

Charles Towne and Town Creek Battlefield

UNCW associate professor of history, Chris E. Fonvielle Jr., Ph.D., and fellow Round Table member had a goal. He wanted to be able to show Ed Bearss, noted Civil War historian and guest speaker at our BCWRT meeting on January 6th, a site he had never seen - an almost impossible goal. But Chris succeeded! On January 7th a group of interested field trippers met at Fort Anderson for a delightful morning of "walk about" history.

The first order of business at Fort Anderson was the presentation of a plaque to Ed Bearss, Historian Emeritus of the National Park Service in "honor of his many visits to Fort Anderson and his tireless devotion to the history of the United States". As the plaque is not ready for installation, BCWRT President Mike Powell presented a portfolio with a photo of the plaque that will be installed at Fort Anderson.

Then the tour began by carpooling to the site of Charles Towne and the Town Creek Battle. The historical site is located on private property with limited access but there is a wonderful view of the Cape Fear River and a colorful windmill with the words : "Old Town 1664". Charles Towne was the first overseas effort to colonize the Carolinas after the 1663 Carolina grant from Charles II to the eight Lord Proprietors. William Hilton began exploring the Cape Fear River in 1662 and following his favorable report, a group of Puritans from the Massachusetts Bay Colony came to start a settlement. We are not sure why they wanted to come here, but they stayed only a very short time. Hilton also went to Barbados in search of land favorable for growing rice to support the workers in the sugarcane fields. Barbados proved to be crowded and expensive, so he started looking along the Carolina Coast again. In the Fall of 1663 he bought land along the river from the Cape Fear Indians. Chris shared with us, that reportedly, Chief Wat Coosa offered to throw in two daughters with the purchase of the land! Hilton refused.

By 1664 a settlement was established on the west side of the river just upstream from the mouth of Old Town Creek. The colony grew rapidly, and eventually there were some 800 inhabitants scattered up and down the river on individual homesteads, producing agricultural products for export. England's loss of interest and lack of support, resulting from the Great Fire of London and a war with the Dutch, caused the abandonment of

this colony in 1667. This site on the Cape Fear is significant as the first Proprietary colony and became the predecessor of the second Charles Towne in 1680 (now Charleston, S.C.).

As we walked along the fields, we were able to find fragments of bricks worn smooth as pebbles from the elements; pieces of pipe stems and glass; evidence of previous inhabitants. Chris explained that he has looked for and found evidence of 18th century structures, but nothing from the 17th century.

Our next stop was the Town Creek Battlefield. This location is the last military engagement before the Union troops crossed the Cape Fear and captured Wilmington. At this site, Major General Jacob D. Cox's division of the XXIII Corps fought against Brigadier General Johnson Hagood's Confederate army on February 19-20, 1865. General Cox soon discovered that General Hagood had crossed Town Creek, burning the bridge behind him. A black man from Pleasant Oaks Plantation informed General Cox that there was one old rice scow (barge) that was left. Cox used this to transport 4,500 men - 50 at a time - across the narrow but very deep Town Creek.

The first troops to cross threw up breastworks approximately 1.5 miles north of the creek to protect all 3 brigades of Union soldiers. They were able to capture 375 Confederates and two artillery pieces. As a group we walked into the woods and stood on the breastworks used by the Union soldiers. I wondered about the men who built them and used them. I wondered "what was the weather like that February day?" I thought about what they must have been feeling. The war had gone on so long, the men had been camping out in the elements without much comfort nor support for a very long time. Did they realize that this battle for Wilmington was almost over?

Chris did a wonderful job walking and talking us through a piece of history many of us had never encountered. He even shared his hand drawn map he created and published in Blue & Gray Magazine, 1994. I do believe that Ed Bearss was delighted at the introduction to this site he had never encountered before. I was thrilled to be a part of this sharing. Submitted by Sarah Pettus

