

THE MYSTERY OF MORNING FLOWER

Attending a district meeting in Pawlet, I had a delightful encounter with a Tracing-Board sitting quietly in the darkened northeast corner of the Lodge room. These are sometimes called a floor-cloth, because formerly such symbolic designs were traced upon the floor, to be removed after the lecture or degree work was done. Later they were painted on canvas to be laid upon the floor for the degree work, like some of the “stairs” still in use for the Second Degree. Most of us are familiar with the pull down examples printed on canvas, usually with a separate one for the symbols associated with each degree, used as props for the memory when reciting the lecture work of the degrees.

The one I was faced with this evening, however, was very different. It was large, about three by four feet, and hand painted in heavy oil paint on canvas, with a beautiful gilded frame enclosing it. It pictured symbols from all three of the degrees, arranged in an upward column, ending with the all Seeing Eye in a sort of circular nimbus at the top. I was immediately struck with its beauty, its rich colors, and the mastery of execution. Bending closer, I saw in white a date painted near the altar of the entered apprentice: 1798. I was peering at a Masonic treasure that was Two Hundred and Twelve years old! The only such cloth I had ever seen in a Vermont lodge was the tracing board at Moose River Lodge in Concord, which while old and interesting, could not begin to compare with this true flower of Morning Flower Lodge.

The painting had a plaque on the bottom: “Presented to Morning Flower Lodge No.71 F&AM by Miss Helen Bromley March 22nd 1912.” So it had been well over a century old by the time it was placed in this historic and unusual lodge room. Of course I wanted to know the story behind this work and the woman who had donated it, and expected it to be common knowledge. But when I asked the brothers there they said they knew nothing about it except “It’s always been here.” A year later I am still asking those questions, and while I have found a few pieces of the story, it still remains a mystery. I am writing this article partly in hopes that there is someone who may read this that is able to provide the missing pieces of the puzzle.

The work contains many of the usual symbols drawn from the classic Prestonian lectures of our degrees, picturing a kind of tiered edifice of triangular form rising beyond a Masonic altar with an open Bible upon it. On the first tier is the checkered pavement leading inward to a “glory” of light in the distance. The second floor shows steps leading past the letter G where a door is opened to a traveler. On the topmost floor, distinctly triangular in form, the symbols of the Builder’s passing are scattered about a coffin before a table. Beyond is a narrow door where brilliance shows through under a suspended compass. Two angels hold the drapes above, clearly forming an arch hinting of the completion of the old legend. On each step of the work the sense of light is subtly increased, until the all Seeing Eye blazes forth at the top. This tower is flanked on either side with the symbols of the lecture of the Third degree.

In my reading of Vermont’s Masonic history, I had only once before encountered mention of such a work. Reading brother James Selleck’s well done “History of Union Lodge” of Middlebury, he mentioned an oil painting called “The Master’s Carpet” done by Rev. Thomas Tolman in 1797. In “Ancient Craft Masonry in Vermont” brother Tillotson notes that “a valuable painting of 1797” was destroyed when the building of Union Lodge burned in November of 1880. Naturally I wondered, given the date, if there was a connection between this “Master’s Carpet” and the one at Morning Flower.

Thomas Tolman was a very interesting early Vermont Mason. He was present at the convention which created our Grand Lodge in Rutland in 1794. Evidently an artist of great talent, he was known for his beautiful

penmanship and in this capacity was asked to “engross” the first Constitution of the Grand Lodge, which manuscript was then signed by the delegates of the five lodges assembled, including the signature of Thomas Tolman. He was then voted to be our first Grand Secretary.

I can’t digress upon brother Thomas too much, but he does hold a special interest for me because in later years he left his Middlebury home and journeyed north to Greensboro, which was the original home of my own symbolic lodge, Meridian Sun. It was brother Tolman who petitioned Grand Lodge to grant this lodge a charter in 1800.

I can’t help but wonder how many “Masonic Carpets” Thomas Tolman painted. There is evidence he was an artist in oil paint, and how many painters in oil of Masonic tracing boards could there have been in Vermont at that time? Obviously, very, very few- maybe one. However, I have been unable to find any evidence that proves his connection to the mysterious carpet of Morning Flower Lodge, so it must remain an enticing, but unfounded, premise.

I then turned my attention to the one piece of evidence I had, Helen Bromley. Who was this woman and why did she leave the Lodge this treasure? How did she come by such an artifact? She turned out to be as interesting as Thomas Tolman. For this information and for the photographs of the tracing board I am entirely in the debt of brother Myron Waite, DDGM of District #2, and a fine Mason. Working with Melissa Clarke of the Pawlet Historical Society the few known facts of Helen’s life and family roots emerged. My most heartfelt thanks goes out to these associates, without whose efforts mine would have been in vain.

Helen M. Bromley was born in Pawlet in 1839 to Amos Bromley and Laura B. Robinson Bromley. Her mother’s father was Jonathan Robinson, who was himself the son of Captain Nathaniel Robinson. Capt. Nathaniel was a veteran of the Revolutionary War, famous for his humor and wit. He traveled with his family from MA to VT around 1812, settling in Pawlet. In a book entitled “Pawlet for One Hundred Years” Heil Hollister describes his son Jonathan Robinson as a great reader and a man of uncommon intelligence, and that he “stood high in the Masonic fraternity.” Jonathan died in 1862 at the age of 85, and his effects, including, according to Hollister, some of the belongings of his father, Capt. Robinson, were passed down to Laura and Amos Bromley- Helen’s parents. For me, it is very tempting to jump to the conclusion that Captain Nathaniel Robinson was a part of the Fraternity in Massachusetts, since membership was so often passed down from father to son and we know his son Jonathan was a Mason. Was he a Mason in Vermont? I have not yet solved that question. Morning Flower Lodge was not chartered until January of 1866, so it was not there. He would have been a member of one of the Lodges prior to the great Anti-Masonic upheaval of 1820-40 in Vermont. Many of these lodges went dark forever, but some old records exist. If any brother reading this has knowledge of the Masonic life of Jonathan Robinson, please contact me. If I were to allow my fantasy to run away with me, I might suppose that in the final days of his lodge, whichever lodge it was, the thoughtful Jonathan took home the great treasure of his lodge room: the Masonic Carpet painting! Perhaps he hid it until the mighty storm that railed against Masonry and all artifacts of the Fraternity had died away. One thing is certain: the Morning Flower painting is one of only a handful of items now in the possession of our Society known to date back prior to the Anti-Masonic upheaval.

Helen Bromley- “Miss” Helen, as the brass plaque states, was the only daughter and had two brothers. The Bromley family were consistently notable in the business life of the growing town of Pawlet. So we can surmise that she grew up in a relatively prosperous family noted for high intelligence and learning. I picture her growing up amid refined culture and a large old library- a library that could well have featured the old Masonic tracing board. That she was intelligent herself and well educated we know because when the Glenwood Ladies

Seminary in West Brattleboro opened in 1860, she was listed as one of ten instructors. She taught Higher Mathematics and Astronomy- obviously a thoughtful, involved lady well ahead of her time. In 1880 the U.S. Federal Census shows her still living at home with her widowed mother, aged 40. She is described as an enthusiastic and encouraging teacher. Perhaps she continued to live in the home where she grew up while her brothers married and moved away. And perhaps she carefully cared for the curious painted heirloom of her father all her life.

Later on Dorothy Offensend in "Pages from my Pawlet Scrapbook" wrote "In 1896 there was a 12 week school in the Town Hall in Pawlet Village...Helen M. Bromley served as Superintendent of the Pawlet and West Pawlet schools."

So the image is clear of a very bright woman dedicated to education and furthering the lives of the residents of Pawlet. As she grew older, she must have looked at the beautiful painting she had inherited and often wondered what to do with it. That she did not pass it over to the Masons until the end of her life certainly shows she valued it as a family heirloom, and probably loved it herself for its mystery and beauty. Finally, perhaps because she had no family to pass it on to, and perhaps no other part of the family would cherish it or cared about it, she decided to return it to a Masonic Lodge room, after its journey of some 85 years in private hands.

I would love to have some record or mention in the archives of Morning Flower Lodge of the occasion of her giving it to them. Did she do so personally? Was there a formal ceremony? All I know now is that on March 22nd, 1912, just as a new spring was awakening, the ancient Carpet came home into the bosom of the Fraternity. Helen was to live only six more years, passing away in 1918 at the age of 78. She took with her whatever she may have known of the history or origin of the painting.

And yet, and yet...I do hope there is someone, a family member who knows an old story, a brother who recalls a minute reference, who can dispel the dark mystery of Morning Flower Lodge. Do we indeed have here the only surviving tracing board of our first Grand Secretary, Thomas Tolman? Or did it travel up to Vermont after the Revolutionary War, a beloved heirloom even then, with a story now forgotten?

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