

Museum Around the Corner

Georgetown County Historical Society and Museum

Fort Winyah ©

In rummaging through files at the Museum, an article written by Tom Davis, former publisher of the Georgetown Times, revealed some interesting information on old Fort Winyah, the subject of much speculation as to its location. Here is Tom's story.

"Georgetown once encompassed a fortification of the United States of America in the early years of our country's history, after President Thomas Jefferson lamented to Congress in 1806 that the entire coastline of South Carolina was defenseless, except for one gun, a four-pounder which could be fired at Charleston. To remedy the defenseless plight of one of the 13 original states, South Carolina at that time ceded four acres of land in Georgetown on Dr. Joseph Blyth's Point for a fort and necessary buildings on the point of land between Sampit Creek and Winyah Bay.

In 1812, the United States of America purchased an additional seven acres of land from Dr. Blyth for the rather magnificent sum of \$7,000, recording the deed in the Charleston County Courthouse.

Georgetown City Attorney Patrick James Doyle a few years ago brought this deed to my attention when he was checking deeds and preparing papers for the City of Georgetown to acquire the land from the United States Government. A photostatic copy of the original handwritten deed between Dr. Blyth and the United States recorded in Charleston proved interesting. In addition to the unique property values that Georgetonians enjoyed even in the early 1800s, I was fascinated by a hand-drawn map of "Fort Wynyah" [sic] on Dr. Blyth's deed to the United States. This deed of 1812, interestingly color coded with red lines showing the original outline of four acres at "Fort Wynyah", a yellow line showing the actual limits of the land occupied for the fortress and its garrison, and the black lines representing dams and outer breastworks.

The 164-year old map in Charleston still is remarkably well preserved, but unfortunately the site once occupied by "Fort Wynyah" on Dr. Blyth's Point has been erased on the blackboard of time.

We do not know that a fort was built, for Mill's Atlas of South Carolina in 1825 showed the word "fort" besides the point of land at the mouth of Sampit River and its confluence with Winyah Bay.

The map on the old deed depicted a horseshoe-shaped fort near the entrance of the Sampit into Winyah Bay, bordered by triangular shaped earthen works and protected by four cannons.

Some Georgetonians today [1977] have vague memories of an old fort down "the boulevard", recalling tales of their parents. City Attorney Doyle, for one, remembers accounts told by his late father, Capt. Joe Doyle, of having played at a fort while a boy near the turn of the century.

Time, however, made a mystery of "Fort Wynyah's" location, for when Army Corp of Engineers began looking for spoil areas to accommodate dredging of the harbor of Georgetown in the early 1900s, Blyth's Point and the site of the old fort that was abandoned well before the Civil War, were obliterated by silt as a new land mass was created with the spoil area.

It's one of the mysteries of history – the site of the early fort in Georgetown that Thomas Jefferson recommended Congress build and maintain and for the National government later purchased land in “the thirty-sixth year of the sovereignty and Independence of the United States of America”.

Another mystery, that I do not comprehend, is why the handwritten deed between Dr. Blyth and the United States in 1812 refers to the fortification as “Fort Wynyah” and yet names the adjoining bay “Winyah Bay”.

A beautiful and talented hand recorded this deed and noted conveyances to the point of land by such figures of history as John Cleland to Archibald Baird to Thomas Waities to his heirs, William and John Waties, to William Allston to Moses Glover, Esquire, Sheriff, to Dr. Joseph Blyth and then to the United States of America and finally to the City of Georgetown 164 years later.

That's quite a bit of Georgetown heritage behind a fort that time has lost and forgotten.”