
SIGN OF FIDELITY

In the Jurisdiction of New York

By

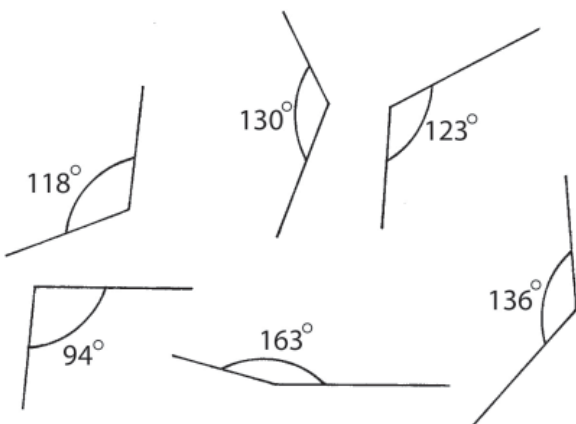
RW Ezekiel M. Bey, FPS

The *Sign of Fidelity* has been discussed and debated for several years in the MWPHGL of New York. Many have different ideas without the correct history, or the correct information as it relates to the ritual utilized by our Grand Lodge. You will many times within the frame and body of this article be reminded of the question, “What are Signs?” It is asked in each of the three degrees in the New York ritual (PHA). The answer will always be, “Right Angles, Horizontals and Perpendiculars.” The position of a brother’s right arm in coming to the sign of fidelity determines the position where his right hand is placed over his left breast. The right hand that covers your left breast should not be confused with the regional part of a women’s breast. A woman’s breast refers to the upper ventral region of the torso. The breasts of a female contain the mammary glands that secrete milk used to feed their infants. Male humans have breasts which are less prominent and have a far more regional scope that consists of the pectoral area.

In ancient Craft Masonry, Masonic signs are 90° or strictly right angles (EA, FC, MM). We have in geometry what is called an “obtuse angle.” This angle is one that is more than 90° . It can be 130° , 118° , 123° , and so forth. An *obtuse angle* has *no place* in Ancient Craft Masonry. An obtuse angle cannot be or form a Masonic sign.

Let us give examples of an obtuse angle:

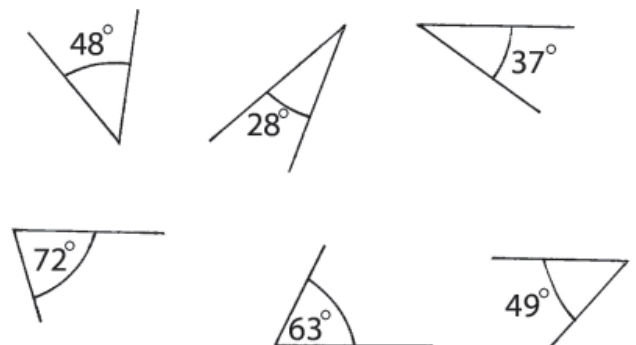
Obtuse Angles¹



I believe we can all agree that such angles cannot, by definition, define a “right angle, horizontal or perpendicular.” Remember that this is science; Masonry is built on science. Geometry within Freemasonry gives us the rules to be governed by. Geometry treats of the powers and properties of magnitudes in general, where length, breadth and thickness are considered. From a point to a line, from a line to a superficies.² An *obtuse angle* is definitely not a Masonic sign as it relates to the ritual in New York.

Let us now examine what is considered in geometry an acute angle. An *acute angle* is an angle less than 90° . Because an acute angle is mistakenly used as our sign of fidelity due to tradition and habit, it is confused with the “hand over heart” held during the pledge of allegiance to the flag. Many feel because the ritual states for officers and members to place their right hand over the left breast that this means to pledge an allegiance. This emphatically *is not true*. The compasses is an instrument in Freemasonry which is symbolically used for describing circles or transferring measurements that consist of two pointed branches joined at the top by a pivot.³ When entering a lodge one should observe the position of the points of the compasses. In Ancient Craft Masonry it is supposed to be at a 45° angle or an acute angle. This is the only acute angle respected in Freemasonry—but it is not a sign.

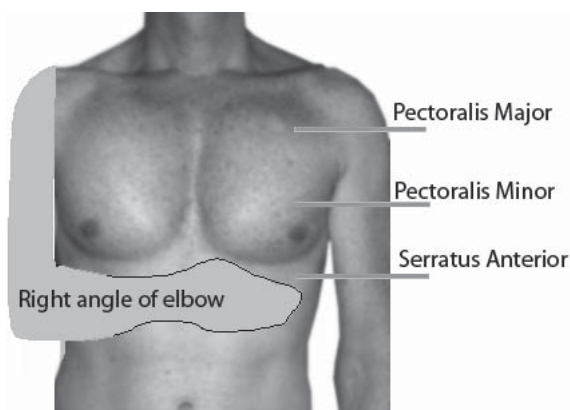
Acute Angles⁴



It would be difficult to state what angle one should position their right arm while giving the sign of fidelity if we accept the *acute angle* as a Masonic sign. But, if we did, what angle would it be? What is the source or origin of an acute angle being the “sign of fidelity?” What degree would be the accepted position, and how would we gauge it for accuracy? Fidelity is a notion that at its most abstract level implies a truthful connection to a source. Its original meaning dealt with faithfulness, honesty and loyalty. For example, in medieval institutions of knighthood in which it is related to the term “Chivalry,” fidelity was associated with the ideals of knightly virtues and honor. But this would be done by the shaking of right hands at a right angle position as to show that neither knight hid a dagger in his sleeve—the same as the present day soldier’s salute. Its origin came from the act of knights who raised their visors with their right hand exposing themselves to a friend. The sign of fidelity is a *salute of respect*.

Let us look at the breast as it relates to the human body:

The pectoralis muscle actually covers from the top of the collarbone to the top of the serratus anterior. It is not necessarily the area by the mammary glands. In each three degrees of the ritual of New York the question is asked, “What are Signs,” and the answer will always be, “Right Angles, Horizontals, and Perpendiculars.” It is very easy to make a right angle within the area that is considered the *breast*. Actually, it is clear how to keep your right hand on your left breast by bending your right elbow at a 90° angle across the breast area. The problem is discipline and undoing what has been in practice for many years. Psychologically,



The pectoral muscles are considered the chest and they cover a wide range of the breast area. To make a right angle, you must use the pectoral minor.

some might even feel that it is impossible because of the conditioning, and some might find it impossible because they disagree. In either case we are attempting to bring to light what is correct. In reality, it is the acceptance of *truth*.

Merriam’s Dictionary—*Breast*: the fore or ventral part of the body between the neck and the abdomen

Oxford Reference—*Breast*: The breast is also used for a person’s chest regarded as the seat of the emotions, and the repository of consciousness, designs, and secrets.

Farlex Dictionary—*Breast*: The superior ventral surface of the human body, extending from the neck to the abdomen.

Infoplease Dictionary—*Breast*: Anat., Zool. (in bipeds) the outer, front part of the thorax, or the front part of the body from the neck to the abdomen.

WordCentral.Com—*Breast*: the front part of the body between the neck and the abdomen.

Dictionary.com Unabridged—*Breast*: Anatomy, Zoology. (in bipeds) the outer, front part of the thorax, or the front part of the body from the neck to the abdomen.

As you can see, the definition of *breast* is not only the mammary glands that a female has, but it covers a larger part of the human torso.

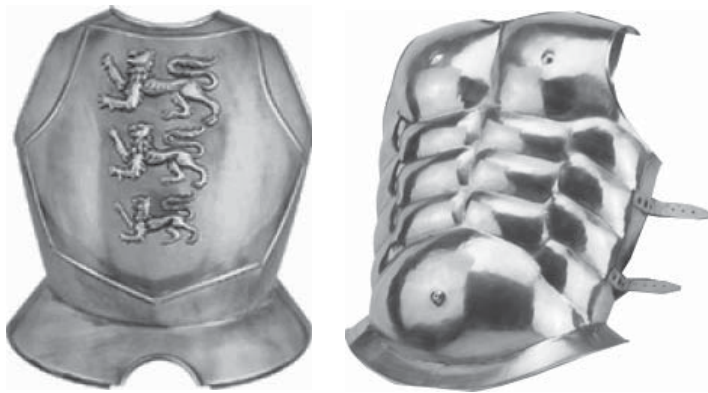
The first question before considering any of this is, “Is the sign of fidelity a Masonic Sign?” If it is not, then it has no business or place in our Masonic Lodges. However, if indeed it is—and I know it is—then we must answer the question, “What are Signs?” Yes, I did warn you in the beginning that you will many times within the frame of this article see the question, “What are Signs?” Then, let us answer the question. First, the word *fidelity* came from the Latin word *Fidelitas*. Fides, a Roman god, is identified by faith and loyalty. A sanctuary was dedicated to Fides in Rome about 254 BC. Fides is symbolized by a pair of clasped hands or two human figures holding each other by the Right Hand.⁵



Signs can be defined as modes of recognition. They are also a form of communication. Being so, we can say that they play an important part in Masonic life, as signs are constantly used within our Masonic intercourse. But we must use them correctly for them to be consistent with our practices and philosophy. Now, I do understand that many of us have been practicing what has not been properly taught, and it is difficult to accept corrections. The emotional and intellectual part that commonly works together in the concept of understanding, are now in confrontation with one another.

“... within the breast are contained the most vital parts of

man...”⁶ Within the breast contains the heart, the rib cage, lungs, diaphragm, etc. We must understand that the breast covers a wide range of the torso. “What are Signs?—Right Angles, Horizontals and Perpendiculars.” If this be so, I truly know that within the area of the breast, one can comply with the above and be at the position of a right or 90° angle.



In medieval times soldiers wore what was called a “Breastplate.” This armor covered the entire torso.

The word breast when used in Ancient Craft Masonry as it relates to males is very much different than when used for a female. The breastplate in Judaism is a device worn by the ancient Jewish high priest in the temple. This breastplate also covered the torso. The Romans used a breastplate called an “aegis” which also covered the breast.

Aegis⁷



Here is an example of the sign of fidelity in a right or 90° degree angle. Of course we all have different body types and because our arms and bodies are not straight lines, there are sometimes imperfections. Also notice he is in the breast area.

In Ancient Craft Masonry, you will consistently see right angles, horizontals, and perpendiculars. You see it in the due guards, steps, squaring of the lodge, the shape of the lodge room, and most importantly you see it in signs. Why would we abuse the sign of fidelity and place our arms at an angle other than 90°?

Some actually think that the sign of fidelity given in a Masonic lodge originated from the pledge of allegiance. This shows that many are not equipped nor blessed with the light of history. “In 1892 Francis Bellamy wrote and published his first Pledge of Allegiance in his magazine, *Youth Companion*.”⁸ You can clearly see and understand that the sign of fidelity could not possibly have originated from the Pledge of Allegiance, as our sign of fidelity predates the year 1892. In fact, in New York, we have been practicing the sign of fidelity since 1812 which is 80 years before the Pledge of Allegiance. Why would we use a profane sign in Freemasonry?

Let us explore *custom and usage*. First, let me begin by saying that there are some who think that the sign of fidelity falls under custom and usage. This is the easiest way to avoid validating what one cannot prove or find historically. As a historian, it is my job to research all information possible in order to prove or disprove the information in question. Now, if some feel that the sign of fidelity falls under custom and usage, why would we recommend legislation to penalize brothers who do not follow the so-called correct position? Let me quote from “Masonic Talk # 10” published by Masonic Service Association (MSA): “Much conduct in lodge is governed by tradition, custom, and usage, with no force of law to enforce or penalty for infringement.”⁹ If this be correct, then we fall outside of the parameters of justice the moment we recommend, enact, or sanction penalties for what some consider Masonic manners or etiquette. However, in my opinion, the sign of fidelity is a requirement. In going forward to dismiss custom and usage we must concentrate on origin, possible origin, or when first recognized or adopted.

In Harry Carr’s, “Freemason’s at Work”, he states on page 258:

THE SIGN OF FIDELITY

The mention of two signs, Reverence and Fidelity, involves a number of issues and it may help if we try to separate the wheat from the chaff. Fundamentally the signs are alike, except for the position of one digit. I have spent some time trying to ascertain when, how and why the actual position of the digits was prescribed for either of these signs, but with only limited success.

Two points may be made here with certainty:

(1) The earliest description of the F.C. sign in a trigradal system is in Prichard’s exposure of 1730

and it gives the right hand in the then customary place, but without any reference to digits.

The exception being the angle of the compasses which is an acute angle but not a Masonic sign.

(2) Prichard also indicates that this was the posture of the Wardens, while the W.M. asked them ‘their situations’ etc., during several questions which seem to belong to the closing of the Lodge. Possibly it was a mark of respect, but still no mention of digits.

Soon after this, from c. 1740 onwards, there is ample evidence that the modern SQUARED form had been adopted. [Remember: *What are signs?*]

The above clearly shows a point of adoption and a possible time lock introduction. But let us go a little further. Brother Harry Carr continues on page 260 and brings to light the dismissal of the sign of reverence and deals strictly with the “Sign of Fidelity”.

Here is what he stated under “Uses of The Sign of Fidelity:”

USES OF THE SIGN OF FIDELITY

Having disposed of the ‘Sn. [*sign*] of Reverence’ as an unauthorized practice, it seems that we must now accept the fact that nowadays we use the posture or Sn. of F. [*sign of fidelity*] for several purposes, e.g.,

(1) As a prescribed mode of recognition.

(2) In Lodges where the Brethren make the Sn. of F. [*sign of fidelity*] during all three Obligations, the Sign is presumably an affirmation of our own fidelity.

(3) It may also be interpreted as a mark of respect, while the V.S.L. is actually in use.

(4) In many workings the Sn. of F. [*sign of fidelity*] is used (momentarily) at the mention of the name of God, e.g. at the end of the lecture on the second T.B., and at the end of the Address to the W.M. on his Installation.

(5) In nearly all workings, at the final closing of the Lodge.”

Due to the above, the sign of fidelity in all its ramifications and definition is indeed a Masonic sign. The point that Brother Carr makes shows the connection. This truly must be respected, if not more importantly, acknowledged by accepting this fact. This takes us to another point. As we further examine, Brother William Preston Campbell-

Everden in his *Freemasonry and its Etiquette* expresses through his own research in the Craft that all signs are to be made properly. Let me share with you his findings and practice as a Freemason.

All Sps. [*steps*] and Sns. [*signs*] should be silently done. Care should be taken that the Sn. [*sign*] should be perfectly *uniform and squared*.¹⁰ There is much slovenliness with regard to this.”

The Sn. [*sign*] should commence where it rests. There should not be a preliminary motion, or point.¹¹

THE ANGLE OF A SQUARE AND NINETY DEGREES (90°)

The *square* is an ancient symbol of old. In many schools of thought it meant truth and uprightness. It is a geometrical shape used in many societies. Ceremonies of building were done by what is known as *laying a foundation-stone*. In 1600, Thothmes II speaks of a ceremony that he observed at Buto, “but the tablets were imperfect.” John Yarker, in his writing of the *Arcane Schools*, chapter III, reveals:

The first stroke of the hammer thereon appears to be intended to conjure the keeping out of the water; a document was deposited in the stone containing the names of all the great gods and goddesses, “and the people rejoiced.” There is also an inscription of this period on the Statue of Semut, in which he is styled: “First of the first, and Master of the works of all Masters of work.”

There are also Geometrical diagrams of this period indicating the knowledge of the *square* and in the great pyramid there yet exists a workman’s diagram indicating the method of making a *right angle*; the *vesica piscis* exists in a recess over the King’s Chamber. Some of the drawings yet exist of a Canon of proportion for the construction of the human figure, which Vitruvius represents by this {X}, the navel being the centre; and though from the earliest to the latest times, the Canon varied, the relative proportions were fixed by forming a chequered diagram of *perfect angle*.^{12,13}

In Carl H. Claudy’s *Introduction to the Entered Apprentice Degree* he states, “No symbol in all Freemasonry has the universal significance of the *square*. ... the emblem known to the world over as the premier implement of the stone worker and the most important of the Masonic working tools. Every schoolboy learns that an angle of ninety degrees is a *right angle*. So common is the description that few—even few Masons—pause in busy lives to ask why. The *ninety-degree angle* is not only a right angle, but it is the *right angle*—the only angle which is *right* for stones which will form a wall, a building, a cathedral. Any other angle is Masonically

incorrect.”^{14,15}

Now, what is so interesting, Claudy also speaks of the *Square* in his *Introduction to the Fellow Craft Degree*. Below is what Brother Claudy says:

We are to square our actions by the Square of Virtue. Every man has a conscience, be it ever so dead; every Freemason is expected to carry the conscience of a Fellowcraft's Square of Virtue in his *breast* and build no act, no matter how small, which does not fit within its *right angle*.^{16,17}

As Claudy continues in his symbolical Masonry, he writes in his *Introduction to the Master Mason Degree*, “In ancient Egypt as we learn from the stone carvings on the ruins of temples a lion raised Osiris from a dead level to a living perpendicular by a grip of his paw; the carvings show a figure standing behind the altar, observing the raising of the dead, with its left arm uplifted and forming the angle of a *square*.”¹⁸

Claudy continues, “Of all people Masons should know what a *square* is: a right angle, the fourth of a circle, an angle of ninety degrees. For the benefit of those who have forgotten their school days, the ‘hypotenuse’ is the line which makes a right angle into a triangle by connecting the ends of the two lines which form it.”

In conclusion to this study and most accurate information, with all the data provided here, I must think that under M.W. G. M. Raymond E. Jackson, the then Grand Lecturer R.W. W Devee Joiner, saw it proper in 1935, to communicate and report to the craft a visitation he had made to Antioch # 66. R.W. Devee Joiner stated, “In Antioch # 66 I directed there that on the proper use of the sign of fidelity, the due guard and sign, the calling from labor to refreshment...” If I am correct, since in that same report he made mention that we are advised to use and study *Mackey's Jurisprudence* among other documents, and knowing that Mackey believed in forming a right angle at the sign of fidelity, it only proves our point on the subject of SIGN OF FIDELITY.

SO MOTE IT BE

(Endnotes)

- 1 <http://www.mathsisfun.com/obtuse.html>.
- 2 New York Ritual (PHA) pg. 135.
- 3 Square, Compass, Quadrant, written by Ezekiel M. Bey.
- 4 <http://www.manthisisfun.com/acute.html>.

5 As stated in our ritual on page 65 and 66; also as depicted on the first page of this article.

6 New York Ritual, pg. 163.

7 http://www.aconet.cz/npm/dept/depl_ancient/eindex.html.

8 Constitutional Right Foundation.

9 Short Talk # 10 (Masonic Service Association)

10 Emphasis mine.

11 William Preston Campbell-Everden, *Freemasonry and its Etiquette*, page 154.

12 http://www.phoenixmasonry.org/arcane_schools/part_1.htm.

13 Emphasis mine.

14 Carl H. Claudy's “Introduction to the Entered Apprentice Degree” pg. 43.

15 All emphases mine.

16 Carl H. Claudy's “Introduction to the Fellow craft Degree” pg. 9.

17 All emphases mine.

18 Carl H. Claudy's “Introduction to the Master Mason Degree” pg. 10.



Brother Ezekial M. Bey, FPS, is the Grand Historian for the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of New York.



Brother S David Bailey, MPS, is Chairman of the Committee on Masonic Education for the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of New York.