

INTRODUCTION

Although many people think of the White House as a symbol of democracy, it is also a part of our country's history of slavery. From the start of White House construction in 1792 until emancipation took effect in Washington, D.C. in 1862, enslaved men, women, and children labored at the Executive Mansion. The stories of these individuals, working under the oppressive institution of slavery in the "People's House," demonstrate a stark contrast to the ideals of freedom and democracy that the White House has long represented.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

After Congress decided on the location for the new national capital, an Irish architect named James Hoban won the design competition for the President's House – now known today as the White House. Three commissioners, appointed by President George Washington, were selected from the local landowning elite to oversee the construction of public buildings. At the start of construction, the commissioners wanted to hire many skilled craftsmen to construct the Executive Mansion. However, due to high costs and low worker turnout, they were only able to hire a handful of European and American craftsmen. As a result, the commissioners relied heavily on enslaved and free African-American laborers to complete the White House (**Image 1**).

According to surviving documentation, at least nine presidents relied on enslaved labor at the White House. Early presidents, such as Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe, brought enslaved people to the White House. One of these individuals was Paul Jennings, who worked as President Madison's manservant and valet (**Image 2**). While at the Executive Mansion, Jennings, along with other enslaved workers and staff, famously saved important objects and



Image 2

documents from the building under the direction of First Lady Dolley Madison before it was burned by British troops in 1814. Dolley sold Jennings in 1846. Soon after Senator Daniel Webster bought Jennings, who then entered into a work agreement with Webster to purchase his own freedom (**Image 3**). In 1865, Jennings went on to publish the first White House memoir, *A Colored Man's Reminiscences of James Madison*.

Following Madison's presidency, enslaved people 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 know many details about these enslaved individuals, including their names, because they are not often discussed in historical documents.

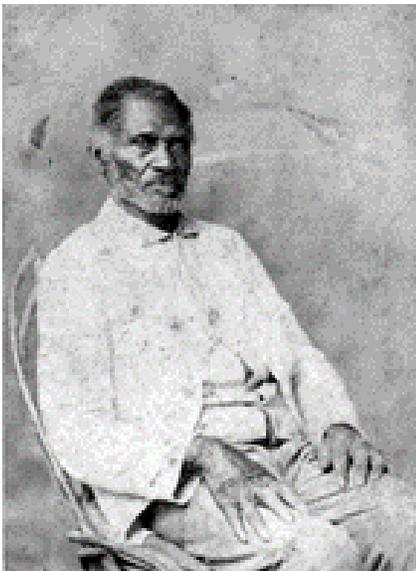


Image 5

Most enslaved individuals were never allowed to learn how to read and write—as a result, they did not leave behind written records. However, some stories have survived, such as Gracy Bradley's narrative. In 1832, President Andrew Jackson purchased an enslaved woman named Gracy Bradley as a wedding present for his son, Andrew Jackson, Jr. and his new wife, Sarah Yorke (**Image 4**). In 1834, Sarah Yorke Jackson went to live at the White House, bringing Gracy Bradley and Gracy's sister, Louisa, to the White House. While serving in the White House, Gracy worked as a lady's maid and expert seamstress. Meanwhile, Louisa served as a nurse for Sarah's young children. At the conclusion of Jackson's presidency, Gracy and Louisa returned to Jackson's home, The Hermitage, where they married into the enslaved community there. After the Civil War, Gracy Bradley and her husband, Alfred Jackson (**Image 5**), continued living on that plantation with Sarah York Jackson into the 1880s.

SLAVERY, FREEDOM, AND THE WHITE HOUSE



Abraham Lincoln's presidency marked a turning point for African Americans, both across the nation and at the White House. First, Lincoln signed the Compensated Emancipation Act on April 16, 1862. This legislation freed enslaved individuals in the District of Columbia, but also financially reimbursed those who had legally owned them. However, this idea did not extend beyond the capital's boundaries. The Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 formally freed slaves in the Confederacy and all other rebelling territories, but Lincoln stopped short of complete emancipation because he feared losing the Border States (Maryland, Delaware, Kentucky, and Missouri – all states that permitted slavery). However, this document transformed the meaning of the Civil War and formally allowed African Americans to enlist in the Union Army.

Throughout his presidency, Lincoln met with several important figures working to end slavery and provide equal rights for all. In 1863 and 1864, Frederick Douglass, a formally enslaved man who became a national leader for abolitionists, visited the White House to speak with Lincoln (**Image 6**). Another former enslaved individual and activist, Sojourner Truth met with Lincoln at the Executive Mansion in 1864 to discuss emancipation and advocate for all African Americans (**Image 7**).

The Lincoln family also had professional relationships and friendships with many free black Washingtonians. One such relationship was between First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln and Elizabeth Keckley, her dressmaker (**Image 8**). Keckley was born into slavery in Virginia but through her expertise in dressmaking, made enough money to purchase her freedom. In 1860, she moved to Washington, D.C. and became a sought-after dressmaker to the most important women in the city, including the first lady. Both Mary Todd Lincoln and Elizabeth Keckley experienced the tragic loss of their sons, a suffering that created a bond between the two women.



Image 8

SLAVERY, FREEDOM, AND THE WHITE HOUSE

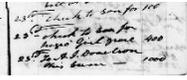


William Slade also worked closely with President Lincoln (**Image 9**). He served as White House Usher – one of the more prestigious positions available to a black Washingtonian during the Civil War. In this role, Slade worked directly under the White House Steward, who managed the operation of the house. Slade helped to coordinate formal events, delivered messages for the president, and managed other members of the White House staff. Outside of the Executive Mansion, Slade was a major leader in black Washington and a friend of Frederick Douglass. Slade advocated for the safety and success of formerly enslaved people and led a mutual aid association. Beyond these responsibilities, Slade had a close, personal friendship with President Lincoln. He often provided the president with valued feedback and direction in oratory, policy, and other matters. After Lincoln's death, Slade continued as White House Usher during Andrew Johnson's presidency, and eventually was promoted to role of White House Steward.

Once the Civil War ended, the struggle for emancipation and equal rights seemed within reach. The 13th Amendment abolished slavery across the United States; the 14th Amendment guaranteed citizenship to “all persons born or naturalized in the United States”, including those formerly enslaved; and the 15th Amendment guaranteed African-American men the right to vote. However, those years also saw the rise of Black Codes, Jim Crow laws, and the pivotal court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which legalized segregation with the popular phrase “separate but equal.” The struggle to end slavery was over, but the fight for freedom and equality under the law had only just begun.

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-grace-bradley

SLAVERY, FREEDOM, AND THE WHITE HOUSE



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 Keckley	1861	Unknown	Moorland-Spingarn 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



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Website: “Slavery in the President’s Neighborhood” initiative from the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Article: “Building the White House” by Lina Mann, White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Article: “Paul Jennings: Slave, Freedman, and White House memoirist” by Matthew Costello, White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Article: “Gracy Bradley's White House” by Callie Hopkins, White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Article: “Slavery’s Mark on Lincoln’s White House” by Matthew Costello, White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Article: “Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln” by Sarah Fling, White House Historical Association [Click here.](#)



SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

- When many students think of slavery, the image of large farming plantations comes to mind, but slavery was also happening in urban cities like Washington, D.C. Explore the virtual tour of the urban Slave Quarters at Decatur House which sits a block away from the White House- [click here](#).
- The stories of skilled seamstresses Gracy Bradley and Elizabeth Keckley told in the contextual essay. Design and draw a dress pattern that celebrates their stories about slavery and freedom.
 - Want to learn more about Elizabeth Keckley- search your local public or school library for her autobiography published in 1868 titled, *Behind the Scenes or Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House*.
- Read the “Index of Enslaved Individuals” who were associated with the White House- [click here](#), and Frederick Douglass’ “The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro”- [click here](#). Compose a reflective essay about what these resources makes your feel and any questions you may have after reading. Feel free to send your questions to spn@whha.org.