

THE TRUE PRINCE HALL

“It is the misfortune of men of African decent to be heavily shadowed by a cloud. And they must wait to have it dispelled before they can be properly seen. Either by themselves or by others”. Frederick Douglass

The True Prince Hall leads to the conclusion that there was a false Prince Hall. In some respects, there is truth in this observation. For there has been fostered upon us false images portrayed by those who have not research Prince Hall as a subject. Others of us have accepted that which has been spoken and written so that incomplete and at times false information has become know, generally adopted and fixed into a tradition.

Prince Hall was one of the Fathers of Freedom in the period of the American Revolution and the Founding Fathers. He was a Black American in slavery and in freedom motivated by interests and goals as were white Americans. He was active in the struggle for the independence and self-government of the United States, as well as for the freedom of blacks with whom he was an active leader and a participant in their activities. He was a black man in America torn between significant causes in this first of our nation's beginnings.

His drive for freedom had a dual thrust. One directed against the dominating rule of a foreign power in the American colonies, and the other against the bondage of blacks. Within these areas, he was the first of the black organizers in American History. He antedated Richard Allen and Absalom Jones in their organization of the Free African Society in Philadelphia in 1787 and their churches in 1791. He was a man among men, and because he occupied a place of leadership it should be upon this basis that we make our judgments.

The primary distinction of Prince Hall was that he was the Founder of Black Masonry, not by copying and imitating white American masonry, but by the application to and the approval of British masonry in the period of the American Revolution when the rights of men were being tested. American Masons had not invited nor considered black Americans for admission to their lodges, nor assisted in the separate organization of them.

Prince Hall was an active leader of the colonial blacks in Massachusetts. He was an advocate and an activist in the termination of the slave trade and slavery. A leader in four petitions in 1773, 1774, 1777, and 1778, and an opponent of them continuously. He did not lean to one principle, only what was good for himself, while denying it to others who were white. He was a supporter of education, which was granted to white children in Boston, but he also wanted it for black children. He was a promoter of citizenship for

blacks and a loyal patriot of the nation. He also wanted freedom to be spread to all alike, although others would want it for themselves but not for those of darker color than they, while they clung to its opportunities and benefits for themselves. Prince Hall attempted to have these benefits spread to all Americans, neglecting none. There were those, as is well known, who wanted freedom from the oppression of George III and Parliament while denying it to others by law and action. Prince Hall and his followers defended both of these views of freedom.

Sources of original information concerning Prince Hall are rare. Books have been written and published which included him, and although there are histories of Masonry for blacks in the United States, there was no single biography of Prince Hall. Writers and speakers with Masonic relationships have built up the description of him so that there is fact and fiction of his life and career. There was no mention of him, as a leader in the histories of America of the period in which he lived. References have had to be found in bits of information here and there, in manuscripts and newspapers of the period, as well as in the available addresses. Published statements, addresses and pictures have appeared about him in the 19th and 20th centuries. He became greater in stature as the years have advanced and the institution of Masonry, which used his name, has projected its services from the lodge rooms to the community.

Year by year, Prince Hall has become a greater man throughout the nation. In Massachusetts, in 1964 Governor Endicott Peabody declared September the 13th a "Prince Hall American Day" and urged all citizens to take note of the observance.

PRINCE HALL AMERICANISM DAY

Prince Hall was the founder and first Grand Master of Freemasonry for Negroes in America. The Prince Hall Masons, after a continuous existence of two centuries, now number over a half million in more than 5500 lodges throughout the United States. These men, dedicated to a belief in the Fatherhood of God, and the Brotherhood of Man, have supported many charitable enterprises and have made a significant contribution to the ethical standards of welfare of millions of American citizens. Prince Hall Masons everywhere have pledge to support, defend and protect the American way of life, to uphold the Constitution, the Bill of Rights and to work toward the goal of one nation indivisible with Liberty and Justice for all.

When he lived, he was an ordinary man, but, one who was revered and esteemed by his contemporaries, white and black, who knew him. After he died on December 4, 1807, he grew as the years passed in the esteem of his people. One of the first references to Prince Hall came seventeen years after his death. Very little information was known of him or written about him between his death in 1807 and 1824. Reference to Prince Hall was

presented in the Centennial Celebration of African Lodge on September 29, 1884. We may see Prince Hall now, a man small in stature. His slight frame is mounted by a shapely head, adorned with the refined features; his eyes are bright and piercing; his nose hook-shaped, his mouth and chin, firm and spiritual. He wears a powdered wig, a black velvet suit, and an immaculate shirt with ruffles. He carries a cane in one hand and a roll of documents in the other.

A major source of information on Prince Hall was a book by William H. Grimshaw, a Grand Master of Black Masons in the District of Columbia. His book, published in 1903, "The Official History of Freemasonry among the Colored People in North America". Without presenting or indicating his supporting documentation or evidence of proof, He initiated myths and untruths about Prince Hall, intermingling them with factual materials, thus presenting an interesting story. In doing this, he became a writer who was recognized as a historian of Masonry among black Americans and as one, who was believed, accepted for his authorship and regarded as an authority. Grimshaw also wrote the Prince Hall was born in 1748, in Bridgetown, Barbados, for which there is no documentation. Where Prince Hall was born is unknown. Prince Hall was born in 1735, since his death certificate states that he was 72 years of age at his death in 1807. It has also been said that William Hall was the father of Prince Hall and that his mother was a free woman of color. No substantiation of that assertion has been found. He may have been born in Africa from where he was brought as a slave and sold in the slave mart, as were so many others of his people. He may have been born in the Colony of Massachusetts, but no actual record of his birth has been found, despite the assertion that he was born in Barbados. He may have been born a slave for a manumission paper was filed for him in 1770 by his owner William Hall, giving him his freedom stating that "he is no longer to be Reckoned a slave". In placing Prince Halls birthplace in Bridgetown, Barbados, on September 14, 1748, this was something of an estimation, without any documentary proof of the birth as to place and time. There is no documentary evidence that Prince Hall was a Methodist Minister nor the pastor of a church, no evidence of his ordination, however, the record does show that he was a student of the bible. These statements have been accepted, repeated in publications and addresses across the years, so credibility has been given to them as almost constituting a tradition. It is now time for correction and admission of the lack of historical proofs. This can be done, without harm to its founder and its history. His birth year is variously given. One of the accepted dates is September 14, 1748. William H. Grimshaw and Harry E. Davis agree on this date. His monument bears the date 1748-1807. However, Harry A. Williamson, Masonic Historian suggest that the year of Halls birth is 1735, since his death notice published on December 7, 1807, stated that he died at the age of 72 years.

The reading of the newspaper notices of the deaths, Monday, December 7, 1807, stated that he died Friday and that his funeral procession would take place on the afternoon of

Monday, December 7th. This takes his death back to Friday, December 4th not December 7th as has been told. The death record of the city of Boston lists his death as December 4, 1807. The epitaph on his gravestone reads, "Here lies the body of Prince Hall, first Grand Master of the first Colored Grand Lodge of Masons in Massachusetts, died Dec 7, 1807". This reference is erroneous. His birth date in September continues to be celebrated as chose by Grimshaw. The birth dates of slaves have been rarely recorded. Frederick Douglass as a grown man selected himself February 14 as his day of birth, and we celebrate it, but it too was an arbitrary selection.

Grimshaw's writings made his account become alive, as the author wanted it to do, but it has too many errors and in other instances does not present facts. The author then is a story-maker about Prince Hall, and has become the target of those among Masons who would criticize and protest Prince Hall Masonry, regarding it as illegitimate, clandestine or irregular. Here are problems, perhaps on a wider scale than have occurred in the preparation of the lives of any other black Americans who have failed to leave behind clues and answers arising during their lives.

We thus revisit Prince Hall, and reconstruct his life and career, in ways which continue him as a great man with an extraordinary life, useful leadership, and service to black people in the era of the struggles of slavery, with freedom, and in the period of America's struggle for its freedom against those who would take it from them.

Prince Hall was a great and good man, which was demonstrated in all of his activities. He was a remarkable Worshipful Master of African Lodge who spread his influence across Boston and beyond state lines, and his influence still lives after him in states and people beyond the State of Massachusetts and across the seas. While recent research has raised doubts concerning the accepted amounts of Prince Halls life and career, and these views have produced questionable opinions of some parts of his life, he still stands like the old oak tree in the forest, as our pioneer and founder, a great man among Americans, white or black, a hero in the period of the American Revolution and our Founding Fathers.

*"Then shall we hear and see and know, All we desir'd and wish'd below
And every power find sweet employ, in that eternal world of joy.
Our flesh shall slumber in the ground, Till the last trumpet's joyful sound.
Then burst the chains with sweet surprise, And our Saviors image arise"*

This was Prince Hall's beloved poem, which he quoted in one of his charges. His name and fame go marching on, in us his heirs. Let us hold high his banner against every wind, gale and storm, so that the True Prince Hall can be seen and know and the false one rejected.

It was my goal to give what I believed to be the most accurate historical account of Prince Hall's life. This is my finding.

By Past Master Charles V. Williams III