

MASONIC RECOGNITION

**An Opinion by
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Masonic recognition is as complex a study as one can imagine when looking at the overall structure of freemasonry. Even the most ardent student of the Craft will find it difficult at times to fathom the many intricate workings of the recognition process. One would be amazed and probably overwhelmed by the numerous facets of recognition which must be observed by sovereign grand obediences as they relate to treaties of recognition between each other. Recognition may range in scope from full, to partial, to limited in its application; it may include inter-visitation, and even dual membership.

The ground rules may differ somewhat from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, but basic to most is: an unfaltering belief in God; the Volume of the Sacred Law (VSL) as an essential part of the furniture of the lodge; prohibition of the discussion of religion and politics in lodge; initiation of only men; and an adherence to the Twenty-five Landmarks of Freemasonry. The list is somewhat more extensive, but it is evident that all of these elements must be satisfied before the recognition process is to take place. I am informed that in many instances the protocol is that the younger of the two grand bodies must initiate the recognition request.

Let's take a look at the recognition process as it applies to our own Prince Hall Masonic bodies. We know that Prince Hall and his associates, following their initiation into masonry on March 6, 1775, encountered difficult times as they endeavored to communicate with the Grand Lodge of England (Moderns) over a period of some years.

Our readers may recall that the Grand Lodge of England was first formed in London, England in 1717. However, following a schism between two factions within the grand lodge, the body was divided into two groups, the Moderns and the Antients. This schism lasted until 1813, when their differences were reconciled and they formed the United Grand Lodge of England (UGLE). As part of their amalgamation, they dropped African Lodge #459 and many others from their rosters as defunct lodges.

For 181 years thereafter, the UGLE denied the regularity of Prince Hall Masonry and refused recognition of its grand bodies. It wasn't until December 1994, after exhaustive study, that the UGLE formally recognized the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

One would imagine that following such an historic event by the UGLE would have warranted her recognizing all Prince Hall grand lodges. Alas, that was not the case.

However, I suspect the reason the UGLE did not unilaterally recognize all Prince Hall grand bodies at once may have had more to do with their concern of possibly alienating some mainstream grand lodges in America with whom they had already established treaties of recognition; and in an attempt to ward off any acrimonious backlash, especially from southern grand lodges, they chose instead to proceed with the process of recognizing one Prince Hall grand lodge at a time. I say this because my understanding is that, as part of the recognition prerequisite by the UGLE, a Prince Hall grand lodge had to first consummate a treaty of recognition with its mainstream counterpart. Only then would the UGLE accept a Prince Hall body for recognition.

Here is where this entire recognition process starts to give me concern. Many of our readers are familiar with Brother Paul M. Bessel, a good friend of Prince Hall Masons and co-author, together with Brother Alton G. Roundtree, of the book, *Out of the Shadows—The Emergence of Prince Hall Freemasonry in America (Over 225 Years of Endurance)*, 2006. Brother Bessel was Executive Secretary of the Masonic Leadership Center and has done extensive research on the study of Masonic Recognition, both in America and abroad. His data, which can be found on the Internet, is used by many students of Masonry, and is considered the most reliable and up-to-date source to be found anywhere on the subject. To reach Paul M. Bessel on the Internet, go to <http://bessel.org/masrec/>.

In reviewing some of Bessel's statistics, I came across some disheartening information. It revealed that at present, there are still nine Mainstream grand lodges which have not established fraternal relations with Prince Hall grand lodges. A look at the map of the contiguous United States tells the story. It shows that the nine jurisdictions not establishing fraternal relations with

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Prince Hall grand lodges are clumped together in what is called the “Deep South.”

I don't believe for one moment that this is an anomaly. Many of our caucasian brethren in the south are not yet ready to embrace the idea of fellowshiping with their Black brothers—their reasons for non-acceptance of Prince Hall Masons may range anywhere from economic, political, religious or racial discrimination factors—and in some instances all of the aforementioned.

However, what I do not understand is while these nine southern jurisdictions remain determined not to recognize Prince Hall Masons, yet they are in fraternal recognition with the UGLE. There has to be something wrong with this picture! How is it possible that a group of Southern grand lodges, who refuse to recognize Prince Hall grand lodges, are at the same time enjoying the benefits of recognition from the same grand body that decided to recognize Prince Hall Masons in 1994? I just don't get it.

If the UGLE had any sense of fairness, it would withdraw recognition of any mainstream grand body that has refused to sign a treaty of amity or recognition with its Prince Hall counterpart. Why, I ask myself, is it fair to demand of a Prince Hall body that which is not demanded of a mainstream grand body?

In my talks with colleagues of other jurisdictions, I get the distinct impression that perhaps some Prince Hall grand lodges in the Deep South may no longer be interested in establishing fraternal relations with their mainstream counterparts, or for that matter, being recognized by the UGLE at all.

Some years ago, the jurisdiction of Georgia, under then grand master Benjamin Barksdale signed a Treaty of Amity with the Grand Lodge of France which was seen as a bold move by Brother Barksdale as he sought to bridge the gap between us and our brethren across the Atlantic Ocean. This unprecedented move has proven beneficial to both our jurisdictions as we currently enjoy a warm and cordial relationship with our French brethren and have had occasions to visit each other during grand sessions.

The signing of a Treaty of Amity by our grand lodge with France was followed by the signing of a similar treaty between the Grand Lodge of France and the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of South Carolina in December 2008. And recently, the Most Worshipful Union Grand Lodge of Florida and Belize, Central America signed a treaty with the Grand Lodge of France as well.

Today, the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Georgia has further expanded its reach across the Atlantic Ocean by signing treaties with the grand lodges of Serbia and Bulgaria, with invitations to sign with a number of other European grand obediences.

There is a clear pattern here that speaks of an undeniable desire toward affiliations with foreign grand bodies that have no ax to grind and certainly no racial agendas—grand bodies that accept us with friendship, morality and brotherly love and which exemplify the true meaning of that universal bond that unites us as freemasons across the oceans.

As I close, it is important to mention that the Grand Lodge of France is currently not recognized by the UGLE. This is significant to note because the three Prince Hall grand lodges that have established treaties with the Grand Lodge of France may find it hard to gain recognition from the UGLE. To that I say, “What will be will be.”

It wasn't the reward that mattered or the recognition you might harvest. It was your depth of commitment, your quality of service, the product of your devotion - these were the things that counted in a life. When you gave purely, the honour came in the giving, and that was honour enough.

— Scott (Francis) O'Grady