

Civil War Era Module

Emancipation Proclamation

The first letter, first chronologically, was a letter written in October of 1862 by Jasper Barney, a private in an Illinois regiment. He fought for the Union Army. He was a farmer from Illinois and he is writing to his brother-in-law, another family member, about the state of the war and particularly about emancipation.

The second letter is written [in] the following month, November of 1862, but it is by a white Confederate soldier, a prosperous farmer, John White, to his wife. And he is writing at a moment when militarily, the Confederacy is enjoying more success, but Confederate civilians are living with the uncertainties of having a war fought in their own backyard. He's also writing about the Emancipation Proclamation and the fears that it has stirred up amongst Confederate civilians at home. His letter is a very personal letter, too, in that he is quite forthcoming with his wife about how much he misses home and how torn he feels between his desire to be home and protect his family and the need to fight this war.

And then the third letter is written in February of 1864. It is by a black member of the 14th Rhode Island Heavy Artillery, a black regiment. And he is writing from the city of New Orleans, which his regiment is occupying at the time, to really articulate what he and many other black soldiers see as the stakes, as why this war matters for black Americans, in particular.

Men in a regiment or at least in a company, tended to enlist together, so letters that come from home will be read probably by more than one person, will probably be read out loud. A letter to home will often include a passage saying: brother A says to say X, Y, Z.

With Civil War soldiers' letters, the vagaries of letter survival can skew our picture a little bit. The letters to home have a much greater survival rate than the letters from home to the front. The letters from home don't survive because soldiers have nothing that they can do with them. Also, before a battle, soldiers are likely to destroy any personal letters that they have on them. Their fear is if personal letters are found on them that the enemy will somehow use that information.

The Union has the U.S. Postal Service. The Confederacy never really has a very efficient or working postal service. There's travel back and forth between home and the front lines all the time, so often somebody from home or nearby, is in camp and going home and you send letters that way. And when that person comes, they bring letters. There're also private express companies.

Jasper Barney is in the hospital when he writes the letter. He's trying to recover from a wound, so the first part of the letter is about recovering from his wound and that actually in one sense is typical because almost every soldier's letter talks about his health to almost excessive degrees.

The letter was written in October of 1862 and in the fall of 1862, there's quite a lot of turbulence on the northern home front and regarding the Union Army cause in general. The war militarily had gone fairly well for the Union in the early months of 1862. Then in the summer of 1862, the war started going poorly for the Union militarily, and the North sort of woke up to the fact that this was going to

be a much longer war than anybody had anticipated. So, by the fall of 1862, the northern home front and soldiers are still trying to cope with that realization.

One of those new measures that is taken to fight the war is the Emancipation Proclamation. The preliminary Emancipation Proclamation had been issued on September 22nd of 1862. The Emancipation Proclamation really changed the whole aim of a war that had been begun to save the Union, now becomes a war also to end slavery. Now, those two goals had never been completely separable, but the official line had always been—this is a war to save the Union and not to have really much of anything to do with slavery. Those changes really rocked much of the Civil War North, particularly the northern home front. You have quite a lot of dissent among white northerners over the Emancipation Proclamation. Black northerners, there's no dissent. They think that this is exactly what has been needed since well before the war began.

There are a number of issues at stake in the 1862 elections. There are economic issues. There are issues having to do with civil liberties. What actions can and cannot the United States government take during wartime. And there's the war. And, of course, there's the Emancipation Proclamation. Meanwhile, you have a number of new soldiers entering the ranks. So you have elections, tumult and dissent, and a host of new soldiers coming into the Army, all at about the same time, and that's when this letter is written.

The letter is written by Barney who has actually been in this army for a while. So he is writing as an experienced soldier to his brother-in-law who has just joined. Barney, who would normally show a certain modicum of deference or respect for his more socially elite and older brother-in-law, thinks that this is too important an issue to stand on ceremony and so he tells him straight up—I think that you're wrong. I think that the Emancipation Proclamation is exactly what is needed to end this war and what is more, you're going to think so, too, as soon as you have been in the war for any length of time.

Barney is fairly typical. He certainly wouldn't have called himself an abolitionist. He certainly would not have predicted that in less than a year he would be calling for an end to an institution that's older than the nation itself. It's quite a radical thing to talk about ending slavery in the 1860s. He's undergone what is a huge transformation in his thinking. As you can see from the letter to his brother-in-law, his family has not really kept up with his transition. A gulf has really opened between many soldiers and their families at home.

He is on the emancipation question even in the first paragraph. He says, "now, my lady love is more attentive for I got a letter from her yesterday. She is all right on the goose question." "All right on the goose" means how you stand on the slavery question. She agrees with him about emancipation so he's pleased about that.

Then in the next paragraph, he's addressing what he sees as his brother-in-law's mistaken views. "You say in your letter that you or your regiment is not in for freeing the Negroes. I am sorry to hear it. You wanted to know what I and my comrades thought of the Negro question. I think old Abe's Proclamation is all right and there's very few old soldiers that is against it. There's my opinion that yourself and the greater part of your regiment will be in favor of it before you are in the service six months. I was of the same opinion of yourself when I first came into the service but I have learned

better. You said you thought the thing would come to a finish by spring if the Negroes was left alone, but I think you will soon find out different. For it is my opinion that the war will never come to a close while the Negroes is left where they are to raise supplies for the rebel army. Even if we could suppress the rebellion and leave the main route where it was before, it wouldn't be long before they would try the same game as before, but if we take away the main route of evil and confiscate all their property they will have nothing to fight for hereafter."

First of all, it's the war that has changed his opinion. Second of all, it's going to change his brother-in-law's opinion, too. His reasoning is actually quite pragmatic. What he's talking about is the recognition that without the institution of slavery there never would have been a war. So if we want the war to end and if we want not to fight it again, we have to get rid of the cause. That passage encapsulates quite well a major shift in thinking that goes on. It's a pretty astute analysis on his part and on many soldiers' part that there's no way that the Confederacy could have conducted a four-year war without the slave labor force. The Confederate work force is mobilized, is in the army.