

Impact Statement

Aviana Cai, Grade 9

Bridging Beyond Barriers, 2025

Digital Art, 11 x 14 inches

Independent Study, Mercer Island High School, Mercer Island, WA

Unsung Hero: Horace King

“Build it higher,” declared Horace King standing proudly before a structure, prepared to let his tributes defy society’s expectations—and even gravity. Born into slavery in 1807, Horace King did not let his situation define him. Instead, he became one of the most renowned bridge builders in the Southern USA. Theoretically, he was skilled, and he was audacious with the support and love of those around him; Horace King was able to defy everyone’s expectations. His incredible journey from being illiterate to architectural greatness is not only impressive, it’s deeply moving. His strength and fortitude convinced me to choose him for my Unsung Hero.

Despite his restraints, Horace was taught a skill set rarely accessible for enslaved individuals—how to read and write—under the mentorship of his owner, John Godwin, who saw his specialness. Horace’s talents quickly began to shine through in the bridges they built together. Over time, his work spoke louder than his social status, earning him respect even among those who once saw him as property. He worked on bridges, courthouses, and even the spiral staircase of the Alabama State Capitol—a remarkable feat of both design and construction. Even when he was finally freed, he didn’t walk away from the South or the people who treated him with disdain. Instead, he continued to design and construct for the betterment of communities that once enslaved him. Horace had compassion under prejudice, strength under bondage, and vision even for a community who had denied his freedom. Perhaps, Horace built bridges as a reflection of himself—standing strong against the forces of nature and time, while connecting people and places with purpose and grace.

I chose to illustrate one of his most renowned tributes: the construction of the bridge over the Chattahoochee River. This wasn’t just wood and nails—it was a symbol of hope, of progress, and of what one determined man could accomplish against all odds. My art features Horace in a moment of creation—sitting with pen in hand as his architectural visions come to life straight from the page. His design of the bridge rose before him, standing tall and durably against the imagined busy river, as if summoned by his imagination alone. But King didn’t just picture the challenging waters and his construction, he also included his wife and children, watching nearby with pride and wonder, giving him the love and support that grounded him through his challenges. The sunrise in the background symbolizes a new era—one he helped build not only with

wood and stone, but with resilience, intelligence, and hope. I want to reflect both the transformative power of his genius and the deeply human story behind it.

Horace King's story changed the way I see perseverance. He overcame slavery, racism, and doubt to become a respected architect and even a member of the Alabama House of Representatives—an incredible achievement for a man who began life enslaved. His determination and grace had shown me that even when the world tries to hold you back, your gifts can still shine through that geniuses can rise from anywhere, and that resilience is often the most beautiful kind of strength. Because of King, I no longer see my future restrained by my family's financial instability. He inspired me to dream bigger, work harder, and believe in the quiet power of dedication. He is, without a doubt, an Unsung Hero.