

Masonic Rods

By Richard D. Carver

Nearly every regular and accepted jurisdiction of Masonry dictates that rods be placed at the stations of the Junior and Senior Deacons and the Junior and Senior Stewards. The specifics as to the use of the rods varies somewhat throughout the many jurisdictions, as does the physical attributes of the rods themselves.

One of my first memories of Masonic ritual was being flanked by two Stewards in the preparation room and being asked what I later learned are commonly known as the *Interrogatories of Initiation*. The Stewards and Senior Deacon wore no particular costume other than the Masonic Apron, and each carried a wooden pole about 6' in length adorned with a metallic tip. I remember thinking they looked like some sort of spear. As I became entranced with 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 some imaginary door. This all seemed a bit odd, (but no less odd than many other parts of the ritual) and I was sure it would be explained at some future date. Sadly, it really never was.

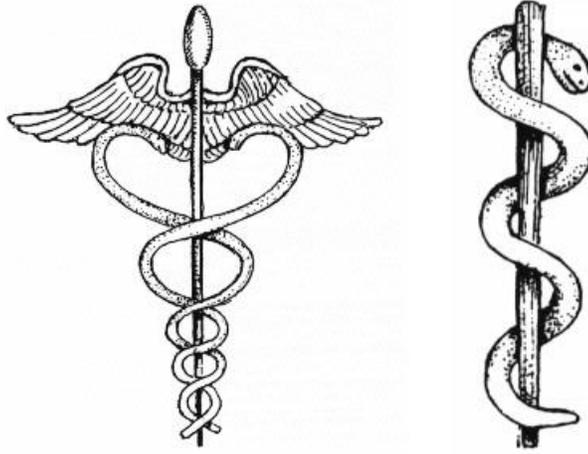
As I progressed through the Degrees and ultimately was able to watch as they were presented to other Brothers, it became more and more obvious that there was a specific methodology and

timing to the handling of the rods, but again no Light 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! The words “rod” and “staff” are commonly used interchangeably. This seemed to be a common thread in the Bible and was also specifically noted by Brother Mackey in *The Dictionary of Freemasonry*. However, from a biblical sense, staff was sometimes used to mean *support*; such as in "Bread is the staff of life." A notable exception to this rule occurs in second verse of the 23rd Psalm where it is said, “Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me;” which by mentioning them both would seem to indicate they have a different meaning.

Many synonyms appear in various works, such as club, stave, wand, baton, mace, scepter, and crozier although several of these venture far from any likely Masonic meaning. These words become easily associated with brute force, leadership, correction or protection, and support, with power and authority being the common denominator in each definition.

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



The caduceus of Mercury is a winged rod entwisted by two serpents and is often erroneously associated with healing and medical arts. In reality, it is the Rod of Aesculapius, a rod entwisted by a single serpent is the proper symbol of the medical profession.

The caduceus (or magic wand) that Mercury carried 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, the largest club and the power to wield it were mighty persuaders as to who was the leader of the tribe. The caduceus is legended to have the power of producing sleep. Milton refers to it as the opiate rod.

As late as 1812, Pennsylvania Deacons in procession carried columns—the very same columns which 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 know 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 mention 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.

The rods carried in Kansas Lodges are non-specific in color, but it is one of the few jurisdictions where handling, placement and carrying of rods is well defined and documented. Here, the rods are considered an integral part of the uniform and are carried by the Deacons and Stewards at almost all times when they move from their stations. They are carried vertically, with the base about 6 inches off the floor, arm in a natural, loose, downward position, in a loose grip between the thumb and first two fingers, with the fingers pointing down, on the right shoulder. When the right hand is in use, such as while receiving the pass and token of the pass, there is a 4 step movement to place it on the left shoulder, where they are carried in a like manner. After completion of the duty, they are returned to the right shoulder, again, in 4 steps. If both hands are required, such as saluting the Worshipful Master, the rod butt is placed on the floor and the rod is leaned against the right shoulder, freeing both hands. When placing the Great Lights, the rod is placed in a stand next to the altar.

When escorting visitors, the rod is carried in the right, and the person is gripped with the left. There are no special rod salutes, and they are never used for pointing or prompting of a candidate. One exception when a rod is not carried is while the Senior Deacon is conducting voting.