



**The Grand Lodge of Ancient, Free and
Accepted Masons of Virginia**



Committee on Masonic Education

Lodge Presentation Program Paper

**THE MASONIC FUNERAL SERVICE
RITUAL INSTRUCTION AND MASONIC EDUCATION**

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We have archeological evidence of burial ceremonies, and there are monuments around the world demonstrating that people have memorialized the dead in ceremonies of varying degrees of complexity since the beginnings of civilization. We also have written evidence of ceremonial burials from Before the Common Era, as time is now measured in academic documents.

Our Masonic rituals and lectures are replete with symbolism of a funereal nature and evidence of Masonic burial ceremonies is at least as old in this country as the country itself. In 1999, in the area around Mount Vernon, Masons re-enacted the Masonic burial ceremony for Worshipful Brother General George Washington on the 200th anniversary of his death. There are many reports that during the Civil War flags of truce allowed Masons in

Confederate and Union uniforms to cease their fighting long enough to bury a dead Mason of the opposing force with appropriate honors. This again demonstrates the importance placed upon a Masonic service.

Masonic funeral service customs have changed considerably over time, as well as from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, as have funeral customs in general. A few Lodges still observe some old funeral customs which appear unusual to members of other Lodges, These include wearing black mourning arm bands with square and compasses, and having each Mason place a bit of evergreen on the coffin before interment.

In the past, Masonic funerals occasioned a great outpouring of Masons. But today, few have witnessed these public processions of Masons marching in regalia from the Lodge to the deceased's home, thence to the church, and then to the cemetery with aproned Masons serving as pall bearers and preceding others in a procession of mourners.

Today the public more often associates large gatherings of mourners with political funerals, or when a fireman or a law enforcement officer dies in the line of duty. There they see large numbers of firemen or law enforcement officers in their dress uniforms, and processions consisting of many

police or fire vehicles escorting the body to the cemetery.

Some church leaders have expressed concern that a Masonic funeral service inappropriately diminishes a traditional function belonging only to the church, while other church leaders have conducted, and supported, by their attendance, Masonic funeral services. Today most Masonic funeral services are conducted at the funeral home rather than at a church or around the grave.

People were once reminded to live toward others, so they would, at the end of their life, still have at least six good friends willing and able to carry them to their final destination. That should surely not be a concern to any Mason. We need to ensure the same outpouring of Masons to attend the Masonic funeral of each Brother as we are accustomed to see of police or firemen for the funerals of their colleagues.

Masons need to inform their family about their desire for a Masonic funeral service and where they keep their white lambskin apron. The Worshipful Master upon learning of the death of a member of the Lodge should immediately contact the widow, or other close family member, to offer the condolences and support of the Lodge, and to inform the family of the availability of the Masonic funeral service.

The importance of the funeral service cannot be overestimated. Family members who attend military funerals speak favorably for years afterward of the competence of those performing the service and the comfort they derived from seeing the dedication to their loved one of all those involved in the funeral service.

The Masonic funeral service is similarly important, and it behooves all Lodge officers and attending members to approach the Masonic funeral rites with the same sense of duty, dedication, and practiced competence exhibited in a military funeral.

In Virginia, the ritual for the Masonic graveside service and the evening memorial service are explicitly prescribed in the Manual of Ceremonies. Although a majority of Masonic funerals are now conducted in mortuaries in the evening rather than around the grave following the funeral, the usual ceremony chosen is the Graveside Funeral Service Around the Bier, rather than the Evening Memorial Service, which the Manual of Ceremonies says is to be used “at the election of the Master of a Lodge in the Funeral Chapel or home of the deceased at an evening service prior to the interment of the deceased or when there is no body or remains.” The Evening Memorial Service ceremony is

equally as beautiful as the Graveside Funeral, but very few have made the effort to learn it in addition to the Graveside Funeral Service.

Regardless of which service the Master selects, the Manual of Ceremonies needs to be studied, and the ritual practiced, so it is delivered in a flawless and impressive manner. It is important to the reputation of the Lodge, and the Fraternity, that the service be performed perfectly, and with as many in attendance as possible at the time and place the family chooses.

There probably is no other ritual performed by the Lodge that will have as favorable and lasting impression on family members and the public as the Masonic funeral service. We are a sacred band or society of friends and Brothers, and despite the many work and family pressures we are under, we know that attending the last Masonic rites for a Brother is a most important Masonic obligation. We owe it to our deceased Brother to offer “the last tribute of our affections” and equally by our presence to demonstrate to the family that while “death has severed and destroyed our social connection with our Brother, it has not impaired or weakened our obligations to the living.”