

Victoria Lodge of Education and Research

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THE TWENTY-FOUR INCH GAUGE

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Preamble: This paper was found on the internet which, to the presenter, answered the deeper question of the significance of the 24 inch gauge. It has been slightly modified from its original version with added material about Brother Thomas Webb.

Thomas Smith Webb is considered to be the “Founding Father of the York or American Rite.” He was born October 30, 1771 in Boston. In his early schooling he was proficient in Latin and French. It is uncertain if his profession was that of a printer or bookbinder. Later he moved to Albany, New York and opened a bookstore. Again uncertainty of his early life but somewhere round this time and location, he became involved in Freemasonry, for it was in Albany that he wrote his famous *Freemasons’ Monitor – or Illustrations of Masonry*. He gained knowledge of the craft degrees through the writings of William Preston and it is recorded that he noted the differences in some of the work as written by Preston to that which was practised in America. Much of his history, though short is found on our website and worth the effort to read.

In the early editions of his *Monitor* (1797 and on) Thomas Smith Webb wrote:

“The twenty-four inch gauge is an instrument made us of my operative Masons, to measure and lay out their work; but Free and Accepted Masons are taught to make use of it for the more noble and glorious purpose of dividing their time; it being divided into twenty-four equal parts, is emblematical of the twenty-four hours of the day, which **they** are taught to divide into three equal parts; whereby are found eight hours for the service of God and a distressed worthy brother; eight hours for their usual **avocations**; and eight for refreshment and sleep.”

Time and the often witless tinkering of well-meaning but uninformed brethren have altered here a word and there a phrase; in some Jurisdictions it is now “Vocations,” in others it is “we” instead of “they” and so on.

Avocation is defined as a second job as opposed to a vocation implying one’s main occupation.

In essence most Jurisdictions use the paragraph as the great ritualist phrased it for us 200 years ago. Unfortunately, he did not go deeply into the symbolism of the gauge, leaving it to us to dig out for ourselves its concealed meanings, and learn from it, as we are able to learn; thinking through it, as we are able to think.

Like most Masonic symbols, it conceals far more than it reveals. Like many, the monitorial explanation deals only with the obvious meaning, leaving the inner symbolism for the Masonic scholar (working in the quarries of the written ritual and its many 18th century phrases), to seek the hidden truths that Freemasonry discloses to all who study.

Among the oldest of man’s beginnings of civilization, measures seem to have originated among all peoples with parts of the human body: the foot, the hand, the palm, the digit, the cubit (elbow to tip of the middle finger) *etc.* The word “inch” comes (as does “ounce”) from the Latin “*uncia*,” a twelfth part of a pound or foot. Some contend that the origin of an inch was in the thumb joint. Both foot and Roman “*uncia*” are very old and our ancient brethren of the Gothic Cathedral building age must surely have known both. But what is important is not the name of the measure but the division of the gauge into units, and their applicability to time. The relation of

twenty-four inches to twenty-four hours is plain enough, but when we examine just what it is that is divided into twenty-four parts, the explanation becomes difficult.

What is time? To most of us it is the duration between two noons; the elapsed interval between any two events; the passage of a certain fraction of life. To the philosopher, time is an unknown quantity. Like space, it appears to be a conception of the mind, without objective existence. Modern mathematicians contend that time and space are but two faces of the same idea, like the two sides of a shield. While we can comprehend one without reference to the other, we cannot “use” one without the other. Every material thing occupies space for a certain time; every material thing existing for a specified time, occupies space.

We pass through space in three directions - up and down, right and left, forward and back. We pass through time, apparently, continuously in one direction from birth to death. We cannot go back for even the smallest fraction of an instant. Omar_Khayyám wrote: “The moving finger writes; and having writ, moves on; nor all piety, nor wit shall lure it back to cancel half a line, nor all your tears wash out a word of it.”

The operative workman measures his stone with his gauge; if the ashlar is too long, he shortens it. If it is too broad, he narrows it. If it too crooked to make square, he casts it on the rubbish heap and begins anew with a rough ashlar.

But the Speculative Mason, measuring his time with the twenty-four inch gauge, has no such latitude. The ruined minute is forever away; the crooked hour can never be made straight. The day unfit for the “building not made with hands” can never be set in the Eternal Wall, nor can the workman find in any quarry a new day to mould. Thinking of it thus, could any symbol cry a more clarion call for accuracy of labor? For skill with which to work? For care and pains in building?

“Eight hours for the service of God and a worthy distressed brother, eight hours for their usual avocation, and eight for refreshment and sleep.”

There is no time to waste. There is no time to be lost. There is no time for idleness. Thomas Smith Webb built better than he knew when, with so sparing a hand, he laid out the speculative Mason’s time for the lighter side of life. In his conception, all such must be taken from the eight hours allotted to refreshment and sleep. He who would “pass the time away” — he who would indulge in “pastimes,” must, according to the Monitor, take these hours from bed!

To divide our twenty-four hours into three equal parts is a very practical, everyday admonition. Here is no erudite philosophy such as “*laborer est orare*” — “to labor is to pray,” or “labour is prayer.” Nor is there any suggestion that even refreshment may be in the “service of God.” Again, the old ritualist knew his audience. His instructions are simple; their wisdom is only for those who wish to look beneath the surface.

For these, indeed, the whole twenty-four hours may be literally “in the service of God” since labor and sleep are necessary for life as we have to live it, and it is a poor theology which does not teach the common lot to be the Will of God.

In 1784 Sir William Jones, an English philologist, wrote: “Seven hours to law, to soothing slumber seven, Ten to the world allot, and all to heaven.”

Webb does not so put it, but if the eight hours for labor is also to be “in the service of God,” it must be labor which results in good work, true work, square work. Refreshment of mind and body which is an offering to heaven must be clean and wholesome, if on the morrow the laborer is to be wholesome and clean for new labor, and prayer and service.

The Mason interested in a further interpretation of the three-fold division of twenty-four hours need look no further than the Great Light upon his Altar - indeed, he need only turn back from Ecclesiastes XII to Ecclesiastes XIII to find the inspiration of this Monitorial

admonition that there is a time for everything. We read: "To everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven; a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; a time to kill and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; a time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace."

But nowhere in the wise counsel of prophet or patriot, preacher or teacher, is there set forth a time to waste time.

Time is the very substance of life, its golden minutes the only stones we have with which to build. Every accomplishment of man, be it Temple of marble or Temple of character, act of selfishness or act of selfless giving to others, building a nation or building a house, must be accomplished with "Time." Without time nothing is ever done. Hence he who wastes either his time or another's, squanders that which he cannot replace; which comes from we know not where, to go we know not where, but which once gone, is gone forever.

Around us are many varieties of men with as many ideas of how time should be spent. Every human being has the same number of minutes in an hour, of hours in a day, of days in a year. Some have little or nothing to show for their thirty, forty, or fifty years. Others have great accomplishments to exhibit as the product of their time. Lincoln used all the time he did not need to devote to his usual avocation to mastering geometry, learning politics, understanding the question of slavery. Albert Pike made himself a learned scholar by constant use of spare time. These men knew what the twenty-four inch gauge really meant, how profound a symbol it is.

It provokes sober thought to apply the Masonic rule to a determination of how long we really have. Our days are allotted as three score and ten. We rarely start on our life work before we are twenty. Of the fifty years of actual time for labor, we are admonished to spend a third in the service of God and a distressed worthy brother, a third in refreshment and sleep, and but a third in labor - not quite seventeen years in which to accomplish all we have to do! No wonder so few of us leave behind a monument which will stand long enough to be seen by the coming generation, still less one which will last through the ages.

"But, the harder the task, the greater the joy of accomplishment!" Much has been made of the amount of time spent in the "service of God and a distressed worthy brother" by enemies of the Craft, who have tried to read into this caution the thought that the other sixteen hours are to be used without service to God, and that only a distressed "brother" is to share in our labors. This, of course, is false. If we instruct a workman to build a wall, we mean that he is to carry the brick, make the mortar, lay the courses, level the whole, leave an opening for the gate, point up the joints - that is, do the whole job!

"Service to God," then, does not mean merely spending time upon ones knees in prayer, but living life acceptable to the Great Architect. By "worthy distressed brother" we have no reason to assume that Masonry means only "brother of the Mystic Tie." Masons are repeatedly bidden to turn to the Great Light as the rule and guide of faith and practice. Here we find "inasmuch as ye do it into the least of these . . ." And all men who own to a common Father are brothers.

The attentive Freemason quickly notes how frequently are the Masonic allusions to work, and how few to refreshment. Our twenty-four inch gauge gives us - almost grudgingly, it seems - eight hours for two occupations of which we know one needs the greater part - eight hours for refreshment and sleep. The other sixteen are for labor, work, effort, doing.

To him who finds labor irksome, the twenty-four inch gauge must be a painful symbol. Alas, all symbols are painful for the idle! But for those who have learned life's greatest lesson, that the most lasting joy comes from accomplishment, the symbol is beautiful.

Fortunate is the man who is happy at his daily task; discontented is he who has not found his work. For him who likes his job, sixteen hours a day are scarce enough. Find the carpenter who carves wood in his spare hours, the bookkeeper who spends his evenings doing mathematics, the doctor whose leisure is spent teaching his healing art, and you hear men singing at their labors; men who curse the clocks which go too fast!

Find the Mason interested in the Ancient Craft, prompt to offer his services for visiting the sick, doing committee work, helping the Tyler, laboring on Fellowcraft or Degree Team, and you see someone happy in his lodge.

Such men have no time to waste - all have some division of their gauge of time which makes every minute count with "sixty seconds worth of distance run."

Time - substance of life! Time - gift of the Great Architect! Time - building stone for the spiritual temple! Time - man's greatest mystery, bitterest enemy, truest friend! Its care, conservation, and employment, is the secret of the twenty-four inch gauge - its waste and aimless spending is the sin against which this symbolic working tool unalterably aligns the Ancient Craft.

The Scythe, emblem of Time, wins in the end. We can race with Father Time for but a little while." But we can win while we are permitted to race." And at the end, the great ruler of our lives is merciful! As you think of the twenty-four inch gauge and its three divisions, think also of these tender and beautiful words written of the mighty servant, mightier master, Time:

"I bring you woe and scalding tears and all life holds of sadness,
Because I am remorseless, your heart in torture pays
In bitter coin of memories of times when time was madness.
"I am the passing hours; I am your march of days."

Enemy and best of friends am I to those who sorrow;
Pitiless in passing, yet oh, so slow, so slow.
I hurry to the sleeping grayness of tomorrow;
Sluggard in my sun-down, I never seem to go . . .
Little bit by even less, all pain I can diminish,
Slowly win the smile to eyes that now know but to weep.
I began your race with life, and I shall see its finish;
my arms, and none but mine, shall in the end give sleep.
I linger not for anyone, yet I may not be hastened;
You must bear your agony until I bid it cease . . .
But when your head is in the dust, and all your pride is chastened,
"At long last, I promise you, I bring the gift of peace."

Some quotations:

"Don't say you don't have enough time. You have exactly the same number of hours per day that were given to Helen Keller, Pasteur, Michelangelo, Mother Teresa, Leonardo Da Vinci, Thomas Jefferson, and Albert Einstein." ~ H. Jackson Brown

"Waste no more time arguing what a good man should be, be one." ~ Marcus Aurelius

"Until you value yourself, you will not value your time. Until you value your time, you will not do anything with it." ~ M. Scott Peck

"If you haven't got the time to do it right, when will you find the time to do it over?" ~ Jeffery J. Mayer

Some comments from the discussion after delivery of the paper:

[1] The 24 inch gauge is a standard measure of length. It reminds us to measure our initial standards when we enter Freemasonry. We ask our new brother to set standards for himself.

[2] The journey from the rough ashlar to the smooth ashlar is just a beginning and we ask our new brother that this is the “measure of a man.”

[3] Without structure in our lives we live in chaos. The 24 inch gauge begins to build that structure, both in admonishing us to carefully use our time, and in using the analogy that the measured ruler begins a standard by which to follow, always correct and always accurate.

[4] As the gauge is opened in a particular way it can increase in length and so present to us the ‘going forward into a new life.’