Foundation Stones, Cornerstone Ceremonies and other Masonic Stones

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There was an article in the Spring 2004 California Freemason, entitled Cornerstone Ceremonies: Carrying on a Masonic Tradition. It got me thinking of Freemasonry's involvement in Cornerstone Ceremonies throughout our history. It also got me thinking of our ancient Operative Brethren and their contribution to our gentle Speculative craft. This paper references some of the California Freemason article, but it also expands on an area than a lot of Masons might not know.

In the Book of Ceremonies published by the Grand Lodge of California, the Cornerstone Ceremony ritual has the following words:

“Friends and brethren, it has been a custom among the Fraternity of Free and Accepted Masons, from time immemorial, to assemble for the purposes of laying the foundation stones of certain buildings, when requested to do so by those having authority. The Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of the State of California, having been invited to lay the cornerstone of this building, we have here assembled and will now proceed with that pleasant duty”

With these words, Grand Master Howard D. Kirkpatrick commenced the solemn Masonic Cornerstone Ceremony for Temple Heights Elementary School in Oceanside, California. This Cornerstone Ceremony hosted by Vista Lodge No. 687, on January 31, 2004 was an opportunity for local Freemasons to celebrate the completion of construction, and dedication of a new school in their community. This, incidentally, was the 14th such cornerstone laying ceremony hosted by Vista Lodge for a Public School in the Vista Unified School District.

But wait, what is this cornerstone ceremony thing all about. After all, the building is already complete. Don’t I recall in the First Degree that the Worshipful Master told me that in operative Masonry, the cornerstone of a building was the first stone of a building, and was usually placed in the North east corner thereof, whereupon to erect the future superstructure. This cornerstone isn’t in the Northeast corner, and the superstructure is already built. Then I start remembering some of the other things that I have been taught in Masonry regarding Operative Masonry versus Speculative Masonry. Then I come to the conclusion that this is indeed one of those Speculative Masonic traditions which evolved from Operative Masonry, and also I remember hearing the resounding phrase - It is symbolic.

Now, Let’s travel back in time and look at how this ancient operative tradition has become a modern speculative tradition.

We as Free and Accepted Masons grew out of a great heritage of the Cathedral building during the European middle ages; the period between 1100 and 1400 AD. The era of St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Bernard, and St. Abellard. It was the period of the crusades, during which numerous major cathedrals, hundreds of major churches, and tens of thousands of parish churches were constructed throughout Europe. When we reflect on this period, three (3) institutions come to mind - Guilds or Lodges, Masonry, and the apprenticeship system for learning of the craft.

Stonemasons worked on a building project for many years because of the limitation of their tools. On any construction, one of the mason's first acts was to erect a lean-to called a lodge. In this lean-to, tools were stored. Here they ate meals, initiated apprentices and conducted business. As they built, they moralized on the tools and
their application to the job at hand, drawing parallels between the art of erecting stately cathedrals, and the philosophy of living as a just and upright man. The basic truths of morality were enshrined in a ritual surrounding the working of their trade. As they built and philosophized they undoubtedly reflected, that as a Trowel is used in the laying of cement for the cornerstone upon which the rest of the building is constructed, the Trowel is also emblematic of "spreading the cement of brotherly love and affection“ toward all mankind.

Modern archeologists have unearthed crypts, vaults, pyramids, and monuments, and have reconstructed the history of ancient civilizations. Travel throughout Europe, even today, will reveal the Mark of the stonemason who actually carved a particular stone. In my travels in Germany, Austria, and the Czech Republic a few years ago, I saw many such Marks on stones. Kinda gave me goose-bumps seeing the “signature” of the stone mason who actually carved that stone 500-600 years ago.

As we listen to the degree work in the Mark Master degree of the Royal Arch Chapter, we learn that the stone carved by stonemason had to be good work, true work, square work, and have their proper mark on it to be entitled to wages. Studies in Royal Arch Masonry reveal that the Mark Master Degree, in the symbolic degrees, are believed to have originated as a ceremony of registering a craftsman’s mark in those years distinguished by the operative craft masons and their temple building.

We know that the cornerstone, or foundation stone, of an edifice in ancient times was a perfectly squared stone from which the remainder of the building could be plumbed, squared and leveled. It provided the builder a point of departure, or reference, which insured that the structure would be properly built. If the first stone, the foundation stone, or cornerstone was not plumb, square, and level, the error would become more and more exaggerated the further the builder went from that corner stone. We know that examination of still standing structures built in ancient times disclose the perfection and exactness required of the stonemasons who constructed the buildings of the time. The stones had to be perfect.

Cornerstone laying as a ceremony is also well documented practically from the beginning of cathedral building age. After the age of cathedral building had come to an end, the operative masons continued their craft. However, they did it more in the construction of public buildings and halls. The oldest existing Masonic Lodge records are those in Scotland, where in 1738 there is a record of a formal and official Masonic cornerstone laying ceremony for the New Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh. In the United States, Masonic Cornerstone laying ceremonies are intimately bound into the very beginnings of our Country. We read of Cornerstone laying ceremonies at Independence Hall in Philadelphia in 1732, by Grand Master Benjamin Franklin and the brethren of St. John’s Lodge. We also read of the cornerstone of the California State Capitol in Sacramento being laid with Masonic Ceremonies for the original Capitol in 1850. It was repeated in recent years for the Capitol rebuilding with the Grand Lodge of California again participating.

The ancient stonemasons used the plumb, square, level and trowel to set the stone. When they had cornerstone laying ceremonies to dedicate the building, they also used these tools just as we as speculative Masons use these tools, but to demonstrate moral concepts and standards of conduct of which all virtuous men approve. The plumb teaches Masons to walk uprightly before God and man; the square for virtue, “squaring our actions”, the level to act upon the level with all men; and the trowel to spread the bonding materials for friendship and brotherly love among all people.

Just as our ancient Brethren dedicated cathedrals, we do the same. Corn, wine, and oil used in the ceremony are offered as symbolic gestures of reward for work which, in the past, were the wages of stonemasons. Thus, the corn of nourishment goes to those who toil; the wine to refresh; and the oil of joy to ensure the flow of good works to all mankind.
Now, let’s travel back to the east coast, to our Nation’s Capital, Washington D. C. The District of Columbia was formed by an act of Congress on July 10, 1790. This act established the seat of the Federal Government in a tract of land ten miles square lying on the Virginia and Maryland sides of the Potomac River. In 1846, Virginia was given back her original contribution of land. The District of Columbia now comprises about seven square miles along the east bank of the Potomac River.

The first recorded Masonic activity in the District of Columbia took place on April 13, 1791. It involved the laying of the cornerstone of the District of Columbia near Alexandria, Virginia. The stone was placed by Alexandria-Washington Lodge No. 22. Worshipful Brother George Washington was Master of the Lodge three years earlier. A team of surveyors used that Masonic cornerstone to help mark the borders of the new city.

On October 13, 1792, another significant Masonic event took place in the history of the District of Columbia. It involved the laying of the cornerstone of the White House with President Washington presiding.

The land on which the White House was built then consisted of 18 acres including what is now Lafayette Square, and which is now about seven acres. It was part of the White House grounds until the presidency of Thomas Jefferson when Pennsylvania Avenue was opened, severing the Square from the actual White House grounds. It has been referred to as the lobby of the President’s house and also the President’s Park. While the White House was under construction, a brick kiln and workmen’s Lodge or living quarters were built on Lafayette Square, and building supplies were stored there. I imagine that, just as the ancient stone masons, they also, slept and ate there meals there As we will find out later, the Stonemasons who worked on the White House, and who lived on Lafayette Square, were both operative and speculative Masons.

Lafayette Square was also used for a meeting place for Masonic Lodges, just before the cornerstone of the Capitol was laid on September 18, 1793. Worshipful Brother George Washington, with his suite, met Lodge No. 15 just before the ceremony. Lodge No. 15 became Federal Lodge No. 1 after the formation of the Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia, and continues to exist today.

In 1992, officers of the Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia, hosted the Cornerstone Bicentennial Celebration for the White House, with Most Worshipful Jerold Samet, Grand Master, officiating. MW Samet led the officers to a new stone which had been prepared for the purpose, where they tested it with the square, level, and plumb, and rededicated it with corn, wine, and oil.

In 1993, Freemasons participated in the Cornerstone Bicentennial Celebration for the United States Capitol, with Most Worshipful George R. Adams, Grand Master, officiating.

The St. John's Lodge Bible on which George Washington, and later George H. W. Bush, took the oath of office as President, was hand carried from New York City to Washington, D. C. The trowel used at the cornerstone-laying ceremony of the U. S. Capitol in 1793, and which is now the property of Alexandria-Washington Lodge No. 22 in Alexandria, Virginia was also used. The gavel used at both the 1793 and the 1993 ceremonies is the property of Potomac Lodge No. 5, Washington, D. C.

It has been a long time since that first stone was laid for the White House in 1792. It has also been a while since the Bicentennial celebrations, and all this is well known and recorded. However, in 1952, during the major reconstruction of the White House, something not so well recorded became public about that old historic building. Little known, or perhaps not fully appreciated, was the fact that the original Masons, operative and speculative, recruited to build the White House in the late 1700’s, in the tradition of the Craft, had marked the stones on which they worked with their “Mark”.

The Masonic world became aware of this discovery due to the collaboration of four outstanding Master Masons:
- President Harry Truman;
During the renovation, these men were able to cause the salvage and preservation of 102 precious Masonic stones, once imbedded in the interior walls of the White House.

Soon a plan was devised for the placement of these stones into responsible Masonic hands. In a letter to Grand Master Camalier, President Truman wrote that he believed that these stones should be preserved in the archives of the various Grand Lodges of the Nation. Also, that since the Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia was Masonically supreme in the Capital of the United States, he felt the Grand Lodge should be entrusted with the distribution of these precious ashlars, which so intimately link Freemasonry with our Government. Further, that it would please him if the Grand Master would personally, or by representative of the Grand Lodge, present these stones to each of the Nation’s Grand Lodges. At the Annual Communication of the Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia in December 1952, the MW Camalier sought and obtained permission of the Grand Lodge to take on the responsibility for the distribution of the Masonic stones. At that communication, he stated that President Truman had signed and placed in his custody, letters addressed to each of the Grand Jurisdictions in the country which read as follows:

The White House
Washington, D. C.

November 22, 1952
Most Worshipful Sir:

Through the good offices of an ambassador from the Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia, which is Masonically supreme in the Capital of the Nation, I place in your hands a stone taken from the walls of the White House during its-just completed rebuilding.

A sufficient number of these stones, each with a Masonic symbol upon it, was discovered so as to give one to each Grand Lodge in the United States.

These evidences of the number of members of the Craft who built the President’s residence, so intimately aligns Freemasonry with the formation and the founding of our government, that I believe your Grand Lodge will cherish this link between the fraternity and the Government of the Nation, of which the White House is a symbol.

Sincerely and fraternally yours,
Harry S. Truman

Thus began the distribution of these Masonic stones. They each had a metal identifying marker. Also, each stone was accompanied by President Truman’s letter which was placed in a picture frame made with wood taken from the White House. At the 1954 Annual communication of the Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia, it was reported that the Special Committee on Distribution of the “Masonic Stones” had completed the task assigned to it.

Later, during 1954 and 1955 there were other recipients of these stones. They included a number of Non-U.S. Grand Lodges and blue lodges and appendant bodies in this country. One such appendant body was Mt. Pleasant Chapter No 13, Royal Arch Masons of the Grand Chapter of D. C. Incidentally, my brother Hiram Wohlfarth III is an member of that Chapter.
Additionally, on December 20, 1955 the MW Camalier journeyed to Grandview Lodge No. 618 in Grandview, Missouri. Harry Truman was a Charter member and first Master of Grandview Lodge in 1911, and again in 1917. He was Grand Master of Missouri in 1940-1941. The purpose for MW Camalier’s visit was to personally present one of the White House stones to former President Truman, who in turn, presented the stone to his lodge. Also on hand for the presentation was Frank S. Land, former Imperial Potentate of the Shrine of North America, and founder of the Order of DeMolay.

Thus, my Brethren, now you know perhaps a little more about Freemasonry, Foundation Stones, Cornerstones, and other Historical Masonic Stones.

Thank you.