

Road to Emancipation & the Role of African-Americans in the Civil War

May 1861: Union Gen. **Benjamin Butler** refused to return captured slaves to their Confederate owners, arguing that they were “contraband of war.” Thereafter, as the Union army successfully advanced into the South, freedmen known as “contraband” traveled alongside and with Union forces –performing various non-combat roles around Union encampments. This notion of “**contraband**” allowed the North to strike at slavery without using that politically dangerous word *slavery*.

Aug, 1861: 1st **Confiscation Act** passed which authorized the Union’s seizure of rebel property, and it stated that all slaves who fought with or worked for the Confederate military services were freed and further obligations to their masters.

July, 1862: 2nd **Confiscation Act** stated that slaves of civilian and military Confederate officials “shall be forever free” but it was enforceable only in areas of the South occupied by the Union Army.

*** Think about WHAT political and war-related motives Lincoln & the Congress had in passing such laws. Neither Lincoln nor Congress was motivated by a desire to achieve equality through these limited emancipation efforts. Think about the BORDER states...

By Aug, 1862: Without official federal approval, several generals unofficially organized all-black regiments.

Sept, 1862: Following the Union ‘victory’ at Antietam, Lincoln issued the **Emancipation Proclamation** which emancipated slaves in areas currently under rebellion (not those occupied by the Union army and not any border states) as of January 1, 1863. Also, the Emancipation Proclamation officially allowed for the organization of segregated African-American regiments (under an all-white leadership).

***Think about WHY Lincoln again issued such a limited declaration & the **consequences** of this document.

- committed the U.S. government to a policy of abolition in the South
- enlarged & elevated the purpose of the war to a moral level (ending slavery); no longer just fighting against secession and rebellion
- added more forces to the Union army
- undermined the South’s war effort by encouraging slaves to runaway to Union-occupied areas
- discouraged European nations from giving diplomatic recognition to the South

By 1863: Several states (including MD, MO, & LA ...now occupied by the Union) abolished slavery. But the federal government never developed any consistent plan for dealing with the 1000’s of freedpersons.

By the end of 1863, over 50,000 African-American **soldiers** were serving in the Union Army. Though promised the same pay & treatment as white soldiers, they received barely ½ the pay as white soldiers and given worse & less supplies. Further, black **POWs** were at risk of murder or of being sold into slavery. Also by the end of 1863, African-Americans like Harriet Tubman served as **spies** who organized slave intelligence networks within southern territory and led scouting raids. Slaves within the South also typically **sabotaged** the southern war effort and the plantation economy by engaging in work slow-downs, sit-downs, and “unorganized malingering” in order to creatively engage in **subversive behavior**.

Jan, 1865: Gen. Tecumseh Sherman issued **Field Order Number 15** authorizing ex-slaves to take possession of more than 400,000 acres of abandoned coastal plantations along the GA coast. (This is the so-called and never-fulfilled promise of “40 acres and a mule.”)

Dec, 1865: The **13th Amendment**, initiated during the final months of the war, was finally ratified & officially abolished slavery.