

First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation by President Lincoln

(July 22, 1862)

Members of Abraham Lincoln’s cabinet gathered at the White House on July 22, 1862, to hear the president read his draft of the Emancipation Proclamation. Written by Lincoln alone, without consultation from his cabinet, the proclamation declared that all persons held as slaves in states that were still in rebellion on January 1, 1863, “shall be then, thenceforward, and forever, free.”

Initially, Lincoln was concerned only with preserving the Union, but he had become increasingly sympathetic to the call for abolition as the Civil War progressed. Determined to move forward with his cause, the president met with his cabinet on September 22 to refine his July draft and announce what is now known as the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. In this document, he issued an ultimatum to the seceded states: Return to the Union by New Year’s Day or freedom will be extended to all slaves within your borders. When the secessionist states ignored this warning, Lincoln issued the final proclamation on January 1, 1863.

Although it is considered one of the most important documents in American history, the Emancipation Proclamation did not immediately end slavery in this country—that was only achieved with passage of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution on December 18, 1865. The proclamation applied only to slaves living in those states that had seceded; it did not affect those states still in the Union. Most importantly, Lincoln’s ability to make good on the Emancipation Proclamation was dependent on a Union victory. But the proclamation fundamentally transformed the character of the war and set a national course toward the final abolition of slavery in the United States.

New York artist Francis Bicknell Carpenter believed that the Emancipation Proclamation was “an act unparalleled for moral grandeur in the history of mankind.”¹ Carpenter had a deep respect for Lincoln’s action, and it was he who had the impulse to capture it on canvas, to exalt the moment of the first reading of the proclamation. About a year after the preliminary proclamation, Carpenter acted on this impulse. He asked Illinois Representative Owen Lovejoy to arrange for him to paint the subject at the White House—in fact, to set up a studio there (eventually, in the State Dining Room). On February 6, 1864, Carpenter met Lincoln, and the project began. His extraordinary extended residence in the White House resulted in the Senate’s painting and in the informative, sometimes moving, 1866 memoir, *Six Months at the White House with Abraham Lincoln*.

Lincoln, concerned above all with the preservation of the Union, drafted the proclamation in part as a political, in part as a military, stratagem. Because it had the potential to recruit former slaves for the Union army while weakening the Confederacy, the proposed proclamation had the immediate support of Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase and Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton. Although faced with resistance from Attorney General Edward Bates, who was unsympathetic to full equality for African Americans, and Postmaster General Montgomery Blair, who was certain that it would lead to defeat in the fall elections, Lincoln had, according to Carpenter, “resolved upon this step, and had not called them together to ask their advice, but to lay the subject-matter of a proclamation before them.” The draft was read and “various suggestions were offered.” Secretary of State William H. Seward thought the proclamation should be delayed until “you give it to the country supported by military success.”² Lincoln, persuaded by Seward’s opinion, put the document aside temporarily.

In September, however, after the Battle of Antietam, Lincoln decided to wait no longer. He finished the second draft of the proclamation and convened the cabinet on September 22. Carpenter’s recital of Lincoln’s account continues: “I determined, as soon as it [the rebel army] should be driven out of Maryland, to issue a Proclamation of Emancipation. . . . I made the promise to myself, and (hesitating a little)—to my Maker. . . . I do not wish your advice about the main matter. . . [for] I already know the views of each on this question. . . . I am here. I must do the best I

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Francis Bicknell Carpenter (1830–1900)

Oil on canvas, 1864

108 x 180 inches (274.3 x 457.2 cm)

Unsigned

Gift of Elizabeth Thompson, 1878

Accepted by joint resolution dated February 1, 1878

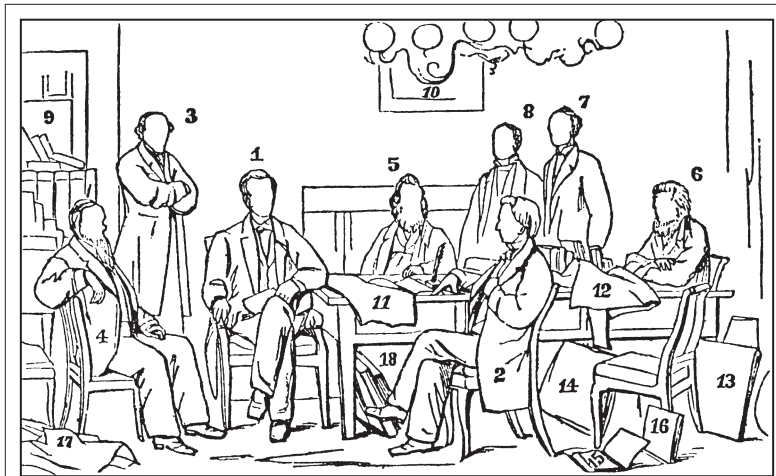
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can, and bear the responsibility of taking the course which I feel I ought to take.”³ The proclamation was published that same day and it took effect on January 1, 1863, affirming the emancipation of slaves in all states still in rebellion.

Thus, the painting deals in its subject matter with a significant historical crisis, though the mood is static and calm. Modern-day viewers may need to be reminded that Carpenter’s work treats one of the core issues in preserving the Union: freedom. To memorably convey the magnitude of this historic decision was beyond the ability of Carpenter, whose ambition was not matched by his artistic talent or training. The quality of the painting does not do justice to the significance of the subject, but not for lack of commitment or energy on Carpenter’s part. With the president’s full cooperation in his endeavor, Carpenter arranged for the *dramatis personae*—Lincoln and his cabinet—to be photographed in

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KEY TO THE PICTURE

THE MEN

1. PRESIDENT LINCOLN.
2. WILLIAM H. SEWARD, Secretary of State.
3. SALMON P. CHASE, Secretary of Treasury.
4. EDWIN M. STANTON, Secretary of War.
5. GIDEON WELLES, Secretary of Navy.
6. EDWARD BATES, Attorney-General.
7. MONTGOMERY BLAIR, Postmaster-General.
8. CALEB B. SMITH, Secretary of Interior.

The room is the Official Chamber of the White House, in which all Cabinet meetings are held, and in which the President receives calls upon official business.

ACCESSORIES

9. Photograph of Simon Cameron, Ex-Sec. War.
10. Portrait of Andrew Jackson.
11. Parchment Copy of the Constitution.
12. Map of Seat of War in Virginia.
13. Map showing Slave Population in gradulight and shade.
14. War Department Portfolio.
15. Story's "Commentaries on the Constitution."
16. Whiting's "War Powers of the President."
17. New York *Tribune*.
18. Two volumes *Congressional Globe*.

This key to Francis B. Carpenter's painting indicates the principal figures and various objects in the room. It first appeared in the artist's book about his experiences at the White House.

(Reproduced from Carpenter, *Six Months at the White House with Abraham Lincoln*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995)

Mathew Brady's studio and again in the White House. He also heard the story of the evolution of the proclamation from President Lincoln himself. In six months he had completed his heroically scaled work. Carpenter intentionally avoided, as he wrote, "imaginary curtain or column, gorgeous furniture or allegorical statue."⁴

Depicted in the painting are, from left to right: Edwin M. Stanton, secretary of war; Salmon P. Chase, secretary of the treasury; President Lincoln; Gideon Welles, secretary of the navy; Caleb B. Smith, secretary of the interior (standing); William H. Seward, secretary of state (seated); Montgomery Blair, postmaster general; and Edward Bates, attorney general. The setting is Lincoln's office, which also served as the Cabinet Room. (This is the site and approximate size of the Lincoln Bedroom today.) The president had indicated to Carpenter each person's position in the room on the day of the first reading. The artist had found the placement "fortunately entirely consistent with my purpose."⁵ On the other hand, Carpenter wrote, "there was a curious mingling of fact and allegory

in my mind, as I *assigned* [emphasis added] to each his place on the canvas." He continued:

There were two elements in the Cabinet—the radical and the conservative. Mr. Lincoln was placed at the head of the official table, between two groups, nearest that representing the radical; but the uniting point of both. The chief powers of a government are War and Finance: the ministers of these were at his right—the Secretary of War, symbolizing the great struggle, in the immediate foreground; the Secretary of the Treasury, actively supporting the new policy, standing by the President's side. . . . To the Secretary of State, as the great expounder of the principles of the Republican party . . . would the attention of all at such a time be given. . . . The . . . chief officers of the government were thus brought in accordance with their relations to the administration, nearest the person of the President, who, with the manuscript proclamation in his hand, which he had just read, was represented leaning forward, listening to, and intently considering the views presented by the Secretary of State.⁶



It took Carpenter six months to create his 15-foot-wide canvas. In an 1866 letter to the artist, Secretary of War Chase remarked on the composition of the work, noting that he and Stanton appear symbolically on Lincoln's right in the painting, having "thoroughly endorsed and heartily welcomed the measure," while those cabinet members who had at first "doubted, or advised delay, or even opposed" the proclamation appear on Lincoln's left.⁷

Carpenter's discussion of the factions within Lincoln's cabinet must be assumed to have come from the president himself, although it seems remarkably candid because all the cabinet officers were still serving (except Caleb Smith, who had died in 1864). Two other men are represented in the painting: portraits of Simon Cameron and Andrew Jackson.

In 1864 Francis B. Carpenter commissioned the American artist Alexander Hay Ritchie to complete a steel engraving of his historical painting. President Abraham Lincoln signed on as the first subscriber, requesting an artist's proof.

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The Senate's painting, *First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation* by Francis B. Carpenter, on display in the Supreme Court Chamber in the Capitol in 1958.

(Architect of the Capitol)

Cameron, former secretary of war and the man who had nominated Lincoln for the presidency, is seen in a portrait at the extreme left. A portrait of Jackson by Miner Kellogg (virtually invisible today) appears in the center of the painting and is located today in the White House collection. Like Lincoln, Jackson was considered a preserver of the Union for his role in the Nullification Crisis of 1832.

Two cabinet members had strong reactions to the painting. Secretary Chase (who claimed to remember “not the slightest trace of such meeting”)⁸ complained that the “whole picture” was “subsidiary to Seward who is talking while every one else either listens or stares into vacancy.”⁹ Seward himself felt that Carpenter had not chosen a truly important subject and that the Lincoln administration’s great achievement was the preservation of the Union.

Perhaps the least successful aspect of the painting, as it presently appears, is the head of Lincoln himself. Although it may be said to embody probity and purpose, it is also the most wooden portrait among the group of eight men. When *First Reading* is compared with the steel engraving of the

painting made by Alexander Hay Ritchie, it is apparent that some significant alteration has been made to the head. The fault is that of the artist, in whose possession the painting remained for a dozen years. During this time, he made so many revisions to heads and to details that the painting finally looked very different from the engraving that had popularized it. Carpenter’s much-revised Lincoln became a weaker portrait than he had originally achieved. Two restorations in the first half of the 20th century seem to have produced further alterations, but conservation of the painting in 1991 removed the later overpaintings. Despite abrasion and other damage, the result is a stronger painting than

has been seen for decades. Lincoln's hair is more natural and more in accord with the engraving, but the face still bears a hardness that must be attributed to Carpenter's reworking.

The painting has strengths—for instance, Seward's head in pure profile is, surprisingly, the strongest in the group. Sculpturally modeled, it is unified and forceful. One suspects that because Seward's figure was essentially a background one, Carpenter ignored it while "improving" his painting, thus leaving intact an excellent likeness, a relaxed and expressive characterization. Although abraded, the portrait of Secretary Blair (standing, second from right) is also well executed.

After completion in 1864, the painting was temporarily exhibited to the general public in the East Room of the White House and then in the Rotunda of the Capitol. It received a good deal of praise in the popular press—although there were dissenters—and it enjoyed a national tour. Lincoln himself declared the painting a success. "In my judgement," he commented, "it is as good a piece of work as the subject will admit of . . . and I am right glad you have done it!"¹⁰

Nonetheless, the government made no move to acquire Carpenter's *First Reading* for the nation. Finally, in 1877, Elizabeth Thompson of New York City bought the canvas from the artist for \$25,000 and offered it as a gift to the nation. On February 12, 1878, the 69th anniversary of Lincoln's birth, Congress met in joint session to formally accept the work. Carpenter attended the session, hearing tributes to himself and his benefactors delivered by Representatives James Garfield of Ohio, who had been a major general in the Union army, and Alexander Stephens of Georgia, former vice president of the Confederacy. In its handsome original frame with the seal of the United States and the rising sun decorating the corners, the painting hangs today in the U.S. Capitol over the west staircase in the Senate wing.