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Bonaventure Cemetery: Colonists, Generals and Johnny Mercer

Savannah, GA

Distance: 2.1 mi (3.4 km)

Time: about 4 hrs (1 h 10 m walking + 2 h at stops)

Difficulty: Easy

Stops: 20

Route: Loop

Scan to open this hike



historictrails.org/hikes/b57zh8i

By Gregg

A 2.2-mile loop through Savannah's most famous cemetery, from the main gate past Georgia's founding colonists, Civil War generals, Little Gracie and the photographer behind the Bird Girl. It finishes along the east end with Johnny Mercer, Conrad Aiken's bench and the Corinne Lawton monument.

Free hike kit — generated October 25, 2026

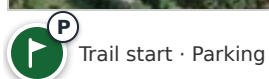
About This Hike

Bonaventure began as a plantation. Colonel John Mullryne owned the land on this bluff of the Wilmington River and named it Bonaventure. On March 10, 1846, Commodore Josiah Tattnall III sold the 600-acre plantation to Peter Wiltberger, who set aside land for a cemetery. In 1868 the Evergreen Cemetery Company was formed to sell and care for family plots. It was laid out as a Victorian cemetery with curving paths, and families came here to picnic. The City of Savannah bought the cemetery for \$30,000 in 1907 and made it public. It has grown from about 60 acres to nearly 103.

In October 1867 a young John Muir, on his thousand-mile walk to the Gulf, camped here among the tombs for five days while he waited for money from home. He wrote that Bonaventure "is called a graveyard, a town of the dead, but the few graves are powerless in such a depth of life." One morning he woke to find "my head had been resting on a grave."

Since 1992 the volunteer Bonaventure Historical Society has helped care for the cemetery and tell its stories. Today's walk visits colonists who came with Oglethorpe, a governor who signed the Articles of Confederation, generals from both sides of the Civil War, a silent-film actress, a poet and a songwriter.

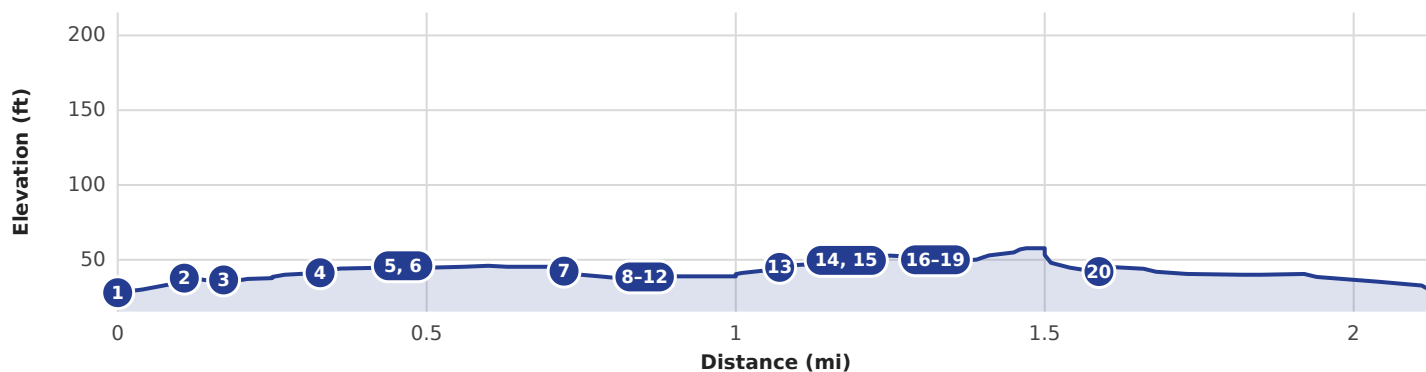
Hike Map



Satellite imagery © Esri — route and numbered waypoints as drawn by the hike author.

Elevation Profile

↑ 75 ft (23 m) gain · ↓ 73 ft (22 m) loss · 25–58 ft (8–18 m) elevation



The Trail, Stop by Stop

1 **Solomon's Lodge No. 1 Masonic Obelisk** (32.04535, -81.05093) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 5 min

Just inside the gates is the old Masonic burial ground. The obelisk in its center was put up in 2009 by Solomon's Lodge No. 1 of Savannah. It marked 275 years of Freemasonry in Georgia, from 1734 to 2009.

Read the inscription to find out who founded the lodge. It's a name you'll hear again in the colonial section.

Next: head east into the cemetery.

2 **Jack Leigh, photographer of the Bird Girl** (32.04552, -81.04930) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 5 min

Savannah photographer Jack Leigh is buried here in Section M. He was born in Savannah on November 8, 1948, and died there on May 19, 2004, at 55.

In 1993 author John Berendt recommended Leigh to Random House to shoot the cover of his book, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. Leigh photographed the Bird Girl, a statue that Lucy Boyd Trosdal had bought around 1938 for her family's plot here in Bonaventure. The cover made the statue famous. The family later removed it from the cemetery and loaned it to Telfair Museums, where it is today.

Next: follow the lane around to the John S. Banks marker.

3 **John S. Banks (Rotary Club founder)** (32.04518, -81.04939) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 5 min

John S. Banks founded the Rotary Club of Savannah in January 1914. He was born on March 22, 1879, and died on November 21, 1915, less than two years later.

The Rotary Club of Savannah placed this marker at his grave in 2015, on the 100th anniversary of his death. Read it to find the Rotary motto that drew him in.

Next: head south to Section A.

4 **John Walz, sculptor** (32.04384, -81.04839) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 5 min

John Walz was born in Württemberg, Germany, on August 31, 1844, and became a popular choice for cemetery monuments in Savannah. He made more than seventy monuments here in Bonaventure. You'll see his best-known work, Little Gracie, later on this walk.

For all that, his own grave had no memorial at first. The monument here came later.

Next: head east along the lane.

5 **Rufus E. Lester, mayor and congressman** (32.04379, -81.04702) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 5 min

Rufus Lester's career is carved right on his monument. He was a Confederate soldier, a Georgia state senator from 1870 to 1879, Mayor of Savannah from 1883 to 1889, and a member of Congress from 1890 to 1906.

Read to the end of the inscription for the short phrase his family chose to sum him up.

Next: the next stop is just a few steps east.

6 Julia Backus Smith, Savannah's marathoner (32.04375, -81.04684) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 5 min

Not every famous grave here is old. Julia Denise Backus Smith (1946-2003) was an educator, a county commissioner and a trustee of the Telfair museum.

Walk around to the back of her two-sided monument. It calls her Savannah's fastest female runner and lists her races, including the age at which she ran her last marathon.

Next: head south along the lane to Section P.

7 Herman Myers, first Jewish mayor of Savannah (32.04187, -81.04755) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 5 min

Herman Nathan Myers was born in Bavaria, Germany, on January 18, 1847. He became the first Jewish mayor of his adopted hometown of Savannah. He died in Savannah on March 24, 1909.

Savannah's Jewish community has deep roots in Bonaventure. In 1909 Congregation Mickve Israel bought land next to the cemetery for a Jewish section, entered through a gate with a Star of David.

Next: head east to the American Legion section on Walz Way.

8 American Legion memorials (32.04234, -81.04624) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 5 min

About 1,300 veterans are buried in Bonaventure, and more than 100 of them lie in this American Legion section.

Two memorials stand about 15 meters apart on Walz Way. The first is "Sacred to the Memory of Veterans of World Wars." Read the second to see who it honors.

Bonaventure also has the nation's second-largest area set aside for those who died in the Spanish-American War.

Next: head east a few steps into Section D, the colonial graves.

9 Governor Edward Telfair (32.04264, -81.04618) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 5 min

Edward Telfair came to America from Scotland in 1758. He served three terms as governor of Georgia in the late 1700s and signed the Articles of Confederation for Georgia.

He was first buried in a vault on his Sharon plantation. His remains were later moved here, and his daughters put up a memorial in 1860.

Next: the Jones graves are a few steps away.

10 Noble Wimberly Jones, "Morning Star of Liberty" (32.04270, -81.04630) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 5 min

Noble Wimberly Jones came to Savannah in 1733 with his parents, among the first colonists. He grew up to be a patriot. He served as one of Georgia's delegates to the Continental Congress and earned the nickname "Morning Star of Liberty."

Read his stone. What title comes before his name? He died on January 9, 1805.

Next: his father's grave is just to the east.

11 Noble Jones, founding colonist (32.04256, -81.04578) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 5 min

Noble Jones was born in Herefordshire, England, in 1702 and arrived in Georgia with James Oglethorpe in 1733. He owned Wormsloe, his plantation on the Isle of Hope, and died in Savannah in 1775.

A Bonaventure Historical Society marker honors 13 colonists buried in this area. Most of them were moved here from earlier burial places. Noble Jones is one of them.

Next: head north to the Tattnall plot.

12 The Tattnall Family Plot (32.04306, -81.04580) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 5 min

The Tattnalls owned Bonaventure before it was a cemetery, and they are still here. Commodore Josiah Tattnall III was born on Bonaventure Plantation on November 9, 1795. He became a naval officer, and in the Civil War he commanded the Confederate ironclad CSS Virginia, the former Merrimac, after its battle with the USS Monitor.

In an 1859 incident he famously used the old saying "blood is thicker than water." On March 10, 1846, he sold the family plantation, which became this cemetery. He died on June 14, 1871.

Next: head east to Little Gracie.

13 Little Gracie Watson (32.04292, -81.04507) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 10 min

Gracie Watson was the only child of W. J. and Frances Watson. At Easter time in April 1889, she died of pneumonia at the age of six.

Her father asked sculptor John Walz, whose grave you passed in Section A, for a statue of her. Walz carved this life-size marble figure from a photograph. So many people came to see it that the grave had to be surrounded by an iron fence.

View her from outside the fence. The historical marker is just to the left.

Next: head southeast to the old waterworks.

14 Old Bonaventure Waterworks and Garden (32.04260, -81.04437) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 5 min

A cemetery this size needs water. In 1905 the Evergreen Cemetery Company installed two Rumsey triplex pumps here. In 1934 the City put in a deep-well turbine pump.

The area was cleared in 1998, and the Bonaventure Historical Society keeps up the garden. Read the marker to learn what happened to the old pumps.

Next: head northeast to Section E.

15 Edythe Chapman, silent-film actress (32.04298, -81.04413) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 5 min

Hollywood is buried here too. Edythe Chapman was a stage actress who moved into silent films and appeared in at least 115 of them. She married actor James Neill, and both rest in the Neill family plot.

Next: head north to Section F.

16 General Hugh Weedon Mercer (32.04324, -81.04498) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 5 min

Hugh Weedon Mercer was born in Fredericksburg, Virginia, on November 27, 1808, and became a Confederate brigadier general. He died far from home, in Baden-Baden, Germany, on June 9, 1877. Records show his body was brought back to Savannah in 1879.

He began the house on Monterey Square now called the Mercer Williams House, and he was the great-grandfather of songwriter Johnny Mercer, whose grave is your next stop but one.

Read his stone for his rank and unit.

Next: head north a few steps.

17 General Robert H. Anderson (32.04376, -81.04487) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 5 min

Robert Houstoun Anderson was another Confederate general buried in Section F. After the war he came home to Savannah and became the city's chief of police in 1867. He held the job until he died in 1888.

Next: head east to the Mercer plot in Section H.

18 Johnny Mercer and the Mercer Family Plot (32.04357, -81.04403) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 10 min

Johnny Mercer was born in Savannah on November 18, 1909, and became one of America's great songwriters. He wrote the lyrics to more than 1,000 songs, including "Moon River" (1961). In 1942 he co-founded Capitol Records in Hollywood. He died on June 25, 1976, and was buried here in the family plot.

Look at the inscription on his grave. It's the title of one of his songs.

If you started downtown, you may have seen his bronze statue reading a newspaper in Ellis Square.

Next: head east to the Aiken bench.

19 Conrad Aiken's Bench (32.04346, -81.04345) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 10 min

Poet Conrad Aiken was born in Savannah on August 5, 1889. He won the Pulitzer Prize in 1930 for his Selected Poems, and Governor Jimmy Carter named him Georgia's poet laureate. He died on August 17, 1973.

His grave marker is a marble bench beside his parents' graves. Read both of its inscriptions, starting with "Cosmos Mariner."

Next: head north to the Lawton plot.

20 Corinne Lawton Monument (32.04388, -81.04330) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 10 min

Corinne Elliott Lawton died on January 24, 1877. Her monument was carved in Italy. It was first placed in Laurel Grove Cemetery and moved here in 1898. Her father, Alexander Robert Lawton, was the Confederacy's quartermaster general and later U.S. minister to Austria.

The Bonaventure Historical Society calls the marble carvings of the Lawton plot one of the cemetery's great sights. Finish here and take your time. Read the inscription at the base.

Done! Head west along the lanes back to the main gate.

Planning Your Hike

Getting There

Trail start: Bonaventure Cemetery main gate (Parking)

330 Bonaventure Rd. Free parking in the small lots by the brick restroom building at the gate, or the larger river lot at the end of Mullryne Way. Gates open daily 8:00 am to 5:00 pm. Restrooms are only here at the front. The hike finishes back at the gate.

Start and finish: the main gate at 330 Bonaventure Rd. Parking is free. The small lots are by the brick restroom building at the gate. The Bonaventure Historical Society also suggests the large lot by the river at the end of Mullryne Way. Don't park on Mullryne Way or Gracie's Lane. The Society's visitor center near the entrance is open on weekends from 10 to 4.

Hours: the gates open at 8:00 am and close at 5:00 pm every day. Admission is free. Be back at your car before 5.

Restrooms: only at the front by the gates. There are none inside the cemetery.

Time: the loop is about 2.2 miles on the cemetery's lanes. With 20 short stops, plan on about three hours.

Etiquette: stay on the lanes and paths; the plots are private. The map puts each stop on the exact location of the grave or marker, so the line dips off the lane at each one. View each grave from the nearest lane. Don't put rocks or anything else on the stones, and don't take anything away. Photos for personal use are fine.

Free tours: the Bonaventure Historical Society leads free tours on the second weekend of each month, now at 1 pm. Its mobile tour app covers more of the cemetery.

Not on this hike: the Bird Girl statue from the cover of Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil was removed from Bonaventure and is now at the Telfair Academy downtown. Several well-known sections, including the Jewish section with its 1950 Holocaust Monument and the Spanish-American War and Confederate sections, are not stops here because their exact locations couldn't be confirmed from a source. The Society's app and tours cover them.

Waypoint hours & fees

Waypoint	Hours	Fees	Restrooms	Notes
1. Solomon's Lodge No. 1 Masonic Obelisk	Cemetery open daily 8:00 am to 5:00 pm	—	—	Restrooms are only here by the gate.
2. Jack Leigh, photographer of the Bird Girl	—	—	—	The Bird Girl is not in the cemetery; see her at the Telfair Academy downtown.
13. Little Gracie Watson	—	—	—	The statue is fenced; see it from outside.
18. Johnny Mercer and the Mercer Family Plot	—	—	—	The family plot is private; please stay on the path.

Challenge Quiz

Answer as you hike — check your score with the answer key on the last page.

1 Solomon's Lodge No. 1 Masonic Obelisk

1. According to the obelisk, who established Solomon's Lodge No. 1?

- A. George Washington
- B. James Edward Oglethorpe
- C. John Wesley
- D. Noble Jones

2 Jack Leigh, photographer of the Bird Girl

2. The Bird Girl statue that Jack Leigh photographed is kept where today?

- A. Still here in Section M
- B. Telfair Museums
- C. The Smithsonian
- D. Savannah City Hall

3 John S. Banks (Rotary Club founder)

3. According to his marker, what Rotary motto drew John S. Banks to the organization?

- A. Duty, honor, country
- B. Service above self
- C. Be prepared
- D. Always faithful

4 John Walz, sculptor

4. About how many gravesite monuments did John Walz create in Bonaventure?

- A. About five
- B. Exactly twelve
- C. More than seventy
- D. Over three thousand

5 Rufus E. Lester, mayor and congressman

5. According to his stone, Lester was Mayor of Savannah during which years?

- A. 1846-1850
- B. 1883-1889
- C. 1907-1913
- D. 1933-1937

6. What short phrase ends Rufus Lester's inscription?

- A. Rest in peace.
- B. Gone but not forgotten.
- C. True to every trust.
- D. Faithful unto death.

6 Julia Backus Smith, Savannah's marathoner

7. According to the back of the monument, at what age did she run her last marathon?

- A. Twenty-one
- B. Forty
- C. Fifty-five
- D. Seventy

7 Herman Myers, first Jewish mayor of Savannah

8. Herman Myers was born in which German region?

- A. Prussia
- B. Bavaria
- C. Saxony
- D. Hamburg

8 American Legion memorials

9. The second American Legion memorial honors veterans who were what?

- A. Buried at sea
- B. Missing in action in all wars
- C. Medal of Honor recipients only
- D. Women who served in World War II only

9 Governor Edward Telfair

10. Which founding document did Edward Telfair sign for Georgia?

- A. The Declaration of Independence
- B. The Articles of Confederation
- C. The Magna Carta
- D. The Emancipation Proclamation

10 Noble Wimberly Jones, "Morning Star of Liberty"

11. What title comes before Noble Wimberly Jones's name on his stone?

- A. Governor
- B. General
- C. Doctor
- D. Reverend

11 Noble Jones, founding colonist

12. Which plantation on the Isle of Hope did Noble Jones own?

- A. Bonaventure
- B. Wormsloe
- C. Tara
- D. Hermitage

12 The Tattnall Family Plot

13. Which famous ironclad did Josiah Tattnall command?

- A. USS Monitor
- B. CSS Virginia (the former Merrimac)
- C. USS Constitution
- D. CSS Hunley

13 Little Gracie Watson

14. What did John Walz work from to carve the statue of Gracie?

- A. A death mask
- B. A photograph
- C. Gracie posing in person
- D. A painting in the Telfair

14 Old Bonaventure Waterworks and Garden

15. According to the marker, what happened before the City installed a new pump in 1934?

- A. The old pumps were sent to a museum
- B. There was an explosion
- C. The river flooded the pump house
- D. The cemetery switched to city water

15 Edythe Chapman, silent-film actress

16. Edythe Chapman starred mainly in what era of film?

- A. The silent-film era
- B. The 1980s blockbuster era
- C. Early television sitcoms
- D. Radio drama

16 General Hugh Weedon Mercer

17. In which country did Hugh W. Mercer die?

- A. France
- B. Germany
- C. Mexico
- D. England

17 General Robert H. Anderson

18. What job did Robert H. Anderson hold in Savannah after the Civil War?

- A. Mayor
- B. Harbor pilot
- C. Chief of police
- D. Cemetery superintendent

18 Johnny Mercer and the Mercer Family Plot

19. Which song title is carved on Johnny Mercer's grave?

- A. And the Angels Sing
- B. Over the Rainbow
- C. White Christmas
- D. Blue Suede Shoes

20. Which record company did Johnny Mercer co-found in 1942?

- A. Motown
- B. Capitol Records
- C. Columbia Records
- D. Sun Records

19 Conrad Aiken's Bench

21. What does Conrad Aiken's bench say after "Cosmos Mariner"?

- A. Home at Last
- B. Destination Unknown
- C. Safe Harbor
- D. Bound for Savannah

20 Corinne Lawton Monument

22. Where was Corinne's monument before it came to Bonaventure in 1898?

- A. Colonial Park Cemetery
- B. Laurel Grove Cemetery
- C. Forsyth Park
- D. A church in Italy

23. Complete the inscription: "Allured to brighter worlds and ____."

- A. found her rest
- B. sleeps in peace
- C. led the way
- D. waits for us

Challenge Answers — Leaders Only!

1. B — James Edward Oglethorpe
2. B — Telfair Museums
3. B — Service above self
4. C — More than seventy
5. B — 1883-1889
6. C — True to every trust.
7. C — Fifty-five
8. B — Bavaria
9. B — Missing in action in all wars
10. B — The Articles of Confederation
11. C — Doctor
12. B — Wormsloe
13. B — CSS Virginia (the former Merrimac)
14. B — A photograph
15. B — There was an explosion
16. A — The silent-film era
17. B — Germany
18. C — Chief of police
19. A — And the Angels Sing
20. B — Capitol Records
21. B — Destination Unknown
22. B — Laurel Grove Cemetery
23. C — led the way