

COALITION FOR HISTORIC FORT WOOL

Dedicated to the Restoration of this Historic Site to the Public

Who we are:

The Coalition for Historic Fort Wool, is a group representative of various Virginians and non-profits who care about historic Fort Wool and are deeply concerned, if not outraged, at recent actions taken by the Commonwealth that negatively impact Fort Wool:

1. Michael Cobb, former curator of the Hampton History Museum, long-time advocate, friend and curator (1985-2020) of Fort Wool. He leads the Friends of Fort Wool, which have been working with the City of Hampton to maintain and operate tours to Fort Wool since 1985. Mike is also the author of the leading book on the history of Fort Wool and a board member of Citizens for a Fort Monroe National Park.

2. Terry McGovern, current officer and former Chairman of the Coast Defense Study Group (www.CDSG.org), a national non-profit corporation formed to promote the study of coast defenses and fortifications, primarily in the United States of America, their history, architecture, technology, and strategic and tactical employment. He is also an author of books on the defenses of Chesapeake Bay and other coastal defenses.

3. Joanne Berkley, a long-time environmental activist in the Hampton Roads area, former Board member of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, past president and former Board member of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America, and Board member of Citizens for a Fort Monroe National Park.

4. Mark Perreault, President of Citizens for a Fort Monroe National Park. Citizens for a Fort Monroe National Park, has been an advocacy group for Fort Monroe since 2006 and a consulting party in the federal undertaking to expand the Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel. The CFMNP has played a leading role in the creation of the Fort Monroe National Monument, which is part of the National Park system Mark is also a former Board member of Preservation Alliance of Virginia, and Vice Chairman of the Shenandoah Valley Battlefields Foundation.

Why is Fort Wool 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 1861 (it was never completed), and placed on the National Register of Historic Places and 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. Additionally, the island has a long history as a presidential retreat for several US Presidents. The fort also took part in the famous battle between the CSS Virginia and USS Monitor during the Civil War by firing in support of the Federal fleet. 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 of the 3rd System, Endicott-Taft Period, and WW2 Program. As one of Hampton's top tourist attractions this site has been generating economic value and employment in the Hampton Roads for many years – until now.

What the Commonwealth has done:

The hasty choice of Fort Wool as a restricted nesting place for marine birds, without any public input or public process, appears entirely unseemly if not perverse, and to reflect a **gross lack of good judgment** by the Commonwealth. It should be noted that Michael Cobb, local guardian of Fort Wool, had been assured by DCR and VDHR in November 2019 that Fort Wool would not be used as a restricted nesting site, but when that decision was reversed, he was not even provided the courtesy of a timely call. As a result, no Friends of Fort Wool were even aware of the VDOT/Governor's office presentation on March 17 to the CTB, and consequently (and perhaps intentionally by the state) no one was there to speak on the importance of Fort Wool as a historic resource and continuing public access.

In no more than 30 days, Rip Raps Island, home of Fort Wool, was transformed by the Commonwealth into a nesting habitat for seabirds. This involved removal of all trees on the island, elimination of the island's current animals, sealing the historic structures, removing historic markers and granite blocks, and laying down a foot of sand and gravel over the island. Additionally, the island is no longer open to the public and ferry service from Hampton, VA, has been discontinued.

Failure to consider other options:

We understand other sites were offered, including a site along Willoughby Bay in Norfolk, Grandview Beach in Hampton and Craney Island, larger areas none of which had vulnerable historic structures of national significance, but were quickly rejected. We would note as well the Virginia Coast Reserve, a chain of preserved, sandy marine islands of more than 33,000 acres just east of the HRBT, preserved by The Nature Conservancy, in large part, to provide wildlife habitat – marine birds are more than capable of flying the 20 or so miles across the Bay to this excellent and pristine habitat.

The contention that Fort Wool is unsafe for public visitation is belied by the thousands of visitors (typically 8,000 per season) who safely visit and enjoy Fort Wool every year, including 2019. There is certainly deferred maintenance on Fort Wool, e.g., slumping signal tower, inadequately supported casemates, deteriorating boat dock, but tour guides successfully keep visitors away from any danger. Rather than spending funds to turn Fort Wool into a pile of sand, the state should have addressed years of deferred spending to stabilize and repair the 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 tourism dollars the fort is generating.

We also decline to accept the **fiction** that the debacle at Fort Wool is unrelated to the federally-funded HRBT expansion project. Just reviewing the press releases from the Governor's office, DCR and DGIF all refer to this action *as* due to the impact of HRBT on the former nesting habitat on South Island. Given that VDOT paid for the entire conversion of Fort Wool into a nesting grounds, it is clear that this action is part of the HRBT project. **It obviously is**, and appropriate public processes for identifying and mitigating potential damage to historic sites in the Area of Potential Effect should have been applied to Fort Wool before altering it.

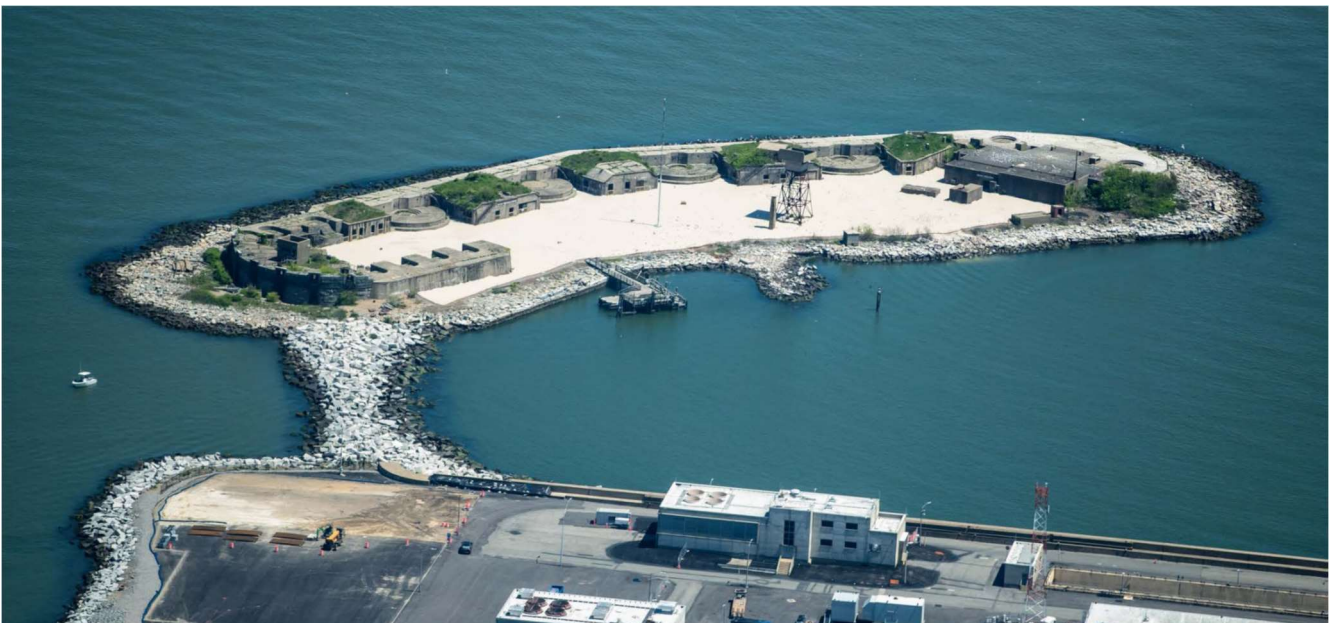
What the Commonwealth needs to do now:

We are most concerned about the uncertain future for Fort Wool. We want the Commonwealth to make a **binding commitment** to restore it to the status quo ante, and indeed invest funds to address deferred maintenance and further public access. This agreement needs to include funding to stabilize the fort's structures, especially the 3rd System casemates and the WW2 BC Tower. The agreement also needs to include a timetable for the fort's return to public access, which means rebuilding the dock and restoring the walkway over the rip raft from South Island. Indeed, the HRBT expansion presents an opportunity for the Commonwealth to build a new concrete dock at Fort Wool at a bargain price or even build a land bridge from South Island.

We intend to explore **all available options** to protect the public interest at Fort Wool. We love birds as much as anyone, but fail to see any justification for damaging an important piece of our American heritage in the name of creating bird habitat.



Historic Fort Wool before conversion to seabird nesting habitats



Historic Fort Wool after conversion to seabird nesting habitats