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The Emancipation Proclamation in Tennessee

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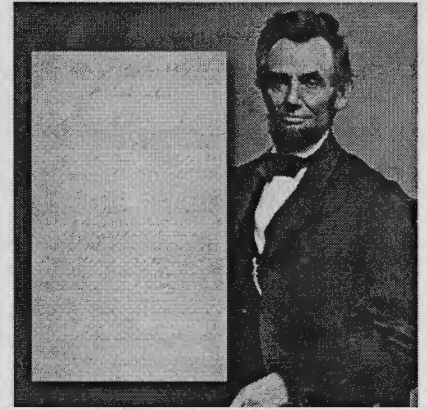
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Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee

The Emancipation Proclamation in Tennessee



President Abraham Lincoln's proclamation, which took effect 150 years ago on January 1, 1863, in the middle of America's Civil War, imparted to the conflict, which until that time had been waged as a struggle to preserve the Union, a social revolutionary character. According to Allen C. Guelzo's *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America* (2004), the Emancipation Proclamation triggered one of the largest property transfers in history. It freed 4 million slaves valued at \$3 billion. By comparison, as a proportion of national wealth, this would represent several trillion in current United States dollars. Perceived by Guelzo as "America's last Enlightenment politician," he notes Lincoln's affection for the political activist, author, political theorist and revolutionary freethinker Thomas Paine and Scottish poet Robert Burns. He writes: "If there was any cardinal doctrine among Lincoln's beliefs, it was his confidence in the inevitability of progress....His was a typically Enlightenment kind of optimism, coming from a man born at the end of the long Enlightenment era and steeped in the conviction that the American founding 'contemplated the progressive improvement in the condition of all men everywhere'" (p. 149).

In the 1850s, Lincoln noted that slavery was "an unqualified evil to the negro [sic], the white man, and the state." Between the election of Lincoln as the 16th President of the United States and his inauguration on March 4, 1861, seven Deep South states—South Carolina, Mississippi, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, and Texas seceded from the Union. Virginia, Arkansas, and North Carolina seceded between April and May of 1861, with Tennessee following on June 8 of the same year. The United States, as well as several foreign nations, awaited Lincoln's position toward the new Confederacy. When he delivered his first inaugural address, President Lincoln affirmed that he had "no

purpose, directly or indirectly to interfere with the institution of thralldom in the states where it exists." Four months later, on July 4, 1861, in his first address to the Congress, Lincoln reiterated his earlier affirmation. Although Tennessee was the last state to secede from the Union, it was at the heart of the war between North and South, second only to Virginia in the number of skirmishes and battles fought on its soil. Only weeks after Lincoln's inauguration, the Confederacy consummated its break with the union by firing on Fort Sumter in South Carolina, one of the last federal military outposts in the South. Lincoln responded by issuing a call for volunteers to put down the rebellion, signaling the beginning of full-scale civil war.

While the Civil War caused mayhem in Tennessee, it broke the manacles of bondage that kept some 275,000 persons enslaved. "By the spring of 1865," according to Ira Berlin's 1985 *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867*, "few Tennessee blacks were still living as slaves," (p.285). When the war started, enslaved black Tennesseans focused their attention on the intersectional hostilities, as well as how their enslavers reacted to the war. Tennessee's enslaved persons remained observant and shared what they learned with each other. Early in 1862 the Union army pushed into the state and by the end of the year, the Union army occupied areas of Middle and West Tennessee, including the cities of Nashville and Memphis. By the end of 1863, the Union army also controlled the East Tennessee cities of Chattanooga and Knoxville. The Union army's occupation of Tennessee contributed to the demise of slavery in the state. Before the end of 1863, Lincoln took action that set in motion the end of the institution of thralldom.

On July 22, 1862, President Lincoln read his "preliminary proclamation" to his cabinet. However, he decided to wait for a Union military

victory before bring the document forth. Two months later, on September 22, 1862, following a victory at Antietam, the president signed the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, formally alerting the Confederate States of America of his intention to free all persons held as slaves within the rebellious states. One hundred days later, with the Confederacy still in full rebellion, President Abraham Lincoln issued the final Emancipation Proclamation to take effect on January 1, 1863.

The signals had been mounting for months. On April 16, 1862, word traveled that the District of Columbia's 3,100 slaves had been freed by Congress—and their owners compensated by the federal government. That July, Congress passed the Second Confiscation Act, which permitted the Union Army to enlist black soldiers and forbade the capture of runaway slaves.

The proclamation managed to destabilize slavery even where it technically remained legal. In Missouri and Tennessee, areas exempted from the Emancipation Proclamation, slaves deserted plantations en masse. By January 1864, one Union general declared that slavery was “virtually dead in Tennessee” (Guelzo p. 215).

President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation did not free enslaved persons in Tennessee or in any other state of the Union or the Confederate States of America. Lincoln specifically exempted Tennessee from the Emancipation Proclamation at the request of Governor Andrew Johnson and other state leaders because the state was not under Confederate control in the fall of 1862—it was under the control of the Union Army and Military Governor Johnson. However, the Proclamation was important because it unreservedly sanctioned the principle of freedom. Enslaved men, women, and children in the state of Tennessee were freed by statewide election on February 22, 1865. Because the Emancipation was a wartime measure, Congress decided that the U. S. Constitution needed amending doing away with slavery for the last time. The Thirteenth Amendment, which formally abolished slavery in the United States, was passed by the 38th Congress on January 31, 1865. Tennessee ratified the amendment on April 7, 1865. Twenty-seven of the thirty-six states ratified the 13th Amendment on December 6, 1865;

approximately ten months after Tennessee freed its slaves by state law.

The impact of the Emancipation Proclamation was immediate and decisive. It changed the dynamic of the war by turning the federal armies into agents of liberation and by giving slaves a direct and vital interest in the defeat of the South.

On May 17, 1962, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered a manifesto reminiscent of the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation to the White House. Sent on the same day that the United States Supreme Court rendered the unanimous *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that outlawed segregated racial public education, King's proposal was constructed as both a moral appeal and a legal brief. The 64-page document called on President John F. Kennedy to issue a “second Emancipation Proclamation,” an executive order outlawing segregation — just as President Abraham Lincoln had done with slavery a century earlier.

A year later, during the American Civil Rights movement of the 1960s Lyndon B. Johnson invoked the Emancipation Proclamation holding it up as a promise yet to be fully implemented. Speaking from Gettysburg on May 30, 1963 (Memorial Day), at the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation, Vice President Johnson connected it directly with the ongoing Civil Rights struggles of the time: “One hundred years ago, the slave was freed. One hundred years later, the Negro remains in bondage to the color of his skin... In this hour, it is not our respective races which are at stake --it is our nation. Let those who care for their country come forward, North and South, white and Negro, to lead the way through this moment of challenge and decision.... Until justice is blind to color, until education is unaware of race, until opportunity is unconcerned with color of men's skins, emancipation will be a proclamation but not a fact. To the extent that the proclamation of emancipation is not fulfilled in fact, to that extent we shall have fallen short of assuring freedom to the free.”

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