

Masonic Lodge Seals

Official "Crimped" Seals-of-Approval

By

Sir Knight James A. Marples

Masonic Lodge seals are interesting and have been, for centuries, valuable tools to authenticate paper documents as official and true. The principle is very similar to that of the seal of a notary public. The seal is a means by which an official person, whether it be a notary public or a Lodge secretary, can attest that the document is genuine, real, and not a clever counterfeit by the crimped ridges on whatever kind of paper document bears the "sealed" imprint.

This photo is a good example of the typical kind of Lodge crimping seals. The tool is usually made out of heavy brass, is called a "seal," and in a funny twist upon words, the crimped imprint on a document is called a seal, too. In ancient times, wax was used as a "seal" both to seal envelopes by official dignitaries such as popes and bishops as well as in the temporal or civic world by mayors, governors, and kings. In a small number of cases, some certificates, both ancient and modern, had rib-

bons attached and even more recently, rounded decorative adhesive stamps usually with sawtoothed edges, similar to the cuts made by pinking shears.

While I like wax seals, I feel that they are harder to read. Additionally, they are messy when first applied. Then as they age, the wax is prone to deteriorate and crumble. Hence a brass crimping seal cannot be best for its long-term durability. My Masonic Lodge, as well as my York Rite Bodies, Allied Masonic Degrees, Masonic Rosicrucians, Red Cross of Constantine, and some of my other

groups use the traditional paper dues-cards imprinted with the crimped seal. I know that some Masonic Lodges are switching to plastic membership cards; my Scottish Rite and Royal Order of Scotland already have switched, years ago. I comprehend the cost-savings, yet I may be sentimental, but when I check a visiting member's dues-card, I'm always glad to see the traditional crimping of the paper dues-card. I might mention that some similar fra-



Photograph of a typical late 1800's-early 1900's Lodge crimping seal.

ternal groups such as the Independent Order of Odd Fellows Lodge as well as the Pythian Knights of Pythis Lodge still use the paper membership cards, and theirs is very similar to Masonic Lodge crimping seals, which generally bear the name of the Lodge, the city where the Lodge is located, and usually the charter date. In many ways, dues cards carry more information than first meets the eye. When I show my dues cards to friends and relatives, they are impressed. They say that they are surely better than the flimsy cards issued by some groups and insurance companies, which are bland and generic and convey no historical detail or sentimental value. Some Grand Jurisdictions now use variants of seals. Some are raised embossed lettering, others may be rubber-stamped or laser-jet printed with "electronic signatures" that are increasingly made out of plastic, then laminated, and similar in size to a credit card; some even with individualized barcodes. Personally, I like the circular type of hand pressed seal. I may be old-fashioned and enjoy this style for historical reasons. However, I believe I like the older circular hand pressed raised embossed Lodge seals, since I can see, touch, and feel the ridged crimping, and I am "satisfied" that the member is handing me a "valid" means of identification that is more difficult to forge or counterfeit. Finally, I like the old style of Lodge seal since it seems to cause the Masonic Lodge to retain its characteristic style of "Ancient Free and Accepted Masons." Sometimes an "ancient way" of doing things is the best way. Today's young people are besieged with all types of cards: Credit cards, debit cards, insurance cards, Sam's Club cards, driver's licenses, and various other club

membership cards. There is something grand about the crimped, unique characteristics of an old-time Masonic seal. It reminds me of the palpable sense of brotherhood, even in our documented written messages of membership cards which are validated by the use of the Lodge seal as a literal seal-of-approval. In a parallel way, in bygone times, many Masonic Lodges issued copper, brass or bronze Masonic pennies, similar to the way our Royal Arch Chapters issue marks or pennies. Sunflower Masonic Lodge in Wichita, Kansas in the year 1964 issued 75th anniversary aluminum Masonic Pennies that marked that anniversary and were circular or oval in shape, reminiscent of the Lodge seal. That proved to be quite popular among members as well as the general public who could see the Masonic symbols thereon.

My own dues cards have sentimental value to me. I have even kept some of my late father's Masonic Lodge and Odd Fellow Lodge membership cards he received way back in the 1940s. To see his signature, for a split-second, gives my heart a sense of joy. Almost as if he was here with me, if only for a second. His handwriting reflects his personality. When he passed away in 1997, the funeral director, who was a Mason and Odd Fellow Lodge member himself and a friend of my dad, asked for my dad's best suit and tie for the funeral. I provided those to him at the funeral home. I also handed to the funeral director my dad's, then current and final 1997 Masonic and Odd Fellow Lodge membership dues cards to ease my grief, and also, in a truthful way, to keeping history alive and meaningful. I specifically instructed the funeral director to place those two Lodge cards

inside the inner pocket of my dad's suit as he lay in the coffin. The funeral director complied. Again, to ease my grief, I quipped to the funeral-director, "Now, my dad can show his dues cards to Saint Peter." The funeral director smiled. I was joking of course, but I'm glad I did it, along with putting a "lucky penny" in my dad's suit jacket.

It amazes me that most Masons have never seen a Lodge secretary use a Lodge seal as a tool. The paper membership card is placed between the two round punches or metal dies which bear the desired imprint. The handle which is sticking upright in the above photo is pressed downward by a spring-action lever. It thus crimps the paper membership card akin to a pair of pliers squeezing the paper. The Secretary then releases or pulls the handle back upright and pulls out the paper dues card, and the process is complete, aside from the member signing the card to make it perfectly valid.

The photograph below shows the two rounded punches or metal dies to be seen if the Lodge seal apparatus were taken apart. As you can see, this Lodge seal says "EXCELSIOR LODGE OF INDUSTRY." It bears a tiny five-pointed upright Masonic "star" at the very bottom. It also has the Masonic beehive and bees flying around it, a symbol of industry, atop a square cube, which is actually representative of a stonemason's perfect ashlar, along with the speculative Freemason's square and compasses emblem.

Grand Lodges, too, have their own seals. The example of The Grand Lodge of Kansas is dated from the year 1856, some five years before Kansas achieved statehood in 1861. It depicts a caucasian settler in a top-hat and a native American who obviously belonged to one of the American Indian tribes, jointly holding a Masonic square and compasses and meeting in peace and harmony. The motto is "Mysteria Non Scripta" which translates to "The Mysteries of the Un-



written." Before any conspiracy looks let their minds wander, the meaning is pure and the objective honorable. In life, some things are felt in the heart, such as Masonic brotherhood, and such characteristics are unwritten yet committed to memory. I compare it to learning things as diverse as the Pledge of Allegiance; yet after a while, it doesn't need to be written down to be imprinted in my mind and soul. Freemasonry has its ritualistic ceremony, based on Ancient Landmarks or traditions. These ceremonies are called "The Mysteries," but nobody need worry. They aren't "mysterious" in the curious sense of the word. They are "The Mysteries" because a candidate isn't exposed to Masonry simply by saying "I do" as if joining a country club. A candidate gradually sees the high moral, social, and virtuous lessons unfolded by a series of steps, literally called "Degrees." One of many nice things about Freemasonry is that you learn a whole lot about history along the way. For many members, this high standard of good, upright, ethical, moral conduct and rectitude becomes second nature. Ethics do not need to be written down to be observed and practiced daily. Finally, a candidate is put to a case, since all solemn promises, oaths, and obligations are exactly the same as all other members have assumed and affirmed by their hand on the *Holy Bible* or *Holy Writ*.

With the symbolism of the Grand Lodge of Kansas showing two Masonic Brothers from two different cultures meeting and greeting each other on the level, it shows the equality of our fraternity. Furthermore, since they are jointly grasping the Masonic emblem, it shows unity. I have always believed that the two words, "peace" and "harmony,"

have a nice ring to them in Masonic settings. An example of the Grand Lodge seal is below:



The "A.L. 5856" denotes that Kansas Masonry uses the dating system "Anno Lucis," which is Latin for "In The Year of Light." In this example, A.L. 5856 would correspond to our A.D. 1856, the year the Grand Lodge of Kansas was established. So, yet again, when a good man joins Freemasonry, he is 100% certain to elevate his character. Plus, he is 100% sure to improve his sense of history in the world around him.

Knight Templar seals were generally only used by the grand masters of the order in communiques with the pope, various prelates, and sometimes as a "mark" imprinted on treaties of various kinds. A secondary primitive "seal" of the Templar Grand Masters was "the Agnus Dei" or "The Lamb of God" or "Paschal Lamb." Some images of the Paschal Lamb would have it bleeding into the holy chalice as an allusion to Jesus' suffering. Other images show the lamb with one hoof bearing a Passion Cross for the same symbolism.

The most well-known seal of the grand masters of the Knights Templar was the two riders riding a single horse. Many detractors of our order and people totally ignorant of history need to realize that this does not refer to any hint of homosexuality. The Crusades were literally holy wars, and very much real wars with some knights and some of the horses carrying them maimed or killed. A horse was a knight's only means of transportation. If his steed was slayed or maimed in battle, it was frequently necessary for two knights to ride a single horse, just to escape death. This is where the proverbial saying: "live to fight another day" originated. The reason was scarcity of horses. In a few cases, with a Knight's vow of "poverty," some Knights could not afford to own a horse. In any event, the reasoning was the scarcity of horses.

An example of the "Two Riders" Templar seal is below:



A very modern colorized "seal" that is currently used in England, mainly to accommodate modern color printers, is shown below:



There have been other Templar seals, including the eagle, the paris temple, the cross, and the sun and moon. This symbol was allegedly used to substantiate the Battle of Bannockburn, where King Robert the Bruce made sixty-three Knights Templar members of his Royal Order of Scotland, celebrating his victory over England. Other Templar seals include the dove, the lion, and the griffin. However, those latter symbols are used so heavily in all aspects of heraldry, it is difficult to attribute them solely to Templary, unless they are expressly used in conjunction with other emblems.

Sir Knight James Marples is a life member of Mt. Olivet Commandery 12 in Wichita, Kansas, and currently resides in Texas. He can be contacted at rosehillks@yahoo.com or 1300 Greenbriar Drive, Longview, TX 75604.

Sources and Recommended Reading

- Mackey's *Encyclopedia of Freemasonry and Its Kindred Sciences* by Sir Knight and Dr. Albert G. Mackey, M.D., 33rd, and K.T.
- Archives of Sunflower Lodge No. 86 A.F. & A.M. of Wichita, Kansas.
- Archives of The M.W. Grand Lodge of Ancient Free & Accepted Masons of Kansas. Grand Lodge Office in Topeka, Kansas.
- *Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia* by Henry W. Coil.
- The Grand Lodge of Mark Master Masons. 86 Saint James Street, London, England. webpage: <http://www.glmmm.com/kt/default.aspx>
- Masonic Dictionary: "Masonic Seals." webpage: <http://www.masonicdictionary.com/seal.html>
- Archives of Excelsior Lodge of Industry, Williamstown, Victoria, Australia.

Grand Encampment

Membership Awards

1202 Geoffrey Brian Elliott
Murfreesboro Commandery 10
Murfreesboro, TN

1203 Zebulon V. Moore III
Sumter Commandery 20
Sumter, SC

1204 Mark K. McFadden
Muskogee Commandery 2
Muskogee, OK
2nd Bronze

1205 Don Thomas Nesbitt, Jr.
Kenedy Commandery 61
Baytown, TX

