Sample lesson pack

Kemet to Now · Lessons from the sourced record

Free Black Philadelphia, 1787 to 1817

Richard Allen, Absalom Jones and James Forten: how free Black Philadelphians built their own institutions and spoke up for their rights.



Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Philadelphia. Lithograph by William L. Breton, 1829. Library of Congress. Public domain.

Grades	6 to 10 (US middle and early high school)
Time	Two class periods of about 45 minutes
Subjects	US history, civics, reading in social studies
Skills	Reading for main ideas, studying a historical picture, comparing sources, writing an argument

For the teacher

Lesson overview

In 1787 a group of free Black Philadelphians started the Free African Society, a group for mutual support. Out of it grew two of the earliest independent Black churches in the United States. Over the next thirty years its circle nursed the city through an epidemic, petitioned Congress against slavery, and in 1817 publicly rejected a plan to send free Black Americans to Africa.

Students meet three people at the centre of it: two ministers who founded churches and a sailmaker who became one of the richest men in the city.

Big question

How did free Black Philadelphians build their own institutions, and why did those institutions matter?

By the end, students can

1. Explain what the Free African Society was and name two things that grew out of it.
2. Describe how Richard Allen, Absalom Jones and James Forten each worked for their community.
3. Use a historical picture as evidence, separating what they see from what they infer.
4. Explain why historians' sources sometimes give different dates, and how careful writers handle it.
5. Write a short argument using evidence from the reading.

What's inside

Page	Part	Time
3	Timeline: Philadelphia, 1746 to 1842	5 min
4 to 5	Student reading: three founders	20 min
6	Picture study: Bethel Church in 1829	15 min
7	Questions on the reading	Day 1, 10 min; finish at home
8	Historian's workshop: when sources disagree	Day 2, 20 min
9	Writing task: the meeting at Bethel, January 1817	Day 2, 25 min
10	Answer key	Teacher
11	Sources and picture credits	Teacher

Before you teach

Words students will need: *enslaved, free Black, mutual aid, congregation, denomination, ordained, petition, privateer, colonization.* These are defined on page 4. The reading mentions slavery and a deadly epidemic but contains no graphic description.

Student page

Timeline: Philadelphia, 1746 to 1842

Where the sources give different dates, both are shown. You will look at why on page 8.

1746	Absalom Jones is born enslaved in Sussex County, Delaware (November 6 or 7). As a boy he is taken to Philadelphia.
1760	Richard Allen is born enslaved in Philadelphia on February 14. He is later held in Delaware.
1766	James Forten is born free in Philadelphia on September 2.
1770	Absalom Jones marries Mary Thomas, who is enslaved, and buys her freedom. He later gains his own.
About 1781	At fourteen, Forten sails on the privateer *Royal Louis* in the American Revolution. He is captured and held on the British prison ship *Jersey* for about seven months.
1780 to 1786	Allen buys his freedom by paying for it over several years (sources differ on the exact years).
1787	Allen, Jones and other free Black Philadelphians found the **Free African Society**.
1793	Yellow fever strikes Philadelphia. Allen and Jones organize Black residents to nurse the sick and bury the dead, then defend the volunteers in a pamphlet.
1794	Allen opens Bethel Church in a converted blacksmith shop. Jones's congregation dedicates St. Thomas African Episcopal Church on July 17.
1798	Forten takes over the sail loft where he has worked since boyhood.
1799	Allen is ordained a deacon. Jones drafts a petition against slavery to Congress, signed by 73 other Black Philadelphians.
1802	Jones is ordained a priest, the first Black priest in the Episcopal Church (one source says 1804).
1813	Forten publishes *A Series of Letters by a Man of Colour* against a bill to restrict Black people moving into Pennsylvania.
1816	Black Methodist congregations from four states form the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. Allen becomes its first bishop on April 11.
1817	In January about 3,000 people meet at Bethel Church, with Forten in the chair, and reject the American Colonization Society's plan.
1818	Absalom Jones dies on February 13 (one source says February 3).
1831	Richard Allen dies in March (26th in most sources, 18th in one).
1842	James Forten dies on March 4. About five thousand mourners, Black and white, attend his funeral.

Three founders

Words to know. Enslaved: held as property and forced to work without pay. **Free Black:** a Black person who was not enslaved. **Mutual aid:** members helping each other, for example in sickness or hard times. **Congregation:** the people who worship together at one church. **Denomination:** a branch of a religion with its own leaders and rules. **Ordained:** officially made a minister. **Petition:** a formal written request to a government. **Privateer:** a privately owned ship allowed by a government to attack enemy ships in wartime. **Colonization:** here, a plan to send free Black Americans to live in Africa.

A city of free Black people

By the 1780s Philadelphia was home to a growing number of free Black people. Some, like James Forten, were born free. Others, like Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, were born enslaved and gained their freedom, often by paying for it. Black worshippers at St. George's Methodist Church in the city faced discrimination there, and some decided to leave.

In 1787 Allen, Jones and other free Black Philadelphians founded the **Free African Society**. It brought free Black people together to support one another. It also became the seedbed of two of the earliest independent Black churches in the country.

Richard Allen (1760 to 1831)

Allen was born enslaved in Philadelphia and later held in Delaware. While still enslaved he became a Methodist and decided to devote his life to religious leadership. He bought his freedom by paying for it over several years.

In 1794 he opened Bethel Church in a converted blacksmith shop. In 1799 he became the first Black man ordained in the Methodist Episcopal Church. For years he struggled with white Methodist leaders over who controlled Bethel and its property. In 1816 he brought Black Methodist congregations from Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland and New Jersey together to form a new, independent denomination: the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. He became its first bishop. The congregation, known today as Mother Bethel AME Church, is still active.



Absalom Jones, painted by Raphaelle Peale in 1810. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Absalom Jones (1746 to 1818)

Jones was born enslaved in Delaware and taken to Philadelphia as a boy. While still enslaved he went to a night school for Black people run by Quakers. He bought the freedom of his wife, Mary Thomas, and later gained his own.

Allen stayed a Methodist, but Jones led a congregation that chose to join the Episcopal Church. Its building, St. Thomas African Episcopal Church, was dedicated in July 1794. It is described as the first Black Episcopal parish in the United States. In 1802 Jones became the first Black priest in the Episcopal Church. He also spoke out against slavery: in 1799 he drafted a petition to Congress, signed by 73 other Black Philadelphians, urging an end to it. The Episcopal Church remembers him every year on February 13.

James Forten (1766 to 1842)

Forten was born free. As a boy he worked beside his father in a sail loft, the workshop where sails for ships were made. At fourteen he went to sea during the American Revolution. The British captured his ship and held him on a prison ship, where as a Black prisoner he risked being sold into slavery. He was released in a prisoner exchange after about seven months.

After the war he went back to the sail loft, and in 1798 he took over the business. He became one of the wealthiest men in Philadelphia, Black or white, and used his money and standing to defend the rights of free Black people. He wrote against a 1813 bill that would have kept Black people from moving into Pennsylvania, and later helped fund the antislavery newspaper *The Liberator*. His wife and daughters were active abolitionists too.

Working together

In 1793 yellow fever swept through Philadelphia. Allen and Jones organized Black residents to nurse the sick and bury the dead. Allen caught the fever himself and nearly died. When a publisher, Mathew Carey, criticized the Black nurses in print, Allen and Jones wrote a pamphlet that defended the volunteers' courage and condemned the oppression of Black Americans, enslaved and free.

In January 1817 a new group, the American Colonization Society, proposed sending free Black Americans to Africa. About 3,000 people met at Allen's Bethel Church, with Forten in the chair, and firmly rejected the plan. Sources say they feared it was a way to push free Black people out of the country. Historians note that Forten's own private views on emigration were more mixed, even as he stood with the crowd.



High Street with the First Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia. A print after William Birch's views of the city from about 1800, the years when Forten ran his sail loft. Library of Congress. Public domain.

Student page · Picture study

Bethel Church in 1829



"Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Philada." Drawn on stone by William L. Breton, July 1829; printed by Kennedy & Lucas's Lithography. Library of Congress (World Digital Library). Public domain.

This picture is a **primary source**: it was made at the time, 35 years after Allen first opened Bethel in a blacksmith shop and two years before he died. Look closely, including at the printed words under the picture.

I see Only what is really in the picture	**I think** What it might tell us	**I wonder** Questions it raises

1. Read the caption printed under the picture. What two years does it give, and what does it say happened in each?
2. Compare this building with "a converted blacksmith shop." What does the change suggest about the congregation between 1794 and 1829?
3. Why might someone in 1829 want to make and sell a print of this church?

Check your understanding

Name _____ Date _____

1. What was the Free African Society, and when was it founded?

2. Name the two churches that grew from the Free African Society's circle, and who led each.

3. Allen and Jones both gained their freedom from slavery. How did each one become free, according to the reading?

4. What danger did James Forten face as a Black prisoner on the *Jersey* that a white prisoner did not?

5. In 1793, what did Allen and Jones do during the yellow fever epidemic, and why did they write a pamphlet afterward?

6. Give two ways James Forten used his wealth or standing to help free Black people.

7. **Think deeper.** Why might it have mattered to Black Philadelphians to have churches they led themselves, rather than worshipping in churches led by white ministers? Use one detail from the reading.

When sources disagree

Kemet to Now builds each article from several sources: archives, museums, universities and books by historians. Sometimes those sources give different dates for the same event. Careful writers do not pick one at random. They show both, and say which most sources favour.

Event	What the sources say
Absalom Jones ordained a priest	1802 in most sources; 1804 in BlackPast
Absalom Jones's death	February 13, 1818 in most sources; February 3 in one
Richard Allen buys his freedom	Agreement dated about 1780 to 1783; final payment as late as 1786
Richard Allen's death	March 26, 1831 in most sources; March 18 in one
James Forten's age when his father died	Seven or nine

Work with a partner

1. Choose one row. List two reasons why sources written about the same person could give different dates. (Think about old records, copying, and what each writer had in front of them.)

2. The Episcopal Church honours Absalom Jones every year on February 13. How might that help a historian decide between February 13 and February 3?

3. Paying for freedom "over several years" could explain why Allen's dates cover a range. Explain how.

4. Why is it more honest to write "1802 (one source says 1804)" than to pick one date and hide the other?

Go further. Each Kemet to Now article lists its sources at the end. Open two of them for one person and find one fact that both agree on and one detail that only one of them gives.

Student page · Writing task

The meeting at Bethel, January 1817

Imagine you are one of the roughly 3,000 free Black Philadelphians at Bethel Church in January 1817. The American Colonization Society has proposed sending free Black Americans to Africa. James Forten is in the chair. The crowd will reject the plan.

Your task. Write one paragraph (6 to 8 sentences) as a speech to the meeting, explaining why you oppose the plan. Use at least **two pieces of evidence** from the reading about what free Black people had already built or done in Philadelphia.

Plan first

Your claim	
Evidence 1 (from the reading)	
Evidence 2 (from the reading)	
Why this evidence supports your claim	

Write

Remember: this is an imagined speech. Do not put invented words in the mouths of real people like Forten or Allen. Speak as yourself, an ordinary member of the crowd.

For the teacher

Answer key

Questions on the reading (page 7)

1. A group founded in 1787 by Richard Allen, Absalom Jones and other free Black Philadelphians to bring free Black people together for mutual support.
2. Bethel Church, led by Richard Allen (today Mother Bethel AME Church), and St. Thomas African Episcopal Church, led by Absalom Jones.
3. Allen paid for his freedom over several years. Jones bought his wife's freedom first and later gained his own (the reading does not say exactly how).
4. He risked being sold into slavery.
5. They organized Black residents to nurse the sick and bury the dead. They wrote the pamphlet to answer Mathew Carey's printed criticism of the Black nurses, defend the volunteers, and condemn the oppression of Black Americans.
6. Any two: wrote against the 1813 bill to restrict Black migration into Pennsylvania; chaired the 1817 Bethel meeting against colonization; helped fund *The Liberator*.
7. Open answer. Strong answers use a detail such as the discrimination at St. George's, Allen's long struggle over control of Bethel's property, or the AME Church becoming an independent denomination.

Picture study (page 6)

1. The caption says the church was founded in 1794 by Richard Allen and rebuilt in 1805.
2. A large brick building replacing a converted blacksmith shop suggests the congregation had grown and could afford a bigger, permanent church. Accept other reasoned answers.
3. Open answer, for example pride in the church, or interest from buyers in a well-known city landmark. Students should mark this as a guess, not a fact.

Historian’s workshop (page 8)

1. Possible reasons: original records were lost or damaged; a writer copied a mistake from an earlier book; one source used a birth or baptism record and another used family memory; dates were written down years later.
2. A church that has kept a yearly feast day on February 13 is a long-standing record that supports that date, though it does not prove it on its own.
3. If he agreed a price in one year and finished paying in a later year, different sources may date "his freedom" from either the agreement or the final payment.
4. It lets readers see the evidence and judge for themselves, and avoids presenting a guess as certain.

Writing task (page 9)

Look for a clear claim against the plan and two pieces of evidence, for example: free Black Philadelphians had built their own churches (Bethel, St. Thomas); they nursed the city in the 1793 epidemic; Forten served at sea in the Revolution; Jones petitioned Congress against slavery; Forten built one of the city's most successful businesses. Speeches should not invent quotations from real people.

For the teacher

Sources and picture credits

Every fact in this pack comes from three published Kemet to Now articles, each built only from the sources listed below. Read the full articles at **kemettonow.com/entry/richard-allen**, **/entry/absalom-jones** and **/entry/james-forten**.

Richard Allen

- U.S. National Archives, Rediscovering Black History, "Richard Allen and the Origins of the AME Church" (2021).
- Archives of the Episcopal Church, "Richard Allen, 1760–1831."
- Library Company of Philadelphia, "The Christianity of Freedom," Black Founders exhibition.
- Mother Bethel AME Church, "Richard Allen."
- Museum of the American Revolution, "Freedom's Prophet."
- Penn State University Libraries, Pennsylvania Center for the Book, "Richard Allen."
- Richard Allen, *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen* (1833), Documenting the American South, University of North Carolina.

Absalom Jones

- Archives of the Episcopal Church, "Absalom Jones, 1746–1818," The Church Awakens.
- Temple University Libraries, William Still exhibit, "Jones, Absalom."
- Historical Society of Pennsylvania, "African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas."
- The Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania, "Absalom Jones."
- EBSCO Research Starters, "Absalom Jones."
- Encyclopedia.com, "Jones, Absalom."

James Forten

- Julie Winch, *A Gentleman of Color: The Life of James Forten* (Oxford University Press, 2002).
- Museum of the American Revolution, "James Forten Discovery Cart" and "African Founders."
- Historical Society of Pennsylvania, "James Forten."
- Pennsylvania Heritage Magazine (Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission), "Shall Liberty Dwell? James Forten and the Struggle for Black Rights in Early Pennsylvania."
- Penn State University Libraries, Pennsylvania Center for the Book, "James Forten."
- PBS, *Africans in America*, "Forten Letter to Cuffe."

Pictures

- Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Philadelphia: William L. Breton, lithograph by Kennedy & Lucas, 1829. Library of Congress (World Digital Library). Public domain, no known restrictions.
- Absalom Jones: portrait by Raphaelle Peale, 1810. Via Wikimedia Commons. Public domain.
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