



Freedom's Fortress

Abundant natural resources made this small piece of land attractive to the American Indian for centuries before Captain John Smith and the Virginia Company identified its strategic importance for the defense of the Chesapeake Bay. In 1609 the first fortification, Fort Algernonne, was built here along the bay. Arriving ten years later were the first “20 and odd” reported Africans brought to the English colonies.

The defense of the nation and the quest for freedom converged at Fort Monroe in 1861, barely one month after the first shots of the United States Civil War were fired at Fort Sumter in South Carolina. Three enslaved men, known to us today as Frank Baker, James Townsend, and Sheppard Mallory, escaped and sought freedom with the Union Army at Fort Monroe. Under provisions of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act these men had to be returned.

The fort's commander Major General Benjamin Butler, a lawyer by profession, reasoned that since Virginia had seceded, stating it was no longer part of the United States, the Fugitive Slave Act did not apply. Further, because the Confederates considered enslaved persons as property and were using these enslaved men in their war efforts against the United States, Butler argued these freedom seekers should be considered “contraband of war.” Like seized goods,

An 1862 lithograph of Fort Monroe showcases its strategic location for maritime defense and commerce. Under construction from 1819-1834, the fort is named after U.S. President James Monroe. It remained a Union stronghold throughout the entire Civil War, earning the name the “Gibraltar of the Chesapeake.” Library of Congress, E. Sachse & Co.



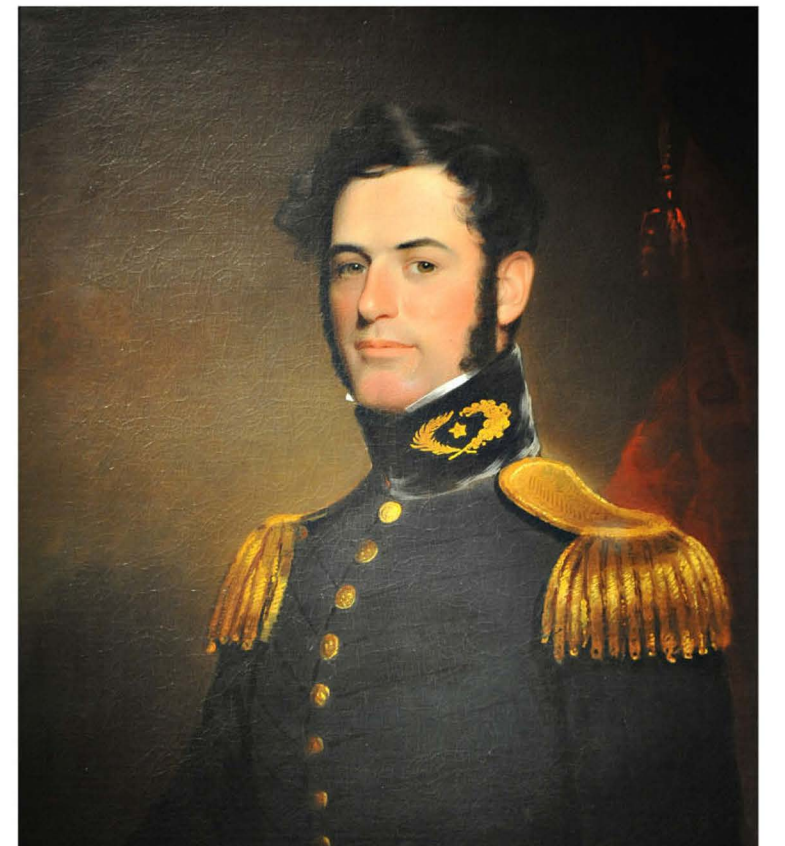
LEFT Major General Benjamin Butler supported education, training, and enlistment of able bodied members of the “Contraband Camp” surrounding Fort Monroe. Mary S. Peake taught former enslaved people encamped for protection near Fort Monroe. She worked for the American Missionary Association (AMA). Library of Congress, Courtesy of Hampton University Archives
RIGHT Hampton University, pictured here in 1899, still thrives as a Historically Black College and University, and traces its existence to the AMA. Library of Congress

these men would not be returned to bondage, giving rise to communities of men, women, and children known as “Contraband Camps” near Union forces.

This landmark decision to consider these freedom seekers as “contraband” forever changed the legal status of enslaved people in the United States, influencing thousands to seek sanctuary behind Union lines. This decision ultimately led to President Abraham Lincoln's

1863 Emancipation Proclamation and the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which finally abolished slavery in the United States in 1865.

The fort became known as “Freedom's Fortress,” and has remained a national symbol for protection and freedom. Fort Monroe continued as a bastion of defense and training until it was deactivated in September of 2011.



ABOVE Robert E. Lee, a 24 year-old West Point-trained engineer, posted in 1831 to oversee construction at Fort Monroe and at the Rip-Raps in Hampton Roads for Fort Calhoun, now Fort Wool. Courtesy of Washington and Lee University
LEFT Following the “Contraband decision” in 1861, thousands of freedom seekers risked their lives to find sanctuary at Fort Monroe. Library of Congress



Brown Pelican



North Beach Area



Old live oaks, Parade Ground



Fort moat
Alan D. Wilson, Fort Monroe Authority, NPS, NPS

Fort Monroe Points of Interest

Building #1, Quarters No. 1: Major General Benjamin Butler occupied these quarters in 1861 where he made the pivotal “Contraband decision.” These quarters were also President Lincoln’s residence while planning the attack on Norfolk in 1862.

Building #50: Constructed in 1834 as quarters and office space for engineers posted to Fort Monroe, the building has seen many architectural changes during its transformation to the set of three houses seen today.

Building #17, Lee’s Quarters: While on leave from Fort Monroe, Robert E. Lee married Mary Custis, great granddaughter of Martha Washington, at Arlington House in present day Arlington, Virginia and occupied these quarters from 1831-34. The Lee’s first child, a son, Custis Lee, was born here in 1832.

Casemate Museum: A partner operated museum depicting the complex history of Fort Monroe in the defense of America’s freedoms. Occupying former artillery emplacements that form the fort’s walls, these casemates have

also served as living quarters and a holding cell for Confederate President Jefferson Davis.

Chapel of the Centurion: Dedicated in 1858 in honor of the Roman centurion Cornelius and designed in the style of noted architect Richard Upjohn this chapel features many impressive architectural details including three Tiffany stained-glass windows.

Parade Ground: This open area, surrounded on three sides by mature live oaks including the 500 year old “Algernourne Oak,” was historically used as much for recreation as military exercises and ceremonies.

Old Point Comfort Lighthouse: This 1802 lighthouse was a British observation post during the War of 1812 and is the oldest operating lighthouse on the Chesapeake Bay. The lighthouse is maintained by the U.S. Coast Guard.

Fort Monroe is one of over 400 parks in the National Park System. Visit www.nps.gov to learn more about parks and National Park Service programs in America’s communities.



For More Information:
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www.nps.gov/fomr

Planning Your Visit

A Brand New National Park

Fort Monroe National Monument is a new national park area with limited services and programs. It is a park “in progress” and in the coming years, facilities and services will be added for the public to enjoy.

The best way to explore “Freedom’s Fortress” today is on foot. As the largest stone fort ever built in the United States, experience and understand the fort’s scale and strategic location in defense of the Hampton Roads Harbor and the Chesapeake Bay simply by walking the ramparts encircling the top of the fort. From here, look across the water to Fort Wool; see how the geography of Old Point Comfort was vital to the coastal defense strategy of the nation. The Fort Monroe peninsula has been home to thousands

of military families throughout the centuries. The scenic streets and historic homes that remain are reminders of American domestic and civic life the fort was established to defend.

Today Fort Monroe is a home and workplace just as it was during the period of active military service. Please respect the residents’ privacy as you enjoy exploring Fort Monroe National Monument.

For a Safe Visit

Use caution when walking the ramparts that circle the top of the fort. Do not venture too close to the edge of the fort walls and stay clear of the moat. Children should be closely supervised. Be alert for vehicular traffic, pedestrians, and cyclists on Fort Monroe’s thoroughfares.

Getting to the Park

From Richmond: I-64 East towards Norfolk/Williamsburg/Virginia Beach. Take Exit 268 (169 East Mallory St/Ft Monroe), the last Exit on I-64 East before the Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel.

From Virginia Beach/Norfolk: I-64 West towards Richmond, VA. Take Exit 268 (169 East Mallory St/ Ft Monroe), the first Exit on I-64 West after the Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel.

Then, for both: Turn Left at the light onto S Mallory St (0.1 miles). Turn Right at the light onto E Mellen St and continue (approximately 0.6 miles) over a small bridge and causeway onto the Fort Monroe Peninsula. At the light take the Left fork onto Ingalls Rd and follow the signs for the Casemate Museum.



Fort wall detail Robert Kelly, Fort Monroe Authority