

NEWS

Literally Speaking: Remembering Bishop Richard Allen and his time spent in Radnor

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PUBLISHED: May 11, 2010 at 10:00 p.m. | UPDATED: September 23, 2021 at 9:11 a.m.

On Tuesday, June 1, 2010, at 10 a.m. there will be a sign dedication event at the newly renamed Bishop Richard Allen Park, which is approximately next to the Bryn Mawr Wawa; the park was formerly named Brook Street Park. The reason the park has been renamed by the Radnor Township Board of Commissioners is part of an unfolding story for which I have had the honor of having a front-row seat.

As part of planning the bicentennial celebration for the Radnor Memorial Library together with other trustees, we had been looking for programs to hold of a historic and, better, of a local nature, around which the year could be celebrated. Toward that end after reading a review of Professor Richard S. Newman's book, "Freedom's Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church and the Black Founding Fathers," I decided to read the book, borrowing it from the library.

While reading I learned that prior to founding the Mother Bethel AME Church in Philadelphia, Allen when an itinerant preacher spent significant time in Radnor



If you are one who enjoys a good mystery, aiming to solve the mystery of local history in one's own town is even more fascinating. In a conversation soon after with former First Ward commissioner Ted Pollard who, fortunately for us, is now busy volunteering at the Radnor Historical Society, I learned not only that he knows of a descendant of Caesar Waters but he had recently spoken with him. Soon after this I sat down and conversed with Mr. Thomas E. Newlin. As the family genealogist he was able to provide information which he gathered together with the late Katherine Hewitt Cummins, in her capacity as secretary of the Radnor Historical Society at the time, which detailed the approximate location of the Waters home and land, which is precisely in what is today Radnor's Fifth Ward.

To help pinpoint the site of the Waters home where Allen would have stayed that winter, William C. Wermuth, treasurer and principal of Yerkes Associates Inc., donated his expertise pro bono and reviewed historic maps. Bill was able to confirm that the lot number of the Waters home coincided with the Fifth Ward pocket park.

What is it that is so compelling about the visit of Allen with the Waterses during the winter of 1784? One can start by saying that it is not significant enough of a moment to warrant a state historic marker; a marker application was twice denied. It is laudable that the state has marked for history the Mother Bethel AME Church for Allen. Their concern seems to be to mark climactic historic moments.

However, it is also important for the rest of us to mark the historic and significant tableaux along the way to these climactic moments. There is a tableau in my mind which has been crystallized for me probably aided by reading Newman's biography of Allen. Having walked for miles to reach Radnor and then having preached along the way and here, Allen's feet were worn and too tender for him to walk the short distance from his chair to the Waterses' dinner table. So instead they washed his feet in water and bran to soothe them and then brought the table directly to him so he could rest while eating. The tableau or picture in my mind is of Allen seated in the chair with his feet bare, and Mr. Waters placing the table in front of him while Mrs. Waters is ready to set his steaming plate down on the table. All of their faces display a Christian sense of gratitude for being together.



It is this moment, the vulnerability of Allen after so much preaching, together with the generosity of the Waters family that convinces me this visit to Radnor Township was formative for Allen to found his church here in the Philadelphia area. Others like Newman and even Newlin believe Allen's visit to Radnor was formative for him too. So now a Radnor Township park will be named for Bishop Richard Allen. And this is a fitting tribute. It will remind us of this image of Allen and the Waterses and provides a window into Christian African-American life in Radnor in the late 1700s.

It seems lately it is difficult to tell the story of historic inequality in Philadelphia and the surrounding environs. For example there are difficulties being encountered in how exactly to build the President's House in Philadelphia, which ought to describe in its construction and presentation the history of the presidents who lived there and also the slaves who lived there. There is a lot of emotion surrounding these discussions.

I find it is helpful not only to capture for history the climactic moments as noted above but also the tableaux along the way that chronicle the historical development that leads to these climactic moments. I believe the more we can document the history of us all, the better for all. Perhaps it is the struggle of our time to grapple with how history ought to be presented. Perhaps we ought to be thankful this is something with which we have to grapple. It signifies that we have come a long way because now we can see the history of both and have the challenge and responsibility of how to note it for future generations.

In the same way that we can document the historic moments along the way to the climactic moments, so that we have a more complete history, also we can document both of these histories, the one of the privileged directly beside the one of the oppressed, because they unfolded directly beside each other, so that we can see the history freely and clearly. Having done that, perhaps our obligation to future generations would be fulfilled in that we have done our best to describe what we have seen and what we now know.

To complete the story, Professor Newman did come to speak at the library last February to a standing-room-only crowd. And now the park will be named for Bishop Allen. The public is welcome to attend the sign dedication. Parking is limited. Enter Brook Street from Landover Road. Please note it is accessible via the P&W trolley too.

