

# This Day in History... December 6, 1865

## 13th Amendment Ratified

Nearly two years after President Abraham Lincoln first declared enslaved people in the Confederacy free, the United States finally took the decisive step that ended slavery *everywhere* in the country. With the ratification of the 13th Amendment on December 6, 1865, the country closed the door on a system that had shaped—and scarred—America since its earliest days. Getting there, however, required a long, bitter, and politically complicated struggle that stretched across the final years of the Civil War.

When the war began in 1861, the Union's main goal was not to end slavery but to prevent the country from breaking apart. Lincoln himself personally opposed slavery, yet he entered office without any clear plan to abolish it nationwide. While many abolitionists urged immediate action, Lincoln worried that pushing too hard might drive border states—slaveholding states that stayed loyal to the Union—into joining the Confederacy.

But as the conflict dragged into its second year, a shift occurred. The fighting became more destructive, and it became clear that slavery was fueling the Southern war effort. Ending slavery, Lincoln realized, was not only a moral necessity but also a military strategy. In September 1862, he announced the Emancipation Proclamation, warning the Confederacy that all enslaved people in rebel-held territory would be declared free on January 1, 1863.

The proclamation was momentous, but it had limits. The Confederate states did not recognize Lincoln's authority and ignored the order. It also did not apply to enslaved people in the loyal border states or areas already under Union control. Still, it changed the nature of the war and signaled that the United States was moving toward permanent abolition.

By late 1863, Lincoln pushed further. That December, he issued the "Proclamation for Amnesty and Reconstruction," offering Southern states a path back into the Union if they agreed to abolish slavery. The Confederate government rejected the offer outright. Meanwhile, momentum was growing in Congress. Representative James Mitchell Ashley introduced the first proposal for a constitutional amendment that would outlaw slavery entirely. Other versions followed, and eventually the ideas merged into one

joint resolution. On April 8, 1864, the Senate approved the measure by a vote of 38 to 6.

The issue became even hotter during the 1864 presidential election. Many Americans supported abolition, but others fiercely opposed it, and some insisted the amendment was unconstitutional. When Lincoln accepted the Republican nomination, he publicly endorsed the amendment, though he spoke cautiously about it on the campaign trail. His reelection in November, however, gave him a clear mandate—and he moved quickly.

In his December 6 State of the Union address, Lincoln urged Congress to finish the work, stating that if the amendment was eventually going to reach the states, "may we not agree that the sooner the better?" Behind the scenes, he assigned Secretary of State William Seward to secure the necessary votes. Seward used every political tool available, including patronage offers, to convince wavering representatives. As Radical Republican Thaddeus Stevens later remarked, the amendment passed through a mixture of "corruption" and the leadership of "the purest man in America."

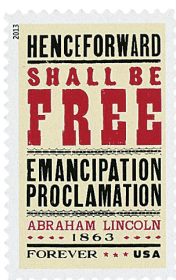
On January 31, 1865, the House finally voted. The resolution passed 119 to 56. The chamber erupted—cheers, tears, and celebrations filled the air, and African American spectators in the gallery rejoiced openly. The amendment was sent to the states the next day. Illinois became the first to ratify it, followed by 17 more states before the end of the month, including Virginia and Louisiana, both recently reclaimed from Confederate control.

After Lincoln's assassination in April 1865, his successor, Andrew Johnson, continued pressing Southern states to ratify. By December 6, Georgia became the 27th state to approve the amendment, reaching the required three-fourths majority. On December 18, Seward officially certified the 13th Amendment as part of the US Constitution.

Though the amendment legally abolished slavery, many Southern states immediately created "Black Codes"—laws designed to restrict the freedom of formerly enslaved people. In response, Johnson signed the country's first Civil Rights Act in 1866, meant to guarantee citizenship and equal protection to African Americans. True equality, however, would remain a struggle for generations to come.



*The 13th Amendment declared, "neither slavery nor involuntary servitude" would be allowed in the US.*



*Issued for the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation.*



*The Emancipation Proclamation was a stepping stone to the 13th Amendment.*



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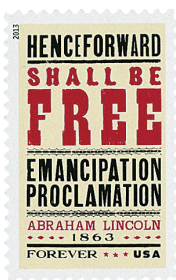
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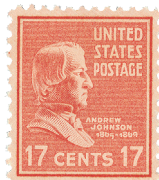
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