

POLITICAL INCORRECTNESS IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY BOSTON:  
WHY PRINCE HALL MASONRY WAS SHOWN THE DOOR

---

Secretary's note: This article is published in the current edition (July 2013) of , "The Journal of the Masonic Society," and is provided by Frater Parsons for our enjoyment.

By John T. Parsons

Most Masonic historians generally tend to view the origins of Price Hall Masonry from one of two perspectives. Many view Prince Hall's own initiation into a British regimental lodge in Boston as illegal or "clandestine," since there were other Craft lodges in Boston at that time to which Prince Hall could have theoretically applied for admission. Similarly, these historians tend to view the establishment of Prince Hall Grand Lodges as illegal and irregular, since those Grand Lodges espouse the doctrine of "Exclusive Territoriality," meaning there can be only one Grand Lodge in any given territorial boundary. Other historians, primarily African-American, view the non-recognition of Prince Hall Masonry as evidence of *de facto* racial discrimination.

While there may be some merit to the latter theory regarding the continued non-recognition of Prince Hall Masonry by some Grand Lodges, both points of view are erroneous. The main reason for the initial non-recognition of Prince Hall and his lodge by Massachusetts had little or nothing to do with race, but was instead politically motivated in the aftermath of the American Revolution.

To understand Prince Hall Masonry in context, however, we must first re-examine the American Revolution and, if necessary, dispel a few popular myths, many of them Masonically related, that have arisen and been accepted as fact by most contemporary American Masons. As the saying goes, "History is written by the winners", and Masonic history is no exception.

First of all, the American Revolution was not a war between two separate countries, the United States and Great Britain, it was a civil war.<sup>i</sup> In 1775 the American colonist viewed himself as a British subject. Contrary to popular belief, developed after the Revolution, Paul Revere on his famous ride did not cry, "The British are coming!" but rather the "Regulars are coming out!"<sup>lii</sup> In contemporary terms, the Minutemen facing off against the Redcoats at Lexington Green, was the equivalent of the National Guard engaging in battle with the regular army.

American Masons revel in the patriotism displayed by Revolutionary War era Masons, such as George Washington, Paul Revere, John Hancock, and Benjamin Franklin, but not all Masons were patriots. Benjamin Franklin's son, William, a Mason and the Governor of New Jersey, was a Loyalist who fled to England after the war. There were Loyalist adherents to the Crown, as well as proponents of the Revolutionary cause, in all parts of the colonies. New York raised more troops for George III than they did for George



Washington, and New Jersey and the Carolinas had about as many active Loyalists as they did Patriots. New England, however, had fewer Loyalists than the other colonies.<sup>iii</sup> Opposition to the Crown in New England had roots going back nearly a century and a half. Most of the immigrants to New England originally came from the portion of England known as East Anglia, a hotbed of support for Cromwell during the English Civil War, and their anti-Royalist sentiments were still evident.<sup>iv</sup>

Further evidence that this was indeed a civil war can be obtained by looking at the other side of the ocean. There was as much opposition to the colonial policies of George III in England as there was in North America. John Wilkes, a leader of the Parliamentary opposition to the Crown, was outspoken in his support for the rebels. Nine of the twelve members of parliament from London were pro-American. Gen. Geoffrey Amherst, the senior ranking British officer in 1775, who had commanded British and colonial forces during the French and Indian War, refused to take command in North America due to his admiration of the colonists and their values. Gen. William Howe and his brother Admiral Richard Howe, who took command of British Army and Naval forces in North America in 1776, supported the demands of the American colonists, and indeed refused to assume military command unless they were dual-hatted as peace commissioners.

While Howe was in command, he refused to treat the colonists harshly, and reprimanded any of his subordinates who attempted to do so.<sup>v</sup> Gen. Henry Clinton, who succeeded William Howe in command in 1778, was married to an American and did not get along well with the Loyalists he dealt with in New York and the other colonies. One of the principal reasons why George III had resort to hiring mercenaries from Germany is that young men in England would not enlist to fight their fellow countrymen in North America. To this day, British army units do not display battle streamers for those actions, such as Bunker Hill, Long Island, and Brandywine in which they participated during the Revolution, considering that conflict to be domestic strife, and not a conflict with a foreign power. In short, there was a great deal of sympathy for the colonial viewpoint in England.<sup>vi</sup>

As with the history of the American Revolution, we need to re-examine our Masonic history. The Modern Grand Lodge of England was founded in 1717 in London, and that Grand Lodge chartered subordinate and provincial lodges in the colonies as well as in England. The membership in those lodges was composed generally of the more well-to-do and societal elites. The Ancient Grand Lodge emerged in England in 1751, partially because of disagreements with the ritual of the moderns, but also because of class differences. The membership in the Ancient lodges was comprised of more tradesmen, craftsmen, and generally members of the emerging middle class. The Ancients also established lodges in the colonies. In the colonies, as well as in England, the Ancients had more members from the emerging middle class (such as the silversmith Paul Revere) while the Moderns had more of an upper-class membership. In 1775, Massachusetts had Provincial Grand Lodges that had been established by both the Ancients and the Moderns. Joseph Warren was the Grand Master of the Ancient Grand Lodge, while John Rowe was the Grand Master of the Modern Grand Lodge.<sup>vii</sup>



In addition to the lodges under the Ancient and Modern Provincial Grand Lodges, in 1775 there were lodges in most of the British Army regiments that were stationed in Boston. Thirteen Regiments of Foot (infantry) and one of dragoons were stationed in Boston and its environs. Two regiments did not have lodges: all the rest did. Four regimental lodges were chartered by the Grand Lodge of Scotland, and the rest by the Grand Lodge of Ireland.<sup>viii</sup>

Prince Hall and several other African-Americans were initiated into Lodge No. 441 in 1775 in Boston. Attached to the 38<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot, Lodge No. 441 was one of those regimental lodges chartered by the Grand Lodge of Ireland. When the regiment departed Boston after the Battle of Bunker Hill in 1776, Prince Hall was given a permit that allowed him and the lodge members remaining in Boston to meet as a lodge, conduct Masonic funerals, and to march in procession on St John's Day, but with the stipulation that they could not initiate any new members.<sup>ix</sup> Prince Hall appears to have had some conversations with Joseph Warren, the Provincial Grand Master of the Ancient Grand Lodge of Massachusetts regarding affiliation with that body, and Warren was apparently receptive to the idea. Unfortunately, Warren was killed at Bunker Hill, and the effort went nowhere.<sup>x</sup>

After the Warren's death, Prince Hall obtained a warrant from the Provincial Grand Master of the Moderns to meet as African Lodge #1, and ultimately obtained, in 1787, a charter from the Modern Grand Lodge of England.

Over the next two centuries many theories were advanced as to why Prince Hall Masonry was not recognized by predominantly white or "mainstream" Grand Lodges. The theories advanced by the white lodges to deny recognition were usually based on two arguments, exclusive territoriality and the fact that Prince Hall was not a member of the 38<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot, and therefore ineligible for membership in its lodge. Both arguments are fallacious and totally without merit.

The doctrine of "Exclusive Territoriality" holds there can be only one Grand Lodge within a given territorial boundary. This is, however, an American innovation and is not recognized anywhere else in the Masonic world. There are numerous examples of subordinate lodges chartered by several Grand Lodges meeting in the same country. Japan, for instance, has a Grand Lodge of Japan and numerous subordinate lodges operating within its territory, but there are also lodges chartered by the Grand Lodges of England, Scotland, the Philippines, Massachusetts, and the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Washington all meeting in Japan. The Grand Lodges of England, Scotland, and Ireland all have lodges meeting in New Zealand, while both England and Scotland have established lodges in several provinces of Canada, and Australia as well as South Africa, Brazil, and Argentina. This doctrine was contrived in the nineteenth century for several reasons, one of which was to perpetuate the non-recognition of Prince Hall Masonry.<sup>xi</sup>

The contention of Prince Hall's ineligibility is similarly invalid. Lodge No. 441 was authorized, by the terms of its warrant, to initiate not only members of the regiment, but also any other local residents, if there was "no other lodge available". The phrase "no other lodge available" means no other lodge chartered by the Grand Lodge of Ireland. In



Boston in 1775 there were civilian and regimental lodges chartered by the Ancient Grand Lodge of England, the Modern Grand Lodge of England, and the Grand Lodge of Scotland, but the only lodges chartered by the Grand Lodge of Ireland were regimental lodges. Therefore, members of those regimental lodges chartered by the Grand Lodge of Ireland could initiate local civilian residents in addition to members of that regiment. There is no record of why Prince Hall chose to petition Lodge No. 441 rather than some other lodge. There is some speculation that he may have considered petitioning St Andrew's Lodge, an Ancient Lodge chartered by Scotland.

St. Andrew's was under the jurisdiction of Grand Master Joseph Warren who was known for his liberal racial views. Why, then, did Prince Hall petition Lodge No 441 instead of St Andrew's Lodge or one of the other regimental lodges in Boston that had Irish charters? The answer may be that there were already black Masons in Lodge No. 441. The 38<sup>th</sup> Regiment had been stationed in Barbados in the West Indies for a number of years and perhaps had black members in the regiment.<sup>xii</sup> If so, it is possible that some of these men from Barbados may have joined the lodge. Unfortunately, the records of the Grand Lodge of Ireland during this time frame are non-existent.

It should be noted, however, that, many African-American Masonic historians have focused on racial undertones for non-recognition almost solely and to the exclusion of other possible factors. While racism was certainly responsible for much of the perpetuation of the policy of non-recognition in the past two centuries, it was not the primary cause for the initial non-recognition by Massachusetts of Prince Hall. The chief cause of that non- recognition was politics.

As previously noted, opposition to the Crown was also very pronounced in Massachusetts. While Patriots and Loyalists managed to co-exist in the South after the Revolution, Massachusetts was notoriously hard on Tories and suspected loyalists, many of whom were persecuted and harried into exile in Britain or Canada. In fact, many Masons suspected of loyalist sympathies left Boston in 1775 with the British Army, while others left later.<sup>xiii</sup> This Diaspora among Modern Masons imploded the Provincial Grand Lodge and it was absorbed by the Ancient Grand Lodge in 1792.<sup>xiv</sup>

While Massachusetts may have been rabidly anti-loyalist, it was also probably as color-blind as any eighteenth century society. Numerous free blacks had served in Massachusetts and other New England regiments during the war, and Massachusetts was the first state to abolish slavery, doing so in 1784.

Prince Hall received a warrant from the Provincial Grand Master of the Moderns, John Rowe, after he could not obtain one from the Ancient Grand Lodge due to the death of Joseph Warren. After the Revolution, Prince Hall continued his efforts to obtain a charter, since his warrant only allowed him to meet, and not to initiate any new members. He may have gone to the Grand Lodge of Ireland for such a charter, but this remains pure speculation owing to the dearth of Irish Masonic records during this period. What we can prove is that he again attempted to obtain a charter in Massachusetts from the Ancient Grand Lodge, presenting the warrant signed by John Rowe. The charter was not granted.



Subsequently, he applied for a charter from the Modern Grand Lodge of England, ultimately receiving it in 1787.<sup>xv</sup>

The correspondence between Prince Hall and the Ancients in Massachusetts did not survive, and was destroyed by a fire in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries, so the conclusion is therefore somewhat speculative. It is likely, however, that the Ancient Grand Lodge of Massachusetts refused a charter to Prince Hall based on the fact that his warrant had been signed by a Modern, John Rowe, who was suspected to be a Tory. Rowe, in fact, had stayed in Boston during the British occupation, and had dined with various British officers who were Masons. When Warren was killed at Bunker Hill, his attempts to participate in the Masonic funeral services for Warren were summarily rebuffed because of his perceived Tory sympathies.<sup>xvi</sup>

There may also have been some suspicions regarding Prince Hall's role and sympathies during the Revolution. While some historians assert that Prince Hall was sympathetic to the Revolutionary cause, and have speculated that he even served in a Massachusetts militia unit, specific evidence is lacking.<sup>xvii</sup> Indeed, while some of the New England colonies enlisted free blacks into their ranks (the 1<sup>st</sup> Rhode Island Regiment is often cited as an example), the British also made a concerted effort to entice slaves away from their masters by offering them their freedom in exchange for their service in support of the Crown.<sup>xviii</sup> Given the fact that a suspected Tory signed the request for a charter, and that Prince Hall did not have any unambiguous credentials as a Patriot veteran, it is likely the request was refused out of hand.

All the rationalizations for non-recognition, based on the faulty premises that Prince Hall's initiation was somehow illegal and "clandestine" and that the doctrine of "exclusive jurisdiction" precluded such recognition are flawed. A politically motivated decision by a Grand Lodge in Massachusetts over two centuries ago, totally independent of race and slavery, continues to serve as the primary justification for non-recognition by some grand lodges today.

It is interesting to speculate a bit further: what would have been the status of Prince Hall Masonry from the Revolution to the current date had Joseph Warren not been killed at Bunker Hill? Had Warren lived, he probably would have issued a charter to Prince Hall in 1775. Prince Hall's Lodge would have been entered on the rolls of the Ancient Grand Lodge of Massachusetts (the one then in existence), and it would today be just one of the nearly 250 lodges on the rolls of Massachusetts, and not the Mother Grand Lodge of a separate branch of Freemasonry.

Had that happened, Prince Hall and his brethren would have become a mere footnote to Masonic history, and today we certainly would not have the robust fraternity that Prince Hall Masonry has become. It appears that the Great Architect of the Universe may have known what he was doing after all.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John T. Parsons is a Past Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Nebraska. He received his A.B. in History from Franklin and Marshall College, and his M.A. in International Relations from Creighton University. He is a retired Air Force officer, Department of the Air Force Civilian, and currently is a consultant for a defense contractor. He is a Past State President of the Nebraska Society Sons of the American Revolution.

---

<sup>i</sup> Kevin Phillips. *The Cousins Wars*. New York:1999, 161-232; See also Janet Schaw, *Journal of a Lady of Quality: Being the Narrative of a Journey from Scotland to the West Indies, North Carolina and Portugal, in the Years 1774-1776*, 1921 (excerpt):from *Making the Revolution: America, 1763-1791*, in <http://americainclass.org/american-revolution-as-civil-war/> (Accessed 4 April 2013)

<sup>ii</sup> David H. Fischer. *Paul Revere's Ride*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, 120

<sup>iii</sup> Phillips, 161-232

<sup>iv</sup> David H. Fischer, *Albion's Seed*: New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, 199-203

<sup>v</sup> David H. Fischer, *Washington's Crossing*: New York, Oxford University Press, 2004, 160-181

<sup>vi</sup> Phillips, 233-245

<sup>vii</sup> Steven G. Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*: Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1996, 112-114

<sup>viii</sup> Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh, *The Temple and the Lodge*: New York, Arcade Publishing, 1989, 269-270

<sup>ix</sup> Harry E. Davis, *A History of Freemasonry Among Negroes in America*: Bloomsburg, PA: United Supreme Council, AASR, Northern Jurisdiction USA, (PHA), 1998 (reprint), 34

<sup>x</sup> Davis, 33

<sup>xi</sup> Conference of Grand Masters, *List of Masonic Lodges*. Bloomington, IL: Pantagraph Printing, 2012

<sup>xii</sup> Davis, 31

<sup>xiii</sup> Bullock, 112-115

<sup>xiv</sup> Bullock, 112-115

<sup>xv</sup> Davis, 38-39

<sup>xvi</sup> Bullock, 112-115

<sup>xvii</sup> Joseph A. Walkes, Jr., *Black Square and Compass:200 Years of Prince Hall Masonry*. Richmond, VA: Macoy Publishing, 1994, 9-10

<sup>xviii</sup> Phillips, 223-224. After the Revolution many of those freed slaves were, in fact, given land in Nova Scotia and other parts of Canada.

