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Out of the Attic

Virginia's first Prince Hall Masonic Lodge

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Universall Lodge No. 1 is being recognized this month with a historic plaque in front of its current location on East Oxford Avenue. Formally organized on Feb. 5, 1845, it was the first Prince Hall Masonic Lodge established in the State of Virginia. Much of its founding can be traced to three residents of Alexandria.

In 1835, William Dudley, Benjamin Crier and Sandy Bryant were made Master Masons in St. George Lodge, No. 32, in Liverpool, England. By 1838, all three lived in Alexandria, which was part of the District of Columbia at the time. They were admitted as members of Social Lodge in Washington, D.C. However, the three men and Rev. John Thomas, who also lived in Alexandria, applied to Deputy Grand Master Daniel Smith, of Hiram Grand Lodge, Pennsylvania, for a charter to establish a Lodge in Alexandria, which was granted on Feb. 5, 1845.

The new Lodge was known as Universal Lodge, No. 10, of Alexandria, D.C., with Brother George Sims, W.M.; Edward Evans, S.W.; Dennis Bourbon, J.W.; James Evans, S.D.; Ephraim Bancroft, J.D.; Richard Garnett, treasurer; Joseph L. Gipson, secretary; William Dudley and Benjamin Crier, stewards and Sandy Bryant, tiler.

Universal was the only Lodge in Virginia open to African Americans for approximately 20 years. It held its meetings on the second floor of a house on South Royal Street in the section of Alexandria then known as Hayti, despite routine intimidation against these black masons. If it wasn't for the aid of Brother John Hancock, a white police officer and fellow Mason, the Lodge might not have been able to communicate regularly.

Early in 1848, Master of Social Lodge No. 1 John E. Thomas, issued a call to two other Lodges which had been chartered in D.C., Universal No. 10, now of Alexandria, and Felix No. 17 of Washington, D.C., to meet in a special convention with Social Lodge No. 1 for the purpose of organizing a Grand Lodge for the District of Columbia.

The Lodge fought for the basic human rights of its members and others, for respect from others and to assert a degree of human dignity. The plaque reminds us of how hard African American institutions had to fight for these basic human rights that many of us assume as a given today.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.