



# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515-1501

### Statement of Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton

### National Capital Memorial Advisory Commission

### Georgetown Waterfront Enslaved Voyages Memorial Act (H.R. 4009)

October 5, 2021

I submit this statement in support of my Georgetown Waterfront Enslaved Voyages Memorial Act (**H.R. 4009**). This bill would authorize the establishment of a memorial on federal land in the District of Columbia commemorating the enslaved individuals who are believed to have disembarked at the Georgetown waterfront after forced migration to the United States by way of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The commemorative work, to be established by the Georgetown African American Historic Landmark Project and Tour, would honor the enslaved individuals' presence, celebrate their contributions to history, recognize their resilience and fortitude and acknowledge their deeds and feats.

Enslavers packed 12.5 million captive Africans into their ships to sell as chattel in the Americas. The vestiges of this history are everywhere, yet scarcely marked, including here in the District. Due to its location at the northernmost navigable point on the Potomac River, North Potomac, as it was then known, the Georgetown waterfront was a busy commercial port that may have operated as a mid-Atlantic trading center of enslaved people.

The first enslaved Africans were believed to have been brought through the Georgetown port in 1732. Though records are incomplete, some scholars believe that between that year and 1761, seven ships carrying an estimated 1,475 enslaved people arrived there. Those who survived the traumatic "Middle Passage" voyage were marched through tunnels that led from the C&O Canal, through the sewage system, to a slave auction block on M Street, now Georgetown's main commercial thoroughfare.

Commodities to be sold for profit, these people were assigned no more value in America than that paid for them by enslavers. Slavery and the slave trade remained for generations an integral part of the United States. While the entire contribution of enslaved African Americans in the District and region cannot be determined, we know with certainty that white citizens and the federal government both relied heavily on enslaved labor to build the nation's capital.

Due to incomplete records and the passage of time, much of this history has been lost to us. The research being conducted by the Georgetown African American Historic Landmark Project and Tour, in connection with architect Rodney Leon at Yale University, is critical to uncovering the role that the District may have played in the slave trade. Engaging in this inquiry is important, regardless of what the investigation might find, because it is in asking ourselves the



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difficult questions that we may unearth the truth and work toward accountability and healing for our community.

We must not hide from this history. The enslaved individuals, known and unknown, who may have disembarked at the Georgetown waterfront after forced migration rest at the core of our nation's shared history. The atrocities of the system of chattel slavery shed light on our nation's central struggle between slavery and freedom—a freedom under which some could be owned, beaten, separated from their families and denied any rights. This bill provides for the creation of a powerful marker of truth-telling and remembrance. Let us honor the personhood of these individuals, who were repeatedly assumed to have none, so that they will never be forgotten.