

Richard Allen: From Slave to Pastor to Black Founding Father of America

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 while 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.

Richard then got his slave master to listen to that preacher too, and his master also came to know the Lord. As a new Christian, he decided to offer Richard his freedom within five years if Richard could pay for that freedom. Even though that logic was still flawed, it offered a door to freedom for Richard. 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. The church literally picked some Blacks up off their knees and dragged them away from praying with Whites.

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 the 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 U.S. 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 U.S. for African-Americans.

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

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