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'If You Love the God of Love...' How a Slave Became a Black Founding Father of America

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PHILADELPHIA – From his young years, Richard Allen knew the humiliating and dehumanizing pain of being a slave. Born in 1760, his entire family was sold from his first master to another. And when that second master fell on financial hard-times, he divided the family by selling Richard's mother and three of his siblings to another plantation.

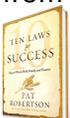
Then the teenager known as "Negro Richard" went on in toil and drudgery with just one of his brothers and sisters still with him. That's when he met the Lord Jesus Christ when listening to the preaching of an abolitionist pastor. He and his brother decided their best Christian witness would be to serve their master all the more and with excellence.

Christianity & a Slew of Odd Jobs Lead to Freedom

Richard then got his slave master to listen to that preacher too, and his master also came to know the Lord. One of his Christian deeds was to offer Richard his freedom within five years if Richard could pay for that freedom. Throwing himself into odd jobs for cash, Richard managed to buy his way out of slavery in just one and a half years.

He educated himself and became an itinerant preacher in the mid-Atlantic states, changing his name from Negro Richard to Richard Allen. He thought soul-saving would now be the major mission of his life. But he also frequently advocated for an end to the enslavement of the colonies' 700,000 black people, even as America was fighting for its liberty from Britain.

A Methodist Episcopal church in Philadelphia asked Allen to preach on a more regular basis. His sermons became so popular that black people began to flood the church to overflowing. The church built a new balcony area and then tried to force the African Americans to worship there, separated from their white Christian brothers and sisters. It literally picked some blacks up off their knees and dragged them away from praying with those whites.



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Allen and many of his fellow congregants decided to walk out of that church. He decided they needed their own house of worship.

Former Slave, Now Landowner & Church Founder

Dr. Peter Lillback founded and heads up the Providence Forum, a group that wants to keep in Americans' hearts how much God and faith figured into the founding of their nation and the forming of its values.

Lillback said of Allen, "This now former slave who's been educated is going to establish a church that reaches out to the African Americans."

The popular pastor had earlier purchased land in 1787 with the help of George Washington and Declaration of Independence signer Dr. Benjamin Rush.

Allen eventually bought a blacksmith's shop, and in 1794 had it dragged by horses to this property, which has become the piece of land continually in the possession of African Americans longer than any other real estate in the US. He turned that blacksmith shop into a church, meant to be for blacks only so they wouldn't have to deal with the degrading prejudice of whites and being pushed around by them in the holy space of a church.

But white Methodist leadership in Philadelphia fought back and demanded control over aspects of Allen's church. He finally took them to court and what's come to be known as Old Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church won its independence.

This became the nation's first major African-American church. Then Allen convinced several other black congregations in the region – who also wanted to be free of racist overseers – to join with his church. In 1816, they became the African Methodist Episcopal Church, America's first independent black denomination and oldest formal institution in the US for African-Americans.

Allen was named its first bishop. The AME now has 2,500,000 members in more than 7,000 congregations in 39 countries spread across five continents. And Allen's Old Mother Bethel is still a lively church within that denomination.

'If You Love the God of Love...'

Those weren't Allen's only firsts. He was the first black activist invited into a US president's home. He was the first African American to write a copyrighted pamphlet; the first black to write a eulogy for George Washington (and the only person at that time to write of Washington emancipating slaves).

"If you love the God of love," he wrote in 1794, "clear your hands from slaves, burden not your children or country with them."

Allen also helped put together the first convention of African American activists. Conventions became a major place for blacks to push for reforms, abolition and civil rights.

He and fellow reformer Absalom Jones formed the Free African Society to benefit blacks. And he made his own church a major place to educate African Americans and help them improve their place in the young nation. That church harbored more than 30 Jamaicans who'd escaped their slave masters. It became an early stop on the Underground Railroad and helped finance it. 



He went on to influence major black reformers in the 1800s like Frederick Douglass and such civil rights activists in the 1900s as Martin Luther King Jr.

Both Sides Used the Bible

While slave owners were using

the Bible to justify slavery, Allen was using that same Bible and the Declaration of Independence to battle against racism and men owning their fellow men.

Frederick Douglass went so far as to say that what Allen preached about freedom and equality for his fellow African Americans formed "a new Declaration of Independence."

Richard Newman wrote a book about Allen, entitled *Freedom's Prophet*, in which he argued Allen has every right to stand in the very front rank of America's black founding fathers.

Newman writes that Allen and these other black activists, "...struggled mightily to solve the American dilemma: racial oppression in the land of the free. They published antislavery pamphlets, challenged racial segregation in emancipating Northern states such as Pennsylvania and claimed America as their own."

Allen Still There Today

The church that he founded loved Allen with a love that wouldn't let go, even in the face of his death in 1831. He's entombed in Old Mother Bethel's basement.

"There's a crypt at the bottom that commemorates this founding father of faith," Peter Lillback said.

Even before he founded that church, Allen, his ally Absalom Jones, and many of their fellow black Christians showed God's love in one of the greatest displays as all of Philadelphia – at that time the nation's capital – passed through the valley of the shadow of death in 1793.



Lillback said of that year, "The yellow fever epidemic breaks out and people are dying. Some 5,000 people died."

Dr. Benjamin Rush remembered an earlier yellow fever epidemic in a southern city and that the city's blacks appeared to be much less susceptible. So as whites, including the new President George Washington, fled the capital city in droves, Rush implored Allen, Jones and their friends to minister to the sick and dying and remove from the city or bury the rapidly-growing ranks of infectious corpses.

'Showed the Best of the Gospel in Courage & Faithfulness'

As Lillback put it, "Guess who's taking care of all the people – the dying and the sick – and preserving their property: the African Americans."

But it turns out Rush was wrong. African Americans were not less susceptible. Nearly 400 of them died, many sacrificially giving their lives to serve the sick.

"And it is a beautiful story of their commitment in Christian faith to serve a community that was in crisis," Lillback said.

Such were the people at the core of Allen's first church and the giant AME denomination that would grow from it.

Lillback said of them, "These African Americans showed the best of the gospel in courage and faithfulness, and they launched a movement that has touched millions of people through the years, right here from Philadelphia."



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