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# Slavery's End Deserves a 150th Celebration

## **Abstract**

As the 150th anniversary of the Civil War winds down toward its conclusion in the spring, it's difficult not to look back on the four years of this sesquicentennial and wonder why it all seemed so lackluster. Unlike the centennial in 1961-65, Congress decided not to create a national commission. And President Obama took a pass on the 150th anniversary of the Gettysburg Address.

But the most surprisingly lackluster remembrance was the one that just slipped by us - the 150th anniversary of the passage of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, abolishing slavery in the United States. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Civil War, Abraham Lincoln, Slavery, Emancipation, Great Emancipator, Emancipation Proclamation, 150th anniversary, 13th Amendment, Abolition, Anti-slavery, Freedom

## **Disciplines**

History | Political History | Public History | Social History | United States History

## Slavery's End Deserves a 150<sup>th</sup> Celebration



An illustration for Harper's Weekly on November 14, 1863 of black troops and escaped slaves listening to a speech by Adjutant-General Thomas in Louisiana.

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By Allen C. Guelzo

As the 150th anniversary of the Civil War winds down toward its conclusion in the spring, it's difficult not to look back on the four years of this sesquicentennial and wonder why it all seemed so lackluster. Unlike the centennial in 1961-65, Congress decided not to create a national commission. And President Obama took a pass on the 150th anniversary of the Gettysburg Address.

But the most surprisingly lackluster remembrance was the one that just slipped by us - the 150th anniversary of the passage of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, abolishing slavery in the United States.

A century and a half ago, this nation poured out billions of dollars and more than 600,000 lives in the Civil War. We even did what Americans had not tried to do for 60 years - we laid hands on our founding document, the Constitution, and wrote an amendment. The Constitution had been considered so sacrosanct that, once the first 12 amendments were adopted, not even Abraham Lincoln was eager to alter it. "Don't interfere with anything in the Constitution," he said in 1856. "That must be maintained, for it is the only safeguard of our liberties."

But something had to be done about slavery. The breakaway Confederacy made its attempt at secession and independence precisely to protect slavery within its boundaries, and the labor of 3.9 million African American slaves contributed hugely to the Confederacy's early success.

Try as he might, Lincoln could find no way to subdue the Confederacy without undermining slavery, too. He hoped, during the first few months of his presidency, that he could offer federal buyouts to purchase and liberate slaves. But their owners threw the proposals back in his face. He then issued the Emancipation Proclamation on Jan. 1, 1863, freeing by presidential declaration slaves in the rebel states. But he had to live with the uncertainty that, once the war was over, the federal courts might declare the proclamation unconstitutional.

By 1864, Lincoln had concluded that only an amendment to the Constitution specifically outlawing slavery would ever rip slavery up by the roots. But an initial push in Congress for such an amendment stalled in the House of Representatives. As the Confederacy began to collapse under Union pounding, Lincoln was faced with a savagely ironic predicament: The Union might win the war and subdue the Confederacy, but the states that had tried to secede in 1861 would be returned to the Union in 1865 with some slaves freed by the proclamation but the legal status of slavery still intact and ready to start again.

It was only with Lincoln's tremendous reelection mandate in 1864 that fresh momentum to pass an abolition amendment asserted itself. We saw how shrewdly Lincoln and congressional Republicans directed that momentum in Steven Spielberg's widely acclaimed *Lincoln* in 2012. And the movie did not exaggerate the joyful pandemonium that broke out on the floor of the House when the amendment squeaked through on Jan. 31, 1865.

"I wish you could have been here the day that the constitutional amendment was passed forever abolishing slavery in the United States," Charles Douglass wrote to his father, the black abolitionist Frederick Douglass. "Such rejoicing I never before witnessed, cannons firing, people hugging and shaking hands, white people, I mean, flags flying. . . . I tell you things are progressing finely."

Indiana Congressman George Julian wrote, "It seemed to me I had been born into a new life, and that the world was overflowing with beauty and joy, while I was inexpressibly thankful for the privilege of recording my name on so glorious a page of the nation's history."

In Philadelphia, the Union League resolved that the "House of the Union League shall be decorated with the National Flag, during the day, and in the evening shall be illuminated."

Sadly, no similar rejoicing marked the 150th anniversary of the amendment. And there are reasons: The 13th Amendment gave African Americans "nothing but freedom" and did little to promote their integration as equal citizens. Like the Emancipation Proclamation (which also disappeared from the Civil War sesquicentennial calendar), the amendment is an irritating reminder that slavery really was the root cause of the Civil War.

And perhaps 150 years later, the abolition of slavery is taken so much for granted we forget how much slavery had been the norm for human societies, and freedom the hard-won exception. Even today, human trafficking flourishes under the radar of Western nations, and terrorism and failed states in the rest of the world have reintroduced human slavery with dismaying ease.

The 13th Amendment was not merely an incident in the long-past details of the American Civil War. It was a blow against centuries of oppression and exploitation everywhere. If we cannot find enough in that to celebrate, we have a far bigger problem at hand than mere historical amnesia.

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