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## Prince Hall



1735?-1807

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### **Nationality**

American

### **Occupation**

Abolitionist, Leather crafter

### **Introduction**

Civic leader Prince Hall was the most famous black in the Boston area during the American Revolution and through the turn of the nineteenth century. He was the founder and master of the world's first black Masonic lodge, African Lodge No. 459, which laid the basis for an organization that continues to this day. Though apparently self-taught, he used his eloquence

to organize the black community politically on such issues as slavery, public education, and economic equality.

## **Narrative Essay**

Prince Hall's parentage, birthplace, and date of birth are unknown, but he is believed to have been born about 1735. Little is known of his personal life. The most widely circulated version of his life, which originated in William H. Grimshaw's 1903 book *The Official History of Freemasonry among the Colored People in North America*, has been strongly discredited; but most history books draw directly or indirectly from it for their own sketches of Hall. In truth, almost nothing about Hall can be documented prior to 1770. Compounding the lack of recorded information is the existence of other blacks named Prince Hall living in the Boston area during this period.

The earliest mention of Hall's name in a documented statement indicates that he was the slave of a Boston leather-dresser named William Hall in the late 1740s. Prince Hall, consequently, was taught leather crafting as a trade. During his servitude, he joined the Congregational Church, School Street, Boston, in 1762 and married fellow slave Sarah Richie on November 2, 1763. The marriage ended with her death on an unrecorded date.

William Hall gave Prince Hall his freedom on April 9, 1770, as reward for 21 years of steadfast service. A few months later, on August 22, he married Flora Gibbs of Gloucester, a small seaside town northeast of Boston. They had one son, Prince Africanus, who was baptized on November 14, 1784, at the New North Church, Boston. At some point in his life he may have fathered a second son, Primus Hall, by a woman named Delia. Shortly after his marriage to Gibbs, Prince Hall opened his own leather goods shop, The Golden Fleece, which became successful. He also worked as a caterer.

## **Free Black Lodge Founded**

Free blacks in and around Boston had little social or political power in the Revolutionary War era. They also lacked formal organizations through which to coordinate beneficial endeavors. In early 1775, Hall petitioned to become a member of Boston's St. John's Lodge of Freemasons but was turned away, presumably because of his race.

Soon thereafter, he and 14 other free black men approached a British army lodge of Freemasons attached to the 38th Foot Regiment, stationed near Boston. Hall and the others were initiated into the lodge on March 6, 1775. The regiment withdrew from the area a short time later, and Sergeant John Batt, who had been in charge of the initiation, issued a limited permit on March 17 allowing the group certain Masonic privileges as well as permission to meet as a lodge. On July 3, 1775, the group formed African Lodge No. 1, the first lodge of black Free and Accepted Masons in the world, and Hall was made master. Provincial Grand Master of North America John Rowe granted the lodge a second limited permit to continue their activities.

Meanwhile, the Revolutionary War had begun with skirmishes at Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775. Rumors that Hall took up arms as a patriot have not been substantiated. Many blacks served in the Continental Army, and historians have claimed that as many as one in seven were men of color. It is certain, however, that Hall used his leather crafting skills to provide five leather drumheads for the Boston Regiment of Artillery, as stated in a bill of sale

dated April 24, 1777, written by Hall.

Public records from the time show that Hall was both a taxpayer and regular voter. He was politically active and rallied his fellow Masons and the Boston community at large to support black causes in which he was involved.

On January 13, 1777, Hall was among eight black petitioners to the Massachusetts state legislature requesting the abolition of slavery in the state. Hall's signature was one of four belonging to Masons, whose names topped the document. The petition adopted the same terminology used by the nation's founding fathers to state their case for freedom from Britain. It was also similar to one sent to Governor Thomas Gage on May 25, 1774, which had been rejected by the British governor. State legislators referred the 1777 petition to the Congress of the Confederation, possibly as a way to avoid the issue themselves. Slavery in Massachusetts was later ended by a state judicial decision in 1783.

Reference to African Lodge No. 1 virtually disappeared from the public record during the latter years of the war for independence, perhaps because many members were away fighting. At war's end, the lodge was still without a permanent charter. Hall wrote to his Most Worshipful Master William Moody of Brotherly Love Lodge No. 55, London, on March 2, 1784, but received no reply. A second letter on June 30, 1784, had the desired effect. On September 29, 1784, a charter was granted authorizing the organization of African Lodge No. 459 in Boston under the leadership of Prince Hall as master. After a lengthy wait, the charter arrived in Boston on April 29, 1787.

In 1786 another rebellion began brewing in the western half of Massachusetts. Named for Captain Daniel Shays, the Shays' Rebellion pitted former patriots who had returned to debt-ridden properties, mostly farms, against the moneyed classes who controlled the banks that were now foreclosing on them. Governor James Bowdoin called for troops to travel west to crush Shay's insurgents. On November 26, Hall wrote a letter to Bowdoin offering the governor the services of 700 black troops he said he could raise; but Hall's offer, which may have been made to declare the black community's loyalty to the new state, was rejected. White politicians were perhaps as afraid of the possible consequences of arming a large group of black men as they were of dealing with the already-armed white farmers of the west.

The following year, Hall reversed his loyalty to the state government and proposed that the state organize a back-to-Africa movement in a petition of January 4, 1787. Leading a committee of 12 members from the African Lodge, Hall proposed that the state secure funds for sending Massachusetts' black population to a point on the African coast. The proposal also called for a colonization effort that would result in mutual benefit to both parties, including extensive future trade between the two states. The petition, which appears to be the first major statement on African colonization by black Americans, died in committee.

Hall then turned his attention to other issues. On October 17, 1787, he petitioned the state legislature to provide education for black children. Blacks were taxed on an equal basis with whites, but only white children received state-supported education. The petition failed, and Hall was equally unsuccessful in obtaining local support for public schools.

Hall was successful, however, in helping to end the slave trade in Massachusetts. In early February 1788, three free black Bostonians, one a Mason, were lured aboard a ship by a captain promising work. Instead, the men were kidnapped, shipped to the Caribbean, and sold

as slaves. In a February 27 petition attacking the slave trade, Hall and 21 other Masons stated their outrage at the seizure of their fellow citizens. The state legislature passed an act on March 26 designed to prohibit the slave trade within the state's borders and to provide recourse for the families of those abducted. Sufficient pressure was applied by Governor John Hancock and the French consul in Boston to obtain the release of the men from the French island of St. Bartholomew. The African Lodge organized a celebration to mark their return home in July of that year.

Hall pressed on for equal education. In 1796 he urged the selectmen of Boston to create a separate school for black children. His request was approved, but the selectmen claimed that no suitable building could be acquired, and the issue remained unresolved.

In an address to the African Lodge at Menotomy (now West Cambridge) on June 24, 1797, Hall focused on slavery in the United States. Reflecting on the recent slave revolt on the West Indies island of Hispaniola that resulted in the creation of Haiti, he encouraged his audience to have faith in God and to bear their burdens quietly, but to be ready for the day of deliverance. *The Voice of Black America* quotes Hall's petition: Now, my brethren, nothing is stable; all things are changeable. Let us seek those things which are sure and steadfast, and let us pray God that, while we remain here, he would give us the grace and patience and strength to bear up under all our troubles, which, at this day, God knows, we have our share of. Patience, I say; for were we not possessed of a great measure of it, we could not bear up under the daily insults we meet with in the streets of Boston, much more on public days of recreation. How, at such times, are we shamefully abused, and that to such a degree that we may truly be said to carry our lives in our hands, and the arrows of death are flying about our heads. Helpless women have their clothes torn from their backs, even to the exposing of their nakedness. ... My brethren, let us not be cast down under these and many other abuses we at present are laboring under, for the darkest hour is just before the break of day. My brethren, let us remember what a dark day it was with our African brethren, six years ago, in the French West Indies. Nothing but the snap of the whip was heard, from morning to evening. Hanging, breaking on the wheel, burning, and all manner of tortures were inflicted upon those unhappy people. But, blessed be God, the scene is changed.

Hall did not hold all white men accountable for the institution of slavery; in fact, he hoped that with the support of like-minded whites, black men could help bring about abolition through persuasion. However, he was not encouraged by the fact that even white Masons did not freely accept their black counterparts, despite their claims to liberty, fraternity, and love of God.

As black masonry continued to remain separate from white masonry in the United States, Hall spread his organization to other cities. On June 24, 1797, a second black lodge was chartered in Providence, Rhode Island. A year later, a third one was started in Philadelphia, with Absalom Jones as worshipful master and Richard Allen as treasurer.

On June 28, 1798, Hall appears to have married for a third time. Sylvia (or Zilpha) Ward would remain his wife until his death a decade later.

In 1800 Hall made a second request to the selectmen of Boston to acquire a building for a black school. After another refusal, Hall offered his own home for the school. A pair of Harvard College students served as teachers until 1806. At that point, increased enrollment forced a move to larger facilities, which were provided by the African Society House on Belknap Street.

Prince Hall died in Boston on December 4, 1807. Funeral rites, in accord with masonic rites, were performed at his home in Lendell's Lane one week later. He was buried in the 59th Street Mathews Cemetery, Boston, in late March, 1808, after a large procession of blacks followed his body to the gravesite. Within a year of his death, Hall's followers renamed their order for their former, much-beloved leader.

Born in obscurity, Prince Hall literally worked himself free of his lowly beginnings. Through diligence and effort he cultivated his abilities, then used them to help others do the same. His name lives on in the title of the largest and most well-regarded black fraternal order, the Prince Hall Masons.

## Sources

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