
“The Course Pursued by the President”: Michigan Soldiers Respond to the Emancipation Proclamation (1863)

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Abstract. *American President Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation (1863) changed the Union Army’s original goals in the American Civil War (1861-1863). What had previously been a war to preserve the Union became a war for the freedom of millions of African Americans held in bondage throughout the Confederacy. Union soldiers reacted differently to Lincoln’s Proclamation. Soldiers serving from the state of Michigan were no different. Michigan was not a fervently abolitionist state, as many citizens shared hostile views towards African Americans. The inclusion of slaves’ freedom as a war goal as well as allowing them to participate in the war effort caused many Michigan men to write home sharing their views of this policy change. While few soldiers favoured the Proclamation, many of those who were opposed changed their opinions as the war progressed. This change of heart demonstrated that these soldiers realised slavery was the root cause of the war and ending slavery would end the war.*

Keywords: *American Civil War, Emancipation Proclamation, Michigan, slavery, freedom, African American, abolition*

The Emancipation Proclamation (1863) expanded the goals of the Union war effort to include the freedom of African Americans, beginning in September 1862 with the preliminary version, and produced varied reactions from Michigan soldiers.¹ This article traces Michigan soldiers’ opinions concerning the Proclamation. Many Michigan soldiers charted reactions from outright disgust to expressions of pragmatic support for the Proclamation; other soldiers expressed neither support nor contempt

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¹ Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation came in four stages: a first draft (July 22, 1862), the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation (September 22, 1862), a final draft (December 29-31, 1862), and the final Emancipation Proclamation (January 1, 1863). The final draft removed all provisions for gradual, compensated emancipation and it provided for the full enlistment of African Americans into the Union Army. See Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 253-260.

towards the Proclamation. Some agreed with the Proclamation, as they felt that it would hasten the war's end, while others were against the edict because it went against the very reasons they enlisted in the Union Army – the preservation of the Union.

Michigan troops' negative reactions to the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation can be broken down into three categories. Firstly, soldiers believed that the edict was unenforceable, as it applied to areas that were in rebellion and not under Federal control. There were soldiers who failed to see how the Proclamation tied into the North's successes would have the result of expanding freedom as the army achieved victories in the field. Secondly, with constant rumours in military camps about the war nearing an end, soldiers thought the war could be finished without the need for emancipation, essentially preserving the Union as it had been before the war. Many Michigan troops maintained the desire for the status quo antebellum era and they made this known in their letters and diaries on multiple occasions. Thirdly, the soldiers viewed Proclamation as lending an air of desperation to the Lincoln administration.

Previous historical scholarship touches on the Proclamation and its many repercussions during the American Civil War (1861-1865), however, it fails to consider white northern soldiers' attitudes regarding President Abraham Lincoln's expansion of the Union's war goals.² In short, a more detailed study of soldiers' reactions to the Proclamation as a part of the Union war effort requires further exploration. Using Michigan soldiers as a sample, this article demonstrates the ways in which these soldiers interpreted the Proclamation and its consequences for their Civil War.

The research presented here utilises the letters, diaries, and journals of forty-three Michigan soldiers from various regiments, serving in different theatres of the war. There were soldiers who reacted immediately to the preliminary Proclamation, the final Proclamation, or both. Likewise, there were also Michigan soldiers who did not immediately respond to the edict. These soldiers described the Proclamation in hindsight, as they realised how it aided the Union in the final two years of the war.

Historian James M. McPherson found evidence of soldiers who felt betrayed by Lincoln and his administration with the Proclamation. Further, he argues that this document "intensified a morale crisis" because it was so divisive as it "provoked a new level of consciousness about the relationship of slavery to the war."³ Other soldiers

² For more on the evolution of Lincoln's emancipation policy, see Harold Holzer, Edna Greene Medford, and Frank J. Williams, *The Emancipation Proclamation: Three Views* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006); William K. Klingaman, *Abraham Lincoln and the Road to Emancipation, 1861-1865* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001); Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004). For more on the impact of this emancipation policy on Union troops, see Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007).

³ James M. McPherson, *What They Fought For, 1861-1865*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), 62.

gave it only a passing mention and said nothing else for the remainder of the war. Michigan troops' letters and diaries reveal an increased awareness of the Proclamation's consequences amongst the soldiers. Further research into Michigan soldiers' responses to the Proclamation highlights McPherson's question: "why do men fight?" Many historians have addressed this question, but have placed varying importance on the role of the Emancipation Proclamation with regard to Union soldiers and their motivations to fight. So many works concerning the Emancipation Proclamation and Union soldiers tend to view its impact on the Union Army as a whole. A comprehensive breakdown of reactions by state could expose variations to soldiers' reactions, some of which may be state specific.

During the Civil War, the Midwest was a very different place from abolitionist New England. Historian Jacque Voegeli argued that "except for the South, the Middle West – Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota – was the region most firmly committed to white supremacy."⁴ If this were true, then many men serving in Midwestern regiments should have opposed emancipation in all forms. Opposition to emancipation here sprouted from the influx of European immigrants during this time to the Midwest, namely German and Irish Catholics, as well as emigrants from the lower North including southern Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois.⁵ Many were supporters of the Democratic Party and its members generally opposed the Emancipation Proclamation. Voegeli and fellow historian Frank L. Klement describe this Democratic opposition to emancipation in their studies of Midwestern politics during the Civil War. These studies, however, do not include Michigan.

From the start of the Civil War, many men from Michigan enlisted in the army to preserve the Union, not to fight for the abolition of slavery. Michigan citizens made their opinion known before Lincoln issued the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in late 1862. Hiram F. Covey's letter home to Waverly, Michigan, in the summer of 1862, less than two months before Lincoln's public announcement of this document, provided his reasons for enlisting. Covey, who fought in both the 40th New York and the 13th Michigan infantry regiments, felt that "the war was not get up to putt down slavery, but to preserve the union, and to putt down treason traters and that the star spangled baner might triumphantly wave over the land of the free and the home of the brave."⁶ Covey made it quite clear that he did not enlist in the army to fight for emancipation but to preserve the Union. Many Union soldiers shared Covey's position, particularly during the war's first two years. Party politics played a key role

⁴ V. Jacque Voegeli, *Free But Not Equal: The Midwest and the Negro During the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 1.

⁵ This breakdown of Midwestern opposition can be found in Frank L. Klement, "Midwestern Opposition to Lincoln's Emancipation Policy," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 49, No. 3, (July, 1964): 170-171.

⁶ Hiram F. Covey to Rosannah [sic] and all, August 1, 1862, *Rosanna Covey Hulbert Papers, 1861-1865*, Bentley Historical Library, the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor (henceforth: BHL, UM).

in shaping the individual interpretations of the Proclamation, which in turn influenced soldiers' opinions of this edict.

Michigan, as well as the rest of the North, cared about politics during the mid-nineteenth century. Historian Phillip Shaw Paludan has noted that more than “75 percent of the eligible voters voted in the presidential elections of 1848-72. . . . Michigan voter turnout between 1854 and 1872 was almost 85 percent.”⁷ In particular, the emancipation issue caused quite a stir among soldiers with Democratic affiliations. Benjamin B. Brock, initially a Republican serving in the 26th Michigan Infantry, discussed wartime politics in early February 1863: “i am A stiff dimocrat and i never Will vote a nother RepuBlican in my life a gain And i want to tell them RepuBlican that they Never would vote that ticket A gain.”⁸ The Emancipation Proclamation increased Brock's dislike for Republican Party because they had strayed from their statements made earlier in the war, namely *status quo antebellum*. Brock continued, “I wish that i had listen To you Before I had enlisted...i did not think When i Enlisted that i was a goin to fight for the negro But when i get hear i found out that i Was agoin to fight i jest turned my coat.”⁹ Brock's statement, written after the final Proclamation's release, demonstrates Northern Democratic troops' resentment toward the both this document and emancipation. According to Klement, Democrat soldiers often launched “attack[s] upon ‘the fell spirit of abolition’” and were often labelled as Copperheads, peace Democrats and butternuts by Republicans.¹⁰ Despite the various labels placed on Northern Democrats by Republicans during the war, it is important to remember that both fought to save the Union. The Proclamation proved to be a divisive political issue and caused men like Brock to switch party affiliation. Brock, the “stiff dimocrat” of the 26th Michigan Infantry, wrote: “I am a democrat i used to be what they called republicans, but i have seen So much of the president and dark colored hats that it made me sick to my stomach and I thought it was time to bolt.”¹¹

The Proclamation pushed Brock's party loyalty to the brink and caused him to break ties with the Republicans. Soldiers who opposed the Proclamation needed a target on which to direct their anger and abolitionists received much of the blame. Placing the blame on abolitionists was common amongst Northern soldiers. Edward Taylor, still angry over the replacement of General George B. McClellan as head of the Army of the Potomac, wrote in January 1863: “The treachery of fanaticism, the base

⁷ Phillip Shaw Paludan, *A People's Contest: The Union & Civil War, 1861-1865*, Second Edition. (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1996), 11.

⁸ Benjamin B. Brock to “My Dear Wife,” February 3, 1863, *Benjamin B. Brock Letters, 1861-1865*, University Archives & Historical Collections of Michigan State University-East Lansing (henceforth: UAHC, MSU).

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰ Frank L. Klement, *Lincoln's Critics: The Copperheads of the North* (Shippensburg, PA: White Mane Books, 1999), 112.

¹¹ Brock to “My Dear Wife,” February 3, 1863.

perversion of justice in those who rule - - our Patriae - - Freedom, Justice and Liberty are dethroned and a snake-haried fury reigns in her place; her name is Abolition.”¹² For Taylor, abolition corrupted the government and a radical element fought the war in a way that was against everything that men like him had enlisted to preserve.

Echoing Taylor’s sentiments, James Sligh, who was a physician and officer in the Michigan Engineers and Mechanics, wrote that “the soldiers down here are disgusted with the way the northern Abolitionists & other politicians are going in up North. They feel like about facing and clearing out the ranks.”¹³ Building on this negative view of abolitionists, Charles H. Church of the 3rd Michigan Volunteers also wrote “The principles that we have to fight for now are to black for anyone to come out for...but we poor cuses do not want to stay out here in the field as targets & instruments for the Black Abolition party & that rotten congress any longer than possible.”¹⁴ For these soldiers, the Proclamation was abolition at its most extreme, endangering the war effort. These men failed to see the edict’s long-term goals and its effect beyond the emancipation of African Americans.

Michigan soldiers who expressed negative opinions of the Emancipation Proclamation did so because they viewed it as a demonstration of Lincoln’s weakness. Soldiers attributed this weakness to the perceived impression that Lincoln, with the Proclamation, gave in to abolitionists’ demands for emancipation. Rohloff C. Hacker wrote from a hospital in New York less than a week after Lincoln issued the preliminary Proclamation that “the Presidents ‘emancipation proclamation’ is unqualifiedly condemned here by the Soldier – allmost all discountenance [?] it & as untimely & useless; besides sharing a weakness in the Administration.”¹⁵ While Edward Taylor criticised the Proclamation as “being of no force,” Hacker viewed it as a sign of weakness in the Lincoln administration as he considered that it went too far and that the policy was unenforceable.

However, not all soldiers viewed the Proclamation in this way as some had long thought that the government had not gone far enough in promoting the end of slavery as a war goal. Writing from Lexington, Kentucky, Phineas A. Hager of the 19th Michigan Infantry supported Lincoln’s war measure in its preliminary form, but wanted the government to eliminate slavery. He said in a letter to his wife on November 6, 1862, “I am still of the opinion in regard to the termination of the war, that I have ever been,” and that, “it will close when the government shall have destroyed the monster slavery, and acknowledge that in doing it, they are governed by

¹² Edward Taylor to Bill, January 25, 1863, microfilm edition, *Edward Henry Courtney Taylor Correspondence, 1860-1864*, BHL, UM.

¹³ James Sligh to Mother, February 9, 1863, microfilm edition, *Sligh Family Papers, 1845-1865*, BHL, UM.

¹⁴ Charles H. Church, *Civil War Letters* (Rose City, MI: Rose City Historical Society, 1987), 32. This excerpt comes from a February 24, 1863, letter to his parents.

¹⁵ Rohloff C. Hacker to Barbara Woll, Serena, & Theodore Hacker, September 27, 1862, *Schoff Collection: Hacker Brothers Papers, 1861-1866*, William L. Clements Library, the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor (henceforth: WCL, UM).

something more than a mere military necessity.”¹⁶ Hager wanted the government to take a higher moral stance with regard to slavery by destroying the institution throughout the nation. He viewed slavery as the root cause of the war and its destruction would be the death knell for the rebellion stating that “It does seem strange that with all the power which the general government has at its command, that so little is being accomplished.”¹⁷ For Hager, the Lincoln administration restricted its full military might which in turn prolonged the war. Viewing slavery as the war’s main cause, these soldiers wanted the government to attack the Confederacy’s cornerstone with the hope that it could bring about a speedy conclusion to the bloodshed.

The desire to destroy slavery did not simply appear when soldiers received word of the preliminary Proclamation. Increasing contact with slavery intensified these soldiers’ hatred of this institution and caused them to support the Proclamation. Historian Chandra Manning notes this phenomenon in her study of Union soldiers and that “After nearly two years of observing slavery...interacting with the slaves, and fighting a horrible war, the Union rank and file now recognized slavery as a much more insidious cancer, embedded in the very spine and sinew of the nation.”¹⁸ Positive reactions to the Emancipation Proclamation must be viewed in light of soldiers’ increasing contact with slavery and runaway slaves in the Border States and the Upper South. Wayne Morris of the 23rd Michigan Infantry wrote “I hardly know what to think of the proclamation...[t]he idea of freeing the negroes, you know my mind, but if it is a ‘necessary war measure’, as Lincoln says it is. There I subscribe to it if peace is to be had in no other way.”¹⁹ Morris tied his positive support for the Proclamation with his increasing contact with Southern slavery. He unabashedly supported the Proclamation from the start, placing him at the extreme positive end of Michigan soldiers’ responses on this issue. This caused Morris to identify with a group of other Michigan soldiers who were regarded by some as divisive. Writing home, Morris stated: “I hated slavery before I enlisted & God knows I hate it more & more everyday as the more I see & hear.”²⁰

Morris went so far as to call himself an abolitionist and would remain as such “untill the curse is wiped out.”²¹ His statement is interesting in this sample of Michigan soldiers, as many blamed the Emancipation Proclamation’s emergence on the abolitionists. Further, these soldiers cursed abolitionists for infusing their radical

¹⁶ P.A. Hager to “My Dear Wife,” November 6, 1862, microfilm edition, *Hager Family Correspondence, 1857-1887*, BHL, UM.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸ Chandra Manning, *What This Cruel War Was Over: Soldiers, Slavery, and the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 85.

¹⁹Wayne Morris to wife, February 1, 1863, *Wayne E. Morris Papers, 1860-1865 and 1908*, BHL, UM.

²⁰Wayne Morris to Parents, March 16, 1863, Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

goals into the war which, as some troopers charged, would only prolong the conflict. Over the period of one month, Morris's opinion of emancipation developed from one of military necessity to an outright hatred of slavery. Wayne Morris's encounter with slavery in the South and his subsequent identification with abolition demonstrated the impact of the institution on many Michigan soldiers.

Soldiers who supported the Proclamation understood that slavery was the root cause of the war, and saw emancipation as a war measure and a practical solution that would end this conflict. Kalamazoo native George Laurence serving in the Third Michigan Cavalry wrote:

The course pursued by the President...although under the circumstances, would not only be questionable but even adverse to the principles of the Republican party; in the present state of affairs I heartily endorse, for the very reason that the course which has been such as to forfeit to them all rights of protection whatever and the only course that is left to us, and in this rests our only hope for the restoration of our government is to push the way with the utmost vigor.²²

Laurence understood that emancipation was not part of the Republican platform at the war's commencement but the situation had changed, and this forced the administration to act in light of these circumstances. Laurence viewed the Proclamation as the North's last and best hope to crush the rebellion, though under different circumstances he may not have been so supportive.

Other soldiers hoped that, with the Proclamation, Americans could put political squabbles behind them and move forward with the war. This desire to put politics aside drove many soldiers to support the edict, as it would cripple slavery and in turn seriously damage the Confederacy regardless of their defence of slavery. Once Union soldiers linked slavery's end with the war's conclusion, they began to support the Emancipation Proclamation. For example, Henry Gilbert wrote: "war cannot last forever but it must last as long as Slavery," because with its continuance, "the cause of the war exists."²³ These men realised that the Proclamation delivered a fatal blow to slavery from which it could not recover. Henry Potter wrote in April 1863, that "there is no use of" Copperheads and those men dodging the Conscription Act "trying to oppose the great fact that this Union will be preserved & that the Sacred Institution will suffer if it is not actually destroyed & the more they oppose this fact the more will they be left out in the cold! I can see it plainly."²⁴

²²George W. Laurence to uncle, February 2, 1863, *Ness Collection*, BHL, UM.

²³Henry C. Gilbert to Hattie, September 22, 1863, *Schoff Collection: Henry C. Gilbert Papers*, Box 3, WCL, UM.

²⁴Henry Albert Potter to "Dear Folks," April 26, 1863, microfilm edition, *Henry Albert Potter Papers, 1862-1908*, BHL, UM.

James H. Kidd, who served with General Custer in the Sixth Michigan Cavalry, wrote to his father that same spring saying, “Do not allow yourself to become involved in politics. . . . Keep clear of politics entirely is my advise [sic]. Let your platform be the Union and the Constitution. The old slavery question is settled.”²⁵ Slavery’s elimination with the Proclamation allowed, in Kidd’s view, the Northern citizenry to focus solely on bringing the war to a successful conclusion. Kidd considered slavery strictly as a political aspect of the war, and with the Proclamation, political squabbles were no longer necessary. Either one was for the Union and the Constitution or against it. There were Michigan soldiers, however, who wanted to focus on the task at hand which was Union victory. Connecting slavery’s destruction with the collapse of the Confederacy was an important factor in the positive responses from soldiers regarding the Proclamation.

Wayne Morris, Michigan soldier, vigorously supported the Emancipation Proclamation in many of his letters home. One letter in particular, dated December 22, 1862, revealed his opinion of what the Proclamation could bring for the nation. He wrote “I think that time is not far distant when the glorious news shall be Heralded throughout the entire land, that the rebellion is crushed, Peace declared, & last though not least, that Slavery has received a blow, from which its death is inevitable.”²⁶ Morris viewed the Proclamation as the beginning of slavery’s end which would bring peace and heal the rift between the North and South therefore ending the rebellion.

According to historian Phillip Shaw Paludan, Lincoln’s proposed gradual compensated emancipation and colonisation measures enabled the final Proclamation to become a “call to the freedmen to stay, to fight to sustain the Union and their freedom.”²⁷ Lincoln’s agenda, along with an added provision inviting African Americans to enlist in the Army gave them the opportunity to serve the Union.²⁸ This ignited a variety of complaints from Michigan soldiers, as clearly evidenced in their letters, diaries, and journals. On New Year’s Day 1863, the final Emancipation Proclamation took effect and all slaves in named parts of the Confederacy became “thenceforward, and forever free.”²⁹ Wayne Morris, encamped at Bowling Green, Kentucky, described the 23rd Michigan’s reaction to the final proclamation: “The boys have got in possession of the President’s Proclamation of January first...and most of

²⁵James H. Kidd letter to father, in Eric J. Wittenberg, ed., *One of Custer’s Wolverines: The Civil War Letters of Brevet Brigadier General James H. Kidd, 6th Michigan Cavalry* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 2000), 35.

²⁶Wayne Morris to “Dear Wife,” December 22, 1862, *Wayne E. Morris Papers*.

²⁷ Phillip Shaw Paludan, *The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1994), 189.

²⁸ Jim Cullen, “Gender and African American Men,” in Clinton & Silber, eds. *Divided Houses*, 81. Cullen further notes that nearly 180,000 African Americans enlisted in the United Army. Although they composed less than 1 percent of the North’s population, African Americans composed nearly 10 percent of the Union Army.

²⁹“Emancipation Proclamation: January 1, 1863,” in Guelzo, *Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation*, 259.

them are highly indignant at his course 'freeing the niggers'."³⁰ In Morris's previous letters, these men were quite pleased upon hearing the news of the preliminary Proclamation only three months earlier. This change of heart may be explained as a simple question of soldier morale at the time of the final Proclamation.

While this may be the case, it is only part of the explanation. In the wake of the Fredericksburg disaster at the end of 1862, and before crucial Union victories during the summer of 1863, Michigan soldiers shared their views concerning the changed nature of the war, as well as African Americans' enlistment. While serving with the 20th Michigan Volunteers, George Ewing wrote his parents warning them about perceived dangers of emancipation and African Americans' service in the army, "the [emancipation] of the slaves...has had a tendency to warde turning a grate meney men her in ky to go and join the rebels and rayse negro ridgment to."³¹ For Ewing, African Americans' role included manual labour, digging trenches, felling trees, and not serving with a "gun and cartridge box" within the ranks. Upon hearing about the possibility of blacks enlisting, white Union soldiers often wrote in their letters that the war should be fought solely by white men. Ewing expressed his thoughts on African Americans' role and declared that the Union should "let the white men do the fitting."³²

African American soldiers, as noted by historian James McPherson, were very much "a corollary of the emancipation policy [because it] did much to change the minds of previously hostile white soldiers," as it aided the Union war effort.³³ The Emancipation Proclamation not only deprived the Confederate Army of their workforce, but it enabled the Union Army to acquire and place more soldiers into combat. The presence of Union soldiers in the South, particularly African American soldiers, encouraged more slaves to flee to Union lines further hindering the Confederate cause. Michigan soldier David Millspaugh wrote that African Americans would "gladly join the army" or, at the very least, "get places as cooks in the army."³⁴ As the war progressed and African American troops proved their mettle in the field, many white soldiers changed their opinions with regard to their enlistment.

To this point, Michigan soldiers had expressed various opinions about the Emancipation Proclamation. Yet, there were many soldiers who changed their opinions over time, regarding both the Proclamation and its effects. One such soldier, Edward Taylor changed his mind, writing:

³⁰ Wayne Morris to Wife, February 1, 1863, *Wayne E. Morris Papers*.

³¹ George Ewing to Parents, John T. Greene, ed., *The Ewing Family Civil War Letters* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1994), 58. The Border States (Kentucky, Missouri, Maryland, and Delaware) were slave states that did not secede from the Union. Fear of their secession played a key role in the shaping of Lincoln's emancipation policy during the summer of 1862.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ McPherson, *What They Fought For*, 66.

³⁴ David Millspaugh diary, January 3, 1863, BHL, UM.

I believe it was the deliberate intention of those in power to prolong the war - - until they have forced an abolition policy . . . [we] are not willing to see the negro in our ranks and do not wish to make that a test question, that we lack patriotism! . . . I speak for the whole army - - particularly the old army.³⁵

Taylor did not view the Emancipation Proclamation as an expansion of war goals, but as a measure adopted and implemented by the Lincoln administration for the purpose of prolonging the war. When Taylor spoke of the *old army* he referred to the army during the first year and half under the beloved General McClellan. This distinction of the old army versus the new army was often made in soldiers' letters. It seems that some soldiers separated themselves from men who enlisted to preserve the Union as it was and the men who enlisted with the hope of destroying slavery. Furthermore, Taylor hinted at Lincoln having a policy of emancipation all along, that the war was not fought for the preservation of the Union, but to free the "poor oppressed negro."³⁶ Taylor did not see emancipation as a means for ending the rebellion; for him it was a distraction that prolonged the war.

Soldiers who questioned the Emancipation Proclamation often faced criticism from civilians, because they were viewed as not acting patriotically. Edward Taylor responded to those who questioned soldiers' patriotism by stating that these soldiers had enlisted to put down the rebellion and reunite the North and South. Taylor himself did not enlist to enable African Americans to participate in their own liberation. In early 1863 he considered the United States' future as being a bleak one where "the negro [came] first, our country next."³⁷ Nearly three months later, however, Taylor changed his tune when he wrote:

As for negro troops, I must say that I begin to think differently. . . I have seen distinctly negroes doing picket duty across the river here. If the 'Rebs' use them why not we? . . . Now that 'Johnny Reb' uses the negro (the thing is settled beyond dispute for negroes have been captured among their ranks and the fact of the negro soldiers is mentioned in the Richmond papers). . . In short I see no objection to using the negro as a soldier if he is properly handled.³⁸

Taylor went further saying he had "been offered a commission in one of Gen. Danl. Ulman's new Regiments - - rank and file black - - officers white - - so far I have

³⁵ Edward Taylor to Lottie, January 15, 1863, microfilm edition, *Edward Henry Courtney Taylor Correspondence*.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸ Edward Taylor to Lottie, April 1, 1863.

neither declined nor accepted. What shall I do?"³⁹ Taylor's desire for promotion could explain his change of attitude towards African American soldiers.

Whether soldiers liked it or not, the Union Army became an instrument of freedom for African Americans through the Proclamation. William Collin Stevens, who served in Company G, 3rd Michigan Cavalry, grasped this concept before the Proclamation came into effect:

I am confident that when our army leaves here there will not be in the county of New Madrid [Missouri] one tenth part the number of slaves that were here when we came, and the few that are left will soon find a way to break the chains that hold them in bondage.⁴⁰

Stevens witnessed firsthand the Union Army's impact on Southern slavery and understood that freedom moved with Federal troops.

As Michigan soldiers changed their opinions about the Proclamation they came into closer, more regular contact with slavery which then altered their perceptions of African American troops. Encamped at Murfreesboro, Tennessee, Henry C. Gilbert wrote to his wife:

I broke off my writing to go out & inspect the Negro troops with Col. Utley... [t]hey are fine looking fellows & proud as Lucifer. They did look well. . . I go for Negro troops. Give us 100,000 of them. They will fight. There is no doubt of it. Oh how it does hurt the rebels & rebel sympathizers to see the Negroes around.⁴¹

Much the opposite of Ewing and in line with Taylor's changing opinion, Gilbert was quite eager to put African American troops into action, knowing how much their presence demoralised Confederate troops and Southerners in general. From this realisation Gilbert noted how within the Union Army's ranks, the "prejudice against negro troops is fast wearing away."⁴² This raises the question as to how and why prejudice towards African American soldiers began to decline. It may have been because black troops, when afforded the opportunity, proved they were brave men up to the task of fighting rebel soldiers. Another possibility was that African American soldiers took the place of white soldiers in battle. This indicates that there were white soldiers who viewed black troops as another tool to be utilised to win the war.

The Proclamation was another important weapon for the Union as noted in early in 1863, by George Laurence who wrote, "had this course [emancipation] been

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰ William Collin Stevens to "My Dear Father," April 8, 1862, microfilm edition, *William Collin Stevens Papers*, 1837-1921, BHL, UM.

⁴¹ Henry C. Gilbert to "My Dear Wife," September 26, 1863, *Schoff Collection: Henry C. Gilbert Papers*, Box 3, WCL, UM.

⁴² Henry C. Gilbert to "My Dear Hattie," September 17, 1863.

pursued at the outset I have reason to believe the war would have ended before this.”⁴³ Laurence went further in trying to understand why emancipation was not a war aim from the start. He reasoned, simply, that many Northerners did not understand how emancipation as a goal could aid the war effort during the conflict’s early years. Even if President Lincoln had attempted to issue the Emancipation Proclamation earlier, its chances of success and Northern public acceptance would have been slim. The Proclamation’s success was predicated upon the timing of when it was released. Laurence wrote:

That such a course was not adopted was not the fault of the administration...the north at that time had not been sufficiently schooled, nor did it sufficiently understand the character of the south to give the President its whole support.⁴⁴

Laurence felt a broad emancipation policy from the war’s outset would have shortened the war considerably. In pragmatic fashion, Laurence realised that such a policy from the war’s beginning would have been impossible, or at least more difficult than it was in 1863. He credited the Proclamation to Lincoln and his administration and not the abolitionists.

As 1863 progressed, more soldiers realised the Proclamation’s impact and how it aided the Union war effort. Responding to a letter from a friend who expressed a hopeless vision of the Union Army’s situation during late 1863, soldier David Lane agreed, and added his reasons for hope. In August, Lane responded to the emancipation measures:

I do not forget the violent opposition to the Emancipation and Confiscation Acts. . . I remember well that reverses and disasters attended all our efforts until the government was compelled, as by an overruling Providence, to free the slaves of rebels, which includes them all; and that from the moment these measures became the fixed policy of the government, reverses ceased.⁴⁵

The Proclamation, the Confiscation Acts and the Militia Act, should be given as much credit for shifting Northern momentum in the war as major Union victories on the battlefields during 1863, namely Gettysburg and Vicksburg.⁴⁶ Victor E. Compton, like David Lane, recognised the far-reaching implications of the Emancipation

⁴³George W. Laurence to uncle, February 2, 1863, *Ness Collection*, BHL, UM.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

⁴⁵ David Lane Diary, *A Soldier’s Diary: The Story of a Volunteer, 1861-1865* (Jackson, MI: privately published by the author, 1905), 80.

⁴⁶ The First and Second Confiscation Acts, the Militia Act, and the D.C. Emancipation Act represented incremental emancipation measures passed by the Lincoln administration leading up to the Emancipation Proclamation.

Proclamation. A French immigrant who settled in Wayne County, Comte, served in the 5th Michigan Cavalry. Pondering the legacy of the war, he wrote to his wife in late 1863, stating "I'll also be able to say that I helped to win the liberty of several thousand of poor beings who because they happen to be black and helpless are treated as slaves." He continued, "I'll be very proud also to say that I was at Port Royal, where, the Cavalry alone forced great lines of infantry to retreat back to their fortifications. It gives one courage to think of the time in the near future when joy and happiness awaits us."⁴⁷ Comte understood the ramifications of Lincoln's Proclamation, especially as the Union Army began to swallow up Confederate territory and slaves were freed. Furthermore, the Proclamation helped the Union achieve victories in the field, and would prove to be a key factor in the Confederacy's surrender during April and May 1865. Victor Comte died of wounds received in battle on July 11, 1864.

By 1864, with the Emancipation Proclamation in place for a little more than a year, there were Michigan soldiers who remained convinced that African Americans were unprepared for emancipation. John Bennitt, a regimental surgeon in the 19th Michigan Infantry, wrote:

My convictions are that the Black race is inferior by nature and that if every master was a true Christian & would treat his servants as children should be treated that a condition of servitude would be better [than] for them that unconditional emancipation, without any preparation.⁴⁸

While Bennitt continued to hold the view that African Americans were unprepared for freedom and military service he seems to be an exception with regard to the other Michigan soldiers used in this study. Many Michigan soldiers regarded the Proclamation, especially later in the war, as a key factor in Union victory.

At the war's conclusion, soldiers shared their understandings of the Emancipation Proclamation as an important element in bringing about Union victory. In hindsight many Michigan soldiers reflected on what the Proclamation did for the Union war effort. Hours after General Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox in April 1865, James H. Kidd wrote:

So long as the Executive, the Congress and the people, stood aloof from a square toed determination to abolish slavery, we were unsuccessful and treason seemed

⁴⁷ Victor E. Comte to Elise (wife), September 3, 1863, microfilm edition, *Victor E. Comte Papers*, 1853-1878, BHL, UM. The Comte letters were translated from French to English in the microfilm edition.

⁴⁸ John Bennitt letter March 3, 1863, Robert Beasecker, ed., *"I Hope to do My Country Service": Civil War Letters of John Bennitt, M.D., Surgeon, 19th Michigan Infantry* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 244.

promised success, but when the right was fully vindicated, the cause of the Rebellion began to decline, and has been swift to collapse.⁴⁹

Until Northerners and the Federal government included slavery's abolition as a war objective, the Confederacy could prolong the bloodshed. This might have allowed for foreign intervention on the Confederacy's behalf or cause the North to sue for peace because of a public backlash.

While the number of Michigan men who expressed an opinion here regarding the Emancipation Proclamation seems small, there were many other letters in which the soldiers said nothing at all choosing silence with regard to the Proclamation. Yet, the Proclamation changed the direction of the war. It is difficult to imagine why so many remained silent. They may have been overcome by the realities of war combined with lack of education, ambivalence, political apathy, and youth. But many soldiers did share their thoughts and feelings about the Proclamation with loved ones and friends on the home front. With that, we are better able to understand their motivations to serve in the Civil War.

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