

# Perspectives on Emancipation

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, and the issue of abolition in general, elicited a number of reactions. Predictably, Confederate leaders fought against the Proclamation and reinforced their commitment to slavery. In contrast, a number of black men took advantage of the Emancipation Proclamation to serve in the Union Army with distinction. The New York City draft riots, meanwhile, revealed a very different response to emancipation among the city's White working class.

This tutorial examines the Emancipation Proclamation in two parts:

## 1. African-American Soldiers

The most radical provision of the Emancipation Proclamation stated that African Americans would “be received into the armed service of the United States....”



### DID YOU KNOW

At the beginning of the war, the Union army refused to accept black volunteers and used contraband—enslaved people who had escaped to Union lines—for manual labor.

Lincoln's proclamation led to the enrollment of thousands of African-American men in the Union Army. Both formerly enslaved people and free Black northerners enlisted. By the end of the Civil War in 1865, approximately 190,000 African-American men had served in the Union army.

After the announcement of the Emancipation Proclamation, northern abolitionists and other advocates for racial equality helped recruit for the Union Army. They believed that participation in the military would help African Americans to truly secure the freedom that the Emancipation Proclamation could only promise.

Read the following selection from a March 2, 1863 speech by Frederick Douglass titled “Men of Color, To Arms!”

### Frederick Douglass, Excerpt from "Men of Color, To Arms!"

“When first the rebel cannon shattered the walls of [Fort] Sumter and drove away its starving garrison, I predicted that the war then and there inaugurated would not be fought out entirely by white men. Every month's experience during these dreary years has confirmed that opinion. A war

undertaken and brazenly carried on for the perpetual enslavement of colored men, calls logically and loudly for colored men to help suppress it. Only a moderate share of sagacity was needed to see that the arm of the slave was the best defense against the arm of the slaveholder. Hence with every reverse to the national arms, with every exulting shout of victory raised by the slaveholding rebels, I have implored the imperiled nation to unchain against her foes, her powerful black hand. Slowly and reluctantly that appeal is beginning to be heeded. Stop not now to complain that it was not heeded sooner. It may or it may not have been best that it should not. This is not the time to discuss that question. Leave it to the future. When the war is over, the country is saved, peace is established, and the black man's rights are secured, as they will be, history with an impartial hand will dispose of that and sundry other questions....”



#### THINK ABOUT IT

1. Given the evidence provided, how would Douglass respond to those who opposed Black participation in the military?
2. Why does Douglass insist that African Americans should not complain about their previous inability to participate in the military?

Douglass, and many other advocates of racial equality, believed that Black participation in the military would require all Americans—and the federal government—to address the issues of Black rights and citizenship. As he stated later in the same speech:

“This is our golden opportunity. Let us accept it, and forever wipe out the dark reproaches unsparingly hurled against us by our enemies.”

Military service proved to be a liberating experience for many African Americans. 85% of Black soldiers in the Union Army were former enslaved persons. Most of them had joined up in the South, after the Union army had freed them. They used the opportunity to fight for the liberation of all enslaved people and to end slavery for good.

When allowed to serve in combat, many Black regiments performed heroically. The Fifty-Fourth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteers distinguished itself at Fort Wagner in South Carolina in July of 1863. The Regiment fought valiantly against an entrenched Confederate position. It was unable to capture the fort, and almost half of its men were killed during the assault, but this battle helped to dispel doubts about the ability of Black soldiers to serve under fire.

Nevertheless, racism in the Union army ran deep. Many Black soldiers were assigned to haul supplies, cook, dig trenches, and perform other manual labor, rather than serving in combat.



This 1865 daguerreotype illustrates three of the Union's distinct advantages: African American soldiers, a stream of cannons and supplies, and an extensive railroad grid.

credit: Library of Congress

In addition (and despite promises to the contrary), Black soldiers initially received lower wages than their White counterparts: ten dollars per month, with three dollars deducted for clothing. White soldiers, in contrast, received 13 dollars monthly, with no deductions. It took the work of Frederick Douglass, other abolitionists, and their Republican supporters in Congress to correct this discriminatory practice. In 1864, Black soldiers began to receive equal wages.

The Confederacy showed no mercy to African Americans who served in the Union Army. Black soldiers were often sold into slavery or even executed when captured by the Confederates.

➔ **EXAMPLE** In April 1864, Confederate forces under General Nathan Bedford Forrest (a founder of the Ku Klux Klan), overran Fort Pillow, Tennessee, which was defended by a black regiment. After the Union garrison surrendered, the Confederates executed several dozen Black soldiers, and some White



soldiers, including the fort's commanding officer.

The performance of African-American soldiers changed President Lincoln's outlook on emancipation and citizenship, as evidenced in a speech he gave in Baltimore on April 18, 1864, shortly after he received word of the incident at Fort Pillow:

Soldiers of the Union Army pose together in this photograph, although Black soldiers were often kept separate from White soldiers, and only given menial jobs.

#### Abraham Lincoln, Excerpt from Speech in Baltimore (1864)

"There seems to be some anxiety in the public mind whether the government is doing its duty to the colored soldier, and to the service, at this point. At the beginning of the war, and for some time, the use of colored troops was not contemplated; and how the change of purpose was wrought, I will not now take time to explain. Upon a clear conviction of duty I resolved to turn that element of strength to account; and I am responsible for it to the American people, to the Christian world, to history, and on my final account to God. Having determined to use the negro as a soldier, there is no way but to give him all the protection given to any other soldier. The difficulty is not in stating the principle, but in practically applying it. It is a mistake to suppose the government is indifferent to this matter, or is not doing the best it can in regard to it...."



#### THINK ABOUT IT

What does Lincoln mean when he says that the difficulty in providing equal protection to Black soldiers lies not in principle, "but in practically applying it"?

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## 2. New York City Draft Riots

A number of White northerners opposed emancipation. Among the most notable were working-class, Irish, urban dwellers, many of whom maintained their affiliation with the Democratic Party during the Civil War.

Mobilization for the war effort brought significant changes to this group of urban laborers. Wartime contracts boosted production and increased profits for factory owners and financiers, but workers often struggled to buy everyday necessities due to inflation. Passage of the Enrollment Act in March of 1863 compelled many of these men to register for the draft. Many White urban laborers did not respond positively to the Emancipation Proclamation. Although racism was involved, much of their opposition was economically based: they feared that they would have to compete with freed Black men for precious wartime jobs.

In New York City, these tensions erupted in July of 1863 during the **New York City draft riots**.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### New York City Draft Riots

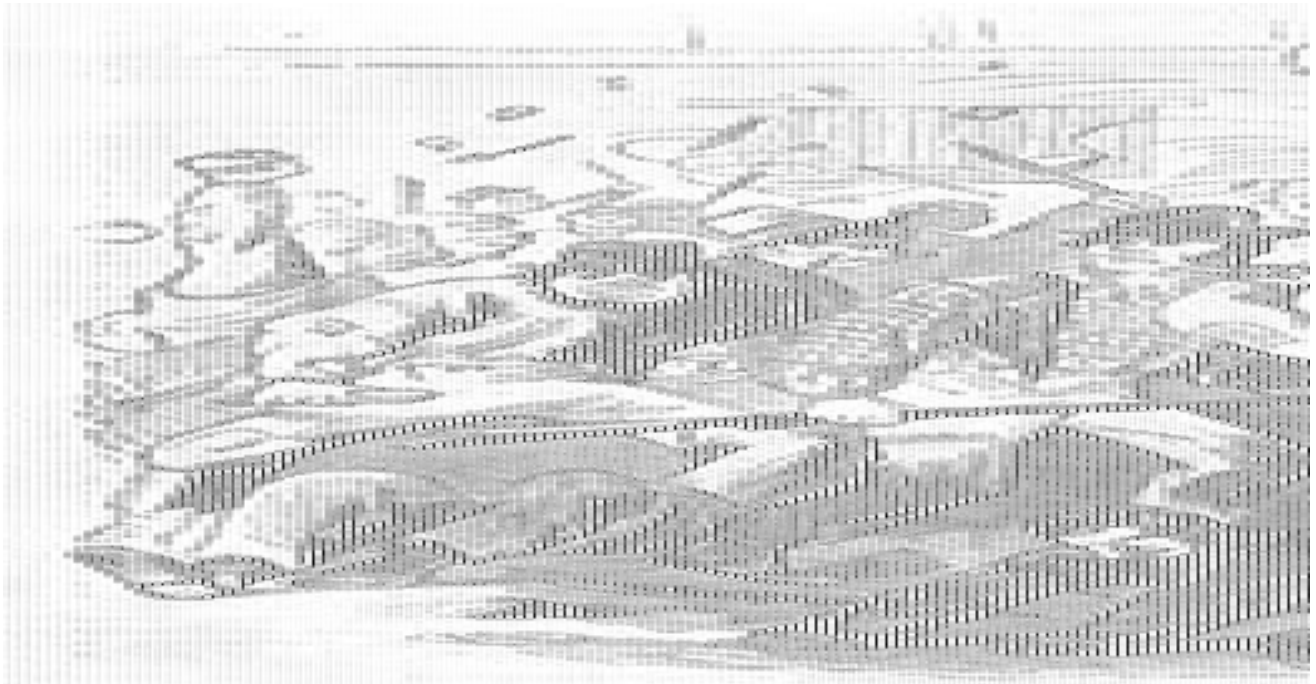
Occurred between July 13th and 16th of 1863, when some members of the city's White working class violently protested against the Union military draft..

On July 13, 1863, two days after the first draft lottery took place in New York City, White working-class frustration with the war effort and emancipation erupted violently. It is believed that a volunteer fire company, whose commander had been drafted, initiated the riot. Crowds, including a large number of Irish immigrants,

assembled at draft offices throughout the city during the lottery, threatening to attack Union draft officials. On July 13th, these mobs made good on their threats: the city descended into violence.

The rioters chose targets associated with the Union army, or with African Americans. Draft offices and other federal property, including an armory, went up in flames. A store that had supplied uniforms to the Union army was also burned. The homes of several prominent Republicans and abolitionists were sacked.

The mobs also destroyed property owned by African Americans and attacked stores that employed them. An orphanage for African-American children was burned to the ground.



**The New York City draft riots revealed that the North was divided over racial equality despite Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation.**

On the fourth day of the riots, Union troops, many of whom had participated in the Battle of Gettysburg, arrived in New York City to end the violence. Millions of dollars in property had been destroyed. More than 100 people had died, approximately 1,000 were injured, and about one-fifth of the city's African-American population had fled New York City.

After the riots ended, a group of businessmen formed The Committee of Merchants for the Relief of Colored People Suffering from the Late Riots to provide aid to the city's black residents. The committee collected newspaper accounts and testimony from African Americans who had suffered as a result of the violence.

A selection from the Committee's report is provided below. It details the experiences of three people who were victimized by the mobs. While reading it, pay attention to how the Committee portrays the victims and the mob's motivations.

### **Report from The Committee of Merchants for the Relief of Colored People Suffering from the Late Riots**

**ABRAHAM FRANKLIN**

This young man who was murdered by the mob on the corner of twenty-seventh St., and Seventh avenue, was a quiet, inoffensive man, 23 years of age, of unexceptionable character, and a member of Zion African Church in this city. Although a cripple, he earned a living for himself and his mother by serving a gentleman in the capacity of coachman. A short time previous to the assault upon his person, he called upon his mother to see if anything could be done by him for her safety. The old lady, who is noted for her piety and her Christian deportment, said she considered herself perfectly safe; but if her time to die had come, she was ready to die. Her son then knelt down by her side, and implored the protection of Heaven in behalf of his mother. The old lady was affected to tears, and said to our informant that it seemed to her that good angels were present in the room. Scarcely had the suppliant risen from his knees, when the mob broke down the door, seized him, beat him over the head and face with fists and clubs, and then hanged him in the presence of his mother....

#### PETER HEUSTON

...sixty-three years of age, a Mohawk Indian, with dark complexion and straight black hair, who has for several years been a resident of [New York City]...and who has obtained a livelihood as a laborer, proved a victim to the late riots.

His wife died about three weeks before the riots, leaving with her husband an only child...aged eight years, whom the [Committee of Merchants] have undertaken to adopt with a view of affording her a guardianship and an education. Heuston served with the New York Volunteers in the Mexican[-American] War, and has always been loyal to our government. He was brutally attacked on the 13th of July by a gang of ruffians who evidently thought him to be of the African race because of his dark complexion. He died within four days at Bellevue hospital from his injuries....

#### JAMES COSTELLO

...killed on Tuesday morning, July 14th. Costello was a shoemaker, an active man in his business--industrious and sober. He went out early in the morning upon an errand, was accosted, and finally was pursued by a powerful man. He ran down the street--endeavored to make his escape--was nearly overtaken by his pursuer in self-defense he turned and shot the rioter with a revolver....

Costello was immediately set upon by the mob. They first mangled his body, then hanged it. They then cut down his body and dragged it through the gutters smashing it with stones, and finally burnt it. The mob then attempted to kill Mrs. Costello and her children but she escaped by climbing fences, and taking refuge in a Police Station house. Mrs. Costello is a Christian woman and has three or four children....”



#### THINK ABOUT IT

1. In what ways are the experiences of the three victims similar? In what ways are they different?
2. How do these accounts portray the mob? What evidence do the accounts provide of the mob's motivations?



#### REFLECT

Imagine you're developing a research project on the New York City draft riots. In addition to the report written by the Committee of Merchants for the Relief of Colored People Suffering from the Late Riots, what

other primary sources and perspectives might you include to develop a complete picture of the events that occurred?



## BRAINSTORM

Recall Frederick Douglass's statement (included in this tutorial, above) that participation in the military would enable African Americans to "forever wipe out the dark reproaches unsparingly hurled against us by our enemies." Given the evidence provided in this tutorial, how well prepared was the Union to fight a war to end slavery? To promote racial equality?



## SUMMARY

The Emancipation Proclamation transformed the Civil War from a conflict to restore the Union into a struggle to end slavery. Freedom from slavery had always been the primary goal for African Americans during the war. The Emancipation Proclamation provided them with an opportunity to achieve their goal by enlisting in the Union armed forces. Black military achievements changed Lincoln's views on African Americans and racial equality. However, the New York City draft riots revealed that equal protection and opportunity for African Americans remained important challenges for the Union.

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## REFERENCES

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Douglass, F., "Men of Color, To Arms," 1863. Ret from the LOC.[bit.ly/2kxQreT](https://bit.ly/2kxQreT)

Lincoln, Address at Sanitary Fair, Ret from [bit.ly/2IWduNm](https://bit.ly/2IWduNm)

Report of the Committee of merchants for the relief of colored people, suffering from the late riots in the city of NY. (1863), LOC, American Memory [Wikimedia Commons](#)



## ATTRIBUTIONS

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## TERMS TO KNOW

### New York City Draft Riots

Occurred between July 13 and 16, 1863, when the city's White working class violently protested against the Union military draft.



## DATES TO KNOW

### **January 1863**

The Emancipation Proclamation declares enslaved people who live in areas of the Confederacy that are still in rebellion “thenceforward, and forever free”.

### **March 1863**

Frederick Douglass gives his "Men of Color, To Arms!" speech; The Union issues a draft.

### **July 1863**

The 54th Regiment of Massachusetts distinguishes itself at Fort Wagner; Protests and rioting in New York City erupt against the Union military draft.

### **April 1864**

Confederate forces overrun an all-Black regiment at the Fort Pillow Massacre.