



Education Monthly

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The Landmarks of Freemasonry

This month we are presenting what has been a controversial topic, that of the Ancient Landmarks. I've been involved recently in an on-line discussion of landmarks. What they are and what they mean. What follows is a discussion of this topic. I have used material obtained from W.Bro. David Oddy of the United Grand Lodge of England to whom I am indebted.

Our Grand Lodge does NOT have an official list. However we do hear references to them in the ritual. What are they? Why are they often controversial?

As with many other practices and customs for which no clear reason exists, other than "it's the way we've always done it", any definition of a Landmark will always be open to challenge. A Landmark should be a reflection of the long established custom or practice, which is central to the principles, objectives and beliefs of an organisation.

In ancient times it was the custom to mark the boundaries of lands by means of stone pillars, the removal of which could cause much confusion as the people had no other guide to distinguish the limits of their property. To remove these pillars, therefore, was considered a most heinous crime. "Thou shalt not," says the Jewish law, "remove thy neighbour's landmark, which they of old time have set in thine inheritance." Hence those peculiar marks of distinction by which we are separated from the non Masonic world, and by which we are able to designate our inheritance, are called the Landmarks of the Order.

To attempt to remove or alter any of our sacred landmarks is something no Mason would willingly countenance. Some have said that it would be "a heinous crime". That would be hard to accept since there is no clear exposition of these landmarks on which all would agree. And to compile a list of them today would be difficult or impossible given the probable necessity of deleting some which would in itself be a violation of one of the landmarks i.e. that the landmarks must not be changed!. Something of a catch 22!

The question as to what are, or are not, the Landmarks of Freemasonry has long been the subject of diverse opinion among Masons. It has been said, "some would restrict them to the signs, tokens and words". Others include the ceremonies of initiation, passing and raising and the form, dimensions, and support; the ground, situation, and covering; the ornaments, furniture, and jewels of a lodge, or their characteristic symbols. Some think that the Order has

no Landmarks beyond its peculiar secrets. But all of these are loose and unsatisfactory definitions, excluding things that may be considered essential, while admitting others that could be deemed to be unessential.

Perhaps the safest method is to restrict them to those ancient, and therefore universal, customs of the Order, which either gradually grew into operation as rules of action, or have been enacted from time beyond memory and are, therefore, “of higher Antiquity than memory or history can reach.”

The first requisite, therefore, of a custom or rule of action to constitute it a Landmark is, that it must have existed from “ a time whereof the memory of man runneth not to the contrary.” Its antiquity is its essential element. Were it possible for all the Masonic authorities to unite in a universal congress, and with the most perfect unanimity to adopt any new regulation. Such regulation would, so long as it remained unrepealed, be obligatory on the whole Craft, yet it would not be a landmark. It would have the character of universality, it is true, but it would be wanting of antiquity.

Another peculiarity of these landmarks of Freemasonry is that they cannot be repealed. As the congress just alluded to would not have the power to enact a landmark, so neither would it have the prerogative of abolishing one. The landmarks of the Order, like the laws of Medes and the Persians, can suffer no change. What they were centuries ago, they still remain, and must so continue in force until Masonry itself shall cease to exist.

Until the year 1858, no attempt had been made by any Masonic writer to distinctly enumerate the Landmarks of Freemasonry, and to give to them a comprehensible form. In October of that year the Quarterly Review of American Freemasonry published an article that enumerated twenty-four distinct Landmarks of Freemasonry. Space does not permit this edition to publish all of them, nor would I do so. I leave it to you to seek out what these landmarks are and to discuss their importance to Masonry today.

I'd welcome your comment on this article. I suspect that we could devote a whole issue to comments should there be sufficient interest in doing so. I'm always glad to receive feedback on the topics covered in Education Monthly. I'd also welcome submissions of your own work. Articles should be both relevant and SHORT (500 to 800 words)

Finally if you didn't receive this edition directly and would like to do so please e-mail me at forster.john@me.com and I'd be happy to put your name on the direct e-mail list. Alternatively you can always read this and all past issues on the Grand Lodge web site that is becoming an excellent source of Masonic knowledge and discussion. If you haven't already done so I'd strongly recommend you register. It's easy to do and well worth it.

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