

THE STATE PORT PILOT OUR TOWN



Photo supplied
Caswell Beach artist Helen Ratcliff (left) presents a watercolor painting of the 1918 World War I rifle range target pit to Norma Eckard, chair of Friends of the Fort Caswell Rifle Range. The artwork is among silent auction items offered during a May 2 fundraiser to preserve the landmark.

Caswell Beach

‘Derby Day’ aids pit project

By Lee Hinnant
Staff Writer

The public is invited to a Kentucky Derby-themed event on May 2 to raise funds for preservation of the historic rifle range pit at Caswell Dunes. The 1918 structure is one of the few standing reminders of America's role in the Great War.

The third annual Derby Day party will be held from 2:30 to 7 p.m. at the Caswell Dunes clubhouse. Admission is \$12 and includes dinner.

"Homeowners in the area know the importance of protecting historic structures like this one in Caswell Beach," said Norma Eckard, chair of Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range Inc. "We are fortunate to have four sites in Caswell Beach that are on the National Register of Historic Places. As well, a recent vote by the homeowners in Caswell Dunes showed

overwhelming support for preserving the history within the community."

Before shipping overseas, soldiers learned long-range shooting techniques at the Fort Caswell range. Constructed in 1918, the 12-foot-deep concrete pit protected operators, who would raise paper targets on metal poles, then mark where the targets were hit. The facility is a reminder of the work and sacrifice American soldiers endured to save Europe from the Germans.

The motion picture "Sergeant York" has an extended scene that illustrates the use of a similar rifle range.

The 200-foot-long pit was the victim of benign neglect until 2011, when a group of residents, led by Norma and Ron Eckard, began efforts to save and restore the structure. Volunteers have surveyed and cleaned the pit and stabilized much of the structure, which is adjacent to what is now Oak Island Golf

Course.

The goal is to raise money for future preservation efforts, including removing some trees that threaten the stability of the walls.

The May 2 event includes a silent auction and five tabletop races with miniature horses and coverage of the Kentucky Derby itself. There will be prizes for the best male and female hats, and a prize for the best-dressed couple, along with door prizes.

Guests are encouraged to "buy" a tabletop horse for the pre-race fun, and Bob Schaffran and Rob Clarke will serve as masters of ceremony.

Eckard said many volunteers have made the event a success in past years. She noted that N.C. Secretary of State's office recently recognized Friends of the Fort Caswell Rifle Range Inc. as a non-profit organization.

To reserve tickets or learn more, e-mail Eckard at normaron@mindspring.com.