



# Freedom's Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers

By Richard S. Newman

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An Interview with the Author on the History News Network

A Founding Father with a Vision of Equality: Richard Newman's op-ed in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*

Author Spotlight in *The Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*

### "Gold" Winner of the 2008 *Foreword Magazine* Book of the Year Award, Biography Category

*Freedom's Prophet* is a long-overdue biography of Richard Allen, founder of the first major African-American church and the leading black activist of the early American republic. A tireless minister, abolitionist, and reformer, Allen inaugurated some of the most important institutions in African-American history and influenced nearly every black leader of the nineteenth century, from Douglass to Du Bois.

Allen (1760–1831) was born a slave in colonial Philadelphia, secured his freedom during the American Revolution, and became one of the nation's leading black activists before the Civil War. Among his many achievements, Allen helped form the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, co-authored the first copyrighted pamphlet by an African American writer, published the first African American eulogy of George Washington, and convened the first national convention of black reformers. In a time when most black men and women were categorized as slave property, Allen was championed as a black hero. As Richard S. Newman writes, Allen must be considered one of America's black Founding Fathers.

In this thoroughly engaging and beautifully written book, Newman describes Allen's continually evolving life and thought, setting both in the context of his times. From Allen's early antislavery struggles and belief in interracial harmony to his later reflections on black democracy and black emigration, Newman traces

Allen's impact on American reform and reformers, on racial attitudes during the years of the early republic, and on the black struggle for justice in the age of Adams, Jefferson, Madison, and Washington. Whether serving as America's first black bishop, challenging slaveholding statesmen in a nation devoted to liberty, or visiting the President's House (the first black activist to do so), this important book makes it clear that Allen belongs in the pantheon of America's great founding figures. *Freedom's Prophet* reintroduces Allen to today's readers and restores him to his rightful place in our nation's history.

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**Freedom's Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers** By Richard S. Newman Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #630404 in Books
- Brand: Brand: NYU Press
- Published on: 2009-10-01

- Released on: 2009-10-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x .94" w x 6.00" l, 1.10 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 359 pages

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. In this elegant and insightful biography, historian Newman (*The Transformation of American Abolitionism*) offers a vivid portrait of Bishop Richard Allen (1760–1831), a tireless preacher committed to ending slavery and fostering equality for blacks in postrevolutionary America. Born a slave in Philadelphia, Allen converted to Methodism when he was 17 during a revival held at his master's house. After obtaining his freedom, Allen helped to establish two of the most important black-led organizations in early America: the Free African Society, a benevolent organization, and Bethel Church, the birthplace of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, one of the most powerful African-American denominations in the United States. Although Allen is best remembered for his religious leadership, his work moved far beyond these circles. According to Newman, his ability to create independent black organizations as well as initiate a published discourse among free blacks established him as one of the nation's founding leaders. Newman's beautifully written study is not only a first-rate social history of the early Republic and African-American culture and religion, it provides a detailed sketch of Allen that is sure to become the definitive biography of the leader. (*Mar.*)

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From [Booklist](#)

\*Starred Review\* Born a slave in colonial Philadelphia, Richard Allen bought his freedom and went on to become a leading black activist before the Civil War, laying the groundwork for modern black nationalist ideology, though he is best known as the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Newman offers an incredibly detailed and astute look at Allen both in the context of religion and in the broader context of American history and philosophy on equality. Allen challenged white leaders by enjoining debate about the immorality of slavery during a time when the national ideology was one of republicanism, which encompassed the notion of citizen virtue and self-sacrifice. He also practiced an expansive black leadership, championing abolition, racial uplift, and black immigration to Haiti or Africa when he suffered disappointment about the prospects for racial justice in the U.S. Newman portrays a man driven by a moral and philosophical impulse for racial justice, evolving as he faced personal, religious, and leadership challenges, as well as the broader national challenge of living up to a creed of equality at a time when the Founding Fathers fell short of those ideals. --Vanessa Bush

Review

"In this elegant and insightful biography, historian Newman (*The Transformation of American Abolitionism*) offers a vivid portrait of Bishop Richard Allen. . . . Newman's beautifully written study is not only a first-rate social history of the early Republic and African-American culture and religion, it provides a detailed sketch of Allen that is sure to become the definitive biography of the leader."-*Publishers Weekly*

"A rich, imaginative, and probably definitive portrait of Richard Allen. . . . Newman makes a convincing case that Allen deserves the iconic status of 'Founding Father' as much as Washington or Jefferson. Highly recommended."

-*Choice*

“*Freedom’s Prophet* is more than a fine biography of Richard Allen. . . . It tells the dramatic story of the role of the black church and its leaders in the African American struggle in Philadelphia and other northern communities against southern slavery and for a place of equality in America during the early decades of nationhood. This compelling study joins the first ranks of the recent work that has profoundly expanded our understanding of the formation of African American community and identity in pre-Civil War America.”

-James Oliver Horton, author of *In Hope of Liberty*

“Newman offers an incredibly detailed and astute look at Allen both in the context of religion and in the broader context of American History and philosophy on equality. . . . Newman portrays a man driven by a moral and philosophical impulse for racial justice, evolving as he faced personal, religious, and leadership challenges, as well as the broader national challenge of living up to a creed of equality at a time when the Founding Fathers fell short of those ideals.”

-*Booklist*

“This is an exuberantly written book that shows how much more we can learn about some eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century black figures.”

-*American Historical Review*

“Few Americans know the extraordinary story of Richard Allen, who rose from slavery in colonial America to become a prosperous entrepreneur and inspirational preacher in the early republic. In this bold biography, Newman rescues Allen from obscurity to achieve a larger goal: to recognize African Americans as active makers of the American republic. The book’s title is provocative, since few people think of blacks as ‘founding fathers,’ but instead as passive victims in an era dominated by their owners: Jefferson, Washington, Madison, Hamilton. ‘Above all else,’ Newman explains, ‘this book poses a simple question: what happens if we put Richard Allen into the hallowed American founding generation?’ The question turns out to have many consequences, for including blacks offers a fuller and truer picture of our origins as a nation—and of our potential as a republic.”

-*The New Republic*

“Newman sees Richard Allen as a black founding father, engaged in developing a nation within a nation, joining blacks to one another in separate institutions within the new republic. It has been a continuing challenge in which charismatic preachers have had a central role.”

-*The New York Review of Books*

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