

Black Men Helped Shape D.C.

Long Before Obama Was Elected, African Americans Built Many of Washington's Landmarks

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Everybody knows that on Jan. 20, [Barack Obama](#) will take the oath of office in front of the U.S. Capitol to become the first African American president of the United States.

What many people may not know is the big role that African Americans had in building the Capitol and many other historic places in Washington.

Jesse J. Holland, a reporter for the [Associated Press](#), wrote a book called "Black Men Built the Capitol," about African American history in and around the nation's capital. Here are some stories.

The U.S. Capitol

The home of Congress was built by a workforce that was made up largely of slaves. They baked bricks used for the building's foundation and walls. They sawed lumber, dug trenches and put down the stones that hold up the Capitol to this day.

Many of the slaves are believed to have come from houses and farms in Virginia, Maryland and the District. Before the 1861-65 Civil War, Virginia was the largest slaveholding state, with a little more than 400,000 slaves. (Because of that history, the fact that a majority of Virginia's voters supported Obama in the presidential election was seen as important.) There were about 100,000 slaves in Maryland and more than 3,000 in the District.

The Statue of Freedom

This is the 19-foot-6-inch statue that stands on top of the Capitol dome. A slave named Philip Reid figured out how to bronze the plaster cast (which was made in Rome) in pieces and then put it together so it could be hoisted onto the building.

[The White House](#)

Slaves played a big role in constructing this building, too. And until the Civil War, many presidents had slaves.

The Mall

Today this big piece of land runs through downtown Washington, linking the [Lincoln Memorial](#) to the Capitol. Museums, monuments, buildings and open spaces can be found there. But before the Civil War, this area held markets where slaves were bought and sold.

On the spot where the National Archives is located, there was a well-known slave market called Lloyd's Tavern, where a young girl named Margaret was seized from her master and sold because he was behind in his rent.

The Archives holds the country's most important documents, including President [Abraham Lincoln](#)'s original Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, which freed the slaves in Southern states that were not under Union control.

[Lincoln Park](#)

Located in Northeast Washington on East Capitol Street between 11th and 13th streets, this was the first park named to honor Lincoln after his 1865 assassination. During the Civil War, the area had housed Union soldiers and a hospital.

A Lincoln statue was dedicated in 1876, paid for almost entirely by freed slaves. The idea for it came from a freed Virginia slave named Charlotte Scott, who donated the first \$5 using the very first money she earned as a free woman.

-- *Valerie Strauss*