

Lincoln and Women in the Civil War

Overview: Students will describe how Lincoln responded to the problems and suffering of women during the Civil War.

Materials:

Letter from Hannah Johnson to Lincoln, July 31, 1863, Published in “The Black Military Experience”, pp.582-83, in “Free at Last, pp.450-51, In “Families and Freedom” pp 81-82. Letters received ser. 360, Colored Troops Division, Adjutant Generals Office, Record Group 94, National Archives.

Presidential Order No. 252, July 30, 1863 Amnesty to Emily T. Helm, December 14, 1863

Oath of Emily T. Helm, December 14, 1863

To Whom It May Concern: from Lincoln, December 14, 1863

Letter to Edwin Stanton from Lincoln, October 16, 1863

(all from <http://www.hti.umich.edu/l/lincoln>)

Aim/Essential Question: How did Lincoln respond to the problems and sufferings of women during the Civil War?

Background Information:

Women played a major role in the Civil War, as they have in every war. Some served as soldiers, some worked as spies for both the Union and Confederate armies, and others tended to soldiers as nurses, laundresses, and cooks. Most women stayed at home where they struggled to make ends meet while their sons, husbands, and fathers were away fighting.

But despite the determination and courage of so many women in overcoming the obstacles to survival, women had the additional hardship of struggling against the social conventions of gender. In nineteenth-century America these conventions constrained opportunities for women in professional and public life. Although their contributions to the war effort would bring forth many positive changes in popular conceptions of womanhood, women would nevertheless continue to suffer under the stigma of inferiority by virtue of their gender long after the war ended.

Many women wrote Lincoln or visited him at the White House to express their grief as well as to secure justice with regard to sons or husbands who had been arrested for any number of military infractions. In some instances women pleaded to spare their Union Army men from execution for desertion. In a number of instances Lincoln personally intervened on behalf of a pleading mother or wife, demonstrating his great capacity for genuine compassion for the suffering.

Objectives:

1. Students will describe the role of women in the Civil War.
2. Students will be able to explain the obstacles faced by American women at the time of the Civil War
3. Students will articulate Lincoln's personal response to women's correspondence to him.

Motivation:

What problems and sufferings do women face when men go off to war?

Procedures:

Place students in groups of two, give each group the set of documents, and have each group prepare written answers to the following questions:

Questions for Discussion:

1. Why did Lincoln issue Executive Order No. 252?
2. How much influence do you think Mrs. Johnson's appeal had on Lincoln's thinking?
3. Do you believe the experiences of free African American women during the Civil War differed from those of white women? Explain.
4. Why did Lincoln let his sister-in-law return to Kentucky under federal protection?
5. How did Lincoln show compassion to Mrs. Elizabeth Platt?

Summary Questions:

1. How did the Civil War affect women in the documents?
2. How did Lincoln respond to the needs of these different women?
3. Did Lincoln's response to these women reflect his compassion and kindness? What evidence can you cite to support your position?

Application:

Write a reply from Abraham Lincoln to Mrs. Johnson

Document A

On July 31, 1863, an African American woman named Hannah Johnson from Buffalo, New York, wrote to President Abraham Lincoln asking for equal treatment for African-American Soldiers.

Excellent Sir My good friend says I must write to you and she will send it. My son went in the 54th regiment. I am a colored woman and my son was strong and able as any to fight for his country and the colored people have as much to fight for as any. My father was a Slave and escaped from Louisiana before I was born morn forty years agoe I have but poor education but I never went to school, but I know just as well as any what is right between man and man. . . . They tell me some do you will take back the Proclamation, don't do it. When you are dead and in Heaven, in a thousand years that action of yours will make the Angels sing your praises I know it. Will you see that colored men fighting now are fairly treated? You ought to do this at once, not let the thing run along. Meet it quickly and manfully, and stop this mean cowardly cruelty. We poor oppressed ones, appeal to you, and ask for fair play. Yours for Christ's sake"

Document B

Executive Mansion, Washington D.C July 30. 1863

It is the duty of every government to give protection to its citizens, of whatever class, color, or condition, and especially to those who are duly organized as soldiers in the public service. The law of nations and the usages and customs of war as carried on by civilized powers, permit no distinction as to color in the treatment of prisoners of war as public enemies. To sell or enslave any captured person, on account of his color, and for no offence against the laws of war, is a relapse into barbarism and a crime against the civilization of the age.

The government of the United States will give the same protection to all its soldiers, and if the enemy shall sell or enslave anyone because of his color, the offense shall be punished by retaliation upon the enemy's prisoners in our possession.

It is therefore ordered that for every soldier of the United States killed in violation of the laws of war, a rebel soldier shall be executed; and for every one enslaved by the enemy or sold into slavery, a rebel soldier shall be placed at hard labor on the public works and continued at such labor until the other shall be released and receive the treatment due to a prisoner of war

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

1.

Document Series 1

“Emily Todd Helm was Mary Lincoln’s half-sister. After her husband, General Benjamin Hardin Helm was killed at the battle of Chickamauga, seeking to return from the Deep South to her home in Kentucky, Emily was passed through the Union lines in December and sought refuge at the White House. The Lincoln’s tried to keep her visit a secret, because the presence of a widow of a high-ranking Confederate officer in the White House was a potential source of embarrassment, especially since Emily remained outspoken in her loyalty to the South. Inevitably news leaked out, and General Daniel Sickles, who had lost a leg in the battle of Gettysburg, told the President, “You should not have that rebel in your house.” Firmly Lincoln responded: “General Sickle, my wife and I are in the habit of choosing our own guest. We do not need from our friends either advice or assistance in the matter.” After a week, with a pass from the President allowing her to cross the army lines, Emily left for Kentucky.”

Excerpted from *Lincoln* by David Herbert Donald, pg. 475.

1a.

Executive Mansion, Washington, December 14. 1863.

Mrs. Emily T. Helm, not being excepted from the benefits of the proclamation by the President of the United States issued on the 8th Day of December. 1863, and having on this day taken and subscribed the oath according to said proclamation, she is fully relieved of all penalties and forfeitures, and remitted to all her rights, all according to said proclamation, and not otherwise; and, in regard to said restored rights of person and property, she is to be protected and afforded facilities as a loyal person.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

P.S. Mrs. Helm claims to own some cotton at Jackson, Mississippi, and also some in Georgia; and I shall be glad, upon either place being brought within our lines, for her to be afforded the proper facilities to show her ownership, and take her property.

A. LINCOLN.

Document 1b.

District of Columbia }
Washington County } SS [December 14, 1863]

I, Emily T. Helm, do solemnly swear in presence of Almighty God that I will henceforth faithfully support, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States, and the union of the States there under; and that I will, in like manner, abide by, and faithfully support all acts of Congress passed during the existing rebellion with reference to slaves, so long and so far as not repealed, modified, or held void by Congress, or by decision of the Supreme Court; and that I will, in like manner, abide by, and faithfully support all proclamations of the President, made during the existing rebellion, having reference to

slaves so long and so far as not modified, or declared void by the Supreme Court. So help me God.

Document 1c.

Executive Mansion

Whom it may concern Washington, December 14. 1863.

It is my wish that Mrs. Emily T. Helm, (widow of the late Gen. B. H. Helm, who fell in the Confederate service) now returning to Kentucky, may have protection of person and property, except as to slaves, of which I say nothing. A. LINCOLN

Document C

Unlike today, the White House of Abraham Lincoln was open to the general public and people took advantage of the access to the Chief Executive. Accounts are replete of office seekers lined up down the staircases waiting to meet with the President. Often, Lincoln met with individuals who had a more personal request. One such visitor was Elizabeth J. Platt. After meeting with Mrs. Platt, Lincoln sent the following to his Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton.

Executive Mansion Washington Oct. 16, 1863

Today Mrs. **Elizabeth J. Platt** calls and states that she is a widow, and at the beginning of the war had two sons only, both whom entered the army, and the eldest was mortally wounded at Gettysburg, and afterwards died; that the younger Edwin F. Platt, of Co. F. 7 New Jersey Vols. was made a prisoner at same battle, but by parole or exchange is now at Annapolis Md. She says he was under sixteen when he entered the service and is now only a trifle over eighteen and is in feeble health. She says he and his brother were in all the battles of their Regiment.

She now asks his discharge and if Hon. Daniel S. Gregory will say in writing on this sheet, that he personally knows Mrs. Platt and that he fully believes this statement, I will allow the discharge upon the papers so indorsed being presented to me.

A. LINCOLN