**Caleb Hendrickson:**Chances are you’ve seen the U.S. Capitol building with its monumental dome hundreds of times even if you’ve never been to Washington D.C. It’s an icon, maybe the icon of American democracy. And the shape of the dome might be familiar from elsewhere. It’s modeled on cathedral domes, specifically St. Peter’s cathedral in Rome and St. Paul’s in London. Many mosques are also built with domes like these. Of course at the top of a cathedral dome you find a cross, and at the top of a mosque, a crescent. At the top of the Capitol dome there’s a statue of a female figure.

**Caleb Hendrickson:**She’s dressed in flowing robes and on top of her head…that’s what this story is about.

**Caleb Hendrickson:** Can you tell from here what’s on top of her head? Can you take a guess?

**Interviewee 1:** I’ve seen this statue in the visitor’s center but I can’t remember.

**Interviewee 2:** Looks like a vulture.

**Interviewee 3:** A rooster, or maybe an eagle?

**Interviewee 4:**Um, feathers? Yeah it just looks like feathers from down here. Inside we thought it was a chicken (laughter).

**Interviewee 5:** I would say one of those Roman helmet things with the ridge on it. I think she’s supposed to be freedom so I am thinking it goes back to Roman, Greek, that kind of stuff.

**Interviewee 6:** There may be a symbolic meaning for this, but I don’t know it.

**Caleb Hendrickson:** The statue depicts freedom personified as a classical goddess. She’s standing on a globe inscribed with the words e pluribus unum. And yes, on top of her head rests a peculiar feathered helmet. This is the story of Freedom’s hat.

**Vivien Green Fryd:** I did not know the complexity of that statue when I started working on it. I had no idea that race and slavery were central to the statue’s iconography.

**Caleb Hendrickson:** This is Vivien Green Fryd, professor of art history at Vanderbilt University. She has written extensively on the art and iconography of the capitol building, particularly the Statue of Freedom, which was designed by the American sculptor Thomas Crawford in the years leading up to the civil war.

**Vivien Green Fryd:**He originally had her standing atop the globe of the world in order to show that the U.S.’s Manifest Destiny was successful. She also was holding a sword as well as the American shield. And on her head, she was wearing what’s called the pileus or the Phrygian cap, which in English we call the Liberty cap.

**Caleb Hendrickson:** The pileus is a soft cone-shaped hat with origins in ancient Rome, where it was worn by liberated slaves.

**Vivien Green Fryd:** And when slaves were freed, the owner had shaved their heads, covered their heads with the cap, and then tapped them on the shoulders with what’s called the vindicta, and that becomes the staff with the cap on top is a symbol of liberty.

**Caleb Hendrickson:**Jefferson Davis, the future president of the Confederacy, was Secretary of War at the time the statue was commissioned. He had also been put in charge of the capitol’s extension.

**Vivien Green Fryd:**He objected to the Liberty cap, arguing, “Its history renders it inappropriate to a people who were born free and would not be enslaved.” Well that’s a really problematic statement because Davis was a plantation owner, a slave owner from Mississippi who argued on behalf of the slave system and the extension of slavery into newly acquired lands. So in making that statement he’s suggesting that the slaves on his plantation and on plantations throughout the United States are not human beings. They’re not people. He uses the term “people who were born free and would not be enslaved.”

**Vivien Green Fryd:** Crawford knew he had to change the cap.

**Caleb Hendrickson:** The capital’s engineer suggested replacing it with another Roman symbol, the helmet usually worn by Minerva, the goddess of the city and the goddess of war.

**Vivien Green Fryd:** So, the statue is a conflation of three very separate personifications. She’s a statue of America. She is also Minerva, the goddess of the war. And she’s Liberty. But what’s significant is the absence of the Liberty cap is the lightning rod of that work because it really all has to do with slavery.

**Caleb Hendrickson:** The Secretary of War rejected any work of art bearing any reference to slavery or to African Americans. While the building bears no visible trace of slavery, a great deal of its iconography depicts Native Americans, either as noble savages or obstacles to be conquered in fulfillment of the nation’s Manifest Destiny.

**Vivien Green Fryd:** The works of art on the building and inside the building establish an iconographic program that represents the subjugation of the native peoples.

**Caleb Hendrickson:** In this light it’s also significant that Crawford topped off Liberty’s new helmet with an imagined headdress, “inspired by the costume of our Indian tribes.”

**Vivien Green Fryd:** All these really conflicted issues about our nation are embodied in that statue.

**Caleb Hendrickson:** How are we to look at fraught images from our nation’s past? Thinking of them as sacred images of our civil religion might give us a place to start. These images command our gaze. We make pilgrimages to look at them, to come into contact with what they represent. But sacred sites are not sacred from the dawn of time. We imbue a place or an image with sacred meaning by the way we regard it, by the way we look, and the way we squint to make out its meaning. In the Capitol visitors center a small didactic panel tells some of the story we have just told. It begins to train the eye we bring to the icons of our conflicted past. How this eye learns to see and how it learns not to see will shape what the future of democracy looks like.

**Caleb Hendrickson:** Crawford’s Statue of Freedom was cast in 1860 in a foundry overseen by an enslaved laborer, named Philip Reed. Jefferson Davis left for Richmond not long after. He never returned to Washington he never saw the finished Capitol Building or the statue at its top. Neither did Thomas Crawford. At the height of his career, the sculptor’s sight began to deteriorate. He wrote to his wife of the tumor slowly darkening his vision: “The fact is t’is all in my eyes as yet. And I have not found any way so far of getting it out.”