

H.R. 4345 Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
Hearing Draft Remarks

Thank you, Chair Haaland, for this opportunity to testify about my bill, H.R. 4345, the Fort Monroe National Monument Land Acquisition Act.

I appreciate your decision to hold a hearing on this bill and hope it will be marked up and favorably reported to the House.

Despite its prominent though somber place in American history, too many remain unaware of the significance of Fort Monroe. In 1619, the first enslaved Africans arrived at Point Comfort, modern day Fort Monroe, where they were traded as commodities and denied basic human dignity. This was a defining moment that enabled our economy and government to be built on the backs of slaves. But Fort Monroe also came to become a beacon of liberty for African Americans. During the Civil War, Fort Monroe was a Union stronghold and was considered “freedom fortress” for slaves escaping the southern states. In 1960, Fort Monroe was designated as a National Historic Landmark and in November 2011, President Barack Obama established it as a National Monument. Fort Monroe had recently shut down its military base, so the President worked to ensure the critical location would be commemorated and honored appropriately. President Obama used his power under the Antiquities Act to establish nearly 325 acres as the national monument we know today.

Currently, approximately 40 acres of coastal land separates two important parts of Fort Monroe. While the Commonwealth of Virginia offered to donate this piece of land to the National Park Service to create a contiguous and federally managed coastline, National Park Service has yet to accept this land. If signed into law, the Fort Monroe National Monument Land Acquisition Act will require the Secretary of the Interior to work with the Commonwealth to resolve issues related to managing several non-historic buildings on the land and unify the two divided sections. Unifying the Fort Monroe National Monument would allow the National Park Service to better coordinate maintenance and development of educational opportunities on site. This bipartisan and bicameral legislation initiates a long overdue transfer of coastal land needed to protect this national monument.

The United States stands at a pivotal moment, as centuries of slavery gave way to systemic racism. Congress must lead in reconciliation, remembrance, and awareness about this history. By passing the Fort Monroe National Monument Land Acquisition Act, future generations of Americans will continue to learn about Fort Monroe’s hallowed history, and I hope it will inform a brighter and more equitable future for all.