

Riding Through History

Our Savannah Trolley Tour

Savannah is the kind of city that invites you to slow down and pay attention. History appears around nearly every corner—in its shaded public squares, centuries-old churches, brick warehouses, elegant homes, monuments, and streets lined with massive live oak trees.

Today, we explored the city aboard a Savannah trolley tour. It was a wonderful way to become better acquainted with the historic district while learning the stories behind many of the places we had already seen.

By the end of the tour, we understood why Savannah is considered one of America's most distinctive cities.

A City Designed Around Its Squares

One of Savannah's most recognizable features is its system of public squares. General James Oglethorpe designed the original city plan after founding Savannah in 1733. Of the original 24 squares, 22 remain today.

The squares are sometimes called the “jewels of Savannah,” and that description seems fitting. Each one feels like a small neighborhood park, usually surrounded by historic homes, churches, museums, restaurants, and businesses.

The trolley carried us through several of the best-known squares, including Chippewa, Madison, Monterey, Wright, Lafayette, Franklin, Reynolds, Columbia, and Ellis squares. Each has its own monument, personality, and story.

Ellis Square is especially interesting. For approximately 50 years, the square was covered by a parking garage. The garage was eventually removed, and Ellis Square reopened as a public gathering place in 2010. Today, it contains a splash pad, shaded seating areas, and a statue of Savannah-born songwriter Johnny Mercer.

River Street and Savannah's Working Waterfront

River Street was one of the most interesting parts of the tour. The busy waterfront that visitors enjoy today was once the center of Savannah's cotton trade.

Many of the buildings along the river began as cotton warehouses. During its peak, Savannah was one of the most important cotton ports in the world. The steep passageways and staircases connecting Bay Street to River Street were constructed during the 1800s. Some of these uneven stairways have earned the nickname “the Stone Stairs of Death”—especially during Savannah's lively St. Patrick's Day celebration.

The cobblestones along River Street also have an interesting history. Many are ballast stones carried aboard ships arriving from Europe. The stones added weight and stability to the ships during their

Atlantic crossings. After the vessels reached Savannah and took on cargo, the stones were removed and eventually reused to help build the waterfront.

The Chart House occupies one of River Street's oldest buildings, dating to around 1790. It originally served as a ship chandlery that supplied arriving vessels and was constructed partly from ballast stone.

Savannah's port remains an important part of the city. The Savannah River has been significantly deepened since colonial times so that today's enormous cargo ships can travel to and from the port. Seeing one of those ships pass close to River Street must be quite a sight.

Visitors can cross the river aboard the free Savannah Belles Ferry, which connects River Street with Hutchinson Island, the Savannah Convention Center, and the Westin. Those wanting a longer river experience can take a sightseeing or dinner cruise aboard the Georgia Queen.

From Power Plant to Plant Riverside

One of the waterfront's most impressive transformations is the Plant Riverside District.

What was once an industrial power plant is now a busy entertainment district anchored by the JW Marriott. The building's original smokestacks were preserved and are illuminated at night, making them a distinctive part of the waterfront skyline.

Inside the hotel is an impressive collection of fossils, minerals, and other displays—including a giant dinosaur. It feels like a museum but is free to visit. The district also includes restaurants, shops, live entertainment, and the Electric Moon rooftop bar overlooking the Savannah River.

Across the water is Hutchinson Island, home to the convention center and Westin Savannah Harbor Golf Resort. The island provides a completely different view of Savannah's waterfront and historic skyline.

The People Remembered in Savannah's Squares

Savannah's monuments introduced us to many of the people who shaped the city and the nation.

In Wright Square, a monument honors William Washington Gordon, founder of the Central of Georgia Railway and grandfather of Girl Scouts founder Juliette Gordon Low. Nearby is a memorial to Tomochichi, the Yamacraw leader who befriended Oglethorpe and helped the early Georgia colony survive.

Franklin Square contains a monument honoring the Haitian soldiers who fought alongside American and French forces during the Siege of Savannah in 1779.

In Madison Square, a statue remembers Sergeant William Jasper, who was killed during that same battle. Our guide described the unsuccessful assault on British-held Savannah as one of the bloodiest hours of the American Revolution.

Monterey Square is dominated by the monument to General Casimir Pulaski, the Polish officer remembered as the "Father of the American Cavalry." Pulaski fought for American independence and was mortally wounded during the Siege of Savannah.

Chippewa Square contains a statue of General Oglethorpe, although many visitors know it better as "Forrest Gump Square." The famous bench scenes from the movie were filmed here. The bench was a

movie prop rather than a permanent feature, but a replica can be seen at the Savannah History Museum.

Stories Behind Savannah's Historic Homes

The tour passed an amazing collection of homes displaying Federal, Greek Revival, Italianate, Queen Anne, Gothic, and Romanesque Revival architecture.

The Owens-Thomas House, completed in 1819, is one of Savannah's best-known historic homes. Parts of the property were constructed with tabby, a traditional coastal building material made from oyster shells, lime, sand, and water. The property also preserves one of the nation's earliest intact urban slave quarters.

In Madison Square, the Green-Meldrim House served as General William Tecumseh Sherman's Savannah headquarters during the winter of 1864. It was from Savannah that Sherman sent President Abraham Lincoln his famous telegram presenting the captured city as a Christmas gift.

Monterey Square is home to the Mercer-Williams House, made famous by the book and movie *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. The house also appeared in the filming of *Glory* and is one of Savannah's most popular house tours.

Near Lafayette Square is the Andrew Low House, where Juliette Gordon Low lived after marrying into the Low family. She founded the Girl Scouts in Savannah in 1912. Her birthplace and the organization's first headquarters are also located in the historic district.

Our tour also passed the Flannery O'Connor Childhood Home, the Sorrel-Weed House, the Hamilton-Turner Inn, and the unusually narrow home at 536 East State Street, believed to be the smallest house in Savannah's historic district.

Churches Faith and Savannah History

Savannah's churches tell an important part of the city's story.

The First African Baptist Church was organized during the 1700s, making it one of the oldest African American congregations in North America. Its historic sanctuary was built largely through the labor and sacrifice of enslaved and formerly enslaved people. Tours of the church explore its history, including its connections to the Underground Railroad.

At Second African Baptist Church, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered an early version of the speech that would later become known as "I Have a Dream."

The Cathedral Basilica of St. John the Baptist, with its twin spires and French Gothic architecture, is one of Savannah's most striking landmarks.

As Methodists, we were especially interested in Wesley Monumental United Methodist Church. The church honors John and Charles Wesley, whose ministry in Georgia helped influence the development of the Methodist movement. Charles Wesley went on to write thousands of hymns, including "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing."

We also passed the Unitarian Universalist Church associated with James Lord Pierpont, the Savannah musician credited with writing "Jingle Bells," originally titled "One Horse Open Sleigh."

Forsyth Park and the Live Oaks

Forsyth Park covers approximately 30 acres and provides one of Savannah's most beautiful public spaces.

Its famous cast-iron fountain is among the most photographed places in the city and is frequently used as a backdrop for weddings. Wide walking paths extend beneath a canopy of mature live oaks draped with Spanish moss.

We learned that Spanish moss is not actually moss. It is an air plant related to the pineapple. Early settlers reportedly used it as stuffing for mattresses, although the insects living inside it made that practice less appealing than it sounds.

The park also contains a Confederate monument erected during the 1870s. On Saturday mornings, a farmers market is held near the southern end of the park.

Savannah's live oaks are unforgettable. Their huge limbs stretch across streets and sidewalks, creating shaded tunnels throughout the historic district. Some of these trees have been standing for hundreds of years.

Savannah and the Movies

Savannah's architecture and atmosphere have made it a popular filming location.

Our guide pointed out locations connected with Forrest Gump, Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil, Glory, The Legend of Bagdad, The General's Daughter, and Something to Talk About.

The opening feather sequence in Forrest Gump includes the steeple of the Independent Presbyterian Church. Chippewa Square was used for the movie's bench scenes, and a window near Bull Street was associated with Julia Roberts' character in Something to Talk About.

Savannah's connection to the arts extends beyond movies. The Savannah College of Art and Design began in 1979 with only 71 students. Today, SCAD has thousands of students and has restored or repurposed numerous historic properties throughout the city.

Food Recommendations from Our Tour

Savannah's history may attract visitors, but its food gives them another reason to stay.

Our guide mentioned enough restaurants to keep us busy for several more trips. River Street favorites included Huey's, the Shrimp Factory, the Cotton Exchange, Wet Willie's, Two Cracked Eggs, River Street Sweets, and Savannah's Candy Kitchen.

Spanky's was recommended as a longtime local favorite. The restaurant claims a place in chicken-finger history, and the suggested order was the chicken finger basket with a spud and honey-horseradish dipping sauce.

Other recommendations included Vinnie Van Go-Go's for pizza, Belford's Seafood and Steaks, Gryphon Tea Room, Collins Quarter, Alligator Soul, The Grey, The Olde Pink House, and Leopold's Ice Cream.

Leopold's has served Savannah for more than a century and was reportedly one of Johnny Mercer's favorite stops. Its Tutti Frutti flavor is especially associated with him.

For something a little different, Lulu's Chocolate Bar combines desserts and cocktails. That sounds like a place worth remembering.

A City Filled With Stories

Some of the most memorable parts of the tour were the smaller stories we heard along the way.

We saw the statue of Florence Martus, Savannah's famous "Waving Girl," who reportedly greeted arriving and departing ships for 44 years with her dog by her side.

We learned that Johnny Mercer wrote more than 1,500 songs, earned four Academy Awards, and helped establish Capitol Records. His best-known songs include "Moon River."

We heard how ironwork once displayed a homeowner's wealth, why pineapple decorations became symbols of welcome, and how fingerprints can still be found in some handmade Savannah gray bricks.

We also passed Whitfield Square, where a gazebo was donated following the filming of Gator, and saw the pet-friendly Myers Drinking Fountain with lower bowls designed for animals.

Every street seemed to hold another story.

Our Thoughts on the Tour

The trolley tour was an excellent introduction to Savannah. It helped us understand how the squares connect, introduced us to places we would like to revisit, and gave us a much better appreciation for the city's history.

Savannah is not a destination that can be fully experienced from a trolley seat, but the tour provides a helpful overview. Now we know where we want to return on foot—including Forsyth Park, River Street, several of the historic churches and homes, and perhaps one or two of those recommended restaurants.

What impressed us most was how Savannah has preserved so much of its character. Its historic district is not simply a collection of old buildings. It remains a living neighborhood filled with churches, homes, students, restaurants, museums, shops, public squares, and gathering places.

Our trolley ride showed us that Savannah is a city best experienced slowly. There is always another beautiful square, remarkable building, moss-draped oak, or fascinating story waiting around the next corner.

And after today's tour, we feel like our Savannah adventure is just beginning.