The danger of naval attack along the North Carolina coast seems remote now but during the 18th and 19th centuries, the region around Beaufort was extremely vulnerable to attack. Blackbeard and other pirates passed through Beaufort Inlet at will, and successive wars with Spain, France and Great Britain during the Colonial Period provided a constant threat of coastal raids by enemy warships. Indeed, Beaufort was captured and plundered by the Spanish in 1747 and again by the British in 1782.

North Carolina leaders recognized the need for coastal defenses to prevent future attacks and began efforts to construct forts. The eastern point of Bogue Banks was determined to be the best location from which a fort might guard the entrance to Beaufort Inlet. In 1756, construction began there on a small fascine fort known as Fort Dobbs. Fort Dobbs never finished, and the inlet remained undefended during the American Revolution.

Early in the 1800s, continued strained relations with Great Britain led the U.S. government to build a national defense chain of coastal forts for protection. As a part of this defense, a small masonry fort named Fort Hampton, after a North Carolina Revolutionary War hero, was built to guard Beaufort Inlet during 1808-09. This fort guarded the inlet during the subsequent War of 1812 but was abandoned shortly after the end of the war. Shore erosion and a hurricane in 1825 were responsible for sweeping Fort Hampton into Beaufort Inlet by 1826.

The War of 1812 demonstrated the weaknesses of existing coastal defenses and prompted the U.S. government to begin construction on an improved chain of coastal fortifications for national defense. This ambitious undertaking involved the construction of 38 new, permanent coastal forts known as the Third System. The forts were built between 1817 and 1865. Fort Macon was part of this system. Fort Macon guarded Beaufort Inlet and Beaufort Harbor, North Carolina’s only major deep-water ocean port.

Fort Macon was designed by Brig. Gen. Simon Bernard and built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. It was named after North Carolina’s eminent statesman of the period, Nathaniel Macon. Construction began in 1826 and lasted for eight years. The fort was completed in December 1834 and was improved with further modifications during 1841-46. The total cost of the fort was $463,790. As a result of congressional economizing, the fort was actively garrisoned only from 1834-36, 1843-44 and 1846-49. Often, an ordnance sergeant acting as a caretaker was the only person stationed at the fort.

The War Between the States began on April 12, 1861, and only two days elapsed before local North Carolina militia forces from Beaufort arrived to seize the fort for the state of North Carolina and the Confederacy. North Carolina Confederate forces occupied the fort for a year, preparing it for battle and arming it with 54 heavy cannons.

Early in 1862, Union forces commanded by Maj. Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside swept through eastern North Carolina and part of Burnside’s command under Brig. Gen. John G. Parke was sent to capture Fort Macon. Parke’s men captured Morehead City and Beaufort without resistance, then landed on Bogue Banks during March and April to operate against Fort Macon.

Col. Moses J. White and 400 North Carolina Confederates in the fort refused to surrender even though the fort was hopelessly surrounded. On April 25, 1862, Parke’s Union forces bombarded the fort with heavy siege guns for 11 hours, aided by the fire of four Union navy gunboats in the ocean offshore and by floating batteries in the sound to the east. While the fort easily repulsed the Union gunboat attack, the Union land batteries, utilizing new rifled cannons, hit the fort 560 times. There was such extensive damage that White was forced to surrender the following morning, April 26. The fort’s Confederate garrison was then paroled as prisoners of war. This battle was the second time in history that new rifled cannons had been used against a fort and demonstrated the obsolescence of fortifications such as Fort Macon as a way of defense.

The Union army held Fort Macon for the remainder of the war, while Beaufort Harbor served as an important coaling and repair station for the Union navy.

During the Reconstruction, the U.S. Army actively occupied Fort Macon until 1877. For about 11 years during this era, since there were no state or federal penitentiaries in the military district of North and South Carolina, Fort Macon was used as a civil and military prison, until 1876.

Fort Macon was deactivated after 1877, only to be reorganized by state troops once again during the summer of 1898 for the Spanish-American War. Finally, in 1903, the U.S. Army completely abandoned the fort. The fort was not even used during World War I, and in 1923, it was offered for sale as surplus military property. However, at the bidding of North Carolina leaders, a congressional act on June 4, 1924, gave the fort and surrounding reservation to the state of North Carolina to be used as a public park. Fort Macon and the surrounding property was the second area acquired by the state for the purpose of establishing a state parks system.

During 1934-35, the Civilian Conservation Corps restored the fort and established public recreational facilities, which enabled Fort Macon State Park to officially open May 1, 1936, as North Carolina’s first functioning state park.

At the outbreak of World War II, the U.S. Army leased the park from the state and actively manned the fort with the Coast Artillery Corps once again to protect a number of important nearby facilities. The fort was occupied from December 1941 to November 1944. On October 1, 1946, the Army returned the fort and the park to the state.

Today, Fort Macon is one of North Carolina’s most visited state parks, welcoming more than 1 million visitors each year.

For detailed information about the history of Fort Macon, visit the Friends of Fort Macon Website at www.friendsoffortmacon.org.
The main entrance to the citadel is known as the sally port (1) and is the primary entrance to Fort Macon. The three sets of original doors date from 1843-44. Directly ahead is the inner court known as the parade ground. On either side of the parade are vaulted rooms known as casemates.

To the left of the sally port are rooms that make up the restored section. These rooms appear as all the fort’s casemates originally would have in the 1800s. The windows, doors, shutters, wooden floors and ornate trim have been duplicated exactly from copies of the fort’s original plans. These rooms house restored soldier quarters and the Fort Macon Museum, with exhibits detailing different periods of the fort’s history.

Casemate 2 was the fort’s guardhouse until the War Between the States. Thereafter, it was an office for the commandant or adjutant. Casemate 3 has been used at different times as an office, officers’ quarters and storage.

Gunpowder magazines (M) are located in the angles under the stairways. They were used to store gunpowder and are protected by extra thick walls, as well as by the stairways themselves. Under the stairs are underground cisterns for drinking water. The water is provided by natural rainwater that filters through the soil above the casemates, passes through zinc pipes in the walls between each casemate and flows through underground channels at the foot of the parade wall to reach the fort’s cisterns.

Casemates 4-8 were usually used as officers’ quarters and constituted what would be termed on many military posts as the “Officers’ Row.” At other times, Casemate 4 was used as an officers’ mess. Casemate 6 was used in the early 1870s as the post library and school, where a private of the garrison taught the children of the families living on the post. Casemates 4 and 5 have been restored to show examples of enlisted men’s and officers’ quarters from the period of the War Between the States.

The gunpowder magazine adjacent to Casemate 8 has been restored inside to show all three of the fort’s magazines as they would have originally appeared. Directly in front of the doorway of Casemate 8 is a restored hot shot furnace (H), which was used to heat cannonballs until they were red hot. The cannonballs were used to set wooden warships on fire during an attack. The cannonballs were used to set wooden warships on fire during an attack. The cannonballs were used to set wooden warships on fire during an attack.

Surrounding Fort Macon’s citadel is the sunken area known as the ditch, which was formerly deeper and could be turned into a moat by flooding it with sea water from a nearby canal. The moat posed an obstacle to an enemy assault. Across the ditch is the fort’s outer wall of defense known as the covertway. Notice the rooms (C) under the covertway that look down the avenues of the ditch. These are counterfire galleries from which the fort’s defenders could open fire with cannons and small arms to annihilate enemy attackers trapped in the ditch.

Tour the covertway or the top of the citadel, where most of the fort’s original cannon emplacements still remain and from which excellent views of the ocean, inlet and surrounding area can be seen. Examples of original and replica cannons can be found at several locations in and around the fort. Guided tours of the fort are usually available during the spring, summer and fall. Check with the park office for information about special programs and events. Enjoy your visit to Fort Macon!