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Milam: Masonic Cornerstones in Madison County
Masonic Cornerstones in Madison County

David Edward Milam, Worshipful Master
Helion Lodge Number F. & A.M.

This article is the first installment of a series of articles on Masonic cornerstones in the Huntsville area. In this issue, the mechanics of the Masonic Cornerstone ceremony are described. A recount of one of the most well attended Cornerstone ceremonies, the laying of the Old Huntsville High School cornerstone, is given in the second section. Future issues will discuss cornerstone ceremonies such as the one at the Old Post Office on Holmes Avenue.

Eunomia Hall

Huntsville, Alabama, May 19th, 1916

To: *A. F. Evans*

Brother:-

You are hereby summoned to attend a Special Communication of the Grand Lodge of Alabama and its Masonic Jurisdiction at Eunomia Hall, on the 25th day of May, 1916, at ten o'clock a.m., for the purpost of laying the Corner Stone of the Huntsville High School, and in this fail not.

By order of GRAND MASTER,

State of Alabama

Attest:

ARTHUR P. BEAN,

Acting Grand Secretary

One of the most public and grand ceremonies of the Masonic Fraternity is the laying of cornerstones at public buildings; this ceremony has inspired the imagination of the United States ever since the famous Masonic ceremony occurred at the laying of the cornerstone of the United States Capitol, an event where George Washington was present as a brother Mason. Madison County, Alabama has been the venue for a number of public cornerstone ceremonies during the last two centuries, and the writer has undertaken a series of articles exploring details of these occasions. The essential structure and verbiage of the ceremony itself in Alabama has remained static since the establishment of the Grand Lodge of the Free and Accepted Masons of the State of Alabama in 1821. The venues, dignitaries, and other details provide the varying degrees of flavor to these occasions.

By Masonic law, the laying of Masonic cornerstones in Alabama is an event conducted only by the Grand Lodge of the State of Alabama, requiring
Published by LOUIS, 2022 the Grand Lodge,¹ but the event should be organized

and sponsored by a Lodge within the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge. In Madison County, Helion Lodge Number One, established by dispensation first from the Grand Lodge of Kentucky to operate in 1811, has been the major sponsor of the cornerstone ceremonies that have transpired over the last two centuries; however, it has not been the only Lodge in Madison County to sponsor and to be present at this Grand Lodge event. Naturally, the longevity and relatively large size of membership of Helion Lodge Number One has provided the most opportunities for sponsorship of cornerstone events—yet Helion Lodge has not been the sole sponsor Lodge in Madison County.

THE CORNERSTONE CEREMONY IN ALABAMA

The cornerstone ceremony is conducted by “the Grand Master in person, or by some brother acting for him, under special written authority, assisted by the Grand Officers, or brethren appointed to fill their places for time being.”² This means that as in any large organized event which requires a number of persons to be at a specific place at a specific time, not all Grand Lodge Officers may be present at a particular cornerstone ceremony, so some of the duties may be executed by other Masonic brethren present. Yet all Masons in good standing “are entitled to a place in the procession.”³

Regarding the types of buildings which may have a Masonic cornerstone, only those being “acknowledged public structures, such as churches, court-houses, school buildings, or asylums, or those which are to be used for Masonic purposes,”⁴ with the exception to the last being if the property has a lien thereupon.

The ideal placement of the cornerstone should be in the northeast corner of the building, and the cornerstone should reflect, by engraving, the year in which the ceremony occurred and the name of the Grand Master by whom it was placed. Arrangements must be made such the cornerstone may be lowered in three gradual motions. The proper elements of consecration of the cornerstone are wheat, wine, and olive oil.⁵

After the Grand Lodge is opened at a “convenient and suitable place,”⁶ a procession is formed and sets out to the site of the cornerstone ceremony in the following order: Music (the band); Tiler, with a drawn sword; two Stewards, with white rods; Master Masons, two and two; two Stewards, with white rods; Junior Deacons; Senior Deacons; Secretaries; Treasurers; Past Wardens; Junior Wardens; Senior Wardens; Past Masters; Masters of Lodges; Grand Tiler, with drawn sword; Deputy Grand Tiler; Grand Stewards with white rods; a brother with a golden vessel containing corn (wheat); two brothers with silver vessels, one containing wine, the other oil (olive

Milam: Masonic Cornerstones in Madison County

oil); Principal Architect with Square, Level, and Plumb; Grand Secretary and Grand Treasurer; The Holy Bible, Square, and Compasses, carried by a Master of a Lodge, supported by two Deacons with black rods; Grand Chaplain; Grand Orator; Grand Marshal; The Five Orders; Grand Historian; Past Grand Wardens; Past Deputy Grand Masters; Past Grand Masters; Chief Magistrate of the place (if a Mason); Grand Wardens; Deputy Grand Master; Book of Constitutions, carried by the Master of the oldest Lodge; Grand Master, supported by the two Grand Deacons with black rods.⁷

The Grand Master calls upon the Grand Chaplain to invoke a blessing, then the Senior Grand Warden relays a call for the observance of solemnity for the occasion from the Grand Master to the Junior Grand Warden, who, in turn, relays that solemnity should be observed by all present. The Grand Master asks the Grand Treasurer if a memorial casket, or container, has been prepared to be deposited within the cavity of the cornerstone. After the Grand Treasurer responds in the affirmative, the Grand Secretary reads aloud the list of articles to be contained within the cornerstone, which should include: “a copy of the Holy Writings, a list of officers of the Grand Lodge for the current year,”⁸ the acting Grand Lodge Officers, a roll of the members of the Lodge (if the edifice is a Lodge), the Official Board having charge of the erection of the building (if the building is a church or public edifice), possibly copies of the local papers, the names of the public officers of the city and the county, the program for the occasion, coins and currency of the United States, etc.⁹

Then the Grand Treasurer then deposits the casket, the Grand Master directs the Grand Marshal to direct the Craftsmen to furnish cement. When the stone is ready to be lowered, the Grand Master spreads cement over the top of the stone upon which the cornerstone will rest. The cornerstone is then lowered in three motions, and public grand honors are given by the Masons at three points in the lowering of the cornerstone. The Grand Master then presents the Plumb to the Junior Grand Warden, the Level to the Senior Grand Warden, and the Square to the Deputy Grand Master, successively. The Grand Master then asks the Deputy Grand Master what the jewel of his office is, its moral and Masonic uses, and he then commands the Deputy Grand Master to apply his tool to the cornerstone and to report if the Craftsmen have adequately placed the stone, in its metaphorical sense. The Grand Master does likewise with the Senior and Junior Grand Wardens.¹⁰

The Grand Master strikes the cornerstone three times with his gavel and declares it to have been correctly lain. The consecration with corn (wheat), wine, and oil follows. The Deputy Grand Master spreads wheat upon the stone and explains its symbolic meaning- bounty; the Senior Grand Master strikes the stone and explains its symbolic meaning as an

emblem of joy and gladness; and finally, the Junior Grand Warden pours oil upon the stone and discusses peace.¹¹

The Grand Master asks a blessing, the Public Grand Honors are given, and then the Grand Master delivers the Plumb, the Square, and the Level to the Architect. An Oration follows, and the Grand Master orders the Grand Marshal to make a proclamation that the cornerstone has been placed in correct custom. A benediction by the Grand Chaplain follows, then the procession returns to its starting point, and the Grand Lodge is closed.¹²

THE CORNERSTONE AT THE OLD HUNTSVILLE HIGH SCHOOL

On 25 May 1916, a Masonic cornerstone was placed for the Huntsville High School on West Clinton Street.¹³ The committee in charge of the preparations for the event was comprised of Dr. G. H. Heyman, E. L. Love, Wells Stanley, and J. J. Bradley. The City Superintendent of Education, Prof. R. C. Johnson, estimated that at least one thousand school children participated in the patriotic parade from the grammar schools on East Clinton to the site, and thousands of attendees were said to have witnessed the event.¹⁴

The ceremonies were to begin at ten o'clock in the morning; the order of the program was that the High School Chorus was to offer a song, which was to be followed by an invocation from the Grand Chaplain, for whose office Rev. Frank L. Wear acted in that capacity for that event.¹⁵ Another song was to be sung by the High School Chorus, then the cornerstone ceremony was to commence, with Grand Master Walter Smith from Tuscaloosa presiding (the only known Grand Officer present for the occasion besides Austin Kendall who was the Grand Senior Deacon). According to the City Directory of Huntsville for the years 1916-1917, Austin Kendall was listed as a cedar dealer. The order of the program suggested that the audience sang "Rock of Ages" before the placing of the stone.¹⁶ For the Cornerstone Laying itself, James L. Kendall (then the Worshipful Master of Helion Lodge Number One and the President of the Tennessee Valley Motor Company) acted as Deputy Grand Master, Edwin F. Hummel, a postal clerk, acted as Grand Senior Warden, and George H. Heyman (the sitting Junior Warden of Helion Lodge and a dentist) acted as Junior Grand Warden. Other Grand Officers or Acting Grand Officers were: I. Wind (sitting Treasurer of Helion Lodge), Acting Grand Treasurer; Arthur P. Bean of Alabama Broom and Mat Company (sitting Secretary of Helion Lodge), Acting Grand Secretary; Austin F. Kendall (sitting Senior Warden of Helion Lodge), Grand Senior Deacon; Lawrence Cooper, a contractor, (sitting Junior Deacon of Helion Lodge), Acting Grand Junior Deacon; Robert L. Schiffman of the I.

<https://louis.uah.edu/huntsville-historical-review/vol28/iss3/5>

Milam: Masonic Cornerstones in Madison County

Schiffman & Company (sitting Senior Steward of Helion Lodge), Acting Grand Senior Steward; Harry H. Elliott, Engineer with the Huntsville Fire Department, (sitting Junior Steward of Helion Lodge), Acting Grand Junior Steward; Wells Stanley, Manager of the Alabama Power Company, Acting Grand Marshall; and William Hooper (sitting Tiler of Helion Lodge), Acting Grand Tiler.¹⁷

Items deposited into the cavity were:

- a roll of the Grand Officers of the Grand Lodge of Alabama
- a roll of the Acting Grand Officers at the Cornerstone Laying
- a roll of the Officers of Helion Lodge
- a roll call of the members of Helion Lodge
- a copy of the bylaws of Helion Lodge
- a copy of the Holy Bible
- a roll of the pupils of the Huntsville Public Schools
- a roll of the Teachers and Board of Education
- a copy of the Huntsville Exchange Telephone Directory
- a copy of the program of the cornerstone ceremony
- a copy of the Masonic Journal
- a certificate of Award
- a copy of the Mercury
- a copy of the Huntsville Daily Times
- a list of the names of the Committee on Arrangements
- one U.S. nickel
- one U.S. cent
- one York Rite Chapter penny
(the Knights Templar were present)¹⁸

The song, "Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow," sung by the audience, followed on the program. The Cornerstone was tested by the Grand Lodge Officers, reported to have been placed in custom, and music from the Merrimack Band followed.¹⁹ Hon. Lawrence Cooper, Jr., Acting Grand Junior Deacon for the occasion, gave the Oration. His topic for which his tone was described as being "in his usual happy style and manner" concerned education and he congratulated Huntsville for making the new High School a reality. He asked that all cooperate to make the school a success and he stated that he stood for education. It was said that he loved common school education and that he endorsed compulsory education laws. Additionally, Lawrence Cooper endorsed military education.²⁰

On the west side of the stone the words, "Huntsville Public School, the hope of the Republic," were inscribed. "Dedicated by the Masons of Alabama, Walter Smith, Grand Master" were inscribed on the east side.²¹

Grand Master Smith spoke regarding the future educational development of Alabama and speculated that an amendment allowing local school taxation to be voted on that fall was one of the most important measures which had been considered in years. He endorsed the idea.²²

Grand Master Smith also added, “Alabama for good and sufficient reasons in some cases has been rated as a backward state in matters of education for several decades that whatever reasons existed in the past for this condition has now passed. It is up to us to remove the stigma which has rested on us for many years and join the ranks of the states with ample educational facilities.”

The tax amendment is the first step looking toward making Alabama the great state she is destined to become.²³

Huntsville, Ala., May 19, 1916

At the invitation of Helion Lodge No. 1, the Grand Lodge of Alabama will lay the Corner Stone of Huntsville High School, Thursday morning, May 25th, 1916. We extend you a hereby invitation to be with us and participate in the ceremony.

Fraternally,

Attest:

James L. Kendall, W. M.

A. H. Bean, Secy.

ENDNOTES

¹*Masonic Ritual, Grand Lodge of F. & A.M.*, Montgomery: Brown Printing Company, 1963, p.121.

²*Ibid*, p. 121.

³*Ibid*,. P. 121.

⁴*Ibid*, p. 121.

⁵*Ibid*, p. 121.

⁶*Ibid*, p. 121.

⁷*Ibid*, 122-123

⁸*Ibid*, 128.

⁹*Ibid*, 128.

¹⁰*Ibid*, 129-132.

¹¹*Ibid*, 133-134.

¹²*Ibid*, 134-137.

Milam: Masonic Conerstones in Madison County

¹³List of Officers of Helion Lodge placed within the cornerstone for the event. The document was returned to Helion Lodge some years following the demolition of the Building.

¹⁴*The Huntsville Weekly*, Thursday Afternoon, 25 May 1916, page 1.

¹⁵List of Officers for the Laying of the Cornerstone of the Huntsville High School extracted from the cornerstone.

¹⁶*The Huntsville Weekly*, p. 1.

¹⁷Officer lists.

¹⁸*The Huntsville Weekly*, p. 1.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p.1.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p.1.

²¹*Ibid.*, p.1.

²²*Ibid.*, p.1.

²³*Ibid.*, p.1.