

“Enslaved and Free Black Labor Used to Construct the United States Capitol”

Written Testimony

prepared by

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for

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“The Construction of the United States Capitol: Recognizing the Contributions of Slave Labor”

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All three branches of government in the United States of America have had close associations with the U. S. Capitol since the North Wing was completed in 1800. The Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution were ratified while the Supreme Court occupied space in the Capitol. Nearly all the Presidents since Andrew Jackson took the oath of office on its steps and no other building, not even the White House, is so closely linked with the lives of all Americans.

The United States Capitol symbolizes the center of the American ideals of freedom and opportunity. Not only is it the seat of representative government, it is where “democracy” (in so far as America is concerned) lives. Yet in all its neoclassic architectural splendor, impressive artwork, and intriguing history, one key component is conspicuously missing from the vast body of historical literature about the Capitol—the role of people of African descent in its construction.

The Residence Act of 1790 specified that the national capital would be located along the Potomac River between Maryland and Virginia. But Congress removed itself from establishing the national capital or financing the venture. It allowed the president the authority to select the exact site along the Potomac as well as giving him responsibility for the overall supervision of constructing the public buildings. The bill also designated that December 1800 would be the time Congress would make its permanent location in the Capitol in addition to the president taking a permanent residence in the new federal city¹.

Indeed, there was pressure to build the Capitol at a brisk pace. Even before its design had been decided, the Commissioners of the District of Columbia (appointed by President George Washington) realized that they faced a long-term problem of finding

¹1st Congress, 2nd Session, The Residence Act of 1790, ch. 28, United States Statutes at Large.

the labor to build such a colossal structure. Almost from the beginning, they looked to enslaved Africans to supply the labor. Such labor was inexpensive and readily available through a system of hire.

The system of “hiring out” enslaved labor or “slave hire” was a common practice in the Chesapeake region as well as other regions of the United States. It was a system in which owners with a surplus of enslaved people hired out their laborers to neighbors or local yeoman farmers to do temporary work. In turn, the owners of the enslaved laborers received payment from the hirers for “renting” the laborers. Owners and hirers typically negotiated the rate of pay based on the level of skill of the enslaved person as well as the demand for a particular skill. At the discretion of the owner, the enslaved person may have been permitted to hire out their own time and/or keep a portion of their earnings.²

Paying a rate of five dollars per person per month, the Commissioners hired enslaved people from local owners on a contractual basis. The following is indicative of such agreements:

The Commissioners Resolve to hire good laboring Negroes by the year, the masters cloathing [sic] them well and finding each a Blanket, the Commissioners finding them Provisions and paying sixty Dollars a year wages, the payment if desired to be made quarterly or half yearly. If the Negroes absent themselves a week or more such time to be deducted. Capt. Williams is requested to obtain as far as 100 Negro men on the above terms.³

² Edna Greene Medford, “‘There was so many degrees in slavery...’: Unfree Labor in an Antebellum Mixed Farming Community,” *Slavery and Abolition* (vol. 14, no. 2) August 1993, 39, 40; see also, Sarah S. Hughes, “Slaves for Hire: The Allocation of Black Labor in Elizabeth City County, Virginia, 1782 to 1810,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., Vol. 35, No. 2. (Apr., 1978), 260-261; and Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 352, 515.

³ Commissioners’ Proceedings, November 3, 1794, Record Group 42, Washington, D. C.: National Archives.

The Commissioners of the Federal District
 Dⁿ to Catherine Greaves
 For Hire of Negro George for 6 Months from 1st of September
 to 1st October 1795 Dⁿ 5 Dollars & 00 Cts. ~~5.00~~
 Rec^d 2^d December 1795 of Chas: Richmond
 Five Dollars for the above Account per Order
 Barton Emis

Capital
 Catherine Greaves
 Negro hire Dⁿ 5.00
 P^d by C.R. 1st Jan 1795
 Order no. N^o 677
 955

Figure 1
 Payment request, Catherine Greaves of St. Mary's County, Maryland to the
 Commissioners

Source: Records of the Accounts Officers of the Department of Treasury, Accounts of the
 Commissioners of the City of Washington, 1794-1802 (Record Group 217) National
 Archives and Records Administration.

In his travels to the federal city, Julian Niemcewicz (a Polish writer and traveler) wrote about the practice of hiring out and what he witnessed at the Capitol construction site in the late 1790s. He conveys to his reader that the white American workers were absent from their tasks:

It was eleven o'clock. No one was at work; they had gone to drink grog. This is what they do twice a day, as well as dinner and breakfast. All that makes four or five hours of relaxation...The negroes alone work. I have seen them in large numbers and I was very glad that these poor unfortunates earned eight to ten dollars per week. My joy was not long lived: I am told that they were not working for themselves; their masters hire them out and retain all the money for themselves. What humanity! What a country of liberty. If at least they shared the earnings!⁴

Enslaved and free black laborers were continuously exploited throughout the Capitol's construction. A portion of the stone supply needed to construct the Capitol came from a quarry located at Aquia Creek in nearby Stafford County, Virginia. Local advertisements sought "strong, active NEGRO MEN" to labor in the quarries.⁵

In keeping with the pace of construction, these enslaved Africans labored constantly, in and out of the building season. In fact, when writing to his assistant in the winter of 1791, Peter Charles L'Enfant ordered that when the weather was "too severe" the enslaved laborers were to "busy themselves in clearing away the rubble" and as often as possible "set about extracting the stone."⁶

Typically, these men worked twelve-hour days, six days per week (the Sabbath was observed on Sundays), using simple machines (such as pulleys, pick axes, and hand saws). Due to the conditions and methods of labor, the men were subjected to injury,

⁴ Julian Niemcewicz, *Under Their Vine and Fig Tree: Travels through America 1797-1799, 1805*, trans. and ed. Metchie J. E. Budka (Elizabeth, NJ: Grassmann Publishing Co., 1965), 93. The quote used in the title of this dissertation is attributed to Niemcewicz whose eyewitness account explicitly describes the roles of the laborers at the Capitol construction site.

⁵ Brent and Cooke, advertisement, *Virginia (Fredericksburg) Herald*, 22 December 1794.

⁶ H. Paul Caemmerer, *The Life of Pierre Charles L'Enfant* (Washington: National Republic Publishing Co., 1950), 152. L'Enfant stopped using "Pierre" soon after he arrived in the United States in 1777, see Kenneth R. Bowling, *Peter Charles L'Enfant: Vision, Honor, and Male Friendship in the Early American Republic* (Washington, DC: George Washington University, 2002).

illness, and even death. As a result, the Commissioners were alarmed by the increased number of “Blacks” seeking “constant attendance” by the physician hired by the Commissioners:

The Board have [sic] just received the accounts of Dr. May, which amounts to \$268.50. for half a year; and the former year by contract, was only ten shillings per head, per annum for the Blacks, about ninety being employed at the public works.... By a verbal Report from Captain Williams, who has enquired into the number of sick during the above time, he has been informed that there have been from two or three, to eight or nine, and the average about 5 or 6. The Board agreed to pay 50 cents per visit.⁷

On August 30, 1822, the *National Intelligencer* (a Washington, D.C. newspaper) reported the death of a free black laborer at the Capitol. The article is indicative of the hazards workers experienced on a daily basis:

Fatal Accidents.—A laborer on the Capitol, a free colored man of the name of Nathaniel Bowen, was crushed to death on Wednesday last by the falling of a block of stone upon him, of near two tons weight. The stone had been raised from its position in the dome, for the purpose of setting it with more precision, and was suspended by the pulleys 18 or 20 inches above its bed, which the deceased was cleansing for its reception; in stooping to do this, he had placed some of his limbs and a part of his body under the block, and while in that situation the lashings of the pulley gave way, and the stone falling upon him, put an instant period to his life.⁸

Enslaved labor used for the Capitol extended beyond the construction site. For instance, an enslaved man played a key role in casting bronze onto the Statue of Freedom (located atop the Capitol dome) at a foundry near Bladensburg, Maryland. The statue is an allegorical figure that was designed in Rome, Italy by American sculptor Thomas Crawford.

The first design Crawford submitted to the Commissioners, which featured a laurel wreath headpiece, was not approved because a pedestal needed to be added. Crawford’s

⁷ Records of the District of Columbia Commissioners and the Offices Concerned with Public Building, 1791-1867 Index to Letters Sent by the Commissioners for the District of Columbia, 1791-1867, Nov. 22, 1798, Commissioners to Dr. Cornelius Conningham.; see also, Robert J. Kapsch, “Building Liberty’s Capital: Black Labor and the New Federal City,” *American Visions*, (Feb./Mar. 1995), 10.

⁸ “Friday, August 30, 1822,” *The National Intelligencer*, 30 Aug. 1822.

second design featured a pedestal and a different headpiece, a liberty cap. The liberty cap was worn in ancient Roman times by freed individuals who had previously been enslaved.

Secretary of War, Jefferson Davis, objected to the design because, he argued that, Americans were “born free”—not enslaved. Therefore, Davis suggested that Crawford replace the liberty cap with a helmet since *Freedom* was also armed with a sword and shield. The Statue of Freedom was redesigned, featuring an eagle’s head (in honor of American Indians) on a helmet. Ironically, an enslaved man would later have an integral role in casting *Freedom*.

The plaster model of *Freedom* was shipped to the federal city in several crates in March 1859. The government paid Clark Mills, a self-taught American sculptor. It also provided supplies for him to cast the statue in bronze. Mills owned eleven enslaved people, one of whom was Philip Reid. According to Mills’ records, he purchased Reid because he was “smart” and had “evident talent” for working in a foundry. Perhaps the hardest aspect of the trade is the molding skills. If the mold is not properly constructed and heated, the casting will be inferior. Philip Reid received a sum of \$41.25 from the government for “keeping up fires under the moulds.”⁹

⁹ “The Statue of Freedom,” brochure prepared by the Architect of the Capitol, S. Pub. 104-40; Ed Crews, “Cast in the Colonial Mold: The Geddy Foundry,” Colonial Williamsburg Journal, (winter 2003-2004); William C. Allen, History of the United States Capitol (Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office, 2001), 308, 253-55; Record Group 217, Records of the Accounts Officers of the Department of Treasury, Accounts of the Commissioners of the City of Washington, 1794-1802, Petition no. 741, Clark Mills, National Archives and Records Administration.

THE UNITED STATES			To Philip Reid		Dr.
DATE.	DESIGNATION.	APPLICATION.	COST.		
			DOLLARS.	CENTS.	
1861 May 16	For Services (on Sundays) between July 1, 1860 and May 16, 1861, 33 days (Sundays) @ \$1. ²⁵ per day	Keeping up fires under the moulds		41 25	
				41 25	

I Certify, That the articles above charged have been received, and services performed; that they were necessary for, and have been, or will be, applied to the construction of the New Dome of the Capitol; and that the prices were, in my opinion, just and reasonable.

Wm. Walter
Arch.
Captain in Charge.
1862, from Capt. W. E. FRANKLIN.

RECEIVED, Washington, D. C., this 6th day of June 1862, from Philip Reid, the sum of Forty one dollars and twenty five cents, in full payment of the above account.

(Signed duplicates.)
Philip Reid
marks

Figure 1
Payment receipt for Philip Reid for "Keeping up fires under the moulds"

Source: Records of the Accounts Officers of the Department of Treasury, Accounts of the Commissioners of the City of Washington, 1794-1802 (Record Group 217) National Archives and Records Administration.

Enslaved people resisted slavery in many ways. In some instances they feigned illness or pretended not to know how to use their tools. In other desperate circumstances they poisoned their owners or when the opportunity presented itself they ran away to escape the constant state of oppression. For instance, when Daniel Brown, Christina Hamilton's enslaved man ran away from the Capitol, she placed an advertisement in the local newspaper as if she had hired him out to a plantation. The following is the advertisement:

Fifty Dollars Reward. Ran away from the subscriber, on Sunday, the 28th ultimo, a Negro Man named Daniel, who calls himself Daniel Brown. He is twenty-three years of age, about five feet nine inches high, very black, shows a pleasant countenance when spoken to, has ears rather larger than common, which stand off from the head.

He has a wide mouth, and shows his teeth very much when he talks or laughs, speaks rather quick, and as if his mouth was full. He was purchased about a year ago from Mr. Kirby, of Prince George's County, Maryland, and has been employed of late as a laborer at the Capitol. When he absconded, he had on a black cloth coat, and light corded pantaloons. The above reward, and reasonable expenses, will be paid for him, if taken and secured out of the District of Columbia and Prince George's County, or ten dollars if taken within the limits of the latter, and delivered to me. CHRISTINA HAMILTON, Residing near the Capitol, Washington City.¹⁰

On April 16, 1862, President Abraham Lincoln implemented the District of Columbia Emancipation Act. It was passed nine months prior to the Emancipation Proclamation. The DC Emancipation Act uniquely provided loyal Unionist owners (including Clark Mills) of enslaved people in the District of Columbia compensation for loss of their property (up to \$300 for each enslaved person). The law effectively ended slavery in the District of Columbia and eliminated the use of enslaved labor at the U. S. Capitol.¹¹

Today, the United States Capitol is one of the most recognizable buildings in the world! Ironically, it stands as a reminder that freedom and democracy in America was predicated on the enslavement of Africans. The Capitol has continuously remained open to the public and thousands of its visitors receive guided tours each year. Information about people of African descent who contributed to the development of this nation, particularly the enslaved Africans who constructed the Capitol, is seldom a subject of discussion on tours of the building. Sadly, African Americans are not seen in much of the artwork on the walls or honored in literature related to the Capitol.¹²

The U. S. Capitol Historical Society (USCHS) is making strides to change this pattern. Founded in 1962 as a non-profit and non-partisan organization, the USCHS is

¹⁰ Christina Hamilton, advertisement, National Intelligencer November 22, 1827.

¹¹ An Act of April 16, 1862 [For the Release of Certain Persons Held to Service or Labor in the District of Columbia], General Records of the United States Government, Record Group 11; National Archives.

¹² Capitol Complex Overview, 31 October 2007, online, available from <http://www.aoc.gov>; Karissa Marcum, "Lawmakers say Capitol artwork is race 'disgrace'," The Hill, 30 October 2007.

dedicated to preserving and protecting the history of the Capitol and Congress through educational programs and scholarly publications. In February 2006, the USCHS launched a traveling exhibit titled, “From *Freedom*’s Shadow: African Americans and the United States Capitol.”

This successful exhibit has traveled to various schools, universities, and institutions throughout the United States including the Georgia State Capitol in Atlanta. It is a survey of the African American experience at the Capitol highlighting the enslaved and free black labor used to construct the building, segregation in the Capitol, and the current African American Members of Congress who serve constituents of all ethnic backgrounds in the Capitol. In addition, the USCHS has always included an African American perspective on its interior and exterior tours of the Capitol. It is the opinion of this historian that all groups should be included in the written history of the Capitol. The Capitol is an American icon and the contributions of all Americans ought to be a part of its historical interpretation to the public.