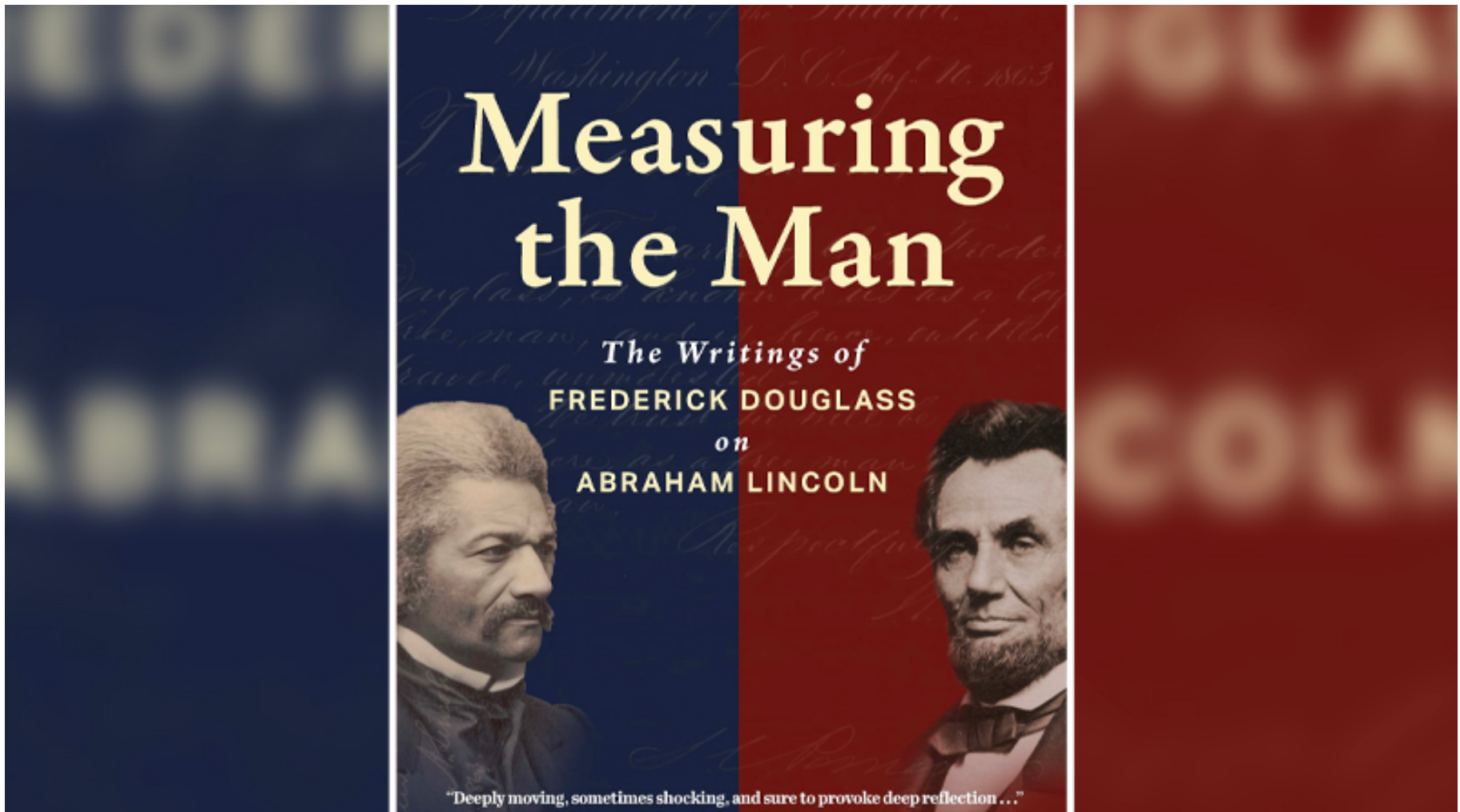


NEWSROOM

[Home](#) / [News](#) / [2025](#) / [September](#) / Professor's New Book Shines Light on Douglass, Lincoln



PROFESSOR'S NEW BOOK SHINES LIGHT ON DOUGLASS, LINCOLN

DR. JONATHAN WHITE ANSWERS QUESTIONS ABOUT HIS LATEST HISTORICAL WORK

by [Kelli Caplan](#) | September 30, 2025

Read time: about 2 min

Tell us about your new book, “Measuring the Man, the Writings of Frederick Douglass on Abraham Lincoln.”

“Measuring the Man” pulls together every substantive comment Frederick Douglass ever made about Abraham Lincoln. Covering the years 1858 to 1894, these writings give an extraordinary picture of how Douglass’s views of Lincoln changed over time, and just how committed he was to the causes of justice and equal rights. Douglass was one of the most perceptive observers of 19th century American life, and he always had his eyes set on the goals of freedom and equality. At the beginning of the Civil War, he was frustrated with Lincoln for not moving more quickly on emancipation and equal rights. He wrote and spoke harshly about Lincoln—things that will probably shock many modern readers. But over time, Douglass came to understand the political realities that constrained Lincoln’s actions. He also came to see that Lincoln’s leadership was guided by a firm moral compass. In the end, Douglass became one of Lincoln’s greatest admirers, and to his dying day, he considered Lincoln a friend.

What did you uncover during the research that will surprise readers?

In researching the book, we discovered a dozen documents that haven’t been seen for a century and half, some of which are going to change the way Americans think about the relationship between these two great leaders. Most importantly, we found eight letters in British newspapers that show that Douglass was much more candid with British audiences than he was in the U.S. In fact, his letters to the U.K. are so startling that some British readers didn’t believe they were authentic. Fortunately, we found the return correspondence in Douglass’s papers at the

Library of Congress, so we know that they are real.

How did the book come about?

The idea for “Measuring the Man” grew out of my teaching and writing. In American Studies 100 (The American Experiment), my students read his famous, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” speech, as well as an editorial he wrote about women’s rights. In AMST 120 (Encounters with the Constitution), students read a speech he delivered in Scotland that lays out the view that the U.S. Constitution was an antislavery document. And Douglass’s three personal interactions with Lincoln appear in my book, “A House Built By Slaves: African American Visitors to the Lincoln White House” (2022). All of this thinking about Douglass led me to write “Measuring the Man.”

What are the book’s CNU connections?

The Center for American Studies has a Junior Fellows program that pays students to assist faculty in research. My students, Charlie Benfanti, PJ Jones, Emily McKenna, Eden McMillan, Raechel Erler, Taylor Davis, Alanna Griffin, and Lainey Hostetler, all assisted with proofreading the transcriptions. Last summer, Charlie also took pictures of several Douglass letters at a library in his hometown of Buffalo, N.Y. The Center’s co-directors, Liz and Nathan Busch, generously supplied some funding for publishing expenses. Finally, Ben Lynerd of the Department of Political Science suggested one of the speeches that we included in the book.
