

FROM THE TRACING FLOOR TO THE TRACING BOARD

THE POWER POINT OF EARLY FREEMASONRY

For many of us, if you look around the wall of your Lodge or maybe in the dining room, your Lodge may have on display, as art, a Tracing Board or painted canvas displaying the talking points of each degree. They are an important part of our early Masonic History. Their evolution and usage have a very long history, beginning with the functional heritage of operative masonry.

The practice started as early as the 12th century and the beginning of the building of the great cathedrals in Medieval Europe. At the building site, in a dedicated large room, a smooth plaster floor would be laid out. Then, in full scale, the architect would first, with chalk or charcoal, lay out his design on the floor. When he was satisfied with the design, it would be incised into the floor. Wood or light metal templates of the drawing were made and taken to the quarries, as patterns for the stone work. When each phase was completed, a new coat of plaster would be laid out on the floor, covering the old patterns, and the next phase was begun.

The Master Overseer would also have a large room with similar floor where he would lay out in full scale, the day's work, so the fellowcraft could see where each numbered stone was to be placed. Several of the tracing floors survive to this day. In England there is one at Wells Cathedral and one at York Minster. The one at York Minster has been dated to the 1280's and measures 23 feet by 13 feet. The details of the great window behind the altar can still be seen excised on the floor.

The Tracing Floor idea was inherited by the first speculative Masons. The earliest Masons did meet in secluded fields in deep valleys or on hill tops. It was the Tyler's responsibility to draw on the ground, in the form of a rectangle or oblong square, the Lodge, and also draw the emblems of each offer in the appropriate locations. Great care would be taken not to step on the lines until Lodge was over, then the lines were stomped out or swept to remove all traces.

It would not be long before meetings were to be held indoors in the upper rooms of Pubs or Meeting Houses. It was still the Tyler's responsibility to draw with chalk or charcoal, the Lodge on the floor. Some of the earliest Tylers were chosen because of their artistic ability. When Lodge was over, the Tyler would have to remove the lines with water and mop. The earliest Lodges didn't meet on a regular basis, but usually for the purpose of initiation. After the ceremony was over, while many of the brothers would retire to the pub, it became the newly initiated brothers' responsibility to mop the floor, under the supervision of the Tyler. This was also used as an educational experience for the new initiates. The Tyler would instruct the newest brother(s) the significance of each part as he was removing it. In some cases, Lodges were held in homes, some with carpet on the floor. In this case, ribbon was held down with pins or tacks. Wood or thin metal cutouts of the officer's station were placed on the floor. The floor drawings and ribbon would, in time, be replaced with canvas and someone with more artistic ability would paint them on the cloth, which could be spread out on the floor. This was called the Master's Carpet. When finished, they were rolled up and removed. Many Lodges still use a version of this today during the fellowcraft degree.

Probably one of the earliest references to a floorcloth was in the minutes of Old King Armes Lodge Number 28, December 2, 1733, when the acting Master requested that the Third Degree should be made on canvas and deposited in the repository and made ready for those occasions.

Later the canvasses were mounted in frames and placed upon sawhorses or stood against a Trestle Board. This became the norm until Lodges started to have new and permanent homes. Because of the size and storage requirement necessary for the Trestle Boards, they would be replaced by the smaller tracing board. These could be set up against a single trestle or upon an easel. This conversion started in the early half of the 19th century with some still being used in England, Scotland, Ireland and Canada today in some historic Lodges embracing their early Masonic heritage.

With the advent of the magic lantern, with their painted glass slides of the 19th to the early 20th century, to the flat screen T.V.'s of today, many tracing boards are now displayed on Lodge room walls as art and a tribute to the past. If your Lodge has some, take a moment and imagine yourself with a newly made brother by your side, taking him on his first journey through the degree.

Have I forgotten one? The slate blackboard mounted on an easel is probably the oldest of them all. It was used to test new designs and ideas before they committed to the tracing floor. Today, they are revered as one of the moveable jewels. But did you know that in those Lodges under the jurisdiction of the British Empire, they are considered immovable? They are thought to be that because on their own, they cannot move, however those assigned to an Officer of the Lodge, on their own, can and do move about the Lodge.

In the end, each has progressively served its purpose, education. In Hutchison's "Spirit of Masonry", written in 1775, he said "As Solomon at Jerusalem carried into the Jewish Temple, all the vessels and instruments requisite for the services of Jehovah, according to the law of his people; so we as Masons, as workers in the moral duties and as servants of the Grand Architect of the universe's world, have placed in our view, those emblems which should constantly remind us of what we are, and what is required of us."