



THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA COMPENSATED EMANCIPATION ACT OF 1862

Introduction

The 150th anniversary of the District of Columbia Compensated Emancipation Act of 1862 occurred in 2012. This bill was introduced to Congress to end slavery in the District of Columbia. Many citizens and members of Congress alike noted that the legality of slavery in the District of Columbia was inconsistent with the ideals and aspirations of the nation. Congress approved the bill and President Abraham Lincoln signed the act.

This activity features the District of Columbia Compensated Emancipation Act of 1862 and other primary and secondary sources that tell the story of Congress's role in this first major step towards the freeing of enslaved African Americans. While intended for 8th grade students, the lesson can be adapted for other grade levels.



National Standards

United States History National Standards

Era 5: Civil War and Reconstruction (1850-1877)

Standard 2: The cause and character of the Civil War and its effects on the American people.

Civic and Government Standard

What are the Roles of the Citizen in American Democracy?

- What is citizenship?
- What are the rights of citizens?
- What are the responsibilities of citizens?
- How can citizens take part in civic life?

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, grade 8

Reading Informational text 1, 2, 3, 4

Speaking and Listening 1, 3, 4

Common Core State Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies, grade 8

Reading 1, 2, 4, 6

Writing 2, 4, 5

Learning Skills

Reading, building vocabulary, analyzing documents, group discussions, internet research, presentation, and writing

Essential Question

The Compensated Emancipation Act was an important legal and symbolic victory. It was part of a larger struggle over the meaning and practice of freedom and citizenship. What does it mean to be a participating member of society? What does freedom and citizenship mean?

Documents and Worksheets

Essays

- *The United States Congress in 1860–1861*
- *Slavery in the District of Columbia*

District of Columbia Compensated Emancipation Act of 1862

Congressional Globe, 25th Congress, 2nd Session, page 41



Representative William Slade’s antislavery speech in the 25th Congress, December 20, 1837,
United States House of Representatives Historical Highlights

Newspaper Articles

- *Emancipation*, *New York Daily Tribune*, April 12, 1862, page 1
- *The March of Freedom*, *New York Daily Tribune*, April 12, 1862, page 4

Document Analysis Worksheet

Vocabulary Building Worksheet

Suggested Activities

Optional Activity: Vocabulary Building

To prepare students for the readings and document analysis activities, use the vocabulary building worksheet to familiarize them with words they will encounter throughout the following activities.

1. Reading and Group Discussion

Share with students copies of the essays. You may choose to read them to students or assign as homework reading in preparation for class discussion. After reading the essays, lead students in a discussion by asking them the following question:

- What occurred during the 36th Congress that contributed to the passing of major bills during the 37th Congress like the District of Columbia Compensated Emancipation Act of 1862?
- Did the Constitution prohibit slavery? Why were some citizens and Members of Congress against slavery in the District of Columbia?
- What amount of compensation was provided for citizens whose slaves were freed? What was offered to those who were emancipated and willing to emigrate to Haiti and Liberia?

2. Document Analysis

Distribute to each student a copy of the District of Columbia Compensated Emancipation Act of 1862, transcript of the document, and the document analysis worksheet. (You may consider having students work in small groups for this activity).

Students review the document using the worksheet as a guide. Have students record their observations and responses to the questions on the worksheet, especially the questions in section six.

Conclude the activity by leading students in a discussion about what they have learned from analyzing the document and how they responded to questions in section six on the worksheet.



3. Internet Research, Document Analysis and Presentation

Divide students into small groups. Distribute to each group one of the following sources.

- Congressional Globe, 25th Congress, 2nd Session, page 41
- Representative William Slade’s antislavery speech in the 25th Congress, December 20, 1837, United States House of Representatives Historical Highlights
- Newspaper Article: *Emancipation*, *New York Daily Tribune*, April 12, 1862
- Newspaper Article: *The March of Freedom*, *New York Daily Tribune*, April 12, 1862

Using the same document analysis skills they learned when looking at the DC Compensated Emancipation Act, students review their assigned document. Within their assigned groups, students write a summary and prepare a presentation about the document using the following questions:

- What is the document?
- Who created it? Why was it created?
- What did you find most interesting about this document?
- What did you learn about Congress’s action towards the guarantee of freedom and citizenship for all?
- What do you think “freedom” and “citizenship” mean today for Americans?

Teacher Tip

As a supplement to this activity, you will also find additional education resources on our website, *Building a More Perfect Union: Congress, the Capitol Building, and the Civil War*.

www.visitthecapitol.gov/Exhibitions/civilwar.

Extended Activity

Make a classroom display of the documents, each with a one page description prepared by the individual groups.



Essay 1: Background Information

The United States Congress in 1860-1861

The election of Abraham Lincoln as President of the United States in November 1860 created a reaction among Senators and members of the House of Representatives. It set in motion a chain of events that would lead to emancipation of human slavery, first in the District of Columbia and then elsewhere.

In November 1860 James Chesnut of South Carolina left the Senate in support of the Confederacy. After South Carolina and Mississippi chose to secede from the Union, Senator Jefferson Davis of Mississippi addressed his colleagues, requesting that the peaceful secession of southern states be allowed. Jefferson Davis and four other senators soon withdrew.

The Senate proceeded to debate how to designate the empty seats: the response depended upon whether the Senate determined the southern states did or did not have the right to secede. Following a heated debate, the seats were declared “vacant,” thus affirming the belief that the southern states continued to be part of the Union.

Several other senators were expelled over the next several months. Many of them had not formally withdrawn and others were barred for disloyalty.

On Christmas Eve 1860 the House of Representatives received a letter announcing South Carolina’s secession from the Union. Representative James Blaine of Maine reported that “a few (Members)... marked their retirement by speeches bitterly reproaching the Federal Government; and bitterly accusing the Republican part... the large majority confined themselves to retiring in a formal fashion.”

Congressional membership at the end of the 36th Congress (1859-1861) consisted of 50 seats in the Senate with Republicans in the majority with 31, and 183 voting members in the House with Republicans occupying 108 seats.

The 37th Congress (1861-1863) first met for an extraordinary session, called by President Lincoln, on July 4, 1861 and again from December 2, 1861–July 17, 1862. The productivity was stunning; without southern opposition, the Senate and House passed the following measures: (first) Confiscation Act, District of Columbia Compensated Emancipation Act, Homestead Act, Revenue Act of 1862, (second) Confiscation Act, Pacific Railway Act, and Morrill Land Grant Act. The final session met from December 1, 1862–March 3, 1863.

Nine months after signing the District of Columbia Compensated Emancipation Act, President Lincoln on January 1, 1863 issued the Emancipation Proclamation.



Sources:

US Senate websites:

http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/expulsion_cases/CivilWar_Expulsion.htm

<http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/DCEmancipationAct.htm>

US House of Representatives website:

<http://artandhistory.house.gov/highlights.aspx?action=view&intID=156>



Essay 2: Background Information

Slavery in the District of Columbia

Although the Constitution did not prohibit slavery, Article I, Section 8 gave the Congress authority over a district “(not exceeding ten Miles square) as may, by Cession of particular States, and the Acceptance of Congress, become the Seat of the Government of the United States.”

The Residence Act of 1790, created during the First Federal Congress, established a permanent site for the federal city. The District of Columbia was created from land ceded from the states of Maryland and Virginia where slavery was legal. As a result, slavery was a legal, economic, and social institution within the District of Columbia, until Congress abolished it during the Civil War.

Many citizens and members of Congress alike noted that the legality of slavery in the District of Columbia was inconsistent with the ideals and aspirations of the nation. In 1836 future Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts was so upset by the sight of a slave auction in the District of Columbia that he vowed to “give all that I had to the cause of emancipation.”

At the same time, the number of free African Americans living in the District grew and laws were passed that restricted the freedom of free African Americans within the District. These laws were referred to as “Black Codes” and included requiring free black people to carry “certificates of freedom” at all times and to adhere to curfews and other regulations.

Throughout the 19th century the District of Columbia served as a center of the domestic slave trade between the upper and lower south where more slaves were needed for work in cotton plantations. One of five separate bills that were collectively known as The Compromise of 1850 outlawed the importation of enslaved people into the District for resale or transportation elsewhere. However, the institution of slavery continued within the District.

Over the years citizens introduced to Congress a growing number of petitions to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia. While many believed that slavery could not be abolished in the states without a constitutional amendment, they thought that slavery should be outlawed in the District because of Congress’ exclusive jurisdiction over the nation’s capital.

In December 1861, Senator Henry Wilson introduced a bill to end slavery in the District of Columbia. The Senate approved the bill on April 3, 1862 and on April 11, 1862 Thaddeus Stevens, an abolitionist from Pennsylvania, successfully directed the bill through the House of Representatives. President Abraham Lincoln signed “An Act for the release of certain persons held to service or labor in the District of Columbia,” known as the District of Columbia Compensated Emancipation Act of 1862, on April 16, 1862.



The act provided for the freedom of all enslaved persons within the District of Columbia, the compensation (up to \$300) of loyal persons who filed a petition to the Commissioners affirming their claim on the manumitted person(s), and the opportunity for those emancipated to emigrate to another country such as Haiti or Liberia by offering \$100 for that purpose.

The District of Columbia Compensated Emancipation Act passed easily in both the House (92-38) and Senate (29-14). Approximately 3,000 men, women and children who resided in the District of Columbia were emancipated and more than 900 petitions for compensation were reviewed.

Representative John Armor Bingham of Ohio stated, “Let the anniversary of that crime (the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter) be signaled by the banishment of slavery forever in the national capital.” And, Senator Lafayette Foster of Connecticut declared, “You may strike off the bonds of every slave in the District of Columbia today.”

Sources:

US House of Representatives Website:

<http://history.house.gov/Historical-Highlights/1851-1900/A-bill-abolishing-slavery-in-the-District-of-Columbia/>

US Senate Website:

http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/civil_war/DCEmanicipationAct_FeaturedDoc.htm

McQuirter, Marya Annette, Government of the District of Columbia, “Ending Slavery in the Nation’s Capital, The District of Columbia Compensated Emancipation Act,” 2009.

The District of Columbia Website:

<http://emancipation.dc.gov/page/history-emancipation-day>

<http://emancipation.dc.gov/node/107252>

**Vocabulary Building Activity: District of Columbia Compensated Emancipation Act**

Name: _____

Definition Match

Connect the words to their meaning. For those words you do not know, look up their definitions, record the meaning and use them in a sentence. Use the back of this worksheet to record your information

- | | |
|-----------------------|---|
| Emancipation | a) Set a price on or value |
| Compensation | b) A demand or request for something considered one's due |
| Involuntary servitude | c) The amount of money spent |
| Claim | d) A formal written request appealing to authority for a particular cause |
| Allegiance | e) Leave one's own county in order to settle permanently in another |
| Petition | f) The action of withdrawing formally from a membership of a federation or a body |
| Appraise | g) Something, typically money, awarded to someone to make up for a loss |
| Appropriate | h) The state of being a slave or completely subject to someone more powerful |
| Manumit | i) Release from slavery; set free |
| Emigrate | j) Devote money or assets to a special purpose |
| Expenditure | k) Loyalty or commitment of an individual to a group or cause |
| Secession | l) The freeing of someone from slavery |



Vocabulary Building Answer Key: District of Columbia Compensated Emancipation Act

- Emancipation (l) a) Set a price on or value
- Compensation (g) b) A demand or request for something considered one's due
- Involuntary servitude (h) c) The amount of money spent
- Claim (b) d) A formal written request appealing to authority for a particular cause
- Allegiance (k) e) Leave one's own county in order to settle permanently in another
- Petition (d) f) The action of withdrawing formally from a membership of a federation or a body
- Appraise (a) g) Something, typically money, awarded to someone to make up for a loss
- Appropriate (j) h) The state of being a slave or completely subject to someone more powerful
- Manumit (i) i) Release from slavery; set free
- Emigrate (e) j) Devote money or assets to a special purpose
- Expenditure (c) k) Loyalty or commitment of an individual to a group or cause
- Secession (f) l) The freeing of someone from slavery

**Written Document Analysis Worksheet: The District of Columbia Compensated Emancipation Act**

Name: _____

Answer the following questions as you analyze the document. Record your observations on the worksheet.

1. What type of document is it?
2. What is the title of the act according to the document?
3. What characteristics make the document appear official?
4. When was the act signed and by whom?
5. Contents of the act:
 - a. Who is emancipated?
 - b. What does the act offer those who have “claims to service or labor against those discharged?”
 - c. Why and to whom do the claimants have to swear allegiance or loyalty?
 - d. What is the maximum amount of compensation allowed per person?
 - e. How much money did Congress appropriate to carry out the act?
 - f. What can the person who is freed obtain for 25 cents?
 - g. In addition to freedom, what else is granted to those affected by this bill?
6. Opinion:
 - a. What did you find most interesting in reading this document?
 - b. Was anything left out of the act that you think should have been covered?
 - c. Did you find the act easy or difficult to read? Why?
 - d. List two topics related to this act that you would like to know more about.