

📖 Topic Page: [Allen, Richard, 1760-1831](#)

Definition: **Allen, Richard** from *Chambers Biographical Dictionary*

1760-1831

US clergyman

Born to slave parents in Philadelphia, he bought his freedom, became an itinerant preacher, and at the age of 27 founded the Free African Society of Philadelphia, the first organization of free African-Americans. He was spiritual leader of the first African Methodist Episcopal Church, and served as its bishop from 1816 to 1831. Throughout his life in Philadelphia, Allen worked as a leader in many African-American institutions to improve the lives of newly freed slaves.



Image from: [A charismatic evangelist for abolition. Sojourner... in The Underground Railroad: An Encyclopedia of People, Places, and Operations](#)

Summary Article: **Allen, Richard (1760–1831)**

From *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*

A black clergyman and founding bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, born into slavery on February 14, 1760.

Richard was converted in 1777 through the preaching of a Methodist circuit rider, Freeborn Garrettson. Richard's brother was also converted and their changed lives eventually led to their master's conversion. Mr. Stokeley was impressed by Allen and allowed him to purchase his freedom.

At twenty-two he was licensed to preach. He worked at different jobs to support himself while preaching throughout the Middle Atlantic states. He traveled with Methodist preachers, including Francis Asbury, Richard Watcoat, and Thomas Coke. Allen was present at the historic Christmas Conference in Baltimore in 1784, when the Methodist Church was officially organized on American soil.

He returned to Philadelphia for a short preaching engagement in February 1786 and ended up staying permanently. Allen joined St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church, where he taught classes for adults and conducted prayer meetings. His ministry attracted numerous blacks to the church but increased racial tension and resulted in formal segregation of seating and Communion.

This racial discrimination caused Allen and the other blacks to leave in protest. Soon thereafter, Allen and Absalom Jones founded the Free African Society, America's first organization established by blacks for blacks. On July 29, 1794, Bethel, the first Methodist church for blacks, was dedicated by Bishop Francis Asbury. In 1799 Allen was ordained a Methodist minister and became the pastor.

On April 9, 1816, Allen invited leaders of several black churches to meet. They organized the African Methodist Episcopal Church and elected Allen as the church's founding bishop. By the time of his death, on March 26, 1831, the denomination had increased in size more than sevenfold.

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