Mother Bethel Pew

This stop is one of our object highlights!

Imagine yourself inside Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church on a cold January day in 1817. The church is crowded with people. Nearly 3,000 Black Philadelphians have packed inside for an important meeting. You would have been lucky to secure a seat on this long wooden pew, which stood inside the building. These people are not here for a church service, though, but to discuss the rise of the new African colonization movement. Advocates of this cause suggest that African Americans will be better off leaving the United States to create a new colony in Africa.

James Forten himself presides over this meeting. Imagine listening intently, on the edge of your seat. When he calls for a vote, the meeting joins together and shakes the church walls with one tremendous “no.”

Forten became a lifelong opponent of colonization. This pew remained in the church and has been carefully preserved by today’s Richard Allen Museum at Mother Bethel AME Church, which you can visit to learn more about the congregation’s amazing history.