

**The Great Emancipator:
A Look at Who Really Freed the Slaves**

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History 489: Senior Thesis

November 20, 2015

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Abstract

In recent years, the discussion of who freed the slaves has become a more controversial topic. It used to be that when someone asked this question the answer was easily Abraham Lincoln. However, today some historians argue that the slaves freed themselves. In this paper, I take a look at both the self-emancipation and the pro-Lincoln sides of the argument. These arguments are then paired with letters and speeches written by Lincoln, along with statistics from the 1860 Presidential Election to show two things. First, yes, those who argue self-emancipation have some validity because the slaves did in fact assist the Union during the Civil War. Second, and most importantly it will show that Lincoln did in fact free the slaves.

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Introduction

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.”

— The Declaration of Independence

“If this country cannot be saved without giving up that principle, I would rather be assassinated on the spot than to surrender it.”¹

— Abraham Lincoln

Freedom is considered to be this country’s most sacred principle. It is the home of the free, and the land of the brave. The American Revolution was fought for it. Many people throughout the history of the United States have died fighting wars to keep it. The message of freedom can be found in every corner of today’s society. However, for 89 years from the start of the United States in 1776 to the 13th Amendment in 1865, that basic principle was denied to so many. Slavery is the greatest injustice experienced within the borders of the US, and it represents a permanent black eye in the history of the worlds strongest powerhouse.

The first black slaves arrived in Virginia in 1619.² In fact, slavery in the American Colonies did not become commonly accepted in most areas until the end of the 17th century.³ However, its origins go back much further then that. Slavery has been part of human history for as long as history has been kept. However, slavery in the United States did not start until 1619, the foundation of slavery can be found in the early the days of the American Colonies. In fact

¹ Richard Striner, *Father Abraham: Lincoln’s Relentless Struggle to End Slavery* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), 121.

² C. Duncan Rice, *The Rise and Fall of Black Slavery* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1975), 52.

³ *Ibid.*, 52.

before 1670, the association with blacks and slavery was very weak.⁴ Before the term slavery was used, the correct vernacular was servant. When the British settled North America they were unlikely to use blacks as servants.⁵ There are a number of possibilities why that may be, but, for the most part, the British used indentured servants, and convicted felons as servants. On occasion they forced captured Native Americans into some sort of servitude, though they did this reluctantly because it produced more problems than it was worth.⁶

In 1619 when the first Dutch ship arrived on the shores of Virginia with the first black slaves there was only roughly 10-20 slaves. By the end of the 17th century, there was several hundred black slaves in the United States.⁷ However, by the end of the 18th century the the number of black slaves skyrocketed especially as the use of indentured servants and convicted felons started to decrease. The use of servants would decrease because of two main reasons. First, indentured servants and felons had limited sentences they had to serve, and second the tide, was changing as people started to believe that white people should no longer be slaves.⁸ Using blacks was logical for plantation owners because whites did not see blacks as their equals, and they have a life sentence.⁹ The following figure shows the number of black slaves in the

⁴ David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 200), 61.

⁵ Rice, *The Rise and fall of Black Slavery*, 25.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁸ Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas*, 73.

⁹ *Ibid.*

United States from the first US Census in 1790 to the 1860 census, which is the final census taken before the end of slavery.

Figure 1. US Slave Population 1790-1860.

Census Year	Slave Population
1790	697,624
1800	893,602
1810	1,191,362
1820	1,538,022
1830	2,009,043
1840	2,487,355
1850	3,204,313
1860	3,953,760

Source: The United States Census Bureau
<http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/00165897ch14.pdf>

The Abolition movement, or the movement to end slavery, started around the world long before it started in the United States. And in many cases the emancipation of slaves went in a very different direction than it did in the United States, but in some cases it had a familiar ring to it. For instance, Haiti paid French slaveholders reimbursement for lost slaves in 1824 even after winning their recognition of independence.¹⁰ Britain had a non-violent emancipation as they allotted 20 million pounds to be dispersed to slaveholders for their emancipation in 1838.¹¹ But even before that, though unsuccessful the Spanish and Portuguese religious order started to push for the abolition of slavery in the early sixteenth century.¹²

¹⁰ Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2010), 15.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹² Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas*, 281.

While these previous examples did not exactly accomplish emancipation until the early 19th century, their movements for abolition started much earlier than that. But the United States came late to the game. The United States abolition movement started around the 1830s, and the exact motives behind the movement are unknown.¹³ Despite the rest of the world moving towards emancipation, the United States would lock itself into the most violent conflict, in its history, over emancipation. This is partially because there are two very different movements in the US working to free the slaves. The first is an extremist that polarized the slavery question and they focused on slavery being a sin and immoral; the second group attempted to use the legal system to fight slavery.¹⁴

The extreme abolitionist are the ones that hold true to the heart of the abolitionist movement. The true abolitionist believed in the immediate emancipation of all slaves, and for them to be given equal rights under the law as white. The abolitionists in many cases were motivated by a moral compass. The movement start in northern churches around 1830 and quickly spread. The movement would grow spreading the word through a local news paper called “The Liberator” and tensions between abolitionists and pro-slavery would start to tighten.

The second group is a group that is called anti-slavery. However, while this group works towards and supports the end of slavery it is not technically considered an abolitionist group. The anti-slavery group worked for a gradual emancipation of the slave. However, the anti-slavery group was not ready to push for equal rights.

¹³ Rice, *The Rise and Fall of Black Slavery*, 305.

¹⁴ Ibid., 307-308.

There is also on final group. This groups did not seek to free the slaves at all, but it also does not support slavery. The free-soil movement's goal was to contain. They had no intentions in interfering with slavery in places it already exists, but they worked to stop its spread west. This group is important because as Lincoln's political career begins he would be considered a free-soilist.

The United States dealings with slavery is gruesome. The polarizing opposite sides lead to two out comes. First, is the prolonged use of slavery, and the second is the bloodiest conflict in the history of the United State. This unique history dealing with slavery, and the unprecedented strength that it gained as part of the United States' economy the US still managed to end slavery within its borders and territories. The fight for freedom was not an easy one in the US. It took many years and a Civil War. When it was all said and done the country found itself with a 13th Amendment to the Constitution and no slavery. The man usually credited with ending this abomination is Abraham Lincoln. However, recently some historians have refuted the credit given to Lincoln. These historians claim that Lincoln may have been more of a hindrance to the abolitionist cause rather than being the cause for its success. These same historians claim that the slaves freed themselves. So, who really freed the slaves? Did they really free themselves? What role did Lincoln really play? In this paper I plan to show that yes, slaves did play a contributing role in achieving their freedom, however, Lincoln is the key factor. He was the reason the slaves gained their freedom.

Historiography

In researching at the previous works surrounding Lincoln and the emancipation of the slaves I found that most of the previous works fell into one of two categories, however, out of

respect for the previous authors I have divided them into three different categories. The first category is the pro-Lincoln category, which is the argument that Lincoln did indeed free the slaves. The second category focuses on what is called self-emancipation. Historians who focus on self-emancipation look at the role that Lincoln played in emancipation and come to the conclusion that the slaves freed themselves. The third and final category is neutral. These are the works of historians who simply contribute information about Lincoln and emancipation with no intentions of declaring a side.

The Great Emancipator

A key book contributing to the pro-Lincoln argument is Richard Striner's *Father Abraham: Lincoln's Relentless Struggle to End Slavery*. Striner takes a chronological approach to show that Lincoln used the "rare combination" of a moral visionary and orchestration of power to play a key part in the emancipation of the slaves and its eventual extinction.¹⁵ Striner begins his journey with Lincoln in 1854 and goes right up to his death in 1865. While Lincoln's surge into prominence began in 1854, his distaste for slavery began much earlier. Lincoln was a purest when it came to the Constitution. He truly believed that when it said "All men are created equal," that is what it meant. His beliefs on slavery were built from the beliefs of the Founding Fathers.¹⁶ The Founding Fathers would not be the only key influences on Lincoln. Lincoln's thoughts on slavery were also shaped by his political mentor Henry Clay, whom Lincoln was devoted to in his early career.¹⁷ Striner meticulously details actions from 1854-

¹⁵ Striner, *Father Abraham*, 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

1865. He shows that for every questionable thing Lincoln may have said or done he did it for a reason. For instance, when Lincoln claimed that he was only interested in saving the Union, he was using it as a weapon to break the slave states power.¹⁸ Striner used a number of speeches and letters to show Lincoln had always had one opinion on slavery, and that it was not something that he could in the right mind allow to plague the United States any longer.

Another important author is James M. McPherson. In his article *Who Freed the Slaves?* McPherson brings to light the Great Emancipator vs. the Self-Emancipation argument. He argues that the Civil War was essential to the ending of slavery because, without it, there would be no Confiscation Acts, Emancipation Proclamation, or even a 13th Amendment.¹⁹ He continues to discuss the importance of the Civil War, but also that the Civil War would have never happened without secession and the United States Government's or in better words Lincoln's refusal to accept it.²⁰ McPherson credits all of these events to one man, and that man is Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln became a prominent political figure in 1854, from that time until the day he died, Lincoln had one defining theme: the opposition of slavery's expansion into the west.²¹ McPherson highlights the fact that Lincoln ran for president on an anti-slavery platform. Because of this, the Southern states started to secede because they feared Lincoln would take their slaves away. Lincoln was approached to negotiate and compromise on the subject of

¹⁸ Striner, *Father Abraham*, 14.

¹⁹ James M. McPherson, "Who Freed the Slaves?" *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 139, no. 1 (March, 1995): 3.

²⁰ McPherson, "Who Freed the Slaves?" 3.

²¹ *Ibid.*

slavery in order to keep the Union together and prevent an potential Civil War, but Lincoln's stance stiffened as he said "Entertain no proposition for a compromise in regard to the extension of slavery."²² McPherson shows that Lincoln hated slavery and in no way would he allow it to expand. Despite the fact that Lincoln said he would not touch slavery where it already existed his stance on slavery sparked secession, and his bullish refusal to compromise lead to the Civil War.

Self-Emancipation:

A key historian who argues for self-emancipation is Barbara J. Fields. Fields has written a chapter, also named *Who Freed the Slaves?*, in Geoffery Ward's book *The Civil War: An Illustrated History*. In this chapter Fields argues that Lincoln hurt the slaves cause more than he helped. In her analysis, it is evident that Lincoln had no interest in freeing the slaves from day one. In his first inaugural speech Lincoln said, "If I could save the Union without freeing any slaves, I would do it; if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leave others alone, I would also do that."²³ She argues that Lincoln's policies towards the war show that he did not believe the Civil War to be a war about slavery.²⁴ Lincoln was quick to overturn Generals when they declared slaves free.²⁵ Lincoln seemed to be more interested in keeping slaveholders happy than to end slavery.²⁶ However, the slaves

²² McPherson, *Who Freed the Slaves?*, 4.

²³ Abraham Lincoln, *First Inaugural Speech* (Washington D.C., March 4, 1861).

²⁴ Barbara J. Fields, "Who Freed the Slaves?," in *The Civil War: An Illustrated History*, ed. by Geoffrey. (New York, NY: Knopf, 1990), 179.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 180.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 179.

showed no doubt. From the moment Lincoln had been elected the slaves knew their time had come.²⁷ Many slaves began to buy their time. They started to refuse work or do lower quality work, attempted to fight back against aggressors, and some started to try and escape north or to Union lines after war broke out. Because of the numerous opportunities Lincoln had to squash slavery during the war but chose not to, Fields argues that slavery was not on his mind. His only care was to save the Union. On the other side, she argues that the actions of the slaves, from the time of Lincoln's election forward, shows that the slaves were responsible for causing the acts and legislation that would eventually lead to their liberation.

Another self-emancipation historian that contributes to the argument is Ira Berlin. In his article *Who Freed the Slaves? Emancipation and its Meaning* Berlin responds to James McPherson's article, and discusses how one of Lincoln's biggest credentials when it came to freeing the slaves was a sham. The Emancipation Proclamation was signed into effect on January 1st, 1863. However, it did not free a single slave that had not already been freed before that date.²⁸ Berlin argues it did nothing more than solidify the first two Confiscation Acts. The Confiscation Act of 1861, also known as the First Confiscation Act, made it legal for the Union army to confiscate Confederate property used against them; it also made it that slaves that were being used by the Confederate Army in any way to be lifted of their servitude.²⁹ The

²⁷ Fields, *Who Freed the Slaves?*, 181.

²⁸ Ira Berlin, "Who Freed the Slaves? Emancipation and Its Meaning," in *Union and Emancipation: Essays on Politics and Race in the Civil War Era*, ed. by David W. Blight and Brooks R. Simpson. (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press), 289.

²⁹ U.S., *Statutes at Large, Treaties, and Proclamations of the United States of America*, vol. 12 (Boston, 1863), p. 319.

Confiscation Act of 1862, also known as the Second Confiscation Act, emancipated all slaves, but only slaves in areas that were occupied by Union forces.³⁰ After the first Confiscation Act was passed, slaves risked their lives fleeing to Union lines.³¹ Berlin highlights that Lincoln pushed for gradual emancipation, and wanted to compensate slaveholders for their loss of property.³² While Lincoln was doing everything he could do to delay freedom from slaves he was also seriously playing around with the idea of colonization, setting up a separate colony off American shores to send blacks to live after liberation. Berlin fires back at McPherson with claims that Lincoln did not help and only did when he saw no other option. He also argues that the actions of the slaves are heavily overlooked. The slaves knew that a Union win was critical and did everything they could to help ensure that victory.³³

One of the most recent additions to the self-emancipation argument came in 2014 in David Williams's *I Freed Myself*. In his book, Williams makes two key arguments. First, that the actions of the slaves pushed towards freedom and forced Lincoln down the road to emancipation. Slaves and free blacks alike were not passive when it came to the fight for freedom and equality. For years before the war broke out, slaves resisted the institution by attempting to escape using the underground railroad.³⁴ However, the underground railroad

³⁰ U.S., *Statutes at Large, Treaties, and Proclamations of the United States of America*, vol. 12 (Boston, 1863), pp. 589–92.

³¹ Berlin, *Who Freed the Slaves?*, 289.

³² *Ibid.*, 294.

³³ *Ibid.*, 290.

³⁴ David Williams, *I Freed Myself: African American Self-Emancipation in the Civil War Era* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press) 22.

was just the beginning. When the war broke after the first shots at Fort Sumter, many blacks tried to enlist.³⁵ When blacks were not allowed to enlist early on in the war many Northern blacks turned to each other and formed unofficial militias or “self-protection groups.”³⁶ Free blacks were not the only ones to take action. In fact, in December of 1860 it was reported that slaves had plans to kill their owners and their families.³⁷ Slaves, escaped and liberated, would provide valuable information to the Union Army, and roughly 200,000 slaves would eventually be allowed to help fight for their freedom by serving in the Army.³⁸

Secondly, Williams argues that while Lincoln himself was against slavery, the actions he took were not of a man trying to end slavery, but that of a man who only did so because the unfolding of events around him forced him to. For instance, Williams points out that during Lincoln’s first Inaugural speech he stated he had no plans to interfere with slavery in the south.³⁹ Throughout Lincoln’s presidency there are a number of interactions with slavery, none more important than the 13th Amendment, but the Emancipation Proclamation made headlines. However, Lincoln originally wrote one version of the proclamation, but backtracked on it to a more moderate version.⁴⁰ Williams portrays Lincoln as a man doing everything he

³⁵ Williams, *I Freed Myself*, 63.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 5, 169-171

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 110.

could to leave slavery alone where it already existed in his search to end the Civil War, and only changed his mind because he was on the brink of losing that war.

Neutral

It is no secret that Lincoln was not an abolitionist. He did not approve of slavery all of his life, but Lincoln, like so many other people of his time, was always adapting and altering his views on slavery. In his book *The Fiery Trial*, Eric Foner approaches Lincoln's ever-developing stance on slavery and his unprecedented rise to leader of the free world. Foner tracks Lincoln as he goes from being a free-soilist to anti-slavery. The death of Lincoln's mentor Henry Clay in mid-1852 would begin Lincoln's journey to becoming the face of anti-slavery. Before 1854, Lincoln viewed slavery as a minor issue because as he said he "always believed that everyone was against it, and that it was on course of ultimate extinction."⁴¹ However, the passing of the Kansas-Nebraska act early in 1854 would push Lincoln over the edge as it repealed the Missouri Compromise, the crowning achievement of Henry Clay. From that day forward Lincoln would speak out against slavery at any chance he was given. The groundwork for Lincoln's anti-slavery campaign would be laid in the Peoria Speech given October 16, 1854.⁴² In that speech, Lincoln lashed out against the repeal of the Missouri Compromise and attacked the institution of slavery. Lincoln spent many of his years between 1854 and his death playing with the idea of colonization, but after he issued the Emancipation Proclamation his opinion on that changed.⁴³ Lincoln's thinking about what to do with freed slaves came so far that he would send

⁴¹ Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 72.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 70.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 258.

instructions to Louisiana allowing any man who proclaimed their loyalty to the Union to vote, including blacks.⁴⁴ Lincoln by no means was a perfect man. Foner paints a picture of a man whose everyday experiences influenced him to continue to develop his approach and beliefs on slavery.

Stephen B. Oates, in his article "*The Man of Our Redemption: Abraham Lincoln and the Emancipation of the Slaves*" takes a stance that does not fully support Lincoln as the man who freed the slaves, but also does not argue in favor of the self-emancipation. He claims Lincoln is not a "saintly Emancipator" nor was he a racist, but in order to understand him you must look at him and his actions in the context of his time.⁴⁵ Oates dissects Lincoln's path to emancipation. The foundation of Lincoln's beliefs about slavery trace back to the founding of the United States. He idolized the Founding Fathers. For Lincoln, there was no greater truth than the Declaration of Independence.⁴⁶ Lincoln's experiences would only help shape his distaste for slavery. So much so that his unwavering stance refusing to allow slavery's expansion out of the South would lead to secession. However, Lincoln would try many times to end slavery peacefully. For instance, in 1862 he proposed that the border states, states still in the Union that had slavery, would take part in a 30-year process of emancipation and compensation. However, this plan failed proving to Lincoln that the "slaveowners – were too tied up in the slave system to ever free their own Negroes and voluntarily transform their way of

⁴⁴ Foner, *The Fiery*, 285.

⁴⁵ Stephen B. Oates, "The Man of Our Redemption: Abraham Lincoln and the Emancipation of the Slaves," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 1 (Winter, 1979): 15-16.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

life.”⁴⁷ From that point on, Lincoln gave up on the idea of compensation and a gradual phase out of slavery. Shortly after, Lincoln would sign the second Confiscation Act, and eventually the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1st 1863. Lincoln’s opinions on slavery and freed blacks came so far that in April of 1865 he publicly endorsed suffrage for southern blacks in a limited capacity, including those deemed intelligent and those who served in the Union Army. Oates brings to life Lincoln’s ever changing process from a man who wanted nothing more than to find a peaceful resolution, but would not compromise the integrity of the United States, to a man who realized that slave owners would never come to their senses unless he forced them too.

The Rhyme Behind the Reasons

I have spent some time reading through all of the secondary sources, as well as a number of speeches and letters written by Lincoln. In doing so, I discovered the answer to “Who Freed the slaves?” is not cut and dry. There are a number factors that played a role in the emancipation of the slaves. However, after doing such extensive research I still came to the conclusion that Lincoln is indeed the Great Emancipator and deserves much of the credit for ending slavery. I have come to this conclusion because of three main points self-emancipation historians failed to address. The first is the border states; the second is the time table of slave actions compared with Lincoln, the war, and emancipation; and the third is Lincoln’s extensive history of speaking out against slavery.

⁴⁷ Oates, *The Man of Our Redemption*, 19.

The Border States

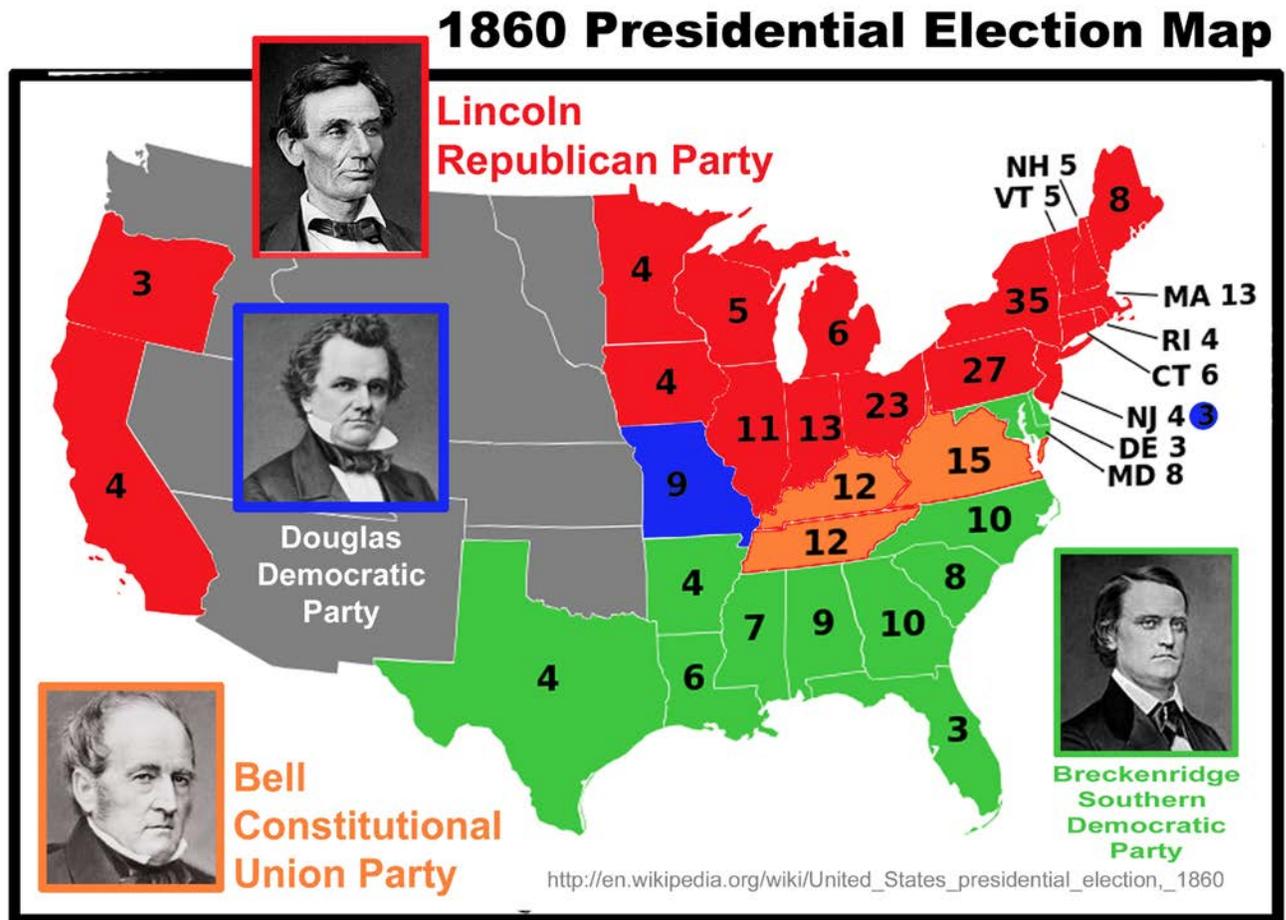
In 1860 there were 33 states. After the election of Abraham Lincoln in November of 1860, 11 states would eventually secede from the United States. The first state to secede was South Carolina on December 20th 1860. The remaining 10 states (Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Texas, Virginia, Arkansas, North Carolina, and Tennessee) would all secede by June 8th of 1861. However, four slave states did not secede from the Union (Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, and Missouri). These four states were key to Lincoln, the Civil War, and the ending of slavery. It was always expressed how important it was for these states to stay loyal to the Union.⁴⁸

To understand the importance of the border states you have to go back to the 1860 presidential election. At first glance it is clear Lincoln won the election in a landslide. He received 180 (59.4%) of the electoral vote, while his opponents John Breckenridge received 72 (23.8%), John Bell received 39 (12.9%), and Stephen Douglas received 12 (4.0%).⁴⁹ However, in order to fully understand the election's outcome a closer look at each state's outcome is needed, the border states in particular. The figure below is a map of the United States electoral results of the 1860 election.

⁴⁸ Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 168.

⁴⁹ "Election of 1860," *The American Presidency Project*, accessed November 1, 2015, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/showelection.php?year=1860>.

Figure 2: 1860 Presidential Election Electoral Results Map



Source: Bardhihistoryclass.weebly.com

The map above clearly shows that Lincoln won, but what it also shows is that he did not win a single border state. A closer inspection of the results in the four states are not good for Lincoln.

The figure below shows the number of votes Lincoln received and the percentage of each state's voters he received in the four border states, with addition to Virginia in which West Virginia would split away from and join the Union as its own state on June 20th, 1863.

Figure 3: Lincoln's 1860 Election Results in the Border States

State	# of Votes	% of vote
Missouri	17,028	10.28%
Kentucky	1,364	0.93%
Maryland	2,294	2.48%
Delaware	3,822	23.72%
Virginia*	1,887	1.13%

*Not a border state. West Virginia would break away and join the Union.

Source: The American Presidency Project, accessed November 1, 2015, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/showelection.php?year=1860>.

This chart shows that not only did Lincoln lose in these states, he was completely blown out of the water by his opponents. However, despite the fact that Lincoln ran on an anti-slavery platform, the four border states stayed loyal to the Union.

So, why is this important, you may ask? Because the border states were on the teetering point of Union loyalty and Confederacy, and as I stated before, Lincoln truly believed the loyalty of the border states was essential to the Union. Lincoln also believed that directly attacking slavery would push the border states over the edge to secession and into the Confederacy.⁵⁰ Because of this, Lincoln walked a tight line when it came to slavery. However, historians who argue for self-emancipation ignore the fact that the border states were not fans of Lincoln. In almost every self-emancipation argument you can find these two phrases:

I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so.⁵¹

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

⁵⁰ Foner, *The Fiery Trial*, 210.

⁵¹ Abraham Lincoln, 1st Inauguration Speech (Washington D.C., March 4, 1861).

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.⁵²

The first quotation is from Lincoln's first inauguration speech. It is no secret that this speech was not anti-slavery. The self-emancipation argument uses this to line show Lincoln's indifference to slavery. However, all that it does is show that Lincoln is very aware that secession has already started to take place and in an attempt to prevent it he did not speak of ending slavery in this speech. Lincoln used this speech in an attempt to ease the minds of slaveholders throughout the country.

The second quotation is a Letter to Horace Greeley. At the time Lincoln's ability and policies were being questioned. This famous line once again seems to show Lincoln's indifference to freeing the slaves. However, what it really does is show Lincoln's ability to play to the crowd. The war had not been going as well as the North had hoped, and at this time people were starting to question the Lincoln administration's management of the war. The first thing this line does is tell Northerners, who still do not approve of the war being a war of slavery, that this is a war to save the country. The second thing it does is send a message to the border states that Lincoln only wants to save the Union. This statement settled the minds of many who thought the war was becoming about slavery. Lincoln made people believe he was still only trying to save the Union at this point, but in reality he was putting the finishing touches on the Emancipation Proclamation and had every intention on ending slavery.

While on the outside, Lincoln appeared to be fighting a battle to only save the Union, but behind the scenes he was tirelessly working to bring the eventual end of slavery. In the first

⁵² Abraham Lincoln, Letter to Horace Greeley, August 22, 1862.

year of the war, Lincoln went to work on a long-term phase out of slavery.⁵³ He began to push the border states. He drafted a proposal to phase out slavery in Delaware.⁵⁴ In March of 1862, he went to Congress to pass a joint resolution to grant aid for the gradual phase out of slavery, but this, just as the proposal in Delaware failed.⁵⁵ Finally, Lincoln would become fed up with the border states' refusal to cooperate. When they continued to refuse to accept a phase out plan Lincoln would turn first to the Second Confiscation Act.⁵⁶ It was at this time Lincoln turned to directly attack slavery in the rebel states as he began to finish and eventually sign the Emancipation Proclamation. The Emancipation Proclamation went into affect on January 1, 1863; on that day every slave in any rebelling areas was from that moment and forever emancipated.⁵⁷

Time and Action

The key argument for self-emancipation is that of the actions of the slaves. The figure below shows a number of notable events in which slaves resisted their captivity, slaveholders feared their slaves, or others rose up in the hope that slaves would join them and resist their owners.

⁵³Striner, *Father Abraham*, 137.

⁵⁴ Striner, *Father Abraham*, 147.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 157.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 168-169.

⁵⁷ Emancipation Proclamation, January 1, 1863; Presidential Proclamations, 1791-1991; Record Group 11; General Records of the United States Government; National Archives.

Figure 4: Slave Resistance

Date	Event
1800	1,000 Slaves March on Richmond.
1811	400 Louisiana slave rise for freedom.
1831	Nat Turners Virginia Rebellion
1837	Band of slave near New Orleans kill several whites.
1849	Slave shoots and kills his owner.
1858	Blacks kill 23 whites
July, 1859	The Liberator reports a rash of slave violence
October, 1859	John Brown's Raid on Harpers Ferry
1861	Slaves resist overseers, 1 overseer ends up dead.
June, 1861	Reports of Slaves becoming lazy and disobedient.

Source: David Williams, *I Freed Myself*.

All but one of the events listed in the above figure shows a number of slave resistances up to the first few months of the Civil War. The one that does not is John Brown's raid; Brown raided Harpers Ferry in hopes that slaves would join him so he could arm them. Hoping to evoke a large scale resistance against slavery. He was successful in taking Harpers Ferry, but was over taken quickly.⁵⁸

The real question is: How does slave resistance stack up against the key events of the Civil War? Did any of the slave resistances coincide or precede the major events of the Civil War? Did any of the slave resistances directly influence a key event? These are the questions that can be answered by looking at the timeline of events. The figure below shows a number of key events during the Civil War that contribute towards the end of slavery.

⁵⁸ Williams, *I Freed Myself*, 51.

Figure 5: Key Civil War Events

Date	Event
November, 1860	Lincoln Elected President
December, 1860	Secession Begins
March, 1861	Attack on Fort Sumter. The Civil War Begins
August, 1861	First Confiscation Act
July, 1862	Second Confiscation Act
January, 1863	Emancipation Proclamation is Issued
January, 1865	13 th Amendment is Passed

Source: David Williams, *I Freed Myself*.

The Comparison is clear. Yes, there were a number of slave resistance events dating back long before Lincoln and the Civil War. So Shouldn't this prove that slaves freed themselves? Not exactly. The answer is a bit more complicated than that. First of all, it needs to be pointed out that I left out any slave resistances that happened after the First Confiscation Act from Figure 4. However, that still leaves a few notable resistances pre-dating Lincoln and the Civil War. All of these events must be recognized to show what slaves were willing to do in order to attain freedom. However, where is the uprising? After each of the events listed in Figure 4 word spread like wild fire of what happened. Yet, no major uprising of slaves happened. In fact, it was not until after the Civil War had started and the Union Army began to occupy part of the south that slaves begin to really resist their chains. The presents of the Union Army in the surrounding areas sparks more attempts to escape and defiance amongst slaves than any small resistance of the past. The Civil War and the Union Army gave slaves the courage and the real hope that their bondage would soon be coming to an end.

Lincoln

The final key argument for the self-emancipation side is one that states Lincoln did not want to free the slaves. In this argument the self-emancipationist would use the quote from Lincoln's First Inaugural Speech, as well as the letter to Horace Greeley. However, they also point to the incident with John C. Fremont. In 1861, after the signing of the First Confiscation Act, John C. Fremont declared all slaves to be free under the new act. Lincoln demanded he recant his statement, but when he refused he was replaced.⁵⁹ The final argument against Lincoln is that he did not push to end slavery until late in the war. All these key aspects come back to one statement: Lincoln did not want to end slavery.

However, that could not be further from the truth. As it has been stated a number of times throughout this paper, Lincoln had always spoken out against slavery, especially from the year 1854 and on.

But all this; to my judgment, furnishes no more excuse for permitting slavery to go into our own free territory, than it would for reviving the African slave trade by law. The law which forbids the bringing of slave from Africa; and that which has so long forbid the taking them to Nebraska, can hardly be distinguished on any moral principle; and the repeal of the former could fin quite as plausible excuses as the latter.⁶⁰

The excerpt above is from the speech Lincoln gave at Peoria in 1854. This speech was given in response to the Missouri compromise being revoked. In Peoria, Lincoln spoke for hours about the atrocity congress had just committed by revoking the Compromise. While Lincoln's speech discusses the evils of allowing slavery to spread west. It is clear by the end of his speech

⁵⁹ Williams, *I Freed Myself*, 76.

⁶⁰ Abraham Lincoln, "The Peoria Speech" (Peoria, Illinois, October 16, 1854). Accessed August 10, 2015. <http://www.nps.gov/liho/learn/historyculture/peoriaspeech.htm>.

that Lincoln is about to become one of the most prominent anti-slavery speakers of the time. The Peoria speech is largely credited with putting Lincoln on the map.

A few years later, the Supreme Court would rule on the Dred Scott case. The court ruled that blacks whether they be free or slaves could not be citizens of the United States, and it also claimed the Missouri Compromise to be unconstitutional. A few short months later Lincoln would speak to the city of Springfield in response to the Dred Scott case. In his speech, Lincoln takes aim at the illogical and incorrect statements made by the judges regarding their ruling. For instance, Lincoln points to Chief Justice Taney's insistence that the Declaration of Independence, or the Constitution was not made for blacks.⁶¹ However, Lincoln responds to Taney's justification by pointing out that at the time of the two documents five of the 13 states allowed for free blacks to vote.⁶² The Springfield Speech shows another instance of Lincoln's willingness to stand up and voice his opinion against slavery and injustice.

In 1858, Lincoln ran for US Senate against Stephen A. Douglas. While Lincoln would eventually lose this election, the seven debates held between him and Douglas would propel Lincoln into the national spotlight. Right from the start in the first debate Lincoln came out firing against slavery as he said, "This declared indifference, but as I must think, covert zeal for the spread of slavery, I can not but hate, I hate it because of the monstrous injustice of slavery itself. I hate it because it deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world –

⁶¹ Abraham Lincoln, "Springfield Speech" (Springfield, Illinois, June 26, 1857). Accessed August 10, 2015. <http://www.mrlincolnanefreedom.org/inside.asp?ID=16&subjectID=2>.

⁶² Abraham Lincoln, "Springfield Speech" (Springfield, Illinois, June 26, 1857). Accessed August 10, 2015. <http://www.mrlincolnanefreedom.org/inside.asp?ID=16&subjectID=2>.

enables the enemies of free institution, with plausibility, to taunt us as hypocrites...."⁶³ The following six debates would follow along these same lines. In the third debate Lincoln would say he believed that he supports leaving the issue of slavery as the Founding Fathers had left it. However, he explains that he believes that the Founding Fathers left slavery on a path of its ultimate demise, and the Democrats have distorted their view allowing it to survive.⁶⁴ By the end of the fourth debate Lincoln makes it perfectly clear that there will never be peace regarding the question of slavery as long as the situation stands as it did.⁶⁵

If you will take the Judge's speeches, and select the short and pointed sentences expressed by him as his declaration that he "don't care whether Slavery is voted up or down" --- you will see at once that this is perfectly logical, if you do not admit that slavery is wrong. If you do admit that it is wrong, Judge Douglas cannot logically say that he don't care whether a wrong is voted up or voted down.⁶⁶

Clearly, there is obvious a theme to what Lincoln has to say throughout the debates with Douglas. Lincoln continues to speak out against slavery and especially its expansion.

Another important speech given by Lincoln is the Cooper Union Address. He gave this speech in February, 1860. Lincoln's topic was the views on slavery held by the 39 signers of the

⁶³ Abraham Lincoln, "First Debate with Stephen A. Douglas" (Ottawa, Illinois, August 21, 1858). Accessed August 10, 2015. <http://www.nps.gov/liho/learn/historyculture/debate1.htm>.

⁶⁴ Abraham Lincoln, "Third Debate with Stephen A. Douglas" (Jonesboro, Illinois, September 15, 1858). Accessed August 10, 2015. <http://www.nps.gov/liho/learn/historyculture/debate3.htm>.

⁶⁵ Abraham Lincoln, "Fourth Debate with Stephen A. Douglas" (Charleston, Illinois, September 18, 1858). Accessed August 10, 2015. <http://www.nps.gov/liho/learn/historyculture/debate4.htm>.

⁶⁶ Abraham Lincoln, "Fifth Debate with Stephen A. Douglas" (Galesburg, Illinois, October 7, 1858). Accessed August 10, 2015. <http://www.nps.gov/liho/learn/historyculture/debate5.htm>.

Constitution. Lincoln discusses how 21 of them voted to keep slavery out of the expanding territories.⁶⁷ He also relates the views of these 21 men to his own.

Authors such as Berlin and Fields look at Lincoln's speeches and pick them apart sentence by sentence. There is not doubt that when you look at many of the speeches and letters written by Lincoln that you can find sentences here and there that can be taken as evidence that Lincoln was not a man looking to free any slaves. However, many of those lines are taken out of context, which is why you find many of them listed without and other portions of the speech or letter it came from. An example of that is in Lincoln's first inaugural speech. Lincoln says, "I have no purpose, directly, or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have now lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so."⁶⁸ However, what Berlin or Fields do not mention when they bring this up is that secession has already began by the time Lincoln was inaugurated, and coming out and blatantly speaking out against slavery would only have ensured the remaining states left the Union, possibly in addition to the states that would become known as the border states.

Lincoln is often criticized for not doing more sooner. However, from the moment he took office he refused to hear or allow any legislation that would allow for the expansion of slavery.⁶⁹ He also signed every piece of anti-slavery legislation that came across his desk. Lincoln would use the save the Union goal outwardly because it gave Northerners what they

⁶⁷ Abraham Lincoln, "Cooper Union Address" (New York, New York, February, 1860). Accessed August 10, 2015. <http://abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/cooper.htm>.

⁶⁸ Abraham Lincoln, 1st Inauguration Speech (Washington D.C., March 4, 1861).

⁶⁹ Striner, *Father Abraham*, 114.

wanted to hear, and eased the fears of slaveholders in the border states who feared they would lose their slaves.

Conclusion

The debate between pro-Lincoln historians and self-emancipationists is still a relatively young debate. It is bound to continue to draw attention from historians as people continue to write about Lincoln and/or emancipation. No matter what side these future works come down on it is imperative that they look at all aspects of the Civil War in doing so. Abraham Lincoln is an enigma. We do not have a personal diary to analyze his personal private thoughts. This leaves us only with the ability to take his known speeches and letters and analyze them within the context of the time he gave them.

There is no doubt that slaves played a role in their own emancipation. The work that they did to help Union soldiers, and even the sacrifice many blacks made by enlisting in the Union Army after they were permitted, can not be over looked. They played a large role helping the Union Army on their way to victory. In this respect, the self-emancipationist is correct, in the fact that blacks helped emancipate themselves. However, when it is all said and done, Lincoln deserves credit for freeing the slaves. As McPherson argued in his article, without Lincoln there is no secession. Without secession there is no Civil War, and, therefore, without Lincoln there is no Civil War. However, not only was Lincoln's election the leading cause of the Civil War, his brilliant political savvy held what was left of the Union together by understanding he had to appear to be solely trying to save the Union publicly all the while trying to bring an end to slavery behind the scenes. Lincoln was a master politician. He had an incredible talent for reading the people, and an even greater talent for manipulating public opinion. Today we

would call him a wordsmith. When he spoke people listened. When he spoke there was purpose and direction. When Lincoln spoke the people followed him. Lincoln had an ability to convince anyone that their worst enemy was their best friend, and he used this genius to lead the American people to come to the right conclusion that slavery had to end. No, Lincoln did not single handedly end slavery, but he refused to compromise on the issue. When the border states refused to cooperate with him, he formulated a full on assault by issuing the Emancipation Proclamation and pushing through the 13th Amendment. In many ways Lincoln was a magician. He had the country look right, but the real trick was happening on the left.

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