2

Beaufort County Comprehensive Plan
History

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Native Americans

The first identified presence of the aboriginal, or Native American, people who inhabited the Southeastern coastal area dates to approximately 1800 B.C. Early inhabitants were hunters and gatherers who moved seasonally in search of favorable weather and changing food sources, leaving few permanent features on the landscape. Seasonal encampments, such as the Fish Haul Archaeological site on Hilton Head Island were located at sites that offered an abundance of food staples, such as hickory nuts, fish, shellfish and game.

Shell Rings

Shell Rings are circular or semi-circular Native-American sites consisting of deposits of shell, bone, soil and artifacts. They are located on barrier islands along the Southeastern coast from South Carolina to Florida and date from the Late Archaic Period, 3000 to 5000 years ago. They range in size from large rings that can be as much as 9 to 15 feet high and 300 feet in diameter to much smaller rings only a few feet in height and diameter. There is a debate among archaeologist as to what shell rings represent. Are they intentionally formed mounds for ceremonies or feasts, are they the accumulation of seasonal or permanent occupations, or are they a combination of both?

Early Settlements

Remains of structures such as shell rings, ceremonial mounds, and burial mounds indicate the more settled life of subsequent groups of Native Americans. Beaufort County has at least seven identified large shell rings and a few smaller rings that are believed to date from about the second millennium B.C. and contain some of the earliest known pottery in North America. Large mounds believed to be religious temples dating from approximately 900-1400 A.D are located at the Indian Hill site on St. Helena Island and the Little Barnwell site on the Whale Branch. Judging from the size of the Indian Hill mound, it probably served as a regional ceremonial center with an adjacent village near by. A mound constructed around 500 A.D. for burial purposes only is located at the Hassell Point site on the Colleton River. Evidence indicates that burned human remains as well as pottery and other materials were buried in layers and that a number of graves were located in one shell ring.

The Yemassee

Around 1680 Native Americans began moving to the Carolina coast from Florida, fleeing Spanish settlers. Among these were the Yemassee. Until 1715, the Yemassee coexisted and traded with the English settlers, unified by their mutual adversary – Spanish Florida. The Yemassee were granted a reserve that covered a huge tract of land from the Combahee River in the north to the Savannah River to the south. However, increasing tensions over trade abuses eventually led to the Yemassee War (1715-17). The war began when Yemassee attacked the Port Royal

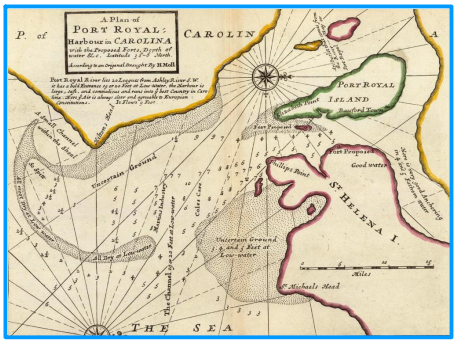
The Sea Pines shell ring site is one of 20 or more prehistoric shell rings located on the southeast coast. All are believed to date early in the second millennium BC, and they contain some of the earliest pottery known in North America.

settlement, and massacred all but a few of the residents, as well as most of the settlers living on the inland plantations. Eventually, the Yemassee and their allies were driven from the area.

There are two identified remaining archaeological sites that were Yemassee town sites – Pocosabo Town, located near present day Sheldon, and Altamaha Town, located in the Okatie area near the Colleton River and Chechessee Creek. These settlements were scattered villages that covered as much as 125 acres and probably had as many as forty households. Altamaha, believed to be inhabited by Native Americans for over 3,200 years, was the head town of the lower region and was the home of the head chief.

Legacy

In addition to shell rings, mounds, artifacts, and place names, perhaps the most identifiable legacy of Native American habitation is the location of many of our current roads and highways. US Highway 21, for example, follows a route from northern Beaufort County to Fripp Island that was originally an Indian trail. Where possible the road follows the high ground, especially across the barrier islands. Many of these trails crossed rivers and creeks making a trip of any distance one that required more than one method of transportation.



Early Explorers and Settlers

From 1520 when the Spanish first sailed the waters along the coast of present day South Carolina to the early 18th century when the English gained a permanent foothold, the region was sought after and contested for by the Spanish, French, English, and Scots. The influence of these Europeans, as well as the Africans they brought in slavery, is apparent today in Beaufort County in the names of places, by the built environment and archaeological sites, and in the language and customs of the people.

Spain

Archaeological dig at the site of Santa Elena and Charles Forte on the southern tip of Parris Island.

In 1526, Captain Lucas Vasquez de Ayllon brought a company of 550 men to what is now Beaufort County. The fort that he built was short-lived as hostile Indians as well as cold and exposure killed most of his men. The rest returned to Hispaniola leaving no trace of this first European settlement. In 1566, the Spanish, intending to establish a northern outpost to protect Florida from the French and English, returned to build another fort named San Felipe which lasted 10 years. The Spanish returned in 1577 and built another fort, San Marcos, about 100 feet from San Felipe. Like its predecessor, San Marcos had a town within its walls. During its eleven year existence, San Marcos was a thriving place. The settlement, now known as Santa Elena, contained over 60 houses. The presence of women, children, agriculture, and Catholic priests gave the settlement a sense of permanence and stability. However, in 1588, the inhospitable Indians and climate forced the Spanish to return to Florida. Today, Santa Elena exists as an important archaeological site on Parris Island and is invaluable as a source of information about the first European settlers in Beaufort County.

France

Arriving in 1562, the French Huguenots were the next Europeans to try and establish themselves in Beaufort County. Led by Captain Jean Ribault, the French explorers cast anchor in "a mighty river" he named Porte Royall because of "the largeness and fairness thereof." He said that there was "No fayrer or fytter place than Porte Royall."

In 1562, Captain Jean Ribault, in an attempt to establish a French colony in the new world, cast anchor in a river he named Porte Royall because of the "largeness and fairness thereof." He said that there was "no fayrer of fytter place than Porte Royall."

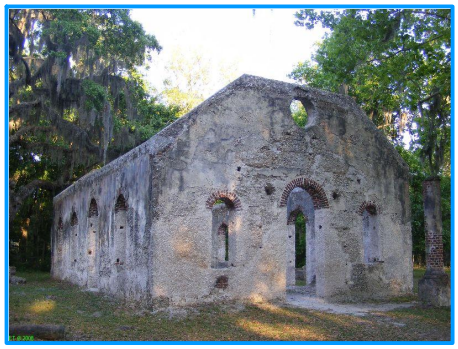
Ribault built a fort of logs and clay that he named Charles Forte located on present day Parris Island. The French stayed only a few months and like the Spanish before them, abandoned the fort. Ribault and his men were later massacred by the Spanish near St. Augustine. While Charles Forte lasted only a short time, it has the distinction of being the first Protestant settlement in North America. The most obvious reminder of the French presence here is the name of Beaufort County's largest island as well as one of its principal towns, Port Royal, and the use of the name Ribaut.

Scotland

In 1684, a Scotsman, Lord Cardross, with 148 of his countrymen, established a colony he named Stuart Town at Spanish Point on the Beaufort River. Difficulties with the English authorities in Charles Town over the fur trade and raids by the Spanish from Florida soon led to the demise of Stuart Town. In 1686, a Spanish force attacked the town and killed or captured most of the Scots. The survivors fled and the town was destroyed. While the approximate site of Stuart Town is known, the exact location has never been determined.

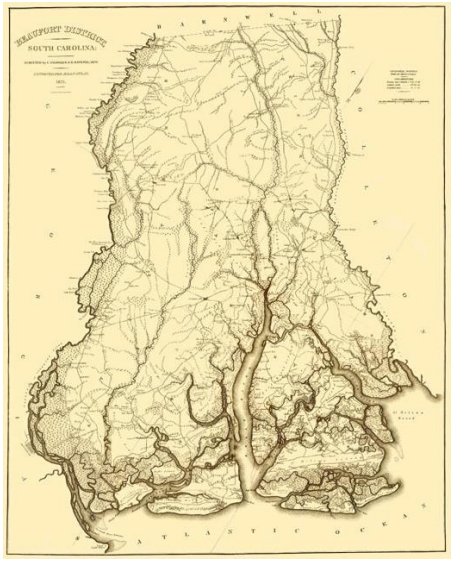
England

For nearly 100 years after the Spanish left, there was no permanent settlement in the area although Spanish priests continued to sporadically operate missions along the coast. Port Royal Sound provided refuge for privateers and warships of all nations as they raided one another and attempted to gain a foothold. In 1663, Captain William Hilton, for whom Hilton Head Island is named, became the first Englishman to explore the region. He reported back favorably to the Crown, and in 1670 the first shipload of colonists arrived in Port Royal Sound. They intended to establish a colony there since they considered the area to be the most favorable for settlement. However, they went further north where they established a colony near present day Charleston that became the first permanent English settlement.



Colonial Period

In 1710, the Lords Proprietors of Carolina ordered the establishment of Beaufort Town, in honor of one of the Lords Proprietors, the Duke of Beaufort. The location of the town was chosen primarily because it offered a safe harbor on the Beaufort River away from the open Port Royal Sound. The growth of the town was initially slow due to its remote island location, skirmishes with the Yemassee Indians, and the continued threat of invasion by the Spanish. In 1721, it was reported that there were only thirty white and forty-two black inhabitants.



Beaufort County was established in 1769 and originally included what is now Jasper and Hampton Counties.

Concerned about the defense of the area, authorities in Charles Town appropriated 1,500 pounds to construct a fort at Port Royal. In 1734, a tabby structure named Fort Frederick was constructed on the Beaufort River under the supervision of the colony's treasurer, Alexander Parris, for whom Parris Island is named. Unfortunately, Fort Frederick was poorly situated and rapidly deteriorated until it was finally abandoned. Tabby ruins of Fort Frederick still exist at the site near the Naval Hospital. When Fort Frederick was abandoned, a new, more formidable tabby fort named Fort Lyttelton was built upriver at Spanish Point, and was used through the Revolutionary War.

Not only did the town of Beaufort develop slowly, but the Sea Island planters did not share in the great wealth being accumulated by the rice and indigo planters of the Charles Town and Georgetown areas. The lack of large freshwater swamps so plentiful on the mainland prevented them from having success with rice, the colony's most profitable export crop. Indigo was the most profitable money crop on the islands and was supported by an imperial bounty which was abolished after the Revolution. Rather than owning huge plantations tilled by hundreds of slaves, the average Sea Island area planter was middle class and owned few slaves and roughly 500 acres of mostly wilderness.

It was not until 1763 when the English finally solidified their hold on North America and the Colonial wars ended that the Port Royal area began to experience prosperity and growth. Between 1763 and 1776 the population of the area quadrupled. The economy grew with the population and the area became a center of the shipbuilding industry.

During that period several large ocean going vessels were constructed of live oak and cypress at boat yards in Beaufort and on Hilton Head, Lady's and Daufuskie Islands.

The American Revolution

As sentiment for a break from England grew in the colonies and among some Beaufort people, many of the prominent families like the Bulls and the Stuarts remained Loyalist. As a result, the revolutionary government in Charles Town had little confidence in the residents of Beaufort. The smuggling of contraband to England in defiance of colonial authority was a constant problem.

The early years of the Revolutionary War were relatively quiet in the area. Then in February 1779, the British attacked in what was to become known as the Battle of Port Royal. While the battle was an American victory and the British were repelled, the American forces left soon after to aid in the defense of Charles Town. The British then occupied Beaufort and Port Royal Island and remained until near the end of the War. Frequent raids on plantations and settlements along the area's rivers were conducted by the British from Port Royal causing extensive damage. After three years of occupation and warfare, the area was devastated. A returning citizen noted that "all was desolation . . . every field, every plantation showed signs of ruin and devastation." The area did, however, produce some revolutionary heroes such as Daniel Heyward, Jr., and John Barnwell.

Legacy

A small but significant group of 18th century buildings remain in Beaufort today. Among the most prominent are St. Helena's Episcopal Church (c. 1724) and the Hepworth-Pringle House (c. 1720) considered to be the oldest house in Beaufort. The most significant 18th century structure outside of the city of Beaufort is the ruins of the Prince William's Parish Church (c. 1745-55). Commonly known as Old Sheldon Church, it is said to be the first conscious attempt in America to imitate a Greek temple and is considered to have been one of the finest revival buildings in the country. It was burned by British forces in 1779, rebuilt in 1826 and later burned by Sherman's troops in 1865 and never rebuilt. At least two extant homes in Beaufort are made completely of tabby (see sidebar) and several others in the area have raised tabby basements or walls of tabby. A number of significant tabby ruins also exist. Among the most prominent are the ruins of the St. Helena Parish Chapel of Ease (c. 1740) on St. Helena Island and several tabby buildings on Spring Island. The Chapel of Ease was built to serve the planters of St. Helena Island, for whom it was too far to travel to the church in Beaufort.

Tabby

Tabby is a cement like material made of oyster shells, lime, sand and water that when hardened becomes a strong material. Neither stone nor the ingredients needed to make brick are found in the area. Tabby incorporates easily available, inexpensive materials into a reliable building material. There are differing opinions as to where the formula for making tabby originated. Some credit the Africans for bringing it here while others believe that Native Americans were the first to use tabby.

Ruins of Fort Frederick (circa 1735-1758). The fort was named after Frederick, son of George II of England and was the main defense of Beaufort until replaced by Fort Lyttleton at Spanish Point.

The Antebellum Era and Civil War

The reconstruction and economic growth of Beaufort after the Revolutionary War was slow. It was not until the introduction and spread of long-staple Sea Island cotton that Beaufort began to enjoy the prosperity it had long awaited. Production of Sea Island cotton in South Carolina and Georgia increased from 10,000 pounds in 1790 to eight and one-half million pounds in 1801. The cotton was shipped from Charleston, Savannah and Port Royal to mills in England.

At this time the landscape of the area, especially the Sea Islands began to change dramatically. Forests were cleared for cotton fields. Marshes and swamps were filled and diked for agricultural lands. The small planters and middle class yeomen of the colonial era were gradually replaced by wealthy planters with large holdings. The wealth of the area began to be concentrated in the hands of a few families. Typical were the St. Helena Island planters like the Fripps, Coffins, Sams, and Chaplins who owned thousands of acres of land and many hundreds of slaves. They often owned large working plantations on St. Helena and the other Sea Islands as well as homes in Beaufort or Charleston.

The prosperity brought by Sea Island cotton facilitated by the invention of the cotton gin had a direct impact on the growth of slavery in Beaufort County during this period. The planters began to realize the enormous profits to be made; the more astute began to buy more land and more slaves. As a result, the African American population of the Beaufort area, especially on the Sea Islands, grew dramatically. By 1800 over 80 percent of the population of the Beaufort area were slaves and slightly higher on the Sea Islands. Like in much of the southeast Atlantic coast, the African Americans in Beaufort County held on to many of the West African customs, religion, and traditions. The historic isolation of the Sea Islands has preserved this culture, known as "Gullah." Gullah communities continue to thrive on the Sea Islands. Today the Gullah are noted for the continued preservation of their African roots and traditions: the language, arts, foods, architecture, dress and customs of the Gullah are all African based. They speak a language that derives

Praise Houses

Praise houses were places of worship for slaves who had no formal churches of their own. First appearing around 1840, they were usually very small, frame structures sometimes built by the planters but often as not constructed by the slaves themselves with whatever material they could find. Elders led services that were a mixture of Christian and African customs. At one time dozens of praise houses dotted the landscape of the Sea Islands. They served not only as places of worship but as community centers for the Africans on the islands. Today, only four 20th century praise houses remain in Beaufort County.

most of its vocabulary from English but many of the words and rhythms are African in origin.

Today a number of significant buildings from the plantation era remain in the County, mostly on the Sea Islands. Many of the finest homes and important public buildings and churches in the 304 acre Beaufort City National Historic Landmark District were built during this time. Included are the Beaufort College Building (c. 1852), the First Baptist Church (c. 1844), Tabernacle Baptist Church (c. 1840), and the Beaufort Arsenal (c. 1852), which was built to house the Beaufort Volunteer Artillery. The oldest known extant plantation house in the area is Retreat Plantation (c. 1740), also known as the Jean de la Gaye House, on Battery Creek near Beaufort. A number of plantation house ruins are found on Daufuskie, Lady's, Hilton Head, St. Helena, and Port Royal Islands. Some of the more prominent churches from the plantation era are Brick Baptist Church (c. 1855) on St. Helena Island, The Church of the Cross (c. 1857) in Bluffton, and St. Luke's Church (c. 1824) near Bluffton.

The gothic revival Church of the Cross in Bluffton was constructed in 1857. The church survived widespread burning by Union troops in 1863.

The Civil War

As might be expected from an area that had a wealthy planter class whose fortunes were dependent upon slave labor, Beaufort County had a strong secessionist movement. On July 31, 1844, Robert Barnwell Rhett, known as South Carolina's "father of secession," spoke at a meeting held under a giant live oak tree in Bluffton. This is believed to be the first secession meeting and "The Bluffton Movement" for secession was born. Later an important secession meeting was held in 1851 in the Milton Maxcy House in Beaufort, the "Secession House," which at the time was owned by Edmund Rhett, the brother of Robert Barnwell Rhett. Both the "Secession Oak" and the Milton Maxcy House are still standing.

Fort Walker during the Battle of Port Royal, November 1861.

In 1860 when South Carolina seceded from the Union, the Beaufort Artillery along with other units such as the St. Helena Mounted Rifles joined in the defense of the area. Their primary fear was that the U.S. Navy would attempt to gain control of the deep harbor of Port Royal Sound. While Beaufort and Port Royal were of little use since there were no well developed port or railroad facilities, the Sound, was a natural anchorage for large warships and other vessels. Two fortifications, Fort Walker on Hilton Head Island and Fort Beauregard on Bay Point, were constructed to defend against attack from the sea. Remains of these earthworks exist today.

The Confederate fears were justified when on November 7, 1861, Union naval and ground forces attacked Confederate forces on Hilton Head Island. The Union won a complete victory routing the Confederates and forcing them to evacuate not only Fort Walker and Fort Beauregard, but all of Hilton Head Island, Port Royal Island and the

other Sea Islands. By December of 1861, Union forces occupied Beaufort and gained control of the entire area.

During this occupation, most of the planters and others of means fled the area going to Charleston, Columbia and other locations. They left their homes in Beaufort and their plantations with no one but the slaves to maintain them. The Union army used a number of Beaufort houses as headquarters, living quarters, and hospitals throughout the occupation and later during Reconstruction. Some Beaufort homes including the Milton Maxcy House and the George Parsons Elliott House have historic graffiti written on the walls by Union troops garrisoned there.

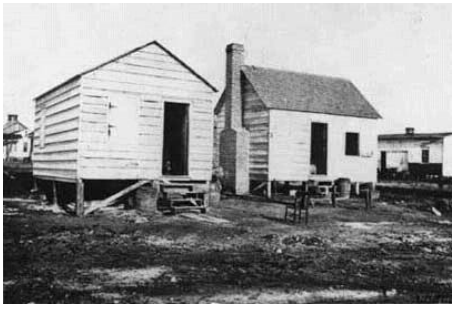
The former slaves who remained in the area were not officially free until January 1, 1863 when the Emancipation Proclamation was read to them at Camp Saxon on the Beaufort River near Fort Frederick. The Green on St. Helena is another place where the good news was given, and it has traditionally been a meeting place for celebration on the island. Both of these sites are listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

During the occupation of Hilton Head Island, one of the many issues facing the Union Army was how to deal with the many freed slaves that either lived on the island or were descending on the island from other areas still under control of the Confederacy. Tent cities and large barracks were originally built to provide housing for freed slaves but did little to help this population to experience and learn about their new freedom. During the fall of 1862, General Ormsby Mitchel, commander of the Union forces on Hilton Head Island, selected a site near the Drayton Plantation, and by March, 1863 a town for freed slaves was built and named after the commander. The town was self governing in matters of education, police, sanitary conditions, public order, tax collection, dispute resolution, and elections. Every child between six and fifteen years of age was required to attend school- the first compulsory education law in South Carolina. By 1865 about 1,500 people lived in Mitchelville. The town included simply built homes, located on about ¼ acre of land for the planting of gardens, as well as stores, a church, a jail, and a school. Many of the freedman worked for the Union Army while others worked for wages on the plantations they once worked on as slaves. No extent buildings or other physical features of Mitchelville remain today.

The Union occupation was characterized by a number of social experiments which served as a prelude to the later occupation of the Southern states during the Reconstruction Era. During the occupation Beaufort was visited by a number of well intentioned Northern missionaries whose purpose was to bring education and culture to the newly liberated freedman who had been released from slavery once the army arrived and their masters fled. While some of the missionary's plans for the freedman were not realized, some of the so called "Port

Penn Center

Under the leadership of Laura Towne and Ellen Murray, the Penn School was located first at the Oaks Plantation and later at a campus in the center of St. Helena. The school operated for over a century as a center of learning, teaching young blacks not only academic subjects but job skills as well. When the school closed in the 1960s, the Penn Community Center was established and still functions as a center of cultural, political and social activities. During the civil rights movement of the 1960s, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his associates used Penn as a retreat and as a place to plan such activities as the March on Washington. While none of the original buildings remain at Penn, a number of 20th century buildings are in use on the campus today. The Penn Center campus is a National Historic Landmark District, one of only four in South Carolina.



A photograph of Mitchelville in 1865 showing typical housing.

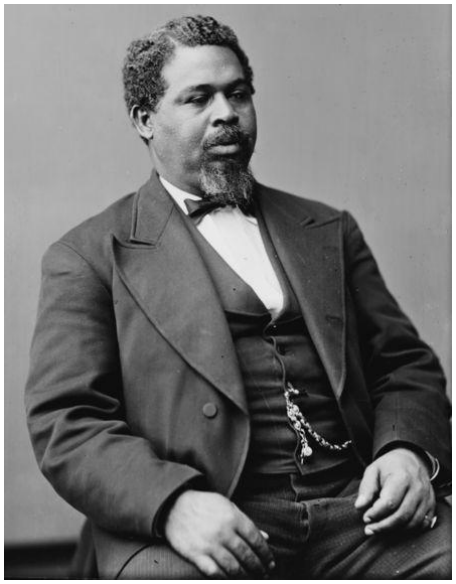
Royal Experiment" was successful. Perhaps the most lasting was the establishment of the Penn School on St. Helena Island by the Port Royal Relief Committee of Philadelphia. Under the leadership of Laura Towne and Ellen Murray, the Penn School was located first at the Oaks Plantation and later at a campus in the center of St. Helena.

The era of wealthy planters had come to an end. Many never returned, others came back and were able to reacquire some of the lands they had lost. But their influence was never the same. And while Beaufort was spared much of the physical destruction of the war, the political and social upheaval that resulted would change the face of Beaufort forever.

Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries

The Reconstruction Era (1865-1877)

Reconstruction brought about radical change in South Carolina. The most important of the changes seen was the enfranchisement and entry into the political arena of African-Americans. During this time, forty six of the 124 members of the Reconstruction Era South Carolina Legislature were black. There were two black Lieutenant Governors, eight members of Congress, six delegates to the Constitutional Convention, and several judges, including a State Supreme Court Chief Justice. Many of the men were from Beaufort County.



During reconstruction, Robert Smalls was a member of the South Carolina House of Representatives (1865-1870) and the South Carolina Senate (1871-1874).

Perhaps the most distinguished of these representatives from Beaufort County was Robert Smalls. Smalls first gained fame when during the Civil War he commandeered a boat called "The Planter," that he served on as a crewman, and brought a number of slaves from Charleston to the freedom of Beaufort. Later he was to serve as a member of the U.S. Congress for nine years, as a member of both the House and Senate of the S.C. State Legislature, and as a delegate to two Constitutional Conventions.

In April of 1877, the Reconstruction Era in South Carolina came to an end amid charges of corruption and malfeasance. The Republican Governor, D.H. Chamberlain, and most other Republican leaders, including most blacks, resigned from office and the political winds of South Carolina changed dramatically. Wade Hampton, a Confederate General during the Civil War, became the Governor. The imposition of the notorious "Black Codes," a system of government designed to keep African-Americans from gaining political, social and economic equality changed the lives of both black and white South Carolinians.

The Reconstruction Era was one of poverty and little change in the South. Most people, black and white, barely got by. Many lived on food they grew or raised themselves and little change occurred to the landscape. While most of the county did not suffer extensive damage during the Civil War, the Town of Bluffton had been burned by Union

troops as well as many of the plantations on the Combahee, Broad and Edisto Rivers. However, much of Beaufort was preserved intact because the owners did not have the money to make changes.

Packing Sheds

The most notable structures related to the truck farming business were the large packing sheds that still dot the landscape near agricultural areas. These buildings were originally used to pack vegetables grown on the islands by truck farmers for shipment to markets around the country. Currently the sheds are used to ship tomatoes and watermelons. The oldest is the Corner Packing Shed (circa 1930) on St. Helena Island. The others in use were built after 1950. Some packing sheds have been adapted for reuse as retail stores, farmers markets or as sites for social gatherings such as oyster roasts.

Post Civil War Economy

Agriculture: Perhaps the most significant change to the landscape during the late 19th century was in the field of agriculture. Land that had once been part of huge cotton plantations was now divided into smaller truck farms, where tomatoes, cucumbers, corn, squash, melons, berries, broccoli, asparagus and beans, among others were cultivated for shipment to towns and cities. In time, successful truck farms consolidated acreage and expanded their operations. By the early 20th century a number of families operated large successful farms in the county, including the Trask family who owned farms throughout the county; the Bellamys in Burton; the McLeods in Seabrook; the Mitchells in Lobeco; the Godleys at the Oaks Plantation; and the Bishops at Yard Farm on St. Helena. Many of the farms had access to the Port Royal Railroad that ran from Port Royal to Yemassee with connections to the main line, where their produce was shipped to the cities of the north. Truck farming was to grow through the first half of the 20th century, reaching its peak in the 1950s. By the 1960s a decline had set in as farming became less profitable. As traditional agriculture declined in the early 20th century, timbering, or silvaculture, emerged as a major industry in the state and in Beaufort County.

Seafood: Along with agriculture another economic force in the County during this time was the seafood business. Fish, shrimp, crabs and oysters have been a staple of the Lowcountry diet since the days of the Native American inhabitants. However, it was not until the 1880s that shrimping began on a larger scale. From that time until well into the 1920s-30s most of the shrimping was done by migrant shrimpers operating mostly out of Florida. Then more local shrimpers began to buy and build the big, diesel powered boats like the ones seen today and the industry began to have an economic impact on the area. Ice houses and processing facilities began to appear on the waterfronts of Beaufort, Port Royal and the islands. Oystermen, operating out of Daufuskie, St. Helena and the other islands, as well as Bluffton, could be seen in their small, flat bottomed boats called "bateaus" working with huge tongs as they pulled clusters of oysters from their beds and placed them in their boats. In the 1880s the first major oyster packing house was established by the Maggioni family on Factory Creek across from Beaufort on Lady's Island. An oyster packing house, the ruins of which are still visible, was also opened during the same time period in Bluffton.

Phosphate Industry: In the late 19th century, the area experienced a brief economic boom from the phosphate industry. The Port Royal Railroad was built to haul phosphate to ships docking at the Port of Port Royal, and the Town of Port Royal was established during this time as

Historic lighthouses such as the Hunting Island Lighthouse and Keeper's Dwelling (c. 1875) are a visible reminder of Beaufort County's maritime history.

well. Phosphate was mined along the coastal areas in Charleston and Beaufort Counties for a few years until the industry eventually succumbed to competition from Florida and the hurricane of 1893. The high winds and ensuing flooding from the "great hurricane of '93" resulted in damaged crops, killed livestock, destroyed buildings, and loss of lives.

From the Reconstruction Era to the 1930s, a number of wealthy individuals, mostly Northern industrialists, purchased large tracts of land along the Carolina and Georgia coasts for use as hunting retreats and winter vacation homes. Often the land they purchased was on former plantations where the houses had been destroyed during the Civil War. Often building on the historic foundations, the new owners built new large beautiful homes often in revival styles. Among some of the notable examples of these homes are Bonny Hall Plantation (c. 1867), Twickenham Plantation (c. 1878), Brays Island Plantation (c. 1938), and Clarendon Plantation (c. 1935). Perhaps the most unique is Auldbrass Plantation designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. Started in 1940 it was never completed. In 1988 the present owner began an extensive restoration, and has completed most buildings from the original site design.

1950 - Present

Much of Beaufort County's slow economic growth during the late 19th and early 20th centuries was due to its geographic isolation. Modern development, which is dependent on rail and automobile accessibility was slow until the construction of bridges began. In the 1920s a bridge was first constructed between Port Royal Island and the mainland and in the 1930s Port Royal and Lady's Islands were bridged. Not until the 1950s were northern and southern Beaufort County joined with bridges across the Broad and Chechessee Rivers; and Hilton Head Island joined to the mainland.

Growth of Southern Beaufort County

Modern development began in Southern Beaufort County with the opening of the bridge to Hilton Head Island in 1956

These transportation improvements set the stage for the growth of the tourism and retirement community industries in Beaufort County. Hilton Head Island, like the other Sea Islands, was largely agricultural in the middle of the century before its bridge to the mainland was built in 1956. At that time the Hilton Head Company had been in the process of purchasing many of the large tracts on the island for timbering. Charles Fraser, the son of one of the principals, set his sights on developing a resort community on the southern portion of the island that became Sea Pines. The concept of a large master planned community with amenities such as tennis, golf, and preserved open space caught on in other large land holdings on the island. By the time the Town incorporated in 1983, 10 large master-planned communities had been approved making up approximately 70% of the island.

Prior to the initial development of Moss Creek and Rose Hill in the mid 1970's, the mainland of Southern Beaufort County was largely rural. Bluffton had scarcely 500 people and covered roughly one square mile. While residential and commercial growth in the Bluffton area had been occurring at a significant pace during the previous two decades, the most significant event that accelerated the spread of development onto the mainland was the arrival of DelWebb (Sun City) on over 6,000 acres of pine forest 11 miles west of Hilton Head Island. In 1993, Beaufort County Council approved a 6,385-unit retirement community that became an anchor for the western part of the U.S. 278 Corridor. Sun City was followed by Belfair, Eagle's Point, Crescent Plantation, Berkeley

Hall, Island West and many other smaller developments. Commercial development in mainland southern Beaufort County followed population growth lining the U.S. 278 corridor with businesses such as Home Depot, Target and outlet malls. The accumulating development along the U.S. 278 corridor in Beaufort County contributed considerably to the current traffic congestion experienced on the roadway today. The Town of Bluffton, which consisted of roughly one square mile before 1998, began to look at annexation as a means to possess more local control over future development. In November 1998, Bluffton annexed Palmetto Bluff and the Shults Tract. In 2000, two more large tracts, the Buckwalter Tract and the Jones Estate annexed into Bluffton, increasing the Town to over 50 square miles, making it one of the largest municipalities (in area) in South Carolina.

Aerial view of Sun City, located approximately 11 west of the bridge to Hilton Head Island.

Growth of Northern Beaufort County

Tourism also increased in northern Beaufort County to a lesser extent due, in part, to an overall growth in heritage tourism. Many tourists drawn to Charleston or Savannah also stop in Beaufort when visiting and often return to visit again, or in many cases to live. Another growing tourism sector is African-American oriented tourism, with Penn Center and the sea island Gullah culture attracting increasing numbers of African-American tourists from around the nation.

In addition to tourism, the growth of the military installations in the 20th century also greatly influenced the social life, economy and built environment of northern Beaufort County. The Navy first acquired a portion of Parris Island in the 1890's and was later given over to the Marine Corps in the early 20th century. Today, the island is the site of the Marine Corps Recruit Depot, Parris Island, the East Coast training area for Marines. The establishment of the Marine Corps Air Station dates back to 1941 when 1,300 acres in Beaufort were purchased by the Civil Aeronautics Authority for an auxiliary air station that supported advanced training for anti-submarine patrol squadrons. During the Korean War the Navy decided to establish a Marine Corps air station in Beaufort and the land was purchased by the Federal government. Today the entire installation includes 6,900 acres at the air station, 1,076 acres at Laurel Bay and an additional 5,182 acres at the Townsend Bombing Range in Georgia, the weapons training installation for the air station.