

# B.C.'s black Masons are finally recognized by their white brothers, but it was a long time coming

By SARAH EFRON

When George Jolly gets ready for church this Sunday, he'll put on a pair of white gloves and tie a blue and white apron over his black suit. Then he'll hang a pendant with two crossed keys around his neck.

With his ceremonial trappings he'll stand out among the members of the congregation at St. John's Strawberry Hill United Church, in Delta, but that's the point. Jolly will be visiting the church to raise awareness of an organization most Vancouverites don't even know exists—a black Masonic group called the True Resolution Lodge—as part of a special service organized to mark black history month.

The origins of True Resolution Lodge No. 16 F. & A.M. (Free and Accepted Masons) go back to the United States, where Jolly grew up. In 1775, one year before the signing of the Declaration of Independence, 15 black men joined a lodge of masons in Boston, made up primarily of Irish soldiers. One of them, Prince Hall—believed to have been born in Barbados—became the first Grand Master of black Freemasonry.

When the Irish Regiments left with the British the following year, the Grand Lodge of Ireland gave Prince Hall and his brethren permission to form African Lodge No. 1. The parallel order spread across North America and later to the Caribbean and Europe, and there are now at least 18 Prince Hall lodges (the name by which they're now known) in Canada—the majority in Ontario.

In Vancouver the Prince Hall affiliated True Resolution Lodge is the oldest surviving black organization in the province: it was founded in 1919 and reports to the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge F. & A.M. in Seattle.

Historically, white Masonic groups refused to recognize Prince Hall masons as legitimate. It wasn't until 1996 that the predominately white Grand Lodge of B.C.

established fraternal relations with True Resolution Lodge. Most mainstream lodges in North America have recognized the black masons, but in Ontario and various states in the American South, the two groups still don't recognize

each other.

"Racism hasn't changed," says Jolly. "It's still there—it's just a little more subtle. Old ideas and ideologies die hard."

Paul Moseley, who originally hails from Barbados, first heard about the lodge after telling a friend he wanted to contribute to black society in Canada.

The friend invited him to become a member.

"Being denied a lot of mainstream things, blacks gravitated to the church and the black masons," says Moseley, sitting in a sparse room with glass block windows in the Masonic hall at Rupert Street and 29th Avenue. "We're not exclusionary. It's just that black men having no choice followed Prince Hall because they couldn't get into anything else."

Both groups share the normal Masonic trappings. They wear ceremonial aprons purchased from the bizarrely named Young & Naughty—a Masonic regalia shop on Pender Street, named after the original owners, Mr. Young and Mr. Naughty. (Jolly's crossed-key pendant is a Masonic symbol demonstrating that he's the group treasurer.) Each group devotes much of its efforts to charity—True Resolution gives out scholarships and hosts an annual

Kiddie's Christmas party and Mother's Day celebration. In recent years the shroud of secrecy that surrounded both black and white masonry has begun to dissipate and despite some recurring conspiracy theories, most people today place the masons somewhere between the Lions Club and a your local cribbage group.

"It's like football teams," says Moseley, as organ music drifts from upstairs where the women in Prince Hall's sister order, the Order of the Eastern Star, are performing their rituals. "So our football team was formed though Prince Hall. They all play the same game and have the same rules and same ideology." Moseley says True Resolution's charity efforts aren't directed exclusively at black people. In fact, he says three of the 22 members of True Resolution Lodge are white.

Moseley also hopes the group's activities will help change negative stereotypes of black men.

"A mason is a gentleman. He's trustworthy. You can assume a man is of good character if he's a mason."

*Sarah Efron is a Vancouver writer.*



**George Jolly in his Masonic regalia, with Michelle Henry, who belongs to the Order of the Eastern Star.**