

Through Four Wars—

# Fort Caswell Guards River

By EUGENE FALLON  
 "Fortress, moat and wall,  
 place without peer,  
 May God be the Watchman  
 before thy gate  
 That the feet of Misfortune  
 Enter not here . . ."  
 —Hafiz.

For 136 years it has guarded Southport's fine harbor, and if no guns are to be found today at Fort Caswell the troops are still there. Baptists all, in summer they garrison this commanding position.

It was not always thus. Caswell was built originally as one of Uncle Sam's strong string of forts along the coast from Maine to Florida. In that chain perhaps no better site for a fortress could be found. Splitting the harbor square in two, and guarding the two entrances of the great Cape Fear River, Caswell served well its purpose through four wars, the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, and World Wars No. I and No. II.

Work was begun on the fort in 1826 and was continued for well over a decade before they had it strong enough to suit its purpose. Major George Blaney, Engineering Corps, U. S. A., was in charge of construction for 11 years, until his death in 1837. Blaney was just past his 53rd birthday when he succumbed at Smithville in the summer of that year. A Bostonian by birth, it could have been that the Yankee officer never quite grew acclimatized to Coastal Carolina. At all events he died of fever with the job unfinished. Over the long years to come, fevers were to kill far more troops on Caswell than shot and shell.

A truism states that no man is indispensable, and to Blaney's trusted assistant engineer, Captain A. J. Swift, fell the task of completing the rising bulwark of river and ocean defense. This sterling officer had the honor of completing the Herculean job. And Caswell was builded well. A trip to the island today will prove that point. The old brick are as firm and well-placed in 1962 as when they left the skilled hands which lifted them in the 1820's.

When the government had it

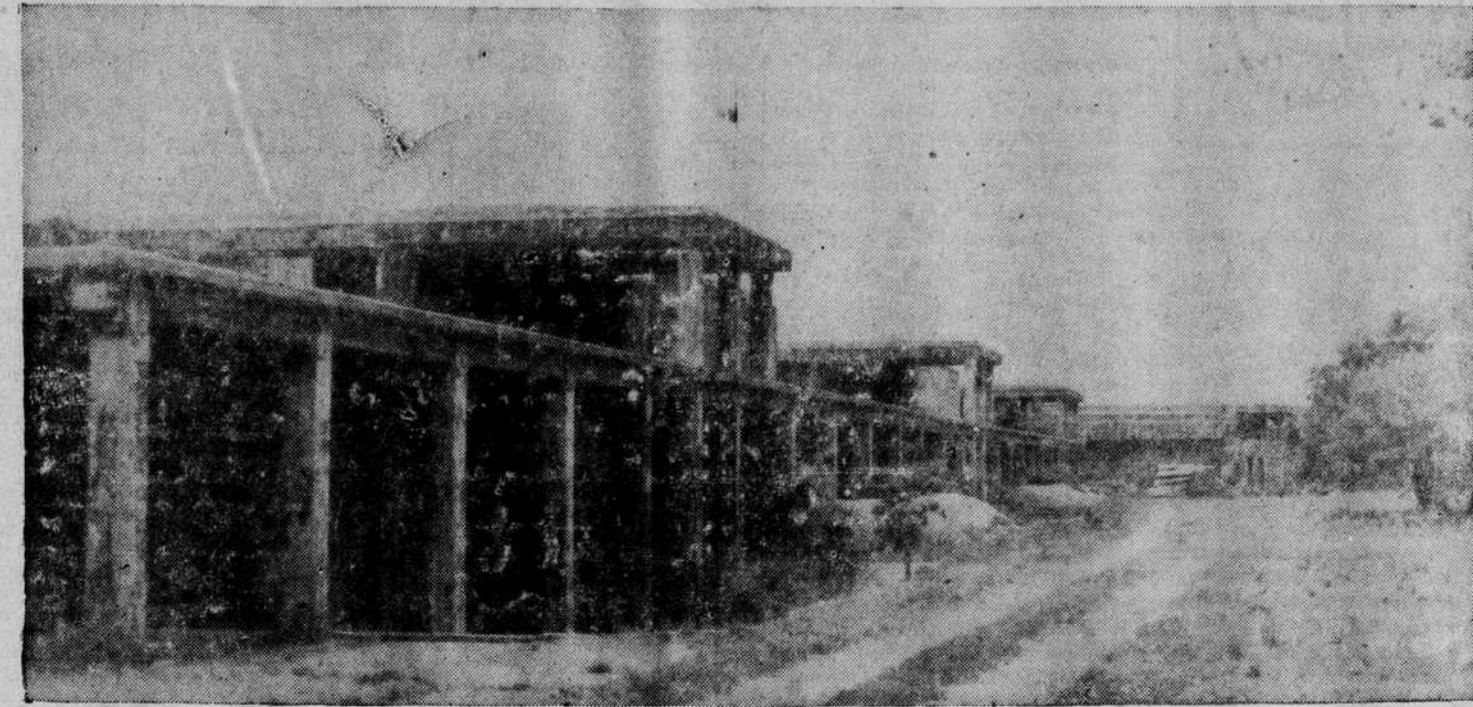
finished they cast about for a suitable name. There was Richard Caswell, first governor of North Carolina. What better name for a Tar Heel fort than Caswell? And when they raised Old Glory over the majestic acres and the first troops were marched in they marched into Fort Caswell, U. S. A.

In this connection a very illustrious American, one Edgar Allen Poe, a man of moods and miseries, just missed being attached to Caswell. This in 1848, when Poe was sent from New York to Fort Moultrie, South Carolina. Poe, who had resigned in semi-disgrace from West Point, where he had been charged with gambling and partaking too freely from the cup that cheers, rejoined the U. S. Army, this time as an enlisted man. His original orders were for that "new fort in North Carolina, Caswell", but a small outbreak of yellowjack sent him instead to Sullivan's Island, where he remained for a year's service as artilleryman; and where he immortalized that South Carolina isle as the scene of the "Gold Bug", a suspenseful tale of buried treasure, skeletons and strange curses.

Through its early history Fort Caswell was garrisoned by only token troops. In fact its entire personnel strength in the days immediately preceding the War Between the States consisted of a sergeant and two troopers. The sergeant's name was James Reilly, and he was first-generation Irish from Holyoke, Mass.

Whereas the life of Reilly is proverbially one of happiness and of ease, one doubts that this particular Reilly was much elated with the status quo of those dangerous days. Reilly was hemmed in with hostility and may have longed desperately for the free life of a sailor. But he was no fool. And when a body of Wilmington militiamen, under the command of Colonel John J. Hedrick, weapons at the ready, disembarked from boats and claimed the fortress for North Carolina, Reilly said as he reckoned "that was a fair and square arrangement."

The remarkable part of this bloodless encounter is that it was



This is a portion of the massive concrete battery which was erected by the United States Government at Fort Caswell to protect the entrance to the Cape Fear River. There were emplacements for

## Mighty Fortification

consummated at least 3 months before the Star of the West was fired upon by Citadel cadets, while that Union supplyship was bringing provisions to the garrison of yet another harbor fort called Sumter. This on January 9, 1861. Hedrick's company had, a few hours earlier, also captured Fort Johnston in Smithville. It is said that the population of the town wildly cheered the N. C. militia as they jumped the gun before the start of the dreadful race to determine if the country could properly support two separate nations.

What of Sergeant Reilly? Well, since the hulking fellow with the Irish brogue had been by-and-large pretty decent about it all, they let him mount a ragged mule and set off in the general direction of Holyoke, Mass. No chains for the sergeant. It is further stated that Reilly was offered muffs to travel in; it having been pointed out that right much Rebel territory remained between Brunswick and Massachusetts, but that Sergeant Reilly properly refused to discard his uniform, saying that, as a soldier, he would take his chances on safe exit. Reilly comes through as a pretty good fellow all the way.

It was, of course, quite premature, this first Rebel raid; so

much so that up at Raleigh Governor John W. Ellis was downright discomfited by the news. Said Ellis: "Whereas I feel that this move was actuated by patriotic motives, I cannot hold with it in my position. There is no declared war. The fort belongs to the U. S. Government and must be relinquished to it."

Down in Brunswick a somewhat deflated Hedrick reluctantly withdrew his "army" from Caswell. For two full days the fort was deserted, before Hedrick came back once more and Caswell remained a Confederate post until the dying days of the desperate conflict.

At this point in the compelling story of Fort Caswell, it might not be amiss to include a nostalgic footnote. In late October of 1838, the government in noting that Fort Caswell was completed, added that its "total cost came to \$473,402." A sum which undoubtedly seemed immense then, seems comically insignificant today when billions are spent to send a man around the world in a capsule.

Perhaps one of the strangest things connected with Fort Caswell during the four years of civil strife was the complete absence of any major campaign by the Union to retake the fort from the Confederates. Outside an occa-

sional artillery duel between the blockading Union warfleet and the fortress, no landing party was sent against Caswell until almost the final hours of the war. There may have been several explanations for this. First and foremost was the strength of the great bastion. It would have had high cost in lives to wrest it from the lads in Gray. Secondly it might have gone against the Union grain to smash and batter what Union money and craft had built. On the other hand, Fort Fisher and Sumter were practically reduced to rubble by Union fire. Whatever the reason, Caswell sailed almost untouched by the stern crucibles of shot, shell and assault.

And it was worth its weight in gold to the loyal sons and daughters of the South. There can be no doubt that Fort Caswell kept Smithville out of Union hands; saved Fort Johnston, and, above all, furnished firepower and protection for those brave men who kept the lifelines of the Confederacy clear through running the blockade.

If Caswell on the whole remained a peaceful oasis in the desert of fiery warfare, it died violently enough, murdered by the garrison of Tarheel soldiery. On the night of Sunday, January 15, 1865, Fort

Fisher fell to an assault party of Unionists. The cause was faltering. The handwriting was now on the wall of history. Word came down from Wilmington that the position of Caswell, now being untenable, that fort must be relinquished. It was still war. The earth must be scorched, must be rendered temporarily useless.

Captain E. S. Martin, C. S. A., was ordered to destroy the fort. On the following day (Monday), Martin set afire all the wooden barracks at Caswell. There were five powder magazines at the fort. One of these held 100,000 pounds of black gunpowder. These were mined and at one a. m. the morning of Tuesday, January 17, 1865, the charges were ignited. The resultant explosion sent Smithville residents tumbling from their beds. The sound was heard at Wilmington, and even as far as Fayetteville, more than one-hundred miles distant. The heavy odor of cordite hung over Fort Caswell for days afterward. A tattered Confederate flag still waved above the ruined fortress.

The war over and done with, Fort Caswell was staffed with a tiny handful of U. S. troops, once again under command of a non-commissioned officer. There seems to exist a local belief that

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The Rev. L. D. Hayman, whose first love outside the ministry is fishing, is a subscriber to the publication "The Fish Boat", and since he received two copies of the February issue, he gave one of them to us. It was the first time we had seen this little magazine, which appears to be devoted entirely to commercial fishing news and advertising.

Right away, there was one article which caught our eye: The one entitled "New Shrimp Fishery"? There are several reasons for our interest. One is the fact that shrimping was so bad that it became almost non-existent here last season. Another is that many Brunswick county boats migrate southward into waters where the new discovery was made. And a third reason is that there appears to be good reason to be alarmed over the shrimping picture as a whole unless a new source of supply is found.

The following information is being quoted from the magazine story:

"Possibilities of a new shrimp fishery for the South Atlantic are currently tested in the area between Fort Pierce and Fernandina Beach, Florida, with some commercial strikes already made in the deep waters off St. Augustine by a small pioneer fleet made up of boats from St. Marys, Georgia and Fernandina Beach. These boats are following up the work of the Bureau of Commer-

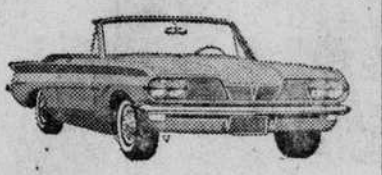
cial Fisheries experimental vessel Silver Bay which has been studying fishery possibilities in the area for some time, and were directed by the Silver Bay to the most likely fishing grounds. When in the proper depths, which to date have ranged between 170 and 200 fathoms, boats have been able to produce from one to three boxes per drag of the deepwater red shrimp which is known also as the royal red shrimp. One boat, the Sea Pearl, operated out of St. Marys by Calery Lang, brought in five boxes for one trip, while Edison Sasey's Sally E., also of St. Marys, reportedly had 15 boxes aboard from operations of one trip. Other boats fishing the area are the Miller Bros. of St. Marys, operated by Dan Miller, and the Miss Julie of Fernandina Beach operated by Henry Montford.

"This is the second time that efforts have been made to establish a fishery based on the red shrimp in the Gulf Stream. The first attempts was made several years ago, principally by boats of the H. F. Sahlman and Wallace fleets, and while this effort showed tangible results, it also revealed serious difficulties as to gear, particularly the hoist, and fishing was discontinued before establishment of a fishery. Efforts are being made to correct these difficulties, and Standard Hardware Company of Fernandina Beach is giving major attention to the problem of pro-

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