

history of savannah squares

History of Savannah Squares

The history of Savannah squares is a captivating tale that intertwines urban planning, architecture, and the cultural evolution of one of America's most storied cities. Savannah, Georgia, renowned for its picturesque streets and beautifully preserved historical architecture, owes much of its charm to its iconic squares. These public spaces are not just parks; they are integral components of the city's urban fabric, serving as social hubs, gathering spots, and historical landmarks. This article delves into the origins, development, and significance of Savannah's squares, exploring how they have shaped the city's identity over the centuries.

Origins of Savannah's Squares

The genesis of Savannah's squares can be traced back to the city's founding in 1733. General James Oglethorpe, the founder of Savannah, envisioned a city that would be both functional and aesthetically pleasing. He implemented a bold layout that was innovative for its time, which included the establishment of a series of squares.

Oglethorpe's Plan

Oglethorpe's design was influenced by the concepts of the Enlightenment, emphasizing rationality and order. Key features of his plan included:

- Grid Layout: Savannah was laid out in a grid pattern, with streets that ran parallel and perpendicular to the river.
- Public Squares: Oglethorpe allocated areas for public squares every few blocks. Originally, there were four squares, but this number would grow over time.
- Military and Civic Purposes: The squares were intended for military drills, public gatherings, and community events, serving both practical and social functions.

Development Through the Centuries

As Savannah grew, so did the number and significance of its squares. By the early 19th century, the city had expanded, and the squares became essential to its urban landscape.

19th Century Growth

During the 1800s, Savannah experienced rapid growth due to its status as a major port city. This period saw the following developments regarding the squares:

- Increased Number of Squares: The original four squares were supplemented by others, reaching a total of 24 squares by the mid-19th century.
- Civic Monuments: Many squares became sites for monuments and statues commemorating local heroes and significant historical events.
- Urban Green Spaces: The squares evolved into green spaces where residents could enjoy nature, social interaction, and cultural activities.

Notable Squares and Their Features

Several squares stand out due to their unique features and historical significance. Some of the most notable include:

1. Chippewa Square: Known for its association with the film "Forrest Gump," this square features a statue of General James Oglethorpe and is surrounded by oak trees draped in Spanish moss.
2. Forsyth Park: Although not an original square, Forsyth Park is a central green space that incorporates elements of the squares and serves as a gathering place for festivals and events.
3. Monterey Square: This square is famous for the Jim Williams House, a prominent example of Savannah's architectural heritage.

Architectural and Cultural Significance

The architectural styles found in and around the squares contribute to Savannah's reputation as a historical treasure. The squares are flanked by various styles of homes, churches, and public buildings.

Architectural Styles

Savannah's squares feature diverse architectural styles, reflecting various periods and influences:

- Georgian: The original buildings from the colonial era showcase Georgian design with symmetrical facades and classic proportions.
- Federal: Following the American Revolution, the Federal style became popular, characterized by decorative motifs and elegant craftsmanship.

- Victorian: The Victorian era brought intricate designs and vibrant colors, evident in many buildings surrounding the squares.

Cultural Impact

The squares have played a crucial role in Savannah's cultural life:

- Public Events: The squares serve as venues for festivals, parades, and concerts, fostering a sense of community.
- Tourism: The historic squares attract millions of visitors each year, contributing to the local economy and promoting Savannah's rich history.
- Art and Sculpture: Many squares feature public art installations and sculptures, reflecting the city's artistic heritage.

Preservation Efforts and Modern-Day Importance

In recent decades, there has been a significant focus on the preservation and maintenance of Savannah's squares. As urban development continues to encroach upon historic areas, community members and organizations work diligently to protect these valuable spaces.

Preservation Initiatives

Several organizations and initiatives are dedicated to preserving Savannah's squares:

- Historic Savannah Foundation: This non-profit organization advocates for the preservation of historic structures and public spaces in Savannah.
- City of Savannah: The city government implements policies and regulations to protect the integrity of the squares and surrounding areas.
- Community Engagement: Local residents are encouraged to participate in maintenance and beautification efforts, fostering a sense of ownership and pride in their neighborhoods.

Modern Relevance

Today, Savannah's squares serve multiple purposes:

- Social Spaces: They are popular spots for locals and tourists alike to relax, enjoy picnics, and engage in

recreational activities.

- **Historical Education:** The squares provide a living history lesson, with interpretative signs and guided tours available to educate visitors about their significance.

- **Civic Engagement:** The squares are often used for civic meetings, political rallies, and community discussions, reinforcing their role as centers of public life.

Conclusion

The history of Savannah squares is a rich tapestry woven from the threads of urban planning, architecture, culture, and community. From their inception by James Oglethorpe to their modern-day significance, the squares have evolved into vital components of Savannah's identity. They are not merely green spaces; they are symbols of the city's resilience, creativity, and enduring spirit. As Savannah continues to grow and change, the squares remain a steadfast reminder of the past, a gathering place for the present, and a beacon for the future.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are Savannah Squares?

Savannah Squares are public parks or plazas in Savannah, Georgia, designed as part of the city's original layout in the early 18th century. They serve as focal points for community gatherings and events.

How many squares are there in Savannah?

There are 22 public squares in Savannah, each with its own unique history, design, and significance.

Who designed the original layout of Savannah and its squares?

The original layout of Savannah, including its squares, was designed by General James Oglethorpe in 1733, inspired by European city planning.

What was the purpose of the squares in the 18th century?

The squares were designed to serve multiple purposes, including providing green space for recreation, facilitating social interactions, and acting as sites for public meetings and events.

Which square is considered the most famous in Savannah?

Chippewa Square is one of the most famous squares in Savannah, largely due to its appearance in the film 'Forrest Gump,' where Tom Hanks's character sat on a bench recounting his life story.

How have Savannah Squares evolved over time?

Over time, Savannah Squares have evolved from practical public spaces to significant historical and cultural landmarks, now featuring monuments, statues, and events that reflect the city's rich heritage.

What role do Savannah Squares play in modern community life?

Today, Savannah Squares are vital for community life, hosting festivals, farmer's markets, and concerts, while also serving as serene retreats for locals and tourists alike.

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