

This Day in History... April 16, 1862

Emancipation Day in Washington, DC

On April 16, 1862, President Abraham Lincoln signed the District of Columbia Compensated Emancipation Act. The act freed over 3,100 people enslaved in the US capital nine months before the Emancipation Proclamation would free all enslaved people in the US.

Since the city was established, there had been calls to end slavery there. Individuals and groups had circulated anti-slavery petitions, published newspaper stories, and spoke publicly against enslavement and the slave trade within the city. Over the years, tensions brewed, with Nat Turner's 1831 rebellion nearby in Virginia, the 1835 Snow Riot, and the 1848 Pearl Affair and Riot.

During the Civil War, thousands of Black people fled to Washington, DC, to seek safety. President Abraham Lincoln felt he needed to take action. Working with Massachusetts Senator Henry Wilson, he got the District of Columbia Compensated Emancipation Act through Congress and signed it into law on April 16, 1862. It reads:

“The act entitled ‘an act for the release of certain persons held to service or labor in the District of Columbia,’ has this day been approved and signed.

“I have never doubted the constitutional authority of Congress to abolish slavery in this district, and I have ever desired to see the National Capital freed from the institution in some satisfactory way. Hence there has never been in my mind any question upon the subject except the one of expediency, arising in view of all the circumstances. If there be matters within and about this act which might have taken a course or shape more satisfactory to my judgments, I do not attempt to specify them. I am gratified that the two principles of compensation and colonization are both recognized and practically applied in the act.

“In the matter of compensation, it is provided that claims may be presented within ninety days from the passage of the act, ‘but not thereafter’, and there is no savings for minors, femes covert, insane, or absent persons, I presume this is an omission by mere oversight, and I recommend that it be supplied by an amendatory or supplemental act.”

News of the act spread quickly through the city, with the more than 3,100 freed people rejoicing. One newspaper reported, “It was a fitting celebration of the anniversary of Fort Sumter, that Congress should pass a bill to emancipate the capital from the thrall of slavery forever. Henceforth, whatever betide the national, its physical heart is freed from the presence of slavery.”

The following year, Emancipation Day, as it became known, was celebrated with a large parade. It became an annual tradition that continued into the early 1900s. In 2005, the city's mayor signed legislation making it an official public holiday. Observed by the federal government, it can also affect the due date for tax returns, traditionally April 15. If Emancipation Day falls on a Saturday or Sunday, Tax Day moves to April 17 or 18.



Stamp pictures the Emancipation Memorial (or Freedman's Memorial) in Washington, DC.



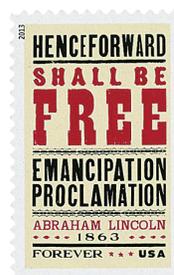
This stamp image was based on a Matthew Brady photo taken a few days before Lincoln's 55th birthday.



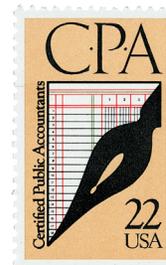
The act was passed three months before Lincoln began working on the Emancipation Proclamation and nine months before it was issued.



Issued for Washington, DC's 200th anniversary in 1991.



Issued for the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation



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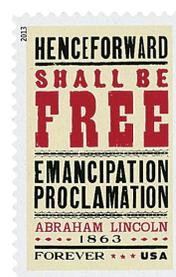
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