Young James Forten's World: Life in Revolutionary Philadelphia

CITY OF BROTHERLY LOVE

Philadelphia found its roots in William Penn's vision of a Quaker utopia. A nobleman from England, William Penn founded the Province of Pennsylvania in 1681, calling its capital Philadelphia, the "City of Brotherly Love." He wished his colony to be a safe place for Quakers like himself and for others who had suffered because of their religious beliefs. He promised that settlers to Pennsylvania would have freedom of religious worship.

In Philadelphia, settlers of many faiths practiced their religion in homes and other buildings before establishing their own places dedicated to worship. As part of Penn's "Holy Experiment," indigenous peoples who already inhabited the land he acquired continued to practice their religions and rich cultures. However, his vision for religious freedom did not include equality for all. Although Jews, Muslims, Catholics, and other non-Protestants were free to worship or practice their faith, only Protestants could vote or hold political office. Plus, some Pennsylvanians bought and sold **enslaved** people of African descent to work on their farms and in their shops and homes. At least three enslaved Africans worked at William Penn's country estate north of Philadelphia.

At the time of James Forten's birth in 1766, Philadelphia was a very diverse city. Philadelphians came from all over the world and interacted with each other in the course of daily life. Though part of a British colony, Philadelphia's residents were French, Native American, Swedish, African, Dutch, and German, as well as Scottish, Irish, English, and Welsh. Both enslaved and free people of African descent lived in Philadelphia. Many different religious groups practiced in the city: Anglicans, Presbyterians, Catholics, Lutherans, Moravians, and Jews. Plus, there were Muslims, Deists, and people who practiced no religion at all.

Philadelphia, as a port city, was economically connected to the wider world. People from all walks of life rubbed elbows on the streets while experiencing the smells and sounds of a busy, diverse city. At the Public Market on High (now Market) Street and on Philadelphia's wharves, city residents interacted with visitors to the city and goods from around the world. Wheat, fruits, and vegetables came from farms surrounding the city to feed residents and to be sold elsewhere. Rum, coffee, mahogany wood (for furniture making), and sugar came to Philadelphia from the Caribbean. Finished goods and refined materials such as fabrics, steel, pewter, and ceramics came from Great Britain, while tea, silk, and fine porcelain came from Southeast Asia by way of England. The shops of merchants, craftspeople, and bakers could be found throughout the city. Socially, Philadelphians had many places to gather, including licensed taverns, coffee houses, and other establishments where people met to eat, drink, talk, read newspapers, share ideas, and more.

By 1766, Philadelphia was a city of over 20,000 people, making it the largest city in British North America, and the second-largest city in the British Empire, second only to London. Yet the size of Philadelphia in the 18th century was very small compared to Philadelphia's current population of over 1.6 million residents. At the time of the Revolution, Philadelphia had 5,300 houses — compared to about 590,000 homes today. Many residents lived in small houses, like those you can still visit today on Elfreth's Alley, the oldest continually occupied residential street in the United States. Some lived in large townhouses. Everyone lived on the grid plan of wide streets and narrow alleyways.

PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT IN COLONIAL PHILADELPHIA

Philadelphia's vast trading community during the middle of the 1700s included the buying and selling of enslaved human beings. Early European settlers introduced slavery into Pennsylvania before the arrival of William Penn in 1682. Enslaved men and women of African descent worked in Delaware River settlements. When William Penn arrived, not much changed for the enslaved population. Although a Quaker who wanted his colony to be a holy experiment based on religious freedom, Penn accepted the institution of slavery as a necessary evil and did not attempt to prevent the sale of enslaved people in his colony. The enslaved population increased in 1684 when the ship *Isabella* brought over 100 enslaved people to the city. Demand for workers increased during the French and Indian War (1754-1763), as immigration to the city declined. In response to this demand, ships carried as many as 500 African people to Philadelphia directly from West Africa to be sold at slave auctions. This rapid growth of the slave trade in Philadelphia ended in the early 1760s as immigration resumed.

However, slavery was still an important and present part of everyday life in Philadelphia. According to historian Gary Nash, at the time of James Forten's birth in 1766, about 100 free people of African descent and 1,400 enslaved people lived in the city, making it one of colonial America's largest concentrated populations of people of African descent. Philadelphia slave owners were typically wealthy landowners and merchants who made a profit or lived in luxury on the labor of their property. Craftspeople often owned one or two enslaved people to help with their business. Enslaved people worked not on large plantations, as in the southern colonies, but alongside their owners who might have been bakers, coopers, carpenters, or tavern owners. Others performed domestic services like cooking and cleaning. The presence of slavery was an everyday observation in Philadelphia. Southeast Square (now known as Washington Square) played an important role in the lives of the enslaved community, both as a gathering space and a burial ground. The square was witness to the diverse African customs that enslaved people continued to practice when they were permitted to gather on Sundays and during fairs and holidays. This shared space allowed the enslaved community of Philadelphia to maintain and further develop their rich culture.

On the eve of the Revolutionary War, some people of African descent were able to purchase their freedom or escape from bondage. In addition, a number of slave owners started to acknowledge the evils of slavery and began to **manumit**, or free, the enslaved people they owned. All of this increased Philadelphia's free Black population. Institutions like churches and schools that allowed people of African descent to participate further contributed to creating a sense of belonging. Many free children of African descent were baptized at Christ Church and attended a Quaker school opened specifically for their education. Free people of African descent were able to find work in shops and along the wharfs.

Despite this, free people of African descent were often treated as a public burden and faced ridicule and violence from white citizens. They also faced the fear of being captured and illegally sold into slavery. However, by the end of the Revolutionary War Philadelphia's free Black population was a thriving community. By 1783, about 1,000 free Black men and women and 400 enslaved people of African descent lived in Philadelphia.

JAMES FORTEN: GROWING UP IN PHILADELPHIA

On September 2, 1766, James Forten was born in the Dock Ward section of Philadelphia, the southernmost part of the city. He was born a free person of African descent. Both of his parents were free, too. James Forten's grandfather had been enslaved but obtained his freedom, though it is not known how. His grandfather may have saved enough money to purchase his freedom or perhaps he was set free by whoever enslaved him. We do know, however, that the Forten family was part of Philadelphia's population of roughly 100 free people of African descent at the time. Even though the Fortens were free, slavery still affected the family. They knew

they could be seized and sold as supposed runaways at any minute. Despite this, they lived as best they could. James' father, Thomas, was a sailmaker and worked in the sail loft of Robert Bridges. Thomas Forten found himself working for pay alongside enslaved people and **indentured servants**.

Thomas Forten brought young James to the sail loft to observe and learn the valuable trade. For James Forten, the sail loft was a place for work and also play. The sights and smells of a busy sail loft kept a young boy like James busy and engaged. James helped to keep the loft clean by sweeping and picking up loose pieces of cloth. He was later trained to make wax blocks so that needles were easier to work with and to hold up the canvas while others cut the sails. He was also trained to use the various tools of the trade, including different types of needles, **fids**, and the important **sailmaker's palm**. Little did he know, but these skills would prove important in his later life as a professional sailmaker. James Forten was also experiencing the diversity found in Philadelphia. In the sail loft of Robert Bridges, he interacted with different groups of people, including enslaved people of African descent and immigrants from a wide range of European countries.

James Forten grew up during an uncertain and exciting time for Philadelphia and Britain's North American colonies. Starting with the passage of the Stamp Act in 1765, a year before Forten's birth, colonists in North America were questioning their place in the British Empire and their rights as British subjects. Americans protested the Stamp Act until it was repealed, but the movement against Britain escalated with the passage of the Townshend Duties. Colonists responded by **boycotting** British goods. Before James Forten turned four in 1770, Crispus Attucks, a free person of African and Native American descent, was killed in the Boston Massacre. Tensions increased in 1773, as colonists in Boston dumped British tea in the harbor, resulting in Britain closing the port until the tea was paid for. In a show of support for the city of Boston, the merchants of Philadelphia closed their shops and ships in the harbor and flew their flags at half-staff. On King George III's birthday in Philadelphia, no bells rang and no bonfires were lit. Tension filled the streets as many considered how they could regain their rights and liberties as members of the British Empire.

Although he was young, James Forten knew something was brewing as war broke out in Massachusetts in 1775 and people began discussions about separating from British rule in 1776. In addition, he might have heard the criticism about colonists who cried for liberty but also owned enslaved people. Some American writers and protesters even described themselves as "slaves" because of British policies toward the colonies. As James Forten learned to read, he may have wondered how so many people could believe in liberty for themselves and not for others.

When James Forten was seven, tragedy struck his family with the sudden death of his father Thomas. As a result, his mother Margaret was convinced that he should be educated to help support the family. She knew his opportunities would be greater if he could read and write. Anthony Benezet, a Quaker advocate for the education of people of African descent, put her in touch with the Friends' African School and James enrolled. The goal of this school was not only to educate children of African descent but to prove to the rest of society that they were able to learn. The school was open to free children of African descent and enslaved children who were permitted to attend. In six years, over 250 students were educated in this school including James Forten and others who would become leaders of Philadelphia's Black community. Unfortunately, James had to leave the school in 1775, after less than two years. His family needed his help to earn money, and he found work at a local grocery store.

Philadelphia and the Forten family experienced anticipation and hardship in the early days of the Revolutionary War. In May of 1775, the Continental Congress met just a few blocks from Forten's home to discuss forming an army. They also created the Olive Branch Petition, an offer of peace to King George III. James Forten would likely have heard about this meeting of important people and witnessed local troops beginning to form in

the city. The Forten family, like everyone in Philadelphia, was affected by a trade embargo of British goods as prices for everyday items increased. Ships were getting ready to sail ahead of the **embargo** and James might have helped in Robert Bridges' sail loft, where his father had worked, at this time.

Then, surprising news reached Philadelphia in 1775: Lord Dunmore, Royal Governor of Virginia, had offered freedom to any enslaved man owned by a "rebel" who joined him in his fight against the rebellious colonists. Many wondered if this meant that the British planned to liberate all enslaved people.

On July 8, 1776, nine-year-old James Forten witnessed an important event in Philadelphia. When he heard bells ringing from the State House (now Independence Hall), Forten joined a crowd to witness the first public reading of the Declaration of Independence, just four days after it was approved. James Forten heard the words in the **preamble** stating that "all men are created equal" and might have wondered what this meant for people of African descent, both free and enslaved. It certainly made an impact on him, as he remembered this event for his entire life.

DID YOU KNOW?

James Forten shared his memory of hearing the Declaration of Independence for the first time with his friends and family. Historians only know about Forten's attendance at the first public reading of the document because Forten's friends wrote about it after his death in 1842. An article in the abolitionist newspaper The Liberator, for example, claimed "Mr. Forten . . . was in the State House yard, when the far-famed Declaration of Independence was read."

In 1777, the British Army set its sights on Philadelphia. The Continental Congress fled the city and many people relocated to the countryside as reports warned that the British were advancing. Loyalists and some enslaved people eagerly awaited their arrival. By September 1777, James Forten's Philadelphia fell under the control of the British. His family most likely lived through the occupation of the city and Forten later fought for the Revolutionary cause against the British as a **privateer**.

James Forten grew up in the diverse city of Philadelphia in the years leading up to the Revolutionary War. He was legally free in a city where most people of African descent were enslaved. He learned how to read and write when few young people of African descent were educated. He was skilled at a trade that was useful in a port city. All these factors helped to guide his future. How has your life been shaped by where you live? How will it affect your future?