

The Trowel

*And the King commanded, and they brought great stones,
costly stones, and hewed stones, to lay the foundation of the house.*

1 Kings 5: 17

On Saturday afternoon, 24 March 2007, with all due pomp and ceremony, M.W. Bro. Gary L. Atkinson, the Grand Master, laid the cornerstone in the renovated and refurbished Guelph Masonic Centre. During renovations an original stone wall, hitherto unknown to exist, was uncovered in the anteroom to the main lodge room on the second floor of the building which has been the home of Masonry in the City of Guelph since 1913. The cornerstone was placed in this wall. After a time capsule was placed in a cavity in the stonework, the inscribed cornerstone was hoisted into position. Using the proper instruments of the trade, the Deputy Grand Master tested and 'proved' it square, the Grand Senior Warden 'proved' it level, and the Grand Junior Warden 'proved' it upright. The Grand Master then took the trowel and symbolically spread mortar on the stone to complete the ceremony.

Well and truly laid

History repeated itself on this gala occasion, for on July 1, 1876, M.W. Bro. James K. Kerr, the Grand Master, laid the foundation stone of the Masonic Hall located on Upper Wyndham Street, Guelph.

Whereupon are the foundations thereof fashioned?

Or who laid the corner stone thereof;

When the morning stars sang together,

and all the sons of God shouted for joy?

Job 38: 6 - 7

The Masonic rites associated with the laying of cornerstones are of ancient origin, a direct link to our operative roots. The ceremony in use at present is abridged and adapted from that prescribed in 1772 by William Preston in his '*Illustrations of Masonry*' and authorized by Lord Petre, the Grand Master of England. In days past, the laying of cornerstones was a common occurrence, when the Grand Lodge was frequently invited to perform the ceremony of placing the suitably inscribed stone at the north-east corner of town halls, churches, schools, libraries, hospitals, and other public buildings. V.W. Bro. Gene Lotz, who functions as Archivist on the Library, Museum, and Archives Committee in our Grand Lodge, has catalogued many of these.

Freemasons laid the cornerstones of such historic structures and edifices as the White House (1792), the U.S. Capitol (1793), the Smithsonian Institution (1841), the George Washington Monument (1848), Cleopatra's Needle, the Egyptian obelisk removed from Heliopolis and re-erected in Central Park, New York (1880), the Statue of Liberty (1884), and the Washington National Cathedral (1907). The silver-bladed ivory-handled trowel used by Bro. George Washington to lay the cornerstone of the U.S. Capitol was presented to and is still in the possession of Alexandria-Washington Lodge No. 22, Alexandria.

The early Proceedings of our Grand Lodge record Especial Communications at which the First Grand Master, M.W. Bro. William Mercer Wilson laid cornerstones: St. James' Church, London (9th September 1859), the New Prison, now known as the Don Jail, Toronto (25th October 1859),

Hamilton Crystal Palace, Hamilton (24th May 1860), In Ontario, cornerstones have been laid with Masonic honours for such important public buildings as Victoria Hall, Cobourg (1856), Union Station, Toronto (1872), and the Masonic Hall, James and Gore Streets, Hamilton (1873), A collection of the trowels used by and presented to M.W. Bro. Wilson are on display in Norfolk Lodge No. 10, Simcoe. One cornerstone laying ceremony deserves mention. On the 24th of May 1872, the Brethren boarded a steamer at Orillia and sailed up Lake Couchiching to Washago, there to lay the cornerstone of St. Paul's Anglican Church. The Ceremony was presided over by R.W. Bro. J. K. Kerr, DDGM. Could this, we wonder, have inspired that ill-fated 'Marine Excursion of the Knights of Pythias' recounted in Stephen Leacock's classic, 'Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town' (1912)?

With the Square, Level, and Plumb-rule we are familiar in both operative and speculative use, but although the Trowel is an indispensable tool of the stonemason's trade, it is not mentioned in the Canadian Ritual. ... Or is it? We will come to a consideration of that curious omission later.

Rituals used in other Grand Jurisdictions are both interesting and informative. *"The working tools of a Master Mason are all the implements of Masonry appertaining to the first three degrees indiscriminately, but more especially the trowel. The trowel is an instrument made use of by operative masons to spread the cement which unites a building into one common mass; but we, as Free and Accepted Masons are taught to make use of it for the more noble and glorious purpose of spreading the cement of brotherly love and affection; that cement which unites us into one sacred band, or society of friends and brothers, among whom no contention should ever exist, but that noble contention, or rather emulation, of whom best can work and best agree."* (Duncan's Ritual of Freemasonry - Ancient York Rite)

The Trowel is a layer's tool. In this sense some older rituals include the Trowel as a Working Tool *"for spreading the cement of Brotherhood and affection."* There is an ambiguous allusion to this idealist construct in the words used at the Closing of the Lodge, when the Master says: *"cementing and adorning it with every social and moral virtue."* Surely there can be no better definition of *"social virtue"* than *"Brotherhood and affection."*

Blest be the tie that binds

The Trowel is an emblem of completion. The final stage of a job is reached when mortar is applied to bind the stones together, or when plaster is applied over the wall, thereby obscuring the differences between the stones. It is in this sense that the Trowel is appropriated to the Master Mason as his chief working tool to spread the cement that binds together the stones rough hewn by the hammer and chisel of the Entered Apprentice and tested by the square, level and plumb-rule of the Fellowcraft. Thus, symbolically the Master of the Lodge is the cement that unites the Brethren and binds them together in peace, harmony, and brotherly love - the mystic tie.

The Egyptians regarded the Trowel as an emblem of secrecy that was binding on the Initiate in the ancient mysteries. In an old English ritual the Entered Apprentice is presented with a silver trowel, *"emblematically to stop up all interstices in the lodge so that not a sound shall escape from with, nor an eye pry without."* In Irish lodges during the eighteenth century, we read that a pointed trowel was used as a stabbing weapon. In our Canadian ritual, the Candidate in the First Degree is *"received on the point of a sharp instrument."* In practice a sword or poniard is used for his reception, and is explained to him as such when the secrets of the degree are

communicated. However, if we look closely at the form of the trowel, and interpret its shape symbolically, the operative implements on which candidates are received in all three degrees are revealed: the point of a sharp instrument, the angle of a square, and the points of the compasses. Superimpose the Square and Compasses on the Trowel, and we see an exact correspondence.

Irish lodges in the eighteenth century used the trowel as the Tyler's or the Inner Guard's weapon. It was the custom in those days to have the Junior Entered Apprentice serve as inner doorkeeper armed with the Trowel.

*I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone,
a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation.*
Isaiah 28: 16

Royal Arch Masons know that when the Second Temple was built by Zerubbabel in the sixth century BCE after the return of the Israelites to Jerusalem from the five decades spent in Babylonian captivity, the masons laboured with the trowel in one hand and the sword in the other. In this traditional history of the Jews we find a link between Trowel and Sword. In Councils of Royal and Select Masters the trowel is a significant jewel of office.

There is yet another symbolic use of the Trowel linking it to the Entered Apprentice. An English ritual used in Cambridge "*exhorts him to the exercise of Charity which is likened to the cement which binds and perfects the building.*" In some Irish lodges the flat of the Trowel rather than an alms plate is presented to the Candidate during the Charity Lecture given at the North-east Angle. In many Lodges in New Zealand, the Trowel is the jewel of office worn by the Junior Deacon.

All of which indicates that the Trowel, while excluded almost completely from our Canadian ritual, enjoyed in the eighteenth century a much greater prominence.

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for The Curriculum Group
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RECOMMENDED FOR FURTHER READING AND REFERENCE

Morris, S. Brent. **Cornerstones of Freedom: A Masonic Tradition.** Washington, D.C.: The Supreme Council, 33°, S.J., 1993.