



Dylan Phillips/Brunswick Beacon

Part of the Fort Caswell Rifle Range, located in the Caswell Dunes neighborhood in Caswell Beach. The range was used for target practice by United States soldiers during World War I.

Hidden history in Caswell Beach

Fort Caswell Rifle Range a
piece of World War I history

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Tucked away in Caswell Dunes, a quiet Caswell Beach community, sits an over century old piece of World War I history, the Fort Caswell Rifle Range, which served an important role in America's effort during the Great War.

Over the past decade, The Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range, a now

defunct nonprofit organization started to stabilize and promote the rifle range, has done extensive work to preserve the historical landmark, learn and share its history and get the site the historical recognition it deserves.

The United States War Department proposed on Jan. 21, 1918, constructing the Fort Caswell Rifle Range adjacent to nearby Fort Caswell, which was built in 1836 and served as a Confederate fort during the Civil War and a United States Army training facility in World War I. The purpose of the rifle range was for “for small arms training of soldiers.”

The range allowed soldiers to practice shooting the target in the pit, a lowered area within the rifle range, from roughly 300 yards to the north.

“During World War I, the military used the rifle range for target practice. A soldier-operated mechanism that held the targets was located in the westernmost section. Armed soldiers, who were several hundred yards north of the structure, would attempt to shoot the targets, which were moved up and down by range operators in the pit,” the Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range website notes.

However, following World War II the range was considered surplus, sold and, over the decades, fell into a state of disarray.

When Norma and Ron Eckard, who founded



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A view inside the pit. Shown is a lentil (doorway) in the pit. Soldiers in this pit operate targets while others would shoot at the target from a few hundred yards away.



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Another view inside the rifle range pit.

the Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range, first became aware of the site, it was in bad shape. So, in 2011, they organized a clean up of the site.

It was during that clean up that the Eckards grew interested in the site and its history.

“We said, ‘What is this? And what’s it all about?’” Norma Eckard said. “Then we began exploring, and our board of directors at Caswell Dunes made Ron and I the head of a special interest committee to find out about this thing, because it just was sitting there with all this mess.”

That committee eventually evolved into the 501(c)3 nonprofit, the Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range, Inc. in 2015.

Gwen Causey, a Brunswick County historian and member of the Brunswick County Historical Society, said Norma Eckard contacted her in 2012 about the rifle range and it piqued her interest. Causey served on the nonprofit’s board of directors starting in 2019, but had been heavily involved with the group for years prior.

Soon, other local historical groups, such as the Brunswick Town Chapter of the National Society of Daughters of the American Revolution (NSDAR), of which Eckard and Causey are also members, and local historian and Brunswick



A view inside a rifle range pit in England during World War I.

Photo contributed

Town/Fort Anderson Site Manager Jim McKee, were getting involved to help bring the rifle range back into shape.

Both Eckard and Causey said NSDAR and McKee played pivotal roles in the preservation efforts.

Ron and Norma's daughter, Amy Eckard, also had a major hand in the group's efforts to dig into the history of the rifle range. Amy, Norma said, runs the Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range website and was able to locate all sorts of military records, which opened doors to the rifle range's history.

Norma explained that Causey initially was identifying those from Brunswick County who served until Amy took over that role in 2017.

The Friends held an annual fundraiser for seven years, raising around \$15,000 in total – enough to stage widespread clean up, fund structural repairs to prevent further decay and remove 17 trees



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that were negatively affecting the rifle range.

“It just sort of kept going and evolved into what we have here today,” Causey said.

Once the group brought the site back up to standard, it began working to promote the Fort Caswell Rifle Range and uncover its associated history.

One way they did this was to have a monument constructed honoring the Brunswick County soldiers who lost their lives during World War I.

Causey said they had originally wanted to place the names of all 717 men and women from Brunswick County who served the United States during the Great War, but it proved to be infeasible due to the number of names.

“So, we said, ‘Well, why don’t we recognize and remember those that lost their lives in World War I,’” Causey said. “That’s the 23 names on the monument.”

The monument was dedicated

on Nov. 11, 2018, 100 years after the original Armistice Day, which is now known as Veterans Day, signified the end of World War I.

Thanks to the work of the Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range, the site was designated as a dis-contiguous part of the Fort Caswell Historic District in 2013. That same year, the rifle range, along with Fort Caswell, was officially added to the National Register of Historic Places. In 2018, the U.S. World War I Centennial Commission and the Pritzker Military Museum and Library recognized the rifle range as one of the 100 national WWI Centennial Memorials, and one of the two sites in North Carolina to be awarded that distinction.

More recently, in 2020, the Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range published a book, “Brunswick County in the Great War” by Amy, Norma and Ron Eckard.

The book tells the history of the



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A sign indicating the storage room area of the Fort Caswell Rifle Range.



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The Fort Caswell Rifle Range monument, honoring the 23 men from Brunswick County who were killed in action during World War I.

MORE

More information on the Fort Caswell Rifle Range can be found online at www.caswellrifle-range.com. Copies of “Brunswick County in the Great War” can also be purchased online at www.caswellrifle-range.com/fundraising/purchase-a-book/.

rifle range and the stories of those from Brunswick County who served the United States during the war. The book also covers the work the nonprofit has done to revitalize and preserve the site.

The group donated copies of the book to Brunswick County Schools high schools, and North Carolina State University and East Carolina University bought copies for their libraries.

Additionally, Amy Eckard’s research into the 14 nurses who served at Fort Caswell during the Great War has been shared by Appalachian State University on the school of nursing website.

On April 4, the Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range completed its roll call of the 717 men and the one nurse from Brunswick County who served during World War I. The roll call began Nov. 11, 2018 and was paused due to the pandemic.

The one nurse the Friends also

recognized was Susan Williams, who was assigned by the Red Cross to the Brest Hospital in France.

“She was one of 40 nurses chosen to be the first 40 nurses from the U.S. to serve,” Norma Eckard said. “They had to be fully trained to be chosen.”

With the completion of their latest projects, the Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range has reached the end of its road, and the nonprofit disbanded in August, Norma Eckard told The Brunswick Beacon.

However, the work the nonprofit undertook to preserve and promote the Fort Caswell Rifle Range will continue to educate and endure for generations to come.

“I think we’ve been quite successful,” Causey said. “We’ve seen a lot of ideas come to life, carried out and executed. I think it’s a fitting memorial that will always be here for the people of Brunswick County and for the visitors.”

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