Robert Purvis and the Underground Railroad

Escaping from slavery came with great risks. Freedom-seeking people had to avoid capture and retribution in the South and North. It was against federal law to help a person escape slavery. Who could you trust?

In the 1780s and 1790s, as James Forten was establishing himself in business and as a leading citizen, a Philadelphia-based network of support for freedom-seekers, the roots of the Underground Railroad, began to form. Over the next 40 years, hundreds of enslaved people traveled to the city for refuge. The homes of some prominent Black Philadelphians became hiding places.

In 1837, with increasing demand for support from freedom-seekers, James Forten's son-in-law, Robert Purvis, helped to form the Vigilant Association of Philadelphia. In public, the Association raised money for African Americans in need. In private, a secret sub-committee provided shelter, clothing, medicine, and legal advice to freedom-seeking people before helping them travel even further north. Nearby is a remarkable ledger: the only surviving record book of the Vigilant Association, which documents the names of the people they worked with and assisted.

The Forten family and its social influence were growing. Harriet Davy Forten had married Purvis, a wealthy businessman born in South Carolina whose parents were a British merchant and a free woman of color. Settled in Philadelphia, Forten's new son-in-law was among the most prominent abolitionists of his generation. Like many others, he closely followed the trials related to the Amistad, a ship on which illegally enslaved Africans revolted against their enslavers and seized the vessel. The entire family celebrated when the United States Supreme Court sided with the Africans. Purvis commissioned a portrait of the rebellion's leader, Sengbe Pieh, whose name was Americanized to Cinqué, and hung it in his home. Some of the other objects displayed nearby are rare personal belongings of Robert Purvis and Harriet Davy Forten Purvis, on loan from their descendants. The Purvis family committed themselves to political and social activism as they took on the mantle of the ongoing American Revolution.