

## Baal's Bridge Square – Ireland's Oldest Masonic Artifact

By David K. McDonnell (© David K. McDonnell, [www.clandonnell.net](http://www.clandonnell.net))

For no particular reason I'm going to read you a poem:

A man from Albuquerque  
Turned his meat into jerky  
Some were of chicken  
Others of bacon  
But his best were made out of turkey

That is a bad poem. I wrote it this morning and it took me about a minute and a half. Does anyone recognize what kind of poem it is?



It is known as a limerick. Limericks take their name from the City and County of Limerick in Ireland. There were a group of 18th Century poets and writers in Limerick known as the Maigue (MAY-g) Poets.

They often met and shared their work and sometimes, after several pints, would make up nonsense poems on the spot. One can imagine Dr. Seuss fitting in quite nicely with the Maigue poets. I wrote about one of the Maigue poets, John Clarach MacDomnaill in my book, *ClanDonnell: A Stories History of Ireland*.

The particular form of poem known as the *limerick* actually originated in England a century later. But for some reason, they became known as limericks, perhaps since they were thought of as a derivation of the Maigue Poets' form of nonsense poetry.

That is my introduction to you of the Irish city of Limerick.

Limerick is shown on the above map of Ireland. On the map of Ireland, Limerick almost looks like an inland city. It is not. It is located on the River Shannon, which begins north and east and flows

into the Atlantic. Limerick is located at the point at which the Shannon widens and opens into to the Atlantic.

The River Shannon is Ireland's longest river and has functioned in Irish history and commerce much like the Mississippi River has to Americans. For centuries, goods - primarily agricultural products - produced in the central third or so of the country were delivered to the banks of the River Shannon, loaded on board boats or barges, and shipped down the Shannon to Limerick.

I spent some time in Limerick and in County Clare and County Kerry last November, and you can see a steady stream of ocean-going vessels going in and out of the Shannon. Limerick today is the island's fourth largest city.

A millennium ago, there were early Celtic settlements in and around Limerick, but none of them seemed to have had much permanence.

The Vikings established a settlement there around the year 812. Many Irish coastal cities were established by the Vikings. Dublin is another example. Viking raiders sailed up the Shannon, raided Celtic villages, took whatever they could take, and then sailed back to Scandinavia.

When that became too cumbersome, the Vikings established permanent settlements on the coast of Ireland. They did not need to go back to Norway with their booty, they could drop it off. Eventually the Vikings in these settlements set up farms and raised cattle and lived much like the Irish. They intermarried with the Irish as well. The Vikings adopted the Irish language and culture, and even the religion of St. Patrick. After several generations, it was difficult to tell the difference between the Celtic Irish and the Viking Irish.



The Normans invaded Ireland in the 12th Century, with the full backing of English King Henry II. The English established a settlement on an island, which they named King's Island.

The map on the left shows the modern city of Limerick, with the center city on the east bank of the Shannon. King's Island is to the north.

King's Island is indeed an island. The River Shannon is

on the north and west. A portion of the Shannon, as it flows downstream, bends around the body of land before flowing back into the Shannon, creating the island. This portion of the river is called the *River Abbey*.

The English built a fortress on King's Island, a walled city. It became their base of operation for the region.

The fortress became a commercial center as well. Native Irish moved into region, mainly those who did business with the English. The Irish settled on the east bank of the River Abbey and the River Shannon.

In the early days of Limerick, the English lived on the south end of King's Island. This was known to everyone as 'English Town'. The settlement on the west bank of the River Shannon (and south bank of the River Abbey) was known by all as 'Irish Town'.

For a few hundred years, the people of English Town and Irish Town interacted without a bridge connecting King's Island to the mainland. There are several bridges connecting now, and for many centuries there was only one bridge - called Baal's Bridge. It was built in 1507.



This is a drawing of Baal's Bridge from about 1830. It is a four arch bridge. You can see that the River Abbey is not very wide. The bridge, though, is quite wide - wider than necessary to carry wagons and carriages. It also had a row of townhomes on the bridge. You can see this on the drawing. The townhomes may appear in the drawing to be on the other side of the bridge, but they are on the bridge itself.

No one is quite sure why the bridge was called Baal's Bridge. In Irish, the bridge was referred to as *Droichead Maol* - the bald bridge. It may have been called this since the bridge does not have a parapet or retaining wall. It was quite easy to fall off. Bald Bridge may have been corrupted to Baal's Bridge.



By the early 1800s, the townhomes on Baal's Bridge were thoroughly decayed and falling down.

I don't know the condition of the actual bridge by this time, but the old Baal's Bridge was torn down, and a new Baal's Bridge constructed.

The photo to the left is the new Baal's Bridge - still in use today. It is a single-arch bridge.

Demolition of the old bridge was in 1830, and the new bridge completed in 1831.

### Why am I telling you all of this?

When they dug up the foundation of the old bridge, on the King's Island (English Town) side, this is what they found:



They found what is now called the Baal's Bridge Square. It is a mason's square, made of brass and much corroded.<sup>1</sup>

It is difficult to read the inscription on the original square. So a mason (I believe in 1842) placed a sheet of paper over the square and rubbed the paper with a pencil. The image created by the rubbing clearly shows the inscription.

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<sup>1</sup> The image above is of a replica of the square.



You ought to recognize the inscription on the above rubbing: "*I will strive to live with love and care, upon the level and by the square*" Dated 1507.

Also note that the inscription is in English, not Irish. We don't know if the masons who put the square in the bridge foundation were from English Town, or were brought in from England to build the bridge.

I would like you to put yourself into the shoes of the mason in 1507 who put this square in the foundation of the Baal's Bridge.

You all know why the name of your organization is the Grand Lodge of Masons, rather than say the Grand Lodge of Carpenters. Masons were a little different from other skilled tradesmen of the era. Most skilled tradesmen - carpenters, tailors, coopers, smiths - plied their trade locally. Every town of note had such tradesmen.

But many of the towns of Europe were evolving into large cities, and there was a boom in the construction of large cathedrals. These cathedrals, as well as large bridges, castles, and the like, could take decades to complete. And they required skilled stone masons to build them. And the work required was more than the local masons could handle.

So masons came from all over Europe to work on these cathedral projects. And these masons shared their skills and knowledge with each other, and carefully tutored those new to the craft.

And they made sure that the tricks of the trade were kept secret, since they didn't want everyone to know them. They would only share the secrets of the trade with those craftsmen who they found to be of sufficient moral character - who would take their job seriously and take their secrets just as seriously.

They also built temporary structures, often just lean-to's, near the construction site, which they called 'lodges' where they would have meetings but also just hang-out during construction.

And they took great pride in their work.

Now take another look at Baal's Bridge. This is not one of the great cathedrals of Europe. As rivers go, the River Abbey is not much of a river. And as bridges go, Baal's Bridge is not much of a bridge.

But a mason who was about to construct the bridge wanted us, in the future, to know that he was the one who was going to build it. So he added an inscription to his square and placed it on top of some stones, and then put the bridge's foundation stones on top of that.

I don't know how much a brass masons square might have cost in 1507, or how many days' wages were expended on the purchase. He certainly could not run up to the local hardware store and quickly and inexpensively replace it.

But as valuable as the square was, he wanted to be remembered. I am sure he had no clue when, or if, the square would ever be found. I do not know if he expected the bridge to last over 300 years.

I wonder if he expected to have people talking about his square 500 years later. I'm sure he never heard of, or could even visualize, North America and could not comprehend people on the other side of the planet talking about his square.

We don't even know the name of the mason who left his square beneath the Baal's Bridge foundation. But what he did is give us the oldest masonic relic ever found in Ireland, and perhaps the oldest masonic relic found anywhere.

I suspect that if one were to demolish the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, or Strasbourg Cathedral, or Winchester Cathedral in England, or any of the great cathedrals of Europe, one would find somewhere in the foundation, a masonic square or other relic comparable to the Baal's Bridge Square.