

COME TO BEAUFORT; GOOD CLIMATE - GOOD FISHING

In 1939 the Beaufort Chamber of Commerce decreed, “Come to Beaufort; Good Climate - Good Fishing.” A positive declaration that says what’s important without wasting words. But for the second half of the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, the reality for Beaufort County was less optimistic.

Before the Civil War, Beaufort County land was divided into plantations which dominated the culture, society, politics and economics. The Beaufort District¹ contained about 1000 plantations from 500-5000+ acres. Rice and cotton were main crops but cattle and livestock raising, production of subsistence crops such as corn, sweet potatoes, melons and beans were a part of plantation’s self-contained and self-sufficient agricultural model.

But quite suddenly and dramatically everything changed with the Civil War (1861-65): the economy, social structure and land use changed. The physical deterioration of plantations as the result of neglect during the Civil War, the subsequent crop failures and the poor economic conditions of the post-war years all contributed to the demise of rice and cotton agriculture in Beaufort. Once agricultural gold, antebellum plantation lands became abandoned lands. In the late 19th century, a wave of wealthy northern financiers and socialites began buying huge tracts (multiple plantations) for recreation (like hunt clubs) and investment (like timbering). Most unused and failing buildings on those old plantations were razed or left to rot, while some were restored and reused. At the same time smaller parcels of land were farmed by a newly-freed black population that could now own or participate in sharecropping and tenant farming. The big got bigger and the small, smaller. These changes were transformative, affecting the Lowcountry economy and land use for at least a century.

Beaufort County, as described by the early 20th century censuses and newspapers was isolated and sleepy. The 1940 Census recorded a Beaufort County population of 22,037: 7,124 whites, 14,781 blacks, and 132 “other.” 14.5% of the County population was classified as urban, leaving 85.5% rural and taxable wealth in 1935 was listed at \$3.7 million.



Bay Street, looking East, Beaufort, S. C.

There were 3,185 residents living in the Town of Beaufort in 1940 which made it a fairly thriving commercial center. 1939 issues of the *Beaufort Gazette* advertised automobiles from 3 dealerships and the Greyhound Terminal offered a one-way trip to Washington DC for \$8.25 ... but concurrently, Coleman’s Stables were still “dealing in horses and mules.” There were grocery stores, department stores, barber shops and

photographers; banks, doctor’s offices and restaurants. The Blue Bird Inn on Boundary Street offered “real pit BBQ” and you could fill up on a 4-course Sunday dinner for 75c at Log Cabin Park.

ADDITIONALLY

¹ Thru the Civil War, our area was called Beaufort District, then Beaufort County. Beaufort County included today’s Beaufort, Jasper and Hampton counties. In 1878 the northern portion of Beaufort County was cut away to form Hampton County. Then Jasper County was formed in 1912 from portions of Hampton County and Beaufort County.

² Globally, there was a lot happening in 1939: Hitler invaded Poland; John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* was published; the 1939 New York World’s Fair opened; and the discovery of nuclear fission and ultimately the construction of the atomic bomb redefined politics, nationalism and warfare.

Photo to left: A hand colored postcard of Beaufort’s commercial district along Bay Street. Correspondence postmarked December 23, 1939. Hard to miss the mix of automobiles and horse-drawn buggies sharing the road.

Below: Historic Verdier House, 801 Bay Street. 1936 photo shows some of the many commercial concerns that did business out of house in the early 20th century. By 1942 the house had been condemned. Citizens took action; the result ultimately being the organization of the Historic Beaufort Foundation in 1968 and restoration of the house museum.



Images from Beaufort District Collection, Beaufort County Library

Movies playing at the Breeze Theater during 1939 included such classics as “Young Dr. Kildare”, “You Can’t Take It With You”, “Mutiny on the Bounty,” and “The Wizard of Oz.” Three to four different films played each week, plus a double feature matinee on Saturdays.

Also in 1939, the *Beaufort Gazette* reported that Memorial Day celebrations and recitals were all cancelled as precautionary measures due to outbreaks of infantile paralysis (polio) in neighboring communities, The Beaufort High School Tidal Wave football team had a winning season, (6 wins and 1 tie) and 37 diplomas were awarded at graduation ceremonies on May 19. The Beaufort Museum was organized with its headquarters in the recently completed wing of the Beaufort Arsenal and there were 8 deaths by auto accidents reported in all of Beaufort County that year. ²

Beaufort County in 1939 *and* today, stretches 923 square miles, 576 of which are land. That leaves 347 square miles, or 38%, water. Water, of course is a curse and a blessing. For over a thousand years the Broad River’s estuary system fed, protected and was the transportation highway for people and goods. That same river system has divided and isolated.

After the Civil War, roads (for wagons and ultimately automobiles) and bridges (for railroads, wagons and automobiles) slowly began to supplant river transportation and become the marker of future development and growth. Spanning the Broad River was an ultimate test and ongoing challenge. The first bridge opened 1829; it was burned in 1865 to delay General Sherman’s crossing but his army crossed on pontoon bridges downstream. The next Broad River Bridge was built 1867. It burned 1925. A concrete bridge was completed 1930. ³

1939’s motto, “Come to Beaufort; Good Climate - Good Fishing” is not dissimilar to today’s Vision Statement, promising that Beaufort County “will continue to be one of the most desirable places in the United States to live, work and enjoy a sense of community in a culturally diverse coastal setting.” More official sounding but no less true. ⁴

During the second half of the 20th century our unincorporated part of Beaufort County had many owners and unsuccessful land schemes. Robin Carrier’s Indigo Plantation was a created-from-scratch plantation/hobby farm/hunt club. She and her husband Colonel Griffin were part of the closing chapter of the South’s plantation phenomenon. Just ahead was the residential real estate boom of which Oldfield is a part. We are all continuing part of living history. ⁵

ADDITIONALLY

³ Leaping decades ahead it’s interesting to note that in 1958 a two-lane drawbridge over the Broad River was constructed but additional traffic and safety concerns demanded that a larger and taller fixed-span bridge be built very soon thereafter. The current four-lane wide structure was not completed until 2004.

⁴ In this case it’s true that numbers never lie: the Beaufort County population in 1940 was 22,037 people and 179,589 in 2015.

⁵ Beaufort, Beaufort County and the Lowcountry continue to fascinate scholars, amateur historians and the local intellectually curious. I put myself in the latter category. Several sources have been invaluable to me in the understanding of our Oldfield story during the period surrounding 1939. Lawrence Rowland is distinguished professor emeritus of history at USCB. His latest tome, written with Stephen Wise, Director of the Parris Island Museum, is *Bridging the Sea Islands’ Past and Present*, a treasure trove of information. Another book, *Northern Money, Southern Land* is a gossipy romp of early 1930s newspaper articles written by Chlotilde Martin documenting the social and economic transformation of the Lowcountry coast as the influx of wealthy northerners bought scores of old local plantations. Her articles combined the name-dropping chatter of the Lowcountry social register with reflections on the tension between past and present in the old rice and cotton kingdoms of South Carolina. And the factoids from *The Beaufort Gazette*, I borrowed from a Beaufort Historical Society online article, “Celebrating Beaufort in 1939”.