

December 17, 2025

Daufuskie Economy

Today's edition of the Daufuskie Island History Museum advent calendar will move away from the dense name and date history of the last few days. (Thank heavens I don't have to follow any more paths through John David and David John Mongins!)

In previous posts we have gone back and forth in time on Daufuskie, discussing who was here and where they lived, with a bit about what they did. So, just what has been the primary economy on Daufuskie over time?

The first few English settlers were here as Indian traders. There were few on the island, and they were the earliest to have land holdings on Daufuskie. Abuses and ill treatment of the natives by the traders became a major factor in the breaking out of the Yemasee War of 1715, which was lost by the Indians and drove them from Daufuskie.

The island was depopulated for over a decade following the war, and it wasn't until the 1730's that settlers returned to Daufuskie. These first settlers relied on ranch farming until the 1750's, when indigo proved to be more profitable than cattle farming. By 1770, the economy was dependent on indigo farming. Per Billie Burn: "Tradition has it that men who could afford large plantations of indigo were referred to as 'Blue Bloods'".

Also according to "An Island Named Daufuskie", the cultivation of rice, despite being a major part of the coastal Carolinas economy and known as Carolina Gold, was never done commercially on Daufuskie due to the salinity of the water. Small patches for private use were planted, but the prevalence of birds plucking the young rice plants led to the end of rice growing on the island.

Indigo was in heavy demand by the British until the Revolutionary War, after which England sought its indigo from India, leading to the economic decline of the crop. Cotton was the successor to indigo as the major cash crop by the late 1700's. and by the time of the Civil War had made a great fortune for many of the plantation owners. Sea island cotton was a sought after commodity, considered far superior to other strains, right up to the outbreak of the Civil War.

It is very important to note that the growing of indigo and cotton crops was extremely labor intensive, and it was slave labor imported from West Africa that provided the ability for the plantation owners and their families to prosper. Life was brutal and dark for the enslaved, but the isolation and remoteness of the sea

islands contributed to the creation of the rich Gullah-Geechee culture we know today.

After the Civil War, Daufuskie's island location protected the Gullah culture from the influence of the bustling world across the water. A large population of freed slaves, who had previously worked on the island's plantations, returned to Daufuskie and purchased small tracts of land for themselves and their families or went to work for the large landowners. Timber became a sought after resource, with live oak particularly desirable in the construction of tall ships. (Old Ironsides was reportedly built with Daufuskie oak.)

From the 1880's until the 1950's, the oyster industry flourished on Daufuskie. By the turn of the century there would be an average of 2,000 people working on the island. In a previous post we discussed the significance of the Maggioni Company on Daufuskie.

When pollution from the Savannah River ended the oyster business on Daufuskie, the population shrank to less than 100 people. In the 1980's development of Daufuskie as we now know it commenced with the purchase of land on the Atlantic side of the island.

