

A MASONIC MINUTE

Why we are “Masons” – The symbolism of stone

Why did a gentleman’s philosophical society adopt the terms and adapt the tools of the stonemason’s trade to illustrate the moral and ethical core values of the fraternity? It is a good question, the answer to which lies at the heart of Masonic philosophy.



Stone is the oldest and most durable and enduring natural building material known to man. The pyramids of Egypt stand as proof of this statement. The magnificent cathedrals, abbeys, and castles, the architectural glories of Europe, were built by the stonemasons of old. They stand today as monuments to their consummate skill and ability.

When the transition from operative to speculative took place in Europe and Britain in particular from about 1600, when Freemasonry in its modern form emerged, the philosophers, scientists, and antiquarians of the day were attracted by the traditions, permanence and stability symbolized by stone. They continued the forms of the operative guilds, adopting and adapting the terms and tools of the trade to their speculative pursuits. Masonry still retains vestiges of this connection. The several grips, tokens and words of the degrees, the working tools presented, and the traditional penalties of the obligations are all inherited from the medieval stonemasons’ trade guilds. Our distinctive regalia is a stylized form of the leather apron worn by the stonemasons. Even our meeting rooms in form and order are patterned after the mediaeval guild halls and the officers of the lodge replicate a similar hierarchy of responsibility.

The ancient guilds had always had a strong element of ethical and moral conduct as evinced by the surviving documents, the oldest of which, the Regius Manuscript dating from the late 14th century. This is not surprising considering the close association between the building trade and the church which was the chief employer of architects and artisans in that period.



Placed in every lodge room are two blocks of stone: the ashlar, one rough hewn, the other smooth and polished. It has been well said that the essence of Freemasonry lies between them. Stone is worked, shaped and polished by removing the rough outer edges to reveal the inner beauty of the material. The great Florentine artist and sculptor, Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564) went inside the rough block of marble to produce the perfect male figure of the young David.

As builders of enduring character, this analogy had a strong and obvious attraction for philosophical discussion by gentlemen. M.W. Bro. William McCord, Past Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of British Columbia and the Yukon (1979-1980), expressed it in these eloquent words: “*We have travelled thus far in vain, if we have failed to learn that as Freemasons we exist to build, not a Lodge that will pass with time, but the much more enduring Temple of Character.*”

The erection of that ‘*Temple of Character*’ is the real ‘*work*’ of a Freemason. It is accomplished by introspection, contemplation and reflection – exploring, discovering, examining, and evaluating the inner man. This is a personal ‘Do It Yourself’ process. Freemasonry provides the compass – ‘*a light unto the path*’ – for the life-long journey of self-discovery.

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