

James Forten

Illustrations by Lonnie Knabel

WALTER DEAN MYERS

NOW IS YOUR TIME!

The African-American Struggle for Freedom



ALA NOTABLE
BOOK
CORETTA SCOTT
KING AWARD

In Now Is Your Time! Walter Dean Myers presents the history of African Americans in North America from 1619, when the first African captives were brought to Virginia, to the present day. Myers points out that the labor of enslaved Africans helped to create the prosperity that enabled the American colonies

to break away from England.

By the time of the Revolutionary War, a number of Africans had obtained their freedom, and some of these joined the fight for independence. The following chapter from the book tells the story of the young African sailor James Forten.

by Walter Dean Myers



Not all Africans were being held on plantations. Some had bought their own freedom; others had been given it by the whites who held them. And when the Africans became free, they did what other Americans were doing. Some worked their own farms; many worked on ships; others started their own business ventures. In Ellicott Mills, Maryland, a free African man named Benjamin Banneker began publishing his almanac and corresponded with Thomas Jefferson. In New York a free African named Samuel Fraunces owned a famous tavern in which George Washington as well as all the leading New Yorkers would eat. An escaped African, Crispus Attucks, was one of five protesters killed when the British fired on a group of colonists in Boston.

Hundreds of Africans joined the fight against the British as sailors and soldiers. One of those was James Forten.

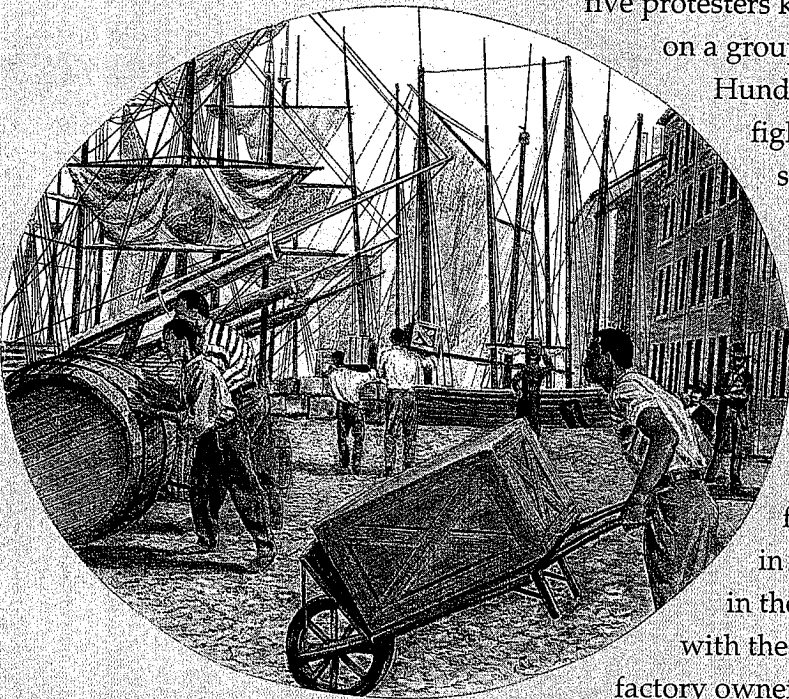
It was early morning on Tuesday, September 2, 1766, in the city of Philadelphia. The roads into the city were already filling with farmers bringing in produce to sell. Windows in the city were coming alive with the glow of lamplight. Small

factory owners trudged through the winding streets to small shops. Printers,

shoemakers, blacksmiths, candle makers, bakers—all began the business of the day. For Philadelphia was indeed a city of business.

As day broke over the harbor, the masts of the ships loomed against the gray skies. The ships rocked at their moorings as if they, too, were ready for the new day.

Hundreds of free men of African descent lived in Philadelphia. The city was the home of a number of noted abolitionists—people who wanted to abolish, or do away with, the practice of slavery—including the Quakers, a powerful and influential religious group. More important was the fact that Africans could find work in Philadelphia.



Many of the Africans worked the docks, loading and unloading the ships that brought products to the colonies from all over the world. Others were tradesmen and seamstresses, cooks, barbers, and common laborers. All along the eastern seaboard, from Baltimore to New England, free Africans worked on boats, hauling loads, carrying passengers, and fishing. Many opened restaurants. Others bought their own boats and tried their luck on the brisk waterfronts.

Thomas Forten, a free African, was employed by Robert Bridges, a sailmaker in Philadelphia. Sail making was a profitable but difficult job. Sewing the coarse cloth was brutal on the hands. The heavy thread had to be waxed and handled with dexterity. A person trying to break the thread with his hands could see it cut through his flesh like a knife. But Forten appreciated his job. It paid reasonably well and the work was steady.

Forten helped in all aspects of sail making and assisted in installing the sails on the ships the firm serviced. With the income from his work he had purchased his wife's freedom. Now, on this early Tuesday morning, a new baby was due. The baby, born later that day, was James Forten.

Young James Forten's early life was not that different from that of other poor children living in Philadelphia. He played marbles and blindman's buff, and he raced in the streets. When he was old enough, he would go down to the docks to see the ships.

Sometimes James went to the shop where his father worked and did odd jobs. Bridges liked him and let him work as much as he could, but he also encouraged Thomas Forten to make sure that his son learned to read and write.

The Fortens sent their son to the small school that had been created for African children by a Quaker, Anthony Benezet. He believed that the only way the Africans would ever take a meaningful place in the colonies would be through education.

Thomas Forten was working on a ship when he fell to his death. James Forten was only seven at the time. His mother was devastated, but still insisted that her son continue school. He did so for two more years, after which he took a job working in a small store.

What James wanted to do was to go to sea. He was fourteen in 1781 when his mother finally relented and gave her permission. America was fighting for its freedom, and James Forten would be fighting, too.

He knew about the difficulties between the British and the American colonists. He had seen first British soldiers and then American soldiers marching through the streets of Philadelphia. Among the American soldiers were men of color.

A black child in Philadelphia in the 1700's had to be careful. There were stories of free Africans being kidnaped and sold into slavery. He had seen the captives on the ships. They looked like him: the same dark skin, the same wide nose; but there was a sadness about them that both touched his heart and frightened him. He had seen Africans in chains being marched through the streets, on their way to the South. He never forgot the sight of his people in bondage, or accepted it as natural that black people should be slaves.

But the black soldiers Forten saw were something special. Marching with muskets on their shoulders, they seemed taller and blacker than any men he had ever seen. And there were African sailors, too. He knew some of these men. They had been fishermen and haulers before the conflict with Great Britain; now they worked on privateers and navy ships. Sometimes he heard talk about naval battles, and he tried to imagine what they must have been like.

In the summer of 1781, James Forten signed onto the privateer *Royal Louis*, commanded by Stephen Decatur, Sr. The colonies had few ships of their own to fight against the powerful British navy and issued "letters of marque" to private parties. These allowed the ships, under the flag of the United States, to attack British ships and to profit from the sale of any vessel captured.

The *Royal Louis* sailed out of Philadelphia in August and was quickly engaged by the British vessel *Active*, a heavily armed brig sent from England to protect its trade ships.

The *Royal Louis*'s guns were loaded with gunpowder that was tamped down by an assistant gunner. Then the cannonball was put into the barrel and pushed against the powder. Then the powder would be ignited. The powder had to be kept belowdecks in case of a hit by an enemy ship. "Powder monkeys," usually young boys between ten and fifteen, carried the powder from below to the guns.

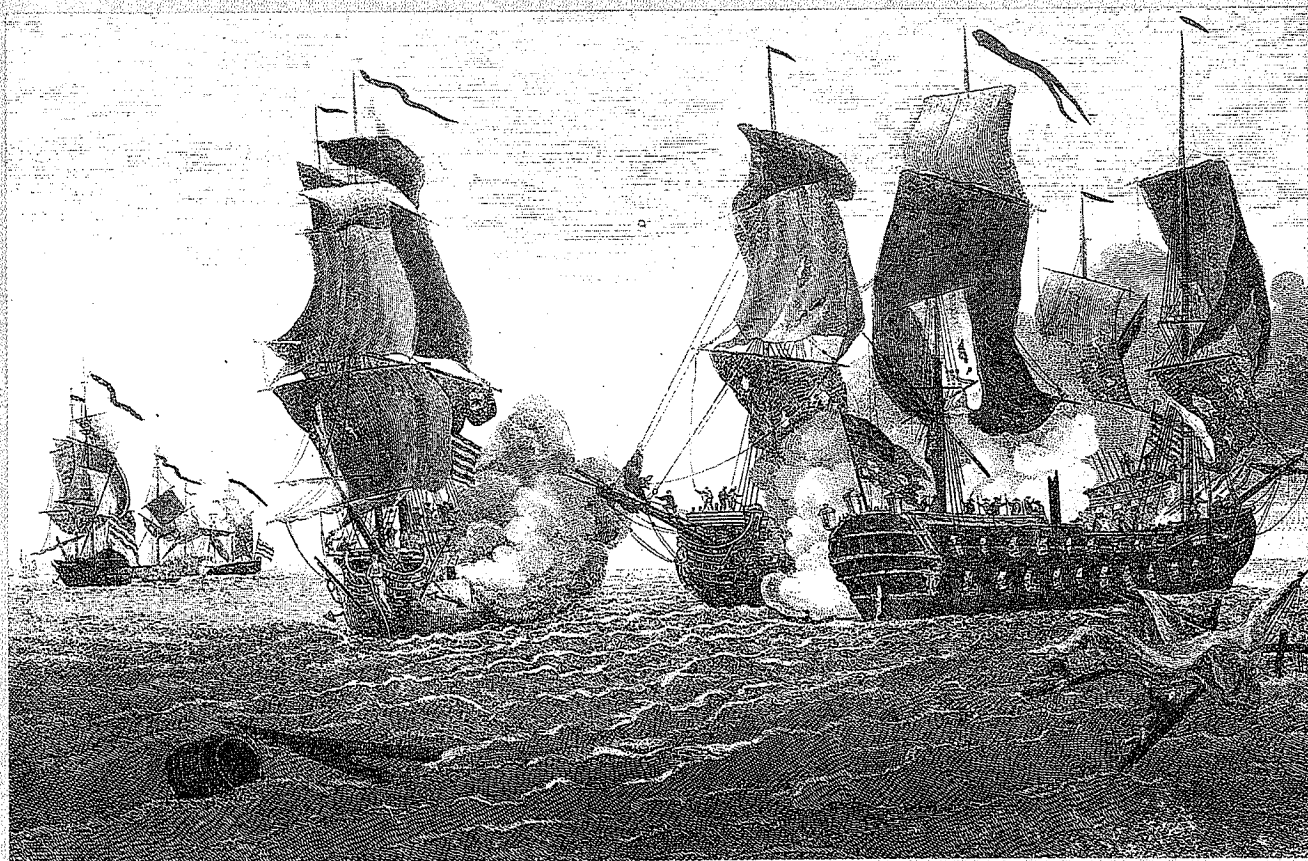
Forten was a powder monkey. Up and down the stairs he raced with the powder as shots from the British ship whistled overhead. There were large holes in the sails and men screaming as they were hit with grapeshot that splintered the sides of the ship. The smell of

gunpowder filled the air as Captain Decatur turned his ship to keep his broadside guns trained on the *Active*. Sailors all about Forten were falling, some dying even as others cried for more powder.

Again he went belowdecks, knowing that if a shot ripped through to the powder kegs, or if any of the burning planks fell down into the hold, he would be killed instantly in the explosion. Up he came again with as much powder as he could carry.

After what must have seemed forever with the two ships tacking about each other like angry cats, the *Active* lowered its flag. It had surrendered!

Decatur brought his ship into Philadelphia, its guns still trained on the limping *Active*.



Battle Between John Paul Jones's Bonhomme Richard and Richard Pearson's Serapis
by B.F. Leizalt, about 1781

The crowd on the dock cheered wildly as they recognized the American flag on the *Royal Louis*. On board the victorious ship James Forten had mixed feelings as he saw so many of his comrades wounded, some mortally.

The *Royal Louis* turned its prisoners over to military authorities. On the 27th of September, the *Active* was sold; the proceeds were split among the owners of the *Royal Louis* and the crew.

The sailors with the worst wounds were sent off to be cared for. The others, their own wounds treated, were soon about the business of repairing the ship. Forten must have been excited. Once the fear of the battle had subsided and the wounded were taken off, it was easy to think about the dangerous encounter in terms of adventure. And they had won.

The missing crew was replaced. The ship was checked carefully by its captain and found to be in fine fighting condition. The crew carried more ammunition aboard, more powder, and fresh provisions. Once more they sailed for open waters.

On the 16th of October, 1781, they sighted a ship, recognized it as British, and made for it instantly. As they neared, a second ship was spotted, and then a third. Decatur turned to escape the trap, but it was already too late. The three British ships, the *Amphyon*, the *Nymph*, and the sloop *Pomona*, closed in. It was soon clear that the *Royal Louis* had two choices: to surrender or to be sunk.

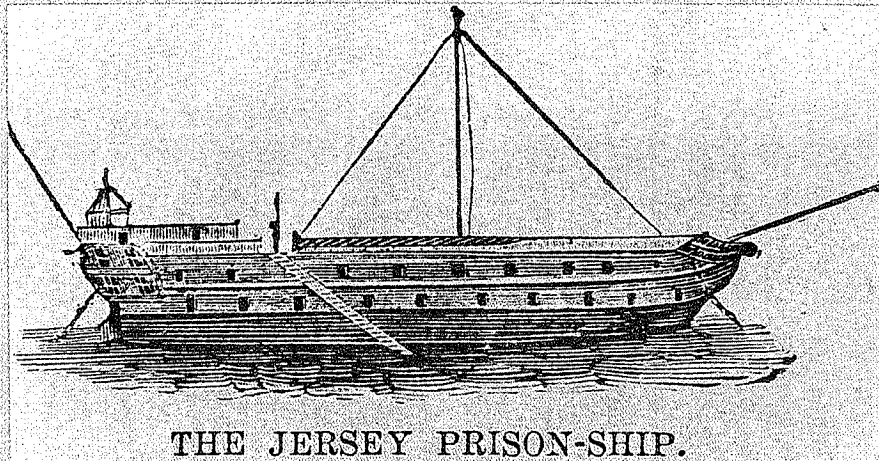
The *Royal Louis* lowered its flag. It had surrendered, and its crew were now prisoners. Forten was terrified. He had heard the stories of the British sending captured Africans to the West Indies to be sold into slavery. He knew the *Pomona* had sailed back and forth from the colonies to the island of Barbados, where many Africans already languished in bondage. It was a time for dread.

James was taken aboard the *Amphyon* with others from his crew. On board the British ship Captain Beasley inspected the prisoners. There were several boys among the American crew, and he separated them from the older men.

Captain Beasley's son looked over the boys who had been captured. Many of them were younger than he was. Although still prisoners, the boys were given more freedom than the men, and Beasley's son saw the Americans playing marbles. He joined in the game, and it was during this playing that he befriended Forten.

The result of this tentative friendship was that Captain Beasley did not, as he might have done, send Forten to a ship bound for the West Indies and slavery. Instead he was treated as a regular prisoner of war and sent to the prison ship the *Jersey*.

Dark and forbidding, the *Jersey* was a sixty-gunner anchored off Long Island, in New York. It had been too old to use in the war and had been refitted first as a hospital ship and then as a ship for



THE JERSEY PRISON-SHIP.

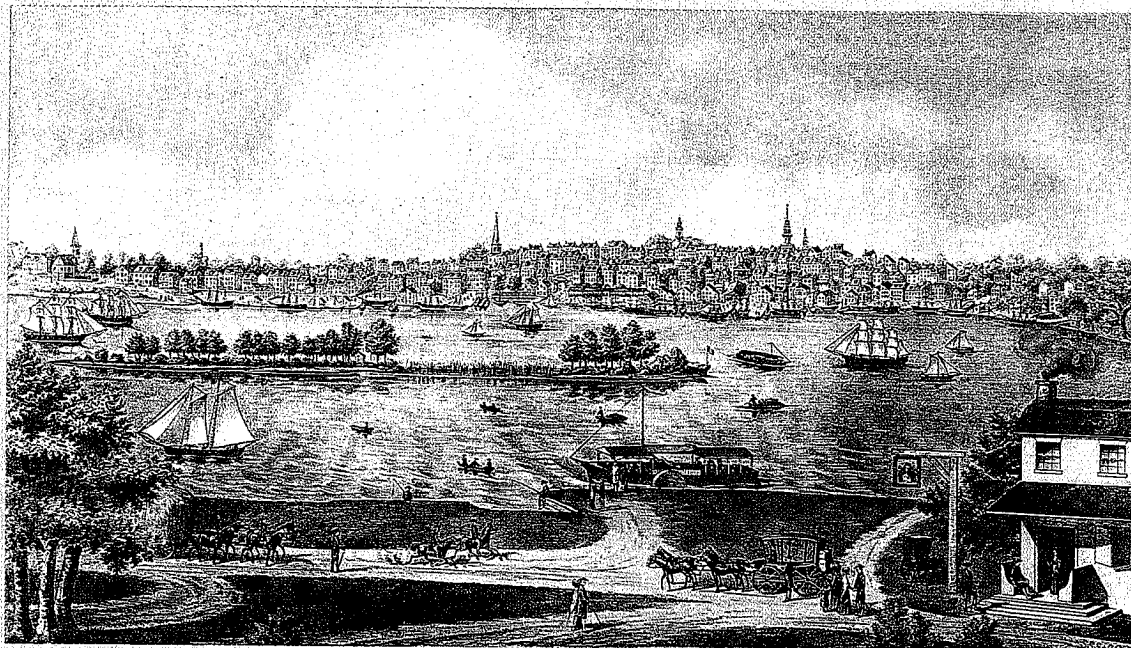
prisoners. The portholes had been sealed and twenty-inch squares carved into her sides. Across these squares iron bars were placed.

The captain of the *Jersey* greeted the prisoners with a sneer. All were searched under the watchful eyes of British marines. The wounded were unattended, the sick ignored. The pitiful cries of other prisoners came from belowdecks. A few pale, sickly prisoners, covered with sores, were huddled around a water cask. Then came the cry that some would hear for months, others for years.

"Down, Rebels, down!"

They were rebels against the king, to be despised, perhaps to be hanged. Traitors, they were being called, not soldiers of America. James was pushed into a line on deck. The line shuffled toward the water cask, where each man could fill a canteen with a pint of water. Then they were pushed roughly belowdecks.

The hold of the ship was dark. What little light there was came from the small squares along the hull. The air was dank as men relieved themselves where they lay. Some of the prisoners were moaning. Others manned pumps to remove the water from the bottom of the boat.



Philadelphia in the 18th Century

Sleep was hard coming, and James wasn't sure if he wouldn't still be sold into slavery. Beasley's son had liked him, he remembered, and the boy had offered to persuade his father to take James to England. It would have been better than the hold of the *Jersey*.

In the morning the first thing the crew did was to check to see how many prisoners had died during the night. Many of the prisoners were sick with yellow fever. For these death would be just a matter of time.

Forten later claimed that the game of marbles with Beasley's son had saved him from a life of slavery in the West Indies. But on November 1, two weeks after the capture of the *Royal Louis*, the news reached New York that Brigadier General Charles Cornwallis, commander of the British army in Virginia, had surrendered to George Washington. Washington had strongly protested the British practice of sending prisoners to the West Indies. It was probably the news of his victory, more than the game of marbles, that saved the young sailor.

James Forten was not a hero. He did not single-handedly defeat the British, or sink a ship. But he fought, like so many other Africans, for the freedom of America, and he fought well. He was only one of thousands of Africans who helped to create the country known as the United States of America.

In Philadelphia, after the war, James Forten became an apprentice to the man his father had worked for, Robert Bridges. Like his father, James was a hard worker. Eventually he would run the business for Robert Bridges, and by 1798 he owned it. At its height the business employed forty workers, both black and white. Forten became one of the wealthiest men in Philadelphia. He married and raised a family, passing on to them the values of hard work he had learned from his father. Forten made several major contributions to the sail-making business, among them a method of handling the huge sails in a shop, which allowed sails to be repaired much faster and saved precious time for shipowners. In the coming years he would use his great wealth to support both antislavery groups and the right of women to vote—at a time when over 90 percent of all Africans in America were still in a state of enslavement.

James Forten became one of the most influential of the African abolitionists. He spent much of his life pleading for the freedom of his people in the country his people had helped to create.



Do you agree with the author that James Forten was not a hero? Do you feel that his life is worth remembering? Explain.

What early home influences probably contributed to James Forten's success later in life?

What special dangers did James Forten face because he was black?

WRITE List several reasons free African Americans might have had for fighting in the Revolutionary War. Then list reasons some might have had for not fighting.

Words About the Author

WALTER DEAN MYERS

Walter Dean Myers may be best known for his fiction books, such as *Fast Sam, Cool Clyde, and Stuff*; *Mojo and the Russians*; and *The Mouse Rap*. But Myers enjoys writing nonfiction too. "I love doing the research," Myers says. "I enjoy assembling all the pieces of information I find and turning them into a book."

It's not always easy for nonfiction writers to make the various facts they find fit together. Sometimes reference books differ in the dates or places they give for an event. Myers says this was a problem as he was writing *Now Is Your Time!* "I first read about Forten in a book about African American patriots, and it discussed events in

Forten's life that happened in 1780. When I tried to verify these facts, I couldn't find anything anywhere to corroborate the material. I was in the library for hours and hours. Finally, I went through newspaper accounts from 1781, and that's where I found the material. The writer was a year off."

Born in 1937, Myers grew up in Harlem. He was first turned on to reading by a teacher who saw him reading a comic book under his desk. The next day she came in with a stack of books and said that if he was going to spend all his time reading, he should at least read something good. "I still remember the first book she gave me, *East of the Sun and West of the Moon*. Reading took on a new dimension for me."

