

## Masonry's Lost Funeral Verses.

"Solemn strikes the funeral chime...." There is sad irony in the fact that the man who wrote those lyrics, sung in Masonic Lodge rooms across America, was himself buried without Masonic honors.

Very little is written about Brother David Vinton's life. Born in Medford, Mass., Jan. 6, 1774, he ultimately became a teacher of York Rite Masonic Ritual in the Southern States, having the most success in North and South Carolina. Brother Vinton was a member of Mount Vernon Lodge No. 4 of Providence, R.I. He was quite prominent in the Masonic Fraternity, and in 1816 compiled and published a volume entitled "The Masonic Minstrel." Actually, the full title was "The Masonic Minstrel, a Selection of Masonic, Sentimental, and Amorous Songs. Duets, Glees, Canons, Rounds and Canzonets, Respectfully Dedicated to the Most Ancient and Honorable Fraternity of Free and Accepted Masons," Bro. Vinton sold about 12,000 copies by subscription. It was in this volume that the verses of the beautiful funeral dirge used in the second section of the Master Masons degree are found.

The familiar melody we've all heard in our Masonic journey, known as "Pleyel's Hymn," was composed by Ignaz Joseph Pleyel, a composer and student of Bro. Franz Joseph Haydn. It is the hymn from Pleyel's "4th Quartet, Opus 7," which he published in 1791. The details that led to Vinton's expulsion from the Grand Lodges of North, and South Carolina, Virginia, and Connecticut have always been a bit sketchy, but the incidents apparently relate to his taking liberties with Masonic ritual.

The last three-quarters of the 19th Century could well be called the era of the Masonic Degree peddlers. It was a time when the idea of a uniform ritual was patently offensive to many Freemasons. So many diverse versions of the ritual found their way into the American Lodge work that it was indeed an extraordinary undertaking to standardize the work. Men who had been taught one way were very stubborn toward the idea of having to relearn ritual they already knew. In every Grand Jurisdiction where the travelling ritualists worked, there was a quiet resistance to change in many of the Lodges.

A half-century earlier, Thomas Webb and his students created a new method for how men learned the work in Lodges. Masonic lectures were no longer a system whereby men would learn Masonry by discussing the lessons in Lodge. They learned Masonry as something that was to be memorized, hence forth. These early promoters of a uniform working ritual were known and respected throughout America as legitimate teachers of the work. They were the first of several generations of 'traveling ritualists'. These men were hired to instruct Lodges in a certain mode of working for the purpose of standardizing the work within a Grand jurisdiction.

The problem, of course, was that, after the death of this first generation of "ritualists by rote," men who claimed to know Webb's work would market themselves as travelling lecturers for the purpose of profiting off the Brethren. And, too, individual Lodges would avail themselves of the services of these travelling ritualists without the sanction of their Grand Lodge. For example, the minutes of Webb Lodge No. 24, in Richmond, Indiana, state that the Lodge engaged one Brother Michael McLaughlin of Ohio to deliver a course of lectures covering a period of ten days, at \$7 per day...pretty good money, back then, I would say.

By the 1840s, when Grand Lodges were unable to agree on a system of instruction and did not have the finances to pay the salary of a Grand Lecturer, there were numerous instances in which

Lodges arranged for their own schools of instruction. Minutes of Lodge after Lodge indicate repeated “*contracts*” with men who had been hired to deliver a series of degree lectures for a fee, plus expenses. The going rate was generally \$25-35 a week, along with a vote of thanks from the Lodge.

On rare occasion, the Lodges would turn against their own travelling degree peddlers. One such unfortunate fellow was David Vinton. In 1821, Vinton was summoned to appear before the Grand Chapter of Virginia to be examined on charges preferred against him by Franklin Lodge No. 4 of Royal Arch Masons, to which Vinton belonged. The charges were for “*highly improper and un-Masonic conduct.*” Vinton did not respond to the summons, so he lost his privileges as a Mason in that Grand Chapter and “*throughout the world.*”

It was publicly claimed within the Craft that Vinton had made Mark Masters and Past Masters without a dispensation or warrant to do so. The real reason for the charge was that Vinton was caught furnishing cipher notes of the several Masonic lectures. Vinton felt that competing lecturers, among them such noted names as Jeremy Cross, were simply trying to discredit his work. The incident caused some heated debate, especially here in the South.

The Grand Lodge of North Carolina followed suit with a public condemnation of Vinton in the Raleigh newspapers. In Vinton’s defense, the Freemasons of Georgia issued a manifesto dated May 16, 1821, in which they claimed Vinton had “*shown them documents which proved his moral character as a private citizen and a Mason.*” It turns out that Vinton’s notes were far less extensive than is normally found in monitors and cipher books of the present day. In fact, according to Thomas Hayward, Grand Master of Florida in 1858, who personally reviewed Vinton’s lectures, his printed work would not even raise an eyebrow compared with what Albert Pike or Mackey had published by the 1860s.

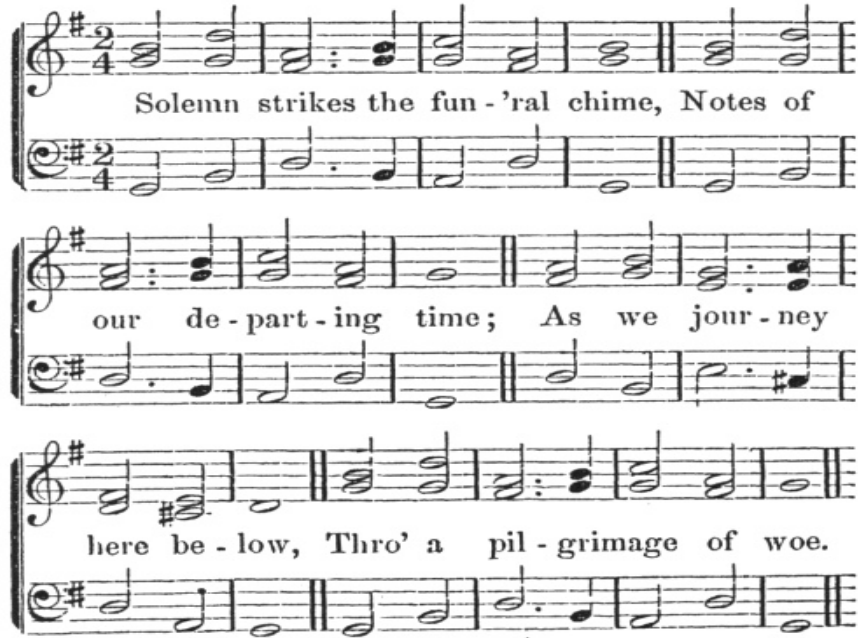
So, the real reason for Vinton’s demise was for the conferring of Chapter Degrees without authority. For this, he should have been disciplined by the Grand Chapters under which he worked. But it is hard to conclude that he actually committed any offense against the laws of Masonry. Since Webb, Cross, Barker, and others made a living by peddling degrees of the York Rite well before Vinton’s time, it can be argued that he was simply following the precedent set by others before him. Although wrong in his own actions, there were no grounds for Grand Lodges to denounce him as they did, let alone expel him from Masonry. Nevertheless, he was hunted down, and disgraced. His last days were spent without the honor or privilege of Masonic charity. He died a broken man, a “stranger in a strange land.”

The kind Brethren of Kentucky, who said they “*were willing to give him funeral honors if his character were cleared up,*” could find no one to offer an official declaration of forgiveness. They could do nothing for him or his memory. Brother David Vinton died in Shakertown, Kentucky, in July of 1833. While on his deathbed, the Freemasons of Lodge No. 73 at Bowling Green, wrote to the Grand Lodge inquiring whether David Vinton was a Mason in good standing. The reply was in the negative. And so the sweet poet and Masonic songster of the period died under a cloud, and there is no emblem of the Craft on his tombstone. \*

In my research I discovered that as many as eight verses have been attributed to Vinton, yet only three verses, the first, third, and fourth, are in general use in Masonic ritual worldwide, as they are here in Virginia.

## FUNERAL DIRGE.

MUSIC—*Pleyel's Hymn.*



Solemn strikes the fun - 'ral chime, Notes of  
our de - part - ing time; As we jour - ney  
here be - low, Thro' a pil - grimage of woe.

The eight verses are:

Solemn strikes the funeral chime!  
Notes of our departing time,  
As we journey here below,  
Through a pilgrimage of woe.

Brothers, now indulge a tear,  
For mortality is here!  
See how wide her trophies wave,  
O'er the slumbers of the grave.

Here another guest we bring,  
Seraphs of Celestial wing,  
To our funeral altar come,  
Waft our friend and brother home.

Lord of all, below, above,  
Fill our hearts with Truth and Love.  
As dissolves our earthly tie,  
Take us to Thy *home*\* on High. (\* Original text is 'Lodge')

For beyond the grave there lie  
Brighter mansions in the sky!  
Where, enthroned, the Diety  
Gives man immortality.

There enlarged, thy soul shall see,  
What was veiled in mystery;  
Heavenly glories of the place  
Show his maker face to face.

God of life's eternal day!  
Guide us, lest from Thee we stray,  
By a false, delusive light,  
To the shades of endless night.

Calm, the good man meets his fate;  
Guards celestial 'round him wait.  
See! he bursts these mortal chains,  
And o'er Death the victory gains.

David Vinton lives on today only because his lyric contribution to the Masonic Ritual is almost universally employed in the workings of the Master Masons Degree. Perhaps it can truthfully be said that David Vinton, of all men, indeed journeyed "*here below, through a pilgrimage of woe*

Sources: excerpted from 'The *Transactions, Texas Lodge of Research*, Volume XXXVI,  
[mpoets.org/Vinton.htm](http://mpoets.org/Vinton.htm)

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