

Yvonne Studevan, descendant of AME founder Richard Allen, among those celebrating denomination's 200th anniversary

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [August 3, 2016](#) issue

Standing outside the historic Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, Yvonne Studevan was full of pride as she saw her great-great-great-great-grandfather being honored with a new, six-foot bronze statue.

Richard Allen started the nation's first independent black denomination, which celebrated its 200th anniversary at its General Conference in early July. The 2.5-million-member denomination has grown from 16 delegates at its first meeting to 1,506 today.

The statue of Allen gives stature to a man many in the AME Church consider a black founding father, said Studevan, 72, of Athens, Georgia.

"It just dignifies us as a race, as a people, because some people today . . . still devalue black people," she said. "Some of the issues that Richard Allen faced, we're still facing today."

Allen was also honored this year with a U.S. postage stamp in the Black Heritage series.

A section of the courtyard surrounding the Allen statue includes plaques paying tribute to the nine members of Mother Emanuel AME in Charleston, South Carolina, gunned down during a Bible study a year ago: "May the untimely deaths of these three men and six women be an eternal reminder of the power of love and forgiveness, and that God's grace is sufficient, no matter what."

Studevan, a retired school administrator, hoped the fresh look at the denomination's history may help pass the story along to the younger generation of AME members. Within minutes of her expressing that hope, a tour guide recounted to a group of teenagers how the walkout from one church led to the creation of their denomination.

Richard Allen started Bethel AME congregation in 1791 after watching white officials of St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church pull up his friend, clergyman Absalom Jones, who was praying on his knees.

"The unwillingness of the Methodists to accept the independent leadership of black preachers like Allen and the institution of segregated seating led Allen and Jones to found independent black churches," said Albert J. Raboteau, an American religion historian.

Those independent congregations formed the AME Church in 1816 at a meeting in Philadelphia and elected Allen the first bishop.

The anniversary highlights a legal achievement by a religious organization of African Americans, said Teresa Fry Brown, AME Church historiographer.

"We had to fight all the way to high court," she said of the battle that was resolved by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. "The Methodist Episcopal Church resisted an independent black denomination." —Religion News Service