“Breaking that ‘backbone’": Images of Emancipation and the Great Emancipator

During the Civil War, the printmakers, artists and photographers represented the great events of the war to an eager nationwide audience. President Lincoln often willingly sat for portraits so that artists could produce images of portentous events for mass consumption; he did this, in part, because he felt it might help him win elections and keep popular support. The Emancipation Proclamation was an important event in Lincoln’s presidency that did not lead to a huge outpouring of prints and cartoons on the subject. An explanation for this, in part, is Lincoln’s relative unpopularity as a subject during points of his presidency. Harold Holzer relates that Lincoln was not a popular subject for printmakers for most of 1861 and 1862 and in 1864 and early in 1865. The Act itself was controversial to some; Holzer states that the Act, “when first issued, was bitterly controversial and widely condemned, not only in the Confederacy but also among northerners, large numbers of whom were willing to fight a war to save the Union but not to free blacks.” Other than caricature, printmakers tended to stay away from controversial subjects. In addition to the Proclamation being controversial, race played a part in the lack of early depictions of the Proclamation. It was not believed that white people would want to purchase prints that depicted African Americans. As Holzer states, “Moreover, at its most basic – and perhaps, to white customers, most threatening – level, the proclamation promised to change the status of black people.

5 Ibid.
From all that we know, white people did not then display pictures of black people in their homes. There was also an element of surprise regarding the issuance of the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln had earlier implied that he would not be issuing any proclamations regarding the abolition of slavery. The announcement of the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation surprised the printmakers, and they had to scramble to begin to produce the images of the Emancipation Proclamation.

An early print regarding emancipation is by Benjamin Day, who drew it in 1862. Entitled “Breaking that “Backbone””, it focuses on the use of emancipation as a tool against the Confederacy (Figure 1). Released before the issuance of the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, the print shows Jefferson Davis leading an animal named “Rebellion”. General Henry Halleck wields a hammer labeled “skill” in a futile attempt to break the “backbone” of the rebellion. General McClellan holds a hammer labeled “Strategy,” and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton holds a hammer labeled “Draft”, his weapon of choice to end the war. President Lincoln holds an axe labeled “Emancipation Proclamation”. Stanton says, “Halleck may use his skill and Mac his strategy, but this draft will do the business.” Day significantly shows Lincoln saying, “You can try him with that, but I’m afraid this axe of mine is the only thing that will fetch him.” Some historians point out that emancipation was a tool, along with larger armies and fresh commanders, that policymakers felt could be used to break the rebellion and end the war.

6 Ibid.
the war. The idea of emancipation being used as a weapon therefore comes relatively early in the war effort.

The 1864 presidential election was the cause of a number of emancipation prints. This campaign came 20 months after Lincoln signed the initial Emancipation Proclamation.\textsuperscript{10} Emancipation was one of the major issues of the campaign, and as such, it was the focus of attention for printmakers and cartoonists.\textsuperscript{11} Some feared Lincoln’s call to abolish slavery would be the cause of his defeat in the election. G.W. Bromley’s print, “Political caricature. No. 3, The abolition catastrophe. Or the November smash-up” (Figure 2) emphatically shows the fear that emancipation would cause Lincoln to lose the election to McClellan. The print features a train labeled “Union” heading to the White House. McClellan is portrayed as an engineer, driving the engine called “Democracy.” Lincoln drives a train that wrecks upon several rocks. These rocks are labeled “Emancipation”, “Confiscation”, “$400,000,000,000 Public Debt”, and

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Benjamin Day. “Breaking that ‘Backbone’”. Image courtesy of Library of Congress, American Cartoon Prints collection and Popular Graphic Arts Collection.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{10} Harold Holzer, “Picturing Freedom: The Thirteenth Amendment in the Graphic Arts,” 235.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 98.
“Abolitionism.” The meaning was clear: the Emancipation Proclamation, among other things, threatened to derail Lincoln’s re-election.

Few negative depictions of Lincoln writing the emancipation survive. Adalbert Volck, a German born dentist who lived in Baltimore during the Civil War, created an intriguing look at Lincoln writing the Emancipation Proclamation. Volck took part in the March on Berlin in 1848, demanding a reformed Germany. After the failed uprising, facing the prospect of forced service in the Bavarian army, Volck fled to New York City and then to Baltimore. In 1852, he married a woman from Baltimore, and he created a life for himself as a dentist and teacher at the Baltimore School of Dental Surgery. It is unclear why he became a Southern sympathizer, but by 1861, he was producing illustrations and secretly circulating them around Baltimore. By 1863, he was circulating his cartoons and prints, under the name V. Blada, to approximately 200

---


14 Ibid., 68

15 Ibid., 69.
subscribers in Baltimore.\textsuperscript{16} Few people at the time saw his prints, although many believe they were more influential than they were due to their frequent reprinting in textbooks.\textsuperscript{17}

Volck’s “Writing the Emancipation” (Figure 3) is one of his prints seen by few people during the Civil War. Abraham Lincoln sits at a desk, writing the Proclamation. His feet rest on the Constitution, showing his disregard for the document. An imp holds the ink Lincoln is using to write the document. A picture of the slave uprising in Saint Domingue and a portrait of John Brown as a martyr are on the walls.\textsuperscript{18} Volck’s simple pen and ink drawing skillfully shows his disdain for the Emancipation Proclamation and its meaning. While visually arresting, Volck’s prints did little to sway public opinion in the direction he intended, as the public did not see them.\textsuperscript{19} However, his print does show the beliefs and prejudices of those living in the Border States.\textsuperscript{20}

\begin{figure}[h!]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.8\textwidth]{Figure3.png}
\caption{Adalbert Volck. “Writing the Emancipation.” Image courtesy of Library of Congress, Civil War Treasures from the New York Historical Society.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 72.
\textsuperscript{17} Holzer, “Picturing Freedom; The Emancipation Proclamation in Art, Iconography, and Memory,” 106.
\textsuperscript{18} Volck, Adalbert John, artist. “Writing the Emancipation Proclamation.” Etching. 1863. From The Library of Congress, Civil War Treasures from the New York Historical Society. http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/h?ammem/cwnyhs:@field(DOCID+@lit(ab01005)).
\textsuperscript{19} Voss, 83.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
Prints created in the North tended to be laudatory of the Emancipation Proclamation. David Gilmour Blythe’s print, “President Lincoln, writing the Proclamation of Freedom. January 1st, 1863” (Figure 4) falls in this category. Widely reproduced in textbooks, the print and lithograph are actually quite scarce, leading Harold Holzer to speculate that “Blythe’s design and the lithographer’s adaptation . . . elicited little notice or approval from picture-buying audiences of the Civil War era.” The relative unpopularity of the print could be because it is crowded with symbols, making it graphically busy and difficult to decode. The print shows a casual Lincoln, clad in his shirtsleeves and slippered feet, writing the Emancipation in a disorganized, cluttered room. Some suggest the chaos of the room is to reflect the chaos of the war and the pressures facing Lincoln as a wartime leader. Some of the symbolic representations portrayed include a bust of former President James Buchanan, hanging by a noose; the Constitution sitting on Lincoln’s lap; a map of the rebellious states, covered by a rail-splitter’s maul; a Bible, upon which Lincoln rests his hand; and the scales of justice in the right hand corner. There is also a picture of shackles depicted in the background of the picture. Published in 1863, this is one of the early emancipation prints.

22 Ibid., 104.
23 Ibid, 105.
Emancipation was not always visually represented using Abraham Lincoln. One example is a carte de visite entitled “Emancipation” by artist G.G. Fish (Figure 5). Columbia stands over two freed slaves, holding the Emancipation Proclamation in her hand with the American flag in the background. The slaves are kneeling in a posture of gratitude. The imagery of kneeling slaves is a holdover from typical abolitionist prints of the period. Jan Nederveen Pieterse, in *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*, speaks about such iconography. He states,

The central icon of abolitionism, the figure of a black kneeling, hands folded and eyes cast upward, carried a clear message. It made emancipation conditional - on condition of conversion, on condition of docility and meekness, on condition of being on one’s knees. This imagery was more an affirmation of Christianity than of the emancipation of blacks.26

Many depictions that featured African Americans often relegated them to the fringes of the scene, shown as ex-slaves being lifted to their feet by Lincoln or Columbia. Artists felt that depictions of the liberation of the slaves would have limited appeal and would not sell on the white-dominated market. Depictions such as this made the revolutionary aspect of Lincoln’s act more palatable to whites.

“Watch Meeting, December 31st, 1862. Waiting for the Hour” focuses solely on African-Americans and their reaction to Emancipation (Figure 6). A group of African American men, women and children gather around a table and a man with a watch, waiting for the hour the Emancipation Proclamation goes into effect. The print was popular with some Northern abolitionists, and William Lloyd Garrison had a copy sent to Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln, however, did not acknowledge receipt of the print for over six months, forcing Garrison to enquire whether he had received it. Holzer states that

28 Ibid.
Lincoln was not interested in Emancipation prints unless they portrayed Abraham Lincoln.\textsuperscript{32}

Thomas Nast also created a cartoon that featured African Americans prominently. Unlike other prints on the subject, it features African Americans predominately in the print. “Emancipation” features the serene home life of an African American family in the center of the print, showing what emancipation meant for African-Americans. A portrait of Abraham Lincoln overlooks the family. Images on the left show life before emancipation. A slave auction is depicted as well as a white man whipping an African American woman. A fugitive slave is depicted being hunted through a southern swamp in the top left corner. The right side of the shows a variety of images, including an African American mother sending her children to school, and a man receiving his wages.\textsuperscript{33} Nast’s print is a hopeful and optimistic vision of what emancipation will mean for African-American families.

\textsuperscript{32} Holzer, “Picturing Freedom: The Emancipation Proclamation in Art, Iconography, and Memory,” 104.

A popular type of Lincoln depiction showed him as the Great Emancipator. After Lincoln’s assassination, it became especially popular to create prints of Washington and Lincoln together. While many initial depictions of Lincoln after his death showed deathbed scenes, the murder scene, and family composites, printmakers soon always began to create “Great Emancipator” scenes as well.\(^{34}\) J. L. Magee published an interesting version of this, one that depicts Lincoln with both whites and African Americans in his role as the Great Emancipator. Figure 8, “Emancipation of the Slaves . . .“, shows Lincoln arm raised and both African Americans and whites kneeling at his feet in gratitude. Lincoln holds the Emancipation Proclamation in his hand and has broken shackles beneath his feet. A public school with a flag entitled “public education for all classes” is depicted in the left side background of the print. The phrase “Freedom for all, both black and white” is blazoned across the print.\(^{35}\) What sets this print apart is

\(^{34}\) Holzer, “Picturing Freedom: The Thirteenth Amendment in the Graphic Arts,” 239.

\(^{35}\) Magee, J.L., publisher. “Emancipation. And by virtue of the power and for the purpose aforesaid, I do order and declare that all persons held as slaves, within designated states and parts of States are, and henceforward [sic] shall be free!” Print. Undated. From The Library of Congress, The Alfred Whitall Stern Collection of Lincolniana. [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=lpbcs&fileName=lpbcs0450/lpbcs0450.db&recNum=0&itemLink=D?scsm bib:12::/temp/~ammem_byMM::]
that poor Southern whites are also shown in the print. Holzer states, “The whites, the picture suggests, are just as likely to benefit from emancipation through ‘education to all classes,’ the words on a banner seen flying over a public school in the background.”

Similar to Magee’s print, lithographer J. Waeshle’s print of the Great Emancipator, entitled “Emancipation of the Slaves”, shows Lincoln in a heroic pose receiving the gratitude of freed slaves (Figure 9). Broken chains lie at his feet while a freed slave kisses his hand. While the Library of Congress dates this picture to c. 1862, some historians differ. Holzer states that this print is part of the prints that emerged in 1864 for the election campaign as it was modeled after a photograph of Lincoln taken in 1864. Holzer adds that images such as these, painting Lincoln and the Emancipation in a benevolent light, were created to make emancipation less threatening to whites as it would seem less a threat to the social order.

---

39 Ibid.
Holzer states, “Another popular motif at this time was the pairing of Lincoln and Washington. History had provided in the first and second American revolutions, the first guided by Washington and the second suppressed by Lincoln, a convenient and inspiring parallel with which to foster the mystic ties between the founder and the savior of the Union.” The artist Louis Kurtz and the lithographer Charles Shober created such an image with the print entitled “National picture. Behold oh! America, your sons. The greatest among men” (Figure 10). Produced in 1865, the picture shows Washington and Lincoln standing on the North American continent. A shield emblazoned “Our Country” sits between them. The phrase “Washington made under providence Lincoln saved.” Washington holds the Constitution while Lincoln holds a copy of the Emancipation Proclamation. With Lincoln’s death, no greater tribute than to equate him with Washington seemed possible. These images created the enduring image of Lincoln as the Great Emancipator.

Artists and printmakers depicted the Emancipation Proclamation and the Great Emancipator in a variety of ways. Artists depicted emancipation variously as a tool to break Southern intransigence, a potential cause for Lincoln to lose the 1864 presidential election, and as a cursed act. Some artists depicted the concept without using Lincoln, showing Columbia and figures of ex-slaves kneeling in gratitude. Some prints, such as the “Watch Meeting” print and Nast’s “Emancipation” print depict African-American life as being bettered by the act. Some prints, such as Magee’s print, show that emancipation will benefit all classes and races as it will lead to increased educational opportunities. After the South’s defeat, and Lincoln’s subsequent assassination, Lincoln was placed in the nation’s pantheon of heroes alongside George Washington. While the Emancipation Proclamation did not lead to as many prints as other news-worthy events of the era, looking at the existing prints reveal a great deal about the feelings that emancipation engendered amongst Americans.