

Philadelphia's African American Heritage

A Brief Historic Context Statement for the Preservation Alliance's Inventory of African American Historic Sites

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Introduction

Philadelphia has been a vital center of African American life for more than 250 years. The city's African American community outnumbered that of any other northern city into the 20th century, thanks in part to the city's geographic proximity to the Mason-Dixon line and the economic and social opportunities the city offered to blacks.¹ In spite of oppressive racism, African Americans in 18th and 19th century Philadelphia built successful businesses, founded churches, established schools, created support networks, honed artistic skills, expressed political ideologies, and challenged the institution of slavery. After the end of slavery, the city continued as an important hub of African American intellectual, cultural and social life through the 20th century and into the present. Yet, sites and buildings associated with this vibrant Philadelphia history have too often received relatively little attention. Philadelphia's black community played an integral role in the growth and development of the city from its earliest days, and the historic sites and buildings that embody this rich heritage of African American resilience, perseverance and accomplishment deserve to be celebrated.

The African American Experience in Philadelphia

Well before the founding of Pennsylvania, a man named Anthony was the first documented African slave in the region, arriving in 1639 as a slave to the governor of New Sweden, John Printz. Thousands more followed in the decades to come. By the mid-18th century, about 1 in 15 Philadelphians were slaves.² Usually living one or two to a household, with mostly English slaveholders, slaves of African descent were forced to perform domestic duties or work alongside a master who was a mariner or artisan. Enslaved Africans adapted quickly to English culture, but nevertheless retained elements of their own African heritage. They carved out some autonomy for themselves by attending church or school, marrying and having families, and performing a number of tasks away from their masters' residences. Blacks gathered in public spaces and at "Congo Square" (now Washington Square), where they held funerals and celebrations in the section of the Strangers' Burial Ground they were permitted to use. And, increasingly, Philadelphians of African descent built new, independent lives as free men and women as they were freed by owners or purchased their freedom. In 1780, Pennsylvania lawmakers adopted a gradual emancipation law, which freed no slaves immediately but for the first time set expiration

¹ Roger Lane, *William Dorsey's Philadelphia & Ours: On the Past and Future of the Black City in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), xii-xiii.

² According to historian Gary Nash, about 1,400 slaves lived in Philadelphia by 1767, out of a total city population of about 18,600. Gary B. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 10, 14, 33.

dates for slavery in the state. By 1783, for a combination of social, economic and legal reasons, about 70 percent of the city's blacks were free.³

However, as the city's free black community grew, so too did white hostility. Despite glimmers of racial harmony in the years before and after the Revolution, many elite and middle-class whites showed through their words and actions that they believed their black neighbors to be inherently inferior. Faced with this racism, African American leaders Richard Allen, Absalom Jones and others formed the Free African Society in 1787, creating a pro-black mutual aid society that helped foster self-identity and self-determination. The group provided heroic assistance to the city during the Yellow Fever epidemic in 1793, and built Philadelphia's first African-American-associated church in 1794. The Free African Church of St. Thomas at 5th and St. James Streets affiliated itself with the Anglican denomination, and chose Jones to serve as its first minister. That same year, Allen organized a new African congregation affiliated with the Methodist denomination: Bethel Methodist Episcopal Church, now known as "Mother Bethel," near 6th and Lombard Streets. (Later, Allen led a group of black Methodist churches in breaking away entirely from the white church hierarchy to form the African Methodist Episcopal denomination.)

Just a few blocks apart, the two churches exerted a dramatic pull on black Philadelphians. Previously, enslaved blacks had lived throughout what is now Center City, either with their owners or with masters to whom they had been hired out. At that time, the city of Philadelphia extended only from South to Vine Streets, between the Schuylkill and Delaware Rivers.⁴ Free blacks who established independent households gravitated toward the northern and southern edges of this area, where housing was smaller and cheaper. In the north, free blacks clustered between Arch and Vine Streets west of 4th Street, and just across the city limit in Northern Liberties. In the south, black households concentrated between South and Walnut Streets west of 4th Street, extending into Southwark and Moyamensing south of the city limit. Outside the city's boundaries, small clusters of free blacks lived in Germantown, Frankford, Holmesburg, and other nearby villages (now part of Philadelphia). However, after the establishment of the Bethel and St. Thomas churches, families flocked to the southern neighborhoods of the city, creating a vital center for black life. By 1820, 75 percent of black households in Philadelphia lived in the city's southern neighborhoods.⁵ Wealthier blacks lived in the larger houses lining Lombard Street and other nearby thoroughfares, assuming they found a developer or landlord willing to sell or rent to them, while poorer ones lived in tighter quarters in the small buildings lining alleys and courtyards.

Whites and blacks intermingled freely in these neighborhoods, but working-class whites became increasingly antagonistic in the first decades of the 19th century about economic competition with free blacks. Blacks generally were excluded from industrial work, but eked out livings as coachmen, carters, barbers, cooks, craftspeople, washerwomen, and more. Whites considered these jobs low-status, but resented blacks

³ In 1765, about 100 free blacks and 1,400 slaves lived in the city. By 1783, the ratio was reversed, with about 1,000 free blacks and 400 slaves. Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840*, 38.

⁴ State lawmakers created Philadelphia's modern boundaries in 1854, consolidating the city with surrounding townships, boroughs and districts in Philadelphia County to help improve law enforcement and other government services.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 167.

who managed to keep working during economic downturns. Through the 1830s and 1840s, racial tensions in the city continued to escalate. In several “race riots,” gangs of whites attacked black neighborhoods while white city leaders and officials largely looked the other way. Constricted by threats of violent retribution, African Americans in Philadelphia faced shrinking opportunities.

No doubt discouraged by the city’s treatment of them, Philadelphia’s African American community persevered in its quest to secure political, social and economic equality. Elites formed intellectual and literary associations like the Gilbert Lyceum and the Benjamin Banneker Institute. Leaders formed dozens of new churches, and the African American community embraced the handful of available black schools, like the esteemed Institute for Colored Youth. They actively participated in the abolition movement, protesting slavery, the fugitive slave laws, and the 1838 disenfranchisement of blacks in Pennsylvania. And locals like Robert Purvis, William Still and others played key roles in the Underground Railroad, helping escaped slaves to freedom.

When the Civil War eventually erupted in 1861, black Philadelphians rallied to the Union cause and, when finally allowed to serve in the Union Army, signed up to fight. African Americans across the country no doubt paid close attention when President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, freeing the slaves in the Confederate South. Two years later, Congress approved the 13th Amendment to the Constitution to officially abolish slavery nationwide. However, the end of slavery did not end the white racism that continued to plague the black community in Philadelphia and elsewhere. Though finally allowed to ride the city’s street cars (thanks to an 1867 state law), the African American community faced chronic problems of limited jobs, few educational opportunities and paltry housing options.

Nevertheless, the city continued as an important hub of African American life, because of the black community’s large size and notable accomplishments. Determined African Americans became teachers, ministers, business-owners, artists, musicians, doctors and lawyers. Ebenezer Don Carlos Bassett, teacher and principal at the Institute for Colored Youth, became the first African American diplomat when he was appointed by President Ulysses S. Grant in 1869 to be Minister to Haiti. Talented local black artists like Henry Ossawa Tanner and Meta V. Warrick Fuller gained fame after studying at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Dr. Nathan Mossell founded the Frederick Douglass Memorial Hospital, and staffed it entirely with African Americans. Black leaders in Philadelphia created social and fraternal organizations, and formed black baseball clubs, like the Pythians.

Much of black culture and community life remained invisible to most white Philadelphians. Instead, whites noticed only the poverty and crime in poor neighborhoods. By the end of the 19th century, white reformers were especially concerned with conditions in poor black and immigrant neighborhoods in the city. The leaders of the College Settlement hired African American sociologist W. E. B. DuBois to study Philadelphia’s blacks, ostensibly to help guide the work of white settlement workers. Yet, unlike the whites’ impressions of a group predisposed to crime and social ills, DuBois described an active black community struggling to overcome the systemic racism holding it back. DuBois found that many blacks still lived in the southern section of the city, between Spruce and South Streets and west from 7th Street to the Schuylkill River. However, even

in this “black ghetto,” only 40 percent of residents were black.⁶ Beyond Center City, African Americans now also lived in West Philadelphia and Germantown, near the wealthy white households where many worked as domestics.

In the early 20th century, northward migration greatly expanded the city’s black community. Between 1900 and 1920, Philadelphia’s black population more than doubled as tens of thousands of migrants moved north hoping for better jobs, better educational opportunities, and an escape from the overt racism of the South.⁷ The city’s historically black neighborhoods were already crowded, so African Americans expanded into new neighborhoods, especially in West Philadelphia and North Philadelphia, and moved in larger numbers to Nicetown and Germantown. Wealthier middle-class blacks were often the first to move into a new area, hoping to escape the social problems of the ghetto. But whites openly resisted blacks’ movement into new areas in the city, and many fled rather than live in integrated neighborhoods. White landlords and real estate agents helped foster this early white flight, buying up properties vacated by white residents and renting or selling the properties to blacks at inflated prices. This trend continued unabated for decades.⁸ Meanwhile, the large influx of southern blacks into Philadelphia and other northern urban centers helped spur a new flourishing of African American culture from the 1910s to 1940s. Encouraged to seek inspiration in their own history and experiences, artists like Jessie Redmon Fauset, Marian Anderson, John Coltrane and Paul Robeson helped to promote black self-determination and equality through their art.

By the mid-20th century, Philadelphia’s black community was larger, more diverse and more accomplished than ever before. Yet, equality remained an elusive goal. Both black and white Philadelphians were active in the civil rights movement, participating in political and social activism locally and nationally. In one notable victory, Philadelphia lawyers Raymond Pace Alexander, Cecil B. Moore and others successfully overturned Girard College’s whites-only admissions policy. Other leaders drew national attention for important social projects, like those founded by the Rev. Dr. Leon H. Sullivan of North Philadelphia’s Zion Baptist Church.

Conclusion

Today, some of these struggles may seem like distant memories, but their impacts are still reverberating and shaping the city as we know it. From churches and schools to businesses and fraternal organizations, the African American experience has left an indelible mark on the city’s neighborhoods. The historic sites and buildings that embody this rich heritage are still scattered around the city, both as reminders of the past and as current community pillars. These resources deserve recognition and protection, and to be celebrated not only for their importance to black history, but for their significance to the history of Philadelphia.

⁶ Nathaniel Burt and Wallace E. Davies, “The Iron Age, 1876-1905,” in *Philadelphia: A 300-Year History*, ed. Russell F. Weigley (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1982), 491.

⁷ Lloyd M. Abernethy, “Progressivism, 1905-1919,” in Weigley, 531.

⁸ “White flight” has been well documented after World War II, when working-class and middle-class white residents in Philadelphia and other cities fled for the surrounding suburbs in part to avoid integrated living with black residents. For a brief overview of changes in white and black residential patterns in the decades before World War II, see Robert Gregg, *Sparks from the Anvil of Oppression: Philadelphia’s African Methodists and Southern Migrants, 1890-1940* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 25-32.

Suggested Readings:

- Blockson, Charles L. *Philadelphia: 1639-2000*. Charleston, S.C.: Arcadia Publishing, 2000.
- DuBois, W. E. B. *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study; With a New Introduction By Elijah Anderson; Together with a Special Report on Domestic Service by Isabel Eaton*. Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996.
- Lane, Roger. *William Dorsey's Philadelphia & Ours: On the Past and Future of the Black City in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Nash, Gary B. *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988.
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