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Article

## Two Murder Confessions and the Struggle for Black Authority in Early 19th Century Philadelphia

Garrett Gaither

AS RICHARD ALLEN HEADED TO THE PRISON TO HELP FACILITATE the confessions of a murder that shook the city of Philadelphia, he let his mind wander. It felt just like yesterday that he arrived in the city and started preaching and helping his Black brothers and sisters. They had made so much progress over his few decades in Philadelphia: an independent church they were still fighting to hold onto, the new law against the Atlantic slave trade, and a large Black community that was active in his church.<sup>1</sup> Despite all of this success, racial tensions were rising in the city.<sup>2</sup> This recent murder was a shock to the community and was not going to help Allen win the conflict over his ability to lead the Black church.<sup>3</sup> Allen knew this as he headed to the jail. The White Methodist leaders did not want his church to gain its independence and this murder created a serious question that must have been on their minds and Allen's; was Richard Allen able and qualified to lead this Black congregation

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1. Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1988), 189–90.

2. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 2.

3. *Joyce John; Mathias, Peter. Fate of Murderers: Faithful Narrative of the Murder of Mrs. Sarah Cross, with the Trial, Sentence & Confession of John Joyce & Peter Mathias, Who Were Executed Near Philadelphia on Monday 14, March 1808.* (Philadelphia, Pa., 1808), 5, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.trials/abnt0001&i=1>.

and community in a racially divided city? More importantly, were Black people capable of holding religious services on their own?

Allen knew that in order to mitigate and help with the racial tension and to address the other questions pressing him, he had to be involved in recording these murder confessions, and more importantly, publishing them.<sup>4</sup> Publishing books in early 19th century America was not common or cheap.<sup>5</sup> In the early 1800s newspapers were expensive to print and had small areas of circulation.<sup>6</sup> However, newspapers and books were the only way to transmit information without it being refashioned. It was also a main way to refute false rumors traveling around the city, from words or other publications. Richard Allen knew that publishing would help to “inform the public that a FALSE confession” was offered to them.<sup>7</sup> A publication could help the Black community stay above suspicion or slander that would come against them from false confessions in this racial murder case. Furthermore, publishing the confessions that he personally facilitated offered Allen a chance to demonstrate his authority as a Black minister and his authority over Bethel church.<sup>8</sup> In a wider context Allen’s life and his act of publishing the confessions would also show that Black people in Philadelphia were capable of holding religious services under their own leadership as any of the White people were and thus offer a look at racial dynamics in American society at this time.

## Richard Allen and the Free African Society

Richard Allen was born on February 14th, 1760, in Philadelphia to slaveholder, Benjamin Chew. Allen and his family were sold to another owner in Delaware where Allen found the Methodist religion and was converted. After his conversion, neighbors warned his owner that allowing Allen to attend religious

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4. Richard S. Newman, *Freedom’s Prophet* (New York University Press, New York, 2008), 151–52, ProQuest Ebrary.

5. Saylor Academy, *Understanding Media and Culture: An Introduction to Mass Communication* (Saylor Academy, 2012), Section 3.2 and 4.1. [https://saylordotorg.github.io/text\\_understanding-media-and-culture-an-introduction-to-mass-communication/so6-00-books.html](https://saylordotorg.github.io/text_understanding-media-and-culture-an-introduction-to-mass-communication/so6-00-books.html)

6. Saylor Academy, *Understanding Media and Culture*, Section 4.1; “American Newspapers, 1800–1860: An Introduction” Illinois Library, accessed April 12, 2021, <https://www.library.illinois.edu/hpnl/tutorials/antebellum-newspapers-introduction/>

7. “Just Published,” *Political and Commercial Register*, March 31, 1808, GenealogyBank

8. Newman, *Freedom’s Prophet*, 151–52.

meetings would “ruin him.” To fight this notion Allen and his brother counseled that they would “attend more faithfully to our master’s business, so that it should not be said that religion made us worse servants.”<sup>9</sup> Not only did this method work but Allen’s master began to brag that religion made his slaves better. With Allen’s invitation his master heard the message from the methodist preachers and a few months later allowed Allen and his brother to buy their freedom for 60£ in 1780.<sup>10</sup> Allen left and worked the following years to earn money for his freedom while also endeavoring to preach the gospel. In 1784 he made his way to Pennsylvania.<sup>11</sup> Allen would travel throughout the north preaching the next two years, and was received warmly by a White community.<sup>12</sup> After his religious travels in the north of Pennsylvania, Allen made his way to Philadelphia in 1786 because the Methodist elder in charge repeatedly asked for him.<sup>13</sup>

When he arrived in Philadelphia, Allen was assigned to preach to the Black community in the early morning at St. George Methodist church.<sup>14</sup> In Allen’s personal autobiography he describes how preaching at 5 am in the White church was difficult for him but he soon saw a “large field open in seeking and instructing my African brethren, who had been a long forgotten people and few of them attended public worship.”<sup>15</sup> With his increasing success at St George, he soon realized the benefits that could come from uniting his Black brothers and sisters together in their own place of worship. When Allen proposed this plan to the “most respectable people of color in this city” he was met with resistance. Only three agreed to join him in this endeavor, one was Absalom Jones. He also faced opposition from the White clergy as they used “very degrading and insulting language” to try and stop them from pursuing the development of a Black church.<sup>16</sup> Likely due to the opposition from the White clergy Allen and the other prominent Black members that joined with him took a slightly different course. In 1787 they started the Free African Society.<sup>17</sup> Although this

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9. Richard Allen, *The Life Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen* (Abingdon Press, New York, 1960), 15–16.

10. Allen, *The Life Experience*, 16–17; Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 95–96.

11. Allen, *The Life Experience*, 18–20.

12. Allen, *The Life Experience*, 20–21.

13. Allen, *The Life Experience*, 21–23.

14. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 96.

15. Allen, *The Life Experience*, 24.

16. Allen, *The Life Experience*, 24.

17. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 98.

society was not religious it was a demonstration that Allen and other Black leaders could work and serve the Black community.

The Free African Society, or FAS, was a secular society established for the benefit of the Black community. Allen and Jones adapted to the religious opposition they faced and formed a society that could help their race progress in this new era after the American Revolution.<sup>18</sup> Julie Winch describes that the FAS was important because of its significance “as the first independent black organization in the city and as the forerunner of the black churches.”<sup>19</sup> It also was an elite group. The leaders of the FAS, like Richard Allen, were financially well off. The FAS required a membership fee and monthly deposits that would help those in need, but without access to that money many Black people could not join the FAS. Nonetheless, this society created and developed the “leadership group composed of individuals who considered themselves best able to speak for the rest of the community.”<sup>20</sup>

As the FAS developed, Allen continued to preach at St George’s church and saw the attendance of the Black community increase. Although he had previously been shot down in his attempt to arouse support for a Black church, Allen kept this idea in sight.<sup>21</sup> His continued devotion to the idea of a Black methodist church and holding methodist meetings through the FAS got him ejected from the society in 1789 because it was solely secular.<sup>22</sup> Although he was separated from the FAS it did not lessen his standing in the community and he continued to grow the hope of a Black Methodist church.<sup>23</sup> Allen describes how the “Lord blessed our endeavors” as he established prayer meetings and “meetings of exhortation” that were for the Black community. Although he was experiencing success preaching at St. George, the opposition ensued. The White elder in charge at St George’s opposed Allen’s preaching and stopped the extra meetings.<sup>24</sup> Newman describes that Allen was “forbidden to exhort in an ecstatic manner and instructed to give services in a sober, deferential, quiet way.”<sup>25</sup> Allen must have struggled knowing that the White leadership opposed

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18. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, eds. Elijah Anderson and Isabel Eaton (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1996), 19–20.

19. Julie Winch, *Philadelphia’s Black Elite* (Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1988), 5.

20. Winch, *Philadelphia’s Black Elite*, 6.

21. Newman, *Freedom’s Prophet*, 59–61.

22. Newman, *Freedom’s Prophet*, 62.

23. Winch, *Philadelphia’s Black Elite*, 6; Newman, *Freedom’s Prophet*, 62.

24. Allen, *The Life Experience*, 25.

25. Newman, *Freedom’s Prophet*, 59–60.

a separate Black church and also opposed his method of preaching.<sup>26</sup> It was at this time he surely realized that in order to develop the Black church and community he envisioned, he needed to go against the cultural norms and develop his authority as a Black religious leader.

## The Black Church, The Yellow Fever Epidemic, and the Power of Publishing

A Black church could give a sense of identity to the ever increasing Black community in Philadelphia. Many of the Black people in Philadelphia were individuals escaping from slavery and finding solace in a city that had their freedom as a right.<sup>27</sup> But without a church the members of the Black community in Philadelphia, as Allen described when he found them, were “a long forgotten people.”<sup>28</sup> “Black religion, writes Gayraud S. Wilmore, was ‘never so much a matter of social custom and convention as it has been for White people. It was a necessity.’” In the early 1790s Black people argued and fought for a Black church while the White church community life was “diminishing.”<sup>29</sup> The struggle to establish the Black church in the 1790s was more than just to have religious services, it was to strengthen, unite, and give Black people authority in the community and validity as people – to give them a voice in society that expected so much of them and gave them so little.<sup>30</sup> In 1791, two years after Allen was ejected from the FAS, he was readmitted and helped formulate the plans to finally create a separate Black church.<sup>31</sup> Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, with the help of Benjamin Rush, worked to raise money for the construction of a Black church. Even though up to this point Allen had faced increased discrimination from the White leaders at St. George’s church with them opposing a separate Black church and restricting Allen’s preaching, there was one event in 1792 that spurred the development of the Black church arguably more than anything else.<sup>32</sup>

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26. George, *Segregated Sabbaths*, 62–63.

27. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 65, 135.

28. Allen, *The Life Experience*, 24.

29. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 113–14.

30. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 113–14.

31. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 113.

32. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 113, 118.

Due to Allen's efforts in the Black community the attendance at St. George's started to increase. The response from the church community was to have the Black attendees stand in the back until they could build onto the church. To add more space the church constructed a gallery.<sup>33</sup> They Black members donated money, effort, and time to help build the gallery to accommodate for the increased attendance.<sup>34</sup> After the construction Allen recounted that when he and the Black members arrived one Sunday the usher at the door "told us to go [to the gallery], and we would see where to sit." Once they took the seats in the gallery, the meeting began and they knelt in prayer with the congregation. Allen recorded, "We had not been long upon our knees before I heard a considerable scuffling and low talking. I raised my head and saw one of the trustees . . . having hold of Rev. Absalom Jones, pulling him up off his knees, and saying, 'you must get up—you must not kneel here.'" Jones asked to wait till prayer was over but the White trustee continued to attempt to pull him off his knees while he motioned for another to come help forcefully remove Jones. After the prayer had ended Allen and the Black members, a large part of St. George's attendance, left the meeting. Allen wrote, "we all went out of the church in a body, and they were no more plagued with us in the church."<sup>35</sup> This incident only strengthened Allen's resolve to establish an autonomous Black church with their own authority.<sup>36</sup> Allen, Jones, and other Black people at St. George's that day had been attending there for years. Fueled by the opposition and this most recent event they continued raising money for the church that they now desperately needed.

After Allen and the others left St. George's, they found a room where they could hold services until they could build their own church. Even as they tried to worship on their own they were threatened to be "disowned, and read publicly out of meeting" if they kept worshiping on their own. Allen and the others were even harassed by the White elder in charge of the area as they worked to raise money for their own church. John McClaskey threatened to remove their names from the Methodist church if Allen and others did not stop trying to raise money.<sup>37</sup> Allen asked McClaskey if they had violated any of the Methodist rules. They had not but that did not matter. McClaskey replied, "I have the charge given to me by the Conference, and unless you submit I will read you publicly out of the meeting." They responded that since they had

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33. Allen, *The Life Experience*, 25.

34. Allen, *The Life Experience*, 26.

35. Winch, *Philadelphia's Black Elite*, 6; Allen, *The Life Experience*, 25.

36. Allen, *The Life Experience*, 26.

37. Allen, *The Life Experience*, 26.

broken no rules, if he read them out they would seek redress because they had been “dragged off our knees in St. George’s church, and treated worse than heathens” and had done nothing wrong.<sup>38</sup> While the persecution from Elder McClaskey did not stop, Allen, Jones, and their brethren did not stop collecting money either.

By 1793 they had bought a vacant lot from the money they collected and Allen “put the first spade in the ground to dig a cellar” for the first Black Church in the United States.<sup>39</sup> Allen recounts that he and Jones wanted to have it connected with the Methodist church but with all the ensuing opposition from the Methodist church they held a vote with the group that had been with them since they left St. George’s, to decide what denomination to follow. The majority voted for the Church of England.<sup>40</sup> After it was organized they asked Allen to be their minister but he declined because he felt indebted to the Methodist religion and believed it was the best denomination for the Black community.<sup>41</sup> The group turned to Jones who decided to lead them.<sup>42</sup> Despite Allen’s devotion to the Methodist church, the leadership did not see Allen as someone who could lead a separate racial church. There may have been several reasons, but Allen was left still trying to establish his authority as a Black preacher in an interracial community.

Around the same time, Philadelphia faced a major yellow fever epidemic which would provide an opportunity for Allen to establish his authority as a community leader and use a publication to his advantage in this pursuit. In the fall of 1793, Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, and many other Black people were called upon to help the sick because of the incorrect understanding from Benjamin Rush that this fever “passes by persons of color.”<sup>43</sup> On September 6, after having discussed the request for aid with the FAS, Allen and Jones told the mayor they could help and he “immediately placed notices in the newspapers notifying citizens that they could apply to Jones and Allen for aid.”<sup>44</sup> As White physicians started to succumb to the fever Allen and the Black community stepped up to help even more. They administered medicine, bled over

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38. Allen, *The Life Experience*, 27.

39. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 113; Allen, *The Life Experience*, 28.

40. Allen, *The Life Experience*, 29.

41. Allen, *The Life Experience*, 29.

42. Carol V. R. George, *Segregated Sabbaths; Richard Allen and the Emergence of Independent Black Churches 1760–1840* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1973) 58.

43. Allen, *The Life Experience*, 48; Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 122.

44. Allen, *The Life Experience*, 48–51; Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 123.



800 people, and buried dead bodies. They even spent their own money to cover those who could not pay for the medical service or burials. Allen and Jones labored for 70 days and paid some 5 hired men at various times ending in over 177 pounds of debt.<sup>45</sup> Almost 3 times the cost Allen had paid for his freedom.

This information of their service to the community was published in a pamphlet titled, *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Colored People During the Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, in the Year 1793; and a Refutation of Some Censures Thrown upon Them in Some Publications*.<sup>46</sup> This narrative was published by Jones and Allen in response to a slanderous publication by Mathew Carey that described how the Black nurses took advantage of the situation and charged exorbitant fees.<sup>47</sup> In this publication Allen and Jones strongly defend the work that the Black community did during this sickness. They acknowledge that there were some Black people who pilfered but argue that White people who did the same were seen as “privateers.” They write, “We wish not to offend; but when an unprovoked attempt is made to make us blacker than we are, it becomes less necessary to be over-cautious on that account; therefore we shall take the liberty to tell of the conduct of some of the whites.”<sup>48</sup> A majority of the publication describes how there were many White people who stole, charged exorbitant fees, and dealt unjustly with the sick they were helping. They also describe how Carey, the one who wrote the slanderous account they were responding to with this publication, fled from the city during the crisis.<sup>49</sup> Allen and Jones understood that publishing this pamphlet could not only help clear up any slanderous and dangerous reports that lied of their honest involvement in the epidemic, but that it could also demonstrate and solidify their authority in the community as Black leaders. Publishing written material was a valid way to send a strong message to and throughout the community. This pamphlet helped move Allen closer to establishing his authority in the community.

Despite the negative slander towards them and the Black community, the progress of the Black church pressed on. By 1794 Allen had an old blacksmith shop brought to “Sixth near Lombard street” and made into a place of worship. This was a lot he had previously purchased and it was only a few blocks from the construction of St. Thomas’s, the church that had previously asked

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45. Allen, *The Life Experience*, 51.

46. Allen, *The Life Experience*, 48

47. Allen, *The Life Experience*, 52; Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 124.

48. Allen, *The Life Experience*, 53.

49. Allen, *The Life Experience*, 53.

Allen to lead them.<sup>50</sup> In June of 1974, with the help of Bishop Asbury, the old blacksmith shop that Allen had turned into a place of worship was opened for services.<sup>51</sup> Unlike Absalom Jones at St. Thomas's, Allen fought for complete independence. While Jones had accepted to be overseen and directed by the White Episcopal church, Allen refused such an idea. His reluctance to succumb to the racial control caused troubles to follow.<sup>52</sup>

Quickly after the opening of Bethel, Allen describes how their troubles over authority began again. Mr. Cooper, a White Elder from the Methodist church, came and told them that they needed to “make over the [Bethel] church to the Conference” and “that we could not be Methodist unless we did.” After all the hard work to create an autonomous Black church Allen must have cringed at the idea of his church under control of the White clergy. The Methodist leadership did not acknowledge Allen as an admissible person to lead the new Black church. Allen rejected the idea to be controlled by the White Methodist leadership and Mr. Cooper offered them the option to be incorporated instead. With incorporation Cooper mentioned that it would benefit Bethel because they could get any money that was left for them. He also offered to draw up the incorporation for them to save money. Allen and the church members “cheerfully” consented to this proposal. It was not until 10 years later that Allen and those in his church realized that Cooper had, through the incorporation, given Bethel over to the White Methodist Conference. However, unaware of this deception, Allen was running what he thought was an autonomous church.<sup>53</sup>

## Philadelphia and Race Relations, 1793–1806

The conflict that Richard Allen was facing with the White Methodist church largely stemmed from race. Although Philadelphia was a place that had been better to Black people than many other areas after the American Revolution, it became increasingly hostile in the decades after.<sup>54</sup> Despite the racial conflicts, from 1790 to 1800 the Black population doubled in Philadelphia while the White population barely increased.<sup>55</sup> Black people were coming from all over

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50. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 130.

51. Allen, *The Life Experience*, 30–31.

52. George, *Segregated Sabbaths*, 58–63.

53. Allen, *The Life Experience*, 30–32; George, *Segregated Sabbaths*, 66.

54. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 2.

55. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 137.

because it was a city that provided a refuge to escaped enslaved persons and hope for those freed from slavery. The population also grew because of a major revolution in Santo Domingo. In 1793, 5,000 White people and 2,000 enslaved Black people came from the French island. Coming from a rebellious place these people added more political feeling to Black society in Philadelphia.<sup>56</sup> Freed from slavery many Black people also came to Philadelphia from Delaware and other nearby states further increasing the population and concentration of Black people so much so that by 1800 almost half of the Pennsylvania's Black population lived in Philadelphia.<sup>57</sup>

Even though the Black community increasingly grew in population they faced very different expectations than the White community. Instead of being seen as free, Nash describes how in 1798 the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery recorded that it was the responsibility of the free Black people in Philadelphia to demonstrate that Black people were qualified to enjoy freedom and by living rightly would "contribute your part towards the liberation of such your fellow men as yet remain in the shackles of slavery." Black people faced attacks from White people that argued they were not fit for freedom and this argument fell on the Black community in Philadelphia to disprove.<sup>58</sup> This was clearly already visible after the 1793 Yellow Fever epidemic when Allen and Jones had to defend themselves and their Black brethren.

While racial relationships in the 1790s were not great, in the first decade of the 19th century things took a turn for the worse. On July 4th, 1804, "several hundred young blacks" got in military formations and marched through the city. They assembled in Southwark, a predominantly Black neighborhood near Bethel church, and marched from there.<sup>59</sup> They harassed White people that got in their way and "at least once entered the house of a hostile White person and pummeled him and his friends." They gathered again the following night and would call out to white community saying they would show them St. Domingo, referencing the slave rebellions taking place there.<sup>60</sup> The following year race relations further deteriorated. In Philadelphia July 4th was usually celebrated by the gathering of the city residents of both races to commemorate the signing

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56. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 140–41.

57. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 137–38.

58. "Address of the American Convention of Antislavery Societies to the Free Africans and Descendants of Africans in the United States," 1789, PPAS, reel 25, quoted in Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1988), 5.

59. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 166–69.

60. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 176.

of the Declaration of Independence. However, the year following the 1804 incident when the black residents headed to the square to celebrate this event in American history they were met with hostility. This time on July 4th, 1805, the White community turned on the Black people who were there to celebrate and drove them away.<sup>61</sup>

The hostilities against the Black community continued. Thomas Branagan, a converted Methodist and former slave driver had published an antislavery pamphlet in 1804, to help the abolitionist cause. He was involved with Richard Allen and Absalon Jones who had helped him publish an epic poem the following year. However, later in 1805 he stirred the racial tension by publishing a lengthy 80-plus page article that described how the north was being overrun by the Black race and “in the course of a few years . . . half the inhabitants of the city will be people of Colour.”<sup>62</sup> His reasoning for this statement was because the races were intermingling and Black people were thirsty for White women.<sup>63</sup> While tensions were increasing the legislature of Philadelphia tried to pass discriminatory laws against Black people in 1806 but failed to do so largely because of the Black communities intervention.<sup>64</sup> With this increase of racial tension taking place, John Joyce and Peter Matthias entered Philadelphia and Allen again took up the fight for Bethel church.

## John Joyce, Peter Matthias, and Richard Allen

In 1806 John Joyce, a self freed Black man, arrived in Philadelphia.<sup>65</sup> Joyce had traveled around the northern United States, living in multiple locations and serving various recognized military leaders in the navy. Leaving his wife and kids behind, Joyce arrived in Philadelphia on a horse he had stolen from a man in Washington. For the next year in Philadelphia, Joyce worked as a stable hand, servant, and coachman. He was fired from his job as a coach man because he stole a watch. He then got a job as a waiter. Joyce was involved in the late night

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61. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 177.

62. Branagan, *Serious Remonstrances* (Philadelphia, 1805), 65–73, 80, quoted in Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 178–79.

63. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 178–79.

64. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 180–81.

65. Linda Myrsiades, “Law, Culture, and Race: The 1808 Murder Trial of John Joyce and Peter Matthias,” *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 86, no. 2 (2019): 159. [muse.jhu.edu/article/721313](https://muse.jhu.edu/article/721313).

dances that would happen within the Black community in Philadelphia. It is most likely through these gatherings that he met Peter Matthias.<sup>66</sup>

Peter Matthias and John Joyce became acquainted in September of 1807. Matthias had come to Philadelphia before Joyce, around the beginning of 1807. However, he had been to the city before because of trips for former work. After he arrived in Philadelphia to stay, Matthias spent his time picking oakum and playing the violin at nightly dances.<sup>67</sup> Picking oakum was a poor job that involved pulling apart old ropes to turn the fibers into calking for ship building. It was extremely difficult work often leaving sore covered fingers and was a common work in prison as a punishment.<sup>68</sup> Both Matthias and Joyce were experiencing work related issues which were increasing in the early 19th century.

Apart from the increase in racial tension, Black residents in Philadelphia at the start of the 19th century faced a decrease in wages and job opportunities. Cost of living also rose steadily after 1790s. Maritime labor, which was a staple in Black employment, began to decline after Jefferson's embargo of 1807 took effect. Along with the increase in living costs, Black unemployment began to rise in the first decade of the 19th century.<sup>69</sup> In 1803 and 1805 the percentage of mariners that were Black was above 20%. This was a staple work for the Black community and arguably caused a major shift when the work decreased.<sup>70</sup> Joyce was gainfully employed on multiple ships during the 1790s but likely could not find more work through maritime labor and headed to Philadelphia.<sup>71</sup> It is important to remember what Philadelphia promised to free Black people. It was a place of refuge and promise, hence the reason it was growing so much.<sup>72</sup> But as described, the economic opportunity for free Black people was lessening and with the Embargo of 1807, that year was especially difficult for unskilled Black people to find work. This also would have increased the number

66. *Confession of John Joyce, Confession of Peter Mathias* (No. 12, Walnut-Street, Philadelphia. 1808), 13, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/joyce/joyce.html>, see bibliography for full title.

67. *Confession of John Joyce, Confession of Peter Mathias*, 31.

68. "How Your Workhouse and Criminal Ancestors Picked Oakum," History House, accessed April 14, 2021, [https://historyhouse.co.uk/articles/junk\\_and\\_oakum.html](https://historyhouse.co.uk/articles/junk_and_oakum.html)

69. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 145.

70. Gary B. Nash, "Forging Freedom, The Emancipation Experience in the Northern Seaport Cities, 1775–1820," in *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution*, ed. Ira Berlin and Ronald Hoffman (Published for the United States Capitol Historical Society by the University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, 1983), 8.

71. *Confession of John Joyce, Confession of Peter Mathias*, 12–13.

72. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 137.

of Black people looking for work because of the maritime labor decrease. With less employment opportunities, rising living costs, decreased wages, and a struggling economy, the year 1807 proved to be one of difficulty for Black people in Philadelphia. This may have been a large reason Joyce saw the need to steal to try and cover what he could not provide through work.

At the same time Joyce and Matthias were getting accustomed to Philadelphia, Allen was facing more difficulties with the church. The incorporation that was drawn up by Mr. Cooper years earlier had not caused any issues of authority between Richard Allen, his Bethel Church, and the White Methodist Conference until 1805.<sup>73</sup> Bethel church had just built a new brick building and was continuing on their path of relative autonomy until a new White elder of the Methodist church was appointed over St. George's in Philadelphia.<sup>74</sup> When the incorporation was created by Mr. Cooper, he included a section that essentially gave the Methodist church and the leaders authority over Allen's Black church.<sup>75</sup> This new Elder, James Smith, saw the charter as a way to preach at the Black church when he wanted and the payment would be given to the White church.<sup>76</sup>

In Allen's description James Smith came and "soon waked us up by demanding the keys and books of the church, and forbid us from holding any meetings except by orders from him." Allen and the church members denied his request and told him that "the house was ours, we had bought it, and paid for it."<sup>77</sup> The elder responded to him that the articles of incorporation stated that it belonged to the White Methodist Conference.<sup>78</sup> So Allen along with other church members took the counsel of a lawyer who told them that their articles could be changed if they had a two thirds vote by the church.<sup>79</sup> This proposal was unanimously passed and they drew up another charter, called the African Supplement. In Allen's short autobiography he includes this supplement because of its magnitude and importance in re-establishing authority and autonomy in the Black church.<sup>80</sup>

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73. George, *Segregated Sabbaths*, 66.

74. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 193; George, *Segregated Sabbaths*, 67.

75. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 195–97.

76. George, *Segregated Sabbaths*, 67.

77. Allen, *The Life Experience*, 32.

78. Allen, *The Life Experience*, 32.

79. George, *Segregated Sabbaths*, 68; Allen, *The Life Experience*, 32.

80. Allen, *The Life Experience*, 37–41.

The passing of this charter was not met without resistance. Allen recorded that it “raised a considerable rumpus” since it had been passed without James Smith’s consent and signature.<sup>81</sup> This supplement gave the right to the property and the church to the Black trustees in Bethel church.<sup>82</sup> The African Supplement was officially made legal in early 1807 by the Philadelphia court and bore the signature of one Justice Tilghman.<sup>83</sup> The methodist leaders attempted to repeal the charter but when they were unsuccessful they tried to use financial means to control the church.<sup>84</sup> With this renewed battle for autonomy taking place the whole Philadelphia community was broadsided with a murder.

## The Murder

On the night of December 18th, Peter Matthias became much more involved with John Joyce whether he wanted it or not. It was a Friday evening and Matthias was preparing to play violin at the local dance.<sup>85</sup> Joyce came to Matthias’s home and asked Matthias to come with him to get his wages. Matthias told him he could not because he was going to play at Jenny Miller’s in Pine Alley that evening.<sup>86</sup> Joyce promised him money which Matthias eventually obliged and went with him.<sup>87</sup> On their way Joyce stopped a few times for some gin. After they had made it to Mr. Kennedy’s, where Joyce was to collect his money, they found that Mr. Kennedy was not at the tavern. Unable to collect the money and receive his promised amount, Matthias turned to leave down market street when Joyce called out to him and said, “here is a near way to go out.”<sup>88</sup> They then headed down Black-Horse Alley near the bank of the Delaware river. As they walked down the alley Joyce told Matthias to come into this store with him because he knew the women in there.<sup>89</sup>

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81. Allen, *The Life Experience*, 32; George, *Segregated Sabbaths*, 69.

82. George, *Segregated Sabbaths*, 69.

83. Richard R. Wright Jr., *The Encyclopedia of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Philadelphia: The Book Concern of The AME Church, 1947), 332–34, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/ucti.000847473>, see bibliography for full title.

84. George, *Segregated Sabbaths*, 69.

85. *Confession of John Joyce, Confession of Peter Mathias*, 13.

86. *Confession of John Joyce, Confession of Peter Mathias*, 31.

87. *Confession of John Joyce, Confession of Peter Mathias*, 14.

88. *Confession of John Joyce, Confession of Peter Mathias*, 32.

89. *Confession of John Joyce, Confession of Peter Mathias*, 32.

This store was also the home of an elderly lady named Mrs. Cross. When they entered the store Joyce engaged in conversation with Mrs. Cross and purchased some apples. Joyce had just lost his job with Mr. Kennedy because he had neglected to close the door late one night when he went to a dance. Mrs. Cross inquired about this and Joyce related to her that he “thought he could suit himself better” and that was the reason he left Mr. Kennedy’s, not because of any neglect on his part.<sup>90</sup> They continued in conversation while Joyce gave Matthias an apple to eat. Matthias, tired of following Joyce around the city and not having received his promised money, asked Joyce if he was to leave soon. Joyce responded that he was but minutes later they were still there. Matthias inquired again. Joyce asked “what is your hurry?”<sup>91</sup> Matthias then got up and said goodbye to Mrs. Cross and told Joyce to join him because they had spent enough time there and needed to head to the dance where Matthias was to play. Joyce told him he would be right out and to just wait outside. Mr. Cross questions Joyce, “why do you not go with the man?”<sup>92</sup>

Mathias made it to the street corner and waited a few minutes. Joyce still not having come out, caused Matthias to turn back to see if Joyce was really going to come. Matthias describes,

On returning to the house, I found the door locked, lifted the latch, and called to John, and asked him whether he would go or not, he answered “he would go directly—stop,” said he “come in.” I then opened the door and went in: at this time there was no light below. I did not see Mrs. Cross, until John lighted a candle.

At this time a little girl came in, and asked for something out of the shop, then John went to the door locked it, and put the key in his pocket. I then saw Mrs. Cross laying on the floor.”<sup>93</sup>

Mrs. Cross was on the floor with a rope around her neck. After Matthias had previously left the store Joyce had struck Mrs. Cross over the head and then tied a noose around her neck. When Matthias realized what was going on he asked Joyce if he had killed her and Joyce in a drunken state, replied that he hadn’t and he swore “he would have his money and property, and that she had more

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90. *Confession of John Joyce, Confession of Peter Mathias, 32.*

91. *Confession of John Joyce, Confession of Peter Mathias, 32.*

92. *Confession of John Joyce, Confession of Peter Mathias, 32.*

93. *Confession of John Joyce, Confession of Peter Mathias, 32–33.*



than two hundred dollars of his money.”<sup>94</sup> Joyce did not allow Matthias or the girl to leave.

Matthias did not know what to do. He tried to avoid helping Joyce as he rummaged through the place. Joyce had tied up his stolen goods in a sheet and then addressed the young girl who had come in. “I demanded of the little girl whether she knew me? She said no. I asked her if she would go with me? She replied ‘yes.’”<sup>95</sup> Matthias left the house first and headed towards his home. As Joyce walked outside with the little girl she screamed murder. Joyce took off running and caught up to Matthias and then proceeded to Matthias’s home which was located near Bethel church, less than a tenth of a mile away.<sup>96</sup> As they were walking home Matthias asked Joyce repeatedly if he had killed Mrs. Cross to which Joyce eventually responded that, “he had killed her, he had knocked her down, and she was dead as hell!”<sup>97</sup>

As they were feeling from the scene, others were running to it. Immediately after the the young girl screamed murder a few men who ran to the home and attempted to resuscitate Mrs. Cross. Later they described the disturbing scene of the murder, finding her body contorted as it had been drug over near the stairs. A doctor arrived shortly after these men and upon examining Mrs. Cross he still felt a pulse. Unable to resuscitate her, she quickly went into convulsions and expired.<sup>98</sup> In all this commotion a large crowd had gathered around the home.<sup>99</sup> Murder rates had been declining in Philadelphia and an account mentioned that the effect of the “cry of murder Mr. was electrical”<sup>100</sup> They wrote how it was “unusual” in the city of Philadelphia and “is happily almost unknown.”<sup>101</sup> Nash describes how the black crime rate had been rising in the early 1800s but most was petty theft.<sup>102</sup> This surely due to the economic state that the African-American population was facing. Nonetheless, this murder brought quite the attention on the Black community and probably the Black

94. *Confession of John Joyce, Confession of Peter Mathias*, 33.

95. *Confession of John Joyce, Confession of Peter Mathias*, 15.

96. *Confession of John Joyce, Confession of Peter Mathias*, 14–15.

97. *Confession of John Joyce, Confession of Peter Mathias*, 34.

98. *Joyce John; Mathias, Peter. Fate of Murderers*, (Philadelphia, Pa., 1808), 6.

99. *Joyce John; Mathias, Peter. Fate of Murderers*, (Philadelphia, Pa., 1808), 7.

100. *The Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia*, “Crime,” by Eric C. Schneider, accessed April 13, 2021, <https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/crime/>; *Joyce John; Mathias, Peter. Fate of Murderers* (Philadelphia, Pa., 1808), 5.

101. *Joyce John; Mathias, Peter. Fate of Murderers* (Philadelphia, Pa., 1808), 5.

102. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 157–58.

church. A police man and constables also arrived at the scene and were told where they could find Joyce and Matthias. A Black man named Barnes had “rejected any impulse but that of justice” and told the police where to find Joyce and Matthias. Arbuster and Colewater, two constables, went and searched for them.<sup>103</sup>

In the meantime while those at the home of Mrs. Cross were trying to resuscitate her and decide where to look for the murderer, Joyce and Mathias arrived at Matthias home. Joyce drank some more and counted some of the money he had in his pocket. He did not tell Matthias if that was his or from Mrs. Cross’s but it can be assumed it was. Matthias, still scheduled to play at the dance that evening, got up and left. He wasn’t able to play at the place previously scheduled and ended up coming across Joyce again at a dance nearby. The woman who lived with Matthias, who Joyce gave his stolen loot to, came and told them both at the dance that they were being looked for. They were arrested later that night but Matthias, on the testimony of the two women at his home, was let go. However the next day around 11 o’clock he was arrested and taken to prison.<sup>104</sup>

The trial was held two months later on Monday February 15th, 1808, by Chief justice Tilghman. The courthouse was filled with spectators early in the morning ready to hear the trial. Not just the courthouse but “the adjoining streets, and the state house yard, were all the day, crowded with people.”<sup>105</sup> This case garnered a lot of attention from the local people in Philadelphia. After the defense and prosecution gave their arguments, the chief justice reminded that it was the jury’s purpose to decide the verdict. Before stating that he said to the jury that “the extension of mercy did not fall within their province” and that “if they thought the facts proved a murder in the first degree, they should say so. That it was his duty, though a painful one, to say, the facts has made that impression on the mind of the court, though it was the right of the jury, exclusively to decide.”<sup>106</sup> The jury took only 15 minutes to decide the verdict.

It was Saturday, February 20th, at 12 o’clock when the verdict was given to the accused. Even before the men were brought from the prison there were many who had gathered around the courthouse and in the streets to hear the verdict the jury had decided. When the doors opened for the public to come in so many intruded that the spaces for the jurors and the bar were filled with

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103. *Joyce John; Mathias, Peter. Fate of Murderers*, (Philadelphia, Pa., 1808), 7–8.

104. *Confession of John Joyce, Confession of Peter Mathias*, 34–35.

105. *Joyce John; Mathias, Peter. Fate of Murderers*, (Philadelphia, Pa., 1808), 9.

106. *Joyce John; Mathias, Peter. Fate of Murderers*, (Philadelphia, Pa., 1808), 13.

spectators. After much effort they were able to quiet down the people.<sup>107</sup> Chief Justice Tilghman, the same justice who had approved the African Supplement months earlier, rose and read the verdict to Joyce and Matthias. He was full of emotion as he gave what may have been his first sentence of death. Having to pause because of the “painful situation [that] his functions place before him,” he read to them “You have been convicted after an impartial trial, of an offence of the blackest dye—the only offence, which by the law is punished with death.” He continued, “You have injured society in general, and the people of your own colour in particular; by rendering them objects of disgust and suspicion. I am happy however to be informed, that they view your conduct with horror, and I hope they will profit by your example.”<sup>108</sup>

One report of the situation in the courtroom described that the prisoners were also overcome with horror and remorse. More so was Joyce because he was the “most intelligent of them.”<sup>109</sup> It’s recorded that Matthias “by no means discovered the fortitude and strength of mind of Joyce. He frequently denied his participation in the guilt, and appeared as if he expected a pardon.” What is interesting is that it continues to record that the clergy urged him to accept his guilt.<sup>110</sup> From the confessions that were later given to Richard Allen by Joyce and Matthias one can see why Matthias would insist that he was not guilty. Both Matthias and Joyce confirmed that he, Matthias, had no part in the murder and was only there afterwards. Interestingly, after the verdict of the trial and after Joyce had given his confession, the mayor visited Joyce in jail and “closely interrogated him as to the guilt of his fellow prisoner.”<sup>111</sup> The mayor was questioning him if Matthias was there when he committed the murder. The main witness, a young girl, claimed they were both in the room but she had not see the murder. Matthias’s testimony made it appear as if he was innocent and that the court was about to hang an innocent man. Consequently, the Mayor questioned Joyce whether Matthias was there or not, and a bystander recorded Joyce’s response to the mayor:

John answered “that he was [there], and also a second time, repeated it, on the same question being proposed.” But as soon as the Mayor had

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107. *Joyce John; Mathias, Peter. Fate of Murderers*, (Philadelphia, Pa., 1808), 14.

108. Zachariah Poulson, “*The American Daily Advertiser*,” Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser, February 22, 1808, GenealogyBank

109. Poulson, “*The American Daily Advertiser*,” February 22, 1808

110. *Joyce John; Mathias, Peter. Fate of Murderers*, (Philadelphia, Pa., 1808), 22.

111. *Confession of John Joyce, Confession of Peter Mathias*, 17.

withdrawn from the cell, an awful horror seemed to seize his mind he exclaimed, "Lord forgive me for I have told the Mayor a falsehood." Being asked by one present, what he had told, he answered, "I have told him, Peter was present, when I killed Mrs. Cross but he was not. Lord! forgive me for it, for he is an innocent man."<sup>112</sup>

With the mayor's answer in hand Joyce and Matthias were hanged March 14th, 1808.<sup>113</sup> It was extremely crowded with one estimate putting the amount of people watching at about 20,000.<sup>114</sup> It was at this time that Richard Allen must have been recognizing the benefit that could come from publishing the recorded confessions of Joyce and Matthias.

## The Authority to Publish, Publishing the Confessions

Years before when the Black community had faced slander and discrimination from the mistakes of a few during the yellow fever epidemic, Allen and Jones saw that publishing could not only help quell the slander but also instate their authority as community leaders and Black leaders. Now in 1808, after having fought again to keep the autonomy of the Black church, Allen was facing a much bigger topic of slander. The Black church wasn't working. This was not a type of slander Allen wanted being spread around the city. The Black community had seen major success in the last year, especially with the passage of the act prohibiting the slave trade by congress. On the 1st of January, 1808, the Atlantic slave trade became illegal.<sup>115</sup> In Philadelphia the Black community celebrated. Jones in his church called for this day to be "set apart in every year, as a day of publick thanksgiving."<sup>116</sup> But three months later the hanging of Joyce and Matthias, which drew a massive crowd, echoed the words by Justice Tilgman, "You have injured society in general, and the people of your own colour in particular;

112. *Confession of John Joyce, Confession of Peter Mathias*, 17.

113. *Confession of John Joyce, Confession of Peter Mathias*, 2, 20.

114. "Life and Adventures of John Joyce and Peter Mathias," *Tickler*, Mar 16, 1808, GenealogyBank

115. US Congress, An Act to Prohibit the Importation of Slaves in Any Port or Place within the Jurisdiction of the United States, from and after the First Day of January 1808. 9th Congress, 2nd Session, 1807. <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/7873517>, National Archives Identifier: 7873517

116. Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 189.

by rendering them objects of disgust and suspicion.”<sup>117</sup> While Tilghman mentioned that the Black community saw this “conduct with horror,” Allen surely knew the White community may have thought differently.<sup>118</sup>

In a biography about Richard Allen, Newman argues that Allen published the confessions of Joyce and Matthias for various reasons. First to help ease the racial tension of the White community. Just like with the Yellow fever epidemic Allen used publishing to help diffuse negative feelings towards the Black community. Second, they were published to demonstrate “his moral authority in the black community.” Allen since he arrived in Philadelphia had been a moral leader to the Black community through his effort at St. George’s church and now through Bethel Church. Third, not only did Allen help facilitate the confessions but he helped mediate the interracial communities through this publication.<sup>119</sup> Apart from those former reasons Richard Allen surely saw this publication as a way to strengthen his authority over Bethel church, his own church he had fought so long for and would for years to come. When the confessions were published in two pamphlets the publication read “Philadelphia: Printed at No. 12, Walnut-Street, For The Benefit of Bethel Church.”<sup>120</sup>

Richard Allen would go on to face more difficulties in establishing his authority over the Church he had dutifully led for years. More attacks would come by the Methodist elders but none would sway Allen from his vision of an independent Black church. This publication did more than just mediate the racial tension and share his moral insights as he encouraged White and Black people to “Break off, O young man your impious companions.”<sup>121</sup> This publication demonstrated that Allen could lead Bethel church, and that he was going to no matter the obstacles. It demonstrated Allen’s authority as a Black minister and his authority over Bethel church.

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117. Poulson, “*The American Daily Advertiser*,” February 22, 1808.

118. Poulson, “*The American Daily Advertiser*,” February 22, 1808.

119. Newman, *Freedom’s Prophet*, 151–53.

120. *Confession of John Joyce, Confession of Peter Mathias*, 1.

121. *Confession of John Joyce, Confession of Peter Mathias*, 5.

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