

The Bugle



Quarterly Journal of the
Camp Curtin Historical Society
and Civil War Round Table, Inc.

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The Inevitable Steps Toward Emancipation

"The field upon which we now stand will be known as classic ground, for here has been the great central point of the organization of our military forces. When my administration of public affairs will have been forgotten and the good and evil will be only known to the investigation of the antiquarian, Camp Curtin, with its memories and associations, will be immortal."

- Governor Andrew Curtin, 1865

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New Lincoln Exhibit at GNMP Museum



The Gettysburg National Military Park's Museum is currently hosting a traveling exhibit *Lincoln: The Constitution and the Civil War*. The exhibit was created by the National Constitution Center and the American Library Association and funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. It examines how Lincoln used the Constitution to confront three intertwined crises of the Civil War - the secession of Southern states, slavery, and wartime civil liberties. Relevant to our current feature article on emancipation, the section about slavery examines the various policy options Lincoln once embraced and how his thoughts about slavery evolved over time. The exhibit, which will remain on display at the GNMP Museum through July, is composed of informative panels featuring photographs and reproductions of original documents, including a draft of Lincoln's first inaugural speech, the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment.

Correction: In the last issue of *The Bugle*, several sharp-eyed readers caught an error. George McClellan's middle name is Brinton not Britton, as we printed. Our online version was corrected.

Cover: Engraving of a painting by Francis Carpenter depicting Lincoln discussing the Emancipation Proclamation with his cabinet. Left to right, seated, Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, President Abraham Lincoln, Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, Secretary of State William Seward, Attorney General Edward Bates; left to right standing, Secretary of the Treasury Salmon Chase, Secretary of the Interior Caleb Smith, Postmaster General Montgomery Blair.

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The Inevitable Steps Toward Emancipation

The United States had been dealing with the issue of slavery since its founding. Various compromises addressing the “peculiar institution” had initially kept the issue from boiling over and a delicate balance was maintained between the North and South. As the nation approached the midpoint of the 19th century, the slavery issue began to dominate politics and would soon reach the breaking point. (See *The Bugle*, Vol. 20, No. 1, Spring 2010, available on our website.)

When the Civil War began, some in the North called for immediate emancipation but President Abraham Lincoln resisted, claiming his sole purpose in fighting the war was to preserve the Union. He realized that emancipation of slaves could have driven the border states into the Confederacy.

The military faced the issue of escaped slaves as soon as the war began. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 required that escaped slaves be returned to their owners. When three slaves who had been working on nearby Confederate forts asked for asylum at Fort Monroe, Gen. Benjamin Butler, an attorney by profession, declared they were “contrabands of war” (property used by the enemy to further its war effort) subject to confiscation and refused to return them. Butler also reasoned that since Virginia had left the Union, it was no longer covered by the Fugitive Slave Act and escaped slaves did not have to be returned.



Butler



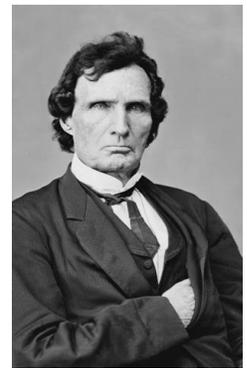
Fremont

Lincoln disagreed with the view that Virginia was out of the Union and an independent foreign country. Congress solved the problem for the military by passing the Confiscation Act that allowed the military confiscate slaves that had been used by the

Confederate military and pay them to work for the Union military.

John C. Fremont, the famous “Pathfinder of the West” and first Republican candidate for president, was appointed commander of the U.S. Army’s Western Department. In August 1861, he issued an order freeing slaves in Missouri because their labor was supporting the Confederate war effort. This went well beyond the Confiscation Act. Although this stand was logical and eventually accepted by Lincoln, the President could not at the time risk losing this border state. He rescinded the order and relieved Fremont of command.

In January 1862, Thaddeus Stevens (right), Pennsylvania’s fiery Congressman from Lancaster and long-time dedicated abolitionist, called for total war against the rebellion and the emancipation of slaves. He argued that emancipation, with its expected loss of slave labor, would ruin the Southern economy and cripple its war effort. Stevens said:



So long as these [Southern] states are left the means of cultivating their fields through forced labor, you may expend the blood of thousands and billions of money year by year, without being any nearer the end . . . Slavery gives the South a great advantage in time of war. They need not, and do not, withdraw a single hand from the cultivation of the soil. Every able-bodied white man can be spared for the army. The black man, without lifting a weapon, is the mainstay of the war.”

Stevens would be in the forefront of the push for emancipation and eventually gained passage of the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery in 1865.

Emancipation moved slowly forward. In March 1862, Congress amended the Articles of War by prohibiting the Union Army from returning fugitive slaves to their owners. Thus, Butler’s “contraband” policy was extended to all slaves, whether working for the Confederate military or not. In April 1862, Congress abolished slavery in the District of Columbia (which

was under its jurisdiction) and compensated their owners with \$300 for each slave. About 3,000 slaves were freed and one million dollars expended. Ironically, Lincoln had proposed a similar law while a congressman in 1849 but it did not pass.

During the summer of 1862, Lincoln urged congressmen from loyal border states to press their state legislatures to adopt similar laws for compensated abolition but none of the states that still had slavery passed such laws. Lincoln even proposed the idea of the federal government providing the money for the slave buy-out but even this was rejected.

In early 1862, the Union cause seemed unstoppable. Its victorious forces had captured New Orleans, won at Shiloh and were within a few miles of Richmond. Then everything fell apart. Within a few weeks the situation was reversed. Confederate armies were on the offensive and pushing Union troops out of the South. By the end of August, the Union appeared to be losing the war.

Thus, it can be seen that Lincoln did not suddenly come to the decision that the slaves must be emancipated. Both the President and Congress had clearly been moving in that direction for months. Lincoln even told Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles that for weeks the issue had “occupied his mind and thoughts day and night.”

The public Lincoln, however, remained committed to saving the Union and in August 1862 wrote his often-quoted letter to Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*:

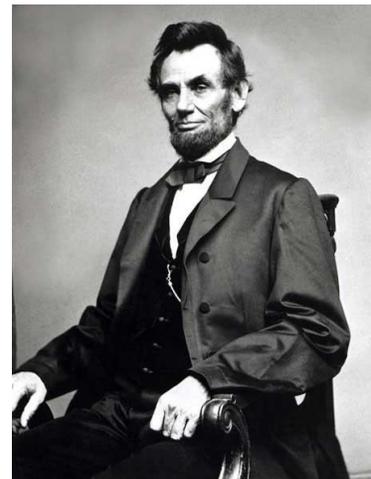
My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it would help to save the Union. . . . I have here stated my purpose according to my view of official duty; and I intend no modification of my oft-expressed personal wish that all men everywhere could be free.

By the time he wrote those words, Lincoln had already drafted the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. The Greeley letter was an astute political move that

would couch emancipation in terms of winning the war and saving the Union rather freeing the slaves. It was a move designed to counter anti-abolitionist sentiment in the North. Who could oppose emancipation if it helped save the Union?

Lincoln had been discussing emancipation with his cabinet over the summer and the general consensus was that it had to wait for a Union victory or the move would seem desperate. The victory came at Antietam as the Union Army defeated the Confederates on (what they saw and claimed as) Northern soil on September 17, 1862.

On September 22, 1862, Lincoln issued a preliminary emancipation proclamation, stating he would free all slaves in any Southern state in rebellion that did not return to the Union by January 1, 1863. The order would not affect slaves in loyal states or those parts of



Southern states under Union Army control. The order would apply to approximately 3 million of the 4 million slaves in the country. Further, the Union would accept African Americans for military service, reversing the earlier decision that banned Blacks from fighting in the war.

Lincoln issued the order under his constitutional authority as commander in chief of the armed forces in suppressing a rebellion. His action was never challenged in court by any of its opponents. Although it technically (some said cynically) freed no slaves because those to be freed were not under Union jurisdiction, it did ultimately free slaves as victorious Union armies moved into the South.

The reaction to the proclamation in the Union Army varied widely, with some units nearly ready to mutiny in protest and some desertions were attributed to it. Other units were inspired and took to heart Julia Ward Howe’s words from the Battle Hymn of the Republic, “As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free, While God is marching on.” A bloody, ugly, depressing war took on the noble spirit of a holy crusade to finally fulfill the promise of the Declaration of Independence.

Reaction on the Northern homefront was even more varied and vociferous. Copperhead Democrats saw it as proof that Black Republicans were taking the first step to Negro equality and voting rights, still an unpopular idea in much of the North. Coupled with Lincoln's suspension of the writ of *habeas corpus*, it confirmed his status as a tyrant. For Democrats who supported the war and most Republicans, it was a logical wartime action to injure an enemy. Radical abolitionists supported the action but thought it did not go far enough and wanted immediate emancipation throughout the nation.

In terms of foreign relations, emancipation was a master stroke of diplomacy. By making the end of slavery one of the war's aims, Lincoln literally precluded the European powers from officially recognizing the Confederacy and giving it economic and military aid.

In the South, the preliminary proclamation was seen as proof that emancipation was Lincoln's plan all along

and that secession was justified. Even with the recent loss at Antietam, it was deemed the last desperate act of a losing nation that would look even more desperate with the coming months with Southern victories at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville.

When no Southern states returned to the Union by the end of the year, Lincoln signed the official Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, declaring:

I do order and declare that all persons held as slaves within said designated States, and parts of States, are, and henceforward shall be free; and that the Executive government of the United States, including the military and naval authorities thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of said persons.

And upon this act, sincerely believed to be an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution, upon military necessity, I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind, and the gracious favor of Almighty God.



Harper's Weekly, January 24, 1863, pictured of slavery on the left and of freedom on the right.

September 17, 1862

Bloodiest Day for Civilians

September 17, 1862, was a bad day. The Army of the Potomac and the Army of Northern Virginia fought the Battle of Antietam and it was the bloodiest single day battle in American history, with about 23,000 casualties on both sides.

Almost unnoticed at the time and little known today, September 17, 1862, was also the bloodiest day during the Civil War for civilians. Seventy women and girls and eight men and boys died in a disastrous explosion at the Allegheny Arsenal.

The terrible news from Pittsburgh was over-shadowed by the numbers of dead, wounded, missing and captured at Antietam. Even in the *Pittsburgh Gazette* of September 18, the story of the explosion was on page three.



The Allegheny Arsenal was established in 1814 in Lawrenceville on the east bank of the Allegheny River. Today it is part of the City of Pittsburgh. Benjamin Latrobe laid out the arsenal grounds and

designed some of the first buildings. It was ideally situated to supply the needs of the army on the expanding frontier by shipping on the Ohio, Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. When the Civil War began, it was one of two dozen arsenals, armories, and ordnance depots scattered around the country.

The U.S. Army Ordnance Department was charged with supplying cannons, artillery equipment, small arms, ammunition, accoutrements, and horse tack. The Allegheny Arsenal's major output included artillery carriages (but not the barrels), leather accoutrements soldiers and horse tack, and small arms and artillery ammunition.

Before the war, the arsenal employed about 100 civilian workers. By 1862, over 1,000 men, women, boys and girls, some as young as 12 years of age, were engaged in the manufacturing operations. Most of the workers were Irish immigrants.



Women, girls and boys were employed in arsenals because they were thought to be easier to control and their smaller figures were better suited for performing the tasks relating to assembling cartridges (depicted above in a Harper's Weekly report of the Watertown Arsenal in New York). The work was steady, relatively easy, helped the war effort and the pay was reasonable, ranging from fifty cents to one dollar per day. It was also dangerous because of the gunpowder but 19th century industry was not very safety conscious. Although there were safety regulations, apparently they were not always followed by the workers and supervisors.

The commander of the post was Colonel John Symington. An 1815 graduate of West Point from Delaware, he had over forty-five years service in the U.S. Ordnance Department. In the waning days of the Buchanan administration, when Secretary of War John Floyd was ordering that supplies be sent to Southern arsenals, Symington tried to obey orders but was blocked by angry Pittsburgh mobs that delayed the shipments until Northern political pressure had the orders countermanded. His family relationships also caused many to question his loyalty. He was married to the sister of Confederate General Joseph Johnston, his son joined the Confederate Army, and his daughter was married to a Confederate officer.

On Wednesday September 17, 1862, no one at the arsenal had any knowledge of the Battle of Antietam. They knew that the Confederates were in Maryland and might be headed for Pennsylvania, perhaps even Pittsburgh. Work went on as normal. In the afternoon, a regular delivery of several barrels of gunpowder was made from the storage magazine to the main "laboratory" where the workers were making rifle musket cartridges and artillery ammunition.

Suddenly, a massive explosion ripped through the building. It was followed by another smaller explosion and then a third larger blast. The explosions could be heard two miles away in downtown Pittsburgh. Workers at the arsenal, local fire companies and nearby residents rushed to the aid of the victims trapped in the collapsed and burning building. Newspaper reports described the devastation in shocking detail. Strewn around for one hundred yards from the flattened building were bodies, body parts, charred wood, broken equipment, debris, and perhaps most touchingly, fragments of dinner baskets and steel springs from the women's burned hoop skirts.

Bodies were quickly collected and laid out as family members began searching for loved ones. Many were so badly disfigured that they could not be identified. Some of the injured were treated at the scene by volunteer doctors who came to help while others were taken to private homes in the neighborhood. Ultimately, the death toll was set at seventy-eight.

The day after the explosion, committees were established to provide for the burial of the victims. The federal government provided coffins and the Allegheny Cemetery donated a plot for the unidentified. A mass procession and funeral service was held for the unidentified and in 1863 a monument was erected over the mass grave.

Almost immediately, suspicion turned to Confederate saboteurs and even Symington because of his Southern "connections" but just as quickly both suppositions died down.

Allegheny County convened a coroner's jury and testimony pointed to the delivery of gunpowder as the triggering cause of the explosion. Various witnesses testified that a spark from either the iron rimmed wheel of the wagon or the horse's shoe struck a spark on the stone roadway that ignited loose gunpowder in the road and on the porch of the building. Apparently, it was common practice to sweep up spilled gunpowder in the building at the end of the day. Clean gunpowder was returned to a barrel but dirty gunpowder was swept out into the street. By arsenal rules, gunpowder in the street was to be collected and dumped in a pond but this procedure was not always followed. The coroner's jury concluded Symington and his subordinates were negligent in not enforcing the safety precautions but no legal action was taken against him or any of the other supervisors.

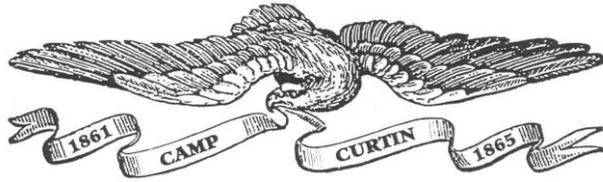
Stung by the conclusions of the coroner's jury, Symington requested a military board of inquiry. Much of the same evidence was presented to the military court but modern historians have noted that there are discrepancies in the testimony of several witnesses. One theory put forth was that the gunpowder barrels were leaking and it was this gunpowder not the alleged gunpowder in the road that caused the explosion. The gunpowder in the barrels came from the Dupont Company, the major supplier of gunpowder to the Union Army. Rather than use new well-fitting barrels for its gunpowder, Dupont used "recycled" barrels that were sent back to its factory by the arsenals. It is possible that these loose fitting barrels leaked the powder that was ignited by the spark that ultimately caused the explosion. The board of inquiry made no determination as to the exact cause but did find that Symington and his staff were not negligent in their duties. Nevertheless, Symington was a broken man. He went on sick leave and died April 4, 1864.

Today, the arsenal site is a public park and a baseball field occupies the area of the explosion. The only remaining arsenal building is part of the gunpowder magazine, now used for storage and a restroom.

In 1928, the Sons of Union Veterans and the Ladies Auxiliary dedicated a replacement monument at the mass grave of the unidentified victims. It contains the names of all of the victims and presents an eloquent epitaph to one of the unknown stories of the Civil War:

Tread softly, this is consecrated dust, forty-five pure patriotic victims lie here. A sacrifice to freedom and civil liberty, a horrid memento of a most wicked rebellion. Patriots! These are patriots' graves, friends of humble, honest toil, these were your peers. Fervent affection kindled these hearts, honest industry employed these hands, widows' and orphans' tears have watered the ground. Female beauty and manhood's vigor commingle here. Identified by man, known by Him who is the resurrection and the life, to be made known and loved again when the morning cometh.





Camp Curtin Historical Society
presents

Stephen A. Zeigler
speaking on his new book

Answering Lincoln's Call
The Civil War Experiences of John D. Hemminger

2:00PM, Sunday, November 11, 2012
at the National Civil War Museum in Harrisburg



130th PV Monument at Antietam

This true story of John D. Hemminger's Civil War experiences takes the reader from rural life in Cumberland County, through training at Camp Curtin, and then abruptly onto the bloody battlefields of the Civil War. As a member of the 130th Pennsylvania Volunteers, Hemminger sees action at Antietam, Fredericksburg, and Chancellorsville. Later, as a member of the 1st Battalion, Pennsylvania Six Month Volunteers, he is selected to be an honor guard near President Lincoln when the famous emancipator delivers his immortal address.

Stephen Zeigler taught in a fifth grade classroom at Bellaire Elementary School in the Carlisle Area School District for twenty-seven years. He then worked for Thrivent Financial for Lutherans recruiting and training chapter volunteers in fifty counties in Pennsylvania. Most recently, he taught part time at the McCann School of Business and Technology. He is a member of the Cumberland County Search and Rescue Team, Newville Historical Society, and Cumberland County Historical Society.

This presentation is free. Bring a friend.

Half price admission tickets to the museum galleries will be available.

For information call 717-732-5115 or email genjenkins@aol.com.