

America's Black Founders

Revolutionary Heroes and Early Leaders



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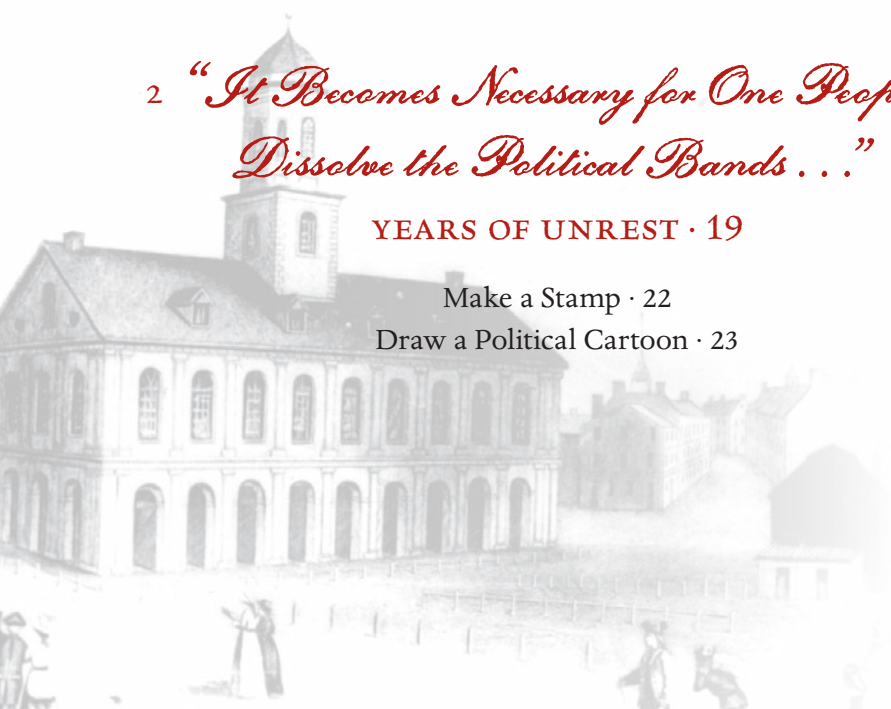
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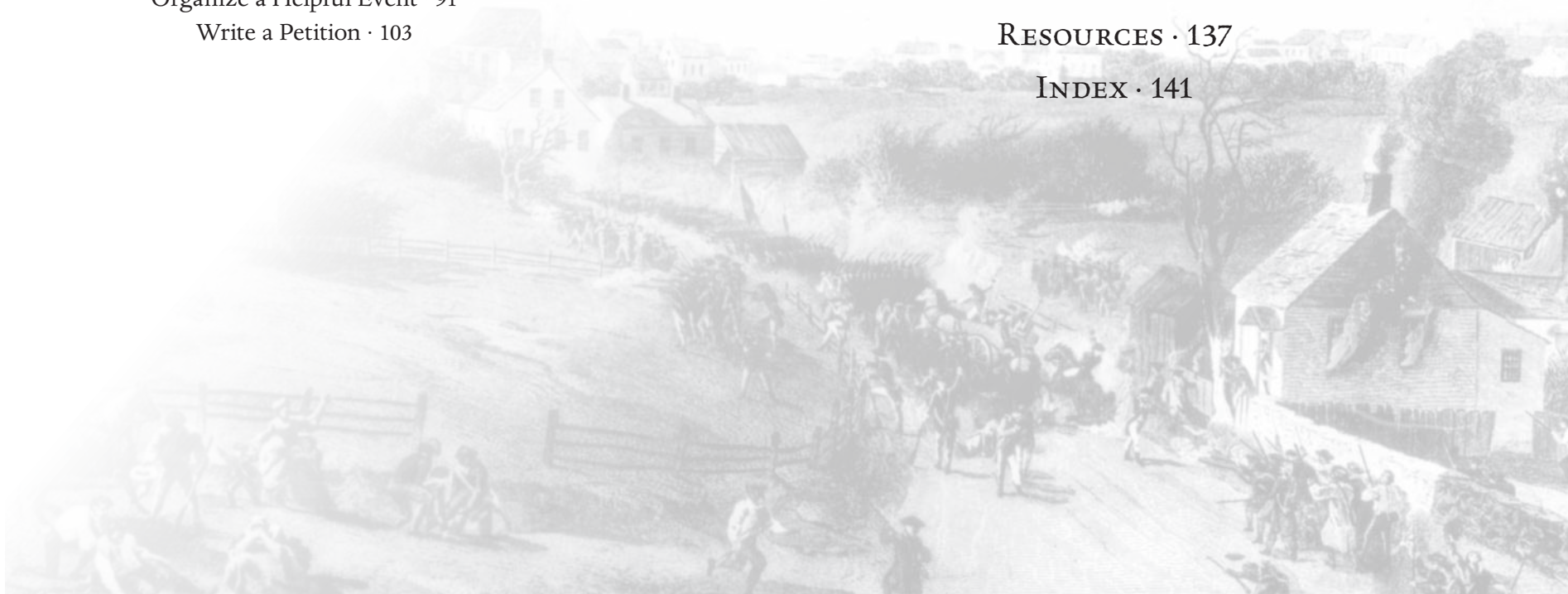
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*“When in the Course
of Human Events . . .”*



COLONIAL DAYS

In 1760, Richard Allen was born. Not noticed by the world, far away from the royal palace in England, not even affected by the talk of freedom and liberty in colonial America, the news reached the ears of his mother’s master in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: another slave had been born.

Richard’s mother held him close, hoping against hope to shield her innocent baby from the harsh realities of slavery, that “peculiar institution,” which supplied the rich treasures for the king and gave the colonists leisure to pursue their liberties in the New World. Yet slavery held no freedom or liberties for the slave.

As Richard’s mother rocked her newborn baby to sleep, what thoughts crossed her mind? She knew too well of the slave’s auction block where babies were torn from their mother’s arms and sold away to a different owner, never to be seen again. Her own father, a white colonist, had sold her and her mother as if they were cattle.

As she counted her baby’s 10 little fingers and 10 little toes, Richard’s mother could not count on his future. It would have warmed her mother’s heart, however, to know that one day her son would return to Philadelphia, the city of his birth, to become the greatest and most influential leader of free blacks in the newly formed United States of America.

He would use his freedom to fight for the liberty and justice of all African Americans—both enslaved and free. Richard Allen would lead the way. He would be the first to forge footsteps and create a path along the trail of freedom for others to follow. He would rise up from the pit of slavery to become one of the Black Founders of America.

The House of Benjamin Chew

At the time Richard Allen was born, slavery was firmly established throughout the American colonies. Allen's father first arrived in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on a slave ship from the Caribbean. He and his wife and children were the property of a Quaker master, Benjamin Chew.

When their son, Richard, was born on February 14, 1760, the Philadelphia household of Benjamin Chew was a hub of important political activity. Chew was climbing the political ladder in colonial America. He was appointed the attorney general of the Province of Pennsylvania from 1755 to 1769. By the time Richard Allen was toddling around his mother's skirts, Benjamin Chew lived in an elegant house of the fashionable neighborhood on South Third Street in Philadelphia.

*"Slavery is a bitter pill."
—Richard Allen*

Benjamin Chew was a friend of George Washington and John Adams. Pennsylvania's famous Penn family hired his law services. However, Chew disagreed with the political stance of Benjamin Franklin. Chew did not support the signing of the Declaration of Independence. During his early years in the Chew household, Richard Allen probably saw important political figures, helped prepare for the flurry of political activities, and overheard heated discussions.

In 1767, there were nearly 1,400 slaves living in the city of Philadelphia. This meant that about one out of every five households owned slaves. Benjamin Chew's large family of 10 usually had about 12 workers in their home at any given time. These workers were paid employees, indentured servants, or slaves.

These workers probably kept out of sight. Breakfast was cooked and the table prepared while the Chew family dressed in their bedrooms. When the family came in to eat, the workers went to the bedrooms to tidy the rooms.

Positions at the household usually included a coachman, maids and menservants, a cook, a washerwoman, and a nurse for the children. Younger slaves, such as Richard, helped out in any way they could. There were always jobs such as carrying wood for the fireplace, stuffing straw in a mattress, or helping the sons and daughters of Benjamin Chew.

The Slave Mother

BY FRANCES ELLEN WATKINS HARPER

Heard you that shriek? It rose
So wildly on the air,
It seemed as if a burdened heart
Was breaking in despair.
Saw you those hands so sadly clasped—
The bowed and feeble head—
The shuddering of that fragile form—
That look of grief and dread?
Saw you the sad, imploring eye?
Its every glance was pain,
As if a storm of agony
Were sweeping through the brain.
She is a mother pale with fear,
Her boy clings to her side,
And in her kirtle* vainly tries
His trembling form to hide.
He is not hers, although she bore
For him a mother's pains;
He is not hers, although her blood
Is coursing through his veins!

*A kirtle is a woman's long skirt or dress.

He is not hers, for cruel hands
May rudely tear apart
The only wreath of household love
That binds her breaking heart.
His love has been a joyous light
That over her pathway smiled,
A fountain gushing ever new,
Amid life's desert wild.
His lightest word has been a tone
Of music round her heart,

Their lives a streamlet blent in one—
Oh, Father! must they part?
They tear him from her circling arms,
Her last and fond embrace.
Oh! never more may her sad eyes
Gaze on his mournful face.
No marvel, then, these bitter shrieks
Disturb the listening air;
She is a mother, and her heart
Is breaking in despair.



A slave auction.

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A Summer Home

When Richard Allen was two years old, a yellow fever epidemic swept through the city of Philadelphia. Dr. Benjamin Rush, a local doctor, described the terrors of 1762 in his papers. As an active physician in the city, he documented as many as 20 deaths a day from August through December. When the fever was over, about one-sixth of Philadelphia's population had died.

This horrible outbreak of yellow fever probably prompted Benjamin Chew to purchase land in Germantown, six miles from Philadelphia. For the next four years he built a summer home called Cliveden on this plot with plans of moving his family away from the city to stay there during the hottest months each year.

Cliveden was expensive to build. Chew's records show he paid large sums of money to build this majestic mansion. By 1767, with the completion of Cliveden, Benjamin Chew sold some of his slaves.

"[We] were sold into Delaware State, near Dover."

—Richard Allen

Going . . . Going . . . Gone . . . SOLD!

Richard was only about seven years old when the normal routine of his life was uprooted. Richard Allen, his mother and father, and his brother and two sisters were sold to a farmer named Stokeley Sturgis who lived near Dover, Delaware. Richard now joined the ranks of countless other African Americans throughout the colonies who toiled in the fields.

Richard lived and worked on a plantation near Dover through the rest of his childhood. He did not have a childhood, really. He was not free to wander the countryside and play simple boyhood games. He was a slave.

So he worked. His back ached from plowing and planting and hoeing the weeds. His hands grew rough from chopping wood. His feet grew tired from standing and walking and working from sunup to sundown, and even into the darkness of night. And yet his heart grew strong. A seed of hope sprouted and grew inside, yearning to be free.

Freedom was a constant thought to this young man known to the world at this time only as Richard. Although we do not know exactly when he acquired his last name, on historical documents the name "Allen" does not appear until *after* he bought his freedom.

After Richard and his family became the property of Stokeley Sturgis, his mother had