

Remembering the “Gibraltar of the South:” A Sesquicentennial View of Civil War Archaeology at Fort Fisher By Thomas E. Beaman, Jr., RPA (Associate Professor of Anthropology, Wake Technical Community College)

The town of Wilmington is located in southeastern North Carolina approximately 20 miles upstream from the mouth of the Lower Cape Fear River. For the first half of the 19th century, Wilmington was the primary trans-Atlantic port in the southern part of North Carolina. It served a vital function not only as a hub for its naval stores exports, but also for the importation of material goods for the larger Cape Fear region, extending northwest to Fayetteville and beyond. Wilmington became a crucial port during the American Civil War as the primary southern nexus for blockade runners, who regularly avoided Federal blockades, in order to supply mercantile goods, food, and weaponry to local citizenry as well as the North Carolina and Virginia Confederate forces. In fact, General Robert E. Lee, commander of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia, recalled that by the summer of 1864, “only Richmond was more valuable to the Confederate cause than Wilmington.”

The key to what made Wilmington a vital 19th century port as well as a successful station for blockade runners relied on two things: the geographic landforms of the Lower Cape Fear River’s terminus, and the four primary fortifications—Anderson, Caswell, Fisher, and Johnston—that were strategically placed to defend access into the river and more importantly, to Wilmington (Figure 1). The largest and most powerful of these was Fort Fisher.

Fort Fisher was built on Federal Point, which overlooks New Inlet. This location was chosen for its vantage view overlooking New Inlet, as well as the densely wooded land approach, which provided a heightened degree of protection from land-based assaults. The first batteries were constructed in the spring and summer of 1861, and heavy artillery was brought from Charleston, which forced the Federal naval blockade to remain well offshore. In July 1862, 1800 linear feet of earthen mounds, measuring some 30 feet in height, were constructed across the peninsula, which formed the land face of Fort Fisher. It was not until the spring of 1863 that the defensive sea face was completed, comprised of over one mile of earthen mounds parallel to the ocean’s edge. One special battery, Battery Buchanan, was constructed on the farthest tip of the peninsula adjacent to New Inlet. These improvements made Fort Fisher the largest Confederate fort and earned it the nickname the “Gibraltar of the South.” This fort weathered Federal blockades and protected blockade runners for the duration of the Civil War until it eventually fell to joint land and sea assaults on January 15, 1865. Its capture led to the immediate abandonment of nearby forts Johnston and Caswell, and just over a month later, Fort Anderson.

Since the Civil War, a variety of transformational processes have altered the historic grounds, structures, and features of these forts (Figure 2). Fort Fisher has been the most dramatically affected by cultural and natural processes. The main highway, U.S. 421, bisected the sandy ruins of the land front. The lower end of Federal Point, including the original grounds of Fort Fisher, became a satellite location of World War II-era Camp Davis, built in 1940 in Onslow County. During those unstable times, national defense took precedence over historic preservation. As the primary firing range for Camp Davis, new firing installations were erected along the beach, between the highway and the Atlantic Ocean—similar to Fort Fisher’s oceanside batteries during the Civil War. These included, among others, batteries of 40-millimeter automatic cannons and 50-caliber machine guns. In addition, the site’s utilities, living quarters, and other features sprang up west of the shore installations, between the highway and the Cape Fear River. By 1944, the facility grew to include an 80-seat cafeteria, a 350-bed hospital and dental clinic, covering an area of several hundred acres. The crowning addition to these improvements was the construction of a large airstrip—an endeavor that destroyed a

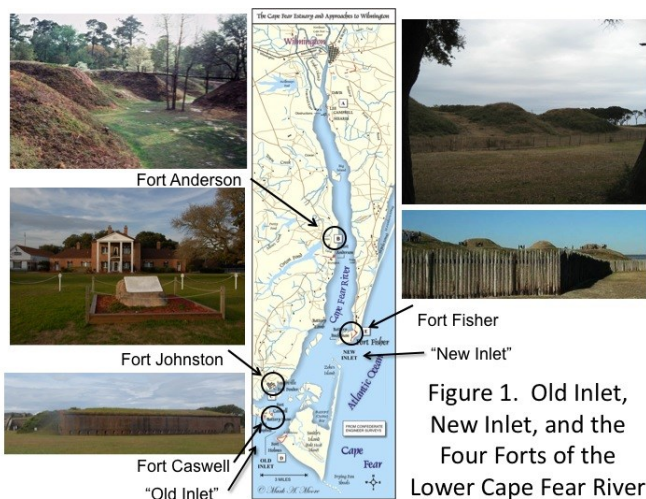


Figure 1. Old Inlet, New Inlet, and the Four Forts of the Lower Cape Fear River

sizable portion of the once-formidable “land front” of the 80-year-old bastion. The post had become an integral site for activities associated with Camp Davis’ Anti-Aircraft Artillery Training Center. Additional units from other ground forces also saw duty here. Moreover, rising sea levels and the tidal action at Kure Beach continue to erode the original sea face batteries, with as much as 600 feet lost from the original shoreline of 150 years ago.



Figure 2. Transformational Processes since the Civil War include construction of World War II era Anti-Aircraft Artillery Training Center for Camp Davis, as well as continually rising sea levels and tidal erosion.



Though historical relics had been plundered from the site of Fort Fisher for years, the earliest formal archaeology was conducted around the Centennial Anniversary of the American Civil War. Leading this research endeavor was Stanley South, who sought to define, interpret, and restore the features of Fort Fisher as part of its development into a State Historic Site. In 1960, the site was largely overgrown with myrtle and yaupon bushes. South and his crew of African-American fishermen-excavators cleared much of the brush in order to create an overall map of the remaining earthworks. The following year, South returned and located the posthole features (and in some cases, remnants of the posts) of the palisade fence north of the land face earthworks (Figure 3). Based on historical accounts of the fort’s construction, it was thought the posts were made of palmetto tree cores but, in fact, were later determined to be local yellow pine. This palisade fence feature was restored based on South’s investigations and is still visible at the site today.

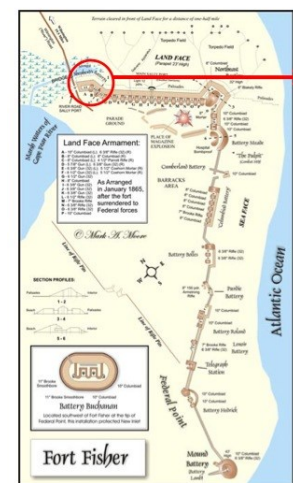


Figure 3. South’s excavation the palisade fence located north of the land face earthworks led to the modern restoration.



The discovery of an L-shaped brick foundation in 1963 by South was identified as a residence for the lighthouse operator, dating from the second half of the 19th century. The material remains revealed an abundance of ceramics, buttons, gunflints, doll parts, a child’s finger ring, a clock key, tobacco pipe fragments, and an 1819 penny. The stratified remains also revealed that the structure was used by Colonel William Lamm during the Civil War. Other artifacts in this stratum, such as exploded shell fragments, lead bullets, brass artillery fuses, military buttons from a North Carolina regiment, and U.S. Army buttons, connected it to the period of Fort Fisher. Other archaeological investigations by South at Fort Fisher included the excavation of a Civil War period barrack structure, as well as a collection of artifacts from the surface around Battery Buchanan.

In 1970, archaeologist Stuart Schwartz began excavation of a “bombproof” or “magazine” under the traverse immediately to the east of the westernmost gun emplacement. The goal of this investigation was to restore the bombproof and mound that contained it. However, due to funding shortages and responsibilities at other sites, completion of the bombproof was soon suspended. Excavations resumed in 1972-3 by Gordon Watts, further continued in 1977 by Thomas Funk, and were finally completed in March 1978 by Mark Wilde-Ramsing. To date, only the palisade and bombproof with a mound have been restored based on archaeological investigations of the original features at Fort Fisher State Historic Site.

Over the years, it has been noted that archaeological resources are not only found on the land, but also in the waters around Federal Point. A large quantity of artillery shells from the bombardment have been recovered from marine contexts. South recovered an intact Confederate torpedo from the Cape Fear River. Period shipwrecks have also been identified. In 1962, the *Modern Greece*, a fully loaded blockade runner which ran aground was located about half a mile northeast of Fort Fisher. Divers from the United States Navy recovered thousands of artifacts from the wreck. Many have been used in various exhibits around the Cape Fear region. In addition, as seen in *Archaeology* magazine in September 2012, many more artifacts from the *Modern Greece* are still in wet storage awaiting conservation. The *C.S.S. Raleigh*, a Richman-class ironclad, ran aground on a shoal in the Cape Fear River off Battery Buchanan, where it remains. Another ship, an 18th-19th century wooden sailing ship was also found by New Inlet. A formal underwater survey of these waters was conducted by Gordon Watts in 1974, followed by an intensive survey of the Cape Fear River by the Underwater Archaeology Branch of the Office of State Archaeology in the 1980s. These surveys continue to guide the documentation of Civil War activities around Fort Fisher.

The remaining investigations of and at Fort Fisher State Historic can be best described as continued site development and maintenance. These small projects occasionally result in a collection of artifacts and brief fieldwork summaries. To date, a total of 22 projects for various purposes—installation or removal of telephone, water, and sewer lines; clearance for reenactor encampments; construction of new buildings or museum expansions; landscape improvements and erosion control measures; and cleaning up various debris and damage by hurricanes or other tropical tempests—have been conducted. These projects were undertaken by many different individuals, from Historic Sites and Properties Section archaeologists, staff members of the Underwater Archaeology Branch office at Kure Beach, or contracted archaeologists.

All of the archaeological investigations undertaken over the past 50 years at Fort Fisher have been important in that the vast amount of information gleaned has resulted in more accurate historical restorations, enhanced site interpretation, and documented areas that have now been developed, eroded, or destroyed. It is beneficial that the definition of features through basic culture history investigations must precede larger anthropological issues and more advanced research questions, as has happened at Fort Fisher. As this year closes the Sesquicentennial commemoration of the American Civil War, it is evident that larger anthropological issues await additional research, not only at Fort Fisher but for all of these forts in the Lower Cape Fear region. Future investigators should take this into consideration in planning their research designs for archaeological investigations on these sites. Specific anthropological questions may provide important insights as to the lives and activities of these men and boys, and where archaeology may achieve the most “relevance” on these sites. Moreover, such questions and answers will contribute to a greater understanding of the past activities at these forts in ways the written word cannot.

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This newsletter article was adapted from several larger topical presentations on Civil War archaeology in the Cape Fear Region by the author previous presented at the 47th Annual Meeting of the Society for Historical Archaeology, Québec City, Québec, Canada, in the symposium entitled, “Foregrounding the Landscape in Archaeology” (2014); at the 48th Annual Meeting of the Society for Historical Archaeology, in Seattle, Washington, in the symposium entitled, “Archaeological Research of the American Civil War” (2015); and at the 71st Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Archaeological Conference, Greenville, South Carolina (2014). A complete version of larger study, which includes the information in this article, is presently in preparation for print.

Upcoming Lithics Conference in Raleigh

On Saturday, April 25, 2015, the NC Office of State Archaeology and the US Forest Service are co-sponsoring a conference on lithic resources. To be held at the William Ross Conference Center at the North Carolina Nature Research Center, 4th floor (121 West Jones Street, Raleigh), the conference will run from 9:30 am until 4:00 pm, with a break for lunch. Speakers include Phil Bradley (NC Geological Survey), Randy Daniel (East Carolina University), Tony Boudreaux (East Carolina University), Shane Petersen (NC Department of Transportation), Dan Cassidy and Matt Jorgensen (URS

Corporation), Shawn Patch and Danny Gregory (New South Associates), and Rodney Snedeker and Joel Hardison (US Forest Service). Posters will also be presented, primarily highlighting information gleaned from the recently donated collections of Jim and Bob Oshnock.

The conference is free and open to the public. On the weekends, all of the state government employee parking lots are available at no charge. If you have questions, please contact Dolores Hall at 919-807-6553 or at dolores.hall@ncdcr.gov.

Archaeology in the Digital Age: Facebook and Twitter

In today’s fast-paced world, technology links us to each other, and our interests, in many ways. Media in all its forms is helping get information about archaeology beyond the academic world—just ask our NCAS Secretary, Linda Carnes-McNaughton, about how her work on medical equipment from Blackbeard’s *Queen Anne’s Revenge* has gone viral!

Not sure how to find the latest news about archaeology? We’re trying to help. Join the North Carolina Archaeological Society group page on Facebook. Group members can share stories and events about archaeology (especially in North Carolina and neighboring states) on the Facebook page. You can also follow us @NCArchSociety on Twitter.

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All NCAS members are encouraged to submit articles and news items to Dee Nelms, Associate Editor, for inclusion in the *Newsletter*. Please use the following cut-off dates as guides for your submissions:

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