

Grand Lodge of AF&AM of North Carolina  
Committee on Masonic Education  
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MASONIC EDUCATION  
SERIES

# The Masonic Funeral



# 1 First Meeting In October

## INTRODUCTION

**The Masonic funeral is the most public exposure the lodge ever experiences. It is our opportunity to show the public the difference between religion and fraternity.**

**According to the Code, it is “the duty of the Master of each Lodge on the death of a member or a sojourning brother qualified to ascertain if Masonic rites would be agreeable, and to take measures accordingly.” (Reg. 82-1, The Code: Constitution and Regulations of 1995 of the Grand Lodge of North Carolina.)**

The measures that the Master of the Lodge may take are listed in the Code involves a relationship not only with the lodge itself, but also with the family of the deceased brother.

What measures are to be taken?

1. Contact with the widow and family.
2. Contact with the religious leader.
3. Communication with the Lodge

A member in good standing in a regular lodge and under no charges may be buried with Masonic rites. This applies, of course, to Master Masons only.

A family experiencing death may find comfort and consoling by the presence of the fraternity during the days surrounding the burial of a loved one. While it is not stated as a matter of Masonic law, it is expected of us to care for the widows and orphans.

# 1

## First Meeting In Oct. (Cont.)

The response time between the passing of a brother and the Master of the Lodge contacting the family is crucial. Quick response is important because:

- ▶ It shows our support of the family at the time of passing
- ▶ It shows our strength as a fraternity to respond to one of the most basic human needs that of being loved and comforted.
- ▶ It demonstrates the multifaceted dimensions of our departed brother and the ties he had with Masonry that shall not be broken, even by the hand of death.

### Discussion Questions

1. What is the procedure of the lodge when a brother passes that insures the Master will be informed and the Lodge's response duly made?
2. How does the lodge appropriately respond? Is the ceremony itself the only response that we make?
3. In what ways do we stay "in touch" with our members to be able to notify the lodge promptly in the event of a death?

# 2

## Second Meeting In October

**We read in the New Testament of the Holy Bible that “religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father, is this; to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” (James 1:27)**

*The Master must have a distinct understanding with the family and the officiating clergyman, prior to the time set for the services, that the lodge is to have the last service at the grave and the actual depositing of the remains in the grave . . . While the religious or other services are being conducted, the lodge has no right or authority to intervene in any way because such services are not a part of and cannot be a part of the Masonic ceremonies. (Reg. 82-8)*

The intent and purpose of this regulation is not to separate the fraternity from the purest of religious intentions, but to place us in the strengthening and supportive role to which we belong.

The Master of the Lodge, by necessity and wisdom, must always contact the officiating religious leader regarding his/her preferences and how Masonic rites may best be included. Several key points should be made.

1. Masonry is fraternal, not religious.
2. Our primary role is to help the family
3. Flexibility may be required to exemplify our fraternal and supportive role

Masonry is not a religion. We have said this in our ceremonies and to the opponents of freemasonry for years. Our emphasis on the deity gives the appearance of being “religious,” but this does not make us a “religion.” Our trust in God causes all of us to yield to the directions of our Supreme Maker, as shared with us in a variety of ways through the various ways God is known to us.

# 2 Second Meeting In Oct. (Cont.)

The challenge for Masons is to find the ways to work within the framework of religion toward a more supported and strengthened society. We do this by keeping our primary focus on helping the family during their time of loss.

Flexibility is not always easy. It is very difficult to realize that some things change and we must change with them. For instance, even though it is in our regulations that we are to *have the last service at the grave and the actual depositing of the remains in the grave*, (Reg. 82-8) how many of us stick around for the actual burial? Are all grave diggers freemasons?

Unless we are flexible enough to remember our primary purpose when a brother passes, we run the risk of being perceived as a problem rather than part of a solution.

## **Discussion Questions**

1. What can be done by the Lodge to improve its relationship with religious leaders? How might this help or hurt when Masonic rites are requested?
2. What is more important: helping a grieving family through their time of loss or doing our ceremonies as they are written with no deviation?
3. What ways do we need to be more or less flexible?

# 3

## First Meeting In November

### **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE I**

Everywhere in the United States, it is the right of Master Masons, in good standing to have Masonic rites at their funeral. This tradition is rooted in the legends of our order and is most meaningful to the Masonic community every time we conduct them.

However, the way and manner in which we conduct the Masonic rites will have a tremendous impact on the community.

The first recorded reference to Masons wearing aprons at a funeral was at that of Matthew Birkhead in 1723. This may have been the first time, but we are not sure. In 1739, a comment was made about the Masonic funeral of a Dr. Anderson “whose funeral was such a weak tribute.” In 1754, the Modern Grand Lodge of England adopted a regulation prohibiting a member from attending a funeral clothed as a Mason, except by dispensation of the Grand Master.

Perhaps, the most interesting reference to Masonic funerals is the one from 1632 in which a fine of one shilling was levied for failure of members to attend a Masonic funeral.

These references raise several key issues.

1. What to wear and do at Masonic funerals
2. Strong tributes for deceased brethren
3. Decline of attendance at funerals in general Masonic funerals in particular.

Early speculative lodges owned palls, sometimes called mort-cloths which were available for the use of families of deceased members. (Preston’s *Illustrations of Masonry*, 1792 ed., p. 118) contains a Masonic funeral ceremonial.

# 3

## First Meeting In Nov. (Cont.)

Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia records the following published description of a Masonic funeral from that era.

The Master and brethren of the lodge, pursuant to dispensation as required by the regulation of 1754 attended, accompanied by as many lodges and their officers as might be thought proper. The brethren walking in procession observed “decent Mourning, with White Stockings, Gloves and Aprons.” Officers wore white sashes and hatbands, and officers of the deceased's own lodge carried white rods. The Tyler, with his sword, led the procession, which ended with the pallbearers, the casket, with regalia and crossed swords thereon, the mourners, the two Stewards, a second Tyler. Members of the lodge carried flowers and herbs in their hands. The Bible and Book of Constitutions were carried on a cushion preceding the Master. Members of the invited lodges formed a ring around the grave, leaving and opening for the officiating lodge, the mourner, etc., to enter. Sometimes the gloves and apron of the deceased were cast into the grave, and usually all present dropped sprigs of acacia or evergreens into the grave.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. How are Masonic funerals today different and similar to those of the late 1700s?
2. What have we changed that was good?

# 4

## Second Meeting In Nov

### **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES II**

In the days before cars and hearses and funeral homes, walking processions from the home to the place of interment were everyday activities. Times have changed.

Today, funerals have changed drastically from those of the eighteenth century. It would be rare indeed to see Masons wearing White Stockings, Gloves and Aprons. Officers wore white sashes and hatbands, and officers of the deceased's own lodge carried white rods.

In North Carolina, one might see Masons wearing white gloves and aprons. A black band or ribbon may be seen. The rods would be those of the Stewards and Deacons.

During the 1960s, many lodges and Grand Lodges began to bow to the opposition of Masonry, particularly in the religious realm. We began to change our ceremonies drastically as a result of this opposition.

One might argue that many people did not understand the importance of our ceremonies and that it was out of that misunderstanding that these changes took place. Yet, in that same argument, we have to admit that our "secrecy" contributes greatly to the misunderstanding so we are, in part, to blame ourselves.

Society has changed dramatically in the last forty years. It is more and more difficult to be excused from the workplace to attend a funeral, even for the relatives of the deceased.

# 4

## Second Meeting In Nov. (Cont.)

Funerals are not the huge gatherings they once were unless they occur at a time when many do not have to go to work. Gatherings at funeral homes on the evening of the funeral are much better attended than the funeral itself. More and more, families opt for graveside services.

These changes in society and culture present several opportunities for freemasonry relative to the Masonic burial rites. We have the opportunity to improve and impress upon families, religion, and community the best about our fraternity. We have the opportunity to reveal ourselves as a fraternity in cooperation with society and culture, not as we have been perceived —“that secret society.”

To make the best of these opportunities, several things need to happen. We need to be familiar enough with our Masonic Burial Rites to the point that it is able to improve and impress upon families, the religious community, and the community at large, the very best about our fraternity. We need to conduct Masonic Burial Rites in a way and manner that promote attendance and insure integrity.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. How can the lodge improve upon the way and manner it conducts Masonic rites?
2. In 1632, a fine of one shilling was levied on Masons who missed a funeral for a deceased brother. How might we encourage attendance at funerals in general and Masonic rites in particular?
3. Are we better off remaining the perceived “secret society” or should we do something different? If so, then what?

# 5 First Meeting In December

## **WHY DO WE NEED MASONIC FUNERALS?**

Thus far, we have talked about the role of the Master, working with religion and not against it, and the historical perspective of Masonic rites.

There are three primary directions that deserve the attention of Masonic rites.

First, the family may request these rites. Because of the nature of our fraternity, there were many days and nights their loved one spent away from home, “doing masonry.” They knew it was important to their family member, but not being a member themselves, they did not know why it was important. Masonic rites, done well, will help the family realize that their loved one was involved in something truly worth their time and effort.

Second, the lodge needs the rites. Bonds of friendship and fraternity formed in the lodge are not easily broken. Death itself was never intended to separate us from those with whom we lived and moved and had our being. It is necessary and proper that we, as a fraternity, should remember those who have labored beside us in the causes of friendship, brotherly love, and charity.

Third, is the issue of the deceased. While it is true that the deceased cannot answer our call, it is equally true that the greatest of all tributes we can give the deceased is some kind of remembrance that is lasting. The Masonic rites, done well, afford us such an opportunity.

# 5

## First Meeting in Dec. (Cont.)

The Code lists the regulations for North Carolina Masonic Burials in chapter 82. Regulation 82-5 reads:

The foregoing requirements should be made clear to the family. If there is objection to them, the Master should respectfully decline to conduct the Masonic ceremonies.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What are the reasons a family might request Masonic Burial rites?
2. What, if anything, when requested by the family, must be respectfully declined?
3. How has your lodge been flexible to keep the integrity of the ceremony, meet the family needs, and honor the memory of a departed brother? How has it not accomplished these things? What needs to be done differently in the future?

# 6 Second Meeting in Dec.

## **BASIC COMPONENTS REQUIRED**

As mentioned in sessions 3 and 4, the Masonic rites have been changing for many years. To maintain the integrity of the ceremony and to meet the needs of everyone, it is important for us to identify various parts of the ceremony that have lasting meaning and appear to be consistent “from time immemorial.”

There are two classes of symbolic acts that must be basic to any Masonic rite relative to burial. The first relates to the relationship of the deceased to deity and family.

Masonic rites are generally done in conjunction with other religious services. The deceased’s relationship to their deity is just one of the many things that endeared him to his family, household of faith, and the lodge.

Our respect for the religious choices made by our departed brother is of highest concern when we conduct these services. We are not in competition with a departed brother’s faith. In fact, the integrity of our brother’s religious faith is never in question by freemasonry. The integrity of who can best work and best agree may very well be on the line.

Our departed brother is not some nameless person to us leveled by death. He was a human being that both he and his family called by name. His trust was in God.

When we remember these things and express them ceremoniously, we bring comfort and reassurance to family and friends alike.

The second class of symbolic acts related to the most fundamental teachings and practices of the Craft.

# 6

## Second Meeting In Dec. (Cont.)

First, we turn our attention to the apron. On our admission into a lodge on the first degree of masonry, we are presented the lambskin or white leather apron and we are taught what it represents. Accordingly, it is placed on the coffin which contains our earthly remains and may even be worn by the deceased. (Regulation 82-9)

Second, we turn our attention to the sprig of acacia. When we are raised to the sublime degree of Master Mason, we are taught the meaning and significance of this symbol in Masonry. The apron and the sprig of acacia become a symbol of beginning and ending, of life and death.

Third, we turn our attention to funeral grand honors. It is one thing for someone to lead in appropriate recognition of a brother. It is entirely something more for the whole of the Masonic community to respond. When the brethren assembled respond, they have the opportunity to witness the unity and harmony that is the strength and support of our institution.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Do you feel the Masonic rites need to be more personal? Why or why not?
2. Of these basic parts of the ceremony what could we omit and why?
3. What, if anything, does the lodge need to do in the future to make Masonic rites more meaningful for the families? For the deceased? For the Lodge? For the community at large?