Charlotte L. Forten’s Journal

This stop is one of our object highlights!

In the midst of the Civil War, James Forten’s granddaughter, Charlotte L. Forten, traveled to South Carolina to take a position teaching formerly enslaved people. This was an adventure and a cause that her entire family supported. She kept detailed journals of this experience, one of which is on display here, on loan from Howard University, a historically Black university in Washington, DC.

This journal dates to the year 1863 and includes Charlotte’s descriptions of meeting the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, one of the first Black regiments in the Union Army, soon after they arrived to fight in South Carolina. She was especially impressed by the regiment’s discipline and its white commanding officer, Colonel Robert Gould Shaw. When she heard about the regiment’s attack on a Confederate fort nearby, Charlotte wrote about the regiment’s courage and shared her sadness about the casualties they suffered:

“To-night comes news oh, so sad, so heart-sickening. It is too terrible, too terrible to write. We can only hope that it may not all be true. That our noble, beautiful young Colonel [Shaw] is killed, and the regiment cut to pieces... There was an attack on Fort Wagner. The 54th put in advance; fought bravely, desperately, but was finally overpowered and driven back after getting into the Fort. Thank Heaven! They fought bravely!”

After the war, Charlotte got married and became known as Charlotte Forten Grimké. Her journals were eventually edited and published, so you can read them today.