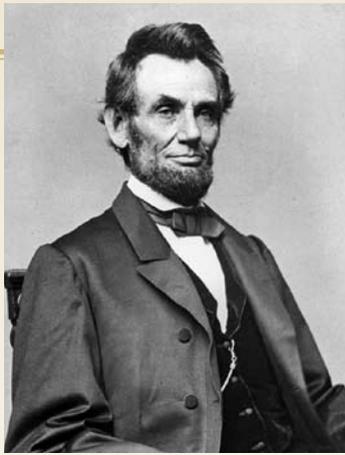
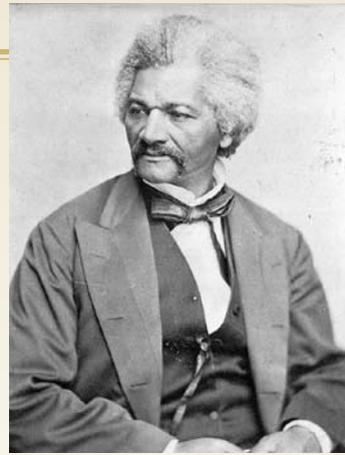


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# LINCOLN *AND* DOUGLASS:

## *Hope, Ambivalence, and Change*

Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass were **inextricably bound by history, the Civil War—and mutual respect.**

BY JAMES OLIVER HORTON



Few relationships in American history have been more remarkable than the relationship between Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln. Douglass was a former slave who had lived a good portion of his adult life as a free man in the North. Lincoln was born a southerner in a rough-hewn cabin near Hodgenville, Kentucky, but he too had spent most of his adult life in the North, working a series of odd jobs before becoming a lawyer and a leading politician in Illinois and, in 1860, the first Republican president of

the United States. Although the two men recognized some slight similarities in their early lives—both were, for example, largely self-educated—a relationship of mutual respect between a former slave and a sitting president was unique, to say the least.

Douglass escaped from slavery in Maryland in 1838 and found shelter with the Underground Railroad's Vigilance Committee in New York City. He was joined there by Anna Murray, a free black woman from Maryland who had helped him escape. The two married and lived

for a short time in New York before moving to New Bedford, Massachusetts, where Douglass became one of the abolition movement's most effective antislavery speakers. In 1845, he set out on a lecture tour of Ireland, Scotland, and England and was enthusiastically received by European supporters of American antislavery who raised funds to purchase his freedom. When Douglass returned to the U.S., he moved his family to Rochester, New York, where he started a newspaper, *The North Star*, and for more than thirty years



*Artist Francis Bicknell Carpenter re-created Lincoln's first reading of the Emancipation Proclamation to members of his cabinet. The original painting toured the country and was a huge success, and today hangs in the U.S. Capitol. This engraved adaptation of the painting (by New Yorker A.H. Ritchie) became a best-seller.*

edited a variety of newspapers that focused on issues of racial justice and equality.

Through the 1850s, Douglass became one of the most respected and influential abolitionists in the nation. His measured support of Lincoln's presidential candidacy in 1860 was based on his pragmatic analysis of national politics at mid-century. In Geneva, New York before the election, he addressed an antislavery crowd skeptical of Lincoln's qualified and relatively mild opposition to slavery, arguing that although Lincoln was not the perfect abolitionist presidential choice, a Republican winner would be a victory "over the wickedly aggressive pro-slavery sentiment of the country." He hoped that such a victory might be a step toward legitimizing abolition in the eyes of American voters and that it might move the nation in an antislavery direction.

### Rumors of War

The slave South feared as much. Within a few months of Lincoln's election, and before he could be inaugurated, the southern slave states, beginning with South Carolina in December 1860, declared their secession from the nation and established themselves as the Confederate States of America. In his March 1861 inaugural address, Lincoln expressed his intention to resolve this national crisis without warfare. Yet in April, after Confederate troops attacked and captured Fort Sumter in South Carolina, war seemed unavoidable.

Douglass' reaction, like that of many African Americans and abolitionists, was hopeful. "God be praised," he exclaimed, calling this Civil War "the American Apocalypse" and arguing that "not a slave should be left a slave in the returning footprints of the American army

gone to put down this slaveholding rebellion."

Despite his optimism about the new administration, however, Douglass shared many of the misgivings that Lincoln created among abolitionists during his pre-presidential political career. During his unsuccessful run for the U.S. Senate in 1858, Lincoln had confronted the attempt by his Democratic opponent, Stephen A. Douglas, to portray him as an abolitionist who favored racial equality. In a series of political debates, Douglas used race as an effective weapon to discredit Lincoln with Illinois voters. In Freeport, he told a jeering white crowd that he had seen Douglass riding in a carriage with a white woman, implying that Lincoln's policies would sanction such practices. In a presentation in Charleston, he claimed that Lincoln considered "Fred. Douglass, The Negro" a friend and that Lincoln's "colored brethren" were committed to the success "of their brother Abe."

Lincoln fully understood the power of such charges, and he defended himself with strong declarations of his belief in white supremacy. "I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races," he declared. Although he was committed to the containment of slavery, not allowing it to expand into the western territories, Lincoln explained that he believed the Constitution

protected the slave property of southern slaveholders.

This stand on slavery's protection deeply concerned those who hoped, as Douglass did, that Lincoln's election might lead to abolition. In the 1861 inaugural address, Lincoln sought to assure slaveholders that they had nothing to fear from his administration. "I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists," he said. He then went on to add his personal stand on the question of slavery, as he had done during the Senate race two years before. Assuring slaveholders that he would enforce the strict Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, Lincoln added, "I believe I have no lawful right to do so [interfere with slavery], and I have no inclination to do so."

This did not convince the South. Yet his words, especially his willingness to "cheerfully" support the Fugitive Slave Law that ignored the rights of any African American accused of being a runaway, surely raised abolitionists' fears. Many blacks came to agree with Thomas Hamilton's editorial in New York City's *Weekly Anglo-African*, which had charged before the election that a Lincoln government would only represent "the fag end of a series of pro-slavery administrations."

### Lincoln Rethinks Slavery

Thus even as the bloody war progressed, Douglass had

good reason to wonder if it would really lead to the end of slavery. Lincoln's actions early in the war raised additional skepticism when he reversed military orders that freed slaves as Union forces advanced through the South. In November 1861, Lincoln actually fired General John C. Fremont after the latter issued a general emancipation order for northern Missouri. In May 1862 in South Carolina, General David Hunter went beyond Fremont's actions, not only freeing slaves but also forming them into a military unit to serve the Union cause. Lincoln revoked the emancipation order and disbanded Hunter's black regiment.

Then, in the fall of 1862, Lincoln reversed his own actions, announcing that on the first day of 1863 he would issue a proclamation freeing all slaves belonging to those then in rebellion against the federal government. Douglass reacted immediately in the pages of his newspaper, *Douglass' Monthly*. While impatient with what he saw as Lincoln's "...own peculiar, cautious, forbearing and hesitating way...", Douglass remained hopeful. Surely, he wrote, "[c]ommon sense, the necessities of war, to say nothing of the dictation of justice and humanity, have at last prevailed."

After months of nervous anticipation, the forces of antislavery were relieved when, on New Year's Day, 1863, Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation. Not only did it

declare freedom for all slaves held by rebel masters, it also reinstated General Hunter's efforts by authorizing the recruitment of African Americans into the Union armed forces. Douglass was among those who agreed to recruit troops for African American regiments, but he was greatly disturbed when he discovered that the pay for blacks was roughly half that provided to whites at the same rank. This pay inequity issue was, in fact, the subject of the first conversation that Douglass and Lincoln ever had.

Douglass recalled that he had first met Lincoln in August 1863. He had come to Washington to confer with federal officials about the unequal pay and treatment imposed on African American troops. After conversations with some members of Congress and Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, Douglass sought an audience with the president. Surprisingly, after presenting his card at the White House, Lincoln received him. Douglass found this one of the most memorable experiences of his life.

Later that year, at the annual meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society in Philadelphia, Douglass related this experience to an enthusiastic crowd. "Perhaps you may like to know," he told the gathering, "how the President of the United States received a black man at the White House." To great applause, he explained that the White House messenger

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had respectfully invited him into Lincoln’s office, referring to him as “Mr. Douglass.” Lincoln rose as Douglass entered. Reaching out his hand, the president said, “Mr. Douglass, I know you; I have read about you, and Mr. Seward [William Seward, secretary of state] has told me about you.” Douglass went on to say that Lincoln “...put me at ease at once,” receiving this former slave “just as you have seen one gentleman receive another; with a hand and a voice well-balanced between a kind cordiality and a respectful reserve.” Although Lincoln did not promise immediate action on the pay equity issue, he was clear that the service of African American troops had greatly impressed him. He mentioned specifically the victories of black regiments over Confederate forces at Miliken’s Bend, Port Hudson, and Fort Wagner. As Douglass remembered it, the president agreed that “ultimately they would receive the same [pay].” He left the meeting much impressed that the president had treated him as an equal and attentively listened to his arguments. He saw in Lincoln a man much like himself, sincere, self-educated, and self-made, and believed him to be worthy of “the prefix Honest” before the nickname “Abe.”

Lincoln was similarly impressed with Douglass, who encouraged Lincoln’s progression toward a more definite antislavery position.

The change was apparent in Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address after his re-election in 1864. Unlike his first inaugural, when he pledged not to move against slavery in places where it currently existed, this time he linked the hardships of war to the sinfulness of slavery. Perhaps, Lincoln speculated, the Almighty would continue to punish America “until all the wealth piled by the bondman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword.” For Douglass, these words were further proof of “the solid gravity of [Lincoln’s] character.”

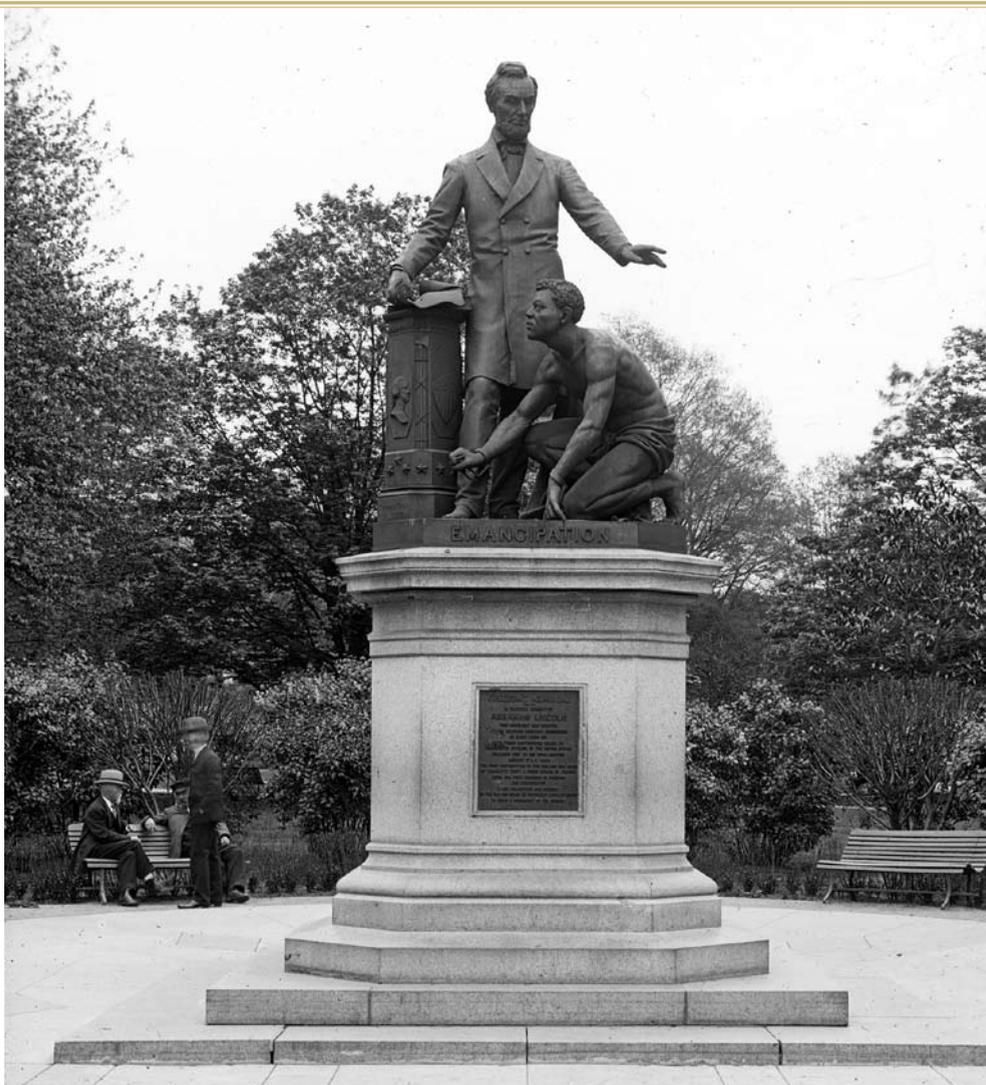
As a further sign of respect, Lincoln invited Douglass to a White House reception after the second inaugural, a gesture unprecedented in presidential history. After assuring skeptical White House officials that he was a guest of the president, Douglass entered the reception, and Lincoln publicly acknowledged his presence. “Here comes my friend Douglass,” Lincoln announced to his guests. Then, taking Douglass’ hand, he said, “I am glad to see you. I saw you in the crowd today, listening to my inaugural address; how did you like it?” Then, adding a final personal touch, Lincoln explained, “There is no man in the country whose opinion I value more than yours.” Douglass complimented the

speech, whereupon Lincoln thanked him.

### **“It Made Us Kin”**

Both men were well aware of the significance of race for their time. Lincoln had dealt with other blacks during his time in the White House, but never on such an equal footing as with Douglass, while Douglass was realistic in his understanding of Lincoln’s racial assumptions and never regarded him as a thoroughgoing racial egalitarian. Still, long after Lincoln’s assassination in 1865, Douglass remembered him fondly. In 1876, President Ulysses S. Grant unveiled the Freedmen’s Monument in Washington, D.C., dedicated to Lincoln’s memory. Douglass then delivered a speech gracious in its praise, expressing the love and deep respect, tempered with ambivalence, that he and many other African Americans felt about the man whose name was “near and dear to our hearts.” Douglass told the racially integrated crowd in Lincoln Park that “...President Lincoln was a white man, and shared the prejudices common to his countrymen toward the colored race.” Then he spoke directly to the African Americans in the audience, urging that all blacks be ever grateful to “...the vast, high, and preeminent services rendered to ourselves, to our race, to our country, and to the whole world by Abraham Lincoln.”

Mary Lincoln evidently



*Frederick Douglass spoke at the dedication of Thomas Ball's Freedmen's Monument, unveiled in Washington, D.C. in 1876 in Lincoln's memory. Funds for the statue came solely from freed slaves.*

understood the mutual respect that the two men shared for one another. After her husband's assassination, she presented Douglass with Lincoln's favorite walking cane, saying that he would have wanted Douglass to have it. She also wrote, "I know of no one that would appreciate this more than Fred. Douglass." Her judgment was sound, for Douglass later wrote, "She sent it to me at Rochester, and I have it in my house to-day, and expect to keep it there as long as I live."

Lincoln and Douglass' relationship also influenced the perspective of each man.

The war, the participation of black soldiers, and the conversations with Douglass changed Lincoln, moving him from his publicly stated belief in white supremacy to the position expressed in his last public speech, in which he advocated citizenship rights for educated blacks and those who had served in the war. This was the speech that infuriated John Wilkes Booth, a popular actor and an ardent southern sympathizer. Within days of hearing Lincoln's words, Booth assassinated the president.

As Douglass spoke to an integrated crowd in Rochester

after receiving the news of Lincoln's death, for the first time he alluded to a connection with his fellow white, as well as black, Americans: "...never to this day was I brought into such close accord with them. We shared in common a terrible calamity... [that] made us more than countrymen, it made us Kin." Douglass' relationship with Lincoln had helped create this connection, even as Lincoln's death had brought horror and mourning. ■

*An annotated version of this article appears at [www.nysarchivestrust.org](http://www.nysarchivestrust.org)*

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