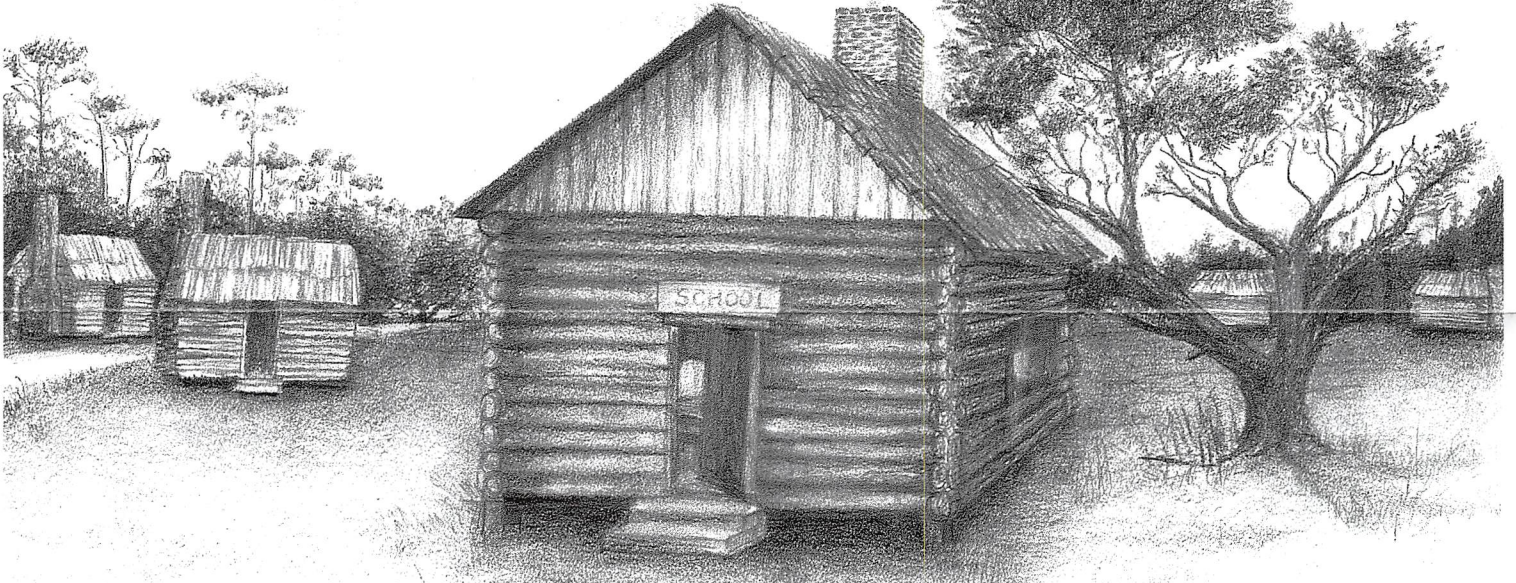




Freedmen's Colony

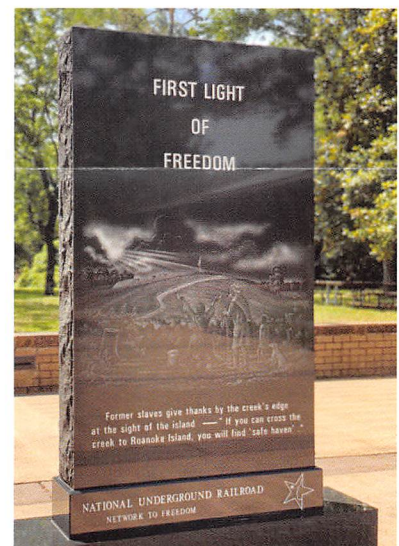


Roanoke Island was the setting for a historic experiment during the Civil War. Following the island's occupation by Union forces in 1862, it became a haven for African American families from throughout the region, and a Freedmen's Colony was built here during the war.

NPS / MOLLY MAVS

A Place of Refuge

The Roanoke Island Freedmen's Colony was part of a large network of routes, safe havens and sympathizers called the Underground Railroad. The network enabled thousands of enslaved people to escape slave-holding states in the south for free areas or the protection of the Union army. Union forces captured Roanoke Island in February 1862 and a few months later President Abraham Lincoln signed into law a Confiscation Act that declared enslaved people "forever free" if they made it to Union lines. As a result, the island became a destination for many enslaved people, and over 3,000 people eventually found refuge on Roanoke.



NPS / MAYRA RAMOS

A Colony is Organized

Prior to the Union recapturing the island, over 200 enslaved persons worked at the Confederate camps and on fortifications. After the Union forces won the battle, they gave the formerly enslaved men the option to stay on the island under their protection or return to the mainland. Despite their

newfound freedom, they chose to go home to their families in the hope that they would be able to return to Roanoke Island with their wives and children to be free together.

The number of people looking for refuge grew quickly, and the rapid increase of people in the camps posed a significant sanitation issue. A similar situation occurred in camps across the country. The first unified response was delegated to the army's Quartermaster's Department and later the Freedmen's Bureau was established to administer the transition of refugees from slavery to freedom and to help them settle into permanent homes.



NPS PHOTO

This photo of a Freedman's Village at Arlington House in Virginia gives an idea of what the Roanoke Colony may have looked like. No known photos exist of the Roanoke Island Freedmen's Colony.

Education is Freedom

Teachers from the north were sponsored by the American Missionary Association (AMA) during the war. They helped the colony through education and charity. AMA teachers were committed to evangelizing colony members to the Christian faith through biblical scripture and wanted to foster the idea that education was freedom. The schoolhouse walls were decorated with quotes such as, *"This school is for the free"*, *"His people are free"*, and *"A day or an hour of virtuous liberty is worth a whole eternity of bondage."* After the war, most teachers were sponsored by the National Freedman's Relief Association (NFRA). Their focus shifted from religion and charity to self-sustaining skills. Women were taught to sew, knit, straw braid and quilt.

Unlike the AMA, the NFRA hired black teachers. Among those hired was Martha Culling, who had established the first all-black school on the island and had been teaching before the northern teachers arrived.

In 1863 teachers saw a substantial drop in attendance when the men of the colony were able to enlist in the army. Able-bodied men between the ages of 18 and 45 left to enlist in the Union Army, forming the Thirty-Fifth, Thirty-Sixth and Thirty-Seventh US Colored Troops. With most men gone, women took on the role as head of the household. Education was no longer a priority. Women stayed home to cut and collect wood, make fires for warmth or build houses. Some worked as cooks, maids and laundresses for the soldiers and returned home to do the same for their families. Children were sent to wait in line for rations three to four times a week, sometimes waiting the whole day, just to be sent back home empty-handed. Many women also took on odd jobs to help meet their family needs. It was a challenging time for the colony as the men regularly received no income for their military service and their families failed to receive promised rations.

The Next Chapter

After the Civil War, the trials persisted. President Andrew Johnson issued the Amnesty Proclamation, allowing former landowners to reclaim their land if they could prove ownership and their alliance to the government. The colony was encouraged to leave and find work on the mainland, but they were reluctant as they had heard stories of former slaves being mistreated and even killed. They were also afraid they wouldn't be able to find work and would pay high rent for homes and gardens. As landowners increasingly reclaimed their land and rations were continuously being reduced, the Freedmen faced starvation. The approach of winter in 1866 only intensified their circumstances. Their future on Roanoke was uncertain.

By 1867 the colony of 3,500 had dropped to 950. Eventually the colony disbanded and most members returned to mainland communities including Coinjock, Elizabeth City, Edenton, and Plymouth, but some remained on the island. Although the colony as a group did not succeed, their time in Roanoke was not in vain. For the first time ever, they had control over their labor and had received an education. They carried with them the skills and knowledge they had gained on this island to their next destination and passed these skills down to their children. Today, the descendants of the Roanoke Island Freedmen's Colony have attained financial independence, purchased real estate, established businesses, and have become community leaders. For these families, Roanoke Island was only the beginning.



Community members with ties to the Freedmen's Colony at an event in 2008. Left to right: Virginia Tillet, Dorothy Drake, Lovey Moore, Mary Conway,

Essie Lee Brown, Doris H. Creecy, unknown, Nick Hodsdon, Carolyn Felton.