

FREEDOM'S FORTRESS

A Ten-Minute Play

By Drew Barker

Based on [Testimony by the Superintendent of Contrabands at Fortress Monroe, Virginia, before the American Freedmen's Inquiry Commission](#) as an elaboration on a remarkable history.

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FREEDOM'S FORTRESS

[Fortress Monroe, Va.] May 9, 1863.

Three pools of light slightly overlap. At a desk on a short, raft-like platform STAGE RIGHT sits the representative from the American Freedmen's Commission. The Superintendent of Contrabands, CAPTAIN WILDER, stands CENTER. The contraband, JAMES, will stand on a similar platform STAGE LEFT.

Lights up on the COMMISSIONER and CAPTAIN WILDER.

COMMISSIONER: So. How many of the people called contrabands, have come under your observation?

WILDER: Some 10,000 have come under our control, to be fed in part, and clothed in part, but I cannot speak accurately in regard to the number.

COMMISSIONER: That many? Can you spare me my own speculation and tell me why, in your opinion, this came to be the situation at Fort Monroe?

WILDER: This is the rendezvous. They come here from all about, from Richmond and 200 miles off in North Carolina. There was one gang that started from Richmond 23 strong and only 3 got through.

COMMISSIONER: That's quite a loss.

WILDER: Yes sir. In a word, yes.

COMMISSIONER: I see. Now, let me ask you something else. In your opinion, is there any communication between the refugees and the black men still in slavery?

WILDER: Yes sir, we have had men here who have gone back 200 miles.

COMMISSIONER: Gone back 200 miles? Why, that's quite the return trip, isn't it?

WILDER: Twice over then, yes sir. It does improve the likelihood of some communication.

COMMISSIONER: In your opinion, would a change in our policy— which would cause them to be treated with fairness, their wages punctually paid and employment furnished them in the army— would that become known, would it have any effect upon others in slavery?

(WILDER looks closer at the COMMISSIONER.)

WILDER: Yes. Thousands upon thousands. I went to Suffolk a short time ago to enquire into the state of things there— for I found I could not get any foothold to make things work there through the Commanding General— and I went to the Provost Marshall and saw all hands. And then the colored people actually sent a deputation to me one morning before I was up to know if we put black men in irons and sent them off to Cuba to be sold, or set them at work and put balls on their legs and whipped them, just as in slavery— because that was the story up there. And some were frightened, and didn't know what to do. When I got at the feelings of these people, however, I found they were not afraid of the slaveholders. They said there was nobody on the

plantations but women, and they were not afraid of them. Moreover, they see all kinds of things...

COMMISSIONER: Captain?

WILDER: The most valuable information we received in regard to the operations of the rebels came from the colored people, and they got no credit for it.

COMMISSIONER: I have hopes that can be remedied somehow.

WILDER: I believe their hopes propel them to it. I also found they had heard all these stories— the same kind of stories that you're collecting most likely— and wanted to come and see how it was.

(JAMES appears. WILDER continues.)

WILDER: I found hundreds who had left their wives and families behind. I asked them: "Why did you come away, and leave them there?"

JAMES: I am going back again. After my wife. When I have earned a little money.

WILDER: What, as far as that?

JAMES: Yes.

WILDER: Indeed, and I have had them come to me to borrow money, sir, or to get their pay— if they had earned a month's wages— and to get passes.

JAMES: I am going back for my family.

WILDER: Are you not afraid? Are you not afraid to risk it?

JAMES: No. I know the way.

(Slight pause as WILDER turns.)

WILDER: Colored men will help colored men, sir, and they will work along the by-paths and get through. In that way I have known quite a number

who have gone up from time to time in the neighborhood of Richmond and several have brought back their families; some I have never heard from. As I was saying, they do not feel afraid now. The white people have nearly all gone, the blood hounds are not there now to hunt them and they are not afraid, before they were afraid to stir.

JAMES: We are not afraid of being carried back—

WILDER: A great many have told us; and—

JAMES: And if we are, we can get away again.

WILDER: I have questioned a great many of them and they do not feel much afraid; and there are a great many courageous fellows who have come from long distances in rebeldom. Some men who came here from North Carolina knew all about the Proclamation and they started on the belief in it; but they had heard these stories and they wanted to know how it was. Well, I gave them the evidence and I have no doubt their friends will hear of it. On the other hand, within the last two or three months the rebel guards have been doubled on the line, and the privates—and the officers— of the 99th New York between Norfolk and Suffolk have caught hundreds of fugitives, and got pay for them.

COMMISSIONER: Do I understand you to say that a great many who have escaped have been sent back?

WILDER: Yes sir. The masters will come in to Suffolk in the daytime, and with the help of some of the 99th, carry off their fugitives and by and by smuggle them across the lines— and the soldier will get his 20 dollars. Or 50 dollars.

COMMISSIONER: I see... That's discouraging.

WILDER: Yes, that's why, sir, the runaways have sometimes started showing up south of the fort...

COMMISSIONER: What do you mean south of the fort?

WILDER: They arrive onshore. The one with the glint in eyes— the one who says they're not afraid of being carried back— he says they *will* be carried back. He says his brothers will carry him back across the waters. That's how some arrive, with only their trousers wet from the swim. When we ask them how they came to be only half submerged, they say... they say they step upon the hands of their brothers and sisters who are in the water. The runaways say they—

JAMES: We step on the hands under the water that are all chained together. And they form a bridge that leads us directly to the lighthouse outside the fort. They help us across.

COMMISSIONER: Have you seen this yourself? Surely there must be boats they are using...

WILDER: No, I haven't seen it. Those ones always arrive at night or near to it. Somehow we don't see them coming in. Last time that happened was last week. That's how we lately received one of the women.

COMMISSIONER: A woman.

WILDER: Yes, she was dressed as a man, sir. She said she had come through 200 miles.

(Slight pause.)

COMMISSIONER: Captain, in your opinion, how do they come to be onshore?

WILDER: I don't know, sir.

COMMISSIONER: We have heard rumor that Fort Monroe is haunted. Is this true?

WILDER: It could be, sir. People have been here for hundreds of years—even before we got here.

COMMISSIONER: What about ghosts? Do you have anything to report on that topic— off the record?

WILDER: Well, no... but I have heard tell that the ghost of Jefferson Davis is said to appear and to scold the contraband slaves— but he's not dead is he?

COMMISSIONER: Not that I have heard of...

JAMES: He visits us in our camp. He's keeps saying that all this is not about us, "This war has nothing to do with you! *I'm the President!*" At first he scared and confused us real good, but now we just laugh and stare at him 'cause he's got a big, dead bird, stinking, around his neck— and he rattles like chains, but we can't see 'em— but we can hear 'em. We almost feel bad for him; he talks to himself most the time. But you wanna know what else is strange? The only person that sorry man won't bother is the Indian. And the Indian just stands out away a piece and watches.

WILDER: You can't be serious. There are no Indians here.

JAMES: I seen 'em. Seen 'em both— as sure as you're standing there. This place is a strange place, sure, where metal boats float, and ghosts walk all 'round the place.

WILDER: You mean the Monitor? It's just a boat. An armored boat that happens to—

JAMES: Tell me, how does it float? How does metal float?

WILDER: Well... I don't know.

JAMES: Well, I don't know why ghosts walk around the grounds either. But I've seen 'em. This place, this Freedom's Fortress, is wonderful strange, I'm tellin' you. I knew as soon as I saw its high walls across the water, I knew it would be safe.

WILDER: Had you heard that Union soldiers were here?

JAMES: Oh, yes— the masters cursed it and our folks talked low about it.

WILDER: Do you think we'll win this war?

JAMES: Look at me. I think we might already have. And now that we see this fortress is open, we will keep coming in...

(WILDER steps up onto the STAGE RIGHT platform and addresses the COMMISSIONER.)

WILDER: Now that they are getting their eyes open, they are coming in. Now, with the sea and the hounds in abeyance, they are getting their eyes open and they are coming in.

Music or singing swells and the lights fade out as THE COMMISSIONER and CAPTAIN WILDER slowly float offstage, and simultaneously light almost fades on JAMES until he begins floating toward us without moving.

Blackout.