A Representative “of our people”: The Agency of William Slade, Leader in the African American Community and Usher to Abraham Lincoln

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In the 2012 movie Lincoln, Stephen Henderson’s William Slade is a likeable character. Asked by Tad Lincoln what it was like to be a slave, he raises an expressive eyebrow and charismatically asserts, “I was born a free man. Nobody beat me except I beat them right back.”

The line emits a gentle chuckle from the audience, who throughout the picture has viewed the gentle banter between Slade and President Lincoln as both comedic and inspirational relief. At the beginning of the movie, for example, Slade is prodding Lincoln to wear his gloves. Midway through the movie, Slade is standing near Lincoln at a White House reception . . . still chiding Lincoln about his gloves. And finally, near the close, Slade provides a final wistful moment for the audience. Lincoln once more leaves his gloves on a table before Slade can catch him. Tony Kushner’s script instructs, “Lincoln walks past the petitioners [sic] chairs. Slade enters the hallway from the office with the discarded gloves, in pursuit. Then Slade stops, thinking better of it. He’s walking back toward the office when, arrested by a strange feeling, he turns around again. Slade watches Lincoln walk down the empty corridor, until he’s gone.” The music swells, and the audience’s hearts are stirred by the knowledge that it is April 14, 1865. William Slade will never have to trouble himself about Abraham Lincoln’s gloves again.

This Hollywood version of the White House employer/servant relationship undoubtedly owes much of its interpretation to John E. Washington’s They Knew Lincoln, the best available account of African American domestic service in the White House. The picture that

2. Ibid., 161.
emerges of Lincoln and Slade’s relationship from the movie screen is one that Washington believed most historians had “neglected”: that of “the lowly companions of great men, the servants . . . who thought of their welfare every moment and who could observe them in their home, where the cares and restraints of official life are laid aside.”³ But many viewers were critical of director Stephen Spielberg’s presentation of Kushner’s story, particularly historian Kate Masur. In her op-ed review for the New York Times, Masur criticizes the movie’s “passive black characters.”⁴ Had Spielberg included “[a] stronger African-American presence, even at the margins,” she writes, the movie “would have suggested that another dynamic of emancipation was occurring just outside the frame—a world of black political debate, of civic engagement and of monumental effort for the liberation of body and spirit.”⁵

Masur stirred a great deal of debate in both the academic and blogging communities. Artistic license, the defense most commonly invoked whenever a movie comes under historical criticism, was employed against her commentary as well. One must admit that it is rather admirable that the movie’s creative minds took any time to research Lincoln’s household staff. However, Masur makes an excellent point: William Slade’s agency is lost within the movie. He was more than an usher—for while Lincoln’s focus was on the Thirteenth Amendment, Slade organized his community to prove that they were worthy of the Fifteenth.

Washington’s William Slade:
“Confidential Messenger and Friend”⁶

John Washington, whose book They Knew Lincoln was published in 1942, presented the most complete picture we have of William Slade. As a child of the African American generation that witnessed Emancipation, Washington’s work fed the growing Lincoln legend during the World War II era. His Lincoln was legendary, “the personification of all that is good in the true American.” He informs his readers early on that the sources for his book, the African American men and women who either met or served Lincoln, were the “old negro saints of my

⁵. Ibid.
childhood” who “never doubted Lincoln’s immortality.”7 With such pronouncements, it is not surprising that the book’s vignettes do little more than celebrate the sources’ connections to Lincoln.

Washington’s particular knowledge of Slade’s story came by way of a teacher of his youth. This teacher, Katherine Slade, was the youngest of William Slade’s daughters. She taught her students about her father’s connection to Lincoln and even displayed gifts that Mary Lincoln sent to her mother.8 When Washington became a teacher in the same school where Katherine worked, his interest in her knowledge grew. He told the teacher of his desire to write a book, and as a result, Katherine was forthcoming with personal stories. She told him of her childhood visits to play with Tad Lincoln. She took pride in the trust that the president placed in her father. Most intriguingly, however, Katherine described moments of great historical importance: the delivery of the Gettysburg Address, the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, and the assassination of Abraham Lincoln.10

Such were the recollections that Washington shared with his readers.11 The stories showcased Lincoln at his finest hours and examined the president’s personality through his servants’ eyes. The belief that a man’s inner self could be discovered through his treatment of those who worked for him was not a new idea. As Leonard Swett once cautioned William Herndon, “One thing you must remember in writing history. That is no man is great to his ‘Valet de chamber.’”12 Everyone had his or her own faults, and surely Lincoln was not without his. Washington, however, presented Lincoln as a rare exception to Swett’s rule, for he claimed that the president “never treated [the White House domestic staff] as servants, but always was polite and requested service, rather than demand it of them.”13 To Washington, Katherine Slade’s memories

7. Ibid., 17.
8. Ibid., 106. These gifts were a fan and handkerchief.
9. It should be noted, however, that Washington’s assertion that William Slade traveled to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, to witness Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address is likely a confused account. In all likelihood, it was William Johnson, the valet who was shunned by the White House domestic staff, who accompanied Lincoln.
11. He also admitted that Katherine had shared many other tales with him during their time teaching together, but unfortunately, a number of episodes were lost to his memory.
not only verified his belief that Lincoln was the ideal president but the ideal nineteenth-century employer, too.

In styling William Slade as Lincoln’s “confidential messenger and confidant,” however, Washington unintentionally reduced Slade’s life to that of merely being the president’s most loyal servant. What he presented is the William Slade of Kushner’s and Spielberg’s *Lincoln*: good-natured and a showcase for the president’s affection towards the African American population. Washington gave no indication that he thought Slade was able to greatly influence the president. Indeed, Washington firmly believed that “Lincoln needed not Slade’s advice and I doubt whether he was swayed by it.” The best credit he gave to the usher was that Slade was “a sincere friend in whose bosom [Lincoln] knew his secrets would rest sacred and inviolate.”

Yet tantalizing clues emerge from Washington’s book to indicate that Slade was more than he appeared in print. Despite Washington’s assertion that Slade “kept the closest mouth on all public affairs and would never discuss any of Lincoln’s plans or business with anyone,” the book also suggests that the trusted servant seemed willing to tell stories to at least one friend—Frederick Douglass. In a brief passage, Washington mentioned that “whenever [Slade] and Frederick Douglass met,” the usher was always “prepared” with a new story concerning the president. This statement came directly from Douglass’s grandson, Haley Douglass. The connection is intriguing: Slade was friends with one of the African-American community’s greatest leaders. More than the man Washington presented in his book, Slade was a leader whose actions constantly and publicly challenged the moderate Republican stance on African American political rights.

The servant’s William Slade: The usher “who bossed all the help”

It is not known when Slade arrived at the Lincoln White House. The 1860 census reveals a dearth of African Americans in the Buchanan White House—an oddity when one considers the domination of African Americans in service industries throughout Washington, D.C., at the time. President Buchanan, however, preferred a staff stocked with European blood. English and French servants were the desired nationalities of the period, but employers deemed individuals with

14. Ibid., 111.
15. Ibid., 110, 115.
16. Ibid., 118.
Irish, Welsh, German, and Belgian blood as acceptable. Unsurprisingly, then, these nationalities populated 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue in 1860.\(^\text{17}\)

Slade did not serve in Buchanan’s White House. He did not even live in Washington, D.C., at the time, although his family had been a part of the District’s respected African American community in the years prior to Buchanan’s presidency. In 1860 the Slade family lived in Cleveland, Ohio, in the Fourth Ward.\(^\text{18}\)

At the outbreak of the Civil War, however, the Slades decided to return to Washington, D.C.—the center of the oncoming storm. “Fires and burglaries occur every night,” wrote U.S. Patent Office employee Horatio Nelson Taft in January 1861, which prompted him to “sleep with a loaded revolver within reach.”\(^\text{19}\) Additionally, troops filled the city, and the flurry of states leaving the Union had just begun. It was hardly an ideal time for the Slades’ return.

Employment likely played a role in the family’s decision to move. At some point in his life, Slade had served “for many years” as a porter at the Metropolitan Hotel in the capital.\(^\text{20}\) The job marked him as a respectable employee and provided opportunities to make connections with important persons both within and outside of the District.\(^\text{21}\) The Treasury Department next employed Slade as a messenger. From there, Slade likely used this position as a stepping-stone into the Lincoln White House.

Slade’s mixed ancestry also made him an ideal candidate for employment in the White House.\(^\text{22}\) Washington described Slade as being

\(^\text{17}\). Washington Ward 1, Washington, District of Columbia, 1860, U.S. Census, Ancestry.com, accessed June 20, 2012. Of the eleven servants listed as residing at the White House, two were English, one was Welsh, one was Belgian, and six were Irish. Only one servant, the eventual steward Thomas Stackpole, was noted to be a native-born employee.

\(^\text{18}\). Cleveland Ward 4, Cuyahoga, Ohio, 1860, U.S. Census, Ancestry.com, accessed November 1, 2012. Opportunities for employment might have been a factor, as well as higher education for the elder Slade children. William’s wife, Josephine, was a teacher, and out of the four elder Slade children, the two eldest daughters were of an age to consider higher education. With real-estate valued at $4,000 and his personal holdings worth $2,000, William’s holdings were respectable.


\(^\text{20}\). St. Albans Vermont Transcript, March 20, 1868.

\(^\text{21}\). Hotels were not just places for out-of-town guests to spend a night; they were also meeting places for discussions of local political, business, and social matters.

\(^\text{22}\). Another factor that undoubtedly assisted Slade in gaining a job in the Lincoln White House was his parental background. A newspaper from his lifetime reported that he “was regarded as the son of a leading citizen” within Washington, D.C. Vermont
“of medium height, olive in complexion, with light eyes and straight chestnut-brown hair.” A light complexion was valuable to any African American who wanted to serve as an usher and steward. As Washington put it, employers appreciated that the house servants who emerged from slavery often had “the blood of the owners of the plantation.” Their lighter skin tone was viewed as proof that they had “inherited the ambition, color and particular traits of their owners.”

This was the supposed winning combination that made the perfect servant in nineteenth-century thought: refined manners and intelligence coupled with servile docility.

Possessing all of the desired requisites, William Slade became Abraham Lincoln’s usher in 1861. This was an important position within any substantial household. As an usher, only two positions existed above Slade’s in the domestic hierarchy—that of steward or stewardess of the White House. While the person appointed as steward or stewardess saw to the financial and technical aspects of running a home, it was the usher who issued tasks to the household’s servants. More importantly, the usher typically assisted his employer if a valet was not hired. Slade found himself fulfilling both roles as a result of household politics.

Slade’s duties were numerous as Lincoln’s usher. First and foremost, his position marked him as a professional. He was held in higher regard than almost all the other servants within the White House hierarchy. The task fell to Slade to make certain that maids were on top of the cleaning, that meals were served at the appointed hour, and that footmen were in their positions at the time the Lincoln family needed them. If such scenes remind the reader of a scene from Downton Abbey, it is because the task of usher in the Lincoln White House was very like that of a European butler. Daniel E. Sunderland provides excellent insight.

Transcript, March 20, 1868. This assertion is complemented by Washington’s brief history of the man, who noted that “Slade was a Virginian of distinguished Southern ancestry” (Washington, They Knew Lincoln, 108). As such, it is believed that Slade was born a freeman to parents of a mixed ancestry.

23. Washington, They Knew Lincoln, 108. Two surviving images confirm the description. Also see 98.

24. Various persons served in these positions, and at times the position was empty.

25. A valet did work for Lincoln when the future president arrived in Washington, D.C. However, due to the snobbery of nineteenth-century household hierarchies, the White House staff rejected William Johnson, Lincoln’s chosen valet. In a letter searching for alternate employment for Johnson, Lincoln noted that Johnson’s skin color was the reason for the discord. While it appears that Johnson continued to occasionally served Lincoln in a domestic capacity, he was not a constant presence. William Slade stepped into the role that gave him intimate access to the president.
into this particular occupation in his book *Americans and Their Servants*, by way of a French-born servant who at the time worked in the States. The butler explained that, at the most basic level, serving in a position such as his meant possessing the ability to read the thoughts of one’s employer before his wants could be voiced aloud. With such information in hand, one must then “tell the other servants by the eye, by the lifting of a finger, so that all runs smooth as if there were no servants and yet all the wants are all supplied.”  

In addition to serving as usher, however, it also fell to Slade to act as Lincoln’s valet. This meant seeing to the president’s wardrobe, assisting him with grooming, and acting, as Sunderland explains, “as a ‘gentleman’s gentleman,’ his employer’s ‘man.’” It was a position that granted Slade an added level of status throughout Washington, D.C., but as Sunderland points out, “probably no other servant was so aware of having a ‘master,’ and it was assumed that few industrious, self-respecting fellows would endure such a position for very long.”

Yet, Slade remained in the position of usher/valet throughout Lincoln’s presidency. “The man . . . who bossed all the help,” as White House seamstress Rosetta Wells recalled him, was well respected in the African American community. He was an elder at the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church, the house of worship where many of the White House’s African American servants attended services. In both daily and religious life, Slade stood as an example for others to follow. Beyond this, however, Slade was engaged in activities to raise the status of African Americans throughout both the District and the nation.

The activist’s William Slade: a man “who had almost passed through brimstone for the colored race”

Slade’s community activism began before he served in the White House. Records demonstrate that before he left the District of Columbia for Cleveland in the late 1850s, Slade was a committed member of the Columbian Harmony Society (CHS). As a mutual aid association, the CHS had assisted African Americans of various economic


27. Ibid., 91.


backgrounds in obtaining burial plots since the association’s founding in 1825. Indeed, it was “perhaps the first relief or mutual aid organization founded and operated by African-Americans in the City of Washington.” Slade acted as the organization’s treasurer, and it was he who, in 1857, completed the transaction for the Columbian Harmony Cemetery’s new location. In 1858 he was undoubtedly one of the association members who was described as being “engaged, at their own expense, in removing the remains of their dead to the site recently purchased.”

Scant records make it difficult to deduce Slade’s activities in Cleveland, but evidence suggests that he participated in the exchange of information between the Ohio and Washington, D.C., African American communities upon his return to the capital. In late 1861 hundreds of the District’s fugitive slaves were incarcerated, herded into prisons that provided little by way of adequate food, clothing, or shelter. Most scandalously, as Masur points out, Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper reported that high numbers of women and children languished in “inhumane conditions.” The readers of the Cleveland Morning Leader, however, were already knowledgeable of fugitive treatment by the way of William Slade, who, being “well known in your city,” informed readers that in addition to “the thirty or forty fugitive slaves” who were held within a prison of more than two-hundred ill-treated occupants, “some 60 or 70 men were confined in the work-house.”

Slade gained knowledge of such conditions through his extensive connections in the African American community. Indeed, he served as president of both the District’s (African American) Convention and of the Social, Civil, and Statistical Association (SCSA). As president of the Convention, Slade presided over meetings in which churches and


33. “Some Things at the Capitol—The Black Hole of Washington—The Horrible Condition fo [sic] the Jail,” Cleveland Morning Leader, December 18, 1861. While this particular William Slade could be another Cleveland resident, William Slade Jr., the son of former Senator William Slade of Vermont and the consul to Nice during Lincoln’s tenure, it is likely that the quoted William Slade is the African American William Slade due to the information he provided about African Americans in the jail. Additionally, William Slade Jr. (consul to Nice) almost always appeared in the Cleveland Morning Leader with Jr. following his name.
organizations came together to discuss “[b]usiness of great importance to the general welfare of the colored people.”

Much like the Columbian Harmony Society, the SCSA was a mutual aid society. However, the aid provided by the SCSA was meant for the here and now, not the forever after. Its goal, as Masur explains, was to establish “a case for African American citizenship” by way of “collecting and publicizing” data. The particular data that the SCSA gathered were the qualities that defined “civilization” in mid-nineteenth century America: What proportion of African Americans received or were interested in an education, and what was the financial standing of the community at large? In other words, had the African American community in the District proven that it was capable of producing responsible citizens for the Republic? By collecting this data, Slade and the SCSA planned to answer that question with an emphatic “Yes.”

Data like the type collected by the SCSA was necessary because even the idea that the two races could live harmoniously together after emancipation was a prospect that many questioned. Most famously, Slade’s employer, President Lincoln, expressed this quandary to a delegation of African Americans who met with him in the late summer of 1862. In a response that has come to be used as a window into the president’s thoughts on race, Lincoln famously told the delegation that “You and we are different races. We have between us a broader difference than exists between almost any other two races. Whether it is right or wrong I need not discuss; but this physical difference is a great disadvantage to both of us, as I think your race suffer very greatly, many of them by living among us, while ours suffer from your presence. In a word we suffer on each side.” Acknowledging that the delegation’s race suffered “the greatest wrong inflicted on any people,” Lincoln also pressed that “our present condition”—the Civil War—would not have existed “[b]ut for your race among us.” “It is better for both of us,” he explained, “to be separated.”

Slade’s political activism in 1862 was at odds with Lincoln’s position. However, one should also consider that Lincoln was at some level aware of Slade’s standing within the African American community because the usher’s activities were so public. Indeed, it stands

to reason that Lincoln’s thoughts on race and suffrage were affected by the example that Slade provided, on both a domestic and political level. For the domestic portrait, Washington makes a compelling case that after a period of time Lincoln unburdened his thoughts to Slade as the usher helped the president prepare for sleep at night. Beyond this, however, Lincoln experienced other domestic moments with Slade that possibly affected his opinion of the District’s African American population. Early in 1862, for example, Lincoln’s son Willie died, and Tad became increasingly disruptive for the White House domestic staff. Slade eventually tempered the problem by supplying his three children, Andrew, Jessie, and Katherine, to play with the boy.\(^\text{37}\) Tad even visited the Slade home on occasion. Of course, it was not uncommon during that era for young children of different races to play with one another, only to fall into patterns of racial ideology when they became young adults. However, the four evidently got along well with one another, and this could not have hurt Slade’s standing in Lincoln’s eyes.

Slade’s younger children were not the only family members to make an impression on the Lincoln family. In her *Reminiscences* educator and abolitionist Lucy Colman briefly described the antics of the Slades’ middle child, Josephine. Colman described the young woman of about eighteen as being “very beautiful.” She was also adventurous, for when a friend complained to Colman of his inability to introduce Sojourner Truth at one of the regular White House receptions, another friend of Colman’s, an English doctor by the name of Thompson, passionately declared, “I would so like to take a colored person on my arm and enter that house.” Colman confidently advised Thompson to let her make arrangements. She then enlisted Josephine for her plan. At the next scheduled reception, Josephine Slade attended arm in arm with Dr. Thompson. Josephine, like her parents, possessed a skin tone that was so light that “being on the arm of a distinguished English gentleman,” her African heritage was not immediately apparent. Mrs. Lincoln, however, noticed, for Josephine occasionally assisted the seamstress Elizabeth Keckly in her work at the White House. According to Colman, the First Lady, “did not fail to scowl upon her contempt at the intrusion.”\(^\text{38}\) She apparently did not publicly reveal the girl, but whether this was owing to an attempt to avoid public embarrassment or to a tolerance

of Josephine remains unknown. At any rate, both Josephine and her father likely received Mrs. Lincoln’s private thoughts on the incident. Josephine, after all, would have found it difficult to enter the White House without falling under the usher’s attention.

The anecdote served Colman’s purpose in highlighting what she viewed as the “contemptible” prejudice against color in Lincoln’s White House. Yet the episode revealed another radical element of political thought within the Slade family: that of universal suffrage. For Lucy Colman was not only a well-known advocate of abolitionism in her day but of women’s rights as well. The likelihood that the younger Josephine held similar views is evidenced by Colman’s request of help from her. Bolstering the possibility of the family’s interest in universal suffrage was that Josephine’s namesake, her mother, could be found listed amongst the vice presidents at the first meeting of the Universal Franchise Association in 1868. The organization based woman’s right to suffrage on the belief that while black enfranchisement “on a small scale comparatively, had yielded rich results, so the enfranchisement of half the adult population would yield vast good.”39 In this light, it seemed that the effort to achieve equality—be it of the natural or political variety for either race or sex—was a family affair for the Slades.

In 1864, however, African American men, let alone the women, possessed no guarantee of suffrage if the Civil War ended favorably for the Union. Indeed, the Thirteenth Amendment had not yet passed. William Slade nonetheless remained tireless in his efforts to prove the worth of the African American community in Washington, D.C.—and it was in this respect that he challenged his employer politically. Only a year previously, Slade’s name was prominently placed above the names of other community leaders in a letter to Edwin Stanton. In their letter, the men petitioned the secretary of war to grant African American community leaders sway in selecting the officers in charge of the District’s and Alexandria’s “colored” regiments. They praised the decision to allow the formation of such regiments and voiced their “firm” belief that multiple regiments could be raised. Stanton additionally received their congratulations for realizing that raising a District regiment would not only “assist in suppressing the existing wicked rebellion,” but that it would benefit their community as well. To such an end, the creation of regiments would “place [African Americans] under organized discipline, and furnish them with employment, where

they can be properly provided and cared for and educated in a very important sense.” This explication served two purposes: first, it was worded in such a way as to secure the appointment of officers who were “prompted by motives of humanity and sympathy with the colored race.”40 Secondly, it served as another offer to prove the worth and sustainability of the District’s African American population. Military participation would assist in halting the war and mold African Americans into good citizens of the Republic.

To further this petition along, Slade included a private note to the president. The usher began by noting, “had we [the black Washingtonian leaders] not deemed it of the utmost importance to have it before your Excellency as the earliest possible moment,” he could have secured the signatures of other prominent African Americans. “I believe to the best of my knowledge these men [requested to be officers] are the universal choice of our people,” he concluded to the president, “and if it is necessary [to raise more regiments] we will increase the List.”41 This sole surviving communication from Slade to Lincoln indicates that Slade was not shy of bringing up the concerns of the African American Washingtonian community. Indeed, he initiated political conversation with Lincoln by presenting himself as a representative of his community’s concerns.

Concerns of another military nature, however, began to affect the entirety of Washington, D.C., in the fall of 1864: the draft. In response, the District’s various wards gathered to support one another through a monetary collection in the event that its citizens were selected to serve in the Union army. These ward meetings also procured substitutes to go in the place of men who could not be spared from their businesses or families. The meetings of Slade’s ward, the Fourth Ward, were not called according to one’s race, nationality, or economic status. Instead, the Fourth Ward gathered on the sole basis of one’s home address.

The democratic nature of the draft meetings did not, however, mean that issues of race and class did not arise during the gatherings. This was especially true of the spirited debates that erupted over how subscriptions would be divided. One attendee put forth the resolution that anyone who contributed twenty dollars should receive an equal amount of the collected funds if drafted. Others protested that such a resolution “would go hard on the poor man” amongst them. In response to such

41. William Slade to Abraham Lincoln, April 28, 1863, ibid.
arguments, one prominent citizen voiced his amazement that “100 men could not be found who would give $100 each, to avert the draft.” If the ward hoped to be spared the effects of the draft on its community, its citizens “should put his shoulders to the wheel and work.” As such, another person within the meeting suggested that the leadership of “the colored men” should also urge on their fellow brethren, as they “were as liable to draft as the whites.” To such ends, the biracial meeting appointed William Slade along with two others “to solicit subscriptions amongst their friends.”

After the appointment of representatives, separate draft meetings for the ward’s African American community were called. As was their custom, the meeting’s participants gathered in one of the local churches. Slade acted as the meeting’s leader. He informed the community that “while he was in favor of the colored men enlisting and fighting the battles of their country, he wished them to have pride for the city and their ward.” Therefore, the community should do its part in contributing to the draft subscription. He chided their lack of participation in the subscription thus far noting that while “the Fourth ward was larger in wealth and resources,” the Seventh Ward (whose circumstances should have meant lower contributions on its part), “was the banner ward, and . . . would continue to be.” His pronouncement finished, he turned the meeting over to Rev. Father Bowland, with the remark that “he was in favor of asking God for everything.” Bowland acquiesced to the request and went on to inform the crowd that while he was aged, he would still contribute to the subscription. He noted that “it had often been said that the colored race was God-forsaken.” He encouraged his brethren “to show the white people that the colored were an intelligent race, and willing to respond when their country called.”

The flow of the meeting thus far was designed to invoke guilt: the community had proven itself lacking despite its resources and its need to prove its worth to the larger District community. Following Bowland’s invocation, Slade took control of the meeting once more to urge everyone present to contribute, so that “the good credit of the colored people of the Fourth Ward” might be preserved. He then introduced the gathering to a Mr. Finney, a white speaker from Ohio. Upon taking the podium, Finney emphasized the debt that the gathered company


owed to Slade, who “had battled against slavery all of his life, and had almost passed through brimstone for the colored race.” With this simple statement, the crowd was reminded that Slade’s battles had been in the hopes of not only gaining the community the natural right of emancipation, but of political rights as well. Here was an opportunity to assist Slade in proving that they were worthy of that goal. With the speeches over, $300 was collected into the community basket.44

The question of what to do with the money was a contested one. At the next night’s meeting, one of the meeting’s leaders put forth that the collected funds should “be equally divided between among those who are drawn and accepted, and who have contributed $1.” Slade spoke in protest against such a resolution, contending that “the money ought to be handed over to the City hall meeting, as that meeting had authorized the collection of the money.” He was met by the argument from the meeting’s secretary, Archibald Lewis, who was disturbed by the possibility that anyone who did not contribute a minimum of twenty-five dollars would not be eligible to receive a fair share of the collected funds. Most of the ward’s African American community could not contribute that amount. Therefore, Slade’s opponent argued, “the colored men might as well divide their own and receive its benefits.”45

Conflict broke out. One man firmly stated that he “was opposed to doing anything to insult his white friends.” The Evening Star described Slade as being “surprised at the turn things had taken, for he was under the impression all were to receive the benefits of the fund without regard to color.” Since “their white friends” had selected him, he advocated that subscriptions continue to be gathered. However, he also offered that before the African American community would turn its collection over, “the colored men ought to receive from the City Hall meeting a satisfactory explanation as to the disposition to be made of the money.” To answer these questions, two emissaries on opposing sides of the argument were immediately sent to City Hall to ascertain whether or not the community’s collection might be at risk. Upon learning that those contributing less than twenty-five dollars were not eligible to receive a fair payment from the collected funds, and also being told that while City Hall would accept the collection that it “did not desire to deceive them as to the disposition to be made

44. Ibid. This was possibly George Grandison Finney, an ardent abolitionist and a figurehead of the Second Great Awakening.

of it,” Slade and his fellow objectors withdrew their criticism of holding a separate fund for their community.46

Slade’s voice in these arguments paints a picture of a man who valiantly attempted to both believe in and implement cooperation between the white and African Americans communities. The draft meetings proved to the community that there was work to be done, but they also offered a type of hope. Men of both races had initially joined together in the face of the draft. Likewise 1865 marked the first time that an African American was officially admitted to one of the president’s public receptions. The man was Slade’s friend, Frederick Douglass, who entered the White House on the occasion of Lincoln’s inauguration.47

Change was on its way in another form by the time Douglass followed Josephine Slade’s footsteps through the White House doors. While Lincoln continued to disapprove of suffrage for all African American men, he demonstrated an interest in suffrage for all those who had served in the Union army. Additionally, as his assistant secretary Edward Duffield Neill explained, he favored “intelligent, impartial suffrage.”48 However, just days after Lincoln publicly expressed his approval of black suffrage, he was assassinated. Slade was at his home when he heard the news. The massive crowds that gathered outside of the scene of the attack hindered Slade’s attempt to reach Lincoln’s side. As a result, Slade only made his way to the Petersen House in the early hours of the morning. A grim prediction met him upon his arrival: the president would not survive. According to Washington, Slade then “returned to the White House knowing that much had to be done there.”49

Slade’s position as Lincoln’s usher meant that he claimed the unenviable task of preparing Lincoln’s body after death. For his burial shroud, he selected the suit that the president wore to his recent inauguration. Materials for washing the body rested nearby, along with a pair of scissors that Slade used to preserve a locket of Lincoln’s hair. Mrs. Lincoln, by way of Elizabeth Keckly, gave Josephine Slade a piece of the dress she wore to Ford’s Theatre that night.50 The hair and the dress piece became family heirlooms that spoke of the Slade family’s special connection to the sixteenth president.

46. Ibid.
50. Ibid., 110.
Douglass’s William Slade:
A friend with “decided advantage in the way of information”\textsuperscript{51}

Despite Lincoln’s death, Slade’s tenure at the White House continued. In the days following the assassination, Edward Duffield Neill noted that a “miserable” Slade sought him out to ask if on the day of the assassination the assistant secretary had noticed that the usher was conversing with Vice President Johnson in Lincoln’s office. Receiving confirmation, he went on to tell Neill that Johnson “had expressed his respect for Mr. Lincoln, but said he thought if he were president he would not make it too easy for the rebels, and that having African blood in his veins he had nodded assent.” Most crushingly for Slade, however, was that he had “expressed the wish that at some future day [Johnson] might be president.” On Saturday, April 15, his expression of desire seemed horribly prophetic. Neill comforted him by noting that “there was no occasion for his unhappiness,” and at this declaration, Slade “seemed to be in a measure relieved.”\textsuperscript{52}

That Slade desired to remain as the White House usher may seem a bit strange to anyone familiar with Andrew Johnson’s position on African Americans. Slade’s friend Frederick Douglass famously claimed that upon making eye contact with Johnson at Lincoln’s inauguration that “Whatever Andrew Johnson may be, he certainly is no friend of our race.” Douglass’s opinion of the man was further damaged after Johnson took particular pains to humiliate him within the White House a year later, in 1866. Douglass, along with an African American delegation that hoped to discuss the topics of race, suffrage, and Reconstruction, was met by Johnson’s “brief addresses” and a refusal “to listen to any reply on [the delegation’s part], although solicited to grant a few moments for that purpose.”\textsuperscript{53} More damaging, a leak to the New World reported that upon the delegation’s exit, Johnson howled, “Those d—d sons of b—-s thought they had me in a trap! I know that d—-d Douglass; he’s just like any nigger, & he would sooner cut a white man’s throat than not!”\textsuperscript{54}

Further study into Johnson’s thoughts on race fails to offer a more positive angle than the encounter Douglass offered—there was an

\textsuperscript{51} Douglass to Slade, August 12, 1867, Frederick Douglass Papers, Library of Congress.
\textsuperscript{52} Neill, Reminiscences of the Last Year of President Lincoln’s Life, 16.
\textsuperscript{53} Frederick Douglass, The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass: An African American Heritage Book (2003), Kindle ed., location 5633–46 of 8062, and location 5929 of 8062.
\textsuperscript{54} Paul H. Bergeron, Andrew Johnson’s Civil War and Reconstruction (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2011), 104.
obvious strain of racism within the new president’s thought. Yet, when the position of steward became available in the summer of 1865, President Johnson appointed Slade to the highly coveted post. As steward, Slade was now in charge of household finances—a job that only went to the most trusted of domestics. Servant pay and the buying of goods now fell under his personal responsibility. News of the appointment spread to Washingtonians by way of the Evening Star, which cheerfully announced, “Mr. Slade is admirably qualified for his new duties, and will conduct the internal economy of the White House with all the efficiency that has characterized the discharge of his previous duties.”

Slade’s appointment also came at a critical moment in his efforts to improve the lives of African Americans within the District. Only a week after the Evening Star announced his new post, Slade attended yet another convention of African American delegates at Asbury Chapel. The leader of Ebenezer Church, the Rev. D.B. Jones, opened the gathering with prayer, and African American men from the First through Seventh wards, in addition to leadership from Georgetown, joined together in singing “Blow the Trumpet, Blow.” As these men proclaimed by hymn that “the year of jubilee is come,” they meant to make it doubly so. The Civil War had ended, and if it fell within their power, those who gathered at Asbury Chapel hoped to eventually gain suffrage for African Americans within the District, too.

Some outside observations of the meeting were of the sort that Slade had worked to prove for the District’s African American community for years. The Evening Star found it “pleasant to note the immense satisfaction with which the embryo voters went through all the motions of making officers, offering resolution and hairsplitting amendment, and raising multitudinous points of order.” Indeed, what occurred during the meeting was republicanism at its finest: arguments broke out over the credentials of those gathered, and accusations of log-rolling filled the air. In response to the tumult, William Slade raised his voice to the crowd. “This course of proceeding was not the way to become good citizens,” he argued. He then urged those gathered to “act as if they appreciated the great prize for which they were striving, and above all, let them act in harmony.” Applause met his passionate response.

55. Although, as Bergeron notes in his study of Johnson, “the absolute reliability of the quotation can be questioned.” Ibid.
56. “Steward at the White House,” Evening Star, August 7, 1865.
58. Ibid.
Once again, Slade offered proof of the intelligence and capability of the District’s African American population.

Perhaps his constant striving for harmony and his alertness to proving his race’s worth was what kept Slade in Johnson’s good graces. For Johnson certainly felt no fondness at the thought of suffrage for African Americans. His attitude towards that population was only one of the elements of Johnson’s personality that rankled a Congress that had become increasingly full of Radical Republicans. Relations between the president and Congress were testy in mid-1867; in 1868 the storm broke. Ignoring Congress’s Tenure of Office Act, Johnson unwisely attempted to remove Edwin Stanton from his position as secretary of war. The action resulted in Johnson’s impeachment by the House of Representatives.

Some historians have argued that Johnson attempted to improve his public image by offering Frederick Douglass the opportunity in August 1867 to head the Freedman’s Bureau. In some histories, the offer is framed as coming by way a friend of Douglass’s. Others identify the intermediary by name and note that the request was written to Douglass on official White House stationary. Given the evidence, all agree that the offer was likely a calculated move on Johnson’s part. What has failed to be calculated into this belief, however, is the background of the intermediary in question: William Slade. In his letter to Douglass, Slade spoke with all of the passion that guided his other efforts to assist the African American community. In a “Private and Confidential manner,” Slade related that a “great many Persons . . . are of the opinion that the freedman’s Bureau (its affairs) are not conducted as they ought to be.” As such, he hoped that his friend would let him “know if I secure the appointment of you at the head of the Bureau will you accept”? After all, Slade could think “of no man—white or colored [who] would be better adapted to the place than your Honorable self.”

Douglass’s response to his friend spoke of a suspicion that Johnson might be behind its penning. After noting the “instrumentalities and opportunities” that it would undoubtedly gain him, he admitted that his “present views of duty” could not allow him to claim the position. He remained thankful to Slade for his efforts on his behalf, but his final remarks offered a direct jab towards the president, “Should President Johnson place a colored man at the head of the bureau, it would more

59. William Slade to Frederick Douglass, July 29, 1867, Frederick Douglass Papers.
than all other acts of his demonstrate his purpose of being the Moses of the colored race in the United States.”

Slade seemed to have recognized Douglass’s implication, as he noted in his next letter to Douglass that he had learned of the opportunity through one of Johnson’s secretaries. Indeed, he was “all-most certain” about his ability to arrange the situation for Douglass, despite the fact that he “had not talk [ed] with the President on the subject.” He continued to push the possibility that Douglass would accept, and ended his business by firmly writing, “I would like to see you at the—head of that Bureau.”

Throughout the exchange, Douglass and Slade remained pleasant in their cordialities. Both asked after the other’s wife, and both complimented the other. Particularly, Douglass singled out the value of Slade’s position within the White House. “I shall always be glad to hear from you,” he assured Slade. After all, he noted to the steward, “Your position gives you decided advantage in the way of the information and I should be very glad at any time to learn the direction of events.” Coupling such a line with knowledge of Slade’s past, it becomes entirely possible to imagine that Slade contacted Douglass without Johnson’s prompting. Of course, Johnson may also have used his knowledge of Slade’s relationship with Douglass and the steward’s status within the African American community to take advantage of the friendship. Or, Slade may have been entirely knowledgeable of Johnson’s intentions and carried through with the letter to Douglass because of an earnest desire to see Douglass at the head of the Bureau. Certainly, Douglass’s own son held similar sentiments, as he had passed on the same offer to his father by way of Ward Hill Lamon just days before Slade’s letter reached the elder Douglass. Nonetheless, the episode demonstrated that Slade continued to work for the betterment of the African American population even during Johnson’s tenure—and that he used his position within the White House to do it.

The death of “one whose zeal has never flagged”

Slade’s tenure as steward of the White House was short-lived. On March 16, 1868, one of the Fourth Ward’s most respected African American

60. Douglass to Slade, August 12, 1867, ibid.
61. Ibid., Slade to Douglass, August 18, 1867, ibid.
62. Ibid., Douglass to Slade, August 12, 1867, ibid.
63. Charles Douglass to Frederick Douglass, July 18, 1867, ibid.
64. “[Communicated.] Columbian Harmonial Cemetery Association—Washington
citizens passed away at the age of fifty-three. The coroner listed heart disease and dropsy as the cause of Slade’s death. Funeral plans were made, and an unusual amount of national curiosity accompanied the arrangements. In both life and death, William Slade left behind indications of his remarkable station.

Slade’s dedication to the Columbian Harmony Society, in addition to assisting the freedmen of the city in the days before the Civil War, was also a result of his own desire to acquire a decent burial ground for his family. His status within the group is obvious by the accoutrements the association secured to mark his death. As a sign of mourning, they wore black armbands for a period of thirty days. Society president David Fisher was “authorized to procure suitable crape and black silk gloves for the use of the society.” Three carriages were given over to Josephine Slade for her family’s use, and another carriage was called upon to convey the society’s members to the burial site. Mrs. Slade, of course, could have employed her own carriage, but the society’s actions signaled Slade’s importance to those who watched his funeral cortège pass by.

Other funerary customs also served to celebrate the steward’s significance. Two days after his death, Slade’s family held funeral services at their Massachusetts Avenue home. The steward’s body rested in “a yellow pine coffin, perfectly plain and covered with black cloth.” Numerous flower arrangements from distinguished guests were placed about the room, and an arrangement of camellia japonicas from President Johnson rested on top of the coffin. Indeed, the president was in attendance with his two daughters. The chaplain of the United States Senate and president of Howard University, Byron Sunderland, acted

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[66] To this end, midway through the Civil War, “a 4/5 acre parcel of land known as the ‘Metropolis View tract’ was conveyed to William Slade” in addition to “his heirs and assigns in trust.” For this, he spent $200. Sluby and Wormley, History of the Columbian Harmony Society, 15. On the Monday that William Slade died, “the few surviving members of the association met at the residence of their late fellow member.” “[Communicated.] Columbian Harmonial Cemetery Association—Washington [sic], D.C.”

[67] “[Communicated.] Columbian Harmonial Cemetery Association—Washington [sic], D.C.”


[70] The press was notably impressed that President Johnson and his two daughters attended Slade’s funeral services. Families in the nineteenth century were known to attend the funerals of servants. Of course, Johnson also desperately needed the posi-
as officiate. The Presbyterian minister was joined by the Rev. Leonard A. Grimes of Boston, whose Twelfth Baptist Church was famous for its efforts to aid runaway slaves. With the funeral sermon finished, a group of white and African American pallbearers placed the coffin into the ground. No matter how unfamiliar a person might have been with William Slade, the attendance at his funeral spoke much about his legacy.

Additionally, on the very rare occasion of a servant’s death, the passing might be noted in the local news. In Slade’s case, the Nashville Union and Dispatch, situated in the former Confederacy, was eager to convey the steward’s special status by noting the “local celebrities” who were in attendance—the District’s mayor was noted in addition to the president. The newspaper also commented that Slade “was quite wealthy.” The Vermont Transcript went further with the financial details, reporting that Slade “had been a successful speculator in real estate” whose worth at death had been “at least $100,000.” Both acknowledged that the community regarded Slade as “a much respected colored man” and that he died with “an untarnished reputation.”

Over time, however, the facts of Slade’s life were lost. John Washington revived interest in Slade for a time in 1942, but ever since, the public has come to view him as merely a loyal confidant of the sixteenth president. Looking back on his life and death, however, it becomes apparent that Slade’s importance went far beyond being Abraham Lincoln’s usher. Slade was a champion for emancipation, a promoter of his community’s public status, and an advocate of suffrage. His life is a reminder of those who fought for an equality that went beyond the natural rights that Lincoln initially advocated as president. That leadership from above and below downstairs interacted so closely together demonstrates that, in at least one instance, the employer-servant relationship meant more than the exchanging of gloves between hands. Some relationships offered opportunities to magnify the minority’s political voice.

Johnson’s presence was another marker of Slade’s extraordinary life.

71. Nashville Union and Dispatch, March 21, 1868.
72. Vermont Transcript, March 20, 1868.
73. Nashville Union and Dispatch and Vermont Transcript, respectively.