

Cable-Tow & Cable Length

**Are they the same? How do they differ? Is there a marine connotation to either?
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Cable-Tow:

In the E.A. ritual, the cable-tow is a real object used to symbolically represent the prevention of a retreat. It is also capable of a wide-ranging symbolism, e.g., submission, or the bonding of ignorance. A case can also be made that the cable-tow represents re-birth or in Masonic use, birth into Masonic life. Other symbolism can also be attributed to the cable-tow. Can you think of more?

In a literal sense the cable-tow is a cable or cord by which something is towed or drawn. For Masons, particularly in the E.A. degree the cable-tow is an apt symbol of those forces and influences which conduct not only the individual, but the human race out of a condition of ignorance or darkness into one of light and knowledge.

It should be noted that cable-tow is not found in most dictionaries. Masonic references are clear that the word is unique as a Masonic term. Although it seems to have a sea flavour, there is no historical documentation to support that assumption. The attachment of a marine flavour is usually driven from confusing cable-tow with cable length use elsewhere in the Ob.. (Cable length will be described in a later issue.)

How long is a Cable-Tow?

During the Ob. of the M.M. degree the candidate promises to answer and obey all lawful ...summonses ... if within the length of my cable-tow. If it is not a marine measurement, then what is the measurement?

The Masonic symbolic allusion of cable-tow length is derived from the old operative regulations which obligated the medieval mason to attend the annual or triennial 'Assemblies' except in the case of sickness or 'in peril of death'. The later versions of the old charges often mention the distance within which attendance was obligatory. Variations on this point range from three to fifty miles.

Nowadays the Candidate's Ob. to answer a Lodge Summons is a simple promise to attend the Lodge so long as it is within his power to do so. No specific distance is involved.

Cable Length:

In the E.A degree there is a reference to something buried at least a cable length from shore. A cable or cable's length is indeed a unit of marine measurement. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a cable length as "about 100 fathoms: in marine charts 605.56 feet, or one tenth of a sea mile."

In our rituals it is certain that the intent of specifying the burial of something at that distance from shore was to make the object irrecoverable.

It is interesting to note that this idea of burial from shore appears in our earliest ritual documents, though the actual use of the words cable length came later. The first use of the term appears in the Wilkinson MS., c 1710.

Incidentally, the Oxford English Dictionary cites a number of special combinations with the word 'cable', e.g., cable-rope, cable-range, cable-stock, etc., but it does not give 'cable-tow'

References

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THE PERFECT POINTS OF ENTRANCE

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You may have noticed that there are parts of our ritual which are not readily understood and are never explained, yet we commit them to memory and at appropriate times recite them without question. One particularly confusing phrase is "The Perfect Points of Entrance." Does this have any special meaning and when and how did it become a part of our ritual?

In the Entered Apprentice lecture we learn that there are four Perfect Points of Entrance: The Guttural, Pectoral, Manual and Pedal, which are illustrated by signs and exemplified by the four Cardinal Virtues: Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence, and Justice. After a short lecture on each of these Cardinal Virtues, we are treated to a demonstration of the sign for each of the points of entrance, with a reference to its origin, but at no time are the points or cardinal virtues associated with entrance. Thus we are left with three separate and seemingly unrelated subjects. The only other reference to the Perfect Points of Entrance occurs in the dialog between the Worshipful Master and the Senior Warden during the opening and closing of the lodge on the Entered Apprentice degree, but again the Points of Entrance are not defined.

Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia offers this definition:

"The four Perfect Points of Entrance constitute the esoteric closing of each of the lectures on Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence and Justice, to which they respectively do not apply, illustrate, or in any way belong, so that the esoteric portions of the four lectures have to be somewhat manipulated to make a connection with them. Moreover, Point of Entrance is somewhat Cabalistic, since it does not disclose what the entrance is into. Does it mean entrance of the candidate into something, or of something into the candidate?"

Whether the architects of our ritual had something specific in mind when they designed this particular part of the work is unclear. Perhaps it is one of those things that is intended to excite our curiosity and leave each of us to draw our own conclusions.

When and how did this become a part of our ritual? There is no ready answer to this question because so much of our ritual is esoteric and is handed down from mouth to ear, making it almost impossible to determine the exact origin of any part of it. There is a distinct possibility that the roots of this particular part of the lecture date back beyond the establishment of Symbolic Masonry. Since the conferral of the Entered Apprentice degree, in which these points occur, deals with the subject of entrance; the entrance of the Entered Apprentice into the lodge, and the entering of his name on the rolls of the lodge, it seems logical to conclude that they were points of instruction relating to the candidate's entrance.

There is some evidence in the Old Manuscripts that there may have been only one point originally, with the three others added and attached to the lectures on the Cardinal Virtues during the 18th century. None of the early exposed rituals had anything to say about Guttural, Pectoral, Manual or Pedal until 1724, at which time they were mentioned as Freemason's signs, and were not connected in any way with the subject of entry. Later exposures, while making reference to the points of entrance, did not associate them with the signs of Guttural, Pectoral, Manual or Pedal, and as late as 1740 there had been no mention of the Cardinal Virtues.

Coill's Masonic Encyclopedia gives this theory on the evolution of the Perfect Points of Entrance in our ritual:

"Modern rituals on this subject, in a portion of the Entered Apprentice lecture, combine in a single treatment of three different things, as follows: 1. Entry on entrance, the points at which there were secrets and penalties; 2. Certain signs classed as Guttural, Pectoral, Manual and Pedal; and 3. Cardinal Virtues, Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence and Justice. In the earliest rituals, they were entirely dissociated. At least up to 1750, points of entry were no more than secrets, signs, tokens, etc., but undefined. These were certain signs classified as guttural, pectoral, manual and pedal, not further defined, but seeming to have no connection with entrance. Evidently, cardinal virtues did not enter the ritual until after the middle of the 18th century when they were taken from the Christian church, which derived them from Plato... So the four cardinal virtues were imposed on the four signs; guttural, pectoral, manual and pedal, and the whole merged with the points of entry, with the result that three matters of doubt and uncertainty, which the ritualists were unable to rationalize, were consolidated into one incongruous mass of verbiage. The only part which has any virtue or value is that of the Cardinal Virtues which, however, could stand on their own merits, needing no assistance from the other enigmatic parts."

The Cardinal Virtues aside then, we might consider the Perfect Points of Entrance, not necessarily in the order in which they are listed, as: the reception upon the point of a sharp instrument, the due guard, the penal sign, and the position in the northeast corner of the lodge upon the first step of Freemasonry, which allude to obligations, penalties, and moral responsibilities. These would seem to be the principal points of a candidate's entry into the lodge, and would explain, and perhaps justify, the retention of "The Perfect Points of Entrance" in our ritual.