

*Black Freemasonry in the Peach State of Georgia: 140 years from  
Slavery to Sublime and from Projects to Pyramids by the Grand Historian  
Douglas Evans, III August 2009*

Freemasonry of today is linked to the Africa of yesterday. The organization of Freemasonry into the Lodge or Craft system is a child of the Operative Guilds of Europe. The Cathedral builders of Europe who used the operative Masonic tools were the carpenters that learned Gothic architecture and geometry from the African sciences. Today in 2009, as Freemasons we have inherited the speculative form of this ancient system of building from the Egyptian culture of over thousands of years ago. The first Freemason in antiquity is said to have been called Imhotep (2630-2611 BC) in Ancient Africa. He is said to be the first builder of one of the world's oldest Pyramids, called the step Pyramid of Saqqara. Today, we can see how the African and Egyptian symbols of the Shriners has related our Fraternal order with its African ancestry. No other symbol depicts this better than the Shriners' emblem of the Pyramid. In Kemet (Egypt) the degrees and symbols were passed on to the Knights of Templars and the Greeks by way of the Moors during the Crusades. This is the reason for the symbolism and costumes of the Shriners in depicting this passing of history into Europe. As a speculative art, Freemasonry is dated to around 926 AD when King Athelston summons the Masons at York, England; although the order had previously existed in Egypt for thousands of years as the Pyramid Temple University.

The first recognized Grand Lodge goes back to February 1717 at the *Apple-Tree Tavern* in England when four Lodges met. In the early days, Freemasons met in bars or taverns and the first Grand Master of Moderns in England was Anthony Sayer in 1717. Before there were any public schools or colleges, the Masonic Lodge was the foundation of many communities in America and abroad. In 1733, a new colony, called Georgia, was formed by England as a

buffer to the Spanish in Florida and as a refuge for the debtors and criminals of England. It must also be noted that in December of 1733 at a sermon of the Grand Lodge of England at the *Devil's Tavern* in London, a plan was devised for all the Masonic Brethren to have the opportunity to erase their debts by cultivating the land of the new colony of Georgia. General Oglethorpe along with other English Masons sailed on the Good Ship "Anne" and landed at the Yamacraw Bluff on February 12, 1733. Therefore, it can be said that the State of Georgia was a Masonic invention.

Keep in mind that at this time, there was no United States, no Constitution, no Independence declared, no cars, or paved streets. No one knew for sure the true origins of Freemasonry at this time, but the first use of the term was in 1356 as a *Code of Masonic Regulations* in London, England. Before that we find the term in Africa as **phre** for sons and **mesons** for light or "**Sons of light**". In 1390 we have the *Regius Manuscripts* as the first extant Masonic document about Freemasonry. It was written in Middle English. The earliest evidence of a Lodge record was in Scotland at *Aitchison's Haven* in 1598. The minutes of *Mary's Chapel Lodge* at Edinburgh record the first Masonic activity in the Old World.

We know that the first Freemason to enter the American Colonies was John Skene in October 1682, a member of *Aberdeen Lodge #1* of Scotland. He settled in Burlington, New Jersey. In 1704, the first American to be made a Mason was Jonathan Belcher of *Aberdeen Lodge #1*. The first Masonic Lodge meeting to take place in North America was *St. John's Lodge* in Philadelphia, PA dating back to 1731. The first Provincial Grand Master in North America was Daniel Coxe. On June 1, 1730, Daniel Coxe was appointed by the Duke of Norfolk as the Masonic Governor for Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York.

Simultaneously, the first Masonic Lodge in Georgia was accredited to General James Edward Oglethorpe on February 12, 1733 when he and several other Freemasons landed on the shores of Savannah. Just shortly afterwards on April 13, the first Grand Lodge (Caucasian) in the Americas was formed by Henry Price in Boston, MA. On February 10, 1734, the order came to Georgia officially when the Grand Master of Masons of England and Lord Viscount of Weymouth, Thomas Tynne issued a warrant to Roger Lacey, Esquire of Savannah. This Lodge (for Caucasians) was chartered and later known as *King Solomon's Lodge* became the first in Georgia. The Grand Lodge of Georgia was later organized in 1786 with *Solomon's Lodge #1* and *Hiram Lodge #2*. The first Grand Master of Masons in Georgia was William Stephens from 1787-1788.

Freemasonry did not enter Atlanta in the White community until April 13, 1847 when *Atlanta Lodge #59* was chartered. The Lodge met on the corner of Lloyd (now Central Avenue) and Alabama Street. The first Worshipful Master was Leonard Christian Simpson. The first White Lodge chartered in Fulton County was *Fulton Lodge #216* on October 30, 1857. They met on Peachtree and Cain Streets at the Masonic Temple where this beautiful edifice still stands today. This is around the time that many Blacks moved to the Atlanta area.

### ***Prince Hall and our Beginning***

For men of African American descent, Freemasonry did not begin until 1775, when Prince Hall and fourteen of his companions were initiated into *Army Lodge #441*. The hallmark of Freemasonry and Fraternal life for Black men in the shores of America started in 1775 before the nation was even founded in 1776. Prince Hall and 14 other black men were initiated into *Army Lodge #441* which was attached to a British Infantry regiment and chartered by the Grand

Lodge of Ireland. The Lodge was stationed in the vicinity of Boston Harbor at Castle Williams called the 1st Battalion and was the 38<sup>th</sup> regiment of Foot (South Straffordshires). Scholars agree that Prince Hall may have been one of the first African Americans to receive the degrees of Freemasonry in the colonies along with his fourteen companions: **Peter Best, Cuff Bufform, John Carter, Peter Freeman, Forten Howard, Cyrus Jonbus, Prince Rees, Thomas Sanderson, Bueston Singer, Boston Smith, Cato Spears, Prince Taylor, Benjamin Tiber, and Richard Tilley.** After the war ended, *Lodge #441* allegedly left Boston for New York and left Prince Hall a Dispensation to assemble into *African Lodge #1*. *African Lodge #1* was the first Lodge for men of African descent in America. This marks the beginning for the search for equality for African Americans in North America.

Although many African Americans served in the war and helped to secure Independence from Great Britain, our founder, Prince Hall, could not get a Charter to operate a legal Lodge in America due to the racial sentiment and fraternal hypocrisy. Consequently, on March 2, 1784 and June 30<sup>th</sup>; Prince Hall sent two petitions to the *Grand Lodge of England (Moderns)* by way of William Moody of *Brotherly Love Lodge #55*. On September 20<sup>th</sup>, the petition was granted and it was received making *African Lodge #1* into *African Lodge #459* on the rolls of the Grand Lodge of England. Notice the use of the name African. They did not name the first organized body in America after Black, Colored or Negro, but decided to link themselves with their motherland. This now world famous Charter was then documented and executed by the Duke of Cumberland and signed by the Earl of Effingham. The Charter was delivered on March 10, 1787 by Captain Scott (cousin of Paul Revere) and member of the *Sons of Philadelphia Lodge*. This event marks the first organization of any group for Blacks in the New World. The first Greek fraternities of the Sigma Pi Phi (Boule) and the Alphas were started in 1904 and 1906

Respectively; over 100 years after Prince Hall Freemasonry.

If we examine this time period in the South, during the Civil War, a Black man sought refuge from the war by leaving his home town of Savannah and sailing to Boston, MA. James M. Simms, while in Boston, became a Baptist Minister as well as a Freemason. Keep in mind that Slavery had been in the state since 1750, though when the Colony of Georgia was chartered Slavery was not permitted in the territory. Freemasonry in the South, at this time, had many obstacles in its development. With authority from the African Grand Lodge of Massachusetts, as a provincial Grand Master for Florida, Georgia, and Alabama, Rev. Simms chartered the first Masonic Lodge in Georgia for men of African American descent on February 4, 1866 with ***Eureka Lodge #11***. This lodge was chartered by the National Compact Grand Lodge of Massachusetts. Simms chartered ***John T. Hilton Lodge #13*** on September of 1866 in Savannah, also chartered by the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts. On December 6, 1866, the third Lodge for African Americans was chartered in Augusta, GA as ***Bannekar Lodge #38***, which was chartered by the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania. On August 22, 1870 Rev. James Simms helps to organize the Grand Lodge of Georgia (for Blacks) with ***Eureka #1, Hilton #2, and Bannekar #3***. The list of Grand Masters in Georgia for the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Masters of the Grand Lodge of Georgia:

1870-1872	Rev. James M. Simms
1872-1874	Louis B. Toomer
1874-1883	John H. DeVeaux
1883-1886	Alexander Harris
1886-1888	Anthony K. Desverney
1888-1889	William E. Terry
1889-1894	John D. Campbell

1894-1901	William E. Terry
1901-1931	Dr. Henry Rutherford Butler
1931-1961	John Wesley Dobbs
1961-1991	Dr. X. L. Neal
1991-1995	Neal A. McQueen
1995-2000	Benjamin P. Barksdale
2000-2005	Willie L. Williams
2005-present	Ramsey Davis, Jr.

In 2009, our Grand Master, Ramsey Davis Jr. has prepared us well for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. We have purchased in the last couple of years, a new multi-million dollar building in Fulton County, Georgia, to serve as our headquarters. Grand Master Davis also purchased our older building from the 5 original Lodge owners in 2006, and today it serves as a meeting place for many of our Lodges within the Atlanta Masonic District. This older building on 330 Auburn Avenue was completed in 1940, by Grand Master John Wesley Dobbs.

The Leadership within the Prince Hall family of Georgia has been among the “Who’s Who” or the best of our society. The first Grand Master and pioneer in Georgia was James Merilous Simms. Simms was well known in the Baptist Church as well as instrumental in conducting a secret school for Blacks prior to the Civil War. He was given 39 lashes in a public beating for being caught teaching young blacks how to read and write. Our first Grand Master who served for 2 years was an orator, politician, writer, and fraternal organizer. He was also an Army Chaplain and was elected to serve one term in the Georgia House of Representatives for Chatham County. In 1867, Simms helped publish a newspaper called the *Southern Radical*, the first periodical published by a Black person in Savannah. Simms was also a Judge and first

Proctor of Savannah State College. In 1888 he authored, *The First Colored Baptist Church of North America*. Our 2<sup>nd</sup> Grand Master was Louis B. Toomer. Grand Master Toomer was one of three Masonic founders for the Black newspaper, *The Savannah Tribune*. This paper is still in print. Bro. Toomer served the Grand Lodge for two years and was also one of the founders of the Republican Party in Georgia. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Grand Master of Masons in Georgia, John DeVeaux, was also one of the founders of the *Savannah Tribune*. DeVeaux was also one of the organizers for the Republican Party and was also one of the founders of the Wage Earners Bank. Grand Master DeVeaux was commissioned by the Governor of Georgia as a lifetime Colonel. He served as Grand Master for 9 years and assisted James Simms and Louis Toomer with the formation of the Grand Lodge of Georgia on August 22, 1870 in Savannah. In 1889, he left Savannah to become the Assistant Collector of Customs for the Savannah Port at Brunswick. The next Grand Master of Georgia was Alexander Harris, a well known minister from Savannah. Rev. Harris served for 3 years. The next Grand Master, Anthony Desverney also served for 2 years. Desverney like his predecessors was also a military man. He became Captain and a Commander of the Colquett Blues Infantry Unit. He had a seat on the Savannah Cotton Exchange, and when he died it was said that Desverney was the wealthiest Negro in Chatham County.

It is an interesting fact that most of the Grand Masters that formed the Grand Lodge of Georgia for Black men were all connected to the Black Church as well as the U.S. Military. They were all accomplished and in many cases very successful businessmen. Most of our original founders have grave sites in the City of Savannah at the historic Laurel Grove Cemetery. It is located as the South Cemetery on B. Street off of Main Street. These men are our founders that sacrificed so much to bring the Fraternity to the African American community at a time

when there was no “Civil Rights movement,” no cell phones or emails to further their cause; only dedication.

In 1901, in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Freemasonry came to the Black Community from Savannah to Atlanta with the election of Dr. H. R. Butler. Henry Rutherford Butler was the first Grand Master of Masons from outside the Savannah area. He was one of the first African American’s to practice medicine in the Atlanta area. He was the first black person to write an article for the Atlanta Journal and Constitution, called “What the Colored people are Doing.” Perhaps none of the Prince Hall leaders are as well known as the 10<sup>th</sup> Grand Master for Georgia, John Wesley Dobbs. Grand Master Dobbs was a legendary almost mythical figure. Dr. Butler before him had made plans for a Masonic Temple in Atlanta, but it was Dobbs who brought that vision to reality. Dobbs took over the order in 1931 and was faced with many obstacles such as the Great Depression. The economic ills of the Depression took our membership in Georgia from 24,000 to 2,500. Even in the face of that economic fallout, Grand Master Dobbs had the new Masonic Temple constructed in the heart of Black Atlanta. He had the building financed along with the 5 Lodges that met on Auburn and it was completed for \$ 31,750, raised in 1937 just 4 years after the Depression.

Dobbs was a political mastermind, and because he promised the Atlanta Mayor, William Hartsfield) 10,000 votes, in April of 1948 the City of Atlanta got its first Black Police Officers. Dobbs was so well known that Mayor Hartsfield bet him that he could send a letter to Dobbs from Europe with no address, just labeled as Grand Master Dobbs. Months later, Hartsfield won the bet, when Dobbs received the letter. Dobbs also organized the Negro Voters League and was very instrumental in the politics of Atlanta and Georgia. The first Black Mayor of

Atlanta was Maynard Jackson, elected in 1974. Maynard was the grandson of Grand Master Dobbs, and learned much about the political arena from his grandfather. Dobbs' Masonic Temple still stands today and houses over 7 Masonic Lodges and 6 Eastern Star Chapters (female auxiliary). I have Dobbs' FBI file, and J. Edgar Hoover and his Co-intel Pro took much interest in Dobbs. Grand Master Dobbs' best friend, J. Earl Acey, was a member of the oldest Lodge in Atlanta for Blacks, Saint James #4. Bro. Acey was a mulatto that looked so light-skinned that many assert that Dobbs had Acey to join the Ku Klux Klan in order to keep tabs on those in the City that kept tabs on him. Dobbs coined the term "Sweet" Auburn to refer to the business and economic power that could be found on Auburn Avenue. During the 50s, *Forbes Magazine* reported Auburn Avenue to be the wealthiest Street in Black America. When James Brown or any major entertainer came to town, they stayed on Auburn Avenue. They performed on Auburn at the Royal Peacock and were booked by promoter, B.B. Beamon of Prince Hall Lodge W. C. Thomas #112. Prince Hall Freemasonry and the Civil Rights movement were intertwined. Just as the "underground railroad" in the North was led by Prince Hall Masons from Ohio to Canada, the racial progress of Blacks in the South was steered by the Prince Hall Fraternity.

Currently the demographics of Freemasonry in Georgia in 2009 shows more than 200 Masonic Lodges and about 185 Eastern star Chapters. We have over 2,500 men as Masons and 5,000 ladies as Eastern Stars. We have our Grand East in and a historical building on Auburn Avenue. We also own property in Americas, Georgia that used to house our youth in what was the Masonic Orphans Home. The Grand Lodge donates thousands of dollars annually and gives scholarships to deserving students each year. We have chartered Lodges and chapters abroad in places like Belgium, Germany, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Our newest Lodge is located

currently in the British Virgin Islands.

In conclusion, the heritage of the Masonic Fraternity in Georgia is as sweet as its peaches. In 1899, with the help of Bro. Solomon Johnson and W. E. Terry, the order of the Eastern Star was formed in the City of Savannah. The OES Grand Chapter for Georgia was formed at 10:00 am on August 20<sup>th</sup> and the first Worthy Matron was Dorothy Edwards. This organization is for the wives, sisters, mothers, or daughters of Masons.

There have been many notable contributions made by members of the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Georgia, not to mention the growth of the order over the past few years. Our building on Auburn Avenue has been declared as a State and National Historical Building and has strong ties to the Civil Rights Movement for the last 40 years. One of the Nation's oldest Black radio stations was housed on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor of the Masonic Temple, called WERD radio. The headquarters of the *Southern Christian Leadership Conference* was started right on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor of the Masonic Temple on Auburn Avenue. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s office was right there in the SCLC section of our building. In 2007, a controversy arose with respect to the Masonic Temple and the King Estate of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. There was a law suit that referenced some letters written by Dr. King and was discovered in the home of a resident that documents the fact that, Dr. King would tap on the ceiling of the Masonic Temple and the DJ from WERD radio station upstairs. The DJ would lower a microphone through a crack in the floor and Dr. King would give his weekly radio address to the public.

Many notables are connected to Prince Hall Freemasonry in Georgia. It is believed that Thurgood Marshall received his 32<sup>nd</sup> degree in Atlanta, and held membership in Atlanta

Consistory #24 (Order for 32<sup>nd</sup> Degree Masons). It has been documented that Martin Luther King, Sr. was a member of the Prince Hall Lodge in Atlanta, and was made a 33<sup>rd</sup> Degree here in 1944 along with Rev. William Holmes Borders. It has been said that W. E. B. Dubois affiliated with the Prince Hall Lodge during his tenure at Atlanta University. Mayors Maynard Jackson, Andrew Young, and Bill Campbell were all made Masons on Auburn Avenue at the Masonic Temple. Several council members and International figures such as Congressman John Lewis and Julian Bond were also made Masons at 330 Auburn Avenue. We have come a long way since the end of the Civil War and the effects of Lincoln's New South. Since the Emancipation Proclamation however, White Masons in Georgia even in 2009; do not respect the rights of Black men to be Freemasons. This is only true for the several Confederates States below the Mason-Dixon Line; and all other States in the U.S. as well as all other foreign Nations world wide do recognize Prince hall Masonry as legitimate. There is one local Masonic legend that claims that Dr. King, Jr. was good friends with Grand Master X. L. Neal, both of whom came out of Morehouse College. The legend claims that Grand Master Neal had promised to make Dr. King a Mason when he came back from the Sanitation Strike in Memphis; but as fate would have it, Dr. King never made it back from Memphis. However, in 1999, Grand Master Benjamin Barksdale gave him a posthumous honor by Declaring him a member of the Craft and Presenting it to his widow, Correta Scott King, at a Morehouse celebration for our Civil Rights icon.

The Prince Hall Freemasons of Georgia have moved mountains and was the fuel behind the Civil Rights' Movement. We have been in the heart of Black Atlanta on Auburn Ave since 1940. Grand Master Willie Williams and Benjamin Barksdale have done much to further the growth of the Fraternity in Georgia. Grand Master Ramsey Davis has brought us into more economic

independence with the purchase of our Grand East in un-incorporated Fulton County. Today, we have many youth groups, and the most recognized is the Georgia Knight's of Pythagoras. This group mentors young men, from the age of 8 to 20. The Prince Hall Masons of Georgia like many other States have the Scottish and York Rite Bodies as well as the Shriners. We are doing many great things here in Georgia, but can always improve with your help. Our web site is [www.mwphglga.org](http://www.mwphglga.org). Look us up; we have been around since 1870, so we plan to stay for a while.

Fraternally,

Bro. Douglas Evans, III

Grand Historian