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African American Churches
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Newly freed slaves in the United States spent a lot of time adjusting to life as a free person. They were looking to start a new life and claim the freedom that had long been denied them. This was no small feat, as they were lacking in stable homes, family, and education. Many of them desired to go back to their homeland of Africa, and start a new community where they could live in peace and forget about the atrocities they suffered in a land that they felt they would never be equal in. While they still had to fight against harsh racism, discrimination and segregation, many prominent members of the Presbyterian church felt that they were owed the opportunity to receive education, and to have a place to worship freely. In this respect, many freed slaves who migrated to Philadelphia used religion as a bridge to their own personal freedom and salvation.

In 1809, a letter was sent from the Evangelical Society of Philadelphia, signed by then President Archibald Alexander. In this letter, the society calls to attention the abuse suffered by the colored people living in Philadelphia. The letter is intended for the Pious (devoutly religious) and the Benevolent (well meaning and kind). It points to defective education, and states that African people arrived on American soil with behaviors that did not mesh with with civil society. This is because they emerged from slavery with no morality and no education. This letter points to the faults of the men who enslaved these people and denied them every right that was theirs, including religious rights. It expresses the idea that it is the duty of those who have heart and compassion, to

provide these people with the things they justly deserve. In the following excerpt, these claims are mentioned and justified:

> "Shall we then, who profess a religion, whose very essence is benevolence, be indifferent to the eternal salvation of our fellow men? Shall we suffer them to perish through lack of knowledge, when it is so much in our power to supply them with the means of instruction? And that too when we have been accessory, as a people, in bringing them to their wretched situation."[1]

In this excerpt, we see the expression of remorse. The Evangelical Society proclaims well that it is unbecoming of a devout Christian to allow their fellow man to suffer any further, and that it is their moral obligation to give them the same opportunity for education and worship as they themselves have been allotted. It states that previously enslaved African Americans deserve a place to worship where they can again find God after everything had been stripped away from them, and that it is the duty of the Pious and Benevolent to provide them with such.

It was very difficult for African Americans to form their own Institutions in Philadelphia, since a lot of them were still fighting for basic rights. "Using petitions, sermons, and letters to the public, lack leaders fought against the kidnapping of free blacks and the attempts of white legislators to pass restrictive and discriminatory laws."[2] Most black Americans just struggled to deal with the building racism in their community. Building a black church became not only for the purpose of religious worship, but as Gary B. Nash would point out, it was much more than that. "The black church became the center of all these activities -- not only religious but also educational, associational,

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[1] Green, Wilson, Janeway, Potts, To The Pious And Benevolent, 1809

[2] Gary B. Nash, Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Churches,(London, England, Harvard University Press, 1988), 190

and political"[3] Religion was a way of life for many, and held up many important aspects of their lives. The African Protestant Episcopal Church of St. Thomas, founded by Absalom Jones in 1794, drew worshippers in for years. It was a "center of black activism" [4] even through fighting discrimination and opposition from the Episcopal Convention.

The same year this church was being manifested and growing, Richard Allen was building his own church just a few blocks away. His Methodist church provided something black Philadelphians were attracted to. His church, Bethel, was successful because of the "warmth, simplicity, and evangelical fervor of methodism, which resonated with a special vibrancy among the manumitted and fugitive southern slaves reaching Philadelphia in this era.[5] This black methodist church was unique in its sense of worship, and known for being uproarious and very expressive. This upset and confused the white methodists who were used to worshipping in silence. [6] This church rose to be the largest black church in Philadelphia, and was a host to many white methodist ministers and parishioners, as well as becoming a church which allowed black parishioners also. This church remained a pillar of Philadelphia's black community in healing a diverse group of oppressed people who were just looking for something to believe in.

In 1808, Presbyterian preacher Gideon Blackburn arrived in Philadelphia with his slave, John Gloucester. Blackburn, while in Philadelphia, wanted to spread word about

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[3] Gary B. Nash, Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Churches 1720-1840 ,(London, England, Harvard University Press, 1988), 191
[4] Ibid, 192
[5] Ibid, 193
[6] Ibid, 194

his slave, and get him recognition for his ability to convey the word of God. Gloucester had given sermons in Tennessee where he was from, and managed to move all people, black or white and "convince them of their sins".[7] A couple years would pass before he would be freed, licensed, and able to partition for the money needed to build a place of worship. [8] He started off in a house in the Cedar Ward district of Philadelphia, with just a handful of men and women. However, as word spread of his abilities, he soon packed the house and moved to an empty lot.[9] People often spoke of the moving nature of his voice, the soothing tone of his songs, and the conviction with which he spoke his words. This gathered crowds and flocks of people who were eager to hear what he had to say. By 1811, The first African Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia was founded with Gloucester at the forefront. By 1813 he had several hundred members, white and black, and even held some prominent members of society.[10] He drew in crowds from near and far, preaching the gospel, and giving hope to a society held down by the heavy hammer of oppression and fueling racism of the era. Sadly enough, John Gloucester tried for many years to buy his own family out of slavery, and even with donations from his community, his family was not released from bondage until 1819, just three years before he would pass away. [11] But John's legacy would live on for centuries and he would be remembered as pious and benevolent himself.

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[7] Gary B. Nash, Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Churches 1720-1840 ,(London, England, Harvard University Press, 1988), 199
[8] Ibid, 199
[9] Ibid, 199
[10] Ibid, 200
[11] Ibid, 201

William T. Catto would also recall the life of John Gloucester, and all that he provided for the minority Philadelphians who had just been freed and had no idea of which direction to go in. He speaks in his book about how John came in to Philadelphia with his owner Gideon Blackburn with a recommendation from the "Presbytery of Union Synod of Tennessee, as a candidate for licensure to labor as a missionary among colored people."[12] He had already been recognized in Tennessee, and he was looked upon to be a voice of a church in Philadelphia. He was freed from Mr. Blackburn, and as stated before, it didn't take long before he was decided to tend to ministry. John Gloucester was a revolutionary missionary for the Gospel, who "had to labor almost alone in this arduous work".[13] What he provided to the oppressed people were visions of hope, equality, peace, and an end to the violence and destruction that had preceded them and that they had witnessed themselves.

John Gloucester, Richard Allen, Absalom Jones and many others paved the way for black parishioners, leaders, ministers, preachers, and were perceived by the oppressed as a beacon of light to shine during dark days. The insistence of these men, along with many white Philadelphians at the time to provide newly freed slaves with education, a moral compass, and a place to worship where they could feel at home and unafraid. These men fought vigilantly for these things, and changed history that is still being discussed centuries later. Many freed slaves in Philadelphia turned to religion as a way to cope with their day to day lives and find meaning in their struggle, and the men

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[12] William T. Catto, A Semi-Centenary Discourse, (Philadelphia, J.M Wilson, 1857), 25
[13] Ibid, 27

who built the churches for them to worship in, went through hell and high water just for them to be able to do so, and provided a cornerstone in many denominations for African American churches to thrive and provide the people with something that was stolen from them many years ago.

1. Green, Wilson, Janeway, Potts. To the Pious and Benevolent. Document. The Evangelical Society of Philadelphia. 1809
2. Nash, Gary B.. Forging America: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840. London, England. Harvard University Press, 1988.
3. Catto, William T.. A Semi-Centenary Discourse. Philadelphia. J.M Wilson, 1857.