

# The Third Degree Tracing Board

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After the founding of the Grand Lodge in 1717, the method of imparting Masonic education gradually changed from informal lectures conducted during a meal, to the more elaborate ritual we see today. Originally working only two degrees, by the 1730's many lodges in England, Scotland, France and Sweden were evolving to a three degree system. By about 1750, this practice was being universally adopted.

The first speculative lodges, as we know them, met in rented rooms, frequently taverns and hotel or inn dining rooms. Having no furniture to speak of, the form of the lodge was drawn on the floor with chalk, charcoal, or clay and erased after the meeting. It was the usual custom to pay the Tyler a special fee for this work. A pail and mop were kept for erasing the markings and it was common practice for the candidate to be delegated the task. A pail and mop were unofficial symbols of Freemasonry in those days, and can be seen in paintings and drawings depicting lodge activities. As the markings were fragile, this was the origination of 'squaring the lodge room', for otherwise, the carefully drawn markings would be scuffed by the passing feet. The drawings were of such a quality and so time consuming to produce that there are minutes *recording* the cancellation of a meeting because the Tyler had drawn the lodge in the wrong degree. As time passed, this procedure of drawing the lodge became redundant as suitable floor cloths were produced that could easily be stored between meetings. These in turn, gave way to the more permanent Tracing Boards in use today.

The Tracing Board of the old operative Master Mason was a draughting board upon which he worked out plans and details of a building. For the speculative Mason, the Tracing Board symbolizes the plans required to erect the building of his Masonic life. The earliest dated Tracing Boards in existence in Great Britain are the set belonging to Lodge Faithful, founded in 1753. The boards of this set are dated 1800. On the base of the Third Degree board is an arcade of columns, in front of which are five columns representing the five orders of architecture.

There are several versions of Tracing Boards. Grand Lodge of Canada in the Province of Ontario has never authorized any particular design. Our jurisdiction (Ontario) seems to have settled on a set produced by John Harris, a noted miniature painter and architectural draughtsman who published the Tracing Board designs in the early 1820s. The designs came to be associated with the Emulation Lodge of Improvement of about 1846, which drew up the ritual that we (Ontario) are said to follow.

In some of the American lodges, the Tracing Board is not used. Instead, the ancient practice of drawing the lodge is updated to projecting the symbols onto a screen or wall as and when required.

The Tracing Boards are explained by lectures in their respective degrees. The Entered Apprentice lecture is that generally delivered by the Junior Warden. The Fellowcraft is that generally delivered by the Senior Warden. Unlike those in the Entered Apprentice and Fellowcraft degrees, the Master Mason Tracing Board is not explained in a formal lecture. Originally, there was such a lecture but it fell into disuse because it repeated material from other lectures of the 3<sup>rd</sup> degree.

The Tracing Board's rectangular shape represents the grave of our Grand Master, Hiram Abiff, the black border being a sign of mourning.

The four cardinal directions remind us that Freemasonry is spread over the four divisions of the world, and its universality applies to all men, no matter where they are. They also remind us that no matter where we are, death is our final condition. Believing in the resurrection of the immortal soul, our dead Brother is buried so that the first light of the rising sun will fall upon his face.

At the head of the grave is a sprig of Acacia, in remembrance of the bush used to mark the actual grave that had been so easily pulled out of the ground by the Fellow Craft. From it is taken the Shittim-wood of the Old Testament, from which was made the Arc of the Covenant, the fittings for Tabernacle and the Table of Shewbread. This table could be found in the sanctuary of the Tabernacle. The wood is heavier than water and is almost impervious to attack by insects such as white ants (termites). Acacia is symbolic of rejuvenation and immortality. Even after being worked and used as building material, this wood frequently sprouted shoots with leaves, hence it's symbolizing of rejuvenation.

Below the Acacia and within the confines of the coffin are the Working Tools of a Master Mason, the significance of which are explained in the lecture in the Southeast angle. It was once customary to bury the prized possessions of a man with him. Many graves of pre-Freemasonry operative masons bear gravestones with working tools engraved upon them. It was also customary to place a lambskin in the casket of a departed Brother.

Below the Working Tools is a rectangle containing some strange characters. In "Beyond the Pillars", these characters are misrepresented as the 'Harris Code.' The code is actually an ancient cipher, possibly older than a thousand years. A similar cipher has been attributed to the Roman legions in what was then Gaul. French lodges used a version in 1745. It was definitely used by soldiers during the American Revolution and the later Civil War.

It is a fairly basic cipher, using the spaces in a grid, similar to a tic-tac-toe pattern, and an X. All the encoder and decipherer had to do was pre-determine in what manner the characters of the alphabet were to be assigned. That could even have been variable, depending on other parts in the message, such as the date, or the first alphabetic character on the note. The resulting variations are innumerable.

The encoding method used by Harris was to assign the letters to the grid, starting at the top right and working left, top to bottom. The second grid was the same with a dot also assigned to the grid space.

The X was encoded in a similar manner, starting at the top right and working left, top to bottom. The second X was the same with a dot also assigned to the available space.

All of the cipher characters are read from right to left, as is Hebrew. On the first line of the rectangle near the top of the coffin are characters that translate to B A H. When read from right to left, the letters are H A B representing Hiram Abiff.

The second line in the centre portion are characters that translate to A L 3000, the alleged date of our Grand Master's death 3,000 years after man's creation (Anno Lucis).

On either side are the characters that translate to T C, representing Tubal Cain, the first artificer in brass and iron, and a name of great importance in a Master Mason's lodge. They are also sometimes interpreted as Temple Completed.

The skull and crossed thighbones are a symbol of man's mortality, and have long been associated with Masonic gravesites. They remind us that 'death has no terrors equal to the stain of falsehood and dishonour.'

Beneath the skull and crossed thighbones are the characters that translate to M B, representing the Master Mason's word. They are also sometimes interpreted as Master Builder, and also Murdered — Buried.

In the centre of the coffin are the Ornaments of a Master Mason's lodge, the Porch, the Dormer and the Squared Pavement. Beyond, we glimpse as through a veil, the Sanctum Sanctorum where 'not even the High Priest (may enter) but once a year; and he not then until after many washings and purifications against the great day of expiation of sins; for by the Israelites' law all flesh was deemed unclean.'

Inscribed in the arch above the Porch are the Hebrew characters Kodesh la-Adonai, which translate to Holiness to the Lord.

On each side and beneath the Ornaments is the character 5. They represent the original 15 Fellow Crafts involved in the conspiracy. Later King Solomon formed 15 trusty Fellow Crafts into 3 Fellow Craft lodges

and sent them in search of our Grand Master. The characters may also represent the Five Points of Fellowship.

Beneath the Ornaments are those tools that were used as weapons to strike down and kill our Grand Master.

Finally, at the very foot of the coffin is a Square, the jewel of the Worshipful Master, indicating the rank of the Brother interred.

#### *References in no particular order*

- Freemasons Guide and Compendium — Bernard E. Jones
- Freemason at Work — Harry Carr
- Encyclopaedia of Freemasonry — Albert Mackey
- Beyond the Pillars — Grand Lodge of Canada in the Province of Ontario
- The Pocket History of Freemasonry — Pick and Knight
- The Work - Grand Lodge of Canada in the Province of Ontario
- Duncan's Masonic Ritual and Monitor — Malcolm C. Duncan Various web sites

You can find information on these ciphers in a large number of places by searching on 'cipher', including the FBI web site.

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