

Season 8, Episode 10 Who Built the White House Final Transcription

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

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Lizzie Peabody: It's the Democratic National Convention in 2016. People from across the nation gather in Philadelphia to choose the Democratic Party's next presidential candidate. If you were watching on TV, you saw plenty of voting.

Speaker 2: 14 votes for Senator Bernie Sanders, and 45 votes for the first woman President of the United States.

Lizzie Peabody: But mostly speeches.

Barack Obama: Democracy works, America, but we got to want it.

Lizzie Peabody: But even though Barack Obama was president at the time, arguably the most memorable speech of that convention was given by another Obama, then First Lady Michelle.

Michelle Obama: It's the story of this country.

Lizzie Peabody: She gave a speech that sent the crowd into a frenzy, a speech that Vogue Magazine said quote, "would go down in history," but it wasn't just the politics that made her speech resonate with those listening, it was something else she said.

Michelle Obama: 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.

Lizzie Peabody: It's no secret that much of the White House, the seat of America's highest elected democratic leader, was built by enslaved African Americans, but this is not a part of our history that's widely taught in school. It's a piece that the American story that, frankly, many Americans don't know. But after Michelle Obama's speech, it became clear, people wanted to know more.

Stuart McLaurin: In the days that followed, our phone lines, our email, our internet, our press office, our historians were all inundated from the public, the press, people wanting to know the story behind those very compelling words.

Lizzie Peabody: This is President of the White House Historical Association, Stuart McLaurin. After receiving that flood of phone calls and emails, he gave a public speech where he told the crowd that the association did know some things about the enslaved people who built the

White House. They were involved in every aspect of its construction, from quarrying stone, to chopping timber, to making bricks. Enslaved people worked on the house through every stage of construction from 1792 to 1800, but he said the public's response to Obama's speech sent a clear message.

Stuart McLaurin: We need to know names. We need to know dates. We need to know specifics. It's the People's House, the White House, but we need to know about the people that built the house.

Lizzie Peabody: McLaurin knew that this was a feat far larger than the White House Historical Association could tackle alone. He says his very first call was to then director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, Lonnie Bunch.

Stuart McLaurin: Say, "Lonnie, we need to know more about this story," and thus began a three-year project delving into this topic.

Lizzie Peabody: That ongoing project has become known as The Slavery in the President's Neighborhood Initiative. Curators from the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture joined the search to find these missing pieces of White House history. So, this time on Sidedoor, we journey back 230 years to the construction of the White House to search for clues about the enslaved African Americans who built it. And through this journey, we explore just how deeply slavery is embedded in our nation's foundation. That's coming up, after the break.

[MUSIC]

Lina Mann: It's actually pretty quiet here today. We got the traffic on H. Street, but we've also got people sitting and reading on benches in the shade.

Lizzie Peabody: I'm walking down H. Street in downtown Washington, DC. It's a sunny day, early fall, so not too hot, not too cold. I'm heading towards the White House. There's a segue way tourists, whole fleets of menacing tourists that comes scooting through on mass.

Lina Mann: They've almost run me down before.

Lizzie Peabody: Really?

Lina Mann: Yeah.

Lizzie Peabody: They travel in fleets.

Lina Mann: They do.

Lizzie Peabody: With those helmets, they're impervious to anything.

Lina Mann: Exactly.

Lizzie Peabody: That's Lina Mann, a historian with the White House Historical Association. She's taking me to the north side of the White House. That's the side opposite the National Mall, which I just learned is actually the front. It faces Lafayette Square Park.

Lina Mann: The one thing that always strikes me is how loud it is out in the park. And we do know that Presidents, first families, they can hear a lot of the stuff that goes on outside. From LBJ's time in the White House, we know that during the Vietnam War, there were people protesting saying like, "Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?" And his daughters have said that they could hear that from the White House.

Lizzie Peabody: Wow.

Lina Mann: So, it is very loud out here, but they really can hear what's going on.

Lizzie Peabody: Wow. These days the park is usually full of tourists and protestors, but if you were to visit this exact spot a couple of hundred years ago, you'd see quite a different scene.

Lina Mann: There were kilns for brick making, brick making is going on, all sorts of staging for the White House itself, probably pieces of stone laying around. It was probably a lot of dirt.

Lizzie Peabody: This rough woodland that was once the ancestral home of the Nanichoke in Piscataway Tribes was a vast construction site 230 years ago. America was building an entire city from scratch. And not just any city, the nation's new capital. But of all places, why here?

Lina Mann: This all dates back to 1790.

Lizzie Peabody: In 1790, the US capital was based in New York City, but southern politicians like James Madison and Thomas Jefferson wanted the nation's center of power to be more, well, central.

Lina Mann: Specifically, George Washington wants to place it on the banks of the Potomac River, not far from his Mount Vernon Plantation.

Lizzie Peabody: This is a few hundred miles south of New York. And if you've seen the musical Hamilton, you know that Treasury Secretary, Alexander Hamilton, was happy to indulge his Southern colleagues if they let his Treasury Department assume state debts, giving the federal government more power. Jefferson and Madison were like, "Oh, okay."

Lina Mann: And during this dinner in the room where it happens, they decide that the capital will be on the banks of Potomac River, so it's a compromise on both of their parts.

Lizzie Peabody: At that time, the land in question was part of the states of Virginia and Maryland.

Mary Elliott: Both enslaving states, and so you can imagine this landscape surrounded by plantations.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Mary Elliot, curator of American Slavery at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. She was a consultant on the White House Historical Association's Slavery in the President's Neighborhood Initiative, and she says moving the capital South wasn't just about a shorter commute.

Mary Elliott: Thomas Jefferson and James Madison wanted the federal city to be built in the jurisdiction that upheld slavery, to maintain slavery and maintain the political power of the enslaving class.

Lizzie Peabody: President Washington's nearby home of Mount Vernon was a plantation where he enslaved more than 300 people.

Mary Elliott: What strikes me really interestingly that George Washington, an enslaver, appoints these three commissioners to manage the development of the federal city. The three commissioners are also enslavers.

Lizzie Peabody: The three commissioners Washington appointed were in charge of overseeing the entire development of this new federal city. Not just what got built, but how it got built. And Congress gave them 10 years to get it done, which is just an obscenely short amount of time to build a city in.

Lina Mann: So, in addition to the White House, they're also constructing the capital building mainly, and then other federal buildings as well.

Lizzie Peabody: President Washington hired French American engineer, Pierre L'Enfant, to design a city that reflected the nation's egalitarian ideals, and one of the centerpieces of this new federal city would be the President's mansion. But Washington and the commissioners needed ideas for what this seat of power should look like, so they settled it the way many things got settled at the time, with a competition.

Lina Mann: So, during the design competition, which is sort of overseen by George Washington and also Thomas Jefferson, they basically call for submissions.

Lizzie Peabody: Even though he was one of the judges, Thomas Jefferson submitted his own design because, of course, he would, but he did not win.

Lina Mann: They go with a man named James Hoban. James Hoban is from Ireland, but he's been over in the United States working and building in places like South Carolina.

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Lizzie Peabody: Hoban's design won for a specific reason, it was modest. Three stories, white stone and brick, columns, cornices, simple, yet stately, a perfect fit for a nation that had just fought a war to free itself from the grips of an opulent European monarchy.

Lina Mann: George Washington and the commissioners and others are thinking very specifically about how this new government will look. They don't want it to look too much like a palace, something like Versailles, something very grand.

Lizzie Peabody: So, the location of the People's House was decided, the design selected. Now, it was up to the commissioners to build it. Well, to be more precise, it was up to them to find the people to build it.

Lina Mann: You can see this in some of the letters that they're sending back and forth that they do want to use craftsmen, people that are expert stone cutters, things like that. And so, for those types of jobs, they are drawing also on a foreign labor pool. So, they're trying to draw a labor force from Europe and other cities in the United States.

Lizzie Peabody: They bring in masons from Scotland and craftsmen from more established cities. But in terms of the heavy lifting, the actual quarrying and cutting and carrying and building, they needed more hands. And remember, DC wasn't a city yet. It was a patchwork of woods, wetlands, farms, and, yes, plantations.

Lina Mann: And so, I think they quickly turn to this idea of, "Oh, well, we're surrounded by all of these plantations. We're also members of this landed elite, and we own enslaved people ourselves," so I imagine there's sort of a network of slave owners in the region that they realize they can pull this labor force from.

Mary Elliott: And this is a network of enslavers who feel there is nothing wrong with slavery, and this labor is there for the purpose of building the seat of power, power being denied the very black people who are putting in the work to build this seat of power literally.

Lizzie Peabody: With a labor pool of immigrant, craftsmen, paid workers, and enslaved black laborers, construction of the White House began at high noon on October 13th, 1792. Crowds gathered to watch as the first cornerstone was laid in the White House's Foundation.

Lina Mann: So that cornerstone is laid. After the cornerstone is laid, then official construction can begin on the White House.

Lizzie Peabody: Now that all the pomp and circumstance was over, the real work began. Hundreds of enslaved black workers were brought into the city to build the White House, the capital, and other federal buildings. The patch of land that is now Lafayette Square Park filled

with barracks, huts, and tents to house these workers. Some paid for their labor, some not. But where exactly did these enslaved people come from? And who were they? We search for answers, after the break. In the years after Michelle Obama's now famous speech, Lina Mann was trying to track down as much information as possible about the enslaved black workers who helped build the White House.

Lina Mann: In the beginning, it was really daunting.

Lizzie Peabody: That's because she didn't have much to go on, just an official list of workers from the National Archives.

Lina Mann: What I started out with was two lists of names, the name of enslaved people, and then the names of their owners or the people that are signing for their wages. And one example, there's a man named Jacob. He is listed in the records with an N in front of his name, and the N denotes that he was an enslaved person.

Lizzie Peabody: But right next to Jacob's name is the name of his enslaver, George Fenwick.

Lina Mann: We don't know much about Jacob because we don't know much more than his first name, and that's really hard to work with, but George Fenwick we can learn a lot about. And so, I started focusing and honing in on those slave owners. Luckily for Fenwick, I found his will, and his will shed a lot more light on the situation.

Lizzie Peabody: With that find, Lina was able to track down Fenwick's relatives, where he owned land, who he enslaved, and where. The Smithsonian's Mary Elliot says that's typically how it goes when doing this type of research,

Mary Elliott: Particularly for African Americans like myself, who are desperately looking to find out information on our ancestors, any small piece that even gives a name, a name and a location, a name and an association, opens the door to try and explore a little bit more and start to add on to their story and find out a little bit more about them.

Lizzie Peabody: Mary says it's rare to find a firsthand account written by an enslaved black person because very few were allowed to read or write.

Mary Elliott: They weren't making their own records, they weren't documenting their lives from a multi-layered perspective about those they loved, about what they did on a daily basis.

Lizzie Peabody: But enslavers kept detailed records that often included the comings and goings of the people they enslaved.

Mary Elliott: Enslavers were unapologetic about documenting things because they felt it was right. So, they're documenting who's getting paid. They're documenting who's doing the work. They're documenting what work is being done. They're documenting the money that's being

paid out. They're documenting their intent. So now you have quite a bit of information because you also find out what is the name of this person, what labor did they perform, and who was their enslaver? And then you can follow the breadcrumbs, including you have dates.

Lizzie Peabody: So, Lina followed the breadcrumbs. The little information she learned about Jacob and his enslaver was a start. And just like a detective in a movie, she started putting pins on a map to show where other enslaved workers were coming from.

Lina Mann: So, I just did it on a little Google map, and I started placing dots where each owner has land. And I discovered that most of the land that they own is in places like St. Mary's County, Maryland, Charles County, Prince George's County, and then also areas in northern Virginia as well. So, all these locations along the Potomac River seem to be where they're pulling this enslaved labor from and sending it up to the capital city.

Lizzie Peabody: The commissioners spread the word that they needed workers and were willing to pay enslavers to lease the people that they enslaved.

Mary Elliott: It is stated in 1792 from the proceedings of the Commissioner of the District of Columbia, April, 1792, a government record, an official record, and these commissioners commit to quote "hire good laboring Negroes by the year, the masters clothing them well, and finding each a blanket, the commissioners, finding them provisions, and paying 21 pounds a year."

Lizzie Peabody: I want to pause here because what Mary's reading, it really brings the business of slavery from that time into focus. The setting of these terms, the slave owner would provide clothes and one blanket per worker. The commissioners would provide food and some payment to the slave owner. It makes very vivid the absolute lack of autonomy that enslaved people lived with every day. But these documents also give us something else, they show how the government protected itself by leasing rather than owning enslaved people.

Lina Mann: It's sort of a way for the federal government to draw from the labor pool without actually having to say that they own enslaved people because they're not directly purchasing these people for their labor.

Lizzie Peabody: It's rather insidious. I mean, it kind of implies an acknowledgement of wrongdoing.

Lina Mann: Yeah, and I think that that is purposeful. This is my personal opinion. But based on what I've read and all of this research, it does seem like at times they're going out of their way not to say exactly what they're doing.

Lizzie Peabody: These old contracts between the federal government and enslavers gave Lina some leads. For example, she found that the architect of the White House leased people here had enslaved to work as carpenters on the project. These men, Peter, Ben, Daniel, and Harry, were some of the few who actually earned a wage, but it was less than white carpenters

earned. Lina also found old newspaper ads posted by contractors who needed help completing their work. Take this one man.

Lina Mann: We see that he's advertising to purchase 10 to 15 enslaved men, and then five boys between the ages of 14 and 17 years old to help him out with digging clay for the production of bricks for these federal construction projects.

Lizzie Peabody: And when this contractor had fulfilled his commitment to the government, he sold those enslaved workers to someone else.

Lina Mann: So, it's sort of this short-term idea that you acquire this labor force, and then when the work is completed, then you can sell that labor force.

Lizzie Peabody: But Lina says one of the best sources of information she found is a receipt from a cobbler. She traced it back to five sisters who were buying shoes for the men that they enslaved, Charles, David, Gabe, Henry, Sylvester, and Nace. This receipt helped Lina learn which sister enslaved which man, making it possible to trace their lineage in the future, but she really didn't have much more than that. And if you think this sounds frustrating or like not a lot of information, you are right. It is a maddeningly slow process with many dead ends, but Lina says that's just how it goes. It's challenging, but we're slowly learning more, and she believes that there are other documents out there that will help us fill in the missing pieces about these enslaved people.

Lina Mann: I do hope that there's more documents to be unearthed, more research to be analyzed, and I hope that we can find out a lot more over time about all of these people.

Lizzie Peabody: People who loved, as Mary says, people with hopes and fears and names, names like...

Crew: Thomas. Steven. Joe. Lynn. Gus. Jess. Peter. Edward. Benjamin. Josias. Tony. Liverpool. Catherine. Sam. Oliver. Davey. David. Dave. Anthony. Olsten. Kit. Ignatius. George. Davenport. Gabe. Dick. Gerard. Nathaniel. Mike. Jacob. Henley. Lewis. Moses. Jared. Bard. Jack. Pompei. Adam. Niro. Emmanuel. Randall. Will. Solomon. Ben. Clinton. Ned. Luke. Emmanuel. Amos. Henry. Nate. Salisbury. John. Francis. James. Harry. Newton. Fielder. Daniel. Basil. Jerry. Jim. Bob. Charles. Richard. Isaac. Sandy. Ralph. Miles. Sylvester. Abram. Robert. Abraham. Joseph. Walter. Cato. William.

Lizzie Peabody: Construction of the White House was completed on time in 1800. But even though this project was finished, there was still a lot more work to be done on the rest of the capital city.

Lina Mann: The capital building itself, that took many, many, many more years to construct. So, the use of enslaved labor is occurring way beyond those eight years and into the early 1800s as well.

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Lizzie Peabody: The Washington Monument, the Smithsonian Castle, even the White House again after the British burned it down, they were all built by enslaved labor. Enslaved people worked at the White House across nine presidencies, and the nation's capital continued to be a hub for the domestic slave trade for decades.

Mary Elliott: With the White House and the capital being built, this is in plain sight to see groups of enslaved people chained together, being marched to these slave pens or marched to the ports in Virginia to be shipped further down south.

Lizzie Peabody: Mary says one of those slave pens was where the Smithsonian's National Museum of African-American History and Culture stands today. And it's important to understand that this was the backdrop in front of which our nation's most iconic landmarks were built. That's why the White House Historical Association called their initiative Slavery in the President's Neighborhood, not Slavery at the White House because slavery was not confined to this one project, and it wasn't confined to plantations.

Lina Mann: I would say it is the story of how much of America was built. Slavery was really essential to the entirety of Washington DC and also more broadly the United States as well, so it really is the story of slavery being embedded into the early years of the country.

Lizzie Peabody: American democracy was built on the ideals of freedom, equality, justice, but it was also built on slave labor. Mary Elliot says we need to look back and fully confront the lasting impact of American slavery if we want to move forward together as a country.

Mary Elliott: I think it's important to think about who we were, who we are, and really think about who it is we want to be, how we want our world to reflect our changing notions of freedom and equality and justice.

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Lizzie Peabody: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

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Lizzie Peabody: To learn more about the enslaved African Americans who built the White House, including a full list of their names, check out our newsletter. You can subscribe at si.edu/Sidedoor. We'll also share a link to The Slavery in the President's neighborhood initiative. You can also find more information, including pictures of my visit to Lafayette Square Park by following us at Sidedoor Pod on Twitter and Instagram. And feel free to reach out by email with any feedback for us. Our address is sidedoor@si.edu.

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Lizzie Peabody: For help with this episode, we want to thank Mary Elliot, Lina Mann, Matthew Costello, PJ Tabit, Marquis Walton, Alaysha Claiborne, and Sierra Jefferson.

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Lizzie Peabody: Our podcast team is James Morrison, Natalie Boyd, Ann Conanan, Caitlin Shaffer, Tami O'Neill, Jess Sadeq, Lara Koch, and Sharon Bryant. Episode Artwork is by Dave Leonard. Extra support comes from PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

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Lizzie Peabody: If you want to sponsor our show, please email sponsorship@prx.org.

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Lizzie Peabody: And don't forget to like and subscribe to our show for all the latest episodes. You can also check out all of our past episodes by subscribing to Sidedoor.

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Lizzie Peabody: I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.