
The Emancipation Proclamation

An Act of Justice

By John Hope Franklin

Thursday, January 1, 1863, was a bright, crisp day in the nation's capital. The previous day had been a strenuous one for President Lincoln, but New Year's Day was to be even more strenuous. So he rose early. There was much to do, not the least of which was to put the finishing touches on the Emancipation Proclamation. At 10:45 the document was brought to the White House by Secretary of State William Seward. The President signed it, but he noticed an error in the superscription. It read, "In testimony whereof I have hereunto set my name and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed." The President had never used that form in proclamations, always preferring to say "In testimony whereof I have hereunto set my hand. . . ." He asked Seward to make the correction, and the formal signing would be made on the corrected copy.

The traditional New Year's Day reception at the White House began that morning at eleven o'clock. Members of the cabinet and the diplomatic corps were among the first to arrive. Officers of the army and navy arrived in a body at half past eleven. The public was admitted at noon, and then Seward and his son Frederick, the assistant secretary of state, returned with the corrected draft. The rigid laws of etiquette held the President to his duty for three hours, as his secretaries Nicholay and Hay observed. "Had necessity required it, he could of course have left such mere social occupation at any moment," they pointed out, "but the President saw no occasion for precipitancy. On the other hand, he probably deemed it wise that the completion of this momentous executive act should be attended by every circumstance of deliberation."

After the guests departed, the President went upstairs to his study for the signing in the presence of a few friends. No cabinet meeting was called, and no attempt was made to have a ceremony. Later, Lincoln told F. B. Carpenter, the artist, that as he took up the pen to sign the paper, his hand shook so violently that he could not write. "I could not for a moment control my arm. I paused, and a superstitious feeling came over me which made me hesitate. . . . In a moment I remembered that I had been shaking hands for hours with several hundred people, and hence a very simple explanation of the trembling and shaking of my arm." With a hearty laugh at his own thoughts, the President proceeded to sign the Emancipation Procla-



A Union soldier reads the Emancipation Proclamation to newly freed slaves. After Lincoln signed the Proclamation, celebrations took place throughout the country.

mation. Just before he affixed his name to the document, he said, "I never, in my life, felt more certain that I was doing right than I do in signing this paper."

When I made my first serious study of this document, several copies of the December 30 draft were in existence. The copies of cabinet officers Edward Bates, Francis Blair, William Seward, and Salmon P. Chase were in the Library of Congress. The draft that the President worked with on December 31 and the morning of New Year's Day is considered the final manuscript draft. The principal parts of the text are written in the President's hand. The two paragraphs from the preliminary proclamation of September 22, 1862, were clipped from a printed copy and pasted onto the President's draft, "merely to save writing." The superscription and the final closing are in the hand of a clerk in the Department of State. Later in the year, Lincoln presented his copy to the ladies in charge of the Northwestern Fair in Chicago. He told them that he had some desire to retain the paper, "but if it shall contribute to the relief and comfort of the soldiers, that will be better," he said most graciously. Thomas Bryan purchased it and presented it to the Soldiers' Home in Chicago, of which he was president. The home was destroyed in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. Fortunately, four photographic copies of the original had been made. The official engrossed document is in the National Archives and follows Lincoln's original copy.

It is worth observing that there was no mention, in the final draft, of Lincoln's pet schemes of compensation and colonization, which were in the preliminary proclamation of September 22, 1862. Perhaps Lincoln was about to give up on such impracticable propositions. In the preliminary proclamation, the President had said that he would declare slaves in designated territories "thenceforward, and forever free." In the final draft of January 1, 1863, he was content to say that they "are, and henceforward shall be free." Nothing had been said in the preliminary draft about the use of blacks as soldiers. In the summer of 1862 the Confiscation Act had authorized the President to use blacks in any way he saw fit, and there had been some limited use of them in noncombat activities. In stating in the Proclamation that former slaves were to be received into the armed services, the President believed that he was using congressional authority to strike a mighty blow against the Confederacy.

It was late afternoon before the Proclamation was ready for transmission to the press and others. Earlier drafts had been available, and some papers, including the *Washington Evening Star*, had used those drafts, but it was at about 8 P.M. on January 1 that the transmission of the text over the telegraph wires actually began.

Young Edward Rosewater, scarcely twenty years old, had an exciting New Year's Day. He was a mere telegraph operator in the War Department, but he knew the President and had gone to the

White House reception earlier that day and had greeted him. When the President made his regular call at the telegraph office that evening, young Rosewater was on duty and was more excited than ever. He greeted the President and went back to his work. Lincoln walked over to see what Rosewater was sending out. It was the Emancipation Proclamation! If Rosewater was excited, the President seemed the picture of relaxation. After watching the young operator for a while, the President went over to the desk of Tom Eckert, the chief telegraph operator in the War Department, sat in his favorite chair, where he had written most of the preliminary proclamation the previous summer, and gave his feet the proper elevation. For him, it was the end of a long, busy, but perfect day.

For many others in various parts of the country, the day was just beginning, for the celebrations were not considered official until word was received that the President had actually signed the Proclamation. The slaves of the District of Columbia did not have to wait, however, for back in April 1862 the Congress had passed a law setting them free. Even so, they joined in the widespread celebrations on New Year's Day. At Israel Bethel Church, Reverend Henry McNeal Turner went out and secured a copy of the *Washington Evening Star* that carried the text of the Proclamation. Back at the church, Turner waved the newspaper from the pulpit and began to read the document. This was the signal for unrestrained celebration characterized by men squealing, women fainting, dogs barking, and whites and blacks shaking hands. The Washington celebrations continued far into the night. In the Navy Yard, cannons began to roar and continued for some time.

In New York the news of the Proclamation was received with mixed feelings. Blacks looked and felt happy, one reporter said, while abolitionists "looked glum and grumbled . . . that the proclamation was only given on account of military necessity." Within a week, however, there were several large celebra-

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tions in which abolitionists took part. At Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, the celebrated Henry Ward Beecher preached a commemorative sermon to an overflow audience. "The Proclamation may not free a single slave," he declared, "but it gives liberty a moral recognition." There was still another celebration at Cooper Union on January 5. Several speakers, including the veteran abolitionist Lewis Tappan, addressed the overflow audience. Music interspersed the several addresses. Two of the renditions were the "New John Brown Song," and the "Emancipation Hymn."

A veritable galaxy of leading literary figures gathered in the Music Hall in Boston to take notice of the climax of the fight that New England abolitionists had led for more than a generation. Among those present were John Greenleaf Whittier, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Francis Parkman, and Josiah Quincy. Toward the close of the meeting, Ralph Waldo Emerson read his "Boston Hymn" to the audience. In the evening, a large crowd gathered at Tremont Temple to await the news that the President had signed the Proclamation. Among the speakers were Judge Thomas Russell, Anna Dickinson, Leonard Grimes, William Wells Brown, and Frederick Douglass. Finally, it was announced that "It is coming over the wire," and pandemonium broke out! At midnight, the group had to vacate Tremont Temple, and from there they went to the Twelfth Baptist Church at the invitation of its pastor, Leonard Grimes. Soon the church was packed, and it was almost dawn when the assemblage dispersed. Frederick Douglass pronounced it a "worthy celebration of the first step on the part of the nation in its departure from the thralldom of the ages."

The trenchant observation by Douglass that the Emancipation Proclamation was but the first step could not have been more accurate. Although the presidential decree would not free slaves in areas where the United States could not enforce the Proclamation, it sent a mighty



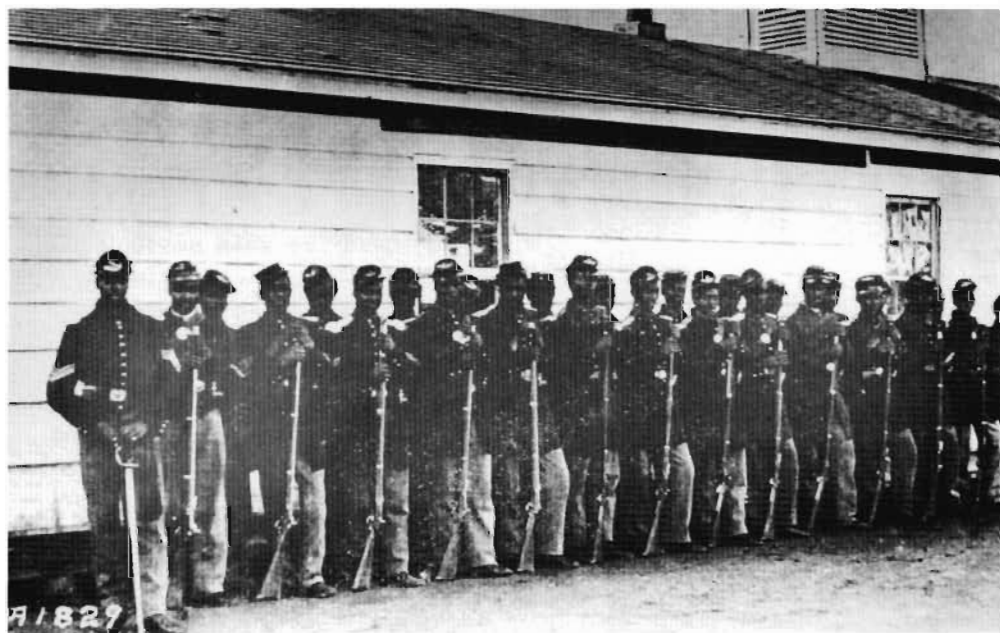
Ralph Waldo Emerson proclaimed, "Today unbind the captive," in his reading of the "Boston Hymn."

signal both to the slaves and to the Confederacy that enslavement would no longer be tolerated. An important part of that signal was the invitation to the slaves to take up arms and participate in the fight for their own freedom. That more than 185,000 slaves as well as free blacks accepted the invitation indicates that those who had been the victims of thralldom were now among the most enthusiastic freedom fighters.

Meanwhile, no one appreciated better

than Lincoln the fact that the Emancipation Proclamation had a quite limited effect in freeing the slaves directly. It should be remembered, however, that in the Proclamation he called emancipation "an act of justice," and in later weeks and months he did everything he could to confirm his view that it was *An Act of Justice*. And no one was more anxious than Lincoln to take the necessary additional steps to bring about actual freedom. Thus, he proposed that the Republican party include in its 1864 platform a plank calling for the abolition of slavery by constitutional amendment. When he was "notified" of his renomination, as was the custom in those days, he singled out that plank in the platform calling for constitutional emancipation and pronounced it "a fitting and necessary conclusion to the final success of the Union cause." Early in 1865, when Congress sent the amendment to Lincoln for his signature, he is reported to have said, "This amendment is a King's cure for all the evils. It winds the whole thing up."

Despite the fact that the Proclamation did not emancipate the slaves and surely did not do what the Thirteenth Amendment did in winding things up, it is the



The Emancipation Proclamation extended an invitation to slaves and free blacks to take up arms and fight for their freedom. Above, a black infantry at Fort Lincoln.

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Lyndon Johnson, a great supporter of civil rights, confers with (left to right) Roy Wilkins, James Farmer, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Whitney Young.

brations of the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. It was bad enough that a casual reading of the Proclamation made clear that it did not set the slaves free. It was also clear that neither the Reconstruction amendments nor the legislation and executive orders of subsequent years had propelled African Americans much closer to real freedom and true equality. The physical violence, the wholesale disfranchisement, and the widespread degradation of blacks in every conceivable form merely demonstrated the resourcefulness and creativity of those white Americans who were determined to deny basic constitutional rights to their black brothers.

Several years before 1963, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People began to use the motto "Free by '63." Other groups adopted the motto and focused more attention on the drive for equality. Many leaders were espe-

cially sensitive to the significance of the Emancipation centennial in pointing up racial inequality in American life. On September 22, 1962, when Governor Nelson Rockefeller of New York spoke in Washington to mark the opening of the exhibit of the preliminary proclamation, "the state's most treasured possession," he said, "the very existence of the document stirs our conscience with the knowledge that Lincoln's vision of a nation truly fulfilling its spiritual heritage is not yet achieved."

During the centennial year itself, the United States Commission on Civil Rights presented to the President a report on the history of civil rights, most of which I wrote on contract with the commission. Knowing that I would be out of the country during most of the centennial year, I published my history of the Emancipation Proclamation as my contribution to the observance. On Lincoln's birthday

in 1963, President and Mrs. Kennedy received more than a thousand black and white citizens at the White House and presented to each of them a copy of the report of the Civil Rights Commission, called *Freedom to the Free*. Speaking at Gettysburg later that year, Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson said, "Until justice is blind, until education is unaware of race, until opportunity is unconcerned with the color of men's skins, emancipation will be a proclamation but not a fact." President Kennedy took note of the absence of equality when he said, "Surely, in 1963, one hundred years after emancipation, it should not be necessary for any American citizen to demonstrate in the streets for an opportunity to stop at a hotel, or eat at a lunch counter . . . on the same terms of any other American."

Although it is now possible for most African Americans to eat at a lunch counter in most parts of the United States, the extension of these civilities has been accompanied by subtle, yet barbarous forms of discrimination. These forms extend from redlining in the sale of real estate to discrimination in employment to the maladministration of justice. In issuing the Emancipation Proclamation and wording it as he did, Lincoln went as far as he felt the law permitted him to go. In subsequent months he went a bit further, inch by inch, until before his death he was calling for the enfranchisement of some blacks. The difference between the position of Lincoln in 1863 and Americans in 1993 is that our leaders in high places seem not to have either the humanity or the courage of Lincoln. The law itself is no longer an obstruction to justice and equality, but it is the people who live under the law who are themselves an obvious obstruction to justice. One can only hope that sooner rather than later we can all find the courage to live under the spirit of the Emancipation Proclamation and under the laws that flowed from its inspiration. □

This essay is based on a talk given by Professor Franklin at the National Archives, January 4, 1993, on the 130th anniversary of the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation.