



Mother Bethel AME Church, Philadelphia, in its current building, erected in the 1880s on the same property where the first building, a blacksmith's shop, was brought and refitted to serve as a house of worship in the 1790s.

Richard Allen: from the Free African Society to Bethel AME Church

by Rev. Jean Williams (2010)

Editor's Note: Rev. Jean B. Williams is an ordained minister (retired) with the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. A long-time resident of Eastern Pennsylvania, currently residing in Lancaster County, she speaks and writes frequently about the history of the AME Church.

I am certain that I will be accused of institutional treason by my friends and colleagues in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, but I have read enough original documents and copies of documents to support the facts I present when discussing the founding of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, historically referred to as “Mother Bethel.”

The same winds of revolution and freedom that were blowing across the colonies in the late 18th and early 19th century were being felt by “people of color” as well as everyone else in the land. African-Americans were becoming increasingly sensitive to the hypocrisy of the public outcry by settlers from Europe, especially England, against political oppression – yet those same protestors were taking comparable positions in the “house of God.”

Patrick Henry’s declaration of “liberty or death” was heard in the streets and “no taxation without representation” was heard across the land. More than 3,000 African-Americans had fought for freedom in the Revolutionary War, and that segment of the population was sensitized to the inequities of its treatment.

Methodism, the offspring of a new religious movement which had its beginnings in England, demonstrated discontent with the

established church which led to open revolt, fueled by the colonists' desire for independence. It (Methodism) was one of the religious and social expressions of protest against 18th century doctrinal standards of worship and life. Methodism was an independent movement which sought to turn attention away from the forms and ceremonies of an Anglicanized ecclesiastical institution to the spiritual needs of the individual, on one hand, and all groups and classes on the other.

African Americans were admitted to the Methodist Societies (as congregations were designated in that era) from their beginnings, and they had responded enthusiastically. The objectives of Methodism were to bring the gospel to the lowly and unfortunate, whether in fine buildings, private homes, barns, the streets or the fields. As their membership numbers increased, African-Americans were relegated to certain sections of the houses of worship (galleries or the rear), given special periods for their services, and required to wait during racially mixed services, such as communion, until the European-Americans had been served.

In a period when the independence of America had been realized, when the philosophical controversy over the Rights of Man was active, and when the doctrines of the French Revolution were being prepared, it should not be considered strange that someone like Richard Allen, influenced by the social and religious revolution in the American colonies, would be willing to demand his manhood rights in American life as well as in his spiritual worship.

FIRST EFFORTS TO ORGANIZE

In 1786, Richard Allen arrived in Philadelphia having been invited to hold a series of preaching services. He preached at 5:00 AM, and initially on Sunday evenings. He chose to stay in the city and organized a class of 42 followers, with whom he soon felt the necessity for the erection of a house of worship for the African-Americans. As he began to declare that need, the idea was poorly received by many who misunderstood his motives, or failed to grasp the spirit of the times.

As early as 1787, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones were involved in efforts to form some kind of religious society for African-Americans, but because of the lack of unanimity of religious sentiments, they decided to form, without regard to religious tenets, a society to provide support in sickness, and to benefit widows and fatherless children. This society was organized in a private house on April 12, 1787. The Free African Society records, dated May 17, 1787, list as founding members

Absalom Jones, Richard Allen, Samuel Boston, Joseph Johnson, Cato Freeman, Caesar Cranchell, James Potter and William White. The meetings were held monthly at the house of Richard Allen until May, 1788, when the growth of the Society demanded a larger accommodation. The house of Sarah Dougherty was used from May to December 1788, and the group moved to larger quarters at the Friends Free African School until 1791. The name was changed to the African Friendly Society after St. Thomas African church was incorporated in 1796.

For more than a year, no mention of religious exercise or of religion appeared in the minutes of the meetings. A committee was appointed in September 1788 to discuss how the meetings should open. It was decided on November 15, 1788 that opening time would be 7 PM, and that there should be a period of silence for fifteen minutes during which there was to be prayer and meditation; this reflected evidence of the spirit of the Quakers on the Society. This action demonstrated a complete change of attitude which usually accompanied the meetings of the Methodists of the day in emotional religious demonstrations. This change was not taken without the meeting spending "some time in considering the proposal."

Richard Allen realized that the organization of a church was not central to the purpose of the Free African Society, and his name is not recorded in the meetings of the Society for the next six months. On May 16, 1789, the committee reported on the "abrupt manner" in which Richard Allen had left the meetings and his effort to bring about a meeting of the members contrary to the rules. The committee stated it had been decided to pay him another visit "in brotherly love," and to report to the next meeting. On June 20, 1789, the committee brought in its report on Richard Allen, which read as follows:

We, the Society of Free Africans in the City of Philadelphia having according to discipline established among us, long treated with Richard Allen, one of our members, for attempting to sow division among us, and endeavoring to convince him in his error of so doing, and of the breach of good order which he has hereby committed, but finding him refractory and declaring that he no longer considers himself a member of our Society, do find it our duty to declare that he has disunited himself from membership with us by refusing to submit himself to the rules of the Society and to attend our meetings, he is accordingly disunited until he shall come to a sense of his conduct, and request to be admitted a member according to our discipline.

The committee signing the report consisted of William White, Caesar Worthington, Caesar Thomas, Henry Steward, Peter Miller, Nathan Gray and Mark Stevenson. The name of Absalom Jones does not appear in this report of the committee. He was sympathetic with Richard Allen and a warm friendship existed between the two men which was unbroken by the different religious associations to which they devoted the remainder of their lives. Richard Allen was not persuaded to renew his membership in the Free African Society, although he later cooperated with the members in the organization of an "African church."

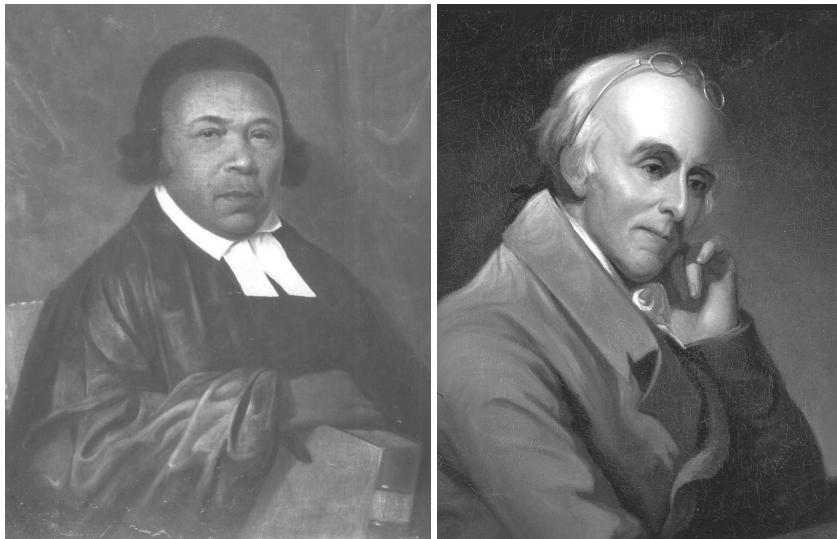
THE FIRST AFRICAN-AMERICAN CONGREGATIONS

In September, 1790, it was decided that there would be regular periods of religious services. An effort was made to obtain a special room for holding these services. This room was secured from Joseph Sharpless, and the first meeting was held for this purpose on January 1, 1791. A silent recess was held in the beginning of the meeting, in accordance with the practice of the Society of Friends. The members filed into the room at seven o'clock and took their seats. A period of silence was observed for fifteen minutes.

Shortly afterwards, the decision was reached to organize a church and to purchase a lot for its erection. A subscription list was drawn up and those who were kindly disposed were asked to contribute to the erection of an African Church. Bishop White, Benjamin Franklin, and Benjamin Rush encouraged and supported the Society and its plans. Richard Allen, although not re-admitted to membership, seemed interested in the plan for church organization. He said that a committee consisting of Absalom Jones, William Gray, William White and himself was appointed to raise the funds.

The subscription list grew and both white and colored people placed their names on it. "Here," recorded Richard Allen, "was the beginning and the rise of the first African Church." This was the first African church in Philadelphia, but independent Baptist churches had been established in Savannah, Georgia and Petersburg, Virginia, prior to this date. The Methodists endeavored to interfere with the plans of the Negroes, but through the assistance of Dr. Benjamin Rush and Mr. Robert Ralston they continued with their projects.

An address to the public under the title, *To the Friends of Liberty and Religion in the City of Philadelphia*, was issued by the "Representatives of



Left: Absalom Jones who became the leader of the first African-American congregation in the Episcopal Church; Right: Dr. Benjamin Rush, one of Philadelphia's leading citizens, who actively supported early African-American efforts to organize themselves.

the African Church in Philadelphia" on August 27, 1791. This statement called upon the people of the city to assist them in the building of a church by making contributions to the cause. Robert Ralston, one of the leading white citizens, was designated as the treasurer, and the subscriptions were to be received by Absalom Jones, William White, Mark Stevenson, William Gardiner, William Wiltshire, Doras Jennings, Henry Stewart, and William Gray. No effort was made in the address to show the denominational choice of the society. They still regarded themselves as "the scattered and unconnected appendages of most of the religious societies of the city."

The minutes of the Free African Society, in 1791, show that a special meeting was held to adopt a plan of church government. Richard Allen says that there were only two who were in favor of the Methodists: Absalom Jones and himself. The majority voted in favor of the Church of England. Quakers and Episcopalians had influenced the members of the society for some years. Absalom Jones then agreed to follow the will of the majority. Richard Allen stood alone and remained loyal to his conviction. He was convinced that the Methodist denomination would

suit the masses of the colored people better than any other denomination. He therefore refused to abide by this decision of the larger number and parted company with the Free African Society. Said he of this conviction:

I was confident there was no religious sect or denomination that would suit the capacity of the colored people as well as the Methodist, for the plain and simple gospel suits best for the people, for the unlearned can understand, and the learned are sure to understand; and the reason that the Methodists are so successful in the awakening and conversion of the colored people is the plain doctrine and having a good discipline. But in many cases the preachers would act to please their own fancy, without discipline, till some of them became such tyrants, and more especially to the colored people. I informed them that I could not be anything but a Methodist, as I was born and awakened under them and I could go no further with them for I was a Methodist and would leave them in peace. I would do nothing to retard them in building a church, as it was an extensive building, neither would I go out with a subscription paper until they were done with their subscription. The Methodists were the first people that brought good tidings to the colored people. I feel thankful that I have ever heard a Methodist preacher. All other denominations preached so high flown that we were not able to comprehend their doctrine. Sure I am that reading sermons will never prove as beneficial to the colored people as spiritual or extempore preaching.

Richard Allen also reported that he was offered the pastorate of the church, which was proposed to be formed of the majority of the members of the Free African Society. This was planned as a Protestant Episcopal Church, and Allen says that he declined the offer, also upon the ground that he was a Methodist.

DOCUMENTING BETHEL'S ORIGIN

The Dr. Carol R. George's account of the seating arrangement of people of color becoming physical at Old St. George's Church seems to be reasonably accurate except for the date used, which is 1787. The recently discovered financial records of the construction of the gallery in the church indicate that the gallery was completed in 1793, probably begun in 1791.

A review of the event follows: At St. George's Church in Philadelphia, in 1793, while celebrating the Holy Eucharist, an usher or sexton tried to forcibly remove Absalom Jones from a prayer position in the gallery area to which African-American worshipers had been recently assigned. (Prior to this time the African-American members of the church had occupied seats on the main floor with the European-Americans.) Mr. Jones begged the officer to allow him and his friends to remain unmolested until the close of the service, but the man was unyielding. Fortunately the prayer was soon completed and the group of African-Americans, "feeling grieved and outraged at the insult got up and left the church" and according to an account attributed to Richard Allen, they never entered St. George's Church again.

Shortly after this incident took place the African-Americans who withdrew met and agreed to establish their own house of worship and to follow the Episcopal (Church of England) tradition. Understandably, they wanted no identity with the Methodists. Richard Allen and Absalom Jones did not agree on this decision, but chose different courses of action. Allen left the group while Jones elected to remain and become their spiritual leader. This group became St. Thomas Episcopal Church, the first African-American body of that denomination.

Extracts from the original minutes of Bethel Church were recorded by one of Richard Allen's sons (probably John) and published in the October 14, 1837 issue of *The Colored American*. They read as follows:

May 5, 1794: A number of us citizens of Philadelphia, descendants of the African race, met together at the house of Richard Allen, in order to consult upon the best and most eligible means to provide for ourselves a house to meet in for religious worship, separate from our white brethren for reasons hereafter mentioned. Robt Green, Joe Houston, Anthony Robinson, John Allen, Rich Allen, Thos. Martin, Sol'mn (sic) Brittenham, Prince Pruece.

Phila., May 13, 1794: At a stated meeting of the committee it was unanimously agreed to proceed to prepare the frame for the purpose and that frame be put in order to move next Saturday. Bro. Robert Green, for which he rendered, resigned as a member of the committee and Bro. Philip Johnson was chose in his stead.

Phila., May 20, 1794: At a stated meeting of the committee, it was thought necessary to call for the assistance and council of our white

brethren and Bros. W. McKean and Richard Moseley were nominated as assistant brethren to counsel us in the mode of organization, and as to the plan of the house and the form of the deed.

Phila., June 3, 1794: Seven persons chosen trustees to serve til Easter Monday, June 1796: John Morris, Philip Johnston, York Eyeres, Wm. Hogan, Richard Allen, Anthony Roberts and John Allen.

June 10, 1794: At a stated meeting the Articles of Faith were read in paragraphs and approved of, except the 6th Article, which ran thus: "That we admit none into close connection or to be enrolled on our books as members, but those who are decedents of the African race. – Instead therefore we have inserted the following words – That although we consider every child of God a member of the mystical body of Christ, yet in the political governance of the church, we do prohibit our white brethren from electing or being elected into any office among us save that of a preacher or public speaker.

June 17, 1794: At a meeting of Trustees it was agreed, as Bishop Francis Asbury was expected up in a few days, to postpone our organization until his arrival.

Sunday, June 29, 1794: The church was opened and dedicated for divine worship by Bishop Francis Asbury, The Reverend Mr. Murrell, and the Reverend Mr. Dickens.

Tuesday, July 1, 1794: At a meeting of the Trustees after deliberation on various subjects, it was agreed that the church should be called "Bethel Church" (Genesis 28:19), that a sexton be appointed and a regular record kept of all marriages, baptisms and burials in the congregation.

Phila., Nov. 4, 1794: The Trustees have tho't (sic) proper and agreed that all and every one of them shall visit each member of the Church once a month, and for to give them such cordial and wholesome advice, both for their souls as well as their bodies and also to administer prayer with them, particularly to the sick.

Phila., Dec. 23, 1794: The Trustees have agreed that no slave or slaves shall have the use of the bearers, without their owners being answerable for the payment of the use of the bearers prices for the use of the bearers, 3s 9d.

Richard Allen (1760-1831), from a portrait hanging at Old St. George's Church, Philadelphia. The exodus he led from St. George's resulted in the formation of Bethel congregation and, later, the AME Church. Questions of dating these events have vexed historians.



There were a Preamble & Articles of Faith, referred to as A Public Statement (Bishop Arnett described it as a "Declaration of Independence"), issued November 3, 1794. Note the following:

WHEREAS, from time to time, many inconveniences have arisen from white people and people of color mixing together in public assemblies, more particularly in places of public worship, we had thought it necessary to provide for ourselves a convenient house to assemble in, separate from our white brethren.

1. To obviate any offence (sic) our mixing with our white brethren might give them.
2. To preserve as much as possible from the crafty wiles of the enemy, our weak-minded brethren, from taking offense at such partiality as they might be had to think contrary to the spirit of the gospel, in which there is neither male nor female, barbarian nor Scythian, bondman nor free, but all one in Christ Jesus.
3. That we might the more freely and fully hold the faith in unity of spirit and bonds of peace together, and build each other up in the most holy faith. Therefore,

We have associated to meet under the following Articles and Regulations:

Article 1 - We, whose names are hereto subscribed, in the name and fear of God, do unite ourselves in gospel fellowship and brotherly love.

Article 2 - We do acquiesce and accord with the rules of the Methodist Episcopal Church, for our church government and discipline, and with their creeds and articles of faith.

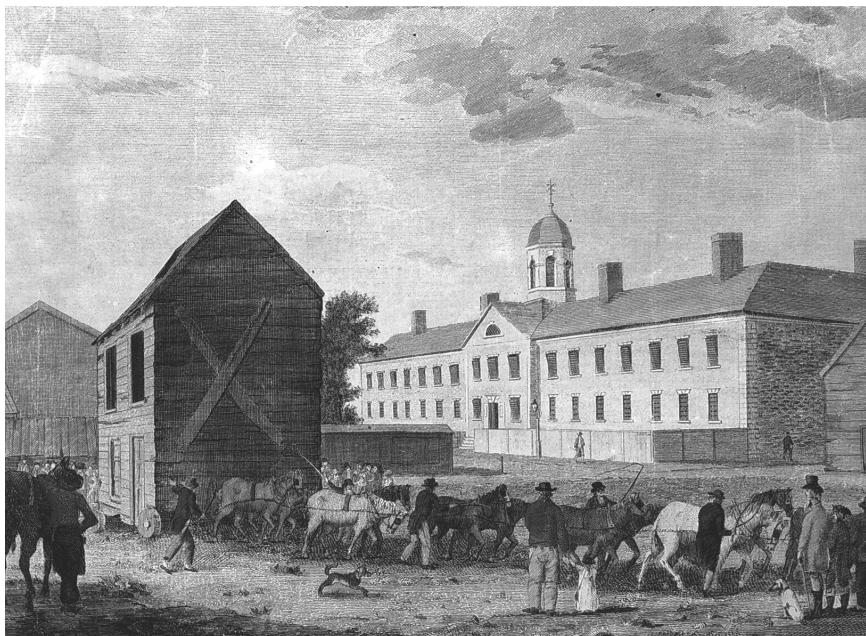
(Articles 3, 4 and 5 were omitted from this document published in *The Colored American*. Vol. 1, Oct. 14, 1837, page 3.)

Article 6 - That we admit none into close connexion with our classes to be enrolled as members on our books, with capacity to vote, but descendants of the African race: nevertheless we do not mean or intend anything wilfully or mentally bordering on schism (sic). Contrary thereto, we rejoice in the prospect of mutual fellowship subsisting between our white brethren and us, and in reciprocally meeting each other in our most private means of grace as visiting brethren-viz; bands, classes, love feasts.

Article 7 - That if it shall please God to call forth among us, any person or persons endowed with gifts and grace to speak for God, we, by our representatives, shall present him or them to the Bishop, for either Elder, for ordination, etc.

Article 9 - That the mode of divine worship and administering ordinances be retained as now in use, with the liberty of extempore, prayer, praise and speaking reserved to any that are moved thereto by the spirit of God.

Article 10 - That as we have by this union in some measure have discriminated ourselves, we think... to declare that we have no other view therein but the Glory of God and the peace of the church-by removing what was in a measure treated and esteemed as a nuisance on one hand, and an insult on the other by endeavoring, through grace, to avoid the appearance of evil, and to seek peace with all men, especially them that are of the household of faith. Therefore we pronounce ourselves a branch of the (sic) African American Methodist Episcopal Church in the name of the Holy Trinity.



An engraving believed to depict the transportation of the blacksmith shop building to 6th and Lombard Streets, where it was remodeled into Bethel's first church building. (Image courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia)

A number of other dates are significant for early African Methodist Episcopal Church history, among which are:

October 10, 1791 - Richard Allen and his wife Flora, purchased a lot from Mark and Mary Wilcox at 6th & Lombard Streets, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

May (6-12) 1794 - Purchase of the blacksmith shop. Referred to as "frame" to be moved to the lot at 6th & Lombard Streets the next Saturday (Owned previously by Mr. Sims).

July 17, 1794 - St. Thomas African Church was dedicated.

December 13, 1794 - Richard Allen deeded the lot at 6th & Lombard Streets to the Trustees of the (sic) African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Preachers were to be assigned to Bethel by the Elder at St. George's, and this provision was the weak link in the chain of the relationship. Some European-American preachers who were assigned to Bethel were unsympathetic and insensitive to the situation, and acted accordingly. When the officers of the new society appealed to the Methodist Conference for relief, and insisted on being part of the decision-making process, they were rebuffed by the Conference administration. Legal proceedings were instituted and, after several decisions that emphasized the semi-autonomous nature of the Bethel Corporation to the Methodist Conference, the African-American congregation succeeded in establishing its legal and religious independence. This was finally accomplished in January 1816, when a Pennsylvania Supreme Court decision denied the request of the pastor of St. George's Church for a writ of mandamus, in order to give him control over Bethel's pulpit against the wishes of the congregation.

Three months later, Richard Allen convened a conference of most of the African-American religious leaders (ministers) of the day. It was referred to as a Manhood Conference in Christianity. It would seem that only those who followed Methodism were invited. The conference was called for the purpose of organizing a strong, unified body to direct their religious affairs. Based on the principle, "In unity there is strength," these men from various sections of the eastern seaboard states discussed the pros and cons of Allen's vision and, in a few days, accomplished the organization of what we know today as the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Richard Allen's belief in Methodism as a spiritual force that would help to meet the needs of the people of color was unswerving in two areas: a satisfying faith in a Divine Power and upward mobility (opportunities) in the everyday world. He showed great determination not to be moved when it seemed that no one was willing to help him make his vision a reality. This sort of faith that almost single-handedly organized a religious denomination that has produced men and women of note, is still needed as time passes by.

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