

# SLAVERY BUILT AMERICA



## ESSENTIAL QUESTION

If America is considered the “land of the free,” what does it mean that the White House was built by enslaved labor?



## OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Explore the role of enslaved labor in the building of Washington, D.C. and the White House.
- Analyze a primary source document demonstrating the use of enslaved labor to build the White House.
- Create a fictionalized narrative taking into account the point of view of an enslaved person.



## LEARNING STANDARDS

See the [standards alignment chart](#) to learn how this lesson supports New Jersey State Standards.



## TIME NEEDED

60 minutes



## MATERIALS

- AV equipment to show a video
- *Who Worked? Who Got Paid?* handout (one per student)
- *The House That Slavery Built: Daniel's Story* handout (one per student)



## VOCABULARY

bondage

enslaver

overseer

enslaved

labor/laborer

servitude

# Procedures

## NOTE ABOUT LANGUAGE

When discussing slavery with students, it is suggested the term “enslaved person” be used instead of “slave” to emphasize their humanity; that “enslaver” be used instead of “master” or “owner” to show that slavery was forced upon human beings; and that “freedom seeker” be used instead of “runaway” or “fugitive” to emphasize justice and avoid the connotation of lawbreaking.

- 1** Project a photo of the White House. Have students do a think-pair-share in response to the following questions:
  - What building do you think this is, and who do you think lives there?
  - How long ago do you think this building was constructed?
  - Who do you think built it?
- 2** Reveal that the building is the White House and ask students what it symbolizes for them. Share that the construction of the White House took place from 1792 to 1800, and that most of the work was done by enslaved people (the work force also included free Black people, immigrants, and local white laborers). Ask students if they are surprised to learn that enslaved people built the White House.
- 3** Have students fold a sheet of paper in half and label the columns “The Workers” and “The President and First Lady.” Tell them that they will be watching a video clip that imagines the first time President John Adams and First Lady Abigail Adams visited the White House. Instruct them to take notes or sketch what stands out to them most about each group (e.g., their environment, physical appearance, mood, reactions, etc.). Show the clip from HBO’s *John Adams, Part 6—Unnecessary War* (3:27): [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BOPE\\_kC-3EY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BOPE_kC-3EY).

## NOTE

The clip depicts a fictionalized scene based on historian David McCullough’s biography, *John Adams*. In this segment, John and Abigail Adams travel through Washington, D.C., under heavy construction, and express their disapproval at the use of enslaved labor.

- 4** In pairs, have students share some of their observations and what most stood out to them. As a class, discuss some of the following questions:
- What did you notice about the type of work being done and the conditions for the laborers?
  - What did you notice about the body language and facial expressions of President and Abigail Adams? What do you think they were thinking as they approached the White House?
  - How did you interpret the first lady's questions: "Half-fed slaves building our nation's capital? What possible good can come from such a place?"
  - Did you know that enslaved people helped to build the White House? How do you feel about this?
  - How does the idea of enslaved people building our nation's capital go against the beliefs our country was built on?
- 5** Ask students: "How do you think we know that enslaved people built the White House?" Distribute the handout, *Who Worked? Who Got Paid?* and have students fold it so the transcribed text is hidden. Encourage them to decipher the 18th century handwriting before reading the text transcription and answering the accompanying questions.
- 6** Share that there are very few historical documents about the enslaved people who helped to construct the nation's most important buildings besides receipts, like this one, drawn up when their enslavers "rented" them out. Ask students why they think there are so few historical documents related to enslaved people and the building of Washington, D.C.

**NOTE**

This primary source document, from the National Archives, is a voucher for James Clagett for payment for work by "Negro George" for five months and three days (July-December 1794) at the "President's House." In today's dollars, the sum paid is the equivalent of approximately \$1,300-\$2,000.

## NOTE

As students write their original story endings, guide them to be realistic and to draw upon what they have learned about chattel slavery. Gently redirect students who may want to write an overly idealistic resolution (e.g., the enslaved people all get freed). Make certain to read students' writing and to discuss as a class which outcomes would have been possible and which would not. Use this writing exercise as a way to deepen students' thinking about slavery and to increase empathy for the people who endured it.

7

Tell students we do know that White House designer James Hoban “rented” out three enslaved people, one of whom was named Daniel. In pairs or small groups, have students read the fictionalized account, *The House That Slavery Built: Daniel's Story*, and complete the ending as directed on the handout. When they are done, have two groups join together and share their endings with each other.

8

To conclude the lesson, read aloud the 2016 remarks below from First Lady Michelle Obama or show a video clip of the speech (1:10): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHnj2sTIVUJ>. Discuss or have students write a reflection on what these words from our country's only Black first lady means to them.

*That is the story of this country, the story that has brought me to this stage tonight, the story of generations of people who felt the lash of bondage, the shame of servitude, the sting of segregation, but who kept on striving and hoping and doing what needed to be done so that today I wake up every morning in a house that was built by slaves. And I watch my daughters, two beautiful, intelligent, Black young women, playing with their dogs on the White House lawn.*

# Discussion Questions

1

In 1776 the words “all men are created equal” were written in the U.S. Declaration of Independence.

- Why do you think the U.S. government, founded on freedom, chose to use enslaved labor to build its new capital?
- What do you think the enslaved people who built the White House thought about this promise of equality?

2

What might it have felt like for Black people who worked in the White House after it was built?

3

How has your feeling about what the White House symbolizes changed?

4

What do you think it means for our country that the White House and our nation was built on enslaved labor?

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- + Arneback, Bob. *Slave Labor in the Capital*. <http://bobarnebeck.com/slaves.html>.
- + Barria, Carlos and Brice, Makini. “Built by my family: America’s grand buildings built by slaves.” *Reuters*. <https://widerimage.reuters.com/story/built-by-my-family-americas-grand-buildings-built-by-slaves>.
- + Geiger, Beth. “Building the White House.” *Kids Discover*. February 9, 2015. <https://www.kidsdiscover.com/teacherresources/building-white-house>.
- + Lewis, Danny. “The White House Was, in Fact, Built by Slaves.” *Smithsonian.com*, July 26, 2016. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/white-house-was-fact-built-slaves-180959916>.
- + Lusane, Clarence. *The Black History of the White House*. San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 2013.
- + Peterson, Bob, “Presidents and the Enslaved: Helping Students Find the Truth.” *Zinn Education Project*. <https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/presidents-and-slaves-helping-students-find-the-truth>.
- + White House Historical Association. “Slavery and the White House.” <https://www.whitehousehistory.org/search?q=slavery+and+the+white+house>.

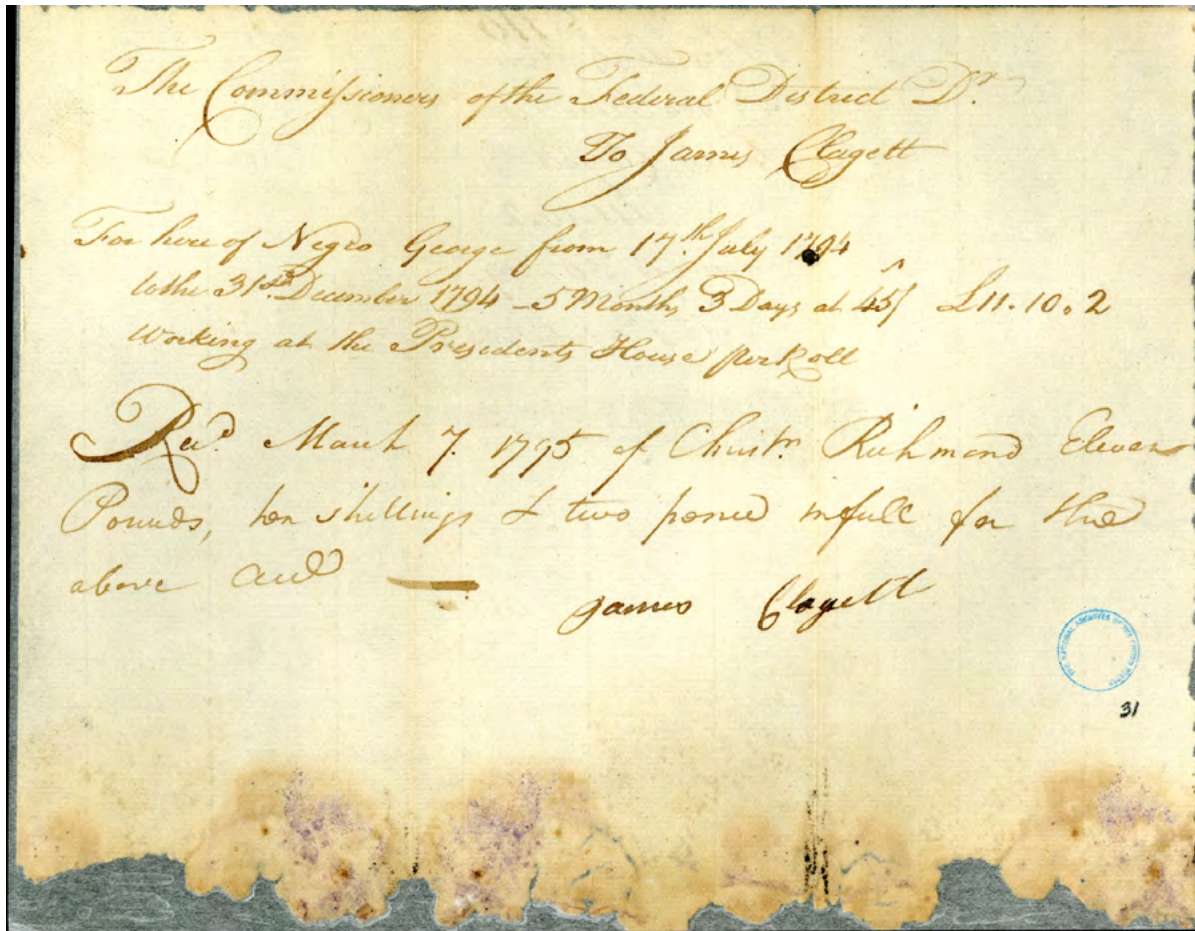
2



# Who Worked? Who Got Paid?

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

**Directions:** Fold this page to hide the text below the document. Can you read it? What does it tell us?



The Commissioners of the Federal District D  
To James Clagett

For hire of Negro George from 17th July 1794  
through 31 December 1794-5 Month, 3 Days at 45 £ 11.10.2\*  
working at the Presidents House payroll

Received March 7, 1795 of Christian Richmond Eleven  
Pounds, ten shillings & two pence in full for the  
above [?]

James Clagett

\*NOTE: £ 11.10.2 or eleven pounds, ten shillings and two pence is between  
\$1,300 and \$2,000 in today's money.



# Who Worked? Who Got Paid?

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Who is the laborer? \_\_\_\_\_

2. Where is the laborer working? \_\_\_\_\_

3. Who is getting paid? \_\_\_\_\_

4. Who is paying? \_\_\_\_\_

5. Put it all together: What does this document tell us about enslaved people and the U.S. government?

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# The House That Slavery Built: Daniel's Story

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

This story is a fictional account of Daniel's experience building the White House based on historical references. After reading the story, work with your group to write an ending for it. Write at least one paragraph.

"Get up Daniel!" I felt a kick on the bottom of my bare feet. It felt like I had just fallen asleep, but here it is, morning already, and I have to get up. I brush some dust off my pants as I get up from the ground where I slept. We have to sleep close to the area where we work, to keep an eye on all our tools that we use to make bricks. It used to be pretty hard to fall asleep on the ground, but I am used to it by now. It isn't all that different from the shack on my master's plantation.

For some reason, today the overseer woke us up even before the sun came up. I don't know why. I am still pretty tired, trying to gather my thoughts and wait

for instructions on what to do. I believe today President Adams is going to visit to check our work and see how things are coming along. I guess that's why we are up so early, to get ready for his visit. He's the most important man in the land now. And I believe this house is for him, so it has to be just right. He's probably gonna see if he likes it. I hope he does, 'cause we been working on these bricks for a long time, months I think.

Some days, my hands bleed from handling all those big rocks all day. And we're usually working from the time the sun comes up until it goes down again. Ain't none of us seen our kinfolk in

months. All we got to talk to is each other, and all we talk about is missing our kinfolk. Some of us even have wives and kids. We're all praying that they don't get sold off before we get back. Some of the men have been wondering if they're gonna free us when we get done, if the president likes it, and if he thinks we did good work. I don't believe they will, but some of them have hope.

**GLOSSARY:**

- Overseer: the person watching over the enslaved people and directing their work
- Kinfolk: relatives
- Master: title for the person who owns enslaved people

*Daniel's Story* is a fictionalized account written by Dr. Donnetrice Allison.

Choose one of the following options for your story:

- Someone gets sick or hurt on the job site.
- The enslaved people leave clues about their contribution to the construction of the White House.
- Daniel returns home after the job is done. What does he find?

**COMPLETE THE STORY**

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