

Today in History - May 21

< May 21 >

Select date

May 21



Go

Today's Stories: [Reverdy Johnson](#)

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Reverdy Johnson

On **May 21**, 1796, attorney and statesman [Reverdy Johnson](#) was born in Annapolis, Maryland. Johnson represented Maryland, a slaveholding state south of the [Mason-Dixon line](#), as a Whig, in the U.S. Senate from 1845-49 and again following the Civil War as a Democrat from 1863-68. Under President [Zachary Taylor](#), he served as attorney general from 1849 until Taylor's death in 1850. Johnson was considered a brilliant constitutional lawyer and won an 1854 Supreme Court decision in favor of a patent for the McCormick reaper.



[President Taylor and His Cabinet....](#) Francis D'Avignon, artist; [New York]: Published by M.B. Brady daguerreian artist, c1849 (N.Y.: Printed by Nagel & Weingærtner). [Popular Graphic Arts](#). Prints & Photographs Division

Print showing President Taylor standing in front of his cabinet officers, seated from left, Reverdy Johnson, Attorney General, William M. Meredith, Secretary of the Treasury, William B. Preston, Secretary of the Navy, George W. Crawford, Secretary of War, Jacob Collamer, Postmaster General, Thomas Ewing, Secretary of the Interior, and John M. Clayton, Secretary of State.



[Men binding grain being cut by McCormick's horse-drawn reaper, "invented in 1831."](#) Photo by McCormick Company. Prints & Photographs Division

Although he personally opposed slavery and emancipated enslaved people inherited from his father, Johnson represented the slave-owning defendant in the 1857 [Dred Scott](#) case in which the U.S. Supreme Court decided that enslaved people could not be citizens of the United States. The court's decision intensified antislavery sentiment in the North and fed the antagonism that sparked the [Civil War](#). In 1865, the ruling was made obsolete with the ratification of the [Thirteenth Amendment](#) prohibiting slavery.

The map below depicts free states in pink and slave states in dark green. The light green area in the West was composed of a number of territories at that time.



[Reynolds's Political Map of the United States...](#) New York: Wm. C. Reynolds and J.C. Jones, c1856. [Map Collections](#). Geography & Map Division

During the Civil War, Reverdy Johnson strove to keep Maryland in the Union as exemplified in a major address to a Unionist meeting in January 1861. He maintained a close relationship with the Lincoln administration by serving as a member of the failed Washington Peace Conference that met in February 1861. Two years later, he was sent by President Lincoln to New Orleans to investigate complaints about the Union occupation of the city. Lincoln's suspension of the writ of habeas corpus was supported by Johnson as mentioned in a [letter](#) setting up a meeting between the two in April 1861.

Johnson was moderate in his attitude toward post-Civil War reconstruction of the rebellious Southern states. When [impeachment proceedings](#) were brought against [Andrew Johnson](#), largely for his lenient treatment of the South, Reverdy Johnson was instrumental in securing the president's acquittal.

Following a two-year appointment as minister to Great Britain from 1868-69, Johnson returned to his law practice in Annapolis where he died in 1876 as a result of a fall.

Learn More

- The Library's [Manuscript Division](#) holds the largest collection of Reverdy Johnson papers with correspondence relating to his early law career, Congressional terms, the 1862 investigation of General Benjamin Franklin Butler, and service as U.S. Minister to the Court of St. James. View the [online finding aid](#) to learn more about what is included in this collection.
- Search the [Abraham Lincoln Papers](#) to find correspondence with Reverdy Johnson.
- See the [Special Presentation](#) on the impeachment trial of President Andrew Johnson included in [A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774-1875](#).
- Visit the online exhibition [The African American Odyssey: A Quest for Full Citizenship](#) which explores black America's quest for equality from the early national period through the twentieth century. Also available is [The African-American Mosaic](#), the first Library-wide resource guide to the institution's African-American collections including books, periodicals, prints, photographs, music, film, and recorded sound covering 500 years of history.
- Search on keyword *Dred Scott* in [Slaves and the Courts, 1740 to 1860](#) to read more about this famous law case. Read, for example, [The Case of Dred Scott in the United States Supreme Court](#).
- See the presentation titled "[The Dred Scott Case](#)" mounted by the National Park Service in conjunction with Gateway Arch National Park and [St. Louis' Old Courthouse](#), where the first two trials of the Dred Scott case were held.

< May 21 >

Select date

May 21



Go

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