

By EMILY E. GIFFORD

On January 2, 1863, to celebrate the Emancipation Proclamation, the city of Norwich fired a 100-gun salute and rang bells for an hour. Norwich was the only Connecticut city to stage such an exuberant display over the beginning of the end of slavery in America. Citizens throughout Connecticut, particularly although not exclusively African Americans, held celebrations in homes, neighborhoods, and churches, but only Norwich celebrated the Proclamation officially, as a municipality.

WHY NORWICH?

First, Norwich was a Union stronghold. When the Republican Party was formed, Norwich embraced its message of centralized government, national unity, and progress. For decades before the Civil War, Norwich was a haven for escaped slaves who, moving through the city on the Underground Railroad, elected to stay there rather than flee farther north.

James Lindsay Smith, for example, escaped from slavery in Virginia in the

mid-1840s and settled in Norwich. Within four years, he had established himself as a property-holding free man. According to records unearthed by Norwich city historian Dale Plummer, when the United States Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, Smith registered a complaint with the Norwich sheriff that he had received threats of being turned in and forced back to his previous owner. The sheriff catalogued the complaints and assured him that, should any warrant be served against Smith, he would resign before executing such a warrant. Still, while Smith ultimately received assurances of protection from the law, the fact remains that he was threatened. Norwich was hardly a city that shared a single anti-slavery consensus.

Nowhere were the community's divergent attitudes toward emancipation more apparent than in Norwich's weekly Democrat newspaper *Aurora*. While its editor John W. Stedman signed an early subscription pledging to raise funds to provision the Union army, his interest was with maintaining the Union and not with ending slavery. By the time the Proclamation became official, the *Aurora* was

more than ready to weigh in against it. On January 3, 1863, the paper published both President Lincoln's Proclamation and another promulgated by and attributed to Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy.

"We publish today two proclamations—one from Jefferson Davis and the other from Abraham Lincoln. They are of equal authority," claimed the *Aurora*. One of the proclamations, the paper went on to assert in an editorial, was inferior: The Emancipation Proclamation "is the culmination of [Lincoln's] stupidity... . It changes the whole character of the war, by making one of its objects the abolition of slavery, and thus exasperating, and driving from the support of the government the very class of men without whose cordial co-operation the Union can never be restored."

These divisive views tainted the city's celebration. Five citizens, including Stedman, filed an injunction, upheld by the Superior Court, to prevent the city from paying the \$98 bill for the gun salute. While \$98 was not a small amount (adjusted for inflation, it would be about \$1,750 today), nor was it a princely sum, particularly at a time when the city was paying a \$150 signing bonus for any

man who joined the Union army. It certainly should not have raised eyebrows on its own, which suggests that however the debate over payment was framed in the written record, the underlying concern was more political than monetary.

With the injunction in place, Mayor James Lloyd Greene paid the bill out of his own pocket, which gave him the opportunity to issue a public notice: "I did sincerely wish that my native city would honor herself by giving a salute in honor of a measure which I am convinced our Father in Heaven must approve; but it was not to be. And now, upon my soul, I do exult and rejoice, that I, James Lloyd Greene, am the man who ordered and paid for the first emancipation salute ever fired in the State of Connecticut." *The Hartford Courant*, *Providence (Rhode Island) Evening Press*, and *New Haven Palladium* all reported on Greene's gesture, with the *Palladium* editorializing that Greene was "both patriotic and spunky."



James Lloyd Greene, hand-colored photograph, c. 1865. The Republican mayor of Norwich paid for the city's celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation himself after townspeople protested the expenditure. photo: Burriss Wilson. Norwich City Hall

Greene served several terms as mayor, but his lasting legacy revolved around his celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation. In 1927, *The Norwich Bulletin* reprinted Greene's obituary from its October 16, 1883 edition under a new headline identifying him as "James Lloyd ('Hundred Gun') Greene."

Now that a century and a half have passed, Norwich is in the midst of a multi-part celebration commemorating its role as the one Connecticut city that held a public celebration. In June 2012, the city's Juneteenth celebrations

(marking the anniversary of the day—June 19, 1865, two and a half years after the Emancipation Proclamation—that enslaved people in Texas learned the war was over and they were free) included the casting, polishing, and presentation of a "Freedom Bell" to be housed in a bell tower in City Hall Plaza. The Emancipation Proclamation Commemoration Committee plans to re-enact the original 100-gun salute and hour of bell ringing on January 1, 2013.

Just as the initial celebration proved controversial, some 21st-century Norwich citizens are less than pleased with these

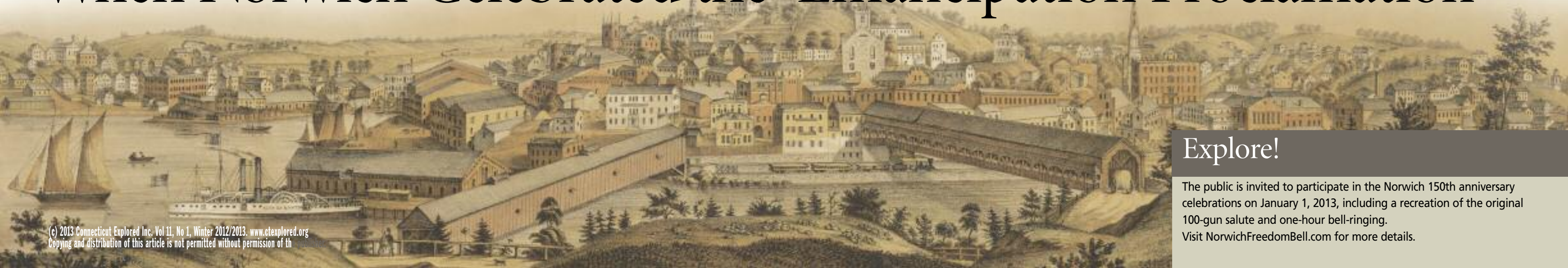
plans. Local resident Michael Brown, in a letter to the editor of *The Norwich Bulletin*, castigated the city for "this abuse of funds," dismissing the bell as a "pet pork project." An anonymous commenter questioned the need for any celebration at all, asking "Why can't they teach this in school?" and complaining that the celebration was a needless attempt to "make amends" for the injustices of slavery in the United States.

Dale Plummer defends the Emancipation Proclamation celebrations as a chance to get people involved in Norwich's history and as "an opportunity to portray Norwich in a positive light." Despite the naysayers, *The Norwich Bulletin* reported that the Juneteenth events were well attended by enthusiastic participants. Plummer and the Commemoration Committee have high hopes for the upcoming dedication of the bell tower and for the salute and bell ringing on January 1.

Emily E. Gifford is an independent historian specializing in social movements and religion in U.S. history.

below: H. Knecht, "Norwich, from the east," printed by J. Rau, New York, c. 1867. Norwich as it appeared just a few years after the Emancipation Proclamation was celebrated. This view shows the steamboat landing and the *City of Boston*, which ran from New York to Norwich, connecting travelers by rail to Worcester and beyond. Library of Congress

When Norwich Celebrated the Emancipation Proclamation



Explore!

The public is invited to participate in the Norwich 150th anniversary celebrations on January 1, 2013, including a recreation of the original 100-gun salute and one-hour bell-ringing. Visit NorwichFreedomBell.com for more details.