

THE NORTHEAST CORNER

by S. Brent Morris

It is customary at the erection of all stately and superb edifices, to lay the first or foundation stone at the Northeast corner of the building; you being newly initiated into Freemasonry are placed at the Northeast corner of the Lodge, figuratively to represent that stone.

The Standard Ceremonies of Craft Masonry
Stability Lodge of Instruction

THE PROBLEM

Suppose someone were to ask about any building, say the White House, the U.S. Capitol, or the Washington National Cathedral, "Where would I find its cornerstone?" A Freemason's answer would be immediate, "In the northeast corner!" So well established is this idea in Masonic ritual that few Masons think to question it. The northeast corner is most often suggested as the location for the "lost" cornerstone of the U.S. Capitol because of the Masonic ceremonies surrounding its laying. Many, no doubt, even believe that the first stones of Egyptian pyramids were laid in the northeast corner. If only reality followed Masonic symbolism so nicely!

A check with almost any Masonic author produces an uneasy agreement on the symbolism of the northeast corner. None seem quite sure about the source, and their explanations are usually a bit strained, even for Masonic symbolism.

When the candidate is made to stand in the Northeast Corner of the lodge as the youngest Entered Apprentice If we recall that the North is the place of darkness, the symbol of the profane and unregenerated world, and that the East is the place of light, the symbol of all perfection in the Masonic life, you will see that it is fitting that an Apprentice be made to find his station there. . .

Meanwhile we may be reminded that the Northeast Corner is also the place, at least ideally, of the laying of the Cornerstone, a ceremony as ancient as it is significant.¹

The custom of placing the foundation-stone in the north-east corner must have been originally adopted for some good and sufficient reason; for we have a right to suppose that it was not an arbitrary selection.²

But the selection does seem to have been arbitrary, evolving from a single symmetric arrangement of Lodge members. This symbolism of the northeast corner is deeply fixed in modern Masonic ceremonies, but its historical roots are rather shallow. Just as everyone "knows" that George Washington threw a dollar across the Potomac River, so too Masons "know" that the symbolism of the northeast corner is an ancient usage.

It has been widely assumed that the preference for the northeast corner came into the modern Masonic fraternity through the medieval building guilds. Bernard E.

Jones nicely summarized the historical position. "There may, of course, be a long-lost symbolism to account for the preference, but the records of stone-laying ceremonies relating to notable medieval buildings do not support any such idea . . ." neither, in fact, do the earliest records of Masonic ritual.³

EARLY MASONIC CATECHISMS

There are a small number of surviving manuscript catechisms which presumably reflect authentic Lodge practices of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and there are several unofficial and possibly disreputable printed exposures of Masonic ritual from the same period. They represent all we have to go on for early Masonic ceremonies. These documents were reprinted by Professors Douglas Knoop, F. P. Jones, and Douglas Hamer in *The Early Masonic Catechisms*.⁴ My theory is that we can trust their accuracy, at least as far as minor details go.

The *Edinburgh Register House Manuscript* of 1696 gives one of the earliest instances of associating compass directions with the positions of officers.

Q. Are there any lights in your lodge?

A. Yes, three. The north east, [south] west], and eastern passage. The one denotes the master mason, the other the warden, the third the setter croft.⁵

From this early catechism one can see that a light (probably a candle) denoting the Master is in the northeast (or perhaps the northeast passage, depending on how the sentence is read). It is not clear from these three passages if the Master is in the northeast or just his light.

The *Dumfries No. 4 Manuscript* of ca. 1710 clearly positions the Master within the Lodge. More importantly it locates the cornerstone of King Solomon's Temple in the southeast. This was also the location for the cornerstone of the U. S. Capitol, 1793, and the cornerstone of the University of North Carolina, 1798, the first state university. The placement of these two cornerstones could indicate adherence to an ancient custom, or the state of flux of Masonic symbolism, or, most likely, the architectural requirements of the buildings in question. If the northeast corner were truly an ancient Masonic symbol, then shouldn't these old catechisms have the Temple's cornerstone located there?

Q. Who was master masson at ye building of ye temple?

A. Hiram of tyre.

Q. Who laid the first stone in ye foundation of ye temple?

A. Ye above said Hiram.

Q. What place did he lay ye first stone?

A. In ye south east corner of ye temple.⁷

The first known printed exposure of Masonic ritual was appended to an anonymous letter published in The Flying-Post or Post-Master, No. 4712, April 11-13, 1723. It is a short collection of questions and answers with a brief description of the ceremonies. The catechism carefully places Master, Wardens, and fellowcrafts in the Lodge, but not consistently with the earlier works cited. It places the both Master and his "Mark on the Work" in the southeast, and thus supports the Dumfries No. 4 Manuscript as to the importance of that location. If Hiram laid the first stone of Solomon's Temple in the southeast corner, then it could be said he placed his mark on the work in that place.

Q. How do Masons take their Place in Work?

A. The Master S.E., the Wardens N.E. and the Fellows Eastern Passage.

Q. Where does the Master place his Mark on the Work?

A. Upon the S. E. Corner. 8

The placement of the Master in the southeast is reinforced in A Mason's Confession of ca. 1727, printed in The Scots Magazine, March 1755/6. The text can be interpreted, however, as placing Entered Apprentices in either the northeast or southwest, depending on whether the line of masons extends from the southeast to the northeast or from the southeast to the southwest.

To be particular in shewing how the master-masons stands in the south-east corner of the lodge, and the fellow-crafts next to him, and next to them the wardens, and next the entered prentices. . . 9

PRICHARD'S MASONRY DISSECTED

Samuel Prichard's Masonry Dissected of 1730 was the most influential and successful of the early exposures. The first edition was advertised for sale on October 20 and by November 2 the three editions and six versions were printed -- all within fourteen days. As a further indication of the popularity of Prichard's book, another fourteen editions were published by 1760 and none more before the end of the century. 10

Prichard presents the earliest version of the Hiramic Legend and the first explicit working of the third or Master Mason's degree. His influence on the evolution of Masonic ritual was immense, and his procedures seem to have dominated Masonic ceremonies until the 1769's.

Prichard gave the first hint of a procedure that ceremonially brings the Entered Apprentice to the northeast, though at the beginning rather than at the end of his initiation. Prichard firmly established the east for the Master and the west for the Junior and Senior Wardens. (I was not until some thirty years later that exposures showed the Junior Warden moved from the west to the south.) Prichard also positioned the Senior and Junior Entered Apprentices, but the latter only made it to the north, not all the way to the northeast.

Q. How did [dthe Junior Warden] dispose of you?

A. He carried me up to the North-East Part of the Lodge, and brought me back again to the West and deliver'd me to the Senior Warden.

Q. Where stands your Master?

A. In the East.

Q. Why so?

A. As the Sun rises in the East and opens the Day, so the Master stands in the East [with his Right Hand upon his Left Breast being a Sign, and the Square about his Neck] to open the Lodge and to set his Men at Work.

Q. Where stands your Wardens?

A. In the West.

Q. What's their Business?

A. As the Sun sets in the West to close the Day, so the Wardens stand in the West [with their Right Hands upon their Left Breasts being a sign, and the Level and Plumb-Rule about their Necks] to close the Lodge and dismiss the Men from Labour, paying their Wages.

Q. Where stands the Senior Enter'd 'Prentice?

A. In the South.

Q. What is his Business?

A. To hear and receive instructions and welcome strange Brothers.

Q. Where stands the Junior Enter'd 'Prentice?

A. In the North.

Q. What is his Business?

A. To keep off all Cowans and Eves-droppers.11

What Prichard seemed to have done is symmetrically distribute the principal officers. The Master opens the Lodge from the east as the sun opens the day, and the Junior and Senior Wardens close the Lodge from the west, as the sun closes the day. The Junior and Senior Entered Apprentices, offices unknown in modern Lodges, are placed in the south and north respectively, but their positions and duties are given no solar counterparts. The best explanation is that Prichard (or the Lodges Whose work he described) sought symmetry in placing the officers,

and this idea of a balanced arrangement seems to have inspired all ritualists that followed (or copied) Prichard. There is no evidence of any particular symbolic importance in 1730 of the placement of the Junior Entered Apprentice, nor is there any apparent connection of the cornerstone with the youngest apprentice and the northeast corner.

By 1760 Masonic ritual was becoming more solidified, and ritual changes still can be followed through the exposures. Three Distinct Knocks, 1760 and Jachin and Boaz, 1762, showed the Master and Wardens in east, west and south as they are today in England and America. The position for the new apprentice has settled down to the northern part of the Lodge, though his final resting place did not yet seem to be fixed. The following questions from the Apprentice catechism in Three Distinct Knocks are almost identical to those in Jachin and Boaz.

Q. After you was investeed of what you had been divested of, what was done to you?

A. I was brought back to the North-west Corner of the Lodge, in order to return Thanks.

Q. How did you return thanks?

A. I stood in the North-west Corner of the Lodge, and with the instruction of a Brother, I said: Master, senior and junior Wardens, senior and junior Deacons, and the rest of the Brethren of this Lodge, I return you Thanks for the Honour you have done me, in making me a Mason, and admitting me a Member of this worthy Society.

Q. What was said to you then?

A. The Master call'd me up to the North-East Corner of the Lodge, or at his Right-hand.

OFFICIAL MASONIC CEREMONY

The year 1772 saw a significant change in the promulgation of Masonic ritual when William Preston published his famous Illustrations of Masonry. This book brought order out of ritualistic chaos by presenting an official version of the lectures, forms, and ceremonies of the Lodge. Lodges no longer were forced to rely on the memory of their members, unsanctioned manuscripts, or unreliable exposures. Illustrations of Masonry was officially sanctioned by the Grand Master, Lord Petre.

While Preston presented official Masonic ritual, he published nothing esoteric nor anything like the exposures' clearly delineated speaking parts and occasional explanations of movements. Preston has no mention of any special position for new apprentices, nor the positions of the Master and Wardens for that matter. Perhaps this information about apprentices was considered esoteric, or more likely there was so little uniformity among the Lodges that no one official form was yet possible. In any event, Preston did not publish any information about

the movement and positions in the Lodge. He did, however, give "The Ceremony Observed at Laying the Foundation Stones of Public Structures."

Preston's ceremony gives instructions for dress, music, the order of the procession, odes, anthems, prayers, and the setting of the stone, but there is not a word about the location of the cornerstone. In the midst of all this detail, the absence of information about the place for the cornerstone must indicate there was no significance to its position.

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Preston's 1772 Illustrations of Masonry provided a solid foundation on which future Masonic ceremony was build, but even Preston's pioneering work didn't resolve all ritual questions. In 1772 there were two rival Grand Lodges in England, the Ancients and the Moderns, with differing ideas of ceremonial propriety, not to mention scores of local Lodges, each with its own idea. The two Grand Lodges vied for control of the Craft until 1813 when they merged to form the United Grand Lodge of England. At the same time Masonic ritual was somewhat independently evolving in the United States and the continent, greatly influenced by England, Scotland, and Ireland, but subject to local pressures.

By 1829 there is evidence the peripatetic new apprentice finally had settled in the northeast corner with an explanation that clearly tied him to the symbolism of the cornerstone. The source is another exposure, Light on Masonry, published during the American antimasonic period. It is not known where this final refinement of the cornerstone symbolism originated, but it must have been in the period 1772-1829.

Q. After you returned how was you disposed of?

A. I was conducted to the northeast corner of the lodge, and there caused to stand upright like a man, my feet forming a square, and received a solemn injunction, ever to walk and act uprightly before God and man. . .

. . .

Q. Why was you conducted to the northeast corner of the lodge. . . ?

A. The first stone, in every Masonic edifice, is, or ought to be placed at the northeast corner; that being the place where an Entered Apprentice Mason receives his first instructions to build his future Masonic edifice upon.¹³

SUMMARY

Despite pronouncements to the contrary by most authors on Masonic symbolism, the northeast corner has a relatively recent association with the newest Entered Apprentice and a quite modern connection with cornerstones. The placement of members in the Lodge began with the Master, who opens the Lodge and dispenses "light" from the east as the sun opens the day. This idea of placing the Master

in the east was first recorded in the Dumfries No. 4 Manuscript in ca. 1710. Some twenty years later Prichard's *Masonry Dissected* matched the Master in the east to open the Lodge with two Wardens in the west to close it.

Succeeding ritualists placed officers and the newest apprentice arbitrarily but symmetrically around the Lodge. By 1760 Jachin and Boaz had the newest apprentice in the northeast to receive his apron from the Master. He remained here in future rituals for a presentation from the Master, but by 1829 the presentation had become "those first instruction[s] whereon to erect his future moral and Masonic edifice." At about the same time these instructions were justified in the northeast corner by explaining this was the site from which buildings traditionally were erected. This satisfying symbolism continues today, but with little appreciation it is an innovation on the body of Masonry.

FOOTNOTES

1. H. L. Haywood, *Symbolical Masonry* (Kingsport, Tenn: Southern Publishers, Inc. 1923), pp 152, 153.
2. Robert Ingham Cleff, reviser, *Mackey's Symbolism of Freemasonry* (New York: Masonic History Co., 1921), p. 164.
3. Bernard E. Hones, *Freemason's Guide and Compendium*, new and revised ed. (London: Harrap, Ltd.) p. 328.
4. Douglas Knoop, G. P. Jones, and Douglas Hamer, eds., *The Early Masonic Catechisms*, 2nd ed., ed. Harry Carr (London: Quatuor Coronati Lodge, 1975), pp. 9-18.
5. Knoop, Jones and Hamer, p. 32.
6. Knoop, Jones and Hamer, p. 43.
7. Knoop, Jones and Hamer, pp. 66, 63.
8. Knoop, Jones and Hamer, p. 74.
9. Knoop, Jones and Hamer, p. 104.
10. Samuel Prichard, *Masonry Dissected, Analysis and Commentary* by Harry Carr (London: 1730; reprint, Bloomington, Ill. Masonic Book Club, 1977), pp. 3, 6.
11. Carr, pp. 11, 15-16.
12. A. C. F. Jackson, ed., *English Masonic Exposures, 1760-1769* (Shepperton, England; Lewis Masonic, 1986), pp. 72-73.
13. David Bernard, *Light on Masonry* (Utica, N.Y.: William Williams, 1829), pp. 35, 38.