

Daufuskie Island Historic District

Southwest of Hilton Head

Hilton Head

Daufuskie Island is one of South Carolina's southernmost Sea Islands. Accessible only by boat, it is one of the few islands unconnected to the mainland by either bridge or causeway. Because of its isolated location, Daufuskie has evolved with a minimum of outside influence.

Daufuskie's first heyday lasted from about 1805 until 1842, when expansion of the plantation system spurred its economy. The slave population grew rapidly as cotton production expanded. Ten slave huts remain standing from this period, significant not only as artifacts of the plantation era, but also as examples of tabby construction, now a vanished building method.

During the Civil War, the island was largely unoccupied. As landowners fled, slaves either fled themselves or were taken from the island. Reconstruction saw a tremendous influx of former slaves, who occupied the abandoned slave quarters and worked the land under freedmen's contracts. Many buildings, including several churches and schools, still stand as documentation of the black community that thrived on Daufuskie Island during the postbellum years. The schools were often used for services and "shouts," rhythmic song-dances whose roots extend back to plantation and African traditions. The Maryfield Cemetery exhibits the holdover of African tradition as well, for decorating graves with household crockery and the decedent's personal possessions is still a common practice. The First Union Sisters and Brothers Oyster Society Hall building, built in the 1890s, indicates the industry that by 1920 was a major source of income for African Americans of Daufuskie Island.

The prosperous years from 1890 to 1930 saw the island's black population swell to about 1,000. It was during this period that the fine examples of folk housing that are included in the historic district were constructed. By the 1940s and 1950s, however, pollution of the Savannah River and competition from mainland farmers forced an exodus from the island. The outward migration left the population at 59 in 1980. The decline in population, coupled with the difficulty of access, has allowed the unique ambience of Daufuskie Island to remain essentially intact today. [CA 6/2/82, 82003831]