
One hundred years separate the Emancipation Proclamation and the March on Washington, yet they are profoundly linked together in a larger story of liberty and the American experience. Both were the result of people demanding justice. Both grew out of decades of bold actions, resistance, organization, and vision. In both we take inspiration from those who marched toward freedom.

Changing America was created to commemorate these two pivotal achievements on their 150th and 50th anniversaries. It explores their historical context, their accomplishments and limitations, and their impact on the generations that followed.


The exhibition will travel to fifty venues across the nation, accompanied by public programming that will help audiences understand and discuss the relationship between these two great people’s movements.

For more information: createdequal.neh.gov
ala.org/programming/changingamerica

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE

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FREEDOM IS NEVER GIVEN; IT IS WON.

A. PHILIP RANDOLPH
OCTOBER 15, 1937

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Front Lines of Freedom

1863

Emancipation was not the product of one act but many. Americans, enslaved and free, chipped away at slavery through daily acts of resistance, organized rebellions, and political pressure.

For most white Americans, the Civil War was a war for the Union, but for black Americans, it was a battle for freedom. Determined to end slavery, tens of thousands of enslaved African Americans used the war to escape their bondage. As the Union Army drove into the Confederacy, enslaved people stole away and entered Union lines. The people had spoken, using one of the few political tools available to enslaved people — the power of coming together to be heard. The sheer number of African Americans arriving in camps and cities pressured politicians, generals, and the U.S. government to act.

These thousands of African Americans made their freedom a fact. Within two years, President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation and made ending slavery a government policy.

Unfulfilled Promises

The Emancipation Proclamation committed the nation to ending slavery. The U.S. Congress responded with Constitutional amendments abolishing slavery, expanding citizenship rights, and giving black men the right to vote. These acts changed the political landscape, but these new freedoms were stripped away in the years that followed. During the darkest days of Jim Crow segregation, black Americans continued to press for full citizenship. Each Emancipation Day, African Americans organized parades reminding the black community and the entire nation of a commitment that remained unfulfilled.

The March on Washington

1963

On August 28, 1963, work in the nation’s capital came to a halt as hundreds of thousands of Americans gathered for the biggest demonstration ever seen in the District of Columbia. People traveled from every state in buses, trains, cars, trucks, airplanes, and on foot. The world watched as an estimated 250,000 people — united across race, class, and ideological lines, and representing organizations, unions, churches or simply themselves — paused into Washington and onto the grounds of the Lincoln Memorial.

The events of that day — the prayers, the electrifying speeches, the stirring music — helped mark the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation and reminded Americans of the nation’s long pursuit to fulfill its founding principles of liberty and equality for all.

For the millions of people who participated or listened to the speakers on radio and television, it was a moving and unforgettable call for social justice.

The Legacy

In the months following the march, demonstrations and violence continued to pressure political leaders to act. Following President Kennedy’s assassination on November 22, 1963, President Lyndon Johnson broke through the legislative stalemate in Congress.

The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were turning points in the struggle for civil rights. Together the two bills outlawed segregated public facilities and prohibited discrimination in employment and voting. The success of the March on Washington and the achievements of the modern black freedom struggle reverberated throughout society and provided a model for social change. The power of mass nonviolent demonstrations inspired Americans fighting for equal rights and access to opportunities regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, religion, age, sexual orientation, or disabilities.

Uncounted Millions from Accra to Zanzibar turned their eyes to Washington as they have for few other events in American history.

The Washington Post

August 28, 1963