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National Parks Conservation Association

Fort Monroe National Monument

Four Hundred Years of Defending the Chesapeake

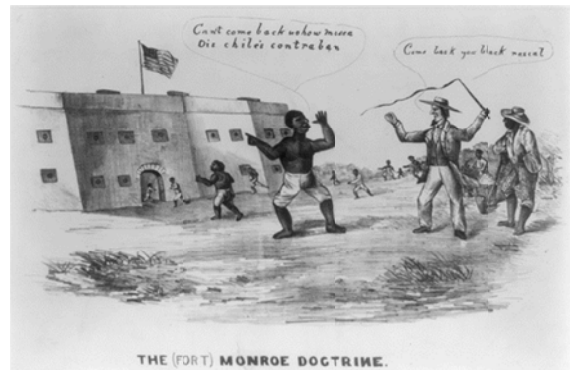
Captain John Smith first described Fort Monroe's location at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay as "a little isle fit for a castle." By 1609, Fort Algernon, a wooden plank fort with seven pieces of artillery, stood at the entrance of Hampton Roads.

It was here in 1619 that a Dutch ship delivered its human cargo, the first recorded arrival of enslaved Africans to English North America.

During the war of 1812, the British burned nearby Hampton, Virginia as its forces headed towards Washington. The island was used as a temporary defensive base until Congress appointed French military engineer Brigadier General Simon Bernard to design Fort Monroe in 1819 as part of a new coastal defense system in the Chesapeake Bay. By the 1830s, it was the largest stone fort the United States had ever built, spanning 63 acres, with 10-foot thick walls and over 400 artillery.

"Freedom's Fortress"

Even though Virginia ratified succession in 1861, Fort Monroe was held by Union forces for the entirety of the Civil War. It became the birthplace of the Civil War-era sanctuary movement when three enslaved men escaped the Confederate army in a small boat, arriving at Fort Monroe. On May 27, 1861, General Benjamin Butler issued the "Fort Monroe Doctrine" declaring any enslaved people who reached Union lines would be "contraband of war" and not returned to bondage. Over the course of the war, more than 10,000 African American women, men, and children would liberate themselves at Fort Monroe.



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National Parks Conservation Association®
Protecting Our National Parks for Future Generations®

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Establishment as a National Monument

Fort Monroe continued to stand as a U.S. Army training facility, defending the Virginia coast through the World Wars. Following 400 years of service as a defense site protecting the Chesapeake Bay, the U.S. Army vacated what had become known as “Freedom’s Fortress.” In November 2011, President Obama responded to broad and deep public support of using his executive powers to preserve 324 acres of the Old Port Comfort peninsula, declaring it a national monument.

Preserving Our Heritage While Growing Our Economy

Fort Monroe National Monument protects an important part of our nation’s heritage while generating jobs and economic activity that will have local and national benefits. An economic study commissioned by the Fort Monroe Authority, the public body overseeing the base, reported that preserving the structures and landscape near Fort Monroe would create 3,000 jobs.

Connecting the Chesapeake Landscape

NPCA was instrumental in ensuring that the beautiful beaches and delicate wetlands in the North Peninsula were included in the park boundary. Fort Monroe anchors the history and landscape found in the 54 parks of the Chesapeake region. The Captain John Smith National Historic Trail is located along the peninsula, affording visitors the opportunity to relive the history of our nation’s early explorers.



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Get Involved

With more than 50 national parks in the Chesapeake Bay watershed, the National Park Service is responsible for protecting some of our nation’s most sacred natural, cultural, and historic places. However, underfunding our national parks threatens what is needed for rangers, interpretation, and other services. Contact your senators and representative and urge them to support full funding of our national parks.

Every action taken helps preserve the national parks of the Chesapeake landscape for future generations. To learn more, visit <http://www.npca.org/about-us/regional-offices/mid-atlantic/virginia> to find additional information, events, and volunteer opportunities.

Contact Us

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