

# Georgia's Historic Capital

## Savannah: Georgia's First State Capital

At the time of statehood in 1776, Georgia's revolutionary government operated from Savannah, though no document or election formally designated Savannah as the capital city. As the largest city of the new state, and by virtue of the tradition of the past three decades, Savannah remained the seat of government. Georgia's first [state constitution](#) directed that the [state legislature](#) meet in Savannah, although it also allowed the assembly to meet at other places as it should decide.

Just after Christmas in 1778, Savannah fell to British forces. Georgia's government fled the city and attempted to reorganize in [Augusta](#), located 127 miles to the north. After the capture of Savannah, British and Tory sympathizers attempted to reinstitute royal government in the city. Throughout the American Revolutionary war, the capital subsequently rotated between Savannah and Augusta due to British occupation of each city.

In February the council resolved to move the capital to Augusta so that it would be nearer the growing backcountry. On January 4, 1785, another session was convened in Savannah, marking the last episode of that city's history as the capital of Georgia. Where precisely the assembly met in Savannah is uncertain, as there was no statehouse building. The legislature likely followed the earlier example of various revolutionary assemblies, which met in taverns (including that of [Peter Tondee](#)), private homes, and perhaps other meeting halls.

## Augusta: Georgia's Second Capital

As large inland areas neighboring the [coastal area](#) of the state had been obtained from Native American groups and opened to white settlers, the center of population began shifting from Savannah and the coast. The frontier settlers discovered the convenience of the capital's location 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. Additionally, the legislature approved land grants, bridges and ferries, pardons, excusals from paying taxes, authorizations to [practice law](#), and a number of other things, which made living near the meeting site of the legislature important.

Thus, by 1784 there was growing concern among the new settlers that the capital would 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 thus became the official capital, and the first session of the legislature convened there on January 3, 1786. However, for many, Augusta was situated 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 (white) residents of the occupied sections of Georgia.

## Louisville: Georgia's Third Capital

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 twenty miles of an Indian trading post known as Galphin's Old Town, or Galphinton, on the Ogeechee River in what is now [Jefferson County](#). [George Galphin](#) had established a trading post at the site two decades earlier. The commission was

authorized to purchase 1,000 acres for the new capital, which would be patterned after Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 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](#) assistance during the Revolutionary War.

The actual site selected for the capital was at the intersection of three roads—one leading to Savannah, one to Augusta, and one to now-forgotten Georgetown—where a market, built in 1758, still stands today. Approved plans for the new capital city called for five streets on each of the four sides of the market, with a statehouse and governor's mansion located an equal distance on either side.



*Yazoo Act*

In 1795, a special [constitutional convention](#) was held, in part to correct for land speculation during the infamous [Yazoo Land Fraud](#). The convention members adopted a new amendment to the Constitution of 1789 that officially designated Louisville as the "permanent seat of government" and directed that the governor and other state officials be in the new capitol at Louisville before the next meeting of the legislature.

In a new state constitution adopted in 1798, Louisville was designated the "seat of government," but the term "permanent," which had been included in the previous document, was omitted. The General Assembly could now change the site of the capital by a legislative act. The press for new Indian lands continued relentlessly, and Louisville would serve as the Georgia state capital for only ten years. Reportedly, the desire to move the capital also arose out of a concern about [malaria](#) in the Louisville area.

In 1802 Creek lands west of Louisville were ceded to Georgia. No sooner had this territory been divided into counties than a drive to move the seat of government was again initiated. Only seven years after Louisville became the capital, the May 11, 1803, joint session of the General Assembly appointed a commission to select a site suitable for a permanent capital at the head of navigation of the Oconee River. On December 12, 1804, lawmakers passed an act to build a new capital, which would be named [Milledgeville](#) in honor of the current governor, [John Milledge](#).

## **Milledgeville: Georgia's Fourth Capital**

Some 3,240 acres were appropriated for the new capital in Milledgeville; lots were sold in the city, and the proceeds were used to construct the new statehouse. Construction of the capitol took two years, and by the fall of 1807 the building was ready for occupation, although the finishing touches would not be completed until 1811. (Over the next thirty years, two wings were added.) Government Square occupied almost twenty acres in the city. In October 1807 fifteen wagons carrying the treasury and public records of the state left Louisville for Milledgeville.



*State Capitol Milledgeville*

The new Gothic revival brick building, located about three-quarters of a mile from the Oconee River, was a parallelogram, with walls four feet thick. Although it was a magnificent statehouse for its time, the structure did not have the dome commonly associated with capitol buildings and resembled instead a castle or fortress.

For sixty years Milledgeville served as Georgia's capital city. The pressure to acquire more Indian lands continued, however, particularly after the forced [removal of the Cherokees](#) from the state in 1838. Lawmakers anticipated that, once again, a desire

to move the capital would soon be heard, and this time the arrival of the [railroad](#) era would play a role in the debate. Milledgeville remained Georgia's official state capital throughout the [Civil War](#) (1861-65).

## **Atlanta: Georgia's Fifth Capital**

The new candidate for the capital city was a small settlement located ninety miles northwest of Milledgeville, near the [Chattahoochee River](#) in [DeKalb County](#). The site was part of a large area ceded to Georgia by the Creeks in 1821. 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 known as Terminus.

In mid-1842 Samuel Mitchell, who had donated land to the Western and Atlantic, and Charles Garnett, a chief engineer, changed the name of Terminus to Marthasville in honor of former governor [Wilson Lumpkin](#)'s youngest daughter, Martha. In December 1843 the legislature incorporated Marthasville. Some residents and workers objected to a frontier railroad town bearing such a feminine name, however, so the name 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 the name change in December 1847.

Atlanta was soon to vie for consideration as the state capital, in part due to its rapid growth and its status as the rail center of Georgia. By 1845 the Georgia Railroad linked Atlanta to Augusta, and the following year the Macon and Western (later the [Central of Georgia](#)) connected Atlanta to Macon. Soon Charleston, South Carolina; Memphis, Tennessee; and other cities would link with Atlanta, prompting that city to initiate a campaign for becoming Georgia's next capital.

Atlanta city officials made a bid for the city's designation as the state capital—especially in light of Atlanta's recent population growth and better rail accessibility. In February 1868, the Atlanta City Council held a special meeting to frame a formal proposal to the constitutional convention. Essentially, the council's offer was that Atlanta, if designated as Georgia's capital, would provide suitable buildings for the legislature, the governor, other state officials, and the [supreme court](#) at no charge for ten years. Additionally, city officials offered the twenty-five-acre fairground or the choice of any unoccupied ten acres in the city for a state capitol.

The constitutional convention accepted the offer and included in the Constitution of 1868 a formal provision: "The seat of government of this State, from and after the date of the ratification of this constitution, shall be in the city of Atlanta, and the general assembly shall provide for the erection of a new capitol, and such other buildings as the public welfare may require." By a vote of 89,007 to 71,309 the new constitution was ratified in April 1868. Georgia now had a new capital—its fifth in less than a century.