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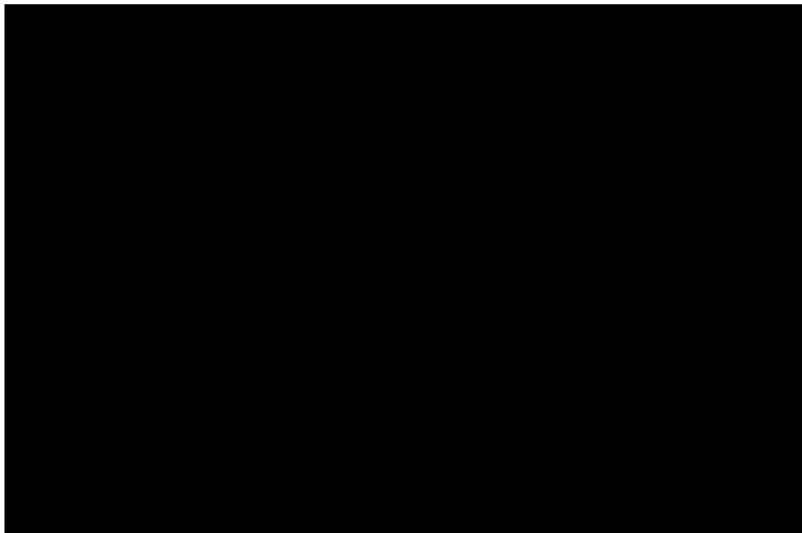
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For freed blacks in the Civil War, Washington was a city of contradictions



CAPTION

By Jeannine Hunter, Published: October 4, 2011 | Updated: Friday, October 7, 4:01 AM
[E-mail the writers](#)

Emancipation was in the air, and Elizabeth Keckley knew it. A former slave herself, she had become dressmaker and confidante to first lady Mary Todd Lincoln, and she was well settled in Washington society by the time the Civil War began. But the plight of other African Americans in the city pained her.

"They came with a great hope in their hearts, and with all their worldly goods on their backs," wrote Keckley, who bought her and her son's freedom, in her memoir, "Behind the Scenes." But "the North is not warm and impulsive. The bright joyous dreams of freedom to the slave faded — were sadly altered in the presence of that stern, practical mother, reality. Poor dusky children of slavery, men and women of my own race — the transition from slavery to freedom was too sudden for you!"

Graphic



Washington in the early war years continued to be riven by the fault lines of race and politics. A decade earlier, Congress had abolished slave trade in the District but not slavery itself.

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[The District](#) but not slavery itself.

Domestic, governmental and service jobs attracted African Americans from Maryland and Virginia, where restrictions were greater.

"By the time of the war, slavery had been diminished considerably," said Lincoln scholar [Edna Medford](#) of Howard University. "Of the 14,000 people of color in the city, fewer than 3,200 were enslaved."

Still, in 1861, free blacks — lawyers and laborers, midwives and ministers, doorkeepers and educators — had to navigate past slave pens, and slave catchers patrolled Washington for fugitives.

"Right here, in the bedrock of this great nation, was a contradiction, this horrible situation," said [Frank Smith](#), director of the African American Civil War Memorial and Museum.

"Free blacks endured injustices such as a 10 p.m. curfew and morality laws, which sought to legislate black behavior — no swearing in public or gambling or card-playing, et cetera, no political rights," Medford said. "Free blacks had to prove their free status and had to carry certificates of freedom at all times. They also had to enter into bonds with five respected members of the community who were willing to ensure their good behavior. Nor could blacks testify against whites in court."

The punishments were fines, jail and whippings. If no one came to bail out free arrestees, "they would be sold to pay the cost of their jail fees," historian [C.R. Gibbs](#) said.

A push for emancipation

By the end of 1861, the situation in the capital had become untenable. Escapees from Southern states arrived without housing, jobs or money. While the city wrestled with how to care for them, fugitive slaves from Maryland were being hunted down and locked up, because federal law still protected slavery in states loyal to the Union.

"Union soldiers marching through Maryland to protect the capital in the spring of 1861 — that was destabilizing to slavery," said Kate Masur, a Northwestern University history professor and author of "[An Example for All the Land: Emancipation and the Struggle Over Equality in Washington, D.C.](#)" "A lot of enslaved people took the opportunity to run away."

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