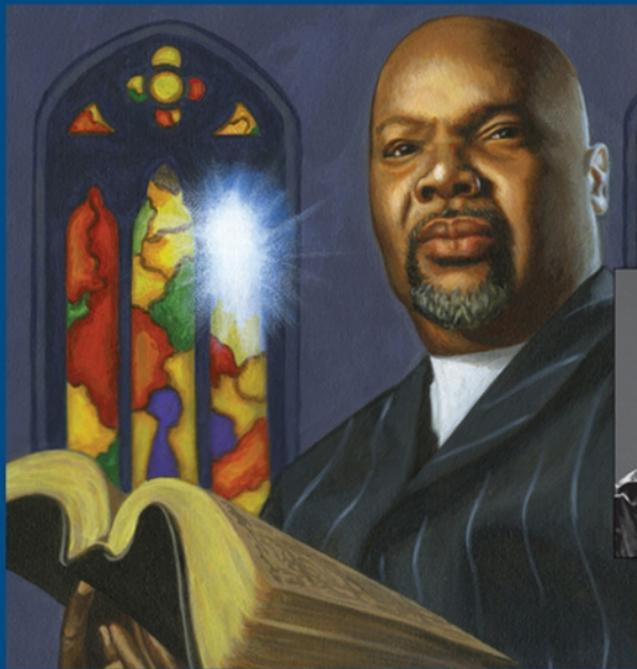


BLACK ♦ STARS

AFRICAN-AMERICAN RELIGIOUS LEADERS



JIM HASKINS AND
KATHLEEN BENSON

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John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

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In memory of Jim Haskins and his brother, Eddie Haskins

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INTRODUCTION



Throughout the history of Africans in America, no need has been greater than the need to believe that there is a purpose to life and that others share the same belief. Religion meets that need, and it is not surprising that religion has been one of the most powerful forces in African American life since Africans first arrived as slaves on North American shores.

The Atlantic slave trade threw together Africans of many different languages and cultures and forced them to live, work, and communicate with one another. They were prevented from keeping their native religions and either encouraged or compelled to adopt Christianity. Treated as one people, they eventually became one people. By the time of the Revolutionary War, people of African heritage had been in America for one hundred fifty years and had created a strong sense of group identity.

The core around which black people coalesced was religion. Whether enslaved or free—and by the time of the Revolution there was a substantial population of free blacks in the North—black people looked to the spirit of hope bestowed by the belief in a higher power and took

advantage of the opportunities to find community that religious services provided.

In the years between the turn of the nineteenth century and the Civil War, the growing community consciousness among black people continued. Black people formed more institutions, and more black leaders arose from the community. The two largest African American religious denominations, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, founded in 1816, and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, founded in the early 1820s, extended their reach and centralized their organizations.

The Civil War ended legal slavery. During a period after the war called Reconstruction, Federal troops oversaw the creation of new governments in the former Confederate states, started schools, and gave other help to the freed people of the South. The post-Civil War Reconstruction period was also an era of institution building for African Americans. A third black Methodist denomination, the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, was established in the South during this time. The Baptist Church, slower to organize nationally than the other Protestant denominations, finally formed the National Baptist Convention for its black churches in 1895.

The promise of freedom proved elusive for black people in the South. After Reconstruction ended, new southern segregation laws effectively reduced African Americans to virtual slavery. Religion and the organized churches became an even more important source of solace and community. After World War I ended in 1919, many southern black people moved to northern cities to find jobs and escape the violence and intimidation of segregation. They found a sense of power in their great numbers, and the influence of black churches grew.

Black religious leaders had varying ideas about how to challenge racial injustice in America—or whether to challenge it at all—but by the time World War II ended in 1945, the majority agreed that the black church not only had to be a center of community life but also had to be involved in political matters. Some leaders went so far as to campaign for elective office, using their churches as a political base. Others used their moral influence and their large followings to mount a campaign for

equal rights. It is no accident that most major leaders of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s were black ministers.

The religious leaders of the baby boom (those born between 1946 and 1955) missed the direct-action civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. They did not have the opportunity to join together with other religious leaders in a fight that was so clearly about justice versus injustice. The civil rights movement had a well-defined goal: national legislation that would legally end segregation and voting discrimination. It is impossible to legislate attitudes. Some religious leaders of the baby boom generation have continued to use the tactics of the civil rights movement, but most have not. The majority have used the greater opportunities available to African Americans in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries to help their people—not only those who are impoverished and poorly educated, but also those who have been successful yet miss the sense of community that the black church has provided over the centuries. Today's leaders have learned to use the mass communication and technology tools of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in their religious work. They are men and women grappling with the challenges of their time.

This history of African American religious leaders starts in the time of slavery and highlights some of the most important leaders in each era through the present day. In the first chapters of this book, nearly all the important leaders of their time are discussed. As time marched on, more and more religious leaders arose, so in later chapters of the book, only some of the most important leaders are profiled. They were chosen because they represented major trends, were firsts in their fields, or accomplished something unique. Most achieved their leadership positions against great odds.

PART ONE



**LEADERS OF THE
REVOLUTIONARY
ERA**



ABSALOM
JONES

(1746–1818)

and

RICHARD
ALLEN

(1760–1831)



Affrican American clergymen in the Revolutionary era used the pulpit as a platform to fight for their people. Two of the first were Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, who were born into slavery fourteen years apart. They met in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where they founded one of the most important black churches, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church.

Absalom Jones was born in Delaware in 1746. Portraits of him as an adult depict a heavysset man with small eyes and a long upper lip that make his mouth appear downturned and stern, but it is hard to tell from such images just what a person looked like when he was not sitting and posing for a portrait painter. As a youth, Jones worked as a servant in the home of his owner, where he had access to his owner's books. He taught himself to read by studying the New Testament of the Bible. When he was sixteen, his owner sold him to a merchant in Philadelphia named Wynkoop.

The city of Philadelphia and the surrounding colony of Pennsylvania had been founded by Quakers. This religious sect began in England in the 1600s as the Society of Friends, with the main belief that "God is within us." The ability to feel God caused some early members of the Society of Friends to shiver or quake, which earned them the nickname "Quakers." Although there were Quaker slave owners in Pennsylvania, Quakers were generally against slavery. Absalom Jones was able to continue his education at a night school for black people operated by Quakers.

Jones attended St. Peter's Anglican Church in Philadelphia. The congregation was predominantly white, but slave parishioners were treated with some sense of their humanity. Jones was twenty-three when he married a fellow slave named Mary in the church on January 4, 1770.

Under Pennsylvania law, children inherited the legal status of their mother, which meant that any children born to Mary while she remained in slavery would also be slaves. Neither Absalom Jones nor his bride wanted their children born in slavery, so the couple set about earning enough money to purchase Mary's freedom. When they could not save enough, Jones appealed to everyone he knew for loans. He composed and circulated a written appeal. In a city with many citizens who were against slavery, he managed to collect enough money to buy his wife's freedom from her owner. Jones then set about earning the money to pay back the debt. It took him until 1778 to do so, working by day for his owner and by night for himself and his family.

Jones would have liked to purchase his own freedom, but Wynkoop did not want to give up his slave. During that time, the Revolutionary War

broke out, and there were many opportunities for work. Jones's owner allowed him to hire himself out to other employers. He eventually saved enough to buy a house and a lot in the southern part of the city. Finally, in 1784, Wynkoop agreed to allow Jones to purchase his own freedom.

Richard Allen was also born a slave, in Philadelphia in 1760. Of the six or seven paintings and drawings made of him as an adult, most depict a light-skinned man with slightly raised eyebrows—as if he were always questioning. He and his family were later sold to a farmer in Delaware. In 1777, when he was seventeen years old, Allen met a traveling black preacher, Freeborn Garretson, who was carrying word of a new church, the Methodist Episcopal Church.

An offshoot of the Anglican Church, or Church of England, the Methodist Episcopal Church did not recognize the same class distinctions as the older church. It had great appeal to slaves because it preached that slaveholders would be punished on Judgment Day. Meetings and services were more emotional and demonstrative than in the Anglican Church, with many more opportunities for participation by parishioners. It was very common for members of the congregation to testify to their faith or recall how they had come to the church. The church also taught that women were equal in the eyes of God. Not surprisingly, many early church leaders were women.

Under Freeborn Garretson's influence, Richard Allen's owner had a change of heart about being a slave owner. He did not free Allen outright, but he allowed Allen to earn enough money by sawing wood and driving a wagon to eventually buy his freedom.

After the Revolutionary War, Allen became a "licensed exhorter" in the Methodist Episcopal Church, which meant that he had the official sanction of the church to travel around preaching and gaining converts. He was so successful that he attracted the attention of church leaders. In 1786, he was appointed an assistant minister of the racially mixed congregation of St. George's Methodist Church in Philadelphia.

By that time, Absalom Jones had also responded to the preaching of the Methodist Church and had joined St. George's, where he was a lay, or unordained, minister to the black members of the congregation. Allen

and Jones became friends. Together, they greatly increased the membership of St. George's—so much so, in fact, that the white parishioners began to feel threatened. Without informing the black parishioners, the church administrators decided to segregate them in an upstairs gallery. Shocked and angered, Jones, Allen, and their fellow black congregants refused to be segregated. The following Sunday, they took their places as usual on the main floor of the church, and when ushers attempted to remove them, the entire black congregation walked out.

Jones and Allen wanted to form their own religious group, but they soon discovered it would be difficult. The free black population of Philadelphia was small and attended many different churches. Also, there was opposition from both blacks and whites to the idea of a separate church. So, in 1787, Jones and Allen formed a nondenominational mutual aid society. They called it the Free African Society in a testament to the strong ties they still felt to Africa. The Free African Society was the first organization of free black people to be formed in the United States, and it had many aims. Its primary purpose was to act independently of whites and for the good of its membership. The Free African Society charged membership dues, and its rules provided for those funds to be used for the welfare of members who needed it, or for the widows and children of members who died.

Jones and Allen continued to feel that they needed a church, and eventually they set about raising the money to build a structure. Disagreements over religious practices led to a split in the congregation, however. The strong Quaker influence in Philadelphia religious life led a majority of those in the Free African Society to adopt the Quaker practice of having fifteen minutes of silence at meetings. Those who preferred the more expressive practices of Methodism objected, and in 1789, Richard Allen led a group that withdrew from the Free African Society. Under the leadership of Absalom Jones, the Free African Society continued its fundraising efforts and broke ground for a new church building in 1792.

In 1793, Jones, Allen, and others among the free black population of Philadelphia put their differences aside and joined in the common cause of helping their fellow inhabitants of the city during the largest yellow

fever epidemic in American history. It killed some five thousand people, or about 10 percent of the city's population.

Absalom Jones presided over the dedication of St. Thomas African Episcopal Church on July 17, 1794. The new church then applied for membership in the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania under the following conditions: (1) that they be recognized as an organized body; (2) that they have control over their local affairs; (3) that Absalom Jones be licensed as a lay reader, and, if qualified, be ordained as minister. In October 1794, the church was admitted to the diocese as St. Thomas African Episcopal Church, and in 1795, Bishop White ordained Jones as deacon. Seven years later, on September 21, 1802, Jones was the first black American to receive formal ordination as a priest.

Richard Allen, meanwhile, led those who had withdrawn from the African Episcopal Church and formed a Methodist congregation, the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. It opened in July 1794, the same month in which St. Thomas African Episcopal Church was dedicated. Although that ceremony was presided over by the white Methodist bishop Francis Asbury, Allen and his fellow congregants were determined to worship separately from whites. They wanted to control their own religious lives, to allow those with a deep faith and oratorical skills to preach without seeking permission from higher church authorities. Bishop Asbury ordained Richard Allen in 1799, and his powerful preaching attracted an ever-growing congregation.

Philadelphia's black population burgeoned after the Revolutionary War, and the Bethel AME congregation grew quickly. Richard Allen understood that the community needed to be educated, and he opened a day school in 1795. In 1804, he established the Society of Free People of Colour for Promoting the Instruction and School Education of Children of African Descent.

Two years later, Allen was seized as a fugitive slave. Under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, which allowed slave owners to travel to the North to reclaim enslaved people who had run away, any person of color was fair game. Allen was able to prove that he had purchased his own freedom many years before. But the fact that a man of Allen's stature