1863: A New Birth of Freedom

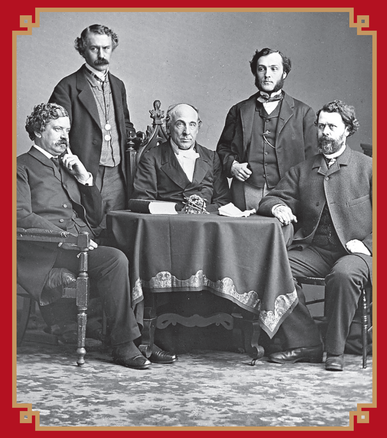
New York During the Civil War

Sifting Out the Hearts of Men: New Yorkers on the Home Front

At the time of the Civil War, New York was the most populous and industrious state in the Union. By the end of the previous century, the Industrial Revolution had already taken hold in the State and its growth was spurred on by public works projects like the Erie Canal and railroads. When the War broke out, New York City was the financial capital of the country and the state was one of the largest producers of manufactured goods in the world. These advantages would play a significant role in the Union's victory.

Union Hospital Armory Square Ward in Washington, DC. *Courtesy of the Library of Congress*

In addition to its economic power, New York, along with Massachusetts, was also the center of the abolitionist movement. Since the 1830s, under the patronage of individuals like Arthur and Lewis Tappan, William Lloyd Garrison, and Gerrit Smith, the abolitionist community in New York grew exponentially. Former slaves and other free black men and women, like David Ruggles, Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass, found New York to be a relatively safe have for their anti-slavery activities and publishing during the 1840s and 50s. When the War finally broke out, many New York abolitionists flocked to join the fight.



Some members of the U.S. Sanitary Commission. *Courtesy of the New York State Archives.*

A draft wheel used in New York City during the Civil War. *Courtesy of the New York State Archives.*

While young men were going off to war, many of the women who stayed behind contributed to the effort in their own way. The Women's Central Relief Association, founded in New York City by Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, created a model of care for wounded veterans who were returning home from the battlefield. From 1861 to 1863, it also organized groups of women across New York who made bandages, blankets and other dressings for hospitals and care homes. Dr. Blackwell's example inspired other women to enter the medical field, as both doctors and nurses.

A depiction of Governor Horatio Seymour addressing draft rioters on the steps of City Hall. *Courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

While support for the War was initially strong in New York, the Union's early defeats, the high number of causalities and the imposition of a draft that wealthy residents were able to exempt themselves from, quickly eroded that support. In July of 1863, draft riots that lasted for three nights broke out in New York City. The rioters mostly came from the impoverished immigrant workers who were angry at the nativist attitudes expressed by many leaders during the mid-19th century. Many of the immigrants also felt that they were being forced to fight in a war that was not their own and resented the fact that people of wealth, who were benefitting economically from the War, could pay a substitute to take their place when drafted. Lincoln did go on to win New York during the 1864 Presidential election, but it was by one of the smallest margins of any state that Lincoln won for re-election.