

# THE SYMBOLIC LIGHTS

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**"A lodge has three symbolic lights; one of these in the East, one in the West, and one in the South. There is no light in the North, because King Solomon's Temple, of which every lodge is a representation, was situated so far north of the ecliptic, that the sun and moon, at their meridian height, could dart no rays into the northern part thereof. The North, therefore, we Masonically term a place of darkness."--Monitor.**

THE WRITER must confess to preconceived ideas of his own in regard to the location in the lodge-room of the "representatives of the Three Lesser Lights"; ideas which to his mind, were well-founded. But the present investigation of the subject reveals a wide divergence of opinion, and has convinced him that a surprising number of other brethren are possessed of conceptions widely at variance with his.

Nothing more or less than "custom" or "convenience" seems to govern the location of these symbolic lights in many varied positions in the different Grand Jurisdictions of America. In at least one jurisdiction the ritual does not specifically require that they shall be placed in a triangular form "about the altar" but "about the lodge." Hence in that particular jurisdiction it would be

perfectly proper to place them singly or in a group north, south, east or west of the altar, or even in any part of the lodge-room distant from the altar.

The custom of grouping the symbolic lights in triangular form about the altar does not prevail, so far as we are able to learn, in Great Britain and other European countries. In England and Scotland in particular they are placed at the stations of the Master and Wardens. One theory of this custom<sup>1</sup> is given as follows:

The medieval lodge was a frame building, constructed of planks, and erected close to the spot where a church or other religious edifice was in process of building. It had three main windows--one in the East, one in the West, and one in the South. There was none in the North, because the lodge was always built on the southern side of the church and close to it on account of the advantages of light and warmth presented by a southern aspect. Hence a window in the North would have been useless. These windows were termed by the craft the "three great lights", the words lichter, light, and windows being synonymous. We find in Vetruius and in

cicero the word lumina, or lights, used to denote windows.

These windows are always represented on the early tracing boards and are distinctly alluded to in our old rituals of 1725 and 1730. In the latter they are termed "fixed lights", their uses being to "light the men to, at and from their work"; and in a note it is expressly stated that these fixed lights "are three windows supposed to be in every room where a lodge is held."

At these three windows were seated the Master and his two Wardens; the Fellowcrafts had their appropriate positions, and the Apprentices were placed in the North as they required less light than the more skillful and advanced Fellowcrafts. The ritual of 1730 alludes to this fact and places the Junior Entered Apprentice in the North, his business being "to keep off all cowans and eavesdroppers." This is explained by the fact that the narrow space between the northern wall of the lodge and the southern wall of the church would form a convenient hiding place for cowans and eavesdroppers, and hence the duty of the Junior Entered Apprentice. On the Master's table at the east window were placed the Bible, Square and Compasses; the former as a token of devoutness and the latter, not merely as the peculiar implements of the Master, but also a sign or mark of the Fraternity.

The Craftsmen while busied at their labors well knew that they received the light necessary for their work from the three great windows in the East, South and West; but they also knew that an inward, or mental light was even more necessary, and without it they could not properly complete their task. As expressive symbols of that mental light, they accepted the implements of the Master and the sacred Book which were displayed on the table; for the Bible was given to them as the rule and guide of their faith and practice; the Square was an ancient symbol of the law, hence among the Greeks and Romans the expression kanon or gnomon tuo nomon and norma legis; and the compasses was an appropriate emblem of that fraternal conduct which should characterize their dealings with all mankind, and more especially within their own circles. These three Great Lights thus inculcated a knowledge of God, of themselves and of mankind.

The three lesser lights of Masonry are derived from the same source. The actual work of the Masons was performed during the hours of daylight. When, however, the brethren met for social enjoyment or business at night, artificial or candle light became necessary. The officers retained their usual positions and before each was placed a candle. These three candles were now termed "the lesser lights," and the idea

of the sun, moon and Master was connected with them.

In the ritual of 1736 the three lesser lights are described as "three large candles placed on high candlesticks; they represent the sun, moon, and Master Mason." When in the course of time the practice was introduced of holding lodges in taverns, or ordinary-houses, the three great windows disappeared but the three candles were retained. The oblong square formerly represented by the lodge itself could no longer be properly represented, either in form or situation, by the meeting-room of an ordinary-house, and its place was supplied by the "drawing upon the floor," consisting of an oblong square drawn with chalk and charcoal. The places of the officers were removed from the walls to the interior of the drawing, while the rest of the brethren stood around.

Subsequently this custom was again changed and the places of the officers and candles were removed outside of the drawing. Again, in later times, for the purpose of convenience, the oblong square was painted upon a movable carpet or tapis and when this custom had once been adopted it soon led to the introduction of more and more emblems upon the carpet until the original symbolism of the latter was entirely lost. In America the use of the carpet has been totally discontinued, its

place being taken by the altar which was formerly the Master's table, and which has been transferred from the East to the center of the lodge.

Sun-worship played a prominent part in the religion of the ancients and was introduced into the mysteries, says Mackey,<sup>2</sup> not as a material idolatry, but as a means of expressing an idea of restoration to life from death, drawn from the daily reappearance in the East of the solar orb after its nightly disappearance in the West. The Gnostics derived many of their symbols from the Mithraic initiations, in which sun-worship played an important part. These again exercised their influence upon the medieval Freemasons. Thus it is that the Sun has become so prominent in the Masonic system; not as an object of worship, but purely as a symbol, the interpretation of which is presented in many different ways. As the source of material light the sun reminds the Mason of that intellectual light of which he is in constant search. But it is especially as the ruler of the day, giving to it a beginning and end, and a regular course of hours, that the sun is presented as a Masonic symbol. Hence, of the three lesser lights, we are told that one represents or symbolizes the sun, one the moon, and one the Master of the lodge, because as the sun rules the day and the moon governs the night, so should the Worshipful Master rule and govern his lodge

with equal regularity. And this is in strict analogy with other Masonic symbolism. For if the lodge is a symbol of the world, which is thus governed in its changes of times and seasons by the sun, it is evident that the Master who governs the lodge, controlling its time of opening and closing, and the work which it should do, must be symbolized by the sun.

"The sun is the symbol of sovereignty, the hieroglyphic of royalty; it doth signify absolute authority," says Gwillim.

This representation of the sun as a symbol of authority, while it explains the reference to the Master, enables us to amplify its meaning and apply it to the three sources of authority in the lodge, and accounts for the respective positions of the officers wielding this authority. The Master, therefore, in the East is a symbol of the rising sun; the Junior Warden in the South, of the meridian sun; and the Senior Warden in the West, of the setting sun.

In the ceremonies attendant upon the lighting and extinguishing of the three symbolic lights, why should we not carry out this reference to the sun's daily journey, as we do in our rite of circumambulation? In fact, this is done in one Grand Jurisdiction, and possibly in others, by the officers of the lodge whose duty it is to attend to these matters. In lighting the lights the one in the East is attended to first, followed

respectively by those in the South and West, thus symbolizing the opening of the day. In extinguishing the lights at the close of Masonic labors, the same detail is carried out, significant of the growing darkness first apparent in the East, thence in the South and West.

Compare this practice with the custom obtaining in many jurisdictions of simply snapping a button to light or extinguish the electric lights all at the same instant.

Manifestly this ceremonial cannot be carried out by the use of electrical substitutes, especially where the three "imitation" candles are all on one circuit, and therefore in lodges where such substitution is permitted, this symbolism would be lost.

But why should we not abolish the substitutes? Our predecessors in the days before electric lights were available got along very well with their actual "burning tapers", or candles.

The general excuse offered for the employment of the electric imitation is that the tallow or paraffine candle is "mussy"; that the drippings fall to the floor, and in warm weather the candles, after burning a short time, become softened and have a tendency to curve from an upright position. Such troubles may be easily overcome by the use of an ingenious contrivance consisting of a hollow metal tube, white enameled, in which the candle is inserted

from the bottom leaving only the wick protruding at the top. The tube is longer than the candle, and after the candle has been inserted the tube is placed over the top of the candlestick. As the candle is consumed by the flame at the top, the weight of the tube is such that it slides down over the top of the candlestick and the candle is forced upward in the tube as it is consumed, leaving the wick always just above the top of the upper opening. There are no drippings to fall to the floor, and since the body of the candle is contained within the tube it cannot therefore become bent out of its upright position.

In his report for 1916, as Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Correspondence of the Grand Lodge of Colorado, Brother Lawrence N. Greenleaf raised a question concerning the "Symbolism of the Burning Taper," with especial emphasis on the "burning". Another studious brother of the "Gild of Fraternal Correspondents" thereupon began an investigation the result of which gives us some pertinent facts relative to the matter. He says:<sup>4</sup>

This correspondent has not thus far found the leisure to look up the symbolism of candles in religious worship, but the study of their use is quite a simple matter. They were so used prior to the Christian era, for the elder Pliny, who flourished in the first century of that era, tells us in his Natural

History that the Romans employed them at funerals, making them out of different kinds of rushes. The rush formed the wick and was probably drawn through melted wax or grease, something after the manner of the old rush-lights.

The extensive use of candles or tapers in the ritual of the Roman Catholic church is well known. The second of February is known as Candlemas Day (candle mass) and on that day, there is a blessing of candles by the clergy and a distribution of them to the people, by whom they are in some churches lighted and carried in procession. Candlemas Day is also observed by Catholics as the festival of the Purification of the virgin Mary, and hence some writers have supposed the candle bearing on that day to refer to simeon's words: "a light to lighten the Gentiles."

It would be interesting, as Brother Greenleaf remarks, to know whether there is any symbolism in a burning taper with special emphasis on "burning". Years ago it was customary to mark divisions of time by the burning of certain makes of candles down to certain marks left on them. In England, prior to the Reformation, a meaning was attached to the size of candles and the manner in which they burned during the procession. The reserved portions of the candle were also supposed by the populace to possess a strong

supernatural viture, Thus we find in Barnaby George's translation of Naogeorgus in the "Popish Kingdom," as printed in Ellis' edition of Brand's "Popular Antiquities," these lines:

This done, each man his candles lights,  
Where chiefest seemeth he

Whose taper greatest may be seen  
And fortunate to be

Whose candle burneth clear and bright;  
A wondrous force and might

Doth in these candles lie, which if  
At any time they light

They sure believe that neither storm  
Nor tempest doth abide.

Nor thunder in the skies be heard  
Nor any devils spied

Nor fearful spirits that walk by night,  
Nor hurts or frost or hail, etc.

It is, of course, possible to imagine a certain amount of symbology for burning candles in the lodge. They may represent the light of truth, the torch of knowledge or the light referred to in the second verse of the last chapter of the book of Ecclesiastes. Though truth is unchanged and unchangeable, our knowledge of it here can only be "in part," and consequently "more light," both in Masonry and in every department of Knowledge should be our constant aim. The taper burning more or less slowly, but always surely towards its inevitable end and formerly employed, as we have seen, to mark the passage of time, may be considered as fitly representing the light referred to by the wise man in his

injunction to "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while . . . the light . . . be not darkened."

\* \* \*

In regard to the substitution of gas or electric light for candles, it may or may not be of interest to Brother Greenleaf and others, to know that the Roman Catholic church, which uses candles so much in its ritual, does not tolerate the substitution for them of more modern forms of artificial lights, either in the case of the essential lights on its altars or in that of the tapers employed around the catafalque at funerals. Extra illumination is now made by means of electricity in many churches, even about the altars, but never in the case of the essential altar lights.

An interesting history of the use of candles in the Roman Catholic ritual, with an account of their symbolism to members of that church, has been kindly furnished to the writer, in answer to his inquiries, by a learned theologian who is both a Doctor and a Professor of Divinity, and is, therefore, an authority upon the subject whereof he speaks. May it not be that the original employment of candles in Freemasonry was necessitated, as in the case of the Roman Catholic church, by the darkness of the subterranean or other concealed quarters, in which its votaries found it necessary in the Dark Ages to hold their assemblies, and

that the use of them has been perpetuated, not only as a symbol of human progress from the darkness of ignorance to the increasing Light that comes with the pursuit of Knowledge, and Freemasonry's constant aim to contribute to this upward progress of the race, but also--as in the case of the church in question--because of the early associations connected therewith.

The information which has come to us from the source above referred to, reads as follows:

"Lights have always been connected with sacrifice and the worship of God. We find that a light, of purest olive oil, was ever to burn in the Tabernacle of the Old Testament, vide Exod. xxvii., 20-21. This would suffice to explain the presence of lights in the sacrifice of the New Testament. But there is to be added the necessity of using them in the early church. Christianity was prescribed for centuries and in the great centres of the Roman Empire, chiefly in Rome, it had no right to existence, and had to take refuge in the catacombs. There the Christians met, in the bowels of the earth, for the celebration of mass, the reception of the sacraments, and instructions in the faith. Lights were consequently an absolute necessity in that subterranean refuge. This association of lights with mass and sacraments was too dear to the Church not to endure after she

came to her place under the light of day, and was free to take it under God's open sky. Lights therefore, became a ritual obligation, and the faithful who had seen them used in the catacombs, expected to find them in the churches at mass and all the liturgical ceremonies. In these countries, olive oil was used--naturally--being the common oil that served for lighting purposes. And, of course, it was pure oil, as God's worship required the best, and forbade admixture of foreign and less worthy elements. Candles were not used on the altars for many centuries after. They were carried by the acolytes, etc., and placed about the altar steps, but not on the altar. Lamps were hung about and around the altar, filled with pure olive oil. But candles used at mass were of beeswax, and for the same reasons, viz., facility of obtaining the material, rejection of mixture with baser compounds, these candles were of pure wax. When later the candles were placed on the altars as today, these candles of pure beeswax were required. The mind of the church has always been that what is best and purest should be used in God's service. Hence, she prescribed pure beeswax for the candles. This is a matter of legislation. There are formal and clear rules on this point.

1. The candles must be beeswax, vide, for instance, Decision of Congregation of Rites, Sept. 4, 1875.

2. These candles are prescribed for mass and for the administration of the sacraments. The two candles lighted at low mass, and the six at high mass, must be of beeswax. As also, the Paschal candle.
3. Other candles used for ornament, for devotional purposes, are not included in this ruling. Lamps of oil may be used upon the altar, but when mass is said, there must be two candles of beeswax.
4. Owing to climatic and economic reasons, in countries far removed from the basin of the Mediterranean, allowances have been made, and an admixture is permitted. For candles used during mass on the altar, the beeswax must be in greatest proportion; as for the Paschal candle, too. The other candles, in greater part, or in notable part of beeswax. Vide Cong. of Rites, Dec. 14, 1904. These regulations were formal and binding.

"As to the symbolism of candles, we must recall the use in the Old Testament, and its perpetuation in the New.

"Sacrifice means the destruction of a victim in expiation of sin. Man substitutes a victim in his own stead, and offers it in his own place. These victims were not only animals, as in the Old Temple, but also other things, as lights (oil), incense, wine poured out, etc.

"Just as the victims, animals, etc., should be without defect for God's worship demands what is best, so the other things offered should be unadulterated. Consequently, it was pure olive oil that was prescribed in Exod. 20, and pure oil and pure beeswax should enter into the sacrificial worship of the New Testament. All the sacrifices of the Old Testament were merely the shadow of the Sacrifice of the Cross and of the mass, which is its continuation. So that the idea of purity of the material is inherent to the sacrificial use.

"The use of electric lights is forbidden when they would replace the candles at mass or in the administration of the sacraments, or in benediction. They may be used about the altar, for illumination, or ornament. A recent ruling from Rome forbade their use upon the altar for these purposes. All the bishops have not yet promulgated this ruling, and until a bishop of a diocese does so, it does not come into effect. Hence, some differences in the use of electric lights upon or about the altar."

It should not, we feel, be necessary to offer any apology to any of our brethren, whatever their religious faith, for printing the above exactly as we have received it. To those members of the Fraternity who are accustomed to the use of the lights so kindly and so interestingly described above in their own places of worship, and to many more of



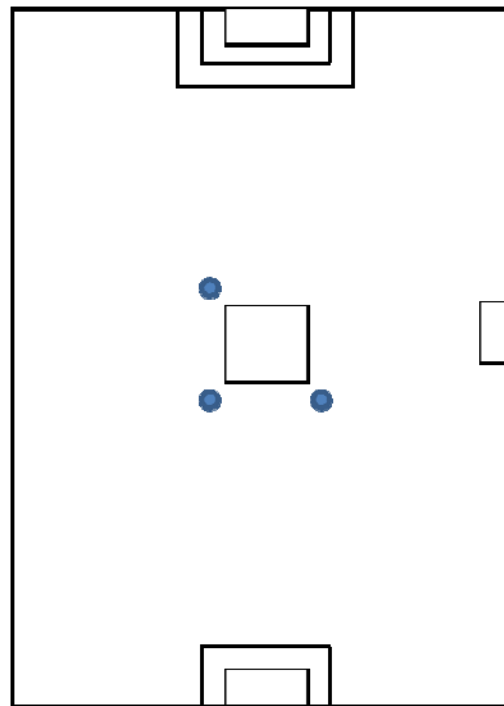
us who delight in the study of ancient symbology, there is much therein that is particularly striking and instructive. Others will understand, that for Masons in general, any of the symbolism of the last nineteen hundred years to which reference is made in the above contribution is mainly interesting as affording to students of our rituals the opportunity of judging to what extent, if any, our use of candles is connected with that employed in the Roman Catholic church, and what reasons exist, if any, against changing them for electrically lighted imitation candles, especially in view of the fact that such proposed change has met with strenuous adverse criticism in the United states. With this explanation, we believe ourselves justified in printing the above information just as it has reached us, and in thus contributing to cast upon this "burning" question, all the "light" at our disposal.

**ARRANGEMENT OF LIGHTS WITH REFERENCE TO ALTAR IN AMERICAN AND CANADIAN JURISDICTIONS**

In the following diagrams showing the manner of arranging the symbolic lights in the various Grand Jurisdictions, it will be noted that in every instance the arrangement is in triangular form- -some states adopting the right-angled triangle and others the equilateral --; the triangle being universally recognized as a symbol of Deity.

To the Mason who has never visited lodges outside of his own jurisdiction a comparison of the location of the symbolic lights in other jurisdictions should prove interesting. A letter sent out from the Secretary's office to every Grand Secretary in the United States and Canada resulted in the receipt of diagrams showing the arrangement of the lights in nearly every Grand Jurisdiction, and eleven different plans are here exhibited.

**Figure 1.** Right angled triangle, apex at

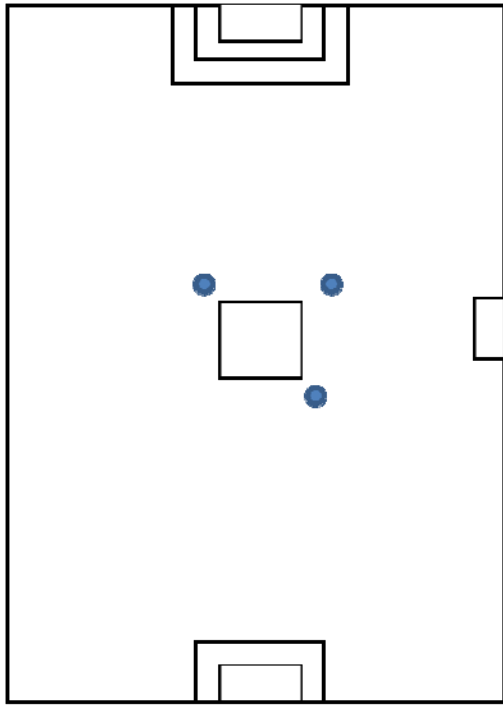


**Fig. 1**

northwest. Lights at northeast, southwest and northwest corners of altar.

Adopted in Alabama, Pennsylvania and Wyoming.

**Figure 2.** Right-angled triangle, apex at southeast. Lights at northeast, southeast and southwest corners of altar.



**Fig. 2**

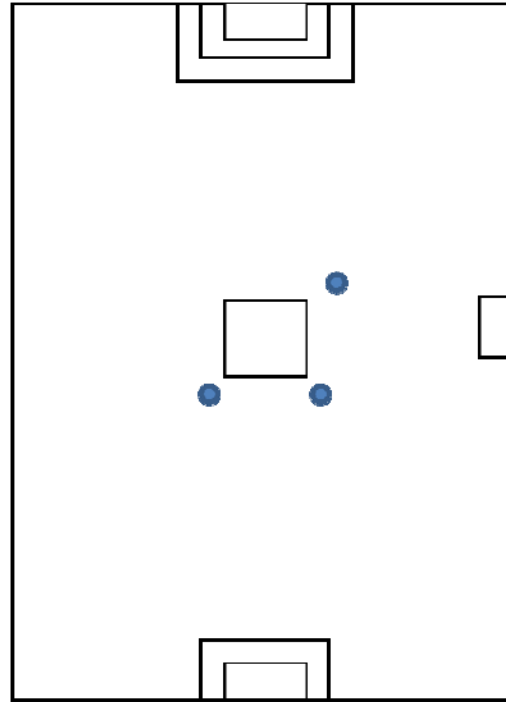
Adopted in Connecticut, South Dakota and Virginia.

Connecticut. Some lodges in this jurisdiction group them in triangular form directly south of altar, as in Figure 5.

South Dakota. Several lodges use electric lights on a single-base standard having three branches for the lights, placing them at the northeast corner of the altar.

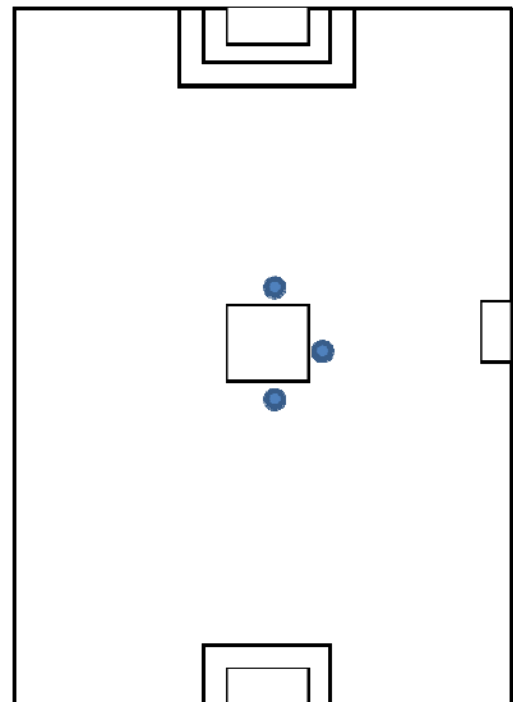
**Figure 3.** Right angled triangle, apex at southwest. Lights at southeast, southwest and northwest corners of altar.

Adopted in Georgia.



**Fig. 3**

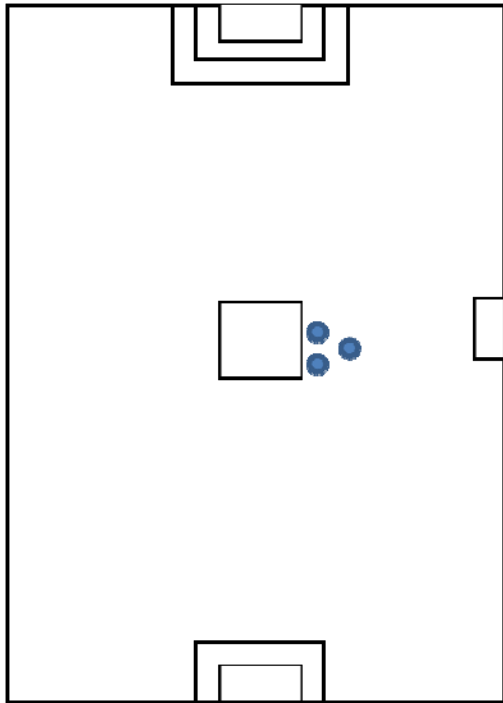
**Figure 4.** Equilateral triangle, apex at south. Lights centered directly east, south and west of altar.



**Fig. 4**

Adopted in Arkansas.

**Figure 5.** Equilateral triangle, apex at south. All lights grouped on south side of altar.



**Fig. 5**

Adopted in Arizona, British Columbia, California, Idaho, Illinois, Kentucky, Nebraska, Missouri, Nevada, Nova Scotia, Utah, Vermont, Wisconsin and Wyoming.

British Columbia. Canadian and American working lodges follow no fixed rule, some placing the lights in this position, and others in the form shown in Figure 7. English working lodges follow the English custom of placing them at the stations of the three principal officers.

California. Placed in this form "for convenience."

Idaho. This plan is general, but there is no fixed rule.

Kentucky. No uniform rule, but the general practice is to place them in this form. Personal reasons of Grand Secretary Jackson given as "because there was no light in the North. In triangular shape so as to diffuse greater light to aid reading the Great Light."

Louisiana. Prior to ten years ago the lights were arranged around the three sides of the altar farthest from the north side of the lodge room and the explanation was then given as "three burning tapers arranged in a triangular form around the altar." After that time the verbiage of the description was changed to "three burning tapers arranged in a triangular form about the altar," and the lights were then placed on the south side.

Montana. This form was adopted by the Grand Lodge some twenty years ago on the ground that the majority of Grand Lodges so placed them.

Missouri. Placed in this position because the south is "the place of the sun at its meridian height," and "a place of light."

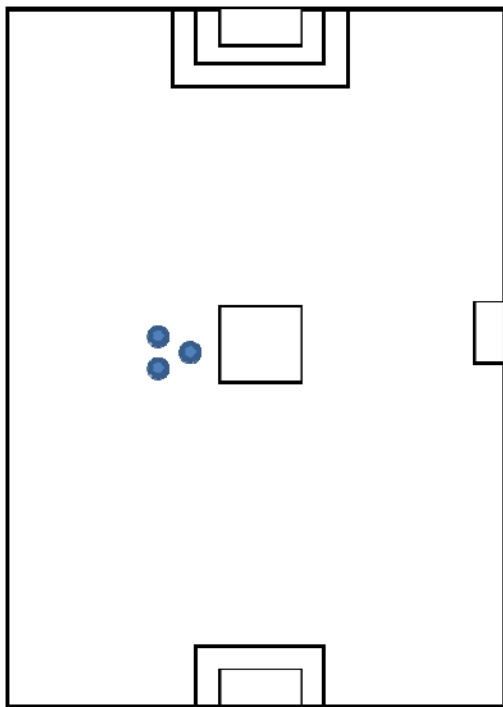
Nevada. This custom established "by precedent."

Texas. This form is generally used because the lights are grouped on a standard having a single base, with three prongs for the lights. Some lodges use

individual candlesticks and arrange them otherwise.

Utah. The conclusion of Grand Secretary McCarty, who consulted several Past Grand Officers in the matter, is that when the first Utah lodges were established the brethren instrumental in organizing them followed the custom prevailing in their mother jurisdictions and that the practice eventually became an "unwritten law" or custom of the Grand Jurisdiction of Utah.

**Figure 6.** Equilateral triangle, apex at north. All lights grouped on north side of altar.



**Fig. 6**

Adopted in Iowa, Kansas and Minnesota.

Iowa. This form is the general custom in this jurisdiction, although the ritual simply says the lights are to be placed in a

triangular form "about the lodge. Hence it would be perfectly proper to place them in a triangular form in any other part of the lodge, near or distant from the altar, or even at the stations of the three principal officers similar to the English practice.

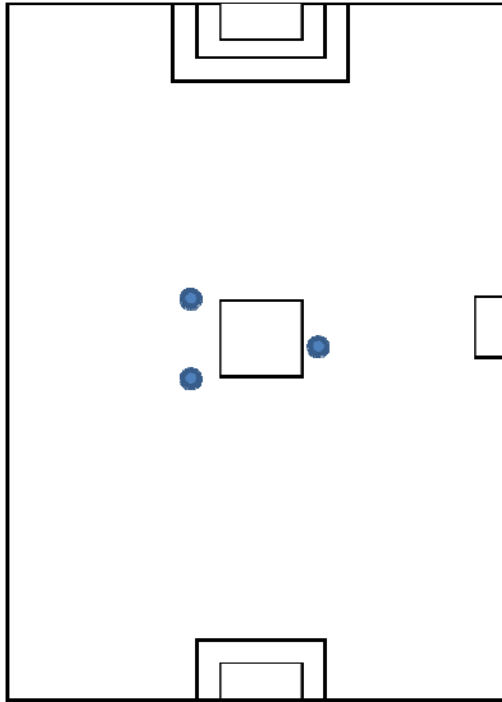
Minnesota. At the Annual Communication of the Grand Lodge in October, 1867, a committee of five was appointed, of which E. P. Barnum was chairman, to formulate the "work" for this Grand Jurisdiction and report at the next Annual Communication, which they did and exemplified the work before Grand Lodge, which adopted it as exemplified. In arranging the lights at the altar they decided to place them on the north, instead of the south side, as some of the lodge rooms in those early days were so narrow that it was not practical for the Senior Deacon and candidate to pass between the lights and the station of the Junior Warden.

**Figure 7.** Equilateral triangle, apex at south. East and West lights opposite northeast and northwest corners, South light centered directly south of altar.

Adopted in Colorado, British Columbia, Michigan, Ohio and Manitoba.

Colorado. Brother W. W. Cooper, Grand Lecturer, says:

"This method of placing the lights is probably based on local custom. No doubt



**Fig. 7**

the

influence of Dr. Albert G. Mackey had much to do with the establishment of the custom, as he specifically recommends this arrangement in his Monitor, which was the standard in this jurisdiction for many years.

"Dr. Mackey also resided temporarily in Colorado, and on one occasion, when visiting the Grand Lodge, addressed the Grand Lodge on the subject of the lights.

"The use of the lights to form an equilateral triangle was also advocated by Albert Pike.

"One reason for placing them in this manner is that the equilateral triangle is a great and ancient symbol of the deity. We cannot read or understand the Great Light without assistance which is furnished by the reason or intelligence which comes to us from God, who is symbolized by the equilateral triangle."

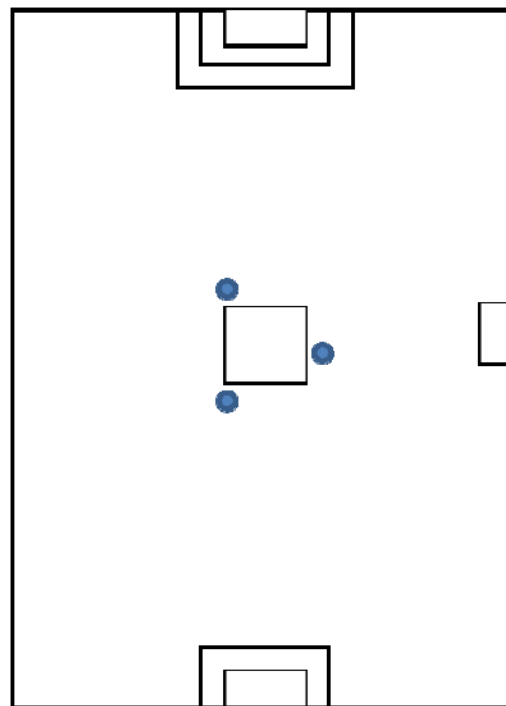
British Columbia. See reference under explanation of Figure 5.

Michigan. This is considered the best plan to represent the East, South and West.

Ohio. Thus located to interpret the ritual.

Manitoba. American working lodges place the lights in this position. They are not lighted in the second and third degrees.

**Figure 8.** Equilateral triangle, apex at south. East and West lights on a direct line with the north side of altar; South light centered directly south of altar.

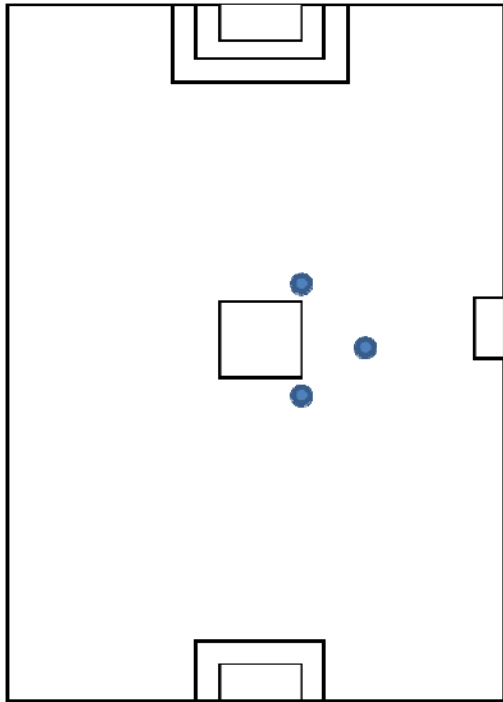


**Fig. 8**

Adopted in District of Columbia.

**Figure 9.** Equilateral triangle, apex at south. East and West lights on a direct line with the south side of altar; South light centered directly south of altar.

Adopted in Indiana.



**Fig. 9**

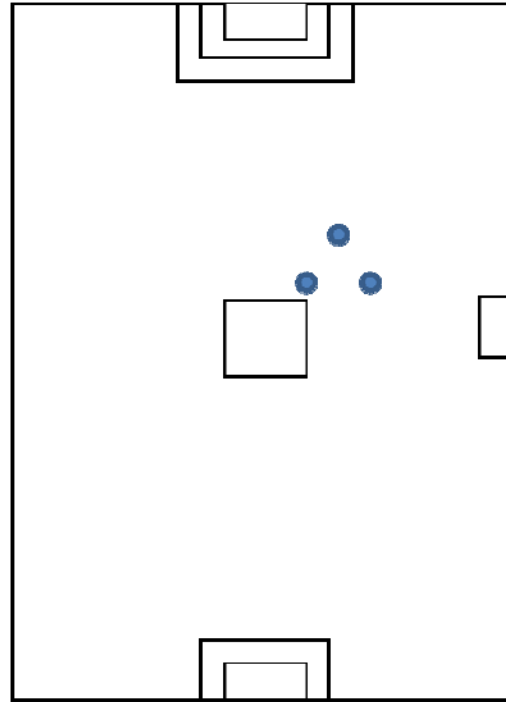
Grand Secretary Prather says this arrangement was advocated by Brother Rob Morris and so taught in the Indiana Monitor.

**Figure 10.** Equilateral triangle, apex at east. Grouped north and east of altar.

Adopted in Massachusetts.

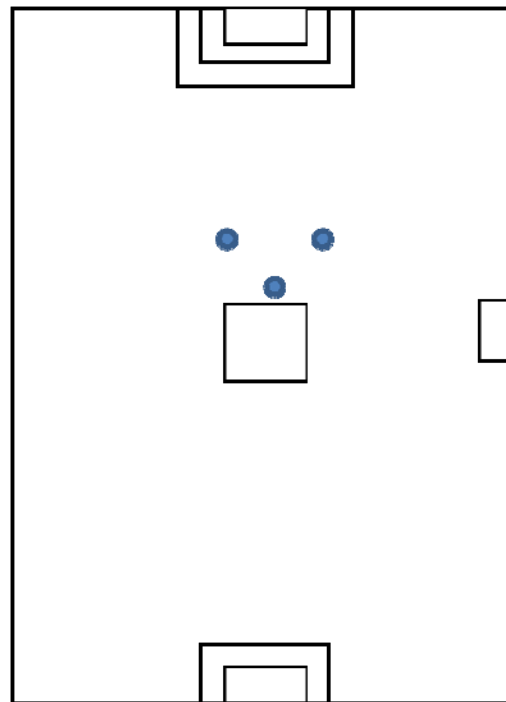
Some lodges in this jurisdiction follow the English custom of placing the lights at the Master's and Wardens' stations.

A cut of the lodge room in the Masonic Temple at Cristobal, Canal Zone, (under jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts,) shows the lights arranged as in Figure 7.



**Fig. 10**

**Figure 11.** Equilateral triangle, apex at west. Grouped directly east of altar.



**Fig. 11**

Adopted in Maryland.

Grand Lecturer Seipp describes this triangular arrangement as symbolic of Deity and perfection, which is the moral, mental and spiritual aim of the candidate in the three degrees.

<sup>1</sup> Freemasons Magazine, vol. XXIV, p. 340.

While we cannot vouch for the authenticity of this explanation of the origin of the lesser lights, perhaps some of our English or Scotch brethren or other members of the Society who may have access to the rituals of 1725, 1730 and 1736, may be able to confirm the allusions.

Fort, in his "Early History and Antiquities of Freemasonry," p. 294, states that this theory of the windows was advanced by Krause, but he (Fort)

discredits it, saying that the assumption is unquestionably incorrect, and lacks the essential elements, as usually elucidated, of symbolism. However, MacBride, in his "Speculative Freemasonry," p. 74, refers to the lights as "three windows."

<sup>2</sup> Mackey's Encyclopedia, 1917 edition, p. 737.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, p. 736.

<sup>4</sup> Kentucky Masonic Home Journal, January 1, 1917.

We regret our inability to give the name of the brother who made this investigation, since it was not appended to the article. If some member of the Society can enlighten us as to the authorship we shall be glad to make proper acknowledgment in a future issue of THE BUILDER.