

## Extract from

# DIAMONDS OF DELAWARE AND MARYLAND'S EASTERN SHORE: SEVEN BLACK MEN OF DISTINCTION

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### **Absalom Jones (1746-1818)** *Religious, Civic, and Community Leader*

Whenever the name of African Methodist Episcopal Bishop Richard Allen is mentioned, the name of Absalom Jones is likely to follow. A close friend and associate, Absalom Jones is also heralded as "one of America's most distinguished clergyman." Absalom Jones was born a slave in Sussex County, Delaware in 1746. Although born in Delaware, at age 15, Jones was sent by his master to work in a shop in Philadelphia. A diligent individual, Jones worked in the shop during the day and attended a Quaker school at night to gain a basic education. Young Jones eventually saved enough money to purchase his own freedom as well as his wife's.

Historian Carol V. R. George, in *Segregated Sabbaths*, described Jones as ". . . essentially a quiet, peaceful man, a committed churchman whose intuitive skill in diplomacy prevented angry confrontations." Unlike Allen, whose aggression sometimes brought on conflict, Jones displayed "tact in social relations." The apparent differences in personality probably served Allen and Jones well in their pastoral, civic, and community partnerships.

In 1787, the year Delaware ratified the United States Constitution, Jones and Allen walked out of St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church when they were asked to interrupt their prayers and move to the rear of the gallery. Their refusal to accept second-class status in the church ultimately led to the founding of the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) in 1794. Allen became the first bishop of the AME branch of Methodism. The development of Methodism amongst blacks in the Delaware and Pennsylvania region is sometimes referred to as "the cradle of black religious freedom," due to the efforts of Allen and Jones.

The quiet leadership of Absalom Jones has gone unnoticed by many historians who often fail to mention his outstanding deeds. In 1794, Jones became the founder and pastor of St. Thomas Protestant Episcopal Church. In addition, Jones has the distinction of being the first black ordained minister in America (in the Protestant Episcopal Church).

One of his most significant achievements was the organization of the Free African Society, a society led by both Allen and Jones. According to Harry Richardson, in *Dark Salvation*: "In the terrible yellow fever epidemic of 1793 in Philadelphia, which killed hundreds, Jones and Allen worked together heroically to tend the sick, bury the dead, and render all possible service to the victims, most of whom were white. They were commended by the mayor of the city for their work."

Although Allen remained a Methodist and Jones became an Episcopal minister, they remained close friends throughout their lives. Their alliance as religious, civic, and community co-workers allowed them to work effectively for the advancement of African Americans. The Allen and Jones team is one of the most effective black leadership duos found in American history.

In 1818, at the age of 71, native Delawarean Absalom Jones passed on his baton of leadership. His legacy was that of an effective, quiet leader. He will be remembered as church founder, co-leader of the Free African Society, and committed to a better way of life for his fellow blacks as well as all Americans.