

James Forten
1766-1842

James Forten, formally James Fortune, died yesterday March 4, 1842. Mr. Forten was born to free black parents in the city of Philadelphia on an unseasonably chilly September 2nd in 1766. By the time he was seven years-old he had already lived through some of the most important events in the forming of our nation including the Townshend Acts, the Tea Act and the Boston Tea Party. However, unlike many of his peers he was unable to fully appreciate the importance of the times as his life was forever changed in late December of 1773 with the death of his father, a local sailmaker. After a short stint enrolled in a local Quaker run school (his departure coinciding with the death of a wealthy aunt who left money to his sister but not to him) at the age of nine he took a job with a local storekeeper.

During the Revolutionary War, after the Battle of Brandywine, James witnessed the occupation of his beloved Philadelphia until the summer of 1778. While under the direct control of the British he and the rest of the residents of the colonial capital suffered food shortages, severe inflation, and riots. Although only 15 years-old James joined a privateer ship as a powder boy. In battle Mr. Forten found himself the sole survivor of the gun he had been assigned to and was taken prisoner by the British.

While most captured soldiers and sailors of African background were sent to the West Indies and sold into slavery James was saved from this fate by a game he learned to master as a child. The captain of the ship that had captured him noticed James playing marbles and, having a son about the same age, asked James to teach his boy the game and a friendship developed. While his skills with marbles might well have saved him from a life of slavery it could not save him from the horrors of the prison ship *Jersey*.

Conditions on the prison ship were very harsh. However, the clever Mr. Forten found a way to escape by making a deal with a sailor who was to be released (he was slight enough to fit in the man's sea chest). But before the man was released James saw a more sickly boy and offered the sea

chest to him. Not only did he give up his freedom in this selfless act he helped carry the chest off the boat to help assure that the weight of it wouldn't draw any undue attention. Eventually he was freed by the British and walked the nearly 100 miles from the ship back to Philadelphia.

As fate would have it upon arriving back in his hometown he got a job as a sailmaker working for the very man his father had worked for. In 1803 James married Martha Beatte but unfortunately she became ill and died only a year into their marriage. Two years later he married Charlotte Vandine and together they had nine children.

When the War of 1812 began James joined a militia unit that protected his beloved Philadelphia. After the war he found a new cause and joined the the abolition movement and worked with the likes of William Lloyd Garrison. Not many men can say they have lived in such imporant times and even fewer can say that they have seen and been a part of the history Mr. Forten has played a role in. Sadly, I fear that we as a country might not remember men like James and his contributions after some time has passed and men of lesser character will rise to the heights that should be reserved for men like Mr. Forten. No. That will never happen.