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FORT CASWELL

by
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The first fort on the Cape Fear was Fort Johnston and according to a plan preserved in the National Archives, was a "star fort" after the French pattern.

The original Fort Johnston was authorized by an act of the Colonial Assembly at New Berne, April 20, 1745 and was so named in honor of Colonial governor Gabriel Johnston, 1734 - 1752. The act stated: "The Fort or Battery shall be called Johnston's Fort . . . and shall be large enough to contain at least twenty four cannon, with barracks and other conveniences for soldiers." It was to be of "tapia" masonry.

Captain John Collett, who styled himself "Governor of Fort Johnston," was its commander in 1770 when he so signed a map entitled "A Compleat Map of North Carolina," which was indeed a remarkable piece of cartography for the times.

Fort Johnston is mentioned here because Fort Johnston and Fort Caswell were closely linked in their history.

The quality of the tapia masonry of Fort Johnston had been described by some of its critics as being "of very poor quality." However, Lieutenant Alexander Swift, who was to be the constructor of Fort Caswell, and later to be Chief of Engineers (as was his father, General Joseph Swift), in writing of it in 1804, said:

"In clearing away the sand I found much of the tapia walls then erected, finer in their whole length, on a front of their ordinary half bastion flank and curtain of two hundred and forty feet extent, far superior to our contemplated plan for the battery of tapia."

There was quite a bit of romance related to Fort Johnston on the "Garrison" as it became more popularly referred to by the local people. It was a favorite resort on summer evenings, especially that of the young gallants and their sweethearts, who found the combination of a gentle breeze and moonlight on the bay fit accompaniment for love-making.

During the summer of 1857, while attached to the U. S. Coast Survey schooner Gallatin, based at Smithville (now Southport), North Carolina, Lieutenant John Newland Maffitt, in company with Lieutenants T. A. Jenkins, J. S. Bradford, and others, participated in the social activities of that place, along with the summer residents and officers' families from the "Garrison" and Fort Caswell.

The construction of the original Fort Caswell on Oak Island was initiated in the year of 1826, the first appropriation for its construction being under an Act of Congress approved March 2, 1825. It was reported as about completed by Captain Alexander J. Swift on October 20, 1838, with a total expenditure of \$ 473,402.00.

This work was named "Fort Caswell" by War Department Order No. 32, dated April 1833, honoring Revolutionary colonel Richard Caswell, who later became the first governor of the State of North Carolina.

Colonel Caswell, with Colonel Alexander Lillington, defeated three regiments of Scotch Loyalists under Colonel Alexander McLeod at Moore's Creek Bridge. These Loyalist forces were enroute to join those of Lord Charles Cornwallis at Wilmington, prior to their moving to Yorktown.

Fort Caswell was an enclosed pentagonal work with a two-tiered, loopholed moated escarpment, flanked by caponnières with emplacements for sixty-one (61) channel-bearing guns, mounted en-barbette. The inner work, or citadel, contained capacious barracks, officers quarters, store rooms, armory, etc.

The present-day remains of old Fort Caswell are of this citadel, plus the latter-day emplacements for a battery of two twelve-inch rifles, mounted en-barbette atop the southeast corner of the original work, along with attendant magazines, shot gallies, plotting room, power plant, etc.

In the trying days preceding the outbreak of the Civil War, Governor John Willis Ellis of North Carolina, aware that some of the Southern States were on the verge of secession, and fearful of involvement, farsightedly recommended a "Conference of States" and a re-organization of the militia. Pursuant to this, the Legislature appointed a "Peace Committee" to Washington to try and resolve the mounting differences, and another to a Conference of Southern States at Montgomery, Alabama.

Lincoln's "demand" for troops, and perhaps, the extension of the blockade to cover the ports of North Carolina and Virginia, served to crystalize the situation.

The "Governor's Papers" bear eloquent testimony to his dedication and the temper of the times.

In this period preceding the war, the forts were not occupied by troops but were in the custody of "caretakers." Ordinance Sergeant Frederick Dardingkiller was in charge of Fort Caswell and Sergeant James Owen Reilly was caretaker at Fort Johnston. Sergeant Reilly was later to become Major Reilly at Fort Fisher, and it was he whose lot it befell to surrender that place in January 1865.

On January 1, 1861, Governor Ellis was waited upon by a delegation that had just arrived by special train from Wilmington. Believing that the forts at the mouth of the Cape Fear were about to be garrisoned by Federal troops, they sought his sanction in securing them in the name of the state by the local militia. The governor rejected the proposal, coming at a time when such an act would nullify all chances of conciliation and would probably bring about military reprisal.

In the meantime, however, in opposition to and without authority therefor, members of militia companies in Wilmington, the Wilmington Light Infantry, German Guards, with the Brunswick Rifles and Smithville Guards, did enter and occupy Forts Caswell and Johnston.

Upon learning of this action the governor immediately directed that the forts be returned to the custody of their respective caretakers and notified President Buchanan of his action. Also he asked the president if it was his intent to garrison the forts

during his administration. The Secretary of War, Joseph Holt, replied:

" . . . It is not his purpose to garrison the forts to which you refer, at present. . . ."

Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated president March 4, 1861. Everyone was apprehensive as to what changes in policy the new administration would bring.

They were not to be kept waiting very long.

On April 16, 1861, Governor Ellis received from Simon Cameron, Lincoln's Secretary of War, a telegram:

"Call made on you by tonight's mail for two (2) regiments for immediate service."

The Governor replied:

"Your dispatch received and if genuine, which its extraordinary character leads me to doubt, I have to say in reply that I regard the levy of troops made by the administration for the purpose of subjugating the states of the South as a violation of the Constitution and a gross usurpation of power. I can be no party to this wicked violation of the law of the country and to this war upon the liberties of a free people. You can get no troops from North Carolina."

The Proclamation of Blockade of Southern ports below North Carolina was issued April 19, 1861 and on April 27, 1861 was amended and extended to cover the ports of North Carolina and Virginia.

". . . at 5½ o'clock Monday evening (May 20, 1861), the good old North State, God bless her and her sons, passed the ordinance of secession unanimously"

The forts were re-occupied.

It is interesting to note here that three of the companies of militia that served these forts in the Civil War were also present at Fort Caswell in World War I, the Wilmington Light Infantry, the Rowan Rifles of Salisbury and the Hornets-Nest Rifles of Charlotte.

After the fall of Fort Fisher, January 15, 1865, General Bragg ordered Fort Caswell abandoned, and after all wooden buildings were burned and the guns spiked, the magazines were exploded. The effect of this blast can be seen today on the wall facing the old parade ground.

Fort Caswell was dormant until shortly before the turn of the century when the Federal Government began to provide for the defense of its shores. This was the so-called period of "Renovation" of the forts that began in the eighteen-eighties and was given an added impetus with the advent of the Spanish-American War in 1898. It was at this time that Battery Swift, named for Captain Alexander Swift, the original constructor, was inaugurated. Battery Bagley, the mortar battery, was named for Lieutenant Worth Bagley, the first North Carolinian killed in the Spanish war. There was also an electric mine field in the approaches to the river that was actuated from within the fort.

At this time modern barracks, officers quarters and miscel-

laneous service buildings were erected. Most of these structures are existant today.

The fort was actively garrisoned until about 1923, after which it was declared surplus, all of the remaining armament and material declared obsolete and sold for scrap.

Circa 1926, the Florida real estate developers, Skinner and Chase, purchased the property. However, the depression of 1929 intervened and the projected development was never realized.

In World War II the fort again became a military base, this time by the Navy. An anti-submarine patrol base was established there.

After the war, Fort Caswell was again declared surplus and offered for sale.

The Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, the present owners, acquired the property in September 1949.

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