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Two African Americans on
their meetings with Abraham Lincoln

Sojourner Truth (1797? - 1883) lacked many of Douglass' opportunities, working as a field hand and never learning to read or write. Intense religious experiences, in which she heard God's voice, gave her unusual independence and strength. Despite her illiteracy, she was, like Douglass, a skillful public speaker, and was recognized as a religious leader as early as the 1830s. In 1843 she turned her attention to abolitionism, and in 1850 she began demanding equality for women as well.

Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth were both born in slavery, and both later met with Lincoln in the White House. Douglass (1817-1895) had been a companion to his master's son, and later worked as a house-servant in Baltimore, where slaves had more personal freedom than they did on the plantations. In Baltimore he learned to read and write, and was eventually able to escape to Massachusetts. There he discovered and developed a talent for public speaking, eventually becoming an influential abolitionist.

Sojourner Truth



Since the mid-1850s Sojourner Truth had been living in Battle Creek, Michigan, and during the war she worked there to raise money for black soldiers. In 1864, she was inspired to make the cross-country trip to Washington so that she could meet the president. After the meeting she dictated a letter to Rowland Johnson describing her experience. She directed him to arrange for it to be published in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* (December 17, 1864). Although she had had to wait outside Lincoln's office for three and a half hours before he could see her, her letter betrays no annoyance at the inconvenience. "I had quite a pleasant time waiting until he was disengaged, and enjoyed his conversation with others; he showed as much kindness and consideration to the colored persons as to the white — if there was any difference, more. ... The

president was seated at his desk. ... [After I was introduced,] he then arose, gave me his hand, made a bow, and said, 'I am pleased to see you.' ... I must say, and I am proud to say, that I never was treated by any one with more kindness and cordiality than were shown to me by that great and good man, Abraham Lincoln, by the grace of God President of the United States for four years more. He took my little book, and with the same hand that signed the death-warrant of slavery, he wrote as follows: *'For Aunty Sojourner Truth, Oct. 29, 1864. A. Lincoln.'* As I was taking my leave, he arose and took my hand, and said he would be pleased to have me call again. I felt that I was in the presence of a friend. ..."

Frederick Douglass

In the spring and summer of 1863 Douglass had been recruiting black soldiers for the army, but by August he was discouraged by the way black soldiers were being treated. (They received less pay than white soldiers, they could not become officers, and they risked being sold into slavery if captured by the Confederates.) Some of Douglass' friends convinced him to take his concerns to the president. In his autobiography, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 1882, he describes the meeting: "I need not say that at the time I undertook this mission it required much more nerve than a similar one would require now. ... I was an ex-slave, identified with a despised race; and yet I was to meet the most exalted person in this great republic. ... Happily for me, there was no vain pomp and ceremony about [Lincoln]. I was never more quickly or more completely put at ease in the presence of a great man, than in that of Abraham Lincoln. ... As I approached and was introduced to him, he rose and extended his hand, and bade me welcome. I at once felt myself in the presence of an honest man — one whom I could love, honor and trust without reserve or doubt. Proceeding to tell him who I was, and what I was doing, he promptly, but kindly, stopped me, saying 'I know who you are, Mr. Douglass; Mr. Seward has told me all about you. Sit down, I am glad to see you.' ... He impressed me with the solid gravity of his character, by his silent listening not less than by his earnest reply to my words. ... Though I was not entirely satisfied with his views, I was so well satisfied with the man and with the educating tendency of the conflict, I determined to go on with the recruiting."



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