

COALITION FOR HISTORIC FORT WOOL

Dedicated to the Restoration of this Historic Site to the Public

Historic Fort Wool is Endangered

In May 2021, Historic Fort Wool was designated as one of Virginia's Most Endangered Historic Places by Preservation Virginia. (See <https://preservationvirginia.org/our-work/most-endangered-historic-places>.) The nearby construction of the Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel (HRBT) Expansion Project resulted in the displacement of a seasonal nesting habitat for seabirds, which has long been located on South Island. As a result of the construction impacts, the adjacent Fort Wool was converted in the spring of 2020 into a much smaller temporary substitute nesting location for the seabirds. This conversion involved dumping tons of sand and gravel on the Fort, removing historic markers and granite blocks, and excluding public access. The public ferry service from Hampton has been discontinued. The Commonwealth is considering demolishing the historic and rare World War II era signal tower on the island. Continued bird use threatens the preservation of Fort Wool by deferring important maintenance and repairs.

Fort Wool is Important

Fort Wool (prior to 1862 known as Fort Calhoun) is an historic fortification at the confluence of the Hampton Roads harbor and the Chesapeake Bay located on the Willoughby Shoal, constructed between 1819 and 1867 (it was never completed), and placed on the National Register of Historic Places and the Virginia Landmarks Register in 1969. Fort Wool and Fort Monroe were built in the aftermath of the War of 1812, powerful symbols of American liberty and independence. Robert E. Lee, Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln shaped the history of Fort Wool. The fort was involved in the famous battle between the CSS Virginia and USS Monitor during the Civil War. Fort Wool and Fort Monroe were designed to work together in defending Hampton Roads from naval attack, and during the Civil War they were both gateways for Contraband (escaping slaves seeking freedom), including Sheppard Mallory, who labored at Fort Wool for the Union forces. Fort Wool has been a publicly accessible park for more than 60 years as a wonderful example of American coast defenses. It has been one of Hampton's top tourist attractions, generating economic value and employment for many years.

The Commonwealth must consider the historic value of Fort Wool

Thousands of visitors (typically 8,000 per season) safely visited and enjoyed Fort Wool every year, including 2019. Repairs are needed to the signal tower, the casemates, and the boat dock. Rather than spending funds to maintain Fort Wool as a bird nesting site, the state should address years of deferred spending to stabilize and repair any deficient structures and create an even more desirable historic site for the public to enjoy, and to continue to allow the state the benefits from the tourism dollars the fort was generating. We respect the need to address the nesting seabirds displaced by the HRBT construction project, but a permanent solution is needed to relocate the birds to a more suitable nesting location and restore an important piece of our American heritage.

The Coalition for Historic Fort Wool

A group representative of various Virginians and non-profits who care about historic Fort Wool and are deeply concerned by the recent actions taken by the Commonwealth that negatively impact Fort Wool, including:

Coast Defense Study Group (CDSG)
Friends of Fort Wool
Norfolk Preservation Alliance
The Contraband Historical Society
Citizens for a Fort Monroe National Park
National Trust for Historic Preservation
Norfolk Historical Society
Fort Monroe Society
National Parks Conservation Association
City of Hampton
American Battlefield Trust
Preservation Virginia

The Executive Committee for the Coalition for Historic Fort Wool is comprised of Mike Cobb, Mark Perreault, Alice Allen-Grimes, Betsy Merritt, and Terry McGovern

Please see below editorial that appeared in The Daily Press and Virginian-Pilot that summarizes The Coalition for Historic Fort Wool's position on the future of Fort Wool.

Fort Wool – Historic Guardian of Hampton Roads and Presidential Retreat

The Daily Press and Virginian-Pilot (September 20, 2020)

Virginians reading the local press celebrating recent developments at Fort Wool (Reprieve for local migratory birds, Opinion, August 13) could be forgiven for asking, wait a minute, isn't Fort Wool a historic site I used to be able to visit? The reader would be right: Fort Wool was built following the War of 1812, as an island of granite and a companion fort to Fort Monroe, allowing the two forts' guns together to control access to Hampton Roads. It also served as a summer residence for two presidents, Andrew Jackson and John Tyler, as well as an initial sanctuary for enslaved Americans (Contrabands) fleeing the Confederacy for the protection of the Union Army. Guns from the Fort fired at the ironclad CSS Virginia, in the Battle of Hampton Roads in March 1862, and Abraham Lincoln observed the first Union attempt to invade Norfolk from the Fort's ramparts in May 1862. The Fort is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and until recently was a tour stop for thousands of tourists a year, arriving on *Miss Hampton II*, a tour boat originating in Downtown Hampton.

Virginians traveling over the Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel can see of Fort Wool, lying to the east, just offshore of the man-made South Island, but may not realize the extent of the fort's surviving historic resources. Construction started in 1819 and for the next 125 years Fort Wool evolved as military technology advanced, resulting in a rare fort that contains military architecture that spans the entire era of America's seacoast defenses. Notable are remaining granite casemates from the 3rd System fort (1826), while most of the remaining fortifications date from the early 20th Century, including the WW2 Battery 229 and its iconic steel tower.

While fully recognizing the need for providing for nesting sites for migratory seabirds and for completing the HRBT expansion, these outcomes need not and should not come at the expense of the permanent loss of a historic treasure. Virginia should promptly plan for a new site for the birds, including locating needed funding to prepare that site and for restoring Fort Wool, to the condition it was in before it was converted to a nesting habitat. That means removing the huge weight of sand now threatening the island's stability (a major issue for the engineers building Fort Wool), building a permanent dock (critical for public access), and stabilizing the Battery Commander's Tower and reinforcing the granite casemates (both key efforts, now on hold). These actions would allow safe visitation of the Fort, and ensure the Fort survives so that future generations may learn about its role in American history.

The tourism appeal of Fort Wool is significant and can be built upon. In recent years thousands of visitors disembarked from the *Miss Hampton II* to walk the grounds, subject to the supervision of safety-conscious tour guides. The appeal of the site, in the middle of Hampton Roads, near upon the site of the 1862 USS Monitor-CSS Virginia battle, and with dramatic views of the Chesapeake Bay and Fort Monroe is significant. Restoring public tours to historic Fort Wool can take place during the eight months each year when migratory nesting is not occurring as soon as the Commonwealth (DCR) stabilizes Fort's historic structures and repairs the dock after decades of deferred maintenance.

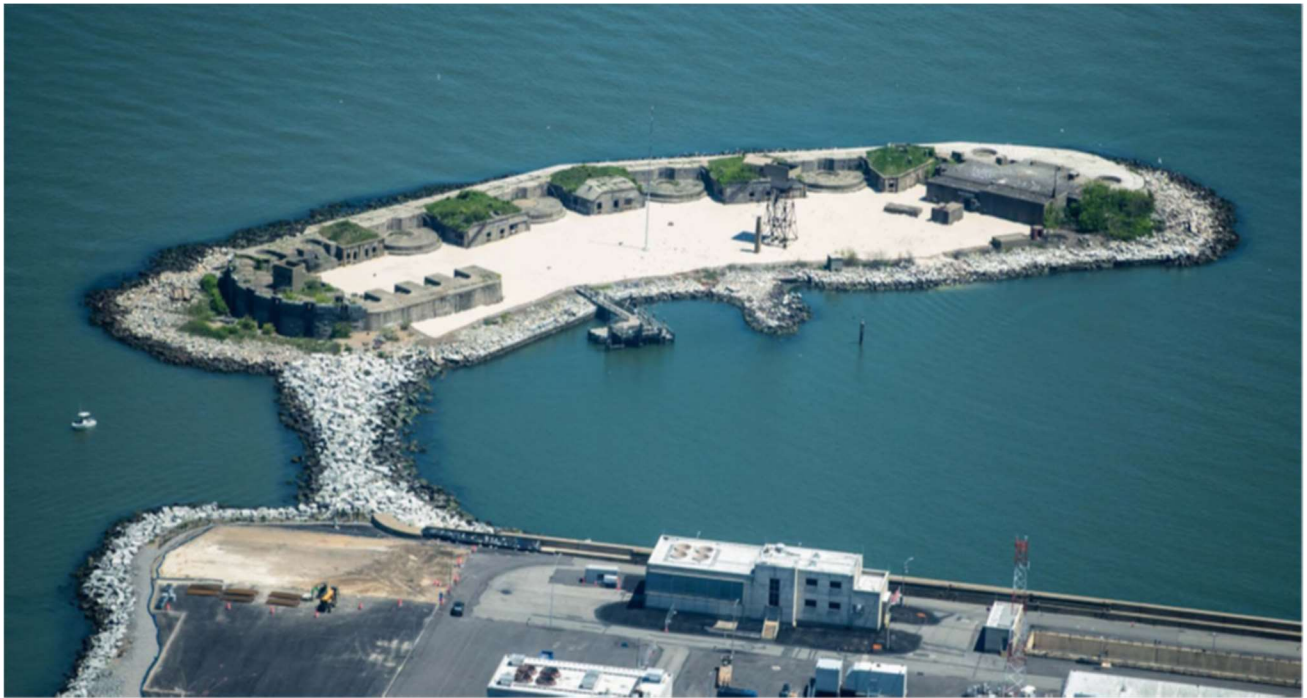
Both the nesting birds and historic Fort Wool need to be safe-guarded. We cannot trade one important resource for another. We are confident Virginia can locate an alternative seasonal nesting habitat and urge it be done promptly. However, it is vital that the citizens of Virginia let their political leaders know that preserving Fort Wool and restoring their access is important to them.

Terry McGovern is the Mid-Atlantic Regional Representative for the Coast Defense Study Group (www.cdsg.org) and a founding member of the Coalition for Historic Fort Wool.

Photographs of Historic Fort Wool

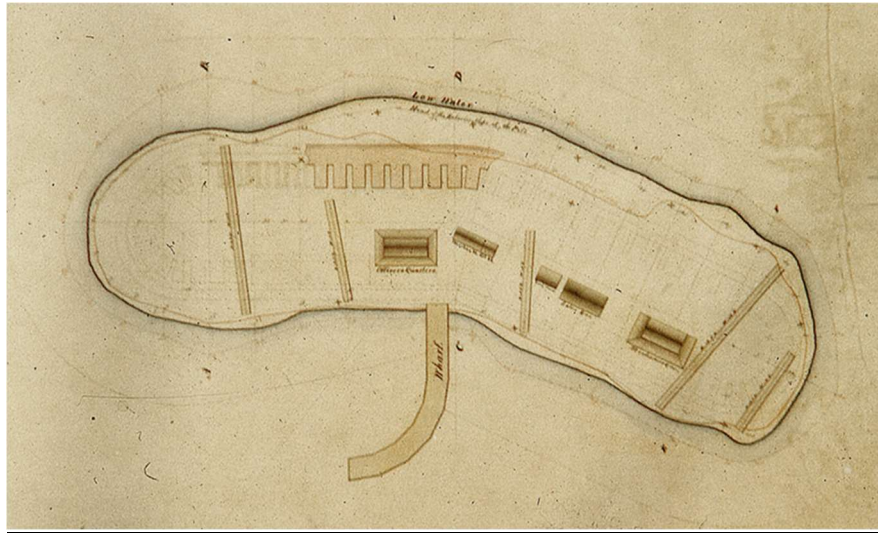


Two views of the historic Fort Wool before conversion to seabird nesting habitat



Two views of historic Fort Wool after conversion to seabird nesting habitat

Plans of Historic Fort Wool's Three Eras



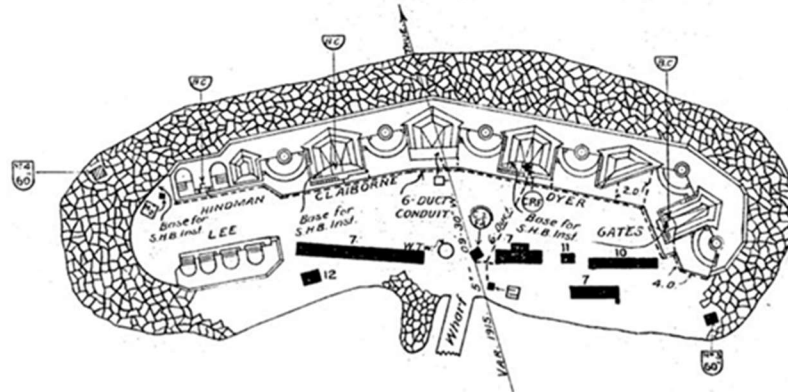
LEGEND
 7. BARRACKS.
 10. MESS HALL.
 11. COAL SHED.
 12. BATH HOUSE.

EDITION OF JUNE 9, 1916.
 REVISIONS: APR. 1, 1921.

SERIAL NUMBER **124**
 CONFIDENTIAL.

HAMPTON ROADS, VA.
FORT WOOL

BATTERIES.
 * CLAIBORNE... 2-6" D.
 * DYER... 2-6" D.
 GATES... 2-6" D.
 LEE... 4-3" P.
 HINDMAN... 2-3" P.
 * Guns Dismounted.



100 0 100 200 300 400 500 ft
 THE PLANE OF REFERENCE IS MEAN LOW WATER.

