

LABORERS ON THE PUBLIC BUILDINGS, WASHINGTON CITY.

MAY 11, 1838.

Laid on the table.

Mr. LINCOLN, from the Committee on the Public Buildings, made the following

REPORT:

The Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds, to which was referred the petition of the laborers employed on the public buildings now in the process of construction, in the city of Washington, ask leave to report :

That the object of the petitioners is to obtain the legislation of Congress in regulating the daily hours of labor. They represent that they are required to work a greater portion of each day than is exacted of the stonemasons, bricklayers, and other artisans, and that they deem the requirement unreasonable and unjust. Upon inquiry, the committee find that the petitioners are all freemen, who voluntarily sought employment on the public buildings, and hired themselves out to the Commissioner upon stipulated terms, both as to *time* and *price*. They have thus found occupation during a period of great pressure and want, at a liberal compensation, while others have been destitute of the means of support. The hours of labor are from sunrising to sunseting, with the allowance of one hour for breakfast and another hour for dinner. This arrangement, during the winter months, admits of but about eight hours' service; and often this, by reason of the inclemency of the weather, is attended with little advantage to the employer. It is obvious that the price of wages and the demand for labor must depend upon the peculiar circumstances of the ever-changing times, and the occasions and events of different places at the same time: the one is best regulated by the other. Free labor will seek the point of greatest demand, and where the price will, of course, be the highest. It is the subject of voluntary contract, and both its duration and rate of reward are the terms of mutual consent and agreement.

In the case of the petitioners, the committee find that the regulations of the Commissioner of the Public Buildings were well understood at the time of the hiring, and that the stipulated wages were settled accordingly. The petitioners expressed no willingness to submit to a diminished rate of compensation corresponding with the proposed reduction in the hours of labor. They have received both employment and full pay during the short days of winter, and have no cause for complaint of oppression or

unreasonable exaction in being required to comply with the terms of their engagement on the advance of a better season. Besides, the committee do not consider the regulation of the *time* or *price* of labor a suitable matter for the interposition of Congress: legislation upon it would, of necessity, be partial. What would be fit and reasonable for one place, would be wholly unsuited to another. The expense of living varies greatly in different cities and parts of the country: that which would be liberal in Washington, might be altogether inadequate in New Orleans, or Mobile, or St. Louis, and the converse between those places and at the public works at the *North* and *East*. The subject is best left with the judgment and discretion of the public agents and executive officers of the Government: and the committee ask to be discharged from a further consideration of the petition.