

Alpha Lodge No. 116 F & AM

by
J. Hampton Harley, MPS

In 1867, two years after the Civil War and eight years before Congress passed the first Civil Rights Act, the wisdom of M.W. William S. Whitehead, G.M., captured the attention of the Craft during his annual address to the Grand Lodge of New Jersey when he said, "the true, fundamental and essential idea of our Institution, the central ideal of Masonry, the foundation upon which the whole superstructure rest is the Universal Brotherhood of Man." He stated his belief that regardless of social, color or creed, "A man's a man for a that." Many Masonic historians consider his statements as an "entering wedge" resulting in penetration of the "for white's only" doctrine that was popular societywide.

During the Grand Lodge of New Jersey's 1870 Annual Communication, a drastic change in New Jersey Masonry began when a group of "blacks" challenged this body's wisdom strength and beauty. It was announced that "colored persons," indicating they were Masons had petitioned for warranting of a lodge to be known as Cushite Lodge. The Jurisprudence and Charity Committee went on record saying the petition would raise questions of "great and increasing importance" in the Craft. The Dispensations and Warrants Committee was opposed to a warrant being issued. This resulted in the formation of a "Special Committee on the Applications of Colored Persons" with M.W. William S. Whitehead, P.G.M. among its members, to carefully investigate, consider and present their report to the 1871 Grand Lodge Communication.

In the interim, several "white" brethren conducted organizational meetings for a new lodge that would be unique in New Jersey Masonry. Preparing for the Grand Lodge opening, they selected officers, appointed committees and prepared the necessary

documents for presentation with their petition for the Lodge to be known as Alpha.

When the Grand Lodge convened in 1871 several petitions, including Alpha Lodge's, were presented and accepted "for issuance of warrants. M.W. Robert Rusling, during his final address as Grand Master stated, "Each Lodge has its particular work to perform " "...When one fails (his Masonic share), the whole work suffers from his neglect." He concluded, perhaps elaborating on M.W. William S. Whitehead's statements, saying "...Having a regard to the fights of others, and doing as we would be done by. This is our duty as Masons; and thus living and acting, we will convince the world of our sincerity."

After the Grand Master's remarks, the Special Committee on Application of Colored Persons gave a lengthy report. It went on record stating technicalities and concluded that the request for warranting be denied. The report also said New Jersey Masonic Lodges are open to all men regardless of color if they receive a favorable ballot. With the rejection of the petition it appeared that the "coloreds" conquest for acceptance in New Jersey Masonry had ended. However, it was just the beginning for Alpha Lodge because there had been no objection to the petition for its warrant. It was assigned the number 116, chartered January 19, and constituted January 27, 1871 by M.W. William E. Pine in St. John's Lodge #1.

Alpha Lodge #116 commenced its labors and rumors spread regarding Alpha Lodge's intent to admit "colored" men. These rumors and reactions resulted in complaints to the Grand Lodge claiming deceit and proceedings of Alpha Lodge that would interrupt the peace and harmony of the Craft. The Grand Master requested and received Alpha's warrant. Masons seeing no reason for alarm sent a petition to the

Grand Master requesting an emergent communication of the Grand Lodge. The Petitions and Grievances Committee began investigating the "Alpha affair" and during the 1872 Annual Communication submitted their report. The matter was debated and on a motion to restore the warrant, Alpha Lodge #116 prevailed by one vote.

Alpha Lodge #116 resumed its labors, and on January 30, 1872 the "colored persons" received a favorable ballot, becoming the first "blacks" initiated into a regular Lodge in the State of New Jersey. The next month a subordinate Lodge sent the Grand Lodge of New Jersey a set of charges against Alpha Lodge. M.W. William E. Pine, G.M. appointed a committee to study, evaluate the charges and report their findings. The Committee reported eight items, the most significant being:

- "Renewed agitation on a subject fully discussed and settled at the last Annual Communication."
- "By declaring' that Freemasonry can be of no benefit to persons of color, it insults the Institution based upon the eternal virtues of love toward all mankind."

After consideration of the importance of the charges, Grand Master William E. Pine declined to interfere with the labors of Alpha Lodge.

Alpha Lodge continued laboring with the newly raised Master Masons and everything appeared to be running smoothly. However, something unexpected happened in 1873 — the "Blacks" requested and received demits from Alpha Lodge #116.

They presented a petition, recommended by Alpha Lodge, for a warranting of a lodge to be known as Surgan during the Grand Lodge of New Jerseys Communication. Two motions were made, one to delay the request for one year, the second was in favor of issuance of the warrant. Both were defeated, thus for the second time ending the formation of a separate but equal black lodge in New Jersey. The Grand

Lodge went on record stating it would not grant a warrant for a "colored Masonic Lodge." However, it did not intend to interfere with any individual Lodge regarding the selection of its members as long as they possessed the required qualifications.

M.W. William S. Whitehead. P.G.M.; P.M. St. John's Lodge #1. whose remarks six years earlier were apparently the catalyst for Alpha Lodge #116, traveled to Alpha in the later part of 1873. He reportedly remarked about the persecutions they had endured and expressed his gratification that New Jersey was the first to achieve universality in its Masonry.

During the following decades Alpha Lodge's initially all "white" membership declined resulting in an increase in "black" brethren. In 1908 it came to the attention of Masons outside the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of New Jersey that Alpha Lodge was integrated. The Grand Lodge of Mississippi sent a communication to M.W. William D. Wolfskiel, G. M. inquiring about Negroes under his jurisdiction. In a reply the Grand Master of New Jersey affirmed the existence of a Lodge "composed almost entirely of Negroes"... "There is no law in this jurisdiction against making Negroes Masons, nor of affiliation by regular made Masons, irrespective of color."

Mississippi's Grand Lodge severed fraternal relations (1909-1927) with New Jersey. Commenting on the severance, the Grand Lodge of Virginia's Foreign Correspondent reported that severing because of Alpha Lodge was looked upon by the Masonic world with laughter. He reported on a communication from Mississippi stating, "It waits with wonder our action in regard to all the other Grand Lodges which admit Negroes to membership, England, Scotland, Nova Scotia, and many others with whom we hold fraternal relations, and whose Lodges recognize no difference in race, color or creed ask us what we propose doing with Scotland that has made a Mason of that black bruiser, Jack Johnson." At the conclusion of his report he stated, "It is not wise to open the doors of Masonry to Negroes. But Mississippi should

act and legislate for Mississippi alone, and leave New Jersey to do the same for New Jersey and Nova Scotia for Nova Scotia."

The labors of Alpha Lodge also caught the attention of Grand Lodges in foreign countries. The following from Western Australia summarizes the essence of what several reported, "...no man, whether white or colored, who is totally, morally and intellectually incapacitated is qualified to enter our ranks. Do the Past Grand Masters and the committee wish to leave the impression that any colored is, for the reasons quoted, disqualified?"..."are the colored folk creatures of another Creator than the God whom we, as Masons, acknowledge?"

The "Alpha affair" was mentioned in many Grand Lodge communications for several years. A trend of thought developed that the Lodge would likely die for lack of support and want of sympathy. Records indicate the light of masonry burned low in Alpha Lodge for seventy odd years; however, it was never extinguished. The dim light was passed to brethren who had deep and sincere respect for the Lodge and its success.

Obviously the success of the Lodge was dependent upon cultural and traditional patterns prevailing during a given time period. There was a positive change in these areas during the 1960's. The influence of these positive changes apparently prompted Grand Master Walter W. Smith's decision to appoint an Alpha Lodge Past Master (black), to his staff as Grand Chaplain. After this appointment the substance of Alpha Lodge began to overshadow fears.

With most fears and passions subdued, brethren apparently began to ask, Are we up to the task of accepting instead of just tolerating Alpha Lodge #116 in the Craft and its appendant bodies? A review of the Lodge's significant achievements in the Craft will help answer this question.

Dual membership in New York Lodges; Alpha Chapter #62 Royal Arch Masons; Grand Chaplain (second in a series of Grand Lodge

appointments); instrumental in the chartering of Allied Lodge #1170 (integrated), New York; Past Master recipient of Grand Lodge of New Jersey Daniel Cox Distinguished Service Medal; District Deputy Grand Master appointment; Cornerstone Laying Ceremony conducted by Grand Lodge of New Jersey for Alpha Lodge's first permanent Masonic temple; first in a series of Grand Royal Arch appointments; District Deputy Grand Master New York appointment (dual member); membership in previously all white appendant bodies; Royal & Select Master, York Rite-Knights Templar. Scottish Rite-32°, Grotto, A.A.O.N.M.S.; dual membership in New Jersey Lodges, and a resurgence of "white" brethren in Alpha Lodge's Line.

Alpha Lodge's membership in the appendant bodies, two especially, was not easy because an epidemic of rejecting Alpha members developed. A no nonsense Grand Master and the Grand Lodge met the issue head on, to the good of Masonry in New Jersey.

The Grand Master's decision to correct the policy against Alpha Lodge's members was timely considering the mounting criticisms and attacks currently against Masonry. A case could be made that these criticisms motivated the Senate to impede the nomination of a judge for a U.S. Circuit Judge position in the District of Columbia because of his membership in the Masons. "...additional information was required concerning the membership policies of the Masons." A reference was made in the September 9, 1987 Congressional Record-Senate Document S-11869 to an Alpha Lodge Past Grand Chaplain (black). This in conjunction with other information was submitted to indicate "Masons do not discriminate on race, color, or creed."

Finally, in an age when men were cursing the dark and seeking light, New Jersey Masons labored within the walls of Masonry and lit a candle to illuminate the dark. Alpha Lodge #116 astonishing accomplishments within these walls proves what can be accomplished through practicing, not just preaching, universal brotherhood.