

Two Strange Words in Freemasonry: Hele and Lewis

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This will be a two-part paper about two short words that are peculiarities to Freemasonry. Two words – *hele* and *lewis* – the first one of which you, here in Virginia, are very familiar, the second is well known among English Masons but is probably not very well known here in Virginia. We shall start with the word *hele* (pronounced "hail").

There are all kinds of "hail." Sometimes in spring and in summer, we get hail – spelled *H-A-I-L* – storms. Pellets as big as golf balls have been recorded. In Kansas in 1970 a hail stone was measured to be 7 1/2" in diameter and weighed 1 2/3 pounds.¹ Gardeners dread them – they knock down tomato plants, beat flowers to death, kill sprouts. They can break windshields in automobiles and dent the tops.

Then there is hale — spelled *H-A-L-E* – like in hale and hearty. You're in good health, feel fine, can go to Lodge, participate in the work. It makes one feel good just to be in the company of someone else who is hale.

Then there is another hale – spelled *H-A-L-E*. I used to think men could not speak plainly or properly when they would say, "Hey, hale that Char box of taps to the bench"; or "Hep me to hale that thar big boad (board) to that thar pile." But I find upon researching in the dictionary that hale does actually mean to haul or pull; to compel to go.² It is good English, an old English word.

¹ Guinness Book of World Records, p. 145

² The Oxford Universal Dictionary, p. 855

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Then there is "hail" as used by little old ladies. One hears them to say, "Mary Sue, if you don't stop associating with that there no good, good-for-nothing Allen Roberts, you are gonna go straight to 'hail'." They would have spelled the word *H-E-L-L*, but they pronounce it "hail."

Of course we are all familiar with the "hail" when we greet a person. We hail a ship, we call out to a passing vessel. We call the attention of some person. It can be a salutation, for example: "Hail Caesar" and for our many Roman Catholic friends, "Hail Mary."

Finally, we arrive at hele, spelled *H-E-L-E*. It is familiar to you Masons. "I hele." You have all learned it. If you had a good ritual coach or instructor, you learned what it meant and how to spell the word. If you had a so-so teacher, you learned to correctly mouth the word. You said, "I hail" at the proper time and the coach said, "Yep! that's right." And you got patted on your head for being a good learner of rote.

By the way, you smart, intelligent, learned guys don't need to listen, hele is spelled *H-E-L-E*. Can't find it in many dictionaries. The English Oxford dictionary has two meanings: 1. (obsolete) to hide, conceal; to keep secret. 2. to cover (roots, seeds) with earth; to cover with slates or tiles, to roof.³ The usage we in Virginia Freemasonry make is to conceal.

Actually we use some very ancient English usage, a hold over in modern times from our English forebears. We say, "I hele," meaning in the language of the ancient craftsmen, "I conceal." Then we hear a second answer in more modern English, "I conceal," so that both parties know of which they are speaking.

"I hele" in old English.

"I conceal" in modern English.

³ Ibid. p. 886

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No person is trying to confuse the other, they are simply making sure that each knows what the other is talking about.

The bad part is, an ancient word has held over into modern times; and *now* that which at its inception made things clearer, *today* muddies the water.

But, you know, even back in ancient times words changed. Masons did not have exact wording in their rituals. The ideas remained the same, but words — different words — were often changed from city to city. In the *Harleian Manuscript* of about 1650, a version of the *Old Charges*, there is no hele, conceal, or never reveal. The words used simply are: "You keep secrets and not to reveal the same in the ears of any person." During the years 1696 to 1725, the words most often used were: "hear, hold, hide." By the years 1730 to 1760, "hail, conceal, and never reveal" were pretty much the standard.

Although often hele is spelled *H-A-I-L* in the old manuscripts, sometimes it is spelled *H-A-L-E*, and quite frequently we find it to be spelled *H-E-A-L*.

There is some discussion among scholars about the pronunciation of *H-E-L-E*. Many authorities insist on "hail." Emulation Lodge of Improvements in London, England, is one of the keepers of the ritual in that fair land. It is a school lodge, one that teaches ritual. Somewhat like a permanent Area Masonic Ritual Schools of Instruction in Virginia.

Editor's Note: The Grand Lodge of Virginia had only recently established the Reid James Simmons Academy at Virginia Tech, now at Fork Union Academy.

Men from all over England come to learn the correct ritual there. This English Lodge must be sponsored by a recognized lodge. It has been in existence since 1830. It sanctions the pronunciation "hail". But so great a Masonic scholar as the late Harry Carr, a Past Master and longtime Secretary of the Quatuor Coronati Lodge of Research in London was of the opinion that "heel" would be most properly the correct pronunciation.

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I hasten to add that the pronunciation discussion is only food for thought for you Virginia Masons. Grand Lodge sanctions "hail."

A few highlights into some of the changes that sneak into Masonry when we aren't looking closely. The Royal Arch Chapter in 1961 came up with a real display of lack of knowledge of Biblical words. In the Royal Master's degree is a quotation from 1 Kings, Chapter 6. The passage refers to cherubim. The 1943 edition of the RAC textbook correctly spells the word *C-H-E-R-U-B-I-M*. This is the plural of the word cherub, an angel of nearly top rank in a pecking order of nine with only seraphim outranking them. But, the Grand Lecturer in 1961 rewrote the textbook and put an "s" on the end of each of those cherubim words, making them cherubims. In Hebrew the plural is formed by adding "im" to the noun. So the Grand Lecturer made the word cherubims a double plural. To put it crudely, there just ain't no need for "im" + "s" – one or the other will suffice. It took until 1981 to get the "s" removed.

But York Rite folks are not the only ones with peculiar words and pronunciations. Our good friends in the Scottish Rite have a degree named — Rose Croix — French for Red Cross. The trouble is they have bastardized the pronunciation. They call the degree the "Rosy Cro-ix." That is about as far from the French as one can get. If one cannot pronounce the French, why not just give the degree the English name and let it go as "Red Cross."

But I digress. I wanted to bring your attention to the word "hele." To let you know a bit about how it got into Masonry and what it actually means. Hele – meaning to conceal, to keep secret.

The second word of today's topic is *lewis*.

Let us look into that word.

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You are, for the most part, bright, intelligent, twentieth century Masons who could stand an examination to gain admittance to almost any Virginia Lodge of Freemasons. But could you pass an examination to gain admission to a Lodge during the eighteenth century?

Let me quote a portion of an examination for a French Lodge during the 1700's translated into English.⁴ This catechism is dated 1744 and goes like this:

Q. Give me the first point of your entry.

A. Give me the first, I will give you the second.

Q. I hele it.

A. I conceal it in my heart.

Q. What do you conceal?

A. The Secret of the Free-Masons, & of Masonry.

Q. How old are you?

A. Seven years & more.

Q. What time is it?

A. Midnight.

Q. Whence come you?

A. From the Lodge of St. John.

Q. What do you bring?

A. Hearty welcome to a Brother visitor.

Q. Do you bring nothing more?

A. The Grand Master of the Lodge greets you with three times three.

Q. Why do you take the sword in hand when receiving a Brother?

A. To keep off the Profane

Q. Are you a master? (Master Mason)

A. Try me, prove me, & disprove me if you can.

Q. If one of your Brothers were lost, where would you find him?

⁴ Early French Exposures, p. 104

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A. Between the Square & the Compasses.

Q. What is the name of a Mason?

A. Gabanon.

Q. What is the name of his son?

A. Lewis.

Q. What privilege has he in the Lodge?

A. To be received before Princes, lords, or any others.

So, let's face it, though you might well gain entrance into a modern-day Virginia Lodge, you may very well have been suspect in a Lodge of 1744. There were several of those questions that you did not know the answer to, did you? Although this particular bit of examination pertaining to ritual and catechism is taken from the French, early English catechisms also had similar words and phrases.

Not many Masons from the United States are familiar with the use of the word "Lewis." Pennsylvania is the only United States Grand lodge, that I know of, that has anything about the "Lewis" in its ritual.⁵ In the Pennsylvania Grand Lodge publication "The Exemplar" the term "Lewis" is identified as:

Term for the son of a Mason who becomes a member of the Craft before he reaches the age of 21 years. In Pennsylvania and England, a lewis is a symbol of strength; a man's strength as represented in his son.

What is a "Lewis?"

It is a stone mason's device. It is used to raise and lower into place large and heavy stones used in construction of buildings. The Romans made use of them when the Flavian Amphitheatre was built by workmen for the Emperors Vespasian, Titus, and Donitian in

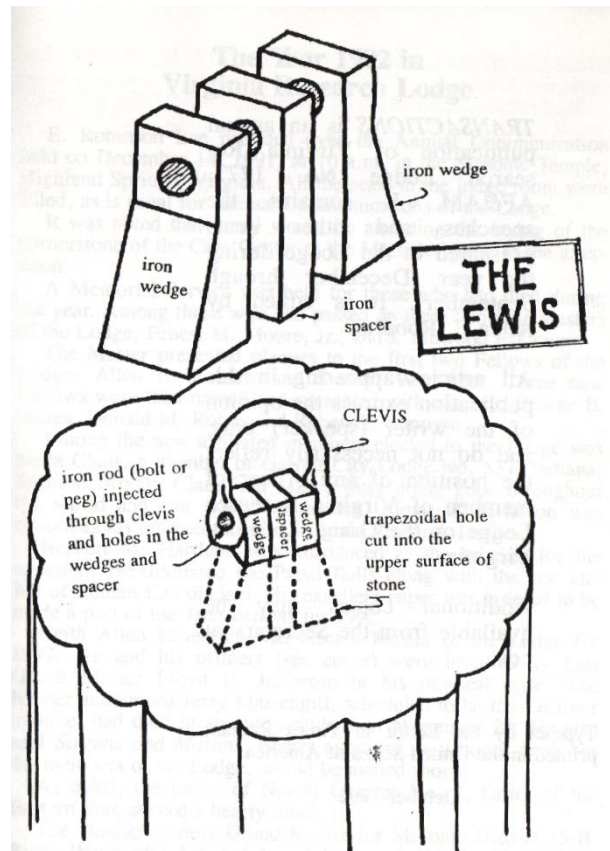
⁵ The Exemplar, p. 4

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the years A.D. 39-96. The Saxons in building Whitby Abbey at Yorkshire, England, made use of the lewis when St. Hilda built it in 657 A.D. Hadrian's Wall was built in 120-127 A.D. in Great Britain – it is about 730 miles long and spans the narrow part of the island of England. The Roman Emperor Severus repaired that wall in 209 A.D. and the lewis was again in use.

In England, as early as 1352, the name Lewis was used and 16th century drawings show the use of this device by the stone masons.

Here is a sketch of what the stone mason's device looks like. It is used to lift large stones into place when the place where they are to be used in the construction precludes the use of a sling to lower the stone into place. This lifting tool may be used only in hard stone inasmuch as a soft stone would most probably give away in the area of the cut out sloping hole and permit the heavy stone to fall. After the stone is in its proper place, the lifting device (the lewis) is removed. Usually the hole is filled with mortar or cement to keep out water which upon freezing would crack the stone. This is the operative mason's usage for the lewis.



Symbolically the lewis has a far different usage. To the speculative Mason it is a symbol of strength. It is the name given to the eldest son of a Mason. It is a reference to the son's duty to support his father in his father's old age and declining years.

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From an English catechism from the late eighteenth century⁶ we find these words:

Q. What do we call the son of a Freemason?

A. A Lewis.

Q. What does that denote?

A. Strength.

Q. How is a lewis depicted in a Mason's lodge?

A. As a cramp of metal.

Q. What is the duty of a lewis . . . to his aged parents?

A. To bear the heavy burden (etc. etc.) so as to render the close of their days happy and comfortable.

Q. His privilege for so doing?

A. To be made a Mason before any other person, however dignified by birth, rank, or riches, unless he, through compliance waves this privilege.

Originally a Lewis was the first-born son of a man after the man became a Freemason. But what are the privileges of a Lewis? The name Lewis in Masonry was not well known in England until about 1730. After that time it became associated with the eldest son of a Mason. But in many lodges, even though the name "Lewis" was not used, the eldest son was accorded several privileges.

In Aberdeen (Scotland) in the seventeenth century an eldest son and also the husband of an eldest daughter was excused from the usual gift of apron and gloves to every member of the Lodge. Often fees for joining were excused or reduced.

In speculative Masonry a Lewis, by custom, was to be initiated before any other candidate including royalty. In Scotland, a Lewis could be initiated at age 18 years.

⁶ Freemasons' Guide and Compendium, p. 41

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Things being what they are, it had to happen.

The lodge at Turks Head on Fleet Street in London in 1739 had in its minutes: "Our Brother Delarant presented the lodge with a bowl of punch on his having a *Lewisa* born, and her health was drunk in form." And a ritual toast of 1770 has it: "To all our royal and loyal, great and little Lewises wherever dispersed, not forgetting the Louisas."⁷

Today, in America, we don't give much attention to the Lewis. Fathers are often reluctant to talk Masonry to their sons, through some strange idea that none should ever talk about or encourage joining! Wait until he brings it up and asks! I subscribe to his having to ask, the prospective candidate that is. But there is certainly nothing wrong with sowing the seed. Bringing up the topic of Masonry and making it sound interesting and worthwhile is most assuredly not taboo. I have heard fathers complain: "I wish Bob/Bill/Bruce had just once brought up the subject of Masonry. I certainly would have liked for him to have joined." I say shame on you Dad! Why didn't you bring it up and do a little cultivating? We are dwindling in numbers. We need your sons. Bring them into the fold.

Then, too, the son's obligation to the aging parents these days appears to be in disrepair. And, too, all of us in Masonry need to reconsider our obligations to the aged. Who knows, you too, may someday be old.

We have a good Masonic Home here in Virginia, as far as it goes — it just — simply — plainly — bluntly — doesn't go far enough. We need to expand our ability to care for the down and out and those whose infirmities have become acute.

What is a Lewis? A Mason's son, symbolized by the masonry lifting device. We need sorely to remember our obligations to the sons. And as sons ourselves, we need to remember our obligations to the aging and elderly.

⁷ Ibid. p. 419

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Perhaps, Grand Lodges everywhere in these United States should follow the lead of our brethren in Pennsylvania and include into our teachings the "Lewis" and what it stands for – strength and filial love.

Hele and Lewis. In the Masonic usages the first word has the meaning of: to conceal; the second word is the name given to a Mason's son. Hele an anachronism that we cling to just because it has been there so long. Why change now? The Lewis is an ancient usage to which we, of today, should pay more attention. Let us cultivate those Lewises.

To wind up the presentation for today, I would like to send you away with a Masonic research problem. The problem is this: In the Masonic emblem we have a pair of compasses superimposed upon a square. What are the degrees of the included angle between the legs of the compasses? The answer is not an easy one to find. You will have to dig deeply to find the answer.

Editor's Note:

In 2018, the Grand Lodge of Virginia authorized the purchase and wearing of the Lewis' Jewel for Master Masons (a) whose father is a Master Mason in good standing or was at the time of their death and (b) whose son is a Master Mason in good standing or was at the time of their death.

The Jewel is engraved with two name plates, one for the father and one for the son. Multi-generational Masons are allowed to wear three or more name plates, one for each generation.



The Lewis Jewel

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