In the early 1800s, Philadelphia was home to the largest population of free people of African descent in the United States. Most of these people — unlike James Forten — had been born somewhere else. They came from places like Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware, where some had escaped from slavery or purchased their freedom. Other Philadelphians of African descent arrived because of events farther away, like the 500 enslaved people brought by white refugees fleeing the Haitian Revolution of the 1790s. For many of these diverse people, adjusting to life in the city was not easy. Institutions founded and supported by the Forten family advocated for Black immigrants, widows, orphans, and the poor.

Forten also threw his newfound financial resources into patriotic efforts. During the War of 1812, he led some 2,500 Black Philadelphians in the construction of emergency fortifications in the city. He contributed money towards the purchase of an elaborate silver trophy urn presented to Captain Isaac Hull, a naval hero of the war, on display in this exhibition. And he and his family began a years-long commitment to funding and supporting schools for Black children in the city.

On display in this section of the exhibition are rare examples of the work of Black students in early Philadelphia. Mary Virginia Wood, for example, went on to marry one of James Forten's sons. Her girlhood album, here, includes poetry and inscriptions from her many friends, including the Fortens.

The nine children of James and Charlotte Vandine Forten would have something their parents never did: extensive formal education. The Forten children were unusually lucky among Black Philadelphians, and they used this training to found businesses, establish their own families, and lead social movements for the rest of their lives.