

THE STORY OF GEORGIA'S CAPITOLS AND CAPITAL CITIES (abridged)

by: Edwin L. Jackson & Carl Vinson
Institute of Government
The University of Georgia

When Georgia declared its independence from Great Britain in 1776, Atlanta did not exist. At that time, Indians occupied most of the state, and the Atlanta vicinity fell on the boundary line between the Creek and Cherokee Indians--the two principal Indian tribes in Georgia.

The story of how Atlanta came to be Georgia's capital city--and of the gold-domed capitol building--is a fascinating one. But first, a distinction should be made in two similar words--"capital" and "capitol." These two words--sometimes used incorrectly--derive from the Latin word "caput," meaning "head." Although the word "capital" now has a number of different meanings, within government it refers to the city where the government of a state or nation is located. Thus, Atlanta is the capital of Georgia, as Washington, D.C., is the capital of the United States. (Incidentally, the term "capital" is not used to designate the city where a county's government is located. Historically, such a city was termed the "county site," but today is referred to as the "county seat.") "Capitol," on the other hand, refers to the large, often domed, building that serves as the main center of government.

Georgia's First Capital

Atlanta is the fifth city to be designated capital of Georgia. Several other cities have also served as temporary seats of government.

To trace the history of these capitals, we must go back over 200 years, beginning with the founding of Georgia. In February 1733, James Oglethorpe landed at Yamacraw Bluff, which was so named after the Yamacraw Indians--a tribe of the Creek Indians. Tomochichi, chief of the Yamacraws, gave Oglethorpe approval for a settlement, which Oglethorpe named Savannah, after the river of that name on which the new settlement was located.

In May 1733, Oglethorpe and Tomochichi signed a treaty, the first of a long number that would eventually involve all Indian lands in Georgia, which ceded Creek lands to the Trustees from the Savannah to the Altamaha rivers, inland from the coast as far as the tide flowed. It is probably incorrect to designate Savannah as "capital" or "seat of government" of the colony at this point. Actual governmental power resided with the trustees back in London, subject to the king's assent. By virtue of their 1732 charter, the trustees were given control of the new colony for 21 years, after which Georgia would become the responsibility of the Crown. During this time, the trustees never designated a governor for the colony, instead retaining much of the control themselves. Oglethorpe, himself a trustee, led the founding of the colony, but by the terms of the charter was forbidden from holding office in Georgia. And

although given only limited authority, he soon assumed leadership in the colony.

With Georgia's transition from a trustee to royal colony in 1754, the Board of Trade designated Savannah as Georgia's capital city (or more correctly the "seat of government")--and it was here that the Royal Governor, new legislative assembly, and courts were headquartered. Just after Christmas of 1778, however, Savannah fell to British forces, and Georgia's government fled the city, attempting to reorganize in Augusta, 127 miles to the north. After the capture of Savannah, British and Tory sympathizers attempted to reinstitute Royal Government in the city.

In January 1779, an attempt was made to convene the revolutionary, or Whig, legislature in Augusta, but representatives from only three counties were present, and thus no quorum could be assembled.

Augusta Becomes State Capital

Important events had been taking place in Georgia in addition to the Revolutionary War. Large areas of Indian lands neighboring the coastal area of the state had been obtained from the Indians and opened to new settlers, and the center of population began shifting away from Savannah and the coast. During the Revolution, people in Georgia frontier settlements had discovered how convenient it was to have the capital in Augusta, for in those days, many matters handled by courts today--such as divorces and name changes--had to be enacted by the legislature. This was especially true since there were no trains at this time, and other forms of transportation were slow and primitive.

Therefore, by 1784, there was growing concern among the new settlers that the capital not revert to Savannah. The agitation for a new capital became so great that when the General Assembly adjourned its last meeting in Savannah on February 22, 1785, it resolved that "all future meetings of the Legislature shall be and continue at that place (Augusta) until otherwise ordered by the General Assembly."

Augusta was thus now the official capital, and the first session of the legislature convened there on January 3, 1786. However, for many, even Augusta was too far east, and on January 26, 1786, the legislature appointed a commission to find a "proper and convenient place" for a new capital--one that would be centrally located and accessible to all residents of the occupied sections of Georgia.

For the 1786 session, lawmakers rented the house of Abraham Jones, located on the southwestern corner of Broad Street and Lincoln (today Third) Street. Out of need for a larger facility, the General Assembly negotiated with the trustees of Richmond Academy for rental of its building on the eastern corner of Lincoln and Elbert Streets (today Third and Fourth Streets). The trustees thereafter purchased the two adjacent lots (lots 9 and 10) and built a new academy adjacent to the building occupied by the General Assembly.

Georgia's Third Capital--Louisville

The commission appointed by the legislature in 1786 to find a new site for the capital was not entirely unbridled in its task, for the legislature's mandate also stipulated that the commission select a location within 20 miles of an Indian trading post known as "Galphin's

Old Town" or "Galphinton" on the Ogeechee River in what is now Jefferson County. It was here that George Galphin established a trading post two decades earlier.

The commission was authorized to purchase 1,000 acres for the new city, which would be patterned after Philadelphia, the first capital of the United States. The legislature also directed that the new capital site be called "Louisville," in honor of Louis XVI of France in appreciation for French help during the Revolutionary War.

Despite the designation of the new capital city, Augusta continued to serve as state capital for 10 more years, until 1796. The building of the capital at Louisville was delayed because of lack of funds, the death of the contractor, and the rush to obtain and disburse Creek and Cherokee lands.

Vast amounts of newly acquired Indian lands were being given away free or at nominal cost, and a great migration of settlers was pushing into Georgia, ultimately pressing for more and more land. In the midst of this sometimes tragic period of Georgia's history, a number of state government officials became involved in dishonest land speculation and other illegal activities, the most notable or infamous being the Yazoo Land Fraud.

Finally in 1795, a special constitutional convention was held, in part to correct the land speculation and fraud. Here a new amendment to the Constitution of 1789 was adopted, officially designating Louisville as the "permanent seat of government" and also directing that the governor and other state officials be in the new capitol at Louisville before the next meeting of the legislature.

By March 1796, a new capitol building in the 18th century red brick Georgian architectural style was completed, and Georgia's state government soon occupied the new capital city. There are no known paintings or sketches of this capitol building, except for a celebrated drawing of the burning of the Yazoo Act on the grounds of the Louisville capitol.

The press for new lands, however, continued unabated, and Louisville, Georgia's first planned capital city, would serve as seat of government for only 10 years. Interestingly, it seems that a desire to move the capital also came from the malarial symptoms which developed in Louisville during this period.

In 1802, Indian lands west of Louisville were added to the state. No sooner had this territory been divided into counties than a drive to move the seat of government again was initiated. On December 2, 1804, lawmakers passed an act to build a new capital in Baldwin County. Some 3,240 acres of land were appropriated for the new town, which would be named Milledgeville, in honor of then Governor John Milledge.

It is not precisely known when state officials left Louisville for the new capital, though it is known that in December 1806, the legislature at Louisville passed an act appointing commissioners of the town of Milledgeville.

By an act of September 1807, the legislature made the Louisville statehouse into a public arsenal. This building was torn down around the turn of the century, and replaced by the courthouse currently standing. On the grounds of this courthouse, a plaque marks the site of Georgia's first capitol building.

Milledgeville as State Capital

The story of the Milledgeville era as Georgia's state capital began after only seven years in

the Louisville capital. On May 11, 1803, a joint session of the General Assembly appointed a commission to select a site at the head of navigation of the Oconee River which would be suitable for a permanent capital to be named Milledgeville.

The site selected had been occupied in 1795 by Fort Defiance, built by General Elijah Clarke, who planned to set up a new republic in Creek Indian lands. His plans were soon thwarted, and the fort was later destroyed.

In December 1804, the General Assembly accepted the plans presented by the commissioners. Lots were sold, the money from which was to be used to construct the new statehouse.

For 60 years, Milledgeville served as Georgia's capital city. However, the pressures for more Indian lands continued, and, particularly after the Cherokees were removed from the state in 1834, it was to be expected that a desire to move the capital would soon be heard. Adding to the pressures came the era of the railroad.

The new candidate for capital city was a small settlement 90 miles northwest of Milledgeville on the Chattahoochee River. Originally an Indian village named Standing Peachtree, the area was part of an 1821 Creek territory ceded to Georgia. White settlers soon inhabited this area; in December 1836, the Georgia legislature chartered the Western and Atlantic railroad to connect the Chattahoochee and Tennessee Rivers. By 1838, construction on the railroad had begun, and soon the collection of stores and shacks supplying the railroad builders from the southern end of the line was properly known as "Terminus."

In December 1843, the legislature incorporated Terminus but changed its name to Marthasville, in honor of former Governor Wilson Lumpkin's youngest daughter, Martha. However, some residents and workers objected to a frontier railroad town bearing such a feminine name, so the new name of "Atlanta" (based on the Western and Atlantic Railroad) was proposed. Despite Lumpkin's disapproval of what he considered a slight to his daughter, the General Assembly formally approved legislation in December 1847 renaming Marthasville as Atlanta.

Atlanta was soon to vie for selection as state capital, in part due to its rapid growth and its status as rail center of Georgia.

Atlanta Becomes State Capital

On June 30, 1868, a train of 16 cars left Atlanta for Milledgeville with an order from the provisional governor to bring back statehouse furniture and furnishings. Five days later, on July 4, the first meeting of the legislature took place in Atlanta on the very site of today's capitol. However, in 1868 this site marked the location of the combination Atlanta City Hall and Fulton County Courthouse, which for a brief period served as Georgia's first statehouse in Atlanta.