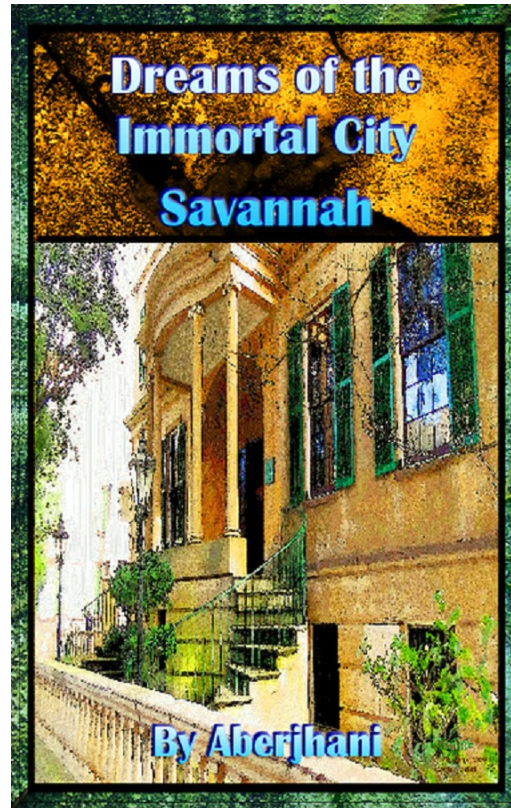


Introduction to:



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"It is true that a person always remains a person and utterly separate and apart from every other person. But it is equally true that each person is destined to reach with others an understanding and a unity which transcend individuality..."

—Thomas Merton (*A Life in Letters*)

Cities are as much composites of human memories, desires, and personalities as they are constructions of steel, concrete, glass, roaring energy, and ever-expanding technologies. Stitched together like the patches of romantic fantasies and terrifying night terrors that give Hollywood and Bollywood some of their most successful creations, diverse experiences combine to create private narratives often linked to public

concerns. These observations, as demonstrated by the stories in this volume, hold as mesmerizingly true for Savannah, Georgia, as for any other locale. They embrace the challenges of here-and-now at the same time that they honor the courageous endeavors of yesterday.

Credit for the original conception of Savannah as a poetically-proclaimed Immortal City should probably go to the state of Georgia's founder, James Edward Oglethorpe, who in 1733 hoped to see the entire new colony become a shining example of enlightenment in progressive action. The actual term was later put to exceptionally good use by historian Barry Sheehy in his work documenting Savannah's role as a major center of slave-trading right up until the American Civil War. Any enduring applicability of such a courageous notion would have to be attributed to its ever-evolving diverse citizenry and the predispositions of history itself.

Savannah's designation in 2018 as the fastest growing city in Georgia and its increasing importance on national and international levels are steadily reversing the social dynamics that once led natives to label it with the comical names "Slow-vannah" and "Save-Anna." Temptation to dub it SCAD-vannah, in reference to the Savannah College of Art and Design's irrefutable impact, is hard to avoid considering the famous art school's ubiquitous presence throughout and beyond the region.

In the impressive city design generally attributed to Oglethorpe, the founder's vision went far beyond any idea of picturesque squares which might one day entice rovers from across the globe to spend time in the city, thus giving natives and transplants reasons to lay claim to measures of justifiable pride. It was a way for colonists to simultaneously structure, empower, and extend communities. You could call it his dream for the future of populations that would eventually grow diverse in ways for which he could hardly have fully prepared himself or anyone else. One of his most interesting proposals was this:

"Each Family should have a Farm in the Country and an Alotment sufficient for a House and a Garden in the Town." (Oglethorpe, James. *Some Account of the Design of the Trustees for Establishing Colonys in America*, Univ. of GA, p. 37, 1990).

What might the application of such an enlightened social experiment look like in this second decade of the 21st century? It certainly dared to propose more for individual citizens than the 2017 strategic plan adopted by city administrators to secure a Triple A bond rating by the year 2030. It also went considerably further than the brilliant options proposed in 2018 by the informed strategists affiliated with the Congress for New Urbanism. With the eradication of areas once referred to as Commons and the aggressive often predatory acquisition of properties in general, Oglethorpe's suggestion would be an impossible undertaking. There are those who loudly proclaim the quest for

Triple A status the same. But the theoretical impact of such concepts—as in the effects they could possibly have on the higher-than-national average percentage of children living in poverty in the state as well as those living far from it—makes for some staggering worthwhile considerations if not practical solutions.

In his dream of Georgia and its future, Oglethorpe took into account nearly every conceivable environmental and developmental factor as it existed at the time and as it might come to exist generations down the road. The psychological dispositions of disabled settlers, how colonists and the mother country of England would financially enrich each other, and the role which the institution of marriage would play in the colony's ultimate success or failure were serious definitive factors. What he did not, and perhaps could not, envision was the extent to which increasing cultural diversity and individual genius would begin to alter our collective experience of history—like a singular flood of epic dimensions, or the strike of a powerful meteor the size of Ohio, completely rearranging a once-familiar landscape. His wise cordial diplomacy toward Yamacraw chief Tomochichi and the initial decision to prohibit slavery in the colony (though yes, he did indeed import slave labor for a time from neighboring South Carolina) indicated he understood well enough it would have some meaningful impact. How much of one remained a question only time could one day answer.

The focus of his mission was to secure a resource-rich outpost that would benefit England to the tune of a profit of £6,700 from the financed immigration of 125 families. In this, it may be said contemporary city leaders—given many modern advantages—have the better stated proposal as they move to link municipal jobs and functions to specific outcomes in the areas of: public safety, infrastructure, neighborhood revitalization, increased economic strength, and poverty reduction. These variables, of course, could only exist after the sluggish passage of time but the option to exercise foresight is always pinned to the moment at hand.

Almost 300 years after a succession of wars, hurricanes, plagues, fires, migrations, and the *Emancipation Proclamation*, Oglethorpe's original basic physical design of the colony has proven enduring even while the city as a whole has morphed into a cosmopolitan center of commerce, diverse demographics, cultural arts, military facilities, and scientific research dedicated to preserving the surrounding natural environment as well as further developing means to leave earth's boundaries altogether. Consequently, if he were able to see his masterful cityscape as it stands now, the founder might very well, as some have suggested, recognize it based on his plan. But he would also have to make some serious adjustments in regard to how society itself has evolved and, as framed by his enlightened disposition, might or might not be pleased by what he discovered.

The relative independence of women and adult children from their male sponsors could strike him as a good thing likely to strengthen the practice of democracy and social civility in general. Undoubtedly the abundance of educational facilities in the

area—Armstrong State/Georgia Southern University, Savannah State University, Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD), Georgia Institute of Technology, and South University among others—would earn approval. The presence in influential positions of “effeminate types” that he considered undesirable as settlers of the colony would require some re-thinking and maybe prompt him to seek briefing or counsel from various authority figures. The preponderance of beautiful churches dotting the landscape—given the Enlightenment period’s lean toward secularism—not to mention a highly visible mosque and Jewish presence would inspire deep reflection as well. Who, we might wonder, would be willing to explain why prisons in Georgia and the rest of America still represent some of the most overt forms of political, class, and racial oppression known to humanity, especially (at the time of this writing) given the sadly disproportionate population of the country to the world’s population of prison inmates?

Moreover: imagine the expression on his face upon discovering descendants of African slaves, whom he once cautioned would violently rebel against enslavement and destroy the colonial enterprise if slavery was made legal, eventually came to comprise the majority of his colony’s first city’s population. In addition, they became over time some of its chief builders—as educators, laborers, ministers, farmers, journalists, business people, and, eventually, as mayors.

The story of people of African descent in Savannah has been one of steady progression marred by the kind of political, economic, and social setbacks which have impacted African-American communities throughout the United States since the days of the Old Jim Crow leading up to the New Jim Crow. Yet it may be argued that in some ways the losses have been more severely felt in Savannah because of the black community’s status as the oldest of its kind in Georgia. From Oglethorpe’s temporary use of slaves imported from South Carolina to clear land for the new colony, and the later importation of Africans from Africa itself during the Atlantic Slave trade to the establishment of Savannah State University (originally the Georgia State Industrial College for Colored Youth) in 1890, and, the successive election of three black mayors from 1996 until 2016, the community has steadily evolved. It has also seen many of its most talented individuals move away and stay away due to seemingly insurmountable blocks to their hopes for upward mobility within their beloved hometown as well as other factors considered sad, deadly, or tragic.

Consider, for example, what happened in 2015: following one of numerous gang incidents to occur in a black neighborhood, a group of concerned citizens took to the streets in a march against violence. Interviewing one of the gang members who acknowledged participating in such destructiveness, a TV reporter asked how it made him feel to see the people of his community publicly mourning the lives of individuals lost to the chaos. With his face and voice obscured to ensure the safety of his three-year-old daughter, the young man gave a very unexpected answer:

“I mean, you know, they should’a been out here marchin’ an’ doin’ somethin’ long

before now. Everybody get upset and got somethin' to say when somebody they know get shot, but what about all the other times when it's just us?" He added that, for the sake of his daughter, he wanted to get away from gang life but believed it might be an inherited trait. "My daddy was in a gang and his daddy was in one before him. They both got shot by bangers."

It was a blood-chilling way of saying: This is all I know, all I have ever been, and all I really expect to be until death sends a bullet for me also. If Oglethorpe's dream-plans were designed to provide a better scenario for him, he certainly did not know about it and likely would not have placed much faith in them if he did. But why such an unyielding mindset in a town where so many residents, as well as potential transplants, have been eyeing enviable indicators of steady economic growth surpassing the state's and that of many other cities? Why do such indicators typically seem to mean little or nothing at all to segments of the population whose lives and succeeding generations are consistently hemmed in by poverty, inadequate education, racial disparities, and imprisonment? Why did Oglethorpe's vision, or for that matter Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream, seem to hold no meaning whatsoever for him?

The stories in *Dreams of the Immortal City Savannah* do not focus directly on the unusual racial dynamics which have influenced the city's growth and development, or lack thereof, since the days of Oglethorpe and slavery. Unfolding on levels ranging from the private and familial to the public and institutional, they offer examinations of what happens when dreams, visions, and nightmares converge, or clash, within the context of a given life impacted by cultural geographies merging within regions of a creative mind. Oglethorpe would have known something about that. In "Cities of Lights and Shadows and Prayers," a writer moves back and forth between awareness of himself in 1990s Savannah and a false memory of interactions with cultural icons in 1940s Paris.

"A Brazilian Thanksgiving in Savannah" examines the paradox of an estranged caregiver rediscovering the meanings of family and fate through a surprise holiday visit from Brazilian immigrants. "Trees Down Everywhere" documents attempts to prevent the flooding of a civil rights icon's historic Victorian home during the ravages of 2016 Hurricane Matthew and at a controversial moment in Donald Trump's campaign for the U.S. presidency. The title story, "Dreams of the Immortal City Savannah," confronts the legacy of slavery while the closing narratives examine modern conditions and hopes for the future.

"The Bridge and the Monument: A Tale of Two Legacies" was first published in *The American Poet Who Went Home Again*. The updated text included in this volume is presented in tribute to Dr. Abigail Jordan, whose passing (January 9, 2019) was reported just as edits were undergoing completion. It is also included because of the role it has come to play in ongoing present-day efforts to change the current name of the bridge spanning the Savannah River from the city's downtown area to Hutchinson Island.

Whether in the instance of the great Oglethorpe establishing America's thirteenth colony, modern-day residents negotiating the wisdom of fleeing the wrath of hurricanes, or contemporary African-Americans acclimating themselves to the reality that with black power for black people comes black responsibility for diverse populations, history makes one demand upon us all. It demands we adapt to the ragged flow of its ever-changing trends and reconfigurations. The only alternative is to await one's own demise. Better, perhaps, as the stories which follow suggest, to step back long enough to reevaluate the kinds of assumptions, practices, and behaviors which too often encourage disruptive conflicts or personal defeats, and then try taking a more enlightened, more empowered, step forward.

Aberjhani

Savannah, GA

Feb 2019 ***Harlem Renaissance Centennial***