

Prince Hall Freemasonry Reconsidered: Mistakes Historians Make

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1.



The excellent papers today, presenting aspects of the relationship between race and Freemasonry, show from a historical viewpoint how this has long been a subject worthy of attention. In discussing the situation in the United States, note that almost every country has issues involving race in its history and its fraternities, so by no means is it a unique American concern. If it reflects badly at times on America, similar episodes reflect on other nations.

Also keep in mind that African-American Freemasonry existed for many years while slavery was legal and an important part of the American economy. Black Freemasonry developed when it was impossible for Blacks to join the so-called white lodges.

My primary intention today is to correct a very widespread notion that there exists a single African-American system of Black grand lodges called Prince Hall lodges, and that giving recognition from white grand lodges will somehow solve racial problems in American Masonry and problems of recognition by European and other grand lodges. Nothing could be further from the truth. There are far more Black lodges than those that have been recently acknowledged by the white lodges.

This notion that there are only single Black grand lodges in each state worthy of recognition is a viewpoint actively promoted despite the contrary evidence. Explaining this is worthwhile exercise as the various Black grand lodge web sites could be a gold mine for

historians. They offer minutes of regional and national meetings of grand masters, and comments on relations with white grand lodges as well as assertions of the origins and legitimacy of their grand lodge. (<https://mwphglnc.net/> I will do my best to make this subject comprehensible, and keep in mind that legalisms that have been offered about black lodges often conceal racism. (I was possibly the second white person to join the black society of Masonic scholars, Phylaxis, thirty or more years ago. With Guillermo de los Reyes, I wrote a number of articles for their journal.)

The situation in the United States, regarding race and Freemasonry, is much more complicated than the scant attention it has received thus far, and so has confused historians. This is partly because one group of largely Black member lodges has gone to great efforts to assert its legitimacy over other

Black grand lodges, something those familiar with the claims of the United Grand Lodge of England and its branding of French grand lodges as irregular might appreciate. Prince Hall Affiliated grand lodges (PHA) are the grand lodges generally recognized by white grand lodges. They split off from the Prince Hall Origin or Compact grand lodges (PHO) associated with the National Grand Lodge in the nineteenth century. The PHO and PHA are two—but only two—of several groups of Black Masonic grand lodges. The irregularity of Black lodges except for PHA lodges is largely determined by the Commission on Bogus Masonic Practices. (<https://thephylaxis.org/bogus/>) The Bogus Commission is made up of Prince Hall Affiliated members. This map shows the recognition by the white grand lodges of the PHA grand lodges.

2.



It is the PHA lodges that have been getting recognition. While recognition may mean brethren from the lodges can visit each other, it is often recognition without free visitation privileges, and so is not a real recognition.

Putting all of this in a European

context, the various Black grand lodges have not confined themselves to the United States. Some American Black grand lodges have lodges in Europe (<https://mwphglmd.org/overseas/>) Indeed, Prince Hall lodges here in France have been the source of controversy:

3.



(<http://freemasonsfordummies.blogspot.com/2019/02/gl-of-utah-withdraws-recognition-of.html> At this site, please note my comments regarding Prince Hall in France and in other countries.)

The reason for this multiplicity of Masonic bodies is partly racial segregation. Clyde Forsberg describes the origins of Prince Hall lodges as, "...unable to become a Mason through the normal 'American' channels because of his race, in the end he gained entrance into the

order by going over heads to obtain a charter from the Grand Lodge in England ... Hall's African Lodge, by all accounts, offered middle-class black men like himself a ritual gathering place where not only dreams of economic advancement but a strong desire to join the ranks of America's white middle class

might be realized. Ironically, Prince Hall Masons discriminated against darker skinned applicants...". Forsberg claims that the Prince Hall lodges kept Masonry alive during the anti-Masonic era in the 1830s, when white lodges were shuttered. (Clyde R. Forsberg Jr., *Equal Rites: The Book of Mormon, Masonry, Gender, and American Culture*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2004, 22).

American Masonry is still struggling with racial issues. In *The Wall Street Journal* of all places, Alex Beam remarks about the white Masonic view, "The brotherhood of man had its limits. 'The truth is, they are ashamed of being on equality with blacks,' ... very few of the white lodge publications record how the black lodges raised money to support their brother Thurgood Marshall in his winning desegregation case, *Brown v. Board of Education*, or mention famous black Masons like W.E.B. DuBois, Nat King Cole, and Booker T. Washington. (Alex Beam, "On the Level and on the Square," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 22, 2020, C90). While institutions in America are now trying to rectify the benefits they received from slavery and removing the names of slaveowners and racists from building—in Harvard's case setting aside 100 million dollars to recompense descendants of slaves and changing the coat of arms of its famous law school from one of an early donor who had slaves—white lodges have not begun to look at how they benefitted from slavery in endowments and build-

ings, and had racist leaders they still honor. In *The Washington Post*, Colbert King writes, "White loathing of Black people was at the heart of legal and de facto segregation—including the voter suppression schemes now being crafted in states across this country ... White supremacy is America's burden. You know it. I know it." (Colbert I. King, "White supremacy is doing quite well for itself," *The Washington Post*, 21 May 2022, A19).

Connections with Prince Hall, a black leader in colonial and post-revolutionary Boston, are invoked by all the competing Black grand lodges as the litmus test of legitimacy on the grounds that he obtained a charter from the grand lodge of England. The impression created is that there is a lineal descent from that Boston lodge to the lodges that have been most successful in winning national and international recognition. The existence and activities of the original Black lodge in Boston were attacked for many years by white protagonists. The evidence is that the Boston lodge was chartered by the English grand lodge, regularly reported, and helped to start more lodges that in turn started other lodges—only some of which are part of the present group of lodges claiming sole legitimacy. Brent Morris and I published in *Heredom*, journal of the Scottish Rite Research Society, a survey of early American newspapers that traced the early efforts of Prince Hall and his black brothers.

4.



Just here in Paris there is a situation where history has created several grand lodges with roots in the past, and so it is with Black Masonry in the United States. America, with 50 states, presents a variety of Black Masonic grand lodges. Imagine if grand bodies as numerous as here in Paris were matched by competing independent grand bodies in every department of France.

The competing claims to legitimacy apply as well to the degrees beyond the blue lodge. Art deHoys, fortunately with us today, has written an important paper about the authenticity of degrees given by black jurisdictions, which I would urge everyone to read. [https://](https://srjarchives.tripod.com/1998-10/DEHOYOS.HTM)

srjarchives.tripod.com/1998-10/DEHOYOS.HTM He writes—“An oft-encountered story maintains that Albert Pike shared his rituals with Prince Hall Masons. On January 16, 1945, Willard W. Allen, 33°, Sovereign Grand Commander of the United Supreme Council, 33°, SJ, PHA wrote about this to George W. Crawford, Lieutenant Grand Commander of the United Supreme Council, 33°, NJ, PHA He explained that Thornton A. Jackson, Sovereign Grand Commander United Supreme Council, 33°, SJ, PHA from 1887 to 1904, was a personal friend of Albert Pike. After Jackson mentioned to Pike how ‘seriously handicapped’ the PHA

bodies were for a lack of adequate rituals, Pike is said to have given him an autographed, complete set of the Scottish Rite rituals. The rituals were passed on to Jackson's successor and eventually came into the hands of Robert L. Pendleton, who was Sovereign Grand Commander from 1911 to 1929. The Pike rituals were said to have been revised and printed, but the original Pike set unfortunately disappeared following Pendleton's death. At the end of his letter Allen noted, "The important fact however is that Pike did give Jackson a complete set of Scottish Rite rituals. Incidentally, it is not necessary to remind you of what practically all Masonic scholars know very well, viz., that in the closing years of General Pike's Masonic career, he became a very staunch friend of Negro Masonry." (<https://srjarchives.tripod.com/1998-10/DEHOYOS.HTM>)

Following on the early activities of Prince Hall, Black Masonry in the United States spread on a federal basis, as did the white grand lodges. The federal system that prevails in American Masonry means that each state grand lodge claims sovereignty over Masonic affairs in its state and through controlling the first three degrees claims control over all other bodies such as those conferring so-called higher degrees. Since there may be a half dozen competing Black grand lodges in a state, that means there may be in a state at least a half dozen competing Black Scottish Rite bodies, a half dozen competing Royal Arch grand chapters, a half dozen competing Cryptic grand councils, and so on.

There was, as I have mentioned, an early effort to unite Black grand lodges,

known as the National Compact. The Prince Hall grand lodges, some of which have been recognized by the white grand lodges, mostly have origins as members of the National Compact, but they left it in 1863. They claim that the National Compact perished, but that is not the case. The grand lodges that have been receiving recognition from white grand lodges are known in some quarters as state rite grand lodges in contrast with the National Compact grand lodges. (<https://mwnationalgrandlodge.com/national-compact-history/>.) The grand lodges that remained in the National Compact have continued. None of these have been recognized by any white grand lodges, and the white Masonic world has gone along with the idea that Black Masonry is simply those PHA grand lodges that assert themselves as the sole Prince Hall grand lodges. Let me emphasize that they are by no means the only Black grand lodges with a claimed descent from the Boston lodge of Prince Hall. The Hiram grand lodges and the St. John's grand lodges are, for example, just two families of several, so to speak, and a Black grand lodge does not necessarily affiliate with one or another of these historically related groups. The Hiram grand lodges and the St. John's grand lodge exist in more than one state and have been involved in litigation with other Black grand lodges. (<https://law.justia.com/cases/oklahoma/supreme-court/1943/7433.html>) Having a PHA grand lodge is never the end of the story in a state. For example, Virginia has a large Prince Hall grand lodge, but the Bogus Commission lists some of the others:

5.

Abraham Grand Lodge of Virginia

Alpha & Omega Supreme Council, A.A.S.R. Enoch Supreme Council Inc.

Exodus Grand Lodge #001

Hiram Grand Lodge Inc.

Ibrahim Grand Lodge of Virginia

Joshua National Supreme Council, A.A.S.R.M. & Zipporah Supreme Grand Chapter

King Solomon Grand Lodge of Virginia

Most Worshipful Consolidated Hiram Grand Lodge of Virginia Most Worshipful Omega Grand Lodge, A.F. & A.M.

Most Worshipful Saint John Grand Lodge, FAAYM (PHO) Most Worshipful St. Johns Grand Lodge

Mt. Zion Grand Lodge of Virginia, AF&AM, Inc. Regular Grand Lodge of Virginia

Rose of Sharon Grand Chapter #002

Each of these grand lodges has its affiliates in other states. One Black grand lodge in Virginia lists among its affiliates these:

6.

GRAND LODGES IN OUR NATIONAL AFFILITATION

Most Worshipful King Solomon Grand Lodge – State of Alabama

Most Worshipful King Solomon Grand Lodge – State of D.C.

Most Worshipful Cypress Grand Lodge – Florida

Most Worshipful United Grand Lodge – State of Illinois

Most Worshipful St. John Grand Lodge – State of Louisiana

Most Worshipful Hiram Grand Lodge – State of Maryland

Most Worshipful Mt. Sinai Grand Lodge – State of Michigan

Most Worshipful King David Grand Lodge – State of Mississippi

Most Worshipful Oriental Grand Lodge – State of New Jersey

Most Worshipful Doric Grand Lodge – State of New York

Most Worshipful St. John Grand Lodge – State of Ohio

Most Worshipful Perfect St.

Most Worshipful Scottish Rite Grand Lodge – State of Texas

Most Worshipful Scottish Rite Grand Lodge – State of Arkansas

We can readily see why trying to sort this out is such a formidable task that it simply has been avoided as a subject for historical analysis, embracing the simplistic solution of accepting the dogma that there are only one set of black grand lodges to consider for recognition. An excellent consideration of this situation is by a Black Masonic historian, John Hariston. (<https://bluelitepha.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/the-united-most-worshipful-scottish-rite-grand-lodge-of-texas-revised.pdf>)

Some of these grand lodges have involved including Scottish Rite degrees as part of the grand lodge, recalling Brother de Hoyos' confirmation that Albert Pike gave copies of the degrees to the Black Freemasons and noting that Scottish Rite bodies claim to have the first degrees, but not confer them. In Louisiana, there are Scottish Rite blue or first three-degree lodges that are in obedience to the white grand lodge. In Washington, D.C., we have temples of the now fully multi-racial grand lodge, a Prince Hall grand lodge, and a St Johns grand lodge within a few blocks of each other. (<https://www.hiramunitedsovereigngrandlo9dge.com/About.html>)

The lines of descent are hotly contested and some of these grand lodges claim a national jurisdiction. A Hiram grand lodge complains:

Hiram United Sovereign Grand Lodge is a complete Jurisdiction, and not the Grand Lodge for the State of Georgia. Nehemiah Grand Lodge is in fact the Grand Lodge for the State of Georgia, with Sov/III. Nathaniel Thomas serving as its Grand Master, which operates under the jurisdiction of Hiram United Sovereign Grand Lodge. There are also other subordinate Grand Bodies throughout the world under this jurisdiction.

Since the late 1700s, much of the time spent by Prince Hall Masons has been dedicated to the non-recognition of other legitimate bodies of Masonry in the United States.

.... Although some factions may have been healed since this time, the level of ignorance regarding their origin cannot be refuted any longer.

(https://www.hiramunitedsovereigngrandlodge.com/prince_hall_exposed.html)

These grand lodges each maintain the auxiliaries that are so much part of American Masonry: Many join Masonry in America so they can join the Grotto or the Tall Cedars or High Twelve or Amaranth. It is not surprising that they all have their Black versions.

7.



All Jurisdictional Members that wish to join the Shrine shall endeavor \$200.00 plus any additional fees (hotel, etc.). All Non-Hiram Members shall endeavor \$400.00 plus additional fees. The fees for the Shrine Degree can be paid online by clicking on the button below...

Hiram Jurisdiction Members \$300.00 USD Non-Jurisdiction Members \$600.00 USD Hiram Jurisdiction Members Healing \$150.00 USD Non-Jurisdiction Members Healing \$300.00 USD

Hiram Jurisdiction Members \$300.00 USD Non-Jurisdiction Members \$600.00 USD Hiram Jurisdiction Members Healing \$150.00 USD Non-Jurisdiction Members Healing \$300.00 USD

Healing refers to regularizing someone who has received degrees from one of the competing jurisdictions. It is usually just instruction in the esoterica rather than a full initiation.

8.

In closing, this is a favorite temple of mine, the PHA grand lodge in Baltimore, Maryland.



THE MOST WORSHIPFUL PRINCE HALL GRAND LODGE OF MARYLAND

THE LIGHT

WORDS FROM THE GRAND LODGE STAFF
FROM THE DESK OF THE MWGM, ELECTED OFFICERS AND REGIONAL DEPUTY GRAND MASTERS

MONTHLY SPOTLIGHT
RW STEVE ISOM

PRESERVING HISTORY
HISTORY OF THE SIGNING OF THE MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

THE NEW MWGM

CONGRATULATIONS TO THE NEW MOST WORSHIPFUL GRAND MASTER
NOEL C. OSBORNE, SR.

MW PRINCE HALL GRAND LODGE
SEP 12, 1876
MARYLAND

Ritual, Secrecy, and Civil Society

Myra Grand Chapter
Order of the Eastern Star,
Prince Hall Affiliated Maryland Jurisdiction

Samuel T. Daniels Sr. Council of Deliberation
A.A.S.R. Prince Hall Affiliation
Southern Jurisdiction of the United States of America, Inc.

Maryland York Rite
Concordant and Appendant Bodies of
the MWPHGL of Maryland