



Foundation Document Overview

Fort Monroe National Monument

Virginia



Contact Information

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Description



The peninsula known as Old Point Comfort, which contains Fort Monroe National Monument, is in southeastern Virginia approximately 2.8 miles east of the downtown area of the City of Hampton. The gateway communities of historic Phoebus and Buckroe are adjacent to Old Point Comfort. The park is located in the Hampton Roads metropolitan area containing a large military presence along with the cities of Norfolk, Virginia Beach, Yorktown, Newport News, and Williamsburg. As part of the regional heritage tourism of southeastern Virginia known as the “Historic Triangle,” Fort Monroe is now considered a new component of what is being referred to as the “Historic Diamond.” In addition to Fort Monroe, three other important historic sites attract visitors to the region: Jamestown and Yorktown in Colonial National Historical Park and Colonial Williamsburg. Old Point Comfort also serves as an anchor point in the lower Chesapeake Bay for the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail, the nation’s first national water trail.

Fort Monroe was built near the strategic point where the James and York rivers meet the Chesapeake Bay. The site is almost surrounded by bodies of water including the Chesapeake Bay, Hampton Roads, and Mill Creek. At the heart of the park is the 63-acre moated masonry and earthen fortress, completed by the US Army in the 1830s on the site of a succession of fortifications dating back to 1607 when colonists built defensive works on the peninsula. Over time the army expanded and improved the military campus to include areas inside and outside of the moated fort. Dredged fill was deposited along the shoreline to increase the size of the peninsula for military uses.



Fort Monroe is home to diverse natural resources and recreational opportunities. Mill Creek, a 53-acre saltmarsh cordgrass community separating the point from the mainland, is considered an ecologically productive wetland of the highest quality. Southern live oaks (*Quercus virginiana*) are the most characteristic tree within the historic monument. The largest southern live oak in the park, known as the Algernourne Oak, is nearly 500 years old, and shares lineage with the “Emancipation Oak” at Hampton University. Sandy beaches stretch along the eastern and southern shore. A seawall provides a place where the public can walk, jog, bike, or sit and enjoy the maritime views and sounds. The north beach area offers residents and visitors opportunities to experience less developed coastal landscapes. Fort Monroe also provides opportunities for swimming, motor and nonmotorized boating, and fishing from piers. On land, the park offers recreational vehicle (RV) camping, recreational playing fields, walking trails, and birding opportunities.

The fort also contains the Fort Monroe Authority’s Casemate Museum, which will not transfer to the National Park Service, and is operated by the park partner, the Fort Monroe Authority. There are numerous historic resources within the park boundary and the National Historic Landmark district. Old Point Comfort Lighthouse is one such feature. Also contributing to the cultural landscape and viewshed is Continental Park at the terminus of Ingalls Road on the Chesapeake Bay. The bandstand in Continental Park began hosting cultural activities, concerts, ceremonies, and celebrations in 1934 and continues today with programming along the Chesapeake Bay authorized by the Fort Monroe Authority.

Monument Map



Purpose



The purpose of FORT MONROE NATIONAL MONUMENT is to preserve, protect, and provide for the appropriate public use of the historical, natural, and recreational resources of Old Point Comfort, strategically located at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay, and to interpret its storied history in the European colonization of our nation, exploration of the bay, slavery in America and the struggle for freedom, and the defense of our nation.



Significance

Significance statements express why Fort Monroe National Monument resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- Located on the Virginia peninsula known as Point Comfort, and later as Old Point Comfort, Fort Monroe is situated at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay in Hampton Roads. Formed by deep-water channel currents and rich in estuarine life and natural resources, Old Point Comfort offers natural anchorage points and became a strategic cultural, political, trade, and defensive crossroads for the American Indian, European, African, and American peoples for more than four centuries.
- Old Point Comfort links two pivotal events in the history of human servitude, commerce, and slavery in America. The first enslaved Africans in England's colonies in America were brought to this peninsula on a ship flying the Dutch flag in 1619, beginning a long ignoble period of slavery in the colonies. Two hundred forty-two years later, this was the site of self-emancipation and the 1861 Contraband Decision that propelled thousands of Africans toward self-liberation and set in motion the dismantling of the institution of slavery.





- Fort Monroe, the largest fully moated masonry and earthen fort in the United States, was constructed in the aftermath of the War of 1812 as the first and largest of the coastal defense fortifications in the Third System (1816–1860). It represents four centuries of evolving military strategies, technologies, and leadership doctrines that have contributed to our national defense, beginning with the site’s Woodland Era peoples and extending through the modern era of airborne weapons systems.
- Fort Monroe, a vital Union stronghold within the Confederate states, was the site of key strategic war planning that included President Lincoln; a supply command from which major Union operations were launched that aided in ending the American Civil War; and the location of the imprisonment of Confederate President Jefferson Davis following the war.
- Just days after Virginia’s secession from the Union in May of 1861, Fort Monroe’s new commanding officer responded to requests for asylum from three self-emancipating slaves by issuing the Contraband Decision using the notion of slaves as property to ensure they would not be returned to owners. The Contraband Decision played a pivotal and groundbreaking role by providing legal and military precedents for the Emancipation Proclamation (1863), and ultimately for the liberation of four million enslaved people and the abolition of the institution of slavery by the 13th Amendment to the US Constitution (1865).
- Following the groundbreaking Contraband Decision at Fort Monroe, hundreds of thousands of enslaved African Americans sought freedom and sanctuary with the Union Army, spawning a humanitarian crisis, and permanently changing communities throughout the nation. Within weeks of the decision, hundreds of people had arrived at Fort Monroe, and by the end of the Civil War, more than 10,000 freedom-seeking African Americans sought refuge within area contraband camps.
- Fort Monroe, as the site of numerous far-reaching events, generates the desire for reminiscence and commemoration on the part of descendants of people associated with the site’s history and has become an arena for public discourse and discussion as well as divergent public memories related to the impacts of colonization on American Indians, slavery, the American Civil War, liberty, and civil rights.
- Fort Monroe National Monument provides one of the only public access points along the lower Chesapeake Bay in proximity to a large urban population. The fort’s natural resources, sandy public beaches, dunal areas, numerous historic trails, and diverse open spaces offer rare opportunities for water- and land-based recreation, including water access points and interpretation along the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail.

Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **Fort Monroe landscapes, buildings, structures, and features managed by the National Park Service.** Fort Monroe's cultural landscapes, buildings, structures, and features that are managed by the National Park Service include the sandy beaches and coastal woods of the North Beach area, along with the tidal moated fort structure, the casemates, the building techniques and materials of the fort itself, individual buildings within the fort (buildings 1, 50, and 17), the Parade Ground, the Lincoln Gun, and southern live oaks (*Quercus virginiana*), including the nearly 500 year old Algernourne Oak near Building 1, which has stood as witness through the recorded history of Fort Monroe and its predecessors. These resources are key contributing elements of the Fort Monroe National Historic Landmark District, and are the physical embodiment of Fort Monroe's national significance. These resources are managed by the National Park Service as federally owned lands or in partnership under a preservation easement with the Commonwealth of Virginia.
- **Fort Monroe archeological sites.** Fort Monroe has been recorded as one large archeological site and issued one site number by the state. This archeological site has more than 24 loci identified (as of April 2015) that have been determined to be national register-eligible, based on their integrity and information potential for research areas including pre-contact period, early colonial life and settlement, military encampments, and the presence of enslaved persons from the colonial era to the Civil War.

- **Old Point Comfort shoreline.** Old Point Comfort continues to be shaped by water, and its strategic location relies heavily on its surrounding waterways. Mill Creek lies to the north and west and is characterized by marsh lands on the Atlantic flyway. The area managed by the National Park Service provides landscape elements characteristic of the earliest human occupation of this area. Old Point Comfort's shoreline along the Chesapeake Bay is characterized by sea walls, boardwalks, and jetties, and to the northeast by several miles of sandy beaches, dunal areas, salt marsh, and coastal woods. The shoreline allows for public recreational access to water, outdoor recreation areas, and for the protection and enjoyment of natural resources, such as estuarine vegetation and wildlife native to the Chesapeake Bay region, as well as providing protection for diverse cultural resources.
- **Views associated with Fort Monroe.** Views to and from, as well as within, Fort Monroe have been identified as significant historic views. These vistas reinforce the historic visual and natural character of the peninsula. The North Beach area adjacent to Mill Creek is an indigenous cultural landscape, a conservation construct used in the comprehensive management plan for the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail.
- **The Contraband Decision, the path to the 13th Amendment, and human rights at Fort Monroe.** Fort Monroe's importance as the site where the groundbreaking Contraband Decision took place is an essential element of the park. The Contraband Decision had legal and political ramifications that impacted American history, and paved the road to the Emancipation Proclamation and the 13th Amendment of the US Constitution, which abolished slavery.



Fundamental Resources and Values



- **Fort Monroe and the celebration of self-emancipation, freedom, and liberty.** Fort Monroe is where African American self-emancipation launched the historic contraband movement as three enslaved freedom seekers made a courageous journey to Union-held Fort Monroe. Thousands of African Americans withstood conditions of deprivation in the struggle for freedom and civil liberties; many determined eligible served with the United States Colored Troops. Fort Monroe is a place where evolving and sometimes conflicting memory of the Civil War and human rights continues to be relevant.
- **Old Point Comfort as a strategic location for defense.** For more than 400 years, the peninsula served as a strategic defensive location for many communities and nations. As such it became known as the Gibraltar of the Chesapeake. Fort Monroe was an active military installation managed by the US Army until 2011. The physical environment of Fort Monroe is an ideal setting for the exploration of issues of national defense, strategic alliances, and collective action to ensure the security and well-being of society.



Other Important Resources and Values

Fort Monroe National Monument contains other resources and values that may not be fundamental to the purpose and significance of the park, but are important to consider in management and planning decisions. These are referred to as other important resources and values.

- **Fort Monroe National Historic Landmark District.** Since 1960, Fort Monroe has been designated a National Historic Landmark district, which acknowledges the national significance of all contributing resources within the district boundary. The Fort Monroe National Historic Landmark District nomination identifies contributing buildings, structures, landscapes, and features, including some that will not be managed by the National Park Service. The landmark includes 157 contributing resources: 147 historic structures, 9 historic landscape features, and 1 historic object.
- **Endicott gun batteries.** As a part of a series of concrete batteries strategically built along the Atlantic and Pacific shorelines, the Fort Monroe Endicott gun batteries were constructed between 1891 and 1901 to defend Hampton Roads and the Chesapeake Bay, and to help train soldiers in coastal defense. They illustrate the changing defensive military technology of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Of the six Endicott gun batteries extant at Fort Monroe, batteries DeRussy, Church, and Anderson-Ruggles are managed by the National Park Service. This period of coastal defense represents an era following Fort Monroe's primary period of significance, 1819–1867.



Other Important Resources and Values



- **Fort Monroe Authority's Casemate Museum and the museum collections.** The US Army established the Casemate Museum on June 1, 1951, within Fort Monroe's casemate interiors to display the cell where Confederate President Jefferson Davis was imprisoned at the conclusion of the Civil War. Since then, the museum has expanded to depict the history of Old Point Comfort, Fort Monroe, and the US Army Coast Artillery Corps. The museum interprets Major General Benjamin Butler's Contraband Decision, which earned the fort the name Freedom's Fortress. The museum, within the park boundary as NPS easement land, is owned and operated by the Fort Monroe Authority. A significant number of artifacts were transferred from the US Army to the Fort Monroe Authority. The National Park Service collaborates with the museum in research, education, and interpretation, and provides technical assistance in resource management.
- **Old Point Comfort Lighthouse.** The Old Point Comfort Lighthouse, built in 1802 and lit in 1803, was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1973. It is the oldest extant structure at Fort Monroe and the oldest lighthouse still in operation on the Chesapeake Bay. The lighthouse, within the NPS easement area, is owned by the Department of Homeland Security and operated by the US Coast Guard. The National Park Service will provide education and interpretation of this site.
- **Military traditions.** Fort Monroe, as a defensive location for hundreds of years, has seen the evolution of American military traditions such as flag raising, military ceremonies, parades, and concerts; display of war trophies or military equipment; the establishment of a museum; as well as the social and recreational cultures that develop in a close-knit mission-oriented community within an installation.

- **Maritime sights and sounds.** Set adjacent to the world's largest naval station and the commercial maritime transportation hub of Norfolk, Virginia, Fort Monroe National Monument offers opportunities to enjoy the ever-changing sights and sounds of this maritime setting, major shipping channel, and Old Point Comfort recreational marina. Visitors may view the sunrise and sunset across the water in varying weather conditions, observe sailboats, listen to foghorns, and witness fishing traditions. The strong presence of the military today evokes the important historic water-based role of the area. The significance of this location is represented by Fort Wool, Fort Monroe's companion fort, located just across the Chesapeake Bay. Visitors can view the location of the "Battle of the Ironclads," the USS *Monitor* and CSS *Virginia* (Merrimack) as witnesses did historically from the terreplein of Fort Monroe.
- **Fostering connections through our shared heritage.** The complex history of Fort Monroe signifies a legacy of freedom, hope, and courage. Connections to Old Point Comfort began with habitation by Virginia Indians and explorations of the Chesapeake Bay by Europeans in the 17th century. Fort Monroe and the strategic military decisions made here forever changed the physical and political landscape of the United States, including the gateway communities of Phoebus, Hampton, and Greater Hampton Roads. The pivotal 1861 Contraband Decision transformed the status of enslaved persons throughout this country and greatly altered the development of African American communities. This decision influenced legislation and the establishment of institutions providing basic needs and education to African Americans that continue to impact American life today. These connections continue today as we recognize descendent communities of Virginia Indians and others and how the quest for life, liberty, and freedom goes on.

