

Prince Hall Masons Grand Lodge

History On An Auburn Avenue Corner



Prince Hall on Auburn Ave

On a lot at the corner of Auburn Avenue and Hilliard Street sits a 3-story, brick building. At first glance, it is not particularly ornate or unusual. Still, the building has architectural touches that make it obvious that it is a longtime neighborhood fixture. Its yellow-beige façade is marked by a trio of arched windows at street level, bookended by a pair of arched, recessed doorways. Perhaps its most decorative feature can be found hanging off the side of the building. It is a small sign that reads

“Prince Hall Free & Accepted Masons.” This’ building is the home of Atlanta’s Prince Hall Masons Grand Lodge.

History

The organization known today as the Prince Hall Masons is a fraternal organization for African Americans. The group’s roots in Georgia trace back to the decade after the Civil War. In 1870, the first Grand Lodge of African American Freemasons in Georgia was established in Savannah. Soon after the turn of the twentieth century, the Lodge relocated to Atlanta.



John Wesley Dobbs "The Grand"

Once in Atlanta, initially, the Prince Hall Masons were based out of the Herndon Building on Auburn Avenue. By the time John Wesley Dobbs, a civic and political organizer in Atlanta was elected the Lodge’s leader – or Grand Master – in 1931, plans were underway to build a new, more permanent meeting place. Dobbs would lead the multi-year fundraising efforts and see the project through to its completion.

A New Building

In September 1937, amid the turmoil of the Great Depression, the building’s cornerstone was laid. Due to waning funds and membership, it would be another three years before the three-story building was fully completed. Described by one report as “modern in every detail,” the building featured hardwood floors and steam heat.



Prince Hall construction completed in 1955

Though the Masons’ name is on the building, they have never – by any means – been its only tenant. Over the years, a variety of businesses have called the Prince Hall Masons Building home. These have included the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company, a dentist, and a barber shop. In the building’s earliest years, more than one dozen Masonic lodges – in addition to Prince Hall – utilized spaces in the building. The Prince Hall Building also served as a meeting place for the African American community in Atlanta.

In the years after World War II, after paying off the original building, planning – and fundraising – was set into motion for an addition to the Lodge. By 1955, construction was complete and tenants had begun moving in to the new space. One of these tenants was not a new lessor, but one with a history in the building dating back to 1940. The Walker Beauty Salon was part of the beauty empire of a woman named Sarah Breedlove, or, as she became known, Madam C.J. Walker. Beginning in the first decade of the twentieth century, Walker had made her fortune developing and selling cosmetics and hair products for Black women. In 1940, an Atlanta Walker Beauty Salon opened in Auburn Avenue-facing offices in the Prince Hall building. But, when the new addition was completed, it moved to a Hilliard Street-fronting space. The salon remained there until after the turn of the twenty-first century. Today, the space is a salon and a Madam C.J. Walker museum.



Madam C.J. Walker

First Black-owned Radio Station



WERD Radio, America's 1st black-owned radio station

Another Lodge tenant was a radio station owned by Jesse Blayton Sr. An accountant, bank president, and Atlanta University professor, 1949, Blayton purchased a 1,000 watt Atlanta radio station. WERD AM 860 would go down in history as America's first radio station to be owned by an African American. Upon purchasing WERD, which was managed by Blayton's son, Jesse Jr., the programming was changed to feature music geared toward a Black audience. The announcing team, featuring Jack "Jockey Jack" Gibson, was immensely popular among listeners. In 1968, nearly twenty

years after purchasing the station, Blayton sold WERD to new owners.

The SCLC

For more than four decades, the first floor of the Prince Hall building was home to one organization. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference – or SCLC – began in the wake of the Montgomery Bus Boycotts in 1955 and 1956. From its founding, the SCLC and its leaders advocated for change through nonviolent protest. Led for part of its early history by Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., the organization has played a part in such landmark events as the 1963 March on Washington, the 1965 Selma Voting Rights Campaign and the 1967 Poor People's Campaign.



Andrew Young and MLK Jr.

Over the years, the SCLC has worked to bring attention to a wide range of issues such as economic inequality, voter education, and employment. The enduring civil rights organization still advocates for social justice, only from a new location. In 2007, the SCLC left its Prince Hall headquarters for new offices next door.



WERD and SCLC signage

The Prince Hall Masonic Building has been a fixture on Auburn Avenue for more than eight decades. In that time, Auburn Avenue has seen its share of changes. And, while the Lodge has seen tenants come and go, it remains standing and is still used by the Masons.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, places that were part of the life and work of Martin Luther King Jr. became collectively known as the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site and Preservation District. In 2017, the District's boundaries were expanded to include the Prince Hall Masonic Building. There are now plans to preserve the building so that visitors can learn about another aspect of the legacy of Dr. King and of Auburn Avenue.

- Takeaways:**
1. Three historic institutions housed within one Auburn Avenue building
 2. Role of John Wesley Dobbs
 3. Building was home to history-making WERD radio station.
 4. Building was headquarters of SCLC
 5. Unlike some Auburn Avenue buildings, it is still used by an original tenant.

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