

Museum Around the Corner

Georgetown County Historical Society Museum

Georgetown County was the wealthiest county in the entire United States during the 1850s from the cultivation of rice. Here is how it all started. Around 1685, a ship bound for the Caribbean called at the port of Charleston for repairs. Laden with Madagascar rice, a bag of seed rice was left as part of the payment. This seed rice was distributed throughout the area with some of it making its way to Georgetown. Rice was soon to become our main industry.

Slaves from West Africa were adept at growing rice. They had been cultivating it long before we began. In Africa, tree trunks were reamed out to be the conduit to flood and drain the rice fields. These were the forerunners to our Rice Trucks or Trunk Docks which were flood gates installed along the fresh water river banks. The word "trunk" stuck to this new engineering feat that can still be seen along Georgetown County rivers. Without the knowledge, experience and hand labor of the enslaved Africans, the great wealth and aristocracy seen in this area would never have been achieved.

Rice has long been grown in Georgetown County, but in the 1740s, it took a back seat to Indigo which became the more lucrative crop. The plant gave off a deep blue/purple clothing dye. The British paid us a bounty to grow it exclusively for them for their navy uniforms and royal robes. After the Revolutionary War the indigo market was lost and cultivation of rice began in earnest.

The trick in the Lowcountry was to find areas where tides from Winyah Bay influenced the level of water in our freshwater rivers. Cultivation flourished to about ten to twenty miles along the Waccamaw, Black, PeeDee, Sampit, and Santee Rivers. It has been said that it took three years to clear a swampy area before a field was ready for planting. Ditches were hand dug around each rice field which were sometimes four feet wide by four feet deep. The fields were elevated so draining could be facilitated better. If all of these hand dug canals were placed end to end, they would measure over 700 miles.

During the winter, besides the work on clearing fields, slaves made small mud balls, inserted a single rice seed, and let these dry. In March and April, these mud balls were planted into the fields, flooding took place for three or four days to germinate the seed, then the fields were drained. Another flooding came in midsummer to kill the weeds and grass. This was a particularly odorous process when the vegetation began rotting as it rose to the surface. Slaves removed the effluvia and drained the fields. Another flooding occurred in late August, again to kill weeds, but to support the burgeoning, heavy seed heads. Harvesting was done after the last draining. Weather conditions during the growing season often altered the time for harvest, and sometimes whole crops were lost if storms were severe.

After harvest, rice grains were removed from the seed head through threshing, then an outer husk was removed through what was known as "pounding". Slaves used wooden mallets to gently knock the rice around in vessels to remove the husk and then sent it to "fanning baskets" (actually Sweetgrass baskets) where rice was tossed into the air, and the chaff blew away in the breeze. Rice was then graded by broken and unbroken, and the rice flour was collected for use.

Numbers for how much rice was exported are staggering. Joshua John Ward produced 4,000,000 pounds of rice in 1851, he being one of over 150 planters at that time. Although numbers for the total amount of rice cultivated are impossible to estimate, certainly the number would be in excess of hundreds of millions overall. In 1860, the last crop before the War Between the States, 119,100,528 pounds were realized. All of the extreme wealth earned by the planters was through the efforts of the enslaved Africans. Production began to decline sharply during the War Between the States. Although rice would continue to be grown in Georgetown County, the yields were quite low, with only about 100,000 pounds produced in 1883. Very little profit was realized, and around 1900, production was almost completely abandoned.