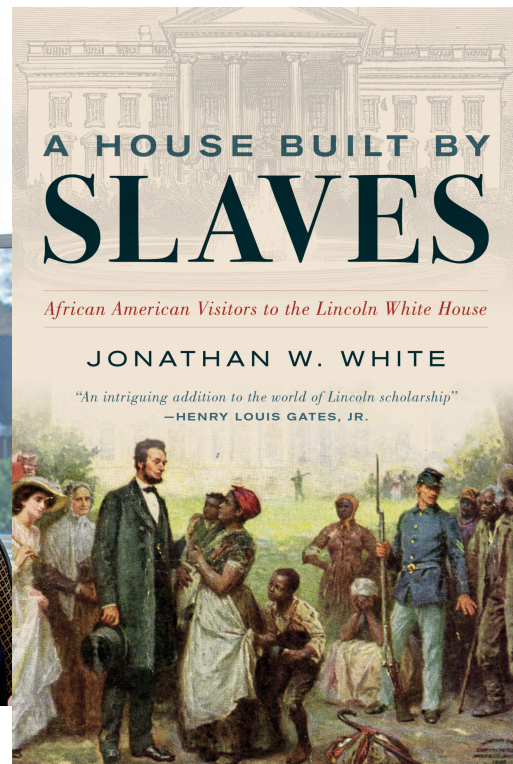


An Interview with Professor Jonathan White



We are excited to announce that JMC fellow Jonathan White has been named a co-recipient of the prestigious 2023 Gilder Lehrman Lincoln Prize for his recent book, [A House Built by Slaves: African American Visitors to the Lincoln White House](#). JMC's Resident Historian and Editorial Manager Elliott Drago sat down to interview Dr. White earlier this May.

ED: Thank you for taking the time to discuss your tremendous and important book! Many Americans may not realize how Abraham Lincoln's meetings with African Americans at the White House had a major impact on his political career and life. Can you explain how you came to this project, and the types of sources and questions that drove your research?

JW: I started collecting letters from African Americans to Lincoln in 2014. I actually don't remember exactly how I got onto that project. I think I had stumbled upon a few in my research for other projects. I soon realized that these were really interesting and important letters that Black men and women were sending Lincoln letters from the North

and the South, some were born free, some were enslaved. They saw in Lincoln a president who was concerned with their lives and with what concerned them. So, I started collecting these letters and my original idea was to write a book called *Emphatically the Black Man's President: African American Correspondence and Conversations with Abraham Lincoln*. The main title comes from a quote from Frederick Douglass, who called Lincoln “emphatically the Black man’s President” shortly after Lincoln’s death. I was just going to pull together letters and primary source documents where African Americans recounted meeting Lincoln. I very quickly realized that I had way too much material for a single book, so I broke it into two different books. I put the letters into a book called *To Address You as My Friend: African Americans’ Letters to Abraham Lincoln* (University of North Carolina Press, 2021). And then I took all of the meetings with Lincoln, and rather than just reproduce them as documents, I turned them into a narrative history. And so that came out in February 2022 as *A House Built by Slaves*. As I was working on these two books, I wanted to get at the question, What did Lincoln mean to African Americans of the Civil War era? How did they view him? How did they interact with him? Was their engagement with him different than it had been with previous presidents—and also with later presidents? I wanted to recapture a historical moment, because today Lincoln gets a lot of criticism from all over the political spectrum and from many different areas of American society. Many African Americans today seem to have a sense of suspicion when it comes to Lincoln. *Suspicion* is a word a number of Black people have used when they’ve come up to me after they’ve heard me give a talk about my book. But it hasn’t always been that way. When Lincoln died in 1865 African Americans mourned more deeply and heartfully than white Americans did. And it’s because of the relationship that had developed between Lincoln and Black Americans during the war. And so, I wanted my book to recapture that moment, that extraordinary period during the war years.

ED: Some of these meetings obviously weren’t without controversy, and I think you do a wonderful job giving the context to the most infamous meeting Lincoln had with Black Americans. During that 1862 meeting, Lincoln discussed the possibility of colonization with Black leaders. You call that meeting “the exception to the rule.” Can you explain maybe some of the context that would make that meeting an exception?

JW: There are several meetings between Lincoln and African Americans that are very famous today. Scholars have known for a long time that Lincoln met with Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth. The other one that’s been really famous is this one you just mentioned, where in August of 1862, Lincoln invites Black leaders from Washington, D.C. to come to the White House, and he then proceeds to lecture them on why they should lead African Americans out of the country through a process known as colonization. In the original *1619 Project*, Nikole Hannah-Jones really held this meeting out as exemplary of Lincoln’s attitude toward and treatment of African Americans. I call it “the exception that proves the rule.” What I mean is that it’s the one meeting that’s different from every other. Every other time Lincoln met with Black men and women he listened and engaged with them in conversation. He was patient and humble and empathetic. This is the one meeting that’s the exception. When they come into his office, he does shake their hands and he asks them a question, but then he proceeds to lecture them for 45 minutes on why they should leave America and why Black people are the cause of the war. And I think in the book, I call it a “regrettable moment.” And as a Lincoln scholar, there are a couple of moments in Lincoln’s life where it’s like, oh man, Abe, did you really have to say that because it makes him hard to defend. But what I do in the book is, I try to explain *why* Lincoln took this approach in this one particular meeting. The explanation is something that other historians have written about as well. This is the period where Lincoln is preparing to issue the Emancipation Proclamation. He decides in the summer of 1862 that he’s going to issue an emancipation proclamation, but his secretary of state convinces him to wait until there’s a victory on the battlefield so that it doesn’t look like an act of desperation because the Union war effort was not going well in the spring in summer of 1862. While he’s waiting for that battlefield victory to come, he does certain things to help prepare the North for what he knows is coming, which is emancipation. He writes a public letter, and he makes some public statements, and one of the actions he takes is he

invites this delegation in, and he talks about colonization. My view is that Lincoln's audience really wasn't those five Black men, and it really wasn't Black Americans. His audience was really a white racist northern electorate who didn't want emancipation. They were willing to fight for the Union, but they didn't support something as drastic in their minds as emancipation. Lincoln actually had a stenographer in the room, writing down everything he said, so that it could get blasted to the newspapers, and the reading public of the North would see, "okay, if emancipation comes, at least he's going to try to push this colonization thing." And to be sure, I think Lincoln was committed to colonization, although I think he also knew he couldn't get 4 million people to leave the country. I think for a good part of his adult life, he really did believe in colonization. But in this meeting, I think his larger goal was to prepare the North for the bigger prize, which was emancipation. As evidence for that, it appears that Lincoln met with a black minister named Henry McNeal Turner shortly after this very infamous meeting with the Black delegation. And Lincoln appears to have said to Turner, essentially, you don't need to worry about colonization: I'm really pushing emancipation and I needed somewhere to point to. If you think about a magician—a magician uses misdirection like, hey, look over here while I'm doing a trick right in front of you, so that you miss what's going on. I think Lincoln was using this meeting as a bit of misdirection, getting the North's attention on one thing while he was really pulling the rabbit out of the hat, which was emancipation. The last thing I'll say about it is that there are two really important points here. One is that this is the first time that the President of the United States invited Black people to the White House to talk about a matter of public policy. And the second is that Lincoln never shared his personal feelings with people. His law partner William Herndon called him "the most shut mouthed man I ever knew." And yet Lincoln invites Henry McNeal Turner into his office and says, here's what I'm really doing. So, for Lincoln to then share his kind of deeper plan with a Black man is also really remarkable.

ED: You begin your book with a quotation from Frederick Douglass in which he says how impressed he was with Lincoln's "entire freedom from popular prejudice against the colored race." Yet their relationship was not always so sanguine. Can you describe the evolution of Lincoln and Douglass's relationship?

JW: Frederick Douglass was one of Lincoln's greatest critics for the first half of the war. When Lincoln was inaugurated in 1861, he gave a speech in which he said he would enforce the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Douglass believed that that law was unconstitutional. When he read in the papers that Lincoln was going to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act, Douglass said the South has no reason to secede, they've got nothing to be worried about. He called Lincoln "abolitionism's most powerful enemy," and an "excellent slave hound." Lincoln was a disappointment to Douglass. When Lincoln is slow in emancipation, Douglass is disappointed. When Lincoln lectures the Black delegation in August of 1862, Douglas writes a scathing editorial about how condescending and out of line Lincoln was. He even criticizes Lincoln for not being a particularly gifted writer or speaker. That's how angry Douglass was. And Douglass was angry that the Lincoln administration was not paying Black soldiers equal pay as white soldiers after they were allowed to enlist beginning in 1863. He was angry that the Union was not protecting Black soldiers from Confederate atrocities, as the Confederacy had said they would execute Black soldiers or sell them into slavery, treating them like slaves in insurrection. In August of 1863, Douglass goes to the White House and meets with Lincoln, where he pushes Lincoln on these issues. Lincoln's answers are not altogether satisfactory for Douglass. However, Douglass is really moved by the fact that Lincoln does not treat him differently because of the color of his skin. They meet again in August of 1864 and discuss a way to try to free as many slaves as possible before the next inauguration because at that point, it looked like Lincoln was going to lose. They meet again on the day of Lincoln second inauguration at the White House where Lincoln asks Douglass, "what did you think of my speech?" These personal interactions with Lincoln transformed the way Douglass viewed the president. He goes on to see that Lincoln's heart is fully in emancipation and that Lincoln is truly a great man who is pushing for what is right. It might not always be as fast as Douglass wants, but Lincoln is someone who can and should be admired. And, you know, historians love to talk about how Lincoln grew, or Lincoln evolved during the Civil War, and I love to point out well,

yeah, so did Frederick Douglass. You know, Frederick Douglass had a view of Lincoln in 1861, and it evolved over the course of the war. I think it was because of the personal interactions that these two men had with each other.

ED: You take care to mention how Lincoln eagerly shook the hands of his Black guests. Why was that physical contact important?

JW: That's something I've thought about a lot since COVID. It used to be that shaking hands was a normal thing. In the last few years, when you would meet someone new, there might be this kind of awkward, "Do you shake hands? Do you not shake hands? What's the appropriate social interaction here?" I think most people are back to normal with shaking hands. It's a sign of trust, and a sign of recognizing, I think, to some extent, the equality of the person that you're engaging with. In the 19th century, most white people never would have shaken a Black person's hand—and that includes abolitionists. One of the things I do in the book is show how some of these abolitionists who we think of as egalitarian and progressive, refused to shake the hands of Black people. Robert Gould Shaw's father [Note: Robert Gould Shaw led the all-Black 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry], refused to shake a Black man's hand and treats him very poorly. Then that guy goes on to meet Lincoln and is so touched by how kind Lincoln is towards him that he dedicates his book to Lincoln, founds a school for Black children in New Orleans named after Lincoln, and later goes to Lincoln's grave and weeps there. Lincoln was out of step with the norm in shaking hands with Black Americans, and I think it really speaks to his empathy—that he engaged with people and treated them as fully human on a personal level, whether they were famous or not. Lincoln is shaking famous people's hands, but he's also shaking Black women's hands out on the streets of Washington, or very poor, downtrodden refugees from slavery who are working in hospitals as cooks. He's learning their names and he's shaking their hands and, you know, there was nothing to be gained in him treating Black people this way, politically. I mean, you just weren't going to win votes this way. But he did it, I think because he really felt that it was a way to connect with people who were around him.

ED: One of the most evocative scenes from the book was when Lincoln received a special Bible from the Black community of Baltimore. Explain the circumstances surrounding the giving of that gift, especially in terms of what the gift meant to Lincoln.

JW: The Black community of Baltimore wanted to show their gratitude to Lincoln for what he had done and so they had a beautiful pulpit Bible with a purple cover and a gold plate that depicts Lincoln freeing an enslaved man on the front cover. They presented it to Lincoln in September of 1864 at the White House. Previously, they'd had it on display in Baltimore, and people could come and pay a little bit of money to see it and that helped raise the funds to pay for it. When they presented it to Lincoln, one of the men made a short speech where he alluded to "The Star-Spangled Banner," our national anthem that had been written in Baltimore during the War of 1812. And he also alluded to ideas about citizenship—that Black people wanted to be part of this national community. They used it as an opportunity to thank Lincoln for everything that he had been doing for African Americans during the war, but also to encourage Lincoln to work to bring African Americans more fully into the body politics.

Lincoln was moved when Black people gave him gifts. He was often moved to tears and he would remind them that God was sovereign over the world, and he would often say, don't give thanks to me, that thanks belongs to God. He would then cherish these gifts. He kept this Bible in his office. A month later, Sojourner Truth came to the White House and met with Lincoln, who was really thrilled to be able to show it to her. They sat down together and leafed through the Bible, and she was really amazed by it, too. The Bible stayed in his family until around 1916, when Fisk University in Nashville, which is an historically Black college, reached out to Lincoln's son Robert and said, you know, wouldn't it be great if this Bible was back in the hands of the Black community and could be used as a way of

remembering Lincoln's legacy for African Americans? Robert Lincoln thought about it, and he agreed. In 1916 he had it sent to Nashville, and it's been there almost ever since. For a while it was on loan at the Museum of the Bible in Washington D.C., but now it's back in the John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library. In the course of my research, I went to Nashville because I wanted to see it, and knew they had some papers in their archive about it. The archivist lifted off the glass container it was in and opened it up. I mean, she was wearing gloves and everything. I didn't touch it, but I was able to get some really cool pictures. And to see it and to imagine what this Bible meant to Lincoln and Sojourner Truth and so many others was pretty incredible. I took a number of pictures to the press and said, Look, I got this really beautiful color picture of the gold emblem on the front cover of Lincoln and the enslaved man and I really want this on the dust jacket. And at first, they were like, oh, we don't know, but they finally relented. It is a great image. It just captures so much of what my book is about, so I was thrilled to have it on the inside flap of the dust jacket.

ED: Lincoln's meeting with Martin Delany featured a discussion of Black soldiers, in particular, potentially recruiting enslaved people in the South. This line of thought complements some historians' views of the Civil War in terms of a massive rebellion of enslaved people. Can you give us a bit more detail regarding Lincoln's thoughts on recruiting southern Blacks and forming an all-Black army of the formerly enslaved, led by Black officers?

JW: Black men began writing to Lincoln as early as April of 1861 saying if you need soldiers, we're happy to volunteer. One of the first letters in *To Address You as My Friend* was a letter from a Black man in New York City named Levin Tilmon wrote to Lincoln and said, basically, If you want soldiers, here's my address, reach out to me. They began writing to other members of Lincoln's administration as well. For the first year and a half of the war Lincoln and his administration say no, this is a white man's war, this isn't not a war about slavery, it's more about Union and democracy—we don't want Black soldiers. That view began to change in late 1862. I think it was partially started by Lincoln meeting with a Black visitor named Robert Smalls, a slave in South Carolina who escaped from slavery by stealing a Confederate ship called the *Planter* and turning it over to the Union blockade. For doing this heroic act, Smalls became a national hero. His story was told throughout the newspapers in the North. He traveled to Washington D.C. in August of 1862, and spoke at a church front of 1,200 people. While he was in D.C., he met with Lincoln. We don't know exactly what these two men talked about because there's no account from that period. I haven't to imagine that they talked about how Robert Smalls stole the ship and became free. I think that had to have had an impact on Lincoln because one of Lincoln's fears had been that Black soldiers would be cowardly, and they might turn their guns over to the Confederates. Now Lincoln met a man who had freed himself with great bravery, daring, and skill. Shortly after this meeting, Robert Smalls returned to South Carolina carrying with him a letter from the War Department that authorized the recruitment of Black soldiers in South Carolina. That became a nationwide effort after the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. From that point forward, Lincoln is fully committed to the idea of having armed Black men. He later in a letter to his friend James C. Conkling likens Black soldiers to steam power or horsepower. Black men make up 10 percent of the Union Army by the end of the war, and if you take away 10 percent of the army, you are decimating the army. Lincoln tries to appeal to white northerners who don't want Black soldiers by saying, look, if you believe in saving the Union and winning the war, you have to recognize that Black soldiers are going to be an essential component to accomplishing those goals. In February of 1865, a prominent Black leader named Martin Delany comes to the White House and meets with Lincoln. Delany suggests that the Union should have a Black army with Black officers, and according to Delany's reminiscence Lincoln says to him, this is the idea I've been looking for. Ultimately, nothing comes of this idea. The war was so close to ending at that point that they didn't create any new armies that were solely Black and with Black major generals. But Lincoln did appoint Delany a major shortly after that meeting.

ED: Can you briefly describe Lincoln's interactions with Black Americans prior to becoming president?

JW: Lincoln spent his earliest years in Kentucky, which was a slave state, and so he almost certainly encountered scenes of slavery in his childhood. As a young man, he traveled to New Orleans two times, and while going down the Mississippi River on his first trip, he and his friend were attacked by seven slaves who maybe tried to kill him, or at the very least, wanted to steal the goods that he was transporting on the flatboat. When he got to New Orleans, he absolutely would have encountered the scenes of slavery, including slave sales. When he got back from his second trip to New Orleans, he settled in New Salem, Illinois. There in the early 1830s, he met a Haitian immigrant named William de Fleurville, a barber who became a close friend. Lincoln did law and tax work for him, too. In 1863, Fleurville sent Lincoln a letter basically saying, here's the news from home, sorry to hear your son died, thank you for emancipation, and I hope you win reelection next year. I mean, a very heartfelt personal letter. It's actually the first letter that I reproduce in *To Address You as My Friend*. When Lincoln moved to Springfield, he had Black neighbors and Black law clients—not a ton, but he had some cases. He also took cases against Black litigants. There's a historian who argues that Lincoln lived in essentially an integrated neighborhood in Springfield. There were a number of Black families on the streets around him and some of whom were involved in the Underground Railroad. So, Lincoln is engaging with African Americans on a fairly regular basis while he's living in Springfield, Illinois in the years leading up to the Civil War, but I think his experiences really multiply once he gets to Washington, D.C. That's where, beginning in 1862, Black Americans start coming to the White House.

ED: Are there any other stories that you wanted to share that you did not write about in the book?

JW: The thing that jumped out at me as I was researching and writing this book was the back and forth that existed between Lincoln and his Black visitors. Other than that infamous meeting in August of 1862, Lincoln engaged in dialogue, listened to his visitors, and he would then respond, and they would listen to him. Sometimes there were multiple back and forth exchanges between Lincoln and Black guests. I think that that was really important—that Lincoln was the president who listened to the people who came and talked to him, whether it was Robert Smalls coming and pushing for the arming of Black men and Lincoln then changing public policy, or Frederick Douglass and Lincoln debating and discussing contentious topics. One that really jumps out at me is the right to vote. Prior to the Civil War, when Lincoln was a young man in the 1830s and '40s, he had mocked the idea of Black men voting. But then he began to have Black men come to the White House pushing for the right to vote and making good arguments on why they should have the right to vote. And I think that they changed Lincoln's mind on that matter, and for the last year of his life, Lincoln works behind the scenes to try to push for Black suffrage in the South. He finally comes out in public on April 11, 1865, and delivers a speech where he argues for limited Black male suffrage. In the audience that night was John Wilkes Booth, and Booth was furious that Lincoln had said this—and four days later, Lincoln is dead. I think it was Lincoln's interaction with Black Americans that pushed him on this issue, and his support for Black suffrage becomes an important part of Lincoln's legacy during Reconstruction.

ED: How would you explain the relationship between Lincoln's interactions with Black Americans and what Lincoln understood about Americans founding principles and history?

JW: I think Lincoln really believed it when he said that the Declaration of Independence applied to “all people of all colors everywhere.” Lincoln really believed that the principles of the Declaration were true, and that they needed to be upheld even though he knew they would never be upheld perfectly. But Lincoln always strove to make them more real. Garry Wills said that Lincoln “picked America's pocket” in the Gettysburg Address and that he was essentially creating a new constitutional order. And I just don't think that's the case at all. I think Lincoln was trying to live up to America's founding principles and make them true. Lincoln said in 1857, that the founders didn't need to write “All men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights” into the Declaration. That had

nothing to do with achieving our independence from Great Britain. Lincoln said those words were in there for “future use.” And Lincoln, I think, was that future use: Lincoln was the guy who was able to help make those principles more true or more real in the United States, and part of the evidence of that is how he treated African Americans—again with empathy and sincerity and cordiality and kindness. And it wasn’t just Black men, it was Black women as well. In his very famous speech in response to the *Dred Scott* decision in 1857, Lincoln uses several hypothetical Black women to say that they deserve the equality promised in the Declaration. And I use a line out of that speech as a chapter title in my book, where I talk about how Lincoln interacted with African Americans around Washington, DC, and that included a number of Black women. He shook their hands, and he engaged them in conversation in ways that most people never would have. And I see all of that as Lincoln living up to those founding principles.

ED: What’s next for Jon White?

JW: I’ve got a lot on my plate right now. In August I’m publishing a book called *Shipwrecked*. It’s a biography of a man named Appleton Oaksmith, who was convicted of slave trading during the Civil War. It’s an extraordinary 19th-century adventure story: this guy had been part of the Gold Rush and filibustering schemes into Cuba and Nicaragua. He had been to the coast of Africa where he was attacked by 3,000 African warriors. He then gets arrested for slave trading, escapes from prison in Boston, and becomes an exile in Havana, where he becomes a Confederate blockade runner. His mother was a really important first wave feminist, too. His life touches every important aspect of the Civil War era. I use his story to explore the great lengths that Lincoln went to destroy the illegal transatlantic slave trade during the Civil War, and to show just how thoroughly his administration was invested in destroying the slave trade, so I’m really excited about that book. I’m also publishing an edited collection, called *Final Resting Places: Reflections on the Meaning of Civil War Graves* with a friend named Brian Matthew Jordan. We gathered 29 historians and each one picked a grave site that’s meaningful to them. We didn’t want a bunch of headstones, so you’ve got the Stono River as a grave site or the turret of the *Monitor* as a gravesite or Lee chapel at Washington & Lee University, or a train wreck site in northeastern Pennsylvania. We have all these different places that became graves during the Civil War. Each historian wrote an essay reflecting on their personal experiences and their personal connection to these places. And they are really powerful essays. I mean, I was actually proofreading the page proofs two weeks ago, the day after the Nashville shooting, and I was actually crying in my office as I was reading the opening essay—it was just so powerfully written. It’s also a beautifully illustrated book with about 120 images, some of them are historical, and for others I hired photographers around the country. I’m very, very excited about that one. I’ve written a children’s book about Lincoln that I’m very excited about, although I’ve had a lot of trouble finding a publisher so I’m probably going to self-publish it in August or September. And then beyond that, I’ve just got a few other projects. I’m thinking about writing a book about a former slave who murdered his former owner while rescuing his teenage daughters from slavery; it’s a really compelling story. Those are some of the things on the horizon.