

VICTORIA LODGE OF EDUCATION AND RESEARCH
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AN ANCIENT LOST TROWEL RETURNS HOME

by

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The story of the recovery of the silver trowel used at the laying of the cornerstone of the Masonic Temple in Victoria, British Columbia, over a Century ago by Most Worshipful Brother Eli Harrison, Grand Master, on April 22nd, 1878

The present Masonic Temple in Victoria, British Columbia, where our Victoria Lodge of Education and Research has met regularly six times each year since 1941, is the third home of Freemasonry in the city and was built in the year 1878, 106 years ago.

In order to appreciate the circumstances of the story of the recovery of the lost trowel a very brief review of the establishment and growth of Freemasonry in the tiny community at the middle of the 19th Century seems appropriate. Our first Masonic Lodge in Victoria was in a small upstairs room in a two-story building on the S.W. corner of Yates and Langley Streets. It was here that Victoria Lodge No.1085 E.C. was Chartered on March 19th, 1859, the first Masonic Lodge in Western Canada west of Ontario. This event was followed quickly in 1862 with the Charter of Vancouver Lodge No.421 S. C., and later Columbia Royal Arch Chapter No.120 S. C. in 1867 in the Stamp Building on Government Street, all as a result of the influx of thousands of would-be miners in the search for gold in the sand bars of the mighty Fraser River emanating from the hinterland of the vast new Province of British Columbia, established in 1863.

On the entry of Vancouver Lodge No.421 in 1862, it soon became evident that the little lodge room on Langley Street was far too small to accommodate two lodges and larger premises were sought and obtained in 1866 in the Stamp Building on Government Street where View Street is today, above the Hibben & Carswell's stationery store. Here the first two Lodges were joined by British Columbia Lodge No.1187 E. C., and our first Royal Arch Chapter, both in 1867, followed by the newly formed Grand Lodge of British Columbia and by Quadra Lodge No.8 in 1871.

But again tenure in this new location was short, for in 1878 the City, requiring to construct View Street westward through to Government Street, expropriated the Stamp Building, giving notice to all tenants to vacate. The decision was then taken to build themselves a new Temple and property on Douglas Street between Fisgard and Herald Streets and acquired for that purpose at a cost of \$1,750.00 for the whole west side of the block. A competition for design was won by Bro. John Teague, a member of the amalgamated Victoria Columbia Lodge No.1, B.C.R, and construction was commenced in April of 1878.

GRAND LODGE LAYS THE CORNERSTONE

The young Grand Lodge of British Columbia, formed in 1871, was quick to seize the opportunity of gaining some publicity by arranging to lay the cornerstone of the new Masonic Temple in Victoria, a handsome and well designed building for its time, by the Architect Bro John Teague, and well sited in a prominent location on a main street near the City Hall. M.W. Bro Eli Harrison was the

Grand Master in the year 1878, serving his first of three terms in that Office (1878-80). Many hundreds of people, Masons and the public, witnessed the ceremony which was given much publicity by the local press, a four-page daily paper, the "Daily British Colonist, published by Bro. Amor De Cosmos, its editor and the Secretary of our first Lodge, and also by the local photographers. But first, before we proceed hither - who was this Amor Do Cosmos?

1.

BROTHER AMOR DE COSMOS - AN ECCENTRIC GENIUS.

A few words of explanation seem appropriate about this unusual man. Armor De Cosmos was an eccentric genius, but a genius all the same. His real name was William Alexander Smith, and he was born at Windsor, Hants County, Nova Scotia, on August 20th, 1825, the son of Jesse and Charlotte Esther Smith. He was educated at a private school and later at Windsor Academy. The family moved to Halifax in 1840, and there he was employed by Charles Whitman & Co., (printers?) and attended night school. About this time a William Smith joined a Masonic Lodge in Halifax, and in all probability this was our Amor De Cosmos.

In 1851, about the beginning of the discovery of gold there, he set out for California, which he reached after many adventures, in 1853. Finding a great many Bill Smiths there and the difficulty of getting his mail which was always going astray, he had his name legally changed to Amor De Cosmos, (Lover of the Universe). When he heard that gold had been discovered in the British lands to the north he followed the gold rush there. Being a printer by trade he founded a weekly newspaper in Victoria which he called the British Gazette, later the Daily British Colonist. He soon plunged into politics, became a member of the Provincial Legislature, Premier and was a strong advocate of Confederation with Canada and was the Secretary of our first Lodge in Victoria, Victoria Lodge No.1085 E. C

(See Historical Notes and Biographical Sketches by M.W Bro Robie L. Reid, K.C., L.L.D. Grand Historian, G.L.B.C, 1930-1945, page 6.)

THE LAYING OF THE CORNERSTONE - APRIL 22nd, 1878.

A better description of the laying of the cornerstone could not be found than that published the following day, April 23rd, by Bro. Amor De Cosmos on the front page of his daily British Colonist, so enthusiastic was he in his factual reporting. He described in detail the formal procession from the Lodge Room on Government Street to the site of the new Temple, and the address of the Grand Master to the large crowd assembled, in glowing terms of welcome, telling them of the tenets and principles of Freemasonry and the purpose of the cornerstone laying ceremony, praying to the Most High for the success of the project. The plans of the new building were presented to the Grand Master for his approval by the Architect Bro. John Teague. This Architect then, on behalf of the fraternity, presented the Grand Master with a handsome solid silver trowel, beautifully engraved for the occasion, a gift customary on such important occasions in British tradition, the workmanship of a craftsman Henry Rudolph, who maintained a watchmakers and jewelry business on Government Street. The trowel, of course, was for the use of the Grand Master in symbolically spreading the cement for the proper setting of the cornerstone.

This was the last time this trowel was ever seen by the Masons of Victoria, now over 105 years ago.

THE READING OF THE SCROLL AND DEPOSITING OF THE ARTIFACTS.

The Grand Secretary read the inscription recorded on an illuminated Scroll depicting the ceremony of the laying of the cornerstone, "dedicated to the Holy Saint John the Evangelist, and the Masonic Fraternity of the Province of British Columbia " This scroll, together with other momentos of the realm including masonic publications, newspapers of the day, coins, list of Officers, etc., was then deposited in a casket and placed in a cavity in the cornerstone by the Grand Treasurer, sealed, and the stone lowered into place in the customary formal manner of the fraternity at such inspiring events employing the symbolic application of corn, wine and oil with the prayer to long preserve this structure from decay, and grant to us all a supply of the corn of nourishment, the wine of refreshment, and the oil of joy.

The ceremony being completed, the band struck up "Rule Britannia", and the procession reformed and returned to the Lodge-room on Government Street.

2.

FIRST MEETING IN THE NEW TEMPLE.

The building was completed in the fall of 1878, and the honour of holding the first masonic lodge meeting in the new Temple went to old Victoria Lodge, originally No.1085 F C., and then after the formation of the Grand Lodge of B.C., and the lodge's amalgamation with British Columbia Lodge No.5 in 1877, named

Victoria Columbia Lodge No.1 B.C.R

THE HISTORIC TROWEL DISAPPEARS

From that day in 1878, until May 30th, 1983, nothing further was known of the now famous and historic trowel. The writer, knowing of its history from Bro. Amor De Cosmos' story in the British Colonist of April 23rd, 1878, often wondered what had become of it, as a number of more recent trowels like it had found their way into our archives,

THE LOST TROWEL IS FOUND

On May 30th, 1983, an unexpected telephone call from a friend, the Director of the Modern History Division of the British Columbia Provincial Museum in Victoria provided the clue as to its whereabouts - in the shop of a very reputable Antique Dealer in Vancouver.!!! This dealer had recently picked it up from another dealer in Victoria (Esquimalt) and had offered it to the museum (at a price). Not being too interested in possessing it themselves, the Museum contacted the writer who being informed of its whereabouts, hurried over to Vancouver and retrieved it immediately.

It could hardly be believed that being "lost" to our knowledge for over a century this historic trowel was actually back in our possession, so well preserved and in such beautiful condition, just as though it had been made yesterday, with its inscriptions and everything intact. Where could it have been hiding all these years?

The old historic trowel was placed in the keeping of the Victoria Masonic Temple Association where it rightfully belongs, and who are presently arranging for its permanent display in a prominent place in our Temple for all to see.

TEMPLE CORNERSTONE BURIED BENEATH STREET

The cornerstone of the Victoria Masonic Temple with all its treasures, has never been seen by any living person, and has remained intact since it was laid in 1878, buried beneath some three feet of paved street, the result of some street elevation many years ago. Presumably it still contains the ancient relics deposited within it so many years ago; but at least we have the written record, and now the very silver trowel used at its dedication, an honoured treasure indeed.