

The legend which connects the origin of English Masonry at York, in 926, is sometimes called the "Athelstane Legend," because the General Assembly, said to have been held there, occurred during the reign of that king; and sometimes the "Edwin Legend," because that prince is supposed to have been at the head of the Craft, and to have convoked them together to form a constitution.

The earliest extant of the old manuscript constitutions is the ancient poem, commonly known as the Halliwell MS., and the date of which is conjectured (on good grounds) to be about the year 1390. In that work we find the following version of the legend :

"Thys craft com ynto England as y yow say.

In tyme of good kynge Adelstonus day ;  
He made tho bothe halle and eke boure,  
And hye templus of great honoure,  
To sportyn him yn bothe day and nyght.  
An to worschepe hys God with alle hys myght.

Thys goode lorde loved thys craft ful wel,  
And purposod to strengthyn hyt every del,  
For dyvers defawtys that yn the craft he fonde ;

He sende aboute ynto the londe  
After alle the masouns of the crafte,  
To come to hym ful evene, strayfte,

For to amende these defawtys alle  
By good conseil gef hyt myght falle.  
Assemble thenne he cowthe let make  
Of dyvers lordis yn here state  
Dukys, erlys, and barnes also,  
Knyghthys, sqwyers and mony mo,  
And the grete burges of that syte,  
They were ther alle yn here degre ;  
These were ther uchon algate,  
To ordeyne for these masouns estate,  
Ther they sowgton by here wytte  
How they mygthyn governe hytte ;  
Fyftene artyculus they there sowgton,  
And fyftene poyntys ther they wrogton."

For the benefit of those who are not familiar with this archaic style, the passage is translated into modern English :

"This craft came into England, as I tell you, in the time of good King Athelstane's reign; he made then both hall and also bower, and lofty temples of great honor, to take his recreation in both day and night, and to worship his God with all his might. This good lord loved this Craft full well, and proposed to strengthen it in every part, on account of various defects that he discovered in the Craft. He sent about into all the land after all the Masons of the Craft, to come straight to him to amend all these defects by good counsel, if it might so happen. He then permitted an assembly to be made of divers lords in their ranks, dukes, earls, and barons also, knights, squires, and many more, and the great burgesses of that city, they were all there in their degree; these were there, each one in every way to make laws for the estate of these Masons. There they sought by their wisdom how they might govern it; there they found out fifteen articles, and there they made fifteen points.

The next old document in which we find this legend recited is that known as the "Cooke MS.," whose date is placed at 1490. The details are here much more full than those contained in the Halliwell MS. The passage referring to the legend is as follows :

"And after that was a worthy kynge in Englonde that was called Athelstone, and his youngest sone lovyd well the sciens of Geometry, and he wyst well that hand craft had the practyke of the sciens of Geometry as well as Masons; wherefore he drew him to counsell and lernyd [the] practyke of that sciens to his speculatyfe. For of speculatyfe he was a master, and he lovyd well masonry and masons. And he became a mason hymselfe. And he gaf hem [gave them] charges and names as it is now usyd in Englonde and in other countries. And he ordeyned that they schulde have reasonabule pay. And purchased [obtained] a fre patent of the kynge that they schulde make a ssembly when thei sarve