"A Contingent Somebody": Hannibal Hamlin's Claim for a First Reading of The Emancipation Proclamation

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Hannibal Hamlin once stated that the vice-president “was really only a contingent somebody.” Historians have largely ignored his function in Lincoln’s first administration, but in fact he may have played an important role in one of the most decisive events of the era—drafting the Emancipation Proclamation. Carte-de-visite, Library of Congress courtesy of the author.
“A CONTINGENT SOMEBODY”:
HANNIBAL HAMLIN’S CLAIM FOR
A FIRST READING OF THE
EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION

BY ALLEN C. GUELZO

On more than one occasion, the historical record has implied that Abra­
ham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation was a hastily composed doc­
ument: an impulsive reaction to military events surrounding the Civil
War. In fact, it was an evolving idea that began to take shape long before
Lincoln read the initial draft of the Proclamation to his cabinet on July
22, 1862. A closer look at the role of Vice-President Hannibal Hamlin of
Maine during the most divisive presidency in American history sheds
new light on the consideration and deliberation that went into drafting a
document that, on January 1, 1863, essentially freed four million slaves.

During the preceding months, the Proclamation was so frequently ed­
ited, criticized, and transformed by so many different people that it is al­
most necessary to talk about the Emancipation Proclamations, rather
than a solitary Emancipation Proclamation. Hamlin was among those
who shared in the president’s confidence during these formative months.

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(Simon and Schuster, 2004).

W HEN PRESIDENT LINCOLN read the first draft of the Emancipa­
tion Proclamation to his Cabinet on July 22, 1862, he pre­
sented an idea that had evolved over some time prior to that
date. Historians and Lincoln’s own contemporaries have criticized him
on the grounds that the proclamation was merely an impulsive reaction
to military events surrounding the Civil War. Alternatively, Lincoln has
been challenged as moving too slowly in drafting the proclamation.
Both of these positions underestimate the extent of the process that led
to its creation. Significant evidence, which has until recently been ig-
The proclamation demonstrated that the Emancipation Proclamation was not hastily composed, but evolved over several months of careful crafting and re-crafting as Lincoln shared his thoughts with close confidants.

Lincoln dropped hints as early as May 1862—when voiding an emancipation proclamation issued by Major General David Hunter for the occupied Carolina coastal district—that he considered it within his purview “as Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy,” to issue an emancipation proclamation and “declare the slaves of any State or States free.” Owen Lovejoy, the abolitionist minister and Congressman from northern Illinois who had tried to draft Lincoln for the Republican party as early as 1854, claimed to have had knowledge of the Proclamation “from [Lincoln’s] own lips . . . as early as June” 1862. Indiana Republican Congressman Schuyler Colfax had long tried to persuade Lincoln’s private secretary and biographer John Nicolay that Lincoln had shown him a “lost” draft of the proclamation from early July 1862, which “abolished Slavery at once on its promulgation.”

But the most forthright—and the most disputed—claim to a sneak preview of the Emancipation Proclamation before its unveiling to the Cabinet on July 22 came from Lincoln’s vice-president, Hannibal Hamlin. A Mainer with a long legacy of radical Republican politics, Hamlin never gained recognition as a prominent national politician. His radical perspective marked him as a leading radical Republican as early as the 1840s, long before abolitionism was popularly regarded. His position on slavery illuminates a possible link between Hamlin and the drafting of Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation.

Hamlin himself once stated that the vice-president “was really only a contingent somebody,” and his neglect at the hands of historians during the Lincoln presidency seems to support this conclusion. However, another glance at the events leading up to Lincoln’s first reading of the Emancipation Proclamation to his Cabinet in July, 1862, and a reconsideration of Hamlin’s role in the process of drafting that document, leads to a different impression of Hamlin’s influence in national politics during one of the most tumultuous periods in American history.

Hannibal Hamlin was born in Paris Hill, Maine, on August 27, 1809. In his early years, he performed a diverse array of jobs, from surveying to farming, to teaching, and finally, to law. He was elected to the Maine House of Representatives in 1836 as a Democrat and served in the Maine Legislature through much of the 1840s. In 1848 he was elected to the US Senate as a anti-slavery Democrat. In 1857 he briefly became governor but resigned when the legislature elected him to the U.S. Senate, where
he served from 1857 through 1861. Prior to his Senate election, Hamlin changed his allegiance to the Republican Party. He had supported the Wilmot Proviso and had taken a hard stance against the Compromise of 1850, which re-opened the question of slavery in the western territories and permitted the Fugitive Slave Act. But it was the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act, which repealed the Missouri Compromise and left the question of slavery to the settlers in these two states, that finally drove him into the Republican Party, where he became well known as a radical. In 1861 Hamlin was nominated as Lincoln’s vice-presidential candidate, and he served with Lincoln until 1864. Andrew Johnson, former military governor of Tennessee, replaced Hamlin during Lincoln’s second administration, a move designed to boost Lincoln’s standing among northern Democrats. Hamlin returned to the Senate in 1869 to continue a long political career. He died in 1891.

In 1899 Hamlin’s grandson, Charles E. Hamlin, published a biography of his grandfather in which he struggled to chip out a more influential niche for Hamlin in Lincoln’s policy-making than the radical Maine Republican had ever claimed for himself. This was a dubious exercise. Hamlin had never even met Lincoln before the 1860 Republican National Convention. During his lone term in Congress in the 1840s, Lincoln sat in the Senate gallery and listened appreciatively to Senator Hamlin’s speech, where, according to Lincoln, he made “a good point against slavery.” But the two never met face-to-face before 1860, and during Lincoln’s first term as president, there is no evidence that Hamlin was even invited to attend cabinet sessions. Lincoln occasionally used Hamlin as a personal emissary, carrying important communications to others, but otherwise, Hamlin and Lincoln were very distant partners in the administration, where Hamlin’s principal responsibility was his constitutional designation as presiding officer of the Senate. Hamlin had “party cunning and management,” wrote Navy Secretary Gideon Welles critically, and so in 1863, Radical Republicans, looking to dump Lincoln from the 1864 election ticket, turned first to Hamlin. The vice-president refused to knife Lincoln politically in the back, and Welles dismissed him as lacking “personal strength.” Hamlin had neither the mind nor the temperament to “build up a party,” Welles thought. George Templeton Strong complimented Hamlin as “a vigorous specimen of the pure Yankee type,” but vigorous or not, even Strong thought of the vice-president as a cipher “about whom nobody knows anything.” William O. Stoddard was exaggerating when he claimed, “I do not now remember that I ever saw Vice President Hamlin at the White House;” since Hamlin occasion-
ally dined with Lincoln and presented delegations. However, despite Hamlin's distinct political perspective in the years preceding the outbreak of the Civil War, the historical record confirms the impression of his invisibility.²

None of this, however, deterred Charles Hamlin in 1899 from insisting that Lincoln had grown “more confidential” with his grandfather and had cultivated “closer relations” with the vice-president over the course of the war. The principal proof of these “relations” was the story Charles Hamlin insisted he had heard from his grandfather's own lips—that Lincoln had called his vice-president behind closed doors to read “a proclamation of emancipation” fully a month before introducing the proclamation to the cabinet, and four months before its actual publication.

As Charles Hamlin recounted the story, the vice-president paid a courtesy call on Lincoln in June 1862 to inform the president that he had “made up his mind to make a short visit to his home in Bangor.” He wanted to notify Lincoln that the president pro tem of the Senate would be presiding in his place. Lincoln, however, objected:

“No, you don’t intend to [do] anything of the sort.”

“Oh yes, but I do,” replied Mr. Hamlin, not quite understanding.

“No,” rejoined Mr. Lincoln, “you do not intend anything of the sort; in fact, Mr. Vice-President, you will not leave Washington at present.”...

In a short time the President and Vice-President, escorted by a file of soldiers, rode horseback out to the Soldiers’ Home. . . . After supper President Lincoln invited Vice-President Hamlin into his library, and after locking the door, said:—“Mr. Hamlin, you have been repeatedly urging me to issue a proclamation of emancipation freeing the slaves. I have concluded to yield to your advice in the matter and that of other friends. . . . Now listen to me while I read this paper. We will correct it together as I go on.”

While saying this, Mr. Lincoln opened a drawer in his desk and took therefrom the first draft of the military proclamation freeing four million slaves. The President and Vice-President then sat down, and Mr. Lincoln slowly read the sketch to his associate, after which he asked for criticism and suggestions.

Charles Hamlin offered no corroboration for this claim, beyond his grandfather’s say-so. The Congressional Globe, however, verified that Hamlin had notified Secretary of the Senate John W. Forney of his in-
Soldiers' Home, the Lincoln family's summer cottage, was located on the outskirts of Washington. It was on a drive to the family residence—at least according to one story—that the president discussed an early draft of the Emancipation Proclamation with Hamlin. Library of Congress photo courtesy of the author.

attention to take an early leave from the second session of the 37th Congress on June 19, 1862, to return to Maine. Without more evidence, few Lincoln biographers have been eager to take Charles Hamlin's assertion at face value. There is no reference to this "reading" in Hannibal Hamlin's surviving papers at the University of Maine, and no allusion to the June meeting in the congratulatory letter Hamlin sent Lincoln after the publication of the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. And one detail of this account—that Hamlin was only planning "a short visit at his home in Bangor"—is assuredly wrong, since Hamlin was in fact leaving Washington to begin shoring up the campaigns of Republican candidates in the 1862 by-elections, which in Maine fell in the first week of September. Hamlin did not return to Washington before the end of the 37th Congress in July, and probably never planned to.

For that reason, historians Ida Tarbell, Stephen Oates, Mark Neely, and William Gienapp pass the Hamlin story by in silence; David Donald notes only that Lincoln "may have discussed a very preliminary draft of such a proclamation with Vice President Hamlin as early as June 18th."
Maine History

Perhaps as the elderly Hamlin aged, his memory began compensating for what Gideon Welles called his "disappointments" in politics; perhaps Charles Hamlin was simply trying to invent a little more glory for his famous patriarch. Except that in this peculiar instance, Charles Hamlin was not actually the first to relate this story.

In late summer 1879 Hannibal Hamlin was at the center of a bitterly-contested governor's race in Maine that pitted the candidate of the state's Republican old guard, headed by Hamlin and James G. Blaine, against upstart Democrats eager to overturn Maine's Republican ascendancy. In the course of the campaign, a reporter for the *Boston Herald*, a notoriously anti-Republican paper, wangled an interview with Hamlin that turned surprisingly avuncular. The article was mostly an autobiographical reminiscence of Hamlin's long career in Maine politics, but the last question the reporter put to Hamlin—"Your relations with Mr. Lincoln were very pleasant, were they not?"—prompted a long statement from Hamlin about the difficulties presidents had with vice-presidents, and how "very easy" it had been for Hamlin and Lincoln to have "got on well together." "We had intimate relations," Hamlin claimed, "and he often consulted me." The chief evidence for this was the Emancipation Proclamation: "I was the first person he ever showed the proclamation to." Hamlin made no effort to pin this to a specific date.

The 1879 account Hamlin provided the *Boston Herald* of his June 1862 meeting with Lincoln was a virtual replica of the account told by Charles Hamlin. This resemblance makes one wonder if the source of Charles Hamlin's 1899 account was in fact the *Herald*, rather than his grandfather. Yet in one major detail the accounts diverge: in the *Herald* interview, Hamlin and Lincoln drive (as in a carriage, rather than on "horseback") out to the Soldiers' Home, the Lincolns' temporary residence, and it was en route, rather than after dinner, that Lincoln read the Proclamation. Either Charles Hamlin had misread the *Herald* account, or he had in fact received a corrected version of the reading from his grandfather, as he claimed. More important, however, the *Herald*'s sceptical Democratic editor accepted Hamlin's story as legitimate, instead of sizing it up as quackery. The *New York Times* picked up the interview and reprinted it a week later.5

The story acquired a third life through another interview Hannibal Hamlin gave, this time to Henry Clay Whitney, who was assembling materials for the book he published in 1892, *Life on the Circuit with Lincoln*. When Whitney first met Hamlin in 1853, the Maine senator had struck Whitney, who had been born in Maine himself, as he had George Tem-
Lincoln at the Anderson Cottage, by Jes Schlaikjer. Although the president was reputedly very secretive about his public policy pronouncements, the Emancipation Proclamation seems to have been “leaked” to several people before he finally read it to his cabinet. Hamlin was possibly the first. Library of Congress painting courtesy of the author.

Stephen Strong: as the archetypal Yankee. “He appeared very much like the average farmer or mechanic, with the single exception that he wore the swallow-tail coat of two decades previously, and the neck stock which had gone out of general use for nearly as long.” But at this later meeting Whitney was impressed by Hamlin’s knowledge of the inner workings of Lincoln’s cabinet, and especially by Hamlin’s claim that Lincoln had read the proclamation to him before ever briefing the Cabinet. “The Emancipation Proclamation was the crowning glory of his life,” Hamlin told Whitney, and Lincoln alone deserved credit for it. “It was the act of Abraham Lincoln, not the act of his cabinet; it was the act of Abraham Lincoln, and of nobody else.” From that point, Hamlin launched into a rehearsal of the journey to the Soldiers’ Home and the reading of the Proclamation.

Again, a number of details of the encounter are consistent with the other versions: first, Hamlin called on Lincoln to notify him of his intention of leaving town; second, Lincoln directed Hamlin to accompany him instead to the Soldier’s Home; third, Lincoln read the proclamation to Hamlin after “tea” and Hamlin offered some suggestions; finally, the
reading preceded any other reading of the Proclamation by Lincoln to anyone else. The only significant departure in the Whitney version is the context: this time, Hamlin made no special plea for his own importance in the Lincoln administration, but instead asserted Lincoln's independence of judgment from the Cabinet.

In the larger scheme of things it may be irrelevant whether Lincoln dropped his first hint about the Emancipation Proclamation to Hannibal Hamlin in June 1862, or Owen Lovejoy, or, in the best-known account of an advance preview, to Gideon Welles and William H. Seward during a carriage ride on July 12, 1862. Lincoln had been drafting emancipation schemes as early as November 1861, and the proclamation would not, in fact, be the last emancipation document he would author.

On the other hand, three things are worth remembering about the Hamlin claim to have been “the first person to see” the Emancipation Proclamation. First, the Herald and Whitney accounts are clearly independent, and in both cases, were incidental to the larger purposes of the interviewers who obtained them. They were not, in other words, launched solely by Hamlin with the intention of promoting his own self-importance. And if Charles Hamlin’s 1899 re-telling of the “reading” actually embodies at least some version of the events described directly by his grandfather, than we have as many as three separate accounts, over a span of twenty years, rooted directly in a first-person informant. There are few other events in Lincoln’s life derived from informant courses that have even that much support, which it makes it substantially more difficult to dismiss than Lincoln biographers have been in the habit of doing.

Second, although the entire affair contradicts Lincoln’s usual secrecy in drafting public policy papers, in the case of the Emancipation Proclamation, there is an extraordinary pattern of leakage by Lincoln. He certainly read an early version to James Speed, the influential brother of his life-long friend, Joshua Speed, only to have Speed conclude that “it will do no good; probably much harm.” The Washington Evening Star heard it “said in unusually well-informed circles” in early August 1862 “that direct and decisive action is to be taken in the prosecution of the war.” Southern Unionist Robert J. Walker brought the novelist and journalist James R. Gilmore to meet Lincoln on August 18, whispering to Gilmore that “I have good news for you, but it must be strictly confidential, —the Emancipation Proclamation is decided upon,” news that Lincoln then authorized Gilmore to leak privately to Gilmore’s boss at the New York Tribune, Horace Greeley. Leonard Swett told John Nicolay that Lincoln had hinted at having “written something” during a meeting at the White
Lincoln and his cabinet with Gen. Winfield Scott in 1861 (Harper’s Weekly). Lincoln read the Emancipation Proclamation to his cabinet on July 22, 1862. Hamlin’s reminiscences reinforce the idea that the document was not simply a hasty political contrivance designed to revive Union spirits after the disastrous Peninsula Campaign, but rather a carefully-scripted addendum to the Union cause. They also suggest that Hamlin might have been more than just a “contingent somebody” in the Lincoln administration. Image courtesy of the author.

House on August 20, which “couldn’t be anything else than the proclamation itself.” Hiram Barney, the collector of the Port of New York and a key figure in New York Republican politics, also claimed fifteen years later that Lincoln had read him a draft of the Proclamation “in his own hand writing and in his pocket when we were together” in Washington on September 5. And if that was not enough, Lincoln’s secretary, John Hay, cryptically added to one of his anonymous editorials for the Missouri Republican, “perhaps the time is coming when the President, so long forebearing, so long suffering with the South and the border, will give the word long waited for, which will breathe the life that is needed, the fire that seems extinguished, in the breasts of our men at arms.” In that context, a reading of a draft of the proclamation to Hamlin may not have been so out of the ordinary.

The third and most important consideration of the Hamlin account brings us directly to the question of relevancy. Lincoln endured a constant squall of criticism for moving too slowly, and with too much prod-
ding from military events, in waiting until July 1862, to present an emancipation proclamation to his cabinet. But if the Hamlin account is correct, then Hamlin’s well-documented departure from Washington on June 19, 1862, pushes the composition of a “first draft” of a proclamation at least a month earlier than is normally supposed. It certainly undercuts the reckless claim of Lerone Bennett, in Forced Into Glory: Abraham Lincoln’s White Dream, that Lincoln hurriedly composed the Emancipation Proclamation to avoid having to implement the far more drastic emancipation provisions of the Second Confiscation Act. Given the fact that the Lincolns did not take up residence at the Soldiers’ Home until mid-June of 1862, he could hardly have read anything to Hamlin at the Soldiers’ Home much before the week of June 12, but that does not preclude pushing the date of Lincoln’s actual drafting of the document even further into the spring of 1862. Another “paper” Lincoln read to Orville Hickman Browning on July 1 concerning “his views of the objects of the war, and the proper mode of conducting it in its relations to slavery” at least establishes that Lincoln was putting on paper proposals about presidential emancipation well in advance of General George B. McClellan’s military collapse on the Peninsula. Lincoln, in other words, was not so stampeded by military or political events that July to compose an Emancipation Proclamation; if the Hamlin reading means anything, it means that the Emancipation Proclamation was already in the offing before the disastrous Seven Days’ battle and before the Second Confiscation Act was adopted by Congress.

Hannibal Hamlin’s claim that he was the first to hear the Emancipation Proclamation read by Lincoln, well in advance of Lincoln’s reading to the Cabinet, sits oddly beside Hamlin’s marginal place in the Lincoln administration, and that, more than anything else, has led to a certain reluctance to accept it as more than “circumstantial.” But the existence of two parallel accounts, and the manner in which they fit an overall pattern of advance “leaks” of the Emancipation Proclamation, have to be taken into account before dismissing the claim too swiftly. And if there is any substance to Hamlin’s claim, and the other claims to advance notice, then it reinforces the conviction that the drafting of Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation was not merely a hasty political contrivance to retrieve Union fortunes in the fall of 1862. In fact, it was a carefully-plotted document, backed by a conscious and long-sustained intention: an idea that evolved over time. Perhaps, also, it suggests that for at least one moment in 1862, Hannibal Hamlin was more than just “a contingent somebody.”
NOTES


3. Hamlin’s arrival was announced in the Bangor Daily Whig and Courier on June 25, noting that he “will remain for the present. He thinks Congress will adjourn about the 10th of July.” He was not far off: it adjourned on July 17 after passing the Second Confiscation Act. See also “Celebration of the Fourth in Bangor,” and “The Grand Rally last Evening,” in Bangor Daily Whig and Courier, July 7, 18, 1862.


