

Lincoln and the execution of a slave trader, 1862

Introduction

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. Between 1837 and 1860, seventy-four cases relating to the slave trade had been tried in the United States, but very few men were convicted, and even then they received only light sentences. 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.

At noon on February 21, 1862, Nathaniel Gordon was brought to the gallows in New York City. Both the death warrant and Lincoln's refusal to commute the sentence were read aloud, and then he was hanged. The article from *Harper's Weekly* below describes the case, Gordon's attempted suicide, and the execution. Within a year of Gordon's execution multiple anti-slavery measures were enacted, including the abolition of slavery in Washington, DC, the Second Confiscation Act, and the Emancipation Proclamation.

Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction, view the image and then read the transcript of Lincoln's letter as well as the article which appeared in *Harper's Weekly*. Then apply your knowledge of American history to answer the following questions:

1. Explain the pressures that were placed on President Lincoln to commute the sentence of Nathaniel Gordon.
2. If Lincoln had chosen to further explain his reasons, what might he have offered as to why he found it his "duty to refuse" the appeal for clemency?
3. How did the execution of Nathaniel Gordon illustrate the evolution of Lincoln's attitude toward the slave trade?
4. To what extent did the dates of the seizure and trial of Gordon play a significant role in his conviction, sentencing, and execution?
5. Why did *Harper's Weekly* so graphically describe Gordon's attempted suicide and his eventual execution?

Lincoln and the execution of a slave trader, 1862

Image

Abraham Lincoln,
 President of the United States of America,
 To all to whom these Presents shall come Greeting:

Whereas, it appears that at a Term of the
 Circuit Court of the United States of America
 for the Southern District of New York held in
 the month of November A.D. 1861, Nathaniel
 Gordon was indicted and convicted for being
 engaged in the Slave Trade, and was by the
 said Court sentenced to be put to death by
 hanging by the neck, on Friday the 7th day of
 February, A.D. 1862;

And whereas, a large number of respect-
 able citizens have earnestly brought me to
 commute the said sentence of the said Nathaniel
 Gordon to a term of imprisonment for life, which
 application I have felt it to be my duty to re-
 fuse;

And whereas, it has seemed to me
 probable that the unsuccessful applications
 made for the commutation of his sentence
 may have prevented the said Nathaniel

Abraham Lincoln, Delay of execution for slaver Nathaniel Gordon, February 4, 1862. Digitally enhanced for readability. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC00182 p. 1)

Lincoln and the execution of a slave trader, 1862

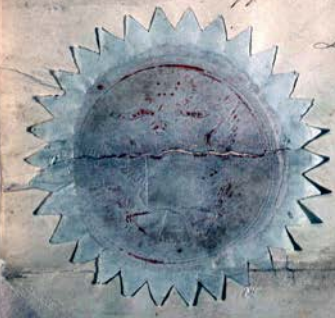
Gordon from making the necessary preparation for the awful change which awaits him;

Now, therefore, be it known, that I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States of America have granted and do hereby grant unto him, the said Nathaniel Gordon, a respite of the above recited sentence, until Friday the twenty-first day of February, A.D. 1862, between the hours of twelve o'clock at noon and three o'clock in the afternoon of the said day, when the said sentence shall be executed.

In granting this respite, it becomes my painful duty to admonish the prisoner that, relinquishing all expectation of pardon by Human Authority, he refer himself alone to the mercy of the Common God and Father of all men.

In testimony whereof, I have hereunto signed my name and caused the Seal of the United States to be affixed.

Done at the City of Washington.



Abraham Lincoln, Delay of execution for slaver Nathaniel Gordon, February 4, 1862. Digitally enhanced for readability. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC00182 p. 2)

Lincoln and the execution of a slave trader, 1862

*this Fourth day of February A.D. 1862, and of
the Independence of the United States the
Eighty-sixth.*

Abraham Lincoln.

By the President:

*William H. Seward
Secretary of State.*

Abraham Lincoln, Delay of execution for slaver Nathaniel Gordon, February 4, 1862. Digitally enhanced for readability. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC00182 p. 3)

Lincoln and the execution of a slave trader, 1862

Transcript

Abraham Lincoln,
President of the United States of America,

To all to whom these Presents shall come Greeting:

Whereas, it appears that at a Term of the Circuit Court of the United States of America for the Southern District of New York held in the month of November A.D. 1861, Nathaniel Gordon was indicted and convicted for being engaged in the Slave Trade, and was by the said Court sentenced to be put to death by hanging by the neck, on Friday the 7th day of February, A.D. 1862;

And whereas, a large number of respectable citizens have earnestly besought me to commute the said sentence of the said Nathaniel Gordon to a term of imprisonment for life, which application I have felt it to be my duty to refuse;

And whereas, it has seemed to me probable that the unsuccessful application made for the commutation of his sentence may have prevented the said Nathaniel [2] Gordon from making the necessary preparation for the awful change which awaits him;

Now, therefore, be it known, that I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States of America have granted and do hereby grant unto him, the said Nathaniel Gordon, a respite of the above recited sentence, until Friday the twenty first day of February, A.D. 1862, between the hours of twelve o'clock at noon and three o'clock in the afternoon of the said day, when the said sentence shall be executed.

In granting this respite, it becomes my painful duty to admonish the prisoner that, relinquishing all expectation of pardon by Human Authority, he refer himself alone to the mercy of the Common God and Father of all men.

In testimony whereof, I have hereunto signed my name and caused the Seal of the United States to be affixed.

Done at the City of Washington, [3] this Fourth day of February A.D. 1862, and of the Independence of the United States the Eighty-sixth.

Abraham Lincoln.

By the President:

William H. Seward

Secretary of State.

Lincoln and the execution of a slave trader, 1862

Transcript of *Harper's Weekly*, Vol. VI, no. 271, March 8, 1862, pg. 150

THE EXECUTION OF GORDON, THE SLAVE-TRADER.

Not the least important among the changes which are taking place in the current of national policy and public opinion is evidenced by the fact that on Friday, 21st February, in this city, Nathaniel Gordon was hung for being engaged in the slave-trade. For forty years the slave-trade has been pronounced piracy by law, and to engage in it has been a capital offense. But the sympathy of the Government and its officials has been so often on the side of the criminal, and it seemed so absurd to hang a man for doing at sea that which, in half the Union, is done daily without censure on land, that no one has ever been punished under the Act. The Administration of Mr. Lincoln has turned over a new leaf in this respect. Henceforth the slave-trade will be abandoned to the British and their friends. The hanging of Gordon is an event in the history of our country.

He was probably the most successful and one of the worst of the individuals engaged in the trade. A native of Maine, he had engaged in the business many years since, and had always eluded justice. The particular voyage which proved fatal to him was undertaken in 1860. The following summary of the case we take from the Times:

It was in evidence (given by Lieutenant Henry D. Todd, U.S.N.) that the ship *Erie* was first discovered by the United States steamer *Mohican*, on the morning of the 8th day of August, 1860; that she was then about fifty miles outside of the River Congo, on the West Coast of Africa, standing to the northward, with all sail set; that she was flying the American flag, and that a gun from the *Mohican* brought her to.

It was shown by Lieutenant Todd that he went on board himself about noon, and took command of the prize. He found on board of the *Erie*, which our readers will remember was but 500 tons burden, eight hundred and ninety-seven (897) negroes, men, women, and children, ranging from the age of six months to forty years. They were half children, one-fourth men, and one-fourth women, and so crowded when on the main deck that one could scarcely put his foot down without stepping on them. The stench from the hold was fearful, and the filth and dirt upon their persons indescribably offensive.

At first he of course knew nothing about them, and until Gordon showed him, he was unable to stow them or feed them—finally he learned how, but they were stowed so closely that during the entire voyage they appeared to be in great agony. The details are sickening, but as fair exponents of the result of this close stowing, we will but mention that running sores and cutaneous diseases of the most painful as well as contagious character infected the entire load. Decency was unthought of; privacy was simply impossible—nastiness and wretchedness reigned supreme. From such a state of affairs we are not surprised to learn that, during the passage of fifteen days, twenty-nine of the sufferers died, and were thrown overboard.

It was proved by one of the seamen that he, with others, shipped on the *Erie*, believing her to be bound upon a legitimate voyage, and that, when at sea they suspected, from the nature of the cargo, that all was not right, which suspicion they mentioned to the Captain (Gordon), who satisfied them by saying

Lincoln and the execution of a slave trader, 1862

that he was on a lawful voyage, that they had shipped as sailors, and would do better to return to their duties than to talk to him.

Subsequently they were told that they had shipped on a slaver, and that for every negro safely landed they should receive a dollar.

The negroes were taken on board the ship on the 7th day of August, 1860, and the entire operation of launching and unloading nearly nine hundred negroes, occupied but three quarters of an hour, or less time than a sensible man would require for his dinner. As the poor creatures came over the side Gordon would take them by the arm, and shove them here or there, as the case might be, and if by chance their persons were covered from entire exposure by a strip of rag, he would, with his knife, cut it off, fling it overboard, and send the wretch naked with his fellows.

Several of the crew testified, all agreeing that Gordon acted as Captain; that he engaged them; that he ordered them; that he promised them the \$1 per capita; that he superintended the bringing on board the negroes; and that he was, in fact, the master-spirit of the entire enterprise.

For this crime Gordon was arrested, tried, and, mainly through the energy of District-Attorney Smith, convicted, and sentenced to death. Immense exertions were made by his friends and the slave-trading interest to procure a pardon, or at least a commutation of his sentence, from President Lincoln, but without avail. He was sentenced to die on 21st. We abridge the following account of his last hours and execution [which we illustrate on page 157] from the Herald and Times:

THE ATTEMPT TO COMMIT SUICIDE.

Nothing worthy of note occurred until about three o'clock A.M. on Friday morning, when the keepers were alarmed by the prisoner being suddenly seized with convulsions. At first it was supposed that he was trying to strangle himself; but on a close examination it was evident that he was suffering from the effects of poison. Dr. Simmons, the prison physician, was immediately sent for, and stimulants were freely administered for the purpose of producing a reaction. For the first half hour or so the efforts of the physician appeared to have but little effect. The patient became quite rigid under the influence of the poison, his pulse could scarcely be felt, and it was thought that after all the gallows would be cheated of its victim. Drs. James R. Wood and Hodgman, who were also in attendance upon the prisoner, labored hard to resuscitate the dying man, and finally, by means of the stomach-pump and the use of brandy, the patient was sufficiently recovered to be able to articulate. It was not until eight o'clock, however, that the physicians had any hope of saving Gordon's life. From that hour, however, the prisoner gradually recovered, although he was subject to fainting fits for hours afterward. When sensible he begged of the doctors to let him alone, preferring, he said, to die by his own hand rather than suffer the ignominy of a public execution.

It has not been satisfactorily ascertained how or in what manner the unfortunate man procured the poison with which he contemplated self-destruction. The symptoms were evidently those of strychnine, and the only way in which the keepers can account for the presence of the poison is its introduction in the cigars which Gordon had smoked so freely the night before. On Thursday the prisoner was compelled to undergo a rigid search, his clothing was changed entirely, and he was placed in a new cell,

Lincoln and the execution of a slave trader, 1862

so that it would seem impossible almost for him to have procured the poison in any other way than that suggested by his keepers.

A few minutes after eleven o'clock, when it was apparent to Gordon that the execution would certainly take place, notwithstanding his attempt at suicide, he sent for Marshal Murray, and said he had something of a private nature to communicate. The Marshal repaired to the bedside of the culprit and asked if any thing could be done to alleviate his sufferings. Gordon raised himself slowly from his cot, and with much difficulty, said: "Cut a lock of hair from my head and give it to my wife." Then taking a ring from his finger, he requested that that also should be sent to his wife in remembrance of her husband. The request was cheerfully complied with, and the official, quite overcome with emotion, left the unhappy man to his fate.

THE EXECUTION.

At 12 o'clock, Marshal Murray notified Gordon, through Mr. Draper, that the hour had arrived. At this he expressed great surprise, and said he thought he had two hours more in which to live. The clergyman entered the cell and prayed with him, or rather for him. Deputy Marshal Borst aided him in dressing and gave him a large drink of clear whisky, when his arms were tied, the black cap was put carelessly on one side of his head, and he was carried on the deputy's shoulders to a chair in the corridor.

The sight was simply shocking.

The man was not sober—that is, so powerful had been the effect of the poison that, in order to keep him alive till the necessary moment, they had been obliged to give him whisky enough to make an ordinary man drunk three times over. He sat lollingly in the chair, gazing listlessly around, while the Marshal, with unaffected emotion, read the former reprieve to him. That done, he was helped to his feet, and held there while the Marshal read to him the death-warrant.

After this he looked around with a senseless smile, asked for some more whisky, which was kindly given him. The procession was then formed, Gordon stalking with a bravadoish air, upheld by the Marshals, toward the scaffold.

To a casual spectator it would appear that, exhausted by mental or physical suffering, Gordon was making a great effort to walk manfully to his fate. As it was, however, he had just sense enough left to endeavor to follow out the suggestion of the well-meaning deputy, who told him to die like a man, and to walk to the rope, so that no one could accuse him of fear. When he reached the scaffold, he said, "Well, a man can't die but once; I'm not afraid." The cap was drawn over the whitened, meaningless features, the noose-knot was carefully adjusted under his ear, and he stood, an unthinking, careless, besotted wretch waiting for he knew not what, when with a jerk he went high in air, and fell to the length of the rope, still senseless, still unfeeling, still regardless of pain or pleasure.

The body swayed hither and thither for a few moments, and all was quiet. No twitchings, no convulsions, no throes, no agonies. His legs opened once, but closed again, and he hung a lump of dishonored clay.