

Masonic Rods

By Richard D. Carver

In nearly every regular and accepted lodge of Freemasons, rods are carried by the Junior and Senior Deacons and sometimes the Junior and Senior Stewards. How these rods are used varies somewhat throughout the many jurisdictions, as does the physical characteristics of the rods themselves.

One of my first memories of Masonic ritual was that of being flanked by the two Stewards in the preparation room and being questioned by the Senior Deacon regarding the Interrogatories of Initiation. The Stewards and Senior Deacon wore no particular costume other than the Masonic Aprons, the badge of office around their necks and each carried a wooden pole about 6' in length adorned with a metallic tip. I remember thinking they looked like a spear. As I became entranced with the many other details of the degree work, I noticed that from time to time, the Senior Deacon used his rod to bluntly strike the floor, as if to knock on an imaginary door. This all seemed a bit odd, (but no less odd than many other parts of the ritual) and I felt confident that it would all be explained at some future date. Sadly, it really never was.

As I progressed through the Degrees and ultimately became able to observe as they were presented to other Brothers, it became more and more obvious that there was a very specific methodology and timing to the handling of the rods — but again, no Light was given as to their meanings. I began this research by searching for a definition of a rod; and more specifically for a Masonic definition, which is not always the same thing.

I discovered that the words “rod” and “staff” are commonly interchanged. This is not only a common thread found in the Bible but is also specifically noted by Brother Mackey in *The Dictionary of Freemasonry*. From a biblical sense, “staff” was sometimes used to mean support; such as in “Bread is the staff of life.” One notable exception to this can be found in second verse of the 23rd Psalm where it is said, “Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.” By mentioning them as two separate entities would seem to indicate they likely have a different meaning.

Many synonyms appear in various works, such as club, stave, wand, baton, mace, scepter, and crozier although several of these stray far from any likely Masonic association. All of these usages are associated with brute force, leadership, correction or protection, and support — power and authority being a common theme of each definition.

The most-common non-biblical mention of a rod is found in the form of the Caduceus of Mercury and the rod of Aesculapius. The Caduceus of Mercury is

a winged rod with two entwined serpents and is often associated with healing and medical arts. It was adopted as the symbol of the American Medical Association in the late 19th century.

The Rod of Aesculapius, a rod wrapped with a single serpent is another symbol of the medical profession. It is widely used by the American Dental Association.

The caduceus (or magic wand) carried by Mercury consists of three elements: a rod, a pair of wings and the two intertwined serpents. The rod is emblematic of power and authority. In the hands of primitive man, he who held the largest club and possessed the power to wield it was usually the leader of the tribe.

Legend holds the caduceus as having the power of producing sleep. Milton went as far as to refer to it as the opiate rod.

As late as 1812, Pennsylvania Deacons in procession carried Columns — the very same columns that now rest on the Wardens' pedestals. Deacons later carried blue rods tipped with gold, symbolizing friendship and benevolence; which later these were tipped with a pine cone, said to be an imitation of the Caduceus of Mercury, the messenger of the gods.

One Masonic book, after explaining about the caduceus, brags:

The rod of the Master of Ceremonies is an analogue [equivalent or parallel]." Another Masonic book claims that "Mercurius Caducifer [Mercury], the bearer of the herald's staff, finds his analogue in a Mason's Lodge, in the Senior Deacon, who accompanies the initiate throughout the ceremonies, and assists at restoration, although himself unable to restore life.

There are hundreds of references to the rod in the Bible. Adam selected a branch to use as a staff to lean on. The rod of Moses turned into a serpent when he threw it down before pharaoh, and later he held high his rod until the water was surged back by a mighty wind till the ground was visible. He quelled the rebellion of Korah by smiting the rock at Meribah with his rod and used it to bring forth water. Aaron showed the priority of the Levi tribe when his rod budded forth and he later used it to stay many devastating plagues and important victories over the desert tribes.

I can find no definitive evidence that rods were used by operative Masons although there are some compelling theories as to their likely use.

One such theory is that they were used as shadow markers — much like a reverse plumb line — where a stationary rod is used to cast a shadow of sunlight and make a directional reference at a given time on a specific day.

Certain Masonic scholars make particular attention in saying that the latitude of the Jerusalem Temples is such that placing a rod in the ground and marking the shadow of the rising sun on morn of the summer solstice (St. John's day in Freemasonry) and again of the rising sun at the winter solstice (the other St. John's day in Freemasonry) the resulting two lines form the apex of a perfect triangle, sometimes called the Delta of Enoch.

Considerable consideration is given this form in the 13th Degree of the Scottish Rite, called the Royal Arch of Enoch or Master of the Ninth Arch. In reality, the location of the Temple is not geometrically unique. I feel especially foolish having spent several hours creating a computer model to test this, only to discover that any point on earth that is between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn form the same angles on the same dates. It does serve to point out that given this regularity, it is possible to calculate a specific standard angle on a given date and at a known standard time, which would be dawn, dusk or when the sun is at its zenith or meridian height.

In Britain the Grand High Steward presided over the King's household and carried a white Rod. This may have been the start of the Masonic Rod, or it could come from Ushers in the House of Parliament. One usher carried a black rod and the other a white rod. People would be seated by calling party affiliation by "black rod" or "white rod," depending on where they wished to be seated.

One of the earliest mentions of Masonic Rods can be found in the procession of Grand Lodge in 1724 in which the Grand Stewards carried white rods symbolizing purity and innocence. Deacons first carried blue rods tipped with gold, symbolizing friendship and benevolence. It is again documented that they were later tipped with a pine cone in imitation of the Caduceus of Mercury. I have found several documents that seem to indicate that rods were used in some early Lodges along the east coast to find eavesdroppers in the eaves of the lodges.

Modern-day Colorado Lodges have the Deacons and Stewards carry rods anytime they transition inside the Lodge. Traditionally, Deacons rods are blue; Stewards rods are white.

In Minnesota, Deacons and Stewards are directed to carry their rods at an angle of 23.5 degrees from vertical, imitating the tilt of the earth's axis from the plane of its orbit.

In Texas, rods are only used when receiving the Grand Master or his personal representative into the Lodge room. This is done by the Deacons as they lock the tops together to form an arch over the honoree and the two Past Masters who escort him. They follow the three from the door to the altar and as the

honoree is escorted by one of the PM's to the East the Deacons part their rods and return to their stations.

In Virginia, Deacons never move in Lodge without carrying their rods. They are carried at an angle is 45 degrees. Stewards never use their rods for any purpose.