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# “Intended for the Better Government of Man”: The Political History of African American Freemasonry in the Era of Emancipation

Stephen Kantrowitz

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In 1848 Frederick Douglass chastised black northerners for showing more devotion to fraternal orders than to political organization against slavery and caste. “If we put forth a call for a National Convention, for the purpose of considering our wrongs, and asserting our rights,” he complained, “we shall bring together about fifty, but if we call a grand celebration of odd-fellowship, or free-masonry, we shall assemble . . . from four to five thousand.” The time and money men invested in these “glittering follies of artificial display,” he asserted, would be better spent “holding public meetings, putting forth addresses, passing resolutions, and in various other ways making their wishes known to the world.” Worse, Douglass explained, the fraternal orders attracted “some of the best and brightest among us,” “contenting” them, “swallowing up their energies . . . and indisposing them to seek for solid and important realities.” These groups’ exclusion of women cast further doubt on their adherents’ commitment to “doing that which is right.” Freemasons donned elaborate regalia, performed secret rites of passage, and emerged from their increasingly elaborate lodge buildings to parade, celebrate, and bury their dead. But they did not, in Douglass’s view, contribute to the political work of establishing rights and redressing wrongs.<sup>1</sup>

Most historians of the mid-nineteenth-century United States have concurred with Douglass’s depiction of fraternal organizations as, at best, peripheral to movements for emancipation, civil rights, and political equality. Instead, black fraternal associations figure in the scholarship as one among many forms of association in the Civil War era, indistinct from the work of burial, benevolent, and literary societies. A few studies have noted the symbolic significance of Masonic participation in early emancipation celebrations and other public assemblies, and several scholars use the methodologies of literary

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<sup>1</sup> “What are the Colored People Doing for Themselves?,” *North Star* (Rochester), July 14, 1848; “U.C.A. Association,” *ibid.*, Aug. 25, 1848, p. 2F. For a similar perspective on fraternal orders by an associate of Frederick Douglass, see William Cooper Nell, “Items from a Spectator’s Journal,” *ibid.*, July 6, 1849, pp. 2–3. For white abolitionists who shared Douglass’s view, see, for example, Martin Stowell, “An Exposition of the Secret Order of the Sons of Temperance,” *Liberator*, July 7, 1848, p. 106D.

and cultural studies to explore the symbolic meanings of black men's engagement in Freemasonry during the era. But although scholars have explored the political dimensions of revolutionary-era Freemasonry and twentieth-century ritual associations, such groups are absent from most accounts of African American political life in the years from the antebellum era through Reconstruction.<sup>2</sup>

Freemasonry was a key arena for black political thought and activity during the decades of crisis and radical transformation from the 1840s to the 1870s. Freemasonry provided an institutional framework, separate from state authority, where men forged political subjectivities, developed organizational expertise, fostered leadership at the community, state, and national levels, repaired schisms, and reconciled rivalries. It also encouraged them to think of those political processes as temporal means of achieving transcendent ends, depicting their lodges, bylaws, and representative bodies as part of a millennia-old project to perfect human society—a cosmopolitan project that welcomed men “of all nations, tongues, kindreds, and languages.”<sup>3</sup> Through Freemasonry, African Americans of the era turned inward and looked outward, building networks of deliberation and solidar-

<sup>2</sup> On associational life in the Civil War era, see, for example, James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest among Northern Free Blacks, 1700–1860* (New York, 1997), 125–29. On Masonic participation in emancipation celebrations, see Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill, 2002), 59–60; and Shane White, “‘It Was a Proud Day’: African Americans, Festivals, and Parades in the North, 1741–1834,” *Journal of American History*, 81 (June 1994), 13–50. On the engagement of black men with Freemasonry, see Maurice Wallace, “‘Are We Men?’: Prince Hall, Martin Delany, and the Masculine Ideal in Black Freemasonry, 1775–1865,” *American Literary History*, 9 (Fall 1997), 396–424. For a textual analysis of Masonic manhood as a mode of public self-presentation, see Corey D. B. Walker, *A Noble Fight: African American Freemasonry and the Struggle for Democracy in America* (Urbana, 2008). I am indebted to Professor Corey D. B. Walker for sharing archival material from his research on black Freemasonry in postbellum Virginia. On the political dimensions of Freemasonry during the Revolutionary War era, see Steven C. Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730–1840* (Chapel Hill, 1996); Peter Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance* (University Park, 1997), 70–73, 178; Joanna Brooks, “Prince Hall, Freemasonry, and Genealogy,” *African American Review*, 34 (Summer, 2000), 197–216; Joanna Brooks, “The Early American Public Sphere and the Emergence of a Black Print Counterpublic,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 62 (Jan. 2005), 67–92; Chernoh Sesay, “Freemasons of Color: Prince Hall, Revolutionary Black Boston, and the Origins of Black Freemasonry, 1770–1807” (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 2006); and Walker, *Noble Fight*. On ritual associations in the twentieth century, see Elsa Barkley Brown, “Womanist Consciousness: Maggie Lena Walker and the Independent Order of Saint Luke,” *Signs*, 14 (Spring, 1989), 610–33; Martin Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900–1930* (Chapel Hill, 2004); and Theda Skocpol, Ariane Liazos, and Marshall Ganz, *What a Mighty Power We Can Be: African American Fraternal Groups and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (Princeton, 2006). These works build on earlier sociological scholarship, notably Loretta J. Williams, *Black Freemasonry and Middle-Class Realities* (Columbia, Mo., 1980); and William Alan Muraskin, *Middle-Class Blacks in a White Society: Prince Hall Freemasonry in America* (Berkeley, 1975). On mid-nineteenth-century black Freemasonry, see Leslie A. Schwalm, *Emancipation's Diaspora: Race and Reconstruction in the Upper Midwest* (Chapel Hill, 2009), 157–74; Matthew James Zacharias Harper, “Living in God's Time: African American Faith and Politics in Post-emancipation North Carolina” (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, 2009), 58–109; Martha S. Jones, *All Bound Up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture, 1830–1900* (Chapel Hill, 2007), 73, 111–13, 168–71; David G. Hackett, “The Prince Hall Masons and the African American Church: The Labors of Grand Master and Bishop James Walker Hood, 1831–1918,” *Church History*, 69 (Dec. 2000), 770–802; Nick Salvatore, *We All Got History: The Memory Books of Amos Webber* (New York, 1996), esp. 60–67, 254–75; Charles H. Wesley, *The History of the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of the State of Ohio, 1849–1971: An Epoch in American Fraternalism* (Washington, 1972); and Cécile Révauger, *Noirs et francs-maçons* (Blacks and Freemasons) (Paris, 2003). Masonic writers have focused more closely on the complex, often schismatic institutional developments of this era. See, for example, Alton G. Roundtree and Paul M. Bessel, *Out of the Shadows: The Emergence of Prince Hall Freemasonry in America; Over 225 Years of Endurance* (Camp Springs, 2006); Tony Pope, “Our Segregated Brethren, Prince Hall Freemasons,” *Phylaxis*, Sept. 1994, <http://www.freemasons-freemasonry.com/popefr.html>; William H. Grimshaw, *Official History of Freemasonry among the Colored People in North America* (1903; Westport, 1969); and Matthew Brock, *History of the National Grand Lodge* (Columbus, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> James Anderson and Benjamin Franklin, “The Constitutions of the Free-Masons (1734). An Online Electronic Edition,” ed. Paul Royster, 2006, [http://works.bepress.com/paul\\_royster/33/](http://works.bepress.com/paul_royster/33/).

ity across lines of geography and denomination while simultaneously seeking openings that might foster future interracial confraternity.

Freemasonry was not the only fraternal order to come to prominence in the 1840s. Notably, the Grand Unified Order of Odd-Fellows also gained many African American adherents beginning in that decade. It is possible that some of the arguments offered here about Freemasonry also apply to some extent to Odd Fellowship and to other orders, but the scholarly literature does not yet support such a claim. In part, this may be because Freemasonry's growth and survival as an important institution required the preservation of more records of its activities. It may also be that Freemasonry—as the ritual order from which most others derived their form and as the one best established across the Atlantic world—fulfilled the purposes and hopes described here better than other orders could. There are hints, though, that some leading Odd Fellows shared visions of bringing a scattered people into “union and communion.” On the other hand, evaluating some orders' postbellum claims about the extent of their antebellum influence requires some skepticism.<sup>4</sup>

With that in mind, it is time for a scholarly return to the unchallenged fact at the heart of Douglass's complaint: a large proportion of the nation's free black male leadership—who were central to movements for fugitive defense, political rights, and educational and economic advancement—eagerly embraced the fraternal orders he decried, especially Freemasonry. Far from being a distraction from political life and work, Masonic participation was a rich, ambitious aspect of those men's activism. Freemasonry's mysteries and festivities may have attracted some men (just as they had repulsed Douglass and some others), but a significant number of leading African American activists devoted themselves to Freemasonry because the order allowed them to function as full citizens of an imagined brotherhood in which all men were emphatically created equal. Although black activists failed to transform the American republic (or even Freemasonry itself), the order nurtured both expansive ideas and extensive networks of leadership, including many of the men who became part of the first generation of black elected officials.

Exploring African American Freemasonry challenges us to rethink the political history of black America during the Civil War era in at least two ways. First, as a realm of antebellum black public culture, Masonic life profoundly shaped how men understood the purpose and development of leadership, and it also shaped how men who were aspiring to lead related to one another across states, regions, and denominations. Black Freemasonry's state and national institutions dwarfed other secular endeavors, such as the more frequently discussed national convention movement, and formed part of a growing international network. More significant than its extent were its institutional practices, for within black Freemasonry men gained political expertise as voters, officers, and representatives that few black Americans otherwise enjoyed prior to the late 1860s. Together, those antebellum experiences shaped the flowering of black elected officialdom in the decades after the Civil War. Just as the political lives of the former slaves analyzed by Steven Hahn were shaped by their antebellum experiences and practices, black northerners and free black urban southerners entered the postbellum era already fully engaged with questions about the nature, responsibilities, and goals of political leadership—an engagement fostered in critical ways by their Masonic lives. The extent and richness of that sphere

<sup>4</sup> Philo, letter to the editor, *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, March 24, 1854, p. 2A. Moses Dickson, *Manual of the International Order of Twelve of Knights and Daughters of Tabor* (St. Louis, 1891). Tunde Adeleke, “Violence as an Option for Free Blacks in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Canadian Review of American Studies/Revue canadienne d'études américaines*, 35 (no. 1, 2005), 87–88.

of political activity and debate make postulating a description of black Freemasonry as a “counterpublic” tempting, but such a conclusion requires some analysis and clarification of the antebellum era and of the radical political and cultural transformations that emerged from the Civil War.<sup>5</sup>

Second, black Masonic efforts to create a cosmopolitan “brotherhood of man” add new dimensions to an understanding of what leading African Americans imagined equal citizenship could be and could mean in the postemancipation world. The radical hope and promise of Freemasonry in that era lay in its elevation of “universal brotherhood” as a political ideal. Freemasonry’s vision of worthy men hewing to ancient wisdom and reshaping human government allowed African American men to join an imagined brotherhood with origins and purposes that were rooted in sublime principles and with a universalist cosmopolitanism that challenged white supremacist rejection. Black Freemasonry’s ambitions extended beyond “rights” and “citizenship”; men such as leading Chicago vigilance committee member John Jones represented the order as having emerged from black activists’ desire to “sprea[d] the cement of brotherly love.” Black Freemasonry was, to borrow a formulation from Robin D. G. Kelley, one of the “few contemporary political spaces where the energies of love and imagination [were] understood and respected as powerful social forces.” The great hopes that black Freemasons placed in that expansive vision came to grief during the Reconstruction years, but their dreams, plans, and campaigns shed new light on the era’s possibilities, achievements, and limits.<sup>6</sup>

This article offers an interpretive framework for understanding black Freemasonry and its significance to the broader political history of the United States during the Civil War era. Black Freemasonry was shaped throughout the nineteenth century by two powerful, inherent tensions: its role as a sphere of racially separate activity versus its leaders’ persistent reach toward white brethren and its avowed universalism versus its members’ insistence that only certain special men were qualified to become Masons. Those tensions played out through several critical dimensions of the movement’s history: African American Freemasonry’s antebellum development and expansion as a training ground for black political life; the effort to build a system of national governance for the order between the 1840s and the 1870s; and black Masonic leaders’ campaigns for fraternal recognition by white Freemasons, especially during Reconstruction. Some conclusions offered here are necessarily tentative and are reflective of the limitations of the fragmentary historical record of African American Freemasonry during that period of expansion and transformation. Future scholars certainly will take full advantage of African American newspapers, the correspondence of black activists, and the numerous white Masonic periodicals of the era—all of which offer substantial insights into that world of political theory and political practice.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> I follow Martha Jones’s use of “public culture” to describe both “intellectual currents” and the ways “activists gave such ideas lived meaning as they moved through various social spaces.” See Jones, *All Bound Up Together*, 4. See also the Black Public Sphere Collective, ed., *The Black Public Sphere* (Chicago, 1995). Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003).

<sup>6</sup> For a related view of early American Freemasonry, see Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, 5. “Colored Masons,” *Christian Recorder*, Oct. 7, 1865, p. 1D–E. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston, 2002), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Substantial collections of published black Masonic proceedings (which appear in significant numbers only from the 1870s on), pamphlets, and other publications are available at Masonic libraries, including the National Heritage Museum (Lexington, Mass.), the Livingston Library (New York, N.Y.), and the Iowa Masonic Library (Cedar Falls). African American grand lodges, including the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Massachusetts, may make their collections available to scholars. Correspondence by or between African American Freemasons is scarce, but some

### “Counterpublics” and “Cosmopolitanism”

Black Freemasonry was, in some sense, a world apart. Joanna Brooks interprets early black Freemasonry as a “black counterpublic,” one “of the forms of bounded collectivity that afforded blacks in the north opportunities to reclaim and rearticulate their political subjectivity in a space ungoverned by whites.” In her view, Masonic lodges, like black churches, became “enclaves of black self-governance” in which black people collectively defied the notion that they (whether slave or free) were the property of their white neighbors. The secrecy and privacy of Masonic lodge rooms, where men could take part in ritual and in debate without hostile or derisive oversight, represented a welcome respite from the cold “freedom” of the postemancipation North.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, black Freemasonry began in the United States with an act of northern exclusion. In 1775 the former slave Prince Hall and fourteen other black Bostonians were rebuffed by the white Masons of colonial Massachusetts when they sought permission to organize a lodge (Masonry’s basic governance unit). The group then asked for—and received—permission from a lodge formed by some of the British soldiers occupying the city. After the war, Hall petitioned for a charter—the authority necessary to make men into Masons—from the Grand Lodge of England, which enrolled the Boston group on its list of subordinates as African Lodge No. 459 in 1784. Black Masonry expanded over the next decades as men in Providence, New York, and Philadelphia sent petitions to Boston for the right to form lodges of their own. Critical figures in the development of early national African American organizational and political life embraced Freemasonry; these included the institutional founders of black Methodism Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, and David Walker (a member of Boston’s African lodge at the time he crafted *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*). And at the same time that the black Masonic order spread across northern Atlantic seaboard cities, it drew on people and ideas circulating in the wider Atlantic world. Freemasonry flourished in Haiti, and Prince Saunders—a resident of Boston and a Freemason—served for a time as the republic’s attorney general. Men of color who had been inducted as Masons in Haiti or other parts of the Caribbean were among those who populated the new lodges in Philadelphia and other cities.<sup>9</sup>

That a powerful strain of diasporan racial collectivity and solidarity formed part of the meaning and appeal of early black Freemasonry seems beyond dispute. At the very least, it is clear that the people who most effectively and emphatically rejected white exclusion and derision became eager and early participants in black Freemasonry. Sometimes

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can be found in the microfilm set *Black Abolitionist Papers*, Charles Chapman Papers (Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.); and the library of the United Grand Lodge of England (London).

<sup>8</sup> Brooks, “Early American Public Sphere and the Emergence of a Black Print Counterpublic,” 69. Joanna Brooks’s argument here relies on Joanne Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and “Race” in New England, 1780–1860* (Ithaca, 1998). For a similar argument about black counterpublics, see Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), 11.

<sup>9</sup> Sesay, “Freemasons of Color”; Bullock, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*; Brooks, “Prince Hall, Freemasonry, and Genealogy”; Brooks, “Early American Public Sphere and the Emergence of a Black Print Counterpublic”; Peter Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, 70–73, 178. David Walker, *Walker’s Appeal in Four Articles, Together with a Preamble to the Colored Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America* (Boston, 1829). Arthur O. White, “Prince Saunders: An Instance of Social Mobility among Antebellum New England Blacks,” *Journal of Negro History*, 60 (Oct. 1975), 526–35. See also Julius S. Scott, “The Common Wind: Currents of Afro-American Communication in the Era of the Haitian Revolution” (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1986).

they spoke a language of defiance. For example, apparently cut off by its English mother lodge and desiring the clear authority to grant charters establishing new lodges, Boston's African lodge (under Master John T. Hilton) issued a declaration of independence in 1827, transforming itself from a subordinate lodge into the African Grand Lodge. Though black Freemasonry suffered the same decline as its white counterpart following the anti-Masonic backlash of the late 1820s and 1830s, it returned to active life in the early 1840s and within a few years had grown and spread beyond its northern coastal origins. The movement reached free black men in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and in communities along the Ohio and the Mississippi rivers as far as New Orleans, while simultaneously establishing beachheads in eastern slave state cities such as Baltimore, Washington, and Alexandria, Virginia, and in the far-flung outposts of Canada West and California. Black Freemasons visited and received visitors from lodges in Liberia, the West Indies, and Europe. Members and practices crossed not only the line between free states and slave states but also the boundaries of nation and empire. Black Freemasonry attracted a new generation of able and ambitious men such as John M. Langston, John Jones, Lewis Hayden, and the itinerant polymath (and Frederick Douglass's co-editor) Martin Delany—people who were rapidly moving to the forefront of movements for civil and political rights, fugitive defense, and abolition.<sup>10</sup>

The practices and principles of Freemasonry appealed to men who saw themselves destined to take part in great works. Freemasons were supposed to be an elect group of self-selecting men who were capable of enacting the timeless cardinal virtues of brotherly love, charity, and truth. Men could only join a lodge with the unanimous consent of its members. Candidates passed through Masonry's three degrees by taking part in elaborately scripted rites of passage that instructed them in mythic stories and bound them to secrecy and confraternity. Within the lodge, discussion of controversial matters—and especially religious or political disagreements—were forbidden, at least in theory. These essential aspects of Masonic practice were designed to ensure its role as “the Means of conciliating true Friendship among Persons that must else have remain'd at a perpetual Distance.” Freemasonry welcomed worthy men of all origins, provided them with a genealogy that rooted their order in the secret wisdom of the ancient world, and offered guidelines for their recognition and treatment of one another in a spirit of openhearted and respectful brotherhood. The seminal text of Anglo-American Freemasonry, James Anderson and Benjamin Franklin's *Constitutions of the Free-Masons*, told these meritorious members to value men according to their worth, to deal honestly with them, and to render aid to one another when necessary. Freemasonry was supposed to be fun, but within the bounds of republican virtue; “innocent mirth” was welcome in the lodge, but not bullying or quarreling nor “gluttony or drunkenness.” Masons' purpose was fundamentally serious and outward looking: to sustain and promote the cardinal virtues through the stories and rituals of their order and through their actions in the wider world. Masonic theory viewed the literal and figurative as dialectically linked; Masonry condensed crucial and ancient wisdom into forms that men could carry with them, improving themselves as they internalized that knowledge and improving the world as they imparted its lessons to those

<sup>10</sup> “Declaration of Independence” and minutes, June 18, 1827, African Lodge microfilm (Samuel Crocker Lawrence Library, Grand Masonic Lodge of Massachusetts, Boston). Ohio's grand lodge, for example, chartered at least twelve lodges in five free and slave states. See Wesley, *History of the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of the State of Ohio*, 36.

inside and outside of the lodge. In this sense, Masonry was part of what Margaret Jacob has dubbed the “radical enlightenment,” a project with world-historical implications.<sup>11</sup>

African Americans enthusiastically seized the notion that Freemasonry offered rules and principles to guide the institutions of human government, and African American Masonic intellectuals of the mid-nineteenth century glossed Anderson and Franklin’s *Constitutions of the Free-Masons* in explicitly political terms. In festival orations later published in newspapers and pamphlets, black Masonic writers often began with the same move toward historical validation employed by Anderson and Franklin, mapping the development of Freemasonry onto Biblical, classical, and modern history to establish the order’s ancient origins and, therefore, the timelessness of its truths. Unlike Anderson and Franklin, they frankly depicted those origins and truths as political and as at least partially African. Some scholars have argued that Freemasonry and other secret societies among African Americans only superficially resembled their white counterparts; in this view, they were essentially rooted in “the remnants of African sensibilities about social relations,” which formed “the communitarian foundations of African American institutional life.” Whatever the merits of such arguments for Freemasonry’s origins among African Americans at the turn of the nineteenth century, the movement’s midcentury flowering as an interstate and international network shows few if any hints of particular African legacies. The order’s leaders, though, did repeatedly insist on the importance of Africa and Africans to the history of Freemasonry and the world.<sup>12</sup>

“Masonry,” explained Martin Delany in an 1853 pamphlet, “was originally intended for the better government of man.” In his reading, its fundamental truths originated with the wise men and priests of the “Egyptian and Ethiopian dynasties,” who sought “to convince man of the importance of his own being and impress him with a proper sense of his duty to his Creator.” Such individual convictions “would also impress him with a sense of his duty and obligations to society and the laws intended for his government.” Men upholding that legacy had shaped the subsequent history of the world, and Masonry’s doctrines of “rectitude of conduct and purpose of heart” remained “the only surety for the successful government of man, and the regulations of society around him.” The perfection (or imperfection) of human government in any era therefore depended on how well the era’s Masons communicated Masonry’s “mysteries.” Delany’s colleague and Illinois abolitionist H. Ford Douglass concurred. Masonry was the best companion men could have as they perfected their political organizations, he explained, for it offered “laws, rules and regulations” designed to “develop and strengthen every scintillation of the higher and better part of his nature—that what is highest and noblest in it may be more thoroughly unfolded and more widely disseminated.” Masonry was a set of principles, but “its purpose,” Douglass concluded, “is to deal with the realities of life.”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> For a sociological analysis of black Freemason rituals of this period, see Bayliss Camp and Orit Kent, “Proprietors, Helpmates, and Pilgrims in Black and White Fraternal Rituals,” *What a Mighty Power We Can Be*, in ed. Skocpol, Liazos, and Ganz, 95–134. Anderson and Franklin, “Constitutions of the Free-Masons.” Margaret Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (New York, 1991).

<sup>12</sup> On the complex history of this identification with African origins and traditions, especially the creation of an “Egyptian” tradition in African American political and historical thought, see Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History* (New York, 1998), esp. 48; Sesay, “Freemasons of Color,” 167–85; and Brooks, “Prince Hall, Freemasonry, and Genealogy.” For a related argument that black Freemasonry only superficially resembled its white counterpart, instead relying on “African sensibilities,” see Craig Steven Wilder, *In the Company of Black Men: The African Influence on African American Culture in New York City* (New York, 2001), 3.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Delany, *Origins and Objects of Ancient Freemasonry*, reprinted in Robert Levine, ed., *Martin R. Delany: A Documentary Reader* (Chapel Hill, 2003), 49–67, esp. 52–57. For the H. Ford Douglass quotation, see *Frederick*

The practical progression of Masonic theory can be seen in the bylaws of Union Lodge No. 2 in Boston, which balanced guidance and scrutiny by outlining provisions for consensus and power sharing. At the lodge's monthly meetings men were to be sober and decorous, and they were to speak, listen, and address one another respectfully; no one was to speak more than twice on the same subject. With those principles of civil debate and equal time established, the bylaws described the annual election of a hierarchy of officers, ranging from the master of the lodge to the tyler, who guarded the lodge's door during meetings. The master was permitted to nominate his successor, but that choice required unanimous ratification; failing unanimity, any brother might be nominated and elected by simple majority. The Masonic principle of "relief" was understood very literally; members who became unemployed or ill could ask the lodge for assistance: two dollars per week for Masons who had achieved the third degree; \$1.50 for those in the first two degrees. Good conduct mattered. If while receiving aid a Mason was found to be working or "frequent[ing] taverns or ale houses or any place of vicious report" he was to be fined or suspended. Disputes among brethren were to be adjudicated by a standing committee of five members with "full power to examine to settle and to decide all disputes or grievances," but those dissatisfied with the committee's rulings could appeal, with the full lodge serving as a court of last resort.<sup>14</sup>

In theory, such rules, expressive of Masonic principles and enforced fairly among equal brethren, elevated Masonic political practice to a rarefied plane. John T. Hilton once contrasted the Masonic hall, where "you will find all is peace and unity," to the "ambition" and "ungovernable passions" of politicians, and even to the "Christian denominations," where "pride, contention, &c." were often practiced. Yet the politics of the lodge inevitably mirrored the discontents of the wider world. Personal rivalries and alliances formed in the lodge as easily as anywhere else, and elections—especially for the master of the lodge—could become heated contests. Perhaps this was why hand voting sufficed for routine lodge business, but the election of officers was by ballot. Yet even those provisions did not prevent political conflict among the brethren. During one 1860s Masonic election in Massachusetts, there was significant opposition to the selection of a particular leader, apparently because of fears that he would appoint a deputy whom others found objectionable. One of those present described the election as so stormy that it became "very unmasonic." Even Hilton acknowledged that his lodge had faced "an opportunity to rend itself" due to some "disaffected spirits," and he warned against "movements of the crafty" that might end in "ruin."<sup>15</sup>

Although the lodge was the center of the Masonic system, as the place where Masons were able to give full expression to their beliefs and commitments, Masonic governance was actually federal. All lodges were technically "subordinate" to a grand lodge, a body that claimed jurisdiction over a specific territory or state. Union Lodge No. 2 was one of the subordinates of the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Massachusetts, which was also the state-level governing body for lodges in Boston, New Bedford, Springfield, Worcester, Lynn, and other cities. Grand lodges met quarterly under officers elected from among the past masters of the subordinate lodges. In those grand lodge sessions, state leaders held

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*Douglass' Paper*, Feb. 18, 1859, p. 1A–D.

<sup>14</sup> "By-laws of the Union Lodge No. 2," African Lodge microfilm.

<sup>15</sup> John T. Hilton, *An Address, Delivered before the African Grand Lodge, of Boston, No. 459, June 24th, 1828 . . . on the Annual Festival, of St. John the Baptist* (Boston, 1828), 8, 4–5. Thomas Thomas to Lewis Hayden, Dec. 26, [1869], Chapman Papers.

elections, heard reports on the state of the various lodges and resolved problems between them, and exchanged information and honors with the grand lodges in other states and jurisdictions. The grand lodge also provided a platform for the state's grand master to make an annual address, sometimes published as a pamphlet or in the pages of an African American newspaper.

Grand lodges were also the tool of Freemasonry's expansion into new territories. State grand lodges claimed the right to establish lodges in American states or territories that lacked a grand lodge of their own. Once three or more lodges existed in one of those states or territories, those Masons could assemble to form a new grand lodge, after which they were no longer subordinate to the grand lodge from which they had originally drawn their authority; they then also gained a monopoly on the establishment of new lodges in their home territory. The expansion of black Freemasonry west and south from its roots on the Atlantic seaboard took place through this process, with many of the new state grand lodges beginning as subordinates of previously established grand lodges in Ohio and other states. At the end of the Civil War, after two decades of active expansion but prior to Freemasonry's great period of growth in the former Confederacy, estimates of the order's membership ranged from 2,700 to 7,000, with lodges in twenty-two states, Canada, and the District of Columbia.<sup>16</sup>

Like other African American religious and secular organizations, Freemasonry wrestled with questions of governance and jurisdiction. By the 1840s both the state-level governance of Freemasonry and the comity between states showed signs of strain. Black Masons in New York and Pennsylvania fractured into groups loyal to rival grand lodges, which competed in chartering new lodges and claiming the loyalty of new and old initiates. Masonic "regularity" was supposed to follow clear and unbroken lines of descent from previously existing "mother" lodges; if two grand lodges existed in one jurisdiction, one must be "irregular," and so must be its members. Inevitably, members of the competing factions began to deny one another's legitimacy as Masons and refused to recognize one another. Even geographically distinct lodges found cause for controversy with one another. Members of New York's Boyer Lodge, originally established as a subordinate of the original African lodge in Boston, apparently asked the Bostonians for a charter of their own so that they could establish new lodges. After refusing to pay what it considered an outrageous fee, the Massachusetts lodge refused to relinquish the charter. In 1846 the two cities' leading Masons were still at odds.<sup>17</sup>

The emergence of a national governing structure in the 1840s reflects both antebellum black activists' persistent desire to forge connections across state lines and the challenge of creating solidarity among and between hard-pressed communities. In 1847 men from several grand lodges established a new constitutional order for black Freemasonry organized around a new institution of national governance: the National Grand Lodge (NGL) or National Compact. They envisioned this compact as a new "mother lodge" for black North Americans, and they hoped its establishment would settle the disputes over

<sup>16</sup> During the 1850s alone, Ohio's grand lodge chartered at least twelve lodges in five other states. See Wesley, *History of the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of the State of Ohio*, 36. For the low estimate, see Theda Skocpol and Jennifer Lynn Oser, "Organization Despite Adversity: The Origins and Development of African American Fraternal Associations," *Social Science History*, 28 (Fall 2004), 385. For the high estimate, see John Jones, *An Argument in relation to Freemasonry among Colored Men in This Country* (Chicago, 1866), 5.

<sup>17</sup> J. Thomas Scharck and Thompson Westcott, *History of Philadelphia, 1609–1884* (3 vols., Philadelphia, 1884), III, 2070. *Masonic Review*, 2 (Dec. 1846), 55–58. Such sources were hostile to black Freemasonry, and their representation of struggles among black Masonic bodies should not be taken at face value.

jurisdiction and legitimacy and allow black Masonry to start afresh, “all having received their authority from the same source.” Grand lodges would send delegates to national conventions, where they would elect national officers and resolve disputes among grand lodges. After its initial convention, the NGL gained adherents across the nation, and for the next thirty years it met in regular triennial sessions. Delany enthusiastically declared the project a success: “the differences and wounds which long existed were all settled and healed,” he wrote, “[and] a complete union formed.” This effort to unify the nation’s black male leadership was not unique to Freemasonry; but the NGL—unlike the annual conferences of the leadership of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) and African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) churches—crossed denominational lines. And unlike the national convention movement, which held numerous meetings during the era, the NGL had a constitution and officers who oversaw a continuously functioning network of state and local affiliates, uniting black Masons who had heretofore been “divided into parties.”<sup>18</sup>

But Freemasonry was not only about collective solidarity and self-governance. The people who invested themselves most deeply in its workings were also crucial figures in other realms of life, and they consistently looked past the lodge toward wider publics for the full expression of Masonry’s principles and potential. Most visibly, black Freemasons moved together beyond the lodge and official meetings, putting public and celebratory faces on their private activities. The order’s many midcentury building projects and celebrations—including those decried by Frederick Douglass—reflected its members’ confidence and prosperity as well as their desire for fraternization. Masons collected funds for elaborate lodge buildings, such as the “new and beautiful” hall at Joy and Cambridge streets in Boston, or the \$13,500 edifice constructed for Philadelphia’s black brethren. Lawyer, doctor, orator, and activist John S. Rock traveled from Boston to serve as the featured speaker at the dedication of the Philadelphia lodge on St. John’s Day in June 1857; the ceremony featured bands, banners, and visiting delegations from Baltimore, New York, and Camden, New Jersey. On the same day, black Freemasons from up and down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers—from as far away as Chicago, Louisville, and New Orleans—assembled in Columbus, Ohio, for the installation of the officers of the National Grand Lodge. They, too, marched through the city’s main streets in full regalia and heard speeches. It is difficult not to imagine the exhilaration that punctuated those kinds of display. Denied official forms of recognition and celebration, ejected from presidential funeral trains, and barred from militia service, African Americans found another way to move festively through the streets and to make for themselves the welcoming community that otherwise had to be sought in private rooms. Women as well as men, non-Masons as well as Masons attended to listen and celebrate, though not as members of the lodges.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Lewis Hayden, *Letters in Vindication of the National Grand Lodge of Ancient, Free, and Accepted Masons of the United States of North America* (Boston, 1867), 28–29. M. R. Delany, *The Origin and Objects of Ancient Freemasonry: Its Introduction into the United States, and Legitimacy among Colored Men; A Treatise Delivered Before St. Cyprian Lodge, No. 13, June 24th, A.D. 1853—A.L. 5853* (Pittsburgh, 1853), 21. Lewis Hayden, *Grand Lodge Jurisdictional Claims; or, War of Races: An Address before the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons for the State of Massachusetts, at the Festival of Saint John the Baptist, June 24, 1868* (Boston, 1868), 35–36. Compare this institutional longevity with the rapid collapse of Douglass’s “national council” movement of the mid-1850s: “From Frederick Douglass’ Paper, National Colored Convention,” *Liberator*, July 22, 1853, p. 1; “Meeting of the State Council, in Behalf of Colored Americans,” *ibid.*, Feb. 24, 1854, p. 30; “National Convention of Colored Americans,” *ibid.*, Dec. 7, 1855, p. 196; “National Council of the Colored People,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, May 18, 1855, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> “The Anniversary of the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge,” *New York Weekly Anglo-African*, July 7, 1860, p. 2. “Grand Masonic Hall for Colored Masons,” *Boston Herald*, May 15, 1857, p. 1; *ibid.*, June 26, 1857, p. 4. “Colored Free Masons,” *Daily Cleveland Herald*, June 29, 1857, p. 2. “Letter from Boston,” *Christian Recorder*, Oct. 5, 1867, p. 1C. See also White, “It was a Proud Day.”

Frederick Douglass's skepticism about this exclusion notwithstanding, the gendered implications of Masonry's brotherhood should not be surprising. While many of the black male activists who participated in African American Freemasonry were among the era's leading supporters of women's rights and welcomed women's participation in some of Masonry's public observances, they did not seek to integrate their lodges. In their view, women might deserve equal rights of various kinds, but they also understood that Masonic membership was not a matter of rights. Freemasons did not discuss their order in terms of liberal subjectivity and individual rights; rather, they sought a communion of people willing to come together for the transcendent purpose of leading the world toward perfection. They imagined their Masonic undertaking not as citizenship so much as leadership—a rarefied realm in which few Civil War-era men could imagine women participating.

Seeing Masonry as a gathering place and a training ground for those citizens particularly suited to lead helps explain how black Freemasons could be supportive of women's equality without seeking to integrate the order, but this is not to say that the exclusion of women passed without protest. Some of the newer ritual associations of the antebellum era included both male and female elected officers, and Freemasonry faced calls to follow suit. Martha Jones has identified one moment of mid-century public protest by women against their exclusion, and there were undoubtedly others. Yet the Masonic order's masculine character was widely understood to be essential and immutable, even by some who also regarded it skeptically. Frederick Douglass's *North Star* criticized fraternal orders broadly for their exclusivity, yet seemed to accept the argument that Masonry's antiquity made a change impossible: "We know it is argued by some, at least the Masonic, that their order cannot be changed. Can as much be said of the others . . . who are of recent origin?" Indeed, African American women had already begun to play leadership roles in newer ritual associations such as the Good Samaritans and Daughters of Samaria and the Independent Order of Brothers and Sisters of Love and Charity—both of which also included leading Freemasons as prominent members. But membership in the Masonic fraternity before the mass enrollments of later decades was a mark of special status even within an enfranchised group, and for the time being that status remained the province of men.<sup>20</sup>

Some features of Masonry's public celebrations seemed to confirm Douglass's suspicion that fraternalism attracted more energy and enthusiasm than "solid and important" campaigns for equality. His own unsuccessful national council movement at least proposed an educational institution; black Freemasons, by contrast, sometimes seemed more interested in life within their institution than beyond it. Consider, for example, the course of two separate petitions to the Boston city council that circulated through the hands of black Boston activists in 1856: one asking for the use of Faneuil Hall for a Masonic levee on St. John's Day; the other asking the council to remove the identifier "colored" from lists of taxpayers and eligible voters. It is not surprising that the first petition was granted while the second was not, but it is noteworthy that the first gained four times as many signatures.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps Masonic festivity simply was more fun than the challenge of political organizing. Perhaps it was easier and more rewarding to join a Masonic celebration that

<sup>20</sup> Jones, *All Bound Up Together*, 111–13, 167–71. "U.C.A. Association," *North Star*, Aug. 25, 1848, p. 2F.

<sup>21</sup> "Petition of Lewis Hayden and others for the use of Faneuil Hall . . .," May 8, 1856, doc. no. 1856-0236-D (Boston City Archives, Massachusetts); "Petition of John S. Rock and others that the word 'color' . . .," 1856, doc. no. 1856-0139-E, *ibid.*

was sure to be a success than it was to issue yet another fruitless petition into the void of white disregard.

Yet a closer look suggests a somewhat different reality. The men who led the more “serious” of the two petitions included the city’s leading Masons, including one (John S. Rock) who would shortly become the first African American admitted to the bar of the U.S. Supreme Court and, strikingly, three who would take office as Republican state legislators during the 1860s and 1870s. In fact, the world of black Freemasonry appears to have served as a training ground for political life; in that role it rivaled the ministry and the military in the production of “firsts.” Many of the earliest African American officeholders first won election in Freemasonry: among them were John Langston, elected to county office in Ohio in 1855 and to Congress from Virginia at the end of the century; six of the first eight black state legislators in Massachusetts, including Lewis Hayden; James Hinton, Indiana’s first black state legislator; John Jones, the first black Cook County (Chicago), Illinois, commissioner; and numerous southern Reconstruction officials, including Lieutenant Governor R. H. Gleaves of South Carolina and U.S. senator Hiram Revels of Mississippi. In the absence of fine-grained accounts of political life within these men’s lodges, it is difficult to say precisely how their Masonic careers shaped their worldly ones. Men may have built on Masonic experiences to create political careers, or they may have been drawn to both for the same reasons. Later in the century they may have become Masons in order to rise in politics.<sup>22</sup> But the correlation between antebellum Masonic leadership and postbellum political prominence is unmistakable.

That so many of the first black elected officials in the post-Civil War era first tasted politics within Freemasonry suggests that African American Freemasonry’s counterpublic was—or became—much more than an “enclave of black self-governance.” A dialectical understanding of the workings of counterpublics—elaborated by scholar Nancy Fraser—helps describe black Freemasonry’s evolution in the mid-nineteenth-century North. Fraser’s “subaltern counterpublics” function both “as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment” and “as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics”; they are “by definition not enclaves” and they tend “against separatism,” because those engaging in “public” activities “understand themselves as part of a potentially wider public.” Joanna Brooks holds that “Prince Hall Freemasonry [was] less a training ground . . . than a counterpublic,” but Fraser’s dialectical view of counterpublics does not embrace this distinction. The Freemasons of the era of Hilton’s declaration of independence may have withdrawn to regroup, but that stance did not last once black Freemasonry returned to active life in the 1840s. Over the next three decades—especially after 1865—African American Freemasonry reached outward as energetically as it had turned inward for unity and mutual support.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> On the overlap between political and Masonic leadership, particularly in the last decades of the nineteenth century, see David A. Gerber, *Black Ohio and the Color Line, 1860–1915* (Urbana, 1976), 162–63. This linkage began earlier than has been generally understood. Black Freemasons elected to the Massachusetts lower house during the first two decades after the Civil War included Edwin G. Walker, John J. Smith, Joshua B. Smith, George W. Lowther, and Julius C. Chappelle. On John Jones, see *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Jan. 2, 1874, p. 5C. On James Hinton, see Ronald David Snell, “Indiana’s Black Representatives: The Rhetoric of the Black Republican Legislators from 1880 to 1896” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1972), 50–78. On John Langston, see Wesley, *History*, 44. On Hiram Revels, see Julius Eric Thompson, “Hiram R. Revels, 1827–1901: A Biography” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1973).

<sup>23</sup> Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text*, 25/26 (1990), 67–68. Brooks, “Early American Public Sphere,” n. 28.

Black Masonry's evolving nineteenth-century self-conception and political practice were keenly attuned to African and diasporan legacies as matters of Masonic lore and human reality, yet they embraced a wider vision of Masonic belonging. Throughout their mid-century progression, black Masonic leaders periodically expressed their ardent desire for cooperative engagement with white Masons. This expression included even the superficially "separatist" project of the National Grand Lodge. The NGL's founding declaration of sentiments explained that "we do not know of any good reason" for separate white and black organizations, mentioned repeated "petitions for redress," and concluded with the reminder: "Not that we have been wanting in attention to our White Brethren. We have from time to time solicited them to extend their jurisdiction over us, but to no effect." Even in declaring the NGL a "free and independent body of Masons," the founders repeatedly "acknowledge[d] all genuine Masons, of all nations and shades of complexion, to be our brethren." Indeed, soon after the NGL's formation its leaders addressed themselves to the Grand Lodge of England, seeking fraternal recognition and correspondence.<sup>24</sup>

Black Freemasonry constantly imagined itself in relation to what Fraser calls "wider publics." This suggests that black Freemasonry's status as a "counterpublic" must be considered in light of another term: "cosmopolitanism." Though both are scholars' terms of art, the latter was also a Masonic watchword. Masonic organizations championed a notion of their brotherhood extending beyond the borders of nations, religions, and languages. Black (and occasionally white) Freemasons used the phrase to express their desire to see the mutual recognition and even integration of the separate black and white orders. Their uses of cosmopolitanism closely track Amanda Anderson's understanding of the term as denoting a "cultivated detachment from restrictive forms of identity" and the articulation of "ethical ideals for the cultivation of character and for negotiating the experience of otherness."<sup>25</sup>

Their cosmopolitanism shared with its Euro-American cousin a certain "tension between elitism and egalitarianism," but black Freemasons understood the limits of their "elite status." Even before the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law and the 1857 *Dred Scott* decision, the black "elites" of the urban North had no illusions about their ability to move freely across geographic or social boundaries. Instead, their cosmopolitanism was articulated in response to their experience of subordination. Men who could rely on no country had to be adept in the ways of many, and they had to be able to identify and trust one another. Chernoh Sesay's work on Prince Hall and early black Freemasonry suggests that Freemasonry's black cosmopolitanism emerged from a growing consciousness (located in the revolutionary-era North's corner of the African diaspora) that "Africans and their descendants needed to formulate their identity politics or political identity beyond the polis, state, tribe, kinship network, or ethnolinguistic group."<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Révauger, *Noirs et franc-maçons*, 79–80. "Declaration of Sentiments," reprinted in *Minutes of Proceedings of the Triennial Session of the National Grand Lodge, A. Y. M., Held in Philadelphia, July, 1856* (Philadelphia, 1856), 5–6. John T. Hilton et al., to the United Grand Lodge of England, March 18, 1849, doc. no. GBR 1991 HC 28 A (14) (Library of the United Grand Lodge of England, London).

<sup>25</sup> Winslow Lewis to Lewis Hayden, Nov. 18, 1868, reprinted in *Proceedings of the Grand Lodge . . . of Ohio . . . 1875* (Cincinnati, 1875), 51; petition of Lewis Hayden and others to the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts that same year, in *Proceedings of the Grand Lodge . . . of Ohio . . . 1875*, 459–60. Amanda Anderson, "Cosmopolitanism, Universalism, and the Divided Legacies of Modernity," in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*, ed. Peng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis, 1998), 266–69.

<sup>26</sup> Anderson, "Cosmopolitanism, Universalism, and the Divided Legacies of Modernity," 266–69. Sesay, "Freemasons of Color," 25–30, esp. 30.

Sesay's work, like that of James Sidbury, helpfully frames early black Freemasonry's relationship with Africa less in terms of survivals than of diasporic relationships. The black Freemasonry of the nineteenth century was never only about Africa or, indeed, African Americans. Rather, black Americans forged a Freemasonry that allowed them simultaneously to be Africans, Americans, descendants of a proud past, and part of a larger group bearing crucial wisdom. Black Freemasonry embraced the "Ethiopian greatness" and "optimistic hope of racial redemption" that Wilson Moses finds common to early African American historical thinking, but it elided the "tragic decline" of that greatness in favor of a vision of progressive, world-historical transformation that embraced both black and white actors. While rooted in northern urban black communities and driven by the imperative of "giving institutional shape to black leadership," black Freemasonry's cosmopolitanism was as broadly universal as the NGL's declaration of sentiments and the Masonic histories of Martin Delany, H. Ford Douglass, and others suggest.<sup>27</sup>

Black Masons insisted that white Masons live up to their professed universalism, and they made repeated overtures to white Masonic bodies for formal recognition and rapprochement. Their hope that black and white Masons might someday work together to perfect the world gained fitful encouragement from some whites, particularly Europeans. It had been white Britons who first extended the hand of Masonic friendship to Prince Hall and his band. Jessica Harland-Jacobs's recent work suggests that the British soldiers' welcome of black men as brethren was one example of the admittedly ambivalent cosmopolitanism of imperial British Freemasonry. Britain remained important to the story of black Freemasonry, since it was the order's institutional descent from the English mother lodge that allowed black Freemasons to assert that they stood on equal footing. They often noted that the Grand Lodge of England, unlike white American Masonry, had taken account of British emancipation, amending its restriction on membership from "freeborn" to "free man"—or, as black Masons often put it, "freeborn, or no bondman." Delany even suggested calling on the Grand Lodge of England "for settlement of [the] question of legality of Colored Masons in the U.S." More concretely, John S. Rock was warmly welcomed in Parisian lodges, where he met "Masons from nearly every part of the globe" and imagined the discomfort his presence caused among white American Masonic visitors.<sup>28</sup>

Many antebellum black Masons even claimed to have experienced moments of Masonic recognition by individual white American brethren. Black Methodist itinerants described white fellow Masons recognizing them, helping them escape suspicious white mobs, and even allowing them to hold services in white Masonic halls. Leading Masonic intellectuals made similar claims, often signifying Masonry's capacity to make white men step beyond their commitments to slavery and white supremacy. Former slave and leading Freemason Lewis Hayden, for example, asserted that a white deputy U.S. marshal honored their Masonic brotherhood by secretly warning him of his impending arrest for participating in the failed rescue of a fugitive slave in 1854. Delany paused in the midst

<sup>27</sup> Sesay, "Freemasons of Color," 25–31; James Sidbury, *Becoming African in America: Race and Nation in the Early Black Atlantic* (New York, 2007), 73–77, 119–21. Moses, *Afrotopia*, 55.

<sup>28</sup> *Proceedings of the Most Worshipful Grand Lodge of Ancient Free and Accepted Masons of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for the Years 1845 to 1855 Inclusive* (Boston, [1866]), 105. Jessica L. Harland-Jacobs, *Builders of Empire: Freemasonry and British Imperialism, 1717–1927* (Chapel Hill, 2007), esp. 218–19; Lewis Hayden, *Caste among Masons: Address before Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of the State of Massachusetts, at the Festival of St. John the Evangelist, December 27, 1865* (Boston, 1866). Delany, *Origin and Objects of Ancient Freemasonry*, 6. "Letter from Dr. Rock," *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, Dec. 31, 1858, p. 1A.

of a disquisition on Freemasonry's partially African origins to claim proudly that white Kentucky Masons recognized him as a brother in an Ohio lodge, and some of the founders of the NGL claimed to have been inducted as Masons under the authority of a white Ohio grand lodge.<sup>29</sup>

Beyond those individual cases, black Masonic intellectuals considered Freemasonry a powerful weapon against racial caste because it was rooted in the natural rights tradition but not, crucially, in the American constitutional order. It therefore offered a potential alternative venue for claims to inclusion and belonging. Masonic membership was by nature exclusive and a matter of personal and collective judgments; no one had a "right" to be a Mason. Yet, just as surely, all men were potentially eligible to become Freemasons, and within the order all men were to be treated equally. Masonry had no three-fifths clause and no *Dred Scott* ruling. Men who had been "regularly" inducted as Masons were, in theory, the brothers of all other such men, no matter what their origin or creed. "We are . . . of all nations, tongues, kindreds, and languages," read Anderson and Franklin's *Constitutions of the Free-Masons*. Even white Masonic intellectuals who were openly hostile to African Americans and black Freemasonry understood that they could not explicitly exclude men of African descent from the order without disregarding their own principles. Masonic writer Albert Pike, a determined white supremacist and former Confederate general, privately acknowledged that the failure to recognize black American Masons on the basis of race was, in Masonic constitutional terms, indefensible.<sup>30</sup>

White Masonic organizations continually rebuffed black Masons' overtures and pursued many strategies to deny the legitimacy of black Masonry in general. Throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, white Masonic bodies repeatedly labeled black Masons "counterfeit" or "clandestine," "irregular" and "fraudulent," refusing to consider their petitions for recognition and aggressively swatting down those white Masons who dissented from that policy. Some white Masons questioned the existence or validity of the charter granted to Prince Hall in 1784, while others claimed that the African lodge, even if genuine, had been struck from England's records due to irregularities. Their most serious argument rested with the Anderson and Franklin text's restriction of membership to "freeborn" men. This qualification, they explained, extended to those who were born slaves but became free, "on the principle that birth, in a servile condition, is accompanied by a degradation of mind and abasement of spirit, which no subsequent disenfranchisement can so completely efface as to render the party qualified to perform his duties, as a Mason." Their unwillingness to imagine that their petitioners might never have been slaves indicated how fully blackness and slavery remained wedded in their minds, and how closely their envisioned fraternal intimacy was tied to their self-representation as white men.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> On mobs, see Sarah J. W. Early, *Life and Labors of Rev. Jordan W. Early* (Nashville, 1894), 50–52. For a similar Kentucky example, see W. E. B. Du Bois, ed., *Economic Co-operation among Negro Americans* (Atlanta, 1907), 113–14. On halls, see *Biography of Rev. David Smith, of the A. M. E. Church* (Xenia, 1881), 58–60. On Lewis Hayden, see typescript copy of passage from the antislavery reminiscences of William F. Channing, [1898], item 484, box 4, T. W. Higginson Letters (Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.). Delany, *Origins and Objects of Ancient Freemasonry*, n. 22. Hilton et al. to United Grand Lodge of England, March 18, 1849, doc. no. GBR 1991 HC 28 A (14) (Library of the United Grand Lodge of England).

<sup>30</sup> Anderson and Franklin, "Constitutions of the Free-Masons." On white Masonic intellectuals, see "Universality of Masonry," in Albert G. Mackey, *An Encyclopaedia of Freemasonry and its Kindred Sciences* (Philadelphia, 1874), 846; and the acknowledgement of Haitian Masonry in *A Lexicon of Freemasonry* by Albert G. Mackey (London, 1860), 325–26. "Colored Masons," *Michigan Freemason*, 7 (Feb. 1876), 120; George Crawford, *Prince Hall and His Followers* (1914; New York, 1971), 84–86.

<sup>31</sup> Compare Hayden's arguments in *Caste among Masons* with the dismissal of his and similar claims in "A Question Settled," *Masonic Review*, 2 (Dec. 1846), 55–58. A. W. A. De Leon, *An Appeal to the Masons Working Under the*

## The Reconstruction of African American Freemasonry

The abolition of slavery in the United States offered unprecedented new possibilities for black Freemasonry's project of unity and solidarity and its imagining of a future in which brotherhood was not bounded by race. Leading black Freemasons envisioned their order playing a critical role in the reconstruction of the slave states, encouraging and unifying local leadership groups whose achievements and example would help heal the wounds of slavery. They also hoped that with slavery's end and with the emergence of racial equality as a part of the American constitutional order, white Freemasons would abandon exclusion and proscription. Black Masonic leaders fully expected that they and their order would play critical roles in extending both of these projects. Freemasonry was more than a place to nurture political skills and hopes while awaiting full enfranchisement. Instead, its leaders saw Freemasonry as integral to the practical and possibly transcendent work of Reconstruction.<sup>32</sup>

The two key campaigns of black Freemasonic Reconstruction—the move south to find worthy men among freedpeople and the resurgent campaign to achieve recognition from white Freemasons—suggest how seriously black Freemasons took the purposes and possibilities of their order. Lifelong activists and community leaders regarded their role in Masonry's world-historical project as so important that they were willing to forego recruiting a mass constituency and to open themselves up frequently to the pain and humiliation of white Masonic rejection. The “energies of love and imagination” surged through these campaigns, shedding light on what the leading free black men in the country thought was possible and desirable in the new era.

Masonic intellectuals imagined their order as a tonic for the depredations of slavery: its legacy of legal and social inferiority and its fostering of mistrust and suspicion among slave and free African Americans. Here Freemasonry's lessons in respect and mutual support seemed particularly trenchant. As the former slave Lewis Hayden warned his Masonic brethren, “in the emerging of nations or people from a state of oppression, more especially when the oppressor is allowed to prey upon them, there must be jealousies and want of confidence in each other.” Slavery had denied black southerners the right to organize their own lives, families, and communities, and newly freed blacks continued to face stubborn resistance from whites. It was no wonder that “discord” pervaded their communities. Though he did not mention it explicitly, Hayden also may have been thinking about the way that discord affected his own community in Boston, despite its distance in space and time from legal bondage.<sup>33</sup>

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*Jurisdiction of the 'National Grand Lodge'* (San Francisco, [1874]). Albert G. Mackey, *The Principles of Masonic Law: A Treatise on the Constitutional Laws, Usages, and Landmarks of Freemasonry* (New York, 1856), bk. III, ch. 1, p. iv. On the relationship of fraternal intimacy to race and gender, see Dana Nelson, *National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* (Durham, 1998); Peter Coviello, *Intimacy in America: Dreams of Affiliation in Antebellum Literature* (Minneapolis, 2005); and Travis Foster, “Affective Conventions: Friendship and Genre in U.S. Literary History” (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, Madison, 2009).

<sup>32</sup> For a detailed narrative overview of black Freemasonry during Reconstruction, see Stephen Kantrowitz, “Brotherhood Denied: Black Freemasonry and the Limits of Reconstruction,” in *All Men Are Free and Are Brethren: Prince Hall and African American Fraternalism*, ed. Donald Yacavone (Ithaca, forthcoming).

<sup>33</sup> On discord among enslaved people, see Brenda Stevenson, “Distress and Discord in Virginia Slave Families, 1830–1860,” in *In Joy and in Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South, 1830–1900* (New York, 1991), 103–24; Nell Irvin Painter, ed., *Southern History across the Color Line* (Chapel Hill, 2002), 15–39; and Dylan Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill, 2002). On the violent conflict among free black Bostonians during the school desegregation movement, see Stephen Kendrick and Paul Kendrick, *Sarah's Long Walk: The Free Blacks of Boston and How Their Struggle*

Masonic values, which proponents believed essential to proper human government, might be of immediate and practical use in the era of emancipation. Such discord as Hayden found among freedpeople, he believed, could “only be removed by associations of the strongest possible ties known among men”: the ties of Freemasonry. “As there are [no ties] known to men whose obligations and duties are so sacred or more holy than ours, we feel that when they have taken upon themselves such obligations, and as they progress in the lessons therein taught, confidence is restored, and each can trust the other with safety; and, in place of confusion, discord, and ruin, each heart is filled with those truly Masonic virtues, ‘brotherly love, relief, and truth.’”<sup>34</sup>

Such invocations of the sacred, of charity, and of the order’s redemptive potential sometimes made Freemasonry seem to be a kind of religion. Yet Masonry’s ambitions differed from those of Christian brotherhood. Unlike the denominations, Masonry did not seek to recruit all people or even all men. It sought only the most “worthy,” and its numbers more closely resembled those of deacons or priests than of the family of Christ at large. Within its elect circle Masonry was dogmatically ecumenical, embracing leading men across lines of denomination. This may have been particularly important during Reconstruction in light of the ongoing and bitter competition among the Protestant denominations for the allegiance of the freedpeople.<sup>35</sup> But there was no mistaking the sense of Masonry as a kind of priesthood.

The spread of Freemasonry into new fields inevitably brought to the fore the question of how to balance its universal truths with its functional exclusivity. How many men should become Masons, and by what means, became a pressing issue as the order moved into the former slave states, regions where free black people’s numbers and proportion of the population dwarfed those of the northern cities where Freemasonry first flourished. The first black Masonic lodges had embraced only a few dozen men at a time, and even in the late 1820s when John T. Hilton sought to keep the order alive in difficult times, he warned that it was not time for all to be aware of Masonry. Hilton believed that in keeping with longstanding Masonic tradition, men should come to the order out of conviction, not mere curiosity. Some day, when “the knowledge of Masonry shall have become universal . . . then will commence a new era in the moral world.” Freemasonry existed to bring about an acceptance of its principles so broad that all men could come together in the lodge, but until then it would remain exclusive. That was why Masonry permitted the exclusion of any candidate for membership by a single dissenting vote and embraced the notion that the order was solely for men of “merit.” Hayden did not emphasize this exclusion as he imagined the Masonic role in Reconstruction, but he envisioned Freemasonry’s march southward as a careful mobilization of those already capable of “united and harmonious” action, and he offered some unflinching assessments of the character of the men that the order had recruited during 1865. James W. Hood, simultaneously organizing Freemasonry and the AMEZ church in North Carolina, similarly understood the need for exclusivity: it was understandable that new southern Masons might lack “polish,” but they nevertheless had to be “men of active minds” and of good repute.<sup>36</sup>

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*for Equality Changed America* (Boston, 2004); and Hilary J. Moss, “The Tarring and Feathering of Thomas Paul Smith: Common Schools, Revolutionary Memory, and the Crisis of Black Citizenship in Antebellum Boston,” *New England Quarterly*, 80 (June 2007), 218–41.

<sup>34</sup> Hayden, *Caste among Masons*, 10.

<sup>35</sup> William E. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African American Church in the South, 1865–1900* (Baton Rouge, 1993).

<sup>36</sup> Hilton, *An Address, Delivered before the African Grand Lodge, of Boston, No. 459, June 24th, 1828 . . . on the*

During Reconstruction, black Freemasonry wrestled internally with the profound questions raised by the rapid expansion of the citizenry. Like the national debate over extending rights to freedpeople, the intra-Masonic debate about the expansion of the brotherhood involved questions of readiness and worthiness, federalism and executive usurpation. Unlike that national debate, in which the nation's black leadership was united at least on the need to enfranchise freedmen, the intra-Masonic debate revealed a tactical and philosophical divide. While some black Masonic leaders moved toward a centralized, rapid, and broad expansion of Masonic lodges and grand lodges throughout the former slave states, others worried that such an extension would corrupt the essential features of the order. The conflict opens a new window on the debates that harrowed Republican politics across the former Confederacy, revealing profound philosophical divisions between antebellum black leaders: not about whether black men should vote, but about the proper nature and cultivation of postbellum southern leadership. The divisions involved basic questions of political fitness and inclusion, understood in a Masonic context: Were recently freed men ready for new responsibilities? How should the order approach their recruitment and incorporation?<sup>37</sup>

A few crucial developments related to these controversies involved the actions of the National Grand Lodge and its postbellum leader. First, despite Martin Delany's cheerful claim that the NGL brought long-sought unity, the compact failed to unify the existing grand lodges, and in fact became the focal point of ruptures and schisms. Before long, "compact" and "sovereign" grand lodges refused to recognize one another's members as brethren, and NGL officials denounced the dissidents as rebels. Those divisions followed Freemasonry into the postwar South. Second, the "vast field of labor" opened to black Freemasonry by emancipation made questions of jurisdiction—especially between the grand lodges and the NGL—vitaly important. When the war ended no ex-Confederate state could claim a black grand lodge, but the NGL's constitution left unsettled whether the authority to charter lodges rested with the existing grand lodges, the NGL and its leadership, or both.<sup>38</sup>

The national grand master treated this constitutional uncertainty as an invitation to pursue a radical course of Masonic expansion. Freeborn northerner Richard Howell Gleaves had spent two decades establishing Masonic lodges (and playing leading roles in several other orders) across Pennsylvania, Ohio, and throughout the Mississippi River valley. By inclination an entrepreneur, Gleaves acted as though Freemasonry's future lay in rapid expansion, which he would personally oversee in his capacity as national leader and which he apparently funded out of his own pocket. Assuming office in 1865, he pledged to extend the national union of Compact Freemasonry into the South: "to cement the

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*Annual Festival, of St. John the Baptist*, 9–10. Hayden, *Caste among Masons*, 7. Hackett, "Prince Hall Masons and the African American Church," 774–75.

<sup>37</sup> For related discussions of Reconstruction's implications for black Freemasonry, and vice-versa, see Schwalm, *Emancipation's Diaspora*; Harper, "Living in God's Time"; and Hackett, "Prince Hall Masons and the African American Church."

<sup>38</sup> Much Masonic ink has been spilled over the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the National Grand Lodge since the 1840s, and in fact its supporters and detractors continue to battle over whether the National Grand Lodge itself or particular actions of its leadership were Masonically constitutional. See Roundtree and Bessel, *Out of the Shadows*; and Brock, *History of the National Grand Lodge*. A Past Master Mason, "Masonic Union," *New York Weekly Anglo-African*, Jan. 21, 1860, p. 1F; "Masonic," *ibid.*, Nov. 30, 1861, p. 3A; "Masonic Festival," *ibid.*, July 4, 1863, p. 2B–C. *Proceedings of the Sixth Triennial Session of the Most Worshipful National Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Ancient York Masons . . . Baltimore, October A.D. 1865* (Philadelphia, 1866), 8–11, 18–25. "Notice," classified advertisement, *Loyal Georgian* (Augusta), Oct. 13, 1866, p. 4D. Richard Howell Gleaves's speech at the Prince Hall Centennial, 1875, reprinted in *Proceeding of the Prince Hall Grand Lodge . . . 1875* (Boston, 1876), 48–49.

craft in every State of the Union . . . into one common band of Masonic workmen." In 1867 the NGL reached its peak, with a membership of twenty grand lodges, including new establishments in Virginia, Missouri, and Kentucky. All were formed under Gleaves's direct guidance and all were quickly admitted to the NGL, essentially on Gleaves's own authority. His ambitions were personal and political as well as Masonic: this experienced organizer relocated to South Carolina, where he began establishing himself as a Republican politician. Not long after, in 1872, Gleaves was elected Republican lieutenant governor of South Carolina. The precise role that his Masonic leadership played in his political career is, for the moment, impossible to judge. Gleaves left no personal, executive, or Masonic papers, and most of what is known about him comes from the words of his detractors. But it is clear that he personally created Masons, chartered lodges, and established grand lodges in new territories at a furious pace during the first few postbellum years, and his simultaneous leadership roles invite speculation that he employed the lodges as an adjunct to his political enterprise. By 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).<sup>39</sup>

In institutional forums and through an increasingly polemical series of pamphlets, several active Masons (including the former slave Lewis Hayden and the Jamaican immigrant A. W. A. DeLeon) offered urgent counterpoints to Gleaves's vision of wholesale expansion. They argued that Masonry must remain selective and must continue to take seriously the connection between Masonic forms and the better government of man. Gleaves's rapid recruitment of men and his formation of lodges and grand lodges offended Hayden's sensibilities and made him fear for the future of the project. Hayden had no objection to Republican office holding; in fact, he took a seat in the Massachusetts legislature the same year Gleaves took office in South Carolina. And he firmly believed in the NGL as a project, having been one of its founders. But he also believed that Gleaves was distorting Freemasonry, treating its expansion as an end in itself rather than as a means for unification and mutual understanding among the nation's leading black men. Centralized and efficient mobilization might promote good politics when undertaken by a Republican candidate, but these were not the means of a Masonic leader.<sup>40</sup> Political leaders naturally sought mass constituencies, but Masons had different and more "sacred" responsibilities to one another and to the role that their order was destined to play in perfecting human government.

Such a conflict reveals the nature and depth of the challenge that emancipation posed to an order historically restricted to a small group within the nation's free black minority. Hayden, in particular, pressed the case against Gleaves's practices of recruitment and

<sup>39</sup> Hayden, *Letters in Vindication of the National Grand Lodge of Ancient, Free, and Accepted Masons of the United States of North America*, 27. *Proceedings of the Sixth Triennial Session of the Most Worshipful National Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Ancient York Masons . . . Baltimore, October A.D. 1865*, 47. Roundtree and Bessel, *Out of the Shadows*, 65. For Gleaves's various roles, see "Laurel Lodge," *Christian Recorder* (Philadelphia), Oct. 22, 1864, p. 1; "At the Annual Meeting of the District Grand Lodge," *ibid.*, June 25, 1864, p. 102; and "To All Whom it May Concern," *ibid.*, Oct. 10, 1863, p. 162. "Colored Masonry," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Sept. 5, 1877, p. 3; Richard Theodore Greener, *An Oration Pronounced at the Celebration of the Festival of St. John the Baptist, June 24, 1876, at the Invitation of the Eureka Lodge No. 1, F. A. M., in the Savannah Georgia Theatre* (Savannah, [1876]), 8. Theodore Greener's figure may have been high, but hostile white commentators did sometimes offer it as well. See "Masonic," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 11, 1875, p. 9. In 1907, the leading authority on American fraternal associations estimated the number of Prince Hall Masons at 60,000. See Albert Stevens, *The Cyclopaedia of Fraternities* (New York, 1907), 72.

<sup>40</sup> Hayden, *Letters in Vindication of the National Grand Lodge of Ancient, Free, and Accepted Masons of the United States of North America*, 9–10.

institution building, arguing that Masonic belonging was properly restricted to those who purposefully and soberly sought it out. He began from the axiom that Masons must, above all, be men of independent thought and action, not the tools of others. "It is a principle that all acts performed, whether by the individual Mason or as a body, must be his or their free act." Men were not to be aggressively recruited into Freemasonry nor were "leading questions" to be offered in the recruitment process. In institutional terms, it was likewise essential that Masons choose "to establish, or not, a Grand Lodge for themselves, and that when a Grand Lodge is so established it should be the free act of the Masons whose Grand Lodge it is to be." Gleaves had violated the principle that "self-controlling authority" marked "true and perfect" Masonic craft as he forged lodges into grand lodges, heedless of whether the Masons involved were "prepared or not prepared for such an organization." The solemn task of establishing a new grand lodge should in itself constitute a demonstration of men's readiness for Masonic obligations. Gleaves's methods short-circuited the critical dialectic of individual and organizational Masonic development: the principle that Masonry's mysteries and wisdom unfolded and took worldly form only as men became worthy of them.<sup>41</sup>

If the Masons created by Gleaves were not ready for their new responsibilities, it followed that the Masonry they entered was debased—perhaps even fraudulent. Under Gleaves, charged A. W. A. De Leon in 1874, the NGL was simply a financial scheme, bilking lodges of an annual fee for each member and charging them to warrant each new lodge. His "Masonic centralization" was "repulsive to the cosmopolitanism of the Order, repulsive to the 'brotherhood of man,' and contrary to the teachings of 'the Fatherhood of God!'" This was not Masonry; it was spiritual and financial fraud. During Reconstruction a stream of grand lodges left the compact amid denunciations and countercharges. Hayden, too, finally gave up on the NGL itself, denouncing its leaders as "these new despoilers who are of our own race and people." By the late 1870s the compact had been reduced to a shadow of its former self and no longer engaged either the imagination or the ire of most Masonic writers. This did not stop other struggles over governance and jurisdiction from continuing to trouble grand lodges in the South and elsewhere, as Leslie Schwalm documents in her work on the Upper Midwest during the postwar era.<sup>42</sup>

Despite their differences, men on all sides of these conflicts shared the common vision that black Freemasonry would play an important role in bringing formerly subordinated people into the mainstream of southern life through Republican politics, economic and educational advancement, or both. Its period as a segregated training ground complete, Freemasonry would take its rightful place shaping how newly vested African American citizens approached their rights and responsibilities in a wider and fully enfranchised public, just as it shaped the civic visions of whites. But the world they imagined did not come into being. Instead, the collapse of southern Republican governments through

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 26, 19–20. Hayden, *Grand Lodge Jurisdictional Claims*, 34–35.

<sup>42</sup> De Leon, *An Appeal to the Masons Working Under the Jurisdiction of the 'National Grand Lodge,'* 2–6. *Proceedings of Ohio*, 1868, 7; Wesley, *History*, 51–56; Grimshaw, *Official History*, 209–11. Lewis Hayden, *A Letter from Lewis Hayden, of Boston, Massachusetts, to Hon. Judge Simms, of Savannah, Georgia* (Boston, 1874), 24. On a succession of meetings that attempted to modify or reinvigorate the National Grand Lodge, see *Transactions of the General Assembly of Masons, Held at Boston, Mass., June 23, A. L. 5875, A. D. 1875* (New York, 1875), 10–11; "The Colored Masons," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Sept. 6, 1877, p. 8; "The City," *ibid.*, Sept. 7, 1877, p. 8; and Robert J. Holland, "Report of the Proceedings of the Convention of Colored Masons," *Christian Recorder*, May 23, 1878, p. 2. For the modern inheritor of the National Grand Lodge, see Brock, *History of the National Grand Lodge*. Schwalm, *Emancipation's Diaspora*, 170–74.

force, fraud, and internal division, and the disfranchisement of most of the region's black voters by the turn of the century erased any hope that—in the short term—black southern Masonic leadership would play a literal role in the better government of man. For a long time thereafter, the great majority of black Freemasons serving as political leaders would do so in states outside the former Confederacy.

The early promise of southern Reconstruction, though, does help explain why black Freemasons in the postbellum era so earnestly sought recognition by white Freemasons. The resurgent black Masonic campaign for recognition and acceptance by white brethren demonstrated that black Masonic leaders sought something more than formal equality in civic life; they wanted to be welcomed as brethren in the secret, sacred space of the lodge and in the world-historical project that it represented. Believing as they did that Masonry's bonds were the strongest possible ties known among men, leaders saw its language of equality and cosmopolitanism—however poorly white Freemasons had practiced it—as a potential bridge between the past of slavery and caste and a future of fraternal embrace. The political opening of Reconstruction could become a wedge with which to open the doors of white lodges. Tying themselves and their egalitarianism to the victorious Union and the “spirit of the age,” black Masons sought to shame and cajole white Masons into rethinking their policies and practices. The goal was not simply equality or access. Rather, the campaign for acceptance imagined a much more profound transformation. If Freemasonry's purpose was to perfect the government of man, then Reconstruction offered a unique opportunity: leading black and white men might be able to join forces in a progressive fraternity. Freemasonry might become the vehicle by which slavery would give way to a national belonging that was not only legislated but broadly felt—an “intimate adhesive” creating bonds among men that were stronger than the countervailing forces of racial antipathy.<sup>43</sup>

In the Reconstruction-era ferment over the parameters of citizenship and belonging, the question of women's place in black Freemasonry once again gained urgency. While black activist women did not succeed in obtaining the rights of political citizenship during the 1860s and 1870s, their campaigns throughout the century (and especially during those decades) certainly transformed the conversation among African Americans about women's “place.” It was during this time that African American Freemasonry established the Order of the Eastern Star, an auxiliary “adoptive rite” that enabled women to join and take leadership roles in a parallel and affiliated branch of the Masonic family. While the existing scholarship does not clarify the precise circumstances of the new order's origins, the timing of its establishment seems much more than coincidental.<sup>44</sup>

Just as in the wider political world, though, African American Freemasons seem to have spent much of their energy arguing for a common national brotherhood, one rooted in the new antiracist constitutional dispensation. A. W. A. De Leon awaited “the auspicious era when the genius of universal Masonry shall trample in the dust the foul incubus of caste” and “br[ing] our oppressors to the true Knowledge of its *cosmopolitan* and *humanitarian* ideas, which embraces *all* without regard to color or race in a common union, by the still stronger and more indissoluble ties of a common interest

<sup>43</sup> On race and the idea of friendship in nineteenth-century American culture, as well as the phrase “intimate adhesive,” see Foster, “Affective Conventions.”

<sup>44</sup> The Order of the Eastern Star among African Americans has not yet received the scholarly treatment it deserves, particularly for this founding era. See Mrs. S. Joe Brown, *The History of the Order of the Eastern Star among Colored People* (Des Moines, 1925).

and a common brotherhood.” Lewis Hayden imagined that acts of recognition across the color line—for example, the Massachusetts Republican governor’s formal praise for black Masons’ support of the Union cause—would help “bind the black and white in this country into one common mass.” As such public breaches of caste multiplied in the postwar world, white Masons would see the light they had previously only glimpsed through the haze of racial proscription. Should that realization fail, there was another incentive: Union victory had thoroughly delegitimized proslavery as a political position, and if white Masons now rejected black men simply because they had once been slaves, they would be working against the emancipating spirit of the nation and the age. To do that, it seemed to Hayden, was “to lead the Masonic fraternity against the government of the United States.”<sup>45</sup>

But the primary purpose of that campaign was not to demonize white Freemasons as unrepentant Confederates but to reach out to “our friends among the white Masons, for there are such.” Black Masonic activists urged their white neighbors to be their brothers—not just to accept their right to sit in first-class railway cars or serve in regiments but to admit them to a position of equality in the fraternal, nonstate sphere of lodge meetings. They imagined a true cosmopolitanism that embraced the end of slavery and then took the next step, seeking an end to the “lamentable state of things” enforced by “negro-dispising brethren” and a universal spirit that would match “the advancing civilization of this enlightened Christian age.” Friends abroad led the way: during Reconstruction, lodges in Germany, Switzerland, Hungary, and elsewhere established fraternal connections with black grand lodges.<sup>46</sup>

A few white American Masons followed suit, and a black South Carolina Masonic leader lauded these “white brethren who believe in justice and right,” asserting that “the unmasonic fabrics of caste are tottering under the strong blows, which these sturdy Liberals of Europe and the true masons of America are striking.” But if the destruction of caste was the test, “true masons of America” were rare indeed. Emancipation did not bring Masonic brotherhood to the Union. White Masonic leaders, rather, simply responded that these acts of recognition were in violation of their lodges’ rules and did not conform to American customs. Then they went further. In 1864, for example, the Grand Lodge of Illinois enacted new bylaws forbidding subordinate lodges from admitting any “negro or mulatto” and requiring the state grand master to seize the charter of any lodge that violated this principle. White grand lodge committees and publications across the North denounced European lodges that recognized black Masonry and continued to insist that Masons must be “free born,” not simply “free men.” Hayden continued to see bigotry and treason. “The white Masons . . . have not yet caught the spirit of the age; they are still exclusive, intolerant, and proscriptive,” he said in 1865. The day had not yet come when “the two bodies may peacefully unite, and Masonic universality will then become a reality, instead of being, as it is, a mere sham.” Men such as Hayden and De Leon insisted

<sup>45</sup> A. W. A. De Leon to John Hervey, Feb. 10, 1869, doc. no. GBR 1991 HC 28 A (21) (Library of the United Grand Lodge of England). “Affairs About Boston,” *New York Weekly Anglo-African*, Jan. 7, ca. 1865, 1: 5–6, Executive Letters, Series 567x, vol. W100 (Commonwealth of Massachusetts Archives, Boston). Hayden, *Caste among Masons*, 45.

<sup>46</sup> Hayden, *Caste Among Masons*, 28–29; De Leon to Hervey, Sept. 27, 1869, doc. no. GBR 1991 HC 28 A (22) (Library of the United Grand Lodge of England). J. G. Findel, *History of Freemasonry* (London, 1866); Hayden, *Grand Lodge Jurisdictional Claims*, 92; *Proceedings of the Prince Hall Grand Lodge, 1875*, 53–54, 58; *Proceedings of the Prince Hall Grand Lodge, 1876*, Dec. 21, 1876.

that Masonry's true spirit of cosmopolitanism was on their side and that white American Masons misunderstood the spirit of the order.<sup>47</sup>

During Reconstruction, black grand lodges across the nation embarked on campaigns to gain fraternal recognition and acceptance from America's white Masonic bodies. These were not gambits designed to reveal the "unmasonic" character of white Masons but instead represented "the spirit of the age" among black Masonic leaders and intellectuals. And although official white recognition of black Freemasonry did not occur until the twenty-first century, these campaigns did move some white Freemasons to reconsider their positions. In the decade after emancipation, Leslie Schwalm shows, white grand lodges in Ohio and Iowa removed their formal ban on black admission, permitting black men to seek membership in previously white lodges; however, this did not in any way recognize African American Freemasonry as a whole or even individual black Masons. With the support of black Masonic colleagues around the state, Hayden spearheaded an 1868 petition for recognition to the (white) Grand Lodge of Massachusetts, which left the white Masons to decide the means by which black men were to be acknowledged in their "equal Masonic manhood." When the petition was not immediately tabled but was instead referred to a committee of eminent Masons, a spirit of excitement was unleashed. One of Hayden's colleagues, who had not expected "to turn the hearts of modern Pharaoh's so soon," even began to consider the possible outcomes. He wrote to Hayden: "I believe I shall favor any proposition that will effect a union of our lodge with the whites, providing we are met on equal grounds, as men, and Masons, and not as supplicants or beggars, for we wish no favors, only rights, we will go through no healing process, or anything humiliating, thereby acknowledging ourselves clandestine, and our past existence a lie."<sup>48</sup>

They did not succeed. The high-water mark of the movement for recognition came in 1876, when (after many years of procedural skirmishing) a motion within the white Grand Lodge of Ohio to recognize the legitimacy of an African grand lodge for Ohio finally came up for a vote. It lost by a margin of sixty votes out of more than 700 cast. The white Massachusetts committee, for its part, appeared to take its work seriously, even confirming the authenticity of the charter that Prince Hall had received from England in the 1780s. In the end, though, it also voted against recognition.<sup>49</sup>

White Masons opposed to recognition had a name for the unqualified fraternal recognition sought by black Freemasons: "social equality." The Grand Lodge of New York,

<sup>47</sup> Greener, *Oration Pronounced at the Celebration of the Festival of Saint John the Baptist, June 24, 1876, at the Invitation of Eureka Lodge No. 1, F.A.M.*, 9. Jones, *Argument in relation to Freemasonry among Colored Men in This Country*, 16. Hayden, *Grand Lodge Jurisdictional Claims*, 52, 60–63. Hayden, *Caste among Masons*, 28–29. Lewis Hayden, *Masonry among Colored Men in Massachusetts; to the Right Worshipful J. G. Findel, Honorary Grand Master of the Prince Hall Grand Lodge, and General Representative thereof to the Lodges upon the Continent of Europe* (Boston, 1871), 48.

<sup>48</sup> On Virginia, see Walker, *Noble Fight*, 189–92. On Ohio, see "1776–1876—New Day—New Duty," *Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of the Most Ancient and Honorable Fraternity of Free and Accepted Masons of the State of Ohio. Sixty-sixth Annual Grand Communication begun and held at Columbus, October 19, A. L. 5875* (Cincinnati, 1875). Schwalm, *Emancipation's Diaspora*, 166–69. *Proceedings of the Most Worshipful Grand Lodge of Ancient Free and Accepted Masons of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for the Years 1845 to 1855 Inclusive, Dec. 9, 1869*, 454–61, 459–60. Thomas to Hayden, Nov. 17, 1868, Chapman Papers.

<sup>49</sup> "The Caucasian Masonic Order in the United States versus the Prince Hall or Negro Masonic Fraternity and Related Matters," (microfilm: frame 22, reel 14), Henry Albro Williamson Masonic Collection (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library); Schwalm, *Emancipation's Diaspora*, 168. *Proceedings of the Most Worshipful Grand Lodge of Ancient Free and Accepted Masons of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for the Years 1845 to 1855 Inclusive*, 1869, 462–63.

protesting a German lodge's plan to recognize the NGL during the late 1860s, warned that such recognition would lead to violence. Many black Masons in the South were former slaves, it explained, "between whom and the whites there is irreconcilable and irradicable repugnance to social equality. A persistent attempt to enforce this equality would be very likely to result in the destruction of Masonry in the United States, or a war of races, ending in the extermination of the negro race."<sup>50</sup>

Lewis Hayden was aghast. Such rhetoric constituted "rather an incentive than a prediction" of racial violence, and he asked how Masons could square this call to violence with their principles. The answers could be found frighteningly close to home. In 1865 President Andrew Johnson had made a similar prediction of "race war" if black Americans insisted on equality, and in the years since, Johnson had betrayed freedpeople's hopes that he would be Abraham Lincoln's worthy successor, siding repeatedly with the former slaveholders of the South and against freedpeople and their Republican allies, even as former Confederates rioted against them, organized the Ku Klux Klan, and sought to deny them political and civil rights. Yet in 1867, as Johnson's intransigence neared its apex, the white Grand Lodge of Massachusetts had hosted the president—their fellow Mason—at the dedication of their new Boston temple.<sup>51</sup>

Hayden sublimated his rage and dismay into an apocalyptic fantasy in which white Masons actually perpetrated a fratricidal "war of races." In a pamphlet bearing that phrase as a subtitle, he reimagined the horrific events of the 1863 New York City draft riots (and perhaps also the postemancipation riots against freedpeople in Memphis, New Orleans, and elsewhere) as the future work of the city's white Masons. He foresaw their "prediction, or advice" of a "war of races" inciting low white men to jealous rage at black men's "progress" and growing "equality" and bringing a riot against the city's black citizens. When the slaughter begins, the culpable white Masons "instantly" leave the lodge "to engage in the contest." In their haste, they do not pause even to remove their white aprons, emblems of purity. Those aprons attract the hopeful attention of a mulatto Mason fleeing the violence; having "providentially" discovered brethren, he "confidingly approaches." But his confidence is misplaced. Crying out "war of races!" the white Masons murder the mulatto, after which "the brother's life-blood is wiped upon that apron which drew him instinctively to his murderer." Nor was Masonic fratricide the end of the crime, for Hayden had a purpose in making the imagined victim a man of mixed descent: "May it not have been that a father has murdered his own son?"<sup>52</sup> White Masons denied the figurative brotherhood of black Masons, but the faces on any country road or city street proved that literal brotherhood was already a reality. The only question was whether white men would acknowledge and embrace that reality or continue to rail violently against it.

What Hayden mourned was more than exclusion from a New York lodge room. His hope had been that white and black Masons would come together to fulfill the spirit of the era and of the order, moving the world closer to true brotherhood. The story he now offered—tacking back and forth between past (the draft riot) and future (the war of races), the lodge room and the streets, the words of Freemasons and the deeds of men—showed the opposite: Masonic influence deployed as an instrument of racial terror. The true horror of the story was not just the violence; it was that white Masons employed that

<sup>50</sup> Hayden, *Grand Lodge Jurisdictional Claims*, 63.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 69, 71–72; William D. Stratton, comp., *Dedication Memorial of the New Masonic Temple, Boston* (Boston, 1868), 191–92.

<sup>52</sup> Hayden, *Grand Lodge Jurisdictional Claims*, 73–74.

sacred institution—its ancient signs and worldly influence—to ends precisely opposite those of true Masonic brotherhood.

In the Grand Lodge of New York's hostility Hayden may have been able to see what was coming: a relentless emphasis on the distinction between the rights that African Americans gained under the laws and amendments of Reconstruction and something called "social equality." Masonic recognition and the destruction of caste must imply more than cold toleration; they had to mean a warm social embrace. But white Masons' rejection of that "spirit of the age" meant that the "spirit of slavery" still lived. Over the next two decades, as courts and paramilitary forces chipped away at Reconstruction's formal gains, the intellectual inheritors of the New Yorkers' "social equality" developed that phrase into a shibboleth of white supremacy, identifying any claim to equal standing by African Americans as a bid for sexual access to white women and therefore a sufficient provocation for the kind of violence Hayden had prophesied. Black Freemasonry imagined an entirely different future, one in which "solid and important realities" could be measured in the warm hand of fellowship as well as in the defense of rights and in which black and white Masons would meet one another as social equals. The overture to white American Masons having failed, African Americans continued their campaign: for decades after the fall of Reconstruction, one African American grand lodge after another addressed itself to the English mother lodge, seeking fraternal recognition and the exchange of proceedings and representatives. But the "love and imagination" of the black Masonic vision of a brotherhood of man could not withstand the invocation of "social equality" as a prelude to a "war of races."<sup>53</sup>

The transformative moment of Reconstruction having passed without success, later black political activists contented themselves with the less transcendent pleasures of partisan organizational life, and, presumably, saved their love and their imaginations for realms beyond the reach of cultural and institutional white supremacy. Freemasonry and the other fraternal associations continued to attract self-identified leading men (and, increasingly, women) to bring them together in local, state, and national bodies and to tie their organizational lives more closely together. In the early twentieth century these associations developed creative and successful strategies to withstand concerted legal assault from the white orders, and in the 1950s they provided resources of space and money to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference as they developed civil rights strategies. In other words, they survived and prospered and helped give life to the freedom dreams of later generations.<sup>54</sup>

The full range of black Freemasonry's activities in the era of emancipation serves as a reminder of how ambitiously black leaders set about remaking the relationship of African Americans to the nation in the era of the Civil War and how poorly even the legal and constitutional victories of Reconstruction reflected their most cherished hopes and desires. The order had played crucial roles: Freemasonry was integral to the political experience and political imagination of the first generation of African Americans to move

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 20, 45. On "social equality," see Painter, *Southern History across the Color Line*, 112–33. Kate Masur, *Crucible of Equality: Reconstruction in Washington, D.C.* (Chapel Hill, forthcoming). For African American grand lodges contacting the English mother lodge, see John D. Campbell to Hervey, July 11, 1885, doc. no. GBR 1991 HC 28 A (40) (Library of the United Grand Lodge of England).

<sup>54</sup> On black fraternalism and twentieth-century struggles, see Skocpol, Liazos, and Ganz, *What a Mighty Power We Can Be*, 135–213.

into state and national political life. It provided them with a training ground where they developed skills and knowledge for careers in electoral politics beyond the lodge. It also promoted a utopian universalism that its proponents hoped would serve as a solvent for racial caste and the other legacies of slavery. When we consider how attenuated the meaning of "political leadership" became as it shrank from Masonry's bearers of ancient wisdom to fractious and beleaguered Republican appointees, or when we reflect on the disappointments of a people who had imagined a "brotherhood of man," we are reminded that political history is not only a story of rights or elections won and lost; it is also a story of the visions of transformation and transcendence that endow people's political lives with emotional and spiritual purpose.