The Stingray Point

Stingray Point Lighthouse, circa 1885. U.S. Coast Guard photo. Courtesy of the U.S. Lighthouse Society.

CONTRABAND

THE STORY OF ONE VOYAGE, SIX MEN AND THE HALF-A-MILLION THAT FOLLOWED.

By Jackie Nunnery

Nearly every day we pass pivotal places where our history has been made, often without knowing. Over 2,500 historical highway markers dot the roads of the Commonwealth, 200 within the Middle Peninsula and the Northern Neck. Some mark battle sites or significant architecture, while others tell the stories of people making important contributions, sometimes not realizing the significance of their actions in those moments.

One such story is that of the Stingray Point Contraband. Just months after the first shots were fired at Fort Sumter, six enslaved men boarded a small boat under the cover of night, headed for a hexagonal refuge in the waters of the Rappahannock River.

According to the Union Navy's own historical account written by O.S. Glisson, commander of the *USS Mount Vernon*, they "observed a boat adrift near Stingray Lighthouse" on the morning of July 15, 1861, while patrolling the mouth of the Rappahannock. Having retrieved the empty boat, they investigated the lighthouse and brought back Alexander Franklin, David Harris, Miles Hunter, John Hunter, Peter Hunter and Samuel Hunter to the ship.

In Glisson's account the men were "very much frightened" and talked of "people on the shore arming negroes with the intention of placing them in the front of the battle. Their taking this course has caused much excitement amongst the negro population, who are deserting in every direction."

NOT QUITE FREEDOM, BUT A STEP CLOSER

The idea of labeling enslaved people as "contraband" was born just weeks earlier and roughly fifty miles down the coast at Fort Monroe, one of the few Union outposts around. In a similar short-yet-life-changing journey, Shepard Mallory, Frank Baker, and James Townsend arrived at the fort commanded by Gen. Benjamin Butler on May 24.

Butler determined that upholding the Fugitive Slave Law, which required the return of runaways to their owners, would work against the Union's war efforts. He argued that since Virginia had seceded from the Union the day before, there was no constitutional obligation to return the men to their enslavers. Further, under military law dealing with warring nations, the three men would be seized as contraband; property to be used by an enemy nation against the Union.

Congress later formalized the concept with the passing of the Confiscation Act of 1861, signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln on August 23.

MARKING A PLACE AND TIME

A new historic marker recounting the men and their historic journey is set to be installed on Route 33, just a couple of miles from the original location of the old Stingray Point Lighthouse in Deltaville. A formal unveiling took place on July 17, almost 160 years to the day that the men rowed into history.

For Bessida Cauthorne White, president of the Middle Peninsula African-American Genealogical and Historical Society which sponsored the marker, it is a milestone in a journey that included lots of persistence, a fair amount of sleuthing, and a little bit of luck.

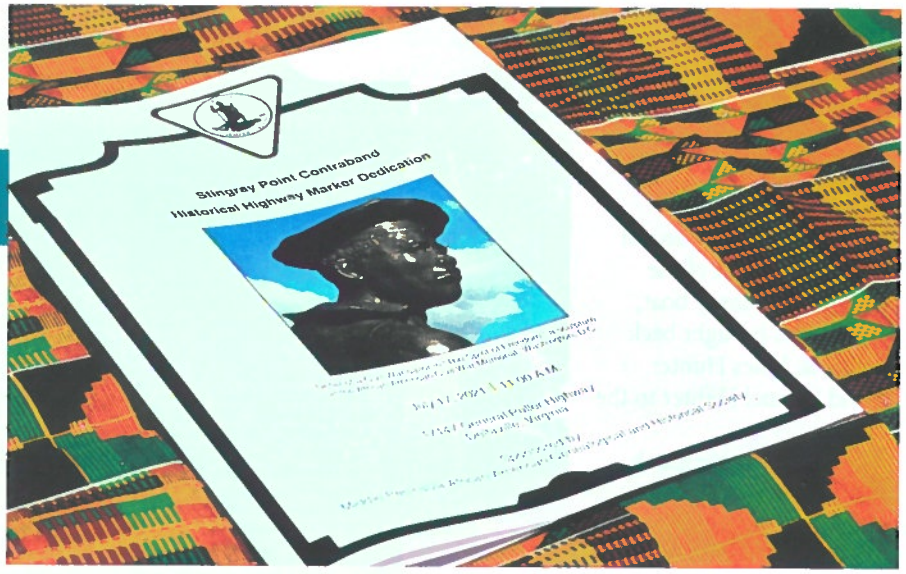
Bessida Cauthorne White, president of the Middle Peninsula African-American Genealogical and Historical Society

White specializes in genealogy but also acknowledges that "you can't do genealogy without doing history." Yet she had not heard the story of the Stingray Point Contraband until she was approached by Davaline Taliaferro, great-granddaughter of David Harris, in April 2012.

While the Harris family knew the story of the lighthouse escape, the historical significance of the event was not discovered until Taliaferro conducted further research using military documents.

It was White and Taliaferro who worked with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources to bring the marker to fruition. The sign reads:

> *"Six enslaved men (Alexander Franklin, David Harris, John Hunter, Miles Hunter, Peter Hunter, and Samuel Hunter), fearing impressment into Confederate service, sought refuge in the Stingray Point Lighthouse near here on 15 July 1861 and hailed*



Sylvia Cyrus, the Executive Director of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) holding a copy of a family history book about her deep-rooted Deltaville family.

the USS Mount Vernon. Similar escapes followed. The U.S. Secretary of the Navy, following the contraband theory established at Fort Monroe, authorized the employment of self-emancipated men and, in Sept. 1861, approved their enlistment in the U.S. Navy, nearly a year before black men could enlist in the U.S. Army. After serving in the Navy, Harris is the only one of the six men known to have returned to this community, where he had been enslaved."

THOSE THAT FOLLOWED

With the possibility of freedom within reach, the trickle of "contraband," as they came to be called, turned into a wave. Fort Monroe, especially, became known as "Freedom Fortress." With ever increasing numbers of men, women, and children, contraband camps were hastily erected, usually near Union-held forts.

Contrabands were given non-military work in support of the Union forces like building fortifications, piloting steamboats, nursing, or cooking for troops. They eventually earned wages for that work, though at a lesser rate than whites. In September 1861, Secretary of the Union Navy, Gideon Welles, issued a directive that contrabands be paid ten dollars per month. With changes in laws, black men were allowed to enlist in the Union Army in July of 1862. At Fort Monroe, the Army paid men eight dollars per month and women four dollars per month. According to military records, roughly 200,000 black men would enlist in the Union forces, with 40,000 paying the ultimate price.

Though important, the contraband story is bigger than a 42 x 40 cast aluminum sign installed along the highway. For some, it is a story about blazing a trail for others and fighting for a cause. For others, it was an idea that signaled the beginning of the end of slavery in the United States.

But for White, this story, like so many others, is about "getting the word out about the rich histories of African-Americans." To that end, White, Taliaferro, and other members of their organization continue to comb through documents looking for clues that will lead to a more complete picture of the other five men, the lives they lived, and descendants that may still be living, unaware of their forefather's place in history.