

PRINCE HALL HISTORY EDUCATION CLASS

By **RW Raymond T. Coleman**, Grand Historian Prince Hall Grand Lodge Free and Accepted Masons
Jurisdiction of Massachusetts.

You'll hear a lot about a man named Prince Hall. But guess what? A lot of this information will be false. Where it all came from is entirely a different story, to be dealt with at another time. We are not here to dwell on -or criticize -misinformation. We are here to learn the truth. Once you have the truth, you have an armor that no one can penetrate.

Prince Hall was born in 1738 according to one of his closest friends. Jeremy Belknap, a deposition of Prince Hail's and the Prince Hail Grand Lodge in its 1906 Proceedings.

Where did Prince Hall come from? Perhaps the greatest African-American historian of all times, George William Washington, in 1775, put it simply this way "Prince Hall was born in 1748; where? We do not know." Williams was absolutely right. we don't know where Prince Hall came from and what's more regretful, we don't even know his actual name.

How can this be? Well, the first time we ever hear of Prince Hall was in 1763 when a marriage announcement appeared in the newspapers: "Prince, negro servant, William Hall & Sarah, negro servant, Francis Ritchery, Nov. 2, 1763' We learned later, in 1770, that Prince Hall was the servant of William Hall from 1749 to 1770. Then on April 9, 1770, about a month after Crispus Attucks was killed in the Boston Massacre, he was "freed" by William Hall.

"Freed", you say. Was Prince Hall a slave? Not hardly. He was a servant; it says so in his marriage announcement and his manumission papers. There were three clas~ea of Blacks in those days: free Blacks, slaves and servants, and there were different laws set up for each class. In freeing Prince Hall, William Hall said that "he was never reckoned a slave by us". Manumission papers bad to be issued to prove, if stopped by the authorities, that Prince Hall, once a servant, was now free.

The death of Cnspus Attucks spurred Prince Hall into the leadership of the Black Community. A Black man had died for a freedom he didn't even possess. Prince Hall was destined to fight to see to it that Blacks could exercise this freedom.

It is important to note that at this time, 1770, Prince Hall was not a mason, in fact there were no Black masons in any lodge in America. He began to go about the town, preaching equal treatment for Blacks, education for Black children and the abolition of slavery and slave trade. But his pleas, it seamed, fell on deaf ears, for the most part, because the community was not disposed to listen to any Black man It was during this time that Prince Hall found Out about masons. All the influential men were masons - and the citizenry listened to masons. Prince Hall felt that if he became a mason, people might start listening to

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him. He made several attempts to join the lodges in Boston, but was rejected in every case. Then, early in March 1775, John Batt, the Worshipful Master of Lodge #441 of the Irish Registry, attached to the 38th British Foot Infantry, heard of his plight, and accepted his petition for membership. Prince Hall and fourteen other men of color were made masons on Castle William Island on **March 6, 1775**. This marked the first time Black men were made Masons in America.

Then on March 17, 1776, the British Foot Infantry evacuated Boston and took its army lodge with it. Worshipful Master Batt gave Prince Hall, and the fourteen other brethren, a permit to meet as a lodge and to bury its dead in manner and *form*. On **July 3, 1776 African Lodge #1 was organized** with Prince Hall as its master. Later Provincial Grand Master John Rowe gave them the right to walk on St. John's Day. Note that the lodge was designated No. 1 - did Prince Hall have plans for other lodges?

To show you where Prince Hall's head was, look what happened then. On January 13, 1777 he petitioned the legislature to free all slaves in Massachusetts. Then on July 3, 1777 he petitioned George Washington to permit Blacks to join the army.

On **September 29, 1784**, a great event took place. The Grand Lodge of England, the premier Grand Lodge of the World, issued a charter to African Lodge, making it a regular lodge, with all the rights and privileges of any regular lodge in the world. The Lodge was designated #459. We will get into how this came about a little later.

Then on November 26, 1786 He offered Gov. Bowdoin the services of the members of African Lodge #459 to help keep the peace during Shays' Rebellion. On January 4, 1787 he petitioned the legislature to support a return to Africa movement.

Prince Hall wasn't through yet, he petitioned the City of Boston, on October 17, 1787, for the education of Black children and then on February 27, 1888 he petitioned the legislature for the return of kidnapped Black seamen.

Besides running his lodge, Prince Hall was a very busy man. He was the first Black leader in New England and set the stage for generations to come.

Getting back to how England happened to issue a charter to "Prince Hall and others"; here is how it happened. I am telling you this so you will know the true story.

Some of the members of African Lodge were mariners. Two of them Prince Reed and John

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Means found themselves in distress while in London. They petitioned the Lodge of Brotherly Love for assistance. After the Lodge had examined these brethren and found them to be true and lawful masons, they granted their petition. When they returned to Boston, they informed Prince Hall as to what had transpired.

Prince Hall did not delay. He must have seen this as the opportunity for which he had waited, even prayed. By granting Reed and Means petition, they recognized these brethren as regular masons. Therefore, they must have recognized African Lodge as a regular Lodge. He sent a letter to the Worshipful Master of the Lodge, William Moody, as follows:

“Permit me to return you my hearty thanks for your brotherly courtesy to my Brothers Reed and Means, when in a strange land and in a time of need, you were so good to receive them as brothers., what you have done to them I look upon it as done to me and the hole of us

He then issued a Masonic request:

“Dear Brother, I would inform you that this Lodge has been founded almost eight years and we have had only a permit to Walk on St. John ‘s Day and to bury our dead in manner andform. We have had no opportunity to apply for a Warrant before now, although 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 the Grand Lodge, hoping you will be so good (in our name and stead) to lay this before the Royal Grand Marter and the Grand Wardens and the rest of the Grand Lodge, who we hope will not deny us nor treat us beneath the rest of ourfellowmen, although poor, yet Sincere Brethren of the Craft.”

William Moody did present the petition to the Grand Lodge and the Charter was granted on September 29, 1784. It wasn't until May 6, 1787 that African Lodge was duly organized. Why did it take so long? Well, that's another story for another time.

African Lodge was so popular and Prince Hall was such an excellent leader that the Grand Lodge of England made him a Provincial Grand Master on January 27, 1791. He was given the job of reporting on the condition of the Lodges in the Boston area. Eight years later, on March 22, 1799 Prince Hall organized a lodge in Philadelphia, called African Lodge #459, they were given permission to work under Prince Hall's Charter. He did not immediately issue them their own charter. On June 25, 1797 he organized African Lodge (later known as Hiram Lodge #3) at Providence, Rhode Island, under the same

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arrangement as Philadelphia.

In 1796 Prince Hall organized the first school for Black children in Boston in his home, later moving to larger quarters in Primus Hall's home and finally in the basement of the newly built African Meeting House.

Prince Hall did not write an autobiography or leave any memoirs, he was a man of action, not of words. He did, however deliver two very important "Charges" to the brethren of African Lodge The first on June 25, 1792, in Charlestown, which related to the brethren the superstructure of masonry and its history, which included the contributions of Black men; and the second on June 24, 1797 in Cambridge, which contained more masonic history and lesson on how to treat fellow men and examples of how to get ahead without using the lack of education, etc. as an excuse for not trying.

After the death of Prince Hall, on **December 4, 1807**, the brethren were eager to form a Grand Lodge. **On June 24, 1808 they organized African Grand Lodge** with the lodges from Philadelphia, Providence and Boston. African Grand Lodge went about doing the things that

Grand Lodges do –including chartering many lodges –and running into few problems, if any, until Boyer Lodge of New York petitioned for a charter.

African Grand Lodge informed Boyer Lodge that they would issue them a charter, but there were some "doubting Thomases" in New York, who called on AGL to prove that they had the authority to issue charters. AGL sent them a copy of their charter, but Boyer Lodge returned an answer that the charter was like any other lodge charter and they could not see that AGL had authority to issue charters.

As stated previously, AGL had been issuing charters for years, ever since they organized the Grand Lodge in 1808. But they could not prove to New York that they were really a Grand Lodge. There was no official pronouncement of when the event occurred. It was at this point that John I. Hilton proposed to the Grand Lodge, an official "Declaration of Independence". They were to write such a declaration and place it in the newspaper, so that it would be official, once and for all.

And so it came to pass that on **June 18, 1827** a declaration declaring African Grand Lodge "free from the government and control of our Mother Grand Lodge of England.. or any other lodges. We do therefore declare ourselves henceforth free. ...and do create (this Grand Lodge) under the title of African Grand Lodge No. 1, to have and exercise the same powers of other Grand Lodges, granting warrants and charters and establishing lodges among our brethren.. -An act made necessary because Boyer Lodge of New York refused to accept the authority of AGL.

PRINCE HALL HISTORY EDUCATION CLASS

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Another incident worth mentioning is the formation of the National Grand Lodge.

There were many disagreements between the “African” Grand Lodges in America until it came to a head in 1847. Grand Lodges were not respecting the sovereign territories of other Grand Lodges. There were some claiming that they were the only legitimate Grand Lodges in some states with as many as three Grand Lodges.

It was John T. Hilton of Massachusetts, attempting to solve this problem, as he did with the Boyer Lodge problem some 20 years previous.

He called for all of the Grand Lodges to meet in Boston on June 24, 1847 to consider the formation of a General Grand Lodge. This General Grand Lodge (among other things) was to get all the Grand Lodges together and agree to one Grand Lodge in each state. The premise being that it would halt the growth of rival grand lodges, since without the sanction of the General Grand Lodge, a Grand Lodge would not be legitimate. Because it was held at the same time that many Grand Lodges were celebrating St. John’s Day, only four Grand Lodges were represented, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New York and Pennsylvania. Because of complaints about the timing, the convention was revived, with additional members and they created a National Grand Lodge of North America and put forth the “Sentiments of the National Grand Lodge”.

While the National Grand Lodge did have some success, it eventually went beyond the bounds for which it was established, and caused as many problems as it solved. By the time of the National Convention was called in 1877, all of the Grand Lodges except two had withdrawn “and there was nothing left to do but resolve the organization”. One of the major problems came from the “masonic rule” that there can be no body, or group of men, above a Grand Lodge. That all Grand Lodges are autonomous, therefore, the National Grand Lodge, or National Compact (as it is sometimes called) was a masonically illegitimate body.

At least one good thing did come out of the National Grand Lodge. African Grand Lodge of Massachusetts petitioned for membership and was refused because they had only one lodge (the others had joined others to form Grand Lodges). The petition was made in December, 1847, under the name of the Prince Hall Grand Lodge (the first time this name was ever used). It forced Massachusetts to obtain three lodges if it wished to join. This despite the fact that John T. Hilton of Massachusetts was the National Grand Master. Massachusetts decided to break up African Lodge and establish three lodges: Union Lodge #2 (Feb. 17, 1848), Rising Sons of St. John Lodge #3 (April 24, 1848) and Celestial Lodge #4 (April 24, 1848). On April 28, 1848 Prince Hall Grand Lodge was accepted by the National Grand Lodge.

Let’s fast-forward to December 14, 1994 (the date that the Grand Lodge of England recognized

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Jurisdiction of Massachusetts.**

Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Massachusetts) and then to March 8, 1995 (when the Grand Lodge of Masons of Massachusetts, A.F.& AM. recognized the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Massachusetts, F. & A.M.

Recognition is very important to any Masonic Jurisdiction. It opens the avenue for visitation between jurisdictions. In our case, it opened our visitation rights from only Prince Hall Grand Lodges to Grand Lodges all over the world. Could we exist without recognition? Certainly we **could. When England approached Past Grand Master Nicholas Locker about recognition and set up several requirements, Bro. Locker refused to budge telling the Grand Lodge of England, “We’ve been a Grand Lodge for 200 years, and we’ll be here for at least another two hundred years —with or with out recognition from England”.**

The system of recognition is worldwide. There are several prerequisites for consideration. The first being that you must have been organized by a regular grand lodge or regular subordinate lodges. It prevents start-up groups –who organize themselves, by just declaring themselves to be a Grand Lodge –from becoming a participant in this world-wide system of recognition.

Specifically, a Grand Lodge must be able to trace its lineage to the Grand Lodges of England, Scotland or Ireland –added to this list is African Lodge #459. If you cannot reach these criteria you cannot be considered. The reason African Lodge #459 was added to the mix, is because there are over 200 African American Grand Lodges in the U.S. claiming to be masonic. If they cannot trace their lineage to African Lodge #459, they are not considered, by this world-wide group of Grand Lodges to be illegitimate.

There is no need to get into arguments about whether or not these groups contain masons, for any group can call themselves masons. The question is, can they pass the test set up by the other grand lodges of the world. Prince Hall Grand Lodges passed the test of legitimacy. The Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Massachusetts must qualify all other African-American Grand Lodges who seek recognition. We, in turn, must verify that they can, indeed, trace their lineage to African Lodge #459.

The regulations for recognition are as follows:

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”**

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- D) belief in a Supreme Being**
- E) obligations must be taken in full view of the VSL**
- F) must display the three great lights in freemasonry**
- G) no discussion of religion and politics in lodges**
- H) membership must be all male**