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Savannah: Squares, Cotton and the Silver Screen

Savannah, GA

Distance: 3.2 mi (5.1 km)

Time: about 5 hrs (1 h 40 m walking + 2 h 45 m at stops)

Difficulty: Easy

Stops: 16

Route: Loop

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historictrails.org/hikes/5r07tdo

By Gregg

A loop from Ellis Square through Savannah's founding, the cotton waterfront, the 1955 rescue that saved the old city, and Sherman's Christmas gift. Along the way: the Forrest Gump bench site, the Mercer House of Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil, and a finale with the Bird Girl at the Telfair Academy.

Free hike kit — generated October 25, 2026

About This Hike

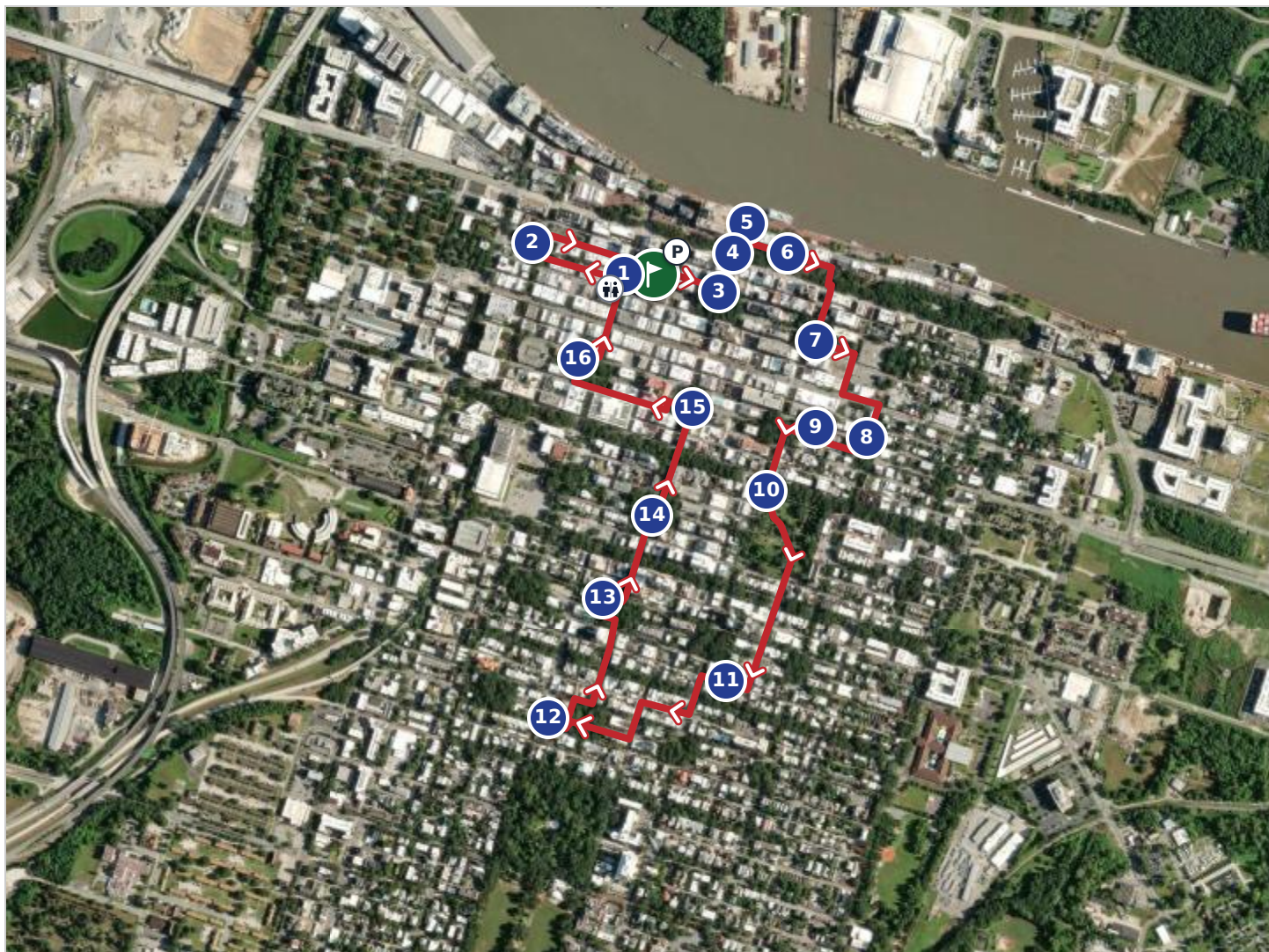
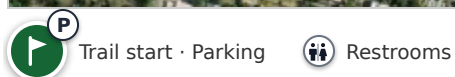
James Oglethorpe and 114 colonists landed at Yamacraw Bluff on February 12, 1733. With the help of Tomochichi, leader of the Yamacraw, they laid out a town built around open squares. That plan still shapes every block you'll walk today.

Cotton made Savannah rich in the 1800s, and the factors' offices and warehouses still line the river. The money paid for the grand houses on the squares. It was also built on the work of enslaved people, whose story is told at First African Baptist Church and in the slave quarters of the Owens-Thomas House.

In December 1864 General William T. Sherman took the city and sent President Lincoln a telegram offering Savannah as a Christmas gift. A century later the old city faced a quieter threat. In the 1950s a historic market was torn down for a parking garage. When the Davenport House was slated for demolition in 1955, seven women formed the Historic Savannah Foundation and saved it. In 1966 Oglethorpe's original town plan became a National Historic Landmark District.

Hollywood found the result irresistible. Watch for scenes from *Forrest Gump*, *Glory*, *Cape Fear*, *The Legend of Bagger Vance* and *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, plus the childhood home of writer Flannery O'Connor.

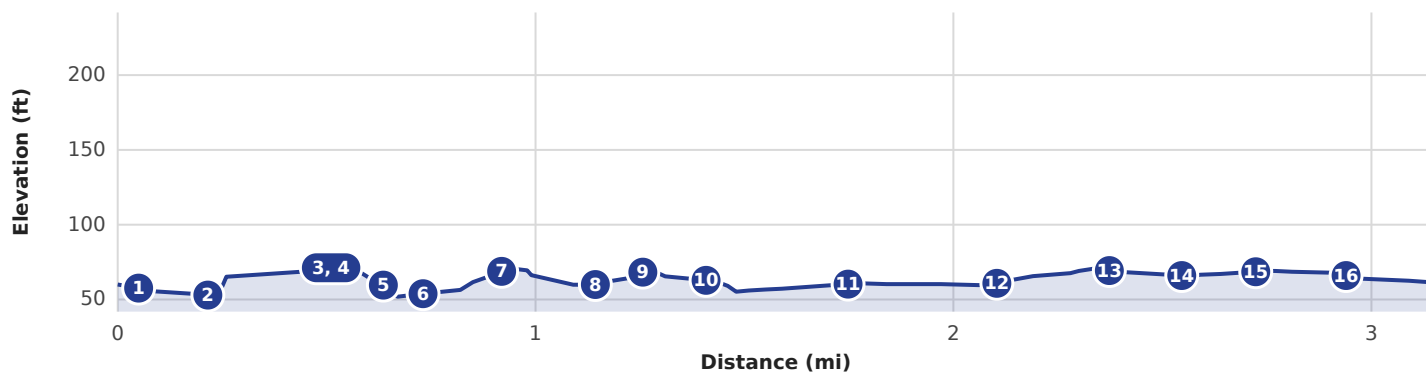
Hike Map



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

Elevation Profile

↑ 91 ft (28 m) gain · ↓ 94 ft (29 m) loss · 52-71 ft (16-22 m) elevation



The Trail, Stop by Stop

1 Ellis Square and City Market (32.08063, -81.09389) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 10 min

This has been Savannah's market square since colonial days. It is named for Sir Henry Ellis, the colony's second royal governor. In 1954 the old market house was torn down to build a parking garage. The anger over that loss helped start the historic preservation movement you'll see the results of all day. The garage was torn down in 2006, and the square reopened as a park on March 11, 2010, with the parking moved underground.

Find the life-size bronze of Johnny Mercer, Savannah's songwriter, who wrote the words to "Moon River." Notice the gap in his teeth.

Film fans: for The Legend of Bagge Vance, a Depression-era storefront was built around City Market, just west of here.

Next: head west on W. Bryan St. to Montgomery St. and Franklin Square.

2

First African Baptist Church and the Haitian Monument (32.08128, -81.09613) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 10 min

First African Baptist Church traces its roots to 1773 and the preaching of George Leile. The present building was finished in 1859. Its members, both free and enslaved, built it of Savannah Grey brick. The church calls itself the oldest continuous Black church in North America. Other congregations dispute that, and the Georgia Historical Society marker says "one of the oldest continuously operating." Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke here. In the 1940s its pastor, Ralph Mark Gilbert, revived Savannah's NAACP.

Across Franklin Square, the Haitian Monument honors the volunteers from Saint-Domingue who fought on the American side in the 1779 Siege of Savannah. The drummer boy represents Henri Christophe, later a leader of independent Haiti.

Next: head east on W. Bryan St. to Johnson Square.

3 Johnson Square (32.08025, -81.09157) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 10 min

This was the first of Savannah's squares, laid out in 1733 by Oglethorpe and Colonel William Bull. It is named for Robert Johnson, the governor of South Carolina, who befriended the colonists.

The Declaration of Independence was read aloud here on August 10, 1776. On November 8, 1860, the first flag of independence in the South was raised here.

The white obelisk honors General Nathanael Greene. Lafayette laid its first cornerstone on March 21, 1825. Greene's remains were later found in a vault in Colonial Park Cemetery and reburied beneath it.

Christ Church, on the east side, was founded in 1733 as the first church in the colony. John Wesley was its minister in 1736-37.

Next: head north on Bull St. to Bay St.

4 **City Hall and Yamacraw Bluff** (32.08103, -81.09126) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 10 min

Georgia began at the foot of this bluff. On February 12, 1733, Oglethorpe landed here with 114 colonists who had sailed from England on the ship *Anne*. Tomochichi, the Mico of the Yamacraw, agreed to the town site. A 1930 Daughters of the American Revolution tablet calls this "the Most Historic Spot in Georgia."

City Hall opened on January 2, 1906, on the site of the City Exchange, which stood from 1799 to 1904. The dome was first gilded in 1987.

Film note: *Cape Fear* (1962) shot its outdoor scenes in Savannah. A local tour company says Robert Mitchum's character walks in the front door of City Hall.

Next: take the stairs down to River St.

5 **African-American Monument (Rousakis Plaza)** (32.08168, -81.09091) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 10 min

River Street is lined with the old warehouses of the cotton trade. This monument was dedicated on July 27, 2002. The sculptor was Dorothy Spradley, a professor at the Savannah College of Art and Design.

Read the inscription at the base. It begins: "We were stolen, sold and bought together from the African Continent." It ends on a note of hope: "Today we are standing up together with faith and even some joy."

Film note: the regiment's parade scenes in *Glory* were shot on River Street.

Next: head east along River St. to the Factors Walk stairs.

6 **Cotton Exchange and Factors Walk** (32.08105, -81.08992) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 10 min

Cotton factors worked in the buildings along this bluff. A factor received goods, like a planter's cotton, and sold them on commission. Savannah was once the leading cotton port on the Atlantic.

The Cotton Exchange was designed by William Gibbons Preston and finished in 1887. Look underneath: it is believed to be one of the few buildings in the world built over a public street. Since 1976 it has been home to Solomon's Lodge No. 1 of the Freemasons.

The retaining wall below you is built of ballast stone. It runs about three-quarters of a mile and averages 19 feet high.

Next: head east on Bay St., then south on Abercorn St. to Reynolds Square.

7

Reynolds Square: John Wesley and the Olde Pink House (32.07923, -81.08923) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 10 min

Reynolds Square was laid out in 1734. The colony's Filature, which housed silkworms, once stood here.

The statue is John Wesley, minister of Christ Church in 1736-37. It was put up in 1969, near where his home is believed to have stood. Walk around to the west side of the base and read his best-known line.

The pink house on the square is the Habersham House, built in the late 1700s for James Habersham Jr. In 1812 it became Planters Bank. Today it's the Olde Pink House restaurant.

Next: head south on Abercorn St. and east on State St. to Columbia Square.

8 **Davenport House and Columbia Square** (32.07721, -81.08796) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 10 min

This Federal-style house was finished around 1820 for Isaiah Davenport. In 1955 it was set to be torn down for a parking lot. Seven Savannah women stepped in to save it and formed the Historic Savannah Foundation. That was the start of the preservation movement that saved the city you're walking through. The foundation still owns the house, which opened as a museum in 1963.

In Columbia Square, look for the new monument to those seven women. It has bronze plaques with a portrait of each of them in relief.

The square itself was laid out in 1799. Its fountain came from Wormsloe plantation in 1970.

Next: head west on State St. to Oglethorpe Square.

9 **Owens-Thomas House and Slave Quarters** (32.07744, -81.08922) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 10 min

English architect William Jay designed this house, built from 1816 to 1819. In 1825 the Marquis de Lafayette spoke to the people of Savannah from its cast-iron side veranda.

The house is best known today for what stands behind it. Its slave quarters are among the oldest and best preserved urban slave quarters in the American South. Between five and fourteen enslaved people lived and worked here at any one time.

It became a National Historic Landmark in 1976. If you tour only one house today, make it this one.

Next: head south on Abercorn St. to Oglethorpe Ave.

10 **Colonial Park Cemetery** (32.07613, -81.09043) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 10 min

Founded about 1750, this was Savannah's main burial ground until it closed to burials in 1853. More than 9,000 people are buried on about six acres. Among them are Button Gwinnett, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, and more than 700 victims of the 1820 yellow fever epidemic. General Greene's remains lay in a vault here before they were moved to Johnson Square.

The arched gateway at Oglethorpe Ave. and Abercorn St. was given by the Daughters of the American Revolution in memory of the Revolution's patriots buried here. Read the plaque.

Union soldiers are said to have defaced some of the stones, though that story is hard to prove.

Next: head south on Abercorn St. to Lafayette Square.

Lafayette Square: the Cathedral and Flannery O'Connor's Home (32.07220, -81.09142)

[Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 10 min

The spires belong to the Cathedral Basilica of St. John the Baptist. It was dedicated here on April 30, 1876, damaged by fire on February 6, 1898, and rededicated in 1900. Film note: it is the backdrop for the opening scene of Disney's 2019 *Lady and the Tramp*.

On the south side of the square is the childhood home of Flannery O'Connor, the novelist and short story writer. She was born on March 25, 1925, and lived here until 1938, going to Mass at the cathedral across the square. At six, she had a chicken that could walk backward, and a newsreel company came to film it. She won the National Book Award in 1972, after her death.

Next: head west on Charlton St. to Bull St. and south to Monterey Square.

12 Monterey Square: the Mercer Williams House (32.07145, -81.09574) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 10 min

Monterey Square was laid out in 1847 and named for the Battle of Monterrey in the Mexican War. The tall marble monument honors Casimir Pulaski. Its cornerstone was laid on October 11, 1853. Look at the figure on top.

The Mercer Williams House faces the square. General Hugh W. Mercer, great-grandfather of songwriter Johnny Mercer, began it in 1860. It was finished after the Civil War for a new owner, so no one named Mercer ever lived in it. Antiques dealer Jim Williams bought it in 1969. The 1981 killing of Danny Hansford here became the subject of John Berendt's 1994 book *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* and the 1997 film.

It also stood in for a Boston home in *Glory*.

Next: head north on Bull St. to Madison Square.

13 Madison Square: Sherman's Headquarters (32.07394, -81.09442) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 10 min

The Gothic Revival Green-Meldrim House was built in 1853 for cotton merchant Charles Green. When Union troops took Savannah, General William T. Sherman made it his headquarters from December 22, 1864, to February 1, 1865. Here he wrote his famous message to President Lincoln, offering him "as a Christmas Gift the City of Savannah, with one hundred and fifty heavy guns and plenty of ammunition." St. John's Episcopal Church has owned the house since 1943.

The bronze in the middle of the square honors Sergeant William Jasper, mortally wounded in the 1779 attack on the British lines.

Next: head north on Bull St. to Chippewa Square.

14 Chippewa Square: Forrest Gump's Bench (32.07563, -81.09322) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 10 min

Forrest Gump sat on his bench on the north side of this square. Don't look for it: the bench was a fiberglass prop, and there's nothing to mark the spot today. A copy is on display at the Savannah History Museum. The steeple in the film's floating-feather shot belongs to Independent Presbyterian Church, on the northwest corner.

The square was laid out in 1815 and named for the Battle of Chippewa in the War of 1812. The statue is James Oglethorpe, by Daniel Chester French, unveiled in 1910. Notice that he faces south, toward the colony's old enemy in Spanish Florida, with his sword drawn.

Next: head north on Bull St. to Wright Square.

15 Wright Square: Tomochichi's Grave (32.07784, -81.09225) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 10 min

Tomochichi, Mico of the Yamacraw, negotiated with Oglethorpe the agreement under which Georgia was settled. He died on October 5, 1739, and was buried here with military honors. In 1883 his old memorial was replaced by the monument to railroad founder William Washington Gordon that stands in the middle of the square. The Colonial Dames placed a granite boulder for Tomochichi in the southeast corner in 1899. Go read its copper plate.

The square was renamed in 1763 for James Wright, Georgia's third and last royal governor.

Film note: a local tour company points out the Gordon monument in Cape Fear (1962).

Next: head west on State St. to Telfair Square.

16 Telfair Academy and the Bird Girl (32.07887, -81.09500) [Google Maps](#) [Apple Maps](#)

Suggested stop: 15 min

William Jay designed this mansion in 1818. It opened as a museum in 1886, making it the oldest public art museum in the South. Look up at the five statues out front: Michelangelo, Rubens, Rembrandt, Raphael and Phidias.

Inside is the finale: the Bird Girl. Sculptor Sylvia Shaw Judson made her in 1936. She stood in a family plot in Bonaventure Cemetery until photographer Jack Leigh's picture of her became the cover of *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. The family then removed her from the cemetery, and since 1997 she has been on loan to Telfair Museums.

Done! Head north on Barnard St. back to Ellis Square and the garage.

Planning Your Hike

Getting There

Trail start: Whitaker Street Garage (Ellis Square) (Parking)

City of Savannah underground garage at 7 Whitaker St., between Bay Lane and Bryan St., directly beneath Ellis Square. Open 24 hours, 7 days. \$2.00 per hour, \$24 daily maximum; \$10 flat rate Saturday and Sunday. American Express, Discover, MasterCard and Visa only, no cash. The hike finishes back here.

Start and finish: the city's Whitaker Street Garage, 7 Whitaker St., directly under Ellis Square. You come up the stairs right into the first stop. It is open 24 hours; \$2.00 an hour up to \$24 a day, with a \$10 flat rate on Saturdays and Sundays. Cards only, no cash.

Tours: The stop times allow a look around rather than museum tours. Add about 45 minutes for each house tour you choose.

Which houses to tour: you won't have time for all of them. The best value is the Telfair Museums pass. One ticket covers the Owens-Thomas House and slave quarters (stop 9) and the Telfair Academy with the Bird Girl (stop 16), and it is good for a week. The Davenport House (stop 8) is the one to add if preservation is your interest. It's the house that started the movement, and its tours are small. The Mercer Williams House (stop 12) appeals mostly to fans of the book.

Days to watch: the Telfair sites close on Mondays. The Davenport House is closed on Sundays. The Flannery O'Connor Childhood Home opens Thursday to Sunday only, and the Green-Meldrim House Tuesday to Saturday. Many sites close for the St. Patrick's Day parade.

Restrooms and food: public restrooms are in Ellis Square at the start and finish. City Market, next to Ellis Square, and River Street have plenty of places to eat.

Underfoot: the stairs between Bay St. and River St. are steep, and River St. is paved with uneven stones. Wear good shoes.

Waypoint hours & fees

Waypoint	Hours	Fees	Restrooms	Notes
1. Ellis Square and City Market	—	—	Yes	Public restrooms and a visitor center are on the square.
2. First African Baptist Church and the Haitian Monument	Church tours Monday through Saturday at 1:00 pm	Church tours \$15 adults, \$12 students, seniors and military	—	Tour times have varied between sources; check the church's website before planning around one.
8. Davenport House and Columbia Square	Museum Mon-Fri 11:00 am to 3:30 pm, Sat 10:00 am to 4:00 pm; closed Sunday and major holidays	Adults \$15; students 18-21 \$12; children 6- 17 \$10; under 6 free	—	Tours run about 70 minutes, are limited to 15 people, and climb curved stairs with no elevator. Enter through the shop at 323 E. Broughton St.

Waypoint	Hours	Fees	Restrooms	Notes
9. Owens-Thomas House and Slave Quarters	Sun and Tue-Sat 10:00 am to 5:00 pm, last tour 4:00 pm; closed Mondays and some holidays	Telfair Museums 3-site pass, good for 7 days: adults \$30; seniors and military \$27; students 13-25 \$20; children 6-12 \$10; 5 and under free	—	Guided tours leave about every 15 minutes. The same pass covers the Telfair Academy, the last stop of this hike.
10. Colonial Park Cemetery	8:00 am to 5:00 pm November to March; until 8:00 pm March to November	—	—	—
11. Lafayette Square: the Cathedral and Flannery O'Connor's Home	O'Connor home Thu-Sun 10:00 am to 5:00 pm (guided tours 11, 1 and 3); Cathedral open Mon-Sat for self-guided visits	O'Connor home self-guided first floor by donation, guided tours charged	—	—
12. Monterey Square: the Mercer Williams House	House tours Mon-Sat 10:30 am to 4:10 pm, Sun noon to 4:00 pm	House tours charged (check the museum's site)	—	Tours enter through the carriage house at 430 Whitaker St., behind the house.
13. Madison Square: Sherman's Headquarters	Green-Meldrim House tours Tue-Sat 10:00 am to 4:00 pm, last tour 3:30 pm; may close for church events	House tours \$15 adults, \$13.50 seniors, \$10 students	—	—
16. Telfair Academy and the Bird Girl	Tue-Sun 10:00 am to 5:00 pm; closed Mondays	Telfair Museums 3-site pass: adults \$30; seniors and military \$27; students 13-25 \$20; children 6-12 \$10; 5 and under free	—	The Bird Girl is inside the Telfair Academy (not the Jepson Center across the square). The pass from the Owens-Thomas House gets you in.

Challenge Quiz

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

1 Ellis Square and City Market

1. What is the bronze Johnny Mercer statue doing?

- A. Playing a piano
- B. Reading a newspaper
- C. Singing into a microphone
- D. Conducting an orchestra

2 First African Baptist Church and the Haitian Monument

2. According to the marker, what is First African Baptist's current building made of?

- A. Tabby (oyster-shell concrete)
- B. Savannah Grey brick
- C. Georgia marble
- D. Cypress timber

3 Johnson Square

3. According to the Johnson Square marker, on what date was the Declaration of Independence read here?

- A. July 4, 1776
- B. August 10, 1776
- C. February 12, 1733
- D. December 22, 1864

4 City Hall and Yamacraw Bluff

4. The 1930 DAR tablet says the Georgia Daughters of the American Revolution voted Yamacraw Bluff what?

- A. The Birthplace of the South
- B. The Most Historic Spot in Georgia
- C. The Oldest Port in America
- D. The Hostess City of the South

5 African-American Monument (Rousakis Plaza)

5. Whose words are inscribed on the African-American Monument?

- A. Langston Hughes
- B. Maya Angelou
- C. Toni Morrison
- D. Zora Neale Hurston

6 Cotton Exchange and Factors Walk

6. According to its marker, what is unusual about where the Cotton Exchange was built?

- A. On top of a colonial cemetery
- B. Over an existing public street
- C. On an old ship's hull
- D. Inside an old fort

7 Reynolds Square: John Wesley and the Olde Pink House

7. Complete Wesley's quotation on the west side of the statue's base: "I look upon all the world as my ____."

- A. Home
- B. Classroom
- C. Parish
- D. Congregation

8 Davenport House and Columbia Square

8. How many women are portrayed on the preservation monument in Columbia Square?

- A. Three
- B. Five
- C. Seven
- D. Twelve

9 Owens-Thomas House and Slave Quarters

9. From what kind of structure did Lafayette speak to Savannah's citizens at this house in 1825?

- A. A wooden front porch
- B. A cast-iron side veranda
- C. The rooftop
- D. A stone pulpit in the garden

10 Colonial Park Cemetery

10. Which years of the American Revolution are inscribed on the DAR gateway plaque?

- A. 1733-1776
- B. 1775-1783
- C. 1776-1781
- D. 1861-1865

11 Lafayette Square: the Cathedral and Flannery O'Connor's Home

11. According to the historical marker, until what year did Flannery O'Connor live in this house?

- A. 1925
- B. 1938
- C. 1950
- D. 1964

12 Monterey Square: the Mercer Williams House

12. How many people named Mercer ever lived in the Mercer House?

- A. None
- B. One
- C. Three
- D. Five generations

13 Madison Square: Sherman's Headquarters

13. According to the marker, on what date did Sherman begin using this house as his headquarters?

- A. July 4, 1863
- B. December 22, 1864
- C. April 9, 1865
- D. December 25, 1865

14 Chippewa Square: Forrest Gump's Bench

14. Which direction does the Oglethorpe statue face?

- A. North, toward the river
- B. South, toward Spanish Florida
- C. East, toward the ocean
- D. West, toward Creek lands

15 Wright Square: Tomochichi's Grave

15. On the boulder's plate, Tomochichi is called the Mico of which people?

- A. The Cherokees
- B. The Yamacraws
- C. The Seminoles
- D. The Guale

16 Telfair Academy and the Bird Girl

16. Which artist is one of the five statues in front of the Telfair Academy?

- A. Leonardo da Vinci
- B. Rembrandt
- C. Vincent van Gogh
- D. Claude Monet

Challenge Answers — Leaders Only!

1. B — Reading a newspaper
2. B — Savannah Grey brick
3. B — August 10, 1776
4. B — The Most Historic Spot in Georgia
5. B — Maya Angelou
6. B — Over an existing public street
7. C — Parish
8. C — Seven
9. B — A cast-iron side veranda
10. B — 1775-1783
11. B — 1938
12. A — None
13. B — December 22, 1864
14. B — South, toward Spanish Florida
15. B — The Yamacraws
16. B — Rembrandt