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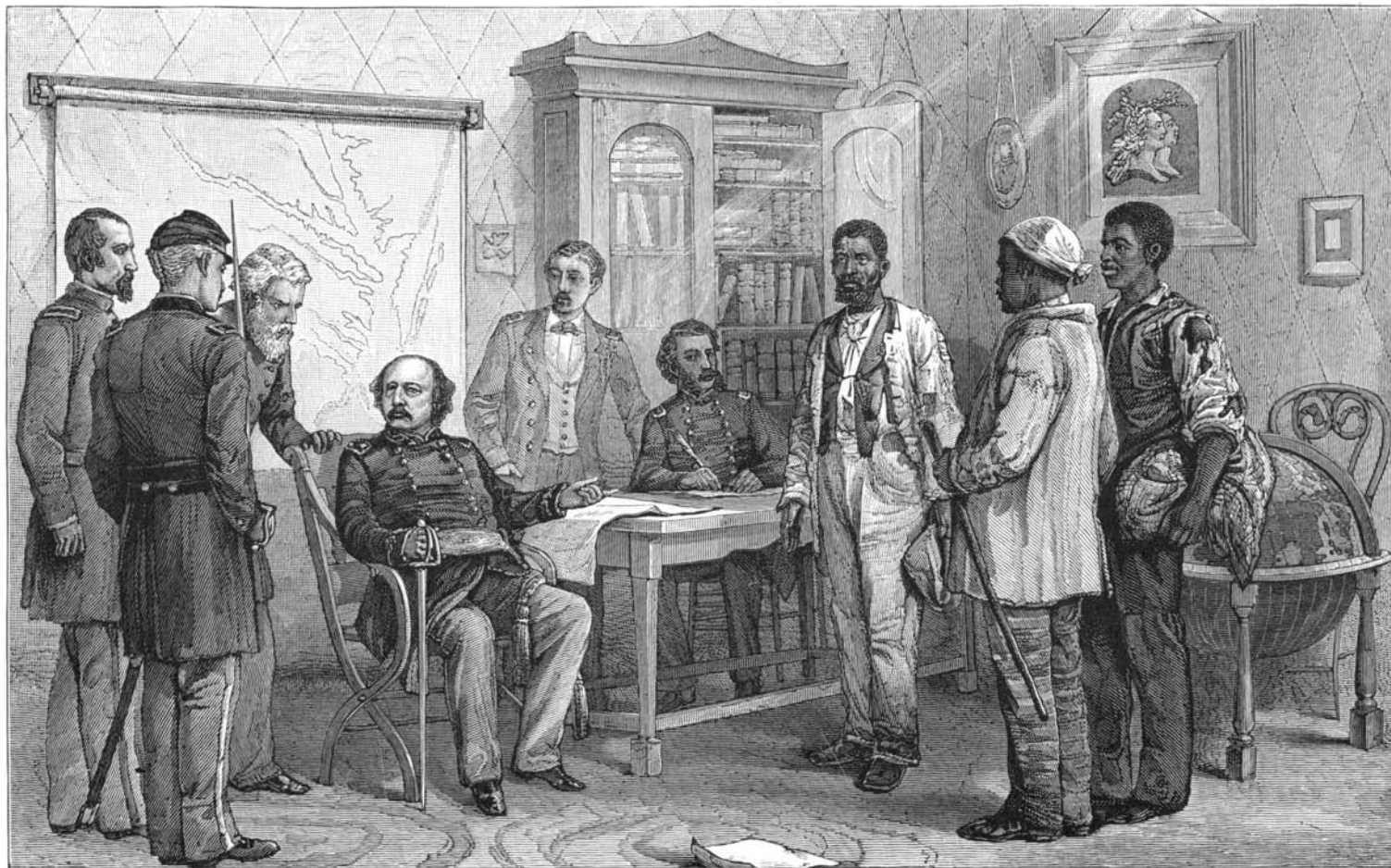


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GUIDE TO

# VIRGINIA'S CIVIL WAR

BATTLEFIELDS & SITES



Gen. Benjamin Butler (seated, left) talks with 'contrabands' at Fort Monroe

## Flight to Freedom *Slaves find refuge at Fort Monroe*

By John V. Quarstein

When Virginia left the Union on April 17, 1861, few realized that within five weeks events in Hampton Roads would help change the war's very purpose from a conflict between the states into a war to clarify America's concept of freedom.

That change was made possible because the Federals were able to maintain control of one pre-war coastal defense fort guarding the lower Chesapeake Bay -- Fort Monroe on Old Point Comfort.

The fort, located just outside Hampton, was built between 1819 and 1834 and was named for President James Monroe. It became the largest moat-encircled, stone fortification in North America. Designed with 412 guns, Fort Monroe's masonry walls had

a circumference of 1.3 miles and covered 63 acres.

When the Civil War erupted, Fort Monroe quickly became a symbol of the Union within the Confederacy. The fort's massive walls and heavy ordnance combined with the U.S. Navy's ability to re-supply Fort Monroe at will made it impossible for the Confederates to seize Old Point Comfort after Virginia seceded. By mid-May 1861, Fort Monroe was overflowing with Northern volunteers.

The rapid increase of Union forces prompted Gen. Winfield Scott to assign Gen. Benjamin Franklin Butler to assume command at Fort Monroe on May 18, 1861. Butler, an astute, corpulent, cross-eyed, bald lawyer and ambitious politician from Mas-

sachusetts, had already gained fame when he helped end Maryland's secessionist movement following the April 19 Baltimore riot. Scott detailed Butler to work with the U.S. Navy and move aggressively against nearby Confederate fortifications.

Butler intended to act immediately upon his orders when he arrived at Fort Monroe. He recognized that the Virginia Peninsula, bordered by the James and York Rivers, was a perfect avenue of approach against the Confederate capital at Richmond, about 80 miles west. He could fulfill his political ambitions with a stunning victory and soon initiated an effort to expand Federal control of the area around Fort Monroe.

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Map of Virginia, pages 20-21

## Flight to Freedom, cont'd from page 1

Just days after his arrival, on May 23, Butler ordered Col. J. Wolcott Phelps to march the 1st Vermont Regiment to Hampton. Butler's goal was to disrupt voting on Virginia's Ordinance of Secession that day. When the Vermonters approached the town, Major John Baytop Cary organized a few volunteers from his Confederate "camp of instruction" to block the Union advance by burning the Hampton Creek Bridge. When Cary learned that Phelps's only purpose was to reconnoiter, Confederates and Federals joined together to extinguish the flames. Phelps then marched into Hampton, closed the polls, and returned to Fort Monroe. Once the Federals left town, Hampton residents immediately reopened the polls and overwhelmingly voted for secession.

While Hampton's white residents may have been in an uproar over this Union advance, local African Americans were overjoyed. This first encounter between bondsmen and Union soldiers prompted three slaves, Sheppard Mallory, Frank Baker and James Townsend, owned by Col. Charles King Mallory, to take "advantage of the terror prevailing among white inhabitants..." and escape into the Union lines.

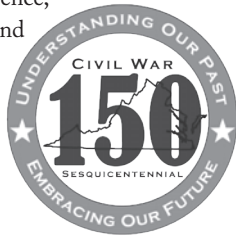
Mallory and his fellow slaves had been contracted to work on the Confederate fortification on Sewell's Point. They escaped, rowing a skiff to Old Point Comfort where they sought asylum within the Union lines.

Even before the Confederates learned about these runaway slaves, Cary went to Butler at Fort Monroe to learn "how far he intended to take possession of Virginia soil." Butler advised Cary that the Federals just required more land for encampments and inferred that they would not act aggressively unless molested by Confederate troops. The next day, May 24, Cary returned to Fort Monroe to retrieve the escaped slaves. He demanded the return of Mallory's property citing the Fugitive Slave Law as justification.

Realizing that slaves were being used to build nearby Confederate fortifications, Butler refused Cary's request. He informed Cary that since Virginia now considered itself an independent nation, his "constitutional obligations" under the Fugitive Slave Act were

### Conference webcast features "Tough Stuff" of history

This year's Virginia Sesquicentennial signature conference, "Race, Slavery and the Civil War: The Tough Stuff of American History and Memory," scheduled Sept. 24 is "sold-out" but the sessions featuring top historians will be available that day via webcast. The program begins at 8:30 am on [www.VirginiaCivilWar.org](http://www.VirginiaCivilWar.org). A dvd of the conference will be available later.



null and void. Butler further noted that since Virginia was at war with the United States he intended to take possession of whatever property his troops required. Since slaves were considered "chattel property," Butler called Mallory's runaways "contraband of war" and assigned them to support Union operations.

The "Contraband of War" decision brought slavery to the forefront as a war-time issue. Even though President Abraham Lincoln initially enforced the Fugitive Slave Law, the war now had grown far beyond an effort just to preserve the Union.

Butler immediately recognized the political and economic implications of his contraband decision. Instead of slaves supporting the Southern economy and war effort, Butler turned this Southern asset into a Union benefit as he put contrabands to work building fortifications and related duties. Butler believed that the work of contrabands was a good return for the food and shelter provided for them.

The Union general's radical opinion was often called "Butler's fugitive slave law." On Aug. 6 Congress formally approved Butler's action in an act that "confiscated any slave who had been used for a military purpose against the United States."

Fort Monroe soon became known as "Freedom's Fortress." On May 27, Butler informed Scott that since 12 slaves had escaped from Sewell's Point to become contrabands, the value of ex-slaves in Union hands exceeded \$60,000. "The negroes came pouring in day by day," Butler later wrote. "I found work for them to do, classified them, and made a list of them so their identity might be fully assured."

Since Fort Monroe was already overcrowded with Union soldiers, several "contraband camps" were established outside the walls. The ex-slaves began receiving wages, as well as food and clothing in return for work. Many contrabands became officers' servants or grew gardens and fished the bay, selling food to the soldiers.

Since the U.S. Navy then accepted African Americans as enlisted men, several contrabands served aboard North Atlantic Blockading Squadron warships. Numerous contrabands, including an all African American gun crew, were aboard the USS *Minnesota* during the capture of Hatteras Inlet in North Carolina. These men also served with distinction later during the "Battle of the Ironclads." The *Minnesota's* commander, Capt. Gershon Jacques Henry Van Brant, wrote after the engagement, "The Negroes fought energetically and bravely -- none more so. They evidently felt that they were thus working out the deliverance of their race."

While military service, economic independence, and social freedom were the goals of many contrabands, these newly "freed" slaves also sought greater independence through education. The American Missionary Association (AMA) later organized several schools for the escaped slaves. The Rev. Lewis Lockwood of the AMA noted with joy that the contrabands had a "great thirst for knowledge... parents and children are delighted with the idea of learning to read." Another missionary remembered passing by the "fortress chapel and adjacent yard, where most of the contraband tents are set... One young man set on the end of a rude seat with a little book in hand. It had been much-fingered, and he was stooping down towards the dim blaze of the fire, to make out

### 'Trail to Freedom' in Fredericksburg

Fort Monroe wasn't the only place where slaves sought freedom under the protection of the Union army. A new series of Fredericksburg-area walking and driving trails follow the path to freedom for more than 10,000 African Americans in the spring and summer of 1862.

Learn more about the tours, download maps and podcasts from [www.TrailtoFreedom.com](http://www.TrailtoFreedom.com).

the words... Where he had learned to read I know not, but where some of his companions will learn to read I do know." Soon schools were established in President Tyler's summer home, Villa Margaret, in the abandoned, burned-out Elizabeth City Courthouse and elsewhere. Around these schools, communities grew and freedom became a dream fulfilled.

Ben Butler's Contraband of War decision was a landmark political action during the early months of the war. The Union general recognized, before many others, that the war could and must revolutionize the nation's views about freedom and equality.

To get to Fort Monroe take the Mallory Street exit from I-64 (the last eastbound before the Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel), then follow the signs. Visitors are welcome, but identification is required to enter. A Civil War Trails sign outside the fort's Casemate Museum describes Butler's contraband decision. For more Hampton Civil War sites, see the Tidewater section of this newspaper.

*John Quarstein is Historian, City of Hampton, and Director Emeritus, Virginia War Museum.*



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[www.civilwartraveler.com/EAST/VA/va-tidewater](http://www.civilwartraveler.com/EAST/VA/va-tidewater)

## NEWS

### Free professional document scans offered in 150th effort

The Hall of Valor Museum, New Market State Historical Park, hosts an original document scanning session Nov. 5-6. The public is invited to bring Civil War documents, photographs, diaries and letters to the museum for evaluation and scanning by Library of Virginia personnel. The "Legacy Project" is part of Virginia's Sesquicentennial commemoration. Hours are 9 am-4 pm Friday and 9 am-noon Saturday. It's free. More info: [www.shenandoahatwar.org](http://www.shenandoahatwar.org).

### Virginia Civil War exhibit opens in February

A major Civil War exhibit commemorating the 150th anniversary of the Civil War opens at the Virginia Historical Society in Richmond Feb. 4, 2011. "An American Turning Point: The Civil War in Virginia," will offer interactive exhibits as well as items from the Society's collections. The exhibit continues at the VHS through 2011, then will travel to other sites in the state. There will be no charge to view the exhibit. For more: [www.vahistorical.org](http://www.vahistorical.org).

## GUIDE TO VIRGINIA'S CIVIL WAR

BATTLEFIELDS & SITES

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### PAGE ONE HISTORY PUBLICATIONS

The *Guide to Virginia's Civil War* is published three times yearly. Editions are printed in early February, late May and early September. Free copies are available at Virginia State Welcome Centers, most Virginia Civil War sites and selected local/regional visitor centers. For a free copy by mail, visit [www.CivilWarTraveler.com](http://www.CivilWarTraveler.com), click on the "Free Info" button, and fill out the form (check Virginia). A copy of the newspaper and other related Civil War travel information will be sent to you.

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