"May the blessing of Heaven rest upon us and all regular Masons!..." That as you know comes from our Craft Ritual. As most of you will now guess Thomas Smith Webb had something to do with our ritual but he was more than that - he was the father of American Masonic Ritual. He created the Monitor which is the basis of ritual for our Craft and York Rite degrees.

The Premier Grand Lodge of England, formed in 1717 introduced organized Freemasonry to America. It was closely followed by both the Irish and Scottish Constitutions. It took, however, the Antients, formed in 1751 as the arch rivals of the Premiere Grand Lodge of England, to aggressively promote Freemasonry in the Colonies. It was the Antients who claimed the Royal Arch as their own and an ambivalence developed in the Premier Grand Lodge in that they did not recognize the Royal Arch. In 1766 the first Grand Principal (Grand High Priest) of the newly formed Grand Chapter was Lord Blayney who was also Grand Master of the Premiere Grand Lodge (1764-76). This 'embarrassment' to the Premiere Grand Lodge led to a fraudulent change of date taking place in the original document from 1766 to 1767 and 'P. G. M.' added to his name. The first recorded minutes of an Exaltation anywhere in the world is at Fredericksburg, Virginia in 1753.

Certainly after 1776 there was a closer Masonic affinity with the Antients who were perceived to be less aristocratic than the Premiere or 'Modern' Grand Lodge. When these links were severed over the decade following 1776 many of the District Grand Lodges formed themselves into Grand Lodges. These jurisdictions of the United States were using ritual that had been derived from many different sources - Moderns, Antients, Irish, Scottish and other European influences.

Thomas Smith Webb was born on October 30th 1771 of English parents. He attended Boston Public Latin School and at the age of 15 started work as an apprentice to a Printer. He moved to Keene in New Hampshire and was initiated on December 24th 1790 where he was subsequently passed and raised to the degree of Master Mason in Rising Sun Lodge. You will notice that, as was not unusual at that time, he was only 19 years old.

He moved to Boston where he opened a Book shop and book binding business. There is little doubt that Webb's education did not end at 15 years of age. His access to books and desire for knowledge increased over the years. To his knowledge of Latin he added French and although we do not know for certain he must have been exposed to many of the emerging hidden studies of Alchemy, Neo Platonism, Hermeticism and the Cabala. In fact for a man who so influenced our Masonic system and ritual very little is known about him.

He married in 1797 and moved to Providence Rhode Island where he affiliated with St. John's Lodge No 1. In 1813 he became Grand Master of Rhode Island and this brings us to a significant event that took place. In 1814 as Grand Master he presided over Grand Lodge and then led a march to build 'Fort Hirum' with other Masons and presented the structure to the Governor to assist in the defense against the British.

Webb while in New York published in 1797 his 'Monitor or Illustrations of Masonry' under the pseudonym of 'by a Royal Arch Mason, K.T. & K.M. etc., etc'. He had been a Master Mason for seven years!!! In the 1803 edition of the Monitor he included his name as 'By Thomas Smith Webb, Past Master of Temple Lodge, Albany and H.P., of Providence Royal Arch Chapter". He had been a Mason for 12 years. He never hesitated to give credit to the English Masonic scholar William Preston and his book 'Illustrations of Masonry'. It was the genius
of Webb that enabled him to take Preston's work condense it and present much of the ritual in a way that was acceptable to American Freemasonry.

In this short dissertation I have not mentioned his accomplishment in the Royal Arch, his formation of the General Grand Chapter International (now the largest single Masonic Group in the World) or his connection with the Knight Templar of which he became Grand Commander.

Thomas Smith Webb died suddenly in 1817 in Ohio. He was on one of his many travels around the States teaching the ritual work. His body was returned to Providence for Masonic Funeral and honors. He left many scholars in his wake who continued his Teachings and produced Monitors of their own but all are based upon Webb's work.

Suffice it to say that Thomas Smith Webb gave Freemasonry in America the core of the ritual from which many jurisdictions work. Although we see difference in the esoteric work between jurisdictions it is Webb's Monitor that is the cement that make Freemasonry in America a commonality and makes the York Rite unique and special. When you go home open your ritual and read 'Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence and Justice' think of the Masonic Scholar Thomas Smith Webb, the father of American ritual and the York Rite.

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