

Black Freemasonry

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Introduction

I became interested in the subject when a black man with whom I worked told me he had petitioned a Prince Hall lodge. We were talking one day after his initiation, when he mentioned that seventeen people were initiated during the one Saturday meeting.

I asked him where in line he was to receive his degree. He told me that he had started out near the middle of the line, but that by the time they reached the altar, he had worked his way up to the front of the line. At that point in time, I knew that I wanted to find out more about this group of Freemasons with whom we hold no conversation.

As he progressed through the degrees, I began to learn more about how the Prince Hall lodges handled the degree candidates. It seems that all the Prince Hall lodges in the district hold a joint communication on a Saturday once a quarter to conduct the degree work for all candidates for the degree in which they are working that day. All candidates were given a coded sheet to assist in learning the memory work. The Saturday before the called communication, all candidates meet with their mentor who determines which candidates can answer which specific questions and then arranges them for examination so that each candidate has a question or questions he can answer.

Harold Van Buren Voorhis in his book "Negro Masonry in the United States", published in 1940 contends that we wrongly brand Prince Hall Lodges as "clandestine" since their original authority was from a proper Grand Based on the history of African Lodge, which we will discuss later. I will not dispute the learned Bro. Voorhis, nor will I confirm his

contention. Please remember that Voorhis withdrew his book from circulation after it was published because of the many errors contained therein.

Voorhis points out that, by usage, "unrecognized" and "clandestine" have come to be regarded as synonymous terms, when in fact they are not.

He defines a clandestine body as "one that has been set up since organized Grand Lodge Freemasonry was formed without any authority of any kind, by individuals grouping themselves into such a body. They may or may not have been Freemasons previously".

He states that to understand the problem, we must keep in mind that regularity and recognition are not the same thing. To bring this point out, you remember the case of the Grand Lodge of Belgium. The Grand Lodge of Virginia withdrew recognition from them because they no longer required a belief in a Supreme Being. They were not, by definition, clandestine, only unrecognized.

Prince Hall

There is disagreement as to exactly when Price Hall was born. According to Voorhis in his book, Negro Masonry in the United States, he states that William Grimshaw records that he was born September 12, 1748, but his death notice in the Boston Gazette and Independent Chronicle, dated Monday, December 1, 1807, gives his age as 72 years. This would make 1735 the year of his birth.

He was born in Bridgetown, Barbados, West Indies. His father was Thomas Prince Hall, an Englishman, and his mother was a free Negro woman of French descent. His father was a leather merchant and he was apprenticed to this trade at age twelve.

He arrived in Boston in March, 1765. In eight years he had saved enough money to become a freeholder and voter. In 1774 he joined the Methodist Church and became a minister of that denomination, ministering primarily to the black people of Boston.

Prince Hall was made a Mason in a lodge at Castle William, Boston Harbor, by the master of a military lodge numbered 441 of Irish registry on March 6, 1775, along with fourteen other black men.

African Lodge was operating as a lodge in 1782 under a permit granted by the Provisional Grand Master in Boston to work on St. Johns Days and bury their dead. They were granted a charter by the Grand Lodge of England September 29, 1784. Prince Hall is listed as Master, and the Senior and Junior Wardens are both listed as original members. Also seven of the members listed are among those receiving degrees on March 6, 1775.

There are conflicting reports as to why Prince Hall lodges are considered clandestine. In a previous study of the subject, the reason given was that African Lodge was suspended by the Grand Lodge of England for not paying their annual assessments. Bro. Voorhis states that they continued to operate in Massachusetts under their previous charter after the formation of the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts. Whatever the reason they were considered irregular by our colonial brethren, they are not in good standing with any Grand Lodge that the Grand Lodge of Virginia recognizes at present. It has been brought to my attention that there are some Grand Lodges that recognize visitation between their lodges and Prince Hall lodges.

After giving this talk for the first time, a Past Master from another lodge approached me and told me that he had time to kill in Boston. In order to pass the time, he visited Old North Church. As he was walking through the cemetery, he found Prince Hall's tombstone.

The Growth of the Prince Hall Movement

Prince Hall would probably have remained as just a black preacher from Boston who organized a Masonic Lodge that lost its recognition had not fate intervened. There was a group of black masons in Philadelphia who wrote to Prince Hall for help in obtaining a charter, as the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania would not grant them one. Prince Hall issued a charter to them and then to a group of members of a Boston lodge who lived in Providence, Rhode Island.

The first Prince Hall Grand Lodge was formed in Boston six months after the death of Prince Hall. They named their Grand Lodge after their friend and former leader.

National Compact Grand Lodge

On October 12, 1848 the Prince Hall Grand Lodges accomplished what the white Grand Lodges have never been able to accomplish nor have they ever tried, to my knowledge. The representatives of the Prince Hall group met and formed a national Grand Lodge.

This national Grand Lodge existed in harmony for thirty years until 1877, when the Prince Hall Grand Lodges withdrew from the National Compact Grand Lodge. To my knowledge, both groups consider the other clandestine today.

Grand Lodge of Virginia and Prince Hall Masons

Shortly after his installation as Grand Master, Most Worshipful Cabell F. Cobbs presented a paper to the North American Conference of Grand Masters entitled "In This Our Dilemma". He spoke of the exclusion of blacks from lodges controlled by Grand Lodges that have Masonic relationship with the Grand Lodge of Virginia.

He points out that the two main arguments given for not granting recognition to Prince Hall Masons are:

1. The first lodge chartered was by African Lodge and not by a Grand Lodge.

2. The Grand Lodges recognized by the Grand Lodge of Virginia were the first in their respective states and the principle of exclusive jurisdiction applies in these cases and the first Grand Lodge is the only legitimate Grand Lodge.

Most Worshipful Brother Cobbs then explained why these arguments were not valid.

He points out that at this time in history, lodges could charter new lodges, and frequently did. Fredericksburg Lodge #4 had constituted Botetourt Lodge # 7. He points out that Fredericksburg Lodge #4 was a self-constituted lodge.

There was no doctrine of exclusive jurisdiction at that time. There were at least three Grand Lodges operating in England at about that time. At the formation of the state of West Virginia, several lodges in the new state that had been chartered by the Grand Lodge of Virginia continued to operate under their previous charters rather than applying for charters from their new Grand Lodge.

After the conclusion of the conference, the Grand Master of Colorado was so impressed by what Most Worshipful Brother Cobbs had to say that he went home and contacted the Grand Master of the Prince Hall Grand Lodge. He and his Grand Line officers arranged a luncheon meeting with the Prince Hall Grand Line. They spent a great deal of time discussing cooperation between the two bodies.

Social Implications of Prince Hall Masonry

I had originally intended to conclude this paper with a history of the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Virginia, but my focus shifted in my search for a copy of the history. In searching the subject file at the Virginia State Library, I discovered a book by William Muraskin titled "Middle-Class Blacks in a White Society."

In this book, the author, a white man, examines minutes of Prince Hall Grand Lodges, correspondence between Grand Lodges, and interviews some prominent members of Prince Hall Masonry to determine how the social status of the members affected their membership, and how certain blacks have traditionally been denied access to Prince Hall lodges because members felt that they were socially inferior and not worthy of membership consideration.

The Prince Hall Grand Master of California in 1909 made a statement that reflects the attitude of the white Grand Lodges today "We should closely guard the inner portals of our fraternity. See that none enters whose character will not bear the closest scrutiny."

In 1923 California was recommending examining committees answer the following questions as a part of their examination:

1. Do you believe him (the candidate) to be of sufficient mental capacity to understand and appreciate the lessons of masonry?
2. Is he a clean, right-living man, sober and industrious?
3. Has he any habits which tend to degrade his morals?
4. Does he live with and support his family as a husband should?
5. Is he likely to become a charge upon the lodge?

The Prince Hall Grand Lodge of New York asked the following questions of all their petitioners:

1. Are you married?
2. Are you at present living with your wife?
3. If not living with your wife, state cause for separation.
4. Have you any children?
5. Are you divorced?
6. If divorced, were you named as the guilty party?

The 1915 Prince Hall Grand Master of California ruled on the issue of admitting a man who had served a term in prison as follows "Freemasons represent the highest type of citizenship and its moral teachings which are so lofty that it would be entirely out of harmony with its exalted precepts to admit into its membership anyone below the standard."

The next few paragraphs are direct quotes from Mr. Muraskin's book and in some cases his comments and statements are direct quotes or summaries of statements he found in reviewing Grand Lodge proceedings or correspondence.

"In addition to the restrictive legal and marital requirements, the fraternity has further demonstrated its commitment to exclusiveness by forbidding lodges to 'receive or retain as a member... any man who is a common, profane swearer, a reputed libertine, an excessive drinker, or one who is guilty of any crime involving moral turpitude or... any demoralizing practice.'

Perhaps the most important questions that Masons ask of potential adherents, and the questions that ultimately are most restrictive in their effects, are the personal ones, those in which the full weight of class bias is able to come into play. Sometimes the question posed inquires, 'Is this the kind of man I will enjoy sitting next to in lodge? Will he enjoy talking to me about our common interests?' More often, 'Is he someone I can bring to my home; Someone I can introduce to my wife and children?' or, when being very blunt, 'Will you be ashamed to associate with him in public or private life?' Unless the answers are an unreserved affirmative, the applicant is rejected. To make sure the prospective Masons meet all the standards, many investigatory committees institute rather inquisitorial type of investigations aimed at discovering 'Something about... his social standing, who... his company is, his family relationship, his real attitude toward society, where he spends his idle hours, and something of his past history.' How many poor ghetto blacks can stand such scrutiny?

All of these requirements and regulations reflect the fraternity's long-standing demand that only 'respectable' blacks, those who demonstrate by their public behavior their adherence to middle-class standards, be admitted regardless of their economic standing."

The Prince Hall Grand Masters have told their members that they are a select group, among the leaders in the black community as follows:

Alabama - 1939: You represent the most fortunate group of the various communities from which you come.

Georgia - 1908: The fraternity is largely made up of the best and most law-abiding colored men in this state - men who have made themselves part of the communities in which they live by owning their homes and living honest and respectable lives.

Texas - 1919: The best men of every community, town, or city, are members of the Masonic lodge.

The following was written about the Prince Hall Square Club of New York in 1931: "This club, composed of men employed in the federal, state and municipal governments, and are Prince Hall Masons, is one of the leading and most popular clubs in the City. It has a limited membership of 130, and has proven a credit to the community, because of the excellent work it has done modestly and quietly, in aid of charity, and in helping promote the best interests of the Negro in all spheres of life."

Prince Hall Masons see education as the salvation for poor and middle class blacks. The Prince Hall Lodges have never been happy about the "contamination" of youth by lower-class black behavior.

"The Masonic fraternity leaves few of the classic petty-bourgeois mores unattended. The Grand Master of California in 1925 pointed out that Masonry

shows 'how to avoid intemperance in drinking, eating and speaking.' The Temperance Committee of the Texas Grand Lodge went further and said Masonry is concerned with temperance in all things, including dress, 'the expenditure of money... the making of bills', and sex. Indeed, for Masonry 'temperance is a restricting factor for our affections, appetites and passions generally. While strong drink has been the area given greatest attention by the Masons, the desire to control drinking has been symbolic of the fraternity's dedication to cultivate general individual repression of 'disruptive' desires. The type of temperance the Masons have advocated is mandatory for the existence of the whole petty-bourgeois life style they have stood for. The Masonic leadership has also seen temperance on the part of the membership not only as a benefit to Masons, as individuals, but as a model for the non-Masonic black community to follow."

If you look at what I have had to say about the social implications and moral lesson of membership in Prince Hall lodges, and who is admitted to membership, I believe you will find that most of it applies to what we as members of Lodges holden under the Grand Lodge of Virginia, believe and try to accomplish. If you take out the references to Prince Hall and the black community, these statements could be about Virginia Lodges to which we belong. In short, I believe our goals are almost identical as far as membership is concerned.

Update

When I first gave this talk in the early 1990's the previous paragraph was the conclusion of my talk. I would like to update this information as follows.

I am proud to now say that in November, 2001 the Grand Lodge of Virginia recognized the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Virginia as a regular Grand Lodge and formed a group to meet with a committee from that Grand Lodge to draft an agreement for full recognition between the two bodies.

In November, 2003 that agreement was presented to the Grand Lodge of Virginia and approved. In January, 2004 the agreement was signed between the two Grand Lodges, allowing visitation between the two Grand Lodges if the visitors were invited by the lodge to be visited.

I am proud to say that on two occasions I have sat in a Prince Hall Lodge as a visitor. Twice I have been in a lodge holden under the Grand Lodge of Virginia where there were Prince Hall Masons visiting, once in Virginia Research Lodge where I was the Worshipful Master and they were there as my guests. I am proud to say that they were very well received by the members.

I am also happy to report that Virginia was the first and at present is the only Grand Lodge from a state that was part of the Confederate States. I understand that North Carolina is presently studying the issue but no action has been taken.

We also beat five states from outside the Confederacy: New Jersey, Missouri, Maryland, Oklahoma and Delaware. I understand that as of September, 2006; 39 Grand Lodges (including the District of Columbia) have recognized Prince Hall in one form or another.

At the Prince Hall visitation to Virginia Research Lodge in June of 2006, at the conclusion of the speaker's presentation, the question was asked if we could have a "question and answer" session. This session went on for almost an hour with questions going both ways. At a December, 2006 visitation to the Prince Hall Lodge that visited Research Lodge, I was asked by several of their members if we could have another "question and answer" session. We are now working on arranging such a session.

In December, 2006 the Grand Lodge of Texas recognized the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Texas as regular, but at present there is no visitation between the two bodies. This was confirmed by an e-mail from the Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Texas in January of 2007 after I questioned him about the matter.