

CAIRO History - Trivia – Facts - Attractions – Events

In 1833 the area's first post office received the name, "Cairo." It was not until 1870, that Cairo as we know it was chartered as a town. It became a city in 1906.

It is the seat of Grady County, which was established on January 1, 1906, from portions of Thomas and Decatur counties and named in honor of Henry Woodfin Grady, editor of the Atlanta Constitution.

The Atlantic and Gulf Railroad track reached Station 20, twelve miles west of Thomasville, on Thursday October 10, 1867. Tradition holds that the rail stop was known locally as Miller's Station, "a wide place in the road with one store and a grog shop," run by Henry Miller. By November 4, Station 20 and vicinity had its own post office, taking the name "Cairo" from the discontinued post office that had been located to the west of the emerging town.



The track soon continued west twelve more miles to Station 21, near the location of the former Cairo post office. Brothers W. W. and John T. Harrell laid out a town there on a thousand-acre parcel purchased from the Thomas Whigham estate a year earlier. The blocks and lots of Harrell, Georgia, and a central dirt road named Broad Street, were in place by mid-December when the Atlantic and Gulf Railroad went on to complete its final twelve miles to Bainbridge. The continuous rail link greatly influenced the growth of both Harrell--later renamed Whigham--and Cairo.

In the 1870 census the district including Cairo listed not only farmers but five school teachers, carpenters, builders, buggy makers, railroad employees, a store clerk, a well



digger, shoemakers, and a mill wright. Cairo citizens later recorded that the first store in town was that of postmaster Jonathan Hall. Dr. H. M. Mitchell, John P. Watts, and George Wight established other early businesses. J. B. Clay and J. A. McAfee were Baptist ministers.

George A. Wight built his Cairo store south of the railroad about 1869. The Wight store in its new frame building contrasted with older log structures of the town. Wight's associate, John D. Powell, ran Wight & Powell in Cairo, while Wight operated a store at Sofkee. Also in 1869, freedmen established the St. Thomas Primitive Baptist Church in Cairo.

Dr. Seaborn A. Roddenbery built a general store just north of the railroad by July of 1870. Roddenbery remained a practicing physician, living in Decatur County and visiting patients across the countryside by horse and buggy, while others operated his store and ran his Crossroads Farm. Charles Dreyfus, a Frenchman from Savannah, managed the Roddenbery store and served as the town's second postmaster.

The single-story Roddenbery Store building of undressed, unpainted lumber housed the post office in a shed room on its north side. The store ledger itemized sales of a variety of products from calico to nails, including hoes, coffee, sardines, liniment, flour, school books, candy, tin ware, soap, axes, matches, silk, horse collars, occasionally umbrellas, and even violin strings. Patrons paid their accounts not only in cash, but also with syrup, corn, cotton, eggs, chickens, and in at least one case, nine fish. Roddenbery, along with other merchants who supplied the needs of farm families, accepted "practically everything that

farmers produced," sending most of it to wholesale dealers in Savannah by rail.

For 100 years Cairo was a cane syrup producer, a tradition that began unofficially in 1862, when Dr. Seaborn Anderson Roddenbery made open-kettle sugar cane syrup and carried it with him on his medical rounds. Marketing under the Roddenbery label commenced in 1889, eventually giving Cairo its nickname, Syrup City. Syrup became such a vital part of the local economy that the school athletic teams were eventually named the Syrupmakers and Syrupmaids. The teams still have the names today.

Pickles were added to the inventory of the Roddenbery Company's products in 1936, placing Cairo on the list of top pickle manufacturers. The city became known as host to the "World's Largest Brine Yard." Ranking among Georgia's leading agricultural and livestock producing regions, Cairo claims other significant distinctions such as "The Okra Capital of the World" and "The Collard Seed Capital of the World."

Wight Nurseries started as a pecan nursery, and for 40 years produced pecan and fruit trees. Wight became a specialist in pecans. In fact, pecan trees were shipped all over the world. The nursery grew to become one of the nation's largest growers of container grown nursery stock. Now part of Monrovia, it is a world leader in ornamental plants.

Not only do Cairo and Grady County have an abundant farming and agricultural history of which to be proud, but we also have our fair share of famous folks who have made their mark in history on state and national levels, from sports and music to literary arts and politics.

George T. Smith, who began practicing law in Cairo in 1947, was the first non-governor to have his portrait hung in the capitol and one of the first to serve in all three branches of state government. A portion of Georgia Highways 93 and 112 are designated as the George T. Smith Highway. Governor of Georgia from 1937 to 1941, **E. D. Rivers** also served in the State House of Representatives and as Speaker of the House. Local residents **Judge R.C. Bell** and **Judge W. H. Duckworth** both served as Chief Justice for the Supreme Court of the State of Georgia. **Vereen Bell**, a gifted author and son of Judge R.C. Bell, became famous for his quail hunting and bird dog tales. **Thomas C. Chubb**, an accomplished Pulitzer Prize winning author, lived on Grady County's nearby Springhill Plantation. **Brenda Knight Graham**, another local and notable author, has written *The Pattersons and the Goat Man* and *Juliana of Clover Hill*. Awarded the Fellowship of Southern Writers Award for Non-Fiction in 1997, local author **June Bailey White** has several delightful books to her credit including *Mama Makes Up Her Mind and Other Dangers of Southern Living*. Her witty observations can also be enjoyed on National Public Radio's "All Things Considered." Elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1962, baseball hero **Jackie Robinson** became the first African-American to play in the major league. Highway 93 South has been named Jackie Robinson Parkway. All-American basketball player **Teresa Edwards**, a five time Olympian with four gold medals and one bronze medal to her credit, has a street named for her on the southwest side of Cairo, where she grew up. **Bill Stanfill**, a Cairo High Syrupmaker, played for the Miami Dolphins from 1969-1976 with two starting Superbowl victories. Highway 84, in Grady County, has been named Bill Stanfill Highway. **Bobby Walden**, known as the "Big Toe from Cairo," holds the record for most career punts while playing for the Pittsburgh Steelers, as well as a 1975 Superbowl victory over Minnesota. Born in Cairo, **Mickey Thomas**, lead singer for the popular rock band *StarShip*, launched his singing career in high school with the local band, Inner Souls. Cairo area country singer **Daryle Singeltary** has released two albums and has several Top 5 hits on the country charts, as well as a guest appearance on *Touched By An Angel*. The Cairo High School campus also reflects the generous contributions of **Art Williams**, founder of A.L. Williams, a multi-billion-dollar insurance company.

The Roddenbery Memorial Library -

Located in downtown Cairo, the library, in addition to its regular selections, features a first-rate collection of children's books and "story garden." Each year the library sponsors children's events such as the Dolls' Tea Party and a very successful summer vacation reading program. The library also offers a special area for teens equipped with age-focused material and an adult services area with ample study space. Local history and genealogy are widely used library services. Roddenbery Memorial Library has twice won the American Library Association's John Cotton Dana award for public relations since its founding in 1939.

Music and the Arts - Cairo is home to "Off Broad Street Centre for the Dance Arts", "The Firm Dance Company", "South Georgia Performing Arts", "South Georgia Ballet Company", "Legacy Twirling Academy", and "Cairo Gymnastics Academy".

The "Syrupmaker Band" is one of the most respected high school music programs in the south. 230 students participate in the marching band, and in the spring are divided into three concert ensembles. Founded in



the 1940's by legendary director Major Verran, the concert bands have consistently earned superior ratings from the Georgia Music Educators' band festivals for over 55 years. The marching band has earned exhibition performances at Notre Dame and Troy State University football games. The band plays a major, integral part in community activities.

Grady County Museum and History Center

- On Broad Street by the railroad, the Museum offers exhibits representing the true local heritage of the area. The Grady County Historical Society oversees the operation and promotion of the facility, encouraging the preservation and awareness of local history through several community events each year.

Antique Auto Museum - Housing a highly prized collection of cars (including the car from "Driving Miss Daisy"), motorcycles and other antiques, the Antique Auto Museum attracts visitors from around the country and is the hub for the annual Antique Car Rally each May.

Great Southern Antique Auto Show & Rally - Hundreds of participants descend on Cairo during the second weekend of May. Family fun activities center around antique cars and trucks. The Great Southern Antique Car Rally is a spin-off from the Great American Race, which



started in 1989 with 70 participants and now averages 120 or more. Participants have a good time, enjoy the ride, eat a lot, show off, and talk about their cars. Event highlights include a downtown Gas Light Parade, a Street Dance on Broad Street, an Antique Auto Poker Rally, the annual Display of Antique Autos and Antique Engines, and plenty of local entertainment.

Recreation Parks and Ball Fields - The City of Cairo maintains four parks within the city limits year round. Grady County operates and maintains Barber Park Recreation Department ball fields, tennis courts, and playgrounds.

Cairo Country Club - The country club features a private, 18-hole golf course that has been the spring break practice headquarters for the Slippery Rock College golf team for more than 25 years.

Parades - Locals eagerly anticipate the spectacular downtown Christmas Parade each year. Approximately eighty entries proceed down Broad Street under a blanket of lights making this event one of the most beautiful in South Georgia. Downtown is also host to the Martin Luther King Day Parade as well as a Veteran's Day Celebration held on the lawn of the courthouse.



Other Special Events - Weekend events in Grady County include Mule Day in the town of Calvary each November and Whigham's annual Rattlesnake Roundup in January, bringing thousands of people into the county to attend these popular festivals.