

CONFERENCE OF GRAND MASTERS

Brief History, Purpose and Mission

Presented by MWPGM Warren R. Whitley (DC)

On Tuesday, August 23, 1887, the forerunner to what is now called the Conference of Grand Masters, met in convention in the city of Chicago, IL. It was known as the National Masonic Convention. The Convention established a national bureau of information and selected a statistical secretary by the name of MWGM Joseph W. Moore (IL) who was also the host for the Convention. The Convention Chairman was MWGM Moses A. Clark (AR), and the Convention Secretary was MWGM B. F. Watson of (KS).

The duties of the Statistical Secretary included keeping a record of all of the grand officers of the several Grand Lodges as they were elected from year to year, a list of representatives of Grand Lodges, and make reports from time to time of important information that may come to his notice.

This Convention of Independent Grand Lodges which make up the Conference of Grand Masters today met in the hall of St. George Commandery, at the corner of State and 16th Streets, in Chicago. Their purpose was to deliberate over diverse matters of National and Masonic interest at that time. Further, they discussed certain questions of importance to the Craft, and to bring about a more friendly relationship among Colored Masons.

Some of the important subjects discussed were: “The True Status of Negro Masonry”, “Concurrent Jurisdiction of Grand Lodges”, “A Text Book or Digest of Masonic Laws”, “A Uniformity of Work”, The Analogy of Craft Masonry to the Christian Religion, and “The Formation of a National Supreme Grand Lodge”. Needless to say these subjects invoked some spicy debates. Any thing sound familiar?

The following Resolutions were adopted:

1. That a digest of Masonic Laws be prepared by a Committee of the Convention for the government of the Craft.
2. That they recommend to the various Grand Lodges to strike out the word “York” from their Constitution.
3. Recommended to the various Grand Lodges that only one Annual Communication be held for each Grand Lodge.
4. That a National Bureau for Masonic Statistics be appointed.
5. That it is unadvisable and un-Masonic to establish a National Supreme Grand Lodge, inasmuch as each Grand Lodge is a Sovereign Body in itself.
6. Recommend that all dual Grand Lodges in the same territory be united.

Does any of this sound familiar?

Of the twenty-six (26) Grand Lodges that promised to be presented there were present: Alabama, Arkansas, Colorado by Proxy, California, District of Columbia, Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Kansas, Louisiana, Missouri, Michigan, New Jersey, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia; in all twenty-one (21) Grand Lodges including Illinois. This delegation represented some 50, 000 Masons.

Led in a discussion by MWGM Samuel W. Clark (OH) a resolution was unanimously adopted by the Convention to denounce the establishment of a National Grand Lodge. Grand Master Clark was also acknowledged by the National Masonic Convention as the Colored Albert Mackey, or the standard of Masonic Laws among Colored Masons.

The Convention next met in Chicago, August 21, 1893. The President was PGM William Theodore Boyd, of Cleveland, (OH) and PGM Joseph Carter Corbin (AR) as Secretary. The MWGL of Illinois submitted an overture for a Grand Masonic Assembly in Chicago during the holding of the World's Fair in 1893, and the opening of a Masonic Headquarters during that time subject to limitation that said Assembly shall in no wise and to no extent presume to exercise any authority, whatever, over the Grand Lodges and that the legal representatives contemplated shall have no power to enter into any agreement not specifically authorized by their respective Grand Lodges

Topics of discussion at this Assembly included: Prerogatives of Grand Masters, Success of the Negro by being a Mason, Petition and Jurisdiction of Candidates, Constitutional Landmarks of the Order, Uniformity of Work, Rejected Candidates, National Grand Lodge, Masonic Relief, Perpetual Jurisdiction, and Legality of Negro Masonry.

Again the Masonic Convention resolved to denounce the recognition or the formation of a National Grand Lodge, to use every means to crush out such ideas as the existence of the same, and to pay no attention to men claiming to hail from the same.

According to the 1894 proceedings of the Independent Grand Lodge of Missouri, hosting the 1893 Masonic Assembly proved to be a financial burden for the Independent Grand Lodge of Illinois. The Grand Master of Illinois bankrupted the Grand Lodge by using all available finance without regard to requirements. A number of Grand Lodges and Grand Masters and distinguished brethren who were desirous of participating in the convention declined to take part when it was made known that the Grand Master of Illinois had disrupted the order by acting the part of headsman in the Craft.

A Masonic Congress of Independent Grand Lodges met in Cleveland, Ohio in 1899.

The Independent Grand Lodge of Ohio proposed to have a General Masonic Conference to address the National Compact. The Conference was held in Jacksonville, Florida, December 28, 1900.

In 1911, the Independent Grand Lodge of Connecticut was calling for a permanent Conference of Grand Masters. There was hope that the Grand Masters Conference would be held annually. The Conference was not organized until 1920, Cincinnati, Ohio.

The International Conference of Grand Master met in Washington, D.C. 1922. All Prince Hall Grand Lodges of the United States, Canada, and Liberia are eligible for membership in the Grand Masters Conference. This Conference is composed of Grand Masters, Past Grand Masters and Secretaries of the various Prince Hall Grand Lodges. Notice that only GM, PGM and Secretaries met. The Conference was now meeting annually in different Jurisdictions so as not to place a burden on one host.

The Conference of Grand Masters has had several noted Brethren of the Craft as Chairman or President of the Conference, i.e. Amos T. Hall (OK), John G. Lewis, Jr.(LA), Samuel T. Daniels

(MD), William B. Odom, Jr. (OR), Earl L. Bradford (LA), Morris S. Miller (MN) , Howard Woods (AR), Deary Vaughn (OK), William O. Jones (AL), Shelton D. Redden (MD) and now Wilbur Curtis (TX). I realize I may have missed a name you are looking for. For that I apologize.

In reading the information provided to me, I found many subjects discussed which were of interest to me and perhaps to you also. However, they were too numerous to put in this brief paper. I did find one of note that we pretty much follow coming from the recommendation of the Conference in the Nassau, Bahamas, 1981:

Recommendation No. 3: That we establish a Mission Statement. The Mission Statement was not developed by the Conference at this Convention.

Recommendation No. 11: Adopt uniform dress throughout the country – possible black or dark (no gray and blues) suits, black shoes, black sox (white for medical reason, if needed), white shirt, black tie, white gloves and aprons. Motion was carried.

Recommendation No. 13: Restudy the time schedule of the conference with a view of better utilizing the time of the conference participants, included, for example, should be discussion on Masonic protocol.” The motion carried.

The question now is have we strayed from the original purpose of the Conference of Grand Masters? To restate from the first meeting – “purpose was to deliberate over diverse matters of National and Masonic interest at that time. Further, they discussed certain questions of importance to the Craft, and to bring about a more friendly relationship among Colored Masons.”

I do not think we have strayed from the intent of this purpose in our thinking. However, the execution of this statement is questionable.

Subsequent purposes for the Conference just to name a few:

“To discuss together the role of the Freemason in the Great Society; and ways and means of enhancing the image of Prince Hall Masonry.” 1966

“To discuss, plan and project methods for building membership and expanding the service of Masonry to the community, state and nation.” 1968

“To discuss together the role of the Conference and its importance to Prince Hall Masonry.” 1972

In my personal documents the Mission Statement of this Conference has been stated in the front of the Official proceedings as far back as 1992, and continues through 2002 as best as I could determine. It states – “The mission of the Conference of Grand Master is to identify Masonic and Non-Masonic research subject(s). Present the product of that research for use by Jurisdictions so disposed, and publicize appropriate positions and issues at a press conference as desired and necessary.”

Some where along the line that Mission Statement changes to the following – “The Conference is an opportunity for jurisdictions to come together to discuss common ideas, share information and recommend procedures that will lead to consistency and promote Prince Hall Masonry by addressing issues that will insure the future of Prince Hall Masons throughout the world.” To the best of my knowledge this Mission Statement has not been officially changed by the Conference.

I should have first made it clear that I am not a historian. I must give credit to Worshipful Alton Roundtree, Editor of the Masonic Digest of the MWPHGL District of Columbia, and Worshipful Master of the David A. McWilliams, Sr., Research and Education Lodge UD, for gathering the

raw information. I think the Conference should charge someone to write such a document. There are volumes of information on this Conference from many diverse sources.