

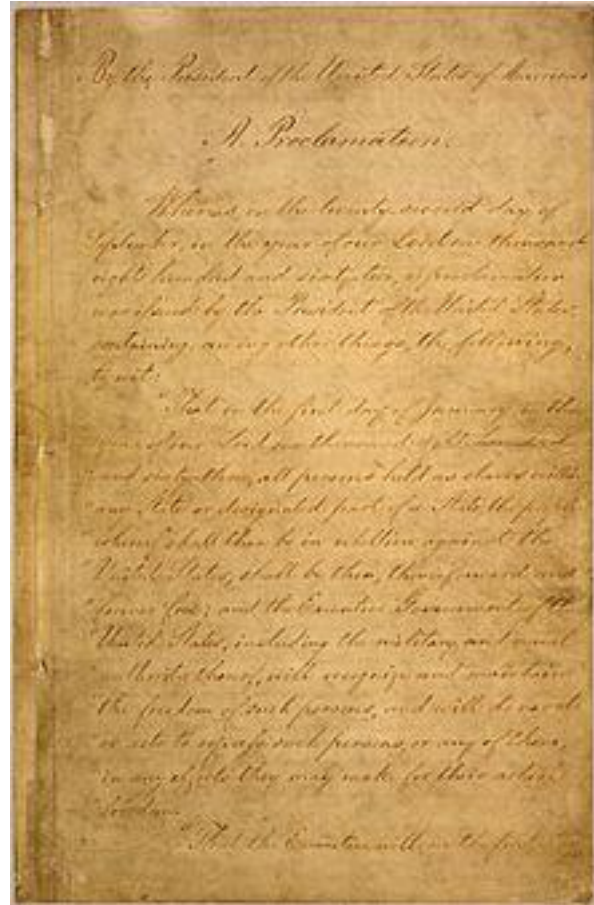
January 1, 1863

Emancipation Proclamation

On September 22, 1862, President [Abraham Lincoln](#) issued the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, which declared that as of January 1, 1863, all enslaved people in the states currently engaged in rebellion against the Union “shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free.”

Lincoln didn't actually free any of the approximately 4 million men, women and children held in slavery in the United States when he signed the formal Emancipation Proclamation the following January. The document applied only to enslaved people in the Confederacy, and not to those in the border states that remained loyal to the Union.

But although it was presented chiefly as a military measure, the proclamation marked a crucial shift in Lincoln's views on slavery. Emancipation would redefine the [Civil War](#), turning it from a struggle to preserve the Union to one focused on ending slavery, and set a decisive course for how the nation would be reshaped after that historic conflict.



Lincoln's Developing Views on Slavery

Sectional tensions over slavery in the United States had been building for decades by 1854, when Congress' passage of the [Kansas-Nebraska Act](#) opened territory that had previously been closed to slavery according to the [Missouri Compromise](#). Opposition to the act led to the formation of the [Republican Party](#) in 1854 and revived the failing political career of an Illinois lawyer named Abraham Lincoln, who rose from obscurity to national prominence and claimed the Republican nomination for president in 1860.

Lincoln personally hated slavery, and considered it immoral. "If the negro is a man, why then my ancient faith teaches me that 'all men are created equal;' and that there can be no moral right in connection with one man's making a slave of another," he said in a now-famous speech in Peoria, Illinois, in 1854. But Lincoln didn't believe the [Constitution](#) gave the federal government the power to abolish it in the states where it already existed, only to prevent its establishment to new western territories that would eventually become states. In his first

inaugural address in early 1861, he declared that he had “no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with slavery in the States where it exists.” By that time, however, seven Southern states had already seceded from the Union, forming the [Confederate States of America](#) and setting the stage for the Civil War.

First Years of War

At the outset of that conflict, Lincoln insisted that the war was not about freeing enslaved people in the South but about preserving the Union. Four border slave states (Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky and Missouri) remained on the Union side, and many others in the North also opposed abolition. When one of his generals, John C. Frémont, put Missouri under martial law, declaring that Confederate sympathizers would have their property seized, and their enslaved people would be freed (the first emancipation proclamation of the war), Lincoln directed him to reverse that policy, and later removed him from command.

But hundreds of enslaved men, women and children were fleeing to Union-controlled areas in the South, such as Fortress Monroe in Virginia, where Gen. Benjamin F. Butler had declared them “contraband” of war, defying the Fugitive Slave Law mandating their return to their owners. Abolitionists argued that freeing enslaved people in the South would help the Union win the war, as enslaved labor was vital to the Confederate war effort.

In July 1862, Congress passed the Militia Act, which allowed black men to serve in the U.S. armed forces as laborers, and the Confiscation Act, which mandated that enslaved people seized from Confederate supporters would be declared forever free. Lincoln also tried to get the border states to agree to gradual emancipation, including compensation to enslavers, with little success. When abolitionists criticized him for not coming out with a stronger emancipation policy, Lincoln replied that he valued saving the Union over all else.

“My paramount object in this struggle *is* to save the Union and *is not* either to save or to destroy slavery,” he wrote in an editorial published in the *Daily National Intelligencer* in August 1862. “If I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing *all* the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that.”

From Preliminary to Formal Emancipation Proclamation



Abraham Lincoln reading the Emancipation Proclamation before his cabinet.
Bettmann Archive/Getty Images

At the same time however, Lincoln’s cabinet was mulling over the document that would become the Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln had written a draft in late July, and while some of his advisers supported it, others were anxious. William H. Seward, Lincoln’s secretary of state, urged the president to wait to announce emancipation until the Union won a significant victory on the battlefield, and Lincoln took his advice.

On September 19, 1862, Union troops halted the advance of Confederate forces led by Gen. [Robert E. Lee](#) near Sharpsburg, Maryland, in the [Battle of Antietam](#). Three days later, Lincoln went public with the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, which called on all Confederate states to rejoin the Union within 100 days—by January 1, 1863—or their slaves would be declared “thenceforward, and forever free.”

On January 1, Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, which included nothing about gradual emancipation, compensation for enslavers or black emigration and colonization, a policy Lincoln had supported in the past. Lincoln justified emancipation as a wartime measure, and was careful to apply it only to the Confederate states currently in rebellion. Exempt from the proclamation were the four border slave states and all or parts of three Confederate states controlled by the Union Army.

Impact of the Emancipation Proclamation

As Lincoln’s decree applied only to territory outside the realm of his control, the Emancipation Proclamation had little actual effect on freeing any of the nation’s enslaved people. But its symbolic power was enormous, as it announced freedom for enslaved people as one of the North’s war aims, alongside preserving the Union itself. It also had practical effects: Nations like Britain and France, which had previously considered supporting the Confederacy to expand their power and influence, backed off due to their steadfast opposition to slavery. Black Americans were permitted to serve in the Union Army for the first time, and nearly 200,000 would do so by the end of the war.

Finally, the Emancipation Proclamation paved the way for the permanent abolition of slavery in the United States. As Lincoln and his allies in Congress realized emancipation would have no

constitutional basis after the war ended, they soon began working to enact a Constitutional amendment abolishing slavery. By the end of January 1865, both houses of Congress had passed the [13th Amendment](#), and it was ratified that December.

"It is my greatest and most enduring contribution to the history of the war," Lincoln said of emancipation in February 1865, two months before his assassination. "It is, in fact, the central act of my administration, and the great event of the 19th century."

Sources

The Emancipation Proclamation, [National Archives](#)

10 Facts: The Emancipation Proclamation, [American Battlefield Trust](#)

Eric Foner, [The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery](#) (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010)

Allen C. Guelzo, "Emancipation and the Quest for Freedom." [National Park Service](#).

Article Title

Emancipation Proclamation

Author

[History.com Editors](#)

Website Name

HISTORY

URL

<https://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/emancipation-proclamation>

Access Date

August 31, 2020

Publisher

A&E Television Networks

Last Updated

June 30, 2020

Original Published Date

October 29, 2009