Congressional Hearing
Testimony
November 7, 2007

Good Afternoon

I am Dr. Bettye Gardner, Professor of History, Coppin State University, a member of the Executive Council of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, and a member of the Task Force.

I have been asked to give a statement on the "Mission and Importance" of the Task Force. During the 200th anniversary of the building of the U. S. Capitol, national attention was focused on the role that slaves played in its construction. A Task Force was established in May 2005 to determine ways to recognize the tremendous contributions that slave laborers made in the construction of the Capitol. Several recommendations have been made including:

(1) A commemorative plaque and building stone quarried by slave labor, placed in or adjacent to the Capitol Rotunda.

(2) Training of the Capitol Guide Service on interpreting the experience of African Americans as slave laborers and members of Congress.

(3) Online publication of the Task Force's report on the history of slave laborers at the Capitol.

(4) Naming the Great Hall of the Visitors Center, Emancipation Hall.

The writer, Alex Haley, commented that" history has been recorded by the winners, kept by the winners and written by the winners." As a result the American story is generally told in a way that enhances and dignifies some, while omitting others. American History cannot be understood without African American History, and so if we are to understand the pivotal role which slavery played in the building of this nation, then this is an excellent opportunity for the Task Force to broaden the conversation on slavery and race. The members of Congress have acknowledged the contradictions inherent in the founding of our nation; hence, the Task Force must help to center the African American experience squarely in the American experience providing an alternative viewpoint that both "illustrates and contradicts the promise of America."

By recognizing the slaves who built the Capitol we shine the light of historical truth on the institution of slavery and the racism that justified it, thereby giving the lie to the American rhetoric of liberty and equality. Like so many aspects of the African American story that have remained on the back pages of our historical consciousness, the story of the slaves who built the Capitol must certainly be told here. Once Washington was selected as the capital city, slavery became an accepted part of the new capital. By 1800 the population was almost ¼

black, both slave and free. It is in this context that the founding of the new nation must be seen and our founding fathers must be judged.

By whatever devices we employ, both the image and the irony of African slaves constructing the most enduring and formidable symbol of democracy in the world must be at the center of our consciousness. Up to now, both their image and that irony have been left out.

Our history omits both their mention and their record. Our iconography has excluded their depiction. Our consciousness involves only white men's well-known names. But the numbers and physicality of black men slaving in this city, the size of this very place and the permanence of it, and the time and lives it took black men to make it, can no longer be ignored. Once little noted, they can no longer be ignored.

But most of all, in these small efforts, the irony's redeemed. These men enslaved and building this monument to the freedom and rights of men have become the ones to tell us who we are. And in so doing, they have given us not just the symbols of democracy, but the thing itself. They have given us ourselves. There is nothing that compares. However, it is not enough that only those visitors to this building know the story.

But what we must do is make certain every venue that carries our history carries that story. This is your moment to do that.

Thank You