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By Julie Zauzmer Weil | The Washington Post

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THIS IS WHO THEY WERE, AND HOW THEY SHAPED THE NATION.

The Washington Post has compiled the first database of slaveholding members of Congress by examining thousands of pages of census records and historical documents.

By Julie Zauzmer Weil, Adrián Blanco and Leo Dominguez

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From the founding of the United States until long after the Civil War, hundreds of the elected leaders writing the nation's laws were current or former slaveowners. More than 1,800 people who served in the U.S. Congress in the 18th, 19th and even 20th centuries owned human beings at some point in their lives, according to a Washington Post investigation of censuses and other historical records.

The country is still grappling with the legacy of their embrace of slavery. The link between race and political power in early America echoes in complicated ways, from the racial inequities that persist to this day to the polarizing fights over voting rights and the way history is taught in schools.

The Washington Post created a database that shows enslavers in Congress represented 39 states, including not just the South but every state but Maine in New England, much of the Midwest, and many Western states.

Some were owners of enormous plantations, like Sen. Edward Lloyd V of Maryland, who enslaved 468 people in 1832 on the same estate where abolitionist Frederick Douglass was enslaved as a child. Many exerted great influences on the issue of slavery, like Sen. Elias Kent Kane, who enslaved five people in Illinois in 1820, and tried to formally legalize slavery in the state.

William Richardson, for example, a Democrat who fought for the Confederacy, died in office in 1914 after representing Alabama for 14 years. Another Democrat, Rebecca Latimer Felton, a suffragist and a white supremacist, was appointed to fill a Senate vacancy in 1922 and briefly represented Georgia at age 87. The first woman ever to serve in the Senate was a former slaveholder.

Enslavers came from all parts of the political spectrum. The Post's database includes lawmakers who were members of more than 60 political parties. Federalists, Whigs, Unionists, Populists, Progressives, Prohibitionists and dozens more: All those parties included slaveholders.

By the eve of the Civil War, there were almost equal numbers of Democrats and Republicans in the 36th Congress, which met in Washington from 1859 to 1861. The Democrats, including those who belonged to Democratic splinter groups, counted nearly 100 slaveholders among their ranks, a Post analysis found. The Republicans, which had emerged as the party of abolition, had just one slaveholder.

This database helps provide a clearer understanding of the ways in which slaveholding influenced early America, as congressmen's own interests as enslavers shaped their decisions on the laws that they crafted.

One example: When Congress voted on the 1820 Missouri Compromise, which prohibited the expansion of slavery in the northern half of the country, the House and Senate contained a nearly equal number of slaveholders and non-slaveholders, a Post analysis found. Almost twice as many

slaveholders, 44 percent, voted against the agreement, compared with 25 percent of non slaveholders. The law was crafted by a slaveholder, Henry Clay, who is so renowned as one of America's greatest statesmen that 16 counties across the country are named for him.



John McLean, an Ohio congressman and, later, a Supreme Court justice, dissented in the notorious 1857 Dred Scott decision, in which the high court ruled that Black Americans were not citizens under the Constitution. McLean was once an enslaver. (Library of Congress)(Library of Congress/Library of Congress)

When Congress voted during the Civil War on the 13th Amendment, which added a ban on slavery to the U.S. Constitution, nine men who had been slaveholders remained in the Senate. Just three of them voted to approve the amendment, while 35 out of 40 non-slaveholders voted yes.

Historian Loren Schweningen, who spent years driving to more than 200 courthouses across the South to collect records on slavery, notes the importance of lawmakers' personal stake in slavery as they passed laws codifying the practice. "They were protective of the institution, that's for sure," Schweningen said of state and federal lawmakers' relationship with slavery. "There was brutality and there was all kinds of exploitation of slaves — but still there were laws."

Sen. Cory Booker (D-N.J.) said he thinks about that history in the halls of Congress, from the portraits on the walls to the votes once taken there.

"I'm very conscious of this as only the fourth Black person popularly elected to the United States Senate. ... The very monuments you walk past: There's very little acknowledgment of the degree that slavery, that wretched institution, shaped the Capitol," Booker said in an interview. He added, "All around you, the very Capitol itself, was shaped by this legacy that we don't fully know or don't fully acknowledge."

The same is true of the White House. Of the first 18 U.S. presidents, 12 were enslavers, including eight during their presidencies.

To Booker, those stories about his predecessors in Congress call for action from their counterparts

today — namely, a bill he has championed that would commission the first national study on reparations for the descendants of enslaved people.

Without acknowledging the harm and trauma caused by slavery, both for the enslaved and their descendants, “it’s very hard to heal and move on,” Booker said. “We have never really tried, in any grand way as a country, to take full responsibility for the evil institution of slavery and what it has done.”



Sen. Cory Booker (D-N.J.), seen in the Capitol's Statuary Hall, has fought to have Confederate statues removed from the building. (Matt McClain/The Washington Post)

America’s atrocity was carried out not in shadow, but with extensive documentation, in carefully recorded censuses and court cases and wills. To create this database, The Washington Post researched all the 5,558 men and one woman, Felton, who served in the U.S. Congress and were born before 1840, meaning they came of age before the Civil War. The verdicts on who enslaved people and who did not are based on journal articles, books, newspapers and many other texts, with most of the information coming from the 1790 through 1860 decennial censuses.

Today, as America struggles with how to understand its history and which historical figures to honor, many of these lawmakers’ statues stand in town squares across the country, and their names adorn streets and public schools, with almost no public acknowledgment that they were enslavers.

The men, women and children they enslaved are less recognized still, often recorded in a census by just their age and gender, without even a name.

The nation’s capital, like many cities, is dotted with reminders of these members of Congress. Rep. John Peter Van Ness of New York, an enslaver, has a D.C. elementary school, a street and a Metro station named in his honor. Sen. Francis Preston Blair Jr. of Missouri, who has a statue in the Capitol and a homeless shelter named after him in Northeast Washington, was an enslaver who opposed allowing Black citizens to vote after the Civil War. (The guesthouse across from the White House is named for the senator’s father, who was not a lawmaker but also was a slaveowner.)

Rep. John Floyd, for instance, who ran for president in 1832, is described in historical accounts as an opponent of slavery who went so far as to raise the possibility of turning Virginia into a free state while he was its governor. Left unmentioned: Floyd was a slaveholder. The 1810 Census shows he kept four people in bondage in Christiansburg, Va.

History remembers Rep. John McLean, an Ohio congressman and then a longtime Supreme Court justice, as one of two jurists who dissented in the notorious 1857 Dred Scott decision, in which the Supreme Court ruled that Black Americans were not citizens under the Constitution. Yet a historic deed and letter indicate that McLean also enslaved people in the 1820s.



Rebecca Latimer Felton briefly represented Georgia in the Senate in 1922. She'd been a slaveholder at one point in her life. (Library of Congress)

Determining who was an enslaver can be complicated. As recent revelations about Founding Father Alexander Hamilton and hospital and university namesake Johns Hopkins make clear, making a judgment about whether someone was a slaveholder based on the handwritten records of the 18th and 19th centuries is painstaking and imprecise work.

The Post initially concluded that 1,715 members of Congress were enslavers at some point in

their adult lives, including at least one lawmaker who held Native Americans in bondage. Evidence suggested that another 3,166 congressmen did not enslave anyone. The Post could not find enough evidence to reach a conclusion about 677 congressmen when the article was first published online.

Since the publication of the database, readers have provided conclusive new information on more than 150 additional congressmen, in the form of documents ranging from enslaved people's handwritten birth certificates to newspaper advertisements placed by congressmen seeking people who had fled their plantations, to a letter one reader's great-great-great-grandfather wrote home from a Civil War battlefield. As more information comes to light, The Post will continue to update the database.

Determining whether a lawmaker enslaved others does not reveal everything about his role in maintaining or questioning the institution of slavery. Some members of Congress who once enslaved people later freed them. Or take, for example, Sen. John A. Logan, whose statue sits on horseback in Washington's Logan Circle for his exploits leading Union troops during the Civil War.

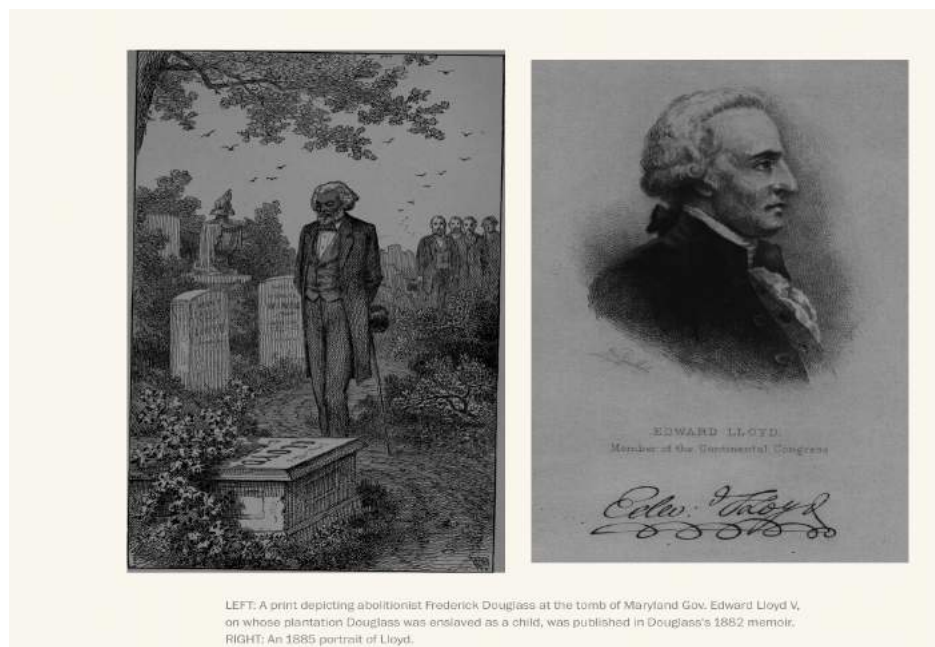
An Illinois senator and defender of the Union who was not a slaveowner, Logan worked as a state lawmaker to ban Black people from the state of Illinois and voted in Congress for the divisive Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which made the federal government responsible for finding and returning those trying to escape bondage, even if they were caught in free states. But after the Civil War, the Democrat turned Republican changed direction, advocating as a senator for Black Americans' civil rights.

The institution of slavery in America predated the first Congress by 170 years and was deeply rooted among the wealthy families most likely to send someone to Washington.

Multiple members of Congress were among the last slaveholding Northerners.

Delaware elected two senators, Willard Saulsbury Sr. and George Read Riddle, who were both among the dwindling number of enslavers in the state in 1860. Riddle was one of just two slaveholders left in his county that year. Both of Delaware's senators went on to vote against the 13th Amendment ending slavery.

Locally, more than 80 percent of the men Maryland and Virginia sent to Congress between 1789 and 1859 were slaveholders.



LEFT: A print depicting abolitionist Frederick Douglass at the tomb of Maryland Gov. Edward Lloyd V, on whose plantation Douglass was enslaved as a child, was published in Douglass's 1852 memoir.
RIGHT: An 1885 portrait of Lloyd.

Rep. John T.H. Worthington was listed as the enslaver of 29 people in the 1840 Census while he was representing the Baltimore area in the House. He sold his own enslaved daughter for \$1,800 to a man who wanted her to bear more enslaved children, according to an account written by James Watkins, who managed to escape slavery.

Worthington's daughter, whose name is not recorded but whose pious faith Watkins remembered, refused to consent to sex with her new enslaver. As punishment, she was beaten to death. Watkins writes that he sat beside her as she died: "She left behind her a bright testimony that she was going to that Saviour from whom it is impossible for all the American laws, and opinions, and prejudices combined, to keep back the soul."

Many members of Congress played a role in such harrowing stories. Toni Morrison's novel "Beloved," a cultural flash point in Virginia's election this fall, is based on the true story of Margaret Garner, who made the wrenching decision to kill her toddler rather than allow her to grow up in chains. One of Garner's enslavers was Rep. John P. Gaines, a Whig who represented Kentucky in Congress from 1847 to 1849.

Knowing which members of Congress were enslavers could lead to changes in how American history is told.

Sen. Rufus King, a signer of the Constitution and an 1816 presidential nominee, gets a section of his Wikipedia page devoted to his anti-slavery activism. Yet until now, it was nearly impossible for a curious student — or perhaps someone who walks past the New York City plaque honoring him — to search the Internet and find that in 1810, King also owned a human being.

Or take the case of Celia, a 19-year-old enslaved woman who killed the septuagenarian man who owned her after five years of sexual abuse. She went to trial in Missouri in 1855 claiming self defense. Judge William Augustus Hall instructed the jury that Missouri's laws protecting women who resist sexual assault did not apply to Celia. Six years later, he was elected to Congress.

An acclaimed book on the case says that "Hall's views about slavery are unknown." It changes the story to note that in the 1850 Census, Hall reported enslaving four people, including a woman not much older than Celia.

For Crystal Feemster, a historian at Yale University, a full accounting of these stories from American history is essential to understanding America today.

"There is a way in which people want to disconnect and say, 'I didn't own slaves. My family didn't own slaves. So let's keep moving,'" she said. "We have to tell them why it's important and why it matters and what it tells about where we are in this present moment."

She pointed to voting rights, the vast racial wealth gap and the disproportionate impact of violence on people of color as examples of current day struggles that spring directly from the history of slavery. "What's happening politically has deep roots in our political leaders' investment in slavery and how they wielded that power for their own personal benefit," she said. "People who don't know that longer history can't draw those connections."

The following Washington Post readers contributed research used to update the database of slaveholders in Congress: Luke Voyles in Tuscaloosa, Ala.; Nick Arjomand, Melinda Buterbaugh and Vincent Johnson in Los Angeles; Carol Bannes in St. Charles, Mo.; Joshua Benton in Arlington, Mass.; Karla Benton in Milwaukee; Ned Benton in Larchmont, N.Y.; John Browne in Warrenton, Va.; Paul Carnahan in Barre, Vt.; Vera Cecelski in Durham, N.C.; Lisa C. Childs in Fayetteville, Ark.; Gloria Clarke in Bridgeton, N.J.; Michelle

Dwyer Cohen in Poulsbo, Wash.; Lyndon Comstock in Bolinas, Calif.; Beth Danesco in Mansfield, Mass.; Donna W. Dzierlenga in Houston; Matthew Edwards in Atlanta; P. Ekman in Media, Pa.; Susan Erickson in Signal Hill, Calif.; Viva Fisher in Belmont, Mass.; Candace Jackson Gray in Land O' Lakes, Fla.; Christopher Handy in Santa Barbara, Calif.; Alexandra Kennedy and David B. Mattern in Charlottesville; Karen Krug in Jonesboro, Ark.; Jennie Leichtling in Cambridge, Md.; Kecia Lifton in Plymouth, Mass.; Christy Melick in Eaton, Ohio; David McGee in Lynchburg, Va.; Susana Moore in New York; Kathy Nitsch in Sarasota, Fla.; Beth O'Malley and Kelly L. Schmidt in St. Louis; Patricia Paakkonen in Espoo, Finland; Charles Perkins in Enfield, N.H.; Timothy M. Phelps and Dustin Renwick in Washington; Courtney Pinkard in Montgomery, Ala.; Chris Pupke in Centreville, Md.; Abby Raskin in Brooklyn; Gordon Rose in Thousand Oaks, Calif.; Gwen Runion in Leonardtown, Md.; Randall K. Stagner in Raleigh, N.C.; Mary Louisa Bacon Sturges in El Cerrito, Calif.; Darlene Walsh in Columbia, Md.; Ruelle M. Watson in Princeton, N.J.; Abby Westgate in Little Silver, N.J.; Kim Curlin Wettroth in Cary, N.C.; Paula L. Wiegand in Indian Head, Md.; Allen J. Wiener in Clearwater Beach, Fla.; Bridgett Williams-Searle in Albany, N.Y.

CORRECTION

Since the initial publication of this article in January 2022, we have found some new information and made some corrections.

We have corrected the breakdown of Democratic and Republican slaveholders, which initially was based on data in the Biographical Directory of the United States Congress. Though the directory is the official source of information on every member of the House and Senate, historians say it includes inconsistencies on party designations. This article has been corrected with a tally of Democratic and Republican slaveholders who served in the 36th Congress on the eve of the Civil War.

In addition, an earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that Rep. Charles Miner (Pa.) was a slaveholder in 1810 based on digitized census records on Ancestry.com that mislabeled the members of his household. Miner was not a slaveholder in 1810. A previous version also incorrectly said that Delaware residents elected senators who voted against the 13th Amendment. Before the 20th century, senators were selected by state legislatures, not directly by state residents. The article has been corrected.

And, finally, we removed and then added back references to Rep. John McLean (Ohio) as a slaveholder, as well as a portrait of him. After publication, a contributor provided information about the 1820 census in Ohio that raised questions about whether McLean was in fact an enslaver. We removed the references to him and the portrait before confirming our original information and restoring them.

About this story

Editing by Lynda Robinson and Debbi Wilgoren. Graphics editing by Kevin Uhrmacher. Data editing by Meghan Hoyer. Design editing by Matthew Callahan and Brian Gross. Copy editing by Anne Kenderdine and Laura Michalski. Photo editing by Mark Miller. Reader submissions managed by Teddy Amenabar.