Backgrounder

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Chesapeake Bay Program
A Watershed Partnership

The Civil War, Slavery and the Chesapeake Bay

Throughout the mid-1800s, the Chesapeake Bay region was at the center of the Civil War and the disputes over slavery in the United States. The Bay region played a large role in the beginnings of slavery in America, as both a conduit for escaped slaves on the Underground Railroad, and as a battlefield throughout the Civil War.

Slavery and the Chesapeake Bay Region

The beginnings of slavery in the Chesapeake Bay region can be traced back to the year 1619 when a Dutch trading vessel entered Jamestown, Virginia carrying twenty men from the continent of Africa. Originally brought to this country to replace a dwindling European labor force, Africans soon became an important part of the economy of the Chesapeake region.

At first, Africans brought to America often were treated as indentured servants and freed after a term of service. As time passed however, many black servants began to lose the same rights afforded to their white counterparts and, over the next few years, the status of blacks in America quickly changed. By the 1660s, court decisions made it nearly impossible for blacks to be viewed as anything other than property and the institution of slavery took root in the new colonies.

In the years that followed, the slave trade expanded, with more and more blacks brought to America. Between 1700 and 1770, the slave population in the Chesapeake Bay region grew from 13,000 to 250,000. By the end of the Revolutionary War five years later, blacks made up nearly a third of the region's population.

As a result of the Constitutional Compromise of 1787, the importation of slaves ended by 1808; however the institution of slavery persisted throughout the southern part of the United States. Despite the fact that the newly ratified Constitution treated slaves as property, not all states supported the institution of slavery. "Free states," which did not support slavery (mapped in blue), bordered the northern portions of the Bay region, while "slave states" encompassed the southern portions of the Chesapeake (shown in gray). "Border states" (in green), which allowed slavery but were allied with the free states, further highlighted the political differences within the Chesapeake Bay region. As a result of these ideological differences, the region became a focal point for the national controversy surrounding slavery.

Enacted by the U.S. Congress in 1793, the Fugitive Slave Law further complicated the divisions between free, slave, and border states. The law permitted the capture and return of escaped slaves who had taken residence in the Northern "free" states. As a result, this new law left the Chesapeake Bay region in the unique position of spanning free, border, and slave states. This specific combination of geography and politics would make the Bay region the center of great turmoil throughout the next century.

The Underground Railroad

The Underground Railroad was a coordinated network of safe houses, which operated prior to the Civil War between 1830 and 1860. Aided by free blacks and sympathetic whites, slaves traveled under the cover of darkness through the network to reach freedom. It is estimated that one thousand slaves a year traveled this path to reach freedom in the north.

While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact routes followed by escaped slaves, records show that the waters of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries were often used as passageways to the North. This segment of the underground railroad, dubbed Chesapeake Station, became an integral part of the anti-slavery movement.

Chesapeake Bay waterways were used in a variety of ways. Escaping slaves would slip quietly aboard vessels docked along Chesapeake shores, which then shuttled them up the Bay and into the Susquehanna River. Captains in Maryland, Delaware and Virginia hid runaways aboard their ships risking high fines and jail time. Slaves working onboard boats also aided runaways, smuggling them aboard without the knowledge of their captains. Other slaves heading toward freedom from Virginia crossed shallow sections of the Potomac River on horseback or by wagon in an attempt to reach safehouses on the Maryland shore.

Famous Abolitionists

Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass both were born into slavery on Maryland's eastern shore. Tubman escaped slavery in 1849 and returned to the south nineteen times freeing over 300 slaves as part of the Underground Railroad. Frederick Douglass used the Chesapeake Bay in his first of two attempts to escape slavery. Douglass and five other men planned to canoe up the Chesapeake Bay and into Pennsylvania. This plan failed, however, when the men were turned in by another slave. It would ultimately be a steamboat traveling from Delaware to Pennsylvania that would deliver Douglass to freedom.

The Civil War

The Chesapeake Bay region, like much of the country, was increasingly divided over the issue of slavery. Pennsylvania, as a free state, was loyal to the Union. The border states of Maryland and Delaware, although pro-slavery, remained loyal to the Union as well. Virginia, fearing the effect that abolishing slavery would have on the state's economy, seceded from the Union April 17,1861 and joined the Confederacy.

When the first shots of the Civil War were fired in 1861, the Bay region became a divided battlefield. Slaves throughout the region seized the opportunity for escape. Often they did not have to travel far to find freedom and assistance in avoiding capture.

In Newport News, Virginia, Union Major General Benjamin F. Butler invoked property law to protect escaped slaves that had fled to his camp. He reasoned that if the Confederacy was going to refer to slaves as property he could seize them as property contraband of war. Butler's interpretation of the law created new hope, and a new workforce. Runaway slaves flooded into Union camps where they were put to work. Although not fighting on the front lines, these individuals were instrumental in wartime operations including building fortifications, maintaining railroads and mining coal.

As time passed and Union casualties grew, blacks were granted the right to serve in the Union Army and many participated in battles throughout the watershed. In Maryland, six black regiments were formed, amassing more than 8,700 men. These regiments played major roles in the Union's battle plans – including the 36th U.S. Colored Infantry's guarding of the Confederate Prison at Point Lookout, MD and, later in the war, it's disabling of Confederate torpedoes in the lower Chesapeake. More than 180,000 black men served in the Union army, 18,000 in the Union Navy. Altogether, 21 were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, the highest military honor in the United States.

For more information about African-American history in the Bay region, please visit www.chesapeakebay.net/aframer.htm.