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Historical Sketch of Milledgeville¹

Situated on a bluff on the fall line of the Oconee River near the geographic center of the state, the city of Milledgeville was created by an 1803 legislative act to serve as the capital city of Georgia. The city was named in honor of Governor John Milledge and served as the state capital from 1804 until 1868. Milledgeville was a planned city that initially contained sixteen lots of 202½ acres each for a total of 3,240 acres. Lots were sold to raise funds for the construction of the statehouse and other public buildings.

The town plan showed considerable relationship to the tradition of colonial town planning and was influenced by both Savannah, Georgia, and Washington, D.C. However, the undulating topography forced some alteration to the traditional grid pattern of streets. The streets of Milledgeville are typically 100 feet in width, with portions of Jefferson and Washington Streets being 120 feet wide. Included in the town plan were four public squares, of which only three were ever used as planned. Statehouse Square was the location of the statehouse, Penitentiary Square housed the state prison and the Baldwin County Courthouse (today the location of Georgia College), and the final square, which was set aside for public uses, became Memory Hill Cemetery.

Early houses in Milledgeville were of frame construction and had few architectural details. The dwellings usually had no porches or columns but had dormer windows in the roofs to utilize all space possible. The chimneys of these houses were constructed of clay because of the lack of stone in the surrounding area. Houses were positioned close to the street and usually had picket or rail fences to keep roving livestock out of residential yards. The first three residences constructed for the governor were modest houses—a double pile log house was replaced by a two-story clapboard house in 1809, which in turn was rebuilt as a two story frame house in 1820. It was not until 1838 that the old Governor's Mansion was constructed.

Milledgeville never experienced rapid growth due in part to commercial limitations. The Oconee River proved too shallow for effective and reliable commercial traffic and the railroads did not receive sufficient local encouragement to connect with Milledgeville. It was not until 1851, long after basic transportation networks for middle Georgia were established, that a spur railroad was built connecting Milledgeville to Gordon. One area in which the town experienced success was with its efforts to establish state institutions. In the 1830s and 1840s several academies and seminaries were established in the Midway district just south of the town and Oglethorpe University was created as well. The 1840s brought about the establishment of the state hospital for the insane. Although not located in the historic district, these events impacted the future of the city.

The physical appearance of the town changed between 1830 and 1850. The community's center shifted west and north while the south and east sides rapidly deteriorated to a condition that earned the name "Dogsboro." Located at Greene and Wilkinson, the Darien Bank served as an anchor for the developing downtown north of the statehouse. During the 1830s trees were planted in front of the statehouse to "reclaim the natural beauty of the area," the city's first oil lamps were placed on Wayne Street, and a new law regulated buildings to be no more than eight feet from the street or sidewalk. A town fire company was established in 1828 after several fires destroyed wood buildings throughout the town.

The Civil War would have a profound impact on the city of Milledgeville. In part this was because the town was a focal point for the debates of the 1850s which culminated in a narrow vote in favor of secession in early 1861. As the state capital, the town was both a military and a political center during the war. When William Sherman carried out his "March to the Sea" the town was clearly a major target. Sherman's presence did lead to property destruction, some of which occurred when the inmates burned the penitentiary. The armory on Statehouse Square was also destroyed, as were some homes. In the aftermath of the war, the politics of reconstruction brought finality to the long rumored move of the state capital from Milledgeville to Atlanta.

With the transfer of the capitol came an economic and emotional downturn that was reflected in the buildings. Few new buildings were constructed between the end of the war and the late 1870s. Growth continued to be mainly institutional. After an abortive attempt to keep Oglethorpe University, the town secured a charter in 1879 for what would become Georgia Military College. Milledgeville lost rights to the technical school in the mid-1880s but in 1889, Georgia Normal and Industrial College was built on Penitentiary Square.

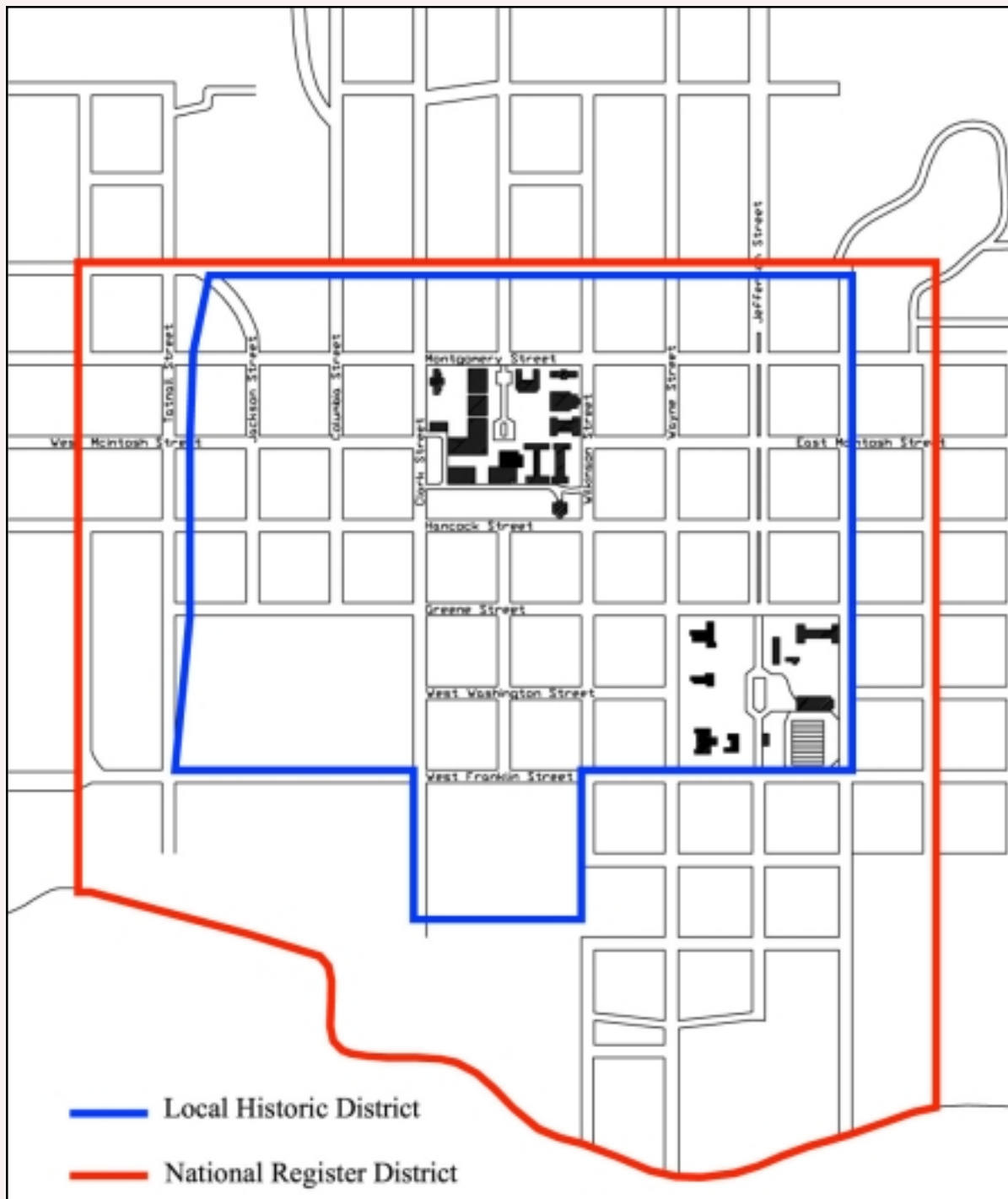
At this time, the state transferred all of its Milledgeville property to the university trustees. Penitentiary Square was cleared of all its unused remaining prison facilities and was considered valuable only as rental commercial property. In 1880, the Executive Mansion was used as a barracks while the Darien Bank served as a dormitory. A courthouse was constructed to replace the one destroyed in 1864 and a new two-story city hall with a bell tower was built as well. A Confederate monument was erected at its front door. Most residential communities in town were well taken care of but the commercial districts remained in decline.

Beginning in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Milledgeville saw innovations such as improved streets, electric lights, telephone service, and a stable water supply. The reoccurring problem of adequate water was of the most concern for the city. Individual wells were still being used as late as the 1890s and there was a high death rate from typhoid fever because of water impurities. A water works plant was constructed and improved in the twentieth century but it was not until 1954 that a modern plant was built that utilized the Oconee River.

The impact of these institutional and physical changes was to permanently alter the once agricultural and political center. Georgia Military College has survived. Georgia Normal and Industrial College became a four-year institution in 1922 and a part of the University System of Georgia in 1933; it remained a woman's college until 1967, when it became co-educational. The state hospital grew rapidly in the twentieth century and was the principal employer for citizens in Milledgeville. Since the late 1960s the hospital has declined in size but other institutions have continued to contribute to Milledgeville including a Youth Development Center and several adult prisons.

While Milledgeville was a town of state politics for 61 years, it has continually struggled to prove its viability. Today, it is known for its fine institutions and rich heritage, which is beautifully illustrated in the homes and commercial buildings which survive today. This former capitol city has a unique town plan and a wealth of historic architecture that represent over 150 years of architectural development in Georgia.

¹ This brief history of Milledgeville is from "The Local Historic District Historical Sketch" edited by Thomas F. Armstrong with additional information provided by the 1972 National Register of Historic Places nomination form for the Milledgeville Historic District.



Milledgeville Local Historic District