

Lodge Boards

- Scott Rowe

As part of the rituals in our Masonic Lodges, there is an explanation given of the appropriate tracing board for each degree. Done after the initiate has been formally obligated and resumed his personal comforts, these lectures are intended to leave the candidate with some more graphic images and detailed meanings of the symbols, which he has been exposed to in the Work.

Technically the term tracing board, although widely used in lodges today, could be more accurately called the Lodge Board. Any Mason who has had the rare privilege to witness a newly consecrated Lodge will see that in the course of the ceremony it is stated "Let the Lodge Board be uncovered." at which point what we now call the First Degree tracing board is revealed. In modern ritual the true tracing board still remains the plain tablet which rests in close proximity to the Master and is there for him to "lay lines and draw designs" on.

To appreciate the actual origins of Masonic tracing boards it is necessary to go back to the early days of the Craft. Almost everywhere Lodge meetings were then held in a local tavern, where there would be sufficient room for the members to assemble and perform the necessary floor work. More than one enterprising barkeep was known to put up signs stating, "Masons made for half a crown" or "Masons made for a round of drinks". Tavern floors in those days were covered in sand and symbols were roughly traced thereon, including the square, compass, blazing star, etc.

When the traditional sanded floors gave way to hardwood planks, the practice of tracing the lodge continued. Often this duty was delegated as part of a Tyler's duties before the start of the meeting, and was it was considered appropriate to pay the Brother for his time and effort to do so. Chalk or charcoal was used for this purpose and it was customary in many Lodges for the new initiate of the degree to be responsible for washing the floor after the meeting was over. This was not meant as a menial task but more to impress upon the candidate that what took place in the Lodge room was not to be communicated to the outside world.

At some point it was apparent that the tracing boards could be produced on canvas and simply rolled out before the commencement of a meeting, saving considerable time and effort. And so the term "Drawing the Lodge" became obsolete and the memory of the practice forgotten. When lodges became permanently located and the beautiful tiles and carpets became fixtures, it was a natural progression for the canvas tracing boards to become permanent works of art that were affixed to walls around the lodge room.

Although specific tracing boards are not constitutionally mandated to conform to a certain pattern, there is wide acceptance of three designed for use in the early 1800s and which we still refer to today. These are even more significant when one

considers how they evolved from the sand floors of English taverns some hundred years prior.