

Wardrobe Lodge No. 555

October 23, 2006

Lecture

(Worshipful Sir, Right Worship Sirs, Very Worshipful Sirs and Brethren,)

Prince Hall Masons in North America

HISTORY IN THE U.S.A.

A black Mason by the name of Prince Hall has been recorded as the man responsible for the founding of Prince Hall Masons in North America and Caribbean. Although, very little is known about this Mason's life, it would be safe to assume that he was born in Africa, as were most black males his age at that time in North America. He was brought to North America as a slave during his early teens. He ended up in Boston, Massachusetts with a Master named William Hall who, after 21 years of service, freed him. As it was customary during that period, he took the last name of his previous master and became known as Prince Hall. Prince Hall stayed living in Boston and a few years later, he and a group of other free blacks in the city decided to become Masons. On March 6, 1775, Prince Hall and several of his friends were initiated into Lodge No. 441 in Boston. This was an Irish Military Lodge attached to the 38th Foot Regiment based at Castle William, what is now known as Fort Independence in Boston Harbour. The Master of the Lodge Was Sergeant John Batt. On that one evening of March 6, 1775, the Military Lodge No. 441 conferred the first, second and third degrees on Prince Hall and fourteen other

of his friends. As it turned out to be, sometime later, this same Lodge granted a special dispensation to Prince Hall and company to meet as *African Lodge*. This special dispensation allowed them:

- 1) to meet regularly,
- 2) to take part in public processions,
- 3) and to perform funeral services
- 4) But not to initiate any new members,

Black men were to be initiated in other White Lodges before they could join African Lodge.

During the War of Independence in 1776, Hall and several of his black friends joined the Continental Army fighting the British. It is believed that Hall himself, fought at Bunker Hill. After the war was over, African Lodge was still in existence with a total number of 33 members.

Before 1776, most of Masonic Lodges in North America were operating with charters issued by British (both Ancient and Modern), Irish or Scottish Grand Lodges. After the war was over, the new States created new Grand Lodges to administer all the Masonic Lodges within their borders. This led Prince Hall and African Lodge to apply for a charter to the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts. That application was denied at that time. Although the principles of Masonry called for equality for all men; white Masons in the United States would not rise above the prejudice of the period. This led Prince Hall and African Lodge with only one option. Early

in 1784, they petitioned a charter directly from the Grand Lodge of England. It was granted in September of that same year but it took three years to get to Massachusetts. On May 6th, 1787, African Lodge officially became Lodge No. 459 on the Register of the Grand Lodge of England.

It is difficult to tell whether it was because of brotherly love and friendship or because it happens to be that the Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of England of that period was the Duke of Cumberland, brother of King George III, King of England during the Independence period of the United States, who may have used this as a way to get to the rebellious Americans. Regardless of the reasons, African Lodge forwarded its annual dues to the Grand Lodge of England without ever getting any reply for years. By the authority of its English charter, by 1792, African Lodge No. 459 was authorizing the creation of black Lodges in Pennsylvania and Rhode Island. By 1813, England had stricken African Lodge No. 459 of its charter due to the fact that they had stopped sending their payments of dues to England for a number of years. Again, reason unknown; a war is going on between the United States and England, which may have had an effect on the Grand Lodge's decision. In 1824, The African Lodge No. 459, once again contacted England to clarify status and to re-acquire the chartered. As customary, England did not respond. After many years of silence from the G.L. of England, In 1827, African Lodge No. 549 declared itself to be its own Grand Lodge, just as most of the Grand Lodges of the United States had done after the American Revolution of 1776. Counting itself and the other two Lodges it had established in Pennsylvania

and Rhode Island, they became the origin of black Freemasonry in North America. Some years later, in honour to its founder, it was re-named the Prince Hall Grand Lodge.

Today, there are some 4,000 Prince Hall affiliated lodges around the world in 45 independent jurisdictions with some 250,000 members.

It is also interesting to know that the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Massachusetts is the only Grand Lodge in the United States still in possession of its original English Charter making it the oldest Grand Lodge in the United States.

Apart from his work for Masonry, Prince Hall was an active man who, at one time or another was a soldier, a land owner, a business man, an entrepreneur, a civil leader, and educator who fought for the establishment of schools for black children in Boston. He later went to open a school of his own. In 1787, he was successful in petitioning the government of Massachusetts to pass laws protecting blacks from being kidnapped and sold into slavery again. He die on December 4th, 1807.

HISTORY IN ONTARIO

The Prince Hall Union Grand Lodge of New Jersey established a lodge of Master Masons in Hamilton, Canada West, under the name of Mount Olive Lodge # 1. The warrant for this lodge was issued on December 27, 1852.

The Prince Hall Grand Lodge of New Jersey also warranted two other lodges; Victoria Lodge #2 of St. Catherines

received its warrant on June 27, 1853 and Olive Branch Lodge #3 of Windsor received its warrant in October 1854. Two years later, on August 25, 1856, these three lodges, Mount Olive #1, Victoria #2 and Olive Branch #3, were called together in Hamilton where they were constituted into Widow's Son Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Ancient York Masons of Canada West.

During the next fifteen years, the Widow's Son Grand Lodge as well as three other American Prince Hall Grand Lodges from Michigan, Illinois and New York, all set up lodges across Canada West in widely scattered areas of Toronto, Owen Sound, London, Chatham, Dresden, Buxton, Shrewsbury and Windsor, all owing allegiance to the various mentioned Grand Lodges. In 1871, in order to rectify this situation, a call was issued to all the Prince Hall Lodges working in the newly designated province of Ontario to meet in a convention in Chatham on October 22, 1872. At this meeting the several lodges united to form the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of the Province of Ontario.

In 1958, after various minor changes of name over the preceding approximate hundred years and with the addition of Mount Moriah Lodge #24 of Montreal, Quebec, the words "and Jurisdiction" were added to the title in order to accommodate the addition of the Province of Quebec.

Finally, in 1975, with the universal recognition of the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Massachusetts as the founder of all Black Masonry in North America, the name was once again changed to conform with those of our sister Grand Lodges in the United States to "The Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge Free and Accepted Masons Province of Ontario and Jurisdiction."

The new Grand Master is M. W. Bro. James Jessop. He is replacing M.V. Bro. Clive Barnes who still had a year to run in his term.

ARGUMENTS

Various reasons have been given for the fact that White Freemasonry has not recognized Prince Hall Masonry. In general, certain events that took place long ago are said to contravene Masonic law and practice -- at least as it is seen today. Let me mention some of arguments, with a comment or two.

(1) First argument: In 1775 or 1778 the mother lodge, African Lodge, it is claimed, was formed illegally, and the man who initiated the blacks, Sergeant John Batt, was a confidence man, a trickster. It may be so, but by any standard you choose, the granting of a charter by the mother grand lodge made the lodge regular, and ensured that its members were legitimate Masons.

(2) Second argument: In 1813 African Lodge was struck off the rolls of the Grand Lodge of England, and ceased to exist as a duly constituted body, because it had not submitted any returns since 1797. Sixteen years is a long time, admittedly, but sometimes colonial lodges were allowed to remain dormant for a longer period than that without being erased. There are two in Ontario that were inactive for twenty-five years and more, in the aftermath of the Morgan affair -- Brockville, No 756/489, and Grimsby, No 761/494; yet they were revived under good auspices, and are still active,

as Sussex Lodge, No 5, Brockville, and Union Lodge, No 7, Grimsby.

(3) Third argument: In 1797 African Lodge, still perfectly regular, sent a copy of its warrant to a group of blacks in Philadelphia, authorizing them to meet as Masons; and later it warranted other lodges in Providence, Rhode Island and in New York City. And in 1827 it formed itself into an independent Grand Lodge. Both actions are said to be improper, and we are told that it requires three lodges to form a Grand Lodge. Today this may well be true. But between 1678 and 1803 Lodge Mother Kilwinning in Scotland issued warrants to nearly fifty lodges, and no one gets upset. And so far as the formation of grand lodges is concerned, Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia tells us that two lodges, not three, formed the Grand Lodge of Rhode Island, and that one lodge, not three, formed the Grand Lodge of Luxemburg -- both of which are regular.

(4) Fourth argument: Prince Hall Grand Lodges formed other Grand Lodges, and this, we are told, is improper. In the Proceedings of our own Grand Lodge for 1989, we read that the French National Grand Lodge constituted the Grand Lodge of the Ivory Coast. And in fact the National Grand Lodge of France itself had been set up by the United Grand Lodge of England in 1912. All perfectly regular.

(5) Fifth argument: Any Grand Lodge, in order to be regular, must hold "exclusive territorial jurisdiction" within the area of its authority. This is one of the criteria for regularity required by the Committee on Information for Recognition of the Conference of Grand Masters of Masons in North

America. So far as I can tell, it is utterly untrue. The Grand Lodge of Quebec does not hold exclusive territorial jurisdiction, for there are two lodges located in Montreal that still hold their warrants from the United Grand Lodge of England, St Paul's, No 374, and St George's, No 440; and yet no one denies that the Grand Lodge of Quebec is regular. During the years between the World Wars, Czechoslovakia had two Grand Lodges, the Lessing Grand Lodge, and the National Grand Lodge; both were recognized as regular.

Next question: how does one decide which non-Caucasian Grand Lodges should be recognized? Joe Walkes's latest book tells us that in 1958, there were 38 Prince Hall Grand Lodges; but as well there were 170 other "Grand Lodges" for Blacks. How does one decide? Easy; Prince Hall Masonry is regular. Prince Hall Masonry has a Conference of Prince Hall Grand Lodges, which provides a list of approved Prince Hall Grand Lodges. Here's a quotation from our Archives: "The Conference of Grand and District Grand Lodges of Canada held in Winnipeg on March 21, 1992, unanimously recommends the acceptance of Prince Hall Grand Lodges as approved by the Conference of Prince Hall Grand Lodges as being regular Masonic Grand Lodges." Several (but not all) Canadian Grand Lodges soon followed this recommendation.