Building the Black Zion: The Role of Black Churches in Creating Philadelphia's Free Black Community, 1787-1820

Brian J. Terpak
History

"Come unto me, ye who are weary and overburdened, and I will give you rest."
Matthew 11:28

Richard Allen was in the wrong place. On this particular fall day in 1792[1] as he and other black parishioners filed into St. George's Methodist Church in Philadelphia, the white elders informed the black worshippers that instead of taking up their normal pews, they would have to remove themselves to the newly built gallery. Before the black congregation had time to comply, the service began. Allen recounted the details of the event:

> We expected to take the seats over the ones we formerly occupied below, not knowing any better. We took those seats; [the] 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 loud talking. I raised my head up and saw one of the trustees, H_____M____, having hold of the Rev. Absalom Jones, pulling him off his knees, and saying, "You must get up, you must not kneel here." Mr. Jones replied, "Wait until prayer is over, and I will get up, and trouble you no more." With that he beckoned to one of the trustees, Mr. L____S_____, to come to his assistance. He came and went to William

[1] Significant scholarly debate has ensued over the date of the St. George's incident. Initially, historians, such as Carol V.R. George in *Segregated Sabbaths: Richard Allen and the Rise of Independent Black Churches, 1760-1840* and Ann C. Lammers in "The Rev. Absalom Jones and the Episcopal Church: Christian Theology and Black Consciousness in a New Alliance," had placed the date of St. George's walkout prior to the founding of the Free African Society in 1787. More recent scholarship, as found in Gary B. Nash's *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* and Richard S. Newman's *Freedom's Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers*, contests the date to be later in 1792. Both Nash and Newman make more convincing cases, with Nash citing the completion of St. George's gallery in 1792 using the church's own architectural records proving that the incident could not have occurred before 1792.

> White to pull him up. By this time prayer was over, and we all went out of the church as a body, and they were no longer plagued by us in the church.[2]

Ironically, the kneeling down of these few intrepid souls marked the beginning of Philadelphia's free black community's stand against white prejudice and discrimination. In the face of growing bigotry, leaders like Allen, Jones, and James Forten had not forgotten the earlier works of white reformers, however. Various actors within Philadelphia's white society proved instrumental in opening the doors of opportunity for the city's free black and slave population. The early efforts of white reformers cannot be discredited. The abolitionist Anthony Benezet worked tirelessly to provide educational opportunities for both free blacks and slaves. Benezet's efforts resulted in the formation of a school for blacks by the Associates of Thomas Bray in 1758, and the Quaker operated Friends African School in 1770. The Quaker politicians in the Pennsylvania Assembly also helped pass the first gradual abolition bill in the New World in 1780.[3] But as the number of free blacks in Philadelphia continued to rise in the late 18th century, white hostility rose. In the eyes of the city's black leaders, the St. George's incident sparked the movement for greater black autonomy within the City of Brotherly Love. But could that progress be sustained?

Free black leaders believed that the only way to protect their nascent society from further white encroachment rested on the creation of independent, black institutions and the black church was the well-spring, from which these autonomous black institutions flowed. C. Eric Lincoln writes that, for blacks, the "church was his school, his forum, his political arena, his social club, his art gallery, his conservatory of music. It was lyceum and gymnasium as well as *sanctum sanctorum*."[4] St. Thomas's African Episcopal Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Church, headed by Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, respectively, were two of the major black churches within Philadelphia. As centers of the community, these institutions helped harness and direct the energies of the hundreds of scattered free blacks across a city experiencing tremendous change in size, wealth, and most importantly, diversity in the late 18th century.

---

[2] Richard Allen as quoted in his reprinted work *The Life Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen*. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960), 25.
[3] James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton. *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 22.
[4] C. Eric Lincoln in the forward of Leonard E Barrett's *Soul-Force: African Heritage in Afro-American Religion*. (Garden City, NY, Anchor Books, 1974), viii.

A Dark Presence

Clement Biddle's 1791 article in the *Philadelphia Directory* provides an interesting snapshot of Philadelphia in the early years of the newly formed American Republic. Despite the document's dry and direct tone, it conjures images of a contemporary metropolis. There was a variety of religious expression within the city. In the Philadelphia of 1791, according to Biddle, one could find the presence of Quakers, Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Baptists, Lutherans, Calvinists, Moravians, Universalists and even Jews, but more importantly a supportive government.[5] "There is not perhaps in the world a more liberal plan of city government, every class of citizens have an opportunity of representing and being represented," he said.[6] This government offered Philadelphians access to a public hospital, library, poorhouse, and, for those more fortunate residents, the opportunity to attend the local university. The city government engaged in many public works projects including the paving and labeling of streets and installing a sanitary gutter system. Biddle attributed the state of the city's health to draining putrid streams, cleaning the city streets, and extending medical care to more denizens, among other things.[7] These public services became extremely important in light of the city's growing population. Biddle paints Philadelphia as a city awash with a "constant and regular influx of foreigners."[8] It was this steady stream of immigrants that eventually caused the city's population to rise to 42,520 in 1790.[9]

Skimming over Biddle's matter-of-fact account of the city, the reader might fail to notice a rather revealing comment about 1791 Philadelphia:

> …It ought not to be omitted, that there is a school for the Africans of every shade or colour, kept under the care and at the expense of the Quakers, into which are admitted gratis, slaves as well as free persons of whatever age of both sexes, and taught reading, writing, arithmetic, knitting, sewing and

---

[5] Clement Biddle as quoted in Billy G. Smith's edited work *Life in Early Philadelphia: Documents from the Revolutionary and Early National Periods.* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 19.

[6] Ibid, 18.

[7] Ibid, 18-22.

[8] Clement Biddle as quoted in Billy G. Smith's edited work *Life in Early Philadelphia* , 15.

[9] Biddle postulated the number to have been 42,400 but that number was incorrect. See U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Heads of Families at the First Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1790: Pennsylvania*. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1908) as displayed in John K. Alexander's "The Philadelphia Numbers Game: An Analysis of Philadelphia's Eighteenth Century Population." *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*. Vol. 98 (1974): 314-24.

> other useful female accomplishments…with a view to prepare that degraded race for a better situation in civil life…[10]

From this quote, one can infer two things about Philadelphia during the early days of the American Republic. Firstly, slaves contributed directly to the population of Philadelphia during the late 18th century. Most of the settlers were Quakers from England and Ireland, but the city's wealthier Quaker residents came from the West Indies and other American colonies, carrying with them their material and human possessions.[11] Unlike the economic structure of the West Indies and the American South, where large amounts of slave labor existed, the urban, commercial-oriented environment of Philadelphia facilitated a decreased reliance upon slave labor. Slaves were, nonetheless, critical to the city's economy in the mid-18th century.

By examining various advertisements of the *Pennsylvania Gazette* from 1767 to 1769, one can see that Philadelphia's slaves engaged in a variety of tasks, revealing a skilled slave labor force. Owners employed their slaves in shoemaking, cooperage, sail making, shipbuilding, blacksmithing, and carpentry.[12] Towards the end of the 18th century, a variety of factors discouraged a reliance upon slave labor within the city. The flow of German and Scotch-Irish immigrants to Philadelphia, which had been stymied by the Seven Years War, returned and provided greater amounts of free labor. After the war, a depression discouraged many craftsmen from buying slave labor. Lastly, from 1761 to 1773, the import duty on slaves into Philadelphia had been raised from £10 to £20.[13] These economic factors decreased the presence of slaves in Philadelphia; in 1767, the city's slave population was 1,481 and by 1775, the number had decreased to 728. Finally, by 1790, after the tumult of the American Revolution, the slave population had dwindled to 301.[14] Clearly, economic considerations impacted the decline in the slave population, but other factors existed.

A Friend Among Quakers

Returning to Clement Biddle's account of the city in 1791, a community of free blacks clearly existed in Philadelphia. In 1767, the free black population was a

---

[10] Clement Biddle as quoted in Billy G. Smith's edited work *Life in Early Philadelphia*, 21.
[11] Jean R. Soderlund. *Quakers and Slavery: A Divided Spirit*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 56.
[12] *Pennsylvania Gazette* advertisements: December 24, 1767; April 28, 1768; May 19, 1768; September 1, 1768; February 23, 1769; and, October 12, 1769.
[13] Soderlund, 61.
[14] Gary B. Nash and Jean R. Soderlund. *Freedom by Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsylvania and its Aftermath*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 18.

paltry 57, but had exploded to 1,849 by 1790.[15] Prior to this, abolitionist and Quaker educator Anthony Benezet laid the essential groundwork against the institution of slavery. A French Huguenot who had immigrated to Philadelphia in 1731, Benezet championed the cause of black social uplift in the city. Though best remembered for his campaign of abolitionist pamphleteering from 1759 until his death in 1784, most of Benezet's energies focused on black education.[16] Through education, Benezet believed that blacks would become reputable and useful members of society. But what could these supposed mentally inferior "creatures" gain from education? Were not slaves incapable of any intellectual advancement? Benezet disagreed: "I have found amongst negroes as great a variety of talents as among a like number of whites…and again I am bold to assert that the notion entertained by some blacks are inferior in the capacities is a vulgar prejudice."[17]

According to Benezet, environmental determinism was the culprit for blacks' degradation. The system of slavery, which exposed slaves to all sorts of depraved brutality, had twisted and debased their minds and spirits. With a proper moral and intellectual education, free blacks and slaves could reverse the damaging effects of slavery.[18] In 1750, Benezet began tutoring free blacks and slaves at his home, emphasizing critical thinking over rote memorization. Building on Benezet's efforts, the Anglican-affiliated Associates of Thomas Bray opened a school for free black and slave children in 1758. Unlike the more holistic educational experience provided by Benezet, the Bray Associates focused instruction around religious themes and, ultimately, conversion to the Anglican faith. While Benezet's educational approach seemed radical to most slave owners, the Associates assured slave owners that educating and converting slaves hardly threatened the institution of slavery. According to the Bray Associates, education and religious conversion would emancipate the mind and spirit - but not the body - of the slave.[19]

With the help of the Quaker community, Benezet broadened the educational opportunity for blacks within Philadelphia. After three years of campaigning, Benezet opened the Africans' School as a part of the Society of Friends' Public Schools in 1773. According to Gary Nash, while the Quaker community generally accepted Benezet's proposals for the venture, Benezet himself "supplied most of

---

[15] Ibid.
[16] Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 29.
[17] Nancy Slocum-Hornick. "Anthony Benezet and Africans' School: Toward a Theory of Full Equality." *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*. Vol. 99 #4 (October 1975): 400; Anthony Benezet as quoted in William C. Kashatus's "A Friend Among Quakers." *Pennsylvania Heritage*. Vol. 3 #2 (2004): 8.
[18] Kashatus, 8.
[19] Horton and Horton, 21; Slocum-Hornick, 403.

the energy required for raising money, building a structure, and hiring a teacher."[20] Students of the Africans' School learned reading, writing, and arithmetic, and received further specialized education according to their sex. Male students undertook an advanced academic course of study, while female students learned how to knit and sew.[21] By 1775, the Africans' School had seen nearly 250 black students pass through its halls, which included future black community leaders Abaslom Jones, Richard Allen, and James Forten.[22]

Despite his life-long efforts to educate free blacks and slaves, Benezet limited the ultimate aim of his pedagogical endeavors. His goal was to help fulfill the intellectual, moral, and spiritual potential of his black charges. He did not, however, believe that moral and intellectual equality would signal social and economic equality. Benezet concerned himself with providing blacks an adequate education that would make them useful to society, not socially and economically equal citizens. According to Benezet, the most pressing matter facing the black community was abolishing slavery.[23] To achieve that goal, Benezet and other abolitionists had to face Philadelphia's ruling political elite of the 1750s and 1760s: the Quaker community.

Reformation and Abolition

Quakers preached unity among all mankind, rebuked violence in human endeavors, and found public flamboyance and pride to be sinful. It was ironic, then, that they condoned the trafficking and use of slave labor. Like their neighbors of other faiths, well-off Quakers often purchased slaves. But just as their finances offered them great social influence, they possessed even greater *political* capital. Quakers in the Pennsylvania Assembly helped pass the colony's major slave codes in 1700, 1705, and 1726 and enacted restrictive regulations on the blacks who had gained freedom from their masters.[24]

By the 1750s, however, the Philadelphian Quaker community witnessed the emergence of new leaders, like Benezet and John Woolman. Influenced by the reforming impetus of the Great Awakening, these men built on the experiences of previous Quaker abolitionists like Benjamin Lay, who relied upon theatrical and disruptive behavior. Benezet and Woolman utilized a more disciplined approach: They reached out to the Quaker community through written appeals and debates at

---

[20] Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 31.
[21] Slocum-Hornick, 404, 406.
[22] Kashatus, 9; Slocum-Hornick, 415.
[23] Slocum-Hornick, 419.
[24] Nash, 24-25.

Quaker Meetings. Prior to his death in 1784, Benezet published nine prominent anti-slavery treatises.[25]

Many of these abolitionist tracts challenged the traditional Enlightenment notions that most Philadelphia slave masters utilized to buttress the institution of slavery. Quaker slave holders argued their behavior along the same lines of famed natural rights philosophers such as John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, and Voltaire. Slavery was justified along the Enlightenment principles of rational order, "natural" practices of subordination, and the protection of private property. Benezet utilized Montesquieu's interpretation of natural law and the natural rights of man, that "all men are born equal" to counter the claims of pro-slavery advocates.[26] Arguing along Enlightenment lines, Benezet stressed that slavery denied slaves the natural rights to their own physical bodies, prevented their pursuit of a moral and rational life, and severely curtailed their capabilities to nurture one's mental and physical talents. Benezet's attempts at linking natural law to anti-slavery, however, were largely unsuccessful as contemporary American slave masters remained committed to their Enlightenment interpretations of slavery.[27]

Despite Benezet's failed challenge to Enlightenment notions regarding slavery, he and Woolman's anti-slavery campaign came at a time of reassessment within the broader Quaker community. According to reformers like Samuel Fothergill and John Churchman, the system of capitalism had eroded Quaker virtue. A double edged sword, capitalism had produced prosperity with the caveat of extravagance. Writing as far back as 1703, Robert Barclay warned of the dangers of decadence: "When from a lust of Vanity, and desire to Adorn themselves, Men and Women, not content with what their condition can bear, do stretch to have things, that from their Rarity, and the price that's put upon them, seem to be precious, and so feed their Lust the more: And this all sober men of all sorts will readily grant to be Evil."[28] Quakers redefined the nature of materials seen as "functional (lawful)" and "superfluous (unlawful)." Before, if a Quaker utilized a cloth or material not readily made in his or her community, it would have been seen as ostentatious. Now, as materials from across the world flooded Philadelphia's market making such goods local, that label could be avoided. Human slaves were no exception.

---

[25] Richard S. Newman. *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic*. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 17.

[26] Baron de Montesquieu as quoted in Roger A Bruns. "Anthony Benezet and the Natural Rights of the Negro." *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*. Vol. 96 #1 (January 1972): 106.

[27]Ibid., 105-106, 110-113.

[28] Robert Barclay. *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity*. (London: T. Sowle, 1703), 533.

To Fothergill and Churchman, the Quaker community's reliance upon the institution of slavery was but one of many examples of the Society's failure to distance itself from the outside world, and subsequent moral decay.[29] Capitalizing on this inner struggle, Benezet placed his abolitionist sentiments within the contemporary debate of Quaker reformation. It was paradoxical, he argued, to "live in… ease and plenty" and still be considered a guardian of religious principles. "That a man should labour to be rich and amass wealth, a state which… proves the ruin of so many thousands – is this keeping clear from defilement[?] Now, that such a person shall esteem himself, and be esteemed, a religious man, and perhaps be the more regarded, even by religious people, is a mere paradox; yet it is too often the case."[30]

At the Yearly Meeting of 1758, the process of reform within the Philadelphia Quaker community began. Leading members urged each other to avoid the slave trade and to remove authority figures from power should they attempt to do otherwise. Though it would take until 1774 for the Society of Friends to officially disown members who sold or bought slaves, the Yearly Meeting of 1758 marked the Quaker community as a whole confronting the issue of slavery.[31] While the institution of slavery within Philadelphia's Quaker community seemed to be waning, abolitionists confronted slavery within the rest of Philadelphia society with the help of the Pennsylvania government.

March 1, 1780

On November 9, 1778 the Pennsylvania Executive Council's President George Bryan implored the Pennsylvania Assembly to consider the cause of abolition. "In divesting the State of Slaves…you will equally serve the cause of humanity and policy…you will also set up your character for Justice and Benevolence in a true point of view to all Europe who are astonished to see a people eager for Liberty holding Negroes in Bondage."[32] The movement for abolition in Pennsylvania began years earlier in 1776 as residents of Philadelphia sent two ill-received abolitionist petitions to the Assembly. Before that, in January 1775, the Pennsylvania Provincial Convention "resolved to urge the General Assembly to prohibit the importation of slaves" and that March, the Chester County Committee of Correspondence created a committee to draft a petition for the gradual abolition

---

[29] Ross E. Martinie Eiler. "Luxury, Capitalism, and the Quaker Reformation, 1737-1798." *Quaker History*. Vol. 97 #1 (2008): 13-14.
[30] Anthony Benezet as quoted in *Memoirs of Samuel Fothergill*. November 27, 1758. Found in George S. Brookes's *Friend Anthony Benezet*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1937), 231. Historical Society of Pennsylvania (hereafter, HSP).
[31] Nash, 26.
[32] *Council to Assembly*. November 9, 1778. *Pennsylvania Archives*. Vol. 7, 79. HSP

of slavery.[33] These motions and petitions struggled to gain adequate attention in 1776, competing in the public's eye with the American Revolution. While the Revolution proved a great opportunity for Pennsylvania's slaves, it hindered the abolitionist movement.

Nonetheless, embers of abolitionism continued to smolder. In August of 1778, Bryan asked the Pennsylvania House of Representatives to raise the duty on recently imported blacks or to consider banning importation altogether. Though these initial forays failed, the executive council resurrected the issue in November of 1778. According to gradual abolition's proponents, the time was ripe for abolition in Pennsylvania. As the Pennsylvania Executive Council noted, "no period seems more happy for the attempt than the present, as the number of [slaves]…ever few in Pennsylvania, has been much reduced by the practices and plunder of our late invaders."[34] Though the Assembly suspended the original abolition measure, it issued a new abolition bill in February 1779.[35] With vigorous debate and the passage of time, this version of the bill passed and became the Gradual Abolition Act of 1780. According to the act's major provisions, all slaves in Pennsylvania born after March 1, 1780 were freed after twenty eight years of servitude. The act also required the slave master to "register his name, occupation, place of residence, and the name, age, and sex of his slave." If the master had not achieved these requirements by November 1, 1780, he forfeited the rights to his slaves. The act also declared that slaves who had resided in Pennsylvania for six months were free. The law, however, did not protect fugitive slaves residing in Pennsylvania from being returned to their masters.[36] While the Gradual Abolition Act of 1780 and its amendment in 1788, initiated the process of abolition in

---

[33] Ibid.; Arthur Zilversmit. *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North.* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 125-126.

[34] *Council to Assembly*. November 9, 1778. *Pennsylvania Archives*. Vol. 7, 79. HSP. Dunmore's *Proclamation* in Virginia and the *Phillipsburg Declaration* offered freedom to any slave who fought for the British during the Revolution. Thousands of slaves fled to British lines during the war, providing one of the largest migrations of blacks in American history. For works dealing with the emancipationist effects of the American Revolution see Sylvia Frey's *Water From the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), and Simon Schama's *Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves, and the American Revolution* (New York: Ecco, 2006).

[35] *Minutes of the Supreme Executive Council*. February 6, 1779. *Colonial Records*. Vol. 9, 688. HSP.

[36] Stanley I. Kutler. "Pennsylvania Courts, the Abolition Act, and Negro Rights." *Pennsylvania History*. Vol. 30 #1 (1963):14. *An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery*, (1780). http://www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/history/gradual.htm.

Pennsylvania, it was not the sole factor responsible for the nearly 700% population explosion of free blacks in Philadelphia from 1780 to 1790.[37]

The Swelling Tide

While lawyers from the Pennsylvania Abolition Society discovered loopholes within the Gradual Abolition Act and helped slaves earn their freedom, arguing that the Society's legal activities were responsible for the increase in the free black population of Philadelphia is farfetched.[38] A variety of complimentary economic and demographic factors explains the growing number of free blacks in the city.

Like their counterparts in Maryland and Delaware, many of the great Virginia tidewater planters turned from tobacco to wheat production. Wheat was less labor intensive and seemingly more profitable in the later half of the 18th century. Tobacco, on the other hand, quickly exhausted the soil's nutrients, required year round attention, and sharply increased the amount of debt a planter accumulated[39] As a result of this shift to wheat production, planters needed fewer slaves. The resulting excess of slaves, which incurred greater levels of debt for planters, coupled with the loosening of restrictions governing private manumissions led to more planters freeing more of their slaves.[40] Many of these newly emancipated slaves headed for Pennsylvania and, more specifically, Philadelphia.

Recent free black arrivals did not originate solely from the Upper South, however. Many of the freed slaves came from the farmlands of York, Lancaster, Bucks, and Chester counties in Pennsylvania. Freed slaves also came from as far away as the southern portions of New England, in order to escape the disagreeable climate.[41] Why did they flock to Philadelphia? As the center of abolitionism in America and situated near three slave states, the City of Brotherly Love "afforded an asylum for…free blacks and runaway slaves."[42] Most rural freed slaves lacked the capital to become independent farmers themselves, and found rural labor's seasonal cycles of unemployment unsuitable to producing a grounded and settled life. Philadelphia's maritime economy offered the much needed stability that

---

[37] Figures drawn from Nash and Soderlund's *Freedom by Degrees*, 18. 1780 population was 241. 1790 population was 1,849.

[38] Ibid, 119-121.

[39] T.H. Breen. *Tobacco Culture: The Mentality of the Great Tidewater Planters on the Eve of the Revolution*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 55, 180; Harold B. Gill, Jr. "Wheat Culture in Colonial Virginia." *Agricultural History*. Vol. 52 #3 (July 1978): 383.

[40] Julie Winch. *A Gentleman of Color: The Life of James Forten*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 127.

[41] Nash, 72.

[42] *Visiting Committee to Acting Committee*, January 8, 1821 as quoted by Nash in "Forging Freedom," 8.

former slaves sought. For freed blacks, who, in 1796, made up at least one-fifth of the 2,000 merchant seamen, the maritime economy provided an important job opportunity for free blacks.[43] While the road to prosperity presented many difficulties for former slaves, success was attainable. Some successful black craftsmen and small-scale entrepreneurs were able to buy real estate and make investments.[44]

Though economic reasons were a large part of the migration for many blacks, social factors also explain why many blacks flocked to Philadelphia. Northern whites in rural areas excluded many free blacks from community life. As the number of free blacks grew, Philadelphia offered them security from white hostility, and extended an opportunity to the previously isolated to become active members in a broader community, subsequently allowing them to form families and participate in social and religious activities.[45] True, Philadelphia provided many new and exciting opportunities for the recently arrived black denizens, but it was a select few from the free black community who harnessed the new arrivals' energies into a coherent and focused force.

Black Founders

To understand the autonomous institutions that breathed solidarity and security into Philadelphia's free black community would be difficult without briefly examining the early careers of three of Philadelphia's most influential free black residents: James Forten, Absalom Jones, and Richard Allen.

An anomaly at the time of his birth on September 2, 1766, James Forten was born in Philadelphia of free black parents. At the age of fifteen, Forten served on an American privateer in 1781 during the American Revolution. Though captured by the British, he was able to secure his freedom during a prisoner transfer. After spending one year abroad in London, working in one of the many sail-lofts along the Thames, Forten returned to Philadelphia and apprenticed himself in the sail-loft of Thomas Bridges in 1785. Forten's skill and character elevated him to Bridges's foreman by 1786. When Bridges retired in 1798, Forten assumed ownership of the sail-loft.[46] Forten employed both black and white apprentices and journeymen, nineteen of whom were white. When he took over Bridges's sail-loft, only one white employee resigned. The remaining workers "all, with one consent agreed to

---

[43] Nash, 8, 72.
[44] Winch, 130.
[45] Ibid.; Nash, 73.
[46] Winch, 74. See also: Julie Winch, "A Person of Good Character and Considerable Property": James Forten and the Issue of Race in Philadelphia's Antebellum Business Community." *The Business History Review*. Vol. 75 #2 (Summer 2001): 262-265.

take [him] as their new master."[47] According to Julie Winch, the thirty-two year old Forten "found himself overseeing one of the city's most successful sail-lofts, regulating a workforce of several dozen men, and running a business worth thousands of dollars a year."[48]

As Forten continued to gain global renown, he more importantly became an advocate and champion of Philadelphia's free black community. His wealth and status, like other black leaders within the city, allowed him access to the "public discourse," where his written appeals such as his *Letters from a Man of Colour* and an *Address to the Humane and Benevolent Inhabitants of the City and County of Philadelphia* reflected the black community's developing rhetorical strategies within white society. Forten's sail-making loft offered economic opportunity to skilled black workers and provided a successful example of a business venture where black and white tradesmen could coexist. Forten was also elected to the first vestry of St. Thomas's African Episcopal Church, a key black institution in the city.[49]

One of the founders, and eventually the pastor of that church, was Absalom Jones. Born into slavery in Sussex, Delaware on November 6, 1746, Jones did not let his physical status imprison his mind. By saving his meager labor wages, Jones purchased books to educate himself. He wrote: "Soon after this, I was able to purchase a spelling book; for as my money increased, I supplied myself with books, among others a Testament. For, fondness for books, gave me little or no time for the amusements that took up the leisure hours of my companions."[50] Jones moved to Philadelphia when he was sixteen after being sold by his first master. While Jones worked in his master's store by day, his master allowed him to attend night school in 1766, where he learned basic mathematics, among other things. In 1770, Jones married, and shortly thereafter, purchased his wife's freedom, while he remained a slave. His master later manumitted him in 1784. Possessing a personality of moderation, patience, persistence, and tolerance, Jones became one of the leading social and religious leaders of Philadelphia's free black community.

---

[47] Rev. Stephen Gloucester as quoted by Winch in *Gentlemen of Color*, 74. See also: Esther M. Douty. *Forten the Sailmaker: Pioneer Champion of Negro Rights*. (New York: Rand McNally and Co, 1968), 81.

[48] Ibid.; Winch, "A Person of Good Character and Considerable Property," 262-265.

[49] Douty, 77; Glen McLish. "A Man of Feeling, A Man of Colour: James Forten and the Rise of African American Deliberative Rhetoric." *Rhetorica*. Vol. 25 #3 (Summer 2007): 2; Winch, *A Gentleman of Color*, 87.

[50] Absalom Jones as quoted in Ann C. Lammers's "The Rev. Absalom Jones and the Episcopal Church: Christian Theology and Black Consciousness in a New Alliance." *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church.* Vol. 51 #2 (1982): 163.

The last of the leading figures of that society was Richard Allen. Like Jones, Allen was born a slave on February 14, 1760 in Kent County, Delaware.[51] After his family was broken up and sold by his second master, Master Stokeley, Allen became involved with the itinerant Methodist movement that was sweeping the countryside. Given a religion which evoked a strong emotional and spiritual connection, valued hard work, and strongly disapproved of slavery, Allen became a life-long convert to the faith. Methodist preachers later convinced Stokeley to free Allen, but with a catch: Allen would be free to seek outside work and wages, but he would continue to belong to Stokeley until he earned enough funds to purchase his freedom.[52] Allen later wrote of his experience, "he [Stokeley] proposed to me and my brother buying our times, to pay him 60£. gold and silver, or $2,000 Continental money, which we complied with in the year 17__."[53] For five years, Allen found work as a woodcutter and in a brickyard and was able to earn the sum requested of him by Stokeley by 1781, thus gaining his official freedom. He also used this time to share his new found zeal for the Methodist faith and became an itinerant preacher, a skill which would characterize his future role in bettering the lot of Philadelphia's black society.[54] Though the examples of Forten, Jones, and Allen demonstrate the existence of black elites, there was little each man alone could do to improve the status of the black community. Lost in the wilderness of the white world, there, off in the proverbial distance rang a tocsin of hope, drawing together the scattered energies of the black community.

The Free African Society

1787 marked an important year for Philadelphia and the country, but not simply because of the Constitutional Convention. While men like James Madison and Benjamin Franklin debated over a new constitution for the country, Absalom Jones and Richard Allen laid the institutional framework of Philadelphia's black community a few city blocks away. Having obtained

---

[51] Much scholarly debate has ensued over the place of Allen's birth. Though Allen claimed to be born "a slave to Benjamin Chew, of Philadelphia" and then "sold into Delaware state," Richard S. Newman makes a strong case for Allen's birth to have been in Delaware. See Newman's *Freedom's Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers.* (New York: New York University Press NY, 2008), 29.

[52] Carol V.R. George. *Segregated Sabbaths: Richard Allen and the Rise of Independent Black Churches, 1760-1840.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 25-28.

[53] Richard Allen as quoted in his *Life Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen*. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960), 17.

[54] Ibid, 18. Carol George postulates that the year was 1777 when Allen and Stokeley agreed to the terms of manumission.

> [A] good report among men, these persons from a love to the people of their complexion whom they beheld with sorrow,…often communed together upon this painful and important subject in order to form some kind of religious society, but their being too few to be found under the like concern and those who were, differed in their religious sentiments…it was proposed…that a society should be formed, without regard to religious tenets…in order to support one another in sickness, and for the benefit of their widows and fatherless children.[55]

The brainchild of Jones and Allen, the Free African Society (FAS) demonstrated the early efforts of free black leaders to simultaneously protect themselves from white hostility, and garner a degree of autonomy over their own affairs. According to John Bracey, as a mutual benefit society, the FAS offered its members opportunities for "companionship, recreation, recognition, and prestige that to some degree compensated for the racial proscriptions facing them."[56] Participants in the society would "advance one shilling in silver Pennsylvania currency a month" in order to provide for those associates in their time of need. Not only were members cared for, but the widows and children of deceased members were privy to FAS aid as well.[57] Behavioral membership guidelines and the required monthly financial contribution, however, excluded the majority of Philadelphia's free, but poor, blacks. The society's rules stipulated that "no drunkard nor disorderly person be admitted as a member" and its leaders could remove those members who were delinquent in paying dues for three months. The FAS also penalized its members "three pence" for missing monthly meetings.[58] By restricting its membership to the more respectable members of black society, the FAS hoped to demonstrate to whites that it was the de facto representative body of Philadelphia's black community, and a suitable liaison to white authorities.

Though the FAS was exclusionary in membership, the organization did not limit its concerns to that of its constituency. As time progressed, the FAS began to

---

[55] Excerpt from the *Preamble of the Free African Society* April 12, 1787 as quoted in William Douglass's *Annals of the First African Church*, etc. (Philadelphia: King and Baird, Printers, 1862) 15.

[56] Julie Winch. *Philadelphia's Black Elite: Activism, Accommodation, and the Struggle for Autonomy, 1787-1848*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 5; John H. Bracey, Jr., August Meier, and Elliot Rudwick, eds. *Black Nationalism in America*. (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co Inc., 1970), 18.

[57] *Articles of the Free African Society* as quoted in Douglass's *Annals of the First African Church*, 16-17.

[58] Ibid, 16.

take a more active role in shaping the lives of Philadelphia's black residents. It issued standards of behavior judged acceptable for the entire community:

> While we are feasting and dancing, many of our complexion are starving under cruel bondage; and it is this practice of ours that enabled our enemies to declare that we are not fit for freedom, -and at the same time, this imprudent conduct stops the mouths of our real friends, who would ardently plead our cause. Let us therefore, dear brethren, learn to be wise…and shew that we have a good understanding by forsaking our foolish practices.[59]

Not only did the FAS provide moral guidance to free blacks, but it also addressed many of their tangible concerns. Unable to bury their dead in white cemeteries, the black community, acting through the FAS, successfully petitioned the Philadelphia Common Council in 1790 to rent a section of the strangers' burial ground, or Potter's Field. The Africans' Burial Ground, as it later came to be known, became a site of black communal gatherings and mourning rituals. The success at the Africans' Burial Ground also demonstrated that the FAS was more than a benevolent community organization. It was the initial lobbying arm of the black community, an organization with distinct social and political aims. The FAS demonstrated the efficacy of black political organization and politicking to future black leaders.[60]

To make the argument that the FAS was simply a social and political institution fails to capture another important feature of the organization: the FAS provided a venue for free blacks' religious expression. While he never intended the organization to be a church, Richard Allen hoped that the FAS would address the religious needs of its members. By offering religious services, the FAS revealed that secular and religious interests of the free black community were seldom separate from each other. According to Gayraud Wilmore, the FAS also created "the classic pattern for the black church in the United States – a pattern of religious commitment that has a double focus: free and autonomous worship in the African American tradition, and the solidarity and social welfare of the black community."[61]

---

[59] Winch, *Philadelphia's Black Elite*, 6; *Petition of Free African Society* as quoted in Doulgass's *Annals of the First African Church*, 32.

[60] *Minutes of Free African Society* as quoted in Douglass's *Annals of the First African Church*, 33-35; Winch, *Philadelphia's Black Elite*, 6-7; Newman, 61-62.

[61] Gayraud S. Wilmore. *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans.* (New York: Orbis Books. 1998), 108.

The Emergence of the Black Churches

Founding an independent black church was the logical progression of the FAS. As previously mentioned above, the disgrace at St. George's Methodist Church in the fall of 1792 catalyzed the need for a separate black church, but black leaders had been planning such a move since the summer of 1791. In order to remedy their "being deprived of the means of regular education, and religious instruction," black leaders "formed Articles and a Plan of Church Government so general as to embrace all, and yet so orthodox in cardinal points to offend none."[62] With aid from Benjamin Rush, Absalom Jones and the FAS purchased a lot to build a school house and later a church. But why was an independent black church necessary? Confrontations within white churches like St. George's was one reason, but that reason alone is too simplistic. Benjamin Rush noted the importance of black churches:

> That men are more influenced in their morals by their equals than by the superiors…and that they are more easily governed by persons chosen themselves for that purpose, than by persons who are placed over them by accidental circumstances; that the attraction and relationship which are established among the Africans and their descendants by the sameness of colour, by a nearly equal and general deficiency of education, by total ignorance, or only humble attainments in religion, and by the line drawn by custom, as well as nature between them and white people; all evince the necessity and propriety of their enjoying separate and exclusive means…of worshipping God, instructing their youth, and of taking care of their poor.[63]

Simply put, a black church would address a majority of the black community's concerns. As an organization separate from the white world, black churches offered an opportunity of security and identity to those black denizens of Philadelphia who had not yet affiliated with a church out of a sense of suspicion directed at whites. The black church also demonstrated the vital importance of black religion. According to Gary Nash, the black community viewed the church as "the one impregnable corner of the world where consolation, solidarity and mutual aid could be found and from which the master and the bossman – at least in the North – could be effectively barred."[64]

---

[62] *Extract of a Letter from Dr. Benjamin Rush, of Philadelphia, to Granville Sharp*. August 27, 1791, 4.
[63] Ibid, 7.
[64] Nash, 114.

Construction began on the African Church of Philadelphia, a distinctly black administered church, in 1793.[65] Originally, its founders had organized the church along non-denominational lines hoping not to discourage any segment of the black population from attending. As time progressed, the idea that the African Church would attach no formal affiliation to itself slowly changed. By the spring of 1794, Philadelphia's blacks debated to which faith the Church would attach itself. This shift towards denominationalism resulted from the perception of many blacks that without an official association with a faith, their church would be violating the tenets of Christian culture. More importantly, by choosing a denomination the black community believed they would garner state recognition of their "corporate status." With official state acknowledgement, blacks hoped that the church property would be secure.[66]

The process of choosing an official faith for the African Church demonstrated that the black community, like any social group, had differences within it. After settling on the Episcopal faith, church elders approached Richard Allen to lead the new congregation. Allen refused. He recounted, "I told them I could not accept of their offer, as I was a Methodist…I informed them that I could not be anything else but a Methodist, as I was born and awakened under them, and I could go no further with them [the Episcopalians]…"[67] Though Absalom Jones had originally declared himself for Methodism, he eventually relented, and accepting the Episcopalian faith, became the pastor of the African Church, renamed St. Thomas's African Episcopal Church on July 17, 1794.[68]

Black Methodism did not die after the African Church officially became Episcopalian. Twelve days after the founding of St. Thomas, Allen and his Methodist followers christened the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME). According to Allen, Methodism was the religion for Philadelphia's black residents. It was the faith for the "plain and simple." Its ministers, who often led ascetic lives themselves, appealed to the lowly people of the city and countryside with a message of salvation and an ideal of a improved community in which austerity, self-discipline, and mutual aid would bring salvation and escape from indigence. It also offered greater avenues of emotional expression and participation than other religions, valued the work of lay preachers and lay societies, and presented a simplified liturgy that practitioners could follow.[69]

By 1795, both St. Thomas's and the AME's congregations had grown. Jones's St. Thomas had reached four hundred members, while Allen's AME had over one

---

[65] Ibid, 113.
[66] Ibid, 126.
[67] Richard Allen in his *Life Experiences and Gospel Labors*, 30.
[68] Lammers, 175-177.
[69] Nash,110; Newman, 71.

hundred devotees. Generally, each church drew from different socioeconomic sectors of the black community. St. Thomas's drew many of black Philadelphia's wealthiest families, like the sailmaker James Forten, whereas the likes of laborers and middling black merchants found the AME more appealing.[70] While diverging interests may have been slowly separating the concerns of Philadelphia's black residents, growing white hostility refocused their energies. The black community's first "public" challenge came earlier in 1793 and it would set the precedent in discourse which black churches and community leaders would continue to utilize and sharpen as Philadelphia entered the 19th century.

Yellow Fever, Black Response

Philadelphia's infamous yellow fever epidemic of 1793 provided a challenge to the city's black community. Lasting from late August until early November, nearly 5,000 of the city's 50,000 residents perished, and 17,000 of the city's residents fled the scourge. In their flight, they left dying family members to fend for themselves and their abandoned property to the greed of thieves.[71] These "frightful scenes…seemed to indicate a total dissolution of the bonds of society in the nearest and dearest connexions."[72] When the fever had passed, the black community confronted yet another trial: the libel of Matthew Carey.

During the fever, black leaders mobilized their community to provide medical assistance to the sick and helped bury the dead, even after they discovered that blacks possessed no immunity against the disease. As the fever fizzled out in November, Carey, a prominent Philadelphia publicist, published rumors that the black nurses and gravediggers extorted exorbitant fees for their services. "The great demand for nurses afforded an opportunity for imposition…They extorted two, three, four, and even five dollars a night for such attendance, as would have been well paid by a single dollar. Some of them were even detected in plundering the houses of the sick."[73]

Richard Allen and Absalom Jones did not let Carey escape such accusations. Together they published *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People* in 1794. The pamphlet counters Carey's claims of extortion. For example, the FAS spent £411 on coffins and labor receiving, yet only received £233 in repayment for

---

[70] Newman, 72-73.

[71] Thomas E. Will. "Liberalism, Republicanism, and Philadelphia's Black Elite in the Early Republic: The Social Thought of Absalom Jones and Richard Allen." *Pennsylvania History*. Vol. 69 #4 (2002): 558; *Letter from Thomas Clifford*. September 10, 1793. *Clifford-Pemberton Papers*, 223-224. HSP.

[72] Matthew Carey. *A Short Account of the Malignant Yellow Fever,…* 4th ed. (Philadelphia, 1794: reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1970), 116.

[73] Ibid, 63.

these materials and services.[74] As to Carey's claim that black nurses extorted higher wages, Allen and Jones claimed that the nurses did not attend prearranged patients because "they had been allured away by others who offered greater wages" which was only "natural for people in low circumstances to accept a voluntary, bounteous reward."[75] Jones and Allen highlighted the truly charitable works of a variety of black nurses. Some worked for free while others simply desired "a dinner…on a cold winter's day." The authors do not deny that some members of the black community did plunder the property, but whites participated in acts of equal criminality as well.[76]

Jones and Allen's *Narrative* is a momentous piece of literature not for what it said, but for what it represented. The *Narrative* marks the emergence of a black "counterpublic" in Philadelphia. As whites controlled property they also dominated access to the public sphere and public spaces, such as sources of print as well as streets, parks, or squares. Philadelphia's black counterpublic arose primarily out of the environment fostered by gradual emancipation beginning in 1780. With the growth of their own neighborhoods and organizations such as the FAS, free blacks redefined what Joanna Brooks calls their "public availability," or their vulnerability to "criminal accusation, economic exploitation, social exclusion, perpetual servitude, indebtedness, and even kidnapping and reenslavement." Free blacks withdrew the idea of blackness from public ownership by establishing new collective spaces for the black community, which boldly proclaimed that only they controlled the shaping of their identity.[77]

As a counterpublic, the *Narrative* presents the black community as a collective subject with a unique history and functions as a social sieve, absorbing and discrediting infectious racist rumor. Jones and Allen further strengthened the document by securing its copyright. Not only did it allow them to "reclaim subjective authority over matters concerning blackness," as Joanna Brooks argues, but the copyright precedent demonstrated the importance of formal incorporation to the black church into a larger established religious polity, as this process created limits and protections against white encroachments.[78] While a black presence in Philadelphia's broader public sphere challenged whites' racist notions and prejudices, the community's black churches, more importantly, provided tangible aid and protection from an increasingly hostile white world.

---

[74] Absalom Jones and Richard Allen. *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People in 1794*. (Philadelphia, PA, 1794), 6.
[75] Ibid, 7.
[76] Ibid, 9, 11.
[77] Ibid, 10. See also: Joanna Brooks. "The Early American Public Sphere and the Emergence of a Black Print Counterpublic." *William and Mary Quarterly*. Vol. 62 No 1 (January 2005): 71-72.
[78] Brooks, 86.

A Guiding Light

As the population of Philadelphia continued to rise, a noticeable shift in residential patterns occurred. While whites dominated the city's commercial center, the southern portion of the city proved to have a magnetic effect upon the city's free black population. In 1790, blacks occupied both the northern and southern peripheries of the city, accounting for 36.7% and 33% of those populations, respectively. However, by 1810 65% of the city's free black population called the southern portion of the city home, while only 28.9% of the black population resided in the northern neighborhoods.[79] Land developers decided to build cheap tenement apartments in the city's northern and southern sections, but it seems that their building patterns placed a heavier focus on the southern section. Still, something else drew most free blacks to this area. It was the city's original black churches that acted as social magnets. For the black community, the church was the vital center of community life around which the neighborhoods coalesced. Absalom Jones and Richard Allen found the property values affordable and both purchased plots of land in this part of the city in the 1790s. After opening in 1794, both churches became centers of black religious, social, and political activity attracting recent arrivals to Philadelphia as well as the city's black domestic servants who moved out of their white employers' households.[80]

The increased black presence in Philadelphia, though potentially good for Jones and Allen's congregations, strained the tenuous relationship between blacks and whites in the city. Rising racial tensions came to a peak on July 4, 1803. Philadelphia's Independence Day had always been an event which all men and women of every social class and race could celebrate together. But the 1803 festivities turned sour for the black participants: white citizens forced their fellow black celebrants out from the square in front of the old State House with threats of violence and abuse.[81] The incident of 1803 demonstrated the broader situation blacks faced in Philadelphia during days of supposed public celebration. Writing in 1813, James Forten remarked, "that black people upon, certain days of public jubilee, dare not been seen after twelve o'clock in the day, upon the field to enjoy the times; for no sooner…the poor black is assailed like the destroying Hyena or the avaricious wolf!"[82]

---

[79]Federal Census Data of 1790 and 1810 as quoted in Nash's *Forging Freedom*, 167.
[80] Nash, 169.
[81] John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830*. (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 346.
[82] James Forten as quoted in his *Letters from a Man of Color* as found in the March 14, 1828 edition of *Freedom's Journal.*

In response to this public castigation, the black churches and their accompanying mutual benefit societies began to plan their own day of thanksgiving. Rallying around America's termination of the international slave trade on January 1, 1808, on May 10, 1807 "a numerous and respectable meeting of Africans" occurred to determine what actions Philadelphia's black community would take to commemorate the occasion. The committee decided that "on the return of the day [January 1] on which the prohibition by act of Congress commences, we will endeavor to evince the gratitude we feel by acts of benevolence and brotherly regard…and by public prayer and thanksgiving."[83] The celebration in Philadelphia revolved predominantly around sermons at churches such as St. Thomas and the AME that communicated a feeling of community and racial pride, and, like Absalom Jones's *Thanksgiving Sermon,* urged the community to be cautious and unostentatious. "Let our conduct be regulated by the precepts of the gospel; let us be sober minded, humble, peaceable, temperate in our meats and drinks, frugal in our apparel and in the furniture of our houses, industrious in our occupations, just in all our dealings, and ever ready to honour all men." [84] The committee also resolved to coordinate efforts with other "religious societies in the Union" to celebrate the event, creating one of the first black days of celebration on a national scale.[85] Like Jones and Allen's *Narrative* before it, the January 1 celebrations demonstrated how blacks continued to garner access to public space and challenge their "public availability," not only in Philadelphia, but also as part of the national community of free blacks.

The churches also organized a variety of benevolent and mutual aid societies to aid and provide guidance to the immoral and destitute of the community. Modeled after the FAS between 1794 and 1797, the Friendly Society of St. Thomas's provided its members aid when they were sick and destitute, procured resources to bury the dead in a "plain and decent" manner, and "any other charitable purpose that the President and a majority of the Committee may deem necessary."[86] St. Thomas's also founded the African Society for the Suppression of Vice and Immorality in 1809. Members of the society would travel to the "more dissipated

---

[83] *Relf's Philadelphia Gazette and Daily Advertiser*. December 30, 1807. HSP.
[84] Absalom Jones. *A Thanksgiving Sermon*. (Philadelphia: Fry and Kammerker Printers, 1808), 17. HSP; Nash, 189.
[85] *Relf's Gazette.* December 30, 1807. HSP
[86] *Constitution and Rules to be Observed and Kept by the Friendly Society of St. Thomas's* as quoted in Dorothy Porter's *Early Negro Writing, 1760-1837*. (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995), 29-30.

parts of the city and suburbs" and use "such persuasive measures as may be best calculated to produce reformation of manners among them."[87]

Why would black church leaders place so much importance on creating an organization to regulate the behavior of poor blacks? To convince whites that they deserved a place in civilized society, black leaders hoped to present their community as a morally composed and mature society. The Society hoped to rein in blacks' gambling, drinking, and even haughty body language, like a carefree gait, uninhibited singing, dancing, and laughing. From 1802-1812, Philadelphia's blacks formed twelve mutual aid and benevolent societies. By 1828, over forty such organizations existed.[88]

As black churches assumed the symbol of community stewards, it is no doubt that many of them established schools for black children and adults. According to Allen's *Doctrines and Disciplines of the AME Church*, the educational role of the church was essential not only for its continued growth but also the strengthening of the society as a whole.[89] In 1795, Allen organized the first black Sunday school and perhaps the first black night school in America at the AME church. He later organized the Society of Free People of Color for Promoting the Instruction and School Education of Children of African Descent which helped raise money for a larger school at Bethel. Jones also reorganized his school at St. Thomas's and opened another school in the city's Northern Liberties neighborhood in 1804. Earlier in 1803, Jones and other free black leaders had taken over three of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society's schools for blacks after the organization withdrew its support. Despite black churches' efforts at educating their community, the PAS and the Quakers, for the most part, were largely responsible for educating blacks.[90]

Despite the pedagogical intentions of both whites and blacks, black school enrollment was dismal. An 1805 survey revealed that only 566 students attended one of the seven schools servicing black students. By 1813, that number had dropped to 414. With such passionate appeals for the importance of education, what accounted for decreasing enrollment in early schools? Many blacks could not afford the tuition required to pay for these private schools. When it seemed that a new public school system would finance the education of black children, the systems' white administrators denied them access to it. An added difficulty was allowing indentured children the opportunity for schooling. As many black

---

[87] Excerpts from the *Petition to the Honorable William Tilghman, Esq. Chief Justice of the State of Pennsylvania* as quoted in Douglass, 113.
[88] Nash, 210, 219; George, *Segregated Sabbaths*, 125.
[89] Richard Allen and Jacob Tapsico. *Doctrines and Disciplines of the AME Church* (Philadelphia, 1817) as cited on http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/ame/ame.html; Newman, 180.
[90] Nash, 203-204.

families struggled from day to day, indenturing one's children was a common practice. The problem with this arrangement is that many young blacks could not garner time away from their duties to attend school.[91]

Attempts to convince adults of seeking education were also largely unsuccessful. It can be argued that the black church itself indirectly retarded the efforts to educate the recently freed blacks. By providing a platform where vital news could be received orally and learned in a communal fashion, the black church convinced many black adults that moral and intellectual uplift would be found in religion, not literacy.[92] While the opportunities for communalism in the black church may have stunted adult education, blacks' turning more to their preachers and congregations revealed the crucial importance many of Philadelphia's black residents placed on their churches.

While the success of formal education via black churches is questionable, the black church's practices of what Richard Newman calls "shadow politics" proved much more promising. When Allen's congregants at the AME church staged yearly elections for church offices or voted on church policy they mimicked the formal political activity from which they were disenfranchised and familiarized themselves with the knowledge of, and respect for, the standards of democratic citizenship.[93]

Members of the AME church saw tangible results of their shadow politics in January 1816. White Methodist ministers challenged the independence of Allen's church and brought their case to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. Confronting the white Methodists was the African Supplement. As a packet of amendments to the Methodist Articles of Association, the Supplement demonstrated the resolve of the black congregation for self-government. According to the document, AME church trustees controlled church property, could appoint only black ministers to preach in the church, and declared that if any articles in the original Articles of Association were inconsistent with the Supplement, those articles became null and void. Though the Supplement required the consent of two-thirds of the church's male members for ratification, the congregation unanimously passed the Supplement. This produced two results: the Pennsylvania Supreme Court recognized the AME church's right of self-government over its internal affairs, and the congregants of the AME realized how their collective activities in shadow politics helped strengthen the black church which, in turn, strengthened the black community against further white encroachment.[94]

---

[91] Nash, 208-210.
[92] Ibid, 210.
[93] Newman, 167-169.
[94] Ibid, 210; Excerpts of the *African Supplement* as found in Allen's *Life Experiences and Gospel Labors*, 37-41.

Conclusion

The free black church in Philadelphia was the primary source of the black community's nascent sovereignty. Though white reformers and politicians gradually manumitted slaves in Pennsylvania and provided a rudimentary education to blacks both free and slave, they never intended to grant citizenship and equality to free blacks. With this realization, James Forten, Absalom Jones, Richard Allen, and other free black leaders initially mobilized their growing community's own social potential around black mutual aid and benevolent societies, like the Free African Society. The black administered churches were, by far, more influential. More than just temporal manifestations of a black response to white hostility, black churches reflected their communities' growing desire for autonomy. Through their actions, these institutions repelled pathogenic rumor, reclaimed the idea of "blackness" in the public realm, provided a framework for political participation in a democratic society, and allowed blacks to pursue their religious practices on their own terms.

Bibliography

Alexander, John K. "The Philadelphia Numbers Game: An Analysis of Philadelphia's Eighteenth Century Population." *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*. Vol. 98 (1974): 314-24.

Allen, Richard. *The Life Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen*. New York: Abingdon Press, 1960.

Allen, Richard and Jacob Tapsico. *Doctrines and Disciplines of the AME Church* Philadelphia, 1817. http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/ame/ame.html.

An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery. (1780) http://www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/history/gradual.htm

Robert Barclay. *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity*. London: T. Sowle, 1703.

Barrett, Leonard E. *Soul-Force: African Heritage in Afro-American Religion*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1974.

Berlin, Era and Ronald Hoffman, eds. *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution*. Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1983.

Bracey, John H. Jr, August Meier, and Elliot Rudwick, eds. *Black Nationalism in America*. New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co Inc., 1970.

Breen, T.H. *Tobacco Culture: The Mentality of the Great Tidewater Planters on the Eve of the Revolution*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985.

Brookes, George S. *Friend Anthony Benezet*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1937. Historical Society of Pennsylvania

Brooks, Joanna. "The Early American Public Sphere and the Emergence of a Black Print Counterpublic." *William and Mary Quarterly*. Vol. 62 No 1 (January 2005): 67-92.

Bruns, Roger A. "Anthony Benezet and the Natural Rights of the Negro." *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*. Vol. 96 #1 (January 1972): 104-113.

Carey, Matthew. *A Short Account of the Malignant Yellow Fever,…* 4th ed. Philadelphia, 1794; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1970.

Clifford-Pemberton Papers. Letter from Thomas Clifford. September 10, 1793. Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Colonial Records. *Minutes of the Supreme Executive Council. February 6, 1779.* Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Douglass, William. *Annals of the First African Church*. Philadelphia: King and Baird, Printers, 1862.

Douty, Esther M. *Forten the Sailmaker: Pioneer Champion of Negro Rights*. New York: Rand McNally and Co, 1968.

Extract of a Letter from Dr. Benjamin Rush, of Philadelphia, to Granville Sharp. August 27, 1791.

Gayraud S. Wilmore. *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans.* New York: Orbis Books, 1998.

George, Carol V.R.. *Segregated Sabbaths: Richard Allen and the Rise of Independent Black Churches, 1760-1840.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Gill, Harold B., Jr. "Wheat Culture in Colonial Virginia." *Agricultural History*. Vol. 52 #3 (July 1978): 380-393.

Horton, James Oliver and Lois E. Horton. *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700-1860*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Jones, Absalom and Richard Allen. *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, during the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, in the Year 1793: And a Refutation of some Censures, Thrown upon Them in Some Late Publications*. Philadelphia, 1794.

Jones, Absalom. *A Thanksgiving Sermon*. Philadelphia: Fry and Kammerer,1808. Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Kashatus, William C. "A Friend Among Quakers." *Pennsylvania Heritage*. Vol. 3 #2 (2004): 6-9.

Kutler, Stanley I.. "Pennsylvania Courts, the Abolition Act, and Negro Rights." *Pennsylvania History*. Vol. 30 #1 (1963): 14-27.

Lammers, Ann C. “The Rev. Absalom Jones and the Episcopal Church: Christian Theology and Black Consciousness in a New Alliance.” *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church.* Vol. 51 #2 (1982): 159-184.

Martinie Eiler, Ross E.. “Luxury, Capitalism, and the Quaker Reformation, 1737-1798.” *Quaker History*. Vol. 97 #1 (2008): 11-31.

McLish, Glen. “A Man of Feeling, A Man of Colour: James Forten and the Rise of African American Deliberative Rhetoric.” *Rhetorica*. Vol. 25 #3 (Summer 2007): 297-328.

Nash, Gary B. and Jean R. Soderlund. *Freedom by Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsylvania and its Aftermath*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Nash, Gary B., *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia’s Black Community, 1720-1840.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988.

Newman, Richard S. *Freedom’s Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers.* New York: New York University Press, 2008.

--*The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

Pennsylvania Archives. Vol. 7. Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Pennsylvania Gazette advertisements. December 24, 1767. April 28, 1768. May 19, 1768. September 1, 1768. February 23, 1769. October 12, 1769.

Porter, Dorothy. *Early Negro Writing, 1760-1837*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995.

Relf’s Philadelphia Gazette and Daily Advertiser. December 30, 1807. Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Slocum-Hornick, Nancy. “Anthony Benezet and Africans’ School: Toward a Theory of Full Equality.” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*. Vol. 99 #4 (October 1975): 399-421.

Smith, Billy G., ed. *Life in Early Philadelphia: Documents from the Revolutionary and Early National Periods.* University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995.

Soderlund, Jean R.. *Quakers and Slavery: A Divided Spirit*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985.

Stoughton Locke, Mary. *Anti-Slavery in America: From the Introduction of African Slaves to the Prohibition of the Slave Trade*. Gloucester, MA: Radcliffe College, 1965.

Sweet, John Wood, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003.

Will, Thomas E. “Liberalism, Republicanism, and Philadelphia’s Black Elite in the Early Republic: The Social Thought of Absalom Jones and Richard Allen.” *Pennsylvania History*. Vol. 69 #4 (2002): 558-576.

Winch, Julie. *A Gentleman of Color: The Life of James Forten*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002,
-- "'A Person of Good Character and Considerable Property': James Forten and the Issue of Race in Philadelphia's Antebellum Business Community." *The Business History Review*. Vol. 75 #2 (Summer 2001): 261-296.
--*Philadelphia's Black Elite: Activism, Accommodation, and the Struggle for Autonomy, 1787-1848*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988.
Zilversmit, Arthur. *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1967.