Captured!

At the height of the Revolutionary War, in 1781, James Forten's first voyage aboard the privateer ship *Royal Louis* was a resounding success, leading to the capture of six British ships. He briefly returned to Philadelphia, just in time to celebrate his fifteenth birthday and witness the march of Washington's army, including the Rhode Island Regiment with its two companies of soldiers of African and Native American descent. His second privateering voyage, however, was disastrous. When his ship was captured by the British, James Forten was eventually transferred to New York and housed with hundreds of others aboard the *Jersey*, an old warship that had been turned into a floating jail. Conditions aboard the *Jersey* were horrific, but Forten's commitment to the Revolution was unwavering. When offered the chance to accompany a British naval captain's son to England, Forten refused. When a chance to escape the *Jersey* presented itself, he gave up his spot to an ailing boy named Daniel Brewton. Brewton successfully escaped and the two became lifelong friends.

Finally, after seven months, Forten secured his release and walked one hundred miles home to Philadelphia. Following the war, the *Jersey* sank into the mud of Wallabout Bay, near Brooklyn. Years later, it was rediscovered and pieces of it were preserved as relics. Some are on display here.

But James Forten's time at sea was far from over. After recovering from his ordeal and just as the Revolutionary War ended, he booked passage to London. When he returned to Philadelphia, he apprenticed himself in the sail loft of Robert Bridges, rising to become a competent craftsman and shop leader. In a fortunate act of confidence, Bridges left the sailmaking business to Forten when he retired. You can explore a small section of a sail loft nearby. We’ve recreated a workspace familiar to Forten and several generations of his family where you can examine and use replicas of sailmaking and rigging tools.

This chain of events propelled Forten into a remarkably successful business career that would provide the resources for a growing family and their multigenerational social activism.