



Schomburg Ctr. for Research in Black Culture



Rev. Richard Allen

The Origins of the African Methodist Episcopal Church

THE FIRST ORGANIZED BLACK DENOMINATION IN THE U.S.

in Richard Allen, *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen*, 1833 __EXCERPTS

Born enslaved in 1760 in Philadelphia, Richard Allen purchased his freedom at age 21. He joined the Methodist church and for several years traveled and preached from New York to South Carolina. Returning to Philadelphia, he joined St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church to serve as preacher to its black members. In 1793, responding to increased discrimination by white church leaders, Allen left St. George's with other black members to form the first black Methodist church, named Bethel. Over two decades later, in 1816, Allen led the formation of the first organized black denomination in the United States, the African Methodist Episcopal (A. M. E.) Church.

A number of us usually attended St. George's Church in Fourth street; and when the coloured people began to get numerous in attending the church, they moved us from the seats we usually sat on and placed us around the wall, and on Sabbath morning we went to church and the sexton stood at the door, and told us to go in the gallery. He told us to go, and we would see where to sit. We expected to take the seats over the ones we formerly occupied below, not knowing any better. We took those seats. Meeting had begun and they were nearly done singing, and just as we got to the seats, the elder said, "let us pray." We had not been long upon our knees before I heard considerable scuffling and low talking. I raised my head up and saw one of the trustees, H— M—, having hold of the Rev. Absalom Jones, pulling him up off of his knees and saying, "You must get up — you must not kneel here." Mr. Jones replied, "wait until prayer is over." Mr. H— M— said "no, you must get up now, or I will call for aid and I force you away." Mr. Jones said, "wait until prayer is over, and I will get up and trouble you no more." With that he beckoned to one of the other trustees, Mr. L— S— to come to his assistance. He came, and went to William White to pull him up. By this time prayer was over, and we all went out of the church in a body, and they were no more plagued with us in the church.

This raised a great excitement and inquiry among the citizens, in so much that I believe they were ashamed of their conduct. But my dear Lord was with us, and we were filled with fresh vigour to get a house erected to worship God in. Seeing our forlorn and distressed situation, many of the hearts of our citizens were moved to urge us forward; notwithstanding we had subscribed largely towards finishing St. George's Church, in building the gallery and laying new floors, and just as the house was made comfortable, we were turned out from enjoying the comforts of worshiping therein. We then hired a store room and held worship by ourselves. Here we were pursued with threats of being disowned, and read publicly out of meeting if we did continue worship in the place we had hired; but we believed the Lord would be our friend. We got subscription papers out to raise money to build the house of the Lord.

By this time we had waited on Dr. Rush and Mr. Robert Ralston,¹ and told them of our distressing situation. We considered it a blessing that the Lord had put it into our hearts to wait upon those gentlemen. They pitied our situation, and subscribed largely towards the church, and were very friendly towards

National Humanities Center, 2007: nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/. In Richard Allen, *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen. To Which is Annexed the Rise and Progress of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America. Containing a Narrative of the Yellow Fever in the Year of Our Lord 1793: With an Address to the People of Colour in the United States* (Philadelphia: Martin & Boden, 1833); full text in Documenting the American South (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library) at docsouth.unc.edu/neh/allen/menu.html. Some spelling and punctuation modernized, and some paragraphing added by NHC. Complete image credits at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/imagecredits.htm.

¹ Benjamin Rush, a Quaker physician and abolitionist, and Robert Ralston, a businessman: white leaders in Philadelphia who supported Allen's pursuit of a black church.

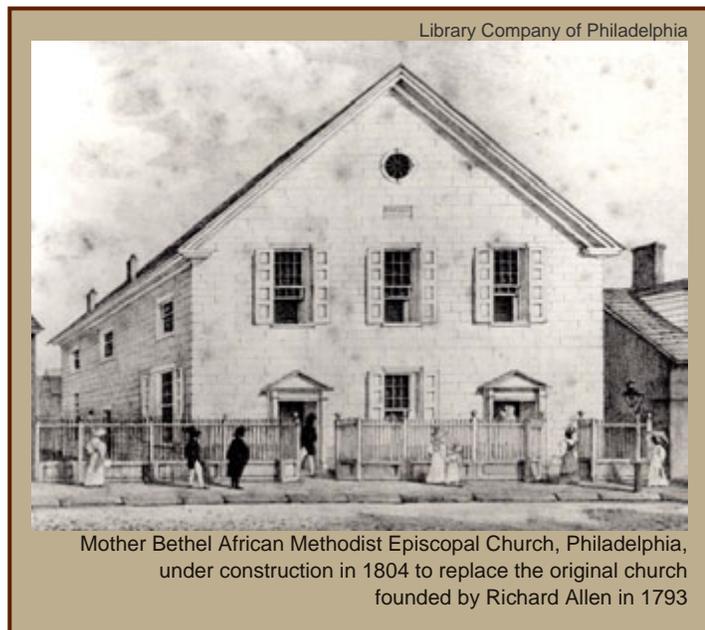
us and advised us how to go on. We appointed Mr. Ralston our treasurer. Dr. Rush did much for us in public by his influence. I hope the name of Dr. Benjamin Rush and Mr. Robert Ralston will never be forgotten among us. They were the two first gentlemen who espoused the cause of the oppressed and aided us in building the house of the Lord for the poor Africans to worship in. Here was the beginning and rise of the first African church in America.

But the elder of the Methodist church still pursued us. Mr. J— M— called upon us and told us if we did not erase our names from the subscription paper and give up the paper, we would be publicly turned out of meeting. We asked him if we had violated any rules of discipline by so doing. He replied, “I have the charge given to me by the Conference, and unless you submit I will read you publicly out of meeting.” We told him we were willing to abide by the discipline of the Methodist church; “and if you will show us where we have violated any law of discipline of the Methodist church, we will submit; and if there is no rule violated in the discipline, we will proceed on.” He replied, “we will read you all out.” We told him if he turned us out contrary to rule of discipline, we should seek further redress. We told him we were dragged off of our knees in St. George’s church, and treated worse than heathens; and we were determined to seek out for ourselves, the Lord being our helper. He told us we were not Methodists, and left us.

Finding we would go on in raising money to build the church, he called upon us again and wished to see us all together. We met him. He told us that he wished us well and that he was a friend to us, and used many arguments to convince us that we were wrong in building a church. We told him we had no place of worship; and we did not mean to go to St. George’s church any more, as we were so scandalously treated in the presence of all the congregation present; “and if you deny us your name, you cannot seal up the scriptures from us, and deny us a name in heaven. We believe heaven is free for all who worship in spirit and truth.” And he said, “so you are determined to go on.” We told him — “yes, God being our helper.” He then replied, “we will disown you all from the Methodist connection.” We believed if we put our trust in the Lord, he would stand by us. This was a trial that I never had to pass through before. I was confident that the great head of the church would support us. My dear Lord was with us.

We went out with our subscription paper and met with great success. We had no reason to complain of the liberality of the citizens. The first day the Rev. Absalom Jones and myself went out we collected three hundred and sixty dollars. This was the greatest day’s collection that we met with. We appointed a committee to look out for a lot — the Rev. Absalom Jones, William Gray, William Wilcher, and myself. We pitched upon a lot at the corner of Lombard and Sixth streets. They authorized me to go and agree for it. I did accordingly. The lot belonged to Mr. Mark Wilcox. We entered into articles of agreement for the lot. Afterwards the committee found a lot in Fifth street, in a more commodious part of the city, which we bought; and the first lot they threw upon my hands and wished me to give it up. I told them they had authorized me to agree for the lot, and they were all well satisfied with the agreement I had made, and I thought it was hard that they should throw it upon my hands. I told them I would sooner keep it myself than to forfeit the agreement I had made. And so I did.

We bore much persecution from many of the Methodist connection; but we have



reason to be thankful to Almighty God, who was our deliverer. The day was appointed to go and dig the cellar. I arose early in the morning and addressed the throne of grace, praying that the Lord would bless our endeavours. Having by this time two or three teams of my own — as I was the first proposer of the African church, I put the first spade in the ground to dig a cellar for the same. This was the first African church or meeting house that was erected in the United States of America. We intended it for the African preaching house or church; but finding that the elder stationed in this city was such an opposer to our proceedings of erecting a place of worship; though the principal part of the directors of this church belonged to the Methodist connection, the elder stationed here would neither preach for us nor have any thing to do with us.

We then held an election to know what religious denomination we should unite with. At the election it was determined — there were two in favour of the Methodist, the Rev. Absalom Jones and myself, and a large majority in favour of the Church of England. The majority carried. Notwithstanding we had been so violently persecuted by the elder, we were in favour of being attached to the Methodist connection; for I was confident that there was no religious sect or denomination would suit the capacity of the coloured people as well as the Methodist; for the plain and simple gospel suits best for any people, for the unlearned can understand, and the learned are sure to understand; and the reason that the Methodist is so successful in the awakening and conversion of the coloured people, the plain doctrine and having a good discipline. . . .

I bought an old frame that had been formerly occupied as a blacksmith shop from Mr. Sims, and hauled it on the lot in Sixth near Lo[m]bard street, that had formerly been taken for the church of England. I employed carpenters to repair the old frame, and fit it for a place of worship. In July, 1794, Bishop Asbury being in town I solicited him to open the church² for us which he accepted. The Rev. John Dickins sung and prayed, and Bishop [Francis] Asbury preached. The house was called bethel agreeable to the prayer that was made. Mr. Dickins prayed that it might be a bethel³ to the gathering in of thousands of souls. My dear Lord was with us, so that there was many hearty Amen's echoed through the house. This house of worship has been favored with the awakening of many souls, and I trust they are in the kingdom both white and colored.

Allen and the Bethel Church leaders were pressured into affiliating their new church with the Methodist Conference, thereby (unbeknownst to them at the time) losing control of their church assets and property. Ten years later a new Methodist official insisted that they hold services only when ordered by him, and that they turn over their keys and church records. The Bethel leaders refused and voted to leave the Methodist Conference.

John Emory, then elder of the Academy, published a circular letter in which we were disowned by the Methodists. A house was also hired and fitted up for worship not far from Bethel, and an invitation given to all who desired to be Methodists to resort thither. But being disappointed in this plan, Robert R. Roberts, the resident elder, came to Bethel, insisted on preaching to us, and taking the spiritual charge of the congregation, for we were Methodists. He was told he should come on some terms with the Trustees: his answer was that, "He did not come to consult with Richard Allen or other trustees, but to inform the congregation that on next Sunday afternoon, he would come and take the spiritual charge." We told him he could not preach for us under existing circumstances. "However, at the appointed time he came, but having taken previous advice we had our preacher in the pulpit when he came, and the house was so fixed that he could not get but more than half way to the pulpit. Finding himself disappointed he appealed to those who came with him as witnesses that "That man (meaning the preacher) had taken his appointment." Several respectable white citizens who knew the colored people had been ill used were present, and told us not to fear for they would see us righted, and not suffer Roberts to preach in a forcible manner, after which Roberts went away. . . .

Many of the colored people in other places were in a situation nearly like those of Philadelphia and Baltimore, which induced us in April 1816 to call a general meeting, by way of Conference. Delegates

² This church will at present accommodate between 3 and 4000 persons. [footnote in original]

³ See Gen[esis]. chap. 28. [footnote in original]

from Baltimore and other places which met those of Philadelphia, and taking into consideration their grievances, and in order to secure the privileges, promote union and harmony among themselves, it was resolved, "That the people of Philadelphia, Baltimore, &c. &c., should become one body, under the name of the African Methodist Episcopal Church." We deemed it expedient to have a form of discipline, whereby we may guide our people in the fear of God, in the unity of the Spirit, and in the bonds of peace, and preserve us from that spiritual despotism which we have so recently experienced — remembering that we are not to lord it over God's heritage, as greedy dogs that can never have enough. But with long suffering, and bowels of compassion to bear each other's burthens, and so fulfill the Law of Christ, praying that our mutual striving together for the promulgation of the Gospel may be crowned with abundant success.

The God of Bethel heard her cries,
 He let his power be seen;
 He stop'd the proud oppressors frown,
 And proved himself a King.

Thou sav'd them in the trying hour,
 Ministers and councils joined
 And all stood ready to retain
 That helpless church of thine.

Bethel surrounded by her foes,
 But not yet in despair,
 Christ heard her supplicating cries;
 The God of Bethel hear.

