

Who Are These Prince Hall Masons?

By Allen E. Roberts, FPS

Recently I received a letter from the secretary of a country lodge. He had seen a picture of a Black man in a lodge in Massachusetts. He wrote: "I am curious as to his Masonic affiliation. I could be wrong but I was under the impression that New Jersey was the only Grand Lodge that recognized Black Masons. I would appreciate it if you would set me straight on this matter." Why the letter was sent to me, I don't know, but all types of requests for information cross my desk. And why the letter surprised me, I'm not certain. I thought everyone was familiar with the subject of Black Freemasonry. As far as I can determine there have been Black Freemasons since 1356 when a code of Mason Regulations was drawn up in Guildhall, London. We don't know when the term "free mason" was first used, but we do know it was applied to early-operative masons to differentiate them from other craftsmen. The "free" was added because these craftsmen were allowed to travel from place to place to seek employment in their important trade. There may have been Black men among them. Shortly after the Grand Lodge system that we know today was established in 1717, Masonic lodges were formed throughout the world.

Many of them were organized in countries with predominately Black populations. The Grand Lodges of England, Ireland and Scotland, even today, have lodges in such countries. In those Whites and Blacks meet, as they should, on an equal footing. When I was a guest of the Grand Lodge of Scotland in 1964 I sat with dozens of Black Masonic leaders from other countries. Since then I have met with Black Freemasons in many jurisdictions. In this country several have attended many of the seminars I have conducted.

The Constitutions of the Free-Masons clearly defines who can and cannot be Freemasons: "The persons admitted members of a Lodge must be good and true men, freeborn, and of mature and discreet age, no bondsmen, no women, no immoral or scandalous men, but of good report". Note, there is not a word in this charge that specifies a color.

There evidently were no Black men among the Freemasons who were in the American colonies prior to 1730, nor, actually, until 1775. Then on March 6 of that year 1775, an event took place that has been discussed, often vehemently, continuously. On that date fifteen men of color were initiated into Freemasonry. Among them was a man who has become immortal among Black Freemasons, Prince Hall.

Sergeant John Batt of the Irish Military Lodge No. 441, attached to the 38th Foot of the British Army, conducted the initiation of Prince Hall and his fourteen brethren. They are reported to have paid fifteen guineas to receive the three degrees. Eleven days later, March 17, 1775, the 38th Foot left Boston, but the Black Masons were issued a "Permit" by Bart. This permitted them to meet as a lodge and "walk on St. John's Day" and "to bury their dead in manner and form". So African Lodge No. 1 of Boston, Massachusetts was born on July 3, 1775.

John Rowe, the Provincial Grand Master, it is said, issued a similar agreement to the lodge in 1784. It is also said that Prince Hall and the members of his lodge asked the English Grand Lodge of Massachusetts for its approval. This was denied. So on March 2, 1784 a request for a warrant was sent to the Grand Lodge of England ("Moderns"). A charter was prepared on September 29, 1784 (which is still in existence), but didn't reach Boston until April 29, 1787. African Lodge became No. 459 on the roster of the English Grand Lodge.

Nineteen days later the Lodge sent an account of its activities to the Grand Lodge of England. It indicated it had "eighteen Masters, four 'Crafts, and eleven Entered Apprentices". Along with the return went a copy of its bylaws which had been adopted on January 14, 1779 my study of Prince Hall Masonry began in 1957.

In 1959, I submitted a paper for Virginia Research Lodge No. 1777 entitled "The controversy concerning Prince Hall Masonry". I attempted, and I think succeeded, in making it an unbiased report on the subject as it was then known. My then Grand Secretary gave me permission to research the subject with the then Prince Hall Grand Secretary in Virginia. Even then I believed, and still do, that it's difficult to consider any organization that's older than our country irregular, illegal, or clandestine.

"Freeborn" is the catchall phrase that the opponents of recognition of Prince Hall Masonry have constantly used. And it may be surprising to many to learn there were Negro (or Black) slaves in Boston in the 1770s. It isn't surprising to this ex-New Englander. There were, however, as many free Blacks as there were slaves. The men Batt initiated into what became African Lodge were free men. What we often forget is that there have been as many, if not more, white and yellow slaves throughout the years. There still are! Bias has been deeply embedded in the subject of Prince Hall Masonry from its inception. Black and White Freemasons have used language to describe each other that's anything but brotherly.

The bigots are not confined to just one side alone. Truth is always difficult to determine for any subject. Historians must depend on the work of others, but whenever possible the work of others should be supplemented by examining original documents. This is often demanding, but frequently more than one book or article will be found on the subject being researched.

Such is the case with Black Freemasonry. In 1903 William H. Grimshaw, a Black Mason, wrote "The Official History of Freemasonry Among the Colored People in North America". In 1940 Harold V.B. Voorhis wrote "Negro Masonry in the United States". Voorhis based much of what he wrote on Grimshaw's book. A short time later Voorhis discovered Grimshaw's book was loaded with errors and fanciful writing, so Voorhis removed his book from distribution. Harry E. Davis wrote "A History of Free Masonry Among Negroes in America" in 1946. He also found Grimshaw's book full of myths and outright untruths.

In 1979 Joseph A. Walkes, Jr., wrote "Black Square and Compass" which was later revised and published by Macoy Publishing and Masonic Supply Company. Later he wrote "The Prince Hall Masonic Quiz Book" which Macoy later revised and published under the same title. Charles H. Wesley wrote "Prince Hall Life and Legacy" in 1977 and attempted to correct the falsehoods of the past. He didn't hesitate to "tell the truth as he found it". He named those who had stretched the truth or told outright falsehoods. And the falsehoods were plentiful; they came from all sides. One such report came from one of my Masonic heroes, Josiah Hayden Drummond of Maine.

After the end of the American Civil War in 1865, many more Black men became interested in Freemasonry. This alarmed several Grand Lodges. As Foreign Correspondent for the Grand Lodge of Maine, Drummond wrote in May 1868 that Prince Hall and other men of color went to England and were made Masons. He said the Grand Lodge of England granted them a warrant for African Lodge No. 459. Drummond added in his report: "But the granting of this charter was an invasion of the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts. It was, therefore, recalled, but a copy of it was kept by the Lodge, and though it was no longer any authority for them, they continued to work as a Lodge, many of those made in the Military Lodges having joined them". This was a complete distortion. These Black men were made Freemasons in Boston, not London. The warrant from England was requested by letter and the Lodge did become No. 459 on the roster of the Grand Lodge of England. The warrant wasn't recalled.

African Lodge was dropped by the Grand Lodge of England in 1813, along with many other American lodges that had made no report to that Grand Lodge in years. Among those dropped were half the lodges in Massachusetts; the other half were never on the rolls of the English Grand Lodge. Exclusive jurisdiction wasn't even thought of in the 1700s, and at any rate there were then two Grand Lodges in Massachusetts, English and Scottish. In addition, the Grand Lodge of England has never considered "exclusive jurisdiction" of any importance. The first evidence that African Lodge had been established as a Grand Lodge occurred on September 28, 1789 when a letter was sent from Philadelphia to "Mr. Hall, Master of the African Lodge".

The Black men in that city "were all ready to go to work, having all but a Dispensation". The request was cautiously approved. Later requests from Providence, Rhode Island, and New York City were granted. African Grand Lodge was a reality and Prince Hall was its Grand Master. Those who question the legality of Prince Hall Freemasonry claim African Lodge, even if legitimate, had no power to warrant other lodges. This is a difficult argument to support. Scottish lodges had warranted new Lodges for years. But one has to go no further than the American colonies. The Lodge at Fredericksburg in the colony of Virginia came into existence on September 1, 1752 with a full slate of officers. This makes one wonder when and where this Lodge was actually formed.

On February 28, 1768 this Lodge granted a warrant for the formation of Falmouth Lodge in Virginia; on October 10, 1770 Fredericksburg Lodge warranted Botetourt Lodge in Gloucester, Virginia. No one has ever questioned the legitimacy of these lodges. Nor has anyone questioned the legitimacy of St. John's Lodge in Massachusetts, which set itself up as a Grand Lodge in 1733.

Prince Hall died on December 4, 1807. The Black Masons continued to work. Caucasian Masonry continued to ignore them even though they requested recognition. In 1824 African Lodge requested permission from the Grand Lodge of England to confer the Royal Arch degrees. The request was ignored, but this created no problem for African Lodge - it had been conferring the degrees for years!

On June 26, 1827 African Grand Lodge notified the world that it was "free and independent of any lodge from this day". Although every Grand Lodge in the United States, including Virginia, had made much the same observation, this statement would haunt Prince Hall Freemasonry to the present day.

In 1847 the African (or National) Grand Lodge became Prince Hall Grand Lodge. Over the years there have been several white Freemasons who have wished Prince Hall Masonry well. They have assisted it insofar as their obligations would permit. John Dove, the Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Virginia, shortly after the close of the American Civil War gave Prince Hall Masons his text book. Much of it is still used to this day even though it has been revised and copyrighted by Prince Hall Masonry.

William Upton, and others, in the Grand Lodge of Washington, in 1898 considered Prince Hall Masonry legitimate, and that Grand Lodge said so. This brought down the wrath of most of the Grand Lodges in the country. The Grand Lodge of Washington rescinded it, in part, the following year (For a full discussion on this subject, see the Proceedings of this Grand Lodge for 1897, 98, 99). Even so, for the past several years it worked closely with the Prince Hall Grand Lodge on many civic projects. One hundred years after Upton was condemned the two Grand Lodges officially recognized each other, then met to celebrate in public ceremonies this historical event. In 1947 Melvin M. Johnson of Massachusetts, another of my Masonic heroes (even though he attempted to make his state Masonically first in everything!), proved to the satisfaction of his Grand Lodge and the Northern Masonic Jurisdiction of the Scottish Rite that Prince Hall Freemasonry is legitimate. George Newberry, also of the NMJ, testified in court that Prince Hall Masonry is legitimate.

And I'll confess. Over the years I have written ritual (not ours!) and other things for Prince Hall Masonry. I'll continue to help it in any way I can as long as what I do doesn't violate the obligations of Freemasonry that I have taken. And I shall continue to abide by the laws, rules and regulations of my Grand Lodge regardless of how I may feel personally.

What does Prince Hall Freemasonry want from "Regular" Freemasonry? Perhaps this item I wrote for my column "Through Masonic Windows" for The Philaethes magazine will answer the question: "Grand Master (and Reverend) Howard L. Woods of the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Arkansas would like to see more cooperation among the Prince Hall Grand Lodges and the Caucasian counterparts. He puts it this way: 'Grand Masters (Prince Hall) do not want any integration as such among the jurisdictions, for we each walk a different path toward the same goal. What I personally would like to see is more meetings like the Phylaxis meetings with you and Jerry [Marsengill] and others like you that have a greater depth of feeling for Freemasonry. Once that feeling is attained, you 'become one with the universe' where there is no color or any other vain distinction that would separate men from each other. Kind of Utopian, but this I believe. In an organization that is nothing without Brotherly Love, shouldn't this become a reality rather than Utopian?"

It must be emphasized that Brother Woods made it clear he was expressing his personal opinion and not that of any organization. From my discussions with Prince Hall leaders I believe that Body does want to retain its own identity. It wants Black men to join its ranks rather than our lodges. It would like to be fully recognized as THE legitimate Black Freemasonry. It would like to be able to meet with us, outside our lodges, as equals. This is an accomplished fact in several jurisdictions today.

What can we do to help? We should never refuse to accept a petition from any good man because of his race, creed, religion, or color. In the case of Black men, however, we should inform them about Prince Hall Masonry and its need for good leaders. These men should then be left to make their own choice with no persuasion in any way on our part.

Is Prince Hall Masonry legitimate? You be the judge. Take into account that it began in 1775, making it older than our country. It started with African Lodge in Massachusetts. This was formed into a Grand Lodge and warranted other lodges and became national in scope. In 1847 it was renamed Prince Hall Grand Lodge to honor its first Master and Grand Master, the man it considered its founder. It has continued to be active without a break to the present day. The Prince Hall rituals, insofar as I have read them, are similar to those we practice. Much of their work is based on the work developed by John Dove, Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Virginia, and one of the greatest ritualists in the country in his day. His work in the Baltimore convention proves this statement. Prince Hall laws, again derived from the work of John Dove, along with Anderson's constitutions of the Freemasons, are what we follow.

A caution, however. There are something like 40 Black organizations calling themselves Masonic that are illegitimate. These have no connection with Prince Hall Masonry, and the latter is constantly at war with them. To fight them successfully, Prince Hall Masonry must have our help. This, briefly, outlines the facts as I see them concerning Black Freemasonry. Each of us must make our own determination about what should be done to keep the Brotherhood of Man through the Fatherhood of God a viable cause for Freemasonry as a whole.

Much of this I related in my keynote address at the Conference of Grand Masters in 1989 when I pleaded for Freemasonry to put Brotherhood and Universality to work in the Craft. The Grand Lodge of Connecticut did, during the same year. Since then about 20 others in the United States and Canada have followed.

We claim there is universality within Freemasonry - but is there?