



The Visitor Experience at Fort Monroe National Monument: A Park in Progress

Natural Resource Report NPS/NRSS/EQD/NRR—2014/814



ON THE COVER

Aerial photo of Fort Monroe, courtesy of the United States Army

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Executive Summary

This report presents the results of a qualitative study of residents of Fort Monroe, VA, and visitors to the Casemate Museum at Fort Monroe National Monument. From December 4-7, 2013, focus groups were conducted with both residents and visitors. Our objectives were to learn about opinions regarding the types of visitor services and facilities that Fort Monroe National Monument, one of the newest additions to the National Park System, should include in its future plans, as well as the types of issues the park should consider as it prepares for increased visitation.

We found a population of residents that valued the historic nature, scenic beauty, and tranquility of Fort Monroe, knew its story, and were keenly interested in the future of their neighborhood. The range of opinions expressed by resident focus group participants was not particularly wide, the general opinion regarding the fort's future being that some level of development would be acceptable, but not at the expense of impacting the fort's unique historic atmosphere enjoyed by residents and visitors alike.

We discovered that visitors to the Casemate Museum and Fort Monroe National Monument valued many of the same aspects treasured by residents, in addition to its visitor-friendly, uncrowded conditions. Like its residents, visitors were concerned with preserving the fort's historic nature and were generally wary of activities that might lead to over-development and commercialization.

Both the resident and visitor focus group participants offered many ideas concerning the types of services and facilities that could improve the visitor experience at Fort Monroe National Monument, and their suggestions overlapped significantly. Directional and interpretive signage was among visitors' most important amenities, while residents' interests were more focused on physical improvements. Both groups were very interested in seeing more of the fort's buildings open to the public.

This focus group study revealed that residents and visitors appreciate what is unique about Fort Monroe, and many view the National Park Service as a worthy and trusted steward of this historic resource. . In support of the NPS initiative "Call to Action Goal #13 Stop Talking and Listen", park managers have taken a positive step in opening a dialogue that can serve them well as future plans develop.

Acknowledgements

We are most grateful to the many Fort Monroe residents and visitors to Fort Monroe National Monument who were willing to share their ideas and opinions with us. We thank Eola Dance of Fort Monroe National Monument and the staff of the Casemate Museum for logistical support. For their assistance recruiting focus group participants we thank Kimberly Gross of the Fort Monroe Authority and Sarah Weatherill of The Chamberlin. We also thank our transcriptionist Kris Vowell and Erin Singer for reviewing the transcripts.

About the Authors

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Background

Fort Monroe National Monument

Fort Monroe National Monument, as stated on the National Park Service website, “spans the American story through the 21st century: American Indian presence, Captain John Smith’s journeys, a safe haven for freedom seekers during the Civil War, and a bastion of defense for the Chesapeake Bay” (www.nps.gov/fomr, retrieved March 1, 2014). The largest stone fort in the U.S., Fort Monroe was one of the nation’s oldest continually operating U.S. Army posts until it was decommissioned in 2011. That same year, portions of Fort Monroe were established as a national monument. The Fort Monroe National Monument boundary encompasses 325 acres with over 100 historic buildings including the Casemate Museum, 85 acres of wetlands, and 3.2 miles of waterfront along Chesapeake Bay. The map in Figure 1 shows the portions of the peninsula that are managed by the National Park Service.

Interpretive services and programming at the park are in the planning stages. The Casemate Museum, located within the historic fort, is operated by the Commonwealth of Virginia through the Fort Monroe Authority. It is free for individuals and open to the public year-round for self-guided and scheduled guided tours. Museum and park visitors may also take a self-guided grounds tour within the moated area of the fort, stroll or bicycle along the public beach’s paved trail, take part in the Junior Ranger program, fish, observe wildlife, and camp.

The Fort Monroe Authority

The Fort Monroe Authority (FMA), a political subdivision of the Commonwealth of Virginia, was established to serve as the community’s official “Local Redevelopment Authority.” As described in the Fort Monroe Authority Act, its mission is:

“...to protect the historic resources at Fort Monroe, provide public access to the fort's historic resources and recreational opportunities, exercise exemplary stewardship of the fort's natural resources, and maintain Fort Monroe in perpetuity as a place that is a desirable one in which to reside, do business, and visit, all in a way that is economically sustainable.”

In its 2013 Master Plan (see www.fmauthority.com), the FMA's responsibilities in the next 15 years are as follows:

1. Historic preservation oversight;
2. Maintaining green areas, parks, and open space;
3. Maintaining roads, sidewalks, and trails;
4. Leasing and maintaining buildings in the Inner Fort due to restriction on sales and new development;
5. Leasing and maintaining buildings in the Wherry Quarter until ground leases are executed for new development;
6. Operating the utility systems;
7. Operating the Casemate Museum and public programs;
8. Administration of long-term ground leases and homeowner associations;
9. Leasing and operating selected properties to the degree needed to generate ongoing revenue.

The City of Hampton, the NPS, and FMA engage in cooperative planning, along with the United States Army. This cooperative management group is working to foster additional partnerships with private, public, and educational institutions to shape the future of Fort Monroe.

At the time of publication, the FMA had 176 residential units to rent, of which 149 were occupied. It leased buildings and office space to 20 different commercial enterprises, institutions, and organizations. One of its biggest leasers is the Chamberlin, a senior living facility with over 130 units.

Figure 1. Fort Monroe National Monument

The Study Populations

The residents of Fort Monroe comprised our first study population. These residents shared the common experience of being newcomers to the community, having moved there within the past three years. An FMA self-administered survey of residents revealed a population with a fairly even age spread, a slightly higher percentage of men than women, and a high proportion of military personnel and professionals (see Tables 1 – 3).

Table 1. Resident age group (n=319)

Age group (years)	Percent
Under 18	20
18-29	23
30-41	19
42-53	17
54-65	16
66 or more	16

Table 3. Resident occupation (n=154)

Occupation	Percent
Military	31
Professional	29
Retired	9
Student	8
Education	6
Other	19

Table 2. Resident gender (n=193)

Gender	Percent
Women	42
Men	58

Our second study population was visitors to the Casemate Museum. In 2013 the Museum received nearly 36,000 visitors, with a majority of visitation occurring from April to August. Visitors may view the museum on their own, or may register in advance for a guided group tour. In 2013, 124 tours were conducted, of which 21% were with school groups. Other guided tours were with Boy Scouts, military groups, and general tourists.

While there is no demographic data on Casemate Museum visitors, the museum staff has observed three common types of visitor groups (R. Reed, personal communication, March 12, 2014). One group type consists of local residents showing the museum to their out-of-town guests. Another common visitor group is African Americans sharing the museum experience with their children, and holding family reunions with the museum as a focal point. A third type of group is military personnel and military families, possibly from one of several military bases

in the area. Among the seven focus groups we held at the Casemate Museum, we encountered all three of these visitor group types.

Study Objectives

When Fort Monroe National Monument was authorized on November 11, 2011, a national park was created from a former army base. As visitation to this new park begins to grow, the NPS seeks information about how to best meet future visitors' needs. The portions of the peninsula managed by the NPS require a cohesive plan to direct on-site services and facilities. The objectives of the focus group study were to:

- find out how residents have used the national monument for recreation;
- obtain visitors' and local residents' preferences concerning the development of facilities, services and recreational opportunities of the national monument.

The input obtained from visitors and local residents resulting from this initial study will be used to help inform collaborative planning efforts with park partners which include the Commonwealth of Virginia, the City of Hampton, the Fort Monroe Authority, and the United States Army.

Methods

Study Design

A qualitative study was deemed the most appropriate research approach in order to address our study objectives. In this study the goal was to learn about the emerging themes across focus groups rather than focusing on individual participants.

The focus group method of data generation was selected for this study as the most applicable to obtain data in a relatively short period of time and at a low cost. This approach has shown to be beneficial in marketing, consumer, and social science research. Focus groups are used to learn about how people feel about a certain topic and to find a range of opinions across several groups (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Typically, six to twelve participants are included in each focus group and multiple groups are conducted. The participants in each group can be diverse in demographic characteristics, but should be compatible enough to create a comfortable environment for open dialogue. We followed guidelines for focus group procedures from Krueger and Casey (2000).

Focus Group Question Route Development

Through multiple communications with staff at Fort Monroe National Monument, we defined the study's objectives and crafted questions to elicit responses related to those objectives. The question route progressed from the general to the more specific. Using Krueger and Casey (2000) as a guide, we developed questions that were open-ended, conversational, clear, simple, direct, and appropriate for the intended audience. The resident focus group question route began with questions about what participants liked about living at Fort Monroe and progressed to specific questions regarding services and facilities at Fort Monroe National Monument. The visitor focus group question route began by asking participants about how often they had visited the fort, and then proceeded with questions about facilities, services, and connecting with local communities.

Participant Recruitment

The populations of interest for this study included Fort Monroe residents and visitors to the Casemate Museum at Fort Monroe National Monument. To recruit residents, we asked staff at Fort Monroe Authority to forward an email from the park superintendent to all residents, inviting them to participate in a focus group. This email was further circulated by a resident who

maintains an online community of Fort Monroe residents. Invitations were also sent to all residents of The Chamberlin, a senior living facility. Potential participants were asked to reserve a place in a focus group by calling the research staff. Originally, the focus group study was scheduled for the week of October 9, 2013. Due to the U.S. government shutdown, the focus groups were cancelled and rescheduled for the week of December 4, 2013. Park Studies Unit staff contacted each participant to both cancel and reschedule, and new emails were sent to residents, via FMA and The Chamberlin.

To recruit visitors to the Casemate Museum, the focus group moderator approached visitors as they entered the museum and invited them to meet in the Museum's conference room, once they had completed their visit.

Focus Group Procedures

Five resident focus groups were held from December 4-7, 2013, in a meeting room in the NPS headquarters building at Fort Monroe. Seven focus groups with visitors were held on December 6 and December 7 in a meeting room within the Casemate Museum. All discussions were recorded with digital audio devices.

As participants arrived they were greeted, offered refreshments, and asked to write their first names on a place card. The moderator explained the purpose of the study as well as the procedures and guidelines for the discussion, then began the question route. The resident focus groups lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, while the visitor focus groups lasted 25 – 40 minutes, depending on the number of participants per group.

During the focus groups participants were offered refreshments and at the close of each session each participant received a small thank-you gift purchased from the Casemate Museum gift shop.

Data Analysis

In this study, data were analyzed using a process of axial coding. Using the focus group questions as a framework, the dominant themes were identified, as well as themes that arose organically from each discussion. This approach provided a structure to gather and group similar participant responses and create a cohesive picture of the focus group discussion results.

Each focus group recording was transcribed then verified for accuracy by a second staff member. The researcher who was present at the focus group discussions read the transcripts through

several times while comparing them with the audio recordings to become very familiar with the content of each. Participants' comments were then evaluated for their specificity (level of detail), and extensiveness (repetition by different individuals). Since this is a pragmatic rather than a theory-based study, the operationalized themes include topic areas that relate to preferences for services and facilities, as well as issues and suggestions regarding the future of the park.

Quality Control

Qualitative research involves the collection and analysis of data that cannot be quantified nor have statistical measures applied. In order to produce results that demonstrate an objective analysis, the researcher must address certain issues: researcher as instrument, trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

In qualitative research, the researcher is also the research instrument (Richards, 2009), serving as a conduit for the data, and by whom it is analyzed and interpreted. This requires extensive preparation and self-reflection on the part of the researcher so as to remain as objective as possible. Data analysis requires reflection to ensure that results are true to the participants and not a reflection of the researcher's own thought process. The data from this study were coded independently by two researchers therefore we rely on their skills and objectivity as researchers.

It is important to know that data were collected and analyzed in a manner that will accurately answer the research questions and/or address the research objectives; this is called trustworthiness. There are four primary categories to judge the trustworthiness of a qualitative study: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Schwandt, T.A., 2001).

Credibility of the results is vital. The researchers were charged with reconstructing, paraphrasing, and interpreting focus group participants' responses. The beliefs and thoughts of each participant must be communicated, though not modified, by the researcher. While quantitative research is often generalized to entire populations via statistical results, the qualitative results from focus groups are reflective of the participants only and can only be transferred to others within this narrow demographic. These results of our research with the cultural groups in this study do not necessarily reflect the reality of members of cultural groups elsewhere. However, the results will be useful to the managers of Fort Monroe National Monument. Our data and analysis are dependable because we can trace the data throughout the process from generation to interpretation. We did not rely on researcher recall but rather on audio

files and transcriptions. Each focus group audio recording was kept on file and transcribed verbatim. Another researcher, having access to our files, would be able to see the process due to our transparency and thoroughness thus confirming the validity of our research. Every element of the research process has been preserved so that the evolution of focus group questions, coding rules, background research and interpretation of the data can be clearly discerned.

Ethics

When conducting qualitative research, care must be taken to protect the identity of each participant. During focus groups participants share personal thoughts and opinions, so in order to obtain trustworthy data it is imperative that each participant feel safe and comfortable and can share honestly. Setting this tone is the moderator's responsibility.

In this study, during the initial communication with focus group participants, the moderator explained the purpose of the study, how the data would be used and how their identities would be protected. Participants were told their names would be changed to aliases to protect their identity and no one outside the research team would listen to the focus group recordings. The moderator mentioned that the focus group script, recruiting script and recruiting strategy were submitted to and approved by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), as required for all federally funded studies. The moderator then presented the OMB approval number. Throughout the focus groups moderators reminded participants that there were no right answers to encourage sincere responses to questions. These components helped to build a safe environment for all the participants.

Findings

The Focus Group Participants

Residents

The resident focus groups consisted of 29 individuals in five different focus group sessions. The demographic data shown in Tables 4 - 7 describes the population. Participants included students, professionals, tradespersons, and retirees. Six participants were residents at The Chamberlin senior living center.

Table 4. Participant age group (n=29)

Age group (years)	Percent
30-40	34
40-60	21
60 or more	45

Table 5. Participant gender (n=29)

Gender	Percent
Women	41
Men	59

Table 6. Participant race/ethnicity (n=29)

Race/ethnicity	Percent
African American	0.3
Asian	0.3
White	97

Table 7. Participant length of residency at Fort Monroe (n=29)

Length of residency	Percent
Less than 1 year	24
1 year	38
2 – 3 years	38

Casemate Museum visitors

Seven focus groups were conducted with visitors to the Casemate Museum, of which two included families with children, for a total of 20 adults and 5 children (ages 6 – 14). Of these, 30% were military personnel, and 20% were local residents of Hampton, VA. Fifty-percent of participants were women. One family was African American. Half of the participants were visiting the fort and museum for the first time.

Qualitative Findings - Residents

The results in this section are organized by focus group question. For each question, we present a summary of participants' responses. Some summaries are followed by illustrative quotes from the focus group transcripts.

Question 1. What do you like about living here at Fort Monroe?

Fort Monroe's historic, picturesque, and peaceful setting was the most common response to the question about what residents liked about living at the fort. Participants also enjoyed the quiet, relaxing atmosphere, their proximity to the water, and scenic views of Chesapeake Bay. Some placed importance on a sense of safety and security, calling Fort Monroe "the ultimate gated community." Participants enjoyed living in historic buildings and being surrounded by historic architecture. For some, convenience was a big plus, saying that they had easy access to everything they needed, and that the fort's location at the first exit after the tunnel on Interstate 64 allowed them to avoid heavy traffic. Finally, the sense of community, "small town feeling," uncrowded conditions, and living among "like-minded neighbors" were important assets of life at Fort Monroe.

In their answers to this question, participants also mentioned the types of activities and facilities they enjoyed at Fort Monroe, as seen in Table 8.

Table 8. Activities and facilities enjoyed by residents

Activities	Facilities
Biking	Boardwalk
Boating	Beach Club
Entertainment at the Beach Club	Fishing pier
Fishing	Restaurants
Free concerts	
Having family and friends visit	
Learning new things about history	
Running	
Walking	
Watching boats	
Watching people	

Participants shared stories of how they came to live at the Fort. For many it was the result of a long search for the perfect home, while others discovered it by accident. Some participants had lived in nearby communities for most of their lives, and jumped at the chance to move into the fort next door. A few had worked at the fort in civilian capacities and welcomed the opportunity to call it home. Regardless of how they got there, these residents of Fort Monroe expected to stay.

I like living here because first of all it's very relaxing. You don't have the hustle and bustle of the city. So it's a great place to come after work. And sit and, I love the view. Just watching the ships. Watching people, up and down the boardwalk. I love the free concerts. The military bands coming and playing. The beach club has a lot of entertainment too.

It's not every day you get to live in a fort. Living in a fort - that's pretty exclusive. Lot of character, the historical aspect to me is tremendous. And convenient, with [Interstate] 64 being right there, you can get anywhere in no time.

I love having family and friends come, and that it's a historical place. There's kind of a reverence due to the history behind it. I like them coming to visit the museum and see all of the history, of where they're walking and what's happened here. It's very convenient and I can go on the peninsula anywhere. Or I can go across the water and be in the south side. So it's very convenient place to live.

Question 2. If you were to bring visitors to Fort Monroe National Monument, please describe the type of experience you would want them to have during their visit.

Answers to this question tended to fall into one of two categories. Participants commented on the *type of experience* they would want for their visitors, as well as the *kinds of activities* in which they would want their visitors to engage.

Above all, participants wanted their visitors to experience, learn about, and appreciate the historical significance of Fort Monroe. They spoke about the depth of its history, the meaning of Freedom's Fort, the value of sharing this history with children, and the importance of understanding the connections between the major U.S. historical events and the fort. They felt that visitors should have opportunities to learn about topics such as the shipping industry, boat-building, and naval/military activities. Participants hoped that visitors would share their sense of pride in and reverence for the fort's place in American history.

In addition, participants wanted visitors to experience the uniqueness of Fort Monroe, the beauty of its setting, and its “relaxing, resort feel.” Participants were also proud of the pristine, uncrowded beaches that they could share with visitors. Many also commented on the authenticity of the experience offered at Fort Monroe, and that unlike other areas, the historic resources there were not reproductions, but “the real thing.”

It's the history that's here. There's so much here. So diverse with the civil war, the revolutionary war. Everything is right here. The colonists come and stop right here before going to Jamestown. Just right at the mouth of the Hampton roads and the bays, it's just an ideal place. And bringing them here, seeing the casemate and everything that went on and just the area itself, even Fort Wool, taking the boat tour going over to Fort Wool, learning about that. Not only just from the Civil War but these were things that were used later on for fortification, for our safety.

It's the depth of the historical significance this area has. Being a northerner I wasn't, and again not even knowing the casemate was here, when I moved here and started exploring and following the history within the casemate the idea about the contraband and the slaves during the civil war I think has had the most impact on me because the civil war for this country, this nation was the biggest event and it's never been the same since. So the historical significance of the casemate and the fort itself and the naval defenses to me that is just, there's nothing to compare to it. This is authentic, this is the real thing, it's not the reproductions like some other areas.

Regarding the types of activities in which they would want visitors to engage, participants suggested many of the same types of activities that they themselves enjoyed, such as walking, beach activities, watching ships, visiting the Casemate Museum and pet cemetery, and camping at the RV park.

The beaches, being able to have access to them, without them being so crowded and commercialized is extremely appreciated.

One of the things I find so fascinating is the shipping that goes on around here, which I had never, as a child that never entered my mind. Part of it was there wasn't as much as we have now with the container ships. But it's very fascinating for children or visitors to see the amount of naval activity as well as the commercial shipping that goes on.

The casemate museum, I always bring people through there, I've been through several times, and being free and so easy, you can do it in 20 minutes or you can do it in an hour and half. You can do it at your own pace. There's lots of interesting things here to see and participate in...

There's kind of a reverence due to the history behind it. I like them coming to visit the museum and see all of the history

Question 3. What types of facilities, recreational activities, educational programs, and/or services should be available to visitors?

When we listened to participants' suggestions regarding visitor facilities, services, and activities, three themes emerged:

1. Additional facilities will accommodate visitors' (and residents') recreational needs and enhance their experience at Fort Monroe.
2. New economic development will attract visitors and commercial enterprises, thus generating the revenue needed to maintain the community's infrastructure.
3. New facilities and development will attract more visitors and may negatively affect the quality of life for Fort Monroe residents.

These three perspectives were not mutually exclusive. During the focus group discussions any participant was likely to express multiple perspectives.

Participants offered many suggestions for the kinds of facilities that would enhance the visitor experience at Fort Monroe. In most cases they did not differentiate between things that would benefit national monument visitors and those that would enhance their own quality of life. While coding, we divided their responses into two categories. Table 9 shows participants' suggestions for traditional visitor services and facilities. Table 10 lists suggestions that fall into the category of development, including restoration and expansion activities for commercial purposes and economic development.

Table 11 lists suggestions that pertain to interpretive facilities and activities. The most common interpretive service mentioned was interpretive wayside signs, followed by exhibits. The topics suggested in that same table demonstrate the breadth of understanding exhibited by Fort Monroe's residents. Many were very knowledgeable about the fort's history and wanted additional information. Those who knew little seemed interested in learning more.

The services and facilities in Table 9 that appeared most important to participants, on the basis of how often they were mentioned and the emphasis placed, were:

- directional signage and orientation to help visitors find their way to the inner fort and the museum;

- additional restrooms;
- maintenance of existing structures and grounds;
- food services;
- lodging.

Regarding the list of development ideas in Table 10, the most popular was to open and/or refurbish more of the casemate and other historic structures, for interpretive and educational activities as well as commercial purposes.

Table 9. Suggested visitor services and facilities

Visitor services/facilities
Beach/primitive camping facilities
Beach houses/bath houses (for swimmers)
Better handicap access from outside the moat (tour bus stop) to the Casemate Museum
Better maintenance at piers to deal with fish-cleaning debris and odors
Bicycle racks
Bicycle rental
Boat rental: kayak/canoe/paddleboat/powerboat
Connect with Fort Wool via tour boat
Directional signage:
from fort entrance to the moat
from freeway exit to the fort
inside inner fort
throughout the Monument
Dog waste bag dispensers

Table 9. Suggested visitor services and facilities, continued

Entrance station to direct traffic (from Ingalls)
Fish cleaning facilities
Food services (restaurants, snack bars)
Increased security – more rangers/police
Life guards
Lodging
Maintenance of buildings and grounds
More frequent trash pickup
More park benches
More restrooms – not porta-potties
More trash cans
Picnic shelters – with ability to reserve for large groups
RV campground enhancement/improvement
Venues for family reunions, celebrations, events

Table 10. Suggested economic development, restoration, expansion

Economic development, restoration, expansion
Airport
Art/craft galleries
Bed and breakfast/inn/hotel
Boat dock at the Chamberlin (re-open the Coast Guard dock)
Conference center/event venues
Connect with Fort Wool via tour boat
Expand and enhance RV park
Expand/open/utilize more of the casemate (e.g. D.C. Prison in Lorton, VA):
More educational/interpretive services
Artists' studios/open studios/art galleries
Improve/beautify Paradise Ocean Club
Miss Hampton II Tour should include Fort Monroe as a stop
Open Building Number 1
Open more buildings for public viewing/tours
Open/continue road to Buckroe:
to provide an additional entrance/exit to the fort
to provide access to more beach
to extend bike/running trail
Open/restore parts of the moat (e.g. jail)
Recreate some parts of the fort to show it in its earlier periods
Refurbish more of the unoccupied buildings for B&B's, coffee shops, pubs, restrooms, etc,
Reopen childcare facility
Reopen "Old Navy Pier" (former yacht club)
Reopen/clean up Dog Beach
Reopen/refurbish the fire station – include in history tour
Reopen theater/cinema
Restore vacant buildings that are in disrepair

Table 11. Suggested interpretive/educational services, facilities, topics

Interpretive/educational services and facilities
Display models of the fort at different periods
Educational center
Exhibits showing earlier fort layout, buildings, defense
Field trips – K-12 and colleges
Guided tours – at Casemate and throughout the fort
Interpretive signage at gun turrets
Interpretive signs for significant buildings
Interpretive/wayside signs - on history/culture - on flora/fauna
Reenactments and mini-dramas
Reopen lighthouse for guided tours
Restore batteries for use as amphitheaters
Restore and interpret mounted guns (along the fort's the wall)
Self-guided tours – via printed brochures, cell phone apps
Self-guided walking historic tour of houses
Visitor center
Interpretive/educational topics
Ancient trees
Architecture
Artillery history
Bird migration
Boat-building - historical (e.g. "dead rise boats") and modern
Civil War
Contraband story
Crabbing

Table 11. Suggested interpretive/educational services and facilities, continued

Interpretive/educational topics, continued
Early forts
Marine life
Famous people at Fort Monroe (e.g. Edgar Allen Poe, Booker T. Washington, military figures)
Fort Wool
Freedom's Fort
Ghost stories
Historic Triangle: Jamestown-Williamsburg-Fort Monroe connection
Mathematics of defense
Military history
Modern shipping
Shipping history (tie in with Mariners Museum)
Survival techniques
Trees, plants, animals, birds
U.S. Naval history

Question 4. Please describe any recreational and/or educational activities that you have participated in the Fort Monroe area. What did you like or dislike about them?

In Question 1 (see page 11), participants were asked what they liked about living at Fort Monroe. Their responses included the types of activities they enjoyed and the facilities they used. Their answers to Question 4 were repetitious of their responses to Question 1. As a result, after conducting the first focus group, we found it unnecessary to continue asking Question 4.

Question 5. What are some of the ways that Fort Monroe National Monument could connect with the local community, to raise awareness and draw visitors to the Monument?

This question elicited responses in several different areas. Participants suggested advertising and promoting the fort's features, such as its rich history and its position in the "historic triangle" of Jamestown, Williamsburg, Fort Monroe; its uncrowded beaches; and its attractive setting as a venue for weddings, conferences, and meetings. They suggested working with local and regional media to raise awareness about the fort and to correct misconceptions. Many participants related

experiences of talking to locals who were unaware that the fort was no longer a military establishment with limited access, but was now open to the public. Others commented on the need for positive media coverage of events at the fort to counteract or balance some of the negative press surrounding contentious development issues. Participants also suggested holding and promoting special events such as 4th of July celebrations, art contests, art shows, and racing events. One participant suggested surveying event visitors to find out how they became aware of the event and how best to inform them of future events.

Here's an interesting thing, with our local newspaper (which is not in fact local, it's printed in Richmond), there are still regular articles in the local paper still referring to this as a military, and it's limited access. Well we don't complain about that. But, there's a lot of misinformation out there. I would think by building some relationships, partnerships with the other local historical places, like the Mariners Museum, they need to know what's here and build some partnership programs. Why reinvent the wheel?

The only thing you read in the newspapers is everyone thinks it's negative, fighting over ownership, and delaying this, and not being able to make a plan for this because everyone is in disagreement. But there ought to be some positive response in the newspaper separate from that, just about what is here and what is happening here rather than what they want to happen here.

Participants proposed building promotional partnerships with the Mariners Museum, Williamsburg, and Jamestown, as well the Miss Hampton II Tours and the Fort Wool tour to help raise awareness of Fort Monroe as a tourist destination.

A third type of response to this question had to do with attracting commercial interests to the fort and promoting it as a good place to do business. Participants suggested restoring historic buildings to accommodate businesses such as restaurants, lodging (i.e. B&B's and inns), and professional office spaces, and offering attractive rental rates. Some expressed a need for a better liaison with FMA's commercial real estate office, saying that they had experienced difficulty communicating with this branch of the organization.

And also they had mentioned here in the middle of the fort making some, like quaint shops. Where it would be, where you'd have small craft shops. Like Larry said, wine shops, which would bring people in and it would be a walking type, outside mall I guess you could kind of call it, I hate to call it a mall. And so one time they had mentioned doing something like that.

All those [buildings] over there could be nice little coffee shops, restaurants, breweries.

If I was a market tech, or an engineer, or a lawyer, what would be neater than having my office inside the moat at Fort Monroe? What impact would that make on people, impression wise, coming to see you.

For some participants, knowing that the National Park Service was involved in managing portions of the fort and making decisions about its future was reassuring. For others, the fort's national park status attracted visitors and symbolized its importance.

I love that it's a national park, because that lets me know that this place is still considered important and taken care of. I think that brings a lot of our family here, to want to be here.

Now I think some of this points out some advantage of having park service management in here. Generally the park service does very well with the properties they manage, on maintaining security and that kind of thing. The rangers have a very good reputation on that. And I'd like to see more of it.

Question 6. In your opinion, what are the issues that the National Park Service should consider as it plans for visitation to Fort Monroe National Monument?

Participants voiced many opinions and concerns about current and future issues regarding plans for the monument as well as the Fort Monroe community. Many of their concerns related to increased visitation and its effect on park resources and the quality of life in their community.

Safety and resource protection

Citing incidents of theft, speeding, and unauthorized activities, participants expressed a need for more security at Fort Monroe in the form of law enforcement officers and more patrols. Some said the current approach to law enforcement is insufficient. There was also concern about protecting historical resources from damage through vandalism. Several participants, who arrived at Fort Monroe when it was still under military control, said they missed the guard at the gate for security reasons and visitor orientation.

Commercial development

While participants spoke in favor of commercial development at Fort Monroe, many did so urging caution, and some were against such development. Those in favor saw the need to enhance the community's economic stability, but were adamant that they did not want certain types, such as fast food franchises or outlet malls, nor did they want the area to resemble a theme

park. Some participants clearly did not want any commercial development in the area. The following comments reflect a common sentiment:

I'll take on the facilities thing. I'm not that dumb that I don't know that they're trying to build up this area as employment and money for the state and national park service so, whatever, our president's design when he passed it over to us, to the state at least. After hearing all the comments here it's obvious we don't want a McDonalds on the premises.

I would like to see the FMA, as everyone would, self-sustaining. By bringing in maybe some small local businesses or operating the theater again, for community residents. I would love to see the idea of the park, the monument part of it, utilized more for family types of activities. But not to the point where it becomes commercialized or a lot of traffic.

Effects of increased visitation

While participants recognized that development and promotion would increase visitation and bring additional revenue to the community, many pointed out it would also result in more traffic, possible crowding, and potential parking problems. For those who wished to protect their privacy and the peaceful, small town atmosphere they so enjoyed at Fort Monroe, steps would need to be taken to mitigate the effects of increased visitation, such as routing traffic away from residential areas and providing shuttle service from parking lots to the inner fort.

Participants were also concerned about providing visitor information and orientation services, adequate and accessible restrooms, and designated parking.

We don't want to make it such that the whole world knows about it. I do worry about that, because I do think that some of the other national parks have become just a parade of cars through, and people... Security, and control. Control of hours. Control of that type of thing. Because some of the smaller parks that I'm aware of will say "We close at sundown," but there's no true closure - we can't have closure here because we have people living throughout it. So we can't put a gate up for example.

I don't want to be sounding negative. I'm just scared, that's the only thing that bothers me, I just don't want a whole big crowd, I don't want to feel like I'm in Virginia Beach. That's my only problem.

Military responsibilities

Some participants pointed out that the U.S. Army was still responsible for removing ordnance from the community, and were concerned about safety issues.

Issues related to STEAM Academy

The STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Applied Mathematics) Academy, located at Fort Monroe and scheduled to open in 2015, caused residents to be concerned about meeting the needs of the students, faculty, and visiting parents related to activities, parking, and lodging.

Tree huggers

Some references to tree huggers came from those who mistrusted outsiders who were against development of open space on the peninsula.

[They are] people who don't live here, and probably people who will never come here, or bring their kids here - they just think anything you do, building new buildings or changing things, they want more green space, they want what's left of the park to be the park. Even though no one's coming to the park. Look at the space now. Who's coming? Got to do something to make the park lands you're going to use useable.

Buckroe Beach issues

The topic of Buckroe Beach, a community at the north end of the peninsula, came up in discussions about extending Fenwick Road to the north (see Figure 1). Participants supported the road extension to provide a second entrance/exit to Fort Monroe to facilitate traffic flow as well as to provide access to more biking, walking, fishing, and waterfront. Others surmised that residents of Buckroe Beach might not be in favor of opening their community to traffic from Fort Monroe. In any case, participants were unclear about the reason for a barricade that currently blocked the road.

Question 7. Are you aware that the Fort Monroe Authority and the City of Hampton are partners with Fort Monroe National Monument? How do you think these partners can work together in the Monument's planning?

All participants were familiar with the Fort Monroe Authority and its responsibilities. Many realized that the National Park Service oversees Fort Monroe National Monument; but most were unsure as to who managed which land areas, nor how the management responsibilities were divided between them. Some participants were not aware that the City of Hampton played a role in planning the future of Fort Monroe. Participants were well aware of the U.S. Army's past presence at Fort Monroe, but did not know the degree of its current involvement and responsibilities.

Despite some lack of understanding of the partners' individual roles, participants understood that a partnership existed between these entities. Some were concerned that without adequate coordination, management and planning efforts risked being duplicated or opportunities overlooked. Participants wondered if the partners had different and potentially conflicting agendas. Some wondered about the degree of influence or oversight one organization might exert over another. For example, a participant asked if the National Park Service could direct the U.S. Army to clean up ordinance buried throughout the fort. It was also suggested that all partners operate under one umbrella organization, with a new name.

Question 8. Are you or a member of your household past or current military personnel?

Question 9. Would you or any member of your household be interested in volunteer opportunities with the Fort Monroe Volunteer Corps?

These two questions were asked to help Fort Monroe National Monument staff's continuing search for historical information, and volunteer recruitment.

While most participants had no family connections to Fort Monroe military personnel, some had worked there in civilian capacities, and some knew of residents at The Chamberlin who had possible connections. One participant did mention that his father had been stationed at the fort, and that he spent a few years living there during early childhood.

Several participants volunteered as docents for the Casemate Museum, and others expressed interest in volunteer opportunities.

Qualitative Findings – Visitors

The results in this section are organized by focus group question. For each question, we present a summary of participants' responses. Some summaries are followed by illustrative quotes from the focus group transcripts. In this section, participants' quotes are only identified by gender, as we did not have opportunities to accurately determine their ages.

The first question was used as an icebreaker, to put participants at ease. They were asked to tell where they were from, and if this was their first visit to Fort Monroe and/or the Casemate Museum. About 20% of participants were from the local area, and 50% were visiting the fort and museum for the first time.

Participants also mentioned how they found out about Fort Monroe. Local residents knew about it due to their proximity. Others saw the signs on I-64, found information online, or used a GPS device to find places of interest. Several participants were military personnel who knew of the fort as a U.S. Army post. One participant learned about it when her child took a school field trip to the fort. An African American woman and mother of three said she often brings her children to the Casemate Museum.

Throughout the discussion participants mentioned what they liked about Fort Monroe. There were specific aspects they enjoyed, including the friendly docents who greeted Casemate Museum visitors, the “mint condition” of the artifacts displayed, and the moat. Many participants also commented on highlights of their visit, including opportunities to learn about history and share it with their children; the sense of “walking through time”; the opportunity to be inside a fort and inside the casemate in a “visitor friendly” atmosphere; the uncrowded, “laid back” feeling at the fort; the overall setting of the fort - its quaintness and its natural and historical features; and the sense that “there’s something for everyone.”

I like how it's so visitor friendly. I can literally walk up into the building. I keep mentioning, elsewhere places like these are completely closed off. And you don't really get to experience the history of them. But here you actually get to go in and look out the windows while you're inside and you can walk around everything. Even outside the Casemate Museum I was able to go up and look at the pet cemetery, and I walk around and get to experience all that, most places because it's an embankment would have closed it off.

Question 2. What types of facilities, recreational activities, educational programs and/or services should be available to visitors?

Participants had many suggestions for visitor services and facilities at the fort. Most were typical of the types of amenities that one would expect at a park. Tables 12 and 13 list their ideas. In addition to these physical amenities, participants were interested in greater public access to more of the fort's buildings and structures, such as the areas of the casemate that are currently closed, the lighthouse, hospital, and the Church of the Centurion.

One participant said would welcome more opportunities to learn about the African American story at the fort. She said:

As a mom, I would like them to have input as to our culture, and what role we played in this area. There's a little small area of the museum and I always kind of draw them towards that. And I just wish it was a little bit more, a little bigger so they can see something they can relate to as opposed to other cultures.

Table 12. Visitors' suggested services and facilities

Visitor services/facilities
Connect with Fort Wool via tour boat
Directional signage: - from fort entrance to the moat - from freeway exit to the fort - inside inner fort - throughout the Monument
Hiking/walking trails
Lifeguards
Park benches
Parking inside the inner fort
Picnic shelters
Restrooms
RV campground
Swimming areas
Trash cans

Regarding recreation at Fort Monroe, visitors mentioned boating, fishing, swimming, picnicking, and walking as activities they did and/or would enjoy doing. Also important were learning about history and experiencing peace and quiet.

Participants had many ideas as to the types of interpretive services and particular topics that could be offered at the monument, as listed below.

Table 13. Visitors' suggested interpretive/educational services, facilities, topics

Interpretive/educational services and facilities
Boat tour that includes Fort Wool
Children's summer camp
Display more mounted guns, with interpretation
Expanded Casemate Museum
Historical house tours
Holiday events with historical contexts
Interactive, hands-on opportunities for children
Interpretive signs to describe buildings – uses, occupants, history
Living history/costumed interpretation and demonstrations
More interpretative exhibits/information on the African American story at Fort Monroe
More orientation to the site, to know what to do and see
Nature center/educational facility to interpret wildlife, marine ecosystems
New film for Casemate Museum
Ranger-guided tours
Reenactments of battles
Self-guided walks with brochures and phone apps
Interpretive/educational topics
African American history
Birds and bird migration
Civil War
Fort building - throughout U.S. history, and at Fort Monroe
Ghosts of Fort Monroe

Table 13. Visitors' suggested interpretive/educational services, facilities, topics, continued

Life at the fort – the ordinary person's experience, at different time periods

Marine life

Naval/military history

Night skies

Who lived here?

Question 3. In your opinion, what are the issues that the National Park Service should consider as it plans for visitation to Fort Monroe National Monument?

Participants addressed several types of issues when responding to this question. The category with the most responses had to do with development issues. Participants wanted to protect park's historic resources and its historic atmosphere by avoiding over-commercialization and over-development. They mentioned keeping the park "as it is," preventing overcrowding, and protecting residents' privacy. An excerpt from a conversation illustrates this sentiment:

Man: Keep it like it is.

Woman: Yeah, keep the commercialization out, no McDonalds.

Man: None of that stuff, nothing commercial like that. Try to keep it as historic as you can.

Others recognized that some businesses were appropriate to have at the fort, but should not be located near the NPS-owned area of the fort. Participants were either unaware or unclear as to which parts of the fort were owned and controlled by the NPS, and what that meant for development. Again, a dialogue between participants explains this viewpoint:

Man: Avoid the commercialization and privatization too close to the site.

Woman: And the concern is too, how much of this is the national park and what isn't? Because I know there's a restaurant. Does the whole Fort Monroe belong to the National Park Service now, or just certain parts of it?

Another participant expressed confidence regarding the NPS:

My experience with the parks has always been very positive, and I think they are very careful and mindful of the environment, I don't think it will become an issue. I think they've got that all in place.

Other issues that concerned participants were: a potential lack of parking as visitation increases; keeping the monument free of entrance fees; avoid too much interpretive media and services so as not to detract from the authentic experience; and to avoid “whitewashing” history, i.e., to candidly tell the true stories of the past.

I guess, not whitewash the past; you’ve got to be up front with even the unpleasant parts of our past. Don’t be afraid to address those - especially issues of race and class and unfairness, and underhandedness.

Participants also had ideas on how to better promote the monument. They suggested using websites, Facebook, and QR codes in tourist publications to advertise. Some felt it was important to get the word out that entrance to the monument was free. As one person said about the Casemate Museum, “it’s the best free museum in the area.” Participants also suggested that promoting the fort as a venue for events, family reunions, and weddings would help spread the word and bring in visitors. A parent who heard about the monument through her child’s school field trip said this:

We’re constantly trying to find things that we can come together as a community to do, to just get the kids to fellowship, and we fellowship as parents. Just to have, like I said, educational yet fun entertainment at the same time.

My experience with the parks has always been very positive, and I think they are very careful and mindful of the environment, I don’t think it will become an issue. I think they’ve got that all in place.

Discussion

Residents

The Fort Monroe resident focus group participants represent a unique group of people seeking a particular experience. Whether they found the Fort Monroe community after a lengthy search or stumbled upon almost by accident, all those with whom we spoke truly enjoyed living in this community and valued its unique characteristics. For many, Fort Monroe's historic features and its place in U.S. history were of great value. Equally important to them was the community's peaceful, quaint atmosphere. Other notable features were a feeling of safety and security and the fort's beautiful setting on Chesapeake Bay.

Residents welcomed visitors to their community and wished to share with them Fort Monroe's story as well as its scenic beauty, access to uncrowded beaches, and recreational activities. Many recognized the potential for new development within the fort and welcomed visitor services such as transportation; information, orientation, and interpretation; enhanced security; nature/walking/biking trails; recreational facilities; lodging and food services; rental facilities; and other services that would enhance their own and their visitors' experiences.

Contingent on their support of additional visitor services, many residents advised caution regarding the types and level of new development at Fort Monroe. Some were wary of attracting large crowds; others were adamant about restricting the types of commercial enterprises allowed within the fort; and most were concerned with protecting the fort's authentic historical setting as well as their privacy, safety, and lifestyle. Many participants recognized the FMA's need to increase revenue to support the fort's infrastructure, and were concerned about achieving a balance between development, resource protection, and their quality of life.

These residents' interest in the future of the fort and its community motivated them to attend. Many participants were quite knowledgeable about Fort Monroe's history, some served as docents and volunteers at the Casemate Museum. For various reasons, each was interested in the future of Fort Monroe.

Visitors

Over half of the Casemate Museum visitors who participated in focus groups were not first-time visitors. Several of these return visitors were residents of nearby communities who simply enjoyed visiting the fort. Some participants were off-duty military personnel from nearby military bases looking for something to do on their days off. Many of the participants shared a common interest in learning about U.S. history.

Visitors were attracted to Fort Monroe for many of the same reasons the fort's residents enjoyed their life at the fort, such as its quiet, picturesque setting; educational opportunities; natural beauty; and its history. Visitors' suggestions for services and facilities were typical of what one would find in a park or historic site, such as directional and interpretive signage, restrooms, and park benches. Similar to the residents, they were interested in seeing more of the fort's buildings, including other portions of the casemate, and they wanted to learn more about each building's history, use, and former occupants.

Like many of the residents, visitors were concerned about protecting the park's historic resources and its authentic historic ambiance by avoiding overcrowding, overdevelopment, and over-commercialization. Some visitors also felt it would be important to respect residents' privacy.

In contrast to the resident focus group participants, visitors did not specifically mention a need for lodging, food services, gift shops, or any other commercial enterprises. These only came up in the context of what should be avoided in terms of development at the fort. Some local visitors recognized that the small towns outside the fort, particularly Phoebus, would benefit economically by serving as a gateway community and offering such services to park visitors.

Recommendations

In sponsoring this focus group study, managers at Fort Monroe National Monument have demonstrated an interest in residents' and visitors' opinions and views about services, facilities, and future development at the fort, and in so doing have begun a dialogue with their clients and neighbors.

The residents who participated in our focus group discussions are potentially a valuable resource to park managers as they plan for the future. Residents' knowledge of the fort, their interest in its story, and their commitment to preserving it as an important piece of American history could be channeled to help support park programs and inform park managers during the planning process and beyond.

We suggest that these residents, whether as an organized group or simply as individual voices, be viewed as another important partner for Fort Monroe National Monument, in addition to the FMA, City of Hampton, and the U.S. Army. The residents' capacity to organize was evidenced by the establishment of an online community, recently created by a resident to help fellow Fort Monroe residents share information about everything from lost pets to social events. (At the time of the study it had 50 members and growing.) As an example of its potential, the manager of this online community posted an announcement about our focus group study, to which some residents responded. Keeping residents informed and updated as to management plans and activities is a proactive approach that could help garner support and maintain positive relationships with this group.

While further research is needed to adequately describe the visitor experience at Fort Monroe, those who attended our focus groups recognized the fort's unique setting and valued its peaceful atmosphere and historic context. The overall sentiment was to protect these features while developing new interpretive opportunities. We recommend an in-depth visitor survey, conducted during peak visitation, to collect data on visitor demographics, activities, opinions, and preferences.

The following specific recommended management activities are based on focus group participants' suggestions.

- To inform residents and locals about upcoming changes and developments, hold regular, well-advertised open forums.
- To help residents better understand the various partners' roles at Fort Monroe, create a brochure/booklet that details each partner's responsibilities, and the overall mission of the partnership. Create a unified logo to represent the partnership on signs and media. (For an example of this, see Ebey's Landing, <http://www.nps.gov/ebla>.)
- Plan events and festivals in collaboration with all partners, including fort residents, to help publicize the fort to residents in nearby communities.
- Develop temporary, rotating exhibits on various topics of interest (see Tables 11 and 13) and advertise them in local media.
- Share the results of this study with residents, partners and local media.

As Fort Monroe National Monument's managers begin to develop plans for visitor services, facilities, and interpretive themes and media, they will want to listen to the focus group participants' voices, and continue the conversation that has begun.

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Appendix 1: Resident Focus Group Question Route

Introduction:

Good (Morning/Afternoon), my name is [MODERATOR], I work for the Park Studies Unit at the University of Idaho. We're conducting research sponsored by the National Park Service. The purpose of the research is to better understand your experience as a resident at Fort Monroe, and learn about your opinions regarding management options at the park.

This discussion group has been approved by the Office of Management and Budget in compliance with the Paperwork Reduction Act (OMB Control Number 1024-0224 and Expiration Date is 8/31/2014). This session is scheduled to take about an hour to complete.

Before we begin I want to tell you that the information that we obtain here is anonymous and will not be used for any purposes other than to help the park managers as they plan for the future. I also want to let you know that we are audio recording this session, but the recording will not be shared with anyone and will be used only to create a summary of our discussion. When necessary we will use codes in transcripts to protect your privacy.

You do not have to use your full names during this discussion. We can refer to one another by using our first names only. Let's begin.

- Please introduce yourself by stating your first name
- Please tell us how long you have lived in the area and what you like most about living here

1. If you were to bring visitors to Fort Monroe National Monument, please describe the type of experience you would want them to have during their visit.

2. The National Park Service is in the process of planning for its visitors, and is seeking input on a few topics.

- a. What types of facilities should be available to visitors?
- b. What types of recreational activities should be available?
- c. What kinds of educational programs and/or services would you like to see offered?

What are some of the topics and subjects you think should be covered?

3. Please describe any recreational and/or educational activities that you have participated in the Fort Monroe area. What did you like or dislike about them?

4. What are some of the ways that Fort Monroe National Monument could connect with the local community, to raise awareness and draw visitors to the Monument?

5. In your opinion, what are the issues that the National Park Service should consider as it plans for visitation to Fort Monroe National Monument?
6. Are you aware that the Fort Monroe Authority and the City of Hampton are partners with Fort Monroe National Monument?
7. Are you or a member of your household past or current military personnel?

If Yes: Would you or any member of your household be interested in participating in oral histories regarding service, life, and/or leisure at Fort Monroe?
8. Would you or any member of your household be interested in volunteer opportunities with the Fort Monroe Volunteer Corp.?
9. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about Fort Monroe National Monument?

Appendix 2: Visitor Focus Group Question Route

Introduction:

Good (Morning/Afternoon), my name is [MODERATOR], I work for the Park Studies Unit at the University of Idaho. We're conducting research sponsored by the National Park Service. The purpose of the research is to better understand your experience as a visitor to Fort Monroe National Monument, and learn about your opinions regarding management options at the park.

This discussion group has been approved by the Office of Management and Budget in compliance with the Paperwork Reduction Act (OMB Control Number 1024-0224 and Expiration Date is 8/31/2014). This session is scheduled to take about an hour to complete.

Before we begin I want to tell you that the information that we obtain here is anonymous and will not be used for any purposes other than to help the park managers as they plan for the future. I also want to let you know that we are audio recording this session, but the recording will not be shared with anyone and will be used only to create a summary of our discussion. When necessary we will use codes in transcripts to protect your privacy. You do not have to use your full names during this discussion. We can refer to one another by using our first names only. Let's begin.

Please introduce yourself by stating your first name. Please tell us where you're from and if this is your first visit to Fort Monroe National Monument.

1. The National Park Service is in the process of planning for its visitors, and is seeking input on a few topics.

- a. What types of facilities should be available to visitors?
- b. What types of recreational activities should be available?
- c. What kinds of educational programs and/or services would you like to see offered?

What are some of the topics and subjects you think should be covered?

2. Please describe any recreational and/or educational activities that you have participated in the Fort Monroe area. What did you like or dislike about them?

3. In your opinion, what are the issues that the National Park Service should consider as it plans for visitation to Fort Monroe National Monument?

4. Are you or a member of your household past or current military personnel?

If Yes: Would you or any member of your household be interested in participating in oral histories regarding service, life, and/or leisure at Fort Monroe?

5. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about Fort Monroe National Monument?

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