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It is my Desire to be Free:
Annie Davis's Letter to Abraham Lincoln and Winslow Homer's Painting *A Visit from the Old Mistress*

Michael Hussey and Elizabeth K. Eder

"Mr. President, It is my Desire to be free," wrote Annie Davis to Abraham Lincoln, 20 months after he issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Writing from Belair, Maryland, she continued, "Will you please let me know if we are free." Although there is no record of Lincoln ever responding, had he, his answer would have been "No, you are not free."

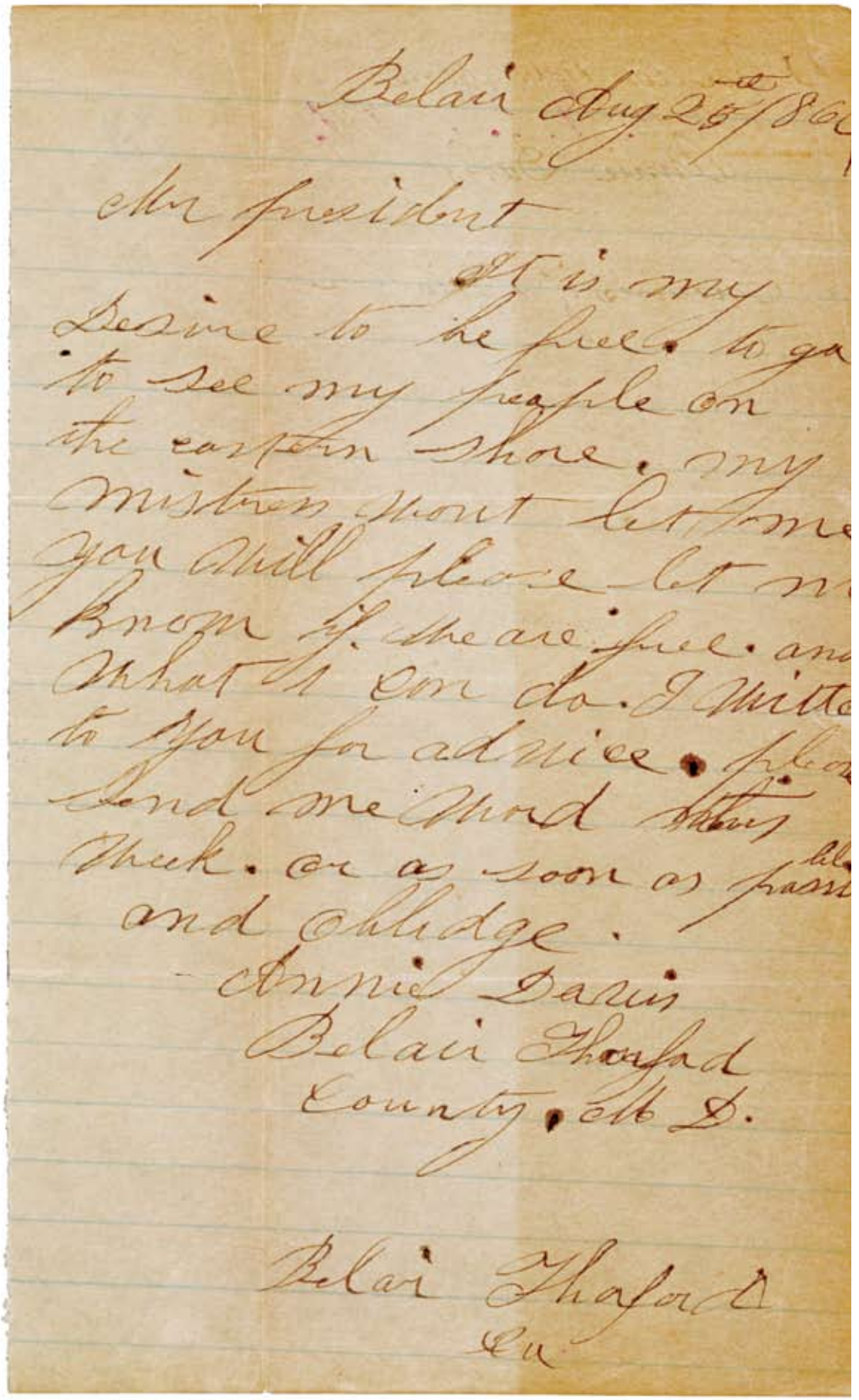
The Emancipation Proclamation affected only those parts of the country that were in rebellion against the United States on the date it was issued, January 1, 1863. The slaveholding border states of Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri had remained in the Union and were thus exempt from the Proclamation. In Lincoln's words, all areas under Union control were "left precisely as if this proclamation were not issued."[1] Not until the ratification of the 13th Amendment on December 6, 1865, would slavery be abolished throughout the United States.

It is not surprising that Annie Davis would have been confused about her legal status. Living close to Baltimore in Harford County, she likely had heard some mention of Lincoln having freed slaves. She may also have known that those enslaved within the District of Columbia had been freed by an act of Congress. Yet, according to her letter, Davis's "mistress" was treating her as if she were still a slave, denying Davis's wish to visit her family. Surely, if she were free, would she not be able to go where she wished? As we see in this article's featured document, she wanted the certainty that she believed only the president could give her.

The Davis letter, found within the records of the Army's Adjutant General's Office in the holdings of the National Archives, is rare. Most enslaved persons were illiterate. Indeed, in many states teaching a slave to read and write was illegal.[2] Of those who could, few wrote to the president. Rather, hundreds of them took matters of personal freedom into their own hands prior to the issuance of the Proclamation in 1863. Since the outbreak of the Civil War in the spring of 1861, many had escaped from slavery to Union lines where they hoped they would be safe. While enslaved people escaped wherever Union troops were present, the concentration of forces around Washington, D.C., made escapes particularly common in Maryland and Virginia.[3] Based on available sources, we cannot determine whether Davis ever escaped. However, in November 1864 the Maryland state constitution was rewritten. The new version abolished slavery, and Annie Davis was free.

A Visit from the Old Mistress is one of several works by Winslow Homer (1836–1910) composed from sketches he made during travels in Virginia in the mid-1870s. It depicts a scene that would have been unlikely when Annie Davis wrote to President Lincoln a decade earlier. Although at first look, the painting seems to portray common daily life activities, the artist conveys much more by muting many of the details and colors of the simple adorned interior and focusing instead on the facial expressions of the figures, their poses, and the overall compositional design. By doing so, Homer straightforwardly explores, through the interactions between black and white figures in this work, the ambiguities and tensions between those newly emancipated and the white families they may have once served.

continued on page 130



Belair Aug 28/80

Mr President

It is my
Desire to be free to go
to see my people on
the eastern shore, my
Mistress wont let me
you will please let me
know if she are free. and
what I can do. I write
to you for advice. please
send me word by
Mail. or as soon as possible
and oblidge.

Annie Davis
Belair Harford
County Md.

Belair Harford
Co

Winslow Homer, *A Visit from the Old Mistress*, 1876, oil on canvas, 18" × 24", Smithsonian American Art Museum

Suggested Teaching Activities

1. Provide your students with a copy of the Emancipation Proclamation and a map of the United States. Lead a class discussion about what the Proclamation was meant to accomplish and what its limitations were. As a follow-up activity, ask them to indicate on the map which areas of the United States were covered by the Proclamation.

   Facsimiles of the Emancipation Proclamation and a transcript are available from the National Archives at: **www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured_documents/emancipation_proclamation/index.html**

2. Provide students with a copy of Annie Davis's letter. Ask them to read the document. Lead a class discussion with the following questions: What kind of document is it? When was it written? Who wrote it and for what purpose?

3. Inform your students that there is no known record of President Lincoln responding to Annie Davis's letter. Ask your students to imagine that he had, however. Then invite them to write a letter responding to Davis as if they were President Lincoln. How would he have answered her question?

4. Ask pairs of students to write a brief definition of the term "freedom." Ask them: What do you associate it with? How would you describe this word to someone who had no idea what it meant? If time permits, encourage your students to share their definitions during a class discussion.

5. Ask your students to draw or paint an image of freedom. During a class discussion, encourage them to describe their artwork and how it depicts freedom.

6. Provide your students with a color copy of Winslow Homer's *A Visit from the Old Mistress* (available at **americanart.si.edu**). After reading Annie Davis's letter, ask them to imagine Davis is one of the figures in Homer's painting. Direct them to discuss the following questions: What conversation might Davis have had with her mistress after Maryland abolished slavery in the fall of 1864? Do you think it would be the same or different than before emancipation? Why?

7. Inform your students that Winslow Homer began his professional career in 1857 working as a freelance illustrator for weekly newspapers. During the mid-nineteenth century, the growth of the pictorial press inundated middle-class readers with images of events and places far outside their daily experience. Among these were scenes from the warfront in Virginia, where Homer worked between 1861 and 1865 as a "special artist" for *Harper's Weekly*, a large-format periodical with a sizeable circulation. He made many sketches that were carefully engraved in New York by the newspaper.

   Encourage your students to search the Smithsonian American Art Museum collection (available at **americanart.si.edu**) for these images. Ask them to create a digital scrapbook of Homer's illustrations using the "My Collection" feature of the website (available at **americanart.si.edu/mycollection/**) and to share their collections with one another.

   You may wish to download the lesson, "A House Divided: Civil War Photography" (available at **americanart.si.edu/education/classroom/results/**) and use the student scrapbook collections to teach about the Civil War.

8. Download and use the lesson plan "A House Divided: Reconstruction (available at **americanart.si.edu/education/classroom/results/**) which uses Homer's *A Visit from the Old Mistress* and two other artworks from the Smithsonian American Art Museum collection to discuss how history might have been different if alternate plans for the reconstruction of the South had been put into practice.

Note about the Document and the Work of Art:

Annie Davis's letter to President Lincoln is letter D-304 -1864 and is contained within the records of the Colored Troops Division of the Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780s–1917 (Record Group 94) at the National Archives and Records Administration. Winslow Homer painted *A Visit from the Old Mistress* in 1876. The painting is in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum (accession number 1909.7.28).

Homer captures a moment frozen in time. Three black women are gathered near a brick hearth. All are dressed in ragged, patched, floor-length dresses and light-colored headscarves; two wear aprons. At center left, a young girl wearing a bonnet and long dress is supported on one woman's hip. They seem to stare in silence, with unsmiling expressions, at the elegantly dressed older white woman who appears to have just entered the room. She stands in profile, wearing a black dress adorned with a white lace collar and cuffs. Her silver-colored hair is neatly braided and styled on top of her head, and she holds in one hand the ribbon of a large, closed, red fan that dangles near the floor at her side. Not only are the freed women no longer obligated to greet their former mistress with welcoming gestures, but one stares off into the distance and remains seated on a bench. Would she have been allowed to do so before emancipation?

Homer positions the two standing figures at right in front of the doorway, with the lintel at top and crossbar at shoulder height nearly joining the two, yet a narrow space separates them. The figures are of equal height and seem to be on equal footing, but are they? Do they represent a silent tension between two communities trying to understand their future? Do they represent the balance the nation hoped to find during the difficult Reconstruction years? Even the work's title, which Homer first gave the painting when he lent it to the Boston Art Club in 1879, is ambiguous. In using the word "old," was he referring to the age of the older white woman or the fact that she was a former mistress? No matter how we choose to read this painting, at least some historians believe it "crystallizes into a single moment the staggering realization faced by all Southerners after the Civil War—both black and white—that things will never again be the same, that American society had been irrevocably changed by the abolition of slavery."[4]

Notes

1. In addition to the states listed above, the following were also exempted from the Proclamation: the Louisiana parishes of St. Bernard, Plaquemines, Jefferson, St. John, St. Charles, St. James Ascension, Assumption, Terrebonne, Lafourche, St. Mary, St. Martin, and Orleans, including the City of New Orleans; the 48 counties comprising West Virginia; and the Virginia counties of Berkley, Accomac, Northampton, Elizabeth City, York, Princess Ann, and Norfolk, including the cities of Norfolk and Portsmouth.
2. Robert A. Margo, *Race and Schooling in the South, 1880–1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 6–8.
3. Ira Berlin, Barbara J. Fields, Thavolia Glymph, Joseph P. Reidy, Leslie S. Rowland, eds., *Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-67; Series I, Volume I, The Destruction of Slavery* (N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 1985): 336-337. The Davis letter is included on pages 384-385 of this volume.
4. Peter H. Wood and Karen C. C. Dalton, *Winslow Homer's Images of Blacks: The Civil War and Reconstruction Years* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press: The Menil Collection, 1988), 94.

Additional Resources

The National Humanities Center website includes excerpts from interviews with former slaves regarding emancipation. See: "Emancipation through Union occupation and victory: Selections from the WPA interviews of formerly enslaved African Americans, 1936–1938" at: http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/emancipation/text7/emancipationwpa.pdf

Please read the following note included on this webpage:

"Selections from the narratives are presented as transcribed. Black interviewees often referred to themselves with terms that in some uses are considered offensive. In the WPA narratives, some white interviewers, despite project guidelines, used stereo-typical patterns of representing black speech. See *A Note on the Language of the Narratives* at lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snlang.html and *Guidelines for Interviewers* at national humanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/wpanarrsuggestions.pdf."

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Steps towards Slavery's Abolition

The Federal Government moved from limited actions, which emancipated some enslaved persons, to the abolition of slavery throughout the United States in the 1860s.

- Congress passed the First Confiscation Act in August 1861, which permitted the seizure of property—including slaves—that had been used in support of the rebellion. Some slaves had, for example, been forced to build Confederate fortifications.
- In April 1862, Congress passed legislation to emancipate all slaves residing in the District of Columbia.
- In July 1862, Congress passed the Second Confiscation Act. This law allowed the seizure of the property and the freeing of the slaves of anyone assisting the rebellion.
- On September 22, 1862, President Lincoln announced that on January 1, 1863, "all persons held as slaves within any state…the people whereof shall then be in rebellion…shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free."
- On January 1, 1863, President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation.
- On December 6, 1865, the 13th Amendment to the Constitution abolished slavery throughout the United States.