

Virginia

Contraband camps took different forms in different places. For instance, while in Memphis camps were created, often from the ground up, along or in the Mississippi River, in South Carolina many camps existed on the same plantations where blacks had been slaves. Still other camps simply consisted of a number of blacks resident at Union encampments. Especially in the case of newly-built camps, the populations were ever-changing since fugitives arrived daily, men were recruited into service, and women were often sent to work on abandoned farms or plantations. Some of what is known about these makeshift communities comes from official record while important details have been provided through the writings of various people—often associated with religious groups or benevolent organizations—who visited them. The most remarkable of these first-hand accounts is provided by Quaker Levi Coffin, who transitioned from his work on the Underground Railroad directly to fundraising for the contraband.

Alexandria

Craney Island

Robert Engs refers to a “large contraband camp on Craney Island in Hampton Roads near Norfolk.”¹ He adds that a school was started on the island.²

Camp Hamilton and Camp Butler

Camps are believed to have “sprung up” outside Camp Hamilton (on the site of present-day Phoebus, Virginia) and Camp Butler.³

Hampton

Hampton is home to the famous Fortress Monroe, at times under the command of Gen. Benjamin Butler. This installation, located on Old Port Comfort, the entrance to Hampton Roads, is referred to as “Fort Freedom.” Historian Robert Engs describes the path of the three bondsmen whose escape from slavery is now directly connected to Gen. Butler’s eventual use of contraband identity being applied to fugitives. According to Engs, “On the night of 24 May 1861, three slave men fled across the causeway

¹ Robert Engs, *Freedom’s First Generation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), 50.

² Robert Engs, *Freedom’s First Generation*, 52.

³ See John V. Quarstein and Dennis P. Mroczkowski, *Fort Monroe: the Key to the South* (Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia, 2000).

that led from Old Point Comfort to Fortress Monroe and appealed for sanctuary.”⁴ Engs explains that Union policies concerning fugitives were modeled after policies at Hampton.⁵

According to Engs, groups that arrived at the Fort could be as large as 1,200 people.⁶ This estimation is in keeping with Superintendent of Freedmen John Eaton, Jr.’s statement that the movement of freemen into occupied areas was like “the arrival of cities.” Given the onslaught, one can perhaps understand why officials chose a labor strategy that included first keeping track of individuals by having them register with the freedmen’s department.

As for housing, Engs suggests that for a perhaps short time blacks and missionaries occupied “the old Chesapeake Female Seminary two miles west of the Fort.” Before long, they were forced to vacate it. Otherwise, according to him, blacks lived “in tents along the Mill Creek Swamp.” By April of ’62, blacks, given lumber, were able to build houses for themselves and renovated a “burned-out courthouse” to use as a school and church.⁷ Still other blacks lived, according to Engs, west of Hampton at “slabtown,” so named “because the houses were constructed from old packing crates.”⁸

Norfolk

Norfolk fell to federal forces in May of 1862. By April of the Following year, under the command of Gen. Benjamin Butler, two schools were opened in black churches. These schools were later moved to white churches.⁹

Portsmouth

Richmond¹⁰

⁴ Robert Engs, *Freedom’s First Generation*, 19.

⁵ Robert Engs, *Freedom’s First Generation*, 25.

⁶ Robert Engs, *Freedom’s First Generation*, 38.

⁷ Robert Engs, *Freedom’s First Generation*, 33.

⁸ Robert Engs, *Freedom’s First Generation*, 38.

⁹ Robert Engs, *Freedom’s First Generation*

¹⁰ A photograph of this camp can be viewed at <http://www.examiner.com/examiner/x-8873-African-American-Genealogy-Examiner~y2009m8d6-Using-Archivesgov-Part-One--Archival-Research-Catalog-ARC>