

All of the Supreme Councils, both mainstream and Prince Hall Affiliated, claim adherence to the 1786 Constitution. Yet it is essential to remember that Scottish Rite Masonry itself did not arrive on American soil until 1801, when it was formally established in Charleston, South Carolina. For men of color, that story would unfold later.

In 1881, five separate Supreme Councils, composed of men of color, merged into two United Supreme Councils: one for the Northern Jurisdiction and one for the Southern Jurisdiction. Among those original five was the Southern and Western Supreme Council, organized around 1875. That body eventually split from the Southern Jurisdiction and continues to exist today, though it no longer includes Prince Hall Masons among its membership.

A significant turning point came in 2012. That year, the United Supreme Council, Southern Jurisdiction, Prince Hall Affiliated, abandoned its original organization and Holy See in Washington, D.C., and sold the Cathedral of the United Supreme Council for the token sum of ten dollars and other “valuable consideration,” as recorded in the bill of sale. In its place, Sovereign Grand Commander Deary Vaughn organized a new body in Memphis, Tennessee the United Supreme Council, AASR, SJ, commonly referred to as USC-TN. All assets of the Southern Jurisdiction were transferred to this new corporation, which deliberately excluded the words “Prince Hall Affiliated.” A new building was also purchased in Memphis under the name Double Eagle Corporation, with Deary Vaughn himself listed as the sole shareholder.

By 2015, a scandal erupted. Certain officers of the USC-TN had misappropriated more than \$5 million. Later that October, the newly elected Council of Administration even voted to absolve those officers of responsibility in official documents. That decision became the breaking point. A large number of Sovereign Grand Inspectors General, holding the Active Grade, voted to withdraw from USC-TN and return to the historic Holy See in Washington, D.C.

At that time, the corporate charter of the original Southern Jurisdiction, PHA, had already been revoked by the District of Columbia government. While it technically could have been revived, the leadership of the reconstituted body made a deliberate choice not to do so. Reviving the old charter might have forced an explanation about what became of the proceeds from the sale of the Washington headquarters, appraised at roughly eight million dollars, an answer that remains elusive to this day. Instead, they created a new incorporation, just as USC-TN had done.

From that point forward, the reconstituted body became known as the United Supreme Council-DC, Prince Hall Affiliated.

When we speak of legitimacy in Prince Hall Freemasonry, it must be emphasized that legitimacy does not flow from recognition by mainstream Masonic organizations. Prince Hall legitimacy stands on its own. The Statement of Unity, signed on September 7, 2022, was an affirmation of mutual recognition, not a grant of legitimacy. For decades before, mainstream Masonry dismissed every Prince Hall body, whether Craft, York Rite, Scottish Rite, or Shrine, as “clandestine.”

History tells a different story. In 1914, white masons who were Shriners filed a federal lawsuit seeking to strip Prince Hall Masons of the right to operate as Shriners. The logic of that case

could easily have been applied to every branch of Prince Hall Masonry. Yet in 1929, the United States Supreme Court ruled in favor of Prince Hall Masons, affirming their legal right to operate as Shriners and setting a precedent that validated the lawfulness of Prince Hall organizations.

Fast-forward to 2015: USC-TN filed two separate \$32 million lawsuits attempting to block USC-DC from functioning. One was filed in Washington, D.C., against USC-DC and the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of D.C.; the other in Virginia against USC-DC and the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Virginia. In both cases, USC-TN claimed it possessed a “patent” from France, granting it exclusive rights to be the only legitimate Prince Hall Supreme Council. These lawsuits highlight the long-standing battles over legitimacy, authority, and property within the Prince Hall Scottish Rite tradition.

USC-TN spent more than \$2 million in legal fees on these cases. In 2018, for reasons never fully explained, then Grand Master of Virginia Paige Cherry paid over \$100,000 to USC-TN to settle their case. The very next day, the federal court in Virginia dismissed the entire lawsuit filed by USC-TN against all remaining parties. Meanwhile, the Washington, D.C., courts dismissed all of USC-TN’s claims. In both venues, the courts affirmed the right of USC-DC to operate as a legitimate Scottish Rite Supreme Council and continue its work. This ruling was reaffirmed by the United States Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals.

Even today, there remain around five Prince Hall Grand Lodges that do not have fraternal relations with mainstream Grand Lodges. Yet the Prince Hall Masonic bodies have never needed or required such recognition to determine their legitimacy or legacy.