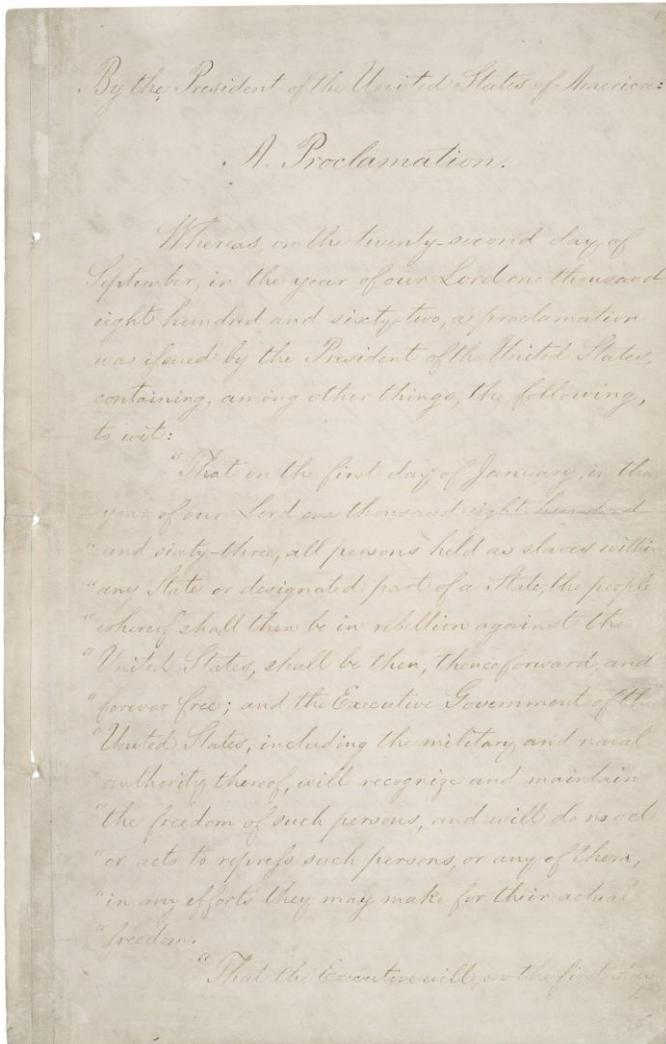


The Emancipation Proclamation



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President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, as the nation approached its third year of bloody civil war.

The proclamation declared "that all persons held as slaves" within the rebellious states "are, and henceforward shall be free."

Despite this expansive wording, the Emancipation Proclamation was limited in many ways. It applied only to states that had seceded from the United States, leaving slavery untouched in the loyal border states. It also expressly exempted parts of the Confederacy (the Southern secessionist states) that had already come under Northern control. Most important, the freedom it promised depended upon Union (United States) military victory.

Although the Emancipation Proclamation did not end slavery in the nation, it captured the hearts and imagination of millions of Americans and fundamentally transformed the character of the war.

After January 1, 1863, every advance of federal troops expanded the domain of freedom. Moreover, the Proclamation announced the acceptance of black men into the Union Army and Navy, enabling the liberated to become liberators. By the end of the war, almost 200,000 black soldiers and sailors had fought for the Union and freedom.

From the first days of the Civil War, slaves had acted to secure their own liberty. The Emancipation Proclamation confirmed their insistence that the war for the Union must become a war for freedom. It added moral force to the Union cause and strengthened the Union both militarily and politically. As a milestone along the road to slavery's final destruction, the Emancipation Proclamation has assumed a place among the great documents of human freedom.

The original of the Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863, is in the National Archives in Washington, DC. With the text covering five pages the document was originally tied with narrow red and blue ribbons, which were attached to the signature page by a wafered impression of the seal of the United States. Most of the ribbon remains; parts of the seal are still decipherable, but other parts have worn off.

The document was bound with other proclamations in a large volume preserved for many years by the Department of State. When it was prepared for binding, it was reinforced with strips along the center folds and then mounted on a still larger sheet of heavy paper.

Written in red ink on the upper right-hand corner of this large sheet is the number of the Proclamation, 95, given to it by the Department of State long after it was signed. With other records, the volume containing the Emancipation Proclamation was transferred in 1936 from the Department of State to the National Archives of the United States.

D.C. Emancipation Day: 3,000 slaves in the nation's capital cried and cheered when they learned they were freed

When one black man heard that more than 3,000 enslaved people in the nation's capital had been freed on April 16, 1862, he raced through the District to tell as many people as he could.

In a letter he later wrote to a friend in Baltimore, he described sharing the news with two women: "When I entered they perceived that something was ahead and immediately asked me 'What's the news?'"

The man told them: “The District’s free says I pulling out the ‘National Republic’ and reading its editorial.”

When the man finished, one chambermaid left the room crying for joy.

“The slave women clapped her hands and shouted, left the house, saying, ‘Let me go and tell my husband that Jesus has done all things well.’ ”

The cook who was now free retired to another room to “offer thanks for the blessing sent.”

“Should I not feel glad to see so much rejoicing around me? Were I a drinker, I would get on a Jolly spree today, but as a Christian I can but kneel in prayer and bless God for the privilege I’ve enjoyed this day. Would to God that the Law applied also to Baltimore but a little patience and all will be well.”

C.R. Gibbs, a historian and author of “Black, Copper & Bright: The District of Columbia’s Black Civil War Regiment,” came across the letter by the man while reading the book, “The Negro’s Civil War,” by James M. McPherson.

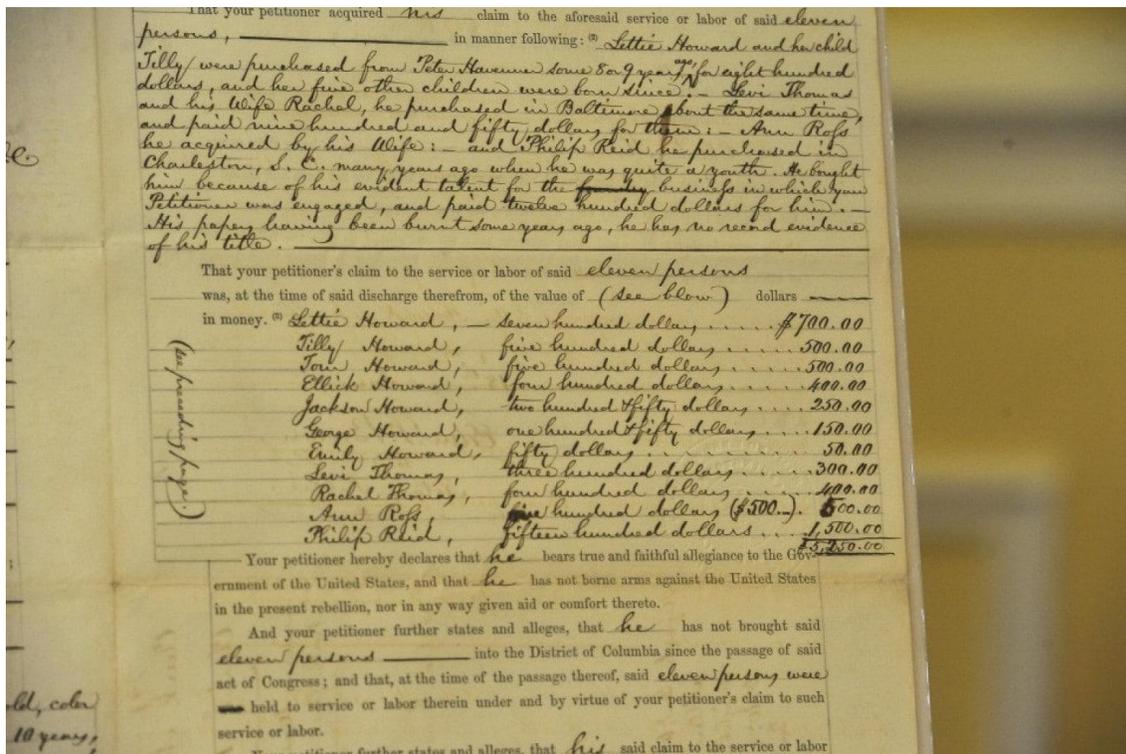
To commemorate April 16, the District every year celebrates Emancipation Day, when the city’s slaves were freed nearly eight months before Lincoln issued his famous Emancipation Proclamation. The District would become the only jurisdiction in the United States to compensate slave owners for freeing people.

The District of Columbia Compensated Emancipation Act was approved on April 16, 1862, according the U.S. congressional records.

The law was sponsored by Massachusetts Sen. Henry Wilson, who was haunted by a slave auction he'd witnessed in 1836 in the shadow of the Capitol. Wilson, a leading abolitionist who would later become vice president in the Republican administration of Ulysses S. Grant, had vowed to "give all that I had to the cause of emancipation."

When the U.S. Senate passed the D.C. Compensated Emancipation Act, there was applause in the Senate galleries.

According to the act, "All persons held to service or labor within the District of Columbia by reason of African descent are hereby discharged and freed of and from all claims to such service or labor; and from and after the passage of this act neither slavery nor involuntary servitude except for crime where of the parties shall be duly convicted shall hereafter exist in said District."



A petition that 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.



President Abraham Lincoln, photographed in 1865.

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.”

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.