

# Georgia's FIRST PEOPLE



Theodore de Bry engraving of Jacques le Moyne drawing

For thousands of years, the coast of Georgia has been inhabited. The first people to live here were Indigenous Paleoindian groups who migrated into coastal Georgia as early as 10,000 BC.

They lived nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyles and utilized the abundant estuaries, upland plants, and animals for food. During the Woodland Period, a more sedentary lifestyle emerged as the climate warmed. Villages became more permanent, and crop cultivation contributed to subsistence along with hunting and fishing. American Indians living along the coast of Georgia and northeast Florida were documented in the 16th century by French artist Jacques le Moyne de Morgues. His illustrations depicted hunting wild game such as deer and alligators. When the first English settlers arrived in Savannah in 1733, they encountered members of the Muscogee (Creek) living along the river.



Theodore de Bry engraving of Jacques le Moyne drawing

## Modes of Travel

The Savannah River provided food and water, but it also provided a route for transportation and trading. American Indians crafted dugout canoes carved from large logs to traverse the river. These boats were used for fishing, transportation, and trading.

## Georgia's Indigenous People

Many American Indian groups may have occupied the coastal region of Georgia during the early protohistoric era. By the late 17th and early 18th century, most of modern-day Georgia was occupied by members of the Muscogee (Creek) Confederacy, a loose alliance of ethnically diverse American Indians.

The Yamacraw were the predominant group of American Indians living in the Savannah area when colonists arrived. This area remains the ancestral lands of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, Kialegee Tribal Town, Alabama-Quassarte Tribal Town, Thlopthlocco Tribal Town, Seminole Nation of Oklahoma, Seminole Tribe of Florida, Shawnee Tribe, Absentee Shawnee Tribe, Eastern Shawnee Tribe, and the Catawba Indian Nation.

## Pottery and Tools

Pottery first appeared in Georgia during the Late Archaic Period. Archaeologists describe the earliest pottery in Georgia as Stallings, a plain, fiber-tempered pottery type. Later vessel styles were decorated by stamping, incising, and impressing the wet clay before firing. Vessels were used for food storage and cooking. Early tools included spear points and drills made from rock, hammerstones, bone hooks, and shell tools.



THOM'S CREEK POTTERY

STALLINGS POTTERY

Examples of Thom's Creek and Stallings pottery types dating from the Late Archaic period (2500-1000 BC)

# Settlement of SAVANNAH



Trustees meet American Indians in London  
Courtesy Winterthur

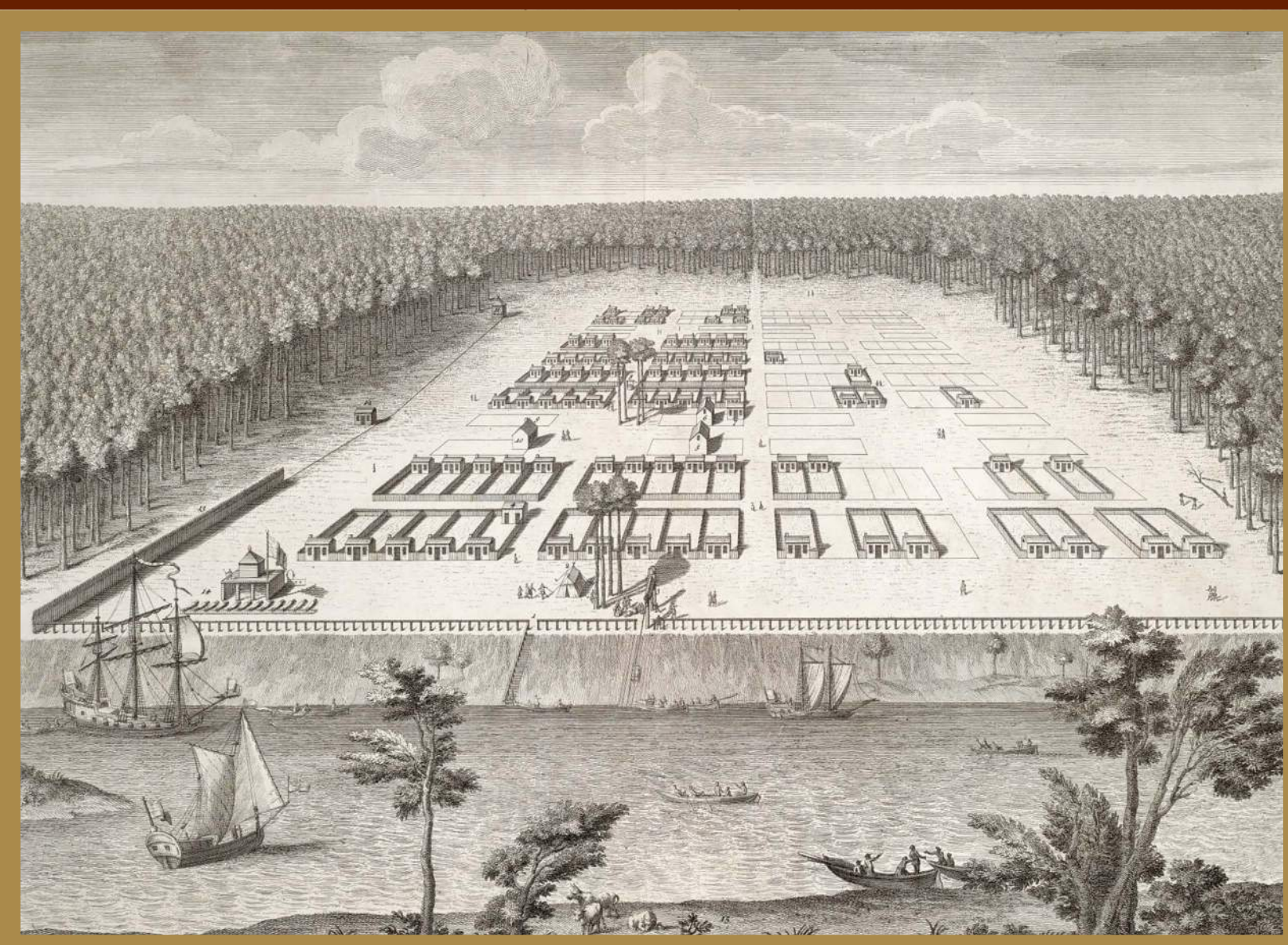


Illustration of Savannah in 1734  
Courtesy Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library / University of Georgia Libraries

*In 1733, the British galley Anne arrived in Charleston, South Carolina, with James Oglethorpe, colonists, and provisions to build a colony south of the Savannah River.*

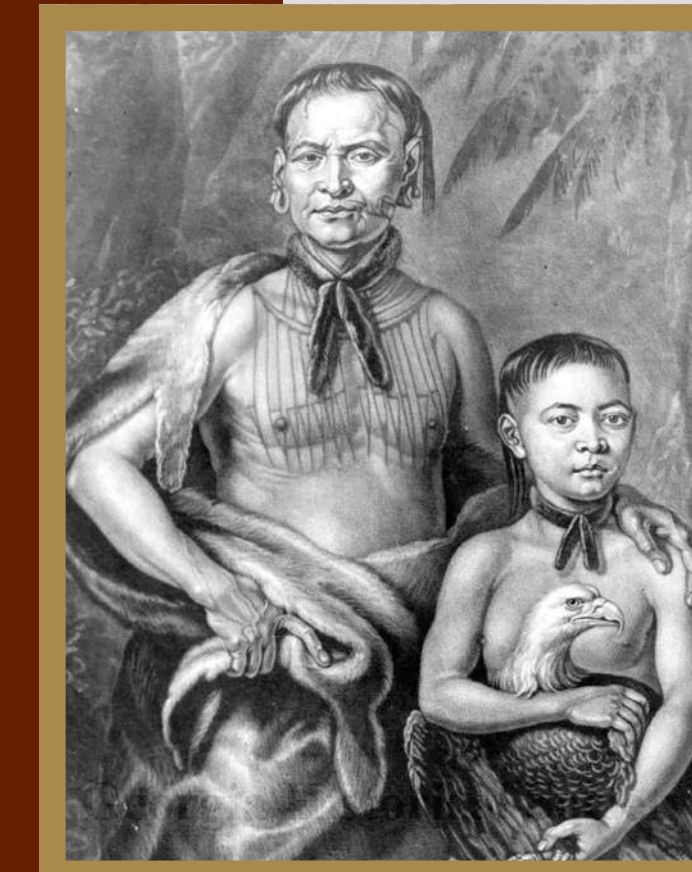
Oglethorpe sought to create a settlement of opportunity for the colonists, some of London's poorest residents. While they rested in Beaufort, South Carolina, Oglethorpe took a small boat to the Savannah River. He selected a high bluff on the south side of the river for this settlement. With assistance from Mary Musgrove, the bilingual daughter of an English trader and a Muscogee (Creek) mother, Oglethorpe negotiated with Yamacraw Chief Tomochichi for the rights to settle this bluff.



## Meet Mary Musgrove

Mary Musgrove served as an interpreter for James Oglethorpe, from 1733 until 1743. She was an essential part of the founding of Savannah and the establishment of the Georgia colony. Because she was half-Muscogee (Creek) and bilingual, she aided in interpreting and negotiating the rights for Oglethorpe to settle on the Savannah River bluff with Chief Tomochichi and neighboring Muscogee (Creek) people.

Oglethorpe laid out the settlement in a perfect grid pattern with common and public spaces. His original design is still reflected in the city today. In one of his first reports to the Georgia Trustees in England, he described the site of Savannah as a "healthy" location "about ten miles from the sea." His plan for Georgia's economy included the production of flax, hemp, cotton, indigo, olives, dates, raisins, pitch, tar, rice, and mulberry trees for silkworms.



Yamacraw Chief Tomochichi  
and nephew Toonahowi  
Courtesy Georgia Historical Society

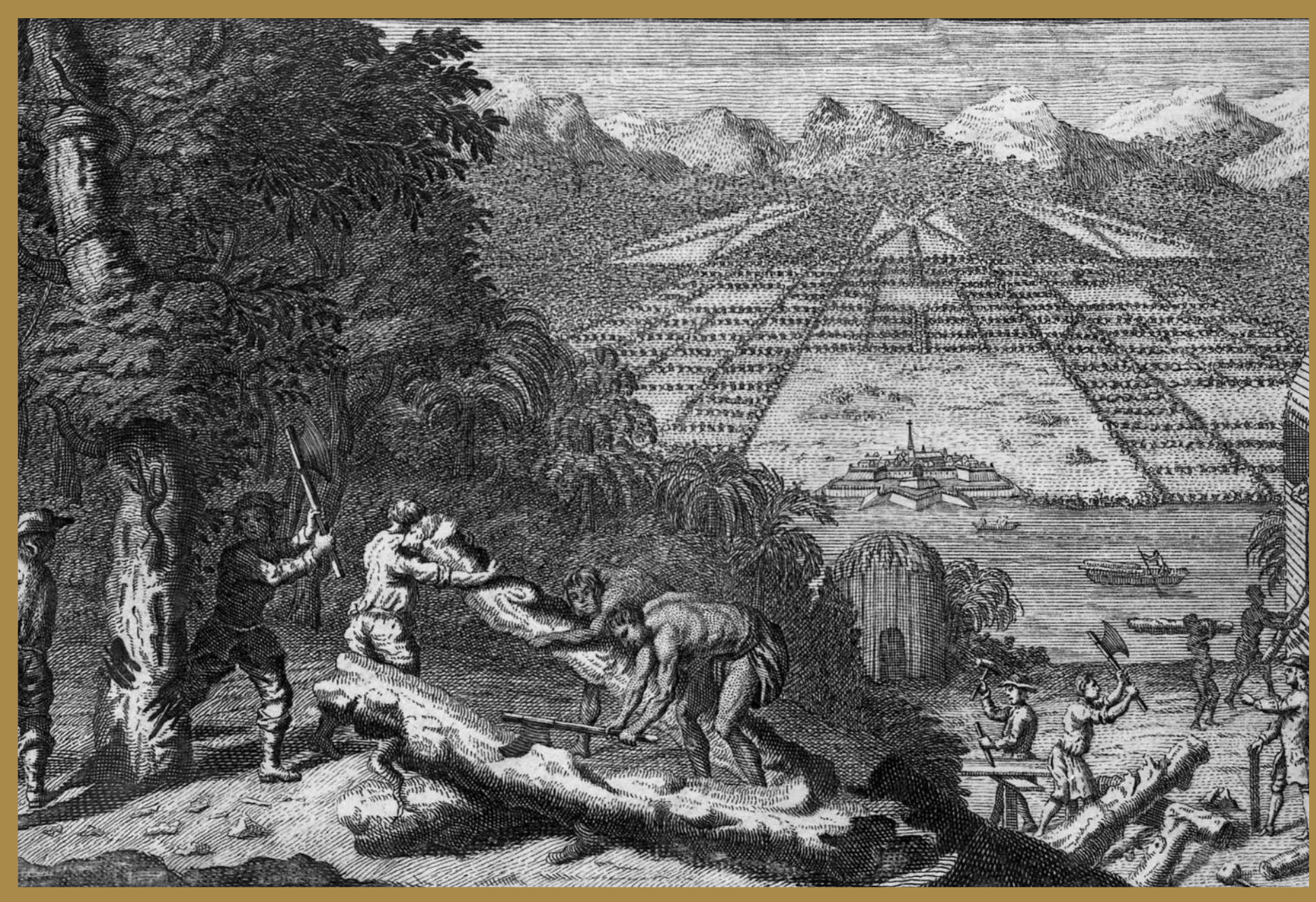
## Indigenous People on the Savannah River

Indigenous people were living along the Savannah River when Oglethorpe arrived. Bands of both Muscogee (Creek) and Shawnee people lived in the area. The name Savannah may have been derived from the Shawnee's native name *Ša-wano·ki*, which means southerners. Local variants included Shawano, Savano, Savana, and Savannah. For Oglethorpe's colony to be successful he needed an ally for trading and help with negotiations between the British and Indigenous population. He found this in Yamacraw Chief Tomochichi. The Yamacraw were a small band of Indigenous people likely comprised of Lower Muscogee (Creek) and Yamasee people that formed after the Yamasee War in nearby South Carolina. Oglethorpe and Tomochichi traveled to England together in 1734 to meet with King George II and the Georgia Trustees.

*"That many of our poor subjects are, through misfortunes and want of employment, reduced to great necessity...they would be glad to settle in any of our provinces in America where by cultivating the lands... they might not only gain a comfortable subsistence for themselves and families, but also strengthen our colonies and increase the trade, navigation and wealth of these our realms."*

KING GEORGE II OF GREAT BRITAIN,  
CHARTER OF GEORGIA, 1732

# Savannah's EARLY ECONOMY



The Trustee Garden in Savannah was based on botanical gardens in Oxford and Chelsea, England  
Illustration by John Pine, 1733

*A critical priority for the first Georgia colonists was to identify and develop economic enterprises that could support the colony.*

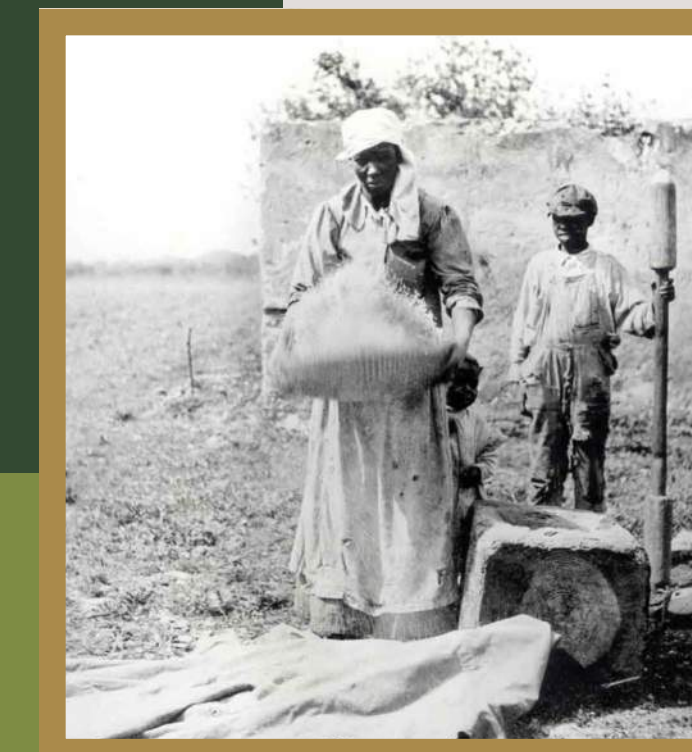
Trade with Indigenous groups was established and exports included hides that could be shipped to England and sold in European markets. Bountiful natural resources offered opportunities to harvest timber and produce naval stores. Long-term agricultural opportunities were found in the cultivation of crops like rice, tobacco, cotton, and indigo. To supplement their diet, settlers planted vegetables and fruits, raised livestock, fished and collected oysters. Although times were difficult, most Georgians produced a surplus to barter for manufactured goods, tools, and weapons that made life on the frontier possible.



Silk production in Georgia  
Courtesy Virginia Historical Society

## Silk Production in the Lowcountry

Colonists also experimented with silk production. German immigrants in nearby Ebenezer, northwest of Savannah, successfully grew small amounts of silk. Ultimately, mulberry trees, a necessary food source for silkworms, suffered during harsh weather, and the crop proved too difficult to cultivate successfully.



Husking rice  
Courtesy Georgia Archives,  
Vanishing Georgia Collection

## Rice Production in the Lowcountry

Already a valuable crop in South Carolina, rice became the first staple crop in Georgia. Enslaved Africans brought vast knowledge of rice cultivation.

With the Georgia Trustee's reversal of their stance prohibiting slavery, they saw the profitability of using forced, enslaved labor in the production of rice on plantations. Enslaved workers transported rice from fields back to the plantation on barges called flats. There the rice kernels were separated by threshing and fanning to blow away the chaff. Husking and polishing were done by hand using a wooden mortar and pestle before mills were developed.

## Agriculture and Foodways of the Savannah River

The Savannah River provided Georgia's colonists with a critical avenue of transportation and trade. As settlements spread into the interior, vessels brought products to market and returned with manufactured English goods. The river also provided fish, oysters, and waterfowl. The proximity to the river provided the perfect conditions for the cultivation of crops like rice and Sea Island cotton. The knowledge of successfully cultivating rice crops was brought here by enslaved Africans. Enslaved labor formed the basis of profitable rice and cotton plantations and bolstered the economy in Georgia's colony. Another valuable crop that advanced through enslaved labor was indigo. Indigo plants were harvested and soaked in a series of vats. The dried cakes that were created were later dissolved to create valuable dye for cloth.



FISH



OYSTERS



WATERFOWL



RICE



COTTON



INDIGO

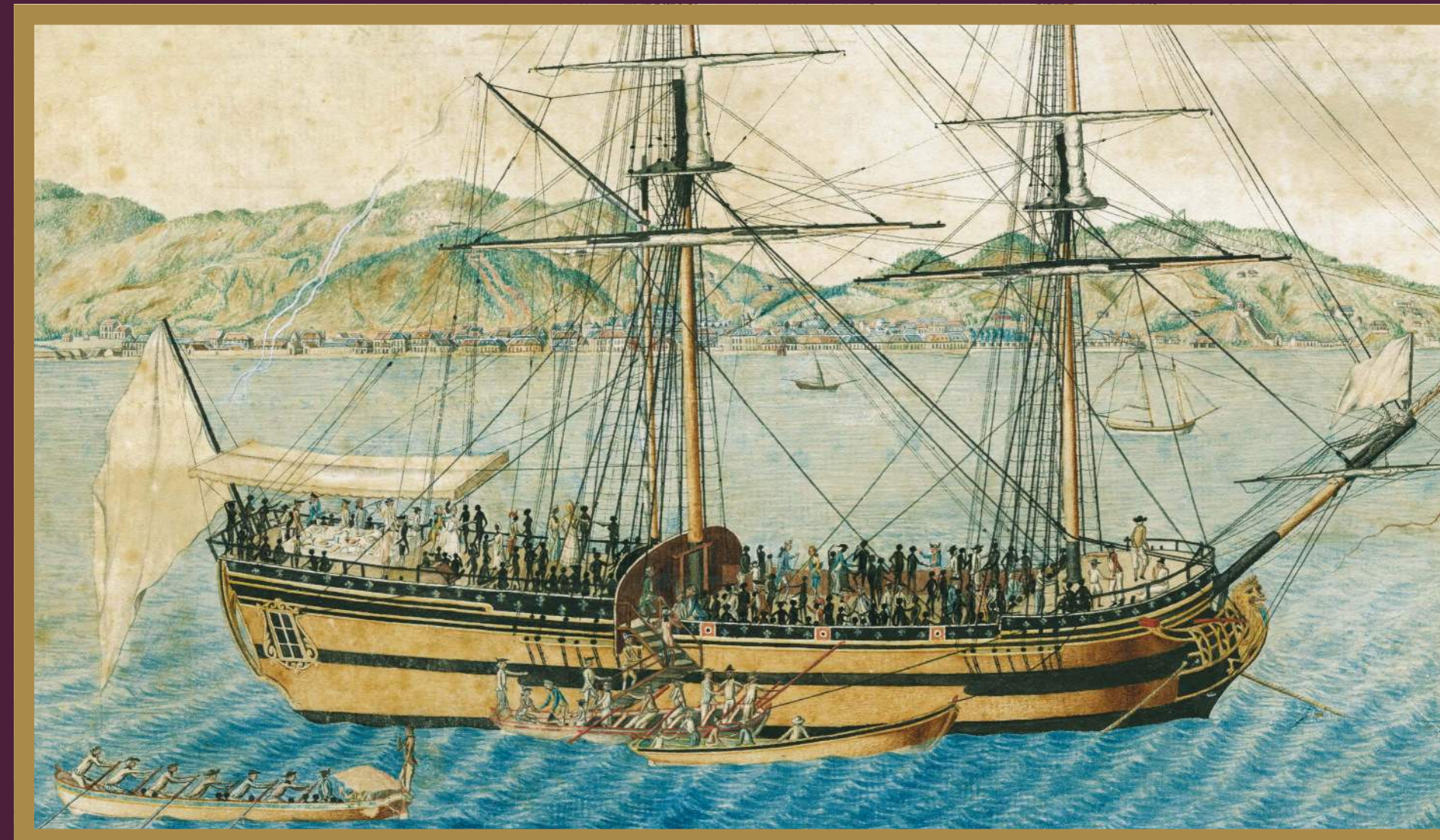


SILKWORMS

# Savannah and the TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

*Although slavery was illegal when the colony of Georgia was founded, it was a well-established institution in other American colonies.*

Georgia colonists encountered a competitive economic landscape shaped by enslaved African labor. Carolinians produced cash crops using enslaved labor that significantly undersold commodities produced in Georgia. South Carolina planters supplied the first enslaved people who arrived in Georgia. With previous restrictions on land ownership repealed in the Georgia colony, landowners could expand their acreage. To support this growth, they needed more labor. Pressure mounted to legalize slavery, and the trustees eventually succumbed to the increasing demand to legalize slavery in 1751.



A French slave ship at anchor in the West Indies  
Courtesy Virginia Foundation for the Humanities

## Olaudah Equiano

Equiano, who was captured as a young child in Africa in 1745, later gained fame for his autobiography detailing his life as an enslaved person. Many of his stories recount his time spent in the Port of Savannah, where he worked aboard a trading vessel. In one account, Equiano describes being nearly beaten to death in Savannah by a drunken enslaver. In 1766, Equiano earned enough money through side trading to buy his freedom.



## The Weeping Time

Savannah became one of the busiest human trafficking ports of enslaved people. One of the largest auctions of enslaved people was held in March 1859 in Savannah. Plantation owner and enslaver Pierce M. Butler gathered 436 enslaved people for auction to settle his gambling debt. The auction was held at Ten Broeck Race Course where families were separated and sold. This tragic event is remembered as "The Weeping Time."

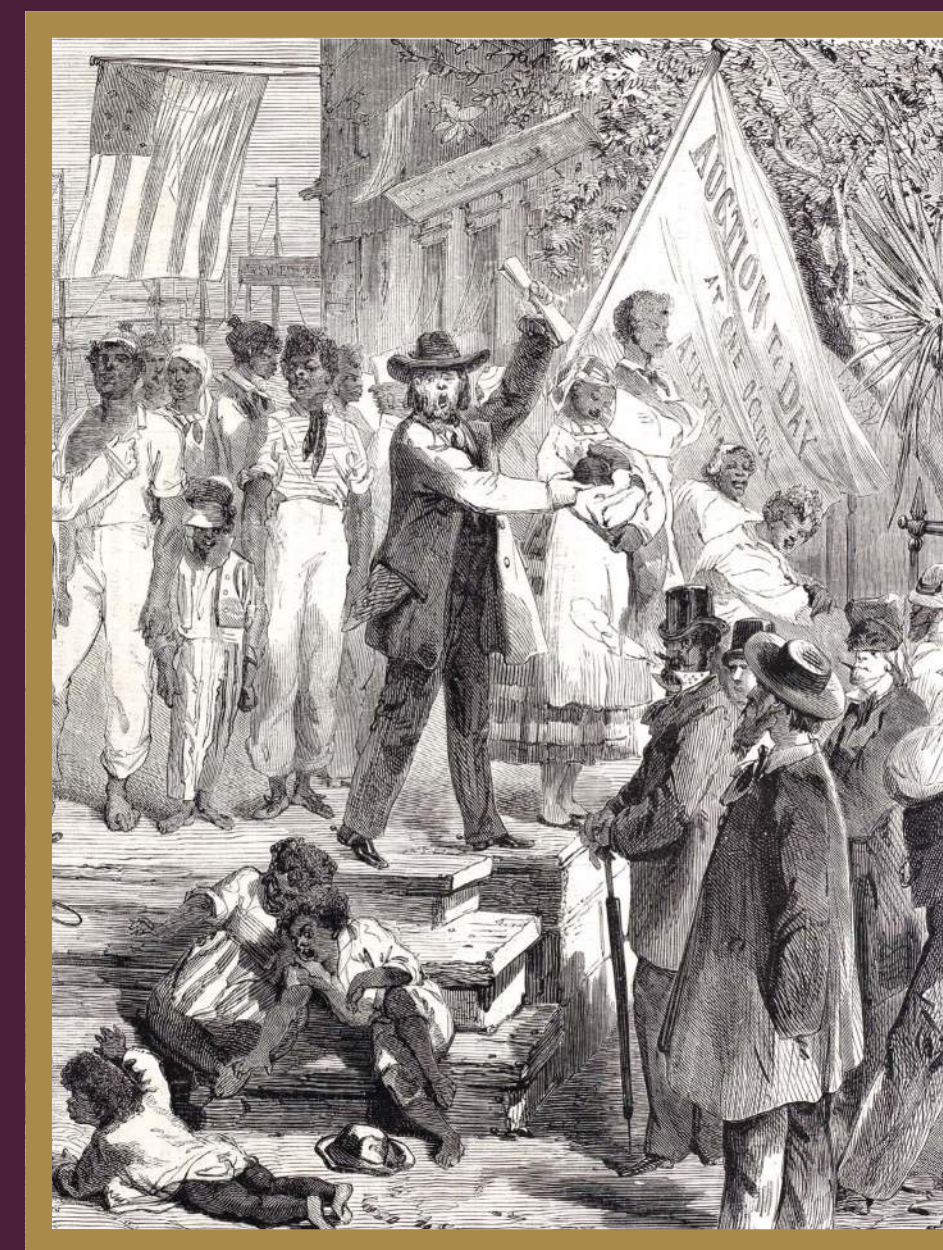


Illustration of a slave auction  
Courtesy Harper's Weekly

## African Traditions and Technology

Enslaved Africans expressed their resilience despite the brutality of slavery. Their bondage did not prevent them from building community, and they celebrated their culture through music, foodways, storytelling, religion, craft, and artistic endeavors. They brought with them extensive knowledge of rice cultivation, a valuable crop for many coastal plantation owners. Their traditions in basketry and cooking were also embraced here in the Lowcountry. As rice became a staple crop, other African foods such as okra and yams began to appear on the tables of plantation owners.



Sewing a sweetgrass basket

## Gullah Geechee Heritage

There is a rich legacy of Gullah Geechee culture in Savannah. The descendants of formerly enslaved Africans celebrate their heritage through language, traditional African arts, and cooking. The craft of sweetgrass baskets has been passed down through generations. Once used as utilitarian objects for fieldwork, such as fanning rice or for household storage, today's weavers employ traditional methods to create both functional baskets and works of art. The Gullah Geechee language is a creole dialect spoken by descendants in the coastal areas of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida.

# Savannah's COBBLESTONES

*The earliest streets of Savannah were sandy avenues with homes, businesses, and public structures made of wood. As sailing vessels arrived to discharge and take on goods, the cobblestones they carried to help stabilize the ship, called ballast, were often deposited along the Savannah River shoreline.*

Cobble ballast became an inexpensive, durable, and fireproof building material for the city. It also proved to be excellent material for paving Savannah's sandy streets. Today, cobblestones used for paving and construction contribute to the history of the waterfront of this port city. You can see ballast in the construction of retaining walls along the bluff above River Street and in the structures along Factors Walk.



Courtesy Georgia Historical Society

## Paving Savannah's Cobblestone Streets

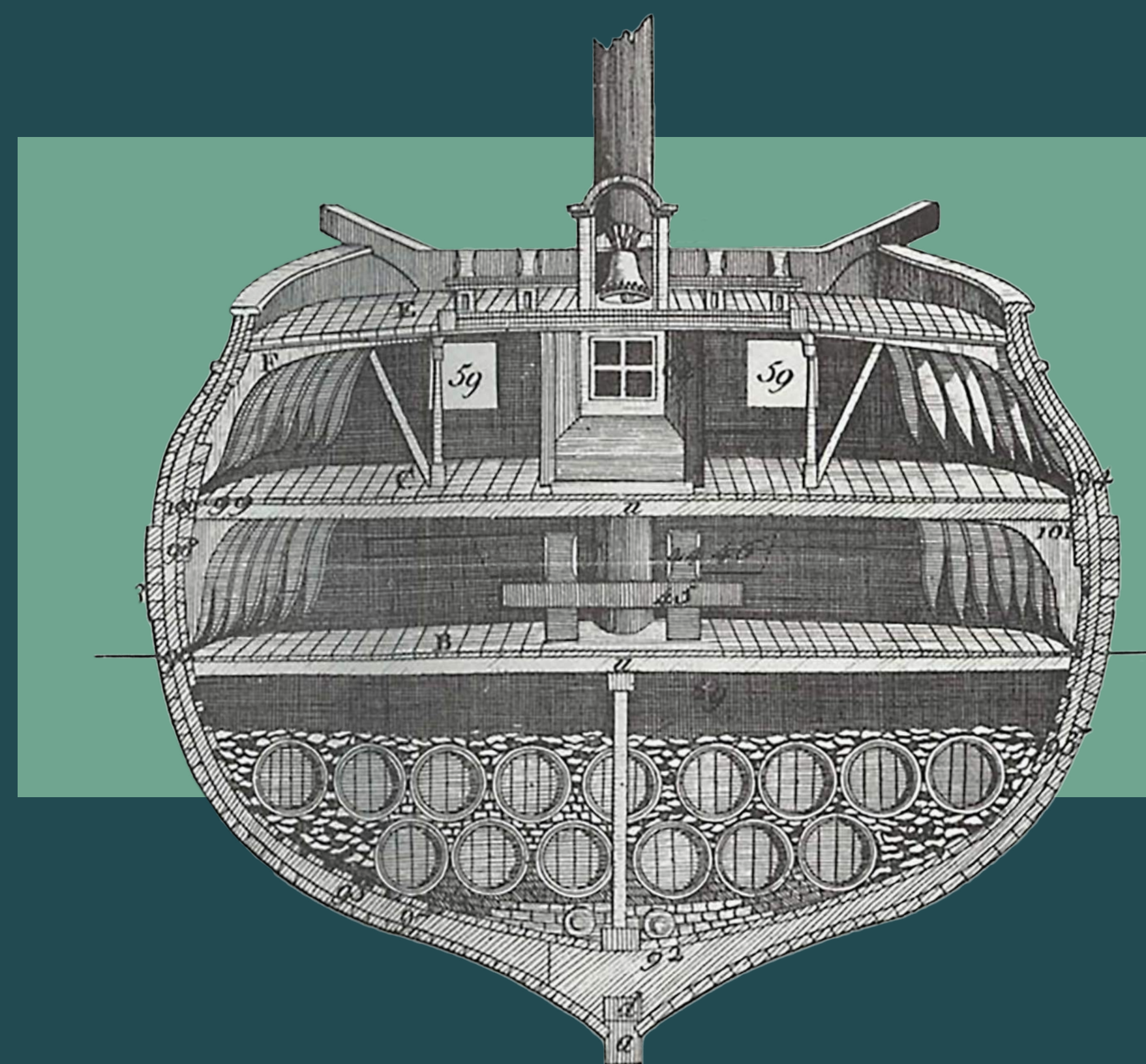
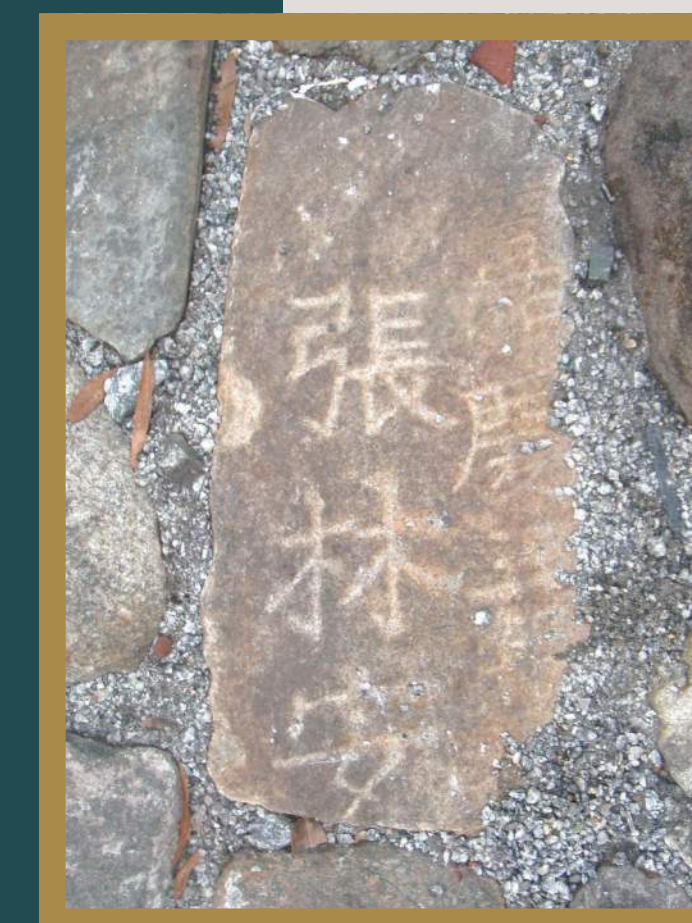
Because ballast streets were rough surfaces for carriages and later for automobiles, they were frequently paved with brick, macadam, or concrete. This photo shows one of Savannah's streets being repaved in the 1930s.

## Ship Ballast for Paving and Construction in Savannah

A brief examination of the cobblestones that pave Savannah's waterfront streets reveals their diversity. The stones reflect the broad spectrum of ports of call for ships entering Savannah beginning with Oglethorpe's arrival in 1733 to the last days of sail early in the 20th century. That pattern connected Savannah with convenient sources of river cobble and quarried stone in the American northeast, the Maritime Provinces of Canada, the British Isles, France, Spain, Portugal, Madeira, and China.

## Chinese Ballast Stone

A ballast stone with Chinese markings was uncovered from the Whitaker Ramp leading to River Street during repair work in 2011. The stone features carved Chinese characters. Translations by local historians and residents of Chinese ancestry believe the marking denote a portion of a grave marker for a man named Zhang Lin'an circa 1798. The stone is in the collection of the City of Savannah Municipal Archives.



## Cross Section of Merchant Vessel

Ballast stones made ships more stable under sail and reduced the possibility of capsizing by lowering the vessel's center of gravity. When heavy cargo was loaded, ballast was deposited on shore. Laws were passed in many colonial American ports to prevent ballast from being dumped into the harbor because it hindered navigation. When ballast had been in the hold for long periods, it became contaminated with waste and jeopardized the health of the crew. The ballast stones would be unloaded, the hull cleaned, and new ballast stowed.

Illustrated cross-section showing ballast stones stabilizing the hull of a ship  
Courtesy F.H. Chapman from *Architectura Navalis Mercatoria* 1768

# Savannah in the AMERICAN REVOLUTION

*Oglethorpe's colony had only existed for four decades when political dissent evolved into armed rebellion in the British Colonies.*

Georgians confronted the same political and economic issues with British taxation as the more established colonies. The deterioration of Royal authority intensified when news of armed resistance at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts, reached Savannah in May of 1775. On July 4, 1775, Georgia's Second Provincial Congress convened to determine the colony's future. Delegates decided that Georgia would join the other 12 colonies to unite against the British Crown.



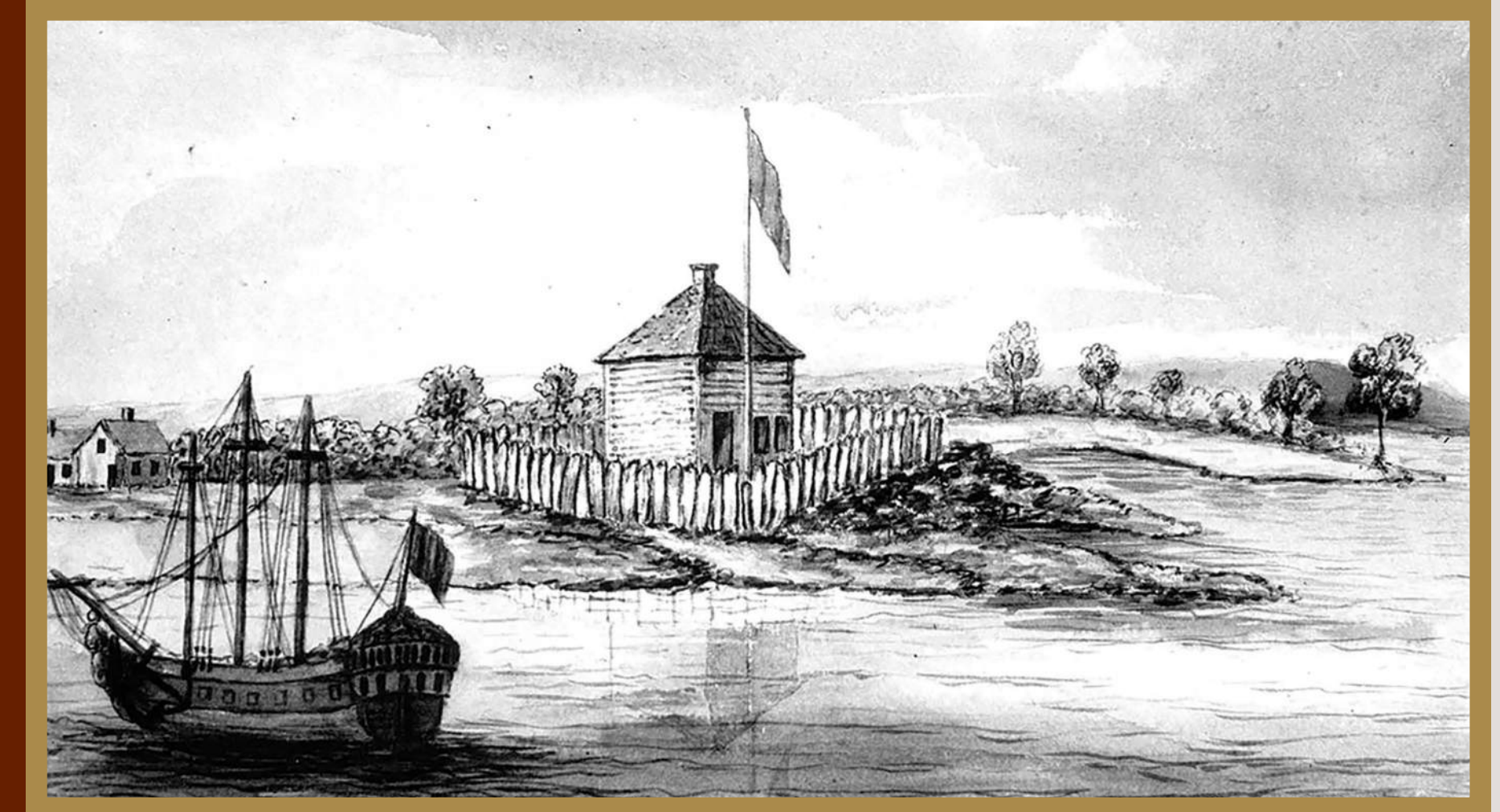
The Sons of Liberty gathered at Tondee's Tavern in protest to British rule  
Courtesy Georgia Historical Society



Depiction of the British siege of Savannah in 1779  
Courtesy National Archives and Records Administration

## The Siege of Savannah

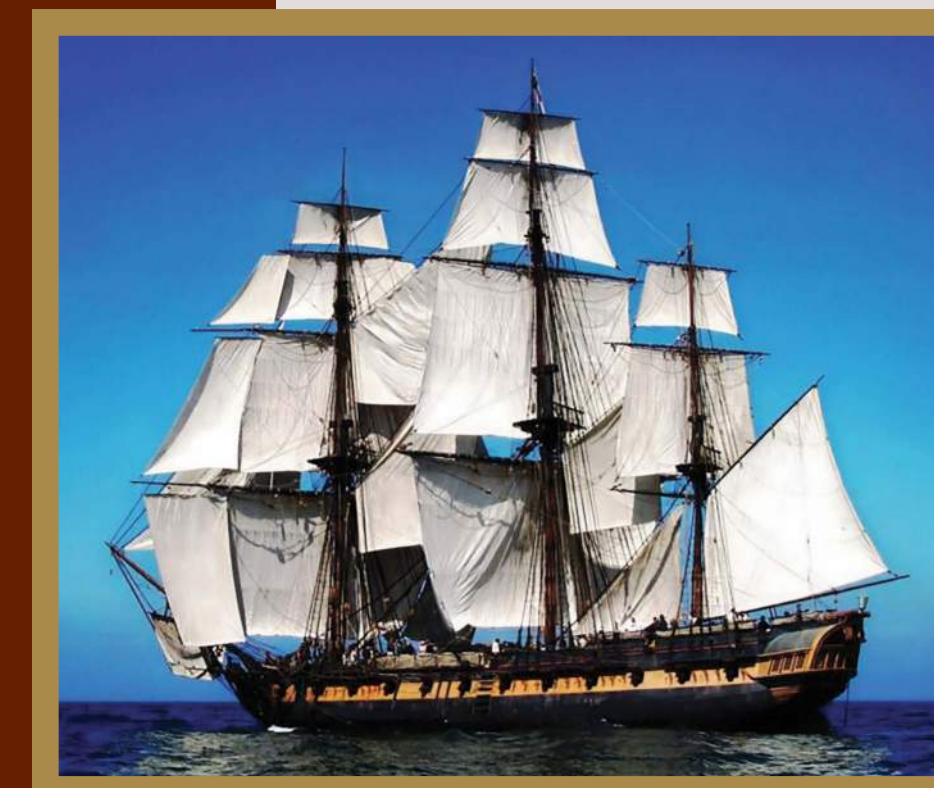
On September 11, 1779, American forces under the command of General Benjamin Lincoln and Polish ally Count Casimir Pulaski assembled northwest of Savannah. The following day, French ally Count Charles-Henri d'Estaing's fleet debarked 3,200 French, Irish, and Haitian soldiers who marched on Savannah to support the American attempt to retake control of the city. A five-day bombardment ensued. However, there was only minor damage to the British defenses. The siege was the second most deadly battle of the Revolutionary War. Even after the final battle at Yorktown and General Cornwallis' surrender to General George Washington in 1781, Savannah remained under British control for over six months. In July of 1782, British forces finally fled the city.



The fort at Cockspur Island, 1764  
Courtesy John Walker Guss

## Battle of the Rice Boats

In March of 1776, the Royal Navy sent ships to Savannah to attempt to gather provisions for the British troops under siege in Boston. British Captain Andrew Barkley entered the Savannah River looking for rice, but the Savannah Whigs, those who resisted British rule, refused. Barkley sailed upriver through the Back River. Although American forces under the lead of Colonel Lachlan McIntosh prepared their defense, the British ships ultimately seized several merchant vessels containing barrels of rice near Hutchinson Island. The occupants were held prisoner, and skirmishing continued until both sides agreed to a prisoner exchange on March 30th. With the British sailing away, victory was declared by American forces in the battle.



Courtesy Al Sorkin and Maritime Museum of San Diego Collection

## HMS Rose

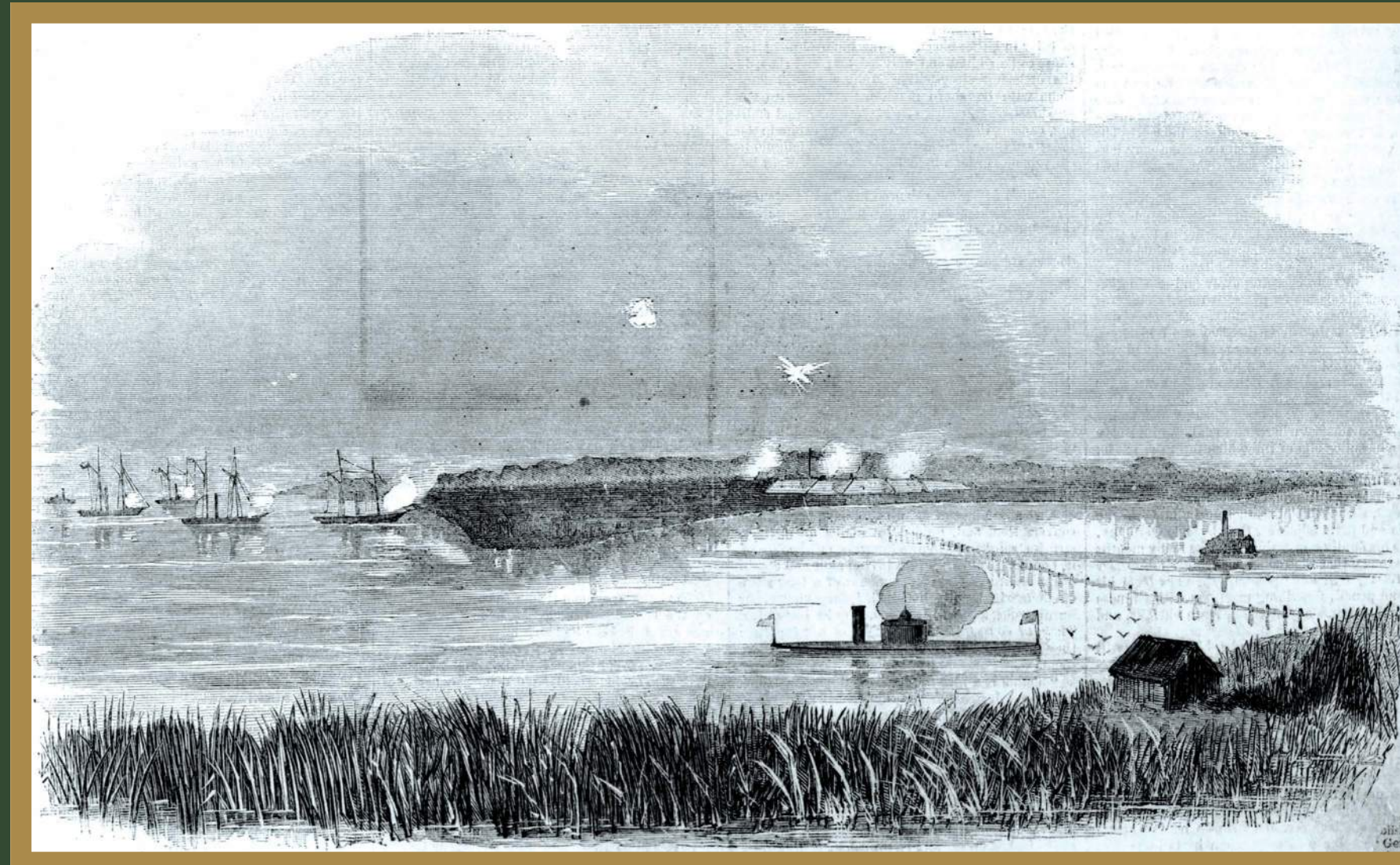
HMS Rose was a small warship stationed in Savannah during the British occupation. The ship was sunk in the river below Savannah to obstruct navigation when the French fleet arrived in September 1779.

Archaeologists discovered cannons believed to be from the Rose while completing work to deepen the river's channel.

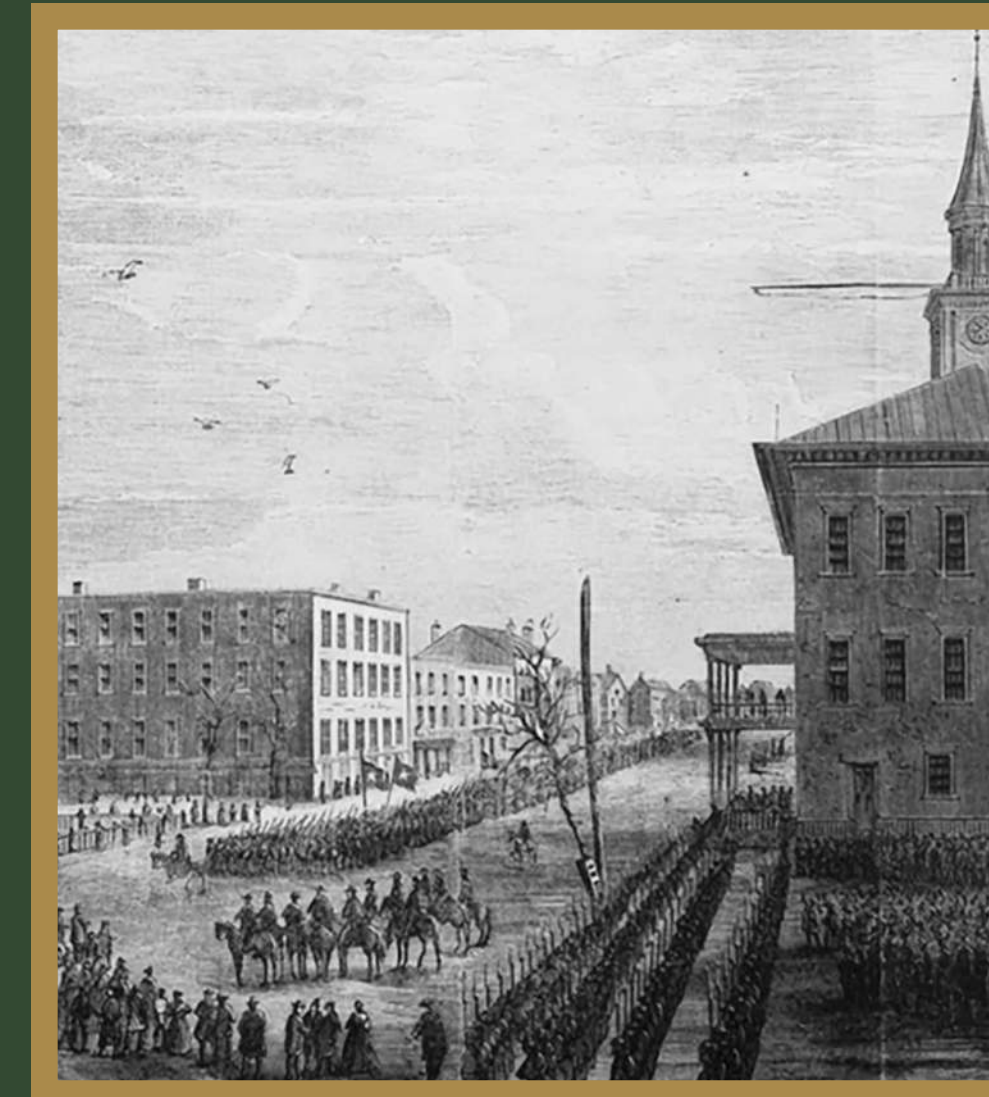
# Savannah in the CIVIL WAR

In 1861, spurred by rising tensions between northern and southern states over the use of enslaved labor, Georgia delegates voted to secede from the Union.

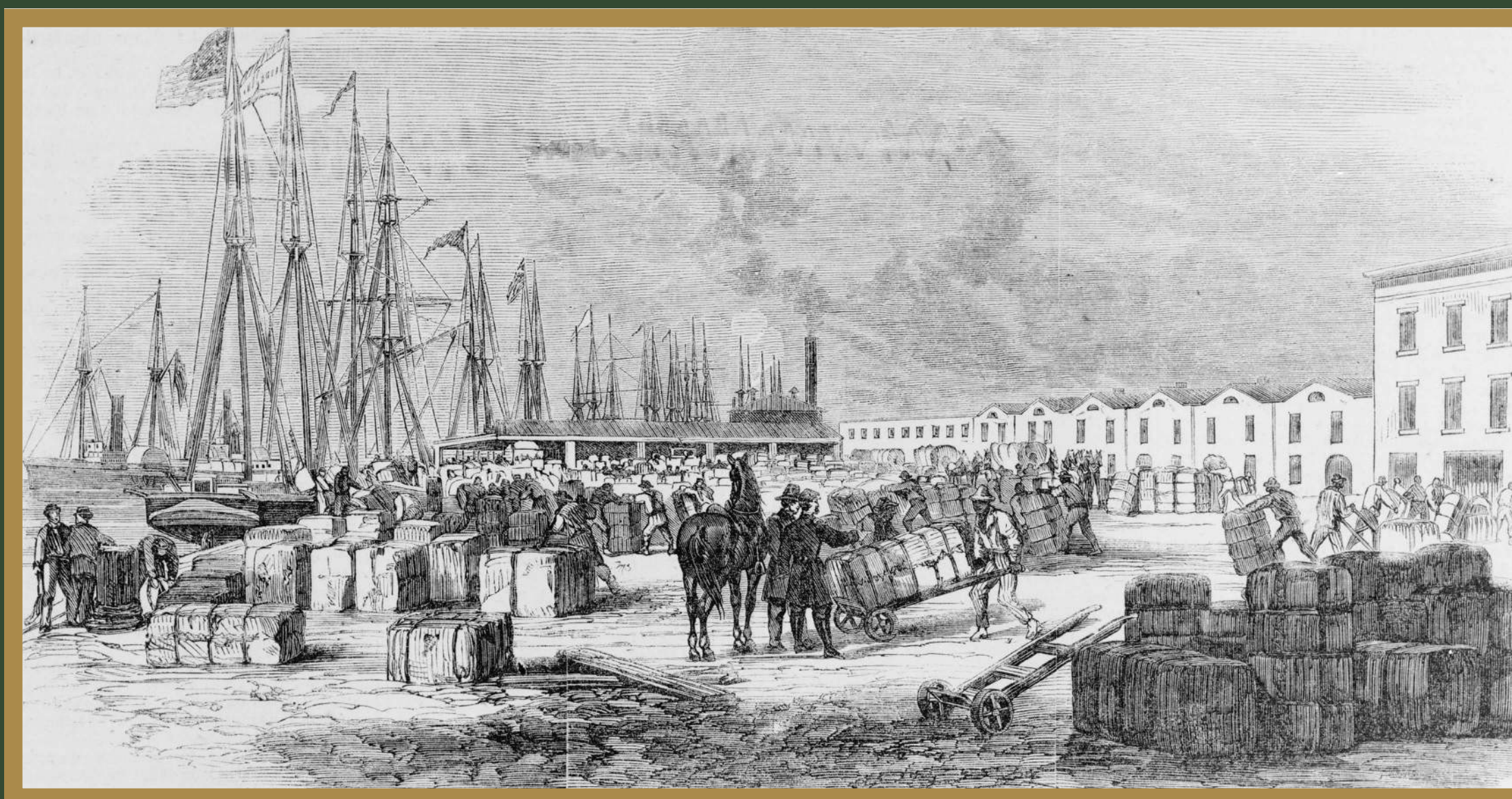
The prosperity of agriculture in the South depended on the plantation system's reliance on forced labor. On April 12, 1861, Confederate forces opened fire on Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina, marking the beginning of a four-year conflict between the states.



The iron-clad *Montauk* engaging Fort McAllister in the Ogeechee River, January 28, 1863



Sherman's Army marching down Bay Street  
Courtesy Harper's Weekly



Captured cotton on the docks  
Courtesy Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper

Savannah was a crucial city for the Confederacy due to its size and access to the port. Union General William T. Sherman's March to the Sea was a devastating campaign from Atlanta to Savannah during November and December of 1864. General Sherman left a trail of destruction in his wake, burning cities and towns along the route, but he spared Savannah when capturing the city in 1864. On December 22, he offered Savannah and 25,000 bales of cotton to President Lincoln as a Christmas gift via telegraph.



Southwest corner of Fort Pulaski, 1863

## Savannah's Defenses

Fort Pulaski was constructed between 1831 and 1845 as a Union defense. It was deemed impregnable against warships entering the Savannah River. However, the advent of rifled cannons and explosive ordnance rendered masonry fortifications obsolete. In 1861, Confederate forces captured Fort Pulaski. By 1862, Union artillery positioned on Tybee Island damaged the fort during a 30-hour bombardment, which resulted in the Confederates surrendering the fort.

Fort McAllister was a Confederate earthwork located on the Ogeechee River in Richmond Hill. Constructed in 1861, this earthwork provided protection from Union Navy blockades. It was crucial in safeguarding the railroad bridge upriver that served the Savannah, Albany, and Gulf Railroads. Between 1862 and 1863, the fort successfully repelled several attacks from

Union naval ships, including the USS *Montauk* and *Passaic*. Unlike the brick fortification of Fort Pulaski, Fort McAllister's earthen construction was easily repaired after ammunition strikes. The fort was never captured by Union forces.

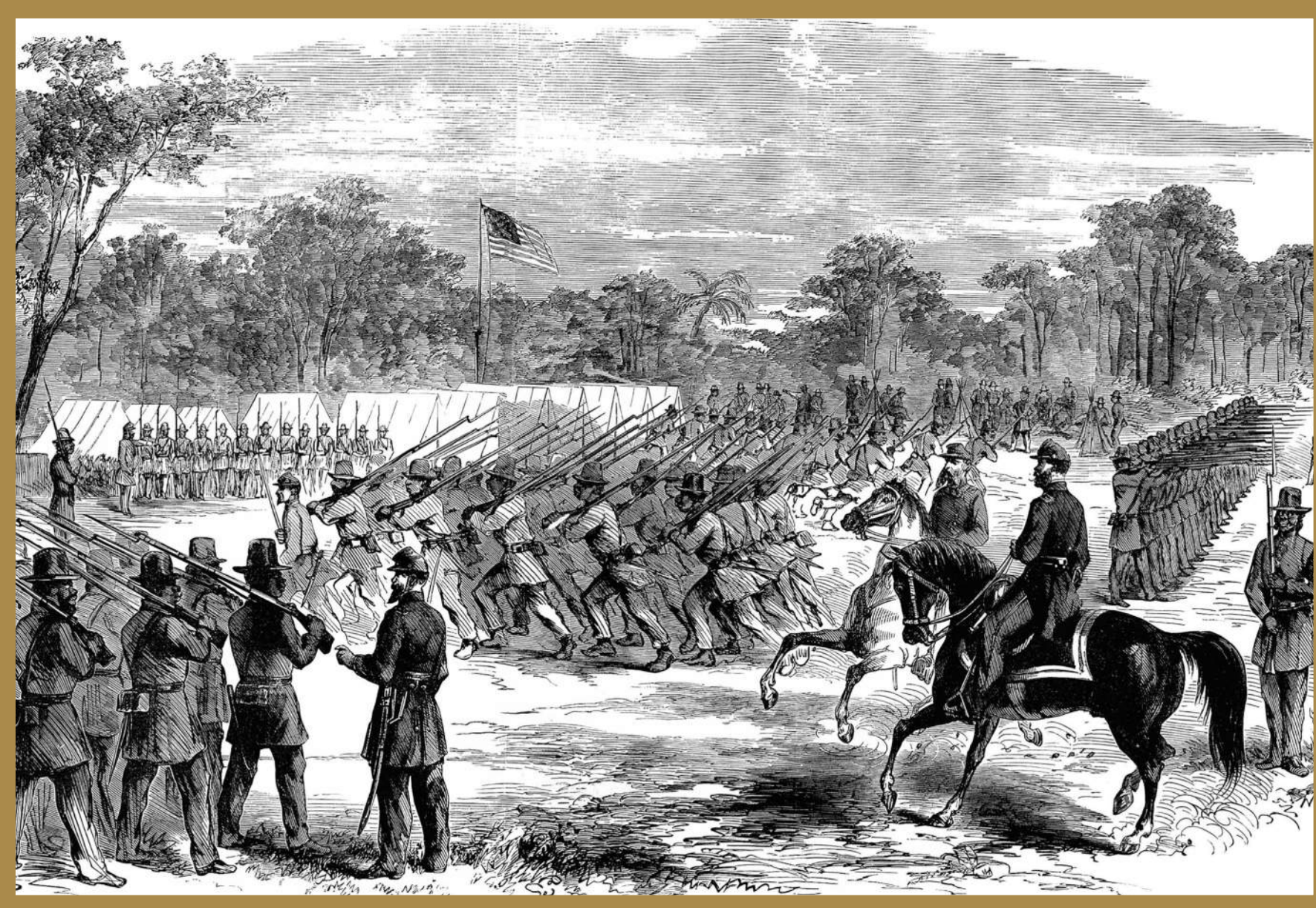


Fort McAllister earthworks

## USS/CSS *Water Witch*

The USS *Water Witch* was a side-wheel gunboat stationed near Savannah as part of the Union naval blockade. In 1864, the Confederate Navy captured the boat in an early morning raid. In 2007, a team of researchers and the Georgia Department of Natural Resources discovered what they believe is the wreckage of the *Water Witch* in the Vernon River near Savannah.

# African Americans in the CIVIL WAR



1st South Carolina Volunteers on Hilton Head Island, June 1862  
Courtesy Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper

*African Americans worked on both sides of the Civil War.*

Some enslaved men enlisted in the Union Army in exchange for their freedom. The Confederate Army did not allow African Americans to serve in combat. However, they filled many support roles, ranging from cooking to construction. African American women worked as nurses, laundresses, and cooks for the Union. Both free and enslaved African Americans engaged in various forms of resistance to slavery during the Civil War. Harriet Tubman's effort to liberate enslaved people through the Underground Railroad reached Savannah, where many operatives supported this secret network of safe spaces. Their work in gathering military intelligence was crucial to the Union Army.

## Savannah During Reconstruction

The process of rebuilding the city after the war was lengthy, and freedom did not represent equality. After emancipation, Savannah's population grew as newly freed men and women established their communities. Many continued to work as farmers when plantations transitioned from forced labor to tenant farming. Jobs paid low wages and most African Americans lacked formal education, making the transition to freedom challenging. The Freedman's Bureau was created to assist formerly enslaved people with the transition to freedom by providing access to medical care, food, clothing, education, and other services. Community schools were created and staffed by teachers from the North. Another vital aspect of community life for African Americans during this time was the formation of formalized church communities.

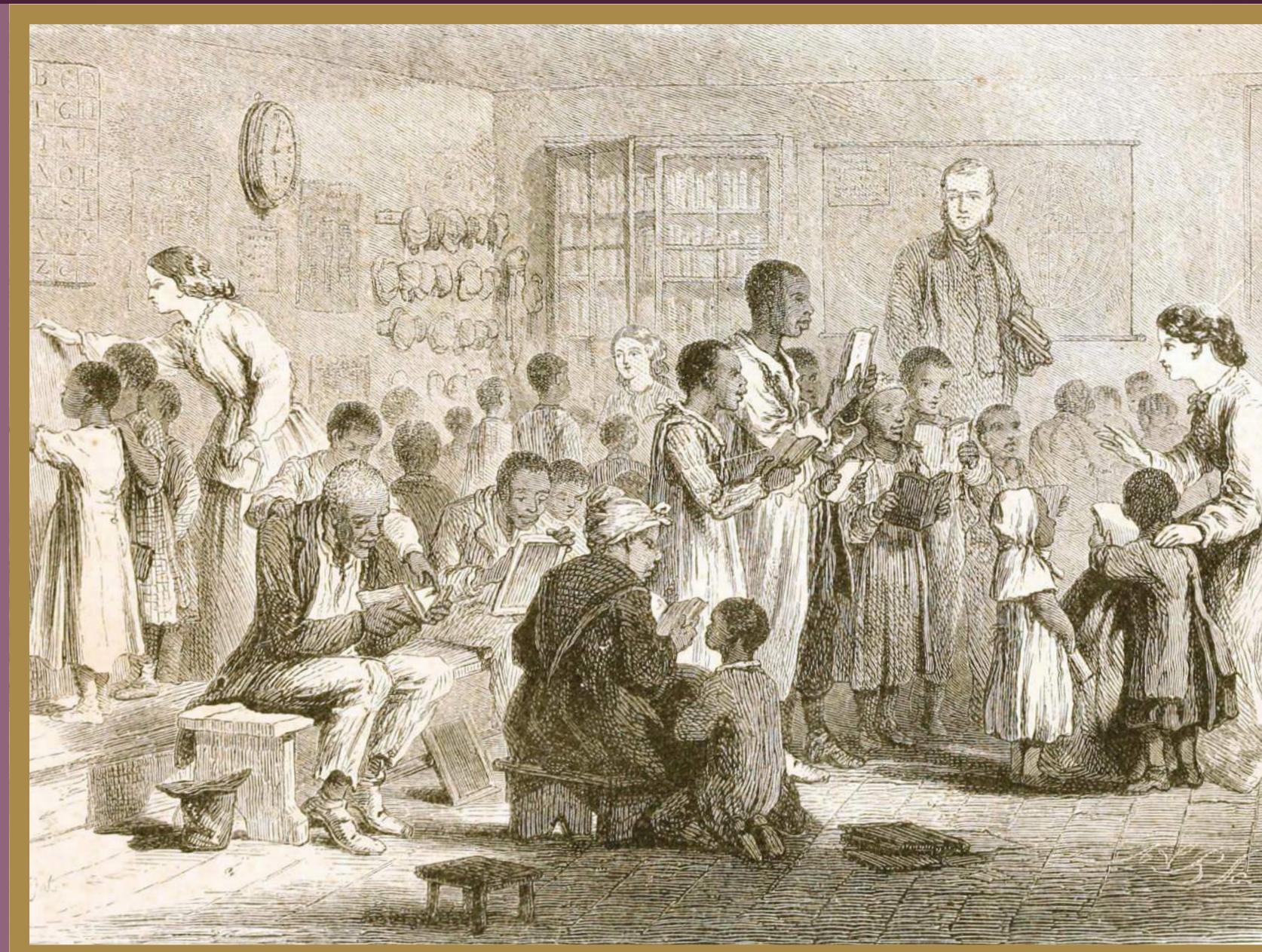


Illustration of a Freedmen's school in the South



Susie King Taylor  
Courtesy Library of Congress

## Meet Susie King Taylor

Susie King Taylor was born into slavery in Liberty County. As a child, she was allowed by her family's enslaver to live in Savannah with her grandmother. Most enslaved children in the South did not have access to education. Susie's grandmother arranged for her to attend school lessons secretly. Her education would prove to be a great asset when she fled Savannah and sought refuge on St. Simon's Island during the Civil War, which was occupied by Union forces. While there, Union Captain C.T. Trowbridge asked her to teach a school for African American children. The Union Army received orders to evacuate the island in 1862, and many residents, including Susie, went with them to Camp Saxton in Beaufort, South Carolina. She enrolled as a laundress in the 1st South Carolina Volunteers, a regiment of the Union Army for African American soldiers. Although officially enrolled as a laundress, Susie acted as a nurse and educator, setting up a small school within the unit to teach illiterate soldiers. After her service, she returned with her husband to Savannah, where she established another school for African Americans.

REMINISCENCES  
OF MY LIFE IN CAMP  
SUSIE KING TAYLOR

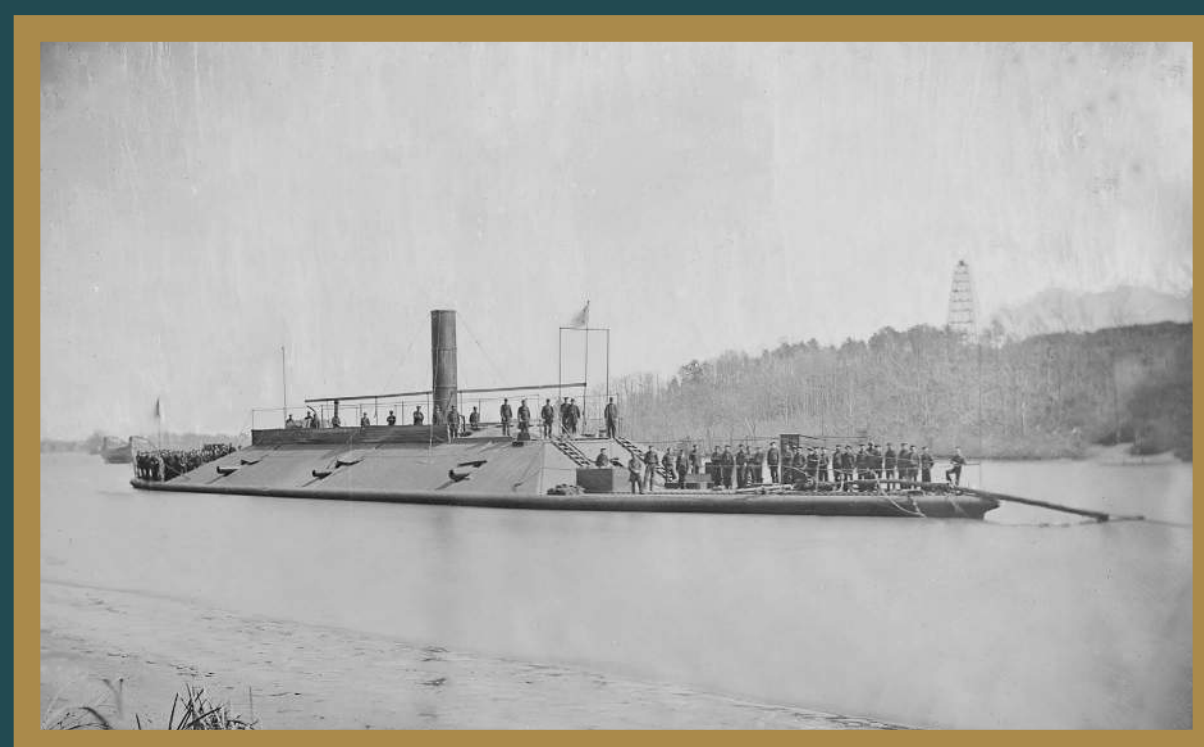


Cover of memoir by Susie King Taylor, 1902  
Courtesy Library of Congress

# Ironclads and Gunboats of the SAVANNAH RIVER SQUADRON

During the Civil War, the Savannah River Squadron protected the City of Savannah from the Union attack by river. The squadron initially consisted of small coastal and river steamers.

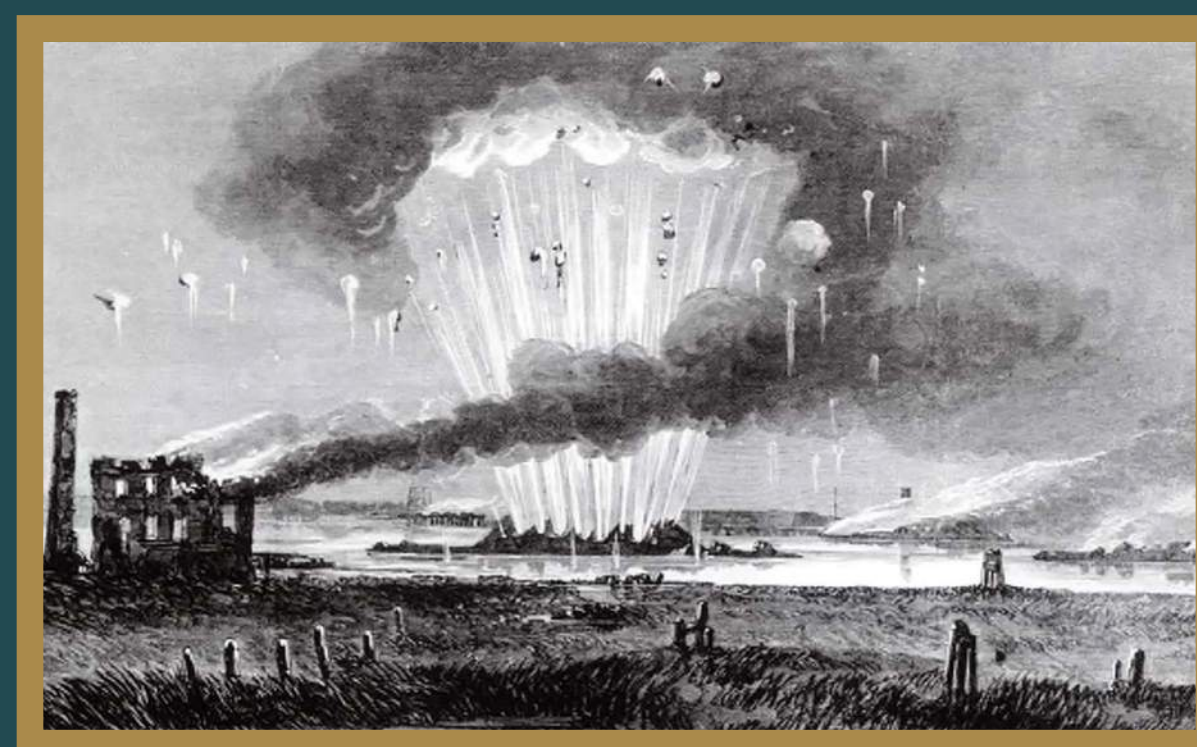
In November 1861, the British-built blockade runner *Fingal* arrived in Savannah and was quickly converted into a powerful ironclad by autumn 1862. Two local ironclads were under construction at the time. The “Ladies Gunboat” CSS *Georgia* was commissioned in November 1862 and the CSS *Savannah* was completed in the summer of 1863. Several purpose-built gunboats, like the CSS *Isondiga* and CSS *Macon*, also served in the Savannah Squadron.



Courtesy National Archives and Records Administration

## USS *Atlanta* in Union Service on the James River in Virginia

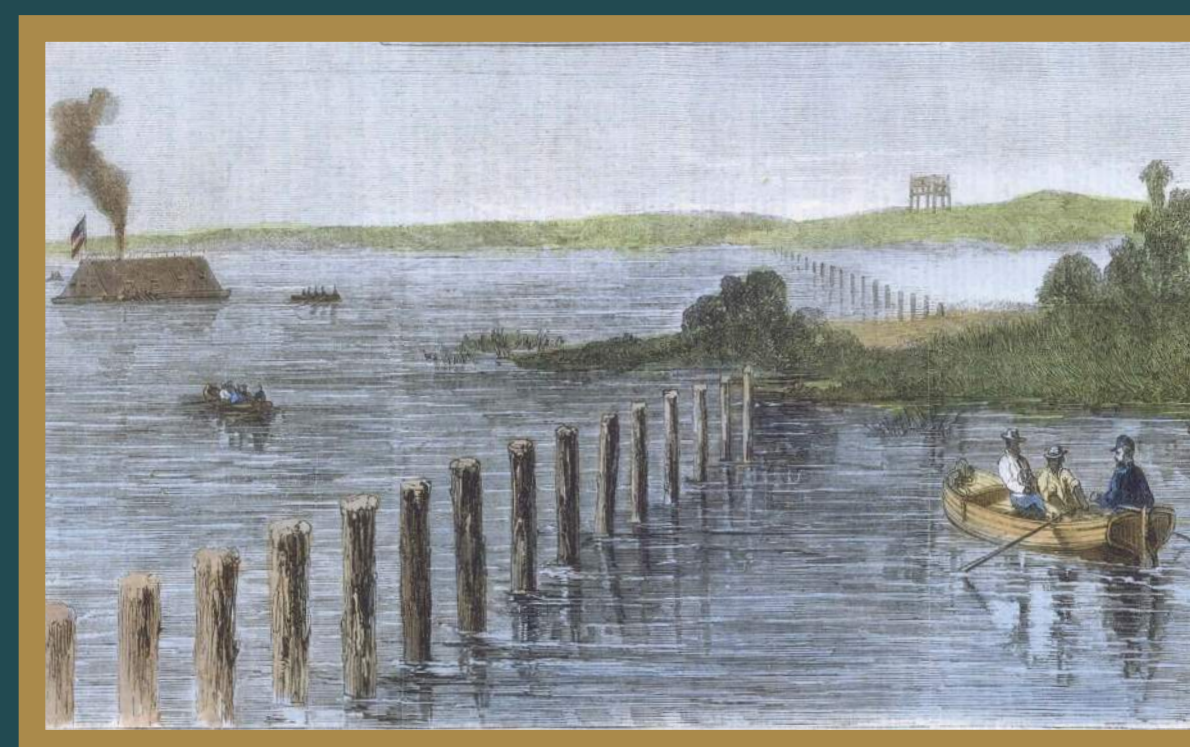
One of the Confederacy’s most powerful ironclads, CSS *Atlanta*, was constructed upon the iron hull of the blockade runner *Fingal*. The refitted 204-foot, 1000-ton ironclad steamed down the Wilmington River under the command of William Webb. As “bold as a lion,” the Confederate navy vessel headed for Union monitors USS *Weehawken* and USS *Nahant*. Before *Atlanta* could intercept the Union vessels, the warship ran aground. Unable to maneuver, Commander Webb surrendered the ship after shots from the *Weehawken* destroyed its pilothouse. Renamed the USS *Atlanta*, the ironclad served the US Navy in Virginia waters until the end of the war.



Courtesy Harper’s Weekly

## CSS *Savannah* Explodes

As the officers and sailors of the Savannah River Squadron retreated into South Carolina during the evacuation of Savannah in December 1864, they scuttled the vessel to prevent its capture by the Union Army. The explosion that destroyed the CSS *Savannah* lit up the sky for miles.



Courtesy Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper

## CSS *Georgia* Moored Above Obstruction

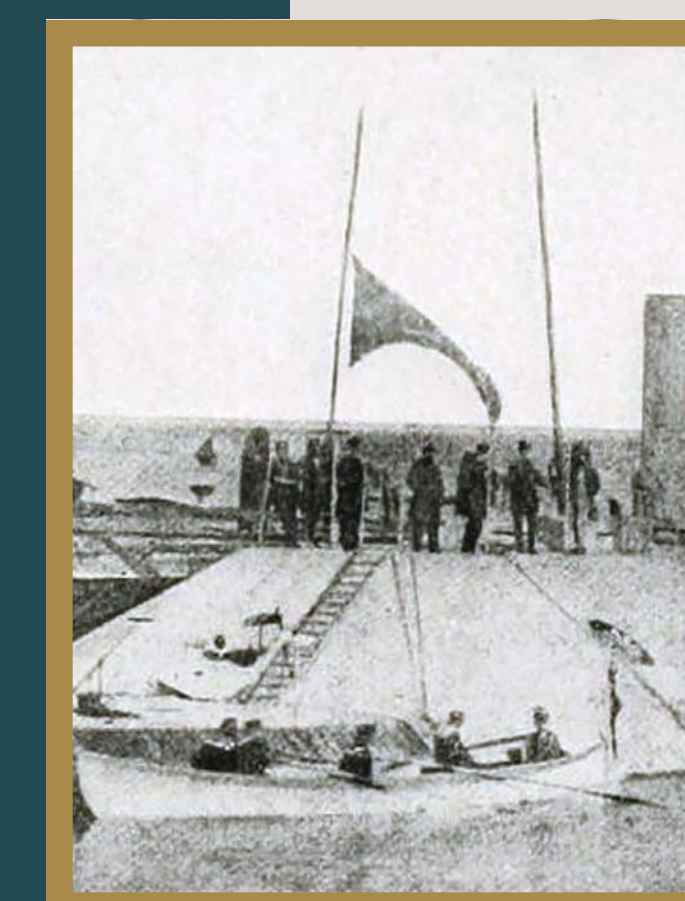
Little is known about the design of the “Ladies Gunboat,” but archaeological investigation of the vessel has provided new clues. *Georgia*’s armor consisted of an alternating pattern of railroad rails. The CSS *Georgia* was intentionally blown up across the river from Fort Jackson on December 21, 1864, to avoid being captured by the approaching Union Army led by General William T. Sherman.



Courtesy Library of Congress

## “Mosquito Fleet” Steamers

A rare illustration of the armed coastal and river steamers in the Savannah Squadron, dubbed the “Mosquito Fleet” because of the small size of the fleet of ships.



Photographic History of the Civil War (1912)  
Courtesy Francis T. Miller

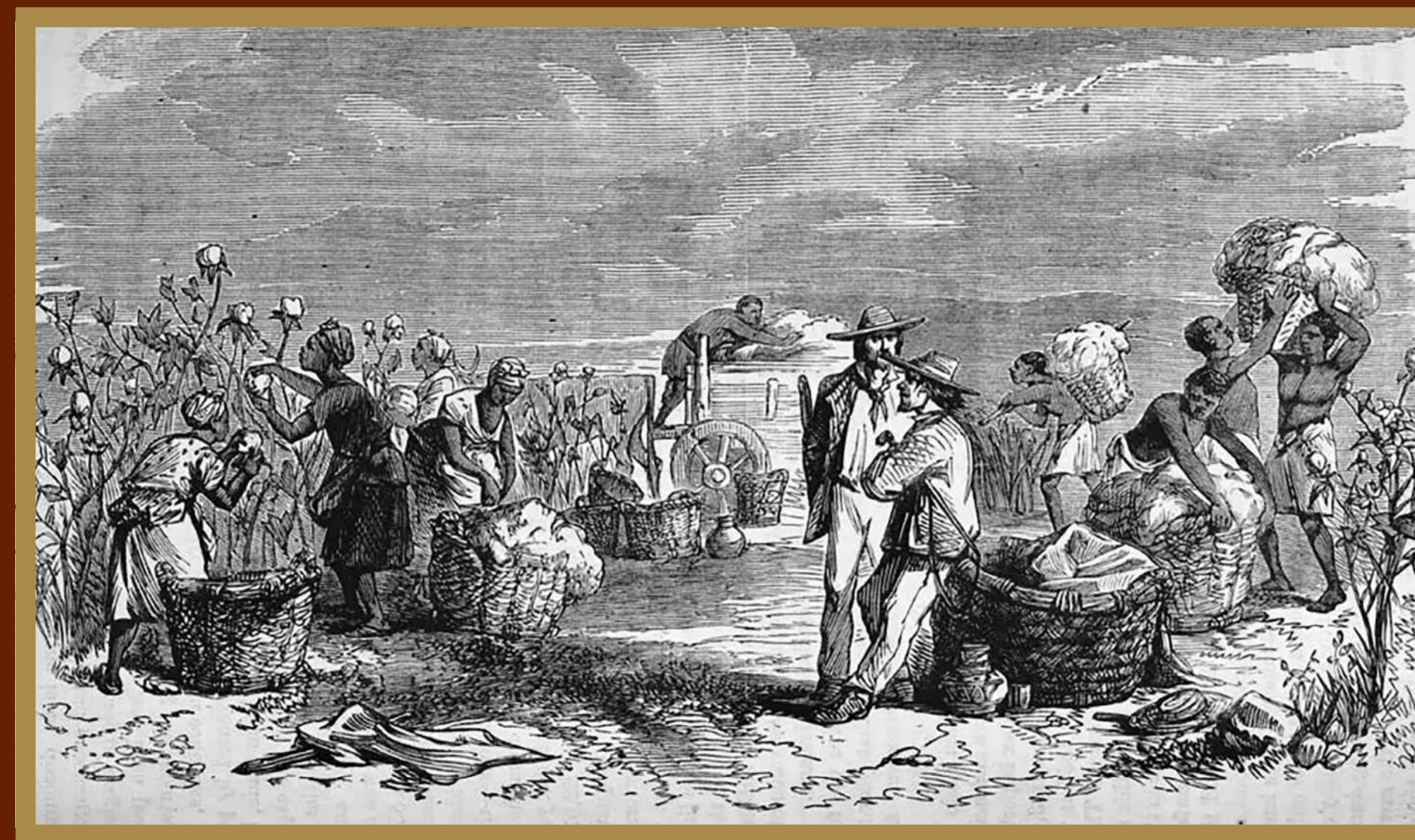
## CSS *Chicora*

The Charleston-built CSS *Chicora* was a Richmond-class Confederate ironclad. A rare image of the *Chicora* shows what CSS *Savannah* would have also looked like.

# Cotton in the Colony AND BEYOND

*The cultivation of crops in the colony took trial and error. Rice was a successful crop that thrived in coastal areas and freshwater swamps, but cultivation was challenging. As colonists moved further west into Georgia, they found that cotton thrived in coastal and inland areas.*

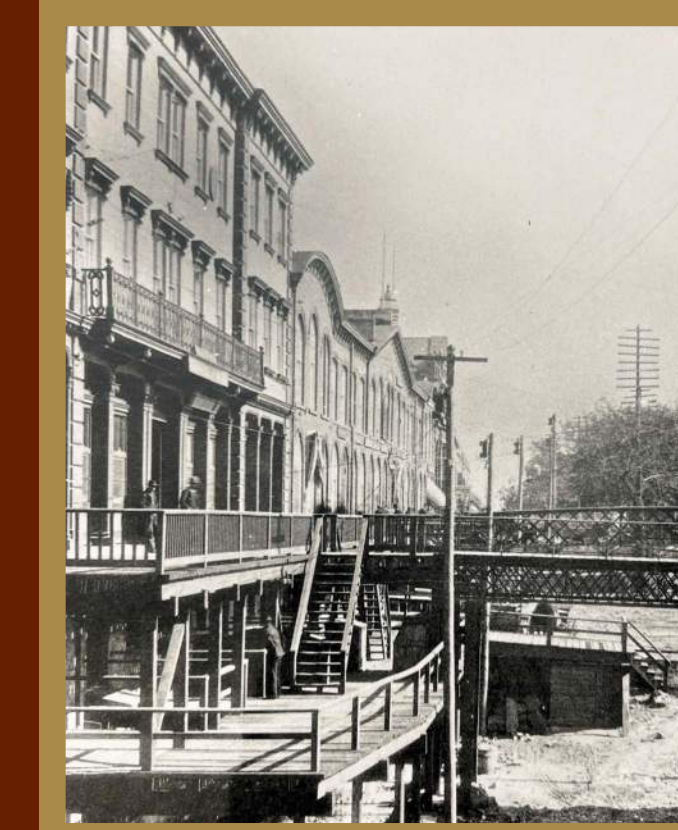
Cotton was planted in the spring for harvest in the fall, which was done by hand. It was transported from the fields in baskets or sacks to the gin for seed removal. After cleaning, the cotton fiber was pressed into bales to prepare them for export. This labor-intensive process was dependent on enslaved labor. Upland, or short staple, cotton did well inland, but long staple Sea Island cotton grown in coastal areas was prized for its long, fine fibers, making it ideal for export to Europe. Originally brought to South Carolina and Georgia from the West Indies, it was the top cash crop until the end of the Civil War. Often referred to as King Cotton by secessionists, they believed the Confederacy could be a prosperous independent nation if they controlled cotton exports to Europe. The slogan gained traction and support throughout the South but ultimately failed. When the Civil War ended and slavery was abolished, the plantation system that had dominated the South also ended. Large plantations were often split into smaller tenant farms.



Picking cotton in the fields  
Courtesy Cassell's Illustrated History



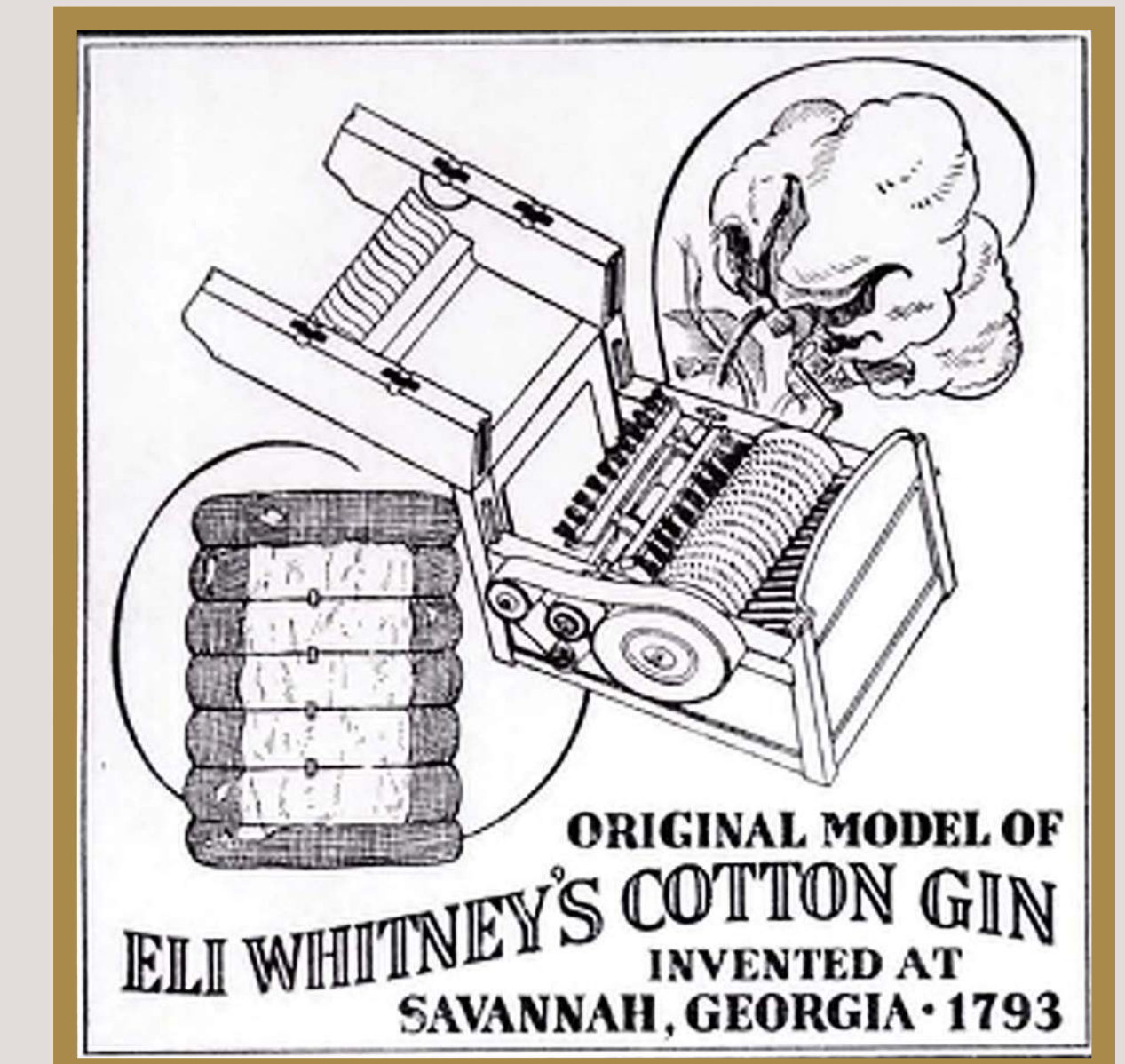
Cotton awaiting shipment to mills in Europe from the Port of Savannah



## Factors Walk

The multi-story buildings along Factors Row were once cotton warehouses. Before River Street was created, the area served as a commercial thoroughfare. Merchants stored cotton bales ready for export in the warehouses under their offices. During the height of the cotton boom, brokers along Factor's Walk and the Savannah Cotton Exchange set the market price for the valuable crop. The last remaining cotton office on Factors Walk closed in 1956.

View of buildings along Factors Walk  
Courtesy Savannah's Waterfront



Courtesy Georgia Historical Society

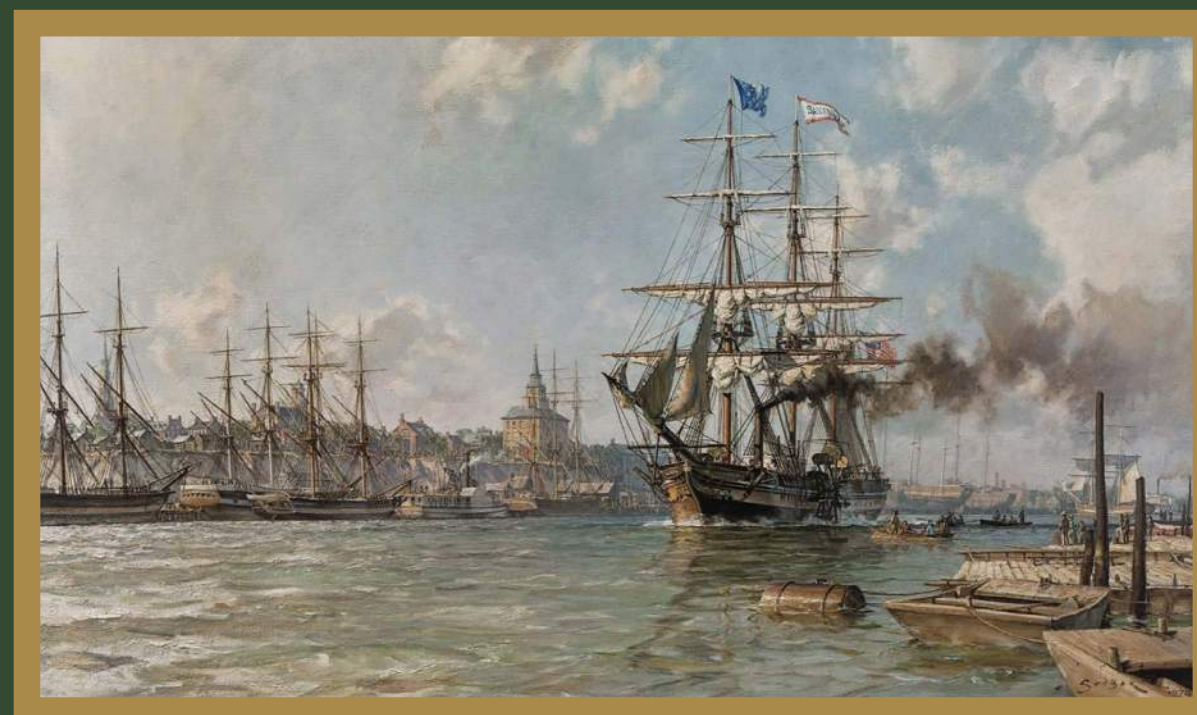
## Whitney's Cotton Gin

The patenting of the cotton gin by Eli Whitney in 1794 streamlined cotton processing for export. His machine, was designed to separate the cotton fibers from seeds. Traditionally, this tedious process was done by hand. The machine increased the efficiency of processing cotton for export. Although Whitney had hoped his cotton gin would reduce the demand for enslaved labor, the efficiency and profitability created by a faster process and greater crop yield led to an increased use of enslaved labor by plantation owners.

# *Ships That Carried the Name* SAVANNAH

Many ships carried the name "Savannah." They included warships and merchant vessels.

One of the most important was the SS *Savannah*, the first steamship to cross the Atlantic Ocean in 1819. Two steamers named *City of Savannah* connected local merchants and travelers with New York and Boston ports. In March 1938, the US Navy commissioned a light cruiser christened USS *Savannah*. And finally, in 1959, the first nuclear-powered merchant ship was named the NS *Savannah* in honor of the first steamship, the *Savannah*.



Courtesy Georgia Historical Society

## Steamship *Savannah*

The SS *Savannah*'s remarkable voyage from Savannah to Liverpool, England, in 1819 marked "one of the world's maritime epochs." While critics called the 300-ton steamship a "steam coffin," Captain Moses Rogers navigated the vessel through the North Sea to Russia and back to Savannah. Europeans hailed Rogers as the "Columbus of trans-Atlantic steam navigation." After several round trips from New York to Savannah, the ship wrecked off Fire Island, New York, on November 5, 1821. In 1933, Congress declared National Maritime Day to commemorate the steamship's transatlantic voyage. Maritime Day is celebrated on May 22nd.



Courtesy US Naval Historical Center

## USS *Savannah* (CL-42)

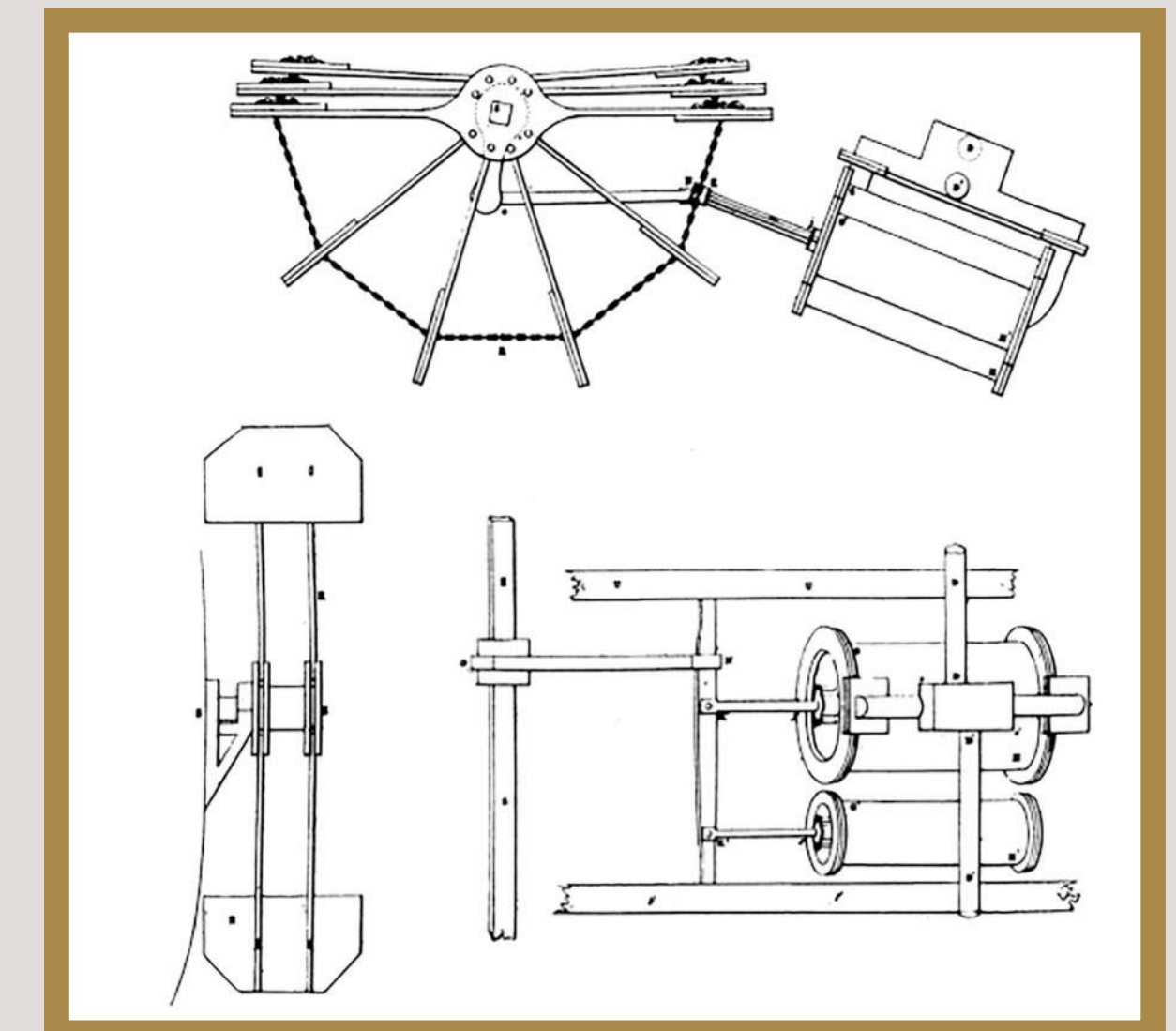
The USS *Savannah* was launched in 1937 and commissioned in 1938. The light cruiser patrolled waters from the Georgia coast to Brazil, Hawaii, the British Isles, and North Africa. CL-42 supported US naval operations that transported President Franklin Roosevelt to the historic Yalta conference. The ship earned three battle stars for World War II service.



Courtesy Georgia Historical Society

## Nuclear Ship (NS) *Savannah*

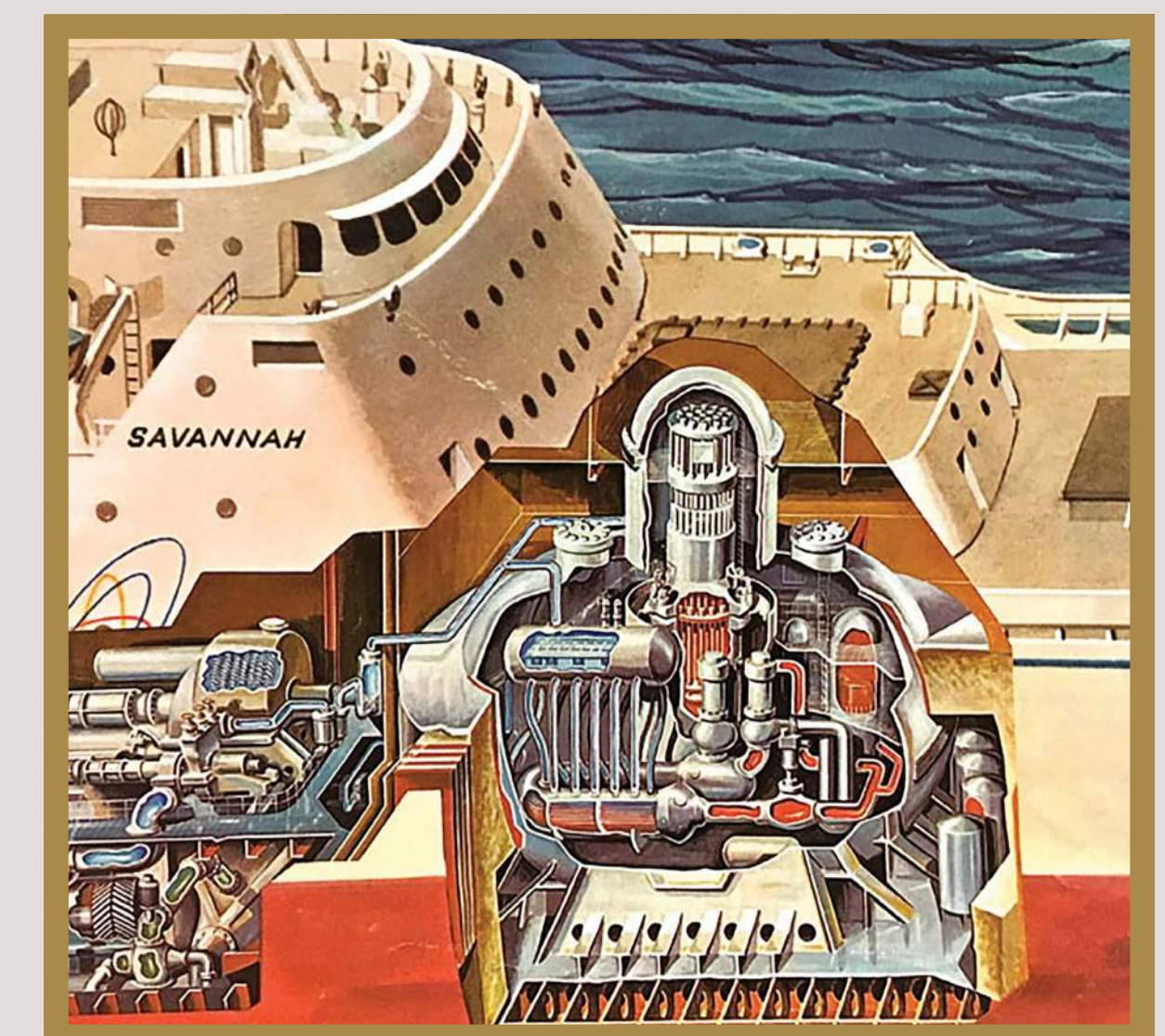
In 1955, President Eisenhower proposed constructing a nuclear-powered merchant vessel to promote the visionary Atoms for Peace program. The NS *Savannah* was launched in 1959 and hailed as a "bold and enterprising experiment in the daring and distinguished annals of American science and seafaring." The 596-foot ship had a cargo capacity of 9,900 tons and accommodated 60 passengers. From 1962 to 1972, NS *Savannah* operated as an experiment to assess the feasibility and cost-effectiveness of nuclear power in commercial shipping. The ship went out of service in 1972 due to high operating costs. It was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1991.



Courtesy Mystic Seaport Museum

## SS *Savannah*'s Collapsible Paddle Wheel

Paddle wheels on the SS *Savannah* rotated at 18 revolutions per minute. The wheels folded to reduce drag while the ship was under sail.



Courtesy Patriots Point Museum

## Cutaway View of NS *Savannah*'s Reactor

NS *Savannah* had a uranium dioxide-fueled reactor with a maximum power rating of 80 thermal megawatts. The vessel consumed 163 pounds of uranium during service, the equivalent of 29 million gallons of fuel oil.

# Savannah's WHARVES



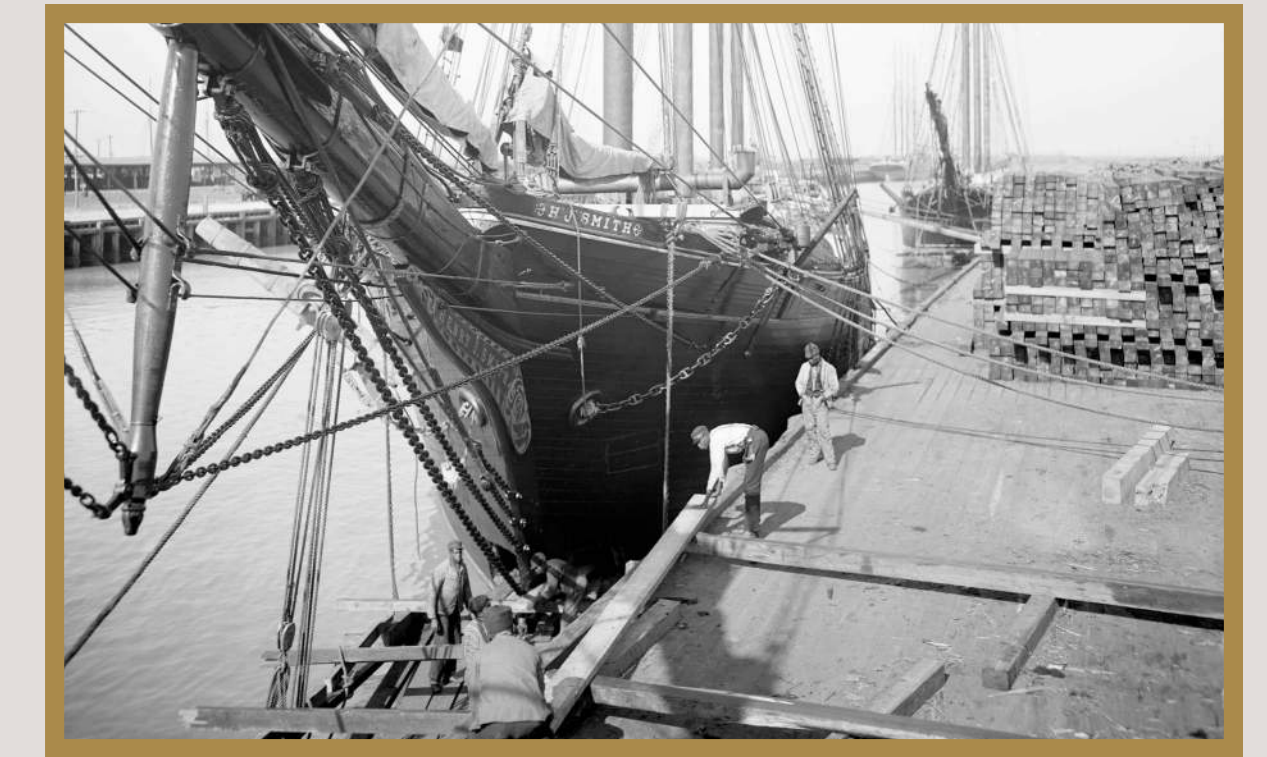
Panorama of the Savannah waterfront  
Courtesy Picturesque America



Wooden wharves on the waterfront  
Courtesy Library of Congress

*Savannah was the busiest port during the height of cotton exportation in the mid-1800s.*

The unique construction of River Street was shaped by early commerce in the colonial port city. Warehouses, ramps, and wharves were constructed to prepare goods for export. Early wharves and warehouses were constructed of wood, but these structures were susceptible to destruction from fire and hurricanes. In 1846, the city began mandating stone construction for durability. Many of the buildings along Factors Walk were built using discarded ballast stone from ships. The buildings and ramps were used to store and load goods onto ships for export. A series of iron and concrete walkways connect them to the bluff.



Loading lumber for export  
Courtesy Library of Congress

## The Port During WWII

Savannah's port was crucial in efforts to support Allied Forces during WWII. The Southeastern Shipbuilding Corporation built 88 Liberty Ships here. The port also facilitated the shipping of supplies, such as guns, ammunition, and tanks. The location on the Atlantic Ocean was crucial in maintaining the supply chain to the European front. In 1945, the Georgia General Assembly created the Georgia Ports Authority. The port expanded upriver to Garden City, with greater cargo capacity and later, containerized goods.



Courtesy Library of Congress

## River Street Revitalization

Savannah's waterfront underwent extensive revitalization in the 1970s. The well-traveled ramps were worn from over 200 years of commerce, and many of the warehouses stood empty. Spurred by local businesses and landowners, urban renewal transformed the area into parks, restaurants, and shops. Historic ballast stone roads and buildings were repaired. The preservation effort cemented Savannah's Historic District as a destination for locals and tourists.

# Savannah's SEAPORT



Cranes at the Port of Savannah  
Courtesy Georgia Ports Authority

## Container & Cargo Lines

A variety of ships travel the Savannah River. In addition to private boats and stern-wheelers, container vessels from several shipping lines transport cargo to and from the terminals. Downriver below Savannah, Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) carriers can be seen with their distinctive half globes aligned on deck.

*Savannah's port is one of the busiest in the US.*

Some of the world's largest merchant vessels bring cargo from Asia, Europe, South America, the South Pacific, and Africa and return with American commodities. Much of this freight is handled as containerized cargo. The Port of Savannah welcomes thousands of vessels per year.



Courtesy BP

## Container Ship

Inbound and outbound ships pass within yards of River Street, providing a unique view of international vessel traffic.

## Two Terminals

Georgia Ports operates two terminals out of Savannah, Ocean and Garden City. The port of Savannah offers goods quickly to the market because of its proximity to major cities by interstate transit and rail.



Courtesy BP

## Tugs Assist with Navigation and Docking

Tugboats play a critical role in Savannah's maritime commerce. Without their meticulous guidance, large ships could not maneuver in the Savannah River's tight bends and turning basins.

## Exports at the Port

The Port of Savannah exports include forestry and solid wood goods, steel, automobiles, and industrial equipment. Today, these items are shipped from terminals controlled by the Georgia Ports Authority in conjunction with nearby private distribution centers owned by Target, IKEA, Heineken, Home Depot, Walmart, Dollar Tree, and Best Buy. A complex network of rail lines and direct access to the interstate supports the terminals. The port generates over 286,000 jobs and \$6.3 billion in annual tax revenue.

# Savannah's LIBERTY SHIPS

## Innovative Design

One of the critical factors in Liberty ship productions was design standardization.

Length	Width	Speed
<b>441</b> FT	<b>56</b> FT	<b>11</b> KNOTS

Triple Expansion Steam Engine

**2,500** -HORSEPOWER

Carrying Limit

**10,000** TONS

The five holds of a Liberty ship could carry the contents of 300 railroad cars, 2,840 jeeps, or 440 Sherman tanks. Liberty ships were equipped with a three-inch gun, two 37mm Bofors cannons on the bow, four or five-inch stern guns, and six 20mm Oerlikon machine guns.

*Before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor brought the United States into World War II, President Roosevelt and Congress authorized a ship-building program to construct a fleet of transport vessels that could carry American supplies to England called Liberty ships.*

Liberty ships could be rapidly produced using welded component construction and assembly line production techniques. During peak construction in 1943, shipbuilders could complete a Liberty ship in 40 days. The Savannah firm of Southeastern Shipbuilding constructed 87 Liberty ships during this time. More than 2,700 Liberty class vessels comprising the “Atlantic Bridge” were built. The “Atlantic Bridge” refers to the constant flow of these ships across the Atlantic to deliver vital supplies to Allied forces in Europe during WWII. Today, only a few survive. Two have been restored to WWII operating conditions. The SS *Jeremiah O'Brien* is homeported in San Francisco, and SS *John W. Brown* is berthed in Baltimore, where it launched in 1942.

## Locally Built

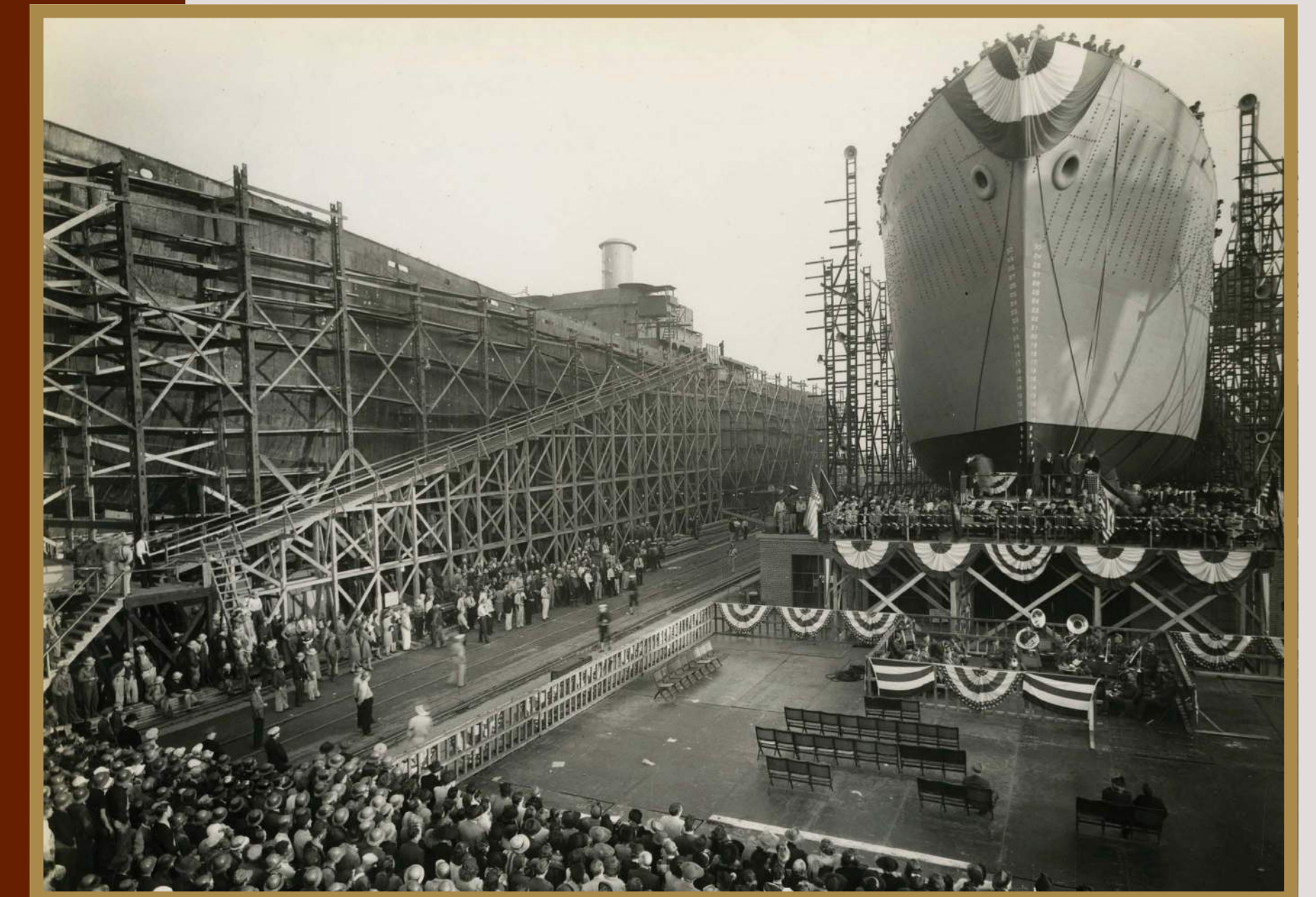
The Southeastern Shipbuilding yard was laid out according to a standard design that permitted work to progress on six vessels simultaneously. The hull and superstructure sections were fabricated and then welded together. Welding was faster and less labor intensive than riveting, increasing production speed. Each Liberty ship launched by Southeastern Shipbuilding cost the United States approximately \$2 million.



Courtesy Tane Casserley/NOAA

## SS James Swan, Still Serving

Approximately 200 Liberty ships were sunk during World War II. Many were lost after the war in merchant marine service. Originally christened as the USS *James Swan*, in 1952, the *Quartette* was en route from Galveston, Texas, to Pusan, South Korea with a cargo consigned to the US Army and struck Pearl and Hermes Atoll northwest of the Hawaiian Islands. Today, the remains of the Savannah-built vessel provide habitat for an artificial reef at the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument off the northwest coast of Hawaii.



Courtesy Georgia Historical Society

## SS James Oglethorpe

The first vessel launched at Southeastern Shipbuilding was the *James Oglethorpe* on November 20, 1942. On March 11, 1943, the Savannah-built Liberty vessel sailed from New York City with the 40-ship fast convoy designated Halifax 229. Five days later, a pack of eight German U-boats attacked the convoy. Of the 74-man crew aboard, 44 lost their lives, including 15 Savannahians, when a torpedo fired by a U-01 severely damaged the heavily loaded *Oglethorpe* the following day.

# Crossing the SAVANNAH RIVER

Although the Savannah River provided an avenue to the sea, it also presented a barrier to overland travel and transportation.

Rochester Ferry, later named Screven's Ferry, was established in 1762 and connected Savannah with a roadway in South Carolina. This location was Savannah's main river crossing site for over 160 years. Three bridges have crossed the river at Savannah: the Seaboard Coastline Railroad Bridge, the Houlihan Bridge, and the Talmadge Bridge.

## Balanced Cantilever Construction

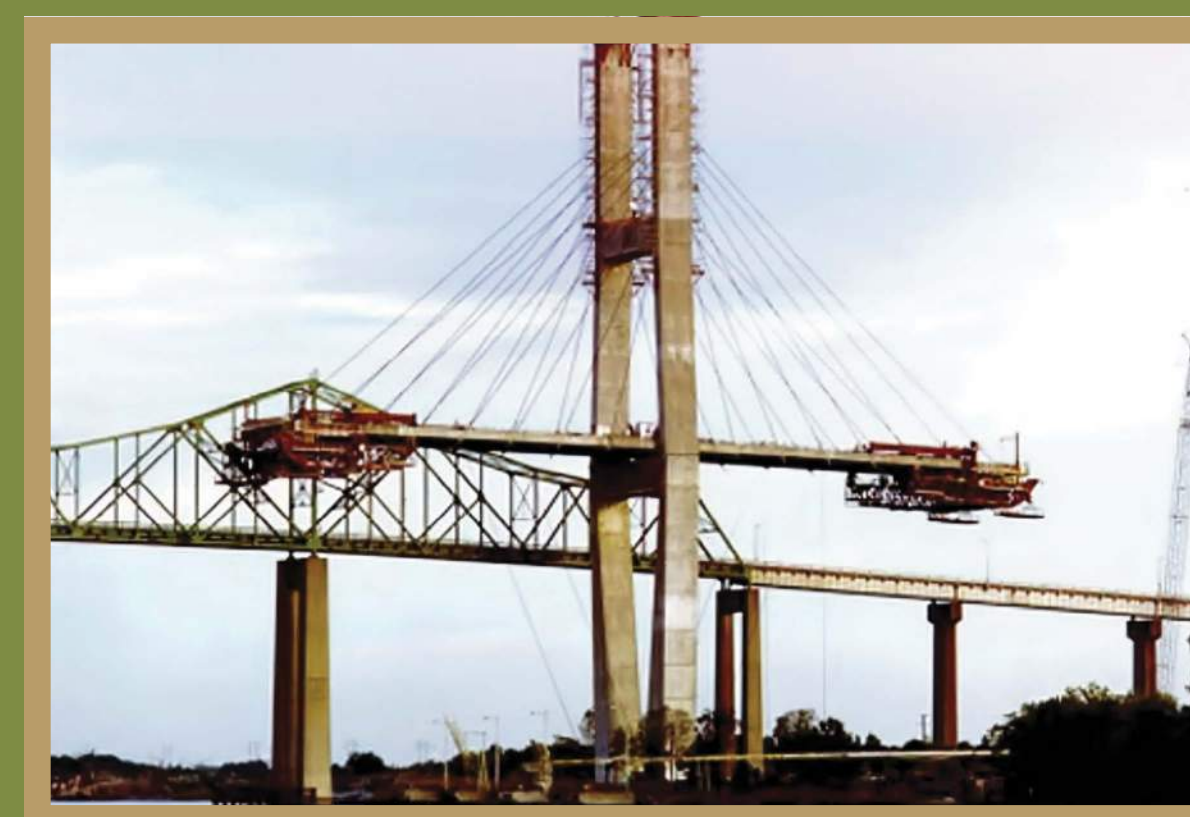
A system of balanced cantilever construction permitted concrete for the new Talmadge Bridge to be cast in place using form travelers. That method required critical wind analysis and temporary cable restraints capable of compensating for hurricane-force winds during construction. Bridge stress tests and construction geometry were controlled to an accuracy of one inch by a water ballast system in the 200-ton travelers.



Construction of the Talmadge Bridge in 1991  
Courtesy Georgia Historical Society

## Talmadge Bridge

The first Talmadge Bridge opened in 1954. It was a 600-foot cantilever truss steel structure, providing 136 feet of vertical clearance at high tide for ship traffic. In 1991, the Georgia Department of Transportation constructed a new \$25.7 million structure. The impressive cable-stayed design suspended the roadway from two 418-foot-tall, H-shaped concrete pylons. The bridge featured a 195-foot vertical clearance at high tide and a 1,023-foot horizontal clearance.



Courtesy Buckland & Taylor Ltd.

## Houlihan Bridge

The Houlihan Bridge is located approximately six miles upriver from downtown Savannah on State Route 25. The original bridge, constructed in 1922 and rehabilitated in 1954, was the first structure to provide direct overland travel between Savannah and South Carolina. With the bridge's construction, the local economy became less dependent on boat traffic for transporting people and goods from nearby towns such as Bluffton, South Carolina. The Georgia Department of Transportation replaced the bridge with a new structure in 2025. New features include additional lanes and a higher clearance than the earlier turnstile versions.



Houlihan Bridge in 2021



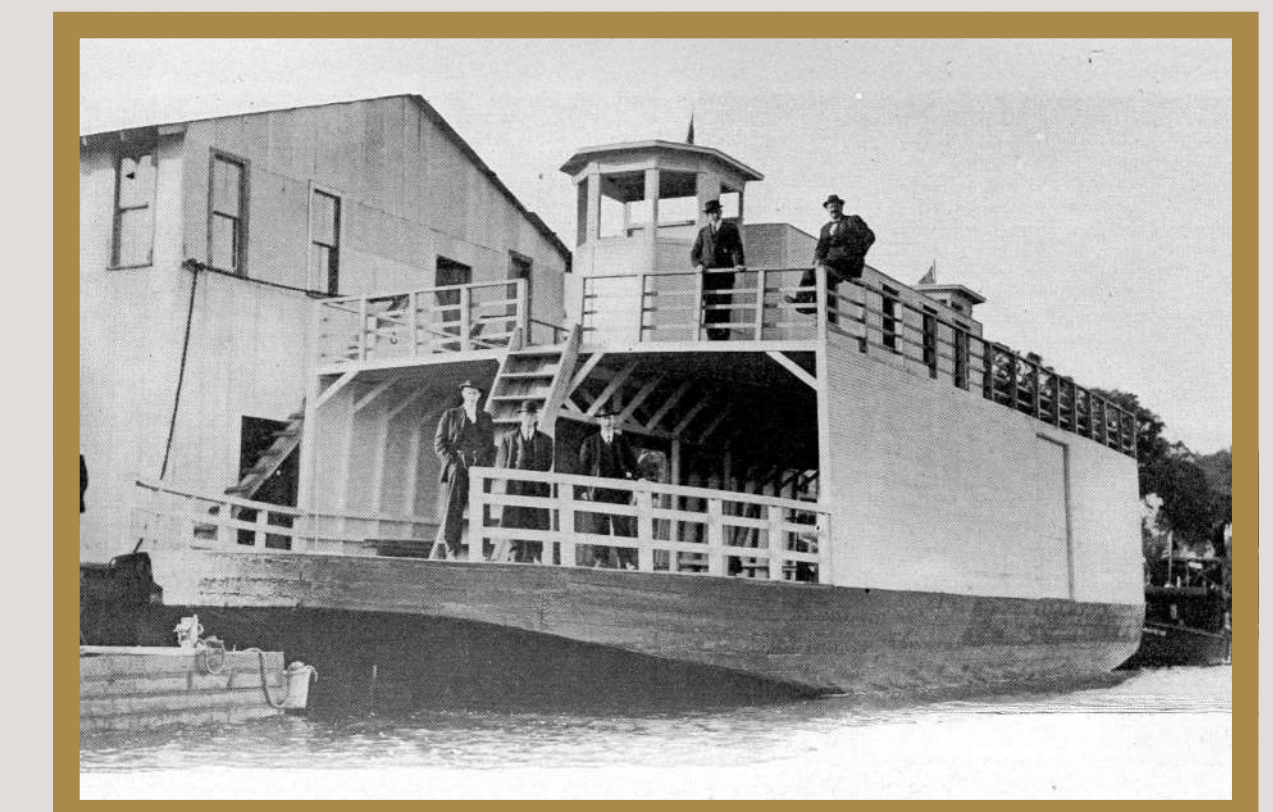
New Houlihan Bridge in 2025



The Savannah Belles Ferry's *Susie King Taylor II* takes visitors across the Savannah River  
Courtesy Savannah's Waterfront

## Transport by Ferry

Historically, ferries provided a method of transporting goods from South Carolina to the shipping center of Savannah. They also offered regular service to employees who worked at the terminals on Hutchinson Island. Today, Chatham Area Transit provides ferry access to visitors and residents through the Savannah Belles Ferry. Their fleet provides access between City Hall, Waving Girl Landing, and Hutchinson Island. In 2025, the first hybrid ferries in the US arrived in Savannah to join their fleet. The *Juliet Gordon Lo II* and *Susie King Taylor II* both utilize a hybrid diesel-powered system.



Courtesy Power Boating Magazine

## Georgia-Carolina Ferry

In the early 1900s, ferry boats such as the *Georgia-Carolina* carried passengers and automobiles between Savannah and the Union Causeway Turnpike across the river in South Carolina. Smaller steamboat ferries also regularly traveled between Savannah's riverfront and Hutchinson Island. These boats transported workers to jobs at the Seaboard Air Line terminals, where goods such as lumber, naval stores, and cotton were prepared for export.