

## THE MARK DEGREE AND ITS ORIGIN



Writing is comparatively speaking, of recent origin. A painter, artist, author, columnist or sculptor attaches his signature to the finished product, indeed all works either bear the signature of the author or some distinguishing trade mark.

In olden times however, before written language, it is quite obvious that all works were recognized by their author's marks, and even today, marks are still used for purposes of identification. Marks, therefore, have never been the monopoly of Masons, many marks, particularly on some of the world's oldest buildings are thousands of years old. And, let me say here, Mason's marks are not secrets, but simply methods of recognition; and it is clearly demonstrable that they serve a useful purpose in aiding Masonic or other students to put together a history of not only buildings and great structures, but a history of the builders themselves.

Collecting and comparing them has done much to enlighten us about the old operatives who spread all over Europe, during the Middle Ages, under the protection of the Church, with the assistance of great Monarchs and Kings, and who finally were known as Freemasons.

Most of these old operatives banded themselves together in lodges and research show they practised many of the rites and ceremonies which had their origin in Ancient Egypt, Phoenicia and even earlier cultures, and in these lodges, every Mason had his own mark, thus distinguishing one man's work from another's.

We do know that every lodge in Scotland during the 1600's & 1700's kept a book of Marks which registered the name, (generally the mark), and the trade or profession of each new Apprentice and every member. The Schaw statutes of 1598, probably the oldest, the earliest Masonic Constitution in Britain, required that the name and the mark of all FC's & M.M.'s be registered in a book kept for that purpose.

We find marks on the great works of the ancient Romans, Assyrians, Greeks, Chinese and Egyptian Temples, on the ruins of nameless structures of Judea, in fact, everywhere that architecture has been fostered, wherever man has chosen to erect noble edifices either to God, or for his own glorification.

These marks, were of every form and character as numerous and varied as the men who made them, and were a language to the illiterate operatives as they wandered from place to place. These men, governed by their own rules and laws, lived a separate life from the local people where they were working, and were "free" masons in the fullest sense, moving on to other places as their works were completed.

We know they were most strictly supervised by their superiors, were most careful of the choice of apprentices and could only be set to work by the officers, belonged to many nations, were bound by ties of brotherhood and placed their marks on the great cathedrals and palaces of Europe.

The Dyonisiac artificers, built the mighty temples of Greece and Rome, and were known to have been an organized body at least 1,000 years BC, and they expressed their marks as flowers, leaves, fruit, animals, fish, beautifully made, expressing symbolically, their names and preserving them to posterity.

The illiterate nobles of Europe, adopted these marks into their coats-of-arms and by these marks we remembered them, as also the totems and tattoos of the savage tribes, even our recent forebears, the convicts, had a distinguishing mark, some still preserved, and it is apparent on the banners of the Israelitish tribes, a symbol by which a man and his clan are recognized. In India and Ceylon, marks were engraved in red on the foreheads of the natives, again, a form of recognition and with some peculiar significance. The Master Architect of the ancient Yucatan impressed his own hand, covered with red paint upon the stones, leaving a perfect impression of fingers and palm, a perfect form of identification and setting his seal of approval on the finished work.

The Tau of the Hebrew Alphabet is found on many ancient monuments, thus approving the finished work, the Tau or Toth, being the final letter of the Hebrew Alphabet and this Tau mark is used by Hindus at the present time and is very frequently marked on their foreheads in red clay. Every stone in the foundation of St. Paul's Cathedral in London bears the Mark of the masons who cut it, and can be verified by a visit to the underground lodge or temple built in the park at Windsor, designed by Sir Christopher Wren where an examination of the old records, giving the Marks of the builders of St. Paul's and comparison with the marks on the foundation proves that the Mark degree was an integral part of their lives and this was long before Masonry as we know it today, was known.

A deep study of Masonry inevitably leads one to the conclusion that the Mark Degree is not a legend, but is based on the actual facts of the V.S.L., the stones of the Temple being marked and placed in their proper position so that no trace of the sounds of axes or hammers was heard.

This is the origin of the Mark Degree, and it is quite clear, in my mind, that every entrant to a lodge of operative masons, as well as later to the speculative lodges, had to record his mark, writing not being in use, and whether he was a Mark Man or a Mark Master, he still had to present his Mark in the same manner, as from earliest history.

As practised today, the earliest known reference to the Mark Degree occurred at Portsmouth, England, on the 1st September, 1769, being introduced by Thomas Dunckerley, the Provincial Grand Master, into the Phoenix Royal Arch Chapter at Portsmouth. It has also been claimed to have originated in Scotland and the records of the Lodge of Edinburgh, record that it was worked in December 1598. It seems fairly clear, from studies of the old records that in olden days of Operative Masonry there was only one ceremony given, but in two parts: 1. Reception as an Apprentice; 2. Passing to Fellow craft or Master.

All the evidence that has been gathered over the years show that the Entered Apprentice and Fellow craft degrees, as we know them, are a division of the Apprentice Degree into 2 parts, and that the Mark Master and Royal Arch Degrees are a division of the Mark Master degree, which when received, made one a fully qualified Mason.

That great Mason and historian, Joseph Fort Newton, in his volume: "The Builders", states:-

"Our present Craft nomenclature, is all wrong, the old order was first, Apprentice, then Master, the Fellow craft, being, not a degree conferred but a reward of skill as a workman and merit as a man."

The confusion today, he claimed, was due to the German Guilds whereby a Fellow craft was made to serve two extra years as a journeyman in order to be recognized and accepted as a Master.

In England, the reverse was true, as it was the Apprentice, not the Fellow craft, who prepared the Masterpiece which if accepted, made him a Master. Having gained his Mastership, he was entitled to become a Fellow of the Craft, and from having previously served them, he was now a peer and fellow.

It is necessary to show the distinction between a Master and the Master of the Work, represented today by the Master of the Lodge. They were both Masters and Fellows and could only become a Master of the Work, provided they had sufficient skill and were lucky enough to be chosen as such, by either the employer or the Lodge.

Although the Lodge of Reconciliation in 1813 stabilized the ritual, creating 3 degrees the "Ancients" had to waive their claim to the inclusion of the Mark with the Fellow craft, as the majority decided it did not come up to the definition of pure and ancient masonry, and it would appear that the 'Mark' was regarded by the moderns as a spurious addition to Craft Masonry.

It is reasonable to surmise in reference to the Mark Degree, that interpreting the Fellow craft Degree as being designed for speculative masons, the further teachings of the Mark Degree were used when an operative brother was admitted.

Mark Masonry, although tabooed by the U.G.L of England was kept up, however, in Scotland. A committee appointed in 1868 by the Grand Master of Scotland reported that the Mark Degree had been worked from time immemorial, long before the Grand Lodge of Scotland, and was worked by operative lodges of St. John's Masonry, the degree was clearly, originally an operative one, and was superior in antiquity to any Grand Lodge or Grand Chapter.

In the 1600's, Mother Kilwinning Lodge, the oldest in Scotland, had Masons choose their Marks and charged 4/- for them, (an enormous price then.). In 1778, it was resolved in the Banff Operative Lodge, that all Masons must be raised to Master Mason before receiving the Mark and the price was 1/6.

Mark Masonry made very little impact in England until March 5th, 1856, when the U.G.L of England decided unanimously that: "The degree of Mark Mason or Mark Master, is not at variance with the ancient landmarks of the Order and that the degree be an addition to and form part of craft masonry and could be conferred by all regularly warranted lodges, under such regulations as shall be sanctioned by the Grand Master."

The decision was negated when brought up for confirmation on the grounds that it was a breach of the Articles of Union, which only allowed 3 degrees plus the Holy Royal Arch. The U.G.L. had blundered, because, in 1857, the Mark Grand Lodge was formed, housed itself in the Mark Masters Hall, London, is still there and most of the prominent masons of the day, including King Edward, took a great interest in it.

However, in 1851, some of the English brethren who were unwilling to join an untried organization such as the Grand Mark Lodge, applied to and were granted a charter from The Bon Accord Chapter of Aberdeen, quite irregular, of course, and was later rescinded

Much bitterness was aroused also, when Supreme Grand Chapter of Scotland offered charters to Mark Masons in England, and this invasion of English territory had a lot to do with the formation of the Mark Grand Lodge of England, and since its formation, Mark Masonry has flourished throughout British Territories, Dependencies, and what, at that time, were the Colonies. Up until recently, there were some 800 Mark Lodges and about 120,000 members, but these are exceeded by the Scotch Lodges and Chapters throughout the world.

Unlike all other degrees in Freemasonry, the Mark degree has only one emblem, the keystone, and the whole degree is woven around this symbol. The symbol we use today is different from the ancient keystone, it being cone-like in shape, with the point cut off and was revered as the most sacred portion of the Arch.

We can appreciate the importance of the keystone in the operative sense, but to us, it not only is the jewel of the degree, bears the MMM's Mark, but teaches us to appreciate the fact that honest work, faithfully performed, even though unappreciated, will vindicate itself and bring just rewards. It teaches us to practice charity of thought, as well as deed, and not to judge harshly or condemn others through lack of understanding.

The high ideals of the Mark Degree are eloquently set forth, in the beautifully worded charge at the end of the ceremony, the essence of which is whatever our successes or failures, whatever happens to us, our duty is to grasp firmly our Masonic Principles that Mark Master Masons will never fail us, and to remember that the stone rejected by the builders became the head of the corner.

**- Henry Rischin.**