

Pinehurst Tea Plantation

Tea came to the United States in 1799 – by way of a French botanist named Francois Andre Michaux, who planted it near Charleston at Middleton Barony (today known as Middleton Place). Several attempts were made in South Carolina to propagate and produce tea for consumption, but none were successful. In the mid 1800's, the U. S. government became interested in developing a commercial tea industry in the United States. By 1880 having determined that the tea plants (*Camellia sinensis*) could be grown in the South, they established an experimental tea planting at Newington Plantation. This effort was short lived.

In 1888, Dr. Charles Shepard founded the Pinehurst Tea Plantation near the site of Andre Michaux's original tea planting at Middleton Barony. He expanded his property in 1889 by purchasing much of the experimental farm and all of the government's plants. Although experimental at first, Summerville soon became the only place in the United States where tea was cultivated and manufactured for commercial use. Pinehurst became both a successful business and a popular tourist attraction. Over the years, the Pinehurst Tea Plantation has been known as Pinehurst Tea Farm (c. 1902), Pinehurst Tea Garden (c. 1906), and Pinehurst Gardens at the Tea Farm (c. 1932)

His operation was quite ambitious and included the tea factory, a tea barn, a gatehouse and his personal residence. In order to compete commercially, he made a deal with local black families to educate their children free if they would pick the tea leaves after school and in the summer. He constructed a school and hired a teacher to provide the free education.

A variety of tea known as Oolong was grown at Pinehurst and won first prize at the 1904 World's Fair. Pinehurst remained prosperous until the death of its owner.

After the death of Dr. Shepard in 1915, tea production at Pinehurst ceased. The Pinehurst Tea Farm closed and Dr. Shepard's tea plants grew wild for the next forty-five years. The land was later sold. Today the George Miler Golf Course, Tea Farm and Salisbury Acres subdivisions are on the former Pinehurst property.

In 1963, the Thomas J. Lipton Company established a research station on a 127-acre potato farm located on Wadmalaw Island. It incorporated plants from Pinehurst Tea Farm.

In 1987, Mack Fleming, a manager at Lipton, and his partner Bill Hall, a third-generation tea taster trained in England, purchased the 127-acre tea farm in order to create the Charleston Tea Plantation. Together, they created the brand known as American Classic Tea, which is still blended today. Their partnership dissolved however, and in 2003 the property ended up at auction where it would most likely have fallen into the hands of developers. At this juncture, Hall joined forces with R. C. Bigelow, the Connecticut-based company well-known in almost every American grocery store, to buy back the farm. The company continues to grow and sell Fleming and Hall's original blend, American Classic Tea, and it remains the only black tea produced commercially in the United States.