

## J. Fondersmith's Patch Box

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The purpose of this discourse is to interpret the symbolic messages that J. Fondersmith engraved onto his patch box some two hundred years ago. It is not meant to be an academic dissertation, nor is it a fictitious story. I visited libraries and museums, researched numerous books and articles and interviewed artists and historians to gather the information I am about to present. It is as accurate as I can make it. If you will concentrate, *with an open mind*, on the following interpretations of the symbols and illusions designed on this patch box, I am certain you will be surprised with the final analysis.

J. Fondersmith's patch box is an exceptional work of American folk art (Figure 1). Its creator engraved in metal, a complex design of symbols and visual illusions to portray concepts of moral conduct and national patriotism—qualities that were cherished by the citizens of a New Republic, the United States of America.

The meanings and translations of these symbols were familiar to the educated people of his day but are not even recognizable to most of us now living in the twenty-first century. A symbol can be a figure, a number or letter, a mark, or a material object that represents something totally immaterial. For example, the wearing of a black armband, representing death and mourning; the algebraic figure "x," representing the multiplication of two numbers. These are symbols readily recognized in today's culture to represent something else.

Before proceeding into the interpretation of the symbols and illusions on J. Fondersmith's patch box, I direct the reader to the line drawing for details (Figure 2).

What are the most obvious figures you readily recognize? The two Native Americans seated at the bottom of the patch box? Do they have any symbolic meaning or are they just decorations? Indians are a symbol of America, the new world. For example, U.S. coinage portraying Indian heads on pennies and nickels (Figure 3). No European or Eastern nations of the world display Indians on their coins. It is strictly an American symbol. Note that both figures are seated on half round or crescent shaped platforms. These crescents represent one-half of the world, the new world, America. Sometimes the Indians are pictured sitting or leaning against a globe of the earth, displaying the outlines of the North and South American continents, symbolizing "The Americas" (Figure 4).



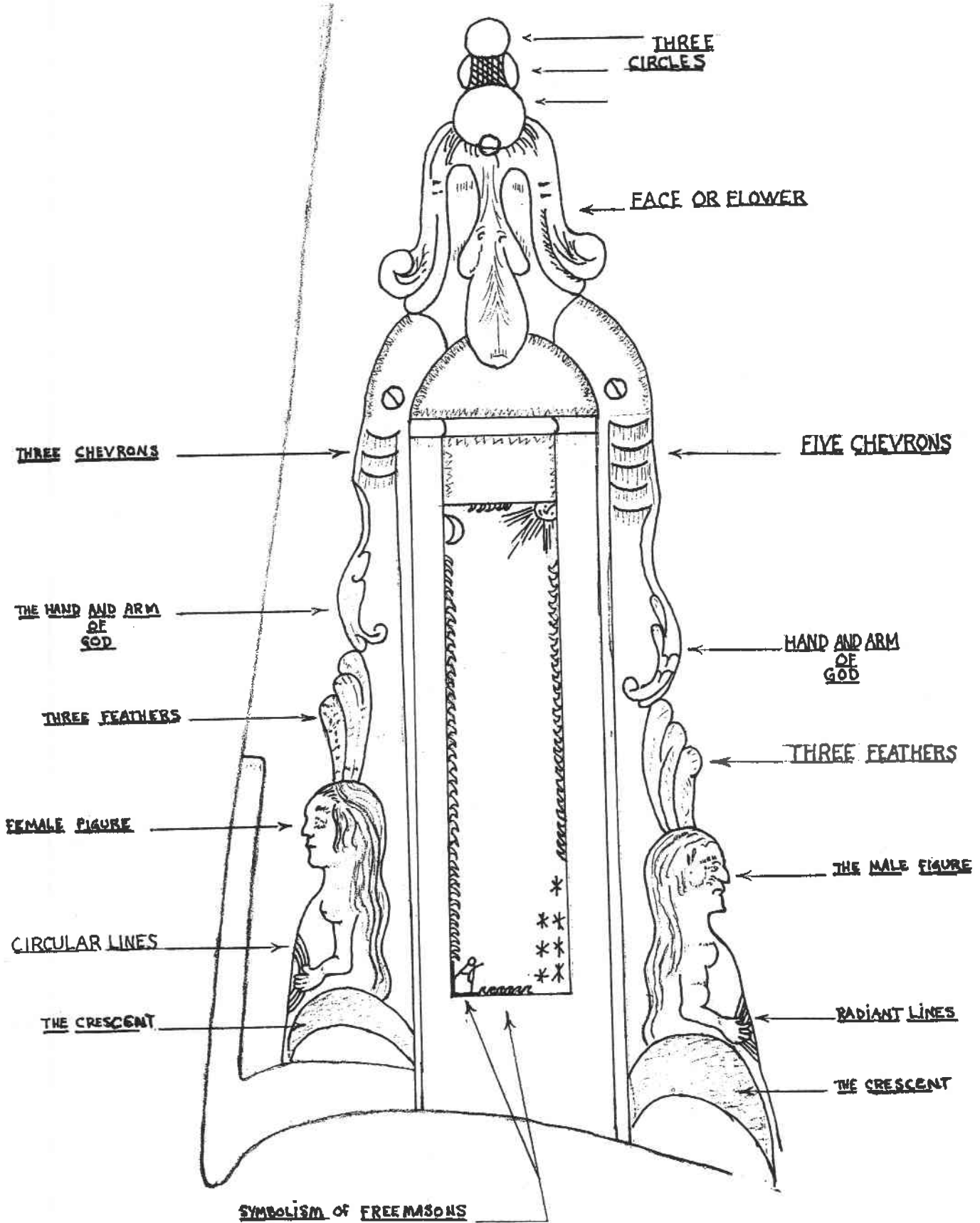
Look closer and compare the features of the two Indians. Notice that the figure on your left has the finer features of a female, while the figure on your right has heavier masculine features. Now, compare the designs on the abdomens of both Indians; they are not the same, a minor visual illusion. The female figure has spiral, circular lines on her abdomen representing rebirth, pregnancy. The circle is also a symbol for eternity or eternal life. The male figure has straight, radial lines pointing inward toward the center of his abdomen, representing the source of life, the seed. These two figures, in the context that has just been interpreted, could also represent Adam and Eve or American men and American women.

The head of each Indian is decorated with three feathers. Why only three? Shouldn't the head of a male Indian chief be decorated with a war bonnet and the Indian maiden's head decorated with a headband and only one feather; that is the way the movies always depict them! Before I answer that question, direct your vision to the upper part of the patch box.

This area includes an optical illusion. Do you see what looks like a large, upside-down, three-petaled flower, resembling a tulip or lily? Do you see the head, face and upper torso of a long-haired, bearded man? Look at the image with just one eye, perhaps your perception will change. As a last resort, refer to the original photograph of the patch box (Figure 1). If you still do not recognize the image of a long-haired, bearded man, don't be discouraged. The face of God is hidden or distorted on purpose. Man in his imperfection is not able to look



Figure 1. J. Fondersmiths' Patch Box.



AN INTERPRETATION OF THE SYMBOLISM  
ENGRAVED ON J. FONDSMITHS PATCH BOX

Figure 2. Detail Line Drawing of Patch Box.

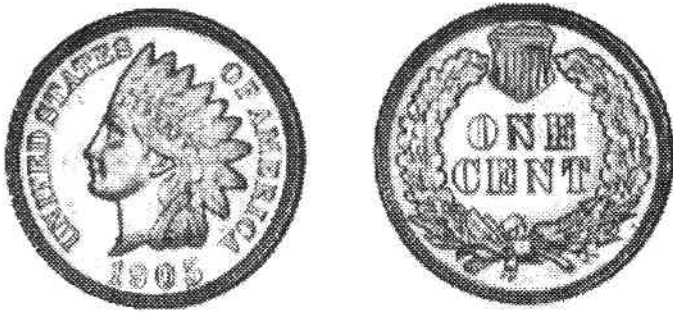


Figure 3. A United States Coin Portraing an Indian.

God square in the face nor to see God in all his glory (Exodus: Ch. 19, V. 20-25 and Deuteronomy: Ch. 4, V 9-14).

The three circles at the very top of the patch box represent, in descending order, the earth or mankind, the cosmos or universe, and the supreme being or God. The lines running through the middle circle are not just a cross hatching design but another minor visual illusion. The *straight* lines are extending upward from the large circle (God), through the middle circle (the universe), to the smaller circle (mankind). These straight lines represent God's perfect love for man. The *diagonal* lines extending downward from the small circle (mankind) through the middle circle (the universe) to the large circle (God) represent man's imperfect love for God. The three circles could also represent the trinity, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. The middle circle, with the straight and diagonal lines, could represent the grace of the Holy Ghost to mankind. The smallest circle could represent Jesus Christ, God's son, who came to earth and died on the cross for the redemption of man's sins.

Now move your vision down along both sides of the patch box, just below the rounded shoulders of the god-head figure. Notice that there is a design of *three* chevrons on the

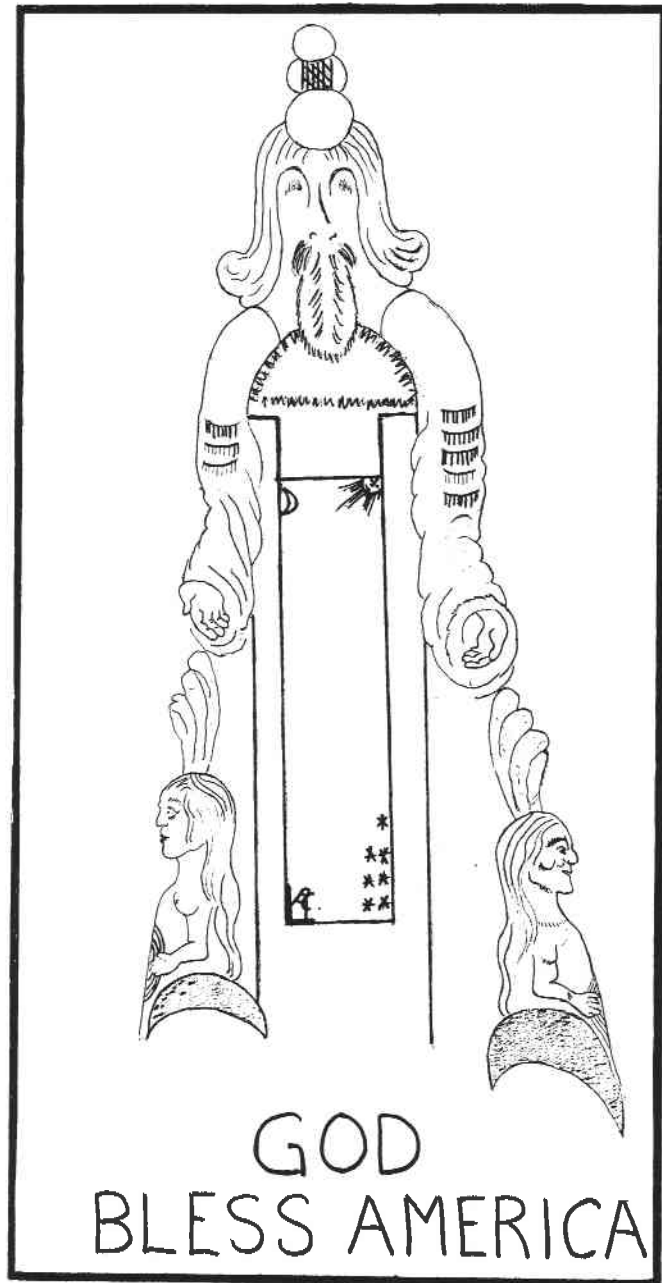


Figure 5. God Bless America.

right upper arm of the torso and a design of *five* chevrons on the left upper arm. Why five and three chevrons? If these designs were just decorations, why aren't they evenly divided, three on the right and three on the left, or five and five? The number three was deemed among the ancient philosophers, to be the most sacred of numbers. Plato saw in it the image of the supreme being because it includes in itself the properties of numbers 1 and 2, which equal the number 3. Aristotle said it contained within itself a beginning, a middle, and an end. The number three also designates some of the attributes of almost all of the ancient Greek and Roman gods. The thunderbolt of Jove was three-forked; the scepter of Neptune was a trident. The sun had three names—Apollo, Sol, and Liber; and the moon also had three names—Diana, Luna, and Hachette. In Christian symbology the number

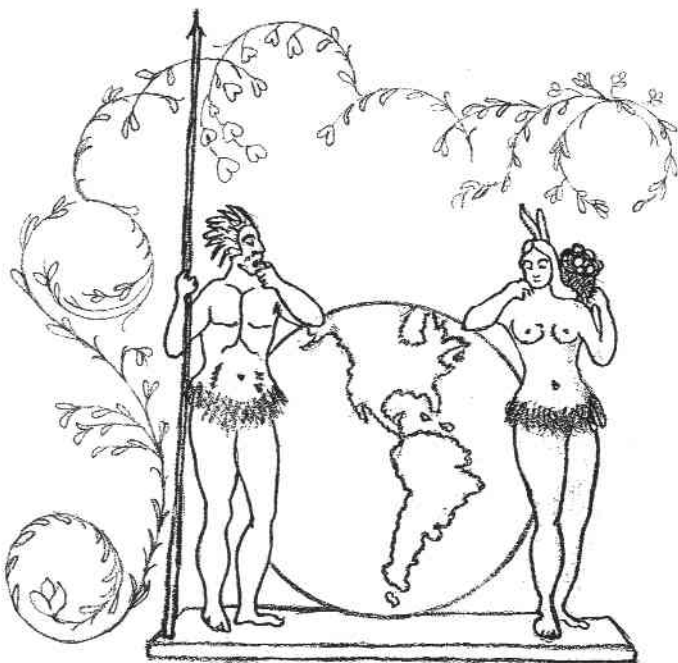


Figure 4. Vignette of Indians Symbolizing "The Americans".

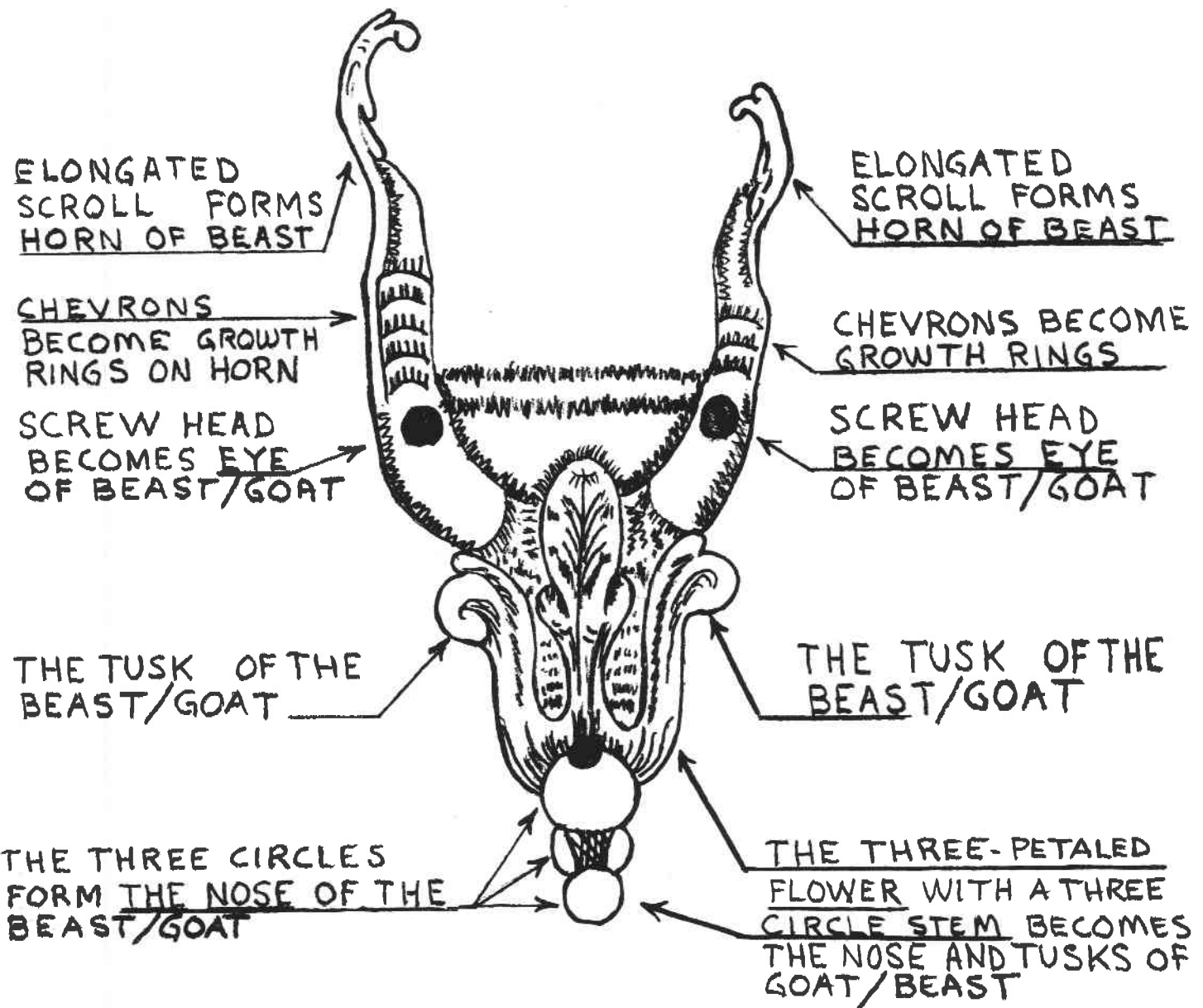


Figure 6. The Devil Depicted as the Head of a Goat. The Reverse of the God Head.

three can represent the trinity, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. The three chevrons on the right upper arm of the god-head figure could represent faith, hope, and charity, Christian virtues infused by God into man.

The number five was also a mystical number among Greek Pythagorean philosophers, because it was formed by the union of the first even number (2) and the first odd number (3), symbolizing the rejection of unity, the mixed conditions of order and disorder, happiness and misfortune, life and death. In Christian symbology the number five could represent the five wounds inflicted on Jesus Christ during his crucifixion; nails driven through his hands and feet, a spear thrust into his side. The five chevrons on the left upper arm could represent the five senses of hearing, seeing, feeling, tasting, and smelling. As these senses are the avenues by which the mind receives its perceptions of things exterior to it, and thus

becomes the storehouse of ideas, they are symbolized to represent the pursuit and acquisition of knowledge.

Now to answer the question about the three feathers decorating the heads of the two Indians. Move your vision down just below the chevrons decorating the right and left upper arms of the God-head figure. The lower arms and hands of this supreme being are symbolically represented as elongated scrolls, touching the feathered heads of the seated Indians. This gesture represents God's gift of knowledge and virtue to mankind. The three feathers, the number three, could also represent the blessing of "the trinity"—God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost—upon mankind. We have now come full circle around the patch box, interpreting the individual symbols engraved upon it. Recall what I said at the beginning, that Indians represented America. The overall interpretation of the combined symbols makes this statement, "God Bless America!" (Figure 5).

Now turn the line drawing and the photograph of the patch box upside down (Figures 1 and 2). You should readily see a three-petaled flower with a three-circle stem. In Christian symbolism this flower represents rebirth, the resurrection of Christ, the Easter lily. Expand your vision. Do you see a fearsome horned beast with tusks? If you do, you're looking at the devil himself. If not, look at Figure 6. At the base of the devil's right horn are five growth rings (the inverted chevrons). They represent, in Christian symbolism, the *pain* of Christ's five wounds during his crucifixion and the mockery of false love the devil has for Jesus Christ. At the base of the left horn are three growth rings (the inverted chevrons) representing an unworthy or false fear of the trinity. All men should love and fear God. The devil hates man and God. The voluted scrolls that represented the arms and hands of God have now turned into long twisted goat horns, touching the feathers of the Indians, representing the evil spirit's hate and curse on mankind. This type of inverted design—revealing opposites—was a popular expression used by some medieval Christians in occult art. It is based on the cabala, a system of mystical interpretations of biblical scripture.

These last few paragraphs contain “heady stuff” but you must keep in mind that the person who designed this patch box was of another world, a world two hundred years in the past. Mystical societies, religious ceremonies, and even philosophers and scientists veiled the true meaning of their instructions in intentional obscurity, lest the unlearned and uninitiated should be offended. The ancient mysteries had their secret doctrine; the alchemists gave a secret and spiritual meaning to their jargon about the transmutation of metals; the Christian Bible was the most popular of all literary works read and studied by the people of Western civilization. J. Fondersmith was of the Christian faith, a Lutheran, steeped in German folklore, superstition, and Medieval Christian theology. So, why shouldn't we find such symbolism on the patch box of a Kentucky rifle made by a gunsmith of German origin? There is no reason that it should not be there!

There is just one more question that needs to be answered. Who was it made for? The answer lies in the symbolism of Freemasonry engraved on the lid of the patch box (Figure 2). Direct your vision to the lower right-hand corner of the patch box lid. The seven stars represent the “luminaries” of the lodge, seven distinguished leaders with outstanding intellectual and moral qualities who provide inspiration and guidance. The sun and moon displayed on the upper corners of the lid represent the regularity or regulations of the ritual of the lodge as the moon follows the sun in the daily regularity of the universe so will the Worshipful Master of a Masonic Lodge conduct the business (ritual) of his lodge. The allusion of a radiant sun and crescent moon may also extend to the regulation of one's morality and serves to remind Brethren to avoid excesses in their actions. The outline of a square and com-

passes are engraved in the lower lefthand corner of the lid. The square and compasses allude to basic moral precepts of Freemasonry, which promote good moral character by dealing fairly (“on the square”) with one's fellow man, and by living within the bounds (radius) of a virtuous lifestyle.

The perimeter of the rectangular patch box lid, encompassing all of these symbols which speak of the universe and the lodge, could represent a masonic apron, worn by the great architect of the universe, the Supreme Being (Figure 5). From all of these symbols we can assume that the original owner of this fine Kentucky rifle was a Freemason.

## SUMMARY

I hope that the information presented in this article will establish a new awareness of the folk art and symbolism created by the American gunsmiths who developed the Kentucky rifle.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to extend my sincere appreciation to John Hamilton, 33<sup>rd</sup> degree and Lorentz Kafka 32<sup>nd</sup> degree Masons, for their prudent and generous counsel. Without their assistance and encouragement, this outstanding artifact of American folk art would have been ignored and disregarded as just another fancy Kentucky Rifle patch box.

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