



ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LIFE AND HISTORY, INC.®

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Let Us Heed the Words of Frederick Douglass on the Emancipation Memorial

If Frederick Douglass could see the controversy over the Emancipation Memorial in Lincoln Park in Washington, D.C. today, he would offer the following “reality check”—don’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good. Although those words are paraphrased from Voltaire and not Douglass, the erudite Douglass would have certainly known the writings of this anti-slavery Enlightenment philosopher. More importantly, however, Douglass himself stated as much in his famous speech at the unveiling of the Emancipation Memorial in 1876. As he stood before the many thousands in the interracial audience of men and women gathered together for the unveiling of the statue that honors the moment of the Emancipation Proclamation, Douglass recognized that the fulfillment of the promised and awaited day of freedom on January 1, 1863, when Lincoln’s proclamation went into effect, was interpreted in near-sacred terms by African Americans. The date is still remembered and acknowledged to this very day by a great many of our people in the New Year’s Eve “Watchnight Service” in churches throughout the nation.

In 1876, when the statue was erected and in what was to become the final year of Reconstruction, it escaped no one present at the Lincoln Park ceremony that the memorial represented a great offense to the Confederate Lost Cause and its way of life. As a Union-related memorial to the abolition of slavery, it stood out as the first and unfortunately one of few sculptural counternarratives to the many Confederate monuments emerging then and to come. Thus Douglass spoke explicitly to his own people: “Wise and thoughtful men of our race, who shall come after us, and study the lesson of our history in the United States; who shall survey the long and dreary spaces over which we have travelled; who shall count the links in the great chain of events by which we have reached our present position, will make a note of this occasion.”

Douglass, in many ways, was a good historian. By this I mean, that he emphasized the importance of understanding the thinking and values of people in the past in the context of the unique circumstances of their own time, as opposed to judging them by those of our present time. He had the ability to discern the complexity of human motivations and historical events, and to explain with eloquence inherent dualities and intricacies, the obvious and the subtle, the progress and setbacks, and, no less important, the part in relation to the whole. He revealed this aptitude in his speech at Lincoln Park, when he spoke of Abraham Lincoln with both criticism and praise. He told his white listeners that they were Lincoln’s foremost concern. “You are the children of Abraham Lincoln,” he asserted, while reminding his black listeners, “We are at best only his step-children; children by adoption, children by force of circumstances and necessity.”

In the present controversy over the Emancipation Memorial in Lincoln Park, those and other statements critical of Lincoln are quoted robustly without any attention to the spirit of Frederick Douglass’s larger message. This selective reading of Lincoln’s imperfections misses Douglass’s

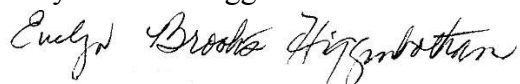
words on the importance of the good done by him. In his speech, Douglass was careful to put this duality in a larger context, stating: “I have said that President Lincoln was a white man, and shared the prejudices common to his countrymen towards the colored race. Looking back to his times and to the condition of his country, we are compelled to admit that this unfriendly feeling on his part may be safely set down as one element of his wonderful success in organizing the loyal American people for the tremendous conflict before them, and bringing them safely through that conflict. His great mission was to accomplish two things: first, to save his country from dismemberment and ruin; and second, to free his country from the great crime of slavery.... Had he put the abolition of slavery before the salvation of the Union, he would have inevitably driven from him a powerful class of the American people and rendered resistance to rebellion impossible.”

Douglass also left no doubt as to his thoughts on how African Americans should remember Lincoln: “When, therefore, it shall be asked what we have to do with the memory of Abraham Lincoln, or what Abraham Lincoln had to do with us, the answer is ready, full, and complete. Though he loved Caesar less than Rome, though the Union was more to him than our freedom or our future, under his wise and beneficent rule we saw ourselves gradually lifted from the depths of slavery to the heights of liberty and manhood.... we saw our brave sons and brothers laying off the rags of bondage, and being clothed all over in the blue uniforms of the soldiers of the United States; under his rule we saw two hundred thousand of our dark and dusky people responding to the call of Abraham Lincoln, and with muskets on their shoulders, and eagles on their buttons, timing their high footsteps to liberty and union under the national flag.” Referring to Lincoln as a “great and good man,” Douglass recited a litany of consequential deeds under his presidency, including but not limited to the abolition of the domestic slave-trade, the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia, the destruction of the Slave Power in the federal government, and ultimately victory over the war of rebellion by the Confederate States against the United States.

Finally, Frederick Douglass bequeathed an important message to us today, when he referred to the good deed of the black community in commissioning and paying for the statue (albeit by later standards an imperfect image) and for having, as he prophesied, “now and here unveiled, set apart, and dedicated a monument of enduring granite and bronze, in every line, feature, and figure of which the men of this generation may read, and those of after-coming generations may read, something of the exalted character and great works of Abraham Lincoln, the first martyr President of the United States.”

Let us heed the immortal words of Frederick Douglass at the dedication of the Emancipation Memorial in Lincoln Park. Let us not erase a crucial chapter in the African American past. And let us see this memorial with his eyes and with his heart — as a monument to endure for future generations.

Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham



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