

The History of Prince Hall and Early American Freemasons

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Not long ago, Sept. 12, 2006, as a city Councilor, I introduced before the City Council, a resolution to erect a monument, on or around the Cambridge Common, to a Black American Patriot and civil rights pioneer, Prince Hall. At that time, many were asking, “Who, what or where is Prince Hall”?

I am pleased that we have present this evening, the modern day **Prince Hall**, the 67th successor to Prince Hall, Most Worshipful Grand Master, Anthony I. Jakes, Sr. of The Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Massachusetts, and some of his officers. I am not a Mason, so whatever I say, if it is incorrect, I ask our esteemed and knowledgeable Masons to correct me. I only know how Prince Hall and the organization he founded affected my life, and it is my intention this evening to praise Prince Hall for his **Great Vision of Freedom** for our nation, and to congratulate these men you see here in black suits that have continued his legacy. Thanks to Aimee E. Newell, our previous speaker, Senior Curator of Collections at the National Heritage Museum, for providing such excellent information about these early Masons and how their lodges were formed.

The History of Prince Hall and Early American Freemasons, or Freemasonry in Massachusetts during the Founding Period of our Nation will be the theme of my remarks. A sub-title would be **Freemasonry and the Vision of Prince Hall**. Freemasonry as an organization for black men in America begins with Prince Hall who was the first black man made a Mason in America, March 6, 1775. There were black Masons here, mariners and others, who were made masons elsewhere. There were two types of Masons in early America, one white and one black. Slavery was a legal institution. Separation of the races was the norm and there was little if any social intermingling between them. Both began before our nation was born. One grew out of the need to socialize and extend charity. The other came from the need to organize and to advocate for social justice. Freemasonry is supposed to be Universal and regard all men as brothers. It is interesting to see how this principle affected the activity of these two diverse groups during the formative years of our nation. Remember, from remarks made by our previous speaker, there were two sets of white Masons, the Moderns and the Ancients, They did not unite until after the war.

The story of how Prince Hall was refused admission into Masonic lodges among the Colonist, and then turned to an Irish Military Lodge of the British Army, where he and 14 other black men were made Masons on Castle William Island, is an irony. It speaks of the difficult choices Prince Hall had to make in pursuing his **vision** of freeing his people. When the Military lodge he belonged to moved away during the war, he and his other members were left without a lodge. They were given a “permit” to operate, which is like a Lodge under dispensation. It allowed them to walk on St Johns day and bury their dead, but could do no other Masonic work. They named the lodge African Lodge #1. After several years, Prince Hall, by chance, applied to the original source of Freemasonry, the Grand Lodge of England. He was granted a charter and was appointed Master of the lodge. The charter, dated the 29th day of September, 1784, designated African Lodge, number #459 on the register of the Grand Lodge of England, made its members a **Regular Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons**.

Lodges or Grand Lodges in America, after the war, broke away from the Grand Lodge of England. The two white groups in Massachusetts joined together forming the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts and declared themselves independent of England. They did not include African Lodge whose charter came directly from England. My understanding of the term “The Universality of Freemasonry” is a concept where all masons are one family, without regard to nations. This was interpreted to mean the lodges in America had no reason to separate from the Grand Lodge of England, but they did. Think of the implications this presented to Prince Hall and his Lodge. It made them the only lodge, or Provincial Grand Lodge, belonging to the Grand Lodge of England in America. Did this make or constitute Prince Hall a Provincial Grand Master? Remember, in 1733, Henry Price had formed the first Lodge, and Provincial Grand Lodge in Massachusetts, simultaneously, from 18 men.

The Masonic Prince Hall

The press release announcing the subject of tonight’s presentation said “It is believed that he was one of six African American men named Prince Hall who fought in the American Revolution, some of whom fought at Bunker Hill.” Six? During my research for this paper and in questioning some of my Masonic Friends, they reminded me that there is a lot of confusion about the different Prince Halls and misinformation about the Masonic Prince Hall. In some recent books by noted Historic writers, some of this misinformation is repeated. It seems that a Masonic writer named William H.

Grimshaw, a Grand Master of Black Masons in the District of Columbia, created much of the myths and misinformation. He wrote a book in 1903 called "The Official History of Freemasonry among the Colored People in North America. The term "Official" caused it to be taken as such, and many other writers and researchers copied what he said. It has been shown that there is no evidence or documentation to support many of his claims related to Prince Hall. I am told that much of the wrong information surrounds Prince Hall's birth. White Masons were trying to disclaim the legitimacy of Black Masons because Masonic ritual says a man must be born free. Grimshaw gave Prince Hall a White father and a free Mulatto mother to qualify him as a Mason. He stated he was born in 1748 in Bridgetown Barbados and was sent to Boston to apprentice. There is no definitive record of Prince Hall prior to his association with a William Hall, who gave him his manumission papers. Please consult the book by Charles H. Wesley, Prince Hall Life and Legacy, for a thorough understanding.

Prince Hall and the City of Cambridge

Our city of Cambridge is noted for its diversity and liberalism. On our city jewel known as the Cambridge Common, tribute is paid to many different ethnic groups for their patriotic contributions to our city and our nation. There was no mention of the contributions of its African American citizens. "Not quite true", some one said. You just have to know your history and how it works. They're just standing in the background or in the shadows. See that Memorial over there to General Thaddeus Kosciusko? He was so impressed by his personal servant, Agrippa Hull, a Massachusetts freeman that served him through the war, that he gave his fortune to Thomas Jefferson to buy the freedom of as many slaves as he could, including Jefferson's own slaves. There is just no mention of Agrippa Hull on the stone. Look at the big stone with the brass relief of George Washington taking command of the Continental army. If you look close you can see the artist tried to insert a black face to represent the many black militiamen that had fought at Concord and Bunker Hill and was ready to take part in the Revolution. William "Billy" Lee, General Washington's constant companion and body servant, in war and peace, must have been there somewhere, They just didn't mention his name either.

Our new President, Barack Obama, seemingly emerged out of the shadows of many prominent Democrats, into the forefront, in the manner of a popular

television show. The Idol. He was being praised for his keynote address at the Democratic Convention, July 2004 and his election to the US Senate from Ill, January 3, 2005. But his primary occupation was that of a **Community Organizer**.

Today's Man of Honor, Prince Hall, offers us another opportunity to introduce to the present generation, not the best known or most popular, but perhaps the most influential man of color, cumulatively, that ever lived in America. We say cumulatively since he lived during the Founding period of our Nation and his influence continues to this day. He is the founder of African American Freemasonry, the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Massachusetts, and a worldwide affiliation of Lodges and Grand Lodges, sometimes called Prince Hall Masonry.

Sidney Kaplan, a founding member of the Department of African-American Studies at U. Mass Amherst, in his book "The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution 1770-1800" describes him this way. "Prince Hall, Boston's most prominent black leader of the era of the Revolution, was not a poet, or an artist, nor was he a preacher or a scientist. He was the founder of the world's first lodge of Black Masons. But more than that, he was, in a sense, the first black organizer in American history. His gift was to show some of his people, in the new climate of independence, how they might get together in defense of their social, political, and economic rights." **I wonder if our President knows about our first black community organizer?**

For many, the image of a civil rights leader is Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, and rightly so. But he, and others associated with the civil rights movement, stand on the shoulders of Prince Hall. He was among the first black civil rights leaders. Not only were there black codes that prevented blacks gathering in groups, but bounty hunters ready to kidnap and return to slavery any upstart or outspoken "Troublemaker". He faced hostile crowds while advocating for schools for children and speaking out for equal rights and preparing petitions to abolish slavery and presenting them before the Great and General Court.

Along with Prince Hall's activities as a Community Organizer and civil right's leader, he was also a businessman. He was a tanner or leather dresser, a trade he learned as an apprentice from his Master, William Hall. It's

interesting that Dr. Jeremy Belknap, American Clergyman noted for his History of New Hampshire and one of the Founders of the Massachusetts Historical Society, wrote glowingly about the character of Prince Hall. Belknap's father was also a tanner, this may account for his affinity for Prince Hall. Prince Hall's business was located not far from the Boston Common and was called "The Golden Fleece". He was also the foremost caterer, a sort of Wolfgang Puck or Emeril Lagasse of his day. There is a story called the "Turtle Feast" in a book, that you can get from your library, called Minutemen and Mariners, True tales of New England by Charles F. Haywood. The story is based on information from the Diaries of William Bentley, Harvard Professor and Pastor of the East Church of Salem. In this book is this description of Prince Hall, "As for a turtle feast, there was one outstanding expert: Prince Hall. A tall, lean Negro of great dignity, he always carried himself with the air of one who ruled many. Indeed he did, for whenever a well to do person wished the best catering job in Eastern Massachusetts, he sent word to Prince Hall in Boston, and when the time came he appeared with a dozen of his black men, or two dozen if the banquet was a large one". This story tells of the character of Prince Hall and how he provided work for perhaps members of his lodge and other free blacks. The information also comes from the one man who probably knew Prince Hall better than most, the Rev. Dr. William Bentley, whose diaries we earlier mentioned. Prince Hall submitted his charges, or his lectures to Dr. Bentley before delivering them to the African Lodge. Dr. Bentley himself was a noted Masonic scholar and gave Masonic lectures and sermons to the lodges in Boston and Marblehead. Question! When did Prince Hall find time to practice Masonry? I'm told this can take up quite a bit of your time.

Where history shows Freemasonry came to Massachusetts in 1733, many of the Masons associated with the American Revolution knew, or were aware of each other. John Hancock, Joseph Warren and Paul Revere, and Prince Hall, Lemuel Haynes and Pompey Edes, played special roles. John Hancock, Joseph Warren and Paul Revere were members of a Lodge called St. Andrews. It is said that members of this Lodge visited the African Lodge. That John Hancock knew Prince Hall and was a customer is testified by a receipt for services of nine pounds and 64 pence in the Massachusetts Historical Society and it was John Hancock's brother-in Law, Captain James Scott of the ship Neptune, that delivered the Charter from England, to Prince Hall. Lemuel Haynes fought at Lexington and Bunker Hill, and was with General Benedict Arnold, before the General became a traitor, in the battle

at Ticonderoga where the cannon were seized and brought back and placed on Dorchester Heights. That operation caused the British to evacuate Boston without a single shot being fired. Pompey Edes originally fought in the French and Indian Wars and then at Bunker Hill. Both later became members of The African Lodge with Pompey Edes as it's Tyler.

When George Washington came to Cambridge to take command of the Continental Army, on our Cambridge Common, black men were standing there in the ranks ready to receive him. They had already proved their desire and right to be involved and to be free. Let me read this little passage from one of the books, mentioned before, used in preparing my speech and which I recommend to you. It's called "The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution. 1770-1800)" By Sidney Kaplan. "When Patriots in arms gathered at Lexington and Concord on the nineteenth of April 1775 to confront the redcoats from Boston, Black Minutemen with flintlocks were among them. Early on the ground was the Lexington slave "Prince Esterbrooks, A Negro man", as he is described in the list of the wounded, who had enlisted in Captain John Parker's company, the first to get into the fight. He would serve in almost every major campaign of the war. From Framingham-the town that Crispus Attucks had fled-came another slave, Peter Salem, private in Captain Simon Edgel's company; from Braintree, Pompy, private in Captain Seth Turner's company; from Brookline, Prince, slave of Joshua Boylston, in Captain Thomas White's company; and from parts unknown, one Pomp Blackman, later in the Continental Line. Cato Stedman and Cato Boardman had joined Captain Samuel Thatcher's company in Cambridge. Young Cuff Whitmore and Cato Wood, both in Captain Benjamin Locke's company from Arlington, had signed on as soldiers in the Massachusetts Service for the Preservation of the liberties of America"; etc. Some of these names are found on the membership rolls of the African Lodge shown in the book, Prince Hall Life and Legacy, by Charles H. Wesley, which I also recommend you, read. Black Volunteers and contingents from towns and villages all over Massachusetts go on and on. Some Black units were created by Legislative acts, such as The New Jersey Militia act of May 1777, and the New Hampshire act, 1777. Then there was the all black 2nd Company 4th Connecticut Regiment, and The 1st Rhode Island Regiment, and of course the Massachusetts Bucks of America. There were run-a-ways and those serving in place of their Masters, all wanting to be free. The more than 5,000 Black Patriots, who fought in the war, and the many other black Patriots, compel us to include them in the memorial to Prince Hall. They are forever linked together in the Founding of our Nation. A note! The announcement of this event said six black men

named Prince Hall fought in the American Revolution. Six. I can't get over that. I was never taught that any black men fought. Six. All named Prince Hall?

I would be remiss if I did not take this moment to mention the sacrifices and contributions of Women, Black and White. Wives and other women often followed the troops, cooking, washing clothes and other menial jobs. I remember hearing about Molly Pitcher who carried water for her husband and other men, and helped load cannon at the battle of Monmouth. Wars are not just fought by those who shoulder rifles. Others, men and women, dug trenches, hauled supplies, built fortifications and were not allowed to have weapons. They too contributed greatly in determining what our nation would be, or become, during its "Founding Period",

The First Great Emancipation Or The Vision of Prince Hall to Free His People

The History of Prince Hall and early American Freemasons, is not about Prince Hall the Mason, or about the Fraternity of Freemasons. But each of us, and this nation as a whole, are beneficiaries of Prince Hall's Vision of Freedom and the efforts of his followers to achieve it. They have given us a legacy, a legacy that began from the time of Prince Hall's manumission in 1770, till his death in 1807. This period encompasses the Founding period of our nation and what I wish to call the period of **The first Great Emancipation** when Black people freed themselves.

The British had long thought that if the Colonist rebelled, they might offer freedom to the slaves, as additional manpower. When hostilities began, the British offer came. Thousands of blacks in the south defected to them. That was their only choice. They wanted to be free. George Washington had no intention of using any Black men until he faced great difficulty in raising and maintaining an army. Only then did Washington recant and accept black men, in numbers, into his ranks.

In the North, especially in Massachusetts, the story of Taxation without representation was well known. Abolitionists pleaded their case to free the slaves. The Suffolk Resolves, written by Joseph Warren, that sounded like the Bill of Rights and the Declaration of Independence combined; was distributed all over Massachusetts. And the speeches of Tom Paine and statements by Ben Franklin were well known by Blacks and repeated by

them. So with their leader Prince Hall, there was a choice to make, the promise of freedom from a tyrant, or the **Vision of Freedom in a new Nation**. Prince Hall unswervingly followed his vision.

The Revolutionary war ended in 1783. By then, in 1780, Massachusetts had adopted a freedom clause to its constitution effectually ending Slavery in Massachusetts. In 1784, Connecticut and Rhode Island passed gradual emancipation laws. These actions were greatly influenced by Prince Hall and his followers. An example, as Kaplan writes, “Two years later, on January 13, 1777, eight blacks of Boston and nearby signed a petition to the general court “humbly” demanding the abolition of slavery. The first four signers, heading the list-Lancaster Hill, Peter Bess, Brister Slenser, and Prince Hall-were Masons”. It said, “Abolish slavery and restore “the Natural Right of all men”. A Prince Hall Quote. **“Sure this was not our conduct in the late war, for then they marched shoulder to shoulder, brother soldier and brother soldier, to the field of battle”**.

Many slaves in the South, who sought freedom by fighting for the British, met tragic ends. Though some were taken to England and some shipped to Nova Scotia, the majority was returned to Slavery. For many years the Black community was reluctant to discuss the fact that Blacks fought on both sides. We now know that blacks also fought in the South for the Colonies. When States like Virginia could not fill their quotas, slave-owners found a way to send slaves in their stead, but were reluctant to arm them. It might be explained this way. **So George Washington gives Billy Lee, his constant body servant, one of his pistols and says, “Billy, take this pistol and watch my back. Just remember it has only one shot. So in case you get any big ideas, you better make it good”**. Yet the vision for freedom resides in every breast and men are ready to pay any price to obtain it.

My friend Red Mitchell says, “The Revolutionary war could not have been won without the Black Patriots”. My other friend Ray Coleman says, “It was the French Navy and General Lafayette that made the difference”. They both agree that Lafayette had James Armistead, who served as a spy in the British headquarters, in his shadow, and a contingent of black men from Haiti called Chasseurs.

Some may still question why the City of Cambridge proclaimed Prince Hall a Founding Father of our Nation.

We know the story of the North's reason for going to war, Taxation without Representation. We never hear much about the South's reason. The South had no interest in fighting until in 1772, a court case called the Mansfield case, outlawed slavery in England. The Southern Colonist realizing they were British subjects felt threatened by the prospect they too were vulnerable to losing their grip on owning slaves. Now there was reason to join with the North. How anxious was the average man to break ties with England, the Mother Country? We wonder. How much tax is there on a cup of tea? Now a shipload, that's something else. If the number of slaves you own determines your wealth, to outlaw slavery would certainly send the market crashing. I see the political signs now. **Taxes No/Slavery Yes.**

The decision of Prince Hall to side with the Colonists was not easy. You know of the rejection he received from the American Masons. The South joining with the North with George Washington as the Commander in Chief and a major slave owner practically assured if the Americans won the war, slavery would continue. Great Britain had outlawed slavery and the British army was the greatest military power in the world. There were many Tories or British loyalist opposed to the war. Ben Franklin's son, William Franklin, was the Governor of New Jersey and a Tory. He spent two years of the Revolution in jail. But the **Vision of Prince Hall for a new Nation**, where all men would be equal, was more real than a dream. **For he was sure that the principles of Freemasonry, grounded in religion and the great philosophies, would some day be a reality, where the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of man would prevail.**

When we look at the lists of traditional Founding Fathers, we see their names on the Declaration of Independence, but we don't see them on the army muster rolls. Now the name Prince Hall, Listed six times. All of them black men? We also don't see General Joseph Warren listed as a Founding Father. He was killed at Bunker Hill. I didn't see Paul Revere's name either, except when I was told to look at a web page of the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts. He (is) listed there as Founding Father, **but no place else.**

When we looked for someone to represent the contributions African Americans made to our City and to our Nation, the name Prince Hall immediately surfaced, except no one, except Masons and older Black Americans, knew anything about him. The name Prince Hall when I was a

child was better known. My Grandfather and other men of my family were Prince Hall Masons. When I went to England some years ago and brought back some information about Prince Hall I had gotten from the Grand Lodge of England, I contacted an old, ole; friend of mine who I knew was a Mason. We had spoken about Prince Hall before. He was shocked when I showed him what I had. How did I, a woman, get this stuff from the Grand Lodge of England? My reply was, "I didn't know any better". I just knew that members of my family were Masons and my interest in History told me to just go in and ask for it. There was also a Prince Hall lodge in Cambridge, Mt Moriah Lodge. Many prominent citizens of Cambridge were members of the Prince Hall Fraternity of Freemasons. Some were Grand Masters of Masons, like William E. Reed, 1900-1902, Benjamin Hazel, 1911-1913, and our well-known Andrew I, Spears, 1980.

We began our own research program. A National Parks Executive and friend, Bernadette Williams, aided us. She knew a Historian and fellow Cantabrigdeon, Dr. Marty Blatt that had been on a team of researchers funded by the Massachusetts Historical Society. They studied why men who were Prince Hall Masons were the principal leaders in the civil rights movement from the beginning of our recorded history to the present day. It was discovered that no one group was more influential in effecting social change than men who were known as Prince Hall Masons. When they looked at the Founding Period of our nation, the number one "Organizer" and the most influential Black man of that time, especially in Massachusetts and New England, was Prince Hall. When we began to compare what the **Vision of America** was destined to be, and those who best exemplified those virtues, Prince Hall stood out like a beacon. We realized that we did not just have a Black representative to symbolize the Black experience, but a true Patriot and every thing you wished in a Founding Father. Prince Hall Quote, (Menotomy) Cambridge, June 24, 1797, "Give the right hand of affection and fellowship to whom it justly belongs; let their colour and complexion be what it will, let their nation be what it may, for they are your brethren, and it is your indispensable duty so to do". Did Prince Hall envision a colorblind nation?

The Memorial

The unveiling of the Memorial to Prince Hall on the Cambridge Common is scheduled Saturday, September 12, 2009 It is designed so you may walk into his presence and see a reflection of yourselves. There will be quotes from him and responses by those that have been influenced and inspired by

him. Black Patriots of the Revolutionary period, men and women, will be duly recognized and honored. A re-enactment is planned of George Washington taking command of the Continental Army. Only this time, he is accepting all comers. The highpoint of the ceremony is delegations from far and near proclaiming Prince Hall a Founding Father, the reading of the Cambridge Proclamation with the present day Prince Hall, the Grand Master of the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Massachusetts, giving a response.

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