



Photos by Lee Hinnant
Ron and Norma Eckard examine the crumbling lintels inside the rifle range. Stabilizing the decay is the first priority.



This view shows the long interior of the range, where targets were hoisted above the wall to the right.



This mason's mark puts the year of construction at 1918.

Historic structure at Caswell Beach

Group aims to save World War I rifle range

By Lee Hinnant
Staff Writer

A group of Caswell Beach residents is working to save one of the few remaining rifle ranges from World War I, a concrete bunker-like structure that has, until lately, suffered from roughly 90 years of benign neglect.

Located in the common area of Caswell Dunes Homeowners Association, the range—technically known as a “rifle butt”—was once part of sprawling Fort Caswell, whose core structures are part of the N.C. Baptist Assembly. For safety, the rifle range was built some distance from the main fortress on the east end of Oak Island.

Although intact, the range walls are decaying and threatened by tree roots and water infiltration. Of special concern are the load-bearing supports across interior doorways, called lintels, which are cracking and separating from the walls.

Neighbors said it's going to take some TLC if the historic structure is to survive another 90-plus years.

“There are just not many of these left that we know of,” said Jim McKee, an interpreter at Brunswick Town/Fort Anderson State Historic Site. “We’re coming up on the centennial of our involvement in World War I. To have something tangible that we know was used to prepare our troops—it’s important.”

The range is 190 feet long, mostly below grade, with a tall earthen mound on the side facing what is now Oak Island Golf Course. It is 12 feet wide and nine feet tall, with a target area on the western end, walkway in the middle and storage room on the eastern end.

The only roof was over the storage area, which held target supplies and tools to maintain the mechanisms that moved the targets. That roof is gone, but volunteers and others have pulled off vines and removed soil and detritus that accumulated on the concrete floor. Other sections of the range still need cleaning.

There are bits and pieces of rusted metal toward the western end, which are likely the remains of mechanisms used to raise and lower targets.

In actual use, soldiers likely stood somewhere around what is now the fifth hole of the golf course and fired at targets that were moved up and down by range operators inside the concrete walls. Scorers affixed colored paper discs to show soldiers and their instructors where rounds struck on the targets.

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Ron and Norma Eckard, who retired to Caswell Dunes, started looking into preserving the range, along with some of their neighbors, more than a year ago. They said staff from the state's Office of Historic Preservation toured the site and encouraged them to save the structure, but offered little hope of securing state money, in part because the range is on private property.

The Eckards said they felt compelled to try to halt the decay of something significant in their own backyard, adding that the HOA doesn't have the funds for restoration.

“It would be a shame to let it fall into disrepair,” Ron Eckard said. Should that happen, he fears the structure would eventually become a fenced-off eyesore.

“When we think of World War I, we tend to think of Europe and trench warfare,” McKee said. “You don't hear as much about how our boys got ready over here to go over there. The last World War I veteran died earlier this year. This is significant.”

Volunteers have so far raised about \$600 and hope to hold more fundraisers in the future.

Stabilizing the crumbling lintels, probably with four-by-four framing, is a priority. One engineer estimated the cost of a complete stabilization study at \$11,000. Ron Eckard said volunteers hoped to find someone qualified to at least stabilize the structure for considerably less.

The Eckards plan to focus on the rifle range again starting in Febru-

ary 2013. Anyone interested in assisting the effort may contact them by e-mail at normaron@mindspring.com.

McKee has secured a 1909 book that could prove useful for future reconstruction of the range. Called “Rifle Range Construction,” it was written by Army servicemen and published by ammunition maker E.I. Du Pont Nemours Powder Co.

In the times leading up to world war, rifle training was considered very serious business. This single, uncomfortably long sentence serves as the book's dedication:

“This book is dedicated to the range builders: Men who are toiling and struggling with almost superhuman energy to do something for our nation's need; men who have been farsighted enough to see that while we are almost, if not quite, the most arrogant nation in the world, we are also the most helpless if war should come; men who believe in peace, who desire peace, and who are trying to insure our country against war, and are therefore willing to spend a few trifling millions now to prevent our paying hundreds of millions later on; men who know that rifle practice makes for clean sportsmanship, healthfulness, and temperance; men whom our country will some day rise up and call blessed.”