James Forten’s wife and daughters pushed themselves beyond the traditional roles of women as wives and mothers to take political action. But they were part of a very small minority of Black Philadelphia women who were fortunate enough to have the time and money to participate in political and social causes. In the early 1800s, most African American women in the city earned meager pay as laundresses, domestic servants, wet nurses, and food sellers. Charlotte Vandine Forten and her daughters Margaretta, Harriet, and Sarah, on the other hand, did not have to work. But they did not pass their time idly.

Beginning in 1833, these women helped establish and lead a new, interracial organization, the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. The Society was dedicated to showing the people of Philadelphia what they called the “injustice and deep sin of slavery” while also combating racial prejudice. Referring to the Bible and the Declaration of Independence as the foundations for its message, the Society petitioned Congress, hosted fundraising fairs, and provided support to freedom-seeking people. Four of the nine initial Black society members were from the Forten family.