



THE ROANOKE ISLAND,

Freedmen's Colony

1862-1867

An exhibit at Roanoke Island Festival Park depicts a scene inside of a Freedmen's Colony school.

AN EXPERIMENTAL, PLANNED COMMUNITY FOR FREED SLAVES WAS AN EARLY AVENUE ON THE NETWORK TO FREEDOM

By Michael E.C. Gery

Most of us know about the English attempts in the 1580s to establish a permanent settlement on Roanoke Island. The project ended when some 112 men, women and children failed to secure a foothold on the island and by 1590 had vanished. It has long been known as the “lost colony.”

Fewer of us know much about another, more successful attempt to establish a permanent colony on Roanoke Island, not far from the “lost colony” site, between 1862 and 1867. At its most robust, by the end of 1863, the Freedmen's Colony on Roanoke Island contained about 3,000 residents, most of whom had been slaves three years earlier in the surrounding mainland of northeastern North Carolina. It was the largest community ever on the Outer Banks, on an island that beforehand was populated by about 600 people (two-thirds white, and one-third black, including some 170 slaves). The Freedmen's Colony, under supervision of the U.S. military, had established its own schools, churches, craft business and a sawmill, and had built about 600 houses and gardens. And it gave people who formerly had been denied any civil rights, a taste of citizenship, family life and hope.

“SAFE HAVEN”

As the Civil War became inevitable, the Confederate military put slaves and free blacks to work building fortifications and protecting ports and waterways along the Southern coast. Many of the coastal area slaves were skilled as boatmen, fishermen, builders and artisans by that time. In the war's early stages, Union forces systematically seized Confederate coastal strongholds and in August 1861 occupied Hatteras Island on the Outer Banks with very little resistance. In her thorough history of the Roanoke Island Freedmen's Colony, Patricia C. Click writes that two of the slaves, Ben Tillett and Thomas Robinson, who had helped build forts on Roanoke Island then escaped to Hatteras when it fell into Union hands, assisted Union commanders in their invasion of nearby Roanoke Island, a crucial gateway for shipping and naval fleets. In February 1862, the Union Army under Gen. Ambrose Burnside defeated the Confederate forces on Roanoke Island and immediately occupied their forts and set up camp.

It wasn't long after the fall of Roanoke Island that word spread among mainland slaves that “if you can cross the creek to Roanoke Island, you will find safe haven.” And so they did. A month after the Union occupation, the army had organized a system for handling the fugitive slaves, who had streamed onto the island and took up residence in the abandoned Confederate barracks and outbuildings. Union leaders considered them “contraband” of war, and felt no obligation to return them to their former owners. In similar situations months earlier in South Carolina, the Union forces simply seized plantations where they could harbor slaves and give them jobs. Roanoke Island, however, as the first contraband camp of former slaves in North Carolina, was organized as a “colony” and intended to become a permanent, self-sufficient community. The commander on the island, Col. Rush Hawkins, aimed to keep the contraband families together, to employ the adults who could work and pay them wages and rations. Gen. Burnside soon turned over the supervision of blacks in eastern North Carolina to U.S. government authorities.

Once Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation declared all slaves freed in January 1863, their movement to sanctuaries

The Roanoke Island Freedmen's Colony is recognized as a site on the National Park Service's National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom. A marker at Fort Raleigh National Historic Site was erected in 2001 and dedicated at a ceremony attended by descendants of the Freedmen's Colony. There also is a path through the woods north of Fort Raleigh that leads visitors to a commemorative park along Croatan Sound. During the weekend of Feb. 14-15, Roanoke Island Festival Park will honor the colony during its Civil War remembrance activities. For more information, call (252) 475-1506. Or visit www.roanokeisland.com

such as Roanoke Island intensified. In April, an Army chaplain from Massachusetts, the Rev. Horace James, who earlier had served with the regiment that seized Roanoke Island, was named "Superintendent of All Blacks in North Carolina" and was ordered to organize "a colony of Negroes" on the island. Simultaneously, the Union Army began recruiting and enlisting newly freed black men and formed the first company of the North Carolina Colored Volunteers.

As the younger men left with the army, the Roanoke Island camp evolved into a sanctuary for their families. The local commanding officer at the time, Brig. Gen. Edward A. Wild, ordered the occupation of abandoned and undeveloped land in the vicinity of the military facilities as the site of an ambitious, planned colony. Horace James in early 1864 submitted a plan that showed 26 streets crossed by three "avenues" 50 feet wide. Families were assigned lots of about an acre, and they began building houses and gardens. They organized churches and schools. Plans grew to include a sawmill, grist mill, industrial school and storehouse. The colonists engaged in fishing, boat-building, basket-making, shoe-making and tending vineyards. Historian Patricia Click quotes from Horace James' annual report for 1864, in which he wrote that the island could become "the abode of a prosperous and virtuous people, of varying blood, but one of destiny, differing it may be, in social position, but equal before the law, a happy commonwealth."

Northern Christian missionaries and anti-slavery advocates became involved in the development of new black communities soon after the Emancipation Proclamation. Horace James was well connected to the New England missionary societies and welcomed help from those willing to serve as teachers on Roanoke Island. The first to arrive in the fall of 1863 was his cousin, Elizabeth James. Eventually, seven teachers worked there. Schools were primitive, but effective, given that few of the colonists could read or write. Rev. James housed some of the teachers in a house known as Sunnyside, even though island native Isaac Meekins protested the absconding of his mother's house. More than teaching, the missionaries found themselves involved in arduous duties intended simply to keep the colony relatively healthy and afloat.

THE DREAM FADES

When the Confederates in the spring of 1864 managed to recapture Plymouth nearby along the Roanoke River, a new influx of freed blacks arrived on Roanoke Island. The colony's population swelled to more than 3,500 people, and the lack of sufficient housing and sanitary conditions for them all began a downward slide from which the Freedmen's Colony was unable to recover.

Relations between the occupying military forces and the freed families were always strained at best. The relationship, as Click points out, perpetuated the colonists' dependency on the military rather than encouraged their self-reliance. As the war dragged on, the island troops began taking advantage of the colonists, even apprehending their rations. The blacks in the volunteer troops complained that not only were they not paid often, if at all, but

their families on the island had begun suffering as well. The superintendent in charge of the colony in 1865 turned out to be corrupt and was discharged. Meanwhile, the fishing and grape seasons had not fared well for the islanders, making them even needier.

In April of 1865, Horace James appealed personally and unsuccessfully to President Andrew Johnson to address the mistreatment and injustices prevalent among the freedmen's camps throughout the South. About a month later, President Johnson issued his Amnesty Proclamation that ordered all property seized by the Union forces during the war be

returned to owners who could prove title to it. That forecast the end of the Roanoke Island colony and others following its model. While James, his supporters and the freed people protested, claiming they had earned the right to at least rent property that they had improved—the Freedmen's Colony in the end occupied some 1,100 acres—the government was determined to return the property to its owners and to redirect the Roanoke Island colonists to new lives on their own on the mainland. Many returned to regions they had escaped as the war broke out and found work as farmers, tradespeople and sharecroppers. Others stayed to work on Roanoke Island and Hatteras communities.

In 1868, Patricia Click reports, 11 former colonists bought 200 acres from local families on the west side of Roanoke Island near where the colony had been. In

1870, the census counted 300 blacks in 60 households. One was Richard Etheridge, a former colonist who had joined the Union's Colored Troops, had seen battle and later joined the famous Buffalo Soldiers in military service on America's western frontier. He was one who had petitioned the government to improve treatment of the Roanoke Island families of soldiers fighting for its cause. In 1885, Etheridge became the first African American commander of a U.S. Lifesaving Station, the Pea Island, N.C. station. In 1996, after a century of neglect, his 1895 crew was awarded the service's highest medal for heroism in rescuing members of the ship E.S. Newman during a fierce hurricane. The ceremony took place next to the Etheridge family cemetery plot on Roanoke Island, a small patch of ground near today's Dare County Airport and the North Carolina Aquarium, which now occupy the land where the Roanoke Island Freedmen's Colony lived. Despite archaeological research conducted on the north end of the island in the 1980s and early 1990s, there is no trace remaining of the colony itself.



The "First Light to Freedom" monument at Fort Raleigh National Historic Site includes this rendering of slaves reaching the safe haven of Roanoke Island.

Resources:

"Time Full of Trial: The Roanoke Island Freedmen's Colony, 1862-1867," by Patricia C. Click, University of North Carolina Press, 2001.
 "Roanoke Island: The Forgotten Colony," by Arvilla Tillett Bowser and Lindsay Bowser, Maximilian Press Publishers, 2002.
 "The Outer Banks of North Carolina," by David Stick, University of North Carolina Press, 1958.
 Fort Raleigh National Historic Site, Manteo, N.C.
 Roanoke Island Festival Park, Manteo, N.C.