

The Cable

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Our Freemasonry started in Britain, and it's important to bear that in mind when we are researching questions such as this. What are the traditions there and at that time that would affect the development of the Craft. Clearly, the naval tradition which made Britain a major power from the time of Elizabeth I would have been paramount. In fact, the concepts of cable, cable-tow and certain portions of our first degree ritual come directly from that naval tradition.

To explain, first what is a cable or rope? We start with fibres, which are just a jumbled mess of short pieces of oakum, without direction or form. If we twist these fibres together, we can make them into a yarn. That a yarn, however, is a long way from a rope or cane. In fact, we twist several yarns together to make a strand. A number of strands, usually three, are "laid-up" to form a rope. Three such ropes laid up together makes a cable. But why doesn't a rope simply unravel and leave you with a pile of fibres? It's all in the twist!

Rope is made when three or more strands are attached at one end to a mechanical device that winds each of them equally. The other end of all the ropes are attached to a free-wheeling bobbin so that they may spin around each other as the twist is applied.

Each part of the rope is trying to untwist, but the close contact with its neighbour counteracts the tendency to unravel and causes the strands to wind around each other. The fibres stay together, and this is what gives the cable its strength.

Now, all the cables on board a ship are all the same length. That's because of the length of the ropewalk where they are made. Some are 100 fathoms, some could be as long as 130 fathoms. In the British Navy, the standard length of a cable is one hundred fathoms, or six hundred feet. That was chosen because it is one-tenth of a nautical mile. Thus, the cable is also used as a measure of distance.

Now we come the first degree. Life in the British Navy from the time of Elizabeth I to this century was governed by the Articles of War. Each Sunday these Articles were read to the men so that they were constantly reminded of their duty and of the penalties for shirking it. Included in these articles is the penalty for treason. A man found guilty of treason would be hanged from the yardarm and, after being left there for a suitable period of time, would be taken down and buried. To ensure there is no honour to the traitor, the Articles of War specified that burial will be a cable's length or 600 feet from shore. Burial on the tidal flats is neither an honourable burial at sea nor on land. This is where the garbage of both land and sea is thrown together to rot. So when burying a traitor, the navy looked for a large tidal flat and dumped the body a cable's length from shore. In fact, both main anchorages at the time of sail - Spithead and the Nore at the mouth of the Thames and at Portsmouth - had such extensive tidal flats. They were also the only places where enough Captains could be brought together to hold a Court Martial.

That covers the cable, and the burial. But what about the cable-tow? I mentioned that a cable was a rope of 600 feet. But when a tug is towing a ship, they are almost always more than six hundred feet apart. That's because a cable and a cable-tow aren't the same thing. The cable is a rope of a specific length. When we make up a tow, we might tie or "bend" several cables together.

The number of cables needed to make up a tow depend on several factors. First, how heavy is the tow? A light object isn't hard to move, but a heavy one is.

A short rope has very little give in it, very little stretch. If you attach it to a light object, it will pull it. But if you tie it to something heavy it will break before it starts to move the tow through the water.

A longer rope has more stretch and give in it. So too, with the cable-tow. The tug's force is applied more slowly, giving enough time to overcome the inertia of the disabled ship and get it moving before the cable snaps.

The burden of the ship is not the only factor that determines the length of the tow. The condition of the sea is also important. If the sea is calm, a shorter cable-tow is enough. Once you get the tow moving, it will follow smoothly. However, if the sea is rough, then a longer cable is needed. The tow may be trying to climb the back of one wave while the tug is surging down the front of another. If the tow is too short, then there isn't enough give in it to allow the tug and the tow to move apart. The rope will snap.

So the heavier the burden, and/or the rougher the conditions, the longer the cable-tow.

The point is that the terms we use in Masonry today have their basis in real terms and in real penalties. That gives them both a strength and a sense of purpose to anyone who comes to understand their origins. I have now explained the construction of a cable and how it may be used as both a unit of length and as a cable-tow. But what, you might ask, has this to do with Freemasonry?

The second thing to understand is the depth of meaning available to us in the use of a cable as a metaphor in Masonry. As the cable is made of many parts put together for a common purpose, so might we look at Freemasonry.

The cable consists of individual fibres, worked together to form strands. These strands are laid together to make up ropes and the ropes to form a cable. As separate entities, the fibres have little strength. However, when organized into a cable, their strength is immense. So it is with Freemasonry. A Masonic cable is made from individuals who form a Lodge. Lodges organize into Districts. Districts unite in a Grand Lodge. And as three ropes entwined produce the strong cable, so too does Virtue, Morality and Brotherly Love give strength to Masonry. Further, a cable gains its strength from three equal ropes, laid together. Each rope is as important to the whole as the other. So it is with the three degrees of Freemasonry. One should not be tempted to forget the lessons of the Entered Apprentice or Fellowcraft just because he has been raised to the Sublime Degree of Master Mason.

As a strong cable is made of three ropes entwined, the strength of a Lodge comes from the Three Great Lights, the Three Lesser Lights, the three principal officers and the three pillars denoting Wisdom, Strength and Beauty.

A cable's great strength is only apparent when it is put to use. So it is with Freemasonry. The strength of our craft remains hidden until it is put to use. We can also think of the cable-tow as the bond connecting the individual Brother to his Lodge and to Grand Lodge, those venerable institutions that give direction to a Brother in his journey through life.

Consider what has just been presented. The cable-tow, which connects the tug to the barge at sea, is not of a specific length. In fact, the amount of cable let out by the tug as it attempts to direct the course and speed of the barge depends on the condition of the sea and the burden of the tow. The heavier the burden and the rougher the sea, the longer the cable-tow that is necessary. Strange as it may seem, in stormy seas, a tug actually gives more secure guidance and direction with the longer cable-tow.

So too, with our Masonic cable-tow: that bond which binds a Brother to his Lodge and to the Craft. What about the Brother who finds himself encountering stormy seas or who finds the burdens of his responsibilities bear heavily on him? Undue pressure from the Lodge or from his Brothers to attend meetings, participate in degree work or to "be a good Mason" may cause his cable-tow to snap and sever his bond to the craft. Finally, once the nautical cable-tow is severed, the state of the seas or the poor condition of the disabled ship may make recovery of the tow impossible. The ship is therefore lost while the tug stands by - helpless.

So might a brother be lost to the craft – and Masonry would be thus impoverished.

This paper is taken from a Masonic playlet in one act of the same name by Bro. Garth Cochran and Bro. Barry Maynard Calgary Lodge, #23 Grand Register of Alberta. The playlet can be found at the following website – <http://www.masonicworld.com/education/files/ct.htm>