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Group wants to build replica of Fort Prince George

By Ray Chandler

Thursday, September 27, 2012

SENECA —It was built of mounds of dirt and logs that rotted quickly and needed replacement often, but it once marked the boundary of European civilization in the Upstate.

Before any of the now familiar towns and cities in the Upstate existed, there was Fort Prince George.

Built in 1753 at the invitation of the Cherokee, the fort served as an outpost of the British Army and colonial civilization until it was abandoned in 1768, after seeing action in the French and Indian War and as a launching base for expeditions against the Cherokee who had urged its building.

At various times, such figures from South Carolina history as Andrew Pickens, Francis Marion, Thomas Sumter and William Moultrie all played roles with the fort as a stage.

The fort's site, on the Pickens County side of the Keowee River, was lost to Lake Keowee in 1968, but a move is on to re-create the fort in all its glory.

The Pickens County Historical Society is hoping to build a full-size replica of the fort as a tourist attraction similar to Fort Loudoun, a British fort of the same period in what is now Monroe County, Tenn. The reconstructed Fort Loudoun draws an estimated 200,000 visitors a year.

The historical society members are working to obtain a 400-acre site for the reconstruction, with the park including a nature center and walking trails, according to Wayne Kelley, the society's vice-president.

Visitors to Duke Energy's World of Energy can now see what the fort was like in a display of a model carefully constructed nearly 40 years ago by Marshall Williams, now 89 and living in Madison, Ga., who was involved in the site's excavation before the lake rose.

His interest in the fort began with a brief reference in a book he found by chance in the early 1960s. He had no idea the fort had existed, and what began as a journey of discovery became almost an obsession.

Williams remembers thinking, "What's this? Here, I've lived in Oconee County for 20 years and did not know that a colonial English fort was within 16 miles of where I was born."

Trips to the Clemson University and University of Georgia libraries showed Williams little, because little had been recorded about the fort beyond its basic history. Even its exact location had been lost.

When plans for Lake Keowee began to take shape, he joined what was two-man effort by state archeologists to find the site and learn everything possible about it before the lake rose. Chance findings of melted glass and fragments of a hoe gave them a place to start. Slowly, the fort began to emerge from the digging and scraping.

Post molds, disturbances in the soil from the posts that made up the fort's walls, still evident after 200 years, gradually grew into an outline of the approximately 200-square -foot fort, with the bastions at the four corners. In time, the diggers found the rock-lined well, a rock-lined cellar of a building and the outlines of other buildings. The fort's structure and fixtures, until then just mentionings in letters and diaries of the time, became real once again.

"Beginning in August 1967 and going through May 11, 1968, I spent almost every weekend at the fort site," Williams said.

Besides the fort itself, the diggings turned up artifacts of life at the lonely outpost. Handmade nails, bits of glass, crockery, lead musket balls, bones of animals eaten for food, even a human skeleton Williams believes might have been that of Lt. Richard Coytmore, once commander of the fort, who was killed in early 1760 during a colonial war against the Cherokee — all saw the light of a new century.

Most of the artifacts eventually entered a new form of burial, this one bureaucratic. They remain packed in boxes in Columbia, according to Luther Lyle, an Oconee County historian who inquired about them about six years ago.

"I was told they were scattered in several locations," Lyle said.

The rise of the lake meant work on the fort had to come to an end for Williams and the others. On May 10, 1968, Williams buried a time capsule at the site, containing among other things a 1968 penny and a 1968 nickel. The next day, he made his last visit to the site.

"No other human being was near, and the dark sky and gray mist and rain were fast descending upon the valley, and my last moments with the fort, its ghosts, and its history, was at hand," Williams remembered in a later writing of his experience. "I stood in the center of the fort for a few moments, gave my best military salute, and then turned and drove off without a backward glance. The great adventure was over."

Well, not quite.

The day after Williams' last visit, the rising lake covered the fort site. But Williams had taken away some rocks and some soil from the site with a vague idea of using them to make a model. About three years later, it was completed.

The display of Williams' model and the history of the fort and its excavation will run through Oct. 6 at the World of Energy, off S.C. 130 about eight miles north of Seneca. Operating hours are Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. until 5 p.m. and Saturday, noon until 5 p.m.



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