

## Woodworker Handcrafts Signs for Fort Gadsden

Tucked into the southwestern portion of the Apalachicola National Forest, British Fort and Fort Gadsden, a National Historic Landmark managed by the U.S. Forest Service, is the site of two successive forts, both of which played an important role in national and Floridian history.

The site is fairly large and features fort wall foundations, earthworks, a powder magazine, moats, and a cemetery. For several years the need was recognized for directional signs to help orient visitors as they moved throughout the site and to identify the features that they encountered.

On a limited budget, and desiring a quality product, the local community was turned to for help.

This past spring at a meeting of the Panhandle Archaeological Society at Tallahassee, a local volunteer organization involved with archeology and history, an announcement was made asking for volunteers for an



upcoming project at Fort Gadsden. As a result, Dave and Sally Pontis volunteered this past June at the site; Dave helping install a new deck on the artifact display building while Sally assisted with archaeological monitoring. Subsequently, Sally and Dave helped clean out the artifact display cases, which are built into the sides of the artifact display building.

As Dave and Sally corresponded with the Forest, making preparations to travel to Fort Gadsden, the Forest became aware of Dave's wood working background. Dave is a skilled woodworker; it had been his pastime ever since middle school when he

constructed his first project in shop class, a sturdy mahogany box. His large attached garage has transitioned into a well-equipped woodshop.



For many years he did the repairs on American Red Cross (ARC) fiberglass sailboats and gear used by volunteer Basic Sailing Instructors in Orlando, Florida. He likewise constructed mahogany daggerboards for the boats, saving ARC the cost of expensive factory replacements. Sally also helped on those repair efforts, sewing a wind sock and various bags used in the program. She also helped Dave with boat repair work when he did repairs or made boat parts in his home garage shop. Dave was also a volunteer sailing instructor and for a time served as an officer in The Sailing Club, an organization that managed the volunteers who operated the Central Florida Chapter, ARC Basic and Advanced Sailing Courses.

Dave recalls that while growing up, his father, an Air Force officer by day, enjoyed toiling at carpentry on weekends, and his grandfather was an inventor who endeavored to create the world's best fishing pole grip (for which he has a patent). Dave and Sally met at Florida State University and once they were married, he worked as a Human Resources Manager within the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for 25 years. The final eight years of Dave's 33-



year civil service career was serving as a Project Manager for Technical Training and Evaluation for the Veterans Benefits Administration of the VA. He managed development of training and electronic performance support products, via principles of Instructional Systems Development (ISD) and using formal project management processes for nationwide distributed/distance delivery.



Woodworking was something that Dave could look forward to when he returned home at night. In his spare time just this year, he built the wooden countertops in the couple's kitchen. His projects, both new work and restorations over the years, are varied and show a flair of intricacy, e.g. marine carvings, restoring & building small sailboats, a seaman's chest, jewelry box, model maker's tool chest, cabinetry, tables, TV stands, & various large chests and small boxes for storing family heirlooms, woodworking tools and supplies. Handcrafting occurs in

much of his woodwork, whether carving details or hand cutting dovetail joinery.

"It's a hobby. I could never do woodworking professionally, I work way too slow and I'd charge too much," said Dave. "So I have to do it for free!"



The cypress lumber and sign-maker's templates for the Fort Gadsden signage project were delivered to Dave and Sally's house in late July and he set about to work immediately. Sweltering hot as it was in his garage, summer days in Tallahassee, Florida can reach temperatures as high as 108 degrees, he finished the project in just ten days, even though the deadline for completion wasn't until the first of January. Sally worked the logistics for Dave and as his facilitator, which she explains meant that she helped with holding stuff! When finished, Dave had constructed 20 picture-perfect signs that would serve to direct visitors to the Exhibits, Fort, River View, Earthworks, Cemetery, Moat, Bastion, Magazine and Parking.

"The value of Dave and Sally's contribution is incredibly substantial," said Shanon Harvey, landscape architect on the Forest and project manager. "How do you put a price on that kind of talent and dedication? British Fort/Fort Gadsden, a National Historic Landmark, is also a shining example of volunteerism at its finest."

The new signage will be installed at Fort Gadsden along the newly improved pathways throughout the site, providing visual guidance to the fort's visitors in January 2016.

Located along the Apalachicola River, the British Fort/Fort Gadsden National Historic Landmark interpretive area offers detailed information about the site and its history, along with trails, river view, picnic area, and vault toilet.

To see more photos of Fort Gadsden and the new signage or to learn more about the National Historic Site, you can find us on the web at: [www.fs.usda.gov/apalachicola](http://www.fs.usda.gov/apalachicola). Please contact the Wakulla Ranger District at 850-926-3561