

**Esoteric Symbolism  
of the  
Watson-Cassoul Apron**

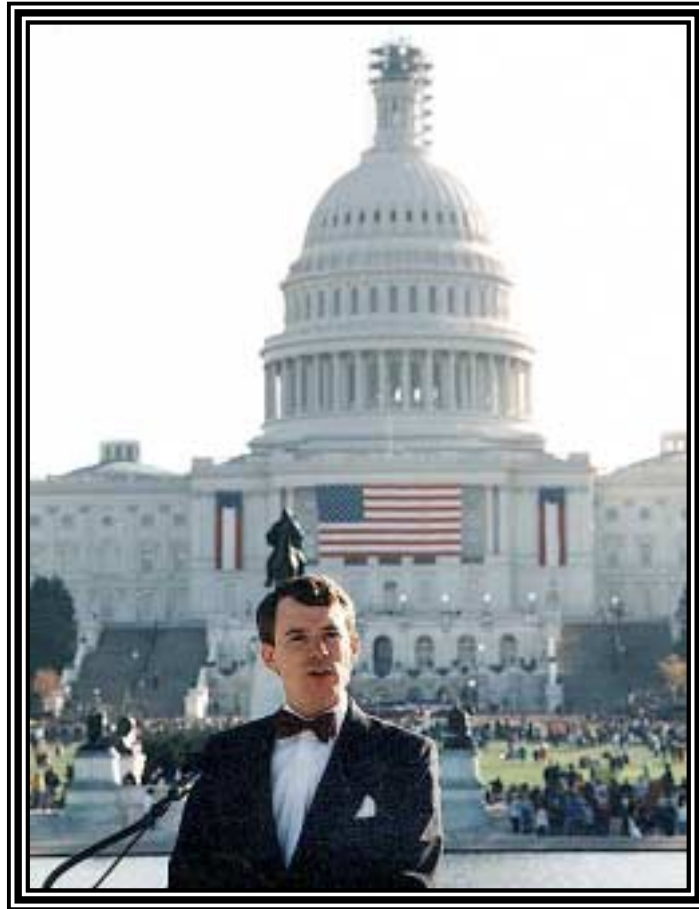
Presented by

Rt. Wor. Claude Harris, P.G.S.W.  
and Past Master of the lodge.

April 23, 5998

*Charter Night*

Alexandria-Washington Lodge No. 22  
A.F.& A.M.



This is a copy of the address RW Claude Harris, doctor of history and civilizations, presented to the Alexandria-Washington Lodge No.22 on April 23, 1998, *Charter Night* of the lodge.

Dr. Harris, who was Archivist of the lodge for approximately ten years, participated in numerous projects concerning General George Washington including principle consulate for the bicentennial ceremonies of the District of Columbia in 1991; the White House in 1992; and the U.S. Capitol in 1993. He presently lives in Bangkok, Thailand and represents the Grand Master of the National Grand Lodge of France as a Past Senior Grand Warden.

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My Brethren,

Tonight, being *Charter Night*, Worshipful Brother Hays requested that I speak on a subject relating to our lodge's history. After careful thought, I decided to select a topic pertaining to the Washington Masonic apron, which we will refer to as the *Watson-Cassoul Apron*. I chose this subject for the simple reason that from my knowledge, the esoteric aspect of the emblems and design, so delicately embroidered,



researched. The best resources available are *Washington and his Masonic Compeers* by Sidney Hayden, written in the mid-nineteenth century, and *George Washington Freemason*, written by our own Past Grand Master of Virginia and Archivist of this lodge, Dr. William Moseley Brown. Both these references only give an overall description of the apron and do not bring forth a study of the symbols. Thus, after a brief history, we will all discover together the hidden symbolism of this famous Masonic apron worn by the Father of our Country.



There are several so-called "Washington" Masonic aprons, but the most famous are two, both found in the estate of Mount Vernon after the general's death. The first being the *Watson-Cassoul Apron* presented in 1782 by Elkanah Watson of Plymouth, Massachusetts and Monsieur Cassoul of Nantes, France now in possession



of the Alexandria-Washington Lodge No. 22. The second is the *Lafayette Apron*, presented two years later by the marquis de Lafayette in 1784, now in the Museum of the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania. The Lafayette Apron, which is said to have been sewn by the hands of Madame Lafayette, has always been the favorite among writers and Masonic speakers throughout our history.<sup>1</sup> This is quite understandable, since the marquis was such a great aristocrat



<sup>1</sup> Benson J. Lossing, in his book *The Home of Washington and Its Associations* dated 1865 and published in New York states on pages 152-153: Madame Lafayette "prepared with her own hands, an apron of white satin, upon which she wrought, in needlework, the various emblems of the Masonic order. This apron Lafayette brought with him, and presented to his distinguished brother at Mount Vernon."

who fought with the American colonists against the British in the American Revolution. Watson and Cassoul on the other hand, were only personal friends and Masonic brothers of Washington who did many services for the general, but with none of the notoriety of the marquis.<sup>2</sup>

A fascinating point here is the fact that during the nineteenth century, the two aprons were confused. So much was the perplexity of the matter, that the Alexandria-Washington Lodge and the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania both claimed to have the Lafayette apron. In the book *The Lodge of Washington* written by F. L. Brockett, Past Master of Lodge 22, appearing in two editions of 1876 and 1899, the author states the following: “This apron and sash, the handiwork of Mrs. General La Fayette, were presented to Washington by La Fayette, during his visit to Mount Vernon, in 1784...together with the box made in France, which contained them.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, Worshipful Masters, Grand Masters and distinguished guests alike of Lodge No. 22 all mistakenly referred to the Watson-Cassoul apron as the Lafayette apron though out the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup>



Major Lawrence Lewis, a nephew of Washington, presented the Watson-Cassoul apron, (thinking it was the Lafayette) together with the black lacquered apron box given by the marquis, to Alexandria-Washington Lodge on June 3, 1812.<sup>5</sup> Washington's legatees gave the Lafayette apron to the Washington Benevolent Society of Philadelphia on October 26, 1816.<sup>6</sup> In turn, this Society presented the apron to the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania on July 3, 1829 where it has remained ever since.<sup>7</sup>



<sup>2</sup> Born January 22, 1758, at Plymouth, Massachusetts, Elkanah Watson was a man of many talents who owned in partnership with Monsieur Cassoul the mercantile firm *Watson & Cassoul*. In 1777, he was sent to Charleston and other southern ports by Boston merchant John Brown with \$50,000 to invest in merchandise. In 1799, he was sent to Paris with dispatches for Benjamin Franklin and traveled throughout Europe. Returning with papers for George Washington, he spent two days with his host at Mount Vernon where they talked agriculture. After traveling north, he settled in Albany, New York eventually forming an agricultural society. He died at Port Kent, New York, December 5, 1842. Watson, E., *Men and Times of the Revolution: Including Journals of Travels in Europe and America, from 1777 to 1842*, New York 1856

<sup>3</sup> Brockett, F. L., *The Lodge of Washington*, Alexandria 1899, p. 90

<sup>4</sup> As quoted by Brown and Callahan, the apron was used by several distinguished guests of the lodge including Lafayette on February 21, 1825, Most Worshipful Peyton S. Coles, who laid the cornerstone of the Yorktown monument on October 18, 1881, Most Worshipful Roscoe Swift on February 22, 1911 and even by President William H. Taft who attended several meetings of the lodge all of whom thought it was the Lafayette apron. Brown, W.M., *George Washington, Freemason*, Richmond 1952, p. 86

<sup>5</sup> This is recorded in the minutes of Alexandria-Washington Lodge No. 22 referencing this date.

<sup>6</sup> No one in specific is mentioned by Hayden or Brown as to who personally took the apron and presented it to the society in Philadelphia.

<sup>7</sup> This society was eventually dissolved during this period and it was the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania who took interest in the apron. Lossing, Benson J., *The Home of Washington and Its Associations*, New York, 1865, p. 154



But why was aprons? One must obvious reason Washington himself Cassoul apron in the black *Japanese style* so that it would shelved and was library after his box were presented to Lodge No. 22 with the understanding that they were from the marquis. When we look at the Watson-Cassoul apron, it does have the American and French flags upon it, French and American logical that everyone apron because of its reason, plus the fact that the Lafayette, Alexandria remain steadfast about its for over ninety years, wrong.



there a mix-up in the theorize, but the most would be that had placed the Watson-Lafayette apron box. The lacquered box was made appear to be a book when located in the general's death.<sup>8</sup> Both apron and

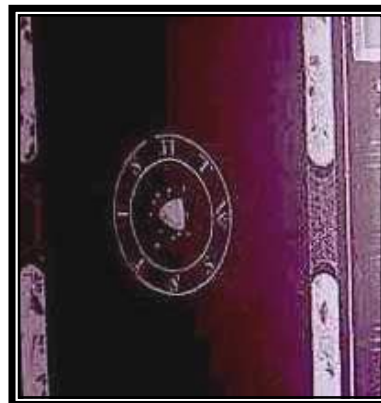


which was associated with the alliance at the time. Thus, it is assumed it to be the Lafayette patriotic symbols.<sup>9</sup> For this Major Lewis presented it as Washington Lodge would position concerning the apron which finally proved to be

It was sometime in the early twentieth century, someone in Virginia<sup>10</sup> finally discovered the Hayden publication of 1866 which clearly reads: "...but the two aprons



may be easily identified, by the Watson & Cassoul apron being wrought with gold and silver tissue, with the American and French flags combined upon it, while the La Fayette apron is wrought with silk, and has for its design on the frontlet the Mark Master's circle, and mystic letters, with a *beehive* as its *mark* in the center. The



same device is beautifully inlaid on the lid of the box in which it was originally presented to Washington; and as this box is also in possession of Lodge No. 22 at Alexandria, and kept with the Watson and Cassoul apron, it has by many been supposed that this was the apron presented in 1784 by La Fayette."<sup>11</sup> Hayden did his research, and found the memoirs of Elkanah Watson entitled *Men and Times of the Revolution: Including Journals of Travels in Europe and America, from 1777 to 1842*, published in New York in 1856. Here, Watson himself accounts his dealings with the apron he presented the

<sup>8</sup> Black lacquered boxes with inlaid flower patterns as in this case, were imitated from like decorated boxes imported especially from Japan.

<sup>9</sup> Although the Lafayette apron has a red, white and blue bordering, the two crossed American and French flags of the Watson-Cassoul apron makes it the more patriotic of the two.

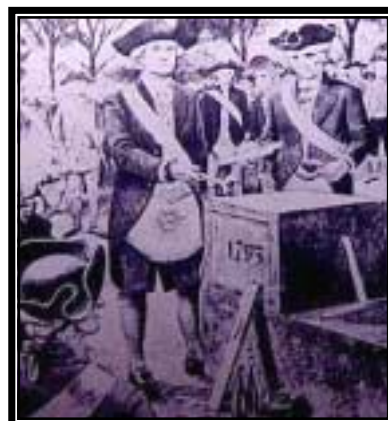
<sup>10</sup> There is no mention in any of the references concerning who discovered the mistake.

<sup>11</sup> Hayden, S., *Washington and his Masonic Compeers*, New York 1866, p. 106

general: “To pay some mark of respect to our beloved Washington, I employed, in conjunction with my friend M. Cassoul, nuns in one of the convents at Nantes to prepare some elegant Masonic ornaments and gave them a plan for combining the American and French flags on the apron designed for this use. They were executed in a superior and expensive style. We transmitted them to America, accompanied by an appropriate address.”<sup>12</sup> After the discovery of this, and the Hayden text, finally an end was put to the confusion, which complicated Masonic history for years.



President Washington also selected the Watson-Cassoul apron when laying the cornerstone of the United States Capitol building in 1793, as testified by his contemporaries.<sup>13</sup> Most individuals at the time must have combined the fame of the marquis and the elegant richness and beauty of the Watson-Cassoul into one apron. Furthermore, it is this writer’s belief that Washington preferred the Watson-



Cassoul to the Lafayette apron. It is the more elegant of the two being made of gold and silver wire and tissue, while the Lafayette apron was made of silk with a very bright and bold red, white and blue bordering. It is well known that Washington preferred black or somber clothing, and if given a choice, might not have chosen the brightly colored apron of Lafayette. This of course does not degrade the appreciation Washington held for the marquis; it was only the general’s personal taste in clothing. Therefore, from the documents readily available, it is my interpretation; Washington’s favorite apron was presented to him by Elkanah Watson and Monsieur



Cassoul in 1782 as depicted by



the heroic statue made by Brother Bryant Baker in Memorial Hall of the George Washington Masonic National Memorial.

Although the apron has many interesting historic aspects, we must now focus in on our subject for tonight: the esoteric symbolism of the apron’s design. Throughout our study,

<sup>12</sup> There are two editions of the publication, the second being published in 1857 by Watson’s son, Winslow C. Watson. Elkanah Watson gives one of the best accounts of the principal towns and villages of the colonies at the time of the American Revolution. Watson, E., *Men and Times of the Revolution: Including Journals of Travels in Europe and America, from 1777 to 1842*, New York 1856

<sup>13</sup> This is a debatable point that is discussed at length in the Brown publication, but we should clearly state here that the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania still claims even today, that Washington wore the Lafayette apron when laying the cornerstone of the capitol. Brown, W.M., *George Washington, Freemason*, Richmond 1952, pp. 85-86

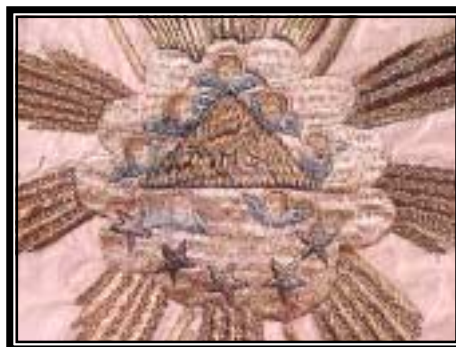


please continue to recognize the superb detail and craftsmanship of this apron, which is indeed a Masonic masterpiece.

When we look at the entire apron we see the scheme as indicated by Watson to be a combination of two flags, but what are all these other symbols? In a letter to J. Hugo Tatch, a noted Masonic historian of the early twentieth century, Charles H. Callahan, Past Grand Master of Virginia and founding father of the George Washington Masonic National Memorial, describes the apron as follows: “The ornamental device in the center, which is embroidered in silk, represents a bee hive with seven small cherubims surrounding the hive. There are five stars in a crescent under the bee hive all of which is on a device which appears to me to represent sheaves of wheat with the French and American flags entwined.”<sup>14</sup> In the famous work *Washington, the Man and the Mason* written by Callahan in 1913 he again describes the apron as “It is of cream-colored satin, heavily embroidered in gold, with the French and American flags entwined. A beehive and fairies adorn the center. It was presented to the Lodge, with the box below and the sash above in 1812 by Lawrence Lewis, nephew of the General and the husband of his adopted daughter, Nellie Custis.”<sup>15</sup>

Although these accounts could be considered accurate, we should reference other documents of the eighteenth and earlier centuries for comparative usage of these emblems to establish a more precise meaning of the symbols.

When first glanced at, we see the dominant design in the center of the apron called a *cloudburst*. From behind the cloudburst, we can see golden rays of light emanating outward. On the clouds there are seven blue-winged cherubim with golden halos. These angles are so finely crafted that we can even see individual facial expressions. These cherubim encompass the most important element of the apron, which is not a beehive, but a golden triangular plate. This triangular plate, representing the divine image of God by the ancients, has an inscription thereon in black. If we look at the following hermetic engravings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, we will understand the origin of this central motif.



<sup>14</sup> Brown, W.M., *George Washington, Freemason*, Richmond 1952, p. 86

<sup>15</sup> This book has passed through half a dozen or more successive editions. Callahan, Charles H., *Washington, The Man and the Mason*. Memorial Temple Committee of the George Washington Masonic National Memorial Association, Alexandria 1913.

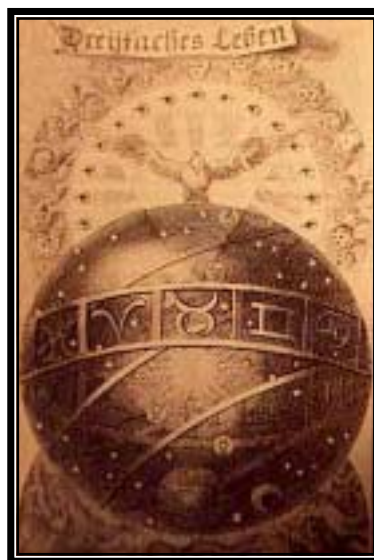




**This is an engraving of *The genesis of the world of the elements between the celestial world of light and the chaotic underworld* by Johann J. Becher 1635-1682. In this drawing, we see the earth with her elements in the center. Above we find the cherubim as on the apron surrounding God depicted here as light.**

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**Next we have two engravings dated 1682 by Jacob Böhme. God is represented by the phoenix descending upon the universe surrounded again by cherubim and the golden triangle from which light emanates.**







Matthäus Merian originally made this engraving for J.D. Myliu's *Opus Medico-Chymicum*. It was later used in the appendix to the *Musaeum Hermeticum* c. 1625.<sup>16</sup> Merian presented all the components of the Great Work in a single great synthesis: a horizontal axis separates the sphere of the divine from the wheel of nature, which is divided into the various phases of the Work.

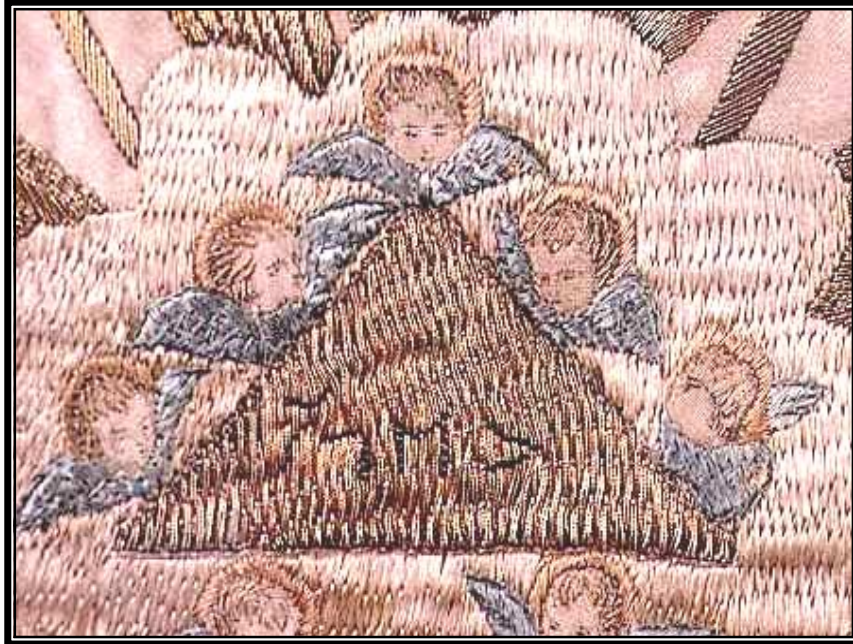


Clearly, the emblems on the apron were greatly referenced from hermetic and philosophic symbols. Hermes Trimegistus was the mythical Greek patriarch of natural mysticism and alchemy. The alchemists regarded him as their "Moses" who had handed down the divine commandments of their art upon the *emerald tablet*.<sup>17</sup> The equilateral triangle, also used among the ancients, can be traced back to the remote periods of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia as a representation of deity.

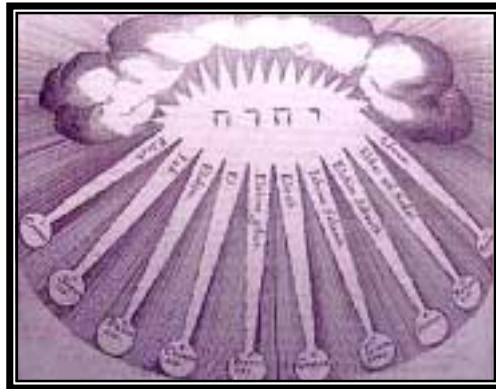
<sup>16</sup> This photograph was taken from *An Encyclopedic Outline of Masonic, Hermetic, Quabbalistic and Rosicrucian Symbolical Philosophy* by Manly P. Hall, fifth edition, San Francisco 1928

<sup>17</sup> The *emerald tablet*, attributed to Hermes, contains the axiom on which hermetism rests, that analogy, or equivalence, is the unifying principle of the whole universe, man included.

Now look closely at the inscription placed upon the golden triangular plate. Because of past restorations of the apron, these characters seem unclear, but when



referencing other illustrations of the period, we find that it is without doubt, the *Grand Omphalos* or *Tetragrammaton*.<sup>18</sup> Traditionally, it is written in Hebrew as in this case, and from right to left is translated thus: *H V H J*, or in English from left to the right: *J H V H*.

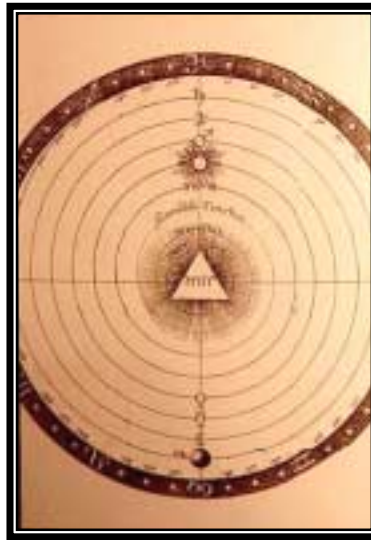


**From the great *Tetragrammaton* flow ten “epithets” of God. These embody various aspects of the godhead, which in turn correspond to the ten primal numbers of the Sephiroth. Robert Fludd, *Philosophia Sacra*, Frankfurt, 1626.**

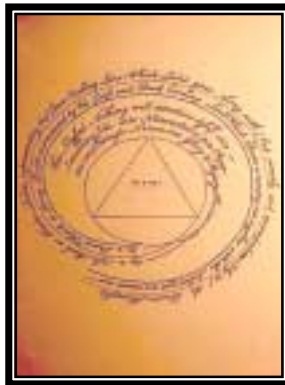
<sup>18</sup> There are many studies on the *Tetragrammaton*, which is a subject in itself. Our presentation will only give a basic explanation of this complex topic.



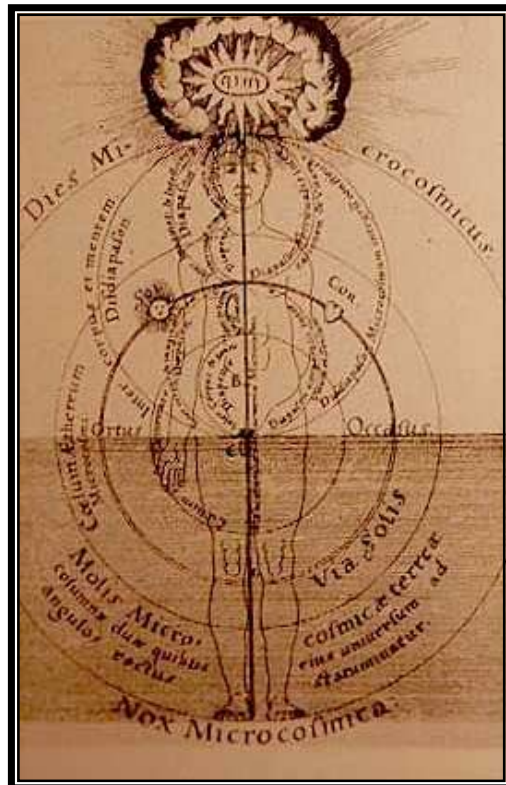
*The Tetragrammaton from the Sephardi Bible, 1385*



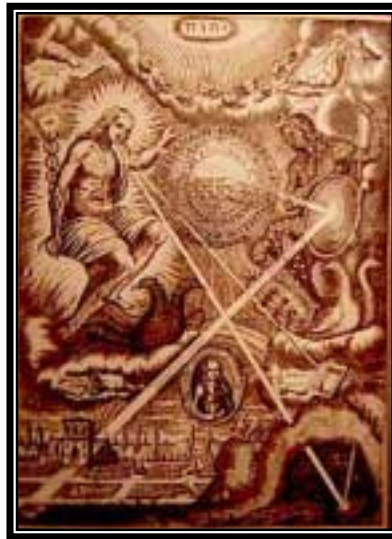
The universe as depicted by Jacob Böhem in 1682. The Earth is at the bottom and God the creator of the universe at the center.



In this eighteenth century drawing by D. A. Freher, the author writes: “Alpha and Omega, the eternal beginning and the eternal end, the first and last. Unground without time and space. Chaos. Mirror eye of eternity.”

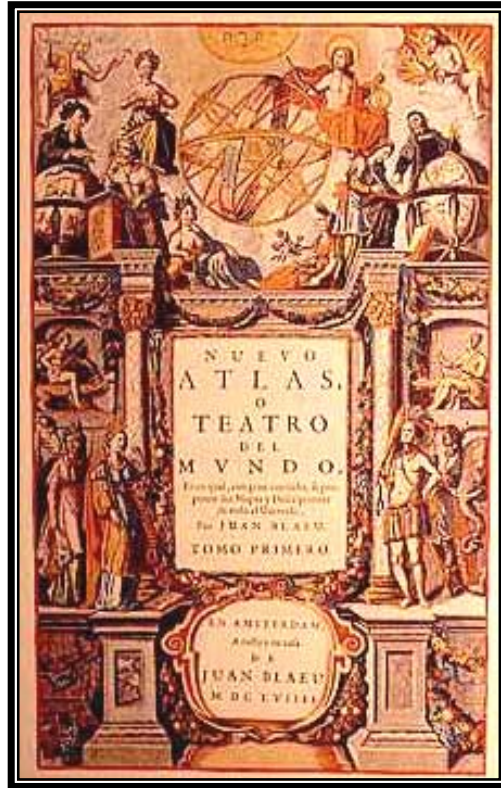


“We see here the wonderful harmony in which the two extremes, the most precious and the most gross, are linked.” Robert Fludd, in his *Utriusque Cosmi*, 1691, is referring to soul and body. The *Tetragrammaton* is considered here as man’s soul.



Of Kircher’s *Ars magna lucis et umbrae*, 1665 Goethe writes: “Here for the first time it is clearly suggested that light, shade and color should be considered as the elements of seeing.” The *Tetragrammaton* is again pictured as the dominant symbol in the presents of cherubim.

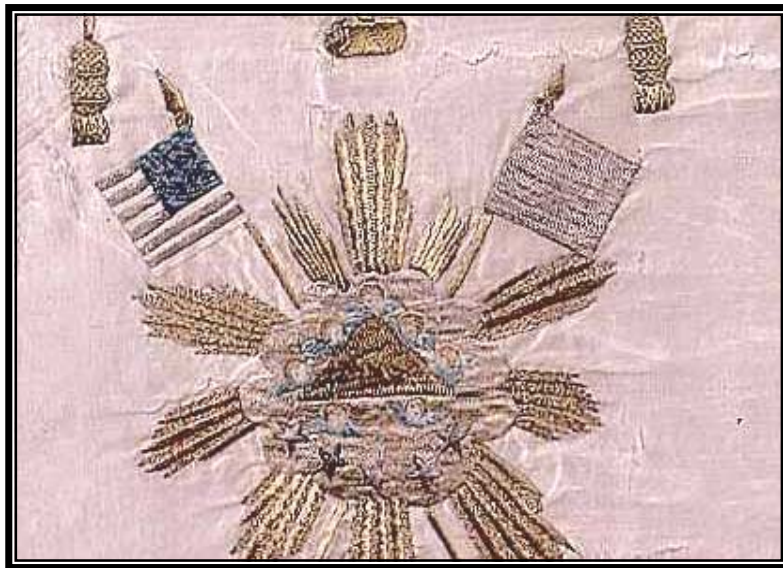




The *Tetragrammaton* is pictured in the Titled-Page to J. Blaeu's *Nuevo Atlas*, 1659.

Under the golden plate we find five silver stars. Stars are quite common in Masonic rituals and relate to the universe. As quoted here from the Virginia Masonic ritual: "...yet that All-Seeing Eye, whose all-pervading intelligence the Sun, Moon, and Stars obey..."<sup>19</sup> These silver stars also balance the Masonic symbolism of the central design, for we now discover the THREE-sided golden plate inscribed with the *Tetragrammaton*, the FIVE silver stars of the universe and the SEVEN heavenly cherubim---thus, 3-5-7, the Masonic and sacred numbers of human civilization.

Next, observing the flags, we can easily recognize the American on the left with the now famous *Stars and Stripes* motif. It is here depicted with fifteen stars



<sup>19</sup> Grand Lodge of Virginia, A.F.& A.M., *Manual of Work*, Richmond 1986



and twelve stripes. The white stripes were sewn in pure silver thread and are now tarnished, whereas the red stripes were in silk and have completely faded giving a reverse of what was originally intended.<sup>20</sup>

On the right is assumed to be the French flag, but it does not seem recognizable. When the apron was made at Nantes in 1782, we must

remember that King Louis XVI was on the throne of France. The famous blue-white-red tricolor comes from the French

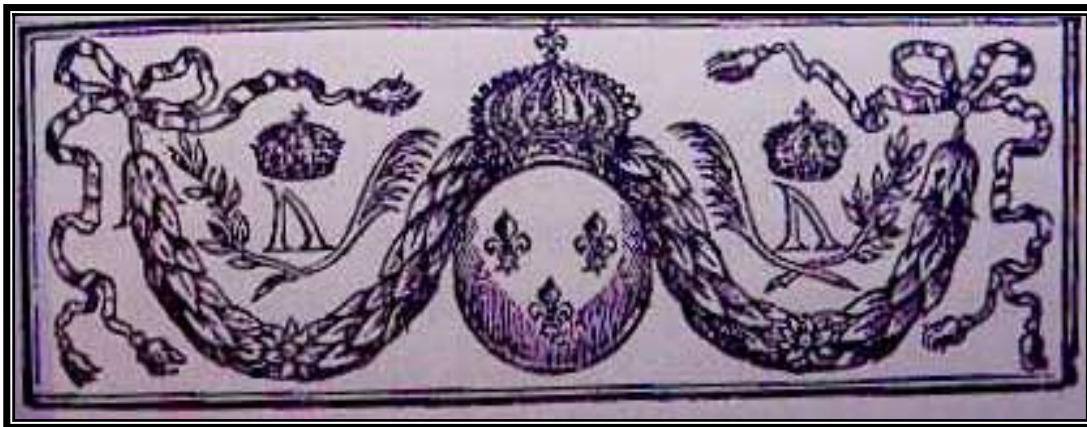


revolution, which lasted from 1789 to 1799, so this flag could not have been used. At that time, the royal standard of France would have



appeared blue with three golden *fleur-de-lis*.<sup>21</sup> In France the *fleur-de-lis* was adopted as the royal emblem by King Louis VI in 1108 and continued thereafter.

**Here is a royal decoration of a French publication addressing King Louis XIV dated 1686. We clearly see the *fleur-de-lis* under the crown as the royal arms.**



<sup>20</sup> At that time, and throughout the nineteenth century, there was no standardization of the American flag. It was therefore quite common to match either the stars or stripes to the then newly established American states.

<sup>21</sup> A *fleur-de-lis* is a conventionalized representation of an iris.





**We can reference here the portrait that Louis XVI gave Washington in 1786. It is an engraving of a full-length portrait of the king in his state robes, enclosed in a superb gilt frame. At the top, we can see the royal arms of France, three *fleur-de-lis* under the crown.**

But the French flag on the Watson-Cassoul apron is definitely not blue and does not appear to have any design what so ever. To explain this, one should understand that since the apron was not the direct gift of the king himself, his royal standard could not be placed upon it. Furthermore, the king's royal standard would not represent the entire



nation. However, the traditional ensign of France, that flown by its navy, was a plain white banner. It dates from 1690 when the French infantry was subjected to “friendly fire” and thereafter it was decided that all regimental flags would have a white “scarf” hanging from the top of the staff.<sup>22</sup> The white flag also developed as the ensign of commanding officers, such as colonel generals, and later colonels with various arms thereon including the *fleur-de-lis*. In sum, to represent the entire nation without regard to any individual or group, the pure white flag used by the French navy was selected and sewn upon the apron in silver wire now tarnished with age.

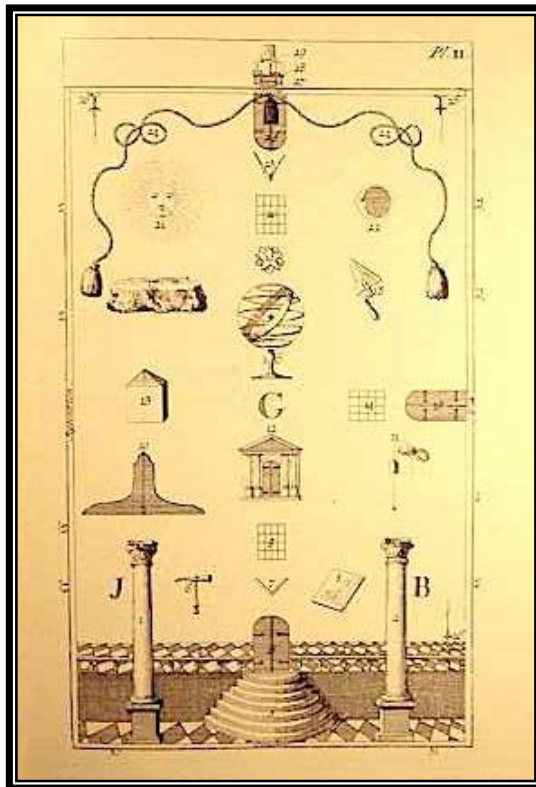
We now direct our attention to the golden cord that is directly above the central design.<sup>23</sup> Being Masonic in origin, the cord represents the fraternity and the knots the

<sup>22</sup> *Friendly fire* is a term used by the military, which traditionally means troops firing upon their own men or army in error.

<sup>23</sup> This is not a *cable-tow*, which symbolizes the scope of a man's reasonable ability.



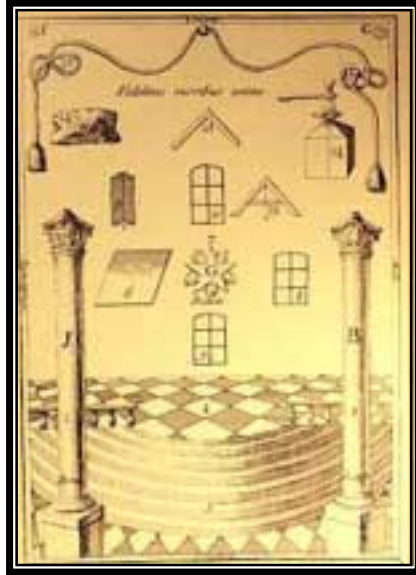
individual Mason---thus, as “the trowel spreads the cement of brotherly love and affection, which unites us into one sacred band or society of friends and brothers,”<sup>24</sup> so does the *golden cord of union* tie or bind the fraternity together as one sacred family. This motif was quite common on French and European Masonic tracing boards of the eighteenth century.



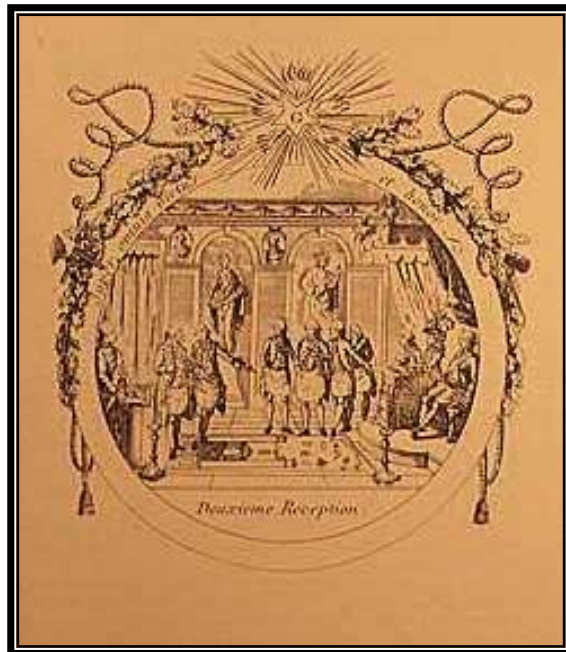
*Plan of the Lodge for the Reception of an Apprentice or Fellowcraft from L'Ordre des Francs-Maçons Trahi, 1745, Amsterdam*

<sup>24</sup> Grand Lodge of Virginia, A.F.& A.M., *Manual of Work*, Richmond 1986





*Plan of the Lodge for the Reception of an Apprentice or Fellowcraft from L'Ordre des Francs-Maçons Trahi, 1745, Amsterdam*



*Second Reception from Étrennes aux Francs-Maçons, ou Nouveau Catéchisme. Paris, 1785*



*Plan of an E A Lodge from Maurerisches Handbuch, Colon, 1821*

Hanging from the *golden cord of union* is a gavel. If examined closely, we discover what appears to be a silver square sewn on its striking surface. The square, which is the jewel of the Worshipful Master, clearly indicates this as the *gavel of authority*.<sup>25</sup>



Finally, after completing our study of all the esoteric symbols of the apron, we can now unite them into the following overall description of the design:

<sup>25</sup> Even if this ornament was not intended to be a square, the gavel in itself would have the same symbolic meaning.



*The Grand Architect of the Universe, creator of heaven and earth, bursts forth to join the American and French alliance. The golden cord of Masonic union unites this coalition into one sacred family, with Washington, represented by the gavel of authority, as its leader.*

In presenting such a highly symbolic Masonic gift, Brothers Watson and Cassoul obviously recognized the great character of this man, his complete dedication to the principles of civil liberty, and that he would be respected and applauded universally for generations to come. This

is evidenced by the follow extract contained in their letter, which accompanied the apron dated March 23, 1782. **“Your glorious career will not be continued to the protection of American liberty, but its ultimate effect will extend to the whole human family, since providence has evidently selected you as an instrument in His Hands to fulfill his eternal decrees.”**<sup>26</sup>



My Brethren, after two hundred years, we now begin to see what a remarkably accurate prediction these, our two Masonic brothers, made of America and our Illustrious Brother George Washington.

<sup>26</sup> Hayden, S., *Washington and his Masonic Compeers*, New York 1866, p. 84

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## Acknowledgments

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George Washington Masonic National Memorial, The, Alexandria, Virginia

Grand Lodge, A.F.&A.M. of Virginia

Grande Loge Nationale Française

Mount Vernon Ladies Association, Mt. Vernon, Virginia

Pierson Photography, Falls Church, Virginia

Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Texas Historical Commission