

The Rise and the Glory of American Black Churches

by Susan G. Foster
Smithsonian News Service

Until the late 1700s, religious worship for Blacks in this country was restricted — by law and by social custom — to either segregated sections of white churches or to separate Black churches under the guidance of white ministers.

Despite untold numbers of gifted Black preachers, both male and female, none could boast a congregation or church to which he or she could minister.

For years, Colonial Black Philadelphians had worshipped with whites in St. George's Methodist Church, enduring not only the indignities of racism from the community at large but similar treatment from fellow parishioners. Then in 1792, the catalyst for a complete break from St. George's Church and a victory for religious freedom came in one highly charged moment.

The change would have a profound impact on American society, from the founding of church-supported schools and universities open to Blacks, to the civil rights leadership of the 1960s offered by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to the basic freedoms that Blacks now share with other Americans.

Philadelphian Richard Allen, a Black Methodist preacher, had often talked of a separate church with his colleague Absalom Jones, a former slave with a devotion to the Black community. Yet their plan lacked support. As an alternative,

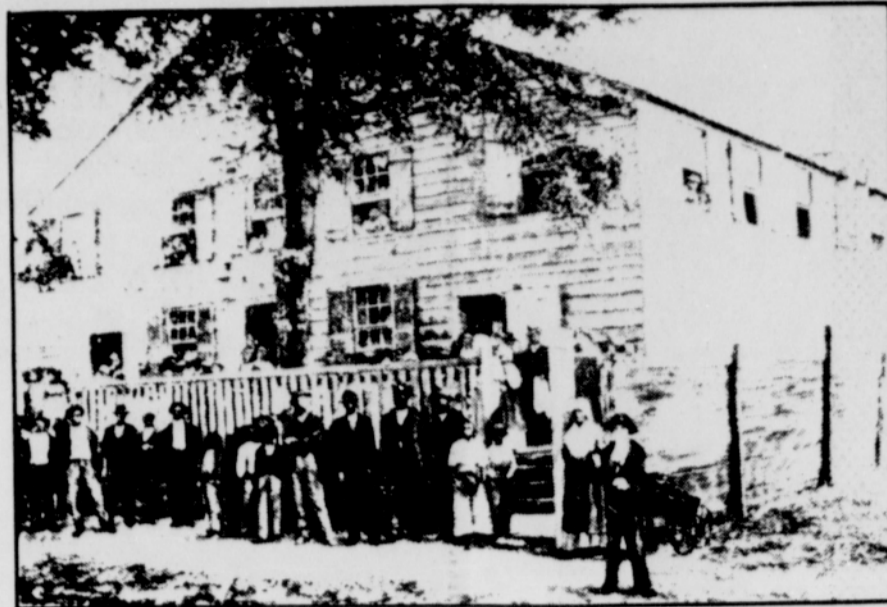
in 1787 the two formed The Free American Society, a non-sectarian group aimed at fostering moral character and helping fellow members in need. The Society also served to unify Blacks against injustices at St. George's.

One Sunday morning, white parishioners tried to forcibly remove Allen, Jones and others from a restricted area during prayer services. Their resistance to moving to the rear of the church culminated in a mass walkout by Black worshippers.

They never returned. Within two years, Allen was preaching regularly in his own church, Mother Bethel, located in a converted blacksmith shop. Although Allen remained a Methodist minister, Jones' disillusionment deepened. He never returned to Methodism, founding instead St. Thomas Episcopal Church for blacks.

What Allen and Jones accomplished through their simple act of protest soon reached Black communities in other Eastern cities. In 1816, Allen and four other congregations formed the African Methodist Episcopal denomination based in Philadelphia; Allen was elected its first bishop. Mother Bethel Church, now known as the African Methodist Episcopal Church, is one of the oldest U.S. Black churches.

The religious conviction shown by Black Philadelphians seeking to



One of the earliest Black churches in America was the First African Baptist Church organized in Savannah in 1788.

exist in an otherwise hostile environment bears more than a passing resemblance to that of their ancestors. Brought to America as slaves, they, nonetheless, held on to elements of African spiritual tradition while adopting the religious teachings of slave owners.

"This new religion, a blend of African religious traditions and Euro-American Christianity, fulfilled spiritual needs and provided stability within the confines of slavery," historian Edward Smith says. Smith organized the exhibition, "Climbing Jacob's Ladder: The Rise of Black Churches in Eastern American Cit-

ies, 1740-1877," on view through March 20 at the Smithsonian's Anacostia Museum in Washington, D.C. In that era, large numbers of Blacks became Christians as a result of an intense religious "awakening" sparked by Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist ministers.

Spiritual revivals stressed a religion of the heart rather than of the mind. Such emotionalism appealed to Blacks, many of whom became preachers, and racially mixed congregations were commonplace, often including newly licensed Black ministers. The Baptist and Methodist denominations, which flourish-

ed simultaneously, seemed especially suited to the social and psychological needs of Blacks because of their emphasis on the conversion experience.

The first Great Awakening took place in the mid-1700s as the American Colonies were considering their own liberation. At the same moment, a strong anti-slavery sentiment was building among white colonists. These changes in social thought were crucial to the spread of Christianity among the slaves and their eventual use of religion to organize independently of white churches, Smith says.

"The Great Awakening had a leveling influence," he explains. "There was a lot of equality in it; poor or rich could be converted."

While Methodism was rapidly making gains in Black communities in the North, Separatist Baptist congregations were emerging in the South. The earliest Black churches drew their congregations from Southern plantations in Virginia and South Carolina. Still, strong opposition, particularly in rural areas of the South, forced Blacks to worship together in secrecy.

Historians believe that the existence of "invisible" black congregations, comprised of numerous slave families living and working on Southern plantations, represents the first organized Black churches. These underground congregations

reveal the varied ways in which Blacks established their own churches.

Black churches in Southern cities existed only in affiliation with white congregations or if their services were overseen by white ministers. White Southerners, in particular, were not convinced that Blacks should be permitted to gather for prayer. Moreover, there was growing suspicion of the influence held by Black preachers. The suspicions appeared to be confirmed by two events in 1822 and 1831.

Black religious activity did in fact facilitate a conspiracy between city and plantation slaves led in 1822 by Denmark Vesey, an ex-slave in Charleston, S.C. Though it did not develop into a rebellion, Vesey and 36 co-conspirators were hanged. Nine years later, in Southampton County, Va., a rebellion led by Nat Turner, who claimed that he had been called to deliver his people from the bondages of slavery, resulted in the death of 200 Blacks and widespread fear of similar uprisings.

To counteract these fears, states throughout the South passed laws forbidding Blacks to preach. However, the statutes proved unenforceable because of the sheer number of Black preachers, licensed and unlicensed.

"When we think of the development of the Black church, we don't tend to look to the South," Smith said, citing the secrecy of Black religious services. But researchers have found records that show the establishment of visible Black congregations on plantations in Virginia and South Carolina as early as 1756.

By 1860, Blacks were represented in every Christian denomination in the South. The growth in Black membership came in part with a second surge of religious revivals and the promotion of formal religious instruction. Christianization of slaves was advocated through prayer services supervised by plantation owners.

The movement was so successful that Black membership far exceeded that of whites in many churches. As early as 1838, for instance, Black membership at the First Baptist Church in Richmond was nearly three times the number of white members.

The Civil War's disruption of normal social order prompted the invisible congregations in the South to worship openly and independently. Moreover, Black and white missionaries from the major denominations in the North simply trailed the Union armies into the South spreading the gospel and recruiting Black converts. A number of Black ministers even served as chaplains to Northern Black troops.

"The Civil War upset the social and economic system of the South," Smith concludes. "It was during these years that a truly independent Black church emerged."

In addition to providing spiritual growth, early Black churches provided classrooms for education. And the earliest colleges for Blacks, among them Morehouse, Howard, Fisk and Shaw, were established with church support during and after the Reconstruction era.

Black ministers and their congregations had new options following the Civil War. With the passage of new civil rights laws, Blacks were able to compete directly with whites for government jobs. Those who had been fortunate enough to receive formal training participated in society in ways that once had been unthinkable. In 1870, Hiram Revels, an African Methodist Episcopal minister, became the first Black man elected to the U.S. Senate.

As the oldest institution in this country controlled by Blacks, the church today maintains great following in the Black community, Smith says. "Almost all aspects of Black history have been influenced by the role of the church."

History is being written today. And Mal Goode's writing it.



As we celebrate Black History month, it's important to reflect not only on the works of great leaders of the past, but we also must recognize those individuals who are doing extraordinary things for mankind today.

Individuals like Malvin R. Goode. Beginning with the Pittsburgh Courier, then to radio station WHOD, on to ABC News and finally to The Black National Network, Mal Goode has played and is playing a key role as a black journalist in today's world. From the

world of sports to the United Nations, the Cuban missile crisis to the civil rights crisis, Mal Goode has covered them all. Throughout his journalism career, Mal Goode has never wavered from his personal dedication to excellence, integrity and honesty.

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