Civil War

Almost twenty years after James Forten’s death, the outbreak of the American Civil War tore the nation apart and finally accomplished one of his life’s goals: the abolition of slavery. His family put their full might behind the Union cause. They led recruiting and fundraising efforts. One of James Forten's granddaughters, 25-year-old Charlotte L. Forten, travelled to South Carolina to teach formerly enslaved people and left a vivid journal of her experiences. The Forten family closely followed the accomplishments of Black soldiers and their white officers. Forten's son Robert Bridges Forten enlisted in the 43rd Regiment of United States Colored Troops, rose to the rank of sergeant major, and died from a wartime illness. Forten's grandson, Joseph B. Purvis, served in the same regiment. Objects displayed here include a military flag painted by Black Philadelphia artist David Bustill Bowser and the equipment of Private Isaac J. Winters, who served alongside Forten and Purvis, in the 43rd Regiment.

The Civil War and the Constitutional Amendments that followed – part of the events known as Reconstruction – finally brought an end to legal slavery in the United States, except as punishment for a crime. They did not, however, end racial prejudice throughout the country, nor did they end the Forten family’s commitment to reforming the nation. The Fortens redoubled their efforts to elevate the rights of free Black people and women. “The spirit of slavery still exists,” wrote Forten's grandson Charles Burleigh Purvis to Frederick Douglass in 1889, “it must be broken. There are great battles yet to be fought.”