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Sidney Kaplan

BLACKS IN MASSACHUSETTS AND THE SHAYS' REBELLION*

AT THE TIME OF the Shays' Rebellion some five thousand African-Americans lived in Massachusetts. Slavery in the Commonwealth had come to an end a few years after the Revolution. So these five thousand were nominally free, yet less than citizens. Four-fifths of them lived in the eastern counties, a thousand in and around Boston. With few exceptions, they were farm laborers, city workers, artisans and apprentices, house-servants, and hands in a few factories. Many were seamen: whalers, fishermen, dock-workers. A few hundred were veterans of the army and navy of the Revolution.

What role did these blacks play in the Shays' Rebellion?

I will not deal at this time with the handful of black yeomen and farm-workers in the western counties who found common cause with the Shaysites—although one of them, Moses Sash of Hampshire, was “a Captain & one of Shayses Council,” nor with a few who were not Shaysites, one of them named Jack Burghardt of Berkshire, who was an ancestor of W.E.B. Du Bois.¹ My narrower aim is to clarify, as best I can, a puzzling event centering in the east.

Two hundred years ago this very November of 1986, the leading black public figure of Boston, one Prince Hall, grand master and founder on the eve of the Revolution of the African Lodge of Free Masons, wrote a letter to James Bowdoin, governor of the Commonwealth, in which he proposed to organize a black regiment of 700 soldiers to aid in the defense of Boston against a marching army of angry farmers from the west.

My main point this afternoon is simply to raise two linked questions about Prince Hall's proposal. First, why did he make it? Second, why did Governor Bowdoin turn it down?

* A talk given at the Historic Deerfield Conference on “Shays' Rebellion and the Constitution,” November 14, 1986.

¹ *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (New York: 1968), 62; Sidney Kaplan, “A Negro Veteran in Shays' Rebellion,” *Journal of Negro History*, XXXIII (April, 1948), 123-129.

Before attempting to answer these questions, I would like to review the train of events that gave birth to Prince Hall's letter.

At the end of October the Secretary at War of the Confederation, Henry Knox, wrote to Governor Bowdoin that Congress was getting ready to wage a war against the Indians—and that Massachusetts would be required to raise a regiment of 660 troops for that purpose. As Knox observed to Washington, "The critical juncture at which this requisition was made, and the large quota of men assigned to the Commonwealth" excited wide suspicion "that the forces were to be employed in suppressing domestick difficulties, previously to their marching to the frontiers."

A few days later, on the first of November, the Supreme Judicial Court was to meet at Cambridge. The government mobilized an army of over 3,000 troops on both banks of the Charles—but the rebels did not appear. Whereupon the troops passed in review before the Governor and his Council, the Chief Justice, a few general officers, and the president of Harvard College.

Five days later, Bowdoin informed the General Court that in Hampshire County "circular letters" were being sent by the insurgents to the county towns urging them to form companies of Minutemen, armed with 60 rounds, and ready to march.

On November 14th, the General Court printed 1,200 copies of its long "Address to the People of the Commonwealth," and ordered ministers to read it on Thanksgiving after Divine Service. The Address attacked the validity of the grievances listed in the avalanche of insurgent petitions, and closed with a plea and a threat: "Many who disapprove insurrections against the Government neglect to afford their Aid in suppressing them; and stand still, as inactive Spectators," watching their own houses burn: "We now call on Persons of all Ranks & Characters to exert themselves for the publick Safety."

On the next day the General Court passed two ineffective acts for the relief of debtors, and one that granted "Indemnity" to all court-stoppers who signed an Oath of Allegiance by New Year's Day.

A week later, the insurgents stopped the court at Worcester and the Governor called upon his major generals to be ready for battle.

Now news arrived in Boston that the insurgents planned once more to stop the Cambridge Court at the end of November and then to march on Boston. Again, Bowdoin assembled his army on the Charles. And once more the rebels did not show up. As Knox reported to Washington: "the deep snow prevented the insurgents from massing at Cambridge."

There was a feeling of relief in the State House—and a special edition of the *Independent Chronicle* boasted that "in the late alarm, every class of citizens were emulous in proffering their services. . . ."

It was in this hour of crisis, on November 26, 1786, that Prince Hall and his brothers of the African Lodge responded to the government threat:

To His Excellency, James Bowdoin.

We, by the Providence of God, are members of a fraternity that not only enjoins upon us to be peaceable subjects to the civil powers where we reside, but also forbids our having concern in any plot or conspiracies against the state where we dwell; and as it is the unhappy lot of this state at the present day, and as the meanest of its members must feel the want of a lawful and good government, and as we have been protected for many years under this once happy Constitution, so we hope, by the blessing of God, we may long enjoy that blessing; therefore, we, though unworthy members of this Commonwealth, are willing to help and support, as far as our weak and feeble abilities may become necessary in this time of trouble and confusion, as you in your wisdom shall direct us. That we may, under just and lawful authority, live peaceable lives in all godliness and honesty, is the hearty wish of the members of the African Lodge; and in their name I subscribe myself your most humble servant, Prince Hall.²

Does this letter seem out of character? Does it seem to violate a tradition?

The black people of Boston and its environs began their struggle for liberty and equality well before the Declaration of Independence—a struggle that comes to life in their own words.

In January of 1773 they sent to the Tory governor, Thomas Hutchinson, a

Humble petition of many slaves in Boston, and other towns . . . who have had every day of their lives embittered with the most intolerable reflection. That, let their behavior be what it will, their children to all Generations shall never be able . . . to possess and enjoy any thing, no not even Life itself, but in a manner as the *Beasts that perish*. We have no Property! We have no Wives! No Children! We have no City! No Country! . . .

Three months later, there appears a printed letter, a leaflet, addressed to the House of Representatives, signed by four black men “in behalf of their fellow slaves,” Life is still bitter: “Grant the Africans . . . one day a week to work for themselves, to enable them to earn money to buy their freedom,” and transport

² The holograph of this letter has not so far been discovered in the state archives—where it should be. Nor has Bowdoin’s reply, if there was one, turned up. The letter was first printed in 1903 by William Grimshaw in his pioneer *Official History of Freemasonry Among the Colored People in North America*, from a letterpress copy in Prince Hall’s ms. Letter Book.

themselves to the coast of Africa.

In June, another petition to Hutchinson argues that all those who are slaves “within the bowels of a free country . . . have in common with other men a natural right to be free. . . .”

Almost a year passes. In the spring of 1774, two petitions reach the desk of the new governor, Thomas Gage: “. . . we are a freeborn people and have never forfeited this Blessing by any compact or agreement whatever . . . our lives are embittered. . . .” Free us and our children! And “grant us” land for “a settlement, where we may sit quietly, each under his own fig tree,” and enjoy the fruits of our labor.”

It is not surprising that at the end of the summer Abigail Adams should write to her husband: “There has been in town a conspiracy of the negroes. . . . They drew up a petition to the governor, telling him they would fight for him provided he would arm them, and engage to liberate them if he conquered.”

Now, about six months before Lexington and Concord, in March of 1775, Prince Hall invents a new form of the black struggle for survival: he and 14 other free blacks join a Masonic Lodge of British army officers in Boston. When the British army leaves Boston, the black Masons seek a permit to meet as an independent lodge.

It is about this time that blacks throughout Massachusetts begin to find their way into the army and navy of the Revolution. Excluded at first from joining the embattled Yankees—who soon begin to suffer a shortage of manpower—blacks of all ages, slave and free, eager to enlist in the war for liberty and equality, are now invited to join the patriot armies. Before the war is over about a thousand black Massachusetts soldiers and sailors see service on land and sea.

The final Boston black petition of the Revolutionary period appears in January 1777, six months after the Declaration of Independence, and is perhaps influenced by its language: “A Great Number of Blacks detained in a State of Slavery in the Bowels of a free and Christian Country” assert their “Natural and Unalienable Right to that freedom which the Great Parent of the Universe hath bestowed equally on all mankind.” They have submitted “petition after petition,” and they are astonished that they are still slaves when “every Principle from which America has acted . . . pleads stronger than a thousand arguments . . . that they may be restored to the Natural Rights of all men.” This petition is signed by Prince Hall and seven other Boston blacks.

During the next four years, as the war grinds on, blacks, slave and free, are in the ranks, and the petitions cease.

Ten years later, a month or so after Prince Hall’s letter of November 26, a few weeks before the battle of Arsenal Hill in Springfield, Governor Bowdoin issues

his orders to mobilize an army of 4,400 men to subdue the Shaysites in the west. Prince Hall's black regiment is not among them.

On the same day a committee of 12 members of the African Lodge, headed by its grand master, delivers a petition, signed by 73 black Masons, to the General Court. A resumption of the petitions of the Revolution, its voice is quite different from the voice of the November letter. It is a lengthy document, carefully composed, and ought to be better known, since it is the first major statement of the Back-to-Africa impulse that informs the black experience from the black mariner Captain Paul Cuffe in 1810 to Marcus Garvey in our time.

I have time to read only a third of it:

We, or our ancestors, have been taken from all our dear connections, and brought from Africa and put into a state of slavery in this country; from which unhappy situation we have been lately in some measure delivered by the new constitution [of Massachusetts, 1780] or by a free act of our former masters. But we yet find ourselves, in many respects, in very disagreeable and disadvantageous circumstances; most of which must attend us so long as we and our children live in America . . . other considerations, which we need not here particularly mention, induce us earnestly to desire to return to Africa, our native country . . . for which the God of nature has formed us; and where we shall live among our equals . . . This leads us humbly to propose the following plan to the consideration of this honourable Court . . . they who are disposed to go and settle there shall form themselves into a civil society, united by a political constitution, in which they shall agree . . . and . . . unite . . . into a religious society, or christian church; and have one or more blacks ordained as their pastors or Bishops; And being thus formed, shall remove to Africa and settle on said lands . . . we are poor and utterly unable to prosecute this scheme or to return to Africa without assistance. Money is wanted to enable those who shall be appointed, to go to Africa, and procure lands to be settled upon; and to obtain passage for us and our families.

The House received this petition and, as usual, buried it in committee.

And now I want to return to my two linked questions about Prince Hall's proposal: Why did he make it? And, why did Governor Bowdoin turn it down?

My tentative answer to both questions is this: each represented—as James Madison might have put it—the interest and outlook of his class.

The blacks of Boston must have figured that if they remained silent and neutral in the face of the governor's menacing exhortation to all classes to take sides, Bowdoin and his party would interpret their silence—rightly, perhaps—as

In the honorable, the general Court of the commonwealth of the Massachusetts Bay, the petition of the subscribers, a number of African Blacks, humbly sheweth.

That we or our ancestors have been taken from all our dear connections, and brought from Africa, and put into a state of slavery in this country: from which unhappy situation we have been lately in some measure delivered by the new constitution which has been adopted by the State, or by the free act of our former masters. But we yet find ourselves in many respects in very disagreeable and disadvantageous circumstances; most of which cannot attend us, so long as we and our children live in America.

This, and other considerations which we need not here particularly mention, induce us earnestly to desire to return to Africa, our native country, which warm climate is much more natural and agreeable to us, and for which the gift of nature has formed us; and where we shall live among our equals, and be more comfortable and happy than we can be in our present situation; and, at the same time, may have a prospect of usefulness to our brethren there.

This leads us humbly to propose the following plan to the consideration of this honorable Court. The soil of our native country is good, and produces the necessaries of life in great abundance. There are large tracts of unencultivated lands, which if proper application were made for them, it is presumed, might be obtained, and would be freely given for those to settle upon, who shall be disposed to return to them. When this shall be offered by a number of blacks, sent thence before for this purpose, who shall be thought most capable of making such an application, and transacting this business; then they who are disposed to go and settle there shall form themselves into a civil society, united by a political constitution, in which they shall agree. And those who are disposed, and shall be thought qualified, shall unite, and be formed into a religious society, or christian church; and have one or more blacks ordained as their pastors.

or to needs. The being thus formed, shall remove with their families to settle on said lands.

There must be furnished with necessary provisions for the voyage, and with farming utensils necessary to cultivate the land, and with the materials which cannot at present be obtained there, and which will be needed to build houses and mills.

The execution of this plan will, we hope, be the means of enlightening and civilizing those nations, who are now sunk in ignorance and barbarity; and may give opportunity to those who shall who shall be disposed, and engaged to promote the salvation of their heathen brethren, to spread the knowledge of Christianity among them, and persuade them to embrace it. And schools may be formed to instruct their youth and children, and christian knowledge be spread through many nations who now are in gross darkness, and christian churches be formed, and the only true, God and Saviour be worshiped and honoured through that vast extent of country, where are now the habitations of cruelty, under the reign of the prince of darkness.

This may also lay a happy foundation for a friendly and lasting connection between the two countries, and the mutual interest of both, by a mutual intercourse and profitable commerce, which may much more than overbalance all the expence which is now necessary in order to carry this plan into effect.

This leads us to observe, that we are poor and utterly unable to prosecute this scheme, or to return to Africa, without assistance. Money is wanted to enable those who shall be appointed, to go to Africa, and procure lands to settle upon, and to obtain a passage for us, and our families; and to furnish us with necessary provisions, and the utensils and articles that have been mentioned.

We therefore humbly and earnestly apply to this honourable Court, hoping and praying, that in your wisdom and goodness, you concert and prosecute the best method to relieve and assist us, either by granting a brief for a collection in all the congregations in this State, or in any other way, which shall to your wisdom appear most expedient. And your petitioners shall, as in duty bound, always pray.

active sympathy for the Shaysites, and then take measures to depress further their shaky, pseudo-free status in the society. For fifteen years the government had rejected their petitions and refused them relief from poverty and abuse. (Slavery itself had come to an end in the early 1780s, not by an act of emancipation, but by a few “class-action” lawsuits fought by blacks themselves.)³

It is not that Boston’s blacks had lost heart and were beaten. It was, rather, that the road of organization and protest, petition and demand—sometimes, in desperation, the threat of workers, artisans and servants (cheap black labor in city and port) to desert their masters and return to Africa—seemed if not the best, then the only way, given the critical juncture of the last days of November 1786, to survive and keep up the struggle.

Sympathy for the poor yeomen of the west they might have. (After all, these farmers were also now marching against oppression, for the liberty and equality they had but a few years earlier fought for in the Revolution along with many blacks.)

But what if Shays won the day? What had the demands of the western farmers, just as they might be, to do with the plight of the embittered blacks of Boston? Among their dozens of grievances, was there a single one that spoke to the vital necessities of black workers, mechanics and mariners in Boston? (Annihilate the lawyers, cancel farm debts, print paper money, stop courts and auctions, lower taxes, move the capital away from Boston, et cetera.)

No, blacks in Boston had other problems (poverty, menial underpaid jobs, the denial of civil rights, racist discrimination, the danger of being kidnapped and the terrors of the slave trade, the condition of being landless and voteless). Would Shays, Shattuck and Day in the State House do more for them than Bowdoin had? Besides, there’s no evidence that the insurgents had ever asked them to enter the fray, ever gave a thought to their problems.

Charles Wesley, in his biography of Prince Hall, wrote that Hall’s letter to Bowdoin was “an expression of loyalty from the African Lodge. When related to the black man’s services as a soldier [in the Revolution], it is an additional evidence of loyalty and patriotic zeal.” There may be only a grain of insight in that judgement. The latest history of the Shays’ Rebellion is of the opinion that Prince Hall wrote the letter in order to make sure that his Back-to-Africa exodus would not be smashed by Bowdoin.⁴ There’s some truth in that, no doubt, but only as part of a broader analysis, I think.

³ Sidney Kaplan, “Elizabeth Freeman and the Bill of Rights,” in *The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution 1770-1800* (Greenwich, Conn.: 1973), 216-217.

⁴ Charles Wesley, *Prince Hall: Life and Legacy* (Washington, DC: 1977), 43; David P. Sztatmary, *Shays’ Rebellion: The Making of an Agrarian Insurrection* (Amherst, Mass.: 1980), 89.

A better rubric for such an analysis might rather be the formulation of Benjamin Quarles in a classic passage from the preface to his volume on *Blacks in the American Revolution* :

The Negro's role in the Revolution can best be understood by realizing that his major loyalty was not to a place nor a people, but to a *principle*. Insofar as he had freedom of choice, he was likely to join the side that made him the quickest and best offer in terms of those 'unalienable rights' of which Mr. Jefferson had spoken. Whoever invoked the image of liberty, be he American or British, could count on a ready response from blacks.

The first black American historian, William C. Nell of Garrison's Boston, in his book of 1855, *Black Patriots of the American Revolution*, tells us that at "the close of the Revolutionary War, John Hancock presented the colored company, called 'the Bucks of America,' with an appropriate banner, bearing his initials, as a tribute to their courage and devotion throughout the struggle." The commander of that company was a black man—one Colonel Middleton. (Lydia Maria Child wrote a sketch of him in his old age.) Colonel Middleton was an active member of Prince Hall's African Lodge of Masons during the Shays' Rebellion—and on both occasions he acted on *principle*.

Unlike the choice that could be made during the revolution in Massachusetts, neither side in the Shays' Rebellion offered to black people "an image of liberty." "Insofar as there was freedom of choice," the one that Boston's blacks were forced to make was, in a sense, the lesser of two evils. In their effort to retain whatever remained to them of Jefferson's "unalienable rights"—they repeat this phrase in the exodus petition—the better path, the more feasible strategy to keep a space for struggle, ironically enough, was to make a gesture of willingness to mobilize a black regiment for Bowdoin. And why did Bowdoin reject Prince Hall's offer? Could he really put any trust in the good faith of this perhaps too eloquent gesture?

The January 4th order to mobilize a government army against Shays carried a charge: "Care will be taken by the Officers that the men be armed with good firelocks . . . 18 balls to pound, and bayonets. . . ." Consider the image of a black regiment in Boston, armed to the teeth, in the minds of Bowdoin and his Council—in the midst of a white civil war between the poor and the rich. As the *Massachusetts Centinel* put it in November after the stopping of the Worcester court: "It were to be wished that news-paper writers would begin to give a relief to the minds of their readers, by humorous sketches, and pieces of innocent levity, for nothing else can keep us from the *horrours*, on reading the perpetual journal

of mobs, riots, and insurrections, enough to stamp the Character of America with everlasting infamy.” One of the events of the month that gave rise to “horror” in the State House, unmentioned by the *Centinel* but reported in other Boston papers, was the report of bloody slave uprisings in the Caribbean—in Dominica and Antigua. Such news might not help Bowdoin and his Council to feel easy with a black regiment in their army.

In 1795 the historian-cleric Jeremy Belknap, looking back, thought that Bowdoin had spurned the offer of a black regiment because he didn’t need it, while his friend, Judge James Winthrop, in that same year, recollected that the white officers did not want black soldiers in their companies—probably for racist reasons, but also because they might be unreliable. Remember Abigail Adams’ report in 1774 that the blacks of Boston had offered to fight for the Tory Governor Gates, if he promised them their liberty! And remember the vigorous denunciations of betrayal in the black petitions always rejected by the government: Boston blacks had not been a subservient and quiescent community but always restive and troublesome.

Nor did white Masons in Boston, many of them veteran officers of the Revolution, then or later, look on their black brethren with love in their hearts—and white Masons were among the most vociferous troops of the anti-Shaysite army.

Indeed, even some of Bowdoin’s own white regiments were restive—and not far from home. In nearby Medford, in Middlesex, just as he received Prince Hall’s letter, two courts-martial were in process in the Sixth Regiment of the militia. Lt. Solomon Spalding was charged with “beating up for volunteers . . . to go to Cambridge to prevent the sitting of the Court & with Refusing to raise men for the service of the Commonwealth; Captain Benjamin Hall with resigning his commission as Captain and the “embodying his men with clubs and sticks when assembled together & marching them to Conant’s tavern. . . .”

In sum—if it was difficult, as a matter of *principle*, for Prince Hall to write his letter to Bowdoin, it was easy for Bowdoin to reject it.

One wonders what the future might have been if the Battle of Arsenal Hill had not ended as it did. If Shaysite armies had marched on Boston—someone has argued that snow was the greatest enemy of the insurgents—would Prince Hall and his 700-strong black regiment, as a matter of *principle*, have joined them?