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Fact Sheet: Where to Experience Black History in Philadelphia

From the scourge of the slave trade in the Port of Philadelphia to William Still's collection of stories recalling brave Freedom Seekers, the City of Brotherly Love has played a pivotal role in Black History

PHILADELPHIA, June 18, 2026 – This year, we're celebrating the 250th birthday of the United States. It also marks the 100th anniversary of the first national observance of Black history, initiated by Dr. Carter G. Woodson and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH) in 1926.

Visit Philadelphia is honoring that legacy through a series of initiatives, highlighted by our [Indivisible campaign](#) featuring a bold spot titled "We Are the Fabric. We Are the Thread" with global icon and homegrown talent Patti LaBelle. Black History is alive and on display at every corner. Here are a few of the important people, places and events still guiding conversations around freedom and independence:

The Timeline: Slave Trade to Civil War

- **1639:** Prior to William Penn establishing the Pennsylvania Colony in 1681, the African slave trade was a raging scourge on society. Early Swedish and Dutch settlers started enslaving people and bringing them from Africa to Philadelphia. [Historical marker](#).
 - 1684: The first slave ship to land in the Port of Philadelphia was the *Isabella*, which brought 150 Africans to town, purchased mainly by Quakers living there.
- **1770:** Founded by Quaker abolitionist Anthony Benezet, the African Free School becomes the first school educating Black children, freed and enslaved. He had started tutoring Black schoolchildren from his home in 1750. [Historical marker](#).
 - 1775: The Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage was established on April 14, 1775. Run by Quakers, it is the first abolitionist society in America. [Historical marker](#).
- **1778:** A small unit, mostly comprised of Black soldiers from Rhode Island, commanded by Captain Thomas Arnold, joins the Valley Forge winter encampment. Later, they fight gallantly at the Battle of Monmouth Courthouse. [Historical marker](#).
 - 1780: Pennsylvania Assembly passes the Act for Gradual Abolition of Slavery, the first of several legislative enactments to abolish slavery in the colonies. The law didn't free everyone: "every Negro and Mulatto child born within the state after the passing of the Act would be free upon reaching age twenty-eight."
- **1787:** Richard Allen and Absalom Jones established the Free African Society, a nondenominational mutual aid society that aided newly freed Blacks, giving them support to grow and develop into community leaders. [Historical marker](#).

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- 1794: Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, founded by Richard Allen, opens its doors on South 6th Street. It serves as a place of worship and gathering for the Black community in Philadelphia, born out of racial discrimination stemming from Allen's physical removal (mid-prayer) from a white church. [Historical marker](#).
- **1822:** The James Forten School (then: Mary Street School) opens its doors at 141 League Street. This is the first officially recognized public school for Blacks.
 - 1830: The first National Negro Convention is held in Philadelphia at Mother Bethel AME. It brings together 40 delegates from nine states to discuss pressing issues like hostility, discrimination and violence against Black people.
- **1838:** Pennsylvania Hall, located at 6th Haines Street, is burned to the ground by a white mob after anti-slavery speeches from William Lloyd Garrison and others. [Historical marker](#).
 - 1852: The first issue of *The Christian Recorder* – the newspaper of the African Methodist Episcopal Church – was published in Philly, under Rev. Molliston Madison Clark. It is the oldest continuously published African-American periodical in the United States.
- **1872:** Famed Black abolitionist William Still publishes *The Underground Railroad*, a collection of stories from 846 freedom seekers. He pens it from his home at 244 North 12th Street in Philadelphia, [stating](#): “These facts must never be lost sight of. The race must not forget the rock from whence they were hewn, nor the pit from whence they were digged.” [Historical marker](#).

The Places: Where to See Black History

- [Belmont Mansion](#): The home of the abolitionist Judge Richard Peters, an opponent of the Fugitive Slave Act and a precedent-setting decision-maker who enabled 134 enslaved Africans to become free, has been preserved and transformed into the Underground Railroad Museum at Belmont Mansion. Visitors can take a self-guided or docent-led tour.
- [Johnson House Historic Site](#): A crucial part of the Germantown Historic District, this site was designated a National Historic Landmark for its role in the Underground Railroad. Among the history-makers who stayed here: William Still and, according to family lore, Harriet Tubman.
- [Liberty Bell Center](#): Videos and interactive displays explain how the abolitionist movement, inspired by the bell's inscribed quote from Leviticus — “Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof” — adopted the bell as an icon of freedom. Beginning in the late 1800s, the Bell traveled to expositions to help heal the divisions of the Civil War.
- [The National Marian Anderson Museum](#): A modest three-story home of opera singer and civil rights icon Marian Anderson, this museum reveals the life and work of the legendary contralto – the first African American to perform at the Metropolitan Opera in New York.
- [Paul Robeson House](#): Located in West Philly, this twin rowhouse served as the residence for the human rights activist and singer during the last decade of his life. Tours (by appointment only) give visitors a chance to hear songs he recorded and to see his “Betsy Ross Spinet” model piano.
- [Philadelphia Museum of Art](#): Julian Abele, the first Black architect to design a major museum in the U.S. and first Black graduate of the University of Pennsylvania School of Architecture, laid plans for Philly's iconic art museum, including the famous Rocky Steps.
- [Seventh Ward](#): Philadelphia's 7th Ward was once the epicenter of the city's Black culture and, for much of the 18th and 19th centuries, one of the nation's largest free Black communities. Pro tip: book a tour with [Black Journey](#).

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- **[The President's House](#)**: View structural fragments of the home where Presidents Washington and Adams lived — the same home where the first president confined nine enslaved Africans, including Ona Judge, who escaped to freedom, despite Washington's attempts to recapture her.
- **[Washington Square](#)**: One of the city's original parks was known three centuries ago as Congo Square, where enslaved and free Africans gathered during holidays and fairs to celebrate traditions of their homelands. A wayside in the park describes these activities.

The Museums: Where to Learn Black History

- **[African American Museum](#)**: Founded in 1976, the museum is the first institution built by a major U.S. city to preserve, interpret and exhibit the heritage and culture of African Americans. Their annual Juneteenth Block Party is a summer highlight.
- **[Colored Girls Museum](#)**: In the heart of residential Germantown, a three-story Victorian twin serves as a memoir museum inspired by the history of and original art by Black women and girls.
- **[Independence Seaport Museum](#)**: Guest curated by Dr. Tukufu Zuberi, the exhibit *Tides of Freedom: African Presence on the Delaware River* uses the city's eastern river to uncover the African experience, near a historical marker about the [Pennsylvania Slave Trade](#).
- **[Lest We Forget Museum of Slavery](#)**: The only museum dedicated to “authentic slave artifacts” features shackles, chains, whips and branding irons, aiming to show the tragic reality of slavery. Their well-known *Traveling Slavery Exhibit* brings the harsh realities of the slave trade on the road.
- **[Museum of the American Revolution](#)**: Telling the story of the Revolutionary War through personal stories, this venue highlights the plight of Black Loyalist soldiers, William Lee, the valet of George Washington, enslaved; James Forten, a 14-year-old who volunteered aboard a privateer ship; and Phillis Wheatley, America's first published Black female poet.
- **[National Constitution Center](#)**: The only museum dedicated to the U.S. Constitution delves into pivotal Supreme Court cases such as *Dred Scott v. Sandford* and *Brown v. Board of Education* and explores the Reconstruction Amendments. Their Civil War alcove displays an extremely rare copy of the *Emancipation Proclamation* signed by President Abraham Lincoln along with a signed draft of Barack Obama's *A More Perfect Union* speech.
- **[National Liberty Museum](#)**: Their *Heroes From Around the World* gallery spotlights notable people from all time periods who protected and advanced freedom — including Nelson Mandela and Gail Gibson, a New Orleans nurse whose bravery helped save lives during Hurricane Katrina.

The Churches: Where to Feel Black History

- **[African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas](#)**: In 1792, Bishop Absalom Jones founded the United States' first Black Episcopal church, with congregation members from the Free African Society, near what is now Washington Square. Today, the church's traditions of outreach and spirited worship continue in West Philadelphia's Overbrook Farms neighborhood.
- **[Christ Church](#)**: This 1744 house of worship ordained Absalom Jones as the country's first African American priest (Episcopalian), baptized 25% of the free and enslaved in Philadelphia over a 20-year period and helped establish a school to educate enslaved people.
- **[George W. South Memorial Church of the Advocate](#)**: This 134-year-old North Philadelphia parish has long promoted social justice. During the Civil Rights era, the church hosted the

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National Conference of Black Power (1968) and Black Panther Conference (1970). It was also the first Episcopal Church to ordain women (1974).

- **[Mother Bethel \(A.M.E.\) Church](#)**: Founded in 1787 by Bishop Richard Allen, this church sits on the oldest parcel of land continuously owned by African Americans and is the “Mother” church of the nation’s first Black denomination. Today, Mother Bethel comprises three institutions under one roof: church, museum and archive.
- **[Tindley Temple](#)**: This historic and vibrant South Broad Street church is considered the birthplace of gospel music. In 1901, United Methodist preacher Charles Albert Tindley made history by writing the lyrics to the hymn-turned-anthem, “We Shall Overcome.”

For more detailed information, check out Visit Philadelphia’s [Explore Black History Guide](#).

The People: Who’s Who (click the [reference guide](#))

- William Still
- James Forten
- Cyrus Bustill
- Absalom Jones
- Richard Allen
- Caroline LeCount
- Octavius V. Catto
- Oney Judge
- Phillis Wheatley
- Robert Purvis

For more detailed pitches on under-the-radar stories related to the American Revolution, [click here](#).

About Visit Philadelphia:

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Compelling photography and videos, interactive maps and detailed visitor information make the site an effective trip-planning tool. Visitors can also find loads of inspiration on Visit Philly’s social media channels.

Note to Editors: For high-resolution photos and high-definition B-roll of Greater Philadelphia, visit the Photos & Video section of [visitphilly.com/mediacenter](#).

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