



Through Wars, Peace, and William Peace: A Summary of Recent Archaeological Investigations at Fort Caswell

Vincent Melomo and Thomas Beaman

On the easternmost point of Oak Island at the mouth of the Cape Fear River sits a ruin rich in local and national history, and also in archaeological significance. This ruin, Fort Caswell, has stood for nearly two centuries as a reminder of the strategic importance of the Cape Fear River and the port of Wilmington, North Carolina. Much of the original brick and mortar fort are still extant, and key architectural features of the fort and its unwritten history have until recently been hidden beneath the sand.

During the summers of 2013 and 2015, the William Peace University Archaeological Field Schools were held at Fort Caswell, and were the first archaeological investigations conducted of the site. The field schools were co-directed by Thomas Beaman, M.A., RPA, Associate Professor of Anthropology at Wake Technical Community College, and Vincent Melomo, Ph.D, Associate Professor of Anthropology at William Peace University (WPU). Thirty-four students participated in both field schools, primarily from WPU and Wake Technical Community College, as well as from various other colleges and universities across North Carolina and the United States.

Fort Caswell is a "Third System" fort. It is one of 48 fortifications that were built in response to the weaknesses in the United States' coastal defenses exposed during the War of 1812. Construction of the fort began in 1826 and finished in 1837. Fort Caswell was designed as a five-sided truncated hexagon, similar to many third system forts, but it had several unique design features. These included a four-foot thick masonry wall, a cross-shaped "citadel" in the center of the parade ground, three pairs of caponiers¹, as well as wet and dry moats. These design features helped the fort to defend from attacks by land and sea.

Numerous documented disturbances and alterations were made to the fort following its initial construction, including significant damage to the fort during the Civil War and the addition of new batteries during the Spanish American War. Changes to the site continued throughout the 20th century as the fort was used on and off for civilian and military purposes, and

particularly during World War I when Fort Caswell served as one of two primary training centers for soldiers prior to their departure for Europe. Since 1949 the North Carolina Baptist Assembly has operated the site as a religious retreat and conference center, and has been an outstanding steward in the preservation of this important historical resource.

Based on discussions with Richard Holbrook, Director of the Fort Caswell Coastal Retreat and Conference Center, as well as with local and national experts on the military history of the Cape Fear, a set of research questions were created in 2013 that were continued to be explored during the 2015 field season. Since no archaeological investigations had been previously conducted at Fort Caswell, the research questions focused on the preliminary assessment of the archaeological integrity of the site and the definition of some of the unique architectural features of the fort. The purpose of the research was to contribute to Fort Caswell's nomination to the National Register of Historic Places and to provide comparative data for future investigations of similar fortifications and of Civil War and World War I era sites. Over the course of the two field seasons, 50 10x10-ft units were fully or partially excavated, and a 30-foot trench exposed one of the surviving caponiers. Although the artifacts from the 2013 and 2015 field schools are still being processed and inventoried, the results were clear in documenting the integrity of the archaeological resources at Fort Caswell, specifically in the identification of several key architectural features of the original construction and use during the Civil War era.

The primary research goal was to archaeologically relocate, define, and document the cross-shaped citadel in the interior of the fort. Described as a two-story, brick structure measuring 100 ft by 40 ft, this structure served as the barracks for both officers and enlisted men during the occupation of the fort. The citadel was partially burned when Confederate militia from Southport abandoned the fort in January 1865, but an undated photograph from the latter half of the 19th century indicates that its shell stood empty for a number of years. When or how the structure disappeared was not well documented.

Over the two field seasons we were able to successfully document that most of the subsurface walls of the citadel are still intact (Figure 1). Despite a number of transformational processes that resulted from the various occupations and uses of the site, the subsurface remains of the citadel were very well

¹ The caponiers are essentially extensions of the rifle gallery of the fort that extend out from the fort walls, allowing soldiers to defend the entrances to the fort and the fort walls.

preserved. Only the southernmost portion of the citadel had been impacted by later construction events. In addition to documenting the location and condition of the exterior walls of the citadel, the investigations revealed other architectural features of the citadel as well as evidence of its destruction. In the northern wing of the citadel the remains of two massive chimneys and fireplaces were uncovered, and several of the entryways to the central foyer were also excavated. Brick and mortar rubble were encountered in all units opened in the interior of the citadel, with slate roofing tiles prevalent in the upper levels. Where excavation went beyond uncovering the top of the citadel walls, as much as five feet of brick and mortar rubble were uncovered, along with pockets of charred wood and ash. As seen in Figure 2, the presence of the charred wood, ash, and roofing tiles in the interior of the citadel is evidence of the documented burning of the citadel by Confederate forces when it was abandoned after the fall of Fort Fisher.

In addition to documenting the remains of the citadel, in 2013 the investigations focused on the second research goal of finding the missing portion of the eastern fort wall and the fifth corner of the fort. Attempts to locate the wall were slowed by the presence of numerous features likely tied to the construction of the later batteries and the continued use of the fort in various capacities through the 20th century. However, by the close of the 2013 season we were able to uncover both the inner and outer sections of the missing northeast wall, and its interior rifle gallery (Figure 3). Although the remains of the wall were likely removed during late 19th century improvements to the fort, the excavations revealed a large crack at this fifth point of the fort, evidencing the damage that likely occurred by the explosion of a magazine when the Confederates retreated.

During the 2015 field season another of the initial research goals was revisited: to archaeologically define and document the wet and dry moats that surround the fort. To uncover the moat, a series of units were opened extending out from the east and west walls of the fort. The units along the east wall of the fort uncovered pipes, conduits, and a roadbed made of reused brick and oyster shell. These features likely dated to the use of the fort during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and were left in-situ. During the third week of the field school the brick and mortar walls lining the wet moat were encountered about six feet below the surface in the units along the exterior west wall of the fort (Figure 4). These walls were discovered just below the water line at low-tide, and so with little time remaining excavations were ceased at the top of the walls. Just to the north of the west moat area, excavations also uncovered one of the four remaining caponiers (Figure 5). The structural details of the intact caponier were recorded, including specific 19th century modifications that were detailed in the historic literature.

In addition to documenting these key architectural features, another research goal was to generally describe the material life of the soldiers who occupied Fort Caswell. Although further

analysis of the recovered materials may yet be illuminating, non-architectural artifacts were very limited. However, some of the most notable finds included the complete remains of a Civil War era .54 caliber Austrian Lorenz rifle excavated in 2013 (Figure 6); and one painted clay Civil War era marble, recovered in 2015.

In conducting the research at Fort Caswell the WPU field schools received tremendous support from Site Director Richard Holbrook, guest services coordinator Nathan Sloan, and the entire site staff of the North Carolina Baptist Assembly. Jim McKee, Site Manager of Brunswick Town/Fort Anderson State Historic Site, was also an invaluable resource at every stage of the project. In addition, a number of professional colleagues contributed their time and expertise offering presentations for the students: Linda F. Carnes-McNaughton, historical archaeologist with Fort Bragg Cultural Resources; Chris Fonvielle, military historian of the Cape Fear at UNC-Wilmington; Paul J. Mohler, archaeologist with the North Carolina Department of Transportation; Garrett Silliman, Civil War archaeologist with Cardno; and Steve Smith, military sites archaeologist with the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology. Also, in 2015 a team of researchers from the Geoscience Program at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington (UNCW) assisted with the field school: Eman Ghoneim, Yvonne Marsan, and Randy Knoll. The UNCW team conducted a remote sensing workshop for the students as part of an ongoing remote sensing project at Fort Caswell.

The field school research also would not have been possible without the skills and dedication of the field supervisors. Serving in this role in 2013 were Jennifer Gabriel, M.A., and Dan Polito, graduates of the 2009 and 2011 WPU field schools, respectively. Kiara Cobb of WPU, a graduate of the 2011 field school, also served as a program assistant in 2013. In 2015, the field supervisors included several graduates from the 2013 field school: Kailie Batsche, WPU graduate of 2014; Tarecka Payne, WPU graduate of 2015; and Alexandria Salisbury, an archaeology student at UNC Greensboro. Many volunteers also contributed to the success of the excavations, particularly Alan Ferrell of Oak Island, and Andrew Powell of England, husband of the recently deceased 2013 field supervisor Jennifer Gabriel.

Since the site had never been investigated, the goals and methods were modest, but the discoveries turned out to be significant. Over the eight weeks of WPU's 2013 and 2015 field schools, nearly all of the research goals were successfully met. Most notably, the field schools documented the presence of intact subsurface remains of the citadel, located the missing eastern wall of the original fort, and uncovered the remains of the moat walls. While the conclusions that can otherwise be drawn from this research are currently limited, the most important accomplishments were in helping the site become a National Register Historic property in 2014 and in establishing the potential for future research to be conducted at this important historic site.



Figure 1. Excavation of the northeastern corner of the citadel illustrating the subsurface integrity of the original walls. Brick and mortar rubble from the interior of the structure are visible in the left profile wall.



Figure 2. Excavation from the entryway to the northern wing of the citadel from its central foyer. The *in situ* presence of charred wooden timbers, ash, brick and mortar rubble, as well as slate roofing tiles, helped interpret the burning and eventual collapse of this structure.



Figure 3. The top of the inner and outer section of the missing northeast exterior fort wall, and its interior rifle gallery. This portion of the original fort was destroyed by the detonation of the powder magazines when the Confederate militia abandoned Fort Caswell in January 1865.



Figure 4. The two-foot-wide brick and mortar walls that lined the wet moat surrounding the original fort. These two walls were encountered approximately six feet below the surface along the exterior west wall of the fort.



Figure 5. Excavation of a caponier on the exterior west wall of the fort. Though the access into the caponiers from the fort were sealed during a later period of construction, archaeologists were able to document the interior and exterior during the 2015 field school.



Figure 6. A complete 0.54 caliber Austrian Lorenz rifle was discovered in the citadel approximately 5 ft below the surface. This artifact, with a wooden stock and metal barrel, is currently undergoing stabilization and conservation at the Underwater Archaeology Branch at Kure Beach.

East Carolina University Archaeological Field School Held at Brunswick Town/Fort Anderson SHS

Charles Ewen

The 2015 ECU summer field school in historical archaeology (ANTH 3175/5175) archaeologically assessed the central waterfront area of Brunswick Town/Fort Anderson State Historic Site. This is the first phase of an anticipated extended research program at Brunswick Town. Founded in 1726, Brunswick was one of North Carolina's earliest ports. It dealt primarily in naval stores and because of the commerce, was an important political center as well. However, the rise of the importance of Wilmington and the depredations of the Revolutionary War led to the virtual abandonment of the town by 1776. Thus we have a well-bounded Colonial component at the site.

The field school ran from May 18th thru June 23rd and included a crew of 15 students under the direction of Dr. Charles Ewen assisted by graduate students Stephanie Byrd and Simon Goldstone. This first season concentrated on recording

the exposed wharf, which site personnel have tentatively identified as William Dry's Wharf. Excavations at the west end of the exposed timbers (shoreside) were conducted to determine where the wharf terminated on land. The interior of the westernmost crib (the wharf appears to be composed of 5 rectangular cribs) was excavated, revealing the nature of the wharf architecture and recovering temporally diagnostic artifacts. The exposed wharf was mapped at low tide, including exposed timber and ballast pile extending to the channel. The wharf timbers were recorded and left in situ. Dating of the wharf awaits analysis of the data.

The area where GPR surveys indicated an anomaly was investigated with 19 excavation units. Extensive horizontal excavations revealed what we believe to be two overlapping tar kilns that predate the founding of Brunswick Town.



ECU field school students setting up the total station to map the Brunswick Town shoreline and record the exposed wharf. Photo by Hannah Smith.



ECU field school excavation in the area where two suspected tar kilns were identified by GPR survey. Photo by Hannah Smith.

Dee Nelms to Step Down as NCAS Manager and Newsletter Editor

R. P. Stephen Davis, Jr.

For more than 25 years Dee Nelms has been the point of contact and office manager of the North Carolina Archaeological Society. Since the modern NCAS was formed in 1991 from the merger of the Archaeological Society of North Carolina and the Friends of North Carolina Archaeology, Dee has faithfully and ably handled all of the Society's day-to-day business. As part of her duties, Dee produced and distributed the quarterly newsletter, collected dues, sold back issues of journals and other NCAS merchandise, sought out members to serve on the Society's governing board, and for many years single-handedly managed the NCAS booth at the annual state fair. Needless to say, Dee has been a vital member of the Society. As Dee nears

retirement from the Office of State Archaeology, she has decided to step back from her active participation in Society affairs, though she will continue to provide help and advice as needed. She will be greatly missed!

As of January 1, 2016, the NCAS business office will transfer from the Office of State Archaeology to the Research Laboratories of Archaeology at UNC-Chapel Hill. At that time, Lisa-Jean Michienzi (michienz@email.unc.edu) of the RLA will assume many of Dee's duties. Effective immediately, and until a new newsletter editor is selected, all submissions to the NCAS Newsletter should be sent to board member Hannah Smith (hs@hannahsmith.com).

At the July meeting of the NCAS board of directors, board members gave Dee a handcrafted silver brooch made in the style of the Society's logo, and the following resolution was approved recognizing Dee's service to the NCAS.

A Resolution Honoring Dee Nelms for Her Years of Service to the North Carolina Archaeological Society

Whereas Dee Nelms has ably managed the business affairs of the North Carolina Archaeological Society since it was formed from the merger of the Friends of North Carolina Archaeology and the Archaeological Society of North Carolina in 1991, and also provided support to the Friends of North Carolina Archaeology prior to that time; and

Whereas Dee also served as NCAS Newsletter Editor, providing timely information to the membership about archaeological happenings and upcoming meetings; and

Whereas Dee has been a friendly point of contact for Society members for more than 25 years, collecting membership dues, selling back issues of journals, and hawking NCAS t-shirts, mugs, caps, and other bling; and

Whereas Dee has done all this while attending to her "day job" of keeping the OSA boss and staff out of trouble;

Therefore be it resolved that the board and entire membership of the North Carolina Archaeological Society extend their thanks to Dee for a job well done.

July, 26, 2015

Raleigh, North Carolina

2015 Annual Fall Meeting and North Carolina Archaeology and Heritage Day at Jordan Lake Visitor's Center and White Oak Recreation Area, Apex, North Carolina

October 3, 2015

NCAS Meeting (Jordan Lake Visitor's Center)

8:30–9:00 AM Refreshments for NCAS members
(coffee and pastries)
9:00 AM NCAS Board Meeting
9:30 AM NCAS Members Meeting with elections

North Carolina Archaeology and Heritage Day (White Oak Recreation Area)

10:00 AM – 3:00 PM Meeting Activities

Celebrate the cultural and natural resources of North Carolina! This free family event offers a variety of exhibits, demonstrations, entertainment, and activities related to archaeology and North Carolina's cultural heritage. There will be fun things to do for all ages!

We are still accepting exhibitors and volunteers. If interested, please contact Theresa McReynolds Shebalin (tmshebalin@alumni.unc.edu; 919-749-5212).

Activities

Check the NCAS web page (www.rla.unc.edu/ncas) for a regularly updated list of participants, demonstrations, and hands-on activities.

- Displays and Mini-Exhibits from Around North Carolina
- Primitive Technology Demonstrations
- Ask an Archaeologist Booth (*Archaeologists will answer your questions and identify artifacts*)
- Hands-on Activities for Kids
- Live Entertainment
- Food and Merchandise Vendors

North Carolina Archaeology and Heritage Day is a collaborative effort by the North Carolina Archaeological Society, the Junior North Carolina Archaeological Society, Jordan Lake State Recreation Area, and the Research Laboratories of Archaeology at UNC-Chapel Hill.

Directions

Jordan Lake State Recreation Area is located in Chatham County, 21 miles southwest of Raleigh off US Hwy 64. Adequate parking is available at both the Visitor's Center and the White Oak Recreation Area.

From Raleigh and points east: Follow I-40 to US 1/US 64W (exit 293A, Sanford/Asheboro). Take exit 98B (US Hwy 64W) and follow 64W for approximately 12.75 miles. Turn **right** into the entrance to White Oak Recreation Area (for Archaeology and Heritage Day) or continue traveling 0.25 miles and turn **left** onto State Park Road to reach the Visitor's Center/Park Office (for the NCAS meeting). *If you cross the bridge over Jordan Lake, you've gone too far!*

From Greensboro and points west: Traveling east on I-40 from Greensboro, take exit 274 and turn **right** onto NC 751. Travel south on 751 for approximately 12 miles. Turn **right** onto US Hwy 64W and proceed approximately 3.5 miles. Turn **right** into the entrance to White Oak Recreation Area (for Archaeology and Heritage Day) or continue traveling 0.25 miles and turn **left** onto State Park Road to reach the Visitor's Center/Park Office (for the NCAS meeting). *If you cross the bridge over Jordan Lake, you've gone too far!*

From Chapel Hill: Traveling south on 15-501, go approximately 13 miles and exit **right** onto US Hwy 64E. Proceed for 9.5 miles and cross the bridge over Jordan Lake.

Turn **right** onto State Park Road to arrive at the Visitor's Center/Park Office (for the NCAS meeting) or continue traveling an additional 0.25 miles and turn **left** into the entrance to White Oak Recreation Area (for Archaeology and Heritage Day).

NCAS Social Media Reminder

Looking for a way to stay up to date on the latest in archaeology news? Social media has become one of the most common ways to do so. Join the North Carolina Archaeological Society group on Facebook or follow NCArchSociety on Twitter to stay up to date on news from North Carolina and the Southeastern US.

Save the Date!

The NCAS meeting in Cherokee, NC, originally scheduled for this Fall, has been rescheduled for Spring, 2016, and will include a bus tour of archaeological sites in the Cherokee area. Stay tuned for further details!

NCAS Officers

President: Theresa McReynolds Shebalin, 3611 University Drive, Apt. 16G, Durham NC 27707

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NCAS Newsletter Publication Schedule

All NCAS members are encouraged to submit articles and news items to Hannah Smith (hs@hannahpsmith.com) for inclusion in the *Newsletter*. Please use the following cut-off dates as guides for your submissions:

Winter Issue – January 31

Summer Issue – July 31

Spring Issue – April 30

Fall Issue – October 31

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