



**The Grand Lodge of Ancient, Free
and Accepted Masons of Virginia
Committee on Masonic Education**



Lodge Presentation Program Paper

MASONIC CORNERSTONES

Compiled from multiple sources by Paul A. Miller
Past Master, Norfolk Lodge No. 1
District Educational Officer, Masonic District 35-A

Our Masonic Cornerstone-laying ritual is one of the few public ceremonies available to the Fraternity for presenting a positive image to the community in a Masonic context. However, the rich symbolism associated with the cornerstone provides a much deeper association to our Craft than a mere public relations display.

The significance of the cornerstone developed from the importance of the first stone placed in a building's foundation, which determines the position of the rest of the structure since all other stones will be set in reference to this stone.

With the development of new building construction technology, the cornerstone became a ceremonial masonry stone, or replica, set in a prominent location on the outside of a building, with an inscription on the stone indicating the construction dates of the building and the names of architect, builder, and other significant individuals.

The origins of the cornerstone symbolism are vague, but its presence in Judeo-Christian countries can be associated with at least six quotations from the Old Testament and also six citations in the New Testament.

Ritual ceremonies associated with cornerstones often involved the placing of offerings of grain, wine, and oil on or under the stone. These were symbolic of the people of the land and the means of their subsistence.^[1]

Albert Mackey wrote this about the symbolism of the cornerstone:

“To the various properties that are necessary to constitute a true cornerstone – its firmness and durability, its perfect form, and its peculiar position as the connecting link between the walls – we must attribute the important character that it has assumed in the language of symbolism. Freemasonry, which alone of all existing institutions, has preserved this ancient and universal language, could not, as it may well be supposed, have neglected to adopt the corner-stone among its most cherished and impressive symbols; and hence it has referred to it many of its most significant lessons of morality and truth.

“The difference between operative and speculative Masonry is simply this – that while the former was engaged in the construction of a material temple, formed, it is true, of the most magnificent materials which the quarries of Palestine, the mountains of Lebanon, and the golden shores of Ophir could contribute, the latter occupies itself in the erection of a spiritual house – a house not made with hands – in which, for stones and cedar, and gold and precious stones, are substituted the virtues of the heart, the pure emotions of the soul, the warm affections gushing forth from the hidden fountains of the spirit, so that the very presence of Jehovah, our Father and our God, shall be enshrined within us as his Shekinah was in the holy of holies of the material temple at Jerusalem.

“The Speculative Mason, then, if he rightly comprehends the scope and design of his profession, is occupied, from his very first admission into the Order until the close of his labors and his life – and the true Mason's labor ends only with his life – in the construction, the adornment, and the completion of this spiritual temple of his body. He lays its foundation in a firm belief and an unshaken confidence in the wisdom, power, and goodness of God. This is his first step: Unless his trust is in God, and in

Him only, he can advance no further than the threshold of initiation. And then he prepares his materials with the gauge and gavel of Truth, raises the walls by the plumb-line of Rectitude, squares his work with the square of Virtue, connects the whole with the cement of Brotherly Love, and thus skillfully erects the living edifice of thoughts, and words, and deeds, in accordance with the designs laid down by the Master Architect of the Universe in the great Book of Revelations.

“The aspirant for Masonic light – the Neophyte – on his first entrance within our sacred porch, prepares himself for this consecrated labor of erecting within his own bosom a fit dwelling-place for the Divine Spirit, and thus commences the noble work by becoming himself the cornerstone on which this spiritual edifice is to be erected.” [2]

The Evolution of the Masonic Cornerstone 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 Freemasonry*. 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 – 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 Honorable, 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.

What the two accounts show is that there was little form to the procedure. The only point in common to the two “ceremonies were 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’s work, 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 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 States of America," but there were no instructions for the laying of a cornerstone.

"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 No. 22 has a wooden triangle and T-square from the 1793 ceremonies, which must have been used to symbolically try the stone." [3]

What we can conclude from this brief discussion, is that as Masonry progressed from its Operative origins to its current Speculative orientation, it maintained both the formal ritual ceremony for the laying of cornerstones as well as a symbolic connection. As important as it is to have a public Cornerstone-laying ceremony at the dedication of a new building, it is even more important that the Entered Apprentice endeavors to establish the proper placement of his spiritual temple as he begins his work as a Freemason and dedicates himself to becoming a better man.

~

REFERENCES:

- [1] "Cornerstone" from Wikipedia,
<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Cornerstone>
- [2] "The Symbolism of Freemasonry" by Albert G. Mackey (1882)
- [3] October 1993, Short Talk Bulletin by the Masonic Service Association. "The Evolution of the Cornerstone Ceremony", by S. Brent Morris, Past Master of Potmos Lodge No. 70, Ellicott City, Maryland.