

Origin of the Word "Freemason"

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In the Winter 1963 issue of THE ROYAL ARCH MASON magazine there is an article entitled "Earliest use of word 'Freemason'" which indicates that the first known use of that word was in 1526, and then states that an earlier use of that word, if found, would arrest immediate attention among Masonic students. It then gives the opinion that correctly fixing the date when this word was first used would tell when the history of the craft took definite form. This latter conclusion would seem to be in error after consideration of the following information.

I have a paperback edition of a book written by G.G. Coupon of St. Johns College, Cambridge, England, entitled Medieval Faith and Symbolism (published by Harper and Brothers, New York). This book is Part I of a larger work entitled Art and the Reformation. This is not a Masonic book, but is a learned and extensive documented survey of medieval architecture and the related arts covering the period of roughly A.D. 1000 to 1600. It gives a mass of detailed information and data regarding the operative stone masons of that period who were the architects, builders and sculptors of the great cathedrals, castles and government buildings with their accompanying statuary, gargoyles and ornaments. In his study Mr. Coulton examined the original records, contracts, building accounts and payrolls, which have been preserved with many of these ancient buildings, as well as the statutes affecting them. The information following is all extracted from that book.

Mr. Coupon states that prior to 1350 all masons came under the general term *caemantarii* which had been a common name for them in much earlier times, but in 1350 a statute was passed which fixed the wages of "master freestone masons" at four pennies a day, of other masons at three pennies, and of their servants (apprentices) at one and one-half pennies. He says this phrase *Mestre mason de franche pere* is most significant for the probable origin of the term "freemason." In 1360 the statute was amended which fixed the wages of the "chief masters of masons" (chiefs *mestres de maceons*) at four pennies a day, and the other masons at two pennies or three pennies according to their worth, and then went on to provide that: "All alliances and covines of masons and carpenters, and congregations, chapters, ordinances and oaths betwixt them made, or to be made, shall be from henceforth void and wholly annulled; so that every mason and carpenter, of what condition that he be, shall be compelled by his master to whom he serveth to do every work that to him pertaineth to do, or of free stone, or of rough stone." Here again is an indication suggestive of the original derivation of "freemason" from "free stone."

Many of the masons were bondmen or serfs under the old feudal system, but no serf or bondman was accepted into the masons' guilds. Many masons, who had enough work near their homes and had no need to travel, did not join the guilds. But the guild was of extreme importance to those masons who traveled from place to place for work. Mr. Coulton surmises that the term "Freemason"

might have grown up; it did gradually come to connote certain privileges enjoyed by the master masons who belonged to the guilds.

About 1830, Wycliff, the English reformer, was much concerned at the self-seeking, which the guilds encouraged, and specially "Men of subtle craft, as Freemasons and others, who conspire together to refuse statutory wages and insist upon a rise." Here is the first instance that Mr. Coulton found of the use of the word Freemason.

In the original building records of Eton College near Oxford (which was begun in February 1441) Mr. Coulton states that often the same man would be called "mason," "freemason" or "master mason," just as an English college teacher might be called "master," "doctor" or "professor." The accountant at first calls the freemasons simply "masons" and adds the full title as time goes on, but by February 1442 the payroll listed 41 employees as "freemasons," which was a separate classification of masons. The payroll listed, for instance, on the week ending May 28, 1442: 49 Freemasons, 14 rough masons, 16 carpenters, 2 sawyers, 2 daubers, 1 jacker, 1 tiler, 10 hard hewers and 28 laborers. Six years later, an estimate for the chapel work in the same building reckons the need of 40 to 60 "Freemasons," 12 to 20 masons of Kent called "hard hewers" and 12 layers.

In 1444 we have the first statutory occurrence of the name Freemason - "frank mason." Such Freemasons, like master carpenters, are to take five pennies a day, while the rough-mason and under-carpenter take only four pennies.

In 1495 the statute is in English, and the word is "Freemason." He and the rough-mason are now valued at the same wage of six pennies a day. In 1513 the master-mason who contracted to finish King's College Chapel undertook to "keep continually 60 'Freemasons' working upon the same works." In 1515 the "Freemasons, rough-masons and carpenters" of the City of London sent a petition to the King. In 1548, for the first time in any one statute, comes the three-fold classification of "Freemasons, rough-masons, and hard-hewers."

In Sir Thomas Elyot's Latin Dictionary (1538) caementarium is translated "rough masons, which do make only walls." In Cooper's Latin Dictionary (1578) caementarius is translated "a dauber, a pargeter, a rough-mason"; and latomas is translated as "a mason, one that cutteth and diggeth stones." In 1602 the Oxford English Dictionary states that at Burford, the "master freemason" and the "master roughmason" who were employed together on a job were paid five pennies a day.

Mr. Coulton says that in the Eton College accounts the "hard-hewers" are evidently connected with the Kentish rag-stone, of which large quantities were used in the upper courses of the chapel. Their job was rather that of quarryman than of the skilled mason, and they probably worked with axes, not with chisels. The hard-hewer, then, dealt with stone in its most elementary form, and it is probable that he was often regularly employed in preparing the work for his more skilled colleagues.

For those who may be interested, the above book by G. G. Coulton also has a chapter dealing with the masons' marks on stones, and another chapter regarding

the stonemasons' grip and signs and means of recognition, and still another chapter dealing with the advancement of apprentices to journeymen and then to master masons.