

Huts and Sheds - Early Lodges

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"In its primary masonic sense, the word lodge appears in documents of the thirteenth century and later, to describe the workshop or hut, common to all sizable building works, in which the masons worked, stored their tools, ate their meals and rested." These words by Harry Carr and similar words by others persistently raise questions such as why were phrases like "in its primary masonic sense" and "from a masonic point of view" used in conjunction with lodge? For two reasons perhaps: First, some believe that the earliest lodges were Masonic Lodges while others do not. Second, the word lodge is not uniquely Masonic. Masons did not invent it they borrowed it. As yet, nobody has solved the mystery surrounding the origin of Masonic lodges. Perhaps, like most human institutions, they evolved from the accumulated needs and experiences of mankind. D.D. Darrah drew the following analogies: No man discovered law or can locate its beginning; no man invented education, or can name its birthplace; nor is it possible to state when religion took its place in the moral sphere of men. These great forces spring from the needs of the human soul, and are the result of growth and development. The same is true for Freemasonry. It was not created, but grew out of the past.

I find it easy to agree with Darrah, A study of the distant past reveals little bearing resemblance to modern Masonry but does reveal traces of human longings and aspirations that have served as building blocks for society and brotherhood. Fortunately, the key to our thought today is realism as seen in this statement by contemporary Masonic historian, Wallace McLeod: "We can say with certainty that modern speculative lodges descend in unbroken line from British craft masons of six hundreds years ago. Earlier than that we cannot go. McLeod's statement echoes the thoughts of many Masonic scholars, but it does not rule out the presence of lodge activity before that time. Keep in mind that advanced building techniques were in use as early as the eleventh century, and it is possible that lodge activity was occurring in the huts and sheds of the builders, at least at the larger cathedral construction sites. I offer the following abstract from the work of Albert G. Mackey and Christian Steiglitz, not as proof but as a point for debate. Please keep in mind that although the account can be partially documented, it is by no means proven fact. "It appears that from the eighth to the middle of the twelfth century, most of the knowledge and practice of architecture was under the control of monks. As a rule, bishops supervised the construction of churches and cathedrals. One of these ecclesiastics was the English monk, Winfrid (Boniface), who was elevated to sainthood for his efforts in Christianizing Germany in the eighth century. Winfrid organized a group of monks for the practice of building who became known as Masters of the Works, Some were involved in design; some in sculpture and painting; some in gold, silver and embroidery; and some in stonemasonry. Laymen were hired when needed as assistants

and laborers, and through this intimate association, much knowledge of the building trade passed to the laity. As more and more edifices were erected, a more intelligent class of builders emerged who ultimately formed their own brotherhoods and were granted certain privileges and franchises by municipal authorities. In addition, similar fraternities of builders arose in France and Italy, and by the middle of the eleventh century, virtually all important building in Europe was in their hands. Under the name of "Traveling Freemasons," they passed from nation to nation constructing castles, public buildings, churches and cathedrals. Of their organizations and customs, famed architect Sir Christopher Wren said: Their government was regular; and where they fixed near the building in hand, they made a camp of huts. A surveyor governed as chief every tenth man was called a Warden, and overlooked each nine."

Stories like this may be true or false or an admixture of both. The same can be said for the following, but it is closer to reality, being well documented for the most part. In the cities of England, associations called craft or trade guilds sprang up around 1100 A.D. made up of men who worked at a common trade. In addition to these, there were groups of highly specialized builders who were unattached and were free to seek work wherever their special talents were needed. Usually, the latter were to be found in the suburbs or countryside at cathedral construction sites. As a rule, there was no housing at these sites, so they built huts and sheds for living quarters, workshops and places to assemble. Many historians have mentioned these structures, and it is generally felt that these were the lodges referred to in the old manuscripts and other records. The earliest reference to a lodge yet discovered is to be found in Masonry's oldest known document, the Regius Poem, reputed to have been written around 1390 A.D. In a verse concerning apprentices, we find: His master's counsel he keep and close, And his fellows by his good purpose; The privities of the chamber tell he no man: Nor in the logge whatsoever they do; Whatsoever thou hearest or seest them do, Tell it no man wheresoever you go: The counsel of all, and even of bower .

Since these lines also made it clear that there were secrets to be kept, a deeper meaning for lodge was suggested even before the start of the fifteenth century. A glimpse at the character of lodges established before the sixteenth century, whether Masonic or otherwise, can be gained from looking in places where continuing building was occurring, for there more stable conditions existed, and better records were kept. At such sites, the builders were a family of work men dwelling together under the guidance of a Master Builder and his Wardens. Many work men spent their entire lives in one lodge since more than a century was required to complete a large cathedral. Brotherhood was paramount, and unification existed in the sense that a traveling stonemason, if qualified, was welcome in any lodge. One of the earliest accounts of such a lodge can be found in the building records of the Vale Royal Abbey for 1278 AD. That a man was paid to clean out the lodge is recorded in the books of the Chapel of St. Stephen in Westminster in 1320 A.D., and in the records of Caernarvon Castle for 1321 A.D., there is an entry of "2s.6d" for straw to cover the Mason's lodge. In 1395 A.D., officials of Westminster Abbey paid "1 5s.6d" to a "dauber" for the lodge of Masons in Tothill Street. Lodges are also mentioned at Canterbury Cathedral in

1429; Aberdeen, Scotland, in 1483; and at St. Giles Church in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1491 A.D. Entries such as these prove the existence of lodges but prove nothing masonically. From the late fourteenth through the eighteenth century, over one hundred manuscripts were discovered which many consider to be the most important discoveries in the history of Freemasonry. Collectively, these are called Gothic Constitutions, and curiously enough all contain words, descriptions and rules of conduct that smack of the governing of Masonic lodges. It is as if they were all patterned after one original. The first to be discovered was the Regius Poem, also known as the Halliwell MS, which was written around 1390 A.D. It is probable that the first few of these were written by priests or monks for the use of lodges at cathedral construction sites. Much of Masonry's customs and uses have come from these precious documents, and historians have offered them as proof that organized Masonry existed before 1717 AD., the year of formation of the first Grand Lodge.

Harry Carr was among those who felt that the old manuscripts were primarily intended for the regulation of semipermanent groups of Masons brought together in the course of their work who were out of reach of the established trade guilds. Among other things, he pointed out that the first of the old manuscripts made provision for an oath of obedience to be taken by new apprentices thus suggesting some sort of admission ceremony. In later versions, a posture to be assumed while taking the oath was suggested as well as secret signs and words.

Carr gave credence to the concept of lodges having existed from at least the fourteenth century by pointing out the codes and ordinances regulating times of work and refreshment in the lodge which were found at York Minster dated 1370, the reference to the masons of the lodge" at Canterbury Cathedral in 1429 accompanied by a list of names, the use of a secret mode of recognition in Scotland, and references to the "Mason's Word" from 1637 AD on. This apparently led Carr to this definition for a lodge: "...an association of masons (operative or otherwise) who are bound together for their common good, and who share a secret mode of recognition to which they are sworn on admission." The term "Masonic lodge" has also borne other meanings at one time or another. One, a place where Masons meet; two, a group of Masons duly assembled for work; and three, a piece of furniture representing the Ark of the Covenant, or in England, the "tracing board."

An acceptable as well as formal definition of a Masonic lodge has been cut and dried since 1723 A.D., when "The Charges of a Freemason... To be read at the Making of New Brethren or When the Master Shall Order it... appeared. This definition was adopted in substance by the Grand Lodge of Texas in 1920 and appears as follows in Article XIII Section III of its Constitution: OF LODGES. A lodge is a place where Masons assemble and work; hence, that assembly, or duly organized society of Masons, is called a Lodge, and every Brother ought to belong to one, and to be subject to its bylaws, and the general regulations of the General or Grand Lodge hereunto annexed. In ancient times, no Master or Fellow

could be absent from it, especially when warned to appear at it, without incurring a severe censure, until it appeared to the Master and Wardens that pure necessity hindered him. The persons admitted members of a Lodge must be good and true men, freeborn, and of a mature and discrete age, no bond men, no woman, no immoral or scandalous men, but of good report. We have seen that in the Middle Ages the operative stonemasons met in huts and sheds at construction sites in which they received instruction, dressed their stones, and partook of fellowship.

Is it so hard to accept that these huts and sheds were more than just shelters or rooms? In 1921 H.L. Haywood said, It may be that the body of Freemasonry as we know it, came into existence only two hundred years ago; but the soul of Freemasonry, its spirit, many of its principles and its symbols, have been among men from a time since which the memory of man runneth not to the contrary.