

Myth #73: Nevada, Abe Lincoln, and Black Americans by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist

Monday is the President's Day holiday. We also celebrate February as Black History Month. Virtually everybody has heard the fantastic tale that Nevada's gold and silver saved the Union during the Civil War and inspired statehood. The reasons for statehood were political, not economic, and every mining territory and state in the American West helped support the Union cause with their gold and silver production. The real and more compelling story of Nevada's contribution to the nation is intimately linked to President Abraham Lincoln, his efforts to reunite the country, and his desire to end slavery and make African-Americans citizens.

By the time Congress approved an *Enabling Act for Nevada Territory* (also Colorado and Nebraska territories) on March 21, 1864, President Lincoln had already issued the Emancipation Proclamation and the Civil War was winding down. The Union had won decisive victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, and the South was in shambles. Lincoln sought reelection in order to reconstruct the South after the war and promote amendments to the U.S. Constitution freeing the slaves and addressing civil rights and suffrage issues.



Lincoln, a moderate Republican, initially faced a three-way race against General John C. Fremont, a radical Republican (who had run for the presidency in 1856 and lost to James Buchanan), and General George B. McClellan, a Democrat. Earlier in the Civil War, Lincoln had unceremoniously relieved both generals of their commands. If the popular and electoral college vote were indecisive and the election went to the House of Representatives, as it had in 1824-25 in a four-way race, Lincoln supporters, including Representative James M. Ashley of Ohio, the author of the Nevada Enabling Act, believed that the new state's lone Congressman would support the incumbent president.

Lincoln and the moderate Republicans believed that the Confederate states were in need of a lengthy reconstruction. Many conditions related to the status of African-Americans would have to be addressed in new state constitutions and statutory law before a rebel state could rejoin the union.

Fremont and the radical Republicans, however, wanted to harshly punish the South, conducting war crime trials and executing convicted Confederate political and military leaders. Questions were raised if these former Union states had forfeited their sovereignty by withdrawing from the United States.

McClellan and the Democrats, on the other hand, wanted to readmit Confederate states back into the union with virtually no conditions.

Ironically, Fremont dropped out of the presidential race in September 1864. Nevada, shortly after its voters approved the state constitution on September 7, was no longer critical to a Lincoln win. President Lincoln proclaimed Nevada the 36th state on October 31, a week before the national election, and then went on to carry Nevada by a decisive margin over General McClellan. Only two electors voted for Lincoln. The third, A.S. Peck, found himself snowbound in Aurora and no law in the new state provided for a replacement.

While it is true that Nevadans gave the beleaguered president three Republican members of Congress to help rebuild the nation, contrary to popular belief, our two U.S. Senators, James W. Nye and William M. Stewart, did not vote on the 13th Amendment. The Senate had approved the amendment proposing to abolish slavery on April 8, 1864.

However, Congressman Henry G. Worthington arrived in time in Washington, D.C. to vote on the amendment in the House on January 31, 1865. According to the late Leslie B. Gray in his work *The*

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Source and The Vision (1989), Worthington "was one of the two key votes which gave it a constitutional majority." Congressman Worthington's heretofore-obscure gravesite in the Congressional Cemetery was marked with a sizeable monument in 2000 thanks to then-U.S. Senator Richard Bryan and Fallon newspaper editor and publisher David Henley.

Illinois, the home of President Lincoln, was the initial state to ratify the 13th Amendment on February 1, 1865. Nevada followed shortly thereafter. The first state legislature ratified the amendment on February 16 making it the sixteenth state to support the constitutional abolition of slavery, two months prior to Lincoln's assassination, and almost ten months before ratification was completed on December 6, 1865.

The Nevada legislature took the unusual step of authorizing Governor Henry G. Blasdel to telegraph the resolution of ratification to President Lincoln. According to UNR political science professor Elmer Rusco in *Good Time Coming: Black Nevadans in the Nineteenth Century* (1975), "A resolution commending President Lincoln and his administration stated that the amendment to abolish slavery marked 'the dawn of a new political era, and [we] pray that its principles may be ever enforced until regenerated America shall forget the name of slave'."

Nevada's Congressional delegation also voted for the 14th amendment, which provided persons in the United States, including African-Americans, civil rights protection. The amendment was proposed on June 13, 1866, ratified by the Nevada legislature on January 22, 1867, and it became law on July 9, 1868.

Perhaps Nevada's greatest contribution to Black Americans was associated with Senator William's Stewart's role in amending a resolution that proposed the 15th amendment to the U. S. Constitution.

The 15th amendment in essence declared that a citizen couldn't be denied the ballot because of race. Congress passed the landmark legislation on February 26, 1869, and Stewart, as one of the principal sponsors, immediately telegraphed the news of congressional passage to the Nevada legislature so that it could act before adjournment. The telegram signed by Stewart, James W. Nye, Delos R. Ashley (the outgoing member of the House), and Thomas Fitch (the incoming member of the House), was received in Carson City at 8AM on February 27. On the following Monday, March 1, 1869, Nevada was the first state in the nation to ratify the 15th amendment. Ratification was completed on February 3, 1870 and the U.S. Secretary of State declared in a proclamation dated March 30 that the legislatures of 29 of 37 states had ratified the amendment.

Nevada had paid back in full its debt to President Abraham Lincoln and the moderate Republicans for statehood. Sadly, it took the nation some 100 years longer to guarantee the rights to Black Americans promised in the 14th and 15th amendments.

Photo from the Assembly Chamber at the Nevada State Legislature

(Original version in *Sierra Sage*, Carson City/Carson Valley, Nevada, February 2002)