



Enabling The Masonic Explorer In All Of Us.

Kansas Lodge of Research was established in 1982 to conduct research, gather and preserve Masonic information, supply speakers, and enhance Grand Lodge endeavors to promote Masonic Education. In this article Bro. Herb Merrick discusses the origins of some of our symbology and how these have been adopted over ages. He has delivered several orations during Masonic Education on this topic at his home lodge to a growing audience.

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Studying Symbolism in Blue Lodge Masonry

"We all owe to the Masonry of the Blue Degrees our first and paramount allegiance. Let us work and labor to elevate and dignify Blue Masonry; for we owe to it all that we are in the order..." Albert Pike *Address of the President*, 1888.

The study of the symbolism found in the Craft's degrees is at least as old as the Craft itself, and it is likely much older. Using careful and analytical study, the relationship between the symbols and what they symbolize can be discerned. However, it is likely that some of the meaning may have been lost in time as the Craft as evolved. One of the earliest books published devoted to this study was William Hutchinson's book titled "The Spirit of Freemasonry". It was published in 1775. Up until this point literature on Masonry could be divided into two general categories, exposes like "Samuel Prichard's Masonry Dissected" printed in 1730 or constitution and charges Dr. William Anderson or "Anderson's Constitutions" printed in 1723. Anderson with the help of a Desagulier developed a series of lectures which evolved over time into what is now called "the questions and answers." These lectures were the basis of

discussions in lodges, but since most of the symbols of the lodge were transferred using mouth to ear so were the discussions of what the symbols meant. Before Anderson little was available for study and reflection. There were no source documents or commentaries to research to clarify what were the origins of specific symbols. By the beginning of the 19th century, these Hutchinson system of lectures were the standard.

Hutchinson's works were revised and enlarged by the work of William Preston. His system appears to introduce or expand several important concepts which we see as integral parts of the lodge symbolism today. His work discussed the pillars, Wisdom, Strength and Beauty, as the supports of the lodge as well as discussions of the four cardinal virtues. With the Grand Union in 1813 a committee under the chairmanship of one Dr. Hemming attempted to establish a standardized system of ritual and lectures. These were never widely accepted and instead the 1797 works of Thomas Smith Webb, a greatly respected New England Masonic scholar, were the North American standard. These were published in the first

addition of his Freemason's Monitor. This document, which was almost completely based on Preston's work, has become the standard for what are the symbols of the fraternity, although the exceptions are well worth noting and studying.

Webb's work leaves us with a problem. What he published was exoteric portions of the ritual, including charts, trestle boards and manuals. What is not found is discussion beyond the monitorial work of the meaning of the symbols. For next fifty years little was published on the role of symbolism in the masonic arts. That does not mean that little was written about masonry; quite the contrary, a lot was published, particularly following the Morgan Affair beginning in 1826 when Morgan disappeared and was presumed murdered for his to be published expose titled "Illustrations of Masonry". There appears to have been a wide spread masonic lecture circuit where prominent masons would travel throughout a region of the country or in some case the entire country and give private lectures on the meanings of the symbolism of the Fraternity, but these were not recorded, and in most case

no notes of the lectures are available. One of the exceptions to this rule was the great sage of the Scottish Rite, Albert Pike.

Pike is most widely known for his work on both the ritual and meaning of the Scottish Rite but, that does not mean that he did not study, speak and publish on the blue lodge ritual and symbolism. Pike believed that the lessons of Freemasonry could be found in a study of its symbols. By 1875 Pike had written two works that dealt in very scholarly fashion with Masonic Symbolism. Throughout the remainder of his life, Pike continued to speak and write on this subject as well as the twenty-nine degree in the Scottish Rite. It was in 1888, three years before his death that he prepared two copies of a manuscript that contained his most current thoughts on the subject. This 367 page document entitled "ESTOERIKA the Symbolism of the Blue Degrees of Freemasonry" was designed as a researcher reference, and Pike never envisioned it released to the general body of masons or least of all to the general public. Pike believed that 9 out of 10 masons were not interested or were unwilling to go beyond the monitorial lectures of rituals, but would be interested in learning the materials if present in lecture form. Thus, his publication was designed for those lecturers.

Pike seems to have been correct. There is a limited audience for researchers on the meaning of the literally hundreds of symbols of the fraternity. On the other hand there has always been and still is an unlimited desire within the fraternity to understand more. The First World War marked the end to a large extent of touring lecturers in almost all phase of society. The emphasis for

the study of many things from natural history to masonry shift from a national or regional expert to those of the local enthusiast. Research into symbolism became a cottage industry, with books and pamphlets being published ranging from the advent of the Short Talk Bulletins of the Masonic Service Association of North America in 1923 to literally hundreds of books today. While Pike's "Esoterika" is an excellent book and raises many thought provoking questions, it is not where a novice researcher should begin. But, all this leads to one problem for someone who wants to start the study: "Where do I begin?" and a second question, "What is the right answer?"

The second question first, because it is easier to answer. The right answer is the answer you come to after the research. There are few absolutes in Masonry, and as Pike concluded that some of the symbolism of the order is older than speculative masonry. The goal of research is to share the light you gain with others and with them move into even greater light. There are levels within the study of symbolism. There is the actual or physical symbol and what it represents. An example would be the stewards' rods are topped by a cornucopia, a symbol of plenty. They relate to the duties of that office which include helping the Junior Warden with refreshment. Then there is how that symbol fits within the system of instruction and beyond that there are the relationships between the symbols of each degree with symbols in other degrees. A simple example would be the apron and the accompanying lecture in each degree about wearing the apron. In each case the progressing mason is told of its ancient use and what it teaches within the degree as it is used today,

but is there more? There is the relationship of each of these lectures to each other. Finally, what other meanings might be found in the contemplation of the apron and the lectures that accompany its presentation? A question that might be considered here is why are the numbers and job sites of ancient workmen important?

This brings the more important question of where does the student want to begin. That also has both a simple and a complicated answer. The easy part of the questions is select a symbol that the researcher is interested in. You could select any badge of office, the square or compasses, the working tools of any degree or maybe any or all of the twelve columns of the lodge; the list could go on for quite a while. But, start with something that you want to know more about. Then once you have an answer, work up a short lecture or presentation, see the lodge education committee and get on the Trestleboard. This will allow you to share your research and address questions that other members have. Pike is the example when he wrote his work on symbolism. He started conversations with a number of other scholars and presented his thoughts to a wide range of groups both before and after his publication of Esoterika. How to get started in researching is a matter of personal taste and time.

I always start with my friend, google. I want to know what resources are out there to use. Since google will prioritize based on number of criteria it is a good place to start. You will have some articles to read and of course more resources to gather. Then there is Wikipedia. It is not recommended as

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a primary source, but it is generally footnoted so you can see what sources others used on the topic. It can also give you an overview of the topic. It is important to remember that because of how the data is collected and edited, it can have significant bias; but it is always good to get started. Then there are the Short Talk bulletins; they provide a masonically focused overview, and they can

point you toward other sources to broaden your scope of study. As a first book the Complete Dummy's Guide to Freemasonry or the Complete Idiots Guide to Freemasonry are good sources for that overview. The Grand Lodge Masonic Education Course lesson three on symbolism also provides an overview focused on the topic and provides some insights and details.

Once you have a basis for research and

an idea of how much is out there you can start reading. Symbolism is the heart of Freemasonry. It is like an onion. You peel back a layer and discover there are more layers, but eventually you will get to a core or at least what you feel is the core of the symbol. Masonry we are told in the second degree is about learning and improving the mind and the study of its symbols will do both those things.

About the Author

Herb Merrick was born in Yokohama Japan the oldest son of a career Army Officer, but grew up in Forsyth, Missouri where his family settle on the farm, that he still oversees. He was raised in November of 1974 in the Forsyth Lodge 453. He graduated from Missouri State University in May of 1975 and was commissioned in the US Army as field artilleryman. In June of that year he married Carolyn and they spent the next twenty two years traveling the world. Herb has sat in a lot of lodges, but was only active in one before moving to Kansas. He held a variety of offices in Forget-Me-Not 896 in the American Canadian Grand Lodge of Germany during his five years serving in that country, including secretary for two years. In 1994 Herb, Carolyn and their daughter Kristina settled in Lansing, Kansas and Herb joined Hancock Lodge 311 on Fort Leavenworth. He served as Master in 2004 and again in 2009. He has held every office in the lodge except Treasurer. He served the Grand Lodge as District Deputy in 2009, as Grand Pursuivant in 2013 and Grand Marshal in 2014. He has also been on a number of Grand Lodge Committees.

Herb belongs to the Armed Forces Scottish Rite, Leavenworth and Heidelberg York Rite bodies, Greeter of Abdallah Shrine, Byington Chapter 177 OES as well as Haworth Chapter 32 OES and the National Sojourners of Fort Leavenworth. He has been the treasurer of Pilgrim Community Church for the last thirteen years. Kristina lives in Washington DC with her husband Nick and their daughter Evelyn.

Herb teaches at the United States Army Command and General Staff College. In his spare time he likes the shooting sports, hunting, golf, and reading particularly ancient and military history. Plus getting to see Evelyn whenever there is a chance.

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