

What Does “Free” Mean?

By

John Shroeder, PM

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Did you know that Masonic scholars cannot agree on the time of origin or source and meaning of the term “Free” in the titles “Free and Accepted Mason” and “Freemasonry”? About half our U.S. Grand Lodges use the term Free in their titles and about half do not. In the United Kingdom, the term Freemasonry is the norm whereas in many U.S. jurisdictions, the normal term is Masonry.

One Masonic historian and author, J.G. Findel, says he found the term “Freemason” as early as 1212. Another, G. W. Steinbrenner, said 1350 was the earliest use found. R.F. Gould said 1376 was the earliest known use of the term that he had found in a record of the Mason Company of London. Others have suggested the first use to be 1459, or as recent as 1526, all of which may seem “ancient” to our modern world, but these claims span more than 300 years. Many printed works using the term from the seventeenth century are still available and it was common by 1717 when the Grand Lodge of England was formed.

The source meaning is likewise a matter of argument among Masonic historians. Other craft guilds used the term “free” as well, complicating the interpretation of its use among operative masons. Many Masons believe the term was unique to masons but G. W. Speth, in an article in *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum*, reported finding Free Carmen, Free Fisherman, Free Dredgers, Free Watermen, Free Vintners, Free Butchers, Free Carpenters and others. Wallace McLeod reports that craft guilds in London in 1319 were “closed shops” and all men of the craft were compelled to belong to the guild. They could not obtain the freedom of the city, the right to engage in trade and commerce, unless they were endorsed by the Guild. There were fewer masons than other craftsmen and many masons lived and worked outside the city and therefore they were later to organize, no record being found prior to 1356.

One of the theories of the origin of the term Free Mason is the “liberal arts” theory. The term “liberal” stems from the Latin *liberalis*, meaning “of a

freeman”. Those who practiced the arts were governed by rules of their art or craft but free to follow their own inspirations and skills. Architecture was considered a fine art.

Another theory of the origin of use of the term is the “freestone” theory. The term freestone is said to have described a stone durable enough to stand in walls for centuries but with so little grain as to be carved and hewn without danger of chipping. Others suggested that freemasons worked in stones already freestanding as freed from the quarries by the hewers in the quarries. One reference of 1350 refers to a “master mason of free stones”. Wallace McLeod reports that a quarrel between the “master hewers” and the “mason layers or setters” broke out in London in 1356 and they appeared before the City fathers to settle the dispute. They drew up a code of agreement in that year.

A third idea is the “free of constraints” theory. During the Middle Ages, people were not free to travel and were bound to the land in a given locale. Master masons, however, were said to be “free” to travel from area-to-area in pursuit of their profession. The Oxford Dictionary supports this idea.

Yet another idea is known as the “free of the Craft” theory. Apprentices were not free of the craft because they could not earn wages nor accept work of their own. When they became Masters, they were then free to do both. A modification of this idea is that there were local guilds of masons who built the simple local buildings and were not free to travel. Other superior craftsmen were builders of cathedrals who were free to work anywhere their services were needed. Albert Mackey’s encyclopedia supports this latter source of the term.

Mackey also comments that a Mason must be free born and not in captivity. He notes that the Grand Lodge of England extends this to say that Masons must be free in all their thoughts and actions. G. H.

Steinmetz points out that both the origin theory of bonds-men being ineligible to join the Operatives Guilds and also the theory that an applicant comes of his own “free” will and accord have support in the rituals of different Grand Jurisdictions.

Steinmetz, as we might expect, offers a more mystical explanation as well. He informs us that the Egyptian term “Phre” meant the sun. Their term “Mas” meant a child. Therefore the combined term, “Phre-massens” would mean “children of the sun”, or “sons of light” as Masons were often called.

Another idea suggests that there were travel tolls and other taxes from which masons were “free”. Mackey reports that the old lectures formerly used in England said, “The Masons who were selected to build the Temple of Solomon were declared Free and were exempted, together with their descendants, from imposts, duties and taxes.” Most authorities would say this was strictly allegorical rather than historical. A modification of this concept is that free masons were free to enter and depart the gates of the city at will without need for a pass. Supporters of this idea point to the present practice of awarding an outstanding person a key to the city signifying “freedom of the city.”

M. D. J. Scanlan wrote a well-researched paper, “Freemasonry and the Mystery of the Acception 1630 – 1723 – A Fatal Flaw”, published in *Freemasonry on Both Sides of the Atlantic*. In it he stated unequivocally that the term Free stems from working in freestone, a type of limestone or sandstone found at considerable depth where the stone is soft and sufficiently fine-grained to permit carving in any direction rather than requiring carving only with the grain of the stone. Both limestone and sandstone harden after long exposure to the air and become more durable. He cites a reference to the *London Assize of Justice* which as early as 1212 used the term *caementarii* from the Latin *caementum*, which he says means ‘stonehewer’. He points out that the *Assize* also used the Latin term *lapidum librorum* which he says means sculptors of freestone. He also cites a French text of 1217 that refer to *cementarius* and *maszun* in the same document and a document of 1314 that a French *massone* undertook to build a house *de pere frannche* which he says means ‘of free stone’. He also references a document of 1342 from

Ludgershall in Wiltshire that includes the Latin term *cementarii libere petre* which he translates as ‘hewer of free stone’. His intent is to show that the term Freemason in England did not imply a speculative Mason only but was applicable to operatives. However, later in his article, he also points out that the Masons were free of the Craft and free in the City.

Full analysis of the various theories presented could fill a book of its own. We can only conclude, as R. F. Gould did, that we do not know for sure either the time or reason for the origin of the term. However, we may take pride in the respect the term has implied from time immemorial and redouble our efforts to ensure that we retain the right to all of our freedoms.

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