



Exclusive to OpEd News:

OpEdNews Op Eds 8/17/2022 at 4:06 PM EDT H2'ed 8/17/22

## Why is Harvard Report Getting All the Press When the White House, the Capitol, and Stone Mountain Were Built on Slavery

By Robert Weiner and Lori Salazar



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On June 9, 2022, Lawrence S. Bacow decided to step down from his position as Harvard's President not long after releasing a report with the institution titled "The Presidential Committee on Harvard & the Legacy of Slavery" (April 26, 2022). The report documents the school's ties to racism and slavery. Although it discusses how Harvard's staff members "utilized over 70 enslaved individuals between 1636 from 1783," and the Harvard Community is vigorously addressing the issue, the rest of the country seems to have forgotten that iconic historical landmarks including the White House, The Capitol, and Stone Mountain also have horrific ties with slavery and racism.

The foundations of the White House and The Capital were built on the backbone of enslaved African American individuals. The Georgia Confederate monument, Stone Mountain, also allowed the Klu Klux Klan to conduct meetings and initiated new members into that racist hate group for decades. By revealing the truth of our country's historic ties to slavery and racism, citizens across the nation can acknowledge the harm done to African Americans and help make at least some amends for the systemic repression and influence of slavery.

A White House Historical Association report titled "Building the White House" (Jan. 3, 2020) states that when the construction of the White House began in 1792, "Congress decided to use African American individuals, who were both enslaved and free, as the labor force to build the historical building." "Congress and the Commissioners for the District of Columbia originally wanted to import labor from Europe" but decided since both Virginia and Maryland permitted slavery at the time of the construction, they were able to rely on the backbones of "slavery to gather up a large labor and construction crew to build the President's House."

It is estimated that over "200 known enslaved individuals were a part of the labor force that built the White House and the Capitol Building." Most of the African American "labor force was hired from slave owners from various parts of northern Virginia,

Maryland, and Washington D.C." on a strict contractual basis that allowed slave owners to make a wage from slavery. This arrangement allowed the Capitol and White House to "reap the monetary benefits of enslaved labor without bearing total responsibility for the workers general wellbeing."

The early presidents used slaves. It is distressing that presidents George Washington, John Adams, and Jefferson didn't aggressively question the moral integrity of using enslaved labor in the White House's household because it was cheap and readily available.

Stone Mountain's history is also steeped with racism since the monument gave way for the symbolic re-birth of the Klu Klux Klan during a period of federal intervention after the civil war. Historically, Confederate monuments were used as a form of propaganda to influence others to deny Black individuals their rights and maintain segregation. After an influx of activism from the NAACP pushing for the removal of confederate memorabilia, Georgian politicians have struggled to find a solution on what to do with Stone Mountain since citizens are greatly divided on whether to preserve or destroy the monument.

To reconcile with the historical site's connections to slavery, Thomas Jefferson's plantation Monticello has decided to embrace the descendants of Sally Hemmings, a slave who gave birth to four of Thomas Jefferson's children. In 2018, Monticello opened an exhibit discussing Sally Hemmings' life at the plantation, living quarters, and relationship with Jefferson. Monticello staff told us there that the plantation also hosts an annual gathering for descendants of Jefferson and Sally Hemmings to be able share stories about their ancestor with themselves and tourists. The plantation does not hide from the truth.

House bill H.R.40, also known as the Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act, was introduced by Representative John Conyers (D-MI) to also help educate our citizens about our country's connections to slavery. A study method, it could also recommend funds to help educate our citizens about the impacts of slavery on our country's society and governmental foundations and even recommend reparation. After Conyers' untimely death in 2019, Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee (D-TX) and 180 cosponsors reintroduced H.R.40 in the House and held hearings, but the Senate has yet to act.

Instead of focusing on Harvard's report, it is essential for our country to realize how racism and slavery were used to create the White House, Capitol, and Stone Mountain. The White House and Capitol could take a page from Monticello to work harder to honor Black individuals who built these historical sites and invite their descendants to events as honored guests. It's important for our nation to be educated about the effects of slavery and push our politicians to implement social programs for helping individuals in our African American communities to find opportunities in various job sectors and education

that their ancestors were denied. Recent court and congressional actions diminishing affirmative action in education, housing, and voting rights are steps in exactly the wrong direction.

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