

Naval Section Bases ^[1]

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by Paul Branch, 2006

See also: [National Guard](#) ^[2].

Naval section bases were small naval bases established by the [U.S. Navy](#) ^[3] on the North Carolina coast prior to and



Fort Caswell was purchased in 1941 by the Navy for use as a base. Image courtesy of NC Office of

during Archives & History.

^[4][World War II](#) ^[5] for coastal patrol and antisubmarine defense. In 1940-41, when it became increasingly evident that the United States would be forced to enter the conflict, the federal government initiated massive programs of military buildup and preparedness. Among these programs, the section base was to function as part of the navy's Inshore Patrol, providing the administrative and operational facilities for small naval or [Coast Guard](#) ^[6] vessels engaged in local harbor defense, coastal patrol, and minesweeping. In 1941 two section bases were authorized, for Morehead City and Southport; in 1942 a third was approved for Ocracoke.

The site for the Morehead Naval Section Base was a 58-acre tract, purchased by the navy in 1941 for \$15,000, within Camp Glenn on Bogue Sound just west of Morehead City. Construction began on 14 November. The base consisted of a two-story, multiwinged building housing the administrative offices, mess hall, and barracks; additional barracks; machine and repair shops; a medical facility; a heating plant; and other buildings. In a remote area north of the post were eight concrete magazines for the storage of ammunition, depth charges, and explosives. A pier with two extensions accommodated up to eight patrol vessels and subchasers. The base, costing more than \$1 million, was located about five miles from the entrance to Beaufort Inlet and the Atlantic Ocean.

Although incomplete, the Morehead base was formally commissioned on 17 Mar. 1942, with the [German U-boat](#) ^[7] offensive along the North Carolina coast well under way. It quickly became the most important reception and processing center on the North Carolina coast for the survivors of sunken or damaged merchant ships. Over the course of the war, both U.S. Navy and Coast Guard personnel used the base, whose primary duty was to serve the vessels patrolling the coast for German U-boats. Navy patrol craft, Coast Guard cutters, and other boats operated from the base in conjunction with larger vessels at the [State Port in Morehead City](#) ^[8] and the [Fort Macon Coast Guard Station](#) ^[9] on Bogue Banks. They aided in minesweeping and in maintaining a submarine net across the entrance to the ship channel in Beaufort Inlet. The base was also available to supply ammunition, make small-scale repairs, and provide refitting.

The need for the base diminished after the summer of 1942, when U-boat attacks off the North Carolina coast became infrequent. It was designated a Naval Frontier Base on 15 Mar. 1944 and was disestablished on 30 June 1944. After the war, the base was declared surplus property and authorized for disposal. In the fall of 1946 North Carolina bought the property on which to build a marine fisheries research institute through its Division of Commercial Fisheries of the [Department of Conservation and Development](#) ^[10]. By the early 2000s, the [North Carolina Institute of Marine Sciences](#) ^[11] occupied the land.

On 17 Nov. 1941 the U.S. Navy also purchased the old [Fort Caswell](#) ^[12] Military Reservation near Southport for use as a section base for the Inshore Patrol. Almost \$1 million was appropriated to make the Fort Caswell Naval Section Base operational, build docking facilities, and adapt the reservation's original buildings. Operations began in early 1942. From the base's docks in the [Cape Fear River](#) ^[13], various patrol boats, [Coast Guard](#) ^[6] vessels, armed yachts and fishing boats, and minesweepers guarded the coast off Cape Fear and [Frying Pan Shoals](#) ^[14] from German U-boats. At the end of the war the Navy Department retained the base for several years with the intention of adapting it for other uses. It sold the property to the [North Carolina Baptist State Convention](#) ^[15] in 1949.

The U.S. Naval Section Base at Ocracoke began operations in May-June 1942 with construction of the Hatteras Minefield, a ring of contact mines laid in an irregular arc offshore from [Cape Hatteras](#) ^[16] to Ocracoke enclosing a protected anchorage for merchant ships. The base itself consisted of a large, two-story administrative building and barracks, a hospital, and various support facilities. Three large piers were built into [Silver Lake](#) ^[17], which was dredged to shelter Coast Guard and navy patrol craft. By the time the base was formally commissioned on 9 Oct. 1942, its original purpose had ceased to exist, as the Hatteras Minefield proved too difficult to maintain. When five friendly ships were sunk or damaged

after entering the minefield by mistake, it was discontinued.

The Ocracoke facility continued to operate as a base for navy and Coast Guard vessels on antisubmarine patrol. In 16 Jan. 1944, with the U-boat menace significantly diminished, it became an Amphibious Training Base, and in 1945 it operated as a Combat Information Center. The base was decommissioned at the end of the war, and eventually most of the buildings were torn down, although the adjacent Coast Guard station remained open. On 31 Mar. 1952, by congressional act (HR 4974), the land containing the base was transferred to the National Park Service ^[18] as part of the Cape Hatteras National Seashore ^[16].

References:

Paolo E. Coletta, *United States Navy and Marine Corps Bases-Domestic* (1985).

Ethel Herring and Carolee Williams, *Fort Caswell in War and Peace* (1983).

Additional Resources:

Fort Caswell: <http://www.fortcaswell.com/> ^[19]

Fort Caswell, NC Historical Marker D-62: <https://www.ncdcr.gov/about/history/division-historical-resources/nc-highway-historical-marker-program/Markers.aspx?sp=search&k=Markers&sv=D-62> ^[4]

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Fort Caswell was purchased in 1941 by the Navy for use as a base. Image courtesy of NC Office of Archives & History. Available from <https://www.ncdcr.gov/about/history/division-historical-resources/nc-highway-historical-marker-program/Markers.aspx?sp=search&k=Markers&sv=D-62> ^[4] (accessed August 30, 2012).

Subjects:

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World War II (1941-1945) ^[23]

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Origin - location:

Brunswick County ^[25]

Carteret County ^[26]

Dare County ^[27]

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Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press. ^[29]

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