

The Liberation of the Enslaved and the Emancipation Proclamation

The election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860 led to the secession of seven states. The Republican platform against slavery in the territories led to the people of these deep southern states to view Lincoln as a threat to slavery, so they left the Union. After his inauguration, when Lincoln called for troops to put down the rebellion, four more states joined the seven states of the deep South, forming the Confederate States of America. The Civil War broke out, with the armies of the North, the Union, trying to end the rebellion, and the armies of the South, the Confederacy, fighting to leave the Union. Not all the states where slavery was legal joined the Confederacy. Missouri, Kentucky, West Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware remained in the Union though slavery was allowed there. Slave states that remained loyal to the Union were called *border states*. In his inaugural address, Lincoln promised, "I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so." Most people knew that although the Civil War was fought to save the Union it was caused by the question of slavery.

The question of slavery came up again and again in the early years of the war even though the Northern armies had little success on the battlefield. Different people across the United States and the world had different views on slavery. Lincoln and Congress faced pressure to end slavery from some groups and to leave it alone by other groups. Most Republicans, Lincoln's political party, opposed slavery, and most Democrats supported it. Lincoln urged the border states to end slavery through *gradual emancipation*, by liberating some enslaved people then and others at a future time. He argued that the economic impact of sudden widespread unemployment might be lessened if emancipation took years to complete. Alternatively, Lincoln suggested to border states that *compensated emancipation* could be used to end slavery, with enslavers being paid the value of those who were freed. Border states did not like any of these plans. Many Americans, in the North and South were racist, believing that Blacks were inferior to Whites and that the two races could not live peaceably side by side. Some, including Lincoln for a time, supported *colonization*, the voluntary deportation of those formerly enslaved, to Haiti or Liberia, in Africa.

On the battlefield some military leaders took action to liberate the enslaved. In May 1861 General Benjamin Butler declared formerly enslaved escapees "*contraband*" who could be employed by the Union army. Three months later Congress passed the First Confiscation Act which approved the taking of any property used to support the rebel cause, including enslaved people. In September 1861 General John C. Frémont declared martial law in Missouri, liberating individuals enslaved by those who support the Confederacy. Fearing the reaction of the Whites in that border state, Lincoln revoked Frémont's declaration in favor of the less radical Confiscation Act. On the front line of liberation, in November, 1861, thousands of formerly enslaved individuals on the Sea Islands in Port Royal Sound in South Carolina gained their freedom and were allowed to attend school as an experiment in the transition to freedom. But in May of 1862 when General Davis Hunter freed individuals enslaved within the broad Department of the South, which included Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina, Lincoln immediately revoked Hunter's decree. He feared that the nation was not prepared for such sweeping reform.

Following the lead of reform-minded generals, Congress took action to end slavery. On April 16, 1862, Congress passed the D.C. Emancipation Act which abolished slavery in Washington D.C.,

compensating enslavers for the monetary value of those they enslaved and providing means for the formerly enslaved people to voluntarily move to Haiti, Liberia or another location outside of the United States. Then in June Congress outlawed slavery in the territories, offering no compensation for enslavers. Further, Congress passed the Second Confiscation Act which freed those individuals enslaved by people disloyal to the U.S. and allowed the President to employ African Americans to put down the rebellion. They passed the Militia Act that allowed the employment of African Americans by the military, emancipating volunteers who had been enslaved, along with their families, if they had been enslaved by individuals disloyal to the U.S.

Independent of the laws and policies that liberated some enslaved people, many other enslaved people were taking matters into their own hands. Being aware of the reforms, some escaped from their enslavers and began to labor for the Union army. For example, on June 12, 1862, John Boston, formerly enslaved, sent a letter to his wife. "I am now in the safety of the 14th Regiment of Brooklyn," he wrote. "This day I can address you, thank God, as a free man." He briefly described his flight from bondage. On August 25, 1862, African Americans on the South Carolina Sea Islands were recruited for military service, a breakthrough that challenged the racist view that African Americans were unfit physically and mentally for military service.

By the middle of 1862, Lincoln became bolder in his policies to end slavery. On July 22, 1862, he shared a preliminary Emancipation Proclamation with his cabinet members who expressed mixed reactions but general support. The proclamation outlined a plan to liberate enslaved people in the states and regions that remained in rebellion against the Union. Enslaved people in border states and, ironically, in regions under Union occupation including all of Tennessee and parts of Virginia and Louisiana, would remain in bondage. The proclamation would represent a compromise policy meant to satisfy the various groups putting pressure on Lincoln. William Seward, the Secretary of State, suggested that Lincoln wait for a Union military victory before issuing the proclamation to avoid the appearance of desperation. That victory occurred on September 17, 1862. The indecisive Battle of Antietam became a Union victory when Robert E. Lee's Confederate troops retreated out of Maryland. Five days later Lincoln published a revised Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, declaring that it would go into effect on January 1, 1863. Southern states had one more chance to end their rebellion and hold on to slavery. Unsurprisingly, none accepted the offer and the war continued. True to his word, on New Year's Day, 1863, Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation.

In many parts of the Confederacy the Emancipation Proclamation had little effect. In July, 1863, a race riot broke out in New York City in response to new draft regulations and the proclamation. As the Union army expanded into the South they brought with them increasing hope for freedom. Sometimes these hopes were dashed, such as when General William Sherman's troops abandoned a large number of African Americans who were traveling with them, leaving them to be massacred by Confederate guerilla fighters. Happier events took place in other locations, such as when, near the end of the war on June 19, 1865, General Gordon Granger announced the enforcement of the Emancipation Proclamation in Texas. Today, the federal holiday of Juneteenth commemorates the African American celebration of Granger's orders.

