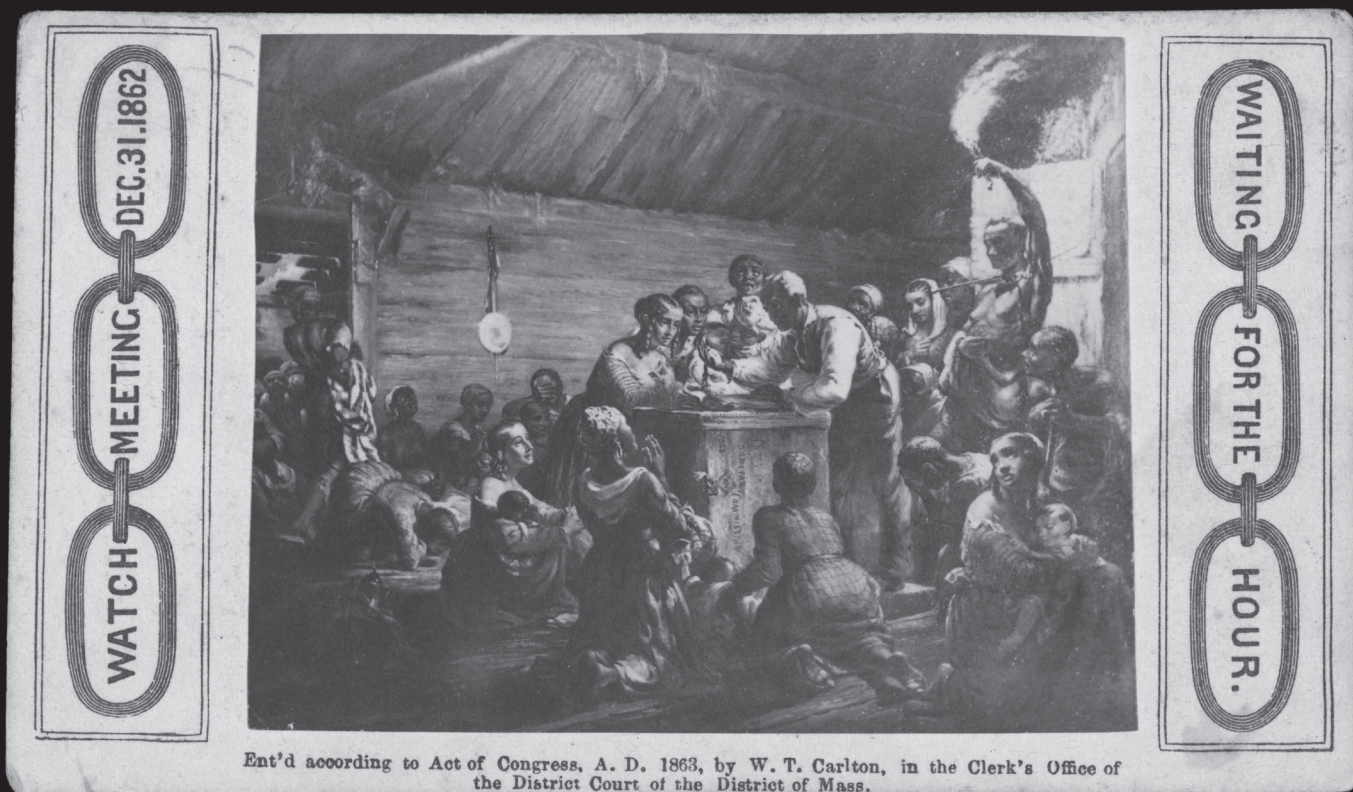


Looking Out upon the
Boundless Sea of the Future;
or, Anticipation

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Ent'd according to Act of Congress, A. D. 1863, by W. T. Carlton, in the Clerk's Office of
the District Court of the District of Mass.

Watch Meeting, Dec. 31, 1862, Waiting for the Hour. Carte de visite.

Heard & Moseley, 10 Tremont Row, Boston. Ca. 1863.

Library of Congress.

A CARTE DE VISITE that circulated in and around Boston in antislavery circles beginning in the later part of the Civil War depicts a group of African Americans huddled together in a shack or barn or similar quarters, some spilling out the entryway into the night (Figure 2). Inside the rudely built wooden building a torch, held aloft by a bare-chested man on the upper right, illuminates the scene. Tacked to the wall behind the torchbearer hangs a copy of President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. In front of him stands the painting's central figure, toward whom most of the people in the room look: an elderly man, perhaps a preacher, in shirtsleeves and a vest. His left hand rests upon a Bible open to the words "Let my people go." In his right he holds a pocket watch, the face of which displays the time: five minutes to midnight—five minutes, that is, to freedom. A decorative border displays the image's title—Watch Meeting, Dec. 31, 1862, Waiting for the Hour—on either side of the image, the words placed, appropriately, within the links of a chain.¹

The date in the title refers, of course, to the night before Lincoln's proclamation would take effect on January 1, 1863. On that eve, watch meetings such as the one the carte de visite captures took place in churches, meeting-houses, and other public spaces all across the country, as African Americans, slave and free, eagerly

looked forward to the stroke of midnight, the symbolic instant marking the symbolic end of legal bondage. I emphasize the symbolism of the moment in part to recognize that the Emancipation Proclamation did not, in fact, free *all* slaves. Nor did it take effect at the stroke of midnight. Indeed, it wasn't until the afternoon of January 1 that Lincoln, twice delayed from signing the document, actually inscribed his signature in ink on paper, with little ceremony or fanfare, despite the hundred days of anticipation between his announcement of the measure and his signing it into law.² I take this temporal disjunction, the interval of time between the moment of freedom anticipated by African Americans and its belated fruition, as my starting point. Such delays help make visible the time lag that constituted a crucial dimension of the chronopolitics of the antebellum period. African Americans and their white abolitionist allies experienced the prehistory of the Civil War as a long, agonizing wait.

From that earlier perspective, this essay examines one powerful attempt to negotiate that disquieting temporal experience. In what follows, I juxtapose *Waiting for the Hour* with Frederick Douglass's underappreciated speech in response to the Supreme Court decision in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857), a key moment in the history of antislavery politics in the years leading up to the war.

In his subsequent address, Douglass also looks forward to emancipation but from a very different vantage than the one captured in the carte de visite. I thus situate this image's emphasis on the anticipatory in relation to a much longer history, with all that the term "anticipate" implies: prediction, expectation, apprehension, preparation. As much as the symbolic stroke of midnight on December 31, 1862, may offer a dramatic rendering of a historical transition, African Americans had long before cultivated a different sort of anticipatory bearing, one not at all anchored to the commencement of a legal decree, although an anchor (not coincidentally) is the fob of the watch toward which everyone looks in *Waiting for the Hour*. Prior to Lincoln's proclamation, prior to December 31, 1862, black Americans like Frederick Douglass had *already* been "waiting for the hour." But they were waiting for an hour that might or might not ever come. With no determinate end in sight, they had to look elsewhere for signs that emancipation was about to be realized.

What, then, made the photographic image so popular? The carte de visite appears to have been the handiwork of John Heard or John Moseley, photographers whose Heard & Moseley studio occupied 10 Tremont Row in Boston. One of them may have taken the first photograph of the original painting, executed by William Tolman Carlton in 1863, on which the widely circulating image was based. Carlton was well known and well respected locally for his portraits and genre paintings. As a young artist, he exhibited at the Boston Athenaeum, and some of his work remains in the permanent collections at Harvard. Later, he spent the better part of

his career as a painting instructor at the free art school established by the Lowell Institute in 1850. The extent to which Carlton associated with abolitionists or involved himself in antislavery activities remains unclear. He does, though, appear to have been at least acquainted with the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, perhaps through his sister Henrietta, who was a long and active supporter of the American Anti-Slavery Society and of Garrison's newspaper the *Liberator*.³ Although the exact circumstances that led to the creation of *Waiting for the Hour* are also obscure, the result was enthusiastically received by Garrison's Boston circle. In fact, the painting may well have been commissioned or produced specifically to promote the ongoing work of the Anti-Slavery Society. Before it was exhibited publicly late in the summer of 1864, for instance, a detailed description of it would appear in the *Liberator* to help promote the sale of commemorative photographs, suitable for framing, at local print shops and the Anti-Slavery Society office on Washington Street, where the large size sold for two dollars, a smaller version for one.⁴

Carlton's painting would also be promoted, or at least celebrated, in September of that year when the *Liberator* published an ekphrastic poem based upon it by the ardent suffragist and abolitionist Phebe Hanaford, biographer of Lucretia Mott and, later, Lincoln. In its closing stanza, Hanaford's poem would capture the temporal double movement at the heart of the image: the interplay between eager anticipation and celebratory retrospection.

They wait! yet while we look, the hour
Comes with its blissful freight;

Jeffrey Insko

Fling out the Stars and Stripes, a sign
They may no longer wait.
Shout Lincoln's name, with blissful tears,
Pray for him, day by day,
And through all coming time, look back
With joy to "Sixty-three."⁵

Hanaford's poem helps to identify the multiple temporal experiences Carlton's painting and its photographic renderings convey. Chief among those experiences is the pleasure of looking back to looking forward, the exhilaration of recalling a moment of expectation that, in retrospect, has been realized. In fact, just as Hanaford would exhort, New Year's Eve "Watch Night" services, where African Americans gathered, kneeled, and prayed at five minutes to midnight in commemoration of December 31, 1862, *would* become a lasting fixture in many African American communities and churches around the country, continuing even today.⁶ At the same time, however, Hanaford's reading of the painting obscures another temporal experience—a specifically African American experience—that the *carte de visite* also depicts: the experience of a moment that is not *retrospectively* celebratory but only expectantly, even anxiously, so. This more apprehensive experience, this more fearful or foreboding type of anticipation, would be captured in the expressions on the faces of the individuals assembled. None is smiling, while many cast their glances downward, or look anxiously in the direction of the watch, as if its hands are as apt to remain frozen as they are to proceed forward to the awaited hour. A man in the back covers his eyes with his hands, a gesture almost of disbelief that the event will come to pass, while a woman at the bottom left lies prostrate, forehead in

hand and nearly pressed to the floor, perhaps still praying for what is ostensibly a certainty.

But the most powerful marker of the unease and uncertainty of the scene is the banjo that hangs prominently on the otherwise bare wall just above and between these two figures, a symbol of revelry-in-waiting. Or, given its damaged state—broken strings, a busted bridge—perhaps the banjo suggests that even the arrival of the awaited hour may not yet be a time for musical merry-making. In sharp contrast to Hanaford's joyful account, which takes emancipation as already accomplished, the scarred banjo frankly acknowledges that Lincoln's proclamation would be only a partial measure, hardly granting the comprehensive emancipation toward which abolitionists had labored with growing impatience for so many years.

Indeed, African Americans had long experienced the nation's political history as a seemingly endless series of postponements, a fact that helps explain why Lincoln so tried the patience of abolitionist leaders. For Frederick Douglass, in particular, Lincoln's sluggishness represented not just a political or moral failure, but a stubborn resistance to the movement of history itself.⁷ In the decade leading up to the war, Douglass set aside deferral and delay and began to see that movement in terms of acceleration. This, at least, is the reading of the prehistory of the Civil War that Douglass advanced in his extraordinary response to *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, which was handed down in March of 1857. In a sweeping, scathing decision written by Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, the Supreme Court not only decided against Dred Scott's claim to freedom, but also ruled that no American of African descent had ever or could ever

possess the rights of citizenship. Taney's decision, which Douglass described as the "judicial incarnation of wolfishness," seemed to deal a death blow to the antislavery cause.⁸ Indeed, it was difficult to imagine a more demoralizing ruling from the nation's highest court.

It was only two months later on May 14 that Douglass delivered his first public remarks in response. The occasion for the address was a convention in New York City commemorating the second anniversary of the American Abolition Society. In contrast to the older and better-known American Anti-Slavery Society, the Abolition Society, formed by a group of radical abolitionists led by Douglass's friend Gerrit Smith, rejected Garrisonian disunionism and—ironically, given the circumstances—promoted a vigorous defense of the Constitution as an antislavery instrument. Douglass's involvement with the American Abolition Society was itself a result of his impatience; by the 1850s, he had grown "sick and tired," as he put it, "of arguing on the slaveholders' side of this question"—that is, of arguing that the Constitution was proslavery.⁹ Against this backdrop, he might have been forgiven for delivering a speech driven not just by impatience, but by despair.

Instead, Douglass stood before his audience and declared audaciously that his "hopes were never brighter than now."¹⁰ Much of the speech is thus Douglass's attempt to vindicate that claim, to justify hope for an emancipatory future at a moment when all signs were seemingly pointing in the opposite direction. Or, to put this in terms rendered visible by *Waiting for the Hour*, Douglass's aim in the Dred Scott address was to earn his way into a mode of anticipation that went beyond expressing a desire for emancipation at some

unspecified, ever-receding, future point. In the wake of *Dred Scott*, Douglass regarded slavery's end in the same way that the slaves in the carte de visite would regard it: as probable, perhaps even inevitable, in the near term. In the Dred Scott address Douglass tried to imagine the temporal mode that was to be the source of the viewer's pleasure in *Waiting for the Hour*: prolepsis, the knowledge or perception of something that has not yet happened.

Fittingly, Douglass pursued this aim by way of an inventive reading of the history of slavery's politics in the United States, a reading that, like *Waiting for the Hour*, relied on the measurement of time. He began the speech by placing himself in a precarious present, acknowledging that, in the wake of Taney's decision, "the prospects of the struggle against slavery seem far from cheering." From there, Douglass cast his glance forward.

Standing, as it were, barefoot, and treading upon the sharp and flinty rocks of the present, and looking out upon the boundless sea of the future, I have sought, in my humble way, to penetrate the intervening mists and clouds, and, perchance, to descry, in the dim and shadowy distance, the white flag of freedom, the precise speck of time at which the cruel bondage of my people should end, and the long entombed millions rise from the foul grave of slavery and death.¹¹

Like the figures huddled in Carlton's watch meeting, Douglass anticipated the moment, the "precise speck of time," that freedom would have been attained. Yet, unlike the relative safety and warmth of the tranquil cabin depicted in *Waiting for the Hour*—a tranquility analogous to Carlton's retrospective certainties, metaphorically reinforced at the image's top left by a roof hole shaped like a cross and revealing the heavens—Douglass

located himself in the midst of danger: exposed to the elements, standing on “sharp and flinty rocks,” confronted with the vast expanse of the “boundless sea.” His measureless ocean would contrast sharply with the depicted watch, which indicates an officially appointed hour near at hand. Douglass instead faced a future obscured by “intervening mists and clouds” somewhere in a “dim and shadowy distance.” Hence, he said, “of that time I can know nothing, and you can know nothing. All is uncertain at that point.”¹²

With uncertainty ahead, Douglass turned back to the past to “see if there are not some things to cheer our heart and nerve us up anew in the good work of emancipation.” He began by noting the growth of the antislavery movement, which “started small” but which, against great odds—prejudice, apathy, mob violence—had “increase[d] in magnitude and in majesty with every hour of its history. From a cloud not bigger than a man’s hand, it has overspread the heavens. It has risen from a grain not bigger than a mustard seed.”¹³ The movement had also, Douglass observed pointedly, outlasted those who sought to quell or forestall its momentum: “Clay, Calhoun, and Webster each tried his hand at suppressing the agitation; and they went to their graves disappointed and defeated.”¹⁴ He thereby invoked legislative attempts to thwart or delay emancipation. Henry Clay had pressed for congressional compromise in 1820 and 1850. John C. Calhoun had long protected the institution of slavery and promoted its expansion, as in the Nullification Crisis of the 1830s and the annexation of Texas in 1845. Daniel Webster had capitulated to the slave power in supporting the Compromise of 1850.

Douglass then situated the Dred Scott decision along a continuum of other signal moments in the history of slavery politics. “Loud and exultingly,” he declared, “have we been told that the slavery question is settled, and settled forever.” But then, to remind his audience that such so-called settlements were nothing new, Douglass playfully rehearsed forty years of legislative attempts to manage the slavery question. “You remember,” he said, “it was settled thirty-seven years ago,” referring to the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which was championed by Clay. That bill preserved the balance of power in Congress by admitting Maine into the union as a free state and Missouri as a slaveholding state, while also prohibiting slavery north of Missouri’s southern border in the future. “Just fifteen years afterwards,” Douglass went on, the question “was settled again by voting down the right of petition” in what came to be known as the congressional Gag Rule. First passed in 1836, the Gag Rule comprised a series of formal resolutions adopted by the House of Representatives that tabled without discussion any petitions pertaining to the abolition of slavery. “Ten years after this,” Douglass then noted, “it was settled again by the annexation of Texas,” which incorporated Texas into the United States (granting statehood in December 1845) and led directly to the Mexican-American War.¹⁵

Five years later, Douglass continued, the question “was again settled” when Congress passed the Compromise of 1850, which offered concessions to both sides of the slavery debate in its organization of western lands acquired after the war with Mexico. California was admitted into the Union as a free state, but the compromise left open the possibility of slavery’s expansion to the west and instituted a new, more stringent Fugitive Slave Act that

criminalized assistance to the self-emancipated. “This,” Douglass noted bitterly, “was called a final settlement. By it slavery was virtually declared to be the equal of Liberty. . . . By it the right and the power to hunt down men, women, and children, in every part of this country, was conceded to our southern brethren.” Yet, just “four years after this settlement,” Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which permitted the question of slavery in the newly organized Kansas and Nebraska territories to be decided by popular sovereignty. With that act, Douglass said wryly as he punned on both the fact of the territorial expansion of slavery and the upheaval made possible by the bill, “the whole question was once more settled, and settled by a settlement which unsettled all the former settlements.” “The fact is,” Douglass concluded from this history of failure, “the more the question has been settled, the more it has needed settling.”¹⁶ When the Missouri Compromise was effectively nullified, he insisted, popular sovereignty fomented violence in the territories.

At this point, in the speech’s most dazzling move, Douglass discerned a peculiar temporal pattern. “The space between the different settlements,” he observed, “has been strikingly on the decrease. The first stood longer than any of its successors.” Douglass thus perceived “a lesson in these decreasing spaces. The first stood fifteen years—the second, ten years—the third, five years—the fourth stood four years—and the fifth has stood the brief space of two years.”¹⁷ The steadily diminishing returns of attempts to delay emancipation had only, Douglass argued, hastened it toward its inevitable culmination. Or, as he put it, “The whole history of the antislavery movement is studded with proof that

all measures devised and executed with a view to [allay] and diminish the antislavery agitation, have only served to increase, intensify, and embolden that agitation.”¹⁸ Far from turning back the clock, then, “the Taney settlement,” as Douglass called it, came so soon after the Kansas-Nebraska Act that it provided the latest sign of the *unsettled* state of the politics of slavery—a sign, that is, of the temporal proximity of slavery’s permanent end.¹⁹

Douglass would have to wait almost another full decade before the abolition of slavery would be assured by constitutional amendment. He may well have been right about the accelerating intensity of antislavery zeal: John Brown’s raid at Harper’s Ferry would take place just two short years after the Supreme Court handed down its decision in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* and Douglass delivered his very public response. Certainly, Douglass’s triumphal reading of the antislavery sentiment in the United States provided a way to manage the temporal crisis that the slavery debate had produced as far back as the 1780s, when Douglass located opposition to the peculiar institution as the dominant “opinion and feeling” even as the Constitution was drafted.²⁰ That reading cheered his auditors in the midst of desperation; he may have been right to recognize, at an awful moment in 1857, that “slavery is a doomed system.”²¹ But the anticipatory stance Douglass ultimately adopted failed to predict slavery’s end. He could not foresee just how late it would be before that hour finally arrived. Where he anticipated resolution, the nation was hurtling toward cataclysm.²²

How fitting, then, that the fate of Carlton’s own anticipatory vision would entail intolerable delay and anxious anticipation. Soon after the painting was exhibited,

Garrison and his Boston friends would organize an effort to purchase it, an effort that raised more than five hundred dollars from figures like Massachusetts governor John Andrew and a number of the city's "most respected citizens."²³ In July 1864, Garrison would send the gift to Lincoln as a gesture of thanks for having issued the Emancipation Proclamation at last. Yet it would be six long months before Garrison received any word of thanks. The unexpected postponement led the impatient abolitionist to write a long letter to the president in January of 1865, expressing concern that, "for some cause or other, no acknowledgement has been made" of the gift.²⁴ Two weeks later, Lincoln would finally respond. Explaining that his "constant engagements" occasioned

his "seeming neglect," the president declared that he had directed his secretary "not to acknowledge [the painting's] arrival at once" but instead to allow him to "[wait] for some leisure hour" when he might reply himself. Lincoln concluded with apologies for offering his thanks "late."²⁵ Upon finally receiving Lincoln's acknowledgment, Garrison promptly, and rather gleefully, published the full letter in the *Liberator* on February 17, 1865. With good grace, Garrison forgave the president his belatedness; he remarked upon Lincoln's "multifarious duties" and marveled that the president "has not long since been broken down by the pressure." "Nevertheless," Garrison said in closing, "may his days be long in the land!"²⁶

NOTES

1. *Watch Meeting, Dec. 31, 1862, Waiting for the Hour*, carte de visite, Heard & Moseley, 10 Tremont Row, Boston, ca. 1863, Library of Congress, accessed January 21, 2018, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/98501210>.

2. See Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 205–6.

3. See William Lloyd Garrison, *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, ed. Louis Rucames (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1975), 4:338n4.

4. "A Valuable Original Picture," *Liberator*, June 12, 1863, 95. A second, much briefer notice under the heading "A Picture for the Times" appeared in the July 3, 1863, issue, p. 107. As an example of the image's circulation among abolitionists, see Lydia Maria Child's September 1863 letter to Carlton regarding a photograph of the painting that had been sent to her nephew, the abolitionist George Stearns. The letter is held at the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library of Duke University.

5. See "Waiting for the Hour," *Liberator*, September 16, 1864, 152.

6. See William H. Wiggins Jr., *O Freedom! Afro-American Emancipation Services* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 26–27.

7. In fact, even upon the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, Douglass cast Lincoln as merely an indicator, rather than the agent of emancipation. "Powerful as Mr. Lincoln is," Douglass wrote in his newspaper, "he is but the hands of the clock." See Frederick Douglass, "January First, 1863," *Douglass' Monthly*, January 1863, 721.

8. Frederick Douglass, "The Dred Scott Decision," in *Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Philip S. Foner (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 347.

9. Frederick Douglass, "To Gerrit Smith," *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 171.

10. Douglass, "Dred Scott," 347.

11. *Ibid.*, 345.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, 346.

14. *Ibid.*, 347.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, 348.

19. *Ibid.*, 347.

20. *Ibid.*, 355.

21. *Ibid.*, 350.

22. Although resolution and cataclysm are not necessarily at odds, particularly from the perspective of millennial thought in the United States. David W. Blight aligns Douglass's vision—his anticipation of the war's successful culmination—with that tradition. See Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), esp. chap. 5, "Frederick Douglass and the American Apocalypse."

23. "A Valuable Original Picture," *Liberator*, June 12, 1863, 95.

24. Garrison goes on to note that Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner had informed him that he had seen the painting at the White House on more than one occasion, so that "all anxiety has been relieved" that it arrived safely. Nevertheless, since "the money raised to

purchase it was collected by ladies who desire that the donors may be officially apprised of its legitimate application," Garrison inquires "in their behalf to say that it would relieve them of much embarrassment if [Lincoln] would be so obliging . . . to send me a line, stating that the painting aforesaid was duly received by you." The extraordinary letter ends with Garrison first insisting that he has "frequently had occasion" to defend Lincoln "against many sweeping accusations that have been brought against" him (presumably excluding his own!), and, finally, suggesting to Lincoln that he consider appointing Governor Andrew to the vacated secretary of the treasury post. See Harold Holzer, ed., *Dear Mr. Lincoln: Letters to the President* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), 230–31.

25. Holzer, *Dear Mr. Lincoln*, 231–32.

26. "Letter from the President," *Liberator*, February 17, 1865, 27.