

# Where Georgia History Began

## Savannah: Georgia's First City

Under the original charter, individuals were free to worship as they pleased and **rum, lawyers and slavery were forbidden** - for a time.

Upon settling, Oglethorpe became friends with the local Yamacraw Indian chief, **Tomochichi**. Oglethorpe and Tomochichi pledged mutual goodwill, and the Yamacraw chief granted the new arrivals permission to settle Savannah on the bluff. As a result the town flourished without warfare and accompanying hardship that burdened many of America's early colonies.

Savannah is known as America's **first planned city**. Oglethorpe laid the city out in a series of grids that allowed for wide open streets intertwined with shady public squares and parks that served as town meeting places and centers of business. Savannah had 24 original squares with 21 still in existence.

During the American Revolution, **the British took Savannah** in 1778, and held it into 1782. A land-sea force of French and Americans tried to retake the city in 1779, first by siege and then by direct assault, but failed.

**After independence** was secured, Savannah flourished. Soon, farmers discovered that the soil was rich and the climate favorable for cultivation of cotton and rice. Plantations and slavery became highly profitable systems for whites in the neighboring "Lowcountry" of South Carolina. So Georgia, the free colony, legalized slavery. The trans-Atlantic slave trade brought many African-Americans through the port of Savannah. Many who stayed in the area formed the unique Gullah culture of the coastal communities in Georgia and South Carolina.

With the **wealth brought by cotton**, residents built lavish homes and churches throughout the city. After the invention of the cotton gin on a plantation outside of Savannah, the city rivaled Charleston as a commercial port. Many of the world's cotton prices were set on the steps of the Savannah Cotton Exchange. The building is still in existence.

But Savannah was not spared from **misfortune**. Two devastating fires in 1796 and 1820 each left half of Savannah in ashes, but residents re-built. The year 1820 saw an outbreak of yellow fever that killed a tenth of its population. Savannah also survived fires, epidemics and hurricanes, but **always bounced back**.

**Pre-Civil War Savannah** was praised as the most picturesque and serene city in America. It was known for its grand oaks festooned with Spanish moss and its genteel citizenry. The Georgia

Historical Society was founded in that era. Magnificent Forsyth Park got its ornate fountain, a sight worth seeing.

During the Civil War, **the city suffered** from sea blockades so strict that the economy crumbled. "Impregnable" Fort Pulaski at the mouth of the Savannah River was captured by Union soldiers in 1862. The city itself did not fall until Union General William Tecumseh Sherman entered on December 22, 1864, after burning the city of Atlanta and everything else in their path on his "march to the sea." Upon entering Savannah, Sherman was said to be so impressed by its beauty that he could not destroy it. On December 22, 1864, he sent a famous telegram to President Abraham Lincoln, offering the city as a Christmas present.

Reconstruction began. Food was scarce in Savannah, and the economy was in ruins. Despite these hardships and the added burdens of prejudice, the **freed slaves** who remained in Savannah built a thriving community, with its own churches, schools and economic strength. Savannah became one of the most historically significant African-American cities in the nation.

At the turn of the 20th century, cotton was king again. Savannah thrived, as did her new industries, including the export of resin and lumber. Then the boll weevils came, destroying most of the cotton and the state's economy—about the same time that the Great Depression began.

It wasn't until the post-war years that Savannah bounced back again, not just economically but also culturally and aesthetically. A group of women banded together in the 1950s to **preserve historic structures** threatened by the wrecking ball. Their brave endeavors began the Historic Savannah Foundation, which is credited with saving the beautiful architecture that was the foundation of Savannah's charm.

Savannah's Historic District was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1966. It is one of the largest historic landmarks in the country.

**Significant buildings** that were saved and restored include the Pirates' House (1754), an inn mentioned in Robert Louis Stevenson's book "Treasure Island"; the Herb House (1734), oldest building in Georgia; and the Pink House (1789), site of Georgia's first bank. Also saved were the birthplace of Juliette Gordon Low, (completed in 1821), now owned and operated by the Girl Scouts of the U.S.A. as a memorial to their founder. The Telfair Academy of Arts and Sciences, built in 1812 as a mansion, was one of the South's first public museums. Restored churches include the Lutheran Church of the Ascension (1741); the Independent Presbyterian Church (1890) and the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist (1876), one of the largest Roman Catholic churches in the South. The First African Baptist Church was established in 1788. Savannah's Temple Mickeve Israel is the third oldest synagogue in America.