

Strolling the Slow Lane

Written by Mark Shaffer
Wednesday, 13 April 2011 08:28

The Backyard Tourist rediscovers Bluffton



(a continuing series in partnership with CityTrex.com)

Bluffton's dogged insistence upon survival is a two hundred year tale told with flood, fire, wind, rain, rice and cotton, slavery and sedition, war, boom, bust and boom again. Through it all the town of Bluffton has remained virtually unchanged in many ways until the recent explosion in development. Yet, the beating heart of whatever modern Bluffton may become, is Old Town, a square mile National Register Historic District and the key to the town's past and future.

– Excerpted from *The Lowcountry Weekly*, March 4, 2009

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In the two years since I wrote those lines much has changed and much has not in Old Town Bluffton.



The stretch of Highway 46 leading into town from 278 is still a work in perpetual progress. The mixed-use development of The Promenade at the tip of the historic center somehow bridges the gap between trendy and traditional. Meanwhile, throughout Old Town the famous “Bluffton state of mind” seems to thrive in an eclectic blend of culture and commerce, the old juxtaposed with the new. Nowhere is this more evident than Calhoun Street. On the south end the street begins at the public docks on the May River, a popular spot for locals to wet a line and gaze up river at the shrimp boats docked at the century old Bluffton Oyster company. For decades this was where locals caught the ferry to Daufuskie Island. Some



years back an idealistic young teacher named Pat Conroy stepped aboard the boat and took a voyage into literary history. Next door the Church of the Cross keeps watch over the river from the bluff above, as it has for more than 150 years.

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Like their Beaufort cousins, Sea Island planters sought out the river bluffs to build summer cottages, escape the oppressive heat and mosquitoes and take advantage of the river's cool breezes. The river made commerce and trade convenient and her pristine waters yielded an abundance of shellfish. Oystering eventually became both an industry and a culture. The seeds of the Civil War were planted here beneath the sprawling branches of a live oak. The tree known as the Secession Oak still stands, its ancient limbs covered in resurrection ferns – perhaps a fitting metaphor for the town.

Old Bluffton has survived fires, floods and hurricanes. She's been torched by Union Troops, suffered



through Reconstruction, the Great Depression and the implosion of the oyster industry. But perhaps the greatest threat to this sleepy little village came in the form of a different kind of army – a legion armed with checkbooks, lawyers, bulldozers and bankers. While the developers gobbled up outlying parcels, bought out old family farms and spread gated communities over pastures, fields and forests the city began an aggressive annexation program. Nearly overnight this tiny riverside community became the third largest municipality in the state, expanding from one square mile to just under sixty square miles.

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