

When officiating in Lodge, why is it that the Worshipful Master might wear on his head a silk topper, a cap on which we see square and compasses, a derby, a soft plaid fedora, or nothing at all? The following paper is an attempt at an explanation.

The Master's Hat

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Have you wondered about that question above? Have you satisfied your curiosity? Perhaps there are a few answers to this quandary.

Let's start with our Vermont Ritual. In this handbook for all Masons it declares: The Worshipful Master "remains covered at all times, except as herein otherwise provided....."¹ This answers the question for us in Vermont that the Master **will** remain covered.

The Masonic Service Association, in its booklet "One Hundred questions about Freemasonry" has this definition: "A contemporary relic of the ancient custom whereby the King remained covered under all circumstances, while his subjects were obligated to uncover in his presence. Apparently the custom which began in English Lodges is not common there now; but in American Lodges a Master wears a hat as a sign and symbol of his authority."²

A Masonic hat is included in a discussion of being "properly clothed" when wearing the prescribed article for any Masonic body he attends." A Master may but not necessarily must, wear a hat in a Symbolic Lodge. For him, and for no one else, it is, there, proper Masonic clothing.³

Mackey⁴ tells us that "to uncover the head in the presence of superiors has been among all Christian nations, held as a mark of respect and reverence. The Eastern nations uncover the feet when they enter a place of worship; the Westerners uncover the head. The converse of this is also true; and to keep the head covered while all around are uncovered is a token of superiority of rank or office. The king remains covered, the courtiers standing around him take off their hats."

What is the custom and history of the Master Wearing the Hat?

Wearing a hat in Lodge is symbolic only as all customs with regard to headgear is symbolic, and certainly no custom which has suffered so many changes and reversals as this can, be considered a Landmark. Ceremonies connected with clothing are very ancient, dating at least from the era in which the first captives in tribal wars were stripped of all their clothing, partly that their captives might possess it, partly as a symbol of the complete subjugation of the slave state.

¹ Vermont Ritual and Floor work, Vermont Grand Lodge, 1949, p.4.(Worshipful Master).

² One Hundred One Questions About Freemasonry, Masonic Service Association, 1981, p 31.

³ Masonic Vocabulary, Masonic Service Association, December 1955 (clothing)

⁴ Mackey, Albert 33°, the Masonic Encyclopaedia, Chicago, m 1927, p.320.

During the days of chivalry, knights often wore full armor in public, and usually when going on private journeys. A knight removed his helmet before a friend as a token that he feared no blow, and always in the presence of a King as a symbol that his life was the King's.

Moderns remove the hat as a sign of respect in greeting a friend, always when speaking to or meeting a lady, a survival of the ancient custom of uncovering as a symbol of trust, or subjectivity to a higher authority.

Just when or where originated the custom of a Master wearing a hat as a sign of authority is an unsolved question. It is easy enough to "guess" that it began from operative Masons of the Middle Ages aping the customs of the Court, and requiring all Fellows of the Craft to uncover before the Master Mason. But guessing is not proving.

Some interesting sidelights to "The Master's Hat"

During the Middle Ages, when a traveling Fellow approached a lodge of Masons in prescribed form, he first exclaimed: "May God bless, direct, and prosper you, Master, Wardens, and dear Fellows! Whereupon the Master, or in his absence, the Pallirer (Warden), was instructed by the ordinance of Torgau to thank him in reply, in order that the visiting brother might see who was custodian of the lodge. And having obtained suitable assistance, the wandering craftsman removed his hat and thanked the brethren with an established formula. From the preceding ceremony, it is evident that neither the Master nor the Wardens of a medieval German lodge were distinguishable by distinctive tokens while at mechanical labor; otherwise, no regulation was essential or obligation upon the officers to make proper response to a visitor for the purpose of determining the Master.

Curiously enough, the implication is direct and clear that the Masons of ancient times, when regularly convened for work, and during the formal exception of a traveler, pursued their daily avocation and attended to usual Masonic demands, within closed portals, with covered heads. At the present day the custom has materially changed, and, with one exception, the members of a lodge at labor noticeably divest themselves of their hats. This is unquestionably a transformation of recent origin, and with it the instruction usually incident to the distinction has been adapted to the innovation.

In the medieval lodge, at initiation, the Master was not prominently contrasted with his brethren. It was typical, during the Middle Ages, of superiority, and was so interpreted in the ceremonies of initiation by the Masons of France at the end of the eighteenth century., all of whom sat in open lodge with covered heads.

That monarchs wear crowns-or hats-as a right when all others are uncovered, has been sung by poets of all ages. In Scott's "Lady of the Lake," Ellen Douglas is taken to see the King, little suspecting who he is:

“On many a splendid garb she gazed –
Then turned bewildered and amazed

For all stood bare, and in the room
Fitz-James alone wore a cap and plume,
To him each lady’s look was lent
On him each courtier’s eye was bent;
Midst furs and silks and jewels sheen
He stood, in simple Lincoln green.
The center of the glittering ring
And Snowden’s knight is Scotland’s King!”⁵

The King never uncovered. He wore the crown where he would, even in the House of God. All had to uncover before the King, as all had to retreat from his presence by moving backward—a custom which continues even today in ceremonial audiences in England—that none might “turn his back on the sovereign.’

Not always does the removal of the hat indicate respect. Orthodox Jews remain covered in their synagogues; early Quakers wore hats in their houses of worship; women do not remove their hats in some churches. Romans prayed with covered heads; indeed, Romans forbade the head covering to a slave, a wooden cap (pileus) being only for citizens.

Finally, by the expression “putting hands in a hat,” was also meant a mutual oath between persons to a confederation of conspiracy. But the most important signification of this covering for the head was its use as a symbol of power and authority, and in such sense it was oftentimes set up as a signal of compulsory assemblage. When this elevated or fixed upon a pedestal, it convened the people of the neighborhood. Gessler’s well-known emblem of subjection and superiority, was a hat erected on a pole or column*. Ancient Germans shared the symbolism of this article with the Romans, who also regarded it as a type of freedom or as a release from servitude. Upon the death of Nero, so much joy was manifested by the populace, that, in the excess of their delight, they rushed about the eternal city with hats on.

Oliver is quoted as saying: “Among the Romans the hat was a sign of freedom. Formerly Masons wore them as a symbol of freedom and brotherly equality. In English and American Lodges it is now exclusively an attribute of the Master’s costume.”⁶

*It is interesting to note that some United States coins illustrate the information gleaned in this report. During the years 1700 through 1900 the “cap of liberty” (a

⁵ Short Talk Bulletin “Why Does the Master Wear a Hat”, Sept. 1934 Internet
www. Masonicdictionary.com

⁶ Ibid, p.2

Roman copy of a Hellenic goddess, a.k.a the *pilleus* or liberty cap) has been on most coin varieties. (see pictures of coins with cap or cap and stick at conclusion of this paper).

Of course, the design is to symbolize liberty. The cap itself was in the shape of half an egg shell, symbolizing the wearer as a chick emerged from captivity—also to cover the shaven head of all prisoners. Some will state that the cap shown on these coins represents the “mobcap” made popular by Martha Washington, this being fashionable headdress during this period.⁷

⁷ Walter Breen’s Encyclopedia of U.S. and Colonial Coins, Doubleday, 1988