

Trestle-Board And Tracing-Board

Unknown

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

In the Master Mason's Degree we hear, "The three steps usually delineated upon the Master's Carpet, are, etc." "What is this Master's Carpet?" is often asked by the newly-raised Mason. He is in a good Lodge the Master of which can give him an intelligent answer!

Among our movable jewels the trestle-board is mentioned and described last, and with elaboration, but the Entered Apprentice looks long, and often in vain, for a piece of furniture which bears any resemblance to the trestle-board shown on the screen, or pointed out on the chart by the Deacon's rod.

We learn that Hiram Abif entered the Sanctum Sanctorum at high twelve to offer his devotions to Deity, and to draw his designs upon the "trestle-board." On that day when he was found missing there was a holiday in the half-finished Temple, because there were no designs on the trestle-board by which the workmen could proceed. But except in the ritual of the Entered Apprentice Degree, no explanation is given in the Lodge as to what a trestle-board may be.

Therefore it is somewhat confusing to find that the Lodge notice of meetings is sometimes called a Trestle-board and still more so when some Masonic speaker refers to the Great Lights as "The Trestle-board."

The tracing-board is a child on the Master's carpet, which is a descendant of operative 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. Doubtless this use of chalk and charcoal first suggested to our ritualistic fathers the availability of these materials as symbols. Incidentally, how did it “not” occur to some good brother of the olden days to make a symbol of that mop and pail!

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, although the more convenient and beautiful lantern slide is often used in this country where finances and electric light permit.

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.

The trestle-board is so entirely different from the tracing-board that it is difficult to understand how so earnest a student as Oliver confounded them. Such mistakes made the most prolific of Masonic writers somewhat doubted as an authority.

“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. Here it is called “trestle-board,” but the object is the same, although the spelling of its name is different.

Symbols differ in relative importance according to the truths they conceal. Eagle and flag are both symbols of American ideals, but the flag is far the greater symbol of the two. The eagle is the American symbol of liberty – the flag, not only of liberty, but also of government of, for and by the people; of equality of opportunity; of free thought; of the nation as a whole. 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. From Mt. St. Albans, newest of the glorious Cathedrals erected to the Most High, to Strassburg, Rheims, Canterbury, Cologne and Notre Dame, all were first drawn upon the trestle-board. 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 erect not 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."

Modern scholars amplify Mackey's dictum rather than quarrel with it. The ritual speaks of the great books of nature and revelation, and by "revelation" the Speculative Freemason understands the Volume of Sacred Law. But the great book of nature must not be forgotten when considering just what is and what is not the trestle-board of Freemasonry.

For Nature is the source of all knowledge. Without the "The great Book of Nature" to read, man could not learn, no matter what his power of reasoning and insight might be. All science comes from observation of nature. In the last analysis, all knowledge is science, therefore all knowledge comes from observation of nature. This is true of the abstract as of the concrete.

Philosophy, ethics, standards of conduct and the like, are not products of natural evolution, but created by men's minds. They are the flowers of natural philosophy. Few blossoms spring directly from the earth; the flowers grow upon the stalk which come from the ground. Indirectly, all that is beautiful in orchid, rose and violet came from the earth in which the roots of the plant find sustenance. So flowers of the mind are traceable back to observations of nature; had there been no nature to contemplate, man could not have imagined a philosophy to account for it.

Therefore modern Masonic scholarship thinks of the Speculative trestle-board as "both" nature – and by inference, all knowledge, all philosophy, all wisdom and learning; wherever dispersed and however made available – and the Volume of Sacred Law, the "revelation" of the ritual.

All great symbols have more than one meaning. Consider again the Flag of our country, which means no one essential part- liberty or equality or freedom to worship as we wish – but all these and many more besides. 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 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, is a great and pregnant symbol. It is worthy of many hours of pondering; a Masonic teaching to be loved and lived. Who makes of it less misses something that is beautiful in Freemasonry.

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