

**Grand Lodge of  
Ancient and Free Accepted  
Masons of Montana**

**Office of the Grand Historian**

**Rae J. Lemert  
Grand Historian**

*Helena, Montana  
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Mr. Samuel Pfrimmer,  
Corydon, Indiana

Dear Brother Pfrimmer:

I congratulate you upon your excellent article on "The Compasses" in The Builder for the current month. It is well written and highly informative. So far as it goes, I see no reason for disagreement between us regarding its subject matter.

May I ask you, however, whether you read, before writing it, the entire Montana Grand Lodge report dealing with the subject, or whether you contented yourself with reading the Correspondence Report in the Indiana proceedings?

Fraternally and sincerely,  
R.J. LEMERT

# The Compasses

by

**BRO. S. PFRIMMER**  
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SITTING in the little library of Pisgah Lodge, No. 32, Corydon, Indiana, the first week in May, 1927, browsing through the annual reports of the Grand Lodge of Indiana, I came across Past Grand Master Gay's Review of the proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Montana for 1925. Bro. Gay wrote with seeming enthusiasm and approval as follows: "The splendid report on the subject of 'Compass or Compasses?' is given by Bro. R. J. Lemert, which concludes with the following recommendation which was adopted:

"This is perhaps the ancient symbolism of the Square and Compass, and we should not destroy or becloud it by over-anxiety to conform to the etymologies of the outer world. Much of the most Sacred symbolism of our institution has been lost forever through the honest but unskilled tinkering of amateur ritualists. Let this Grand Lodge not add to the confusion within the Temple.

"For these and other reasons, with which the committee was not willing further to burden the Grand Lodge, it was recommended that the word 'Compass' be once again given sanction in preference to 'Compasses' wherever it appears in our work, written or unwritten."

At once the question arose, why should Reviewer Gay refer to this action of the Grand Lodge of Montana with such enthusiasm and apparent approval? Upon inquiry, I was informed that the Grand Lodge of Indiana had a few years ago adopted a ritual which used the word "Compass" instead of "Compasses," but a record of this action had failed to appear in the Grand Lodge report. This at once opened up a field of investigation. I had been giving the degree lectures for forty-nine years, always using the word "Compasses" and had never had its correctness questioned. I did not know what practice prevailed in the Masonic world and for the purpose of discovering this I wrote to the Grand Secretaries of the Grand Lodges with which Indiana has fraternal relations. I have received sixty-eight answers. Of these sixty-two Grand Secretaries answer that the word in use in their Grand Jurisdictions is "Compasses." Six say "Compass." I am giving a list of the Grand Jurisdictions with answers and comment, if any:

Alabama - Compasses.  
Alberta - Compasses.  
Arkansas - Compasses. "Compass" is the nautical instrument for steering.  
Arizona - Compass.  
British Columbia - Compasses  
California - Compass.  
Colorado - Compasses.  
Connecticut - In Connecticut the preferred terminology is the plural, Compasses. Delaware - Compasses.  
District of Columbia - Compasses.  
England - I return your letter of the 4th of July with the word "Compasses" inserted therein, this being the method of description in the English Jurisdiction. P. Coville Smith, Grand Secretary.  
Florida - Our Monitor gives it Compasses.  
Georgia - Compasses.  
Guatemala - Compasses is called in this Jurisdiction.

Idaho - Compasses.  
Iowa - Compass.  
Ireland - In reply to yours of the 29th ultimo, the Masonic Emblem referred to is known under the Irish constitution as the Compasses. H. C. Shellard, Grand Secretary.  
Illinois - Compasses.  
Kansas - Compasses.  
Kentucky - Compasses.  
Louisiana - Compasses.  
Maine - Compasses.  
Manitoba - Compasses.  
Maryland - Compasses.  
Massachusetts - Compasses.  
Michigan - Compasses.  
Minnesota - Compass. I am well aware that the best authorities sanction the word "Compasses", and I am personally of the opinion that the same is the only correct designation.  
Missouri - Compasses (Monitor).  
Mississippi - Compasses.  
Montana - Compass.  
Nebraska - Compass. Although the authorities seem to be nearly all against us.  
Nevada - Compasses.  
New Brunswick - Compasses.  
New Hampshire - Compasses.  
New Jersey - Compasses.  
New Mexico - Compasses (Monitor).  
New South Wales - Compasses.  
New York - Compasses.  
New Zealand - Compasses.  
North Carolina - Compasses.  
North Dakota - Compasses.  
Nova Scotia - Compasses.  
Ontario - Compasses.  
Ohio - Compasses. Past Grand Master Belt, Chairman of the Ritual Committee for Ohio, in answering the question "Compasses" says, "I never heard any other from anywhere on earth."  
Oklahoma - Compasses  
Oregon - Compasses always in all work.  
Pennsylvania - Compasses.  
Prince Edward Island - Compasses.  
Quebec - we invariably give it in the plural, Compasses, as distinctive from a Mariner's compass.  
Queensland - Compasses.  
Rhode Island - Compasses.  
Saskatchewan - Compasses.  
Scotland - Compasses.  
South Australia - Compasses. The great Oxford dictionary supports this usage.  
South Carolina - Compasses.  
South Dakota - Compasses  
Tasmania - Compasses.  
Tennessee - Compasses.  
Texas - Compasses.  
Utah - Compasses.  
Vermont - Compasses.  
Victoria - Compasses.  
Virginia - Compasses, never Compass.  
Washington - Compasses.  
Western Australia - Compasses.

West Virginia - Compasses.  
Wisconsin - Compasses.  
Wyoming - Compasses.

After completing this survey, the compiler turned his attention to Masonic dictionaries and encyclopaedias.

The first volume of Oliver's Universal Masonic Library (30 volumes) is a Masonic Dictionary. In this dictionary, the word "Compasses" only is used, and this seems to be true in all of Dr. Oliver's writings, so far as I have been able to discover.

Albert G. Mackey, in his monumental work, Encyclopaedia of Freemasonry, seems invariably to use the word "Compasses." The following quotations from this work are given under the heading:

COMPASSES. As in Operative Masonry the Compasses are used for the admeasurement of the architect's plans, and to enable him to give those just proportions which will ensure beauty, as well as stability to his work; so, in Speculative Masonry, is this important implement symbolic of that even tenor of deportment, that true standard of rectitude which alone can bestow happiness here and felicity hereafter. Hence, are the compasses the most prominent emblem of virtue, the true and only measure of a Mason's life and conduct.

And under

SQUARE AND COMPASSES: These two symbols have been so long and so universally combined to teach us, as says an early ritual, "to square our actions and to keep them within due bounds," they are so seldom seen apart but are so kept together either as two great lights, or as a jewel worn once by the Master of the Lodge, now by the Past Master.

Again, we find this:

The Bible, square and compasses are technically said to constitute the furniture of a lodge.

And also:

GREATER LIGHTS: The Bible, and the Square and Compasses.

Bro. William L. Boyden's Little Masonic Dictionary says,

COMPASSES: one of the most prominent of the emblems of Masonry.

SQUARE AND COMPASSES: the badge of the fraternity.

The furniture of a lodge, the Bible, Square and Compasses.

GREAT LIGHTS: the Bible, Square and Compasses.

Bro. Charles H. Merz, author and editor of the Sandusky Masonic Bulletin, in his unique book, Ask Me, Brother, says the furnishings of a lodge are  
The Holy Bible, Square and Compasses.

And again:

The word "Compass" may be used only to indicate the cardinal points; as a geometrical instrument, the word in Masonry is always "Compasses."

One of the important products of Masonic learning in the last century was Bro. Mitchell's Common Law of Masonry, and in an inserted Dictionary of Masonic terms uses the word "Compasses" only.

A letter from the Grand Librarian of the Grand Lodge of England, the oldest Grand Lodge in the world, says:

In reply to your letter, the use of the word "Compasses" (in the plural) by Freemasons of the English Constitution is in no way a use peculiar only to the Craft. It is the proper English designation of this particular instrument used by many professions and trades besides its symbolic employment by Freemasons. The word "Compasses" is, however, really an abbreviation, for colloquial conveniences of the full name which is "a pair of Compasses", just as the word "Scissors" describes, for shortness sake, a "pair of Scissors", another instrument which like the Compasses consists of more than one distinct part and so may rightly be denominated in the plural.

The Secretary of Grand Master's Lodge, No. 1, in the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of England, says:

So far as my observation and research have gone the word "Compasses" is always used and not "Compass."

The Secretary of St. John's Lodge, No. 1, Boston, Massachusetts, reputed to be the oldest lodge in America, writes that they use the word "Compasses" and he presumes they have always done so.

Bro. Lionel Vibert, Editor of *Miscellanea Latomorum* and Past Master of Quatuor Coronati Lodge, says:

The facts are pretty clear. Compass in the singular means for us the Mariner's compass. The emblem is the Compasses.

We now turn to "the etymologies of the outer world." Chamber's Encyclopaedia has: COMPASS, Mariner's is the name given to the instrument by which sailors are enabled to steer their course on the ocean and out of sight of land.

Much more is given, but no reference to the mathematical instrument.

And then says,

COMPASSES, instrument for transferring and marking off distances, or for drawing circles. etc.

The International Encyclopaedia has four pages devoted to "Compass" - not once referring to the mathematical instrument And follows this with

COMPASSES, a mathematical instrument for transferring or marking off distances (and for this purpose often called "dividers") or for drawing circles. The common compasses or dividers are composed of two rods or legs joined together by a pivot joint at one end and pointed at the other.

The Encyclopaedia Americana says:

COMPASS, MARINER'S: an instrument to ascertain directions at sea by means of the attraction of the earth for a movable magnet or a set of magnets.

Considerable space is given to a discussion of the subject, but no reference is made to the geometrical instrument. But this is followed by another heading:

COMPASSES: mathematical instrument used for describing circles, measuring lines, etc.

The Funk and Wagnall's Standard Encyclopaedia says:

COMPASS or Mariner's compass, a magnetic instrument used to indicate the direction of a ship with respect to the magnetic N. and S. line.

This discussion continues for four columns. No reference is made to the architectural instrument.

Then comes:

COMPASSES, instruments for transferring and marking off distances or for drawing circles, etc.

The following letter was written to the Editor of the Standard Dictionary:

Under the word "Compass" in the Standard Dictionary, you provide for thirteen definitions. You use twelve of them in defining things other than the mathematical instrument. After the number 7, you say, "see Compasses." And then in regular alphabetical order you say, "Compasses, noun, plural. An instrument consisting of two branches or legs, etc."

Are we not justified in concluding that you mean that "compasses" is one of the few nouns that have no singular? Chamber International, Funk and Wagnall's, The Americana, Mackey's (Masonic) Encyclopaedias, as well as Oliver's (Masonic) dictionary, all confirm this view. While Webster's, the Century and Stormonth's dictionaries practically do so.

I shall be greatly obliged to you for a reply.

To which the Editor replied:

Yes, compasses and scissors are words in the same class. "Compass" singular has a totally different meaning.

The Century Dictionary defines "Compass" under 10 headings. Under number 8, it says:

A mathematical instrument for describing circles or for measuring figures, distances between two points, etc.; commonly plural. Compasses consist of two pointed legs, etc. and then quotes Milton -

"In his hand He took the Golden Compasses, prepared In God's eternal store, to circumscribe This Universe and all created things."

Webster's Dictionary devotes 10 headings to the definition of "Compass." Nine of them refer to other things than the geometrical instrument. After number 8 it says:

8 (usually plural). An instrument for describing circles transferring measurements, consisting in its simple form of two pointed branches or legs, joined at the top by a pivot; called also pair of compasses. Compasses have generally one pen or pencil point, those with two sharp metal points for measuring are specifically called dividers.

Then in regular alphabetical order comes this:

COMPASSES, noun, plural. An instrument for describing curves, measuring, etc.

## GEOMETRY OR MASONRY, ORIGINALLY SYNONYMOUS TERMS

Bro. H. L. Haywood's pamphlet, *The Walrus and the Carpenter*, which is included in the Dollar Masonic Library, gives us a glimpse of the mathematics of Masonry. Writing of the Forty-seventh problem of Euclid and its reputed discoverer, the Great Pythagoras, Bro. Haywood says:

There is more substantial evidence to show that he founded a School of mathematics to make special studies of the righted-angled triangles. That theorem which showed up in Euclid as the forty-seventh proposition was attributed to him - in itself sufficient to establish ever enduring fame for any man. This proposition, you will recall holds that the sum of the squares of the two shorter sides of a right-angled triangle is equal to the square of the hypotenuse. For ages before Pythagoras the Egyptians had known on the basis of a rule of thumb that any triangle, the sides of which are in units of 3, 4, and 5 is a right-angled triangle; it is possible that Pythagoras generalized this into his own theorem.

The importance of this theorem in the history of mathematics, and even in the history of exact thinking in general, cannot be exaggerated. "No proposition in the whole of mathematics has had such a distinguished history," writes Bertrand Russell one of the greatest of all living mathematicians. "Everything in geometry, and subsequently in physics, has been derived from it by successive generalizations."

This problem at once becomes intensely interesting, and important to every Master Mason. The symbolism of Masonry being so closely connected with the mathematical sciences, I wrote to the Department of Mathematics of a number of Universities and Colleges asking what name they applied to the geometrical instrument used in describing circles. Here is the result so far as obtained:

Amherst College - Compasses.

University of Arizona - A pair of Compasses. A pair of Dividers. This is not a magnetic Compass.

University of Arkansas - Compasses.

Birmingham-Southern University - Compasses.

Brown University - Compasses.

Cambridge (England) University - Compasses.

University of California - Either but Compasses more common.

Chicago University - Dividers or Compasses

Columbia University - This is known as Compasses, i.e., an instrument often called Compass, but "Compasses" is scientifically correct, the magnetic needle, a circle or space being a Compass. The above is also referred to often as a pair of Compasses.

University of Colorado - Plural drawing instrument for measuring, describing circles, etc. (Webster).

Connecticut Agricultural College - Compasses. Dartmouth University - Compasses.

University of Delaware - Compasses. Compare the word scissors.

Earlham College - Compasses.

George Washington University - Compasses. See Funk & Wagnall's, or any other good dictionary. J. T. Erwin.

University of Georgia - Compasses. R. P. Stephen.

Hanover College - Usually plural.

Howard Payne University - Dividers

University of Illinois - Pair of Compasses. Not Compass.

Indiana University - Compasses.

Indiana Central University - Compasses.

Iowa State University - Dividers or Compasses.

University of Kansas - Compasses.  
 University of Kentucky - Compasses.  
 University of Maine - Compasses.  
 University of Manitoba - A pair of Compasses.  
 U. S. Military Academy - Pair of Compasses or Compasses.  
 Massachusetts Institute of Technology - Compasses.  
 University of Michigan - I prefer the plural Compasses, or a pair of Compasses.  
 University of Minnesota - This looks like a pair of Compasses.  
 University of Missouri - Compasses.  
 University of Montana - Compasses. See dictionary.  
 U.S. Naval Academy - Compasses. (See Webster.)  
 University of Nebraska - Compasses.  
 University of Nevada - Compasses.  
 University of North Dakota - Compasses.  
 University of Notre Dame - An instrument used in drawing, for describing arcs, circles, etc., is called "Compasses". An instrument used in surveying, for determining courses and directions from a magnetic needle is called "Compass".  
 Oakland City College - Compasses.  
 Oberlin College - The term applied to the above is Compasses or a pair of Compasses. Ohio State University - Compasses.  
 University of Oklahoma - Compasses.  
 University of Oregon - Compasses  
 University of Pennsylvania - Pair of Compasses.  
 Princeton University - Compasses (or Dividers).  
 Purdue University - If used in drawing, "a pair of Compasses". If used in measuring, "a pair of Dividers".  
 Rollins College - Compasses.  
 Rose Polytechnic Institute - Compasses.  
 University of South Carolina - Compass  
 University of Southern California - Compasses.  
 University of Tennessee - Compasses.  
 University of Utah - Compasses.  
 Taylor University - Compasses.  
 University of Vermont - Compasses.  
 University of Virginia - Compasses.  
 Wabash College - I would call the above "Compasses" or "a pair of Compasses." University of Washington - Compasses is technically correct. I prefer the term "a pair of Compasses".  
 Western Reserve University - Compasses.  
 West Virginia University - A pair of Dividers or Compasses.  
 Wyoming University - (Pair of) Compasses.  
 Yale University - Pair of Compasses or Dividers.

DIVIDERS is given in dictionaries and by mathematicians as synonymous with COMPASSES.

The following excerpts are taken from Brothers and Builders, Bro. Joseph Fort Newton, and will form a fitting conclusion to this article:

### **THE HOLY BIBLE**

Upon the Altar of every Masonic Lodge, supporting the Square and Compasses, lies the Holy Bible. The old, familiar Book, so beloved by so many generations, is our volume of Sacred Law and a Great Light in Masonry. The Bible opens when the Lodge opens; it closes when the Lodge closes. No Lodge can transact its own business, much less initiate candidates into its mysteries unless the Book of the Holy Law lies open upon its Altar. Thus the book of the



Will of God rules the Lodge in its labours, as the Sun rules the day, making its work a worship.

## **THE SQUARE**

The Holy Bible lies open upon the Altar of Masonry, and upon the Bible lie the Square and Compasses. They are the three Great Lights of the Lodge, at once its Divine warrant and its chief working tools. They are symbols of Revelation, Righteousness, and Redemption, teaching us that by walking in the light of Truth, and obeying the law of Right, the Divine in man wins victory over the earthly. How to live is the one important matter, and he will seek far without finding a wiser way than that shown us by the Great Lights of the Lodge.

The Square and Compasses are the oldest, the simplest, and the most universal symbols of Masonry. All the world over, whether as a sign on a building or a badge worn by a brother, even the profane know them to be emblems of our ancient Craft. Some years ago, when a business firm tried to adopt the Square and Compasses as a trade-mark, the Patent Office refused permission, on the ground, as the decision said, that "there can be no doubt that this device, so commonly worn and employed by Masons, has an established mystic significance, universally recognized as existing; whether comprehended by all or not, is not material to this issue." They belong to us, alike by the associations of history and the tongue of common report.

Nearly everywhere in our Ritual, as in the public mind, the Square and Compasses are seen together. If not interlocked they are seldom far apart, and the one suggests the other. And that is as it should be, because the things they symbolize are interwoven. In the old days when the earth was thought to be flat and square, the Square was the emblem of the Earth, and later, of the earthly element in man. As the sky is an arc or a circle, the implement which describes a Circle became the symbol of the heavenly, or skyey spirit in man. Thus, the tools of the builder became the emblems of the thoughts of the thinker- and nothing in Masonry is more impressive than the slow elevation of the Compasses above the Square in the progress of the degrees. The whole meaning and task of life is there, for such as have eyes to see.

## **THE COMPASSES**

In our study of the Square we saw that it is nearly always linked with the Compasses, and these old emblems, joined with the Holy Bible, are the Great Lights of the Craft. If the Lodge is an "Oblong Square" and built upon the Square (as the earth was thought to be in olden time), over it arches the Sky, which is a circle. Thus, Earth and Heaven are brought together in the Lodge - the earth where man goes forth to his labor, and the Heaven to which he aspires. In other words, the light of the Revelation and the law of Nature are like the two points of the Compasses within which our life is set under a canopy of Sun and Stars.

## THE COMPASSES

### THE GREAT LIGHT IN MASONRY

From

#### "The Soul of the Craft"

What is the Great Light in Masonry? The Holy Bible, open upon the Altar for all to read – open for each to interpret for himself? No, though the wise old Book does bring the radiance of revelation to guide us in the dim country of this world, at once a lamp to our feet and warmth to our hearts which, if a man follows it faithfully, he will not lose his way in the Valley of Illusion.

**The Square**, by which we are taught our duty to our fellow men in the fellowships and conflicts of life – to do justly and show mercy and build our lives on the laws of God? No, though by the little try-square of moral right which each carries in his bosom we are taught to walk uprightly, and work righteously, and speak the truth in our heart.

**The Compasses**, by which we are shown our duty to ourselves in life, how each must live alone – how each must circumscribe his passions and keep his desires within due bounds; and that he that ruleth his own spirit is better than he that taketh a city? No, though if a man fail of self-knowledge, self-reverence and self-control, he fails utterly, and his life ends in a rubbish heap.

The great Light in Masonry is the soul of all these symbols, the sum of the truths they teach, builded into a character of moral strength, spiritual beauty, and human service; a glad, faithful, heroic, gentle soul – your soul and mine – more than any temple, a sanctuary of faith, a shrine of love, an altar of pity, pity and unconquerable hope.

"LET THE LIGHT SO SHINE."

*Joseph Fort Newton.*