

Sword Comes Home

by Paul Branch

In July, 2007, Fort Macon State Park had the extremely good fortune to acquire an original War Between the States era sword used by a Confederate soldier at Fort Macon. The sword is a very rare pattern militia non-commissioned officer's sword worn by Sergeant William Frederick Edwards, of Company F, 3rd North Carolina Artillery, while stationed at Fort Macon. It is similar to the standard regulation sword worn by non-commissioned officers of the United States and Confederate Armies known as the Model 1840 Non-Commissioned Officer's Sword. It differs, however, by having a down-turned "clamshell" counterguard at the handle and a brass scabbard, whereas the regulation Model 1840 sword had a leather scabbard. The sword is a product of the company of William H. Horstmann and Sons, Philadelphia, and was made before the War Between the States, probably during the period of 1845-55. Sergeant Edwards' initials 'WFE' are inscribed on the counterguard.

William Frederick Edwards was from Greene County, N.C., and enlisted at age 37 in Company F, 3rd North Carolina Artillery, on August 13, 1861, as a corporal. The company arrived at Fort Macon in September, 1861, and was then sent to help man batteries on nearby Harker's Island the following month. Edwards was promoted to sergeant on December 1, 1861. His company remained on Harker's Island until the end of February, 1862, when it was withdrawn back to Fort Macon. It then participated in the siege of Fort Macon during March and April, 1862, manning a battery of 32-pounder cannons inside the fort on the northwest front of the fort citadel during the bombardment of April 25, 1862. Following the surrender of the fort the next morning, Edwards and the other members of Company F were taken prisoner by Union forces and paroled.

In September, 1862, Company F was exchanged and resumed its service. Edwards continued as sergeant until November 3, 1863, when he was promoted to 2nd Lieutenant of the company. He served with the company at that rank for the remainder of the war.

The sword is the one that Edwards would have worn as a sergeant from December, 1861 to November, 1863, when, as an officer, he would have used a "Foot Officer's Sword". The origin of his noncommissioned officer's sword is not known, but is something he would have been issued or purchased when he became sergeant. It is also possible it may have already been in his family before the war from some prior militia service.

A question associated with the sword is how it managed to stay in his possession after the fort was captured.



Weapons of captured soldiers usually became spoils of war to the victors, with only commissioned officers given the courtesy of being allowed to retain their side arms when they were paroled. The terms of the fort's surrender state the officers and men of the garrison were allowed to take with them "all their private effects, such as clothing, bedding, books, etc." Perhaps Edwards was allowed by his captors to retain the sword as a personal possession even though he was not a commissioned officer.

Family legend, however, states that the sword was smuggled out of the Fort and therefore did not fall into Union hands. This could very well have happened since during the siege a boatload of men from the Fort was sent out by Fort commandant Colonel Moses J. White on the night of April 9, 1862, to try to reach Confederate lines near Wilmington. The boat carried important messages and dispatches for Confederate authorities, and a few personal letters from men in the Fort. Perhaps Sergeant Edwards' sword was also included, to be sent to his family for safe keeping. The boat was able to slip past Union warships anchored off the fort and reach Confederate lines.

Regardless of how Edwards retained possession of the sword, he used it until he became a 2nd Lieutenant in November, 1863, whereupon he would have worn an officer's sword. Thereafter, his sergeant's sword remained in his family and finally ended up in the possession of his great great granddaughter, Sarah Edwards Massengill, of Goldsboro.

In July, 2007, Mrs. Massengill approached Mr. William D. Gorges, owner of Battlefield Antiques of New Bern, about selling the sword. Mr. Gorges then contacted Ranger Paul Branch to inquire if Fort Macon State Park was interested in purchasing the sword since it was known to have been used at the fort. The park had no funding available in its budget to make such an unplanned purchase, and it appeared the opportunity would be lost since other buyers were also interested in the sword. Fortunately, at this point the members of the living history group 1st North Carolina/11th Regiment, which performs living history reenactments at the park each year, voted to purchase the sword for \$2500 and donate it to the park. The sword is now a part of the park's museum collection and is the only weapon in the collection that is known to have actually been used at the fort during the War Between the States.

The intention is that Sergeant Edwards' sword will be put on display with the weapons exhibits of the final museum room in the fort, which should be installed in Casemate 6 at the conclusion of the long-awaited Coastal Education Center project. Thanks to the generosity of the members of the 1st North Carolina/11th Regiment, and their devotion to the preservation of the history of Fort Macon, the journey of Sergeant Edwards' sword has come full circle. The sword has now come home to Fort Macon.