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From
“GIBRALTAR OF THE CHESAPEAKE”
to
“FREEDOM’S FORTRESS”:
Reinterpreting Fort Monroe

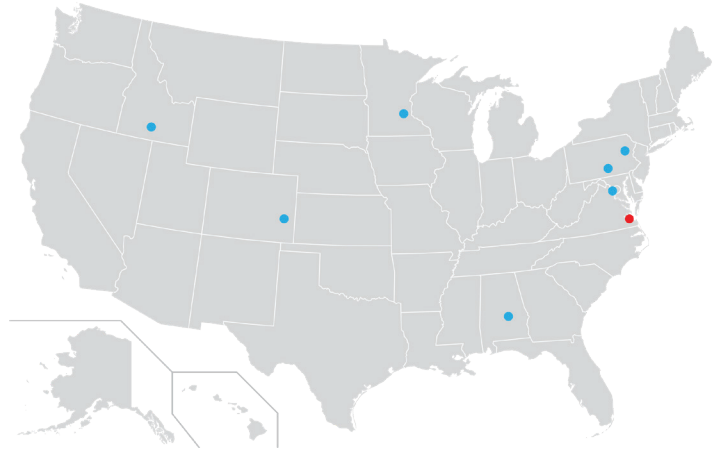
CASSANDRA NEWBY-ALEXANDER

ABSTRACT

Historians, community activists, leaders with the Fort Monroe Authority, and the National Park Service collaborated to reimagine the legacy of Fort Monroe, long known as the “Gibraltar of the Chesapeake,” after 188 years of service as a military base. However, Fort Monroe also was the site where America’s institution of slavery began evolving and where that institution also began unraveling. This is the legacy that is foregrounded for 21st century visitors. In 2019, Fort Monroe hosted the commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the landing of the first Africans in the Virginia colony. A new Welcome Center focuses on this legacy. While Fort Monroe continues to highlight its military history and the natural landscape to countless visitors, the primary narrative interprets 1619 and the Civil War-era contraband story. Adding to this important story is the 2021 designation of Fort Monroe as a Site of Memory Associated to the Slave Route by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Today’s message to visitors is very different than it once was, and much more engaging. In so many ways, the recent changes reflect current historical scholarship and the many voices of those whose lives and history intersected at this site.

In 2011, I was invited to accompany a group of Virginia lawmakers on a tour of Fort Monroe, which is strategically located near the entrance to Chesapeake Bay in Hampton, Virginia. My

task was to explain the history of those African Americans who had been designated by Major General Benjamin Butler, commander of the fort, as contrabands of war during the early months of the Civil War. Later, I participated in roundtable discussions by historians to identify the primary stories that should be told about Fort Monroe. Our recommendation was that the two paramount stories are that Fort Monroe is the site where America's institution of slavery began evolving—and where that institution also began unraveling. This is the primary legacy of Fort Monroe, a story that should grip our 21st-century reimagining of its history. The recommendation of numerous historians as well as civic and community leaders was realized when Fort Monroe became the site of the important 2019 commemoration that launched a national discussion about 1619, the year that the first Africans landed in the Virginia colony, and a newly created Welcome Center at the fort that focused on its legacy and its primary story.



The sudden ending, in September 2011, of the 188-year military service of Fort Monroe, took many in Hampton Roads by surprise. The decommissioning process began after the 2005 notification that Fort Monroe, the third oldest US Army post in continuous active service, would be placed on the Department of Defense's Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) list. Shortly thereafter, meetings began among state and federal leaders who envisioned the importance of Fort Monroe beyond its military use. They understood that this fort, known as the “Gibraltar of the Chesapeake,” had a historical relevance that had not yet been mined for its importance to the nation and beyond.¹

Local community groups and historians actually had been discussing, writing about, and holding programming events on the historical significance of this site for many years prior to the base's closure. In fact, Fort Monroe had been designated as a national historic landmark in 1960 and listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It was also envisioned as the place to understand the importance of Chesapeake Bay and the history of the Civil War. Importantly, the landscape was preserved because, as a military base, development was kept at bay. Consequently, the shoreline of North Beach remained undeveloped at Old Point Comfort, giving visitors an idea of what the area looked like in the early 1600s.²

With some lobbying, President Barack Obama recognized the importance of this site as a battlefield and as the first landing point for Africans entering America's first colony. Under Presidential Proclamation 8750, President Obama designated Fort Monroe as a national monument on November 1, 2011, ensuring that the National Park Service would have partial oversight of this important site. At the same time, the commonwealth of Virginia negotiated an agreement with BRAC to manage, protect, and preserve part of the site through the Fort Monroe Authority. Two years later, the Army officially sent a quitclaim deed to the commonwealth of Virginia for 312.75 acres that was part of the fort while the 38 acres designated as a national monument were officially transferred to the National Park Service.³

Since then, much has changed for this former US Army base and the way it has interpreted history. Although the site has been involved in a tug of war between those who want to develop the 565 acres that includes land controlled by the Fort Monroe Authority, and private owners and others who want to preserve it, the combined efforts of the Fort Monroe Authority and the National Park Service have produced programming that seeks to tell the most compelling

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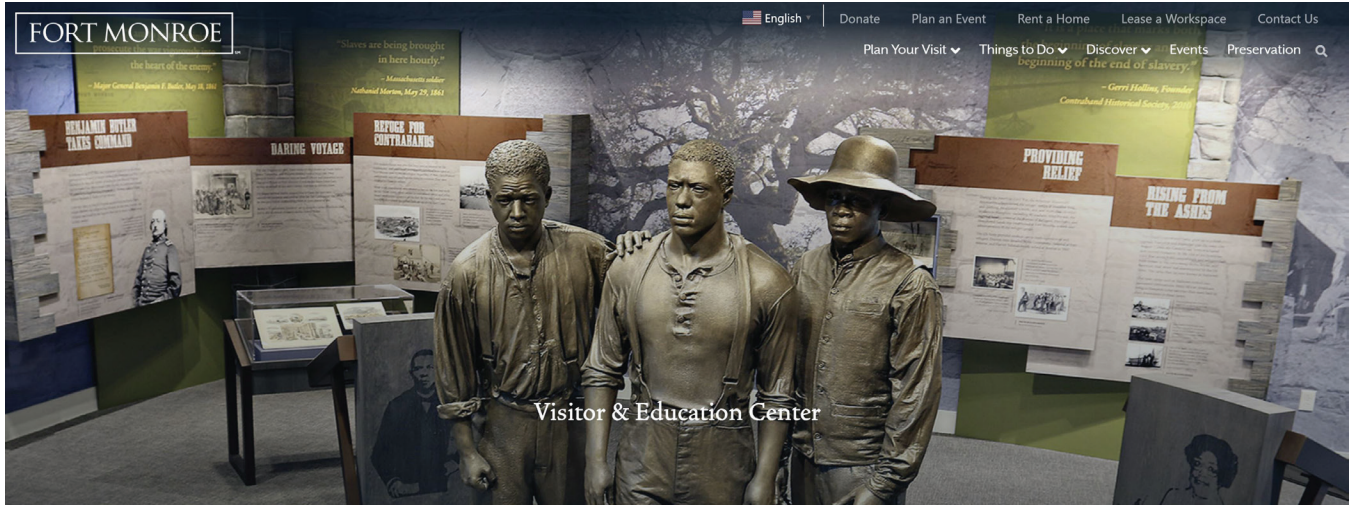


Calvin Pearson, President of Project 1619, discusses his organization's work in commemorating the landing of the first Africans at Old Point Comfort (Fort Monroe) in August 1619 during a tour for the 1619 Making of America conference in 2015. Project 1619 was founded in 1994. CASSANDRA NEWBY-ALEXANDER

stories about the fort to visitors from around the world. The decision that Fort Monroe would remind America of its history of slavery because this was the site where it began—and began to be ended—was announced with the tolling of a bell during the 400th anniversary commemoration program in 2019. While both of these origins would involve other areas of the nation and a more complicated history, Fort Monroe would be the site that interprets a balanced, honest, and inclusive narrative that begins with 1619.⁴

The Virginia colony and, later, the nation were forever changed by the first landing of Africans to the shores of Old Point Comfort (the site of the future Fort Monroe). Beginning with the forced arrival of Angolans from the Kingdom of Ndongo aboard two privateers, America evolved as a diverse culture that included people from three continents. Ironically, on this same site that heralded in a system of slavery, especially for people of African descent, the contra-band declaration by the Civil War Union commander of Fort Monroe also initiated a process that eventually freed those in perpetual bondage. Fort Monroe's centrality in the Civil War also included launching America's first purpose-built ironclad vessel—the *U.S.S. Monitor*—which would engage in a famous battle with the refitted ironclad *C.S.S. Virginia* (formerly the *U.S.S. Merrimack*) in 1862. Moreover, the fort was headquarters for the US government's Peninsula Campaign and for organizing the United States Colored Troops (USCT) who, beginning in 1863, fought valiantly in many of the Civil War's major battles as part of the Army of the James. It all began at Fort Monroe, the place known as "Freedom's Fortress," where determined African Americans changed the trajectory of America from slavery to freedom by traveling, at great personal peril, to the safe haven of the fort during the war.

The importance of Fort Monroe is inextricably tied to the landscape, people, and history of Lower Tidewater, the region now called Hampton Roads. It is at the convergence of the Atlantic Ocean, Chesapeake Bay, and the James, Nansemond, Elizabeth, and York rivers. Hampton Roads is a vast waterway network that serves as a marine superhighway hub, connecting the bay with the intricate river system from Lower Tidewater to Washington, DC. The name "Hampton Roads" also denotes the land area surrounding this complex body of water. Its tidal rivers flow from the bay inland, making access easy by water. The rivers Potomac, York, James, and Rappahannock, comprising 1,000 miles of the tributaries of Chesapeake Bay, were the main arteries of Virginia's early trade, while the artery to



(above) The website at the Fort Monroe Visitor and Education Center features an artistic rendition of Shepard Mallory, Frank Baker, and James Townsend, the three men who escaped in May 1861, seeking sanctuary at the Fort.
<https://fortmonroe.org/fort-monroe-visitor-education-center/>

(right) The boundary of Fort Monroe National Monument (in green) and the overall site also controlled by the Fort Monroe Authority. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE



North Carolina rested with the deep waters of the Elizabeth River. This tremendous expanse of lands and waterways connected thousands of Indigenous people's tribal groups with their numerous cities and towns.

For years, the official story about Fort Monroe focused on its military history and significance. The new narrative now told at Fort Monroe focuses on its origins that paralleled America's first colony. In 1607, the world of Tsenacomoco (the Powhatan name later changed to "Virginia" by the English colonists) was upset by the arrival of the English, who built Jamestown Fort and established numerous settlements along the James, York, Nansemond, and Elizabeth Rivers. Twelve years later, in 1619, the colony signaled growing stability with the creation of a self-governing body.



This map, created by John Smith in 1624, is the first recorded detailed map of the Chesapeake Bay. In this portion of the map, Point Comfort is surrounded by numerous villages and towns occupied by tribes who were part of the Powhatan Confederacy. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Also in that year, the first Africans, kidnapped into slavery by the Portuguese from the Kingdom of Ndongo, were forcibly brought to Old Point Comfort, where they faced an emerging colonial system that never embraced them as citizens or contributors to the colony. Brought to the colony by two English privateer vessels—the *White Lion* and the *Treasurer*—who pirated about 100 Africans from the *San Juan Bautista*, the ships landed at Old Point Comfort in late August and exchanged about 32 Angolans for supplies. The rest of the prisoners were presumably sold as unfree laborers in Bermuda.⁵ More Africans were transported to and enslaved in the colony in the years afterward.

The *Muster of 1624/5* for the Virginia colony listed a population of 1,218 people. Three-fourths were men and 90% were White, all clustered on or near plantations; Elizabeth City, James City, and Surry Counties; Jamestown Fort; or Jamestown. Although small in number, the Africans who were being brought into the colony were often held in bondage on the plantations of the most prominent and wealthiest colonists, including that of Sir George Yeardley, governor of the colony. The Africans, who were primarily Angolans in the first three decades after 1619, were considered valuable because they had knowledge of tobacco cultivation, pipe making, and other specialized skills. They were also familiar with Portuguese culture and the Catholic Church. As a result, they pushed the English colonists to include them in society, with equal rights and privileges as baptized Christians. They did so through countless freedom suits (arguing that since they were Christians, they could not be enslaved) and by running away. Despite efforts to gain freedom, however, the lives of these early Africans were locked in a system of perpetual servitude.⁶

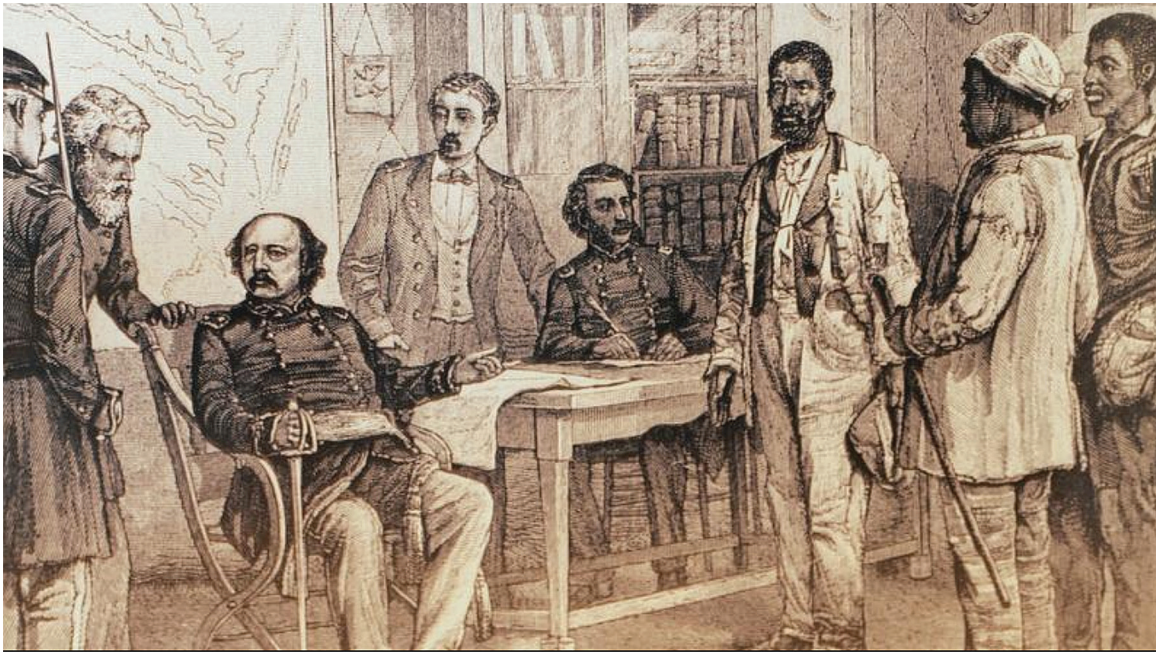
Currently, the story of Africans in Virginia that began at Old Point Comfort is being emphasized and promoted as part of its historical arc at Fort Monroe. The history of this site begins with its role as a summer fishing and oystering site for Indigenous people and continues as an important site of exchange and refueling. For example, a year after Jamestown Fort was constructed, Captain John Smith took special note of it, designating it in 1608 as the “Isle fit for a Castle.” The following year, the English built Fort Algernourne (1609–1612), which reportedly was destroyed by fire although the site continued being used as a resupply and trading station for all incoming vessels. By 1632, another fort was constructed, Point Comfort, which continued operations until 1667. After a 60-year gap, another stronghold, Fort George, was built, continuing operations until 1749.⁷ Thus, from 1609 until the late 18th century, the site was continuously used by the colonists as a fort, a stronghold, a resupply point, and a waystation.

Following the American Revolution and the War of 1812, the newly established nation realized that it needed a fortress that would guard the important opening to Chesapeake Bay and access to the nation’s capital. The areas along Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries were where America’s largest population resided. In addition, during both wars, America lost thousands of enslaved people who either ran away to other localities or sought refuge, aboard British vessels. What they hoped for was freedom. Indeed, Virginians understood that the “exploitation and domination” of African Americans created an “internal enemy who longed for freedom.”⁸ Despite this reality, slaveholders were furious about losing their “property” and the failure of the American government to secure fair compensation from the British in the war’s aftermath. During the war and following the burning of towns such as Hampton in 1813, the British were able to easily sail up Chesapeake Bay to the Potomac River, burning Washington, DC. Only Fort McHenry in Baltimore was able to repel British forces, providing evidence of the need to have a similar fort at the mouth of Chesapeake Bay in Hampton Roads. So it was that the nation resolved to build an impenetrable fort that came to be known as the “Gibraltar of the Chesapeake” after the War of 1812. Construction commenced in 1819 and continued until 1834 at a cost of over \$1.8 million. Using the labor of hundreds of enslaved and free Blacks, this fortress was designed to stand in defense of the nation, guarding the opening to Chesapeake Bay with solid granite walls, ramparts, casemates, cannons, and seacoast guns. The fort, which sits on 63 acres of land and with walls that stretch 1.3 miles, was named in honor of James Monroe, who was president during the War of 1812.⁹

The site of Fort Monroe has evolved tremendously since 1819. For most of the 20th century, the Casemate Museum focused on the history of the site as a military installation, with a section specifically glorifying Jefferson Davis’s imprisonment in the Casemate. Since Fort Monroe’s designation as a national monument, the interpretive focus has changed to its role in the arc of freedom for African Americans. After years of gathering documents about the fort that were scattered throughout the National Archives and US Army records, a clearer picture of what occurred at this site has emerged. For example, the Fort’s Welcome Center now hosts a collection of documents, images, maps, and copies of records, including the “Register of Work Done by Slave Labor at Fort Monroe.” This 100-page register includes the first and last names of enslaved men who worked to construct the fort from 1819 to 1834. Most of these men were skilled laborers, doing brickmaking and masonry work that included impregnable walls and a moat surrounding the 63-acre fort.¹⁰

After the 1830s, the fort’s role shifted from a fortress to prevent foreign incursions into Chesapeake Bay to a training facility for artillerymen and officers. However, the outbreak of the Civil War brought new importance. When Virginia became the capital of the Confederacy, some of the most critical battles occurred along the James River and in the Richmond–Washington corridor. Most important, the story of Fort Monroe and the Civil War is intricately tied to what happened on May 23, 1861. Three enslaved men—Shepard Mallory, Frank Baker, and James Townsend—threw caution to the wind. Desperate to stay close to their families in Hampton, the men decided that it was now or never. In the middle of the night, the men crept away from their encampment at Sewell’s Point in Norfolk County and stole a boat.¹¹

Making a journey fraught with danger, they rowed across Hampton Roads’ deep channel. Any high swell could have overturned the boat and drowned the men. Yet, they were undaunted in their quest to reach Fort Monroe and, hopefully, freedom. Once they arrived on shore, the men began looking for Union forces. Finally, in the wee hours of the morning on May 24, the men encountered a Union reconnaissance expedition. Letting the soldiers know their intent, the three men were interrogated and then taken to Major General Benjamin Butler, who had arrived just two days before to become commander of Fort Monroe. They explained that their owner, Colonel C.L. Mallory of



This *Harper's Weekly* illustration depicted the important meeting between General Benjamin Butler, Shepard Mallory, Frank Baker, and James Townsend on May 23, 1861.
HAMPTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

Hampton, was preparing to withdraw his forces from the area and take all the enslaved laborers to continue building fortifications. One account mentioned that Colonel Mallory planned to ship all the enslaved men to Florida, while other accounts claimed that the strategy was to consolidate his forces in North Carolina. Either way, the intent was to take the men far from home and their families, which for these men was unthinkable.¹²

Frank Baker was the oldest of the three men. Born around 1819 in North Carolina, he was 43 years old and married to Mary Baker with two sons (Henry and Dempsy) and two daughters (Easter and Frances). James Townsend was about 36 when he escaped in 1861 (birth year was recorded as around 1825). A resident of Hampton in Elizabeth City County, he later married Maria Townsend, and together they had two children (John and Press). The youngest escapee was Shepard Mallory, who was only 20 years old at the time of their departure (born about 1841). It is unclear whether he was married yet, to a woman whose first name was Fanny, but clearly the three men were an important part of the Hampton community.¹³

When these three enslaved men escaped from the Confederate battle lines and sought sanctuary at the Union-held Fort Monroe in May 1861, Butler was faced with a decision that other commanders had previously encountered. Should they follow military protocol and return these fugitive slaves to their owners or refuse, thereby violating federal law?

The official response should have been for Butler to refuse sanctuary to the escaping slaves, as had other Union generals in occupied regions throughout the South. The Fugitive Slave Clause and the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 compelled Butler to return all runaway slaves to their proven owner. However, this was war, and the three men who presented themselves to Butler explained that the enemies of the United States were using them to help them fight the war. Butler caught hold of the argument provided to him by the freedom seekers and declared them “contrabands of war.” He decided that seizure and confiscation of these able-bodied slaves for military purposes would be beneficial to the fort, inoffensive to the border states, and a blow to the Confederacy without violating the Constitution or federal law.¹⁴

Accepting these three freedom seekers as contrabands of war meant that Butler was treading carefully in the hope of avoiding the politically charged minefield of anything that smacked of abolitionism. Butler’s letter to President Abraham Lincoln requesting direction about his decision was met with silence. Lincoln declined to formulate a policy

that would address enslaved men and women escaping and fleeing to Union lines, fearing this might result in the secession of border states. Ever the pragmatist, Lincoln recognized that slavery was at the heart of the Civil War and the constitutional debate over states' rights, yet he treaded carefully, especially during the early years of the war.¹⁵

So it was that a monumental decision was made by the commander of Fort Monroe, the impenetrable fortress that was almost forgotten because no one dared challenge its dominance at the mouth of Chesapeake Bay. For the immediate moment, however, Butler was unaware that his decision would transform the war and eventually the nation. The day after Butler gave sanctuary to freedom seekers, several others arrived at the fort from York County with the same intent of Mallory, Townshend, and Baker. When Confederates evacuated Hampton on May 25, eight other enslaved people sought refuge at the fort, followed by 47 the next day. Before long, the stream became a flood with hundreds appearing, requesting protection.¹⁶

Those arriving at the fort sometimes brought a few household items, bundles of food, or clothing, but often only the clothes on their backs. They traveled at night through the woods, enduring untold hardships. Sometimes hundreds trekked down to Fort Monroe with only a few successfully arriving, like the 200 who left Richmond in 1862, but only three of whom entered the gates of the fort. Other freedom seekers had better success, reaching Hampton aboard Union riverboats, on small ships, or overland in groups. A mass exodus occurred from upcountry plantations, with entire families fleeing to the closest Union lines, willing to risk their lives for freedom. And they came to Fort

News of Butler's actions spread quickly. Hampton was abandoned, leaving many Blacks hiding in nearby woods and fields. On May 24, 1861, three slaves fled to the fort. Shortly thereafter, hundreds began pouring into the fort. Today, this path in the main entrance has an historic marker recognizing Fort Monroe as "Freedom's Fortress." HARRISON B. WILSON ARCHIVES, NORFOLK STATE UNIVERSITY



Monroe, Washington, DC, Slab Town, Warwick County, City Point, and Norfolk, just to name a few. Indeed, Virginia had the largest number of contraband camps in the South during the Civil War, with the majority concentrated in the Greater Hampton Roads region.¹⁷

Three months after Butler's contraband declaration, Congress validated his move with the first Confiscation Act in August 1861.¹⁸ Almost a year later, on July 17, 1862, Congress passed the Second Confiscation and Militia Act, freeing slaves who had masters in the Confederate Army.

In a May 27, 1861, letter to Lieutenant General Winfield Scott, Butler wrote that he believed providing sanctuary to runaway slaves, rather than returning them to their owners, was a military necessity for the Union army because it deprived the South of the slaves' services. Consequently, Butler decided to employ all able-bodied African Americans in exchange for food and supplies, as the government did not provide relief for the runaway slaves. By July 1861, more than 900 contrabands had sought sanctuary within the walls of Fort Monroe.¹⁹

Coming with hope and an expectation of freedom, they faced many of the same prospects from Union officials that confronted them during their enslavement: the probability of hard work in exchange for rations and clothing. These freedom seekers did not sit idly by and wait for freedom; they took it through action, perseverance, and force. They pushed the boundaries and limitations established by an unjust and racist system of laws and forced the nation to acknowledge their humanity and apply the ideals of the Declaration of Independence to them and their children. And when they did, the nation began to shed itself of the shackles of hypocrisy and move toward a system of inclusion. It would take another hundred years for that to begin happening, but that is another story.

Butler soon discovered that accepting runaway enslaved people as contrabands was not enough. It was important that a decision be made as to what to do with these refugees. Although some African Americans felt that Butler was suggesting a redistribution of land, the reality was that, for the time being, Blacks were put to work for the government in areas under federal control. In so doing, needed labor was made available for building defenses, and the resulting loss of Black labor to Rebel masters hurt the rebellion. Butler decided that these freedom seekers were never to be returned to slavery and should be relocated to areas where they could survive and assist the Union government with their labor needs. Clearly, Butler's contraband decision was in no way reflective of any sympathy he had for enslaved African Americans. His actions were almost callous towards the freedom seekers who arrived at the fort and later, to New Orleans where he was transferred. It would take a shift in federal policy and his direct engagement with Black soldiers before Butler developed an appreciation for the humanity of African Americans and a respect for their bravery and fortitude.²⁰

Most freedom seekers arrived with their entire families, necessitating a "system of organization ... to usefully employ the able-bodied while supporting the dependent."²¹ And, as the war progressed, the government made Butler's practice the general rule: hiring Black men to work in government service in a variety of areas, including the transportation of goods and weapons, fortification construction, farming, and hospitals. Unfortunately for many, their pay was paltry and often replaced with rancid food and old blankets.²²

These freedom seekers did not take abuses in silence, however. They complained about being exploited, whether it was by slaveholders or Union officials.²³ In one such case, missionary Lewis C. Lockwood reported that one Black man "said that he had worked for [the] gov[ernment] since the first of July," expecting money for his efforts, but received "only rations, a pair of shoes [and] a coat."²⁴ Yet, many persevered. Black women assisted their families, working in the government's hospitals as nurses, laundresses, and cooks. Moreover, the men offered their services as spies and later as soldiers, fighting for their freedom and that of their families.²⁵

In *Sick from Freedom: African-American Illness and Suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction*, Jim Downs highlighted the challenges many Civil War freedom seekers faced, which significantly contrasted with the trials faced by earlier escapees. He said that those fleeing from slavery to Union lines fell within none of the recognized categories of war casualties: gunshots, dysentery, smallpox, pneumonia, prisoners of war, or deserters. Instead, refugees were exposed to polluted conditions, exacerbated by a lack of medical care and access to basic needs. Moreover, many of those who fled

to Union lines journeyed for weeks or months, often without adequate resources to survive, being severely weakened by the journey. Indeed, some mistakenly ran toward the battlefronts, placing them directly between the two warring sides.²⁶

Despite these challenges, refugees/freedom seekers in Hampton Roads had an easier time than others in Union-occupied areas because many quickly established makeshift homes, using discarded wood and other materials left by the departing Confederates. Just outside of Fort Monroe, the refugees established homes in what was referred to as “Slab Town,” a section of Hampton on Old Buckroe Road and Chamberlin Avenue that is now part of the Phoebus neighborhood. Others set up homesteads on what was the former village of Hampton. When the Confederates burned Hampton as they departed in August 1861, enslaved people, who came from as far away as Richmond, established homes on the site of what is now downtown Hampton. This site became one of the nation’s first self-contained Black communities in what was called the Grand Contraband Camp. Residents named the streets after Grant and Lincoln, and named other streets Union and Liberty (now Armistead Avenue) as they created churches, schools, financial institutions, and businesses.²⁷

Following issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, President Lincoln authorized the office of the adjutant general to establish a Bureau of Colored Troops. By December 22, 1863, the First Regiment Cavalry was organized at Camp Hamilton near Fort Monroe, while the Second Regiment Cavalry was organized at Fort Monroe. Both were attached to the fort and later to the First Brigade, in the Third Division, Eighteenth Corps, Army of the James. Charged with protecting Hampton Roads in the first year of their existence, these regiments would be involved in some of the bloodiest operations in Virginia until the end of the war, including operations against Petersburg and Richmond, capturing Bermuda Hundred and City Point, and engaging in operations against Fort Darling and Drury’s Bluff.²⁸

General Butler eventually returned to Fort Monroe in 1863 to command the Department of Virginia and North Carolina. He immediately organized the Army of the James, enlisting troops in Norfolk and Portsmouth and on the Peninsula. Unlike those who enlisted as sailors, Black soldiers enlisted into segregated, non-regular regiments and were given inferior weapons, inferior medical care, and lower pay (\$7 per month regardless of rank while White enlistees were paid \$13 per month plus a clothing allowance). Despite these inequities, Blacks continued to enlist because the army provided economic and social opportunities otherwise closed to them. It was not until July 28, 1866, that Congress passed an act enabling Blacks to serve in the regular peacetime army with equal pay (\$13 per month, along with food, clothing, shelter, and job security).²⁹

Ten regiments formed in Hampton Roads participated in this initiative. The Tenth US Colored Volunteers—established in Norfolk and commanded by Colonel Edward A. Wild—engaged the enemy in combat. Known as Wild’s African Brigade, the Tenth included several regiments whose recruits came from Virginia and North Carolina (especially maroons from the Great Dismal Swamp). Similarly, the First US Colored Cavalry engaged in many of Virginia’s major battles as part of the Second Peninsula Campaign: Cabin Point, Fort Pocahontas, New Market Heights, Wilson’s Landing, Bermuda Hundreds, Smithfield, and Powhatan. Other units fought at Milliken’s Bend and Port Hudson, Louisiana; Petersburg, Virginia; Nashville, Tennessee; and Fort Wagner, South Carolina.³⁰

With these critical engagements African American men distinguished themselves, especially as all eyes turned back to Virginia during the final major battle that involved the Armies of the James and Potomac Rivers. Twenty thousand Black troops were enlisted throughout the North and South to participate in this final effort to crush the Confederate stronghold. By June 1864, many of the newly enlisted and transferred Black troops were positioned for surprise attacks on Petersburg, an important railroad center, and the surrounding areas between Petersburg and Richmond that included City Point. After a long battle at City Point, Union forces were victorious.³¹

By the war’s end, Black troops were in every major Union campaign except Sherman’s invasion of Georgia. Approximately “179,000 African American men [10% of the Union Army] served in the U.S. Army” in 140 USCT regiments. Fifteen of those regiments served in the Army of the James based out of Fort Monroe, while 23 served in the Army of the Potomac.³²

After the war, Fort Monroe continued its service as a military installation through numerous other wars that included the Spanish American War, World Wars I and II, the Korean and Vietnam Conflicts, and the Afghanistan War.³³ During World War I, it became the most significant coast artillery training center in the country. In World War II, the fort served as headquarters of the Harbor Defense of the Chesapeake, considered the most elaborate defense network on the East Coast. In July 1973, it became the headquarters for the Training and Doctrine Command. And on May 13, 2005, the BRAC commission announced that Fort Monroe would close September 15, 2011.³⁴

Despite the fact that Fort Monroe remained under Union control throughout the Civil War, army officials allowed the United Daughters of the Confederacy to build an arch and memorial park on the grounds in 1956 to honor Jefferson Davis, the former president of the Confederacy, near the casemate where he was imprisoned after the Civil War. Interestingly, this was the year that Virginia launched its massive resistance against the 1954 Supreme Court's ruling in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case. Davis had been the most vocal proponent of the "Cult of the Lost Cause" that sought to recast the Civil War from being a war about slavery to a constitutional struggle for state autonomy. This elevation of the Confederacy's actions to a crusade temporarily rewrote history, making Jefferson Davis into an icon and a hero. The memorial park was maintained by the federal government and was a featured tourism site on the grounds of the fort. So integral to the identity of the fort was the arch that it was rededicated in 1986.³⁵

Visitors to Fort Monroe no longer see the memorial park honoring the person who betrayed the nation as president of the Confederacy. Instead, they see a historical marker dedicated to what happened from 1865 with Jefferson

This Memorial Arch, dedicated to Jefferson Davis, was erected in 1956 on the grounds of Fort Monroe. This photograph was taken after the name of Jefferson Davis was removed. Later, the arch itself was removed. DEVRY BECKER JONES, FEBRUARY 6, 2021





Visitors to Fort Monroe now see, instead of the arch, the Jefferson Davis Memorial Park Marker dedicated to the defeated Confederate President. DEVRY BECKER JONES, FEBRUARY 6, 2021

Davis’s imprisonment to the establishment of a memorial park and its subsequent removal beginning in 2019, 63 years after its first dedication.

In an April 2019 letter to the Fort Monroe Authority’s Board of Trustees, Governor Ralph Northam requested the removal of the memorial, which he believed glorified Jefferson Davis. Northam wrote that “A memorial glorifying the President of the Confederacy has no place here.... While it is appropriate to discuss and interpret Jefferson Davis’ imprisonment at Fort Monroe, it is not appropriate to glorify it.” The board agreed, ordering the removal of the lettering on the memorial arch a few weeks before the August 2019 commemoration.³⁶

From August 23–25, 2019, Fort Monroe hosted an international commemoration. This event was sponsored by Virginia’s 2019 Commemoration, American Evolution, Fort Monroe Authority, Fort Monroe National Monument, Project 1619, City of Hampton, Contraband Historical Society, National Park Service, Hampton History Museum, Yorktown Foundation, Maggie L. Walker National Historic Site, Hampton University, Norfolk State University, and a host of other organizations and institutions. The multi-day commemoration focused on the landing of the first Africans in English North America at Old Point Comfort 400 years earlier. Storytellers, living history demonstrations, Black culture tours, and cultural performances were featured during this event. Numerous scholars and community leaders, including myself, were invited to participate in this important commemoration and were honored with the Distinguished Service Award by the 400 Years of African American History Commission, established by the Department of the Interior. During the 2019 commemorative weekend, Fort Monroe also opened its new visitor and education center with interpretation focused on the two historical events that primarily define the fort’s importance: as the site where slavery began, and began to be ended, in America.³⁷



Special Event: 1619 Commemoration of the First Enslaved African Landing at Point Comfort and live stream link

August 27, 2022 @ 10:00 am - 4:00 pm **FREE**



1619 
COMMEMORATION
 OF THE FIRST ENSLAVED AFRICAN LANDING
 Point Comfort | Fort Monroe | Hampton, VA

(top) C-SPAN livestreamed the 2019 commemoration at Fort Monroe. Those who missed this event can view the 400th anniversary ceremony on C-SPAN's website.
<https://www.c-span.org/video/?463305-1/400th-anniversary-ceremony-africans-virginia>

(bottom) Since the 2019 commemoration, each year the Fort Monroe Authority's website announces each the upcoming 1619 commemoration at Fort Monroe.
<https://fortmonroe.org/event/special-event-1619-commemoration-of-the-first-enslaved-african-landing-at-point-comfort/>

The commemoration marked a sea change in how Fort Monroe is interpreted. While Fort Monroe continues to highlight its military history and the natural landscape to countless visitors, the primary narrative focuses on 1619 and the contraband story. Public reaction to this storyline has been positive. In May and August each year, the fort hosts commemorative programming amplifying these two stories. Perhaps most significant is the National Park Service website, which features the fort's narrative and history and its 2021 designation as a Site of Memory Associated to the Slave Route by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Fort Monroe is one of approximately 50 sites to receive this designation because of its ties to the transatlantic slave trade.³⁸

I recall my first visit years ago to the “Gibraltar of the Chesapeake” as it proudly highlighted the history of Jefferson Davis’s imprisonment at the fort and honored him with a memorial park. I was struck by the emphasis on the former president of the Confederacy and the irony this veneration represented on a US military base. Today’s message is very different and much more engaging. In so many ways, the recent changes reflect more current historical scholarship and the many voices of those whose lives and history intersected at this site.

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