“Forever Free: Abraham Lincoln’s Journey to Emancipation” is being displayed in 63 public, community college and university libraries throughout the United States. For a schedule of exhibition locations and display periods, please visit the following Web site: www.ala.org/publicprograms/lincoln.

For further information, please contact The American Library Association, Public Programs Office, 50 East Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611, or call 1-800-545-2433, ext. 5045.

ADDITIONAL READINGS
David Herbert Donald, Lincoln, 1995.

On the Web
Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission:
http://www.lincoln200.gov
Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress:
http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/alhtml/malhome.html
The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, online edition:
http://www.hti.umich.edu/l/lincoln
Freedom: A Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861–1867:
http://www.hmdb.org.uk/ed/edfreeem

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John Rhodehamel, Norris Foundation Curator of American Historical Manuscripts, The Huntington Library, served as exhibition curator.

IQ Magic of Santa Monica, California, provided exhibition design.

Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this brochure do not necessarily reflect those of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

“Slavery, and the prejudice it fostered, remains the central tragedy of American history. How could it be that a nation founded on human equality was also home to one of the harshest labor systems the modern world has known? This exhibition looks for answers in the progress of Abraham Lincoln towards a higher realization of America’s ideals. Lincolns hated slavery. Yet he did not support immediate emancipation. Lincoln became the great emancipator only when he and his nation were recast in the crucible of war.”
YOUNG LINCOLN’S AMERICA

The American Revolution left a contradictory legacy of freedom and slavery. Most of the founding fathers thought slavery was wrong, but could envision no way to end it. As the United States grew, slavery flourished. No longer did slaveholders lament slavery as a “necessary evil.” They began to celebrate it as a “positive good.” By the 1830s, slavery was coming under attack by Northern abolitionists. But most white Americans regarded abolitionists as dangerous fanatics. Lincoln himself lived out the contradictions of the slaveholding republic. He believed that equality was the great promise of America. Yet Lincoln was not an abolitionist. He believed that an attack on slavery would split the Union, and end the American experiment in self-government.

THE HOUSE DIVIDING

Conflict over the spread of slavery into the western territories was the wedge that finally split the Union. Opposition to slavery’s expansion was also the cause that carried an obscure Illinois politician named Abraham Lincoln to the White House. Lincoln and the new Republican Party did not call for an end to slavery. But they did insist that slavery be confined to the South. It must not spread into the western territories. When Lincoln won the presidency on that platform in 1860, the slaveholding states began to leave the Union.

WAR FOR THE UNION

When the Civil War broke out in 1861, President Lincoln quickly declared that the North was fighting only to restore the Union, and not to free the slaves. Lincoln moved cautiously, struggling to hold together a fragile union. He feared that moving against slavery would push the border states of Maryland and Kentucky into the arms of the Confederacy. Lincoln also recognized that white racism was powerful and widespread in the South. The president thought that the Northern war effort could be fatally damaged if he appeared to be a champion of black freedom.

WAR FOR UNION AND FREEDOM

For more than a year, Lincoln left slavery alone. Abolitionists demanded emancipation and condemned the president as a weak leader. But Lincoln’s caution was grounded on hard political realities. As the war dragged on, however, Lincoln came around to the idea of emancipation: “We must face the slaves or be ourselves subdued.” He signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree transformed the Civil War. After emancipation, the North fought not just for the Union, but also for the centuries-old evil of slavery. Enlisting black soldiers in the Northern army was one of the Proclamation’s most important provisions. By war’s end, some 200,000 African-American soldiers and sailors had fought for the Union.

LEGACIES

When the Civil War ended millions of former slaves faced an uncertain future. Black rights were backed by Northern bayonets during the period of Reconstruction. But Southern whites were implacably opposed to equality. The North was largely indifferent. When U.S. soldiers left the South in 1877, the experiment of Reconstruction was over. African Americans lost many of the rights of citizenship guaranteed by the Constitution, rights that were not regained until the civil rights crusade of the twentieth century. Our national journey to equality still continues.