

Rich in American history, Fort Frederick Heritage Preserve now open to the public□



By Mindy Lucas

At the end of a narrow road running through an unassuming residential section on the eastern side of Port Royal Island, sits an equally unassuming but picture-perfect little park overlooking the Beaufort River.

Here Spanish moss, hanging from the branches of hardwoods and massive live oaks, stirs gently in the breeze as salt marshes give way to a grand sweeping view of the river.

Next to the park is what is left of Fort Frederick. Built by the British colonial government in the early 1700s, the fort is thought to be the oldest surviving tabby fort in South Carolina. Its low walls run down the river's embankment and disappear into the water below.

While the fort is the most obvious connection to the past, it certainly isn't the site's only link to history.

“All of American history actually began in Beaufort, South Carolina,” local historian Dr. Larry Rowland tells an



enthusiastic crowd of residents, community leaders and archaeologists gathered recently on a cold and foggy February morning.

They are here to celebrate the grand opening of Fort Frederick Heritage Preserve, nearly seven years in the making.

The site has been largely closed to the public since 9/11 for security precautions since the preserve is sandwiched between the river and Naval Hospital Beaufort.

Even archaeologists with the S.C. Department of Natural Resources, which owns the three-acre portion featuring the fort, have, at times, had difficulty accessing the site due to its close proximity to a military installation.

But now the doors have been flung open, and with it has come the public’s first look at what park planners and archaeologists have been working to uncover and preserve since 2015, when the first extensive archaeological excavation began.

It’s a fascinating history spanning hundreds – if not thousands – of years and one that’s only recently becoming more appreciated as similar archaeological digs such as one at Parris Island which uncovered the location of a Spanish fort and settlement there, has helped round out the historical record and increase our understanding of the area’s rich history.

Early Beginnings

Named for Prince Frederick, the eldest son of King George II of England, the fort was built by the British colonial government between 1733 and 1735 to protect “Beaufort Towne” from possible attacks by Spanish warships entering Port Royal Sound.



As one of the deepest ports on the East Coast, Port Royal and other surrounding sea islands were coveted at one point or another by all of the conquering empires of the time – from the Spanish, who arrived first in 1521, to the French who followed in 1562, to the British who claimed the land in 1663 and named it for their king “Carolina, the land of Charles.”

While the fort never saw any action, its guns were fired in salute of passing ships, causing its walls to crumble a bit more with each successive blast. By the mid-1700s it is abandoned for a larger, more sturdier-built fort, constructed up river.

Still, the little fort played an important role in the early planning of the defense of Beaufort, considered the Southern frontier of British North America.

But the abandoned site didn't stay quiet for long.

A Day of Jubilation

Fast forward 123 years. It is now New Year's Day 1863, and President Lincoln has just issued the Emancipation Proclamation.

The once humble fort, now in ruins, has been all but swallowed up by a nearby plantation, now occupied by Union forces.

Preparations for a celebration, which have been underway since Lincoln announced his intentions for such a document the summer before, are complete and the proclamation is to be read on the site, named Camp Saxton in honor of U.S. Brigadier General Rufus Saxton.

Just a year earlier and following the Battle of Port Royal in 1861, Saxton was authorized to recruit 5,000 freedmen to fight with the Union Army. He manages to recruit 550 African American soldiers who go on to become the 1st South Carolina Regiment of Volunteers, later renamed the 33rd United States Colored Troops.

On Jan. 1, 1863, thousands pour in, both white and black, to attend the celebration, many travelling from miles around. Those arriving at the camp disembark at a dock and pier built overtop the "Old Fort's" ruins.

