

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Hampton Roads Peace Conference of 1865

By James B. Conroy

Resources

If you can read only one book

Author	<i>Title</i> . City: Publisher, Year.
Conroy, James B.	<i>Our One Common Country: Abraham Lincoln and the Hampton Roads Peace Conference of 1865</i> . Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2014.

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Organizations

Web Resources

Other Sources

Scholars

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Topic Précis

The Hampton Roads Peace Conference culminated in a meeting between President Lincoln and Secretary of State William Seward with three Confederate commissioners with the aim of negotiating the end of the Civil War. It was held aboard the presidential steamboat *River Queen* on Friday, February 3, 1865 at Hampton Roads Virginia. Francis Preston Blair initiated the process in late December, passing through union lines with the knowledge of President Lincoln to meet with Jefferson Davis in Richmond. Blair proposed to Davis that Lee would retreat from Richmond into Mexico, pursued by Grant and the two armies would join together to fight the Emperor of Mexico. Reunion would follow, the South would abandon slavery for a chance to look Mexico and Davis would become President of Mexico. Davis endorsed this bizarre plan offering to send envoys to Lincoln to negotiate peace. Davis sent three commissioners who were members of a group trying to end the war. If they bought breathing room for the Confederacy Davis would take it, if they failed, they and their compatriots would be discredited. The Confederate commissioners duly moved through their lines and met with Grant at City Point. On February 2 Lincoln slipped out of Washington and met with the Confederate commissioners the next morning. Lincoln made it clear he had no interest in the idea of invading Mexico but offered in return for laying down of Confederate arms the lives, liberty, and property of all southerners and an agreeable postwar order. The northerners revealed that the Thirteenth Amendment freeing the slaves had passed in Congress and now awaited ratification of 2/3rds of the states. If the Confederates rejoined the union immediately, with 11 states, they could block ratification. Lincoln pointed out that Congress controlled when the Confederate states could rejoin the union. He also stated that he was in favor of compensation for emancipated slaves, though again Congress would decide that as well. At the heart of the negotiation was Lincoln's demand for immediate reunion which Davis refused to contemplate. Though ideas had been discussed there was no concrete proposal for peace. The Confederate commissioners returned to Richmond: Returning to Washington, Seward announced that the peace talks had failed, but Lincoln continued to work on a formal peace offer involving immediate reunion, ratification of the 13th Amendment, return of confiscated property except slaves, and compensation to be paid for freed slaves. Lincoln took his plan to his cabinet where he was unanimously rebuffed, and where he abandoned any further attempt to reach a peaceful settlement of the war. As the sure defeat of the Confederacy came closer day by day after the conference, Confederate leaders discussed reopening negotiations for peace along the lines discussed at the Hampton Roads Peace Conference, but no one was willing to take responsibility and act. Within a dozen weeks after the Hampton Roads conference, the Carolinas were looted, the better parts of Columbia and Richmond were burned, the Confederacy's leaders were jailed, Davis was captured in Georgia with a thinly escorted band of frightened women and children, and Lincoln was dead. So were 10,000 Union and Confederate soldiers who were killed fighting in the last battles as the Army of Northern Virginia retreated towards its end at Appomattox Courthouse. Years would pass before the occupied Southern states were admitted back into the Union.
