

**Sueanna Smith**

**Dissertation Abstract**

**Tentative Title of Dissertation:**

“African Americans and the Cultural Work of Freemasonry: From Revolution through Reconstruction”

**Abstract:**

My dissertation examines the cultural work that freemasonry performed for African Americans in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries. As a social institution dedicated to brotherly love, freemasonry developed a powerful material culture that facilitated fellowship and social intercourse. Printed texts, manuscripts, symbolic artifacts, and art played pivotal roles in the day to day operations and activities of the order. These items also operated within an extensive material economy where they were circulated between lodges and individual masons in acts of fraternal exchange. My dissertation reconstructs these larger fraternal economics and argues that by tracing the circulation of fraternal objects we can begin to understand the larger institutional context into which African American freemasonry was born. Turning to the historical records contained within masonic archives, I argue that the historical record invalidates claims that early black freemasonry was separatist in nature. Instead, freemasonry facilitated an extensive array of interracial fellowship and exchange all the way through the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. These cultural forms also promoted social bonds within the black race as masons adapted masonic rituals, allegories, and genealogies to form new black fraternal orders during the reconstruction period. Finally, I examine a work of fraternal fiction which drew upon masonic allegories and rituals in an effort to highlight the devastation that would occur if fraternal orders were to lose their social purpose and become strictly political organizations.