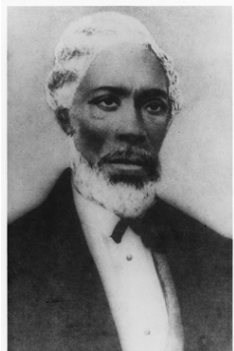


YMCA Spiritual Legacy Series

Anthony Bowen – Founder of the 1st African American YMCA



Anthony Bowen

The first YMCA in the world established to serve African American people came into being in 1853, seven years before the Civil War and ten years before slavery was officially ended in the United States. The principal founder was a former slave, Anthony Bowen, who, with a group of friends, organized the "YMCA for Colored Men and Boys" in Washington, D.C., just nine years after the world's first YMCA was founded in London, England and less than two years after the first North American YMCAs were organized in Boston and Montreal

Anthony Bowen was an unusual man. Born a slave in 1809 in nearby Prince George's County, Maryland, Bowen moved to Washington in 1826 and became legally free within four years. Remarkably, given the times in which he lived, Bowen was the first black man to become a clerk in the U.S. Patent Office. Bowen first heard of the YMCA from a white co-worker, William Chauncy Langdon, a member of the board of the year-old Washington YMCA for white men and boys. With black people barred from membership in any organizations of the day, Bowen decided that a "Black YMCA" was needed.

As Anthony Bowen's work in the 1850s indicates, African Americans embraced the YMCA early on, but social and financial conditions for black people made it difficult for the movement to grow very quickly. Nevertheless, by the late 1860s, the movement found a firm foothold in the community with associations established in New York City, Philadelphia, Charleston, S.C., and Harrisburg, Pa. In 1867, E. V. C. Eato of New York City became the first black delegate to attend the YMCA's annual convention.

The YMCA was not the first institution Bowen founded. He helped to found the St. Paul AME Church in 1856 and established a Sunday Evening School for children and adults. Both met in his home in the 900 block of E Street, SW (now part of the Southeast-Southwest Freeway).

In "The Journal of Negro History" (vol.7, 1922) Carter G. Woodson described the struggles and triumphs of the black community in seeking spiritual expression and ministry:

"One grievance among others was that the Negro members [of the Ebenezer Methodist Church] were dissatisfied with their white pastors because they declined to take the black children into their arms when administering the rites of baptism. In 1839 this alienation developed into an open rupture, when thirteen

class leaders and one exhorter left the mother church, and, after purchasing a lot on the Island, erected a house and formed a black church, independent of the Methodist Episcopal body, under the name of the Wesley Zion Church, and employed a black preacher. Among the prominent men in this separation were Enoch Ambush, the well-known schoolmaster, and Anthony Bowen, who for many years was an estimable employee in the Department of the Interior. Mr. Bowen served as a local preacher for forty years, and under his guidance St. Paul's Church on the Island was organized, at first worshipping in E Street Chapel."

Though we have no written records of Bowen's preaching or writings, if the religion of the African-American community at the time is any indication then his faith was vigorous, evangelical, and deeply spiritual. We can also assume that Bowen shared the spiritual focus of YMCA leaders of his generation (Williams, Sullivan, et al.)

As one of the city's active abolitionists, Bowen met freedom-seekers at the Sixth Street wharf and sheltered them at his home, an important stop along the Underground Railroad. During the Civil War, Bowen met with President Lincoln to urge him to recruit African American soldiers.

Today the Anthony Bowen Branch of the YMCA of Metropolitan Washington bears his name. William Sidney Pittman, son-in-law of Booker T. Washington and one of the nation's first African-American architects, designed the five story building to hold 72 rooms and a swimming pool. President Theodore Roosevelt laid the cornerstone on Thanksgiving of 1908, calling the Y "a monument to the advancement of the city of Washington." Renamed the Anthony Bowen YMCA in 1972, the community center housed such famous residents as Langston Hughes who lived there for a few years.



Original 12th Street YMCA

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