

Huge turnout for viewing of Emancipation Proclamation in Michigan

Shannon Jones
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Over 21,000 people poured through the Henry Ford Museum in the Detroit suburb of Dearborn, Michigan earlier this week to view the original Emancipation Proclamation issued by President Abraham Lincoln in 1862, some waiting in line for up to seven hours. The great interest evoked by the exhibit testifies to the continued deep-going attachment of wide layers of the population to the democratic principles embodied in the proclamation.

The document was only on view for 36 hours as part of an ongoing exhibit at the museum commemorating 150 years since the start of the American Civil War. Because of its age and delicate condition the proclamation is only available for public viewing for a very limited time each year. The document is normally stored at the National Archive in Washington DC. The last time it travelled to Michigan was 1948.

The proclamation, issued in the midst of the Civil War, freed slaves in the rebelling states of the southern Confederacy, setting a course toward the general abolition of slavery in the United States.

Contrary to the claims of some critics that the document was little more than a paper bullet since it formally only freed slaves in areas still under Confederate rule, it had a decisive impact on the course of the war. It turned it from a war to preserve the union into a war of liberation, leading to one of the largest property transfers in world history. As a consequence, some 4 million slaves valued at \$3 billion gained their freedom. In equivalent US dollars that would amount to several trillions.

The proclamation not only freed slaves, but also called for their recruitment into the union army to participate in their own liberation. Further, the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation raised the stature of the United States internationally. By transforming the

Civil War into a war against slavery Lincoln attracted to the side of the North workers and progressive-minded intellectuals in Europe. It complicated the position of governments such as that of Great Britain who contemplated intervention on the side of the Confederacy.

The issuing of the proclamation quickly led to the collapse of slavery even in the Border States, where slaves, ignoring the “fine print” of the document, fled the plantations.

The Emancipation Proclamation is just five pages long. The first two pages have writing on both sides, so only one side could be displayed to view. The document was mounted on a matted panel; only the second and fifth panel showed original pages. The other panels contained facsimiles of the original. It shows the sign of age, with some of the writing barely visible. However, Lincoln’s original signature is plainly readable.

Brian James Egen, manager of special programs and equine operations at The Henry Ford Museum told the WSWS he was overwhelmed by the response to the exhibit, noting that some were brought to tears being in the presence of the document.

“This exceeded our expectations,” he said. “This was an emotional experience. I am exhausted, I have been up for the last 24 hours.” he added.

The WSWS spoke to several of those who had seen the exhibit.

Paul Jones said he had waited five hours to see the document, “It was worth it. The turnout was awesome—more people than I thought.

“This was something my great, great, grandparents had to go through, it was amazing. It had me hurting right here,” he said pointing to his heart.

Dr. Claudia Wells-Hamilton said, “I had mixed

emotions, I was very happy this was written. When I was here today with my son I realize that my life may have been totally different, I may not have known my son, he may have been taken from me at birth.

“Also, I am in an interracial marriage, Because of the Emancipation Proclamation I am able to have a relationship, a dialogue with other people without being concerned about their color.

“I waited five and a half hours—the only other time I've waited that long was for John Kennedy's funeral—it was worth every minute.

“There was a warmth in the line. We were exchanging cards, and phone numbers. People in the line thanked me; there was a common vein—we all want peace and harmony.”

Her son Thaddeus added, “The historical value of the document was most important for me, but it was also personal. I think it's the concept that started a process that is coming to fruition. It's not about liberation only in this country but everywhere.”

Serena Dan-Pollo, a teacher in the Pontiac, Michigan schools, expressed concern over the erosion of historical knowledge among young people in the United States. “I am a teacher. I know a lot of the history of this country is not presented factually. A lot of the wording in textbooks is being changed to something that is supposed to be politically correct today. How can you present history as it was if you are trying to make it appropriate for today? So I am concerned.”

She added, “This is an exhibit that everyone should see. It's an injustice not to see it.”



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