

Lincoln and New Orleans, 1831–1865

~The Lalaurie Incident~William de Fleurville/The John Shelby incident~Presidency and war~Pan of New Orleans~Emancipation~A spy in New Orleans~The Louisiana experiment~Roudanez and Bertonneau~A dark and indefinite future

Lincoln's direct interaction with New Orleans ceased in June 1831 and would not resume until his presidency commenced in March 1861. On a few occasions during those three intervening decades, however, the city factored into Lincoln's life. This was typical: New Orleans' vast commercial hinterland, nourished by a relentless flow of waterborne traffic, made the metropolis relevant to most inhabitants of the riverine West, even if they never set foot in the city. Many items at Lincoln's New Salem store, for example, transhipped at New Orleans. Any time Lincoln and his neighbors drank coffee, sweetened with sugar, enjoyed tropical fruit, or partook of numerous other imports, they became consumers in the greater New Orleans economic system. News, too, diffused upriver from the Crescent City (a nickname coined in a popular 1835 publication, which subsequently spread nationwide¹), and given the city's reputation for the lascivious, the shocking, and the wicked, certain stories traveled as fast as the swiftest steamboat.

One such news item may have brought New Orleans' sordid character—and its brand of human enslavement—directly into the Lincoln parlour. One evening in April 1834, a blaze damaged a French Quarter mansion, revealing that owner Madame Delphine Lalaurie had been torturing her live-in slaves in the attic. A riot ensued among outraged neighbors on Royal Street. Sensationalized newspaper articles about the incident propelled the story up the Mississippi and Ohio rivers in subsequent weeks, landing in the hands of, among many others, two young ladies in the Todd family of Lexington, Kentucky. The teenagers “shivered with horror” over the lurid details reported in the *New Orleans Bee*:

1. The publication was seen in Holt Ingraham's, *The South-West by a Yankee* (New York, 1835), 1:91. See “The Lexicon of Place: Deconstructing New Orleans' Names, Nicknames, and Slogans,” in Richard Campanella, *Bienville's Dilemma: A Historical Geography of New Orleans* (Lafayette: University of Louisiana Press, 2008), 179–287.

2. Katherine Helm, *The True Story of Mary, Wife of Lincoln, Containing the Recollection of Mary Lincoln's Sister Emilie, Extracts from Her War-Time Diary, Numerous Letters*

[S]laves . . . horribly mutilated, were seen suspended by the neck, with their limbs apparently stretched and torn from one extremity to the other. Language is powerless . . . to give a proper conception of the horror. . . . These slaves were the property of the demons, in the shape of a woman. . . .³

“We were horrified and talked of nothing else for days,” remembered one of the Kentucky girls. “In one such case could happen, it damned the whole institution [of slavery].” The other girl, her niece and best friend Mary, would later marry Abraham Lincoln. We do not know if Mary Todd Lincoln shared the gruesome story and its New Orleans connection with her husband, but we do know that the Lalaurie story directly inspired Mary to question the morality of the institution of slavery and her family’s affiliation with it. It also moved Mary to call her beloved “Mammy” in assisting her to stay away. Mary Todd Lincoln would come to abhor slavery and push her husband to take increasingly radical stances against it. In a large sense, the Lalaurie story illustrates how New Orleans unintentionally produced and exported countless narratives about the brutality of human bondage to an American nation growing increasingly uncomfortable with the whole beastly business. To this day, the story of Madame Lalaurie and her tortured slaves remains a mainstay of local history, told to scores of visitors asking nightly “ghost tours” of the French Quarter.

New Orleans favored into Mary Todd’s economic life as well. Her father interacted commercially with the city regularly, via flatboat and steamboat, helping elevate his family’s status to that of the Lexington elite. He regularly brought back embroidered French swisses, muslins, lace, dolls, and other luxury items for Mary, who spoke French fluently and kept abreast of the latest political news. According to one (somewhat romanticized) recollection by her niece Katharine Helm, Mary sported elegant New Orleans fashions when she first met Abraham.⁵

If Mary thought Abraham well-groomed, she might have thanked his

1. *Other Documents Now First Published* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1928), 38–4.

3. *New Orleans Bee*, April 11, 1834, 2, c. 1.

4. Helm, *Story of Mary*, 38–40.

5. *Ibid.*, 30, 44–45, 73–74. The Todd family would later remember Louisiana as where one of their own, Confederate Lt. Alexander H. Todd (Mary’s half-brother) met his fate, in fighting near Baton Rouge.

barber, William “Billy” Florville (born of mixed Franco-African ancestry at Cape Haytien in Haiti around 1806, the teenage William de Fleurville escaped a revolution in 1821–22 and made his way to Baltimore with his godmother. There, while at St. Mary’s Convent, he apprenticed in barbering. After his godmother died, he decided, for reasons unclear, to leave for New Orleans. We do not know the timing or circumstance of his New Orleans experience, but we do know it proved to be a bad decision. New Orleans in the late 1820s grew increasingly hostile to free people of color, curtailing their rights, proscribing their moving into the city, and expelling those recently arrived. Fearing kidnapping and enslavement, Fleurville departed for St. Louis and found his way up the Illinois and Sangamon rivers in 1831. A county history picks up the story from there:

While approaching the village of New Salem, he overtook a tall man wearing a red flannel shirt, and carrying an axe on his shoulder. They fell into a conversation, and walked to a little grocery store together. The tall man was Abraham Lincoln, who soon learned that the stranger was a barber out of money. Mr. Lincoln took him to his boarding house, and told the people his business and situation. That opened the way for an evening’s work among the boarders. . . .

Lincoln later convinced Fleurville—who Anglicized his name to Florville—to settle in Springfield. There he married, raised a family, and prospered as the haircutter for hundreds of Springfield men and children, including Lincoln, who knew him affectionately as “Billy the Barber.” It was Florville who groomed Lincoln’s iconic mustacheless beard prior to his departure for the White House. We can only imagine the conversations the future president shared with his bilingual, Catholic, Franco-African-Haitian-American friend—conversations about the Caribbean, the Mississippi, New Orleans, slavery—at the barber shop on East Adams Street. They seem to have been of substance, and the foundation of a genuine friendship, because in late 1863, Florville wrote Lincoln a warm letter of gratitude for the emancipation that was steadily sweeping the South. It read in part,

I . . . thought it might not be improper for one so honorable in life and occupation, to address the President of the United States—

6. *History of Sangamon County, Illinois, Together with Sketches of its Cities, Villages, and Townships* (Chicago: Inter-state Publishing Company, 1891), 36–737.

Yet, I do so, feeling that if it is received by you . . . it will be read with pleasure as a communication from Billy the Barber. . . .

I and my people feel grateful to you for . . . your Proclamation. . . . The Shackles have fallen, and Bondmen have become free men to Some extent already. . . . And I hope ere long, it may be universal in all the Slave States. That your Authority may soon extend over them all, to all the oppressed relieving them from their Bondage, and cruel Masters; Who make them work, and fight, against the Government [*sic*].

May God grant you health, and Strength, and wisdom . . . your obedient Servant, William Florville the Barber⁷

It is unlikely that Lincoln first learned of Haiti and its conditions from Florville when the two men first met in 1831. Three decades later, President Lincoln officially established diplomatic relations with that independent Caribbean nation.⁸

Florville was one of several black barbers in Springfield, which had an African American population of twenty-seven families in 1850. News spread rapidly within that tight-knit community about a memoir who committed the same mistake Florville once made—traveling to New Orleans. The story began some years earlier, when a white Kentuckian named Hinkle (or Henkle) moved into Illinois, where upon he freed his accompanying slaves. Among them were a woman named Polly Mack and her son, John Shelby. In late 1856, Shelby, by then a young man, ventured to St. Louis and took a deck and job aboard a Mississippi steamboat bound for New Orleans. Upon arriving at the Crescent City, Shelby, like Lincoln or any other young chap, eagerly stepped ashore to explore the enticing metrop-

7. William Florville to Abraham Lincoln, December 27, 1863, Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as Lincoln Papers).

8. In this case, however, Lincoln failed to demonstrate the wisdom Florville would later wish him. Lincoln's recognition of Haiti aimed to enable an uncharacteristically impractical scheme: to deport freed slaves to L'Île à Vache, based on the notion that free blacks would be better off among their own. Despite the abysmal failure of the L'Île à Vache project, Lincoln consistently dabbled in deportation plans—to Panama, to the Caribbean, to Liberia—up to the last days of his life. One of the men who stonewalled the Commander in Chief's attempts to further these schemes was none other than Lincoln's commanding office in the occupation of New Orleans, Benjamin Butler. James D. Lockett, "Abraham Lincoln and Colonization: An Episode That Ends in Tragedy at L'Île à Vache, Haiti, 1863–1864," *Journal of Black Studies* 21, no. 4 (June 1991): 428–444.

olis. What Shelby did not realize was that New Orleans, finding itself increasingly on the defensive regarding slavery, aggressively limited the rights of free blacks in this era. The establishment viewed out-of-state free black males in particular as potential subversives whose very existence threatened the institution. A contemporaneous *Picayune* editorial, for example, angrily described “free negroes” as an “evil,” a “plague and a pest” responsible for “the chief to the slave population,” and recommended deporting them to Liberia and cracking down on further emancipations.⁹ Authorities generally felt the same way, and mandated that unsupervised blacks without papers be jailed.

Shelby, who neglected to procure a pass from his captor before setting out into the streets, suffered exactly that fate at the hands of the police. The imprisoned youth was later “brought out[,] tried[,] fined[,] and because his steamboat by then had left, he had no way to pay his penalty.¹⁰ Shelby was “thrown [back] into prison,” and,

as no one was especially interested in him, he was forgotten. After a certain length of time, established by law, he would inevitably have been sold into slavery to defray prison expenses.¹¹

Shelby somehow established contact with a sympathetic young Springfield-raised New Orleans attorney named Benjamin F. Jonas, and suggested to him that another lawyer back home, by the name of Abraham Lincoln, might adopt his case and arrange for his liberation. Jonas recognized the name: Lincoln was a close friend of his father Abraham Jonas, a leading citizen of Springfield and one of the first Jewish settlers in the region. Word went upriver to Shelby’s mother and to Lincoln. A later history narrated Lincoln’s response:

Mr. Lincoln was very much moved, and requested [his law partner] Mr. Herndon to . . . inquire of Governor Bissell if there was not something that he could do to obtain possession of the negro. Mr. Herndon . . . returned with the report that the Governor regretted to say that he had no legal or constitutional right to [act]. Mr. Lincoln rose to his feet in great excite-

9. “Freed Negroes,” *Weekly Picayune* (New Orleans), March 8, 1856, p. 3, c. 2.

10. Josiah Gilbert Holland, *Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Springfield, MA: Gurdon Bill, 1866), 127–128.

11. Annie E. Jonas to William H. Herndon, October 28, 1865, in ed. Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, *Herndon’s Informants: Letters, Interviews, and Statements About Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 379–380.

ment, and exclaimed, "By the Almighty, I'll have that negro back soon. . . I'll have a twenty years' agitation in Illinois, until the Government *does* have a legal and constitutional right to do something. . . ."12

Lacking further recourse and all too aware that New Orleans had the law on its side, Lincoln and Herndon drafted \$6,450 out of the Metropolitan Bank of New York and on May 27, sent the funds from their law office at South 6th and East Adams streets in Springfield to Benjamin Jonas at his 3 St. Charles Street law office in New Orleans. Jonas paid the fine and, by each means, won Shelby's release and returned him safely to Springfield. "[S]hould he come south again," Jonas warned Lincoln, "be sure [he has] his papers with him—and he must be careful not to go away from the boat at night—without a pass [from] the captain. . . ."13

We may justly view John Shelby as among the first African Americans (if not *the* first) ever freed by Abraham Lincoln—from a New Orleans imprisonment that would have led to forced labor, and quite possibly to permanent enslavement. What makes the case even more remarkable is the situation in which the Jonases would find themselves when war broke out in 1861. The Illinois-based Jonas family had many relatives in New Orleans, some of whom secretly informed Abraham Jonas of Confederate activities, who in turn passed the intelligence directly to President Lincoln.¹⁴ Others, however, sided with the Confederacy—including, paradoxically, the same Benjamin Jonas who helped liberate Shelby in 1857. Despite the divided loyalties, President Lincoln maintained his affection for the Jonas family, unionists and rebels alike: Benjamin once recalled that "Mr. Lincoln always asked after us when he saw any one from New Orleans during the war." The president even granted a three-week parole to Benjamin's imprisoned Confederate brother Charles so he could visit his dying mother (and Lincoln's long-time friend and informant), Abraham Jonas. Benjamin F. Jonas would later serve as Senator for the State of Louisiana.¹⁵

Lincoln's rise from regional to national prominence during the 1860 presidential campaign introduced his biographical detail into popular culture for the first time. The publication of Lincoln's brief autobiography

12. Holland, *Life of Abraham Lincoln*, 127–128 (emphasis added).

13. B. F. Jonas to Abraham Lincoln, June 4, 1857, Lincoln Papers.

14. Abraham Jonas to Abraham Lincoln, December 30, 1860, Lincoln Papers.

15. Isaac Markens, *Abraham Lincoln and the Jews* (New York: Isaac Markens, 1909), 19–21.

in June 1860, followed by newspaper articles reporting the details therein, informed many New Orleanians—for the first time—about their least-favorite candidate's surprising connection to their city.

That connection would intensify over the next five years.

Abraham Lincoln's election to the presidency in November 1860 triggered the secession of seven Southern states (of which Louisiana on January 26, 1861) numbered sixth. Each eventually ratified the Confederate constitution; Louisiana did so after a two-month period of proclaimed sovereignty, complete with its own national flag. A season of mounting tensions followed, in which the United States of America denied the existence of the Confederate States of America even as the latter boldly seized U.S. assets, formed a government, and organized a military. All-out conflict lay just one violent act away. In *your* hands, my dissatisfied fellow countrymen, and not in *mine*," warned a solemn President Lincoln in his March 4 inaugural address, "is the momentous issue of civil war."¹⁶

One night the following month, Lincoln dreamed strangely. He felt "a vague sense of floating—floating away on some vast and indistinct expanse toward an unknown shore."¹⁷ The recurring vision, similar to the sensation experienced by flatboatmen navigating through darkness or mist, never failed to distress him.

The next day brought stunning news. Confederate Brig. Gen. Pierre Gustave Toutant de Beauregard—a white Creole from the New Orleans area—had bombarded Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, one of only two U.S. military garrisons that resisted Confederate seizure. Here was the first strike everyone had long anticipated. Four additional states seceded in the following weeks, as Southerners *en masse* took up arms for the rebellion—some in support of states' rights to preserve slavery, others to defend their homeland, and the rest simply because they were forced to. President Lincoln responded with equal determination to suppress the rebellion and recruited thousands of Northerners to fight for that cause.

¹⁶ Abraham Lincoln, "First Inaugural Address—Final Text," March 4, 1861, in *The Selected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 4:27 (emphasis in original).

¹⁷ As recollectd by Frederick W. Seward, in Don E. Fehrenbacher and Virginia Fehrenbacher, *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 398. This particular recollection of the dream goes to April 14, 1865, but Lincoln specifically explained that he had the same dream numerous times throughout his presidency.

In time, conscription would replace volunteerism, creating the two largest militaries on earth.

Lincoln's goal to preserve the Union at all costs inspired a strategy of seeking and battling armed rebels, more so than capturing population centers. The Confederacy, in Lincoln's mind, did not exist as a government, and the South held no status as a nation; the *rebellion* was the enemy. Port, mine and railroad cities, however, were the exceptions. They strategically controlled critical supply lines and could not remain in rebel hands. The Mississippi River ranked as the premier Western supply line and thus the top Union priority. New Orleans, gatekeeper of the lower Mississippi, became the priority's priority.

Secession defied federal authority most flagrantly at lucrative Southern ports. From Washington's perspective, these municipalities were effectively stealing U.S. tax revenue generated by enormous shipments of cotton, tobacco, sugar, rice, and other cargo. Worse yet, those revenues now flowed into Confederate munitions. Secession emboldened the insurgents to attack and seize vessels deemed threatening to Confederate interests, even as they sailed in waters that the United States quite pointedly viewed to be in its domain. Secession also left Southern ports in a position to interact with foreign agents in a manner that further affronted U.S. authority. With these crises in mind, Lincoln, one week after Fort Sumter, officially blocked all Southern ports. The blockade would form a critical component of Gen. Winfield Scott's proposed Anaconda Plan: to encircle and strangle the Confederacy by controlling its coastal and riverine periphery.

The blockade proclamation, however, meant more on paper than in reality. So thin was the U.S. Navy dispersed along Southern coasts that its vessels either failed to barricade ships or succumbed to Confederate forces. London war correspondent William Howard Russell, for example, had no problem traveling "coastwise" a month after Fort Sumter (and six weeks after meeting personally with President Lincoln). Tensions, however, were apparent as Russell steamed from Mobile into New Orleans: gunners flew about armed U.S. cruisers threaten[ing] coastal positions; armed rebels in uniform eyed the boat as it steamed past Biloxi-area beaches, some military men on board nearly came to blows over politics. Russell also noted "a thin, fiery-eyed little woman . . . express[ing] a fervid desire for bits of Old Abe"—his ear, his hair; [either] for the purpose of eating or as curi-

18. Abraham Lincoln, "Proclamation of a Blockade," April 19, 1861, in *Collected Works*, 4:338–339.

ous relics. . . .”¹⁹ Upon arriving in New Orleans, Russell found life in the streets throbbing with “a whirl of secession and politics.”

The Confederate flag was flying from the public buildings and from many private houses. Military companies paraded through the streets, and a large proportion of men were in uniform. . . .

The streets are full of Turcos, Zouaves, Chasseurs [French country units and other foreign soldiers who wore distinctive uniforms]; walls are covered with placards of volunteer companies, there are Pickwick rifles, La Fayette, Beauregard, MacMahon guards, Irish, German, Italian and Spanish, and native volunteers. . . . Tailors are busy night and day making uniforms. . . .

Sentiment behind closed doors was another matter. Many members of the merchant and planter class, particularly Anglo-Americans with northern ties, remained skeptical of secession or privately loyal to the Union. Poor whites and immigrants suspected they would be the ones shedding the blood. Free people of color feared secession would further erode their dwindling rights, and slaves could only guess how their fate might change. Only the most optimistic viewed the new order as a peaceful ending to the ever-escalating sectional discord:

There are some who maintain there will be no war after all. . . . No one imagines the South will ever go back to the Union voluntarily, that the North has power to thrust it back at the point of the bayonet.²⁰

Shortly thereafter, news arrived at New Orleans that federal troops had “invaded” Virginia. The subsequent battle at Manassas produced a surprise Confederate victory (led again by Brig. Gen. Beauregard), shocking the North, inspiring the South, and motivating both sides to conscript hundreds of thousands of men to prepare for a long and violent conflict.

With every passing day in 1861–2, more and more New Orleanians marched off to the front. Military preparations dominated the cityscape. Fewer steamboats arrived from upriver, bearing less cargo. Fewer sailing ships arrived from the sea. Commodity trading slackened, and slave commerce froze. A “free market” of local stuffs donated by regional planters

19. William Howard Russell, *My Diary North and South* (Boston and New York, 1863), 230–31.

20. *Ibid.*, 230–31.

kept city dwellers fed but with a steadily diminishing quantity and quality.²¹ New Orleansians, who had utterly ignored the nameless flatboatman strolling their streets thirty years earlier, now shook their fists at the hated new president of the enemy nation to the north.

Lincoln rested on his blockade by divvying up Southern coasts and deploying naval squadrons to each section. New Orleans fell within the charge of the West Gulf Blockading Squadron, commanded by Capt. David Glasgow Farragut. “[G]et into New Orleans if you can,” Lincoln instructed his military, “and the backbone of the rebellion will be broken.”²² Farragut’s four ships, escorted by nearly two score gun- and mortar-boats, converged in the Gulf of Mexico in the spring of 1862. Their presence scared off most commercial traffic.

Preparations in and around New Orleans, meanwhile, floundered. An inquiry later conducted by the Confederate States of America revealed that the region “was almost entirely defenceless, unable to make an hour’s fight.” Soldiers were “badly armed and had very little ammunition.” A line of entrenchments around the city itself had been planned [and] commenced [but lay] entirely unfinished, not a gun was mounted, a magazine built, nor a platform laid.” The city relied almost entirely on its regional fortification system, whose citadel dated to post-War of 1812 or colonial times. Their general condition: “dilapidated & crumbling . . . [with] neither shot nor shell” for their guns, which were mounted on carriages that were “old & defective from long exposure [and] so decayed that [one] could insert a pen-knife with ease into the wood.” Of absolute criticality were forts Philip and Jackson, positioned on either side of the lowermost Mississippi River in Plaquemines Parish. The dual bastions “were in a better state of preparation than the other works, but still badly deficient. . . . Perhaps the most innovative defense constituted a boom of cypress-log rafts and de-masted schooners blocking the lower Mississippi River, strung together by cables and chains and held in place by anchors. Designed to impede Union vessels in direct line of cannon fire from the forts, the boom itself proved a challenge, as the shifting sands of the deep river jostled its anchorages, and accumulating flotsam stressed the cables

21. Julia LeGrand, *The Journal of Julia LeGrand: New Orleans—1862–1863*, ed. Kate Mason Rowland and M. Norris L. Powell (Richmond, VA: Everett Wadley Company, 1911), 37–38.

22. As recollected by Benjamin F. Fowler, in *Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln by Distinguished Men of His Time*, ed. Allen Thorndike Rice (New York: North American Review, 1889), 142. Lincoln later added to the above directive, “but don’t interfere with the slavery question.”

and chains.²³ Upriver from the boom lingered a small but fierce flotilla of Confederate steamers and ironclads.

On April 16, Farragut's fleet entered the mouth of the Mississippi River. Two days later it arrived within mortar range of the forts. Each side proceeded to fire shells at the other, with occasional strikes but little consequence. Farragut grew impatient and prepared to escalate. He could not attempt to run the gauntlet, however, without first severing the boom. At 10 p.m. on the eerily moonless night of April 20, he deployed two explosive-laden gunboats toward the floating iron-and-wood bulk. Amid drifting rafts set ablaze by upstream Confederates, specialists boarded the angled apparatus and, with surprising ease, unraveled its cables and chains. Being only as strong as its weakest link, the severed boom swung open with the river's current.²⁴ Now only two forts and two dozen gunboats separated Lincoln's warships from Confederate New Orleans.

In the wee hours of April 24, the Union fleet fired up its engines, weighed anchor, and ploughed into the darkness. Confederates discovered the advance and responded with thunderous fire. Broadside cannons roared in return. Exploding shells turned night into day, clouded by the choking smoke and coal exhaust enveloping every vessel. Blazing rafts released upstream drifted treacherously among maneuvering warships. [T]he sublimity of the scene can never be exceeded, Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler later reported to Lincoln. Nor could the confusion and uncertainty, amid darkness, smoke, toppled masts, tattered rigging, damaged hulls, and mounting casualties.

Then, as dawn approached, the lethal cacophony subsided, and the armadas began to disassociate. Fourteen of the seventeen Union vessels pulled away upriver, leaving their straggled and weary foes behind in swampy isolation. "Of the gallantry, courage, and conduct of this heroic action, unprecedented in naval warfare," wrote Butler of the Union's effort, "so much cannot be said."²⁵ The gauntlet had been run. After re-

23. War Department, Confederate States of America, *Proceedings of the Court of Inquiry Relative to the Fall of New Orleans* (Richmond, VA: R. M. Smith, 1864), 10–12, 20–22.

24. Chester G. Hearns, *The Capture of New Orleans 1862* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 201.

25. Report of Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler, Headquarters Department of the Gulf, April 29, 1862, United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series 1 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1882), 6:503–505.

grouping in the safety of the Quarantine Station to tend to wounds and repairs, the U.S. Navy advanced to Confederate New Orleans.²⁶

Telegrams alerted city authorities of the terrible news. Bells tolled to rouse citizens. Not a vast militia took position along the riverfront, no massive fortifications readied their artillery, and no great fleet of ironclads raced downriver. Having invested most of their soldiers and firepower at Vicksburg and St. Philip, Confederate commanders decided to evacuate the remainder northward to fight another day. Aside from a brief exchange of fire at Chalmette and a steady stream of burning cotton bales and smoldering wreckage drifting downriver, the U.S. Navy advanced into Confederate Louisiana largely unmolested. According to a Union eyewitness, a scant few white civilians came out on the levee to grieve silently at the fleet. Blacks, on the other hand, were more numerous and “more communicative and more friendly.” When out of their master’s sight, the slaves

gave enthusiastic evidence of good will, dancing at us, waving hats or branches and shouting welcome. One old maum . . . capered vigorously on the levee, screaming, “Praise de Ieud! I knows dat ar flag. I knew it would come. Praise de Lawd!”²⁷

They were the first enslaved Louisianans to see emancipation—*de facto*, if not quite yet *de jure*—on the horizon.

As the fleet approached New Orleans, sailors witnessed an apocalypse of flame and smoke, the handiwork of rebels determined to deprive the enemy of spoils by igniting wharves, cargo, and watercraft. The city itself remained intact, but given the belligerent mob and uncooperative authorities confronting the federals upon landing, that situation could have changed in a flash. Tensions were such during the next five days that a single unexpected discharge of guns could have set off a full-scale metropolitan conflagration. Beyond the bravado, however, were poverty, hunger, and deprivation. “The town is early and squarely on the point of starvation,” wrote one Union eyewitness of the poor Germans, poor French Creoles and ragged slaves. . . . “No one denies now that our blockage has been effective. . . .”²⁸ These conditions forced reluctant city authorities finally to succumb peacefully, and on May 1, 1862, federal troops entered

26. Hearn, *Capture of New Orleans*, 1862, 209–236.

27. John William De Forest, *A Volunteer's Adventures: A Union Captain's Record of the Civil War*, ed. James H. Croushore (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1946), 17.

28. *Ibid.*, 21.

en masse. One week later, Major General Butler wrote the flatboatman-turned-president, “New Orleans . . . is at your command.”²⁹

“Poor New Orleans! What has become of all your promised greatness!” lamented one New Orleanian in her journal, “Never can I forget the day that the alarm bell rang.”³⁰ Shockwaves reverberated nationwide: the sudden loss of their largest city and most lucrative region confounded Southerners who until then thrilled to a steady stream of military successes. It galvanized President Lincoln and Northerners on the other hand, a much-needed dose of encouraging news. Subsequent battles on other fronts soon diverted attention, but Lincoln continued to contemplate New Orleans because the city presented him with a myriad of enormous policy decisions. This was, after all, the first major section of the rebellious South to return to federal control; policies enacted here for rejoining the Union might establish a model to be refined and replicated elsewhere. New Orleans size and importance, its substantial population of educated free blacks, and its numerous Union sympathizers (some of them forming organizations such as the Pioneer Lincoln Club, which audaciously applauded the U.S. commander in chief) made the city and region thus much more attractive as a laboratory for what would later be termed “reconstruction.”³¹ So too did its extensive international affiliations: “If Louisiana could be made a showcase of reconstruction,” wrote historian David Herbert Donald, “Europeans would receive an inescapable signal of the inevitable collapse of the Confederacy.”³² At stake in the Louisiana experiment were fundamental questions regarding slavery, freedom, suffrage, national allegiance, the fate of former rebels, and the reestablishment of state government and congressional representation.

Two schools formed on reconstruction. One side favored leniency to Louisiana and a “soft” re-assimilation into the Union, even if it meant the continued domination of the planter elite and the subordination of blacks. Others sought to punish the rebels via emancipation, full black suffrage, and the exclusion of former Confederates from state government. Up for grabs was not only the future of Louisiana society and potentially other

29. Benjamin F. Butler to Abraham Lincoln, May 8, 1862, Lincoln Papers.

30. LeGrand, *Journal of Julia LeGrand*, 40.

31. “Meeting of the Pioneer Lincoln Club,” *Daily True Delta* (New Orleans), February 23, 1864, p. 1, c. 5.

32. David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 484–485.

Southern states, but valuable political turf for warring Democrat and Republican partisans, each with their own spectrum of conservatives, moderates, and radicals. White New Orleans society, for its part, exhibited similar schism. Merchants and Union sympathizers advocated for conciliation and tolerated black rights, while hard-core secessionists insisted on vindicating wounded Southern honor and rejecting any level of black equality in the new republic order. Free men of color, meanwhile, organized among themselves to seize this long-awaited opportunity toward gaining full civil rights. Their newspaper, *L'Union*, founded in 1862 and published in French at the corner of Chartres and St. Louis (ironically near the old Hewlett's Exchange) kept their people informed.

President Lincoln initially assumed a moderate Republican stance in the debate, reflecting his clearly stated prioritization for Union preservation above all. His position frustrated hard-liners who sought punitive action. One wealthy pro-Union New Orleans planter complained of Lincoln's indecision and "vacillating policy" on reconstruction; Lincoln personally responded by taking exception to the suggestion that he had "no policy," and patiently explained that he had been advocating for national reconciliation ever since his inauguration. "Broken eggs cannot be mended," wrote Lincoln, "Louisiana has nothing to do now but to take her place in the Union. . . ."³³ Increasingly, however, Lincoln fretted that his desire for reconciliation might fast-track Louisiana toward rejoining the Union without outlawing slavery, thus setting a worrisome precedent.

When Northern popular support wavered for the increasingly bloody toll required for Union-saving, Lincoln reconsidered his priorities. Southern military successes, he realized, derived in part from the Confederacy's reliance on four million slaves to produce food and income-generating commodities. The North enjoyed no such advantage: every man in uniform was one out of economic production. Emancipating slaves, then, would help reap the South economically and militarily, while confronting its social order. Emancipation might also deliver to Northerners thousands of freedmen to take up arms against their former masters. In a larger sense, emancipation would redefine a conflict currently being fought over political abstractions (states' rights and secession) into a struggle for freedom—a more compelling cause for many Northerners growing disgusted with both the South and the war. Freeing slaves, the commander in chief

33. Abraham Lincoln to August Belmont, July 31, 1862, in *Collected Works*, 5:350–351. This communication with Belmont responds to a letter written to Lincoln by an unnamed New Orleanian; Belmont himself was a wealthy New York financier.

appreciated, now modeled conveniently with his ultimate goal of preserving the Union.

Lincoln worked on his emancipation plan secretly during the summer of 1862. He withheld announcing the bombshell, waiting for a Union military victory that would boost a sense of momentum and inevitability, or at least make the move seem less like an act of desperation. None came. Then, one night in mid-September, Lincoln dreamed that strange riverine vision again, of sailing swiftly in a strange vessel toward an indefinite shore—the same dream he had the night before Fort Sumter.³⁴ Once again, he learned shortly thereafter of dramatic news: his troops had successfully held off major Confederate advances in Maryland in a terribly costly strategic victory that ranks today as the bloodiest day in American military history. The Battle of Antietam provided just enough impetus for Lincoln to announce his own stunning news. On September 22, 1862, he issued the Emancipation Proclamation.

Lincoln's proclamation emancipated no one until January 1, 1863, effective date. Even then, it liberated few slaves, targeting only those where the U.S. government had no power to enforce it. Slaves in loyal border states or areas under federal control, including "the [Louisiana] Parishes of St. Bernard, Laquemines, Jefferson, St. John, St. Charles, St. James[,] Ascension, Assumption, Terrebonne, Lafourche, St. Mary, St. Martin, and Orleans, including the City of New-Orleans,"³⁵ would remain enslaved. Lincoln thus specifically refrained from emancipating slaves in the very city whose practice of the institution so affected him decades earlier. The Emancipation Proclamation was initially conceived only as a military strategy aimed at rebellious areas.

But the effects of the proclamation went far beyond military strategy. It transformed federal troops from rebellion suppressers into liberation forces. Every territorial gain exacted by the coats left freedom in their wake. Many slaves in Union-held Louisiana, while technically excluded from the proclamation, proceeded to liberate themselves by wandering off the plantation, their masters powerless to stop them. Others in nearby gray-coat-held areas escaped to join their brethren. In droves the freed-

34. Details of Lincoln's dream, here and later in this chapter, are drawn from Fehrenbacher and Fehrenbacher, *Recollected Words of Lincoln*, 398, and from John G. Nicolay and John Hay, "Abraham Lincoln: A History—The Fourteenth of April—The Fate of the Assassins—The Mourning Page," *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, January 1890, 430.

35. Abraham Lincoln, "Emancipation Proclamation," January 1, 1863, in *Collected Works*, 6:28–30.

men—hungry, penniless, and homeless—beelined for Camp Parapet and other federal encampments, presenting Union officers with humanitarian and policy crises even as they had a war on their hands. Slavery in the New Orleans region, the bane of the land every day since 1719, unraveled piecemeal throughout the months and years following Lincoln's colossal decision.³⁶ While the president crafted the Emancipation Proclamation with an eye toward pragmatism, the reality of total war now liberated Lincoln from his own cautious instincts to seek Solomonic compromise with slaveholders. It motivated him to take more aggressive steps toward finally and irrevocably destroying the ancient institution.

After the world on the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln concurrently directed General Butler and military commander George F. Smith to conduct fair and legal elections in which Louisianians—and not Northern soldiers or carpetbaggers—could elect representatives. Union loyalists came out in relatively high numbers to vote on December 3, 1862, resulting in the election of Benjamin Flanders and Michael Hahn. Upon arriving in Washington, however, Flanders and Hahn found themselves less than welcome—and subjects of the same continuing debate over how, exactly, to reconstruct devastated Southern regions.³⁷ Behind those arguments loomed even more polemical matters: what shall be the fate of slavery as the war progressed? And as the ranks of freedmen expanded, what shall be their rights, particularly in regard to suffrage? New Orleans' free people of color—many of whom were well-educated, employed, organized, and increasingly vocal—pushed for Louisiana to join as a free state, with full citizenship and rights for their people.

Lincoln during his presidency occasionally solicited secret insights about affairs in occupied New Orleans. His premier informant was Zacharie, an English-born American of Jewish ancestry whose skills as a chirographist matched his relentless ambition and opportunism. In November 1862, Zacharie, working as Lincoln's foot doctor, convinced his presidential patient to send him to New Orleans as the commander in

36. Self-liberation in fact commenced shortly after the Union arrival in late spring 1862. One Union captain in July of that year remembered slaves "continually quitting the plantations and swarming to us for protection and support. . . . They are mainly a burden." De Forest, *Volunteer's Adventures*, 31.

37. Peyton McCrary, *Abraham Lincoln and Reconstruction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 100–101.

chief's "correspondent"³⁸ Lincoln obliged. Once there the doctor used his social and professional connections to supply Lincoln with intelligence on troop movements, public sentiment, political sympathies, commercial activity, race relations, and the behavior of the president's generals. At one point he served directly under Gen. Nathaniel Banks; at another, he organized a team of spies disguised as peddlers and sent them across the region collecting data. Evidence suggests Zacharie also attempted to enrich himself from his arrangements.³⁹ Throughout the occupation, Zacharie (in addition to performing medical services) communicated extensively with Union authorities and the president, forming a link not only between Lincoln and New Orleans, but between the White House and American Jews. When a Zionist advocate discussed with the president a possible state in Palestine, Lincoln is said to have responded, "I myself have a friend for the Jews. My chiropodist is a Jew, and he has so many times put me on my feet, that I would have no objection to giving his countrymen 'a leg up.'"⁴⁰

Spring and summer 1862 brought new action to the theater of war, denying Lincoln the luxury of focusing on Louisiana or other matters. One early-summer evening the mysterious river dream returned to Lincoln's slumbering mind—and, once again, it retold astonishing news. On July 3–4, Union forces repelled a major Confederate northward foray at a town called Gettysburg, engaging the world's two greatest armies in a battle that would rank as the largest ever in the Western Hemisphere. At the same time, a thousand miles to the southwest, the key Mississippi River stronghold of Vicksburg finally yielded to forty-day Union siege. Within a single summer weekend, the course of the conflict shifted to Northern favor. The fall of Vicksburg left the tiny bluff-top town of Port Hudson, Louisiana, as the last remaining Confederate hold on the Mississippi River. It too fell later in July, in a battle and siege that involved Louisiana men of both races. "The signs look better," proclaimed Lincoln

38. Charles M. Segal, "Notes and Documents Isachar Zacharie: Lincoln's Chiropodist," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 44, no. 1–4 (September 1954–June 1955).

39. *Ibid.*

40. Letters between Isachar Zacharie and Abraham Lincoln, dating between January 14, 1863, and December 26, 1864, Lincoln Papers; Charles M. Segal, "Isachar Zacharie: Lincoln's Chiropodist," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 43, no. 1–4 (September 1953), 71–126.

toward the end of that breathtaking season; “The Father of Waters again goes unvexed to the sea.”⁴¹

With military matters progressing, the Mississippi River in federal hands, Arkansas and Tennessee falling to Union control, and the Emancipation Proclamation in place, Lincoln returned to reconstruction policy in Louisiana. On December 8, 1863, he presented a plan: If 10 percent of Louisiana’s 1860 voter turnout swore allegiance to the United States and abided by the Emancipation Proclamation, the state would be allowed to elect a government and draft a constitution—so long as it outlawed slavery. Louisiana would then be recognized and readmitted to the Union. Inserting the slavery ban condition reflected the rising prioritization Lincoln ascribed to black freedom, although he hoped that the state would do the outlawing itself without his personal intervention. Setting the allegiance bar so low as 10 percent reflected Lincoln’s desire to reconcile swiftly with defeated states and lure still rebellious states back to the Union, perhaps precipitating an end to a war growing increasingly unpopular with Northern Democrats. He probably also had political motivations, with the 1864 reelection campaign on the horizon. The lenient plan paralleled his decision earlier in the year to replace the hardline Gen. Benjamin Butler—loathed by white New Orleanians, loved by blacks, and admired by radical Republicans—with the conservative-moderate Gen. Nathaniel Banks.⁴²

Lincoln’s Ten Percent Plan prompted a response from the radical Republicans in the form of the Wade-Davis Bill, which among other things hardened the allegiance criteria and upped the bar from 10 to 50 percent. Lincoln refused to sign it. The Ten Percent Plan motivated pro-Union delegates in Louisiana to set to work electing a governor and drafting a new state constitution.

Both books focused attention on one major issue: what to do with the ever-increasing ranks of freedmen. Immediate concerns regarding food and shelter proved challenging enough, to say nothing of long-term matters involving land, housing, employment, and education. Most pressing of all, from a constitutional perspective, was the question of suffrage. The sugar coast and New Orleans being home to the largest major concentration of African Americans nationwide, the question of voting rights would

41. Abraham Lincoln to James C. Conkling, August 20, 1863, in *Collected Works*, 6:409.

42. McCrary, *Lincoln and Reconstruction*, 124–125.

determine the political future of Louisiana. Lincoln's position echoed his earlier stance on slavery: it originally reflected cautious conciliatory accommodation, but moved steadily toward progressive social change.

Two prominent New Orleanians, *L'Union* newspaper co-founder Jean-Baptiste Roudanez and a merchant-turned-Union-captain Arnold Bertonneau, helped further that transformation. Both free black Francophone Creoles, Roudanez and Bertonneau were selected by their peers to travel to Washington, under risky wartime conditions, to promote black suffrage to Union authorities. They brought with them (according to their liaison Thomas J. Durant, in his letter to the president), "a petition numerously signed by respectable persons of [New Orleans] in favor of the extension of political privileges to the citizens of African descent."⁴³

On March 12, 1864, Roudanez and Bertonneau arrived at the White House. That African-descended people were received in the highest office of the land demonstrated President Lincoln's respect for their men. Their message apparently won his sympathy because, the very next day, Lincoln transmitted to the newly elected Louisiana governor an encapsulation of the New Orleanians' message. After congratulating Michael Hahn for becoming "the first free-state Governor of Louisiana" about to oversee a Constitutional Convention to "define the elective franchise" in Louisiana, Lincoln, with characteristic caution, wrote:

I barely suggest for your private consideration whether some of the colored people may not be invited [to the Convention]—as, for instance, the very intelligent, and especially those who have fought gallantly in our ranks. They would probably help, in some trying time to come, to keep the jewel of liberty within the family of freedom. But this is only a suggestion, not to the public, but to you alone.

One eventful year later, General Lee surrendered to General Grant at Appomattox, essentially ending the catastrophic four-year conflict. President Lincoln addressed the breathless nation two evening later, in a tone that muted jubilation with a warning about the challenges of national reuni-

43. Thomas J. Durant to Abraham Lincoln, February 10, 1864, Lincoln Papers.

44. Abraham Lincoln to Michael Hahn, March 13, 1864 in *Collected Works*, 7:243.

fiction that lay ahead. Having coined the term “reconstruction” to describe that task, Lincoln then presented his Louisiana experiment of the last three years as a blueprint for the future. “Some twelve thousand voters in the heretofore slave-state of Louisiana,” Lincoln proudly proclaimed,

have sworn allegiance to the Union, assumed to be the rightful political power of the State, held elections, organized a State government, adopted a free-state constitution, giving the benefit of public schools equally to black and white, and empowering the Legislature to confer the elective franchise upon the colored man.⁴⁵

Spurning all this progress by adopting a vindictive and radical approach to reconstruction, Lincoln warned, would

in effect say to the white man, “You are worthless, or worse—we will neither help you, nor be helped by you. To the blacks we say “This cup of liberty which these, your old masters, held to your lips, we will dash from you, and leave you to the chances of gathering the spilled and scattered contents in some vague and undefined when, where, and how.”

It was the most Louisiana-focused speech of Lincoln’s career. The message set a tone for the postbellum era that was both progressive and magnanimous. It grated, however, on radicals at both extremes—among them a man in Lincoln’s audience that evening, the well-known actor John Wilkes Booth.

Two nights later, Lincoln envisaged his river dream again—the strange and indescribable vessel, the swift glide across the dark expanse, the vague and indefinite shore. Next morning, Good Friday, the president shared the reoccurring vision with his Cabinet members, pointing out the curious way in which Fort Sumter, Bull Run, Antietam, Gettysburg, Stones River, Vicksburg, and other startling news. Now, with peace breaking out all over, Lincoln could only suppose to hear from Sherman, and surely the triumphant general would bear good news.⁴⁷

Louisiana remained on President Lincoln’s mind that day. At one point he commended the state’s effort to present “one of the best con-

45. Abraham Lincoln, Last Public Address, April 11, 1865, in *Collected Works*, 8:399–405.

46. *Ibid.*, 399–405.

47. As recollected by Gideon Welles, in Fehrenbacher and Fehrenbacher, *Recollected Words of Lincoln*, 486–487.

stitutions that has ever been furnished.” At another, he appointed William P. Kellogg as Collector for the Port of New Orleans, allegedly directing him, “I want you to make love to those people down there.” Amid sundry ministerial tasks, he also recounted an old boating anecdote about the Sangamon River, origin of his second flatboat trip to New Orleans.⁴⁸

The First Lady in the meantime kept the president apprised of their plans to be guests at a play that evening. The invitation, extended by the theater’s management, reached the ears of the thespian John Wilkes Booth. Here, finally, was an opportunity to act on a rancorous scheme Booth had been plotting for months.

Wary but invigorated, President Lincoln seemed to enjoy himself at the Ford’s Theatre production of the comedy *Our American Cousin*. Booth, meanwhile, hovered in the stairwell awaiting a certain moment in the act. Timing his entry into the presidential box to coincide with audience laughter, Booth cracked open the door, slinked up behind the president, leveled a derringer behind his ear, and pulled the trigger.

At 7:22 a.m. Saturday, April 15, 1865, the old flatboatman was dead.

48. Recollections of what Lincoln said and did during the last days of his life vary among sources; according to John W. Starr, those mentioned here occurred on April 14, 1865. John W. Starr, Jr., *Lincoln’s Last Day* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1922), 12–15, 19–20, 29–30.