

DCFPI Remembers DC Emancipation Day

By Doni Crawford

Today, DC Emancipation Day, we commemorate the District's important position as the first place where enslaved Black people were freed by federal action. Yet in this emancipation we also see the roots of institutional policies that maintained racial inequities, with impacts that continue to this day. The work of emancipation is not complete, and the responsibility for it is still ours.

On this day in 1862, President Lincoln signed a bill¹ that freed nearly 3,100 enslaved Black people in the District after years of relentless local resistance by the enslaved, runaways and Black and white abolitionists. It preceded the Emancipation Proclamation, which intended to preserve the union by freeing enslaved Blacks held in Confederate states. Republican members of Congress saw the District as a place to test "racial policies," or as one senator put it, an "experiment in emancipation."²

While no doubt a moment of progress for Black people in DC, this experiment in emancipation was not without serious drawbacks. DC emancipation was the [only](#) instance of direct federal government compensation to slaveowners, up to \$300 per enslaved person, and most enslaved Blacks were not freed until they submitted to physical observations to assess their value. And both emancipation and compensation were seen as wartime necessities given the Union's delicate balancing act of winning the war while placating Southern loyalists that could defect at any moment. The federal government ultimately spent nearly \$1 million compensating former slaveowners.³

The amount of federal compensation to the formerly enslaved whose forced labor and bodies literally and economically built this country? Zero.

The DC emancipation bill also included a \$100,000 fund to encourage colonization and voluntary emigration by newly freed Blacks to modern-day Haiti and Liberia.⁴ President Lincoln and some of his supporters used this fund to incentivize racial segregation and dispose of the Union's Black population by resettling them on other people's land. Racial segregation was considered an ideal solution to the Union's problems.

The District became a beacon for Black freedom and opportunity, through emancipation and further legislation that sanctioned Black physical movement, economic activity and peaceful assembly. But the quick death of [Reconstruction](#) and a plethora of policies and actions to legalize discrimination soon created an uneven playing field. They restricted Black access to [wealth building](#) through limitations on capital, land, political power and education. For example, while white families were [given](#) land and saved from



foreclosure by federal creation of mortgages during the Great Depression, Black families were largely forced to rent substandard housing in neighborhoods intentionally robbed of resources.

These historical injustices continue to manifest today in the District in countless ways. Nearly [90 percent](#) of the 27,000 extremely-low income households that spend at least half their income on housing are headed by a person of color and most of them are Black. Less than [1 percent](#) of new affordable housing is being built west of Rock Creek Park, where access to economic opportunity and social mobility is limitless. Meanwhile, [unemployment east of the Anacostia River](#), where many Black people reside, is more than double the average of the other six wards west of the river. The [life expectancy at birth](#) in Ward 3 is 87 years but it is 15 years lower in Ward 8. And within the District’s public and charter schools, over 80 percent of white students are considered college and career ready in English, compared with just [25 percent of Black students](#).

We’re encouraged by national and local discussions about addressing these historical inequities. Some Democratic [candidates](#) for President are joining local advocates and leaders, such as [Aja Taylor](#) and [Yanique Redwood](#), in talking about the need for reparations, moral reckoning and government responsibility for historic, intentional damage to Black families. Native residents of the District are [advocating](#) for a day that recognizes and respects their long-term residency— clearly needed as the [culture](#) of historically Black neighborhoods is at risk and as Black residents are involuntarily displaced at [alarming](#) rates. Efforts are even underway to change who we choose to publicly commemorate, from [statues](#) to the [names](#) of schools.

The exalted Angela Davis once said, “Radical simply means ‘grasping things at the root.’” Let’s commemorate Emancipation Day by being radical. Let’s operate with intentionality and resist stopping at just addressing symptoms of structural racism and racial inequality. We at least owe Black DC that.

¹ Although the bill is now known as the “DC Compensated Emancipation Act,” the original bill was called “An Act for the Release of Certain Persons Held to Service or Labor in the District of Columbia” and did not include the words “slave, slavery or emancipation.” See source below.

² Chris Myers Asch and George Derek Musgrove. *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation’s Capital* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), page 114.

³ Ibid. pages 114-118.

⁴ Ibid.