

A RADICAL IN THE EAST

A RADICAL IN THE EAST

Second Edition

S. Brent Morris

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Iowa Research Lodge No. 2

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Bucktrout Masonic Chair

(Cover photo used with permission of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation)

THE BUCKTROUT MASONIC CHAIR is arguably the most elaborate piece of Masonic furniture of eighteenth-century America and the most important piece of signed Virginia furniture. This Master's chair by Bro. Benjamin Bucktrout captures much of the finer symbolism of our fraternity. The documented history of the chair is unfortunately sparse.

It was presented to Unanimity Lodge No. 7 in Edenton, North Carolina, on July 6, 1778, by Bro. George Russell. Lodge tradition maintains that Russell was a sea captain who rescued the chair from potential destruction during the Revolutionary War and gave it to Unanimity Lodge for safekeeping. Unanimity Lodge tradition maintains that Bucktrout's Master's Chair was one of the three commissioned for lodges in Virginia by "Lord Baltimore," probably a corruption of "Lord Botetroust," royal governor of Virginia 1768–1770. The records of Unanimity Lodge include references in 1811 and 1815 to requests from Norfolk Lodge No. 1 that the chair be returned to Virginia, though there is no specific evidence that the chair was made for that lodge. Nothing came of those requests and the chair remained in Edenton Lodge until 1983 when it was acquired by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Former chief conservator Carey Howlett supervised the lengthy treatment of this grand chair and made an interesting observation. The five-pointed star, compass, and square placed on the open bible in the center of the back became, within a generation of the chair being constructed, the precise form of the jewel in Britain for a provincial grand master. Shortly after the chair was made in Williamsburg, a distinguished Williamsburg resident was appointed provincial grand master—none other than Right Worshipful Brother Peyton Randolph who served as Speaker of the Virginia House of Burgesses and later as President of the Continental Congress.

Bro. Benjamin Bucktrout was made a Master Mason in Williamsburg Lodge No. 3 on the evening of May 28, 1774. There were seven other candidates that evening, including Edmund Randolph, nephew of Peyton Randolph. Bucktrout had immigrated to Williamsburg from London in 1765 and subsequently became a successful cabinetmaker and merchant. The records from the mid-1770s show that he was one of the most active members of Williamsburg Lodge No. 3. Might Bro. Benjamin Bucktrout have made this elaborate chair for the eminent Mason and Speaker, Right Wor. Bro. Peyton Randolph? There is nothing to either prove or disprove it.

Iowa Research Lodge No. 2
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To the memory of

Jerry E. Marsengill

PM, FPS, 32^o, KCCH, PGHP, PGM, MBMC

FRIEND • MENTOR • EDITOR • MASTER MASON

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Foreword to the Second Edition

IN 1993 I was thrust into the task of assisting S. Brent Morris in the first edition of *A Radical In The East*. Sixteen years later I have been asked to write a new foreword to this remarkable book, moving from the back to the front of the volume! In order to accomplish this I took the opportunity to re-read this book and I found it just as timely for today's Mason as it was then. Bro. Morris speaks truths that are timeless.

A Radical in the East was and is a forward-looking book. It does not dwell on the past except to analyze the conditions that have led us to the fraternity of today. Bro. S. Brent Morris is a mathematician and he looks at the problems of Masonry with a mathematician's eye. He is also a Mason with a long experience with Craft, York, and Scottish Rite Masonry. There are few, if any, Masons who can claim the experience that Bro. Morris has. Since the book originally came out, he has continued his Masonic accomplishments. He was awarded the Grand Cross of the Court of Honour in the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry, Southern Jurisdiction, in 1999. Most recently he has just completed a term as Master of Quaturor Coronati Lodge No. 2076, London, the premier research lodge in the world. A complete list of his accomplishments would fill more space than I have been allotted for this forward.

Brother Morris' books have cleared the cobwebs from Freemasonry. He has appeared on national radio and television and has brought reasonable answers to questions that have been asked about our fraternity. His work has brought a new level of scholarship to Freemasonry. He does not write something unless he has researched it and tested it and when he does say something it is worth listening to—more than once.

Bro. Morris has added two additional papers to the book. "Voting with their Feet" and an article about Scottish Rite membership are worthy additions to the collection and add to the overall theme of the book. Keith Arrington left it up to the reader in the original forward to decide whether or not Bro. Morris was a radical. This book has shaped my thinking about Freemasonry and the need for the Craft to address the problems which (still) face it today. I think that Brother Morris would agree with me that leadership needs to lead and not just "hold a place" for a year. *A Radical In The East* can be a guidebook to action by Masons or groups of Masons who are interested in learning about our Craft and its membership problems and ways to address them. It can be read and studied by individuals, study groups or even entire lodges. There is a lot of value in this little book. There is much food for thought and discussion. I recommend it to any serious student of Masonry.

JAY COLE SIMSER, PM
Iowa Lodge of Research No. 2

Foreword to the First Edition

A SELF-PROFESSED “Radical in the East,” Brent Morris is a Masonic scholar, author, lecturer, and book reviewer and is Executive Secretary of the Editorial Board of *The Scottish Rite Journal*. He has served in the Masonic East and lives and works on the East Coast, in the United States Capitol area.

Although an Easterner by residence (he was born in Texas), Brent has an Iowa-Midwest connection in that he was, in a sense, the Masonic protégé of the late Franklin J. “Andy” Anderson, Iowa school teacher, Assistant Librarian of the Iowa Masonic Library and, later, assistant to the editor of *The Royal Arch Mason*. Andy retired to Columbia, Maryland, where he served as Executive Secretary of the Philalethes Society. When he relinquished that office, the Philalethes secretary’s pen was turned over to his young friend, S. Brent Morris, who filled the office with distinction for several years.

The recipient of many Masonic honors, Brent Morris is a Fellow of the Philalethes Society and wears the white cap of the Thirty-Third Degree of the Scottish Rite.

This collection of papers, which have been presented by Brother Morris in such far-flung Masonic scenes as Minnesota and Texas as well as on the East Coast, presents something of interest, information and challenge for everyone. Whether or not the brother is a radical will be decided by you, the reader. In any case, you will be impressed with his scholarship and caught up by his enthusiasm.

Brother Morris examines, as a professional mathematician and statistician, the persistent problems of shrinking Masonic membership and non-attendance at meetings with fresh viewpoints and a realistic but optimistic

outlook. He also provides a wealth of informative and relaxing reading about Masonry for those who never tire of learning more about our fraternity. As an amateur magician, it is possible that Brent may have insight which is denied to other mere mortals.

A Radical In The East was the last book chosen by Jerry Marsengill, founder, editor and moving force behind Iowa Research Lodge No. 2, for publication by that body.

KEITH ARRINGTON, FPS, BF
Grand Librarian Emeritus, Iowa

Preface to the Second Edition

If you want to make God smile, announce your plans.

IF I thought it was exciting sixteen years ago to be invited to assemble a collection of my papers on Freemasonry, then it's doubly so to be asked to prepare a second edition. It is humbling to think that someone is still interested in reading essays written as much as twenty-seven years ago!

The oldest essay here, "A Radical in the East," still conveys my frustration after finishing a year as High Priest of a Royal Arch Chapter, but I'm not sure that my "radical" proposals—serving liquor, abandoning top hats and formal wear, simplifying ceremonies, and holding more interesting meetings—are all that important now, except for holding more interesting meetings. (Who could disagree with that!) The York Rite has continued its decline to the point that in many places it's lost "critical mass," that is, enough members for it to function. For example, a few years ago the Cryptic Masons of Maryland could not find anyone willing to start in the bottom of the line to the Grand East.

I think the second oldest essay, "Trends Affecting American Freemasonry," has held up better, as have most of my statistical and historical papers. My discovery that many fraternal groups peaked in membership *before* the Depression calls into question our understanding of how Freemasonry and other fraternal groups fit in to American Society, and the puzzle of the ascendancy of the Scottish Rite over the York Rite in twentieth-century America still remains. Prof. Robert Putnam's 2000 book, *Bowling Alone*, was a nice confirmation that declining Masonic memberships are part of a larger societal trend. (We're still drowning, but largely for reasons that appear to be beyond our control.)

Perhaps the main things that I have learned since writing these essays is that changing membership trends is like turning an aircraft carrier. There are no simple answers and no quick fixes, only persistent hard work. One of the reasons that change is so difficult in Freemasonry and other voluntary associations is that our members (including me!) who have stuck with the fraternity and have become its leaders pretty much like it the way it is. Significant change, which is probably necessary, is outside of our comfort zone and might lead to an organization different from the one we love.

When I assembled the first edition of *A Radical in the East*, I was a mathematician working for the federal government. One of the things that attracted me to majoring in mathematics was that I didn't have to produce term papers or other written material on a deadline. In 2000 I retired from the government and went to work for the Supreme Council, 33°, S.J., in the newly created position of Director of Membership Development. It was an opportunity to put some of my theories into practice. In 2005 I became editor of *The Scottish Rite Journal* and now regularly produce written material on a deadline. I'm having fun, and I'm sure that God is smiling!

It will be interesting to see if in another twenty-seven years anyone wants a third edition.

S. BRENT MORRIS, PM, FPS, BF
Laurel, Maryland, June 12, 2009.

Preface to the First Edition

IT WAS exciting to have my good friend and the noted Masonic scholar. Jerry Marsengill, agree to publish a collection of my papers for Iowa Research Lodge No. 2. My enthusiasm has been tempered, however, by his untimely passing; my self-confidence has been tested by carefully rereading these early literary efforts.

It is all too easy for authors to think of their writings as timeless gems of wisdom, to be sought eagerly by future generations. Some of my writing has aged quite well, I think, but time has not been so kind to all. Why did I use such a trite phrase there? Did I really think those words were so clever (when they sound so clichéd now)?

My first temptation was to rewrite every paper. In some cases I have additional facts and better references. In others I could make my point in fewer and stronger words. If nothing else, I could use a consistent style for references. With a great deal of effort I resisted these noble urges.

There should be some value in seeing an author's ideas evolve and his style mature. If nothing else, the passion that inspired me to write some papers might be lost by careful polishing and refining. You have here what I published—not what I should have written.

Indications of radicalism appeared early in my Masonic career; I've always asked questions. "On Masonic Research" reveals some of the first questions I raised about our gentle craft, even before I was initiated. When I was appointed to the officer's line in Patmos Lodge, I did the unthinkable: I read the Constitution of the Grand Lodge of Maryland. After that I was always asking, "Where does it say that in the Constitution?" Later I posed other questions: "If it's such a great idea, why didn't it work for the Odd Fellows." Like

Jerry Marsengill, I discovered that some Masonic “leaders” don’t like questions (especially carefully researched and documented ones).

I don’t expect you to agree with everything I’ve written, but I do hope you will think about the issues I raise. I had fun writing these papers, and I hope you will enjoy reading them.

S. BRENT MORRIS, PM, FPS
Columbia, Maryland, July 26, 1993

A Radical in the East

THE REFLECTIONS OF A HIGH PRIEST ON HIS YEAR IN THE EAST

Loyalty to petrified opinion never yet broke a chain or freed a soul.

—Mark Twain

As a man matures, his thinking about various things changes. Some of these changes are gradual developments; some are sudden, abrupt turnarounds. I would like to share with you a shift in my thinking about Freemasonry of the latter type. My comments deal most specifically with the chapter, though they are applicable to the lodge or any other organization. My thinking was radicalized while I served as High Priest of Zeredathah Chapter No. 35 in Laurel, Maryland. I may not persuade you to my thinking, but at least I hope to make you pause and consider.

My road to becoming a radical began innocently one evening before the opening of chapter. I was concerned with the usual pre-meeting worries: attendance; officers; programs; and time. Especially time, as that evening we had a fair amount of business, and I wanted to close early. I recall thinking to myself: “Open—15 minutes; read and approve the minutes—5 minutes; ballot—10 minutes; announcements—10 minutes; close—10 minutes.” Already I saw an hour’s work ahead of me, assuming no one became long-winded, and that didn’t even include business. Then the Secretary handed me a note with the name of a

recently deceased Companion. My first thought was, “Damn! Another three minutes at least for a eulogy and a prayer.”

As I thought over the meeting while driving home that evening, I recalled with growing revulsion my reaction to the death of our Companion. His death had not touched me in the least—his passing did not mean to me a loss of fellowship, but only a few minutes longer to spend in chapter. What a perversion of Masonic principles my thinking had become! As I tried to decide what caused me to change so, I realized that my thinking had abruptly shifted.

I recalled our Affirmation Sunday service at a local church where there had been an unpleasant confrontation about whether we should wear our aprons. An older Past High Priest felt that we should follow the Grand Chapter’s suggestion and wear our aprons to show the world that we were Royal Arch Masons and proud of it. On the other hand, I maintained that we were at the church to worship, not to impress the congregation. The settlement of this disagreement was that some Companions wore their aprons, some didn’t, and I felt smugly self-righteous. That is, until I later reflected on the day. Then I realized that while I had made pious noises about the joy of worshipping together, my real concern had been to wheedle and cajole enough Companions to attend so that the chapter (and especially the High Priest) would not be embarrassed by sparsely filled pews. Was this what our Affirmation Sunday was supposed to be about?

Then my thoughts went to our efforts to gain new members. Were we interested in increasing our circle of friends, sharing our fellowship, or helping a brother find that which was lost? Not on your life! We had much simpler and baser motives. We needed more money, for one thing, and initiation fees were an easy source of income. By increasing our rolls, we would show the world that we were a healthy and vibrant organization; we would reestablish our self-importance (for if we weren’t important, why would all of these people seek membership?), and, perhaps most significantly, we would get new officer material. What could be a more urgent task for Masonic Officers than to perpetuate themselves?

Kindled by the death of a companion and fueled by some reflection on Capitular Masonry, my old thinking burned away. The time had now come for me to reevaluate my point of view towards the chapter. The fundamental question was: “What is the purpose of Royal Arch Masonry?” My answer was fourfold: preservation, transmission, encouragement, and enhancement. Our chapters are predicated upon preserving the Legend of the Recovery and the philosophy and way of life that is Freemasonry, and transmitting them to our successors.

We also serve to encourage a dynamic interest in our Craft, and to enhance this interest by offering further opportunities for fellowship and service.

If these indeed are our purposes, how do we fulfill them? The ritual serves as our fundamental method for preserving and transmitting the Legend of the Recovery. In our chapter rituals, we elaborate upon and expand the basic tenets of the Craft. Our ceremonies act as a binding force that permits us to enlarge our sense of unity by sharing common experiences. The formality of our procedures, customs, and (at least in Maryland) dress emphasizes the seriousness of our intent; it serves to set us apart from other, more informal groups. And yet, with these lofty purposes and means to achieve them, we fall far, far short of the mark. What has gone wrong?

There is no one simple answer. However, I will share with you what I observe to be some of our more glaring errors. Our formality all too often degenerates into a caricature of the solemnity we hope to attain. Perhaps when evening clothes were a standard item in any gentleman's wardrobe, black tie was an appropriate dress for chapter. Today, when few social functions require black tie and even fewer men own a tuxedo, our formality is out of place. If formal dress is the genuine desire of an individual chapter, then it should be vigorously encouraged. But to put a blanket requirement on all chapters—large and small, city and country—is to invite stagnation and eventual suffocation. The result is, sadly, a cartoon-like scene of ill-fitting tuxedos bought decades ago and kept in service well beyond their natural lives. Presiding over this setting is a High Priest, without his own top hat, who borrows a faded, frayed, and wrong-sized refugee from the coat closet, and then attempts to represent the glory of Solomon!

Ceremony could be the spice of a chapter meeting, but like a spice, it should not overwhelm. If only we followed this maxim! Unfortunately, at least 20–30 minutes of each meeting is spent in the tedium of opening and closing. The repetitive nature of these exercises numbs the mind and bores the onlooker. We have all seen ritual bastardizations that produce “short form” ceremonies. These informal alterations indicate a crying need for more fundamental changes, but it is a cry that is seldom heeded. Rather than ask why we persist in using ceremonies created in and ideally suited for the previous century, our Companions slowly drift away, never to return.

When we look at our ritual, we cannot help but be impressed at the position of preeminent importance it has in our affairs. Its importance, I feel, has been bloated entirely out of proportion. Consider for a moment the thousands of man-hours spent on ritual—memorization, rehearsal, exemplification, confer-

ral—and contrast this with the efforts spent on charity or education or even fellowship. It is a rare chapter that does not spend the major part of its time and efforts on ritual, to the exclusion of almost anything else. It is my disturbing observation that ritual has ceased to be a means to an end, the method by which we preserve and transmit our heritage, but rather it has become an end in itself.

While I was in the East, I was advised to hold more rehearsals so we could confer the degrees proficiently. We needed to confer the degrees so we could get new members who were needed to become officers who were needed to attend rehearsals so we could confer the degrees proficiently. We're caught on a treadmill and too few realize it. Our older members long for the halcyon days when weekly rehearsals were packed with eager young Companions longing to be appointed to the line. Those days, if they ever really existed, are past us. It is true that a healthy, strong chapter has excellent degree work, just as it excels in all activities. However, it is folly to think that a crash program in upgrading ritual performance alone will materially improve an ailing chapter.

Having outlined what I consider to be our purposes and some of our failings, I would be remiss if I didn't offer a few suggestions on how we could improve. We could begin by allowing more individuality in our chapters. Some chapters may wish to meet twice a month with a full line of officers in black tie and to confer degrees on demand. Others may want to meet quarterly with only nine Companions in informal dress and to send candidates to other chapters or festivals for their degrees. The current notion of the ideal chapter is one that is large, has a full line of officers, meets frequently, rehearses religiously, and has a waiting list of prospective Officers. This ideal at one time may have been common, and for the nineteenth century and even the early twentieth century was perfect, but it is certainly the exception now. We must allow our chapters to find equivalent expressions for their zeal in Capitular Masonry without feeling inadequate. The alternative is to continue as we are, with chapters withering as they become trapped in an endless cycle of failure.

The words *spontaneous* and *lively* are seldom used to describe chapter meetings. Why not encourage a return of activities that not only promote fellowship but also are fun? These could include Table Chapters, dinners, and—as heretical as the suggestion may be—liquor served as refreshments or with a meal. American Freemasonry was bitten at an early age by the temperance bug, and has never quite recovered. Capitular Masonry could take a progressive step for the Craft by permitting chapters to serve liquor, and at the same time encourage a less puritanical image of Masonry.

Our opening and closing rituals (not to mention most other routine procedures) should be streamlined. We really don't need ten or more officers in a chapter. Certainly the Veilsmen are unnecessary as is probably the Principal Sojourner. Ideally we should have both a long and short form opening and closing. The latter exist widely in bastard form and need only to be recognized and standardized. I've heard many say that short form ceremonies should never be allowed because the long forms would not be used again. If there is such a willingness to abandon our current forms, perhaps they have outlived their usefulness.

Finally, I'll share with you my most radical thought: Our degrees need to be changed! Masonic ritual as we know it was born in the late seventeenth century. It grew and adapted to serve the Craft as the Craft evolved. It varied locally, and was a living, changing expression of the differing interpretations of our ritual heritage. Then, in the early to mid-nineteenth century, possibly in response to excessive variation and extreme interpretations, our ritual became uniform, rigid, and ossified. It was declared that the interpretations and usages of the middle 1800s would henceforth and forevermore be the orthodox ritual.

As beautiful and meaningful as our ritual may be, I'm not convinced that our 1850 version is any better than a 1750 one, and I'm certainly sorry that I'll never see a 1950 interpretation. Our ritual is indeed impressive, but it should be as we have plagiarized from the finest sources—Shakespeare, the King James Bible, and others. However, great portions are wordy, turgid, anachronistic, unhistorical, and all but impossible to follow. When an evening devoted to the Royal Arch degree alone can drag on to nearly midnight, we cannot help but run off workers as well as sideliners. The task before us is one that will require delicacy, that will cause howls of pain, but at the least must be seriously considered.

It is painfully obvious that something is wrong with Capitular Masonry. Our membership is declining, as is that of most fraternal organizations, but more alarming is the fact that the percentage of Craftsmen who join the chapter is also declining. The reasons for this downtrend are neither simple nor clear, else we would have eliminated them long ago. As conditions continue to deteriorate, many of our Companions take on a siege mentality, perhaps feeling that they are the last guardians of the sanctum sanctorum. They call, with increasing stridency, for a return to what they perceive as the virtues of our earlier days of strength: rehearsals, degree work, and conformity. To them, any change at all is tantamount to surrender.

On the other hand, I, as a self-confessed radical, want a more imaginative solution. While we still operate from a position of relative stability and

strength, we should seek bold innovations. Surely we can preserve and transmit our teachings by some more flexible method. Certainly we can encourage and enhance fellowship and interest in the Craft less stodgily. Novelty will not guarantee success, nor will change be without failure. However, if we must fail, I would rather fail by trying than by acquiescence. When we pass on, as shall all things flesh, I want to go with a bang and not a whimper.

Afterword to the First Edition

WHEN my friend Jerry Marsengill telephoned me to ask me to become his assistant I thought for a moment and said yes. (It was always hard for me to say no to Jerry). My expectation was that I would have a long time to “sit at the master’s feet” and learn from him.

Unfortunately for all of us, Jerry was taken from us and I was thrust into the role of shepherding this book to publication with no experience or expertise to draw upon. Fortunately for Iowa Research Lodge No. 2 the author of this book is an accomplished editor and were it not for his insistence and effort this would not be the quality production which we want to give to our members.

I want to express my appreciation to Brent Morris for his work and for all that he has taught me. From our first meeting on the evening in July that the floods hit Des Moines (He was in Iowa to give the first annual Jerald E. Marsengill Lecture) I have learned from him. He has been patient with this novice editor and I hope that our association and friendship will continue to grow. I thank him and I also thank Keith Arrington, Tom Dean and Tom Gruis my fellow editor/researchers. We all hope that you will enjoy this presentation of Iowa Research Lodge No. 2.

JAY COLE SIMSER

Afterword to the Second Edition

THE FIRST edition of *A Radical in the East* was published in 1993. It immediately became a very popular book in Masonic circles. The members of Iowa Research Lodge No. 2 have long discussed the possibility of republishing it. The messages that it brings are as timely today as they were sixteen years ago.

I encourage readers to contemplate the themes that Bro. S. Brent Morris presents. Many of the issues that he discussed in 1993 are still relevant concerns for our fraternity. I especially encourage young Masons to read and think about the messages contained herein. The future of our fraternity is in your hands.

I want to express my sincerest appreciation to Bro. Morris who has been so gracious to work with on this project. When I first contacted Bro. Brent and told him that Iowa Research Lodge No. 2 would like to reprint his original work, he was enthusiastic about helping us publish a second edition. Bro. Brent not only has provided two additional papers for this edition, but also is responsible for designing and typesetting the book.

Bro. Jay Cole Simser also deserves thanks for his support and encouragement. He never wavered in expressing his desire to see this project completed. Bros. Keith Arrington, Tom Gruis, and Tom Dean were also instrumental in helping in the original publication.

On behalf of the brethren of Iowa Research Lodge No. 2, I would like to express our hope that the readers of *A Radical in the East* will find enjoyment and thought-provoking ideas that will enable them to bring renewal to their respective lodges and our fraternity.

WADE E. SHEELER, PM
Iowa Research Lodge No.2

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