

THE TRESTLE-BOARD

One of the first symbols that a new Entered Apprentice learns about upon entering the lodge is the Trestle-Board. He is informed that the Trestle-Board is one of the movable jewels of the lodge. He also learns that in Operative Masonry the workmen erected their Temples in accordance with the plans laid down by the Master on his Trestle-Board and that he, as a Speculative Mason, should endeavor to erect his spiritual Temple agreeably to the rules and designs laid down by the Supreme Architect of the Universe in the Book of Life which is his spiritual Trestle-Board.

The Trestle-Board is not only one of the first symbols that a Mason is introduced to, but it is also one of the oldest symbols used in Masonry. According to Mackey's Encyclopedia, the term *Trasel-Board*, a corrupted form of Trestle-Board, was first found in the Masonic expose, Masonry Dissected, of a man named Prichard in 1730. Prichard described the Trasel-Board as one of the immovable jewels of a Masonic lodge (modern English work still considers the Trestle-Board as an immovable jewel while in the American systems it is a movable jewel). In the years following there was some confusion and combining of the terms Trestle-Board and the Tracing-Board, which is a picture drawn on the floor of a lodge containing symbols of the degree being considered. The Tracing Board was a forerunner of the various charts and carpets which contain symbols of the various degrees but differs from a Trestle-Board which is a complete plan for the erection of a building or the construction of a spiritual Temple. In his works, Webb restored the meaning of the Trestle-Board that is used now used.

Mackey defines the Trestle-Board literally as the "Board upon which the Master inscribes the designs by which the Craft are to be directed in their labors." The word is a compound with the first portion Trestle being the supporting framework on which the board is displayed. In a 1932 Short Talk Bulletin, it was explained that in Carpentry trestles (or sawhorses) are used to support boards to be worked upon, and thus a board supported by two trestles would provide "a natural and easy way to display plans."

For the Operative Mason the Trestle-Board was extremely important. Mackey explains its use quite beautifully and eloquently: "It was on such an implement (the Trestle-Board) that the genius of the ancient Masters worked out those problems of architecture that have reflected an unfading luster on their skill. The Trestle-Board was the cradle that nursed the infancy of such mighty monuments as the cathedrals of Strassburg and Cologne; and as they advanced in stature, the Trestle-Board became the guardian spirit that directed their growth. Often have those old Builders pondered by the midnight lamp upon their Trestle-Board, working out its designs with consummate taste and knowledge- here springing an arch, and turning an angle there, until the embryo edifice stood forth in all the wisdom, strength, and beauty of the Master's art. ... To construct his earthly Temple, the Operative Mason followed the architectural designs laid down on the Trestle-Board, or book of plans, of the architect. By these he hewed and squared his materials; by these he raised his walls; by these he constructed his arches; and by these strength and durability, combined with grace and beauty, were bestowed upon the edifice which he was constructing."

In Speculative Masonry, the architectural plans by which each builder should erect his spiritual edifice are those laid down by the Supreme Architect of the Universe, and the Trestle-Board has become a symbol for that divine plan of natural and moral law. For the Christian those plans are contained in the Bible, for the Jew in the writings of the Old Testament, and for the Muslim in the teachings of the Koran, but, as Mackey notes, in all cases, "Freemasonry does not interfere with the peculiar form or development of any one's religious faith. All that it asks is that the interpretation of the symbol shall be according to what each one supposes to be the revealed will of his creator. ... But...it peremptorily excludes the atheist from its communion, because believing in no Supreme Being - no Divine Architect - he must necessarily be without a spiritual Trestle-Board on which the designs of that Being may be inscribed for his direction."

And what is the responsibility of each Speculative Mason as he labors to erect his spiritual Temple? It is his responsibility to follow those guidelines laid down on that Trestle-Board as carefully and as faithfully as his skills enable him because no matter how perfect the architect's designs are, if the craftsman is not diligent in his work, the resulting edifice will not reflect the full glory and beauty of its creator. However, if the craftsman shapes his life according to those plans; if he makes his spiritual Temple plumb, level, and square, then he will have truly performed his task, bring credit to himself, his Fraternity, and the Architect whose plans he so faithfully followed, and be deserving of the commendation, "Well done good and faithful Brother."

"Trestle-Board," Mackey's Revised Encyclopedia of Freemasonry. 1946 ed.

"Trestle-Board and Tracing-Board," The Short Talk Bulletin. Jul 1932: 3-9.