



THE WHITE HOUSE
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

CLASSROOM | 4-8 Lessons : “Making History at the White House”

African-Americans and the White House

Slavery in the White House

When George Washington was president (1789-1797) he lived in New York and Philadelphia. He brought cooks, maids and coachmen from Mount Vernon — all of them slaves — to work at his house alongside white servants. The presidents in the early days were expected to hire and pay for their own staff. Since many of the early presidents were southern planters, they brought their slaves to work for them in Washington, D.C. Thomas Jefferson (1801-1809) brought slaves from Monticello, and during his presidency the second child ever born in the President’s House was born to his slaves, Fanny and Eddy. Paul Jennings was the personal servant of President James Madison (1809-1817). He was a slave who wrote down his memories of living in the Madison White House. Tennesseans Andrew Jackson (1829-1837) and James K. Polk (1845-1849) also brought slaves from their farms, and almost always they lived in basement rooms. Enslaved craftsmen helped build the White House. Black servants helped save documents and art when the British burned the structure in 1814. Most of all, African Americans made the president’s household operate efficiently. But it was a man who never held others as property, Abraham Lincoln, who would make sure that slaves would never work in the White House again.



President Lincoln discusses the Emancipation Proclamation with his cabinet. Library of Congress



Slaves wait for freedom in Watch Meeting-Dec. 31st 1862 Waiting for the Hour by William Tolman Carlton, 1863. The White House



The Emancipation Proclamation

In the middle of 1862, things did not look good for either the Union or for Abraham Lincoln's presidency (1861-1865). What many had thought would be a short war that would lead to the south rejoining the Union had turned into a bloody conflict with no end in sight. The Confederate Army had been successful. France and Britain were getting close to agreeing that the Confederate States of America was a separate nation. On July 22, Lincoln met with his cabinet on the second floor of the White House. He told them that he had written a document that would free many of the slaves in the south. He asked them for their opinion. The response was divided but Lincoln had already made up his mind to sign the proclamation. He followed advice that he should wait to tell the public until the Union Army had won a battle. He did not want Americans to think that he was freeing the slaves because the Union cause was desperate. In September 1862, with a win at the battle of Antietam, Lincoln told the nation that he would officially sign the Emancipation Proclamation in 100 days — on January 1, 1863. On New Year's Day, after greeting hundreds of visitors at the annual White House reception, Lincoln went upstairs to his office. With a shaking hand, he signed the proclamation. From that moment, the war had two aims: to preserve the Union and to fight for freedom. Lincoln said he never "felt more certain that I was doing right, than I do in signing this paper."

Booker T. Washington Visits the White House

On October 16, 1901 Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909) enjoyed dinner in the White House with his family and a few prominent Americans. There was nothing out of the ordinary except that one of his guests—the well-known educator Booker T. Washington—was a black man. It was not the first time an African American had called on a president. Abraham Lincoln (1861-1865) signed Sojourner Truth's autograph book when she came to the White House. Rutherford B. Hayes (1877-1881) had Frederick Douglass at concerts of black performers. But Booker T. Washington, author of the famous book *Up From Slavery*, seems to be the first to be invited to a formal dinner. The next day, as usual, the newspapers published the names of the White House dinner guests (as they still do today). Many people were furious that Roosevelt would do such a thing. The president, only in office for one month, did not think there was anything wrong with having dinner with Washington, who he called "a good citizen and a good American." But Roosevelt never invited an African-American to a White House dinner again. He would meet Washington again, and would sometimes invite black officials to White House receptions. But even a leader as bold as Roosevelt was afraid to anger an American public that was not yet ready to accept black equality. Roosevelt learned a lesson about the strength of the White House as symbol.





Booker T. Washington. National Park Service



Eleanor Roosevelt on a school visit. Franklin D. Roosevelt Library



Harry Truman ordered integration of military units, 1945. Harry S. Truman Library

Eleanor Roosevelt Speaks Out

As soon as she became first lady in 1933, Eleanor Roosevelt let the country know that she believed that racism was wrong, and that she would work to improve the life of African Americans. A few days after moving into the White House, Mrs. Roosevelt announced that she would only hire black servants. This may seem odd today, but the African Americans on the White House staff from the previous president worried that the incoming family would not keep them on because of their race. The first lady quickly became visible around Washington, D.C. and the rest of the country meeting with African Americans and talking about their problems. Her husband, President Franklin Roosevelt, was worried that Eleanor was making some white citizens angry by pointing out the injustice of racism. Because of this, Eleanor usually had to travel around the country to work with African-American leaders, rather than have them come to the White House. Mrs. Roosevelt's most famous act to help an individual who was a victim of racism happened in 1939. She heard that Constitution Hall, a popular concert hall in Washington, refused to let the singer Marian Anderson perform there because she was black. The first lady arranged for Anderson to sing at the Lincoln Memorial, and later invited her to the White House so that she could sing before Britain's king and queen.

Truman and Desegregation

Harry S. Truman (1945-1953) did not seem to be a likely man to fight for the civil rights of African Americans. He grew up in a place and time when discrimination was common, he had relatives who fought for the Confederacy, and his own mother became angry at the mention of Abraham Lincoln's name. But in September 1946 a group of African Americans met with Truman in the White House and told him about the violence that many black families experienced in the South. Truman liked to say that he was president "of all of the people" and he decided that it was time to act. He ordered government lawyers to help civil rights lawyers who were fighting court cases to try to gain more rights for African Americans. On July 26, 1948 Truman signed executive orders in the White House that called for desegregation of the federal government and the U. S. military. This meant that blacks could no longer be grouped together and separated from whites.

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Whites and blacks would work and live with one another in the same place. This executive order outraged the Americans who wanted to continue segregation. Truman knew that he risked losing the support of southerners in the presidential election that year because of the positions he had taken. But he surprised both the American public and all of the experts. Truman won the election and continued to support civil rights for four more years. Truman's actions were only a beginning, but he became the first president since Lincoln to take such serious political risks to help improve the lives of African Americans.

The Little Rock Nine

"I can't imagine any set of circumstances that would induce me to send federal troops into any area to enforce the orders of a federal court" explained President Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953-1961) at a White House press conference in July 1957. Two months later, the governor of Arkansas would cause Eisenhower to change his mind. The Supreme Court had ordered the states to desegregate public schools. Local officials in Little Rock, Arkansas had decided to allow African American students to attend Central High School. In September 1957, Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus called in the Arkansas National Guard to stop this from happening. President Eisenhower was on vacation in Rhode Island at the time. Eisenhower decided the only way to make sure that the children could go to school safely, was to send United States Army troops to Little Rock to protect them from angry crowds. It was time to tell the American people what the president was doing and why he was doing it. Eisenhower planned a television speech, and he decided that he should leave Rhode Island and broadcast his message from the White House. "Speaking from the house of Lincoln, of Jackson and of Wilson, my words better convey both the sadness I feel in the action I was compelled today to take and the firmness with which I intend to pursue this course until the orders of the federal court at Little Rock can be executed without unlawful interference." The next morning, nine African American students attended classes at Central High.



The U.S. Army protected African-Americans attending Central High in Little Rock, 1957. National Archives



Lyndon B. Johnson signs the 1964 Civil Rights Bill. Library of Congress



LBJ and the Civil Rights Bill of 1964

Almost as soon as he became president after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson (1963-1969) made civil rights for Americans of all colors his top task. Johnson came from Texas, and knew just how badly African Americans were treated in the South, as well as in other parts of the country. Early in 1964 Johnson gathered African-American leaders at the White House. He told them that he was determined to convince Congress to pass a law that would outlaw discrimination in public places. "This bill" promised Johnson, "is going to pass if it takes all summer."

It was difficult to get enough members of Congress to support the bill because many Southerners opposed any laws promoting civil rights. But Johnson was an expert at getting other people to see his point of view, and he would often invite members of Congress over to the White House to discuss their differences. Although he faced strong opposition, he succeeded in getting enough Congressmen to vote for the bill. Some advisors felt that Johnson should quietly sign the law because they thought it was a bad idea to make his opponents angrier than they already were. But Johnson believed that the law might be the most important document signed by a president since Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation freeing slaves. Johnson invited important Americans and foreign diplomats to the East Room of the White House. He signed the bill into law on July 2, 1964. A large television audience watched while Johnson explained that although racism had been a sad part of American history, "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."

