

## **R.I.'S MIXED REACTION TO THE EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION**

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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.

One hundred and fifty years ago, President Abraham Lincoln changed America forever.

Viewed from the distance of a century and a half, we see the act of ending slavery as the inevitable outcome of the Civil War; the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, issued on Sept. 22, 1862, generally accepted and even anticipated. In the fall of 1862, however, Lincoln's proclamation was not only a surprise, but it was not even clear that emancipation would survive the upcoming mid-term elections.

"Apart from the Declaration of Independence, this proclamation may be the single most significant statement of policy issued by a governing authority in the history of the country," stated retired Rhode Island Chief Justice Frank Williams, co-author of "The Emancipation Proclamation: Three Views."

"Yet it was a gamble. It cost [Lincoln's party] more than 30 seats in the fall elections."

The previous year had seen unprecedented bloodshed, as great battles at Antietam, Bull Run, Shiloh and in the Peninsula Campaign had resulted in nearly 90,000 total casualties. Changing the focus of the war from reunion alone to include universal liberty as well may have given added meaning to those losses, but it had political costs as well.

"The feeling of the general populace [to the Emancipation Proclamation] was mixed," said Elyssa Tardiff, director of the Rhode Island Historical Society's Goff Center for Education and Public Programs. "There were discussion forums, advertised meetings [in Rhode Island]. People were debating the question."

The debates raged in the newspapers as well, where opponents of the war, of the president and of black "equality" spoke in extremes.

"People write [letters to the editor] about interests they feel most strongly about," said Ms. Tardiff. "The war had brought all this suffering. No one was sure where it would end."

Many people were surprised by the Proclamation. While opposed to slavery in theory, most felt that abolition was an extreme measure. The working class worried about four million former slaves coming north and flooding the job market. Upper class whites, even most abolitionists, had no desire to see African Americans as equal citizens.

"The working class was worried about jobs, but prejudice played a part," according to Ms. Tardiff. "It was not separated in the minds of people at that time ? Even the poor classes looked at African Americans condescendingly."

The soldiers in the field were just as divided over the question as the people back in Rhode Island, perhaps more so because of all they had suffered. William Barker of Providence, an artilleryman in Battery A of the 1st R.I. Light Artillery, wrote home in an oft quoted example of opposition to the Proclamation.

"The proclamation of the president, I do not confirm wholly," Barker wrote. "I didn't come here to fight for the N--."

The most important part however, is usually left out. He continued, "but I will do anything to end this strife." By the election of 1864, emancipation was seen as a necessary step to defeat the rebellion. Lincoln was reelected by an overwhelming majority that carried over into the Congress and the 13th Amendment was sent to the states for ratification by the end of the year. Slavery was ended forever on Dec. 6, 1865.

As one Illinois soldier put it, "Every Body [sic] knows that slavery was the cause of this war, now let us put it out of the way."

A symposium on "Antietam, Emancipation and Memorialization" will be held at Rhode Island College on Sept. 28 from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. The free event features author Richard Slotkin and Judge Williams. For more information, contact Erik Christiansen at [echristiansen@ric.edu](mailto:echristiansen@ric.edu).

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