

Who Made Your Square?

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Virginia Research Royal Arch Chapter No. 1753

April 30, 2005

In Highland Springs, Virginia, on a wall in Babcock Lodge (which incidentally, is named for the Babcock family who donated the land to the Grand Lodge of Virginia where now stands the Masonic Home of Virginia) hangs a copy of an 1864 painting by Professor C. Schussele called "The Iron Worker and King Solomon." On this is depicted the throne of King Solomon, with a smaller throne at his right hand. Seated on this smaller throne is a well-muscled workman. Approaching him are soldiers with weapons drawn, as a disturbed crowd looks on. A disgruntled group of workmen are in protest, while above all King Solomon stands with outstretched arms, holding everyone at bay. The explanation for this scene is printed at the bottom of the picture. According to an ancient Jewish legend, at the completion of the temple, King Solomon ordered the smaller throne made, to be occupied by a representative of the craftsman who had built the temple. At the unveiling of the throne the workers were assembled to select from among themselves, a representative to occupy this place of honor. However, at the appointed time the throne was undraped to reveal the ironworker was already sitting in it. The offended crowd stormed the throne but King Solomon commands them to halt (it is this moment that the painting captures) and listen to the man's explanation. The ironworker replied that all the guilds had been invited, all of the workers except him (remember, there was not the sound of any tool of iron heard in the temple while it was building). However, he had made all the tools of the other workman, and without his work, they could not have done theirs. Therefore, he thought that he should be considered first among the workmen and King Solomon, in his wisdom, agreed.

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Brethren, I ask you, who made your tools? More specifically, who made your square? As Masons we are all familiar with the symbolism of fitting our minds as living stones for that house above. We are taught to use the tools of a Mason to symbolically form those stones. In the Entered Apprentice lecture we are specifically told that the rough ashlar is a stone in its rude and natural state representing our rude and natural state by nature. The perfect ashlar represents that state of perfection which we hope to attain and is represented by a stone made ready by the hands of the Apprentice to be adjusted by the working tools of a Fellowcraft. The working tools of a Fellowcraft. What are the working tools of a Fellowcraft? The level, square, and plumb, measuring tools. And which would you use to check the shape of a stone? It is the square of course. I'll come back to this, but first I would like to address the subjects of geometry and tool making for a moment. Don't worry you won't have to remember any of this if you don't want to, but there will be a test in the end.

Some of the most magnificent structures ever built were done so thousands of years before AutoCAD and laser levels. Have you ever heard someone (usually a salesman) say that the skills are now built into tools? Indeed they are. But a true master craftsman could get the job done with good basic tools, even if he has to make some of them himself (Note: this does not apply if you are attempting to construct something like an aircraft carrier; I'm talking buildings, bridges, book cases, etc.). So what would happen if there were no measuring tools available? No standard to go by well, you make one up. Don't think this would work? It did for hundreds of years in Europe. Almost every kingdom had its own standards of measurement (say based upon the length of the king's foot). But as long as you used a constant unit of measurement throughout your project, it didn't matter if your inch was five percent more or less than used in the next country over. We actually make use of this today; it's called building scale. As long as your ratios of measure stay consistent throughout, things should fit the same. The most accurate way to do this would probably be to find the lowest common denominator and build your measures up from there. So now we have standard measure. What else would we need? How about a straight edge? What could we use as a point of reference for a perfectly straight line?

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A string stretched tightly between two points would work, either as your measure it a reference to make a rigid one. How about a plumb? Take that same string, add a weight to one end, and now you've got a plumb line. Do you need a level? No problem! All you've got to do is suspend the aforementioned plumb line from the top of a square (or preferably a pair of back-to-back identical squares) and you've got an instant level. Ah, but where do we get the square? This one is a little more involved.

First let's consider how we can test square for accuracy. Here is where the geometry comes into play. The first thing we need to do is establish a parallelogram. We can use our trusty string again to help us. If we have a figure with four sides, all we have to do is make sure that the top side is the same as the bottom side (measure it with the string) and the right side is equal to the left side. If this is the case, we have a parallelogram. But are the angles square? Not necessarily. In order to be square the distance from the top left corner to the bottom right corner must be the same as the top right to bottom left. If all these criteria are met, we have a rectangle and if all sides are equal, a square. So it's easy to test something rectangular for squareness. Once we have established a reference, we can put our square up against it and rest it. And if it's not square we can adjust it, or more likely, start over. So while this may be an easy way to prove a square is accurate, it is not a very efficient way to make one. A better way would be to have a known good square copy, or a stone with straight sides and known right angles to form it against. Surely this would be how a smith would make one.

Brethren, the same is true of a man. While it's often easy to see if a man is true and square, it's not always so easy to make him that way. A lot depends on his working tools. There is a cliché that it be a poor workman who blames his tools, and in this case it's true. So, brethren, where do we get our own squares? Why, we make them ourselves of course. One must form his own standards and ethics. The question is really what we use as a mold or form. Do we just follow rules that someone else made, essentially copying a square (which may or may not be right), or do we find a worthy mentor, and model our tools by them? With this method you know what you're getting. You must bear in

mind however, that man has more than two dimensions. Just because his public face looks good, you've still got to examine the depth of his character. How about an adjustable square? One set of standards for dealing with some people, and a different set for dealing with others. Would a master craftsman use an adjustable tool for something that important? Can you imagine walking into a garage and hearing "hey, give me them channel locks. I've got this valve cover off this Jaguar"? I don't think so. Also just like an operative tool, the more you adjust your symbolic tools, the harder is to get them to hold their standard. A rigid one-purpose tool does not have that problem.

Brethren, whose tools are you helping to form? Your sons, daughters, or grandkids? How about someone from church, or a younger employee? Are you a worthy form that someone could fit his or her square upon?

The Living Stone

Consider your life,
Wrought with pleasure and strife,
It's the one thing you truly do own.

You take the good with the bad,
The happy and sad,
Together they weather your stone.

When you examine the way,
That you live every day,
Are you treating your fellowman fair?

Are you forming a block?
Or is your stone just a rock,
That you happened to find over there?

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What in your life rules
The way you use your tools
To chip away pieces of waste?

Do you follow a draft?
As you carefully craft,
Or haphazardly do it in haste?

When your days have all passed
And you're called home at last
Will your stone be considered a saver?

Will the criteria be met?
In the wall will it set?
Or be stuck in the ground as a paver?

When they've examined each side
Will your mentors all hide,
And blend in amongst their fellow creatures?

Or will one step from the crowd
And proclaim boldly and loud
I'm proud to be one of his teachers?

Is your stone up to spec?
Or a weight round your neck,
Pulling you down to despair?

Are you up to the task?
Perhaps you should ask:
Who taught you the use of the square?