

# **The Evolution of the Cornerstone Ceremony**

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*This Short Talk Bulletin is excerpted from Cornerstones of Freedom; A Masonic Tradition, by Bro. S. Brent Morris and published by the Supreme Council, 33<sup>o</sup>, S. J. in October 1993. The book can be ordered from the Supreme Council 1733 16th St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009-3199, (202) 232-3579. – Editor*

The Masonic cornerstone ceremony, like most complex customs, has evolved over years of use. It is easy for the romantic to imagine King Solomon using our current rituals to lay the cornerstone of the Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, but such was not the case. The Masonic cornerstone ceremony first appeared in the middle 1700s and in less than a century had finished evolving, except for minor grammatical changes. The procedure, at least as used in America, can be traced fairly well through its entire evolution, though Grand Lodges differ on the exact details of their cornerstone ceremonies.

## ***THE FIRST RECORDED MASONIC CEREMONY.***

"The earliest record of a formal and official Masonic ceremony is that of the laying of the Foundation Stone of the New Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh by the Earl of Cromarty, Grand Master of Scottish Masons, on August 2, 1738." The description of the event was written sixty-six years later in 1804 by Alexander Lawrie in his History of free Masonry. Lawrie describes a simple, almost primitive ceremony.

"When the company came to the ground, the Grand Master, and his brethren of the free and accepted Masons, surrounded the plan of the foundation hand in hand: and the Grand Master-Mason, along with the press [representatives] of the Managers of the Royal Infirmary, having come to the east corner of the foundation where the stone was to be laid, placed the same in its bed; and after the Right Honourable the Lord Provost had laid a medal under it each in their turns gave three strokes upon the stone with an iron mallet, which was succeeded by three clarions of the trumpet, three huzzas, and three claps of the hands."

James Anderson reported a similarly simple ceremony on March 19, 1721, in his 1723 *The Constitutions of the Free-Masons*, though the Grand Lodge of England apparently was not involved.

"The Bishop of Salisbury went in an orderly Procession , duly attended, and having levell'd the first Stone, gave it two or three Knocks with a Mallet, upon which the Trumpets sounded, and a vast Multitude made loud Acclamations of Joy; when his Lordship laid upon the Stone a Purse of 100 Guineas, as a Present from his Majesty for the use of the Craftsmen."

### ***THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF PRESTON AND WEBB***

What the two accounts above show is that there was little form to the procedure. The only point in common to the two 'ceremonies' was the symbolic striking of the Stone with a mallet. In just a few decades, though, the ritual evolved into something more recognizable to the modern form. In 1772 William Preston published *Illustrations of Masonry*, which presented an official version of the lectures, forms, and ceremonies of the Lodge. Preston based his book on the practices in Lodges across England. Twenty-five years later in 1797 Thomas Smith Webb published *The Freemason's Monitor*, his version of Preston adopted for American Masonry.

The cornerstone ceremonies of Preston in 1772 and those of Webb in 1797 are quite simple, though evolved beyond the descriptions of Lawrie and Anderson. Preston limited attendance to the Grand Lodge while Webb welcomed members of private Lodges. Webb's ritual shows the introduction of corn, wine, and oil, the tests of trueness of the stone, and the now almost universal approbation from the Grand Master that the stone is "well formed, true, and trusty."

Both Preston and Webb follow the generosity of King George toward the workmen and have a voluntary collection taken for the workers; virtually all subsequent rituals require a similar collection. This generosity may be based on the description in Ezra 3:7 of the preparations for the second temple in Jerusalem. "So they gave money to the masons and the carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the Sidonians and the Tyrians to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea, to Joppa, according to the grant which they had from Cyrus King of Persia."

### ***THE U.S. CAPITOL CEREMONIES IN 1793***

The cornerstone of the U.S. Capitol was laid in 1793, between the publication of the first edition of Preston in 1772 in London and the first edition of Webb in 1797 in Albany. Preston's *Illustrations of Masonry* was certainly available to the Masons who planned the Capitol cornerstone laying. More familiar to the planners would have been John K. Read's *New; Ahiman Rezon* published in Richmond in 1791 , two years before the Capitol event. Read's book was published for the guidance of Virginia Lodges and dedicated to "George Washington, Esq. President of the United Shtes of America," but there were no instructions for cornerstone layings.

There is circumstantial evidence that the procedures used by George Washington were more like those of Webb than Preston. The newspaper account of the day specifically mentions that corn, wine, and oil were placed on the cornerstone after it was set in place. Also, Alexandria-Washington Lodge #22 have a wooden triangle and T-square from the 1793 ceremonies, which must have been used to symbolically try the stone.

### ***LATER DEVELOPMENTS***

Succeeding generations of Masonic lecturers and writers have tried their hands at producing the "perfect" textbook for teaching Masonic ritual. Each new monitor showed the "improvements" of its author-perhaps expanded explanations, or improved grammar, or clarified directions. Sometimes the books would reflect the peculiar development of Masonic ritual in some particular part of the country. The cornerstone ceremony, however, has remained relatively consistent from author to author and from region to region. The few changes made were usually logical expansions of earlier ceremonies; there have been no radical departures. Webb's anointing with corn, wine, and oil together with his benediction for the stone, which begins "May the all-bounteous Author of Nature..." have been universally adopted by his American successors.

A brief summary of changes in the cornerstone ceremony from some of the more popular Masonic monitors will give a sense of the evolution. In 1819 Jeremy Ladd Cross published *The True Masonic Chart of Hieroglyphic Monitor*, which was essentially Webb's book with the addition of original engravings, the first such illustrations; it had no changes from Webb. Samuel Cole's 1862 *Freemason's Library* does not differ materially from Webb or Cross, but Cole is one of the only writers to omit the collection for the workers.

The Baltimore Convention of 1843 was the biggest attempt to produce a uniform American Masonic ritual, and the effort failed. Charles W. Moore produced *The Masonic Trestleboard* in 1843 following the convention's ritual. His only significant change to the cornerstone ceremony was the recommendation of hymns to be sung. The rituals of the Baltimore convention were not universally accepted, which led John Dove to produce *The Virginia Textbook* in 1846, supposedly correcting the errors found in Moore. Dove and Moore agreed on the essentials of the cornerstone ceremony, though they did recommend different hymns.

### ***THE MODERN CEREMONY***

Albert G. Mackey was one of the most productive and successful Masonic writers of the nineteenth century (though his theories of Masonic origins are entirely discounted by serious historians today). Mackey's 1862 *Manual of the Lodge* made three important additions to the ceremony, which essentially brings the evolution to modern practices. First, there are brief speaking parts for the Deputy Grand Master, Senior Grand Warden, and Junior Grand Warden,

respectively explaining and presenting to the Grand Master the corn, wine, and oil. Second, Mackey has the now common address to the crowd wherein the Grand Master announces, "Be it known unto you that we be lawful Masons, true and faithful to the laws of our country.." It is not known why Mackey thought it necessary to introduce this defense of Masonry. Finally, Mackey has the stone lowered into place by three distinct motions.

Daniel Sickels was another prolific Masonic author and a contemporary of Mackey. He edited *The Freemason's Monitor* in 1864 and wrote *The General Ahiman Rezon and Freemason's Guide* in 1866. His cornerstone ceremony represents about the greatest elaboration of Preston's simple procedure from 1772. Rather than the Grand Master, Sickels has three principal subordinate grand officers, the Deputy Grand Master, Senior Grand Warden, and Junior Grand Warden, try the stone with their jewels of offices, the square, level, and plumb respectively. The Grand Master still declares the stone "well formed, true, and trusty." the corn, wine, and oil are not just presented by the three grand officers but are spread by them with a more elaborate explanation of the symbolism. Sickels follows Mackey with the Grand Master's defensive address on Masonry.

## ***NOTES***

1. David Flather, "The Foundation Stone," *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*. Vol. 48, 1939, p. 221; Lawric quoted in Flather, p. 222.
2. James Anderson, *The Constitutions of the Free -Masons* (London: 1723; reprint. Bloomington Ill.: The Masonic Book club, 1975), p42

*(As noted earlier this STB is an excerpt from a new book, Cornerstones of Freemasonry; a Masonic Tradition. Please see page 3 for more information as to its availability.)*

*STB - October 1993*