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Congress

Biden uses tribute in Capitol for abolitionist Frederick Douglass to pitch DC voting rights

(Carolyn Kaster/ Associated Press) - From left, Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi of Calif., Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell of Ky., Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nev., House Speaker John Boehner of Ohio and Vice President Joe Biden applaud during a ceremony to dedicate the statue of Frederick Douglass, seen behind them, Wednesday, June 19, 2013, in the Emancipation Hall of the United States Visitor Center on Capitol Hill in Washington. The bronze statue of Douglass is by Maryland artist Steve Weitzman.



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WASHINGTON — Vice President Joe Biden on Wednesday used a tribute to 19th-century abolitionist Frederick Douglass to renew the call for equal voting rights for people who live in the nation's capital.

During a ceremony unveiling a statue of Douglass in the Capitol, Biden hailed Douglass' work advocating equal justice, and noted that Douglass supported complete voting rights for residents of the District of Columbia, where Douglass once lived.

Although each of the 50 states was allowed two statues of notable citizens in the Capitol, the District of Columbia was not allowed any statue until a measure passed by Congress last year. Residents chose to honor Douglass, whose home near the Anacostia River is a national historic site.

Biden said he and President Barack Obama back Eleanor Holmes Norton, the District's nonvoting delegate to Congress, in her effort to bring statehood and full voting rights to the city.

"The people of the District made the right choice in selecting Frederick Douglass as their representative, and they put both Eleanor Holmes Norton and Frederick Douglass in this Capitol and, quite frankly, I don't see either of them leaving until all the District residents get their voice," the vice president said.

House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, called the statue "a fitting tribute to one of the greatest Americans and voices for freedom who ever lived." House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., joined Biden in saying that Douglass initiated a movement that has yet to come to fruition.

"His voice is still being heard," Pelosi said of Douglass. "We need full representation in the halls of Congress."

Douglass was born a slave in 1818 in Talbot County, Md. He was a writer who advised President Abraham Lincoln and was a voice for women's rights as well as those of black Americans. In 1872, Douglass became the first African-American nominated for vice president, and he went on to serve as U.S. consul-general to Haiti. He died in 1895.

The 7-foot bronze likeness of Douglass joins sculpted statues of fellow blacks Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr. and Sojourner Truth in the Capitol's Emancipation Hall.

In 2007 Maryland artist Steve Weitzman completed the statue, which portrays Douglass in his 50s as an orator and writer. It was commissioned by the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities.

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