

Historic Lincoln document that changed America coming to Syracuse

Published: Wednesday, September 26, 2012, 6:01 AM Updated: Wednesday, September 26, 2012, 9:33 AM



By **Rick Moriarty, The Post-Standard**



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NARA C&GS Collection

Central New York artist Francis Bicknell Carpenter, of Homer, in 1864 painted this famous scene, "The First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation before the Cabinet." The painting hangs in the U.S. Capitol.

With blood flowing horrifically on the nation's battlefields in the summer of 1862, President Abraham Lincoln searched for a way to seize the moral high ground and weaken the Confederacy at the same time.

It wasn't going to be easy. Since taking office the previous year, Lincoln said his only goal was to save the Union, not to free the slaves, even though he had opposed slavery his entire career. He often noted that he had no legal authority under the Constitution to end slavery.

But with casualties piling [up and](#) no end to the Civil War in sight, Lincoln devised a strategy to both

free the slaves and strengthen the military's hand as it struggled to put down the rebellion — and do it in a way that could survive a challenge in court.

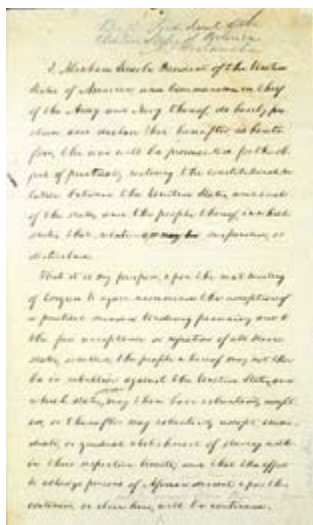
Lincoln, a [lawyer](#) before he was elected president, decided to issue a military order freeing the slaves in the states that had seceded from the Union, but not in the four border states that had not joined the Confederacy.

As commander in chief, he reasoned, he had the authority to issue such an order in states at war with the Union. In effect, he would authorize the Army to take manpower — the labor of slaves — away from the Confederacy, just as it would seize weapons and other tools of war.

His order became known as the Emancipation Proclamation, one of the most important documents in the nation's history, and led to the greatest freeing of people in history until the liberation of Nazi-occupied Europe in World War II.

"This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice," the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. would tell thousands during his "**I Have a Dream**" speech 100 years later on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. "It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity."

But few people know that Lincoln, ever the political genius, issued his order in two parts. The first was a sort of threat to the South, as well as a way to appease Northern conservatives who, while supporting a war to preserve the Union, had no [interest](#) in fighting one to end slavery.



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New York State
Library

The only surviving copy of the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, handwritten in 1862 by President Abraham Lincoln, will be exhibited Thursday Sept. 27, 2012 at the Nicholas J. Pirro Convention Center in Syracuse.

Issued Sept. 22, the handwritten, four-page document known as the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation telegraphed his intention to free the slaves in 100 days unless the South surrendered and rejoined the Union.

Lincoln no doubt knew the South would likely ignore his threat. But he was clearing a political path in the North, giving opponents time to get used to the idea of freeing the slaves and showing conservatives that he had given the South every chance he could.

True to his word, Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on Jan. 1, 1863. The document he signed that day does not survive today. It was lost in the Chicago Fire of 1871.

But the lesser known Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation survived its own brush with fire at the New York State Capitol in 1911. And on Thursday, Central New Yorkers will have a rare chance to view it up close.

The document will be publicly displayed in the Ballroom in the basement of the Nicholas J. Pirro Convention Center in Syracuse from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. tomorrow. The exhibition, which is free of charge, also will include the original, hand-written manuscript of a speech Martin Luther King Jr. delivered in 1962 on the Emancipation Proclamation's 100th anniversary.

The New York State Museum arranged the eight-city **traveling exhibit** to mark the sesquicentennial of the only surviving copy of the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in Lincoln's own handwriting.

Historians say Lincoln was displaying his political genius by issuing the preliminary proclamation rather than simply issuing a single order and being done with it.

Paul Finkelman, a professor of law and public policy at Albany Law School and currently a visiting professor of American legal history at Duke University School of Law, said Lincoln knew his action would be viewed as radical in areas of the North, where racism still ran deep.

So Lincoln decided to issue his proclamation in two stages. The first one, announcing his intention to free the slaves, would be issued following a major battlefield victory so it would carry more weight. (That victory came Sept. 17, 1862 at the **Battle of Antietam** in Maryland, the bloodiest one-day battle in American history.)

"He's essentially saying he's giving these crazy Confederates another 100 days to rejoin the Union," said Finkelman. "He's showing that he's done everything he could to bring the South back, but the South isn't listening."



Douglas Egerton, a professor of 19th century American history at Le Moyne College, said Lincoln was “paving the way politically” by issuing the preliminary proclamation.

“He knew the South would not surrender, but he wanted to make it appear he was giving them a chance,” he said.

For many in the nation, including Lincoln, the war was always about slavery. So in a way, the issuance of the preliminary proclamation was Lincoln’s way of telling the country to “practice what it preached,” Egerton said.

“He was making it a fight for freedom,” he said.

Cynics have noted that the proclamation, by itself, did not free the vast majority of the 4 million slaves in the South. Practically speaking, it merely made freedom official for the estimated 80,000 to 200,000 slaves who had escaped to the protection of U.S. Army lines.

But Egerton said Lincoln’s bold move ensured that millions more would win their freedom forever as Union forces marched through the South to eventual victory in April 1865.

“It really changed the war,” he said.

The preliminary proclamation has Central New York connections. It contains a few handwritten edits by William Seward, an Auburn native who served as Lincoln’s secretary of state. A well-known painting of Lincoln showing the document to his cabinet for the first time (with Seward’s hand about to reach for a pen to make his edits) was done by Francis Bicknell Carpenter of Homer.

Gregg Tripoli, executive director of the Onondaga Historical Association, which helped arrange the Syracuse exhibit, said the document survives today partly because of another Central New Yorker.

Lincoln donated the document to a private relief agency, the U.S. Sanitary Commission. The commission raffled it at the Albany Army Relief Association Fair in 1864. Gerrit Smith, a wealthy abolitionist from Peterboro in Madison County, won the raffle.

“He bought 1,000 tickets at \$1 each and won it,” said Tripoli.

Smith sold the document to the New York State Legislature and donated the proceeds to the Sanitary Commission. The Legislature deposited the document in the New York State Library, which retains possession of it.



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National Portrait Gallery

President Abraham Lincoln meets with Gen. George McClellan and his staff on the Antietam battlefield near Sharpsburg, Md., in October 1862. Lincoln issued the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation five days after the Union Army’s victory at Antietam on Sept. 17.

Contact Rick Moriarty at rmoriarty@syracuse.com or (315) 470-3148. Follow him on Twitter at **RickMoriartyCNY** and on Facebook at **rick.moriarty.92**.

If you're going ...

What: The original copy of President Abraham Lincoln's Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, written in Lincoln's own hand, will be displayed for one day in Syracuse.

When: 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Thursday

Where: Nicholas J. Pirro Convention Center, 800 S. State St.

Cost: Free

Also: See the original hand-written manuscript of the speech given by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. on the 100th anniversary of the proclamation.

Sponsors: Wegmans, The Pyramid Cos. and the Allyn Foundation

More information: www.nysm.nysed.gov/ep/ (includes lesson help for teachers)

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