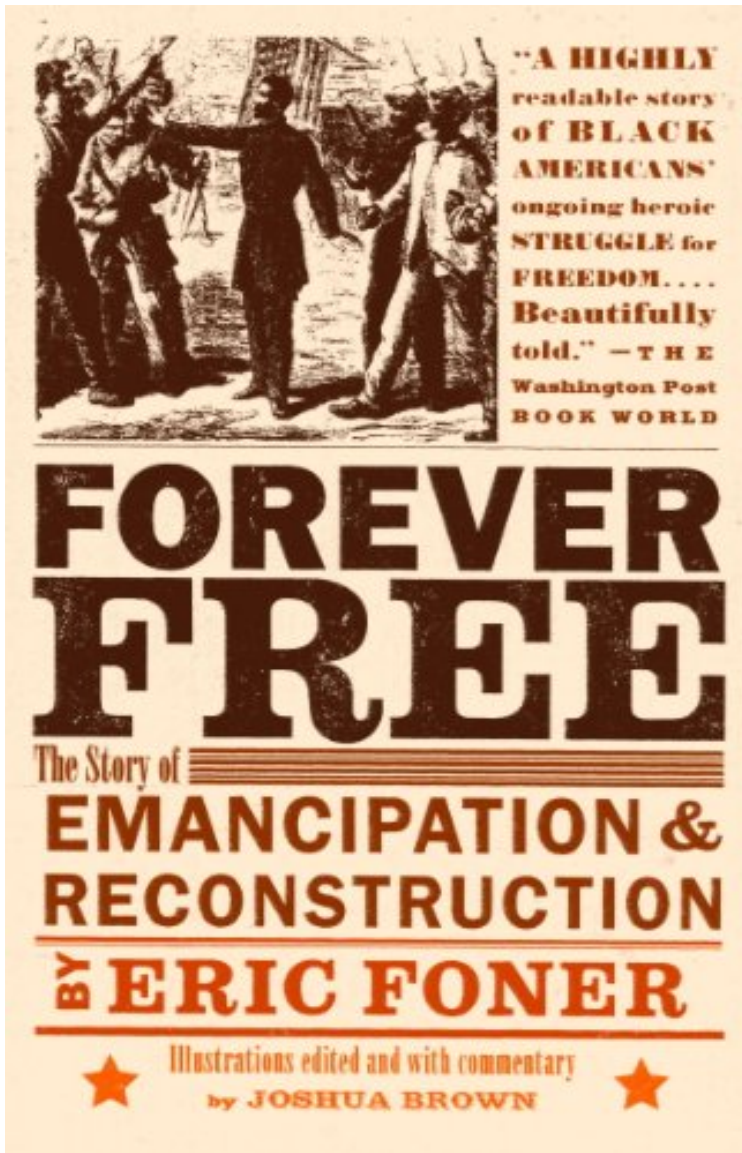


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# Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction



Par Eric Foner  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurFrom one of our most distinguished historians, a new examination of the vitally important years of Emancipation and Reconstruction during and immediately following the Civil Wara necessary reconsideration that emphasizes the eras political and cultural meaning for todays America. In Forever Free, Eric Foner overturns numerous assumptions growing out of the traditional understanding of the period, which is based almost exclusively on white sources and shaped by (often unconscious) racism. He presents the period as a time of determination, especially on the part of recently emancipated black

Americans, to put into effect the principles of equal rights and citizenship for all. Drawing on a wide range of long-neglected documents, he places a new emphasis on the centrality of the black experience to an understanding of the era. We see African Americans as active agents in overthrowing slavery, in helping win the Civil War, and even more actively in shaping Reconstruction and creating a legacy long obscured and misunderstood. Foner makes clear how, by wars end, freed slaves in the South built on networks of church and family in order to exercise their right of suffrage as well as gain access to education, land, and employment. He shows us that the birth of the Ku Klux Klan and renewed acts of racial violence were retaliation for the progress made by blacks soon after the war. He refutes lingering misconceptions about Reconstruction, including the attribution of its ills to corrupt African American politicians and carpetbaggers, and connects it to the movements for civil rights and racial justice. Joshua Browns illustrated commentary on the eras graphic art and photographs complements the narrative. He offers a unique portrait of how Americans envisioned their world and time. Forever Free is an essential contribution to our understanding of the events that fundamentally reshaped American life after the Civil War a persuasive reading of history that transforms our sense of the era from a time of failure and despair to a threshold of hope and achievement.

Extrait On the evening of January 12, 1865, twenty leaders of the local black community gathered in Savannah, Georgia, for a discussion with General William T. Sherman and Edwin M. Stanton, the Unions secretary of war. The encounter took place at a pivotal moment in American history. Less than three weeks earlier, Sherman, at the head of a sixty-thousand-man Union army, had captured the city, completing his March to the Sea, which cut a swath of destruction through one of the most productive regions of the slave South. On the horizon loomed the final collapse of the Confederacy, the irrevocable destruction of slavery, and the turbulent postwar era known as Reconstruction. Americans, black and white, would now have to come to terms with the wars legacy, and decide whether they would build an interracial democracy on the ashes of the Old South. One of the most remarkable interchanges of those momentous years, the Colloquy between Sherman, Stanton, and the black leaders offered a rare lens through which the experience of slavery and the aspirations that would help to shape Reconstruction came into sharp focus. The meeting, which took place in the house where Sherman had established his headquarters in Savannah, was the brainchild of Secretary Stanton, who, the general later recalled, seemed desirous of coming into contact with the negroes to confer with them. It was Sherman who invited the most intelligent of the negroes of the city to the gathering. The immediate purpose was to assist Union authorities in devising a plan to deal with the tens of thousands of slaves who had abandoned Georgia and South Carolina plantations and followed his army to the city. But in its deeper significance, the discussion, conducted in a dignified, almost solemn manner, revealed how the experience of bondage had shaped African Americans ideas and hopes at the moment of emancipation. The group that met with Sherman and Stanton, mostly Baptist and Methodist ministers, included several men who had already achieved prominence among Savannahs African American population and who would shortly assume positions of leadership in Reconstruction. Ulysses L. Houston, who had worked as a house servant and butcher while in slavery, had since 1861 been pastor of the citys Third African Baptist Church. He would go on to take part in the statewide black convention of 1866, where representatives of the freedpeople demanded the right to vote and equality before the law, and to serve in the state legislature. James Porter, an Episcopal vestryman, before the war operated a clandestine and illegal school for black children, who kept their secret with their studies; at home. He would soon help to organize the Georgia Equal Rights Association, and, like Houston, become one of the eras black lawmakers. James D. Lynch would rise to prominence in Mississippis Reconstruction, serving as secretary of state and winning a reputation, in the words of a white contemporary, as a great orator, fluid and graceful, who stirred the emotions of his black listeners as no other man could do. Most of the other Colloquy participants would play major roles in the consolidation of independent black churches, one of the signal developments of the postwar years. If the Colloquy looked forward to the era of Reconstruction, it also shed light backward onto slavery. Taking place, as it were, at the dawn of freedom, it underscored both the diversity of the black experience under slavery and the common culture the institutions, values, and aspirations that African Americans had managed to construct before the Civil War in the face of the extraordinary repression and dislocations visited by slavery. The group that met with Sherman was hardly typical of all blacks. Only 5 percent of the nations black population was free in 1860, but five of the twenty men who met with Sherman were freeborn, and of the remainder, no fewer than six had obtained their liberty before the war, either by self-purchase or through the will of a deceased owner. Although the law forbade teaching slaves to read and write, several at the Colloquy were literate. Houston had been taught to read by white sailors while working

in the city's Marine Hospital. Lynch, the only participant in the Colloquy to live in the North before the war, had been educated at Kimball Union Academy, in New Hampshire, taught school in Jamaica, New York, and preached for the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Indiana prior to 1860. These were men of talent, ambition, and standing, fully prepared for the challenges of freedom. The conversation with Sherman and Stanton revealed that the black leaders possessed clear conceptions of slavery and freedom. The group chose at its spokesman Garrison Frazier, a Baptist minister who had purchased the liberty of his wife and himself in 1856. Asked what he understood by slavery, Frazier responded that it meant one person receiving by irresistible power the work of another man, and not by his consent. Freedom he defined as placing us where we could reap the fruit of our own labor, and take care of ourselves; the best way to accomplish this was to have land, and turn it and till it by our own labor. Frazier also affirmed (despite pro-slavery dogma to the contrary) that blacks, free and slave, possessed sufficient intelligence to maintain themselves in freedom and to enjoy the equal protection of the laws. Here were the goals: the right to the fruits of one's labor, access to land, equal rights as citizens that would animate black politics during and after Reconstruction. Despite Frazier's optimism about blacks' capacity to take full advantage of emancipation, slavery cast a long shadow over the discussion. Asked whether blacks preferred to live in communities of their own or scattered among the whites, he replied: I would prefer to live by ourselves, for there is a prejudice against us in the South that will take years to get over. (On this point alone, disagreement followed, for Lynch insisted it would be best for the races to live together; all the others, however, agreed with Frazier.) At the same time, Frazier affirmed the loyalty of African Americans, free and slave, to the federal government. If the prayers that have gone up for the Union army could be read out, he added, you would not get through them these two weeks. As for Sherman himself, Frazier remarked that blacks viewed him as a man specially set apart by God to accomplish this work of emancipation. By the time of the Savannah Colloquy, slavery was an old institution in America. Two and a half centuries had passed since the first African Americans set foot in Britain's mainland colonies. Before the American Revolution, slavery existed in all the colonies, and in Spanish Florida and French Louisiana, areas subsequently absorbed into the United States. Slavery is as old as human civilization itself. It was central to the societies of ancient Greece and Rome. After dying out in northern Europe after the collapse of the Roman empire, it persisted in the Mediterranean world, where a slave trade in Slavic peoples survived into the fifteenth century. (The English word slavery derives from Slav.) Slavery in Africa long predated the coming of Europeans and the opening of the mammoth transatlantic slave trade in the sixteenth century. The slave system that arose in the western hemisphere differed in significant ways from others that preceded it. Traditionally, Africans enslaved on their own continent tended to be criminals, debtors, and captives in war. They worked within the households of their owners and had well-defined rights, such as possessing property and marrying free persons. It was not uncommon for slaves in Africa to acquire their freedom. Slavery was one of several forms of labor, not the basis of the overall economy as it would become in large parts of the New World. In the western hemisphere, by contrast, slavery centered on the plantation system, in which large concentrations of slave laborers under the control of a single owner produced goods—sugar, tobacco, rice, and cotton—for the world market. The fact that slaves greatly outnumbered whites in plantation regions magnified the prospects for resistance and made it necessary to police the system rigidly. Labor on slave plantations was far more demanding than in household slavery, and the death rate among slaves much higher. And New World slavery was a racial system. Unlike in the ancient world or Africa, slaves who managed to become free remained distinct because of their color, a mark of bondage and a visible sign of being considered unworthy of incorporation as equals into free society. Slavery proved indispensable to the settlement and development of the New World. Of the approximately 12.5 million persons who crossed the Atlantic to live in the western hemisphere between 1500 and 1820, perhaps 10 million were African slaves. The Atlantic slave trade, which flourished from 1500 into the nineteenth century, was a regularized business in which European merchants, African traders, and American planters engaged in a complex and profitable bargaining over human lives. Most Africans were shipped in inhuman conditions. The height, sometimes, between decks, wrote one slave trader, was only 18 inches, so that the unfortunate human beings could not turn around, or even on their sides . . . and here they are usually chained to the decks by their necks and legs. Olaudah Equiano, the eleven-year-old son of a West African village chief, kidnapped by slave traders in the 1750s, later wrote a widely read account of his experiences, in which he described the shrieks of the women and the groans of the dying on the ship that carried him to slavery in Barbados. Disease spread rapidly on slave ships; sometimes the ill were thrown overboard to prevent epidemics. The colonies that became the United States attracted a higher

percentage of free immigrants than other parts of the New World. Even here, however, of some 800,000 arrivals between 1607 and 1770, more than 300,000 were slaves. The first mass consumer goods in international trade were produced by slave sugar, rice, coffee, and tobacco. The rising demand for these products fueled the rapid growth of the Atlantic slave trade. The profits from slavery stimulated the rise of British ports such as Liverpool and Bristol, and the growth of banking, shipbuilding, and insurance, and helped to finance the early industrial revolution. The centrality of slavery to the economy of the British empire encouraged an ever-closer identification of freedom with whites and slavery with blacks. This is not to say that all whites enjoyed equality. Many gradations of freedom coexisted in colonial America. The majority of English settlers who crossed the Atlantic in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries came as indentured servants who agreed to labor for a period of years in exchange for passage. Even after their term of labor ended, many remained poor, landless, and unable to meet the property qualifications for voting. Slavery and ideas about innate racial difference developed slowly in seventeenth-century America. Some early black arrivals were apparently treated as servants rather than slaves, and gained their freedom after a fixed term of labor. Not until the 1660s did the laws of Virginia and Maryland explicitly refer to slavery. As tobacco planting spread and the demand for labor increased, however, the condition of black and white servants diverged sharply. Race the idea that humanity is divided into well-defined groups associated with skin color is a modern concept that had not fully developed in the seventeenth century. Nor had racism an ideology based on the belief that some races are inherently superior to others and entitled to rule over them. But as slavery became more and more central to the colonial economy, views of race hardened. In 1762, the Quaker abolitionist John Woolman commented on the strength of the idea of slavery being connected with the black color, and liberty with the white. By the mid-eighteenth century, slaves accounted for nearly half of Virginia's population. Virginia had changed from a society with slaves, in which slavery was one system of labor among others, to a slave society, where the institution stood at the center of the economic process. Slavery formed the basis of the economy, and the foundation of a powerful local ruling class, in the entire region from Maryland south to Georgia. Slavery also existed in the middle and northern colonies, although there, slaves generally worked on small farms or in their owners' homes or shops rather than on large plantations. Nonetheless, in 1746, New York City's 2,440 slaves comprised one-fifth of its total population. Among cities on the North American continent, only Charleston and New Orleans counted more slaves than New York. As immigration from Europe increased, the proportion of slaves in the workforce outside the southern colonies declined. But areas where slavery was only a minor institution still profited from slave labor. Merchants in New York, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island participated actively in the slave trade, shipping slaves from Africa to the Caribbean or the South. Much of the grain, fish, and livestock exported from Pennsylvania and other northern colonies was destined for the slave plantations of the West Indies. The colonial era witnessed the simultaneous expansion of freedom and slavery in Britain's Atlantic empire. These were the years when the idea of the freeborn Englishman became powerfully entrenched in the outlook of both colonists and Britons. Yet the eighteenth century was also the great era of the Atlantic slave trade, a commerce increasingly dominated by British merchants and ships. During that century more than half the Africans shipped to the New World as slaves were carried on British vessels. The American Revolution threw the future of slavery into doubt. When Thomas Jefferson in 1776 proclaimed mankind's inalienable right to liberty, and he and other leaders of the new nation spoke of the United States as an asylum of freedom for the oppressed peoples of the world, one American in five was a black slave (including more than one hundred owned by Jefferson himself). The same colonial newspapers that carried arguments against British policies and accounts of resistance to British tyranny also printed advertisements for the sale of slaves. The Revolution did, however, make slavery for the first time a matter of widespread public debate. It inspired charges of hypocrisy, not only from British opponents of independence but also within America. How strong, wondered Abigail Adams, could the passion for liberty be among those accustomed to deprive their fellow citizens of theirs? But the Revolution also inspired hopes that the institution of slavery could be eliminated from American life. The language of liberty echoed in slave communities, North and South. The first concrete steps toward emancipation in the North were freedom petitions—arguments for emancipation presented to New England's courts by slaves who claimed the rhetoric of liberty for themselves. In 1776, Lemuel Haynes, a black minister who served in the Massachusetts militia during the War of Independence, penned an antislavery essay. If liberty were truly an innate principle for all mankind, Haynes wrote, even an African [had] as equally good a right to his liberty in common with Englishmen. The British offered freedom to slaves who joined the royal cause, and nearly one hundred thousand deserted their owners; twenty

thousand of them accompanied the British out of the country at the end of the war to Europe, Canada, Africa, and, in some cases, reenslavement in the West Indies. Perhaps five thousand escaped bondage by enlisting in the Revolutionary army or local American militias. Revue de presse A highly readable story of black Americans ongoing heroic struggle for freedom . . . Beautifully told. The Washington Post Book World Passionate, lucid, concise without being light. . . . Foner traces the lines of race and politics that run from Reconstruction to the age of segregation to the civil rights movement to our own time. The New York Times Book Foner delves deeply into the politics of the time, to be sure, but he spends much more time showing how political decisions affected real people. . . . This book has the potential to become a model for future history books that target a broader audience. The Washington Monthly African Americans emerge as political powerful actors in Forever Free. In [these] vivid pages . . . we become acquainted with these extraordinary people, some well-known, some virtually unknown. The New Republic