



The INCOMPLETE CELEBRATION

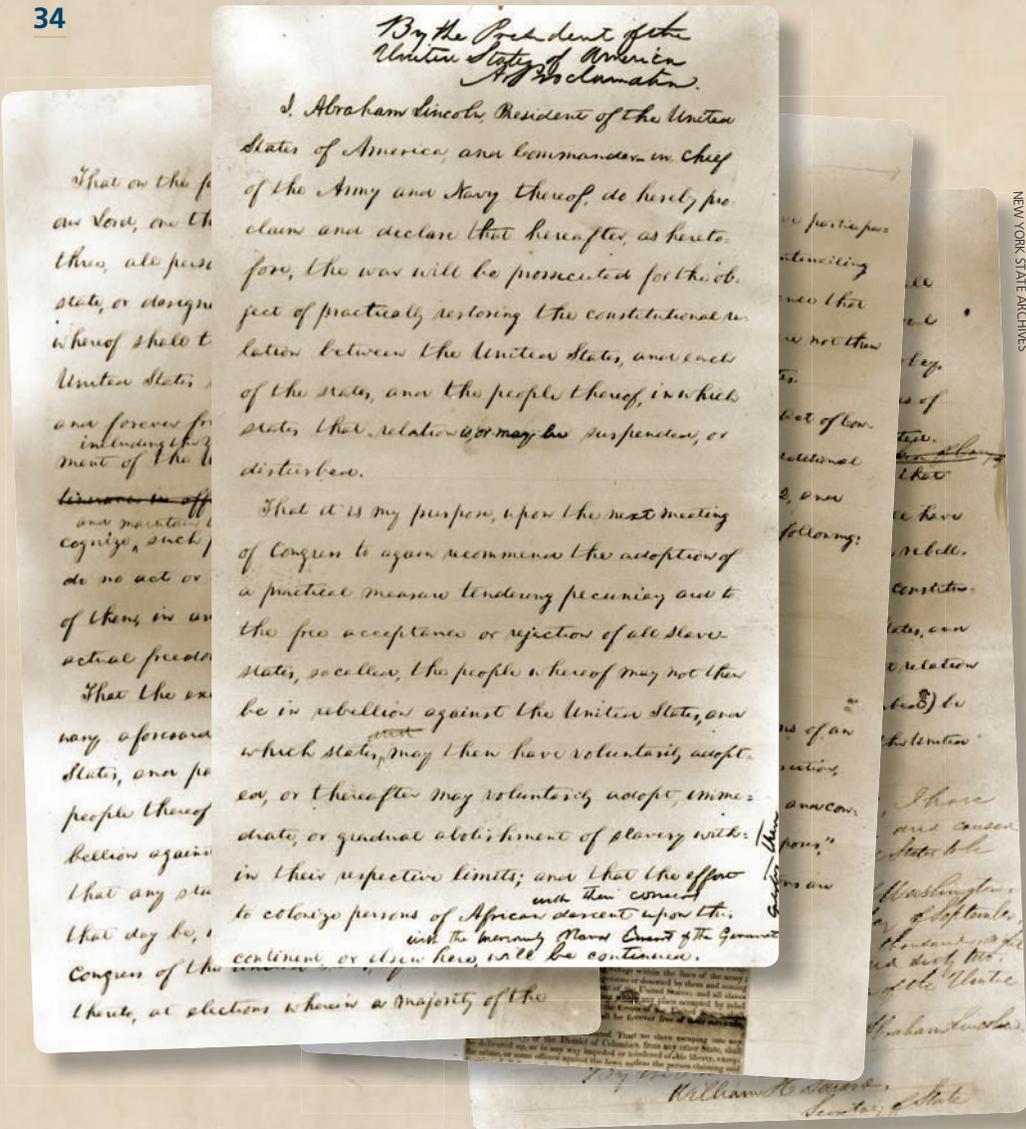


BY JENNIFER LEMAK

In his quest to show New York's progressive leadership in civil rights, Governor Nelson Rockefeller overlooked one important factor during the state's Civil War centennial events: participation by African Americans.

In the early 1960s, New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller had presidential aspirations; he was also particularly interested in celebrating the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation, since the state had a large African American population. A bonus was that the state owned the historically significant Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, in President Abraham Lincoln's handwriting. This document, issued on September 22, 1862, warned that if the Confederate states remained in rebellion against the United States for a period of more than 100 days, Lincoln as president would free all the slaves within their borders on January 1, 1863. As we know, Lincoln's promised executive order was indeed issued on that day as the landmark Emancipation Proclamation, which freed over 4 million slaves.

One year later, in January 1864, President Lincoln presented his preliminary handwritten draft of the proclamation to the Albany Relief Bazaar to be used as a fundraiser for the Union war effort. New York abolitionist Gerrit Smith won the document at a Relief Bazaar raffle and gave it to the United States Sanitary Commission (a precursor to the Red Cross) to be resold to support the war effort. After Lincoln's death in 1865, the New York Legislature purchased the document from the Sanitary Commission for \$1,000 and deposited it in the New York State Library, where it remains today.



The Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, in Abraham Lincoln's handwriting.

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New York Tries to Lead the Way...

On April 17, 1961, the New York Civil War Centennial Commission ceremonies opened in Albany with two events. The first commemorated the role of New York's soldiers in the Civil War; the second took place at the State Education Building in Albany, where Civil War historian Bruce Catton, chairman of New York's Centennial Commission, and John Hope Franklin, renowned African American historian and vice-chairman of the commission, both declared that in winning freedom for the slave, the United States

committed itself to freedom for all people everywhere.

New York's celebrations were peaceful; however, elsewhere they were not. Charleston, South Carolina's Francis Marion Hotel denied accommodations to an African American member of the New Jersey Civil War Centennial Commission during one of the federal commission's events. Governor Rockefeller and the New York Commission subsequently boycotted the meetings and suggested they be moved to the Sixth Naval Base at Charleston, on federal territory, where local segregation laws did not apply.

Furthermore, Rockefeller and the commission declared that they would boycott any future segregationist activities for the remainder of the centennial observances.

Rockefeller, a liberal Republican and a champion of civil rights, decided that he and New York State would show the nation, especially the South, that the centennial of the eradication of slavery in the South was a significant event. Word went forth from the governor's office that New York would be the leader in commemorating the Emancipation Proclamation's anniversary, and that the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation would be the centerpiece of the effort. Throughout the year, the document traveled to multiple sites across the state for citizens to view. In addition, Rockefeller pushed to pass legislation establishing another commission that would design a permanent shrine in New York where the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation would be housed.

Rockefeller and the New York Commission also planned an Emancipation dinner on September 12, 1962 at the Park Sheraton Hotel in New York City. Rockefeller invited Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to attend the dinner, but it conflicted with a fundraiser at which King was scheduled to appear. King's advisors worried that the Emancipation dinner was too "Republican," and King was worried about upsetting President Kennedy,

who was a key figure in King's civil rights agenda. Rockefeller, however, sweetened the deal by donating money to rebuild burned African American churches in Georgia. As a result, King's advisors realized that there were several Democrats on the New York Civil War Centennial Commission, and that many of the governor's multi-millionaire friends would be present at the dinner. Thus King did attend the dinner, at which both he and Rockefeller spoke.

Rockefeller's speech focused on civil rights history in America since Lincoln, and how far the nation still had to go to achieve the principles that the Emancipation Proclamation espoused. Rockefeller thrust New York forward as the most progressive state in the Union. Historian Taylor Branch wrote about the fancy event: "This was Rockefeller's day, honoring a president of his Republican Party and summoning up nearly a century of Rockefeller family interest in the welfare of former slaves. Fittingly, Rockefeller possessed the original parchment of Lincoln's proclamation."

...but Politics Intervene

Throughout 1963, the celebration in New York State proceeded without too many problems; however, plans for the Emancipation celebration in Washington D.C. were a political mess. Dr. King urged President Kennedy to issue a second Emancipation Proclamation against segregation, and although Kennedy

personally wanted to issue this order, he knew that if he did, he would lose important political votes. It put him in a quandary: he had already been asked to deliver a major address supporting civil rights at the Emancipation celebration, but was hesitant because he felt that being at the event would invite comparisons between himself and President Lincoln—a comparison he did not want because of his history of being weak on civil rights. Ultimately Kennedy did not attend the Emancipation celebration, but sent a video-taped message instead.

One week before the Washington D.C. celebration, Bishop Smallwood E. Williams, president of the District of Columbia branch of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), called for a boycott of the celebration because African Americans felt they had been snubbed by the federal Centennial Commission and the others who were planning the program. Dr. King endorsed Williams's call for a boycott. The day after, black leaders met with commission representatives, White House aides, and an official of the Civil Rights Commission. The group settled on new parameters for the public event: black leaders would sit on the platform, and a black speaker would be added to the program.

The festivities took place at the foot of the Lincoln Memorial. Prior to the program, Rockefeller instructed dignitaries to gather to per-



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sonally view the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. Adlai Stevenson, the nation's UN representative and the celebration's principal speaker, paid tribute to the day by saying, "The immortal document that the Great Emancipator read to his advisors just 100 years ago today closed one era of American history and opened another." Poet Archibald MacLeish, singer Mahalia Jackson, federal judge (and later Supreme Court Justice) Thurgood Marshall, and Reverend Frederick Brown Harris, chaplain of the Senate, were part of the program, and President Kennedy's video-taped address was broadcast on TV.

Yet despite the luminaries present, the day clearly belonged to Governor Rockefeller and "his" document; in his speech, he called for the nation to rededicate itself to the "basic belief in the worth and dignity of the individual and the right of each to full and equal opportunity in sharing the American dream." Dr. William Ronan, secretary to the governor, remembered the celebration,

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. weighed the political ramifications of his attendance before agreeing to speak at a dinner in New York City commemorating the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. He is shown here with Francis Joseph Cardinal Spellman, Archbishop of New York, and Governor Nelson Rockefeller.

KING'S ADVISORS
WORRIED THAT
THE EMANCIPATION
DINNER WAS TOO
"REPUBLICAN," AND
KING WAS WORRIED
ABOUT UPSETTING
PRESIDENT KENNEDY,
WHO WAS A KEY
FIGURE IN KING'S
CIVIL RIGHTS AGENDA.

THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

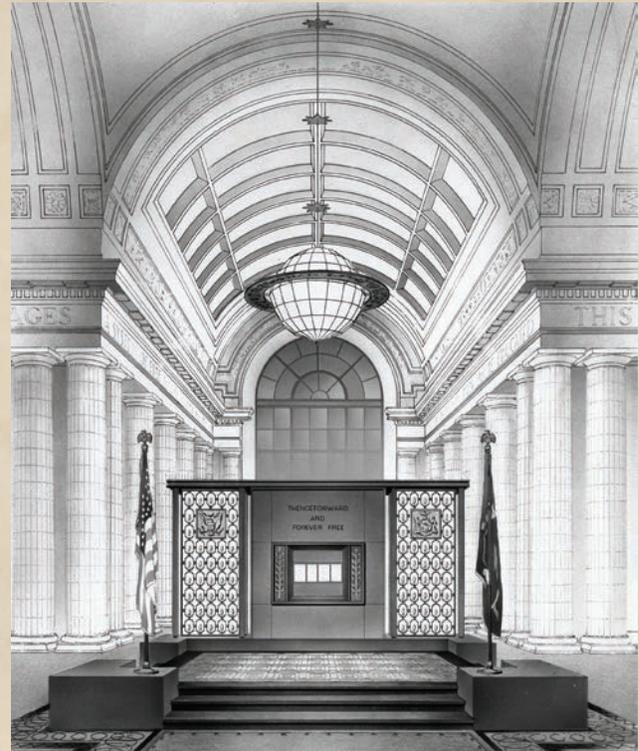
The New York State Archives holds the official records from the New York State Civil War Centennial Commission and the New York State Bicentennial Commission. It also holds the records dealing with the proposed Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation shrine.

ROCKEFELLER HOPED THAT NEW YORK'S HISTORY OF FREEING THE SLAVES, AND HIS OWN EARLY SUPPORT OF CIVIL RIGHTS, WOULD BE ENOUGH TO ENCOURAGE THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STATE'S CIVIL WAR CENTENNIAL CELEBRATIONS—BUT UNFORTUNATELY THEY WERE NOT.

saying, “No one will ever forget when we took the [Preliminary] Emancipation Proclamation—which New York State owns—to Washington for its Centennial Celebration. As owners we insisted, much to the chagrin of John F. and Robert Kennedy, that Nelson present it over national television at the...ceremony. When the Marine Band began to play ‘The Battle Hymn of the Republic,’ guess who got up and led the band and the impromptu singing? Nelson A.!”

Rockefeller hoped that New York's history of freeing the slaves, and his own early support of civil rights, would be enough to encourage the African American community to participate in the state's Civil War Centennial celebrations—but unfortunately they were not. In a letter, William Ronan discussed Rockefeller's disappointment: “... The Governor is disappointed that Negro leaders are not doing more to support work of the commission. He wishes to engage more church leaders and others.” Another blow to Rockefeller and his image of an inclusive New York came when plans for the Emancipation shrine were abandoned because of lack of support and funds and the passing of the moment. As a result, the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation went back into the storage vault at the New York State Library.

Overlooking the Obvious
Perhaps New York's African Americans were too busy with



This shrine for the Emancipation Proclamation in the State Capitol was never built.

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the struggle for civil rights to participate in centennial activities, or perhaps they felt left out of the planning. Or perhaps Frederick Douglass's words from the 1852 July 4th holiday celebration struck a chord with black New Yorkers 111 years later: “What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham.”

In retrospect, if Rockefeller and New York's Civil War Centennial Commission had truly looked at the civil rights movement unfolding around them, they might have approached the celebrations with a more inclusive tone and called for more grassroots participation, since the 1963 commemoration of the Emancipation Proclamation was almost completely driven

by government and political leaders. It was one thing to acknowledge the proclamation as a historical event, but for the African American community, the unanswered question seemed to be, “How does this affect me, since there is still racial discrimination and bitter hatred toward African Americans?”

Fortunately, some of these mistakes were lessons learned ten years later, when New York State and the nation began planning celebrations for the 1976 Bicentennial. The New York State Bicentennial Planning Commission made it a point to include all New Yorkers in the celebration—especially African Americans. In 1977, the United States Bicentennial Commission issued a statement that reported an increase in participation at commemorative events “at all levels of American society, particularly on the urban front.” ■