

RHODE ISLAND AND THE QUESTION OF SLAVERY

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Editor's Note: This is part of a biweekly series on Rhode Island's role in the Civil War by former Sun staff writer Sam Simons.

"Citizens of South Carolina: The civilized world stands appalled at the course you are pursuing! Appalled at the crime you are committing against your own mother - the best, the most enlightened and therefore the most prosperous of nations."

So proclaimed Thomas W. Sherman in November of 1861. Sherman, a native of Newport, was the commander of a 12,000-man force that had just occupied Port Royal Sound on the South Carolina coast. They were there to create a base for Admiral Samuel F. DuPont's South Atlantic Blockade Squadron to operate against the ports of Charleston, S.C. and Savannah, Ga.

Sherman's force was also there, at this early stage of the Civil War, to convince the South of the futility of its rebellion.

The statement above comes from the Port Royal Proclamation, a carefully worded, if bombastic, statement of the war aims of the Lincoln Administration. Sherman lectured the people of South Carolina on the evils of treason while at the same time assuring them that the army was not there to free the slaves. It was ultimately a naïve effort to separate the issues of disunion and slavery.

"The aim at the beginning of the war was reunion, but slavery came to the forefront," Frank Williams, retired chief justice of the Rhode Island Supreme Court and a noted Lincoln scholar, explained. "It was unique in the history of warfare to change aims in the middle of a war, but the slavery issue just overtook the original aims."

Regardless of the intention of the Lincoln Administration not to make this a war of abolition, escaping slaves were flocking to the protection of the Union army wherever it appeared. General Benjamin Butler, a Massachusetts lawyer and politician commanding Fortress Monroe in Virginia, resolved the dilemma in May 1861 by turning the slaveholders' own words against them. By agreeing that the slaves were property as the plantation owners insisted, Butler kept the black men and women within his lines by declaring them "contraband of war." For many in the North, this was an important distinction.

While most opposed slavery, they didn't consider blacks to be equal to whites and weren't ready to die for them. The situation was further complicated by the Border States that remained loyal, but were themselves slave states.

"Lincoln was worried about losing the border states of Maryland, Missouri and especially Kentucky," Williams said. "He took the position that he could take the property of rebels - their slaves - while pushing a policy of compensating (loyal slaveholders)."

Rhode Island, on the other hand, was the only state that had granted voting rights to free black men.

It was not surprising then that Sherman, the native Rhode Islander, issued General Order No. 9 on Feb. 6, 1862, calling on Northern societies to assist in helping the freedmen and providing a plan for plantation supervisors and teachers to help them become self-sufficient. Ultimately, the U.S. government would both organize those who wanted to fight and pay those who chose to work on the captured plantations in what became known as the Port Royal Experiment.

Lincoln's policies would evolve along with the rest of the North in the meantime.

"[Lincoln] was really a moderate," Justice Williams explained. "His views evolved during the war; with the acceptance of escaped slaves as contrabands, the confiscation and enrollment acts, and of course the Emancipation Proclamation that became effective on Jan. 1, 1863. He was advocating full citizenship by the end of the war."

Thomas W. Sherman would serve with distinction in the Civil War and suffer the amputation of his leg after the battle to capture Port Hudson, La. in 1863. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the Port Royal Experiment was his greatest contribution.

Thomas W. Sherman is buried in his hometown of Newport.

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