

# Fundraiser set as Caswell Rifle Range nears 100th birthday

What is 184 feet long, has a depth of 12 feet, is almost 100 years old and left abandoned at Caswell Beach? Hint: It is not a ship or a whale. It is a rifle range target pit and storage area built in 1918 so that armed soldiers who were several hundred yards away could shoot at targets north of the structure, practicing marksmanship before being shipped to Europe. The rifle range target pit would become part of the Fort Caswell Historic District.

The story of preserving the rifle pit and storage area began in 2011, when members of the Caswell Dunes Neighborhood Landscape Committee came upon a structure covered in weeds and tree limbs and dirt. They could not immediately identify the structure, but it piqued their curiosity.

One of the committee members was Norma Eckard, also a member of the Brunswick Town Chapter of the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution. She decided to seek help from fellow DAR member Gwen Causey, also a member of Friends of Brunswick Town /Fort Anderson. She advised that the best person to contact was Jim McKee, historian and site manager of Brunswick Town/Fort Anderson. McKee's credentials are widely known and revered in Brunswick County and throughout the state.

McKee immediately met with the landscape committee to view the structure. About a week or so later, he gave them information on the historical nature of the structure. He identified it as a KD (known distance) target pit and storage area that was built in 1918 for use in World War I for military target practice, and as an extension of Fort Caswell. He advised the landscape committee to clean the soil off the floor, as well as remove vines, small trees, etc. He said that he would seek advice from the State Historic Preservation Office in Raleigh and soon scheduled their visit to the site.

The group included historians, engineers, lawyers and others who make the determination of what North Carolina places are listed on the National List of Historic Places. After inspecting the site, it was advised that a "No Trespassing" sign be immediately placed at the site because of large cracks in the pit's doorways (lintels) and center wall because of the possibility of collapse.

Norma and her husband Ron Eckard were then appointed by the board of directors of the Caswell Dunes Homeowners Association to chair a special interests group to handle the preservation of this important historical project. The Eckards presented progress updates at each board meeting. The mayor of Caswell Beach and the town administrator advised them to obtain nonprofit status, as a 501(C)(3) organization would be advantageous in securing funds. They followed the advice and obtained nonprofit status as Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range Inc. Ron Eckard is the administrator. He also gives talks on the project to local clubs and organizations.

"We were soon notified by state officials that a proposal was being written to place the fort on the Natural List of Historic Places and that the rifle pit fit into that piece of history because it was once owned by Fort Caswell," Norma Eckard said in a news release. "The rifle range was sold after World War II to the N.C. Baptist



Photo contributed

The 184-foot-long Fort Caswell Rifle Range wall is shown from the east side where the center wall is tilted inward displaying the need to stabilize it before it collapses.

State Convention. Funds were raised by the special interest group to pay for submission of the proposal by the state."

In 2013, there were big smiles all over Caswell Dunes. Their hard work had paid off. They received word that the rifle range would be considered as a discontinuous part of the Fort Caswell Historic District.

The Fort Caswell Historic District occupies a 760-acre area at the tip of a peninsula on the southeastern end of Oak Island in Brunswick County, including a one-half nautical mile extension east into the Cape Fear River and south into the Atlantic Ocean.

The engineering study has now been completed and recommendations made to straighten the center wall at a cost of \$20,000 or more. To repair the lintels, patch and seal the walls the cost goes much higher.

To raise money for this project of historical significance, the fifth annual Derby Day fundraiser will be May 6 from 2:30 to 7 p.m. at 45 Pinehurst Drive in Caswell Beach. All are welcome. To attend, contact [ftcaswellrifle@gmail.com](mailto:ftcaswellrifle@gmail.com).

There will be a silent auction featuring a painting by artist Helen Radcliffe. Her first watercolor of the rifle pit

was sold to the highest bidder. Images of the watercolor were placed on note cards, magnets, mouse pads, prints of different sizes and business cards. She is in charge of the silent auction and will be securing donated gifts from local businesses.

Another Caswell Beach artist, Marti Hardy, created two stained glass pieces of the rifle range and another that sits on a shelf, as well as a mosaic. These items raised funds of more than \$650 in 2013 and 2014. Hardy is a Caswell Beach commissioner.

For information and to follow the progress of this preservation project, go to [caswellrifle.com](http://caswellrifle.com). Post pictures of family members or friends on the Honor Wall of World War I veterans. The website is packed full of information about the restoration process and how you can help. Ideas and energy are needed to assist with the work to save this structure and prevent additional deterioration. For information, email [ftcaswellrifle@gmail.com](mailto:ftcaswellrifle@gmail.com).

The Fort Caswell Rifle Range is inside the Caswell Dunes subdivision in Caswell Beach, next to Oak Island Golf Course. It is one of a few of its kind remaining in the United States.