

Academia Lodge № 847

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The Tiler

Officers of the Lodge

by **Shawn Eyer, P.:M.:**

Some at our Fraternity will rail,
 Because our Secrets we so well conceal;
 And curse the Centry with the flaming Sword,
 Who keeps Eves-droppers from the **Masons Word.**

W.:Bro.: Nathaniel Blackerby, D.:G.:M.:
 1729

In California ritual, the Tiler is always the first officer of the Lodge to be installed. As soon as the sword is placed in his hands, the officiant reminds all present that:

"As the sword is placed in the hands of the Tiler to enable him effectually to guard against the approach of cowans and eavesdroppers, and suffer none to pass or repass except such as are duly qualified, so should it admonish us to set a guard over our thoughts, a watch at our lips, and post a sentinel over our actions; thereby preventing the approach of every unworthy thought and deed, and preserving consciences void of offense toward God and man."

By this we understand that in addition to the literal Tiler that guards the Lodge, we are intended to maintain a kind of symbolic or internal Tiler to ward away temptations and unvirtuous actions. It is only by "setting a guard over our thoughts" that we will be able to "subdue every discordant passion within us." Thus, the Tiler and his sword are symbolic of moral consciousness and self-control.

Among the "hieroglyphical emblems" of the third degree is the dual symbol of the Book of Constitutions, guarded by the Tiler's Sword. While the image itself can be found on aprons of the eighteenth century, the oldest description of this symbol is found in nineteenth-century editions of Webb's Monitor: "The Book of Constitutions,

guarded by the Tyler's Sword, reminds us that we should be ever watchful and guarded in our thoughts, words and actions, particularly when before the enemies of Masonry; ever bearing in remembrance those truly Masonic virtues, **Silence** and **Circumspection.**"

The Book of Constitutions is a symbol which represents the Ancient Landmarks or original plan of the Order. The Tyler's Sword is a symbol that represents the collective obligations of all Freemasons, for only thereby is the book truly guarded against the encroachment of innovation and irregularity. Taken together, these two symbols conjoined remind us all of our shared responsibility to monitor every thought, word and deed, and to reflect carefully on the importance of preserving Freemasonry intact, even when it is denounced by opponents.



Origin of the Title of the Office

It is commonly explained that the Tyler's name derives from operative masonry and that it refers to the labor of properly fixing the roofing tiles to prevent eavesdropping through the ceiling. Although this is a fairly artificial explanation, with no identifiable support in the speculative symbolism of the Tiler, **and no parallel officer of the same title in the records of the operative lodges**, it has been accepted by many. A more natural interpretation may be that since—according to the earliest records—the Tyler was responsible for "drawing the floor of the Lodge." This was done using chalk, charcoal and clay, and after the meeting, the design was cleaned up. As the most noticeable part of the floor's design was and remains the alternating black and white tiles of the mosaic pavement, it seems less of a stretch to consider this the source of the title. But there is more to the Tiler than lodge setup and cleanup, whether in the form of drawing the floor or of laying out the various furnishings. Since the earliest days, the Tiler has had a unique place in Masonic symbolism, and he is the only officer who represents a supernatural, rather than historical, character. This was expressed traditionally through the form of his implement and his overall dress.

The Tyler's Sword

Many are surprised to learn that the Tyler's sword was traditionally **curved** in order to represent the shape of fire. "In early days, the Tyler's sword was always of that kind," according to **Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia** (1996, p. 252). Albert Mackey, writing in 1874, tells us that "Until very recently, this was the form of the Tyler's sword. ... In former times, when symbols and ceremonies were more

respected than they are now...the cavalry sword was unknown as a Masonic implement, and the Tiler always bore a flaming sword. It were better if we could get back to the old customs."

(**Encyclopaedia**, vol. 1, p. 279)

Many of these older swords survive, and some are still in use, both in Great Britain and the United States. Many Grand Jurisdictions, including the Grand Lodge of California, display such wavy blades found on their two-handed Swords of State, preserving the old symbolism.

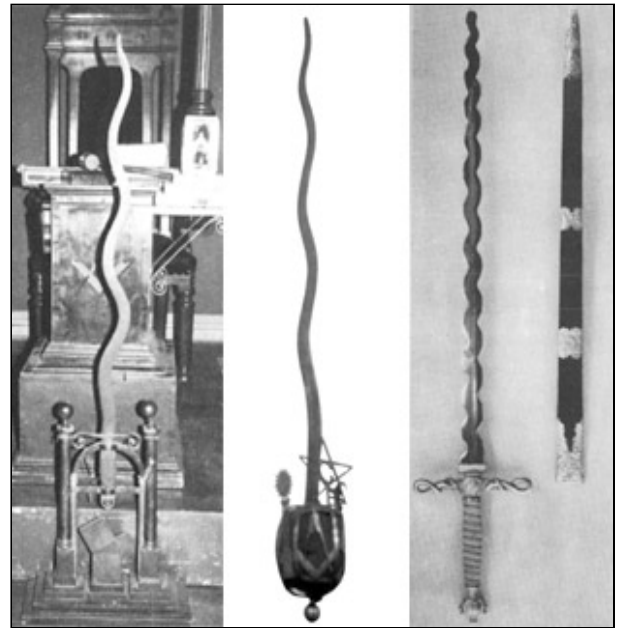
The design of the wavy Tiler's sword was not intended for mundane purposes such as actual defense, nor to inspire fright. The Masonic writers of the eighteenth century inform us the fiery blade represented a sacred allusion to the flaming, flashing, turning sword wielded by the cherubim who were tasked to guard the way to the tree of life in the Garden, after the first human beings were expelled: "So He drove out the man; and He placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life." (Genesis 3:24)

The implication seems to be that the Lodge, when in session, is something of a paradise which must be protected by the "cherub" of the tiler—in fact, several old Masonic songs include lines such as:

We taste what angels do above,
Here happiness is found.
The fruit of Eden's tree we taste,
Its balmy joys are our repast.
(J. Dunham, **Vocal Companion**,
1802, pp. 102)

Even today many lodges still use this style of blade for the Tiler's implement—

especially the oldest ones and ones that are dedicated to maintaining Masonic traditions. This reminds the brethren that the Tiler himself is a symbol of the boundary between the sacred and the profane worlds: a boundary that is closely



Eighteenth-century Tiler's swords. From left: North Beverly, North Alnwick, Grand Lodge of England (Antients)



Hilt detail, Antient Grand Tiler's sword, circa 1790

guarded by a one who cannot be fooled, where merit alone is the qualification for passage.

The Tiler's Other Dress

But it was not only the sword that connected the Tiler to the story of the cherubim. In many places the Tiler was clothed differently than the other brethren. This usually took the form of a cloak, cape, or full robe of striking design. Some were deep blue and decorated with golden shapes of suns, moons and stars. Others were red and orange, with similar decorations. In other words, the Tiler was dressed as a cherub, a celestial being of fire.

An early description of the appearance of the Tiler in The Antient Boyne Lodge № 84 in Bandon, County Cork, Ireland has survived in a book written on the history of the town. The Masonic lodge there was founded in 1738.

Arriving at the landing, [the candidate] gently asked the tyler may he go in; but the redoubtable Dick Baylie would not even allow him to put his nose inside the scarlet curtain which hung some feet in front of the lodge door. Even the dress the tyler wore appeared in harmony with the sanguinary and mysterious deeds that are said to have been perpetuated within. A huge red cloak covered him to the very toes; the large sleeves, which hung below his hands, terminated in cuffs of orange velvet, on each of which was a representation of a skull and cross-bones in lustrous black; the blue collar had on it moons and stars of bright yellow; and candlesticks, compasses, and other cabalistic symbols of the craft, nearly covered it with odd-looking devices. On his head was a gigantic cocked-hat, which would almost have served him for a boat, it was so large. This was surmounted with blue and red feathers; and in his hand was a flaming falchion [wavy sword]. (George Bennett, **The History of Bandon and the Principal Towns in the West Riding of County Cork**, 1869, p. 411)

It is likely that over time, as the symbolism of this sort of costume was forgotten, it was seen as merely whimsical and thus fell out of fashion. But we should study the traditional form for the lessons and wisdom it contains. And we should always remember, as we pass our friend the Tiler on the way into the temple, to bring our hearts and minds under the control of virtue, so that the Lodge may truly "reflect the order and beauty" of the Celestial Lodge.

Further Reading

Henry Wilson Coil. 'Flaming Sword' and 'Tiler' entries in **Coil's Encyclopaedia of Freemasonry** (1996 edition).

F.J.W. Crowe. Masonic Clothing. **Ars Quatuor Coronatorum** 6 (1893): 160–4.

John D. Hamilton. **Material Culture of the American Freemasons** (Lexington, MA: Museum of Our National Heritage, 1994).

Albert G. Mackey. 'Flaming Sword' and 'Tiler' entries in **An Encyclopaedia of Freemasonry and Kindred Sciences** (1874).

Henry Sadler. Tylers and Tying. **Ars Quatuor Coronatorum** 82 (1969): 309–22.



Tiler's sword manufactured for the Scottish Rite, Southern Jurisdiction, USA, early 1900s

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