

History of Newberry County

Newberry is a community filled to its borders with history: ancient Indian sites, battlefields of the American Revolution, historic plantations, and beautiful homes. European settlers (primarily German, Scotch-Irish, and English) began appearing in great numbers in the 1750's. Newberry County, formed from the Ninety-Six District in 1785, was once described as the largest tract of unbroken farmland in South Carolina. The origin of the county's name is still unknown. It is likely an alternate spelling for the English town "Newbury," but the popular notion has always been that the surrounding fields and forests were as pretty as a "new berry." Although cotton was the primary crop before the Civil War, today's farmers rotate crops such as corn, millet, wheat, and soybeans. In addition Newberry has dairy, poultry, and cattle farms, as well as many acres of controlled reforestation.

The town of Newberry was founded in 1789 as the county seat. Its site was chosen because of its nearness to the center of the county. By the coming of the railroad in 1851, Newberry had become a thriving trade center. Lutheran-supported Newberry College was established in 1856 and has been an important part of the community ever since. Although the Civil War interrupted the growth of the town and dramatically changed its social order, a stronger community emerged which continued to thrive. Industry, in the form of cotton mills, was introduced to the town in 1881. Although the face of the town has changed because of fires, storms, and former economic slumps, the City of Newberry today retains diverse historic buildings and a revitalized downtown.

Since rivers form the boundaries of the county, other communities developed at highway crossroads and, later railroad depots. Among the towns incorporated as a result of the Greenville and Columbia Railroad were Peak, Pomaria, Frog Level (now Prosperity), Silverstreet and Chappells. A branch railroad to Laurens in 1854 had depots at Jalapa and Kinards. In 1890, the arrival of the Columbia, Newberry and Laurens Railroad prompted the incorporation of Little Mountain. Whitmire, a trading center on the Enoree River, was incorporated in 1891 when the Georgia, Carolina and Northern Railroad came through. Aside from the City of Newberry, Prosperity and Whitmire are the most populous towns in the county.

Many interesting and colorful personalities have made a mark on Newberry's history. Emily Geiger, a young woman living in what is now eastern Newberry County, rode her way into the history books when she delivered a message from General Nathaniel Greene to General Thomas Sumter during the American Revolution. Tales also abound about a Quaker girl named Hannah Gaunt who helped defend her father's house against a Tory attack. John Belton O'Neill was a prominent judge in Newberry until his death in 1863. Among his many accomplishments is *The Annals of Newberry*, an early history of the county. Job Johnstone (1793-1862), a Newberry lawyer, served as Chancellor in South Carolina for thirty-two years and later served on the State Court of Appeals. Another Newberry lawyer, John Fletcher Hobbs, left for Australia in 1882 and, by 1893, had become chief of two tribes of cannibals. Marie Boozer gained notoriety for her great beauty, and her exploits (after leaving Newberry) were the inspiration for two books: *La Belle* and *Another Jezebel*. Coleman L. Blease (1868-1942) was the only permanent resident of Newberry to be Governor of South Carolina. A lawyer, Representative and United States Senator, he was elected Governor in 1910 and 1912. Interestingly, his two opponents in 1912 were also from Newberry.

Among the many scenic and historic sites in the county are: The Rock House (pre-Revolutionary, the oldest house in the county); Quaker Cemetery (used from the 1760's - 1820's); Tea Table Rock (site of a British encampment during the Revolutionary War); St. John's Lutheran Church, Pomaria (1808); Little Mountain (800 feet above sea level, highest point in county); Gauntt House, Newberry (1808, oldest home in city); Hardy House, Maybinton (1825, typical of early nineteenth century); Pomaria Plantation, Pomaria (1826, site of a well-known nursery); Old Court House (1851); Newberry College (founded 1856); Jasper Hall, Whitmire (1857, fine antebellum residence); Rosemont Cemetery (1863); Newberry Opera House (1881); Lake Murray; and Lynches Woods (a scenic road winds through the forest).