

Inside the Owens Thomas House and Slave Quarters

A House of Beauty and Contradiction

SAVANNAH GEORGIA HOUSE TOUR

During our visit to Savannah, we toured the Owens-Thomas House & Slave Quarters, one of the city's most impressive historic homes. From the street, it is easy to focus on the elegant architecture, grand rooms, and beautiful gardens. The tour, however, revealed a much deeper story.

The Owens-Thomas House is not simply the story of a wealthy Savannah family. It is also the story of the enslaved men, women, and children whose labor made that privileged lifestyle possible.

Walking through the property gave us a powerful look at these two very different experiences: one defined by comfort and social position, and the other by forced labor, separation, and a lack of freedom.

The Beginning of the House

The story began in 1816 when Richard Richardson, a successful Savannah shipping merchant, purchased the property. He hired William Jay, a young English architect who was only about 22 years old, to design an elaborate neoclassical home.

Jay incorporated Greek, Roman, and Egyptian influences into the design. Construction took approximately two and a half years, and the house was completed around 1819.

Richardson's time in the home was brief and marked by hardship. Savannah experienced a devastating fire in 1820, followed by a severe yellow fever epidemic that killed hundreds of people. At the time, people did not understand that mosquitoes transmitted the disease. The country was also suffering through the financial Panic of 1819.

After losing his wife and two of his three children, Richardson left Savannah for New Orleans in 1822. He never returned to the house. Because of his unpaid debts, the property eventually fell into the hands of the Bank of the United States.

Savannah's Elegant Boarding House

From 1822 until 1830, Mary Maxwell leased the property and operated it as an upscale boarding house, something similar to a fine hotel.

Its most famous guest was the Marquis de Lafayette, the French aristocrat and military officer who supported the American colonies during the Revolutionary War. Lafayette visited Savannah in 1825 as part of his celebrated tour of the United States marking the approaching 50th anniversary of the Revolution.

The finest room in the house was probably prepared for Lafayette during his stay. According to local tradition, he may have appeared on the room's private balcony to acknowledge the crowds gathered outside.

Lafayette was an outspoken opponent of slavery. Before his arrival, Savannah officials reportedly placed additional restrictions on enslaved and free Black residents. City leaders may have feared that Lafayette's views would encourage resistance or public demonstrations.

During the visit, Lafayette met Nelson, an enslaved man who had served alongside him during the Revolutionary War. Lafayette reportedly treated Nelson as a fellow soldier and wartime brother, an extraordinary encounter in a city where slavery shaped nearly every part of daily life.

The Owens Family Arrives

In 1830, George Welshman Owens purchased the house at auction for \$10,000. Owens was a wealthy lawyer, politician, landowner, and enslaver. He moved into the house with his wife, Sarah, and their six children. The Owens family would own the property for the next 121 years.

George Owens served as a Savannah alderman, briefly served as mayor, and represented Georgia for two terms in the United States House of Representatives. His political career was closely connected to the major issues and injustices of the period.

While in Congress, he supported the first congressional gag rule, which prevented petitions opposing slavery from being formally considered. He was also connected to the Treaty of New Echota, which helped clear the way for the forced removal of the Cherokee people from their homeland, an event that became part of the Trail of Tears.

These actions reflected Owens' personal interests as a major landholder and enslaver. At different times, the Owens family enslaved hundreds of people at this residence and on eight Georgia plantations.

The Wall of Names

One of the most meaningful parts of the tour was the wall displaying the names of enslaved individuals associated with the Richardson and Owens families.

Researchers have identified approximately 600 people so far. Around 200 were connected to the Richardson family's shipping operations, while roughly 400 were enslaved by the Owens family in Savannah or on their plantations.

The museum continues searching family letters, business documents, shipping records, bills, and public records to recover additional names and stories.

This wall changes the way visitors understand the property. The people listed there were not simply an anonymous labor force. They were individuals with families, skills, responsibilities, relationships, and personal histories, many of which were never recorded or were deliberately ignored.

Life in the Slave Quarters

We began learning about their daily lives in the carriage house behind the main residence.

During the 1800s, one side of this building contained a stable and hayloft. The other side served as living quarters for approximately five to fourteen enslaved people.

Most were women and children who performed the constant domestic work required by the household. They cooked meals, cleaned rooms, washed clothes, cared for children, tended animals, and responded to the family's needs at all hours.

The quarters were probably used mainly for sleeping. The first floor may have functioned as a small common area, while the upper level contained simple sleeping arrangements. The museum displays examples that include a rope bed, a mat on the floor, and a small box bed for a child.

The rooms provide a striking contrast with the spacious and beautifully furnished bedrooms inside the main house.

When a dropped ceiling was removed during restoration, workers discovered original ceiling beams covered with numerous layers of blue paint. The color is commonly known as haint blue and is often associated with Gullah Geechee and West African spiritual traditions. According to tradition, the watery blue color helped prevent harmful spirits from entering a home because those spirits could not cross water.

The museum found fourteen layers of paint on the ceiling, offering physical evidence of the many generations who lived and worked within the building.

From Work Yard to Formal Garden

The area between the slave quarters and the main house is now a carefully maintained English parterre garden. Its symmetrical design complements the neoclassical architecture of the house.

During the Owens family's time, however, this was not an ornamental garden. It was a working yard.

The space would have contained laundry lines, livestock such as chickens and possibly a cow, and areas for growing fruits and vegetables. A circular stone beneath the archway marks the location of the original well. A two-stall brick privy once stood in one corner.

Even the back of the house was designed around symmetry. Two Ionic columns balance the porch, while a blind window was added to preserve the exterior appearance without interfering with the arrangement of the rooms inside.

Inside the Main House

Once inside, the architectural sophistication of William Jay's design became immediately apparent.

The entrance hall was created to impress visitors. Pine columns and baseboards were painted to resemble expensive marble. Decorative floor cloth provided an attractive surface that was easier to clean than unfinished wood. Busts of literary figures such as Lord Byron and Sir Walter Scott displayed George Owens' education and cultural interests.

The hallway even contains a false door installed solely to maintain visual balance. If it had actually opened, it would have led to a six-foot drop into the basement. This devotion to symmetry appears throughout the house.

Preparing and Serving the Meals

The butler's pantry was used to organize meals, plate food, and store the family's dishes, silver, candles, oils, and linens. Original pine cabinets were painted to resemble oak and fitted with locks.

Sarah Owens likely controlled the keys, demonstrating how closely the household's valuables, and the enslaved people who handled them, were monitored.

Food was prepared in the basement kitchen and carried upstairs by hand. There was no dumbwaiter, so meals had to be moved quickly through the house.

The formal dining room was the largest and most decorative room. Its curved wall and curved wooden doors would have been difficult and expensive to construct. Elaborate plaster molding featured classical Greek designs, while amber-colored glass sidelights cast a warm glow into the room.

During Savannah's social season, which generally extended from September through May, the Owens family entertained guests with elaborate meals containing five to ten courses.

Enslaved workers planned and prepared the food, carried every dish upstairs, served the guests, responded to the bell pull, and cleaned everything afterward. A small opening in the floor led directly to the basement scullery and may have been used to send dirty dishes below.

The beauty of the dining room depended upon an enormous amount of labor occurring largely out of sight.

The Drawing Room

After dinner, women traditionally withdrew to the drawing room for tea, conversation, music, or needlework.

The most remarkable feature of this room is its trompe l'oeil ceiling. Painted rings and clouds create the illusion of a dome rising above the room. It is an impressive example of William Jay's talent, especially considering his young age when he designed the house.

The room's elegance also required constant maintenance. Smoke from fireplaces, candles, and whale-oil lamps left soot on the walls and ceilings. The carpets were made in strips and periodically removed, scrubbed with harsh cleaning solutions, dried, and sewn back together. Those difficult jobs were performed by enslaved workers.

The Children and Mom Kate

Upstairs, we visited the room shared by the Owens daughters, Mary, Sarah, and Margaret.

The children's toys included miniature tea sets and sewing supplies. These were not merely playthings; they trained the girls in the social skills expected of future wealthy wives and household managers.

Rolled sleeping mats beneath the bed represented where an enslaved nursemaid might sleep while caring for the children throughout the night.

Two nursemaids connected to the family were Emma and Kate, whom the Owens children called Mom Kate. Kate also had a child of her own. Because a child's legal status followed that of the mother, Kate's child was automatically enslaved and was sent to live on another Owens plantation.

A surviving letter from Sarah Owens mentions allowing Kate to visit her child. The wording reminds us that something as natural as a mother seeing her own child required permission from the person who claimed ownership over them.

The Owens children apparently continued calling her Mom Kate into adulthood. That connection may have been emotionally real, but it existed within a system that denied Kate control over her own life and family.

Early Indoor Plumbing

The Owens-Thomas House contained one of Savannah's earliest complete indoor plumbing systems, installed years before one was added to the White House.

Rainwater flowed from the pitched roof through lead pipes into three cisterns located in the attic, second floor, and basement. Together, they could hold more than 7,000 gallons of water. Thick tabby walls, made from oyster shells, sand, lime, and water, helped support their tremendous weight.

The house included indoor water closets and washing facilities for the family. Enslaved residents still used the outdoor privy.

The system was probably maintained by skilled mechanics, many of whom would have been enslaved workers or free people of color. Their technical contributions were essential, even though their names were rarely included in accounts of the house's architectural achievements.

Politics and the Illegal Slave Trade

George Owens used the upstairs library as his business and political office. This room introduces another difficult chapter in the family's history.

In 1858, a ship called the *Wanderer* was secretly altered to transport enslaved people from Africa. Although the international slave trade had been illegal in the United States since 1808, approximately 400 Africans were kidnapped and brought to Georgia.

Charles Lamar, one of the men involved in the operation, was defended in court by George Owens' son, John Owens. The trial took place in Savannah amid increasing tension between the North and South. The defendants were found not guilty.

The case became one of the most notorious examples of the illegal trafficking of African captives immediately before the Civil War. It also demonstrated how wealth, family connections, political influence, and pro-slavery attitudes could shape the legal system.

Below the Grand Rooms

The basement presented the greatest contrast with the comfortable rooms above.

Its uneven sandstone floors, low ceilings, heat, smoke, and heavy stucco created an extremely difficult working environment. The kitchen fire burned throughout the day and often through the night.

The kitchen contained a large fireplace, warming oven, and bread oven. Nearby, the scullery was used for washing dishes and doing laundry. Enslaved workers prepared the family's elaborate meals here before carrying each course upstairs.

A massive 5,000-gallon cistern occupied part of the basement. Unlike the fixtures upstairs, water on this level had to be removed with buckets.

Across from the cistern was an ice chamber. Ice cut from frozen lakes in New England was shipped south and stored there. In Savannah's heat, having ice that could last for weeks was an extraordinary luxury, another convenience sustained by the labor of people working in harsh conditions below the family's living spaces.

Preserving the House and Its Stories

Margaret Gray Thomas, the granddaughter of George and Sarah Owens, was the last family member to own the house. She never married and had no children.

After her death in 1951, she donated the property to the Telfair Academy of Arts and Sciences. She also left family letters, bills, business records, and other documents that have allowed historians to examine life within the house more closely.

Some of those records contain insensitive and callous descriptions of enslaved people. Yet they remain important because they help historians recover names, relationships, responsibilities, and experiences that might otherwise have been lost.

The museum also draws upon interviews conducted during the Federal Writers' Project in the 1930s, when researchers spoke with formerly enslaved people. These accounts help balance a historical record that was largely written by slaveholding families.

More Than a Beautiful House

The Owens-Thomas House is undoubtedly an architectural masterpiece. Its curved doors, false windows, decorative plasterwork, early plumbing system, painted finishes, and carefully balanced spaces demonstrate William Jay's remarkable abilities.

But architecture is only part of its story.

The house reveals how wealth and comfort were created and maintained in 19th-century Savannah. Behind every formal dinner, polished room, clean carpet, cared-for child, and carefully arranged social gathering stood the labor of enslaved people.

The tour did not ask us to ignore the beauty of the house. Instead, it challenged us to look beyond that beauty and consider its full human cost.

We left curious, thoughtful, and wanting to learn more. That may be the greatest value of visiting a historic place like the Owens-Thomas House: it allows us to step into the past while reminding us that history is rarely simple.

It is found in the grand drawing room and the hot basement kitchen, in the formal garden and the former work yard, in the family portraits and the wall of names. To understand the house, we must be willing to see all of it.