

Birth of the African Methodist Episcopal Church

by Clarence L. Holfe

The spirit of freedom which permeated the air during the Revolutionary War did much to enhance the ability of Blacks to manly resist subjugation and build their own institutions. They looked upon them with pride. The major avenue at the time which lent itself to this possibility was the church, and the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia became the flagship; Richard Allen was the commander, and Absalom Jones the first mate.

Richard Allen (1760-1831), born a slave in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, showed high evidence of talent and leadership at an early age. He was converted while young and was licensed to preach in 1782. In 1797, he was ordained a deacon by Bishop Francis Asbury, superintendent of Methodist work in America.

Allen travelled as an exhorter, but returned to Philadelphia in 1786 to preach at St. George Methodist Episcopal Church and at various other places in the city. Few Blacks attended public worship and this induced him to hold prayer meetings at St. George. He preached with such power, a large number of Blacks started to attend the church. The officials regarded this as a problem and undertook to segregate them. In carrying out the action, Allen, Absalom Jones and William White, occupying their usual seats on the main floor for the Sunday morning service, were pulled from their knees while praying to be led by the ushers to the segregated area designed for the Black communicants. All the Blacks arose in a

body and withdrew from the church.

Allen possessed organizing talents of the highest order, a born leader and an almost infallible judge of human nature. He was actively identified with every forward movement among Black people, irrespective of religious denomination. He died leaving a greater influence upon Black people in the North than any other man of his times. He was one of the organizers, as well as one of the chief actors in the first national convention of Black men held in the United States. It convened in Philadelphia in 1830.

Absalom Jones (1745-1818), born a slave in Sussex, Delaware, was taken to Philadelphia when he was sixteen years old. His education was so limited, a dispensation was necessary to permit his ordination, and a condition was affixed that the St. Thomas Church should not have the privilege of sharing in the government of the Episcopal Church in the diocese of Pennsylvania. Jones was impressive in his style of preaching, but his forte was not in the pulpit. It was his mild and easy manner, his habits as a minister, and his public spirit that strengthened him in public regard. Whenever he appeared in public, he donned the dress of his profession -- black dress coat, breeches and vest of the same color, with top-boots or shoes with buckles and black stockings. After a ministry of twenty-two years, he died at the age of seventy-one years.

Allen and Jones organized the Free African Society in 1787, which held the group together. It functioned to systematize a means by which its members could assist

one another during illness, and to assist widows and fatherless children. It was the first Black organization of its kind. Out of it grew the first two Black-administered churches in the North, each dedicated in 1794 -- St. Thomas African Episcopal Church and Bethel. Black in Baltimore; Wilmington, Delaware; Attleboro, Pennsylvania; and Salem, New Jersey followed the example of Bethel and established African Methodist Episcopal Churches, and the number continued to grow.



Recording spirituals sung by ex-slaves, Petersburg

The Portland Public Schools and the Portland School Board join in saluting **BLACK HISTORY MONTH**



It is the aim of Portland Public Schools to encourage all employees and students to continue to develop and practice constructive human relations.



The Portland School District consistently encourages programs in Black History which affirmatively manifest a commitment to good human relations and equality of educational opportunity.



Portland Public Schools is an Equal Opportunity Employer