

## BCC holds groundbreaking for health sciences building



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# THE BRUNSWICK BEACON

## Family locates gravesite of WWI soldier

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STAFF WRITER

**BOLIVIA** — One hundred years ago in France, Pvt. David Williams, who had survived the end of World War I, succumbed to Spanish influenza on March 18, 1919, at the age of 25.

Nearly a century later Norma Eckard of Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range, dating to WWI, and her family members located Williams' gravesite in Bolivia during the holidays.

Williams was one of 23 Brunswick County veterans who gave their lives during WWI whose gravesites Eckard has been tracking down over the years. Williams served overseas with the 545th Engineers, building and maintaining roadways and railways during both the war and after for the Army of Occupation. He left behind a wife, Florence, who died in 1973, and a son, David Williams Jr., who would never get a chance to meet his father but would eventually serve in World War II and died in 1996.

Williams was called to war only four months after getting married. Decades after her husband's death, in 1947 Florence Williams became a schoolteacher, teaching at Brunswick County Training School in Southport — the only African American high school in the county, Eckard said.

Eckard said Williams' remains were returned to the United States on Nov. 26, 1921, but there was no record to help locate his gravesite. But Eckard's daughter, Amy Eckard, who often helps her mother and father Ron Eckard to locate gravesites, learned that Florence Williams had been buried in Greer Cemetery in Bolivia off Midway Road.

"She's a good sleuth. She tracks everything down," Norma Eckard said.

Records didn't show Williams was buried in the same cemetery as his wife, but on Dec. 26 Norma Eckard, Amy Eckard and her children Shaun and Michelle Allison set off for Bolivia in hopes of finding Williams himself.

The gravesite itself was difficult to get to, off a backroad off another backroad, the path to the site located off a dead-end dirt road with driveways and overgrown brush.

"Visiting the gravesite was certainly an adventure," Michelle Allison said. "We didn't know what to expect, and when we realized it was along a dirt road with 'no trespassing' signs along it, it was a little scary."

"We were worried that we would take a wrong turn and end up on someone's private property," Shaun Allison said. "But luckily my mom had some satellite images from Google Maps with what appeared to be the graveyard we were looking for, and we got there without much trouble."

"As the cemetery is on the driver's side, I was able to see the headstones peeking out from the tall grass and so then we relaxed some, but it still took time to maneuver the SUV around," Amy Eckard said.

Norma Eckard said upon arrival at the cemetery without

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Staff photo by Lindsay Kriz

Norma Eckard of Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range surveys the gravesite of David Williams, who died nearly 100 years ago in France as a result of Spanish influenza. He was buried in Greer Cemetery in Bolivia. His wife, Florence Williams, who died 55 years after he did and bore him one son, David Williams Jr., is also buried in Greer Cemetery. Williams Jr. is buried out of state.

### Gravesite

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incident, it was Shaun Allison who first found Williams' headstone.

"He was all over (the site) in about a minute," Norma Eckard said.

"I think I found his grave after going back through an area I had already checked," Shaun Allison said.

The group learned from their discovery that Williams and his wife are not buried next to each other but are not sure why. Williams Jr. is buried out of state, Norma Eckard said. She said Williams' headstone isn't a military headstone but it does mention his military service. Specifically, it reads, "David Williams, Privet (sic) 545 Eng. U.S.A. Died March 18, 1919. Erected by his wife Florence Williams."

The family took plenty of pictures of the site to show family back home and to document for Findagrave.com and for the Friends of Fort Caswell website. Norma Eckard stressed the importance of this, in case a relative of Williams' wants to find his gravesite. She and her daughter are also planning a book about those fallen and discovered.

"It allows the entire story from beginning to end to be told and not forgotten," Norma Eckard said.

Amy Eckard said she likes seeing closure on the soldiers' lives once they've been found. "Seeing their headstones

completes the story," she said.

"I got involved not only because I felt it would be a service to David Williams and his wife, as they achieved so much in their lives, but because I also wanted to see who else was at the gravesite and consider what their stories might be as well," Michelle Allison said.

The family will next begin the search for Fred Wilson, who may be buried in Robeson County.

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