James Forten’s parents, Thomas and Margaret, were unusual in that they were free Black Philadelphians in a city where most people of African descent were enslaved. Thomas Forten worked in one of the city’s sailmaking shops, called “lofts,” before he died in 1773. James Forten was just seven, but his father’s trade would shape the rest of his life. Thomas Forten’s death meant that James Forten received only a brief period of formal education at a Quaker school. Philadelphia was an exciting place to grow up in the midst of the Revolutionary War. Forten would have seen enormous ships under construction at the city docks, like ones inspired by the long wooden “half-model” made by James Humphreys in 1777 on display here. He would have watched as Continental Army soldiers from all walks of life marched through the city, as depicted in the nearby painting by artist Don Troiani and documented in original wartime records from the Museum’s Patriots of Color Archive. This newly acquired collection features nearly 200 rare original documents related to soldiers of African and Native American descent.

In 1781, inspired by such sights, James Forten, at age 14, signed up aboard a privateer ship named the Royal Louis. Nearby, a newly commissioned model shows what the Royal Louis looked like. Imagine yourself stepping aboard this ship. The potential rewards of privateering were enormous: crews were authorized to capture enemy ships and sell their cargo for profit. But the risks were equally great: life at sea was dangerous, especially for a teenager with little to no sailing experience. James Forten risked being killed or wounded in battle, being captured and thrown aboard a British prison ship, or even — as a young Black man — being consigned to slavery in the Caribbean. What would happen to James Forten next?