

Freedom's Prophet

*Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church,
and the Black Founding Fathers*

Richard S. Newman



NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS
New York and London

For Lisa

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS
New York and London
www.nyupress.org

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First published in paperback in 2009.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Newman, Richard S.
Freedom's prophet : Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church,
and the Black founding fathers / Richard S. Newman.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-8147-5857-1 (pbk : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-8147-5857-6 (pbk : alk. paper)

ISBN-13: 978-0-8147-5826-7 (cl : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-8147-5826-6 (cl : alk. paper)

1. Allen, Richard, 1760-1831. 2. African Methodist Episcopal
Church—Bishops—Biography. 3. Bishops—United States—
Biography. 4. African Methodist Episcopal Church—History.
I. Title.

BX8459.A4N49 2008

287'.83—dc22 2007043259

[B]

New York University Press books are printed on acid-free paper,
and their binding materials are chosen for strength and durability.

Manufactured in the United States of America

c 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

p 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Introduction

A Black Founder's Many Worlds

If I could write but a part of my labors, it would fill a volume.

—Richard Allen, *Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours*

If you go to Philadelphia today and stop at the corner of Sixth and Lombard streets, you stand on hallowed ground. Here one of early America's leading reformers built an internationally famous church, wrote pamphlets of protest that served as models for generations to come, and championed liberty and justice for all. "He was one of the most talented people of his generation," a distinguished scholar of the American Revolution has written; he was a true "Apostle of Freedom," an early biographer declared. His name was Richard Allen. He was a black founder.¹

For those who visit "Mother Bethel," as his South Philadelphia church is still called, objects big and small commemorate Allen as a black founder. A hand-fan informs its holders that the church "stands on the oldest parcel of ground continuously owned by blacks." The simple object—made of the thinnest cardboard material but deceptively useful during the sweltering Philadelphia summers—also highlights Allen's organization of the first black reform society in America (the Free African Society) during the magical year of 1787. Knowing that many modern-day visitors will already have taken in the Liberty Bell and Independence Mall (where white American founders attempted to craft "a more perfect union"), the Mother Bethel fan implies that the formation of the Constitution was but one of the many key events occurring in Philadelphia that year. Black founder Richard Allen led another critical event less than a mile from where Washington, Franklin, Hamilton, and Adams once stood.

In his hometown, as one might suspect, Allen's legacy remains strong. The Philadelphia phone book lists the number for "Mother Bethel" and then adds that the church sits on land "purchased by Richard Allen" in 1791. Guided tours roll past Mother Bethel on most days, and Sunday services at Allen's magnificently rebuilt church (refashioned in 1889 in the Romanesque style favored by late-nineteenth-century American architects like Henry Hobson Richardson) find visitors attending from all over the world. "Welcome, Bienvenue, Welcommen," the church hymnal says. "No institution allows deeper insight to the heart and soul of African Americans than the church," AME pastor Jeffrey Leath has written, and "Mother Bethel . . . has been a shining star for African Americans for over two hundred years." (Today, the broader AME Church boasts a global membership of over two million people.) "The courage and compassion of her founder, Bishop Richard Allen," he continues, "set a tone for succeeding generations."²

Allen's contemporaries agreed. "Richard Allen! Oh my God!!" celebrated Boston activist David Walker wrote in 1829. "The bare recollection of the labors of this man fills my soul with all those very high emotions which would take the pen of Addison to portray." Allen's admirers constitute a who's who of African American life: celebrated reformer Frederick Douglass, black physician James McCune Smith, famed female preacher Jarena Lee, the pathbreaking urban sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois. "If true greatness consists in self-sacrificing heroism and devotion," African American preacher John Palmer told a gathering at Allen Chapel in Philadelphia at the close of the nineteenth century, "if again, greatness consists in that manifest patriotism which yearns to strike the blow which results in bringing freedom and liberty to an oppressed people . . . then Richard Allen was great."³

White reformers celebrated Allen's founding credentials as well. He was, one commentator wrote of an 1813 engraving of the Rev. Richard Allen, "the first black Bishop in the United States and perhaps the world!"⁴ During the 1790s, Quaker abolitionist Warner Mifflin roamed the mid-Atlantic countryside touting Allen's pamphlets of protest, telling whoever would listen that this man—yes, an African American writer!—must be studied. A decade prior to Mifflin's clarion call, the young and recently freed Richard Allen had so impressed the country's leading Methodist missionary, Francis Asbury, that the white chaplain asked the prodigy preacher to be his special assistant in saving American souls. And before even this, Allen gained renown around his child-

hood home of Dover, Delaware, for using a white preacher to finagle freedom from his second master. Allen always behaved "honestly," wrote Stokeley Sturgis, Allen's former master, in 1783. Though a young man and enslaved, Allen seemed destined for big things.⁵

For many of his admirers, Allen was not simply a great black man—a significant achievement itself in an age that equated blackness with enslavement—but a man who belonged to the ages. "There is one man whom our people should never forget," Philadelphia's Bishop A. W. Wyman told a crowd at an Allen birthday celebration in February 1865. "Rome had her Caesar . . . Germany her illustrious Luther . . . America her Washington, Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln." African Americans could proudly offer their own "illustrious hero" in the vaunted Allen.⁶ Delaware pastor N. H. Turpin went a step further: Allen was "truly a Moses." Allen, Turpin wrote at the end of the Civil War, was one of the first Americans to call for universal brotherhood in this world while knowing deep in his bones that it existed in the next one. Americans black and white should offer thanks and praise to "the sainted Richard Allen and his noble soul and spirit [for] laying so firm a foundation [of liberty] for his sons to build upon."⁷

For whatever reason they celebrated him, black communities came to commemorate Allen's birthday—February 14—as a day of black pride. (In what may have been the sincerest form of flattery, Frederick Douglass even claimed it as his own birthday.) One of the most memorable "Allen Day" events occurred in Philadelphia in February 1865, when a small gathering honored Allen's heroic deeds alongside Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation.⁸ As the choir sang "beautiful hymns," worshipers conjured not only Lincoln's visage but Allen's too. The memory of Allen, a man who fought slavery before Lincoln was even born, appeared more saintly than ever. A tireless abolitionist, community activist, and minister, Richard Allen would always be remembered as a black founder.

Despite his many achievements and towering reputation, no modern biography of Richard Allen exists. The last major study of Allen was produced by African American scholar Charles Wesley in the 1930s. Written during an era that treated black history as secondary to the nation's main themes, Wesley's book pictured Allen as both an American and an African American hero. (Unsurprisingly, Allen's emigrationist musings found little space in Wesley's fine book). Historian Carol George's stirring monograph of Allen's central role in the formation of

the African Methodist Episcopal Church was one of the few post-civil-rights-era biographies of a black founder, though it has been over thirty years since that volume's publication. More recently, Dee Andrews, Gary Nash, and Albert Raboteau, among others, have made Allen a key figure in their artful examinations of Methodism, black community building, and Afro-Christianity, respectively. But there is still no authoritative biography of Allen's long and ramifying life.⁹

Freedom's Prophet attempts to recapture Allen's key role in post-Revolutionary American and African American life. Indeed, borrowing a phrase from David Levering Lewis's monumental work on Du Bois, one might say that Allen's story provides a "biography of his race" during the early republic—and a biography of race as a lived experience in early national America. Although biography remains a cornerstone of history writing, there are still relatively few books dedicated to examining the lives of African-descended people in the eighteenth-century Western world.¹⁰ Allen's seven decades on American soil illuminate, among other key issues, race relations in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, the advent of the black church and black abolitionism, the rise of black leadership traditions and print culture, the varieties of black nationalism and political discourse espoused by African American reformers through time, and the ever-expanding debates over black identity in the Atlantic world.¹¹ Above all else, this book poses a simple question: what happens if we put Richard Allen into the hallowed American founding generation? The text then considers Allen as essentially the forerunner of modern civil rights activists, for his belief in nonviolent but confrontational reform offered lessons for virtually every black leader who followed in his wake.

It is important at the outset to underscore the momentous age in which this black founder lived. Born a slave in a colonial American world that barely questioned bondage, Allen grew up to see slavery crack in Western culture. He also lived to see racial subjugation revived through waves of discriminatory codes and practices, from segregated seating in most Northern churches (inequality in the House of the Lord! Allen would exclaim) to rescinded black voting rights in most Northern states. Indeed, except among academic specialists, it is all too easy to forget that black founders like Allen lived through a tumultuous era of American race relations. Historians formerly referred to this time period as "the first emancipation"; it might be better understood as America's first Reconstruction.¹² Not only was the American Revolution

a fresh event in the minds of both black and white Americans—not least because the War of Independence prompted between sixty thousand and one hundred thousand slaves to flee bondage¹³—so too was the nation's first experiment with emancipation: the ending of slavery by Northern states between 1780 (when Pennsylvania passed the first gradual abolition act) and 1804 (when New Jersey passed the last such bill).¹⁴ In addition, the Chesapeake states of Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia eased emancipation restrictions, prompting thousands of manumissions by the early 1800s. Black freedom was no longer a rumor. On top of this, Allen witnessed the ending of the slave trade in America and England, the massive growth of slavery in the South and Southwest (a doubling of enslaved populations over Allen's life), the rise of the domestic slave trade between Northern and Southern locales, and the advent of the world's first black republic, Haiti. Richard Allen's world was filled with high hopes and dashing disappointments.

Yet Allen did not live through these immense changes passively, a black man adrift in a sea of impersonal and malevolent forces. Rather, he shaped, and was in turn shaped by, the events swirling around him. As the most prominent black preacher of his era, he helped inaugurate a moral critique of slavery and slaveholding that shaped abolitionism for years to come. As one of the first black pamphleteers, he pushed not only for slavery's demise but also for black equality. As a black institution builder, he spurred the creation of autonomous organizations and churches that nurtured African American struggles for justice throughout the nineteenth century. As a sometime doubter of American racial equality, he participated in black emigration to Haiti. As a leader of the first national black convention, he defined continent-wide protest tactics and strategies for a new generation of activists.

Bishop Allen's lifelong struggle for racial justice makes for a compelling and illuminating story—a tale about a black founder and African Americans in the early American republic.

1. *Richard Allen beyond the Myth: "Modest without Timidity"*

Just who was Richard Allen? Though he left no personal papers or scholarly archive, we know a good deal about him. He married twice and claimed in his last will to love "his beloved [second] wife," Sarah. He had six children—Richard, Peter, John, James, Sarah, and Ann—

and is remembered in Allen family lore as a kind and loving parent. He owned several properties, worked a host of jobs (from skilled trades to unskilled day jobs), and tried at least once in his life to start a major business. Though a proponent of black autonomy, he had many white friends, from the celebrated (Benjamin Rush and Francis Asbury) to the unheralded (antislavery activist Warner Mifflin). One of Allen's prized possessions was a seventeenth-century Bible given him by white abolitionist Thomas Garrett. The tattered book still sits safely behind a pane of protective glass in the Richard Allen Museum below Bethel Church. Allen could be kindly: he bequeathed his famed walking cane—willed to him by Absalom Jones—to a fellow black preacher. He could also be shrewd, as in 1830 when he maneuvered the first black convention to Philadelphia rather than let New York City's or Baltimore's black reformers claim the honor of hosting the event.

"Modest without timidity" is the way AME Bishop Daniel Payne described Allen's personality. That phrase characterized Allen's physical presence too: he was of average height for his time and locale, a modest five foot seven or five foot eight. The fiery black Presbyterian orator Henry Highland Garnet later described Allen as "a little below the middle size, roundly built, with a frame that indicated endurance and strength." Garnet called Allen "a beautiful Negro," for his dark complexion and tightly curled hair. In his later years, according to Garnet, Allen's hair took on a "beautiful silver gray" color—nearly biblical in its shimmering tones. For the young Garnet (who was just a boy when he encountered Allen), the Bishop's wonderfully silvery mane accented his chocolate brown skin, making Garnet forever proud of his African ancestry. Garnet perhaps read a little too much into Allen's complexion, for the black founder had (like Frederick Douglass later) a multiracial ancestry. Family lore says that his mother was mixed race (and his father African).¹⁵

Allen's less than imposing physical size did not in any way detract from his commanding stature. Virtually everyone who knew the preacher commented on his incredibly strong will and palpable sense of certitude. Indeed, to gauge Allen's character and inner drive, all one had to do was peer into his dazzling eyes. Garnet's words are again instructive. He met the distinguished preacher in the late 1820s on one of Allen's trips to New York City, where Garnet's family had settled after a daring escape from Maryland slavery. Garnet's father was a religious man and knew well of Allen. When Allen came to Manhattan for Meth-

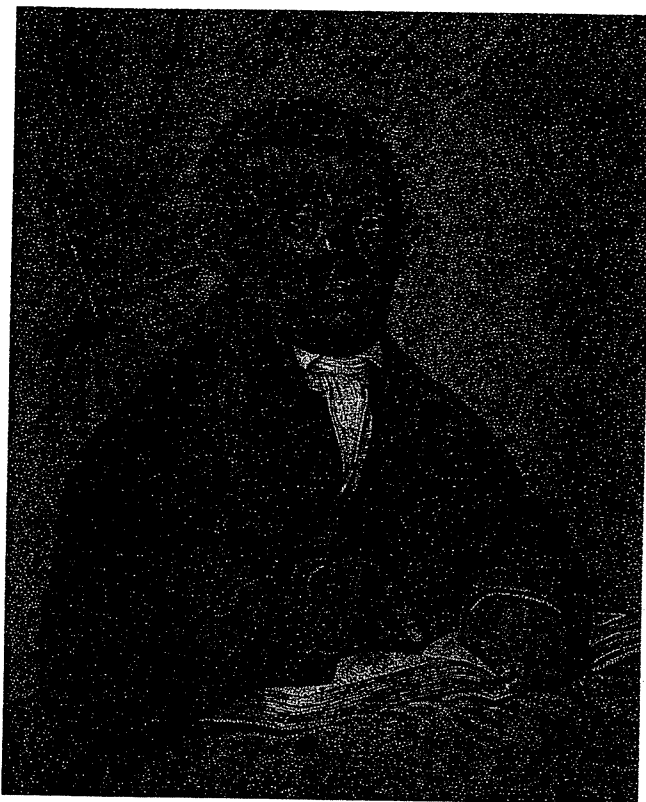
odist revivals, Garnet recalled that he always took time to visit the flock of kids who ran to the preacher's side as he entered the room or disembarked from a boat. Children called him "Papa" Allen, and he seemed as gentle and kind as anyone could possibly be. Garnet had the most wonderful memory of "standing between" the great preacher's creaking knees, listening to the "venerable" man gently instructing the lad to "be a good boy, and serve, honor and obey the Lord."¹⁶

When preaching, however, or when his ire had been raised, Allen's eyes flashed, commanding the respect of everyone around him. "They seemed to blaze with a fire that attracted the attention of all who beheld them," Garnet wrote after the Civil War, nearly forty years removed from his time with "Papa" Allen. But he vividly remembered Allen's piercing gaze as an emblem of black confidence and pride.¹⁷

Perhaps Allen's most important trait was his rigid determination, some would say obstinacy. Allen was *stubborn* in an era when many black people learned to dissemble, defer, and concede to white authority in order to survive. Even black comrades learned about Allen's stubbornness. When the Free African Society refused to follow Methodist principles, Allen balked. Then he left the group he helped organize. "No religious sect," he explained, "would suit the capacity of the coloured people as well as the Methodist."¹⁸ When whites criticized African Americans during the yellow-fever epidemic, Allen wasted little time in calling them hypocritical and racist—doing it in print and having that printed work sent up and down the Atlantic coast and even off to Great Britain.

Allen was a man for whom propriety and dignity remained key parts of his identity. At the celebration of his sixty-eighth birthday in 1828, "a number of respectable ladies and gentlemen met at the right Rev. Richard Allen's" longtime Philadelphia home. Yet, as a black newspaper reported, they did not engage in an evening of dancing and revelry. Allen would not have it. "The entertainment," as *Freedom's Journal* put it, "was intermingled with singing and prayer."¹⁹ Allen sang his favorite hymns and gave thanks to the Lord for seeing him through another year. One just cannot imagine this man, this superserious personality, being caricatured in any way.

Allen's famous 1813 portrait, commissioned by the black preacher himself, displayed his dignified persona. His already-graying hair topped a rounded face with a prominent forehead, a flat nose and dimpled chin, and those deep-set yet piercing eyes. Dressed appropriately in the



"Rev. Richard Allen," artist unknown, 1813. The second of three portraits drawn of Allen during his lifetime, this remains perhaps the most famous image of the black founder. Allen's piercing eyes, celebrated black abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet recalled, "seemed to blaze with a fire that attracted the attention of all who beheld them." (Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia)

day's formal garb—a dark, heavy vest and long suitcoat with a white cravat—Allen puts on no airs. Just as important, his pose refuses to let viewers condescend to or pity an African American figure. In fact, Allen turned the tables on those who would look his way, shooting a piercing glance outward while pointing his finger firmly downward toward a Bible on his lap. It is a striking position, for Allen is not a passive subject in the least, a man content simply to have his portrait painted. Richard Allen, everyone knew from one look at him, was literate, moral, and upright—and he was in control of how people saw him.

Most people knew Allen as a religious man, a minister of the gospel, and eventually the nation's first black bishop. As a pious Methodist (he converted in 1777, at age seventeen), Allen's theology revolved around two key beliefs: Christian moralism and liberation theology. As a devout evangelical, Allen believed that the Christian religion defined the essential elements of daily life for every American, black or white: piety, sobriety, cleanliness, humility, and charity. Quoting the Bible, Allen implored black and white Americans to "do good and . . . hope for nothing" in return, except heavenly reward. Christianity also taught Americans to love one another no matter the class, ethnic, or racial lines seemingly dividing them. "Love your enemies," Allen preached throughout his life, "do good and lend, hoping for nothing again, and your reward shall be great."²⁰ Not only would faith and good works guarantee one's entry into heaven, they would also ensure harmony of the disparate souls composing the American nation. In other words, true Christian morality served as a delicate bridge of understanding between white and black Americans. Whites needed to heed God's word and emancipate enslaved people. But Afro-Christian freemen, Allen lectured, had to live by the Golden Rule: treat others as you would be treated. Liberated black Christians could not seek to settle scores with cruel former masters through violence; rather, they had to exemplify Christian charity and forgiveness. In this manner, he believed, African Americans would move from outsiders to fellow believers to equal citizens. Allen's was truly a theology of inclusiveness.

His Christian moralism notwithstanding, Allen also helped define the meaning of liberation theology, the notion that God sided with oppressed people.²¹ In his first major statement on American bondage, penned in 1794, Allen reminded slaveholders that God almighty had obliterated unrepentant Egyptian slaveholders. As the story of Exodus foretold, the Lord would again wreak divine vengeance on recalcitrant American masters. "We do not wish to make you angry," Allen argued, "but excite your attention to consider how hateful slavery is in the sight of that God who hath destroyed kings and princes for their oppression of slaves."²² Emancipation and renunciation of racial superiority could, however, salvage one's soul. But destroying slavery was only part of Allen's liberation theology. A corollary came from Psalm 68: "Princes shall come out of Egypt," Allen declared, and "Ethiopia shall stretch forth its hand to God." Like other black founders and activists after him, Allen believed that Psalm 68 established a moral foundation for

black freedom, including black citizenship in the American republic. Once freed from bondage—and the stigma of slavery—African Americans would redeem both themselves and the nation by emphasizing equality of the races. They would be the people on whom the great experiment in liberty depended, for African Americans would lead the charge against bondage. In this sense, Allen's liberation theology offered not merely a warning to American slaveholders but hope: by embracing true Christianity, and liberating bondpeople, they could avert the terrible fate awaiting all sinners. But that fate would indeed come to those who ignored God's sympathy with oppressed people.²³

As his antislavery sermonizing and pamphleteering efforts illustrate, Allen adhered to the principles of nonviolent protest throughout his life. Even in an age of great slave revolts, from Gabriel's Rebellion in Virginia to the Haitian Revolution in the Caribbean, Allen's ideology was perhaps the norm. Most slaves in the Atlantic world did not, and could not, successfully rebel; most enslaved people had to endure. But what did that actually mean? For Allen and black founders, it meant turning nonviolent protest—enduring over the long haul—into a moral and political weapon. By marshaling the tools of modernity (institution building and mass organizing, print culture and public demonstration, the deployment of democratic ideals and nationalist ideologies), they sought to refute the notion that blacks were either subhuman, political outsiders, or nothing better than maroons at the edges of Western society.²⁴ For Allen, black abolitionism (which espoused full equality for African Americans beyond slavery) was the heart and soul of America's future. He and other black founders still do not get enough credit for developing this idea, or for creating a tradition of public protest that undermined notions of racial superiority every bit as much as Atlantic-world slave rebellions.²⁵ Indeed, down to the American Civil War, many slaveholders' greatest fear was not massive slave rebellion but the specter of a "blackened" republic via universal emancipation and African American equality.²⁶ In Lincoln's day, these fears took the rather infamous name of "Black Republicanism." But they harked all the way back to black founders' vision of revolutionizing the white republic from within.

Obviously, Allen's Christian faith informed his understanding of nonviolent protest. He read Psalm 37 as the keynote to his activism. Famous for its prophecy that "the meek shall inherit the earth" (37:11), the Psalm also instructs Christians to "Rest in the Lord, and wait pa-

tiently for him" (37:7). "Mark the perfect *man*, and behold the upright: for the end of *that* man is peace," it concludes (37:37). Allen loved this reference so much that he used it as the epigraph to his autobiography. Like Frederick Douglass, he may have believed that blacks could never win a violent uprising in America anyway. More probably, his temperament and deep faith made him believe that black endurance would, as the biblical story of Exodus and Psalms 37 and 68 prophesied, eventually win out and transform the Western world.²⁷

Often depicted as unschooled, Allen nevertheless mastered literacy, largely through religious instruction and Bible study while in his late teens and early twenties.²⁸ Literacy served as a critical platform for Allen's faith ever after. Allen began and ended each and every day with prayer. Although he favored "extempore" preaching—speaking off the cuff rather than writing out (and reading) sermons—Allen vigorously studied biblical exegesis. He owned two big sets of biblical commentaries. He studied them not merely for ministerial purposes but to defend the black community. On one striking occasion in 1802, Allen jumped in front of a drunken white soldier who had accosted his black congregation on the street. As the threatening white figure receded into the Philadelphia night still screaming, Allen whipped around and told his parishioners that Satan frequently worked this way, testing God's followers by raising up wicked men. "That was a lesson worthy of the greatest preacher," a white female itinerant visiting from England gushed after witnessing Allen in action.²⁹

As much as these details about Allen's physical appearance, theology, and preaching style amuse, delight, and inform, they also beg questions. How did Allen approach fatherhood as a black parent in the early republic? Did he ever cast a vote in any civic election? And, perhaps most important, what were his deepest feelings about the struggle for racial justice in America? Unfortunately, when one digs deeper into his personal thoughts and emotions, Allen becomes like the overwhelming majority of African Americans before the Civil War—a bit harder to track. Allen did not leave a voluminous private correspondence, nor did he leave a daily journal or diary of his thoughts for later scholars to mine.

The novelist John Edgar Wideman provides a hypothetical example of the type of personal source unavailable to Allen biographers. In his stunning novel *The Cattle Killing*, Wideman uses African American figures during the Philadelphia yellow-fever epidemic of 1793 to examine

issues of race and identity in the African American past—issues Allen himself grappled with in his own autobiography. But Wideman goes further than Allen ever did. In one key scene, based on Allen's real-life departure from a segregated white church, Wideman imagines Richard Allen interrogating himself. "When you marched out," Wideman writes, "marched away, admit, Allen, in your secret heart you hoped the entire congregation, black and white, would rise and march out with you in affirmation of God's law." This is not supposed to be Wideman's voice but Bishop Allen's, "on the edge of his bed thinking these thoughts."³⁰

Allen penned no such thoughts. And so one is left with basic questions about one of the most important African American leaders of his or any other era. This problem is quite familiar to scholars of black life. Even at the turn of the twentieth century, when black literacy rates had increased dramatically and slavery itself had faded into memory, it was difficult to find the types of primary sources for black private life that one could locate with relative ease for many white figures. The scholar and biographer Paula Giddings has written that uncovering the details of even one of the most prominent black couples of the industrial age—the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar and his wife, Alice Ruth Moore—proved elusive, for "such primary sources are understandably rare, even among educated blacks."³¹ Why? Racial fears, for one thing: black Americans have often veiled their feelings for fear of repercussions by white figures. Lack of educational resources and leisure time might be another explanation. But there it is: a paucity of source material on early black thought.

Allen's autobiography, dictated to his son near the end of his life around 1830, is quite stunning for what it left out. Allen stated at the very outset of his narrative that "slavery is a bitter pill," a lesson he learned early (as a slave separated from his family) and often (Allen was mistakenly grabbed as a runaway slave in the early 1800s).³² But Allen stopped there, telling readers merely that he eventually purchased his freedom. What happened to his mother? How did he react when informed that he would be separated from his parents? Did he ever attempt to reconnect with lost family members? Allen's reticence on such matters is interesting when one considers that he died just prior to a literary revolution: the advent of antebellum slave narratives. Befitting a romantic, confessional, highly emotional age, with a more literate

reading public than ever before, these new-style autobiographies of the 1840s and 1850 revealed slaves' innermost thoughts to a largely white, Northern, middle-class audience hungry for tales of injustice in the South. Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs remain the model slave narrators, telling white readers their feelings about being sold, whipped, humiliated, and ultimately freed.

That was not Allen's time and certainly not Allen's style. In fact, his reticence about detailing personal emotions may explain a bit more about his own personality (modest but stubborn) and the time in which he matured (America's founding era, a time dominated by dour federalist mentalities preaching about a virtuous citizenry). He may very well have believed that veiling one's deeper thoughts was critical to black survival. There may also be more to the story. Consider again Allen's autobiography. Like Thomas Jefferson's frustrating personal history, it is epistolary and instructional rather than confessional and revelatory. Neither Allen nor Jefferson explained their incredible lives in any probing manner. In true Enlightenment fashion both Allen and Jefferson hoped that their public deeds (and for Allen, his religious journey) would instruct readers about how to lead a moral, upright life in America. Another model in this regard may have been even closer to Allen—his fellow Pennsylvanian Ben Franklin's instructional autobiography.³³

In this sense, Allen (like Jefferson and Franklin) remained very much a man of the eighteenth century. He took cues from the world he grew up in—founding fathers discussing liberty and virtuous public service, Americans debating the meaning of constitutions and moral citizenship, slaveholders walking around Philadelphia defending bondage. Allen also meditated on what was missing from that world: black commentary, black insight on public duty, a black man's vigorous though non-violent response to racial oppression. Allen truly believed that public work revealed one's inner character, that *his own* public work would reveal *his* character. Both Allen and Jefferson lived in a world that valued the public over the private. Jefferson's tombstone merely asks people to remember his three great public accomplishments—writing the Declaration of Independence, ensuring religious liberty in the Virginia constitution, and launching the University of Virginia. No one asked him, but Allen chose to be buried beneath Bethel Church, and that must be his view on the matter of his own legacy: public accomplishment is all that need be remembered of this black founder's life.

2. Allen and Black Founders

Founders build things—nations, constitutions, institutions of governance and learning, belief systems that open unto worlds others scarcely knew existed. It is hard, according to David McCulloch, to underestimate the importance of a white founding figure like John Adams, who helped win the American Revolution, craft the federal Constitution and build a nation that stood tall in the Atlantic world. We can never know enough about him, McCulloch wistfully comments.³⁴ What exactly did Allen and black founders do? And what happens when you attempt to define them into the broader pantheon of American founders?

For answers, we must begin with Allen's church. In Mother Bethel, Allen built a physical edifice that defined African American Christianity and black autonomy for years to come. Here, ideas preceded bricks and mortar, for before Allen literally built his church in the 1790s he envisioned an autonomous black religious institution where none had previously existed. Allen once recalled that even local blacks doubted the efficacy of an independent black church in Philadelphia, so fearful were they of a white backlash. But after segregated seating policies were instituted at white churches, Allen appeared to be a visionary, and many blacks soon joined his exodus from segregated Northern pews and galleries for independent black churches. For subsequent generations, Allen's act of defiance had all the meaning and power of Rosa Parks's sit-in during the mid-twentieth century. The comparison is not superficial. For while both events—Parks's sit-in and Allen's walkout of segregated pews—were courageous nonviolent acts in and of themselves, they also set the stage for new black freedom struggles.

Indeed, after Allen's exit from a segregated white church, the young preacher had to build an autonomous black church with his own money and hands. In 1794, Allen bought an old blacksmith shop and hauled it to Bethel's present location, a spot of land he had purchased just a few years earlier beyond Philadelphia's more saturated urban grid. Honing skills learned both at his second master's Delaware home and along the mid-Atlantic coast during his first few years of freedom, Allen crafted a pulpit, arranged the pews, and whitewashed the walls of his new church. After being inaugurated in July 1794, Bethel Church, as it was soon known, became identified with black abolitionism and the dream of black redemption.

Allen's founding status rested on other constructions too. As *Free-*

dom's Journal reported in February 1828, Allen was "the first person that established a Benevolent Society among us for the grand purpose of relieving one another in time of duress."³⁵ The Free African Society, which Allen created with Absalom Jones in 1787, spawned dozens of "African Benevolent Societies" over the years, including over forty such institutions in Philadelphia alone.³⁶ Allen (again with Jones) also published the first copyrighted document by a black author in the United States: "A Narrative of the Black People," printed in January 1794. Right up to his death, Allen used print to publicize an impressive array of topics, including black church politics, the memory of slavery in eighteenth-century society, Canadian emigration, and the need for black unity in the face of continued white hostility. For example, in 1817 he helped draft a petition against the American Colonization Society that firmly asserted Northern black leaders' intimate bond—intellectually and ideologically—with Southern slaves. "Resolved, That, we never will separate ourselves voluntarily from [you]," the petition told enslaved people, for "[you] are our brethren."³⁷ The document quickly assumed an iconic status in black communities, underscoring racial unity across lines of status, geography, and condition.

There is a note of exceptionalism in Allen's early and consistent emphasis on racial unity. Indeed, free black Northerners were unique in the late-eighteenth-century Atlantic world for their steady allegiance to enslaved people. As David Brion Davis has intriguingly explained, in many parts of the Caribbean free blacks and enslaved Africans were often divided by lines of status, racial complexion, and even ideology. "One point that historians of black abolitionism have mostly overlooked is that free blacks in the West Indies generally supported the slave system," Davis has observed, "and the more successful ones became owners of slaves and even of large plantations." Only after the Haitian Revolution began did free and enslaved Caribbean people of color join forces under a unified racial banner. But before that, Richard Allen had insisted that free and enslaved African Americans belonged to the same community.³⁸

Allen's ability to build autonomous black institutions and inaugurate a printed discourse among free people of color propelled him into the upper echelons of black leadership by the early nineteenth century. In this sense, Allen's very leadership position heralded something new, for it skillfully blended African traditions with American political practices. Traditionally, African leadership flowed from priests and medicine

men. Because they were “considered intermediaries between the gods and members of the community,” these respected figures (particularly priests) “assumed the task of interpreting the universe and codifying and rationalizing cultural values.”³⁹ Following the American Revolution, black leaders’ task of explaining, codifying, and rationalizing values and events shifted in key ways. Now they interjected black voices into societal debates over racial justice and attempted to explain to white citizens African American claims to equality. To project their voices, black founders used print as well as the pulpit, republican theory as well as African communal traditions.

In the broadest sense, black founders included men and women who fought against racial oppression in some public way, shape, or form during the early republic and thereby set models of public protest for later activists. Thus, rabble-rousers and revolutionaries like Virginia slave rebel “Gabriel,” born in 1776 and put to death in 1800 after his slave rebellion failed before even getting started, must be considered key members of the black founding generation. But for every Sam Adams there was a John Adams, and so the black founding generation might also claim brash but bookish personas like Phyllis Wheatley, the prodigy poet and Massachusetts slave whose literary exploits confounded racial assumptions in Revolutionary America (even the worthiest of worthies, from Ben Franklin to George Washington, found themselves wondering about black freedom claims when reading her poems). Unheralded names could be added to the list of black founders too—the four Massachusetts slaves who in 1773 petitioned the colonial assembly for liberty before America had even claimed its independence, the band of South Carolina slaves who marched through Charleston’s streets in 1776 verbally demanding their freedom, and countless other black men and women whose struggles for liberty and equality are all but lost to history but still inspired others.

Black founders might also be defined as the rising generation of race leaders who built autonomous institutions—churches, schools, benevolent groups—in locales transiting from slavery to freedom.⁴⁰ Like Allen, they moved from local to national and even global politics by establishing a broader nonviolent movement capable of challenging slavery and racial discrimination. In Philadelphia, Absalom Jones and James Forten joined Allen to form the great triumvirate of African American reform. For decades, they gave shape to black leadership, arguing that America



“Distinguished Colored Men,” artist unknown, 1883. This post-Reconstruction poster placed Allen in the company of the nineteenth century’s most distinguished black activists and politicians, including Frederick Douglass, whose image is in the center of the poster. Allen is to his immediate right. (Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia)

was a black homeland and that African Americans had a vital role to play in redeeming the American republic.

Both in Philadelphia and nationally, black founders matured in a dynamic community context. Before he became “Richard Allen,” celebrated black leader, the young itinerant minister lived among Afro-Philadelphians who shared his ambition of racial—not merely individual—uplift. For example, Allen shared much with a black man a generation older named James Dexter. Like the famous Allen, the less-famous Dexter was a one-time colonial slave who secured his freedom (in 1767), probably by saving money to pay off his deceased master’s estate. The industrious Dexter then worked as a coachman for several years before becoming a “fruitier” in the 1790s. Well-known to white abolitionists, he eventually bought property, married, and turned to racial-uplift projects in the last two decades of the eighteenth century. Dexter joined Allen’s Free African Society, which developed the art of community organizing by borrowing from Dexter’s 1782 campaign to secure black burial grounds in Philadelphia’s potter’s field. Dexter and Allen also became church builders at roughly the same time. While Allen created the AME Church, Dexter hosted founding meetings of St. Thomas’s African Episcopal Church.⁴¹

Intriguingly, Allen’s and Dexter’s community-building and racial-uplift initiatives did not develop out of blacks’ segregated living arrangements. Allen and Dexter lived a mile apart from each another in diverse neighborhoods during the 1780s and 1790s. (Rigid segregation would become a feature of antebellum and industrial Philadelphia.) Dexter resided in a predominantly German-Quaker enclave where only 5 to 10 percent of the population was African American. Located almost directly on the site of the present-day National Constitution Center near Arch and Fifth streets, Dexter’s home sat in a neighborhood where black laboring people rubbed elbows with elite white men. The same held true for Allen: his longtime Spruce Street home was one of only six black residences on a street of white laborers, merchants, doctors, and gentlemen.

Allen’s and Dexter’s residential stories tell us that black community building in many Northern locales remained very much a product of imagination and hard work—it was not a fait accompli simply because free black men (and women) were clustered tightly in an urban environment. Just as slaves throughout the Atlantic world had to forge slave cultures out of diverse backgrounds, so too did Allen and other black

community leaders combine ties of kinship and color with those of persuasion and craftiness to build durable free black institutions. This included finding public meeting spaces for black reformers who were spread out geographically; articulating goals that cut across lines of status, color, and disparate religious beliefs; and sustaining membership rolls amid the economic crosscurrents taking black people to jobs throughout an ever-expanding commercial city.

Up and down the Atlantic seaboard, free black communities coalesced not so much around single leaders but around churches, reform institutions, and kinship networks that included visible saints like Allen, less visible saints like Dexter, and truly unheralded community activists like Allen’s first and second wives, Flora and Sarah Allen, who followed him out of a segregated white church and supported the creation of Mother Bethel (Allen’s first wife, Flora, was married to the preacher at the time, while his future second wife, Sarah Bass, attended the same Methodist meeting). In New England, the talented quartet of black leaders that burst forth in the last years of the eighteenth century—Prince Hall, Paul Cuffee, Lemuel Haynes, and Hosea Easton—relied on the community- and family-uplift initiatives of a coterie of less visible men and women. Hall, perhaps the best known of these figures (he started the first Masonic Lodge in black America in 1784 and used his home and meetinghouse over the next three decades as a base for black political activity until his death in 1807), relied on the support of members of the African Meeting House. Easton, perhaps the least known of New England’s black leaders, learned the art of protest in a white republic from his father, a former slave who worked to secure his freedom. When black Baltimorean Daniel Coker surveyed free African American culture in 1810, he celebrated not merely great black men like Allen but the rise of entire free black communities, free black churches, and free black reform groups. Quoting from the Bible (1 Peter 2:9–10), Coker declared, “Ye are a chosen generation,” with black founders serving as “a royal priesthood” to “an holy nation, a peculiar people.” Before the Revolution, the overwhelming majority of blacks in colonial America were slaves; in the nineteenth century, free black communities thrived along the Atlantic coast, and black founders envisioned themselves as a rising moral force in American culture.⁴²

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Allen’s and black founders’ activism, then, was their increasing cynicism about achieving racial justice in America. By the second decade of the nineteenth century, Allen

grew so doubtful that he flirted with various Atlantic-world emigration plans. No fleeting consideration for him, Allen meditated on black removal for the last fifteen years of his life. He supported black-led African-colonization schemes before becoming one of the most forceful African American proponents of Haitian emigration. America, he told Haitian president Jean-Pierre Boyer in 1824, is a land of oppression, whereas the great black republic of Haiti promised “freedom and equality.”⁴³ Allen even headed the Haitian Emigration Society of Philadelphia, helping hundreds of black émigrés set sail for the Caribbean. Still later, he supported emigration to Canada.

In making such pronouncements, Allen participated in a great wave of black Atlantic reform. Soon after the Haitian revolution ended with the creation of the first black republic in the Western Hemisphere, African-descended people in the Americas reconceived the very basis of their antiracist struggle. Perhaps, black leaders in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore argued, African Americans did not have to remain in the United States to achieve true liberty. Rather, they could join people of color throughout the Atlantic world to build a new Zion in Haiti or Canada or Africa. Though not often thought of as a black nationalist, Allen came to believe in the utility of building a black nation in the Western Hemisphere—as long as Christian piety served as a foundation of that black nation. Like countless other black reformers and intellectuals after him, Allen came to see racism as America’s original sin. Black redemptive suffering could only go so far before Allen, again like countless other black leaders after him, decided to explore some form of black nationalism.

In this manner, Allen’s life exemplified one of the defining characteristics of black activism before the Civil War: the movement from integrationist to nationalist beliefs. Perhaps because most scholars have viewed Allen as primarily a religious figure, his radical side has not garnered much attention (beyond the obviously radical act of starting a black church in the 1790s). Yet like so many black leaders following in his wake, Allen’s concern with achieving racial justice compelled him to consider the efficacy of a variety of tactical and strategic imperatives, including schemes that we would now define as part of a black-nationalist agenda like emigrationism. Allen’s willingness to consider black emigrationism was part and parcel of a larger series of strategic questions that he wrestled with throughout his life—and that generations of black leaders continue to consider in our time: Would interracial activism ever

lead to black equality, or was black autonomy an end in and of itself? Was the American nation a vessel of freedom for people of color or an iron cage of oppression? Were people of African descent destined to return to Africa, or would they redeem any and all nations they touched in the Western Hemisphere?

In reconsidering the meaning of African identity and national allegiance in the age of democratic revolutions, Allen was one of the earliest black leaders to express publicly the feelings of “double consciousness” that W. E. B. Du Bois famously articulated later—a division between his African and American identities. Early in his protest career, Allen expressed great confidence in American society’s ability to achieve racial reform. “We pray to the same God,” he wrote in 1794, and that fact alone should lead to emancipation and racial equality in the United States. By the late 1820s, however, as slavery grew both demographically and geographically, and as Northern racism intensified, Allen grew pessimistic. At the 1830 free black convention, he emphasized the need for a black safety valve beyond American shores.⁴⁴

Yet despite his divided consciousness, Allen never left the United States. Instead, like other black founders, he redoubled his protest efforts domestically by seeking to influence the rising generation of abolitionists during the 1820s and 1830s, by supporting the first black newspapers, by raising consciousness about non-slave-derived products, and by inaugurating the black convention movement.

3. *An Integrated Founding Generation*

As a *black* founder, Richard Allen’s credentials are secure. But Allen believed himself to be a member of two founding generations. He was a black leader who built reform institutions to redeem African Americans, and he was a broader moral leader who wanted to redeem the American republic from the sin of racial subjugation. The nation was incomplete, Allen argued over and over again, as long as the American people accepted slavery and racial exclusion. Allen’s many pamphlets of protest prodded American statesmen to banish bondage. Their refusal to do so compelled Allen to think of himself as a moral leader who discussed topics that timid or self-interested statesmen avoided.

And as far as Allen was concerned, many white founders did scrupulously avoid the slavery issue. In his award-winning book *Founding*

Brothers, the modern historian Joseph Ellis agrees, calling this “the silence”: early white leaders’ conscious strategy of avoiding discussion of bondage (for fear it would sunder the young nation and foment slave rebellion).⁴⁵ Black founders like Allen provided what can only be called “the reply,” a collective attempt to discuss publicly slavery and racial injustice. Allen’s artful eulogy of George Washington—whose house he visited as a master chimney sweep in Philadelphia—remains the black bishop’s boldest attempt to build an abolitionist republic through images and words. Allen’s speech, delivered initially at his church and then reprinted in Baltimore, New York, and Philadelphia newspapers, praised Washington for emancipating his slaves (after his wife’s death) and critiqued Americans who retained bondage. “May a double portion of his [emancipatory] spirit rest on all the officers of the Government of the United States,” he called out, “and the whole of the American people.”⁴⁶ Abolitionism was not subversion (as many white commentators feared) but patriotism, as Washington (according to Allen) had finally demonstrated.

In this sense, we might call Richard Allen an African American “republican.”⁴⁷ Far from a mere party label, the postrevolutionary republican was the American equivalent of the English Commonwealthman—the consummate advocate of the nation’s greater good. A republican believed that building and maintaining a democratic republic required moral rectitude on the part of the citizenry. Because there was no monarchy or aristocracy, republicanism held, American citizens had to sacrifice personal good for the nation’s betterment, to think of national rather than local interests, to ground American identity in concepts of public duty, civic virtue, and equality. No mere Spartan code of behavior, republicanism was at its heart “nothing less than a utopian hope for a new moral and social order led by enlightened and virtuous men,” in the words of historian Gordon Wood.⁴⁸ Because the American Revolution had been viewed as a radical experiment in representative government, Wood argues, it tore apart traditional modes of society—monarchy, patronage, hereditary political privilege.

Richard Allen believed that he participated in this radical experiment of nation-building and republican citizenship. America, Allen argued, was more than the sum of its local, state, and federal governments. Rather, it was an ideal: universal freedom. Unless and until the founding generation rectified the racial wrongs that undermined that ideal, the American experiment would fail. The nation therefore required men of

faith to step forward and defend both abolitionism and equality. If, as a black man, he could not vote—and thereby participate in what scholars refer to as the “deliberative” rights of citizenship—then Allen would become a passionate dissenter from the racial status quo. His dissent became part of an emerging tradition (scholars call it “persuasive politics”) that influenced subsequent generations of radical abolitionists, civil rights reformers, and antislavery statesmen.⁴⁹

At the heart of Allen’s moral vision was an evangelical religion—Methodism—that promised equality to all believers in Christ. Indeed, one of Allen’s best claims to equal founding status was his attempt to merge faith and racial politics in the young republic. His constant sermonizing on slavery’s evil was (in theory) perfectly pitched to men and women who viewed faith as a key part of the American character. Jon Meacham has perceptively noted that several leading white founders “came to believe that religion, for all its faults, was an essential foundation for a people’s moral conduct.” Although many of these men were deists who believed in a distant God of reason and not revelation, Allen hoped that they would nevertheless listen to black freedom appeals steeped in religious understandings of morality. After all, many white Americans saw the Revolutionary War through the lens of Exodus (with the British playing Pharaoh). Moreover, Allen knew that below elite founders, a host of local leaders believed deeply in the Christian gospel. In Allen’s eyes, black Christians would be the prophets of a new American morality promising not just spiritual liberty but universal freedom.⁵⁰

But Allen’s vision of a moral republic had a secular corollary: the Declaration of Independence. That document, he believed, was a covenant binding Americans of all races, classes, and religions into a nation of equal citizens. On more than one occasion, Allen spoke in the “name of the laws of the commonwealth of Pennsylvania” and as a “fellow citizen” of the United States. In merely making such claims, Allen hoped to challenge the notion that America was, and would forever be, a white man’s republic.⁵¹

Of course, most white founders vehemently disagreed. As Jefferson sneered, African Americans had never produced great art or rhetoric—how could they possibly be considered equal citizens?⁵² To judge from the massive resurgence of literature focusing solely on white founders—a trend labeled “founders chic” by one iconoclastic group of scholars⁵³—many popular historians agree. The founders, whether defined as

political men, religious leaders, or moral reformers, remain white men in wigs.

Black founders' exclusion from the broader pantheon of early American heroes is certainly ironic when one considers just how much men like Franklin, Jefferson, Madison, and Washington shared with Allen, Forten, and Jones. Although there are obvious differences (the former group was never literally enslaved), both black and white founders were often self-made men. During the 1820s, a white commentator called Richard Allen "a self-created Bishop," a man "whose importance is measured by the fact that he probably created 100 [black] ministers by his ordination."⁵⁴ In addition, both sets of founders were often the first in their families to gain some sort of advanced education: for white leaders like Madison, this meant college; for Revolutionary-era blacks like Allen, literacy skills.

Finally, both groups of founders had their creative imaginations stirred by outsider status. This point is perhaps the most underappreciated link between white and black men of Allen's generation. White revolutionaries received little respect within the British Empire. As Bernard Bailyn has reminded us, colonial men existed on the periphery of British power—they were not privy to the inner workings of English politics, nor did they have access to colonial circles of power, where status and personal connections reigned supreme. Because they felt so politically marginalized, white colonials even took to calling themselves "slaves" to Mother England. British exclusionary treatment spurred colonial imaginations on such things as the right of revolution, human liberty, and the fundamental necessity of written constitutionalism.⁵⁵ Similarly, black founders often fell outside white definitions of citizenship and public standing in the new republic. But their marginalization did not prevent them from seeking to expand the discourse of American rights. Indeed, like white revolutionaries during the colonial crisis with Britain, black founders desperately sought an audience with their oppressors.

Allen's virtual dialogue with Benjamin Franklin illustrates the point. Franklin and Allen briefly lived together in early national Philadelphia during the nation's founding era. Although they never actually corresponded with each other, Franklin and Allen began their public considerations of American race relations at virtually the same time, the years following the ratification of the federal Constitution. In November 1789, Franklin, the one-time slaveholder and late convert to abolitionism, signed two messages on the broader meaning of black freedom in

America. He did so as president of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. Delighted that Pennsylvania had issued the world's first gradual abolition act just a few years before, Franklin nevertheless expressed the concerns of many white citizens when he labeled black freedom a potential problem. "Slavery," the normally irrepressible Franklin observed in uncharacteristically pessimistic tones, "is such an atrocious debasement of human nature, that its very extirpation, if not performed with solicitous care, may sometimes open a source of serious evils." Long treated as "a brute animal," freed blacks became "machines" unused to reasonable reflection who posed a great risk to the American citizenry. Indeed, Franklin warned, "under such circumstances, freedom may often prove a misfortune to [former slaves], and prejudicial to society."⁵⁶ To guard against what he believed would be blacks' natural tendency toward social disruption (and dissension from whites), Franklin and the Pennsylvania Abolition Society proposed becoming African Americans' moral guardians. Committees would watch after their moral, economic, and social well-being and report to Pennsylvania citizens on the prospects and perils of a biracial social order. Without such white oversight, Franklin feared, there could be no black freedom.

A former slave now in the capital of free black life, Richard Allen publicly challenged Franklin's line of thinking. The problem, he commented in 1794, lay not in blacks' essentially subversive nature but in white society's consistent failure to nurture African American equality. Allen condemned not only slavery but also the racist beliefs underpinning slavery and black inequality. He then proposed his own solutions in very Franklinesque language. Whites, Allen suggested, might try the "experiment" of treating black people as they would members of their own family. Next, he wrote in an almost direct reply to Franklin's fears of black equality, white citizens must believe in their own Christian and republican language. It was a message he returned to again and again: liberate blacks, teach them scripture and principles of good citizenship, and watch them become pious and respectable members of the American republic. Allen repeated these thoughts in his eulogy of Washington, when he told free blacks that their public mourning of the sainted Washington demonstrated their ability to sacrifice personal animosity for national good. As he put it, such actions "will make you good citizens."

Reading Allen's thoughts next to Franklin's, one is struck not only by the public dialogue in which these two founding figures engaged but by

how much of a difference Allen's ideas have made over the long term. Racial equality is now part of Americans' innermost sense of nationhood. What, after all, was Abraham Lincoln's call for a "new birth of freedom" during the Civil War other than a rousing resuscitation of black founders'—of Allen's—original creed? What is modern Americans' faith in multiracial democracy other than a ratification of Allen's vision—people of all races and ethnicities can live together peaceably in American culture. Thomas Jefferson never thought so, Washington did not want to talk about it, and even the elder abolitionist Franklin had his doubts. We must then turn to Allen and black founders to understand the genealogy of multiracial democracy. As Allen put it in Jefferson's day and age, "if you love your children, if you love your country, if you love the God of love, clear your hands from slaves, burden not your children or country with them."⁵⁷ That Allen's language conjures images of none other than Martin Luther King, Jr.—the modern hero of civil rights and the man who spoke of the civil rights struggle as a "loving" movement—speaks volumes about the potency of his ideas and claims to founding status.

1

"For Zion's Sake . . . I Will Not Rest"

As the new year opened, a comet streaked across the Philadelphia sky. While scientific observers methodically plotted its "very swift" movement, commoners wondered what omen this cosmic event heralded. A few weeks later, on February 14, 1760, at two o'clock in the morning, an enslaved child was born to a woman in the possession of a prosperous local attorney. Surely, no one could have predicted that the black babe, who later took the name Richard Allen, was what the comet had heralded. And yet, for African Americans over the next two centuries, Richard Allen's birthday carried all the significance of prophecy. Lines from Isaiah 62:1, which a Philadelphia printer published on that very day—February 14, 1760—seemed tailor-made for Allen's future: "For Zion's sake, I will not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness, and the salvation thereof as a lamp that burneth."¹

For the moment, Allen's birth occurred in what to most contemporary observers would have been mundane circumstances. Philadelphia sat contentedly in the British Empire, colonial trade filled the city's merchant shops with the finest goods the world had to offer, and slavery was a normal part of colonial life in the City of Brotherly Love. "To be sold," an ad proclaimed in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* the day Allen came into the world, "a young healthy Negro fellow, country born, about 20 years old, has had the smallpox and measles, was brought up to country work. Enquire at the new printing office."² The big news of the day was the progress of what became known as the French and Indian War, which recently turned in favor of British forces. Other than intriguing occurrences (a comet, prophetic lines from the Bible) and news of another war between ancient rivals France and Great Britain, there was nothing auspicious about Allen's birth year. If the biographer Douglas Egerton could write of Virginia slave rebel "Gabriel's" nativity, "in the

year 1776, a slave child was born to a lie," the best one can say of Allen is that his birth year revealed a hard truth: servitude remained the lot for most blacks.³

Allen would spend the rest of his life overturning that supposed maxim.

1. "I Was Born"

Neither Allen nor any of his biographers have had much to say about his earliest years. "I was born," Allen matter-of-factly began his autobiography, "a slave to Benjamin Chew, of Philadelphia. My mother and father and four of us children were then sold into Delaware state."⁴ Allen said little about childhood slavery, the memory of being sold, or what his parents thought of bondage. But all his life, Allen recalled the constant struggle of bondpeople like himself to live, love, and somehow survive. Even after he secured his own freedom, Allen could not forget how horrible slavery had been. "I address you with an affectionate sympathy," he wrote as a free man of thirty-four making his first public pronouncement to enslaved African Americans, "having been a slave and desirous of freedom as any of you." Before he gained that freedom, Allen underscored just how "impatient" and even "discouraged" slaves might become over their servile status.⁵ The daily drudgery of bondage tried his patience; separation from family members—which occurred when his second master ran into financial difficulty later on—tried his soul. "Slavery is a bitter pill," he famously wrote at the end of his life.⁶ No mere rhetorical flourish, Allen knew precisely the meaning of those words.

Beyond his bitter memory of bondage, Allen's unwillingness to elaborate on his youth has proved vexing to historians. The simplest details remain obscure. Was Allen born in Philadelphia, as his autobiography suggested, or in Delaware, as new evidence might indicate? Both scenarios seem plausible, though neither is definitive.

Allen's first master, Benjamin Chew (1722–1810), was a prominent attorney and magistrate who settled in Philadelphia in 1754 after having lived in Maryland and Delaware. Chew eventually became chief justice of colonial Pennsylvania. A gentleman of property and standing, he was what people in colonial society referred to as a "worthy." Wealthy enough to own several impressive properties in both Delaware and

Pennsylvania, Chew called an elegant mansion on Front Street his main Philadelphia home. Located just off the Delaware River, Front Street bustled with shops, merchants, and slaves. The London Coffeehouse, just down the street from Chew's home and a prominent meeting place, served as an outdoor slave market. Chew and other prominent officials conducted business there, from buying and selling land to buying and selling slaves. If born in Philadelphia, a young Allen would have been familiar with the London Coffeehouse's slave auction blocks. If he went by them, then like other members of the city's black community he probably observed harrowing scenes—public slave sales, families being separated, slave shackles protecting masters from slaves' tendency to run.⁷

Chew's slaveholdings varied, but, as one historian has put it, he "bought and sold slaves" his entire life.⁸ Like other worthies, he viewed slave labor as a critical part of estate building, no matter the size or locale. In urban areas like Philadelphia, this meant utilizing slaves as porters, butlers, cooks, and laborers in fancy homes. In the Pennsylvania (and Delaware) countryside, this meant using slaves to clear the land, build houses and barns, and tend to crops. Richard Allen and his family were thus bound to a man who viewed bondage as vital to business, society, and culture in a place already known as the City of Brotherly Love.

Because Pennsylvania did not ban bondage until after American independence—and because Allen claimed to be born "a slave to Benjamin Chew, of Philadelphia" and then "sold *into* Delaware state" (emphasis added)—it is not hard to imagine Allen's enslaved family roots beginning in colonial Philadelphia. Yet a compelling case can also be made for Allen's Delaware birth. In this scenario, he was born in Kent County, Delaware, on one of Benjamin Chew's three plantations. All of Chew's Delaware properties contained sizable numbers of enslaved people, and only a small number of the over three hundred known Chew slaves ever resided (or were born) in the Philadelphia area. Perhaps Whitehall plantation, one of Delaware's largest, was Allen's first home. According to Phillip Seitz, curator of history at Cliveden, Benjamin Chew's one-time summer home in Germantown, Pennsylvania (and now a nicely restored National Trust Historic Site), Allen may have been born of a fieldhand at Whitehall. Indeed, Allen's autobiography never mentioned his parents' or his own domestic service under Chew, a possible sign that he was not born of a house servant in Philadelphia

(Chew rarely moved house servants from Philadelphia to Delaware or fieldhands from Delaware to Philadelphia). So Allen's Delaware birth is possible.⁹

The major problem with this scenario is documentation. There were a few male slaves born on Chew plantations in 1760—there was a "Cato" at Whitehall and another "Cato" at a nearby plantation—but no enslaved person named "Negro Richard" or anyone with Allen's exact birthday of February 14.¹⁰ Was Allen misremembering things and actually born in 1757 or 1762, dates corresponding to other male slave births on Chew properties in Delaware? This is unlikely, for Richard Allen's second master, Stokeley Sturgis, also claimed that Allen was born on February 14, 1760.¹¹ So perhaps Allen was an anomaly in Chew's holdings and was born in Philadelphia, beyond the more rigorous plantation documentation of Chew's Delaware properties.

For the Allen biographer, this is only the first of many such quandaries. Where was the great preacher born? When did he leave a segregated Philadelphia church and inaugurate Bethel? Why did he rename himself "Richard Allen" upon gaining freedom? Allen never offered insightful answers to any of these queries. Taken together, these gaps underline the problem of deciphering the life of any African American person of that time, even so vaunted a figure as Allen. Lacking control of their own bodies, and denied information about their surroundings, enslaved people like Allen could scarcely be expected to track their own lives with precision. Then, too, there is the matter of Allen's personality. He was convinced that private details mattered little in one's life—only the public man, and good works, could fully measure one's worth. Allen's autobiography, conceived in the early nineteenth century after the former slave became the nation's first black bishop, focused little on the gaps in his historical record and more on his historic accomplishments beyond bondage.

Despite a paucity of conclusive evidence, we can reconstruct parts of Allen's youth in colonial and then Revolutionary Philadelphia and Delaware, not to mention the world as it then existed for an enslaved person in both urban and rural bondage. Let us begin by placing Allen with his first master, Benjamin Chew, in Philadelphia during the early 1760s, as Allen himself would have it. Allen lived with Chew until perhaps the age of eight, which means that he may have resided in Philadelphia during the 1760s, a key era for enslaved people in this mid-Atlantic locale. Within the British Empire, Philadelphia stood tall: it was the third-larg-

est city under British rule, not to mention one of colonial North America's financial hubs and an intellectual capital as well. On any day of the week, a person visiting Philadelphia's wharves would find ships from around the world—Antigua and Barbados in the Caribbean, London and Belfast in the British Isles, Charleston and Boston in the colonies. One could purchase fine linens from the mother country; teas from the Dutch East Indies; books, pamphlets, and newspapers from most other parts of the world; and just about anything else one could want.¹²

For a short period of time in the 1760s, Philadelphians desired African slaves. Philadelphia was not colonial America's central slave-trading port—that honor went to Charleston, South Carolina—but it did serve as a slave depot for the middle-Atlantic region, stretching from southern New Jersey and southeastern Pennsylvania through Delaware and Maryland. Between 1759 and 1766, Philadelphia merchants and slave owners imported the largest number of slaves in the city's history—over one thousand Africans. This trend, prompted by a shortage of white indentured servants following the Seven Years' War between England and France, did not last. By the 1770s, slave imports trickled to a near halt. Still, by 1767, the city contained roughly fifteen hundred people of African descent, or roughly 7.5 percent of colonial Philadelphia. Fewer than one hundred black persons (just fifty-seven) could call themselves free. So Allen and his family would have been like the majority of Philadelphia blacks: they belonged to someone else.¹³

Although Pennsylvania had a reputation as a liberal colony, slavery had deep roots. Like colonies southward, Pennsylvania laws clearly defined bondage: only black colonials could be slaves for life. Richard Allen was born a slave because his mother had been enslaved. And so it was for thousands of other enslaved blacks, in the colonial North as well as the colonial South.

Just how many enslaved people existed in the Quaker State? Exact numbers remain difficult to come by, but at the time of Allen's birth the colony contained perhaps as many as fifteen thousand slaves (a number that fell drastically by the 1780s). In the Pennsylvania countryside, slaves worked wheat fields, cleared land, and labored at countless miscellaneous activities. A visitor from, say, colonial Virginia or South Carolina (or from the British Caribbean) would not have been surprised to find slaves in Pennsylvania; such a visitor would have noticed, however, that few of rural Pennsylvania's slaveholders owned great numbers of bondpeople. Whereas South Carolina rice plantations could hold

hundreds of slaves, a large Pennsylvania plantation might contain only seven.¹⁴

Richard Allen was born into, and matured in, a world that accepted slavery. Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Jersey embraced bondage; so too did Rhode Island and New York, colonies that contained the highest percentages of slaves above the Mason-Dixon line.¹⁵ In Allen's Philadelphia, artisans, not merely wealthy men like Benjamin Chew, owned slaves. In fact, roughly one of every five families had slaves. But per capita slave holdings remained relatively low: urban dwellers owned fewer than five and quite often only one or two slaves. In this regard, slaves were indicators of status. We know that wealthy folks like Chew used slaves in a variety of ways, from launderers to laborers. But what did slaves do for artisans and merchants? They did nearly everything—loaded wagons, built homes and storefronts, cut wood, served as cooks, cartmen, and cleaners. Absalom Jones, a Delaware slave who journeyed to Philadelphia with his master during the second half of the eighteenth century, worked in a dry-goods store, filling stock, hauling goods, and generally doing as told. Jones was quite lucky, though, for his master allowed him to attain literacy skills and attend Anthony Benezet's Quaker school.¹⁶

Despite slavery's legal and cultural standing, some Pennsylvania masters were haunted by a looming idea: bondage was a sin. Pennsylvania Quakers took the first antislavery measures on the North American continent in 1758 by banning slave trading; they subsequently banned slaveholding too. The Society of Friends formed an antislavery vanguard thereafter, providing the foundation of the world's first organized antislavery group, the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. During Allen's youth, however, Quakers remained a minority of slavery's critics.¹⁷

The eighteenth century also witnessed a flowering of black resistance and achievement, as enslaved people ran away in increasing numbers, mastered literacy, and sought to redeem the very word "African." Phyllis Wheatley, John Marrant, Olaudah Equiano, Agrippa Hull, Prince Hall—this new generation of African-descended people began building a trans-Atlantic freedom struggle centered on the notion of black humanity. Take Venture Smith: born in 1729 in Africa, Smith was captured and sold into New World bondage while just a boy. He purchased his freedom in 1765, having chopped so much wood, threshed so much grain, and labored so hard that he could also set his sights on buying his wife and two sons. But Smith was not content with his own freedom.

To prove bondage was thievery, he wrote one of the first American-style slave narratives during the 1790s. "I've made considerable money," Smith recalled bitterly, "and paid an enormous sum for my freedom."¹⁸

Allen imbibed strength from nascent black-freedom movements. As a free man, Allen incorporated the term "African" into a host of fledgling black enterprises: the "Free African Society," a black mutual-aid group formed in 1787; the "African Methodist Episcopal Church," an autonomous African American religious organization, formed in the early 1790s; the "African Society for the Education of Youth," formed in 1804. When Allen discovered in 1807 that white religious leaders had craftily conceived legal documents undermining his own church's autonomy, he wrote a rebuttal of their actions entitled simply the "African Supplement." Like Venture Smith, Allen's belief in African redemption was fueled at an early age.

Despite the heroic struggles of black activists in Allen's time, and the humanitarian inroads of antislavery Quakers, bondage was still nasty, brutish, and anything but short for Pennsylvania's enslaved population. For most white colonials, the word "African" still connoted slavery. And before Allen made it out of his youth, he discovered another of slavery's wicked little rules: he was chattel—a movable commodity.

2. Delaware

Around 1768, Allen and his family were sold south to one of Benjamin Chew's Delaware neighbors, a middling farmer named Stokeley Sturgis. Located in Dover, in the fertile Delaware River Valley, Sturgis's farm was part of a thriving agricultural economy that included not only the cash crop of tobacco but also a range of staple products like wheat, rye, and corn. Farmers in the Delaware Valley enjoyed ready river access to the principal urban market in the area (Philadelphia), not to mention parts of Maryland and Virginia. Abundant forest products (timber for barrel staves) supplemented Delawareans' agricultural production.¹⁹

The archives are silent on why Benjamin Chew sold the Allens. We know that he ran into financial troubles and, further, that he had no moral qualms about selling slaves to replenish his financial stocks. Moreover, Chew owned Delaware land next to Sturgis; it was a quick and easy deal. Whatever the reason, Allen spent over a decade on Sturgis's farm.

Allen's Delaware was awash in paradoxes. Slavery had been a prominent feature of the state's landscape since the early 1700s, when farmers turned to bondage to maximize tobacco, wheat, and corn yields. Yet Delaware masters also were the least tied to a single cash crop (such as Virginia's tobacco barons or South Carolina's rice moguls). In Kent County, by the Revolutionary era, historian William H. Williams writes, "slaveholders and other farmers concentrated on growing wheat and corn," rather than building the larger tobacco plantations found elsewhere in the Chesapeake. As a result, many enslaved people—like Allen and his family—found themselves on smaller plantations, with much closer proximity to masters. As in the case of Pennsylvania, colonial Delaware's slave demographics must remain estimates. But by the 1770s, Delaware contained roughly eleven thousand slaves. The average Delaware slave lived on a farm of ten persons or fewer—that is, ten persons in all, master, mistress, their children, and a few slaves.²⁰

It was hard to maintain a stable black family life anywhere in the South. Allen found this out when Sturgis sold the young boy's mother and three of his siblings to cover debts. Now, as Allen put it, "three of us children remained" with Sturgis, while four family members scattered like the winds.²¹ Allen suggested that he still visited his mother, noting in his autobiography that she became "a very pious woman" after the sale.²² But Allen did not elaborate, indicating that he could not visit as much as he wanted or that the subject remained a sore one. William Williams makes the striking claim that, despite the state's small geographic size, "most bondsmen did not have an easy commute" if they wanted to maintain contact with relatives "and could [therefore] make only sporadic visits." Virginia and Maryland slaves faced similar problems, but, ironically, these more densely settled slave locales provided marginally more access to separated husbands and fathers. Delaware's "generally smaller and more thinly scattered" slave settlements meant that only a "small percentage of male slaves lived with and therefore had daily contact with their wives and children."²³

Slaves' living arrangements were equally makeshift: they lived in attics, basements, and sometimes barns or sheds if masters were wealthy enough. Although some larger plantations had slave cabins, most Delaware slaveholders did not erect separate quarters for their chattels. Sturgis owned a fairly typical Delaware dwelling, what might be described by a modern real-estate broker as a "colonial-style" house. Allen lived

with the Sturgis family, either in a small cabin or in some corner space in the house itself. As was the custom, Sturgis would have supplied basic living material to his slaves, although as a middling master he probably did not provide more than was absolutely necessary.

Allen did not discuss his daily working life on Sturgis's plantation, but it involved "putting crops forward."²⁴ This meant planting corn, wheat, and flax—there is little record of tobacco on Sturgis's farm. No tobacco, no toil? Not so, for even these staple products translated into well-regulated work shifts for slaves like Allen. Corn required intense labor to get successful yields in the days before modern fertilization techniques and machinery. Prior to the Revolution, Delaware slaves used farm implements (hoes) to till the soil, working the land foot by foot (only after the Revolution came the ox and plow). Corn was planted in the spring and harvested in late summer. Working corn crops taught slaves like Allen hard life-lessons: you worked the land as soon as your master told you to, and even after the crop had been "put forward" you moved on to a succession of other tasks demanded by your master—clearing wheat fields, tending livestock, hauling crops to and from storage areas. "Shuck corn, shell corn, carry corn to mill," a slave song went, "grind de meal, gimme de husk; bake de bread, gimme de crus".²⁵ A rough translation: a slave's work was never done, and you got only crumbs in return.

So life was never easy for an enslaved person, no matter the locale. If Delaware did not have massive plantations dedicated to big-time cash crops, it offered land to be cleared and waterways connecting its corn and wheat yields to the Atlantic world. Land sales boomed around Allen's Dover home. For sale, ad after ad declared in Philadelphia papers, one hundred, five hundred, one thousand acres of great Delaware land. The ads did not say so explicitly, but it was a given that slaves (or less likely but still an option, white tenants) would do the clearing, the planting, the building on all these properties. Richard Allen probably did all of these chores on Sturgis's farm. After Allen left Sturgis's home in the 1780s, he worked as a sawyer, butcher, mason, and cartman, which indicates familiarity with each job.

Clearly, Allen's memories of slavery as "a bitter pill" meant more than spiritual anguish—bondage was hard labor. Unsurprisingly, enslaved people escaped whenever possible. Kent County masters were no strangers to fugitives in their midst. "Ranaway from the subscriber,"

one fugitive-slave ad read in 1765, "a mulatoo [*sic*] slave, named Joe." This runaway "can read print and will try to pass for a freeman," the ad warned.²⁶ Similar ads placed in Baltimore and Philadelphia newspapers told the tale of black resistance spreading beyond Allen's Delaware home.

Though they did masters' work all day and into the night, enslaved blacks worked after-hours to gain extra funds for various pursuits, from contributing money to roaming preachers (which Allen said cost "a quarter" during the Revolutionary War) to buying one's freedom. "The slaves would toil in their little [garden] patches many a night until midnight," Allen recalled as an old man. Putting in their own crops was also a way of creating autonomy from masters. Sundown to sunup was enslaved people's time. They used it not only to supplement their diet through personal gardens (Allen noted that he and other slaves had to do this "to support them[selves] with more than their masters gave them") but also to hold prayer meetings in the woods, tell stories of ancestors and family members sold to other plantations, and pass on literacy skills and African traditions.²⁷

Land, labor, and slaves' struggle for autonomy—these were not the only things that framed Allen's Delaware years. Indeed, the historian's eye returns once again to paradoxes swirling around him. Although Allen's Delaware was viewed as a part of the Chesapeake through much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it had important connections to Pennsylvania. As such, Delaware had a more vibrant manumission tradition than any other Southern state by the close of the eighteenth century. By 1800, according to one estimate, an incredible 50 percent of Delaware's black population was free, a much higher percentage than any other Southern locale.²⁸ Furthermore, Delaware's proximity and connections to liberal Pennsylvania (with its large Quaker population) influenced enslaved blacks, many of whom traveled from Delaware to Pennsylvania after manumission.

Allen recognized Delaware's unique status. When he had earned his liberty and begun traveling the evangelical circuit, Allen refused to travel to the Carolinas with Methodist preacher Francis Asbury. Those "slave countries," as he put it, scared the hell out of him.²⁹ Life was nowhere easy for a slave, Allen already knew. But nowhere in the South was slave life more conducive to black freedom than in Delaware following the Revolution—especially if a slave was focused on liberty.

3. Redemption

By his teenage years, Allen had learned some of the ultimate lessons slavery had to offer. Sold once himself, he had also been separated from his mother and three of his siblings; sunup to sundown belonged to his master's many chores; on the vertical ladder of colonial society, he occupied the bottom-most rung. Although he referred to Sturgis as a kind man and, in the absence of his own father (whom he never discussed in his autobiography), very nearly a parental figure, Allen felt remarkably like Frederick Douglass did in his teenage years on a Maryland plantation. "I am," Douglass wrote of his feelings at age seventeen, "but the sport of a power which makes no account either of my welfare or my happiness." Separated from family members and told again and again that he was essentially "a wild young working animal," Douglass feared that he would spend the rest of his life in "bitter and lifelong bondage."³⁰ Allen knew the same despair:

When we would think that our day's work was never done, we often thought that after our master's death we were liable to be sold to the highest bidder, as [Sturgis] was much in debt; and thus my troubles were increased, and I was often brought to weep between the porch and the altar.³¹

Yet by the time he turned twenty, Allen had secured a freedom agreement. It all began in 1777, when the teenager was "born again" after hearing a revival sermon preached near Sturgis's home. "The genesis of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME)," the Mother Bethel website grandly informs modern-day Internet browsers, "which today numbers over 2.5 million members, can be traced to a clearing in the Delaware woods in the year 1777. To that sylvan setting an itinerant Methodist preacher came, spreading the gospel to a group of slaves, among whom was a seventeen-year-old fieldhand named Richard Allen."³² The newly converted young man soon brought a revivalist preacher to Sturgis's home (making the planter feel the guilt of slaveholding), had a manumission agreement drawn up, and began planning a life of liberty. There was no way that Allen would spend the rest of his days in "bitter bondage"! Thankfully, he observed, "a door was open unexpectedly for me to buy my time and enjoy my liberty." Allen refused to let the door close without sneaking through.³³

It is important to examine the details of Allen's remarkable six-year journey from slave to born-again Christian to free person of color. For one thing, it highlights at an early age one of Allen's most distinguishing characteristics: his incredible will, stubbornness, and focus on a singular goal. As friend and foe, white as well as black, would ever discover, Allen could not be moved from his goals. He was, wrote Daniel Payne in the 1890s, a "master-spirit"—a man who exuded a firm belief in his objectives.³⁴ That unshakable sense of mission gave even the young Allen a sense that he could shape events seemingly beyond his control.

Moreover, Allen's spiritual journey to Christianity and his secular journey to freedom occurred at a critical time in North America. Around him swirled the events of a revolutionary war, trans-Atlantic revivalism, and the first antislavery movement in Western culture. Each of these broader forces swept down in some way to touch Allen's life.

The war between the American colonies and Britain reverberated in many ways, from establishing the nation of which Allen would try so hard to become a part to establishing liberty as the American lingua franca. The Revolution also unleashed the first sustained public attack on the institution of slavery in Western culture. Just as many colonials had accused Britain of oppressing them as virtual slaves (with no rights and liberties), so too did black slaves tell American masters that they were unjustly held in true bondage. (In Charleston, South Carolina, slaves famously marched through the city streets in the summer of '76 with a banner declaring, "Liberty!") The American Revolution's intense focus on rights and liberties shattered the institution's standing. Slavery, quite simply, became a dirty word. One fact illuminates this mighty transformation: in 1776, every one of the new thirteen American states sanctioned slavery; by the turn of the century, however, every Northern state had adopted gradual abolition plans, and Southern states like Virginia had removed many restrictions on private manumissions.³⁵

There were two key parts to this antislavery surge: the rise of secular abolitionist movements, centered in Allen's hometown of Philadelphia; and the rise of evangelical antislavery, which touched Allen directly when he converted to Methodism in the 1770s. The Pennsylvania Abolition Society (PAS) was formed in Philadelphia in 1775, and it dedicated itself to the proposition that slavery must be publicly challenged. Composed of some of the new nation's ablest legal and political minds—just before his death, Benjamin Franklin served as the group's president—the PAS advocated gradual abolitionism. It considered the Penn-

sylvania Abolition Act of 1780 a model for Atlantic-world slavery regimes. The act declared that all Pennsylvania slaves born after 1780 must be registered with state officials; they would then be emancipated at age twenty-eight.³⁶ By 1804, the legislature of every American state north of Pennsylvania had gradually abolished bondage (save Massachusetts and Vermont, which did so by judicial and constitutional decrees, respectively).

By the Revolutionary War, trans-Atlantic religious itinerants also began arguing that slavery was a sin. Besides Quakers, no group was more fervently antislavery than Methodists. A dissenting religion founded in the 1730s by former Anglican John Wesley, Methodism emphasized class meetings (with rigorous attention paid to biblical texts rather than ministers' erudition), camp revivals (where congregants visually displayed the power of God's saving grace), and expansive preaching circuits (which extended deep into the North American countryside). For Methodists, the Lord was not some distant and angry figure but a palpable and healing presence in people's lives. Anyone could alter his or her destiny, Methodists claimed, by embracing God through a conversion experience. Though opponents derided Methodist claims that Bible study and conversion outweighed the significance of formal schooling (or predestination), they could not deny the group's appeal among average folks, from the growing British working class to slaves in British colonies. Wesley furthered Methodism's appeal by emphasizing charity in daily life. He visited prisoners and spread the gospel among workers and farmers beyond the reach of the Anglican Church. By the Revolution, Methodist itinerants in America alone had carried Wesley's movement to thousands and thousands of people, including increasing numbers of African Americans.³⁷

One Methodist hot spot was Allen's boyhood home, the mid-Atlantic region of Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia. Itinerant Francis Asbury, who had trained with Wesley in England before coming to America, encouraged black colonials (and then Americans) to embrace Methodism. "The poor Negroes have been deeply affected with the power of God," he wrote his parents after one Baltimore revival in January 1773. He kept his eye out for notable black worshipers, like an unidentified man who might "be fit to send to England soon to preach" (surely not Allen, who was still too young for such work). Asbury marveled at blacks' "astonishing" preaching abilities.³⁸

For his part, Allen marveled at Methodism's unadulterated appeal to

enslaved people. Methodists were plain and simple, he recalled; they emphasized "extempore preaching," and they eagerly spoke before black audiences. "I am well convinced that the Methodist has proved beneficial to thousands and ten times thousands," Allen said.³⁹

Although American Methodism would eventually split into northern and southern branches during antebellum debates over slavery's sinfulness, in Allen's day Methodists were not shy about their antislavery commitments. This early "antislavery militancy," as Dee Andrews calls it, flowed from John Wesley himself.⁴⁰ "Have you, has any man living, a right to use another as a slave?" Wesley wondered in his famous denunciation of British bondage, "Thoughts upon Slavery" (1774). "It cannot be."⁴¹ Wesley remained interested in trans-Atlantic antislavery movements, even going so far as to encourage famed British abolitionist William Wilberforce to read the latest abolitionist publications from black authors like Olaudah Equiano.⁴² Allen may not have read Wesley's antislavery pronouncements until later, but Wesley's itinerants surely told the young convert that Methodists believed in the spiritual (and sometimes social) equality of blacks. And that news inspired him.

Allen "got religion" in 1777. The memory of his conversion experience stayed with him until the day he died. Indeed, Allen's autobiography trumpeted two birthdays: the one that put him on earth in 1760 and his rebirth, or conversion experience, as a teenager, "during which time I was awakened and brought to see myself poor, wretched and undone, and without the mercy of God must be lost." But Allen saw the light. "One night I thought Hell would be my portion," he went on, and "I cried to the Lord both night and day. . . . I cried unto him who delighted to hear the prayers of a poor sinner." Speaking figuratively, Allen then famously exclaimed, "all of a sudden my dungeon shook, my chains flew off, and, glory to God, I cried."⁴³

Gary Nash has surmised that young Allen experienced a spiritual crisis after Sturgis sold his mother.⁴⁴ Religion became the balm for the reeling teenager. Allen's siblings helped him discover a religious community that embraced all souls. "My oldest brother embraced religion, and my sister," he wrote in the 1830s.⁴⁵ From them, Allen learned that Methodist preachers had come into Kent County in the summer of 1777. Led by former slaveholder Freeborn Garrettson, they initiated a series of revivals at homes surrounding Sturgis's property. One such event occurred at Benjamin Wells's place, the next farm over. Allen may indeed have had his first encounter in the forest, where revivals often occurred; or

he might have seen a traveling preacher outside Sturgis's home or in town on market day. On receiving the word of God, Allen confessed his sins and endured a brief period of "doubt," before finding "the Lord afresh."⁴⁶ From that moment onward, one might say, Allen's career as a slave was never the same. He now attended Methodist class meetings, led exhortation sessions in and around Sturgis's farm, and became a reliable, even trusted, member of Delaware's revivalist world.

Allen's quick mastery of, and dedication to, Methodism was incontestable. Each day began and ended with prayers. Few who met the young preacher came away doubting his sincerity. Allen believed "in the unity of the Godhead, a trinity of persons," believed "O blessed Jesus, that thou art of one substance with the Father, the very and eternal God," and believed "that thou didst truly suffer, and was crucified . . . to reconcile us to thy Father and to be sacrificed for sin." And, crucially, Allen now believed that he had an important place on God's earth. "Thou has not only given thyself to die for me," he prayed, "but to be my spiritual food and sustenance . . . and endless comfort." The Lord looked out for young Richard Allen, a slave ("Thou hast not abandoned me," he said), and Allen professed to be the Lord's undying servant.⁴⁷

Why did the young enslaved man become a true believer and not a revolutionary? Part of the answer is temperamental. Allen simply took to the Methodist faith. Beyond this, though, Allen appreciated the sense of security—of belonging—he felt in God's arms. "I entered life without acknowledging Thee," he relayed in one section of his autobiography. "Let me therefore finish it in loving Thee." "God is Love," he also proclaimed, clueing readers in to another rationale for his deep sense of faith: there was an eternal power beyond his master who treated him not as an object but as a person to be loved. Instead of eternal bondage, Allen came to believe that his destiny was in the care of a benevolent force. The Lord, he wrote, "from time to time raised up instruments" of revelation, reconciliation, and justice. Allen now saw himself as just such a figure. His life had a noble purpose, a benevolent end, a supreme sanction. As he put it, slavery taxed the soul as much as it depleted the body. "The love of God" brought renewal and a sense of "hope," "confidence," and direction of which "no master can deprive you."⁴⁸

Aside from spiritual blessings, Allen found that Methodism allowed him to become an antislavery spokesman. The Revolutionary period is often remembered as a triumph of reason over emotion, with Enlighten-

ment precepts embraced by skeptical men producing a democratic culture. This picture obscures the significance of religion as a revolutionary force. Roaming preachers attacked more than generic sin in Allen's youth; they railed against centralized authority and hierarchies in the house of the Lord. Black evangelicals joined this crusade, forming a formidable challenge to an institutional status quo that viewed slavery as acceptable and descendants of Africa as inferior. Methodism "appealed to ambitious, intelligent, young African Americans," historian Graham Hodges argues, because "many Methodist ministers were openly anti-slavery."⁴⁹ The church also actively recruited blacks like Allen, offering them organizational duties as exhorters and preachers. In the upper Chesapeake, Francis Asbury relied on Allen to spread the gospel to people of color. But he was not the only black preacher to gain notoriety during the Revolutionary era. His generation included a half-dozen major black ministers, many of whom had Methodist connections: John Jea, Absalom Jones, Boston King, John Marrant, George White, and Peter Williams. For them, as for Allen, the light of revelation was powerful enough to destroy the shackles of slavery.⁵⁰

4. Everybody Say Freedom

Methodism brought Allen freedom. Or rather, Allen shrewdly used Methodist preaching to shame his master into bargaining slavery down into a contract for freedom. He moved tactically and in stages. But for the first time in his life, Allen manipulated events to his benefit.⁵¹ "He who would be free must strike the first blow," an African American aphorism stated.⁵² Allen struck with the word of God.

Allen first had to prove to his master that religion did not make for recalcitrant slaves. Masters' preferred biblical text was "servants will obey masters" (1 Peter 2:18). Allen assured Sturgis that he would not disobey while attending Methodist worship. This was a critical maneuver: with revival preachers working the Dover area, Sturgis was ridiculed by his neighbors for allowing Allen to so openly embrace Methodism. Wouldn't even a meeting every other week "ruin [his] Negroes"? they chided. Allen and his brother resolved to work harder, giving Sturgis no excuse for cracking down on their pious observances. They even missed a few meetings as a show of loyalty. "Is this not your meeting day?" a surprised Sturgis might ask on the Thursday that Allen was

supposed to attend Bible study. "No sir," came Allen's reply, "we would rather stay at home and get our work done." With this, Sturgis was convinced that religion made excellent servants.⁵³

Allen then worked on longer-range plans. Not content to be an enslaved believer, he plotted to bring revivalist preachers into Sturgis's house. According to Allen, Sturgis and his wife "being old and infirm," and doubtless thinking of the afterlife, "asked some of the Methodist preachers to come and preach at his house." Actually, the thought did not just suddenly come to Sturgis; Allen put it there, asking if the "preachers [could] come and preach at" the Sturgis home someday. Indeed, Allen's leadership in the episode is underscored by what happened next. Knowing that preachers had been accused of interceding between masters and slaves, Allen asked Sturgis for a note to his class leader (a man named John Gray), who feared attending Sturgis's house without a formal request from Allen's master. Sturgis refused to write a note but sanctioned Allen's invitation. White preachers went to Sturgis's home knowing they had the slave master's blessing.⁵⁴

Meetings occurred in and around Sturgis's home during the summer of 1779 (including visits by Francis Asbury). Then came Freeborn Garrettson's visit, perhaps in September 1779. "Thou art weighed in the balance," Garrettson lectured a shaking Sturgis, "and found wanting" (Daniel 5:27). Sturgis wilted when the Word of the Lord was revealed to him. "After that," Allen wrote, "he could not be satisfied to hold slaves." The two soon struck a deal for Allen and his brother's freedom.⁵⁵ "I had it often impressed on my mind that I should one day enjoy my freedom," Allen recalled thinking at the time.⁵⁶ That time was now, for he had just shaped the course of his own emancipation.

By January 25, 1780, the twenty-year-old Allen had a written agreement with his master: he would pay two thousand dollars over the next five years for his freedom. So nice did that word "freedom" sound that Allen paid his first installment—\$150—early.⁵⁷ Allen worked feverishly over the next several years to bring his agreement with Sturgis to fruition. How hard did Richard Allen work? He claimed to have cut so much wood on his first day alone that "it was only with difficulty I could open or close [my] hands." He actually prayed for a cure. Then Allen rested for a few days, doing other chores while his blistered and bleeding hands healed. Driven by fears that "after our master's death we were liable to be sold to the highest bidder," Allen eagerly returned to what he referred to as "his work" of gaining freedom. He cut more

wood, took on more odd jobs, and refused to pause for anything but prayer, food, and fellowship.⁵⁸

We can approximate Allen's workload by consulting various sources. Allen recalled earning fifty Continental dollars per month at a Delaware brickyard. Debt to his master amounted to two thousand Continental dollars. This translated into roughly three and half years of hauling bricks to secure his freedom, with no external expenditures. Another, perhaps more telling, indicator was Allen's woodcutting work. Pay scales instituted well after the Revolutionary War set rates for what sawyers could charge. Cutting oak or hickory was rated at two to three Pennsylvania schillings per cord (one dollar in Continental currency was roughly seven and a half Pennsylvania schillings). Allen observed that he could cut "a cord and half to two cords per day." If you do the math, that means it would have taken three thousand to four thousand cords of wood and, at Allen's hard-working rate of one and a half to two cords a day, fifteen hundred days, or roughly five years, of cutting wood for Allen to pay off his agreement with Sturgis.⁵⁹

Allen would have had to work all day every day at the single chore of cutting wood—an activity that made his hands blister and bleed—for five years straight. And that did not include money for food, clothing, transportation, or any other miscellaneous cost. Considering Stokeley Sturgis's already weakened financial state, Allen was now responsible for such items. Add to this the shaky state of the American economy and it is clear that Allen worked like hell to gain his freedom. Indeed, pray though he might for deliverance, Allen left nothing to God or fate—he was going to gain his freedom as quickly as possible.

The record shows that Richard Allen made good on his freedom agreement a year and half early. He signed his contract with Stokeley Sturgis in 1780; he paid the last installment of debt in August 1783, providing Sturgis not only with the necessary funds for his liberty but also with bushels of corn, wheat, and salt. The piece of paper that Allen took away from Sturgis (when he was twenty-three years old) assured that nobody would call Richard Allen a slave anymore. As Sturgis's deed put it, "I do hereby for myself, my heirs, executors, administrators or assigns manumit, exonerate, release and forever discharge and set at full liberty said Negro man named Richard quitting all claim that I were they in my right may or might have to him by virtue of any law, custom or usage whatsoever."⁶⁰

Allen was right to take no chances with his freedom. Many blacks

became entrapped in dubious emancipation schemes of one sort or another, particularly as the Revolutionary War ended and slaveholders came to view bondmen as still-vital commodities in a reconstructing economy. Some Northern masters deviously used the promise of emancipation to lull slaves into a false sense of security, only to sell them south before their liberty date approached. In New York City (which adopted a gradual abolition law in 1799), according to one scholar's estimate, perhaps one-third of the enslaved population was sold south before gaining liberty. Allen did everything he could to avoid such a fate.⁶¹ He paid his debt early, got that freedom paper, and eventually had it deposited in the master files of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society for future reference. It sits there today as the very first manumission agreement on file.

5. The Name Game

After gaining his independence, another matter weighed heavily on the newly freed Richard Allen. What would he call himself? His emancipation agreement refers merely to a man called "Negro Richard." But names meant a lot to enslaved people. Out of the reach of masters' ears, they would sometimes use different names to refer to one another.

The story of how "Negro Richard" took the name "Richard Allen" went to the grave with the man himself. He never explained his reasons in public, and no family member or acquaintance left any insights. Gary Nash has suggested that the liberated slave took the last name "Allen" to honor a well-regarded Pennsylvania jurist (named William Allen) who had been Benjamin Chew's neighbor.⁶² If this is true, then perhaps Allen was also paying homage to his home state, which in the exact same year that he signed a manumission deal with Sturgis had passed the world's first gradual abolition law. Whatever the reason, Allen's renaming constituted the first act of self-possession in his life.

Taking a name and making a name for himself were not necessarily the same thing. After securing his freedom and renaming himself, Allen set off on the Methodist preaching circuit. Ever cautious and calculating, Allen took no chances when he hit the road. He made sure he had a pass, or a letter of testimonial, allowing him unfettered movement. This recently discovered document shows just how important mobility was to the young Allen. On August 27, 1783, his former master Stokeley

Sturgis penned a six-line pass for Allen, telling anyone who would challenge the young black man that he was indeed "free" and that Allen "intends to travel some ways abroad from this [place?] to work where it suits him." Sturgis added that Allen always "behaved himself . . . honestly when he wrought about this place."⁶³ Clearly, Allen had made his grand intentions known to those closest to him, including his former master. Far from being content with mere freedom, Allen dreamed of traveling far and wide, of working where he wanted, of spreading the gospel to all who would receive it, of settling in a place he decided to call home. Sturgis's evident desire to vouch for Allen's character, not to mention his concern with Allen's dream of traveling "abroad," is almost touching. That little document conveyed Allen's biggest desires (his wanderlust) to anyone who would read it. He carried it wherever he went and made sure to pass it along to posterity.⁶⁴

In no time at all, the wandering Allen became a familiar figure at camp meetings and revivals. "Come unto me, all ye that are weary and heavy laden," he would call out, "Glory be to God!" "This man must be a man of God!" people replied upon hearing Allen's voice. "I have never heard such preaching before."⁶⁵ So dedicated was he to the evangelical circuit that even while tracking cartloads of salt between Delaware and Pennsylvania during the Revolution—Allen made deliveries to American forces—he held "church" at the side of the road. "I never forgot to serve my Lord," Allen said. "I used oft-times to pray, sitting, standing or lying."⁶⁶

Word of Allen's circuit preaching eventually made it to Pennsylvania abolitionists, who used his story as a model of black uplift in the new republic. In a pamphlet prepared in 1787 for distribution among British abolitionists (who wanted the information as fodder for their own anti-slave-trading campaigns), Pennsylvania reformers compiled stories of free black preachers, workers, and community builders who exemplified black achievement. This first-ever group portrait of African Americans in the emancipating North celebrated the possibilities of abolitionism in trans-Atlantic culture. That Allen became the very first subject of these testimonials speaks volumes about his renown as a black minister of the gospel. "He believed it to be his duty to Travel abroad as a Preacher of Righteousness," the pamphlet declared, noting that Allen paid out of pocket to be a Methodist itinerant. His extensive "religious journeys" were so impressive, however, that white officials soon paid his expenses. (Allen's dedication extended to "Indian natives," among whom he spent

nearly two months preaching.) Allen distinguished himself as a businessman too, abolitionists continued, for his dry-goods operations gained him both "money and reputation." Only four years removed from paying off his freedom dues, the former slave was now known on both side of the Atlantic.⁶⁷

Allen's first base of operations was Wilmington, Delaware, in 1783. Allen then moved northward to New Jersey, where he spent several weeks preaching the gospel. In the spring of 1784, Allen arrived at the home of well-known preacher Benjamin Abbott, who lived on the western edge of New Jersey. Quickly impressing the white cleric, Allen preached with Abbott at several local meetings. Allen then moved to the other side of New Jersey, living briefly with Joseph Budd (another white acquaintance), before going to Bennington, New Jersey, and finally Pennsylvania. "I walked until my feet became so sore I blistered," he recalled of this one year of itinerant activity. "I could scarcely bear them to the ground."⁶⁸

Despite bouts of illness, Allen kept moving and preaching. Between 1784 and 1785, he worked on circuits in southeastern Pennsylvania; Baltimore, Maryland; and Kent County, Delaware. By the time he finished his itinerancy in early 1786 and moved back to Philadelphia, Allen had traveled several hundred miles and impressed thousands of worshipers, many of whom were white. In his autobiography, Allen named nearly two dozen people with whom he stayed and prayed on his mid-Atlantic sojourns. The majority of his contacts were white people. This fact underscored the young black man's early belief that religion could form a bridge of understanding between the races. In his first published attack on bondage in 1794, Allen challenged masters to end slavery lest they face eternal damnation. If guilty masters like Thomas Jefferson balked at this notion and worried about slaves' vengeance, then Allen perceptively pointed to the Bible. Christianizing slaves and emancipating masters prayed to the same God, he lectured; neither party would dare treat the other wrongly, lest they be eternally condemned. Indeed, freed blacks would live under the same Golden Rule as former slaveholders: they must treat others as they would be treated. For Allen, this was no mere parlor philosophizing. His revivalist experience was proof positive that black and white could pray together, eat together, and live together as equals in the new American republic.⁶⁹

His optimism notwithstanding, Allen recognized the dangers of black itinerancy, particularly in Southern states. In 1785, the great Methodist

itinerant Francis Asbury (1745–1816) asked the talented and increasingly well-known black exhorter to “travel abroad” with him. They would visit slavery’s heartland, Maryland and Virginia, before traveling to both North and South Carolina. Asbury warned Allen that he must not “intermix with slaves” in the Deep South and that he would “have to sleep in his carriage” at nights. “I would not travel on these conditions,” Allen replied firmly. Why not? Asbury wondered. “If I was taken sick,” the free-speaking Allen countered, “who would support me?”⁷⁰

Asbury apparently did not understand Allen’s concern, for he told the young man that he would provide adequate food and clothing. Allen repeated his fears, again telling Asbury plainly, “I would not travel on these conditions.” Allen simply doubted that he would be treated as a free man in the heavily enslaved South. He envisioned a scenario in which he was left to the kindness of locals, who already made clear their doubts about black equality and abolitionism. Worse, he suffered from rheumatoid arthritis. What if he could not travel for a while? No, Allen could not imagine risking his freedom in the Deep South. He told Asbury no and headed north again.⁷¹

Allen’s reluctance to travel with Asbury did not prevent these Methodist itinerants of the gospel from forming a great interracial friendship—a relatively uncommon thing in late-eighteenth-century America. In 1803, Allen celebrated their two decades of fellowship by purchasing a horse for Asbury (for the not-unsubstantial sum of ninety dollars). That token of gratitude, gladly accepted by Asbury (who had worn out his own mare), was but a small repayment for Asbury’s longtime assistance to Allen. When Allen broke from white Methodists at St. George’s in the early 1790s, Asbury gave the inaugural address to the new black church. It was Asbury too who ordained Allen as the first black Methodist deacon in 1799. And of course, in 1785, only a bit removed from slavery and just beginning his own itinerancy, Allen received his first major boost from Asbury, who had actually called for the talented young exhorter by name. Come and help me save souls, he asked Allen. Here, Allen recalled, was a bishop who not only recalled a black man’s full name but wanted his help.

Allen and Asbury had good reason to become friends. Like Allen, Asbury was attracted to the bare-bones aspects of Methodism. Nothing pleased Asbury more than “serious” prayers and “serious” congregations. Also like Allen, Asbury relished discipline—regular prayer, prayer as a daily ritual and not a weekly obligation, prayer as a mode of living

and working. Why were people mired in hypocrisy and sin? “Neglect of Prayer,” Asbury declared. And Asbury surely won favor with Allen for speaking directly, truthfully, even painfully about God’s word. Sin was sin, there could be no way around it, both Allen and Asbury believed. At the start of 1778, Asbury preached to a large crowd in Allen’s Dover. “The people felt the weight of Divine truths,” he noted of that day. He did what he called “plain-dealing” at other prayer meetings in the weeks that followed. “What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his soul?” Asbury prodded his listeners. Was an eternity of hell worth ignoring righteousness? Asbury “spoke searchingly” about sin, even if it did not endear him to religious and political authorities. That was a man after Allen’s heart.⁷²

Allen and Asbury shared something else, for religion offered both a route out of a grinding existence. Asbury was born in England only a few years prior to Allen. He worked as a blacksmith before becoming a traveling lecturer. In 1771, he answered Methodist calls to work as an itinerant in the American colonies. He spent the next several decades building Methodism in the American countryside. According to one estimate, he traveled over one hundred thousand miles to spread the Word. Asbury also demonstrated that he could look beyond race. In Maryland in 1773, he recalled a wonderful “public worship” session at which “a serious Negro was powerfully struck” by the Word. The man did not say much, but he “trembled” as the conversion experience enveloped his entire body. “The very house shook,” Asbury wrote.⁷³

Allen’s itinerant work fostered other memorable meetings. At the end of 1784, for example, he made his way from New Jersey to Pennsylvania, settling in a small town called Radnor, located just a dozen miles from Philadelphia. His feet bloodied from miles of walking, he came to the home of Caesar Waters and his wife, a black couple eager for Allen’s companionship. After chatting awhile, they asked the young preacher to stay for tea. A delighted but weary Allen agreed to stay but found that he could not move from his chair to the dinner table. “They brought the table to me,” a grateful Allen remembered. When later at night Allen finally hobbled out of his chair, Mrs. Waters “bathed my feet with warm water and bran.” Restored and revitalized, Allen awoke the next morning ready to preach. “We had a glorious meeting!” he glowed. The couple asked him to stay a few days more, to share food and the love of God. Days turned into weeks at the couple’s insistence. Around Radnor, Allen preached to groups large and small. Word spread about the black

preacher's commanding presence. "How can we be saved?" people asked him. "Prayer and supplication to the throne of Grace," he told them. Allen's meetings bore all the signs of a good old revival, with shouting and hollering in the name of the Lord. "Many souls were awakened," as he put it, "and cried aloud to the Lord to have mercy upon them."⁷⁴

Allen called the Waterses the "kindest" people he had ever met. But something else occurred to him while in Pennsylvania: there were relatively "few colored people" like the Waterses to preach to. Perhaps, Allen thought, he should now dedicate time to building a black Methodist constituency.⁷⁵

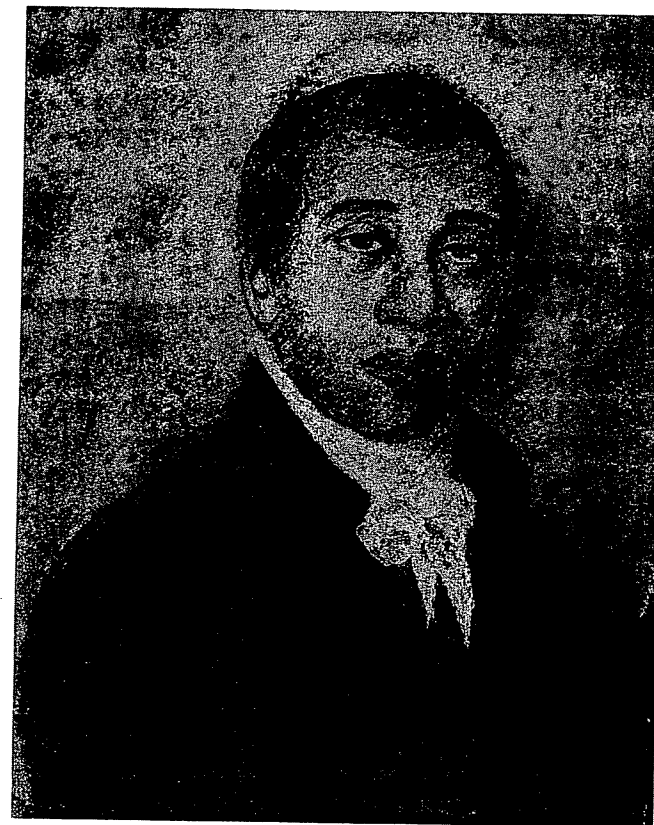
That opportunity came in February 1786, when he accepted the invitation of a white Methodist elder to come to Philadelphia and minister to black congregants in the burgeoning city he once called home.

6. *Portrait of a Man Named Allen*

For anyone of the Revolutionary era, much less a black man and former slave, Allen had lived an amazing life by 1786. He had been sold by his first master and separated from his mother by his second master; he had been born again; he chartered his own ticket to freedom and earned more as a laborer than most people of the time, white or black; he had been anointed as an up-and-coming exhorter on the Methodist circuit.

Allen even had his portrait painted, probably after attending the inaugural Methodist conference in Baltimore in December 1784. This organizational meeting created the structures that defined the Methodist Episcopal Church in America: the office of bishop, the powers of the presiding elder in congregational life, the continuing importance of conversion experiences and itinerant work. The "Christmas Conference" also created "a new and detailed antislavery rule": Methodists must liberate their slaves lest they be denied the Lord's Supper and expelled from the church. Although the Methodist Church subsequently retreated from such antislavery orthodoxy, in the 1780s it appeared to be part of the abolitionist vanguard. Allen may have been the picture of Methodists' great antislavery future.⁷⁶

Indeed, Allen so impressed the many white preachers who gathered in Baltimore that he became the subject of a magnificent portrait, the earliest rendition we have of him. Dressed in the simple but dignified



Allen's first portrait, c. 1784–85. This is the first likeness of Allen—and among the first of black founders. Recently liberated and gaining fame as an itinerant Methodist preacher on the mid-Atlantic revival circuit at the time of this sitting, Allen soon after settled in Philadelphia, where he founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church. (Courtesy of Howard University)

garb of a roaming preacher—Allen wore a black waistcoat with a white scarf tied into a cravat—he forthrightly faces his viewers, the smallest of smiles forming above his chin. Allen appears absolutely unfazed by his portrait; he does not frown or clench his jaw in the least. He is amiable, confident, assured. His winning personality must have influenced the artist, for Allen's portrait is set against a rather cheery blue-white background, rather than the weighty and severe backdrops (deep velvety reds or chocolate browns) of most other Enlightenment portraiture.

Still, the unidentified artist captured perfectly Allen's piercing gaze—the intensity of those eyes that Henry Highland Garnet would later recall as Allen's essential (and most unforgettable) physical feature.⁷⁷

Allen's portrait was painted before he celebrated his twenty-fifth birthday. This fact alone says something rather remarkable. People knew him not by generic racial features (a black man, a slave) but by name and accomplishment. His name was Richard Allen, and few people who met him over the next few decades ever forgot that.

2

Gospel Labors

When Richard Allen journeyed to his boyhood home of Philadelphia in 1786, he had just turned twenty-six. Since his manumission, he had traveled to a half-dozen states in the new American nation and worked at well over half a dozen different jobs too. Stability would now become Allen's primary concern. After settling in the City of Brotherly Love, he sought to build institutional homes for the burgeoning free black community—churches, reform groups, educational societies. He also struggled to secure equality for African Americans in the new republic. "Whoever hopes for great things in this world," Allen wrote, "takes pains to attain them."¹ He went to great lengths to achieve his dreams.

Allen's efforts soon paid off, as he helped inaugurate two of the most revered black-led institutions in early national America: the Free African Society, a benevolent organization, and Bethel Church, which would become one of the most powerful African American churches in the United States. Achieving equality proved decidedly more difficult, however. The black founder's antislavery sermonizing met with apathy and even anger. But Allen was not deterred. Indeed, he knew that hardship was part of the long, hard road a prophet traveled.

1. Church Roots

Allen's church dated to his itinerant work in Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. He recalled that few free blacks attended services in Northern locales and that Southern masters tried to keep roaming preachers away from slaves.² Yet experience as a Methodist class leader told Allen that both free blacks and enslaved people hungered for the Word. Soon after attending the inaugural Methodist conference in Baltimore in 1784, Allen decided that someone must convert blacks into a powerful Afro-Christian constituency.

Notes

NOTES TO THE INTRODUCTION

1. Gary B. Nash, "New Light on Richard Allen: The Early Years of Freedom," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, vol. 46, no. 2 (April 1989): 332-40; Charles Wesley, *Richard Allen: Apostle of Freedom* (Washington, D.C., 1935).
2. Mother Bethel Church pastor Jeffrey N. Leath, monthly letter, October 1993, in Bethel Archives, misc. archives.
3. David Walker, "Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World" (Boston, 1830), reprinted in Richard Newman, Patrick Rael, and Phillip Lapsansky, eds., *Pamphlets of Protest* (New York, 2000), 97-99; Rev. John M. Palmer, "Was Richard Allen Great?" (Philadelphia, 1898), 1-10.
4. "Rev. Richard Allen, Founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church," engraving published by "J. Dainty," Philadelphia, 1813, with words inscribed anonymously afterward.
5. Stokeley Sturgis wrote a quasi-pass on behalf of Allen on August 27, 1783, vouching for his character for those who might meet the young preacher on his travels. A copy of this little-known document is held in the Richard Allen Museum, Bethel Archives.
6. Wyman speech, reprinted in the *Christian Recorder*, February 8, 1865.
7. Turpin speech, reprinted in the *Christian Recorder*, November 25, 1865.
8. See report of "Allen Day" in the *Christian Recorder*, February 18, 1865.
9. In addition to Wesley's work on Allen, see Carol V. R. George, *Segregated Sabbaths: Richard Allen and the Rise of Independent Black Churches, 1760-1840* (New York, 1973); Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), which contains a wealth of great information on Allen's rise to prominence; Albert J. Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African American Religious History* (New York, 1999), which features a wonderful section on Allen as a church builder; and Dee E. Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760-1800* (Princeton, N.J., 2000), which provides many terrific insights on Allen and African Methodism.
10. For the best books on eighteenth-century African-American figures, see

Douglas Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1996); John Saillant, *Black Puritan, Black Republican: The Life and Thought of Lemuel Haynes, 1753–1833* (New York, 2002); and Julie Winch, *A Gentleman of Color: The Life of James Forten* (New York, 2002). For terrific black Atlantic world biographies, see Madison Smart Bell, *Toussaint L'Ouverture: A Biography* (New York, 2007); Vincent Carretta, *Equiano, the African* (Athens, Ga., 2006); and Jon F. Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005).

11. David Levering Lewis, W. E. B. Du Bois: *Biography of a Race, 1867–1919* (New York, 1993).

12. The classic study remains Arthur Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North* (Chicago, 1967).

13. See Benjamin Quarles's great book, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1996); and Sylvia R. Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton, N.J., 1993).

14. As notes in succeeding chapters illustrate, there is an increasingly rich literature on early national emancipation. A great place to start is Joanne P. Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780–1860* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1998).

15. See Daniel A. Payne, *A History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Nashville, Tenn., 1893), 85. Henry Highland Garnet recalled Allen in the *Christian Recorder*, February 20, 1869. I am indebted to John Stauffer of Harvard University for showing me this wonderful description of Allen.

16. Garnet, *Christian Recorder*.

17. Ibid.

18. 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) (hereafter cited as LEGL), 16.

19. *Freedom's Journal*, February 22, 1828.

20. LEGL, 50.

21. On the history of liberation theology among slaves and free people of color, see James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York, 1969). See also Dwight N. Hopkins and George Cummings, eds., *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave Narratives* (Maryknoll, N.Y., 1991).

22. Richard Allen, "An Address to Those Who Keep Slaves and Approve the Practice" (originally published in 1794 in Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, "A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People during the Late Awful Calam-

ity in Philadelphia, in the Year 1793"), reprinted in Newman, Rael, and Lapsansky, *Pamphlets of Protest*, 41–42.

23. See, especially, Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*, 26–38.

24. Ira Berlin's critical and beautifully written book, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (New York, 2003), especially the prologue, makes a powerful case for reading free blacks as essentially maroons.

25. On the significance of Caribbean slave rebels in the creation of a democratic society, see especially Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), prologue.

26. For a magnificent analysis of slaveholders' pre-Civil War fears, see William W. Freehling, Preface to *Road to Disunion*, vol. 2, *Secessionists Triumphant* (New York, 2007).

27. Psalm 37:37 is printed on the title page of LEGL; emphasis in original.

28. See Payne, *History of the AME Church*, 85–86.

29. See "Some Letters of Richard Allen and Absalom Jones to Dorothy Ripley," *Journal of Negro History* 1, no. 4 (1916): 436–43.

30. John Edgar Wideman, *The Cattle Killing* (New York, 1996), 157.

31. Paula J. Giddings, "Lives of the Poets," a review of *Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow: The Tragic Courtship and Marriage of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Alice Ruth Moore*, by Eleanor Alexander, *New York Times Book Review*, August 18, 2002.

32. LEGL, 7.

33. See Andrew Burstein's two fine books, *The Inner Jefferson: Portrait of a Grieving Optimist* (Charlottesville, Va., 1995) and *Jefferson's Secrets: Death and Desire at Monticello* (New York, 2005).

34. See, especially, David McCulloch, *John Adams* (New York, 2001), introduction.

35. *Freedom's Journal*, February 22, 1828.

36. *Freedom's Journal*, June 22, 1828.

37. The 1817 Philadelphia petition was reprinted in William Lloyd Garrison, *Thoughts on African Colonization* (Boston, 1832), 9.

38. David Brion Davis of Yale University, email to author, May 23, 2003. See also David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York, 2006), esp. 180–81.

39. William Banks, *Black Intellectuals* (New York, 1999), 3–4. See also John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1992).

40. On the definition and meaning of black founders, see also Richard S. Newman and Roy E. Finkenbine, eds., "Black Founders in the New Republic," introduction to a forum in the *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, vol. 64, no. 1 (January 2007): 83–94.

41. On Dexter, see Richard S. Newman, Roy Finkenbine, and Douglass

Mooney, eds., "Philadelphia Emigrationist Petition: An Introduction," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, vol. 64, no. 1 (January 2007): 161–66, which contains a brief biography.

42. Daniel Coker, "Dialogue between a Virginian and an African Minister" (Baltimore, 1810), reprinted in Newman, Rael, and Lapsansky, *Pamphlets of Protest*, 52–65.

43. Allen to Boyer, August 22, 1824, reprinted in Jonathas Henri Granville, *Biographie de Jonathas Granville, par son fils* (Paris, 1880).

44. Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) is available in dozens of reprints, including the Oxford World's Classics edition (New York, 1997), edited by Brent Hayes Edwards.

45. Joseph J. Ellis, *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (New York, 1997), chap. 3.

46. Allen's "Eulogy of Washington" was reprinted in the *Philadelphia Gazette*, December 31, 1799.

47. On black republicanism, see Saillant, *Black Puritan, Black Republican*, particularly the discussion at 73. On the religious dimensions of republicanism, see Jonathan D. Sassi, *A Righteous Republic* (New York, 2001).

48. See Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York, 1991).

49. For a great summary of deliberative versus persuasive politics in early American history, see John L. Brooke, "Consent, Civil Society, and the Public Sphere in the Age of Revolution and the Early American Republic," in Jeffrey L. Pasley, Andrew W. Robertson, and David Waldstreicher, eds., *Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2004), 207–50, esp. 231–34.

50. Black founders do not garner much attention as religious visionaries in early America. This is particularly striking when one examines recent popular books on religion and the founders. In otherwise excellent studies, neither Jon Meacham's *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers and the Making of a Nation* (New York, 2006) nor David L. Holmes's *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers* (New York, 2006) deals with black religious figures during the founding era. For quotation, see Meacham, *American Gospel*, 27.

51. I treat this theme more intensively in "We Participate in Common": Richard Allen's Eulogy of Washington and the Challenge of Inter-Racial Appeals," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, vol. 64, no. 1 (January 2007): 117–28.

52. See Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1781–1782, published 1785), usefully digitized at the University of Virginia Library's Electronic Text Center: <http://etext.virginia.edu>; quotation at 264.

53. See Pasley, Robertson, and Waldstreicher, introduction to *Beyond the Founders*.

54. See Dainty's 1813 engraving, "Rev. Richard Allen, Founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church."

55. Bernard Bailyn, *To Begin the World Anew: The Genius and Ambiguities of the American Founders* (New York, 2005).

56. Benjamin Franklin and the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, "Address to the Public" (Philadelphia, November 1789) and "A Plan for Improving the Condition of the Free Blacks" (Philadelphia, October 1789).

57. Allen, "An Address to Those Who Keep Slaves."

NOTES TO CHAPTER 1

1. *Pennsylvania Gazette*, February 14, 1760.

2. Ibid.

3. Egerton quoted the novelist James Baldwin. See Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion*, 3.

4. LEGL, 5.

5. "To the People of Colour" (originally published in 1794 in Jones and Allen, "Narrative of the . . . Black People"), in Dorothy Porter, ed., *Negro Protest Pamphlets* (New York, 1969), 21–22.

6. Ibid., 7.

7. The standard biography of Benjamin Chew remains Burton A. Konckle, *Benjamin Chew, 1722–1810* (Philadelphia, 1832). The Historical Society of Pennsylvania houses the Chew Papers, including new collections generously donated by Cliveden, Chew's wonderfully restored Germantown home, now restored as a historic site.

8. Nash, *Forging Freedom* 15–16.

9. I am grateful to Philip Seitz, curator of history at Cliveden, for providing me access to his amazing database, "Chew Family Slaves."

10. Information on Chew slaves born in 1760 from ibid.

11. Certificate from Stokeley Sturgis to Richard Allen, circa 1783, about Allen's freedom. Copy obtained from Bethel Archives.

12. Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982).

13. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 1–11.

14. On Pennsylvania slavery, see Gary B. Nash and Jean R. Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsylvania and Its Aftermath* (New York, 1990).

15. For expert examinations of Northern bondage, see especially David N. Gellman, *Emancipating New York: The Politics of Slavery and Freedom, 1777–1827* (Baton Rouge, La., 2007); Graham Russell Hodges, *Slavery and Freedom in the Rural North, African Americans in Monmouth County, New Jersey, 1665–1865* (Madison, Wis., 1997); and Melish, *Disowning Slavery*.

16. See Sidney Kaplan, *The Black Presence in the Era of the American Revolution* (Washington, D.C., 1973), 81–89.
17. Jean R. Soderlund, *Quakers and Slavery: A Divided Spirit* (Princeton, N.J., 1982).
18. “Venture Smith, Narrative of a Slave’s Capture” (Middletown, Conn., 1798). On Smith generally, see John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic* (Baltimore, 2004).
19. Before Gary Nash’s careful research showed that Stokeley Sturgis was Allen’s second master, scholars had little clue about “Mr. Stokeley’s” identity. See Nash’s groundbreaking article, “New Light on Richard Allen,” cited in the introduction, n. 1. D. W. Meinig, ed., *The Shaping of America: Eight Geographical Perspectives on 500 Years of History*, vol. 1, *Atlantic America, 1492–1800* (New Haven, Conn., 1986).
20. William H. Williams, *Slavery and Freedom in Delaware* (Independence, Ky., 1999), 110–11.
21. LEGL, 6.
22. Ibid.
23. Williams, *Slavery and Freedom in Delaware*, 110–11.
24. LEGL, 6.
25. See Roger D. Abrahams, *Singing the Master: The Emergence of African-American Culture in the Plantation South* (New York, 1992), chap. 1, appendix 1.
26. *Pennsylvania Gazette*, September 5, 1765.
27. LEGL, 17.
28. Williams, *Slavery and Freedom in Delaware*, 110–11.
29. LEGL, 11.
30. Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Boston, 1892), 141.
31. LEGL, 7.
32. Mother Bethel website, www.motherbethel.org.
33. LEGL, 7–8.
34. See Payne, *History of the AME Church*, 83.
35. See James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest among Northern Free Blacks, 1700–1860* (New York, 1997); Nash, *Forging Freedom*; Shane White, *Somewhat More Independent: The End of Slavery in New York City, 1770–1810* (Athens, Ga., 1991).
36. On the PAS, see Richard S. Newman, *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2002).
37. On Methodism, see Andrews, *The Methodists*, chaps. 1–2. See also Betty Wood and Sylvia Frey, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1998).

38. Asbury to his parents, January 24, 1773, in Elmer T. Clark, ed., *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, 3 vols. (London, 1958), 3:260–65.
39. LEGL, 17.
40. Andrews, *The Methodists*, 123–24.
41. Wesley, “Thoughts upon Slavery” (London, 1774), available online at <http://gbgm-umc.org/UMW/wesley/thoughtsuponslavery.stm>.
42. See Adam Hochschild, “British Abolition: The Movie,” *New York Review of Books* 54, no. 10 (June 14, 2007): 73–75.
43. LEGL, 5–7.
44. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 95–96.
45. LEGL, 6.
46. Ibid., 5.
47. Quotations come from little-used sections of Allen’s autobiography, “Acts of Faith,” “Acts of Hope,” “Acts of Love,” LEGL, 25–28.
48. Ibid.; see also Richard Allen, “To the People of Colour,” in LEGL, 47–48.
49. Graham Russell Hodges, *Black Itinerants of the Gospel: The Narratives of John Jea and George White* (Madison, Wis., 1993), introduction, esp. 1–19.
50. On the international dimensions of black activists, including religious itinerants like John Marrant, see Cassandra Pybus, *Epic Journeys of Freedom* (Boston, 2006).
51. LEGL, 6.
52. See, for instance, Frederick Douglass, *Three Addresses on the Relations Subsisting between the White and Colored People of the United States* (Washington, D.C., 1886), 3–23.
53. LEGL, 6–7.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid.
57. For a wonderful reprint of Allen’s manumission deed, see Nash, “New Light on Richard Allen.”
58. LEGL, 7–8. See also Andrews, *The Methodists*, 89–90, 140–41, 147.
59. LEGL, 8. Because Pennsylvania currency was notoriously unstable during the early 1780s, this is only an approximation. My thanks to Cathy Matson and Bob Wright for advice here, though the calculation is mine alone.
60. Nash, “New Light on Richard Allen.”
61. On masters’ deviousness in New York City, see White, *Somewhat More Independent*.
62. Nash, “New Light on Richard Allen.”
63. Certificate from Stokeley Sturgis to Richard Allen, circa 1783, about Allen’s freedom. Copy obtained from Bethel Archives.

64. As mentioned in note 5 to the introduction, Sturgis had written a quasi-pass on behalf of Allen on August 27, 1783.

65. LEGL, 10.

66. Ibid, 8.

67. Both the PAS and the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting prepared such testimonials for use in Britain. See, for example, the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, "Meeting of Sufferings, Minute Book, 1785-1802," October 18, 1787, in Haverford College's Quaker Special Collections. I remain indebted to Douglass Mooney of URS Corporation in Philadelphia, a wonderful historical researcher, for showing me a copy of this pamphlet.

68. LEGL, 9.

69. See Allen's antislavery appeal, "An Address to Those Who Keep Slaves."

70. LEGL, 11-12.

71. Ibid.

72. Asbury to his parents, January 24, 1773, in Clark, *Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, 3:260-65.

73. Ibid.

74. LEGL, 9-10.

75. Ibid.

76. Donald G. Mathews, *Slavery and Methodism: A Chapter in American Morality, 1780-1845* (Princeton, N.J., 1965), 10.

77. Allen's first portrait appears in Kaplan, *Black Presence*, chap. 3, plate 4.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 2

1. LEGL, 31.

2. Ibid., 11.

3. Ibid., 12.

4. See PAS report on visiting people of color from December 1, 1795, in "Committee for Improving the Condition of Free Blacks: Minutes, 1790-1803," PAS Papers, Reel 6.

5. On the rise of black Philadelphia, see Nash, *Forging Freedom*; Julie Winch, *Philadelphia's Black Elite* (Philadelphia, 1993); and Winch, *A Gentleman of Color*. On slave runaways and abolitionist aid in Pennsylvania, see also Newman, *Transformation of American Abolitionism*.

6. Newman, *Transformation of American Abolitionism*, chap. 3.

7. James Forten, "Series of Letters by a Man of Colour" (Philadelphia, 1813), reprinted in Newman, Rael, and Lapsansky, *Pamphlets of Protest*.

8. See Nash and Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees*, 127.

9. Newman, *Transformation of American Abolitionism*, chap. 3.

10. Paul A. Gilje and Howard B. Rock, *Keepers of the Revolution: New Yorkers at Work during the Early Republic* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1992), 221-23.

11. On black mariners, see Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 69-70; and W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African Americans Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997).

12. On the Allen apprentice case, see the PAS's "Committee of Guardians Report," September 17, 1790, PAS Papers, Reel 6, 47-57.

13. *Pennsylvania Gazette*, August 13, 1788, and September 14, 1791; quotation from the second ad.

14. "Committee of Guardians Report," February 16, 1793, PAS Papers, Reel 6, 55.

15. Nash and Soderlund, *Freedom by Degrees*, 192-93.

16. Allen, "To the People of Colour," in Porter, *Negro Protest Pamphlets*, 22. See also Hodges, *Black Itinerants of the Gospel*, introduction.

17. LEGL, 12-13.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid. Andrews, *The Methodists*, 144-50, is particularly good at recounting the meaning of Allen's initial vision of a black church within Methodist religious circles.

21. See Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 98-99.

22. "Preamble and Articles of Association of the Free African Society, April 12, 1787," reprinted in Wesley, *Richard Allen*, 269-71, quotations at 269, 270.

23. See William Douglass, "Annals of the First African Church in United States of America, Now Styled the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas, Philadelphia" (Philadelphia, 1862). For a terrific treatment of the broader meaning of the FAS and black autonomy, see Craig Steven Wilder, *In the Company of Black Men: The African Influence on African American Culture in New York City* (New York, 2001).

24. "Preamble and Articles of the Free African Society," 269.

25. Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty*, 126-30.

26. Michael C. Dawson, *Black Visions: The Roots of Contemporary African-American Political Ideologies* (Chicago, 2001), 86.

27. The story is told in many places, beginning with Wesley, *Richard Allen*, 66-68.

28. The charges against Allen, brought June 20, 1789, are usefully recounted in Wesley, *Richard Allen*, 66.

29. Ibid, 65.

30. LEGL, 15.

31. On Washington's donation to an African church, see Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 164.

32. Finding precise dates for these activities remains problematic, for documentation is scarce. Allen bought land for the church in 1791, claiming in his autobiography that he had been authorized to do so by the FAS (see LEGL, 15).