

The official newsletter of the Cape Fear Civil War Roundtable

## January Program to Feature Fort Fisher Visitor Center Project

By Bill Jayne, CFCWRT President

The January meeting of the Cape Fear Civil War Round Table features a presentation by Jim Steele about the new Fort Fisher visitors center and other projects at the state's most visited historic site. The presentation is scheduled for Thursday evening, January 11, at centrally located St. John's Episcopal Church in Midtown Wilmington near Independence Mall. Doors open at 6:30 and the meeting begins at 7:00 p.m.

Jim Steele has been manager of Fort Fisher State Historic Site for 16 years. He came here from South Carolina, where he was a state park ranger managing the Rivers Bridge battlefield. Jim is a veteran of the U.S. Navy, and earned both his bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of South Carolina.

Jim's presentation will be about the new Fort Fisher visitor center and other improvements, and the journey it took to get from the idea phase of this project to the construction phase.

A new interpretive center is coming to Fort Fisher State Historic Site in Kure Beach. Nearly three times larger than its 1965 predecessor, the new center will welcome more than a million

## Membership Report

By Bruce Patterson  
CFCWRT Secretary

The end of the calendar year gives us an opportunity to review our procedures and examine statistics related to membership and attendance. Although we lost several members who chose not to renew or who had simply aged out, we also gained back several members who had departed years ago and were, thankfully, able to rejoin and become active once again.

We are grateful for each and every member and through our active recruiting and renewal procedures, maintain a relatively consistent membership. We are additionally heartened by the fact that our per capita attendance remains at a very respectable level. Recall please, that every member is also a recruiter. Please bring friends and/or neighbors to future a meeting.

We wrap up 2023 by welcoming **Peter G. Dorosko** (Radian Road, Wilmington) to the round table. Great to have Peter aboard.

Looking forward to 2024, please recall that *your month of renewal* is listed on your name tag. You may renew on-line, at the next meeting or by mailing your check (\$30.) to **Treasurer Mike McDonald at CFCWRT, 8387 East Highcroft NE, Leland, NC 29451.**

annual visitors and showcase museum exhibits about the history of Fort Fisher. In addition, the Underwater Archaeology Branch of the Office of State Archaeology will receive a new conservation lab.

These projects were in the planning stage for many years, but it took a long time for full funding to be secured for both projects. The Friends of Fort Fisher, Inc., the historic site's official support group, has been instrumental in the planning and in obtaining funding. The project budget is approximately \$25.5 million, most of which has been appropriated over several budget years. Work began in late 2022.

Plans are also in place to reconstruct a portion of Fort Fisher's earthen ramparts that were demolished during World War II for the construction of an airstrip. Much of the gigantic fort that guarded the "new inlet" entrance the Cape Fear River has been eroded by the ocean. It was an L-shaped fort with about one mile of fortifications on the sea face and one-third of a mile on the land face. Known as the "Gibraltar of the South," it was the key to maintaining access to the port of Wilmington for the blockade runners that provided critical supplies for the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia.

Jim explained, "A new interpretive center and restored earthworks will be welcome additions to Fort Fisher. The exhibits will cover Fort Fisher history in a broad, all-inclusive manner and feature something for every visitor. Visitation at Fort Fisher now exceeds one million visitors a year, and it is time for facilities that can accommodate such crowds and for historical interpretation that sets new standards in museum exhibits and scholarship."



Located at [1610 Fort Fisher Blvd S, Kure Beach, N.C. 28449](#), Fort Fisher is part of the Division of State Historic Sites in the N.C. Department of Natural and Cultural Resources (NCDNCR), the state agency with a vision to be the leader in using the state’s natural and cultural resources to build the social, cultural, educational, and economic future of North Carolina. “In 2021, we finally exceeded 1 million visitors,” Jim said.



That number clearly wasn’t in mind when the site’s visitor center was designed more than a half-century ago. The center, which has been sitting since 1965 at the entrance to the historic site at the southern end of Pleasure Island in New



Hanover County, was designed for 25,000 visitors a year.

The project includes a new center, three times larger than the current building, to house updated exhibits in an open, airy indoor space that will offer views of the natural, picturesque landscape strategically located near the mouth of the Cape Fear River at the Atlantic Ocean.

There will be a 120-person capacity multipurpose room available to rent, a gift shop overlooking the fort’s earthworks, a second-story balcony, a theater that will sit 100 people, and a changeable exhibit gallery of artifacts from the North Carolina Underwater Archeology Center.

The underwater archeology center, or UAC, is housed at Fort Fisher in a series of buildings, some built during World War II. A new lab is also under construction several yards from the visitor center.



The lab is not open to the public.

The new visitor center and archaeology facility carry a price tag of \$25.5 million, funds primarily secured through state budget appropriations.

The project also includes reconstruction of a series of Civil War-era mounds on the land face. To clear the site for a runway, the Army bulldozed three of the mounds after activating Fort Fisher as a training base during World War II. A fourth mound was taken out during construction of U.S. 421, which ends at the N.C. Department of Transportation’s Fort Fisher ferry terminal.

The idea is to tell a complete and inclusive history of Fort Fisher, one where reconstructed underground bunkers will give visitors a real sense of life in a Confederate fort, one built of mostly earth and sand by soldiers and more than 500 free and enslaved African Americans.

Construction of the visitor center is expected to be complete in mid- to late May 2024. Once the building is open to the public, the current center is to be torn down.

As usual, the meeting will be held in Elebash Hall at the rear of St. John’s Episcopal at 1219 Forest Hills Drive in Wilmington. The church parking lot and entrance to the meeting room is easily accessed via Park Avenue off of Independence Boulevard. See you there!

We rely on the submission of content to the Runner to fill it up every month. Whether it’s an article on an aspect of the Civil War you’re interested in, a book review, or even a description of a site you visited, original writing by Roundtable members is what fills our pages. Please consider submitting something.

## Area Historical Association Events

By Yelena Howell, Tours and Trips Committee

**Tuesday, January 2, through Tuesday, January 9. Bellamy Mansion Museum** closed to the public for restoration work. Please visit the website for updates: <https://www.bellamymansion.org/calendar-of-events.html>

**Friday, January 5, 2-3:30 p.m. New Hanover County Public Library, Main Branch, Harnett Room. Senior Game Day.** 201 Chestnut St., Wilmington. Board games and refreshments. Ages 55+. Cost: free. Registration encouraged. Contact: Frances (910) 798-6347 or see <https://libcal.nhcgov.com/event/11674114>

**Saturday, January 6, or Saturday, January 20, 8-9 pm. Latimer House,** 126 South 3rd St., Wilmington. **Night tour** featuring gaslight and a scholarly discussion of the history and functions of gas lighting. Tickets are \$20: <https://latimerhouse.org/events/>

**Sunday, January 7, 3-7 pm. Cameron Art Museum,** 3201 South 17th St., Wilmington. **Floating Lantern Ceremony.** A tremendously popular event to honor and remember those who have meant a lot to us with a floating light to grace the pond on the property. Lantern sleeves are available now for purchase at the Visitor Services Desk during regular museum hours (\$15 for CAM members/ \$20 for Not-Yet Members). <https://cameronartmuseum.org/event/floating-lantern-ceremony/>

**Friday, January 12, 9-1030 am, Burgwin-Wright House,** 224 Market St., Wilmington. **Hunter Ingram** presents his **Cape Fear Legends and Lore Walking Tour**, a lively exploration of select downtown sites of historic interest. Tickets \$20 (+tax) ea. Please call (910) 762-0570 to reserve your spot.

**Friday, January 12, 5:30 pm. New Hanover County Public Library Book Sale** begins at the **Northeast Branch,** 1241 Military Cutoff Rd, Wilmington. **Members only Friday 5:30-9 pm** (can join at the door for \$20). Hardbacks \$3, paperbacks \$2, no AV items. Non-members welcome on **Saturday, January 13, 10 am-5 pm** and **Sunday, January 14, 10 am-5 pm.**

**Saturday, January 13, 10 am-12 pm. Cameron Art Museum,** 3201 South 17th St., Wilmington. Kid-friendly celebration of the **birthday and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.** Historian Daniel Jones will lead a family tour of the Boundless sculpture. To register: <https://cameronartmuseum.org/event/mlk-weekend-kidscam/>

**Thursday, January 18, 7-8 pm. Cameron Art Museum,** 3201 South 17th St., Wilmington. **Joel Cook**, historian, archaeologist, and host of the award-winning PBS NC series "Rogue History" will deliver the **first of the Boundless Lecture and Conversation Series.** To register: <https://cameronartmuseum.org/event/illustrated-lecture-with-joel-cook/>

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Happy New Year 2024 to each of you! Many area historic organizations are taking January to regroup, re-energize and plan for the months to come. Please feel free to check in with them individually and monitor CFCWRT's Facebook page for additional announcements. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1696952227331256>

## “Hold the Date” for These Upcoming Speakers

### February 8

#### Chris Mackowski—The Battle for Jackson, MS

Nationally known speaker, founder of “Emerging Civil War,” prolific author, Professor Mackowski talks about the 1863 battle for Mississippi’s capital, part of the Vicksburg campaign.



### March 14

#### Sarah Kay Bierle—From California to Gettysburg The Hancock Family

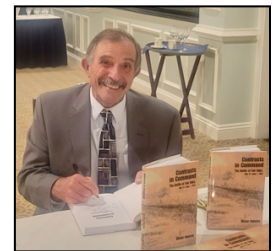
Author, speaker, and researcher focusing on the American Civil War. Sarah graduated from Thomas Edison State University with a BA in History, she is managing editor at Emerging Civil War, and works in the Educational Department of the American Battlefield Trust. Much of Sarah’s research focuses on real people and their trials and successes of everyday life, and the Winfield Scott Hancock family is a prime example.



### April 11

#### Victor Vignola—Contrasts in Command; The Battle of Fair Oaks, 1862

Vic Vignola, a lifelong student of the Civil War, has written articles for publication in “North and South Magazine” and *Contrasts in Command* is his first book. The book is listed as one of Top 10 Books reviewed in 2023 by the highly regarded [Civil War Books and Authors](#) site. Vic graduated from SUNY-New Paltz with a degree in economics and business. He lives with his family in Orange County, New York, home of the 124th New York Infantry “Orange Blossoms” Regiment. The battle of Fair Oaks/Seven Pines has been little studied although it was a large, bloody, pivotal battle on the outskirts of Richmond that saw Joseph Johnston fail to defeat a section of McClellan’s army dangerously exposed and cut off by flooded rivers and streams. Johnston not only failed, he was wounded and gave way to Robert E. Lee in command of the main Confederate army.



### May 9

#### Angela Zombek—Key West: Union Stronghold

Angela Zombek will speak to us about the subject of her latest book—*Stronghold of the Union: Key West Under Martial Law* which will be published by The University Press of Florida. Dr.

Zombek is a Copie Hill Civil War Fellow with the American Battlefield Trust and an assistant professor of history, Civil War Era, at UNCW. She holds a PhD in 19th Century U.S. History from the University of Florida. Key West was held by the Union from early in the war and became a valuable key in the control of shipping lanes.



## December Meeting Featured Talk on the Common Soldier

By B.R. Scurry, Correspondent



Our December 14 meeting featured Dr. Ev Smith’s very professional overview of the lives of “Billy Yank” and “Johnny Reb” in the Civil War. Replete with viewings of Dr. Smith’s authentic period weapons including various swords, a revolver, a muzzle loading rifle musket and a breech loading rifle, the presentation covered uniforms, tactics, weapons and logistics.

Dr. Smith earned his Ph.D. at UNC Chapel Hill and completed a career with NC state government. He is very much involved in historic preservation in Wilmington and was one of the key movers in the preservation of the WWII era USO building on Second Street.

In addition, USMC Gunnery Sergeant Peter Keen, an avid reenactor of Civil War through Vietnam War scenarios brought a sample of his Union uniforms and accouterments, including many uniform pieces handmade to exacting authentic standards.

We also welcomed new member Peter Dorosko.



Editor’s Note: In an effort to keep the Runner as timely as possible, events scheduled to take place several months in the future may be held for a later issue when Roundtable members are more likely to remember them. Bigger events may be run sooner.

## A Visit to the Levin Cole House in Johnston County

By Fred Claridge, Runner Editor

These are pictures of the ruins of the Levin Cole farmhouse on Battlefield Road in Johnston County - not far from the Bentonville Battlefield. They were taken recently. Much older pictures are also included here.



Levin Cole was a slave until he was freed. He might have been freed either during or right after the battle. Or perhaps he became emancipated later, when the war ended.

Unfortunately, not much detail is known about Cole's life. An extensive internet search doesn't provide much information or many leads. Records, even birth and census records, are sometimes conflicting, inaccurate or incomplete for slaves and former slaves. In some cases, they never existed. A couple of us from the battlefield did find some information however at the Johnston County Historical Society in Smithfield. The director there was very helpful. There are a few records contained in various volumes in the Society's library about the Cole house and farm. Other records show his family tree.

Cole married Harriet Morris. Both the white Cole and Morris families had farms near the battlefield, so it's likely that both Levin and Harriet were slaves

on those respective farms. As per custom, they took their owners last names. Together, Levin and Harriet had either seven or nine children, depending on the source reviewed. Famous descendants of the Coles (through marriage) include Theolonius Monk, the revered jazz musician, and Art Monk, the Hall of Fame receiver for the Washington Redskins during their championship years.

The Cole house was most likely built in the early 1870s according to a report by Cole's great grandson O.V. Cogdell. An early drawing of the floorplan of the house exists (it's impossible to know exactly when it was done) that shows a single story with a porch and three main rooms. An "L" addition to the house was completed later. The drawing also documents the planting of an oak tree on the site in 1872.

According to a book on historic Johnston County architecture, the Cole farmhouse was considered the oldest and most





substantial dwelling built by a former slave still standing in the county when the book was published in 2016.



There are also some copies of agricultural records of the Cole farm at the Historical Association, completed in 1880. The farm consisted of 120 acres, sixty of them tilled for crops, and sixty which remained as woodland and forest. Of the tilled acres, twenty acres were planted with Indian corn, one acre with wheat, ten acres with peas, four acres with cotton, one acre with sweet potatoes, one acre with forty apple trees, and one acre with forty peach trees. Ten acres were devoted to wood products. The farm was considered successful and Cole is thought to have become a well-to-do businessman in the community.

A cemetery not far from the house serves as a family plot. It's the final resting place for Levin and Harriet who were both buried there in the early 1900s. Other family members are buried there as well. There are twenty-two graves in all.



Unfortunately, like many older dwellings and buildings on the backroads of North Carolina, the Cole farmhouse is gradually being overtaken by nature and the elements. It's relatively structurally intact, but hard to get close to because of all the vegetation growing up around it. The "L" section is no longer there. Nor is the porch. But the condition of the house doesn't negate the fact that for many years it served as the residence and workplace of former slaves who did their

best to live a productive life with their family in post-war North Carolina. No doubt they worked very hard their entire lives.

Descendants of the Cole family still live in the area, including one who lives directly in front of the cemetery.

Places like this remind us that history is all around us. Sometimes you have to look a little bit to find it. Maybe hike some. Or even move a few branches. But it's there nonetheless and still has much to teach us.



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