



BIOGRAPHY

Charlotte Forten Grimké

A deep sense of responsibility to her African American roots propelled Charlotte Forten to leave her life of comfort in Philadelphia to teach newly freed slaves on a wind-swept island off the coast of South Carolina. She was the product of a distinguished African American family that valued the American tradition of social reform and lived and worked at its very heart.

As you read the profile below, consider the experiences that led to a lifetime of social commitment for Charlotte Forten Grimké.

Charlotte Forten was born in 1837 into wealth that few Americans, much less African Americans, enjoyed at that time. The Forten family traced their ancestry back five generations to a slave brought from Africa. But for four generations, they had been free. Charlotte's grandfather, James Forten, Sr., had built the family fortune. After serving aboard a patriot ship as a "powder boy" during the American Revolution, he went on to learn the sailmaking trade. By age 32, he owned his own sailmaking company. Forten's invention of a device to make handling sails easier made him a wealthy man and one of Philadelphia's most notable African American citizens.

Charlotte was only 3 when her mother died, and as a result, she grew up in her grandfather's house. The Forten household was a center for antislavery activity and a meeting place for abolitionists from across the eastern seaboard. It was there that the American Anti-Slavery Society was founded in 1833. The influence and example of her grandfather and her aunts imbued Charlotte with the idea that not only must slaves be freed, but they also must be educated to take their rightful place in American society.

In 1854 young Charlotte went north to earn a teaching degree in Salem, Massachusetts, which had one of the few integrated school systems of

the time. After graduation in 1856, she became the first African American to teach both the white and black children in Salem. Within two years, however, ill health forced her to resign from her position. She returned to Philadelphia to recuperate.

In 1862 Forten learned of a "social experiment" that captured her imagination. The previous November, Union forces had captured St. Helena, an island off the coast of South Carolina. There, in the community of Port Royal, an attempt was to be made to educate the newly freed slaves and prepare them for land ownership on the island. In October 1862, Forten arrived in Port Royal and began teaching in the island's one-room schoolhouse. On Thanksgiving Day, the following month, she recorded in her diary her thanks for the "crowd of eager, happy black faces from which the shadows of slavery had forever passed."

Forten continued teaching at Port Royal for nearly two years, until once again, ill health ended her work there. In 1878 Charlotte Forten married the Reverend Francis Grimké, the African American nephew of the noted abolitionist sisters Sarah and Angelina Grimké. For the rest of her life, she and her husband dedicated themselves to their joint mission: to speak out against racism and oppression. Charlotte Forten Grimké died in 1914.

Questions to Think About

1. How did Charlotte Forten's home life encourage her strong sense of responsibility to her African American heritage?
2. **Identifying Central Issues** How would you describe the primary focus of Charlotte Forten Grimké's life?