



**The Grand Lodge of Ancient, Free  
and Accepted Masons of Virginia**  

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**Committee on Masonic Education**



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**Lodge Presentation Program Paper**

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**MASONIC APRONS: Ancient Tradition And History;  
Their Variety, Symbolism and Meaning**

**By: Worshipful M. Kent Brinkley  
LEO, Williamsburg Lodge No. 6, and  
Charter Master, Peyton Randolph Lodge of Research No. 1774**

The public generally recognizes us as Freemasons when they see us wearing that very distinctive item of regalia, the apron. This is generally when we assemble, for example, in procession, at a funeral home ceremony, or at a graveside burial service. The public often wonders, however, why we wear these aprons and what they are supposed to symbolize. Indeed, many Masons have only a sketchy idea of the history and variety of aprons, and in this talk we will explore some of that history.

The apron, from ancient times was a practical item, sometimes of cloth, but more often of leather, typically worn to protect clothing from dirt and damage from rough and heavy types of work. Aprons were worn by tradesmen of many sorts, but the wearing of **lambskin** aprons came over time to be a unique and peculiar "badge" or "emblem" of stone masons; who wore them not only for its protective qualities, but apparently also for its symbolism.

As the Craft changed in the seventeenth-century from purely “Operative” to being more “Speculative” in nature, the wearing of an apron was retained as a tangible link with the Craft's ancient, Operative past, and this has continued to the present day.

What has changed over time, however, is the design of these Masonic aprons. From surviving examples, we know that in the late sixteen and early seventeen hundreds, Masonic aprons were typically made from rough animal or sheep skins, and tended to be very long; covering the wearer's thighs and knees. As Speculative Masonry developed in England and spread throughout Europe and North America throughout the mid- to late-seventeen hundreds, Craft apron shapes became both more varied and smaller in size.

These aprons had decorative designs, sometimes embroidered on silk or satin material and applied to aprons, but more often painted directly on the leather apron. These designs derived from the “Tracing Boards,” which were used by the Master Mason in Operative times to draw full-sized details of building components, which would then be used, by Journeymen or Fellowcraft Masons as templates from which to shape and carve certain stones to fit into much larger patterns of stone tracery and decorative details. Speculative Masonry retained the use of tracing boards, which were illustrated with the working tools, and other Masonic symbols used in each one of the three Craft degrees, and used to teach candidates the lessons of those degrees. Indeed, as recently as a few decades ago, these "Tracing Boards" were regularly used in most jurisdictions.

By about 1735, the French began to paint or embroider Masonic symbols from their Tracing Boards onto their aprons. These symbols were intended to remind both the wearer and other Masons of the central lessons of Speculative Masonry. These French aprons were typically smaller in size than English aprons used during this period, and were often elaborately trimmed with lace borders, tassels and other decorative detail.

Around 1760, the two competing English Grand Lodges started to follow the French practice of decorating aprons with Masonic symbols, and by the last decade of the seventeenth hundreds, they too had downsized their aprons to a much smaller, neater, shield-shaped configuration. By the 1780s the Germans, and then the Americans, also downsized their Masonic aprons and they, too, soon followed the more decorative and colorful French fashion.

By the late seventeen and early eighteen-hundreds, in both France and England, Masons began to paint certain symbols from the so-called, "higher," Masonic degrees, which had become popular, on their personalized aprons. This was to show that they had attained a more advanced status within the Fraternity. However, this practice quickly got out of hand. Brethren started mixing Craft symbols with those of the Royal Arch, Scottish Rite, and Commandery, resulting in a confusing jumble of symbols and emblems that appeared to be as gaudy as they were confusing; especially to newer Masons. The degree of excess seemed to be limited only by the highly personal whims and tastes of individual Brothers in supplying themselves with their own apron; often without regard for their actual Masonic standing within the Craft.

By 1815, after the two competing English Grand Lodges had been unified as the United Grand Lodge of England (UGLE), the indiscriminate use of different Masonic symbols on personal aprons came to an end as steps were adopted setting forth standards for the Craft Masonic aprons permitted to be worn for each degree, and by all Provincial and Grand officer ranks,.

Despite these developments in England, the independent Grand Lodges founded in the colonies and in the United States continued to tolerate the practice of decorating personal Masonic aprons with various painted and embroidered symbols. Around 1825-30, however, less decoration on aprons became more common within Freemasonry world-wide; as one-by-one, individual jurisdictions began to legislate what kinds of decorations and embellishments could be placed on the aprons worn by their members. But it was not until about 1880, that most of the American Grand Lodges had come to enforce much stricter regulations on the wearing of specific aprons by their members and subordinate Lodges.

What is interesting is that this evolution toward standardized apron design had little to do with the development of another custom, the responsibility to provide aprons. In some jurisdictions, it was the responsibility of the individual Mason to obtain an apron, while in others, the subordinate Lodge would provide aprons to both officers and members. For example, in most, if not all, Lodges that hold charters from the UGLE, each individual member had the responsibility to provide and bring with him, his own personal apron and gloves to wear at Lodge meetings. Most American Lodges, on the other hand, would typically provide cloth, or at least paper, aprons for all of its members and visitors, and appropriate aprons for each of its officers.

Nevertheless, as noted earlier, the UGLE is very specific about what apron design was permitted based on a Brother's Masonic rank or office, and many, if not most, American Grand Lodges also had standardized designs, and explicitly designated the types and sizes of aprons that could legally be worn by the members of that Grand Jurisdiction. In many American Grand Lodges, the authorized size and approved designs of member and officer aprons is highly regulated; for example in Texas, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and South Carolina. In other jurisdictions, while the specific requirements may not be expressly spelled out in a Grand Lodge's laws, long-established practice governs what is considered acceptable apron design.

In spite of the movement toward standardization in apron size, form, and decoration, any Mason who has traveled widely is aware that there are still significantly different apron designs in use today. Some aprons are trimmed and highly decorated, while others are simpler, and some are just plain white.

Although, the Lambskin or white leather apron is considered to be the standard form of Masonic regalia virtually world-wide, there is variation with respect to different Masonic officers and functions at the Lodge, District, Provincial, and Grand Lodge levels. There is also variation in the design of Masonic aprons used by certain concordant and appendant bodies, which use different colored borders with symbols unique to that body.

With respect to Craft or "Blue Lodge Masonry," trimmed or decorated aprons usually denote some form of higher Masonic rank or office. Generally, aprons trimmed with a blue border denote current Lodge Officers or Past

Masters, with the central emblem on the apron's body varying according to the office held by the wearer. District Officers and Grand Lodge Committeemen are often also provided with distinctively trimmed aprons; to indicate their special service to and status within the Fraternity, as well. Aprons trimmed with a purple border often identify current or past District Deputy Grand Masters, and these aprons may have the year the wearer served in that office embroidered on them. Gold-trimmed aprons typically indicate current Grand Lodge Officers or Past Grand Masters, with the central emblem and other decorative embellishments displayed on the apron's body often varying according to the specific office held by the wearer. Obviously, the aprons worn by Grand Masters and Past Grand Master tend to be the most elaborate in design, using expensive materials, such as gold bullion thread in their construction.

If all of this is not complex enough, let me introduce just one more complexity to our discussion. In some jurisdictions, there is the concept of "dress" and "undress" regalia. For example, in most Lodges and Grand Jurisdictions that were chartered by, or are allied with the UGLE, "undress" aprons would be routinely worn to a regular subordinate Lodge meeting. However, there would be more formality at the quarterly or annual meetings of a Provincial Grand Lodge or the Grand Lodge in London, where "dress regalia" is required. Generally, the "dress" apron would have side tabs affixed to the apron body to serve as a symbolic representation of the tied apron strings or tasseled ends of the cords that once hung down in the front of older-style aprons, and usually some type of white, blue, purple, silver, or gold fringe attached to both the body and the flap of the apron. Formal Masonic dress

would also generally extend to the elaborate style of the officers' collars, jewels, and gloves.

In the United States, the types of simpler, trimmed aprons that are worn by most Lodge, District and even Grand Lodge Officers, would generally be described as "undress" aprons in most parts of the world. However, in Virginia, it is proper for any Brother sitting in Lodge to wear either what might be termed the "undress apron" provided by the Lodge, or a "dress apron" of his own, so long as the Brother is entitled to wear an apron that reflects a specific status, standing, or rank within the Craft.

In this context, let me say a word or two about gloves. In the United States, given our less formal manner, many Lodges do not expect members and visitors to wear gloves during stated and called meetings. Of course, gloves may be worn by Master Masons at any time, at their option, or by a request of the Master. They are generally required by our Grand Lodge Committee on Work at all Masonic funerals and evening memorial services; and by individual Lodge custom for all Lodge officers on the occasion of official visits of the District Deputy Grand Master and Grand Master. Moreover, at the opening and closing ceremonies of both the emergent and the annual communications of the Grand Lodge of Virginia, all of the Grand Lodge Officers are expected to wear gloves for portions of these meetings.

Despite all of the changes in, and ornamentation of, Masonic aprons, it is the Lambskin or white leather apron that remains the most important one of all. Let us, therefore, conclude our discussion of Masonic aprons by exploring the symbolism behind this plain white apron we were first presented

when we were initiated an Entered Apprentice, wore during our passing and raising, and which we may wear again on our journey to the Celestial Lodge.

The white Lambskin apron reminds us of the moral teachings of our Masonic Craft, and our duty to always endeavor to live by its tenets. It serves as a tangible and highly-visible symbol of what each of us should try to be – an upright, morally pure, man of solid and spotless character. Just as we should keep this white Lambskin apron as clean and spotless as the day we received it, so should we endeavor to keep our character in that same unsullied state.

Today, the apron's corners are squared so there are four, equal, 90-degree angles to remind us that the virtues of *Purity*, *Sincerity*, *Truth*, and *Honesty* are the best and true foundations of all morality. The four sides of the apron remind us to always practice the four Cardinal Virtues of the Masonic Craft: *Temperance* in thought, word and deed; *Fortitude* in every noble endeavor; *Prudence* in wisely judging before taking each intentional act in life; and *Justice* in equal measure to all with whom we come in contact.

The flap of the apron is an inverted triangle; a symbol of the Deity, and reminds us to generously extend charity and to practice tolerance to ALL of Mankind, all of God's children; regardless of race or creed. The strings, cords or belt that tie or affix the apron to the body symbolize the Mystic Ties of *Love*, *Faith*, and *Trust* that bind us all together as equally valued and respected friends and Brothers.



A Brother is supposed to keep this presentation apron in a safe place at his home, either stored flat or rolled up in a protective tube, and should tell his wife and children about its location and its importance. Upon his death, his survivors should give the apron to the funeral home, so the deceased Brother can be buried or cremated while wearing it. When thus worn in death, the apron then represents to us the completion of one life's journey, and our transition as a Master Mason to yet another, more perfect and eternal life in the Celestial Lodge above.

So recalling my opening remarks, when the public sees us wearing that most ancient and venerable badge, and universally recognized symbol, of a Free and Accepted Mason, they should know that we are keeping faith with the values of the oldest and largest Fraternity in the world. While it harkens back to our heritage as working stone masons, it now identifies us as members of a moral and ethical brotherhood of men who are working under the Fatherhood of God, to build their own character, and to serve as a role model for all mankind.