



PAPER

Demystifying the First Degree Tracing Board

Summary: An exploration of the symbolism of the objects found on the First Degree Tracing Board.

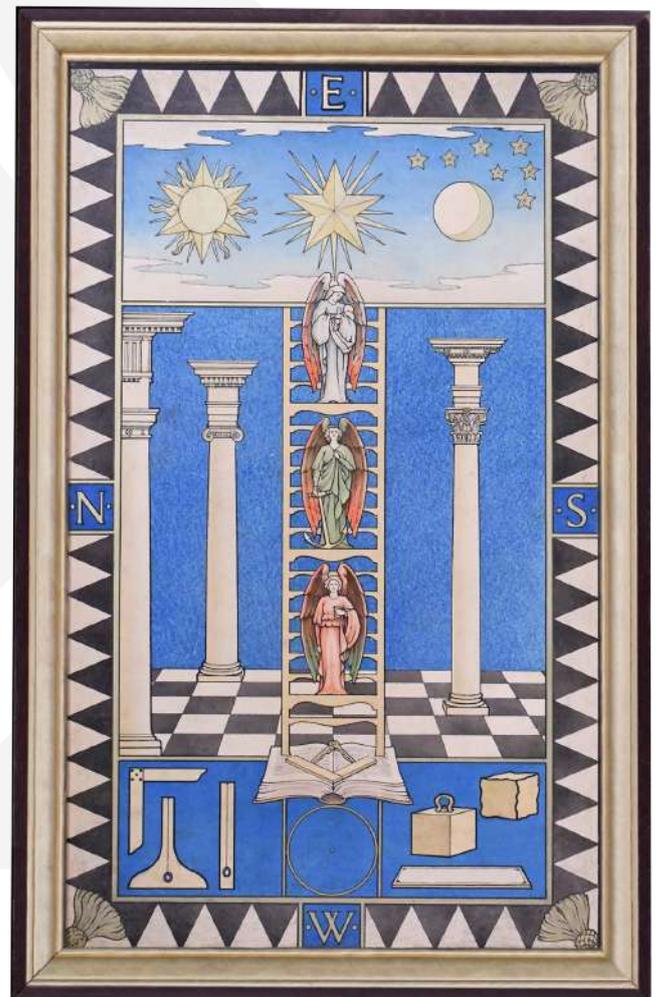
At the opening of a Lodge for business, the Tracing Board is displayed. For an Entered Apprentice, the reason for this would not necessarily be apparent. So, what then is the function and purpose of the Tracing Board?

First and foremost, it provides a pictorial representation of the working Temple. More simply, it is a storyboard. So, let us look at the First Degree Tracing Board and describe the component parts.

Most notable are the three great pillars which are said to support our Lodges. They are referred to as 'Wisdom, Strength and Beauty'. Wisdom to guide us in the way we think, act and perform; Strength to support us in the way we face challenges and difficulties; and Beauty to help us reflect on the good things we do and are capable of doing. The three great pillars on the Tracing Board thus emblematically illustrate how Freemasons' Lodges are held together through these Divine attributes.

They further represent Solomon King of Israel, Hiram King of Tyre, and Hiram Abiff. Solomon King of Israel for his Wisdom in ensuring the Temple of Jerusalem was completed and dedicated to God's service; Hiram King of Tyre for his Strength in supporting him with skilled men and materials; and Hiram Abiff for his skill in providing masterly workmanship and Beauty in the completed structure. Associated by Masonic scholars with three of the most celebrated forms of architecture; the Ionic (wisdom), Doric (strength) and Corinthian (beauty).

As you look up in a Masonic Temple, your eyes are drawn to what is referred to as the Celestial Canopy, meant to represent Heaven. This is indicated on the Tracing Board as the place where Jacob's Ladder ascends. For Freemasons, it is meant to allude to our guidance from earth to Heaven.



First Degree Tracing Board ©UGLE



*First Degree Tracing Board - Unknown Artist
©Museum of Freemasonry*

The ladder itself has many staves or rungs. The staves are intended to point out to us a number of moral virtues that we should embrace. The three principal virtues being Faith, Hope and Charity. That is, Faith in the great architect of the universe or supreme being; Hope in our salvation; and the Charity we should have for all peoples.

You will see that the ladder rests on the Volume of the Sacred Law, as it ascends to the Heavens. From the Sacred Volume we learn that Faith enables us to ascend the first step. This Faith naturally creates in us Hope for the realisation of the blessed promises contained therein. Having ascended the second step, we are enabled to transcend to the third step depicting Charity where, as Masons, we are able to fulfil our purpose. That is, we become 'Perfect'. This is depicted emblematically on the Tracing Board by seven stars, this number being intrinsic in forming a perfect Lodge. We learn through our Masonic lives that without Faith, Hope and Charity, ascent is not possible.

In our Ceremonies, we refer to the interior of a Freemasons' Lodge as comprising of Ornaments, Furniture and Jewels. All of these are illustrated on the Tracing Board. The Ornaments of the Lodge are the Mosaic pavement, the Blazing Star and the Indented or Tessellated Border.

The Mosaic pavement is the beautiful flooring of the Lodge. The black and white pavement symbolises, the darkness and light, the joys and sorrows of our chequered existence; perhaps even the good and bad in man. The Blazing Star (sometimes referred as the 'Glory') represents the Sun which enlightens the earth and

provides blessings to mankind. The Indented or Tessellated border refers to the Planets, in their various revolutions around the Sun; that grand luminary sustaining growth.

The Furniture of the Lodge consists of the Volume of the Sacred Law, the Square and the Compasses. The Volume of the Sacred Law is intended to help us better understand what the Great Architect of the Universe expects of us. It is not surprising, therefore, that so much credence is given to it in the Obligation and Charge to the Initiate. The purpose of the united Square and Compasses reminds us to regulate our lives and actions so that we have a beneficial impact on our communities.

The Jewels of the Lodge consist of three Movable and three Immovable Jewels. The Movable Jewels are the Square, Level and Plumb-Rule. Their uses for operative Masons are self-evident. The Square teaches morality, the Level equality, and the Plumb-Rule justness and uprightness of life and actions. They are called Movable Jewels because they are worn on the collars of the Master and his Wardens. They are transferred each year to their successors at the Installation Ceremonies.

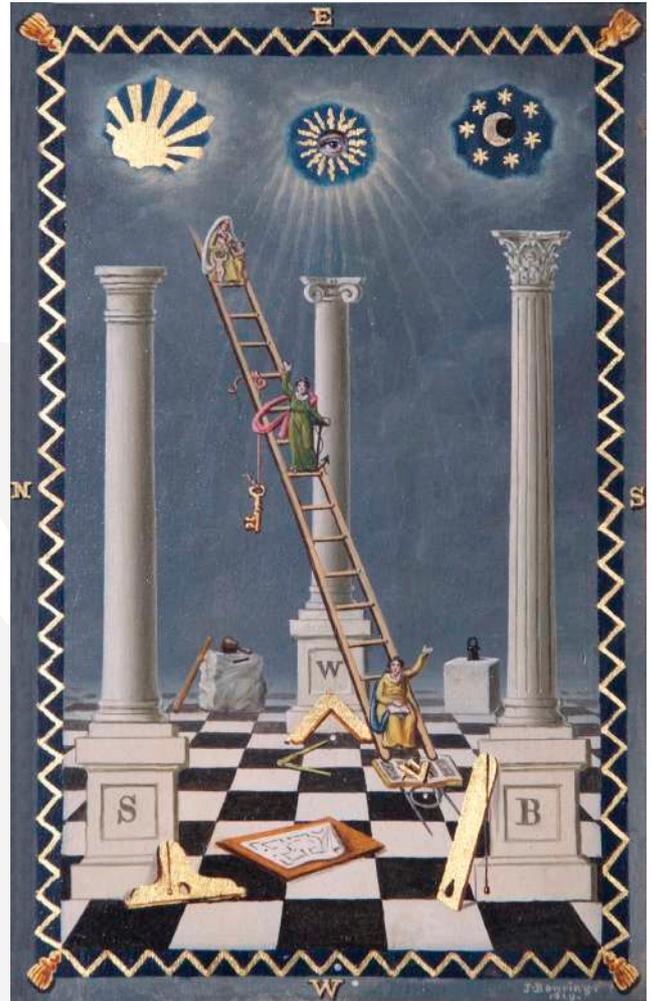
The Immovable Jewels comprise the Tracing Board and the rough and smooth Ashlars. We refer to them as Immovable because they have a set place in the Lodge room for brethren to moralise on.

In its practical sense, the Tracing Board is used by the Worshipful Master to share his designs with the brethren, so that structures are developed with regularity and propriety. It is fair to consider the Volume of the Sacred Law as a Spiritual Tracing Board on which are laid down Divine Law and Moral plans.

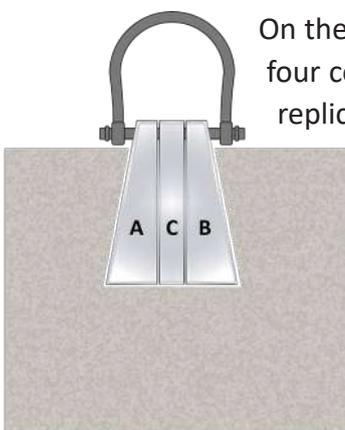
The Rough Ashlar represents man with much to learn. Through care and attention, his mind becomes cultivated so that he becomes a benefit to civilised society. There is a metamorphosis from Rough to Smooth, achieved through a regular well-spent life of piety and virtue; in essence, becoming a man of conscience.

You may also have noticed that on the Tracing Board and the near to the Senior Warden's pedestal there is a device from which is suspended a stone. The device, known as a Lewis, is an iron clamp shaped like an inverted keystone or a pair of dovetailed wedges. It is inserted into a specially prepared hole in the top of a piece of stone, and when combined with a stand and pulleys, the operative Mason was able to lift, move and arrange these stones onto suitable and proper bases. It illustrates the combined

strength of Freemasons working toward a common goal of mutual support. The term Lewis likewise denotes the son of a Mason. As a Lewis, his duty would be to bear the burden of his aged parents.



First Degree Tracing Board - Josiah Bowring 1819
©Museum of Freemasonry



Principle of the Lewis. The sections are inserted A, B then C. ©UGLE

On the corners of the Tracing Board you will see four tassels. These are also seen on the four corners of the ceiling of the Grand Temple in the Freemasons' Hall and sometimes replicated within the carpet of a Lodge or even re-created and hung in the four corners of some Lodge rooms. These are intended to remind us of the four cardinal virtues, namely: Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence and Justice. Virtues were constantly practised by the majority of our ancient brethren.

Hence the Tracing Board reminds us that when the Lodge is open, it becomes veritably spiritual work. Individually, we contribute to the collective work of the Lodge that in turn benefits each one of us individually. It opens our eyes to the Temple in which we regularly work. We each have the spiritual gift, the gift of careful observation.



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*Note: All biblical passages are taken from the Authorized King James version unless otherwise specified.

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Acknowledgement:

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