

# GRAND LODGE BULLETIN

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### Thomas Smith Webb

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Somewhere in England in the period that roughly fell between 1750 A.D. and 1775 A.D. there were a number of families with close relatives or old friends residing in America, so that, if it became possible, they took ship for Portsmouth, Providence, or Boston for a stay of weeks or months. Once in a while, largely because of the marvels of a new land, they remained here as residents, and often established families. Among such were the parents of Thomas Smith Webb, who, a fortunate man always, was never again to feel as fortunate as he did while four years of age when he began to learn what manner of man his father was, how devoted to him and to her husband his mother was.

He grew rapidly, while playing about Boston, but never was a normal lad so precocious. He went through grade school, and then on through a Latin school, oftentimes startling his teachers by the brilliancy of his mind, the capacious memory, the sparklings of authentic genius. He was only fifteen at the time, which meant that he had known scarcely anything except home, school, and Boston where he had been born October 30, 1771.

After he had matured sufficiently he found an abiding interest in printing, an ancient combination of art and craft that became one of the three principal concerns of his own lifetime. Where he was to amass wealth, attain property, and establish himself at the center of New England and its industry was for the future to lie within a triangle formed by a line from Boston to Portsmouth, New Hampshire's great port, thence to Albany, which belonged one-half to Massachusetts and one-half to the Hudson Valley, and back from Albany to Boston. Here, except one later investment in Ohio, near Columbus, he was to work out a new and very different career in business. For he was the discoverer of means to print paper on rolls by a device or two of his own, and furthermore was the first American financier to learn the true organization of a business to be supervised by a man other than its owner. It was this genius for a genuine way of organization that he carried into Freemasonry.

Somewhere among Masonic writings Webb has always been depicted as a sort of wandering printer and itinerant Masonic lecturer, who, from being too unsettled in himself, was not able to abide the same location for very long; if he was - and here the usual guesswork has come in - he never was a man of wealth. That foolish picture of the man credited by Mackey's "Encyclopedia of Freemasonry" with having founded the American Rite of Masonry never was true. Webb always was well to do; by mid-life he was wealthy; and always he remained centered in either Boston or Providence, Rhode Island.

Webb was a genius—he reminds one of another ritualist, Martin Clare, whose brilliance has dazzled the Mother Grand Lodge that had begun in London, in 1717. In reality, he was never in haste; but his whole being always was of an incredible swiftness. He was educated by fifteen, instead of by twenty; he married early (as young men in those days frequently did); he entered Freemasonry when only about nineteen by a special, but legal dispensation. If he passed on in his prime, that, however, contrary to an appearance of headlong haste in his being, was not his impatience with his career, but was owing to a very fast acting food poison. This swiftness within the man was normal, and, let me repeat it, was never haste or restiveness; the fact, I say, must be well understood or Webb cannot be understood, because his career in American Freemasonry was over many states, on a national scale, and always was decisive, prompt, and complete. He set up, or helped to set up, state and national Grand Bodies, some of them at a large distance, but he did so without having to reside in one after another of them.

At the time he was about nineteen Webb was in, or near, Keene, New Hampshire, on some long lasting errand of his own concern, or for his family, which had connections there. A friend of his in Keene, William Todd, was Worshipful Master of Keene's Rising Sun Lodge, and possibly was the first to explain a lodge to one who was destined to understand Freemasonry more utterly and sincerely than any other American. Todd proposed Webb for membership, along with William Blake, another of Webb's New Hampshire friends. By a special dispensation, legal, possibly because Webb was only about nineteen, the two "were pass'd to fellow crafts and raised to the sublime degree," on December 27, 1790. The initiation fee, was £3.6, a sum roughly equivalent to some \$40.00 now.

When Webb left Keene it was after having established some interests of his own there, so that while in Providence, Rhode Island, his most lasting place of residence (it was his business interests, some of them very large, rather than his Masonic engagements, that explains two or three of his removals), he could feel secure in his New Hampshire undertakings from a distance.

While yet in early days, Webb established a business connection, of a somewhat unusual type of printing, in Albany, New York—this was, and to remind the reader, one of the three corners of the triangle of New England finance and industry. If he had already received permission from William Preston to make use of the latter's Standard Monitor in America, he must have done so after careful, written negotiations and permission, because that was his way; it also was his way to obtain Preston's approval of a Standard Monitor for use in New England. For myself, I cannot quote chapter and verse in this connection, but out of a certain familiarity with Webb's own personal career I am sure that the afterwards famous Webb Monitor, published in Albany in 1797, was set and printed by Webb himself, and after he had a clear and definite understanding with William Preston and two others among Webb's English Masonic friends. The Monitor was reissued too often, and revised too much, for any bibliographer to keep track of it. It would appear that after the original 1797 edition Webb privately

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amended it for two other editions. In the first of the two he made some alterations not very important, in the second at least one of them was important. The fact proves several facts: first, Webb issued his own Standard Monitor as an American version of Preston's with Preston's approval; second, Webb did not consider his own version to be final; third, such alterations as he made *were in Monitorial language*—he would never have approved a Masonic Monitor, prepared for, use in initiation, written in newspaper English.

The greatness of Webb's work in Freemasonry has never been justly estimated, possibly because he accomplished so much for two separate Masonic purposes: one was in enforcing the use of the ancient ritual, and to head off innovations; the other was to organize Grand Bodies, state or national, as only they ever can be organized in Freemasonry. Of these two, only the first has been much publicized, oftentimes by men who had too few facts; it has done no harm to publicize that accomplishment because all Grand Lodges are still ceaselessly on guard to head off innovations in the ancient ritual. The latter, however, was equally fundamental to any lasting American system of the Five Rites. For to organize such Grand Bodies is not easy, since they are so wholly unlike other organizations; and it is only that such men as Webb understood Freemasonry as a whole so very clearly that they knew how to establish Grand Lodges, Grand Chapters, Grand Commanderies.

When the ancient ritual is thought of as "the Webb Work" those who thus describe it invert Webb's own long lasting endeavor; he had not added a word to the ancient ritual, nor would he tolerate any added word from another. If he set up a school of instruction in Providence, if he thoroughly trained other ritualists, Cross, Gleason, Barney, Snow, etc., and continued to do so year after year, it was always to make certain that no alterations would enter the ancient ritual through them. Insofar as "Webb Work" means anything, it is only to show that some ritualist had been coached by Webb—never should it be taken that Webb was ever the author of anything in the Standard Work.