

African American/Black History Month

At the Crossroads of Freedom and
Equality: The Emancipation
Proclamation and the March on
Washington

African American/Black History Month

In 2013, the United States will commemorate two events that changed the course of the nation—the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation and the 1963 March on Washington.

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These milestone events in American history were the culmination of decades of struggles by individuals—both famous and unknown—who believed in the American promise that this nation was “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

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Abraham Lincoln and his Emancipation Proclamation

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President Abraham Lincoln issued the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, 1862. It stipulated that if the Southern states did not cease their rebellion by January 1, 1863, the Proclamation would go into effect.

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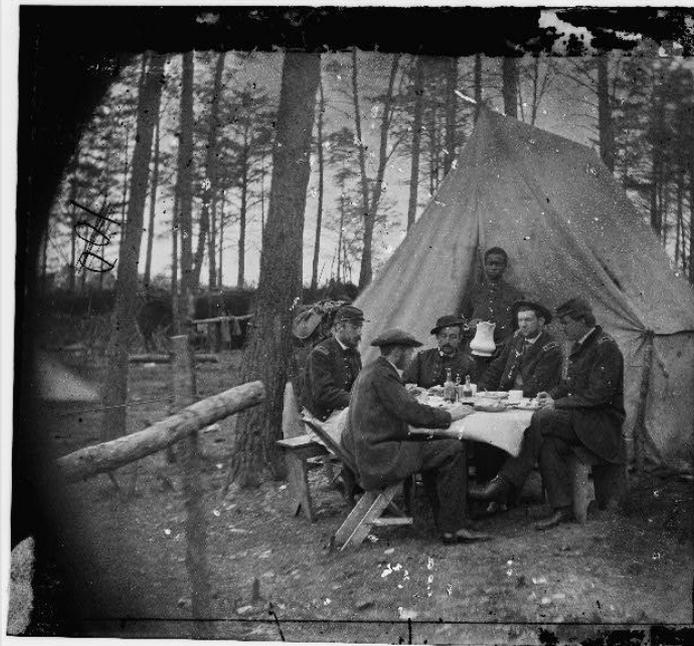
The Emancipation Proclamation applied only to states that had seceded from the Union, leaving slavery untouched in the border states. It also exempted parts of the Confederacy that had already come under Northern control. Most important, the freedom it promised depended upon Union military victory.

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Lincoln justified the Proclamation as a war measure intended to disable the Confederacy's use of slaves in the war effort. Being cautious to respect the limits of his authority, Lincoln applied the Emancipation Proclamation only to the Southern states in rebellion.

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The Southern states used slaves to support their armies on the battlefield and to care for their homes so more men could fight.

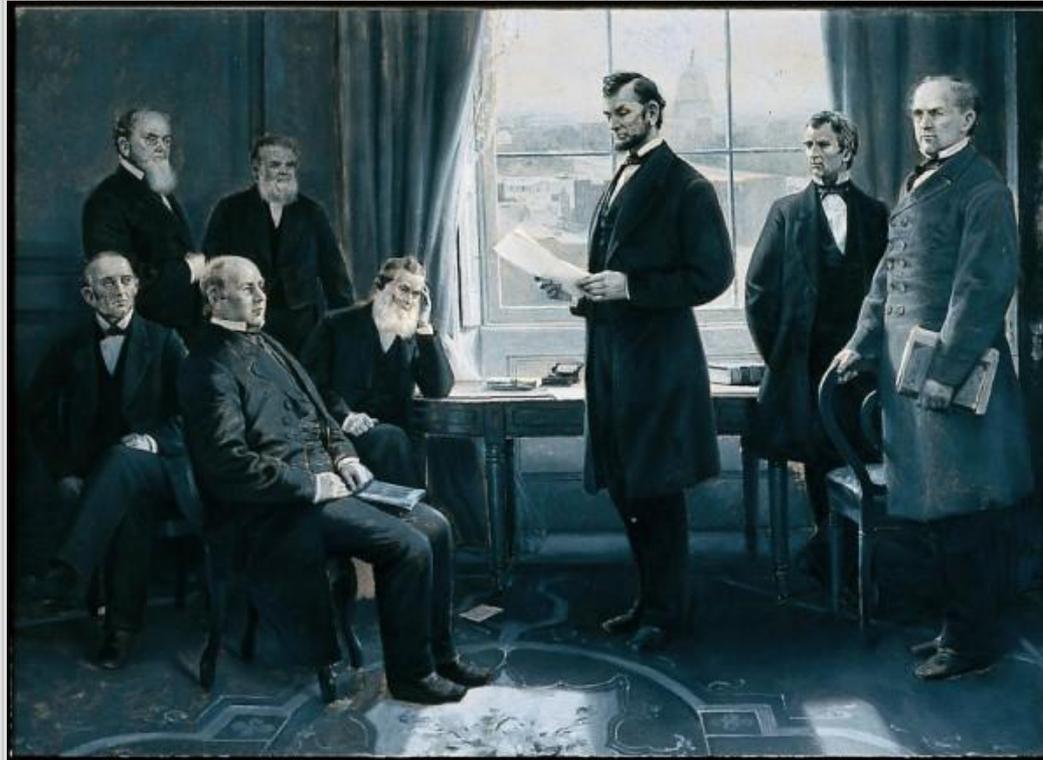


White officers eating while a Black servant stands behind them with a pitcher of water

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Lincoln first proposed the Emancipation Proclamation to his cabinet in the summer of 1862, and many of the cabinet secretaries were apathetic or worried that the Proclamation was too drastic. Lincoln's commitment to the necessity of the Proclamation, along with the Union victory at Antietam, finally persuaded his cabinet members to support him.

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*Lincoln Reading the Emancipation Proclamation to his Cabinet [Painting].
Boston; Museum of Fine Arts.*

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Lincoln also declared that the Proclamation would be enforced under his power as Commander-in-Chief, and that the freedom of the slaves would be maintained by the Executive government of the United States.

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Up until September 1862, the central focus of the war had been to preserve the Union. With the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, freedom for slaves became a legitimate war plan.

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Lincoln declared in the Proclamation that African Americans of “suitable condition, would be received into the armed service of the United States.” Five months after the Proclamation took effect, the War Department of the United States issued General Order No. 143, establishing the United States Colored Troops.

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When the Confederacy did not yield, Lincoln issued the final Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863.



The inkwell used by Lincoln, the Proclamation draft and Lincoln's pen

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By the end of the war, over 200,000 African Americans would serve in the Union Army and Navy.

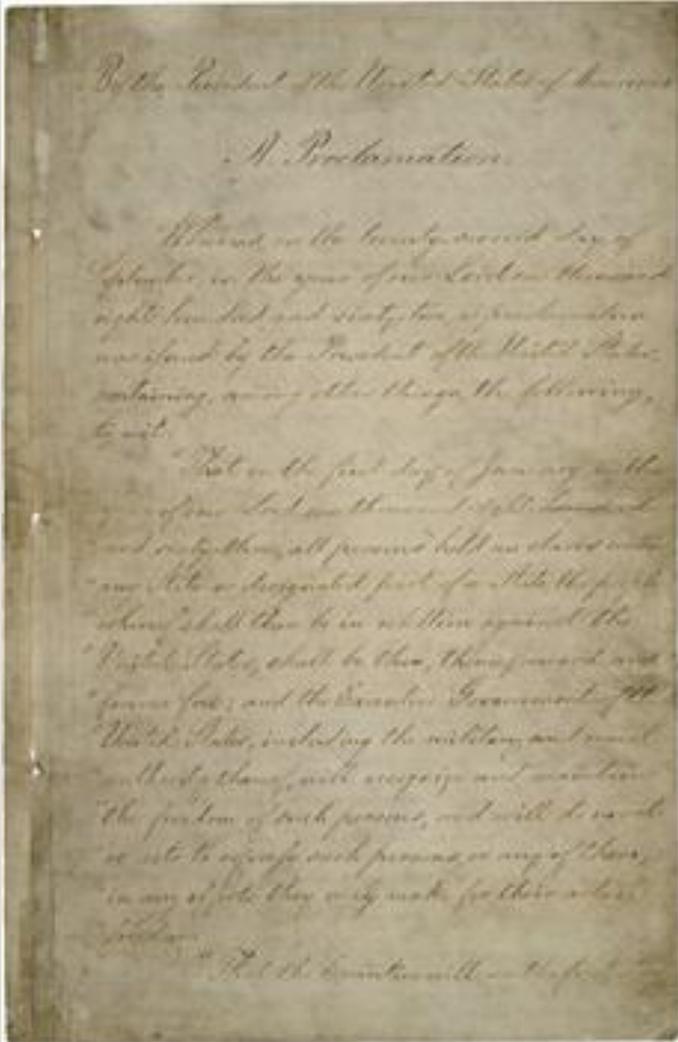


African-American Union Soldiers

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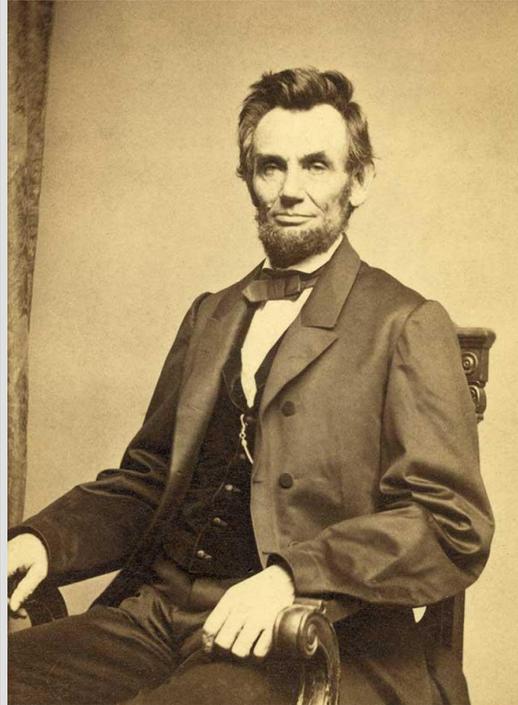
Although the Proclamation initially freed only the slaves in the rebellious states, by the end of the war the Proclamation had influenced and prepared citizens to advocate and accept abolition for all slaves in both the North and South. The 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery in the United States, was passed on December 6, 1865.

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Lincoln considered the Emancipation Proclamation the crowning achievement of his presidency.

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“I never, in my life, felt more certain that I was doing right, than I do in signing this paper. If my name ever goes into history it will be for this act, and my whole soul is in it.”

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Although the Emancipation Proclamation did not end slavery in the nation, it captured the hearts and imaginations of millions of Americans and fundamentally transformed the character of the war. After January 1, 1863, every advance of federal troops expanded the domain of freedom.

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From the first days of the Civil War, slaves had acted to secure their own liberty. The Emancipation Proclamation confirmed their insistence that the war for the Union must become a war for freedom. It added moral force to the Union cause and strengthened the Union both militarily and politically.

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As a milestone along the road to slavery's final destruction, the Emancipation Proclamation has assumed a place among the great documents of human freedom.



Former Slave, Sally Fickland views
the Emancipation Proclamation, 1947

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An Appeal to You from

MATHEW AHMANN
EUGENE CARSON BLAKE
JAMES FARMER
MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.
JOHN LEWIS

ISAIAH MINKOFF
A. PHILIP RANDOLPH
WALTER REUTHER
ROY WILKINS
WHITNEY YOUNG

to MARCH on **WASHINGTON** WEDNESDAY AUGUST 28, 1963

America faces a crisis . . .

Millions of Negroes are denied freedom . . .

Millions of citizens, black and white, are unemployed . . .

We demand:

- Meaningful Civil Rights Laws
- Full and Fair Employment
- Massive Federal Works Program
- Decent Housing
- The Right to Vote
- Adequate Integrated Education

In your community, groups are mobilizing for the March. You can get information on how to go to Washington by calling civil rights organizations, religious organizations, trade unions, fraternal organizations and youth groups.

National Office—

MARCH ON WASHINGTON FOR JOBS AND FREEDOM

170 West 130 Street • New York 27 • FI 8-1900

Cleveland Robinson

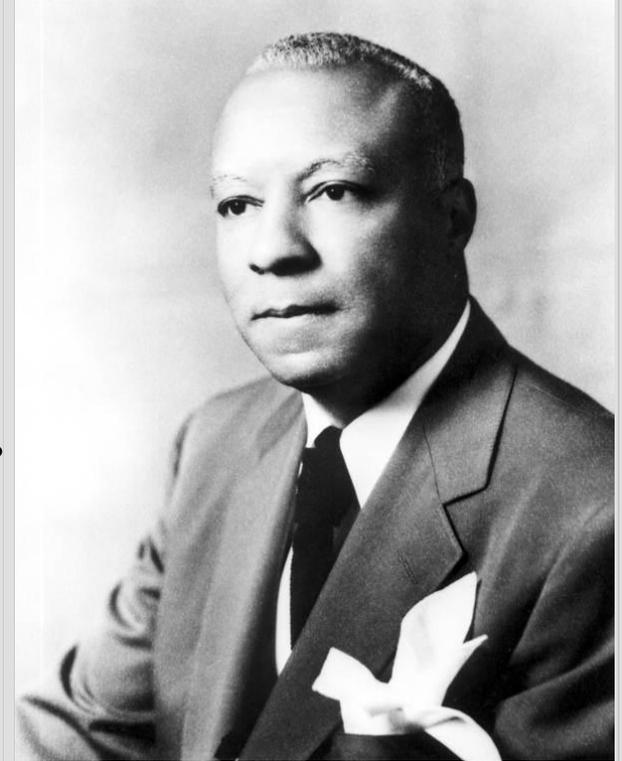
Chairman, Administrative Committee

Bayard Rustin

Deputy Director

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The March on Washington was envisioned by A. Philip Randolph, a long-time civil rights activist dedicated to improving the economic condition of Black Americans. When Randolph first proposed the march in late 1962, he received little response from other civil rights leaders.



A. Philip Randolph

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He knew that cooperation would be difficult among civil rights leaders because each had his own agenda for the civil rights movement, and the leaders competed for funding and press coverage. He knew that for the March on Washington to be successful, all civil rights leaders would have to support the event.

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The "Big Six" leaders were James Farmer, of the Congress of Racial Equality; Martin Luther King, Jr., of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference; John Lewis, of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee; A. Philip Randolph, of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters; Roy Wilkins, of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; and Whitney Young, Jr., of the National Urban League.

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John Lewis, Whitney Young, A. Philip Randolph, Martin Luther King, Jr., James Farmer and Roy Wilkins met in March 1963 in New York City to organize the March on Washington.

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The March on Washington was not universally embraced by civil rights leaders, and President John F. Kennedy was initially opposed to the March. Kennedy was concerned that the event might exacerbate already heightened racial tensions across the country and perhaps erode public support for the civil rights movement at large.

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Additionally, various influential organizations and individuals opposed the March. Besides the expected, such as Southern segregationists and members of the Ku Klux Klan, the Black-separatist group Nation of Islam and its outspoken member Malcolm X adamantly disagreed with the peaceful intentions of the event. He felt it presented an inaccurate, sanitized pageant of racial harmony and called it the “Farce on Washington.”

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In May, at the height of the Birmingham Campaign, King joined A. Philip Randolph, James Farmer, and Charles McDew. After notifying President Kennedy of their intent, the leaders of the major civil rights organizations set the march date for August 28th.

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The goals of the protest included:

- a comprehensive civil rights bill that would do away with segregated public accommodations
- protection of the right to vote
- mechanisms for seeking redress of violations of constitutional rights
- desegregation of all public schools in 1963
- federal work programs to train and place unemployed workers
- Federal Fair Employment Practices Act barring discrimination in all employment

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On August 28, 1963, more than 200,000 Americans gathered in Washington, D.C., for a political rally known as the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

Organized by civil rights and religious groups, the event was designed to shed light on the political and social challenges African Americans faced across the United States.

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The March began with a rally at the Washington Monument featuring several celebrities and musicians. Participants then marched the mile-long National Mall to the Lincoln Memorial.



Aerial view of the March on Washington

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The 3-hour-long program at the Lincoln Memorial included speeches from prominent civil rights and religious leaders and culminated in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech.



Martin Luther King, Jr.
at the March on Washington

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President John F. Kennedy with leaders of
the March on Washington

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"We have witnessed today in Washington tens of thousands of Americans, both Negro and white, exercising their right to assemble peaceably and direct the widest possible attention to a great national issue. Efforts to secure equal treatment and equal opportunity for all without regard to race, color, creed, or nationality are neither novel nor difficult to understand. What is different today is the intensified and widespread public awareness of the need to move forward in achieving these objectives, objectives which are older than this Nation."

— John F. Kennedy

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The March on Washington, became a key moment in the struggle for civil rights in the United States. It was not only a plea for equality and justice, it also helped pave the way for both the ratification of the 24th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution outlawing the poll tax and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

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The following year, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as a concrete step toward fulfilling the promise of the Emancipation Proclamation.



President Lyndon B. Johnson signing the Civil Rights Act of 1964

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“The story of African Americans is a story of resilience and perseverance. It traces a people who refused to accept the circumstances under which they arrived on these shores, and it chronicles the generations who fought for an America that truly reflects the ideals enshrined in our founding documents.”

—President Barack Obama
Presidential Proclamation 2012

Sources

The Emancipation Proclamation

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<http://www.loc.gov/>

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March on Washington

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**Defense Equal Opportunity
Management Institute,
Patrick Air Force Base, Florida
February 2013**

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