"You Know I Am a Man of Business": James Forten and the Factor of Race in Philadelphia's Antebellum Business Community

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Sir Charles Lyell was perplexed. Visiting Philadelphia in March of 1842, he witnessed the funeral procession of African-American entrepreneur James Forten. He was impressed by the many hundreds of people, black and white, rich and poor, who joined in paying their respects. Surely this must indicate that the deceased had been held in high regard by all classes of society, and that, in his case, racial prejudice had been set aside.

> I was rejoicing that his colour had proved no impediment to his rising in the world, and that he had been allowed so much fair play as to succeed in over-topping the majority of his white competitors, when I learnt...not long before his death, he had been especially mortified, because...his sons had been refused a hearing at a public meeting...to speak on some subject connected with trade [Lyell, 1843, p. 207].

Perhaps the editor of the antislavery journal *The Herald of Freedom* could have helped the Englishman understand the situation. As he observed, to "The white men in Philadelphia...It would have seemed a sort of sacrilege to despise [Forten], and they made him an exception to his race" [*Herald of Freedom* in *Liberator*, April 8, 1842]. Being "an exception to his race" was hardly a comfortable role for James Forten. It meant that, although he could "rise in the world," there were certain bounds he and his children could not overstep. But what were those bounds? How did Forten try to negotiate his way around them? When was he successful, and when did the forces of racial proscription prove too powerful even for someone of his tact and ingenuity?

James Forten was born in a modest home in Philadelphia's Dock Ward on September 2, 1766. His father, Thomas Forten, was freeborn, but Thomas was the grandson of an African slave who had been brought to the infant colony of Pennsylvania in the 1680s [Gloucester, 1843, p. 18]. James's mother, Margaret, had probably spent her early years in bondage. She bore her first child, James's sister Abigail, when she was 41. She was 44 when James was born. In an era when most white couples married and began establishing families while they were in their mid- to late twenties, James and Margaret had

BUSINESS AND ECONOMIC HISTORY, Volume twenty-six, no. 1, Fall 1997.
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been forced to wait. The most likely reason why was that Margaret was not legally free. Had she borne children before her freedom had been granted by her master, or purchased by herself and her husband, they would have been condemned to servitude. As it was, Abigail and James Forten began their lives with an advantage few children of African descent enjoyed in the eighteenth century. They were legally free.

In a city where the vast majority of black people were slaves, and free people of color were generally confined to the most menial of occupations, the Forten family was exceptional. Thomas Forten had a skilled trade. He was a journeyman in Robert Bridges' sail-loft and a small-scale contractor in his own right. He was anxious to pass on his skills to his son. Under Thomas Forten's tutelage, young James learned the elements of the sailmaker's craft. One day he might become an apprentice, and in time graduate to journeyman, but that was a long way off. When Thomas died suddenly in 1773, an apprenticeship for his son seemed a very remote possibility indeed. Thomas Forten had managed to feed, clothe, and house his wife and children. However, like most journeymen, irrespective of race, he had not been able to amass much in the way of savings. His family was left with very little to live on when he died. It fell to Margaret Forten to support herself and her children. Most likely she became a domestic or took in washing. Despite the family's desperate situation, she struggled to give James some formal education, sending him on a part-time basis to the Quakers' "African School," but poverty forced him to quit at age nine and go out to work full-time, cleaning and clerking for a white grocer [Purvis, 1842, p. 3].

The Revolution became a crucial reference point in James Forten's life, as it did in the lives of so many of his contemporaries. Ideological contradictions confronted him – the rhetoric about "freedom" from British "slavery," bold statements about the rights of man that seemed not to include *all* men – but in purely practical terms the war meant new opportunities.

In the summer of 1781, when he was almost fifteen, James Forten went to sea as a powder-boy on the *Royal Louis*, one of the largest and most heavily-armed privateers to sail out of the port of Philadelphia. Her captain, Stephen Decatur, Sr., already had an impressive list of prizes to his name, and, humble though his rank was, Forten had every reason to hope for a good share of prize money at the end of the voyage.

His first cruise was a great success. He returned home unscathed and, as he had anticipated, with money in his pockets. He immediately signed on again. His second voyage ended swiftly and disastrously when the *Royal Louis* fell in with two British warships soon after leaving the relative safety of the Delaware. After trying and failing to outrun the British vessels, Captain Decatur acknowledged defeat. He was outgunned and he knew it. He hauled down the American colors, gave up the ship, and he and his men were taken aboard on H.M.S. *Amphion* to await transfer to a prison-hulk. That was bad enough, but James Forten feared an even worse fate awaited him – transportation to the British West Indies as a slave [Purvis, 1842, pp. 6-7].

Ironically, given the desperate plight he was in, Forten could have done very well for himself at this point. The commander of the *Amphion*, John

Bazely, was "struck by his honest countenance," and chose him to watch over his young son, Henry. Twelve-year-old Henry Bazely was making his first voyage in preparation for a career in the Royal Navy. The boy was bored and was constantly getting in everyone's way. Someone had to keep him occupied and out of trouble. As a prisoner at the mercy of the British captain, Forten could hardly refuse the assignment. Over the next few days a friendship developed between James Forten and his young charge. As the *Amphion* neared the Loyalist stronghold of New York, and the flotilla of prison-ships at anchor in the harbor, Henry Bazely begged his father to spare his friend. The result was an invitation from Captain Bazely to change allegiances, go to England, be educated with Henry, and then be established in a good trade under the Bazely family's patronage. To the amazement of father and son, Forten rejected the offer, insisting he could not betray his country. Despite Forten's refusal to accept his invitation, Captain Bazely did what he could to protect him and ensure he was not enslaved. He wrote to the commander of the prison-ship *Jersey*, to which the crew of the *Royal Louis* was to be sent, requesting that Forten be treated the same as the other American prisoners and exchanged as soon as possible. That was something, but the seven months he spent on board the infamous *Jersey* almost killed Forten. He returned to Philadelphia in the spring of 1782 after a general exchange of prisoners to find his mother and sister had long since given him up for dead.

In later years James Forten would make much of his wartime service, citing his patriotism and his sufferings as reasons why he should be granted full civil rights. He would earn the praise of many in the antislavery movement, and even the grudging respect of many in the white community who had no sympathy whatsoever for abolition or black demands for equal treatment. However, that is an aspect of Forten's remarkable career that is beyond the scope of this essay. What was important in terms of his future success was that he learned on his two privateering voyages how to handle and repair sails under the most difficult of conditions.

When peace came, James Forten ventured off to sea again. His sister's husband, a merchant seaman, persuaded Forten to sign up with him for a voyage to England on Captain Thomas Truxtun's ship, the *Commerce* [Purvis, 1842, p. 8]. When they reached London, Forten asked Truxtun to pay him off. He intended to stay for a while. Although it is tempting to imagine Forten making his way from London to Dover, where the Bazelys lived, presenting himself on their doorstep, and reclaiming their friendship, there is not a scrap of evidence to suggest he ever saw them again after he left the *Amphion*. He settled in London, where he found a sizable black community and the chance of work. The war had left many shipyards and sail-lofts along the Thames short-handed, and for a youth with a knowledge of the elements of sailmaking employment was easy to find [Walvin, 1973, pp. 47-57, 61, 72]. James Forten stayed a year in London.

In 1785 he returned to Philadelphia and apprenticed himself to Robert Bridges, his father's old employer. However, this was no ordinary apprenticeship. At 19 Forten was older and more experienced than the majority of

apprentices. Advancement came quickly. Within a year he was the foreman of the loft, with Bridges quelling a minor rebellion among the white men in the workforce to keep him in that position of authority [Purvis, 1842, p. 9].

In the normal course of events James Forten could have expected to continue as foreman for the rest of his days, employed by Bridges, and then by whichever of his sons or sons-in-law inherited the business. However, as he may have known from the moment he signed his indentures, that was not Bridges' intention.

Robert Bridges had become a sailmaker through force of circumstance. His merchant father had died young, and his mother had bound him out to learn a trade. He had struggled, but he had prospered. He wanted his children to do better still. His sons were not destined to work with their hands. He expected them to become merchants or professional men. As for his daughters, he had no intention of seeing them wed artisans. His designated successor in the sail-loft was not a family member, but his foreman.

James Forten had a complex relationship with the Bridges family, one that lasted most of his adult life. He lived for a time in their home, a home that included slaves [Robert Bridges' will, 1800]. Bridges' encouragement of Forten was based not on egalitarian principles but on mutual respect. As for Forten, he developed close ties with various family members, eventually naming a son for Robert Bridges, and a daughter for his daughter Harriet. Once established as proprietor of the sail-loft, he helped Bridges' widow and an unmarried daughter, and entered into what proved to be an unprofitable business relationship with the husband of yet another daughter.

In 1792 James Forten became a homeowner. Robert Bridges bought him a small two-story frame house in Southwark, one of Philadelphia's unincorporated "Liberties" and a riverside neighborhood that was home to many who earned their living in the maritime trades. Forten was to pay him back in installments. Bridges' generosity was likely combined with a wish to bind closer to him a trusted junior partner. It may also have been a token of appreciation for the sail-handling device Forten reportedly designed and the Bridges loft adopted [Purvis, 1842, p. 8].

Forten's years as Bridges' foreman were crucial to his future success in many ways. He mastered the technological aspects of his craft, and learned how to deal with suppliers, ships' captains, and shipowners – white men who undoubtedly looked askance at Bridges's choice of a successor. Then there was the vexed issue of interacting with white workers as an equal and then as a superior. There had been trouble when Bridges promoted Forten. What would happen when he took over the loft? In fact, when Bridges retired in 1798 the workers split into two camps. The apprentices had indentured themselves to Bridges to learn the "mystery" of sailmaking. Latterly they had worked under Forten's direction. They knew him to be highly skilled, and they "all, with one consent, agreed to take him as their new master" [Gloucester, 1843, p. 23]. But the journeymen were worried. No other major business enterprise in the city was run by a man of color. Could Forten succeed? Could he make enough money to pay them regularly? Eventually Robert Bridges came to his rescue

with moral and financial support, and there was no exodus of journeymen [*National Anti-Slavery Standard*, March 10, 1842].

James Forten never forgot Robert Bridges's decision to stand by him. Nor did he forget his early labor troubles. Once secure as owner of the loft, he set about integrating the workforce. As a first step, he brought his relatives into the business – his nephews and his niece's husband, and in time his father-in-law and his sons. But he wanted to do more than ensure the financial well-being of his family. Again and again he lamented the fact that there were so few employers of Robert Bridges's stamp prepared to train African-American men in skilled trades. "If a man of color has children, it is almost impossible for him to get a trade for them, as the journeymen and apprentices generally refuse to work with them, even if the master is willing, which is seldom the case" [Forten to William Lloyd Garrison, February 3, 1831, BPL]. In another letter he declared: "[I]f the whites will give us our rights, establish good schools for our children as well as theirs, give them trades, and encourage them after they have become masters...they will find us as true to this our country...as any class of persons" [*Liberator*, March 19, 1831]. If few white masters would train black youths, black masters must make a commitment to do so.

In 1805, on the recommendation of white friends in the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, Forten took on a black teenager, Samuel Elbert, as an indentured servant. Then he sought out other young men of color eager to learn a trade: Pennsylvania natives Joseph Waterford and Charles Anthony; a migrant from Delaware, James Cornish; New Englanders Shadrack Howard and Ezra P. Johnson, grandsons of his friend Captain Paul Cuffe. Waterford was with Forten twenty-five years as apprentice and then foreman. In time, Forten hired his son, Joseph Jr. Eventually, lured by prospects in California in the 1850s, the Waterfords moved to San Francisco. In the 1840s Charles Anthony joined forces with George Bolivar, a wealthy free man of color from North Carolina, and another of James Forten's apprentices, to buy the business from Forten's heirs [Minton, 1913, p. 16].

Like the Waterfords, other men used skills learned at Forten's loft to succeed elsewhere. Two journeymen left him in the 1820s to establish sail-lofts in Haiti [Hunt, 1860, p. 6]. Forten probably approved of their move, for he was deeply interested in the future of the black republic. His wife's brother had already emigrated to Haiti and established himself as a merchant in Port au Prince.

Occasionally, though, an apprentice disappointed Forten. That was the case with Francis Devany, an ex-slave from South Carolina. Forten trained him and then watched him leave for Liberia. The white officers of the American Colonization Society had made repeated overtures to Forten, whom they identified as "a man of both *wealth* and *respectability*" [Elliott Cresson to R.R. Gurley, January 1, 1828, ACS Papers]. Would he lead an exodus of African-Americans to Liberia? Would he operate a packet service between the United States and Liberia? Would he endorse the work of the Colonization Society, or at least mute his criticism of it? Forten rejected every approach, fearing the true purpose of the ACS was to remove from the United States thousands of free

people of color who could help the slaves in the South win their freedom. It smacked of forced deportation. He would have nothing to do with the ACS or its African colony. But Devany saw in Liberia economic opportunities. He went, did well, and joined the ACS leadership in attacking Forten [*African Repository*, May 1834].

Although a strong advocate of black employment opportunities, at no point did Forten consider dismissing his white workers. He kept those who had worked for Bridges and hired more. Deeply committed to integration, he wanted a workforce in which black men and white men worked harmoniously together. They must obey his rules and subscribe to his values, labor faithfully, attend church, and abstain from alcohol, but race made no difference in his sail-loft.

As an employer, James Forten's values were the same as those of many of his white counterparts. He demanded punctuality – of himself and those around him. His devotion to the clock was a character trait his minister singled out in his eulogy. It was no coincidence that one of Forten's prized possessions was a gold pocket watch.

James Forten expected to oversee the private lives of his workers. In the case of some of them, he did that by having them live in his home. In census after census his household included far more people than could be accounted for by members of his immediate family – 15 individuals in 1810, 18 in 1820, and 22 in 1830 [U.S. Census, Philadelphia, New Market Ward, 1810, 1820, 1830].

Thrift was another of the values Forten tried to inculcate in his workforce, as an unnamed visitor to his sail-loft in 1834 noted. By that point Forten owned several adjoining lofts. The visitor observed: "All was order and harmony and every arrangement seemed admirably adapted for the despatch of business. My friend took great delight in pointing out to me various improvements that he had introduced in his art; and spoke very kindly of his workmen." Among the white men, "Here was one who had been in his employ twenty years, who owned not a brick when he came, but now was the possessor of a good brick house; here was another who had been rescued from ruin." Pointing to the "peace and harmony" that prevailed, Forten observed: "Here...you see what may be done and ought to be done in our country at large" [*Anti-Slavery Record*, December 1835].

Paying a man's wages, whether that man be black or white, gave an employer power, and Forten was not loathe to use that power. One day in 1822 Samuel Breck, a merchant turned politician, was out walking in Philadelphia when he was "accosted" by "a Negro man named Fortune...offering his hand to me." Breck was surprised but, "knowing [Forten's] respectability," he stopped. Forten politely informed Breck that Breck was in his debt.

> [H]e told me that at my late election to Congress, he had taken 15 white men to vote for me. In my sail-loft [he said] I have 30 persons at work...and among them are 22 journeymen – 15 of whom are white...All the white men went to the poles [sic] and voted for you [Wainwright, 1978, p. 505].

Effectively disfranchised by custom if not by law, Forten had at his command fifteen votes to give to the candidate of his choice in an era where the secret ballot was decades away.

The acquaintance with Breck (one can hardly call it a friendship) reveals much about Forten's standing in the business community. In 1828 the two corresponded about one Mr. Marckley. Marckley, a total stranger, had approached Forten about a loan. Forten observed to Breck that "an inducement to loan Mr. M. the money was the fact that he mentioned to me...he was connected by marriage with your family." As with the election, it never hurt to remind an influential man of favors conferred. Forten had made the loan, expected repayment, received empty promises, given Marckley time and more time, and finally threatened legal action. Breck had taken a hand in sorting out Marckley's tangled affairs and had written Forten, who replied with a deft mix of force and flattery: "Weeks have elapsed – Under these circumstances my claim may perhaps be considered as entitled to a *preference* and to be *immediately* paid." But he was willing to do what Breck said others had done and give Marckley time, "if you or some other equally responsible Gentleman would guarantee the payment." Breck saved Forten's letter, noting the novelty of having a letter from "a Negro gentleman" [Forten to Breck, July 22, 1828, Breck Papers].

The relationship progressed. In 1833 Breck called at the sail-loft and was introduced to Forten's two eldest sons, James Jr. and Robert, and his foreman, Joseph Waterford [Wainwright, 1979, pp. 249-50]. He was much impressed. However, although Breck admired Forten for his respectability and his wartime heroism, he stopped short of seeing him as simply another entrepreneur, to be judged only on his business acumen and his reputation for fair dealing. Forten was "a black *gentleman*...[who] by his urbane manners, manly and correct deportment, deserves the epithet I have used, [in spite of] his black face" [Breck Diary, 1832-33].

What of Forten's other contacts in the business community? There were few African-American entrepreneurs who could put business his way. The only man of color to give him commissions was New Englander Captain Paul Cuffe. Cuffe, the son of an African man and a Native American woman, made Philadelphia a regular port of call for more than two decades. He and Forten forged a deep bond of friendship. They discussed the ending of the slave trade, their religious faith, and their vision of America. Forten fitted out Cuffe's vessels, loaned him money, got loans from him, kept him informed about the state of the market, and helped him sell property in Philadelphia [Cuffe Papers].

Through letters and conversations Paul Cuffe involved James Forten in a vast undertaking that he hoped would accomplish goals both men shared – the complete abolition of the African slave trade, the Christianization of Africa, and the alleviation of the suffering of slaves and free people of color in the United States. The scheme involved nothing less than the relocation of thousands of ex-slaves from America to West Africa. James Forten was interested. In the 1810s he was prepared to endorse what he would come to oppose so forcefully a decade later.

Forten's enthusiasm for the "African undertaking" can be attributed to the depth of his friendship with Cuffe, and to Cuffe's ties with the London-based African Institution. The African Institution had among its officers members of the British aristocracy, prominent churchmen, and, most significantly (as far as Cuffe and Forten were concerned) the leading advocates of British antislavery, Thomas Clarkson, Granville Sharp, and William Wilberforce. Forten knew the reputation of these men, and evidently felt he could trust them. Cuffe and the African Institution proposed to take to Britain's recently-established colony of Sierra Leone anyone who wanted to begin a new life in West Africa. Under the auspices of the African Institution, emigration would be strictly voluntary – it had not always been so under the now-defunct Sierra Leone Company – and it would be overseen by men of staunch antislavery principles. A key goal would be the elimination of slavery. If slaveowners in the West Indies and the United States were telling the truth when they claimed their reluctance to free their slaves stemmed from their fear of having free people of color as neighbors, then they would surely be willing to act if they knew their former bondsmen could leave for Africa. On the religious front, black Christians from the New World could undertake mission work in Africa. They could also promote trade in commodities other than human beings. They could show that the African continent had valuable resources other than slaves to sell to Europe and the Americas. It was a great and glorious scheme, and Forten could see its money-making potential.

James Forten was probably already known to some of the officers of the African Institution, by reputation if not in person. In 1807 a London journal, *The Monthly Repository of Theology and General Literature*, had published a short biographical sketch, apparently based on information from the Delaware Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery.

> As a tribute due to merit it may be stated, that there is now resident at Philadelphia, James Torten [sic], a man of colour, who received an education at the school established by the Society of Friends in that city, where he carries on the sail-making business with reputation to himself and satisfaction to his employers, and is engaged in that branch more extensively than any other person at Philadelphia. He possesses considerable property, acquired by his own industry and care, and is very much respected by the citizens generally [*The Monthly Repository*, 1807].

Now, in 1815, as president of the Philadelphia auxiliary of the African Institution, and with his friend Captain Cuffe making regular visits to London and to Sierra Leone, Forten introduced himself to the entire board of officers. He wrote to report that he had been busily recruiting emigrants for Sierra Leone from among the free people of color in Philadelphia. What was the African Institution prepared to do in return by way of offering financial incentives? "It would afford us much satisfaction if we could know…if any exemptions would be made in favour [sic] of this Institution, provided it should embark in any commercial enterprise desirable for the purpose of civilizing

Africa" [*African Institution*, 1816]. If making money could be combined with philanthropy, so much the better.

Forten was keen to find out about prospects for sailmaking in West Africa. It is clear from his correspondence that he never intended to move to Sierra Leone, but he may have been investigating the situation on behalf of one or more of his apprentices. Cuffe sent discouraging news on that front, but he had other suggestions. Forten might consider joining him in financing whaling voyages off the West African coast, one of the richest whaling grounds in the world [Cuffe Papers; Wiggins, 1996, p. 330]. Cuffe also suggested that Forten and other African-Americans of means might pool their resources and build a 200-ton vessel that could be used as "an [A]frican trader." Forten was enthusiastic. He wrote to Cuffe: "I approve very highly of your propesition [sic] of Building a Ship for the African traid [sic] by the men of Colour, so as to come in common stock and shall lay it before the Society [the Philadelphia auxiliary of the African Institution] when next we meet" [Cuffe Papers; Wiggins, 1996, p. 308].

Ultimately, the plans for profitable philanthropy came to nothing. The British authorities were reluctant to fill their colony with American settlers. They preferred to assist West Indians, black Britishers, and "recaptured" Africans (people rescued from illegal slavers on the high seas by the Royal Navy). In the United States Southern slaveholders proved not to be as willing to free their slaves as Cuffe and his friends had hoped, even if they could send them out of the country. Then, in the fall of 1817 James Forten received word of Paul Cuffe's death. The vision of an African homeland for such people of color as volunteered to emigrate became something rather different under the direction of the newly-established American Colonization Society. Sierra Leone was abandoned in favor of an American-sponsored colony, Liberia. African-Americans were not wanted as equal partners in the undertaking, but only as emigrants, who would do as they were told by the agents of the ACS. With Cuffe dead, the leaders of the ACS made moves to recruit Forten. "His coming into the measure would do great good... His opinion has great weight with the coloured population." The local ACS agent in Philadelphia insisted that nothing less than a letter from the ACS's president would be needed to draw Forten in, since "the blacks are sometimes more accessible thro' the channel of *flattery* than any other" [Cresson to Gurley, January 1, 1828, ACS Papers]. Approaches were made, but James Forten rejected every one.

Had Cuffe lived, and had the relationship with the African Institution in London continued, the course of Forten's business career might have been very different. Perhaps he would have become involved in ventures in West Africa and Britain. Perhaps he would have forged links with other black entrepreneurs, Africans, West Indians and African-Americans, in a black Atlantic commercial network. As it was, his business interests remained firmly centered in Philadelphia, and he spent his career dealing with white merchants and men of affairs. The relationship with Paul Cuffe had been a mutually advantageous one, but it was the only one Forten enjoyed with a man of color whose business activities complimented his own.

James Forten had to make his way in a predominantly white world of business, and he did so with remarkable success. With his reputation growing as one of the best sailmakers in Philadelphia, he was able to retain Robert Bridges's customers and gain new ones. His loft was on the premises of the powerful mercantile firm of Willing & Francis, and the partners gave him many commissions [*North American*, March 5, 1842]. In gratitude he named a son Thomas Willing Francis Forten. Near neighbors of Willing & Francis were merchants Louis Clappier and Stephen Girard. Forten did work for them and "many other [merchants] of like character" [Gloucester, 1843, p. 23].

New clients came to him with orders. A valued customer in the 1820s was Irishman Patrick Hayes, nephew of Commodore John Barry. Hayes had substantial interests in the China trade and in commercial ventures with Cuba. He was also a Warden of the Port of Philadelphia. In an association that lasted well over a decade, Forten supplied sails and sailmaker's gear, did repairs, and consulted with Hayes about redesigning sail plans. His loft even turned out a canvas cover for the captain's piano [Barry-Hayes Papers].

One major advantage Forten had was that he was beginning in business as Philadelphia merchants were entering the lucrative China trade. They needed to fit out their vessels with the finest quality sails for the hazardous voyage around the Cape of Good Hope and the equally gruelling encounter with the typhoons of the South China Seas. Hiring a less than proficient sailmaker could mean the loss of a vessel. If Forten's loft produced the best sails then that fact outweighed all other considerations.

Forten learned early in his career the importance of diversifying his investments. In 1803, with orders coming in steadily, he made his first foray into the real estate market. He bought a lot in Southwark, built a house, and rented it out. In 1806 he moved his family from Southwark to the city proper, purchasing a three-story brick house on Lombard Street. Then he began looking for suitable investments. In 1809 he acquired a second house on Lombard. As the nation headed into its second war with Britain, he bought a lot in Blockley Township, just outside Philadelphia, and another house in the city. The outbreak of war brought a sharp upturn in property values, and he acquired more real estate. The end of the war led to economic upheavals, but for those who survived it with their fortunes intact there were real estate bargains to be had as fellow merchants went to the wall. In the space of four years, from 1816 to 1820, Forten added considerably to his holdings in the city of Philadelphia, Southwark, and rural areas of Philadelphia County. He sold real estate as well, and always at a profit [Philadelphia County Deeds, Mortgages]. He rented out various properties to tenants from many segments of Philadelphia society and used his profits to acquire bonds, mortgages, bank stock, and shares in various companies. His investments extended well beyond the confines of Philadelphia. He owned stock, for example, in the Mount Carbon Railroad Company in Pennsylvania's anthracite region [James Forten, Probate Records, 1842].

James Forten kept himself informed about the state of the market at home and abroad. In the spring of 1815, for instance, he advised Paul Cuffe

that there were huge stockpiles of cotton in the warehouses and on the wharves of New Orleans awaiting shipment to Europe now that the war was over. Cuffe could make good money shipping cotton to Liverpool [Wiggins, 1996, pp. 346-47]. Forten read the newspapers, exchanged news with merchants and captains, and, despite the failure of the "African venture" and his repeated denunciations of the ACS, maintained a correspondence with acquaintances in Liberia and the West Indies. He also knew what was going on much closer to home, which members of Philadelphia's business community were in trouble and which were doing well. Such information was vital to his own success.

For more than four decades James Forten was an active participant in a complex network of credit arrangements. He loaned money and in turn got loans. His transactions almost always involved men he knew as neighbors on Lombard Street, where he lived, on South Wharves, where his sail-loft was located, or as customers. These men borrowed from him; they also loaned money to him. It depended on many variables whether at any given time one was a debtor or a creditor. With no account books or business ledgers to consult, it is still possible get some sense of whom Forten lent money to from the inventory of Forten's estate and the various lawsuits he brought when people defaulted. Those indebted to James Forten represented a cross-section of the business community – grocers, wine merchants, tavern keepers, blacksmiths, a proprietor of a livery stable, and one self-described "gentleman" [Philadelphia Court Records].

James Forten prided himself that "he never...took an advantage of his neighbor in the time of...pecuniary embarrassment," and that he studiously avoided "the genteel kind of swindling that some professedly 'good' people practice under the...name of *note shaving*" [Gloucester, 1843, p. 22]. But he was no fool. When debts went unpaid, he asked for payment. Sometimes he approached a friend or relative of the delinquent. But if he had to he went to court – to the District Court, to Common Pleas, and in one instance to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. If anyone thought they could cheat him because he was a man of color they soon learned their mistake. He hired good lawyers and invariably won his lawsuits.

Extending loans in a volatile market inevitably entailed risks, as James Forten learned to his cost in the Panic of 1837. He was heavily involved in the failure of a firm referred to only as T. & Co. One of his contemporaries put the best light he could on the affair, using it to illustrate Forten's generous nature.

> Mr. Forten lost by that firm, nine thousand dollars. Being himself in good circumstances...hearing of the failure of old constant patrons, he called at the house; one of the proprietors...on his entering the warehouse, came forward [and], taking him by the hand observed, 'Ah! Mr. Forten, it is useless to call on us – we are gone – we can do nothing!' at which Mr. Forten remarked, 'Sir, I hope you think better of me than to suppose me capable of calling on a friend to torture him in adversity! I came, sir, to express my regret at your misfortune, and...to cheer you by

> words of encouragement, If your liabilities were all in my hands, you should never be under the necessity of closing business' [Delany, 1852, p. 94].

It was a gracious speech, but Forten was naive if he had not come to the warehouse to check on his investment – and there is no evidence to indicate that he was naive when it came to matters of business.

But buying and selling, borrowing and lending – the business transactions only constitute a part of the equation. What was James Forten's standing as a businessman? How was he seen by black Philadelphians, by white Philadelphians, by his admirers and by his detractors?

Within the African-American community James Forten was a dominant figure for over half a century. Black Philadelphians discovered early on what white Philadelphians would soon learn. James Forten was a man of great ability when it came to managing money and suggesting innovative solutions to seemingly insoluble problems. Years before he took over the sail-loft he was helping the African Masonic Lodge, of which he was an officer, get out of a financial quagmire. The manner in which he did it, appealing to common sense and avarice, would have delighted his contemporary, Alexander Hamilton [African Lodge, 1797-1800]. As a vestryman at St. Thomas's African Episcopal Church for many years, he brought the same talents to bear, raising funds to pay the minister, financing the expansion of the church, regulating the church's benevolent societies, and ensuring officers performed their duties honestly [*National Anti-Slavery Standard*, May 5, 1842]. He was mediator, patron, and protector. He was asked again and again to witness wills for members of the black community, administer their estates, and act as guardian of their children.

James Forten put his talents at the disposal of the entire community in his native Philadelphia during times of crisis. In the fall of 1814, for instance, when a British assault on the city seemed inevitable, he offered his help as a concerned citizen, a community leader, and a master craftsman. He rallied black men to work on the redoubts, began recruiting a black military company, and wrote to the Committee of Defence to offer his professional services. The committee had only to say the word and he would put his journeymen and apprentices to work "to *make*, gratuitously, canvas covers, or bags" for the use of the troops being hastily mustered into service [*Minutes*, 1867, pp. 101, 115].

James Forten's business ability was also put at the service of a wide range of reform causes. He gave his support to initiatives to promote education, pacifism, women's rights, and temperance [*College*, 1831, p. 3; *Liberator*, August 9, 1839]. Although freeborn, he was committed to the antislavery crusade. He advised abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, advanced him money, solicited new subscribers to the *Liberator*, and counselled Garrison on how best to market the newspaper and other antislavery publications. However, as he reminded Garrison again and again, he was a man of business, and running his various enterprises often left him short of time for other endeavors. "Business prevents more at this time,... [Y]ou know I am a man of business and have not always time at my disposal" [Antislavery Manuscripts].

White abolitionists pointed proudly to Forten's financial success as vindication of the ability of African-Americans not merely to survive as free people but to prosper. For instance, Lewis Tappan, the brother of New York entrepreneur Arthur Tappan and himself a man of business, recalled: "Mr. Forten was a sailmaker...and was considered among the most eminent in his calling at that day. It was said by the secretary of the navy, 'Mr. Forten can undertake to rig a seventy-four-gun ship, and not call for any money until the job is done'" [Tappan, 1871, p. 161]. Another white friend wrote: "Though he belonged to a proscribed race, it was no uncommon thing to see him shaking hands, or walking arm in arm, with merchants of the first respectability" [*National Anti-Slavery Standard*, March 10, 1842].

What did the predominantly white business community think of Forten? He had his tried and trusted friends. There was merchant Thomas Ash. Forten introduced him in a letter to Paul Cuffe as "a Merchant I work for, and a very greate [sic] friend of mine." There was Captain Daniel Brewton, a shipmate and comrade-in-arms from the Revolution. He and Forten were lifelong friends. There was William Deas, a partner in the firm of Knox & Deas. Friendship and a deep sense of gratitude for support given at a crucial time prompted James Forten, some two decades after Deas's death, to name a son for him. Then there were a handful of others [Cuffe Papers; Purvis, 1842, p. 8].

Beyond that circle of intimates there were hundreds of acquaintances, like Charles Perry, who carried word of James Forten's worldly success to Cuba and saddled him with a most unlikely commission. (James Forten the abolitionist found himself called upon to arrange for the education of the grandson of an West African king who was a leading slave trader. Years later Forten discovered that the king had ordered the capture of Joseph Cinque, the hero of the *Amistad* mutiny) [Pennsylvania Abolition Society, p. 260].

The likes of Charles Perry never quite knew what to make of James Forten. They certainly gossiped about him. In 1831, when Harriet Forten married Robert Purvis, the son of an Anglo-Scottish cotton merchant and his mulatto mistress, the story went around that James Forten had made "some sacrifice of his fortune" to buy "a whiter species" of husband for his daughter [Ritter, 1860, pp. 46-47]. It made a good story except for a few crucial facts. Purvis, who could have "passed," chose to identify himself as a man of color; he was a committed abolitionist; and he was richer than his father-in-law.

What could James Forten's wealth and industry buy him? He obviously thought it should buy him and those like him, the entrepreneurs and the aspiring entrepreneurs in the black community, some measure of respect. In his 1813 *Letters From A Man of Colour* he reminded members of the Pennsylvania legislature: "Many of us are men of property, for the security of which, we have hitherto looked to the laws of our blessed state." He feared a proposed change in the law would "wrest" from an individual like himself "those estates, which years of honest industry have accumulated." He reminded legislators: "There are men among us of reputation and property, as good citizens as any men can be, and who, for their property, pay as heavy taxes as any citizens are compelled to pay" [Forten, 1813, pp. 3, 6, 8].

James Forten the community leader, James Forten the man of business, inevitably attracted attention. However, within his family circle he craved privacy. In 1825 an enthusiastic young advocate of African colonization stopped off in Philadelphia hoping to win him over. He was disappointed. James Forten "was a very boisterous talker," and the young man wrote, "I exhausted myself in conversation with him to a degree that was considerably alarming." He found Forten "proud of his money and vain of his abilities which have enabled him to get it," but he noted that the sailmaker "likes the situation in which public opinion places him very little" [S.H. Cowles to Leonard Bacon, February 9, 1825, Yale]. James Forten valued his privacy, and was distressed when it was violated, even by those who were well-intentioned. As he wrote to Nathaniel P. Rogers, editor of the *Herald of Freedom* in 1839:

> In looking over the Herald the other day I was surprised to see my name in print; an honor which, without being too sensitive, I ever wish to decline... I feel conscious of not meriting the notice you were pleased to bestow on myself and family in so public a manner; and it is very unpleasant to see our names in the paper [Forten to Nathaniel P. Rogers, March 29, 1839, Haverford].

In times of crisis Forten's wealth could buy him and his family a measure of security. On one occasion in the 1830s when racial violence seemed likely, the mayor sent troops to protect Forten's house. However, Forten's wealth also made him and his family members targets. He received death threats, and in 1834 a mob of young white workingmen attacked his well-dressed and obviously well-to-do son in the street and almost killed him. Sarah Forten, James's daughter, observed that she and her family and friends were always cautious when they ventured outside their homes. They could never be sure what kind of welcome they would receive when they went to fashionable stores, to art exhibitions, public lectures, and the like [Abdy, 1835, vol. 3, p. 320; Barnes and Dumond, 1934, pp. 379-81].

In many respects it seems that the community became more and more firmly closed as time passed. Philadelphia had never been a paradise of racial harmony, but in the early years of the nineteenth century there had been less overt racism. James Forten certainly benefitted from that personally and professionally. On his marriage to Charlotte Vandine in 1805, for instance, "a number of the most respectable merchants in Philad[a] called to congratulate him and drink punch with him" [Susanna Emlen to William Dillwyn, December 8, 1809, Dillwyn MSS]. By the 1830s that camaraderie was gone. The British abolitionist and writer Harriet Martineau, who visited the Forten home on Christmas Day, 1834, found the sailmaker "depressed (as well he might be) at the condition & prospects of his race" [Cooper, 1951, unpaginated]. Martineau understood what her countryman, Sir Charles Lyell, found so puzzling. For all the wealth he commanded and the personal respect he still enjoyed, James Forten knew he was "an exception to his race." He knew he and other black entrepreneurs would not be judged as their white counterparts were judged.

And worse, with racial tensions escalating, he feared his sons would not have the opportunities he had had.

"[T]he yellow man – Fortune – who [has] the *mis*-fortune to possess the wrong colour." "JAMES FORTUNE, [who] in consequence of his color, is noticed more than a white man would be in the same situation." "[A] gentleman [in spite of] his black face" [*Proceedings and Debates*, 1837-39, vol. 3, p. 83; vol. 10, p. 113]. For James Forten the inescapable fact was that, try as he might to be a businessman who happened to be of African descent, he was, to all but a handful of Philadelphia's entrepreneurs, a man of color first. It was that realization that he and his children could advance so far and no further in an America that sanctioned slavery and racial proscription that motivated him to devote so much of his wealth and his time to the twin causes of antislavery and social reform. Only in a very different America could he escape the kind of notice that was so understandably distasteful. Only in a very different America could he be what he set out to be, "a man of business," nothing less and nothing more.

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