

Inspiration on the Long Road to Ending Slavery

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January 2, 2013

Greenwich Time

On January 1, 1808, the promise of the American Founders was fulfilled. Importation of African slaves into America was banned. Over a year earlier, on December 2, 1806, President Thomas Jefferson had requested that Congress end the slave trade. The abolition would be effective in 1808 -- the earliest date allowed by the U.S. Constitution. Congress responded affirmatively in March 1807.

That same month, a 20-year battle to end the British slave trade had culminated in London. Legislation -- which William Wilberforce had been introducing since 1791 -- passed both the House of Lords and the House of Commons. The law received royal approval on March 27, 1807. It would take another 26 years, however, for Britain to abolish slavery completely.

Wilberforce's persistent efforts did not go unnoticed in America, especially by Abraham Lincoln. In the 1850s, private citizen Lincoln repeatedly debated Illinois Senator Stephen A. Douglas, who often expressed his indifference to slavery. Lincoln could not be indifferent to slavery and during this period wrote out some notes in which he explained the inspiration he found in Wilberforce's long efforts.

"I have not allowed myself to forget that the abolition of the Slave-trade by Great Britain, was agitated a hundred years before it was a final success; that the measure had it's open fire-eating opponents; it's stealthy `don't care' opponents; it's dollar and cent opponents; it's inferior race opponents; its negro equality opponents; and its religion and good order opponents; that all these opponents got offices, and their adversaries got none," Lincoln wrote. Lincoln said these opponents "blazed, like tallow-candles for a century, at last they flickered in the socket, died out, stank in the dark for a brief season, and were remembered no more, even by the smell. School-boys know that William Wilbe[r]force, and Granville Sharpe, helped that cause forward; but who can now name a single man who labored to retard it? Remembering these things I can not but regard it as possible that the higher object of this contest may not be completely attained within the term of my natural life."

There was strong English precedent for Lincoln's feelings. After the British slave trade was abolished, Wilberforce had pressed tirelessly in Parliament for legislation to abolish slavery in the British Empire. In 1833, the Slavery Abolition Act completely ended involuntary servitude. Just days after Wilberforce's death on July 29, King William IV gave his assent to the legislation and it became law.

In notes written more than two decades later, Lincoln prophesied of the abolition of slavery in America: "I can not doubt either that it will come in due time. Even in this view, I am proud, in my passing speck of time, to contribute an humble mite to that glorious consummation, which my own poor eyes may not last to see."

Lincoln contributed his mite by issuing the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863 -- 55 years after the American slave trade had been abolished. But Lincoln realized his executive order was limited and temporary. He energetically and successfully lobbied in December 1864 and January 1865 for passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution to make emancipation permanent.

Although the amendment's ratification would not be finalized until the end of 1865, the "higher object of this contest" had been obtained before Lincoln was assassinated on April 14. In responding to the amendment's passage in January, President Lincoln used language even an Englishman could have appreciated. He called the Thirteenth Amendment a "King's cure" for slavery.

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