

What Does "Freemason" Really Mean?

By C. Bruce Hunter

When and where did the word "Freemason" originate? And what does it really mean? These are among the Craft's most enduring questions, and several answers have been proposed.

The word has been in use since the 14th century, but until the modern fraternity arose in the 18th century we find it only in a scattering of documents. And it seems no one felt the need to leave us a proper definition.

Of course, the second part is easy. It comes from the French *masoun*, which refers to a craftsman who works in stone, in other words a stonemason. Since the modern fraternity supposedly descended from medieval stonemasons, there's no problem here.

It's the first part of the word that causes confusion. It apparently served as an adjective to tell something about the stonemason. But what does it tell us?

Possible origins

There are several possibilities. One is that it originally denoted a person who was at liberty. This usually meant anyone who was not a serf (i.e. bound to a master or

feudal lord) and was therefore free to do what he wanted to do.

A good example of this is the "freelance," originally a knight at liberty to carry his lance anywhere and fight for any feudal lord willing to hire him. But the term had a special meaning for stonemasons.

Since erecting massive structures like Gothic cathedrals required more craftsmen than were available locally, these projects attracted workers from far and wide. It was primarily stonemasons who traveled from place to place to find this kind of work, and as a concession to the practical needs of their profession, they were exempted from many of the regulations and taxes local workers had to deal with. So they really did have more freedom than most craftsmen, and this may be why they were called "free masons."

But nowadays most historians favor another possibility: that "free mason" was short for "freestone mason." Freestone was the high quality stone used for decorative work, and carving it required considerable skill. Masons who worked with freestone were elite members of the profession, and today's Freemasons like to think they were the ones from whom the fraternity descended.

On the other hand, it is just possible that we can find the source of the term in more recent history.

From operative to speculative

For the most part, today's lodges trace their pedigree to the Grand Lodge of England, which was organized in London in 1717 to oversee the affairs of several lodges that had existed there for many years.

Although no one knows the pedigree of those lodges, they most likely arose in the wake of the Great Fire of London, which devastated the city in 1666. A massive rebuilding effort was necessary to restore the hundreds of structures the fire had destroyed. And to prevent another fire from devastating the city in the future, Parliament passed a law - the Rebuilding Act - requiring that all new buildings be made of brick or stone instead of wood.

This meant that large numbers of masons had to be brought in from elsewhere, because there weren't enough locals to rebuild everything the fire had destroyed. So the city was desperate to attract as many skilled masons as possible.

To do this, Parliament added a clause to the Rebuilding Act offering workers the freedom of the city for seven years. This simply meant they could come to London and work without

joining the local "companies" - organizations that amounted to labor unions, which all workers normally had to join to work within the city limits.

The "freedom of the city"

The freedom of the city was a status that had existed in London since 1237. At first it was granted to persons who were free in a sense we have already seen. They were not bound to a feudal lord and were therefore "free" to do as they pleased. They could engage in commercial activities, own land, and were originally allowed such quaint privileges as herding sheep, carrying a sword and acting drunk and disorderly in public without fear of being arrested.

Of course, after the Great Fire the freedom of the city was a little more practical. It was mostly a matter of making it easy for craftsmen to come to London and join the rebuilding effort.

But the Rebuilding Act contained another provision as well. Workers who came and stayed for seven years were granted the freedom of the city for life. Thus they were designated "Freemen of the City" of London.

The real origin of the term?

The lodges that organized the Grand Lodge of England were probably formed to serve stonemasons who came to London and earned the freedom of the city in this way. But everyone knew the building boom wouldn't go on forever. Its last major project was St. Paul's cathedral, which was completed in 1710.

After that the city had little need for visiting workers, including all the masons who had come to rebuild the city. And this is probably why the lodges that served them ceased to be craft organizations and evolved into social clubs.

Could this really be the origin of the term "free mason"? Quite possibly, and we see a clue in a document called *Masonry Dissected*, which shows what the lodges' workings were like just after the Grand Lodge was formed.

This document tells us that "if any Working Masons are at Work, and you have a desire to distinguish Accepted Masons from the rest ... by asking him, how old he is, he replies above Seven, which denotes he has pass'd Master."

Are we to believe that a person could be a master mason when he was seven years old? Of course not. But a man could be a "free" mason of the city of London after he had worked there for seven years.

Thus while the words "free" and "mason" had been used together for centuries and often described men who traveled to find work, their use by the modern lodge may have a special meaning. It may recall the men who rebuilt London after the Great Fire and who, after their work was finished, settled down to enjoy the freedom of a grateful city.

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