

Prince Hall Masonry

A paper presented to William F Bunting Lodge of Research
Grand Lodge of New Brunswick
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In this paper I will try to present the early history of the Black Lodges and address the recognition problem that has existed in North America for the last two hundred and twenty five years. Let me say from the outset that I believe the whole issue is one of bigotry. Many arguments have been developed using Masonic Jurisprudence to support these beliefs, however, these arguments do not stand up when they are applied to all Lodges.

The problem is whether the Prince Hall Lodges are regular and true Lodges. Terms related to this are clandestine, regular and recognized Lodges. Definition of Clandestine: (Webster's Unabridged) Conducted with secrecy by design, actually for evil purposes. Mackey: The irregular origin or operation as a Masonic Lodge or men functioning as a Body of Masonry. Also referring to Clandestine, perhaps those Grand Jurisdictions do not require a belief in a Supreme Being as a requirement for membership, or the use of a Book of Sacred Law on the Altar in their Lodges; also those Grand Jurisdictions which do not conform to all the requirements of recognition as are set forth in our own Grand Jurisdiction. The Grand Lodge of England has a paper used to judge if a Lodge or Grand Lodge is regular and thus able to be recognized.

The regularity and recognition of Grand Lodges are separate but allied subjects. Unless a Grand Lodge is regular, it cannot be recognized. Unless a Grand Lodge is recognized, its Brethren cannot (or should not) be met as Freemasons by Brethren of regular and recognized Grand Lodges.

The "Basic Principles for Grand Lodge Recognition" were adopted by The Grand Lodge of England in 1929. To be eligible for recognition, a Grand Lodge must

- a. be regular in its origin
- b. be truly independent and self-governing.
- c. adhere to 'landmarks' (a landmark is an essential characteristic of regular Freemasonry).

A Grand Lodge must have been established by: a) a recognized Grand Lodge, or b) three (nowadays) or more regularly constituted private Lodges, formed in accordance within the rules and customs of a regular Grand Lodge.

A Grand Lodge must have undisputed authority over Craft (or basic) Freemasonry within its jurisdiction, and not be subject in any way to or share power with any other Masonic body. This principle is expressed overseas as exclusive Territorial jurisdiction, but has recently been qualified as being "subject to exceptions". This qualification means the principle is not violated if Grand Lodges agree to share territory while maintaining authority over Brethren under their jurisdiction (e.g., The Grand Lodge of England's recognition of four Grand Lodges in Colombia; the acceptance of the Grand Lodges of New Zealand and South Africa (etc.), in their territory,

and the fact that Lodges under the Grand Lodge of the State of Washington work in the territory of the Grand Lodge of Alaska). Agreement by one Grand Lodge to share Its territory with another does not imply license for other Grand Lodges to insert Lodges into the territory of the first Grand Lodge.

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 "Permet" by Batt. 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. In 1792 they were renumbered 370, but this did not get transmitted to the Lodge.

The first Lodge in Boston was called "Old First Lodge" and was started by Henry Price in 1733. In 1752 a group of Masons in Boston self constituted a Lodge and got a Charter in 1760 from The Grand Lodge of Scotland naming them St Andrews Lodge. In Boston at this time are Lodges from the Grand Lodges of England and Scotland.

It is of interest that in 1737 First Lodge of Boston made a Master Mason of Erasmus James Phillipps who was in the city correcting a border dispute on behalf of the British. Henry Price who was at this time Provincial Grand Master of North America appointed Phillipps Provincial Grand Master of Nova Scotia. On his return to Nova Scotia he constituted the first non military Lodge in Canada at Annapolis Royal. From this Lodge most of the Lodges in the Maritimes can be traced. That is to say that this Lodge was able to give warrants for the start of new Lodges. This is a power that critics maintain African Lodge did not possess.

The question of extending Black Masonry arose when Absalom Jones of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania appeared in Boston. He was an ordained Episcopal priest and a mason who was interested in establishing a masonic lodge in Philadelphia. Under the authority of the charter of African Lodge #459, Prince Hall established African Lodge #459 of Philadelphia on March 22, 1797 and Hiram Lodge #3 in Providence, Rhode Island on June 25, 1797. African Lodge of Boston became the "Mother Lodge" of the Prince Hall Family. In 1808 these Lodges joined into the "African Grand Lodge of Boston".

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 Fredericksburgh 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 Fredericksburgh 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.

The Lodges of Boston on the English Registry formed the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts in 1792. St. Andrews Lodge on the Scottish Registry did not join and African Lodge was not invited. The Grand Lodge worked on St Andrews until it joined in 1809. African Lodge was ignored.

Prince Hall was performing the duties of a Provincial Grand Master from 1792 until his death in 1807. One writer states that Prince Hall was appointed a Provincial Grand Master by HRH the Prince of Wales in 1791. This does not show up in other reports. He communicated with the Grand Lodge of England many times over this period, but did not always get an answer from the Grand Secretary.

In 1813 the two Grand Lodges of England, the Moderns and the Ancients, united. During this unification all the Lodges in America were dropped from the rolls. The reason given was that they were not up to date with their dues to Grand Lodge. Most of these either cleared up with England or joined into an American Grand Lodge. African Lodge 370 was still sending correspondence to the Grand Lodge in 1824, but getting no response. It seems as if they did not know they had been dropped.

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 other states the Black Lodges were forming their own Grand Lodges and to try to keep some conformity among themselves three joined to form the National Grand Lodge. In 1849 three of these renamed themselves The Prince Hall Grand Lodge. Over the next twenty five years several different grand bodies were formed in several different states. This added confusion to the whole situation of the Black Lodges and gave fodder to the opponents. By 1876 most all have joined the group that set up Prince Hall Grand in 1849.

In 1897 two Black Masons petitioned the Grand Lodge of Washington to be recognized as regular Masons. In 1898 the committee returned their report and stated that indeed they were in order and their regularity was without doubt. The GL of Washington then voted on a four part resolution which, in part, stated that:

1) "neither race nor color are among the tests proper to be applied to determine the fitness of a candidate for the degrees of Masonry."

2) "in view of recognized laws of the Masonic Institution, and of facts of history apparently well authenticated and worthy of full credence, this Grand Lodge does not see its way clear to deny or question the right of its constituent Lodges, or of the members thereof, to recognize as brother Masons, Negroes who have been initiated in Lodges which can trace their origin to African Lodge, No. 459."

3) "This Grand Lodge deems it to the best interest of Masonry to declare that if regular Masons of African descent desire to establish, within the State of Washington, Lodges confined wholly or chiefly to brethren of their race, and shall establish such Lodges strictly in accordance with the Landmarks of Masonry, and in accordance with Masonic Law as heretofore interpreted by Masonic tribunals of their own race, and if such Lodges shall in due time see fit in like manner to erect a Grand Lodge for the better administration of their affairs, this Grand Lodge, having more regard for the good of Masonry than for any mere technicality, will not regard the establishment of such Lodges of Grand Lodge as an invasion of its jurisdiction, but as evincing a disposition to conform to its own ideas as to the best interests of the Craft under peculiar circumstances; and will ever extend to our colored brethren its sincere sympathy in every effort to promote the welfare of the Craft or inculcate the pure principles of our Art."

4) "The Grand Secretary be instructed to acknowledge receipt of the communication from Gideon S. Bailey and Con A. Rideout, and forward to them a copy of the printed Proceedings of this annual communication of the Grand Lodge, as a response to said communication."

This created a firestorm of protest from other white Grand Lodges and they threatened to end communications with Washington. Washington conceded and reversed its decision in 1899. Ninety years will pass before this error is corrected.

In 1992 the Grand Lodges of Canada jointly stated that Prince Hall Masonry was regular. In May of that year New Brunswick responded to a request from the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Ontario to open visitation rights between the two Grand Lodges and became the first in Canada to offer recognition. At present all Canadian Grand Lodges except Ontario have accepted Prince Hall of Ontario.

In the United States most States except those of the south have recognized some Prince Hall Grand Lodges. A grand Lodge needs to be asked by another Grand Lodge to offer recognition before any talks take place. It is also up to the junior Grand Lodge to approach the more senior Grand Lodge.

Let me be clear about recognition and visiting other Jurisdictions. If your Grand Lodge and their Grand Lodge have not recognized each other you cannot visit in that Jurisdiction. This is not a question of the lodges being regular, but a question of the two recognizing and agreeing that they support the same principals of Masonry.

In closing let me state that the research for this paper was difficult. The facts surrounding Prince Hall are confusing and not agreed to by all writers. In 1903 William H. Grimshaw, a Black Mason, wrote "Official History of Freemasonry Among the Colored People in North America". He used much fabrication to fill in gaps in the recorded history and was quoted many times. These miss truths are hard to get out of the record and the legends. As a result I have not tried to present a biography of Prince Hall, but looked at his work in Masonry. His legacy cannot be denied.

Here are some of the objections and responses to the question of whether Prince Hall masons are regular. These are taken from a paper of Charles H. Tupper MPS, Washington State.

The main objection raised today against intervisitation between Grand Lodges in the same State has to do with a purely American doctrine - exclusive jurisdiction. This doctrine had its beginnings during and after the Revolutionary War when the Grand Lodges began to form. The various States began to form Grand Lodges and would then Charter Lodges only within the territory of their State and the areas that did not have an existing Grand Lodge. Gradually the concept of exclusive jurisdiction became the norm.

In 1796 the Grand Lodge of New York passed a resolution stating that it would not issue a Charter to any group in a State where there was another Grand Lodge in existence. The concept spread by common consent and not rules as most Masons believe today. There were exceptions to this rule in the early days but they were all ironed out in the end. The important thing about this is that it is being used as a reason to not recognize the Prince Hall Grand Lodges in many jurisdictions.

Ob: "The supposed acting army lodge, in recognition of the fact that

Masonic degrees can be conferred only in a lodge, turned out to be no more than a lone former sergeant named John Batt in the British forces who, having been discharged therefrom, enlisted in the American Army at Boston for a short period until he deserted. Since it was a financial venture for him, it is difficult to see why he selected Blacks for his prey, none of whom seem to have been overburdened with wealth, though the needs of White petitioners were supplied by the several lodges in that city."

Ans: This claim is a very deliberate attempt to put the date of the

initiation, passing and raising of Prince Hall and his fellows to a time when this could not have legally happened. A perusal of the documents show that the year of the event is missing and this makes the claim possible. It is reasonably certain that John Batt did, in fact, sell degrees in 1778 but nowhere is Prince Hall or any of his Brethren mentioned in the documentation. I submit that, since Military Lodge #441 was, in fact, active at Castle William in 1775 that it is not up to the Prince Hall Masons to prove that he was legally initiated, passed and raised at that time, as Prince Hall himself claimed but, rather, is up to those who do not believe this to disprove it.

It must be remembered that Masonic Records for this period are fragmentary in many places and the lack of a positive document to show the fact of conferral is missing for a great many men who are claimed by our Fraternity as true and trusty brothers.

Ob: "African Lodge ceased after 1797 to pay Grand Lodge dues and to correspond with the London office, for which reason it was dropped from the joint roll of the UGLE in 1813 along with 352 or 363 other delinquent lodges. In this or any similar case, those who 'creep under the tent' to enter the Fraternity, by that very act, declare their lack of Masonic qualities, for no Masonic body rejects good material."

Ans: Oh really? It is an established fact that Grand Lodges throughout the United States have, for over two hundred years, rejected "good material" because of the color of their skin. This racial bigotry has even been, at one time or other, been written into the Masonic Code in many Grand Jurisdictions. Following are some representative examples:

- 1) Louisiana - 1924 - decision of GM - "A mixture of white and Negro blood made a man ineligible for the degrees"
- 2) South Carolina - Ahiman Rezon - ".....that a candidate must be of free white parents."
- 3) Texas - Constitution and Laws - 1948 - "This Grand Lodge does not recognize as legal or Masonic any body of Negroes working under any character of charter in the United States, without regard to the body granting such charter, and they regard all Negro lodges as clandestine, illegal and un-Masonic, and moreover, they regard as highly censurable the course of any Grand Lodge in the United States which shall recognize such bodies of Negroes as Masonic Lodges."
- 4) Illinois - Proceedings - 1899 - "Therefore to have Lodges exclusively of Negroes, would be dangerous to the high character of our Order. And, to associate them in Lodges with white brethren, would be impossible."
- 5) Delaware - Proceedings - 1867 - contained in obligation of Master Mason - "making of any Negro, mulatto, or colored person of the

United States "

As can be seen from these examples it was impossible for the Negro to petition a Lodge for the degrees or for Negro Lodges to petition anywhere for entrance into any Grand Lodge in the Country. I submit that Freemasonry itself does not draw barriers on the basis of the color of skin. Since the general practice in the United States is to draw this line, the Negro Lodges are left with no choice but to be separate. Just who is the un-Masonic party here?

When the UGLE dropped the Lodges in the United States from the rolls in 1813, the UGLE had a problem on their hands because every Lodge wanted a low number. The re-numbering process left out all Lodges that had not been regular in their Charity donations for a period of time. This had nothing to do with whether or not the Lodges were worthy of being Lodges.

Ob: "African Lodge could not under regulations of the Grand Lodge do aught but make, pass and raise Masons, nor could it create other lodges or a Grand Lodge."

Ans: Neither could Mother Kilwinning Lodge or St. Andrews Lodge but they, among others, did the same thing and I do not see them being attacked for doing it nor are the Lodges they chartered deemed clandestine.

Ob: That it surrendered its warrant to the UGLE in 1824.

Ans: In 1824 African Lodge stated in a letter to the UGLE that they were Royal Arch Masons and that the warrant they had only authorized them to confer the first three degrees. They wished to confer the four RA degrees and so solicited the "Renewal of our Charter." There is no mention of surrendering any charter and the objection is not worthy.

Ob: African Lodge declared itself independent in 1827.

Ans: This came because African Lodge published in a newspaper, after being unsuccessful in communicating with the UGLE, the following:

"Taking all these things into consideration, we have come to the conclusion that with what knowledge we possess of Masonry, and as people of color by ourselves, we are, and ought by rights to be, free and independent of other Lodges. We do, therefore, with this belief, publicly declare ourselves free and independent of any Lodge from this day, and that we will not be tributary, or be governed by any Lodge but our own. We agree solemnly to abide by all proper rules and regulations

which govern the like Fraternity, discountenancing all imposition to injure the Order, and to use all fair and honorable means to promote its prosperity, resting in full hope that this will enable us to transmit it in its purity to our posterity for their enjoyment." . . . "We did no more than the Massachusetts Grand Lodge did on the 6th day of December, 1782, when it, in full Grand Lodge, adopted the following resolution , and made it part of its constitution: "That this Lodge be hereafter known and called by the name of the Massachusetts Grand Lodge of Ancient Masons, and that it is free and independent, in its government and official authority, of any other Grand Lodge or Grand Master in the Universe."

"Did this declaration of independence destroy the legality, if it had any, of the Massachusetts Grand Lodge? Was its existence brought to an end by this act? We believe not. Then why should it destroy the legality of African Lodge, or terminate its existence? We demand that you measure both of us by the same rule, and we will abide the result; any other course is dishonest, unfair and unjust."

At the time this was written the Lodge did not know it had been removed from the roll of the UGLE. Although it had acted as a Mother Lodge, it still thought of itself as a Lodge on the roll of the UGLE. The rest of the objection is put aside as the statement indicates. What is good for the goose is good for the gander.
