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American Commemorative Panels: Emancipation Proclamation

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Emancipation Proclamation



FREEDOM

ON JANUARY 1, 1863, nearly two years into the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, declaring freedom for more than three million African Americans living in bondage in the rebel-held areas of the Confederacy. Lincoln believed the proclamation was the “central act of my administration, and the great event of the nineteenth century.”

The famed abolitionist and ex-slave Frederick Douglass evidently agreed. He used the words “wild and grand” to describe the scene in one of the many cities where crowds gathered on New Year’s Day to hear news of the signing of the proclamation. “Joy and gladness exhausted all forms of expression, from shouts of praise to joys and tears,” Douglass exclaimed.

One provision of the Proclamation authorized enlisting African Americans in the Union army. This bold provision gave blacks an opportunity to show their courage in battle and convince skeptical whites they were worthy of citizenship.

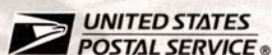
All-black regiments quickly gained notice for heroism in fighting at Port Hudson and Milliken’s Bend, Louisiana, and at Battery Wagner, outside Charleston, South Carolina. By the end of the war, some 179,000 blacks had served in the Union army, and nearly 40,000 had given their lives fighting for freedom. Their contributions and sacrifices influenced the nation to adopt the 13th Amendment to the Constitution in 1865, outlawing slavery once and for all.

The Emancipation Proclamation stamp, evocative of broadsides from the Civil War era, highlights the powerful phrase from Lincoln’s document: “Henceforward Shall Be Free.” Art director Antonio Alcalá worked with graphic designer Gail Anderson to produce this important commemorative stamp, one of three stamps being issued in a civil rights set in 2013.

A. Lincoln

background: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division; left: © Yuri Gripas/Reuters/Corbis

Stamps printed by Avery Dennison (AVR)/No. 910 in a series/January 1, 2013/Printed in U.S.A./©2013 United States Postal Service



FREEDOM



I do order and declare that all persons held as slaves within said designated States, and parts of States, are, and henceforward shall be free. . . .

With these words in the Emancipation Proclamation, issued on January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln declared more than three million African-American slaves to be free.

According to many historians, only the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States have had as great an impact on human life and liberty for so many. Lincoln himself believed the proclamation was the “central act of my administration, and the great event of the nineteenth century.”

The Emancipation Proclamation wasn't a perfect solution. Written two years into the Civil War, the document left slavery intact in the four slave states still loyal to the Union, and actual freedom for slaves in the rebellious states depended entirely on future Union victories. Still, in the words of abolitionist and ex-slave Frederick Douglass, the proclamation was “the first step on the part of the nation in its departure from the thralldom of the ages.”

With the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln made freedom for slaves an explicit goal of the Civil War. In addition, the document authorized the recruitment of black soldiers into the Union army. Their courage in battle and contributions to the Union's ultimate victory greatly influenced the nation to adopt the 13th Amendment to the Constitution in 1865, outlawing slavery forever.

“In giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free,” Lincoln wrote in a message to Congress one month before signing the Emancipation Proclamation. A nation “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal” at last began the journey toward true liberty and justice for all.



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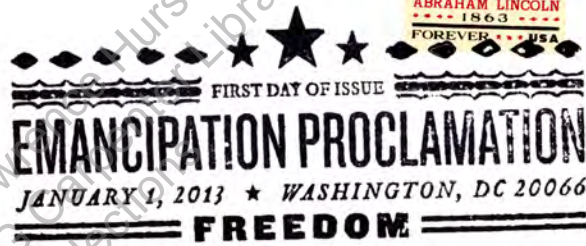
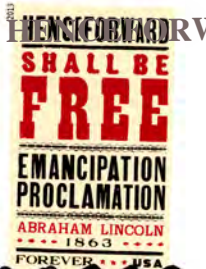
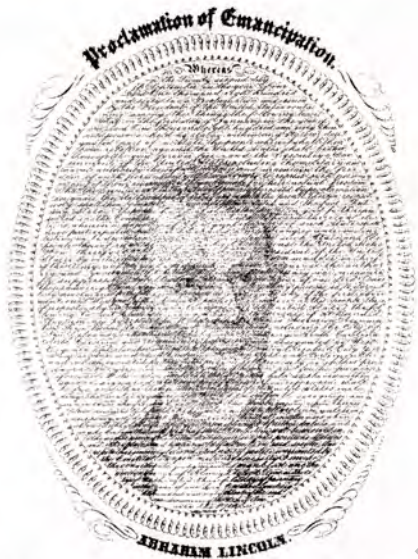
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This portrait of Abraham Lincoln was created by W.H. Pratt two years after his assassination. The actual words of the Emancipation Proclamation form a drawing of his face.