WILLIAM O. WARE LODGE OF RESEARCH
BOOK REVIEW

THE MASONIC LADDER OR THE
NINE STEPS TO ANCIENT FREEMASONRY

By: John Sherer

Reviewed by: Dan M. Kemble, PM, William O. Ware Lodge of Research

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I n the middle years of the 19th century, Cincinnati, Ohio had established a reputation as a center for Masonic publishing and fraternal supply. John Sherer (1803-1876) was one of the men responsible for Cincinnati's prominence with regard to the dissemination of Masonic books and paraphernalia. Although John Sherer's name may be unfamiliar to 21st century Masons, his artistry is much more likely to be recognized.

John Sherer was an engraver and lithographer whose "Masonic Carpets" were widely accepted as a useful tool for teaching the meaning of the symbols of the various degrees of Masonry. Rich in color and dramatically illustrated, Sherer's "Masonic Carpets" remain on display in many contemporary Lodges.

The proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky indicate that Sherer was at least an occasional visitor to the Commonwealth (he was, briefly, a partner in business with Rob Morris), and that he had presented one or more of his "Masonic Carpets" to the Grand Lodge, which was received with effusive thanks.

THE

MASONIC LADDER:

OR THE

Nine Steps to Ancient Freemasonry,

BEING

A PRACTICAL EXHIBIT, IN PROSE AND VERSE,

OF THE

MORAL PRECEPTS, TRADITIONS,

Scriptural Instructions and Allegories

OF THE DEGREES OF

ENTERED APPRENTICE, FELLOW CRAFT, MASTER MASON,

MARK MASTER, PAST MASTER, MOST EXCELLENT MASTER, ROYAL ARCH MASON, ROYAL MASTER AND SELECT MASTER,

BY JOHN SHERER,

Compiler of the "Masonic Carpets of Blue Lodge, Chapter and Council Masonry," and other Masonic Publications.

CINCINNATI:
R. W. CARROLL & CO., PUBLISHERS,
1876.

In 1866, Sherer authored **The Masonic Ladder, or the Nine Steps to Ancient Freemasonry**, as a complement to his "Masonic Carpets." The **Masonic Ladder** was reprinted in 1874, just before Sherer's death, and it is the 1874 edition that is the subject of this review.
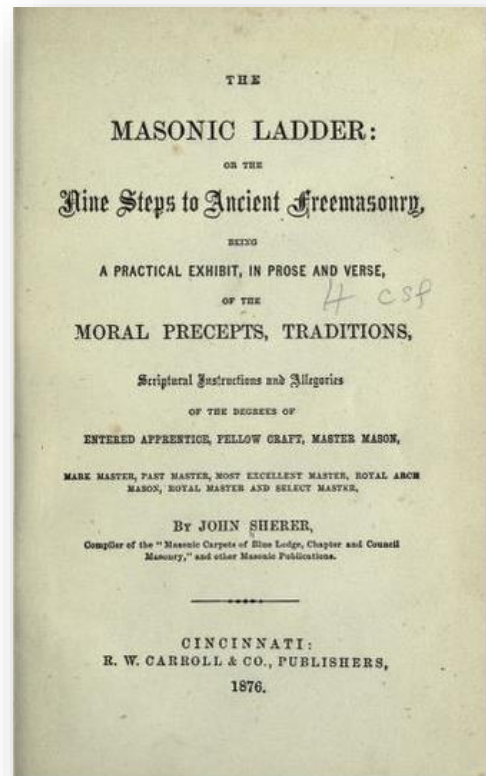
The Masonic Ladder is a revealing glimpse into the Masonic mindset, at least in the mid-West and upper South, as of the time of its publication. The **Nine Steps** to which Sherer refers in his title are the three degrees of the Symbolic Lodge, the four degrees of Capitular Masonry (the Chapter degrees) and the two degrees of Cryptic Masonry (Council degrees). **The Masonic Ladder** indicates the extent to which, at that time, the degrees of the York Rite, not including the Knights Templar, were viewed as a natural extension of the Symbolic Lodge. Indirectly, **The Masonic Ladder** also informs us that the Scottish Rite had not yet achieved the status that it would later gain in American Freemasonry.

Sherer divided **The Masonic Ladder** into three sections, which he identified as "Orders." **The Masonic Ladder** consists of a total of 267 pages. The first 102 pages are devoted to the "Order" of the Symbolic Lodge, and these pages will be the focus of this review.
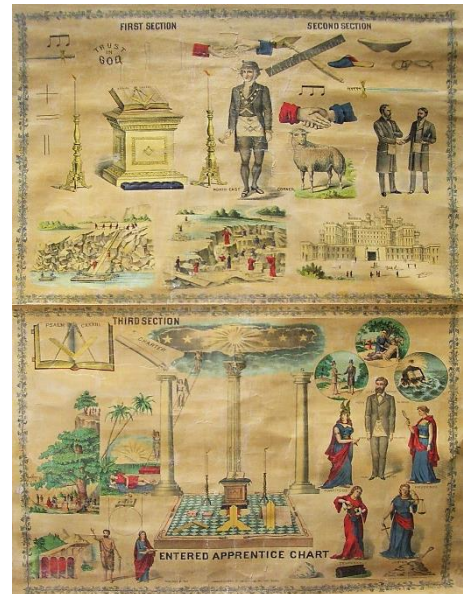
In his Preface, Sherer clearly indicates that **The Masonic Ladder** is intended to be used in conjunction with his "Masonic Carpets." Indeed, much of Sherer's descriptions of the symbols as contained in **The Masonic Ladder** either originated in, or subsequently found their way into, the monitorial parts of the lectures associated with the various degrees. Interestingly, **The Masonic Ladder** is not illustrated, and in that sense it is not a competitor of the "Masonic Carpets."

Sherer calls the Entered Apprentice Degree "the initial letter of the Masonic alphabet." In an interesting bit of analysis, he asserts that the Entered Apprentice enters the Lodge for the very first time, already having been made a Mason. He writes, "that is, he must be already *prepared in heart*, for there is nothing in Masonic science that can do the work of heart-preparation."

In our current age where the focus of too many Lodges is merely on making members, Sherer's reminder that a man must be made a Mason in his heart, even (especially) before receiving the degrees, is timely. He stresses that the importance of the concept of preparation, not just in the physical sense, but in the moral and spiritual senses, is paramount.

Regarding the Fellow Craft Degree, Sherer offers the following:
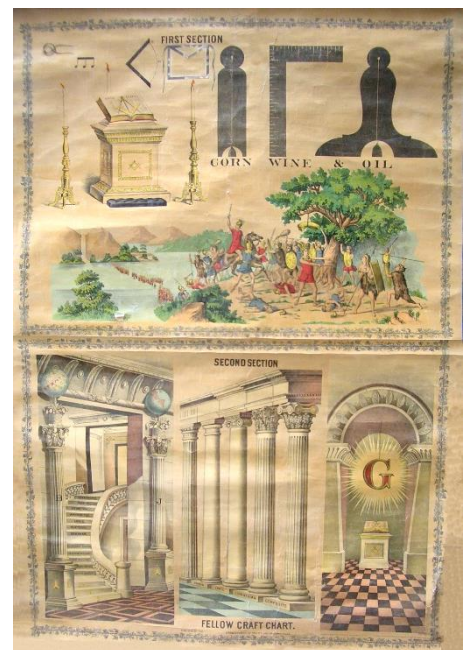
> "The Degree of Fellow Craft represents the Entered Apprentice *complete*. It is not merely the second grade in the series; all that is to follow does not express so great and advance from the Degree of Fellow Craft, as that of the Fellow Craft is from the Entered Apprentice."

John Sherer was an admirer of George Washington, and those who view his "Masonic Carpets" find Washington's likeness included thereon. In the Fellow Craft section of **The Masonic Ladder**, Sherer explains his view of Washington as the Perfect Ashlar (a theme repeated by Mark Tabbert in this century).

Sherer described the Master Mason Degree as a type of the communion of God and man. To Sherer, the degree represented man as a complete being, morally (he described morality as "practical virtue") and intellectually. As such, he was fit for a relationship with his Creator, the Great Architect of the Universe.

Having completed the Master Mason Degree, Sherer writes:

> "Every step in this part of the Masonic Ladder will lift up the initiate further above the sordid level of humanity, and nearer to the celestial world, whose light, shining upon him through the first great light of the Order, wins him toward itself.
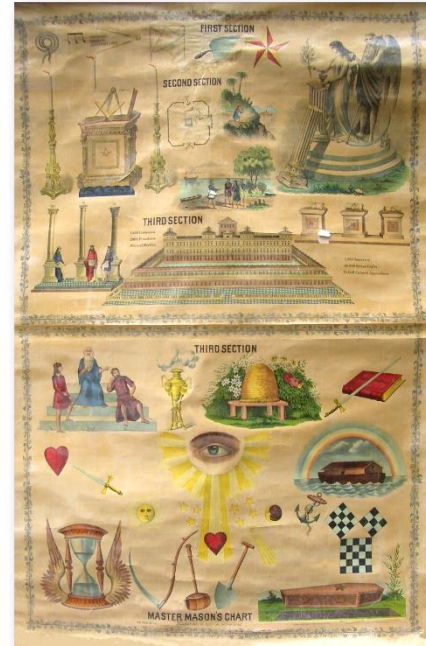
Clearly, John Sherer viewed Freemasonry as a vehicle through which man could first know himself, and then, properly equipped, begin to know God.

The Masonic Ladder received mixed reviews upon publication. In some Masonic journals it was viewed as a useful tool and a complement to the "Masonic Carpets." Other reviewers somewhat harshly denounced **The Mason Ladder** as merely being a vehicle to stimulate sales of the "Masonic Carpets." Perhaps it was because Sherer died relatively soon after its publication, but **The Masonic Ladder** never won wide acceptance and finding an original copy is quite rare. Reprints are available through online booksellers.

John Sherer's contributions to American Freemasonry have been largely overlooked. This is true, at least in part, because so little is known of his personal life. It would be a service to 21st century Freemasonry if contemporary Masonic scholars would invest their time and resources to produce a more developed portrait of this somewhat enigmatic character.

John Sherer's **The Masonic Ladder** offers a valuable insight into the Freemasonry that one would find in the middle of the 19th century. It is also a valuable complementary piece to his "Masonic Carpets." Although obscure, **The Masonic Ladder** is an important part of the literature of American Freemasonry.