

The Consistory Research Network  
is proud to present:



## THE TWENTY FOUR INCH GAUGE

From "The Short Talk Bulletin" - September 1933

### **E-MASONIC EDUCATION SITE**

Visit our sponsors:

[phoenixmasonry.org](http://phoenixmasonry.org)

Masonic Service Association of North America: [MSANA.org](http://MSANA.org)

Grand Lodge of Iowa: [gl-iowa.org](http://gl-iowa.org)

Supreme Council, A. A. S. R., Southern Jurisdiction: [scottishrite.org](http://scottishrite.org)

## THE TWENTY FOUR INCH GAUGE

In the early editions of his Monitor (1797 and on) Thomas Smith Webb wrote:

The twenty-four inch gauge is an instrument made use of by operative masons, to measure and layout their work; but free and accepted masons, are taught to make use of it for the more noble and glorious purpose of dividing their time; it being divided into twenty-four equal parts, is emblematic of the twenty-four hours of the day, which they are taught to divide into three equal parts, whereby are found eight hours for the service of God and a distressed worthy brother; eight hours for their usual avocations; and eight for refreshment and sleep.

Time and the often witless tinkering of well-meaning but uninformed brethren have altered here a word and there a phrase; in some Jurisdictions it is now "vocations", in others it is "we" instead of "they" and so on.

But in essentials most American Jurisdictions use the paragraph as the great ritualist phrased it for us a century and a third ago. Unfortunately, he did not go deeply into the symbolism of the gauge, leaving it to us to dig out for ourselves its concealed meanings, and learn from it, as we are able to learn; thinking through it, as we are able to think.

Like most Masonic symbols, it conceals far more than it reveals. Like many, the Monitorial explanation deals only with the obvious meaning, leaving the inner symbolism for the delver in the rubbish of the Temple's verbiage who seeks the hidden truths Freemasonry discloses to all who look.

Among the oldest of man's beginnings of civilization, measures seem to have originated among all peoples with parts of the human body - the foot, the hand, the palm, the digit, the cubit (elbow to tip of middle finger) etc. The word inch comes (as does "ounce") from the Latin *uncia*, a unit divided into twelve parts. Some contend that origin of an inch was in the thumb joint. Both foot and Roman *uncia* are very old and our ancient brethren of the Gothic Cathedral building age must surely have known both. But what is important is not the name of the measure but the division of the gauge into finer units than its total, and their applicability to time.

The relation of twenty-four inches to twenty-four hours is plain enough, but when we examine just what it is that is divided into twenty-four parts, the

explanation becomes difficult.

What is time? To most of us it is the duration between two noons; the elapsed interval between any two events; the passage of a certain fraction of life. To the philosopher, time is an unknown quantity. Like space, it appears to be a conception of the mind, without objective existence. Modern mathematicians contend that time and space are but two faces of the same idea, like the two sides of a shield. While we can comprehend one without reference to the other, we cannot *use* one without using the other. Every material thing occupies space for a certain time; every material thing existing for a specified time, occupies space.

We pass through space in three directions-up and down, right and left, forward and back. We pass through time, apparently, continuously in one direction from birth to death.

We cannot go back for even the smallest fraction of an instant. Omar wrote:

*The Moving Finger writes; and having writ,  
Moves on, nor all your Piety nor Wit  
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line, Nor all your tears wash out a Word  
of it.*

The operative workman measures his stone with his gauge; if the ashlar is too long, he shortens it. If it is too broad, he narrows it. If it is not straight, he corrects it. If it is too crooked to make square, he casts it on the rubbish heap and begins anew with a rough ashlar.

But the Speculative Mason, measuring his time with the twenty-four inch gauge, has no such latitude. The ruined minute is forever away; the crooked hour can never be made straight. The day unfit for the Building Not Made With Hands can never be set in the Eternal Wall, nor can the workman find in any quarry a new day to mould.

Thinking of it thus, could any symbol cry a more clarion call for accuracy of labor? For skill with which to work? For care and pains in building?

*Eight hours for the service of God and a worthy distressed brother, eight hours for their usual avocations, and eight for refreshment and sleep.*

There is no time to waste. There is no time to be lost. There is no time for idleness. Thomas Smith Webb builded better than he knew when with so sparing a hand he laid out the Speculative Mason's time for the lighter side of life. In his conception, all such must be taken from the eight hours allotted to refreshment and sleep. He who would "pass the time away" - he who would indulge in "pastimes", must, according to the Monitor, take these hours from bed!

To divide our twenty-four hours into three equal parts is a very practical, everyday admonition. Here is no erudite philosophy such as *laborare est orare* - to labor is to pray. Nor is there any suggestion that even refreshment may be in the "service of God"; Again the old ritualist knew his audience. His instructions are simple; their profundity is only for those who wish to look beneath the surface.

For these, indeed, the whole twenty-four hours may be literally "in the service of God" since labor and sleep are necessary for life as we have to live it, and it is a poor theology which does not teach the common lot to be the will of God.

In 1784 Sir William Jones wrote:

*Seven hours to law, to soothing slumber seven,  
Ten to the world allot, and all to heaven.*

Webb does not so put it, but if the eight hours for labor is also to be "in the service of God", it must be labor which results' in good work, true work, square work. Refreshment of mind and body which is an offering to heaven must be clean and wholesome, if on the morrow the laborer is to be wholesome and clean for new labor, prayer and service.

The Mason interested in a further interpretation of the three fold division of twenty-four hours need look no further than the Great Light upon his Altar-- indeed. he need only turn back from Ecclesiastes XII to Ecclesiastes III to find the inspiration of this Monitorial admonition that there is a time for everything. We read:

To everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under

heaven;

A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;

A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;  
A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.

But nowhere in the wise counsels of prophet or patriot, preacher or teacher, is there set forth a time to waste time.

Time is the very substance of life, its golden minutes the only stones we have with which to build. Every accomplishment of man, be it temple of marble or temple of character, act of selfishness or selfless giving to others, building a nation or building a house, must be accomplished with *time*. Without time nothing is ever done. Hence he who wastes either his time or another's, squanders that which he cannot replace; which comes from we know not whither, to go we know not whence; which, once gone, is gone forever.

About us are many varieties of men with as many ideas of how time should be spent. Every human being has the same number of minutes in an hour, of hours in a day, of days in a year. Some have little or nothing to show for their thirty, forty, or fifty years. Others have great accomplishments to exhibit as the product of their time. Lincoln used all the time he did not need to devote to his usual avocations to mastering geometry, learning politics, understanding the question of slavery. Albert Pike made himself a learned scholar by constant use of spare time. These men knew what the twenty-four inch gauge really meant, how

Profound a symbol it is --- aye, Lincoln knew, though he was a Freemason only "in his heart" and not a member of any lodge.

It provokes sober thought to apply the Masonic rule to a determination of how long we really have. Our days are allotted as three score and ten. We rarely start on our life work before we are twenty. Of the fifty years of actual time for labor, we are admonished to spend a third in the service of God and a distressed worthy brother, a third in refreshment and sleep, and but a third in labor - not quite seventeen years in which to accomplish all we have to do! No wonder so few of us leave behind a monument which will stand long enough to be seen by the coming generation, still less one which will last through the ages.

*But the harder the task, the greater the joy of accomplishment.*

Much has been made of the amount of time to spend in the "service of God and a distressed worthy brother" by enemies of the Craft, who have tried to read into this admonition the thought that the other sixteen hours are to be used *without* service to God, and that only a distressed *brother* is to share in our labors.

This, of course, is pure casuistry. If we instruct a workman to build a wall, we mean that he is to carry the brick, make the mortar, lay the courses, level the whole, leave the opening for the gate, point up the joints - do the whole job!

"Service to God", then, does not mean merely spending time upon one's knees in prayer, but living a life acceptable to the Great Architect. By "worthy distressed *brother*" we have no reason to assume that Masonry means only "brother of the Mystic tie." Masons are repeatedly bidden to turn to the Great Light as the rule and guide of faith and practice. Here we find "inasmuch as ye do it unto the . *least* of these ...." And all men who own to a common Father are brothers.

The attentive Freemason quickly notes how frequent are the Masonic allusions to work, and how few to refreshment. Our twenty-four inch gauge gives us - almost grudgingly, it seems -- eight hours for *two* occupations of which we know one needs the greater part -- eight hours for refreshment and

sleep. The other sixteen are for labor, work, effort, doing.

To him who finds labor irksome, the twenty-four inch gauge must be a painful symbol. Alas, all symbols are painful for the idle! But for those who have learned life's greatest lesson, that the most lasting joy comes from accomplishment, the symbol is beautiful.

Fortunate the man who is happy at his daily task; discontented he who has not found his work. For him who likes his job, sixteen hours a day are scarce enough. Find the carpenter who carves wood in his spare hours, the bookkeeper who spends his evenings doing mathematics, the doctor whose leisure is spent teaching his healing art, and you hear men singing at their labors; men who curse the clocks which go too fast!

Find the Freemason interested in the Ancient Craft, prompt to offer his services for visiting the sick, doing committee work, helping the tiler, laboring on Fellow Craft or Degree Team, and you see one happy in his lodge.

Such men have no time to waste - all have some division of their gauge of time which makes every minute count with "sixty seconds worth of distance run."

Time - substance of life! Time - gift of the Great Architect! Time-building stone for the spiritual temple! Time - man's greatest mystery, bitterest enemy, truest friend! Its care, conservation, employment, is the secret of the twenty-four inch gauge - its waste and aimless spending is the sin against which this symbolic working tool unalterably aligns the Ancient Craft.

The Scythe, emblem of Time, wins in the end. We can race with Father Time for but a little, while.

*But we can win while we are permitted to race.*

And at the end, the great ruler of our lives is merciful! As you think of the twenty-four inch gauge and its three divisions, think also of these tender and beautiful words written of the mighty servant, mightier master, Time:

I bring you woe and scalding tears and all life holds of sadness,

Because I am remorseless, your heart in torture pays  
In bitter coin of memories of times when time was madness,  
*I am the passing of hour hours; I am your march of days.*

Enemy and best of friends am I to those who sorrow;

Pitiless in passing, yet Oh, so slow, so slow ...

I hurry to the sleeping the greyness of tomorrow;

Sluggard in my sun-down, I never seem to go ...

Little bit by even less, all pain I can diminish,

Slowly Win the smile to eyes that now know but to weep.

I began your race with life, and I shall see its finish;

My arms, and none but mine, shall in the end give sleep.

I linger not for anyone, yet I may not be hastened;

You must bear your agony until I bid it cease ...

But when your head is in the dust and all your pride is chastened,

*At long last, I promise you, I bring the gift of peace.*