

Watch Night

Christian religious service

WRITTEN BY

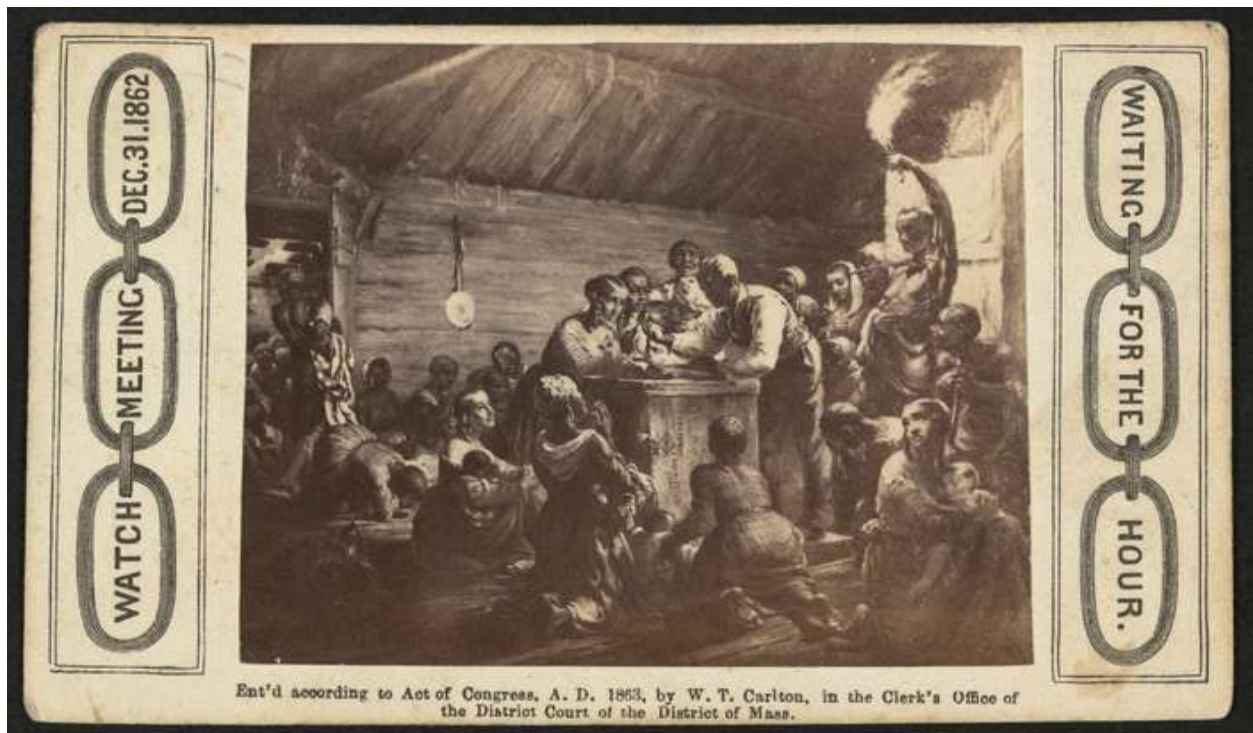
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Alternative Title: Freedom's Eve

Watch Night, also called **Freedom's Eve**, Christian religious service held on [New Year's Eve](#) and associated, in many [African American](#) churches, with a celebration and remembrance of the [Emancipation Proclamation](#) (enacted January 1, 1863), which freed slaves in the [Confederate states](#) during the [American Civil War](#). Many mainline Protestant churches in the [United States](#) [sponsor](#) a Watch Night service on New Year's Eve.



Watch Night An illustration of African Americans waiting for the Emancipation Proclamation. *Heard & Moseley, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (reproduction no. LC-DIG-ppmsca-10980)*

The tradition of Watch Night may be traced to the early 18th century in [Moravian](#) churches, when churchgoers began marking the occasion with a vigil to reflect upon the year past and to contemplate the one to come. [John Wesley](#) adopted the practice for his [Methodist](#) followers, who held similar vigils monthly with the full moon. It was given new significance among African Americans on December 31, 1862, when, according to tradition, slaves in the Confederate states gathered in churches and private homes on the night before U.S. Pres. [Abraham Lincoln](#)'s Emancipation Proclamation was expected to go into effect, pending his signing of the document. The soon-to-be-free slaves stayed awake all night and watched the night turn into a new dawn while waiting for news that the Emancipation Proclamation had been issued, thus making all the slaves legally free.

Church services on Watch Night generally begin sometime between 7:00 and 10:00 pm and end at midnight. The services tend to be attended by family groups. Many attendees go on to New Year's Eve parties afterward.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Watch-Night>. Accessed July 15, 2020.