

Slavery, Freedom, and the White House



INTRODUCTION

Many people think of the White House as a symbol of democracy, but it is also a part of America's history of slavery. When construction of the White House began in 1792, enslaved people provided most of the labor. Enslaved people have also worked and lived in the White House under multiple presidents. Even after slavery was abolished in Washington, DC in 1862, formerly enslaved people continued to have impacts on the White House through meetings with presidents and writing about their own experiences there. The stories of these individuals, working under the oppressive institution of slavery in the "People's House," demonstrate the sharp contrast between slavery and the freedom that the White House has long represented.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY



Image 1. Modern painting of the White House construction site and its surroundings as it may have appeared in 1796 (2007).

After Congress passed the Residence Act on July 16, 1790, establishing the location for the new capital city of Washington, D.C. along the Potomac River, President George Washington took an active role overseeing construction in the Federal City. He appointed three commissioners for the District of Columbia in January 1791 to manage federal construction projects. Soon after selecting the commissioners, President Washington

appointed French-born engineer Pierre Charles L'Enfant to survey, map, and plan the new city. Together, they selected the site for the White House. The following year, the commissioners announced and advertised a national design competition for the President's House. Irish-born architect James Hoban's design was selected, and White House construction officially began.

Originally, the commissioners hoped to primarily hire paid craftsmen and white wage laborers to construct the White House. However, due to high costs, low worker turnout, and familiarity with the institution of slavery—many enslavers were involved in White House construction, including

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architect James Hoban and President George Washington—free and enslaved people of African descent were hired out alongside American and European craftsman and white wage laborers. Enslaved people were brought on to this project on a contract hire basis meaning that the wages they earned went directly to their enslavers. View **Image 1**, above, to see a modern painting entitled *A Vision Takes Form*. The painting illustrates the White House construction site and its surroundings as it may have appeared in 1796.



Image 2. Photograph of Paul Jennings
(ca. 1850).

According to surviving documentation, at least nine presidents relied on enslaved labor at the White House. Early presidents, including Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe, brought enslaved people to the White House. Paul Jennings, seen in **Image 2** to the left, was enslaved at birth in 1799 at Montpelier—the Virginia estate of James and Dolley Madison. When James Madison won the election in 1808, the family brought Jennings to the White House. Jennings worked as President Madison’s valet but often fell under First Lady Dolley Madison’s authority as a dining room servant.

During the War of 1812, the British marched into the capital city and set fire to the White House. According to popular folklore, First Lady Dolley Madison personally saved the infamous portrait of President George Washington, cutting it out of its frame and carrying it off as wagons and carts departed the White House. Paul Jennings, however, later stated in his memoir that the myth surrounding Dolley Madison’s independent rescue of the painting was “totally false.” In reality, enslaved workers and staff—including Jennings—saved the portrait. The first lady sold Jennings to a local insurance agent in 1846. Soon after, Senator Daniel Webster bought Jennings and Jennings entered into a work agreement to purchase his own freedom. View **Image 3**, in the chart, to see a photograph of Paul Jennings’ 1847 work agreement with Daniel

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Webster. In 1865, Jennings published the first White House memoir, *A Colored Man's Reminiscences of James Madison*.

After Madison's presidency, enslaved individuals continued to staff the White House. Presidents John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson, Martin Van Buren, John Tyler, James K. Polk, and Zachary Taylor all used enslaved labor during their administrations. Unfortunately, it is difficult to uncover details about these enslaved individuals—including their names—because they are not often included in the historical record.



Image 5. Photograph of Alfred Jackson.

Because enslaved people had little access to education and were often barred from learning how to read and write, they rarely left any written accounts about their experiences. Although some stories, such as Gracy Bradley's narrative, have survived. In 1832, President Andrew Jackson purchased an enslaved woman named Gracy Bradley as a wedding present for his son's new wife, Sarah Yorke. Refer to **Image 4**, in the chart, to see an excerpt from President Jackson's bank book for March 23, 1832, showing a check of \$400 for Gracy Bradley. When Andrew Jackson, Jr. and Sarah Yorke Jackson moved into the White House in 1834, Gracy Bradley and her sister, Louisa, were assigned to work for them. In the White House, Gracy worked as a lady's maid and expert seamstress while Louisa served as a nurse for Sarah's young children. After Andrew Jackson's presidency ended, Gracy and Louisa returned to the Jackson family home and plantation, The Hermitage in Tennessee, and married members of the enslaved community there. After the Civil War, most of the enslaved workers left The Hermitage. Gracy Bradley and her husband Alfred Jackson, seen in **Image 5** above, chose to stay. By the 1880s, they were the only ones left living at the old plantation with the elderly Sarah Yorke Jackson.

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Abraham Lincoln's presidency marked a turning point for African Americans, both at the White House and across the nation. In April 1862, Congress passed the Compensated Emancipation Act, ending slavery in Washington, D.C. While this legislation delivered long-awaited freedom to more than 3,000 men, women, and children in the nation's capital, emancipation did not extend beyond the boundaries of the District of Columbia. Moreover, slave owners were financially reimbursed for their "losses." President Lincoln's 1863 Emancipation Proclamation declared that all enslaved people in the Confederacy and all other rebelling territories were free. While the order did not address slavery's status in the Border States (Maryland, Delaware, Kentucky, and Missouri—all states loyal to the Union that permitted slavery) or in southern states already under Union control, the proclamation transformed the meaning of the war and turned the Union forces into an army of liberation. It also allowed African Americans to enlist in the Union Army, and by the end of the war more than 200,000 Black soldiers and sailors contributed to the national fight for freedom.

Abraham Lincoln met with several important abolitionist leaders during his presidency. Frederick Douglass, a formerly enslaved man who dedicated his life to advocating for enslaved and free African Americans, visited the White House to speak with President Lincoln in 1863 and 1864. See a photograph of Frederick Douglass in **Image 6**, to the right. In 1864, Sojourner Truth, a formerly enslaved abolitionist and women's rights activist, also met with Lincoln at the White House to discuss emancipation. **Image 7**, in the chart below, features an 1864 painting of President Abraham Lincoln showing Sojourner Truth a bible gifted to him by African Americans from Baltimore, Maryland.

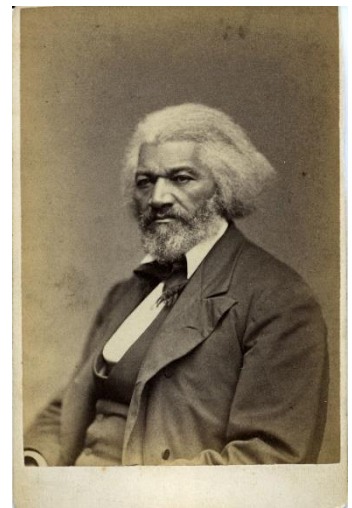


Image 6. Photograph of Frederick Douglass (ca. 1879).

The Lincoln family also maintained professional relationships and friendships with many free Black Washingtonians. For example, First Lady Mary Lincoln had a close relationship with her dressmaker

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Image 8. Photograph of Elizabeth Keckly (1861).

Elizabeth Keckly—seen in **Image 8**, on the following page. Elizabeth Keckly was enslaved at birth in Virginia. She purchased her freedom for herself and her son, George, by sewing dresses for paying customers. In 1860, Keckly moved to Washington, D.C. and was a sought-after dressmaker to the most notable women in the city. By 1861, she was an almost daily presence in the White House, where she fitted Mrs. Lincoln's clothes, dressed her for formal events, and became her trusted friend. Mary Lincoln and Elizabeth Keckly both experienced the tragic loss of their sons—a suffering that fostered a remarkable bond between the two women.

William Slade, pictured in **Image 9** in the chart, also worked closely with President Lincoln. His title was White House Usher, one of the most prestigious positions available to a Black Washingtonian during the Civil War. He worked directly under the White House Steward, who managed and oversaw operations of the house. Slade arranged formal events, served at dinner parties, prepared special dishes, and managed other members of the White House staff. Outside of the White House, Slade was an abolitionist leader and a friend of Frederick Douglass. He advocated for the safety and success of formerly enslaved people, led a mutual aid association, and had a personal friendship with President Lincoln. He often provided the president with valued feedback and direction on speeches, policy, and other matters. After Lincoln's presidency, Slade continued to serve as a White House Usher during Andrew Johnson's presidency was later promoted to White House Steward.

After the Civil War, the struggle for equal rights seemed within reach—especially in the nation's capital. During Reconstruction, the time immediately following the Civil War until 1877, Congress passed three significant amendments to the United States Constitution. The 13th Amendment officially abolished the institution of slavery in the United States. The 14th Amendment guaranteed citizenship to “all persons born or naturalized in the United States,” including formerly enslaved individuals. The

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15th Amendment granted African American men the right to vote. Despite its ratification, however, African American voters were continuously disenfranchised, or denied the right to vote, by Black Codes, poll taxes, literacy tests, and violence. In the following years, the emergence of racist Jim Crow laws and the landmark 1896 Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*—which legalized segregation and gave rise to the popular phrase “separate but equal”—further solidified racism and inequality in America’s laws. Although the struggle to end slavery was over, the fight for freedom and equality under the law had only just begun.



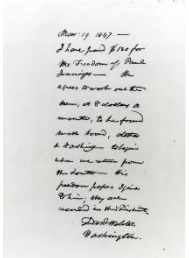
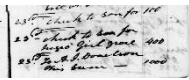
We often think of the White House as a home and office for the President and First Family and a museum for the American people, but it is important to remember that the White House was also a place where enslaved people lived and worked. Research into the enslaved individuals that built, lived, and worked in the White House is ongoing and allows us to better understand our nation’s complicated past and the contradictory relationship between slavery and freedom in Washington, D.C.

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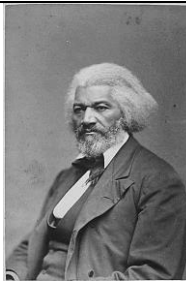



IMAGES

Click on web link to access online and for larger viewing.

	Title	Date	Created By	Courtesy Of	Thumbnail	Web Link
1	A Vision Takes Form: The White House Under Construction, 1796	2007	Peter Waddell	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital-Library/Main%20Index/Construction%20&%20Maintenance/8697.tif.info
2	Paul Jennings	Mid-Nineteenth Century	E.C. Perry Photography	The Estate of Sylvia Jennings Alexander		https://www.whitehousehistory.org/photos/african-american-history-in-the-white-house-photo-1
3	Paul Jennings' Work Agreement with Daniel Webster	March 19, 1847	Daniel Webster	Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University		https://www.whitehousehistory.org/photos/photo-2-23
4	Excerpt from bank book, showing a check for \$400 "to son for Negro Girl Grace"	March 23, 1832	Andrew Jackson	Library of Congress, Manuscript Division		https://www.whitehousehistory.org/photos/check-for-gracey-bradley

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5	Alfred Jackson	Unknown	Unknown	Andrew Jackson's The Hermitage, Nashville, TN		https://www.whitehousehistory.org/photos/alfred-jackson
6	Frederick Douglass	Ca. 1879	Frank Legg	National Archives and Records Administration		https://catalog.archives.gov/id/558770
7	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
8	A Photograph of Elizabeth Keckly	1861	Unknown	Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University		https://www.whitehousehistory.org/photos/photo-1-57
9	William Slade	Unknown	Unknown	Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum		https://www.whitehousehistory.org/photos/william-slade

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Anywhere Activity

- “Design a Dress Like Elizabeth Keckly” by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)

Articles

- “Building the White House” by Lina Mann for the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- “Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln” by Sarah Fling for the White House Historical Association [Click here.](#)
- “From Slavery to the White House: The Extraordinary Life of Elizabeth Keckly” by Lina Mann for the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- “Gracy Bradley's White House” by Callie Hopkins for the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- “Paul Jennings: Slave, Freedman, and White House memoirist” by Matthew Costello for the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- “Slavery’s Mark on Lincoln’s White House” by Matthew Costello for the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)

Research Initiative

- “Slavery in the President’s Neighborhood” by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)

Videos

- “Elizabeth Keckly: From Slavery to the White House” by the White House Historical Association in partnership with UNTOLD. [Watch here.](#)

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- “The Enslaved Household of Thomas Jefferson” by the White House Historical Association in partnership with UNTOLD. [Watch here.](#)
- “The Burning of the White House” by the White House Historical Association in partnership with UNTOLD. [Watch here.](#)
- “White House Valets” by the White House Historical Association in partnership with UNTOLD. [Watch here.](#)
- “Emancipation Proclamation Exposed” by UNTOLD. [Watch here.](#)

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

For all learners:

- Explore the *Slavery in the President’s Neighborhood* Timeline to learn more about the enslaved and formerly enslaved individuals living and working in the households of our nation’s early presidents. [Click here.](#)
- Often, when we think of slavery, the image of large plantations comes to mind. But slavery was very present in urban cities, like Washington, D.C., as well. Explore the virtual tour of the Decatur House Slave Quarters—one of the only remaining physical legacies of slavery in sight of the White House. [Click here.](#)

For older learners:

- According to meticulous research, over 200 known enslaved individuals labored on the White House and Capitol Building. View a list of all known enslaved people who were associated with the White House [here](#). There are likely many more enslaved people who worked on these federal building projects and remain unknown—their names are either lost to history or await future discovery. Determining anything more than an enslaved individual’s first name is very

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difficult. Write a reflective essay about how the index makes you feel and any questions you may have after engaging with it. Feel free to send any questions to spn@whha.org.

- Frederick Douglass delivered many eloquent speeches denouncing the institution of slavery that received national attention. In 1852, Douglass gave what is now his best-known speech, “What to a Slave is the Fourth of July?” Read an excerpt from the address by the Smithsonian Museum of African American History & Culture [here](#). Reflect on the speech. Share your thoughts with a classmate, friend, or family member.
- If you’re interested in learning more about Elizabeth Keckly, search your local public or school library for her autobiography, *Behind the Scenes or Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House*, published in 1868.

For younger learners:

- Read the stories of seamstresses Gracy Bradley and Elizabeth Keckly in the contextual essay. Design and draw a dress pattern that celebrates their stories about slavery and freedom using the “Design a Dress Like Elizabeth Keckly” Anywhere Activity. [Click here](#).
- Read “Brick by Brick” by Charles R. Smith Jr. to learn about how enslaved laborers helped construct the White House.