

AT THE CROSSROADS OF FREEDOM AND EQUALITY: THE EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION AND THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON

The year 2013 marks two important anniversaries in the history of African Americans and the United States. On January 1, 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation set the United States on the path of ending slavery. A wartime measure issued by President Abraham Lincoln, the proclamation freed relatively few slaves, but it fueled the fire of the enslaved to strike for their freedom. In many respects, Lincoln's declaration simply acknowledged the epidemic of black self-emancipation – spread by black freedom crusaders like Harriet Tubman – that already had commenced beyond his control. Those in bondage increasingly streamed into the camps of the Union Army, reclaiming and asserting self-determination. The result, abolitionist Fredrick Douglass predicted, was that the war for the Union became a war against slavery. The actions of both Lincoln and the slaves made clear that the Civil War was in deed, as well as in theory, a struggle between the forces of slavery and emancipation. The full-scale dismantlement of the “peculiar institution” of human bondage had begun.

In 1963, a century later, America once again stood at the crossroads. Nine years earlier, the U.S. Supreme Court had outlawed racial segregation in public schools, but the nation had not yet committed itself to equality of citizenship. Segregation and innumerable other forms of discrimination made second-class citizenship the extra-constitutional status of non-whites. Another American president caught in the gale of racial change, John F. Kennedy, temporized over the legal and moral issue of his time. Like Lincoln before him, national concerns, and the growing momentum of black mass mobilization efforts, overrode his personal ambivalence toward demands for black civil rights. On August 28, 1963, hundreds of thousands of Americans, blacks and whites, Jews and gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, marched to the memorial of Abraham Lincoln, the author of the Emancipation Proclamation, in the continuing pursuit of equality of citizenship and self-determination. It was on this occasion that Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his celebrated “I Have a Dream” speech. Just as the Emancipation Proclamation had recognized the coming end of slavery, the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom announced that the days of legal segregation in the United States were numbered.

Marking the sesquicentennial of the Emancipation Proclamation and the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington, the Association for the Study of African American Life and History invites papers, panels, and roundtables on these and related topics of black emancipation, freedom, justice and equality, and the movements that have sought to achieve these goals. Submissions may focus on the historical periods tied to the 2013 theme, their precursors and successors, and other past and contemporary moments across the breadth of African American history.

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