

1861–1865: The Civil War



Early Seventh Street

Washington, D.C.

A petition was used to free slaves in the District of Columbia. (Marvin Joseph/The Washington Post)

The act authorized the appointment of three commissioners who could receive petitions and investigate claims for compensation to slave owners, providing that “the entire sum so appraised and apportioned shall not exceed in the aggregate an amount equal to \$300 for each person shown to have been held by lawful claim.”

Two days later, according to a Senate report, “Senator Lafayette Foster of Connecticut proudly declared, ‘You may strike off the bonds of every slave in the District of Columbia today.’ ” The Hartford Daily Courant, according to the Senate report, declared, “Not a slave exists in the District of Columbia. Their shackles have fallen, never to be restored.”

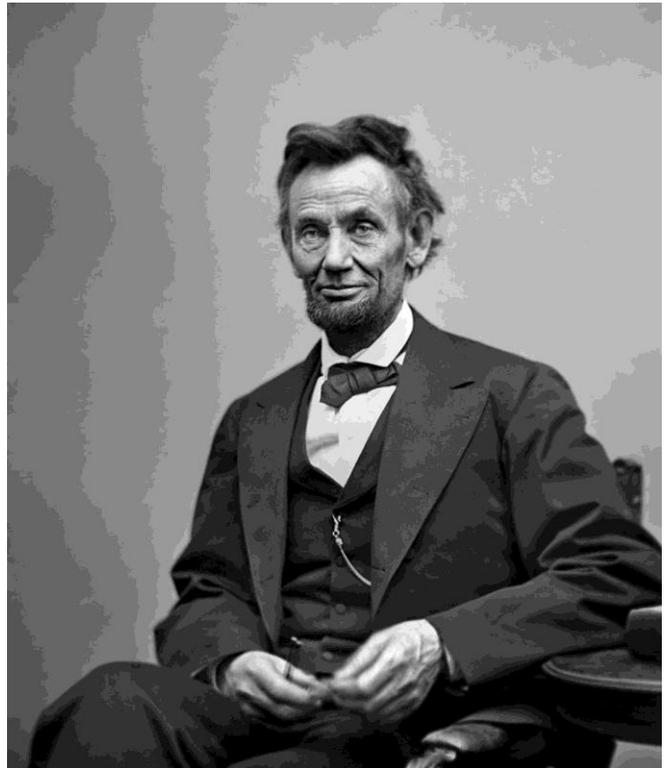
Five months later, Lincoln warned Confederate states in rebellion against the United States to rejoin the Union by Jan. 1, 1863, or their slaves would be freed as well.

Lincoln followed through on his threat on Jan. 1, 1863, as the nation entered the third year of the Civil War. The Emancipation Proclamation declared “that all persons held as slaves” within the rebellious states “are, and henceforward shall be free.”

President Abraham Lincoln, photographed in 1865.

According to the National Archives website, “the Emancipation Proclamation was limited in many ways. It applied only to states that had seceded from the Union, leaving slavery untouched in the loyal border states.

It also expressly exempted parts of the Confederacy that had already come under Northern control. Most important, the freedom it promised depended upon Union military victory.”



Lincoln called upon the freed blacks to “abstain from all violence, unless in necessary self-defence” and recommended “they labor faithfully for reasonable wages.” And he issued a welcome to the men “of suitable condition” to join the Union’s armed forces.

The Emancipation Proclamation itself did not end slavery, but it changed the Civil War. The Union forces were now fighting not only to quell the rebellion in the South but to create a new country without the cruelty of slavery. According to scholars, 180,000 black men served in the Union Army and 18,000 served in the Navy.

It would not be until Nov. 1, 1864, a few months before Congress approved the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery, that enslaved people in Maryland were declared free. The 13th Amendment was ratified in 1865 at the end of the Civil War.

In a country founded on the belief that “all men are created equal,” slavery had finally been vanquished.

Richmond, Virginia



Map of Richmond during the war

In February 1861, [Jefferson Davis](#) was inaugurated as [President](#) of the [Confederate States of America](#) in Montgomery, Alabama. Two months after Davis' inauguration, the Confederate army fired on [Fort Sumter](#) in [Charleston, South Carolina](#), and the [Civil War](#) had begun.

With the outbreak of war, followed by Virginia's secession in May 1861, the strategic location of the Tredegar Iron Works was one of the primary factors in the decision to relocate the capital of the Confederacy to Richmond.

From this arsenal came much of the Confederates' heavy ordnance machinery, making 723 tons of armor plating that covered the [CSS Virginia](#), the world's first [ironclad](#) used in the two-day [Battle of Hampton Roads](#) in March 1862, against the [USS Monitor](#).

In 1862, the [Peninsula Campaign](#), led by General [George B. McClellan](#), was a Union attempt to take Richmond, beginning from Union held [Fort Monroe](#) at the eastern tip of the [Virginia Peninsula](#) at [Old Point Comfort](#). Efforts to take Richmond by the [James River](#) were successfully blocked by Confederate defenses at [Drewry's Bluff](#), about 8 miles (13 km) downstream from Richmond.

The Union march up the Peninsula by land culminated in the [Seven Days Battles](#). Ruses to make the defending forces seem larger by General [John B. Magruder](#), Richmond's defensive line of batteries and fortifications set up under General [Robert E. Lee](#), a daring ride around the Union Army by Confederate cavalry under General [J.E.B. Stuart](#), and an unexpected appearance of General [Stonewall Jackson](#)'s famous "[foot cavalry](#)" combined to unnerve the ever-cautious McClellan, and he initiated a Union retreat before Richmond. Even as other portions of the South were falling, the failure of the Peninsula Campaign to take Richmond led to almost three more years of bitter and bloody warfare between the states.



Bread riots in Richmond

On April 2, 1863, the city was beset by a large [bread riot](#) as housewives could no longer afford very high food prices and broke into stores. The militia was called out.

After a long siege, Union General [Ulysses S. Grant](#) captured nearby Petersburg in April 1865.

As the fall of Petersburg became imminent, on *Evacuation Sunday* (April 2), President Davis, his cabinet, and the Confederate defenders abandoned Richmond, and fled south on the last open railroad line, the Richmond and Danville.

The retreating Confederate soldiers received orders to set [fire](#) to [bridges](#), the [armory](#), and warehouses as they left. The fires spread out of control, and destroyed large parts of the city, reaching to the very edge of Capitol Square mostly unchecked. At dawn, Richmond's mayor and other civilians went to the Union lines east of Richmond on New Market Road (now [State Route 5](#)) and surrendered the city; Union troops entered and eventually quenched the flames.



Shells of the buildings of Richmond, silhouetted against a dark sky after the destruction by Confederates, 1865.

On April 4, President Abraham Lincoln toured the fallen city by foot with his young son Tad, and visited the former [White House of the Confederacy](#) and the [Virginia State Capitol](#).^[12] Arriving as fires set by the retreating Confederates still smoldered, Lincoln went to the White House of the Confederacy, expecting a communication from the retreating forces.

Some wanted him to make a public gesture of sitting at [Jefferson Davis](#)'s own desk, symbolically saying to the nation that the President of the United States held authority over the entire land.

Citizens and freed slaves greeted Lincoln as a conquering hero. One admirer reportedly said, "I know I am free, for I have seen the face of Father Abraham and have felt him. When a general asked Lincoln how the defeated Confederates should be treated, Lincoln replied, "Let 'em up easy."

In the meantime, the governor and top officials relocated briefly to [Danville](#). About a week after Richmond's evacuation, Robert E. Lee surrendered to Grant, ending the [Battle of Appomattox Courthouse](#). Within the same week, on April 14, 1865, President Lincoln was [assassinated](#) at [Ford's Theatre](#) in Washington, D.C. by [John Wilkes Booth](#). Northern leadership would deal much more harshly with the fallen states than Lincoln had planned.

On May 25, 1865, [Francis Harrison Pierpont](#) of [Fairmont, West Virginia](#), moved the seat of government of "restored" Virginia from Alexandria back to Richmond. The Virginia General Assembly was once again located in the State House in Richmond.

During President [Andrew Johnson](#)'s administration, Governor Pierpont was replaced as Governor on April 4, 1868, by General [Henry H. Wells](#) of New York, who was formerly under the command of Brevet Major General [John Schofield](#). Pierpont and his family returned home to Fairmont.

1865–1880: Reconstruction and City growth

During 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution abolished slavery. Richmond (and the South's) Reconstruction began. Richmond's Theological School for Freedmen, later becoming Virginia Union University, was established that year. (Today, the historic campus is located on Lombardy Street just north of the downtown area).

In 1866, the first organized Memorial Day was celebrated in Richmond at Oakwood Cemetery near Church Hill on the Nine Mile Road. Many fallen Confederate troops were buried there and at Hollywood Cemetery, just west of the Tredegar Iron Works in Richmond.

In 1869, the segregated public school system was started in the city. Black voters registered in the city's first municipal election since the end of the Civil War. One year later, Virginia was readmitted to the Union with a new Constitution and federal troops were removed from the city.

1870 has been called the **Year of Disasters**. The worst flood in 100 years occurred. An overcrowding during a court hearing over Richmond's elections collapsed the third floor of the Virginia State Capitol, causing it to fall into the Hall of the House of Delegates, killing 60 and injuring 250.

Robert E. Lee's death in Lexington where he headed what is now Washington and Lee University compounded grief, followed by the Spotswood Hotel fire, killing eight people. Over the next decade, the city's first high school, Richmond High School, opened in 1873.

Cigarette manufacturing was introduced in Richmond by P.H. Mayo & Bros. Tobacco Co. in 1874, further expanding the city's economic importance to the tobacco industry. The last federal troops were removed from the South in 1877, and Reconstruction ended.

Virginia politics underwent many power struggles in the 1870s and 1880s. Conservatives split over repayment of the state's pre-war debt. "Funders" wanted the full amount to be paid, much of which was held by northern interests. "Readjusters" wanted a portion to be paid by the new State of West Virginia, and formed the Readjuster Party, a coalition of Republicans, conservative Democrats, and free blacks led by railroad executive William Mahone.

Mahone was elected to the U.S. Senate, where he served from 1881 to 1887, and the Readjuster's candidate, William E. Cameron, was elected as Virginia's governor, serving from 1882 to 1886. However, by 1883, Democrats were assuming power in state politics, which they held about 80 years, until the fall of the Byrd Organization in the late 1960s, following the death of former Governor and U.S. Senator Harry F. Byrd in 1966.



Richmond skyline after the Evacuation Fire of 1865.