Many Marylanders found some measure of redemption in October 1864 when, by a slim margin, voters embraced a new state constitution declaring freedom for more than eighty thousand slaves in their state. Though born at the ballot box six months before the end of the Civil War, the conditions that helped bring emancipation to Maryland had been gestating for decades

Tobacco, that labor-intensive crop that thrived in the warm climate and rich soil of southern Maryland and the Eastern Shore, had long been the bedrock of Maryland slavery. However, years of overfertilization and lack of crop rotation had devastated soil and harvest. The response of Maryland planters, hiring free labor for seasonal crops such as wheat, grain, and cereals, had undermined slavery more insidiously than any outraged petition from abolitionists.[1]

Black Marylanders had much to do with winning their freedom. Beginning in 1861, slaves found sanctuary in two new places: federal army camps and, in the spring of 1862, the newly emancipated nation's capital. Starting in 1863 more than 8,700 black men from Maryland, free and slave, would join the United States Bureau of Colored Troops, to fight for cause and country alongside whites in the Union army.[2]

Since 1776, life had grown progressively worse for Maryland blacks. That year they could vote in House elections but by 1810 were disenfranchised by a Maryland legislature terrified of slave insurrection. Lawmakers managed to keep free blacks in a de facto bondage that could send them into slavery for such capricious reasons as being labeled runaways or being used to settle the debts of their former owners.[3]

Tobacco's decline during the first half of the nineteenth century meant fewer slaves. The free black population grew; slavery became concentrated in fewer areas and smaller numbers. "The most common slaveholding in Maryland in 1860 was one slave; half the slaveholders owned fewer than three slaves, three-fourths fewer than eight, and 90 percent fewer than fifteen slaves," wrote Barbara J. Fields. "A typical slaveholding in Maryland cannot have included both parties to a slave marriage, let alone all members of an immediate family." Owners mixed charity with frugality, freeing slaves or stipulating in newspaper advertisements and wills that they could not be sold outside of Maryland. But others unable to afford more than a few slaves tore families apart by selling husbands and wives, parents and children to different owners. Nonetheless, at the outbreak of the Civil War, many Marylanders who believed slavery constitutionally permissible by 1861 saw no profit in it. Others objected on moral grounds [4]

Into this volatile mix marched the Union army. By mid-1861, slaveholders were confronting military authorities in Maryland over the flow of slaves, or "contraband," into military camps. Lincoln, wary of alienating Unionist Maryland slave-