The Forten Family

Between 1806 and 1823, James Forten and Charlotte Vandine Forten had nine children. They led interesting lives and contributed to the family’s businesses and social activism. Needlework samplers made by daughters Margaretta and Mary are on display here and still belong to descendants of James Forten. They have never been displayed in a museum before. Nearby, an embossed book cover that belonged to another daughter, Sarah L. Forten, is all that is known to survive of what was once an impressive family library that included novels, scholarly works, and magazines. We can only imagine the conversations these works inspired.

We have relatively few images to put faces to these names. Charlotte Vandine Forten outlived her husband by decades, long enough to sit for a photograph, shown here, in the 1860s. We know that in 1882 she still owned an oil painting of her late husband, but that portrait is not known to survive. Over the years, various scholars have proposed that other paintings and photographs of Black men might show James Forten, which you can learn more about nearby. In this sense, the Fortens were not unusual. Because of the expense of creating a painting, we have very few images of early Americans of African descent. That makes it all the more important to imagine their lives through rare objects and documents like the ones on display throughout this exhibition.