

The Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment

Imagine that you have been a slave your whole life. One day, someone gathers all the slaves together and reads out loud something called the “Emancipation Proclamation.” It’s a statement by President Abraham Lincoln declaring that slaves are now free. How would that feel? How did it happen?

Slavery first came to the U.S. Colonies in the early 1600’s. Different colonies had different laws about slavery. Later, when those colonies became states, they still had different laws about slavery.

There wasn’t just one law for the whole country. In Northern states like Massachusetts and New York, for example, slavery was against the law. In Southern states like Georgia and Virginia, slavery was legal.

In the 1800’s, more people began speaking out against slavery. Most – but not all -- of the people who wanted it to be illegal were in the North. But the slave owners in the South didn’t agree. They depended on slave work to make money. Most of them grew crops like tobacco and cotton, which need a lot of workers. To pay all of those workers, the Southern slave owners said, would mean they would have to be poor. Slavery was a way of life in the South, and the slave owners did not want to change it. Although many Northerners wanted the South to change, they did not want to force them to do so. The two sides tried to find a compromise, but none lasted. In the end, they fought a war – the Civil War – that settled the issue permanently.

During the war, President Abraham Lincoln decided the time had come to take the risk of telling the South what to do. In 1862, he wrote the “Emancipation Proclamation.” “Emancipation” means freedom, and a “Proclamation” is a statement made by a ruler, like a President. The Emancipation Proclamation freed slaves in the South. Slaves who were freed were stunned by the news, and overjoyed. They were no longer anyone’s property – they were free. Many of them simply stopped working and walked away from their homes, heading North. Others stayed behind to work – for pay.

But Lincoln was not done. He had freed the slaves only in certain states. And a statement made by a President is a law – but it is not the strongest kind of law. In our country, the most important set of laws is called the Constitution.

Lincoln knew that his Proclamation could be changed – for example, if another President came in who wanted slavery. That’s why he pushed for the country to change the Constitution. That’s hard to do – many people have to agree to it.

In 1865, the United States passed a Constitutional Amendment – a change to the basic law of our land. The change was called the Thirteenth Amendment, and it made slavery illegal in all of the United States for all time.

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