

# OPINION

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## America's Story and a Museum for All Americans

### Long overdue landmark takes shape

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

The Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History and Culture is in the final stages of construction on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., next to the Washington Monument and near the National Museum of American History. It will be a transformative and long-overdue landmark in the center of the nation's capital.

As the museum's director, Lonnie G. Bunch III, puts it, "This museum will tell the American story through the lens of African American history and culture. This is America's Story and this museum is for all Americans."

One of the most striking pieces visitors to the new museum will see is a slave cabin from Edisto Island, S. C. that was painstakingly dismantled and rebuilt at the museum's center. It will join artifacts like a child's slave shackles and Harriet Tubman's shawl and hymn book in telling the chapter at the foundation of our national story. The slave cabin may have come from hundreds of miles away, but slavery itself was at the heart of our nation's capital from its very beginning.

Traces of this other Washington are everywhere. As the new capital was rising from former woods and swampland, slaves labored on many of its buildings including the White House and the Capitol. As the Architect of the Capitol's office explains: "When construction of the U.S. Capitol



Building began in 1793, Washington, D.C. was little more than a rural landscape with dirt roads and few accommodations beyond a small number of boarding houses. Skilled labor was hard to find or attract to the fledgling city. Enslaved laborers, who were rented from their owners, were involved in almost every stage of construction." Records showing how much owners were paid for their slaves' labor tell us a few of these slaves' names:

*Visitors to the U.S. Capitol can see a marker in the building's Emancipation Hall honoring the slaves and other laborers who helped construct it.*

Tom, Peter, Ben, Harry, and Daniel worked on the White House. Nace, Harry, and Gabe worked on the Capitol. One slave who received special notice was Philip Reid, who helped construct the Statue of Freedom that sits atop the Capitol dome. He was the only person able to solve the puzzle of how to dissect and reassemble the original model of the statue after the sculptor who knew the secret refused to help without being paid

more money.

Slave coffles were a familiar sight in Washington's streets. Those lines of slaves chained together were horrifying to visitors from other countries and those traveling to the capital of the new country seemingly built on freedom. Slave markets and slave pens existed on a number of city sites including some not far from the spot on the Mall where the new museum will stand and the Tidal Basin now framed by beautiful cherry trees. Others were within yards of the White House.

The movie *12 Years a Slave* retold the

"in view from the windows of the capitol, a sort of Negro livery-stable, where droves of negroes were collected, temporarily kept, and finally taken to southern markets, precisely like droves of horses."

Some of this history is commemorated in Washington today. Visitors to the U.S. Capitol can see a marker in the building's Emancipation Hall honoring the slaves and other laborers who helped construct it. Beneath the inscription on a marble platform is a large chunk of sandstone from the Capitol's original East Front Portico, with chisel marks still visible. In other places new steps are being taken to honor the past.

For many years the Treasury Annex building stood on the site of the Freedman's Bank, built in 1865 to provide an opportunity for wealth-building among newly freed slaves—an attempt to right one of the profound wrongs the black community is still struggling to overcome. In January the U.S. Treasury Department held a ceremony officially renaming the Treasury Annex the Freedman's Bank Building and recognizing the Freedman Bank's legacy.

Even with important steps like these so much more of this other Washington remains hidden and forgotten. It's time to uncover and remember these parts of our shared history—in Washington and in states and cities and small towns across the country. An honest accounting of the past is the best way to keep moving forward together. Only the truth can make us free.

*Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund.*

## I've Been Terrorized in My Own Country

*A way of life it has become* BY JIMI JOHNSON

I was terrorized when my mother told me that a 14 year old black boy named Emmitt Till was lynched in Mississippi for looking at a white girl.

I was terrorized when I watched the evening news and saw Alabama police beating black boys and girls and giving them the blues.

Spraying them with fire hoses and knocking 'em to the ground--

Then the dogs began biting them while they were already down.

I was terrorized and traumatized when Megar Evers was murdered for trying to gain voting rights for black people in the south.

It cost him his life so we must VOTE, not only with our mouth--

I was terrorized when Malcolm X was murdered in 1965-- All he ever wanted was for us to stand up and rise!

When the anguish of the black community reached a boiling point in L.A. Watts burned like wildfire and many lives were snuffed away. Again I was terrorized as tears welled up in my eyes. The war on terror is at my doorstep; land mines everywhere I dare not misstep!

As police brutality ran rampant and out of control-- Riots in 1967 put the country on hold -- I was terrorized!

I screamed in terror when Martin Luther King Jr. was killed. He had prayed for peace and there was none to be

found --

Cities burned across America as he was laid in the ground. Once again I cried -- I was terrorized.

I was terrorized when police in riot gear patrolled our streets-- And demanded that black people not be around, or go to jail after sundown!

I was terrorized when they tried to bus me to an all white school--

I refused to go, I'm not the fool.

When I walked into a store in a small southern town and was told "we don't serve your kind"-- I got a lump in my throat and those words never left my mind!

I was terrorized when the police pulled me over --

They wanted to see my I.D.

With hands on their guns and resentment in their eyes, I said a silent prayer -- Please don't shoot me.

With gangs running rampant in our neighborhoods I'm terrorized once again, but they have been terrorized too -- It is still up to us to teach them what to do.

I was terrorized when Portland police murdered a young black woman named Kendra --

Before my tears could dry, another young black man named Perez had to die.

Michael Brown, Sandra Bland and Treyvon Martin too --



In the 21st century we find nothing new- I'm still terrorized.

And now..... 'I can't breathe'!

This is terrorism and it lives next door, across the street and around the corner in the name of law and order.

I was terrorized and traumatized when the Black Panthers took a fall --

They stood Black and Proud and tried to help us all.

I'm stunned and terrorized time and time again, I see too many black men locked up in the pens. Second chance we got none, barely a first --

Destiny arranged from the time of our birth.

So terrorized was I a conspiracy this must be, because one by one they've tried to eliminate you and me.

I went to the doctor and was terrorized again --

The doctor said most deadly risks are found in black men. Cancer, kidney failure and high blood pressure too --

They would do the same thing to me that an Uzi would do!

I've been terrorized in my own country --

A way of life it has become.

My life span has been shortened and my babies are dying too young!

Terrorism has been with me like my next to kin --

And in the United States of America the healing must begin.

*--Jimi Johnson is a freelance writer and poet from Portland.*