

**Freemasonry
& Black Greek
Letter Organizations**

**Elevation is
NOT a Trophy**



Freemasonry and Black Greek

In order to meet the demands of the day and age, African Americans have historically banded together to create power and share resources. This is certainly the case for Afro-American Freemasonry. While the formal organization of African Lodge can be tied to the charter issued in 1784, organizations like the Free African Society had also been in place to meet the challenges of Slavery. Its objectives were not only to free the enslaved but also to provide those who made it northward with the resources and abilities to start and sustain a new life on the homefront. This became its fundamental function and duty.

Faith, hope and charity fueled these actions. It is no secret why Prince Hall Freemasonry pulled from these ranks to fill Masonic Lodges. Their faith in God and worship yielded direction which resulted in solutions for the issues of the day. The relief provided by them also gave others hope in a better tomorrow. The acts of charity were acts of love that were meant to build a stage for the future. It is upon this stage that the fraternities and sororities of today stand.

While multiple Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLO) have been in existence since the turn of

the 20th Century, they all receive acclaim for their works at the professional and collegiate levels. These organizations serve the purpose of advancement within multiple circles. The products of their unions provide evidence to their relevance today.

Sigma Pi Phi Fraternity is considered one of the first African American Greek fraternal orders in America. With its members affectionately known as the Boule, the fraternity was organized at the turn of the 20th Century as a means for African American professionals to share resources. Its ranks included physicians, scientists and other professionals who sought to convene and design solutions that would extend the careers of black professionals and open doors for subsequent generations. Many black Freemasons were members of these ranks in its early stages including Dr. Allen A. Wesley of North Star Lodge #1, Chicago, Illinois and others. Their success in uniting like-minded individuals opened new doors and could have been the spark which prompted the formation of fraternities on college campuses across the country.

The turn of the 20th Century found many African American students attending some of the

nation's most prominent universities. In order to ensure success, several felt it necessary to band together for protection and to share resources that would allow ALL to succeed. This is the premise for the creation of all BGLOs.

Alpha Phi Alpha was founded in 1906 on the campus of Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. Influenced by the Boule, its founding fathers organized themselves into the first black fraternity to ensure mutual success. The fraternity grew at Cornell and expanded across the country. The Beta Chapter was organized as the first fraternity on a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) in 1907 at Howard University in Washington, DC. Its success provided a model upon which other fraternities and sororities would establish and extend themselves.

Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority followed suit in 1908 at Howard University. It was the first sorority to be organized on the campus of a HBCU. Its founders were true women of distinction who sought to bring together link-minded ladies. Their focus on scholarship and service became a factor which drew more into its fold. Their formation sparked the establishment



Letter Organizations (BGLO)

of other new sororities and fraternities on the same campus in subsequent years.

Like Alpha Phi Alpha, Kappa Alpha Psi was organized on a predominantly white campus, Indiana University, in 1911 originally as Kappa Alpha Nu. The fraternity found itself embroiled in racial unrest early on. One of its initiates, **Frank Myron Summers**, was a track star who endured



racial taunts as he excelled in Track and Field. Often called that “Kappa Alpha Nig”, he continued to excel despite the epithets. The fraternity decided to change its name to Kappa Alpha Psi and has remained steadfast in its pursuit of excellence.

With the establishment of a sorority on the campus of Howard University and the existence of Chapters of Alpha Phi Alpha and Kappa Alpha Psi on the campus, other groups of men and women were inspired to organize fraternities and sororities of their own for similar purposes. Omega Psi Phi was organized in 1911 and, within ten years, three additional organizations

would follow. Delta Sigma Theta was organized as a sorority in 1913 from ladies who previously held membership in Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority. Phi Beta Sigma was organized as a fraternity in 1914 and Zeta Phi Beta was organized as a sorority in 1920.

Sigma Gamma Rho became the first BGLO sorority to be organized on a predominantly white campus. Founded in 1922, Sigma Gamma Rho was formed on the campus of Butler University. Its initial membership consisted of talented women of distinction who worked together to ensure mutual success in the educational arena. Like the aforementioned organizations, it remains in tact to this day.

It is important to note that each fraternity and sorority leveraged one another for their genesis and forward movement. The relationship between each is apparent as their modes of organization and expansion are almost identical. Each organized itself and adopted the Chapter system for logistical purposes. Each utilized a similar hierarchy in leadership structure and mode of operation. Each made it a point to collaborate with one another to maintain regularity. These relationships, the common structure

and common bonds of mutual improvement became a basis upon which a formal organization was created in 1930 to maintain the bond. As such, they came together in 1930 to form the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) which remains in existence to this date.

The NPHC welcomed Iota Phi Theta fraternity into its ranks in the 1960s. Founded on the campus of Morgan State University, an HBCU, Iota Phi Theta was actually born from the Civil Rights Movement. Many of its initial founders bonded well with the ideals of the Black Panther Party including self-reliance and strength in unity. These concepts drew men of like-mind together on the campus to found the fraternity in 1963.

Many stellar African American citizens throughout history have had a direct linkage to BGLOs and have also attested to the fact that the organizations helped them to complete their collegiate educational requirements and post collegiate requisites. The bonds of brotherhood and sisterhood run deep as attested by the likes of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Jesse Jackson Sr., W.E.B. DuBois, Carter G. Woodson, George Washington Carver, Rosa Parks and many

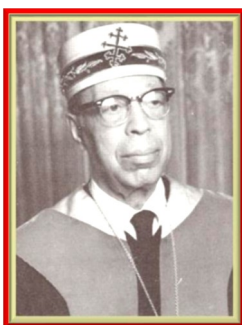
others. Their examples have inspired generations of young men and women into the ranks not only on campuses through BGLO but also in the community through Prince Hall Freemasonry. Together, they activated many citizens who helped to sustain the state of the African American community despite the struggles of race relations. Considering this, it is no surprise that several BGLO founders held direct ties to Prince Hall Freemasonry including:

- George Biddle Kelley, a founder of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, was a member of Mt. Moriah Lodge #25 of Troy, New York.
- Ezra D. Alexander, a founder of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, was a member of Central Lodge #1 of Indianapolis, Indiana.
- Ernest E. Just, Edgar A. Love and Frank Coleman, founders of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, were members in Lodges under the Jurisdiction of the District of Columbia. Just was a member of Corinthian Lodge #18 while Love and Coleman held membership in Pythagoras Lodge #9.
- A. Langston Taylor, a founder of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity was a member of Pythagoras Lodge #9 of Washington, DC.

Freemasonry, itself, is an extension

of the mutual aid and relief that was being done on college campuses. As such, it is a natural transition for one to move from the collegiate ranks to the ranks of Freemasonry.

The Scottish Rite is considered the University of Freemasonry and it is of great interest to note that several BGLO leaders were also active in the Rite at the same time. Illustrious Frank Summers served as



the 14th Grand Polemarch for **Kappa Alpha Psi** Fraternity while serving as Deputy for the Orient of Illinois. Illustrious

Sumner A. Furniss became a charter member of a Graduate Chapter of **Alpha Phi Alpha** in Indianapolis, Indiana while serving as Sovereign Grand Commander of the Northern Jurisdiction. The



double ties extend through other Sovereign Grand Commanders of the Northern Jurisdiction as well. Illustrious Russell Gideon and Illustrious Booker T. Alexander held membership in **Phi Beta Sigma**. Illustrious Algie S. Oldham held membership in **Kappa Alpha Psi**. Illustrious Melvin J. Bazemore

is a member of **Omega Psi Phi**. There are countless other examples of the same which helps to draw a link between the nature of the BGLO and the Scottish Rite.

The pursuit of knowledge is most-definitely a common factor. The collegiate-style curriculum of the Scottish Rite can easily be described as a University system within which BGLOs thrive. The character and determination required to complete a collegiate education must be of a high caliber to meet the rigorous demands of the educational system. Is this also not the case for the Scottish Rite whose Degrees, in actuality, are collegiate level courses on the specific areas of focus? The Rite, being diverse, is a conclave of like-minded individuals who have completed their coursework, at a minimum, through 32 Degrees of knowledge. With this in mind, the kindred spirit between the BGLO and the Scottish Rite, if stoked, can create a blaze that is wide enough to encompass all and create synergy that can be use for mutual improvement at a larger scale.

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George B. Kelley



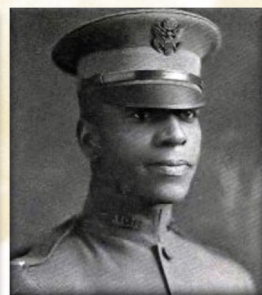
Ezra Alexander



Ernest E. Just



Edgar A. Love



Frank Coleman



A. Langston Taylor

Elevation is Not a Trophy

Elevation to higher ranks is considered a great honor to men with service at heart. For those who see it for what it actually is, they have a greater understanding of its purpose. Elevation is not a trophy. It is, in fact, the acceptance of a higher level of responsibilities.

I have served as Grand Treasurer, Grand Secretary and Grand Auditor in the Grand Lodge to which I belong and have come to understand that the salutations afforded are representative of graduated levels of responsibility. For example, a brother can only be styled Worshipful Brother if he has served as Worshipful Master of a Lodge. "Right" is added for those who have been elevated to perform specific responsibilities at the Grand Lodge level. "Most" replaces "Right" for those who have been elevated to the highest level of accountability for the organization.

For clarification, it is important to note that there is a difference between a responsibility (micro) and an accountability (macro) for an organization. Responsibility is one's ability to respond appropriately to a specific set of circumstances for a section of an account or plan. The ability of the manager to ensure fulfillment of the entire account is accountability. As a Right Worshipful Brother, countless hours of service were necessary to fulfill the various responsibilities associated with the elevation in rank. Much of this work went unseen but their lack of fulfillment would have negatively impacted the organization. As such, "Right" or "revered" is appropriate because of the importance of the labor required to conclude it. Self-accountability at the micro level produced the expected results.

Needless to say, it is common for

Worshipful Brothers at all levels to experience sleepless nights and endure uncomfortable situations in the name of service. The Most Worshipful Brother is the account manager who bears the entire burden though. Consider that when a Grand Lodge is not in session, the Grand Master is **fully accountable** for the corporation to all external entities. After all, taxes must be filed with the appropriate local, state and federal agencies for the corporation. The Chief Financial Officer (Grand Treasurer) may **respond** with assistance but the Grand Master must ensure the account is squared away. In cases of lawsuits, the Grand Master and the Grand Secretary will find their names on the complaint. While the Grand Secretary **responds** from a communications perspective, the Grand Master is actually the chief defender who must manage the crisis. So the crown can clearly become heavy with the full weight of accountability on its bearer. Hence, the nature of the salutations.

The salutations of the Scottish Rite prior to 1966 aligned similarly. The French term "Puissant" was used to denote power and the teachings of the 32nd Degree speak to the execution of power responsibly. The concepts of liberty, equality and fraternity promote the degree of equity between the terms "leader" and "servant". This can be measured in the degrees of the responses.

In order for one to effectively respond and commit their abilities to a purpose, a clear vision must be laid. The vision defines the account at the macro level so that individuals can respond appropriately to micro-level missions. Movement from the responses helps to define success because it is the movement that affirms power which is force in

action. So the director of the vision was not only "Puissant" but "Most Puissant". However, an amendment to the USC Constitution and General Laws in 1966 removed the "Puissant" salutations placing a focus on the salutation of "Sovereign".

One who has received the 33rd Degree becomes a Grand Inspector General, an honorary member of the USC. "Sovereign" is added for those who have been elevated from honorary to actual membership which commits them to respond to a higher level of duties in the Rite. Only Sovereign Grand Inspectors General may gain by election to higher office and only one member may become the Sovereign Grand Commander who holds full accountability for the Holy Empire.

Additionally, the salutation of "Illustrious" is also associated with actual and honorary members of the United Supreme Council (USC) along with Commanders-In-Chief of local Consistories. It means "admired for past deeds". "Most" is added for leaders who have been deputized to oversee Orients of the USC. As such, a Deputy or Overseer of an Orient is the "Most Illustrious Commander-In-Chief" of that Orient who reports to the Sovereign Grand Commander.

An enormous weight lies upon the crown of the Sovereign Grand Commander. The management of the Holy Empire is multi-faceted and international in scope with many moving parts. Success is measured by the responses to the missions that align with the vision that has been presented. Hence, the crown of the Sovereign Grand Commandery is a visionary's crown. It is distinguished from all others not as a trophy but as a signet of one who has accepted **full accountability** for the Holy Empire.

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