

MASONIC APRONS AT LOMBARDY HALL

“Masonic aprons are the most important piece of ceremonial regalia that Masons wear. Symbolically it has a direct link to the stonemasons of the medieval period who, like most craftsmen, wore a protective apron while they worked” to quote Barbara Franco. Aprons have been studied for years with extensive articles in Transactions of Lodge Quatuor Coronati in 1897 and 1961 and in the 1980 book by Barbara Franco, “Bespangled, Painted and Embroidered.” From these sources a little historical background will be described.

The earliest picture of Masonic aprons shows them extending from the ankles to the top of the chest. Apparently they were made from a single animal skin, with the legs used as apron strings and the skin of the head, with a hole in it, at the top. A thong through this hole and around the neck held the bib of the apron in place. Through an evolutionary process, the apron became shorter and the bib was permitted to fall down in front of the apron. Many of these skins were rough on the inside and linings were therefore attached. Although the linings were originally white, Mackey indicates that other colors assigned to specific officers were later employed. These linings extended around the edges of the apron onto the front of the apron and are the genesis of today's apron borders. As aprons became more elaborate, a separate colored stripe was sewed on the front of the apron.

Between 40 and 50 aprons have been donated to Lombardy Hall. A few of the more interesting aprons have been selected to discuss tonight. Aprons from other jurisdictions, domestic and foreign, might also be an interesting study but would make this presentation too long.

(Figure 1) Today's lodge apron is standardized at 14 3/4 in. x 12 in. In 1871 the lambskin aprons purchased for Felton Lodge No. 22 were significantly smaller, measuring only 13 in. x 11 1/2 in. Before purchasing these leather aprons (from 1865), aprons were made from a simple cloth oval measuring 21 in. long x 15 in. wide. When the strings were attached 6 1/2 inch from one end, the top fell over to form the flap, giving a 15 in. x 14 1/2 in. apron. Probably there are earlier lodge aprons in Delaware which could add to this local apron history.

(Figure 2) The next apron of interest might be the Grand Master's apron. The purple lined, purple bordered apron with its design consisting of a wreath enclosing a suspended compasses upon the arc of a circle, in the center of which is a triangle, has been in use since at least 1880 (P.G.M. Watson). There is no printed explanation for the particular and unique design on these aprons.

There are several Past Grand Master's aprons from before 1900 including one at Lombardy Hall, two in Dover, and one at 818 Market Street. The earlier aprons differ from those used since 1939 (P.G.M. George Vandegrift) when the apron and flap with rounded corners was replaced with one having square corners. The design was enlarged to 4 1/4 in. from 3 1/2 in.

(Figure 3) One of the first aprons donated to Lombardy Hall in 1980 was a 15 in. x 14 in. apron embroidered and painted on silk. When it was purchased at a flea market several years earlier, the frame was 2 in. too small all around and the blue border protruded over the back. The apron was carefully removed from the frame and remounted using current preservation techniques recommended by Winterthur Museum personnel. Today it hangs in the hallway at the top of the stairs at Lombardy Hall.

(Figure 4) At first glance you notice the familiar symbols - the all seeing eye, the two columns labeled J and B, the anchor and ark, the level and plumb, the beehive, mosaic pavement, square and compasses, etc. There is no G in the square and compasses suggesting that the apron was made before 1873, reported to be the time of this design innovation.

(Figure 5) Closer study shows at the bottom of the apron Jacob's ladder, a coffin, a 24 inch gage and a sprig of acacia. Notice also on the left, the chisel and pallet of the Mark Master degree. Most of the designs are embroidered with very fine stitches but some of them are painted -- the sun, the eye and two blotches at the ends of the rainbow.

(Figure 6) Beneath the flap is pencilled a continuation of the overall design.

(Figure 7) The next apron came to Lombardy Hall via P.G.M. James Hutchins and was that belonging to P.G.M. Daniel C. Godwin (1860-1862). This apron is about 13 1/2 in. square and the design is engraved on silk. It has a linen backing and many unusual features.

1. It has no flap or bib as such: stitches outline the flap.
2. At the top is an unidentified bell-shaped emblem outlined in metallic braid. A series of loops of this same braid extends down both sides and across the bottom.
3. (Figure 8) At the top of the design are the words SEMPER T. ANS which could be translated "Always Faithful".
4. (Figure 9) In the top right area are three men carrying a body. This apron is the only one on which I've ever seen this scene pictured.
5. The square and compasses on the altar bible are on the Entered Apprentice degree.
6. There are Masons on each of the three steps, each having a working tool in his hand. Also pictured are the compasses, level, plumb, coffin, etc.
7. (Figure 10) At the bottom are the words VIDE, AUDI, TACE SIT ET LUX FUIT which can be translated, "See, Hear, Keep Secret, Be Quiet and Seek Light."
8. Below this inscription is printed "Published by Brothers Desilver and Webster 5813 Philadelphia".

This apron design without the metallic loops is pictured in Barbara Eranco's book. The apron pictured is said to be engraved on leather and is in the Grand Lodge Museum in Philadelphia. Both Desilver and Webster were Masons in Philadelphia.

(Figure 11) A second apron presented by P.G.M. Hutchins is the embroidered Royal Arch apron of Daniel C. Godwin, the first Grand High Priest of Delaware's current Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons (1869). On the back of this apron is inscribed, "Daniel C. Godwin, Milford, Delaware, Presented by Mary R. Shockley, Aug. 1839." In the 1988 report of the Grand Historian of the Grand Chapter, R.A.M., P.G.M. Hutchins notes that Godwin was made a Master Mason on June 7, 1838 and was Treasurer of Temple Chapter No. 2 R.A.M. in 1839. Because he was not elected High Priest until 1868, it must be assumed that this apron was presented to him shortly after he received his Royal Arch degrees. This apron is slightly larger than current aprons, measuring 17 1/2 in. x 19 in. Most of the design in this apron is achieved with very fine needlework stitches; there are a minimum of printed or engraved features.

(Figure 12) There are few emblems on this apron except for the three crowns, (Figure 13) the Royal Arch, the two columns (without J arid B) and the three officers at the top.

(Figure 14) The officer at the left carries a cross, the one in the center a plumb, and the one on the right an anchor.

The last three aprons came from Brothers Ralph Cassel and Andrew Bulloch. No identifying dates or information is shown on any of these aprons.

(Figure 15) On the first apron, again there is no G in the square and compasses.

(Figure 16) There are words printed on the arch.

(Figure 17) The second apron in this group is a painted York Rite apron which shows the flap with three painted crowns and many familiar symbols.

(Figure 18) This apron may be one of the oldest because Barbara Franco breaks aprons down to four classes - painted, stenciled, engraved and needlework.

(Figure 19) Finally there is a black velvet apron with a metallic tent, eye, fringe and floral design.

(Figure 20) The apron is lined with red on which are engraved in gold a five pointed star and stalks of wheat.

In major Masonic museums in Pennsylvania, New York, Massachusetts, Ohio, etc, there are literally dozens of elaborate Masonic aprons. There are a few on display in various lodges up and down Delaware as well as at 818 Market Street. Undoubtedly there are many interesting aprons still hidden in out of the way places in lodges, possibly in vaults or in private collections. Wouldn't it be nice if these hidden Masonic treasures could be brought to light so that all Masons and non-Masons could share this part of our rich heritage? Lombardy Hall has many interesting aprons which they are proud to share.

Harold T. J. Littleton
Past Celebrant
May 30, 1991

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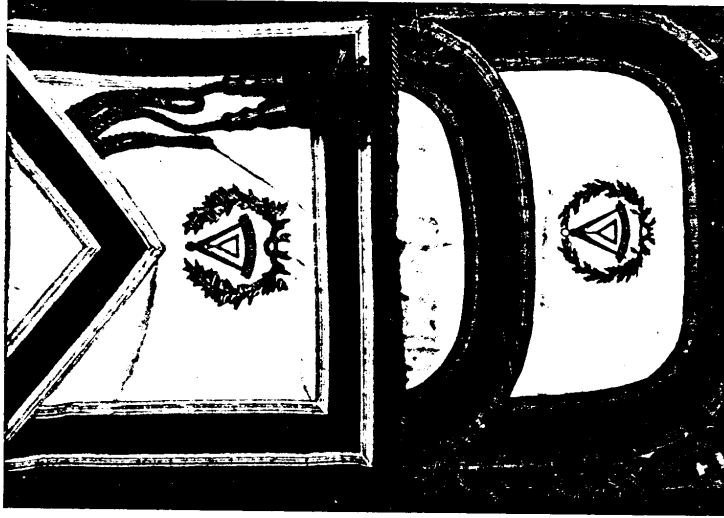


FIGURE 2
PAST GRAND MASTER'S APRONS
top: 1982 ; bottom 1880



FIGURE 1
APRONS FROM FELTON LODGE NO. 22
1865 cloth on left
1871 leather on right

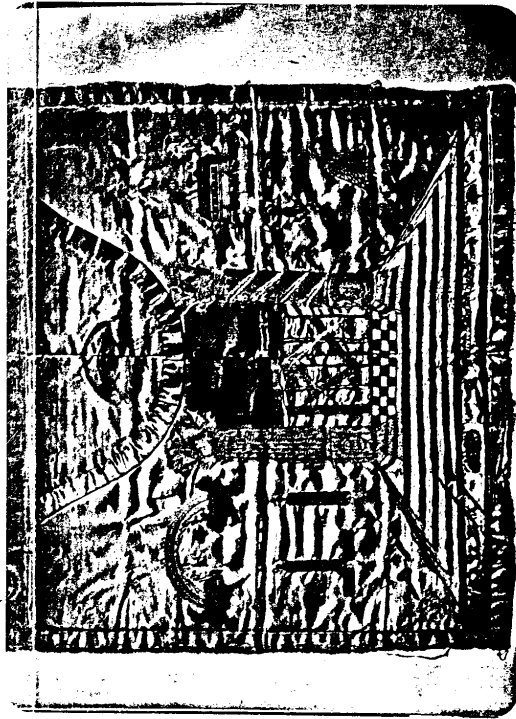


FIGURE 3
PAINTED-EMBROIDERED APRON ON SILK
Purchased at Flea Market by Edgar Hirdler)

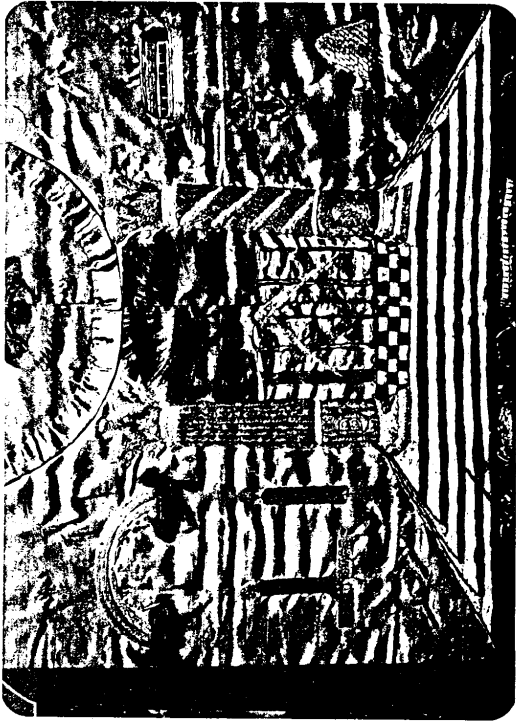


FIGURE 4
CLOSE-UP OF FIGURE 3



FIGURE 5
CORNER OF FIGURE 3



FIGURE 6
DESIGN UNDER FLAP FIGURE 3

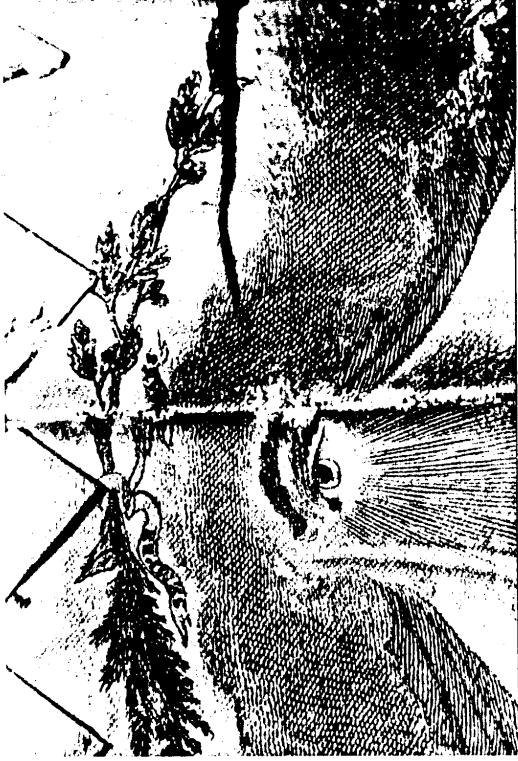


FIGURE 8
CLOSE-UP TOP FIGURE 7

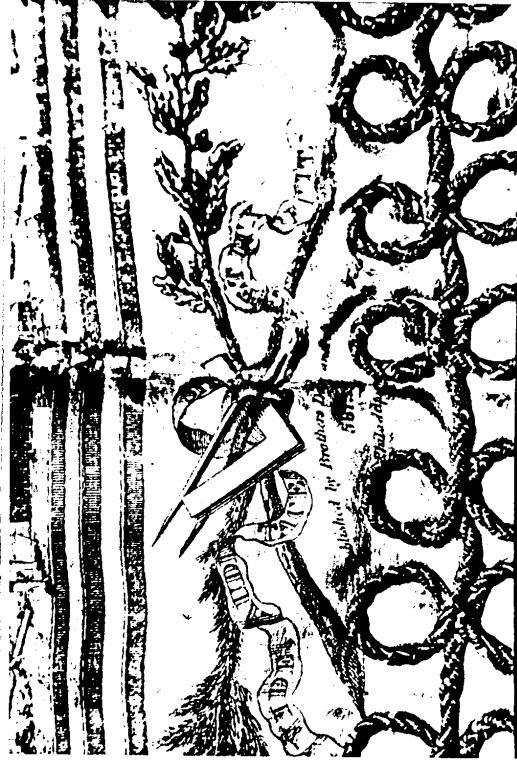


FIGURE 10
CLOSE-UP BOTTOM CENTER FIGURE 7

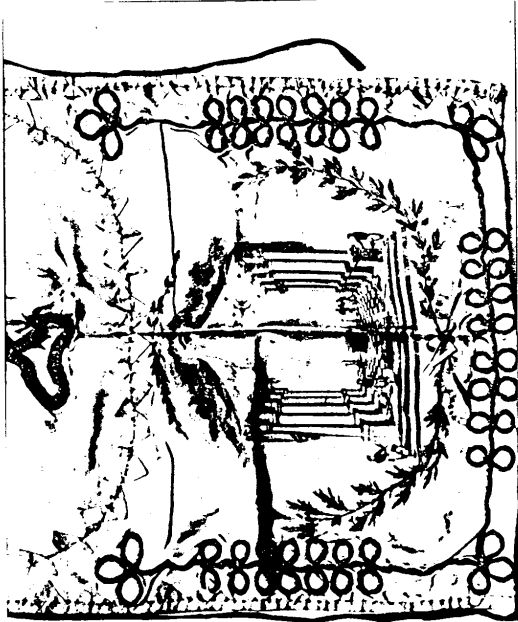


FIGURE 7
APRON OF P.G.M. DANIEL C. GODWIN
1860 - 1862



FIGURE 9
DETAIL, RIGHT CENTER OF FIGURE 8

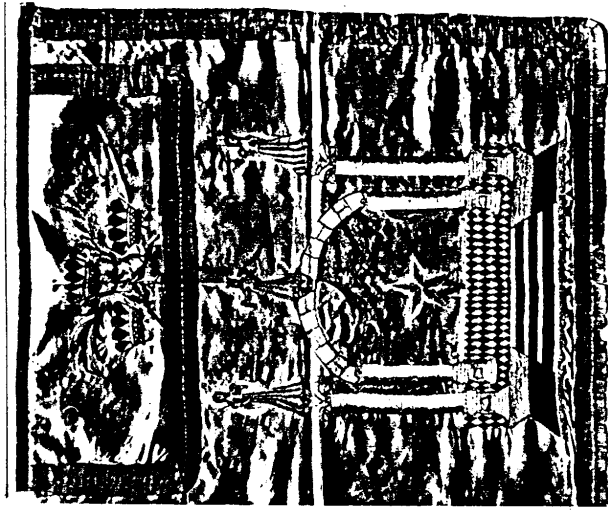


FIGURE 11
DANIEL C. GODWIN ROYAL ARCH MASON APRON

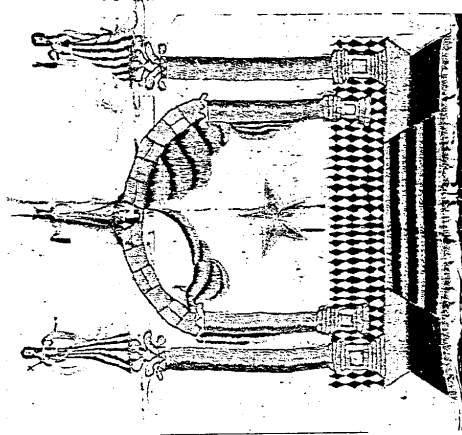


FIGURE 13
GODWIN RAM APRON

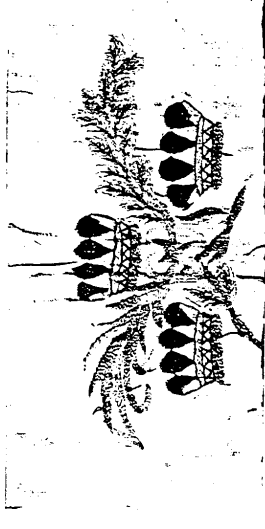


FIGURE 12
GODWIN RAM APRON
CLOSE-UP TOP

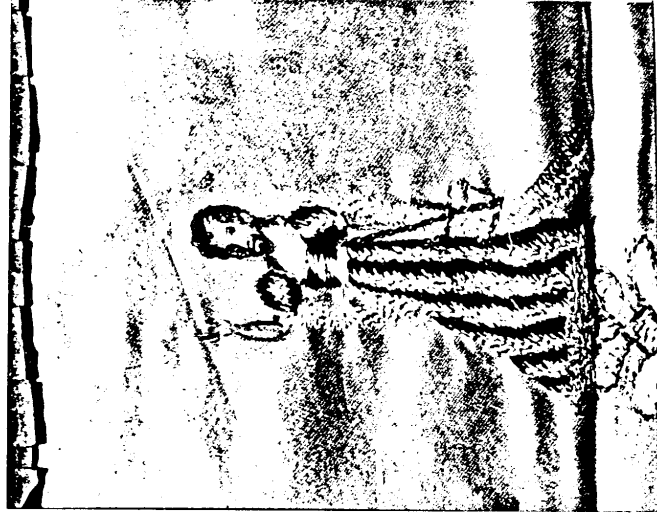


FIGURE 14



FIGURE 15
UNIDENTIFIED PAST MASTER'S APRON
FROM RALPH CASSEL COLLECTION



FIGURE 17
UNIDENTIFIED ROYAL ARCH MASON APRON
FROM COLLECTION OF RALPH CASSEL

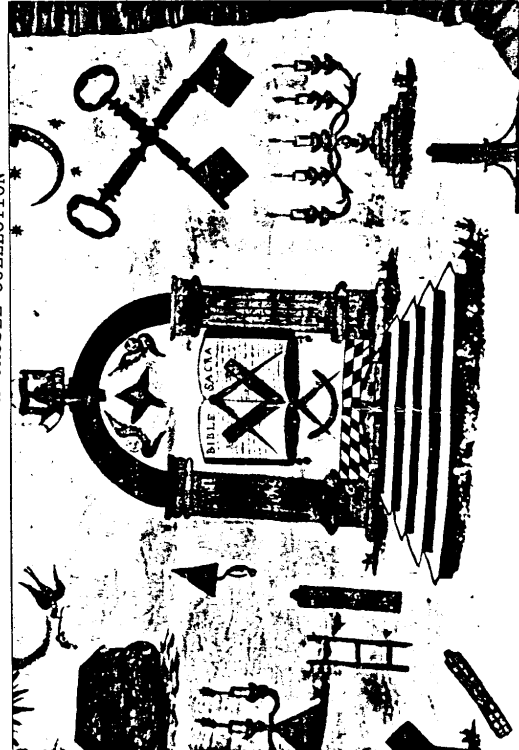


FIGURE 16
CLOSE-UP OF FIGURE 15

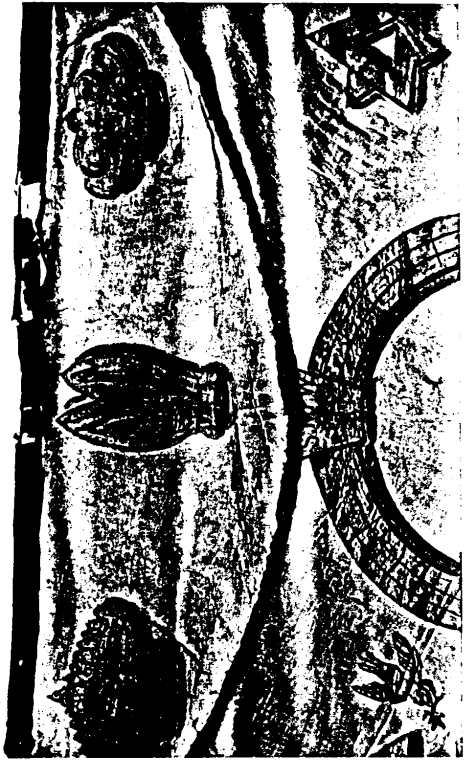


FIGURE 18
CLOSE-UP OF FIGURE 17

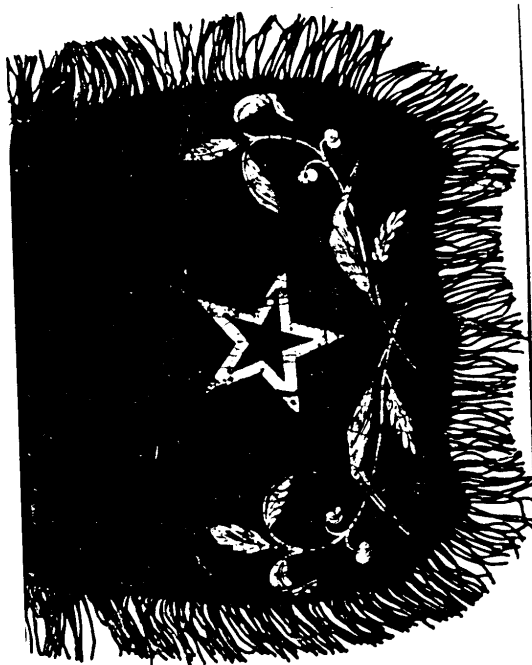


FIGURE 20
REVERSE OF FIGURE 19

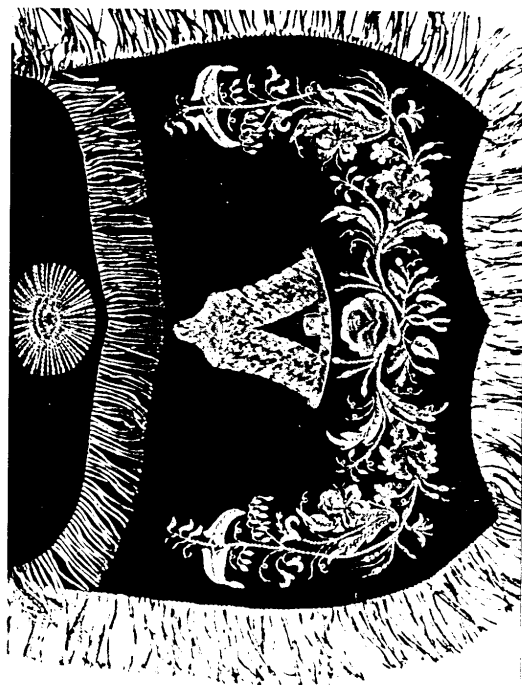


FIGURE 19
UNIDENTIFIED KNIGHT TEMPLAR APRON (?)
FROM COLLECTION OF RALPH CASSEL