Unassuming Heroism

Richard Allen’s Theology, Writing and Leadership during Philadelphia’s Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793

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Historical moments of catastrophe have a dual nature. Instances of great tragedy and transcendent obstacles afford the possibility that racial barriers might be jettisoned. Philadelphia’s Yellow Fever epidemic of 1793 was such a case. Highlighting the destruction and injustice of the event, Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, the religious and social leaders of black Philadelphia, invoked this proverb in a refutation of censures directed at the black community: “When war is over, and all things righted, God is forgotten, and the soldier slighted.” The anxieties, acts of heroism, written words, and dialogue generated by the event provide a case study in early Black historiography and social leadership. Although the service of blacks from Philadelphia and their efforts were largely marginalized, the epidemic prompted Richard Allen’s nascent free black population to develop an internal community dynamic, fostering the growth of black institutions. Alongside these institutional developments during this transitional period between slavery and freedom, Richard Allen’s shrewd, prophetic voice gave birth to a generation of activism and protest.

In August of 1793, Dr. Benjamin Rush, signer of the Declaration of Independence and one of America’s eminent physicians, wrestled with a mysterious illness plaguing several Philadelphians. Symptoms included fever, a morbid yellow coloring of the skin, and black granular vomit. In accordance with the prevailing miasmatic theory of disease transmission, Rush’s initial reaction was to blame the “noxious effluvia of rotting coffee,” and the “pestilential wharf” that seemed to connect the cases. His explanation started to deteriorate as people in other parts of the city succumbed to the same disease. With the memory of an epidemic thirty years prior on the minds of Philadelphians, few proclamations could have pained the city more: “the bilious remitting yellow fever” was making another appearance. In the immediate wake of his announcement, many dismissed Rush’s worries as alarmist, but the coming months would confirm his diagnosis. Within a few weeks, havoc wreaked the city and those with the means fled. Rush began to pour through all prior records of the fever. He found evidence that blacks were immune to the yellow fever from an account of a previous epidemic in South Carolina, and suggested to Richard Allen and Absalom Jones that they would offer their services in procuring nurses to the sick and burying the dead. “Heeding a Christian commitment to mutual aid,” and feeling a duty to the doctor who had long been their ally, they responded to Rush’s call. On September 9th, in a notice in the Dunlap’s American Daily Advertiser, Allen announced the availability of the services of black people, “under a greatful remembrance of the favours received from the white inhabitants.”

The language of disease immunities and susceptibilities has long been associated with the issue of race, and both used to justify slavery. The evolution of African slavery is inextricably linked to the evolution of race as a historical construct. Before the establishment of plantation race-based slavery, Africans, Atlantic creoles, European indentured servants, and Amerindians comprised an ethnically heterogeneous enslaved community in the Americas. Because of previously acquired disease immunities from the African tropics, “blacks were nominated for labor in the tropics quite literally by the process of elimination, and the notion that only Africans could perform labor in hot climates was born.” These arguments were recycled in the late antebellum period by Southerner slaveholders defending their belief in the innateness of their peculiar institution of slavery. On the other hand, disease susceptibilities led to a medici

1. Richard Allen, The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen, (Philadelphia: Martin & Boden, Printers, 1833), 42. (Transcribed by UNC Chapel Hill) and available on-line with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Included in this publication was the Narrative of the Yellow Fever epidemic co-written with Absalom Jones.


3. Ibid., 12.

4. It is possible that those people of color who were born in the Caribbean or West Africa might have increased resistance to Yellow Fever, especially if they were exposed to the disease previously. However, the final figures of those deceased are not particularly persuasive to this possibility in the case of Philadelphia in 1793. See page 38 of Allen’s Narrative.


cal lexicon that categorized “black diseases,” and overall, elevated “prejudice to the level of science, thereby giving it respectability.”

Richard Allen, a former slave, was an important clergyman and organizational leader for Philadelphia’s black population. Description of Allen’s youth is scant. He was born in Philadelphia in 1760, and as a consequence of several transactions was separated from his mother at a young age. 7 After securing manumission, he took his name and worked his way through a half-dozen states on the Methodist preaching circuit. 8 Returning to the city of his birth, Allen set out to fulfill his goal of building an Afro-Christian constituency and working to mitigate the system of bondage into which he was born. Though many whites distrusted those blacks who were taking care of the sick and the dead at the risk of their own lives, Rush, at least in his writing, says he was convinced of racial equality in both moral and intellectual spheres. 9 Rush wrote extensively on the merits and healing skills of his friend Dr. James Durham, a former slave, and the skill of his own servant, Marcus, as equaling “any apothecary in town.” 10 The intentions of Rush’s call for aid are not clear, but the response fitted into a longstanding pattern of black people being forced to bury the dead and other noxious forms of employment. The Union Army’s use of black soldiers for this purpose on the battlefields of the American Civil War is perhaps the most widely known example. For this reason, it is difficult to appraise Rush’s motives in asking Allen for aid. My concern is less with whether or not Rush’s act was “racist” and more with the response of the black community.

Portents of change reached Philadelphia in the late 18th century. In 1780, the bill for gradual abolition passed. By 1800 fewer than one-percent of the black population was enslaved. 11 The same year that the United States Constitution was written and adopted in Philadelphia, a group of former slaves, “considering their place in the new republic and their relationship to Africa,” organized into what was essentially an early conception of the Freedman’s Bureau in the form of the Free African Society, a social organization whose conception was partly orchestrated by Richard Allen. 12 In the late summer of 1793, black men and women entered a unique urban landscape. Not only were the majority of them free, black institutions were beginning to take foothold in the city. For a brief moment, white leadership presence was absent or suppressed by a force beyond its control. It was in this stage that black leaders tested their organizations. Common black men and women experienced a new environment, even while performing tasks to which they may become accustomed to. The temporal proximity of this event to the institution of slavery in Philadelphia, which was widespread just two decades earlier, is significant. 13 Though

the noxious work performed by the black community was work they may have performed as slaves, they now did it as freed men and women in the context of free black institutions and leadership. Freedom, however, was not the ultimate prize for all blacks. Blacks, free and enslaved, operated in a society that severely limited their social and physical mobility. Legislation and prevailing attitudes did not automatically change with the passage of the gradual abolition bill in 1780. For example, The Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 infringed freedom’s meaning for blacks—even the well-known Allen was accused of being a runaway in 1806. 14, 15

The Yellow fever wrought havoc in the summer and fall months of 1793—having killed thousands, displaced the federal government, and stalled public life. In the aftermath, Mathew Carey, an Irish-born businessman and economist, wrote A Short Account of the Malignant Fever, his reflections on the epidemic. Carey detailed modes of treatment, the flight of Philadelphia’s citizens, and the general state of despondency. He also made room to chide the black community. “They extorted two, three, four, and even five dollars a night for such attendance, as would have been well paid for, by a single dollar,” explained Carey in reference to poor blacks and whites, “some of them were even detected in plundering the houses of the sick.” 16 Carey refers here to both poor whites and blacks, but the implication is clear. He characterizes the response of black people as exploitative and greed-driven. Carey’s Short Account was wildly popular. The first edition sold out within days, and “in all, he published and sold over 10,000 copies.” 17 The idea of poor black people throwing aside prior injustices and responding to Dr. Rush’s call for help did not fit the narrative that Carey hoped to craft. Instead, he highlighted out a public meeting of the few city officials who did not flee. In Carey’s account, the meeting hosted by Mayor Matthew Clarkson was an iconic moment that created order from chaos, referring “back to previous constitutive moments in American civic mythology; among them the Mayflower Compact, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitutional Convention.” 18 It is hard to imagine Richard Allen, described as a “shrewd, quick, popular leader, positive and dogged, and yet far-seeing in his knowledge of Negro character,” acquiescing to such a description. 19 His response soon followed. 20

The Narrative of the Proceeding of Black People, During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, written by Richard Allen and Absalom Jones in response to Mathew Carey’s derogative comments provides us with

16. An Act respecting fugitives from justice, and persons escaping from the service of their masters (1793), as enacted by the Senate. Made available on-line at: (http://academic.udayton.edu/race/02rights/slave02.htm)
17. Gary Nash has cited and discussed the kidnapping confrontation of Richard Allen in 1806, although its legitimacy is somewhat dubious and is perhaps apocryphal. Nash, Forging Freedom, 247.
18. Carey, A Short Account.
20. Ibid., 51.
22. Absalom Jones and Richard Allen. A Narrative of the Proceeding of Black People, during the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, in the Year 1793: And a Refutation of some Censures, Thrown upon Them in Some Late Publications: 1794

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8. Ibid., 216.
10. Ibid., 45.
12. Ibid., 415.
an instance of a profound and novel articulation, demonstrating how black leaders defended a people whose stories deserved to be told. This was the first document of African-American authorship to be granted federal copyright. While distinctions of primacy are often dubious as they can be qualified in so many ways, this particular distinction speaks to two issues. First, it represented successful petitioning to, and co-opting of, governing bodies to project a call for justice. Second, it helped to push the role of the black leaders and abolitionists into the print media, where it would grow in popularity (with varying success) in the coming decades.

Allen and Jones continuously advertised their publication in the Philadelphia’s *General Advertiser.* Interestingly, advertisements for Mathew Carey’s various writings (including his popular account of the Yellow Fever epidemic) are scattered around Allen and Jones’ advertisements on a consistent basis, as if in hopes to minimize its impact. Although Allen and Jones relied heavily on interaction with their white neighbors, in this influential response, these two men claimed agency for black people in the healing of a great many Philadelphia citizens. “We have been the instruments, in the hands of God, for saving the lives of some hundreds of our suffering fellow mortals,” aware of the moral clarity of their purpose and sure of their efforts. True to his nature, Allen’s tone is courteous, yet unwavering. He saw an injustice and acted upon it with diligence, eloquence, and a sense of purity. In the *Narrative,* Allen accomplished a number of monumental feats. Aside from claiming the first black federal copyright, it addressed serious issues of black historiography and leadership. Its publication included notes on the institution of slavery. Noting in particular that “it is foolish that a superior good conduct is looked for, from our race, by those who stigmatise us as men, whose baseness is incurable, and may therefore be held in a state of servitude, yet you try what you can to prevent us from rising from the state of barbarism you represent us to be in.” This contradiction remains a central theme in the study of the dynamics of race and slavery and is representative of the frustration felt by black leadership in the instance of the 1793 epidemic.

Biographical difficulties arise in discerning any substantive character flaws; Allen might have had from his or his contemporaries’ writing. He was widely embraced and looked up to as a moral compass for the African-American community. If anything, he was too overbearing in his yearning for justice in the eyes of God, and disenchanted more than a few of his acquaintances with his “unyielding, stern, and overbearing” tendencies. One can imagine Allen confronted ill-doers in the street, giving them impromptu sermons awash in biblical allusion and fervor, and then sending them on their way.

Cognizant of the challenges faced by a black leader in a racist society, it is not altogether surprising that Allen stressed importance of black political and economic institutions. Gary Nash has argued that Allen’s years of traveling and preaching between 1780 and 1786 “[seem] to have increased enormously his confidence at maneuvering in a world dominated by whites.” The Yellow

fever epidemic of 1793 was at the apex of another journey; Allen had led the charge in the development of a black Philadelphia and black Atlantic world. W.E.B. DuBois addressed the actions of these visionary leaders in *The Philadelphia Negro,* specifically highlighting Allen and Jones:

“They two were real leaders and actually succeeded to a remarkable degree in organizing the freedmen for group action. Both had bought their own freedom and that of their families by hiring their time—Allen being a blacksmith by trade, and Jones also having a trade. When, in 1793, the terrible epidemic drove Philadelphians away so quickly that many did not remain to bury the dead, Jones and Allen quietly took the work in hand, spending, some of their own funds and doing so well that they were publicly commended by Mayor Clarkson in 1794.”

Though the epidemic was not the first instance of Allen and Jones engaging in humanitarian efforts—indeed they had just finished work on the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas which was dedicated just as the disease began to spread—the events of 1793 tested them in their roles and gave them an opportunity to articulate the definition and model of black leadership.

W.E.B. DuBois’ comments on the work of Allen and Jones suggested that there has been an alternative black historiography of the events of the 1793 epidemic, but it certainly finds its roots in the *Narrative.* However, “it is misleading to suggest simply that African American historians [were] faced with the task of correcting an inaccurate historical record—for there was no singular record, and the inaccuracies in the record were manifestations of a deeper problem.”

Allen, instead, was a player on an international stage that featured a discussion on the nature of leadership and the moral imperative of abolition. Furthermore, Allen inaugurated a tradition of African-American publication and historiographical agency. The successes and achievements of the Black clergy and leadership should not overshadow the legacy of those who they represented. Philadelphia was influenced by its Quaker roots, and its Abolition Society was a model for all other such societies in the country. In general, it was home to “great champions of the people of color,” including Reverend James Sproat and Dr. Benjamin Rush. These factors, among many others, made Philadelphia’s black population one of the most educated and literate in the United States. The usage here of the terms “black population” and “black community,” in reference to Allen’s constituency, simplified as a complex group of people and should be clarified. From slaves to intellectuals, Philadelphia’s blacks occupied a spectrum of societal niches. However, most freedmen had few economic opportunities and no social equality. Women were domestic workers and men took jobs as day laborers or tradesmen. The “black community” was comprised of a variety of African, Caribbean, and Amerindian traditions, each adding “their distinctive customs, their accents, and their perspectives to the diversity of the city’s black population.”

Richard Allen was careful about accepting personal praise, and consistent in giving it to the common black men and women whose

24. *General Advertiser,* February 8, 1794.
25. Allen, 29
26. Ibid., 45.
27. Ibid., 176.
32. Ibid., 127.
duties on the streets of Philadelphia were scarcely repaid. A large portion of the Narrative dealt with setting the record straight about the common black people's contributions and sacrifices in the face of calamity. The emerging black leadership gave a voice to those whose voice might have been lost to history. A poor black man named Sampson and Sara Bass, who went house to house assisting those smitten by the disease without accepting any payment, were two of the many whose stories were told in Allen and Jones' Narrative. Making use of irony, specifically in reference to Carey's allegations of looting the homes of the sick, the Narrative discusses an elderly black lady, Mrs. Malony, whose ring was stolen by the white woman she was tending to when Mrs. Malony was the first to die.

Beyond this, there is some evidence that blacks, who demonstrated leadership during the epidemic, were catapulted into a greater engagement in the black community after 1793. This is perhaps the most interesting unintended implication of the epidemic. Aside from the intellectual implications of Allen's response, blacks made real gains after the epidemic. In fact, thanks to his efforts during the epidemic, Absalom Jones was propelled into the top leadership position in the African Church of Philadelphia, which in July 1794 was formally connected to the Episcopal church. Gary Nash elaborates on the connection between Jones' rise to prominence and the epidemic:

"His ministrations to the sick and dying during the terrible days of the yellow fever epidemic had also brought him wide recognition in the black community. 'Administering to the poor sufferers, and soothing the last moments of many departing souls among his people', it was later written, 'he became greatly endeared to the colored race.' Also, blacks freed from jail, to help tend to the sick and dead, were able to gain new foothold in a free society and renew identity with the leadership which represented them. The suggestion is not that blacks were able to "prove" their worth to the white Philadelphia as a result of the epidemic, but rather, the event was important as an exercise in black leadership and in shaping the free black society.

Of course, these gains came at the expense of many lives, and in another unintended consequence, an immediate emancipation bill that was being considered in the Pennsylvania legislature was not passed as the city had to deal with the disease.

It is true that Richard Allen and Absalom Jones sought to change the white popular opinion of the actions of Philadelphia's black community in their Narrative. "The bad consequences many of our colour apprehend from a partial relation of our conduct are, that it will prejudice the minds of the people in general against us," the Narrative explains, "[but] we can with certainty assure the public that we have seen more humanity, more real sensibility from the poor coloured than from poor whites." However, Allen and Jones' response represented a vocalization from a dynamic black community that had already started to take form. The formative experience that the epidemic provided the Philadelphia black community to further its development of its leadership and organizational growth.

Not only did Allen anticipate Liberation Theology, but he developed media abolitionism long before it became mainstream in the early to mid 19th century. For the purposes of this discussion, the "liberationist" theology that Allen helped to forge will be defined as an African and African-American interpretation and application of old and new testament texts to the cause of black freedom in the face of American slavery. In particular, the story of the Exodus—Israelites being freed from servitude in Egypt by God—was recast in terms of black bondage and Jesus Christ was characterized as an active servant of the oppressed. While one can certainly look to figures such as Olaudah Equiano for early criticalism of the slave trade, Allen's moralist outrage and cognizance of the most volatile theological issues are noteworthy for his time. Equiano, referring to the kidnapping of his sister pleads, "O ye nominal Christians! Might not an African ask you, learned you this from your God? Who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you?" Allen, a Philadelphia, would have been familiar with this Quaker biblical interpretation. He took this interpretation among others, and put them into motion in terms of social vocation in Philadelphia, and the collective spiritual consciousness of Black America.

Blacks had ample reason to distrust the scriptures. Many were introduced to a strictly white interpretation of the Bible: blacks were cast as the descendants of Ham and therefore destined for servitude, and it was said by white preachers that those who wrote the scriptures were white. However, Allen showed surprisingly little anxiety in his methodology. He traced the roots of his faith to a personal transformation and independently developed a Church that was both traditional and revolutionary, working for a social goal. Like many blacks, Allen "made an eschatological decision for black liberation with the 'intuitive knowledge that Jesus Christ had not willed their eternal bondage but their freedom.'" Theologian James H. Cone accurately assessed the role of churches like Allen's AME Bethel Church as serving the "whole Black person in the whole Society," and outlined the great contributions of the 19th Century Black Church:

"'Led for the most part by illiterate preachers, many of whom were slaves or recently freed, impoverished and repressed by custom and law, this church converted thousands, stabilized the Black family, established insurance and burial societies, founded schools and colleges, commissioned missionaries to the far corners of the world when most Blacks had difficulty buying a ticket on a steamship, and at the

33. Allen, 36.
34. Ibid., 37.
36. Ibid., 127.
38. Allen, 34.
39. The process that Allen underwent is not unique. Allen Callahan suggests that "slaves and former slaves begin to develop a 'liberationist' reading from the moment they begin to work out their soul salvation under the slave regime." What is significant is the extent to which Allen institutionalized these sentiments giving them the respectability of a theology, church and social organization. Allen D. Callahan, The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).
40. Olaudah Equiano. The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African. (London: By the Author, 1789), 70. Made available at (http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhistory/rights/docs/equiano_writing.htm)
41. Ibid., 35.
42. Callahan, 53.
same time, petitioned governments for the abolition of slavery, fomented slave uprisings, organized the Underground Railroad, promoted the Civil War, developed programs of political education and action on behalf of citizenship rights and provided the social, cultural, economic, and political base of the entire African-American community in the United States."

Though Allen never received a formal education, he was literate. While Allen's church was founded in the 18th, not the 19th century, he introduced many of these impacts and served as a model. Perhaps figures like Absalom Jones and James Forten, who both attended Quaker schools, influenced his literary models. He was known to value his erudition and kept a personal library. This, however, in no way detracted from his reputation as a superb and powerful extemporaneous speaker. Such pure vision forced Allen to adhere to a system to personal faith and its community implications. Allen's work during the Yellow Fever epidemic and the work done by the black community mimic these lofty theological abstractions that went undefined until sometime after.

This is the story of a man and a group of oppressed, but hopeful people who engaged in a service that has been long since forgotten to history and the unintended consequences which followed. Beneath what appears to be another instance of blacks being cajoled and forced into an unsanitary labor, one finds an eloquent framing of black leadership, black theology, and black community dynamic. In a way that both parallels and conflicts with the same concepts as we understand them today, the complexities and outcomes of the Yellow Fever epidemic shed light on Allen's genius and places him among the august company of not only the great black leaders, but America's many founders. His narrative ought to be placed alongside the founding documents of protest including the Declaration of Independence, and Paine's Common Sense.

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