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News Release
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Date: May 2, 2022

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‘Contraband Decision’ commemorated with events, tours in May

Hampton, VA – The “Contraband Decision” of 1861 at Fort Monroe will be commemorated through a series of events and tours in May. The events are presented by the Contraband Historical Society, Fort Monroe Authority, Fort Monroe National Monument and the Hampton History Museum.

The occasion will mark the 161st anniversary of the “Contraband Decision” at Fort Monroe. On May 23, 1861, three enslaved men, Shepard Mallory, Frank Baker, and James Townsend, escaped to Fort Monroe, setting in motion a mass wave of self-emancipation that eventually would help lead to the abolition of slavery in the United States. Knowing that the secession vote earlier that day changed Virginia’s legal and political landscape, they gambled that they would be allowed to stay at Fort Monroe rather than be returned to slavery. Union Army Maj. Gen. Benjamin Butler declared the three men “contraband of war,” and by mid-summer, around 1,000 other freedom seekers were gathered near Fort Monroe, known as “Freedom’s Fortress.”

For more information on the tours and events visit fortmonroe.org.

Contraband Decision Legacy Lecture

Monday, May 2, 7 p.m.

Hampton History Museum, 120 Old Hampton Ln, Hampton, VA 23669

Museum members free, non-members \$5

Eric W. Claville discusses the legacy of the “Contraband Decision” as he analyzes the struggle for freedom, citizenship, and equal protection under the law from 1861 to 2022 in

his illustrated lecture at the [Hampton History Museum](#). Claville has worked for two and half decades in politics, public policy, education and law. As a political and legal analyst, he has appeared on various news outlets to provide insight on current issues. As a professor, he has taught constitutional law and civil rights, and courses in politics and public policy. He is also the creator and co-host of the award-winning radio commentary, The Claville Report on WHRO/WHRV 89.5 FM Another View with Barbara Hamm Lee and the creator and host of State of the Water on Norfolk State University's own, WNSB 91.1FM.

Living History Tours at Fort Monroe

Saturday, May 14, 11a.m., 11:30 a.m., 12 noon, 12:30 p.m. and 1 p.m.

Intersection of East Gate and Fenwick Rd., Fort Monroe, VA 23651

Free admission

Join the Fort Monroe National Monument for walking tours beginning every 30 minutes from 11 a.m. - 1 p.m. Living historians will explore the legacy of events surrounding the “Contraband Decision” of 1861, the beginning of the end of slavery in the United States. Attendees will interact with historical figures such as United States Colored Troops, Tuskegee Airman, and Harriet Tubman.

Seeking Freedom’s Fortress Day

Saturday, May 21, 10:30 a.m. - 4 p.m.

Fort Monroe Visitor & Education Center, 30 Ingalls Rd, Fort Monroe, VA 23651

Free admission

Start your visit at the Fort Monroe Visitor & Education Center and hear the stories of Shepard Mallory, Frank Baker, and James Townsend—three enslaved men who sought freedom at Union-held Fort Monroe. There will be activities throughout the Fort and community organizations will also be on-site including the Contraband Historical Society, Casemate Museum, Hampton History Museum, and Fort Monroe National Monument.

Seeking Untold Stories: Researching African American Genealogy in Historic Records

Saturday, May 21, 5:30 p.m. – 7 p.m.

Fort Monroe Visitor & Education Center, 30 Ingalls Rd, Fort Monroe, VA 23651

Free admission

A discussion and evening of information about researching the genealogy surrounding African Americans. Winston Favor from the Mariners’ Museum will speak about his project on finding Black Stories in museum collections, and there will be a video of Selma Stewart of the Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society speaking specifically about her knowledge of finding Contraband within the historical narrative. There will also be panelists

from the AAHGS to answer questions. In addition, information and resources about conducting genealogical research will be available.

Remembering the Contraband and Their Descendants

Sunday, May 22, 4 p.m. - 5:30 pm

Fort Monroe Visitor & Education Center, 30 Ingalls Rd, Fort Monroe, VA 23651

Free admission

A forum presented by the Contraband Historical Society, remembering the Civil War “contrabands” – the first of the enslaved to forge a path to freedom – and bringing their story down to the present day through descendants who will share their family histories.

Annual Commemoration of the 1861 Contraband Decision

Tuesday, May 24, 7 p.m. - 8 p.m.

Cannon Park, 3 Ruckman Rd. Fort Monroe, VA 23651

Free Admission

Ceremony by the Contraband Historical Society marking the 161st anniversary of the May 24, 1861, “Contraband Decision” at Fort Monroe, the first successful action by an official of the United States Government to confiscate enslaved people from their enslavers. That action signaled the beginning of the end of slavery in the United States. Featuring a presentation on the life of Harry Jarvis, contraband and soldier, who liberated himself and then fought to liberate others. Ceremony concludes with a candlelight procession from Cannon Park through the old fort’s main gate into “Freedom’s Fortress.”

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Partially bordered by the Hampton Roads harbor and Chesapeake Bay, Hampton, with the 344,000 sq. ft. Hampton Roads Convention Center and the award-winning Hampton Coliseum, is located in the center of Coastal Virginia and the Hampton Roads metropolitan area. Hampton is the site of America's first continuous English-speaking settlement, the site of the first arrival of Africans in English North America, and is home to such visitor attractions as the Virginia Air & Space Science Center, Fort Monroe National Monument, Hampton History Museum, Hampton University Museum, The American Theatre, among others.