

# Review

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Jonathan W. White. *A House Built by Slaves: African American Visitors to the White House*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022. Pp. xxii, 249.

Abraham Lincoln's first meeting with Frederick Douglass occurred at the White House on August 10, 1863. The president and the abolitionist discussed the service of black soldiers. A few months later, Douglass told an audience that he had been to see the president. "Perhaps you may like to know how the President of the United States received a black man at the White House," he suggested. He told the audience that he had been received "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. I tell you I felt big there."

As Jonathan White demonstrates in *A House Built by Slaves*, which focuses on Lincoln's reception of African-American men and women visitors at the White House, Lincoln's treatment of Douglass was no anomaly. Time and again, the president met with African Americans, and White documents every meeting that he could identify. The result is an eye-opening, deeply researched book that challenges the oft-invoked narrative that claims Lincoln was a racist who did not truly care about black Americans. Rather, White argues, Lincoln treated African-American visitors as equals and made the White House "a space where black people could make a claim to the rights of U.S. Citizenship." (xv) The argument will not surprise readers of this journal who are familiar with Michael Burlingame's recent two-part article "African Americans at White House Receptions During Lincoln's Administration," and "President Lincoln's Meetings with African Americans." Professor White's audience, of course, is broader and, in a book of just over 200 pages of main text, he offers a comprehensive account of these meetings.

On April 14, 1862, Bishop Daniel Alexander Payne of the A.M.E. Church became the first black visitor to Lincoln's White House. He wanted to encourage Lincoln to sign the bill freeing the slaves in the District of Columbia, and he left Lincoln with copies of the *Christian Recorder*. Unfortunately, there were few accounts at the time of Payne's historic visit. The *Christian Recorder*, one of the exceptions, noted that

Lincoln expressed “a hearty wish for the welfare of the colored race.” Payne’s recollections of the meeting, in which he claimed that Lincoln “received and conversed with me as though I had been one of his intimate acquaintances,” dates from 1888. That does not invalidate it, especially when juxtaposed with similar accounts that document Lincoln’s warmth. White is methodical about evaluating his sources, and his arguments never extend beyond the limitations of the evidence.

At times, his scrutiny of the evidence challenges how some historians have used the sources. For example, he corrects several inaccuracies about Sojourner Truth’s visit with Lincoln on October 29, 1864. Truth was accompanied by abolitionist Lucy Colman, whose recollections written 30 years later got numerous details wrong and denounced Lincoln as having been indifferent to the enslaved and hostile to Truth. Some historians have relied on Colman’s memoir. Yet, as White shows, her contemporaneous account in 1864 provided a different perspective: She said that she and Truth were received with “real politeness and a pleasing cordiality.” (150)

White consistently offers sound judgments against any analysis that “reads things into the historical record that simply are not there.” For example, when Truth left Lincoln, she asked him to sign her book and he inscribed it “For Aunty.” For some, this is evidence of paternalistic racism. White points out, however, that such appellations were common terms of endearment, much like Uncle Abe. Moreover, Truth never questioned Lincoln’s attitude toward her. In 1864, she declared, “I am proud to say that I was never treated with more kindness and cordiality than I was by that great and good man, *Abraham Lincoln*.” (151)

The one visit with African Americans that has long troubled historians is the meeting on August 14, 1862, with a delegation of five black men to discuss colonization. A stenographer was present, and Lincoln proclaimed that discrimination was a fact that could not be changed, and that he blamed the war on their presence in the United States. He encouraged separation through voluntary migration elsewhere, such as Liberia. The *Liberator* denounced the address as “a tissue of absurdities and false assumptions.” Frederick Douglass thought the meeting made Lincoln appear “silly and ridiculous.”

White acknowledges the moment as “regrettable.” (44) Contextualizing the event, he reminds us that this was the first time a sitting president invited a group of black men to the White House. He also reminds us that, as Harold Holzer and James Oakes have argued, Lincoln was likely using the meeting to try to allay the anxiety of Northern Democrats at the moment when he had already decided to issue an Emancipation Proclamation. Perhaps colonization would make emancipation more palatable. White notes that part of the significance

of the meeting was that Lincoln asked the black men for a response to his entreaties, and they were free to answer as they would. They rejected his entreaties.

Lincoln continued to greet African-American leaders who sought to discuss the status of blacks in America. In time, he moved away from colonization, and the focus of his meetings shifted to arming black men, not only with guns but also with the ballot. On March 3, 1864, Lincoln welcomed E. Arnold Bertonneau and Jean Baptiste Roudanez, two Creole citizens from New Orleans who petitioned Lincoln and Congress to enfranchise New Orleans citizens of African descent. Whatever Lincoln thought about black suffrage before the meeting, 10 days later he wrote to Michael Hahn, newly elected Governor of Louisiana, to suggest privately that in adopting a new state constitution some black men might be enfranchised. White discusses several other delegations that met with Lincoln to lobby for the right to vote, including one led by Abraham Galloway, a former slave who became a political leader during the war and served in the North Carolina Senate during Reconstruction.

Lincoln not only met with dozens of African Americans, but also authorized the use of the White House grounds for blacks' festivals and picnics. In some cases, he personally signed the permits, such as when Gabriel Coakley, a leader of the black Roman Catholic community, sought permission to hold a fundraiser on the grounds. The Democratic press revolted with horror at what they saw as the desecration of sacred spaces. For African Americans, however, these events held a special place in their memories of Lincoln and the war.

Page after page of *A House Built by Slaves* discusses previously unknown or little-known meetings with African Americans. It might have been useful to include a chronology of these meetings in an Appendix so as to have a complete record of them. He does include an Appendix that discusses unconfirmed meetings. The book also contains six "Interludes" that briefly tell stories of events that took place mainly outside of the White House.

Douglass again met with Lincoln on August 19, 1864. "He treated me as a man," Douglass reported. "He did not let me feel for a moment that there was any difference in the color of our skins." For readers who have any doubts about Lincoln's treatment of African Americans, about his humanity and sympathy, White's invaluable book should erase them. And for those who already love Lincoln in all his complexity, this volume will only enhance their ardor. Consider this: On August 11, 1863, the day after his first meeting with Douglass, Lincoln wrote a check for \$5.00 and gave it to a "Colored man, with one leg." Little more is known; little more need be said.