

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

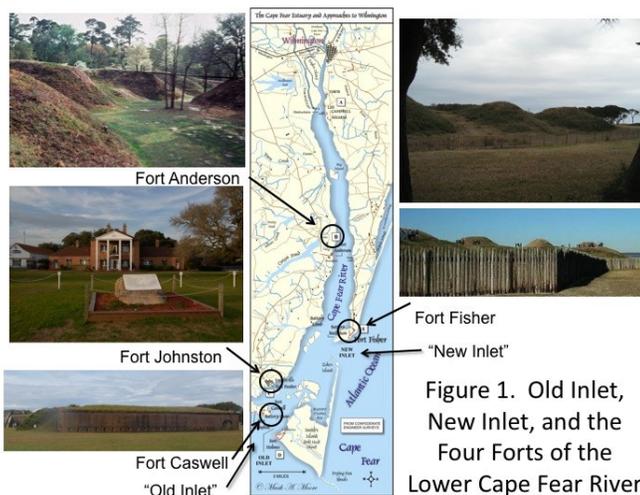


Figure 1. Old Inlet, New Inlet, and the Four Forts of the Lower Cape Fear River

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.

Acknowledgements: The author wishes to thank Linda F. Carnes-McNaughton (Fort Bragg Cultural Resources), John J. Mintz (North Carolina Office of State Archaeology), as well as Barry Malone and Jeff Harris (Wake Technical Community College) for their comments on this newsletter article. However, even with the tremendous support and assistance of these individuals, the author assumes full responsibility for any factual errors and the interpretations presented here.

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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