



Dry Tortugas National Park Is Deep In History, Natural Beauty

FAITH LAPIDUS: I'm Faith Lapidus.

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: And I'm Christopher Cruise with the VOA Special English program EXPLORATIONS. Today we visit one of the most unusual national parks in the United States. It is called the Dry Tortugas National Park. It includes seven very small islands about two-hundred kilometers southwest of the southern state of Florida. One of them was once a prison. Let us begin our visit by imagining that we are traveling back in time almost one hundred fifty years.

FAITH LAPIDUS: It is the last few days of July in eighteen sixty five. The United States Navy steamship "Florida" moves slowly toward a small island. Members of the crew tie the ship to the dock. Passengers begin to leave the ship. They move slowly in the extreme heat of the summer day. In front of them is a huge red brick building.

The passengers walk over a small wooden bridge. It crosses an area of water that circles the huge building. They move slowly to the only door. They pass through the door and stop in front of a group of soldiers.

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: An officer among the soldiers comes forward and tells the ship's passengers to stop. He looks at the passengers and says, "You are now within the walls of the Fort Jefferson Military Prison in the Dry Tortugas. You have been tried, convicted and sentenced to serve your punishment here.

"No prisoner has ever successfully escaped from Fort Jefferson. No one will ever escape. It is more than two-hundred kilometers across open ocean to the nearest occupied land."

FAITH LAPIDUS: Four of the prisoners who arrived that long ago day had been found guilty of taking part in the successful plot to murder the president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln.

One of the prisoners was sentenced for giving medical aid to the man who killed President Lincoln. He was also found guilty of being an active member of the plot. That man was Samuel Mudd. He was a thirty-two year old doctor from the eastern state of Maryland. He had been sentenced to spend the rest of his life

doing hard labor at Fort Jefferson.

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: The huge red brick building that faced Doctor Mudd and the other prisoners had six sides. It took up most of the land area of the small island. The six wide walls surrounded a large area of open space in the center.

Each wall was about fifteen meters tall. Inside the walls were hundreds of rooms. Most of them held huge guns that pointed out to sea. Many other buildings were also inside the huge fort. Soldiers slept in them. Some of the houses were used by the officers.

Soldiers and prisoners worked and lived within the walls of the fort. The extreme heat affected them all.

Hundreds of sea birds flew over the small island. Doctor Mudd must have believed that those birds would be the only creatures that would ever escape from Fort Jefferson. He must have believed that far away island would be his new home for a very long time. But he was wrong.

FAITH LAPIDUS: In eighteen sixty seven, Doctor Mudd was helping the prison doctor treat victims of the disease yellow fever. Many died. Soon, the prison doctor also lost his own battle with the disease. Only Doctor Mudd was left to treat the increasing number of men who became sick with yellow fever.

Later, the sickness seemed to leave the island. Many of those who survived knew they owed their lives to Doctor Mudd. Almost every man in Fort Jefferson wrote to the president of the United States asking that Doctor Mudd be pardoned because of his work treating patients who had Yellow Fever. They said Doctor Mudd was a hero.

In February eighteen sixty nine, President Andrew Johnson signed a presidential pardon. Doctor Mudd was a free man. He left Fort Jefferson and returned to his home in the state of Maryland. He once again became a family doctor.

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: The first European visitor to the small islands was the Spanish explorer, Ponce de Leon. He arrived in fifteen thirteen. Ponce de Leon was an older man who was searching for special water that stories said would make him young again. It was called the "Fountain of Youth."

Ponce de Leon named the little islands the Tortugas. Tortugas is the Spanish word for a turtle. Thousands of these creatures lived on the islands. Ponce de Leon was able to capture many turtles to provide fresh meat for his ship's crew. He never did find the special water of the Fountain of Youth.

In fact, the little islands had no water at all. The Tortugas were dry. The word "dry" began to appear on early maps of the area to warn ships they could find no fresh water there.

FAITH LAPIDUS: President Thomas Jefferson took an interest in the little islands as a place that could help protect ships traveling in a large area of water called the Florida Straits. He proposed a military base be built there. In eighteen twenty one, the United States took control of Florida and its islands. The military fort was not begun until eighteen forty eight, long after Jefferson's death.

The fort was to be the home of one thousand five hundred men and four hundred fifty huge cannon. It would become the largest American fort made of brick building material.

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: Fort Jefferson was never really completed. It had to be worked on continually. The salt air, wind, water and sand quickly caused problems. The weight of the brick walls made them sink into the sand.

It was difficult to keep the fort in good repair. As workers built new parts of the fort, others worked at repairing damage caused by the environment.

Slaves and prisoners did the building and repair work at the fort. Most of the prisoners were army troops. They had been found guilty of some crime and ordered to serve their sentences at Fort Jefferson.

In eighteen seventy four, the American army left Fort Jefferson. Modern artillery made the fort no longer useful.

FAITH LAPIDUS: Today, thousands of visitors make the trip to the Dry Tortugas National Park. Soldiers no longer greet them when they arrive at Fort Jefferson. Friendly members of the National Park Service do. They meet every boat filled with visitors. They smile and say, "Welcome to Fort Jefferson and the Dry Tortugas National Park."

The small island's days as a prison are long past. Yet almost every visitor to the Dry Tortugas National Park asks about its most famous prisoner, Samuel Alexander Mudd. They ask to see his room. Most people know that Doctor Mudd did not end his life in the Fort Jefferson prison.

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: Only a few of the huge cannon remain at the Park. These have been left to show visitors what the old fort looked like. The weather continues to affect the fort's grounds and buildings. So workers continue the fight against the severe environmental damage.

A government program, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, is providing money to help keep Fort Jefferson standing. Workers are removing and rebuilding damaged areas of the walls.

FAITH LAPIDUS: The Park extends over an area of more than twenty-six-thousand hectares. Almost all of this is ocean and living coral reefs that protect the little islands.

Thousands of different kinds of fish live in the waters near the islands. Many ships have sunk in those waters over the centuries. Many are inside the area that is part of the national park. The wrecks of these ships help provide safe places for many of the fish.

Some visitors are lucky enough to see the huge sea turtles that gave the islands their name. The little islands are also home to many kinds of sea birds. Visitors are not permitted on some of the islands in the Dry Tortugas National Park because they would frighten birds that are laying eggs.

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: When Fort Jefferson was a prison, a sign was placed on the wall for new prisoners to see. It said, "Thee Who Enter Here Leave Hope Behind." Few prisoners except for Doctor Mudd had any hope of ever leaving there.

Today the old fort and empty little islands provide a protected home for thousands of birds, fish and turtles. Visitors travel for hours on high-speed boats that bring them from the island of Key West, Florida. They swim in the warm waters and enjoy the bright sun. Many explore the underwater shipwrecks. Still others bring tents and spend a few days living on the white sand beaches.

The striking natural beauty of the island today seems to clash with its earlier history as a lonely, inescapable prison. Doctor Mudd surely would approve of the change.

FAITH LAPIDUS: This program was written by Paul Thompson and produced by Brianna Blake. I'm Faith Lapidus.

CHRISTOPHER CRUISE: And I'm Christopher Cruise. You can see a video about Fort Jefferson and its restoration on our website, voa.specialenglish.com. Join us again next week for another EXPLORATIONS program on the Voice of America.