"The Construction of the United States Capitol: Recognizing the Construction of Slave Labor"

Good Afternoon, my name is Sarah Jean Davidson and I reside in Silver Spring, Maryland. I am here today because Curtis Sykes, a former Slave Labor Task Force member, recommended that I serve in his stead due to his illness. Mr. Sykes subsequently died in September 2007 and Senator Blanche Lincoln permanently appointed me to the Slave Labor Task Force.

Furthermore, I have done extensive historical preservation work and I am the founder and president of the Association for the Preservation of North Little Rock, Arkansas African American History (APNLRAAAHistory) in my native city, North Little Rock. The APNLRAAAHistory was formed in 2000 to promote and preserve the culture, heritage and history of African Americans who live and/or have lived in North Little Rock. In addition, the organization works closely with the North Little Rock History Commission. Most recently, we produced a 13-panel exhibition entitled *"Black Life on the North Side of the River 1850-2000."* The exhibit received favorable reviews in the local news media. Moreover, I am a contributing researcher to On the Opposite Shore, the Making of North Little Rock," by Cary Bradburn, North Little Rock's first effort to include African Americans' historical contributions, published in 2004

I am honored to submit written testimony on a subject that addresses the injustices to enslaved blacks and to African American history. Drawing upon my experience as a descendant of slaves and as a history preservationist, today I share my sentiments regarding why a memorial to slaves who helped construct the United States Capitol is an honorable act for all Americans.

Why Honor Slaves Who Helped Build the United States Capitol With a Memorial?

Memorializing slaves who helped to build the U. S. Capitol, "the shrine of freedom," presents an incredible opportunity to not only broaden the public's understanding of African American contributions to the United States, but also to right an appalling wrong.

The United States owes an enormous debt to slaves upon whose backs this country was built. University of Texas historian Gerald Horne notes in an article in the Summer 2006 *Journal of African American History*, "The question of slavery looms large in consideration of the founding of the nation with understandable emphasis on how Africans, enslaved and otherwise, played a crucial role in bringing into being the nation now known as the United States of America. This has been an important research question in the field, not least since it helps to bolster the claim that this nation owes a profound debt to African Americans."

Even though my ancestors were slaves, their talents and skills were recognized by white society. Both Walter Hill, senior archival and African American history specialist at the National Archives, and C.R. Gibbs, Washington, DC historian, in a February 2007 *USA*

Today news article noted that "some slaves who helped to build the US Capitol were skilled artisans and were respected for their work."

History has frequently distorted slavery in the United States. Thomas Sowell in Black Education: Myths and Tragedies notes that even up until the 1950s, history books in America still promoted stereotypes of the Negro, and I quote, "The slave system… did harm to the white people of the South, and benefited nobody but the Negro, in that it served as a vast training school for African savages. Slavery taught… slaves discipline, cleanliness and conception of moral standards."

Indeed, slavery was a hideous atrocity and cruel injustice to people of color. Slaves were their master's property, mere chattel, and were considered brutes, literally and in reality stripped of their humanity. Slave owners, as with the building of the Capitol, reaped the financial benefits of slavery. Nevertheless, overtime, America began to recognize that blacks were not, "part of the animal kingdom and devoid of souls," as reported in the *Arkansas Gazette* in 1867.

The Importance of Preserving Slaves' Contributions to Building the U. S. Capitol

Many blacks and other Americans believe that there is a disconnect between institutions that stand for America and its heritage. If Philip Reid, one of the few slaves identified by name associated with the actual building of the Capitol, and the other slave laborers were alive today, they would say, as the Harlem Renaissance poet and novelist Langston Hughes stated, *"I, Too, Sing America.*"

Because slaves were considered property, records of slaves' labor in the construction of the Capitol are elusive and few, as reported by William C. Allen in the "*History of Slave Laborers in the Construction of the United States Capitol*." Nonetheless, this limitation of information does not negate the need for a memorial but rather makes a case for inclusion.

Some may ask why we cannot simply say that Americans built the U. S. Capitol. Current events such as the confrontational behavior between white and black youth in Jena, Louisiana, and the preponderance of nooses that are being displayed around the country, highlight the need for a better understanding between the races and the realization that all people contributed significantly to the development of this country. Prior to the Jena 6, many people did not understand the significance of a noose and the frightening images it invokes for African Americans. As my late mentor, Curtis Sykes used to say, "If you don't know your history, you are doomed to repeat it, and I don't want to go back into slavery again." It is important for all people both young and old to learn their history, and for all Americans to understand how we are all connected. Recognizing the involvement of slaves helps to close important gaps in history and informs this country about the roles of African Americans during slavery and beyond. Memorializing this contribution will create a better understanding of race relations, especially for the younger generation.

Various recommendations suggested by the Slave Labor Task Force are as follows: a commemorative plaque and building stone to be placed in the Capitol Visitors Center; an online exhibition detailing the contributions and recognizing the slaves' work; and, a pamphlet on slave labor -- among others suggestions. These suggestions are just examples of fitting tributes to the memory and free labor provided by the slaves who helped to construct the United States Capitol.

This recognition will provide its audience with an enriching educational experience. Students, historians and visitors will have an opportunity to learn more about African American history, about Africans who were brought to this country unwillingly, in bondage and their vital involvement to building the U.S. Capitol. Visitors will leave informed with an increased awareness of the contributions of African American slaves who resided in the Washington, DC metropolitan area.

In closing, I would like to acknowledge Ed Hotaling, a retired Washington, DC TV reporter, who according to *USA Today* was among the first to widely publicize the US Capitol slave labor issue; and those upon whose shoulders I stand and who looked upon me with favor and helped to make my contributions to America possible.

I begin with Curtis Sykes, who even in illness, saw in me the ability to serve as his representative on the Slave Labor Task Force; my deceased parents, Earnest Jefferson Davidson and Alice Sanders Davidson who recognized early on, that their teenage daughter had a calling and allowed and encouraged me to step out in the midst of racial hatred and segregation to help right society's wrongs; my late brother, Earnest Davidson, Jr., who supported my teenage civil rights initiatives and my history preservation efforts until his death in August of 2007; Daisy Bates, the late civil rights icon who mentored me during my teenage civil right years; Dr. O.C. Jones, my childhood pastor; and, members of the Association for the Preservation of North Little Rock, Arkansas African American History. Finally and most importantly, I would like to acknowledge all my enslaved ancestors for without their perseverance and survival skills during slavery I simply would not be.

As a tribute to Philip Reid and the many, yet to be identified slaves who helped to build the U.S. Capitol, I close with the last stanza of Maya Angelou's poem, "And Still I Rise".

"I rise, bring forth the gifts
That my ancestors gave
I am the dream of hope
Of the Slave
I rise, I rise, I rise.
I rise."

Thank you for your consideration.
Respectfully submitted,
Sarah Jean Davidson.