

# JAMES R. MORGAN III

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HISTORIAN. GENEALOGIST. AUTHOR.

## Our Sacred Orders: African American Fraternalism and Genealogy

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### 1. What is a Fraternal Organization?

Fraternal organizations can be defined as secular groups of individuals who come together around a unique and usually secret initiation ritual, oath ceremony, and philosophy for the moral and physical uplift of the membership and/or community. The pageantry, ritualized mythology and initiation style of learning render these organizations as a separate category from other less complex volunteer organizations and societies. As a whole fraternal organization came into existence as a means of creating social welfare programs at a time when government agencies were not as involved in this field as they are today. The ritualized drama and bureaucratic organizational structure also served as training grounds for the upwardly mobile class as a means of refining organizational skills such as public speaking and bookkeeping. Elected officers often were able to hold a significant sway over local area politics due to their influential positions and connections. Some fraternal organizations are exclusively male; some exclusively female and still others offered equal membership to both genders. Most male only societies eventually adopted female auxiliary groups, typically limited to female relations of male members.

### 2. Types of Fraternal Organization

\*A fraternal organization might show characteristics of multiple categories or have a related body to service different functions.

- **Social and Burial Societies** – For persons of a particular social class, economic status or residents of specific geographic locations. These organizations used some other association as a center of union for the membership. (Columbian Harmony Society)
- **Benevolent / Service Clubs** – Focused on charitable giving and initiatives as well as welfare style financial relief for members and their families (The Phyllis Wheatley Women's Club)
- **Ethnic / Cultural** – Groups designed to preserve the heritage of a particular ethnic group, typically for those who are residing outside of their mother country but not in all cases. (New York African Society)

- **Trade Unions** – Organizations whose membership is made up exclusively of those of a particular trade or occupation (Fraternal Order of Police)
- **Mystical / Religious** – Organizations whose primary focus is spiritual enlightenment. Groups of this category may or may not be sanctioned by a specific religious denomination. (Freemasons)
- **Political** – Groups who are organized around a specific, tangible political goal such as abolition. (Knights of Liberty)
- **Criminal** – Groups created to perform illicit and illegal actions for the purpose of profit (Mafia)

### **3. Understanding African American Fraternal Organizations: Why are they important to family historians?**

Fraternal organizations are important to family historians because their records, history and practices can provide a unique look into the social lives and social standing of individual ancestors and the communities in which they inhabited. A common practice of the African American press was to carry fraternal columns and pages with local and national happenings. A common practice was to publish election results of local societies and sometimes the entire history of annual convention proceedings. Another common occurrence was for newspapers to publish instructions and assembly times for members who wished to participate in burial rites for a recently deceased member. Many organizations published national or local publications or adopted existing periodicals as their official news outlets.

- #### **4. Fraternal Symbolism and Standard Practices** (Burials, Insurance Records Etc...)
- Remember to note any symbolism on a headstone as even the slightest variation in symbolism may open up new doors of understanding about an ancestor's life.
  - Properly identifying and preserving fraternal regalia, documents, jewelry and other remains is very critical to this process. Consult with family members, local historians or the internet if you are not sure of items significance.

#### **5. Select List of Black Fraternal Organizations (City and Year Established)**

- Prince Hall Freemasons (Boston, M.A., 1775)
- Free African Society (Philadelphia, P.A., 1787)
- African Union Society (New Port, R.I., 1787)
- Brown Fellowship Society (Charleston, S.C.)
- The Female Benevolent Society (New Haven, C.T., 1804)
- The New York African Society for Mutual Relief (New York, N.Y., 1808)
- Moral Reform Society (Philadelphia, P.A., 1835)
- Union Benevolent Society (Lexington, K.Y., 1843)
- Grand United Order of Oddfellows (New York, N.Y., 1843)
- Knights of Liberty (St. Louis, M.O., 1846)
- Independent Order of Good Samaritans and Daughters of Samaria (New York, N.Y., September 14, 1847)
- United Brothers of Friendship & Sisters of the Mysterious Ten (Louisville, K.Y., August 1, 1861)

- Independent Order of St. Luke (Baltimore, M.D., 1867)
- International Order of the Twelve Knights and Daughters of Tabor (Independence, M.O., 1872)
- Mosaic Templars (Little Rock, A.R., 1882)
- Ancient Egyptian Arabic Order Nobles of the Mystic Shrine (Prince Hall Shriners, Chicago, I.L., June 3, 1893)
- The Phyllis Wheatley Women's Club ((Nashville, T.N., 1895)
- Supreme Camp of the American Woodmen (Denver, C.O., 1901)

## **6. Suggested Reading List**

- Black Square and Compass by Joseph Walkes
- In the Company of Black Men by Dr. Craig S. Wilder
- Prince Hall Life & Legacy by Charles H. Wesley
- The Alabama Knights of Pythias of North America, South America, Europe, Africa and Australia: A Brief History by Marilyn T. Peebles
- West African Secret Societies: Their Organizations, Officials and Teachings by F.W. Butt-Thompson
- History of the Mosaic Templars of America: Its Founders and Officials edited by A.E. Bush & P.L. Dorman
- History of the Shrine (1893-1993) by Joseph Walkes

## **7. African American Fraternal and Benevolent Society Resources**

### **Wilbert M. Curtis Texas Prince Hall Library & Museum**

Attn: Benny Tucker, 3433 Martin Luther King  
Freeway Fort Worth, TX 76119

This Library and Museum was established by the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Texas with a goal of becoming a premiere research facility on African American Freemasonry, particularly within the state of Texas. The Library and Museum is open to research by members and non-members alike. Genealogical information is available. Holdings mostly pertain to African American Freemasonry and other fraternal/benevolent groups such as the Oddfellows and the Knights of Pythias in the state of Texas or surrounding states. Donations of artifacts and records are appreciated as well. This facility does have a genealogist on staff.

### **John Ellington Jr. Library**

1000 U Street, Washington, D.C. 20001 (Third Floor)  
202-462-0272

As the official library of the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia, this library is open to researchers during normal business hours and by appointment. Holdings include a vast array of documents pertaining to Prince Hall Freemasonry in the nation's capital and the surrounding area. This library has external archival holdings at Howard University: Moreland Spingarn Research Center. To access external holdings, permission must

be granted from library staff and an appointment made in advance. Staff is available to assist with genealogy research

**Tulane University: Amistad Research Center**

6823 St Charles Avenue, New Orleans, LA 70118

Phone:(504) 862-3222

**Hours:** Monday-Friday 7:30AM-6:00PM

The official archive of the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Louisiana houses a vast array of archival material on African American Freemasonry in the state of Louisiana to include material from Francophone and Creole masonic organizations.

**Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture**

<http://www.nypl.org/>

515 Malcolm X Blvd, New York, NY 10037

Hours 10:00AM-6:00PM

The premiere resource center for African American life and culture, the Schomburg Center is home to the Harry A. Williamson Collection on Prince Hall Freemasonry. A finding aid index of the collection is available for download at:

[http://archives.nypl.org/uploads/collection/pdf\\_finding\\_aid/Sc\\_Micro\\_R-3984.pdf](http://archives.nypl.org/uploads/collection/pdf_finding_aid/Sc_Micro_R-3984.pdf)

**The Columbus Black History Museum and Archives**

315 8<sup>th</sup> Street, Columbus, GA 31901

Phone: 706-507-3466

The Columbus Black History Museum and Archives is the repository for the African American history of the Chattahoochee Valley. Staff available for genealogy research . Emphasis is placed on local fraternal groups within the exhibits of the museum.

**Mosaic Templars Cultural Center**

<http://www.mosaictemplarscenter.com/>

501 West 9<sup>th</sup> Street, Little Rock, A.R. 72201

(501) 683-3593

**The Iowa Masonic Library**

<http://grandlodgeofiowa.org/library-2/>

813 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue S.E., Cedar Rapids, I.A. 52402

319-365-1438

One of the largest masonic libraries in the world, the Iowa Masonic Library houses the largest collection of masonic proceedings in North America. Collections include a vast array of African American masonic records which can be scanned and e-mailed for a fee.

