There are moments in our nation’s history when individuals unite and take courageous steps to fulfill the promise of democracy.

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

A. PHILIP RANDOLPH
OCTOBER 15, 1937

Credit:
J.J. Smith’s Plantation, Beaufort, South Carolina, 1862, Library of Congress
Participants at the March on Washington, 1963, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration
At Headquarters, 1963, Library of Congress
Phoos: Paul Saslaw
Participants at the March, 1963, Library of Congress

Smithsonian Institution
THE EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION

On September 22, 1862, five days after the Union victory at the Battle of Antietam, Abraham Lincoln issued the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. He presented the proclamation as a wartime necessity, under his authority as Commander-in-Chief. It ordered that as of January 1, 1863, all enslaved individuals in all areas still in rebellion against the United States “henceforward shall be free,” and under the protection of the military. Those willing to enlist would be received into the armed forces. Once free, more than 186,000 African American volunteers fought to liberate those still held in slavery.

The proclamation was limited in scope and revolutionary in impact. The war to preserve the Union also became a war to end slavery. 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. These local celebrations set the stage for the national push for freedom in the 20th century.

THE MARCH ON WASHINGTON

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 — polled 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.

THE WASHINGTON POST
AUGUST 29, 1963

UNCOUNTED MILLIONS FROM ACCRA TO ZANZIBAR TURNED THEIR EYES TO WASHINGTON AS THEY HAVE FOR FEW OTHER EVENTS IN AMERICAN HISTORY.