

Fellowcraft

Masonic Service Association - Short Talk
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This word is a shortening of Fellow of the Craft. A fellow is a comrade, an associate of equal rank and privilege. In the development of learned societies and universities following the Renaissance, a Fellow was a distinguished member of an educated group or college faculty. For example, the Fellows of Magdalen College, Oxford, are a group of eminent scholars and teachers who enjoy a certain equality of rank and privilege because of their Fellowship. The Fellows of the Royal Society of London are the modern successors to the outstanding men of science and letters who founded that organization in the seventeenth century, at the time when operative Masonry was evolving into the social, charitable, and philosophic institution we call Freemasonry today. As Fellows they hold a grade of membership above that of an ordinary Member. A similar distinction may be found in the membership of the Philalethes Society, an association of American Freemasons.

A Fellow of the Craft originally was a worker who had completed his term of service as an apprentice, and after a further period of employment and experience as a journeyman, had been received into the Fellowship of his guild or "trade union". In the case of workers in stone, they passed into the Fellowship of the Lodge. They became associates, or equal comrades, because they were now believed to be "of great skill, tried and trusty". The term Fellowcraft was used in other trades and guilds besides the Masons' association; but its survival in modern times is exclusively Masonic.

Today's Fellowcraft is a thin shadow of his operative counterpart. Too many Masons remember their experience in this degree but vaguely. A shadowy recollection of the working tools, of two bronze pillars, of an ascent up a flight of winding stairs, of a long lecture about the seven liberal arts and sciences, something about wages, the Middle Chamber of King Solomon's Temple, and the letter "G", and the realization that he still had another degree to "take" before he could really become a member of the Lodge, - these are the principal remembrances which the average modern Mason can summon when he hears the word Fellowcraft.

In some Lodges, where the unfortunate tendency to shorten or to omit large parts of the Middle Chamber Lecture is habitual, the members are even poorer in the memories that they have stored up about a significant initiatory experience. Yet to those who view the history of operative Masonry only through a golden aura of legend and idealism, it may prove disappointing to learn that such modern Freemasons are reflecting an attitude or practice of operative Masons concerning the experience of "passing". Many operative craftsmen never bothered to become Fellows of the Craft; but they acted from very practical and economic reasons. Furthermore, they had already received the ritualistic instruction which is reserved for the modern Fellowcraft.

It must be remembered that mediaeval guild Masonry, and its extension through the period of the Renaissance up to the eighteenth century when Speculative Freemasonry was formally organized, was never a fixed and changeless thing. Like all human institutions it grew and adapted itself to changing conditions. Therefore, all statements about the practices and principles of operative craftsmen must be prefixed by the phrase, "Generally speaking..... or "In such and such a century . . .". No descriptive statement about Fellows of the Craft can ever apply to all workers in stone at all times and in all places. Conditions varied widely from one locality to another; regulations were stricter in the cities, where Councils could control the workers more easily.

The Short Talk Bulletin of September, 1959, presented picture of the operative apprentice. He was a worker indentured to a master for a specific period of training, usually seven years. At the time of his indenture he was "booked", i.e., his contract was registered with the municipal authorities. When he had acquired sufficient skill and dependability in his work, and when his master was ready to guarantee his fees as well as his character, the apprentice could be "entered" in the lodge. The average period of time it took apprentices to be "entered" was four years after they had begun to serve their masters. Yet there are some cases on record in which the apprentice was "entered" at the same time he was "booked", i.e., at the very beginning of his apprenticeship to a master. Kinship to the master or the affluence of the apprentice's parents or guarantors probably helped to speed up the process in some cases.

When an apprentice had completed his indenture, he was a journeyman, free to travel from employer to employer, seeking work at regular wages, which were usually fixed by law at a daily or weekly rate. He could stay on with the master of his apprenticeship, or he could seek employment with another. He could "free lance" his skills. He could take on an apprentice himself; this was a useful source of extra income. He could even hire out his apprentice to others, when his own affairs were slack. He could contract for small jobs, the cost of which had an upper limit prescribed by the municipal authorities. He was sufficiently trained and skillful to "start life on his own". A journeyman could earn a comfortable living.

The ultimate goal of all apprentices was to become a burgess, a free citizen of the town. To practice his trade with the widest latitude and freedom, a craftsman had to become a burgess, a full-fledged citizen with certain property rights and the franchise. He had to have "the freedom of the city". It was the highest station in life to which the ordinary man could aspire.

Generally speaking, an operative mason had to be a Fellow of the Craft if he hoped to achieve the status of burgess. This was especially true in the smaller towns and in the country, where the Lodge was the highest authority in regulating workmen. In the cities, the Council had overriding authority; and it usually insisted that workmen could not be ranked (or make contracts) as Masters, until they had "taken the freedom of the city". This freedom entailed certain duties and responsibilities; but it also gave the freeman some educational advantages for his children, some "social security" benefits for his family, priority in housing, and the right to practice his trade as a Master Workman.

Lodges apparently considered a workman "free" only after he had had approximately three years' experience as a journeyman, and after he had "passed to Fellow of the Craft" in a simple ceremony, of which the payment of prescribed fees seems to have been the most important element.

"Passing F.C." was not a ritualistic experience; it was the attainment of a certain grade or status in the classification of workmen in a trade organization. While there undoubtedly was some ceremony connected with the event, it should be remembered that "entered apprentices" were full members of a lodge, that they had received all the instructions pertaining to the noble craft, as well as most of its operative secrets, at the time of their initiation. A simpler, shorter version of the lecture on the seven liberal arts and sciences, which was part of the old charges and regulations, was read to apprentices at the time they were "entered".

The Schaw Statutes of 1598 attempted to enforce a seven years' period of journeymanship before an apprentice could be "passed a Fellow of the Craft"; but old lodge

records indicate that the idea was largely a hope or a dream, since practically no apprentices had to wait that long to become Fellows of the Craft. The "accommodation" of the law to suit men' s practical needs and ambitions has been arranged in every generation.

An apprentice, for practical purposes, was free to work wherever he chose as soon as he had completed his apprenticeship, and he was technically "free" the day he completed the required period of his journeymanhip. Since "the freedom of the city" could be granted to a "free" apprentice as well as to a Fellow of the Craft, it depended on the degree of understanding and agreement between the Council and the guilds (or Lodges) whether only Fellows of the Craft received the freedom. Where such Fellowship was not insisted on, a worker could bypass the rank of Fellowcraft on his way to becoming a burgess.

In Edinburgh around 1600 "Freemen Masters" were the actual full members and managers of the Lodges. Fellows of the Craft were fully trained masons, potential Masters. They could take on apprentices, do limited "jobbing" on their own account, but they could not work as Masters until they had been made burgesses. They needed no additional qualifications to become Masters, except to pay the required fees and to execute "an essay", a master' s piece.

No record of any ceremony for making a Fellow of the Craft a Master has ever come to light. When a workman was "passed F.C.", nothing more seems to have been recorded of him until he was made a burgess. Then, without any announcement, minute, or ceremony of any kind, he is to be found signing the Lodge minutes as a "Freeman Master".

Apprentices could speed up the process of becoming "free" by another, a modern sounding technique, - by marrying the boss' daughter. An "unfreeman" could acquire his "freedom" at the cheapest rate and in the shortest period of time by marrying a burgess' daughter. If his master was a burgess and the apprentice did this at the end of his indenture, he was excused from the extra three years of service as a journeyman. From the evidence revealed by old lodge records, it appears that many of them did. It was a practical arrangement to insure the future security of the females in a Master' s family.

Many other journeymen, however, failed to "pass the Fellow of the Craft". We can only guess at their reasons. Some lacked ambition and were content to continue a journeyman' s existence as a hired hand or as a small employer of one or two apprentices. Some may have multiplied their family needs and obligations so rapidly that they were never able to lay aside the sums required for membership as Fellows of the Lodge. Lacking relatives of means to help them pay the necessary fees for Fellowship and Freedom, they remained in the ranks of the unsung common man, who may not always "lead a life of quiet desperation", but who learns to adapt his life to calm frustration.

Every system of society tends to harden into a mold of custom and tradition which changes far too slowly in some of its minor practices to suit the changing conditions of the life of which it is composed. When it became more and more difficult for operative craftsmen to "get to the top" in the exercise of the builders' arts, there was less and less urgency for journeymen masons to undertake the responsibilities and the financial obligations of "passing Fellowcraft".

Toward the close of the era of operative Masonry, we discover a problem created by this phenomenon, the solution of which helped to hasten the transformation. of Craft Masonry into Speculative Freemasonry.

In 1681 Mary' Chapel Lodge in Edinburgh issued an edict against "entered Apprentices" who neglected to be passed to Fellowcraft. It ordered that no master was to employ any apprentices who remained "unpassed" for more than, two years after their discharge from

their indentures. A fine of twenty shillings a day was to be imposed on any master who employed them.

In this event we see the transformation of a "closed shop" association of highly skilled craftsmen into a broader trade association, in which the number of members in the Lodge and the income to be derived from their fees were more important than the proven skills and needs of specialized craftsmen. A year later, 1682, the same Lodge legislated directly against "unpassed" apprentices, by levying a fine of twelve shillings a year upon every such member. To make the legislation more palatable, it was announced that the fines would be used to relieve the poor and the needy. It was not long before the claims upon such funds for relief became excessive, with the result that quarrels and contentions broke out in the Lodge.

By the time the eighteenth century was well under way, the Lodge was solving this difficulty by enrolling in its membership "nonoperatives", who paid 1 pound, 1 s (Sterling), "for the use of the poor". The Lodge had practically abandoned its original function of trade control; it was now virtually a social and benevolent society. And it was just about this time that Speculative Freemasonry began its history with the founding of the first Grand Lodge in London in 1717.

In spite of the differences between the operative masons' grade of Fellow of the Craft and the present Fellowcraft degree, there is a thread that runs from the ancient to the modern. It is the great theme of enlightened manhood. The symbolic ritual stresses the necessity of the cultivation of the intellect and the acquisition of habits of industry, both essential to the man who in the prime of life would be a Master in the building of a spiritual Temple of Brotherhood.

The operative Fellow of the Craft was in the full vigor of physical manhood. Because of the nature of the work involved in cutting and handling stone, the masons' guilds generally required beginning apprentices to be somewhat older than was the case in other trades. Some Lodges tried to enforce a minimum age of eighteen, although records indicate that some apprentices were younger.

Nevertheless, an operative mason, after completing his seven years' apprenticeship and the usual period of service as a journeyman, was a man in his late twenties. In an era when the average life expectancy was somewhere in the early forties, such a man was well into the period of middle life, when his skills should be mature and his objectives well defined. Whatever executive ability he needed to become a "freeman Master" must have been demonstrated by the time he became a Fellow of the Craft. Habits of industry and the acquisition of knowledge were among the important qualities in the development of that ability.

In the modern Fellowcraft degree the underlying idea of the Middle Chamber Lecture is the development of manhood through useful knowledge and constructive work. The scientific facts and the theories of art contained in the various sections of that discourse are not its vital elements. They are too elementary and too generalized to be of practical use in any trade or profession today. It is reverence for knowledge and its moral usefulness which is illustrated for the speculative Fellowcraft.

The ritual stresses the need for studying and for learning throughout the period of manhood. It illuminates the idea that a Fellowcraft must search for knowledge about the liberalizing ideas of morality and brotherly love. If he would truly become a Master engaged in building "a house not made with hands", he must know the means of achieving universal tolerance and understanding.

The ritual of the Fellowcraft degree admittedly difficult to learn and to present

with the same dramatic appeal that is inherent in the other two degrees. But, because the ennobling fascination of the beautiful ceremonies of Freemasonry can capture the hearts and minds of men in every generation (and in every degree), it is important that symbolic Craftsmen learn and interpret as meaningfully as possible the ritual of this degree.

A Fellow of the Craft should feel that he has achieved a distinguished rank and privilege when he has completed his journey through King Solomon' s Temple. A Fellow of the Craft should understand that he has fulfilled symbolically a journeyman' s years of learning and of labor in the arts of Brotherly Love, Relief, and Truth.