127th USCT Flag

This stop is one of our object highlights!

This large silk flag was created in 1863 by a Black Philadelphia painter named David Bustill Bowser. During the Civil War, just like in the Revolutionary War, soldiers carried flags to signal and organize their movements in battle and display their pride. This one is over five feet long on each side, and it was carried by the 127th Regiment of the United States Colored Troops, the branch of the U.S. army made up of units of Black soldiers led by white officers. Eleven of these regiments were raised in Philadelphia and trained in the city at Camp William Penn. Bowser made flags for each regiment, and while many were photographed during the war, this is the only one that still exists.

Bowser was a painter, and so after someone else sewed the flags from silk, he added unique designs to each one, often showing Black soldiers below patriotic mottos. In this one, a soldier is encouraging a woman, who symbolizes the United States. The motto resonated with Black soldiers fighting for their rights in the midst of the Civil War: “We will prove ourselves men.”

Next to this flag is another one: a Confederate battle flag. This flag flew in battle against the flag of the United States, and it was captured in a dramatic moment by the 43rd Regiment of the United States Colored Troops, the same one in which Forten’s son and grandson served.