

Seymour Lodge No. 272  
April 10, 2012

## TRESTLE-BOARD AND TRACING-BOARD



Often confused, the trestle-board and the tracing-board are actually alike only in the similarity of their names.

The tracing-board refers to the Master's carpet, which is a descendant of operative Masons to designs drawn upon the ground, or on the floors of the buildings used by operative builders for meeting purposes, and during construction hours as what we would term an architect's office.

Early operative builders plans, drawn upon floor or earth, were erased and destroyed as soon as used. When Lodges changed from operative to Speculative, the custom of drawing designs upon the Lodge floor was continued; the "designs" for the Speculative Lodge, of course, were the emblems and symbols for the construction of the Speculative Temple of Character.

From their position such plans became known as Carpets, the Master's Carpet, of course was the design made upon the Lodge room floor during the Master's Degree. Such carpets were drawn with chalk or charcoal. It was the duty of the youngest Entered Apprentice to erase this Carpet after the meeting, using a mop and pail for the purpose.

Later it became evident that as no real Masonic secrets were drawn on the Carpet, the essentials of the institution were not disclosed by leaving them where the profane might see them. For convenience,

the several symbols of the degrees were then painted on cloth and laid upon the floor; true Carpets now. Still later these Carpets were held erect on easels; in America the chart - in England the Tracing-board - is still a commonplace of Lodge furniture. Old Tracing-boards (charts) are already objects of interest to Masonic antiquarians, and those early ones which follow almost exactly the illustrations in Jeremy Cross' "True Masonic Chart" (1820) are increasingly valuable as the years go by. Charts or Tracing-boards have performed a most valuable service; together with the printed monitors or manuals, they have kept a reasonable uniformity in the exoteric part of American work, thus making for a unity which is sometimes difficult for the newly made Mason to discover when he compares the esoteric work of one Jurisdiction with that of another.

"Trestle" comes from an old Scotch word, "trest," meaning a supporting framework. Carpenters use trestles, or "saw horses," to support boards to be sawed or planed. A board across two trestles provided a natural and easy way to display plans. Hence the name trestle-board; a board supported by trestles, on which plans were shown or made.

Mackey observes: "The trestle-board is at least two hundred years old; it is found in Pritchard's "Masonry Dissected," earliest of the exposes of Masonic Ritual Symbols differ in relative importance according to the truths they conceal. If one disagrees with Mackey and considers the tracing-board a symbol, it is, at most, one of teaching and learning; the trestle-board, on the contrary, has a symbolic content comparable in Freemasonry to that of the flag of the nation.

From the meanest hut to the mightiest Cathedral, never a building was not first an idea in some man's mind. Never a pile of masonry of any pretensions but first a series of drawings, designs, plans. Every bridge, every battleship, every engineering work, every dam,

tunnel, monument, canal, tower erected by man must first be drawn upon paper with pencil and rule; with square and

compasses. The ancient builders erected Cathedrals by following the designs upon the Master's trestle-board. Where he indicated stone, stone was laid. Where he drew a flying buttress, stone took wings. Where he showed a tower, a spire pointed to the vault. Where he indicated carvings, stone lace appeared.

Speculative Freemasons build not of stone, but with character. We do not erect Cathedrals, but the "House Not Made With Hands." Our trestle-board, "spiritual, Moral and Masonic" as the ritual has it, is as important in character building as the plans and designs laid down by the Master on the trestle-board by which the operative workman builds his temporal building.

The trestle-board of the Speculative Mason, so we are told by the ritual, is to be found in "the great books of nature and revelation." Mackey considers that the Volume of the Sacred Law as the real trestle-board of Speculative Freemasonry. He Says:

"The trestle-board is then the symbol of the natural and moral law. Like every other symbol of the Order, it is universal and tolerant in its application; and while, as Christian Masons, we cling with unfaltering integrity to the explanation which makes the scriptures of both dispensations our trestle-board, we permit Jewish and Mohammedan brethren to content themselves with the books of the Old Testament or Koran. Masonry does not interfere with the peculiar form or development of any one's religious faith. All that it asks is that the interpretation of the symbol shall be in accordance to what each one supposes to be the revealed will of the Creator. But so rigidly is it that the symbol shall be preserved and, in some rational way, interpreted, that it peremptorily excludes the atheist from its communion, because, believing in no

Supreme Being - no Divine Architect - he must necessarily be without a spiritual trestle-board on which the designs of that Being may be inscribed for his direction.”

All great symbols have more than one meaning. The trestle-board is a symbol with more than one meaning - aye, more meanings than “nature and revelation.” As each ancient builder had his own trestle-board, on which he drew the designs from which the workman produced in stone the dream in his mind, so each Mason has his own private trestle board, on which he draws the design by which he erects his House No Made With Hands. He may draw it of any one of many designs - he may choose a spiritual Doric, Ionic or Corinthian. He may make his edifice beautiful, useful or merely ornamental. But draw “some” design he must, else he cannot build. And the Freemason who builds not, what kind of a Freemason is he?

Within the Master’s reach in every Lodge is some table, stand, pedestal or other structure on which he may lay his papers. Often this is considered the trestle-board because upon it the Master draws the design for the meeting. Any brother has a right to read into any symbol his own interpretation; for those to whom this conception is sufficient, it is good enough. But it seems rather a reduction of the great level of the little. A light house is, indeed, a house with a light, but he who sees but the house and the light, but fails to visualize those lost ones who by it find their way; who cannot see the ships kept in safety by its ceaseless admonition that this way lies danger; who cannot behold it as a symbol as well as a structure, misses its beauty. Those who see only the pedestal which supports the Master’s plans as a Speculative Trestle-board miss the higher meaning of the symbol.

Lodge notices are not infrequently called trestle-boards, since on them the Master draws the design for the coming work, and sends them out to the Craftsmen. This too, seems belittling of the

symbol, unless the brethren are led to see that in so denominating the monthly notice, is but a play on words, and not a teaching.

A Freemason's trestle-board, his own combination of what he may learn from man and nature, from the Book of Revelation on the Altar, and the designs in his own heart, it is a great symbol. It is worthy of many hours of pondering; a Masonic teaching to be loved and lived. He who makes less of it misses something of the beauty that is Freemasonry.

Thank you Brethren for your attention.

R.W. Bro. John K. Johnston