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Historical Fact Sheet

European Settlement and Exploration

In 1520, Spain's Captain Francisco Gordillo landed near Port Royal Sounds and named the region Santa Elena. In 1559, Philip II of Spain ordered that a colony be settled at Santa Elena to prevent the French from claiming the region.

Attempts at colonization failed and by 1562, France's Captain Jean Ribaut was tasked with founding a colony of French Protestants in the New World. After exploring the coast from Florida to South Carolina, Ribaut decided upon Santa Elena and named it Port Royal, a name that it continues to bear. Ribaut left 30 Protestants at the settlement he named Charlesfort and returned to France for supplies. During his absence, the colony was abandoned due to disputes amongst themselves and Native Americans. When Ribaut returned, he moved his settlement ideas to Florida and established Fort Caroline on the St. Johns River.

As the race for the New World continued, Spain's Pedro Menendez de Aviles was sent to Florida and founded St. Augustine. From this location, Menendez de Aviles was able to eliminate Ribaut's Fort Caroline and set up a string of posts along Florida, Georgia and South Carolina. The northern most post was in fact the site of Ribaut's Charlesfort on Parris Island. By 1580, the settlement was one of the largest Spanish towns north of Mexico.

In 1586, legendary Englishman Sir Francis Drake attacked and burned St. Augustine. This act forced Spain to withdraw its forces from neighboring posts along the coastline to focus on the Florida settlement. Port Royal was abandoned, however, the area was still considered under Spanish hold for nearly a century more.

In the 1600s, the English began to explore the Port Royal region. First William Hilton arrived in 1663, then Robert Sanford in 1666. Sanford left South Carolina's first settler at Port Royal; a minister named Dr. Henry Woodward who worked to foster a positive relationship with the Native Americans. When the first ship of British colonists arrived to the area in 1670, Woodward and the Native Americans warned them that Spaniards were still too much of a threat to settle in the area. The colonists moved northward instead and settled the banks of Charleston's Ashley River in 1670.

The 18th Century

By the 1700s, English planters and traders had ventured into the Port Royal area. It was with this expansion, that Englishmen Thomas Nairn and John Barnwell were able to found the town of Beaufort in 1711. During the Revolutionary War, Britain occupied Beaufort from 1778 to 1779.

During the October 1779 siege on Savannah by Patriots and the French West Indies fleet, British troops were forced to evacuate Beaufort and head on to Charleston.

It should be noted that the Beaufort area was home to Tories and Patriots alike, and bitter disputes between the two took place throughout the war.

Situated in South Carolina, slavery was an accepted practice in Beaufort throughout the 1700 and 1800s. Most slaves transported to the region came through either Savannah or Charleston and originated from West and Central Africa. The descendents of these Africans have a rich Gullah culture known for preserving more of their African linguistic and cultural heritage than any other African-American community within the United States. Gullah live in the Lowcountry region of South Carolina and Georgia. They speak an English-based Creole language that contains many African words and significant influences from African languages in grammar and sentence structure. Gullah storytelling, cuisine, music, folk stories, crafts, farming and fishing traditions all can be traced back to strong influences from West and Central African cultures.

The 19th Century

Beaufort is the site of the first meeting to draft the Ordinance of Secession by Southern states. The meeting was held at the city's Milton Maxey House and caused Beaufort to be an early target for Union troops.

On Dec. 20, 1860, South Carolina officially seceded from the Union. By November 1861, Union ships severely attached Port Royal settlements and on Nov. 7, Confederate soldiers fled the area. The occupation of the harbor helped the Union succeed in its blockade of the South and also freed approximately 1,000 slaves on the Sea Islands. This group represented the first slaves in the South to be freed and many of them went on to serve in the Union Army's First South Carolina Volunteers.

Nearly one month later, Union General Isaac Stevens occupied Beaufort and it became a Union city for the remainder of the war. Homes were confiscated and served as meeting places and hospitals. This occupation resulted in the preservation of Beaufort's historical architecture and design.

Long before the war ended, Pennsylvania Quaker missionaries traveled to the Sea Islands to create schools for the newly freed slaves. Penn Center was the first school for freed slaves and is located on St. Helena Island.

Following the war's conclusion, Beaufort relied on phosphate mining as part of its economic growth. These efforts, however, were stifled in 1893 by a destructive hurricane that was soon followed by a devastating fire in 1907.

20th Century to Today

The aforementioned fire and hurricane slowed growth for the town by nearly 50 years. By the mid 1900s, Beaufort began to establish itself as a tourist destination and has since gained in popularity for travelers and history buffs alike. Its economy is also very strongly dependent on the military presence in and around the town. Most recently, the town was recognized as a standout travel destination and community by media outlets such as: *USA Today, Coastal Living, Southern Living, Fox News, CNN, Thrillist, CBS* and *Travel+Leisure*. Beaufort was named to the *NY Times* "52 Place to Visit in 2017".

In 2013, the U.S. census reported a city population of 12,788 for Beaufort.