

FORT MACON MORTARS by Paul Branch Jr.

The two mortars on the parade ground in Fort Macon usually garner at least passing interest from visitors to the fort. However, at first glance many people fail to realize that they are a type of cannon. Indeed, some visitors at times have asked if they were some type of cannonball *holder*. True, long barrel cannons are what one usually sees in movies and pictures rather than stubby-barrel mortars. Still, mortars are an important type of artillery and the two at Fort Macon deserve some comment concerning their place in the fort's history.

Fort Macon's two mortars are Model 1861 10-inch siege mortars, which were cast in early 1862 by Cyrus Alger and Company of Boston, Massachusetts. They are stamped on their muzzle faces with "No. 7" and "No. 8" and the date 1862, indicating they were the seventh and eighth mortars cast by the foundry in 1862. Number 7 weighs 1968 pounds, while Number 8 weighs two pound less. Each of their iron carriages (called "beds") weighs over 1800 additional pounds. They fire 10-inch diameter exploding shells that weigh 88.4 pounds each. They are able to lob a shell about 2100 yards (1.2 miles) with accuracy. The time of flight for the shell at this range is 21 seconds.

Mortars are used to lob explosive shells in a high arc onto enemy targets from above. They are usually set at about a 45° angle to fire their shells into the air. The shells then drop out of the sky onto the enemy below. Mortars are most useful during a siege or static operations where enemy forces take refuge behind entrenchments, barricades or emplacements. Mortars are able to lob shells down into trenches and foxholes, or behind barricades or fortifications where the enemy cannot readily be reached by small arms fire or flat-trajectory artillery.



In the War Between the States, one of the factors contributing to the capture of Fort Macon by Union forces in the April 25, 1862, bombardment of the fort was a lack of mortars in the fort's armament. Confederates were unable to obtain mortars for the fort before Union forces attacked. Without them, the Confederates were therefore unable to knock out Union artillery emplacements during the bombardment, which were well hidden in the sand dunes west of the fort.

The Union on the other hand had no shortage of mortars for their operations. They brought four 8-inch and four 10-inch mortars to use against the fort during the bombardment. These were able to lob shells over the walls into the fort and drive three 10-inch siege mortars to the fort's armament in June. One of the three with the rest of the 19th century they were mounted on the northwest front of the outer wall facing the landward approaches to the fort.

In the Spanish-American War of 1898, Army Engineers remounted the two mortars in an emplacement at the south angle of the outer wall behind a protective earth mound called a traverse. A magazine for ammunition was established in the south counterfire gallery under the mortar emplacement. A short time later the mortars were moved to alternate firing platforms on the fort's parade ground. They remained in this location after the war ended.

By 1902, the two mortars were the only cannons remaining at the fort, all others having been removed. In that year, the city of Raleigh applied to the Army to use both mortars as monuments in front of the entrance to the Soldiers Home on New Bern Avenue. The Army agreed to donate the mortar barrels, but not their carriages, to the city. For over forty years the mortar barrels then sat on concrete mounts outside the Soldier Home. After the home finally closed, they were moved to the front of the Agriculture Building on Edenton Street where they remained until 1953.

In 1953, State Parks officials acquired the mortars for use at Fort Macon State Park. A restoration of the fort museum had just been completed and it was desired to have the mortars on hand to serve as examples of the type of cannons that had been used against it in the battle. At the time, it was not realized the mortars had actually come from the fort in the first place.

Accordingly, the mortars were hauled back to the fort from Raleigh in a truck and placed in front of the entrance to the museum in the parade ground. Thus after just over half a century they were now back at the fort. Because their original carriages were long gone, they were simply placed on the ground in the parade. During the 1976-77 restoration of the fort they were mounted on stones. In 1997, through the efforts of the Friends of Fort Macon and the Atlantic Beach Merchants and Professional Association, two new iron replica carriages were fabricated for them by B & W/Core Sound Fiberglass at Sea Level. They are mounted on replicas of the wooden firing platforms that would have typically been used with them. Here they remain only a few paces from the last original firing position they occupied in the Spanish-American War.

At one time during the 19th century, there were over fifty heavy guns in Fort Macon's armament, including the two mortars. From the 1860s to the time the fort was abandoned in 1903, all were eventually removed by the Army as they aged out. Most all of these guns suffered an ignominious end by being broken up and melted for scrap iron. Of them all, only two escaped this fate to survive into modern times. They are the two mortars now standing silently today near the fort's sally port entrance.