

The Scope of Enslaved Labor in Washington D.C. Landmark Projects

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In the late 18th century, the United States sought to establish a permanent capital city that would symbolize the unity and strength of a new nation. The Residence Act of 1790 designated land along the Potomac River as the site for the federal district, chosen as a result of this compromise between Northern and Southern states. Washington, D.C. was envisioned as a grand city that would embody democratic ideals and serve as the political and cultural epicenter of the country. However, its construction required a large labor force and significant resources, exposing the true nature of the social and economic systems that supported the growing republic.

The monuments and landmarks that define the landscape of Washington, D.C. are usually viewed as timeless representations of democracy and American ingenuity. The White House, the United States Capitol, and other famous structures are honored as symbols of the tenacity and ideals of the country's founding. However, underneath the glory lies a complicated and unsettling past that is often forgotten: the use of slave labor to build these monuments. This paradox marks a striking contradiction - the very edifices that symbolize liberty and justice that were built through the forced labor and suffering of African Americans.

At the heart of this contradiction is the story of those whose voices have been historically silenced. Enslaved laborers not only contributed their physical effort to the construction of these monumental buildings but did so under brutal conditions, often receiving no recognition or compensation. The construction of key landmark projects in Washington D.C. in the United States, including government buildings, infrastructure, and cultural monuments was significantly enabled by the labor of enslaved individuals. This foundational, yet often marginalized, contribution reconfigures our understanding of American progress by revealing the stark contradiction between the nation's ideals of liberty and the exploitation upon which its development was built.

The Residence Act of 1790 itself was designed to support the Southern desire of establishing the Capitol in a southern state, while having northern debt being paid by the South. Reliance on enslaved labor to build the Capitol stemmed from both the practical need for inexpensive, accessible labor and the economic systems of Maryland and Virginia, where slavery was central to social and economic structures. Following the passing of the Act, “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”¹. Even before the full design for the Capitol had been sought out, the Commissioners of the District of Columbia knew that they would have a difficult time finding adequate labor.

The construction of the U.S. Capitol began in 1793 as part of the broader plan to establish Washington D.C. as the nation's political and cultural epicenter. The Capitol was designed to house the legislative branch of the federal government, symbolizing democratic process and governance. However, its construction started during a period of deep societal contradictions, as the ideals of liberty and equality were upheld by a nation that simultaneously relied on slavery. Labor shortages combined with high demand for skilled and unskilled workers to aid the building of the Capitol led to the systemic use of enslaved individuals. Their forced labor helped bridge the gap between the ambitious architectural vision and the available labor at the time. George Washington formally appointed Pierre L’Enfant in 1791, when he started working on his plans for the city². Pierre L’Enfant’s urban design for Washington D.C. noted the lack of local

¹ Felicia A. Bell, “Enslaved and Free Black Labor Used to Construct the United States Capitol,” written testimony for Committee on House Administration Hearing: The Construction of the United States Capitol: Recognizing the Contributions of Slave Labor, November 7, 2007, [97].

² Chance Losee, “Pierre L’Enfant”, George Washington’s Mount Vernon, George Washington University, access date December 17 2024.

<https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/pierre-lenfant>

resources and funding, stating, “the neighborhood [sic] of the city offering no kind of resources at least none to be depended on”³. This laid out the framework used to justify the use of enslaved labor due to the profound logistical and economic challenges faced during construction. The underdeveloped state of the region chosen for the federal city, which lacked infrastructure and skilled labor, forced project leaders like L’Enfant to seek alternative solutions, including the exploitation of enslaved labor. The reliance on enslaved individuals was not merely a matter of convenience, but also a structural necessity born out of the absence of dependable local resources.

Throughout history, racially biased ideas in slave markets have been categorized by various factors such as gender, age, skill, size/strength, racial designation (lighter or darker skin), and more. These ideas have influenced how enslaved individuals were valued, traded, and assigned roles within the economic and social structures of slaveholding societies. For instance, enslaved men who were perceived as stronger were often given more physically demanding labor, such as working in quarries or on plantations, while women were assigned more domestic roles. From the quarrying of the stone to the cutting of timbers to the manufacturing of bricks, enslaved individuals participated in every facet of the White House building⁴. Enslaved laborers often undertook physically demanding and hazardous tasks delegated by white men, and faced constant exploitation to support the Capitol’s construction. Many advertisements surfaced to fulfill the high demand for labor, stating, “strong, active NEGRO MEN to labor in the quarries”⁵.

³ Robert James Kapsch, *Building Washington Engineering and Construction of the New Federal City, 1790-1840* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 22.

⁴ “Slavery in the President's Neighborhood”. The White House Historical Association. February 2020, <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/spn/introduction>

⁵ U.S. Congress, House, Committee on House Administration, *The Construction of the United States Capitol: Recognizing the Contributions of Slave Labor*, 110th Cong., 1st sess., November 7, 2007 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2008), [61].

These racializations reflected the exploitative nature of slavery, particularly how enslaved labor was commodified and controlled by their masters, not the workers themselves. Enslaved individuals also typically had 6-day work weeks, often working nights as well ⁶. Historian Bob Arnebeck's book *Slave Labor in the Capital: Building Washington's Iconic Federal Landmarks* highlights the connection between slavery and the development of recognizable national symbols. Specifically, he mentions that "Those were not the complaints of hired slaves. What they were paid was immaterial to them since the money went to their masters" ⁷. This emphasizes the lack of autonomy and control that enslaved individuals had over their own lives because the money paid for their labor did not go into their hands, but rather was kept by their masters. While the nation championed liberty and democracy, the nation's very own Capital [representing democratic legislation] was built upon the forced and economic marginalization of enslaved individuals.

A National Archives press release reveals extensive documentation such as a "Carpenters Roll" from 1795 which details work on the President's House, Mount Vernon. The roll lists four enslaved individuals - Tom, Peter, Ben, and Harry - two of whom were owned by James Hoban, the architect of the building. The records specify the number of days worked and the payment rate for each individual. However, the wages for enslaved workers were paid directly to their owners, who signed the roll to acknowledge receipt⁸. This was not an incidental or informal arrangement - it was recorded, standardized, and normalized in official transactions, revealing the economic exploitation of enslaved individuals. These wages that could have gone toward

⁶ William C. Allen. *History of Slave Laborers in the Construction of the United States Capitol* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2005), [9].

⁷ Bob Arnebeck, *Slave Labor in the Capital: Building Washington's Iconic Federal Landmarks* (Mount Pleasant: Arcadia Publishing, 2014), 76.

⁸ "Slaves Built the White House and Capitol - See the Records." National Archives, 2000, <https://www.archives.gov/press/press-releases/2009/nr09-28-images.html>

improving their lives, securing their freedom, or supporting their families, were instead redistributed to their enslavers. This disenfranchisement ensured that enslaved people had no means to escape their condition, trapping them and their families into a cycle of slavery.

Financial disparities were common between free men of color and those enslaved in the construction of the U.S. Capitol. Historian Felicia Bell remarks that “While enslaved men were paid on average only pennies a day, free men of color were paid about \$1 a day”⁹. While free men of color were marginally better compensated, their labor was still devalued due to systemic racism. For example, William C. Allen found that “Initially, pay for enslaved black labor was \$60 a year at a time when an unskilled white laborer earned \$70”¹⁰. This hierarchy reflects a racial caste system that extended into the workforce where free men of color faced discrimination while enslaved men were commodified.

Philip Reid, an enslaved man, was a skilled artisan who played an immense role in casting the Statue of Freedom placed atop the U.S. Capitol. The Statue of Freedom was designed to represent the ideals of liberty, independence, and democracy. Yet, Reid had no personal access to the freedom represented by the very own statue he had aided in creation. Despite symbolizing liberty, the Statue of Freedom embodies a contradiction, as its creation relied on the labor of enslaved individuals. As such “The statue stands today as an ironic reminder of how freedom for some was predicated on the enslavement of others”¹¹. The cost of the statute compared to the unpaid or undervalued labor of workers like Philip Reid demonstrates the economic exploitation underpinning these iconic symbols of freedom. By the time the Statue was put into place, “Reid

⁹ Felicia Bell, “Enslaved Labor and the U.S. Capitol.” United States Capitol History, 2003.

<https://capitolhistory.org/explore/historical-articles/enslaved-labor-united-states-capitol/>

¹⁰ William C. Allen. History of Slave Laborers in the Construction of the United States Capitol (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2005), [8].

¹¹ Felicia Bell, “Enslaved Labor and the U.S. Capitol.” United States Capitol History, 2003.

<https://capitolhistory.org/explore/historical-articles/enslaved-labor-united-states-capitol/>

had been a free man for over a year”¹². This irony is marked by William C. Allen in his reference, “It is not known if he witnessed the ceremony, but the statue of freedom must have been a particularly poignant sight for the former slave”¹³. Allen’s acknowledgment exposes the profound irony of enslaved labor being at the heart of America’s monuments that represent liberty. Allen’s interpretation of Reid’s role transforms the statue from a simple architectural triumph into a poignant reminder of the contradictions of American principles: freedom at the expense of exploitation that enabled its progress. For Reid, witnessing the Statue’s completion would have been a deeply emotional moment as it embodied ideals he had just claimed for himself.

George Washington is widely regarded as a symbol of freedom in the United States. As a leader in the Revolutionary War, he secured the Nation’s independence from Great Britain. Washington was a key figure in marking out the ideals of liberty and democracy upon which the country was founded, making his legacy often closely tied to these principles. However, his involvement in the institution of slavery complicates this image, particularly when examining his use of enslaved labor in the building of his own house, Mount Vernon. Washington, like others in the Potomac region, rented out enslaved individuals to meet short-term labor demands. For example, labor needs such as spring house cleaning or fish harvests were ways in which “13 percent of slaves at Mt. Vernon were rented”¹⁴. Washington’s behavior of leasing enslaved individuals demonstrates how essential slavery was in generating private wealth. This served as a

¹² William C. Allen. *History of Slave Laborers in the Construction of the United States Capitol* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2005), [16]

¹³ William C. Allen. *History of Slave Laborers in the Construction of the United States Capitol* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2005), [16].

¹⁴ William C. Allen. *History of Slave Laborers in the Construction of the United States Capitol* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2005), [8].

versatile resource, serving both personal estates and government enterprises, which continues to highlight the contradiction between America's ideals of liberty and the reality of slavery.

The exploration of enslaved labor in the construction of Washington D.C.'s Capitol Building, The White House, and Mount Vernon uncovers the fundamental tensions between America's aspirations of liberty and the realities of exploitation. The nation's remarkable achievements, as represented by its governmental structures and cultural monuments, were made possible only by the forced labor of enslaved individuals. This uncomfortable reality requires a reconsideration of American development that acknowledges the fundamental role that enslaved labor played in establishing America's infrastructure and identity.

To fully understand the complexities within history surrounding the construction of Washington D.C., a veil of ignorance must be uncovered, exposing true American progress. In exploring the historical contributions of enslaved labor to iconic American structures, the *Hearing before the Committee on House Administration* provides invaluable insights. This hearing, held by the U.S. House of Representatives on November 7, 2007, focuses specifically on the construction of the United States Capitol and acknowledges the critical and yet often overlooked role of enslaved individuals in aiding its development. Historian Felicia Bell testified for this congressional committee and offered critiques about the historical erasure of African Americans in public narratives about the Capitol, stating, "Yet 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"¹⁵. This omission underlines the erasure of enslaved African Americans' contributions to national achievements like the Capitol, The White House, and Mount Vernon. Acknowledging

¹⁵ U.S. Congress, House, Committee on House Administration, *The Construction of the United States Capitol: Recognizing the Contributions of Slave Labor*, 110th Cong., 1st sess., November 7, 2007 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2008), [96]

their labor and the irony of the historical significance those buildings hold to American values is essential to a more inclusive and accurate historical narrative.

Renee K. Harrison holds a vital perspective on the overlooked contributions and struggles of African Americans through her challenging dominant narratives and fostering a deeper understanding of America's history and its ongoing racial inequalities. The foundation of the United States is a paradoxical blend of lofty ideals and grave injustices. While the nation upholds freedom and opportunity, its growth was aided by the labor of enslaved people and the displacement of indigenous communities. This contrasting reality is held in this assertion: "It is the misuse of these hands and the hands of other enslaved Black-bodied people and microcosmic scope of the European immigrant's pursuit of the American dream on stolen lands"¹⁶. Harrison critiques the concept of American progress by highlighting the exploitation of enslaved Black labor and the dispossession of Indigenous lands, revealing how the pursuit of the American dream was built on the suffering and oppression of marginalized communities. A significant moment in the fight for freedom occurred when the U.S. government took a step toward emancipation, marked by, "On April 16, 1862, the US government freed 3,185 enslaved Black people in the District of Columbia. The date became an official city holiday in Washington, DC, in 2005"¹⁷. This reflects a key moment in American progress, symbolizing a formal, though limited, acknowledgment of the enslaved individuals' contributions to the nation's growth and a step toward greater freedom. While the emancipation of 3,185 individuals in the District of Columbia was a significant achievement, it also highlights the ongoing struggle for justice, as it

¹⁶ Harrison, Renee K. *Black Hands, White House: Slave Labor and the Making of America*. Minneapolis: 1517 Media, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1khdq18>. [50]

¹⁷ Harrison, Renee K. *Black Hands, White House: Slave Labor and the Making of America*. Minneapolis: 1517 Media, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1khdq18>. [225]

took over a century for the government to officially recognize the importance of this act by declaring April 16 a holiday in 2005. This delayed recognition reveals the slow and often incomplete nature of American progress in addressing the legacy of slavery and racism.

Michelle Obama, former First Lady of the United States under Barack Obama's presidency, has made comments about living in the White House as a Black woman. A powerful reminder of America's history's complexities and progress, Michelle Obama once reflected on the significance of her life in the White House, stating, "I wake up every morning in a house that was built by slaves"¹⁸. This statement not only honors the sacrifices of those who came before but also challenges American ideals of their shared history, urging a deeper reckoning with the complexities of justice, progress, and representation. Her words serve as a poignant reminder of the unacknowledged contributions of Black Americans to the Nation's foundation and a testament to the resilience and progress of their descendants. The symbolism of a Black First Family living in a house built by enslaved hands is an example of resilience and transformation, but it also serves as a reminder that progress is not inevitable - it is achieved through conscious effort and the willingness to confront uncomfortable truths.

Acknowledging the painful truths of history is essential to understanding its lasting impact, yet symbolic gestures alone cannot undo past injustices. As stated, "A memorial, a commemorative plaque or exhibit will never right the wrongs of the past, but it could serve as a reminder of the story behind the significant contribution of an oppressed people"¹⁹. This reinforces the importance of recognition without overestimating the power of symbolic gestures

¹⁸ Michelle Obama, speech, PBS News, News Hour Productions LLC, July 2016

¹⁹ U.S. Congress, House, Committee on House Administration, *The Construction of the United States Capitol: Recognizing the Contributions of Slave Labor*, 110th Cong., 1st sess., November 7, 2007 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2008), [2]

to heal historical wounds. While monuments and exhibits cannot erase the harm caused by systematic oppression, they serve as vital tools for preserving the stories of marginalized communities. This ensures that enslaved individuals' contributions are not forgotten and that future generations are reminded of the struggles that shaped the nation.

The construction of Washington, D.C., and its monumental structures, including the White House, Capitol, and Mount Vernon, stands as a powerful testament to the paradox that defines American history. The labor of enslaved individuals who played an integral role in building these symbols of freedom and democracy reveals the deep contradictions at the heart of the nation's founding ideals. The painful history of slavery, both as a system of exploitation and a means of constructing national identity, calls for a re-evaluation of American progress. True progress requires a continual effort to confront uncomfortable truths, not just through symbolic recognition, but acknowledgment of their contributions, which can stimulate meaningful change. Only then can the nation begin to move closer to realizing the democratic ideals originally intended by these historical buildings.

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