

The Canadian Three-Penny Beaver - A Masonic stamp?



Most stamp collectors are aware of the significance of Canada's first postage stamp, the three-pence or three-penny beaver released in 1851. It was the first stamp in the world to depict an animal. It was also the first stamp in the British Empire to not depict a member of the Monarchy and the first adhesive stamp used in Canada. As we see, it was a stamp of many firsts including, I believe, the first postage stamp to depict Masonic symbolism. This makes it the oldest Masonic-related stamp in the world!

I contend that the inclusion of the Masonic symbolism was a deliberate act, and I will provide what I believe to be a credible argument to support my theory. In doing so, I will attempt to provide an explanation behind the Masonic symbolism and attempt to interpret its meaning. Furthermore I will identify the men I believe were responsible for this mystery.

Many stamps are full of symbolism, some symbols are overt, while others are sublime; the Three-Penny Beaver has both. For example, the crown representing the 3 British Monarch is placed upon a rose, shamrock, and thistle—emblematic of the countries that comprise the United Kingdom (England, Ireland and Scotland)-- and on either side are the letters "V R" (Victoria Regina) representing Queen Victoria. The beaver itself is representative of the animal whose pelt was largely responsible for establishing the Canadian economy and fostering the development of this country. Growing beside the flowing waterfalls are several flowers that appear to be trilliums, the flower known since 1760 as the "True Love of Canada" (1).

Behind the beaver we see two different forest scenes, symbolic of the rugged forests of this new land--one complex and the other quite amateurish. All of this symbolism makes perfectly good sense in the context in which it was created, except for one symbol that until now has escaped critical interpretation. That symbol is the sun.

Oddly the sun is quite subtle, blending peacefully into the background and allowing all of the other symbols and design features to assume center stage. The sun is hardly worth noting because it is such a common illustration, even if it has a face. Other than its rays and a clump of crude pine trees there is little to draw the viewer's eye.

Until now nobody has bothered to question why the sun depicted on this stamp has a face. Indeed, many people are not even aware the sun has a face, and when it is pointed out to them they experience a feeling similar to the scene in the Da Vinci Code --when we realize that an apostle does look like a woman in the painting of "The Last Supper." Like the mysterious feminine looking apostle in this painting, the sun face has always been present, but it has been invisible to many until now.



The Three-Penny Beaver – is it a Masonic stamp? Not only does the sun on the Three-Penny Beaver have a face, that specific design is clearly a Masonic symbol!

The question, therefore, that needs to be addressed is: if the stamp designer wished to incorporate a face on the sun, why did he choose this specific design?

One could also question why the designer incorporated such a childlike sun design on what is otherwise a very dignified stamp. He could have had used round eyes, a smile, an open mouth or used wavy lines for the sunrays. After all, the designer obviously knew that using an animal in place of a monarch was breaking the rules of protocol for this momentous and historical occasion (especially by replacing the monarch with a rodent).

My Hypothesis. To understand the Masonic symbolism in this stamp one needs to understand a bit about Freemasonry, and for the purpose of this essay I am asking the reader to accept the premise that the top of the stamp is north, the right side the east, and the left the west.

Though the practice of Freemasonry around the world varies slightly, there are many things that are the same regardless of the jurisdiction. Everyone knows that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, and as a result it is considered sacred in many religions and mysteries. In Freemasonry the Lodge is a symbol of the world, and the Master who governs the Lodge sits in the east represents the sun.

The Three-Penny Beaver stamp is relatively consistent in its tone and shading except for the area around the sun, which is the brightest area on the entire stamp. As a result, our eyes are drawn to this space and the clump of pine trees illuminated below it. In contrast, the area above the beaver's head is darker and cloudier. This contrast between light and darkness is pure Masonic symbolism. Masonically speaking, the sun, which is the source of material light, is the intellectual light of which a Mason is in search of (knowledge). As the sun travels to the west (ignorance) it spreads the light of knowledge. Certain numbers play an important part in Masonic ritual and the most important numbers are three, five and seven.

Historians have often question why Upper Canada decided to break with protocol and produce a postage stamp with an animal depicted on it--but have you ever wondered why it was the first stamp instead of the second or even third? Three stamps were commissioned and the 6d, and 12d stamps depicted Prince Albert and Queen Victoria respectively. So, why wouldn't the designer put the Queen on the first stamp in the series, and place the rodent on the third? Arguably the most consistent number in Masonic symbolism is the number three and it comes as no surprise that this stamp is a three-pence/cent stamp. There are three degrees in Freemasonry; three principal officers; three original Grand Masters; three lesser lights; three great lights, and so forth. Certain numbers play an important part in Masonic ritual and the most important numbers are three, five and seven.

Some would argue that Queen Victoria was placed on the 12d because it was the highest denomination. However, that argument is weak because the lowest denomination would have been the stamp used the most, and being the first stamp for Upper Canada, protocol would have dictated that Victoria should have been the main feature on the stamp. Therefore it would only make sense to include the Masonic symbolism on the stamp bearing the mysterious number three. This is because six has no meaning to Freemasonry, and twelve (although a number of considerable value) has far less significant meaning to the fraternity.



As previously stated, the Crown rests on the symbols of the United Kingdom--the rose, thistle and shamrock. However, these symbols are not depicted equally--we see one rose, two shamrocks, and two thistles. These combine to provide the number five, which is symbolic of the five officers that hold a lodge, and is also an allusion to the five noble orders of architecture: the Tuscan, Doric, Ionic, Corinthian and Composite. The Three-Penny Beaver has the sun shining above six evergreen trees, which when combined with the sun provide the number seven. Seven is the number, which Pythagoreans called the “perfect number.” It is the number of Freemasons required to make a Lodge perfect (a Quorum). It also refers to the seven liberal arts and sciences that all Freemasons are encouraged to study. The six trees are evergreens. In Freemasonry, the evergreen is symbolic of the immortality of the soul. Freemasons wear a sprig of evergreen at the funerals of their brethren. Furthermore, the six evergreens are not standing perpendicular as would be expected. Instead they are leaning forward or bowing towards the sun. Here one might interpret that the trees (representing members of a Lodge) are bowing towards the Master of the Lodge as a sign of respect (recognition of his authority over the Lodge).



Another example of Masonic symbolism, known to all Freemasons, is the reference to an ear of corn (wheat) by a stream of flowing water. We see on the stamp that the stream of flowing water beneath the beaver is next to the sheaf of wheat surrounding the numeral three.

None of this symbolism would be obvious to anyone, including its intended audience of Freemasons, if the stamp designer had not chosen to use a specific symbol that would be recognizable to Freemasons worldwide. Utilizing the recognizable “Square and Compasses” would have been too obvious, and the plot would have been immediately evident and quashed. As a result, a less obvious symbol was required. That symbol was the sun with its very specific face. Not only is it symbolic of the Fraternity and the Master of a lodge but also this specific design is the symbol for the highest Masonic officer-- the Grand Master. The sun face symbol is depicted on the apron of nearly every Grand Master in the world. The positioning of the sun in the stamp design seems normal, because most viewers would assume it was there because the sun rises in the east. However its positioning was quite deliberate.

The designer had several options available to him. He could have chosen to make the sun smaller and place it higher in the east, or placed it in the upper left portion of the stamp, or not included it at all. Instead, he chose to place it ‘Masonically’ (rising in the east). Placing the sun higher in the design would not have been acceptable because that would have placed it above the symbol of Monarch (the “V R”) and the realm (rose, shamrock, and thistle).

For this reason, the sun representing Freemasonry was placed respectfully below these symbols, which makes perfect sense to Freemasons. Although the Grand Master reigns supreme within his jurisdiction, a British/Canadian Freemason’s supreme allegiance is to God, his Monarch and his country. In short, placing a symbol that represents the Grand Master or Freemasonry above the symbol of the Monarch and his country would not be appropriate or acceptable. It simply would not have been done.

It is important to understand that the interpretation of the symbolism in this stamp should be taken in the context of its period in history. One hundred and sixty years ago Canada was not yet a country, what existed were the colonies of New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island Nova Scotia, Upper and Lower Canada (Ontario and Quebec). The West had not yet been colonized and the rest was pretty much owned by the Hudson Bay Company. Freemasons throughout the British Empire were fiercely loyal to the Crown.

Understandably the assumption that the beaver was chosen as the focal point of this stamp was because of its direct connection to Canada, but could there have been a Masonic connection to the beaver? The answer is Yes, and it was first used in England in 1717, was adopted in America in 1733 and it is still in use to this day!

Reference to a beaver in Masonic ritual to my knowledge will not be found, whereas other symbols of industry such as the beehive do exist. The ‘Masonic beaver’ can be found in both the seal of the Premier Grand Lodge of England “the Moderns” and the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts. The taste of bitterness takes a long time to fade and though this stamp was designed in 1851, fraternal harmony did not really occur with the union of the Moderns and Ancients in 1813 a mere 38 years before this stamp was released.

In a Fraternity that values peace, respect and harmony, the 96-year war of words and hostility was very un-Masonic and its effects were long lasting. In order to understand this situation a short history lesson on the creation of modern Freemasonry is necessary.

Nobody knows the true origins of Freemasonry, but in 1717 four Lodges in the London area met and formed a Grand Lodge that declared itself as the regulatory body over the craft in England. It subsequently elected a Grand Master and then compiled a book of constitutions. The Grand Lodge of England then began affiliating many of the existing lodges and warranting new ones around the world including North America. In reality there were many other lodges in existence besides the four that created a Grand Lodge, especially in Scotland, and Ireland and not everyone was happy about the creation of this new governing body.

Many of the preexisting lodges refused to affiliate or recognize the authority of the new Grand Lodge and as the Grand Lodge of England grew, a great deal of antipathy developed largely due to the changes in ritual and procedure. As a result a rival Grand Lodge was created in 1751. This new body called themselves the “the Ancient Grand Lodge of England or “Ancients” because they were adhering to the old customs of Freemasonry and they dubbed the other the “Moderns”.



Both Grand Lodges had official seals and the seal of the Ancients had two winged angels supporting their crest while the Moderns seal had two beavers supporting theirs. Politics is said to be the art of compromise, but the act of compromising seldom satisfies the participants. Though the two rivals managed to put aside many of their differences in 1813 both sides had to give in on strongly held opinions as to how Freemasonry should be conducted and governed. In the end the official ritual became a hybrid of the Ancients and Moderns and the new design of the United Grand Lodge of England official seal included the crests of both but favored the Ancients 9 over the Moderns when the beavers were dropped from the design in favor of the angels.



While the Ancients and Moderns were squabbling in England, Freemasonry was expanding elsewhere with both rival English Grand Lodges along with the Grand Lodges of Ireland and Scotland were creating Provincial jurisdictions around the world. When union was finally achieved between the two rival English Lodges all the Lodges under their jurisdiction were expected to comply with dictates of the new united grand lodge. This occurred in all jurisdictions that were still part of the English empire but time had passed by in the United States of America, who with obtaining independence from England established their own independent Grand Lodges and retained their original rituals.



The Grand Lodge of Massachusetts lineage stems directly from the first Grand Lodge of England (Moderns) when Henry Price was created the Provincial Grand Master of New England in 1733. The Moderns Grand Master in turn appointed each successive Provincial Grand Master.

Following the war of independence, the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts merged with their rival Scottish Grand Lodge on March 5th 1792 and adopted the name The Grand Lodge of the Most Ancient and Honorable Society of Free and Accepted Masons of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The seal of the new Grand Lodge of Massachusetts established in 1792 retained most of the original design of the “Moderns” seal and to this day still includes the beavers.

Canada was not immune to the animosity between the Moderns and the Ancients, and rival lodges existed before and after the union. When Grand lodges in Canada were being created in the Province of Upper Canada, the United Grand Lodge of England was the supreme authority. Despite this fact that it all but ignored Freemasonry in Upper Canada (the Province of Ontario) which resulted resulting in considerable strife and confusion and lead to the creation of rival grand lodges.

Masonic harmony was not brought to the Province of Ontario until a resolution to form an independent Grand Lodge of Canada was passed on November 2nd, 1855. The Grand Lodge of Massachusetts motto is “Follow Reason”, considering the fact that not everyone was happy with the union between the two rival Grand Lodges it would not seem unreasonable to suggest that the “Moderns” beaver was possibly a Masonic symbol along with all of the other Masonic symbolism that is more overt in the design of the this stamp.

Could the reason the Beaver stamp was chosen to incorporate Masonic symbolism be a way of thumbing their noses at those who favored the adoption of the new “Ancient” logo over the Moderns? The mere suggestion that there are Masonic symbols embedded in this historically important postage stamp is a very bold claim to make, and will likely generate some controversy.

To do so without providing any supporting evidence would, and should, be reason to dismiss the suggestion outright. Fortunately there is plenty of circumstantial evidence to support the theory that a group of well-placed Canadian Freemasons deliberately inserted these symbols into Canada’s first stamp without anyone knowing about it. For this plot to succeed there had to be the elements of means, motive, and opportunity.



...Another 'nugget from the quarry of Freemasonry'. SM
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Sources:

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