

## Ed Bearss Tours Baldhead Island

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The Brunswick Civil War Round Table had another successful outing, for which they are rather famous, with a recent tour to Bald Head Island on a cool, crisp Thursday morning.

Members and guests of the Round Table boarded the "Patriot" on January 9 with Wednesday night's guest speaker, esteemed historian and author, Edwin Bearss. It has been the tradition to take Ed to a Civil War site that he has never visited before, when in town.

As the bow of the ferry powered toward the island, we were gifted with a breathtaking sunrise filtered through the approaching storm front and many were at the rail with cameras and smartphones to capture the scene.

Upon disembarking, we were greeted by Susan Grantier, Program Coordinator for the Old Baldy Foundation. Thanks to Susan, our golf carts had been exchanged for two trams with clear curtains to block the chilly wind. These were the equivalent of island limousines, since gas powered vehicles are not generally allowed on the island, with occasional exceptions such as service vehicles.

Tour commentary was provided by member Dr. Chris E. Fonvielle Jr., well known UNCW professor, historian and author, who led the group to several areas of interest. Many people are keenly aware of Ft. Fisher and Ft. Anderson, but very few are aware of any military history associated with the island.

Ft. Holmes existed for a relatively short time during the Civil War, spanning September 9, 1863 through January 16, 1865. The earthen fort was constructed by garrisoned soldiers and by the strongest slaves from surrounding plantations, hired out by their masters. Its name was derived from Major General Theophilus Holmes from Sampson County, N.C. The largest of the gun emplacements, Battery Holmes, was built on the southwestern tip of the island, now eroded and 700 yards out into the sea. Its purpose was to assist Ft. Caswell in protecting the blockade runners making a run for it through Old Inlet at the entrance to the Cape Fear River.

Hopping aboard the trams, the first stop was Battery No. 4, an unexcavated area which had been an ordnance magazine for powder and artillery projectiles, although the fort never saw a battle. The area is covered in vegetation, but the built up area is still quite visible.

Our next stop was a small preserved portion of the fort within a sea of modern houses. This had been the area of some of the quarters for the soldiers. Several years ago, handmade bricks and pieces were in abundance, but those are apparently all gone. Dr. Fonvielle did spot one small pottery shard, which he turned over to the foundation.

The group was taken to the beach near the area where the blockade runner "*Ella*" was run ashore on December 3, 1864 by Union ships. After her unsuccessful attempt to enter Old Inlet, Confederates salvaged all of the valuable cargo they could before it was finally destroyed by the Federals. The skeleton of the ship is a mile out from the shore. During nearby dredging, a cannon ball was brought up and is now undergoing conservation at the Ft. Fisher underwater archaeology laboratory.

After being treated by the Old Baldy Foundation to pumpkin muffins and coffee/hot cocoa, we were told of the group's efforts to locate and restore prisms from the island's 1903 Cape Fear Lighthouse, which was deactivated in 1958 and demolished. The glass had been sold piecemeal for over 50 years from an antique store in Wilmington, and the foundation is attempting to locate the missing parts of the Fresnel Lens.

With everyone warmed up, we headed across the street and passed a remnant of the old road used by the fort, almost indiscernible in the undergrowth. As we continued, the edge of the golf course came into view with a

portion of the western earthworks on its perimeter. Though the course cuts through the fort wall, the developers tried to preserve as much as they could. The earthworks are still substantially built up, and we walked along the top of the mound and marveled at the huge physical human undertaking to build this wall with shovels and wheelbarrows for 1 1/2 miles! We were advised that on the other side of the fairway, this particular remnant continues.

Coming back across the street, more of the old road bed was evident, and a swale in the distance was noted as an encampment site, the main base camp and headquarters for Colonel John J. Hedrick, 40th Regiment NC Troops. Here also had been barracks and storehouses for some of the 1,100 soldiers quartered on the island at its top occupancy.

Following the attack on Ft. Fisher in January of 1865, soldiers evacuated Ft. Holmes, burning structures and goods, and destroying livestock and artillery so they would not fall into the hands of the invading army. The longevity of Ft. Holmes had been brief.

The annual "Charge!" photo was taken, and the group boarded the ferry once more for the return trip to Southport. Everyone agreed it was a morning well spent.