

The Masonic Rods and Staffs

by
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Why This Program Was Prepared

I have been told that in Virginia the stewards have "Rods" beside their chairs and beside the Deacon's chairs are "Staffs" and that was about all the information I had about these metal poles of the lodge room. As a steward, I sat by them for two years and possibly another two years as a deacon. I thought I had to know more about them and began to ask questions. The answers I obtained about these instruments did not satisfy my curiosity and with the prodding of Worshipful Brother William A. Meyer of Springfield 217, I decided to put together a program on the Rods and Staffs.

As I did the research, two things from the Middle Chamber of the Fellowcraft degree kept running through mind. The first was "Tools and implements of masonry and symbolic emblems most expressive are selected by the fraternity to imprint on the mind wise and serious truths". The other was "The lapse of time, the ruthless hand of ignorance and the devastations of war have laid waste and destroyed many valuable - - -".

What Are Rods and Staffs

The first thing I did was find a definition. I found that Rod and Staff may be used interchangeably. However, from a biblical sense, staff meant support; such as, "Bread is the staff of life".

History and Development

The development was as follows:

1. Club
2. Stave
3. Staff (spear, arrow, etc.)
4. Wand (supernatural)
5. Baton (marshal)
6. Mace (only one made entirely of metal)

7. Scepter (surmounted by globes)
8. Crozier (surmounted by a cross)
9. Rod (divining)
10. Masonic Rod (surmounted by symbolic devices)

The meaning of the above developed in this way:

1. Brute Force
2. Power
3. Leadership
4. Delegated Authority
5. Correction
6. Protection
7. Support
8. Effort
9. Progress
10. Prosperity
11. Peace

Power has been associated with the devices throughout their development. We might think of power in the following ways:

Outwardly Inwardly

To Strike To Support

To Chastise To Promote Peace and Prosperity

To Correct To Protect

Special Forms of Rods

Some special forms of the Rods are:

1. Caduceus of Mercury
2. Rod of AESCULAPIUS

The caduceus of Mercury was a winged rod entwisted by two serpents. The Rod of AESCULAPIUS was a rod entwisted with one serpent and is now the symbol of our medical profession.

Biblical

Rods and staffs are each mentioned more than one hundred times in the bible. The best known verse is the 23rd psalm. Here the hooked staff was used to beat down the grass and retrieve straying sheep. The rod was used for protection. Other well known parts of the bible are:

- Adam selected a branch to use as a staff to lean on.
- Rod of Moses turned into a serpent when he threw it down. (Wisdom by effort).

How Did Rods and Staffs Get Into Masonic Lodges?

There is no evidence that they were used by operative Masons. In Britain the Grand High Steward presided over the King's household and carried a white Rod. This may have been the start of the Masonic Rod but it probably came from Ushers in the House of Parliament. One usher carried a black rod and the other a white rod. People would be seated by calling a "black rod" or "white rod" depending on where they wished to be seated.

The first mention of Masonic Rods was in a procession of Grand Lodge in 1724 in which the Grand Stewards carried white rods symbolizing purity and innocence.

As late as 1812, Deacons in Pennsylvania carried columns in procession.

Deacons first carried blue rods tipped with gold, symbolizing friendship and benevolence. Later they were tipped with a pine cone in imitation of the Caduceus of Mercury.

It is also reported that rods were used in early lodges to find eavesdroppers in the eaves of the lodges.

Symbolism of the Rods and Staffs

Symbolism requires individual thought and interpretation to be of any value. Each individual may interpret things in his own way. For example: looking at a picture of a river may

bring to the mind of some a fishing experience, to some it may be sailing or boating and to others peace and solitude. The important thing is that it has meaning to the individual and can help him perfect his ashlar. So, the following statements must not be considered final, but rather suggestive of the endless possibilities of rod symbolism.

It could symbolize a plumb line pointing to heaven and could mean moral rectitude, or to set our lives to lead to immortality.

The Stewards rods could remind us of the perfect parallel lines and John the Baptist and John the Evangelist.

They could mean authority or power.

They could remind us of a lever. Archimedes said "Give me a lever and a place to rest and I will move the world". How infinitesimal are the forces exerted by the mechanical lever as to the spiritual force exerted by the Masonic Rod on the minds and hearts of men.

The devices on top the rods represent the forces of nature acting beneficially for mankind.

Oliver Day said "The glorious orbs of night and day (referring to the moon and sun of the deacon staff) have not yet lost their power to stir the thoughts of divinity in the human mind".

The moon on the Junior Deacon's staff is a water spilling moon. The water spilled on the ground with sunshine, as represented by the sun atop the Senior Deacon's, on the growing crop brings forth the fruit of harvest overflowing in the cornucopias in the rods of the Stewards.

The story of the cornucopias goes like this: When Zeus was an infant, he was raised by the two daughters of Melisseus. His daughters were virgins so for nourishment, Zeus was given the milk of the goat Amalthea. When Zeus became ruler of the Gods, to show appreciation for his early care and nourishment, he placed the goat Amalthea in the heavens as a constellation. To the daughters of Melisseus, he gave each one

horn of the goat with the provision that as long as they lived, whatever they desired they only had to express the wish and it would be supplied from the goat's horn in over-flowing abundance. And so the cornucopias of the steward's rods are overflowing with the fruits of the harvest to symbolize the abundant material and spiritual life which faithful masons may hope to enjoy.

Rods and Staffs from State to State

There are many differences in the way the rods and staffs are used from state to state, indicating that the lapse of time, and ruthless hand of ignorance has played a significant roll in this ritual.

In Maine, the stewards have white rods. The deacons use black. There are lodges in Virginia that use white and black rods.

In Illinois and Washington the rods and staff's are both used and are carried at a 45° angle.

In Colorado the candidate is led into the lodge by the stewards carrying the rods upright.

There are no stewards in Pennsylvania (at least as positioned officers in the lodge room).

In Illinois the stewards keep their hand on the rod at all times.

In Washington and Illinois at funerals both the steward's rods and deacon's staffs are used.

In Virginia Funerals

Stewards with their rods upright lead the procession of masons into the funeral home. Deacon's staffs are not used.

Symbolism:

The 23rd Psalm states that "Thy rod and thy staff comfort me", and this is a time to comfort the family.

They also represent the lines that touch the circle which circumscribes our bounds

throughout life - - - - - from initiation into masonry until death.

They also may represent the lines of brethren at the altar that were in support of the deceased brother.

Deacons Please Prepare Your Rods and Staffs

While Deacons are preparing the rods and staffs. The narrator draws and discusses the following figures:

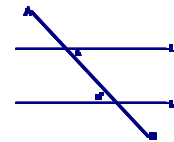


Figure 1

As the rod officer carries the rod at a 45o angle, he demonstrates an important proposition of Geometry. The point of his shoulder (L1) and hip (L2) produce straight parallel lines as he walks.

The rod (A-B) cuts these two lines. The alternate interior angles (a & a') are equal. This fact is useful to surveyors but can also be used to illustrate a practical application of the law of conservation of energy.

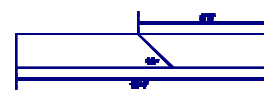


Figure 2

Looking at Figure 2, if a carpenter needs to produce one hundred eight inch boards, eight feet in maximum length and with a 45o miter on one end, he would take one saw cuts at a 45o angle as shown above on fifty boards. To produce the one hundred boards only fifty saw cuts are needed and there would be no waste. Had he done otherwise, he would have wasted twenty-two feet of lumber plus time and energy in making fifty additional saw cuts.

The semicircle described by the point of the rod demonstrates another useful proposition.

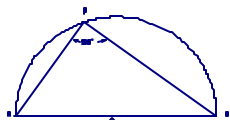


Figure 1

Lines drawn from one end of the diameter to any point on the semi-circle and from there to the other end of the diameter form a 90o angle. It is believed by some that the ancient operative Masons used this construction technique for the purpose of making and checking their oblong try squares.

A sailor is guiding his ship uses the same principle. This is illustrated below.

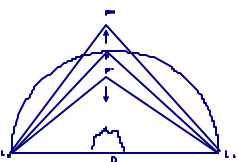


Figure 1

L₁, L₂ — Landmarks
 P, P'' — Safe Course
 O — Obstruction
 P' — Danger

If there is a danger area in the sea, the sailor could construct a semicircle with landmarks L₁ and L₂ on opposite ends of the diameter. Then in sailing around the obstruction he would make sightings to both L₁ and L₂. If the angle is 90° (P), he would be sailing on the semicircle. If the angle became acute (P''), he would also be safe but if it became obtuse (P') he would know that the ship is approaching the danger area and will take steps to correct his course.

The Deacons Return and Their Rods and Staffs are placed in Position

The white steward rods are pointed out.

Narrator: Brother Albert L. Woody; Past Master of an Illinois Lodge who was commissioned Grand Lecturer in 1939 and Editor of the Illinois Masonic Enlightener and now serving masonry in the state of Washington, wrote an article titled "Masonic

Rods. Their Use, History and Symbolism". In it he had an interesting idea. He thought of the rods and staffs as the operative part of our lodges. That is, if you would envision lighted rods in a dark lodge room as the rod officers performed their ritual, the rods would "cut out" many of the implements used by operative masons, such as the square, compasses, semicircles, the point, a line, plane, arc, curve, etc.

What we are going to do tonight is try to demonstrate what we believe he had in mind.

Brother Deacon - lower the lights.

Behold, the stewards rods (glowing); perfect parallel lines, representing the Holy St. Johns.

Brothers Sr. & Jr. Deacon: Show a point atop your staffs. (Small light on top of staffs lit). This point represents the individual with no extensions and helpless.

Brother Deacons: Extend the point to a line (slowly lighting staff from point to bottom). The point now is extended to a line, which may represent our own expansion in one direction and as an entered apprentice are able now to help ourselves.

Brother Jr. Deacon: Come to the east as you do just before obligating a candidate. The line now forms a superfice and may represent an individuals extension in a second direction indicating he can now support himself and family.

Brother Jr. Deacon: Go from a superfice to a solid (goes completely around lodge squaring corners). This may remind us that when our life is based on a solid foundation we can support ourselves, our family and contribute to the relief of - - - - -.

Brother Jr. Deacon: Form the fourth part of a circle (a 90° turn to the left). Notice that as the rod officer makes the turn, the tip of his staff cuts out an arc or 4th part of a circle. Then when

the question is asked "What is a square", the answer is - - - - -.

Brother Sr. Deacon: Form the letter "G" as if balloting. (As he performs ritual): Notice, - - - - - the letter "G" is being formed.

Brothers Sr. & Jr. Deacon: Form the 180° clockwise motion.

Notice, after giving - - - - - to the Sr. Warden, the tip of their rods form a 180° clockwise motion. It also occurs in other movements in the ritual.

It is a symbol of life and is the course the sun takes from rising and setting.

The candidate travels in a clockwise motion in his progress through the degrees.

It is one of the most ancient rights known to man.

Brother Jr. Deacon: Perform the ritual at the door. (While demonstrating). Notice - - - - -

This may remind us of the scripture verse (I believe Matt. 6:1) regarding the dispensing of charity. "Let not the left hand knoweth what thy right hand doeth".

Brothers Sr. & Jr. Deacon: Prepare to receive the Master and move to the candidate.

With the sun atop the Sr. Deacon's staff between the square and compasses and the moon likewise between the square and compasses of the Jr. Deacon's staff and now the Worshipful Master between the compasses formed by the staffs and the jewel he wears we may recall that as the sun rules the - - - - -.

As the Master stands under the staffs forming the compasses and wearing his jewel and then moves to the candidate, we are reminded that the moral lessons of these implements extend from the Worshipful Master to Candidate.

May We Have The Lights

Brethren, this program has only scratched the surface about the valuable meanings hidden in the rods and staffs. As the poet Andrew Lang said "The eye of each man sees but what it is capable of seeing". The purpose of symbolism is to develop each craftsman's capacity "to see" the wealth of meaning hidden in our symbolic degrees.

It is our sincere hope that this program has in some small way provided a better appreciation for the Masonic rods and staffs, for it is certain that a better understanding of these important functions is desirable for the well being and progress of our fraternity.