

The Black History of the White House (City Lights Open Media)

By Clarence Lusane

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The Black History of the White House presents the untold history, racial politics, and shifting significance of the White House as experienced by African Americans, from the generations of enslaved people who helped to build it or were forced to work there to its first black First Family, the Obamas.

Clarence Lusane juxtaposes significant events in White House history with the ongoing struggle for democratic, civil, and human rights by black Americans and demonstrates that only during crises have presidents used their authority to advance racial justice. He describes how in 1901 the building was officially named the “White House” amidst a furious backlash against President Roosevelt for inviting Booker T. Washington to dinner, and how that same year that saw the consolidation of white power with the departure of the last black Congressman elected after the Civil War. Lusane explores how, from its construction in 1792 to its becoming the home of the first black president, the White House has been a prism through which to view the progress and struggles of black Americans seeking full citizenship and justice.

“Clarence Lusane is one of America’s most thoughtful and critical thinkers on issues of race, class and power.”—Manning Marable


"Barack Obama may be the first black president in the White House, but he's far from the first black person to work in it. In this fascinating history of all the enslaved people, workers and entertainers who spent time in the president's official residence over the years, Clarence Lusane restores the White House to its true colors."—Barbara Ehrenreich

"Reading *The Black History of the White House* shows us how much we DON'T know about our history, politics, and culture. In a very accessible and polished style, Clarence Lusane takes us inside the key national events of the American past and present. He reveals new dimensions of the black presence in the US from revolutionary days to the Obama campaign. Yes, 'black hands built the White House'—enslaved black hands—but they also built this country's economy, political system, and culture, in ways Lusane shows us in great detail. A particularly important feature of this book its personal storytelling: we see

black political history through the experiences and insights of little-known participants in great American events. The detailed lives of Washington's slaves seeking freedom, or the complexities of Duke Ellington's relationships with the Truman and Eisenhower White House, show us American racism, and also black America's fierce hunger for freedom, in brand new and very exciting ways. This book would be a great addition to many courses in history, sociology, or ethnic studies courses. Highly recommended!"—Howard Winant

"The White House was built with slave labor and at least six US presidents owned slaves during their time in office. With these facts, Clarence Lusane, a political science professor at American University, opens *The Black History of the White House*(City Lights), a fascinating story of race relations that plays out both on the domestic front and the international stage. As Lusane writes, 'The Lincoln White House resolved the issue of slavery, but not that of racism.' Along with the political calculations surrounding who gets invited to the White House are matters of musical tastes and opinionated first ladies, ingredients that make for good storytelling."—*Boston Globe*

Dr. Clarence Lusane has published in *The Washington Post*, *The Miami Herald*, *The Baltimore Sun*, *Oakland Tribune*, *Black Scholar*, and *Race and Class*. He often appears on PBS, BET, C-SPAN, and other national media.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Lusane (Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice) returns to the nation's highest office in his latest work, tracing the seldom-revealed contributions of black men and women in the White House, from the days of its construction to the present. He meticulously threads personal stories of slaves, builders, chefs, jazz performers, policymakers, and other historic figures (accompanied by occasional portraits) with sharp analyses of leaders facing the criticism and challenges of their times. Whether considering slave-owning presidents who publicly skirted their participation in the practice, exploring Emancipation, Reconstruction, the Civil Rights movement and its aftermath, or discussing contemporary instances, like the Beer Summit, and questioning whether the Obama presidency signals a post-racial era, Lusane offers a vital addition to American history. The thorough density with which he approaches his subject may slow the pace, but scholars will find an intelligent account of one of the most controversial and revered seats of power. Lusane's effort is much more than a catchy title or revisionist tome: it's an eye-opening tribute and a provocative reminder of the many narratives that have gone untold. Photos.

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From [Booklist](#)

Despite the racial progress represented by the election of the first black president of the U.S., the nation's capital has a very complicated and often unflattering racial history. Lusane traces the racial history of the White House from George Washington to Barack Obama. He profiles slaves and free blacks who defied the barriers of racism, including Oney Judge and others owned by presidents who escaped to freedom; performers such as the enslaved musical prodigy known as Blind Tom, who performed at the White House; and Elizabeth Keckly, who served as seamstress and confidante to Mary Todd Lincoln. From the very beginning, the tension between the nation's ideals and the practices of its leaders produced glaring contradictions: Washington's deliberate circumvention of the law to hold on to slaves while living in Philadelphia, Lincoln's struggle to keep a fractious nation together and come to terms with his own racial biases, and the struggle of others to balance party and political concerns against a burgeoning civil rights movement. A sweeping portrayal of changing historical tides at the White House. --Vanessa Bush

Review

"The historical patterns elucidated within Lusane's work will have a profound impact on the perceptions of social work students (BSW and MSW). Concepts of race relationships will be altered. In addition, I found that the biographical sketches are reminiscent of Kennedy's *Profiles in Courage*...The book will be a great asset to the intellectual and emotional development of social work students."—*Journal of Social Work Values & Ethics*

"Dr. Clarence Lusane, program director for Comparative and Regional Studies at American University, painted an interesting link between African Americans and the White House dating all the way back to its construction. Throughout the course of his research, Dr. Lusane found that slave labor was used in the construction of the White House and other buildings in Washington, D.C. His book, *The Black History of the White House*, will certainly be a lesson to us all."—Amber Gray, *The Bulletin*, Vol. 23, No. 3

"The Obamas were the first African American first family, but not the first residents. This thoroughly

researched and gripping book shares the untold stories of some of the people who were enslaved by U.S. presidents, including stories of resistance and escape. Lusane describes the myriad ways that the White House and the lives of African Americans have been intertwined throughout U.S. history. This is the only book to document this essential story in our country's history."—*Rethinking Schools*

"Clarence Lusane's *Black History of the White House* came out late last year and flew under the radar at most of the major book reviews. But Lusane is an elegant, impassioned writer, and the book—which is full of stories we'd never encountered in American History 101—is totally engrossing. Lusane starts off in the 18th century, working his way up to Barack Obama's White House. Presidents Washington, Madison, and Roosevelt (the first) come in for especially close examination, but you'll also read about 'Blind Tom' Wiggins (an autistic savant who was the first African-American to give a professional performance at the White House), James Benjamin Parker (an extremely large man who became a national hero after helping to subdue President McKinley's assassin), and other figures who are more or less ignored by conventional historians. This is a serious, necessary book, but not a humorless one, and one of our favorite sections involves the forgotten campaign to draft Dizzy Gillespie to run against Lyndon Johnson in 1964: 'Rather than "secretaries" he would have "ministers,"' Lusane writes, 'including Max Roach as Minister of Defense, bassist Charles Mingus as Minister of Peace, Malcolm X as Attorney General, composer Duke Ellington as Ambassador to the Vatican, Louis Armstrong as Minister of Agriculture, and singer Ray Charles would be in charge of the Library of Congress. Other positions were to go to Ella Fitzgerald, Peggy Lee, Carmen McRae, Woody Herman, and Count Basie.'"—*The Observer's "Very Short List"*

"The author concludes from his research that there is little doubt the first African American in the White House was a slave. In fact, 25 percent of our presidents were slaveholders. And between the time of slavery and now—with our nation's first black president—there is a long and storied history of blacks in the White House, from servants to lobbyists to Secret Service agents, reporters, activists, officials and more."—*Chicago Sun Times*

"*The Black History of the White House* features stories of those who were forced to work on the construction of 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. and the White House slaves and servants who went on to write books. Readers hear from the Secret Service agents who were harassed by their peers to the Washington insiders who rose to the highest levels of power and behind-the-scenes with Black artists and intellectuals invited to the White House. 'This book focuses on the historic relationship/contradiction between the declaration of freedom and equality by the nation's founders—and as embodied in the president and the presidency—and the systematic and state-sanctioned discrimination against African Americans and other people of color in the United States,' explained Lusane. 'The White House, as symbol and substance, is the prism through which the long history of Black marginalization is viewed. This book argues that while Barack Obama's election is a milestone, it does not undo the historic or contemporary racial barriers that have always defined the nation, and that contentions that we are now in a post-racial America are false. It further argues that many U.S. Presidents, including those under which major racial progress occurred (Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson), have been complicit in Black marginalization, and that Obama will have to overcome the institution of the presidency if he is to achieve real progress in the area of race relations.'"—*The Philadelphia Tribune*

"Those who think they know their presidents may be in for surprises in Clarence Lusane's fascinating social history that begins: '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 12 presidents who were enslavers, more than half kept people in bondage at the White House.' Lusane, an American University professor, weaves in stories of people like Paul Jennings, born into slavery on James Madison's farm, who at 10 was a White House footman and in 1865 wrote the first White House memoir, *A Colored Man's Reminiscences of James Madison*.'"—*USA Today*

"In eloquent language, Lusane shows how the African American experience helped shape a series of presidential administrations and governmental policies."—*Sacramento Bee*

"Despite the racial progress represented by the election of the first black president of the U.S., the nation's capital has a very complicated and often unflattering racial history. Lusane traces the racial history of the White House from George Washington to Barack Obama."—*Booklist*

"Slaves have toiled in the White House; 25 percent of our Presidents were slaveholders. Lusane reminds readers of the place of the President's house, from its very construction onward, in African American history, a tale all-too rarely told."—*Library Journal*

"...carefully documents the travails of a polity in which African-Americans were so essential and prevalent, but that struggled endlessly to maintain, then dismantle, the institution of slavery...A lively, opinionated survey, telling a story that the textbooks too often overlook."—*Kirkus Reviews*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Ronald Finch:

In this 21st one hundred year, people become competitive in every single way. By being competitive right now, people have do something to make these survives, being in the middle of the actual crowded place and notice through surrounding. One thing that often many people have underestimated the item for a while is reading. Sure, by reading a e-book your ability to survive raise then having chance to remain than other is high. For you personally who want to start reading a new book, we give you this specific *The Black History of the White House (City Lights Open Media)* book as beginner and daily reading reserve. Why, because this book is more than just a book.

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