

THE FREEDPEOPLE OF THE ROANOKE ISLAND FREEDMEN'S COLONY

In February 1862, shortly after the Battle of Roanoke Island, some of the slaves who had been working for the Confederate troops on the island joined with some slaves from the island and some slaves who had escaped from the mainland and established a camp on the fringe of the Union encampment. Following the precedent established by General Benjamin Butler at Fortress Monroe, the slaves were not returned to their owners. Rather they were considered contraband of war, and they were initially referred to as contrabands, and later freedmen or freedpeople. Word soon spread to the neighboring North Carolina mainland that slaves reaching Roanoke Island would be granted freedom, and many others sought refuge in the contraband camp. By early April, there were approximately 250 former slaves in the Roanoke Island camp. By late summer the number approached 1,000 and was growing. By the end of the war, at least 3,500 former slaves called the Roanoke Island colony home.

During their first days on the island, the slave refugees sought shelter wherever they could find it. Some built huts out of tree limbs, but most moved into the old barracks or other buildings that had been abandoned by the Confederates on the north end of the island. After gathering their family members together, the contrabands built two churches and opened a school. Family, religion, and education retained positions of importance in the freedmen's colony throughout its existence.

Although the military took over the direction of the colony in the spring of 1863, the freedpeople continued to play a significant role in the direction of the colony. They cleared land and built houses, and many worked for the Union army in other construction projects on the island. They also were vocal in denouncing the military's treatment of the freedpeople on the island and the improprieties of some of the assistant superintendents. Once it was established that black men could serve in the Union army, most of the island's able-bodied men enlisted in the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd North Carolina Colored Volunteers, which were renamed the 35th, 36th, and 37th U.S. Colored Troops.

Projects:

1. Read *Time Full of Trial: The Roanoke Island Freedmen's Colony, 1862-1867*, especially chapters 2, 4, and 5. Describe life in the colony from the perspective of the freedpeople. What were some of the challenges that they faced? Why were they so interested in education? What, in particular, did it seem that they wanted from their education? Assess the significance of the cultural differences between the freedpeople and the missionaries on the island.
2. Read *Time Full of Trial: The Roanoke Island Freedmen's Colony, 1862-1867*, especially chapters 6, 7, and 8, and the letters from the Roanoke Island freedmen that are

transcribed on this Web site. Discuss the military's treatment of the freedpeople. What were the freedmen's major complaints? What practical and cultural difficulties did the freedpeople face in dealing with the military on the island?

3. Read the Epilogue of *Time Full of Trial: The Roanoke Island Freedmen's Colony, 1862-1867* in conjunction with the letters from Roanoke Island freedmen that are transcribed on this Web site. Why were the colonists who stayed on Roanoke Island successful in the postwar period? What were some of the problems that they faced?