

Marker: Enslaved men used lighthouse

by Larry Chowning

Along with 19 other newly approved Virginia historical highway markers celebrating African-American history, Gov. Ralph Northam announced last week that a historical "Stingray Point Contraband" highway marker will be placed in Deltaville, alongside General Puller Highway (Route 33), 1.8 miles west of where the original lighthouse was located.

The marker speaks to six enslaved men who used the abandoned Stingray Point Lighthouse building during the Civil War as a safe house while waiting to catch a Union ship allowing them to escape slavery and join the Union army.

The marker will state that "Alexander Franklin, David Harris, and John, Miles, Peter and Samuel Hunter, fearing impressment into Confederate service, sought refuge in the

Stingray Point Lighthouse near here on 15 July 1861 and hailed the (Union ship) USS Mount Vernon.

"Similar escapes followed. The U.S. Secretary of 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."

The marker was sponsored by Middle Peninsula African-American Genealogical and Historical Society (MPAAGHS) that in 2005 co-sponsored, with the James River Blues Society, a highway marker for blues musician William Moore in Tappahannock.

David Harris was a slave from Middlesex County. The story of Stingray Point Contraband was brought to the group's attention by Davaline

Taliaferro, great-granddaughter of Harris, said MPAAGHS co-founder and president, Bessida Cauthorne White.

Taliaferro, a Middlesex County native who spent most of her adult life in Washington, D.C., now lives in Deltaville. The story of Harris' escape to freedom was passed down through family oral history.

"All of my life I have known about David Harris' escape from Stingray Point and his service in the U.S. Navy; however I only learned the national significance of this in recent years from David Harris' Civil War pension files, the official naval records, and other sources," Taliaferro said in an interview with White.

Taliaferro spent countless hours pouring over official naval records, census and vital

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The Stingray Point Lighthouse, constructed in 1858 and dismantled in 1965 to make way for a modern light, was used by Middlesex County African-American slaves as an avenue to freedom. This is a 1920s view of it. (Courtesy Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum)

Lighthouse . . .

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records, and other sources to learn about her great-grandfather and the other Stingray Point refugees, said White. She was unable to determine if any of the others returned to Middlesex.

Harris did return to Middlesex after the Civil War and lived the rest of his life in the Deltaville community. The family has Harris' sword, Bible and Civil War ledger. Taliaferro says that these family possessions were always in the house in which she grew up, having been passed down by Harris and his wife Nancy Henry Harris to their daughter, Magdalene Harris Taliaferro, and her son Davies Taliaferro (Davaline's grandmother and father). The Bible and the ledger have been digitized by the Library of Congress.

The Stingray Point Contraband marker application was prepared on behalf of MPAAGHS by White and Taliaferro. Tyler Radabaugh assisted by helping to find citations for some of the sources. The Middlesex Museum and Historical Society Inc. voiced its support for the Stingray Point marker.

In addition to Davaline Taliaferro, David Harris' surviving great-grandchildren are Gwathney Taliaferro, Barbara Taliaferro Foster, and Ceres Brooks Gillis, all of whom live in the Hampton Roads area. Great-great-grandchildren living in Middlesex County are Camilla Sutherlin, Aaron Sutherlin and Joan Harris Oppie.

MPAAGHS has also identified the site of the Rappahannock Industrial Academy in Essex, and the 1923 lynching site of Horace Carter in

King and Queen County as potential historic road sign sites.

The group is currently researching the lives of the other five Stingray Point sailors and searching for their present-day descendants. Also on tap are plans to restore the Harris family cemetery where David Harris, his wife, and other family members are buried.

For information on the Stingray Point Lighthouse story, see Davaline Taliaferro's essay, "Slave, Contraband Sailor, Citizen — Middlesex County, VA" on the MPAAGHS website at <http://mpaagenealogicalsociety.org/slaverycivilwar.html>

The other 19 signs and locations are Charlotte Harris Lynched 6 March 1878, City of Harrisonburg; African-American community of Bristow, Clarke County; Burrell Memorial Hospital, City of Roanoke; John Chilembwe, City of Lynchburg; Spy Hill African-American Cemetery, King George County; Sunset Hill School, Town of Strasburg; Campbell County Training School, Campbell County; Prospect Public School, Scott County; Calvin Collidge Green, New Kent County; Central Lunatic Asylum, City of Richmond; Central State Hospital Cemetery, Dinwiddie County; Little Zion Baptist Church, Orange County; The African Preacher, Nottoway County; Westwood Baptist Church, City of Richmond; Barbara Rose Johns, Prince Edward County; Camilla Ella Williams, City of Danville; Ona Judge, Fairfax County; Wyatt Tee Walker, City of Petersburg; and Sgt. William H. Carney, City of Norfolk.