President Abraham Lincoln, in office for less than two years and leader of a fractured and war-torn nation, picked up his pen and signed his Emancipation Proclamation New Year’s Day 1863. From Boston to Beaufort, South Carolina, crowds that had been waiting all day erupted excitedly as the news finally came from Washington, D.C. over the telegraph wires. At the Music Hall in Boston, where the program included Longfellow and Emerson, crowds chanted “Harriet Beecher Stowe, Harriet Beecher Stowe” for the author of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, until the “little lady who started this great war” came forward and was recognized.

Stowe is often credited with influencing the country to think differently about slavery. But what do we know about how Stowe influenced Lincoln?

A decade earlier, Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852) had been a publishing and propaganda phenomenon. Using stories to illustrate the human impact of slavery, Stowe’s blistering pen lit the world on fire. The statistics remain record-breaking: 10,000 copies sold in the first week; a million and a half British copies in a year. The book was so successful it was immediately dramatized for the stage, where it became a theatrical icon. Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner, leader of the radical Republicans, said, “Had there been no Uncle Tom’s Cabin, there would have been no Lincoln in the White House.”

In an 1853 letter, Stowe explained what drove her. “I wrote what I did because as a woman, as a mother, I was oppressed and broken-hearted with the sorrows and injustice I saw, because as a Christian I felt the dishonor to Christianity—because as a lover of my country, I trembled at the coming day of wrath.”

But pro-slavery critics charged that Stowe had made it all up and that slavery was a humane system. So Stowe wrote a nonfiction retort, A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1853), compiling the real-life evidence that had informed her fictional stories. Stowe’s sentiments touched millions. But did she have Lincoln’s ear?

The question of slavery had been part of the American dialogue since the country’s founding. By the 1850 census, of the 20 million people in the U.S., 4 million were enslaved. This “system” that treated people as property and used their uncompensated labor to support the economy finally split the country. When the anti-slavery Lincoln was elected in 1860, the country fractured: 10 Southern states seceded, while 4 slave-holding border states stayed in the Union but protected their right to retain human property. Lincoln spent his entire time in office as a war president.

Stowe had joined abolition and anti-slavery forces, using her influence in publicly pressuring Lincoln to do something about slavery. (Of course, he was pressured by the pro-slavery side as well. The Union was far from united against slavery.) Advocates used all available means: newspaper articles, letters to the editor, petitions, private letters and memorizations, and public address.

Opinion leaders such as Stowe used the popular press to pressure the president and Congress. Over the course of 1861 and 1862, she published frequently in the New York paper The Independent. Historian Lyde Cullen Size, in her book The Political Work of Northern Women Writers and the Civil War, 1850-1872 (University of North Carolina Press, 2000), notes that “Lydia Maria Child in the Standard and Harriet Beecher Stowe in The Independent were two of the most prolific and consistent anti-slavery writers in the early years of the war. Both used letters to the editor as their primary method of persuasion and both, through counseling, idealistic action, were well informed and incisive governmental critics. The harder edge to their writings demonstrated the strength of their conviction that a war for any purpose other than social justice would not be worth fighting.”

Daughter, wife, sister, and mother of ministers, Stowe used in her advocacy writing scriptural phrasing and references. In her August 1861 “Letter to Lord Shaftesbury” in The Independent she wrote, “we consider this war is a great Anti-Slavery War, not in form, but in fact: not in proclamation, but in the intense conviction and purpose of each of the contending parties, and still more in the inevitable overpowering indications of divine Providence.” On July 31, 1862 Stowe wrote, “the time has come when the nation has a RIGHT to demand, and the President of the United States a right to decree, their freedom; and there should go up petitions from all the land that he should do it. How many plagues must come on us before we will hear the evident voice, ‘Let this people go, that they may serve me.’”

Lincoln had long deliberated over the issue of slavery, but it took him a year into the war to see his way. Beyond any moral imperative, as he considered emancipation, Lincoln was balancing public opinion (for and against slavery), the racist attitudes of the day, his responsibilities to the Constitution, military needs, and diplomatic pressure.

Stowe is often credited with influencing the country to think differently about slavery. But what do we know about how Stowe influenced Lincoln?

A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin

by Katherine Kane

And he was keeping his eye on his own reelection. By early summer of 1862, though, he determined his course of action.

As a war president, Lincoln’s goal was a united country. But he was also struggling to decide the best course for emancipation. By the fall of 1861 through the next summer, Lincoln promoted various versions of compensated emancipation even as he considered alternatives.

As the war proceeded, though, people took things into their own hands. Human “property” crossed Union military lines. Two commanding officers declared emancipation: General John C. Fremont freeing slaves in Missouri the summer of 1861 and in May 1862, General David Hunter doing so in areas of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. President Lincoln overrode both actions on the grounds that the president was the only one who could take such action.

The 37th Congress—freed from years of legislative deadlock by the departure of seceding Southern legislators—had also acted. In April 1862, Congress emancipated enslaved people enslaved in Washington, D.C., compensating the owners. And they passed a Confiscation Act freeing the human property of Confederate officials in areas occupied by the Union army. Slaves residing Union territory were “captive of war” and would be set free.

Lincoln may be the most-studied American, and many details of his life are well known. Others, though, are not. Robert Bray, in his 2007 article in the *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*. “What Abraham Lincoln Read—An Evocative and Annotated List,” evaluated what this pivotal president read—and what he did not read, testing the theory that what one reads reflects one’s interests and influences what one thinks. Bray concluded that it is “somewhat unlikely” that Lincoln read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and “very unlikely” he read *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Bray acknowledged that “Lincoln might have at least looked at the Key without having read Stowe’s novel, since the former contained... documentation supporting the author’s representation of slavery—plausibly quite interesting to Lincoln.” Bray downplays Library of Congress circulation records: “...in addition to Lincoln himself, the books in question may have been borrowed from the Library by or for Mary Todd Lincoln, the Lincoln children, or any of the president’s secretaries. Who borrowed what is hard to determine.” Was Bray right about that? Could Lincoln, in this moment in history, have possibly not read the most popular book in America?

In Lincoln’s day, the Library of Congress collection was only available to members of Congress, justices of the Supreme Court, diplomatic corps, and the cabinet. Lincoln used the Library regularly. Today the Library’s collections are accessible to everyone, so one chilly February a couple of years ago, I traveled to Washington and investigated for myself. After passing through security screening and registering as a reader, I handed a call slip for the 1862 circulation records to a manuscripts reference librarian. Soon I was presented with a quarto-sized ledger book, rebound with brown pasteboard covers. Skimming the handwritten columns in the section documenting Lincoln’s transactions for 1861-1863, I found that on June 16, 1862, President Lincoln had checked out “Stowe’s Key to Uncle Tom,” which he returned on July 29. This corresponds with the time during which he drafted the Emancipation Proclamation.

Two days after Lincoln checked out *A Key*, on June 18, he and Vice President Hannibal Hamlin rode to the Lincolns’ summer cottage at the Soldiers’ Home in Washington, D.C. Hamlin reported that after dinner they retired to the library and locked the doors. Then Lincoln read Hamlin the draft of the Emancipation Proclamation he had been writing.

A page from the Stafford House petition, a collection of more than 500,000 signatures from women of Great Britain asking U.S. women to work to abolish slavery. It was presented to Stowe in London in 1853. Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, Hartford, Connecticut.

Above the Library of Congress in the U.S. Capitol Building, c. 1863. Lincoln regularly visited the Library of Congress, then only open to members of Congress, justices of the Supreme Court, diplomatic corps, and the cabinet. He checked out Stowe’s *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* at the time he was contemplating the Emancipation Proclamation. *Library of Congress.*
On July 22, Lincoln read the Proclamation to his cabinet. It was strong, and they knew it was bold, and they worried it would encourage insurrection north and south. Lincoln argued the Proclamation would unite the Republican party, and that a rebellion was in order to save the Union whenever it would hurt the cause of the slave, and more when I believe it would help the cause of the slave.

On September 22, 1862 Lincoln released the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. In his words, steps for “owner” compensation and colonization, or export, of emancipated people, provisions that were dropped from the final Proclamation. It did not provide for adding emancipated people to military units. The steps were added to the final Proclamation. Lincoln announced that he would sign it on January 1, one hundred days later. Yet abolitionists had no confidence he would fulfill that promise.

Their skepticism was reasonable. Deeply controversial and radical, the Emancipation Proclamation made Lincoln a hero to many but villain to others. Doris Kearns Goodwin writes in her 2005 Team of Rivals, that President Lincoln’s Proclamation was “shocking in scope.” In a single stroke, it superseded legislation on slavery and property rights that had guided policy in eleven states for nearly three quarters of a century. Three and a half million enslaved, a century needed for generations were promised freedom.

Stowe was among the skeptics, and she determined to publish a response to the Stafford House petition presented to her in London in 1853 in which the women of Great Britain urged that they go up to the U.S. to abolish slavery. The petition, now in the Center’s collection, a recent gift of the Connecticut Historical Society, contains 563,000 signatures in 26 volumes.

Stowe also decided to personally influence the president. She wrote her publisher James T. Fields on November 13, 1862, “I am going to Washington to see the heads of department myself and to satisfy myself that I may refer to the Emancipation Proclamation as a reality and a substance not to fizzle out at the little end of the hour… I start for Washington tomorrow morning—and mean to have a talk with Father Abraham’s himself.” On November 19 she wrote again to Fields, expressing some optimism:

There is most cheering news ahead in the way of assurance that our war is to be put right through and that the Proclamation is to go with vigor. We shall see a great fire— I think I am doing as well as for my testimony to it as I could ask.

Her optimism continued as she wrote to Fields again on the 27th: “It seems to be the opinion here not only that the president will stand up to his Proclamation but that the Boarder [sic] states will accede to his proposition for Emancipation—I have noted the thing as a glorious expectation!” Her outlook was tempered by her brother Henry’s skepticism, as she notes in a December 13 letter to Engraving, “Harriet Beecher Stowe” writing in her conservatory at Oak Hill, her first Hartford home, originally published as a frontispiece to her Our Young Folks, 1866—Harriet Beecher Stowe Center, Hartford, Connecticut. Still Relevant, Still Revolutionary December 13, 2012, 5 p.m., Stowe Center A reading from the historic record by “Abraham Lincoln” followed by a panel discussion with Gene Leuch and Book DeVaughn. $5, free for Stowe Center members.

Symposium: Seizing Liberty April 20, 2013, 8:30 a.m.—4 p.m., at Hartford Public High School This symposium will link historic and contemporary abolition and emancipation. Keynote address by Debby Applegate, author of the 2007 Pulitzer Prize-winning The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher, followed by panels, dramatic readings, abolititonist workshop, and tour of the Stowe House. For more information visit HarrietBeecherStowe.org or call 860-522-9558, ext. 317.