



Paper

Foundation Stone

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The association between a Foundation stone, the North-East Corner and the First-Degree.

Summary

This presentation gives an overview of the North-East Corner and its long association with the laying of foundation-stones through the centuries.

Keywords:

Foundation, Stone, North-East, Corner, Edward VII, Bible

The Foundation Stone

At a certain point in the ceremony of initiation, the newly Initiated Candidate is placed in the North-East of the Lodge to receive an address, which begins: *'It is customary at the erection of all stately and superb edifices, to lay the first, or foundation stone at the North-East corner of the building...'* But why is the Candidate in the North-East corner and not somewhere more convenient?

It is said that the North-East point of the heavens was especially sacred to Hindus. According to Ancient Egyptian mythology, the sun rose in this quarter on the day of its creation. Hence, over time, the North-East corner of the Lodge acquired a particular sanctity and significance. In Ancient Egypt, it was often the practice to offer a human sacrifice by entombing a workman in the North-East corner of a new building so that it could absorb his strength and spirit.

We are told that the Candidate is placed in the North-East-corner of the Lodge to represent the foundation stone and to symbolise the Entered Apprentice beginning his Masonic Journey by turning from the darkness of ignorance to face the light of the new dawn in the East. An alternative explanation is that 'North' refers to the outer or profane world, and 'East' the inner world of Freemasonry, thus the North-East symbolises the double position of a newcomer, partly in the darkness of his former life and partly in the light of his new life.

There are many references in the Bible to foundation stones or corner stones, here are some examples from the King James Authorised Version:

- *Whereupon are the foundations thereof fastened? or who laid the corner stone thereof? (Job 38:6)*
- *Therefore thus saith the Lord God, Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste. (Isaiah 28:16)*
- *And they shall not take of thee a stone for a corner, nor a stone for foundations; but thou shalt be desolate for ever, saith the Lord. (Jeremiah 51:26)*
- *Jesus saith unto them, Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes? (Gospel according to St Matthew 21:42)*
- *And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; (St Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians 2:20)*

The symbolic importance of the foundation stone was well established by the time King Solomon's Temple was built. Even then, stonemasons were highly skilled in maintaining a building's integrity by constructing corners and supports of carefully dressed stone. As these corner stones guaranteed strength and stability, 'corner stone' became a colloquial term to describe a leader, or an important part of something. The corner or foundation stone is normally the first stone to be set in the construction of a new building and provides a reference to which all the other stones in the building will be set.

To answer the question of why the Candidate is positioned in the North-East of the Lodge, we should turn to examine building customs and traditions in the early 18th century, when our original Rituals were devised, and in particular, whether it was traditional to lay foundation stones at the North-East corner.

Before the advent of Freemasonry, a great deal of ritual was attached to the ceremony of laying a foundation stone. For example, one English record from c.1338 shows that this was the case at Vale Royal Abbey in the Delaware Forest, Cheshire: *'Afterwards in the same sixth year, to wit on the Ides of August (13 August 1277), the aforementioned Edward, the most illustrious King of England (Edward I), in an assembly of all the great people of the Kingdom, with his own hands put the first stone in place where the great altar was to be built. Also Eleanor, the Queen of England, who was likewise present there, placed two stones one for herself and the other for her son Alfunso (Alphonso, Earl of Chester), in the same spot'*.

Many old records show the corner or foundation stone as having been laid at the North-East corner of a building, but there is no evidence to support the theory that this influenced the people who devised our ritual, but it would be too much of a coincidence otherwise. Certainly, when Freemasonry was established, Freemasons were often called upon to perform foundation-stone-laying ceremonies for important buildings, and these were invariably performed at the North-East corner. This custom began to die out after the end of the First World War. Although there is no evidence of what the people who devised our Ritual were thinking when they specified that the Candidate was to be placed in the North-East corner of the Lodge for the important First Degree address, it is likely that this was a combination of old ecclesiastical and Operative Masonic traditions.

An interesting case of Operative Masonry meeting Speculative Freemasonry was on the occasion of the construction of the Church of St Martin-in-the-Fields in London. A report in *Mist's Weekly Journal* of 26 May 1722 reads: *'As the first Stone of the Foundation of the Church of St Martin's-in-the-Fields underground was some time ago laid on the Behalf and by the Command of His Majesty by the Bishop of Salisbury, Lord Almoner; so the first stone of the Foundation at the same corner above ground, being twelve foot above the other, was laid with a great deal of ceremony by the Society of Freemasons who on that occasion were very generous to the Workmen'*.

Another example occurred in 1870, when Albert Edward, Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII), attended by a considerable retinue of Freemasons, laid the Foundation Stone of Reading Grammar School in Berkshire, a fine example of Freemasonry being a positive and proud contributor to English society.

On 20 May, 1880, the same Prince of Wales (combining his roles of Duke of Cornwall and Grand Master of the UGLE), laid the Foundation Stone of Truro Cathedral in Cornwall, supported by the full Grand Lodge. As far as we know, this is the only time a Cathedral's foundation stone has been laid in full Masonic splendour.

In 1919, the approved form of procedure for the laying of a foundation stone in the Book of Constitutions was removed. It was one of the few surviving links between us and our Operative Mason predecessors. However, many Grand Lodges in America still have a precise Ritual for a Masonic corner-stone-laying ceremony, invariably performed after the Lodge has been opened in the First Degree.

Dr. Albert Gallatin Mackey (1807-1881), a prolific American Masonic writer, wrote: *'In Freemasonry, which grew from the practice of Stonemasons, the Initiate (Entered Apprentice) is placed in the North-East corner of the lodge as a figurative foundation stone. This is intended to signify the unity of the North associated with darkness and the East associated with light'*.

The Imperial Romans considered the North to be a place of darkness and this symbolism appears to have been adopted by Freemasonry. The Candidate is told that there are three Lesser Lights, which are situated in the East, South, and West: the North is not mentioned.

In the true sense of the word, many who have received their three Degrees in Freemasonry have never 'passed' beyond the North-East corner. In the course of their Initiation, where they represented a foundation stone, they must have received some Masonic Light, but without further study and thought about the meanings behind our ceremonies and symbols, they will not be able to avail themselves of the true Masonic Light. Neither wholehearted, nor illuminated, they remain, in a spiritual sense, stuck in the North-East corner. If only a Brother mentor could persuade them to 'pass' from that position to enjoy the full privileges of Masonic life, he would confer on them, and on the Craft, a great benefit. So, Brethren, we should each ask ourselves: *'Have I moved from the North-East corner and, from the foundation stone laid, made an attempt to raise a superstructure 'perfect in its parts and honourable to the Builder'?*

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- Read at home for private study
- Shared for pre-reading by members of a discussion group
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 - Followed by 'any questions'
 - As a precursor to a discussion (*in which case much more time is needed, possibly more than double that allocated to the paper itself*)
 - Supported by audio-visual aids, if necessary.

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Rudyard Kipling

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