

The Free Lance-Star

Uplifting Symbol

For Black History Month, here's a look at Hampton University, founded in 1868 to educate freed slaves

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BY JUDY COLBERT

FOR THE FREE LANCE-STAR

THE HISTORY and development of Hampton University, the city of Hampton and Fort Monroe are as inextricably entwined as fibers in a ship's line.

Settlers visited the area in December 1606 before sailing farther inland to what became Jamestown. The confluence of the Elizabeth, Nansemond and James rivers was designated as a strategic and tactical defensive site.

Over the new few years a community grew, incorporating the local Kecoughtan tribe of American Indians, and the name Hampton was applied. It honored Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton, a major figure in the Virginia Company of London.

After the War of 1812, the Army constructed a more significant fortification that was named Fort Monroe, in honor of President James Monroe. It took until 1834 to complete the structure-which was never fired upon and never needed defending.

Despite Virginia laws prohibiting the education of slaves, Mary Peake (1823-62), the daughter of a freed black woman and a French man, secretly taught many students their first classes in reading and writing, starting in 1861.



President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation was read in the South for the first time in 1863 under what is called the Emancipation Oak, which is on the Hampton University grounds. The tree has been named one of the 10 Great Trees in the World by the National Geographic Society.

During the Civil War, Fort Monroe remained in Union hands although it was surrounded by Virginia, which belonged to the Confederacy. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler (1818-93) adopted a policy of providing a safe haven for hundreds of slaves during the Civil War, considering them "contraband of war," which gave the fort the nickname "Freedom's Fortress."

Many of the "contrabands" were housed in the Grand Contraband Camp that they helped construct from materials



reclaimed after the Confederates burned Hampton upon retreating.

Butler, Union Brig. Gen. Samuel C. Armstrong (1839-93) and others realized the necessity of educating the freed population, and so Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute was established on April 1, 1868, during Reconstruction. "Normal" meant that it created standards, or norms, for educating teachers. Armstrong was its first principal (president).

TEACHING FREED SLAVES

The new school was built on the grounds of a former plantation and farm named Little Scotland, where slaves had toiled. The students were taught to lead and teach other newly freed slaves.

Within 10 years it had added a formal education program for American Indians that saw more than 1,300 Indians from 65 different tribes, primarily Plains tribes, educated. The program lasted until 1923, and has been restored in the past few years.

On July 1, 1930, the school's name was changed to Hampton Institute and then, in 1984, the university structure was incorporated as the school name changed to Hampton University. Since then, it has expanded its reach and provides a wide spectrum of technical, liberal-arts, preprofessional, professional and graduate degree programs.

Cultural entertainment is a continued highlight of campus life, and the Hampton Pirates athletic teams are almost always a force to be reckoned with, regardless of the sport.

The university and the city of Hampton work well together.

"The Hampton Jazz Festival started 42 years ago at the university and has grown into one of Hampton's most popular events," says Ryan LaFata, media relations manager for the Hampton Convention & Visitors Bureau.

"It's now grown into a three-night event and it's been moved to the Coliseum and is a huge draw. B.B. King, Gladys Knight, and Dizzy Gillespie are just three of the international stars who come to Hampton because of the festival," he says.

Growing university

William R. Harvey, who became president on March 24, 1979, and continues in that office (making him the third-longest-serving college president in the United States), has taken the school from 2,700 students to a campus with more than 6,000 undergraduate and postgraduate students from 49 states and 35 territories and nations. Today, about 10 percent of the student population is white.

A list of the school's alumni is impressive, with the school ranking among the top 10 in graduating African-Americans in the fields of biology, business management, communications, English, journalism and psychology. It is also one of the country's top schools for wireless Internet capability.

The school receives about 9,000 applications each year for about 1,000 open freshman slots.

Because the school is located on the waterfront, it's understandable that its Center for Marine and Environmental Studies is the first marine science program at a predominantly black university.

Another outstanding program was initiated when the National Science Foundation provided \$10 million to establish the University's Nuclear/High Energy Physics Center of Excellence. The Department of Engineering, in association with AT&T Bell Laboratories, offers scholarships to outstanding freshmen in chemical and electrical engineering.

ATTRACTIVE CAMPUS

Even if you aren't a high school student headed toward college or the parent of one, a visit to the campus should be high on your priority list. It has just about everything someone looks for when traveling, including history, the arts, nature and athletics.

Driving onto the grounds provides a variety of visual stimulations. There are 255 acres of tree-lined streets bordering lush green lawns, 155 buildings that explore architectural styles of the 150 years of the school's existence, and neatly dressed students and faculty observing a time-honored dress code.

When Armstrong started the school, he felt the addition of the trees helped stimulate intellectual learning. Dr. Harvey's policy is that any tree cut down or removed must be replaced (somewhere on the campus) by another tree.

A 15-acre portion of the campus along the Hampton River, including many of the older buildings, is a national historic landmark district. One amazing aspect of the campus is its urban waterfront location that has a suburban or rural campus feel to it.

A dynamic, progressive institution of higher education, Hampton is a privately endowed, nonprofit, nonsectarian, co-educational historically black university.

You're invited to tour the campus and various buildings. You can just amble around or have a student-led tour that starts with a 30-minute Q&A session and an hour walking tour, Monday through Friday, 9:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m., or Saturday at 11 a.m.

You can take an online tour at hamptonu.edu/student_services/admissions/web_tour, or you can download a narrated iPod tour from visit_hampton.com.

Your trip starts at the Circle of Nations, the Ogden Auditorium and the Armstrong Lincoln Memorial. Vernon Courtney, director of the Hampton University Museum, is the narrator.

Included in the hour long visit (if you don't stop to explore any of the sites) are comments about the museum, Virginia Cleveland Hall, Mansion House and the waterfront, the Academy building, the chapel, Clarke Hall, the Charles White murals, the sequoia slice, the trade school building, the Hampton University cemetery, Turner Hall, Hampton National Cemetery, the student center, the football stadium, Holland Hall, the Emancipation Oak, the Booker T. Washington statue, the William R. and Norma B. Harvey Library, Phenix Hall, the admissions building and the Holly Tree Inn, before returning to the Circle of Nations.

Two dozen flagpoles sit at the edge of the Circle of Nations, each carrying the standard representing one of the 35 countries that have students attending school here. A brief warning, though: It's said that students who walk across the circle do not graduate from the school. A small memorial across from the circle is dedicated to President Lincoln and Gen. Armstrong.

As part of their class work, students helped raise the funds for construction, made the bricks and built the Virginia Cleveland building, one stop on the tour. When completed, the hall housed dorm rooms, classrooms, a chapel and, it's said, a meat-packing plant.

Designed by Richard Morris Hunt (who also designed the base of the Statue of Liberty and the facade of New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art), it's now a freshman girls dorm and houses the main cafeteria.

MANSION HOUSE

Mansion House is where the school's president and his family live. Originally it was the main building on the old plantation, and is thought to have been built in 1828.

This is where the school started, with 15 students and two instructors, and the students studied and ate here. The female students were quartered here, as well, while the men and boys slept in Army tents outside.

J.C. Cady, a famous New York church architect, designed the Romanesque Revival red brick chapel with a 150-foot bell tower, the last building constructed before Armstrong's death in 1893. It's thought that most of the bricks, at least in the tower, were fired on campus. There are 12 bells, the largest of which weighs a ton, that toll on the hour and can be heard throughout the campus.

The pews were made by the students at the trade school and are of yellow pine. Boys and girls were separated by the dividers, an arrangement that no longer exists. The faces on the upper trim are said to be of students. The piece of coral on your right when you exit the chapel is from the foundation of a church built by Armstrong's father, the Rev. Richard Armstrong, in the 1830s and '40s, Kawaiaha'o Church in Honolulu.

Inside Clarke Hall is a mural by Charles White called "Contribution of the Negro to Democracy in America." White was commissioned to create the piece in 1943, and several students, including John Biggers, helped prepare the egg tempera paints.

Within the work, which is about 12 by 17 feet, are images of Crispus Attucks, the first soldier to die in the American Revolution; Peter Salem, a Revolutionary War hero in the Battle of Bunker Hill; Nat Turner; Denmark Vesey; Harriet Tubman; members of the 54th Massachusetts regiment; Frederick Douglass; Booker T. Washington; George Washington Carver; Marian Anderson; Paul Robeson; and Leadbelly. You can see White in the center of the mural, kneeling in front of a woman and child.

Outside Clarke Hall is a slice of a 2,000-year-old sequoia tree from California. Several significant events are noted on the tree's rings, including Yorktown's becoming a naval base in 1917 for World War I and the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215. It was presented as part of the Yorktown sesquicentennial celebration in 1931.

LEARNING TRADES

Hampton had a very active trade-school program between 1930 and 1984, with courses in auto mechanics, blacksmithing, bricklaying, plastering, cabinetmaking, carpentry and joinery. Some of the furniture made during that time is still on the campus. Classes in lace making, cooking, dairy husbandry and millinery were taught as well.

Hampton University Cemetery is the resting place for leaders and students from the school's history. Just off campus is Hampton National Cemetery, established after the Civil War, which holds the remains of military personnel who died in battles from the Civil War to the Persian Gulf War.

Among the more than 30,000 people buried there are eight Medal of Honor recipients, 272 Confederate soldiers and 29 members of the crew of a German submarine, which is a story in itself.

Judy Colbert of Crofton, Md., is the author of "Virginia Off the Beaten Path." E-mail her in care of Email: gwoolf@freelancestar.com.

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