

history of savannah squares

history of savannah squares is a captivating journey into the heart of one of America's most cherished historic cities. These iconic green spaces are more than just picturesque landscapes; they are the very foundation of Savannah's meticulously planned urban design and a testament to its rich past. From their inception as vital elements of Oglethorpe's visionary city plan to their enduring role in shaping Savannah's identity, understanding the history of these squares reveals a fascinating story of civic ambition, community life, and architectural evolution. This article delves into the origins, development, and significance of Savannah's renowned squares, exploring how they have been shaped by historical events and continue to be integral to the city's charm and character.

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The Genesis of Savannah's Squares: Oglethorpe's Vision

The remarkable **history of Savannah squares** begins with General James Oglethorpe's ambitious plan for the city, conceived in 1733. Unlike the organic growth typical of many colonial settlements, Savannah was designed with a deliberate and systematic approach, aiming to create a functional, defensible, and aesthetically pleasing urban environment. Oglethorpe's genius lay in his concept of a "ward system," which served as the blueprint for the city's unique layout. Each ward was intended to encompass a central square, acting as the focal point for residential and commercial activities. This innovative urban planning strategy was revolutionary for its time and laid the groundwork for what would become Savannah's signature feature.

Oglethorpe envisioned these squares as more than just decorative elements; they were to serve practical purposes. They provided open spaces for community gatherings, markets, and military drills, essential functions for a nascent colonial outpost. The squares also offered a degree of separation between the residential blocks, contributing to a sense of order and tranquility. This foresight in urban design ensured that Savannah would possess a character distinct from other colonial cities, a legacy that continues to define its identity today.

The Ward System: A Foundation for Growth

The cornerstone of Savannah's unique urban fabric is its ward system, a brilliant organizational principle introduced by Oglethorpe. This system was designed around repeating units, or "tythings," that could be easily expanded as the city grew. At the heart of each tything was a central public square, surrounded by four residential blocks and four trustee garden plots. This modular approach allowed for predictable and orderly expansion, a crucial factor for a settlement hoping to thrive in a new world.

The original plan called for a series of these wards, each anchored by a square. This structure was not only efficient for administration and defense but also fostered a sense of community within each ward. The squares acted as communal living rooms, encouraging interaction among residents and providing a much-needed green lung in the developing city. The success of this system is evident in the fact that Savannah's original plan is still largely intact today, a remarkable achievement in urban planning history.

The Original Four Wards

When General Oglethorpe first laid out his plan, he established four initial wards, each centered around a significant square. These early squares were instrumental in shaping the initial character and development of Savannah. They served as the nascent heart of the community, providing spaces for essential civic functions and social interaction.

- Bay Street Ward (later Savannah's central business district)
- North Ward (containing what would become Chippewa Square)
- South Ward (containing what would become Monterey Square)
- West Ward (containing what would become Reynolds Square)

These original wards and their associated squares provided a framework upon which the entire city would be built. The repeating pattern of squares and blocks allowed for organic yet controlled growth, a testament to Oglethorpe's meticulous planning.

Evolution and Expansion of the Squares

While Oglethorpe's original plan provided a robust framework, the **history of Savannah squares** is also one of continuous evolution and adaptation. As the city grew and its needs changed, so too did the development and utilization of these public spaces. Over time, additional wards and squares were added to accommodate the expanding population and evolving urban landscape. This expansion was carefully managed to maintain the integrity of the original grid and the spirit of Oglethorpe's design.

Many of the squares that exist today were not part of Oglethorpe's initial plan but were added in later decades as the city prospered. Each new square was integrated into the existing ward system, ensuring a consistent and harmonious urban aesthetic. The development of these squares often reflected the prevailing architectural styles and social needs of their respective eras, adding layers of historical depth to Savannah's green spaces.

From Plan to Reality: The First Squares

The realization of Oglethorpe's vision for the squares was a gradual process. While the plan was established early on, the actual development and embellishment of each square took time and investment. Early squares were often simple, open plots of land, serving their basic functional purposes. As the city's economy grew, so did the resources available to enhance these communal areas.

The dedication and naming of squares also played a role in their history. Many were named in honor of prominent figures, significant events, or important geographic locations, further embedding them in the city's narrative. The transformation of these foundational spaces from undeveloped land to vibrant civic hubs is a key aspect of their evolving history.

Adding to the Grid: Later Squares

As Savannah's population and influence grew throughout the 19th century, the need for more public green spaces became apparent. This led to the creation of additional squares, often carved out of larger blocks or established in newly developed areas. These later additions maintained the city's characteristic pattern of squares, reinforcing its unique urban identity.

The embellishment of these newer squares often included the addition of statuary, fountains, and elaborate landscaping, reflecting the changing tastes and civic pride of the time. Each new square contributed to the overall beauty and functionality of the city, solidifying Savannah's reputation as a city of squares.

Key Savannah Squares and Their Stories

The **history of Savannah squares** is best understood through the individual stories of these captivating green spaces. Each square possesses a unique character, often shaped by its location, the people who frequented it, and the events that transpired within its boundaries. From bustling commercial hubs to serene residential retreats, Savannah's squares tell a diverse and engaging story of the city's past.

Exploring some of the most notable squares reveals the rich tapestry of Savannah's history. Their names often commemorate important historical figures, military victories, or significant settlements, providing a living connection to the city's heritage. The architectural styles of surrounding buildings and the presence of monuments further enhance the historical narrative of each square.

Chippewa Square: A Cinematic Connection

Chippewa Square is perhaps one of Savannah's most famous squares, largely due to its prominent role in the Academy Award-winning film "Forrest Gump." The iconic bench scenes, where Forrest recounts his life story, were filmed here, bringing the square to international recognition. However, Chippewa Square's history predates its cinematic fame, having been established in 1815 and named after the Battle of Chippewa, a significant engagement during the War of 1812.

Before its Hollywood fame, Chippewa Square was a vibrant social hub, surrounded by stately homes and churches. The beautiful oak trees draped with Spanish moss that characterize its appearance today have witnessed generations of Savannahians enjoying this tranquil urban oasis. Its association with American history, both military and cultural, makes it a particularly significant site.

Monterey Square: Monuments and Elegance

Monterey Square, established in 1847, is distinguished by its grandeur and the presence of significant monuments. It was named to commemorate the American victory at the Battle of Monterrey during the Mexican-American War. The square is a beautiful example of Savannah's evolving aesthetic, featuring lush landscaping and elegant surrounding architecture.

The most prominent feature of Monterey Square is the Pulaski Monument, a towering obelisk honoring Casimir Pulaski, a Polish hero of the American Revolutionary War. The monument serves as a powerful reminder of the sacrifices made by those who fought for American independence. The square itself is a testament to Savannah's commitment to commemorating its heroes and maintaining its historic beauty.

Reynolds Square: A Historic Commercial Hub

Reynolds Square, one of Savannah's oldest squares, was laid out in 1733 and named in honor of Captain John Reynolds, a colonial governor of Georgia. Initially, it served as a bustling commercial center, reflecting its proximity to the Savannah River and its role in the city's early trade and commerce. The square was a focal point for merchants and traders, contributing to Savannah's economic development.

Over the centuries, Reynolds Square has retained its importance as a public gathering place. The surrounding buildings, many of which date back to the 18th and 19th centuries, offer a glimpse into Savannah's architectural past. Its enduring presence as a lively urban space underscores its historical significance as a commercial and social cornerstone.

The Role of Savannah Squares in Community Life

Beyond their architectural and historical importance, the **history of Savannah squares** is

inextricably linked to their role in fostering community life. From the earliest days of the colony, these open spaces were designed to be the heart of social interaction, civic engagement, and everyday life for Savannah's residents. They provided common ground for neighbors to meet, children to play, and public events to unfold.

The deliberate placement of squares within the ward system ensured that every neighborhood had access to a communal green space. This design promoted a sense of belonging and encouraged residents to engage with their surroundings and with each other. The squares served as natural gathering spots, facilitating the development of strong community bonds.

Public Gatherings and Celebrations

Throughout Savannah's history, its squares have been the venues for numerous public gatherings, celebrations, and festivals. From markets and parades to political rallies and religious services, these open spaces have provided the perfect backdrop for communal events. The ability of the squares to accommodate large numbers of people made them indispensable for civic celebrations.

The traditions of using squares for public events continue to this day, with many contemporary festivals and gatherings still taking place in these historic locations. This continuity highlights the enduring role of Savannah's squares as vital centers of community life, connecting past and present through shared experiences.

A Space for Reflection and Relaxation

In addition to their roles in civic life and commerce, Savannah's squares have always offered residents a place for quiet reflection and relaxation. Shaded by majestic oaks and often adorned with beautiful plantings, they provide peaceful oases within the urban environment. The tranquility of these green spaces offers a welcome respite from the bustle of city life.

For centuries, residents have found solace and rejuvenation in the serene atmosphere of Savannah's squares. They serve as outdoor living rooms, inviting people to sit, read, converse, or simply enjoy the natural beauty. This aspect of their function is a testament to their enduring appeal as places of personal respite.

Preservation and Modern Relevance of Savannah Squares

The remarkable preservation of Savannah's squares is a key element in their enduring legacy. The commitment to maintaining Oglethorpe's original urban plan and the subsequent care for these historic green spaces have ensured their continued beauty and functionality. The **history of Savannah squares** is a story of careful stewardship and a deep appreciation for urban heritage.

In modern times, the squares remain an integral part of Savannah's identity and a significant draw for tourism. Their well-preserved state allows visitors and residents alike to experience the unique charm and historical character of the city. Efforts to protect and enhance these spaces are ongoing, reflecting a commitment to safeguarding this invaluable urban asset for future generations.

Maintaining Historical Integrity

The preservation of Savannah's squares involves a continuous effort to maintain their historical integrity while also allowing for their modern use. This often includes careful landscaping, restoration of historic features, and adherence to strict guidelines for any new developments or alterations. The goal is to ensure that the character and essence of these spaces are not compromised.

Organizations and city officials work diligently to protect the squares from inappropriate development and to ensure they remain vibrant and accessible public spaces. This dedication to preservation is crucial for maintaining Savannah's status as a UNESCO World Heritage City candidate and preserving its unique urban landscape.

The Squares Today: A Living Legacy

Today, Savannah's 22 historic squares are more than just remnants of a bygone era; they are a living testament to visionary urban planning and a vital component of the city's present-day appeal. They continue to serve as gathering places, offer natural beauty, and connect residents and visitors to the rich tapestry of Savannah's past.

The squares remain the vibrant heart of Savannah, drawing people together for everyday moments and special occasions. Their continued relevance underscores the enduring power of thoughtful urban design and the timeless appeal of well-preserved public spaces. The ongoing appreciation and care for these historic squares ensure that their captivating history will continue to unfold for generations to come.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the primary historical purpose behind Savannah's unique grid system and its numerous squares?

The squares were integral to General James Oglethorpe's visionary city plan from 1733. They served as public gathering spaces, market areas, defensive outposts, and provided green breathing room within the dense urban fabric, contributing to both the city's functionality and aesthetic appeal.

Which Savannah square is often considered the oldest and

most historically significant?

Colonial Park Cemetery, although not exclusively a 'square' in the modern sense, contains the earliest burial grounds and was a central civic space in early Savannah. Wright Square, named after Georgia's last colonial governor, is also highly significant, being one of the original four wards laid out by Oglethorpe and the site of important historical events.

How have the functions of Savannah's squares evolved over time?

Initially conceived for military defense, commerce, and public assembly, the squares have transitioned into primarily aesthetic, recreational, and commemorative spaces. They now host festivals, concerts, serve as popular tourist attractions, and are cherished by residents for relaxation and social interaction.

Are there specific historical events or figures commemorated by particular Savannah squares?

Yes, many squares are named after or honor significant individuals and events. For instance, Chippewa Square is famously known for being the filming location of the 'park bench' scene in *Forrest Gump*, but it's also named after the Battle of Chippewa. Pulaski Square commemorates Casimir Pulaski, a Polish nobleman who died fighting for the American Revolution.

What is the architectural significance of the buildings surrounding Savannah's squares?

The buildings surrounding the squares often showcase a variety of architectural styles, reflecting different periods of Savannah's development. These include Georgian, Federal, Greek Revival, and Victorian styles, with many historic homes, churches, and public buildings contributing to the unique character and preservation of the squares as living historical environments.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to the history of Savannah squares, each using italics and accompanied by a short description:

1. *Savannah's Living Rooms: The Gardens and Grids of a Southern City*

This book delves into the foundational design of Savannah's renowned squares, exploring the visionary planning of James Oglethorpe and its evolution. It examines how these green spaces were conceived as integral to the city's structure and social fabric, moving beyond mere aesthetics to understand their historical purpose. The narrative highlights the transformation of these plots from functional elements into cherished public gardens that define Savannah's unique character.

2. *Beneath the Oaks: Untold Stories of Savannah's Squares*

This compelling title unearths the lesser-known narratives connected to Savannah's historic squares. It goes beyond the architectural descriptions to investigate the people who lived, worked, and gathered within these urban oases. Expect accounts of notable events, forgotten figures, and the

social dynamics that played out across centuries in these public spaces.

3. *The Olmsted Legacy in Savannah: Squares and Urban Park Design*

This title focuses on the influence of the renowned Olmsted firm on Savannah's subsequent park development, particularly in relation to its existing squares. It explores how their principles of landscape architecture may have informed preservation efforts or inspired new park designs in the city. The book connects Savannah's iconic squares to broader trends in American urban park planning.

4. *Savannah's Green Heartbeat: A Century of Change in its Public Squares*

This work chronicles the dynamic history of Savannah's squares over a significant period, detailing how they have been used, modified, and cherished. It examines the impact of societal changes, economic shifts, and urban development on these central gathering places. The book provides a rich tapestry of how the squares have adapted and endured through time.

5. *From Trustees' Garden to City Square: A Sprawling History*

This book traces the origins of Savannah's unique grid system, beginning with the early plans for the Trustees' Garden and its eventual integration into the city's square layout. It offers a comprehensive overview of the evolution of urban planning in Savannah, emphasizing the foresight that led to the creation of these distinctive public spaces. The narrative highlights the early vision and how it shaped the city's physical and cultural landscape.

6. *Savannah Squares: More Than Just Green Spaces*

This insightful title explores the multifaceted roles Savannah's squares have played throughout history, looking beyond their horticultural and aesthetic value. It examines their significance as civic centers, sites of commemoration, and crucial elements of community life. The book celebrates the enduring impact of these squares on the identity and social cohesion of Savannah.

7. *Whispers in the Squares: Oral Histories of Savannah's Public Spaces*

This collection of oral histories provides a deeply personal perspective on the history of Savannah's squares. It features accounts from longtime residents, historians, and community members, sharing their memories and experiences associated with these iconic locations. The book offers a vibrant and intimate look at how the squares have been woven into the lives of Savannah's people.

8. *The Art and Architecture of Savannah's Squares: A Visual History*

This beautifully illustrated book showcases the architectural styles, sculptural elements, and landscape designs that characterize Savannah's historic squares. It delves into the artistic influences and design choices that have shaped these public spaces over centuries. The work offers a visual journey through the aesthetic evolution of Savannah's most beloved urban features.

9. *Savannah's Squares in the Age of Progress: Modernity and Preservation*

This book examines the challenges and triumphs of preserving Savannah's historic squares during periods of significant urban growth and modernization. It explores the debates surrounding development, the efforts to protect these irreplaceable landmarks, and the ongoing balance between progress and heritage. The narrative highlights how the city has navigated the complexities of maintaining its unique urban fabric.

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