

The Centre for Research into Freemasonry and Fraternalism
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Black Freemasonry

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Introduction

There has been a growing interest across a number of specialist historic fields in the history of freemasonry. Two Lodges in the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic era provide us with a link to Britain's black history.

Lodge of Freedom No. 77 in Gravesend was named on 16 April 1789, while events across the Channel in France were hotting up. The banner used by the lodge featured (in 1940 at least and doubtless still today) a black slave freed from his chains of bondage with his arms lifted to heaven in supplication. This banner dated from 1867, but apparently replaced one destroyed by fire the previous year, and there is every reason to think that the image had been in use by the lodge for sometime. The historians of the lodge, Leslie Carnie and Frederick Simpkins, suggested that this was a reference to the freeing of a slave at Gravesend as a result of legal actions brought by Granville Sharp. It might also, they suggested, be a copy of a Wilberforce poster. If it was the freeing of a slave, then could it be Thomas Lewis? (Peter Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 119; G. Gretchen, *Black England*, p. 105-115).

On the other hand, the warrant of the Lodge of Industry No 186 was suspended on 23 Nov. 1808, 'for having entered, passed, and raised a Black-man.' The reason was apparently that he was a freed slave: see further the catalogue entry for the lodge returns in Freemasons' Hall in London, available [here]. The Lodge had been constituted on 15 January 1788, and met at the Black Friar in Playhouse Yard in Blackfriars. It frequently changed meeting venue in the next ten years: 1789 the George and Crown, Broad Street, Bloomsbury; 1791 the Duke's Head, Phoenix Alley, Long Acre; 1792 the Black Horse, Boswell Court, Carey St; 1793 Phoenix Court, Long Acre and the Grapes, Wardour St, Soho; 1794 the Sun, Great Windmill St, Haymarket; 1794 the Bull and Ram, Old St; 1798 the Britannia, Golden Lane, Barbican; 1803 White Swan, Whitecross Street; 1804 Clare Court, Drury Lane; 1805 White Swan, Whitecross Street; 1806 Britannia, Golden Lane, Barbican.

The purpose of this note is to provide a guide to the growing amount of information on black freemasonry and linked aspects of freemasonry in general in Colonial America, the United States, the Caribbean, Africa and Britain.

Masonic Networking

Networks, both informal and formal, have long been an important part of the way individuals with a shared view and set of aspirations, work together to achieve what they want. In 1980s much publicity was given to the negative aspects of British Masonic networking, forcing the English Grand Lodge to end its long period of not having a high public profile in the way that it did before the Second World War, and even more so before the First World War. English freemasonry is also seen as having a more establishment outlook than European freemasonry with a more radical and revolutionary tradition, partly in response to the active hostility of the Roman Catholic Church. Mozart and Garibaldi were masons. This did not mean that English

freemasonry did not have radicals among its members. The work of Andrew Prescott and others shows how many radicals were also freemasons, including John Baxter Langley, the pro-North supporter in the US Civil War, and Reform League activist, and Richard Bagnall Reed, the Chartist leader in Newcastle.

As the English-British expanded overseas and built its colonial Empire so it exported freemasonry. Freemasonry went to the Americas, and leading Revolutionaries were members, including George Washington and Benjamin Franklin. Because American lodges sanctioned by the English Grand Lodge up to the Revolution would not accept black members, a number of black men joined an Irish lodge based in colonial America. Then they formed the African Lodge, which was sanctioned by the English Grand Lodge in September 1784, and paid its dues to London. The text of the Grand Lodge's authorisation can be read [\[here\]](#).

Prince Hall Freemasonry

After a period when it stopped paying its dues, the African Lodge was struck off the English Grand Lodge's register of lodges in 1813. In 1827 it declared itself independent becoming a Grand Lodge sanctioning the formation of other black lodges in the United States. Its founder was Prince Hall, a freed New England slave, who was probably born in West Africa. American black freemasonry's name is from the founder: Prince Hall Freemasonry (PHF). More information on Prince Hall is available [\[here\]](#) (Thanks to Douglas Banin for this reference). The story of John Marrant, the Chaplain to the African Lodge is told [\[here\]](#).

An extract from William Henry Grimshaw's *Official History of Freemasonry among the Colored People in North America* (1908), describing the reaction of the white Grand Lodge in North Carolina to the formation of a PHF Grand Lodge there can be read [\[here\]](#).

Many famous black Americans have been or are members of PHF including W E B Du Bois, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Alex Haley, William C Handy, Lionel Hampton, Sugar Ray Robinson, Booker T Washington, Nat King Cole, and Jesse Jackson. See further the lists available [\[here\]](#), [\[here\]](#) and [\[here\]](#).

It has been claimed that Martin Luther King was a freemason, but this was not the case: see further [\[here\]](#). Similarly, it is frequently stated that Louis Armstrong was a freemason, but doubt has been expressed about this: see further [\[here\]](#).

Prince Hall Freemasonry has been a major force in the formation of a distinctive Black American middle class. This is discussed in:

William A. Muraskin, Middle-class Blacks in a White Society: Prince Hall Freemasonry in America (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975)

Loretta J. Williams, *Black Freemasonry and Middle-Class Realities*, University of Missouri Studies 69 (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1980).

The journal *Gender and History* included in November 2003 an article by Martin Summers, 'Diasporic Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transnational Production of Black Middle-Class Masculinity' contrasting two black freemasons, one in New York and the other in Ghana. An abstract is available [\[here\]](#).

Today PHF has about 275,000 members, mostly black, while other freemasons' organisations are mostly white. Most of its lodges are in the United States. There are several web sites servicing lodges in different American States.

PHF History

Study into the history of PHF is undertaken by the Dr Charles H Wesley Masonic Research Society. It is supporting a memorial to Charles Delany, a leading advocate of PHF, to be sited at the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Centre at Wilberforce, Ohio.

Details of PHF history and books on PHF include:

An essay by George Draffen

James Abron's Prince Hall Masonry page

Review by R. A. Gilbert of Joseph A. Walkes, *Prince Hall's Mission*. Walkes has his own website with further information on PHF.

Books on PHF are available for purchase [here].

A review of David Gray, *Inside Prince Hall Freemasonry* is available [here].

A listing of webpages with information about PHF has been compiled by Paul Bessel.

Discussions of PHF within the context of US friendly societies have been written by:

Leslie Siddely in the Humane Studies Review (1992) of the Institute of Humane Studies at the George Mason University, available [here].

Barbara Franco of the Museum of Our National Heritage at Lexington, available [here].

The *African American Review* Vol. 34. No.2. (Summer 2000) contains an article on 'Prince Hall, Freemasonry and Genealogy' by Joanna Brooks, available [here].

Other aspects of American Freemasonry

Other relevant matters relating to Black Freemasonry are:

Racism in freemasonry. Details of an American book on this subject are [here].

Civil Rights Movement. Many Prince Hall Masons were active in the Civil Rights Movement. The

Prince Hall Masonic Temple in Atlanta was the headquarters of the Southern Christian Leadership founded by Martin Luther King, and King delivered his last speech at the Memphis Masonic Temple. A discussion on freemasons in the movement is available (only as a Google cache) [here].

Africa and the Caribbean.

PHF has Grand and ordinary lodges in the Caribbean. Black men in Africa and the Caribbean not only joined PHF, but also lodges under the English, Scottish and Irish Grand Lodges (the last two were particularly popular with black freemasons).

Two fundamental studies of freemasonry in African countries are:

Augustus Casely-Hayford and Richard Rathbone, 'Politics, Families and Freemasonry in the Colonial Gold Coast', in: J. F. Ade Ajayi and J. D. Y. Peel, Peoples and Empires in African History: Essays in Memory of Michael Crowder (London: Longman 1992, pp. 143-60)

Abner Cohen, 'The Politics of Ritual Secrecy' (*Man* 6 (1971. pp.427-448), reprinted in *On The Margin of the Visible: Sociology, the Esoteric and the Occult*, ed. Edward A. Tiryakian, pp.

111-140 (New York, London, Sydney, Toronto: John Wiley and Sons, 1974), which deals with

Sierra Leone. Anecdotes told by American freemasons report that during the civil war many Black freemasons from Sierra Leone fled to America, where they took an active part in breaking some remaining colour bars in lodges in the southern United States.

A picture of an English masonic lodge in Lagos with black and white members in the early 20th century is [here].

Black Freemasonry in Britain

There were hints in the 1980s when Sean worked in Brixton, that some West Indian activists were members of a Masonic type organisation, which could have been PHF. There is one PHF lodge at the moment in Britain: the Russell S Gideon Lodge based at West Ruislip: more information [here].

According to an article in *Freemasonry Today*, the cricketer Clive Lloyd was initiated as a freemason in West Indian Lodge No 9424 in London, whose members included the then Antiguan High Commissioner.

The black American entertainer Bert Williams, who came to Britain in 1903 with the all-black composed and acted musical *In Dahomey*, joined the Waverley Lodge No. 597 under the Grand Lodge of Scotland in 1904 (Jeffrey Green *The Black Edwardians*: Frank Cass, 1998, p. 86). Information about Williams is available [here] and a photo of Williams and his partner George Walker can be seen on [here]. Further information about black membership of lodges under the Grand Lodge of Scotland is given [here].

Anti-Freemasonry

Freemasonry, whatever its organisational institutions, remains highly controversial. There are many websites denouncing freemasonry e.g. including former PHF member Rev. Charles G Finney.

There has recently been an upsurge in anti-masonry among Muslims in Britain. The anti-masonic book *Satanic Voices — Ancient and Modern* by the leader of the Islamic Party of Great Britain, David Musa Pidcock, is available on-line [here].

Further Reading and Research

A comprehensive study of blacks in freemasonry, *Noirs et Franc-Maçons*, has recently been published by the French scholar Cecile Revauger (Edimaf, 2003). Further details are available [here].

For further research, the most useful starting point is the catalogue of the Library and Museum of Freemasonry at Freemasons' Hall in London, the most comprehensive collection of books on freemasonry in the world, which is available on-line [here].

A directory of all lodges founded by the English Grand Lodges between 1717 and 1894 has recently been made available on-line by the Library and Museum of Freemasonry and the Centre for Research into Freemasonry, and is available [here].