

# PRINCE HALL FREEMASONRY

BY  
W Bro CECIL NORMAN MURRAY, *PDistSGW*

---

In its quarterly News Letter of December 14, 1994, United Grand Lodge announced its recognition of the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Massachusetts and promised that they would consider applications from other Prince Hall Lodges for recognition. Since then, the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Connecticut, which was formed in 1873, has been recognized. (see Grand Lodge News Letter September 1998).

I understand that this recognition is an acknowledgement of legitimacy and the involvement of inter-visitation.

Many of our younger brethren would know nothing of Prince Hall Freemasonry and would therefore have little idea of the significance of this decision. After all, only a few years ago subordinate Lodges in Guyana under the E.C. were reminded that the United Grand Lodge is not in regular communication with Lodges of the Prince Hall Affiliation.

The present position is that the United Grand Lodge is not in regular communication with Lodges of the Prince Hall Affiliation (Massachusetts: Connecticut now accepted), and as such we cannot visit Prince Hall Lodges nor could members of those Lodges visit us. This is equally true for Irish and Scottish Lodges as for our English Brethren.

This approach followed the then established policy of recognizing only the one Supreme Masonic authority in any one jurisdiction and the recognition that such differences that exist between the Regular Freemasonry in America and Freemasons of Prince Hall Affiliation must be left for America to sort out.

Quite simply the attitude was, this matter concerned the internal affairs of the American Jurisdictions and must be resolved by them. How we recognize two supreme Masonic authorities in the Jurisdiction of Massachusetts and in the next few years we are likely to see more of this duopoly in the other Masonic Jurisdictions of America as more Prince Hall Grand Lodges trace their origins from the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Massachusetts.

There are several well-known sources of reference for the formation and development of Freemasonry among the coloured people of North America. Some of the main sources are:-

1. Official History of Freemasonry among the Coloured People of North America – William H. Grimshaw (1903).
2. Freemasonry among Negroes in America – Harry E. Davis (1946).
3. Prince Hall, Life and Legacy – Dr. Charles H. Wesley (1975).
4. Prince Hall Freemasonry, Transactions of Quatuor Coronati Vol. 89 p. 71-79 – G. Draffen (1977).
5. Prince Hall Freemasonry – Derrick McKoy
6. History of Prince Hall Freemasonry

At present there are more than **fifty Grand Lodges** worldwide operating wider the banner of Prince Hall Freemasonry with each having its own history of the formation of the Negro fraternity but with all more or less saying the same thing.

In this paper I propose to discuss the Personal and Masonic Life of Prince Hall, and the origins, development and present-day activity of Prince Hall Masonry.

Information from the Prince Hall Masonic Year Book and the fact sheets of the most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Virginia and that which is found in the books of Grimshaw, Davis and Wesley is essentially the same, and reveals that:

Prince Hall was born at Bridgetown, Barbados, West Indies **September, 12, 1748**. He was freeborn. His Father, Thomas Prince Hall, was an Englishman and his mother a free coloured woman of French extraction. In 1765, at the age of 17, he worked his passage on a ship to Boston, where he worked as a leather-worker, a trade learned from his father. Eight years later he had acquired real estate and was qualified to vote. He was religiously inclined and later became a preacher in the Methodist Church with a charge at Cambridge. On **March 6, 1775**, Prince Hall and fourteen other free coloured men of Boston were made Master Masons in an Army Lodge attached to one of General Gage's regiments, then stationed near Boston. This Lodge granted Prince Hall and his brethren authority to meet as a Lodge, to go in procession on St. John's Day, and as a Lodge to bury their dead, but they could not confer Degrees nor perform any other Masonic "work".

Although the early life of Prince Hall is not well documented, his adult life is. In Boston, Prince Hall is reported to have worked as a Labourer by day and his proclivity for him to take private lessons at night to better his education. He was successful in his business as a soap manufacturer and artisan. He first married Sarah Ritchary and fifteen years after her death he married Phoebe Baker. By age twenty-five Prince Hall had acquired enough property to vote in Massachusetts.

Prince Hall later turned his talents to politics and developed as a publicist and champion for the basic human rights of blacks and slaves in the colony. He petitioned the Massachusetts Assembly to enlist slaves in the Revolutionary Army and later led a successful delegation to General George Washington to accept Negro Freemen into the Revolutionary Army which resulted in the enlistment of 5000 Freemen into the services.

It was also known that Prince Hall was a Revolutionary and soldier in cause of the Independence of the American colonies from England. On April 20, 1778 at age 30, Prince Hall enlisted in the Revolutionary Army from the town of Medford – Massachusetts.

He was active not only in the revolutionary life of the American Colonies, but also, in its civil and political life of the Black population. He developed into a petitioner of great forensic skill. On October 17, 1787 and in 1786 he petitioned the Massachusetts legislature to provide for the education of coloured youth and for a school. (Goldson – Prince Hall and Freemasonry) p. 14-15.

Goldson further reports (p.15) that Prince Hall founded the African Benevolent Society in 1776, to care for the sick, help the indigent, defray the funeral expenses of members looking for means to do so, and care for the widow and children of its members. Prince Hall was well read and his letter book shows that he was familiar with the works of Tertullian, Cyprian, Origen and the fathers of the early church.

Questions have been raised about the year of birth of Prince Hall. Bro. Draffen of Newington has asserted in Quator Coronati Vol. 89 of 1976, that no proof exists that Prince Hall was born in Barbados in 1748, that it was most likely he was brought from West Africa as a slave and was sold in New England to William Hall and that he could not have been freeborn. In his article Draffen cited the report in the Boston Gazette of **December 7, 1807** announcing the death of Prince Hall and stating his age as **72 years**. The inference is that his year of birth would be **1735** instead of **1748**.

Was he Freeborn? Draffen called attention to a Certificate of Manumission dated April 9, 1770 signed by William Hall and giving one Prince Hall his freedom. This document further states that Prince Hall had worked with the family for 21 years. The name Prince was a common Christian name among Negroes then and indeed three of the original fifteen members Initiated on **March 6, 1775** in the Army Lodge of General Gage's Regiment bore the name Prince, while Hall was itself a common surname among the whites. Dr. Wesley assures us that there were several Negroes bearing the name Prince Hall and living in or around Boston at the time.

Further Brother McLeEwen argues that even though Prince Hall's Manumission in 1770 proves he was a slave, it tells nothing about his being born a slave. He was of the view that he was seized in some part of West Africa as a lad between eleven and fourteen, brought to New England by a slave trader and sold as a slave.

### **PRINCE HALL THE MASON:**

As stated earlier, Prince Hall enlisted in the Revolutionary Army and with fourteen other Freemen of colour were made Master Masons on **March 6, 1775** in an **Army Lodge** stationed near Boston being **Lodge 441** operating under the Constitution of the **Grand Lodge of Ireland**. The British Army left Boston on March 17, 1776 and **African Lodge No. 1** came into existence on **July 3, 1776**, a self-erected body with Prince Hall as Master. The Army Lodge No. 441 gave Prince Hall and his free Negro Brethren authority by way of a **PERMIT** or **LICENCE** to meet as a LODGE, to GO IN PROCESSION on St. John's day, **but NOT to Confer Degrees nor perform any other Masonic work**.

The PERMIT provided by LODGE 441 which was acting as some form of parent allowed (them) to be an organized association but did NOT NOR COULD NOT give authority to MAKE, PASS or RAISE Masons. For eight years these Brethren together with those who had received their Degrees elsewhere assembled and enjoyed limited rights as Masons.

Shortly after receiving their PERMIT Prince Hall and his brethren petitioned Provincial Grand Master Joseph Warren of the Scottish Provincial Grand Lodge for recognition. The petition was favourably received but Warren was killed at the battle of Bunkers Hill.

Another petition was made in **1779** and was met by mixed reaction by WHITE MASONS. Those in sympathy advised Prince Hall to apply to the Grand Orient of France for recognition. Having twice been unsuccessful in his petition for affiliation to these independent bodies in **1784**, Prince Hall applied to the Grand Lodge of England.

Eventually in a letter to a Bro Moody in London, he wrote and I quote:

*Dear Brother Moody,*

*I would inform you that this Lodge hath been founded almost eight years and we have had only a Permit to walk on St. John's Day and to bury our dead; though we have been importuned to send to France for one, yet we thought it best to send to the fountain from whence we received the Light for a Warrant and now Dear Brother we must make you our advocate at Grand Lodge, who we hope will not deny us nor thrust us beneath the rest of our fellowmen, although poor yet sincere Brethren of the Craft.*

The petition was successful and in a letter dated **March 8, 1784** the Grand Lodge of England granted to Prince Hall and his Brethren a Warrant of Constitution under the name **African Lodge No. 459**.

The Warrant was not delivered however, until three years later, owing to the fact that the Brother to whom the matter was entrusted failed to call for it. It was delivered however on the **29<sup>th</sup> September, 1787** by Capt. James Scott. Prince Hall also received a copy of the Constitution of the Grand Lodge. They contained a requirement that each Lodge must be properly constituted and to what extent that requirement was observed by Overseas Lodges is open to doubt. The date of the petition was the **30<sup>th</sup> June 1784**.

The Charter I understand is preserved by the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Massachusetts in a safe deposit box in Boston. There is no question as regards its authenticity and it is believed to be the only Original Charter issued from the Grand Lodge of England in the possession of any Lodge in the U.S.A.

On **May 06, 1787**, by virtue of the authority of this Charter, **African Lodge No 1** was established as **African Lodge No 459** and began work as a Regular Masonic body.

In accordance with Masonic usage at that time, a General Assembly of Coloured Masons met in Masonic Hall, Water Street,

Boston, Massachusetts on **June 24, 1791** and formed **African Grand Lodge** with Prince Hall as its first Grand Master, which office he held until his death in December 1807.

In the meantime, African Lodge was very active among the Black community in and around Boston.

In March 1797, Prince Hall received a petition from PETER MANTONE who lived in Philadelphia and ten Negroes from Philadelphia, all of whom were Raised in the **True Blue Lodge No. 253 of London (Philadelphia)** seeking a Warrant for a Lodge. They had made application to the White Masons and had been refused a Warrant on the grounds *"that the White Masons were afraid that 'Blackmen' living in Virginia would get to be Masons too"*. Mantone did not say to which Grand Lodge he had applied.

In reply to Mantone's request, Prince Hall, a man who was always meticulous about legitimacy, in granting the request, wrote :-

*Mr. Peter Mantone,*

*Sir,*

*I received your letter of the 2<sup>nd</sup> which informed me that there are a number of blacks in your city who have received the Light of Masonry, and I hope they got it in a just and lawful manner. If so, Dear Brother, we are willing to set you at work under our **Charter and Lodge No. 450**, from London: under that authority, and by the name of African Lodge, we hereby and herein give you **Licence** to assemble and work as aforesaid, under that denomination as in the sight and fear of God. I would advise you not to take in any at present till your Officers and Master be installed in the Grand Lodge, which we are willing to do when he thinks convenient, and he may receive a full **Warrant** instead of a **Permit**.*

In the aforementioned reply, Prince Hall agreed to issue a Warrant to the Brethren in Philadelphia, but in doing no more or less than Lodge Fredericksburg – Virginia had done in 1752.

Lodge Fredericksburg was self formed in 1752, but did not get a Warrant of its own from the Grand Lodge of Scotland until 1756. In 1757 it issued a dispensation to Lodge Boutecourt to meet in Gloucester, Virginia and that Lodge subsequently obtained a Warrant from the Grand Lodge of England (Modern) as No. 458 in 1773. We have here a lapse of 16 years between the granting of a Dispensation, by an Unwarranted Lodge before obtaining a Warrant. Lodge Fredericksburg is now No. 4 under the Grand Lodge of Virginia and was George Washington Lodge.

The rights of Fredericksburg to issue those Charters was recognized by the Craft during that period. If Fredericksburg possessed, and had exercised the right to issue Charters then the same right cannot be denied to African Lodge No 459.

Prince Hall's Letter to Mantone shows that the Lodge proposed to function as a Grand Lodge or at least to exercise rights similar to those of which Fredericksburg believed itself to be possessed. It further agreed to install the Master and Officers in the new Lodge in Philadelphia.

We know from Prince Hall's Letter Book, that he wrote the Grand Secretary in May 1787 seeking clarification on the extent of his authority. He wrote thus:

*"As this Lodge, without doubt, may increase to such a number as may not be convenient for us to sit in one body I should be glad to know the mind of the Grand Lodge whether this Charter will empower us to set apart another by the same name".*

Wesley (3) is quite firm that there was never a reply to this question. Eventually a second Lodge in Providence, Rhode Island was Chartered by African Lodge.

There are those who have argued that the Warrant granted to Prince Hall did not permit him to Charter new Lodges or to act as a Provincial Grand Lodge. It is wrong I believe for us to use existing Laws and Regulations, to render illegal, that which existed before the coming into life of those said Laws.

African Lodge, as was the custom at the time, functioned as a MOTHER LODGE and as such had the moral authority to Charter other Lodges. Draffen cites the examples earlier mentioned of Lodge Fredericksburg, the Mother Lodge of George Washington, which was self-formed in 1752 and Warranted by The Grand Lodge of Scotland in 1756 and who issued a dispensation to a new Lodge in 1757. This new Lodge was Warranted by the Moderns in 1773. After Fredericksburg was Warranted, it Chartered several other Lodges.

During this period African Lodge was still writing to London in its capacity as a private Lodge under the Grand Lodge of England (Moderns) and sending in "returns" and fees. The last payment of fees was made in 1797.

On June 15, 1802 Prince Hall again wrote to the Grand Secretary stating:

*"I have sent a number of letters to Grand Lodge and money for Grand Charity and by faithful Brethren as I thought, but, I have not received one letter from the Grand Lodge for five years, which I thought somewhat strange at first but when I heard so many were taken by the French I thought otherwise and prudent not to send."*

Prince Hall again on August 16, 1806 wrote the Grand Secretary yet another letter complaining that he had not received any answers to his letters since 1792. From that it is clear that Prince Hall and African Lodge were still of the view that as late as 1806 African Lodge was still a Private Lodge under the Grand Lodge of England.

The Lodge was finally struck off the Register of the Grand Lodge of England (Modern) at the Union in 1813 because no returns or fees had been paid for many years.

Prince Hall died on the **4<sup>th</sup> December, 1807** and Nero Prince was elected and Installed Master the same month. Not much transpired until December 1815, when at a meeting of Past Masters held in Philadelphia, it was agreed to constitute a Grand

Lodge. Around this time historical developments were being fashioned in England. The two rival premier Grand Lodges were united in 1813 to form the United Grand Lodge of England. At the formation of this body 359 Lodges were not carried forward on the Register of the new Grand Lodge. It is alleged that the Premier Grand Lodge did not receive any communications nor any remittance from the African Lodge. I say alleged because of what transpired on the **18<sup>th</sup> June, 1827** and what Dr Wesley calls, **"one of the greatest periods in the life and forward march of Prince Hall Masonry."** On that day a declaration, under the signatures of John T. Hilton, Master, his Wardens and Secretary of African Lodge, was published in the Boston Daily Advertiser.

The declaration states, inter alia,

*"Since the rise of the Lodge to this Degree of proficiency, we concluded it was best and proper to make it known to the Most Worshipful Grand Lodge from whence we derive our Charter, by sending written documents and monies, to fulfill the agreements of our ancestors, giving information of the low state to which it had fallen, its cause etc., with its rise and progress; and also soliciting further favours, whereby we might be placed on a different and better standing than we had heretofore. And, notwithstanding this has been long since alone, and more than sufficient time has elapsed for returns, yet we have never received a single line or reply from that Hon. Society. In consequences of this neglect we have been at a stand what course to pursue. Our remote situation prevents us from making any verbal communication whatever. Taking all these things into consideration, we have come to the conclusion that, with what knowledge we possess of Masonry, and as people of colour 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 (to) or governed by any Lodge than that of our own. We agree solemnly to abide by all proper rules and regulations which govern the like fraternities, discountenancing all imposition to injure the Order and to use all fair and honourable means to promote its prosperity, resting in full hope that this will enable us to transmit it in its purity to our posterity".*

With this declaration **The Grand Lodge of Massachusetts (Prince Hall)** was formed by an assembly of the Craft in the same manner as the United Grand Lodge in 1813. The next important epoch in the Prince Hall Freemasonry occurred in **June 1847** when the **National or Compact Grand Lodge** was formed to unify all the coloured Lodges in the nation and was named the **National Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Ancient York Masons for the United States of America**. John T. Hilton was its first Grand Master and all the existing coloured Lodges were re-warranted.

Was the formation and subsequent transactions of the African Lodge legitimate? It is often argued that the formation of the African Lodge constituted a trespass when viewed against the principal of **"exclusive territorial jurisdiction"**. One should ask, **whose jurisdiction**, since at the time there were functioning in Massachusetts the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts (Scottish) and St. John's Grand Lodge (English) each working independently. The English could not therefore trespass on territory on which it already had jurisdiction. The principle could only apply after 1880 when the United Grand Lodge recognized the White Grand Lodges of the States.

Between the years 1797-1970 the White Grand Lodge of Massachusetts established 17 committees to investigate Prince Hall Masonry. The Committee of 1946, consisting of six past Grand Masters, tabled a report which was taken at the communication of **March 1947**. The report read in part,

*"Your committee finds that according to the then prevailing Masonic laws and customs, the origin, early procedure and subsequent development of the so-called Prince Hall (Negro) Freemasonry in this Commonwealth has been, and are, regular and legitimate. We believe that in view of the existing social conditions in our country, it is advisable for the official and organized activities of White and Coloured Freemasons to proceed in parallel lines, but organically separate and without mutually embarrassing demands or commitments".*

The report was accepted and the recommendations adopted unanimously. However, at a subsequent meeting in 1949, the vote of 1947 was rescinded, the reason being,

*"the net result of the 1947 resolution is producing disharmony in American Freemasonry, whereas unity is what we need more than anything else. Unity and harmony are vastly more important than debates about Negro Freemasonry".*

On **August 28, 1969**, the **Grandmaster of Prince Hall Grand Lodge (Massachusetts)** asked the **White Grand Lodge of Massachusetts** for a reaffirmation of the resolution of **1947**.

The White Grand Lodge sought guidance from the **United Grand Lodge of England** and on the **28<sup>th</sup> November 1969**, the then Grand Secretary, **Sir James W Stubbs** replied,

*"So far as the Grand Lodge of England is concerned, the brief history of the matter is that the Lodge in Boston, which was known as African Lodge became inactive for one reason or another (no dues or communications received from it since the late 1790's) and it was erased from the roll of our Grand Lodge in 1813, whereupon the Warrant became ineffective. This Warrant may still be in the possession of the Prince Hall Masons in the United States but had it come back in our possession, as strictly speaking it should have done, it would have been endorsed as cancelled and returned for the records in our archives".*

*"From the English Masonic point of view, therefore, the Prince Hall movement has been acting unconstitutionally by assuming the functions of a Grand Lodge and issuing Warrants to form other Lodges. African Lodge as formed as a Lodge under the Grand Lodge of England and therefore it remained an English Lodge throughout the period of its existence: the Lodge and members were subject to the regulations of the Grand Lodge of England and they had no authority to use or act on the English Warrant by way of forming other Lodges and then forming themselves into a Grand Lodge".*

*"I hope your Grand Master will find the information helpful in the consideration of the matter by your Grand Lodge".*

**The Grand Master concluded** that, on the basis of the restated position of the Grand Lodge of England, and other information available, **no useful purpose would be served in putting the request** for consideration at that time.

The conclusion, one can draw from all this is that the true **opposition** to Prince Hall Masonry is really **social** and not **legal**. In



**December 1994**, the Grand Lodge of England gave recognition to the **Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Massachusetts** and promised that they would consider applications from other Prince Hall Grand Lodges for recognition. Since then the **Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Connecticut**, which was formed in 1873, has been recognized (see **Grand Lodge News September 1996**). This newsletter assures us when it states,

*"it has shown that it was regularly formed and is descended from the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Massachusetts".*

This recognition is an acknowledgement of legitimacy and the involvement of inter-visitation.

## THE MOVEMENT

Prince Hall Freemasonry developed in the U.S.A. at the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and has spread throughout the world. There are Freemasons' Lodges of the Prince Hall Affiliation as far a field as Japan, West Africa and the Caribbean. In modern times the progress of Prince Hall Freemasonry has been assisted by the movement of the Armed Forces of the U.S.A, and it is common to find Prince Hall Lodges where there are large American military establishments.

Prince Hall Freemasonry spread to the Commonwealth Caribbean Region as well as there are several Prince Hall Lodges working in the various territories wider the respective jurisdictions of the constitutions of Prince Hall Grand Lodges of New York and Massachusetts. Every indication is that Prince Hall Freemasonry is prospering in the Region particularly in Barbados and Trinidad.

There are at present **three** Prince Hall Lodges in GUYANA – **two** in Georgetown and **one** at Linden –

**MT. AYANGANA LODGE** now No. 2 was Chartered on September 12<sup>th</sup>, 1970, by Most Worshipful Grand Master Herman Bailey of the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of New York.

**TAMIN LODGE** No. 113 was Chartered in 1976 by the Most Worshipful William J. Richardson Grand Master of Prince Hall Grand Lodge of New York and

**CELESTIAL LODGE** No. 8 was Chartered on April 24, 1983 by the Most Worshipful Solomon Wallace Grand Master of the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of New York.

Apart from the obvious American influence in its lineage, the striking characteristics of Prince Hall Masonry are **firstly** that membership in Freemasons Lodges of the Prince Hall Affiliation **are almost universally confined to Blacks**, (so much so, that in the U.S.A., Prince Hall Freemasonry is almost commonly called Negro or Black Freemasonry) and **secondly** until recently none of the Freemason Lodges in America with which we are in regular communication, (we recognize) were in regular communication with them.

These characteristics are of concern because it seems that, contrary to the expressed teachings of our Order, Freemasons in many jurisdictions of the U.S.A. have segregated themselves into **Black** and **White** Constitutions and we in Guyana, accustomed as we are to ethnic diversity of our society and the universality of Freemasonry under English and Scottish Constitutions were, and to some extent, still restricted in regular communication to those American Lodges which are under the American White Constitutions.

To some, this unhappy position was accommodated by our respective Grand Lodges, by the assumed irregularity of the Lodges under the Prince Hall Affiliation, an assumption which some had argued, and which the United Grand Lodge now acknowledges was erroneous.

I understand that this assumed irregularity did not stand up to the academic scrutiny of American Masonic scholars

William H. Upton – **Negro Freemasonry (1902)**

Delmar Duane Darrah – **History and Evolution of Freemasonry (1967)**

neither was it always reflective in the behaviour of White and Black Freemasons Lodges.

Finally Brethren, writing in Quator Coronati as far back as Nov. 1976, W. Bro. Wells stated

*"Prince Hall Freemasonry has flourished to such an extent that regular conferences of their Grand Masters are held. In 1980 the Conference met in Bahamas where they were **24 Masonic Lodges** and **16 Eastern Star Chapters**. Many influential members of society, civil and professional, in the emergent nations, are Freemasons in the Prince Hall jurisdictions and it is well that members of **Quator Coronati Correspondence Circle** would have facts concerning their origin, development and present day activity".*

The recent recognition by the United Grand Lodge of England of the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Massachusetts is therefore not surprising.

The Prince Hall Grand Lodges are no more or less regular than most of the Grand Lodges of America, the circumstances of their formations being the same. As Brother Darrah explained, it was

*"the antithesis of which for generations have divided the white man and the black man and caused them to remain at a perpetual distance".*

Once the racial issue is resolved, the regularity issue would be also. However, this **"antithesis of race"** has left American Masonry with a peculiar legacy. It is not likely that after two centuries as a Supreme Grand Lodge, the **Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Massachusetts** will abandon its primacy to the **Grand Lodge of Massachusetts**.

We will now recognize **two** Supreme and Regular Grand Lodges in the same physical territory; **one for whites** and **one for blacks**.

Is this what Masonry is all about?

**CNM 1997**