



Preserving the Civil War and African American History

Now Is the Time for President Obama to Designate Fort Monroe as a National Monument

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Fort Monroe, located in Hampton Roads, VA, is an active military installation with an extraordinary history. The fort was the location of a key event in the Civil War that led to the beginning of the end of slavery, when a Union general designated three escaped slaves as “contraband of war” and refused to return them to their Confederate owners. Because of its historical and cultural value, many local elected officials, historic preservation groups, and members of the public have called on President Barack Obama to use the Antiquities Act to designate the site as a national monument. And the local Fort Monroe Authority has stated that a partnership with the National Park Service would be the best way to manage the area. But time is running out—the base reverts to state authority in September of this year.

The time is right. Because of the imminent transfer of the property to the state of Virginia, there may not be a better time to protect this site. This is because on September 15, 2011, management of the fort will transfer from the Army to the state of Virginia as part of the Army’s Base Realignment and Closure process. Plans for the site at this point are vague, and plans for new management of the area are already underway. State officials and the Fort Monroe Authority itself agree the site would best be managed by the National Park Service because of its historic value to the American people.

There is strong local support for the designation of Fort Monroe as a national monument. Local members of the U.S. House of Representatives, Virginia’s two U.S. senators, Virginia Gov. Robert McDonnell, Hampton Mayor Molly Joseph Ward, and the Fort Monroe Authority all strongly support the designation of Fort Monroe as a national monument. Tourists bound for the nearby “Historic Triangle” of Jamestown, Williamsburg, and Yorktown would take great interest in Fort Monroe and could help support the local economy.

Fort Monroe represents a unique and often forgotten moment in our nation's history.

In 1861 three slaves escaped from a Confederate-occupied area to Fort Monroe to seek asylum. The Union Army leader at the fort claimed that these men were “contraband of war” and refused to return the slaves to their owners. The National Trust for Historic Preservation calls this “an unusual legal maneuver,” because Virginia had just seceded from the Union, and “contraband of war” had only been utilized in wars with foreign powers. This legal classification provided more freedom to the three slaves. Following the incident at Fort Monroe, more than half a million African Americans were granted safer harbor in the Union under the “contraband of war” label.

2011 is the 150th anniversary of the beginning of the Civil War. This anniversary is a time for the people of the United States to celebrate and remember the men and women who took part in one of the greatest challenges our nation has ever faced. The events at Fort Monroe are particularly important to recognize because they marked a changing point in the Civil War, where the fighting shifted from restoring the union to abolishing slavery—and they happened two years before the Emancipation Proclamation and 13 years before the 13th Amendment was passed.

The Antiquities Act allows the president to designate “objects of historic or scientific interest” as national monuments. The Antiquities Act was first used by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1906, and since then has been used by 15 of 18 presidents to protect some of our nation's greatest natural and historic sites such as the Great Sand Dunes, Giant Sequoia, the Statue of Liberty, President Lincoln's Cottage, and the African Burial Ground in New York City. This would be the first time President Obama used the Antiquities Act.

Use of the Antiquities Act would immediately protect the fort. The Fort Monroe Authority has explored designating the site as a national park. Studies have shown, however, that this process could take up to three years, at which point the state may have decided to manage the site for other purposes besides historic preservation.

Branches of a tree frame some of the fortifications inside the mote at Fort Monroe in Hampton, Virginia. Fort Monroe, where fugitive slaves once flocked to find freedom within this Union oasis during the Civil War, will return to Virginia in 2011.



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