

The First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation

Compiled by the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

Target Grade Level: 4–12 in United States history classes

Objectives

After completing this lesson, students will be better able to:

- Identify and analyze key components of a portrait and relate visual elements to relevant historical context and significance.
- Evaluate provisions of the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln's reasons for issuing it, and its significance.

Portrait

The First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation

By Alexander Hay Ritchie, after Francis Bicknell Carpenter

Stipple engraving, 1866

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of Mrs. Chester E. King

NPG.78.109

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Background Information for Teachers

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First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation (depicting a scene that took place on July 22, 1862)

Pictured, left to right: Secretary of War Edwin Stanton; Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase; President Abraham Lincoln; Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles; Secretary of State William H. Seward (seated); Secretary of the Interior Caleb Smith; Postmaster General Montgomery Blair; Attorney General Edward Bates

Pictured on the table: a copy of the Constitution of the United States; a map entitled *The Seat of War in Virginia*;

Pictured on the floor: two volumes of *Congressional Globe*; War Department portfolio; “Commentaries on the Constitution”; “War Powers of the President”; and a map showing the country’s slave population

Portrait Information:

The painter of the original work, Francis Carpenter, spent six months in Abraham Lincoln’s White House in 1864, reconstructing the scene on July 22, 1862, when Lincoln read the first draft of his Emancipation Proclamation to his cabinet. President Lincoln described the historic meeting to Carpenter in great detail and showed him exactly where each man sat on that day. Carpenter was given access to paint his sitters from life and to sketch the actual furniture and objects necessary to represent the room exactly as it had been. According to the artist’s memoir of his time in the White House, Lincoln declared the likenesses in the painting to be “absolutely

perfect” and the painting as a whole to be “as good as it can be made.” The painting was put on public display in the White House, but gained much wider fame when Alexander Ritchie made an engraving of it in 1866. *The First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation* was widely sold and became a popular decoration for schoolrooms across the United States.

THE CABINET (from left to right in the engraving)

Edwin Stanton, secretary of war:

Stanton supported the Emancipation Proclamation as a military measure that would deprive the Confederacy of slave labor and bring additional men into the Union army. He strongly urged the immediate dissemination of this order, while noting that it went much further than he had expected or recommended.

Salmon P. Chase, secretary of the treasury:

According to his diary, Chase gave his full support to the proclamation, but expressed his opinion that emancipation would happen more quickly and easily if slaves were armed and organized by Union generals. He was strongly opposed to the idea of compensating slave owners for their lost slaves. In September 1862, he wrote in his diary that “The Proclamation does not, indeed, mark out exactly the course I should myself prefer. But I am ready to take it just as it is written, and to stand by it with all my heart.”

Gideon Welles, secretary of the navy

Two weeks before he presented the draft of the proclamation to the full cabinet, Lincoln shared it privately with Welles and Secretary of State William Seward. Welles’s reaction was described as “dumbfounded,” but he gave Lincoln his full support. Historians have speculated that Lincoln chose to confide in Welles and Seward because they were seen as the moderates in his cabinet, as opposed to the more radical Chase and Stanton and the more conservative Blair, Bates, and Smith.

William Seward, secretary of state (seated):

A devout abolitionist, Seward supported the idea of emancipation, but urged Lincoln to wait to issue the proclamation until the Union had a military victory. He argued that issuing it in the summer of 1862, amidst several Union defeats, would undermine the proclamation by making it appear an act of desperation. Lincoln acted on this advice, waiting to release the proclamation until the Union success at Antietam in September 1862.

Caleb B. Smith, secretary of the interior

Although Smith’s reaction to the proclamation was not recorded, his assistant secretary later recalled that Smith was not a strong supporter of emancipation and had initially opposed the idea, saying privately that he would resign from the cabinet if Lincoln issued the proclamation. Smith did not resign, however, and apparently changed his mind and gave his support when proclamation was issued.

Montgomery Blair, postmaster general

Blair was the most outspoken critic of the proclamation when Lincoln first presented it. Although he declared himself to support the idea of emancipation, he feared the effects that it

would have on the loyalties of the slave-owning border states and on Republican prospects in the fall congressional elections.

Edward Bates, attorney general

Conservative by nature, Bates believed that Lincoln did not have the legal or constitutional authority to issue an emancipation decree. Historians believe that he counseled Lincoln in writing the final version of the proclamation, which rests firmly on the authority of the president's war powers.

Lesson Procedures

Portrait Activity

Use the Thirty-second Look (found in the *Reading Portraiture Guide for Educators*) to analyze "The First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation."

Questions to consider with your students:

- Describe the setting of this portrait. Where might this be?
- How many men were in this portrait? Who is in charge in this scene? How can you tell?
- Did you recognize any of the men? Who?
- What objects do you see in this portrait? Why might they be here?

Tableau Activity (What Happens Next?)

Tableau is a dramatic performance that is motionless. Actors begin their scene in motion but then freeze in position. Actors usually will freeze for a specific time frame and then move into a new position and freeze again.

Students will become the individuals represented in *The First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation*.

- Break the class into groups of eight. Have each student in a group take on the role of one of the individuals represented in the portrait.
- They should begin with a tableau of the portrait.
- Students will need to create **X** number of additional tableaus to show what happens next. Use the background information as a resource.
- Consider the question: What are the visual reactions of Lincoln's cabinet after Lincoln has read the Emancipation Proclamation?