

Club Profile

Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range

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The Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range began as members of the landscape/grounds committee of Caswell Dunes neighborhood next to Oak Island Golf Course.

In 2011, the committee was planning to clean up the neighborhood common area.

What they discovered in the overgrowth was a nearly 100-year-old structure. They learned it was a rifle range target pit that was once part of Fort Caswell.

Inside is a 200-foot concrete structure made up of compartments, a store room/passageway, the target pit area, and a rifle range.

The range was built in 1918 for soldiers in World War I to practice marksmanship before shipping off to Europe. It was used in both World Wars and then was sold to the Baptist Assembly after World War II.

Over the years, trees and brush grew up in and around the rifle range causing conditions to deteriorate, with trees pushing on the sides of the concrete walls, cracking doorways and threatening to collapse the structure in on itself.

The Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range organized to save and restore the site as an all volunteer group and incorporated as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit to preserve the Fort Caswell Rifle Range.

Norma Lee Eckard serves as the group's president, Russ Barlowe is the vice president, Tom Luken serves as secretary-treasurer and Eckard's husband, Ronald Eckard, is the administrator.

They learned the rifle range target pit qualified as a dis-contiguous extension of Fort Caswell and is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places, along with Fort Caswell.

The rifle range was also added to the Historic Wilmington Foundation's Most Threatened Historic Places List in 2016 and



Photo contributed

Artist Helen Radcliffe, left presents a rifle range painting to Norma Eckard, president of Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range in this file photo.

held over on the list for 2017.

The group worked to raise funds for a structural engineering study to identify how to repair the center wall of the 184-foot section before it collapses and recently removed a row of trees along the wall to stabilize the site.

The group now is working on repairs to recognize the World War I site on the 100th anniversary of the United States entrance into the Great War.

"The community has been working for six years planning for the stabilization effort and it is difficult to give up on the historical preservation of something that helped our military train before they left for France," Norma Lee Eckard said in a news release. "The site deserves to be here for future generations as a witness to our desire and interest in preserving democracy."

Paul Shivers, engineer and president of the Friends of Brunswick Town/Fort Anderson and project manager of the rifle range work, estimates straightening the center wall will cost about \$15,000 to \$20,000.

After that, the two lintels, or doorways, need repairing as well as patching on the walls.

The group has raised about \$6,000 toward the cost to complete repairs to straighten the passageway wall.

It also is continuing a public appeal to send pictures of family members who served in World War I from any state. Anyone interested can send a copy of a photograph of a family member in uniform, with their rank, units/divisions, any stories about them and the war. If possible, list the state where they signed up and/or where they lived.

The group hosts an annual Kentucky Derby Day fundraiser and has received corporate and individual donations ranging from \$25 to more than \$1,000.

For more information about the Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range, go to caswellriflerange.com or email ftcaswellriflerange@gmail.com

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