

THE GILDER LEHRMAN
INSTITUTE *of* AMERICAN HISTORY

Dear Colleague,

The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History cordially invites your students to participate in its annual Civil War Essay Contest for high school (grades 9–12) and middle school (grades 5–8) students. This contest recognizes excellence in research and expression of thought and is designed to enhance students' knowledge of the Civil War era through use of primary sources. This year, students will be presented with the option of submitting an essay or an entry in our new Documentary Film category.

Essays will be judged on originality and clarity of thesis, quality of writing, and use of primary sources, among other criteria. Top essays are not only well researched, but also well written. Top films, meanwhile, are well researched, well organized, and edited in a manner that is clear, articulate, and visually impactful. Therefore, we strongly encourage collaboration between Language Arts and Social Studies departments to assist students with all aspects of the writing process, and between Social Studies and Arts teachers to assist students with aspects of documentary film production and editing.

Participation is limited to Gilder Lehrman Affiliate Schools. There is no limit to the number of essays or films that a school may submit; however, we do encourage you to submit only the strongest essays/films from your classes. If you are a student or teacher at a school that is not yet a Gilder Lehrman Affiliate School and you're interested in participating in the contest, please consider registering as a Gilder Lehrman Affiliate School. Learn more about the free Affiliate School Program at gilderlehrman.org/affiliate.

All entries are due at the Gilder Lehrman Institute by Monday, February 26, 2018, by 5 p.m. ET. As a research paper or film of this scale requires significant time for research, writing, and editing, you will need to set your own internal deadlines. Please see the supporting documentation for more information on submission guidelines, potential topics, and a scoring rubric.

Winners will be announced in the early spring and will be notified by a letter to their home address and an email to their teachers and parents. Each of the top three student Essay winners at the high school and middle school levels and the top Documentary Film winner overall, will be flown to New York City with two guests and a teacher for the annual Lincoln Prize Dinner on April 19, where they will be acknowledged for their accomplishments.

Please feel free to call (646-366-9666 ext. 27) or email us (affiliate@gilderlehrman.org) with any questions.

Best regards,
Education Department
The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History

Civil War Essay Contest Rules, Regulations, and Prize Information

Essay Requirements and Guidelines

- Word Count: Essay should be approximately 1,500-1,800 words of text for high school entries and approximately 1,000-1,200 words of text for middle school entries. (Note that this word count does not include footnotes, endnotes, or citations.)
- Font and Page Style: Papers should be written and submitted in *Times New Roman – Font Size 12* with margins of approximately one inch at the top, bottom, and sides.
- Primary Sources: Top essays will use a minimum of five primary source documents. We will count a single letter, photograph, broadside, etc. as a single primary source document. See the *Civil War Essay Contest Guidelines and Scoring Rubric* for more information on the minimum number of primary sources for each score.
- Secondary Sources: Top essays will use scholarly secondary sources (three to five sources at a minimum) beyond the textbook. Textbooks can be referenced only for general background information.
- Internet Sources: Please caution your students to evaluate the validity of web content and cite their sources carefully in their references and bibliography.
- Organization: Top essays have an introduction, body, and conclusion, and a clearly stated, well-developed thesis statement with supportive historical evidence.
- Essay Topics: As a general guide, please refer to the *Civil War Essay Contest Writing Prompts* as possible suggestions to guide your selection of an essay topic. (Students are not limited to these topics and questions.) Biographies, even of obscure figures, and battle reports are usually easier to write than other types of essays. Likewise, certain topics, such as female spies, battlefield medicine, or the new medium of photography, have been covered in great detail by past contest participants. It is important to remember that all essays should feature a clearly stated, well-developed thesis statement with a variety of primary sources, a well-reasoned analysis, and supportive evidence.
- Citations: The best essays have clear, complete, and consistent citations. Students must document their sources and evidence, using any one of the following three formats: MLA, APA, or University of Chicago. Regarding Internet sources, please make sure that students provide information beyond URLs in their citations, such as the author and title of the source.
- Bibliography: Each essay is required to include a bibliography listing all sources divided into two categories – Primary Sources and Secondary Sources.

Documentary Film Requirements and Guidelines

- Length: Submitted film should be edited to approximately 5-7 minutes in length.
- Primary Sources: Top films will use a minimum of five primary sources (letters, photographs, broadsides, etc.), either in narration or as file images in the film itself.
- Secondary Sources: Top films will also use scholarly secondary sources (articles or monographs); this may also include interviews with scholars, though this is not required.
- Internet Sources: Please caution your students to evaluate the validity of web content and cite their sources carefully in their references and bibliography.
- Organization: Like essays, top films will have a structure (either a three-act structure of introduction, body, and conclusion, or another effective structure) and a clearly stated, well-developed thesis statement with supportive historical evidence.
- Editing: Top films will be edited in such a manner that all material is clear, articulate, and visually impactful.
- Student Direction: All equipment, both for shooting and editing, must be student-run.
- Film Topics: As a general guide, please refer to the Civil War Essay Contest Writing Prompts as possible suggestions to guide your selection of a film topic. (Students are not limited to these topics and questions.) Biographies, even of obscure figures, and battle reports are usually easier to write than other types of essays. Likewise, certain topics, such as female spies, battlefield medicine, or the new medium of photography, have been covered in great detail by past contest participants.
- Citations: Students must document their sources and evidence using MLA, APA, or Chicago style in the film's credits.

Submission Requirements/Deadlines

- Entries are due at the Gilder Lehrman Institute by 5 p.m. ET on Monday, February 26, 2018.
- Essays **must** be submitted electronically. Word or RTF documents are preferred; scanned documents sent as PDFs will also be accepted. Essays **may not** have any grade markings, comments, or corrections. If submitting an essay that was used in class, please submit a clean copy without any grades or teacher comments.
- Essays may be submitted to our website by using the online form and with the essay attached as a PDF or Word document. Hard copies of essays are not accepted and will not be reviewed.
- Films must also be submitted electronically. MOV, MP4, and MPEG files are preferred; AVI and WMV will also be accepted. Films may also be submitted to our website using the online form; hard copies of films in any format are not accepted and will not be reviewed.
- To help reduce administrative processing time, please name each file accordingly: School Name_Student Name (e.g., "Central High School_Jane Doe").

Prizes

1. Essays

- High School: \$1,000 to the first-place student and \$500 to the school; \$750 to the second-place student; \$500 to the third-place student; \$100 to seven honorable-mention students
- Middle School: \$300 to the first-place student; \$200 to the second-place student; \$100 to the third-place student

2. Documentary Films

- Overall: \$1,000 and an archive of great Civil War documentaries to the first-place student; \$750 for the second-place student, and \$500 to the third-place student.

3. School Prizes

- The school with the most entries (of either medium), and the school with the highest average judges' score (minimum 10 entries of any medium) will each receive a special certificate and pack of materials.

High School Civil War Essay Contest Guidelines and Scoring Rubric

The Civil War Essay Contest, sponsored by the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, is designed to enhance students' knowledge of the Civil War era through use of primary sources. Students must identify a topic, conduct research using primary and secondary sources, document their sources in footnotes/parenthetical notations *and* a bibliography, develop a thesis statement, and write a clear, cogent essay of approximately 1,500-1,800 words. Essays will be read by a panel of judges and evaluated using the following rubric for document-based and thematic essay guidelines.

Score of 5:

- Thoroughly develops all aspects of the task evenly and in depth
- Is more analytical than descriptive (analyzes, evaluates, and/or creates information)
- Richly supports the theme with many relevant facts, examples, and details
- Demonstrates a logical and clear plan of organization; includes an introduction and a conclusion that are beyond a restatement of the theme
- Incorporates relevant information from at least seven primary source documents; a single letter, photograph, broadside, etc. counts as one primary source document

Score of 4:

- Develops all aspects of the task but may do so somewhat unevenly
- Is both descriptive and analytical (applies, analyzes, evaluates, and/or creates information)
- Supports the theme with relevant facts, examples, and details
- Demonstrates a logical and clear plan of organization; includes an introduction and a conclusion that are beyond a restatement of the theme
- Incorporates relevant information from at least five primary source documents; a single letter, photograph, broadside, etc. counts as one primary source document

Score of 3:

- Develops all aspects of the task with little depth or develops most aspects of the task in some depth
- Is more descriptive than analytical (applies, may analyze, and/or evaluate information)
- Includes some relevant facts, examples, and details; may include some minor inaccuracies
- Demonstrates a satisfactory plan of organization; includes an introduction and a conclusion that may be a restatement of the theme.
- Incorporates relevant information from at least four primary source documents; a single letter, photograph, broadside, etc. counts as one primary source document

Score of 2:

- Minimally develops all aspects of the task or develops some aspects of the task in some depth
- Is primarily descriptive; may include faulty, weak, or isolated application or analysis
- Includes few relevant facts, examples, and details; may include some inaccuracies
- Demonstrates a general plan of organization; may lack focus; may contain digressions; may not clearly identify which aspect of the task is being addressed; may lack an introduction and/or a conclusion
- Incorporates relevant information from at least three primary source documents. A single letter, photograph, broadside, etc. counts as one primary source document.

Score of 1:

- Minimally develops some aspects of the task
- Is descriptive; may lack understanding, application, or analysis
- Includes few relevant facts, examples, or details; may include inaccuracies
- May demonstrate a weakness in organization; may lack focus; may contain digressions; may not clearly identify which aspect of the task is being addressed; may lack an introduction and/or a conclusion
- Does not incorporate relevant information from primary source documents; a single letter, photograph, broadside, etc. counts as one primary source document

Middle School Civil War Essay Contest Guidelines and Scoring Rubric

The Civil War Essay Contest, sponsored by the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, is designed to enhance students' knowledge of the Civil War era through use of primary sources. Students must identify a topic, conduct research using primary and secondary sources, document their sources in footnotes/parenthetical notations *and* a bibliography, develop a thesis statement, and write a clear, cogent essay of approximately 1,000-1,200 words. Essays will be read by a panel of judges and evaluated using the following rubric for document-based and thematic essay guidelines.

Score of 5:

- Thoroughly develops all aspects of the task evenly and in depth
- Is more analytical than descriptive (analyzes, evaluates, and/or creates information)
- Richly supports the theme with many relevant facts, examples, and details
- Demonstrates a logical and clear plan of organization; includes an introduction and a conclusion that are beyond a restatement of the theme
- Incorporates relevant information from at least five primary source documents; a single letter, photograph, broadside, etc. counts as one primary source document

Score of 4:

- Develops all aspects of the task but may do so somewhat unevenly
- Is both descriptive and analytical (applies, analyzes, evaluates, and/or creates information)
- Supports the theme with relevant facts, examples, and details
- Demonstrates a logical and clear plan of organization; includes an introduction and a conclusion that are beyond a restatement of the theme
- Incorporates relevant information from at least four primary source documents; a single letter, photograph, broadside, etc. counts as one primary source document

Score of 3:

- Develops all aspects of the task with little depth or develops most aspects of the task in some depth
- Is more descriptive than analytical (applies, may analyze, and/or evaluate information)
- Includes some relevant facts, examples, and details; may include some minor inaccuracies
- Demonstrates a satisfactory plan of organization; includes an introduction and a conclusion that may be a restatement of the theme
- Incorporates relevant information from at least three primary source documents; a single letter, photograph, broadside, etc. counts as one primary source document

Score of 2:

- Minimally develops all aspects of the task or develops some aspects of the task in some depth
- Is primarily descriptive; may include faulty, weak, or isolated application or analysis
- Includes few relevant facts, examples, and details; may include some inaccuracies
- Demonstrates a general plan of organization; may lack focus; may contain digressions; may not clearly identify which aspect of the task is being addressed; may lack an introduction and/or a conclusion
- Incorporates relevant information from at least two primary source documents; a single letter, photograph, broadside, etc. counts as one primary source document

Score of 1:

- Minimally develops some aspects of the task
- Is descriptive; may lack understanding, application, or analysis
- Includes few relevant facts, examples, or details; may include inaccuracies
- May demonstrate a weakness in organization; may lack focus; may contain digressions; may not clearly identify which aspect of the task is being addressed; may lack an introduction and/or a conclusion
- Does not incorporate relevant information from primary source documents; a single letter, photograph, broadside, etc. counts as one primary source document

Civil War Essay Contest Documentary Film Guidelines and Scoring Rubric

The Civil War Essay Contest's Documentary Film category, sponsored by the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, is designed to enhance students' knowledge of the Civil War era through use of primary sources. Students must identify a topic, conduct research using primary and secondary sources, document their sources as citations in the film's credits, develop a clear thesis statement, and organize and edit their film in a clear and visually impactful manner. Films will be viewed by a panel of judges and evaluated using the following rubric for document-based and thematic guidelines.

Score of 5:

- Thoroughly develops all aspects of the task evenly and in depth
- Is more analytical than descriptive (analyzes, evaluates, and/or creates information)
- Richly supports the theme with many relevant facts, examples, and details
- Richly utilizes visual media and editing techniques in a way that brings the content of the film above and beyond the impact of a written essay
- Demonstrates a logical and clear plan of organization (either a three-act structure of introduction, body, and conclusion, or another effective structure)
- Incorporates relevant information from at least five primary source documents; a single letter, photograph, broadside, etc. counts as one primary source document

Score of 4:

- Develops all aspects of the task but may do so somewhat unevenly
- Is both descriptive and analytical (applies, analyzes, evaluates, and/or creates information)
- Supports the theme with relevant facts, examples, and details
- Utilizes visual media and editing techniques in a way that makes the content of the film equal in value to the impact of a written essay
- Demonstrates a logical and clear plan of organization (either a three-act structure of introduction, body, and conclusion, or another effective structure)
- Incorporates relevant information from at least five primary source documents; a single letter, photograph, broadside, etc. counts as one primary source document

Score of 3:

- Develops all aspects of the task with little depth or develops most aspects of the task in some depth
- Is more descriptive than analytical (applies, may analyze, and/or evaluate information)
- Includes some relevant facts, examples, and details; may include some minor inaccuracies
- Utilizes visual media and editing techniques in a way that makes the content of the film equal in value to the impact of a written essay
- Demonstrates a satisfactory plan of organization; introduction and conclusion of film may be a restatement of the theme
- Incorporates relevant information from at least four primary source documents; a single letter, photograph, broadside, etc. counts as one primary source document

Score of 2:

- Minimally develops all aspects of the task or develops some aspects of the task in some depth
- Is primarily descriptive; may include faulty, weak, or isolated application or analysis
- Includes few relevant facts, examples, and details; may include some inaccuracies
- Generally utilizes visual media and editing techniques in a way that makes the content of the film equal in value to the impact of a written essay; is visually repetitive or monotonous
- Demonstrates a general plan of organization; may lack focus; may contain digressions; may not clearly identify which aspect of the task is being addressed; may lack an introduction and/or a conclusion
- Incorporates relevant information from at least three primary source documents; A single letter, photograph, broadside, etc. counts as one primary source document

Score of 1:

- Minimally develops some aspects of the task
- Is descriptive; may lack understanding, application, or analysis
- Includes few relevant facts, examples, or details; may include inaccuracies
- Does not utilize visual media and editing techniques in a way that makes the content of the film equal in value to the impact of a written essay; is visually repetitive or monotonous; visual media does not add value to the historical content of the film
- May demonstrate a weakness in organization; may lack focus; may contain digressions; may not clearly identify which aspect of the task is being addressed; may lack an introduction and/or a conclusion
- Does not incorporate relevant information from primary source documents; a single letter, photograph, broadside, etc. counts as one primary source document

Civil War Essay Contest Writing Prompts

These topics and questions are meant as a guide to spark research and eventually help students hone a thesis statement. Students are not limited to these topics and questions, and advisors are cautioned not to submit all student essays on a single theme. Supporting materials from the Gilder Lehrman Institute, including primary source documents, videos, articles from *History Now*, online exhibitions, and print publications, may be found at <http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/civil-war-and-reconstruction-1861-1877>. Please note that a login is required.

The coming of the war

What were the causes of the Civil War? How did slavery evolve as an issue that led to war? How were politics involved?

Opinion

How did people in the North and South form opinions on the war? How did both sides rally support? How did two presidents—Lincoln and Davis—motivate the Union and Confederacy? Examine newspapers and the press, letters to and from the field, photos, broadsides, music, plays, art, magazines, speeches, general meetings, reports from the home front, testimony, textbooks, etc.

Impacts

How did the war impact America, both immediately and in the long term? What *wasn't* impacted by the war? What went on separate from it? Think about the Civil War as a unique event and in general, noting what was different about it and what changes it caused that other wars have also set in motion. Some areas to consider are technology, media, the economy, African Americans, women, children, politics, government, divisions, environment (destruction and growth), and local histories. Non-war-related: land-grants, religious beliefs, lives put on hold, dreams deferred, etc.

Local effects

This topic is related to impacts. Think about what the war did to cities, towns, communities, and families. Millions of people went to the battlefields. Many millions more stayed behind. Some prospered; most suffered. Does your family have a Civil War story? What about your community? Look into narratives (stories), but also study other records—census data, population shifts, economic production, etc.

Women's roles

What did women do during the war? Think about both Confederate and Union women at home and near the battlefield. Women worked as medical personnel, performed other labor on or near the battlefield, acted as spies, kept plantations and industries going on the home front, and formed sanitary commissions. Who were they? What are their stories? What did they do before the war? What happened to them after the war? What changed and what stayed the same?

African American experience

What did African Americans do during the war? How did their experiences differ in the North and South and change over the course of the war? What impact did the Emancipation Proclamation have? Consider the work African Americans did, the roles they played and the lives they led, as well as how things differed for free blacks, slaves, freedmen and women, soldiers, and leaders.

Military issues

Much has been written about battlefield tactics and generals' strategies. Less has been written about the materials, transportation systems, communications networks, supply chains, hospitals, and POW camps required to keep both the Union and Confederate armies operating during the war. How did necessary material and people get to and from the battlefield? Who did the work?

Politics and government

Many historians believe that the Civil War was the Second American Revolution, for it resolved some issues created in the Revolutionary and founding eras and raised others that were not resolved until the twentieth century. Consider how the Civil War expanded the powers of the federal government and how Abraham Lincoln defined his role as a wartime president. What changes did the Civil War cause? What happened to state governments? How did congressional power evolve? What happened to individual rights? How did the government mobilize its resources to care for veterans after the war?

International impact

Though civil wars are fought within nations, they take place in the larger international system. Yet foreign countries kept out of the American Civil War to a surprising degree. Why? What went on internationally during the war? Who supported the Confederacy and who supported the Union? How was this support shown? What diplomatic issues did the war raise? How did it impact international trade?

The war remembered

Why is there such popular fascination with the Civil War? Why have so many movies been made and books been written about the war? Why has the American public struggled with the war's causes, meaning, and legacy? How did Americans view this conflict during the Civil War years? Five years later? Fifty years later? One hundred years later? Consider re-enactments, cemeteries, the WPA slave narratives, centennial activities, and the sesquicentennial (the 150 year commemoration).

Recent Winners of the Civil War Essay Contest

2017

HIGH SCHOOL DIVISION

1. Kaylee Kimbrough, Pennsylvania Homeschoolers AP Online, Kitanning, Pennsylvania (based in Greenville, Texas)
“I Shall Deal at the Other Shop’: Confederate Cotton, British Neutrality, and Egyptian Opportunity”
2. Tyler Yandrofski, Chapel Hill High School, Chapel Hill, North Carolina
“A Necessary Abuse: The Causes and Effects of Lincoln’s Suspensions of Habeas Corpus”
3. Madeleine Yancy, C. E. Jordan High School, Durham, North Carolina
“The Idolization of Colonel Robert G. Shaw”

MIDDLE SCHOOL DIVISION

1. Katherine Li, Williams Middle School, Longmeadow, Massachusetts
“How the Civil War Changed America’s Money System”
2. Aly Yamamoto, Carl G. Renfroe Middle School, Decatur, Georgia
“Children of the American Civil War”
3. Julia Anitescu, University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, Chicago, Illinois
“Civil War: Not Just a Man’s Fight”

2016

HIGH SCHOOL DIVISION

1. Catherine Cai, Garnet Valley High School, Garnet Valley, Pennsylvania
“‘Army Disease’ and America’s Changing Attitudes toward Drug Addiction”
2. Anastasia LeDuc, Chapel Hill High School, Chapel Hill, North Carolina
“The Continuing Influence of Slavery and Emancipation on Contemporary African-American Culture”
3. Nicholas C. Monaco, Collegiate School, New York, New York
“Reconstructing the Crescent City: Benjamin Butler’s Occupation of New Orleans”

MIDDLE SCHOOL DIVISION

1. Ellie Schweiker, The Manning School, Golden, Colorado
“A Taste of Food in the Civil War”
2. Ameera Waterford, Emmanuel Lutheran School, Kahului, Hawaii
“How Death Saved Lives: The Evolution of Medicine in the Civil War”
3. Idris Young, City Honors School at Fosdick-Masten Park, Buffalo, New York
“Illustrating War and Race: Political Cartoons and the Civil War”

2015

HIGH SCHOOL DIVISION

1. Anjelica Matcho, Bridgewater Raritan High School, Bridgewater, New Jersey
“Dethroning King Cotton: The Failed Diplomacy of the Confederacy”

2. Stefano E. Jacobson, Collegiate School, New York, New York
“Andrew Johnson’s Pardon Policy and the Failure of Freedmen’s Land Ownership during Reconstruction”
3. Dante Mangiaracina, Collegiate School, New York, New York
“The Army for Lincoln in 1864: Electing the President, Ending the War, and Changing the Voting Process”

MIDDLE SCHOOL DIVISION

1. Justin Swanson, Johnson Creek Middle School, Johnson Creek, Wisconsin
“How Was the Strategy of Blockades Influenced by Britain?”
2. Jamie Joung, The Manning School, Golden, Colorado
“Our Strengths As Women”
3. Maya Jowers, Endeavor Hall Charter School, West Valley City, Utah
“The Emancipation Proclamation: A Key Factor in the Civil War”

2014

HIGH SCHOOL DIVISION

1. Mahir Rafi Riaz, The Collegiate School, New York, New York
“An End to the Era of Compromise: Amending the Constitution in Civil War America”
2. Hannah Teller, Bridgewater-Raritan High School, Bridgewater, New Jersey
“Snakes Lurking in the Grass: Lincoln and the Copperheads in the Civil War”
3. Maggie Foster, North Oldham High School, Goshen, Kentucky
“Self-Reliance: The Role of Anti-Industrial Individualism in Abolitionism”

MIDDLE SCHOOL DIVISION

1. Madeleine Yancy, Trinity School of Durham and Chapel Hill, Durham, North Carolina
“The Roles of Lincoln: Father, Husband and President?”
2. Yeats McDonald, Grace Christian School, Blacklick, Ohio
“Man’s Best Friend Goes to War”
3. Adianna Jackson, US Grant School, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
“African Americans and Their Battle”

2013

HIGH SCHOOL DIVISION

1. Clarissa Aaron, Kelso High School, Kelso, Washington
“Uncle Tom’s Failure”
2. Farukh Saidmuratov, New Dorp High School, Staten Island, New York
“Religion - A Dynamic Force in the Civil War”
3. Allyson Guerrero, Rocky Mountain High School, Fort Collins, Colorado
“An Unsettling Precedent”

MIDDLE SCHOOL DIVISION

1. Lorenzo Contreras, U. S. Grant School, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
“Medical Procedures and Non-Violent Deaths in the Civil War”
2. Zion Belmont, Coral Springs Middle School, Coral Springs, Florida
“A Catastrophic Event: The Underground Railroad”

3. Molly Yost, Thomas C. Cario Middle School, Mount Pleasant, South Carolina
“Foreign Influence on the Civil War”

Featured Primary Sources from the Gilder Lehrman Collection

I. The Coming of the War

1. [James W.C. Pennington, “The Whole Land is full of blood,” 1851](#) (#GLC09088)
James W. C. Pennington, a former slave and noted abolitionist, wrote this letter in the wake of Thomas Sims’s infamous trial. Sims had escaped from slavery in Georgia before being captured in Massachusetts in April 1851 and taken to court under the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. The judge decided in favor of Sims’s owner, and the seventeen-year-old was marched through the streets of Boston by US marines before being returned to Georgia. The authoritarian nature and public spectacle of Sims’s case sent a resounding message to slaves who sought refuge in the North. It also inflamed anti-slavery sentiment, spurring many abolitionists to action.
In 1827, Pennington himself had escaped from slavery in Maryland, ultimately obtaining his ordination from the Yale School of Divinity in 1838. He is noted for establishing an argument for the African origins of western European civilization and is also known for presiding as minister over Frederick Douglass’s marriage to Anna Murray. In this letter, Pennington offers us a glimpse into the frustrating struggle for abolition at a time when fugitive slave laws provoked pivotal court rulings. In his words, “These cases are enough to break one’s heart. It is difficult to see how the enormous evil and crime of Slavery can be carried to a greater extent.”
2. [Mahala Doyle, “Bleeding Kansas” and the Pottawatomie Massacre, 1856](#) (#GLC07590)
In 1854, the Kansas-Nebraska Act overturned the Missouri Compromise, which stated that slavery would not be allowed north of latitude 36°30’. Instead, settlers would use the principle of popular sovereignty and vote to determine whether slavery would be allowed in each state. Supporters of both sides flooded into the territory of Kansas, where violence soon erupted between pro-slavery and anti-slavery settlers.
In retaliation for the “sack” of the free-state town of Lawrence on May 21, 1856, the abolitionist John Brown led a brutal attack on a pro-slavery settlement at Pottawatomie Creek on the night of May 24. This was an example of the kind of violence that alienated even his anti-slavery supporters. Brown and six followers killed five men, hacking at them with broadswords and cutting their throats before shooting them. Mahala Doyle, the wife and mother of three of Brown’s victims, expressed her bitterness and pain in this letter to John Brown. She sent it to him in November 1859 as he awaited execution after the Harpers Ferry raid.
3. [John Brown’s final speech, 1859](#) (#GLC05508.051)
Small broadside with lithograph signature of Brown produced by the Liberator, reprinting his address to the Virginia Court before sentencing. Brown denies wanting to murder or cause an uprising. He argues that his raid on Harper’s Ferry was just and aligned with the teachings of the Bible.
4. [Abraham Lincoln, The “House Divided” Speech, ca. 1857–1858](#) (#GLC02533)

In this speech fragment from 1857, which he later expanded as the opening speech of the 1858 US Senate campaign against Stephen A. Douglas, Abraham Lincoln identified slavery as a moral and a political issue that threatened the continued existence of the United States. Invoking the famous biblical words, “A house divided against itself can not stand,” he declared, “I do not expect the Union to be dissolved. I do not expect the house to fall; but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and put it in course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will push it forward till it shall become alike lawfull in all the states, old, as well as new.”

5. [Runaway Slave Ad, 1860](#) (#GLC06377.01)

Runaway slave ads were a reality in America as long as slavery existed. Appearing as broadsides and in newspapers, such ads offered monetary rewards from slaveholders for the capture and return of escaped slaves. On May 9, 1860, Enoch Duley of Kentucky offered a reward for the capture and return of his slave Manuel. Under close scrutiny, the lives of particular slaves emerge in fragmentary details, including names, physical descriptions, talents, personalities, and other hints of their individuality. This broadside describes Manuel’s height, weight, and other physical characteristics as well as more subjective views of the slave as “well dressed” with a “shrewd expression of the eye.”

6. [The Charleston Mercury, “The Union is Dissolved!”, 1860](#) (#GLC02688)

The election of Abraham Lincoln as the sixteenth president of the United States in November 1860 led to the eventual secession of eleven slave-holding states and the formation of the Confederacy. Convinced that the federal government would initiate judicial and legal action against slavery, South Carolina became the first state to secede. Printed in Charleston, South Carolina, on December 20, 1860, this broadside announces South Carolina’s repeal of the Constitution of the United States and the state’s secession from the Union. “The Union Is Dissolved!” it declares. The Constitution of the new Confederacy would sanction the unrestricted right to hold slaves.

7. [A proposed Thirteenth Amendment to prevent secession, 1861](#) (#GLC09040)

In the wake of the presidential election of 1860 that brought Abraham Lincoln to the White House, the slaveholding states of the American South, led by South Carolina, began withdrawing from the nation. In the midst of this constitutional crisis, President James Buchanan, still in office until Lincoln’s inauguration in March 1861, tried to reassure the South that their slave property would remain safe, even under the incoming Republican administration. He asked Congress to draw up what he called an “explanatory amendment” to the Constitution that would explicitly recognize the right of states to sanction human bondage and allow slaveholders to retain their human property. In response, the House of Representatives established a thirty-three member committee under the leadership of Representative Thomas Corwin of Ohio to prepare a draft for the President’s consideration.

Within weeks, the committee delivered the “Corwin Amendment” to the House, a document many hoped would mollify the South. This proposed Thirteenth Amendment reflected the apprehension of those who in late 1860 believed they were witnessing the dissolution of the nation. Without using the word “slavery” or “slave,” the proposed

amendment would deny “to Congress the power to abolish or interfere, within any State, with the domestic institutions thereof, including that of persons held to labor or service by the laws of said State.” The amendment, officially designated Joint Resolution No. 80, passed the House of Representatives in late February by the convincing vote of more than two-thirds of the membership. It was delivered to the Senate just days before Lincoln’s inauguration and although most members of that body supported it, opponents were successful in blocking the amendment on a parliamentary technicality. Lincoln sent the amendment to the states for consideration. Only Ohio and Maryland ratified it.

8. [President Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address, 1861](#) (#GLC01264)

On March 4, 1861, the day Abraham Lincoln was first sworn into office as President of the United States, the *Chicago Tribune* printed this special pamphlet of his First Inaugural Address. In the address, the new president appealed to the “mystic chords of memory” and to “the better angels of our nature” to hold the nation together. Seeking to alleviate the “Apprehension [that] seems to exist among the Southern States,” Lincoln pledged not to interfere with slavery in the South and pleaded with the Confederate states to reconcile with the North. Twenty times he used the word “Union.” But he also sent a clear message that he would not allow the Union to be peacefully dissolved.

II. At and Beyond the Battlefield

1. [Best friends divided by the Civil War, 1861](#) (GLC00925.01, GLC00925.02)

The following exchange between two old Army friends illustrates the painful choices made by Americans after the surrender of Fort Sumter. At the time, the Confederate general Braxton Bragg was in command in Pensacola, Florida, while Union colonel Henry Hunt was at Fort Pickens, just across the bay. Each was moved to explain their differences and to anticipate the consequences of the impending conflict.

2. [Lincoln on the execution of a slave trader, 1862](#) (#GLC00182)

This stunning document, a refusal of clemency for a convicted slave trader, stands out among the papers of Abraham Lincoln, a man renowned for his mercy and willingness to pardon. In November 1861, Nathaniel Gordon was convicted of slave trading and sentenced to hang. Participation in the slave trade had been punishable by death since 1820, but Gordon was the first man to be executed for the crime. Only one other slave trader had been sentenced to death, but he received a full pardon from President James Buchanan in 1857. Gordon’s friends and supporters approached Lincoln, as the President wrote, “to commute the said sentence of the said Nathaniel Gordon to a term of imprisonment for life.” Lincoln declined, writing that it was his “duty to refuse.” He did, however, delay the execution for two weeks, to allow the prisoner time to make “the necessary preparation for the awful change which awaits him.” Lincoln’s unwavering refusal to grant Gordon clemency is a testament to his intolerance of slavery.

3. [P.G.T. Beauregard, Confederate reaction to “Beast” Butler’s orders, 1862](#) (#GLC00666)

In April 1862 Union forces led by Captain David G. Farragut steamed past the weak Confederate defenses and captured New Orleans. During the occupation of the city Union troops were repeatedly insulted by New Orleans women. The women hoped their actions would prompt a reaction from Union troops that would incite paroled Confederates to act.

General Benjamin F. Butler's men showed remarkable restraint against the insults, but Butler realized that it was only a matter of time before one of them, pressed too far, would react. As military governor of the city, Butler issued General Orders 28 on May 15, 1862, which declared that any woman behaving disrespectfully would be "treated as a woman of the town plying her avocation." In other words, they were to be regarded as prostitutes and therefore were subject to arrest.

While reaction in the North was mixed, the South saw "Beast" Butler's ruling as an affront to womanhood, dishonorable and offensive. In response, on May 19, Confederate General P. G. T. Beauregard issued his own General Orders 44, shown here.

Beauregard's orders reprinted Butler's orders and stated that they were to be read aloud to Confederate troops in order to stir their emotions: "Arouse friends, and drive back from our soil, those infamous invaders of our homes and disturbers of our family ties." Butler's orders backfired as they only served as a tool for increasing Southern anger against the Northern occupiers.

4. [Abraham Lincoln, A proclamation on the suspension of habeas corpus, 1862](#) (#GLC06099)

The doctrine of habeas corpus is the right of any person under arrest to appear in person before the court, to ensure that they have not been falsely accused. The US Constitution specifically protects this right in Article I, Section 9: "The privilege of the writ of habeas corpus shall not be suspended, unless when in cases of rebellion or invasion the public safety may require it." Lincoln initially suspended habeas corpus in the volatile border state of Maryland in 1861 in order to try large numbers of civilian rioters in military courts and to prevent the movement of Confederate troops on Washington. The order was eventually extended in response to different threats. In the summer of 1862, President Lincoln had called up the state militias, leading to increased opposition to the Civil War within the Union. By General Orders No. 141, September 25, 1862, Lincoln subjected protestors to martial law and the suspension of habeas corpus.

5. [Death at Gettysburg, 1863: Paul Semmes](#) (#GLC06823)

On the day before his death in a Virginia hospital, Confederate Brigadier General Paul Semmes, who was wounded at Gettysburg, wrote the following letter to his wife. His handwriting is evidence of the severity of his wounds. Such deathbed letters testify to Americans' yearnings to connect with loved ones as they faced their own mortality.

6. [Elbert Corbin, letter to Emily Corbin from Gettysburg, 1863](#) (#GLC03685)

After three days of fierce fighting on July 1–3, 1863, nearly 40,000 battered soldiers lay scattered across the blood-soaked fields of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. As the torrential summer rain poured down on the wounded, Private Elbert Corbin of the 1st New York Light Artillery was thrust into an unexpected role when he was ordered to remain behind and take care of his fallen comrades. In this rare letter, Corbin detailed the quick training that enabled him to assist his wounded compatriots. He also writes of helping wounded enemies: "dressed our Boys wounds then . . . assisting to cut out Balls and dress the wounded Rebels." He resignedly noted the paradox of having to "Help to wound & Kill men then Patch them up." The letter also includes a map of the scene on the battlefield.

7. [The Gettysburg Address, 1863](#) (#GLC06811)

On November 19, 1863, four months after the Battle of Gettysburg, a ceremony was held at the site in Pennsylvania to dedicate a cemetery for the Union dead. The battle had been a Union victory, but at great cost—about 23,000 Union casualties and 23,000 Confederate (a total of nearly 8,000 killed, 27,000 wounded, and 11,000 missing). At the cemetery dedication in November 1863, the day’s speakers found themselves tasked with finding the right words to commemorate those who had perished in the bloodiest battle of the Civil War. President Lincoln had been invited to make a “few appropriate remarks” at the cemetery’s consecration. Some 15,000 people heard his speech. Less than 275 words in length, Lincoln’s three-minute-long Gettysburg Address defined the meaning of the Civil War. Drawing upon the biblical concepts of suffering, consecration, and resurrection, he described the war as a momentous chapter in the global struggle for self-government, liberty, and equality. In his short address, Lincoln honored the fallen dead and framed those soldiers’ sacrifices and the war itself as necessary to the survival of the nation.

8. [Gen. Ulysses S. Grant on the Siege of Vicksburg, 1863](#) (#GLC07055)

One of the Union’s top military objectives was to gain control of the Mississippi River, and thereby split the Confederacy in two. General Ulysses S. Grant took up this challenge late in 1862 but was frustrated for several months by the rebel defenses of Vicksburg, Mississippi. In mid-April 1863, Grant undertook a series of naval and infantry maneuvers that moved more than 30,000 troops into Vicksburg’s rear. This directive reflects Grant’s genius for military strategy as well as the fortitude that led Lincoln to believe in 1864 that he had at last found a general who would not let him down.

9. [The Fort Pillow Massacre, 1864](#) (#GLC05080.01)

On April 12, 1864, fifteen hundred Confederate soldiers led by General Nathan Bedford Forrest attacked the 567 Union troops stationed at Fort Pillow, Tennessee. Fighting raged until a truce was called at 3 p.m., but despite being greatly outnumbered, the Union troops refused to surrender. The Confederates renewed their attack at 4 p.m. and quickly overwhelmed the garrison. Nearly 300 Union soldiers were killed. The Confederates suffered only fourteen deaths. Many believe that Forrest and his men wanted to punish, not just defeat, both the African American soldiers and the white men from Tennessee fighting on the side of the Union who were based at Fort Pillow. According to eyewitnesses, Confederates murdered Union prisoners, including some who were wounded, after the fort had been taken. Despite the carnage, Fort Pillow was of little tactical significance and General Forrest abandoned the fort the next day.

First Lieutenant Mack Leaming served in the 13th Tennessee Regiment in the Union Army. As the highest-ranking officer in his regiment to survive, Leaming wrote his regiment’s official report of the battle. Nearly thirty years later, he wrote a vivid seventeen-page account of the battle and its aftermath. It stands as testimony to the brutality and ruthlessness of the battle.

10. [The service of Medal of Honor recipient Dr. Mary Walker, 1864](#) (#GLC06882)

A graduate of Syracuse Medical College, Mary Walker served as a doctor during the American Civil War and was the only female acting assistant surgeon in the Union Army. In April 1864, Walker was captured by the Confederates in Tennessee and was held in the women’s ward at Castle Thunder in Richmond, Virginia, as a prisoner of war.

Following her release in August 1864, President Lincoln summoned Walker to Washington, DC, to discuss her imprisonment. In this letter, written after her meeting with the President, Walker outlines her contributions to the war force and urges Inspector General James Hardie to speak to Lincoln regarding her rank in the army:

11. [President Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, 1865](#) (#GLC06044)

Just 701 words long, Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address took only six or seven minutes to deliver, yet contains many of the most memorable phrases in American political oratory. The speech contained neither gloating nor rejoicing. Rather, it offered Lincoln's most profound reflections on the causes and meaning of the war. The "scourge of war," he explained, was best understood as divine punishment for the sin of slavery, a sin in which all Americans, North as well as South, were complicit. It describes a national moral debt that had been created by the "bondsmen's 250 years of unrequited toil," and ends with a call for compassion and reconciliation. With its biblical allusions, alliteration, repetition, and parallel structure, and its reliance on one-syllable words, the address has the power of a sermon. It incorporates many of the themes of the religious revivals: sin, sacrifice, and redemption.

In this printing of the Second Inaugural, the blue ink is a significant design detail. After Lincoln's death on April 15, 1865, all copies were printed in black ink appropriate to a national mood of mourning. In the days before Lincoln's assassination, readers were focused primarily on the tone of reconciliation that on March 4 had moved his audience to tears.

12. [The Surrender of Robert E. Lee, 1865](#) (#GLC07967)

Left with no route of escape after the fall of Petersburg, Virginia, on April 2, 1865, Confederate General Robert E. Lee was faced with a difficult choice: keep fighting in an increasingly hopeless war or surrender to Ulysses S. Grant. Lee wrote to Grant and asked to meet to discuss terms of surrender. Throughout the morning, as communications concerning the surrender flew back and forth between Grant and Lee, their troops were still fighting at Appomattox Court House. Shortly before noon, Lee sent a message to Grant's lines asking for a "suspension of hostilities pending the discussion of the Terms of surrender of this army." It was received and recorded by General Ord, who wrote on it: "men at rest – firing stopped." By the end of the day, Lee had accepted Grant's terms for surrender.

13. [Abraham Lincoln's last letter to his wife, 1865](#) (#GLC08090)

At the greatest moment of his presidency—the fall of the Confederate capital, Richmond—Abraham Lincoln chose to write to his wife on April 2 before writing to any public official. With great optimism, Lincoln also wrote of Grant's intention to order a full attack on Petersburg, not knowing that Grant's campaign had already been successful and Lee was abandoning Petersburg. Later that afternoon Lee sent word to President Davis to evacuate Richmond. On April 3, Richmond fell under Union control. This is the last known letter between the President and Mary Todd Lincoln.

III. Emancipation, Abolition, and Reconstruction

1. [The Emancipation Proclamation, January 1, 1863](#) (#GLC00742)

The Emancipation Proclamation was shaped by both pragmatic considerations and

Lincoln's deeply held, lifelong hatred of slavery. It was timed, after the Union victory at Antietam, to strike a military blow against the South's economic and social infrastructure, and was taken in the full understanding (given the experience of "contrabands") that the advance of the Union armies would free more and more fugitive slaves. The Proclamation transformed the war to preserve the Union into a war to save the Union *and* end slavery.

2. [James E. Yeatman, The Western Sanitary Commission reports on suffering in the Mississippi Valley, 1863](#) (#GLC01545.11)

In 1863 in the war-torn South, thousands were homeless and starving. Some of those most in need of aid were newly liberated slaves. The Western Sanitary Commission was organized on September 5, 1861, by General John C. Fremont and D.L. Dix, a philanthropist from St. Louis, Missouri. The commission modeled itself after the United States Sanitary Commission (USSC), a federally endorsed organization that unified efforts of benevolent societies. The USSC and the WSC assumed similar roles: they set up hospitals and administered medical services, housed orphans, and improved sanitary and dietary conditions in military camps and prisons. But there was a major difference between the organizations: the WSC was not considered an official branch of the USSC and did not receive federal funding.

In October 1863, members of the WSC traveled to the Mississippi Valley to assess the situation there. Shocked by the suffering in communities of freedmen along the river, the commission alerted the senior officers who in turn wrote to Lincoln on November 6, requesting Lincoln's endorsement for their endeavors. Their appeal to "offer our humble but active services, asking no reward of any kind, but the opportunity and encouragement to work" was accepted. The WSC accumulated \$30,000 in clothing and other necessary materials as well as \$13,000 in cash to assist the communities along the Mississippi. In recognition of his contributions, Lincoln later asked the WSC president, James Yeatman, to lead the Freedman's Bureau.

3. ["Men of Color, To Arms! To Arms," 1863](#) (#GLC02752)

After the Emancipation Proclamation was enacted on January 1, 1863, black leaders including Frederick Douglass swiftly moved to recruit African Americans as soldiers. This broadside, endorsed by Douglass (third name in the first column) and other African American leaders, urges free African Americans to enlist, declaring "If we value liberty, if we wish to be free in this land. . . . If we would be regarded men, if we would forever silence the tongue of Calumny, of Prejudice and Hate, let us Rise Now and Fly to Arms."

4. [Sgt. Francis Fletcher of the 54th Massachusetts on equal pay for black soldiers, 1864](#) (#GLC07345)

Francis H. Fletcher, a 22-year-old clerk from Salem, Massachusetts, enlisted as a private in Company A of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment on February 13, 1863. One year after the regiment left Boston with great fanfare, Fletcher wrote to his friend Jacob C. Safford regarding the discrimination and hardships black soldiers encountered when they were denied the same pay as white soldiers.

The 54th Massachusetts is famous for steadfastly refusing the government pay of \$7 per month instead of the \$13 per month paid to white soldiers. Abolitionists and black leaders opposed the inequality in pay. After many delays, Congress finally passed a bill to

equalize pay for black Union soldiers on June 15, 1864. In September 1864 the men of the 54th Massachusetts were retroactively paid in full for their eighteen months of service. Written two weeks before the passage of the congressional bill, Fletcher's letter expresses his resentment clearly and eloquently.

5. [Iowa General Assembly, Ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, 1866](#) (#GLC02631)
President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation freed slaves only in Confederate states still at war with the Union on January 1, 1863, and as a wartime order, it could be reversed by subsequent presidential proclamation, congressional legislation, or court ruling. Through a constitutional amendment, the abolition of slavery could be made permanent throughout the United States.

Following his re-election in November 1864, Lincoln threw his weight behind the amendment. He persuaded eight House Democrats to switch their votes and encouraged several other Representatives who had missed the previous vote in April 1864 to support the amendment, which was finally passed on January 31, 1865. The Constitution does not require presidential signatures on amendments, but Lincoln added his, making it the only constitutional amendment to be later ratified that was signed by a president.

The Thirteenth Amendment was ratified on December 6, 1865, when Georgia became the twenty-seventh state to approve it out of the then-total thirty-six states. Iowa was the thirty-first state, voting for ratification on January 15, 1866. The document is the joint resolution passed by Iowa's House and Senate and printed on March 30. It lists the names of all the Iowa legislators in the general assembly who voted for ratification, and includes a few small engravings depicting allegorical symbols of liberty and other patriotic images.

6. [Charles Sumner on Reconstruction and the South, 1866](#) (#GLC00496.088.01)
By 1865 there were sharp differences of opinion about the rights of freedmen and the governance of the defeated Southern states among political leaders in Congress and the Executive Branch in Washington, DC. Conflict among Republicans, Radical Republicans, and Democrats led to an all-out political war between President Andrew Johnson and members of Congress. In these notes for the "One Man Power vs. Congress" address he gave in Boston on October 2, 1866, Charles Sumner (Mass.), the key Radical Republican leader, accused Johnson of jeopardizing the North's victory in the war. Sumner declared that if, on the other hand, Congress's approach to Reconstruction prevailed, the "faith of the Republic will be preserved . . . the Rebellion itself will be trampled out forever; the whole country . . . will be at peace; the rebel region, no longer harrassed by controversy & injustice, will enjoy the richest fruits of security & reconciliation."
7. [Sharecropper contract, 1867](#) (#GLC04522.11)
Immediately after the Civil War, many former slaves established subsistence farms on land that had been abandoned by fleeing white Southerners. President Andrew Johnson, a Democrat and a former slaveholder, soon restored this land to its white owners, reducing many freed slaves to economic dependency on the South's old planter class. The freedmen, who wanted autonomy and independence, refused to sign contracts that required gang labor, and sharecropping emerged as a compromise.

This 1867 contract between landowner Isham G. Bailey in Marshall County, Mississippi, and two freedmen stipulates different arrangements for each man's family. Both Charles Roberts and Cooper Hughs were to raise cotton and corn and give more than half of the cotton and two-thirds of the corn they raised to Bailey, but the Roberts family was to receive 487 pounds of meat to the Hughs family's 550 pounds. Additionally, Charles Roberts and his wife agreed to do housework for an additional \$50 a year, while the Hughs family agreed to tend the livestock for no additional compensation.

8. [A Ku Klux Klan threat, 1868](#) (#GLC09090)

Reconstruction politics was a catalyst for widespread racism and hatred that freed people experienced throughout the South. The Ku Klux Klan, founded by a Confederate general in 1866, became known as the "invisible empire of the South" in which members represented the ghosts of the Confederate dead returning to terrorize African Americans and Republicans. Although it was a covert organization, the Klan's displays of violence and intolerance were anything but discreet. Many murders and beatings were never reported due to fear of reprisal from the Klan. This document is an example of the type of threats for which the KKK became known. In this case, the target was Davie Jeems, a black Republican recently elected sheriff in Lincoln County, Georgia. The language of the document evokes a ghostly menacing presence; even the handwriting is reminiscent of a ransom note. With the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1871, the already weakened Klan became dormant, but it resurfaced again in 1915.

9. [Frederick Douglass on racism in the North, 1870](#) (#GLC01954)

In 1870 Thomas Burnett Pugh, an ardent abolitionist prior to the Civil War, invited Frederick Douglass to participate in the "Star Course" lecture series he had organized at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia. However, Douglass "learned with some surprise considering our recently improved civilization, that in servile deference to a vulgar and senseless prejudice against my long abused and proscribed people, the Directors of that popular Hall persist in refusing to allow it to be used for a lecture to which my race shall be admitted on terms of equality with others." In this strongly worded letter refusing the speaking engagement, Douglass conveyed his disgust not only with the academy's policy but also at the "intensity of [Philadelphia's] wolfish hate and snobbish pride of race."

10. [William Seward's copy of The Fifteenth Amendment, 1870](#) (#GLC00788)

The Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments gave constitutional status to emancipation's promise. The Fifteenth Amendment provided suffrage for black men, declaring that, "the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude."

Although ratified in 1870, the promise of the Fifteenth Amendment was not fully realized in our country until almost a century later. African Americans were deterred from exercising their right to vote through measures such as poll taxes and literacy tests. It was not until the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that the majority of African Americans in the South were finally able to vote.

11. [Nominating an African American for vice president, 1880](#) (#GLC09400.133)

Born a slave in 1841, Blanche Kelso Bruce was the first African American to be elected to a full term in the US Senate. During his term as a senator from Mississippi (1875–

1881), he advocated the rights of African Americans and other minorities, including American Indians and Chinese immigrants.

In this draft of a circular letter to be published in newspapers, James Milton Turner, chairman of the Negro National Republican Committee, proposes nominating Bruce as the vice presidential candidate on the Republican ticket in 1880. Turner cites Bruce's popularity with both Democrats and Republicans and applauds the senator's commitment to the Republican cause. Although Bruce did not receive the nomination, he did receive eight votes at the Republican Party's convention in Chicago.