We can't begin anything serious on Prince Hall Freemasonry without first presenting some facts concerning the man and the legend, responsible for the creation of the fraternity that bears his name. So much has been written about the man, Prince Hall, one may wonder what purpose is served by rehashing the same story over and over, as it involves the early history of Masonry in America, which, in itself, is quite complex. As much as the writer would relish reviewing the early history of Masonry in Massachusetts, in this, the focus will be on Prince Hall himself.

In reviewing the early history of Freemasonry among Blacks, one must rely heavily on the numerous books that have been written on the subject. How much reliability the reader can place on these various works is questionable. The reader must rely on the writer's interpretation of events, and insofar as Prince Hall Masonry is concerned this reliance is quite risky.

Those who believe that "nothing establishes a fact until it has been verified," may very well wish to launch their own investigation. The field is far from being exhausted, and with continued research by those who seek to discover the full facts or merely to verify those that are now known, the material is available, and new discoveries are waiting to be uncovered.

The beginnings of Masonry among Blacks are surrounded by controversy, mystery, passion, and unfortunately the record of its early events contains some untruths. Harry E. Davis, the Prince Hall Masonic historian, wrote that "one of the saddest things about controversy is that its frequently obscures every other element concerning the topic except the point controverter. Black Masonry has suffered much from the blight of controversy. In Masonic, as well as in the date of death is incorrect."
In 1903 it was published a so-called Official history of Freemasonry Among the Colored People in North America. This book was written by William Henry Grimshaw, Past Grand Master of the District of Columbia. Grimshaw was born August 4, 1847 or 48. His father's name was Robert Tyler and his mother's name was Julia Grimshaw. No explanation has been found for the reason he took the name of his mother. He worked for a number of years in the Bureau of Equipment and Commandant's Office, in the Navy Yard, was a doorkeeper in the Gallery of the House of Representatives, and was a Library Assistant and Doorkeeper in the main reading room on the Library of Congress. He was a member of Social Lodge No.1, in Washington, D.C. serving as its Worshipful Master, 1874-75.

Social Lodge No.1 was chartered on June 6, 1825, by the M.W. African Grand Lodge of North America in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania as Social Lodge No.7. It became No.1 on the rolls of the Grand Lodge of D.C., March 7, 1848 when this Grand Lodge was formed. Grimshaw served this Prince Hall Jurisdiction as Grand Master in 1907.

Grimshaw was probably well-meaning in his attempt to enlarge beyond the bounds of truth regarding Prince Hall's life. The stories cooked-up by him are inexcusable and can't be justified. Such falsehood as prince Hall's "Being born in Bridgetown, Barbados on the 12th of September 1748, the son of Thomas Prince Hall, an English leather merchant and his wife a free negro woman of French descent. After supposedly serving his apprenticeship in the leather trade, Prince Hall went to Boston, arriving in 1765, and by hard work became a free holder and voter. He converted to Methodism and became an ordained minister."

All were figments of Grimshaw's overly active imagination and cannot be overlooked as an innocent stretching of the truth. These tales were accepted by freemasonry, Black as well as White the world over, copied and recopied not only by the craft, but by historians of Black history with the result that many of these falsehoods are recorded in these books and taught in Black study courses across the country, even to the point that some of it has found its way into the higher degrees of Prince Hall Freemasonry. That prominent Masonic historians and scholars, friends and enemies of Prince
Hall Masonry, alike, were led astray by the deliberate fabrications by one individual brings forth the lesson that Masonic research must be verified beyond a question and that nothing should be accepted at face value. And Those who are found to falsify deliberately Masonic documentations, regardless of their good intentions, should be ostracized by the entire fraternity. The following from the proceedings of the Prince hall Grand Lodge of Massachusetts for 1906, page 82, is of interest:

"Reference is made to the portrait of Prince Hall. This is not known to be authentic, and the sketch of his life has little in the way of authenticity to commend it. In 1795 Prince Hall told the Rev. Dr. Belknap he was fifty-seven years of age, which would make the year of his birth 1738; Brother John D. Caldwell appears to quote Bro. William S. Gardner as saying that when initiated, March 8 (sic), 1775, Prince Hall was 32 years, 3 months and 28 days old, which would make the date of birth, Nov. 9, 1742; and Bro. Bruce (John Edward "Bruce Grit: Bruce") quotes Bro. Grimshaw-who really did not know anything about it-as saying, Sept. 12, 1748. Our preference is for the year 1738, being based upon Hall's statement to Belknap....How a supposedly intelligent man can write such nonsense, and other supposedly intelligent men seriously quote it, passes all comprehension."

During the Revolutionary War it is claimed that Prince Hall headed a committee of freemen to General Washington's headquarters seeking to join the Army; (19) and that Prince Hall served in the Continental Army. There are tree records of soldiers bearing the name:

Prince Hall, Dartmouth. List of men who marched from Dartmouth camp under command of Capt. Benjamin Dillingham and arrived there Feb. 15, 1776; also, Private, Capt. Joshua Wilbore's Co., Col. Ebenzer Francis's Regt; pay abstract for travel allowance from camp home, etc; said Hall credited with allowance for 3 days (65 miles); company drafted from Taunton, Raynham, Easton, Dartmouth, Freetown, Berkley, and Dighton; warrant allowed in Council Nov.29, 1776.

Prince Hall, Medford. Receipt dated Medford, May 25, 1778, for bounty paid said Hall by Richard Hall, in behalf of the town of Medford, to serve in the Continental Army; also, descriptive list of men raised in Middlesex Co. for the term of 9 months from the time of their arrival at Fishkill, agreeable to resolve of April 20, 1778; Capt. Brook's Co., Col. Thatcher's regt., age 30 yrs.; stature, 5 ft. 3 in.; residence, Medford; engaged for town of Medford; arrived at Fishkill June 21, 1778; also, list of men returned as received of Jonathan Warner, Commissioner, by Col. R. Putname, July 20, 1778

Prince Hall, Medford (also Medfiled). List of men raised to serve in the Continental Army from 1st Middlesex Co., regt., as returned by Lieut. Stephen Hall, dated Medford, Fed. 19, 1778, residence, Medford; engaged for town of Medford; joined Capt. Allen's Co., Col. Bailey's regt., term, during war; also, list of men mustered by Nat. Barbar, Muster for Suffolk Co., dated Boston, April 13, 1777; also, Private 3d co., Col. John Bailey's regt.; Continental Army pay accounts for service from April 7, 1777, to Dec.18, 1777; residence, Medfield; reported died Dec. 18, 1778; also, (late) Capt. Jacob Allen's (3d) Co., Col. Bailey's regt.; return of men in service before Aug. 15, 1777; also, same Co., and regt., company return dated Camp at Valley Forge, Jan. 24, 1778; also, Capt. Adams Bailey's (late Capt. Jacob Allen's) co., Col Bailey's (2d); muster roll made up from Jan. 1, 1777, to Jan. 1, 1780; enlisted April 7, 1777. (2)
It is this writer's contention that Grimshaw was inspired not only by the above records, but also the records of Primus Hall.

But Masonically, it is immaterial whether or not Prince Halls served in the Army. Of the three Prince Halls mentioned the problem becomes one of identification. One of the Halls is listed as having died in service. Of the remaining two, not much is really known of the Prince Hall from Dartmouth.

In Charles Brooks' History of the Town of Medford, Middlesex County, Massachusetts, etc. (p. 438) he writes:

"In 1754, there were in Medford twenty-seven male and seven female slaves, and fifteen free blacks; total, forty-nine. In 1764, there were forty-nine free blacks. When the law freed all the slaves, many in Medford chose to remain with their masters, and they were faithful unto death."

In 1754, there were four slaves belonging to the Hall families. Benjamin Hall had a slave named Prince who died in 1766. In 1772, Stephen Hall had a servant named Prince who married Chloe, a Negro servant of Richard Hall (Medford Vital Records).

In Helen Tilden Wild’s book Medford in the Revolution, she describes the role of the Medford during the war. Of the second Prince Hall, Miss Wild writes:

"Hall, Prince. Enlisted for 3 yrs., April 7, 1777; died Dec. 18, 1778: vol. 7, p.105. Rev. Osgood records in his diary, April 1, 1777, “Prince ran away last night.” Mr. Osgood at the time boarded with Mr. Richard Hall, whose Negro servant, Chloe, married Prince, a negro servant of Stephen Hall, Eqq., Sept. 15, 1772.”

Of the first Prince Hall, Miss Wild writes:

"Hall, Prince. Enlisted for 9 mos., 1778, age 30; vol. 7, p. 105. Receipt signed by himself for bounty received on enlistment can be seen at state archives. Free negro; taxed in Medford, 1778 and 1779; he was the author of the petition to the House of Representatives urging the abolition of slavery in Massachusetts. He was the founder of Free Masonry among Negroes, receiving his degrees from a military lodge, consisting of British soldiers in Boston, march 6, 1775. Married Phebe, a slave of Mrs. Lydie Bowman Baker, of Boston, who set her free. Their home was on Phillips Street, Boston, where he died Dec. 7, 1807. See archives of Prince Hall Grand Lodge F. & A.M.

The problem remains as stated before, one of identification. Benjamin Quarles makes a good point when he wrote that, “A final problem has been the determination of Negro identity. Since most of the participants
in the Revolutionary War were racially anonymous, on what basis may a person be identified as a Negro? In this work I have designated an individual as Negro only when the source specifically states it or where the source is referring only to Negroes. I make only one assumption: if the first or last name of a person was Negro, he was not likely to be white. Although there are certain names largely confined to Negroes, I have not assumed that persons with such names were colored. Thus, although three of the Americans on the sloop Charming Polly, captured by the British on May 16, 1777, bore the typically Negro names of William Cuff, Prince Hall and Cuff Scott (and all came from Massachusetts coastal towns, where Negro seamen were common), I have not assumed that they were Negroes.” (21) This rationale can also be used with identifying a Prince Hall, as being the Masonic Prince Hall. So in manner of speaking there is no proof at this writing that the Masonic Prince Hall served in the Revolutionary War, nor is there any proof that he did not.

It is generally accepted that Freemasonry among Blacks in the United Stated began with the initiation of Prince Hall and fourteen other “free” Blacks in Lodge No. 441, Irish constitution, attached to the 38th Regiment of Foot, British Army garrisoned at Castle Williams (now Fort Independence), Boston Harbor on March 6, 1775, the Master of the Lodge being one Sergeant J. Batt (or J.T. Batt or John Batt.)

There are documents showing that a John Batt was discharged from the 38th Regiment of Foot at Staten Island, New York, on the third of February 1777, and that he was later enlisted in the Continental Army, Col. David Henly’s Regiment on February 20, 1778, and deserted June 10, 1778.

It is claimed that when the British Army left Boston, that Hall was left a “permit” to meet as a lodge, but apparently not to confer degrees. Masonic authorities agree that this was how African Lodge No. 1 was organized, and that Prince Hall later petitioned the Mother Grand Lodge of the world, England, for a warrant that was issued on September 29, 1784, for African Lodge 459.

In order to measure the greatness of Prince Hall, one must review the written documents left by him, his petitions to the Senate and House of
representatives of Massachusetts, his Letter Book and his Charges to African Lodge. There has not been on the American Masonic scene, or in the pages of its history, so unique a Black Freemason as Prince Hall. His lack of a formal education, his bondage, and the racial conditions of the time merely enhance the character of this outstanding individual. His many accomplishments must be viewed in this light and his achievements in overcoming all of these handicaps, and the abuses, mistreatment and often viciousness that was heaped on him, his Lodge, and later the fraternity he founded, is more than proof that Prince Hall was indeed “The Master."

THE MASTER-PRINCE HALL

REFERENCES FOR PART 1


3. Harry A. Williamson, The Negro Mason in Literature (author’s collection, microfilm, 1929)

4. William H. Grimshaw, Official History of Freemasonry Among the Colored People in North America (New York, Macoy Publishing and Masonic Supply Co., 1903), p. 69. Through this work contains many fabrications concerning the life and times of Prince Hall, there remains a wealth of material concerning the later establishment of individual Prince Hall Grand Lodges, though it is best to verify all facts presented by Grimshaw.

5. John Edward (Bruce Grit) Bruce, Prince Hall the Pioneer of Negro Masonry-Proofs of the Legitimacy of Prince Hall Masonry (author’s collection, 1921), p. 4. This is an interesting pamphlet, but for the most part follows the Grimshaw fabrications. Yet he emphasizes “the great importance and need of keeping historical records and correct biographical sketches of the important men in the order, the dates of their birth and death, and wherever possible, their photographs, so that in the coming years the boys of today, who will be the Master Masons of tomorrow, will have the data at hand from which to write the history of Negro Masonry in the Centuries to come.”

6. Jeremy Belknap, Queries respecting the Slavery and Emancipation of Negroes in Massachusetts, proposed by the Hon. Judge Tucker of Virginia, and answered by the Rev. Dr. Belknap (author’s collection, 1795), p. 199.

7. Davis, op. cit., p. 266. I am not sure where Davis got his information.


12. Davis, op. cit., p. 16.
17. Bentley, op. cit.