

James Forten and Entrepreneurs of African Descent

The purpose of this unit is to have students consider the importance of businessmen and women of African descent during the decades after the Revolutionary War. Using the story of James Forten, students can consider the challenges and opportunities of becoming an entrepreneur as a person of African descent during the first half of the 1800s. Students will explore how James Forten made his wealth in a sailmaking business and the stories of others of African descent in Philadelphia and around the country who became entrepreneurs in a wide range of industries.

MATERIALS

Big Idea 4: James Forten and Entrepreneurs of African Descent

Object Card: Tools of the Trade

Advertisement: Joseph Cassey advertisement in United States directory for the use of travellers and merchants : giving an account of the principal establishments, of business and pleasure, throughout the Union / by Joshua Shaw (The Library Company of Philadelphia)

https://www.dropbox.com/s/wxh4g3kz2cux6ll/IM.101_Joseph%20Cassey%20Advert.tif?dl=0

Worksheet: What We Know

Handout: Business Leaders of African Descent in the Early 19th Century

Recording: *The Grave of the Slave*, lyrics by Sarah L. Forten and music by Francis Johnson. Sung by Candace Nicole Potts of the Jeremy Winston Chorale, accompanied by Jeremy Winston on piano, 2021

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/zuioc37y4io6ydz/Grave%20of%20the%20Slave%20-%20C.%20Potts.mp3?dl=0>

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The modular activities and extensions in this unit provide opportunities for students to:

- Discover how James Forten became the leading entrepreneur of African descent in Philadelphia during the first half of the 1800s.
- Consider the important contributions of other business leaders of African descent in the decades following the Revolutionary War both in Philadelphia and around the nation.
- Evaluate the challenges and opportunities of becoming an entrepreneur today.

PROCEDURES

Engagement, Option 1 (10-15 minutes)

WOULD YOU BE AN ENTREPRENEUR?

Teacher preparation: Prepare to display or project the advertisement for Joseph Cassey.

Project or display the advertisement. Engage students in a conversation around the following questions:

- What is this document? What do you see that makes you think this?
- What is being advertised?
- Why are the names William Davenport and Joseph Cassey displayed so boldly?

Then, engage students in conversation around the following questions:

- Do you know what an entrepreneur does?
- Would you rather work for an established company/ organization or become an entrepreneur?
- What responsibilities do entrepreneurs have to give back to their community?
- If you had a lot of money to give back to the community, which organizations would you choose and why?

EXTEND: Discuss with students what would be the pros and cons of becoming an entrepreneur or working for an established company.

Engagement, Option 2 (10-15 minutes)

OBJECT INVESTIGATION: TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Teacher preparation: Review *Big Idea 4: James Forten and Entrepreneurs of African Descent*. Prepare to project or display the *Object Card Tools of the Trade*.

Ask students to describe each object (color, shape, size, what they are made of). Then, ask them to consider what the tools were used for and attempt to justify their responses. After they have had time to think about the objects and guess what they might have been used for, reveal the purpose of the tools. Explain that young James Forten used similar tools alongside his father, Thomas, who was a sailmaker. Conclude by asking students if they could learn a trade or craft, what would it be and why?

EXTEND: Have students research what other trades existed in the 18th century and how a master and apprentice relationship worked in these trades.

Development, Option 1

(35-45 minutes and research time)

BUSINESS CHALLENGES

Teacher preparation: Review *Big Idea 4: James Forten and Entrepreneurs of African Descent*. Ensure students have access to computers, tablets, or other devices with working internet connections to read *Big Idea 4* or print out enough copies for each student.

Break the students into small groups (or pairs). After they are in their groups, assign each group one of the following challenges for James Forten's business.

- Many people did not consider Forten to be a citizen and had prejudices about his ability to run a business as a person of African descent
- James Forten was not able to vote
- A President Thomas Jefferson's trade embargo in 1807
- The War of 1812
- The city of Philadelphia was no longer the capital of Pennsylvania and the country
- New York City surpassed Philadelphia as the nation's largest city and economic center

In their groups or pairs, have students consider:

- How might James Forten's business been affected by your assigned challenge?
- Did the challenge exist for business leaders after James Forten? Does it still exist today?

Have students present their findings to the class. Conclude by having a class discussion on ways to address these types of challenges today.

Development, Option 2 (40-45 minutes)

WHAT WE KNOW

Teacher preparation: Review *Big Idea 4: James Forten and Entrepreneurs of African Descent*. Ensure students have access to computers, tablets, or other devices with working internet connections to read *Big Idea 4* or print out enough copies for each student. Prepare copies of the *What We Know* handout.

Explain to students that unfortunately, most of James Forten's business papers are missing. They were either burned, thrown away, or lost. However, we can gather information about his business from the few primary sources that have been found. Assign students in groups or individually to complete the worksheet: *What We Know*.

Afterwards, engage students in conversation around the following questions:

- How did the primary sources help uncover information about James Forten's business?
- What did they reveal about the business?
- How can documents help historians uncover information about the past?

EXTEND: Have students create a list of sources they would need to create a better picture of James Forten's business.

Culmination

(2 class periods: one class for research, one for the fair)

BUSINESS FAIR/ GROUP ACTIVITY

Teacher preparation: Prepare copies of the *Business Leaders of African Descent in the Early 19th Century* handout.

Have students individually, in pairs or in small groups choose an entrepreneur of African descent from the handout. Assign students to create a commercial, tri-fold, or poster board that will feature the business of the person. Encourage students to be creative and think about how they could sell their product to customers in the time period (middle of the 1800s) and how their company plans to give back to the community. In addition, as part of the activity, have them create a visual example of the business (food, music, product, demonstration).

Dedicate a day in class as the business fair, when students can present or display their business and products.

Optional: Give each student \$100 fake money to use at the business fair to buy their classmates' products or vote on which business they would most like to do business with.

EXTENSIONS/ ADAPTATIONS

CREATE YOUR OWN BUSINESS

In small groups or individually, assign students to create their own businesses. Have the students present their businesses and a list of obstacles they may face. After the presentation, ask the remaining students if they would consider buying the product. Why or why not? Have a Business Fair to allow students the opportunity to table their businesses.

INTERVIEW AN ENTREPRENEUR IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Have students either find an entrepreneur to interview or invite them to your class. Ask them the following questions:

- How did you get the idea to start your business?
- How many employees do you have?
- What do you look for in an employee?
- What were your biggest challenges?
- What are you hoping to do in the future?
- If you were to give advice about starting a business, what would it be?
- How do you engage with/give back to the community?

A FORTEN FAMILY BALLAD

Have students listen to the song “The Grave of the Slave,” which was written by Sarah L. Forten and set to music by Francis Johnson. Ask them if his music reminds them of any music today. What is the mood of the piece? What emotions do you think Johnson was trying to evoke for his audience with this song?

HELP WANTED

After students have read Big Idea 4: James Forten and Entrepreneurs of African Descent, assign them to create a poster (as if they were living in 1800) advertising for workers in James Forten’s sail loft. Have them consider the benefits of Forten’s interracial workplace as part of their advertisement.

REAL ESTATE INVESTMENTS

James Forten invested much of his money in real estate. If you were to buy one piece of land or a building, what would it be and why? Why do you think it may go up in value in the future?

CHARTING YOUR CAREER

Ask students to list some of the activities they do outside of school. Then ask them to consider how and why these activities might lead to a career.

MY BUSINESS RULES

James Forten enforced various rules in his sail loft. He banned alcohol and immediately let go of any worker who showed up intoxicated (drunk). He expected his workers to arrive on time and ready to work. He kept track of time with one of his most treasured possessions, his gold watch.

Ask students: What rules would you make for your employees if you owned a business? How would you ensure you remained fair to your employees and made them want to work for you while encouraging their responsibility?