

Written Testimony of

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COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA  
AND CHAIR OF THE FORT MONROE AUTHORITY BOARD

Before The  
Senate Committee on Energy & Natural Resources  
Subcommittee on National Parks

Regarding  
S. 1303, a bill to authorize the Secretary of the Interior to establish Fort Monroe  
National Historical Park in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2011

## **Introduction**

Chairman Udall, Ranking Member Paul and distinguished members of the National Parks Subcommittee, on behalf of the Commonwealth of Virginia, I thank you all for the opportunity to testify today. This hearing to consider a National Park at Fort Monroe, Virginia represents the next major step in a process that began several years ago when the United States Army first learned it would be leaving this historic site. Since that time, the citizens of the Commonwealth, led by Governor, Bob McDonnell, have passionately advocated the telling of Fort Monroe's great American story, one that everyone in our nation should know and cherish.

## **History**

Historic Fort Monroe is located in the City of Hampton, Virginia on Old Point Comfort peninsula, part of Hampton Roads Harbor. It has a deep, rich military history dating back to the early 1600's. Over the course of 200 years, multiple forts called Old Point Comfort home until construction of Fort Monroe was ultimately completed in 1834. From that time, it began to serve as the assembly, training, and embarkation point for U.S. forces involved in multiple conflicts on US soil.

Fort Monroe is one of the most important cultural treasures not only in the Commonwealth of Virginia, but in the entire nation. This geographically significant location served as the site for one of the darkest parts of our nation's history, the tragic beginning of slavery in America. While this darkness remained for over 240 years, in 1861 Fort Monroe, in a rare chance at redemption, yielded its most compelling virtue by claiming its unique status as the birthplace of the Civil War-era "Contraband" decision. This decision created for the first time, a

pathway to freedom from slavery for African Americans. “Freedom’s Fortress” bore witness to the struggles and triumphs of African American men, women and children who courageously self-emancipated themselves from the hideous institution of slavery. Through tremendous adversity and at great risk, their efforts ultimately paved the way for the Emancipation Proclamation, granting freedom to all.

### **National Park Service**

With this amazing history in mind, the 2005 BRAC decision to close Fort Monroe immediately sparked discussions regarding a National Park Service presence at this historical landmark. Governor McDonnell fully embraced this initiative and with his election in 2010 directed his administration’s support to this cause. Since that time the McDonnell Administration has worked closely with Mayor Molly Ward of the city of Hampton and our bipartisan congressional delegation toward this mutually supported goal. The legislation before you today is a direct by-product of those combined efforts.

Recent public hearings in south-eastern Virginia, known as Hampton Roads, resulted in more than 1,000 citizens coming forward to passionately support a National Park at Fort Monroe. More than twenty-five different organizations were represented at these meetings as well, including:

- National Trust For Historic Preservation
- National Parks Conservation Association
- Hampton Contraband Slave Society
- Citizens for a National Park at Fort Monroe

➤ Chesapeake Bay Foundation

There continues to be strong, bipartisan support at the federal and state levels for a National Park at Fort Monroe. Hampton Mayor Molly Ward has been a stalwart for the Fort Monroe Authority working tirelessly as the representative for the City of Hampton. Mayor Ward could not attend today's hearing as her city is hosting the President's visit, but she continues to work with the Governor and the citizens to make sure the President, who is visiting Hampton today, is fully aware of the tremendous support for a National Park at Fort Monroe. Though she couldn't be here, she has presented written testimony to the committee.

**Fort Monroe Authority**

The Fort Monroe Authority has diligently identified the most appropriate footprint for the park, carving out 324 acres which includes 4 historical structures, so that the National Park both compliments and supports the concept of a vibrant community working and living at Fort Monroe. The Authority believes the footprint identified in this legislation is most desirable from a fiscal perspective rather than making the entire Fort a National Park.

The Fort Monroe Authority has also established the Fort Monroe Foundation, which will function as a non-profit, fundraising organization to support educational programs. These programs will ensure that the marvelous history of Fort Monroe is told for generations to come.

In addition, the Fort Monroe Authority has worked meticulously with the Army and other stakeholders to create a Programmatic Agreement that sets forth criteria to maintain the historic

nature and coastal views at Fort Monroe. This Agreement along with any easements which may be required by the National Park Service will provide a National Park at Fort Monroe with open spaces for all to enjoy and will also play a critical economic role in sustaining the vibrant community being planned. It is the declared policy of the Commonwealth of Virginia to exercise exemplary stewardship in protecting the historic resources at Fort Monroe while also providing public access to the Fort's historic resources and recreational opportunities.

### **Closing**

The Governor along with the leaders and citizens of Virginia truly believe Fort Monroe is a rare and essential national treasure, one whose history and beauty must be shared with current and future generations of Americans. We feel this can best be accomplished through the efforts of the National Park Service, in whom the American people have long entrusted the nation's historical landmarks for preservation of history and heritage. It is therefore in the public interest to preserve Fort Monroe and its surrounding lands and buildings with dignity, integrity and with the level of excellence that only the National Park Service can offer.