



12-27-2012

Resolute on the Eve of Emancipation

John M. Rudy
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/interpretcw>

 Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), [Public History Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Rudy, John M., "Resolute on the Eve of Emancipation" (2012). *Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public*. 100.

<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/interpretcw/100>

This open access blog post is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Resolute on the Eve of Emancipation

Abstract

In the eyes of William Lloyd Garrison, Abraham Lincoln stood waffling on the issue of slavery in the early days of December 1862. To be quite fair, in Garrison's eyes nearly anyone aside from William Lloyd Garrison stood waffling on the issue of slavery most of the time. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, Samuel Wilkeson, Emancipation, Slaveholder's Rebellion

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Public History | Social History | United States History

Comments

Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

Creative Commons License

Creative

Commons

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

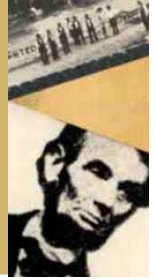
License



Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

www.civilwarconnect.com



Resolute on the Eve of Emancipation

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 27, 2012

In the eyes of William Lloyd Garrison, Abraham Lincoln stood waffling on the issue of slavery in the early days of December 1862. To be quite fair, in Garrison's eyes nearly anyone aside from William Lloyd Garrison stood waffling on the issue of slavery most of the time.

The future of the Emancipation Proclamation still was not yet written in the final few days of 1862. In the White House, Lincoln was polishing and weighing his words. But outside the walls of the Executive Mansion, there was doubt and uncertainty. Would he? Countless ministers in the north penned petitions urging him to follow through on his threat of September. But were the petitions enough?

For one man on the Peninsula, it wouldn't matter. His name was Tom, Garrison's *Liberator* reported in a snippet reprinted from *The New York Tribune*. Tom's [conversation with a Tribune reporter named Samuel Wilkeson](#) was both intriguing and incisive. Wilkeson was traipsing about the area around Norfolk and Fortress Monroe, speaking as he went, "with many intelligent men of color," on the question of emancipation and freedom.

While Sam Wilkeson was fighting a war with a pen, paper and the telegrapher's key, his son Bayard was fighting with field artillery and hot iron. As the ink dried on the *Tribune* and *Liberator* that December, Sam was serving as First Lieutenant in the 4th Light Artillery, Battery G., lobbing shells across the Rappahannock River at the rebel hordes. Eventually, Bayard would fight at Gettysburg to disastrous results. Each Wilkeson fought the battle against the Slaveholder's Rebellion in his own peculiar way.

While America sat tensely awaiting Lincoln's pen, Sam Wilkeson spoke with a black man, a former slave named Tom.

Wilkeson asked a simple question. Why didn't the black men of the South fight for the United States?

"They expected to, sir," Tom told Sam, but they, "were driven from your lines and camps, and pretty plainly told that you didn't want anything to do with us; that you meant to carry on the war, and leave us in slavery at the end of the war."

VIEWS OF AN INTELLIGENT NEGRO.

Samuel Wilkeson, Esq., of the New York Tribune, in a letter from the Peninsula, relates the following remarkable conversation held with an intelligent negro on the subject of the slave policy of the Government:—

I have talked with many intelligent men of color on this subject. The superior man of all is known as "Tom." I one day drew him out of his guarded silence on this theme by saying, "I am surprised, Tom, that the negroes in this Peninsula don't fight for us."

"I reckon you ain't, Mr. W.; you know too much."

"Why don't they fight for us, Tom?"

"They expected to, sir, and all the colored men, from here to Texas, expected to."

"Why didn't they?"

"You know as well as I. We were driven from your lines and camps, and pretty plainly told that you didn't want anything to do with us; that you meant to carry on the war, and leave us in slavery at the end of the war. So we left you to carry on the war as you could, and a pretty poor flat you are making of it, too, Mr. W.," said Tom, warming into earnestness. "The North can't conquer the South without the help of the slaves. We men of color, who have communication with each other through all the States, (the leading men, I mean,) know this. We know, too, that if the war lasts, one party or the other party will give us our freedom."

"What is that you say—the slaveholders free their slaves?"

"They certainly will do it, if they can't whip you otherwise. You may depend on that. My friends in the South all tell me so. Our position, Mr. W., is like that of the San Domingo blacks. They put

Still Tom, from his perch on one of the lowest rungs of society, could see the plain truth: "The North can't conquer the South without the help of the slaves.... We know, too, that if the war lasts, one party or the other party will give us our freedom." Whichever side offered the slaves their freedom would win their loyalty. "*We mean to sell ourselves for freedom,*" Tom exclaimed, "*we hope to you Northern men.*"



The dream of a slave...
in blue or possibly gray.

Tom could see more. "How long would this war last, if we were freed by act of Congress and the President's Proclamation," the wizened slave explained, "the rebel armies would melt away in a week." But if the war were to be won, then it needed to be won in whole. If the United States was to be won, Tom explained, "you can't save it without the social revolution," without destroying slavery.

Sam's account ended with a keen warning from the former slave. "*You white men of the North will go into slavery,*" Wilkeson reported, "*unless you take us black men of the South out of slavery; and Mr. W., you have not a great deal of time left in which to decide what you will do!*"

Did Tom really exist? It's tough to say. He very well might have been a clever literary device derived by an anti-slavery reporter trying to capture the stakes in the waning moments before Lincoln would or wouldn't make his move.

Sam Wilkeson's opinion was clear regardless. The words of Tom, whether he existed or not, should be heeded. For Sam Wilkeson, abolitionist reporter, emancipation *must* come. And through the blood of thousands of black and white soldiers, including Sam's son Bayard, emancipation *would* come.