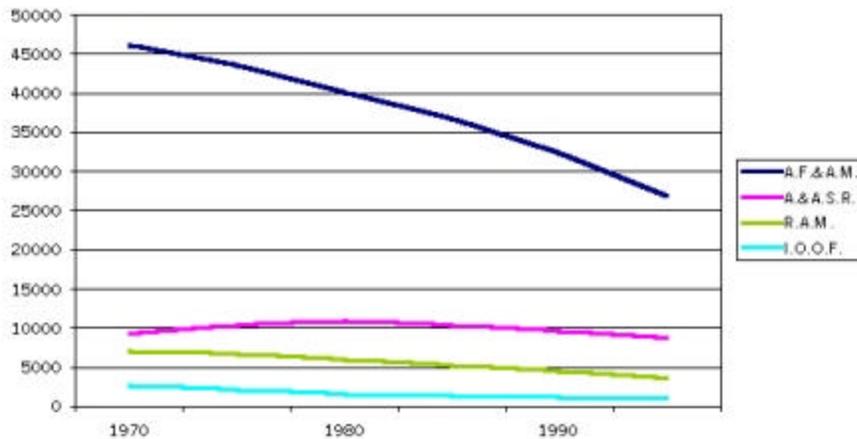
U.S. Fraternal Memberships: 1900-1995



This relative decline in fortunes between the York and Scottish Rites has tried to be explained in various ways. The Scottish Rite is largely found in urban areas, and their dramatic increase in membership coincides with the rural to urban migration of the American population. The York Rite offers only one route to significant recognition: presiding over a local body. While no Masonic body could serve as a model of organizational efficiency, the Scottish Rite has a more stable governing structure with its long-serving state leaders who can institute and support consistent policies and goals. It has recently been suggested that the theatrical staging of Scottish Rite degrees so appealed to turn-of-the-century Masons, that it “eliminated the competition.”^[iii]

As interesting as these speculations are, they are not as intriguing as another discovery I made as I studied fraternal membership in Maryland for the twenty-five year period 1970 to 1995. In 1970 Maryland had 46,000 Masons, and by 1995 they had declined 42% to 26,900. By comparison, Maryland Odd Fellows declined 63% from 2,6100 to 971. Royal Arch membership declined 49% to 3,600 and the Scottish Rite declined only 5% to 8,794. These figures tell an interesting story about fraternalism in Maryland, but are part of a larger national trend of declining memberships in the United States. Odd Fellowship has been declining since about 1950, the York Rite since 1957, Freemasonry since 1959, and the Scottish Rite since 1978.

Maryland Fraternal Memberships: 1970-1995



As I was doing my analysis, I decided to tally the new Masonic groups started in Maryland during the period from 1970 to 1995. My informal research, which probably overlooked several bodies, turned up the following new Masonic organizations in the state, and I doubt that Maryland is significantly different from other states.

Ancient, Free & Accepted Masons

- Bayside Lodge
- John R. Coats Memorial Lodge
- Daylight Lodge
- David Kerr Memorial Lodge

Philalethes Society

- Southern Maryland Chapter

Maryland Masonic Research Society

Ancient & Accepted Scottish Rite

- Southern Maryland Valley

Scottish Rite Clubs

- Chesapeake Club
- Conowingo Club

Carrol Club

Societas Rosicruciana In Civitatibus Foederatis

Maryland College

Royal & Select Masters

Acacia No. 24

Allied Masonic Degrees

Old Line Council No. 234

Southern Cross Council No. 268

Chesapeake Bay Council No. 278

Freestate Council No. 308

Eastern Shore Council No. 301

Tide Water Council No. 334

Royal Ark Mariners

Pride of Baltimore Lodge

Knight Masons of America

Baltimore Council

York Rite College of North America

Maryland College

New City Square Club

New Maryland Masonic Bodies: 1970–1995

At least twenty-one new Masonic organizations were started during the twenty-five year period of 1970 to 1995. One of these groups was a regular Lodge, one was a Council of Cryptic Masons, and one was a Scottish Rite Valley. The other seventeen that I counted were associated Masonic groups at the fringe of Masonry. While the general adult male population in Maryland has little interest in the Craft, as witnessed by our declining membership, Maryland Masons

themselves are enthusiastic. Almost once a year they form a new Masonic body in the state. Maryland Masons are so zealous about Masonry that they seem to be constantly looking for more ways to enjoy the mystic bonds of fraternal fellowship, even as our Grand Lodge membership continues its slow, sad decline.

But Maryland Masons have no apparent interest in forming new Lodges or York Rite bodies. The list of new Maryland Masonic bodies speaks clearly to that. They love Masonic fellowship, but have no use for new lodges, the fundamental unit, the heart and soul of Masonry. And this is the interesting warning sign I alluded to earlier. Our most enthusiastic supporters—our active Masters Masons—are voting with their feet and quietly moving their Masonic activities to almost anything other than the basic Lodge.

In 1891 a young man moved to Chicago from Philadelphia. He began work as a soap salesman offering merchants baking powder as a premium for buying his soap. He noted that the merchants were more interested in the baking powder than the soap, so in 1892 he started selling baking powder and offered two packs of chewing gum as a premium. Once again his customers were more interested in his premium than his product, so in 1893 William Wrigley, Jr., a successful businessman who gave his customers what they wanted, went into the chewing gum business. The rest is history. [\[iv\]](#)

The thoughtful Mason must wonder why so much Masonic energy is being expended away from the Lodge. York Rite Masons in particular must wonder why we can't find candidates or officers, and yet these new Maryland groups, most of which draw their memberships exclusively from active York Rite Masons, are growing. It could be that these growing bodies require a simpler "infrastructure"—regalia, annual returns, and ritual proficiency—and are thus easier to start up and maintain. It could be that they are perceived as more prestigious and exclusive than Lodges or Chapters or Commanderies. Most of these groups formed in Maryland are "invitation" bodies that recognize some service to Masonry. Who doesn't like to be recognized for hard work? Who doesn't like to belong to an exclusive group, membership in which is recognized and admired? And yet why can't we generate that sense of exclusivity and recognition in a Lodge? If I were smart enough to know the answers to the questions I have raised, I would sell the solution to each fraternal lodge in the country and become fabulously wealthy. In fact, we may be the wrong people to be asking the questions: we enjoy the status quo, and we revel in the current structure, otherwise we wouldn't be participating so enthusiastically (or reading essays like this one).

I would like to propose a possible answer:

Traditional Masonic bodies are overburdened with constricting rules and nitpicking regulations.

We suffer from short-tenured leaders who are given almost limitless power and no time to use it effectively. Grand Lodges and Grand York Rite Bodies have little managerial continuity. Most Grand Lodges elect a new Grand Master each year, who barely has time to pick a motto and a flower before he's running around the state on the grand visitation circuit. He may start a new program or institute a new policy, but it will fade as fast as his flower without the wholehearted support of his successors, and they may have their own hobbyhorses to ride. Only the Scottish Rite, with its long-serving state leaders, has created a managerial structure in Masonry that allows organizational continuity of significant programs and policies, rather than the mindless maintenance of the status quo.

Most Masonic bodies have massively centralized authority, greater than that found in almost any other voluntary associations. Masonic presiding officers, both by tradition and by regulation, have extreme discretion in administering their enormous powers. Grand Lodges have this centralized authority, an executive officer who can rule by decree, and a network of District Deputy Grand Officers to enforce their rules and regulations. None of this makes it fun for local bodies. By contrast, the allied Masonic bodies that are showing growth lack a network to enforce the central authority. Their local groups are largely autonomous and have wide discretion in conducting their affairs. This freedom from central interference may be what is more appealing about an A.M.D. Council than a symbolic Lodge. These allied Masonic bodies are "lean and mean"—small organizations that can be flexible and can quickly respond to their members' needs.

Grand Lodges today are multi-million dollar operations, but they lack the managerial and organizational continuity they need to thrive. The foremost management theory today holds that decision making and authority should be delegated to the lowest possible level where local managers best understand the immediate needs of the organization. What if we elected Grand Masters to five year or longer terms? What if a Grand Master could start a program, nurture it, and see it to established and accepted in his jurisdiction? What if Lodges were given the flexibility and responsibility to make decisions for themselves? And what if Masons were encouraged and rewarded to form and participate in new Lodges?

Masonry is declining in membership as are nearly all other voluntary associations.[\[V\]](#) Our members continue to be enthusiastic about the Masonic experience, just not in Lodges. There is hope for the Craft if we can focus our members' enthusiasm back at the main body of Masonry, but this will require difficult changes. Some of the most urgent changes are administrative, but they strike at the heart of our Masonic culture as it has evolved over centuries. Our basic rewards structure is predicated upon presiding, and no one wants to reduce rewards. There is no reason

why accepted management techniques cannot be used in Masonry nor any reason why control cannot be returned to local Lodges. If we are not willing to put changes to a vote in our Grand Lodges, then our members will continue to vote with their feet and to move their Masonic energies to more rewarding activities. And if we could conduct post-election polls, we'd probably find a lot of these voters saying, "I love Masonry. It's Grand Lodges I can't stand."

NOTES

[i] William Souder, "Hundreds of Deformed Frogs Pose Environmental Warning," *Washington Post*, Sep. 30, 1996, p. A1.

[ii] S. Brent Morris, "Trends Affecting American Freemasonry," *The Philaethes*, vol. 35, no. 2 (Apr. 1982), pp. 16–17; "The Public Image of Freemasonry," *The Royal Arch Mason Magazine*, vol. 14, no. 4 (winter 1982), pp. 105–111; "The Siren Song of Solicitation," *The Royal Arch Mason Magazine*, vol. 14, no. 6 (summer 1982), pp. 163–168; "Boom to Bust in the Twentieth Century," *Transactions of the Texas Lodge of Research*, vol. 23 (1987–88), pp. 142–63.

[iii] C. Lance Brockman, "Catalyst for Change: Intersection of the Theater and the Scottish Rite," *Heredom*, vol. 3 (1994), pp. 121–46.

[iv] Wm. Wrigley, Jr. Co., www.wrigley.com.

[v] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000)