



Slaves who built U.S. Capitol honored with plaque

Published: Thursday, June 17, 2010, 3:00 AM



By **McClatchy-Tribune News Service**

By



Pete Marovich, McClatchy-Tribune News Service

A plaque in recognition of the contributions of enslaved blacks in the construction of the United States Capitol was unveiled during a ceremony on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., on Wednesday.

By Reid Davenport

WASHINGTON -- Even though George Washington laid the ceremonial first brick of the U.S. Capitol, the people who did most of the dangerous, back-breaking construction under the hot sun of the Potomac weren't considered full citizens. In fact, they weren't considered full people.

For about 220 years, the fact that enslaved blacks built the U.S. Capitol was rarely mentioned and never recognized. Until now.

The leaders of both parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives gathered on Wednesday to unveil a plaque honoring the slaves who helped build the Capitol.

"In the words of President Lincoln: 'We cannot escape history,' " said the Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi. "And with this plaque, we embrace history. We celebrate it."

U.S. Rep. John Lewis, a Georgia Democrat and longtime civil rights activist, was the head of the task force designated to recognize these slaves. He said the plaques would "shed light on a long-hidden truth" and give these black Americans the recognition they deserve.

The plaque is the first to formally recognize the contributions of slaves in the construction of much of Washington's historic landmarks. For Jesse Holland, author of "Black Men Built the Capitol," the commemoration is long overdue.

"Congress' actions will bring to life the contributions of African-American slaves, not only in the Capitol, but to other buildings in D.C.," Holland said.

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