



“A Noble Example” *The Anti-Slavery Record* December 1835

James Forten was born into a free black family in Philadelphia in 1766. After serving on a ship during the American Revolution, he was apprenticed to a sailmaker, purchasing the business in 1798 when the owner retired. He became one of the wealthiest men in Philadelphia (and perhaps the richest black man in the nation). He gained the respect of white and black leaders alike and became influential in the abolition, temperance, and Negro convention movements. Forten died in 1842 at age 75.

The Anti-Slavery Record was a monthly publication of the American Anti-Slavery Society, founded in 1833 (in James Forten’s house) and growing to a membership of 150,000-200,000 by 1840. Among its founders was the white abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, a personal friend of Forten. Whether Garrison is the author “W” of this article is unknown.



Last year I visited a gentleman in Philadelphia, who employs a considerable capital in the business of Sail-making. He invited me to see his establishment, which occupies several lofts. In one, his workmen, 20 or 30 in number, were industriously at work upon the canvass. 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 art¹; and spoke very kindly of his workmen. Here was one who had been in his employ 20 years, who owned not a brick when he came, but was now the possessor of a good brick house; there was another who had been rescued from ruin.

These were *white* men, but not so all. As near as I can recollect, about half of them were *colored*. My friend remarked to me that both colors had thus been employed together for more, I think, than 20 years, and always with the same peace and harmony which I then saw. “*Here,*” said he, *you see what may be done, and ought to be done in our country at large.*” The words made an impression on me which can never be effaced.



And who is this noble Sail-maker? *He is a COLORED MAN!* Yes, reader, he is a *colored man*, and a few years ago he was urged to go to Liberia, after this manner—“Go to Liberia, and you will be the *Lord Mansfield* of the Colony—*here* you can only be *Jim*—the Sail-maker.” This was the argument for expatriating a man who fought in the Revolution; who, for years before the Temperance reformation, set an example of total abstinence from ardent spirits in his whole establishment; who stands at the head of a most useful branch of industry, and whose family is a pattern of every thing that is virtuous, refined and praiseworthy.

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¹ Forten’s inventions, which sold widely and earned him a fortune, included an improved sail and a sail hoist for large sailing ships.