

MONITOR Cover Story

Prince Hall Freemasonry and Its Extraordinary Role in AOIP's Community Building

PART ONE

THE history of Prince Hall Freemasonry is one of the most illuminating in America. For it parallels the history of the struggles, progress and achievements of Black people in America. Most of the events chronicled in the continuing saga of Black Americans can be found in the proceedings and other documents of the Masonic Grand Lodges.

Prince Hall Freemasonry is the oldest and largest of all the Black fraternal societies in the world. These leaders have multiple reasons for an extraordinary amount of pride. What they have done has served as a model for practically all of the other non-Masonic fraternal orders such as the Elks, Odd fellows, etc.

American Freemasonry originated with the English *operative masonry* (stonemasonry) of the 17th and 18th centuries. The American lodges have practiced racial discrimination from the very beginning. White Masons have sought to rationalize the exclusion of Blacks on the basis of membership requirements contained in the *Regius* manuscript. This document, dated 1390 A.D., is housed in the British Museum. The manuscript stresses, among other things, the belief in a deity, brotherly love, honesty, secrecy and equality.

The membership provisions of the manuscript state that "an applicant who desired to become an operative freemason (actual stonemason) had to be free to take oaths of loyalty and secrecy." An applicant for membership was ineligible if he was a *bondsman*, that is, bound to a feudal lord or to a guild.



In their *Landmarks*, laws which Masons hold as "immemorial, universal and unalterable," the original phrase *free-born* or *free and well-born* was interpreted to mean that if an applicant had had servant (indentured or slave) status at any time, he was ineligible for membership. The Grand Lodge of England removed the word *free-born* from the list of qualifications for candidates in 1837.

White Masonic lodges have not only excluded Blacks from membership, but also have waged a constant campaign to deny the legitimacy of Black Masonic lodges.

The First Black Masonic Grand Lodge

PRINCE HALL, the founder of Black Freemasonry, was a most remarkable man. A fitting and accurate biography of this Black giant remains to be written. He has earned the undisputed reputation of being the most distinguished Black man of his day. He was one of the first abolitionists, a champion of Black rights and a capable and unselfish leader of his people.

For over two years, beginning in 1781, Prince Hall petitioned the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts to grant a warrant for a local lodge of free Black men. Each petition was refused. Undaunted by this rejection, Hall and 14 other free Black men of Boston became Master Masons in Lodge No. 441, Irish Constitution, attached to the 38th Regiment of Foot Soldiers of the British Army garrisoned at Castle Williams (now Fort Independence), Boston Harbor. Sgt. John Batt was the Master. This historic event took place on March 6, 1775.

The other 14 associates of Prince Hall were Cyrus Forbes, Bristol Stenzer, Thomas Sanderson, Prince Taylor, Cato Gardner, Boston Smith, Peter Best, Fortune Howard, Prince Reed, John Cater, Peter Freeman, Benjamin Tyler, Cuff Buffom and Richard Tilledge.

A temporary license was granted by the Army Lodge which permitted the group, which was known as African Lodge No. 1, to meet as a lodge; go in procession on December 27th, the feast of St. John the Evangelist, one of the patron saints of Freemasonry; and to bury their dead according to the Masonic ritual. This license did not include the conferring of degrees nor the performance of any other Masonic "work."

On Friday, December 27, 1782, African Lodge No. 1 observed the Feast of St. John with a fitting procession. In a Boston newspaper of the event, the lodge was called "St. Black's Lodge" of free and Accepted Masons. Prince Hall responded to this misnomer, saying:

(Continued on Page 16)

"Pulling Ourselves Up By Our Own Bootstraps"...A Series