

The Associated Press State & Local Wire

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January 31, 2004, Saturday, BC cycle

SECTION: State and Regional

LENGTH: 1115 words

HEADLINE: Month marks slavery, freedom and beyond

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DATELINE: WASHINGTON

BODY:

As the nation marks Black History Month, historians and museum curators are reminding the world that African-Americans have been a part Washington, D.C., since its earliest days.

About 60 percent of the District of Columbia's 572,000 residents are black. Their history in the area predates the 1791 creation of the federal district by Congress.

"There was always a sizable free black population in the District of Columbia," said James Horton, the Benjamin Banneker professor of American Studies and History at George Washington University.

For decades after the city became the nation's capital, slave markets flourished in the area that is today the National Mall, particularly along what is now Independence Avenue.

By 1860, slaves represented much of the nation's wealth. "Greater than the dollar value of all of America's banks, railroads and manufacturing put together," said Horton.

Although President George Washington personally took part in the placing the south cornerstone of the "seat of government at Jones Point" eight miles north of Mount Vernon estate, it was the surveyor Banneker who performed the calculations needed to position 39 other stones along a route measuring ten miles on each side.

"Washington was dedicated to having high quality craftsman and workmanship," said Stephanie Brown, a Mount Vernon spokeswoman. Many of the 316 slaves living at his estate at the time of his death were trained as coopers, millers, blacksmiths, carpenters and shoemakers and distillers.

While skilled slaves and house servants often lived in or near areas where they worked, Washington housed many slaves in "The House of Families," a communal quarters. Although the original building burned early in the 20th century it has been reconstructed.

Slaves and free blacks helped build the White House and U.S. Capitol as both

laborers and craftsmen. Neighborhoods created by and for blacks, including shops, churches and homes survive today.

Such institutions were sometimes intricately involved in surreptitious escapes plots. The Georgetown section of Washington had several "safe houses" used by conductors on the "Underground Railroad."

"It's really only on the black history tours that slavery is discussed in any detail," said LaNelle Daughtry, spokeswoman for the Guild of Professional Tour Guides of Washington, D.C.

According to Daughtry, a village established for runaway and freed slaves was located on the grounds of what is now Arlington National Cemetery. It once had a population of 30,000. Section 27 of the cemetery contains their graves, and those of the U.S. Colored Troops, the Union Army's official designation for its black units during the Civil War.

Anderson Cottage, the summer retreat where President Lincoln spent about a 25 percent of his presidency was declared one of America's Treasures at Risk in 2000. The 14-room home on the grounds of the Soldier's Home in Northwest Washington is where Lincoln wrote the final draft of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1865.

The home where abolitionist and orator Frederick Douglass lived during the last 18 years of his life is also a national historical site. The Victorian mansion sits on an eight acre site overlooking the city from the one of the highest points in the district east of the Anacostia River. Records indicate that Douglass did much of his civil rights work during Reconstruction in the home's small library.

"In that room, you will find the cane that Mary Todd Lincoln gave to Douglass after the death of President Lincoln," said Bill Clark, a spokesman for the National Park Service.

The Park Service also administers the Mary McLeod Bethune Council House, where the **National Council of Negro Women** was founded. Bethune who founded Florida's Bethune-Cookman College was a confidant of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt.

"Bethune believed in education being the key to freedom," just like Mr. Douglass, said Clark.

The district is also home to the National Black Civil War Memorial. The 15-foot bronze statue features the images of black troops and sailors as well as so-called contraband slaves liberated by union forces during the war. Stainless steel plaques are inscribed with the names of 209,145 soldiers and 19,000 sailors who served with Union forces.

"Virtually every black family in the United States has a name on this wall," said Frank Smith, executive director of the museum. The home of Carter G. Woodson, the educator considered the "father" of Black History Month is undergoing preservation nearby.

Cultural Tourism D.C. has worked with the city government, the National Park Service and others to promote the African American Heritage Trail.

"There are more than 60 museums off the National Mall that people seldom find," said Kathryn S. Smith, consulting historian on the project.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the landmark Brown vs the Board of Education decision. The 1954 Supreme Court decision declaring "separate but equal, inherently unequal," cleared the way for integration.

During the Civil Rights era and the Vietnam War the Lincoln Memorial and surrounding National Mall were the rallying points for Americans fighting for social justice.

The Lincoln Memorial was the site of opera singer Marian Anderson's Easter concert, after she was barred from performing at DAR Constitution Hall.

"The steps of the Lincoln Memorial were just etched last year with the words from Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream' speech," said Victoria Isley, spokeswoman for the Washington, D.C. Convention and Tourism Council.

At the Smithsonian's Anacostia Museum, the photo-essay "Crowns" includes 30 portrait quality black and white photographs of black women. Although the subjects were homemakers, domestics, and in did other menial jobs, they used their day of worship to add fashion and flare to their lives.

"Sunday was a day that they could really get dressed up," said Michael Cunningham, the photographer who produced the work. Five of the hats, passed down from one generation to the next are also included in the exhibit.

On the Net: Mount Vernon: www.mountvernon.org

The Lyceum: oha.ci.alexandria.va.us

Arena Stage: www.arena-stage.org

Washington Convention and Tourism Corporation: www.arena-stage.org

Frederick Douglass House:

Mary McCleod Bethune Council House: www.nps.gov/mamc

Anacostia Museum: www.anacostia.si.edu

Frederick Douglass National Historic Site: www.nps.gov/frdo

African American Civil War Memorial: <http://www.afroamcivilwar.org>

Cultural Tourism D.C.: www.culturealtourismdc.org

Guild of Professional Tour Guides of Washington, DC:
www.washingtondctourguides.com

LOAD-DATE: February 1, 2004