Let Us Die to Make Men Free:
The Civil War’s Effect on New York

The Civil War transformed the societal, economic and political landscape of the nation. These effects were especially profound in New York. Because of the high number of New York causalities, the state was faced with economic and social challenges that few of the other Union states were confronted with. In some villages and towns, where almost all of the men capable of serving chose to enlist, a whole generation was lost. Thousands of women, who had never left home before the War, had the opportunity to travel through the country, discover new careers in the medical and administrative fields, and discover a revitalized sense of economic empowerment.

For millions of black Americans, the War’s end brought new legal freedom, however civil and political equality would be denied to them for another century and a half. Just as New York was the center of the abolitionist movement it would become one of the most important places in the Civil Rights struggle by becoming the home of the Niagara Movement, the artistic and cultural-revolution known as the Harlem Renaissance, and the NAACP.

The remainder of the 19th century witnessed New York’s emergence as one of the most influential states in the country. The rapid economic growth that the War initiated would continue, making the State’s economy one of the strongest economies in the world. The spirit of progressive thought that culminated with the Civil War would find new channels after the War, especially in the areas of labor organization, women’s equality and education.

New York continued to be a central place in the lives of many associated with the Civil War. After serving two terms as President of the United States, Ulysses S. Grant retired to New York in order to work on his memoirs. He died shortly after finishing the work and is buried in Riverside Park in New York City.

Frederick Douglass transitioned from full-time activist to public servant and held several positions in the federal government. He was a member of New York’s Electoral College delegation during the 1872 Presidential election, becoming the first black person to cast a vote for the President. Clara Barton, who studied in New York, took many of the practices she developed as a nurse and hospital administrator during the War and helped found the American Red Cross.

In their lives and the lives of a million more, New York became a physical and spiritual home for them as they worked out their hopes and aspirations.

1863: A New Birth of Freedom
New York During the Civil War

The heading on each of these three panels was drawn from the lyrics of The Battle Hymn of the Republic. The lyrics were composed by Julia Ward Howe in 1861 and first published in 1862. The song became extremely popular and was often played in Army camps.