

Bonaventure Cemetery

Savannah History Art and Folklore

Few places capture the spirit of Savannah as completely as Bonaventure Cemetery. Spread across approximately 160 acres beside the Wilmington River, Bonaventure is a peaceful setting of live oaks, Spanish moss, flowering plants, Victorian monuments, family vaults, and winding roads.

Within this beautiful setting are stories of Savannah's prominent families, military leaders, artists, musicians, writers, children, and ordinary citizens. History and symbolism appear around nearly every corner, while generations of folklore add another layer of mystery.

The cemetery's international fame grew after the publication of *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, but Bonaventure's story began more than two centuries earlier.

From Plantation to Cemetery

The property that became Bonaventure Cemetery was established as a plantation in the early 1760s by John Mullryne, a wealthy Englishman. Mullryne and his son-in-law, Josiah Tattnall, developed an estate overlooking the river.

The name Bonaventure comes from words associated with good fortune. It proved to be an enduring name, surviving wars, changes in ownership, and the property's eventual transformation into a cemetery.

Mullryne and Tattnall supported the British Crown during the American Revolution. Their Loyalist sympathies forced the family to flee, and the property was confiscated and sold. It eventually returned to the Tattnall family when Josiah Tattnall Jr., who was born there, reacquired it. Tattnall later became governor of Georgia.

In 1846, the property was purchased by Peter Wiltberger. The land gradually became known as Evergreen Cemetery, a privately operated burial ground designed in the rural cemetery tradition that had become popular during the Victorian era.

These cemeteries were intended to serve as both burial places and public parks. Families came to mourn, walk, picnic, reflect, and spend time among the trees and gardens.

The City of Savannah purchased the cemetery in 1907, made it public, and restored the Bonaventure name.

A Landscape Filled with Meaning

Bonaventure's natural beauty is one of its most memorable features. Massive live oaks form canopies above the roads, with strands of Spanish moss moving gently in the breeze. Palms, azaleas, magnolias, and other Southern plants grow among the monuments.

The cemetery contains tens of thousands of burials, although the exact number is difficult to determine because of its age, incomplete records, relocated graves, and changing burial practices.

Bonaventure's monuments also make it an outdoor museum of Victorian art. Angels, lambs, urns, flowers, crosses, draped cloths, and carved portraits communicate messages that Victorian visitors would have immediately understood.

Rosebuds and lambs often represent children who died young. Lilies can symbolize resurrection or restored innocence, while roses frequently represent love. Poppies are associated with eternal rest and remembrance. An urn may represent the final earthly remains of the deceased, while a cloth draped across it can symbolize mourning or the person's last earthly garment.

Large family monuments often stand at the center or rear of a plot. These markers function almost like family homes, gathering several generations together within one carefully defined space.

Iron fences made certain family plots more prominent and separated them from the surrounding grounds. Although folklore sometimes associates iron with protection from spirits, the fences also served the practical purpose of marking family property. They eventually fell out of favor because of the expense and difficulty of maintaining them.

Some plots contain narrow brick or stone planting beds. Families filled these structures with flowers, creating a living expression of love and remembrance.

Customs of Remembrance

Visitors may notice stones, shells, flowers, toys, and coins placed on graves throughout Bonaventure.

Leaving a small stone is particularly associated with Jewish burial customs. Unlike flowers, which eventually fade, a stone provides a lasting indication that someone visited and remembered the deceased.

Coins left on military graves have also acquired symbolic meanings. A penny generally indicates that someone visited. Other coins may suggest a closer connection, such as serving with the deceased or being present at the time of death. Meanings can vary, but the larger purpose remains remembrance and respect.

The cemetery contains numerous military markers. Some graves commemorate veterans of the American Revolution, the Civil War, World War I, World War II, and later conflicts. Iron crosses bearing the letters C.S.A. identify many Confederate veterans.

Grave orientation sometimes reflects family preference, the shape of the plot, or religious tradition. Some Christians historically preferred an eastward-facing burial because of beliefs concerning resurrection. Local tradition also holds that some Confederate soldiers were buried facing south as a final expression of regional loyalty.

The Fear of Premature Burial

One of Bonaventure's most fascinating legends involves so-called safety coffins or death bells.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, medical knowledge was limited, and people feared that a coma or other unconscious condition could be mistaken for death. Stories describe bells positioned above graves and connected by a cord to the person inside the coffin. If that person awakened, movement of a hand or foot would supposedly ring the bell.

Tour guides often connect these devices with expressions such as saved by the bell, dead ringer, and graveyard shift. These explanations are entertaining parts of cemetery folklore, although language historians offer different origins for the familiar phrases.

Whether widely used or not, stories about death bells reveal a genuine Victorian fear of being buried alive.

Little Gracie Watson

The grave of Little Gracie Watson is one of Bonaventure's most visited and emotional sites.

Gracie was the daughter of W.J. and Frances Watson, who managed Savannah's Pulaski House hotel. Known for charming hotel guests, Gracie died of pneumonia in 1889 at only six years old.

Sculptor John Walz created a life-size marble statue of Gracie wearing a dress based on her appearance in a photograph. The sculpture's extraordinary detail gives visitors the feeling that they are standing before the child herself.

Over the years, stories developed that Gracie's spirit visits the cemetery at night. Visitors frequently leave coins, flowers, candy, and small toys at her monument. Whatever one believes about the legend, the gifts express a desire to assure a child that she has not been forgotten.

John Walz and the Art of Bonaventure

German-born sculptor John Walz produced some of Bonaventure's most intricate monuments. His sculptures are recognized for their realistic figures, carefully carved clothing, flowers, wings, and symbolic details.

Walz frequently portrayed women and children. Some figures stand with one foot slightly forward, giving the sculpture a more natural and graceful posture. His monuments combine personal likenesses with symbols of love, innocence, resurrection, and eternal rest.

Walz's own monument reportedly includes an unfinished area. It has been interpreted as a reminder that human beings, and particularly Freemasons, should consider themselves unfinished works, always capable of further growth and improvement.

Conrad Aiken and the Cosmos Mariner

Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Conrad Aiken has one of Bonaventure's most distinctive memorials.

Aiken's childhood was marked by tragedy. In 1901, when he was 11 years old, his father killed Aiken's mother and then himself. Despite the terrible circumstances, the family viewed mental illness as the cause and buried his parents together.

Aiken later moved to Massachusetts and became part of an influential literary circle that included T.S. Eliot. Savannah, however, remained an important part of his identity.

During visits to Bonaventure, Aiken reportedly sat on a bench near his future grave, drank martinis, and watched ships moving along the river. His bench-shaped memorial includes the words below.

Cosmos Mariner Destination Unknown

The phrase transforms the nearby river into a metaphor for life, a voyage through an immense universe toward a destination none of us can fully know.

Johnny Mercer and Savannah Music

Johnny Mercer is perhaps Savannah's most celebrated musical figure. The songwriter and performer wrote lyrics for more than 1,000 songs and helped create some of the most recognizable music of the 20th century.

His works include Moon River, Hooray for Hollywood, Jeepers Creepers, Accentuate the Positive, and You Must Have Been a Beautiful Baby. Mercer also co-founded Capitol Records and worked with many of America's leading composers and entertainers.

His family plot contains lyrical tributes drawn from the music that shaped his life. His wife, Ginger, is remembered with a reference to You Must Have Been a Beautiful Baby, while other family monuments contain words connected to Mercer's songs.

Johnny Mercer died in 1976 following complications from a brain tumor. His grave remains a popular destination for music lovers who come to honor the man whose words became part of America's soundtrack.

Commodore Josiah Tattnall

The Tattnall family's connection to Bonaventure continued through several generations.

Commodore Josiah Tattnall III served in both the United States Navy and the Confederate Navy. During an international naval conflict in China, Tattnall assisted British forces despite American neutrality. His explanation helped popularize the phrase blood is thicker than water.

Although the expression existed earlier, Tattnall's use of it became famous. Several naval vessels were later named USS Tattnall in his honor.

John Muirs Unusual Visit

Long before Bonaventure became a major Savannah attraction, naturalist John Muir spent several nights there.

During his thousand-mile walk from the Midwest toward the Gulf of Mexico, Muir arrived in Savannah with little money. Unable to afford lodging, he slept in the cemetery for several nights.

Rather than seeing Bonaventure as frightening, Muir was captivated by its wildlife and vegetation. He observed birds, insects, squirrels, butterflies, owls, and the abundant plants surrounding the graves. In his writing, he described Bonaventure as a place where life seemed more powerful than death.

His experience remains one of the cemetery's most compelling stories. A man who would become one of America's most influential conservationists found shelter among Bonaventure's trees and discovered that a cemetery could be overflowing with life.

Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil

Bonaventure became internationally famous after John Berendt published *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* in 1994.

The book tells the story of Savannah antiques dealer Jim Williams and the death of Danny Hansford inside Mercer House. Williams endured four murder trials before being acquitted. Around the central case, Berendt introduced readers to an unforgettable collection of Savannah personalities, traditions, social customs, and legends.

The book remained on The New York Times bestseller list for years. Clint Eastwood directed the 1997 film adaptation starring Kevin Spacey and John Cusack.

The book's cover featured the now-famous Bird Girl statue, photographed in Bonaventure. The sculpture originally stood in a family plot near the river, but increased visitor traffic began damaging the surrounding graves. It was removed from the cemetery and is now displayed by Savannah's Telfair Museums.

The title of the book is connected to Gullah-Geechee spiritual traditions described in its pages. According to the story, graveyard soil collected shortly before midnight could be used for good, while soil gathered after midnight could be used for harmful purposes.

Minerva, the spiritualist portrayed in the book, was based on a real root worker who allegedly assisted Jim Williams. These accounts blend regional culture, storytelling, and folklore, contributing to Savannah's reputation as one of America's most mysterious cities.

Beauty Beyond the Legends

It would be easy to view Bonaventure only through its ghosts, unusual customs, and famous graves. Its lasting power, however, comes from something deeper.

The monuments represent the way people responded to love and loss. Parents carved lambs and rosebuds for children who did not survive. Families built elaborate memorials to preserve their names. Soldiers were remembered through symbols of service. Artists transformed marble into expressions of sorrow and hope. Visitors continue the process by leaving stones, flowers, coins, and handwritten notes.

Today, people come to Bonaventure to study history, photograph its scenery, walk beneath the oak trees, visit loved ones, or simply sit quietly beside the river. Its pathways are popular with walkers and joggers, and leashed dogs are permitted. Maps, restrooms, and visitor information are available near the administrative offices.

The cemetery's uneven ground and exposed roots require careful walking, especially around older plots. Visitors should also remember that Bonaventure remains an active cemetery. Every monument marks a person, and every family plot deserves respect.

Bonaventure Cemetery is a place where Savannah preserved its stories. Beneath the moss-covered trees, history, art, nature, grief, and legend exist together, creating one of the most memorable settings in the city.