Battling Slavery, Defending Freedom

James Forten argued for the equality of African Americans in the new United States. The Forten family used their wealth, education, and writing talents to advance the cause of freedom and equal rights. In speeches and writings, James Forten made it clear that he was committed to equality in the face of racism. In his earliest surviving letter, dated January 1800, Forten wrote:

“Though our faces are black . . . we all have the feelings and passions of men.”

He subsequently authored countless newspaper editorials and a renowned pamphlet, *Letters from a Man of Colour*, which advocated for the rights of Black Americans. His wife and daughters helped establish the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society.

Slavery persisted, however, even in Pennsylvania. The state’s 1780 Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery was revolutionary — but limited. A variety of loopholes left some people enslaved for their entire lives. Enslaved people brought from other states into Pennsylvania were supposed to be declared free if they stayed more than six months. Slaveholders, including President George Washington, sidestepped the law by rotating enslaved people in and out of the state.

Recognizing these limitations inside their state and the persistence of slavery across the nation, the Forten family advocated relentlessly for the abolition of slavery. They contributed to organizations, meetings, fundraisers, publicity campaigns, and lobbying efforts with the singular goal of holding the nation accountable to the ideals set forth in the Declaration of Independence.

They didn’t always win these battles. Late in James Forten’s life, in 1838, Pennsylvania issued a new state constitution that revoked the right to vote from African American men. Despite such setbacks, the Forten family refused to give up the fight for people like them to be recognized as equal citizens in the United States.