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Lincoln, Curtin and the Altoona conference

By MATT CONNOR — For The Express
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With two strokes of a pen, Abraham Lincoln in 1862 and 1863 brought an end to the dark period of human bondage in the South.

The first Emancipation Proclamation (there were actually two), was an executive order signed Sept. 22, 1862 declaring the freedom of all slaves in any Confederate state that did not return to Union control by January 1, 1863. The second, issued January 1, 1863, named the specific states where it applied.

Despite contemporary belief that the Emancipation Proclamation immediately ended slavery throughout the U.S., Lincoln's executive orders of 1862 and '63 were only a start. There was still legal slavery in several "Union" states where the Proclamation did not apply, including the Northern states of Delaware and Maryland, although it was really just a matter of time before slavery was abolished in those areas as well.



On December 18, 1865, as a direct result of the Emancipation Proclamation and the Union victory in the war, Congress passed the Thirteenth Amendment, abolishing slavery throughout the land, truly a great day in the history of the nation, and of humanity.

But the dual proclamations of 1862 and '63 were by no means a preordained slam dunk for the 16th president. They were widely attacked and hugely controversial even among Lincoln supporters. Some wanted the proclamations to go further, some wanted them to pass through a vote of Congress, and some hated the very idea of African American freedom.

The U.S. was a widely-divided nation during the period, and not just by North and South or on the matter of slavery. Many in the Union argued for a quick end to the war -which until the then-recent Battle of Antietam had gone terribly for the North- by simply allowing the Confederate states to go their own way.

The president needed some political cover to help him survive what many feared would be a firestorm of controversy generated by the emancipation of the slaves. And he needed to quiet appeasers as secessionists in the North and drum up additional support for the war.

In this he was aided by his good friend PA. Gov. Andrew Gregg Curtin, a proud son of Bellefonte.

Curtin, who had long protested the continued existence of slavery, decided in 1862 to gather a group of Union governors together to prepare an address in support of the president, the Union and the Emancipation Proclamation.

The idea came about during a visit New York City, where he had a confab with Secretary of State William Seward at the Astor House hotel. Seward's plan was to meet with big city mayors to enlist their support of the Proclamation, but Curtin steered him in another direction. He felt certain that support for the president would come from a meeting of the loyal governors of the Union.

Seward liked the idea and at once sent a telegraph to Lincoln, who quickly agreed to let Curtin try to round up Union support among the governors.

Curtin then wired other "loyal" governors, most notably Massachusetts Gov. John Albion Andrew, and got most of them to agree to meet in Altoona to draft the address.

According to a long interview Curtin later gave to the Elmira, NY Telegram, Lincoln "warmly approved of the plan."

"He told us that he was preparing a proclamation emancipating the slaves and asked us if it would not be advisable for him to wait until we had requested him to act before issuing it," Curtin told the newspaper. "We told him that by all means he should issue it first and we would at once follow it up with a strong address of commendation and support. As a result of our interview with the president it was agreed that the course of which Governor Andrew and I proposed should be followed."

Under those conditions, the Altoona Conference convened on Sept. 24, 1862, just two days after the first Emancipation Proclamation was signed. The meeting was held at Altoona's Logan House hotel, named after the same Indian chief for whom the village of Loganton got its name.

"Though the president's proclamation had already appeared we found several of the governors hesitating and doubtful," Curtin said. "However, the majority favored unswerving support of the president, and after a conference of several hours, Governor Andrew and I were selected to draft the address."

The two men worked on it that evening, with Andrew doing the writing itself and Curtin standing over his shoulder offering suggestions and clarifications as he went along.

"When it was finished (Andrew) rose and walked the floor nervously," Curtin recounted. "Both of us felt keenly the weight of the tremendous results that would follow our action. I look back with pride and pleasure to the fact that I was the first to sign the address. Governor Andrew signed next and the others an hour or so later."

The only governor who abstained from signing was Maryland Gov. Augustus Williamson Bradford, who claimed to be in support of his colleagues "heart and soul" but was concerned that signing the document would ruin him financially. Unlike many politicians of that time (and today) he was not independently wealthy. Indeed, he pleaded poverty to the other governors and could not afford to alienate those who might oppose the address.

The next day, the governors arrived in Washington, D.C. and presented the address to the president.

In the address, the governors pledged themselves to support the policies of Abraham Lincoln, but were careful to avoid anything that might embarrass the government or appear to extend beyond potential presidential policies.

It reads, in part: "After nearly one year and a half spent in contest with an armed and gigantic rebellion against the national government of the United States, the duty and purpose of the loyal states and people continue, and must always remain as they were at its origin - namely, to restore and perpetuate the authority of this government and the life of the nation. No matter what consequences are involved in our fidelity, this work of restoring the Republic, preserving the institutions of democratic liberty, and justifying the hopes and toils of our fathers shall not fail to be performed."

Further, the address continued, "We hail with heartfelt gratitude and encouraged hope the proclamation of the President, issued on the twenty second instant, declaring emancipated from their bondage all persons held to service or labor as slaves in the rebel states"

"We feared at the time that the bold stand which we took would cost us one election, but subsequent events showed that we had struck while the iron was hot and had touched a popular chord," Curtin said. "My own triumphant re-election the following year was one evidence of this and elsewhere the endorsement of our course was fully as flattering and unmistakable."

More than that, said Michigan Gov. Austin Blair, one of the signers of the Altoona address, "The Altoona Conference was, next to the Proclamation of Emancipation, the most decisive civil event of the war."

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