Colonization and Abolitionism

“We hold this truth to be self-evident, that GOD created all men equal, and is one of the most prominent features of the Declaration of Independence and in that glorious fabric of collected wisdom, our noble Constitution.”

As he did in Letters from a Man of Colour, quoted here, James Forten persistently cited the Declaration and the Constitution among the founding principles of his view of the world. But under these guiding lights, he was also capable of changing his mind. When a new plan — called the colonization movement — emerged in the early 1800s to resettle Black Americans in Africa, he initially supported it. In 1817, 3,000 Black Philadelphians packed into Bethel AME Church for a meeting about colonization presided over by Forten himself. Some sat in the long wooden pew displayed here. When he asked for their opinion on resettling, the crowd loudly and wholeheartedly rejected the plan.

Forten listened. He became the leading opponent of colonization. Events in years to come proved him right: the American Colonization Society’s plans were increasingly based on racism and segregation.

The Forten family came to believe that their home was the United States and that their job would be to reshape the country and eradicate slavery. In 1834, Forten’s daughter Sarah composed a poem she called “My Country”:

When America’s standard is floating so fair
I blush that the impress of falsehood is there;
That oppression and mockery dim the high fame,
That seeks from all nations a patriot’s name.
Speak not of ‘my country,’ unless she shall be,
In truth, the bright home of the ‘brave and the free!’