

Who Freed the Slaves?

September 1858: (2 1/2 years before the Civil War) Abraham Lincoln: “I will say, then, that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races; that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of making voters or jurors of Negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people. ... And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.”

January 1861: Most southern states secede. They take with them the labor of about four million black slaves. Blacks form the backbone of the southern economy: cotton, rice, sugar, dockwork, etc.

March 1861: Lincoln’s Inaugural Address: If the southern states return to the Union, President Lincoln promises to support a Constitutional amendment guaranteeing that slavery will never be abolished in states where it currently exists.

April 1861: Lincoln expects a short war to reunify the nation; he calls for 75,000 volunteers for three months.

October 1861: Major General Dix of the Union army seizes two counties of Virginia. He orders that slavery is not to be interfered with, that the slaves are not to be given freedom by the northern armies.

Later, 1861: Baltimore, Maryland. Northern General Burnside returns two black slaves to their master because they had tried to escape to Union lines.

July 4, 1862: Colonel Pryor of the North to residents in Virginia: “I desire to assure you that the relation of master and servant as recognized in your state shall be respected. Your authority over that species of property shall not in the least be interfered with. To this end, I assure you that those under my command have orders to take up and hold any Negroes found running about the camp without passes from their masters.”

One northern general promises to put down any attempted slave insurrection “with an iron hand.”

1861 and most of 1862: Free blacks in the North are not allowed to volunteer to fight with the Union army. The abolitionist Frederick Douglass criticizes this policy: “[T]his is no time to fight with one hand when both are needed; ... this is no time to fight only with your white hand, and allow your black hand to remain tied.”

By the beginning of 1862: Runaway slaves by the thousands are escaping from their masters and finding their way to the invading northern armies. Some generals decide to return the slaves, others decide to put them to work for the Union cause.

1862: Union General Fremont in Missouri frees the slaves of enemy plantation owners. President Lincoln orders him to return the slaves.

Spring 1862: Northern General Hunter, with only 10,000 men, must hold the coasts of Georgia, South Carolina, and Florida. He pleads with Washington for more troops. The War Department replies: “You must get along as best you can. Not a man from the North can be spared.”

Against orders, Hunter begins using runaway slaves as soldiers. He writes: “They are now eager beyond all things to take the field and be led into action. ... They are displaying great natural capacities in acquiring the duties of the soldier.”

August 1862: Lincoln realizes that whatever he does, the slaves are freeing themselves simply by running into the northern armies by the thousands. However, he still maintains that, “My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union and is not either to save or destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slaves, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do that. What I do about slavery and the colored race, I do because I believe it would help to save the Union.” He worries that if he freed the slaves, the 20,000 Kentuckians fighting for the North would go over to the South, thus harming the cause of the Union. In addition to Kentucky, the slave states of Missouri, Maryland, and Delaware also did not secede.

1862: The North is having great trouble winning the war. If France and England support the South, the North may be defeated. Lincoln finds it increasingly hard to get new recruits to fight.

September 1862: Lincoln announces the Emancipation Proclamation, which will take effect January 1, 1863. It will “free” all the slaves in the states and portions of states “under rebellion,” but will not free slaves in the areas under Union control such as the border states of Kentucky,

Maryland, Delaware, and Missouri, or in the western counties of Virginia, that split off from Virginia and stayed in the Union. Thus if states or parts of states were to return to the Union between September and January, slaveowners would be able to keep their slaves.

January 1863: The Emancipation Proclamation takes effect, freeing slaves in states under rebellion, but not in the border states or in areas controlled by Union armies, such as New Orleans and other parts of Louisiana. Lincoln changes course; he allows active recruitment of free blacks into the Union army. In the South, slave resistance continues to grow. Slaves sabotage plantations, stop work, flee to Union lines, and volunteer to fight their former masters.

Spring 1863: The Emancipation Proclamation swings English and French public opinion to the side of the Union.

July 1863: Lincoln begins a draft to get enough soldiers to continue the war. Only white males—no free blacks—are to be drafted. The Irish workers in New York City stage massive and violent protests. Riots kill between 400 and 1,000 people, mostly African Americans. Property damage is over \$1 million. Riots also break out in other northern cities. Workers and poor whites protest the draft and the provision of the law that allows wealthy people to hire substitutes or to buy their way out for \$300. One slogan is “It’s a rich man’s war and a poor man’s fight.”

July 1863: The Massachusetts 54th Infantry, a black regiment under the command of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw, leads the attack on the Confederate Fort Wagner in Charleston, S.C. They fight courageously. Over half the regiment dies in battle.

Later 1863: An officer under General Ulysses S. Grant, commenting on the performance of the 20,000 black soldiers under his command in Virginia says, “The problem [of finding troops

to fight] is solved. The Negro is a man, a soldier, a hero.”

March 17, 1865: In an act of desperation, Confederate President Jefferson Davis calls for forming a black army to fight for the South. The Confederate Congress approves drafting 300,000 black slaves for combat. Implies that those who volunteer will gain their freedom.

April 9, 1865: General Robert E. Lee surrenders.

In the Civil War, 186,017 black soldiers fought, having formed 154 regiments. At least 68,000 blacks died in combat. Eight out of every 10 black soldiers who served were either liberated or escaped slaves.

—compiled by Bill Bigelow

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