

Georgetown African American Historic Landmark Project and Tour

Statements Before  
the  
National Capital Memorial Advisory Commission  
October 5, 2021  
Testimony of Andrena Crockett  
Founder and CEO

INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon, Chairman May and members of the National Capital Memorial Advisory Commission. My name is Andrena Crockett representing Georgetown African American Historic Landmark Project and Tour. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you on what I believe is a topic of national significance worthy of commemorating: the recognition of the enslaved of African descent and free African Americans in the United States.

As established under Section 8904 of the Commemorative Works Act of 1986 (40 U.S.C. 89), the Commission has the important role of advising the Secretary of the Interior and the Administrator of the General Services Administration on the establishment of commemorative works in the District of Columbia and its environs.

Envisioning a commemorative work in the nation's capital dedicated to the people taken from Africa and enslaved is a great responsibility. In areas administered by the National Park Service and the Administrator of General Services in the District of Columbia, where many existing works already commemorate subjects of national significance, making recommendations on a well-constructed design in accordance with Section 8901 of the Act is daunting, but the Commission is here to perform this honorable task on behalf of the American people. I am here in my capacity as sponsor of H.R. 4009 to convince you of the worthiness of the Bill.

HOUSE RESOLUTION 4009

On June 17, 2021, Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton introduced H.R. 4009, the Georgetown Waterfront Enslaved Voyages Memorial Act. This piece of legislation authorizes the Georgetown African American Historic Landmark Project and Tour (GAAHLP) to establish a commemorative work, in the form of a memorial, in the District of Columbia. As the sponsor of H.R. 4009, the GAAHLP testifies at this time to the importance of this legislation and its lasting impact on our nation as we progress toward a more perfect union. With this legislation we can also have a lasting impact on the world, as other nations watch and learn from the United States.

The GAAHLP speaks in consensus with our partners and the numerous organizations and individual voices who support our efforts to honor the enslaved of African descent and free African Americans who worked, lived, and assisted in building Georgetown, the District of Columbia, and this nation. Their resilience, strength, and fortitude are unparalleled. With partners Yale University and the National Park Service, we are conducting research on the environs. You will hear testimony today from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, another partner, whose various projects inform the world on human rights. In November 2019 UNESCO designated the Georgetown Waterfront a Site of Memory, recognizing the importation of the enslaved who disembarked there. With Georgetown University Press, GAAHLP is promoting the preservation of



This work recognizes the contributions of people of African descent who were brought to American shores against their will and who toiled without recognition or compensation. This commemorating work shall serve as a place of reflection and healing for all Americans.

## DOMESTIC IMPLICATION

Unfortunately, many Africans were forcibly brought to American shores. They toiled for free under inhumane conditions when labor was needed because others were incapable of building and maintaining the roads, homes, gardens, and households. In return, people of African descent had their identities stripped from them. Their last names removed. Their religions eliminated. Their cultures replaced. Their families torn apart. And after the Civil War and Emancipation their dignity was suppressed by Black codes and Jim Crow laws that were enacted to keep those of African descent in servitude.

The United States did issue a formal apology for slavery and Jim Crow laws. The resolution adopted by the U.S. House of Representatives on July 29, 2008, was unprecedented, even after decades of lawmakers trying to push the government to finally apologize. Speaking before the vote on the House resolution, Representative Steve Cohen (D-Tenn.) said, “Only a great country can recognize and admit its mistakes, and then travel forth to create indeed a more perfect union.”

In the “Apology for the Enslavement of African Americans,” (Senate Concurrent Resolution 26, 111th Congress 1st Session), Congress “acknowledges the fundamental injustice, cruelty, brutality, and inhumanity of slavery and Jim Crow laws” and “apologizes to African-Americans on behalf of the people of the United States, for the wrongs committed against them and their ancestors who suffered.” While this apology was primarily symbolic, by officially recognizing its role in perpetuating the horrors of slavery and Jim Crow, the American government took a step forward in addressing and atoning for one of its greatest wrongs.

The District of Columbia has no physical or natural site to convert into a memorial or dedicate to commemorate families who were torn apart and cannot be made whole. Washington, D.C., and its Georgetown Waterfront have no remaining structure symbolic of the transgression against the enslaved who were transported to and from Georgetown and the nation’s capital. They have been removed. The pain, after Emancipation, was too unbearable to have relics as reminders. There is no place to go to reflect and heal. There is no place to remember with contemplative thoughts or to forgive and reconcile. When this Commission convenes to make recommendations regarding H.R. 4009, they should remember the broken families and acknowledge the mistakes inflicted during slavery and the visceral racism of the Jim Crow era that these people endured. This commission should be reminded that a memorial in our nation’s capital is the least that the United States—the greatest nation on the earth, with the greatest government conceived by man, with the great belief that “all men are created equal”—can do.

## INTERNATIONAL AND OTHER MEMORIALS

Memorials recognizing the legacy of the enslaved exist in different forms around the world: For more than 25 years UNESCO’s Slave Route Project has worked to break the wall of silence surrounding the legacy of the slave trade through research, education, and recognition. The Ark of Return at the United Nations headquarters in New York honors victims of the slave trade. La Citadelle Laferrière in Haiti stands as a legacy to the formerly enslaved who built it. Ghana has preserved Elmina Castle and its slave forts. Windsor, Ontario, has the Underground Railroad Memorial. The Le Morne Cultural

landscape preserves the legacy of those who escaped slavery in Mauritius. Pelourinho, the historic center of Salvador de Bahia in Brazil, still stands as the site of the first slave market in the Americas. The Dutch recognize their role in the slave trade with the National Slavery Monument in Amsterdam, and the statues in Stone Town, Zanzibar, mark the center of the slave trade in East Africa.

In the United States, the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, which opened to the public on April 26, 2018, in Montgomery, Alabama, is our nation's first memorial dedicated to the legacy of enslaved people, people terrorized by lynching, African Americans humiliated by racial segregation and Jim Crow, and people of color burdened with contemporary presumption of guilt and police violence.

## GEORGETOWN WATERFRONT'S HISTORY AND DOMESTIC IMPACT

Henry Fleete, who sailed past the site of present-day Washington on the Potomac in 1632, wrote in his journal, as quoted in the Columbia Historical Society records, “we set sail for the town of Tohogae, where we came to an anchor about two leagues short of the Falls, being in the latitude 41. . . . This place without all question is the most pleasant and healthful place in all this country, and most convenient for habitation, the air temperate in summer and not violent in winter. It aboundeth with all manner of fish. The Indians in one night will catch thirty sturgeons in a place where the river is not above twelve fathoms broad. And as for deer, buffaloes, bears, turkeys, the woods do swarm with them, and the soil is exceedingly fertile.” This was the site upon which Georgetown was founded. But the waters of the Potomac, for those who were forcibly transported on them to unknown lands, take on a different meaning.

The Potomac, like all waterways in colonial times, provided the most efficient route for communication and trade with neighbors, villages, and coastal ports. In response to the increasing trade, a customs office for Maryland was created in 1673. By 1686 it was necessary to appoint a second North Potomac customs district solely for the collection of duties along the Maryland shore of the river, which included Georgetown.

George Washington's private secretary, Tobias Lear, wrote in his “Observations on the River Potomack, the Country Adjacent, and the City of Washington” in 1793: “From the Capes of the Chesapeake to the City of Washington, is upwards of three hundred miles; but the navigation is easy and perfectly safe.” He reported a vessel of seven hundred hogsheads of tobacco “at George-Town, which is above the City” of Washington. Now part of the District of Columbia, this area south of M Street and west of Rock Creek along the bluffs of the Potomac River was platted and named Geoge-Town in 1751.

Tobacco was king in the 18th century. Tobacco warehouses sprang up along the riverside in Maryland and Virginia. Wharves were built for ships, and taverns were opened for planters and seaman. In 1762 a public wharf was constructed at the foot of Water Street (now Wisconsin).

Georgetown passed its early history as an essential port town—the farthest up the Potomac possible. Between Georgetown and the ocean, the Potomac flows wide, deep and smooth. Silt accumulations changed that by the 20th century. Before a factory economy overwhelmed the port, Georgetown occupied an impressive position and controlled the westernmost point from which goods from the Potomac Watershed, Virginia, and Maryland could be shipped to the ocean, which was the preferred mode of transporting freight.

The labor in a southern port city, which was heavy, intensive, and rough, usually meant that whites saddled the enslaved and free African Americans with what work they could. So too in Georgetown, where a large African American population and slaving industry emerged quickly. Before the Civil War, African Americans made up between a third and a sixth of Georgetown's population at any given time. They constituted a third of the population within 25 years of Georgetown's founding, and freed African Americans found work almost exclusively as laborers. The Georgetown waterfront was the heart of this colonial town. Activities in the 100-acre waterfront area included Indian trade, development of a tobacco port, construction of the C&O Canal and the Potomac Aqueduct Bridge.

Next came the establishment of many mills, the erection of a market house, firehouse, church, and lodge. Before the Civil War the waterfront prospered as a transshipment point of trade on the canal and river until its decline around 1880. Across the Potomac the deep water port Alexandria attracted large cargo vessels, and the railroad replaced the canal for shipment of goods to and from Washington's developed commercial area to service the entire city. Georgetown businessmen began to look for new places to invest. The evolution of the waterfront area can be traced in the structures and urban form created as Georgetown emerged from an 18th-century plantation into a distinctive section within the nation's capital. During its 75 years as a tobacco port, Georgetown was incorporated into a city, became the center for milling, was included in the new nation's capital territory, and was made the terminus for the Potomac Canal.

A review of significant and representative structures provides information on the historical context that led to the designation of the waterfront as a National Historic Landmark by the U.S. Department of the Interior on October 7, 1967. The provisions of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1967 require that any project using federal funds or seeking federal license must take into account the effect of the project on the properties in the historic district.

Unfortunately, many commercial buildings, residences, civic structures, and the canal construction in this area have already disappeared as citizens and government agencies decided to demolish them to provide for new uses. In 1947, the home of Francis Scott Key, which was built in 1795, was dismantled. One of the early naval schools, located at 1042 Wisconsin Avenue, was demolished in 1960, and the houses at 1061–1063 Potomac Street disappeared in 1940. In 1968, the monumental Capital Traction Company Powerhouse on K Street was demolished.

## CONCLUSION

If America is to move toward a more perfect union and not only apologize for its misdeeds, erecting a memorial sends a powerful message. Beneficiaries of an attempt to correct the wrongdoings can go there to pay homage, others can recognize their ancestors' existence, and still others can go to reflect and heal. In 2009 the United States Congress made an official public apology for America's role in the history of slavery. Several of the southern American states had already issued their own apology.

Is 158 years after President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation too late? No! Even though the time limit on what an apology would look like and achieve has passed, it is never too late. The 158 years exceeds the 25-year requirement set forth in the Commemorative Works Act for this group to be honored with a memorial by the United States. It is befitting that a memorial be erected in Washington, D.C., whose founding was preceded in 1751 when Georgetown was incorporated and subsequently absorbed into the District of Columbia, the nation's capital, where all Americans come to visit. It is befitting that the site of an edifice to recognize those of African descent be among the many monuments, memorials, and embassies in our nation's capital, where representatives

from all over the world gather. The very least we can do is to recognize the existence of those who suffered for so long. For those who withstood indignations and racism in the United States, the bare minimum the United States should provide is a space to pause for a moment to erase one drop of their pain. I believe the ancestors are watching. Americans should want to acknowledge the enslaved contributions. It is our responsibility to those who sacrificed, and because they sacrificed, America's union survived. It is because they survived and thrived, that all Americans exist in their present condition.

A simple "We acknowledge your existence" can have a profound impact on erasing years of neglect and eliminating long-standing conflicts. H.R. 4009 attempts to send that message. A plaque is not an option and will not suffice. The scars are too many and too deep. The pain and suffering have gone on for too long.

Thank you for allowing me this time to speak before the Commission.

Respectfully Submitted by:

Andrena Crockett, Founder and CEO

---

Dated: September 27, 2021