

Jane Conner's Testimony on

Government Island

February 7, 2002

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee, it is an honor to be able to testify before you on behalf of the resolution recognizing Government Island for its unique contribution to our country. The mere fact that it exists today in its natural state is more a product of good fortune than careful planning. Yet, due to the wisdom and generosity of our Stafford County government, we were able to purchase this national treasure. This unique island produced the stone which helped create the U.S. Capitol and White House, our two greatest public buildings and the two greatest symbols of liberty and freedom in the world.

Yet more than buildings, the island embodies the story of the American people in our earliest years. American Indians lived on its shores; British settlers, both Catholic and Protestant, organized its quarries; immigrants and American slaves, and freemen quarried its heavy stone and transported it great distances over land and water.

This small island's sandstone, called Aquia stone or freestone, can be found in colonial and federal-period buildings still standing today. For example, in Yorktown it can be found in the home of Thomas Nelson, signer of the Declaration of Independence, and at historic Cape Henry Lighthouse in Virginia Beach, Virginia. In northern Virginia it decorates many churches such as Aquia Church, located near the quarry; Pohick Church, the church of George Mason; and Christ Church in Alexandria, the church of George Washington. Washington, who lived in Stafford at Ferry Farm from the age of 6 to the age of 20, was familiar with the island quarry. He sent his men down to the island twice to obtain stone for his steps at Mount Vernon.

Government Island and its quarry operated for a century in colonial America. After the Revolutionary War, when the District of Columbia was being laid out, Aquia stone was selected for the forty boundary markers. By the way, there are still over 30 standing today outlining the original district. It is no wonder that the Commissioners selected the island as the source of our new nation's building material.

Pierre L'Enfant purchased the island for the United States Government in 1791. Immediately, there was much activity on the island quarrying the stone for these two important edifices. After the completion of the White House in 1800 and the completion of main portion of the Capitol, Benjamin Henry Latrobe, who was in charge of the Capitol's construction, wished to put on a portico, or porch, with 24 massive columns topped with Corinthian capitals. Charles Bullfinch, who later took over Latrobe's position, discovered that there was adequate stone left on Government Island for the creation of the columns. They would be made from single shafts, or blocks of stone, unlike the columns on the west side of the building. In 1824, while slaves were starting to quarry the stone, 70 masons in the D.C. were planning to join in a parade to celebrate the Fourth of July. The parade was a huge success with President Monroe's carriage followed by those of "Mr. Secretary Adams and Mr. Secretary Calhoun." (Washington Gazette, July 6, 1824) A working printing press graced one float. After copies of the Declaration of Independence were printed they were distributed to the spectators. But the float that delighted all was that of stone masons working on a large freestone Corinthian Capital.

Congressmen of that day were so excited when the massive shafts of stone appeared from Government Island that they would go down to the wharf when they heard of one's arrival. Only one shaft could be placed on the boat for the trip down Aquia Creek and up the Potomac River, for each shaft was from 24 to 40 feet long and about 9 1/2 feet thick. The massive blocks were so heavy that horses were not used. Instead a special carriage was constructed with one hundred ropes. Congressmen, caught up in the moment, grabbed the ropes and pulled the wagon to the masons' shed. Anne Newport Royall, America's first woman journalist wrote about witnessing one shaft's arrival. "...members of congress will turn out in the evening to assist in pulling "the big waggon," as it is called, and join in all the pleasantry to which the novelty of the thing gives rise. When the column arrives at the capitol, it is cheered by loud huzzas from a hundred voices." (Sketches of History, Life, and Manners in the United States, 1826)

We in Stafford County are very proud of Government Island and its important stone. For it is this small island that contributed the birthstone of the U.S. Capitol and White House. Hopefully, its rich history can be shared with the nation. I urge you to recognize its historical significance by the approval of House Resolution 261.

Thank you.

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