On January 1, 1863, Abraham Lincoln announced the Emancipation Proclamation, an event that soon became a bold statement of presidential power, a dramatic shift in the rationale for fighting the Civil War, and a promise of future freedom for four million enslaved Americans. But the document marked only a beginning; freedom’s future was anything but certain. Thereafter, the significance both of the Proclamation and of emancipation assumed new and diverse meanings, as African Americans explored freedom and the nation attempted to rebuild itself. Despite the sweeping power of Lincoln’s Proclamation, struggle, rather than freedom, defined emancipation’s broader legacy. The nine essays in this volume unpack the long history and varied meanings of the emancipation of American slaves. Together, the contributions argue that 1863 did not mark an end point or a mission accomplished in black freedom; rather, it initiated the beginning of an ongoing, contested process.

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Rethinking American Emancipation

*Legacies of Slavery and the Quest for Black Freedom*

Edited by

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Contents

List of figures ix
Notes on the Editors and Contributors xi
Acknowledgments xv

Introduction 1
William A. Link and James J. Broomall

I CLAIMING EMANCIPATION

1 Bodies in Motion and the Making of Emancipation 15
Yael A. Sternhell

2 Force, Freedom, and the Making of Emancipation 42
Gregory P. Downs

3 Military Interference in Elections as an Influence on Abolition 69
William A. Blair

II CONTESTING EMANCIPATION

4 “One Pillar of the Social Fabric May Still Stand Firm”: Border South Marriages in the Emancipation Era 93
Allison Fredette

5 Axes of Empire: Race, Region, and the “Greater Reconstruction” of Federal Authority after Emancipation 119
Carole Emberton

6 Fear of Reenslavement: Black Political Mobilization in Response to the Waning of Reconstruction 146
Justin Behrend
III REMEMBERING EMANCIPATION

7 African Americans and the Long Emancipation in New South
   Atlanta
   William A. Link
   167

8 Washington, Toussaint, and Bolivar, “The Glorious Advocates
   of Liberty”: Black Internationalism and Reimagining
   Emancipation
   Paul Ortiz
   187

9 Remembering the Abolitionists and the Meanings of
   Freedom
   John Stauffer
   216

   Epilogue: Emancipation and the Nation
   Laura F. Edwards
   252

Index
   271
Figures


7 Henry W. Grady, half-length portrait, facing left. Source: Unidentified photographer. Courtesy of the Library of
List of figures

Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-93574. 183

8 Henry Highland Garnet, noted antebellum abolitionist and leader of the Cuban Anti-Slavery Committee in the 1870s. Source: National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. 206


12 Santa Fe Trail movie poster, 1940. Source: Santa Fe Trail, color print (poster), 1940. Collection of John Stauffer. 239


14 Contrabands escaping. Source: Edward Forbes, Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-DIG-ppmsca-20701. 266
Notes on the Editors and Contributors


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Notes on the Editors and Contributors

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Notes on the Editors and Contributors xiii


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Any writing endeavor is collaborative, but none more so than an edited collection. As such, in the course of assembling this volume, we incurred a number of debts. We appreciate the backing of the University of Florida, which provided funds to support an extraordinary conference in February 2013, held on the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. Entitled “The Shadow of Slavery: Emancipation, Memory, and the Meaning of Freedom,” the conference drew scholars from around the country to think about new ways of reconsidering the understanding and impact of the destruction of slavery. A team of graduate students in the Richard J. Milbauer Program in Southern History helped to plan, organize, and realize the conference. We appreciate the efforts of this team, which included Angela Diaz, Allison Fredette, Chris Ruehlen, and Clay Cooper, all of whom have now finished their degrees and are beginning careers with bright futures. Ultimately, the conference created a forum that fostered the exchange of new ideas, insights, and perspectives on emancipation and its legacy, and first sparked our interest in crafting an essay collection.

A group of remarkable scholars underpin this volume. Each contributor generously devoted himself or herself to realizing the collection, often drafting and redrafting their work. We thank them for their dedication and collegiality, their participation and enthusiasm, all of which exemplifies what is best about our profession. It’s not always the case that an edited volume moves forward – and coheres intellectually – and we appreciate the privilege of working with all the authors. It was, in sum, an extremely gratifying and rewarding experience to work with such talented people.
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Collaborating with new colleagues and working with old friends has made this project worthwhile. But its conclusion causes pause for reflection. Throughout the course of this work we have relied heavily on the intellectual and emotional support of Susannah and Tish, whose examples inspire us. In them we find meaning and through them we find worth.

William A. Link
James J. Broomall