



THE PONDS

A History of Summerville

This small-town appeal of Summerville is not new to local residents. Summerville was a retreat for local planters from summer malaria in the late 1700s until the railroad came through in 1847. The town has remained largely unchanged by the passage of time, with its quaint downtown, beautiful old homes and friendly townspeople.

But the story of the area called Dorchester County starts more than 200 years earlier. Puritans from Dorchester, England, arriving in Massachusetts in the 1630s, founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony and the town of Dorchester, Mass. In 1695, a group of the Massachusetts colonists decided to embark on a religious mission to the Carolinas. They arrived in Charles Town by ship on Dec. 20. By mid-January 1696, they had selected a site along the banks of the Ashley River to settle and named it Dorchester.

For more than 150 years, the area was home to numerous plantations, including a rice plantation located at The Ponds. River access made Dorchester a natural center of trade for the colony. Plantation owners, merchants and local Indians brought goods to town, some of which were stored in warehouses and on several wharfs.

Even before the Revolution, local colonists began to view the town of Dorchester as unhealthy because “miasma” (malaria) flourished in the summer and fall months. After the Revolution ended in 1783, they looked for better places to escape the disease. The colonists noticed that the high, dry, pine land near Summerville was particularly free from the disease. Probably in the late 1780s, local planters from the Ashley River and Goose Creek began to build small cottages to spend the summer there. Naturally, when the South Carolina Rail Road came through in 1847, the planters expected the town to grow into more than just a retreat spot, so they incorporated the town of Summerville.

In the years before the Civil War not only local planters but Charlestonians began to settle in the small town. Citizens suspected that the pine trees provided medicinal remedies for malaria (the absence of stagnant ponds for mosquito breeding was the real reason for the healthful atmosphere). From this thinking came the town’s motto “The pine is sacred.” The

town remained a summertime retreat for many years. By 1860 it had become a thriving year-round town with more than 1,000 residents. The town survived the Civil War that followed, and by the time of the Great Earthquake in 1886 there were about 1,500 residents. And then, things began to boom again.

Turn of the Century Tourism

Toward the end of the 19th century, the International Tuberculosis Congress in Paris named Summerville one of the best places in the world for people with consumptive conditions. This new endorsement of the area's healthy climate helped build the local tourism industry. By the early 20th century, Summerville had become a popular vacation spot with visitors from near and far. It boasted wonderful accommodations, like the Pine Forest Inn, the Carolina Inn and the White Gables Inn.

Another draw for tourists was the local floral fairs, which began in the 1890s. By the 1920s tourists would flock to Summerville every spring to view the flowers, creating traffic jams in the streets. In 1925 the local Chamber of Commerce adopted the slogan "Flower Town in the Pines." In April 1941 the town had its First Annual Flower Festival. But it wasn't until 1972 that the current Flowertown Festival got its start. Now, more than 250,000 visitors attend this annual event in Summerville.

Summerville Today

In addition to Flowertown, one of Summerville's biggest boons today is the Dorchester County School System. It has been ranked one of the best school systems in the state. Parents can truly see the benefits of a strong commitment to education, which is why the Summerville area is so attractive to families. Summerville's nearby shopping district offers a rich array of retailers – from national chains to local shops, banks and restaurants. Small-town life in Summerville has indeed reached the 21st century.

Summerville and Dorchester County have a rich, detailed history you may want to explore further. Pay a visit to Town Hall, the library or a local bookstore where information on the subject abounds. There are also plenty of townsfolk who would be glad to tell you a few stories over a glass of sweet tea.

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For more information, contact:

John Morgan, Greenwood Development, 843.851.3939, johnwmorgan3@knology.net
Beth Doughty, Corder Philips, 704.378.2118, bdoughty@corderphilips.com