



Abraham Lincoln

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Discovery of Frederick Douglass letter sheds light on contested Lincoln statue

Amid protests, some want removal of Washington statue which shows president standing over a man who has broken his chains

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An argument between history professors over a statue which **many protesters say should be removed** from **Lincoln Park in Washington** led to the discovery of a letter in which Frederick Douglass described his feelings about it.

“The negro here, though rising, is still on his knees and nude,” the civil rights campaigner wrote to the National Republican

newspaper in 1876, about the statue of Abraham Lincoln, the 16th president, standing over a man who has broken his chains.

“What I want to see before I die is a monument representing the negro, not couchant on his knees like a four-footed animal, but erect on his feet like a man.”

Amid protests over structural racism and police brutality, debate over such statues has surged. Donald Trump has made [defending monuments](#) to Confederate leaders and figures with outdated views on race a central part of his campaign for re-election.

Until now, accounts of Douglass’s views on the Lincoln statue have relied on a description of its unveiling by an attendee but written 40 years later. The exchange which led to the discovery of Douglass’s letter was between [Jonathan White of Christopher Newport University in Virginia](#), advocating the statue be preserved, and [Scott Sandage of Carnegie Mellon University in Pennsylvania](#), saying it should come down.

Sandage found the letter through searches on [newspapers.com](#) using “couchant”, a distinctive adjective of which Douglass was fond. He [told the Wall Street Journal](#) that David Blight of Yale, who won a Pulitzer prize for [his 2018 biography of Douglass](#), was “practically giddy” when told of the discovery.

Douglass was born into slavery in 1818 but escaped and became a dominant figure in American public life. He died in 1895.

The statue in Lincoln Park was largely paid for by African Americans and dedicated 13 years after [the Emancipation Proclamation](#) of 1863 and 11 years after Lincoln’s assassination and the end of the civil war.

This week, Eleanor Holmes Norton, the District of Columbia’s non-voting member of Congress, [said](#): “Although formerly enslaved Americans paid for this statue to be built, the design and sculpting process was done without their input, and it shows. The statue fails to note in any way how enslaved African Americans pushed for their own emancipation.”

A copy of Thomas Ball's work will be removed from display in Boston but on Sunday the Lincoln biographer Sidney Blumenthal pointed to why the sculptor used the now controversial pose: it was a development of the symbol of the abolitionist movement, adopted by Americans from the British anti-slavery campaigner Josiah Wedgwood.

Though Ball did not produce "much of a statue", Blumenthal said, "it's ironic that people have lost the historical memory of abolitionism. The kneeling slave was on the masthead of the Liberator" - William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist newspaper - "and was a very widespread image."

Blumenthal also noted that contrary to Holmes Norton's claim, Douglass sat on the committee which approved Ball's design.

In his newly discovered letter, Douglass writes: "Admirable as is the monument by Mr Ball in Lincoln Park, it does not, as it seems to me, tell the whole truth, and perhaps no one monument could be made to tell the whole truth of any subject which it might be designed to illustrate."

He goes on to point to what is now complicated political reality.

"The mere act of breaking the negro's chains was the act of Abraham Lincoln and is beautifully expressed in this monument. But the act by which the negro was made a citizen of the United States and invested with the elective franchise was pre-eminently the act of President [Ulysses] S Grant and is nowhere seen in the Lincoln monument."

Grant commanded the Union armies which defeated the Confederacy in the civil war. As president he oversaw the constitutional amendments which gave African Americans citizenship and African American men the vote, fought the Ku Klux Klan and championed Reconstruction.

But Grant also married into a slave-owning family and at one time owned - and freed - an enslaved man. In San Francisco last month, a statue of Grant came down.

Blumenthal noted one possible motivation for Douglass's thoughts about Grant. By 1876, Douglass had both painfully split from Garrison and become a "Republican party stalwart or even a party hack" who wanted Grant to win a third term and would later be made minister to Haiti and US Marshal for the District of Columbia.

Some historians, Blumenthal among them, advocate adding figures in Lincoln Park, perhaps of Douglass, black Union soldiers or Charlotte Scott, a formerly enslaved woman who drove fundraising for the Lincoln statue. In his letter, Douglass offers such a suggestion.

"There is room in Lincoln Park for another monument," he writes, "and I throw out this suggestion to the end that it may be taken up and acted upon."

In fact there is another statue in Lincoln Park, to the African American educator and civil rights activist [Mary McLeod Bethune](#).

On its [website](#), the US National Parks Service acknowledges that "for many people, including Frederick Douglass, the [Lincoln] monument perpetuated many stereotypes about African Americans' ability and participation in antislavery activity."

But it also notes a previous change. The Lincoln statue originally faced west, towards the US Capitol. In 1974 it was rotated east, in order to face Bethune.

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