

THE NORTH EAST CORNER

A statement often heard by a Mason is that in operative masonry the first stone of a building is usually placed in the northeast corner and from that fact an impressive lesson is taught but the reason for placing the first stone in that corner is not given.

When a public building is to be erected, a stone, usually larger and more elaborate than the other stones of the building, called the corner stone, is usually placed in the northeast corner although it should be at the most prominent corner, regardless of its location. This stone is usually laid with impressive ceremonies and it is customary to request a Masonic Grand Lodge to take charge of these ceremonies but no reference is made in these ceremonies to a particular corner and again the question arises, "Whence came the general impression that this stone should be in the northeast corner? "

As a matter of fact, this particular stone is not always placed in that corner and yet, symbolically, the location of that stone in the building is the northeast corner. In the lodge room we call the Master's station "the East" regardless of its real position and there is a reason for so naming it. In a similar way the location of the corner stone is symbolically in the northeast corner. Why?

In seeking an answer to this question we must examine traditions which have come down to us from the dim and distant past.

An ancient Ritual states that the form of a Mason's lodge is an "oblong square" in length from east to west and in breadth from north to south and as such it is a symbol of the world. This is also the form of a map of the primitive world. At the time of the building of King Solomon's Temple the people generally believed the world was flat in the form of a rectangle. Only a few of the learned priests knew that the earth was round and they kept their knowledge a profound secret which they revealed only to the initiated. The traditional belief was that civilisation arose in the northeast corner of this "oblong square" known as the world and from this corner civilised people spread over the then known world. Therefore, to them the northeast corner as the place where the light of civilisation first dawned was sacred and the proper place to set the first stone of a temple erected to the worship of God.

Another tradition comes from Egypt where some astronomers taught that the world was created when the sun rose in Leo. This was in the northeast. They therefore believed that the first stone of a temple erected to the Creator and dedicated to his worship should be laid in the northeast corner.

The belief that the corner stone of the world was laid in the morning is illustrated by the following quotation from Job 38:4-7:

Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?
Declare, if thou has understanding, who hath laid the
measures thereof, if thou knowest? Or who hath stretched
the line upon it? Whereupon are the foundations thereof
fastened? Or who laid the corner stone thereof:
When the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God
shouted for joy?

Building operations require good light to properly lay the stones. With our electric lights we can make the night as light as day but the ancients did not have that advantage. They must make the best use of the sunlight while it lasted. The stones in the corner had to be laid with great exactness and since in the civilised world of that day the sun rose in the northeast, that corner would be the natural place to begin. It was the only place where in the early morning the sun would shine on both of the outer walls of the stone and permit accurate placing by sunlight.

The Bible tells us that Solomon began to build the house of the Lord in the second day of the second month. This would be the month we know as May, when the days are long. This is probably the reason Dr. Oliver said "the Masonic days proper for laying the foundation-stone of a Masonic Lodge are from the 15th of April to the 15th of May". There was a legend among operative Masons that Solomon laid the corner stone at the northeast corner early in the morning because at that point the sun was outside of the northeast corner. When that stone was proved square, level and plumb, true and trusty and properly laid, he proceeded to the southeast corner where, about the middle of the forenoon he laid the corner stone at that point. Then at the corresponding time in the afternoon he performed the same task at the southwest corner and ended the day by laying the corner stone of the northwest corner by the light of the setting sun. In each case the stone was laid at a time when the sun shone on both the outer sides of the stone.

Here the northeast corner represents the dawn of light into the soul. It is a symbol of a youth emerging from the darkness of ignorance into the light of knowledge. The southeast corner represents the time when the sun reaches its full power on the earth and symbolises the youth graduating from school and entering the active duties of life. The southwest corner represents the time when the strength of the sun begins to fail and symbolises the beginning of man's declining years and the failure of his moral faculties. The northwest corner represents the setting sun and symbolises the setting of the sun on man's mortal life.

Hence the east wall of the temple represents the rising sun, a symbol of the acquisition of knowledge and growth in power. The south wall represents the sun in its full strength, a symbol of man in his prime. The west wall represents the setting sun, a symbol of man in his declining years. The north wall represents the darkness left by the departed sun, a symbol of two apparently contradictory truths for from one end of this wall the sun has set, but it will rise again on another day from the other end of the same wall. Therefore, the north wall is a symbol of both birth and death. It is true that with the setting of the sun many lay down the working tools of this earthly life but only to enter his eternal home where the sun of his spiritual life forever shines.

It will be noted that each of the corner stones traditionally laid by King Solomon represents a turning point in the life of man; his emergence from darkness to light, his passing from the period of growth to maturity to failing faculties and finally his passage from this earthly life to his heavenly home.

Since the northeast corner represents the dawn of light, the Entered Apprentice is placed in that corner of the lodge room to receive his first instruction on which to build his moral and Masonic edifice but he should not remain there. He should make the best use of the light that is offered him and go forward with his Masonic work. In some jurisdictions where the symbolism of the other two corners is ritualistically developed, as a rule it is the lesson of the northeast corner only that is explained to the candidate. The lessons of the other corners must be learned by him for himself just like in life after his school days a man must learn life's lessons by his own efforts.

Let us now summarise some of the lessons which the northeast corner teaches.

It will be noted that in all the traditions and legends about this corner it represents the source of the dawn, the place of beginning where the sun's rays first strike and therefore it symbolises the Entered Apprentice beginning his Masonic life.

The fact that in the northern hemisphere the sun rises in the northeast is probably the reason that in many lands from time immemorial the northeast has been symbolically considered the place of beginnings.

From the fact that, Masonically, the north is considered the place of darkness and the east the source of light, the northeast corner appropriately symbolises the candidate emerging from darkness of the north to the dawning light of the east. He has come out of the darkness of ignorance and is facing the east. He has received some light and is in search of more.

The north as the place of darkness, Masonically, represents the profane world, while the east as the source of light represents the lodge. The corner stone in the northeast corner has one side toward the north and the other towards the east. The candidate in that corner, therefore, represents one who has just emerged from the darkness of the north but has not wholly left it. Nevertheless, as Mackey says: "He is striving for light and truth; the pathway upon which he has entered is directed toward the east. He is not altogether profane nor altogether a Freemason". He is an apprentice with some of the ignorance of the world cleaving to him and some of the light of the Order beaming upon him".

In some jurisdictions it is customary while the candidate is standing in the northeast corner for the Master to give him some advice and instruction in his own language in addition to that given in the Ritual. Given at that time by a competent Master such instruction is very effective. If given at all however it should be so expressed as to impress the candidate with the sincerity of masonic friendship, the greatness of Masonic labour and the sublimity and grandeur of Masonic principles and the candidate should be informed that it has now become his privilege to share in this friendship and his duty to take part in that labour and practice those principles. Only so doing will he learn the lesson of the northeast corner.