

The Trestle Board or Masonic Tracing Board..... Why We Square the Lodge



A Masonic trestle board is a design board for the Master Workman or Architect to draw his plans and designs upon to give the workmen an outline of the work that needs to be performed. In today's terms, we would call it a blueprint. It's one of the 3 Movable jewels in the Lodge.

A trestle board is a framework consisting of (usually 3) vertical, slanted supports (or legs) with one or more horizontal crosspieces on which to hang or display an item. Today, we call it an "easel".

Some jurisdictions around the world call it a tracing board. It would be somewhat of a "circular logic" task to argue the difference, while neither word can be fully proven in historical writings; the "tracing board" may very well have preceded the use of the word "Trestleboard".



Hiram Abif's tracing board was most likely made of wood, covered with a coating of wax. Each day he would draw his Master architect's measurements and symbols into the wax in order to instruct his Master Masons of the work that was to be accomplished.

At the end of the day, he would simply scrape off the wax and pour a new layer of hot wax onto the board to ready it for the next day's work. Much later, in the days when Lodges were held in secret places, or on high hills or low vales, once lodge was in session, the Tyler would draw an oblong square image into the dirt that represented the form of the lodge. Again, onto that tracing board was drawn the architect's plan...the working tools of the degree that was to be worked.

Through the years, the Masonic Tracing Board progressed to charcoal or chalk on the floor of taverns where lodges were held back in the 1700s. After the lecture, the Stewards or the Entered Apprentice, as a lesson in secrecy, would get a mop and bucket and remove all trace of these drawings. This, obviously, was a somewhat tedious and messy procedure, so cloths or rugs were created which could be laid onto the floor and simply folded up when the lecture was complete.

Later, these cloths were placed onto a table. As time passed, they were finally hung onto an easel (or a trestle board) much like a drawing board at a construction site where each workman could receive clear instructions as to what his specific part in the project entailed.

When the team's work was completed, it was obvious that each Master Mason not only understood their specific part in the undertaking, but how their part (no matter how small), contributed to the construction of the entire edifice.

Several places in my search of old Masonic books and on the web, I found these words.... "Nothing further remains to be done, according to ancient custom, except to disarrange our emblems". I believe it's a reference to the now antiquated use of these trestleboards during which the dirt on the ground was erased or the chalk marks on the floor of these lodges was mopped or scrubbed, thus leaving no trace of the form of the Lodge or the contents drawn thereon.

The act of 'squaring the lodge'....The reason why our lines of travel are at right angles within the lodge, and thus the reason that we "square" the lodge, is a "throwback" to the antiquity of the ritual. If the brethren were to walk atop the markings made in the dirt; atop the chalk on the floor of the taverns; or walk upon and thus soil the cloths or rugs used to provide the workings of that degree, the message of that particular portion of the ritual could be partially or even fully destroyed.

Therefore, "Squaring the Lodge" in a semi-military-like precision, goes back many centuries as the means of preserving the ritual and the degrees being worked so as not to destroy the symbolism of their markings before their usefulness on that day had been completed.

And there, my Brethren, you have another nugget carefully removed from the quarry of Freemasonry.

Portions adapted from: lodgeeducation.com

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