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Emancipation: Triumph, sorrow and the bridge of memory

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By **Sean Kirst, The Post-Standard**



Mike Greenlar/The Post-Standard

Looking Thursday at Abraham Lincoln's preliminary draft of the Emancipation Proclamation - the last surviving version of the document that freed American slaves - are, left to right, Vanessa Glenn and her niece, Natalie Glenn, with her son Marques Spencer II. They were part of thousands of visitors who waited patiently in a line that rarely dwindled as the day went on.

Many in the crowd that waited for as long as three hours Thursday in downtown Syracuse to view Abraham Lincoln's **preliminary draft of the Emancipation Proclamation** spoke of the old document as a symbol of national progress, a stained yet triumphant reminder of an era when Americans finally put the brutality of slavery behind them.

Patricia Stith, 65, a Jamesville woman whose great-grandmother was born into slavery, was so overwhelmed with emotion that she paused and closed her eyes. She praised Lincoln for his courage and political savvy, and said the proclamation marked a colossal moment in history: It was the first time any American president acknowledged the full humanity of her ancestors.

Mary Jackson, like Stith, was among the few in the Nicholas J. Pirro Convention Center who'd actually met a freed slave. For Jackson, the proclamation summoned an entirely different mood:

One of sadness.

"I've seen the changes, and the opportunities, but so many of our young people are out there on the corners, trying to make the [fast money](#) and getting themselves killed," said Jackson, who turned 99 in August. "The killing is everywhere. Get an education, that's what I want our young people to take from this."

Jackson, who weighs only 86 pounds, offers almost a century of perspective. She is a walking legend at the Dunbar Center in Syracuse, where she shows up at least several times a week. She moved here in 1949, after promising a surgeon in her home state of Florida that she could pay him in full for a [kidney](#) operation if he'd give her a couple of months to earn some money in the North.

During her Florida childhood, she witnessed the limits of Lincoln's proclamation, issued almost 150 years ago. The Civil War, and the end of slavery, hardly put an end to an American system of de facto apartheid.

Jackson was raised in Florida, where the state embraced the fierce code of legal segregation known as Jim Crow.

"It was all 'white here, colored here,'" she said. "If you (as a black person) went into a store, you couldn't touch the clothes. If you did, you had to buy them."

Jackson was close to her elderly grandmother, whose long life almost certainly made her a freed slave — although Jackson never heard the older woman speak of it.

The same was true for the great-grandfather of Marion Ervin, 65, a Jamesville man raised on a South Carolina farm.

"They didn't talk about those things," Ervin said of older relatives he recalls from his childhood. "People were too busy every day, just living, just [working](#) hard."

In those days, to black Americans, the freedoms offered by full emancipation remained a promise unfulfilled.

Jackson and Lena Moss, 73, a Georgia native who's also in a Dunbar seniors group, said they were never taught in grade school about Lincoln or what he did to free the slaves — maybe because of local fear about stirring up a longing for equality. It was only in Syracuse, where the two women settled while searching for better [jobs](#), that they began to see real change during the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

Like Jackson, Moss said the proclamation reminds her of all the blood, sweat and toil along the road to legal freedom. She said too many youths are emotionally [divorced](#) from the hardships of their own ancestral past, a lost identity that contributes to violence and addiction on the streets.

"It means a lot to me to see it," Moss said of Lincoln's document. "I just hope these young people appreciate their opportunities."

The traveling, one-day display, presented by the New York State Museum, was hosted by the

Onondaga Historical Association. At 9 a.m.,

the doors opened to a welcome by U.S. Rep. Ann

Marie Buerkle, Mayor Stephanie Miner, OHA executive director Gregg Tripoli and other officials.

Emancipation Proclamation Draft Comes to CNY

Post-Standard columnist Sean Kirst reports from the Pirro Convention Center at Oncenter, where thousands of people gathered throughout the day to view a display of a preliminary draft of the emancipation proclamation.

While they had no idea of how the proclamation would be received, attendance quickly surpassed their best hopes. The exhibit was supposed to close at 9 p.m., but the OHA kept the doors open to make sure everyone saw the display. At 11:35 p.m., about 20 people were still waiting for a chance to view the document. Throughout the day, those in line routinely waited for hours to study words put down in careful script by Lincoln — with the occasional editorial insertion by Lincoln's secretary of state, William Seward, who spent much of his life in Auburn.

"It makes me very proud to be a part of this community," said Tripoli, putting total attendance beyond 3,500.

Nancy Clausen, a retired biology teacher who stood patiently in line, said the wait was worthwhile "because this is an important part of history (and) because it's something that all citizens should know about."

As for Jackson and other African-American elders, they were pleased to see dozens upon dozens of teens, brought to the exhibit by social studies teachers from throughout the region. The young people often lingered over the display, which included an original speech about the proclamation by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Ny-Jalah Rice and Tiffany Correa, juniors from the Institute of Technology at Syracuse Central, said the documents lent a sense of reality to hard truths they'd learned in history class.

"It used to be they'd only consider me 3/5 of a human being," said Rice, recalling the percentage used by the writers of the Constitution in judging how each slave would be counted - as compared to whites - in assessing representation, based on population.

One of Rice's classmates, Nashiem Allen, was intrigued by the number of corrections Lincoln had to make by pen; long before computers, long before typewriters, the president had no button to push to "cut and paste."

The exhibit also attracted a contingent from Enable, an agency that serves Central New Yorkers who live with disabilities. Jim Moffett, an Enable community service specialist, reflected on how Lincoln's fundamental step toward civil rights rippled out to eventually help other American constituencies that had been mistreated — including the disabled.

"Sure, the same thing, just a different time," Moffett said. "Not all that long ago, if these guys (with disabilities) had come here, a place like this might have been inaccessible to them. They did the same thing (as African-Americans). They stood up for themselves, and they brought about change."

Among the students who used phones to snap photos of the proclamation were Josh Thomas, 18, of Central Tech and Paul Williams, 17, a senior from Henninger.

"Pretty crazy," Williams said. "Until this, they made (slaves) do the work they didn't want to do themselves, and (slaveowners) kept the money."

Joe Grefer, one of Williams' social studies teachers at Henninger, said the fundamental truths of slavery remain a painful topic in city classrooms often filled with descendants of those once held in chains.

"We talk about the injustice, and they see the progress, and how we as human beings can make things better over time," Grefer said. "But are things perfect? No. They're never perfect."

The most joyous aspect of Thursday's event was simply this: Even Lincoln, who understood the magnitude of his proclamation, could never have envisioned such a diverse scene. Men, women and children from a vast array of backgrounds stood in line, shoulder-to-shoulder, waiting for a chance to view the great statement of emancipation.

Patricia Kornegay, 49, an African-American mother, said she didn't want her sons — Joseph, 13 and Simeon, 8 — to miss such a rare chance to view the proclamation. Most important, Kornegay said, she wants them to learn this truth: While physical slavery is an evil of the American past, she sees a great challenge for today's young people in resisting "all of the inner and outer pressures that seek to again enslave us spiritually."

To find that strength, she wants her children to have full knowledge of what their ancestors endured. Patricia dreams her boys will embrace careers involving "compassion and courage," a message Joseph clearly takes to heart. He said his first reaction, upon seeing the proclamation, had nothing to do with Lincoln or the Civil War.

"I think about all the people who died as slaves before he ever signed it," said Joseph, a sense of homage that his elders say will truly set him free.

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