

# SLAVERY, FREEDOM, AND FORT MONROE

BY GIL KLEIN

**S**TAND ON THE SHORE of Old Point Comfort and look over the water, across Hampton Roads, where the James River flows into Chesapeake Bay. Here, in 1609, two years after the founding of the Jamestown colony, English settlers established a rude fort to guard the river's approach.

Imagine the consternation of the watch when an unknown ship appeared in late August 1619. It was a privateer, the *White Lion*, flying a Dutch flag but manned by Englishmen. Weeks before, they had waylaid a Portuguese ship loaded with captive Africans heading from Angola to slavery in Spanish Mexico. Now the *White Lion's* captain wanted to trade his perishable human cargo to surprised but willing Virginia colonists for supplies.

Writer Tim Hashaw calls the *White Lion* "the African *Mayflower*," because it brought the first blacks to British North America. And with them came the beginning of slavery in what would become the United States.

Turn around away from the water. You see the stone walls and gun ports of Fort Monroe, the last bastion surrounded by a moat still in active United States Army service. Built mostly by slave labor, beginning in 1819, Fort Monroe was the nation's largest coastal fortification when it was completed in 1834. Critical to the defense of the Union, federal troops garrisoned it when the Civil War began, and President Abraham Lincoln hastily ordered General Benjamin Butler to reinforce it soon after.

The night of May 23, 1861, five weeks after Virginia seceded, three runaway slave men risked the lash and worse to seek sanctuary at the fort. Acting on no authority but his own, Butler declared them "contraband of war," and refused their master's appeal for their return. They were the first fugitive slaves freed in the War between the States.

Slaves called Fort Monroe "the freedom fort."

Just by turning around, you have seen where in America slavery began, and began to end. Now, Fort Monroe is to be decommissioned by 2011. What will happen to this property? How to commemorate its history?

"I talk about this fort like it's a human being," said Heather McCann. A civilian employee at the fort, she is married to an army officer. "A lot of people have that kind of strong connection because it is such a historic and beautiful place."

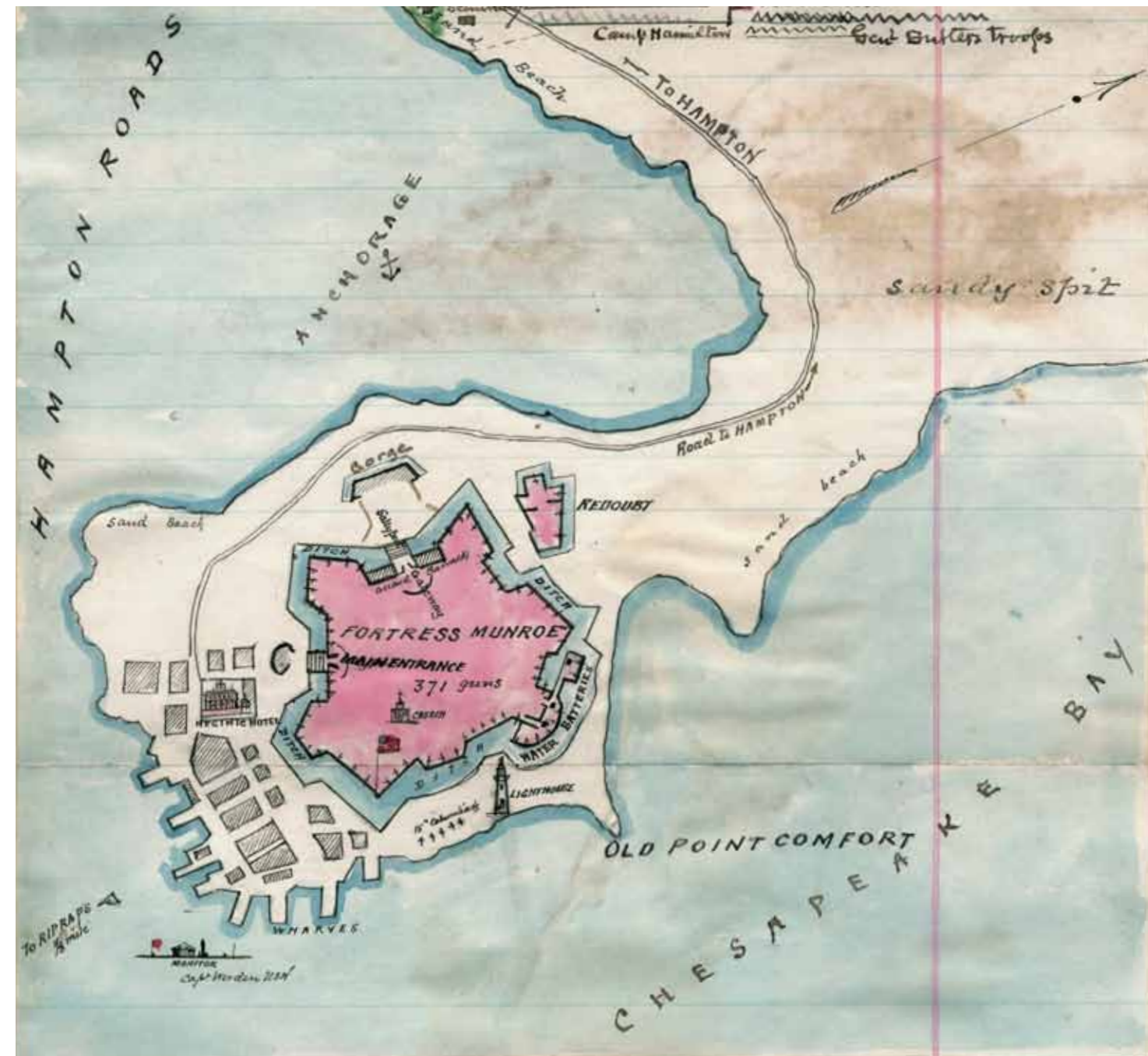
Here a young Lieutenant Robert E. Lee learned leadership and engineering skills, and celebrated the birth of his first child. Here Edgar Allan Poe penned early poetry as he plotted how to get out of the army. Here President Lincoln met with his generals to plan an attack on Norfolk, across

the Roads. Here Clara Barton and Harriett Tubman tended the war's wounded. Here, after Appomattox, captured Confederate President Jefferson Davis was confined in a cell with a metal cot, a desk, a Bible, and a huge American flag that still hangs on the wall.

And here the history of the United States Army



Dave Doody



## PLAN OF FORTRESS MUNROE VA 1862.

Area of outside walls 65 acres. Granite walls 35 ft. high. Embrasures intended for 42/6  
Ditch 75 to 150 ft wide. Tide ebb and flows in Ditch 8 to 15 ft daily. 42 embrasures  
War garrison. 2,450 men Cost \$ 2,400,000 No of Guns 1862 371

Many Embrasures were enlarged and heavier guns mounted (some 200 lbs Parrots) in 1862

The fort was planned by Genl Simon Bernard Corps of Engineers formerly and Officer of French Army under Napoleon  
The foundations of the Fort were laid in March 1819, under Maj Charles Bratton. The fort was first occupied by Battery C. 3rd US Artillery June 1823. Capt M.P. Lomax Commanding USA.  
The site was occupied by a small Fort as early as 1608.

Genl. Benj F. Butler Commanded all the U.S. Troops at Hampton to Fort Monroe with Head Quarters at the Fort. April 1861 to July 1862.

Above, the sign documenting the arrival of Africans in British America in 1649. Union soldier Robert Sneden's map, opposite, of "Fortress Munroe"—the president's name misspelled—where the first fugitive slaves were declared contraband of war and freed.



Dave Doody

A moat surrounds the stone walls of the fort compound, the last such military outpost in active service, but the fort closes in 2011.

has been traced through the careers of thousands of soldiers who protected the nation's coastline, practiced gunnery, and, in more recent years, planned military training.

But it's the stories of the beginning and ending of slavery that define this spot in American history.

**T**HE ORIGINS of these first Africans are told by John Thornton and Linda Heywood, husband and wife historians at Boston University. Thornton was born at Fort Monroe; his grandfather commanded its hospital. Heywood was born in the West Indies of African descent.

For much of history, the 1619 Africans were known only as "20 and odd Negroes," as John Rolfe, the widower of Pocahontas, wrote at the time they arrived. He said they came on a Dutch ship.

Thornton and Heywood dug into Portuguese colonial records and found that in 1618 and 1619 the Portuguese, allied with bands of African mercenaries known as the Imbangala, thrust into central Africa from their base in Luanda near the mouth of the Kwanza River in present-day Angola.

"This was a big war; it was not just a raid," Thornton said. "The outcome of the war was the king of Ndongo was driven from his capital. His wives

were captured. Thousands of people were killed, captured, and enslaved."

Many of the captured Africans had lived close to Portuguese colonialists for generations, were sophisticated urban dwellers, and had adopted European customs. "We think those people who went to Virginia, the twenty and odd and others, some of them were literate in Portuguese," Heywood said. "Many of them had Portuguese names. We think a good percentage were Christian."

About 350 of these captured Africans were loaded aboard the *Sao Joao Bautista* bound for Vera Cruz, Mexico, as part of a trade with Spanish colonies that attracted privateers commissioned by Spain's enemies.

Tim Hashaw, who traces his ancestors to the first Africans brought to Virginia, discovered the names of the privateer, the *White Lion*, and of its captain, John Colyn Jope. Through the Internet he found a descendant, Hugh Jope of Connecticut, who had researched his privateer ancestor.

"The colony was not counting on the Africans to arrive," Hashaw said. "It was totally unexpected."

At the time, England's King James I sought peace with Spain. English privateers defied him and sailed under flags of countries still at war with



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Fortress Monroe at Old Point Comfort with its Hygeia Hotel guarded the James River-route to Richmond, the Confederate capital.

the Spanish. The *White Lion* hoisted the Dutch flag, and its companion, the *Treasurer*, sailed under the banner of the Duke of Savoy. The ships came across the *Sao Joao Bautista* off the coast of Campeche, Mexico. Winning a fierce fight, the English were disappointed to find their prey cargoes not with Spanish gold but with Africans.

Figuring how much food they had, and how long it would take them to sail to Virginia and the nearest English port, they divided about sixty of the healthiest African men, women, and children between them and sailed north. The *White Lion* arrived first. Rolfe wrote:

At the latter end of August 1619 a Dutch man of war of the burden of a 160 tons arrived at Point Comfort . . . brought not anything but 20 and odd Negroes, which the Governor and Cape Merchant bought for victuals . . . at the best and easiest rate they could.

The Jamestown colonists had to decide the status of these Africans. With no experience in slavery, their colony had no laws or policy to govern it. Some of the colonists treated the Africans as slaves, others as indentured servants. They had not determined

whether the status of "slave" was for a term of years, or lifelong, or inheritable.

The museum at the Jamestown Settlement chronicles the life of an African woman, Angelo, captured in Angola and among the first to arrive in Virginia. By 1625, Angelo belonged to planter William Pierce, who also owned the indentures of English servants. It is not known if Angelo, like the other servants, regained her freedom at the end of a term of service.

A historic marker on the shore tells about two of the first Africans—Antony and Isabell—who were purchased by William Tucker, commander of the Old Point Comfort fort. Their son, William, likely was the first black child born in British America.

As Christians who could speak Portuguese, some of these first Africans had an easier time asserting their freedom and blending in with the European colonists, Hashaw said. With an ability to farm and raise cattle often superior to that of their English masters, some bought their freedom and blended into European society. One, John Pedro, purchased a plantation.

Because only an occasional privateer brought blacks to the English colonies, the number of Africans stayed small, and their status remained



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undefined, for nearly forty years. But the demand for labor became great, and after Charles II came to power in 1660, he licensed the Royal African Company, and it began importing Africans by the shipload.

Slavery, codified and regulated, became big business.

**F**AST FORWARD to May 1861. Virginia's secession left Fort Monroe, the citadel of North America, in enemy territory. To command it, Lincoln chose Butler, a Massachusetts lawyer and politician with no military experience. Butler raised a regiment during the winter before First Manassas. He pulled strings to get himself appointed brigadier general of the Massachusetts troops, quick-timing to Washington to protect the capital.

In these delicate opening days of the war, Lincoln sought to coax such border states as Maryland to stay in the Union, treating them with as much mildness as could under the circumstances be mustered. When Butler reached Baltimore, he declared martial law in defiance of orders, vowed to arrest every legislator who voted for secession, and took into custody the mayor and chief of police and into possession the state's Great Seal so no legislation could be enacted without his approval.

General Winfield Scott, commander of the Union armies, wanted to fire Butler. Instead, Lincoln promoted him to major general. The president knew he needed Butler, a prominent Democrat, so that the war did not look like too Republican a venture. But what to do with this new major general?

"You could say he was banished by Lincoln,"



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**General Benjamin Butler, sometime commander of Fort Monroe, refused to return slaves seeking freedom, declaring them contraband of war. Top, a "Contraband Yard" in Memphis, after Union occupation, where slaves gathered after fleeing their owners.**

Paul Morando, director of the Casemate Museum at Fort Monroe, said. "He was stirring up all kinds of trouble in Baltimore. Lincoln thought he would send him to Fort Monroe to keep him out of trouble."

On the evening of May 23, two days after Butler arrived, three slave men, who had been working on Confederate fortifications at nearby Sewell's Point, fled to Fort Monroe. Robert Engs, a University of Pennsylvania historian, identifies them as Shepard Mallory, Frank Baker, and James Townsend.

Lincoln initially portrayed the war as a struggle exclusively to preserve the Union, Engs said. What happened at Fort Monroe changed that.

"Right there in May of 1861, these three slaves



Dave Doody

told America—whether or not America was willing to listen—this war is about slavery and freedom."

The next morning the slaves were brought face to face with Butler. They told Butler they were about to be taken by their master, Confederate Colonel Charles Mallory, to North Carolina as laborers for the rebel army. Major John Carey of the Virginia Artillery appeared at the fort under a flag of truce to demand the slaves be returned under the Fugitive Slave Act.

If Butler declared the slaves free, he again would defy orders and undermine Lincoln's strategy. But if he returned them to their master, he would outrage abolitionists, especially in Massachusetts, where he had political ambitions.

"Butler struck upon a shrewd plan that turned Southerners' insistence that slaves were chattel property—just like pigs and cows—on its head," Engs wrote. "The three fugitives, Butler decreed, were 'contraband of war,' enemy property that could be employed in waging war against the Union. Under his wartime powers, Butler had the right to seize such property so as to deny its use to the enemy."

Butler told Carey the Fugitive Slave Act could not apply if Virginia, as it claimed, was no longer part of the United States. Mallory could get his slaves back only if he came to the fort and swore allegiance to the Union.

Word spread among slaves that freedom could be found at the fort. They made their way to it as their white masters fled from the Union army. On May 25 another eight slaves appeared, and the next day forty-seven more showed up. Union patrols would find blacks asking, "Which way to the free-



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**In May 1862, President Lincoln stayed at a building at Fort Monroe, top, planning the Battle of Norfolk. He had placed Benjamin Butler in command of the fort, in part, to prevent the kind of trouble he had caused earlier in Southern-leaning Baltimore.**

dom fort?" By the end of the war, about 20,000 former slaves were living in squalid camps in the fort's vicinity. Lincoln was uneasy about Butler's action, but he did not countermand the order. And when Lincoln wrote the Emancipation Proclamation, he used Butler's contraband reasoning to justify freeing slaves in rebel territory, though the Constitution still protected slavery.

**F**OR YEARS the army fought to keep Fort Monroe open, but it was axed in the latest round of base closings in 2005. The army is to leave in 2011, the property to revert to the state of Virginia.

The fort is not just the sixty-three acres chockablock with historic buildings inside moat-encircled walls. It covers 570 acres on a peninsula that includes 2.3 miles of undeveloped shoreline and 190 historic buildings and features. Residents around the fort fear developers, if given the chance, would build high-rise waterfront condominiums.

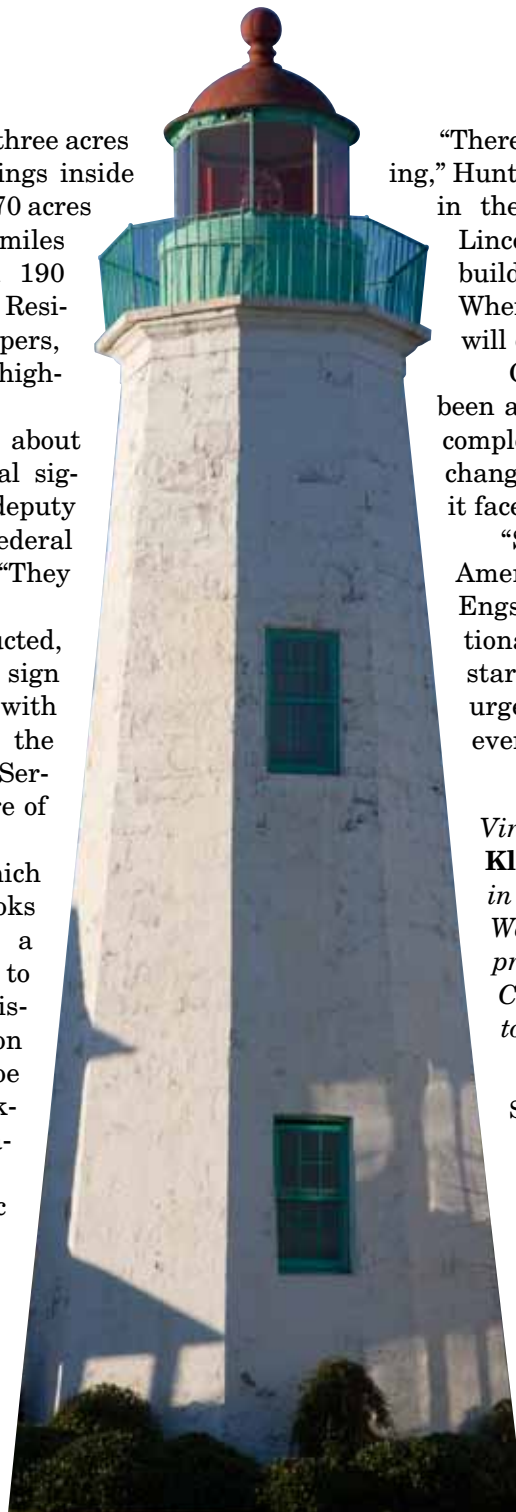
“People are very emotional about historic sites that have national significance,” said Conover Hunt, deputy director of the Fort Monroe Federal Area Development Authority. “They react emotionally.”

No high rises will be constructed, she said. The authority will sign a legally binding agreement with Virginia, preservation groups, the army, and the National Park Service that says the historic nature of the fort must be preserved.

She said the authority, which is planning the fort’s future, looks at Colonial Williamsburg as a model of what can be done to make a town with a large, historic property into an attraction that teaches history. Fort Monroe could join Jamestown and Yorktown as a fourth historic destination in this part of Virginia.

Preserving so many historic buildings will be expensive. Key to their preservation will be finding new uses for them before they deteriorate. The authority sees a mixed use of residences, retail businesses, historic sites, and recreational facilities. Exteriors of the buildings are to be kept historically accurate. The interiors are to be updated.

Hunt sees festivals and historic and cultural programs attracting tourists and driving economic growth. Colonial Williamsburg has its Grand Illumination at Christmas. Fort Monroe could take advantage of its Poe connection, as well as a myriad of ghost stories, to become a Halloween destination.



“There are multiple ghosts in this building,” Hunt said. She looks around her office, in the fort’s oldest structure, where Lincoln stayed. “There are very few buildings here that don’t have a ghost. When all is done in twenty years, we will own Halloween.”

Ghosts or not, Fort Monroe has been a survivor. Obsolete soon after its completion, it has been adapted to the changing technologies of warfare. Now it faces a new test.

“So many things that define American history happened there,” Eng said. “It really should be a national park. Because black freedom started there makes it all the more urgent that it should be opened to everybody.”

*Virginia-based journalist **Gilbert Klein** was a national correspondent in Media General News Service’s Washington bureau, and is a past president of the National Press Club. This is his first contribution to the journal.*

Suggestions for further reading:

Contraband Historical Society, [www.geocities.com/contrabandsoc/](http://www.geocities.com/contrabandsoc/).

Robert F. Eng, *Freedom’s First Generation: Black Hampton, Virginia, 1861–1890* (New York, 2004).

*Fort Monroe Reuse Plan*, Fort Monroe Federal Development Authority, [www.fmfada.com](http://www.fmfada.com) (August 2008).

Tim Hashaw, *The Birth of Black America: The First African Americans and the Pursuit of Freedom at Jamestown* (New York, 2007).

Linda M. Heywood and John K. Thornton, *Central Africans,*

*Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585–1660* (New York, 2007).

Paul S. Morando and David Johnson, *Images of America: Fort Monroe* (Charleston, SC, 2008).

John V. Quarstein and Dennis Mroczkowski, *Fort Monroe: The Key to the South* (Charleston, SC, 2000).

*Dave Doody*  
The Point Comfort lighthouse beside Fort Monroe warned mariners away from Hampton Roads shoals.