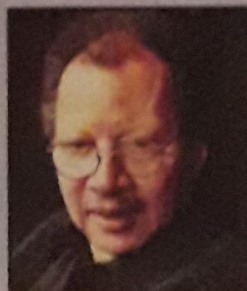
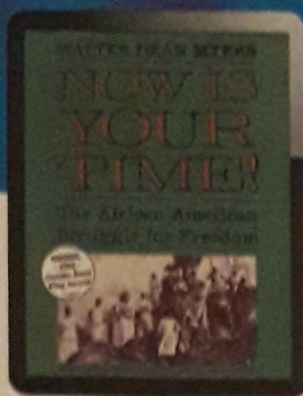


ANCHOR TEXT



MEET THE AUTHOR

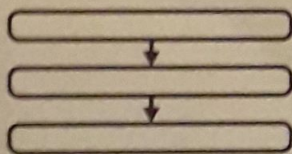
Walter Dean Myers

Walter Dean Myers begins each new piece of writing with

an outline because, he says, it “forces me to do the thinking.” Then he tries to write ten pages a day until he finishes his first draft. After that he revises. Myers has written over eighty books for young people and has won numerous awards, including the Coretta Scott King Award and the Newbery Honor.

TARGET SKILL

Sequence of Events Identify the order of events used by the author.

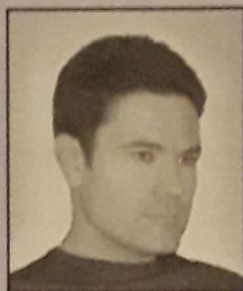


GENRE

Biography tells about a person’s life but is written by another person. As you read, look for:

- ▶ events in time order
- ▶ information about what the person accomplished and why he or she is important

COMMON CORE **RI.5.1** quote accurately when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences; **RI.5.2** determine two or more main ideas and explain how they are supported by details/ summarize; **RI.5.3** explain the relationships between individuals/events/concepts in a text; **RI.5.10** read and comprehend informational texts



MEET THE ILLUSTRATOR

Steven Noble

Steven Noble uses a variety of techniques to create his realistically detailed illustrations. These include

scratchboard, woodcut, pen and ink, and engraving. He lives in California.



JAMES FORTEN

An illustration of James Forten, a Black inventor and abolitionist, on the deck of a ship. He is wearing a large, wide-brimmed hat and is holding a rope that is part of the ship's rigging. The background shows the complex structure of the ship's masts and rigging, with a warm, golden light suggesting a sunset or sunrise.

from *Now Is Your Time!*

by Walter Dean Myers
selection illustrated by Steven Noble

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What events or feelings
would lead someone to
fight for freedom?

James Forten was born in Philadelphia in 1766 and grew up during the American Revolution. He overcame great obstacles to become one of the most important African Americans of his time.



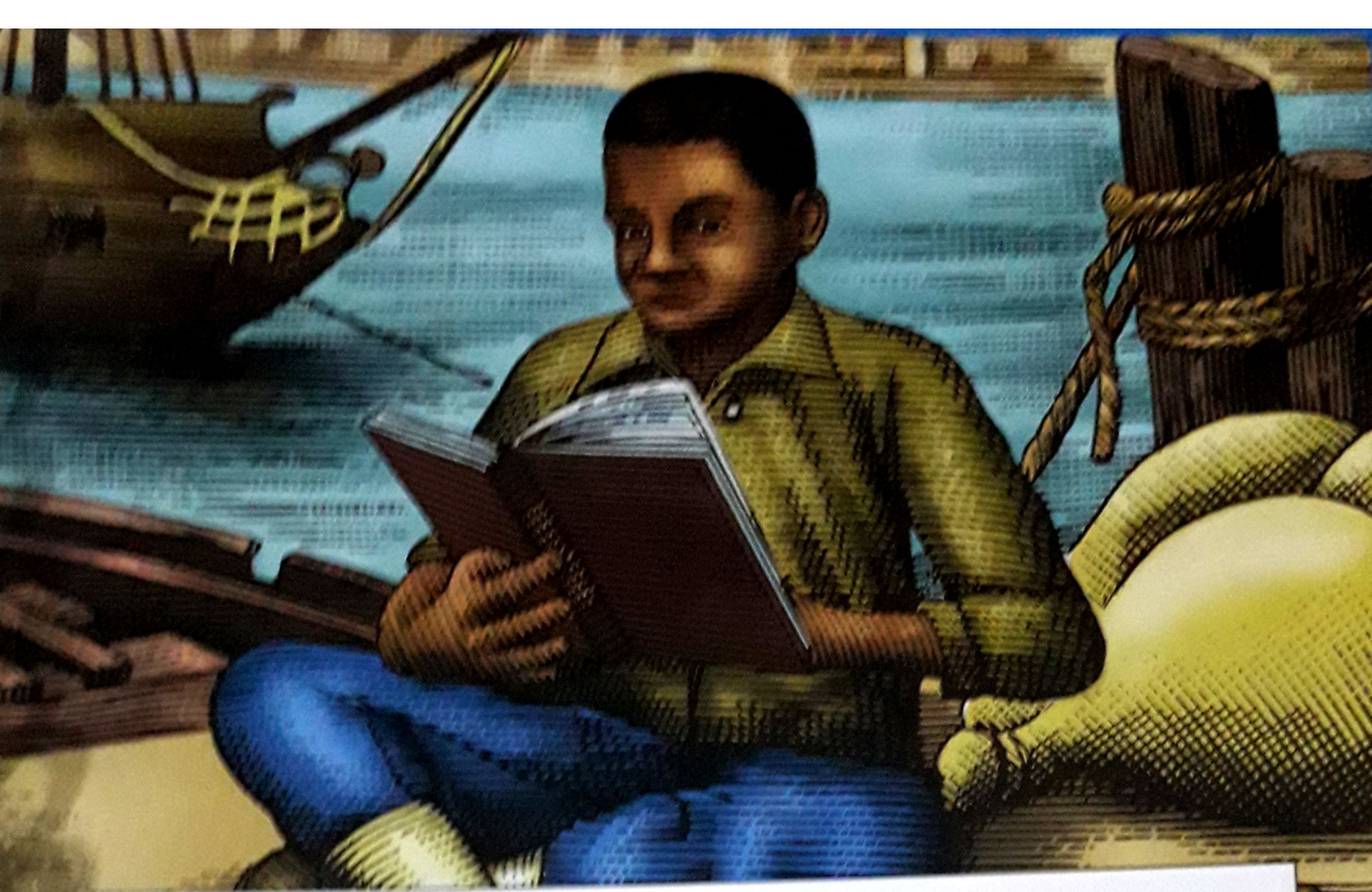
Thomas Forten, a free African, was employed by Robert Bridges, a sailmaker in Philadelphia. Sail making was a profitable but difficult job. Sewing the coarse cloth was brutal on the hands. The heavy thread had to be waxed and handled with **dexterity**. A person trying to break the thread with his hands could see it cut through his flesh like a knife. But Forten appreciated his job. It paid reasonably well and the work was steady. **1**

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. **2**

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 bluff, 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.

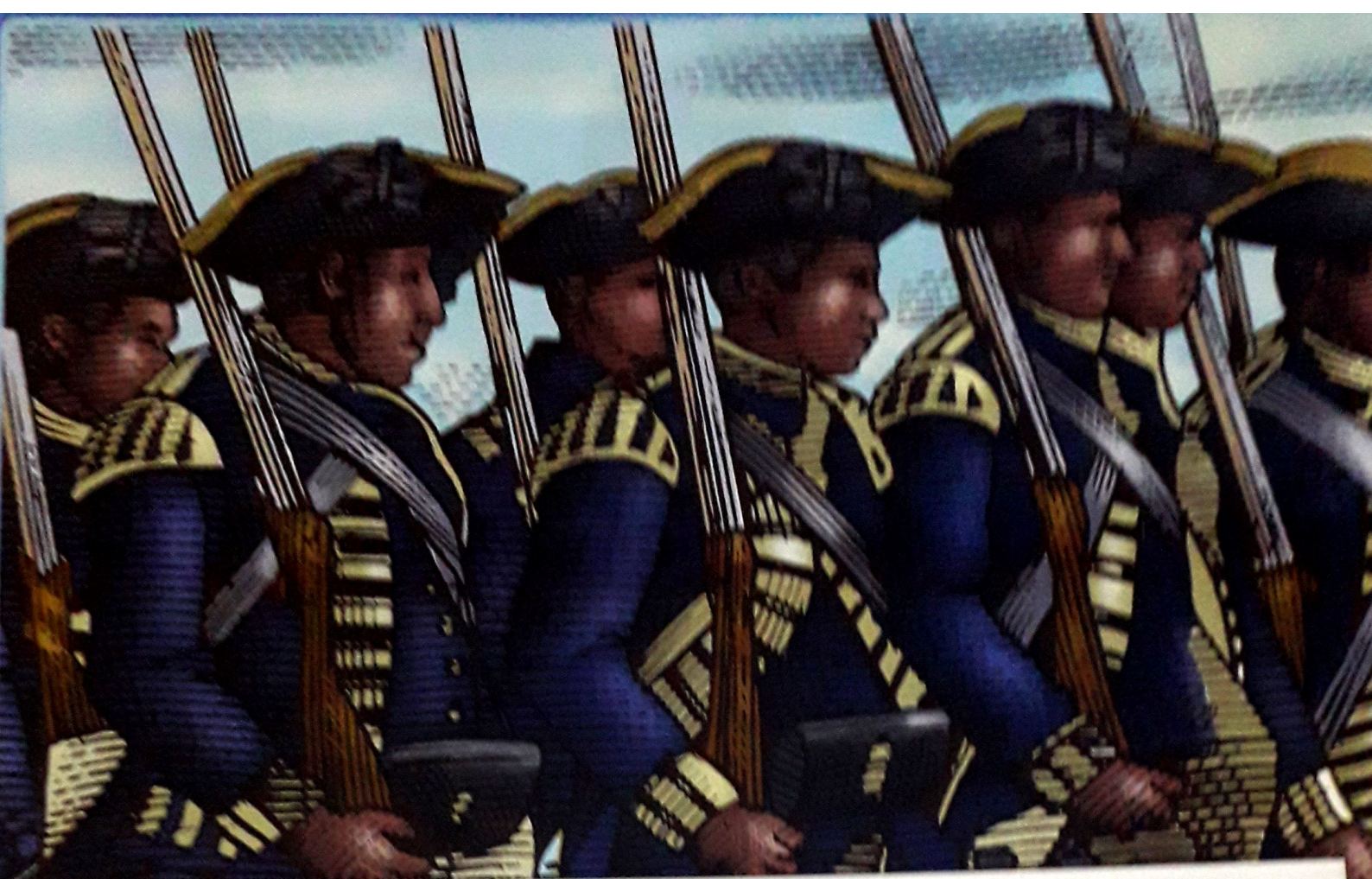
The Fortens sent their son to the small school that had been created for African children by a Quaker, Anthony Benezet. He believed that the only way the Africans would ever take a meaningful place in the colonies would be through education.



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.

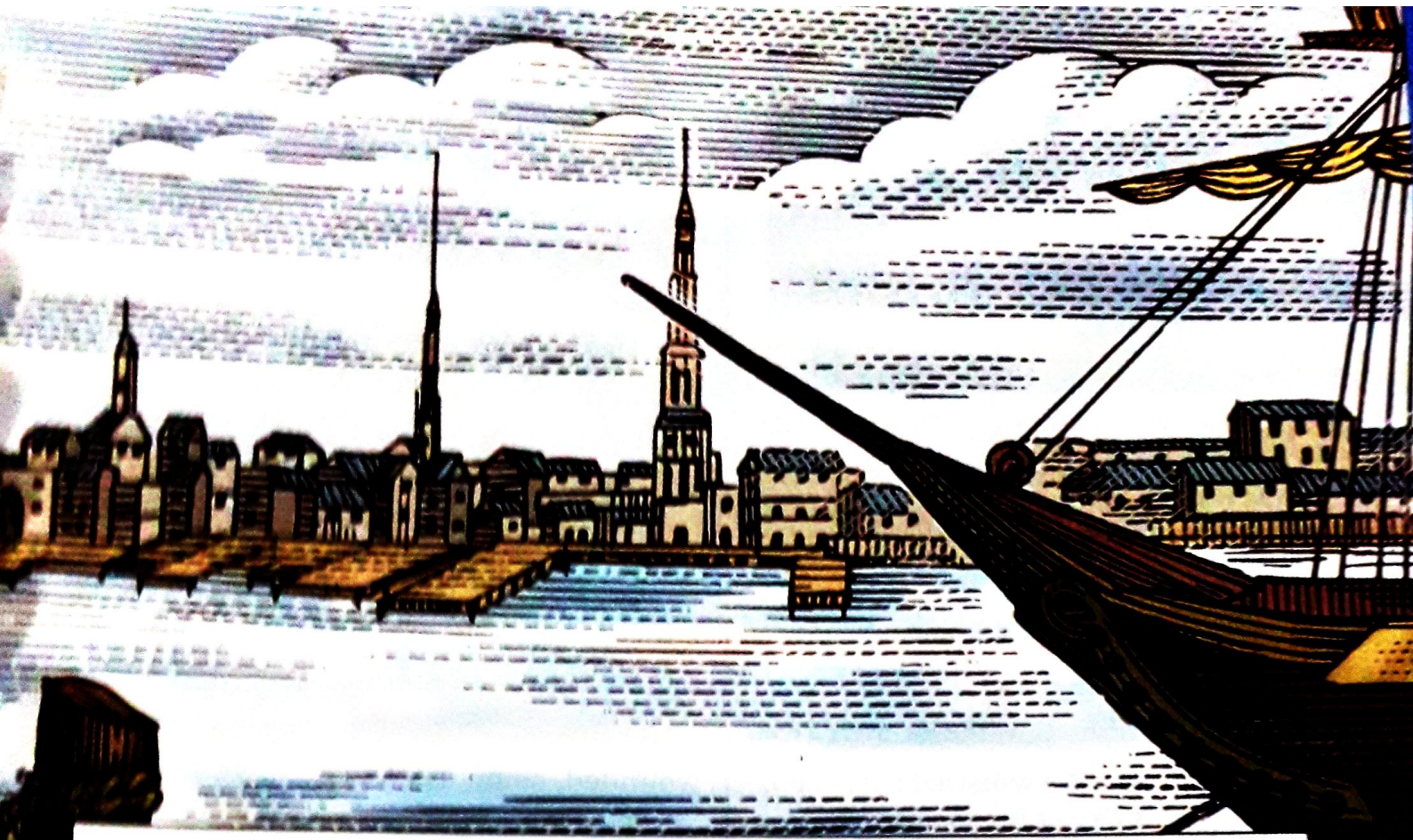


A black child in Philadelphia in the 1700's had to be careful. There were stories of free Africans being kidnapped and sold into slavery. He had seen the captives on the ships. They looked like him: the same dark skin, the same wide nose; but there was a sadness about them that both touched his heart 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.

ANALYZE THE TEXT

Explain Historical Events Why are the black soldiers James sees marching on the American side special? What was happening during this time period in history that made their positions in the military unusual?



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 heavy 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.



Philadelphia harbor as it appeared around the time the *Royal Louis* defeated the *Active*.

Forten's job was to carry the gunpowder from below to the guns. 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*.

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 twenty-seventh 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.

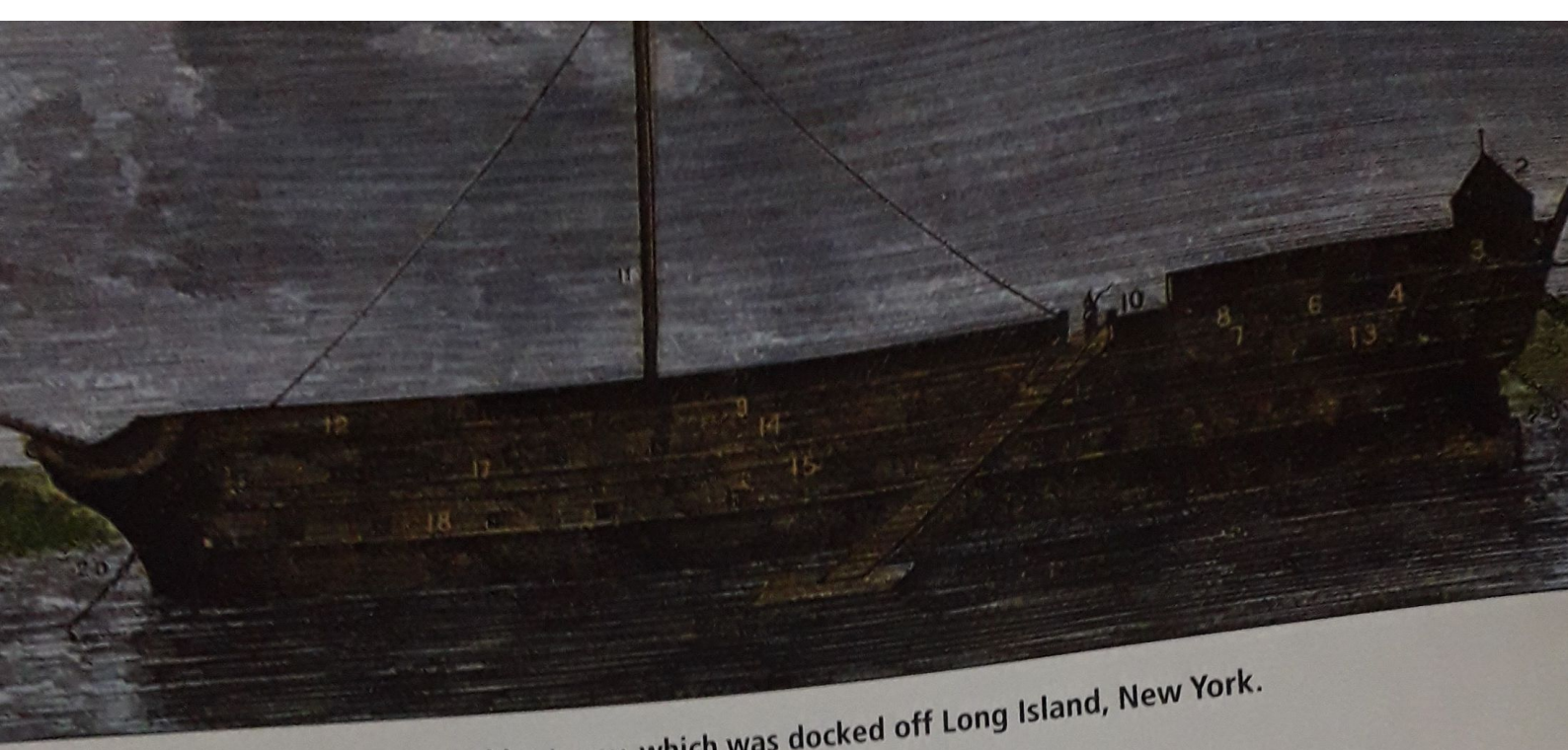


The missing crew was replaced. The ship was checked carefully by its captain and found to be in fine fighting condition. The crew carried more ammunition aboard, more powder, and fresh **provisions**. Once more they sailed for open waters.

On the sixteenth 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.



The notorious British prison ship, *Jersey*, which was docked off Long Island, New York.

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 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. Some of the prisoners were moaning. Others manned pumps to remove the water from the bottom of the boat.

Sleep was hard coming, and James wasn't sure if he wouldn't

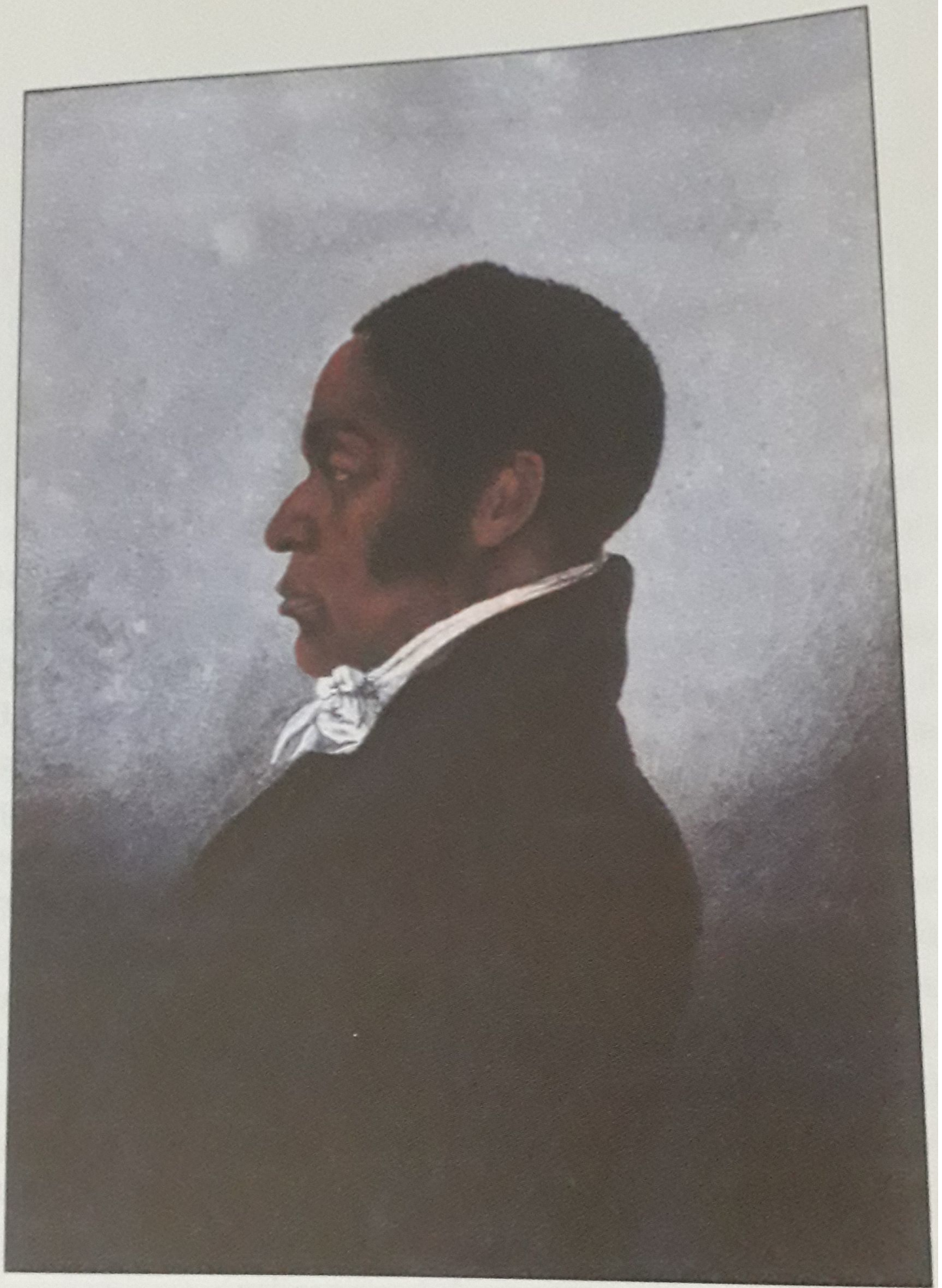
still be sold into slavery. Beasley's son had liked him, he remembered, and the boy had offered to **persuade** his father to take James to England. It would have been better than the hold of the *Jersey*.

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 first, two weeks after the capture of the *Royal Louis*, the news reached New York that Brigadier General Charles Cornwallis 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.

ANALYZE THE TEXT

Sequence of Events How did James Forten come to be on the ship with Captain Beasley's son?



An unknown artist probably painted this watercolor portrait of Forten during his lifetime.

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 ship owners. 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.

15

16

ANALYZE THE TEXT

Main Ideas and Details What are the main ideas of this text? How do you know? What seems to be the text's overall main idea?