

LIFE OF RICHARD ALLEN, RELIGIOUS & CIVIL RIGHTS LEADER FROM ENSLAVEMENT TO FREEDOM



BIRTH & FAMILY

Richard Allen was an exceptionally religious civil rights leader. He overcame enslavement and prejudice to transform American history and culture.

Richard Allen was born in Philadelphia on February 14, 1760. At the time of Allen's birth, his parents were enslaved by Philadelphia lawyer and judge Benjamin Chew.

While enslaved, Allen had no last name and was referred to as Negro Richard.

Chew sold Allen, who was seven or eight years old at the time, as well as his father, mother, and three siblings to a farmer in Delaware named Stokely Sturgis. Allen reported that his mother had additional children while working for Sturgis.

Unlike the wealthy Chew, Sturgis had financial difficulties and debts. He eventually sold Allen's mother and three of her children. This left only Allen, one brother, and one sister on the Sturgis farm. There is no further documentation of his father's fate.

Chew built the Cliveden House (6401 Germantown Avenue, Philadelphia, PA) as a country home in 1767. In 1777, it was the site of the American Revolutionary War's Battle of Germantown. There is no record of Allen working at the Cliveden House, but Chew owned several plantations in Delaware where Allen may have resided with his father, mother, and three siblings. Today, the Cliveden House is owned by the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

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"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness..."

These words were written as the opening to the Declaration of Independence in 1776, during which time Allen, his family, and millions of Black people were still enslaved in America.

Frederick Douglass, one of America's most known abolitionists, memorialized Allen at the Chicago's World Fair by stating, "Among the remarkable men whose names have found deserved place in American annals, there is not one who will be longer remembered or whose memory will be more sacredly cherished ... than will the name and character of Richard Allen."

CONVERSION TO METHODISM

During this time, it was generally forbidden for enslaved people to attend religious events. Enslavers believed that such meetings would "ruin the slave" and make him or her lazy. However, Sturgis allowed those he held in bondage to attend religious meetings in the woods after work hours. Allen and his brother understood that their work as enslaved persons would come under scrutiny by attending worship services, so they worked extra hard to maintain this privilege and to prove the enslavers wrong. The brothers were successful at their work and attended the religious meetings for years. It is possible that Allen learned to read and write at these meetings, as there is evidence that Allen was proficient at both.

These religious meetings were Allen's introduction to the Methodist religion. Spiritual growth and freedom for himself and others became the driving force in Allen's life. In 1777, at the age of seventeen, Allen converted to Methodism saying,

"All of a sudden, my dungeon shook, my chains flew off, and glory to God, I cried. My soul was filled. I cried, enough for me - the Savior died."

Sturgis eventually allowed Allen to invite Methodist preachers into his home. Freeborn Garrettson, an itinerant Methodist preacher who freed his slaves, preached to Allen and Sturgis. As these religious meetings continued, Sturgis became convinced that enslaving people was wrong.



Early days of Methodism

OBTAINING HIS FREEDOM

Due to the Methodist teachings, Sturgis feared that he would die and be "found wanting". He agreed that Allen and his brother could earn money to buy their freedom by working outside of the farm. Sturgis asked for either \$2,000 continental dollars or 60 pounds of gold and silver before issuing papers as proof of manumission (the freeing of an enslaved person by the enslaver, rather than by government action). Sturgis allowed Allen and his brother to pay for their freedom in installments over a five-year period.

Fearing that Sturgis would either die or sell him due to financial hardship before

obtaining freedom, Allen worked several jobs, including sawing wood, driving a salt wagon, and working in a brick yard. It is also during this time that Allen began to become an itinerant Methodist preacher, preaching to Black and White people.

Allen signed his freedom agreement in January 1780 and paid it off in August 1783, about three and a half years later. At this time, Allen chose his name – Richard Allen – to signify his free status. It is unknown why he chose Allen. It has been suggested that he named himself after a friend of Chew, William Allen.

No one knows precisely how much \$2,000 continental dollars would be worth today because there is no conversion rate. When the colonies belonged to Great Britain, they used pounds and shillings. Leading up to and during the American Revolution, the colonies often acted as independent states issuing their own paper money. There was no formal banking system. And, the continental dollar soon lost much of its value. What is certain is that the price of freedom was a significant amount of money, which Allen did not have.

LIFE AS A FREE MAN
Sometime after purchasing his freedom, Allen moved to Philadelphia where he and Absalom Jones established the Free African Society (FAS) in 1787. FAS assisted people in finding work and homes, provided literacy and financial education, and assisted in community projects.

One of Allen's magnificent skills was his willingness to become an ombudsman for Black labor needs. He trained young men to chimney sweep, cut wood, clean yards, paint, and farm. One of his most notable chimney sweep customers was President George Washington, as Philadelphia served as the nation's capital at the time. Allen also invested in rooming houses to give these new start-ups a place to live.

Allen married twice. In 1791, Allen wed his first wife Flora who, like Allen, was formerly enslaved. She became ill and remained so until her death on March 11, 1801.

Allen married Sarah Bass not long after Flora's death. Like his first wife, Sarah was a strong Black woman who obtained her



Sarah Bass

freedom. She was a helpmate and confidant to Allen as well as a pillar of the community. Sarah organized the work and managed the rooming houses for Allen's rapidly growing church. She also established new church services. Richard and Sarah Allen had four sons, Richard Jr., James, John, and Peter, two daughters, Sarah and Ann. Sarah died in 1849.

Allen remained a lifelong reformer and civil rights advocate. He condemned racial prejudice in the North and urged Americans to follow through on the promises of the Declaration of Independence by treating all Americans equally. Through pamphlets and newspaper articles, Allen attacked slavery in the United States. In 1794, he printed an antislavery appeal to congressmen meeting in the temporary federal capital of Philadelphia that proclaimed,

"If you love your children, if you love your country, if you love the God of love, clear your hands from slaves [and] burthen not your children or your country with them."

After the death of George Washington in 1799, Allen published a eulogy highlighting the former president's will, which promised to manumit enslaved people at his home, Mount Vernon – an act that all slaveholders should emulate, according to Allen. In September 1830, Allen assembled a national meeting of Black reformers at Mother Bethel Church that helped revive the abolitionist movement in the United States.

Richard died at his home on Spruce Street in Philadelphia on March 26, 1831, at the age of 71. He was laid to rest under Bethel Church and later moved to a tomb in the current church building on the same site.

LIFE OF RICHARD ALLEN, RELIGIOUS & CIVIL RIGHTS LEADER

A CHURCH OF HIS OWN

RICHARD ALLEN'S JOURNEY TO A CHURCH OF HIS OWN

began with the walk out from St. George's Methodist Church in Philadelphia.

As an itinerant preacher, Allen preached in Delaware, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. He often traveled by foot. In 1786, St. George's Methodist Church invited Allen to preach at their 5:00 AM services. In a short time, Allen's preaching attracted many free and enslaved Black people.

Initially, Black and Whites worshiped together without restriction. However, Methodist churches throughout the nation were increasingly turning hostile toward Black members and instituting what would be known as 'segregated pews.' St. George's was not exempt from this practice. On a Sunday morning in 1787, Absalom Jones and Allen entered St. George's for worship. As they knelt to pray in the section reserved for Whites, the officers of the church attempted to forcefully pull them from their knees to move them to the section reserved for Black worshippers.

This was the proverbial "last straw." Allen, Jones, and other Black congregants walked out of St. George's Methodist Church in protest of the racial discrimination. They vowed never to return and committed to having a church of their own.



Richard Allen's Achievements

THE BEGINNING OF MOTHER BETHEL AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH

THE BLACKSMITH SHOP CHURCH

Allen purchased a lot at 6th and Lombard Streets in 1791 for eighteen shillings. This now the oldest parcel of land in the United States continuously owned by Black people.

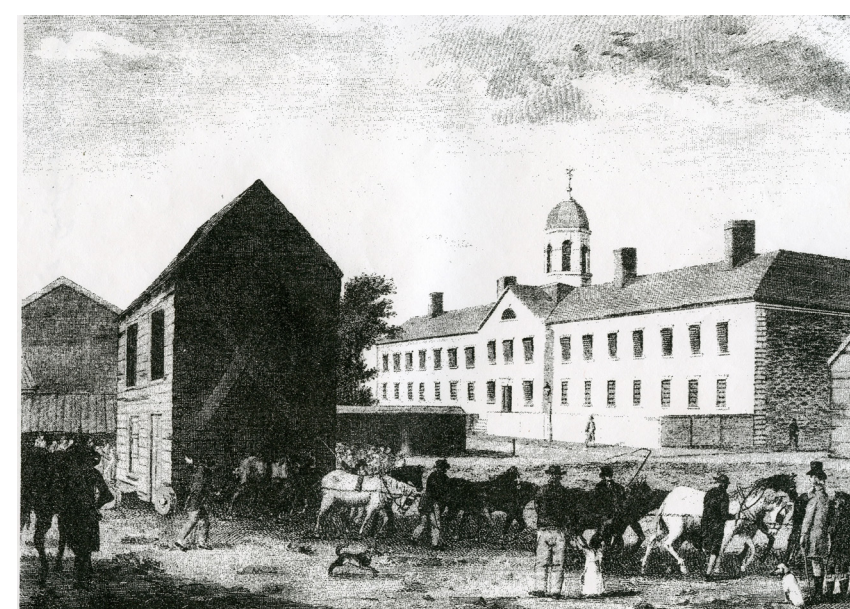
The original church structure was constructed from an old blacksmith shop frame purchased by Allen. It was pulled to the 6th and Lombard Street lot by a team of horses. Allen hired carpenters to repair the frame and furnish it as a house of worship. An anvil was the first pulpit and lectern. The blacksmith shop church was not as small as one might think; it housed up to 150 members.

The church building was consecrated on July 29, 1794. Bishop Francis Asbury, a leading official in American Methodism, presided.

The Founding of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church

Because Black Methodists across the mid-Atlantic region encountered racism and desired religious autonomy, Allen called for a "General Conference" at his church. At this conference, Allen and other Black leaders formed a new denomination – the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. Allen was ordained on April 11, 1816, as their first bishop. And, Allen's church became Mother Bethel AME Church, the "mother" church of the nation's first fully independent Black denomination.

On June 11, 1799, Allen became the first Black man to be ordained as a deacon by the Methodist Episcopal Church. Although Bethel Church was still under the control of White Methodists, Allen's sermons appealed to many and the church's membership grew to 457, forcing Allen to enlarge the church building.



An image depicting what the Allen's blacksmith shop church might have looked like.

1760
Born to enslaved parents

1780 - 1783
Purchased his freedom and chose the name Richard Allen

1791
Purchased the lot at 6th and Lombard Streets, now the oldest parcel of land continuously owned by Black people

1794
Purchased a blacksmith shop where he established Bethel - a Methodist Episcopal Church for Black worshippers

1831
Passed away at age 71

1777
Converted to Methodism

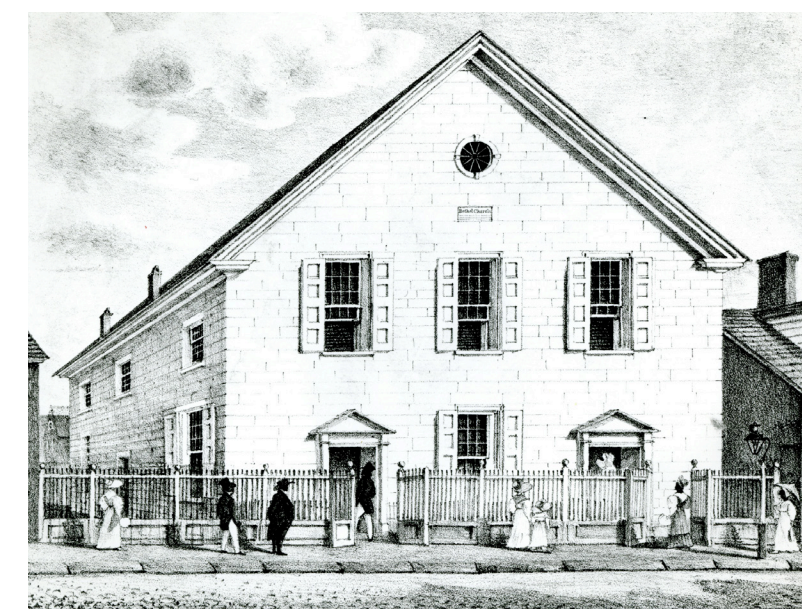
1787
Co-led the "walk out" from St. George's Methodist Church, located in Philadelphia

1793 - 1794

- Co-organized Black people in Philadelphia to help the sick and dying during the Yellow Fever epidemic
- Richard Allen and Absalom Jones became the first Black writers to earn a copyright for the Yellow Fever pamphlet, "A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People during the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia"

1799
Ordained a deacon of the Methodist Episcopal Church

1816
Ordained a Bishop at the General Conference of 1816 held at Bethel, where the great African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church was born



Roughcast church building

THE ROUGHCAST CHURCH

The second, larger church structure was built on the same site in 1805. To build this church, four additional lots were purchased by church trustees for 700 pounds: two lots adjoining the church on the north side and two lots on the south side.

The second church was a crude, roughcast cinder block structure and was a station on the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad was the network of people, secret routes, and safe houses used by freedom seekers escaping enslavement.

In 1816, Allen successfully sued in the Pennsylvania Supreme Court for the right of his church to exist as an independent institution.

It was at this church's pulpit that Allen preached his last sermon.

THE BRICK CHURCH

The third church structure was built in 1841, ten years after Allen's death. This church was built of brick and stone for \$18,000 dollars. Bishop Daniel Payne described the interior as more elegant than the earlier buildings, which were free of ornaments like most Methodist churches.



Brick church building

THE CHURCH BUILDING TODAY

The fourth and current church structure was proposed in 1889. Trustees of Mother Bethel purchased the adjacent property to accommodate a larger building. The building was designed by renowned Philadelphia architects Hazlehurst & Huckel. Upon its dedication in 1890, the church was described as an elegant and splendid building.



Present day church building

On May 30, 1974, Mother Bethel AME Church was declared a National Historic landmark. Mother Bethel AME Church's strong and vibrant congregation continues Allen's legacy today.

THE AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL (AME) CHURCH TODAY

To spread the Word of God at home and abroad, Allen sent his son to Haiti to start an AME mission. Those who came after Allen followed his example and sent missionaries to Canada, Sierra Leone, South Africa, and the West Indies before 1900. Presently, there are 20 districts of the AME denomination located on five continents and in 40 countries including the Virgin Islands, Suriname-Guyana, Windward Island, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica, Bermuda, England, France, Liberia, and South Africa. The global membership of the AME Church is approximately 2.5 million members, and it remains one of the largest Methodist denominations in the world.

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