



HILTON HEAD ISLAND-BLUFFTON CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

THE BIRTH OF HILTON HEAD ISLAND

In 1663, English sea captain William Hilton landed on Hilton Head Island and, thus, the seeds of the first successful plantations were sown. Commissioned by a group of Barbados planters to find new land on which to plant sugar and indigo, Hilton soon claimed the Island in the name of the British Crown.

Hilton, however, was not the first European to visit the Island. In 1521, the Spanish were the first confirmed Island visitors, but many historians speculate that English explorer Sebastian Cabot may have sighted its shores during his expedition to the New World in 1497. In the 1560's, French Huguenot colonists sought refuge on Hilton Head Island, fleeing persecution in their own Catholic homeland. The Huguenots christened Port Royale Harbour, now known as Port Royal Sound, and charted the Island on French maps as "Ile de la Riviere Grande" - Island of the Broad River. Soon they moved to more protected water, settling in an area that today is known as Beaufort, South Carolina.

Earliest Inhabitants

When Hilton landed on the Island in 1663, he was greeted by Spanish-speaking Indians from the Yemassee tribe who had migrated north from Florida a hundred years earlier at the behest of Spanish colonists. He also encountered the native Ewascus Indians, but little is known of the earlier native civilization which inhabited the Island 4,000 years ago. Remnants of mysterious shell rings, measuring up to 240 feet across and nine feet high, can still be found on the Island. Yet, like the enigmatic rocks of Stonehenge and the carvings of Easter Island, their secrets remain hidden from history. Today, visitors to Hilton Head Island can view these rings in Sea Pines Forest Preserve and on the north end of the Island off Squire Pope Road.

Plantation Life

In 1698, the English king granted several islands and some of the Lowcountry's mainland to John Bayley. While the entire area was named Bayley's Barony, Hilton Head Island was referred to as Trench's Island, in honor of Alexander Trench, Bayley's property agent and collector of landlease fees.

John Barnwell became Hilton Head Island's first English settler in 1717 after receiving a

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grant of 500 acres in what is now Hilton Head Plantation. However, Hilton Head Island did not gain worldwide recognition until 1790 when another planter, William Elliott, successfully raised the first crop of long-stem Sea Island cotton. Elliott, with the help of his neighbor, Will Seabrook, pioneered a new type of fertilizer for the cotton, resulting in record crops and wide acclaim for the Sea Island cotton.

By 1860, 24 plantations were in operation on Hilton Head Island. Although the main crop was cotton, indigo, sugar cane, rice and other crops also were cultivated. Due to the land's low elevation and hot summers, the wealthy landowners spent little time on the Island, opting to locate their beautiful townhouses in less tropical environments on the mainland.

Civil War

Seven months after South Carolina seceded from the Union, the shots fired on Fort Sumter reverberated on Hilton Head Island. On November 7, 1861, the Island became the scene of the largest naval battle fought in American waters. More than 12,000 Union soldiers and marines landed on the Island, and in less than five hours, the Union fleet captured both Fort Beauregard near Beaufort and Fort Walker on Hilton Head Island. The Island fell into the hands of Federal troops, forcing Island families to evacuate their plantation homes.

The Civil War and the subsequent abolition of slavery altered the prosperous and patrician lifestyle of the plantation owners forever. The boll weevil proved to be even more devastating, as the new technology took a fearful toll on Sea Island cotton. Consequently, Hilton Head Island lapsed into obscurity, remaining isolated for over 90 years.

During this period, the Island maintained a small population of mostly the descendants of former slaves. They survived modestly on small farms and as hunters and fisherman. Their culture and language, both known as Gullah, survive today as a living legacy of their strength and perseverance.

In the 1940's, the Island experienced a sort of re-birth when a group of timbermen recognized great potential in the Island's tall, straight pines. Popularly called sea pines, the trees produced lumber for a variety of uses.

The First Resort

In 1956, Charles Fraser, son of one of the families that owned the Island, realized that Hilton Head Island had more to offer than just timber. Armed with vision, energy, modern air conditioning and investment dollars, he created a master plan for a resort community. His efforts were aided by the construction of a bridge to the mainland the same year. Sea Pines Plantation became the prototype of the modern resort community, now copied around the world.

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Incorporated as a town in 1983, Hilton Head Island is now home to several environmentally planned resort and residential communities, supporting more than 30,000 full-time residents. These communities have been named "plantations," but cotton fields have been replaced by lush green golf courses, tennis courts, shimmering lakes and beautifully designed resorts and villas.

Despite this development, much of the Island remains as it was when sighted from William Hilton's ship more than 300 years ago. Hilton Head Island's natural beauty, spectacular seascapes and exceptional ecology now beckon a new generation of explorers.

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