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From Post to Park: The Fort Monroe National Monument

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Abstract

The Civil War Institute will be celebrating the National Park Service Centennial this spring with its brand new “Find Your Park Friday” series. Inspired by the NPS #FindYourPark campaign, the series will challenge our fellows to share their experiences exploring America’s national historical, cultural, and natural resources through trips and internships with the NPS. In our sixth post, Kaylyn Sawyer takes a look at the history of her park. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

From Post to Park: The Fort Monroe National Monument

May 27, 2016

By Kaylyn Sawyer '17

The Civil War Institute will be celebrating the National Park Service Centennial this spring with its brand new “[Find Your Park Friday](#)” series. Inspired by the NPS #FindYourPark campaign, the series will challenge our fellows to share their experiences exploring America’s national historical, cultural, and natural resources through trips and internships with the NPS. In our sixth post, Kaylyn Sawyer takes a look at the history of her park.

I was 11 years old when I made my first visit to Fort Monroe for a military ID card. This small Army post, I was told, would have a shorter line than the more familiar and populated Langley Air Force Base. Although already interested in Civil War history, I didn’t know much about the fort’s story, and I had no idea that I would return in seven years for my first history internship. Finally, I didn’t know that Fort Monroe had been targeted for closure by the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission (BRAC). Concerned about preserving the Fort’s historic integrity amidst calls for economic development, local citizens mobilized in collaboration with leaders across all levels of government to guide Fort Monroe’s transition from post to park.



An aerial view of Fort Monroe. Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Point Comfort peninsula, named by John Smith in 1607 but known about for centuries by the American Indians, has long been recognized as a strategic location along the Chesapeake Bay. Early settlers first fortified the peninsula in 1609 with the construction of Fort Algernonne. Successive fortifications followed and by 1834 Fort Monroe, the largest fully moated fortress of stone and earth ever built in America, was complete. A young engineer from West Point, Robert E. Lee, arrived at Fort Monroe in 1831 to oversee its final construction. When the Civil War broke out, the Fort was under Federal control and stayed that way throughout the war. It was here that General Benjamin Butler made his touchstone decision that slaves seeking freedom would be considered “contrabands of war.” This decision inaugurated the cause of freedom into the conflict and laid the groundwork for the Emancipation Proclamation and ratification of the Thirteenth amendment. Furthermore, with recent scholarship showing that the first enslaved Africans were not brought to Jamestown but to Point Comfort in 1619, the fort stands as a landmark for both the beginning and end of slavery in America. “Freedom’s Fortress” would serve as the launching point for McClellan’s Peninsula Campaign, a supply base for the siege of Petersburg, and as a site of imprisonment for Confederate President Jefferson Davis. Fort Monroe continued to be an active army post until September 15, 2011, serving most recently as headquarters for the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command.



Fort Monroe was fortified in 1609 and remained an active army base from 1823-2011. Photo courtesy of the author.

Concerned for the future of this important landmark, local citizens formed a nonprofit group to advocate for park service involvement. The Commonwealth of Virginia created The Fort Monroe Authority (FMA) to oversee planning and management of the property. On November 1, 2011, President Barack Obama claimed authority under the Antiquities Act and signed a proclamation creating the Fort Monroe National Monument. The 325 noncontiguous acres encompassed the historical fortifications and the North Beach area. In March 2016, the Fort Monroe Authority approved the transfer of additional land to the National Park Service to unify the two separate areas. The NPS continues to operate in partnership with the Fort Monroe Authority and the city of Hampton to manage the natural, cultural, and historic resources on the Old Point Comfort peninsula.



This marker indicates that the first African Americans were brought here in 1619. Photo courtesy of the author.

The NPS completed the Fort Monroe Foundation Document in 2015. In addition to describing the park's significance and resources, this document will guide future development decisions. Interpretive themes for Fort Monroe include topics of European colonization, bay exploration, slavery and the struggle for freedom in America, and national defense. Visitors are invited to explore this "park in progress." Suggested points of interest along a walking tour include Building #1, site of the contraband decision and President Lincoln's residence during his 1862 visit; Lee's quarters in Building #17; and the FMA operated Casemate Museum, location of Jefferson Davis' holding cell.

I know these historic sites are worth seeing and that a walk along the North Beach area is beautiful, even if a bit breezy. The progression of Fort Monroe from army installation to National Monument shows how grassroots involvement with collaboration of officials at the local, state, and federal level can work to insure that rich historical resources are preserved and interpreted. I am unbothered by my longer wait at the Langley military ID office, because I know I can drive a short distance and stretch my legs with a windy walk along the ramparts of Fort Monroe. It is an experience I highly recommend.

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