

THOMAS SMITH WEBB

To evaluate the position any Masonic leader has held in the affairs of the Fraternity in the United States, or to place the importance -of his labors as compared with any other, is at best a thankless task which results in little if any good. Yet no such evaluation of Thomas Smith Webb, no consideration of the effect of his labors, could be made which did not put both the man and his works near the head of any list.

For to Thomas Smith Webb and his system of Masonic work, American Freemasons owe a large part of the ritual of the "American Rite" (often miscalled the "York Rite"). In practically all jurisdictions some of his words are used: in a majority, all the "work" is Smith, or, more properly, Preston heard from the lips of Smith.

Born of English parents, emigrants to Massachusetts, Thomas Smith Webb first saw the light of day in October 13, 1771. Educated in the schools of his birthplace, Boston, Webb became proficient in French and Latin as well as his mother tongue. He was a rare combination of poet, dreamer, visionary, and practical man of action, having much of the mental equipment and character development which has been the foundation of inspired leadership throughout the world's history. In another land, another age, he might have been prominent in any one of a dozen lines of labor; in the environment in which he was born, and in those places and times in which he lived, his genius found in Freemasonry both an untitled field and an opportunity for expression of his poetry, his idealism, his passion for improvement and for teaching.

He was either printer or bookbinder, or both-historians are a bit vague as to which. His trade took him to Keene, New Hampshire, where, in Rising Sun Lodge, on December 17th, 1790, he was made a Mason.

Not long after he married Miss Martha Hopkins, and went to live in Albany, New York, where he owned and conducted a book store. Here he attended and worked Masonically to such good advantage that he established both a Chapter of Royal Arch Masonry and an Encampment of Knights Templary.

Just what other Masonic activities he had in Albany must be imagined, since the records are scanty. But that he devoted much time and thought to Symbolic Masonry is evident, since in 1797 he published the first edition of his "Freemason's Monitor, or Illustrations of Masonry." The book, now comparatively rare, although many copies are to be found in Libraries, bears no name as author (it is "By a ROYAL ARCH MASON, K. T., K. of M., etc., etc.") But it is marked "Printed at Albany for Spencer and Webb, Market-street," 1797," and subsequent editions of the same work do bear his name. Thus, the edition of 1802, printed in New York City, is "By Thomas S. Webb, Past Master of Temple Lodge, Albany, and H. P. of the Providence Royal Arch Chapter."

The book has been of vast importance to American Grand Lodges, most of which adhere rather strictly to his text, which is, of course, of the written or exoteric work. Here the curious may find the 133rd Psalm in the charge at opening" - here also is the familiar prayer at closing "May the blessing of heaven rest upon us and all regular Masons, may brotherly love prevail, and every moral and social virtue cement us." Here are those paragraphs which have come down unchanged in many petitions for the degrees, in which the petitioner "seriously declares upon his honor" that the petition is made "unbiased by friends, uninfluenced by mercenary motives---a desire for knowledge and a sincere wish of being serviceable to your fellow creatures, etc." Here, too, are familiar prayers-"Vouchsafe thine aid, Almighty Father of the Universe ...Thou, Oh God, knowest our down sittings and our uprisings . . ."

It is to Thomas Smith Webb that ritualists owe the necessity to memorize those fine mouthfuls of paragraphs of the four cardinal virtues. It is Webb that the Senior Deacon or other officer in the Second degree must memorize to utter his description of Grammar, Rhetoric, Logic, Arithmetic, Geometry, Music and Astronomy, not to mention the five orders of architecture and the five senses. To Webb we owe the charges of the degrees and the words regarding many an Emblem, including Bee Hive, Pot of Incense, Book of Constitutions, Sword and Naked Heart, All Seeing Eye, Anchor and Ark, Forty Seventh Problem, Hour Glass and Scytlie.

. And finally, in many a Grand jurisdiction, the installation of a newly elected Master is conducted in the very words which Webb printed, with hardly a deviation, from "You agree to be a good man and true" to "Do you agree to these charges---as masters have done in all ages before you?"

Much of Webb is really Preston. The point is not that Webb originated, when as a matter of fact so much of his labor was but rearrangement, abbreviation, and changing to fit American conditions, but that Webb published an American book, for American Masons, and then put the driving force of his personality, his zeal, his enthusiasms and his marked ability as a teacher behind that which he had published. It is to Webb the teacher, the Masonic zealot, to whom American Masons are indebted so heavily, not Webb the originator or the inspired writer. The important angle is that Webb so believed in what he did that he went out of his way to teach it, preach it, fight for it, memorize it, make others memorize it, spread it. Freemasonry in early days had little if any unity in work. While the essentials were the same, the variations were enormous, and Ancient and Modern, Scottish and Irish, English and local "work" was a veritable hodge podge throughout the colonies.

Webb and his labors brought, to some extent, order. The esoteric work of all American jurisdictions differs-between some but little, between others, much. But the printed work is markedly similar in a majority of our jurisdictions. This is Webb's monument. He was clever enough to see the need of simplicity (as men in those, days conceived simplicity, poet enough not to alter old phraseology when it would serve his purpose, scholar enough to weave a thread of continuity (where our printed and esoteric work is noncontinuous in thought the fault may usually be traced to some early "committee on work" or "Grand Lecturer" who cut, slashed and altered with no knowledge of what they or he did, or to faulty memorize in the "colonization" days of the westward spread of Masonry).

In 1801 Webb went to Providence, R. I., there to engage rather extensively in the manufacture of wall paper. His reputation as a Masonic teacher and authority had preceded him, so that a Committee from St. John's Lodge waited upon him, to ask him to become a member. This he did; having been Master of Temple Lodge in Albany, N. Y., he acquired membership in the Grand Lodge of Rhode Island, was elected Junior Grand Warden in 1802, Senior Grand Warden in 1803 and for several years immediately following, Deputy Grand Master in 1811, Grand Master in 1813 and 1814, declining a re-election in 1815.

His memory is revered in the Grand Lodge of his adoption, not only for his character and attainments, his insight and his ceaseless activities in spreading Masonic light, but also because he was intimately concerned in one of the patriotic endeavors of that Grand Lodge.

From the History of Freemasonry in Rhode Island appears the following account of this incident:

"At a Special Communication held in Providence, Sept. 27, 1814, the following resolution was adopted:

'Voted and Resolved, That this Grand Lodge, sensible of the importance at all times of aiding and assisting in the defense of our Beloved Country, and deeming it important at this critical moment that the services of this society should be tendered for the erection of fortifications, etc., do appoint the R. W. Dept. Grand Master, Grand Senior Warden and W. Br. John Carlie a Committee to tender the services of the members of the Grand Lodge, and of such of the members of the subordinate Lodges under its jurisdiction as can conveniently, attend, to the Committee of Defence, appointed by the Citizens of the Town.

'Voted and Resolved, that Tuesday the 3d of October next be the day upon which the Grand Lodge will assemble for the purpose above named, provided it should meet the sanction of said Committee of Defense, and that the aforesaid Committee be requested to take the necessary measures to carry the same into effect.'

"The Grand Lodge met pursuant to its purpose thus declared., and the following is the official record of the day's doings---October 3, 1814:

The Grand Lodge was opened in ample form. Present: M. W. Thomas Smith Webb, Grand Master; R. W. Amos Maine Atwell, Dept. Grand Master; W. William Wilkinson, Senr Grand Warden; W. John Davis, Junr Grand Warden; W. Benjamin Clifford, Grand Treasurer; W. John Holroyd Grand Secy; W. John Snow, Senr Grand Deacon; W. Sam] Jackson, Junr Grand Deacon; W. Ebenezer Johnson, Grand Marshal; Br. William P. R. Benson, Grand Tyler,

'A great number of Brethren, Mt. Moriah, Friendship, Union, Manchester & Morning Star Lodges and also many Brethren from Eastern Star Lodge, Rehoboth (Mass) together with the members of St. Johns & Mount Vernon Lodges, at 8 o'clock A. M. the Grand Lodge with the members of the Subordinate Lodges about two hundred & thirty in number formed a grand procession and accompanied by, musick, moved to Foxpoint at the south part of the Town and commenced the erection of a Fort as laid out by the Committee of Defence. At sunset they completed their labours, having finished a Breastwork of about 430 feet in length and about ten

feet wide and five feet high, after which a Grand Procession was formed and having marched several times upon the parapet from one extremity to the other the M. W. Grand Master in the name of the Grand Lodge of the State of Rhode Island, etc., gave it the dignified appellation of Fort Hiram. In the evening the Grand Lodge waited upon his Excellency the Governor and obtained his approbation of the proceeding and his sanction to the name which had been given to the Fort. Perhaps in no instance has there been a greater work accomplished in one day, by an equal number of persons than was done on this ever memorable occasion---the day was remarkable fine and the Brethren evinced that refreshment was designed only as an incentive to active exertions when called to labour. At an early hour the Brethren separated enjoying the consoling reflection of having done their duty.

'From the minutes of Mr. Holroyd.

WALKER HUMPHRY,

Dept. Grand Secretary.' "

If this Bulletin had more space, much might be utilized for retelling the activities of this pioneer in American ritual, in the spread of Capitular and Commandery Masonry. Such facts belong in any complete account of his life and works. But here he is considered merely for his interest in and labors for Symbolic Freemasonry. Suffice it to be said that his influence was largely felt in the establishment of Chapters of the Royal Arch (instead of conferring the Capitular degrees in Symbolic Lodges) and the General Grand Chapter of the United States. He was successively Grand Scribe, General Grand King and finally Deputy General Grand High Priest. He traveled much in the Middle West, establishing Chapters and Encampments but never forgetting his love for Symbolic Freemasonry, and spreading the light of his arrangement of Preston wherever he went.

In general it may be said that few if any brethren have had a greater influence upon the Craft in this country. His labors have stood the acid test of time, a fact attested to by the well nigh universal use of exoteric work first to be brought to American Freemasonic eyes through the justly famous Webb Monitor.

On his retiring from the office, his Grand Lodge, by a unanimous vote, expressed its grateful acknowledgment "for the great and signal services he has rendered to Freemasonry in general, and particularly in this State."

Webb died suddenly, at Cleveland, Ohio, in July, 1819. Acting with other Masonic organizations in Rhode Island, the Grand Lodge brought his body back to Providence, and gave to it an honored Masonic burial at an Emergent Communication held Nov. 8, 1819. The remains of this brilliant Freemason are interred in the North Burial Ground, Providence, where an unpretentious memorial erected by the Grand Lodge bears witness to the fame and usefulness of this indefatigable laborer in the quarries.