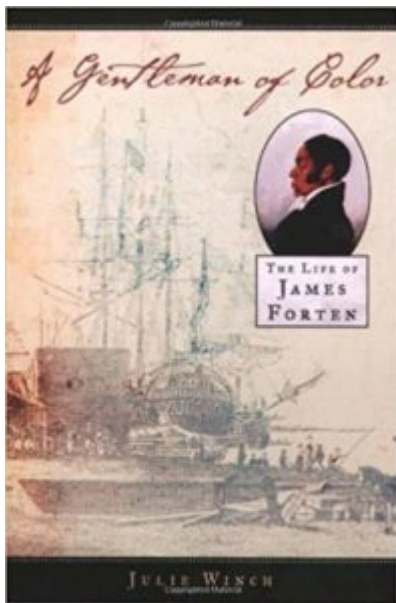
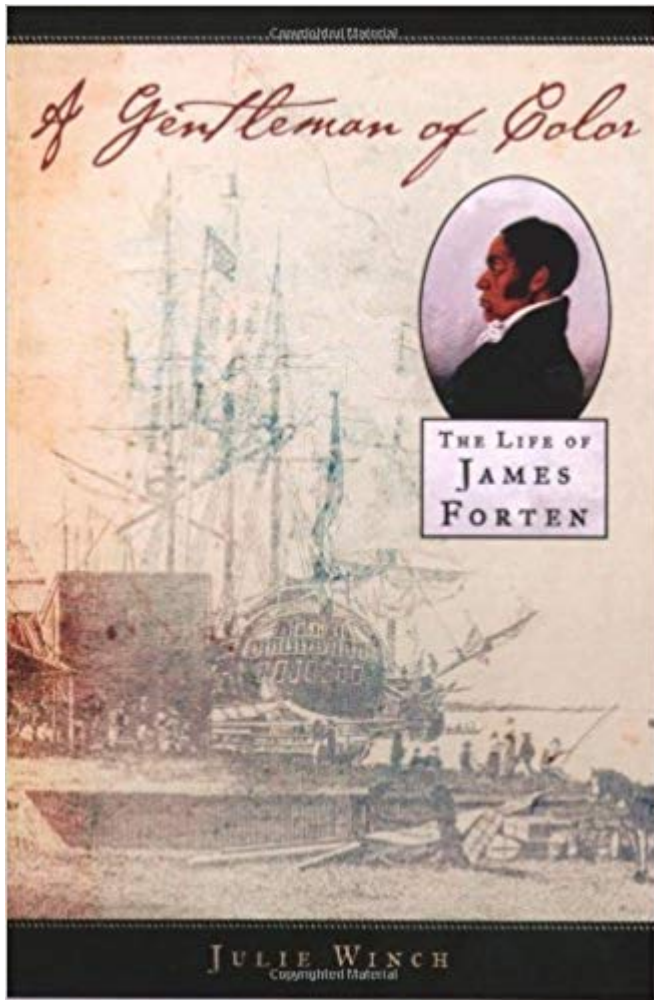


# A Gentleman of Color



Julie Winch, *A Gentleman of Color: The Life of James Forten*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. x + 501 pp., \$35.00. Review by Richard Newman.

"We hold this truth to be self-evident, that God created all men equal." For some American Founders, these words stopped at color, class, or creed. For others, the words held out limitless possibilities for the American nation—if made real. Though originally set down by Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence, on this occasion they were paraphrased by James Forten, one of early national America's leading black reformers. In 1813, protesting against a proposed Pennsylvania law limiting black migration in the Quaker State, Forten penned a pamphlet that called on Americans to live up to their founding language. The Declaration, Forten argued, "embraces the Indian and the European, the Savage and the Saint . . . the White man and the African," and anyone who violated that sacred notion of equality should be "subject to the animadversion of all."

Although an inspiration to celebrated antebellum figures such as Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison, James Forten (like many of his cohorts in the black founding generation) has suffered in semiobscurity in recent years. For a long time, no major biography of him even existed. That has now changed with Julie Winch's important and compelling new work, *A Gentleman of Color*. Winch's book is indeed a milestone. At five hundred pages, it is probably the longest biography of an antebellum African American (William McFeely's *Frederick Douglass* is just a bit shorter), and it is certainly the most extensively researched monograph on an early national black figure. It also makes a case for defining Forten into the hallowed founding generation. Not only was he a community leader and black institution builder, Winch makes clear, he was also a key part of the new nation's cultural and political fabric—a black man who defied racial categorization and stereotypes to try to expand the meaning of liberty and justice for all.

In Winch's capable hands, Forten's rags-to-riches life-story comes alive. Born in 1766 to a free black family of "modest" status, Forten became perhaps the richest black man of the early republic. Indeed, at his passing in 1842, Forten was favored with one of Philadelphia's largest public funerals. He fought in the American Revolution as a mere lad, became a respected businessman (one who employed white as well as black workers), and assumed a place as race leader and abolitionist as if born to these roles. In fact, Forten's life was constantly framed by racial injustice. "Although he knew he was the descendant of one of the first people to settle in Philadelphia," Winch observes, "he was painfully aware that his great-grandfather had arrived in [slave] shackles" (27). Born almost exactly a century before W.E.B. Dubois, Forten grappled early and often with Dubois' famous conundrum—he was an African and an American, his two identities often sparring.

Winch treats Forten's life with as much attention to detail as is possible for an early "gentleman of color." "Regrettably, for a man who lived so long and achieved so much," Winch writes, "there is no James Forten archive" (7). And unlike Frederick Douglass or even Harriet Jacobs, Forten left no autobiography

for later writers to examine. Winch exhaustively searched records in America and England, piecing together everything from stray business receipts to Forten's anonymous newspaper writings. She also learned Forten's sailmaking trade, for "James Forten's life was also written in canvas" (7). In 1785, Forten apprenticed himself to a white sailmaker named Robert Bridges. In little over a decade, he would become a master sailmaker himself, taking over Bridge's business and acquiring enough wealth to assume a leadership position in Philadelphia's black community. Forten's shop "was a showplace of his industry and values" (84). Winch reprints an 1834 newspaper article on Forten's business, where "his workman, twenty or thirty in number, were industriously at work . . . Here was one who had been in his employ for twenty years . . . Here was another who had been rescued from ruin. These were WHITE men, but not so all." Everyone from white politicians to fellow black leaders would visit Forten's shop to get what Winch calls "an all-too-rare sight of an integrated workplace" in antebellum America (84).

As the best biography does, Winch's portrait of Forten illuminates not only the man's life but his times. This is critically important in the case of the founding generation of black leaders. There are simply many more biographies of antebellum black men and women (from the likes of Frederick Douglass to important but lesser-known people such as Mary Ann Shadd Cary and T. Morris Chester). Antebellum black life is therefore much more richly detailed than the Revolutionary era or early republic. Readers interested in how a black man like Forten was educated in the 1770s, how he assumed a prominent status in black reform circles, how he viewed the battle against slavery and racial prejudice before 1830, and a host of other matters, will find much in Winch's book.

One thing readers may find surprising is the skepticism of early black leaders. Forten's most enduring role was as a racial reformer but he was not always sure that racial reform could succeed in America. Forten tried everything: he signed a congressional petition against racial injustice, wrote an important pamphlet attacking prejudicial laws, and became a leading critic of the American Colonization Society. But Forten also flirted briefly with colonization's flip side: black emigration. Forten believed that white colonizationists viewed blacks as inherently unequal—and that blacks could have no place in American society. Black emigrationists, on the other hand, told blacks to better their condition wherever they could, even beyond American shores. For a few years, then, he "promoted" emigration to the black republic of Haiti and joined the board of managers of the Haitian Emigration Society. Although he dropped active support of Haitian emigration during the 1820s, Forten remained critical of colonization. "The rising tide of intolerance he saw all about him could not help but make James Forten anxious about the future," Winch comments. "What kind of world would his children inherit?" (233). Faith in American ideals—"liberty, equality, brotherhood"—had stirred Forten's soul for years but a worsening racial climate "made him question those ideals" (233).

The advent of radical abolitionism in the 1830s reinvigorated Forten, and it is no surprise that he was a critical part of its formation. Forten helped William

Lloyd Garrison, the fiery young Massachusetts printer and soon-to-be publisher of the antislavery newspaper, the *Liberator*, gain monetary support for his journal from the black community and abolitionist content from black writers. "What created a bond between the two was a passionate commitment to antislavery and equally passionate hatred of the American Colonization Society" (239). Forten remained an important abolitionist voice until his very death.

Despite her exhaustive treatment of Forten, Winch cannot surmount the problem facing all biographers of early black figures. She must resort to conditional phraseology when the documentary trail dries up, as it too often does. Forten "might have" done this; he certainly "could have been" at that meeting. No matter, for Forten has found a biographer who treats his life with all the rigor and celebration it deserves. Forten deserves to be viewed as part of the founding generation of American leaders, and Winch's book of this gentleman of color certainly deserves a wide readership.

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