

[Book Review for *The Square* by Tony Pope, July 2016]

LANDMARKS OF OUR FATHERS: A Critical Analysis Of The Start And Origin Of African Lodge No. 1

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Was Prince Hall 'initiated' without benefit of a warranted lodge? Was he a soldier in the Continental Army? Was *Sergeant* John Batt the first master of African Lodge No. 1, and *Private* Prince Hall his successor? Yes, yes, and yes! These are conclusions to be drawn from the careful and detailed research of John Hairston, himself a Prince Hall Freemason.

Background

More than 220 years ago, historian Jeremy Belknap of Boston, Massachusetts, wrote of Prince Hall: 'he is Grand Master of a Lodge of Free masons composed wholly of blacks and distinguished by the name of African Lodge. It was begun in this town while it was occupied by the British Troops in 1775, some of whom held a Lodge and initiated a number of blacks. After the Peace they sent to England and obtained a Charter.'

Over the years, this story has been adopted and developed further, by reference to other sources and by use of imagination, by both black and white writers. It has also been challenged, by white writers who rely on a group of disputed documents usually referred to as the minutes of African Lodge. These 'minutes' relate to African Lodge No. 1 (working in Boston without a warrant), African Lodge No. 459 of Boston (granted by the Grand Lodge of England in 1784, and renumbered 370 in 1792), and African Lodge No. 459bis of Philadelphia (cloned from African Lodge No. 459/370 in 1797). These 'minutes' were microfilmed in 1950, and it is the microfilm which is referred to in discussion, not the original documents.

The main issue is whether Prince Hall and his companions were initiated in a warranted lodge in 1775, when British troops with an Irish military warrant were present in Boston, or underwent a bogus initiation in Boston in 1778, when the troops and the lodge were elsewhere. That they were subsequently granted a warrant by the Grand Lodge of England (Moderns) after the war, as African Lodge No. 459, is not disputed, but it is argued that the warrant would not have been issued if the 'facts' had been known.

In 1994, when the United Grand Lodge of England formally recognised the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Massachusetts, derived from African Lodge No. 459 of Boston, all issues of 'irregularity' seemed to have been put to rest, but now they have been resurrected by Bro Hairston's further research of the period 1775–1784.

Landmarks of our Fathers

The author has a copy of the microfilmed 'minutes' and shares key pages with his readers, in facsimile illustrations and transcripts, together with numerous other documents studied in his search for reliable information. With them he builds a picture of the movements and interaction of Prince Hall with John Batt, leading to the conclusion that historian Jeremy Belknap was mistaken or misinformed in asserting that the initiations occurred in 1775.

Hairston accepts as established facts that John Batt was a soldier in the British 38th regiment of foot from 1759 to 1777; that Masons in the regiment held a travelling warrant from the Grand Lodge of Ireland, for Lodge 441 IC, from 1765 to 1840; that John Batt was registered as a member of the lodge in 1771; and that the regiment was in or near Boston from July 1774 to March 1776. He points out that the Grand Lodge of Ireland has no record of the activity of the lodge in America before 1781, when the lodge assisted in the formation of the Grand Lodge of New York, and that the warrant departed from America with the regiment in 1783.

The regiment went from Boston to Halifax, where it stayed two months before going to Staten Island, New York, in July 1776. Entering uncharted or disputed territory, the author provides documentary evidence that John Batt remained in Halifax on garrison duty, and was discharged from the British army in February 1777. Tracing the whereabouts and activities of John Batt after his discharge, the author locates a John Batt in Massachusetts, who was hired as a mercenary

in Capt Edgell's company in the Continental Army in December 1777. The same source (*Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors in the War of the Revolution*, published in 1891) has John Batt later joining Capt Lunt's company in Col Henley's regiment. The muster rolls of Henley's regiment, dated Boston, 28 May 1778, contain the signature of 'John Batt Serjeant', and a copy of his service record in Henley's regiment gives the following details: place of residence Boston, rank Sergeant, enlistment date 20 February 1778, and then records that he deserted on 10 June 1778. These dates are significant in relation to the microfilmed minutes of African Lodge.

Where was Prince Hall between 1776 and 1778? We know that he was a leather dresser, as stated in a deposition shortly before his death in 1807, and a bill of sale containing various dates in 1777 acknowledges receipt of five drumheads delivered by Prince Hall to Col Craft's regiment of artillery.

The inference is that Prince Hall was a civilian in April–May 1777, but the author supplies convincing evidence that Hall did enlist in the following year. According to a private record of a public notary, in 1770 William Hall freed his slave named Prince Hall. William Hall died the following year and left Prince Hall some land at Medford, about five miles from Boston; records show that Prince Hall paid tax on this land at least until 1779. Another document shows that a Prince Hall of Medford was paid a \$60 bounty on 25 May 1778 to serve in the Continental Army for nine months from the date of arrival at the town of Fishkill. He arrived at Fishkill on 21 June 1778; described as 30 years old and five feet three inches tall, he was enlisted in Capt Brooke's company of Col Thatcher's regiment. Simple arithmetic indicates that he would have been due for discharge on 20 March 1779.

The author provides a facsimile image of the bounty receipt, with Prince Hall's signature, which appears to be identical with the signature on an undated record in the microfilmed minutes of African Lodge and with several specimens of dated original correspondence held by the Library and Museum of Freemasonry in London.

Among the papers microfilmed in 1950, two in particular link Hall with Batt. One of them is evidently a document compiled by more than one writer over a period of time. This is featured on the front cover of the book, and again at pages 66, 69 and 127. The other, apparently relating to a single occasion, is reproduced on pages 103 and 129. Both are difficult to read. Slightly clearer reproductions of the same documents are available in the 1977 Transactions of Quatuor Coronati Lodge, volume 90 at pages 318 and 319. Both are dated at Boston on 6 March, with the year disputed. Brother Hairston and most other writers opt for 1778 in both cases.

The document with a single author begins with the words '... Marster Batt wose made these brothers', followed by a list of 15 names commencing with Prince Hall. Below are a list of figures, apparently guineas, and partially legible words which suggest that some brothers were made Master Masons, some Fellow Crafts and some Entered Apprentices. One possible interpretation is that all 15 were initiated that day, then 7 were passed and 3 of the 7 were raised, at one guinea per person per degree—25 guineas in all, a considerable sum.

The other document has a heading '... The wrthey and ammabel — Grand Marster John Batt', followed by three ruled columns of names, some of which appear in more than one column. Evidently it was intended to list Apprentices in the left-hand column, Fellow Crafts in the middle and Master Masons on the right, but lower entries are not all consistent. Prince Hall's initiation, passing and raising are not recorded on this document, but the first entry in the right-hand column is "Prince Hall Grand Marster 1778". Other entries in that column record raisings on 30 May, 2 June and 20 June 1778, 14 May, 28 May and 23 June 1779, and 26 January 17--. It is likely that the term 'Grand Marster' was used for the Master of the lodge, to distinguish him from Master Masons, and that Prince Hall succeeded John Batt some time in 1778, presumably after Batt deserted from Henley's regiment on 10 June.

Although Prince Hall was not due to be discharged from the army until 20 March 1779, other minutes of African Lodge record him conducting an initiation on 29 December 1778, and another document contains lodge by-laws passed in January 1779.

Consequences

The author regards the result of his research as 'a simple mending', not to be looked upon as 'a crack in the Prince Hall mosaic', but others may see it differently. When Prince Hall's application to the Grand Lodge of England (Moderns) for a charter could be seen as the plea of (probably) regularly made Freemasons in an unwarranted lodge, the subsequent warrant might justifiably be considered to be a cure for any previous irregularity. An application for a charter on behalf of a group of men duped into parting with their money in

the belief that they were being made Freemasons would almost certainly have been met with refusal, but the author reports that there is no record of any inquiry by the Grand Lodge before issuing the warrant for African Lodge.

That may leave the validity of the warrant in limbo, and even call into question the statement by UGLE's Board of General Purposes in 1994 that: 'By today's standards, the formation of the Prince Hall Grand Lodge was irregular but, in view of the way in which some other Grand Lodges were formed in America in that period, the formation of the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Massachusetts could have been seen as "merely eccentric" and of acceptable regularity.'

It is unlikely to result in any withdrawal of existing recognition, but may cause additional difficulty in eventually obtaining recognition in those nine southern states where more than half of all Prince Hall Masons reside, unrecognised.

Bro Hairston is to be commended for his diligence, intellectual honesty, and his courage in publishing his findings, but should not be surprised if he receives brickbats among the bouquets.

Verdict: a good read for history buffs, a fine example for potential researchers, and a must for anyone interested in the controversy likely to arise from it.