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Prince Hall and the Masons

by Phillip St. Laurent

To outsiders, the Masons may seem an esoteric, puzzling, even amusing lot—with their secret signs, cabalistic symbols, odd vocabulary, strange rites and questionable claim to a history reaching into pre-Christian times. Yet for all their apparent eccentricities, American Masons, both White and Black, have pumped millions of dollars into good works, and many of the best-known men in public life at any given time are Masons.

Although the country is literally teeming with Masons now—the number of Black Masons exceeds a quarter of a million—members of the fraternity continue to regard it as rather exclusive. In fact, it takes perhaps a year, including a considerable period of character evaluation, to be admitted. In the latter part of the 18th century, even more than now, to be a Mason was considered a rare distinction; and for a Black, even though free, to aspire to become a Mason, in an America where slavery was legal, was an astonishing ambition. Yet one did become a Mason and founded what is now Black Masonry in the U.S.

His name was Prince Hall, and he was born in Bridgetown, Barbados, the son of Thomas Prince Hall, an English leather merchant whose wife was a mulatto of Black and French descent. There is some dispute over his date of birth, but most records have it as September 12, 1748. When he was 12, Prince Hall was apprenticed to his father in the leather trade, but he soon decided his prospects were rather meager and got working passage on a British merchant ship, which arrived in Boston in 1765.

The Boston of the time was not
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yet the liberal city which later was to feed the flames of abolition. There was no provision for the education or religious training of the free Blacks in the city, who were usually able to get only the jobs Whites refused to take, and then only at the lowest wages possible.

Nevertheless, Hall found a job and lived frugally. Within eight years he owned property and—since holding property was a requirement for suffrage at the time—became a voter. He also became a Methodist minister in Cambridge.

If he had been quiet and submissive when he first arrived in Boston, Hall became startlingly outspoken after he joined the ministry. He demanded the abolition of slavery, participation of Blacks in government on the same terms as Whites, equality before the law, resistance to all encroachments upon the rights of Blacks, the education of Black children, what he called “the right to be let alone,” and the recognition by Whites of “the iniquity of public insult” to Blacks.

He was, despite all, a patriot—early in 1775 he presented a petition to John Hancock and Joseph Warren of the Committee of Safety of the Colonies asking permission to join the Army. The petition was passed on to the Continental Congress, then to George Washington himself, who granted it. Hall joined the Army in February, 1776, and was one of several Blacks who fought with the Colonial Army in the Battle of Bunker Hill.

But shortly after he drew up the petition, something happened which Hall thought as unfair as the barriers to Black military enlistment. He and 14 of his friends sought admission into Masonic lodges around Boston and were refused everywhere. Having been rejected by Colonial lodges, the 15 Blacks applied on March 6, 1775, to the master of Lodge No. 44, a British military lodge attached to the 38th Foot Regiment, which was stationed in Boston. One of Hall's biographers of the last century noted that the 15 men “took the case to the English, [who] showed themselves to be freer from pettiness than the Colonists.” Hall was insistent, another biographer says, in his “refusal to see in the principles of Masonry any implication of race,” and the British soldiers, evidently agreeing with him, admitted him to the Masons. The men were, in the Masonic phrase, duly initiated, passed and raised in the Army lodge, and made Masons. The war intervened, of course, and it was not until Hall's return in 1782

that the Black Masons in Boston petitioned the Mother Grand Lodge of England for a warrant for their own lodge—all Masonic lodges in the United States were under the English lodge until 1813. The application was granted and a warrant issued to them September 29, 1784, authorizing them to be constituted into a regular lodge to be called African Lodge No. 459.

There were soon hints of the pettiness ahead. The lodge celebrated the Feast of St. John, and an account printed in a Boston newspaper referred to the lodge as “St. Blacks' Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons.” Hall wrote the paper a chiding letter and signed it, “Prince Hall, Master of African Lodge No. 459, Dedicated to St. John.”

While he was busy with his Masonic duties, his ministry and the Colonies' war, Hall had not neglected his concern with the condition of Blacks in this country. As early as January 13, 1777, he filed a memorandum to the House of Representatives of Massachusetts urging emancipation. And after the war, on October 17, 1787, he petitioned the legislature to provide schools for Black children. In a speech known as the “Charge Delivered to the Brethren of the African Lodge” on June 25, 1792, he said:

“Let us lay by our recreation, and superfluities, so that we may have that to educate our rising generation which was spent in these follies. Make you this beginning, and who knows but God may raise up some friend or body of friends as he did in Philadelphia, to open a school for the Blacks here, as that friendly city has done.” On October 4, 1796, he sent a memorandum to the selectmen of Boston about opening a school for Black children; before the end of the year the school was opened.

In 1786, western Massachusetts farmers started an armed revolt against the high land tax, imposed on them despite the financial depression that followed the Revolution. Shays' Rebellion, as it was known, was put down; but before it was, Hall, in a letter to Governor James Bowdoin, offered the services of the entire membership of his lodge. “We, by the Providence of God, are members of a fraternity that not only enjoins upon us to be peaceable subjects to the civil powers where we reside, but it also forbids our having concern in any plot or conspiracies against the state where we dwell.”

Meanwhile, with the White Masons of Boston continuing to ignore him and his lodge, Hall began to expand the organization. One Peter

Mantore wrote him from Philadelphia, March 2, 1797, asking for a dispensation for an African lodge.

“We have been tried by five Royal Arch Masons,” wrote Mantore, whose group of 11 consisted of Black men who had been made Masons in England and Ireland. “The White Masons have refused to give us a dispensation fearing the Black men living in Virginia would get to be Masons, too.” Mantore's group was African Lodge No. 459 of Philadelphia. Absalom Jones, the first Black priest in the Episcopal Church in America, was master, and Richard Allen, the founder and first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the first treasurer.

The third lodge Hall set to work was Hiram Lodge No. 3, in Providence, Rhode Island, on June 25, 1797. About 1813 the members of that lodge emigrated to Liberia with the settlement project of the African Humane Society. The Liberian lodges remain, with a handful in Ontario and the Bahamas, the only foreign lodges of what are now known as Prince Hall Masons.

Prince Hall died of pneumonia on December 7, 1807. Six months later, the three lodges then existing met in Boston and strangely—since Masons throughout the world and Blacks in the United States are overwhelmingly Protestant—elected Nero Prince, a Russian Jew, the grand master. At the same convention, the name of the Grand Lodge, the governing body for individual lodges, was changed to Prince Hall Grand Lodge.

More lodges sprang up: Union Lodge No. 2, Laurel Lodge No. 5 and Phoenix Lodge No. 6 in Philadelphia, and Boyer Lodge No. 1 in New York. Meanwhile, Black Masonry was growing rapidly. In 1847 at a convention (Masons call it a communication) held in New York, the differences were resolved; a national grand lodge was formed, from which practically all the Black lodges in the country are descended. There are now 4,795 lodges of Prince Hall Masons with more than a quarter of a million members. There are grand lodges in most states, in Liberia, the Bahamas and Ontario.

From the beginning, when the Colonial Masons refused to admit Prince Hall and his friends, there has been a chasm separating Black and White Masons. Shortly after Hall's lodge was formed, for instance, the movement toward an independent Masonic government for America—as opposed to being affiliated with the Grand Lodge of England—began gaining ground, and, a Masonic historian has written,

“Always Negro Masons were ignored in any plans. The African Lodge as a subordinate body would sooner or later find itself in a precarious situation and the door of Masonry closed to Black Americans. Therefore, to perpetuate the privileges which had come to his people with the Constitution of African Lodge No. 459, Prince Hall, taking the needful steps, erected the Mother Lodge in a Grand Body, having the sanction and recognition of England in so doing.

“It remained upon the English registry—occasionally contributing to the General Charity Fund—until, upon the amalgamation of the rival Grand Lodges of the ‘Moderns’ and the ‘Ancients’ into the present United Grand Lodge of England in 1813, it and the other English lodges in the United States were erased.”

If all this seems like an exercise in esoterica to outsiders, it is anything but that to the Masons, to whom admission to the order, the issuance of charters, the maintaining of good standing and so forth are of the highest importance. There are even gradations of illegitimacy within Masonry: an “irregular” lodge, for instance, is one that once was recognized but no longer is because of some Masonic impropriety, and a “clandestine” lodge is one that has been set up without any authority.

Almost immediately after the founding of the African Lodge, the White Masons began to voice doubts about its legitimacy, claiming that it had not received a warrant, that it had not obtained it properly, that there had been violations of the rules in obtaining it and that Prince Hall and his friends had begun practicing Masonry before they had received it. But as one Masonic historian put it: “The legitimacy of the Masonic body is the principal question. Is the authority by which it assumes to practice and exemplify Masonic principles derived from the proper source and did the manner of the derivation of such authority conform to the accepted usage for the time? Black Masonry can make out as good a case as any, perhaps freer from technical irregularities than White Masonry in America.”

There were a few voices of fairness. The White grand master of Massachusetts, William Sewall Gardner, said in 1870 that he had “no doubt” that the Black Masons were legitimate. Samuel W. Clark, Grand Master of Colored Masons in Ohio, replied rather sourly that, “the testimony of such an eminent Mason and scholar, who, probably, has given more study and research to this particular question than any

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other White Mason in America, should be sufficient to establish the falsity of the objection and to remove all doubts concerning our origin; and especially so when it is remembered that his historical researches are not for our benefit, but for our destruction. He is entitled to the credit, however, of being a true historian although his conclusions are not always philosophical."

The White Grand Lodge of Ohio then appointed a committee to investigate the subject of Black Masonry and, after a year, came up with a report entitled "New Day—New Duty," which said:

"Your committee deem it sufficient to say that they are satisfied beyond all question that Colored Freemasonry had a legitimate beginning in this country, as much so as any other Freemasonry; in fact it came from the same source. Your committee have the most satisfactory and conclusive evidence that these Colored Freemasons practice the very same rites and ceremonies, and have substantially the same esoteric or secret modes of recognition as are practiced by ourselves and by the universal family of Freemasons throughout the world."

Despite such occasional protestations of the legitimacy of Black Masons, the gulf between the two bodies widened. In 1897, two Blacks asked the annual convention of White Masons in the state of Washington to find some way they might be "brought into communication

with members of the Craft in this state." A committee studied the subject for a year and came up with a report remarkable on one hand for admitting the legitimacy of the Black Masons, and on the other for the sophistry by which it excused refusing to admit them. Black Masons "who can trace their descent from the Grand Lodge of England are as fully entitled to the name of Masons as any other brethren."

"But," a member of the committee wrote two years later, "as [the committee] knew that a different view was entertained in many quarters . . . they recommended only the adoption of certain resolutions, which left the status of the petitioners as it was under the Landmarks and ancient usages of the Craft, except that the Grand Lodge declared that the colored Masons might cultivate the royal art and regulate their own affairs within this state without molestation from it." In other words, the White Masons said the Blacks were legitimate but couldn't be admitted.

The Washington convention passed two remarkable resolutions, one saying all men are equal in the Masons and another saying they aren't. "Masonry is universal," said the first one, "and, without doubt, neither race nor color are among the tests proper to be applied to determine the fitness of a candidate for the degrees of Masonry." The other insisted, "While this Grand Lodge recognizes no difference between

brethren based upon race or color, yet it is not unmindful of the fact that the white and colored races in the United States have in many ways shown a preference to remain, in purely social matters, separate and apart. In view of this inclination of the two races—Masonry being pre-eminently a social institution—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, it will be all right with the White Masons."

A member of the committee, William Upton, wrote later that the committee's report didn't discuss the objections to Negro Masonry but contented itself with remarking that they had been "fully met and completely answered, over and over again." This, he later decided, was a mistake, ". . . for, during the year since, those same old threadbare and untenable objections have been brought forward in numerous Grand Lodges; with the result, not only that this Grand Lodge has been condemned without a hearing but that the question itself has been prejudiced in many Grand Lodges for another generation; by the mistaken notion that its merits were fully examined in the year 1898-99 by committees of those jurisdictions."

The dispute has continued, although it has abated some, until now. As late as 1947 the White Masons in

Boston voted to recognize the Black Masons and were forced to rescind the resolution under pressure from other White Lodges, principally in the South. The Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Liberia, inconsistently, is recognized by White Masons although it was set up by the Prince Hall Masons in the United States.

The Masons, Black or White, claim to be descended lineally from Moses. Martin R. Delany, a famous Black historian and Mason of the first half of the last century, once wrote:

"Truly; if the African races have no legitimate claims to Masonry, then it is illegitimate to all the rest of mankind. I believe it is a settled and acknowledged fact, conceded by all intelligent writers and speakers, that to Africa is the world indebted for its knowledge of the mysteries of Ancient Freemasonry. Had Moses or the Israelites never lived in Africa, the mysteries of the wise men of the East never would have been handed down to us.

"Was it not Africa that gave birth to Euclid, the master geometrician of the world? And was it not in consequence of a twenty-five years' residence in Africa that the great Pythagoras was enabled to discover that key problem in geometry—the forty-seventh problem of Euclid—without which Masonry would be incomplete? Must I hesitate to tell the world that, as applied to Masonry, the word—Eureka—was first exclaimed in Africa? But there! I've revealed the Masonic secret and must stop!" ■