

This Day in History... February 14, 1760

Happy Birthday to Richard Allen

Minister, writer, and educator Richard Allen was born on February 14, 1760, in the Colony of Delaware. He went on to found the first independent Black church in the United States, the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Born into slavery, Richard Allen taught himself to read and write. In his teens, he was drawn to religion and joined the Methodist Society. After hearing a white Methodist preacher Reverend Freeborn Garretson speak against slavery, Allen adopted the faith and became immensely devoted. It gave him “eternal hope that no master could deprive him of.” Allen’s piety was contagious – his master eventually converted as well. Fearing slaveholding to be sinful, he allowed Allen to purchase his freedom in 1783.

Allen settled in Philadelphia and became a preacher in 1784. Two years later, he started preaching at St. George’s Methodist Church, which catered to both blacks and whites. Allen was only permitted to preach at early morning services, which were mostly attended by African Americans. Allen’s services began drawing large crowds and he was told to lead his services elsewhere – on the nearby commons.

Allen eventually had a congregation of 50 people and worked several side jobs to support himself and his family.

Eventually, Allen and fellow preacher Absalom Jones grew angry over the church’s segregation. In 1787, they led their congregants out of the church and set out to establish their own. They formed the Free African Society, which offered aid to fugitive slaves and other new arrivals to the city. Later that year, Allen purchased a lot to build the church. (The lot is still occupied by a Black church, making it the oldest piece of land in the country to be continuously owned by African Americans.)



Imperforate Allen Stamp

On July 29, 1794, Allen opened the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME). Initially, the church had to invite white ministers to come for communion. Then in 1799, Allen was ordained as the first black Methodist minister. His church grew quickly – to 1,272 members by 1813. Then in 1816, Allen along with five other Methodist African American congregations, founded the African Methodist Episcopal Church. It was the first entirely independent black denomination in the country. On April 10 of that year, Allen was elected as the church’s first bishop.

Richard Allen’s dedicated religious and social work has been called “the first wavering step of a people toward organized social life.” The early black congregations he fostered and their abolitionist efforts are often credited with beginning the civil rights movement. Allen and his wife also provided aid to the Underground Railroad. He died on March 26, 1831. That date has since become his feast day in the Episcopal Church.



This stamp was issued for the 200th anniversary of the founding of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.



The African Methodist Episcopal Church was the first independent black denomination in the US.

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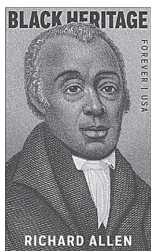
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