

LESSON FOURTEEN

The End of Slavery

September 30, 2022

Key Themes: Freedom; dignity of the person (people are not property); self-determination

ACI Values: Faith, Liberty, Community, Life

Before we dive in, think of a time when you were unsure about something. Maybe you had to take a spelling test and didn't know what would be on it. Maybe you embarked on a scavenger hunt with your friends and didn't know where it would lead. Or maybe you picked up a new book and didn't know how it would end.

During the past two lessons, we have talked quite a bit about slavery and the heroes who fought against it. Recall that President Abraham Lincoln was the Republican leader of the Union, who fought to preserve the Union and abolish slavery.

Take a moment to put yourself in Lincoln's shoes. He didn't know how the Civil War would turn out and if or how slavery would end in America. He was learning, adjusting, and responding as he went. He had a clear goal in mind as you know, to preserve the Union and eliminate slavery, but he didn't have a playbook for how to do it.

As we study history, it's important to put yourselves in the minds of those who were there, living it and writing it. If you remember this as you learn, the accomplishments of history become all the more remarkable. With that, let's get started.

Lincoln, who recognized the moral evils of slavery, seized the opportunity to end this horrific practice when, on September 22, 1862, he announced his intent to free all of the slaves in the rebelling Southern states with the Emancipation Proclamation.¹

On January 1, 1863, Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, meaning that millions of slaves in the southern United States were freed.

Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation was important for many reasons.

First, it made fighting for the end of slavery a central purpose of the Civil War. The war was not just about preserving the Union but was also about winning freedom for those unjustly enslaved.

¹ https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/american_originals_iv/sections/preliminary_emancipation_proclamation.html

However, in order to enforce the Emancipation Proclamation in the states that were in rebellion (to which the measure applied) meant the Union had to win the war.

Second, the Emancipation Proclamation marked the beginning of the end of the institution of slavery in the United States. But, it was only the beginning.

Lincoln's proclamation freed the slaves in Confederate states in rebellion and used war powers granted to the president during wartime as the legal reasoning for doing so. However, no one—not even Lincoln – was sure that the Emancipation Proclamation would still be in effect after the war ended.

Would former slave owners go to court, say that the Emancipation Proclamation was unlawful, and get their slaves back? Could a future president undo the proclamation with another proclamation? Would a future Congress pass a new law that would invalidate the proclamation?²

It sounds complicated, but Lincoln knew that the Emancipation Proclamation was only a temporary fix, or a band-aid, for a much deeper and larger problem.

Additionally, there was the issue that not everyone in the Union supported abolishing slavery. Take the Border States, for instance. The Border States didn't secede from the Union, but slavery still existed within these states, which remained sympathetic to the Confederate cause. Lincoln didn't want to ruffle any feathers and give the Border States a reason to leave the Union, so they were exempt from the Emancipation Proclamation.³

While many recognized the gruesome evils of slavery, there were also people throughout America who were prejudiced toward Blacks. Prejudice is a word that means someone thought another person was "less than" because of a certain quality or characteristic, such as skin color, religious beliefs, or gender.

Faced with these challenges, abolitionists in the Union recognized that a permanent solution was needed to end slavery in America.

Because America has three branches of government, and a system of checks and balances that limits the powers of each branch, the president had done all he could do. So, the responsibility to find a permanent fix fell to Republicans in Congress. Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation planted the flag that encouraged them to get started.

Members of Congress decided that they needed to propose an amendment – also known as a change or an update – to the U.S. Constitution. To do so, the proposed amendment must be passed

² <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/ratifying-thirteenth-amendment-1866>

³ <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/us-history/civil-war-era/slavery-and-the-civil-war/a/the-emancipation-proclamation>

by both the House and the Senate and then ratified (or approved) by the states. (Technically, the states can also ask Congress to call a Constitutional Convention. But that's not what happened here.)⁴

The Congressman from Ohio, Republican James Ashley, introduced the first amendment to abolish slavery on December 14, 1863. What followed was a legislative battle in Congress that included more options for an amendment in the House and the Senate being introduced.

After months of debate in Congress, the Senate Judiciary Committee passed the 13th Amendment on February 10, 1864. It advanced to the full Senate for a vote and passed 38-6 on April 8, 1864.

While the 13th Amendment sped forward to victory in the Senate, the same was not true in the House. Anti-slavery representatives failed twice – first in February and again in June – to get the two-thirds majority support that was required for the amendment to pass.⁵

Although Lincoln supported an amendment to abolish slavery behind the scenes, he kept his opinions out of the public square (until late 1864) and let Congress do the job given to them by the people to advance the best version.⁶

But the presidential election of 1864 was underway and there was a real possibility that the elimination of slavery – a cause which thousands had given their lives fighting for – would not happen.

Republicans took the risk to make support for the 13th Amendment central to the 1864 campaign. The 1864 Republican Party platform said that “slavery was the cause” of the Civil War and that Republicans supported a Constitutional amendment that would “terminate and forever prohibit” slavery in the United States.⁷

It was with this vision for the future of the country that Lincoln, the Republican candidate, won the 1864 election. It was clear that the majority of voters wanted to abolish slavery in the United States once and for all. Abolitionists viewed this as a mandate from the people and pressured the House to pass the 13th Amendment.⁸ Lincoln's efforts convinced eight Democrats to switch their votes from no to yes and secured the support of other members of Congress who had previously not voted.

On January 31, 1865, these efforts succeeded, and the 13th Amendment was passed. Lincoln added his signature to the amendment – although this was not required. (Today, it is the only ratified amendment to the Constitution with a signature from the president.)⁹

⁴ <https://bensguide.gpo.gov/j-ways-to-amend-constitution>

⁵ <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/13th-amendment-constitution-united-states>

⁶ <https://www.senate.gov/about/origins-foundations/senate-and-constitution/senate-passes-the-thirteenth-amendment.htm>

⁷ <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/republican-party-platform-1864>

⁸ <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/13th-amendment-constitution-united-states>

⁹ <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/ratifying-thirteenth-amendment-1866>

Now, three-fourths of states had to ratify – or approve – it. At the time of Abraham Lincoln’s assassination on April 14, 1865, the required number of states had not yet ratified the 13th Amendment. Vice President Andrew Johnson – who succeeded Lincoln as president – was very supportive of preserving the Union, but was less committed to the cause of abolition.¹⁰

However, after the war ended and President Johnson mandated that the Southern states ratify the 13th Amendment, it finally became law on December 6, 1865, with Georgia being the 27th state to approve it (out of 36 states at the time).¹¹

This 13th Amendment reads: Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.¹²

The 13th amendment’s ratification was a milestone for the United States, permanently abolishing slavery in the United States and freeing four million Blacks (nearly one-third of the South’s population) from bondage.¹³

¹⁰ <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/13th-amendment-constitution-united-states>

¹¹ <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/ratifying-thirteenth-amendment-1866>

¹² https://www.senate.gov/civics/constitution_item/constitution.htm#a5

¹³ <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/ratifying-thirteenth-amendment-1866>