

# The Degree of Mark Master



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Of the

GRAND CHAPTER OF ROYAL ARCH MASONS OF MINNESOTA

**The Degree of**  
**MARK MASTER**  
**- HISTORICAL -**

The custom, on the part of operative masons, of selecting for themselves individual “marks” is very ancient. The mark placed upon the work of each craftsman served as a check upon the work of each for the overseer, and facilitated the just payment of wages. Each mark was distinctive and the same mark frequently descended from father to son through several generations. Such marks may be seen today on stones in various cathedrals of Europe. In Scotland, the operative mason was required to register his mark by The Statutes issued in 1598 by William Schaw, Master of Works to King James VI.

It was quite natural that, when Masonry gradually moved from the purely operative to the speculative stage, such a well-established custom should become a symbol, and that an important degree should be founded upon it. In a report made to the Grand Lodge of Mark Master Masons of England appears the statement: “There is probably no degree in Freemasonry that can lay claim to greater antiquity than those of Mark Man or Mark Mason and Mark Master Mason.”

As far as we know, these were at first “side degrees” given by a sort of inner circle within certain lodges, the degree of Mark Man or Mark Mason being conferred upon Fellowcrafts, and the degree of Mark Master only upon Master Masons. There also seems to be some evidence that the content of our present degree is more like that of the former of these, while the name is taken from the latter. There is a record of the degree being conferred in the Royal Arch Chapter of Portsmouth, England, on September 1, 1769, but for the most part this took place in craft lodges in those days. There are records of its being conferred in Scotland in 1778, in Nova Scotia in 1784, in New York and Connecticut in 1791, and in Boston in 1793.

The Mark Master degree has never been included in the Chapter in England, but was conferred in blue lodges until the “Grand Lodge of Mark Master Masons” was organized in June 1856. The early history in this country showed a similar trend, for the General Grand Chapter of R.A.M., which was formally organized in 1798, issued separate Mark Lodge charters up to 1853, when it was prohibited and the degree passed fully under Chapter control, becoming the first of the four regular capitular degrees.

### **- SYMBOLS -**

At the beginning of his progress in capitular Masonry the candidate is clearly taught that “square work, and square work only” is needed in the building of the Temple. And this every man must learn, as he builds the spiritual Temple of his life. Constantly his work is being tested, and many a man make a failure of his life because he puts into it work which will not stand repeated test, to say nothing of the final test of the Grand Overseer’s square. There need be no cause for surprise, then, if at the end he is told to stand aside while more faithful craftsmen receive their well-earned wages.

The Keystone is the uppermost stone in an arch, by which the side members of the arch are firmly locked together. The other stones of the structure may be well made, and of good material, but without the Keystone the arch cannot stand. Such stones were used in arch construction in Thebes and elsewhere long before the building of Solomon’s Temple, but it is quite possible that the craft in general might not have known of their shape and use at that time, and that the secret of their construction might have been the possession only of the chief architect, or of a select few in his immediate circle. This symbol, which first appear prominently in this degree, and which plays a large part in two of the subsequent degrees, suggests that broad tolerance of charity which is the crown or completion of the Masonic edifice.

By it all the materials of the building are bound together, and without it all would be incomplete and useless. A further and less obvious allusion of this symbol will be touched upon later.

In previous degrees there have been references to craftsmen receiving wages, but here for the first time are they actually received by the faithful. The laborer is worthy of a reward, and the true and worthy craftsman need not fear to apply for wages. But he must present the proper token, the mark of a well spent life which God will recognize at the last great day of reckoning. A man may spend his life, hoping by some stroke of "luck" to receive the reward of the faithful, without the token which alone can claim it; what he may expect is in fact not only a refusal of the reward, but rather the penalty which will forever prevent further labor on his part. And we must not overlook the fact that it is while reverently kneeling at the altar that his token is presented to his view. It is in an atmosphere of quiet dedication that the key to life's highest rewards is revealed.

The chisel and mallet are the tools with which the work of the Mark Master is shaped. The chisel is a sharp cutting tool, suggesting the constant process of our discipline and education throughout life. Even the brilliant diamond, in its original shape, is rude and ugly; much cutting is required before its latent beauties are revealed; so, by a lifelong process are our hidden powers developed, our knowledge broadened, and our duty to God and man made clear. The mallet has a similar lesson for us; by the blows of self-criticism we must curb our passions and ambitions, we must control anger and envy. So we daily shape the stones for the building of our eternal life. Surely such moral precepts should make a deep and lasting impression upon our future life and conduct.

## - LESSONS OF THE DEGREE –

Having taken a glance at some of the detailed symbols used in this degree, let us look at the degree as a whole. The legendary background of the story set forth in the Mark Master degree fits well with that of the third degree; the Temple is still incomplete. Hiram the master craftsman nowhere appears, though his work looms large. The candidate is again a workman, now a young Fellow of the Craft, laboring in the quarries, and presenting work for inspection. As ever in the symbolism of Masonry, the Temple is our human life, temporal and eternal, and the materials for the building must be subjected, as we have already seen, to the most scrutinizing test.

And here appears the first great lesson of this very impressive and suggestive degree. Not only must we offer good work, true and square, if it is to be accepted, but the work must be **our own**. We cannot and must not substitute the results of another's labor, no matter how attractive it may appear, if it is not our own work. It is sure to be detected and we shall lose our reward, and be fortunate indeed if we escape severe punishment. We must learn to have confidence in our own labor, truly and honestly performed, before we can be master builders. To quote the words of St. Paul, "let every man prove his own work, and then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another." (Gal., 6:4). Each of us is given opportunity for faithful work; we may not all be able to do an equal amount, but each may receive the reward of work well done, up to the limits of his personal ability. But the work which is not his own for which he may seek credit, is cast among the rubbish, as far as he is concerned, whatever may be its merit for someone else.

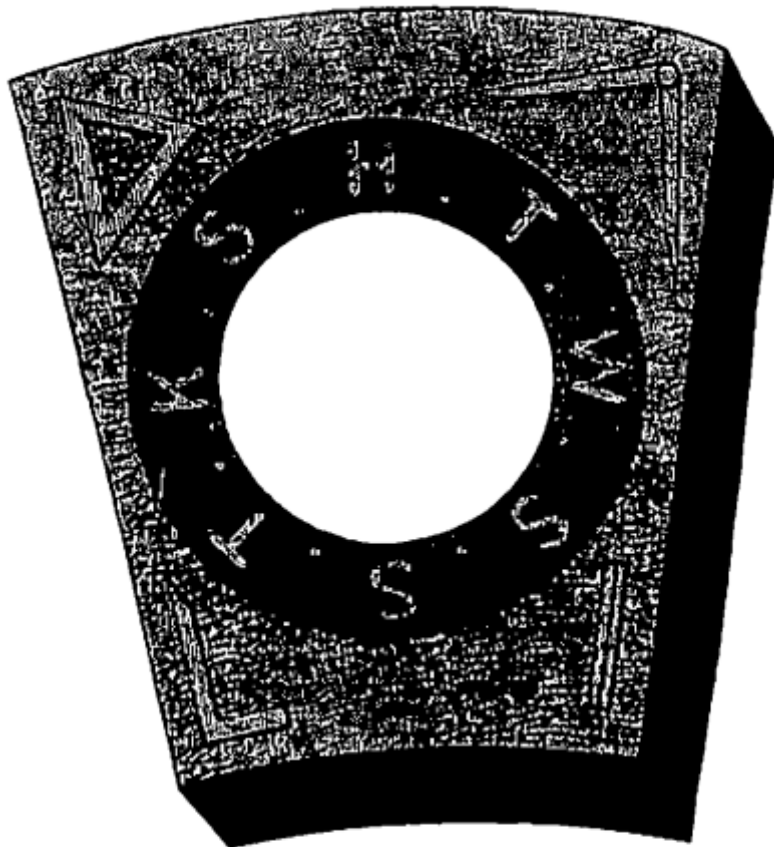
Even when we have rested, worshipped and done our best and presented what appears to be good work, we may find that it is not enough. And here appears another striking lesson of this degree, less obvious than that just mentioned, but no less important. The building cannot be complete without the masterpiece of the chief architect, the operative Grand Master. The Keystone is still lacking, and must be found before the work can go on to its final goal. It is the “white stone” (Rev. 2:17) representing not only completeness, but acceptance, pardon and favor, and bearing symbolically the name of its maker. Only after the stone is found can the workman select for himself his own “mark,” which is truly his own, and stands for himself, his character, his worthiness to receive wages, both as a Mason and as a man. His mark, however, must be placed within that of the Master Workman when it is presented at the end of life. And who is this Master Workman? In the ritual, he is mentioned as our ancient operative Grand Master, the architect and chief builder of the Temple of long ago, but there is a deeper significance hidden here. There is Another whom Christians call Master, also a builder by trade, and (in Christian tradition) a widow’s son, who was also rejected, and even killed, of whom the Apostle Peter spoke the familiar words, “this is the stone which was set naught of you builders, which is become the head of the corner.” (Acts 4:11). He is referred to again in the New Testament scriptures as “a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious.” (I Peter 2:4), and again as the eternal foundation upon which a life must be built (I Cor. 3:11). And so the faint foreshowings of the Christ found in the third degree of the rite became more clear, to become increasingly so in later degrees. Many find “Keystones” which they think to be of value, passing schemes for curing the ills of men, whether scientific, political, social or economical, which must in their turn be cast aside. They may hold forth promise for the completion of human life, but they are useless without the real Keystone, with its “new name.”

The “mark” has a further significance for us; it is a means of recognizing a brother in need, and of extending fraternal help as we are vividly taught in this degree, when we are embarrassed to find ourselves in need, and are assisted in our difficulty. And this helpfulness to others, even though the amount of money or time involved may be small, is itself “good work, true work,” which brings its own reward. For so we shape the truly square stones of which the Temple of our life is built. So, in thought of others, and not of self, we constantly with chisel and mallet chip off the waste and bring out the best that is in us, and in our brother as well. This is an important part of the “discipline and education” of every man. Not enlightened reason alone, but quite usefulness and a good disposition, are the characteristic marks of a true man and Mason. Such a life, though assailed by misfortune, traduced or even persecuted, may be lived in the assurance that in the end it will be accepted and crowned with joy, just as “the stone which the builders rejected, possessing merits to them unknow, became the chief stone of the Temple.”

Having learned these important lessons, the candidate is now ready to be seated as a master, and to receive the instructions necessary for one who presides over the craft; these ceremonies constitute the next degree.

EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH COMMITTEE,

Walter B. Congdon,  
Samuel F. Franklin,  
J. Arthur Jensen,  
Ernest Malmberg,  
William E. Pool.



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