Final Years

As the Forten family and other free people of color became more prominent in the social life of Philadelphia, they also became the subject of scrutiny, ridicule, and even violence. The prints on display here are racist satires of elite Black Philadelphians. Forten and his family would have recognized themselves and their friends in these thinly veiled caricatures.

James Forten was used to being ridiculed, but as the years passed the frequency of racial violence increased. The 1830s and 1840s were a time of social strife in Philadelphia as people grappled with an expanding population, periodic economic crises, and new immigration. Sometimes, violent crowds targeted immigrants, especially Irish Catholics. Often the anger of white working men was directed at Black people. In 1834, a gang of young white men chased one of Forten's sons down Lombard Street before he narrowly escaped. Days later, a white mob burned homes, looted churches, and killed a man in the African American neighborhood around South Street. In 1842, another riot broke out on Lombard Street. James Forten's son-in-law, Robert Purvis, loaded a gun and stood on the steps of his home ready to defend his family before a priest intervened and dispersed the mob.

The most devastating event in this period for the Forten family came in 1838. That year, social reformers and abolitionists constructed an impressive new two-story meeting place, within sight of Independence Hall, that included an abolitionist bookstore, a printing office, and a 3,000-person auditorium. They called it Pennsylvania Hall. Just four days after it opened, a white mob sacked and burned the building to the ground.

It is hard to imagine what James Forten thought of all of this, and he left us few accounts of what must have been a personal and social tragedy. And his family had another trial yet to come: James Forten died after an illness on March 4, 1842. His funeral was attended by almost 4,000 people, including the most prominent citizens of Philadelphia, Black and white.

Instead of retreating after the destruction of Pennsylvania Hall and the death of their patriarch, though, activists like the Forten family became more committed to their cause. Their dedication took time to pay off: it would take nearly 25 years after Forten's death for them to finally achieve their primary goal of abolishing slavery.