

## **A Brief History of Georgetown County**

by

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**G**eorgetown, South Carolina occupies a unique place in America's history. In fact, some historians claim that American history began here in 1526 with the earliest settlement in North America by Europeans. It is believed that in that year the Spanish, under Lucas Vasquez de Allyon, founded a colony on Waccamaw Neck. These colonists stayed only a short time and thus lost for Spain a real opportunity in the New World.

**A**fter settling Charles Town in 1670, the English established trade with the Indians and trading posts in outlying areas quickly became settlements.

**B**y 1721, the petition for a new parish, Prince George, Winyah, on Black River was granted. In 1734, Prince George, Winyah was divided and the newly created Prince Frederick Parish came to occupy the church at Black River. Prince George Parish, Winyah then encompassed the new town of Georgetown on the Sampit River.

**I**n 1729, Elisha Screven laid the plan for Georgetown and began selling lots. Today the historic Georgetown district comprises the area of the original town plan. The street names are the same, the lot numbers remain unchanged, and many of the homes are the original.

**T**he Indian trade declined soon after Georgetown was established and indigo became the cash crop with rice as a secondary crop. Agricultural profits were so great between 1735-1775 that in 1757 the Winyah Indigo Society, whose members paid dues in indigo, opened and maintained the first public school between Charles Town and Wilmington.

**W**hen the American Revolution erupted, Georgetown played a large role by sending both Thomas Lynch, Sr. and Thomas Lynch, Jr. to sign the Declaration of Independence.

**L**ater in the war, Georgetown received the Marquis de Lafayette to our shores from France to help our cause against England. During the final years of the conflict, Georgetown was an important port for supplying General Nathaniel Greene's army. Francis Marion (the Swamp Fox) led many guerrilla actions in this vicinity.

**F**ollowing the American Revolution rice became the staple crop. It required the low land along the rivers for cultivation. Thus the rice plantations were established around Georgetown on its six rivers. By 1840, the Georgetown District (later County) produced nearly one-half of the total rice crop of the United States. This wealth produced an aristocratic way of living featuring lovely homes, elegant furniture, gracious hospitality and a leisurely lifestyle for a selected few that lasted until 1860.

**G**eorgetown and Georgetown County suffered terribly during Reconstruction (1865-1876). The rice crops of 1866-88 were failures due to disrupted labor patterns, lack of capital and inclement weather. Rice continued to be grown commercially until about 1910, but never on the scale or with the profits attained before 1860.

## **Georgetown County (cont'd)**

**A**fter the Reconstruction ended, Georgetown turned to wood products for its economic survival and by 1900 there were several lumber mills in operation on the Sampit River. The largest was the Atlantic Coast Lumber Company which provided a much needed boost to the local economy.

**A**s the twentieth century dawned, Georgetown was modernized under the leadership of Mayor William Doyle Morgan. The city added electricity, telephone service, sewer facilities, rail connections, some paved streets and sidewalks, new banks, a thriving port, a new public school and a handsome Post Office and Customs House building.

Like most cities, Georgetown suffered great economic deprivation during the Great Depression. The Atlantic Coast Lumber Company went bankrupt early in the depression, putting almost everyone out of work. In 1936 help arrived. In that year the Southern Kraft Division of the International Paper Company opened a mill which by 1944 was the largest in the world. Georgetown was able to move forward again.

In recent years, the economy has become more diversified. A steel mill has located here, tourism has become a booming business and many retirees have chosen to settle here in this area of lovely beaches, plantations developed as communities, and pleasant climate.

**O**ur history has been shared by many prominent people. George Washington visited Clifton Plantation and addressed the townspeople in 1791. President James Monroe was entertained in 1821 at Prospect Hill (now Arcadia) on Waccamaw with a real red carpet rolled out to the river. Theodosia Burr made her home at the Oaks Plantation (now part of Brookgreen Gardens) after her marriage to Joseph Alston in 1801 and departed from Georgetown on her ill-fated voyage in 1812. Brookgreen was also the boyhood home of one of America's most famous painters, Washington Allston. Joel R. Poinsett lived at White House Plantation on the Black River. After retiring from government service, Poinsett entertained President Martin Van Buren at his home.

**P**resident Grover Cleveland, as guest of the Annandale Gun Club, came for duck hunting and was feted by the citizens in 1894 and 1896. Bernard Baruch, America's elder statesman, entertained many notables at Hobcaw Barony, his home for many years. Among those were President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, Mark Clark and General Omar Bradley.

**T**oday, the Historic District of Georgetown contains more than fifty homes, public buildings and sites which are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Although many of the Plantation homes are gone, enough remain throughout the area to give a real flavor of yesteryear.

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