

Free

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The question as to the origin of the prefix “free” to the word “mason” has been studied in detail and the result is a number of explanations, all plausible, none definite.

The earliest use of the whole word “Freemasonry” is to be found in the ancient charges of the operative masons, where the clear implication was that of freedom of birth. That is “free” in the physical sense - freedom from slavery or serfdom of any kind. This aspect is still reflected in the questions put to the candidate on his initiation.

The other popular explanation relates to the mason’s trade being the only one of the medieval guilds that needed the freedom of movement from one location to another, in order to implement their craft. Thus the freedom from the trade restriction of limited location within the walls of London, which applied to the other guilds, did not apply to traveling masons. The most popular and widely held view is that the term “free” reflected the quality of the stone worked by the mason. The original full term for some of the operative masons was “freestone-mason,” which was eventually abbreviated to “free-mason.”

It has been suggested, quite plausibly, that all of these different interpretations in various forms may have applied during different periods of time, which would explain the difficulty in pinpointing one simple explanation.

It should also be pointed out that there are other “free” trade guilds, such as the “free carpenters.” These relate to a number of guilds in Scotland in the 16th Century, who were “free” to practice their chosen trade by virtue of qualification following service (as opposed to apprenticeship). It did not apply to the guilds south of the border.