

THE EMANCIPATION OAK

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The Emancipation Oak on the grounds of Hampton University, Hampton, Virginia, is the site where the African Americans of Hampton first heard the Emancipation Proclamation read. Various sources credit Union soldiers as having read the proclamation aloud to the assembled refugees and townspeople under the boughs of this live oak (*Quercus virginiana*). Besides the dramatic events of that legendary day, the Emancipation Oak has been witness to the gradually growing education of an oppressed people, which itself is another form of emancipation.

Mary Smith Kelsey Peake (1823–1862) was born in Norfolk, VA to a free mulatto woman and white Englishman.¹ In her twenties Mary taught children of

her Hampton Baptist church how to read and write. By the 1850's Mary Peake secretly was teaching free and enslaved African American adults and youth to read and write. This courageous act of educating slaves was actively opposed in the South at this time. When her Hampton church burned down, she taught her classes under the Emancipation Oak.²

Even before the Emancipation Proclamation, nearby Fort Monroe attracted fleeing slaves. In May of 1861, commanding officer Major General Benjamin J. Butler provided shelter to three escaped slaves who sought refuge in his camp. Instead of allowing Confederate authorities to recapture the runaways as was customary, Butler employed the former slaves in the Union army and labeled them "contraband of war", the first usage of this concept.³ Upon hearing of Butler's action, thousands of people escaping slavery sought refuge at Fort Monroe, earning it its nickname, "Freedom's Fortress". In addition to providing employment to "contraband" people, Butler set up schools for them to attend. Logically Major General Butler turned to Mary Peake to first teach under the Emancipation Oak, and later, at the Brown Cottage of the Fort Monroe hospital. "[Mary Peake] was a mulatto woman who represented efforts not only on the part of paternalistic Northern whites, but the African-American race as well – and its willingness to educate "its own" and work towards betterment of their race."⁴



The Emancipation oak (*Quercus virginiana*) dwarfs admirers.
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President Lincoln had initially thought of the Civil War in terms of preserving the Union. However as public outcry against slavery increased and Congress made steps toward abolition, Lincoln came around to embracing the emancipation of slaves. He finally came to the opinion that, "if slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong."⁵ On September 22, 1862 Abraham Lincoln issued a preliminary proclamation stating that if the rebelling states did not return to the Union by January 1, 1863, he would declare their slaves "forever free". The Confederate government ignored this threat and Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation on New Years Day 1863. It stated:

"And by virtue of the power and for the purpose aforesaid, I do order and declare that all persons held as slaves within said designated States and parts of States are, and henceforward shall be, free; and that the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authorities thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of said persons.

... And upon this act, sincerely believed to be an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution upon military necessity, I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind and the gracious favor of Almighty God."⁶

The Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 actually freed relatively few slaves. The proclamation was limited to territories in rebellion and not to pro-Union border states or to southern states under Union control. Slavery in America would only be eliminated entirely with the passage of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution on December 18, 1865. The Emancipation did, however, shift the meaning of the Civil War for the North. Rather than simply an attempt to reunify the Union of States, the Civil War was now also a fight to eliminate slavery from the United States.

At the time of the proclamation, Hampton was under the control of the Union army and therefore the slaves living in the Hampton Roads area were not emancipated. Nonetheless, the proclamation was greeted with great celebration by African Americans. There was widespread confidence that the end of the Civil War would bring emancipation to all. Shortly after the issuance of the proclamation, hundreds more fugitive slaves from the Lower Virginia Peninsula, a rebel territory, gathered near the protection of the federally controlled Fort Monroe.

In 1868, the American Missionary Association purchased a farm adjacent to the Emancipation Oak and Brigadier General Samuel Chapman Armstrong founded a school to train selected African American and Native American men and women. Armstrong envisioned teaching the young people who would lead their fellow citizens by example toward a self sufficient and dignified future. In truth, this was a continuation of the work Mary Peake started alone, uncredited and in defiance years earlier on the very same site. In 1870, Armstrong's school was chartered as Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute, today known as Hampton University. Hampton's most famous graduate was Booker T. Washington in 1875.

The Emancipation Oak, a national landmark, stands on the grounds of Hampton University and still serves as a shady outdoor classroom today.

Thanks to Victoria L. Jones, Director of University Relations, Hampton University for permission to photograph the Emancipation Oak. Photograph credits: Jeff Krueger 2003

References

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