

ST. JOHN DAYS

June 24 • December 27

By history, custom, tradition and ritualistic requirements, the Craft holds dear the days of St. John the Baptist on June 24, and St. John the Evangelist on December 27. A lodge which forgets both forfeits a precious link with the past and loses an opportunity for the renewal of allegiance to everything in Freemasonry symbolized by these Patron Saints. No satisfactory explanation has as yet been advanced to explain why operative Masons adopted two Christian saints, when St. Thomas, the patron of architecture and building, was available.

Most Freemasons are agreed that the choice of our ancient brethren was wise. No two great teachers, preachers, wise men, saints, could have been found who better showed in their lives and works the doctrine and teachings of Freemasonry.

St. John the Evangelist apparently came into our fraternal system somewhere towards the close of the sixteenth century; at least, we find the earliest authentic lodge minute reference to St. John the evangelist in Edinborough in 1599, although earlier mentions are made in connection with that may be called relatives, if not ancestors, of our Craft. For instance "The Fraternity of St. John" existed in Cologne in 1430. "St. John's Masonry" is a distinctive term for Scotch Lodges, many of the older of which took the name of the saint. Thus, in its early records, the Lodge of Scoon and Perth is often called the Lodge of St. John, and the Lodge possesses a beautiful mural painting of the-saint, on the east wall of the lodge room.

Other Lodges denominated "St. John's Lodges" were some of those unaffiliated with either the "Moderns" or the "Ancients" in the period between establishment of the Ancients (1751) and the Reconciliation (1813).

In many old histories of the Craft is a quaint legend that St. John the Evangelist became a "Grand Master" at the age of ninety. It seems to have its origin in a book printed in 1789, in which one Richard Linnecar of Wakefield wrote certain "Strictures on Freemasonry," although his paper is really an eulogy. Whether this writer really continued a tradition, or invented the tale which was seized upon by Oliver and kept alive as a legend, impossible though it is, no man may say.

One Grand Lodge has ruled that St. John' Days are Landmarks! Of course any Grand Lodge may make it's own laws, but it is beyond the power of any Grand Lodge either to make a Landmark by pronouncement, or to unmake a Landmark by denying it. Inasmuch as Landmarks are universally admitted to be handed down to us from "time immemorial", and St. Johns' Days as Masonic festivals, are neither extremely old nor universal among the Craft (England using Wednesday after St. George's day; Scotland St. Andrew's Day; and Ireland St. Patrick's), we must consider only that Grand Lodge's intent to honor our patron saints, and not the validity of her results.

Historians believe that only after 1717, when the Mother Grand Lodge was formed, did Freemasons generally hold festival meetings on either or both June 24 and December 27.

Here are two addresses, either of which is appropriate to either June 24 or December 27, and a Masonic story, which, if well read by some brother with some elocutionary training, is also appropriate and informative:

ST. JOHNS' DAYS

The real explanation of Freemasonry's connection with the Sts. John is not to be found in the history of the Craft, but in the history of religions. For the festival days of the two St. Johns are as old as the ancient systems of worship of fire and sun.

Travel backwards in imagination to an unknown date when the world of men was young; when knowledge did not exist and the primal urges of all humanity were divided between the satisfaction of bodily needs-hunger, thirst, warmth, light and the instincts of self-preservation, mating, and the love of children. The men of that far-off age found everything in nature a wonder. They understood not why the

wind blew, what made the rain, from whence came lightning, thunder, cold and warmth; why the sun climbed the heavens in the morning and disappeared at night, or what the stars might be.

All primitive people tried to explain mysteries in terms of their daily lives. When angry their emotions resulted in loud shouts and a desire to kill. What more natural than to think thunder and lightning the anger of the Unknown who held their lives and well being in His hands? Ancient man bundled the enemy he conquered out of his cave into the open, where he froze or starved or was eaten by beasts.

What more natural than to think the wind, the rain, the cold, a manifestation of an angered Unseen Presence? The greatest manifestation of nature known to our ancient ancestors was the sun. It was always present during the day, and its near kin, fire, warmed and comforted them at night. Under its gentle rays crops grew and rivers rose.

The sun kept away the wild beasts by its light. The sun made their lives possible. Sun worship and fire worship were as natural for men just struggling into understanding as the breath they drew.

Early recognized facts must have been the sun's slow travel from north to south and back again as the seasons waxed and waned. And so mid summers day, the longest, became a festival; it was the harbinger Or harvest, the birthday of new life, as the winter solstice was significant of the end of the slow decline of the sun, the beginning of a new time of warmth and crop and happiness.

Through countless years, in a thousand religious, cults, mysteries, in a hundred climes and lands, priests and people celebrated the solstices. We know it not only from history and the records of ancient peoples, often cut upon stone, but from myths and legends; the story of Ceres and her search for her daughter Proserpine the allegory of Isis, Osiris and Horus.

Ancient custom is taken from a people with difficulty. Even today we retain customs the origin of which is lost to most of us. We speak glibly of Yuletide at Christmas, without thinking of an ancient Scandinavian god, Juul. The small boy avers truth "By Golly!" not knowing that he offers his hand (gol) if he speaks not the truth. Those who think it "bad luck" to break a mirror only continue a savage belief that a stone thrown in water which mirrors the face of an enemy will break his heart even as the reflection is broken.

If such ideas persist to this day, imagine how strenuously a people would resist giving up a holiday celebration which their fathers' and their fathers' fathers before them had kept for untold ages.

So it was when Christianity came to the world. Old feasts and festival days were not lightly to be given up, even by those who put their faith upon a Cross. Hence clever men in the early days of Christianity turned the pagan festivals to Christian usage, and the old celebrations of summer and winter solstice became the Sts. Johns' Days of the Middle Ages.

As the slow years passed, those who celebrated thought less and less of what the days really commemorated, and became more and more convinced of their new character. Today, hardly a Freemason gives a thought to the origin of St. John's Day in Winter, or knows his celebration of St. John's Day in midsummer preserves a touch with cavemen ancestors.

It was a common custom in the middle Ages for craftsmen to place themselves under the protection of some saint of the church. All the London trades appear to have ranged themselves under the banner of some saint and if possible they chose one who bore fancied relation to their trades Thus the fishmongers adopted St. Peter; the drapers chose the Virgin Mary, mother of the 'Holy Lamb' or 'Fleece' as an emblem of that trade. The goldsmiths' patron was St. Dunstan, represented to have been a brother artisan. The merchant tailors, another branch of the draping business, marked their connection with it by selecting St. John the Baptist, who was the harbinger of the Holy Lamb' so adopted by the drapers.

Eleven or more of the guilds had John the Baptist as To say with certainty why Freemasons adopted the two Sts. John, and continue to celebrate days as principal feasts which were once of a far different significance, is not in the power of any historian as yet. But the fitness of these two is obvious in our system if we consider the spiritual suggestion of their lives.

St. John the Baptist was a stern and just man; intolerant of sham, of pretense, of weakness; a man of strength and fire, uncompromising with evil or expediency, and yet withal courageous, humble, sincere, magnanimous. A character at once heroic and of rugged nobility, of him the Greatest of Teachers said: "Among them that are born of woman, there hath not arisen a greater than John the Baptist."

Of St. John the Evangelist, the disciple whom Jesus loved, a thousand books have been written, and student has vied with minister, teacher with historian, to find words fitly to describe the character of the gentle writer of the Fourth Gospel.

No attempt at rivalry will here be made; suffice it that St. John the Evangelist is recognized the world over as the apostle of love and light, the bringer of comfort to the grief-stricken, of courage to the weak, of help to the helpless, of strength to the falling.

Freemasonry is wise in a gentle wisdom which passeth that in books when she takes for her on both the saint who foretold the coming and the saint who taught the law of the Son of Man who walked by Galilee.

The question **"From whence come you?"** and the answer **"From the Lodge of the Holy Sts. John at Jerusalem"**, has puzzled many. None have phrased the simple, explanation of the inner meaning of this with more beauty and clarity than Brother Joseph Fort Newton, he of the golden pen and the voice of music: "There is no historical evidence that either of the two Saints of the church were ever members of the Craft. But they were adopted as its patron Saints, after the manner of former times a good manner it is, too and they have remained so in Christian lands. Lodges are dedicated to them, instead of to King Solomon, as formerly.

"So, naturally, there came the idea, or ideal, of a sacred lodge in the Holy City presided over by the Saints John. No such lodge ever existed in fact, and yet it is not a fiction-it is an ideal, and without such ideals our life would be dim and drab. The thought back of the question and answer, then, is that we come from an ideal or Dream Lodge into this actual work-a-day world, where our ideals are to be tested".

We do not know just when, or just how, Freemasonry adopted the Sts. John. Their days are the Christian adaption of pagan festivals of a time when man, knowing no better, worshipped the sun as the supreme God. So when we celebrate our festival days on June 24 and December 27, we walk step by step with ancient ancestors, worshipping as they worshipped, giving thanks as they did; they to the only god they knew for the glory of summer, the beginning of the period when days lengthened- we to the G.A.O.T.U., that our gentle Craft took for its own the austere but loving characters of two among the greatest of the saintly men who have taught of the Father of all mankind.

Here is the second address:

POINT WITHIN A CIRCLE

"Lodges were anciently dedicated to King Solomon, as he is said to have been our first most Excellent Grand Master; but speculative Masons dedicate theirs to the memory of St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist. Since their time, there is represented in every regular and well-governed lodge, a certain POINT WITHIN A CIRCLE, the point representing the individual brother; the circle, the boundary line of his conduct to God and man, beyond which he is never to suffer his passions, prejudices, or interests to betray him on any occasion. This circle is bordered by two perpendicular parallel lines representing these saints, and upon the top rest the Holy Scriptures. In going around this circle we necessarily touch upon these two lines, as well as upon the Holy Scriptures, and while a Mason keeps himself thus circumscribed, it is impossible that he should materially err."

Familiar to every Mason, this ancient symbol is too often considered merely as one of many, instead of what it really is, among the most illuminating of the Entered Apprentice's degree.

No man may say when, where, or how the symbol began. From the earliest dawn of history a simple closed figure has been man's symbol for Deity-the circle for some peoples, the triangle for others, and a circle or a triangle with a central point, for still others. The closed figure represents the conception of Him who has neither beginning or ending; the triangle adds to this the reading of a triune nature. The Lesser Lights form a triangle placed in our lodges in that orientation which expresses Wisdom, Strength and Beauty. In some Jurisdictions a lodge closes with brethren forming a circle about the Altar, which thus becomes the point, or focus, of the Supreme Blessing upon the brethren.

A symbol may have many meanings, all of them right, so long as they are not self-contradictory. The point within a circle has had many different meanings to many Masons.

We find it connected with sun-Worship, the most ancient of religions; ruins of ancient temples devoted both to sun and to fire worship are circular in form, with a central altar, or "point" which was the Holy of Holies. The symbol is found in India, in which land of mystery and mysticism its antiquity is beyond calculation.

Another ancient meaning of the symbol is that the point represents the sun and the circle the universe. A dot in a small circle is the astronomical symbol for the sun, and the derivation of this astronomical symbol marks its Masonic connection. The Indian interpretation makes the point the male principle, the circle the female; the point became the sun and the circle the solar system which ancient peoples thought was the universe because the sun is the vivifying, the life-giving principle, for all that lives.

The two parallel lines, which modern Masonry states represent the two holy St. Johns, are as ancient as the rest of the symbol, and originally had nothing to do with the "two eminent Christian patrons of Masonry." It is a pretty conception, but without foundation. The holy St. Johns lived and taught many hundreds of years before any Masonry existed which can justly be called by that name. If this is distasteful to those brethren who believe that King Solomon was Grand Master of a Grand Lodge, devised the system and perhaps wrote the ritual, one must refute them with their own chronology, for both the Holy St. Johns lived long after the wise king wrought his "famous fabric."

The two lines against the circle with the point date back before Solomon. On early Egyptian monuments may be found the Alpha and Omega, or symbol of God, in the center of circle embordered by two upright, perpendicular parallel Serpents, representing the Power and the Wisdom of the Creator. The derivation of the symbol which satisfies the mind as to logic and appropriateness, students find in the operative craft.

To understand just how the point within a circle came into Speculative Masonry by way of Operative craftsmanship, it is necessary to have some mental picture of the times in which the Craftsmen of the early middle ages lived and wrought.

The vast majority had little education. They could neither read nor write-unimportant matters to most, because there were no books to read and there was nothing which they needed to write. Skilled craftsmen they were, through long apprenticeship and careful teaching in the art of cutting and setting stone, but except for manual skill and a cunning artifice founded on generations of experience, they were without learning.

This was not true of the leaders or, as we would call them, The Masters. The great cathedrals of Europe were not planned and overseen by ignorance. There, knowledge was power and the architects, the overseers, the practical builders, those who laid out the designs and planned the cutting and the placing of the stones these were learned in all that pertained to their craft.

Doubtless many of them had knowledge of practical mathematics. Certain parts of this knowledge became diffused from the Master Builders through the several grades of superintendents, architects, overseers, foremen in charge of any section of the work. With hundreds if not thousands of men working on a great structure, some organization must have been essential.

Equally essential would be the overseeing of the tools. The tools used by the Cathedral builders were gavel and mallet and setting maul and hammer; they had chisel and trowel and plumb and square and level and twenty-four-inch gauge to "measure and lay out their work." The square, the level and the plumb were made of wood- wood, cord and weight for plumb and level; wood alone for square.

Wood wears when used against stone. Wood warps when exposed to water or damp air. The metal used to fasten the two arms of the square together would rust and perhaps bend or break. Naturally, the squares would not indefinitely stay square. Squares had constantly to be checked up for their right-angledness. Some standard had to be adopted by which a square could be compared, so that, when Operative Masons' squares were tried by it they would not "materially err."

The importance of the perfect right angle in the square by which the stones were shaped cannot be over-estimated. Operative Masonry in the Cathedral building days was largely a matter of cut and try, of individual workmen, of careful craftsmanship.

Quantity production, micrometer measurement, interchangeable parts were ideas which had not been invented. All the more necessary, then, that the foundation on which all the work was done should be as perfect as the Masters knew how to make it. Cathedral builders erected their temples for all time because they knew how to check and try their squares!

Today any school boy knows the simple "secret of the square" which was then the closely guarded wisdom of the Masters alone; today any school boy can explain the steam engine which was a wonder two hundred years ago, and make and use a wireless which was a miracle scarce twenty-five years gone by. Let us not wonder that our ancient Operative brethren thought their secret of a square so valuable!

Lay out a circle any size on a piece of paper. With a straight edge draw a line across through its center. Put a dot on the circle, anywhere. Connect that dot with the line at both points where it crosses the circle. Result, a perfect right angle. Draw the circle of what size you will; place the dot on the circumference where you will, if the lines from the dot meet the horizontal line crossing the circle through its center, they will form a right angle.

This was the Operative Masters great secret- knowing how to "try the square". It was by this means that he tested the working tools of the Fellows of the Craft so it was impossible either for their tools or their work "to materially err." From this, also, comes the ritual used in the lodges of our English brethren, where they "open on the center." Alas, we have dropped the quaint old words they use, and American Lodges know the "center" only as the point within a circle. The original line across the center has been shifted to the side and become the "two perpendicular parallel lines" of Egypt and India and our admonitions are no longer what they must once have been...."while a Mason circumscribes his square within these point, it is impossible that it should materially err."

Today we only have our Speculative meaning; we circumscribe our desires and our passions within the circle and the lines touching on the Holy Scriptures. For speculative Masons who use squares only in the symbolic sense, such an admonition is of far greater use than would be the secret of the square as known to our ancient brethren.

Pass it not lightly. Regard it with the reverence it deserves, for surely it is one of the greatest teachings of Masonry, concealed within a symbol which is plain for any man to read, so be it he has Masonry in his heart.

Author Unknown