



Davaline Taliaferro, left, and Ceres Brooks, both great-granddaughters of David Harris, a Middlesex County slave who escaped to freedom by hiding in Stingray Point Lighthouse and joining the Union Navy, unveiled the Stingray Point Contraband Virginia Historic Road Sign in front of the Deltaville Community Association's Ricky Taylor Community Swimming Pool in Deltaville on Saturday.

(Photo by Larry Chowning)

Marker dedicated describing 1861 “self-emancipation” at Stingray Point Lighthouse

by Larry Chowning

There was standing room only under a large tent in the Deltaville Community Center parking lot Saturday as more than 100 people attended the dedication and celebration of the Stingray Point Contraband Virginia Historic Road Sign.

The marker recognizes six enslaved Middlesex County men who self-emancipated 160 years ago at Stingray Point on July 15, 1861. The men knew that the United States Navy had blockaded the Chesapeake Bay and they escaped to the Stingray Point Lighthouse, where they took shelter until they hailed the U.S.S. Mount Vernon, which took them aboard.

The six men enlisted in the Navy after the secretary of the Navy invoked the contraband of war theory established earlier that year at Fort Monroe. The marker's sponsor is the Middle Peninsula African-American Genealogical and Historical Society (Middle Peninsula AAGHS).

The six Middlesex African-Americans who “self-emancipated” were John, Samuel, Miles and Peter Hunter, Alexander Franklin and David Harris. Great-granddaughters of Harris, Darlene Harris Royce, Ceres Brooks and Davaline Taliaferro unveiled the marker before the crowd. After the war, Harris

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Marker . . .

was the only one of the six to return to Deltaville and live out his life.

Invocation

President of Middle Peninsula AAGHS, Bessida Cauthorne White, presided over the ceremony and introduced the Rev. Keith L. Parham, who gave the invocation. The Rev. Parham's prayer touched on the very core of why the sign was being erected. He said "to mark this historic day we invoke God's divine presence . . . let your presence seep into our hearts with love and let your compassion unite our lives into one people with positive purpose and radiate and revive our hope for a better today and a more peaceful tomorrow. Bless all those in attendance and especially to those descendants of those gallant men and women who braved tyranny and won freedom for themselves.

"We thank the Lord for those who sacrificed so that this marker and this moment could become a living reality. Bless this time of sharing that it serves as an inspiration to Stingray Point, to the historic Deltaville community, to Middlesex County, to the Commonwealth of Virginia, to the United States of America and to the world.



George Robinson of Deltaville touched the soul of the crowd with his rendition of the song "O, Freedom."

"Lord when we leave this place let this marker stand as a red badge of honor for you and for all who see it. Let it be motivation for all of us, for all of us Lord, as we go forth to do the work, the work of peace and unity to build a greater understanding of this nation and abroad."

Middle Peninsula AAGHS

After the invocation, White explained that the Middle Peninsula AAGHS learned in 2019 that only about 12% of Virginia's Historic roadside markers related to African-Americans and her group vowed to change that. "We decided to take action and we found it was not at all difficult to identify topics deserving of a marker," she said. "We started with Stingray Point simply because much of the heavy lifting in terms of research had already been done by our member Davaline Taliaferro. So many years ago Davaline shared this story with us," she said.

The group toured the Stingray Point area in 2012 and visited the replica of the Stingray Point Lighthouse at Stingray Point Marina in Deltaville. The original Stingray Point Lighthouse was decommissioned and dismantled in 1965.

White thanked Taliaferro for teaching the



At the start of the Stingray Point Contraband state historic roadside sign program on Saturday in Deltaville, Middle Peninsula African-American Genealogical and Historical Society president Bessida Cauthorne White, left, said "as a way to remember (our past) we look to traditional African culture and in many African societies before any venture is undertaken libation is poured to ask our ancestors to look in favor upon which is to be done. Libation is a ritual of pouring of liquid on the ground as an offering in memory of those who have died and it is most important libation is poured before we unveil this highway marker today," said White. The water was poured into a bowl and then poured onto the ground near the marker. Alexandria Hunt-Quarles, right, a rising eighth grader in Essex County Public Schools, assisted White in the ritual. (Photo by Larry Chowning)

group history that was not taught in school and it was her impetus that persuaded the group to pursue a "Stingray Point Contraband" State Historic Marker.

Libation

As part of the ceremony, White performed a libation (pouring of water) as a traditional ritual brought to America from African cultures. Libation is a ritual of pouring water on the ground as an offering in memory of those

ancestors who have died and to seek approval from those dead ancestors.

"An African proverb states that to go through life without knowledge of our past is like a tree without roots," she said. "In the spirit of remembrance we pour this libation . . . we pour to honor the past so we might learn from it.

"We pour to celebrate the memory of those departed. We call upon our ancestors far and near, fathers of fathers, and mothers of mothers, especially those who endured the institution

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of slavery. We revoke their presence to bare witness to that which we do today. We remember and reflect on the millions of persons who were stolen from the African continent, those who endured the horrors of the continental slave trade as well as the atrocity of the domestic slave trade of which Eastern Virginia was the center . . . to all of those named and unnamed we pour libation.

" . . . We pour libation to the six contraband sailors who we especially remember today and we call their names . . . we pour libation to all Black men who fought for their own freedom as members of the Union Navy and the Army of United States Colored troops.

"We call for libation for all those hundreds and hundreds of enslaved men and women who managed their own fate by self-emancipation in several innovative ways.

"May the indomitable spirit of those named and unnamed engulf this occasion. We offer thanks to this glorious crowd of witnesses whose ancestors had courage and fortitude in facing overwhelming adversity that led us to this day of commemoration and dedication.

Speakers

Chairman of the Middlesex County Board of Supervisors Wayne Jessie welcomed the crowd on behalf of Middlesex County and he thanked officials of the Middle Peninsula AAGHS for their efforts in obtaining the marker.

Joseph S.H. Rogers, Educational Programs manager for the American Civil War Museum, spoke on efforts of the museum to enlighten the public on African-American aspects of the Civil War.

John V. Quarstein, curator emeritus of the USS Monitor Center at The Mariners Museum, told the story of how General Benjamin Butler stationed at Fort Monroe where he became the first to identify slaves who ran away into Union lines as "contraband of war," despite the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850.

Sylvia Cyrus, executive director of the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH), spoke of her own ancestry with Middlesex County. ASALH is an organization that leads the nation in discussion of African-American culture.

Karice Luck-Brimmer, board member of the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, spoke about the procedures involved in establishing a Virginia Historical Roadside sign in the state.

Descendants of contraband sailor David Harris unveiled the marker located right next to the state highway sign celebrating Captain John Smith 1608 voyage to Stingray Point. The new marker is located at 17147 General Puller Highway (Route 33) in Deltaville.