The Emancipation Proclamation 1

The Preliminary Document: Summer of 1862

One afternoon, soon after the Battle of Sharpsburg, Maryland, Presidential assistant John Hayes shove a sheet of paper at another assistant, William O. Stoddard. “Stodd, the President wants you to make two copies of this, right away.” he said. Stoddard recalled that he began the task mechanically but as he proceeded he “wrote more slowly and with a queer kind of tremor. I was copying from Abraham Lincoln’s first draft of the Emancipation Proclamation.” Revealing the events later with artist Francis Carpenter, President Lincoln himself recalled “Finally came the week of the Battle of Antietam. I determined to wait no longer. The news came, I think, on Wednesday that the advantage was on our side. I was then staying at the soldier’s home three miles out of Washington. Here I finished writing the second draft of the preliminary Proclamation. I came up on Saturday, called the cabinet together to hear it, and it was published the following Monday.” At the final meeting of September, ’22, another interesting incident occurred in connection with Secretary Seward. The President had written the important part of the Proclamation in these words. "That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom.” Seward told Lincoln, “I think, Mr. President, that after the word ‘recognize’ in that sentence, you should insert the words ‘and maintain’.” Lincoln replied that he had already fully considered the import of that expression in this connection but he had not introduced it because it was not his way to promise what he was not entirely sure he could perform. And he was not exactly sure that he was able to maintain that. It was this cabinet meeting that Carpenter immortalized in his painting of President Lincoln, Secretary of State, Seward; Secretary of War, Stanton; Secretary of the Interior, Caleb Smith; Attorney General, Edward Bates; Postmaster General, Montgomery Blair; Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Wells, and Secretary of the Treasure, Salmon Chase. Carpenter spent 6 months at the White House working on the context and detail of that meeting. As usual, the cabinet had met on the second floor of the south side of the White House. Attendance at this meeting was much better than usual for Mr. Lincoln’s cabinet. The President opened the meeting as he often did, by reading the work of a noted humorist that he enjoyed and whom some members of his cabinet did not. Secretary Chase wrote in his diary that night, “To department at 9:00. State Department messenger came with notice to heads of departments to meet at 12:00. Received sundry callers. Went to White House. All the members of the Cabinet were in attendance. There was some general talk and the President mentioned that Artemus Ward had sent him his book. Proposed to read a chapter which he thought very funny. Read it and seemed to enjoy it very much. The heads also, except Stanton, of course. The chapter was High-Handed Outrage at Utica.” The President then took a graver tone. He said, “Gentlemen, I have, as you are aware, thought a great deal about the relation of this was to slavery. And you all remember that several weeks ago I had read an order that I had prepared on this subject which, on account of the objections made by some of you, was not issued. Ever since then, my mind has been much occupied with this subject. And I have thought all along that the time for action on it might very probably come. I think the time has come now. I wish it were a better time. I wish that we were I a better condition. The action of the army against the rebels has not been quite what I should have best liked. But they have been driven out of Maryland and Pennsylvania is no longer in danger of invasion. When the rebel army was at Fredrick, I determined when it was driven out of Maryland, to issue a Proclamation of Emancipation such as I thought most likely to be useful. I said nothing to anyone but I made the promise to myself and my maker. The rebel army is now driven out and I am going to fulfill that promise.” Before reading the Proclamation, the President explained to the cabinet that he was not seeking their advice on the substance of the Proclamation. He told them he knew and had reviewed their views; however, he had made the decision to issue the proclamation and sought only comments on the Proclamation’s wording or structure. He said, “What I have written is that which my reflections determine me to say. If there is anything in the expressions I use or in any other minor matter which any of you thinks best be changed, I shall be glad to receive the suggestions. One other observation I will make. I know very well that many others might, in this matter, as in others, do better than I can. And if I was satisfied that the public confidence was more fully possessed by any one of them than by me, and knew of any Constitutional way in which he could be put in my place, he should have it. I would gladly yield it to him. But though I believe that I have not so much of the confidence of the people as I had some time since, I do not know that, all things considered, any other has more. And, however this may be, there is no way I can have any other man put where I am. I am here. I must do the best I can and bear the responsibility of taking the course which I feel I ought to take.” The President then proceeded to read the Emancipation Proclamation, making remarks on the several parts as he went on, and showing that he had fully considered the whole subject in all lights in which it had been presented to him. Secretary Wells also kept a diary in which he wrote about how President Lincoln interpreted the will of providence. He said, “God had decided this question in favor of the slaves. He was satisfied it was right. Was confirmed and strengthened in his action by the vow and the results. His mind was fixed. His decision made. But his wished his paper announcing his course as correct in terms as it could be made without as change in his determination.”