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## Enigmas of Potton

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### On the Trail of Freemasonry in Potton

by **Gérard Leduc**

Translation by Sandra Jewett

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#### A note from the Editorial team

In the autumn of 2015, *Histoire Potton History* published a special edition commemorating the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of St. John's Lodge No. 27 in Mansonville. That edition contained much about the general history of Freemasonry and dealt specifically with the history of the Lodge in Mansonville. This article might well interest you, as a complement to the special edition published last year.

Gérard Leduc, founding president of the Potton Heritage Association and co-recipient, with Paul Rouillard, of the 2015 Award for Heritage, presents herein an unpublished text, the result of his great interest in, and research about the origins of Freemasonry in Potton. Any hypotheses drawn or conclusions are his own. *Histoire Potton History* presents this article with the usual disclaimer that the authors assume total responsibility for their works and absolve the publisher of all responsibility.

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#### The Skinner Cemetery

Hidden in a wood-lot, atop a large earth mound I judge to be manmade, stands the Skinner cemetery marked with a number of old burial sites. We have counted 18. All are from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and there are probably several more hidden beneath the humus. After more than a century, only a few tombstones remain standing. Others have fallen and are partially or entirely covered with earth. This is where discoveries begin. Without any pretense as to an exhaustive

research, the oldest stone to have thus far been identified is that for Abel Skinner, a 4 year old; as well as one for William Skinner, aged 77 years.

Another stone, a rectangular slab, lies flat on the ground and is partially covered with dead leaves and humus. This one belongs to Abel Skinner, who died in 1839 at the age of 85 years, born therefore, around 1754 – long before the American Revolution. The slab measures 91 cm on the longest side, 86 cm on the opposite, with a base measuring 43 cm. These unequal sides create an 8 degrees angle with the horizontal; the significance of this angle is explained later. What triggered my curiosity here was to note the handmade engravings, as compared with the others done mechanically. Why?



#### Decoding the Skinner Gravestone

By simply looking at the photograph below, the average person can easily read the inscription to the memory of Abel Skinner, aged 85 and the year 1839. (Please note that the inscription was traced with chalk before taking the photograph.) I believe, however, that there is a cryptic message inscribed in these lines, and that the incorporation of certain esoteric symbols in this inscription was made in order to reveal the fundamental principles of Freemasonry. It also conveys discreetly to the viewer that the deceased,

Abel Skinner, was likely a member of that organization.

Let me explain how I arrive at such a conclusion.

The two almost universally identifying symbols of Freemasonry are the compass and square. These may be recognized in Abel Skinner's given name. I believe that the letters **A** and **L** were intended to be bigger than the two other letters, the B and the E. The **A** without a cross bar represents the compass, while the letter **L** the square.

The figure **8** is most important as it recalls the octagonal base of the *Temple of the Rock* in Jerusalem, to which Freemasons still identify. The figure also represents the sun's path from dawn to sundown, or the invisible path of the sun, called the *analemma*, which is the figure formed by plotting the position of the Sun as viewed from a fixed position on Earth at the same clock time every day, for an entire calendar year. It is also the symbol for infinity.

Here, on the Skinner tombstone, the figure **8** is prominent in three ways: **On the age: 85**, the **8** is engraved obliquely; and, **on the year: 1839**, a straight line passes through the **8**. Moreover, it may be observed that the top edge of the slate slab has been cut obliquely to an **8°** angle in relation to the virtual horizontal line.

Three other anomalies may be interpreted on this engraved epitaph. The letter **S** in the surname Skinner suggests a serpentine image, which was a symbol of knowledge in ancient cultures, whereas the letter **E** in Skinner lacks the transversal bar in the middle. This letter, the 5<sup>th</sup> of our alphabet, corresponds to the numeral 5 and is clearly without the usual small cross bar in the middle. This was no mistake. It too is an important symbol: it represents the astronomical cycle of the planet Venus, the pentagram, the pentagon, the five

petal rose and the five pointed star, all symbols associated with the Knights Templar. For the deceased's age, 85, the figure **5** is truncated at the base.

Finally, notice the numeral **3** in 1839 is reversed, turned to the right, possibly to draw attention to important principles in Freemasonry – the triple principles of freedom, fairness and fellowship or **Liberty, Equality and Fraternity**. The number three is also a very old symbol of varied significance, often found in relation with the Celts. All of this suggests to me that the author or authors of the inscription on this grave stone possessed certain esoteric knowledge and spirituality which, except for the initiated, may be difficult to understand or to recognize nowadays.

Since I theorize that Skinner was in fact a Mason, I can also deduce from the date of 1839 etched into his slate gravestone, he might well have been a member of the Union Lodge No. 16 in Troy, Vermont, a village located to the south of Mansonville, and to which several of Potton's early Masons belonged. Remember Mansonville's Masonic Lodge was founded only in 1865, by David A. Manson.

At this time, Freemasonry was shunned by the Roman Catholic Church, and by many politicians who mistrusted the growing influence and power of Masons. These were good reasons for hiding the Masonic identity of Able Skinner and other Masons buried nearby such as Bradbury Green, who died in 1889. He too may have had an affiliation with Freemasonry, confirmed by the initials Br. (for brother) which are engraved on this gravestone, before his name.

Near the marker belonging to Abel Skinner are three gravestones of rectangular form, and all are similarly angled to that of Skinner. In two cases, the angle is 16°, an obvious multiple

of 8, while the third bears the angle of only 4°. While no inscription remains to identify these gravestones, each could indicate a Masonic origin.

It seems evident to me that this cemetery might well have been a place chosen as the final resting place of early Masons and their relatives. However, possibly there is a deeper significance to these cryptic inscriptions, other than to obscure an ideological identity. They may very well have been a means to transmit, in a permanent and secretive fashion, some of the knowledge and principles, the fundamental elements of Freemasonry, or as an expression of their mysticism.

### Connection between Potton's Freemasons and the Templars

The type of anomalies noted on the inscription of the Skinner gravestone may also be seen engraved on the rock face beside the sulphur spring at Potton Springs. On July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1863, the Freemasons met at this place; they inscribed their insignia – the compass and square, as well as a five-pointed star inside a circle with a sabre passing through it, which is a symbol of the Templars. The letters of the name Paul Casavant are etched in reverse order into the stone as follows: LUAP (with the P inverted) and TNAVASAC.

This way of writing remains enigmatic, a way perhaps of drawing attention and also of secretly identifying oneself. This practice could have originated with the European Knights Templar as there are analogous scripts engraved on the walls of Temple Bruer (Brighton, 2006), an ancient site of importance to the Knights Templar in Lincolnshire, England, and which dates back to the years 1150-1160. This way of writing goes back over 800 years and appears as a possible cultural link between the Knights Templar of the Middle Age and Potton's Freemasons of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.



Inscription of the symbol of Freemasonry near the sulphur spring at Potton Springs. The name Paul Casavant may also be seen engraved in a reverse form.

On this very subject, it must be said that certain authors theorize that the Knights Templar were the historic ancestors of Freemasonry, a concept that is hotly contested in historical circles and in fact, by the Freemasons themselves. Tim Wallace-Murphy (2006) strongly endorses opposition to this theory when he writes: "...to propose that Freemasonry arose directly from the heretical Order of the Knights Templar is patently absurd for the military Order was suppressed in 1314". He is, however, ambiguous on the issue when he writes: "Thus, while Freemasonry is not the child of the medieval Templar Order, it is a branch of the same genealogical tree."

According to Freemason Jacques G. Ruelland, an indirect link exists between the Templars and Freemasonry. Many grand cathedrals of Europe were built under the aegis of the Templars, and to do so, the needed workers were trained in the art of Masonry and the craft of sacred geometry. These workers lived together and in that way created primitive 'lodges', that evolved over time into the form of today.

It is important to add here that at the height of their hegemony, and apart from their headquarters in France, the Knights Templar were established in several European countries, including England, Scotland, Spain, Portugal, Italy, etc. (Brighton, 2006). In 1314, many Knights fled persecution in France and joined the Order of Malta, or fled by sea to Scotland, from whence Freemasonry emerged, before reaching the south of England. The debate goes on!

But, who were the Templars? They were an order of ascetic warrior monks who, in the year 1099, following the First Crusade and the capture of the Temple of Jerusalem, founded the Order of the Temple in that city. At the beginning, only nine Frenchmen formed the Order, but they were rapidly joined by vast numbers of supporters. A formidable force was able to conquer vast territory by the Mediterranean, from Jerusalem to Antioch, before being repelled by the Arabs in 1291, when the Templars left Palestine. In the meanwhile, in Europe, they built a strong navy, invested in business and banking and, in less than two hundred years, became immensely rich. In 1307, they were arrested by the King of France, Philippe le Bel; and, in 1314, several Templars were burned at the stake, including their Grand Master, Jacques de Molay. Although completely mis-understood, their past presence in New France before the French settlements of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries will be revealed in a book that I am currently writing.

In the course of research, I have noticed several anomalies, analogous to those already mentioned, and which I attribute to Knights Templar in the Lake Memphremagog Region (Leduc, 2005). On an old historical map of the area, I discovered that the reversal of the

letter **E** has been used in the place of a lower case 'i' that should have been used. This way of writing is very subtle and may easily go unnoticed, but therein lies a tool which may identify the Templars. The important work of Tim Wallace-Murphy (2005) illustrates how different heretical messages were transmitted for the initiated, without alerting the authorities in Rome.

### Freemasonry in the History of Potton

This fraternity left its mark in several places within the Township of Potton. The best-



Around 1909, on the shores of Lake Memphremagog, a Clam Bake at the wharf of the old Mountain House Hotel, which burned in 1899. This photo comes from a post card published by E.L. Chaplin from Newport, Vt.

known is doubtless a history of Lodge meetings, first held in 1857, in the natural chamber at the summit of Owl's Head Mountain. The practice was instituted by Stanstead's Golden Rule Lodge No. 5, established in 1803. Thus began a tradition that persists to this day. Freemasons from the world over come to this chamber around the time of the summer solstice, June 21<sup>st</sup>; this date coincides approximately with the feast day of Saint John the Baptist, the patron saint of the Masonic order, as well as that of the Knights Templar. This latter group also gathered on the lakeshore at the base of Owl's

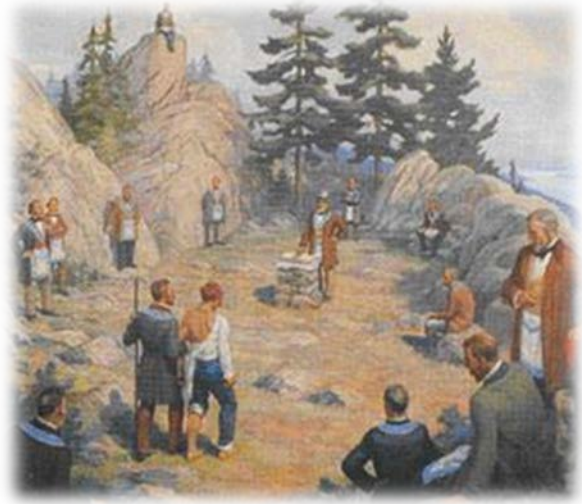
Head for fraternal occasions such as clam bakes and the like.

Pictured here is a group of about sixty Knights Templar, men only, since women were and are not admitted to Templar meetings. The Knights Templar are part of the hierarchy of Freemasonry; it is the highest degree attainable by a Mason in the York rite. It is likely the tiny steamship The Yioco, barely visible but moored beside the wharf, that conveyed the gathering. They probably came from Georgeville, on the East side of the Lake, where Mount Orford Lodge No. 48 was located. At other times, they were also known to climb Mount Pevee at the time of the summer solstice.

St. John's Lodge No. 23 was founded in Mansonville in 1865 by David A. Manson, its first Lodge Master. In 1902, St. Paul's Anglican Church was built by Freemasons in the village. It is interesting to note that the Cross Pattée (or Cross Formy) of the Knights Templar is engraved on the cornerstone of the church. Moreover, symbols common to Masonry are discretely evident in the window treatment and in other artefacts found throughout the structure itself.

The Templars and the Freemasons continue to mystify...

### Owl's Head – natural chamber



Initiation of a Freemason in the Lodge chamber at the summit of Owl's Head, which rises over Lake Memphremagog.

### Credits:

Cooperation in research and editing:  
Sylvie Delorme and Madeleine Soucy  
Photos: Gérard Leduc and Pierre Nadeau

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