



The nonprofit group Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range has preserved a World War I site in Caswell Beach and is also honoring Brunswick County's WWI veterans in numerous ways.

An oddly shaped, decaying concrete structure sprouting trees and weeds and posing a blight to a Brunswick County neighborhood is now on the National Register of Historic Places, thanks to several years of dedicated work by numerous individuals and organizations. The structure's importance to the outcome of World War I may never be fully known, but the volunteers who have worked to save it want county residents to know of its purpose.

When the Caswell Dunes Neighborhood Landscape Committee began investigating the structure, they sought assistance from Jim McKee, historian and site manager of Brunswick Town/Fort Anderson. McKee's research identified the structure as a known distance target pit and storage area constructed in 1918 for long-distance target practice for WWI Inductees. He called in the state's historic preservation office, which visited the site with historians, engineers, lawyers and others, according to Norma Eckard, who is part of the Caswell Dunes group assigned to handle the project for the neighborhood association.



According to a Brunswick Beacon article, after the United States entered WWI, the pit allowed soldiers to practice before being shipped to Europe. Sixteen targets were raised and lowered from inside, while the line of fire was stationed about 300 yards away.

"The military had to build it outside the old Fort Caswell because of safety issues," Eckard says. "Within the fort it would have been unsafe because of the men firing live ammo 300 yards beyond the targets. If you have seen the movie Sergeant York, a WWI movie, it has a scene of York training at a rifle range."

For the Caswell Dunes team, it quickly became evident that the site is of historic significance. With pro bono assistance from a local attorney, they formed a 501(c)(3), Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range Inc., for fundraising and management. Eckard's husband, Ron, is administrator and spokesperson to local organizations. A member of National Society Daughters of the American Revolution, Eckard involved the Brunswick Town chapter in the effort. One of DAR's mandates is historic preservation; another is patriotism.

The Friends team's hard work of removing the dirt and vegetation began and proceeded carefully so as not to further damage the 184-foot long, 12-foot-deep structure.

When the group learned that nearby Fort Caswell was being considered for National Register of Historic Places status, they joined the proposal by personally loaning the money needed for the submission fee. By 2013 they were notified the range would be a noncontiguous part of the Fort Caswell Historic District. By 2017, an engineering study was complete with recommendations for straightening the center wall, repair of lintels, patching and sealing the walls.



As part of their effort to bring attention to restoration of the rifle range, Eckard and her daughter, Amy Eckard, began researching and writing profiles of WWI veterans from Brunswick County. For the past several months, these profiles have run weekly in the Brunswick Beacon and occasionally in other publications. All the profiles, about 80 thus far, are published on the Friends' weekly blog at caswellrifle range.com.

Their research has uncovered the names of 724 men and one woman veteran of WWI who were from or enlisted in Brunswick County. Their published profiles have focused primarily on those who were killed, wounded or died of disease. The woman was a Southport native who attended nursing school in New York. She was one of the first 40 nurses to serve in France. At the time, nurses, even in combat zones, weren't counted as military. She survived the war and died of pneumonia in 1935, Eckard says. Fourteen nurses who served at Fort Caswell have been identified, and their profiles will be added to the website. The Eckards encourage residents to send in stories, photos and any available information on relatives who served in WWI, and not just those who were from Brunswick County.

Family members' reactions to the stories have been gratifying for Eckard, but a highlight was the unexpected offer of a newcomer who read the story of Robert Bollie Stanley. Stanley is Brunswick County's only known WWI POW, but his grave in the Stanley Cemetery in Brierwood makes no mention of his military service, his Purple Heart or his POW status.

A native of Charlotte who worked at Southport's Fish Scrap and Oil Company, Stanley was one of 25 local African-Americans who stepped forward to serve in the war. After weeks of intensive training, he and four others were assigned to combat duty. William James Gordon of Southport and William Frederick Brooks of Charlotte were scheduled to leave for France with Stanley. Brooks died of meningitis before they reached Brest, France, in June 1918.

Stanley and Gordon were assigned to the famed Buffalo Soldiers, the 92nd Division 365th Infantry, and served in multiple engagements in Meuse-Argonne. Eckard points out that it was important for combat troops to be able to read and write, and while many of that time could not, Gordon could and was a school teacher.

Wounded on November 4, 1918, Gordon returned to the United States. His early death at age 39 is partially attributed to his war injuries. Stanley was initially listed as missing, but he was actually wounded and captured by the Germans on October 29, 1918. He was released a month later, but his right leg had to be amputated. He returned home to Charlotte in March 1919. He later married Ethel Harrison and the couple had several children. Privates Joseph R. Burney of Supply and Willie Leak of Winnabow served in numerous engagements with the 92nd Division, 366th Infantry and returned home safely.

A 2018 profile of Stanley touched the heart of Allen Dunstan, a worker at the Duke Energy nuclear plant. He tracked down Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range and offered to pay for a military style marker for Stanley's grave. In May 2019 the marker was dedicated with several of Stanley's relatives in attendance, along with members of DAR Brunswick Town and Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range.



Once the restoration of the range is complete, the organization's work will continue. Maintenance of the rifle range will require much more funding. The committee has encouraged residents to donate any amount they desire to honor a soldier. The organization's website includes a database of all who served by service branch. Donations will be acknowledged through a certificate, which includes an image of the soldier's service card and a donor listing on the website.

Their long-range goal is to publish profiles of Brunswick County's WWI veterans in a book that can be given to school and public libraries and perhaps sold to the public, Eckard says.

"The book will include our journey of preserving the rifle range beginning in 2011, when our homeowners discovered it, to forming the nonprofit, having it placed on the National Register of Historic Places along with Fort Caswell, and finally being chosen as a National WWI Centennial Memorial, one of only two in North Carolina," Eckard says.

A memorial obelisk honoring the veterans was dedicated on Armistice Day, November 11, 1918, the centennial of the end of World War I. One side includes the name of 23 Brunswick County men who died in WWI.

Numerous fundraisers and commemorative events have been held and are scheduled for the foreseeable future. A fundraiser on October 12 featured music by the Back Porch Rockers and food by Turtle Island, an on Veterans Day, November 11, the Roll Call continued at the rifle range.

A lot of progress has been made in eight years, but Eckard notes that it's not over. "This project has got to be completed, otherwise it will be a forgotten war, as many have said."

Learn More about the Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range
Directions: The 1918 Fort Caswell Rifle Range is in Caswell Dunes subdivision on Caswell Beach. Just past Oak Island Golf Course, turn left onto Pinehurst Drive. At the first street (Foxfire Trace), turn right. The range is on the left.

To sponsor a WWI veteran, call Norma Eckard at (910) 278-7584 or visit the website.

Information and written profiles of the WWI veterans can be found at caswellrifle range.com.

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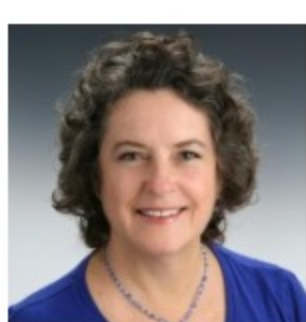
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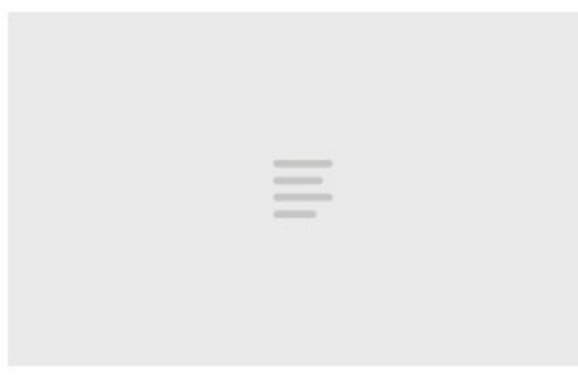
ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Teresa McLamb

Since high school, Teresa A. McLamb has been a professional journalist. Her love of storytelling and the written word led her to a BA in journalism from UNCCH and an MA in English from UNCW. She feels very fortunate to be a native of coastal North Carolina. Her love of art, animals and travel often lead to articles in magazines and on the web. She is also a real estate developer and licensed broker. The mother of two, Teresa lives in Carolina Beach and Hickman Cross Roads with her cats.

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