

The Mason's Mark

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A recent tour of England and Scotland included visits to the beautiful and stately Salisbury Cathedral, York Minster, Westminster Abbey, and to Roslyn Chapel and Melrose Abbey. All had many "Mason's Marks" carved in the stones and can be found in many other buildings still standing in Europe and the British Isles.

These old Mason's Marks help us to trace Freemasonry's story from its early operative days to the present, when it is used in a symbolic sense in the first of Capitular degrees of the York Rite.

Putting aside the legends from the old Gothic Constitutions perpetuated in our present day rituals, which purport to trace Masonry from the building of King Solomon's Temple, to Noah's flood or to Cain and Abel, Masonic students in the last century or so have been able to document fairly accurately the evolution of Freemasonry as far back as the mid-fourteenth century when the first attempt was made to organize the Mason's trade in England, and to establish work rules for its government.

Our modern Freemasonry is an outgrowth of those operative masons of the middle ages, the builders of those ornate and beautiful examples of the Gothic school of architecture unsurpassed in the builders' art. The mason's mark has been found on structures far older than these, however, some going back to 2500 B.C. Little attention was paid to these carvings until 1841 when a British archeologist published an article on his studies. Masonic students took an interest in the subject, and perceived the link formed between operative and speculative Masonry.

It is surprising how long a thing may remain unnoticed until it has first been discovered. When a number of mason's marks were pointed out to an old priest, he remarked "I have walked through this church four times a day, twenty eight times a week, and never noticed one of them. Now I cannot look anywhere but they flit into my eyes."

The operative mason's mark was used for purely practical purposes. During the period when most cathedrals, abbeys and monasteries were built, there were few who could read or write. When he became a Fellowcraft or journeyman, each mason selected his mark or design, which

was his for life, and was never to be changed. The mark thus served as a signature. He cut it into each stone he prepared, so that he might be given credit and receive wages for his labor, and also be held responsible for the quality and proper execution of the work. The mason's mark has a similar objective to a trade mark by assigning responsibility for quality of work.

During the middle ages, the Roman Catholic Church dominated the religious scene in Europe and Britain, and most of the work done by the operative masons of the day was construction of cathedrals, abbeys and monasteries for the church. With the coming of the Protestant reformation in 1517 however, the Roman church lost much of its temporal power and influence, and the building of religious works fell off sharply. The operative masons found themselves facing increased unemployment. Fewer apprentices were accepted to learn the trade, and work for the masons left was limited largely to military construction and repair work requiring lesser skills. This period of operative decline was the beginning of a gradual change from guilds of builders, to the moral and philosophical fraternity which today we call "Speculative Masonry."

Returning our attention to the mason's mark, we find an early reference to it in the German "Torgau Statutes" of 1462. They note that on becoming a journeyman (equivalent of the Fellowcraft), the mason "took his mark at a solemn admission feast". Later in Scotland, in 1598, the so-called "Schaw Statutes" were placed in effect. A set of rules governing the operative mason's trade were issued by William Schaw, Master of the Work of King James VI of Scotland. These contain the first known reference to the mason's mark in the English/Scottish area from whence our present day Freemasonry has descended. These Statutes say: "That no master or fellow of craft be received or admitted without their being six masters and two entered apprentices present, the Warden of that lodge being one of the six, and that the day of the receiving of the said fellow of craft or master be properly booked and his name and mark inserted in the said book..."

The newly passed fellow craft had to pay the lodge "one Scots merk" for such registration. The Fellowcraft was journeyman, fully qualified to do mason's work, and the master was a contractor, or employer of Fellowcrafts, and who could take apprentices for training.

In 1634 an event took place which was to profoundly affect the future of the Craft. The minutes of the Scottish Lodge of Edinburgh (Mary's Chapel) for July 1, 1634 notes that Lord Alexander, Viscount Canada; Sir Anthony Alexander; and Sir Alexander Strachan, both were admitted members of the Lodge. This is the earliest record of the admission of non-operatives into a lodge in Scotland or England, and it turned out to be the opening wedge in the transition from operative to speculative Masonry.

The earliest minutes of this Lodge are dated July 31st, 1599, and show the mason's mark used in conjunction with the signature of one of the members present. By the following year, many marks appear in the minutes, sometimes unaccompanied by a signature. Minutes of other

Scottish Lodges also show the use of the mark, undoubtedly in conformance with the Schaw Statutes requirement.

Following the admission of the three non-operatives noted above, the practice spread rapidly. In a period of decline for operatives, more and more non-operatives came to be accepted as members by most lodges, and the character of Masonry underwent increasingly rapid change. By 1670, for example, the Lodge at Aberdeen shows minutes signed by some 49 members, about three quarters of whom were non-operatives. Noteworthy was the fact that all but two had marks shown beside their names indicating that the practice of choosing a mark was not restricted to the operatives.

During this period when activities are well documented in Scotland, English records are scarce regarding acceptance of non-operatives, and make no reference at all to use of the mason's mark. This dearth of records makes it difficult to do more than guess at the chain of events which immediately preceded the most important event of all, formation of the first Grand Lodge by four old lodges in London in 1717, generally accepted as the historical dividing line between operative and speculative Masonry. It established the basis of organizational pattern followed by all regular Masonic jurisdictions everywhere. Ireland followed suit, forming its own Grand Lodge in 1725, and Scotland likewise in 1736.

At that time, English lodges were almost entirely made up of non-operatives, while in Scotland the operatives were still strong, but waning rapidly.

Ritual played a relatively minor part in operative Masonry, but with the transition to speculative, it developed and expanded, and soon came to play an important role. We know little of it until the publication of the first of many "exposes" in 1724. None of them had anything to say about the mason's mark, and the first indication we have of a ceremony or degree being connected with it is in the September 1, 1769 minutes of Phoenix Royal Arch Chapter of Plymouth, England, where it states that six members were made "Mark Masons and Mark Master Masons," and each "chose their mark." While the mark had been used in Scotland for many years, the first time we hear of its ceremonial aspect is in the records of St. John Operative Lodge, Banff, on July 7, 1778. There is strong evidence that the Mark degree was worked in America as early as 1782, although documentary proof is lacking.

The development of the Mark Master Mason degree to its present day status is a story in itself. At various times, it has been conferred in Craft lodges, by the Scottish Rite, by Royal Arch Chapters, by Templar Encampments and by independent Mark lodges. In America, the degree was gradually absorbed by the Royal Arch early in the 19th century.

Over the years, there have been other degrees based on the mark, such as the Mark Man, Mark and Link, Fugitive Mark, Black Mark and others, but these have disappeared, leaving only the Mark Master Mason. Although the rituals vary somewhat in different jurisdictions, they are basically similar. As the ritual of the Mark Master Mason degree developed, the mason's mark

came to take a somewhat subordinate role to the Keystone and the theme of the building of King Solomon's Temple.

The Mark degree now is a requirement for candidates for the R.A. degree in the United States, Ireland and Scotland. The United Grand Lodge of England at one time voted to recognize the Mark degree as a "graceful addition to the Fellowcraft degree", but soon reversed itself, which led to the formation of the "Grand Lodge of Mark Master Masons of England, Wales and the Dominions and Dependencies of the British Crown" in 1856, which today has some 1200 Mark Lodges under its jurisdiction.

Only in Scotland is the Mark degree recognized as a part of Craft Masonry. It may be, and usually is, conferred on Master Masons in the Symbolic Lodge. It is also a requirement for the R.A. degree, and the degree may be conferred in the Royal Arch Chapter if the candidate has not already received it in his lodge.

Our ritual for the three Craft degrees is clearly based on the practices of operative Masonry, with symbolic usage of the working tools, the ashlar, the trestleboard, lessons in architecture and many others. Why the mason's mark, an operative practice from time immemorial should have been omitted in favor of such things as the anchor and the ark, the beehive, etc. is difficult to understand. A possible explanation may be that most of those who composed our early ritual were English, who may well have been unaware of the mark in the operative scheme of things. Only in Scotland has it received recognition and been given its rightful place as a part of Craft Masonry.

Our Mason's Mark is the Masonic equivalent of our signature. It represents our name, our character, our integrity and our skills. When we sign our name or apply our Mark to a document, letter, painting, or to a stone for the building of a cathedral, we stand up to be counted. By it we say in effect "This is where I stand, this is my work. I guarantee its quality, and am proud of the workmanship it shows."

In addition to our own Mason's Mark, we have a responsibility in regard to that best known Mason's Mark of them all, the Square and Compasses. Almost all of us wear it or otherwise display it thus identifying ourselves as Masons to all we come in contact with. In doing so, we cannot help but project an image of Masonry to the public. When we wear this Mason's Mark, the Square and Compasses, the world will judge the Craft by our words and actions. Should we feel unable to live up to the tenets and principles Freemasonry stands for, we would be well advised to leave the Masonic ring or pin in the dresser drawer, rather than damage the good name of the Fraternity.

It seems to be human nature for us to want to leave some sort of a memorial, that future generations will know we passed this way. We find this in the graffiti scrawled on the walls of Pompei and in ancient Egypt, and on the subway cars in modern cities. It shows in the initials

carved in old school desks and in the "John loves Mary" cut into tree trunks, and in the "Kilroy Was Here" of World War II.

We sometimes hear it said of a person, that "he left his mark", meaning he made a lasting impression on some institution or field of endeavor. Yet there are varying kinds of marks left. George Washington and Thomas Edison most certainly left their marks on our society and civilization; so did Hitler and Stalin.

All of us can't be Washingtons or Edisons, but we can contribute toward the building of a better world. Our ancient operative ancestor in cutting his mark on a stone for Salisbury cathedral left a memorial which says "I had a part in building this beautiful house of God." By being better citizens, better husbands, better fathers, we can leave our mark on society by discharging our responsibilities to God, to our country, to our neighbor and to ourselves.

In our vocations, in our daily lives and in our dealings with our fellow man, lets do our best to leave our marks only on "good work, true work, square work, just such work as is wanted for the building of the Temple."

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