

# Social Studies

## WV History/Geography

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## John Brown's Raid, 1859

Just after sundown on the evening of Sunday October 16, 1859 John Brown led a group of 21 men (16 white and 5 black) across the Potomac River from Maryland to Virginia. Their immediate objective was the capture of the cache of weapons stored at the U.S. Arsenal at Harpers Ferry. Brown's ultimate goal was to destroy the slave system of the South. The arms captured by the raid would allow Brown and his followers to establish a stronghold in the nearby mountains from which they could attack slaveholders and draw liberated slaves into their ranks.

Brown's raid attained initial success. Slashing the telegraph wires to cut off the town from the outside world, the raiders captured the local armory, arsenal and rifle manufacturing plant. They then rounded up 60 townspeople as hostages. Unfortunately, the raiders were unsuccessful in their attempt to isolate the town. A B&O Railroad train was detained as it passed through, but allowed to continue on its journey to Baltimore. Once it reached its destination, the alarm was raised and federal troops sent to the rescue. In the meantime, the local militia surrounded the town preventing the raiders' escape. Realizing his predicament, John Brown led his men, along with nine hostages, to the small fire engine house adjacent to the armory.

Federal forces arrived on Monday evening and successfully stormed the stronghold the following day, seriously wounding Brown. He was tried and convicted of treason against the Commonwealth of Virginia. Just before his hanging on December 2, 1859, Brown uttered a prophetic forewarning of the coming Civil War: "I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood."

John Brown's raid and subsequent trial inflamed the dispute between the country's abolitionist and pro-slavery factions hardening the lines that separated the North and the South.

"I determined to summon the insurgents to surrender. I did not expect it would be accepted."

The federal forces that rushed to rescue Harper's Ferry were led by Colonel Robert E. Lee - soon to become commander of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia. Lee described the action at Harpers Ferry in a report to his superiors:

"...on arriving here on the night of the 17th instant, I learned that a party of insurgents, about 11pm on the 16th, had seized the watchmen stationed at the armory, arsenal, rifle factory, and bridge across the Potomac, and taken possession of those points.

They then dispatched six men, under one of their party, called Captain Aaron C.V. Stevens, to arrest the principal citizens in the neighborhood and incite the Negroes to join in the insurrection. The party took Colonel L. W. Washington (the great-grand-nephew of George Washington) from his bed about 1 1/2 am on the 17th, and brought him, with four of his servants, to this place. Mr. J. H. Allstadt and six of his servants were in the same manner seized about 3 am, and arms placed in the hands of the Negroes.

Upon their return here, John E. Cook, one of the party sent to Mr. Washington's, was dispatched to Maryland, with Mr. Washington's wagon, two of his servants, and three of Mr. Allstadt's, for arms and ammunition, &c. As day advanced, and the citizens of Harper's Ferry commenced their usual avocations, they were separately captured, to the number of forty, as well as I could learn, and confined in one room of the fire-engine house of the armory, which seems early to have been selected as a point of defense... These companies forced the insurgents to abandon their positions at the bridge and in the village, and to withdraw within the armory enclosure, where they fortified themselves in the fire-engine house, and carried ten of their prisoners for the purpose of insuring their safety and facilitating their escape, whom they termed hostages...

I determined to summon the insurgents to surrender. As soon after daylight as the arrangements were made Lieutenant J. E. B. Stewart, 1st cavalry, who had accompanied me from Washington as staff officer, was dispatched, under a flag, with a written summons... Knowing the character of the leader of the insurgents, I did not expect it would be accepted. I had therefore directed that the volunteer troops, under their respective commanders, should be paraded on the lines assigned them outside the armory, and had prepared a storming party of twelve marines, under their commander, Lieutenant Green, and had placed them close to the engine house, and secure from its fire. Three marines were furnished with sledge-hammers to break in the doors, and the men were instructed how to distinguish our citizens from the insurgents; to attack with the bayonet and not to injure the blacks detained in custody unless they resisted."

#### The Attack on the Engine House

Lieutenant Stewart was also directed not to receive from the insurgents any counter propositions. If they accepted the terms offered, they must immediately deliver up their arms and release their prisoners. If they did not, he must, on leaving the engine-house, give me the signal. My object was, with a view of saving our citizens, to have as short an interval as possible between the summons and attack. The summons, as I had anticipated, was rejected. At the concerted signal the storming party moved quickly to the door and commenced the attack. The fire engines within the house had been placed by the besieged close to the doors. The doors were fastened by ropes, the spring of which prevented their being broken by the blows of the hammers. The men were therefore ordered to drop the hammers, and, with a portion of the

reserve, to use as a battering-ram a heavy ladder, with which they dashed in a part of the door and gave admittance to the storming party.

The fire of the insurgents up to this time had been harmless. At the threshold one marine fell mortally wounded. The rest, led by Lieutenant Green and Major Russell, quickly ended the contest. The insurgents that resisted were bayoneted. Their leader, John Brown, was cut down by the sword of Lieutenant Green, and our citizens were protected by both officers and men. The whole was over in a few minutes. . . .

From the information derived from the papers found upon the persons and among the baggage of the insurgents, and the statement of those now in custody, it appears that the party consisted of nineteen men - fourteen white and five black. That they were headed by John Brown, of some notoriety in Kansas, who in June last located himself in Maryland, at the Kennedy farm, where he has been engaged in preparing to capture the United States works at Harper's Ferry.

He avows that his object was the liberation of the slaves of Virginia, and of the whole South; and acknowledges that he has been disappointed in his expectations of aid from the black as well as white population, both in the Southern and Northern States. The blacks whom he forced from their homes in this neighborhood, as far as I could learn, gave him no voluntary assistance. The result proves that the plan was the attempt of a fanatic or madman, which could only end in failure; and its temporary success was owing to the panic and confusion he succeeded in creating by magnifying his numbers."

#### References:

Robert E. Lee's account appears in: Hart, Albert B., American History Told by Contemporaries vol.4 (1928); Furnas, J.C. The Road to Harper's Ferry (1961); Nelson, Truman John, The Old Man: John Brown at Harper's Ferry (1973).

#### How To Cite This Article:

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## John Brown Defends His Raid, 1859

On October 16, 1859 abolitionist John Brown led a small force in an attack on the Federal Armory at Harper's Ferry, Virginia (see [John Brown's Raid, 1859](#)). His purpose was to steal weapons in an attempt to rally and arm local slaves and abolitionist whites to his cause. His raid was unsuccessful. Brown was wounded and captured. He was tired, convicted of treason against the Commonwealth of Virginia and sentenced to be hanged. His sentence was carried out at Charles Town, Virginia (now West Virginia) on December 2 1859.

**"You may dispose of me very easily. I am nearly disposed of now; but this question is still to be settled."**

*Shortly after the raid, John Brown was interviewed by a group of citizens that included Senator Mason and Congressman Vallandigham of Ohio. Still suffering from his wounds and speaking from a bed, Brown revealed his motivation and expectations regarding the raid. Among those present was a reporter for the New York Herald who filed the following report:*

**Mr. Vallandigham** (member of Congress from Ohio, who had just entered) - Mr. Brown, who sent you here?

**Mr. Brown** - No man sent me here; it was my own prompting and that of my Maker, or that of the devil, which ever you please to ascribe it to. I acknowledge no man [master] in human form.

**Mr. Vallandigham** - Did you get up the expedition yourself?

**Mr. Brown** - I did. . . .

**Mr. Mason** - What was your object in coming?

**Mr. Brown** - We came to free the slaves, and only that.

**A Young Man** (in the uniform of a volunteer company) - How many men in all had you?

**Mr. Brown** - I came to Virginia with eighteen men only, besides myself.

**Volunteer** - What in the world did you suppose you could do here in Virginia with that amount of men?

**Mr. Brown** -Young man, I don't wish to discuss that question here.

**Volunteer** - You could not do anything.

**Mr. Brown** - Well, perhaps your ideas and mine on military subjects would differ materially.

**Mr. Mason** - How do you justify your acts?

**Mr. Brown** - I think, my friend, you are guilty of a great wrong against God and humanity - I say it without wishing to be offensive - and it would be



perfectly right for anyone to interfere with you so far as to free those you willfully and wickedly hold in bondage. I do not say this insultingly.

**Mr. Mason** - I understand that.

**Mr. Brown** - I think I did right, and that others will do right who interfere with you at any time and all times. I hold that the golden rule, "Do unto others as you would that others should do unto you," applies to all who would help others to gain their liberty. . .

**Mr. Vallandigham** - Have you had any correspondence with parties at the North on the subject of this movement?

**Mr. Brown** - I have had correspondence.

**A Bystander** - Do you consider this a religious movement?

**Mr. Brown** - It is, in my opinion, the greatest service a man can render to God.

**Bystander** - Do you consider yourself an instrument in the hands of Providence?

**Mr. Brown** - I do.

**Bystander** - Upon what principle do you justify your acts?

**Mr. Brown** - Upon the golden rule. I pity the poor in bondage that have none to help them; that is why I am here; not to gratify any personal animosity, revenge or vindictive spirit. It is my sympathy with the oppressed and the wronged that are as good as you and as precious in the sight of God.

**Bystander** - Certainly. But why take the slaves against their will?

**Mr. Brown** - I never did. . . . I want you to understand gentlemen - (and to the reporter of the Herald) you may report that - I want you to understand that I respect the rights of the poorest and weakest of colored people, oppressed by the slave system, just as much as I do those of the most wealthy and powerful. That is the idea that has moved me, and that alone. We expected no reward except the satisfaction of endeavoring to do for those in distress and greatly oppressed as we would be done by. The cry of distress of the oppressed is my reason, and the only thing that prompted me to come here. . .

**Mr. Vallandigham** - Did you expect to hold possession here till then?

**Mr. Brown** - Well, probably I had quite a different idea. I do not know that I ought to reveal my plans. I am here a prisoner and wounded, because I foolishly allowed myself to be so. You overrate your strength in supposing I could have been taken if I had not allowed it. I was too tardy after commencing the open attack - in delaying my movements through Monday night, and up to the time I was attacked by the government troops. It was all occasioned by my desire to spare the feelings of my prisoners and their families and the community at large. I had no knowledge of the shooting of the negro (Heywood). . . .

**Mr. Vallandigham** - Where did you get arms to obtain possession of the armory?



**Mr. Brown** - I bought them.

**Mr. Vallandigham** - In what State?

**Mr. Brown** - That I would not state. . . .

**Reporter of the *Herald*** - I do not wish to annoy you; but if you have anything further you would like to say I will report it.

**Mr. Brown** - I have nothing to say, only that I claim to be here in carrying out a measure I believe perfectly justifiable, and not to act the part of an incendiary or ruffian, but to aid those suffering great wrong. I wish to say, furthermore, that you had better - all you people at the South - prepare yourselves for a settlement of that question that must come up for settlement sooner than you are prepared for it. The sooner you are prepared the better. You may dispose of me very easily. I am nearly disposed of now; but this question is still to be settled - this negro question I mean; the end of that is not yet. . . .

**Bystander** - Suppose you had every [negro] in the United States, what would you do with them?

**Mr. Brown** - Set them free.

**Bystander** - Your intention was to carry them off and free them?

**Mr. Brown** - Not at all.

**Bystander** - To set them free would sacrifice the life of every man in this community.

**Mr. Brown** - I do not think so.

**Bystander** - I know it. I think you are fanatical.

**Mr. Brown** - And I think you are fanatical. 'Whom the gods would destroy they first made mad,' and you are mad."

**References:**

This eyewitness account was originally published in: the *New York Herald*, October 21, 1859, republished in: Hart, Albert Bushnell, *American History Told by Contemporaries* v. 5 (1929).

How To Cite This Article:

"John Brown Defends His Raid, 1859" EyeWitness to History, [www.eyewitnesstohistory.com](http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com) (2009).

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# The First Shot of the Civil War

## The Surrender of Fort Sumter, 1861

The election of Abraham Lincoln in November 1860 provoked the secession of the Southern States from the Union. South Carolina was the first to leave. By the time of the convening of a constitutional convention to establish the Confederacy in February 1861, six other states had joined her. The majority of the Southern leaders who attended the convention expected a peaceful secession; they did not anticipate that their action would lead to bloody conflict. They were wrong. Fort Sumter, lying in the harbor off the city of Charleston, South Carolina, would prove the point.

After her secession from the Union, South Carolina perceived herself as a sovereign state - the presence of Union forces in an armed fortress whose guns commanded her principal harbor was intolerable as it belied her independence. For President Lincoln the voluntary abandonment of this fortress was equally intolerable as it would be a tacit acknowledgment of South Carolina's independent status.

Lincoln learned that the garrison at Fort Sumter was in trouble on the day he took office in March 1861. The garrison was running out of food and supplies and had no way of obtaining these on shore. The President ordered a relief expedition to sail immediately and informed the Governor of South Carolina of his decision. Alerted, General P.G.T. Beauregard, commander of the Confederate military forces, realized he had to quickly force the evacuation of the fort before the relief expedition's arrival. He would try threats first, and if these failed he would bombard the fort into submission.

**"...that shot was a sound of alarm that brought every soldier in the harbor to his feet."**

*On the afternoon of April 11, waving a white flag, two members of General Beauregard's staff were rowed across Charleston's harbor to Fort Sumter carrying a written demand for surrender. One of the emissaries - Stephen D. Lee - wrote of the experience after the war:*

"This demand was delivered to Major Anderson at 3:45 P.M., by two aides of General Beauregard, James Chesnut, Jr., and myself. At 4:30 P.M. he handed us his reply, refusing to accede to the demand; but added, 'Gentlemen, if you do not batter the fort to pieces about us, we shall be starved out in a few days.' The reply of Major Anderson was put in General Beauregard's hands at 5:15 P.M., and he was also told of this informal remark. Anderson's reply and remark were communicated to the Confederate authorities at Montgomery. The Secretary of War, L.P. Walker, replied to Beauregard as follows:"

'Do not desire needlessly to bombard Fort Sumter. If Major Anderson will state the time at which, as indicated by him, he will evacuate, and agree that in the meantime he will not

Fort Sumter returned the Confederate fire. The artillery duel continued throughout April 12 and into the following day. Slowly, the fort was being destroyed. Fire broke out and threatened to explode the gunpowder stored in the fort's magazine. At mid-day on April 13 a white flag of surrender was raised and the garrison evacuated the fort on the 14th. The next day, President Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to help put down the rebellion.

Amazingly, there were no deaths on either side during the battle.

use his guns against us, unless ours should be employed against Fort Sumter, you are authorized thus to avoid the effusion of blood. If this, or its equivalent, be refused, reduce the fort as your judgment decides to be most practicable.'

" The same aides bore a second communication to Major Anderson, based on the above instructions, which was placed in, his hands at 12:45 A.M., April 12th. His reply indicated that he would evacuate the fort on the 15th, provided he did not in the meantime receive contradictory instructions from his Government, or additional supplies, but he declined to agree not to open his guns upon the Confederate troops, in the event of any hostile demonstration on their part against his flag. Major Anderson made every possible effort to retain the aides till daylight, making one excuse and then another for not replying. Finally, at 3:15 A.M., he delivered his reply. In accordance with their instructions, the aides read it and, finding it unsatisfactory, gave Major Anderson this notification:"

'FORT SUMTER, S.C., April 12, 1861, 3:20 A.M. - SIR: By authority of Brigadier-General Beauregard, commanding the Provisional Forces of the Confederate States, we have the honor to notify you that he will open the fire of his batteries on Fort Sumter in one hour from this time. We have the honor to be very respectfully, Your obedient servants, JAMES CHESNUT JR., Aide-de-camp. STEPHEN D. LEE, Captain C. S. Army, Aide-de-camp.'

"The above note was written in one of the casemates of the fort, and in the presence of Major Anderson and several of his officers. On receiving it, he was much affected. He seemed to realize the full import of the consequences, and the great responsibility of his position. Escorting us to the boat at the wharf, he cordially pressed our hands in farewell, remarking, 'If we never meet in this world again, God grant that we may meet in the next.'

It was then 4 A.M. Captain James at once aroused his command, and arranged to carry out the order. He was a great admirer of Roger A. Pryor, and said to him, 'You are the only man to whom I would give up the honor of firing the first gun of the war'; and he offered to allow him to fire it. Pryor, on receiving the offer, was very much agitated. With a husky voice he said, 'I could not fire the first gun of the war.' His manner was almost similar to that of Major Anderson as we left him a few moments before on the wharf at Fort Sumter. Captain James would allow no one else but himself to fire the gun.

The boat with the aides of General Beauregard left Fort Johnson before arrangements were complete for the firing of the gun, and laid on its oars, about one-third the distance between the fort and Sumter, there to witness the firing of 'the first gun of the war' between the States. It was fired from a ten-inch mortar at 4:30 A.M., April 12th, 1861. Captain James was a skillful officer, and the firing of the shell was a success. It burst immediately over the fort, apparently about one hundred feet above.

The firing of the mortar woke the echoes from every nook and corner of the harbor, and in this the dead hour of the night, before dawn, that shot was a

sound of alarm that brought every soldier in the harbor to his feet, and every man, woman and child in the city of Charleston from their beds. A thrill went through the whole city. It was felt that the Rubicon was passed. No one thought of going home; unused as their ears were to the appalling sounds, or the vivid flashes from the batteries, they stood for hours fascinated with horror."

**References:**

Stephen Lee's account appears in: Buel, Clarence, and Robert U. Johnson, *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, Vol. I (1888, reprinted. 1982); McPherson, James M. *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (1988); Niven, John, *The Coming of the Civil War 1837-1861* (1990).

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## Views of President Lincoln, 1861

Lyndon Johnson once remarked that: "Being president is like being a jackass in a hailstorm. There's nothing to do but to stand there and take it." Abraham Lincoln's presidency epitomizes this sentiment.

Today, Lincoln is considered one of America's greatest leaders. Two of his speeches - the Gettysburg Address and his second inaugural address - are among the most revered in the country's history. So great is our appreciation that the words of his second inaugural address are etched in stone on the walls of his memorial in Washington, D.C. However, this present-day adulation was not widely held in 1861.

Lincoln's physical attributes, including his extraordinary six-foot-four-inch height, large hands, over-sized ears, prominent nose and ungainly gait, provided easy targets for ridicule. His lack of formal education (he spent only one year in school) supplied his detractors the ammunition to attack his intelligence and deride his mental abilities.

These negative attitudes subsided during the course of Lincoln's first administration. By the end of his first term he began to receive credit for his leadership during the nation's most troubling time. This reversal of attitude is reflected in the fact that he was elected to a second term - a feat that had not been accomplished by eight previous Presidents. His popularity was such that many newspapers predicted he would be elected for an unprecedented third term in 1868. However, Lincoln had to suffer through a "hailstorm" of criticism through much of his first term.

### Disparaging Words

*William Russell was a reporter for the London Times and kept a diary of his impressions as he covered the war in both the North and South. We join his account three weeks after Lincoln's inauguration. The Southern states have seceded and established the Confederacy but open warfare would not commence until April 12 when the Confederates bombard Fort Sumter in Charleston harbor. Russell sits in an anteroom as the new President enters:*

"March 27, 1861

Soon afterwards there entered, with a shambling, loose, irregular, almost unsteady gait, a tall, lank, lean man, considerably over six feet in height, with stooping shoulders, long pendulous arms, terminating in hands of extraordinary dimensions, which, however, were far exceeded in proportion by his feet. He was dressed in an ill-fitting, wrinkled suit of black, which put one in mind of an undertaker's uniform at a funeral; round his neck a rope of black silk was knotted in a large bulb, with flying ends projecting beyond the collar of his coat; his turned-down shirt-collar disclosed a sinewy muscular yellow neck, and above that, nestling in a great black mass of hair, bristling and compact like a ruff of mourning pins, rose the strange



quaint face and head, covered with its thatch of wild, republican hair, of President Lincoln.

The impression produced by the size of his extremities, and by his flapping and wide projecting ears, may be removed by the appearance of kindness, sagacity, and the awkward bonhomie of his face; the mouth is absolutely prodigious; the lips, straggling and extending almost from one line of black beard to the other, are only kept in order by two deep furrows from the nostril to the chin; the nose itself - a prominent organ - stands out from the face, with an inquiring, anxious air, as though it were sniffing for some good thing in the wind; the eyes dark, full, and deeply set, are penetrating, but full of an expression which almost amounts to tenderness; and above them projects the shaggy brow, running into the small hard frontal space, the development of which can scarcely be estimated accurately, owing to the irregular flocks of thick hair carelessly brushed across it.

One would say that, although the mouth was made to enjoy a joke, it could also utter the severest sentence which the head could dictate, but that Mr. Lincoln would be ever more willing to temper justice with mercy, and to enjoy what he considers the amenities of life, than to take a harsh view of men's nature and of the world, and to estimate things in an ascetic or puritan spirit.

A person who met Mr. Lincoln in the street would not take him to be what - according to the usages of European society - is called a 'gentleman;' and, indeed, since I came to the United States, I have heard more disparaging allusions made by Americans to him on that account than I could have expected among simple republicans, where all should be equals; but, at the same time, it would not be possible for the most indifferent observer to pass him in the street without notice. . . .

### **Lincoln's Use of Humor**

"March 28

In the conversation which occurred before dinner, I was amused to observe the manner in which Mr. Lincoln used the anecdotes for which he is famous. Where men bred in courts, accustomed to the world, or versed in diplomacy, would use some subterfuge, or would make a polite speech, or give a shrug of the shoulders as the means of getting out of an embarrassing position, Mr. Lincoln raises a laugh by some bold west-country anecdote, and moves off in the cloud of merriment produced by his joke. . . .

."

### **Insult from a General**

"October 9

Calling on the General [McClellan - commander of the Army of the Potomac] the other night at his usual time of return, I was told by the orderly, who was closing the door, 'The General's gone to bed tired, and can see no one. He sent the same message to the President, who came inquiring after him ten minutes ago.'

This poor President! He is to be pitied; surrounded by such scenes, and trying with all his might to understand strategy, naval warfare, big guns, the movements of troops, military maps, reconnaissances, occupations, interior

and exterior lines, and all the technical details of the art of slaying. He runs from one house to another, armed with plans, papers, reports, recommendations, sometimes good humoured, never angry, occasionally dejected, and always a little fussy. The other night, as I was sitting in the parlour at headquarters, with an English friend who had come to see his old acquaintance the General, walked in a tall man with a navy's cap, and an ill-made shooting suit, from the pockets of which protruded paper and bundles. 'Well,' said he to Brigadier Van Vliet, who rose to receive him, 'is George in?'

'Yes, sir. He's come back, but is lying down, very much fatigued. I'll send up, sir, and inform him you wish to see him.'

'Oh, no; I can wait. I think I'll take supper with him. Well, and what are you now, - I forget your name - are you a major, or a colonel, or a general?' 'Whatever you like to make me, sir.'

Seeing that General McClellan would be occupied, I walked out with my friend, who asked me when I got into the street why I stood up when that tall fellow came into the room.

'Because it was the President.'

'The President of what?'

'Of the United States.'

'Oh! come, now you're humbugging me. Let me have another look at him.'

He came back more incredulous than ever, but when I assured him I was quite serious, he exclaimed, 'I give up the United States after this.'

But for all that, there have been many more courtly presidents who, in a similar crisis, would have displayed less capacity, honesty, and plain dealing than Abraham Lincoln."

#### **References:**

William Russell's account appears in: Russell, William Howard, My Diary, North and South (Fletcher Pratt, ed) (1954, originally published in 1863);

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"Views of President Lincoln, 1861" EyeWitness to History, [www.eyewitnesstohistory.com](http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com) (2005).

## Analyze a Written Document

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Describe it as if you were explaining to someone who can't see it.

*Think about: Is it handwritten or typed? Is it all by the same person? Are there stamps or other marks? What else do you see on it?*

### Observe its parts.

Who wrote it?

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When is it from?

Where is it from?

### Try to make sense of it.

What is it talking about?

Write one sentence summarizing this document.

Why did the author write it?

Quote evidence from the document that tells you this.

What was happening at the time in history this document was created?

### Use it as historical evidence.

What did you find out from this document that you might not learn anywhere else?

What other documents or historical evidence are you going to use to help you understand this event or topic?



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## President Lincoln Signs the Emancipation Proclamation, 1863

**"I**f slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong." This is what Abraham Lincoln stated in a letter to a constituent in 1864. He had always been against slavery but believed that his presidential powers as defined by the Constitution did not give him the authority to abolish it. In early 1862, Lincoln tried and failed to develop an alternative approach: an effort to free the slaves of the Border States by buying out their masters.

Stymied, Lincoln came up with a unique solution; if he could not eliminate slavery in the Union, he would do it in the Confederacy. He would abolish slavery in the Southern States based on his military powers as commander-in-chief of the Union's war effort. His decision was prompted by the realization that slave labor provided the foundation of the South's ability to wage war. On the battle front, slaves dug the trenches, built the battlements, cooked the meals and drove the wagons. On the home front, they tilled the fields, ginned the cotton, and performed many other duties that underpinned the South's economy. Slave labor freed the Confederate soldiers for combat. Without their slaves, the South's military power would be seriously diminished. Thus, his proclamation to end slavery in the South would be a military action intended to further the Union's war effort for, as Lincoln declared: "civilized belligerents do all in their power to help themselves or hurt the enemy."

He revealed his plan and a first draft of the proclamation to his Cabinet on July 22, 1862. He made it clear that he was not seeking their approval, as he had made up his mind to issue the proclamation. He did, however, ask for their comments. Secretary of State Seward questioned the timing of the announcement. The war was not going well for the North. A year earlier it had been soundly defeated at the First Battle of Bull Run and subsequent attempts to attack the South had sputtered. Seward felt that announcing the proclamation at this time would appear to be a desperate attempt of a broken government to rally opinion at home and abroad to its cause. Better to wait for a victory on the battlefield. Lincoln agreed.

The Union's victory came in September when it repulsed Lee's invasion of the North at the Battle of Antietam ([see Carnage at Antietam, 1862](#)). Lincoln issued a preliminary draft of the proclamation on September 22 that warned the Confederate States that if they did not return to the Union by January 1, 1863, he would issue a second proclamation declaring the slaves of those states "forever free". His warning was ignored. The general reaction in the North was supportive, but many had doubts as to whether Lincoln would actually follow through with his plan.

**"...the act itself was only the simplest and briefest formality."**

*John Nicolay and John Hay were Lincoln's private secretaries and were there on that New Year's Day when he signed the Emancipation Proclamation:*

Slavery was eliminated in the Union with the ratification of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution in 1868.

"Mr. Lincoln took the various manuscript notes and memoranda which his Cabinet advisers brought him on the 31st of December and during that afternoon and the following morning with his own hand carefully rewrote the entire body of the draft of the proclamation...

It is a custom in the Executive Mansion to hold on New Year's Day an official and public reception, beginning at eleven o'clock in the morning, which keeps the President at his post in the Blue Room until two in the afternoon. The hour for this reception came before Mr. Lincoln had entirely finished revising the engrossed copy of the proclamation, and he was compelled to hurry away from his office to friendly handshaking and festal greeting with the rapidly arriving official and diplomatic guests.

The rigid laws of etiquette held him to this duty for the space of three hours. Had actual necessity required it, he could of course have left such mere social occupation at any moment; but the President saw no occasion for precipitancy. On the other hand, he probably deemed it wise that the completion of this momentous executive act should be attended by every circumstance of deliberation.

Vast as were its consequences, the act itself was only the simplest and briefest formality. It could in no wise be made sensational or dramatic. Those characteristics attached, if at all, only to the long-past decisions and announcements of July 22 and September 22 of the previous year. Those dates had witnessed the mental conflict and the moral victory.

No ceremony was made or attempted of this final official signing. The afternoon was well advanced when Mr. Lincoln went back from his New Year's greetings, with his right hand so fatigued that it was an effort to hold the pen. There was no special convocation of the Cabinet or of prominent officials. Those who were in the house came to the executive office merely from the personal impulse of curiosity joined to momentary convenience.

His signature was attached to one of the greatest and most beneficent military decrees of history in the presence of less than a dozen persons; after which it was carried to the Department of State to be attested by the great seal and deposited among the archives of the Government."

**References:**

This eyewitness account appears in: Nicolay, John G. and John Hay, Abraham Lincoln, a History vol. 6 (1890); Goodwin, Doris Kearns, Team of Rivals (2005).

**How To Cite This Article:**

"President Lincoln Signs the Emancipation Proclamation, 1863" EyeWitness to History, [www.eyewitnesstohistory.com](http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com) (2006).

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# Bread Riot in Richmond, 1863

## The Confederate Home Front

**B**y 1863, the combination of the Northern blockade of Southern ports, the diversion of Southern food supplies from the home front to the war front and the escalating inflation of its currency began to negatively affect the Confederacy's civilian population. Tensions boiled to the surface on April 2, 1863 when a group of hungry and desperate women descended upon the Confederate capitol in Richmond demanding relief. Rebuffed by the Governor, the mob took their complaints to the streets and sparked a spontaneous protest by a crowd estimated in the thousands. Shouting "Bread, Bread, Bread!" the mob vented its frustrations by smashing store windows and looted their contents.

The chaos was curbed only when Confederate President Jefferson Davis called upon the crowd to disperse, backing up his entreaty with troops armed with fixed bayonets

### **"Something very sad has just happened in Richmond..."**

*A Richmond woman described the scene in a letter written to a friend on April 2, 1863:*

"Something very sad has just happened in Richmond - something that makes me ashamed of all my jeremiads over the loss of the petty comforts and conveniences of life - hats, bonnets, gowns, stationery, books, magazines, dainty food.

Since the weather has been so pleasant, I have been in the habit of walking in the Capitol Square before breakfast every morning. . . Yesterday, upon arriving, I found within the gates a crowd of women and boys - several hundreds of them, standing quietly together.

I sat on a bench near, and one of the number left the rest and took the seat beside me. She was a pale, emaciated girl, not more than eighteen. . . As she raised her hand to remove her sunbonnet and use it for a fan, her loose calico sleeve slipped up and revealed the mere skeleton of an arm. She perceived my expression as I looked at it, and hastily pulled down her sleeve with a short laugh. 'This is all that's left of me!' she said. 'It seems real funny, don't it? . . . We are starving. As soon as enough of us get together, we are going to the bakeries and each of us will take a loaf of bread. That is little enough for the government to give us after it has taken all our men.'

. . . The crowd now rapidly increased, and numbered, I am sure, more than a thousand women and children. It grew and grew until it reached the dignity of a mob - a bread riot. They impressed all the light carts they met, and marched along silently and in order. They marched through Cary Street and Main, visiting the stores of the speculators and emptying them of their contents. Governor Letcher sent the mayor to read the Riot Act, and as this



had no effect on the crowd. The city battalion came up. The women fell back with frightened eyes, but did not obey the order to disperse.

The President [Jefferson Davis] then appeared ascended a dray, and addressed them. It is said he was received at first with hisses from the boys, but after he had spoken some little time with great kindness and sympathy, the women moved quietly on, taking their food with them. General Elze and General Winder wished to call troops from the camps to 'suppress the women,' but [Secretary of War James] Seddon, a wise man, declined to issue the order. While I write women and children are still standing in the streets, demanding food, and the government is issuing to them rations of rice."

**References:**

This eyewitness account appears in: Gallman, Matthew J., *The Civil War Chronicle* (2000)

**How To Cite This Article:**

"Bread Riot in Richmond, 1863" EyeWitness to History, [www.eyewitnesstohistory.com](http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com) (2009).