In 2021, the Museum debuted this new painting from Don Troiani with financial support from the Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route National Historic Trail of the National Park Service. Here, you can explore the painting, a few objects used in its creation, and even the art supplies Troiani used.

*Brave Men as Ever Fought* shows a 15-year-old free African American sailor, James Forten, on Chestnut Street, here in Philadelphia. On September 2, 1781, the Continental Army marched through the city on its way to Yorktown, Virginia. The troops kicked up clouds of dust as they marched “in slow and solemn step” past the brick façade of the Pennsylvania State House (now known as Independence Hall), shown in the background. Later in life, Forten described the scene to his friend and fellow abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison: “I well remember that when the New England Regiment passed through this city on their way to attack the English Army under the command of Lord Cornwallis, there was several Companies of Coloured People, as brave Men as ever fought.” Forten was referring to the Rhode Island Regiment, shown here wearing hunting shirts and distinctive leather caps with the anchor emblem of Rhode Island. Two of the regiment’s nine companies consisted almost entirely soldiers of African and Native American ancestry led by white officers, a rarity in the Continental Army. Most men of color in other regiments served in integrated companies, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with white soldiers.

James Forten carried this memory for the rest of his life. Soon after witnessing this scene, Forten was aboard a Revolutionary privateer and was captured at sea. He endured life as a prisoner-of-war, later travelled to London, and finally returned home to Philadelphia. He became a successful sailmaker and businessman, ending his life as one of the city’s most prominent residents. Forten’s American Revolution did not end in 1783. He dedicated much of his life to fighting for what he saw as the true legacies of these events: liberty and equality for all people. As an abolitionist and the head of a family of social reformers, Forten pushed Americans to pursue the ideals of the American Revolution.