

Ritual Magic: The History of Freemasonry's Magicians

Brother Richard Potter

By Brother Triston Wilkinson

(The following is the first of a possible series of articles on the history of famous magicians who were Freemasons. I thought it would be best to begin with the first American-born professional magician.)

Many years ago, when I was in Franklin County High School in Mississippi, my school was hosting a program to celebrate Black History Month. Knowing my interest in magic, I was approached by my friend Luther Bolin about performing a magic routine for the program, with the caveat that it related to the ongoing Black History Month program that the school was running.

Needless to say, I was honored, but at the time I did not know much more than an overview of magic history, let alone much of magic's African American history. This caused me to do some research on my own and I was eventually led to a very well respected African American Magician known as Kendrick "Ice" McDonald. At the time he was the Vice President for a Magician's Club that I now belong to called the Society of American Magicians. Ice McDonald was an invaluable resource for me and was able to inform me a great deal about the rich history of African American magic. Over the course of my investigations, there was one magician who immediately stood out to me, Brother Richard Potter.

Imagine for just a moment to be alive in the early 1800's (with no television, radios, cellphones, etc.) what it must have been like to be entertained. Imagine seeing a banner for a show unlike any other with a man claiming to be of Asian descent and claiming to have ties to the Native Americans. A show in which you will experience 100 curious but mysterious experiments. Imagine seeing a man dance on eggshells without them breaking, walking through solid objects, placing his hands in molten metal without being harmed, and make men's hats speak. This was all just an average night for anyone who attended a show starring Richard Potter.

Potter was the first American born professional magician. At that time, all other professional magicians were immigrants, mostly all from Europe. Richard was born in the year 1783 in Massachusetts to a former slave woman named Dinah, who was emancipated after the Massachusetts Constitution abolished slavery. No one truly knows who Potter's Father is, and it is a subject of debate as to whether it was Dinah's former owner, Charles Frankland, or whether it was Frankland's son, or if it was a man named George Simmons. Either way, when Richard became 10 years old, he traveled to England with a family friend known as Captain Skinner. Captain Skinner owned a boat and young Richard Potter worked as a cabin-boy but did not enjoy the occupation, so he parted ways with Skinner upon reaching Europe.

Shortly after arriving in Europe, Potter fell in with a circus and learned to be a rope walker and acrobat. It was at a performance that he saw a magician and ventriloquist known as John Rannie performing at a British fair. It was at that moment Potter knew what he wanted to do with his life. Potter began to tour with Rannie as his "apprentice." Sometime around 1800 Rannie brought Potter to America, where they traveled and performed with the circus. Sometime during this period, Potter married a Native American woman known as Sally Harris. Potter and Sally Potter performed with John Rannie until 1811, when John returned home to Scotland. It was at that time that the now 28-year-old Potter advanced from being a Magician's Apprentice to being a Master Magician, with his wife Sally as his Magician's Assistant. Richard Potter held his first solo performance at a coffee house in Boston known as the Exchange Coffee House. Afterward, he began performing quite a bit at a place known as the Columbia Museum.

Potter's story is a great one as a magician. In a time with a lot of increasing racial tension in the Country, Potter was able to perform at many places throughout the United States, yet it was often hard for an African American to convince a theater owner to allow him to perform. Potter would come up with unique ways to draw the owner's attention, often by performing a trick or even making inanimate objects talk to the owner on his behalf. It caught the eye of many owners who allowed this African American man to perform in their theaters. That is not to suggest that it was always easy, and Potter often faced opposition. On one occasion in Alabama, a local hotel allowed him to perform in the local tavern, however it would not permit him to stay overnight in the hotel due to his African American background. Yet the joke was on the hotel, for it has been reported that he was still able to perform and walked away with close to \$4,000 (over \$83,000 in today's money) @ only \$1 a ticket.

As well as starting his solo magical career in 1811, another life changing event happened in Potter's life that year. On December 3rd, 1811, Richard Potter became Brother Richard Potter when he joined African Lodge # 459 under the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of England. Brother Potter quickly became a highly active Freemason and even served as Master of his Lodge, often displaying a square and compasses in the advertising of his performances as a magician and a ventriloquist. Brother Potter remained an active Freemason throughout his life. In fact, "Brother Richard Potter is named in the June 18, 1827, "Declaration of Independence" of African Lodge as one of three Royal Arch Masons to whom the three signing Past Masters of the lodge delivered the "Grand Charter." This is the document that created Prince Hall Masonry." (1) There are some historical errors in that quote, but Brother Potter was instrumental in the founding of the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Massachusetts, Free & Accepted Masons.

Brother Potter laid down his working tools and went to the "Great Lodge in the Sky" on September 20th, 1835. One thing that should be noted about the death of Brother Potter was a special request that he had made. Specifically, he had requested to be buried in an upright position, which was done. His body was later moved to another location but was still buried upright, so that even in his death, Brother Richard Potter remains an upright Man and Mason.

For more information on the Magical Life of Brother Richard Potter, please see the book: "Richard Potter: America's First Black Celebrity" by John A. Hodgson.

VENTRILOQUISM.

Mr.  POTTER,
The VENTRILOQUIST.
*Begs leave most respectfully to inform the Ladies
and Gentlemen of that he intends to give an*
Evening's Brush to Sweep away
CARE; Or, A Medley to Please.

At Mr.  Ball-Room,
On Evening, instant.
In the course of the Evening will be offered up cards of

100
CURIOUS BUT MYSTERIOUS
Experiments,
A SONG,



PART SECOND.
VENTRILOQUISM.

Mr. P. will display his wonderful but laborious powers of Ventriloquism. He throws his voice into many different parts of the room, and into the gentlemen's hats, trunks, &c. Imitates all kinds of Birds and Beasts, so that few or none will be able to distinguish his imitations from the reality. This part of the performance has never failed of exciting the surprise of the learned and well informed, as the conveyance of sounds is allowed to be one of the greatest curiosities of nature.

PART THIRD.
THE WHOLE TO CONCLUDE WITH A RECITATION AND SONG IN CHARACTER OF TIMOTHY NORPOST

* Tickets 75 cents, to be had at the place of performance. Children under 12 years of age, half price. Performance to commence at early candle-light. The
; after they are assured that the Room will be in single order for the reception of Visitors, handsomely illuminated, with good music, & every the conveniences. Ladies or Gentle-
men desirous of having seats reserved for them, are requested to call on the day of the performance.

(Courtesy of the Invisible Lodge)

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References:

1. Saxton, Elliott. "Bro. Richard Potter: 'The Great Magician.'" *Scottish Rite of Freemasonry, S.J., U.S.A.*, 22 July 2013