

An Explanation of the History, Symbolism, and Meaning of the Mark Master Degree

Virginia Research Royal Arch Chapter No. 1753

Right Excellent Companion Jeremy B. Utt

April 11, 2015

The Mark Master Degree is, for Virginia and West Virginia Freemasons, the first of seven degrees of Royal Arch Masonry that a Master Mason can obtain, owing to the fact that in these jurisdictions, the Cryptic degrees are controlled by their respective Grand Royal Arch Chapters. In all of the other American Grand Royal Arch Chapter jurisdictions, the Mark Master Degree is the first of four degrees of Royal Arch Masonry. In some parts of the world, the Mark Master Degree is conferred in Mark Master Masons lodges, lodges independent of Royal Arch Chapters, or even in Craft lodges, instead of in a Royal Arch Chapter.

In England and Wales, and in several other parts of the world, the Mark Master Degree is conferred in Mark Master Mason lodges beholden to the *Grand Lodge of Mark Master Masons of England and Wales and its Districts and Lodges Overseas*, which is headquartered in Mark Masons' Hall in London. In Scotland, the Mark Master Degree may be conferred in a Craft lodge or in a Royal Arch Chapter. "Under the constitution of the Grand Lodge of Scotland the Mark is considered an extension of the Fellowcraft degree but under an agreement signed between Grand Lodge of Scotland and Supreme Grand Chapter it is only conferred on Master Masons."¹

History

The practice of stonemasons placing identifying symbols upon their work goes back to ancient times. The symbol was known as a *Mark*. During the Middle Ages, operative lodges maintained Books of Marks where member Marks were registered.² In his account of the history of the Mark Master Mason Degree, Rev. Jan L. Bederstadt, in *The Making of the Mark*, states, "In keeping with the tradition of the stone masons of the middle ages, marking one's mark on the cut stone was standard operating procedure. No finished stone could be submitted for acceptance unless it bore the cutter's mark. A survey of stones in both ancient Israel; and medieval European structures show that such practice was common place."³

Referencing *Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia*, Rev. Bederstadt mentions "the first evidence of using a mark in Masonry was recorded in the minutes of the June 8, 1600 meeting of the lodge in Edinburgh, Scotland."⁴ In the minutes, William Schaw, Master of Work to the King (King James VI of Scotland, who would within three years also be King James I of England), who was in attendance at the meeting, signed his name and affixed his mark.⁵

According to the Mark Master Masons of Cornwall, "The first mention of a brother being made a Mark Mason was at a Lodge in Newcastle in January 1756, although earlier references to a brother having 'received his mark' are known. [However], it is not clear from

¹ "Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons of Alberta"

<http://www.royalarchmasonsAlberta.com/index.php/library/aspeslet-library/general/236-the-royal-arch-in-scotland> (September 19, 2014)

² Frederick G. Speidel, *The York Rite of Freemasonry, A History and Handbook* (Mitchell-Fleming Printing, Inc.), 26.

³ Rev. Jan L. Bederstadt, *The Making of the Mark* (Turner, Michigan: Coffee Time Press, 2005), 7.

⁴ Ibid, 7.

⁵ Ibid, 7.

these records whether a degree ceremony was being worked.”⁶ In *The York Rite of Freemasonry: A History and Handbook*, Frederick G. Speidel writes, “The first reference to the conferral of a Mark degree is found in the minutes of Phoenix Royal Arch Chapter, working within Friendship Lodge at Portsmouth, England, on September 1, 1769. In that account, Thomas Dunckerley, the Pro Grand Master of the ‘Modern’ Grand Lodge delivered the Warrant to the Chapter and ‘he made the brethren *Mark Masons* and *Mark Masters*, and each chose their Mark.”⁷

This is the first known speculative Mark degree work. Speidel mentions that there were two degrees conferred, the Mark Mason in the Fellowcraft lodges and the Mark Master in Master Mason lodges, instead of the current practice of just conferring the Mark Master Degree.⁸ What we know of as the Mark Master Degree became attached to the Royal Arch Chapter in many jurisdictions, except where there are Mark Master Lodges separate from Royal Arch Chapters. England is one of the areas where the Mark Master Degree is separate from Royal Arch Masonry, due to political circumstances related to the disputes between the English Ancients and Moderns, and their subsequent Union in 1813. The articles of union that created the United Grand Lodge of England excluded the Mark degree. In the United Grand Lodge of England, the Holy Royal Arch is an appendant order attached to Craft lodges.

Symbolism and Meaning

In *The Masonic Ladder or the Nine Steps to Ancient Freemasonry*, John Sherer wrote in the 19th century, “So practical is the Mark Master’s Degree in its character, as conferred in the United States, that its principal device, The Key-Stone, is publicly worn, bearing the same relation to the so-called ‘Higher Degrees’ which the symbol of the Square and Compass bears to the ‘Lower Degrees’.”⁹

The Mark Master Degree teaches the values of honest employment and charitable activity. As mentioned, the Mark Master Degree is seen in Scotland as an extension of the Fellowcraft Degree. Sherer states, “In theory, the Degree of Mark Master is appendant to that of Fellow Craft, and could its traditions be historically established, might, with propriety, be conferred upon Fellow Crafts as the complement of that grade. Its original members were merely Fellow Crafts; its lectures describe the manner in which Fellow Crafts were classified, governed, and paid; its covenants have direct application to Fellow Crafts alone.”¹⁰ Despite the connection that the Mark Master Degree has to the Fellowcraft Degree, there is now a universal requirement that one be a Master Mason prior to obtaining the Mark Master Degree.

Rev. Beaderstadt writes, “The Mark Master Degree is the first time a Bible reading comes from the New Testament . . . Freemasonry begins with the Old Testament because it

⁶ “Mark Master Masons of Cornwall”

<http://www.markmastermasonsofcornwall.org.uk/history-of-mark-master-masons> (September 19, 2014)

⁷ Speidel, 27.

⁸ Ibid, 27.

⁹ John Sherer, *The Masonic Ladder or the Nine Steps to Ancient Freemasonry* (Cincinnati: R.W. Carroll & Co., 1872), 108.

¹⁰ Ibid, 109.

is the foundation of our faith . . . the fraternity builds upon the character of the Old Testament before making any movement toward the New Testament.”¹¹ The Bible passage referred to by Rev. Baderstadt is Matthew 20: 1-16, Jesus’s parable about the workmen in the vineyard. Expounding upon the passage, Rev. Baderstadt states, “It is human nature to expect that those who have served the longest will receive the greatest honor. But the kingdom of God does not work that way. Salvation comes to all who have faith.”¹² According to Rev. Baderstadt, “The great lesson of this degree is to be active in the practice of charity.”¹³

Given the lessons that it teaches, the Mark Master Degree is important in the development of a Master Mason as he works to achieve more light in Freemasonry. It provides the Master Mason with important lessons regarding honesty and charity, while extending lessons learned in the Fellowcraft Degree.

¹¹ Baderstadt, 11.

¹² Ibid, 14-15.

¹³ Ibid, 20.