

What Does the Emancipation Proclamation Say?

Before coming to the Atlanta History Center, ask your students what they know about this legendary document. If they are familiar with the basic ideas surrounding it, they will be able to enjoy and understand the tour on a deeper level.

Full text of the proclamation:

http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured_documents/emancipation_proclamation/transcript.html

Primary documents related to the proclamation as well as comprehensive lesson plans are available at

EDSITEment: <http://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plan/emancipation-proclamation-freedoms-first-steps#sect-introduction>

About the Emancipation Proclamation:

- It is widely known that President Lincoln did not support slavery. However, he understood that it would be unconstitutional for the government to take “property” away from its citizens. Therefore, the proclamation was issued as a “necessary war measure.” It was hoped that freeing the slaves would reduce the South’s capacity for war-making and allow more soldiers to join the Union army. In issuing it as a war tactic, even those northerners who did not support abolition in itself could perhaps support a tactic that would help win the war.
- Lincoln read his initial draft of the proclamation to his cabinet as early as July 22, 1862, but he decided to wait to unveil it publicly until after Union victory at Antietam in September of the same year.
- It freed only slaves in states “rebelling against the United States.”
- There were 4 states on the Union side which had slaves, but were not affected by the proclamation: Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland, and Delaware.
- The proclamation also did not apply to certain counties in conquered areas of the South, since they were no longer rebelling.
- Since the South considered itself an independent country, the Confederacy felt no need to enforce the order.
- William Seward, Lincoln’s Secretary of State, commented, “We show our sympathy with slavery by emancipating slaves where we cannot reach them and holding them in bondage where we can set them free.” Lincoln was fully aware of the irony, but he did not want to antagonize the slave states loyal to the Union by setting their slaves free. (from pbs.org)
- While the proclamation did not actually set many slaves free, its biggest impact was in changing the purpose of the war and setting the stage for permanent and complete abolition. This would be not merely a war to reunite the country, but to reunite a country without slavery.
- The 13th amendment, passed in 1865, legally freed all slaves in all states. “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” Georgia was the last state to ratify the amendment.
- The proclamation included a provision which made it legal to accept African Americans into the Union army.

