

Caswell Beach

World War I stories part of monument effort

By Lee Hinnant
Staff Writer

Supporters of a significant World War I site are working to build a permanent Brunswick County monument to the Great War at a place once used to train soldiers at Fort Caswell.

The Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range are gathering stories, pictures and other memorabilia about the more than 700 people from Brunswick County who served. As the nation marks the 100th anniversary of that conflict, locals are trying to gather interest in saving a place and the stories behind the war.

Fort Caswell and the rifle pit were essential places for training young American soldiers before they were shipped off to fight Germany. Today, the circa-1917 rifle pit and larger Fort Caswell complex are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Supporters are continuing efforts to stabilize and restore the rifle range, now a part of the Caswell Dunes subdivision and adjacent to Oak Island Golf Course. The site—rare among remaining places—was once part of the larger, nearby Fort Caswell.

Volunteers are inviting families to share stories of those who served and hope to create a lasting monument. As part of their efforts, they are featuring profiles of Brunswick County residents who helped in the war effort.

“Our objective is to honor a World War I veteran as well as to perhaps gain some funds for signage at the rifle range site,” said Norma Eckard of the Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range. “A booklet will be published with all the 731 names of World War I veterans that served from Brunswick County. Those that honor a vet will have their names beside their selected veteran.”

“It is all about making connections with a human element,” Eckard said. “Real live people used the rifle range, and again we want to focus on some of those veterans that may be of interest to the public.”

The current profile featured on the Friends website is about Susan Adkins Williams, who



Southport native Susan Adkins Williams served as a nurse in France during the Great War. She posed here with other nurses at the U.S. Navy Hospital in Brest, France. Volunteers are promoting her story and the experiences of more than 700 other Brunswick County residents who served to create a permanent monument at the Fort Caswell Rifle Range.



served as a nurse for 18 months abroad:

Susan Adkins Williams
1879-1938

Susie Williams was born and raised in Southport. Her father, known as the “Captain,” mother, stepmother and three siblings are buried in Old Smithville Burying Ground in Southport. Two sisters out of eight siblings married and had children, none of whom remained in Southport. Their gravesites are unknown.

Susie attended Long Island College Nursing Hospital, New York, sometime between 1905, when the Census listed her occupation as forewoman, and 1910, when the Census listed her as a private nurse.

This poster may have inspired Williams to offer her services to the Navy on June 27, 1917. (The British and French governments requested that only graduate nurses be sent overseas.) Nurses served without rank or commission and were not trained as soldiers, which was modified after the war, perhaps due to these women’s extraordinary service and bravery.

In September 1917, Williams

boarded the *U.S.S. Henderson* to serve at the first base hospital the Red Cross organized for the Navy, Navy Base Hospital No. 1, in Brest, France. Chief Nurse Francis Van Ingen was given the task of staffing.

Williams succumbed to pneumonia on February 23, 1938, and was buried at Queens, New York.

The State Port Pilot published her obituary:

Former Resident Dies

Miss Susie A. Williams, Who Was Born And Reared Here, Died In New York City Of Pneumonia

Miss Susan A. Williams, who was born and reared in Southport, died Saturday in New York City following a short illness with pneumonia.

The deceased, who was 58 years of age, was the daughter of the late Captain and Mrs. J.A. Williams, of Southport. She was a registered nurse, and for the past few years had held a responsible position with the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company.

She was a member of the American Legion by virtue of her service in France during the World War, and last summer she paid another visit to French soil.

She has no immediate relatives in Southport, but is survived by one brother, Raymond S. Williams, of New York; three sisters, Miss Leila Williams, Mrs. Beatrice Potter, of New York, and Mrs. George Reid (Reeves), of New Jersey.

Her funeral services were conducted in New York, and interment was made there.

Readers who would like to help honor Susan Adkins Williams or another Brunswick County World War I veteran are invited to visit www.caswellrifle.com

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