

# FORT MACON RAMPARTS

A publication of the Friends of Fort Macon

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## NATHANIEL MACON

Planter, Patriot and Politician

by: William N. Horton

Most North Carolinians, if questioned about Nathaniel Macon, the man for whom Fort Macon is named, would in all likelihood plead ignorance. Unfortunately, many historians would also find it difficult to describe him with any degree of accuracy. It would seem that Macon, 162 years after his death, had succeeded in his wish to pass into obscurity.

It was certainly not the way things were while Macon was alive. He was considered to be one of President Jefferson's insiders and he helped to articulate, as well as legislate, the policies of the new Republican party. His honesty, frugality and humility endeared him to his conservative constituents, and caused Jefferson to refer to him as the "last of the Romans". He rose to promi-

nence on the national scene, serving as Speaker of the House of Representatives for three consecutive terms. At one point he was even mentioned as a possible candidate for President.

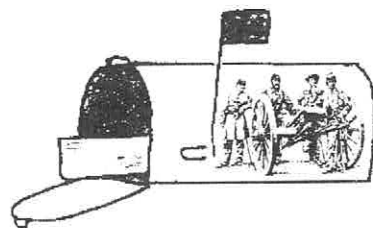


Nathaniel Macon  
1758 - 1837

He never reached the White House. His country rapidly outgrew his concept of an agrarian citizen republic, and he increasingly retreated to his home in the woods of North Carolina. After his death his country gradually forgot him. Oddly enough Macon himself went out of his way to assure his oblivion by destroying much of his correspondence before his death. He even threatened to sue anyone who dared to write his biography. However, this intensely private and modest man deserves to

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## LETTER FROM FORT MACON



This is the fifth installment of letters written by "Jeannie" Coues, the wife of the post war Fort Macon surgeon and renowned naturalist, Dr. Elliott Coues. At this time the Fort was being used as a Federal penitentiary.

8 o'clock PM  
March 12, 1870  
Fort Macon, N.C.

Dear Louise,

I may say that I was entirely overcome by your last; such a flow and such paper would do credit to Queen Victoria herself! You ask me to visit Aunt Jane with you. I didn't know before that I had an Aunt Jane, or rather I had forgotten the fact. I should be very much pleased to visit her or any other of my relatives if I thought they cared to see me ... but as I haven't had any communication with them for some 18 or 20 years I don't flatter myself that they especially care to re-make my acquaintance.

Your plan for us to meet some-

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If you're on the internet and would like to receive current news about the Fort and timely reminders of upcoming meetings and events of the Friends, just tell us you would, via

Email, at: [friends@clis.com](mailto:friends@clis.com)

be rescued from obscurity.

The Macon family is thought to have been among the French Huguenots who settled in Virginia in the 17th century. They gradually migrated south to the land between the Neuse and Roanoke Rivers. Gideon Macon, Nathaniel's father, settled in what became known as Macon Manor. He prospered as a tobacco planter, and at his death in 1763 his estate consisted of some 3,000 acres and 25 slaves that he willed to his wife Priscilla.

Nathaniel Macon was born December 17, 1758, and was the sixth child. When he was only five his father died, and Macon inherited 500 acres along with several slaves. Several years later, he began his formal education along with his older brother John. His mother had arranged for a young tutor to live with them and prepare her sons in the classics, which was the customary education for a young gentleman in the 18th century. Much later, when reminiscing about his early education, Macon would fondly recall that his most vivid memory was learning "to drink great gourdfuls of whiskey".

Whatever inadequacies there were in his early education, he entered the College of New Jersey in 1776 along with a number of other boys from the South. The College that later changed its name to Princeton was a popular destination for southern gentlemen with Macon's background. Going back to England for an education was expensive and limited to the wealthy. Shortly after his arrival at college, the "trouble in the colonies" burst into revolution. The ensuing war cut short his formal education, and Macon found himself joining the New Jersey militia. His military service in the North was brief and he soon returned to Warren County and his

mother's plantation.

His bucolic life on the plantation was upset early in 1780 when the British captured Charleston and threatened to occupy the Carolinas. The War that had previously been mostly in the North suddenly shifted focus. Macon once again joined the local militia and refused the \$150 bounty that was being offered to new recruits. Although he was asked to stand for election to a lieutenancy, he refused and entered as a private.

His military career was brief and largely limited to events surrounding the Battle for Camden, South Carolina. The British had thoroughly routed the Americans, and their subsequent retreat to North Carolina was chaotic. Macon followed the remnants of his unit to Salisbury where he remained until the British abandoned their attempts to subdue the Carolinas, following their loss at King's Mountain. When he finally returned home to Warren County, he was surprised to learn that in his absence he had been elected to the North Carolina Assembly. He was 22.

The demands on the young legislator were modest, and after the War he resumed the life of a southern planter. Certainly more pressing was his infatuation with Hannah Plummer, an attractive young neighbor. The problem was that Hannah had another suitor. Rather than wait on Hannah's decision, Macon suggested to his competitor that they decide who should receive Hannah's favor based upon a draw of the cards. Macon lost the draw. Undeterred he went to Hannah and told her: "That notwithstanding I have lost you fairly, love is superior to honesty and I cannot give you up". The boldness worked and they were married in October 1783.

The newlyweds moved to the isolated property willed to him by his father that was near Hubquarter

Creek, about 12 miles from the county seat. There they built a small house that was to be the basis for their plantation, which they named Buck Spring. Hannah was soon with child, and in a few years was busy raising two girls and a son.

While Macon had declined election to the Continental Congress, and generally opposed the new Federal constitution, he reluctantly accepted election to the new U.S. House of Representatives in 1791. It proved to be a good decision and one that would keep him in public office for the next 37 years.

Tragically, within a year of his election both Hannah and his son were dead from malaria. It happened quickly and their deaths were only a few months apart. Emotionally, he never recovered from their deaths. He left his two daughters in the care of relatives, and departed Buck Spring for the new capital city in the District of Columbia. The thirty-four year old Macon had decided to devote his considerable energies to public life.

Macon brought to the new Congress a strong advocacy of states' rights and a close affiliation with the opponents of nationalism. While he lacked knowledge of international affairs, it did not seem to inhibit his success. He demonstrated little interest in commerce, except as it had an impact on agriculture. Like Jefferson, he had a strong belief that government should reflect the will of the people. He had opposed adoption of the Constitution based on his belief that a general government would pass too easily out of control of the people.

His formative years in Congress were characterized by actively working to contain the scope and activities of the new national government. He became a formidable opponent of most appropriation bills.

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where in New York is impracticable for we have neither of us funds enough to stay at a hotel together. You speak of us visiting Central Park, the "Battery," etc. The Battery is not considered a place of fashionable resort. I believe it used to be years ago but is now given up to the lower classes. I want you to make your arrangements for your visit without any reference to my coming to Troy. Go whenever you feel like it. I am sorry you are to move in Sept. as that is the month that would be most convenient for me to visit you. However, if my funds hold out, I will try to see you some way or other. I have got to have a good deal of work done on my teeth, which will take my money up dreadfully.

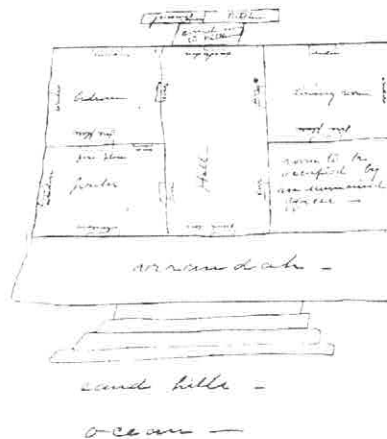
I am very sorry to hear you are all so miserable, and I don't see how you can get along. Don't think of taking Sterling with you. If the whole family goes you might as well stay at home. Then beside the care of him you will have to fuss about his clothes, and whenever you want to go out you will have to leave him with someone to take care of. Again I say Don't think of taking him.

What do you mean by this sentence - "Perhaps I had better visit the Sterlings after my return from the East." This is the first intimation that I have had that you contemplated any such trip. If it wouldn't be asking too much, might I ask when and how this idea originated and what points in the East you intend to move on? Don't forget to enlarge on this subject when you write.

I am overwhelmed with work. Have been cutting and basting for

a long time and now just as I have a big basketful ready for the machine it refuses to take a single stitch. I feel as if I could fly at it and smash it into a thousand pieces. If you want a wrapper pattern I have one which I consider embodies all the virtues of which any human wrapper is capable. I could see my best dress cut up by that pattern without a pang. Elliott is sitting at his desk writing and I am permitted to sit not far off and bask in the rays of the German student.

Did I tell you that we had moved into a little row of cottages just outside the fort in consequence of Elliott's being the second officer in rank. All of the houses are one story and the following is a plan of them ...



This will give you an idea of my cottage by the sea.

With love ,

Jeannie

We are deeply indebted to David Dean of Rochester New York, who has graciously permitted us to publish these letters from his private collection. Mr. Dean is descended from Jeannie's sister Louise.

## DISPATCH FROM HEADQUARTERS

The Friends of Fort Macon have witnessed much progress toward the achievement of our primary objectives - the restoration of the Fort and the construction of needed educational exhibits. This progress was possible only because the size of our membership has given us a great deal of influence in Raleigh and in our communities.

Paradoxically, our very success has become our biggest problem. As an example of this, we used to get membership applications from up to 300 visitors each year who could see just how badly the Fort needed repairs. Now they see that extensive repairs are in progress, and they no longer see the need for their support. The result is that we only get a third as many recruits at the Fort as we used to get. Our membership renewal rate has also declined for the same reason.

This decline in our membership roll would not be of much concern if we had, indeed, fulfilled our mission. But, in fact, we still have a long way to go. At this writing, we are still short about \$4,000,000 from the amount needed to complete the planned repairs. We also have a long way to go on needed educational exhibits, and the Park desperately needs a Visitor Center with an auditorium for lectures and videos in all kinds of weather.

None of our needs can be satisfied without numbers. Please try to recruit for us. Talk your friends and neighbors into joining, or give gift memberships. And by all means, don't fail to renew your own membership, if you are not already a Lifetime Member. Your support is needed now as much as ever.

Bennett Moss



Macon's position was the least government was the best government. His vision of the new nation did not include monies being spent on public works or large standing armies. These positions often placed him in opposition to his colleagues. Nevertheless, he gained their respect, if not their votes, due to his consistency and the sincerity of his beliefs.

The election of Jefferson had confirmed the efficacy of political parties which had previously been little more than informal networks. As one of Jefferson's supporters, Macon was elected Speaker of the House, the first Southerner to be so honored. He promptly appointed his close friend, John Randolph of Virginia, Chairman of Ways and Means, the key committee in the implementation of the President's agenda. The resulting combination of conservative Southerners assured fiscal restraint and a reduction in the scope of the new government domestically, as well as in foreign affairs.

European conflicts, however, soon engaged the young American republic. The British were fighting Napoleon, and American shipping rights were the least of their concerns. The Non importation Act had split the Republicans, and Macon failed to retain his Speakership with Madison's election. Macon's set back was only temporary, however, and he was soon thereafter appointed Chairman of the Commit-

tee on Foreign Relations ( a position not held again by a North Carolinian until 1994).

The ensuing War of 1812 with Britain resulted in Macon being more isolated politically in the House. During the War a new breed of politician had emerged, one who was more nationalistic and expansion minded, in stark contrast to Macon's position. While he had favored invasion of Canada, as had most Republicans, he now found himself less willing to favor aggression as the means to an end. His



"Buck Spring", as it appeared in the 1920's

political convictions were definitely out of sync with the newer and younger members of Congress.

Despite his old fashioned ways, he remained popular with his constituents, and at the conclusion of the war was reelected to the House. Within weeks of his election, the North Carolina legislature elected him to the position held by retiring Senator Stone. Because of his stature in the House and his years of political experience, he quickly became the voice of the Southern attitude in the Senate, particularly with respect to slavery.

Nearly forgotten in the gathering crisis over slavery were plans

prompted by the recent war to fortify the coasts. By 1821 the commission created to survey the coastline had completed its work, except for the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina. Several forts were already under construction. In its report to Congress the commission had recommended that, due to budgetary constraints, the proposed fortifications be categorized into three classes. The first would protect major cities and ports on the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. The second category, which included Beaufort In-

let, would include those places that lacked some natural protection and could wait until the more important locations were fortified. Finally, there was a third category, which included all other sites that required some form of additional protection to provide for an integrated defense system.

Because North Carolina had no major port cities, it did not qualify for inclusion as a category one location. Secondary classification meant not only delay in undertaking any construction projects on the part of the Army Engineer Corps, but possible lack of funding for the project. Considering that the Corps consisted of just 22 officers, it is not surprising that it took until 1823 before an investigation was completed of the coastal situation in North Carolina. Furthermore, such plans were not completed until late in 1824, and missed being included in the Army's appropriation request.

At this point Macon learned that

plans for new fortifications at Beaufort Inlet had been indefinitely postponed. He was advised by Secretary of War Calhoun that primary forts took priority. Calhoun suggested to Macon that the War Department might agree to accept an additional appropriation for a fort at Beaufort. Senator Macon would, however, have to sponsor an amendment for \$30,000 in the annual War Department appropriation bill to make it happen.

Macon moved quickly and asked a colleague in the House to introduce the appropriate enabling legislation. The House, however, had serious reservations about the entire coastal defense program, and defeated Macon's attempt. His years in Congress had taught him that there was more than one way to achieve his objectives. Consequently, Macon joined with Senator Smith of Maryland, an old ally, and introduced a similar bill in the Senate that was passed.

The modified bill was returned to the House where a vigorous debate ensued. Opponents maintained that it was unwise to start on secondary forts until the primary ones were completed. Besides, they argued, there was a lack of commerce and population in North Carolina that required such costly protection. Those in favor of the Fort pointed out that completion of the Dismal Swamp Canal had made Beaufort the southern terminus of the Inland Waterway. Now that Fort Hampton had been abandoned and was slipping into the sea, Beaufort Inlet would be unprotected.

When all was said and done, the most telling argument used by those in favor of the Fort was a simple appeal to regional pride. Had not the South agreed to the building up of coastal defenses in the North? Why had North Caro-

lina been singled out for neglect? It was argued that the Old North State deserved its "fair share" of Federal moneys. Macon used all of his considerable influence to convince the House that the Fort was a necessity. It worked, and the legislation this time was passed decisively.

Early in his public career, Macon had remarked that he intended to retire to his dogs and horses when he reached the biblical age of three score and ten. True to his word, Macon in 1829 notified the North Carolina legislature of his intent to resign from the Senate. He retired to his home at Buck Spring, that now consisted of 2,000 acres and 70 slaves. The simple house he and Hannah had built, consisting of only two rooms, had remained as the plantation house. While storage bins and barns completed the compound, Buck Spring remained as always a working plantation. Never one for pretension, he was happiest with his hound dogs and in working alongside his people in the fields.

His desire for a simple life carried over to his religious beliefs. He was a Baptist by persuasion, and on occasion attended local church services. On any Sunday he was more likely to gather his slaves in front of the small plantation house, where he conducted Bible readings and prayers. Slaves who failed to attend were to be flogged. Throughout his life Macon remained steadfast in his belief that being a slave was God's will. He vigorously opposed abolition, and thought that manumission was humbug.

Macon's retirement was punctuated by his election as president of the 1835 State Constitutional Convention, despite his opposition to any constitutional changes. He always felt that any change in government was for the worse. His remarks and contrariness seemed to endear him

rather than turn off the delegates. Amazingly, at the conclusion of the convention, he urged that the people reject its work. He said that the new constitution failed to provide for annual elections, and he disapproved of the new method for election of the governor.

Always in good health, he had slowed considerably following the constitutional meetings. Now in anticipation of his death, he arranged to be buried next to his wife and son on a plot that he had selected earlier as being unsuitable for anything except a cemetery. He asked that no monument be erected, as he preferred that only a simple pile of rocks mark the grave site. His wishes were honored, and he passed in his sleep on June 29, 1837, at the age of 79.

In spite of his best efforts, Macon was only partially successful in ensuring that he would pass and be forgotten. Because of his intense modesty, he probably would have been greatly distressed if he had known that by Fort Macon being named in his honor, it would serve forever as a reminder of a man who dedicated his life to the service of his country.

*William Horton is a member of the Friends, and is an avid student of history. Bill also conducts guided tours for visitors to Fort Macon.*

*We wish to acknowledge the assistance provided by the Warren County Economic Development Office and the Clerk of the Court in developing historical background for this article. We would also like to encourage you to visit Buck Spring when you are close to Warrenton.*



## PROGRESS MADE ON NEW EXHIBITS

The Friends, along with the Park maintenance staff, are working on several new educational exhibits, and repairing one old one.

The maintenance staff has disassembled our first large cannon replica, and is in the process of replacing areas of wood rot. The source of the rot is being dealt with so that the likelihood of a recurrence will be greatly reduced. Another replica of a 32-pounder cannon is under construction by our contractor. Our hope is that both cannon will be on display in the Spring.

Work is well under way on the construction of a working replica of the Fort's original 5-kettle kitchen range. We are in the process of seeking additional funds to construct the dining area that was associated with the kitchen.

A commissary store room replica will be constructed in the casemate that adjoins the kitchen/dinning

hall. Dozens of barrels and boxes have already been acquired as part of the exhibit. Much work will have to be done before these two exhibits will be ready for display.

After a long wait, the heavy bronze hinge and lock castings have finally been received from the foundry. The massive new gun powder magazine door will soon be in place.

Although plans and materials for the large bake oven have been on hand for more than a year, the casemate in which the original oven was located can not be used until the structural repairs to the Fort are completed. This may delay the start on the bake oven for another two years.

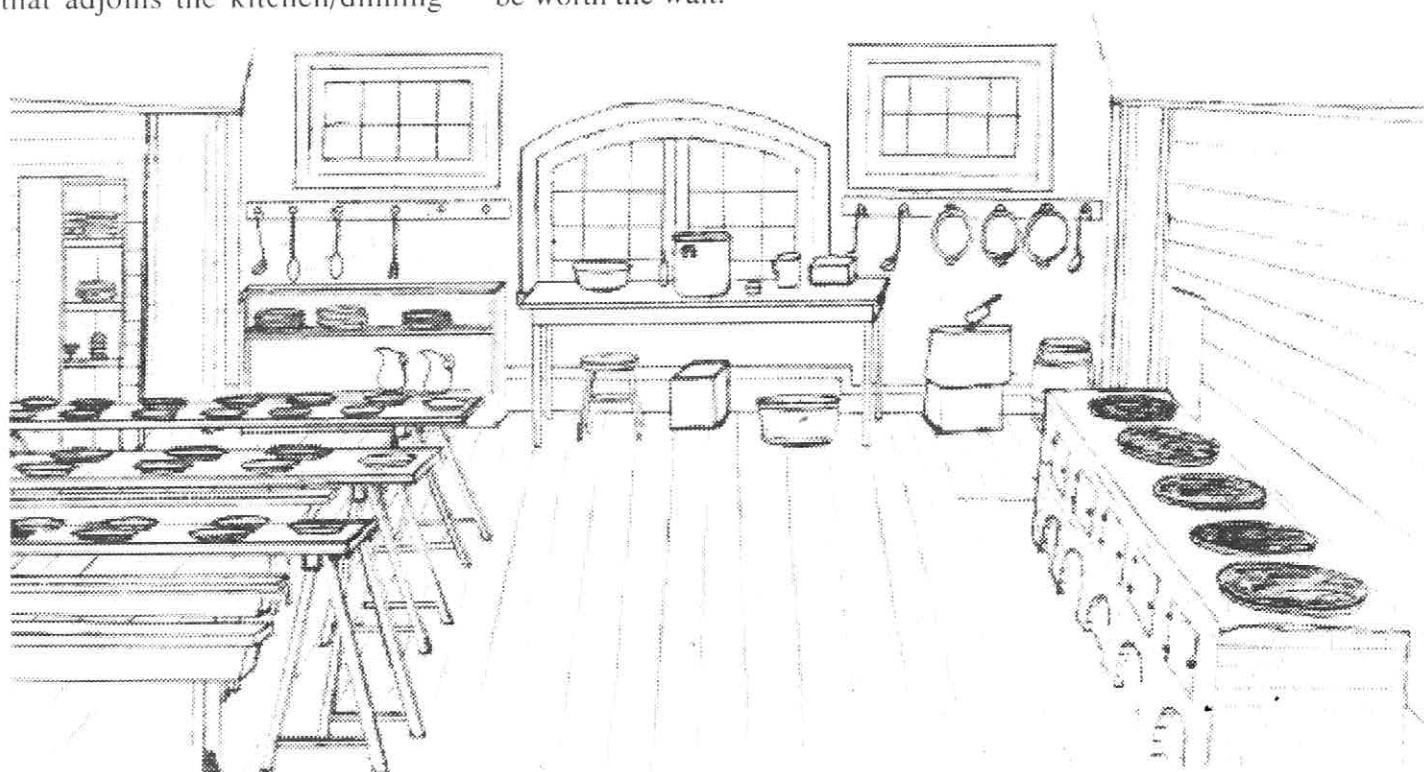
Progress on new exhibits can be much slower than we would like, but the Fort Historian insists that any work that is accomplished be as historically accurate as possible. This, of course, is what we all want. So bear with us, the end result will be worth the wait.

## NEW TOUR GUIDE TRAINING SET

The Volunteer Tour Guide program, now in its third year, is one of the Friends' most successful ventures. The Tour Guides provide a valuable service to the visiting public, and relieve the over-worked Park Rangers of some of their excessive burden. In the process, the Tour Guides are able to hone their public speaking skills, and learn a great deal about North Carolina history as well.

Training for new volunteer Tour Guides at Fort Macon has been scheduled for February 8 and February 15. Prospective Guides will be expected to attend both sessions, which will be held in the Barracks Building, opposite the entrance to the Coast Guard station.

For further information, call Joe Beam at 726-3560, Sue Wolfe at 393-7626, or Nancy Donnan at 728-5495.



Planned Kitchen and Dining Hall Exhibit



## STATUS OF FORT REPAIRS

It has been almost one year since the major renovation of Fort Macon began. During that year the major emphasis has been on repairing the roofs over the Fort's casemates. This has required the removal of all of the gun mounts, the removal of more than six feet of earth, repair of the lead sheathing, applying tar and tar paper over the lead, and the replacement of the earth cover. This work will be completed in another 2 to 3 months. After that, the vegetation will be restored, and all of the brick gun mounts reconstructed. Drainage in the moat has also been improved.

Another phase of the work involves the repair of the individual casemate rooms. Cracks will be filled with grout, broken bricks replaced, and wood flooring installed. Three of the casemates will be refinished to make them suitable for housing new exhibits. The electrical wiring, air conditioning, and humidity control systems have already been installed or upgraded in all existing and future exhibit rooms.

The brick walkways in the Fort will all have to be taken up and relevelled, and bricks throughout the Fort repaired and tuck pointed as needed. Iron railings have rusted through in places, and must be replaced.

Over all, the contractor is either on or ahead of schedule. But the very magnitude of the job dictates that the better part of two more years will pass before the Fort repairs will be completed. All of this is dependent upon the continued availability of State funds. The massive damage to the eastern part of the state from this year's hurricanes adds considerable uncertainty to the funding picture. Your continued support through your membership in the Friends is still the best guarantee that the job will get done.

## NOT ALL ANGELS ARE IN HEAVEN

The Friends of Fort Macon have been indeed fortunate to have received very generous contributions in 1999 from the following organizations and individuals:

- Town of Atlantic Beach
- The Carteret County Commissioners
- Mr. Dick Parker
- The Beaufort Historical Association
- Bunch Pattern Works, Inc.

In the words of a TV commercial, "You can do anything you set your mind to, but you can't do it alone." We have been fortunate to have received the help of the above named folks. We have also benefited from the generosity of many of our members who have, without being asked, donated funds in excess of their dues. We are grateful to them all.

## IT'S FEEL-GOOD TIME AGAIN

On the theory that it is better to give than to receive, your annual opportunity to renew your spir-its as you renew your membership in the Friends of Fort Macon is rapidly approaching.

Membership in the Friends is on a calendar year basis. We realize that it would be more equitable to maintain all memberships on an individual anniversary basis, but without an office staff this would be too burdensome for our very limited, unpaid, resources to cope with.

If you joined the Friends after September 1, you are already paid up for year 2000. If your mailing label shows a '99, then your membership is due for renewal by the end of December.

But why not become a Lifetime Member? It only costs \$100 and you need never worry again about whether or not you have remembered to renew your membership. Besides, sending \$100 for Fort Macon is the ultimate feel-good experience!

### Membership Form

Check One: ☐ New Member(s) ☐ Renewal ☐ Gift Membership

Fee Enclosed \$ \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Member's Name(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Street or P.O.Box \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Donor, if gift \_\_\_\_\_

#### Membership Categories and Fees

Individual/Family - \$10.00      Lifetime (Individual) - \$100.00  
Business or Organization - \$25.00      Business Lifetime - \$500.00

**Friends of Fort Macon, P.O.Box 651, Beaufort, NC 28516-0651**