

# The Washington Times

## Capitol slave labor studied

By

The Washington Times

Tuesday, May 31, 2005

ASSOCIATED PRESS

The U.S. Capitol was built with the labor of slaves who cut the logs, laid the stones and baked the bricks. Two centuries later, Congress has decided the world should know about this.

Congressional leaders yesterday announced the creation of a task force to study the history of slave labor in the construction of the Capitol and suggest how it can best be commemorated.

"It is our hope that the work of the task force will shed light on this part of our history, the building of our nation's greatest symbol of democracy," said House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert, Illinois Republican; Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, Tennessee Republican; and Democratic leaders Rep. Nancy Pelosi of California and Sen. Harry Reid of Nevada.

Historians say slaves were the largest labor pool when Congress in 1790 decided to create a new national capital along the Potomac surrounded by the two slave-owning states of Maryland and Virginia.

Over the next decade, local farmers rented out their slaves for an average of \$55 a year to help build the Capitol, the White House, the Treasury Department and the streets laid out by city planner Pierre L'Enfant.

Slaves cut trees on the hill where the Capitol would stand, cleared stumps from the new streets, worked in the stone quarries where sandstone was cut and assisted the masons laying stone for the walls of the new homes of Congress and the president.

They also were involved in the expansion of the Capitol in the late 1850s.

Sen. Blanche Lincoln, Arkansas Democrat and a task force member, said lawmakers became aware of the use of slaves after researchers in the late 1990s found documents of Treasury Department payments to slave owners. She said more than 400 slaves apparently were hired out.

In 2000, Mrs. Lincoln and Sen. Spencer Abraham, Michigan Republican, Rep. John Lewis, Georgia Democrat, and Rep. J.C. Watts Jr., Oklahoma Republican, pushed through legislation approving the formation of a task force.

But Mrs. Lincoln said that because of changes in control of the Senate, it has taken until now to implement that legislation. "It's certainly long overdue," she said. "The task force will have a great opportunity to bring forward basically a history lesson as well as an appropriate memorial."

Mr. Lewis, a veteran of the civil rights movement, said the opening of a Capitol visitors' center next year might provide a venue for recognizing the slaves. "We need to find someplace not only to place a statue or appropriate symbol, we also need to find a way to tell their story," he said.