

# Old Brunswick Town Improvements To Welcome Visitors

BY PEGGY HOWE

**N.C. Dept. of Cultural Resources**  
On the banks of the Cape Fear River, Brunswick Town State Historic Site was North Carolina's first major port. Today's remains recall the colonial town that once stood there and the great mounds that make up Fort Anderson, Confederate defenses, built a century later.

Archaeologists have excavated and left uncovered the more than 60 foundations of Brunswick Town's ruins, revealing to visitors what English colonial life was like. Also, visitors can walk along the fort's breastworks, viewing the river as Confederate defenders saw it.

Surrounding the ruins of both the town and the fort are 120 acres of maritime woodlands—home to several rare plants and an excellent selection of birds, according to Jimmy Bartley, site manager. Of the 120-acre park, roughly 100 acres are still intact.

Bartley says he welcomes the opportunity to explain the forest management practices now in progress. "Our first priority is the cultural resources, but we cannot neglect nature," he said.

"Those (people) with wildlife appreciation understand land management—how important management is to wildlife." He said Brunswick Town's nature trail is especially important. "Many of our visitors come just to enjoy the birds and vegetation, including the Venus flytrap, a native to the area, which is on the trail."

Recognizing management's impact is vital, he said. "For several years we have worked on the forest management program. During the past two years, we have consulted with landscapers, the Department of Agriculture and (Department of Environment, Health and Natural Resources) Forestry Division to plan—to determine which old, storm-damaged or diseased trees should go and which healthy trees should stay to bring the park into manageable condition and preserve the maritime forest.

"We did selective cutting, trying to minimize the effect on visitation. Now visitors can see the plants and birds, and breezes reduce the number of bugs. The river is visible through the tree branches."

Bartley said the project required special legislation to enable the site to cut the timber and keep the proceeds for site improvement. State Rep. David Redwine introduced it.

"Civil War fans are especially impressed," he continued. "Careful timbering has increased visibility to Fort Anderson. Originally the fort had no trees. We are removing some stumps from the breastworks where the guns were mounted and vines and undergrowth from access and visibility standpoints."

Also, improving security had become important. Vandals with metal detectors were coming into the grounds to roam at night. "This is an isolated site and the thick undergrowth made detection difficult." It is a felony to remove anything from a state historic site.

"Before the timbering, we didn't have this wonderful breeze," Bartley said. "Here, it was stagnant, buggy. I am pleased with the outcome. As custodians of the land we have made some difficult choices."

"Some (people) in the community didn't understand our clearing, although most state parks do clear underbrush for fire prevention." Bartley noted that during its private ownership, the site was timbered.

Cutting began March 30, just after the "storm of the century."

"The timing was good for us—after the storm we had limb damage and trees down. (The site) did look a bit rough during the spring visitation—unfinished, with no grading done. It's gradually getting back into shape."

"We're through cutting," he noted. "No more large-scale timbering is planned—we just wanted to thin it out; to get light and visibility in there. We even exposed some rare varieties of plants, some we never knew were there." He added that the cleared underbrush also revealed more colonial ruins.

"This year we're improving Fort Anderson, removing trees from the breastworks and from Battery B. A



**IMPROVEMENTS** to Brunswick Town State Historic Site include removing trees and stumps from Fort Anderson breastworks.

new history trail, to be designed, will wind around with signs posted at the gun emplacement sites selected for future reconstruction. We must get the traffic off the mounds and direct people around," he said. Foot traffic has begun to erode the mounds.

Among improvements planned are 30 outdoor exhibit signs, upgrading of interior exhibits and stabiliza-

tion of ruins. "We will move the handicapped ramp and provide transportation for handicapped visitors—wheelchairs just bog down in sand trails. Additional archaeology is on the agenda. These are improvements we wouldn't have had without the timber money."

Early exploration began in the Cape Fear area in 1524 for the French by John Verrazano. In June

1726, Brunswick Town was launched as a business venture by South Carolinian Maurice Moore.

Soon becoming an important port for naval supplies and lumber to Europe and the West Indies, Brunswick also was an active political center that served as the seat of government for New Hanover County and later Brunswick County.

The colonial assembly met often

at the Brunswick Courthouse since nearby Russellborough estate was the home of two royal governors, Arthur Dobbs and William Tryon.

Because of its location on the Cape Fear River and Atlantic Ocean, the settlement was especially vulnerable to enemy ships. Its colorful history includes attacks and a siege by Spanish privateers. During one counterattack townspeople seized the Spanish ship Fortuna, sold its contents and used the proceeds to help finance construction of St. Phillips Church, now an important ruin at the site.

In 1765 Brunswick citizens rallied against the hated Stamp Act, forcing several officials to resign in one of the first incidences of armed resistance to British authority.

As the upriver port of Wilmington grew, Brunswick declined. Townspeople fled in the wake of destructive hurricanes, high humidity and malaria-carrying mosquitoes. In 1776, as the British burned the town, the remaining few slipped away.

Never recovering, Brunswick was sold in the 1840s for \$4.25 to the then-owner of nearby Orton Plantation.

Experiencing a revival nearly a century later, Brunswick became the site of Confederate Fort Anderson, consisting of two five-gun batteries

and small emplacements along the length of protective sand mounds.

Wooden barracks housed troops stationed at Fort Anderson who were responsible for protecting the river leading to Wilmington. In December 1864 the Federal navy attacked Fort Fisher, which fell in January 1865. Several weeks later, Feb. 19, 1865, a severe Union bombardment and an encirclement movement forced Confederate forces to abandon Fort Anderson.

Greeting today's guests at Brunswick Town Visitor Center are exhibits about colonial life and artifacts gathered from archaeological excavations. Also available are guide maps to help visitors tour the site.

Later this month, Oct. 26 and 28, Brunswick Town will provide demonstrations of colonial domestic skills from 1-3 p.m. each day. Again, Dec. 12, the public is invited to a special program, the Brunswick Town/Fort Anderson Christmas Celebration featuring Christmas concerts and tours conducted by costumed guides.

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