

GUIDE TO READING

- ▶ What were the characteristics of early free black communities?
- ▶ What role did mutual aid societies play in African-American society?
- ▶ What place did black churches have in African-American communities?

KEY TERMS

- ▶ mutual aid societies, p. 154
- ▶ Free African Society, p. 154
- ▶ freemasonry, p. 155
- ▶ Prince Hall, p. 155
- ▶ Prince Hall Masons, p. 155

▶ [Guide to Reading/Key Terms](#)

For answers, see the *Teacher's Resource Manual*.

▶ [Document](#)

5-2 [Preamble of the Free Africa Society, 1787](#)

▶ [Recommended Reading](#)

Gary B. Nash. *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720–1840*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988. This path-breaking study of a black community analyzes the origins of separate black institutions.

Section 3

The Emergence of Free Black Communities

Black Community Life

The competing forces of slavery and racism, on one hand, and freedom and opportunity, on the other, shaped the growth of African-American communities in the early American republic. A distinctive black culture had existed since the early colonial period. But enslavement had limited black community life. The advent of large free black populations in the North and upper South after the Revolution allowed African Americans to establish autonomous and dynamic communities. They appeared in Philadelphia, Baltimore, Newport (Rhode Island), Richmond, Norfolk, New York, and Boston. Although smaller and less autonomous, there were also free black communities in such deep South cities as Charleston, Savannah, and New Orleans. As free black people in these cities acquired a modicum of wealth and education, they established institutions that have shaped African-American life ever since.

A combination of factors encouraged African Americans to form these distinctive institutions. First, as they emerged from slavery, they realized they would have inferior status in white-dominated organizations or not be allowed to participate in them at all. Second, black people valued the African heritage they had preserved over generations in slavery. They wanted institutions that would perpetuate their heritage.

Black Societies

The earliest black community institutions were **mutual aid societies**. Patterned on similar white organizations, these societies were like modern insurance companies and benevolent organizations. They provided for their members' medical and burial expenses and helped support widows and children. African Americans in Newport, Rhode Island, organized the first such black mutual aid society in 1780. Seven years later, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones established the more famous **Free African Society** in Philadelphia.

Most early free black societies admitted only men, but similar organizations for women appeared during the 1790s. For example, in 1793 Philadelphia's Female Benevolent Society of St. Thomas took over the welfare functions of the city's Free African Society. Other black women's organizations in Philadelphia during the early republic included the

Benevolent Daughters—established in 1796 by Richard Allen’s wife Sarah—Daughters of Africa established in 1812, the American Female Bond Benevolent Society formed in 1817, and the Female Benezet begun in 1818.

These ostensibly secular societies maintained a decidedly Christian moral character. They insisted that their members meet standards of middle-class propriety. In effect, they became self-improvement as well as mutual aid societies. By the early 1800s, such societies also organized resistance to kidnappers who sought to recapture fugitive slaves or enslave free African Americans.

Because such societies provided real benefits and reflected black middle-class aspirations, they spread to every black urban community. More than one hundred such organizations existed in Philadelphia alone by 1830. These societies were more common in the North than in the South.

Black Freemasons

Of particular importance were the black freemasons because, unlike other free black organizations, the masons united black men from several northern cities. Combining rationalism with secrecy and obscure ritual, **freemasonry** was a major movement among European and American men during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Opportunities for male bonding, wearing fancy regalia, and achieving prestige in a supposedly ancient hierarchy attracted both black and white men. As historians James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton suggest, black people drew special satisfaction from the European-based order’s claims to have originated in ancient Egypt, which black people associated with their own African heritage.

The most famous black mason of his time was **Prince Hall**, the Revolutionary War veteran and abolitionist. During the 1770s he founded what became known as the African Grand Lodge of North America, or, more colloquially, the **Prince Hall Masons**. In several respects, Hall’s relationship to masonry epitomizes the free black predicament in America.

In 1775 the local white masonic lodge in Boston rejected Hall’s application for membership because of his black ancestry. Instead, Hall, who was a Patriot, got a limited license for what was called African Lodge No. 1 from a British lodge associated with the British Army that then occupied Boston. The irony of this situation was compounded when, after the War for Independence, American masonry refused to grant the African Lodge a full charter. Hall again had to turn to the British masons who approved his application in 1787. It was under this British charter that Hall in 1791 became provincial grand master of North America and began authorizing black lodges in other cities, notably Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Providence, Rhode Island.



A former slave, a skilled craftsman and entrepreneur, an abolitionist, and an advocate of black education, Prince Hall is best remembered as the founder of the African Lodge of North America, popularly known as the Prince Hall Masons.

The Origins of Independent Black Churches

Black churches emerged at least a decade later than black benevolent associations and quickly became the core of African-American communities. Not only did these churches attend to the spiritual needs of free black people and—in some southern cities—slaves, their pastors also became the primary African-American leaders. Black church buildings housed schools, social organizations, and antislavery meetings.

During the late eighteenth century, separate, but not independent, black churches appeared in the South. The biracial churches spawned by the Awakening had never embraced African Americans on an equal basis with white people. As time passed white people denied black people significant influence in church governance and subjected them to segregated seating, communion services, Sunday schools, and cemeteries. Separate black congregations, usually headed by black ministers but subordinate to white church hierarchies, were the result of these policies. The first such congregations appeared during the 1770s in South Carolina and Georgia.

The First Independent Black Church

In contrast to these subordinate churches, a truly independent black church emerged gradually in Philadelphia between the 1780s and the early 1800s. The movement for such a church began within the city's white-controlled St. George's Methodist Church. The movement's leaders were Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, who could rely on the Free African Society they had established to help them.

These men were former slaves who had purchased their freedom: Allen in 1780 and Jones in 1783. Allen, a fervent Methodist since the 1770s, had received permission from St. George's white leadership to preach to black people in the evenings in what was then a simple church building. By the mid-1780s, Jones had joined Allen's congregation, and soon they and other black members of St. George's chafed under policies they considered unchristian and insulting. But Allen's and Jones's faith that Methodist egalitarianism would prevail over racial discrimination undermined their efforts during the 1780s to create a separate black Methodist church.

The break finally came in 1792 when St. George's white leaders grievously insulted the church's black members. An attempt by white trustees to prevent Jones from praying in what the trustees considered the white section of the church led black members to walk out. "We all went out of the church in a body," recalled Allen, "and they were no more plagued with us in the church."

St. George's white leaders fought hard and long to control the expanding and economically valuable black congregation. Yet other white Philadelphians, led by abolitionist Benjamin Rush, applauded the concept of an independent "African church." Rush and other sympathetic

► Document

5-5 *Absalom Jones, Sermon on the Abolition of the International Slave Trade, 1808*

Congress outlawed the importation of slaves into the United States, effective January 1, 1808. To mark the occasion, Absalom Jones, co-founder and first pastor of Philadelphia's African Methodist Episcopal Church, preached a sermon in which he expressed his hope that each year this day would be remembered and "our children, to the remotest generations" would learn "the history of the sufferings of our brethren, and of their deliverance [from] the trade which dragged your fathers from their native country, and sold them as bond men in the United States of America."

► Retracing the Odyssey

Afro-American Historical and Cultural Museum, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Includes an exhibit on the rise of black churches, 1740–1977.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Richard Allen on the Break with St. George's Church

It took an emotionally wrenching experience to convince Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, and other black Methodists that they must break their association with St. George's Church. Allen published the following account in 1831 as part of his autobiography, The Life Experiences and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen. Although many years had passed since the incident, Allen's account retains a strong emotional immediacy.

A number of us usually attended St. George's church in Fourth street; and when the colored people began to get numerous in attending the church, they moved us from the seats we usually sat on, and placed us around the wall, and on Sabbath morning, we went to the church and the sexton stood at the door, and told us to go in the gallery. He told us to go, and we would see where to sit. We expected to take the seats over the ones we formerly occupied below, not knowing any better. We took those seats. Meeting had begun and they were nearly done singing, and just as we got to the seats, the elder said, "Let us pray." We had not been long upon our knees before I heard considerable scuffling and low talking. I raised my head up and saw one of the trustees, H M, having hold of the Rev. Absalom Jones, pulling him up off his knees, and saying, "You must get up—you must not kneel here." Mr. Jones replied, "Wait until prayer is over." Mr. H M said, "No, you must get up now, or I will call for aid and force you away." Mr. Jones said, "Wait until prayer is over, and I will get up and trouble you no more." With that he [H M] beckoned to one of the other trustees, Mr. L S to come to his assistance. He came, and went to William White to pull him up. By this time prayer was over, and we all went out of the church in a body, and they were no more plagued with us in the church. . . . We then hired a storeroom, and held worship by ourselves. Here we were pursued with threats of being disowned, and read publicly out of meeting if we did continue worship in the place we had hired; but we believed the Lord would be our friend. We got subscription papers out to raise money to build the house of the Lord.

What Do You Think?

- ▶ What appears to have sparked the confrontation Allen describes?
- ▶ How did white church leaders respond to the withdrawal of the church's black members?

▶ What Do You Think?

- Racial prejudice appears to have sparked the confrontation.
- White church leaders threatened to ban them publicly from the church if they continued to hold their own services.

▶ Document

7-2 *Richard Allen, "Address to the Free People of Colour of these United States," 1830*
American Methodist Episcopal Bishop Richard Allen and other free blacks issued a call for a Negro convention. In September 1830 free blacks throughout the country arrived in Philadelphia to discuss forming the American Society of Free Persons of Colour. For four days, more than three-dozen delegates representing eight states met at Bethel AME Church debated ways that would improve their lives. Although the Society denounced African colonization, the organization did have plans for "purchasing land, and locating a settlement in the Province of Upper Canada." In addition, Allen wanted to establish auxiliary societies across the nation that would aid in establishing a Canadian colony. Fifteen delegates from five states returned to Philadelphia's Wesleyan Church the following year to discuss obstacles that plagued black freedom. The meeting marked the beginning of Negro Conventions that would meet before and after the Civil War as black people sought ways of coping with white America.



Philadelphia's Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church was built in 1793 under the direction of Richard Allen, the first bishop of the AME denomination.

white people contributed to the new church's building fund. When construction began in 1793, Rush and at least one hundred other white people joined with African Americans at a banquet to celebrate the occasion.

However, the black congregation soon split. When the majority determined that the new church would be Episcopalian rather than Methodist, Allen and a few others refused to join. The result was *two* black churches in Philadelphia. St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, with Jones as priest, opened in July 1794 as an African-American congregation within the white-led national Episcopal Church. Then Allen's Mother Bethel congregation got under way as the first truly independent black church. The white leaders of St. George's tried to control Mother Bethel until 1816. That year Mother Bethel became the birthplace of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. Allen became the first bishop of this organization, which quickly spread to other cities in the North and the South.

New Black Churches Emerge

The more significant among the other AME congregations were Daniel Coker's in Baltimore, the AME Zion in New York, and those in Wilmington, Delaware; Salem, New Jersey; and Attleboro, Pennsylvania. Additional independent black churches formed at this time out of similar conflicts with white-led congregations. Among them were the African Baptist Church established in Boston in 1805 and led by Thomas Paul from 1806 to 1808, the Presbyterian Evangelical Society founded in 1811 by John Gloucester, the Abyssinian Baptist Church organized in New York City in 1808 by Paul, and the African Presbyterian Church, established in Philadelphia by Samuel E. Cornish in 1822.

The First Black Schools

Schools for African-American children, slave and free, date to the early 1700s. In both North and South, white clergy, including Cotton Mather, ran the schools. So did Quakers, early abolition societies, and missionaries acting for the Anglican Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. But the first schools established by African Americans to instruct African-American children arose after the Revolution. The new black mutual aid societies and churches created and sustained them.

Schools for black people organized or taught by white people continued to flourish. But in other instances, black people founded their own schools because local white authorities regularly refused either to admit black children to public schools or to maintain adequate separate schools for them. For example, in 1796, when he failed to convince Boston's city council to provide a school for black students, Prince Hall had the children taught in his own home and that of his son Primus. By

► What do You Think?

- Lack of food and water, diseases, shipwrecks due to storms, and piracy.
- The author is indifferent to the slaves' suffering.

1806 the school was meeting in the basement of the new African Meeting House, which housed Thomas Paul's African Baptist Church.

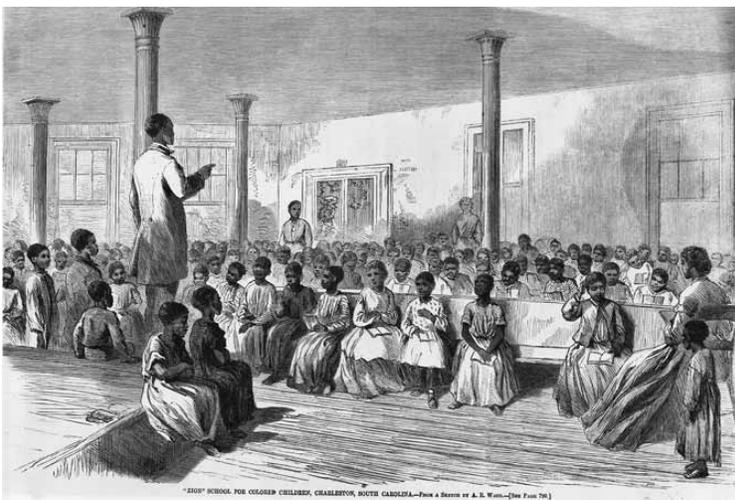
Hall was not the first to take such action. As early as 1790, Charleston's Brown Fellowship operated a school for its members' children. Free black people in Baltimore supported schools during the same decade, and during the early 1800s, similar schools opened in Washington, D.C. Such schools frequently employed white teachers. Not until Philadelphia's Mother Bethel Church established the Augustine School in 1818 did a school entirely administered and taught by African Americans for black children exist.

These schools faced great difficulties. Many black families could not afford the fees, but rather than turn children away, the schools strained their meager resources by taking charity cases. Some black parents also believed education was pointless when African Americans often could not get skilled jobs. White people feared competition from skilled black workers, believed black schools attracted undesirable populations, and, particularly in the South, feared that educated free African Americans would encourage slaves to revolt.

Threats of violence against black schools and efforts to suppress them were common. The case of Christopher McPherson exemplifies these dangers. McPherson, a free African American, established a night school for black men at Richmond, Virginia, in 1811 and hired a white teacher. All went well until McPherson advertised the school in a local newspaper. In response, white residents forced the teacher to leave the city, and local authorities had McPherson committed to the state lunatic asylum. Nevertheless, similar schools continued to operate in both the North and upper South, producing a growing class of literate African Americans.



Reading Check What were the characteristics of early free black communities?



► **Reading Check**

The advent of large free black populations in the North allowed for the creation of autonomous and dynamic black communities. Conscious of their disadvantages in a society dominated by whites and desirous of preserving their African heritage, free blacks developed their own community institutions.