

**Statement Of
The Honorable Eleanor Holmes Norton
Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings,
and Emergency Management
Hearing On
“H.R. 3315, A Bill to Name the Great Hall at the Capitol Visitor
Center Emancipation Hall”**

I am very pleased to welcome to today’s hearing Congressman Jesse Jackson Jr. and Congressman Zach Wamp, key sponsors of the resolution to name the great hall located at the Capitol Visitor Center as “Emancipation Hall.”

The U.S. Capitol and its iconic dome are symbols of representative democracy. As our country has grown and changed over its 225 year history, so has the Capitol. The Capitol Building, or the “Temple of Liberty” as it was known early on, ironically was built in large part by “negro hires,” a term used to indicate that the enslaved blacks who helped to build the Capitol were hired out, not hired. More accurately, they were leased or contracted out by their owners to do the work, essentially a contract between Congress and slaveowners, with all the funds going directly to the pockets of the slaveowners.

The slaves who helped to build the Capitol came not only from southern states like Maryland and Virginia. Some were property of residents of the nation’s capital itself, where slaves lived and worked until Congress abolished slavery in the District in 1863, only nine months before the Emancipation Proclamation.

Slaves here and in the rest of United States often were skilled craftsmen who were profitable not only to the slaveowners’ household, but also for the skills they brought to others as “negro hires.” One of the many ironies of slavery is that when emancipation finally arrived, slaves throughout the United States had the entire skill set for any project in our country; they were an indigenous workforce ready and anxious to work. Ubiquitous discrimination across the country, however, confined blacks to joblessness unless no whites, including newly arrived immigrants were available. A bitter freedom for slaves who wanted nothing more than their freedom and ability to work became a national tragedy. A major hall in the new Capitol building 200 years later provides a token of the respect and gratitude these slave laborers, never received.

Today, little remains on Capitol Hill that bears the imprint of slave labor. Much of the carpentry work, including the mahogany, pine and walnut doors, was lost to fires, rebuilding and remolding. History wiped away the work of these slaves without so much as a marker to indicate their contributions. The history of these slaves’ contributions has been suppressed, even in official histories at the Capitol, until recent years. We are grateful for the bipartisan task force, of which Representative John Lewis is a member, established several years ago in anticipation of the recognition of the contributions of slave labor as envisioned by House Congressional Resolution 130.

In 1998, following the first shooting deaths of Capitol Police officers in the nation’s history, I introduced H.R. 4347, the Jacob Joseph Chestnut-John Michael Gibson United

States Capitol Visitor Center Act of 1998. The bill provided for enhanced security on the Capitol Grounds and for an appropriate place to welcome our constituents, taking into account their health and comfort. Nine years later, I have toured the graceful new addition to the Capitol, the Capitol Visitor Center. About 97% completed, finishing touches are in progress, such as the installation of bronze framework around the doors, and carpet installation, cafeteria counter tops, and millwork. Plaster and paint, along with a bronze handrail, are being applied to the three-level spiral stair case that will welcome visitors in elegant style to this outstanding facility.

The facility contains so much history and so many new amenities that it is nothing less than a premier new tourist destination that we in the District particularly welcome. The Congress and the nation depend on this city to be welcoming to constituents and to visitors from around the world. The District of Columbia is one of America's preeminent tourist destinations and consequently, there is a perfect synergy between what Congress and the District of Columbia want for tourists who come to the city to visit historic sites. City officials and I are working closely with Capitol officials on how to facilitate getting millions of visitors to this new venue that offers a modern setting in which to view the history of Congress and its contributions to our country. Included in this landmark building will be an exhibition gallery, a 550 seat cafeteria, gift shops, and visitor orientation theaters. At nearly 580,000 square feet, this project is the largest in the Capitol's 212 year history. No longer will visitors stand in long lines, and arrive in at the beginning of their Capitol tour tired, hungry, and often with little knowledge of what they are about to see. Not only will the new center provide greater security, but it will afford visitors an enjoyable and educational experience that would be incomplete if the untold story of the building of the Capitol remains untold.

Naming the great hall for the long unrecognized contributions of slaves will in some small way honor the importance of their contributions to their country and our determination to continue to erase the conditions that derive from that period in our history.

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