

Shipbuilding on Daufuskie - The Bloody Point Shipyard

June 1, 2026

We're going to take a break from tracing the early settlers on Daufuskie, before the Mongins owned so much of it, and step back and cover a lesser-known aspect of Daufuskie history, the presence of a shipyard at Bloody Point prior to the Revolution. As you will come to find out, calling it a shipyard may create a mental picture beyond what may have existed, but ships were built there, nonetheless.

The first true ocean-going vessel built in the colonial Beaufort area was the 15-ton schooner St. Joseph built in 1740. Between 1740 and 1760 approximately sixteen ships of about 18 tons were built in the Beaufort area. These ships were used by local plantation owners to transport produce to market and provisions back to the plantation. Shipbuilding growth, particularly of larger ships, was focused more on the Charleston and Georgetown areas during that period, as shipbuilding became South Carolina's largest industry. Shipbuilding had been primarily done in the northern colonies up to that time.



One of the reasons for the growth of the South Carolina industry was the availability of pine lumber for planking and decking, and more importantly, the availability of live oak timber for the structural lumber in the hull. The superiority of live oak to the white oak used in

northern shipyards, a product of its density and resistance to impacts, was noticed in European markets, and orders for ships were arriving from England, with its use recommended to the British admiralty. (Note: the ribs and framing of the USS Constitution, "Old Ironsides", were reportedly made of southern live oak in 1795, and it earned its nickname in the War of 1812).

While live oak was a superior wood for ship construction, its unusual density made construction inefficient and wasteful. Live oak could not be warped to shape by the steaming methods in use at the time, so templates of ship parts, made of paper or cloth, were taken into forests and laid against trees to find the proper size and shape desired, in line with the grain of the tree. In some cases, an entire live oak tree was cut down for a single ship component. This wasteful process may help to explain why construction of larger ships began to move south from Charleston and Georgetown into the Port Royal and Beaufort area. Between 1763 and the Revolution, shipbuilding in the Beaufort area grew rapidly, and it became the largest shipbuilding center in the southern colonies in the thirteen years leading up to the Revolutionary War.

The growth of the local industries drew shipbuilders who had learned the trade in England or shipyards in the northern colonies, as might be expected. Larger ships began to be constructed for transatlantic and West Indian trade. Ships built in the period 1765-1775 averaged around 200 tons (existing ships then sailing the transatlantic route averaged around 135 tons with West Indian trading ships averaging around 45 tons). Carolina builders generally favored schooners as their ship of choice. Attached below is a copy of several announcements in the South Carolina Gazette (Charleston) over the period 1766 to 1773.

A new Ship named the St. Helena, belonging to the Estate of Francis Stuart, Esq; deceased, said to be the best ever built in this Province, and will carry a Thousand Barrels of Rice, was last Week launched at Beaufort, Port-Royal, by the Builder Mr. Robert Watts.

The South-Carolina and American General Gazette (Charleston, South Carolina) · Fri, Oct 24, 1766

There have been lately built and launched here, a fine Brigantine by Mr. Cornelius Dewees, for Captain William Thomson; and another Brigantine, by Mr. Wallis, for Capt. John Wright; both designed for the West-India Trade, and now near ready for the Sea. Three fine large Ships are also in such Forwardness on the Stocks, that they will be launched early this Fall; one of them, building by Messrs. Begbie & Manson, for Capt. William White, in the London Trade, reckoned a very complete Vessel; the second, building by Mr. James Black, for Captain James Bailey, also in the London Trade, full as complete; and the third, building by Mr. Robert Watts, for Captain William Carter, in the Bristol Trade, not less complete than the others.

The South-Carolina Gazette (Charleston, South Carolina) · Thu, Aug 8, 1771

Saturday last was launched at Bloody-Point, a fine new Ship, called the Georgia-Planter, built by Mr. Robert Watts for the London Trade.

The South-Carolina Gazette; and Country Journal (Charleston, South Carolina) · Tue, Mar 3, 1772

Ship-Building is still carried on with Spirit at Beaufort, Port-Royal, where a fine Brigantine of 180 Tons, for Captain Ruffel, was launched last Thursday, by Mr. James Vance; and a large Ship is on the Stocks, by Mr. James Black, for Capt. John Maitland. Another large Ship, and a Schooner 50 Feet Keel, are also building by Mr. Robert Watts, at Hilton Head, near Port-Royal.

The South-Carolina Gazette (Charleston, South Carolina) · Thu, May 14, 1772

The same Day, another Ship, upwards of 400 Tons Burthen, was launched at Hilton-Head, built by Mr. Robert Watts, for the Jamaica Trade, also allowed to be a very fine Vessel. And, Two other Ships are set up at Beaufort, one to be built by Mr. Black, the other by Mr. James Vance; besides several Schooners.

The South-Carolina Gazette (Charleston, South Carolina) · Mon, Feb 15, 1773

The same Day was launched at Hilton Head, a fine Ship, of 420 Tons, built of Live-Oak, by Mr. Robert Watts, to be commanded by Captain Caldwell, and is also esteemed a complete Vessel.

The South-Carolina Gazette; and Country Journal (Charleston, South Carolina) · Tue, Feb 16, 1773

The largest ship built in the area was reported to be 420 tons, built on Hilton Head by shipbuilder Robert Watts of Savannah for the Jamaican sugar trade. You may remember the name Robert Watts from last month's post as the owner of Bloody Point leading up to the Revolutionary War period. The announcement of his ship launching was included in the document above, dated February 15, 1773.

Watts had come to the area from Philadelphia and was one of several shipbuilders who had established themselves in the sea islands. James Black was another, who came to Daufuskie in 1777. These shipbuilders employed shipwrights (the skilled craftsmen tasked with the actual construction), ships carpenters, blacksmiths and loggers. In addition, local slaves were trained as carpenters, sawyers, boatswains, caulkers, blacksmiths and riggers, among other skilled crafts.

In December of 1770, Robert Watts, ship carpenter, acquired 422 acres of property on Daufuskie Island, St. Lukes parish in Granville County from John Gordon of Charlestown for 400 pounds. The property was "bounding to the Northwest on Mrs. Martinangeles Land to the North East on Land of Mr. Evans to the South eastward on Daufuskie sound to the South West on Daufuskie creek". The copy of the Indenture is attached below. The land had been granted to John Gordon by King George the Third on October 12th of that year. From the boundaries it can be recognized as what came to be known as Bloody Point plantation. It was on this property that the "shipyard" was established. The reference to Mr. Evans to the North East would appear to be Hugh Evans, a Charleston tailor who was granted 800 acres on Daufuskie in 1733, owning the property that would become Oak Ridge.

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M^r John Gordon ^{M^r D} Georgia This Indenture made the...

M^r Robert Watts ^{no hall} twenty sixth day of December in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and seventy Between John Gordon of Charles town in the Province of South Carolina Merchant of the one part and Robert Watts of the said Province of South Carolina Ship Carpenter of the other Part Witnesses that the said John Gordon for and in consideration of the sum of four hundred pounds of good and lawful money of Great Britain to him in hand paid by the said Robert Watts the receipt whereof he the said John Gordon doth hereby confess and acknowledge and for divers other good causes and considerations him throught moving He the said John Gordon hath granted bargain and sold aliened release and confirmed and by these presents Doth grant bargain sell alien release and confirm unto the said Robert Watts in his actual possession now being by virtue of a bargain and sale to him thereof made for one whole year by Indenture bearing date the day next before the day of the date of these presents and by force of the Statute for transferring Uses in possession and to his heirs and assigns forever All that plantation or tract of Land containing four hundred and twenty two acres situate on Daufuskee Island in Saint Lukes parish in Granville County bounding to the Northwest on M^r Martin angles Land to the North East on Land of M^r Evans to the South East ward on Daufuskee Sound to the South West on Daufuskee creek and which said plantation or tract of Land containing four hundred and twenty two acres as aforesaid was granted by his present Majesty King George the Third on the twelfth day of October in the ~~seventh~~ year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and seventy to the said John Gordon partly he and the rights members and appurtenances thereof and all houses out houses edifices buildings orchards gardens lands meadows commons pastures feedings trees woods under woods ways paths waters water courses easements profits commodities advantsages hereditaments and appurtenances whatsoever to the said plantation or tract of Land containing four hundred and twenty two acres as aforesaid belonging or in anywise appertaining or which now are or formerly have been accepted reputed taken known used occupied or enjoyed to or with the same as part parcel or member thereof or of any part thereof and also the reversions and reversions remainders and remainders rents and services of all and singular the premises above mentioned and of every part and parcel thereof with the appurtenances And also all the estate right title interest claim and demand whatsoever as well in equity as in law of him the said John Gordon in and to all and singular the said premises above mentioned and of in and to every part and parcel thereof with the appurtenances To have and to hold the said plantation or tract of Land containing four hundred and twenty two acres as aforesaid and all and singular the premises above mentioned and every part and parcel thereof with the appurtenances unto the said Robert Watts his heirs and assigns to the only proper use and behoof of the said Robert Watts his heirs and assigns forever and the said John Gordon for himself his heirs and assigns Doth covenant and grant to and with the said Robert Watts his heirs and assigns that he the said John Gordon now is the true lawful and rightful owner of all and singular the said plantation or tract of Land containing four hundred and twenty two acres as aforesaid and premises above mentioned and every part and parcel thereof with the appurtenances And also that he the said John Gordon now hath good right full power and lawful authority in his own right to grant bargain sell and convey the said plantation or tract of Land containing four hundred and twenty two acres and premises above mentioned unto the said Robert Watts his heirs and assigns to the only proper use and behoof of the said Robert Watts his heirs and assigns forever according to the true intent and meaning of these presents And also that he the said Robert Watts his heirs and assigns shall and may at all times forever hereafter peaceably and quietly have hold occupy possess and enjoy all and singular the said plantation or tract of Land containing four hundred and twenty two acres

(M.S.)

[Authors note: This same land (Bloody Point, approximately 500 acres) had previously been granted to Samuel Hilden by the Lord Proprietors in 1708/09 and acquired by John Wright in 1714. It is not unusual for the same land to be granted by the King after the proprietorship period. In this case it appears that there was not a clear chain of ownership from the Proprietorship period to the Royal Colony establishment. The Memorial (basically the chain of ownership document listing the property history) filed by John Gordon makes no mention of prior owners of the property, using the King's grant as the source of ownership.]

Robert Watts obviously was involved in building at other sites in the area. He was listed as the builder of the 420-ton ship on Hilton Head. He was also listed as the builder of the St. Helena, launched from Port Royal in 1766, said to be "the finest vessel ever built in this province". And he was reported to be the builder of the 100-ton brigantine Georgia Planter in 1771, launched from Bloody Point, a 260-ton vessel, the Cowles, in 1770, and the 260-ton Friendship in 1772. (See the announcements below.)

So just how could Robert Watts have been involved in different ships at different sites, and why is there no apparent evidence of a "shipyard" at Bloody Point?

The evidence indicates that shipbuilding in the Beaufort area was highly itinerant. Only one shipyard, identified as "Black's Point", is listed from that era, apparently named after the same James Black who later acquired property on Daufuskie. Any location with deep water access and a supply of lumber was adequate for construction. Shipbuilding crews probably set up a temporary camp that disappeared as soon as a ship was launched. Some of the locations included Spanish Point near Beaufort, Bloody Point, Skull Creek on Hilton Head, and Factory Creek on Lady's Island. These temporary shipyards never became the sites of permanent settlements. Despite their transient nature, shipbuilding in the Beaufort area gained an international reputation and served as a major component of the local and colonial economy. To give you some idea of what the "shipyard" may have looked like, a graphic is shown below.



Charles Watts, first cousin to Robert, joined him in the shipbuilding business in Savannah in 1763. Charles is reported to have moved to Bloody Point in 1772 to participate in the shipbuilding there. Simeon Martinangele of Daufuskie apprenticed to Charles' shipbuilding business for 15 months, ending in 1775.

Charles was forced to leave Daufuskie in 1775 when he refused to sign a rebel oath. He was allegedly tarred and feathered over his refusal to sign. He fled to Savannah, taking with him an unfinished vessel he was building for William Moss of Savannah.

The end of Simeon Martinangele's apprenticeship as well as the flight of Charles Watts are probably tied to the fact that Robert Watts died in April of 1775. The newspaper announcement of his death in the South Carolina and General Gazette is presented below.

DEATH. In Georgia, Mr. Robert Watts, an eminent Ship-builder, formerly of this Province.