

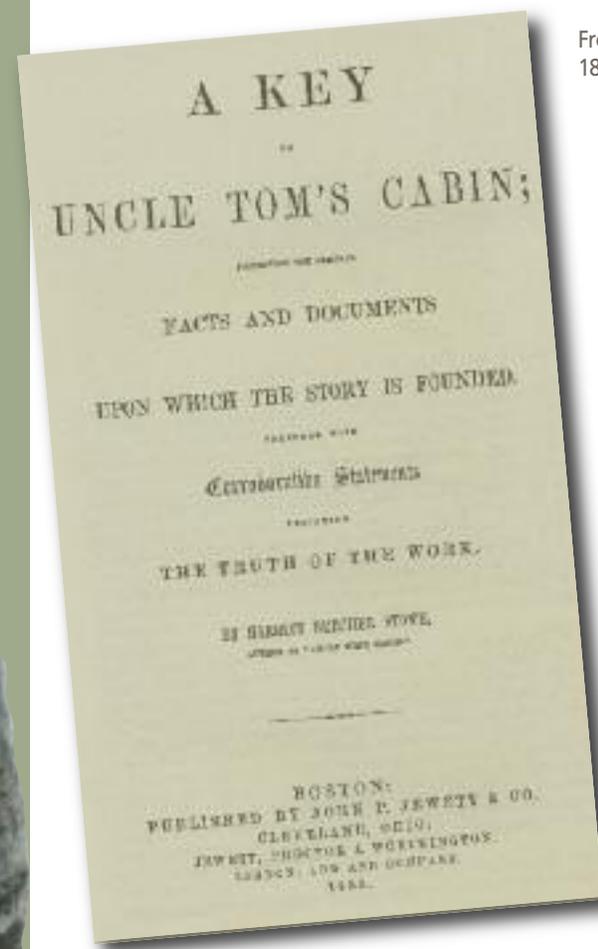
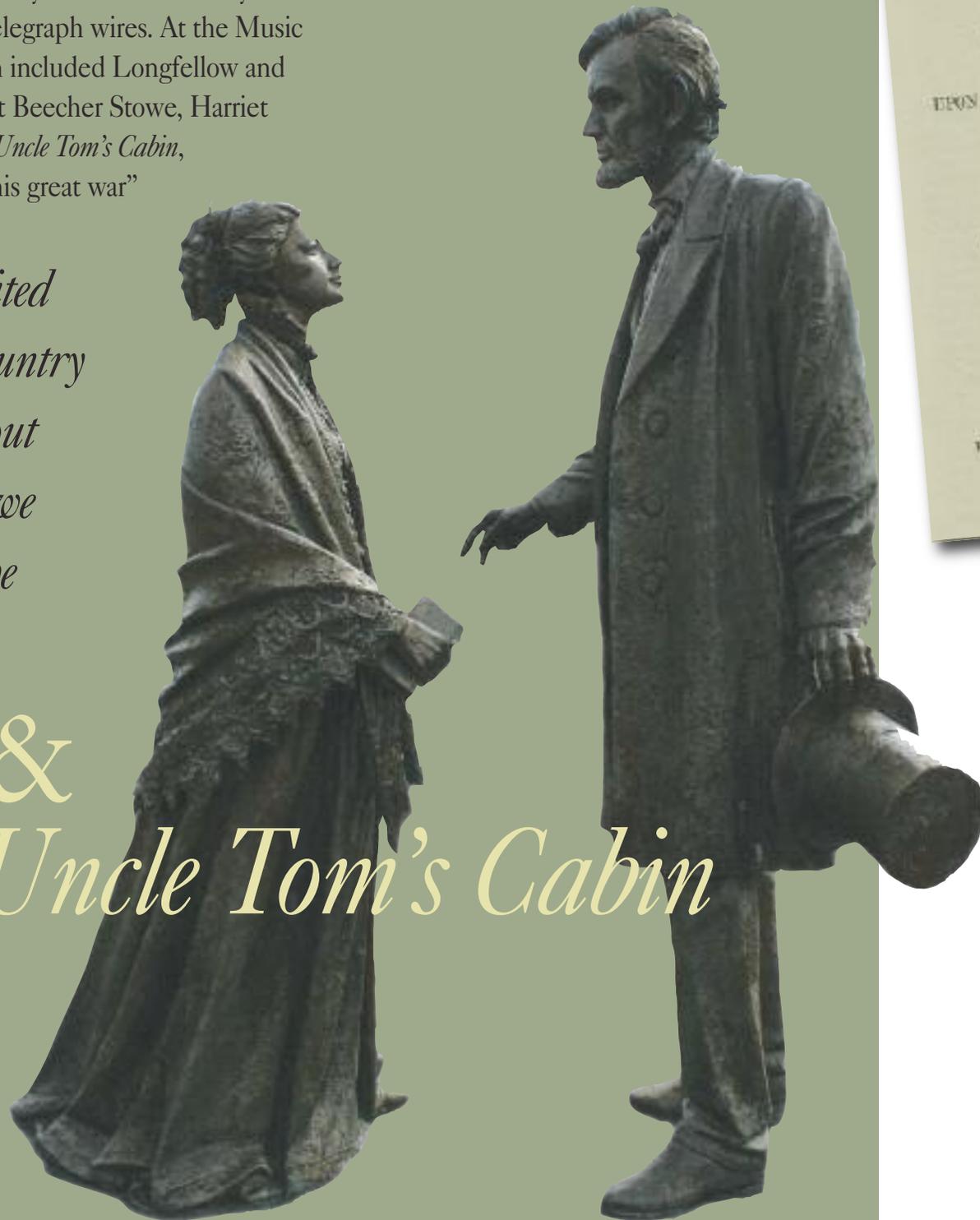
President Abraham Lincoln, in office for less than two years and leader of a fractured and war-torn nation, picked up his pen and signed his Emancipation Proclamation New Year's Day 1863. From Boston to Beaufort, South Carolina, crowds that had been waiting all day erupted excitedly as the news finally came from Washington, D.C. over the telegraph wires. At the Music Hall in Boston, where the program included Longfellow and Emerson, crowds chanted "Harriet Beecher Stowe, Harriet Beecher Stowe" for the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, until the "little lady who started this great war" came forward and was recognized.

Stowe is often credited with influencing the country to think differently about slavery. But what do we know about how Stowe influenced Lincoln?

Lincoln & A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin

By Katherine Kane

Bruno Lucchesi, "Lincoln Meets Stowe," 2006, Lincoln Sculpture Walk, Hartford. Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, Hartford, Connecticut. The sculpture commemorates the 1862 meeting in Washington D. C. between President Lincoln and Harriet Beecher Stowe.



Frontispiece to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (John P. Jewett & Co., 1853). Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, Hartford, Connecticut

oppressed and broken-hearted with the sorrows and injustice I saw, because as a Christian I felt the dishonor to Christianity—because as a lover of my country, I trembled at the coming day of wrath."

But pro-slavery critics charged that Stowe had made it all up and that slavery was a humane system. So Stowe wrote a nonfiction retort, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853), compiling the real-life evidence that had informed her fictional stories.

Stowe's sentiments touched millions. But did she have Lincoln's ear?

The question of slavery had been part of the American dialogue since the country's founding. By the 1850 census, of the 20 million people in the U.S., 4 million were enslaved. This "system" that treated people as property and used their uncompensated labor to support the economy finally split the country. When the anti-slavery Lincoln was elected in 1860, the country fractured: 10 Southern states seceded, while 4 slave-holding border states stayed in the Union but protected their right to retain human property. Lincoln spent his entire time in office as a war president.

Stowe had joined abolition and anti-slavery forces, using her influence in publicly pressuring Lincoln to do something about slavery. (Of course, he was pressured by the pro-slavery side as well. The Union was far from united against slavery.) Advocates used all available means: newspaper articles, letters to the editor, petitions, private letters and conversations, and public address.

Opinion leaders such as Stowe used the popular press to pressure the president and Congress. Over the course of 1861 and 1862, she published frequently in the New York paper *The Independent*. Historian Lyde Cullen Sizer, in her book *The Political Work of Northern*

Women Writers and the Civil War, 1850-1872 (University of North Carolina Press, 2000), notes that "Lydia Maria Child in the *Standard* and Harriet Beecher Stowe in *The Independent* were two of the most prolific and consistent anti-slavery writers in the early years of the war. Both used letters to the editor as their primary method of persuasion and both, through counseling idealistic action, were well informed and incisive governmental critics. The harder edge to their writings demonstrated the strength of their conviction that a war for any purpose other than social justice would not be worth fighting."

Daughter, wife, sister, and mother of ministers, Stowe used in her advocacy writing scriptural phrasing and references. In her August 1861 "Letter to Lord Shaftesbury" in *The Independent* she wrote, "we consider this war is a great Anti-Slavery War, not in form, but in fact: not in proclamation, but in the intense conviction and purpose of each of the contending parties, and still more in the inevitable overruling indications of divine Providence." On July 31, 1862 Stowe wrote, "the time has come when the nation has a RIGHT to demand, and the President of the United States a right to decree, their freedom; and there should go up petitions from all the land that he should do it. How many plagues must come on us before we will hear the evident voice, 'Let this people go, that they may serve me.'"

Lincoln had long deliberated over the issue of slavery, but it took him a year into the war to see his way. Beyond any moral imperative, as he considered emancipation, Lincoln was balancing public opinion (for and against slavery), the racist attitudes of the day, his responsibilities to the Constitution, military needs, and diplomatic pressure.

A decade earlier, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) had been a publishing and propaganda phenomenon. Using stories to illustrate the human impact of slavery, Stowe's blistering pen lit the world on fire. The statistics remain record-breaking: 10,000 copies sold in the first week; a million and a half British copies in a year. The book was so successful it was immediately dramatized for the stage, where it became a theatrical icon. Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner, leader of the radical Republicans, said, "Had there been no *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, there would have been no Lincoln in the White House."

In an 1853 letter, Stowe explained what drove her. "I wrote what I did because as a woman, as a mother, I was

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And he was keeping his eye on his own reelection. By early summer of 1862, though, he determined his course of action.

As a war president, Lincoln's goal was a united country. But he was also struggling to decide the best course for emancipation. By the fall of 1861 through the next summer, Lincoln promoted various versions of compensated emancipation even as he considered alternatives.

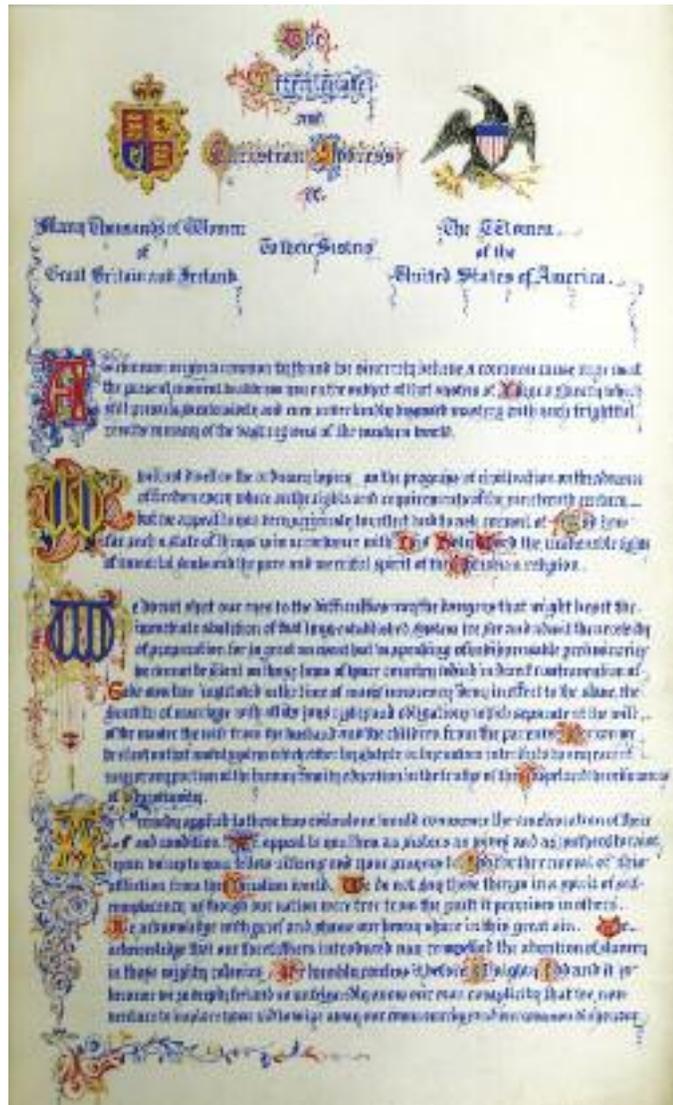
As the war proceeded, though, people took things into their own hands. Human "property" crossed Union military lines. Two commanding officers declared emancipation: General John C. Fremont freeing slaves in Missouri the summer of 1861 and in May 1862, General David Hunter doing so in areas of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. President Lincoln overrode both actions on the grounds that the president was the only one who could take such action.

The 37th Congress—freed from years of legislative deadlock by the departure of seceding Southern legislators—had also acted. In April 1862, Congress emancipated people enslaved in Washington, D.C., compensating the owners. And they passed a Confiscation Act freeing the human property of Confederate officials in areas occupied by the Union army. Slaves reaching Union territory were "captives of war" and would be set free.

Lincoln may be the most-studied American, and many details of his life are well known. Others, though, are not. Robert Bray, in his 2007 article in the *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* "What Abraham Lincoln Read—An Evaluative and Annotated List," evaluated what this pivotal president read—and what he did not read, testing the theory that what one reads reflects one's interests and influences what one thinks. Bray concluded that it is "somewhat unlikely" that Lincoln read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and "very unlikely" he read *A Key to Uncle*

Tom's Cabin. Bray acknowledged that "Lincoln might have at least looked at the *Key* without having read Stowe's novel, since the former contained... documentation supporting the author's representation of slavery—plausibly quite interesting to Lincoln." Bray downplays Library of Congress circulation records: "...in addition to Lincoln himself, the books in question may have been borrowed from the Library by or for Mary Todd Lincoln, the Lincoln children, or any of the president's secretaries. Who borrowed what is hard to determine." Was Bray right about that? Could Lincoln, in this moment in history, have possibly *not* read the most popular book in America?

In Lincoln's day, the Library of Congress collection was only available to members of Congress, justices of the Supreme Court, diplomatic corps, and the cabinet. Lincoln used the Library regularly. Today the Library's collections are accessible to everyone, so one chilly February a couple of years ago, I traveled to Washington and investigated for myself. After passing through security screening and registering as a reader, I handed a call slip for the 1862 circulation records to a manuscripts reference librarian. Soon I was presented with a quarto-sized ledger book, rebound with brown pasteboard covers. Skimming the handwritten columns in the section documenting Lincoln's transactions for 1861-1863, I found that on June 16, 1862, President Lincoln had checked out "Stowe's Key to Uncle Tom," which he



A page from the Stafford House petition, a collection of more than 500,000 signatures from women of Great Britain asking U.S. women to work to abolish slavery. It was presented to Stowe in London in 1853. Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, Hartford, Connecticut

returned on July 29. This corresponds with the time during which he drafted the Emancipation Proclamation.

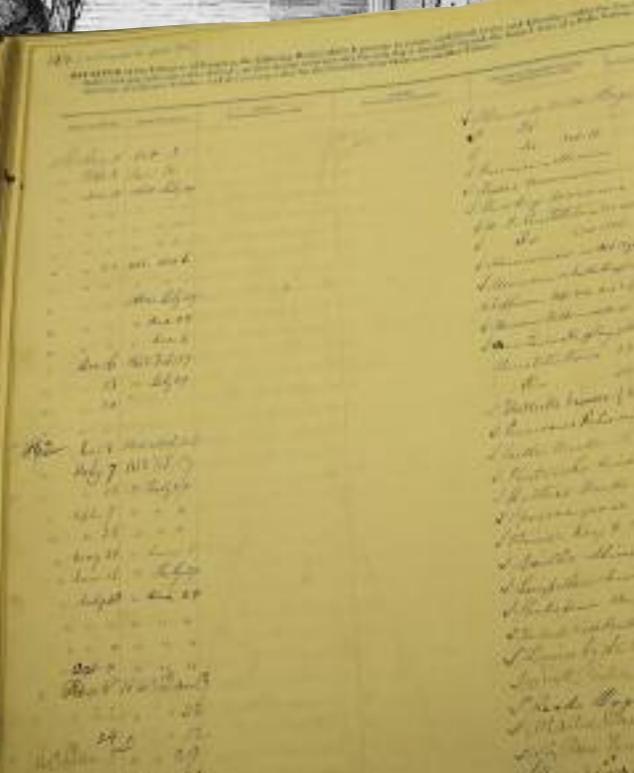
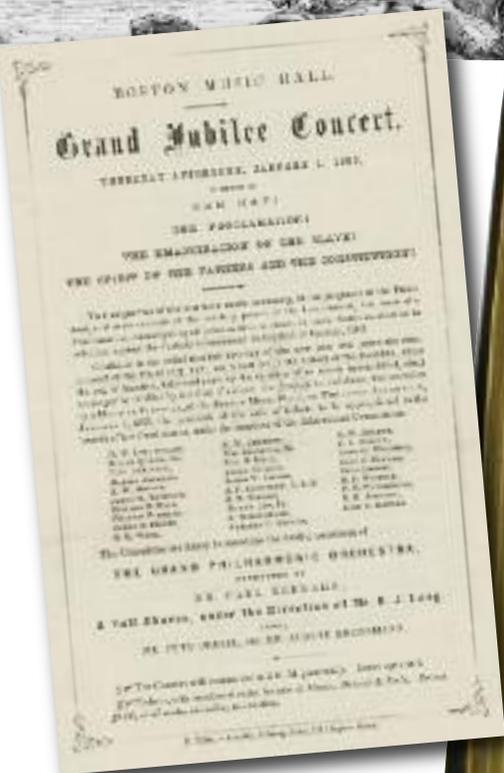
Two days after Lincoln checked out *A Key*, on June 18, he and Vice President Hannibal Hamlin rode to the Lincolns' summer cottage at the Soldiers' Home in Washington, D.C. Hamlin reported that after dinner they retired to the library and locked the doors. Then Lincoln read Hamlin the draft of the Emancipation Proclamation he had been writing.



above: The Library of Congress in the U.S. Capitol Building, c. 1853. Lincoln regularly visited the Library of Congress, then only open to members of Congress, justices of the Supreme Court, diplomatic corps, and the cabinet. He checked out Stowe's *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* as he was contemplating the Emancipation Proclamation. Library of Congress

right: Broadside for a Boston Music Hall concert on January 1, 1863. Stowe attended to be with others who had worked for the abolition of slavery and was called to the stage by an appreciative crowd. Houghton Library, Harvard University

far right: A page from the log book of the Library of Congress showing the books President Lincoln checked out, including Stowe's *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which he checked out on June 16, 1862 and returned July 29. Library of Congress





Engraving, "Harriet Beecher Stowe" writing in her conservatory at Oakholm, her first Hartford home, originally published as a frontispiece to her *Our Young Folks*, 1866. Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, Hartford, Connecticut

A few weeks later, on July 13, 1862, President Lincoln, Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, and Secretary of State William Seward shared a carriage for the funeral of Secretary of War Edwin Stanton's child. Welles recalled in his diary, "It was on this occasion and on this ride that [Lincoln] first mentioned . . . the subject of emancipating the slaves by proclamation . . . He dwelt earnestly on the gravity, importance, and delicacy of the movement, said he had given it much thought and had about come to the conclusion that it was a military necessity absolutely essential for the salvation of the Union, that we must free the slaves or be ourselves subdued."

On July 22, Lincoln read the Proclamation to his cabinet. Cabinet members knew it was bold, and they worried it would encourage insurrection north and south. Lincoln argued the Proclamation would unite the Republicans for the fall elections, reduce the "free" slave labor supporting the Southern war effort, and help keep Europe on the North's side. At Secretary Seward's suggestion, Lincoln decided to publicly release the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation after a military victory; that took until September 22, after the battle of Antietam.

Meanwhile, public pressure was building. Though the president had set his course, the public was unaware of it. On August 20, 1862 he responded to "The Prayer of 20 Millions" published in Horace Greeley's influential *New York Tribune*. "My para-

mount object," Lincoln wrote, "in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or destroy Slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it... What I do about slavery and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union and what I forbear I forbear because I do not believe it would help to save the Union."

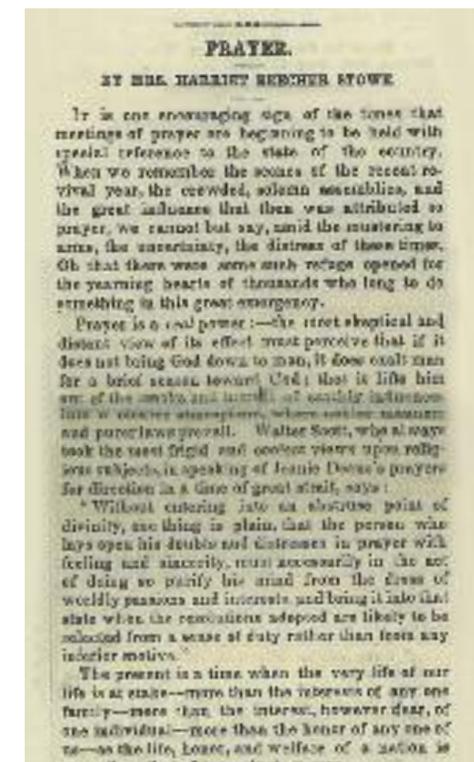
Stowe responded with her own "prayer" on September 11 in *The Independent*. Borrowing Lincoln's phrasing, she wrote, "my paramount object in this struggle is to set at liberty them that are bruised, and not either to save or destroy the Union. What I do in favor of the Union, I do because it helps to free the

oppressed; what I forbear, I forbear because it does not help to free the oppressed. I shall do less for the Union whenever it would hurt the cause of the slave, and more when I believe it would help the cause of the slave."

On September 22, 1862 Lincoln released the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. It included steps for "owner" compensation and colonization, or export, of emancipated people, provisions that were dropped from the final Proclamation. It did not provide for adding emancipated people to military units; such provisions were added to the final Proclamation. Lincoln announced that he would sign it on January 1, one hundred days later. Yet abolitionists had no confidence he would fulfill that promise.

Their skepticism was reasonable. Deeply controversial and radical, the Emancipation Proclamation made Lincoln

Stowe frequently contributed to *The Independent*, a New York religious anti-slavery paper. In the September 11, 1862 issue, her article "The Prayer" responded to Lincoln's public statement the month before about his intent with regard to the future of slavery. Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, Hartford, Connecticut



a hero to many but villain to others. Doris Kearns Goodwin writes in her 2005 *Team of Rivals* that the Emancipation Proclamation was "shocking in scope. In a single stroke, it superseded legislation on slavery and property rights that had guided policy in eleven states for nearly three quarters of a century. Three and a half million blacks who had lived enslaved for generations were promised freedom."

Stowe was among the skeptics, and she determined to publish a response to the Stafford House petition presented to her in London in 1853 in which the women of Great Britain asked the women of the U.S. to abolish slavery. The petition, now in the Center's collection, a recent gift of the Connecticut Historical Society, contains 563,000 signatures in 26 volumes.

Stowe also decided to personally influence the president. She wrote her publisher James T. Fields on November 13, 1862, "I am going to Washington to see the heads of department myself and to satisfy myself that I may refer to the Emancipation Proclamation as a reality and a substance not to fizzle out at the little end of the hour... I start for Washington tomorrow morning—and mean to have a talk with 'Father Abraham' himself." On November 19 she wrote, again to Fields, expressing some optimism:

There is most cheering news ahead in the way of assurance that our war is to be put right through and that the Proclamation is to go with vigor. We shall see a great first and I think I am doing as well as for my testimony to it as I could ask.

Her optimism continued as she wrote to Fields again on the 27th: "It seems to be the opinion here not only that the president will stand up to his Proclamation but that the Boarder [sic] states will accede to his proposition for Emancipation—I have noted the thing as a glorious expectancy!" Her outlook was

tempered by her brother Henry's skepticism, as she notes in a December 13 letter to Senator Sumner:

Every body I meet in New England says to me with anxious earnestness—[Will] the President stand firm to his Proclamation? — I tell them your saying—that nobody ever could put out the labor and perseverance to make him back down that you have to induce him to go up. —Brother Henry says—not so sure after all—it's far easier to slide down on the bannisters than to go up the stairs. —Dont let Mr. Sumner be too sure they say—Such unsleeping tremendous forces are at work to shake his resolution—such long fingered intrigue reaches even from Richmond to Washington that you all should be like knights that watch an enchanted shield past some fateful crisis—If you sleep a moment all may be gone—

Well—if the First of January sees the sacred shield yet unstolen from our temple—if the President even tho it be with An Aroon and Hur [Biblical heroes] each side to upstay his hands speaks those tremendous words of power—then—you will all draw a long breath and shake hands with each other. I remember just after Uncle Tom was published you were telling me some of the incidents of your conflict with slavery in Washington—and that then you arose and walked across the room very alertly and said—I expect to live to see this thing all down under foot yet—I wondered then to hear you say it—[Can] it be true that the time is so near—

For Harriet Beecher Stowe emancipation in any form had been a long time coming.

The degree to which *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, or Stowe herself influenced Lincoln's thinking as he crafted the Emancipation Proclamation may never be known. But it is clear that Stowe contributed mightily to the body of public thought and the flavor of public opinion upon which Lincoln inevitably drew as he formulated his thoughts regarding emancipation.

Stowe's position as author of the attitude-changing *Uncle Tom's Cabin* gave her a solid platform for shaping public opinion. She wrote frequently about emancipation during 1861 and 1862. And in the critical period of June and July 1862, when Lincoln was drafting the Proclamation and then sharing it privately, he had Stowe's *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* close at hand. ◀

Explore!

The Harriet Beecher Stowe Center presents:

Performance & Panel Discussion:

The Emancipation Proclamation at 150: Still Relevant, Still Revolutionary

December 13, 2012, 5-7 p.m., Stowe Center
A reading from the historic record by "Abraham Lincoln" followed by a panel and discussion with Gene Leach and Booker DeVaughn. \$5, free for Stowe Center members.

Symposium: Seizing Liberty

April 20, 2013, 8:30 a.m.- 4 p.m., at Hartford Public High School

This symposium will link historic and contemporary abolition and emancipation. Keynote address by Debby Applegate, author of the 2007 Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher*, followed by panels, dramatic readings, abolitionist workshop, and tour of the Stowe House.

For more information visit HarrietBeecherStowe.org or call 860-522-9258, ext. 317.