

# Prince Hall Freemasonry: Forming a Free African American Community

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Before the foundation of the Prince Hall Freemasonic Order, the free black population in the United States was lacking a community and group identity. Rather, there existed a disjointed group of individuals kept at a perpetual distance, both by societal pressures and by personal desire for status and advancement. Prince Hall Masonry instituted a framework for this population to grow together, form connections, and collectively interact with greater society. This paper will delineate what role this fraternal organization had in the formation of a free black community in early America. It will explore the institution's foundation, its ideology and teachings, and its rituals and symbols. Aspects of the fraternal organization's effect on the internal interactions and identity of the emerging community, and the community's external interaction with white Masonic orders and the encompassing white society will be considered. The effect of Masonic doctrine on these group exchanges will also be thoroughly examined.

*Keywords: Freemasonry, Prince Hall, African American Community*

## Introduction

In the first years following the American Revolutionary War, to be a free African in the new nation was essentially to be alone. Rejected by society and torn from their heritage, African men had little sense of remaining identity or community. Scarce opportunity for success was available, and the true degree of freedom for these men was still heavily restricted. This was a life with little hope or ambition, leaving many yearning for more.

Freemasonry offered something more. The Prince Hall Freemason Order was the first fraternal organization for Africans living in America. Founded by Prince Hall in the late 1780s, this order offered a community for free black men founded on brotherly love, charity, and truth. Membership required the performance of many rituals and symbolic action but was also an outlet for research and writing, a platform for political empowerment, and an environment conducive for forming robust social connections. Black Masons were still scrutinized and rejected by the mainstream white society around them, but when within the confines of a Masonic lodge, they were able to form political subjectivities and debate ideological principles in a setting where they were accepted. Most importantly, however, masonry brought together a diverse group of free blacks that would have otherwise been unlikely to form a unified group. The Prince Hall Freemason Order built a nascent African American community with powerful internal and external tensions, which, although often contradictory in nature, instilled ideals of altruism and fraternity among men who had no place in their society.

## Background

### The Free Black Caste

Prior to the emergence of the Prince Hall Order, free black men in America lacked significant form of meaningful group identity or community. A sense of heritage had been stolen from them, and independent identity development in early American society was nearly impossible. The economic and social formation of the time was based on a simple dichotomy: white men were artisans, merchants, and plantation owners. Black men were slaves. Black freemen thus occupied "an anomalous caste in a system built for two" (Williams, 1976, p. 42) where opportunity was scarce and societal rejection was part of everyday life. Social capital formation in this precarious position was not only difficult to realize, but stifled internally and externally.

The free black man in early America was first and foremost isolated. Alexis De Tocqueville (1838) remarked in length on the condition of the black freeman in his classic *Democracy in America*: "...independence is often felt by him to be a heavier burden than slavery...[a] thousand... desires beset him, and he is destitute of the knowledge and energy necessary to resist them" (p. 314). The condition of freedom placed the black individual in an unwinnable situation, set apart from his kin and despised by his "equals." "In short, he sinks to such a depth of wretchedness, that while servitude brutalizes, liberty destroys him" (Tocqueville, 1838, p. 314).

Despite the immense pressure inherent in the condition of the black freeman, many did not shun society for excluding them, and rather worked to fight their exclusion. This was by no means a simple task. Between the legal marginalization, the social rejection, and lack of

community, African Americans had little opportunity for advancement and participation. Between the free blacks and whites were insurmountable prejudices and barriers raised by elements of education, law, and association (Rael, 2002). Were an African American to try to vote, he would have his life threatened or taken (Malone, 2006). Social barriers were no less restrictive, especially in the states and areas where black freemen resided. In the northern states, conditions were not much better than in the South. Free blacks had not grown closer in position to their white “equals,” and remained despised by the white population long after they became free. In fact, in states that had abolished slavery, and especially in those in which it had never existed, blacks were more stigmatized, facing ongoing prejudice and abuse (Malone, 2006, Rael, 2002). This was likely the result of the lack of formal legal inferiority (despite the still obvious barriers), which created resentment amongst the white population. The northern states did not recognize slavery in legal terms, but this by no means implies that the white population saw free blacks as their equals in a social sense. This false equality is described almost poetically by Tocqueville (1838): “The negro is free, but he can share neither the rights, nor the pleasures, nor the labor, nor the afflictions, nor the tomb of him whose equal he has been declared to be; and he cannot meet him upon fair terms in life or in death” (p. 340).

To evade the legal barriers and social discrimination he faced, the black freeman sought to identify with white society. Many African Americans were engrained with the idea of their own inferiority, and desired to commune with those not considered inferior. “The Negro makes a thousand fruitless efforts to insinuate himself amongst men who repulse him; he conforms to the tastes of his oppressors, adopts their opinions, and hopes by imitating them to form a part of their community” (Tocqueville, 1838, p. 315). This did little to better society’s opinion of the oppressed blacks, however, as Tocqueville (1838) noted, “[t]here is a natural prejudice which prompts men to despise...their inferior long after he is become their equal” (p. 337). Black freemen, seeing the social fight as a losing one, turned towards self-promotion in an economic sense. This would still require a certain amount of social maneuvering, but potentially did not require approval of the broader white community to succeed.

To achieve economic status, free African Americans had to reject the sense of loyalty or kinship they felt with slaves or other free blacks. “It was pragmatic for free...blacks to attempt to carry themselves as differently as possible from the still enslaved” (Williams, 1976, p. 46). This disposition was more than simply judicious; it was engrained into black consciousness. “In each of his features he discovers a trace of slavery, and, if it were in his power, he would willingly rid himself of everything that makes him what he is” (Tocqueville, 1838, p. 315). The less one interacted with blacks of any status, the better their chances were in this society. The more one “acted white” the more likely one was to be accepted by the dominant white society around them. Most free blacks either had a percentage of white blood or benefited directly from some close relationship with whites, encouraging blacks to reject the “black part” of their heritage, and embrace the white culture that was oppressing them. This rejection of identity was more stringent in the South than in the North. In northern states free blacks could achieve small levels of success as artisans; in the South, however, economic success depended on slave ownership. Freemen in the South had to employ slave labor if they wished to obtain economic success, and those that did “were generally the wealthiest and best connected

members of their caste” (Williams, 1976, p. 48).

The social formation and modes of production during this period set a black population with varying levels of position at perpetual odds with one another. Many successful freemen sympathized less and less with their enslaved compatriots as they advanced economically. This sentiment was evident to a greater degree in the South, where it was common for free black slave-owners to beat and abuse their slaves in the pursuit of profit, just like their white counterparts. Black plantation owners became the most economically successful members of the free black caste, and rather than use this newfound influence to better the circumstances of the enslaved, most instead worked for personal gain. Differentiating oneself from other blacks was indeed a higher value for the majority of freemen than aiding others or forming solidarity.

Social capital formation amongst the free black population was not only internally repressed by blacks for social advancement, but also faced external pressures. The displaced and rare nature of this caste caused heightened attention to be placed upon its members. According to the University of Maryland, free black men comprised between one and two percent of the population in both the North and South during this period (1780–1790) (University of Maryland, 2016). Being so uncommon, free blacks were placed under intense scrutiny by both white citizens and by civil authorities. Their movement and freedom of association were heavily restricted.

Several forces thus began to coalesce within the free black population that would become the impetus for the black freemason movement. As plantation owners in the South gained economically and artisans and merchants in the North were suppressed, free blacks began to see what society was withholding from them, even as free men. At the same time, this small free population was growing increasingly diverse. Free blacks and free descendants of former slaves from disparate regions (who had different languages, customs, and modes) now constituted one “class.” These men recognized the need to band together, for it was going to be near impossible to better their circumstances without collective action. Black freemen still constituted a small percentage of the population, so to achieve these aims, urbanization became a commonality (Williams, 1976). With growing numbers of free blacks in the cities, civil authorities became increasingly restrictive and suppressive. Black association thus naturally moved into secrecy within early American cities, laying the foundations for a black Freemason society.

### Prince Hall

The origins of the Prince Hall Masonic Order and the life of Prince Hall, its founder, have been misrepresented by many historical accounts. Hall was born in the 1730s, although the exact date and year are disputed. Numerous sources indicate that Hall was born a freeman to a free mother and a free father in England. It is written that his father was a leather merchant, and after apprenticing to his father for a number of years, Hall earned his passage aboard a ship to America. There he worked for abolition, became a clergyman, fought as a war hero in the American Revolutionary War, and eventually established the first order of black Freemasonry (Coil, 1982; Williams, 1976).

However, according to Coil (1982) in *A Documentary Account of Prince Hall and Other Black Fraternal Orders*, which is solely a collection and interpretation of written records, this narrative is inaccurate. Much popular information concerning Prince Hall, and thus the

founding of Prince Hall Freemasonry, has been exaggerated and glamorized by writers espousing the black cause. Hall was not a war hero, as he never actually served. Four men with the name Prince Hall served in the revolutionary army, but documented accounts of these men reveal that none were from Boston or of the correct age to be the Prince Hall here discussed (Coil, 1982, p. 20). While Hall was a Methodist clergyman, documentation of at least five, perhaps six, marriages of a black clergyman named Prince Hall living in Boston during this period exist. Multiple marriages would not have been characteristic of a clergyman based on the mores of the time. Most significant, however, Hall was not born a free man. A manumission statement from 1770 is provided by Coil (1982) documenting the release of Prince Hall after 21 years of forced servitude, signed by his master, a leather dresser in Boston named William Hall (p. 97).

This documented account of Prince Hall's bondage is the first important point of incongruity within early black Freemasonry. Hall would later go on to found the first black Masonic order and was named Grand Master of its first lodge. However, Masonic code dictates that any member of the order cannot be born into a position of bondage or servitude because this would disable the individual from being able to ascertain freely discovered truths. Free information and the search for "Truth" are core foundational motives for Masonic orders, so the fact that the Prince Hall Order was in fact founded by a former slave demonstrates a clear break from Masonic tradition. This was, from its onset, a new type of Freemason order filled with contradictions in ideology and makeup and reflective of the peculiar position in society held by its members—the free black caste.

In 1775, five years after his release from bondage, Hall requested an apprenticeship from a British Military Lodge in Boston. "He was accepted and became a Master Mason, soon joined by fourteen other black men admitted to the same lodge" (Skocpol, Liazos, & Ganz, 2006, p. 34). After the Revolutionary War, Hall and these fourteen petitioned the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts for their own Masonic charter. The Massachusetts lodge refused, so in 1782 "Hall petitioned the Grand Lodge of England for a charter, which was delivered in 1787, launching what would eventually evolve into a vast order" (Skocpol et al., 2006, p. 34). This charter established the African Lodge no. 1, which was later renamed African Lodge no. 459, the first lodge of the Prince Hall Order, and the first African Masonic lodge (Sidbury, 2007).

### **Prince Hall Freemasonry**

Prince Hall Freemasonry was not the only fraternal organization or even the only order of black Freemasonry in early America. However, it was undoubtedly the most influential organization on the formation of a black community. Among Freemason groups, white or black, the Lodge founded by Prince Hall in Boston, African Lodge #459, is the only United States masonic body that holds an original charter from the Mother Grand Lodge of England. Moreover, Prince Hall Freemasonry was not just a parallel organization to white orders. There were "no precedents for the establishment of lodges based on race or color" (Coil, 1982, p. 11). The use of racial group identity as a basis for Masonic practice was a completely new concept when the Prince Hall Order was founded, making the Prince Hall practice again separate and unique. Prince Hall Freemasonry also had to deal with affronts from

competing orders of black Masons, something that had never existed before in Freemasonry.

Harold Van Buren Voorhis, a noted white Masonic author, contests that, "the history of the black man in America is the history of Prince Hall Freemasonry" (Walkes, 1981, XV). Indeed, the Prince Hall Masonic Order is the "only body of black men in America who are able to document their existence as an organized body from 1775 to the present" (Williams, 1976, p. 130). It was also the first black organization that was national in span and was "the most imitated of all fraternal organizations" (Williams, 1976, p. 5-7). Being the first, the largest, and the longest lasting black fraternal organization of the time, Prince Hall Freemasonry had immense influence over the formation of a black community in America.

### **Symbolism, Ideology, and Fraternity**

Masonic practice provided an infrastructure for building social capital for a fragmented black community in dire need of it. For a diverse caste so distinct from mainstream society, the doctrine and ritual of Freemasonry facilitated the creation of bridging capital amongst its members and with the surrounding community. The Prince Hall Masonic order centered its teachings on the ideals of brotherly love, charity, and truth (Kantrowitz, 2010), and its members were expected to live by these principles.

In a Masonic community with such a diverse set of backgrounds, it would have been easy for factionalism to permeate or for the order to become fragmented and collapse. However, through the daily ritual of Masonic practice the members of the Prince Hall Order grew together to form a tight-knit community. All of Masonry, including the Prince Hall order, centers much of its practice on the use of symbols and ritual. The use of symbols was a method of uniting a diverse community, each symbol representing cross-sectional or shared experience of the members. Prince Hall Masons understood that despite the dissimilarities they might have, there was a certain level of commonality in all subjective experience from which Masonic members could extract "Truth." This understanding of similarity and difference was represented through Masonic symbols in the order's rituals, chants, and practices: "It is by uttering the same cry, pronouncing the same word, or performing the same gesture in regard to some object that they become and feel themselves in unison" (Williams, 1976, p. 81).

Symbolism was not the only way Prince Hall Freemasonry emphasized unity among men or the bond between brothers. Masonic doctrine, like its symbolism, focused on what men share, as opposed to what differentiates them. Masonic doctrine "teaches that the whole human species is one family... Masonry unites men of every country, sect and opinion and conciliates true friendship among those who might otherwise have remained at a perpetual distance" (Walkes, 1981, p. 81). Members of the Prince Hall Order were taught that all men were their brothers and should be treated with brotherly love, that they should be charitable in all their interactions, and that they should hold truth in the highest esteem (Kantrowitz, 2010).

The majority of the teachings of the Prince Hall Order were conciliatory and unifying in this way. Members not only formed a fraternal bond by seeking truth in their shared subjective experiences, but also developed a nuanced understanding of the world outside their order. The Prince Hall Masons taught that their white oppressors, who could

be seen as the enemy, were in fact also their brothers, as all men were.

### Political Empowerment

One important aspect of Prince Hall Freemasonry was the extent to which it facilitated the political empowerment of the newly developing black community. Despite the doctrine of Masonry which declares that politics not be brought within the confines of a Lodge, the Prince Hall Order clearly laid the foundation for black political advancement (Kantrowitz, 2010). As much “public” life was still suppressed for the free black man in America, Freemasonry provided an institutional framework separate from state authority—with a hierarchical structure that allowed for upward mobility—and was an outlet for writing and research that would not have been allowed elsewhere (Kantrowitz, 2010; Williams, 1976; Walkes, 1981).

Providing an institutionary setting free from state control was vital for advancing the positions of the black community. “Freemasonry was a key arena for black political thought and activity during...decades of crisis and radical transformation” (Kantrowitz, 2010, p. 1002). Within this context, black Freemasons could form political subjectivities, acquire organizational experience, take part in community leadership, repair schisms, and reconcile rivalries. The development of separate structures and political partialities was important for the formation of group identity and purpose. Prince Hall Masons were able to unreservedly debate and discuss what was best for their fraternal community, free from the suppressive power of the civil authorities.

In a society that repressed upward mobility for free blacks, Prince Hall Freemasonry created a hierarchical structure through which members could gain status and responsibility. For the first time, the free black population in America had a role to play in the formation of its community, and structures through which to gain influence and affect change.

Prince Hall Freemasonry also provided the tools necessary for its members to produce research and writings for the order. Such a platform allowed those who were illiterate to educate themselves, and those who were literate to help advance their newly forming community. Produced writings were not limited to the confines of any one lodge. The writings and research of members of a lodge were shared with lodges of other states, “in the hope that a strong bond, union and dialogue would develop, thereby creating more Masonic light, knowledge and information for the whole group” (Walkes, 1981, p. 145). This not only contributed to the education and advancement of members, but also strengthened connections between lodges, forming interstate bonds between Prince Hall Freemason communities.

### Analysis

The influence Prince Hall Freemasonry had over the formation of a black community and identity in early America is complex and multifaceted. Participation in the Prince Hall Order in many ways reoriented a member’s perspective on their place and their role in the world. This role included their relationship with their fellow lodge members, with the white Freemason lodges opposite them, and with the larger society around them. Each of these relationships was profoundly influenced by Masonry for the black community, and constitutes their own intriguing dynamic.

### An African American Identity

Facing great odds, Prince Hall Freemasonry brought together a diverse group of men who were otherwise being driven apart by their society. Prior to the foundation of the order, these were men who rejected one another, who worked to identify themselves as separate from other blacks. The Prince Hall Order contributed to the building of an identity with much more depth and purpose, founded on brotherhood rather than status. Within this community the order fostered an environment conducive to collective action and advancement. It was a place where men worked together forming political subjectivities that would one day be realized. This was a community “rooted in ‘the remnants of African sensibilities about social relations’ which formed ‘the communitarian foundations of African American institutional life’” (Kantrowitz, 2010, p. 1007).

Out of a population that was being internally and externally pressured to remain fragmented, a vibrant and incredibly tightly knit community emerged. Within the lodge, while there was a hierarchical structure; members did not have to reject each other to rise. Rather, the Prince Hall Order fostered community and brotherhood amongst members that extended beyond their ranks or status (Kantrowitz, 2010). This contrasted the drive to reject one’s history and heritage so pervasive in a free black’s life. Masonic doctrine instills a sense of unity in its members, and coming from such a disjointed background, these men embraced this new worldview enthusiastically.

Of course, this nascent community was not perfectly inclusive. The Prince Hall Order turned their backs on two groups: former slaves and women. Despite the fact that a former slave founded the order, the fraternity refused the incorporation of blacks released from bondage. This held true for nearly one hundred years, up until the Civil War (Williams, 1976). One would think that perhaps Hall would have been more sympathetic to the plight of the enslaved, but no provision was ever made for the allowance of slaves who had earned their freedom. The Prince Hall Order thus put the principles of Freemasonry before the good of their fellow African American, keeping some element of status and exclusion. Moreover, no women were admitted or involved with early Prince Hall Freemasonry. While it is true that white orders were also not admitting women, the exclusion of women “reinforced western; bourgeois gender conventions” (Summers, 2003, p. 554) by keeping “manliness” in the public sphere and keeping “womanliness” domestic. Martin Summers (2003), associate professor at Boston College, argues in the journal *Gender and History* that this was another way in which the Prince Hall Order kept alive elements of status and exclusion.

The significance of these two areas of exclusion is twofold. First, exclusion highlights some of the contradictions within Price Hall Masonry. In rejecting former slaves, the order was adhering to one doctrine while forgetting their foundational principles. While Masons believe that birth in a position of servitude obscures the ability to receive Masonic light and truth, they also swear oaths and perform rituals dedicated to an avowed universalism, one of brotherhood, love, and charity. While for their white counterparts admitting former slaves had never been an issue of concern, black Freemasons had to essentially place one doctrine before another. Unfortunately for those suffering the plight of oppression, the order chose status over camaraderie. Second, the Price Hall Order hindered its progress by exclusion in the

sense that the order was also in many ways the beginning of a movement. Much activity within the order concerned the ability of African Americans to advance socially. Rejecting those who would share their aspirations, be they women or former slaves, was not conducive for meeting this goal in the long term. Although in multiple ways positively impactful, the influence Prince Hall Freemasonry had on early African American community formation could not do away with all narrow-mindedness.

It is likely this element of exclusion accounted for the order's sluggish growth in its early years. During the late 1700s and early 1800s, the Prince Hall Order was in many ways an elite order amongst black citizens, and it was not until the mid-1800s that the order began to aggressively expand. In the decades before the Civil War "estimates of the order's membership ranged from 2,700 to 7,000, with lodges in twenty-two states" (Kantrowitz, 2010, p. 1009). Members of the order were heavily involved in the abolitionist effort prior to the war, and during the Civil War many fought for the North. Southern blacks were attracted to the order during and after the war, and "[b]y 1877 estimates of the numbers of African American Freemasons ranged from 28,000 to (a probably inflated) 100,000 (with much of the increase after 1865 occurring in the former slave states)" (Kantrowitz, 2010, p. 1019).

Regardless of period, what the Prince Hall Order did for the burgeoning African American community was prodigious considering the condition of blacks outside the order. Masonry provided the necessary structures for its members to learn to negotiate hierarchical structures, to gain influence in their community, to discuss political issues that pertained to them, and to form tight social networks, much of which would otherwise have been impossible during the period.

### Acceptance and Rejection

The interaction between the Prince Hall Freemason Order and white Freemason lodges exhibited similar complexities to other aspects of the order. Being Masons themselves, white Freemason orders upheld similar beliefs and dogma to those esteemed by black Masons. Brotherhood, love, charity, and the search for truth were avowed "universal values" for white Masons as well, and yet there was much dissimilarity in the ways these values were enacted by the black and white orders.

The parallel white institutions of Freemasonry never recognized the Prince Hall Order as legitimate, and even went so far as to actively reject it. In an attempted show of solidarity, and in accordance with the Masonic principle of brotherhood, Prince Hall Masons extended visitation and fellowship rites to white Masons, but the white mason orders refused to reciprocate (Williams, 1976). The search for "Truth" is meant to be at the heart of Freemasonry, and yet even when it was pertinent to a lodge's trial, white Masons still refused the "testimony of a Negro" (Walkes, 1981, p. 52). The utter rejection of the Prince Hall Order was not a problem for the order only in its infancy, rather, "organized Caucasian Freemasonry does not accept it, and have attacked the Black man and his masonry for 200 years" (Walkes, 1981, XIV).

Even though it preached the merits of inclusivity and universality, "mainstream" freemasonry could not overcome long-held prejudices. "In spite of its ideal of a world-wide brotherhood, Masonry has often failed, when put to the test, to transcend the limitations of nationalism and sometimes even racial and religious differences within a nation" (Williams, 1976, p. 158). This was not, in this case, for lack of effort

on behalf of the Prince Hall Order. They accepted their white counterparts as Masons and brothers, but "mainstream" Masonry could not adhere to their Masonic ideology when it came to their black counterparts. The racial prejudices were too deeply engrained for even their foundationally held belief in Freemasonry to overcome.

Black Freemasons thus had the "difficulty of deciding how to treat these regular masons in the manner which their own unMasonic attitude deserves, and yet be consistent and true to Masonic vows" (Williams, 1976, p. 178). The Prince Hall order was put in an ethical quandary; the white order rejected them, both a personal affront and an insult to Masonic tradition. Black Masons were accustomed to adversity, however, and held true to their order's foundational values. "Toleration of the error of mainstream masons [was] urged" (Williams, 1976, p. 152). Prince Hall Masons saw their white brothers as misguided and mistaken, but did not turn on them in anger. The order's solution was to "be aloof: except to those individuals who treat black masons as equals" (Williams, 1976, p. 178).

Refusing to reject white Masonic orders, even in the face of rejection, could not have been an easy path for members of the Prince Hall Order to take. Rather than shoulder this burden begrudgingly, however, black Masons took pride. They made it very clear that they wished to operate above such a dispute, and had "no desire to join the 'petty man'" (Williams, 1976, p. 178) in his petty worries. By refusing to engage with white orders in such conflict, Prince Hall Masons were able to remain more true to masonic doctrine than even their white counterparts, a fact they were aware of and which brought them great satisfaction. "The black masons pride themselves on their true adherence to masonic ideals" (Williams, 1976, p. 183) when compared to white Masonic orders.

Prince Hall Freemasonry was forming a tight-knit black community in which its members took great pride. More than simply a community to call their own, African Americans could now be proud of the integrity of their order. Instead of just having things to struggle against, black Masons had something worth working towards, a Masonic community with resolve, humility, and ambitions.

### Dissent and Incorporation

Freemason doctrine did not call on the Prince Hall Order to accept only fellow Masons, but all men regardless of creed, color, or constitution. They were being called to embrace the society that enslaved and oppressed them as brothers deserving of their understanding. This was the function of the Prince Hall Order, to instill ideals of giving, generosity, and brotherhood among all men, despite the harsh treatment from the outside world (Walkes, 1981).

Prince Hall Freemasons had thus reached an "anxious intersection between dissent and incorporation" that Sesay (2013) terms being both a black "counter public and universal public" (p. 380). The fraternity had ambitions of working towards a society in which they could be accepted and treated with dignity, and therefore, their doctrine instructed them to love their oppressors. This tension, one of many within the order, conveys the way in which Freemasonry was a remarkably pragmatic method for achieving reform for blacks. They had to carefully balance pursuing their own objectives with being cooperative members of society. The nuanced identity that was forming within the Prince Hall Order was a point of pride for members, despite how immensely difficult it must have been to assume.

The Prince Hall Order understood that the way they were perceived by society as a community was a fundamental piece of how they would be treated, and a direct factor in what change they could affect. They believed respectability would play a key role in their material and moral success. They understood the realities of the white-controlled society around them, and knew they would need the respect of the whites to advance their cause. Prince Hall Masons thus took great care to prove that respect was deserved, both as individuals and as a community (Sesay, 2013).

Prince Hall Freemasonry took a steady and careful approach to interacting and attempting to change the surrounding society. They understood that creating too much disharmony would set them back, not advance their cause, but as a group black Masons were cautiously optimistic. The order “shaped how men understood the purpose and development of leadership” (Kantrowitz, 2010, p. 1003) and imparted an enlightened understanding of politics. Prince Hall Freemasons were taught that politics was only a means to achieve the transcendent end of perfecting society, in this case forming a society that welcomes all (Kantrowitz, 2010). More than a means of social control, black Masons believed they could pursue equality within the existing infrastructure. This can be seen in a publication of the *Masonic Quarterly Review*: “We believe men, no matter of what race, can respect each other without the hobby of raising the dust of social equality. What we demand and are entitled to is plain justice, nothing but equality before the law” (Williams, 1976, p. 184). The process of incorporation was slow and difficult, but would eventually be fruitful, as this endeavor would eventually become the roots of the abolitionist movement in America. Indeed, “African American Freemasons led the earliest written abolitionist campaign in New England” (Sesay, 2013, p. 381).

### Conclusion

Although the Prince Hall Freemasonic order began as a small and exclusive society and the first fraternal organization for free blacks in early America, it contributed to many foundational components of the black community. African Americans in this period encountered intense exclusion from mainstream society, which when faced alone can be crippling. When many face such rejection and can commune with one another, however, “the existing culture of exclusion serves to motivate a defense of racial solidarity” (Rogers, n.d., p. 15). This was the beginning of a tight knit community based upon common race, history, and plight. Together free blacks were much stronger than they could be standing alone, a condition that fostered the desire for mutually beneficial reform—“solidarity among the excluded becomes the foundation for responding to the polity as a whole” (Rogers, n.d., p. 14). The lasting effect of the Prince Hall Order is thus twofold: it brought together a group of disenfranchised individuals and empowered them through the organizational structure of voluntary association, which created the potential to exert influence. As Alexis De Tocqueville (1838) noted about the vibrant associational life in America: “When an association is allowed to establish centers of action at certain important points in the country, its activity is increased, and its influence extended” (p. 171).

Prince Hall Freemasonry and the building of early African American community faced powerful tensions: their masonry existed in a sphere of racially separate activity, despite their reach towards brotherhood with whites. They also avowed universalism, despite the fact

that they only allowed special men to join the order (Kantrowitz, 2010). From foundation to ideology to external interaction, the Prince Hall Order was plagued with such tensions and contradiction. Nonetheless, members of the order were instilled with ideals, skills, and social connections they would not have otherwise acquired. The order built a community where none existed, which, regardless of its complexity, greatly enhanced the lives of those privileged to take part in it. The Prince Hall Freemason Order built a nascent African American community with powerful internal and external tensions, which, although often contradictory in nature, instilled ideals of altruism and fraternity among men who had no place in their society. It laid the foundations of what would become black political involvement and eventually the emancipation movement, building a black identity and race consciousness for its members.

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