The Fortens and the Future

The Fortens and the Abolition

This alphabet book was created to teach children about the key events of the anti-slavery movement.

What would you create an alphabet about?

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This is the story of a family, the Fortens family of Philadelphia. What is your family life? Do you work toward common goals? Celebrate each other's successes? Support each other when things are hard, sometimes really, really hard? And do you all use your talents and knowledge to improve your community and world? If so, your family might be like the Forten family.

You are meeting the Forten family when they lived in Philadelphia almost two years ago. John Forten, the father in this family, was just nine years old when he heard the Declaration of Independence read aloud for the first time. Its words — “all men are created equal” and “dare say ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’” stuck with him for the rest of his life. He believed them and, with his wife Charlotte, raised their children and grandchildren to believe them, too. Together, this family and their descendants used their skills, voices, and resources to fight for these words to truly apply to all Americans.

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Meet the Forten Family

The Fortens lived primarily in Philadelphia from the 18th century until the beginning of the 20th century. Here are some family members you will meet as you explore their contributions to this revolutionary city.

Can you find them in the Forten family tree?

How would you want to be described in your family tree?

Who are you?

Draw a self-portrait.

The Forten Family

James Forten
A slave born in Philadelphia in 1754, James served as a colors during the Revolutionary War and later became aTriangles. He was one of the wealthiest men in Philadelphia and a leader in the African American community.

Charlotte Forten Payne
A grandaughter of James Forten, she helped educate men and women of color through teaching, including in Philadelphia and several other communities.

Harriet Beecher Forten
Mother of James and Charlotte, she was an active member of the Philadelphia Free African Society and other organizations that fought for racial and gender equality.

Robert Purvis
The husband of Harriet Beecher Forten, he was a multi-racial man who used his wealth and influence to become a leader in the fight for abolition and civil rights in the United States.

The Fortens and the Sea

In 1797, at age 14, James Forten joined the Revolutionary War by serving on the Royal Louis, a privateer ship, bringing cannon to the ships' cannons. It was a job that carried risks of being captured, but also rewards, like money from the cargo which he might capture from enemy ships.

James experienced both. On his first voyage, he and the crew captured a British ship and were rewarded with a share of the money. The next time to sea, they were captured by a British warship and taken prisoner.

When he was 15, James was released from the privateer ship he was held captive on. He returned to Philadelphia. This was his last time as a sealer in the Revolutionary War, but the experience stirred in him a desire to help fellow African Americans and his family remained linked to sailing and the sea for the rest of his life.

WHAT IS A PRIVATEER?

A privateer is a privately owned ship with a permission slip from the government to attack enemy ships, take their cargo, and sell it for a profit. The sailors on these ships were also called privateers. Today, there are legal privateers! Should you take the risk?

FAITH AND THE FORTONS

The African Episcopal Church of the United States was founded by the Fortens. Though they were not the first, they were among the first African American church leaders in the United States. They used their influence to help others in need, including helping others to escape slavery and providing support to the freedmen.

FIND THE FORTON PARLOR

This space was created to show what the Forten family's living room might have looked like in 1867. The room might have been where the family gathered together to read or discuss their day. They would have entertained friends and loved ones in their parlors and held meetings with other community members.

FIND THE FORTON SAMPLERS

Samplers were used to teach girls graft, the art of sewing, and needlework skills. They often included Bible verses as part of their “morals lessons.” Today, people can learn to stitch classic grids to create your samplers. What lesson would you want to stitch?

The Fortens and Philadelphia

After the Revolutionary War, both James Forten and Philadelphia began to reach new levels of wealth and success. In 1776, Philadelphia was the second largest city in the nation and the capital of the new nation's government. It welcomed hundreds of ships into port on the Delaware River. James Forten was a leading merchant in Philadelphia, providing ships and goods for most of the ships arriving in the city, making him one of the wealthiest people in America.

Philadelphia was also home to the largest population of free Black people in the United States. For some, life was very challenging. They were free from slavery, but many struggled to have what they needed to survive. Many of those communities did well, although they struggled to support education, and help causes to aid Philadelphia's Black community.

JAME S FORTEN

In 1781, at age 14, James Forten joined the Revolutionary War by serving on the Royal Louis, a privateer ship, bringing cannon to the ships' cannons. It was a job that carried risks of being captured, but also rewards, like money from the cargo which he might capture from enemy ships.

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Today, anyone can learn to stitch! Use the grid to create your sampler. What lesson would you want to stitch?