

Early Freemasonry in Williamstown
Presented to the Vermont Lodge of Research
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The following is based on a copy of the minutes of Social Masters Lodge prepared by Bro. Henry Poole, the first secretary of Summit Lodge No. 104.

When undertaking this project, which is not complete, some chronology and historical fact are necessary, but it is felt that dwelling on them is uninteresting. Instead, an attempt is made to reflect the manner in which the lodges of the early 19th century might have operated, often in stark contrast to the present.

Social Masters Lodge first met in Williamstown on March 9, 1824 at "Masons Hall" with 14 members present. No mention of time or place is noted, but it may be assumed that the brethren convened at 1:00 p.m., which conclusion is drawn from entries later in the proceedings. Social Masters Lodge was formed by members of Federal Lodge, then working in Randolph. The first communication saw the beginning of the process of securing a hall, necessary wooden implements, and a portion of the funds from Federal Lodge, as well as starting a code of bylaws under which to work. There were 47 charter members.

The second communication was held on April 13th with 38 members present. Lodge opened on the First Degree, and after approving the bylaws, the first candidate, Jacob Jeffords, was balloted upon and initiated. Fee paid \$10.00. Arrangements were made to secure the necessary furniture and a book for minutes.

Lodge was then called from labor to refreshment and back to labor, opened on the Second Degree, and then on the Third Degree. The minutes read: "Appointed Br. Elias Works a committee to examine David R. Tilden wishing to be raised to the sublime degree of a Master Mason, report accepted by ballot and found clear in his favor. Br. Tilden raised to the sublime degree of a Master Mason. Fees paid \$3.00." The fees are mentioned here to suggest that Freemasonry nearly 200 years ago was far more expensive than today.

Lodge was again opened on the First Degree and all officers below that of Junior Warden were appointed.

It appears that all advancement required the appointment of an examining committee and a ballot on the report. Degrees were conferred at almost all communications until 1828, when conferrals and candidates dropped off. Often two or three degrees were conferred at the same communication, and on at least one occasion all three degrees were conferred on the same candidate. During the 10 year history of Social Masters Lodge 57 candidates were initiated, 50 passed, and 51 raised. Membership was perhaps as high as 114.

Generally speaking, all business was conducted on the First Degree, and the lodge was almost always opened on that degree before proceeding to the Second or Third for work. This practice was followed until 1827. On July 3rd the lodge opened on the 1st Degree, and on July 31st, at a special communication, on the 3rd Degree. From that time, until August 31, 1830, lodge always opened on the 3rd Degree. Opening then reverted to the 1st Degree. One might assume that Grand Lodge directed the change, but there is no mention in the minutes. It must also be noted that on at least one occasion, contrary to current Masonic Law, Social Masters Lodge was opened without the Master or one of the Wardens present.

Refreshment most often came during the meeting, with lodge being called off and back on. On May 11, 1824 the following is noted: "Voted those who refresh pay into the Treasurer of the Lodge Twelve and one half cents." The following accounts were allowed: David Watson – ¾ gallons rum \$3.50, Derius Pride – 1 gallon rum \$1.17 and 8 ½ pounds cheese \$.60. Refreshment usually consisted of rum, crackers, and cheese, although sometimes brandy and/or gin was added. On this day also, it was voted to accept Bro. David Watson's proposal

for use of his hall for \$16.00 per year to include wood and candles. It was also voted to attend Federal Lodge in June for the Festival of St. John the Baptist as a lodge.

St. John's Sunday was a special event. Social Masters Lodge later celebrated in Northfield, as well as in Williamstown. The event was advertised in the two newspapers in the region. The celebration consisted of opening Lodge, a procession to the meeting house for a sermon and some sort of oration, a procession to refreshment, and then to Masons Hall for closing.

On June 8, 1824 it was voted to approve a loan of \$20.00 for 90 days. This was to be the first of many loans made through the years to the brethren, and on several occasions the brethren voted to reimburse a brother for expenses in relief of another. Some brethren even received "reloans." This might have become a problem, because a little more than two years later the following report of committee appears: "To the Worshipful Master Wardens & Brethren of Social Masters Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons your committee appointed to take into consideration & devise some rule to be adopted for collecting the money now due the Lodge & such as shall hereafter become due by loan to state that we consider the funds of the lodge ought to be for the use of the Brethren generally and that no Bro. ought to have the loan of money for more than ninety days at any one time therefore would recommend the adoption of the following resolution. Resolved that it shall be the duty of the Treasurer of So.(?) Lodge to call on the Brethren now indebted to the Lodge requiring the payment of the same by the next communication and if not paid by that time or a reloan of the same obtained that he shall resort to legal measures to collect the same and that all moneys hereafter obtained from the funds of the Lodge by loan and not paid at the communication next after the same becomes due it shall be the duty of the Treasurer to collect the same without further notice." This resolution was adopted. It is interesting to note that interest was apparently charged on the loans, but no mention of an amount is found in the record.

On August 3, 1824 preparations were started for chartering. It was determined what additional furniture and implements (pedestals and desks), and that a copy of the dispensation be provided the Grand Secretary and he be requested to prepare a charter. This petition, with several others, was received in Grand Lodge on October 12, referred to the Committee on New Lodges which reported favorably, and approved by vote of the Grand Lodge.

On October 21, 1824, the Grand Lodge chartered Social Masters Lodge No. 59. "The Grand Lodge was conducted within the Lodge with the usual ceremonies then repaired to the meeting house under the conduct of the Marshall where a Sermon and address appropriate for the occasion was delivered after which the officers were duly installed, was conducted from thence to refreshment provided for the Brethren from thence to the Lodge Room." A band played, and a singer was employed for the occasion. The summary of the accounts suggests the attendance: 84 dinners at \$.75. The Brethren also allowed \$2.30 for entertaining Grand Officers, \$7.51 for the singer, \$10.00 to the Grand Chaplain, \$7.00 for the band, and \$10.00 for the charter.

Attendance at communications was generally quite good, with thirty or more in attendance at most communications. This held true until February 1829 when attendance dropped and communications began getting shorter. Frequently after that time no more was recorded than opening and closing. Concern was expressed about lack of attendance in September, 1825 when the Secretary was instructed to summon all who had not been present for five months at a regular communication to show cause. Those that did come forward at subsequent communications were excused.

Our early brethren took the adherence to Masonic principles quite seriously. This is evidenced in the several trials that took place in the five-year active history of the lodge. The first formal complaint is seen January 4, 1825. It is included in its entirety due to the interesting wording contained therein.

“Complaint S.W. vs R. Hedges”

“To the Worshipful Master Officers and Brethren of Social Masters Lodge. It becomes my duty as your Senior Warden in conformity with the By Laws to submit to your consideration a complaint against Brother Richard Hedges of Northfield a Master Mason and a member of this Lodge for unmasonic conduct he is charged with being so far unmindful of his obligation and duty as a mason as to be guilty of the most abusive railing and slander against his Brethren with a seeming determination of destroying their good names and aggravating their feelings to the utmost of his power. I would also represent that the repeated labor of his Brethren in his vicinity to convince him of his error and reclaim him have not proved ineffectual much in ... this trial.”

The committee appointed to investigate reported that the charges were with substance, and on February 1st the Brethren voted that Bro. Hedges be “suspended from the Lodge during their pleasure.” In July the Senior Warden was appointed to converse with Bro. Hedges in an attempt to aid his reformation. In August he reported that there appeared no signs of reformation. This was borne out by several brethren, and Bro. Hedges was expelled.

In January 1826 two previously investigated complaints were lodged. Bro. John Campbell was “charged with being so unmindful of his duty as a Mason as to be guilty of the most unbecoming and abusive conduct to his wife by whipping and otherwise ill treating her so that she has repeatedly been under the necessity of seeking and obtaining that hospitality abroad which she could not find at home. Bro. Campbell was expelled. Bro. Elisha Burnham was charged with “indulging himself in habits of intemperance to a very alarming degree. No disposition of Bro. Burnham’s case is noted, but a similar complaint against Bro. Benjamin Colt, including “raising his hand against his neighbor” was dismissed. The complaint of intemperance was not supported by evidence, and the second was resolved.

No mention is made of any lodge other than Federal Lodge until October 1826. At that communication when the approbation of the lodge was granted to the formation of a new lodge at Corinth.

At the January 1827 communication it was voted to dispense with refreshment in the lodge, but no indication of the duration of such dispensation was given. No mention of refreshments is made until January 1828 when payment for 2 bottles of brandy, 1 of rum, 100 crackers and 10 pounds of cheese was authorized. This communication shows the first mention in the minutes of the number 59 being associated with the Lodge. William S. Beckwith had just taken over as Secretary.

That the fraternity was benevolent there is no question. There are frequent entries of sums up to \$20.00 being sent to various individuals or families, frequently a family of a deceased brother. An item of interest is seen in April 1828 when it was “Voted that this lodge purchase a cow for the use of the Widow Merrill the present season.” Bro. David Robinson was appointed a committee to purchase said cow and take charge of it on behalf of the lodge. On March 9, 1830 it was voted to appoint Bro. Robinson a committee to dispose of the cow for the advantage of the Lodge. No mention is made of the status of the widow Merrill. Apparently the cow was actually kept by Bro. John Adams, as Bro. Robinson was eventually instructed to settle with Bro. Adams for keeping the cow, and to sell it to him, bringing a report and note to the lodge. This was done for a sum of \$13.00.

It is clear to see that Social Masters Lodge was suffering serious problems. Attendance was down significantly, although the lodge met monthly through June 1831. Beginning in February 1829 the minutes, other than the list of officers and brethren present, often consisted of two lines. “Lodge opened on the 3rd Degree in Masonry in due form. Lodge closed in form.” March 22, 1831 saw a vote to appoint a committee to “ascertain why certain brethren do not attend Lodge.” There is no recorded report of this committee, nor were the members identified. It can not be therefore determined that the committee was, in fact, appointed. Similar committees had been appointed in the past, or the Secretary had been directed to summon non-attending members, but little more is noted other than those coming forward being excused.

In January of 1832 the brethren voted to meet four times a year, in January, April, July, and October. Some optimism was still evident as it was voted to appoint a committee to hire a hall for the ensuing year. It might be noted at this point that the minutes book contains 167 handwritten pages. The Annual Communication in January 1829 begins on page 129. The January 1832 communication begins on page 162. From this one can interpolate the activity level of the lodge.

The end is obviously near when in April three items were voted: 1) that the Brethren be cited to appear at Masons Hall at the communication in July next, 2) that an assistant Secretary be appointed in each town in the jurisdiction of the lodge (Northfield, Brookfield, Chelsea, Barre, Washington) to effect the preceding resolution, and 3) that Bro. W. S. Beckett sell some part of the furniture belonging to the lodge.

Nowhere in the proceedings of Social Masters Lodge is there an indication of the cause of the transition from active, vibrant lodge to the door of extinction. One needs only to note the era, and one answer quickly comes to mind. It is well explained in a paragraph probably written by Henry Poole of Summit Lodge. He writes:

“The Anti-Masonic trouble commenced here as early as 1824, and continued with the utmost, unrelenting, and bitter fury for years. Lodges surrendered their Charters, the brethren deserted their Fraternity, appeals were made by the Grand Lodge, and the secular Lodges to the public, and in return they were met with reproaches, and persecutions; -Our honest intentions misrepresented, our rights as Masons, our rights as Freemen abridged, and our characters traduced-so said Grand Master Haswell, in 1831.....”

No more communications were held until March 12, 1834. On that date Social Masters Lodge No. 59, Free and Accepted Masons died an unnatural death. It was voted to return the Charter and the records of the lodge to Grand Lodge, to dispose of the furniture of the lodge at auction, and to collect the funds due the lodge and divide the monetary assets among the members.

The final entry in the minutes of that fateful communication read: “Lodge Dissolved Forever. J.D. Howe, Secy Pro Tem”