

MASTER MASON

"Are you a Master Mason?"

Every member of the Fraternity has answered this challenge affirmatively, even if only passively, during the ceremonies of opening and closing a lodge. What the words have actually meant to every individual Brother is anybody's guess; but it is a safe assumption that the reply was at least intended to signify membership in the world's oldest fraternal organization.

Unfortunately, too many members have never gone beyond that definition of a Master Mason. They know that they "took" the three degrees: The last was the Master Mason degree. Upon its completion, they were acknowledged as regular members. They knew that they were now "Masons".

To be sure, every member has been made aware of some of the legends, symbolism, and philosophy of freemasonry during his initiatory experiences. This is one of the great achievements of the immemorial phrases of Masonic ritual; even the least attentive and absent member remembers the glimpses he had of the "genius of Freemasonry". The lapse of time, however, tends to erase those vivid impressions, so that the non-attender comes to think of a Master Mason merely as a member of a club or society.

This is a problem for Masonic education,- for the individual "mentor", "intender", or committee on instruction or information. It is not the subject of this Short Talk Bulletin, however. This essay is an attempt to amplify the average Brother's concept of a Master Mason, and as such it may be helpful in correcting the "average" impressions sketched above.

Historically, the Term Master Mason comes from the operative builders organizations of the Middle Ages, although the concept of a master, or skilled boss of the workmen, is as old as civilization. The Roman builders were directed by their most skillful craftsmen, the magister of the collegia. References to Master Mason occur in English building records as early as the thirteenth century: at that time they were still given Latin names. e.g., magister cementarius (*master of the stone-cutting masons*) and magister operacionum (*master of the works*), or general contractor.

Detailed rules existed for the government of the masons connected with a lodge, which originally designated the shed or structure in which stonemasons dressed the stones for a large undertaking. The Regius Poem (c. 1390) is a compilation of some of these rules which had been in existence for a long time.

The supervision of the masons was the business of the principal and second master masons, who, upon assuming these offices by appointment from the King or clerics who had ordered the building of a structure were required to take a solemn oath to enforce the regulations.

The master mason had to see that the work started promptly and to report to the master of the works and the "keeper of the rolls" any faults or defects of the workmen. Fines for defective work were imposed as a result of his reports. The hiring of workmen was done with his advice and consent. He had to make certain that a craftsman was "worthy and well-qualified".

Generally speaking, the master mason had authority over the workmen and the actual construction of the building, while his colleague, the "keeper of the rolls" was chiefly concerned with accounts and finance; but the master mason necessarily had a share in the responsibility for expenditures and accounts, since he decided such things as the kind of stones to be used, from which quarries they were to be bought, as well as quantities and prices of other tools and materials, like sand and lime for mortar.

In fact, many a master mason achieved that rank because of his early experiences as a purveyor of stones and building materials. He had been able to accumulate the necessary capital, experience, and influence to become a freeman burgess, and to learn the mason's trade as one of its principal suppliers. Sometimes a master mason had achieved his rank because of his administrative skill in securing and organizing a dependable labor force.

Nevertheless, most master masons achieved their eminence by learning the masons' trade "from the bottom up". They may have made money on the side by furnishing building stones or other supplies, but they possessed the builder's skills and secrets to such a degree that they achieved distinction primarily by merit. Some of them were actually skillful architects and designers, whose gifts stimulated a wide-spread demand for their services. Like so many creative artists of the Middle Ages, these unusual master masons had more than one string on their bow, for they were good surveyors, accountants, superintendents of property, and civil servants as well as stone dressers and spreaders of mortar. One of them, as a matter of fact, William of Wykeham, became Bishop of Winchester in 1367.

At that time, however, a master mason was a man who had accumulated sufficient skill and capital to set himself up in business as a contractor or superintendent of the works. The title of "master" was conferred not by a lodge of masons, but by the City Council or its agency for regulating trade. To become a "master" a workman had to purchase his "freedom" to make contracts, by becoming a burgess, i.e., a municipal taxpayer with a certain civic obligations, like going "watch and ward" duty and supplying military arms or service if it became necessary. The capital for such advancement usually came from "side" activities, such as dealing in stone or being in a position to make contracts for building or supplying labor.

Few operative masons became masters. It required more money and ability than the average stonemason or layer possessed. Even Master masons differed widely in their earning power and financial success. The building projects in the early Middle Ages were too few to require a large force of specialized administrative builders.

Master masons were naturally paid more for their labors than "rough masons" or apprentices. Attempts were made regularly to fix the wage scales of all types of artisans and workmen, but it was the masters who most frequently enjoyed bonuses and rewards. The master of a large building project not only received daily wages which might rise as high as six times those of the

ordinary laborer; he would also receive extra payments, sometimes so regularly in both amount and time of payment that they may have been part of his official "salary". No wonder the phrase, "a masters wages", carried overtones of considerable prestige into modern Speculative Masonry!

Sometimes a reward was paid not in money, but in the form of a robe or livery. such an honorarium rarely was paid to any but a master mason in a responsible position, like the architect or superintendent of the work. At the building of Eton College in 1445-46."cloth was purchased for the liveries of the chief mason, of the warden, and of the purveyors"- the sub contractors.

In some cases the attention of the master mason was not needed constantly: he could work elsewhere with the permission of the authorities who had engaged him. In such cases, his remuneration was usually an annual fee, plus a per diem wage for each day that he was present and working at the building. The position of such a master mason was appointed for life, he was given "social security" in the form of maintenance in sickness and old age.

The importance of master masons varied with the size and cost of the structures they were working on. The master builder of a cathedral, however, was a highly skilled workman and administrator. He had to have the ability to draw plans and elevations. He had to be able to compute the quantities of material and labor needed; he had to manage his workmen effectively and fairly. since he had the final authority to "hire and fire, he had to know good work from bad work, good masons from poor ones. He had to administer with justice and "equal regularity". A master mason was a man of worth and dignity.

During the seventeenth century, from the days of Queen Elizabeth to the institution of "constitutional" monarchs in England after the reign of James II, masons' lodges underwent a considerable change, and early in the eighteenth century they evolved into their modern fraternal form, especially with the organization of Grand Lodges from 1717 on.

Lodges were still associations of stoneworkers and masons, but the cessation of cathedral building and the expansion of overseas trade lessened the importance of the masons' companies to the point where they had to change to survive. From the active trade associations whose primary function was the regulation of workers and their qualifications, as well as their working conditions, wages, rights, and responsibilities, they gradually became mutual benefit societies concerned largely with charity and relief for the destitute and unemployed.

It was during this century that non-operative members began to be accepted in ever-increasing numbers, largely to build up the financial reserves for the lodges' philanthropic designs. Especially welcome were members of the professional, educated, and titled classes, not merely because they could afford the higher "entry" fees for accepted masons, but also because they could help to restore the waning prestige of the craft associations.

Up to this time, a Fellow of the Craft was a workman who had passed two stages of admission. There were no more. A Master Mason was a Fellow of the Craft who had bought his status, not from the lodge, but from the Town Council of its trade incorporators. So far as a lodge was concerned, a Fellow of the Craft and a Master were practically the same thing.

With the change from operative to Speculative Freemasonry, however, the lodges began to record members in three different categories: apprentices, fellowcrafts, and masters. Since accepted masons could not become operative master masons, lodges began to grant the title of Master to non-operative masons in their ranks. The only requirement seems to have been the payment of another fee: no special ceremony was performed to make such accepted masons Masters.

So far as can be determined from records and historical papers, the ceremonies of the Master Mason degree were a product of the transformation achieved by modern Speculative Freemasonry. In the change from operative craft lodges of skilled stonemasons to lodges of accepted Masons, the status of master masons declined from that of outstanding leadership in skills and management to that of mere membership in a fraternal organization. Part of our modern problem about the answer to the question, "Are you a Master Mason?" is a built-in weakness which has been inherited from the practices of operative masons in the period of transition.

Part of the problem undoubtedly lies in the failure of modern Freemasonry to make the title of Master Mason truly "proud" and "sublime". We may surmise that this is one reason why Speculative Freemasonry adopted the ceremonies of the third degree so rapidly and universally during the first decades of the Grand Lodge era. They are impressive; they do give the initiate a distinct impression of the grandeur and the lofty possibilities of Freemasonry's ultimate designs. This may also be the reason that additional rites and degrees proliferated so rapidly in the first century of modern Freemasonry.

But ceremony and ritual, no matter how superbly executed, are not enough to really make a man a Master Mason. An operative master of the craft has to acquire certain skills, specific knowledge, and practical experience over a period of years before he could qualify for the title of master mason. A speculative Master, or overseer of the work, must likewise demonstrate in his own life the qualities and experiences which alone can make him a symbolic Master of the builders of Brotherhood. Ritual and ceremony can help him to define and to recognize those spiritual skills. The important question, therefore, is not "Are you a Master Mason?" It is the more searching and difficult query, "What is a Master Mason?"

Reverence for the Great Architect of the Universe is a first characteristic. It cannot be exemplified merely in a lodge. It must be a way of thinking and acting, which manifests itself at a man's place of business, in his home, at the club, -- in his activities to promote and encourage the work of a church or synagogue.

Benevolence is the next significant quality; but it must be more than dutiful acts of charity and relief which alleviate the distress of a fallen brother, his widow, or his orphans. Benevolence means literally "well wishing", which to a Master Mason means an attitude of helpful interest to every member of the whole family of mankind.

Tolerance also characterizes the true Master Mason -- not merely the tolerance which suffers or endures that which is inimical or distasteful, but that spirit of "bear ye one another's burdens" which permits real understanding of and sympathy for those with whom we disagree. One reason

that Freemasonry is so concerned about freedom, political as well as spiritual, is that Freemasonry knows the absolute necessity of mutual tolerance if men are to live in freedom and justice.

Respect for knowledge and the skills dependent thereon is the significant lesson of the Fellowcraft degree. But such respect is part of a larger reverence which the true Master Mason accords to excellence in every form. And the true Master Mason has the courage to define and to insist on excellence, whether he is dealing merely with the ritual labors of his lodge, or with the performance of his fellow-workers in business, government, and community affairs. But since excellence alone can recognize the excellent, he reverences all knowledge and experience which have helped men everywhere to achieve excellence. the true Master Mason is not satisfied with the "average": he dares to be better than that.

An operative master mason was trained individually to be an architect or overseer of the work. He was a man of worth and dignity. The Speculative Master Mason must also trained individually to be a master of the moral and spiritual skills of the Builders of Brotherhood. His excellence must make him a man of worth and dignity.

Are you a Master Mason?