

Testimony of Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton
Hearing on H.R. 3531 and H.R. 4009
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
October 14, 2021

I thank Chairman Neguse for holding this hearing on two of my bills.

The Women Who Worked on the Home Front World War II Memorial Act would authorize the establishment of a memorial on federal land in the District of Columbia commemorating the efforts of the 18 million American women who kept the home front running during World War II. Last Congress, the House passed this bill by voice vote. Senators Tammy Duckworth, Mike Braun and Marsha Blackburn introduced the companion bill in the Senate.

As a fifth-grader, Raya Kenney, who is my constituent and the founder of the non-profit Women Who Worked on the Home Front Foundation, developed the idea for this memorial. She rightfully questioned why the women on the home front, whose efforts were so instrumental in maintaining the stability of the country during World War II, have not received recognition for their contributions like the men who fought bravely in World War II.

The work done by women on the home front during World War II opened doors for women in the workplace more widely and had a profound and lasting effect on the labor market.

My second bill, the Georgetown Waterfront Enslaved Voyages Memorial Act, would authorize the Georgetown African American Historic Landmark Project and Tour to establish a memorial on federal land in D.C. commemorating the enslaved individuals who are believed to have disembarked at the Georgetown waterfront after forced migration to the United States by way of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The National Capital Memorial Advisory Commission unanimously supported this bill, with the recommendation that the memorial should honor all enslaved people in the United States. I support amending the language of the bill to do so, as does the project sponsor.

Enslavers packed 12.5 million captive Africans into their ships to sell as chattel in the Americas. Enslaved Africans are believed to have first been brought through the Georgetown port in 1732. Though records are incomplete, some scholars believe that between that year and 1761, seven ships carrying an estimated 1,475 enslaved people arrived there. Those who survived the traumatic “Middle Passage” voyage were marched through tunnels that led from the C&O Canal, through the sewage system, to a slave auction block on M Street, now Georgetown’s main commercial thoroughfare.

While the entire contribution of enslaved African Americans in D.C. cannot be determined, we know with certainty that white citizens and the federal government both relied heavily on enslaved labor to build the nation’s capital.

We must not hide from this history. This bill provides for the creation of a powerful marker of truth-telling and remembrance. Let us honor the personhood of these individuals, who were repeatedly assumed to have none, so that they will never be forgotten.

These bills would not only authorize memorials about critical events in our nation's history, but would also help to diversify the memorials on federal land in the nation's capital. Again, I thank the chairman for holding this hearing.