

# Introduction

*Robert Weible*

Theodore Roosevelt once told an audience of Civil War veterans that “there have been two great crises in our country’s history: first when it was formed, and then, when it was perpetuated.”<sup>1</sup> Roosevelt was himself a historian, and he was clearly on to something. His words are as true today as they were when he spoke them a century ago. Roosevelt was more than a historian, of course. He was also a proud New Yorker, and he would likely have agreed that there is no better way to view the second of America’s two great crises—whether in the twentieth century or the twenty-first—than through the lens of New Yorkers who witnessed the Civil War firsthand and who forever keep its memory alive.

New Yorkers have, in fact, been keeping those memories alive and making sense of them ever since the war ended in 1865. Just look at the New York landscape. There are Civil War monuments and memorials everywhere: in town squares and city parks and along roadsides in every corner of the state. Or just consider the New Yorkers who, to this day, participate in Civil War Roundtables, research the lives of their Civil War ancestors, and read and write books and articles of scholarly and popular interest. And understand that when the Civil War Sesquicentennial got underway in 2011, New Yorkers—through local and regional historical societies and museums, state humanities council programs, and private initiatives—demonstrated their unshakable determination to honor the heroism of their forebears while also making the war relevant for today’s audiences.

For its part, the New York State Museum developed a traveling exhibition entitled “The First Step to Freedom: Abraham Lincoln’s Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation.”

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1. Theodore Roosevelt, “The New Nationalism,” Speech, Osawatomie, Kansas, August 31, 1910.



MODEL, MONUMENT TO THE 122ND NY VOLUNTEER INFANTRY REGIMENT  
The 122nd New York Volunteer Infantry was known as the “Onondagas,” because it was raised in Onondaga County. This model is a replica of one that the State of New York dedicated on the Gettysburg Battlefield in 1888. The monument is topped by the cross that is the symbol of the Union 6th Army Corps and is fronted with a bronze of the Seal of the State of New York. *(Courtesy of the Onondaga Historical Association)*



**THEODORE PARKER LECTURING IN NEW YORK**

Parker was a prominent Boston Transcendentalist and one of the nation's most celebrated abolitionists. He advocated resistance to the Fugitive Slave Act and supported John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry. His speeches would inspire Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., Betty Friedan, and others. (*New York State Library, Manuscripts and Special Collections*)

The exhibit featured the State Library's copy of the Proclamation, along with the State Archives' copy of the 1962 speech in which Martin Luther King Jr. spoke to the document's enduring power. People in nine New York cities—from Long Island to the North Country and from the Hudson River to the Great Lakes—lined up for as long as three hours to see documents that continue to hold strong meaning for New Yorkers and other Americans today.

As it turns out, too, "The First Step to Freedom" was a prelude to an even bigger act of remembrance: the State Museum's opening of a nearly 7,000-square-foot exhibition entitled "An Irrepressible Conflict: The Empire State in the Civil War." As shown in the pages that follow, "An Irrepressible Conflict" interprets the Civil War in its entirety—from the early nineteenth century (when New York was the largest slave state in the North), through the war years themselves (when New York State supplied more men, money, and materiel to the war effort than any other state), and up to the memory of the war today (when New York continues to reflect and influence America's memory). This is indeed an "epic story of conflict and courage,"<sup>2</sup> and it is indeed a story about America that New Yorkers can tell better than anyone else. For years, historians and officials in other states—particularly in the South—insisted that slavery was a benevolent institution and that the Civil War was caused by Northern aggression and fought to settle a dispute over states' rights. This was an argument that was still persuasive fifty years ago, even among some New Yorkers.

Others, however, knew differently. They understood, as New York's William H. Seward did in 1858, that the Civil War was always an "irrepressible conflict." Two different societies—one free and the other slave—could never have co-existed harmoniously. Most New Yorkers (and many others) know this now, thanks in part to social and political upheavals and lessons learned during the last fifty years. The legacy of slavery lives on in the twenty-first century, too, and it raises continuing questions about race relations, the meaning of American freedom, the proper role of government, and a whole host of other issues at the heart of the American identity.

"An Irrepressible Conflict" opened to the public for a year-and-a-half on September 22, 2012, the 150th anniversary of Lincoln's Preliminary Emancipation, and it quickly gained popularity, not only among historians and Civil War enthusiasts, but also among children learning about the war for the first time and adults learning something new about the ways in which the war and its aftermath keep teaching us lessons about ourselves. Those of us who had the privilege of bringing the exhibit to life are grateful to our friends at SUNY Press for enabling us to keep "An Irrepressible Conflict" alive for years to come through this catalogue. And we are hoping that when 2062 rolls around, some of the kids (and maybe even some of the adults) who saw the show in 2012-13 will return to the New York State Museum to see a major exhibition entitled something like "The Irrepressible Conflict Continues." It promises to be quite an event.

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2. Paul Grondahl, "An epic story of conflict and courage: State Museum unveiling sweeping new exhibit on Civil War," *Albany Times-Union*, September 21, 2012.



CANNON CAISSON

A restored cannon caisson—a two-wheeled cart designed to carry artillery ammunition—manufactured at the U.S. Army's Watervliet Arsenal. The Arsenal at Watervliet continues operations today and remains the U.S. Army's longest continuously operational arsenal. (*New York State Museum Collection, H-1975.75.2*)