23 Freedom Fighters

James Forten became wealthy as a sailmaker and influential as a leader of free blacks.

James Forten had to beg his mother to let him go to sea. His father had died when he was seven and his mother depended on him. Besides, he was her pride and delight. James was bright and full of fun and willing to work hard and please. He'd gone to Anthony Benezet's well-known Quaker school until he was nine, so he could read and write well and handle numbers, too. Then he'd gone to work: first at Benezet's grocery store and then on Philadelphia's docks. His father had been a sailmaker (sewing the heavy sailcloth with waxed thread took special skill). James learned the trade and eventually became one of Philadelphia's most successful and wealthiest sailmakers.

Everyone who knew Anthony Benezet described him as a man who did good deeds and asked nothing in return. During the day he taught white children and at night he taught blacks. He soon discovered that the black and white children were equal in their abilities (many whites had a hard time believing that). Benezet did everything he could to get Philadelphia's slave owners to free slaves. When he died, in 1784, hundreds of blacks mourned at his funeral.

But when James was 14 there was a war being fought, and he wanted to be a part of it. Like everyone in Philadelphia, he'd seen George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, and he'd heard those words, "all men are created equal." They were worth fighting for.

So he signed up on the *Royal Louis*, a privateer. The colonies had small navies, but they didn't amount to much against the great English fleet. It was the private ships that were hurting England. Congress allowed them to attack British ships and keep any profits that they made.

James Forten became a powder boy. It was a dangerous job. Eighteenth-century ships were wooden, and flammable. Cannons were kept on deck, but gunpowder was stored below, where it was more likely to stay dry and be safe from accidents. When fighting began someone had to keep the cannons supplied. It was powder boys who did that. They needed to be small, fast, and fearless. They

Powder boys were also called ***powder monkeys***.

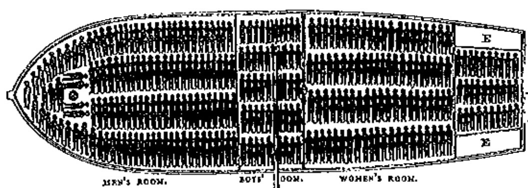
needed to keep running—up and down the ship's stairs, or companionways—even if cannonballs were falling around them and men were screaming in pain.

Which is exactly what happened on James Forten's first voyage out. The *Royal Louis* met a British ship; there was an awful fight with exploding shells, screams, groans, and deaths. But when the *Royal Louis* returned to Philadelphia, her guns were pointed at a captive British ship. It seemed as if all Philadelphia came out to cheer. James Forten knew what it was to be treated as a hero. And he got his share of the profits when the English ship was sold. Then he, and the other crew members who survived, repaired their ship and were soon back at sea. This time they were not lucky.

This 19th-century watercolor is titled *Overseer Doing His Duty*. He lounges around and smokes, while barefoot slaves swing hoes to clear still-burning tree stumps from new fields.

When the *Royal Louis* went after a British ship, two others appeared out of the blue. The Americans had stumbled into a trap; they were outnumbered; there was nothing to do but surrender. James Forten and his mates were brought aboard a British ship as prisoners. Now Forten had a special worry. In Philadelphia he was a free person, but he knew that the British often sold black prisoners to slave dealers in the West Indies—and James had dark skin. What would the ship's captain do with him? He was taking most of the American captives to a prison ship—and that was a bad enough fate. Would he take Forten with them? Even worse, would he sell him?

Later in his life Forten liked to tell the story of what happened next. He said it was his skill at playing marbles—learned as a boy in Philadelphia—that saved him from slavery. It so happened that the British captain had a son who was about Forten's age. When the English boy saw the young prisoner playing marbles, he asked to play. Forten beat him. But James Forten was so likable that the captain's son asked his father to take him back to England and set him free. The captain said he would do it, if James would renounce his country.



Slaves were packed into slave ships, but this widely reproduced picture is an exaggeration. It was used to make people recoil at the horrors of the slave trade.

Tom Paine asked how American slave owners could "complain so loudly of attempts to enslave them [by Britain], while they will hold so many hundred thousand in slavery."

This slave auction was unusual for being held indoors. Most were conducted right on the street.

Forten wouldn't consider it. He was an American and he said, "No! I shall never prove a traitor to my country!" and that was that. James Forten spent the next seven months in an overcrowded, stinking prison ship before he was released in a prisoner exchange.

No one knows the numbers for sure, but about 5,000 black men and boys are said to have fought on the American side during the Revolutionary War (out of about 300,000 soldiers in all). A redcoat wrote, "No regiment is to be seen in which there are not Negroes in abundance and among them are able-bodied, strong, and brave fellows."

Some helped England. The British promised to free any slaves who left their Patriot masters. (They didn't promise freedom to slaves of Loyalists. Those slaves were returned to their owners.) In the South it wasn't easy to escape to the British lines. There were lashings and other punishments for those who were caught. But tens of thousands of black men, women, and children "voted with their feet." They made it to British camps. Others were captured by the British. Thomas Jefferson wrote of what happened on his plantation:

"He [Lord Cornwallis] carried off about thirty slaves. Had this been to give them freedom, he would have done right; but it was to consign them to inevitable death from the smallpox and putrid fever, then raging in his camp. This I knew afterward to be the fate of twenty-seven of them. I never had news of the remaining three, but presume they shared the same fate." One of the slaves who died of fever was named Sam. He was nine years old. Another, Jane, was ten.

What would you do if you were a black person living in Philadelphia at the time of the Revolution? James Forten wasn't typical. Many of Philadelphia's blacks supported the British. The English offered freedom to slaves (or so they said). But then there was that Declaration of Independence to think about. Black people understood the real meaning of those words "all men are created equal" long before most whites did.

Many white Americans—especially in the South, where blacks often outnumbered whites—didn't want black people to have guns. They feared a slave uprising. So a year after the first battles a rule was made: no blacks—free or slave—in the Continental army. George Washington insisted on an exception to that rule. He said that those free black soldiers who had already fought should be allowed to reenlist. But otherwise, blacks were excluded.

As the war went on—and on—some people began to see the nonsense of that policy. By the summer of 1777, New England's militias were using black soldiers again and promising them their freedom. Rhode Island had two black regiments. In Virginia, black soldiers fought alongside white soldiers. Most of the southern states used blacks as river pilots and even gunners on ships. Finally, in 1778, the Continental army changed its policy and began enrolling black soldiers. But South Carolina and Georgia still wouldn't go along.

Two young officers on General Washington's staff—John Laurens (from South Carolina) and Alexander Hamilton (from New York)—tried to get South Carolina to change its mind. They couldn't do it.

Why would blacks fight for a nation that allowed slavery? This war for freedom and equality was confusing. The words of the Declaration of Independence were noble—everyone agreed on that—but were they really meant to be taken seriously? Now that was where there was some disagreement.

The fact is, the whole idea of equality seemed insane to some people. Remember, the world of the 18th century was like a ladder, where everyone had a particular rung to stand on. It seemed secure, and sure. It was a world where everyone knew his or her place. You were always looking up, or down, at others. Equality would knock the ladder on its side. Equality is horizontal. Everyone is on the same level.

Many men and women weren't ready to make that change. (Children often have an easier time with that idea of equality than adults do.) Most grown-ups believed that if people didn't know their place, society would fall apart. And they were right. The society they knew—the society of the ladder—was going to be destroyed by that phrase "all men are created equal." No one could tell where it would lead, but some were scared.

This new idea—that people all have equal rights—seemed wild and radical. Equal rights? "Nonsense," said some. If equality were taken seriously it would change everything about people's relationships. It was going to happen, but not overnight. You needed to start with the idea. James Forten understood that. So did Thomas Jefferson. So did many others.

A Leading Citizen

After the war, James Forten became one of Philadelphia's most prosperous and influential citizens. He owned a large sailmaking business that employed both blacks and whites. He helped found an antislavery society (with Benjamin Rush) and was a leader in the African Methodist Church. He supported women's rights and peace movements. When a white-owned firm closed (leaving large debts owed to Forten and others), James Forten went to the owner and said, "I came, sir, to express my regret at your misfortune.... If your liabilities were all in my hands, you should never be under the necessity of closing your business." Forten acted as a bridge between the black and white communities, respected by all.

Philadelphia in 1765 had about 1,400 slaves and 100 free blacks. In 1783, Philadelphia had about 400 slaves and more than 1,000 free blacks.

A Monumental Journey

The blue-robed Franciscan missionaries had planned to leave on July 4, 1776, heading a grand expedition with arms and banners and a full military escort. But it was actually July 29 when they got started, just two Catholic friars and eight other men. They were "without noise of arms," which means they didn't have guns. The small party was being sent to find a way across New Spain from Santa Fe (in New Mexico) to Monterey (on the coast of California).

The Spaniards knew little of that vast expanse of land—licked by the Mississippi River on one of its edges and the Pacific Ocean on the other. A French explorer had written of a Great Sea of the North (probably the Great Salt Lake); he said its waters fed into a great river to the West. Everyone believed that river must exist. The friars expected to find it. (Later, Thomas Jefferson sent Lewis and Clark searching for the same river.)

The Spaniards had no idea that—that very same July—a liberty bell was ringing in Philadelphia. It would be heard in Spain and around the world. If the friars had known, they might not have listened. They had other things on their minds.

They were taking a chance, traveling without arms. But Silvestre Veléz de Escalante, who was 25 and kept a diary of their journey, said guns "usually terrify the tribes." So, he added, there "must be a sufficient force or none at all." There would *not* be a sufficient force. The officials in Mexico were no longer generous, as they had been more than 200 years earlier in the days of Coronado. This expedition, said Spanish-born Escalante, was in God's hands.

Francisco Atanasio Dominguez, 36 and Mexican-born, agreed. He and the others celebrated mass, asking for the protection of the Virgin Mary. Then—with leather bags stuffed with necessities, 10 pack mules carrying supplies to trade with the Indians, and 20 head of cattle to eat en route—they headed northwest, following the Rio Grande, the Chama, the Navajo, the Dolores, the Gunnison, and the Colorado rivers. They were traveling through Indian territory—unknown to Europeans—and were expected to explore and map as they went. They could carry a few days' water for themselves, but they needed water each day for the animals. So following rivers made sense.

In early September, still in Colorado, they were met by "about eighty Yutas all on good horses...we concluded that they traveled together...to find out whether any more Spanish people were following us." Because the party was so small, and without guns, they were no threat to the Indians, who rode on.

The explorers headed into Utah, along the Green River, across semidesert, following trails blazed by buffalo. They now had an Indian guide, who killed one of the great beasts. They ate heartily and gave their guide a woollen cloak, a hunting knife, and glass beads.

On September 17—while friars and soldiers in California were celebrating the completion of a presidio at San Francisco—Dominguez and Escalante were exploring the ruins of an old pueblo in Utah. Then they went on through "low valleys of very soft earth, the animals sinking and stumbling every instant in many little holes." (Were they prairie-dog holes?) They reached the Strawberry River, where "there is an abundance of good trout, two of which [were] killed with an arrow and caught, and each one of which would weigh somewhat more than two pounds."

Was it a fish story? Probably not. This was a valley with "good pastures, many creeks and pretty groves of white cottonwoods," but empty of people. Their guide told them the Lagunas, who had once lived there, "withdrew for fear of the Comanches."

The Spanish explorers met and dealt peacefully with Comanches, Hopis, Utes,

Lagunas, Yutas, Sabuaganas—more than a dozen different Indian peoples—most of whom had never seen men like them before.

On top of a high ridge, "we saw in front of us and not very far away many large columns of smoke....We replied to them with other smoke signals so that if they had already seen us they would not take us to be enemies." They knew the Indians would "approach the camp to see what people had come here." At about two o'clock in the morning, their Indian guide "made a long speech in his own language... giving them to understand that we were peaceable people."

When they reached the valley of the Great Salt Lake (near what is now Provo, Utah), they were enchanted with the land they saw. "This is the most pleasing, beautiful and fertile site in all New Spain," Escalante wrote to Spain's Carlos III. "It alone is capable of maintaining a settlement with as many people as Mexico City." (Mexico City in 1776—with 100,000 people—was larger than Boston, New York, and Philadelphia combined.) Much later, Brigham Young would enter the same valley, say "This is the place!" and settle his Mormon followers there.

They went on, past Mt. Nebo in the Wasatch Range (which scratches the heavens at 11,877 feet). The weather was now turning. "Tonight it was so cold that even the water which was near the fire all night was frozen in the morning." Worse was to come. Ahead were parched deserts, rocky precipices, icy mountains, impenetrable thickets, and impassable chasms. The Spaniards ate their horses in order to survive. After that they turned back.

On January 2, 1777, "we arrived at the Villa de Santa Fe." The next day Dominguez and Escalante gave their diary to the governor, "because everything stated in this diary is true and faithful to what happened." One of the party, a cartographer, made maps that were amazingly accurate and useful to others who came later. But they didn't find a Great River to the West. They didn't blaze a trail from Santa Fe to Monterey.

They did explore more than 2,000 miles of land—more than their contemporary, Daniel Boone, had explored in his whole lifetime.

And they did it peacefully, "without noise of arms." Today, in Utah, you will find a national monument, a town, and a river all named Escalante. And you'll know why.

A modern artist painted this picture of Escalante and Dominguez and their party entering the valley of the Great Salt Lake. Why do you think the friar is raising his cross?