

Local and Regional

Commentary

This history is a special one

The decision to require African American studies is correct.

By Amy Jane Cohen

In 2005, the School Reform Commission voted to make the completion of an African American History course a graduation requirement in all public high schools in Philadelphia. This controversial mandate, sponsored by Sandra Dungee Glenn, now the incoming chair of the SRC, garnered national attention and stirred up debate here in Philadelphia.

Among the seemingly valid arguments against requiring African American History was the notion that it is unfair to single out just one group for such special attention. "Why not an Asian American History class, a Hispanic History class, an Irish American History class?" some

asked. "Doesn't every group have a history that is equally worthy and interesting?"

Having taught the African American History course for two years at Masterman School, I have become increasingly convinced that the SRC did the right thing and that the African American experience is uniquely deserving of a year-long required course, particularly in



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Philadelphia.

My thoughts on the matter crystallized in the spring while I was driving east on the 1600 block of Christian Street. An historical marker in front of the First African Baptist Church caught my attention. I slowed and read: "Founded in 1809 as one of the first Black Baptist churches in America. Later two members sold themselves into slavery to free a slave to serve as pastor."

These words clarified for me the three reasons that African American History is unlike the history of any other group in our richly diverse city.

First of all, African Americans have been in Philadelphia since its founding. Enslaved Africans working for Dutch and Swedish traders were already on the shores of the Delaware



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River when William Penn arrived in 1682. Thus, before the turn of the 17th century, Africans were already a substantial portion of Philadelphia's population. From the late 1790s through the mid-nineteenth century, Philadelphia was home to the largest and most dynamic free black community in the United States. Numerous schools, scores of mutual-aid societies, and many churches and denominations were founded during this period. The abolitionist movement and the underground railroad were sustained by contributions of Philadelphia's black residents. African Americans have been a consistent and vital presence in our city since its inception and continue to make up a substantial proportion of our population.

The second reason is that an examination of the black experience enables us to consider the ways in which our country has and has not lived up to its ideals. From minister Richard Allen's efforts in the 1790s to secure the ability for black people to worship in dignity, to activist Cecil B. Moore's 1960s crusade to integrate Girard College, African Americans have tested the meaning of the words "all men are created equal." From the 1863 struggle to desegregate Philadelphia streetcars so that black women could visit their wounded husbands and sons in Union military hospitals, to the 1944 campaign to compel the Philadelphia Transportation Co. to train black mechanics to become bus drivers, African

Americans have expanded access for all minority groups.

Most importantly, African Americans deserve special recognition for being the only group to have experienced hundreds of years of enslavement in America. Although it is common knowledge that slaves worked on Southern plantations, many Philadelphians don't realize that enslaved Africans built and toiled in our city, as well. In 1700, one in 10 Philadelphia families owned slaves. Slave auctions were regularly held at Second and Market Streets, and a 1693 city ordinance called for the public whipping of any slave found out on a Sunday without a pass.

As the recent excavation of the President's House site adjacent to the Liberty Bell has underscored, slavery continued in Philadelphia even after Pennsylvania's landmark Gradual Emancipation Act of 1780. In spite of our reputation as the Quaker City and the seat of William Penn's Holy Experiment, Philadelphia was intimately involved with the slave trade. We must recognize and confront this sad fact in order to have a fuller understanding of slavery's ongoing legacy.

While I certainly recognize that every group has made important societal contributions, I look forward to another year of teaching African American History, a course that is — and should continue to be — a requirement for all Philadelphia students.

Amy Jane Cohen lives and writes in Philadelphia.