



BLACKVILLE, SOUTH CAROLINA
1700 – 2016
A Historical Perspective Compiled by Myrtle L. Quattlebaum



The site of present day Blackville was considered part of the Backcountry in the 1700's. Transportation from the coast was by horseback, wagon, or possibly part-way by boat or barge. Charles Town, Beaufort and Georgetown developed during the 1700's and settlers slowly made their way inland.

Blackville is located in what was part of Lord Colleton's land grant that later became part of Orangeburg District. From a portion of southwestern Orangeburg District, Barnwell District was formed, effective in 1800. The district was named for John Barnwell, a local figure during the Revolution. Districts became counties in 1868. In 1871 the northwestern section of Barnwell was taken to help form Aiken County, and in 1897 the eastern third of Barnwell was taken to become part of Bamberg County. The southern half of Barnwell County was taken in 1929 to help form Allendale County, reducing Barnwell County to its current size.

Among the early families that settled in the Healing Springs community was that of Nathaniel Walker. It is thought he came from England to South Carolina by way of Virginia. He was a preacher and also a surveyor of many early land grants. He organized what would become Healing Springs Baptist Church about 1777.

On December 22, 1781, during the Revolutionary War, the "Battle of Slaughter Field" was fought northeast of Healing Springs. Sixteen Patriots were killed and seven British soldiers were badly wounded. The wounded were left at Healing Springs along with two uninjured soldiers who were to care for and bury them. However, the wounded completely recovered and all returned to their headquarters. It was believed the recovery of the wounded was largely due to their drinking and being bathed in the water of the springs.

The earliest documented settler in what is now Blackville was an Irishman, Cornelius Tobin, in the 1780's. He was granted land and built a fine home near what is currently known as the Country Club. A picture of the Tobin home can be found in the booklet written by E. Stanley McDonald, "The Natural History Buried in Blackville, SC, Including Healing Springs and Slaughter Field." There is also a copy hanging in the Blackville Heritage Museum. The Tobin home and plantation were called Fairmount.

More settlers of several nationalities made their way inland. Many of the planters in the Backcountry were shipping goods down the Savannah River rather than sending them to Charles Town since it was easier and quicker. This caused Charles Town to lose business. A group of businessmen in Charles Town organized the South Carolina Canal and Railroad Company in 1828, and planned a railroad to run from Charles Town to Hamburg so the planters could send their lumber and produce to the port of Charles Town rather than to Savannah.

John Alexander Black was head of the railroad's Committee of Inquiry and was given the responsibility of choosing the sites for fuel and water stops for the train. The location of present-day Blackville was as far as they estimated the train could travel in one day; this was designated to become the overnight stop. A village began to grow around the railroad track and became a town which was named for Mr. Black who later came to live here.

The first steam locomotive "The Best Friend" made its premier run from Charles Town in December, 1830, on the six miles of completed track. This engine exploded about six months later due to carelessness of the fireman so a new engine had to be built. The new engine was named the Phoenix, after the bird of Egyptian legend which was consumed by fire but arose anew from its ashes. This was probably the first engine to run all the way to Blackville. The train burned wood, so a bright glow could be seen down the track when the train approached. As the darkness came earlier during the winter months, a fire was built of pitch pine on layers of dirt on a flatcar in front of the engine so the engineer could see the track immediately ahead. This railroad was the longest of its kind in the world at that time.

The town continued to grow and was chartered as the village of Blackville in 1837. It is not clear why the name was changed to Clinton in 1848 and changed back to Blackville by late 1851. Market Hall, also known as the Old Jail, was built on the first piece of property purchased by the town for municipal use in 1858. It first served as a public market. When someone butchered and had fresh meat for sale, a bell would be rung, and people would come to buy. An upstairs was added to the building and used as Town Hall. It was later used as a school, for magic lantern shows, fire station, and library. The town jail was located downstairs in the rear of the building. The building became the James H. Hammond Museum in 1967 and used until closed for lack of repairs about 2005. The building is still owned by the town.

The railroad was of vital importance during the Civil War. It was used by the Confederacy to transport troops and supplies making it a special target of the Union Army. Several thousand Union troops camped in and around Blackville in early February of 1864. The Lartigue House was used as Union Headquarters. Horses were housed in the Methodist Church and a dance was held in the Baptist Church according to old newspapers. While in Blackville, the Union troops destroyed the railroad. They made large bonfires and heated the metal rails and twisted them so they could not be used again. This was done in numerous places up and down the rail line. There is evidence that General Sherman himself met here with two of his generals before continuing toward Columbia. On February 12th the army marched out of Blackville, leaving a trail of smoke behind them. A few homes and other buildings survived due to the vigilance and fast work of the townspeople.

Recovery after the war was slow. The railroad was rebuilt as soon as possible. There were political changes and Blackville became the county seat in 1868. Court was held in the Baptist Church building, among other places, until a two-storied brick court house was erected. The political climate changed again and the county seat was moved back to Barnwell in 1874. Over

the years, the court house building was used as an opera house, private school, and eventually became the Blackville High School. It was demolished about 1952.

Besides the burning of Blackville by Union troops, there were other serious fires which swept large portions of the town. In 1887, fifty-seven buildings were lost to fire. The reason was never determined though a number of possibilities were discussed. Like the mythological Phoenix, the town arose only to be burned again. Another fire ravaged the town one night in May of 1888, sweeping over a large portion of town north of the railroad. When morning dawned, it revealed another scene of destruction, second only to that of 1887. The fire department acquired additional men with training and equipment after these two fires, and in 1909 a water system was put in place.

A railroad was built from Barnwell to Blackville connecting with the North-South B&M Railroad in 1875, making Blackville a railroad hub and center of transportation for a large area. The share-cropping system came into use and smaller farmers were able to prosper, though some were exploited by the farm owners. Many farmers in the Blackville area planted cucumbers, cantaloupes and watermelons, as well as the old staple, cotton. Blackville was known as the cucumber capitol of the world during mid-1900. Since the freight loading docks were on Main Street, wagons and trucks lined Main Street as well as the back lots and side streets with produce to be sold and shipped in box cars that were parked on the railroad side tracks. In 1917, the town's railroad sidetracks held more than a hundred railroad cars.

Blackville had several hotels during the early years. Among them were the Maloney House, Rush House, and in 1911 the Shamrock Hotel was built by John Farrell. Mr. Farrell also built a hosiery mill on Main Street. This building would later become Palm Beach Company where during the 1950's approximately 150 people, mostly women, were employed.

Just west of town on US Highway 78, the Edisto Experiment Station was opened by Clemson University in 1937. This operation began with 200 acres of land and is currently known as Edisto Research and Education Center with more than 2,000 acres being used for research to assist farmers in solving problems faced particularly in the Coastal Plain area.

Built by the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Barnwell County State Park was dedicated in 1939. The Park is located just off SC Highway 3 about three miles west of Blackville. Hiking, camping, boating and fishing are among the activities to be enjoyed there. You may swim at your own risk. There are also rental cabins.

The Savannah River Plant was constructed during the 1950's and many families moved to the area to work there. Some of these people made Blackville their home. New houses were built and some of the residents divided their homes, making rental apartments to help house the new folk. Churches were filled almost to capacity for most Sunday morning services. New schools were built to house the increasing number of students.

During the fifties, one could shop at Dora Hutto's Store, Simon Brown Sons, Central Parts Store, DeWitt's 5 & 10, Ussery's Department Store, Hoffman's, Lowe's, H. L. Buist, Everette's, Western Auto, Piggly Wiggly and McDonald's Superette. There was Rush's Pharmacy and also Epps' Pharmacy and well as Doctors Hammond, Kneece and others from time to time. Kelly's Studio was the place to have your photograph made. A short-order meal was available at Heinie's Café. During the summer months every room at the Shamrock was occupied. Every store on Main Street was filled. The Farmers' Market was moved from downtown to a site on Jones Bridge Road but is now obsolete.

The passenger depot which was built about 1910 was moved to Court House Square in 1985 and renovated to house the Blackville Library. Almost all tracks of the Charleston-Hamburg railroad line were removed by 1994. The whistle of the train can no longer be heard in Blackville.

Trucks came to be used more frequently than trains to haul freight, and the growing use of cars rather than trains and busses for transportation is part of the cause for Blackville's economic downturn. Another cause is lack of diversification. This is still basically a farming community. Most young people have to go elsewhere for good paying jobs.

During the 1960's several Mennonite families moved to the area. Most of them began farming, but soon there were carpenters, plumbers, and others in trade. Ray and Susie Miller opened the Bread Basket Restaurant on Main Street which has become well known. It was once visited by the television show Good Morning America. Ray and Susie retired in 2015 but another Miller family purchased and now operates the restaurant. The Mennonites have their own schools and churches.

Some important families settled in the area and built lovely homes during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Lartigue House, once considered the oldest house in town, was built about 1832 and burned in January, 1952. The Lartigues were a French family who immigrated to Barbados and fled there to South Carolina during the Barbados slave revolt. The two story house was located at the corner of South Boundary and Solomon Blatt Avenue. A family cemetery is located a few yards behind the house. The Simon Brown Family came from Germany by way of New York and settled in Blackville about 1848. They had thirteen children. Mr. & Mrs. Riley Shelton now (2017) enjoy living in this historic home, the yellow two-storied house on Main Street. Patrick Farrell from Ireland built the Farrell-O'Gorman House circa 1875. It has been occupied by family continuously and has been beautifully maintained. It is currently the home of Louis and Gail O'Gorman. The Blatt House was built by Nathan Blatt, a Jewish Russian immigrant. He was the father of Solomon Blatt, who was for many years speaker of the SC House of Representatives, and the grandfather of Federal Judge Solomon Blatt, Jr. The Blatt House is located on Solomon Blatt Avenue, formerly called Clark Street for another very early family.

Other lovely homes and historic buildings are too numerous to mention. A brochure will give more information about a few of them. Some other old local family names include Baxley, Nix,

Gyles, Ninestein, Peeples, Reynolds, Reed, Nevils, Briggs, Hartzog, Lancaster, Martin and many more.

Hammond was a name well-known state-wide because of governor and later US Senator James H. Hammond who lived at Redcliffe Plantation near Beech Island. His son, Edward Spann Hammond, owned a large plantation called Broadacres, located between Blackville and the Edisto River, west of Highway 3. Spann Hammond had several children. Among them were Dr. O. D. Hammond and State Senator James H. Hammond. It has been said that this Senator Hammond was responsible for organizing the Boy Scouts in South Carolina.

Blackville has its own geological mystery.... a Carolina Bay. I found it first recognized in print in a book titled "The Mysterious Carolina Bays" by Henry Savage, Jr. Savage says Carolina Bays were first scientifically described in 1848 by State Geologist Michael Tuomey. Carolina Bays are shallow, elliptically-shaped depressions, oriented NW to SE, occurring in large numbers throughout the Coastal Plain portion of the South Atlantic Region. Many exist between Maryland and northern Florida, with a large concentration occurring in the Carolinas and Georgia. Blackville has a large Bay (over 800 acres), and since all the virgin timber has been cut, the Bay can easily be seen from the bluff by the High School Auditorium. There are a number of theories as to how these depressions came about, but nothing has been proved. Teams are still investigating the cause. One such team is operating under the Savannah River Archaeological and Geological Research Department. Some bays hold water and some do not. Most have many different species of plants and animals. They are named Bays mainly because of the bay trees which grow there. There is an aerial photograph in the Blackville Heritage Museum of the Blackville Bay. In this photograph you can see where the railroad ran as well as Highway 78 and a portion of the town.

Blackville, steeped in history, was a wonderful, quietly bustling place to grow up during the twentieth century. It has slowly declined and a number of the older homes have burned or been torn down. The town government has begun demolishing some of the old unsightly and unsafe buildings on Main Street for safety reasons and also to make the town more appealing to prospective industries and residents.

Make a visit to Blackville in the near future and experience a little of its history and ambience.

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