

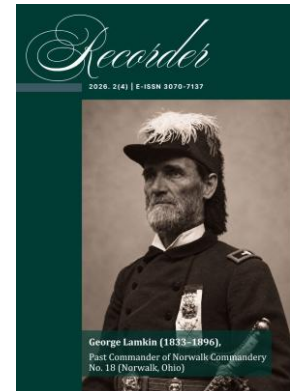
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Sir Thomas Smith Webb (1771–1819): A Ritualist Mason and One of the Leading Educators in American Freemasonry

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Abstract

This article examines the life and activities of Thomas Smith Webb (1771–1819), one of the most prominent figures in American Freemasonry in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The aim of the study is to reconstruct the principal stages of his biography and examine his multifaceted activities as a businessman, songwriter, and Freemason. The source base of the research includes biographical studies, historical works on American Freemasonry, and materials from the Archive of Cherkas Global University (Houston, USA). The study is based on the principles of historicism and systematic analysis, employing biographical, chronological, and historical-genetic methods.

The author concludes that Thomas Smith Webb distinguished himself as a successful entrepreneur, public figure, musician, and organizer of musical education. The publication of *Freemasons' Monitor* contributed to the systematization of Masonic rituals, the adaptation of European traditions to American practices, and the dissemination of the York (American) Rite. Particular attention is devoted to Webb's involvement in the establishment and development of Capitular and Templar Masonic organizations, including the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the United States. Webb's legacy lies not so much in the originality of his philosophical ideas as in the establishment of a solid foundation that enabled American Freemasonry to achieve a degree of unity, order, and continuity that has endured to the present day.

Keywords: Thomas Smith Webb, «Freemasons' Monitor»; or, *Illustrations of Masonry*», York Rite, St. John's Lodge No. 1, Grand Lodge of Rhode Island.

1. Introduction

Thomas Smith Webb is widely regarded as one of the key figures in the history of American Freemasonry. He is frequently described as the founder of the York (American) Rite; such an assessment can be found, in particular, in the writings of one of his earliest biographers, T. Leyland ([Abbot, 1971: 4](#)). Webb's name is closely associated with the establishment of major Masonic organizations. During his lifetime, he enjoyed unquestioned authority among his fellow Freemasons, and his death was regarded as a significant loss to the educated public of his time.

The year 2026 marks the 255th anniversary of Thomas Smith Webb's birth. The purpose of this article is to examine the principal stages of his biography and analyze the contributions of this prominent figure to the development of entrepreneurship, culture, and Freemasonry in America at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Although Thomas S. Webb is a well-known figure both within American Freemasonry and beyond, relatively little information about his life has survived. The principal materials used in preparing this article consist of biographical studies of Webb, as well as historical accounts of American Freemasonry that document the activities of this energetic individual.

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One of the most valuable and detailed studies of Webb's life is the historical and biographical article by Norris G. Abbot, Jr., entitled *Founding Father of the York Rite* (Abbot, 1971), published in 1971. The article is distinguished by its well-structured presentation, unique illustrative materials, and reliance on various types of historical sources. Its author served for many years as chairman of the Committee on Archives and as a member of the Special Committee on History of the Supreme Council, as well as historian of the Grand Lodge of Rhode Island. He was actively involved in various branches of Freemasonry, was an adherent of the Scottish Rite, and gained recognition as a gifted speaker at Masonic events.

The Masonic career of T. S. Webb is also examined in Charles T. McClenachan's historical work, *History of the Most Ancient and Honorable Fraternity of Free and Accepted Masons in New York, from the Earliest Date* (McClenachan, 1892). The author emphasizes that Webb is recognized as a founding father of the York (American) Rite.

To reconstruct the principal stages of Webb's biography, the present study also draws upon the multivolume reference work *Dictionary of American Biography* (Dictionary of American Biography, 1943), which discusses not only his Masonic activities but also his musical achievements and initiatives.

Among more recent studies of Freemasonry, particular attention should be given to Mark A. Tabbert's *American Freemasons: Three Centuries of Building Communities* (Tabbert, 2005). In this work, Tabbert examines Webb's biography and Masonic activities, placing particular emphasis on the educational mission that Webb pursued until the end of his life. Tabbert also briefly discusses Webb's followers, who recognized the importance of disseminating and strengthening the York (American) Rite throughout the United States.

A primary source of particular importance for examining Webb's activities as a Masonic ritualist is his *Freemasons' Monitor; or, Illustrations of Masonry*, first published in 1797 (Fig. 1).

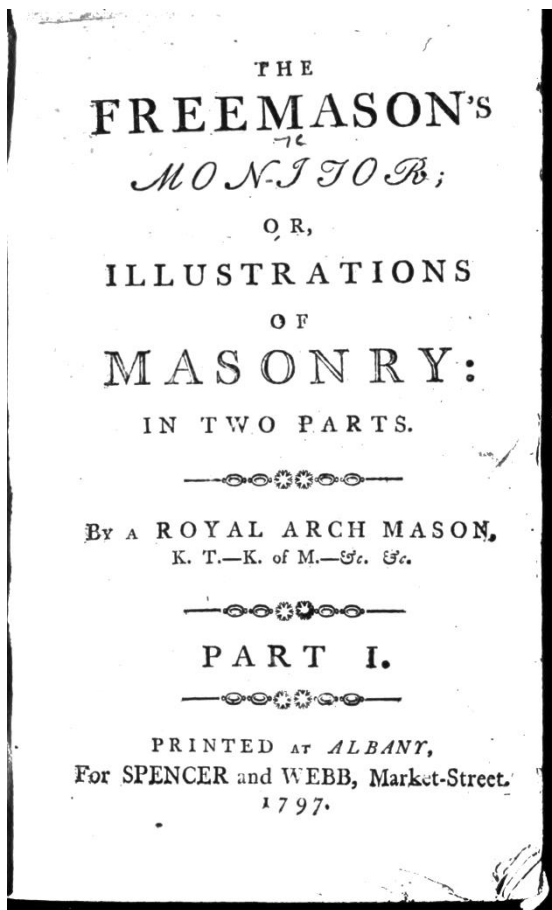


Fig. 1. *Freemasons' Monitor; or, Illustrations of Masonry*, published in 1797.

Additional sources consulted in this study include materials from the Archive of Cherkas Global University, particularly a specimen of Thomas S. Webb's signature preserved in Fund 3 (Collection of Documents on Masonic Organizations in the United States (1733–Present)) (Archive CGU. F. 3. Inv. 3. File 8. Fol. 1).

2.2. The present study is based on the fundamental principles of historical research: historicism, systematic analysis, and historical specificity. The examination of the principal stages of Thomas S. Webb's

life and Masonic activities combines general scientific methods of analysis and synthesis with specialized methods of historical inquiry, including the biographical, chronological, and historical-genetic methods.

3. Results

Thomas Smith Webb (Fig. 2) was born on October 30, 1771, in Boston, Massachusetts. His parents were Samuel Webb and Margaret (Smith) Webb ([Dictionary of American Biography, 1943: 577](#)). Shortly before their son's birth, they had emigrated from England to America.



Fig. 2. Portrait of Thomas Smith Webb (1771–1819) with his signature ([McClenachan, 1892: 3](#)).

Thomas S. Webb began his education at a public school in Boston. It was during his school years that he developed an interest in music, which would eventually become a professional pursuit and remain an important part of his life until his death. Webb also independently mastered Latin and French ([McClenachan, 1892: 110](#)).

The foundations of Webb's business career were laid by his father, who taught him the craft of bookbinding. Webb subsequently established his own business in Keene, New Hampshire, before moving to Albany, New York, in 1793, where he successfully engaged in wallpaper manufacturing and established a paper mill ([Dictionary of American Biography, 1943: 577](#)).

T. S. Webb was distinguished by his tireless energy in all his endeavors. Continuing to develop his business interests, he eventually settled in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1799, where he engaged in wallpaper manufacturing and operated a bookstore for the next sixteen years. During this period, Webb entered into an agreement to serve as an agent for the Hope Cotton Co. and subsequently established his own cotton mill in Walpole, Massachusetts. Several years later, the mill's equipment was transferred to Ohio as part of a merger with the Worthington Manufacturing Co. As Norris G. Abbot, Jr., observed, "all moves were based on changing economic conditions and were justified by future events" ([Abbot, 1971: 4](#)).

In Rhode Island, T. S. Webb was widely recognized for his active civic engagement and participation in the public life of the state. Among the positions he held were membership on a school committee, directorship of the Providence Library Company, and various offices, including director, trustee, and treasurer, within the Providence Mutual Fire Insurance Company. He also served in the state militia, rising from the rank of private to that of colonel of his regiment.

Music was another major passion in Webb's life. While residing in Providence, he participated in various musical circles and became an active patron of music. In 1809, he joined a group of amateur musicians led by Oliver Shaw, the blind organist of the First Congregational Church ([Dictionary of American Biography, 1943: 577](#)). This group subsequently established the Psallonian Society, which remained active until 1832, "for the purpose of improving themselves in the knowledge and practice of sacred music and inculcating a more correct taste in the choice and performance of it" ([Dictionary of American Biography, 1943: 577](#)).

Together with his associates, including J. C. Gottlieb Graupner and Asa Peabody, T. S. Webb participated in the establishment of the Boston Handel and Haydn Philharmonic Society in 1815. The invitation to join

the society emphasized “the expediency of forming a society for cultivating and improving a correct taste in the performance of sacred music, and also to introduce into more general practice the works of Handel, Haydn and other eminent composers” ([Dictionary of American Biography, 1943: 578](#)).

Initially, the society consisted of only sixteen members. T. S. Webb became its first president and held this position until his death in 1819. In this capacity, Webb had the honor of conducting the society’s first public concert, held at King’s Chapel on Christmas Day in 1815. Approximately one hundred performers participated in the festive concert.

However, Freemasonry was the central focus of his life, and he remained actively involved in its activities. Having entered Freemasonry at the age of nineteen, Webb remained devoted to its principles throughout his life and became known in Masonic history as the founder of the York (American) Rite.

T. S. Webb received his initial Masonic education at Rising Sun Lodge in Keene, New Hampshire. It was there that he was initiated, passed, and raised through the three degrees of Craft Masonry ([Dictionary of American Biography, 1943: 577](#)).

Upon his arrival in Albany, T. S. Webb was admitted to Union Lodge and subsequently became its Worshipful Master. Together with his fellow Masons, he helped establish Temple Royal Arch Chapter, later serving as its High Priest. In the late 1790s, Thomas S. Webb frequently visited Providence and eventually settled there in 1799, where he was subsequently invited to join St. John’s Lodge No. 1. After becoming a member, he established a school.

In his book *American Freemasons: Three Centuries of Building Communities*, Mark A. Tabbert observes that, owing to the considerable diversity of ceremonies and rituals within Freemasonry, a “new generation of Masons at the turn of the 19th century desired institutional order and ritual uniformity. Two groups of Masons - one centered in New England and the other at Charleston, South Carolina - profoundly shaped the fraternity’s future. The New England group focused on the British degree system and established the York Rite, while the Charleston group used the continental European degree system to bring order to the Scottish Rite. Like America’s developing political parties, these two groups became so dominant by the 1850s that other rites did not prosper” ([Tabbert, 2005: 51](#)). The activities of T. S. Webb, who shared the views of the New England group, contributed significantly to addressing this problem.

Before reaching the age of twenty-six, T. S. Webb compiled *Freemasons’ Monitor; or, Illustrations of Masonry* ([Freemasons’ Monitor..., 1797](#)), which became one of the most respected and authoritative works in Freemasonry. The book went through numerous editions, gained international recognition, and established standards of ritual practice that were adopted in many Masonic jurisdictions. Webb intended *Freemasons’ Monitor* not only to assist the Masonic fraternity in systematizing its ritual and ceremonial practices but also to introduce Freemasonry as an institution to a wider audience. To this end, the publication brought together a substantial collection of instructional materials used by Freemasons, biblical narratives and parables, prayers, songs, and information concerning Masonic history, organizational structure, insignia, and rules of conduct.

Some researchers regard *Freemasons’ Monitor* as a revised and republished compilation of the writings of the English Freemason William Preston, who devoted himself to the study and improvement of Masonic lectures ([Abbot, 1971: 4](#)). The work also incorporated ideas developed by Thomas Dunckerley ([McClenachan, 1892: 111](#)). We believe that researchers may also have been misled by the absence of an author’s name on the title page of the first edition of *Freemasons’ Monitor; or, Illustrations of Masonry*, which bore only the imprint “Printed at Albany for Spencer and Webb, Market-street, 1797” ([Freemasons’ Monitor..., 1797](#)).

Nevertheless, Webb’s contribution consisted in supplementing and expanding Preston’s ideas, adapting them to the American context, and laying the foundations for the degrees of the York Rite ([Tabbert, 2005: 51](#)). In the preface to his book, Webb explained that although Preston’s observations served as the basis for the three degrees of Craft Masonry — Entered Apprentice, Fellow Craft, and Master Mason—they did not correspond to the prevailing mode of Masonic work in the United States. Consequently, the material was rearranged to meet the requirements of practical application, extending “from the Entered Apprentice to the Royal Arch Mason” ([Freemasons’ Monitor..., 1797: A2](#)).

As the historian M. Tabbert observes, *Freemasons’ Monitor* represented a successful attempt to combine “Preston’s three craft degrees with the additional degrees of the Royal Arch, Royal & Select Masters and Knights Templar” ([Tabbert, 2005: 53](#)). The publication of this work established T. S. Webb’s reputation as a leading Masonic ritualist.

Following the publication of *Freemasons’ Monitor*, T. S. Webb devoted himself to educational activities, traveling throughout the states to teach improved Masonic rituals and assisting in the reorganization of local, state, and national governing bodies of the York (American) Rite. Over a period of slightly more than twenty years, approximately 16,000 copies of *Freemasons’ Monitor* were sold, and the work went through seven editions during Webb’s lifetime. Many Grand Lodges adopted it as a foundational text for official ritual practice ([Tabbert, 2005: 53](#)) and expressed their approval and support for the York Rite. Among Webb’s followers in the dissemination and development of the York Rite were Jeremy Cross, who traveled with him, and Amos Doolittle, whose engravings became an important foundation of American Masonic iconography.

T. S. Webb laid the foundations of the American system of Capitular and Templar Masonry. In 1797, he was elected chairman of a committee at a convention held in Boston for the purpose of organizing the

General Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons ([McClenachan, 1892: 111](#)). Webb's activities contributed to the institutional development of Capitular Masonry in the United States, including the establishment of a nationwide organizational structure for Royal Arch Masonry. In early 1799, acting as chairman of the committee, Webb presented a constitution to the convention, which was adopted at a meeting in Providence. The original draft of this constitution, bearing amendments made in Webb's own handwriting, was subsequently preserved in the archives of St. John's Commandery.

Through Webb's energetic efforts within the Masonic fraternity, St. John's Encampment of Knights Templar (St. John's Commandery No. 1 of Providence) was established on August 11, 1802. Webb personally participated in developing the ritual procedures and ceremonies of the Templar Orders and became the Encampment's first Eminent Commander, a position to which he was repeatedly reelected until 1814. In 1805, the Grand Commandery of Massachusetts and Rhode Island was established with Webb's participation. He served as its Commander until his resignation in 1817.

An autograph of T. S. Webb preserved in the Archive of Cherkas Global University (Fig. 3) is tentatively attributed to this period. The artifact was acquired by the Archive in 2024 from a private collection. The provenance of the original document is unknown. For preservation purposes, the autograph had been mounted on a cardboard card by its previous owner. Information about T. S. Webb and his portrait were subsequently added by the Archive. The autograph is tentatively dated to the period 1804–1808.

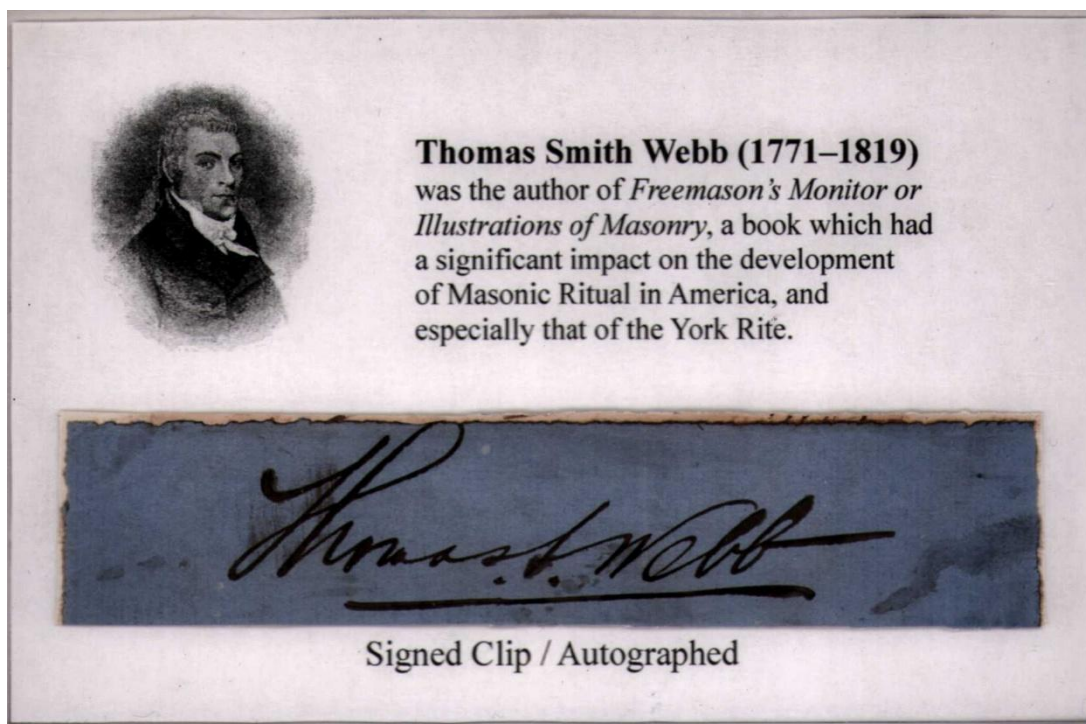


Fig. 3. Autograph of Thomas Smith Webb, ca. 1804–1808 ([Archive CGU. F. 3. Inv. 3. File 8. Fol. 1](#))

Also, being a member of Rhode Island Lodge, T. S. Webb had the right to attend the Grand Lodge, and, what should be emphasized, during his first visit to it, he was appointed a member of the committee for revising the Constitutions.

The biographer and Masonic historian Norris G. Abbot, Jr., identifies several amendments to the above-mentioned constitution that directly concerned the activities and position of T. S. Webb. These amendments allowed the services of T. S. Webb to be used by bypassing the previous rules. Thus, for example, one of the amendments abolished the two-year limitation on the term of office of Grand Wardens, thereby allowing T. S. Webb to hold the position of Grand Senior Warden for 3 years. The next important amendment allowed a person who was not a Past Master of a Lodge in Rhode Island to be elected Grand Master. Accordingly, in 1813 and 1814, T. S. Webb was elected Grand Master. In 1815 and subsequent years, he refused to participate in the elections.

Holding the position of Grand Master, T. S. Webb approached the duties entrusted to him with great responsibility and also established himself as an energetic and active leader. Several recorded cases illustrating the above have been preserved in the biographical information about T. S. Webb.

One of them is the incident involving a British warship in 1814. In that year, a warship of the British fleet arrived off the coast of Newport, creating a threat of bombardment and invasion by British troops. This was also feared in Providence. At a general meeting, a defense committee was appointed to ensure the protection of the city. It was decided to call for volunteers to construct fortifications. Grand Master T. S. Webb held a

special meeting of the Grand Lodge and instructed the brethren to “bring shovel, spade or axe and one day’s provisions” (Abbot, 1971: 5). After the opening of the Grand Lodge, on the same day, in the Fox Hill area, the Masonic brethren “had erected breastworks 430 feet long, 10 wide, and 5 high, naming it Fort Hiram, an act confirmed by the Governor that evening. This was one of only two Masonic forts in the country” (Abbot, 1971: 5). Thus, T. S. Webb established himself as a talented organizer.

In addition to the position of Grand Master, T. S. Webb was invited to the Providence Royal Arch Chapter and, several years later, became its High Priest. He also participated in the establishment of the Grand Chapter of Rhode Island, where he served as Grand High Priest from 1804 to 1814.

Together with his fellow Freemasons, T. S. Webb helped establish another Masonic governing body, the General Grand Royal Arch Chapter of the United States. Within this organization, Webb held one of its senior leadership positions, that of Deputy Grand High Priest, until his death.

Webb’s biographers emphasize his particularly important role in the establishment of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the United States in New York City in 1816. Governor De Witt Clinton became the Grand Master of this organization, while T. S. Webb assumed the position of Deputy Grand Master.

The available sources provide relatively limited information about Webb’s personal life. It is known that in the autumn of 1797, T. S. Webb married Mrs. Martha Hopkins of Boston. The couple had five children, only two of whom survived their parents. Martha Hopkins subsequently died, and in 1809 Webb married her sister. Together, they raised four children who survived their father (Dictionary of American Biography, 1943: 578).

T. S. Webb died suddenly of a stroke on July 6, 1819, at the age of forty-seven (Abbot, 1971: 5). His death occurred during another journey to the western states. The news of his passing deeply affected the Masonic fraternity. Freemasons in Cleveland, Ohio, conducted a memorial service, and Webb’s body was buried with Masonic honors. Memorial services were also held in other cities.

Subsequently, with the consent of his widow and financial assistance from the Grand Lodge of Rhode Island and other local Masonic organizations, Webb’s remains were exhumed and transported to Providence, where they were reinterred at West Burying Ground on November 8, 1819. Later, when the cemetery was converted into a park, Webb’s grave was relocated to North Burial Ground, where it occupied a hillside plot donated by the city.



Fig. 4. Memorial obelisk at the burial site of T. S. Webb, erected by the Grand Lodge of Rhode Island in Providence (Abbot, 1971: 5).

In memory of Webb, a Rhode Island Masonic lodge erected a monument at the site (Fig. 4). Each side of the marble obelisk commemorated one of his most significant achievements. The name of the highly respected T. S. Webb was subsequently adopted by a Rhode Island lodge, council, and commandery ([Abbot, 1971: 5](#)).

4. Conclusion

Thomas Smith Webb was an outstanding and multifaceted individual whose activities, as demonstrated by the principal stages of his biography, exerted a considerable influence on American society at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. His life can be characterized as the path of an inspired man with tireless energy and a passion for teaching. He distinguished himself in many spheres of life; let us note the key ones.

In the first half of his life, the period of entrepreneurship and an active civic position particularly stands out: T. S. Webb was a successful businessman who knew how to adapt to changing economic conditions, developing the production of wallpaper, paper, and textiles. His civic activity was expressed in his participation in the management of libraries, school committees, and the militia, which emphasizes his role as a responsible member of society.

Webb's contributions to musical education and cultural development also deserve recognition. Music was not merely a personal interest but became one of his lifelong pursuits. He stood at the forefront of the professionalization of musical culture in the United States as a co-founder and the first president of the prestigious Boston Handel and Haydn Philharmonic Society. He also distinguished himself as a conductor and composer.

T. S. Webb played a particularly important role in the reform of American Freemasonry, which constitutes the most significant aspect of his legacy. Webb entered Masonic history as an "architect" of American Freemasonry. His *Freemasons' Monitor; or, Illustrations of Masonry* (1797) became an authoritative work that helped systematize Masonic ritual practices and adapt European traditions to the American context. It was largely through his organizational abilities, educational activities, and capacity for institutional development that the York (American) Rite took shape and became dominant in the United States. Furthermore, Webb laid the foundations of the American system of Capitular and Templar Masonry.

In conclusion, T. S. Webb was not merely a talented organizer but also a systematic thinker. He possessed a remarkable ability to bring structure to complex and fragmented processes, whether in business enterprises, musical associations, or Masonic ritual practices, and to transform them into enduring institutions. His contribution to American culture and public life was so substantial that, even centuries later, his name continues to serve as a model of achievement within Masonic circles, while the organizational principles he helped establish continue to influence the activities of numerous Masonic jurisdictions.

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