**Emancipation Proclamation**

**Washington, D.C.**

**January 1, 1863**

As early as 1859, Abraham Lincoln believed that slaves should be emancipated, calling for a program in which they would be freed gradually. Early in his presidency, still convinced that gradual emancipation was the best course, he tried to win over legislators. To gain support, he proposed that slave owners be compensated for giving up their "property." His ideas were not supported.

In September of 1862, after the Union's victory at Antietam, Lincoln issued a preliminary decree stating that, unless the rebellious states returned to the Union by January 1, freedom would be granted to slaves in those states. The decree also left room for a plan to compensate slave owners. Not one Confederate state took the offer. On January 1, Lincoln presented the Emancipation Proclamation. The proclamation declared, "all persons held as slaves within any States, or designated part of the State, the people whereof shall be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free."

The Emancipation Proclamation did not free all slaves in the United States. Rather, it declared free only those slaves living in states not under Union control. William Seward, Lincoln's secretary of state, commented, "We show our sympathy with slavery by emancipating slaves where we cannot reach them and holding them in bondage where we can set them free." Lincoln was fully aware of this contradiction, but he did not want to cause problems in the slave states loyal to the Union by setting their slaves free.

The proclamation allowed black soldiers to fight for the Union -- soldiers that were desperately needed. It also tied the issue of slavery directly to the war.