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## “Grand and Splendid Abolition”: Founders Exhibition at the Library Company Spotlights Influential African Americans of Early Philadelphia

PHILADELPHIA March 19, 2008: Abraham Lincoln was not the Great Emancipator.

True, Lincoln did sign the Emancipation Proclamation 145 years ago, on January 1, 1863. The Proclamation did outlaw slavery in Confederate states. It validated the freedom journeys undertaken by many enslaved people toward the North. But the struggle of American blacks to secure rights as citizens—as free people—began years before our first bearded President took up his pen.

Take Absalom Jones. Born into slavery in 1746, he purchased freedom for himself and his wife, and then became the first African American priest in the Episcopal Church and an outspoken abolitionist.



Or the Allens. Richard Allen and Jones founded the Free Africa Society in 1787, the first organization in the U.S. founded by blacks for blacks. Sarah Allen outlived her husband by almost two decades and was herself a leader in Philadelphia’s free black community, piloting many slaves to freedom through the Underground Railroad.

Portraits of Bishop Richard Allen and Sarah Allen from *Proceedings of the Quarto-centennial Conference of the African M.E. Church, of South Carolina*. Charleston: 1890. p.8.

The Library Company’s new exhibition, “Black Founders: The Free Black Community in the Early Republic” features Jones,

the Allens, and many other newly-freed African Americans in the north. It tracks their struggles to found independent churches, schools, fraternal, and educational associations, and to champion the status of African Americans as equal citizens on the American landscape. They held close the tenants of egalitarian Christianity and championed that single-sentence affirmation of “certain unalienable rights” in the American Declaration of Independence. Theirs was the most consistent voice for multi-racial democracy in the new republic, and their words and deeds helped inspire a vigorous American antislavery movement.

The issues of abolitionism, exodus, and white supremacy consumed popular media for decades before the Civil War. “Black Founders” features books, pamphlets, and newspaper articles by these individuals, promoting their own welfare, championing their rights, struggling against slavery, and defining themselves as Americans in what was a mostly hostile white society. Excluded from national civic ceremonies such as Fourth of July festivities, they

celebrated the abolition of the slave trade in 1808—two hundred years ago, on January 1, 1808—by making January 1 the first African American holiday. Excluded from schools and educational societies, they formed their own. Denied access to the political system, they made alliances with supportive whites to promote their political rights. As movements arose to drive them from American society, they protested and resisted—but at the same time supported movements to consider emigration beyond the influence of American slavery and racism. In fact, the liveliness of the printed debate makes Lincoln look like nothing less than a Johnny-come-lately.

The exhibition runs through October 10 in the Louis Lux-Sions and Harry Sions Gallery at 1314 Locust Street (open from 9:00am to 4:45pm, Monday through Friday). It covers the years after the American Revolution up to 1830, when the first national convention of African Americans brought together blacks from all over the north to consider a national program for their rights and sharpen their campaign against slavery. Though “Black Founders” features African Americans from all over the United States, the primary focus is on the Philadelphia black community, the largest of the northern free black communities in the remaining years of American slavery.



John H.W. Burley. Bishops of the A.M.E. church, detail of inset "Early Days of African Methodism." Boston: Printed by J.H.

“Black Founders” builds on one of the Library Company’s greatest subject strengths. The Afro-Americana Collection comprises over 13,000 titles and almost 1,000 graphics, and includes books, pamphlets, newspapers, periodicals, broadsides, and graphics. Ranging in date from the mid 16th century into the early years of the 20th century, it covers an equally vast range of topics. It documents the western discovery and exploitation of Africa; the rise of both slavery in the new world and the movements against slavery; the development of racial thought and racism; descriptions of African American life, slave and free, throughout the Americas; slavery and race in fiction and drama; and the printed works of African American individuals and organizations. “Black Founders” will give visitors a choice view of items important in the development of liberty and justice for all.

### **Background Information about the Library Company**

The Library Company of Philadelphia is an independent research library concentrating on American society and culture from the 17th through 19th centuries. Free and open to the public, the Library Company houses an extensive non-circulating collection of rare books, manuscripts, broadsides, ephemera and works of art. The mission of the Library Company is to preserve, interpret, make available, and augment the valuable materials within our care. We serve a diverse constituency throughout Philadelphia and the nation, offering comprehensive reader services, an internationally renowned fellowship program, an online public access catalog, and regular exhibitions and public programs. Located at 1314 Locust Street, Philadelphia, it is open to the public free of charge from 9:00 a.m. to 4:45 p.m. Monday through Friday. The Library Company can be found online at [www.librarycompany.org](http://www.librarycompany.org).

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