

HENRY PRICE

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Denslow's 10,000 Famous Freemasons, states Henry Price is sometimes referred to as "The Father of Freemasonry in America." Masonic records from the 1700's are not always "well-kept" but Bro. Price's activities are clearly documented in this STB. --Editor

In the year 1733 a tailor from Boston, Henry Price by name, received a warrant from the newly formed Grand Lodge of England appointing him as "Provincial Grand Master of New England and Dominions and Territories thereunto belonging." This authorized him to constitute all brethren then residing in New England into one or more Regular Lodges. This deputation was signed by the then Grand Master of Masons in England-Lord Viscount Montague.

Who was Henry Price and how did he come to America? How and when did he become a Mason? In the next few pages we will be introduced to Price, to Boston at that time period and to Freemasonry and the first chartered Lodge to open in the Western hemisphere. Let's start with Henry Price.

Henry Price was born in or around the city of London in 1697. He was there apprenticed as a Tailor for he was "admitted to the Freedom of the Company of Merchant Tailors by Patrimony on the 1st of July 1719." In 1723 he arrived in the Port city of Boston, where he entered the Tailor's trade. In 1730 he opened his own shop on what is now Washington Street between State and Water Streets. He remained there until 1740 where, after a fire, he moved to the corner of Bedford and Washington Streets. In 1744 he opened a second shop on State Street. Price had entered a new phase of his life, that of being a shopkeeper.

Price was so successful at his trade that in 1750, six years after opening his shop on State Street, he retired and so far as can be ascertained never again engaged in any occupation. He entered the world of Real Estate and had holdings in Boston, Hull, Cambridge, Woburn, Concord, Sherborne and Townsend in Massachusetts, as well as some holdings in Rhode Island, New Hampshire and Connecticut.

The city of Boston at that time was small by today's standards only having around 16,000 citizens. It was a city of commerce and industry where ships from all over the world made port. Boston was a great center of commerce where people from all over New England came to trade. So successful a businessman could hardly have escaped notice and in fact in 1733 Price was made a cornet in the Governor's Guards with the rank of Major by Governor Belcher. In 1764-65 he was a member of the legislature where he met Samuel Adams. He also met John Hancock and Thomas Cushing.

Price had married a 17 year old girl named Mary Townsend who had one child, a girl named Mary, who was the apple of Price's eye. Unfortunately his wife died and in the year 1752 he married for the second time to Mary Tilden. Death struck a double blow to Price because in 1759 his wife died and in 1760 his daughter Mary died. In 1771 he met and married for the third time. Price at this time was 75 years old and Lydia Randall, his third wife was a young widow with one son. Together they had two daughters, Mary and Rebecca, a remarkable feat for a man of Price's age.

Price became a Mason in England before he left to come to Boston in 1723. Exactly what Lodge he joined is not known although he probably joined one of the four Lodges that in 1717 formed the Grand Lodge of England. He is recorded in the year 1730 as a member of Lodge #75 meeting at the old Rainbow Tavern in London. Price's name is number fifty three on the list in the minute book at the Grand Lodge of England. The Lodge is still in existence and is now called Britannic Lodge #33 meeting at the Grand Lodge building on Great Queen Street in London. Price was active in Masonry from the day he joined and made many Masonic friends on both sides of the Atlantic.

In the year 1733 Price was in London on a business trip. While in London he made application to the Grand Master of Masons in England, Lord Viscount Montague, for a Deputation as "Provincial Grand Master of New England and Dominions and Territories thereunto belonging." This was not the first deputation issued to an American by the Grand Lodge of England. On June 5, 1730, a deputation was issued to Daniel Coxe of New Jersey by the Duke of Norfolk who was then Grand Master. Coxe was named as a Provincial Grand Master of New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania. Unfortunately there is no evidence that he ever exercised this commission. Although there were operating Lodges in those states none were added to the rolls of the Grand Lodge of England under Coxe's name. Coxe did not receive his deputation until January of 1731 when he was recorded as attending the Quarterly Communication of the Grand Lodge held at the Devil Tavern within the Temple Bar. It is here that Coxe is referred to as "Provincial Grand Master of North America." It would seem that this deputation expired on June 24, 1732 and mention is made of Coxe thereafter.

Price returned to America and on Monday July 30, 1733 met with several brethren at the Bunch of Grapes Tavern on King Street (now State Street) in Boston. He read his deputation and organized the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts. He appointed Andrew Belcher Deputy Grand Master and Thomas Kennel and John Quan as Grand Wardens. The first order of business was to make eight candidates Freemasons. The second act of business was to receive and act on the petition of eighteen brethren, all Free and Accepted Mason who wished to be formed into a regular Masonic Lodge. The petition was granted and in accordance with all the ancient customs,; provided for in the book of constitution Price constituted the first regular (chartered) Lodge in North America.

It might be interesting to visualize this scene. R. W. Price sitting in the East, on his left sits the Deputy Grand Master, and in the South and West the Grand Wardens in the stations. The petitioners and their chosen officers in the center of the assembly. In due and ancient order those officers are presented and invested with the implements of the office they will hold. To each Price gives a solemn charge and then greets the Lodge as a whole admonishing them to uphold

the book of Constitutions and Regulations written by Anderson in 1723. It would have been interesting to have been there, the first meeting a regular and duly constituted Lodge und the English Grand Lodge, and the first meeting of the Provincial Grand Lodge of New England.

In the years that followed, Price carried o his duties as Grand Master. In 1734 Benjamin Franklin, visiting Boston, met Price and requested his authorization to open Lodges Pennsylvania through the Grand Lodge England. In 1735 Grand Master Price issued dispensations for Lodges in Portsmouth, New Hampshire also Annapolis and Halifax, Nova Scotia.

R. W. Price served as Grand Master for three years, and in 1736 the records show that he "resigned." The question arises-Who did he resign to? The only logical answer would be the Grand Master of England who issued the original deputation. On June 24, 1736, at the Feast of St. John, the brethren of Massachusetts decided to petition England to appoint Robert Tomlinson as Grand Master. His commission arrived in Boston on April 20, 1737 and he was installed by Price. Fate had not finished with Price however, for in 1740 R. W. Tomlinson died and the office reverted to the Immediate Past Grand Master--Price. He held office for four years until a commission appointing Thomas Oxnard as Grand Master came from England.

Unfortunately Oxnard died in 1754 and again Price was asked to fill the office. In 1755 Jeremy Gridley was appointed as Provincial Grand Master. Gridley served the Grand Lodge for ten years dying in office. Once again the Grand Lodge turned to Henry Price who served as acting Grand Master until installing John Rowe in January of 1766. This marked the end of Price's officership, but not the end of his career in Masonry. Price attended 13 quarterly Communications after 1766, traveling 46 miles each time to do so. The last Communication he attended was January 28, 1774 which was also the last held before the siege of Boston caused all meetings to be suspended.

It would seem that dotage never overtook Price for at 75 years old he had married a widow and had two daughters. He had moved to Townsend, Massachusetts near the New Hampshire border where he owned several hundred acres of land. He operated a farm, mill shops, and wood lots. He played an active roll in town government and in 1764 was elected to represent Townsend in the state Legislature. While chopping wood in May of 1780 Price met his end when the ax slipped and gave a mortal wound. Price was 83 years old.

Price was buried in Townsend and in 1888 the body was moved to its present location within the same cemetery. M. W. Henry Endicott, Grand Master of Massachusetts and Governor of the state, dedicated a marble monument at his gravesite. The original gravestone was removed and is now on the third floor of the Grand Lodge building on Boylston and Tremont Streets in Boston. Price's life is aptly summed up in the last sentence on his marker--"An Honest Man, the Noblest Work of God."