

A HISTORY OF FREEMASONRY AMONG NEGROES IN AMERICA

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A PARALLEL CASE

It has been asserted heretofore that the work of Prince Hall must be equitably judged by the Masonic law and standards of *his* day. There is so much ignorance and misinformation prevailing as to the usages of that day, even among the better informed fraters, that many will be inclined to doubt some of the statements made herein. Especially is this true as to the practice of Masons assembling and forming a lodge without license or permit; of private lodges licensing other lodges; and the doctrine of "Mother" lodges and their development into Grand Lodges. These practices were well known to such eminent British Masonic writers as R. F. Gould, G. W. Speth, W. J. Hughan, John Lane, and Henry Sadler who had the true historian's attitude on these subjects, but many American Masons seem to assume that the present system of creating lodges by Grand Lodge warrant or charter has always been *the* method and the *only* method entitled to respectable sanction. A glance at some of the transactions of the old, and justly famous, lodge at York, illustrates how different the practices of that day were from the notions too commonly entertained by Masons of this day. This lodge is termed a "Grand Lodge" and perhaps not incorrectly so; but to designate it as a "mother" lodge would be equally appropriate.

On December 17, 1767, fifty years after the founding of the first modern Grand Lodge, the York lodge sent a letter to the Grand Lodge in London, which, among other things contained the following assertion:

"That this Lodge acknowledges no superior; that it pays homage to none; that it exists in its own Right; that it grants Constitutions (i.e., warrants) and Certificates in the same manner, as is done by the Grand Lodge in London, and as it has from time immemorial had a Right and used to do. . . ."

On October 30, 1769, a constitution was issued for a lodge at Knaresborough, and on September 24, 1770, one for a lodge

at Macclesfield, and the practice continued until at least 1792. Later, it will be seen that it even constituted a Grand Lodge.¹

The old lodge at Alnwick presents another illustration of the informal nature and practice of the early Craft. The origin of this lodge is unknown, and it is now extinct. Its minutes from 1701 are preserved. It never joined the Grand Lodge of England, but, like its famous sister at York, it preferred independence and isolation even to the point of extinction. As late as 1763 the "Rules and Orders of the Lodge of Free-Masons in the Town of Alnwick" provided that:

"if any fellows of the Lodge shall, without the cognizance and approbation of the Master and Wardens, presume to hold private lodges and Assemblies with an Intent to make any person free of this honourable Lodge, they shall each forfeits to the box the sum of £3, 6s, 8d."

Similarly the old lodge at York enacted a rule (Rule 8, 1725) providing that:

"Any Brother or Brothers presuming to call a lodge with a design to make a Mason or Masons, without the Master or Deputy, or one of them deputed, for every such offense shall forfeit the sum of Five Pounds."²

The necessity of these rules is the best evidence of the prevalence of a practice which they sought to abolish by the imposition of a severe penalty. Here private lodges found it necessary to limit the inherent Mason-making power of unorganized Masons just as the first Grand Lodge deemed it expedient to prohibit this right.

But it should be noted that the penalty was imposed upon the guilty parties, and the innocent initiates were not branded as spurious or clandestine. And the fact that the presumptuous members were subject only to a fine and not to expulsion, indicates how deep-rooted the custom must have been; so deep-rooted that it could not be abolished by a positive prohibition, but only gradually abated by a discouraging forfeiture.

¹ 13 A.Q.C. Part 2, Pg. 113—Constitution of Antiquity Lodge & Pgs. 98 and 115.

² The York Grand Lodge, W. J. Hughan, 13 A.Q.C., Part 1, Pg. 7. Five Minute Talks on Freemasonry, S. M. Hills, Pg. 13.

If the alleged irregularities connected with the founding of Negro Masonry in America were isolated and peculiar to their institution alone, some weight might be attached to the criticisms of the Prince Hall sodality. But when history shows that hundreds of lodges in Europe and America were established with almost entire disregard for what is now termed "regularity," it is manifestly unjust to pillory one organization on this ground, and waive the alleged defects in all other cases. The fact is that the things we now term "defects" and "irregularities" were not such in the light of the law and practices of the times in which they occurred. Warrants, charters, and permits from Grand Masters were not regarded as essential for years after 1717 nor was their absence considered a serious omission even by those lodges which had received all of this indicia. The foremost English Masonic historian, R. F. Gould, has aptly stated the case as follows:³

"In those early days a piece of paper or parchment, containing a written or printed authority for certain brethren and their successors to meet as a lodge, was not held in the superstitious reverence with which it afterwards became regarded. The old customs were gradually being supplanted by the new, but the former evinced great tenacity of existence in some instances, especially in the British colonies, where they appear to have remained for the longest period of time unmodified. . . ."

The writer referred especially to the "Modern" lodges in Philadelphia, which were organized and existed without any charter authority and which erected a Grand Lodge of which Benjamin Franklin became Grand Master. Gould concludes that this grand body must be held to have been legal, as much as the Grand Lodge of "all England at York."

It would require an exposition beyond the scope of this

³ Negro Freemasonry, Silas H. Shepherd; Masonic News (San Diego, Cal.), November, 1937.

History of Freemasonry, Gould, Vol. IV, Pg. 240.

Freemasonry in the Thirteen Colonies, J. Hugo Tatsch.

An English View of Freemasonry in America, G. W. Speth, Pg. 3.

Masonic Celebrities, R. F. Gould, VI A.Q.C. Pg. 143.

The Virginia Text Book, Dove, Pg. 54.

English-speaking Freemasonry, Sir Alfred Robbins.

An Introduction to Mark Masonry, J. A. Grantham, Pg. 25.

work to cite the numerous cases which are illustrative of the point discussed, but there is one lodge whose history so closely parallels that of African Lodge, that some knowledge of its origin and career is informative. The fact is that comparatively it had much less claim to "regularity" than the first colored lodges. But the parallel ceases when we learn that this lodge, and its numerous progeny, have been accorded full recognition, while this sanction has been withheld from African Lodge and its descendants.

This parallel is the celebrated Loge L'Anglaise of Bordeaux, France.⁴ It was organized April 27, 1732, by a group of Englishmen, who were residents of that city, without any warrant or other authority. Although composed of Englishmen, it made no attempt to secure the sanction of the British Grand Lodge; in fact that body had no knowledge of its existence for some years later.

Loge L'Anglaise began its career as a "Mother Lodge" by setting up Loge Française in 1740, a body composed mainly of Frenchmen. It continued this activity so that by 1785 it reported the constitution of nearly fifty lodges under its patronage. In doing this, it was merely acting on its own assumed authority as the lodge never claimed to be acting for or on behalf of the Grand Lodge of England, and it did not report its work to, or attempt to place itself or its daughters on the English register.

No doubt the prosperity of L'Anglaise brought it to the notice of the French Grand Lodge which soon attempted to subject it to its obedience. This attempt was stubbornly resisted and was unsuccessful so far as L'Anglaise was concerned. Its daughter lodges, however, affiliated with the Grand Lodge of France, leaving the "Mother Lodge" to bear the brunt of this unequal conflict alone. Finding itself thus forsaken and its position somewhat precarious and untenable, and weary of factional strife, L'Anglaise in 1766 applied to England and was warranted under the number 363, with a recognition that it had been in being since 1732.

This action apparently caused some dissension in the lodge and in 1774, the "French" faction being in control, it severed

⁴ XII A.Q.C., Page 6.

relations with England and later affiliated with the French Grand Lodge. In 1782 the "English" faction dominated; relations with France were severed and the British connection re-established. It was successively renumbered on the British roll until in 1792 it became No. 204, which number it retained for a long time.

In 1802, as in the case of African Lodge in 1824, it tried to secure authority to work the Royal Arch degrees. Again, like African Lodge, it was in 1813 erased from the British roll as a consequence of the reunion, and, as with African Lodge, it did not learn of its erasure until five years later. In 1816, being still in ignorance of its status, it, like African Lodge, attempted to resume correspondence with England, which the Napoleonic wars had interrupted. But it never succeeded in securing a replacement on the British roll, although it was known as L'Anglaise No. 204. In contrast to this, African Lodge, after learning of its erasure, issued its celebrated declaration of independence in 1827.⁵

It is apparent that the history of Lodge L'Anglaise bears a striking coincidence to that of the African Lodge, except that in its origin it had no authority save ancient usage, while African Lodge did have a permit, issued in accordance with a well established practice of that day, and later a charter, and likewise the colored lodges in Philadelphia and Providence had better sanction for their creation than did L'Anglaise. Aside from this the parallel is nearly exact. Both existed among a people of a different race; both developed into a "Mother" Lodge; they were both antagonized by the Masonic powers of their respective Countries. Together they were erased from the British roll; each sought authority to work the higher degrees; and finally, after learning of their exclusion from the English register, both tried unsuccessfully to secure reinstatement thereon. But here the parallel ends, for no one ever challenged or denied the Masonry of L'Anglaise or of its numerous descendants, while American Masonry has attempted to outlaw the Prince Hall Sodality from the Masonic world.

⁵ Address of John T. Hilton, June 24, 1827.

GRAND LODGES

The rise and development of Grand Lodge systems in the Masonic world will always be of absorbing interest to the student of Masonic history. This is so because the grand organizations have gradually come to be the dominant factors in the government of the Craft. Grand Lodges came into being because of convenience and necessity in the administration of fraternal affairs, and derived their authority generally, but not always, from delegated or granted powers from private lodges. The English Grand Lodge system had its origin in 1717 at the famous assembly at Apple Tree Tavern when members of four lodges in London and Westminster projected the first Grand Lodge, as we use the term today. It was an assembly of the Craft rather than a delegate body and was so designated by Dr. James Anderson, the only historian of that event, in his 1738 edition of the *Book of Constitutions*.

Prior to 1717 the nearest approach to a Grand Lodge was the grand Masonic assembly. This was not a delegate body but simply a mass meeting of all Masons. Outside of electing a presiding officer the function of these assemblies seems somewhat vague and indefinite. Their exact character is difficult to comprehend because of an almost complete lack of written records of their proceedings. Apparently these assemblies did not exercise any lodge creating powers nor did they assert any disciplinary or jurisdictional authority over lodges. Each lodge was sovereign and not amenable to any higher authority.

It should be kept in mind that in the early days of the Craft but little attention was paid to formal organization. From reliable records it is evident that when a given number of Masons happened to be in the same place, they formed a lodge and made Masons without any license, permit, or other authority. They continued these meetings at pleasure, and when the occasion for their being congregated in a certain place passed, these temporary or occasional lodges discon-

tinued,—dissolved with as little formality as they organized. Masons so made obviously had no lodge connection and can only be considered as members-at-large of the universal Fraternity.

However, some lodges formed in this manner developed into permanent establishments and exist to this day. For obvious reasons no date of origin can be given in these cases, and their founding is simply ascribed to "Time Immemorial." An occasional record authenticates the origin of some of these self-constituted lodges. A typical example is Peebles Kilwinning No. 24 (Scotland) whose minutes for October 18, 1716, recite that finding a sufficient number of brethren present they "did this day erect a lodge among themselves." In 1688 a group from the Lodge of Edinburgh (Mary's Chapel) seceded and formed the lodge Canongate and Leith, now No. 5 on the roll of Scotland; and in 1708 another secession resulted in the formation of Journeymen Lodge, now No. 8 on the register. These two lodges were formed in defiance of the parent body which had assumed a superior position, and asserted a sort of Masonic monopoly over the Craft in Edinburgh.

With equal disregard for authority and formality, private lodges authorized the formation of other private lodges by issuing a letter or permit. The sanction of the nearest lodge, or of any lodge, was all that was required for a group of Masons to form a lodge, and the lodge which gave numerous sanctions gradually was recognized as a "mother" lodge with some of the later powers of Grand Lodges, especially with reference to setting up new or daughter lodges. Instances of a lodge licensing or sanctioning the formation of another lodge occur as late as 1840.¹ This informal and decentralized organization of the Craft certainly was not conducive to dignity, stability or unity, and it is surprising that under such unpromising conditions the Craft survived.

The meeting of 1717 was designed to put an end to this looseness in Craft affairs. It renounced the old mass assembly by making the Grand Lodge a delegate body, and new regula-

¹ Military Lodges, Gould, Pg. 190-1. Virginia Text Book, Dove, Pg. 344. VI A.Q.C. Pg. 143. An Introduction to Mark Masonry, J. A. Grantham, Pg. 25.

tions required a permit from the Grand Master to meet and work as a lodge under the authority of the Grand Lodge. Other measures, constitutional and administrative, tended to give stability and permanency to the order, and the Grand Lodge gradually acquired the dominant position it now holds, a fact amply attested when it is realized that the constituent or private lodges which give life and power to Grand Lodges are now generally termed its "subordinates."

This ascendancy, however, was not gained without a battle. The old English Craftsman loved his Masonic freedom and independence; a considerable number of them looked with jealousy and suspicion upon this minority group who were attempting to restrict and encroach upon their ancient customs and privileges; they refused to conform or give allegiance to this new authority preferring to meet and to govern their activities by what they considered the immemorial customs and usages of the Craft. Particularly, they declined to adhere to the new Grand Lodge regulation requiring the Grand Master's authority to form a lodge.

This regulation was only intended to apply to members of the new Grand Lodge, but it was interpreted as an attempt to make an innovation in Masonry in defiance of the old landmarks.² Such an interpretation, however, was not and is not sound. The reason for the regulation was founded in common sense, and the necessity for orderly and dignified administration of Craft affairs. All that the new Grand Lodge required was that some sanction from a proper authority be obtained for its own subordinates, and the rule tended to and did restrict indiscriminate and irresponsible organization. It did not require a warrant for a new lodge as that term is used today, but merely the Grand Master's authority or sanction,³ and the rule originally applied to London and Westminster only. At no time did the new Grand Lodge ever attempt to enforce its rules upon private lodges which were not of its own obedience, and no attempt was made to coerce independent

² 13 A.Q.C. Part 2, Pg. 115, et seq.

³ 13 A.Q.C. Part 2, Pg. 122. The Early Warrant in America, W. J. Chetwode Crawley. An Introduction to Mark Masonry, J. A. Grantham, Pg. 11.

private lodges into its acceptance. There were possibly fifty lodges in and around London which had no connection with the meeting of 1717. Further, the rule did not brand as clandestine or unlawful those lodges which were formed in defiance of it, but it was a limitation upon the inherent and immemorial right of Masons to meet and form lodges at pleasure, and gradually it came to be the accepted law of the Fraternity. Because it was an attempted restriction on ancient usage and right, the regulation was violently assailed and misinterpreted by those Masons who denied its validity as Masonic law. In fact, it was not a part of the universal Masonic law until it achieved this distinction over a century later by the general acquiescence of the Masonic world.⁴

The Masons who refused to acknowledge the new Grand Lodge were contemptuously and derisively classed as rebels and schismatics. The celebrated William Preston, author of *Illustrations of Masonry*, seems to have been the originator of this accusation against the dissenters which may be ascribed more to his over-zealousness than to any sound factual basis. The real difference between these groups of Masons had its roots in social caste rather than in any alleged rebellion. The members of the new Grand Lodge comprised some of the nobility, the professions, the clergy, and scholars,—the class then known as “gentlemen,” and they represented a higher intellectual and social standard than the other group. The dissenters, on the other hand, drew their adherents largely from the mechanic, artisan, and tradesman classes, and a good part of their attitude was unquestionably due to resentment against social snobbery.

Preston himself was first a member of an Ancient Lodge which he deserted to affiliate with the Moderns. Ironically enough, he later became a “seceder” and a “schismatic.” This grew out of his membership in the Lodge of Antiquity which in 1778 became involved in a serious controversy with its Grand Lodge. Preston espoused the cause of the lodge with characteristic and intemperate ardor, and his cavalier attitude and open defiance of Grand Lodge mandates resulted in his

⁴ History of Freemasonry, etc., Stillson, Pg. 218.

expulsion in 1779. Preston and his associates thereupon founded a new Grand Lodge—Grand Lodge of England South of the River Trent—which had a feeble and inglorious existence for a decade. Perceiving the futility of his effort Preston in 1789 made due submission, apologized for his conduct, and was restored to good standing. From him it came with ill grace to charge the Ancients with being rebels and seceders.

These characterizations were unjust and unwarranted and may be ascribed to the heat of the controversy which soon enveloped the Craft. Later and more authoritative researches have demonstrated that they were not seceders; that they were never connected with the new Grand Lodge; and that they developed independently of it.⁵ Properly speaking, they were simply non-conformists who viewed the new organization and its pretensions with positive distrust and declined to give it their allegiance.

Resistance to the new Grand Lodge took organized form in 1751 when a group of these non-conforming Masons held a "General Assembly" under ancient usage and formed a body which they styled a Grand Lodge. They did not elect a Grand Master, but formed a "Grand Committee" with an elected president until a Peer could be secured for the grand office. Two years later they elected a Grand Master, the Duke of Atholl, and thus came into being the grand body of "Ancient" or "Atholl" Masons, and also a bitter feud between the two grand bodies, which continued until a reunion was effected in 1813.

These Ancients were no mean antagonists; their philosophy and declarations made a powerful appeal to the Masons of that day; they appear to have had the active sympathy of Irish and Scottish Masonry; they grew steadily under able leadership until they had superiority of numbers, and they spread their organization wherever English colonies were planted, particularly in America, where today it is found that the great majority of Grand Lodges are lineal descendants from the Ancients. A review of the merits of this famous controversy would be largely academic today, but candor

⁵ Masonic Facts and Fictions, Henry Sadler.

compels any historian to say that the Ancients had a large measure of justice and historical right on their side. Most of the customs and practices of the Ancients were adopted at the Union of 1813 indicating that they had preserved the purity of the venerable institution to a greater degree than their more aristocratic rival.⁶

But the efficiency of the "Modern" Grand Lodge was not to be denied. Its system was superior from the standpoint of organization and administration; in fact, the "Ancients" had to adopt the machinery of their rival in order to compete successfully, and when Peers were elected to the office of Grand Master of both bodies the Fraternity experienced a tremendous growth and prestige, so that today we are accustomed to look upon the year 1717 as the "revival" of Masonry. The Union of 1813 was triumph of democracy, and consolidated British Masonry, but even then it was some years later before it could be said that the present Grand Lodge system gained universal acceptance in the Masonic world.

The foregoing is only an abbreviated outline of the origin and development of the Grand Lodge system in England. But the British system is not exclusive, and the methods used there are not the only methods of creating a grand body. The development of private lodges into "mother" lodges, and later, into Grand Lodges, has already been suggested. Grand Lodges of respectability abroad have come into being by this process, and this procedure was historically and legally sound, and is entitled to the same respect and sanction as is the British development. Some classic examples of this practice are Grand Lodge Sun, Three Globes, Royal York, and Eclectic Union in Germany; Lodge L'Anglaise in France; St. Jean Auxilliaire (Sweden), which renounced its lodge-creating rights in 1761; and Lodge du Grand Maître, later Union Mother Lodge, in Holland, all of which had their origin in a private lodge, and after the establishment of the Modern Grand Lodge in England. This list could be greatly amplified by citing names of "Mother" lodges like Old Kilwinning which had honorable and unchallenged careers before the establishment

⁶ Masonic Facts and Fictions, Sadler, Pg. 176.

of the present Grand Lodge system. It is important to keep all of the foregoing in mind because of later references, and also to have a clear picture of an extremely important and curious phase in Craft history.

It may seem that all of this is an unwarranted departure from the field of Negro Masonry, but the digression is justified as a matter of information, and also because it has a direct bearing on the evolution of Negro Masonry in America. Keep in mind that Grand Lodges have now acquired the sole power to warrant and establish new lodges.

When Negro Masonry was assailed in America the first attack was on the origin of African Lodge No. 459, but when the original charter was produced, supported by British Grand Lodge records the opposition was compelled to adopt new tactics. The assault was then transferred to the method by which new lodges were created by Prince Hall, and their development into a Grand Lodge.⁷

Admitting the legitimacy of African Lodge, the opposition contended that its charter gave it no unusual powers, and that the warranting of lodges in Philadelphia and Providence was illegal; that the formation of a Grand Lodge by these three bodies was permeated with such vice that Negro Masonry was not entitled to a seat in the universal Masonic family. These assailants seemed to have been entirely ignorant of the matters heretofore presented on the origin and growth of the modern Grand Lodge organization. African Lodge was but following Masonic precedent by becoming a mother lodge, and, in calling an assembly of Negro Masons in 1791 to form a Grand Lodge, Prince Hall was merely following in the foot-steps of Masons whose acts made the institution the illustrious body it is today.⁸ It is to impress these facts upon the reader that the story of Grand Lodges has been retold here, and to make it obvious that the assault on the expansion of Negro Masonry is just as groundless as the assault on its origin. With these details firmly in mind it is relatively simple

⁷ Committee Report—Grand Lodge of New Jersey—Reprinted 1871 Ohio (P.H.) Page 41.

⁸ The Sandusky Masonic Bulletin (Sandusky, Ohio) Vol. XIX, No. 2, October, 1938.

to follow the logical development of Negro Masonry into Grand Lodge systems, closely paralleling the development of the British and continental systems. In fact both systems were used by the early Negro Masons in America, first by calling an assembly of the Craft at which African Grand Lodge was formed, and later in 1808, by a delegate convention of the three existing Negro lodges, which reorganized African Grand Lodge after the pattern of the modern Grand Lodge system.

The whole controversy regarding legitimacy and legality will be much simplified if the reader will keep in mind the undeniable fact that the acts of Prince Hall and his early associates must be judged by the Masonic law and practice of *his* day and time—not that of a century later. Further the modern Grand Lodge system must be viewed in proper perspective, not as an omnipotent institution which sprang into being when Masonry began, endowed and vested with its powers, but as a comparatively modern arrangement designed to meet the administrative and juridical needs of the Craft which its growth made imperative.

Moreover, in any discussion of Grand Lodge origins, it must be understood that during the period which has just been discussed, there was no rule or law prescribing the method for organizing a Grand Lodge. From the very nature of the institution there could not have been any supreme authority which could enact such a regulation, because it is a fundamental tenet that each Grand Lodge is sovereign, and the peer of every other Grand Lodge. Today, it is said that the legal method of forming a Grand Lodge is by a delegate convention of representatives of three or more lodges. What is really meant by this is that this method has gained general acceptance in Masonry. The stream of precedent shows that the plan of organization projected in England in 1717 has achieved the approval and sanction of the Craft, so that it is a part of the common law of English-speaking Masonry. But the meeting of 1717 did not make any universally binding law; it merely announced the plan that had been adopted by it, and it became a precedent which is followed, especially since no better plan has ever been devised. However, the

number of lodges, three, is purely arbitrary, and if its adoption ever was predicated on any authority, it has been lost. The law of the Ancients required five participating lodges; in New Hampshire and in Rhode Island a Grand Lodge was formed with only two lodges; and in New Jersey with none, the "assembly" method being used.

It is manifestly absurd, at this late date, to challenge the method by which any Grand Lodge was formed. The time to protest, or to contest, is at the time of its erection, not after it has had years of successful life.⁹ If technical quibbles as to origin can now be justly asserted, it means that a number of our oldest and most honored Grand Lodges would be placed on the defensive in a rather precarious position. Reason and common sense demand that, when a Grand Lodge has had a useful and efficient Masonic career for over a century, its legality be recognized, and in fact this principle is followed in America in all cases—except that of Grand Lodges of Prince Hall descent. A typical example is the present Grand Lodge of Massachusetts, established in 1792, not by a delegate convention, nor even by an assembly, but by the amalgamation of a Provincial Grand Lodge,—St. Johns—with the Massachusetts Grand Lodge of Ancient Masons, the successor or continuity of Warren's St. Andrews Provincial Grand Lodge. Yet today no one would be heard to challenge the standing of this grand body.

CHAPTER V—*Continued*

AFRICAN GRAND LODGE

Now comes a significant period in the development of Negro Masonry in America—the formation of the first Grand Lodge. The importance of this event cannot be over-estimated, for without it the future expansion of Masonry among colored men would have been seriously jeopardized. Notwithstanding what has been set forth in the preceding chapters about the informal manner in which Masonry developed in the early days, it is clear that the method which now obtains,

⁹ Negro Masonry, Upton, Page 228, letter of P.G.M. Carl Wiebe.