

The Ancient Landmarks Revisited *by Bro. Jeff Peace*

Part 1



Most American Freemasons have heard mention of “The Ancient Landmarks” at one time or another in their Masonic journey. Most simply assume it is a list of the most fundamental aspects of Freemasonry that were written down long ago when the organization first came into being. Some believe it is the “Landmarks” as written down by Bro. Albert G. Mackey, Bro. Albert Pike or something their Grand Lodge printed in its Code or monitor. While all of these could be “The Ancient Landmarks” none of them can assert that claim with absolute certainty. The

problem with “The Ancient Landmarks” arises out of a statement in Anderson’s Constitutions of 1723: “Every Annual Grand Lodge has an inherent power and Authority to make new Regulations or to alter these, for the real benefits of this Ancient Fraternity; provided always that the old Land-Marks be carefully preserved.” Unfortunately, brother Anderson doesn’t bother to provide us with a list of the “Land-Marks” to which he is referring. This problem has plagued Masonic scholars for years.

As a historian with no particular interest in Masonic Jurisprudence I never spent any time in search of the Landmarks because there wasn’t a single document to support a valid argument regarding them. Other scholars had already speculated about them and adding to their speculations wouldn’t help to clarify the matter.

Every week I receive emails asking questions about the history of Freemasonry and its symbolism from brothers around the globe, and usually I am able to provide them with a quick answer or point them to other resources that can provide an answer. Then one day I received the grand daddy of all questions. It seemed like such a simple question at the time but it took two years for me to reply to the email with a twenty-five page essay.

The brother pointed to the definition of Freemasonry which says that “Freemasonry is a peculiar system of morality veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols” and asked what was “so peculiar or unique about the morals discussed in the degrees?” After thinking about it for a moment I realized there was nothing particularly peculiar or unique about them. The morality taught in the degrees is the same as one would learn from their parents or at Sunday School. Then an idea occurred to me; could the definition of Freemasonry actually be a Landmark? After all, wouldn’t the definition of Freemasonry be something that should be “carefully preserved” as Anderson had said? If it was a Landmark then what were the others? Did the founders have more than one definition of “Freemasonry”? I was soon to discover that indeed the founders left several “Landmark”

definitions of the Craft.

Anderson's Constitutions of 1723 are ninety-one pages long. They include the regulations of the Grand Lodge, constitutions of the fraternity, a lengthy mythical history, the charges of a Freemason, an approbation, and several songs. It would have taken Bro. Anderson a long time to compile this document and write everything out by hand, so it seems very strange that he would leave out something so fundamental as a list of Landmarks. Was it an oversight? If it were then he could easily have corrected it when he published a revised version of the Constitutions in 1734, but again the Landmarks are strangely absent from these as well.

I would put forth that there are only two possible reasons for this behavior by Anderson:

1. "The Ancient Landmarks" were secret.
2. "The Ancient Landmarks" were universally known by all Fellows and Masters of the Craft.

If they were a secret then he could not publish them without violating his oath and obligation, and if they were already well known by Masons then there was no reason to put them into print.

If they were a secret then the original Masons must have taken it to their graves. Why?

In 1753 there was a Masonic schism. A rival Grand Lodge appeared known today as the 'Antients.' The new Grand Lodge adopted the Royal Arch degree as an explanation for the supposed lost word of a Master Mason. The original Grand Lodge (est.1717) claimed that both the 'Antients' and their new degree was clandestine and irregular. They further stated that the "word" was not lost. Many modern readers will find this statement incredible because they have been told the word was lost and that they have its replacement.

There are some fragments from a Masonic catechism attributed to Bros. Anderson and Desauguliers written about 1720 that seem to verify this claim.

Q: What are you going to do there?

A: To seek for that which was lost and is now found.

Q: What is that which was lost and is now found?

A: THE MASTER MASONS WORD.

Since virtually all modern era Grand Lodges are derived from the Grand Lodge of the 'Antients' it makes sense that we are not in possession of "The Ancient Landmarks," because they were the creation of the 'Moderns' of the Grand Lodge of London (est. 1717).

If “The Ancient Landmarks” were lost during the schism then might we be able to recover some part of them? While we can’t know for certain their exact wording I do believe we can at the very least come to a basic understanding of them. All we need to do is look at the definitions of Freemasonry handed down to us.

1. Freemasonry is a peculiar system of morality veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols.
2. Freemasonry is dedicated to the brotherhood of man under the All-Seeing Eye of Deity.
3. Freemasonry is a progressive science.
4. Freemasonry is a natural philosophy, or system of natural philosophy.

From the first definition a few things can be concluded. The original speculative Freemasonry offered a peculiar or unique system of morality from that which was accepted in the early eighteenth century. That this peculiar morality was hidden in an allegory, and that specific symbols were used to illustrate or reveal it to the initiates. Thus, having the right set of symbols is essential to understanding the peculiar system of morality, which is, in and of itself, Freemasonry.

From the second definition we learn the object of Freemasonry, or the peculiar system of morality; the brotherhood of man under God. Unfortunately, we do not know how this was to be accomplished. That would have been an aspect of the Landmarks that can only be speculated upon.

In the third definition we learn that Freemasonry was a progressive science. Science, as we know it today, was in its infancy at the time. One of the Landmarks must have promoted the need for a progressive science as a means to furthering the cause of the peculiar system of morality and the brotherhood of man.

Finally, in the fourth definition we discover that Freemasonry was a system of natural philosophy as opposed to a religion. It, like all natural philosophy, attempts to interpret the universe and our reality through the laws of nature. This definition is closely associated with the third definition (Freemasonry is a progressive science) because natural philosophy relies on a progressive science to further our understanding of the cosmos.

As Freemasons we may never know all of the details of the original “Ancient Landmarks” but now I believe we have a place to start our search. What we’re searching for isn’t obvious or easily uncovered. It will take time and perseverance, but in the end we may discover that which we have been seeking all along: the truth.

Part 2: How Anglo-American Freemasonry lost its way

In Part 1 of this paper I asserted that the Ancient Landmarks were based around the common definitions of Freemasonry from the early eighteenth century.

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If there ever was a document listing the Ancient Landmarks it is now lost, but we do have the old definitions, and when put together with historical events, I believe we can still come to an understanding of the guiding principles of the original Speculative Freemasons.

We know from existing historical documents the nature of the men who called themselves "Freemasons" and what they were doing both inside and outside the Craft. Since it is human nature to join together with men like your self we can safely assume that some common thread of interests must run through all of these people. I believe that common thread of interest is both spelled-out and veiled by the definitions above.

History would suggest that these men were bonded together by a peculiar or unique system of guiding moral principles that were distinct from those of the common people of the eighteenth century. And, that these moral principles were conducive to joining all people together in peace and harmony into one great brotherhood. Since religion and divine revelation were the framework of morality at the time it is clear that such an ideology would have met stiff resistance from both church and state; thus, the need for absolute secrecy in lodges. In light of this the grisly oaths and obligations begin to make perfect sense.

This new morality is evolving at a time when the Catholic Church in Europe had been weakened by both political and philosophical changes within society, and advancements in science and understanding. During the Middle Ages the church had become tyrannical, and questioning its authority or ideology was a death sentence to those courageous enough to do so. Galileo Galilei and Giordano Bruno are examples of this behavior. Modern free-thinkers had finally come to realize that divinely revealed systems of morality were incompatible with the advancement of humanity, and that too many people had needlessly died defending one religion from another during the Crusades. Thus, the unique system of morality proposed by the early Freemasons was entirely devoid of religion and instead based on Natural Philosophy. Unlike religious morality the new system would be adaptable to advancements in human understanding and open to a progressive science, thus ensuring that the Galileos of the future would not be silenced for their ideas. This is the dawning of what will become known as "The Age of Enlightenment" and it will be driven by the Light given to mankind by Freemasons.

What were these early brothers really like? What did they do in lodge? Were they really a society of mystics searching for some lost inner truth, or were they a product of the changing times in Europe? By gaining an understanding of this we can better

comprehend the true nature of Speculative Freemasonry.

The earliest Speculative Freemasons came from a wide variety of backgrounds. Most were protestants, some devout and others barely religious. There were Pantheists, Atheists, Gnostics, Jews; men of every religious and non-religious persuasion joined the Craft. Most were from the growing middle class, and some were a part of the old aristocracy.

From the minutes of old lodge meetings we learn that Bro. John T. Desaguliers was teaching Newton's Calculus and the Laws of Motion at their meetings. A brother who was a doctor brought a corpse to lodge and dissected it showing the brothers how the human body worked. From the periodicals of the time we learn that the early Freemasons were the ultimate party club of the eighteenth century. They were notorious for staying up to all hours of the morning drinking and singing. Tavern owners began to hate them for breaking all the glasses. Eventually super thick and difficult to break glasses were created just for the Freemasons. These were known as "firing glasses." On one noted occasion the Freemasons of Savannah, after a night of drinking, commandeered one of the king's gun boats and took it for a cruise around the harbor. The idea of them being humble introspective mystics just doesn't seem to fit with the history. If anything they appear to be rebelling against the rigid customs of society and enjoying the freedom of the human spirit.

The early Freemasons were also prolific underground printers circulating various heretical and revolutionary tracts throughout Europe like the "Treatise of the Three Impostures." In a sense they were the first political activists who spawned many of the revolutionary ideas that would help to form both modern Europe and America.

Within sixty years of the founding of the Grand Lodge of London in 1717 Masonic ideology will have pervaded most of Europe and crossed the Atlantic to America. On July 4, 1776 it will move from a "Speculative Art" to an Operative one.

"When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them...." — The Declaration of Independence

In the very opening words of the American Declaration of Independence we see traces of Masonic ideology. It does not make an appeal to any religious God, but to "the Laws of Nature and Nature's God." The new world and its laws will not be based on the divinely inspired decrees of pontiffs and priests, but upon the principles of Natural Philosophy. Masonic lodges were democratic in operation as would be the new nation. The Masonic idea of tolerance as the cement of brotherhood will be applied in the American government which protects the freedom of religion.

If you step back and look objectively at the Freemasonry in America today does it resemble that of the past? Were George Washington and Benjamin Franklin humble

introspective mystics? Was Freemasonry about self-discovery or the advancement of all of humanity? Perhaps it was a little of both?