

The Emancipation Proclamation

What was the significance of the Emancipation Proclamation?

When most people think of Abraham Lincoln, they think of his greatest achievement: ending the institution of slavery in the United States during the American Civil War (1861-1865). In fact, most statues of Lincoln show him holding a piece of paper meant to represent the text of the Emancipation Proclamation.



Photograph of a statue of Abraham Lincoln which stands in Edinburgh, Scotland. The statue is holding a piece of paper meant to represent the Emancipation Proclamation.

Statue of Lincoln holding the Emancipation Proclamation, sculpted by George Bissell. Edinburgh, Scotland. [Image](#) courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

What most people don't know about the Emancipation Proclamation, however, is the number of enslaved people who actually were freed when it took effect on January 1, 1863. 1 million? 10 million? Any guesses?

How about zero? Although there were more than four million slaves living in the U.S. at this time, the Emancipation Proclamation did not formally free a single one of them. So that presents us with a couple of very interesting questions: first, why did Lincoln issue the proclamation if it had no practical effect? Second, why is the Emancipation Proclamation considered Lincoln's most important legacy if it didn't actually free anyone?

Slavery and the Civil War

Washington D.C., summer 1862. The Civil War had been going on for over a year, and it was not going well for Abraham Lincoln. 11 of the 15 southern states where slavery was legal had formed the Confederate States of America (CSA) and were waging a war to break free from the U.S. Lincoln was determined that the nation was not going to fall apart on his watch. When war broke out a year earlier, general opinion was that it would only take the North a few weeks to suppress the rebellion. Instead,

during the first year of the conflict, the Confederates had won the majority of important battles. It was becoming more and more apparent that the Civil War was going to be a long and bloody conflict. Ironically, when Lincoln became president, he had no intention of abolishing slavery. Though he personally despised slavery, and had won the presidency on an anti-slavery platform, he would gladly have given up any chance of ending slavery in the South if it meant that the Confederate states would rejoin the United States.

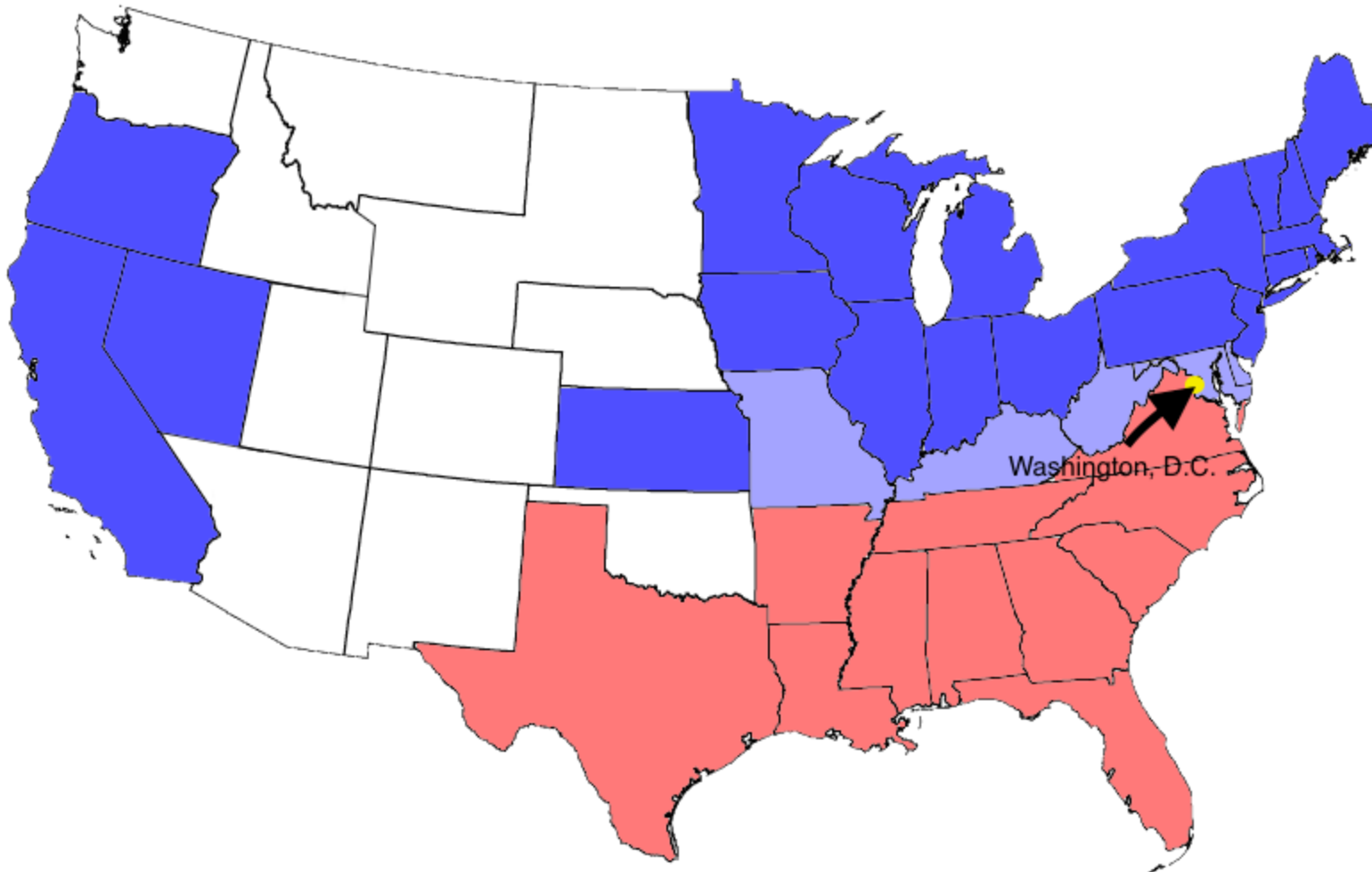
In Lincoln's first inaugural address in 1861, he told the Confederates that "I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so." But Lincoln's reassurances fell on deaf ears. The states of the CSA were not going to backtrack on their bid for independence.

Lincoln's dilemma

With no hope of bringing the South back into the United States by protecting slavery, Lincoln had a new dilemma. His own political party, the Republicans, had formed around their opposition to slavery. Many of the more radical politicians in the party saw the secession of the South as the best opportunity to abolish slavery once and for all. As the U.S. war dead piled up, more and more Northerners began to push Lincoln to punish the states that had seceded by making abolition a major goal of the war.

The problem with abolishing slavery, however, was that there were still four slave states that had not seceded from the United States: Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland, and Delaware. Lincoln feared that if he advocated emancipation he would provoke those states into joining the Confederacy, making the war even more difficult to win. Of the border states, Maryland was particularly worrisome, because the US capital at Washington D.C. sat on its border with Virginia. If Maryland decided to join the Confederacy, Washington D.C. would be completely surrounded by enemy territory.

The Border States



Map of the United States in 1862, with the states of the Confederacy in the south highlighted in red, and the states that remained in the Union highlighted in blue. The Border States of Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland, and Delaware and highlighted in light purple. These slaveholding states were located in between the states of the North and the South. Washington, D.C., on the border of Maryland and Virginia, is in between a border state and the South. Abraham Lincoln was determined not to let any of the Border States join the Confederacy.

The United States in 1862. The states in light blue were "border states," on the border of the North (dark blue) and the South (red). Border states allowed slavery but did not secede along with the rest of the slave states. [Map](#) courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

Towards emancipation

Even though Lincoln did not intend to abolish slavery when the war began, circumstances changed rapidly. Enslaved people in the South, whose owners were waging war to make sure slavery endured, immediately interpreted the conflict as a war to end slavery. When Northern forces invaded the South, black men and women escaped from bondage and ran to U.S. army lines, seeing the soldiers as liberators. At first, the army had no idea what to do with this massive influx of former slaves, referring to them as "contrabands" since they were still technically considered pieces of property. Some commanders found them irritating, since it was difficult to feed and move so many extra civilians, and treated them abominably. Others saw the exodus of former slaves as a double bonus: losing slaves not only demoralized white Southerners, it also deprived them of their labor force, meaning the South would soon run out of food and supplies.

By mid-1862, over a year into the fighting, it had become clear that slavery was a major war issue. Lincoln, like several of his generals, began to see that committing the North to abolishing slavery would only help their cause. In the summer of 1862, he began to hash out the details of the Emancipation Proclamation.

The Emancipation Proclamation

Lincoln wrote the first draft of the Emancipation Proclamation while staying with his family at the Soldier's Home, a cottage on the outskirts of Washington D.C. where they could get away from the heat of the city in summer. He presented the Emancipation Proclamation to his cabinet on July 22, 1862 and asked for their opinions.

[\[Read the full text of the Emancipation Proclamation\]](#)

They approved, but Lincoln's secretary of war Edwin Stanton suggested that they wait for a big military victory to issue the proclamation so that it wouldn't seem like a desperate measure. The summer went poorly for the U.S. army. Not until September 17, 1862, did they win a decisive victory at the Battle of Antietam in Maryland.



Photograph from 1862 showing many dead soldiers laying along a wooden fence next to a road. *Confederate dead by a fence on the Hagerstown road (Antietam battlefield)*. Alexander Gardner (photographer), 1862. Image courtesy [Library of Congress](#).

Interpreting the proclamation

Lincoln is known for his unmatched eloquence as a writer and orator. The year after he wrote the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln would pen the Gettysburg Address, perhaps the most beautiful and well-known speech in American history. The Emancipation Proclamation, with its whereof, thenceforwards, and hereuntos is anything but elegant. One historian famously joked that the proclamation had "all the moral grandeur of a bill of lading."²² So why is the Emancipation Proclamation such a dense, inelegant piece of writing? Lincoln was a lawyer by trade, and he knew the importance of making sure contracts had no loopholes. Unlike the Gettysburg Address, which was a short speech delivered at the dedication of a cemetery, the

Emancipation Proclamation was not intended to be eloquent or touching. It was intended to be an iron-clad legal document.

Though the term proclamation seems to imply that Lincoln stood up and "proclaimed" it somewhere, the Emancipation Proclamation was not a speech given by Lincoln. In essence, it was more like a decree. Lincoln wrote and signed it, and then copies of it were distributed for public notice. In many cases, U.S. army officers read the document aloud to the former slaves who were accompanying the army in the South, letting them know that from that point forward they were officially free. Newspapers also reprinted the text of the proclamation.

It's important to note that Lincoln specified that slaves would only be freed in states which were "then in rebellion against the United States" -- the states of the Confederacy. He even gave those states the opportunity to rejoin the Union before January 1, 1863 to prevent the proclamation from going into effect (they declined).

The Emancipation Proclamation did *not* apply to enslaved people in the border states of Missouri, Kentucky, Delaware, and Maryland, which had not joined the Confederacy. Lincoln exempted the border states from the proclamation because he didn't want to tempt them into joining the Confederacy. So in a way, Lincoln did *not* free the slaves where he *could* free them (in areas that were under U.S. control) but only in the rebellious states, which did not recognize his authority.

Because the proclamation was a temporary war measure, it later had to be codified into law with the 13th Amendment to the Constitution. Congress officially outlawed slavery when it passed the 13th Amendment in January, 1865.

Significance of the proclamation

Because the Emancipation Proclamation applied only the rebellious states, it didn't *directly* free any slaves when it went into effect. Nevertheless, it had a huge impact: it made emancipation an official part of the North's military strategy. As the U.S. army made its way across the South, it truly became an army of liberation. As enslaved people learned about the proclamation, they took an active role in freeing themselves from bondage, knowing that the army would defend them. Black men were accepted into the army to play their own part in ending slavery.

What's more, the Emancipation Proclamation made a promise: it promised that the United States was committed to ending slavery once and for all. It promised African Americans in the South that under no circumstances would they be returned to slavery if the North won the war. Finally, it promised the Confederacy that there was no turning back the clock to before the war. The Emancipation Proclamation made the promise that the Civil War would change the United States forever.