

Slave Labor and the Capitol: A Commentary

by Felicia Bell

WHEN I THINK about the United States Capitol, I think about a structure that represents freedom and democracy in all its architectural beauty. The Capitol, which has housed Congress since 1800, is the most recognized symbol of democratic government in the world. Although this magnificent structure is visited by nearly five million people each year, very few are aware of the use of slave labor to build it.



A Slave-Coffle passing the Capitol.

Manacled and chained, a group of enslaved Africans is marched past the West Front of the Capitol in this later engraving of a c. 1810 scene. (Courtesy Library of Congress)

In order to construct the Capitol, mass labor was required. The laborers would have to be inexpensive and they did not necessarily need to be skilled craftsmen. During the eighteenth century, the greatest number of enslaved people lived in Virginia, Maryland, and South Carolina, since large plantations were concentrated in these states. Capitol architect and district commissioner, Dr. William Thornton, a Quaker from Tortola in the British West Indies, happened to own slaves. He also helped to establish the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Color. In keeping with his commitment to African colonization as an antislavery measure, Thornton used his newly appointed position as commissioner to propose two schemes to the

design and construction commissioners appointed by President George Washington. The first was to allow fifty "intelligent negroes" to earn their freedom by earning wages while working on the Capitol project for six years. The second idea was to purchase these enslaved men, train them to be stone cutters and free them after six years of work. There is no record of the board's response to Thornton's suggestions and no certainty of any enslaved Africans earning freedom for their work on the Capitol.

All of the thirteen original states had small numbers of free people of color, but only Maryland had a sizeable free black population. In fact, Baltimore had the largest free black population in the country. Both enslaved and free men of color provided much of the arduous labor used to build the Capitol, including cutting and hauling stone, laying brick, digging trenches, forging nails, and clearing the land. These men probably worked twelve-hour days every day of the week for little or no pay. Some of these laborers were able to keep their earnings if they worked Sundays or at night, or if they were skilled

craftsmen. Most slaveowners received earnings of \$5 a week for the labor of their enslaved men. While enslaved men were paid on average only pennies a day, free men of color were paid about \$1 a day.

Enslaved men made up the workforce that was used to cut sandstone at the Aquia Creek quarry for use in the Capitol's construction. After the stone was cut, it was hauled by oxen to small schooners that brought it to Commissioner's Wharf in the Federal City. There an additional workforce of both enslaved and free laborers hauled the stone to the Capitol site where it was later dressed and set with the skilled assistance of European-born artisans.

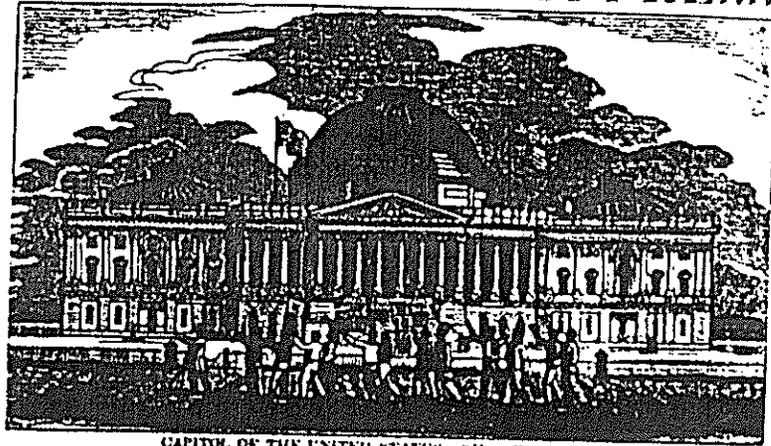
The manual labor performed by enslaved men was long, tedious, and arduous. August 1795, for example, was a heavy construction month. According to the National Weather Service, temperatures recorded in the nineteenth century during the month of August in Washington, D.C., reached as high as 100-plus degrees. One can only imagine the work conditions for these men under the blazing, late summer sun. The hard-working laborers at the Capitol used simple machines and conventional tools. Enslaved sawyers used pit saws (two-manned handsaws) to cut lumber and clear the land. Pulleys were used for lifting heavy materials.

Some of the men who constructed the Capitol were skilled artisans, mostly of European origin, but some skilled laborers were enslaved or free men of color. A man of Italian descent working at the Capitol, for example, joined each section of the plaster model of the Statue of Freedom perfectly together so that no crevices showed. However, when the time came to take the figure apart to be cast in bronze, the Italian artisan refused to do so unless his wages were increased and he was guaranteed more work.

Clark Mills, who owned the foundry in Bladensburg, Maryland and a clever enslaved mulatto named Philip Reid, volunteered Reid to cast the statue. Reid had worked at the foundry for several years and was an expert at casting. He was able to dismantle the model using a pulley and tackle. After taking it apart without injury, the model was safely taken to the foundry, where the statue was cast in bronze.

Time sheets indicate that Mills and his men worked for five weeks in September and October 1860 for one hour a day. On Sundays they rested. Philip Reid is recorded earning \$1.25 a day (a total of \$38.75). On April 16, 1862, 42-year-old Philip Reid and other "persons held to service or labor in the District of Columbia" were emancipated. Under the terms of the compensated emancipation provided in the D.C. Emancipation Act, Mills filed a petition to be compensated

"THE HOME OF THE OPPRESSED."



An 1836 antislavery handbill used this image of the Capitol to contrast the irony of the nation's ideal as the "the land of the free" with its reality as "the home of the oppressed." (Courtesy Library of Congress)

for the loss of his property (11 persons), including Philip Reid who was valued at \$350.40.

The last section of the Statue of Freedom (the head and shoulders) was raised atop the Capitol dome on December 2, 1863 to the sound of a 35-gun salute. She stands 19 feet 6 inches tall and weighs approximately 15,000 pounds. *Freedom* is poised at 288 feet above the East Front plaza on a cast-iron pedestal and cost \$23,796.82 (excluding her installation). The statue stands today as an ironic reminder of how freedom for some was predicated on slavery for others. The role of enslaved labor in the construction of the Capitol is a history that cries out for more research and study.

Felicia Bell is associate historian of the U.S. Capitol Historical Society. This fall she enters the doctoral program at Howard University, where she intends to pursue her interest in the history of enslaved labor and the Capitol.

Suggested Readings

Allen, William C. "Capitol Construction," *American Visions* (Feb./Mar. 1995).

Allen, William C. *The United States Capitol: A Brief Architectural History*. Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 2001.

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