

FORT MACON RAMPARTS

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FORT MACON AS A MILITARY PRISON AND A FEDERAL PENITENTIARY

by Christy Skojec

Brick forts may have become useless for defense as a result of the advent of rifled artillery during the Civil War, but Fort Macon continued in the service of the United States for many years following the war. One of its functions was that of federal penitentiary. It was initiated to this use by doing duty as a military prison during the last years of the Civil War. At the end of the war, in 1865, the fort was occupied by regular Federal troops. They remained until 1877. The fort operated as a Federal penitentiary from 1866 to 1876.

Exactly when it ceased being a military prison and became a Federal penitentiary is unclear. Post Returns seem to indicate that all military prisoners were gone by November 1865, with no prisoners returning until August of 1866. However, letters from log books and "Received at Post" dates for prisoners seem to indicate that there were indeed prisoners confined here during that eight month intermission. It is as yet unclear who they were, or why they were not listed on the post returns. The fort's duty as a Federal penitentiary ended in July 1876, when all remaining prisoners were transferred to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

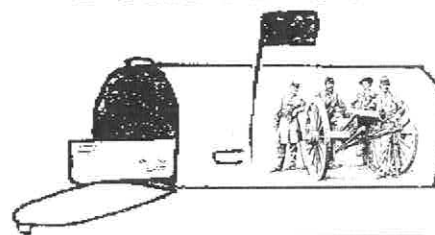
The men incarcerated at the fort during the Civil War were Confederate soldiers, active Southern sympathizers

or troublesome Union soldiers. These Confederate prisoners of war were kept in what has now been designated as Casemate 26. Twenty to thirty men were stuffed into this casemate, which was so dark that "sunshine never enters to such an extent to make printed matter discernible in all parts of the room. Consequently, the place is constantly damp." There was usually a fairly low number of military convicts, but that number jumped considerably in April 1, 1865. This is assumed to have been caused by General Sherman entering North Carolina at this time, and dumping his prisoners of war and troublesome soldiers at Fort Macon.

The prisoners during the penitentiary period were civilian and military offenders. The offenses of all the convicts are not known at this time. However, some of the Post Returns did list the offense and sentence, and a few descriptions of court martial were available. From these, much can be learned about the men incarcerated at Fort Macon. One of the most common military offenses was desertion. The sentence for this ranged from one to three years. A conviction for manslaughter got Isaac Milton a ten year sentence of hard labor while a conviction for sleeping on post netted another man eight months of imprisonment. He was lucky that this did not occur during a

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A LETTER FROM FORT MACON



This is part of a series of letters written by soldiers stationed at Fort Macon. The writer of this letter, James A. Graham, was a member of the 27th North Carolina Infantry, Company G (Orange Guards). This unit arrived at Fort Macon in April 1861. It remained there until the following January when it was ordered to join in the defense of New Bern against an expected attack by the Union forces of General Ambrose Burnside.

*Fort Macon
Nov 26th 1861*

Dear Mother

There is no news here and little or nothing to write about, but I will try to write you to-night even if I can find nothing else to say than that I have at last gotten well of the mumps and am very well again.

Johnny and Cousin William Morrison were down here last Saturday with Gen. Gatlin.

I suppose that Johnny is with you by this time as he told me that he expected to go home on Sunday, the day after he was here.

We had a very sad occurrence here

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time of war, because the Articles of War state that this is punishable by death. Many of the sentences also included dishonorable discharge. The civilian prisoners were convicted of a wide variety of crimes, ranging from receiving stolen property, to highway robbery, to rape and murder.

The microfilm letterbooks contained records of court martials for several of the men at Fort Macon. These offer a greater insight into the offenses which the men were charged with. Apparently, these were court martials of men who committed an offense at the fort while stationed there. They were all fairly similar, here is an example of one:

On March 2, 1868, Henry D. Dorsey was court martialed for conduct prejudicial to good order and military discipline. The first charge stated that he "did assist in the violation of the good order and quiet of the garrison after taps had been sounded by being in the post bakery with several enlisted men engaged in gambling."

The second charge stated that when he was ordered by his chief of squad to put his effects and bunk in order and refused by saying "I'll be damned if I'll do it 'till I get orders from a higher authority."

The third charge stated that he was absent without authority from a stated roll call. He pled guilty to the first charge and not guilty to the other two. He was found guilty of all three and sentenced to "forfeit \$12 a month for one month and be confined in charge of the guard for a period of twenty days, each alternate day to carry a log of wood weighing twenty pounds for eight hours."

The soldiers at Fort Macon had a wide variety of criminals to deal with. Whereas in today's society, someone charged with receiving stolen property might be sent to a minimum security prison, while those convicted of murder go to a maximum security prison, during this period both would be sent to Fort Macon. This made it very difficult to guard the prisoners and led to strict rules concerning the care and treatment of them.

A General Order in April, 1863, stated that "immediately after breakfast the prisoners will be put to work and kept at work constantly until retreat, allowing one hour for dinner. It is also stated that "the prisoners will not be allowed to talk or communicate with any of the soldiers of the garrison or with their guard." Lastly, it is stated that "the prisoners shall be locked up immediately after supper and no light will be allowed in their quarters." At the time these orders were issued, there were twenty six prisoners confined at the fort.

Orders issued on June 14, 1865 seem to be much harsher, indicating that perhaps the prisoners had become more difficult to guard. One of the harshest orders was that "no

prisoners allowed to go to sink (toilet) except working in vicinity." Those orders also stated that "no one will talk to them from outside." At the time these orders were issued, there were forty-one prisoners confined at the fort.

The prisoners were required to perform many different tasks at the fort. As indicated earlier, some were sentenced to such useless punishments as walking eight hours a day carrying a heavy log or knapsack. Some, however were actually sentenced to tasks which needed to be done. Men with a talent for tailoring or cooking were assigned to perform these tasks. Others were put to work doing the general duties of the fort. These included everything necessary to keep the fort in good condition. The prisoners were also required to empty the slop tubs which were in the casemates, and carry water from the wells. Civil War prisoners of war were "made to perform the back breaking job of loading coal aboard Federal warships, which used Beaufort Harbor as a refueling and refitting station during the war. In general, the prisoners were required to do everything necessary for the overall upkeep and maintenance of the fort, plus whatever else was deemed necessary.

An incident which occurred on November 25, 1875 demonstrated that these tasks were very burdensome. So burdensome in fact, that inmates sometimes faked illness to get out of performing them. It cannot be known how many of these ruses succeeded, but Emerson Barney's certainly did not. On this date he complained of Rheumatism so severe as to be unable to walk, was brought to Hospital on a stretcher. A careful examination shows no indications of any disease. He is apparently in every sense a perfectly well one. On questioning, he details with "Incredible minuteness" all the details of a similar attack of Rheumatism at the age of twelve years. He contradicts himself now and states that the pain is confined to his left leg, yet when he walks his greater lameness is in his right leg. Because Barney confused which leg he said was in pain and the leg which he limped on, he was not allowed out of duty but reported as "a possible malingerer".

Captain Charles Gaskill, who was commanding officer of Fort Macon from May 1867 until July 1868, had an interesting idea to make the prisoners useful not only at Fort Macon, but beneficial for the Army as a whole. He wrote a letter in 1867 suggesting that the prisoners could "be made self sustaining and perhaps remunerative." He suggested that the prisoners should manufacture boots and underclothing for the Army. He stated that in this way the prisoners could make up the expenses incurred by feeding, clothing, and sheltering them. He also suggested that the prisoners could thus provide their own clothes and "cut one

third of the expense to the government now occasioned."

Gaskill wrote this letter in July, and suggested it again in his monthly report at inspection for August. Apparently nothing ever became of it, because Fort Macon was never used to manufacture clothing for the Army. The letter indicated that he was interested not only in punishing the prisoners, but also wanted to "make this labor of practical use." This is in almost direct contradiction to a number of letters by other commanding officers who insisted that they could barely guard the prisoners, let alone enforce their sentences of hard labor.

The records are peppered with accounts of escapes and requests for more men and supplies to enhance the guardability of the fort. By looking at these, it is possible to understand the difficulties involved in attempting to keep the fort secure.

Before looking into the escapes, it is necessary to ascertain exactly why the prisoners were so eager to escape. Of course, the obvious answer is that they, as would any human, desired to be free from confinement. The conditions which they lived under also enhanced their desire to get out. As early as 1863, surgeons reported that the prison quarters were insufficient. F. B. Snelling stated that "the proportion of sickness is almost five times greater among the prisoners than among the troops and I can give no other cause than the miserable quarters."

In 1867, the quarters were reported as being clean, but it is also stated that "lumber for the bunks should be furnished at once. The casemates are damp and to sleep upon these floors is injurious to health". It is never reported that bunks were constructed, but once again in 1869, they were in disrepair. "The bunks in the prison rooms are worn out with age and infested with vermin and no longer fit for use." In 1870, Dr. Elliott Coues stated that "the casemates will

only accommodate ten or twelve men . . . and even when not crowded cannot be considered as eligible quarters." He also stated that "they have no bunks." Thus, the prisoners slept in crowded quarters, often on hard, cold, damp floors.

More about the life of the prisoners may be discerned from a letter written by Major Stewart, commanding officer from February 1870 until October 1872, in January, 1872. This letter was apparently a rebuttal to a Special Sanitary Report, by Dr. Yarrow, who was a surgeon at the fort. Apparently the prisoners felt that they were being cheated out of their allotment of clothing. Stewart insisted that he was not cheating them, and asked "How is the sani-

tary condition of this fort affected by two felons wearing old shoes for a few days longer than some persons might think they should?" This statement seems indicative of Stewart's opinion of the prisoners, and if the other commanding officers had the same attitude, this could be another reason for the prisoners wanting to escape.

Stewart's letter also gave a clear picture of what a prisoner's day was like. "In the summer the prisoners are

turned out after guard mounting about half past 8 o'clock for the necessary fatigue duty. Recall is sounded at 11 1/2 o'clock and the fatigue call at one o'clock PM and recall half an hour before retreat. I have not changed these written orders because ordinarily it is cool enough for prisoners to work during these prescribed hours. But on all occasions when I have found the weather too warm I have had the recall sounded at 11 o'clock AM and the fatigue call at 2 or 3 o'clock PM thus giving the men a rest of from three to four hours in the heat of the day. Thus, not only did the prisoners live in dilapidated quarters, they were sentenced to, and usually made to engage in hard labor.

One constant security problem was the lack of iron bars to secure the windows and doors of the casemates. A let-



Ft. Macon in 1867

Note prisoners looking through barred windows

ter in 1867 urged that "the estimate for iron . . . should be speedily filled." At least three escapes can be attributed to the lack of secure windows. The first one occurred on October 19, 1866:

Charles A. Spencer and Ransom Shaw "escaped on the night of the 19th instant by breaking through the rear window of the cell." An ironic part to this escape is that they had been confined in a cell separate from the rest of the prisoners because of bad conduct. Ransom Shaw was recaptured in New Bern on November 12.

A letter written on October 31, 1866 discussed this escape and indicated that the windows had already been a security problem. "Some three months ago prisoners broke out at one of these windows." Then, again in 1867, it was written that "the grating and other fastenings of the windows and doors of the prison rooms are deemed insecure."

The next window escape occurred on September 1, 1868. On this night, Thomas Donohue and Chester B. Smith "escaped through an embrasure which was closed by an iron grating but the bricks forming the lower side had been loosened in such a way that the bars could be passed out and replaced at will." As if it wasn't bad enough that the windows were insecure, "some of the prisoners have stated that this was habitually used as a means of exit by the colored troops recently on duty at the fort." Thomas Donohue was recaptured on September 5.

Another problem which plagued the fort was a lack of supplies such as lights, balls and chains, and weapons. It seems rather strange that a fort designated as a prison would suffer from a lack of balls and chains, but Fort Macon did. A letter written on June 22, 1865 stated that "the supply of balls and chains is not sufficient to supply the number ordered to be placed upon the prisoners of this fort." Not only was there a lack of them, the ones available were not secure. A letter which described an escape in September 1868 stated that it was discovered that all but three of the men could easily remove their balls and chains.

There was also apparently a concern about having adequate weapons to guard the men. A letter written by Gaskill in May, 1867 requests fifty revolvers. He states that this is necessary because he has almost more prisoners than men available for duty, and most of his prisoners could be considered desperadoes.

A lack of sufficient light led to at least one escape. On February 3, 1867, six of the prisoners made their escape "by cutting the panels from out of the door which leads from the casemate in which they were confined to another, which was unoccupied and from there passing through another door into another casemate used as a storeroom by

the medical department. After reaching this casemate they passed out through the door which seems to have been previously prepared . . . into the open part or parade of the fort." The commanding officer of the fort, Charles Snyder, wrote that he blamed the loss of the prisoners to the fact that the commissary department had not furnished the fort with candles. He stated further that "there has been no light at this post since my arrival except what has been furnished from my pocket."

This also depicts another common means of escape, the use of lightning rods. After these men entered the parade ground, they "walked up the steps leading to the parapet, from whence they reached the ditch of the fort by means of the lightning rods." Two years later, on February 9, 1869, William McCormic, Henry B. Everett, Thomas Lucas and Michael Harty also escaped by "going upon the ramparts and letting themselves into the ditch by the lightning rod". Apparently none of these men were ever recaptured.

The attempts to prohibit the prisoners from utilizing the lightning rods as a means of escape led to a great tragedy on March 26, 1869. A sentinel had been placed on the counterscarp across from the lightning rod in order to prohibit any escapees from sliding down the lightning rods. On the night of the 26th, a fire broke out in one of the chimneys and Lieut. Alexander and Private Downey ran up to extinguish it. The sentinel, thinking they were convicts attempting to escape, challenged them. As the wind was blowing very hard, they did not hear the challenge and thus gave no reply. The sentinel then fired, killing Private Downey instantly and mortally injuring Lt. Alexander. A letter from Jeannie Coues (surgeon's wife) to her sister stated that, "I never witnessed such excruciating agony in my life. He (Lt. Alexander) lingered twenty-four hours."

From 1868 onward, there were continual complaints about not having enough men available for duty. A report dated February 12, 1869 stated, "as for doing anything with the prisoners beyond locking them up and feeding them it would simply be offering them opportunities to escape. During my absence at Goldsboro, four escaped and there were not enough men to permit a detachment to be sent down the island."

A Board of Inquiry reported that "the duty is performed as thoroughly as possible under the circumstances". It went on to state that "half of the effective force is on duty every day and it has frequently happened that the men relieved from guard in the morning have been necessarily replaced on duty that same afternoon." There simply were not enough men to guard the prisoners. During the month of September, 1865, there were 105 prisoners and 44 men available

for guard duty at Fort Macon.

Not only was there a lack of men, apparently some of the guards assisted the prisoners in escaping. On September 2, 1868, Reuben Strong, James Griss, Patrick Desmond, and Henry Matthews "used a duplicate key to get out of the prison gate. Strong said the key was given to Griss by Sergeant Smith of Co. B, 40th US Infantry, before his company left the fort." Several of the other prisoners were discovered to have keys also. It is difficult enough to prevent escape where there are more than two times more prisoners than men available for guard duty, it becomes almost impossible when a departing soldier provides the prisoners with keys.

There is one more escape which cannot be directly blamed on a lack of guards, but must be recounted simply because it is so incredible. On the night of February 8, 1874, eleven men escaped from Fort Macon. Eight of the men were never recaptured. John Mooney and John Synder were apprehended on February 9 at Bogue Inlet and Abram Yerks, thought to be the ringleader, was recaptured in New Bern. Their route of escape is most astonishing. Somehow they managed to "pass through the ventilator in the arch of the casemate." These are round holes in the ceilings of the casemates about 14 inches in diameter. They probably then used the lightning rods to escape from the Fort. For someone to decide to attempt to fit through one of those holes is surprising. The fact that eleven men succeeded in doing so is amazing. It is difficult to believe that a vigilant guard would not have noticed this going on.

After any prisoner escaped from the Fort, he had one last obstacle to overcome. That was how to get from the island to the mainland. Apparently the families living on the island helped to overcome this obstacle. "These eight or ten families living on this island are a great help to deserters as not less than 12 men carried to the mainland by them since my arrival at post." Not only did they help the escapees cross to the mainland, they often lied in order to throw off the search parties.

James Stoly and A. N. Gibbs, Henry Pully, and Sewell Buckner escaped on a Sunday in January, 1866, while they were collecting shells to cover the parade ground. "When they were searched for, local citizens gave false information." It was finally discovered that the escapees had been taken to the mainland, but they were never recaptured.

Thus, there were a great many obstacles to overcome in order to maintain Fort Macon as a functioning prison. As if lack of men and supplies and apparent indifference to continual requests for these were not enough, poor living conditions and interference from others induced and aided

the prisoners in escaping. All things considered, it seems amazing that so few escapes were actually made. In judging the effectiveness of Fort Macon as a prison, the Board of Inquiry report from September of 1868 summed it up well, "the duty is performed as thoroughly as is possible under the circumstances". Effective or not, the prison period at Fort Macon was indeed a colorful one and an important part of the Fort's service to the United States.

The author, Christy Skojec, prepared this article while employed at Fort Macon as a Seasonal Historian during the Summer of 1993.

STATE BUDGET CRUNCH PUTS VISITOR CENTER ON HOLD

For several years, Fort Macon State Park has been working with a firm of architects on the design of a Coastal Education Center for visitors to the Fort.

The Education Center would provide interpretive information about the Fort, but also would have exhibits about the flora and fauna of the coastal environment. The design includes an auditorium for lectures and video programs that will accommodate those school groups that must now be turned away in inclement weather. The new facility will also permit a simulated experience of the Fort for those handicapped visitors who are not able to access some parts of the actual Fort.

The architectural plans for this handsome facility are now complete. But just as we were about to launch a campaign to get construction funds allocated to this important project, the State of North Carolina has had to suspend all discretionary spending because of a very serious budgetary shortfall. Our expectation is that this funding problem is a short term one, and that within two years there will be a return to normalcy. When that happens, we will ask all of our members to use their influence with their State Legislators to procure the needed construction funds for this very important project.



"Thus ended the great American Civil War, which upon the whole must be considered the noblest and least avoidable of all the great mass conflicts of which till then there was record."

Winston Churchill

SCHEDULE OF SPECIAL PROGRAMS AT PARK

Following is a list of nature programs conducted by Park Rangers at Fort Macon State Park during July and August. For more information about program content and meeting place, call the Park office Monday through Friday at (252) 726-3775.

7/1	8:15	Bird Walk
7/4	10:30	Little Ranger* Discovery Program
7/6	10:00	Seining the Sound
7/8	8:15	Bird Walk
7/11	10:30	Little Ranger* Discovery Program
7/13	10:00	Seining the Sound
7/15	8:15	Bird Walk
7/17	10:00	Barrier Island Nature Hike
7/18	10:30	Little Ranger* Discovery Program
7/20	10:00	Seining the Sound
7/22	8:15	Bird Walk
7/24	10:00	Crabs of Fort Macon
7/25	10:30	Little Ranger* Discovery Program
7/27	10:00	Seining the Sound
7/29	8:15	Bird Walk
8/1	10:30	Little Ranger* Discovery Program
8/3	10:00	Seining the Sound
8/5	8:15	Bird Walk
8/8	10:30	Little Ranger* Discovery Program
8/10	10:00	Seining the Sound
8/14	10:00	Crabs of Fort Macon
8/15	10:30	Little Ranger* Discovery Program
8/17	10:00	Seining the Sound
8/19	8:15	Bird Walk
8/22	10:30	Little Ranger* Discovery Program
8/23	9:00	Wild Flower Hike
8/24	10:00	Seining the Sound
8/29	10:30	Little Ranger* Discovery Program
8/31	10:00	Seining the Sound

* Program for children ages 3-6. Reserve.

HISTORY TOURS

Interpretive tours of the Fort are conducted daily by Friends of Fort Macon volunteer tour guides. Musket firing demonstrations at 10:30 and 2:30 on weekends.

I have noticed that the people who are late are often so much jollier than the people who have to wait for them.

E. V. Lucas

REENACTMENTS SCHEDULED

July 14 and 15, and September 15 and 16. From 10AM to 4PM Saturday and Sunday. Civil War events will be reenacted throughout both days by the 1st NC Volunteers. Flag talks, uniform talks, women's dress talks, and musket firings and drills are but a few of the programs to be performed.

SONGS OF THE CIVIL WAR

The War Between the States was the bloodiest war in American history. Yet it inspired some of the most beautiful music ever written. This patriotic music was an important factor in sustaining the morale of the soldiers on both sides of the conflict. Quite often, music composed for one side was adopted, with some changes in lyrics, by the musicians of the other side.

Just Before the Battle, Mother

*Just before the battle, mother,
I am thinking most of you,
While upon the field we're watching,
With the enemy in view.
Comrades brave are round me lying,
Filled with thoughts of home and God;
For well they know that on the morrow,
Some will sleep beneath the sod.*

(Chorus)

*Farewell, Mother, you may never
Press me to your heart again;
But O, you'll not forget me, Mother,
If I'm numbered with the slain.*

*Hark! I hear the bugles sounding,
Tis the signal for the fight;
Now may God protect us, Mother,
As He ever does the right.
Hear the "Battle Cry of Freedom,"
How it swells upon the air;
Oh, yes, we'll rally round the standard,
Or we'll perish nobly there.*

(Repeat Chorus)

Composer: George F. Root, 1862

WORK ON NEW WWII EXHIBIT ADVANCES

Paul Branch, our Fort Historian, met with exhibit designers from Raleigh, on April 14, to plan a new casemate exhibit covering the soldiers who occupied Fort Macon during the second World War.

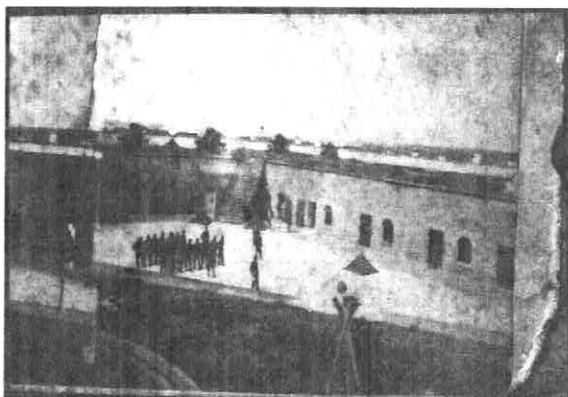
As part of the extensive renovations now under way at the Fort, several of the casemate rooms are being restored. One of the restored rooms will be devoted to a museum display of artifacts, uniforms, and memorabilia from the World War II period at the Fort.

Generous contributions from John Kilroy, Herman Jennette, George Ipock, and others have enabled us to complete our collection of small arms carried by the troops stationed at Fort Macon during this period.

It is anticipated that the casemate restoration and the exhibit construction will be completed by June 2002.

WHAT IS THIS?

This is one half of a Stereopticon image taken at Fort Macon in 1867.



It was obtained from the War Department in the 1930's.

Using the latest computer technology, Dick Whipple, of the Ramparts team, was able to recover the original images. Compare this deteriorated relic with the restored product on page three.

FRIENDS POSITION ON THE CIVIL WAR

The Civil War was contested by people on both sides who had equally strong convictions about the moral justification for their cause. Men and women on both sides committed themselves with total dedication to their beliefs.

Whether they fought to restore the Union, or fought for Southern independence, the Friends respect and admire those qualities of fortitude and bravery that characterized the participants on both sides.

The membership of the Friends is almost evenly divided between Southerners and those with Northern origins. Although our individual members may lean more strongly toward one side or the other, the Friends as an organization are completely impartial, but we are totally committed to the preservation of Fort Macon, which represents the noblest aspects of Civil War history.

Continued from page 1

last Sunday night.

The Orderly Sergeant of the Guilford Grays, from Greensboro, attempted to commit suicide by cutting his throat with a razor in a fit of temporary derangement of mind.

He was prevented from finishing the deed by a young man who was sleeping with him. He is now very low and there is little or no hope of his recovery, as he tore his throat with his hands after the razor was taken away from him. It seems strange that a man will meddle with his own life in this way.

If you have my flannel shirts done please send them down by Capt. Webb. He will come back about the middle of next week.

I will try to get a furlough and come home in about a month. I must close.

Love to all. Write soon to

Your affectionate Son

James A. Graham

James A. Graham was a member of a politically prominent family of Orange County, North Carolina. This letter is part of a collection previously published by the University of North Carolina Press in 1928.

Membership Form

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

Fee Enclosed \$ _____ Date: _____

Member's Name(s) _____

Street or P.O.Box _____

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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