

# The Black History of the White House



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Clarence Lusane



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*To the Lusane House  
(Clarence, Zezeh, Ellington, and Jessica)*

*To Dr. Ronald W. (Ron) Walters (1938–2010), a friend, mentor,  
and scholar-activist of the highest order whose life made a  
substantive difference.*

***The Black History of the White House* by Clarence Lusane**  
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## INTRODUCTION

# Black People, White Houses

### African Americans and the Promise of the White House

*I, too, am America*—Langston Hughes, from his poem “I, Too, Sing America”

More than one in four U.S. presidents were involved in human trafficking and slavery. These presidents bought, sold, bred and enslaved black people for profit. Of the twelve presidents who were enslavers, more than half kept people in bondage at the White House. For this reason there is little doubt that the first person of African descent to enter the White House—or the presidential homes used in New York (1788–1790) and Philadelphia (1790–1800) before construction of the White House was complete—was an enslaved person.<sup>1</sup> That person’s name and history are lost to obscurity and the tragic anonymity of slavery, which only underscores the jubilation expressed by tens of millions of African Americans—and perhaps billions of other people around the world—220 years later on November 4, 2008, when the people of the United States elected Barack Obama to be the nation’s president and commander in chief. His inauguration on January 20, 2009, drew between one and two million people to Washington, D.C., one of the largest gatherings in the history of the city and more than likely the largest presidential inauguration to date.<sup>2</sup> Taking into account

the tens of millions around the globe who watched the event live via TV or Internet, it was perhaps the most watched inauguration in world history. It was of great international interest that for the first time in U.S. history, the “first family” in the White House was going to be a black family.

Obama has often stated that he stands on the shoulders of those who came before him. In terms of the White House, this has generally been seen to mean those presidents he admires, such as Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, John Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson, who all inspired him in his political career. However, he is also standing on the shoulders of the many, many African Americans who were forced to labor for, were employed by, or in some other capacity directly involved with the White House in a wide array of roles, including as slaves, house servants, elected and appointed officials, Secret Service agents, advisers, reporters, lobbyists, artists, musicians, photographers, and family members, not to mention the activists who lobbied and pressured the White House in their struggle for racial and social justice. As the Obama family resides daily in the White House, the narratives of these individuals resonate throughout their home.

The black history of the White House is rich in heroic stories of men, women, and youth who have struggled to make the nation live up to the egalitarian and liberationist principles expressed in its founding documents, including the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. For over 200 years African Americans and other people of color were legally disenfranchised and denied basic rights of citizenship, including the right to vote for the person who leads the country from the White House. But despite the oppressive state of racial apartheid that characterized the majority of U.S. history, in the main, as Langston Hughes reminds us, black Americans have always claimed that they too are American.

At the end of the nineteenth century, when Jim Crow segregation and “separate but equal” black codes were aggressively enforced throughout the South, few African Americans were permitted to even visit the White House. As Frances Benjamin Johnston’s 1898 photo on the cover of this book indicates, however, black children were allowed to attend the White House’s annual Easter egg-rolling ceremony. Permitting black children to integrate with white children on the White House premises one day a year was acceptable, even though such mingling was illegal in many public spaces throughout the South at the time, including libraries and schools.

The Easter egg-rolling tradition had begun on the grounds of the Capitol, but concern over damage to the grounds led to the 1876 Turf Protection Law, which ended the practice at that site. Two years later, President Hayes—who had won the presidency by promising to withdraw federal troops protecting African Americans in the South from whites who opposed black voting and political rights—opened the White House’s south lawn for the event. By the time of Johnston’s photo, the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision legalizing segregation had been implemented, the last of the black politicians elected to Congress would soon be gone by 1901, and accommodationist black leader Booker T. Washington, who was also photographed by Johnston, was on the ascendant.

For many African Americans, the “white” of the White House has meant more than just the building’s color; it has symbolized the hue and source of dehumanizing cruelty, domination, and exclusion that has defined the long narrative of whites’ relations to people of color in the United States. Well before President Theodore Roosevelt officially designated it the “White House” in October 1901, the premises had been a site of black marginalization and disempowerment, but also of re-



*What the White House looked like while human trafficking and enslavement of black people was thriving in Washington, D.C., 1858.*

sistance and struggle. Constructed in part by black slave labor, the home and office of the president of the United States has embodied different principles for different people. For whites, whose social privileges and political rights have always been protected by the laws of the land, the White House has symbolized the power of freedom and democracy over monarchy. For blacks, whose history is rooted in slavery and the struggle against white domination, the symbolic power of the White House has shifted along with each president's relation to black citizenship. For many whites and people of color, the White House has symbolized the supremacy of white people both domestically and internationally. U.S. nativists with colonizing and imperialist aspirations understood the symbolism of the White House as a projection of that supremacy on a global scale.

Centuries of slavery, brutally enforced apartheid, and powerful social movements that ended both, are all part of the

historical continuum preceding the American people's election of Barack Obama. Few people, black or otherwise, genuinely thought that they would live to see what exists today: a black man commanding the presidency of the United States and a black family running the White House. Despite important advances in public policy and popular attitude since the social movements of the 1950s, '60s and '70s, for the many people of color who lived through the segregation era and experienced the viciousness of racists, the complicity of most of their white neighbors, and the callous disregard and participation of city, state, and national authorities, Obama's election was a moment never imagined. It was never imagined, in part, because of the misleading and unbalanced history we have been taught.

### **The Struggle over Historical Perspective**

*History is always written wrong, and so always needs to be rewritten.*<sup>3</sup>—George Santayana

U.S. history is taught—and for the most part, learned—through filters. In everything from schoolbooks and movies to oral traditions, historical markers, and museums, we are presented with narratives of the nation's history and evolution. For generations, the dominant stories have validated a view that overly centralizes the experiences, lives, and issues of privileged, white male Americans and silences the voice of others. It has been as though some have an entitlement to historic representation and everyone else does not.

But it is more than a matter of marginalization and silencing. History is not just a series of dates and facts, but more important, involves interpretation, analysis, and point of view. Historic understanding shapes public consciousness, and thus politics and policy decisions, social relations, and access to



*African American school children facing the Horatio Greenough statue of George Washington at the U.S. Capitol, circa 1899.*

resources and opportunity. The dominant narratives of U.S. history elevate the nation's development through a perspective that reduces the vast scale and consequences of white enslavement of blacks, "Indian removal," violent conquest, genocide, racism, sexism, and class power. The generations of lives, experiences, and voices of marginalized and silenced Americans offer an array of diverse interpretations of U.S. history that have largely gone unheard, unacknowledged, and unrewarded. Without their perspectives, we are presented with an incomplete and incongruent story that is at best a disservice to the historical record and at worst a means of maintaining an unjust status quo.

In education, the field of Black History and other areas of what are generally referred to as Ethnic Studies have attempted to serve as counter-histories, seeking to include the communities and individuals that have too often been written out of the national story. Scholars have attempted not only to correct the

record but also to restore a dignity and respect obliterated in official chronicles. These efforts have met with fierce resistance, from the beginning up to the present moment. In spring 2010, conservatives in Arizona not only passed SB 1070, which authorized—in fact, demanded—that law enforcement officers question the immigration status of anyone they deemed suspicious and who looked like they did not belong in the country, but also enacted HB 2281, which bans schools from teaching Ethnic Studies courses. While the former promotes racial profiling, the latter guarantees a continuing ignorance of the social diversity, history, and interests of everyone except white Americans. Framing education about the history of people of color in the worst possible manner, the law states, “Public school pupils should be taught to treat and value each other as individuals and not be taught to resent or hate other races or classes of people.”<sup>4</sup> Specifically aimed at Mexican, indigenous, and black studies, the law generated copycat efforts elsewhere, just as attempts to reproduce the anti-immigrant SB 1070 spread to other U.S. states in the expanding culture war over whose history deserves state and political support and promotion.

The challenge of presenting an alternative and more inclusive history of the White House lies not so much in finding the details and facts of other voices, in this instance black voices, but in challenging the long-standing views and dominant discourses that permeate all aspects of our public and popular education. The White House itself is figuratively constructed as a repository of democratic aspirations, high principles, and ethical values. For many Americans, it is an act of unacceptable subversion to criticize the nation’s founders, the founding documents, the presidency, the president’s house, and other institutions that have come to symbolize the official story of the United States. Understandably, it is uncomfortable to give up long-held and

even meaningful beliefs that in many ways build both collective and personal identities. However, partial and distorted knowledge is detrimental, and only through a more diverse voicing of the nation's experience and history, in this case of the White House, can the country—as a people—move forward.

### Race, the Presidency, and Grand Crises

*You never want a serious crisis to go to waste.*<sup>5</sup>—Rahm Emanuel, Barack Obama's White House chief of staff

Even after the celebrations of Obama's historic triumph, achieved with nearly unanimous support from African Americans and the votes of tens of millions of progressives, a nagging question remained: *What would the Obama White House mean for racial progress in the United States?* Will the Obama presidency generate the kind of historic policies that emerged under Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson to create greater racial equality, or will Obama's contribution be more symbolic, as Bill Clinton's was? Will having a black president make a difference, and if so, what kind of difference?

United States history has shown that opportunity for sustainable and qualitative social reform, including in the area of race relations, typically arises from a crisis leveraged by massive social and political organizing, i.e., a crisis that threatens the ability of those in power to maintain governability and control. Presidents, and political leaders in general, are captives of the period and circumstances they inherit. Elected leaders have the potential to advance a political and policy agenda, but only within the limits of the social and broader historical constraints of their times. The political status quo is stubborn and, within a system of checks and balances such as exists in the United States, rarely elastic enough to answer civil society's incessant

call for change. It is only under extraordinary conditions, such as when the efforts of ordinary citizens are focused on social movements whose demands threaten the elites with crisis, that massive and fundamental social transformation occurs. This trend is particularly pronounced throughout the history of race relations in the United States. In other words, whether Obama will have the opportunity for major advancements in the area of race relations and social equality will depend much more on the evolution of the political balance of forces, the state of the economy, the viability of political and social institutions, and the ideological atmosphere than simply his will (or lack thereof).

The black history of the White House is one in which the institution of the U.S. presidency has, generally speaking, only seriously and qualitatively responded to the nation's unjust racial divide in the face of crisis, when an uncertain future loomed, critical and divisive decisions had to be made, and black and anti-racist resistance were focused, intense, and spreading. Whether the White House response led to progressive social advances, conservative rollback—or both—has been determined by each era's particular factors, the personal predilections of the president in command being only one such element. Presidents Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, and Lyndon Johnson faced crises, arguably, under which the coherence and very existence of the nation itself was at stake. Civil war, economic catastrophe, and urban unrest challenged the legitimacy and power of the state, creating opportunities for radical social proposals that were normally ignored and dismissed.

It is hardly a given that the state's response to crisis will result in progressive democratic change. The Bush White House, for example, responding to the September 11 attacks, instituted antidemocratic, authoritarian, ultraconservative policies that

would have been impossible to implement under normal circumstances. These included launching wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; curtailing civil liberties with the harsh USA Patriot Act; violating international human rights conventions with opened-ended detentions, military tribunals, the legal limbo of Guantánamo Bay prison, secret prisons, torture, extraordinary rendition, extrajudicial assassinations, and negligent killing of foreign civilians; and other legally and morally reprehensible actions.

### **Black Challenges to the White House**

There is a long history of both black challenge and black accommodation to the White House. Every point in this country's past has seen black resistance to social injustice, including direct calls to the president for relief from, reparations for, and remediation of institutional racism. The black challenge has taken the form of slave escapes, revolts, underground networks, creation of maroon societies, literacy campaigns, petitions, participation in the Revolution (on both sides) and the Civil War, grassroots Reconstruction efforts, sit-ins, sit-outs, mass mobilizations (and threats thereof), voter registration drives, leadership in massive social movements, campaigns for political office including the offices of president and vice president, and countless other collective and individual counterassaults against white domination and discrimination. All have factored into the policy and political decisions made by U.S. presidents. The squeezing of the president for the juice of justice has been indispensable to black political and social movements in the enduring struggle for equality.

It could not be any other way. Racism and the exercise of white racial hegemony were at the core of the American Revolution and the founding of the nation itself. The establishment of a racial hierarchy was neither unconscious, secondary, an after-

thought, nor even what many have called an unfortunate but necessary compromise. Rather than a compromise—implying that both sides gave up something fundamental—it was a surrender by Northern leaders, who set aside their publicly stated antislavery principles and dishonorably granted the South the legally protected business of human trafficking and enslavement of black people, some arguing that abolition was a battle to be fought another day.

As discussed in greater detail in Chapter 1, Southern leaders joined the armed revolutionary movement not so much to fight British domination of the colonies as to protect themselves from the British Crown's foreshadowed intent to liberate blacks from bondage. For the South, the nonnegotiable price of joining the armed revolt was the prolongation of white people's power to buy, sell, breed, and enslave black people in the post-revolution nation.

Perceiving this profound moral and political disjuncture, many free<sup>6</sup> and enslaved blacks joined the war on the side of the British. At the very center of this turbulent mix were the men who would become the first four presidents of the United States—George Washington (1789–1797), John Adams (1797–1801), Thomas Jefferson (1801–1809), and James Madison (1809–1817)—all of whom helped to define the duties, roles, responsibilities, and powers of the presidency itself. Their engagement with the moral and economic questions of slavery and race was complex, and their individual will, private interests, and political courage were as much an influence upon as influenced by social forces and the still gestating processes and structures of state authority. Ultimately, all would fail to rise above the popular racist views of their times and were unwilling and unable to advance egalitarian relations among races. As we will see in Chapters 3 and 4, their vacillations would

only postpone the nation's inexorable drive toward civil war and further crises of legitimacy.

Alternative voices, however, would be raised by blacks and others during the Revolutionary period and ever afterward. By all the means at black organizers' disposal, from petitions and direct lobbying to local community organizing and national mass movements, presidents were challenged to live up to their oath of office and the promises of the nation's founding documents. Despite these calls for justice and freedom, until the Civil War, president after president would ratify white people's power to own and traffic blacks by signing laws such as the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 and Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. James Buchanan (1857–1861), the last president before the Civil War, stated that slavery was “a great political and moral evil” but nonetheless (as president-elect) supported the Supreme Court's 1857 *Dred Scott vs. Sandford* decision, which ruled that no person of African descent could become a citizen of the United States, that blacks had “no rights which the white man was bound to respect, and that the negro [*sic*] might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit.”<sup>7</sup> As is discussed in Chapter 5, it would take a horrific civil war and a hesitating but ultimately reformist president to resolve the nation's dilemma by illegalizing slavery.

The reluctance of the pre-Civil War presidents to address and assist the abolition movement only fueled the surging black resistance and directed its outrage at the White House. During the Civil War there was a massive desertion of plantations and work sites by millions of enslaved people—what W. E. B. Du Bois termed a black general strike. Fearing that a Southern victory would maintain the slave system and hoping a Northern win would abolish it, African Americans joined the Southern guerrilla underground and Union Army and fought valiantly

to crush the pro-slavery forces.<sup>8</sup> Under pressure from the abolitionist movement, from influential public figures like Frederick Douglass, and simply out of military necessity, President Lincoln eventually permitted blacks to join the armed combat and enlist in the Union Army.

Beyond the military imperatives of winning the war, the Lincoln White House found itself forced to address the black cause; racial issues had become so urgent they could no longer be ignored. The escalating crisis opened up the political space to allow not just piecemeal reforms on human trafficking or another Faustian compromise with politicians representing white enslavers from the South, but the dismantling of the system of slavery once and for all. President Lincoln's personal views on the matter—whether those of a late convert to abolitionism, as argued by historian James M. McPherson, or of an unrepentant defender of the system who was “forced into glory,” as historian Lerone Bennett Jr. contends—ultimately became secondary as circumstances demanded he take action on whites' legal right to enslave blacks, a demand that previous presidents had not had to address in a fundamental manner.<sup>9</sup> Although the Emancipation Proclamation, as a strategy against the South, freed only blacks enslaved to Confederate states that were in rebellion at the time, it nevertheless marked the beginning of a series of profound and irrevocable legal and societal shifts away from the barbarity of white domination and toward the democratic equality promised by the American Revolution.

The Lincoln White House resolved the issue of slavery, but not that of racism. Among the other variables that led to the war was the rise of Northern financial interests, which supported the Republican Party and were in competition with the interests of the Southern agricultural-based aristocracy. The push by the Republican Party for “free” labor in an increasingly industrializing

nation—meaning a mobile, wage-paid workforce—was not the equivalent of fairness to workers or labor equality between whites and people of color. To advance its agenda and that of its sponsors, the Republican Party needed to break the economic power of the South as well as its dominance in Congress.

In the political openings created by the crisis and the transition of power from Southern interests to Northern ones, the experiment of Reconstruction was launched, wherein state authorities intervened on behalf of newly liberated women, men, and children, addressing the crisis of exclusion with political enfranchisement (for men), economic reparations (through the Freedmen's Bank), and social inclusion (through educational opportunities at all levels).

After the April 14, 1865, assassination of President Lincoln by John Wilkes Booth—the pro-slavery extremist who was impelled to commit the crime by the president's promise of voting rights for blacks—Lincoln's successor, President Andrew Johnson, began almost immediately to roll back the commitments Lincoln had made to black Americans. Republican Party radicals in Congress, led by Thaddeus Stevens, countered the Johnson White House and for nearly nine years pushed through groundbreaking legislation that granted new political rights and protection to blacks.

However, the crisis of the 1876 presidential election, in which a dispute arose over the legality of black votes in Florida, Louisiana, and South Carolina, redrew the political balance of power and once again saw the White House facilitate the subordination of blacks in U.S. society. The Hayes-Tilden Compromise was about more than just an election fiasco; it represented the reemergence of a modernized, post-slavery South that made an accommodation with its Northern counterpart. Once the urgent dispute over economic authority was resolved, there was

little motivation on the part of the Republican Party to continue alienating large numbers of whites.

Jim Crow segregation policies and their legal and extralegal enforcement were well in place prior to the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision that gave de jure cover to systemic, institutional, and private forms of racism. The Jim Crow presidents, from Rutherford Hayes (1877–1881) to Dwight Eisenhower (1953–1961), did little to support the black challenge to segregation and white domination over U.S. social and economic life. As I discuss in Chapter 5, during this period the White House, with a few notable exceptions, did little to further the cause of full citizenship and equal rights for blacks in America.

Yet the next series of crises would once again see a president—Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933–1945)—confront an issue he would have preferred to keep in the closet. By early 1933, unemployment had grown to 25 percent and more than 4,000 banks had collapsed.<sup>10</sup> The Dust Bowl drought destroyed tens of thousands of farms, rendering more than 500,000 people homeless. Roosevelt desperately launched a number of policies to address these emergencies. Blacks would benefit only partially and often indirectly from his economic rescue policies. Indeed, in some arenas, as more whites' economic and social standing advanced, blacks actually lost ground in one of the most legislatively and policy-generous periods in U.S. history. "The wide array of significant and far-reaching public policies that were shaped and administered during the New Deal and Fair Deal era of the 1930s and 1940s," Ira Katznelson notes in his history-revising book, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America*, "were crafted and administered in a deeply discriminatory manner."<sup>11</sup>

An equally critical factor was the qualitative transformation of the framework under which U.S. business and much of

global capitalism would operate. Keynesian economics, which called for decisive state intervention in managing and policing big business, would result in the opening of political space for working-class prerogatives to emerge. Given the working-class status of most African Americans at the time, they too made some economic and political gains during the period. Progress was more regional than national, however, as the still white-dominated South dug in and refused to budge on the issue of segregation.

Black resistance would not relent either, and soon ballooned into a full-blown uprising with millions of African Americans driving the civil rights campaigns that began to engulf the entire South. In courtrooms, classrooms, and even restrooms, black activists and ordinary people alike challenged the system of white control. The black freedom movement mushroomed, opening new fronts on various levels with wide-ranging tactics and perspectives. The battle streams of civil rights and urban resistance would soon join a mighty river of national turbulence expressing multiple demands upon the nation in general and the White House in particular. Black struggle, antiwar resistance, and a vibrant youth counterculture drove the crises between 1955 and 1974. As discussed in Chapter 7, the political status quo was further destabilized by one president's unexpected refusal to run for reelection, the assassination of a presidential candidate, the resignation of a vice president, the resignation to preempt impeachment of a president, and the installation of both a president and a vice president who had not been elected to the office, all within the span of six years.

The late-term Civil Rights Era presidencies of Dwight Eisenhower (1953–1961), John Kennedy (1961–1963), and Lyndon Johnson (1963–1968) were reluctant to assist the cause of black freedom yet began to champion policies and endorse

legislation that attacked Jim Crow. During the four-year period from 1964 to 1968, the black view of the White House became more favorable as presidential pressure helped defeat white opposition to bills that finally broke the back of formal segregation in the South.

Through high rhetoric, low legislation, and symbolic appointments, post-Johnson presidents have been treading water on racial issues since 1968. Richard Nixon (1968–1974), Jimmy Carter (1977–1981), Ronald Reagan (1981–1989), and Bill Clinton (1993–2001) all sustained aggressive attacks on civil rights advances, whereas Gerald Ford (1974–1977), George H. W. Bush (1989–1993), and George W. Bush (2001–2009) engaged in egregious neglect. None proposed legislation that would substantially address the economic and social disparities between whites and people of color, despite symbolism and rhetoric aplenty (e.g., a new national holiday honoring Martin Luther King Jr.; Clinton's Race Initiative; and various cabinet appointments). During this period the White House did not face the type of grand crisis that would have opened the door to major changes advancing equality in politics, education, economics, justice, housing, and labor for people of color in the United States. For most black social justice leaders, activists, and organizers it was a bleak period with little hope on the horizon.

Some pioneering African Americans, rather than looking to the White House for help, decided to run for the White House themselves. These campaigns ran the gamut from the comical to the serious and included women and men, members of major parties and minor parties as well as independent candidates, and ideological tendencies from the far right to the far left and everything in between. As discussed in Chapter 8, each campaign would be a building block for the ones that followed. Then came Obama.

## Obama and the Future of Black History

*I have never been so naïve as to believe that we can get beyond our racial divisions in a single election cycle, or with a single candidacy—particularly a candidacy as imperfect as my own.*<sup>12</sup>—President Barack Obama, March 18, 2008, Philadelphia

Obama may not have been so naïve about the continuation of racism after his election, but many others were. Naïve in some ways, opportunistic in others. While liberal supporters of Obama wishfully believed that his election signified a radical change in American race relations, the anti-Obama right wing took advantage of his election to bruit its “postracial” mantra. Conservative columnist Laura Hollis, writing for *Townhall.com*, stated, “Racism is dead.” Writer Shelby Steele, in a post-election *Los Angeles Times* article, asked, “Doesn’t a black in the Oval Office put the lie to both black inferiority and white racism? Doesn’t it imply a ‘post-racial’ America?” Conservative media and lobbyists rejoiced in Obama’s victory, seeing it as vindication of their decades-old argument that laws passed as a result of the Civil Rights Movement had ended racism in the United States.

Those who make this argument are wrong on many accounts. On the immediate level, they ignore the significance of racial incidents that occurred during the campaigns and the fact that racist incidents actually appeared to escalate after Obama’s election. On a deeper level, they fail to acknowledge the perpetuation of institutional racism as it manifests through measurable disparities in job opportunities, career advancement, real estate and housing, education and academic performance, health and access to health care, criminal justice and susceptibility to incarceration, the absence of black history in public education, and lack of black representation in popular media.



*President-elect Barack Obama was about to walk out to take the oath of office. Backstage at the U.S. Capitol, he took one last look at his appearance in the mirror.*

Despite the victory Obama's election represents, this country is still a long way from realizing the essence and spirit of its founding principles, and thus still a long way from being a genuinely egalitarian and democratic "postracial" society.

Until it is, there's work to do. This book was written in honor of those who have come before, that their stories and efforts may inform and inspire future generations of leaders, organizers, and ordinary people to carry the torch and spread the flame. To that end, this book is narrative driven: more than anything, it is the stories of real people who have challenged the racist dimensions of U.S. power and privilege that convey the history and experience of African Americans and their shifting relationship to the White House. For too many years, their experiences have been ignored, their voices silenced, their history absent from the public classroom. Yet they are an indelible, inextricable part of this

country. Their story is our story, and their determined struggle, over generations, to share in the founding promises of equality, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is as much a part of White House history as the stories of the presidents and their families. From the courageous black woman Oney Judge, who escaped enslavement from the first U.S. president, to the regal Michelle LaVaughn Robinson Obama, there has been a black presence in the White House reflecting in one form or another the ongoing struggle for equality and freedom.

In the book's final chapter I attempt to discuss the significance of the Obama White House in the context of black history, and how the crises his presidency faced coming into power may be quite different from the ones he is likely to leave behind. Issues of racial controversy are already manifesting in the first years of his presidency and are likely to escalate as Republican Party strategists attempt to exploit a politics of resentment and fear for electoral gain. This strategy has already unleashed a barrage of racial incidents and a jittery, less than stellar response from the Obama administration. However, it goes without saying that at the time of this writing in 2010, the story of the first black White House is still a work in progress, and what the Obama presidency will do to further extend the nation's founding promises to people of color and others outside the sphere of traditional privilege is still unfolding on a daily basis. Despite the powerful concrete and symbolic victory that the Obama White House represents, one race's privilege, preference, and politics continue to exert undue influence over national civic and private culture. What the first black White House does to level the racial playing field will forever be part of both black history and the nation's history. How far it goes and to what degree it succeeds is still very much up to the actions of ordinary people like you and me.

## NOTES

### Introduction

1. Throughout this work, the terms “enslaved person” and “slave” are used interchangeably. They are not quite equivalent. The term “slave,” arguably, generates a more emotive response and connotes a personal status of being that resonates with popular understandings of the word. “Enslaved person” implies the process and context by which an individual ends up in a specific condition of oppression and maintains the humanity of that individual. In this work, however, both interpretations seem warranted and I make use of both terms, privileging breadth over consistency.
2. By comparison, Ronald Reagan drew 500,000, Bill Clinton 800,000, and George W. Bush 300,000. See “Strollers, umbrellas forbidden at Obama inauguration,” AFP, December 21, 2008. [www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jAxfSUb6KLjwIDStOzMbKoKfqncA](http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5jAxfSUb6KLjwIDStOzMbKoKfqncA).
3. George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, Volumes 4 and 5 (Charleston, SC: BiblioBazaar, 2009), p. 208.
4. Quoted in Andy Barr, “Arizona Bans ‘Ethnic Studies,’” *Politico*, May 12, 2010.
5. Gerald F. Seib, “In Crisis, Opportunity for Obama,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 21, 2008.
6. It is important to note that “free” is not the same as “equal.” While a small percentage of African Americans were not held in chattel slavery and are commonly referred to as having been free, they did not enjoy the same rights and privileges whites had. Restrictions were placed on voting rights, business and property ownership, marriage, legal rights, education, and other areas of life and livelihood, such that the distinction between being enslaved and being free was not as broad as it may appear. And there was always the omnipresent threat of being kidnapped and openly sold into slavery, an atrocity no white American has ever suffered. This is not to diminish the qualitative difference between being held in slavery and not, but to demythologize exactly how “free” free blacks really were.
7. U.S. Supreme Court, *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 60 U.S. 393 (1856), 60 U.S. 393 (How.) *dred scott, plaintiff in error, v. john f. a. sandford*. December Term, 1857. See <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?court=US&vol=60&invol=393>.
8. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York: Free Press, 1998).
9. See James M. McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford[\* Or New York? Some of the earlier Oxford Univ. Press references have given New York as the locale.] New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009); and Lerone Bennett, *Forced Into Glory: Abraham Lincoln’s White Dream* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing, 2007).
10. Christian Saint-Etienne, *The Great Depression, 1929–1938: Lessons for the 1980s* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Press, 1984), p. 10; and “Farming in the 1930s.” See Living History Farm Web site: [www.livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthe30s/money\\_08.html](http://www.livinghistoryfarm.org/farminginthe30s/money_08.html).
11. Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2005), p. 17.

12. Barack Obama, "A More Perfect Union" speech, Philadelphia, March 18, 2008. See Barack Obama "Organizing for America" Web site: <http://my.barackobama.com/page/community/post/stateupdates/gGBbTW>.

## Chapter 1

1. George Washington's Mount Vernon Web site: [www.mountvernon.org/learn/meet\\_george/index.cfm/ss/101/](http://www.mountvernon.org/learn/meet_george/index.cfm/ss/101/). See also Fritz Hirschfeld, *George Washington and Slavery: A Documentary Portrayal* (Univ. of Missouri Press, 1997); and Henry Wiencek, *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America* (New York: Macmillan, 2004).
2. Edward Lawler Jr., "Oney Judge." [www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/slaves/oney.htm](http://www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/slaves/oney.htm).
3. T.H. Adams, "Washington's Runaway Slave, and How Portsmouth Freed Her," *The Granite Freeman*, Concord, New Hampshire, May 22, 1845.
4. Helen Bryan, *Martha Washington: First Lady of Liberty* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons Inc., 2002), p. 341.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 242.
6. See Stanley W. Campbell, *The Slave Catchers: Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850-1860* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1972).
7. Slavery in the North, Web site: [www.slavenorth.com/newhampshire.htm](http://www.slavenorth.com/newhampshire.htm).
8. See Paul Finkelman, *An Imperfect Union: Slavery, Federalism, and Comity* (Buffalo, NY: Wm. S. Hein Publishing, 2000).
9. Albert P. Blaustein and Robert L. Zangrando, eds., *Civil Rights and African Americans: A Documentary History* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1968), p. 52.
10. "1780 Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery," *afrolumens project* Web site: [www.afrolumens.org/slavery/gradual.html](http://www.afrolumens.org/slavery/gradual.html).
11. *Ibid.*
12. Edward Lawler Jr., "Washington, the Enslaved, and the 1780 Law," [www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/slaves/washingtonand8.htm](http://www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/slaves/washingtonand8.htm).
13. Hirschfeld, *George Washington and Slavery*, p. 28.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 186-187.
15. John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington*, Vol. 36 (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1933), p.2.
16. Bryan, *First Lady of Liberty*, p. 342.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 344.
18. George Washington letter to Oliver Wipple, September 1, 1796. [www.weekslibrary.org/ona\\_maria\\_judge.htm](http://www.weekslibrary.org/ona_maria_judge.htm).
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. Adams, "Washington's Runaway Slave."
22. The legal issues were even more complicated. Under the law, the legal status of slaves was determined by the mother's history. If the mother was a dower, then all of her children were dowers. In a marriage between a dower and a slave who was owned outright, the children of that marriage would or would not be dowers depending on the status of the mother.

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