

The Symbolic Lodge

-or-

“Where were you made a Mason?”

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Submitted by:
Bernhard W. Hoff
Senior Warden
Highland Park Lodge #240

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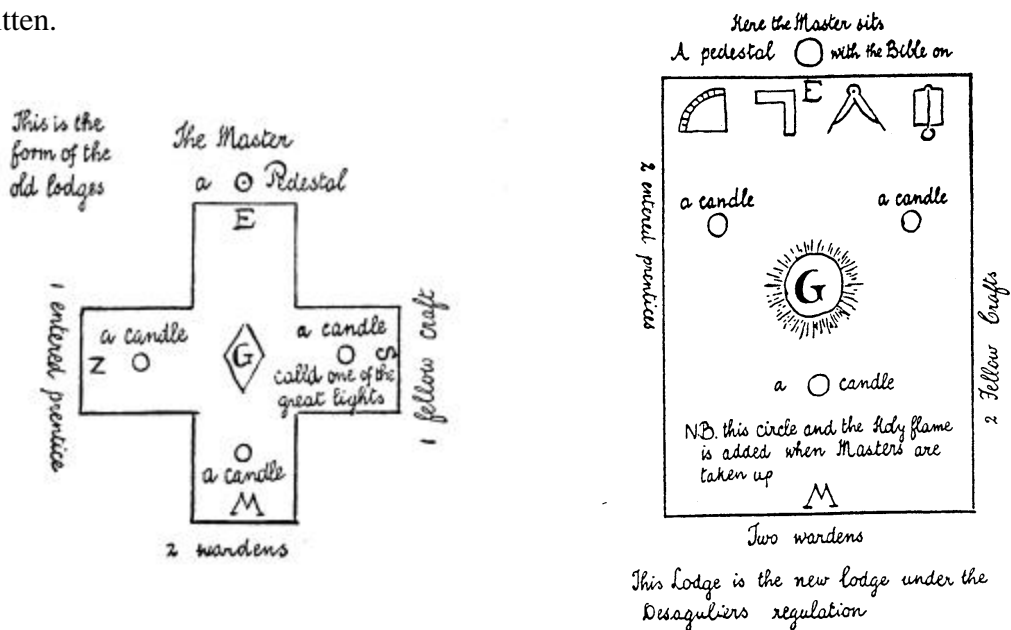
There comes a point in most American Masonic degree rituals where the Worshipful Master calls the brethren to “form a lodge”, whereupon those present stand and arrange themselves around the center of the lodge room. This phrase and the resulting activity have always struck me as rather strange since we are already in a lodge room symbolically arranged and furnished to represent a lodge. A lodge also is a certain number of Masons convened for work, and not just the room, or even the building where that meeting takes place. But the Worshipful Master has already declared the lodge to be open while we are in our original formation. So why are we supposed to “form a lodge” if we are already formed as a lodge and in a lodge?

The answer to this particular puzzle leads us back to the ritual practices of the 18th century “Table Lodges” held in private rooms of taverns rather than in purpose built lodge rooms in use today. The answer involves the significance of the number of masons required to form a lodge, not as a minimum or quorum for a lodge meeting, but as a particular number that actually composed the body of a symbolic lodge. In addition to a certain number and arrangement of Masons, this symbolic lodge was represented in other ways as well, some of which have come down to us in forms that we do not immediately recognize as such today. The answer also sheds light on other matters, including some of the differences between English and American practices in the arrangement of lodge rooms, the handling of candidates, the use of lodge decorations, and visual aids to the lectures. By exploring this question not only have I gained a deeper understanding of our ritual’s history, but also a fuller appreciation of the significance of this particular aspect of our ceremonies.

Our operative forbears met in sheds or huts on the work site. These structures were called lodges. Based on their name, these must have been the places where Masons lodged, and probably took their meals or other refreshment as well. As lodgings, these lodges undoubtedly contained the Masons’ tools and clothing, and perhaps pieces of work in various stages of completion. Thus, these articles were available for use in whatever rituals operative Masons may have practiced in their lodges.

Early speculative Masons had no such lodge buildings available to them. So following typical practice of the multitude of other clubs, societies, fraternities, and associations that existed in the 17th and 18th centuries, these Masons met in rented rooms, typically in taverns. This undoubtedly was convenient so far as the refreshment and Q&A lecture portions of a Masonic meeting was concerned. But from a ritual perspective I imagine that it left something to be desired. Masons can only be made in a lodge. As we know from the surviving early lectures or catechisms, a lodge has some very specific attributes and contents not typically found in rented tavern rooms. So it appears that in true speculative fashion, these Masons devised a symbolic lodge for use in their degree work.

The earliest documentary evidence for this usage dates to about the 1740's, which is a quarter century after the founding of the Grand Lodge of England in 1717. This evidence consists of two diagrams of lodge layouts found in a private manuscript titled "*Dialogue between Simon and Philip*".¹ One diagram is purported to be the arrangement used by the "Old Masons" (below left), and the other (below right) as the "new lodge under the Desaugliers regulation". The reference to Desaugliers, an early Grand Master of the Premier GL of 1717, and later its' longtime Deputy GM, indicates that this form was used by the GL of England, later called the "Moderns". The term "Old Masons" likely refers to independent lodges unaffiliated with the GLoE, not to the "Antients", since the English Antient GL was not formed until a decade after this document appears to have been written.



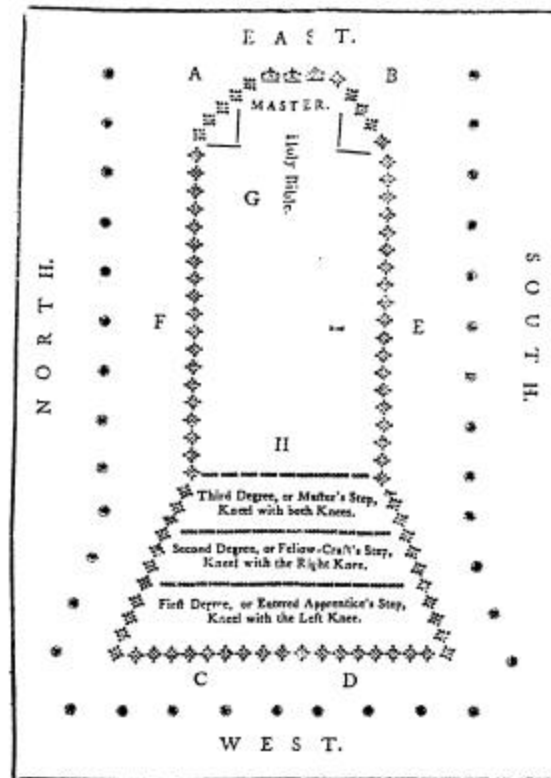
These diagrams are symbolic representations of lodges drawn on the floors of meeting rooms. The common features of both are the presence of three candles, the Master in the East, two Wardens in the West, the letter “G” in the center, and a pedestal (not an altar) in front of the Master in the East. Also notice that both of these diagrams are quite specific about the number of Masons required to form the figure: either five in the “old” diagram or seven in the “new”. No indication is given about where any other brothers are located. Also notice that places are designated for EA’s and FC’s, but not for Masters apart from the WM. So these configurations seem to date from that time period before the general usage of the MM degree. But then, the note on the right hand diagram mentions that “the circle and holy flame [around the “G”] is added when Masters are *taken up*.” Yet places for EA’s and FC’s are still noted on the diagram. Interestingly enough, if we presume that the EA’s and FC’s are absent when masters are “taken up”, then the figure is composed of only three Masons, which is the number of Masons in a lodge of Masters.

There are significant differences between these diagrams as well. The most obvious difference is that the “Old” lodge is cross shaped, while the “New” is an oblong square. The “Old” lodge has the candles in the north, west, and south while the “New” lodge has them as an equilateral triangle around the “G” in the center. The “old” lodge has the “G” within a diamond; the “New” lodge has the “G” in a flaming circle. The most distinctive feature of the “New” lodge is the tools (quadrant, square, compasses, and plumb) arrayed in the east. The manuscript states that these and the letters of the compass points are of thin metal, and are brought by the brothers to each meeting.

Some of these lodge symbols are familiar to us while others are not. This is not surprising because Masonic symbolism was far from settled in those days. Two different sets of old catechism test questions make reference to the diamond as one of the jewels of the lodge.² Other old catechisms make reference to a “blazing star”³, while still others give various collections of tools as necessary items. While I cannot match either of these diagrams with the contents of a lodge as given in any single old catechism, everything in both diagrams is accounted for in one or another of them.

There is a good deal that we do not know about these diagrams. For one thing, we do not know how large they were. They must have been at least six or eight feet on a side to hold their contents while providing room for those standing around the figure. But their dimensions could have been in yards as well. Still, it is evident that they were not intended to fill the entire room since the brothers stand outside the diagrams themselves. Neither do we know how these early diagrams were used for ritual purposes. The ritual use of these floor diagrams is clarified at a later date in the well-known exposures from the 1760's, another quarter century after the confidential "Dialogue between Simon and Phillip" was written.

The floor diagram depicted below is from the 1762 exposure "Jachin & Boaz" (J&B)⁴. Essentially the same diagram is published in "Three Distinct Knocks" (TDK) of 1760⁵.



- EXPLANATION.**
- A Senior Deacon, with a black Rod.
 - B Pass-Master, with the Sun and Compasses, and a String of Cords.
 - C Senior Warden, with the Level, and a Column in his Hand.
 - D Junior Deacon, with a black Rod.
 - E Junior Warden, with a Column in his Hand.
 - F The Secretary, with the Cross-Pens.
 - G H, I, Candles.
 - Masons standing round at the Ceremony.

N. B.

Before discussing the actual use of this representation of the symbolic lodge, I will discuss the figure itself. Notice first that it is in the oblong square shape, but with the addition of three “steps” at the bottom. The arrangement of candles is still triangular, but they are more closely aligned with the east, south, and west. Notice that the candles are not placed around the bible, which is in front of the WM in the east. Also notice that there is still no altar. Altars are a feature of Scottish, Irish, and American lodges, but even to this day, are not found in English lodges. Since *J&B* is an exposure of English Masonry, it is not surprising to find English custom regarding the altar.

The placement of officers also follows current English practice. While seven masons are still required to form this symbolic lodge, their situation is much closer to the configuration known today. The JW is now in the south and the deacons, previously absent, are now in their accustomed places. The Wardens held pillars, while the deacons held rods or wands. The Secretary now appears, but in the North. This is not his place in American Lodges, but it is exactly where the Treasurer and Secretary both are located in English lodges to the present day. There is an additional officer in the lineup that requires some explanation for Americans. The Immediate Past Master (last year’s WM) is also an officer in English lodges to this day. His place is to the left of the WM, exactly where placed in this figure. The item that most closely bears on the starting point of this inquiry, however, is the arrangement of the other brothers in the lodge. Notice that the diagram has them “standing round at the ceremony” on three sides of the figure.

Now how was this symbolic lodge used in the ceremonies? Both *J&B* and *TDK*, as well as other sources of the period inform us that the lodge was opened in a table lodge form with the brethren seated around the table. If there was to be degree work that evening, then the symbolic lodge figure was drawn on the floor with chalk or charcoal (if not already done) and other preparations made while the candidate himself was being prepared. Depending on the space available, the table could be moved out of the way and the symbolic lodge drawn in the space created. If the room was large enough, the figure could be drawn at one end of the room leaving the table in place. Sometimes an entirely

separate room was used for the ceremony. The brothers arranged themselves, and the candidate was admitted.

The candidate's proposer or a Deacon may conduct the candidate. In either case, the candidate is conducted around the outside of the symbolic lodge including the officers, but inside the lines of other brothers. The candidate was stopped "*at the back of*"⁶ the appropriate officers and was caused to knock on their shoulders to gain admittance. For this reason, the candidate was led by the hand, rather than by the upper arm, since the conductor actually knocked with the candidate's hand. This method of knocking with the candidate's hand on the officers' shoulders is still current English practice, even though it does make for some cumbersome floor work to edge a hoodwinked candidate up to the side of a seated Warden's station. Typical American usage of the Deacons knocking by rapping against the floor with the but-end of their long spear-like rods would be impossible since English Deacons' rods are short, delicate wands that would never serve for such a purpose. Some sources have a Warden conducting the candidate⁷, in which there are no stops behind the Wardens, for obvious reasons.

At length, the candidate is conducted to the west end of the symbolic lodge where he advances by successive steps to the line appropriate to the degree about to be conferred. He is then placed inside the figure of the lodge among the candles to take his obligation "*within the body of a just and duly constituted lodge*".

After the ceremony is over and congratulations are given all round, the new brother is given a mop and pail with which he erases the drawings on the floor while the brethren resume their seats around the table. The meeting then resumes in table lodge form. The new brother is given a seat at the WM's right (which corresponds with the north east). He makes a toast to the company giving thanks for being made a mason. The WM then presents him with an apron, and explains the working tools. Dinner is then served. After the meal, the question and answer lectures are worked around the table with breaks for toasts and firing before the lodge is ultimately closed for the evening.

The other brethren standing around the figure are not mere spectators. They are usually involved with the ceremony in some way or other. For instance, several sources including J&B⁸ (but not TDK) describe the brethren forming up with their swords – all gentlemen carried swords in those days – drawn and pointed toward the candidate. Depending on the custom of the lodge, the brothers might alternate being at salute and at point. In either case, at the appropriate moment the candidate sees the brethren thus arrayed, undoubtedly resulting in a dramatic psychological effect. The reason for this demonstration was then explained. This sword ritual was not used in all lodges at that time, but it is documented to continue in the Bristol ritual from the west of England to the present day⁹.

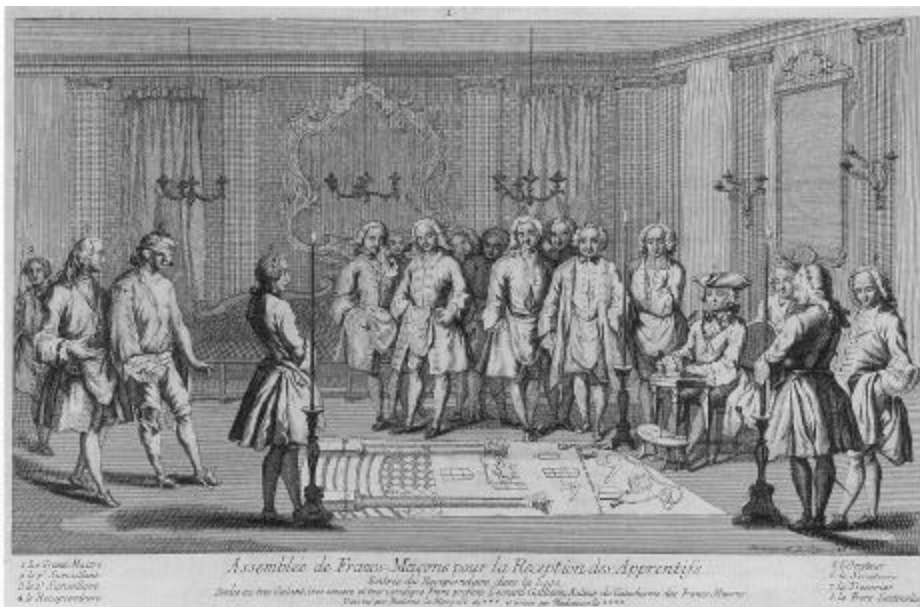
Other methods of participation by the on looking brethren also continue to the present day. In some American jurisdictions the brethren form the lodge before the obligation, then stand and hold the sign of Fidelity during the obligation. Other American jurisdictions form the lodge after the obligation with claps and gestures at different points. In English lodges I have visited, the brethren remain seated on the sidelines, but punctuate the obligation by slapping their aprons in unison at a certain point, and holding the penal sign during the obligation. Having the brethren forming the walls of the lodge as represented on the floor diagram is simply another way of being involved in the ceremony. It is also a way of symbolically representing the lodge when a floor drawing is inadvisable or impractical.

A floor drawing might have been impractical for traveling military lodges. While meetings in local taverns must have been preferable, if need required meetings also were undoubtedly held in tents pitched on open ground. During the Revolutionary War George Washington is said to have initiated new brothers in meetings held in his tent using a drum for an altar. The need to improvise might have led to the brothers forming the symbolic lodge rather than using a physical drawing on the ground. It is generally accepted that traveling military lodges were quite influential in spreading Freemasonry in the American colonies. So it is not surprising that much of our ritual practice could have derived from the ritual practices of military lodges.

Another consideration is that standing brethren leave no marks on the floor for others to find. This was a bit of a problem at the time. It is difficult to erase all sign of chalk or charcoal markings on a wooden floor. The author of TDK notes that non-masons often wondered why masons always wanted a mop and pail, so curious innkeepers would sometimes pretend not to have them available¹⁰. He goes on to say that as a result some Masons took to making the figures with tape and tacks, which could be more completely removed. Ultimately some Masons took to using painted floor cloths and floor carpets.

The floor drawings that I have discussed so far are relatively simple affairs. The author of the exposure *Mahabone*¹¹ describes a much more elaborate floor drawing filled with multicolored symbols that took some hours to produce. Lodges that used such elaborate and time consuming drawings also undoubtedly spent at least some time explaining these symbols to the new brother before washing them out. This may have contributed to the transition from catechism or question and answer lectures to the narrative lectures we use today. It also accounts for the increasing use of the elaborate floor cloths or floor carpets.

It seems likely that the elaborate but small floor cloths and floor carpets preserved from that period in Masonic museums and libraries were used either as visual aids to lectures or as adjuncts to the floor drawings rather than symbolic representations of the lodge in its entirety. Floor cloths large enough to use as symbolic lodges would have been quite bulky and difficult to handle. But the evidence of this well known French engraving¹² from the 1740's suggests that larger floor cloths were known.



Another factor leading to the disuse of floor drawings is simply the fact that speculative Masons moved their meetings out of taverns and into permanent, purpose built lodge rooms. Speculative Masons now had their own “space” just as their operative predecessors once enjoyed. But these rooms were not the combination lodgings and workshops of operative Masons. Instead, they were furnished and arranged to be scaled-up versions of the symbolic lodges once represented as drawings on the floor.

With the room itself now representing the lodge and the symbolic items such as ashlar and pillars now physically represented in the room, there was no need for symbolic depictions of these either as floor drawings or floor carpets. So the use of floor carpets even as lecture aids gradually died out in America, although magic lanterns and slide shows were sometimes used in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

In England floor cloths took a different form by evolving into tracing boards, which are not used in American lodges. Tracing boards are a set of pictures about three or four feet tall, one for each degree, displaying the symbols of that degree. The tracing board appropriate to the degree is displayed leaning against the JW’s pedestal while the lodge is at labor on that degree. The lectures in English degree work are called tracing board explanations. Typical practice has the tracing board brought to the front of the lodge for the lecturer to point out the various symbols to the candidate during the course of the lecture. In other lodges, including the Emulation Lodge of Improvement – a standing lodge of instruction held to preserve and teach the Emulation ritual – the lectures are given with the tracing boards laid on the floor in the center of the lodge room in front of the candidate exactly as they would have been if they were still drawings or floor cloths.

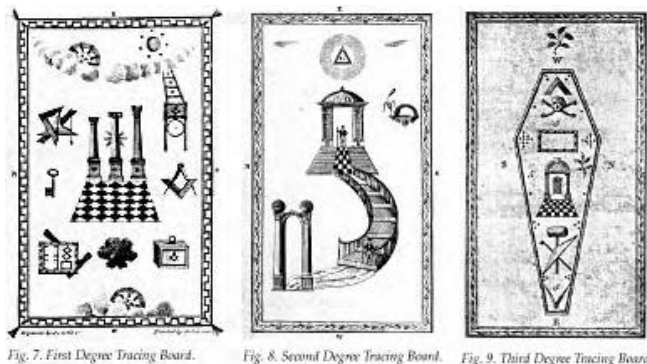


Fig. 7. First Degree Tracing Board.

Fig. 8. Second Degree Tracing Board.

Fig. 9. Third Degree Tracing Board.

So what have we discovered by unraveling, as it were, this particular thread of which the web of Masonic ritual history is composed? That in the absence of an actual lodge room or building, our early speculative brethren created a symbolic lodge, complete with the necessary symbols, by drawing it on the floor when needed for conferring degrees. This representation also required a precise number of masons arranged in a particular way for it to be considered “a just and perfect lodge” within which a mason could be made.

Over time these lodge representations, especially the symbols, became more elaborate, and for a variety of reasons, came to be made on floor clothes and carpets rather than directly on the floor. Also over time, ways were found for the side-line brethren to be more active participants in the degree ceremonies. One such method, evidently in common usage among those who brought masonry to the American Colonies, was to have the brethren themselves form the figure of the symbolic lodge.

The move to purpose built lodge rooms rendered the floor drawings unnecessary, and also required some adaptation of the floor work and ritual practices that had grown up around the use of floor drawings symbolically representing the lodge. Old customs die hard, however. Just as our English brethren have retained the use of some curious practices from those days that we have abandoned, so we have retained some practices abandoned by our English brethren. One of those curious practices that we have retained is that of the brethren forming a symbolic lodge.

Endnotes

¹ Knoop, Jones & Hamer, edited by Harry Carr *Early Masonic Catechisms*, 2nd edition. (designated as EMC in further citations) Reprint by Kessinger Publishing, ISBN1-56459-324-X. Pages 175-181.

² A Mason's Examination (1723) in EMC, page 74; The Grand Mystery of Free-Masons Discover'd (1724) in EMC, page 78

³ The Sloane Manuscript No. 3329 (ca. 1710) in EMC, page 48.

⁴ Anonymous, *Jachin and Boaz*, Kessinger Publishing ISBN 1-56459-246-4 (Abbreviated *J&B*)

⁵ Anonymous, *Three Distinct Knocks*, Kessinger Publishing ISBN 1-56459-247-2 (Abbreviated (*TDK*))

⁶ *TDK*, page 18

⁷ J***** G*****, *Mahabone*, (1777), reprint by Kessinger Publishing, ISBN1-56459-994-9, page 11

⁸ *J&B*, page 9, also *Mahabone*, footnote on page 12

⁹ Charles E. Cohoughlyn-Burroughs, editor *Bristol Masonic Ritual*, Poemandres Press 1995, printed by Kessinger Publishing. ISBN1-56459-984-1 page16.

¹⁰ *TDK*, page 9

¹¹ *Mahabone*, page 2 (in description of diagram)

¹² Prints from *Les Costumesdes Francs-Masons dans leurs Assemblees, Principalement pour la Reception des Apprentils et des Maitres* c. 1745, copied from W. Kirk MacNulty, *Freemasonry – A Jopurney through Ritual and Symbol*, Thames and Hudson, 1991, ISBN 0-500-81037-0, page 73.