



## EMANCIPATION MEMORIALS

Washington, D.C., and Boston, Massachusetts, USA

38.8897841, -76.9923953

42.3511483, -71.0679455



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### Executive Summary

The first Emancipation Memorial, also known as the Freedmen's Memorial, was erected in Washington, D.C., in 1876. Funded by formerly enslaved persons, the statue celebrates President Abraham Lincoln. During the American Civil War, Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, offering limited freedom to enslaved people. Shortly after the creation of the Emancipation Memorial in Washington, a copy, known as the Emancipation Group, was installed in Boston, Massachusetts. Despite the memorials' nod to emancipation, they have attracted historical and recent controversy for the positioning of the figures, mainly the sculpted enslaved person kneeling at Lincoln's feet, and praise of Lincoln. In 2020, the City of Boston removed the Emancipation Group, and though the Freedmen's Memorial in Washington garnered similar controversy, as of 2022, it remains in its original place. This case study examines the power of iconography and the impact of federal and municipal governments on decision-making regarding monuments within their jurisdiction.

## Introduction

Though identical and the site of significant controversy, the Freedmen's Memorial in the District of Columbia and the Emancipation Group in Boston have distinct histories. The City of Boston removed its Emancipation Group in the wake of the Black Lives Matter Movement, but the Freedmen's Memorial in Washington, D.C., remains. Examining the disparate trajectories of these monuments and the respective responses of city and federal governments offers essential insights into the process of addressing complex public iconography.

## Background

### *The Emancipation Proclamation*

The American Civil War began in 1861, when Confederate troops fired on Fort Sumter, and lasted until 1865. During the war, 11 states in the southern United States seceded in a desire to keep their right to enslave, as their economy and society depended on it, forming the Confederate States of America, also known as the Confederacy. Though slavery was legal in the Confederacy, it had been criminalised in the North over a process lasting 100 years before the Secession of the Southern States.<sup>1</sup>

In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, ordering that enslaved persons in the Confederate States be set free. The executive order also welcomed Black men into the army and the navy. However, these orders would not be carried out in the Confederacy and so required the military victory of the Union, or northern army, for enforcement. Though legislatively unexpansive, the Emancipation Proclamation has had a lasting moral and philosophical impact on the United States.<sup>2</sup>

### *The Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement*

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement belongs to a more recent history of American Civil Rights Struggles. The work of names such as Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X all contributed to vital progress seen in the 20th century, such as the 1964 Civil Rights Act, 1965 Voting Rights Act, and the 1968 Fair Housing Act. There were many more crucial steps along the long road from the state of African American Civil Rights in the 1860s to 2013 when BLM began, and it is important to note these, as it is only with these that BLM were in a position to make their

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<sup>1</sup> National Geographic, "Civil War," *National Geographic*.

<sup>2</sup> National Archives, "The Emancipation Proclamation," *National Archives*, January 28, 2022.

demands. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement began in 2013 with Black female organisers Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi. The movement centres and uplifts Black voices, calling for political action to combat systemic racism. It began with a social media hashtag (#BlackLivesMatter)<sup>3</sup> after George Zimmerman, the white man who shot Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teenager, was acquitted of murder in 2012.<sup>4</sup> The movement grew in 2014 following the deaths of Michael Brown, shot by a white police officer in Missouri,<sup>5</sup> and Eric Garner, choked to death by another white police officer in New York.<sup>6</sup> In 2020, following the death of George Floyd, murdered by police officers in Minneapolis,<sup>7</sup> the movement further intensified, culminating in protests against racism and police brutality across the United States,<sup>8</sup> despite the difficulty in doing so during the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Part of the Black Lives Matter Movement, and in particular the protests over George Floyd's death, involved the dismantling and removal of statues in memorials honouring white supremacy, such as Confederate monuments in the South and the Emancipation Memorials in Washington, D.C. and Boston.<sup>9</sup> In June 2020, President Donald Trump issued an executive order prohibiting the grassroots toppling or removal of statues or monuments.<sup>10</sup>

### *Creation of the Statue in Washington, D.C.*

In the late nineteenth century, Charlotte Scott, a former enslaved person, started a movement to erect a memorial in honour of former President Abraham Lincoln, donating \$5.00 to that end. Other former enslaved persons joined in the effort, as well as members of the Western Sanitary Commission of St. Louis, raising enough money – \$18,000 – to cover the costs of the sculpture. Congress appropriated an additional \$3,000 for a granite pedestal designed by Major O.E. Babcock.<sup>11</sup>



**Figure 1:** "Emancipation Memorial' (1876) – Lincoln Park NE Washington (DC) July 2021" Image by Ron Cogswell via Flickr CC BY 2.0

<sup>3</sup> Howard University School of Law, "Black Lives Matter Movement," *Howard University School of Law*.

<sup>4</sup> Lizette Alvarez and Cara Buckley, "Zimmerman Is Acquitted in Trayvon Martin Killing," *New York Times*, July 13, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Jake Halpern, "The Cop," *New Yorker*, August 3, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Troy Closson, "Officers to Testify About Eric Garner's Death in Long-Delayed Inquiry," *New York Times*, October 25, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Evan Hill et al., "How George Floyd Was Killed in Police Custody," *New York Times*, May 31, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Howard University Law Library, "Black Lives Matter Movement," Howard University School of Law.

<sup>9</sup> Aimee Ortiz and Johnny Diaz, "George Floyd Protests Reignite Debate Over Confederate Statues," *New York Times*, June 3, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Marie Fazio, "Boston Removes Statue of Formerly Enslaved Man Kneeling Before Lincoln," *New York Times*, December 29, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> D.C. Historic Sites, "Emancipation Monument," *D.C. Historic Sites*.

In 1876, the white sculptor Thomas Ball<sup>12</sup> created the Emancipation Memorial, also known as the Freedmen's Memorial. The monument depicts President Abraham Lincoln holding the Emancipation Proclamation and a freed enslaved person at his feet (Figure 1).<sup>13</sup> Ball modelled the enslaved person after Archer Alexander, the last person to be caught and punished under the Fugitive Slave Act.<sup>14</sup> Surrounding the sculpted enslaved person, who is mostly undressed, are symbols of slavery, including shackles, a whipping post, and chains.<sup>15</sup>

The memorial was unveiled and dedicated on the 11th anniversary of Lincoln's assassination in 1876. Activist and writer Frederick Douglass gave the keynote address, with President Ulysses S. Grant and 25,000 others in the audience.<sup>16</sup>

Today, the memorial resides in Lincoln Park on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., near the Lincoln Memorial (Figure 2). In 1974, the memorial was rotated to face a memorial honouring Dr Mary McLeod Bethune<sup>17</sup> (Figure 3), a Black civil rights activist and founder of Bethune-Cookman University.<sup>18</sup>

### *Creation of the Statue in Boston, Massachusetts*

In 1879, after the creation of the statue in Washington, Moses Kimball, a politician and the founder of the Boston Museum, donated a bronze recasting of Ball's Emancipation Memorial. Named Emancipation Group, the statue was identical to the one in Washington, D.C.<sup>19</sup> It was installed in Park Square in downtown Boston.<sup>20</sup>

Mayor Frederick Octavius Prince presented it as reflecting Kimball's 'desire, by this memorial bronze, not only to adorn the city and gratify our sense of the beautiful, but to elevate and instruct the popular mind by its solemn lessons of justice, philanthropy, and patriotism.'<sup>21</sup> Kimball wished not only to improve his own political standing through his philanthropic contribution, but also to jump on a trend in Boston at the time of glorifying their position in the historic struggle for African American Civil Rights. Another cynical interpretation of the donation, and one that later activists would see in the figure of Archer Alexander, is that of glorifying African American Emancipation as white-led. It is

<sup>12</sup> Gillian Brockell, "Controversial Lincoln statue is removed in Boston, but remains in D.C.," *Washington Post*, December 29, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Washington D.C., "Emancipation Memorial (Freedman's Memorial)," *Washington D.C.*

<sup>14</sup> D.C. Historic Sites, "Emancipation Monument," *D.C. Historic Sites*.

<sup>15</sup> City of Boston, "Emancipation Group," *City of Boston*, February 26, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Washington D.C., "Emancipation Memorial (Freedman's Memorial)," *Washington D.C.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Bethune-Cookman University, "Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune," *Bethune-Cookman University*.

<sup>19</sup> City of Boston, "Emancipation Group," *City of Boston*, February 26, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Marie Fazio, "Boston Removes Statue of Formerly Enslaved Man Kneeling Before Lincoln," *New York Times*, December 29, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Prince, Frederick O., *Bronze group commemorating emancipation, Boston, Boston, 1879*, pg 26

the agency of the white institutionalised powers to give African Americans their rights, represented in this monument by Abraham Lincoln, rather than something that they fought for and earned themselves.



**Figure 2:** "The Equinox Arrives at the Lincoln Memorial" Image by Geoff Livingston via Flickr CC BY-NC-ND 2.0



**Figure 3:** "Mary McLeod Bethune memorial" Image by Lauren Parnell Marino via Flickr CC BY-NC 2.0

## History of the Contestation

### *Frederick Douglass*

One of the most prominent figures that challenged this white-led approach to African American Civil Rights was activist and writer Frederick Douglass, a former enslaved person, perhaps most famous for the publication of his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845).<sup>22</sup> Douglass opposed the Freedmen's Memorial from its conception. At the dedication in Washington, D.C., while delivering the keynote address, he observed that Lincoln, although celebrated for issuing the Emancipation Proclamation, was reluctant to free enslaved people. Douglass also noted the limitations of the Emancipation Proclamation, such as the lack of regulation it exercised over Confederate states.<sup>23</sup>

Following the dedication, Douglass wrote a letter in 1876 to the editor of the *National Republican*. Douglass took particular issue with the relationship between Lincoln and the slave in the

<sup>22</sup> Documenting the American South, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself: Electronic Edition," University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1999.

<sup>23</sup> Gillian Brockell, "Controversial Lincoln statue is removed in Boston, but remains in D.C.," *Washington Post*, December 29, 2020.

memorial. Although Ball intended to represent the enslaved person as standing up, he still appears kneeling before Lincoln. Douglass wrote:

Admirable as is the monument by Mr. Ball in Lincoln park, it does not, as it seems to me, tell the whole truth, and perhaps no one monument could be made to tell the whole truth of any subject which it might be designed to illustrate... What I want to see before I die is a monument representing the Negro, not couchant on his knees like a four-footed animal, but erect on his feet like a man.<sup>24</sup>

Though Douglass and many others to come interpreted the statue as representative of submission, Ball intended the opposite. Ball worked with the Western Sanitary Commission, which had collected many donations from freed slaves, which encouraged him to emphasise the role they played, now including the portrayal of the freed slave that has caused so much controversy in an attempt to empower, not belittle, the role of African Americans. Others defended this view, saying that the inclusion of Archer Alexander showed 'an AGENT IN HIS OWN DELIVERANCE... breaking the chain which had bound him.'<sup>25</sup>

Regardless, what is shown by this is that from its inception, there was controversy in how to interpret this memorial.

### *Recent Controversy in Washington, D.C.*

The Freedmen's Memorial sparked controversy in 2020 as a result of the #BlackLivesMatter protests, although some advocated against potential removal. For example, President Donald Trump criticised those lobbying for the statue's removal, calling them 'rioters' and 'bad people.'<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Kevin McCarthy, then the minority leader in the House of Representatives, tweeted that Trump 'will not allow the Emancipation Memorial of President Lincoln to be destroyed by the left-wing mob.'<sup>27</sup> Historian and Douglass biographer David W. Blight also wrote an article for the *Washington Post* advising against the removal of the statue, instead recommending the addition of other signage and memorials.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Frederick Douglass cited in Marie Fazio, "Boston Removes Statue of Formerly Enslaved Man Kneeling Before Lincoln," *New York Times*, December 29, 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Jonathan W. White and Scott Sandage, "What Frederick Douglass Had to Say About Monuments," *Smithsonian Magazine*, June 30, 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Donald Trump cited in Aishvarya Kavi, "Activists Push for Removal of Statue of Freed Slave Kneeling Before Lincoln," *New York Times*, June 27, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Kevin McCarthy cited in *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Jonathan W. White and Scott Sandage, "What Frederick Douglass Had to Say About Monuments," *Smithsonian Magazine*, June 30, 2020.

Requests to address the statue continued, however. Washington D.C.'s Congressional delegate, Eleanor Norton, called for the relocation of the statue.<sup>29</sup> Many petitions gained lots of support, such as Marcus Goodwin's, which received over 10,000 signatures, calling for the removal of a monument that memorialises the intended subservience of black people in this country. Confederate statues are the obvious example, but this statue in Washington D.C., perpetuates the idea that we are beneath white people and should simply be grateful for the scraps that have been thrown our way.<sup>30</sup>

A local group in D.C. called 'Freedom Memorial' went so far as to organise a planned removal of the memorial, with members and supporters gathering in June 2020.<sup>31</sup> In response, law enforcement officials erected a fence around the memorial and instituted a temporary patrol.<sup>32</sup>

### *Contestation in Boston*

In the century after its creation, calls to remove the 'Emancipation Group' in Boston were largely ignored.<sup>33</sup> In 2018, Boston University PhD student Ewa Matyczyk undertook a study of public monuments in Boston.<sup>34</sup> Surveying 'Emancipation Group,' Matyczyk observed several points of controversy, including the 'subservient' depiction of an enslaved person, attribution of abolitionism to one person (Lincoln), and lack of additional signage or recontextualisation. Matyczyk advised that the monument be removed and relocated.<sup>35</sup>

In June 2020, actor and artist Tory Bullock started an online petition advocating for the removal of 'Emancipation Group.' The petition gathered over 12,000 signatures and widespread support across the city.<sup>36</sup> There were some voices advocating for keeping the statue, but these were a lot less numerous - 955 members of the Boston community signed a petition started by Jess K, suggesting that 'to remove the statute would be a disgrace to the men and women—slave, free, freed—who fought for freedom in the American Civil War.'<sup>37</sup> Therefore, it was not a unanimous belief in the removal of this statue, but considering the controversy on both sides that had existed for its whole existence, it is unsurprising that there was not complete agreement on such a divisive issue.

<sup>29</sup> David W. Blight, "Yes, the Freedmen's Memorial uses racist imagery. But don't tear it down," *Washington Post*, June 25, 2020.

<sup>30</sup> Goodwin, Marcus, "Take Down the Abraham Lincoln 'Emancipation Statue' in Washington, DC", *Change.Org*, June 18, 2020

<sup>31</sup> Aishvarya Kavi, "Activists Push for Removal of Statue of Freed Slave Kneeling Before Lincoln," *New York Times*, June 27, 2020.

<sup>32</sup> Jonathan W. White and Scott Sandage, "What Frederick Douglass Had to Say About Monuments," *Smithsonian Magazine*, June 30, 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Eva Matyczyk, "An Opportunity for Change: Discussing Monuments in Boston (& Beyond)," Boston University Center for the Humanities and Office of the Associate Provost for Graduate Affairs, August 16, 2018, 28.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-29.

<sup>36</sup> Marie Fazio, "Boston Removes Statue of Formerly Enslaved Man Kneeling Before Lincoln," *New York Times*, December 29, 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Jess K, "Preserve the Emancipation Statue in Boston", *Change.Org*, July 6, 2020

## Decision-Making Processes

### *Boston*

In June 2020, the Boston Art Commission started a public review of monuments across the city. The review included five hours of public testimonials given at two separate meetings, comments gathered from over 160 letters, and 645 survey responses. The majority of the public was in favour of the Emancipation Group's removal.<sup>38</sup> On June 30, 2020, the Boston Art Commission voted unanimously to document and remove the Emancipation Group, intending to later relocate and recontextualise it.<sup>39</sup> On December 29, 2020, the city removed the statue, with some spectators gathering to applaud and others to debate.<sup>40</sup> As of July 2022, the monument is currently being kept in storage until a new location can be agreed upon.<sup>41</sup>

### *Washington, D.C.*

Because Freedmen's Memorial is in Lincoln Park and on federal land, it falls under federal rather than state or municipal jurisdiction. Therefore, the mayor of Washington, D.C., did not have the authority to remove the statue. Eleanor Norton, the delegate who advocated for the removal of Freedmen's Memorial, said that she would work with the National Park Service, the federal organisation responsible for the statue, to circumvent Congress.<sup>42</sup> As of 2022, the statue remains in D.C.<sup>43</sup>

## Summary and Conclusions

The municipal government in Boston acted quickly to respond to citizens' outrage regarding their Emancipation Group, showing the possible effects of grassroots campaigning. Furthermore, the popularity of this decision, as indicated by public forums, suggests that Boston has not only developed a strong belief in defending the position of African Americans in their state but also in ensuring that their elected representatives follow this view. By contrast, the federal government, which had oversight of the Freedmen's Memorial in Washington, D.C., took little to no action, despite the public outcry that ensued. This perhaps speaks to the way that accountability of government figures varies within institutions; on a more local scale, there is more pressure to act

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<sup>38</sup> City of Boston, "Emancipation Group," *City of Boston*, February 26, 2021.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Marie Fazio, "Boston Removes Statue of Formerly Enslaved Man Kneeling Before Lincoln," *New York Times*, December 29, 2020.

<sup>41</sup> City of Boston, "Emancipation Group," *City of Boston*, February 26, 2021.

<sup>42</sup> Aishvarya Kavi, "Activists Push for Removal of Statue of Freed Slave Kneeling Before Lincoln," *New York Times*, June 27, 2020.

<sup>43</sup> Washington D.C., "Emancipation Memorial (Freedman's Memorial)," Washington D.C..

as those are the people whose votes you are seeking, whereas for federal politicians, they have the whole country to gain votes from.

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## About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions, whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

## About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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