

An Examination of the Common Gavel

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In examining the working tools and emblems of the Entered Apprentice degree, the allegory of the common gavel stands out as out of place. The general theme of the degree is to teach the candidate the basics of his initiation and to establish a foundation on which to further build his Masonic knowledge. When asked the meaning behind the common gavel, most Masons will describe the working tool as a symbol emphasizing a moral lesson that teaches the candidate to remove from his life those things that will prevent him from entering the Kingdom of Heaven. However, when the origins of the allegory of the common gavel are examined, we find that this working tool may have more practical uses beyond a moral one, a practical use that is meant to instruct the candidate to learn and increase Masonic knowledge. The medieval origins of the common gavel suggest that it may have been a reference to a mnemonic device intended to help facilitate learning. In addition to teaching a moral lesson, the common gavel may have a more practical purpose for the newly initiated Entered Apprentice: to shape and build his mind in order to continue his journey through Masonry.

This paper will explore the allegory of the common gavel and present an alternative or additional interpretation to the modern explanation for the use of this working tool. This paper will examine the modern wording of the working tool, the origins of

the allegory behind the common gavel, and how it became part of the modern Virginia ritual. By doing so I also hope to demonstrate how the interpretation of Masonic symbols and emblems can change over time and the importance of researching the history behind Masonic symbols, emblems, and working tools to preserve the landmarks of the Craft.

As one of the working tools of the Entered Apprentice degree, the choice of words that describes the common gavel, when viewed solely as a moral lesson, stands out as unique when compared to other Masonic emblems with a moral lesson such as the sword pointing at a naked heart. Moral shortcomings in Masonry are most often described as irregularity, intemperance, or passions. The vices and superfluities referenced in the common gavel description are more representative of a waste of time rather than a moral offense. Masonry's human organ of choice most associated with morality is the heart. The reference to the mind has a direct academic or intellectual illusion rather than that of the heart, soul, or spirit which would suggest a more moral characterization. The common gavel teaches us to divest our hearts and consciences of vices and superfluities to prepare the mind for that spiritual building eternal in the heavens. Though it is not a drastic distinction, the use of vices in superfluities as well as the shaping of the mind are

relatively unique and merits giving the common gavel a further look.

There is no record of when the working tools were incorporated into the Masonic ritual. One of the pitfalls of research in Masonic history is that very little information is written down or recorded. Within Masonic literature, there is very little reference to tools or emblems at all. Anderson's Constitutions of 1723 only mentions that "All tools used in working shall be approved by Grand Lodge." [Anderson pg. 53]. A French drawing from 1742 to 1744 for a "Lodge of Apprentice-Fellows" pictures the Square, Compasses, Level, Plumb-Rule, Trowel, and a Mason's Hammer [McKeown, 1965]. However, the use of the various tools and how they were applied to Masonic ritual is not well documented until the late 18th century.

Exposures of Masonic ritual are the only real historical source of information on ritual available prior to the late eighteenth century. These exposures were generally collected by those trying to discredit Masonry and the questionable nature of how they were acquired and the motivation of their authors can potentially question their accuracy. To further muddy the waters, prior to the late 18th century there was no effective attempt to standardize ritual throughout Masonry. This allowed for a wide variation in how ritual was conducted throughout the Masonic world. There could be significant variation in ritual even between lodges in the same jurisdiction [Atkinson, 1985]. Therefore, any single exposure will likely only provide information on a specific lodge or small groups of lodges vice describe ritual throughout Masonry. Despite the potential bias and small sample size, exposures do represent a reasonable historical source for evolving trends of ritual within Masonry.

The exposure *The Whole Institution of Masonry* written in 1724, describes the twelve lights of Masonry as "Father, Son, Holy Ghost, Sun, Moon, Master, Mason, Square, Rule, Plum, Line, Mell and Cheisal [The Whole Institution of Masonry, pg. 1]." *Masonry Dissected* by Samuel Pritchard (1730) mentions the movable and immovable jewels but makes no mention of the common gavel, mell, or other working tools. The exposure of *Three Distinct Knocks* provides a common gavel description that resembles the modern description. Originally published in 1760, *Three Distinct Knocks* classifies the common gavel as a working tool of an Entered Apprentice and describes its use as "to knock off all superfluous Matters, whereby the Square may set easy and just [Pritchard, pg 21]." Based on these exposures, the common gavel likely started to gain formality as a working tool in the early 1700s.

It is also interesting to point out that William Morgan (1774-1826?), of the infamous "William Morgan Affair," in his exposure *The Mysteries of Free Masonry* provides an almost verbatim description for the use of the common gavel as is currently used in Virginia. The allegory behind the common gavel probably had its origins during the High Middle Ages (1000 to 1300 A.D.) and the Late Middle Ages (1301 to roughly 1500 A.D.). A great deal of Masonic traditions found their origins or gained formality during these periods. Traditions and emblems such as the Four Cardinal Virtues (as well as Faith, Hope, and Charity), the Orders of the Star and Garter, The Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences, memento mori, and many others all gained popularity and found increased incorporation into European society during the High and Late Middle Ages.

Academic prowess during the High and Late Middle Ages was measured by how much information a person stored in their memory. The more books and stories an individual was able to recall, the greater their intellectual reputation. This was not done because of the unavailability of books or other literary works. It was believed a person needed to have the knowledge readily available in their memory for recall in order to analyze information and as a creative resource to quickly develop sermons, prayers, homilies, lectures, and perform great feats of rhetoric. [Carruthers 2002, pg. 3] Today, intellect is measured by creativity and the ability to find and utilize external sources of information.

There is a significant amount of scholarly work available on memorization techniques during the Middle Ages. This research was primarily done by, or collaborated with, Mary Carruthers at New York University. Based on Carruthers's research, medieval education was characterized by the craft of memory. Locational memory was the style of memorization commonly used during this period to retain and recall texts and information. This style of memorization is often referred to as the Method of Loci or Memory Palace and was a common subject of classical rhetorical works such as the anonymous *Rhetorica ad Herennium* as well as works by Cicero and Quintilian. Locational memory built off the human brain's evolved ability to recall maps and landmarks, which was essential to our prehistoric ancestors in their nomadic lifestyle. Locational memory techniques generally consist of mentally "placing" bits

of information at a location to aid in its recall. Familiar buildings, gardens, or common items such as the spokes of a wheel or rungs of a ladder were often used as frameworks and structures in which to mentally store information. Biblical buildings and structures were favorite sources to store information. Particular favorites were King Solomon's Temple, Noah's Ark, Ezekiel's Temple vision, Cathedrals, and Churches. Academic Scholars during this period built on the memory techniques of classical scholars such as Aristotle, Cicero, and later Christian theologians such as St Augustine of Hippo who wrote extensively on the importance of memory in Book X of his *Confessions* [Caruthers & Ziolkowski pg. 13].

Memory craft was the norm in almost every aspect of education during the Middle Ages [Caruthers & Ziolkowski pg. 13]. Carruthers argues that many of the buildings and structures included in much of medieval writings served no purpose other than to provide a framework for the reader to store information within the work [Carruthers, 1993]. Readers can see this technique in works by medieval writers such as Dante, Chaucer, Hugh of St. Victor, Thomas Aquinas, Richard of St. Victor, and Adam of Dryburgh [Carruthers 1993; Carruthers & Ziolkowski pg. 8].

One important medieval scholar to note is Hugh of St. Victor. Hugh of St. Victor was a 12th-century Franciscan monk who taught at the School of St. Victor in France. He wrote extensively on academic methods and his works gained notoriety throughout medieval Europe.

In his work *Didascalion*, Hugh of St. Victor uses the work of a mason as an allegory for learning scriptures. In the below passages, he is instructing a student on how to memorize scripture using the allegory of building a spiritual building:

Take a look at what the mason does. When the foundation has been laid, he stretches out his string in a straight line, he drops his perpendicular, and then, one by one, he lays the diligently polished stones in a row. Then he asks for other stones, and still others, and if by chance he finds some that do not fit with the fixed course he has laid, he takes his file, smoothens off the protruding parts, files down the rough spots, and the places that do not fit, reduces to form, and so, at last, joins them to the rest of the stones set into the row. But if he finds some

to be such that they cannot either be made smaller or be fitly shaped, he does not use these lest perhaps while he labors to grind down the stone he should break his file. [Hugh pg. 141]

Hugh continues:

Here is the whole of divinity, this is that spiritual structure

which is raised on high, built, as it were, with as many courses of stones as it contains mysteries. You wish also to know the very bases themselves. The bases of the courses are the principles of the mysteries. See now, you have come to your study, you are about to construct the spiritual building. [Hugh pg.142]

Hugh of St. Victor’s allegory uses very similar language to the modern common gavel description and matches its theme. Though he does not mention a gavel in the passage, he does reference a “file” to smooth out the protruding parts and rough spots.

The modern description of the common gavel was adopted by the Grand Lodge of Virginia shortly after the Baltimore convention of 1843 and has, for the most part, remained unchanged [Atkinson, 1985]. However, there are several variations on the wording from

sources leading up to the Baltimore convention as well as variations in ritual bulletins following the convention, though these bulletins had no real impact on Virginia ritual. Thomas Webb’s *Freemason’s Monitor* of 1818 describes the common gavel as, “...divesting our hearts and minds of all the vices and superfluities of life, thereby fitting our bodies as living stones, for that spiritual building... [Webb, pg 33-34],” using “bodies” vice “minds.” The 1856 *Masonic Trestle-board* published by Charles W. Moore has

only one-word change from the 1843 convention adding the word “superfluous” to the operative use of the common gavel, “rough and superfluous parts of stones [Moore, pg. 23-24].” The 1846 edition states “fitting ourselves as living stones [Moore & Carnegy, pg.30].”

Despite these minor variations, commentary following the 1843 Baltimore convention regarding the ritual agreed upon by the convention suggests that the wording matched, at least in substance, to what had been previously accepted within the majority of lodges. Charles W. Moore, who was part of the 1843 Baltimore Convention ritual and lecture committee wrote, “The work and lectures of the first three degrees, as adopted and authorized by the Baltimore Convention, in 1843, were, with a few unimportant verbal exceptions, literally as they were originally compiled by Bro. Thos. S. Webb, about the close of the last century, and as they were subsequently taught by him during his lifetime...[The Builder Magazine, June 1916]” William Preston (1742-1818), is probably the most responsible Mason in establishing the framework for modern Masonic ritual. His book, *Illustration of Masonry*, first published in 1772, contains many aspects of ritual that a Virginian Mason will find familiar however, it does not provide a description of any of the working tools, though he does allude to the “tools and implements of architecture... [Preston, pg. 8].”

This examination of the common gavel and its history in Masonic ritual provides an argument for more extensive use of this working tool. Based on the style of the allegory defining its use, the common gavel likely found its origins as a symbol in Masonic ritual in the high or late Middle Ages. The allegory of shaping the mind as a living stone is similar to medieval references to memory craft, specifically the use of architectural references to provide a basis for locational memory techniques. A medieval scholar presented with the modern description of the common gavel’s use would likely recognize it as a reference to these memorization techniques and may even be able to recognize the school from which it was derived. Unfortunately, the several centuries between the Middle Ages and the work of Masonic ritualists such as William Preston and Thomas Webb provide very little information about the evolution of the common gavel in Masonic ritual and its use as a working tool. When reliable references regarding the use of the common gavel appeared in the 18th and 19th centuries, variations in the wording may suggest that an association with the common gavel’s medieval allegory was lost. However, looking at the common gavel’s use as a reference to learning fits the theme of the Entered Apprentice degree wherein the Candidate is directed to receive instruction on which to build his moral and Masonic knowledge.

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