

OBSERVANT CAPITULAR MASONRY in New York



By H. Hancock, in Summa 21, Regent Street, London.

A GUIDE TO PRACTICE & CERTIFICATION

Observant Chapter Committee

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A. BACKGROUND

Observant Masonry (OM) is practiced by Lodges within the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of New York, which follows certain key practices which were or have been common in our past. Similarly, Observant Capitular Masonry (OCM) is practiced by Royal Arch Chapters within the jurisdiction of the Grand Chapter of New York. Freemasonry in New York can trace its origins back over 280 years, and its Grand Chapter over 230 years. In 1797, a group of Royal Arch masons met in Hartford, Connecticut to try to establish some sort of governing body for degrees that were largely conferred in the New England states, which became the Grand Chapter of the Northern States, and later was broken down into the state-by-state Grand Chapter system. This body later became the General Grand Chapter, Royal Arch Masons International. Less than a year later, the Grand Chapter of the State of New York, Royal Arch Masons was chartered by the General Grand Chapter on March 14th, 1798. As you can see, Capitular Masonry in the United States is nearly as old as the country itself. By being ‘observant’ we are recalling the most fundamental aspects of our history and tradition, and reintroducing these practices into our present-day setting.

In order to qualify as an ‘Observant Chapter’, certain behaviors and activities should be regularly practiced which emphasize a heightened quality of Masonic experience. These are divided into Key and Optional Categories. All Key categories need to be in place prior to review by the Grand High Priest, the Committee charged with implementing Observant Chapters, or another nominee of the Grand High Priest. The Optional categories, while not required, may appeal to the Chapter as items of interest in addition to the Key Categories. While the review itself can only be a ‘snapshot’, it is important that the Chapter lives as an Observant Chapter, and does not merely put on a one-time show for the benefit of the review. The elements stated herein were set forth as Guidelines for Observant Lodges within the Grand Lodge of New York by Observant Masonry Chair and Past Grand High Priest, M.E. Piers A. Vaughan.

It is important to recognize two things:

1. Observant Capitular Masonry is not for everybody. However, it does appeal in particular to a number of the newer members coming into Royal Arch Masonry, who have researched the topic thoroughly before joining, and are expecting us to adhere to the tradition of which we are so rightly proud.
2. Observant Capitular Masonry is not elitist. Any Companion may attend any meeting (but remembering the High Priest’s right to exclude visitors at his discretion. The following practices are available to any Chapter in New York, and indeed most visitors to an Observant Chapter will likely find much that is familiar, as well as some practices they may well wish

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to take back to their own Chapters.

When the Chapter is ready to for a review of its practices, it should contact R.E. Richard J Powell (Email: rjpowell@arsonica.com) or R.E. B.R. Hubbard (Email: SummaObservantia@gmail.com), who will bring this to the attention of the Grand High Priest. The email should include at least a couple of suggested dates and times for the review, which can be at a Stated Communication, or a Special Communication called specifically for the review. It is not necessary to confer a Degree that evening: indeed, it would be more appropriate for a Companion of the Chapter to deliver a suitable Lecture.

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B. KEY CATEGORIES

1. **Attire:** The Chapter should adhere to a dress code which suitably conveys the importance ascribed to their proceedings. Officers and/or members may elect to wear traditional formalwear of tuxedos and black bowties, or if desired white tie and tails with appropriate regalia and white gloves. “Royal Arch semiformal” is another option for consideration, which consists of a red jacket, black trousers and shoes, white dress shirt, black bowtie, and a black pocket square. The important factor is for all Chapter members to be consistent in their attire. All Companions and visitors should wear a minimum of a jacket, tie, and smart pants. Companions and visitors may wear white gloves, but this is not mandatory unless the Chapter wishes to adopt this approach; in which case it is recommended the Chapter has a supply of white gloves with the Sentinel to lend to visitors.

Rationale: Convocations and other gatherings are special places set apart from the profane world where Companions come together to discuss philosophy, learn from one another, and confer the Degrees upon worthy Candidates. It is fitting that they should attend these events with as much dignity and respect as they would any other important gathering.

2. **A Place Set Apart:** The furniture and regalia should be in good repair, and the lighting appropriately dim to set the desired ambiance. Convocations should include periods of music (organ music, recorded music, hymns or Masonic Odes) and silence to allow for personal introspection or meditation. Companions should be discouraged from carrying on conversation once inside the Chapter Room. However, when the Chapter is at refreshment, quiet relevant conversations which do not disturb others is acceptable. Electronic devices should be switched off or silenced while in Chapter. While it is recognized that there are times when use of such devices in a Chapter setting is acceptable (such as checking calendars and looking up telephone numbers in order to contact a sick or absent Companion), the Guidelines on the use of electronic equipment set down by Grand Chapter should be adhered to.

Rationale: The Chapter Room is a sacred space, consecrated and solemnly set apart from the profane world without. The furnishings, deportment of the Companions, and the activities when in session should reflect this.

3. **Ritual:** The Ritual must follow the Standard Work of New York, unless a special dispensation has been obtained from the Grand High Priest to exemplify or confer other

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work (which itself is educational). All Rituals are to be performed from memory, in full form, and to the highest possible standard, both in delivery and in a clear understanding of what is being conveyed. Regular ritual rehearsals should be held, especially prior to conferring or exemplifying a degree.

Rationale: The ritual is the means by which Royal Arch Masons transmit their teachings as a continuation of the initiatory chain. As such it is the single most important function we perform. It is important therefore that it be performed with dignity, solemnity, and a deep understanding of the forms and ceremonies.

4. **Education:** The education offered in an Observant Chapter should go well beyond the minimum required standard with regular and consistent educational programs in the form of lectures, preparation and presentation of papers, and guided discussion forums to name a few. While not stipulating a particular syllabus, the education should reflect an understanding of Masonic & Royal Arch history, in particular that of the Chapter, and regularly explore the esoteric aspects of the symbols and lessons inculcated in the ritual. In Chapter, every meeting without a Degree should include a lecture or program on a subject connected with Capitular Masonry. This is an ideal opportunity to invite speakers from other Chapters – or other Grand Jurisdictions in amity with the Grand Chapter of New York – to come and offer further enlightenment on Royal Arch Masonry.

Rationale: The primary purpose of Capitular Masonry is to bring Candidates and Companions to greater light, and this can only be accomplished through teaching and the sharing of knowledge and experience.

5. **Candidates:** Proper and thorough investigations should be conducted in accordance with the Constitution of the Grand Chapter to ascertain that membership in an Observant Chapter is appropriate for a given petitioner. Observant Lodges are not commonplace by any means, so many Brothers may be neither familiar with nor desirous of the Observant model. You may also find petitioners who are willing to travel well beyond their locale or district boundaries to participate in this unique opportunity. Candidates should not be rushed through the degrees but an appropriate time taken between each to provide for suitable education, personal development, and a thorough understanding of the forms and ceremonies. An Observant Chapter would never advocate a “festival” style one-day conferral for its Candidates. Candidates should be encouraged to undertake independent research and deliver papers in Chapter. Mentorship is likewise an important part of this process, and each Candidate should be assigned a mentor – preferably his sponsor – who

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will serve as his guide throughout the degree cycle through his introduction to the Chapter as a Royal Arch Companion.

Rationale: It is important for the development of both the Petitioner and Chapter to ensure a good match and subsequent cheerful conformity to the established practices of an Observant Chapter. New member retention is directly related to the investment a Chapter makes into his education and development.

6. **Festive Board:** From the first days of Freemasonry, the Festive board played a central role in the bonding and fellowship which sets the Craft apart. Far from being an informal social affair, this was a structured event in which formal toasts and short allocutions given, and fine fare enjoyed by all present. A Festive Board is not a Table Chapter as no formal ritual is employed. No Chapter is required to hold a Festive Board following every meeting, however an Observant Chapter should hold a minimum of two each year. There are several versions of Festive Boards available on the Grand Chapter website and elsewhere. Those wishing to attend a Festive Board should give the Chapter Secretary advance notice, and be prepared to pay for his meal. In order to experience the complete Observant Chapter, it is highly recommended that the visitor attends both the Meeting and the Festive Board.

Rationale: Companions bond both in labor and at refreshment, and good Ritual can be defeated by a casual afterthought of a meal. The act of bonding over a formal meal is a tradition which goes back to the very beginning of human civilization.

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C. OPTIONAL CATEGORIES

1. **Chamber of Reflection:** This mode of preparing the Candidate has once again found prominence among Masons. The Chamber is to be used before the formal ritual begins, as it is outside of Standard Work. Advice can be given to Chapters who wish to establish a Chamber of Reflection but it must conform to Preston-Webb model, and furniture and settings inappropriate to that tradition must not be incorporated, since these will only confuse the Candidate. Levity is prohibited; and a sufficient time should be allowed for the Candidate to obtain the maximum benefit from this exercise in Masonic meditation. This is not traditionally associated with Capitular Masonry (in the U.S., it is a part of Commandery and some Observant Lodge systems) but could be developed as an instrument of meditation preceding one or more Capitular degrees.

Rationale: The Chamber of Reflection is a highly effective way to give the Candidate an opportunity to seriously consider the step he is about to take and reflect on the importance of his continuing Masonic journey. For many it will be the first time in many years they have sat quietly, separated from mundane concerns, and afforded an opportunity to reflect.

2. **Real candles:** Wherever permissible, a “living flame” in the form of a candle, a seven-branch candlestick, or a traditional oil lamp should be present in the Tabernacle. The protocol for these is for them to be lit with a taper and extinguished with a snuffer: never blow a candle out! If real candles are not possible, excellent reproductions can now be found which look and behave like real candles.

Rationale: A living flame is a mystical element which contributes to the meditational atmosphere of a Convocation. It enhances the receptivity of both Candidates and the Companions attending such a gathering.

3. **Processions:** The solemnity and gravity of a Convocation can be greatly enhanced by introducing a procession of officers into the Chapter room prior to the standard ritualistic work of the opening. While the structure of a procession is left to the discretion of the individual Chapter, one format which has been proven to work well in most settings is available from Grand Chapter.

Rationale: A procession is a deliberate act preceding or in preparation for an event

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which is of great significance to a particular group. Processions are an ancient custom that can be found in secular, religious, and esoteric traditions the world over.

Chain of Union: Although the Standard Work for opening a Chapter includes a form of the Chain of Union, it would be equally acceptable to close a Convocation with a similar practice. However, as that is not a part of the Standard Work, it should either be done as a separate ceremony immediately after Closing or during the Closing Prayer, since it is as appropriate to hold hands when praying as coming to the Sign of Fidelity. The Chain of Union takes several forms, from holding hands; resting the left hand on the neighbor's shoulder while coming to Fidelity with the right; crossing the arms to grasp the neighbor's hands either in front or behind the body; or in the elaborate double chain where the hand the Companion beyond one's neighbor are grasped.

Rationale: This is an important symbol of the universality of Masonry, and the bond between its Companions. When performed at the end of a meeting, it is a powerful parting memory to carry out into the world.

4. **Optional Furniture:** There are additional items one may introduce into a Chapter, which are not strictly essential but add to the experience, and are not contrary to the Standard Work. These might include the Crow, Pickaxe and Spade as well as a Keystone, Seven Branch Candlestick, Ark of the Covenant and Trestleboards appropriate to each Degree. Where permitted, and acceptable to the members of a Chapter, a little incense may be used.

Rationale: An article which can enhance the solemnity and gravitas of the Capitular experience or add to the educational possibilities but does not conflict with the Standard Work is encouraged.

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RESOURCES:

While it is not the practice or intention of the Grand Chapter of New York to endorse any specific publication or author, it should be noted that at the time of this writing there have been several books published on the subject of Observant Masonry which may be of interest and assistance to those seeking to implement the Observant model within the Capitular setting. One might consider the following works as a sort of general “Observant Masonic Reading List” :

1. Laudable Pursuit by Knights of the North
2. Observing the Craft by Andrew Hammer
3. Freemasonry as a Way of Awakening by Remi Boyer

While there is a wide berth afforded to those desirous of pursuing the Observant model within their Chapter, it can be quite helpful to confer with other individual Chapters who have successfully implemented such practices previously regarding how that was accomplished. Those desirous of doing so should contact the Committee Chair or consult their directory for the contact information of a current Secretary or High Priest of an Observant Chapter.

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D. PROCESS & OBSERVATIONS

1. A group of Royal Arch Masons may decide to pursue Observant Capitular Masonry by one of three routes: start a new Chapter, transform their current Chapter, or seek an inactive Chapter to turn around.
2. Each route brings its own set of opportunities and challenges. History has shown that the greatest success tends to be in starting up a new Chapter, where those who are founding members know exactly what they wish to accomplish. Trying to transform your own Chapter can often result in political issues; and taking over a moribund Chapter can also lead to significant challenges in grandfathering the rights of the existing members. Setting higher dues, while allowing existing members to keep their current dues levels, can lead to financial hardship for a poor Chapter attempting to replace furniture, regalia and hold elegant dinners. Similarly, grandfathering dress codes for former members can lead to old members deliberately flaunting the new dress codes. Surprisingly this is the main reason for the failure of Chapters attempting to transition to an Observant model.
3. New Chapters will need to apply using the standard forms outlined in the Constitutions.
4. It has been suggested that an Observant Chapter meet at least four times a year. Those founding and Observant Chapter should be mindful of the logistical problems which arise when two of those meetings would be taken up with the District Deputy's Visit and the Summoned Communication to hear and vote on the Annual Reports, as well as the Annual Election and Installation of Officers. In addition, all Chapters should be encouraged not only to exemplify Degrees but to confer them in reality upon worthy Candidates. All of this leaves little time for the Lectures and Education which set an Observant Chapter apart. A number of Chapters perform ritual work at a Special Communication when no other business can be transacted, and leave the Stated Communications for Lectures and business. A High Priest-elect needs to be aware of these points when putting together a suitable Trestleboard for an Observant Chapter.
5. Once the Chapter is up and running, this document should be used to verify that meetings conform to at least the Key Categories of this document.
6. Once the Chapter Officers feel confident that all requirements are being met, they can apply as above for a visit to a Stated or Special Communication for the purpose of reviewing the Chapter's practices. Once the Score Sheet has been completed, and its contents discussed with the High Priest and Officers, it will be sent to the Grand High Priest for his decision.
7. If the results are approved, the Chapter will be issued a Certificate of Observance, and will be entitled to use the letters 'OCM' or the words 'Observant Capitular Masonry' after their name and number on all correspondence, media and communications on public boards.

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This will be for the duration for the present Grand High Priest's tenure, and the Program will be subject to review by his successors to be continued or terminated.

8. The requirements may be changed and refined over time. However, any Chapter achieving 'OCM' status will not lose their status due to any later changes.
9. Once achieving the status of an 'OCM' Chapter, a Chapter will undergo an annual review so long as the Program is in force.

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E. SCORE SHEET

Chapter Name: _____

Chapter #: _____

District: _____ Date of Review: ____/____/____

Category	Comments
1. Attire	
2. A Place Set Apart	
3. Ritual	
4. Education	
5. Festive Board	
6. Optional Categories	

RECOMMENDATION: Y / N

REVIEWER'S TITLE & NAME: _____

REVIEWER'S SIGNATURE: _____