

## **Grand Army of the Republic and Masonic Ritual**

As a member of the Sons of Union Veterans and a Master Mason I have always noticed similarities in our rituals. During the post-civil War eras, a number of fraternal organizations started in the United States. Most of them borrowed significant ritual from the only major fraternal group of the period, the Masons. It is from the GAR that both the Legion of Spanish War Veterans and the Sons of Civil War Veterans took their ritual lead.

Masonic and GAR ritual are very similar in their organization and ritual. Both organizations have similar positions. The GAR was a Commander (Worshipful Master), a Senior Vice Commander (Senior Warden), and a Junior Vice Commander (Junior Warden). These principal officers sit in chairs assigned to them. At the opening of the lodge and the post, the Commander (Master) declares whether this is a regular or special meeting of post (lodge)\_\_\_\_. Both organizations then verify that all present in the post (lodge) are members of the organization. The Officer of the Day (Junior/Senior Wardens) perform the task of purging those non-members from the room. The chaplain in both organizations during the opening invokes the blessing of deity on their members. Finally, both organizations declare that the post (lodge) is open in “due form” allowing the organization to conduct business.

Membership rituals both require an “oath” requiring that any signs or words used in recognition between comrades (brothers) to be kept secret. Both organizations require the member to “aid poor distressed” members, their widows, and orphans to the best of their abilities. After initiation, the new comrades (brothers) are given a “charge” or lecture explaining what they have just experienced. It is during this time that the GAR Officer of the Day instructs the new comrades in the hand grip, signs, and countersigns of the order. Masons do the same ritual but with different officers. These hand grip, signs, and countersigns are illustrated along with an explanation of their use in both organizations. Each organization requires the member whisper the secret word used for verification of membership. A “Hailing Sign” is used for the recognition of members. If a member attends another Post (Lodge), he may have to be tested with a question and answer session to allow him to be admitted. Both organizations have specific ritual to be used in this type of membership identification process. A sign of distress and a verbal exclamation for use in the dark were developed by the GAR based upon the masonic ritual. Upon seeing the sign or hearing the phrase, a GAR (Masonic) member was required to provide immediate assistance to their fellow member.

“Raps” of a gavel by officers are used in both rituals to have the members rise and sit own. This is listed in the GAR initiation ritual. Overall, two raps call up the officers, three raps called up the Post and one rap seated everyone or called them to order in both organizations.

After a person becomes a member, both organizations required the new member to sign a book with the rules, regulations, and by-laws of the Post (Lodge). The initiates were then full members of the organization. This was done at the Adjutant’s (Secretary’s) desk in the Post (Lodge).

If there was “no further business to come before this” Post (Lodge), the Commander (Master) would then “close.” Both organizations then admonished their members that they were leaving their unique place to go into the world and had obligations to each other as members outside the Post (Lodge). While Masons always end with a prayer, the GAR Post ritual focuses on the “doom of all traitors ...death!” Both organizations then declared that their Post (Lodge) number \_\_\_ is now officially closed.

It is clear that the GAR borrowed heavily from Masons for its ritual.

Sincerely

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