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.”

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.”

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!” 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 author-
itative 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” dur-
ing 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 exam-
ining 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 aboli-
tionism, the rise of black leadership traditions and print culture, the var-
rieties 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 hal-
lowed 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 revi-
-fied through waves of discriminatory codes and practices, from segre-
gated 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 bondage—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). 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.


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.”

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.

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.” 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.” 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
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.” 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. 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.” 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.

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. 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. 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. 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.”

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.” 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). 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 1850s 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. 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.” 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. 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 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

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 other 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.” 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.” 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. 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.”

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 racialist beliefs underpinning slavery and black inequality. He then proposed his own solutions in very Franklin-esque 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.” 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.