

From Centre to Circumference, From Base to Cope

*Founding the Most Worshipful
Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Arkansas,
F.&A.M., c.1862–1902¹*

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STUDIES PERTAINING TO THE ROLE OF PRINCE HALL FREEMASONRY IN American life during the nineteenth century are coming to the forefront of both academic scholarship and masonic studies.² The founding of Prince Hall Freemasonry in

¹ The author thanks M.W. Bro. Cleveland Wilson and the late M.W. Bro. Howard Woods, as well as all of the Masonic brethren of Arkansas, for assistance in completing this article.

² P. P. Hinks and S. Kantrowitz (Eds), *All Men Free and Brethren: Essays on the History of African American Freemasonry* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2013); Kantrowitz, *More Than Freedom: Fighting for Black Citizenship in a White Republic, 1829–1889* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012); W. A. Muraskin, *Middle-class Blacks in a White Society: Prince Hall Freemasons in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); T. Skocpol, A. Liazos, and M. Ganz, *What a Mighty Power We Can Be: African American Fraternal Groups and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

Arkansas during the American Civil War and Reconstruction Era is a critical part of this larger topic of study. Both within the states of the former Confederacy, as well as along the western frontier, the establishment of Prince Hall Freemasonry was the single most important civic institution for the Freedmen and their families, ranking alongside that of family and religious life. As archetypes, Arkansas's Prince Hall brethren were at the vanguard for the construction of autonomous, free, and independent black communities, thereby securing newfound political, economic, and legal rights earned in the aftermath of the collapse of American chattel slavery.

Much like the role that caucasian Masonry played in North America during the American Revolutionary Era (1763–89), the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Arkansas quickly became the premier black social fraternity after the Civil War (1861–65), attracting leading members of Arkansas's black bourgeoisie, while local lodges, often closely aligned with African Methodist Episcopal congregations, became keystones of the rural and urban black communities they served. With the founding of the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Arkansas in 1873, the very public lives of its first three Grand Masters, William Henry Grey of Helena, John H. Johnson of Little Rock, and Joseph Carter Corbin of Pine Bluff, are demonstrative of the transfiguration that American society underwent during the American Civil War and Reconstruction Era.

After emancipation the Lower Mississippi River Valley in general and Arkansas in particular are among the most important locales for studying the black community's transformation from slavery to freedom. The historical development of Prince Hall Freemasonry during this particular era runs directly parallel to this transformation. Prince Hall lodges were founded and thrived in every place where free and self-sufficient urban black communities were established in Arkansas.

Throughout the entire Mississippi River Valley the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Missouri was the crucible for the establishment of Prince Hall Freemasonry in black communities struggling to secure newfound freedom after the Civil War. In the late summer and autumn of 1866 Missouri Grand Lecturer Moses Dickson established lodges in Arkansas, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Mississippi, and Missouri.³ As an ordained minister of the African Methodist Episcopal Church Dickson was likely establishing AME congregations simultaneously, there being a strong traditional link between Prince Hall Freemasonry and the AME Church.⁴ Just as with the spread of Prince Hall

³ 'History of the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Missouri', <http://glmopha.org/missouri-masons>, 2, accessed 9 December 2019. Dickson established J. M. Alexander Lodge at Helena (6/12/1866) and Jephtha Lodge in Little Rock (11/26/1866) in Arkansas; York Lodge in Keokuk (10/4/1866) and Clark Lodge at Muscatine (8/11/1866) in Iowa; Western Star Lodge (9/26/1866) in Lawrence, Kansas; Pioneer Lodge in Saint Paul, Minnesota (8/4/1866); Magnolia Lodge (12/11/1866) in Columbus, Mississippi; and Capital City Lodge (9/20/1866) in Missouri.

⁴ 'Interview with M.W. Bro. Howard Woods', 1998, Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Arkansas,

Freemasonry westward on the antebellum frontier in such areas as Ohio and Indiana, all of the places that Dickson established Prince Hall Lodges were urban commercial river ports with significant free black communities both before, during, and immediately after, the Civil War.⁵ In Arkansas the towns of Helena, Little Rock, and Pine Bluff served as metropolises for both the nascent free black community and Prince Hall Freemasonry in this former Confederate state.

The Mississippi River port of Helena, Arkansas was the fountainhead of this transfiguration from a slave society to an urban free black community. During the American Civil War the often overlooked but decisive Battle of Pea Ridge on 7–8 March 1862 in Northwest Arkansas secured Missouri for the Union and made possible the future Union conquest of the Trans-Mississippi West. After his hard fought and crucial victory at Pea Ridge Union Brigadier General Samuel R. Curtis, Commander of the US Army of the Southwest, took his victorious forces down the White River Valley, marching east across southern Missouri, and then turned southeast across the Mississippi Delta to reach the critical Mississippi river port of Helena, Arkansas in June 1862. Curtis was a West Point graduate, a founder of the Iowa Republican Party, a former US Congressman, and active abolitionist. During his march Curtis commandeered a second-hand press and began printing so-called Freedom Papers to runaway slaves that followed the Army of the Southwest as they conquered the Ozarks and the White River Valley. Without any legal authority or directive from his superiors whatsoever, Curtis' action preceded President Abraham Lincoln's preliminary Emancipation Proclamation by six months and thus initiated the Union Army's destruction of American slavery from the West back to the East. By the time that the liberation Army of the Southwest reached Helena, over two thousand former slaves had run off to join this march to freedom. Their conscious protest against their enslavement disrupted the southern economy and provided crucial logistical intelligence to Curtis's army. Here on the Ozark frontier the Army of the Southwest and runaway slaves worked together to transform this great crisis from a war to save the Union into a war to abolish slavery.⁶

Thereafter Helena served as one of the first large refugee camps in the nation, with more slaves every day fleeing plantations to seek freedom behind Union lines. Some even swam from both Mississippi and Tennessee across the Father of Waters to join the Union forces at Helena. Initially, with the influx of both a large standing army and thousands of

Pine Bluff.

⁵ S. Kantrowitz, 'Brotherhood Denied: Black Freemasonry and the Limits of Reconstruction', in Hinks and Kantrowitz, *All Men Free and Brethren*, 97–8; C. Hodapp, 'The Barber and the Brethren', posted 23 July 2019 and 'Speech: Indianapolis' Masonic Temples at the Center of the Community', posted 14 Oct 2019, *Freemasons for Dummies*, <http://freemasonsfordummies.blogspot.com>.

⁶ W. L. Shea & E. J. Hess, *Pea Ridge: Civil War Campaign in the West* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); *The Edge of Conflict DVD* (Conway: AETN, 1994).



Fig. 1. In downtown Helena, Arkansas, Fort Curtis is recreated on its original location (top), while Freedom Park (above) commemorates the critical defence of the Little Rock Road by US Coloured troops
Courtesy of the author



Fig. 2. Painting of the Third Minnesota Infantry entering Little Rock.
Courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society

runaway slaves increasing by the day, the living conditions of the area steadily deteriorated, only accented by the hot subtropical climate of the lower Mississippi Delta. At the time the US Government's official policy defined runaway slaves as contraband. Accordingly, Curtis housed the refugees in makeshift shelters known as contraband camps. The situation became so deplorable that in their letters back home Union soldiers described the squalor of Helena as 'Hell in Arkansas'.⁷

Once secure behind Union lines, the Freedmen and their families immediately contributed to the Union war effort, serving as cooks, nurses, labourers, and carrying out other duties in support of Curtis's army. After the Emancipation Proclamation formally went into effect on 1 January 1863, the contraband camps set a precedent that was played out for

⁷ W. L. Shea, 'A Semi-Savage State: The Image of Arkansas in the Civil War', in A. J. Bailey and D. E. Sutherland (Eds), *Civil War Arkansas: Beyond Battles and Leaders* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000), 85-100; A. M. Taylor, *Embattled Freedom: Journeys through the Civil War's Slave Refugee Camps* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018); M. Bowman, 'Completing an Incomplete History: The African American Narrative in Civil War Helena', *Race, Gender, & Class* Vol. 22, No. 1 (2015), 236-47.



Fig. 3. MWB William Henry Grey, First Grand Master of Prince Hall Freemasonry
Courtesy of Arkansas State Archives

the rest of the war and into the Reconstruction era. Brigadier General Lorenzo Thomas, Adjutant General of the Union Army, arrived in Helena on 6 April to recruit Freedmen into the Army. The day after his arrival, the First Arkansas Volunteer Infantry Regiment 'African Descent', was formed. The First Arkansas later fought at the Battle of Milliken's Bend (6 July 1863) in Louisiana as part of Lieutenant General U. S. Grant's successful Vicksburg campaign. The Freedmen of Helena soon formed the Second Arkansas Volunteer Regiment 'African Descent', which provided critical defence in repelling the nearly successful attack of Arkansas Confederate troops led by Brigadier General James Fagan against Battery D in the Union victory in the Battle of Helena on 4 July 1863. Ultimately, 5,526 black men from Arkansas joined the Union Army in the fight to abolish slavery.⁸

A similar process transpired across Arkansas and throughout the Trans-Mississippi West: Prince Hall lodges were typically established wherever former slaves had eman-

⁸ Bowman, 'Completing an Incomplete History', 3; M. Christ, *Civil War Arkansas, 1863: The Battle for a State* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), 103-04; W. Shea and T. J. Winschel, *Vicksburg is the Key: The Struggle for the Mississippi River* (Bison Books, 2005).

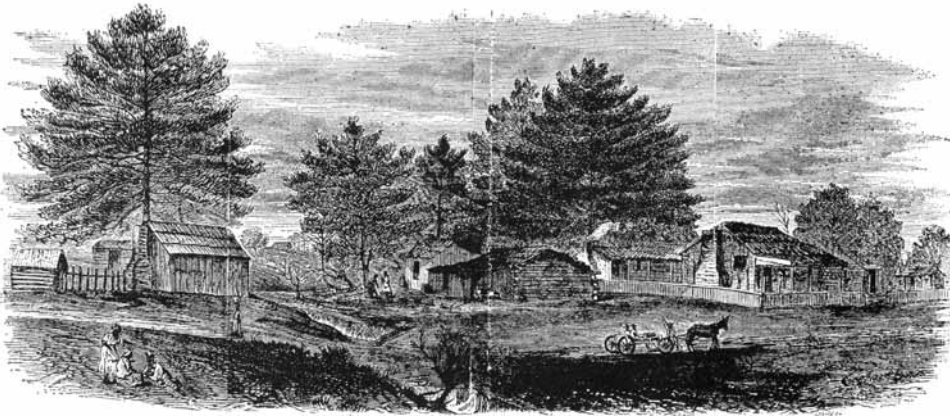


Fig. 4. *Blissville, A Negro Refuge Settlement in Little Rock, 1866*
Courtesy University of Central Arkansas, Torreyson Library

Like other refugee settlements Blissville served as the genesis of the urban black community of Little Rock

cupated themselves and then fought in the Union Army to secure their freedom. For instance, the Prince Hall lodge, ‘Widow’s Son’, was established in Fort Smith at the confluence of the Arkansas and Poteau Rivers soon after Dickson’s initial trip. On 30 December 1862, just across the river at Van Buren, the Union Army of the Frontier led by Brigadier General James Blunt of Kansas freed approximately 1,000 slaves after decisively winning the Battle of Prairie Grove on 7 December. As a true liberation force for emancipation the Union Army of the Frontier was composed of the most diverse body of soldiers of any American army between the War of 1812 and World War II.⁹ Soldiers included Arkansas and Missouri Freedmen, Kansas Jayhawkers, Germans, Irish, Jews, and a plethora of American Indian nations that remained loyal to the Union. A soldier from the Ninth Kansas Calvary attested:

the negroes are flocking from every direction and falling in with the column. All along the road as we march they are standing, grinning from ear to ear, and waiting as they have been all the morning for the train to come along so that they may throw their bundle on some wagon and trudge along on foot with hundreds of others who are following us out.¹⁰

⁹ W. Shea, ‘The War we Have Lost’, *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* LXX, No. 2 (Summer 2011), 100–108.

¹⁰ Shea, ‘Fields of Blood: The Prairie Grove Campaign (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 280.

In letters to his family back home in New England, a Union medical corpsmen summed up his experience: ‘if you want to see abolitionists just come out here. The genuine article ain’t in Massachusetts.’¹¹

It was in this milieu of the Freedmen proactively fleeing, working, marching, and then fighting to secure their liberty, that Prince Hall Freemasonry came to Arkansas. The Revd Bro. Dickson came first to Helena to establish J. M. Alexander Lodge, PHA, on 12 June 1866. Dickson’s first contact in Helena was William Henry Grey, who ultimately became Arkansas’s first Grand Master when the Prince Hall Grand Lodge was formally organized in 1873.¹² Grey was born in Washington, D.C., and raised in Virginia. He was never enslaved. As a young man Grey served as valet to the Governor of Virginia, thus associating with some of the most elite circles of antebellum American politics. From there Grey sought his fortunes in the West, spending time as a chef on steamboats in the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, living at times in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Cincinnati, Ohio, and Saint Louis, Missouri. He was made a Freemason in St John’s Lodge of Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1852. By the time he arrived in Helena in 1863, Grey was a skilled chef, a minister of the nascent southern AME Church, a prominent businessmen, and a noted orator. Grey helped to found both the AME Church and Prince Hall Freemasonry below the Mason-Dixon Line. He most probably worked with both J. M. Alexander Lodge, PHA in Helena as well as Jephtha Lodge, PHA in Little Rock, after he became involved in Arkansas politics.¹³

Grey was a founding member of the Arkansas Republican Party, which was founded by a combination of black and white northern unionists (aka carpetbaggers) like himself, as well as the white Ohio journalist John ‘Poker Jack’ McClure, who was editor of the party’s organ, *The Daily Republican*, and the white Ohio Methodist minister, abolitionist, and future governor, Joseph Brooks. Arkansas Republicans were also composed of Freedmen and white southern Unionists (aka Scalawags), who came largely from the highland regions of the state in the Ozarks and Ouachita Mountains like future Republican Governor Elisha Baxter of Batesville.¹⁴

¹¹ A. Jones, ‘Black Organizing through Fraternal Orders: Black Mobilization and White Backlash’, in G. Lancaster, Ed., *The Elaine Massacre and Arkansas: A Century of Atrocity and Resistance, 1819–1919* (Little Rock: Butler Center Books, 2018), 141; Shea, *Fields of Blood*, 280.

¹² ‘History of the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Missouri’, <http://glmopha.org/missouri-masons>, p.2, accessed 25 March 2020.

¹³ ‘William Henry Gray’, *Indiana Freeman*, March 2, 1889; ‘William Grey Excellent Sketch’, *The Daily Republican*, February 5, 1873; ‘Death of Prominent Negro’, *Saint Louis Republic*, November 11, 1883, S. Matkin-Rawn, ‘William Gray Folder,’ which includes numerous newspaper articles, including an obituary from *The Daily Republican*. In author’s possession.

¹⁴ Over the course of the Civil War, Arkansas supplied over 6,200 troops to the Union war effort, more than any other Confederate states except Tennessee.



Fig. 5. The Masonic headstone of M.W. Bro. William Grey, PHA, Courtesy of the author

In 1867 the US Congress passed the Reconstruction Act, imposing martial law in the former Confederacy.¹⁵ Led by Grey, a Union Party quickly formed and assembled in Little Rock. The Union League became the political vehicle of the Freedmen. Over the course of the tumultuous year of 1867 they raised \$1,800 for the election and helped to register some 22,000 Freedmen between May and November. In November 1867 Arkansas voters approved by a margin of over 2 to 1 a measure to hold a constitutional convention and elect seventy-five delegates to such, which was held in Little Rock on 7 January 1868.

The black delegates to the Arkansas state constitutional convention were led by Grey and James W. Mason. The latter was the black scion of Elisha Worthington, the white owner of Sunnyside, Arkansas's largest plantation prior to the Civil War, with some 12,000 acres worked by 543 slaves. Mason, whose mother was probably one of Worthington's slaves that he kept as a common law wife, was sent by his father to Oberlin College (which, incidentally, was the very epicentre of the anti-Masonic movement in antebellum America), and then to the Sorbonne in France, until he returned home in 1860. Mason

¹⁵ 'US Presidents Freemasons,' Grand Lodge of Virginia <https://grandlodgeofvirginia.com>. Accessed 25 March 2020.

was, therefore, probably the only college-educated African American in Arkansas prior to the Civil War. On 6 January 1860 the Masonic Lodge of St Vincent de Paul in Paris offered a public tribute to the legacy of the controversial abolitionist John Brown.¹⁶

At the 1868 Arkansas State Constitutional Convention a delegate from White County, Democratic Representative Jesse Cypert, motioned to maintain the Arkansas State Constitution of 1864, enacted during the period known as Presidential Reconstruction, which offered rather lenient policies toward former Confederates and did not specifically enfranchise the Freedmen nor explicitly guarantee their full civil rights. As the controversy raged, Grey, the Republican delegate from Helena in Phillips County, took control of the debate. Grey rose from his seat and addressed the convention:

I am here as a representative of a portion of the citizens of Arkansas, whose rights are not secured by the Ordinance offered by the gentleman from White;—men, sir, who have stood by the Government and the old flag in times of trouble, when the republic trembled with the throes of civil war, from centre to circumference, from base to cope. From this and other considerations we are not here to ask for charity at the hands from this honourable body, but to receive at the hands of the people of Arkansas, in Convention assembled, the apportionment of our rights as assigned by the Reconstruction Act of Congress. I am here, sir, to see those rights engrafted upon the organic law of this State.¹⁷

Grey's eloquence convinced the delegates to defeat Cypert's measure, ensuring that the Freedmen's full civil rights were explicitly written into and protected by the 1868 Arkansas State Constitution, by far the most radical of any of the state constitutions enacted in the former Confederacy during Reconstruction. Grey continued to serve as an Arkansas state representative until 1872. As a leader of the Arkansas Republican Party Grey also served as a delegate to both the 1868 and 1872 Republican National Conventions. In 1872 Grey formally addressed the national convention, supporting the renomination of Grant for a second presidential term, thereby becoming the first African American to speak at the convention of a major American political party. In 1873 Grey was elected to represent Arkansas in the Vienna Exposition in Austria. Even after the 1874 collapse of Reconstruction in Arkansas Grey still managed to be elected as a Republican to the Arkansas State Senate the following year, advocating for black voting rights while denouncing anti-miscegenation laws. In 1878 while serving as Phillips County Clerk Grey suffered paralysis. He thereafter lived as an invalid until his death in 1888.¹⁸

¹⁶ T. DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword: Arkansas 1861–1874* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2003); W. Gatewood, 'Sunnyside: The Evolution of an Arkansas Plantation, 1840–1945', in J. M. Whayne, Ed., *Shadows over Sunnyside: An Arkansas Plantation in Transition, 1830–1945* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1993), 3–6; B. B. Stutler, 'John Brown and the Masonic Order', *Ohio History* Vol. 71, No. 1 (January 1962), 24–33.

¹⁷ DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*.

¹⁸ T. Dillard, 'Three Important Black Leaders in Phillips County History', *Phillips County Historical Quarterly* 19

The second Grand Master of Prince Hall Freemasonry in Arkansas was John H. Johnson. A black Union veteran originally from Ohio, Johnson was a trained lawyer who arrived in Arkansas in 1865 after leaving the army. Johnson was first elected to the Arkansas State House of Representatives in 1873, where he served until his death in Little Rock on 12 July 1884. Just prior to his death Johnson had been elected temporary chairman of the Republican State Convention.¹⁹

Grey and Johnson's charismatic leadership of both Republican politics and Prince Hall Freemasonry directly contradicts contemporary depictions by leading caucasian Masonic leaders such as Albert Gallatin Mackey and Albert Pike. During the Reconstruction Era both Mackey and Pike perpetuated crude racial stereotypes and bigoted racist tropes toward black Republican political leaders in general and their Prince Hall brethren in particular. Mackey, for instance, consistently perpetuated the scurrilous mendacity that Prince Hall Freemasonry was inherently clandestine, and he worked assiduously to prevent American caucasian lodges from offering amity to Prince Hall Brethren.²⁰ As co-owner and editor-in-chief, Pike turned the *Memphis Daily Appeal* into one of the most vitriolic organs opposed to Reconstruction. According to Pike, Republicans and Prince Hall leaders who organized the Freedmen politically pursued a fool's errand. The vote 'might just as safely be given to so many Southern American monkeys', Pike argued, 'we do not want their votes and never shall.' For Pike Prince Hall brethren and Republican leaders like Grey, Mason, and Johnson exemplified 'the disgrace of negroism.'²¹ Unfortunately, most southern American caucasian Masons, up to the present day, continue to hold on to this completely distorted image of both the Reconstruction Era and the influential role that Prince Hall Freemasonry played in it – to the Craft's detriment throughout the world.

Arkansas Republicans in general and the state's Prince Hall Freemasons in particular were forced to take up arms yet again to defend and secure their newly-won civil rights. After the 1868 Arkansas State Constitution had been ratified, Republicans swept to office, led by Republican Governor Powell Clayton, a former Union cavalry officer from Kansas. Immediately after Clayton's inauguration on July 3, 1868 the Ku Klux Klan emerged in Arkansas, engaging in a campaign of terror and intimidation to overthrow Republican Reconstruction. Originally organized as a social fraternity in Pulaski, Tennessee, the Ku Klux Klan acted as the paramilitary wing of the Democratic Party, led by former Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest, a Tennessee Mason. In response Clayton ultimately declared martial law in twenty-two Arkansas counties, and organized a new

(December 1980–March 1981), 10–21; 'LR Republican Grey in Vienna', *Little Rock Republican*, July 31, 1873; 'Death of Prominent Negro', *Saint Louis Republic*, November 11, 1883, Matkin-Rawn, 'William Gray Folder.'

¹⁹ Jones, 'Black Organizing through Fraternal Orders', 146–47.

²⁰ J. A. Walkes, Jr, *Black Square and Compass: 200 Years of Prince Hall Freemasonry* (Richmond: Macoy Publishing & Masonic Supply Co., Inc., 2006), 33–64 and 80–99;

²¹ W. Brown, *A Life of Albert Pike* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1997), 437.



Fig. 6. M.W. Bro. Joseph Carter Corbin, Third Grand Master of Arkansas Prince Hall Freemasonry in Masonic Regalia

State Militia composed largely of black Union veterans, many of whom were probably already initiated into the mysteries of Prince Hall Freemasonry.²²

To outfit his new Arkansas State Militia Clayton procured arms from distant New York City. The arms were transported down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to Memphis, but the shipment of 4,000 rifles was stuck there. Since no local steamboat captain would ‘handle the unholy cargo’, Clayton hired the Little Rock steamboat *Hesper* to go for his arms. As the *Hesper* departed from Memphis in the late afternoon of 15 October 1868, heading south to Helena with the cache of arms, the boat was overtaken by the tugboat *Nettie Jones*, which carried over 100 men in white masks. The masked pirates harmlessly overtook the crew, threw all of the 4,000 rifles overboard, and then set the *Hesper* adrift. The Klan raid was reportedly led personally by Forrest, who denied involvement nonetheless. Pike was also in Memphis at the time, but no evidence exists that he too participated in the raid. Thereafter Clayton’s black State Militia and the Ku Klux Klan clashed

²² T. Berry and J. K. Day, *Arkansas History: A Collegiate Reader* (Southlake: Fountainhead Press, 2008), 239–78; Brown, 425–432; Walkes, 85.

repeatedly in a series of open battles across Arkansas during the winter of 1868–69, with atrocities committed on both sides. By the early spring of 1869 Clayton's black State Militia effectively destroyed the Klan as an active fighting force. Scholars conclude that Clayton and the black militia eradicated the Klan more thoroughly than in other southern states. The Ku Klux Klan did not reappear in Arkansas until forty years later.²³

With the Klan defeated and the rights of the Freedmen secure, the Republicans, led by Prince Hall Freemasons, enacted among the most revolutionary Reconstruction policies of any state of the former Confederacy. In addition to leadership in the national Republican Party and just prior to his election as Prince Hall Grand Master in 1873, Grey was elected as Arkansas's Commissioner of Public Lands in 1872, where he helped to initiate black migration to the state. Encouraged by both the era's national black leadership like Grey, as well as readily available access to cheap yet fertile Federal lands due to the Southern Homestead Act (1866), Arkansas subsequently enjoyed more black immigration than any other single state in the Union, North or South. From 1870 to 1910 over 160,000 African Americans migrated to Arkansas.²⁴

In addition to black migration and economic development, Arkansas's Prince Hall Freemasons led the development of public education. Arkansas's third Prince Hall Grand Master was Joseph Carter Corbin, arguably the state's greatest Prince Hall Freemason. Corbin was born on 26 March 1833 in Chillicothe, Ross County, which is located along the Scioto River. Corbin's parents were free African Americans originally from Virginia. The Corbins were longtime activist Baptist Missionaries affiliated with the First African Baptist Church of Christ of Chillicothe, pastored by the legendary Revd David Leroy Nickens, an abolitionist ex-slave and open conductor of the Underground Railroad, who was the first African American to be ordained in the free state of Ohio. Prior to coming to Ohio Corbin's mother, Susan Mordecai Carter, was a full member of the First Baptist Church of Richmond, Virginia. The first church organized in the city in 1780, the First Baptist Church of Richmond, was a fully integrated congregation, composed of whites, their slaves, and free blacks. It was also the first congregation in America to send missionaries to Africa, was opposed to hereditary slavery, and supported efforts to repatriate blacks to Africa upon emancipation.²⁵

Joseph Carter Corbin received his formal education first in Louisville, Kentucky, from 1848 to 1850, where he prepared for college by serving as a teaching assistant to the prom-

²³ Berry and Day, *Arkansas History*, 251–78; Brown, *A Life of Albert Pike*, 442; K. Barnes, *Anti-Catholicism in Arkansas: How Politicians, the Press, the Klan, and Religious Leaders Imagined an Enemy, 1910–1960* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2016).

²⁴ S. Matkin-Rawn, "'The Great Negro State of the Country': Arkansas's Reconstruction and the Other Great Migration", *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 72 (Spring 2013), 1–42.

²⁵ G. T. Finney, *Joseph Carter Corbin: Educator Extraordinaire and Founder of the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff* (Little Rock, AR: Butler Center Books, 2017), Chap 1.



MASONIC TEMPLE, PINE BLUFF, ARKANSAS
 Corner Fourth Avenue and State Street

Fig. 7. Architectural Sketch of Arkansas Prince Hall Grand Lodge, c.1902
 Courtesy of the UCA Torreyson Library Special Collections

inent Baptist preacher and teacher, Henry Adams. In the autumn of 1850 the seventeen year old Corbin entered Ohio University as a sophomore. Matriculating for three years, Corbin received one of the most rigorous classical educations to be found in the antebellum United States, while the college town of Athens was a hotbed of the abolition movement and Underground Railroad. Corbin later earned two separate MA degrees from Ohio University, in 1856 and 1889, respectively.²⁶

During the Civil War Corbin helped to found and publish the black oriented newspaper, *The Colored Citizen* (1863–69) of Cincinnati, Ohio, while supplementing his income as a bank clerk. In addition to his interest in journalism and politics Corbin also became involved in education during the war, serving on the Cincinnati Colored School Board. He also started a family, marrying in 1866 Mary Jane Ward with whom he had five children. In 1871 Corbin took the momentous step of taking his family to Arkansas, following other Ohio Carpetbaggers. First settling in Little Rock, Corbin served as beat reporter

²⁶ Turner, *Embattled Freedom*, Chap. 2; D. McCullough, *The Pioneers: The Heroic Story of the Settlers Who Brought the American Ideal West* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019).



Fig. 8. The former residence of the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge today
Courtesy of the Author

for McClure's *Daily Republican* and also secured a plum federal salary as Assistant Post master.²⁷

In 1872 Corbin successfully ran as a Republican for the statewide office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. Among other responsibilities this position also made Corbin the president of the Board of Trustees of Arkansas Industrial University, established by the Republican's 1868 Constitution.²⁸ Upon taking office Corbin immediately worked to establish a public institution for training black teachers to fill positions in the state's newly formed black schools. Here he worked intimately with Clayton's younger brother, W. Bro. John Clayton (Past Master of Pine Bluff Lodge No. 69, F. & A. M. of Arkansas), who as state representative sponsored legislation to establish Branch Normal College. Corbin's work was delayed, however, by the Brooks-Baxter War (1872–74) when the Arkansas Republican Party divided into warring rival factions, allowing former Confed-

²⁷ Turner, *Embattled Freedom*, Chap. 2.

²⁸ Holding its inaugural classes the previous year in 1871, Arkansas Industrial University is the beginning of today's University of Arkansas System.



Fig. 9. M.W.B. Joseph Carter Corbin wearing a Masonic jewel. He was the 3rd Grand Master of Arkansas Prince Hall Freemasonry. Courtesy of the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff Museum & Cultural Center

erates back into power and ending Reconstruction in Arkansas. Republicans were swept out of office, including Corbin, who went north to Jefferson City, Missouri, to become a professor at the historically black college, Lincoln University. The new Redeemer Democratic Governor, Augustus Garland, nonetheless recruited Corbin to come back to Arkansas at a salary of \$1,000 per year to begin the new school, which was placed in Pine Bluff at the centre of the state's black population.²⁹ Branch Normal College formally opened its doors on 27 September 1875.³⁰

Corbin's challenges for the new school were daunting. Included were a lack of adequate funding from the state, a majority of the Arkansas population that were hostile to providing educational resources for the Freedmen and their families, as well as a black student body that was both largely impoverished and academically unprepared for the rigours of a first-rate college curriculum. Despite these formidable obstacles Corbin managed to

²⁹ By 1877, Reconstruction ended throughout the South. Democrats regained control and the last Federal troops were removed from the former states of the Confederacy. Democrats described this process as Redemption, whereby home rule was restored in southern states and full civil rights of former Confederates were restored.

³⁰ Turner, *Embattled Freedom*, 32–36.



Fig. 10. Bro. Walter 'Wiley' Jones. Courtesy of the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff Museum and Cultural Center.

inculcate a classical college curriculum based upon his own education in Kentucky and Ohio. He established both preparatory and college classes in algebra, drawing, English, geometry, grammar & composition, Greek, history, and music, as well as opening every day with a Sabbath school lesson. In this respect Corbin was far ahead of his time in advocating a classical education along the model later championed by such black educational luminaries as W. E. B. DuBois. Because of social pressure and funding challenges, however, Corbin ultimately developed industrial classes for both boys and girls along the popular model supported by Booker T. Washington. Led by Corbin the Republican Reconstruction successes for education in Arkansas are astounding. These fruits of success include, but are not limited to:

1. The establishment of a superintendent of education as a separate state officer,
2. The creation of a universal system of education,
3. The first efforts toward compulsory attendance,
4. Raised teachers' standards through boards of education, teachers' associations, and a statewide teachers' journal for the study and dissemination of education information, and

5. The creation of two college campuses, which evolved into the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville and the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff.

The specific advances for black education are most impressive. In 1870, the year before Corbin arrived in Little Rock, the black illiteracy rate in Arkansas was 90%. In 1885 the black illiteracy rate was 75%. In 1890, just three years prior to Corbin's demotion to high school principal by a Redeemer-dominated University of Arkansas Board of Trustees for his refusal to abandon the classical education model in favour of the Tuskegee model, the black illiteracy rate stood at 54%. By the year 1900, after Corbin had worked for nearly thirty years leading efforts in Arkansas education, the black illiteracy rate had been cut by over half, to 40%.³¹

Corbin's accomplishments went well beyond leadership in black education. He was an accomplished musician and leader of the choir of his church. In 1898 Corbin co-founded the Arkansas Teachers Association, which served as the primary organization for black schoolteachers until it merged in 1969 with the formerly all-white Arkansas Education Association. He held officer positions in both the Pine Bluff's Immigration Bureau and the Colored Industrial Fair Association, and helped to found the Arkansas state chapter of the National Negro Business League.³²

Academically Corbin was a true polymath. In addition to his administrative talents and civic contributions Corbin was fluent in French, German, Greek, Latin, Italian, and Spanish. His forte, however, was mathematics. Corbin regularly published formulaic solutions in *Barnes' Educational Monthly*, *Mathematical Gazette*, *Mathematical Magazine*, *Mathematical Visitor*, and the *School Visitor*.³³

Corbin's contributions to Freemasonry should not be underestimated. From 1878–81 he served three consecutive terms as Prince Hall Grand Master, and then as Grand Secretary until his death in 1911. During M.W. Bro. Corbin's tenure he participated in the York Rite and served as first Grand Secretary of the Grand Chapter of the Order of the Eastern Star, PHA, when it was established in Arkansas in 1885. He was also an accomplished Masonic writer, authoring *The Status of Colored Freemasons* (1896) and then editing *Minutes of Masonry, Grand Lodge of Arkansas, 1873–1902*.³⁴

M.W. Bro. Corbin astutely moved both Branch Normal College and the Prince Hall Grand Lodge to Pine Bluff. As the centre of the Arkansas' black community, Pine Bluff's experience during the era was again similar to that of Helena, Fort Smith, and Little Rock, but even more so. After the liberation of Little Rock in September 1863 Pine Bluff was

³¹ DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword*.

³² Finney, *Joseph Carter Corbin*, 104.

³³ Finney, *Joseph Carter Corbin*, 103.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 102–03; J. C. Corbin, *The Status of Colored Freemasons* (Pine Bluff: Commercial Printing, 1896); Corbin, Ed., *Minutes of Masonry, Grand Lodge of Arkansas, 1873–1902* (Pine Bluff: Commercial Printing, 1903).

occupied by the Fifth Kansas Calvary, headed by future governor Clayton, then a colonel. The Fifth Kansas saw fighting at most of the major battles in Arkansas, including the most brutal aspects of the successful defence of Helena. Once secure in Pine Bluff, Clayton took Curtis's novel policy to its logical conclusion, encouraging slaves to run away from the region's plantations to behind Union lines within the city, where they received food rations and other supplies at the expense of the pro-Confederate citizens of the city. All the while Clayton personally led successful raids against Confederates across lower Arkansas. The policy worked, for runaway slaves came into the city every day. As a city matron remembered, 'for 30 miles round, they came pouring in by the 100's – every one's servant ran off to P. Bluff, there is scarcely a house here that has a servant left.'³⁵ Thereafter the Freedmen proved critical to the Fifth Kansas's successful defence in the Battle of Pine Bluff fought on 25 October 1863. Confederate raiders, led by one of the most celebrated calvary officers of the war, Brigadier General and future Missouri Governor John Sappington Marmaduke, attacked, trying to win back the valuable river port. The Freedmen proved critical to the ultimate Union victory, building defensive fortifications for Union troops out of cotton bales, filling water barrels, and carrying supplies back and forth.³⁶

After the Civil War and during Corbin's tenure as both the head of Branch Normal College and leader of Prince Hall Freemasonry, Pine Bluff developed into one of the most prosperous black majority cities in the United States. With its readily accessible port on the Arkansas River, during the late nineteenth century Pine Bluff became a major hub of the Cotton Belt Railroad, home to numerous cotton textile, timber, and pulp mills. As a centre of black academic and civic life, Pine Bluff also possessed among the most prosperous black business communities in the South, which included Prince Hall Bro. Walter 'Wiley' Jones, a former slave and leading Republican who ultimately became famous as the wealthiest African American in the United States at the time of his death in 1904.³⁷

Indeed, the successes of Pine Bluff's Prince Hall brethren are illustrative of the entire black community of Arkansas. For instance, AME Bishop Henry McNeal Turner of Georgia visited the state in 1888. 'Arkansas is destined to be the great Negro State of the country', Turner reported after returning home. 'The rich lands, the healthy regions, the meagre prejudice compared to some States and opportunities to acquire wealth all conspire to make it inviting to the colored man.' Probably alluding to many of our Prince Hall brethren, Turner observed that 'to see a colored judge, justice of the peace, member

³⁵ Christ, *Civil War Arkansas*, 1863, 229.

³⁶ Christ, *Civil War Arkansas*, 1863, 224–44; Pine Bluff Historical Museum, 201 East 4th Avenue, Pine Bluff, AR 71601.

³⁷ B. J. Hall, 'Wiley Jones (1848–1904)', *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net, accessed 24 March 2020.

of the legislature, clerk of the court, sheriff, policeman and other high functionaries is an ordinary sight.³⁸

Among the greatest accomplishments of Arkansas Prince Hall Freemasons during M.W. Bro. Corbin's tenure of leadership was the completion of their Grand Lodge building, located in the heart of the once thriving black business district of downtown Pine Bluff, directly adjacent to the once busy railroad station. Over one thousand Prince Hall Masons and their families attended the cornerstone laying ceremony in 1902.³⁹ Once completed, the four story edifice was the tallest building in Pine Bluff, a monument to the dramatic advances of the black community and Prince Hall Freemasonry since the beginning of emancipation forty years beforehand. Today the Prince Hall Grand Lodge has moved to another building on the outskirts of the city. Hopefully preservation efforts will soon begin on their historical former residence.

The accomplishments of Arkansas's Prince Hall brethren from the throes of the American Civil War to the dawn of the twentieth century are truly remarkable. This preliminary investigation into Prince Hall Freemasonry places its proliferation into the larger context of Arkansas history during this tumultuous period. However, further research is sorely needed for both this particular Grand Lodge as well as that of other Prince Hall jurisdictions to understand fully Freemasonry's larger role in American life both within the other states of the former Confederacy, as well as those communities where the American Frontier was pushed steadily West. The documentary evidence is there. Scholars just need to be creative in their research, looking for Masonic connections to documents supposedly unrelated to the Craft. Foremost, all Masonic scholars must work across the ephemeral jurisdictional and illusory regular and irregular lines to gain a full understanding of the truly great impact of Freemasonry on the American frontier.

³⁸ Matkin-Rawn, "Send Forth More Laborers into the Vineyard": Understanding the African American Exodus to Arkansas," in J. A. Kirk, Ed., *Race and Ethnicity in Arkansas: New Perspectives* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2014), 31-48.

³⁹ 'History Lovers Take Walk Through History', Pine Bluff Commercial, September 7, 2013, in Turner, *Embattled Freedom*, 103.