



Located near the geographic heart of South Carolina, the City of Sumter is situated in the western “High Hills of the Santee” area of Sumter County. A rich history of native communities, local conflict, and economic growth has provided the environment which has allowed Sumter to become the community it is today.

Native and Colonist Populations

Long before European settlers moved to the banks of the Wateree River, Native Americans populated the surrounding countryside. The present-day Wateree and Santee Rivers are named for the local tribes that lived on the land. English speaking explorers first encountered the tribes in 1567, but it would be a century before their lives would be documented by European immigrants. A war in 1715 between the native tribes and foreign settlers signaled the end of Native American control in the area that would become Sumter.

Only a few decades passed before townships developed inland to protect the burgeoning coastal settlement at Charleston. One of the earliest public roads, designated in 1753, started as a path through the wilderness connecting these isolated townships. For the early settlers, traveling by river was easiest though far from ideal. The lack of access to the area hindered settlement efforts, and in 1758, thirty-eight pioneers signed a petition requesting new roads.

In addition to a lack of transportation infrastructure, other difficulties faced the area's early inhabitants. Settlers cleared the land of large trees, built shelter, hunted, fished, and prepared the soil for growing corn, wheat, tobacco, and indigo. Life in the midlands remained simple but hard through the years leading up to the fight for independence.

The War for Independence

The City and County of Sumter were named in honor of General Thomas Sumter, the “Fighting Gamecock” or “Gamecock General” of the American Revolution who took an interest in local issues. While few events in the War of Independence took place in the area, the region contributed to and was affected by the struggle. Many local men participated in the war, and present-day Highway 261 was an

important route between Camden and Charleston for troops and supplies.

The war had a damaging effect on the economic and social structure of the area as armies on both sides of the conflict seized supplies and larger towns throughout the region were destroyed. Like other areas in the new country, disorder and lawlessness marked the years after the war.

In response to post-war chaos, the Sumter District was established at the turn of the 19th century. The original area included 1,672 square miles before being reduced to its current size of 681 square miles when Clarendon and Lee Counties formed in 1855 and 1902, respectively.

By purchasing land in the High Hills and planning the Village of Statesburg's design, General Sumter maintained an active interest in the district that would eventually bear his name. A few miles to the east of Statesburg, the community of Sumterville incorporated in 1845. Originally a plantation settlement, Sumterville was recognized as early as 1801 when it was identified by the postmaster general of the United States.

Transportation and Commerce

Following the American Revolution, effective transportation in the Sumter area remained elusive. General Sumter formed a company in 1787 to open the Catawba and Wateree Rivers and connect Statesburg with Charleston, but the attempt proved too costly and was eventually abandoned.

A key road to the Sumter area, King's Highway (SC 261) originally connected the larger cities of Camden and Charleston and served as a trade route for settlers and Native Americans. As a result of the settler's petition in 1758, another road was constructed along the Black River. Prior to the arrival of railroad, all local commerce went through Charleston and traveled these two primitive roads. Ferries provided necessary links to a variety of locations, including the new capital at Columbia. Commerce accompanied the transportation links as a collection of general stores, taverns, and inns developed as roads were constructed and ferries were launched.

A cotton mill near Statesburg began operating in 1790. When it was discovered that cotton could be produced profitably in the midlands and uplands of South Carolina, the crop replaced rice and indigo as the region's principal harvest. Fluctuations in price, however, challenged cotton farmers throughout the 1800s. Manufacturing didn't fare much better, and growth in the area's population and economy stagnated.

Similar to areas throughout the United State, the arrival of the railroad changed Sumterville. Residents clamored for rail service in the early 1830s, but high costs, political wrangling, poor weather, and an inconsistent economy conspired to delay its arrival for nearly 20 years. When the railroad was eventually established in the region, it was accompanied by the construction of new buildings and homes, a new jail, freight depot, and bank. With this growth came the need for additional services, such as fire protection and improved infrastructure. Streets in town were improved, and by 1855 the town known as Sumter had grown considerably.

The Civil War and Reconstruction

Sumter's role in the Civil War began early: the first shot in the war was fired from Fort Sumter in Charleston by a Sumter soldier. As men of all ages marched off to war, women and children of Sumter assumed responsibilities left behind by the absence of men. Tending to farms and supporting the war effort by making uniforms and supplies became everyday chores. As the wounded returned home, women tended to their injuries in makeshift hospitals and private homes throughout the region.

Near the end of the Civil War, Sumter residents thought they had been spared the destruction during General William Sherman's March to the Sea. The hopes of local residents and business owners were soon shattered when General Edward Potter marched inland from Georgetown and in the process destroyed mills, gins, farms, plantations, railroads, engines, and lumber.

When he arrived in Sumter on April 9, 1866, General Potter met some resistance by an overmatched local militia. This was the same day General Robert E. Lee surrendered, but it would take nearly two weeks for word of the events in Appomattox to reach General Potter. On April 10, he directed his men to go house to house to search for



contraband and take food, clothing, and other valuables. As a result, Sumter's shops and printing press were destroyed.

Similar to the Revolutionary War, Sumter emerged from the Civil War in disarray. While many were initially left homeless, life began to return to normal as public buildings, bridges, and railroads appeared from the ruins of war. By the early 1870s, Sumter once again began to grow.

Post-Civil War decades proved challenging for the region. The South's economy had to be restructured following the abolishment of slavery, and freed slaves and whites clashed in a number of racial conflicts. In addition, labor disputes and poor crop yields made life difficult for mill workers and farmers.

On the upside, more railroads began operating at the close of the century. A direct line from Sumter to Camden opened in 1888, followed by a branch linking Sumter to the Southern Railroad in 1899. In 1880, a short line connected Sumter with the logging interests in Bishopville. New communities developed along these railroads, including Pinewood, Oswego, and Hagood. Commerce also was supported by the railroad. In 1884, Sumter boasted a cotton factory, 73 flour and grist mills, 31 lumber mills, and 10 turpentine establishments. Good access by rail and ample cotton and lumber resources gave particular strength to these industries.

Community Advancement, Transportation Improvements, and Economic Development

Sumter proved to be an innovative community, recognized as the first city in the United States to incorporate the basic principles of the council-manager form of government. Sumter adopted this style in 1912, ahead of the more than 3,400 cities and 371 counties that now use the council-manager or council-administrator form. For Sumter, the new government was better equipped to keep up with the growing city's water, sewer, and electricity needs. A program inaugurated in 1915 expanded the few paved roads and sidewalks along Sumter's Main Street.

Not to be left behind by the City of Sumter, Sumter County led the state with a commitment to improve the roadway network. The county held a referendum in 1920 that approved \$2.5 million in bonds for construction of paved roads. By 1924, the total had been increased to \$4 million. Within the next few years, hundreds of miles of new highways radiated from city to the county limits, including a highway across the Wateree Swamp that connected Sumter with the state capital in Columbia. Only after the state began constructing highways in 1925 did portions of the Sumter County paved roads become part of the state system and fall under the state's maintenance program.

The bonds also funded improvements to a sidewalk network that included 10 miles of elevated sidewalks made of compacted clay held in shape by wooden curbs.

Like others throughout the country, the people of Sumter had to endure the good and bad times brought on by the World Wars and Great Depression during the first half of the 20th century. Through the 1950s, the economy of Sumter County relied on agriculture. More than 3,000 farms covered the landscape, although manufacturing began establishing a niche market during this time. Eventually, Sumter benefited from a resurgent economy following World War II.

Shaw Air Force Base and the Growth of the Military Economy

The history of Sumter is forever tied to the events of August 30, 1941, the day Shaw Field was activated to train cadets to fly before sending them off to the European and Pacific campaigns of World War II. The military facility's name honored Ervin D. Shaw, the first Sumter County pilot to die in combat during World War I.

The training field not only served as the site of pilot instruction throughout the war, but also housed German prisoners-of-war in 1945 and early 1946. Activity at Shaw doubled in 1951 with the addition of the 363rd Tactical Reconnaissance Wing from Langley Air Force Base in Virginia. The facility received another boost in 1954 when the 9th Air Force headquarters was assigned to Shaw from Pope Air Force Base in North Carolina.

By the 1990s, Shaw Air Force Base was serving as an essential component of Sumter's economy and a key contributor to U.S. defense operations worldwide. During the early stages of the Gulf War, F-16 Fighting Falcons flew missions to stop Iraqi ground forces from invading Saudi Arabia. Throughout the war, troops and equipment from Shaw supported the military effort.

As a result of the 2005 Defense Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) Commission recommendations, Shaw grew to an approximate total of 1,500 military and civilian employees with the relocation of the Third Army. The growth of the base will inevitably impact business in the Sumter area as well as the services offered to military and civilian personnel.

Looking Back and Moving Forward

The transportation options available to Sumter residents are constantly evolving. The National Interstate and Highway Defense Act of 1956 brought increased access to the area. As a result, the region is now encircled by three Interstate Highways: I-95, I-20, and I-26. In 1973, the state legislature passed a series of laws in response to a need for public transportation throughout South Carolina which led to the formation of the Santee Wateree Regional Transportation Authority (SWRTA) in 1978. SWRTA has expanded to reach into eight counties, including Sumter County, with fixed route, paratransit, and Medicaid transportation services.

Local industry continues to take advantage of new opportunities brought by improved access. Today, a good transportation network and growing economic base positions the City and County of Sumter for a healthy future. By undertaking the development of a long-range transportation plan, Sumter is committing to preserving the region's unique historical, cultural, and natural resources while expanding services to meet the needs of the area's changing population.