



*The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev.
Richard Allen*

(Events described: 1786-1793)

Richard Allen grew up in slavery in Delaware but purchased his freedom as a young adult. He became a Methodist while he was enslaved and a traveling Methodist preacher after he was free. Settling in Philadelphia, he joined a Methodist congregation, St. George's, which had both black and white members. As the black membership grew, the whites tried to force the blacks into segregated balcony seating, at which point Allen and other black members walked out and launched their own congregation. Allen narrates those events in this selection from his autobiography. He later spearheaded the coming together of several congregations to form the first independent black denomination in the United States, the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

February 1786, I came to Philadelphia. [...] I preached at different places in the city. My labor was much blessed. I soon saw a large field open in seeking and instructing my African brethren, who had been a long-forgotten people and few of them attended public worship. I preached in the commons, in Southwark, [in] Northern Liberties, and wherever I could find an opening. I frequently preached twice a day, at 5 o'clock in the morning and in the evening, and it was not uncommon for me to preach from four to five times a day. I established prayer meetings; I raised a society, in 1786, of forty-two members. I saw the necessity of erecting a place of worship for the colored people. I proposed it to the most respectable people of color in this city, but here I met with opposition. I had but three colored brethren that united with me in erecting a place of worship: the Rev. Absalom Jones, William White, and Dorus Ginnings. [...] The Rev. C— B— opposed the plan and would not submit to any argument we could raise, but he was shortly removed from the charge. The Rev. Mr. W— took the charge, and [...] was much opposed to an African church, and used very degrading and insulting language to us to try and prevent us from going on.

We all belonged to St. George's Church—Rev. Absalom Jones, William White, and Dorus Ginnings. We felt ourselves much cramped; but my dear Lord was with us, and we believed, if it was his will, the work would go on and that we would be able to succeed in building the house of the Lord. We established prayer meetings and meetings of exhortation, and the Lord blessed our endeavors, and many souls were awakened. But the elder soon forbid us holding any such meetings; but we viewed the forlorn state of our colored brethren and that they were destitute of a place of worship. They were considered as a nuisance.

A number of us usually attended St. George's Church, in Fourth Street; and when the colored people began to get numerous in attending the church, they moved us from the seats we usually sat on and placed us around the wall. And one Sabbath morning, we went to church, and the sexton stood at the door and told us to go in the gallery. He told us to go, and we would see where to sit. We expected to take the seats over the ones we formerly occupied below, not knowing any better. We took those seats. Meeting had begun, and they were nearly done singing, and just as we got to the seats, the elder said, "Let us pray." We had not been long upon our knees before I heard considerable scuffling and low talking. I raised my head up and saw one of the trustees, H— M—, having hold of the Rev. Absalom Jones, pulling him up off of his knees

and saying, “You must get up—you must not kneel here.” Mr. Jones replied, “Wait until prayer is over.” Mr. H— M— said, “No, you must get up now, or I will call for aid and force you away.” Mr. Jones said, “Wait until prayer is over, and I will get up and trouble you no more.” With that, [Mr. H— M—] beckoned to one of the other trustees, Mr. L— S—, to come to his assistance. He came and went to William White to pull him up. By this time, prayer was over, and we all went out of the church in a body, and they were no more plagued with us in the church.

This raised a great excitement and inquiry among the citizens, insomuch that I believe they were ashamed of their conduct. But my dear Lord was with us, and we were filled with fresh vigor to get a house erected to worship God in. Seeing our forlorn and distressed situation, many of the hearts of our citizens were moved to urge us forward; notwithstanding we had subscribed largely towards finishing St. George’s Church, in building the gallery and laying new floors, and just as the house was made comfortable, we were turned out from enjoying the comforts of worshipping therein.

We then hired a storeroom and held worship by ourselves. Here we were pursued with threats of being disowned and read publicly out of meeting if we did continue worship in the place we had hired; but we believed the Lord would be our friend. We got subscription papers out to raise money to build the house of the Lord. By this time, we had waited on Dr. Rush and Mr. Robert Ralston and told them of our distressing situation. [...] They pitied our situation, and subscribed largely towards the church, and were very friendly towards us, and advised us how to go on. [...] I hope the names of Dr. Benjamin Rush and Mr. Robert Ralston will never be forgotten among us. They were the two first gentlemen who espoused the cause of the oppressed and aided us in building the house of the Lord for the poor Africans to worship in. Here was the beginning and rise of the first African church in America.

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

We believed if we put our trust in the Lord, he would stand by us. This was a trial that I never had to pass through before. I was confident that the great head of the church would support us. My dear Lord was with us. We went out with our subscription paper and met with great success. We had no reason to complain of the liberality of the citizens. The first day the Rev. Absalom Jones and myself went out, we collected three hundred and sixty dollars. This was the greatest day’s collection that we met with. We appointed a committee to look out for a lot: the Rev. Absalom Jones, William Gray, William Wilcher, and myself. [...]he committee found a lot in

Fifth Street, in a more commodious part of the city, which we bought [...] This was the first African church or meetinghouse that was erected in the United States of America.

Source: *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen* [...] (Philadelphia: F. Ford and M. A. Riply, 1880), 13-18, <https://archive.org/details/lifeexperiencego1880alle>. Free eBook from the Internet Archive.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. Additional paragraph and sentence breaks inserted for readability. A presumed typographical error emended (*on* → *one*). A subject-verb agreement error corrected. Spelling, capitalization and punctuation emended in line with modern conventions.

These edited excerpts from Allen’s autobiography are intended for **teaching** purposes only. For **research** purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source listed above.

See also: The walkout from St. George’s is traditionally dated to 1787; but a more recent argument has been made for 1792-93, which would place the walkout closer to the new church’s 1793 groundbreaking and could support a theory that the walkout was a premeditated protest. Richard S. Newman, *Freedom’s Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 63-68.



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