

Slave Labor Task Force works to tell story of blacks in the Capitol

By Shira Poliak - 07/21/10 05:00 AM ET

While Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.) was busy crafting legislation to create national historic sites around the country honoring black leaders, he discovered that his own workplace was in need of some overdue recognition.

In 2000, while reading a newspaper article, he learned that slaves helped build the Capitol.

His reaction? "Unreal.

Unbelievable.

"When I was in elementary school, high school, even in college, no one ever told me -- I never read it any place -- that African-American slaves built the Capitol," Lewis said. "I was shocked that I had no idea that slaves built the Capitol. There was a double shock when I learned that they weren't paid for their labor."

Like Lewis's civil rights activism and previous legislative efforts, he was determined to publicly recognize the slaves' role in building the Capitol. "I felt that we had to do something about it," he said.

He teamed up with former Rep. J.C. Watts (R-Okla.) and Sen. Blanche Lincoln (D-Ark.) to create the Slave Labor Task Force in 2000, and last month the group unveiled the first public markers recognizing these slaves, with two plaques now hanging in the Capitol Visitor Center (CVC).

Lewis said the plaques are "just another step down a very long road for generations," and many involved in the project say more must be done to shed light on this untold, harrowing part of American history. (The task force is also responsible for having the CVC atrium named Emancipation Hall.)

"Slavery is not anything that we can be proud of, but we don't need to hide from it, run away from it," he said. "We have to tell that story to educate and sensitize ... people."

The group is planning to place in front of the plaques two large marble stones from the quarry where the Capitol's slaves labored.

The stones will serve as a "symbol of their physical labor," Lincoln said.

"When you see the stones in the walls of the Capitol, you don't get a full perspective on how difficult it was to chisel them," she said. Lincoln wants visitors "to think about the fact that when slaves built the building, they had some of the more difficult jobs and didn't have modern-day equipment."

The task force also instructed the Capitol Guide Service to incorporate the experience of black slaves in its tours (there was no mention of slave laborers in Capitol tours before) and published information on the history of Capitol slave laborers and black lawmakers online. And it suggested creating educational brochures highlighting individual 19th-century blacks in the Capitol (like slave laborers, members of Congress and staffers).

The group worked with Capitol historians and curators, the clerk of the House, other members and the House Administration Committee "to try to find some suitable and appropriate way that we can tell this story," Lewis said.

Lewis said the decade spent on the project reflects the task force's concern that the African-American slaves be commemorated properly.

"The Capitol is going to be here for many, many generations to come," he said. "So we had to take our time and do it right. Sometimes it takes time to make these important changes."