

Marching down Georgia's Gone With the Wind Trail

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Marietta, Ga., historic town square is considered one of the best town squares in America and continues to draw thousands of visitors for concerts and events.

August 31, 2014 12:45 am • By Suzanne Corbett Special to the Post-Dispatch

Separating Georgia's Civil War facts from fiction may be a goal for some history buffs; however, "Gone With the Wind" fans frankly don't give a damn. They search for Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler along with Georgia's antebellum culture and Civil War past immortalized in Margaret Mitchell's epic novel and depicted in the MGM film masterpiece. A search that begins with Georgia's newest tourism trail, the Gone With the Wind Trail and Atlanta's celebration of the 75th anniversary of the film's premiere.

MARCHING TO ATLANTA

Marietta, Ga., is the first stop along the trail for tourists and Yankees traveling south. It was also a stop for Gen. William T. Sherman's 150 years ago. Sherman knew the capture of Marietta and its railroad was a strategic campaign necessity. While occupying the city for five months, Union troops converted the Kennesaw House depot hotel into a hospital and for a night (July 3, 1864) headquarters for Sherman. Kennesaw House today houses the Marietta Museum of History and features permanent and special exhibits as its current exhibition "Bleeding Blue and Grey: Marietta's Civil War Hospitals." One block south of Kennesaw House is a renovated cotton warehouse, the home of Marietta's Gone with the Wind Museum: Scarlett on the Square.

Since its 2003 opening, Windies (aka fans of "Gone With the Wind") have flocked to view the museum's eclectic mix of movie memorabilia that includes scripts, rare film props, books, contracts and promotional lobby posters. The collection's prized signature artifact is Scarlett's original Bengaline honeymoon gown worn by Vivian Leigh in the film. After exploring the museum's collection, stroll Marietta's historic town square where summer concerts, art walks and farm markets thrive throughout the fall.

From Marietta it's a 20-mile march (drive) to Atlanta where Sherman torched the city in November 1864. Less than 75 years later, Mitchell would include Atlanta's burning in her Pulitzer Prize-winning classic, which she wrote in a small downtown Atlanta apartment shared with her husband, John Marsh. The unassuming two-room basement apartment Mitchell dubbed "The Dump" became the Margaret Mitchell House, a designated historic landmark.

Tours of the Tudor Revival apartment building feature Mitchell's tiny apartment and two exhibit galleries. In celebration of "Gone With the Wind's" 75th anniversary, the upper level gallery features "Stars Fall on Atlanta: The Premiere of Gone With the Wind," documenting the three days surrounding the December 1939 world premiere, the film's cast, Atlanta's antebellum past and its Civil War veterans. Exit the Mitchell House through a garden courtyard to reach its adjunct gallery to view "Making of a Film Legend: Gone With The Wind," an exhibition examining the film's production, the issues of race and the motion picture and the depiction of Tara. Admission to the Margaret Mitchell House includes both galleries along with admission to the Atlanta History Center, just a five-minute drive away.

Atlanta's History Center stretches over 33 acres to include the 1860s Smith Farm, the Swan House and Gardens and the museum whose related "Gone With the Wind" and Civil War exhibits bridge Hollywood and history. "The Wilbur G. Kurtz: History in Gone With the Wind" exhibition, on display until April 2015, spotlights Kurtz's role as the film's historian, documents his influence on the historical accuracy and the depiction of Atlanta. Turning Point: The American Civil War exhibition presents more than 1,400 original artifacts coupled with life-size displays conveying the monumental struggle that united the states of America.

As Atlanta continues to commemorate the anniversaries of the Battle of Atlanta, the Atlanta Cyclorama and Civil War Museum are expected to draw larger crowds. The Cyclorama's 42-foot, 358 feet circumference is a life-size painting that retells the story of the Battle of Atlanta. The multimedia presentation drew Mitchell and Clark Gable during the Atlanta premiere, whose narrative track was recorded by Victor Jory, the actor who portrayed "Gone With the Wind's" villainous overseer.

WINDIE HANGOUTS

AND HAUNTS

Allow an hour to hang out on the Atlanta-Fulton Central Library's fifth floor, location of the Margaret Mitchell collection. On display is Mitchell's second-hand Remington typewriter used to write "Gone With the Wind" along with personal items, photographs and rare editions of the novel. Afterward, pay your respects and tour Oakland Cemetery, Mitchell's final resting place. Mitchell is buried here along with other Atlanta notables, including 6,900 Confederate soldiers. Throughout the year, Oakland offers more than the expected ghost and cemetery walks; among the most popular, Tunes From the Tombs and the Malts and Vaults of Oakland.

Before Mitchell's untimely death in 1949, she was known to dine at Mary Mac's Tea Room. Mitchell frequented Mary Mac's with her cousin, Margent Lupo, who later bought the restaurant in 1960. Through the years ownership has changed, but Mary Mac's continues filling plates with its famous Southern cooking. Cooking that inspired the Georgia House of Representatives to pass a resolution naming Mary Mac's as Atlanta's Dining Room.

Beyond traditional fare, gourmet cuisine with a southern accent is found at historic Livingston's Restaurant in the Georgian Terrace Hotel, the location of the premiere's post party. Four years before the 1939 premiere, the Georgian was where Mitchell met her editor with her manuscript for publication. Beautifully restored, the Georgian Terrace Hotel provides visitors the opportunity to party like Hollywood royalty while sipping champagne under its brass chandeliers.

To expand one's "Gone With the Wind" social circle, travel 45 minutes east of downtown Atlanta to Social Circle Georgia. Social Circle was a favored destination for the young Mitchell, who visited the Upshaw estate during her courtship to her first husband, Redd Upshaw, her inspiration for Rhett Butler. In 1991 the old neoclassical mansion opened as Blue Willow Inn, renowned for Southern buffets sporting fried chicken, collard greens and caramel cake. While waiting for a table, grab a rocker on the front porch and strike up a conversation. If you're lucky you'll find a local willing to recount tales of how Sherman's troops marched through the streets.

ROAD TO TARA: JONESBORO,

CLAYTON COUNTY, GA.

Searching for the real Tara and Scarlett O'Hara requires a 30-minute drive south of Atlanta to Jonesboro in Clayton County, Ga. Clayton County was home to Mitchell's maternal great-grandparents, the Fitzgeralds, who owned a plantation outside of Jonesboro. As a result, Clayton County and Jonesboro were designated the official home of "Gone With the Wind" in 1969.

While Sherman didn't destroy the Fitzgerald plantation, its main house did catch fire after the war, leaving only the fireplace standing. That fireplace was moved to Margaret Mitchell Memorial Park, which preserves and interprets historic buildings on the grounds of the 1839 Stately Oaks Plantation. Stately Oaks' grand antebellum Greek Revival architecture was thought to have been the inspiration for Tara.

Stately Oaks' mission today is to preserve Southern culture, which includes commemorating the sesquicentennial of the Battle of Jonesboro along with a number of living history events. Yankees are scheduled to invade Stately Oaks with a Union Encampment slated for Sept. 6-7.

Return to downtown Jonesboro and a lesson in history and Hollywood at the Road to Tara Museum. Located in Jonesboro's 1867 train depot, the Road to Tara Museum boasts the largest collection of "Gone With the Wind" artifacts along with Civil War rarities such as an authentic "Sherman necktie," a piece of railroad track that was twisted into a loop, making it usable. The collection includes personal items owned by Mitchell, an impressive costume display and the recovered character portraits of Rhett, Scarlett, Ashley and Melanie produced for outdoor display on the Loew's Grand Theater during the premiere.

IF YOU GO:

Where to stay • Overnight accommodations along the trail vary from chain motels and historic bed-and-breakfasts to luxury hotels. Considering Scarlett's affection for luxury, her top picks would include Twelve Oaks B&B (thetwelveoaks.com), the Georgian Terrace Hotel (thegeorgianterrace.com) or the five-star Mandarin Oriental Atlanta (mandarinoriental.com/atlanta).

Gone With The Wind Trail • gwtwtrail.com

Atlanta Tourism • atlanta.net

Atlanta History Center and the Margaret Mitchell House • atlantahistorycenter.com

Oakland Cemetery • oaklandcemetery.com

Clayton County Convention & Visitors Bureau • VisitScarlett.com