

**Statement of
The Honorable James L. Oberstar
Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings,
and Emergency Management
Hearing on
“H.R. 3315, A Bill to Name the Great Hall of the Capitol Visitor
Center ‘Emancipation Hall’”
September 25, 2007**

Today, the Subcommittee will hear testimony from the sponsors of H.R. 3315, a bill to designate the great hall in the new Capitol Visitor Center as Emancipation Hall.

This bill symbolically honors the efforts of African Americans, both slaves and freedmen, who helped build the United States Capitol. The great hall will be located in the new Capitol Visitor Center, the most recent and largest addition to the U.S. Capitol in its 212-year history. The great hall will include information and ticketing desks, and provide an area where Americans from all over the country can gather to take in scenic views of the Capitol or prepare to explore the 580,000 square foot Visitor Center.

In 2004, Congress directed the Architect of the Capitol to produce a report on the history of slave labor in the construction of the United States Capitol. The report examined the efforts of slaves who helped to build the Capitol, other Federal buildings, and the White House, which at the time was known as the President’s House. Although the record is incomplete, because of limited documentation of slave labor, the evidence available and historical context provide several indications that slaves and free African Americans played a significant role in building these historical monuments.

One of the more poignant stories featured in the report is the story of Phillip Reid, perhaps the best known slave to have worked on the construction of the U.S. Capitol. While working as a slave, Reid devised a method to disassemble the plaster sculpture of the Statute of Freedom, by splitting it into several pieces, for transport to the bronze foundry when the original craftsmen refused to do so without an increase in pay. The Statute of Freedom was intended to be a crowning feature of the soon to be completed U.S. Capitol dome. Reid went on to work on the fabrication of the bronze statue. By the time the Statute of Freedom was finally lifted on top of the U.S. Capitol dome, in December 1863, Phillip Reid was free man as a result of an Act of Congress.

There is an irony not lost on this Committee that slave labor was used to build the U.S. Capitol, a worldwide symbol of democracy. H.R. 3315 serves as an honor to those unsung workers who worked tirelessly to erect symbols of American ideals of freedom.

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