

TRAVEL STORY

Walking Through Savannah

The City That Saved Its Past

A walk through architecture, preservation, faith and the remarkable plan behind Savannah's historic squares

Savannah, Georgia

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After seeing Savannah from a trolley, we decided it was time to slow down and experience the Historic District on foot. A walking tour offers an entirely different perspective. From the sidewalk, you notice the ironwork, aging bricks, hidden courtyards, tree-lined streets and small architectural details that are easy to miss from a vehicle.

What began as a walk through Savannah's beautiful squares became a much deeper lesson about city planning, architecture, slavery, preservation and the people who helped save Savannah from losing its historic character.

A Beautiful City That Nearly Disappeared

It is difficult to imagine today, but much of Savannah's Historic District was once neglected. Buildings were boarded up, historic houses were deteriorating and entire blocks were threatened by demolition.

Savannah was sometimes compared to a beautiful woman with a dirty face. The beauty was still there, but years of neglect had covered it.

As modern development arrived during the middle of the twentieth century, older buildings were often considered obstacles rather than treasures. Historic structures were removed to create parking lots, commercial buildings and wider streets. Savannah was in danger of losing the very character that now attracts people from around the world.

The turning point came in 1955, when seven Savannah women organized to save the Isaiah Davenport House from demolition. Their work led to the creation of the Historic Savannah Foundation.

That single rescue helped begin a larger preservation movement. Through its revolving fund and other efforts, the foundation has since helped save more than 400 historic structures.

Savannah's preservation story is a reminder that the city we enjoy today did not survive by accident. It survived because ordinary citizens decided that its buildings, neighborhoods and stories were worth protecting.

SCAD Brings New Life to Old Buildings

Another major influence on modern Savannah is the Savannah College of Art and Design, better known as SCAD.

The college was established in 1978 and began classes the following year with 71 students. Today, SCAD serves more than 18,000 students across its locations and has become one of the most visible institutions in downtown Savannah.

Unlike a traditional college campus surrounded by walls, SCAD's Savannah campus is spread throughout the city. Academic buildings, residence halls, galleries, theaters and offices occupy restored structures across the Historic District.

The college has adapted former schools, warehouses, government buildings and other older properties for modern use. This has allowed many important buildings to remain part of Savannah's daily life rather than becoming vacant or being demolished.

As we walked, it became clear that preservation does not always mean freezing a building in time. Sometimes the best way to save an old building is to give it a new purpose.

The House That Became a Business Card

One of the most impressive buildings on our walk was the Kehoe House overlooking Columbia Square.

William Kehoe was an Irish immigrant who became a successful Savannah iron foundry owner. Completed in 1892, the house was built for Kehoe, his wife, Anne, and their ten children.

The house also served as an elaborate demonstration of what Kehoe's ironworks could produce. Its exterior features an extraordinary amount of ornamental cast iron, including columns, balconies, railings, window treatments, fences and gates. The mixture of brick and decorative iron gives the house a distinctive appearance.

In many ways, the Kehoe House was William Kehoe's portfolio. Anyone considering hiring his foundry could look at the house and see the quality and variety of its work.

The building also connects Savannah's architecture with the city's strong Irish heritage. Irish immigrants such as Kehoe became an important part of Savannah's workforce, businesses, churches and culture—a heritage still celebrated through the city's enormous St. Patrick's Day festivities.

The ironwork requires constant care. Cast iron must be painted and protected from moisture to prevent rust. Looking closely at some of the columns, we could see places where rust had begun to bleed through the paint. Even the strongest historic materials require ongoing maintenance.

When Savannah Lost Its City Market

Savannah's preservation movement was also influenced by what the city had already lost.

The original City Market area once contained historic buildings that served generations of residents and merchants. During the twentieth century, many of those structures were demolished as the city made room for parking and new development.

Unlike New Orleans, Savannah no longer has its original central market building. The loss of buildings around City Market helped residents realize how quickly Savannah's history could disappear. Once a building is demolished, even the best modern interpretation cannot fully replace it.

Today's City Market is a lively destination filled with restaurants, shops, galleries and entertainment. Nearby Ellis Square, which spent decades covered by a parking garage, was eventually reclaimed and reopened as a public square in 2010. Parking was moved underground, allowing the square to return to public use.

Although the restored square feels more modern than many of Savannah's older spaces, its return shows that cities can sometimes correct earlier planning decisions.

Oglethorpe's Remarkable City Plan

Savannah's squares are not simply decorative parks. They are part of a carefully organized city plan that began with James Edward Oglethorpe and Georgia's first settlers in 1733.

The city was arranged into wards. Each ward was centered around a public square and included residential lots called tythings, along with larger trust lots intended for public buildings such as churches and government facilities.

Homes generally occupied the blocks north and south of each square, while important public buildings were placed on the larger lots to the east and west.

This layout helped create small communities within the larger city. The squares provided gathering places, open space and room for public activities. They could also assist with defense during the colony's early years.

What makes the plan remarkable is how well it still works nearly three centuries later. Savannah's squares slow traffic, provide shade, encourage walking and create natural gathering places throughout downtown.

They also give the city a comfortable rhythm. After walking a few blocks, another green space appears, offering a place to sit beneath the live oaks before continuing.

The original plan proved flexible enough to expand as Savannah grew. Although some squares were lost to development, 22 of the traditional historic squares remain today.

Stories of Faith, Freedom and Enslavement

Savannah's beauty cannot be separated from the more difficult parts of its history.

Many of its buildings, institutions and fortunes were connected to slavery and the cotton economy. Enslaved laborers contributed to the construction of the city, including the making and laying of bricks used in important structures.

Savannah also became home to some of America's earliest Black congregations.

The First African Baptist Church traces its roots to the eighteenth century. Its present sanctuary near Franklin Square was completed in 1859 through the labor of free and enslaved African Americans. Enslaved workers reportedly contributed after completing long days of labor elsewhere.

Near Greene Square, the Second African Baptist Church was organized in 1802 under the leadership of the Reverend Henry Cunningham, a formerly enslaved man who became an important pastor and community leader.

These churches became places of worship, education, mutual support and resistance. Their stories reveal a Savannah that is more complicated—and far more meaningful—than its beautiful buildings alone might suggest.

Architecture That Continues to Change

One of the pleasures of walking through Savannah is seeing that its historic homes are not identical.

Some have formal brick façades, while others have stucco, wood siding, side entrances, iron balconies or hidden garden levels. Different architectural periods exist side by side, reflecting changing tastes, available materials and the financial circumstances of their owners.

Many houses have also been divided into apartments or condominiums. Former carriage houses and service buildings have become garages, guest quarters, offices and residences.

Modern conveniences such as indoor plumbing, kitchens, electrical systems and full bathrooms were added long after many of the houses were constructed. Every renovation represents a balance between preserving the past and making a building useful for the present.

New construction creates an even greater challenge. Residents and preservation organizations can speak at meetings, organize opposition and advocate for historically compatible designs. Ultimately, however, private development rights and city regulations play a major role in determining what will be built.

Savannah's preservation story is therefore ongoing. The city must continually decide how to accommodate growth without sacrificing the qualities that make it special.

The Living Landscape

The trees and plants are as much a part of Savannah's character as its buildings.

Live oaks stretch across the streets, creating broad canopies covered with Spanish moss and air plants. Air plants do not draw nourishment from the trees. Instead, they attach themselves to the rough bark and absorb moisture and nutrients from the humid air. After rain, the plants appear especially green and lush.

Azaleas provide Savannah's famous bursts of spring color, with some varieties producing additional blooms in the fall. Crape myrtles add color during the heat of summer when many other plants have finished flowering.

The city also works to replace trees that are lost. Younger trees grow among specimens that may be many decades old, creating a staggered canopy rather than one in which all the trees reach the end of their lives at the same time.

That careful approach helps ensure that future visitors will experience the same shaded streets that make Savannah so inviting today.

Savannah and Popular Culture

The year 1994 introduced Savannah to an even larger audience.

Forrest Gump arrived in theaters, featuring several memorable scenes filmed around the city. The famous bus-stop scenes were filmed at Chippewa Square, although the bench itself was a movie prop and is no longer located there.

That same year, John Berendt published *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. The book's eccentric characters, scandalous true-crime story and atmospheric portrayal of Savannah became a national sensation. A movie adaptation followed in 1997.

Together, these stories helped transform Savannah into a major tourism destination. Visitors came looking for movie locations, historic houses, beautiful squares, ghost stories and the mysterious Southern atmosphere portrayed in the book.

A City Saved One Building at a Time

By the end of our walk, Savannah felt different to us.

The squares were still beautiful, the houses were still impressive and the moss-covered trees were still worthy of photographs. But we could now see the struggle behind that beauty.

Savannah is a city that nearly lost much of its historic identity. Its survival required determined residents, preservation organizations, responsible property owners and institutions willing to invest in old buildings.

Not every structure was saved, and debates over growth and preservation continue. Yet Savannah demonstrates what can happen when a community recognizes the value of its past before everything disappears.

Our walking tour was more than a tour of attractive streets. It was a walk through nearly three centuries of ambition, conflict, loss, reinvention and preservation.

“Savannah is not simply a city that has history.”

“It is a city that made the decision to save it.”

Prepared from notes taken during our Savannah historic walking tour.