

Like the tides, Beaufort's fortunes seem to ebb and flow. The merchants who built the great homes along Bay Street once earned the highest per capita incomes in the United States. But in the late 1800s and the early 1900s, the area drifted toward poverty with the collapse of phosphate mines, a severe hurricane and a devastating fire. Fortunately, Beaufort's rich history is preserved in grand homes, impressive churches and in the hearts and memories and culture of residents whose ancestors reach back across the ages and across the Atlantic.

Spanish explorers were the first Europeans to enter Port Royal Sound, only 30 years after Columbus arrived in the New World. For the next two centuries the Spanish, French, Native Americans and ultimately the British struggled to control the area. The British prevailed, and Beaufort, the second oldest town in South Carolina, was incorporated in 1711.

By the time of the American Revolution, the town had a population of 4,000, which included some of the wealthiest families in America. Their fortunes came from indigo and rice and were made possible from the labor of enslaved Africans. Relations between Tories and Whigs were strained, but Thomas Heyward Jr., a local rice plantation owner, signed the Declaration of Independence. Valiantly, South Carolina lost more men and gave more money to the Revolutionary cause than any other colony.

After the Revolution, Sea Island cotton was the crop that made Beaufort the wealthiest, most aristocratic and cultivated town of its size in America. Planters built magnificent summer homes in the heart of the community along the Beaufort River; another favored and prestigious location for showcasing one's wealth was the area now known as The Point.

In the decades preceding the Civil War, secessionist sentiment grew. But after the Union Navy decisively won the Battle of Port Royal Sound on November 7, 1861, the European population fled, and when General Sherman marched through the South burning towns and plantations, Beaufort was spared as the Union was firmly established in the area.

Because of the Civil War, life in Beaufort drastically changed. Property and other forms of wealth were confiscated through liens and then sold, primarily to those considered to be insidious opportunists. The political base shifted from European American to African American, and as a result the Gullah/Geechee culture flourished ... especially on St. Helena Island, where the first school to educate freedmen was established. The lifestyle-fostered skills and crafts brought from Africa and the Caribbean emphasized the importance of family and religion, while continuing a language blend of Elizabethan English and African rhythms.

The mining of phosphate (used as an agricultural fertilizer), a revival of cotton and rice farming, and a new influx of Northerners seeking moderate winters brought better times to Beaufort. But that influx of population and wealth ended after a succession of natural disasters (a devastating hurricane in 1893 and destructive fire in 1907) and the arrival of the Great Depression in 1929. The economic turmoil and stagnant growth plagued the area until the mid-1950s, when the increasing military presence and the development of tourism infused new life and wealth into the economy.

Another industry that has in more recent times found the Beaufort area attractive and ripe for production is the motion picture industry: the area's natural beauty and varied landscapes make the Southern Sea Islands a location scout's dream. "Hauntingly beautiful" is perhaps the best way to describe this area. Colorful wildlife, lush forests and jungles, historic towns and villages, unspoiled beaches that abound with natural beauty, inviting resort islands—that's the Lowcountry.

Miles of white beaches washed clean by the tide—free of tracks except those left by a hermit crab or sea turtle—endless marshes alive with the calls of birds and rustling flight, and trees laden with Spanish moss add to its ethereal setting.

“Forrest Gump,” “The Jungle Book,” “G.I. Jane,” “The Big Chill,” “Rules of Engagement,” “Last Dance,” “Something to Talk About,” “The War,” “White Squall” and “Forces of Nature” are just some of the films that have used this unique region as a backdrop, and during our visit to the Beaufort area, we’ll see and visit some of the locations used in the filming of some of these and other feature films.

Guiding us through this beautiful town and areas further afield will be Beaufort’s most recognizable and sought-after guides. Evelene Stevenson is the owner of The Spirit of Old Beaufort and has been giving historic tours entwined with musical entertainment since the mid-1990s. Evelene and her guides clothe themselves in authentic 19<sup>th</sup> century dress and share Beaufort’s history with guests through stories, diary accounts and songs of the past. If the Muse cooperates, an antebellum “*pas de deux*” is sometimes demonstrated and taught to those so interested.