

“God Is Settling the Account”: African American Reaction to Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation

THE WHITE MAN SEATED ACROSS THE ROOM was offering them a new life in a land of opportunity. Against the backdrop of Washington’s sweaty August, in 1862, he told his five black guests from the District of Columbia about a temperate, welcoming place, with fine harbors, exotic flora and fauna, and vast reserves of minerals. “There is evidence of very rich coal mines,” he offered. Surely they—ministers, teachers, and a congressional messenger—could understand that whites (notwithstanding his own feelings) would never treat them as equals on American soil. “Your race are suffering, in my judgment, the greatest wrong inflicted on any people,” he told them. But he seemed more concerned with injuries to his own race: “See our present condition—the country engaged in war!—our white men cutting one another’s throats. . . . But for your race among us, there could not be war.”

He offered to finance their passage to a new home in a mountainous quarter of the Isthmus of Panama known as Chiriquí. The government had in hand a glowing report on everything from Chiriquí’s climate and coal to its value as a forward post of US influence in Central America.

This article is adapted and expanded from our book *Tasting Freedom: Octavius Catto and the Battle for Equality in Civil War America* (Philadelphia, 2010). Other major sources include Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York, 2010); Kate Masur, “The African American Delegation to Abraham Lincoln: A Reappraisal,” *Civil War History* 56 (2010): 117–44; and numerous documents reviewed in C. Peter Ripley, ed., *Black Abolitionist Papers*, 5 vols. (Chapel Hill, NC, 1985–92), hereafter cited as *BAP*. Both are available online by subscription as a Proquest database. Citations below are to volume and document number for those sources that appear in the printed volumes and by accession numbers for those that are only in the microfilm and online edition. We are grateful for invaluable assistance, advice, and encouragement from a corps of terrific historians and archivists: Erica Armstrong Dunbar, Harlan Greene, Phillip “Dr. Phil” Lapsansky, Roger Lane, Randall Miller, Jutta Seibert, and Stacey Peeples.

PENNSYLVANIA MAGAZINE OF HISTORY AND BIOGRAPHY
Vol. CXXXVII, No. 1 (January 2013)

There was even a disquisition on the tolerable pleasures of dining on monkey meat.¹

It was risky—but he pointed out that George Washington had risked all for his countrymen, “yet he was a happy man, because he was engaged in benefiting his race.” Finally, he took on tones of a country auctioneer. “Could I get a hundred tolerably intelligent men, with their wives and children?” he asked. “Can I have 50? If I could find 25 . . . I think I could make a successful commencement.”

The room went silent. The guests were among the small but energetic class of free African Americans whose writers and thinkers had bridled at white-led “colonization” schemes for nearly half a century. Many had braved bullwhips and bloodhounds to attain the equivocal freedoms of Washington, DC, and the North. They had overcome all sorts of obstacles to prosper there, as preachers and porters, caterers and cooks, raising families, launching colored schools and churches, starting libraries and literary societies. Now a gifted pitchman was all but bribing them to turn their backs on those hard-earned victories and promote colonization by leading the charge to Central America.

The pitchman was Abraham Lincoln.

His guests asked for time to consider their reply. The president, believing the meeting so important that he had transcripts sent to the newspapers, agreed, reassuring them, “No hurry at all.”²

* * *

The meeting was held on August 14, 1862. Lincoln’s guests did not know that five weeks later he would promise to free the slaves. On September 22, the president decreed that in every state still in rebellion on January 1, 1863—a hundred days hence—any person still enslaved would be “then, thenceforward, and forever free.”³ On the 150th anniversary of those world-changing announcements, it is easy to imagine

¹ US House of Representatives, *Report of the Select Committee on Emancipation and Colonization: With an Appendix* (Washington, DC, 1862), 75.

² Abraham Lincoln, “Address on Colonization to a Deputation of Negroes,” Aug. 14, 1862, in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 8 vols. (Springfield, IL, 1953), 5:370–75, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/>.

³ Abraham Lincoln, “Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation,” Sept. 22, 1862, in American Originals exhibit, National Archives and Records Administration (hereafter cited as NARA), http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/american_originals_iv/sections/preliminary_emancipation_proclamation.html.

Africans Americans exulting in Lincoln's pledge as soon as they learned of it. The truth was more complicated.

Historians have debated Lincoln's motives. Was he, in Michael Burlingame's words, "eager to end slavery" and publicly pushing colonization "to sugarcoat the bitter pill of emancipation" for whites?⁴ The September 22 announcement broadcast that efforts to "colonize persons of African descent, with their consent . . . will be continued."⁵ Yet the Emancipation Proclamation Lincoln signed on January 1 made no mention of such a scheme. Louis P. Masur has written that the president "changed his mind" on colonization during those hundred days.⁶

But African Americans had no way of reading Lincoln's mind. Having endured many proslavery administrations, they had had their hopes raised by his vague antislavery pronouncements as a candidate, only to be disappointed by his actions and words in his first years in office. They had seen him advocate a "gradual" emancipation that would not be complete in their lifetimes. They saw that his September promise was born of military and not moral necessity, and they received it with his Central America spiel still ringing in their ears.

The history of emancipation is often told with little mention of how African Americans viewed Lincoln before his September promise and in the hundred days that followed. Overlooking those reactions starves the story of its street-level impact; heeding those voices enriches it and, furthermore, offers a glimpse into the hopes, fears, conflicts, and complexities of the African American community at that historic hour.

That community was divided by generation, income, education level, skin color, and proximity to slavery or distance from it; their leaders often engaged in the kind of endless bickering over strategy and belief that marks any major social movement. They differed on whether to stay in the country. They differed on supporting the war. Some differed on slavery itself, because in Charleston and other southern outposts some free blacks owned slaves. In short, they were no more monolithic than their white counterparts.

⁴ Michael Burlingame, *Lincoln and the Civil War* (Carbondale, IL, 2011), 59. See also Kate Masur, "A Separate Peace," *Opinionator: Exclusive Online Commentary From The Times*, Aug. 17, 2012, <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/08/17/a-separate-peace/>.

⁵ Lincoln, "Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation," in American Originals exhibit, NARA.

⁶ Louis P. Masur, "Liberty Is a Slow Fruit: Lincoln the Deliberate Emancipator," *American Scholar* 81, no. 4 (2012): 44.

As historian Kate Masur has written, the meeting with Lincoln and the reaction that followed “reveal a vigorous and complex debate among African-Americans regarding their future in the United States.”⁷ The man future generations would know as the Great Emancipator was showing more enthusiasm—at least in public pronouncements—for emigration than emancipation. The September 22 promise, therefore, came as a surprise. Exultation would come eventually, but only after a hundred days marked by doubt, disagreement, and more than a little suspense.

* * *

To be invited to a private talk with a president in the White House—that was persuasive in its own right. (“I tell you I felt big in there!” Frederick Douglass said of a later visit.⁸) No harm in listening, counseled a black Washington pastor who had helped arrange the meeting. Rev. Henry McNeal Turner quipped, “I suppose no colored man in the nation would have any objection to going any where, if this government pay them for their two hundred and forty years’ work.”⁹

The delegation’s chairman—Edward M. Thomas, a messenger for the House of Representatives and a collector of books and art—felt his fears of colonization recede as Lincoln spoke. Thomas promised to argue the case to his counterparts in New York, Boston, and the hub of the rising black intelligentsia, Philadelphia. But he could not make the sale. Who was this “*bogus committee*,” a writer with the pseudonym “Cerebus” demanded in the AME Church’s weekly *Christian Recorder*, printed in Philadelphia. The writer wanted to know “*who gave that committee authority to act for us, the fifteen thousand residents of color in this District—and . . . the two hundred and ten thousand inhabitants of color in the Free States.*”¹⁰

Newspaper reports of the White House meeting prompted expressions of anger and anguish in Northern blacks’ letters to Lincoln. George B. Vashon of Pittsburgh wondered if the president “calmly calculated the hundreds of millions of dollars” the Chiriquí plan would add to the national debt, and took fierce exception to Lincoln’s contention that the

⁷ Kate Masur, “A Separate Peace.”

⁸ Philip S. Foner, ed., *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, abridged and adapted by Yuval Taylor (Chicago, 1999), 551.

⁹ Masur, “African American Delegation,” 136.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 132–37.

black man's presence in America had brought on the war: "He may have been the occasion of it; but he has not been its cause. That cause must be sought in the wrongs inflicted upon him by the white man."¹¹ A. P. Smith of New Jersey wrote, "Pray tell us, is our right to a home in this country less than your own, Mr. Lincoln? . . . Are you an American? So are we. Are you a patriot? So are we."¹²

Douglass, the best-known black voice in the land, came down harshly on the meeting's host. "Mr. Lincoln assumes the language and arguments of an itinerant Colonization lecturer, showing all his inconsistencies, his pride of race and blood, his contempt for Negroes and his canting hypocrisy," he wrote in *Douglass' Monthly*. "He says to the colored people: 'I don't like you, you must clear out of the country.'"¹³

Lincoln was hardly the first to say it. Schemes to "colonize" free African Americans, whether in Africa or Central America, had risen and fallen for decades, backed by slaveholding interests but also by presidents such as Thomas Jefferson and James Monroe. From time to time, black leaders such as Henry Highland Garnet of New York City and Martin R. Delany of Pittsburgh promoted their own emigration ventures—Rev. Garnet with an espoused goal of bringing the Gospel to Africa, Delany with a vision of founding a self-sustaining black republic.¹⁴

Other black leaders believed white-sponsored colonization societies aimed to put an ocean between enslaved people and their greatest allies, free blacks. Rev. William Catto of Philadelphia—who had nearly sailed to Liberia in 1847 before his thinking changed—denounced colonization as a ruse to deport freemen like himself lest they educate or incite the slaves, the better to "hold our brethren the more quietly and safely in chains."¹⁵ The only things new about the pitch made in Washington were the salesman and the destination.

Robert Purvis, the gentleman farmer and Underground Railroad hero, tried to explain this to Samuel Pomeroy, the Kansas senator who was Lincoln's point man on the Chiriquí effort. Purvis noted that his own

¹¹ George Boyer Vashon to Abraham Lincoln, Sept. 1862, in *Douglass' Monthly*, Oct. 1862; reprinted in *BAP*, vol. 5, doc. 30.

¹² Foner, *Fiercy Trial*, 225.

¹³ Frederick Douglass, "The President and His Speeches," *Douglass' Monthly*, Sept. 1862.

¹⁴ For Garnet's emigration efforts, see, e.g., Henry Highland Garnet, circular by the African Civilization Society, Feb. 16, 1854, *BAP*, vol. 5, doc. 1a; for Delany's, see, e.g., Martin R. Delany to Frederick Douglass, July 10, 1852, *BAP*, vol. 4, doc. 25.

¹⁵ Daniel A. Payne, *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Nashville, TN, 1891), 250, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/payne/payne.html>.

father-in-law, sailmaker James Forten, had in 1817 helped lead black protests against colonization. "Senator Pomeroy," Purvis wrote, "these were the sentiments of the colored people of Philadelphia, and of the whole land, in 1817; they have been their sentiments ever since, and they will be found to be their sentiments now."¹⁶

But some African Americans did want to "clear out of the country." That was the eternal rub of the colonization debate—for every black leader who scorned the idea, a hundred families were ready to go. Many had already immigrated to Liberia. An enthusiastic Pomeroy reported in October 1862 that fourteen thousand black people had signed up for passage to Chiriquí. Even if that number was inflated, Washington's Rev. Turner said he alone knew of a thousand. Douglass needed to look no further than his own family to know how conflicted his people were: one of his grown sons wanted to sign up.¹⁷

Lincoln had been a steadfast colonizationist ("I cannot make it better known than it already is, that I strongly favor colonization," he avowed in his December 1862 message to Congress).¹⁸ The candidate whose speeches raised blacks' hopes had, as president, inspired dismay and distrust. Soon after the meeting on Chiriquí, he famously insisted that the war was not to end slavery but to save the Union, with or without slavery.¹⁹ And early in his presidency, circumstances had tested his commitment to freedom. As far as black leaders were concerned, he had failed each test.

When two Union generals ordered slaves freed in territories they commanded—John C. Fremont in Missouri and David Hunter in Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina—Lincoln rescinded their orders. Then there was the subordinate's order he refused to rescind: closing schools the army had opened for the thousands of newly freed and education-starved blacks of Union-occupied North Carolina. His appointee explained that the president was merely upholding the state's law—which, like South Carolina's and others', banned teaching blacks to read and write.²⁰ Lincoln also had signaled that he, like many other white Northerners, feared the consequences of letting blacks enlist. On September 13, 1862, he told Chicago ministers who had come to the White House to argue

¹⁶ Robert Purvis to Samuel Pomeroy, Aug. 29, 1862, *Liberator*, Sept. 12, 1862.

¹⁷ Masur, "African American Delegation," 138.

¹⁸ Foner, *Fiery Trial*, 236.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 227–28.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 176–180, 206–12.

for emancipation, "If we were to arm them, I fear that in a few weeks the arms would be in the hands of the rebels."²¹

As recently as March, Lincoln had made the case for letting states embark on "gradual abolishment of slavery," with compensation to slaveholders. This emancipation would be so gradual that it would not be complete until the end of the century. The decree of September 22 meant that Lincoln was, in essence, revising his main timetable for emancipation from thirty-seven years to one hundred days. Could his seemingly sudden change of position be trusted?²² Author William Wells Brown, who had escaped slavery, remarked, "The colored people of the country rejoice in what Mr. Lincoln has done for them, but they all wish that General Fremont had been in his place."²³

The Chiriquí offer was still on the table as the hundred-day wait began—and still dividing black leadership. Rev. Garnet argued that creating a Central American refuge for the thousands of "contrabands" fleeing from the Confederate states was a good idea. "Let the government give them a territory, and arm and defend them until they can fully defend themselves, and thus hundreds of thousands of men will be saved, and the Northern bugbear 'they will all come here' be removed," Garnet wrote in the *Weekly Anglo-African*. But just weeks earlier, Garnet's Shiloh Presbyterian Church in lower Manhattan was the site of an anticolonization rally. A guest speaker from Philadelphia, Rev. Catto, accused Lincoln of caving in to the most hateful, violent white elements, of "pandering to the mob spirit."²⁴

Yet African Americans' hopes were rising. Catto's son Octavius and Robert Purvis' niece Charlotte Forten were part of a new generation of activists—reared in homes that doubled as hideaways in the network known as the Underground Railroad and taught that education was a birthright, agitation for equal rights a duty. They had reached adulthood in the late 1850s, espousing in writings and speeches a belief that they could change the world. As one of their staunchest white allies, Massachusetts minister Theodore Parker, put it, the arc of the moral uni-

²¹ Ibid., 229.

²² Ibid., 196, 236–38.

²³ Donald Yacovone, ed., *A Voice of Thunder: The Civil War Letters of George E. Stephens* (Urbana, IL, 1997), 18.

²⁴ *Pacific Appeal*, Oct. 18, 1862, quoted in introduction to George B. Vashon to Abraham Lincoln, Sept. 1862, BAP, vol. 5, doc. 30; *Weekly Anglo-African* article reprinted in *Pacific Appeal*, Oct. 11, 1862, BAP, accession no. 02181; Biddle and Dubin, *Tasting Freedom*, 271.

verse seemed to be bending toward justice, even if he could not “calculate the curve.”²⁵

Black Americans created and lived in a complex world. In Philadelphia, home to the largest free African American population of any northern city, with upward of twenty thousand by 1860, thousands lived in poverty, disease, and illiteracy in the worst, most crowded sections. But there were also, by the time the war began, eighteen black churches, a widely read black newspaper, a black-run cemetery, and a patchwork of fraternal, social, and literary societies that numbered as many as one hundred. The backbone of the Underground Railroad was made up of well-to-do families such as the Fortens and Purvises—each a “dynasty of social activists,” as Emma Lapsansky Werner describes them—while its eyes and ears were the waiters, drivers, porters, and maids who staffed hotels, restaurants, and docks. The Quaker-financed Institute for Colored Youth, where Octavius Catto and his friend Jacob White Jr. graduated and taught, drew visiting educators eager to observe black pupils thriving under the tutelage of black teachers.²⁶

Slavery was never far away. In December 1859, when Rev. Jeremiah Asher told his Philadelphia flock that members of his family were still enslaved in the South, shouts went up from every pew: “So is mine”! “So is mine”!²⁷ Yet discord ran rampant. Black activists who wanted to launch an antislavery party and otherwise gain entrance to the political arena broke bitterly with abolitionists who favored “moral suasion.”²⁸ Douglass branded black pastors cowards for not hosting antislavery meetings—never mind that past meetings had resulted in churches being stoned or set afire.²⁹

²⁵ *Centenary Edition of the Works of Theodore Parker*, 15 vols. (Boston, 1907–12), 3:64. See also Biddle and Dubin, *Tasting Freedom*, esp. chaps. 5–9.

²⁶ See, e.g., Roger Lane, *William Dorsey's Philadelphia and Ours: On the Past and Future of the Black City in America* (New York, 1991). Visitors to the Institute for Colored Youth are described in Biddle and Dubin, *Tasting Freedom*, 183–84, citing, e.g., Fanny Jackson Coppin, *Reminiscences of School Life, and Hints on Teaching* (Philadelphia, 1913), 21; and Emma Jones Lapsansky, “The World the Agitators Made: The Counterculture of Agitation in Urban Philadelphia,” in *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne (Ithaca, NY, 1994), 96.

²⁷ William Dusingberre, *Civil War Issues in Philadelphia, 1856–1865* (Philadelphia, 1965), 86.

²⁸ See, e.g., *BAP*, vol. 3, introduction and p. 22; Allen B. Ballard, *One More Day's Journey: The Story of a Family and a People* (New York, 1984), 67; and description of Frederick Douglass's debate with Charles L. Remond, *New York Times*, May 21, 1857.

²⁹ See, e.g., Douglass's criticism of Philadelphia pastors in *North Star*, Sept. 1, Oct. 13, and Oct. 20, 1848.

Then there was the war; in its first two years, African American leaders split over whether to seek to join the fighting or even support the cause. Why bring slaveholders back into the Union? Lincoln had made it crystal clear that abolition was not the point. Besides, as Garnet pointed out, many Northern whites were so “horror stricken” at the idea of a biracial army that they “turned up their noses till they almost met their foreheads.”³⁰

In August 1862, pastor Jabez Campbell led a men-only meeting at Mother Bethel AME Church, at which he insisted that the time had come “to state our own position in the present crisis.” With little discussion, the group adopted resolutions:

Whereas, We have been made to understand that in no case, at the present, will the negroes be armed or employed as soldiers in defence of the Government. . . .

Resolved, That . . . the better class of colored people have too much self-respect to intrude themselves where they are not wanted. . . .

Resolved, That as a loyal and peace-loving community, the colored people of Philadelphia desire by no act of theirs to increase disorder or intensify evil feelings; but if by order and quiet they can assist in restoring peace to the country, they desire to practise that.³¹

But younger men were already finding ways to fight. Billy Wormley, a friend of Octavius Catto from Washington, DC, talked his way into a job with the navy flotilla that drove the rebels out of Beaufort, South Carolina.³² Another friend, Alfred M. Green, wrote to New York’s *Weekly Anglo-African* protesting the paper’s call for neutrality. Green said newly formed independent companies of black soldiers drilling in the countryside had the right idea: “No nation ever has or ever will be emancipated from slavery . . . but by the sword, wielded too by their own strong arms. . . . The prejudiced white men, North or South, never will respect us until they are forced to . . . by deeds of our own.”³³

³⁰ Carla L. Peterson, *Black Gotham: A Family History of African Americans in Nineteenth-Century New York City* (New Haven, CT, 2011).

³¹ *Christian Recorder*, Sept. 6, 1862.

³² William A. Wormley to Octavius V. Catto, Nov. 7, 1861, box 3Ga, folder 5, Leon Gardiner Collection of American Negro Historical Society Records (Collection 0008), Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

³³ Albert M. Green, letter to editor, *Weekly Anglo-African*, Oct. 1861, in *BAP*, vol. 5, doc. 22b.

Green's argument rang hollow at first; the army, after all, wasn't letting colored men enlist. But the same thought occurred to other black writers and leaders. The exigencies of the war had forced Lincoln and his generals to consider emancipation and enlistment; now, African Americans had a chance to address exigencies of their own. If the North needed them to win the war, they needed the validating stamp of citizenship that came with valor on the battlefield.³⁴

* * *

On one sad score, at least, they knew Lincoln was right: when he said they had "suffered very greatly" from living among whites. Douglass, for instance, had been whipped in slavery, had been pelted with rotten eggs for an antislavery speech in Pennsylvania, and had his right hand broken for another in Indiana. Garnet had been chased from a school in boyhood and tossed from a train as an adult. In 1864, whites in Syracuse would throw the minister down, take his wooden leg and silver-plated cane and make him crawl through the mud.³⁵

William H. Parham of Cincinnati, for one, was ready to leave. "I have almost concluded to go to Jamaica," the young colored teacher wrote on September 7, 1862, to his Philadelphia friend Jacob White Jr. White rioters had descended on black Cincinnati, and Parham told of a mob that "attacked a house occupied by a colored family on Commercial Street." He said his mind was all but made up "to get out of this slavery-cursed and Negro-hating country as soon as I can."³⁶

A reminder of the "mob spirit" had just been in the newspapers. Nine days before the White House meeting, whites in Brooklyn decided they had seen enough jobs in tobacco warehouses go to black men, women, and children, so they set fire to two warehouses. The *New York Times* reported that as flames threatened to trap colored women and children who had retreated to the upper floors, whites outside shouted, "kill the d—n naygurs!" and "burn the naygurs." Police rescued the workers, but the owner hired whites to replace them.³⁷

³⁴ See, e.g., Robert Hamilton, "The Present—and its Duties," editorial, *Weekly Anglo-African*, Jan. 17, 1863, in *BAP*, vol. 5, doc. 35.

³⁵ Peterson, *Black Gotham*, 273.

³⁶ William H. Parham to Jacob C. White Jr., Sept. 7, 1863, in *BAP*, vol. 5, doc. 29.

³⁷ *New York Times*, Aug. 5, 1862; James M. McPherson, *The Negro's Civil War: How American Blacks Felt and Acted during the War for the Union* (1982; repr., New York, 2003), 70.

Such events may have made Pomeroy's Chiriquí plea more appealing. He published a letter "To the Free Colored People" in the black papers. "The hour has now arrived," Pomeroy wrote, "when it is within your own power to take one step that will secure, if successful, the elevation, freedom and social position of your race upon the American continent. The President of the United States has already signified his desire to carry out fully . . . the desire of the National Legislature, which made an appropriation to facilitate your emigration and settlement in some favorable locality outside of these States."³⁸

The letter had barely made it to readers of San Francisco's *Pacific Appeal*, an African American newspaper, when news of Lincoln's promise arrived and overtook all conversation. "Though no firing of cannon was heard from the hilltops . . . the Proclamation was, nevertheless, read and discussed with intense interest," the paper reported on September 27. "A murmur might have been heard, here and there, from the groups that could be seen in earnest conversation, apparently discussing the merits of the great topic which the telegraph had just announced, but there was not much excitement and no noisy demonstration of any kind."³⁹

The closer to slavery, the stronger the reaction. Here, too, was a divide—between those who had not lived in slavery and those who, in Rev. Catto's words, had seen "the evil" and knew that "the most vivid descriptions fell far short of the realities."⁴⁰

Harriet Jacobs was still in girlhood in North Carolina when a slaveholder had begun sexually harassing her—"slavery is terrible for men, but it is far more terrible for women," she wrote. She managed to escape by hiding in an attic for seven years. Now she was teaching, feeding, and clothing contrabands at a federal camp in Alexandria, Virginia. There, a mammoth barracks built for 500 freed people now housed 1,500. Lincoln's promise had infused her with energy. In a December 1862 letter to her Rochester abolitionist friend Amy Post, a white woman, Jacobs wrote that the past six months had been "the happiest of all my life." She felt that "a just God is settleing [*sic*] the account."

Jacobs implored Post and others to volunteer at the camps. She wrote of refugees "so degraded by slavery that . . . they know little else than the handle of the hoe, the plough, the cotton pad, and the overseer's lash.

³⁸ Masur, "African American Delegation," 138–39; Samuel C. Pomeroy, "To the Free Colored People of the United States," *Pacific Appeal*, Sept. 20, 1862.

³⁹ "The Proclamation," editorial, *Pacific Appeal*, Sept. 27, 1862, in *BAP*, accession no. 08481.

⁴⁰ William Catto, quoted in William Still, *The Underground Rail Road* (Philadelphia, 1872), 86.

Have patience with them. You have helped to make them what they are; teach them civilization. You owe it to them, and you will find them as apt to learn as any other people.”⁴¹

But even after graphic testimony about slavery in Jacobs’s and other accounts, many a well-educated Northerner seemed barely awake to its degradations. Diarist Sidney George Fisher, a member of Philadelphia’s elite, wrote of his shock at learning—through his slaveholder in-laws—that masters impregnated slaves and sold off their mulatto children. He reported that abolitionists as fiery as James Miller McKim of Philadelphia had been appalled to learn of “the lacerated backs” of slave women whipped by masters’ jealous wives in “some of the best families.”⁴² Nathaniel Hawthorne, visiting the camp where Jacobs worked, wrote that its residents wore “such a crust of primeval simplicity (which is quite polished away from the northern black man), that they seemed a kind of creature by themselves, not altogether human.”⁴³

Who knows what the freed people thought of the novelist staring in at them? Such gawking was all too familiar for free Americans of color. The Amy Posts were far outnumbered by whites who had no idea of blacks’ lives. When proslavery forces alleged in 1860 that Lincoln had met with blacks, the president-elect could honestly reply, “I was never in a meeting with negroes in my life.”⁴⁴ Black New York abolitionist James McCune Smith lamented, “Our white countrymen do not know us. . . . What hand has refused to fan the flame of prejudice against us? . . . What American artist has not caricatured us?”⁴⁵ In this complaint, he could have included British artists. When Lincoln promised to liberate the slaves and enlist colored troops, *Punch* magazine lampooned the president as a desperate gambler trying to best the Confederacy by throwing down an outsized ace of spades.⁴⁶ In the cartoon, titled “Abe Lincoln’s Last Card,” readers saw that the “spade” on the card was an African face.

⁴¹ Jean Fagan Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* (New York, 2004), esp. 159–63.

⁴² Sidney George Fisher diary, Jan. 2, 1860, and Aug. 31, 1863, in *A Philadelphia Perspective: The Diary of Sidney George Fisher*, ed. Nicholas Wainwright (Philadelphia, 1967), 343–44, 459.

⁴³ Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs*, 163.

⁴⁴ Foner, *Fiery Trial*, 131.

⁴⁵ Ibid.; Benjamin Quarles, *Lincoln and the Negro* (1962; repr., New York, 1991), 43.

⁴⁶ Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York, 1998), 543.

* * *

As the day drew near, the black editors of the *Pacific Appeal* took stock:

Notwithstanding the results of the recent elections in the Eastern States,—by many supposed to be adverse and in antagonism to the position of the President . . . by telegraphic despatches [*sic*] we are constantly informed that the President will not yield to pro-slavery pressure, by the modification or withdrawal of his great mandate for emancipation. Almost every paper (Republican or Democrat) is filled with the opinions expressed by nearly all the great statesmen of the day, in favor of the great edict to be issued, it is to be hoped, by the President, January 1st.⁴⁷

It was to be hoped.

With eleven days to go, an organization of Philadelphia's leading men of color, the Statistical Association, implored the population to exercise restraint. Three of the association's leaders, William Still, Jacob White Sr., and a barber named Isaiah Wears, published an article in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* headlined "The President's Proclamation":

How shall the 1st of January be observed by the colored people?

The question is doubtless uppermost in the minds of very many among us of all classes.

The Executive Committee of the Social, Civil and Statistical Association of the Colored People of Pennsylvania, conceiving that much harm might grow out of an observance not governed by discretion, deem it essential to the welfare of themselves and their brethren generally, to offer publicly a few well-considered suggestions on the subject.

The writers were old enough to know what harms might come—anti-slavery meetings in Philadelphia had been stormed by mobs; a black 1842 temperance parade had triggered bloody white reaction. They also made note of the calculated nature of Lincoln's promise:

That the hearts of thousands are anxiously longing for the glad day to fly swiftly around none can doubt. . . .

⁴⁷ "The Great Coming Event," editorial, *Pacific Appeal*, Nov. 29, 1862, in *BAP*, accession no. 08595.

... [But] the manner by which the proclamation was brought about; the direct efforts being made to prohibit us from participating in the defence of the government; the malignant opposition manifest against our having a peaceful habitation on the continent where we were born and have labored and suffered—these with other considerations admonish us forcibly that the day has not yet come for us to arrange the “jubilee,” or to make public demonstrations in the way of parades, etc. The time may come soon when we can publicly rejoice over the downfall of slavery and the rebellion together; but be assured it is not yet. Let us not, therefore, make merry too soon.⁴⁸

The White House sent no signal of any last-minute change of plans. In fact, there was good news for colonization foes—opposition from neighboring Central American governments had cooled the administration’s Chiriquí fever.⁴⁹ But Frederick Douglass was wary. What if the president “fails in this trial hour, what if he now listens to the demon slavery—and rejects the entreaties of the Angel of Liberty?” he wrote. “Suppose he cowers at last . . . and thus gives a new lease of life to the slaveholder’s rebellion? Where then will stand Mr. Abraham Lincoln? . . . His name would go down in history scarcely less loathsome than that of Nero.”⁵⁰

On December 31, Lincoln signed a different sort of document: a federal contract to pay a speculator fifty dollars for every freed slave he could ship to, and settle on, an island off Haiti. Like the emissary who touted Chiriquí’s coal and monkey meat, Bernard Kock promised Lincoln that food, shelter, and opportunity awaited freed blacks beneath the palms of Île-à-Vache.⁵¹ If the colonization push was a feint on Lincoln’s part, it was an elaborate one.

By then, black carpenter George Stephens of Philadelphia had signed on with a Union regiment as cook and valet to a general. Writing on New Year’s Eve from an encampment near Fredericksburg, he offered readers of the *Weekly Anglo-African* his expression of the hour’s hopes and fears. He, too, said accounts needed settling. This “may be the watch night which shall usher in the new era of freedom,” Stephens wrote. “Do not

⁴⁸ William Still, Jacob B. White Sr., and Isaiah C. Wears, “The President’s Proclamation,” *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, Dec. 20, 1862, in *BAP*, accession no. 03502.

⁴⁹ Masur, “African American Delegation,” 140.

⁵⁰ Frederick Douglass, in *Douglass’ Monthly*, Jan. 1, 1863.

⁵¹ See, e.g., Foner, *Fiery Trial*, 239–40.

nations have to suffer for misdeeds as well as individuals? And should they not have a season of moral reckoning? . . . Her wealth is built on the labor of slaves." As for Lincoln, "The pro-slavery pressure on him must be very great. Since the recent elections have unmistakably indicated that the pro-slaveryites are immensely in the majority, I should not be disappointed if the proclamation be withheld."⁵²

At Union-occupied Port Royal, South Carolina, Charlotte Forten was entertaining no such doubts. Ten oxen were being roasted for the ceremony. The young teacher—ordinarily a doubter extraordinaire—was so sure of what was coming that she taught her newly freed pupils the John Brown song for the occasion. On December 31, she wrote in her journal: "I count the hours till to-morrow, the glorious, glorious day of freedom."⁵³

* * *

The words of women such as Forten and Jacobs and men such as Stephens and Douglass represented only the most educated black Americans—the "talented thousandth," as historians described blacks at Oberlin, the only antebellum US college to welcome them.⁵⁴ They had access to pencil, paper, and presses. No one knew with any certainty, then or now, how most of the Americans most directly affected by Lincoln's promised order would receive the word—that is, if they received it at all.

Booker T. Washington recalled a "grapevine telegraph" that carried word of Lincoln's decree from plantation to plantation in Virginia.⁵⁵ Even before that, slaveholders found their inventories suddenly thinning as Union armies advanced. Charles Colcock Jones, a minister and Georgia planter, was distraught in July 1862 to find his beloved house servant gone. Jones wrote to his Confederate soldier son: "*Fifty-one* have already gone from this county. Your Uncle John has lost five. *Three* are said to have left from your Aunt Susan's and Cousin Laura's; one was captured, two not; and one of these was *Joefinny*!"⁵⁶ As the war unfolded, a

⁵² George Stephens to *Weekly Anglo-African*, Dec. 31, 1862, in Yacovone, *Voice of Thunder*, 216–20.

⁵³ Brenda E. Stevenson, ed., *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké* (New York, 1988), 428.

⁵⁴ See Ellen N. Lawson and Marlene Merrill, "The Antebellum 'Talented Thousandth': Black College Students at Oberlin before the Civil War," *Journal of Negro Education* 52 (1983): 142–55.

⁵⁵ Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA, 2003), 66.

⁵⁶ Erskine Clarke, *Dwelling Place: A Plantation Epic* (New Haven, 2005), 414–15.

South Carolina planter observed to diarist Mary Boykin Chestnut that “the black waiters are all ears now.” He said he had taken the precaution of speaking French in their presence.⁵⁷

But for millions of others, slavery’s censorship was profound. Slaves were barred from writing—“for God’s sake, don’t let a slave be cotch with pencil and paper,” former Charleston slave Elijah Green remembered seventy years later; “You might as well had killed your master or missus.”⁵⁸ And most free blacks had no access to learning. What they said and felt in those hundred days is hard to know now and was harder to know then.

So, on January 1, 1863, a Lincoln loyalist in Philadelphia made it his business to find out. Benjamin Rush Plumly ventured across new-fallen snow to find the black churches full.⁵⁹ A merchant, published poet, and abolitionist, Plumly chose his destinations wisely that day; the city was the hub of free black America, and the black churches were the durable brick-and-wood-frame hubs of that hub. Plumly found himself welcomed—and overwhelmed. He promptly wrote to Lincoln:

Dear Sir,

I have been, all day, from early morning intil [*sic*] a short time ago, in the Crowded Churches of the Colored People of this City.

During thirty years of active Anti-Slavery life, I have never witnessed, such intense, intelligent and devout “Thanksgiving.” . . .

Occasionally, they sang and shouted and wept and prayed. God knows, I cried, with them. . . .

The mention of your name . . . evoked a spontaneous benediction from the whole Congregation. No doubt of the coming of Your Proclamation beset any one of them.

As one of their speakers was explaining the effect of your Act, he was interrupted by a sudden outburst, from four or five hundred voices, singing “The Year of Jubilee.”

An old Anti-Slavery song . . . which we sang, stirringly, in the dark days of mobs & outrage, was so changed as to include Your name.

At one church, Plumly reported, worshippers lined up to receive Communion made small donations in support of “the Contrabands; all

⁵⁷ Hahn, *Nation under Our Feet*, 67.

⁵⁸ Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780–1860* (New York, 1983), 197.

⁵⁹ Snow and other Philadelphia weather data for December 31, 1862–January 1, 1863, courtesy of Stacey C. Peebles, curator and lead archivist, Pennsylvania Hospital, Philadelphia, PA.

the while singing their moving hymns.” “To day,” Plumly continued, all of the city’s twenty black churches “were open & filled”:

They have among them, many men of talent, education and property. There are several excellent orators. All of these,—ministers and laymen, exhorted the people, to accept the great gift, with reverent joy; to make no public demonstration, no procession or parade; to indulge in no resentment for the past, and no impatience for the future, but to “work and wait,[]” trusting in God, for the final triumph of Justice. . . .

The Black people all trust you. They beleive [*sic*] that you desire to do them Justice.

They do not beleive [*sic*] that You, wish to expatriate them, or to enforce upon them, any disability, but—that you cannot do all, that you would.

The spontaneous outburst of this faith in you, was touching, beyond expression.

Some one intimated, that You might be forced into some, form of Colinzation [*sic*].

“God wont let him,” shouted an old woman. “God’s in his heart,” said another, and the response of the Congregation was emphatic.⁶⁰

* * *

One of the crowded churches was First African Presbyterian. Jonathan C. Gibbs, the seminary-trained pastor, had a sermon ready for the moment when the news arrived:

The morning dawns! The long night of sorrow and gloom is past, rosy-fingered Aurora, early born of day, shows the first faint flush of her coming glory, low down on the distant horizon of Freedom’s joyful day. O day, thrice blessed, that brings liberty to four million native-born Americans. . . .

The Proclamation has gone forth, and God is saying to this nation by its legitimate constitute head, Man must be free.

Gibbs took a moment to warn against any shipping of free Americans to a colony “in the Torrid Zone.” But he welcomed the new language that had cropped up—as if in colonization’s place—in the Emancipation Proclamation; the final version authorized black men’s enlistment in the

⁶⁰ Benjamin Rush Plumly to Abraham Lincoln, Jan. 1, 1863, Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mal:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(d2088100\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mal:@field(DOCID+@lit(d2088100))).

“armed service” of the Union. “Many persons are asking, Will black men fight?” Gibbs orated. “That is not what they mean. The question they are asking is simply this: Have white men of the North the same moral courage, the pluck, the grit, to lay down their foolish prejudice against the colored man and place him in a position where he can bear his full share of the toils and dangers of this war?”⁶¹

* * *

In snowbound Boston, white intellectuals gathered in the Music Hall to await the news—among them essayists and poets Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and John Greenleaf Whittier, as well as the elfin giant of abolitionism, William Lloyd Garrison. An orchestra played Beethoven’s Fifth, and a cheer went up for Harriet Beecher Stowe. The author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (a novel that endorsed colonization even as it exposed slavery) daubed her eyes with a handkerchief as thousands chanted her name.

A few blocks away, at Tremont Temple, another audience, three thousand strong, gathered in the same high-ceilinged hall where two years earlier a white mob of “gentlemen” and “roughs” alike had broken up a biracial antislavery meeting, “knocked down and trampled upon” blacks in the audience and thrown Frederick Douglass “down the staircase.”

On January 1, 1863, the only things pulling Douglass down were his doubts. Would Lincoln’s wife, “from an old slaveholding family, influence him to delay and give the slaveholders one other chance?” Would Union losses in battle or Republican losses in the fall elections persuade the president to reconsider his timetable?

Messengers were put in place between the hall and the telegraph office. All that Douglass, William Wells Brown, and other speakers could do was make their speeches—and wait. “Every moment of waiting chilled our hopes, strengthened our fears,” Douglass wrote. “Eight, nine, ten o’clock came and went. . . . A visible shadow seemed falling on the expecting throng.”

Then came the word. “It is on the wires!” . . . and the scene was wild and grand. Joy and gladness exhausted all forms of expression from shouts

⁶¹ *Christian Recorder*, Jan. 17, 1863, in *Lift Every Voice: African American Oratory, 1787–1900*, ed. Philip S. Foner and Robert J. Branham (Tuscaloosa, AL, 1998), 381–83; Foner, *Fiery Trial*, 240.

of praise, to sobs and tears.” Douglass noted that the celebrants included both races, “but we all seemed to be about of one color that day.”⁶²

At the Shiloh Presbyterian Church in New York, Rev. Garnet was presiding. Hymns were sung, speeches delivered; pews filled up as midnight approached. The reverend announced that a hero of abolitionism had just walked in—“I allude to Hon. Horace Greeley.” The audience rose and applauded. Then Garnet noticed something: “Greeley” was clapping, too! He corrected himself: “A gentleman right here before me looked so much like Mr. Greeley that I thought it was him, but when I mentioned Mr. Greeley’s name, he clapped as hard as the rest, and then I saw my mistake.” The congregation laughed with the reverend.

As the hour approached, Garnet called for order. From 11:55 p.m. until midnight, he led a silent prayer.⁶³

In Washington, Rev. Turner, who had quipped about 240 years’ back wages due, stood in the crush outside the *Evening Star’s* offices, waiting for the edition with Lincoln’s news. Here, again, blacks and whites were at close quarters, and no one seemed to mind. As soon as he got his hands on a newspaper, or at least the portion with the Proclamation’s wording, Turner ran “for life and death” to his church, nearly a mile down Pennsylvania Avenue. His flock raised an “almost deafening” cheer. Men hoisted him to a platform to read the words—but Turner was out of breath. He handed the sheet to a friend to read aloud. As the words rang out, “Men squealed, women fainted, dogs barked, white and colored people shook hands, songs were sung.”⁶⁴

* * *

Other crowds waited and celebrated in black churches from New England to Nevada. At Port Royal, Charlotte Forten, freedmen, white soldiers, freed slaves who had become soldiers, and their white officers, including Thomas Wentworth Higginson of Massachusetts, assembled in a clearing under the live oaks. “It all seemed, and seems still, like a brilliant dream,” Forten wrote in her journal. She described “an eager, won-

⁶² *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself* (1892; repr. with introduction by Rayford W. Logan, London, 1962), 428–29; Mayer, *All on Fire*, 545–46; Quarles, *Lincoln and the Negro*, 141–44.

⁶³ *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, Jan. 10, 1863, in BAP, accession no. 03420; *New York Times*, Jan. 1, 1863; Biddle and Dubin, *Tasting Freedom*, 278.

⁶⁴ Edwin S. Redkey, ed., *Respect Black: The Writings and Speeches of Henry McNeal Turner* (New York, 1971), 3–4.

dering crowd of freed people in their holiday-attire, with the gayest of head-handkerchiefs, the whitest of aprons, and the happiest of faces." Troops paraded in red pantaloons, a "fine soldierly-looking set of men. . . . To us, it seemed strange as a miracle,—this black regiment . . . doing itself honor in the sight of the officers of the other regiments, many of whom, doubtless, 'came to scoff.'"⁶⁵

Colonel Higginson recorded in his diary:

prayer by our chaplain . . . proclamation read. . . . There followed an incident so simple, so touching, so utterly unexpected . . . just as I took & waved the flag, which now for the first time meant anything to these poor people, there suddenly arose . . . a strong but rather cracked and elderly male voice, into which two women's voices immediately blended, singing as if by an impulse . . . the hymn

"My Country 'tis of thee,
Sweet Land of Liberty."

People looked at each other & then at the stage to see whence came this interruption . . . irrepressibly the quavering voices sang on, verse after verse; others around them joined; some on the platform sung, but I motioned them to silence. I never saw anything so electric; it made all other words cheap, it seemed the choked voice of a race, at last unloosed . . . & when I came to speak of it, after it was silent, tears were everywhere.⁶⁶

* * *

Within days, a new tone rippled through the words of the Northern black intelligentsia.

In Philadelphia, a writer witnessed Robert Purvis's conversion from insurgent to patriot, remarking, "It sounded odd, and indicated changed times, to hear Mr. Purvis speak of America in connection with the subject of slavery, without his customary invective; and it brought moisture to many eyes to hear him—who for thirty years had stood a shining mark for the shafts of prejudice—say: 'Forgetting the past, I, too, am proud of the land of my nativity!'"⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Charlotte Forten, "Life on the Sea Islands," *Atlantic Monthly*, June 1864, 668–70; and entry for Jan. 1, 1863, in *Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké*, 428–30.

⁶⁶ Journal entry, Jan. 1, 1863, in *The Complete Civil War Journal and Selected Letters of Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, ed. Christopher Looby (Chicago, 1999), 75–77; also quoted in Biddle and Dubin, *Tasting Freedom*, 277–79.

⁶⁷ "The Proclamation in Philadelphia. Speeches of Robert Purvis and Alfred Green," *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, Jan. 24, 1863, in *BAP*, accession no. 03501. See also Robert Hamilton's editorial in the *Weekly Anglo-African*, Jan. 17, 1863, in *BAP*, vol. 5, doc. 35.

In Grove City, Ohio, the black Philadelphia poet Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was taking time away from meetings and lecture tours to raise her year-old daughter, Mary, when word of the celebrations reached her. Harper had married and moved to Ohio. As she told her friend William Still in a letter, friends in nearby Columbus implored her to come and speak. She was ailing. No matter—the memoirs and itineraries of Harper and other black abolitionists make clear that no malady short of death itself was going to silence their voices. She accepted the invitation and made her way to Columbus.

Her speech began in a solemn, biblical cadence. “Yes, we may thank God that in the hour when the nation’s life was convulsed, and fearful gloom had shed its shadows over the land, the President reached out his hand through the darkness to break the chains on which the rust of centuries had gathered.”

Then the poet let her hair down. “Well,” she said to the audience. “Did you ever expect to see this day?”⁶⁸

* * *

Of course, many enslaved people were denied word of Lincoln’s act, the “grapevine telegraph” notwithstanding. In old age, one man said he learned of the Proclamation when Sherman’s army liberated him more than a year later. On June 19, 1865—Juneteenth—when Union officials read the Proclamation to black Americans in Texas, the news came as a surprise.⁶⁹

But in the North, black men promptly began enlisting, and with great encouragement. The only change to rival former slaves’ conversion into soldiers was the wave of black radicals who, like Purvis, became army recruiters—men who had ranked among Uncle Sam’s fiercest critics.

Meanwhile, the Île-à-Vache deal that Lincoln had signed ended in disease and disgrace. As for Chiriqui’s coal, US scientists deemed it unreliable after all.⁷⁰ By 1864, Lincoln had “sloughed off that idea of colonization,” as his young aide John Hay wrote with relief.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Frances Ellen Watkins Harper to William Still, n.d., quoted in Still, *Underground Rail Road*, 765–66.

⁶⁹ Kenneth Chelst, *Exodus and Emancipation: Biblical and African-American Slavery* (New York, 2009), 262.

⁷⁰ Foner, *Fiery Trial*, 233.

⁷¹ Tyler Dennett, ed., *Lincoln and the Civil War in the Diaries and Letters of John Hay* (New York, 1988), 203; Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America* (New York, 2004), 160.

Black leaders came to admire the president they had doubted and derided. The president who once denied ever having met with African Americans invited Douglass into the White House as his friend and commissioned Delany an army officer. Later, a grieving Mary Todd Lincoln made gifts of her late husband's walking sticks to Douglass and Garnet.⁷²

Jacob White Jr.'s Cincinnati friend William Parham did not go to Jamaica after all; he rose to become superintendent, after the war, of his city's colored schools.⁷³ White became the first black principal of a Philadelphia public high school.⁷⁴ His friend Octavius Catto would die bullet-riddled—not by the hands of Confederates but by the organized wrath of northern white Democrats seeking to snuff black voting power in its cradle. He was gunned down in daylight, as his ally Isaiah Wears put it, by “the Ku Klux of the North.”⁷⁵

But on that New Years' night in 1863, no one doubted that the hinge of history, however ponderous and halting, had at last begun to move. As Rev. Gibbs told his flock, African Americans free and enslaved could see a new day dawning. And if they could not yet see where the long arc of Parker's moral universe might end, on Watch Night they could at least begin to calculate the curve.

Philadelphia, PA

DANIEL R. BIDDLE and MURRAY DUBIN

⁷² David W. Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory, and the American Civil War* (Amherst, MA, 2002), 79.

⁷³ Darrel E. Bigham, *On Jordan's Banks: Emancipation and Its Aftermath in the Ohio River Valley* (Lexington, KY, 2006), 286, 288.

⁷⁴ See Harry C. Silcox, “Philadelphia Negro Educator: Jacob C. White Jr., 1837–1902,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 97 (1973): 75–98.

⁷⁵ Isaiah Wears eulogy quoted in *Christian Recorder*, Nov. 18, 1871, in Foner and Branham, *Lift Every Voice*, 512–14; Biddle and Dubin, *Tasting Freedom*, 439.