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CIVIL WAR TO CIVIL RIGHTS: AFRICAN AMERICAN RECRUITMENT PROCLAMATION



Kentucky Historical Society collections

STATEWIDE — Most Kentuckians, including Gov. Thomas E. Bramlette and many Kentucky political leaders, were adamantly opposed to Civil War-era black enlistment — until it benefited them. The Second Confiscation Act and Militia Act, both of July 1862, allowed President Abraham Lincoln to accept “persons of African descent” into the United States service. Lincoln first used this power in the fall of 1862 to create black regiments in the Union-occupied Southern states.

On Jan. 1, 1863, Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, officially creating the Bureau of Colored Troops in the U.S. military; however, this did not immediately spur black recruitment efforts in Kentucky. Bramlette first wrote text encouraging slave owners to resist U.S. Army officers who came to enroll or enlist their slaves. He passed his draft to a group of advisers known as the Unconditional Union men. The group convinced him not to release the draft. Instead, he destroyed the original proclamation and wrote a new one that still spoke disapprovingly of black recruitment, but did not encourage open insurrection. If the Unconditional Union men had endorsed Bramlette’s original draft, Kentucky would have been in rebellion, meaning the state would have seceded from the Union.

Because Bramlette revised his statement, enslaved Kentucky men, with their owner’s permission, and free men of color began to enlist in February 1864. Unrestricted enlistment of all enslaved men did not occur until June 1864.

The Kentucky Historical Society (KHS) links Kentuckians with their past via archival collections that document people from every walk of life, reaching back to 1509. The “Civil War Governors of Kentucky” (CWG-K) is a multi-year documentary-editing project dedicated to publishing documents associated with all five of the state’s Civil War governors: the three Union governors, Beriah Magoffin (1859 – 1862), James F. Robinson (1862 – 1863), and Thomas E. Bramlette (1863 – 1867); and the two provisional Confederate governors, George W. Johnson (1861 – 1862) and Richard Hawes (1862 – 1865).

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