



MAKE YOUR MARK

The origin and heritage of Free Masonry is humble, rich, and elusive. I am going to take you on a brief journey, first with the beginning of Operative Masonry as an organized craft, then to the beginning of Speculative Masonry.

First, let's take a look at Operative Masonry in Medieval Europe. Early records are few because of a lack of written historical information. This was due firstly to the lack of literate Masons to record their affairs, and secondly, fear from the Church and the Crown.

Historians have found archaeological evidence of Stone Masons marks on building stones as far back as the building of the Pyramids, as far back as 2500 BCE. Some however, think it is nothing more than ancient graffiti. The current use of the Mason's Mark had its beginning in Medieval Europe, as early as the mid 14th century. Attempts were being made to organize the StoneMasons Guild by both the Cross and the Crown, to control wages and set work standards. The reason it was organized was the Plague, which ran from 1346 to 1353. The havoc it caused had no regard for age or class. It reduced the numbers of Operative Masons. With fewer skilled Masons, they demanded more money. As a result, laws and statutes were passed setting wages and creating standards of work. The StoneMasons Guild were singled out, refusing to let them meet, with exceptions being made for work instruction. This primarily came from

the Church and their fear of such a group, meeting without their supervision. The Crown, if they needed work, would impress them.

The path of an experienced young Mason was not an easy one. His path today would be considered as a rigorous and very structured one. He would have left home at the age of nine or ten, already literate in English and French. He would have been educated at home or at a petty or junior school. From ten to fourteen, he would enter a monastery or grammar school to learn Latin, or he would become a page in a Knightly family where he would also learn deportment. From fourteen to seventeen, he would then become an Entered Apprentice, assigned to a Fellowcraft as his mentor. From him, he would learn the basic skills of choosing, shaping, and combining stone. After three years as a journeyman, at seventeen to twenty-one, he would be required to learn by rote, a large number of formal problems in geometry. At the end of his three years as a journeyman, or apprentice he would submit a Master Work dealing with a set problem in construction or in design. If passed, he was considered qualified as a Fellowcraft and then would choose and make his mark. A mark that remained his alone for the rest of his life. It was his trademark, certifying the stone was ready to be put in place and that he may be paid for his work.

The Fellowcrafts were generally grouped into two camps depending on skill level. The straight or square Masons were symbolically endowed with the square. They were usually paid less because less skill was required to square an ashlar for placement in a

building. The Arch Masons were endowed with the compasses because making and finishing a rounded surface was more difficult.

To become a Master Mason he would have other gates to pass before he may be selected as a Master Mason. It would take several years of proving himself, progressing to larger and more complex sites that he may then become an Architect or Master Mason.

The century of 1500 - 1600 would see major changes in the Church, the Crown, society in general, and particularly in Freemasonry. Until now, most of the Operative Masons plied their expertise on building the great cathedrals, abbies, and monasteries for the Holy Roman Church. The Crown would continue to build castles but when the Mason's skills were needed they would only impress them and suppress their wages. It was the Protestant reformation, beginning in 1517 when Martin Luther nailed his demands to the door of the Church that would spell significant changes to Operative Masonry. At first, the changes were subtle, as the church began losing its hold. They were building fewer structures. The Masons found themselves facing increased unemployment. Fewer apprentices were needed. This operative period of decline was the beginning of the change of the Guild of Builders to one of a moral and philosophical nature, one that today is Speculative Masonry.

No one knows for sure when the changes began or why. A Gentlemen's Club, maybe. A safe place where like minded, educated men, who in a climate of political and theological unrest could meet, maybe also. But change they did.

There are minutes from July thirty-first 1599, from the Scottish Lodge of Edinburgh, called St Mary's Chapel, showing the signature of one speculative Mason and he making his mark. By 1670 the Lodge of Aberdeen had minutes being signed by forty-nine members and about three quarters were speculative Masons.

In 1598, the Shaw Statutes were commissioned by King James VI of Scotland who would soon be King James the First of England. The statutes would for the first time become a unified set of rules for the Operative StoneMasons Lodges. They were written and issued by William Shaw, Master of the Work for King James VI. The code consisted of twenty-two regulations. One stated "that no Master of Fellowcraft be received nor admitted without the number of six Masters and two Entered Apprentices, the Warden (Master) being one of the said six, and that his name and mark inserted in said book with the names of his six admitters. Proving always that no man admitted without an essay (test) and sufficient trial of his skill and worthiness in his vocation and craft."

In 1634 an event took place which would profoundly affect the future of the craft. In the July first, 1634 minutes, the Scottish Lodge of Edinburgh noted that Lord

Alexander, Viscount of Canada, his brother, Sir Anthony Alexander and Sir Alexander Strahan were admitted as members of the Lodge. This was the earliest record of a non Operative and would be the opening wedge in the transition from Operative to Speculative Masonry.

As far as we know, Operative Masonry had no formal degree ceremonies. It was Speculative Masonry that would do that. In early Speculative Masonry, as in Operative Masonry, there were only two degrees, the Entered Apprentice and the Fellowcraft. It wasn't until 1723 when the first reference to a third degree, the Master Mason, was made. In keeping with the tradition of the Operative Fellow Crafts, the Speculative Mason would choose and make his mark. He then was called a Mark Mason.

The Mark Mason had been part of Operative Masonry from as early as the late 1400's. It had several names such as the Mark Master, Mark Man, Christian Mark, and the Travelling or Fugitive Mark.. The Mark Mason degree instructs that learning is most useful when judiciously employed for our own honor. It teaches regularity, diligence, discipline, and justifiable but humble pride in work well done.

Our first three degrees come from the York Rite. First, the Mark Mason degree was combined with the Mark Master Degree which started to appear around 1723. It was conferred only when a Brother completed his degree work. Today it is found only

in Lodges operating with charters from the Grand Lodge of Scotland and is given at the end of the Fellowcraft Degree.

Well where did it go for us? It has now been moved to the Royal Arch as the Fourth Degree, the first degree given upon entering Royal Arch Masonry. The ritual is built on one verse from Psalm 118, "The stone which the builders rejected has become the headstone of the corner." One of the messages this degree conveys is that the wisest of men can be mistaken, that experts can often be wrong, that the weakest can display perseverance better than the strongest, that the insignificant has the potential for distinction and that we all have a part to play in the building of life.

Though you may not be a York Rite Mason and have not made your own personal mark, you still have one. We have a responsibility to regard that best known Mason's Mark, the Square and Compasses as your own. Many of us wear or display it identifying ourselves as Masons. We are projecting an image of Masonry to the world at large. The world will judge the Craft by our words and actions. Every moment of every day we must remind ourselves of the standard we have set. Let's do our best to leave our marks only on good work, true work, square work as we make ourselves living stones for that "house not made with hands, eternal in the Heavens."

Mark well my brothers, mark well.

