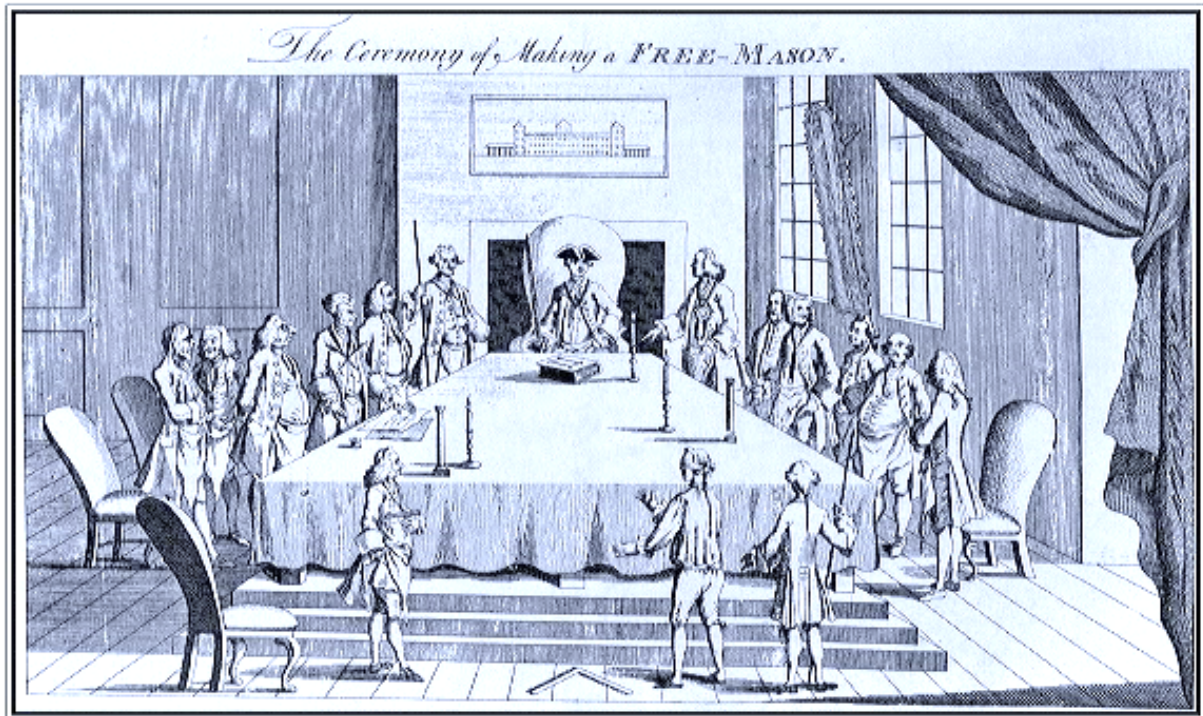


OBSERVANT MASONRY IN NEW YORK



A GUIDE TO PRACTICE & CERTIFICATION

R. : W. : Piers A. Vaughan
Grand Director of Ceremonies At Large
Chairman, Observant Masonry Committee
Tel: (201) 637 - 3278 / Email: piers.2014om@gmail.com

OBSERVANT MASONRY – A GUIDE TO PRACTICE & CERTIFICATION

A. BACKGROUND

Observant Masonry (OM) is practiced by Lodges within the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of New York which follows certain key practices which were or have been common in our past. Freemasonry in New York can trace its origins back over 280 years, and its Grand Lodge over 230 years. By being ‘observant’ we are recalling our own history and tradition, and reintroducing these practices into our modern day setting.

In order to qualify as an ‘Observant Lodge’, certain behaviors and activities should be regularly practiced in Lodge. These are divided into Key and Optional Categories. All Key Categories need to be in place prior to review by the Grand Master, the Director of Ceremonies charged with implementing Observant Lodges, or another nominee of the Grand Master. The Optional Categories, while not required, may appeal to the Lodge as of interest in addition to the Key Categories. While the review itself can only be a ‘snapshot’ it is important that the Lodge *lives* as an Observant Lodge, and does not merely put on a one-time show for the benefit of the review.

It is important to recognize two things:

1. Observant Masonry is not for everybody. However, it does appeal in particular to a number of the newer members coming into Masonry, who have researched the topic thoroughly before joining, and are expecting us to adhere to the tradition of which we are so rightly proud.
2. Observant Masonry is not elitist. Any Brother may attend any meeting (but remembering the Worshipful Master’s right to exclude a visitor from a meeting, showing respect by wearing at least a jacket and tie with smart pants is recommended). It also practices what any Lodge in New York may practice, and indeed most visitors will find much which is familiar, as well as some practices they may well wish to take back to their own Lodges.

When the Lodge is ready to for a review of its practices, it should contact R. : W. : Piers A. Vaughan (Tel: 201-637-3278 / Email: piers.2014om@gmail.com, who will bring this to the attention of the Grand Master. The email should include at least a couple of suggested dates and times for the review, which can be at a Stated Communication, or a Special Communication called specifically for the review. It is not necessary to confer a Degree that evening: indeed, it would be more appropriate for a Brother of the Lodge to deliver a suitable Lecture.

OBSERVANT MASONRY – A GUIDE TO PRACTICE & CERTIFICATION

B. KEY CATEGORIES

1. **Attire:** Officers should wear tuxedos and black ties, and if desired white tie and tails, appropriate regalia and white gloves. All Brethren and Visitors will wear a minimum of jacket, tie and smart pants. Brethren and Visitors may wear white gloves, but this is not mandatory unless the Lodge wishes to adopt this approach; in which case it is recommended the Lodge has a supply of white gloves with the Tiler to lend to visitors. **Rationale:** A Lodge is a special place where Brothers come together to discuss philosophy, learn from one another and confer the Degrees upon worthy Candidates. It is fitting that they should the Lodge with as much respect as they would any other important gathering.
2. **A Place Set Apart:** The furniture and regalia should be in good repair, and the lighting as dim in order to set an appropriate tone. All meetings should include periods of music (organ music, taped music, hymns or Masonic Odes) and silence to allow for personal introspection or meditation. Brethren are discouraged from talking once inside the Lodge Room. However, since it is recognized that the Lodge is at refreshment, quiet relevant conversations which do not disturb others is acceptable. Electronic devices should be switched off or set to vibrate only while in Lodge. While it is recognized that there are times when use of such devices in a Lodge setting is acceptable (such as checking calendars and looking up telephone numbers in order to contact a sick or absent Brother), the Guidelines on the use of electronic equipment set down by Grand Lodge should be adhered to. **Rationale:** The Lodge Room is a sacred space, consecrated and solemnly set apart from daily life. The furnishings, deportment of the Brothers, and the activities when tiled should reflect this.
3. **Ritual:** The Ritual must follow the Standard Work of New York, unless a special dispensation has been obtained from the Grand Master to exemplify or confer other work (which itself is educational). All Rituals are to be performed from memory, in full form, and to the highest possible standard, both in delivery and in a clear understanding of what is being conveyed. Regular Ritual rehearsals are to be held prior to conferring or exemplifying a Degree. **Rationale:** The Ritual is the means by which Masons transmit their teachings, and also the initiatory chain. As such it is the single most important function we perform. It is important therefore that it be performed with dignity, solemnity, and understanding.
4. **Education:** The education offered in an OM Lodge should go well beyond the minimum required of learning the Catechism. There should be regular and consistent education sessions, and

OBSERVANT MASONRY – A GUIDE TO PRACTICE & CERTIFICATION

Candidates for each Degree should be encouraged to do their own research and deliver papers in Lodge as well. While not stipulating a particular syllabus, the education should reflect an understanding of Masonic history, in particular that of the Lodge, and explore the symbols and lessons inculcated in the Rituals, including the Seven Liberal Arts & Sciences. Mentorship is also an important part of this process, and each Candidate should be assigned a Mentor – preferably his first line signer – who will remain his guide, to sit with him in Lodge and in educational sessions, and answer any questions; at least until he becomes a Master Mason. In Lodge, every meeting without a Degree should include a Lecture or Talk on a subject connected with Masonry. This is an ideal opportunity to invite speakers from other Lodges – or other Grand Jurisdictions in amity with the Grand Lodge of New York – to come and offer further enlightenment on the Craft. *Rationale:* The primary purpose of Freemasonry is to bring Candidates and Brothers to Light, and this can only be accomplished through teaching and the sharing of knowledge and experience.

5. **Festive Board:** From the first days of Freemasonry, the Festive board played a central role in the bonding and fellowship which sets the Craft apart. Far from being an informal social, this was a structured event in which formal toasts were given, short allocutions given, and fine fare enjoyed by all present. A Festive Board is not a Table Lodge, for no Degree is conferred. No Lodge is required to hold a Festive Bard following every meeting: however, an Observant Lodge should hold a minimum of two each year. There are several versions of Festive Boards available in the library and elsewhere. Those wishing to attend a Festive Board should give the Lodge Secretary advance notice, and be prepared to pay for his meal. In order to experience the complete Observant Lodge it is highly recommended that the visitor attends both the Meeting and the Festive Board. *Rationale:* Brothers bond both in labor and at refreshment, and a good Ritual can be defeated by a casual afterthought of a meal. Both are equally important, and the ability to bond over a formal meal is a tradition which goes back to the beginnings of civilization.

C. OPTIONAL CATEGORIES

1. **Chamber of Reflection:** This mode of preparing the Candidate has become highly popular recently. The Chamber is to be used before the Ritual begins, as it is outside of Standard Work, and when the Candidate knocks at the door of the Lodge the Chamber is ended. We must remember it is an ‘act of his own free will and accord’, and therefore the Candidate is to make his *own* way to the appointed place at the appointed time. Advice can be given to Lodges who wish to

OBSERVANT MASONRY – A GUIDE TO PRACTICE & CERTIFICATION

establish a Chamber of Reflection but it must conform to Preston-Webb model, and furniture and settings inappropriate to that tradition must not be incorporated, since these will only confuse the Candidate. Levity is prohibited; and a sufficient time should be allowed for the Candidate to obtain the maximum benefit from this meditational exercise. *Rationale:* The Chamber of Reflection is a highly effective way to make sure the Candidate has time to seriously consider the step he is about to take, and to reflect on the importance of what he is about to do. For most it will be the first time in many years they have sat quietly, separated from daily life, and been given an opportunity to reflect.

2. **Real candles:** While the Fire Department Rules in many areas do not allow these, it is a great shame, and wherever possible real beeswax candles should be used. The protocol for these is for them to be lit with a taper and extinguished with a snuffer: never blow a candle out! If real candles are not possible, excellent reproductions can now be found which look and behave like real candles, and these are to be preferred to electric lights if at all possible. *Rationale:* Real candlelight contributes to the meditational and set-apart atmosphere of the Lodge, since the lighting is both organic and not normally used in day to day life. It enhances the receptive mood both of Candidates and the Brothers attending a meeting.
3. **Processions:** In many traditions the Opening and Closing of a Lodge is enhanced by having the Officers process into the Lodge prior to Opening. Led by the Marshal the procession moves around the Lodge until all Officers are in their respective Stations and Places. Then with the blow of the gavel, the Master commences to Open the Lodge. *Rationale:* This is a deliberate act of setting the Opening apart from daily life, and can be seen used in many walks of life, from the opening of a religious ceremony, the opening of a courtroom trial, the annual St. John's Day Procession at the Utica Masonic Campus, to the Inauguration of a President.
4. **Chain of Union:** Since this is not an English practice but a mainland European one, it cannot be considered a mandatory part of our tradition. But the symbolism is sufficiently powerful for many Lodges to consider incorporating it into their practices. The Chain of union is traditionally performed at the Closing, when the Brothers come together on the level. As it is not a part of Standard Work, it should either be done as a separate ceremony immediately after Closing; and in some Lodges it is done during the Closing Prayer, since it is a valid to hold hands when praying as coming to the Sign of Fidelity (and indeed in many US Jurisdictions the *Sign of the Good Shepherd* is used in all prayers). The Chain of Union takes several forms, from holding hands; resting the left hand on the neighbor's shoulder while coming to Fidelity with the right; crossing the arms to grasp the neighbor's hands either in front or behind the body; or in the elaborate

OBSERVANT MASONRY – A GUIDE TO PRACTICE & CERTIFICATION

double chain where the hand the Brother beyond one's neighbor are grasped. **Rationale:** This is an important symbol of the universality of Masonry, and the bond between its Brothers. When performed at the end of a meeting, it is a powerful last memory to carry out into the world.

5. **Optional Furniture:** There are additional items one may introduce into a Lodge, which are not strictly essential but add to the experience, and are not contrary to the Standard Work. These include the Wardens' columns, a bell to announce the entrance of the Officers, a physical representation of the 'Point within a Circle bounded by the Holy Saints John and surmounted by the Volume of the Sacred Law', and the three traditional Trestleboards which may be displayed during the appropriate Degree. Where permitted, and acceptable to the members of a Lodge, a little incense may be used. **Rationale:** Any article which can enhance the Lodge Room experience or add to the educational possibilities is to be encouraged.

D. PROCESS & OBSERVATIONS

1. A group of Master Masons may decide to pursue Observant Masonry by one of three routes: start up a new Lodge, transform their Lodge, or seek an inactive Lodge to turn around.
2. Each route brings its own set of opportunities and challenges. History has shown that the greatest success tends to be in starting up a brand new Lodge, where those who are founder members know exactly what they wish to accomplish. Trying to transform your own Lodge can often result in political issues; and taking over a moribund Lodge can also lead to significant challenges in grandfathering the rights of the existing members. Setting higher dues, while allowing existing members to keep their current dues levels, can lead to financial hardship for a poor Lodge attempting to replace furniture, regalia and hold elegant dinners. Similarly, grandfathering dress codes for former members can lead to old members deliberately flaunting the new dress codes. Surprisingly this is the main reason for the failure of Lodges attempting to transition to an Observant model.
3. New Lodges will need to apply using the standard forms outlined in the Constitutions.
4. It has been suggested that an Observant Lodge meet four times a year. Those founding and Observant Lodge should be mindful of the logistical problems which arise when two of those meetings would be taken up with the District Deputy's Visit and the Summoned Communication to hear and vote on the Annual Reports, as well as the Annual Election and Installation of Officers. In addition, all Lodges should be encouraged not only to exemplify Degree but to confer them in reality upon worthy Candidates. All of this leaves little time for the Lectures and

OBSERVANT MASONRY – A GUIDE TO PRACTICE & CERTIFICATION

Education which set an Observant Lodge apart. A number of Lodges perform ritual work at a Special Communication when no other business can be transacted, and leave the Stated Communications for Lectures and business. A Master-elect needs to be aware of these point when putting together a suitable Trestleboard for an Observant Lodge.

5. Once the Lodge is up and running, this document should be used to verify that meetings conform to at least the Key Categories of this document.
6. Once the Lodge Officers feel confident that all requirements are being met, they can apply as above for a visit to a Stated of Special Communication for the purpose of reviewing the Lodge's practices. Once the Score Sheet has been completed, and its contents discussed with the Master and Officers, it will be sent to the Grand Master for his decision.
7. If the results are approved, the Lodge will be issued a Certificate of Observance, and will be entitled to use the letters 'OM' or the words 'Observant Masonry' after their name and number, in all correspondence, media and communications on public board such as Atholl and Hiram's Highlights. This will be for the duration for the present Grand Master's tenure, and the Program will be subject to review by his successors to be continued or terminated.
8. The requirements may be changed and refined over time. However, any Lodge achieving 'OM' status will not lose their status due to any later changes.
9. Once achieving the status of an 'OM' Lodge, a Lodge will undergo an annual review so long as the Program is in force.

OBSERVANT MASONRY – A GUIDE TO PRACTICE & CERTIFICATION

E. SCORE SHEET

Lodge Name: _____ Lodge #: _____

District: _____ Date of Review: __ / __ / __

Category	Comments
1. Attire	
2. A Place Set Apart	
3. Ritual	
4. Education	
5. Festive Board	
6. Optional Categories	

RECOMMENDATION: Y / N

REVIEWER'S TITLE & NAME: _____

REVIEWER'S SIGNATURE: _____