

Introduction

IN THE MONTHS SURROUNDING the sesquicentennial of the Emancipation Proclamation, much has been and is being written about this liberating document and its meanings—in its own time and over the decades. Indeed, important new books are already recasting the story of how and why Abraham Lincoln's emancipation proclamations of 1862 and 1863 came when they did, and with what consequences. Many note that—for blacks, at least—the signal act of the Emancipation Proclamation, issued on January 1, 1863, amid a great civil war, gave America new purpose and power and restored God's favor. It created an obligation to save the Union by ending slavery. It promised the dawn of a new day. Celebrations of the emancipating moment then and in years to come marked that hope and obligation. Recalling the Emancipation Proclamation, such works suggest, also demands inquiry into the dynamics, directions, and even dialectics of “emancipation,” both in the 1860s and thereafter. Such interest led the staff and editorial board of the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* to invite scholars to survey the new literature on emancipation, investigate particular examples of emancipation being worked out during the nineteenth century, and place the struggles over emancipation in a larger context that embraced northern, and especially Pennsylvanian, experiences. Thus, this special issue of *PMHB* on emancipation.

One important new dimension of recent scholarship has been a reorientation of the perspectives from which to assess the character and consequences of emancipation. The two principal hinges of the new orientation are place and race. By enlarging the compass of inquiry to include northerners' expectations of and experiences with freedom, scholars show that the abolitionist interest had been not only to end slavery in the South but also to bring together blacks and whites as equal citizens in the republic. Whatever doubts even some white abolitionists had about blacks' capacity to be fully free, they pressed for basic civil rights, and even the franchise as necessary, to ensure the freedom of black people everywhere as well as blacks' opportunity to make their own way. Many blacks,

too, sought the full rights of citizenship, and, without giving up their own institutions and identity, they also sought full inclusion into polity and society. This perspective reveals a different story than that of blacks working out the meaning of freedom after emancipation in the South, where most scholars have focused their attention. There, scholars argue, the freedpeople emphasized self-determination in building their own institutions, especially churches. Approaching the question of what emancipation wrought from the perspective of place and race reveals that emancipation meant more than just freedom and that its consequences varied. The essays in this special issue take the measure of emancipation by beginning to give northern blacks, and whites, their due.

The long history of emancipation must include the tens of thousands of free blacks who lived throughout the North, some of whose freedom dated back to the colonial era. Many African Americans were freed during and after the American Revolution as states above the Mason-Dixon Line gradually began to abolish slavery. There were many reasons for the gradual decline of slavery in the North as economic practicality, the rise of a wage labor system, religious revivalism, and the ideology of the Revolution argued for slavery's end and opened paths to freedom for blacks.

For Pennsylvanians especially, the moral and monetary dilemma of human bondage placed the commonwealth on the national stage as it became a test case of sorts. To borrow from the historian Willie Lee Rose, Pennsylvania became a "rehearsal for emancipation" after the passage of the 1780 Gradual Abolition Act. Pennsylvania legislators understood the delicate nature of emancipation in the late years of the eighteenth century. Although there was a growing opposition to enslavement, the Gradual Abolition Act attempted to appease Pennsylvania slaveholders by allowing them to extract twenty-eight years of unfree labor from men and women of African descent.

Other northern states also moved against slavery so that by the early nineteenth century it existed as a "peculiar institution" confined to the South rather than a national one. During the nineteenth century, many northern states also sought to limit slavery's hold by instituting "personal liberty laws" and other devices that obstructed the reach of southern slaveholders trying to recover fugitives. Antislavery interests also resisted efforts to introduce slavery in areas thus far closed to the institution, such as the Old Northwest. To be sure, northerners constricted the meaning of

freedom for blacks by denying them access to public schools and the franchise, requiring bonds to enter states or territories, and imposing other discriminatory acts, but the habit of freedom in northern places provided a counternarrative to southern slaveholders' insistence that slavery was right and ought to be protected everywhere.

This special issue of *PMHB* reminds us that emancipation was an uneven and incomplete process that succeeded largely through direct action, a point demonstrated by the bold and aggressive antislavery actions of both enslaved and free African Americans. Black men and women did not sit idly by as passive recipients of freedom. Instead, they petitioned the courts, challenged their previous owners, took flight, and created their own independent churches, businesses, and mutual aid organizations, all with the intention of claiming and enlarging American freedom. They also joined with white antislavery advocates to press for ending slavery everywhere by moral suasion and, for some, by any means available.

But these efforts were not enough to slow slavery's advance or endanger the institution where it was deeply rooted, and black and white abolitionists insisted that such limited efforts alone could not save America from the corrupting power of slavery. At the same time, northern communities struggled to reconcile racial and religious differences with ideas about freedom, often with violent responses. Such troubles persisted through the Civil War era. The long history of antislavery activism and whites' resistance to such efforts, the authors suggest, informed the particular ways blacks and whites responded to Lincoln's changing views about emancipation when it came as a promise with the Emancipation Proclamation and as a fact with the Thirteenth Amendment.

The long history of emancipation also includes the ways blacks and whites remembered it—or, as in the case of many whites over time, sought to forget or distort it. Amid a period of sectional reconciliation by whites and rising racism—with social Darwinism, the trope of the “white man's burden,” and Jim Crow laws all gaining strength—blacks in particular took stock of what had come from emancipation. In 1913, for example, blacks in Pennsylvania and elsewhere organized events and exhibitions to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. In Philadelphia, they organized the Pennsylvania Emancipation Exposition, which drew an estimated one hundred thousand people to the exhibits showing black progress. Through churches, civic organizations, schools,

and individual efforts, blacks commemorated the Emancipation Proclamation by asserting their own contributions to the health and wealth of their communities and calling for another new birth of freedom. That story, however, has not been much told. The essay in this issue on one particular example of black self-assessment in Germantown speaks to that moment and memory.

The essays herein collectively show that emancipation was never a moment and was always part of a movement. They also suggest that understanding and appreciating the many meanings of the Emancipation Proclamation, in its day and after, must move the focus from any preoccupation with one place or one people. Indeed, the story of emancipation—of freedom—is the constant in America. Its demands extend beyond its time. During this sesquicentennial of the Emancipation Proclamation, we might well take that to heart so that its parchment promise—that people might be free—becomes hard fact. Thus, too, this special issue on emancipation.

University of Delaware
Saint Joseph's University

ERICA ARMSTRONG DUNBAR
RANDALL M. MILLER