



# Slave Labor in the Capital: Building Washington's Iconic Federal Landmarks

*Bob Arnebeck*

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In 1791, President George Washington appointed a commission to build the future capital of the nation. The commission found paying masters of faraway Maryland plantations sixty dollars a year for their slaves made it easier to keep wages low for free workers who flocked to the city. In 1798, half of the two hundred workers building the two most iconic Washington landmarks, the Capitol and the White House, were slaves. They moved stones for Scottish masons and sawed lumber for Irish carpenters. They cut trees and baked bricks. These unschooled young black men left no memoirs. Based on his research in the commissioners' records, author Bob Arnebeck describes their world of dawn to dusk work, salt pork and corn bread, white scorn and a kind nurse and the moments when everything depended on their skills.

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