

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE WHITE HOUSE

1900 – MODERN DAY



INTRODUCTION

The White House has figured prominently in many stories of the African American freedom struggle. Brave men and women battled to end slavery in the nineteenth century and continued the fight by working to secure the vote and challenge discrimination. Their paths often led to the Executive Mansion and the power that resides there. The twentieth century offered several examples of their stories and the actions taken by presidents and first ladies to support the fight for civil rights.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

Although notable figures such as Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth visited the White House (**Image 1**), it was not until 1901 that an African American was invited to dine with the president and first family. Theodore Roosevelt, the 26th president, asked civil rights leader Booker T. Washington to dinner at the White House on October 16, 1901. Washington was a well-regarded educator whose autobiography, *Up From Slavery*, was very popular at the time (**Image 2**). When news of this social visit hit the newspapers, many people questioned its propriety. No African American would be asked to the White House on a social call for the next twenty-eight years. Even then, First Lady Lou Hoover was admonished for inviting Jessie DePriest, the wife of a newly-elected congressman, to attend a traditional White House tea party.

In a watershed moment for the growing Civil Rights Movement, Marian Anderson performed at the Lincoln Memorial on April 9, 1939. The controversy that precipitated this performance involved Ms. Anderson, the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt (**Image 3**). When Anderson was denied the opportunity to perform at Constitution Hall by the DAR, Eleanor



Image 3

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE WHITE HOUSE

1900 – MODERN DAY



Roosevelt not only arranged for the performance to be moved to the Lincoln Memorial, but also resigned from the DAR. Afterward the Roosevelts asked Anderson to perform again, this time at a White House state dinner for the visiting British royals.

President Harry S. Truman's executive order integrating the Armed forces marked another bold action taken by the White House in support of African American equality (**Image 4**). Although Truman's order was met with resistance from military personnel and civilians, U.S. troops were almost entirely desegregated by the end of the Korean War. Truman's action provided opportunities to millions of African Americans, including Colin Powell. Powell climbed the ranks of the Army to become the first African American to serve as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, a group of senior military personnel who advise the president, and later to be unanimously confirmed by the United States Senate as the first African-American Secretary of State (**Image 5**).

Two legislative landmarks of the 1960s, the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965), resulted from the hard work of activists in cooperation with the White House. Civil Rights leaders met with both President John F. Kennedy and President Lyndon B. Johnson to advocate for these



Image 7

laws. Their passage signified a major victory for the African American freedom struggle (**Images 6 & 7**). Many of these leaders, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., joined President Johnson for the signing of the Civil Rights Act in the East Room of the White House in 1964 (**Image 8**). Johnson believed that the Civil Rights Act might be the most important piece of legislation since Abraham Lincoln signed

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE WHITE HOUSE

1900 – MODERN DAY



the Emancipation Proclamation, so he ignored those who advised him to sign the bill quietly without fanfare. Instead, he made his views about discrimination known during a televised ceremony of the signing: "Our Constitution, the foundation of our Republic, forbids it. The principles of our freedom forbid it. Morality forbids it. And the law I will sign tonight forbids it."

In the decades following the civil rights legislation, increasing numbers of African Americans would hold prominent positions in presidential administrations, including Condoleezza Rice, the first African American woman to serve as National Security Advisor and later Secretary of State (**Image 9**). However, it was not until the election of Barack Obama in 2008 that an African American would serve as President of the United States. In 2015, President Obama participated in the 50th anniversary of the civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery. The original 1965 march had been a demonstration for African American voting rights. Obama's participation in the anniversary march, alongside his family and some of the original organizers, symbolized the progress made toward equality over the previous fifty years.



Image 9

A powerful example of the relationship between the White House and the African American freedom struggle can be found in the words of First Lady Michelle Obama at the 2016 Democratic National Convention (**Image 10**). Herself a descendant of enslaved African Americans, she identified her position as first lady as an important signifier: "I wake up every morning in a house that was built by slaves. And I watch my daughters, two beautiful, intelligent, black young women playing with their dogs on the White House lawn." Although work remains in the fight for racial equality, it is undeniable that African Americans have made remarkable strides in this effort, frequently employing the power of the president to support the cause.




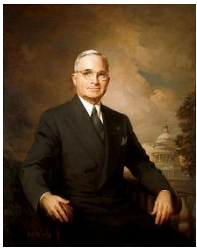
AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE WHITE HOUSE

1900 – MODERN DAY



IMAGES






Click on web link to access online and for larger viewing

Source	Title	Date	Created By	Courtesy Of	Thumbnail	Web Link
1	Abraham Lincoln and Sojourner Truth	1864	R. D. Bayley	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Abraham%20Lincoln/1543.tif.info
2	Booker T. Washington	Ca. 1910	Peter P. Jones	Library of Congress		https://www.loc.gov/item/2013649123/
3	Eleanor Roosevelt with Marian Anderson in the Japan	1953	Unknown	Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Franklin%20D%20Roosevelt/2685.tif.info
4	Harry S. Truman	1947	Martha Greta Kempton	White House Collection/ White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/23.tif.info

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE WHITE HOUSE

1900 – MODERN DAY




5	President Bush meets with Colin Powell in the Oval Office	2001	Eric Draper	George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/George%20W%20Bush/1743.tif.info
6	The President's Meeting with the Leaders of the March on Washington	1963	Unknown	John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/John%20F%20Kennedy/2679.tif.info
7	President Lyndon B. Johnson with Civil Rights Leaders in the Oval Office	1964	Yoichi Okamoto	Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Lyndon%20B%20Johnson/6236.tif.info
8	President Johnson signing the Civil Rights Act in the East Room	1964	Cecil Stoughton	Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/1514.tif.info
9	Condoleezza Rice and George W. Bush in the Oval Office	2001	Eric Draper	George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/George%20W%20Bush/5708.tif.info

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE WHITE HOUSE

1900 – MODERN DAY



10	Michelle Obama	2009	Joyce N. Boghosian	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Portraits/9394.tif.info
----	----------------	------	--------------------	------------------------------------	---	---

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Text: Executive Order 9981 by President Harry S. Truman “Establishing the President’s Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity In the Armed Forces” from the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum. [Click here.](#)
- Video: President John F. Kennedy’s Civil Rights Address on June 11, 1963 from the Library of Congress’ *The Civil Rights Act of 1964: A Long Struggle for Freedom* exhibit. [Click here.](#)
- Letters: Related to the Eleanor Roosevelt and Marian Anderson controversy with the Daughters of the American Revolution in 1939 from the National Archives and Records Administration. [Click here.](#)

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE WHITE HOUSE

1900 – MODERN DAY



SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

- Have students reflect on the quote from First Lady Michelle Obama’s 2016 Democratic National Convention speech:

“That is the story of this country, the story that has brought me to this stage tonight, the story of generations of people who felt the lash of bondage, the shame of servitude, the sting of segregation, but who kept on striving and hoping and doing what needed to be done so that today I wake up every morning in a house that was built by slaves. And I watch my daughters, two beautiful, intelligent, black young women playing with their dogs on the White House lawn.”

 - Enhance the conversation by learning more about “Slavery and the White House” on the White House Historical Association’s website. [Click here.](#)
- Research avenues of the freedom struggle that did not seek presidential support or influence. Compare and contrast your findings with the events mentioned in the contextual essay.
- Create a class debate on the question: was the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 or the Civil Rights Act of 1964 more significant in the freedom struggle. Remember to have students research the limitations of each.
 - Follow up conversation: Is it possible to compare two historical events that happened 100 years apart from each other? Why or why not?