

## A Southern city that brims with history

Its architectural heritage was spared by William Tecumseh Sherman in the Civil War, unlike other coastal cities in the South

BY DAWNA FREEMAN, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE MARCH 23, 2010

Savannah was not on my short list when we decided to spend Christmas in the Old South. But when this sleepy destination promised the fastest connections both ways, our decision was easy.

Cabbing it from the Savannah Hilton Head International Airport on Christmas Eve day, I had visions of driving to our hotel through *Gone with the Wind* scenery. I would glimpse the stately stone pillars of cotton plantation mansions behind cast-iron gates and century-old trees.

Wrong. The estuaries and marshlands of the lower coastal plains aren't green, ever, or inhabited, much, or cotton-producing, at all. And even if they were, you couldn't squeeze a plantation in between the airport and our hotel. For it was only 15 kilometres later when we turned in to this lush and tree-canopied street, and I knew we had travelled back in time to Georgia's First City.

Second misconception: The port city of Savannah is not actually on the ocean; it's hidden behind barrier islands about 29 km inland on the edge of the grand Savannah River.

But it was an important port in its day. At the height of the cotton era, before the Civil War, Savannah was the world's leading cotton port, traders setting prices here each day.

Colonized by the British in 1733, Savannah owes its architectural heritage to mayor Richard Arnold, who surrendered the town to Maj.-Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman in 1864 on the condition it not be burned to the ground like the other coastal cities.

Today, Savannah tourists can also thank the efforts of local preservationists who, over the last 60 years, have restored some 800 of 1,100 historical buildings in the original six-squarekilometre garden city.

While Savannah is the largest urban National Landmark Historic District in the United States, its history is all within walking distance. City founder British Gen. James Oglethorpe laid out the city in a grid pattern, with streets interrupted every few blocks by one-acre landscaped squares.

After our requisite trolley tour to get our bearings, a smattering of lore and a checklist of places to visit, we began strolling around this living museum, once home to sailors and slaves, pirates and voodooists, cotton traders and shipping merchants.

We first made our way to the famous Mercer-Williams House, the goings-on there so gloriously described in John Berendt's bestselling non-fiction book *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. "The book," as locals call it, forced this secluded city of 133,000 onto the map when it was published in

1994, boosting tourism by 46 per cent. In 2006, the Hostess City of the South welcomed more than six million tourists.

The imposing Victorian red brick mansion, spanning an entire city block facing Monterey Square, was completed in 1868 by the great-grandfather of songwriter Johnny Mercer (think Moon River).

A statue of Mercer now stands in the newly reclaimed Ellis Square. As we stood before the house on Christmas Day, snapping pictures between the trolley and carriage tours, I imagined the decadent black-tie Christmas parties held in the '70s by then owner and murder suspect Jim Williams (played by Kevin Spacey in the movie adaptation).

During the Christmas season, public parks and houses alike are decorated with festive pine garlands and red velvet ribbons, lending the city a Christmas-card-like quality.

There is a spooky kind of charm to a 300-year-old city built on graveyards, so we waited until daylight to venture to the Sorrell-Weed House, one of the most haunted in Savannah.

This 18th-and 19th-century Greek Revival and Regency style home was built for Frances Sorrell, a wealthy shipping merchant, in 1838, and acquired by businessman Henry Weed in 1862.

As the tale goes, a female African-American slave was murdered by a family member in the carriage house behind the mansion. Embellishing as his audience stood looking up at the room where she was hanged, the tour guide hinted the wife had discovered her husband's affair with the slave.

So distraught was the owner by the death of this slave that he bought the house next door, boarded up the windows on the side facing the carriage house, and never set foot in his other home again. So distraught was the wife by her husband's departure, she committed suicide.

#### IF YOU GO

The best time to see Savannah is in the spring, when the city's magnolias, oleanders and azaleas are in full bloom and temperatures are comfortable in the low 20s C. March is also the time when the public can enjoy music festivals, a fantastic parade and the furnishings, architecture and collections of some of the finest private homes.

- The 75th annual Savannah Tour of Houses and Gardens, March 25-28. Sign up for walking tours of homes and gardens, lunches and seminars on cooking, architecture or antique furniture. Check out [savannatourofhomes.org](http://savannatourofhomes.org)

© Copyright (c) The Vancouver Sun