

St. Marys History

Self Guided Tour

St. Marys was established in 1787 when a group of 19 men bought 4 blocks each or squares of land (each block was 4 acres) at a cost of \$38.00 from Jacob Weed. The land had once been part of a plantation owned by Jermyn & Charles Wright, brothers of Georgia's Royal Governor, James Wright. This area was known as Buttermilk Bluff. The Articles of Agreement were signed on Cumberland Island. The only requirement was that they build a wooden structure on their property. All of the streets in the Historic District are named for those 20 men. St. Marys was the first county seat of Camden County. In 1790 the first census was taken in Camden County and recorded 305 residents of St. Marys. 70 of those 305 were slaves, and 14 being "free persons of color".

St. Marys became a bustling seaport because the St. Marys River was a natural deep water harbor & because it sits inland, protected by Cumberland Island. Consequently, bad weather has a tendency to miss St. Marys. The seaport lent itself to smugglers & pirates as well as legitimate citizens. Yellow pine was considered a very desirable construction material & so much of the pine was shipped that the yellow pine forests were wiped out in this area. If you notice the floor boards in the older buildings you will see that one board will span the length of the building. Whole trees would be cut down just to get one board.

By 1837, we boasted almost a 1,000 residents, 9 grocery & dry goods stores, 5 churches, 3 schools, 3 ministers, 3 lawyers & 3 physicians. At one point St. Marys was the 6th largest city in Georgia. We continued to grow & prosper until the Civil War. Coastal towns were left unprotected & many inhabitants fled to safer more protected inland areas. St. Marys was occupied by the Ninth Maine Regiment led by Captain Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Upon leaving town, he stated if the citizens made a signal to the Confederates he would come back & burn the town.

The 3 Seals Sisters went down to the waterfront waving their white handkerchiefs in a gesture of goodbye. Captain Higginson took this as a sign to the Confederates & came back and burned much of St. Marys, including the waterfront and the Episcopal Church. After the war, St. Marys was once again on the road to recovery. People returned to their desolate town and began rebuilding. New businesses started. In 1908 Lemuel Johnson built a rail line between St. Marys and Kingsland and the shipping industry shifted to shipping by rail because it was more efficient. Things continued to progress until the Great Depression. Once again people left, businesses went under. In 1940 Gilman Paper Company came to St. Marys bringing new industry and jobs. In 1955, the U. S. Army developed the Kings Bay land as an ammunition loading facility. In 1979, the Navy established Kings Bay Submarine Base covering 17,777 acres. In 1996 Money Magazine selected St. Marys as the #1 Small Boom Town in America. That was the same year that John Kennedy, Jr. was married at Cumberland Island's First African Baptist Church. St. Marys was the site of the 2004 HGTV Dream House (located in a gated community).

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St. Marys River Once home to pirates, smugglers, Indian canoes, and a shipping industry, it's primarily used by shrimp boats and pleasure boats today. The river has its headwaters in the Okefenokee Swamp, which is the source of all fresh water in this area. The St. Marys River is called a black water river because of its color, which comes from tannin leached from rotting vegetation. Legend has it that during the 1700s & 1800s, sailors would sail 50 miles up the St. Marys River to fill their cast with water before their return voyage across the Atlantic because the tannin content assured the water would remain fresh. St. Marys is the Rock Shrimp Capital of Georgia.

The Riverview Hotel 105 Osborne Street – Built in 1916. In 1926 it was purchased by the 3 Brandon Sisters: Sally, Ethel & Semora. It had been owned and operated by a member of the Brandon Family until 2019. The Sisters were entrepreneurs and pioneer women, running the hotel, a restaurant, a pharmacy, and a beauty parlor. They also started the first telephone company in St. Marys. Notable guests include Marjorie Keenan Rawlins, Admiral Chester Nimitz, Roy Crane, the cartoonist that drew "Wash Tubbs & Easy" in the 1930's, and Willard Scott, the weatherman.

St. Mary Submarine Museum 102 W. St. Marys Street – Houses memorabilia and Submarine History from World War II thru present day. The building, built in 1911, has served many purposes including a grocery store, hayloft apartments, movie theatre and post office. The blocks are one foot thick and were made on sight. The building was donated to the City of St. Marys by the Lucas Family. Open Tuesday – Saturday, 10-5 and Sunday 12-5. (subject to change)

Cumberland Island Visitor Center 113 W. St. Marys Street – Opened in 2005 and is a replica of Miller's Dock, an old St. Marys Landmark. It features an exhibit on the life of salt water marshes, the primary and secondary dune systems, and the barrier ecosystem or the island. It is the departure point for the Ferry to Cumberland Island. It also houses the Cumberland Island Gift Shop. Open 8-4 daily. (subject to change)

The Bachlott House 101 Wheeler Street – Originally built in 1885 by John Bachlott, Jr., in the early 1900s it was purchased by Mr. A. M. Peebles and was made into a hotel to accommodate winter visitors. Later it was the Merrow Family Boarding House. For about 20 years the house set in ruins and was condemned until the National Park Service purchased and renovated the house to serve as their Administrative Building.

St. Marys Waterfront Park

Also called the Howard Gilman Memorial Park, the park opened on June 30, 2001 and features waterfront swings, a boardwalk, and a fishing pier, along with a boat launch and kayak launch. You'll find a gazebo, wide open lawns, a playground, and an amphitheater that are all widely used and the perfect place to soak in the feel and sounds of the river. The park is a popular wedding location and special events location. From late Spring to Fall we hold music concerts each month, weather permitting.



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St. Marys History Walk -Corner of St. Marys Street & Bartlett Street – This 600-foot walking trail has 24 interpretive panels that highlight the milestones of St. Marys.

Peace Garden Corner of St. Marys Street and Bartlett Street – Commemorates the War of 1812 and the shared heritage of the United States and Canada. Celebrates 200 years of peace, prosperity and brotherhood between the two Nations.

Oak Grove Cemetery Bartlett Street – The oldest marked grave is dated 1801. The cemetery was in the original town layout. The reason for the brick walls was to keep cattle from tromping over the graves. The Resurrection Angel stands in memorial to two husbands buried on either: one died at age 28 and one died at age 34. There are more Revolutionary War Soldiers buried in Oak Grove than any other cemetery in Georgia.

Big Oak Tree Suspected to be the oldest tree in St. Marys, it is just over 300 years old and is located behind Christ Episcopal Church.

Christ Episcopal Church



305 Wheeler Street. – The history of Christ Episcopal Church in St. Marys can be traced to a founding congregation in 1843. A church building was constructed under the supervision of Israel Geer in 1845-46. Christ Church entered the Diocese of Georgia as a mission in 1848 and in two years had a congregation of 25. The town of St. Marys suffered during the Civil War. A Union gunboat shelled the town's riverfront. To escape the ravages of war, many of St. Marys' residents fled the county. The Federal commander Captain Thomas

Wentworth Higginson ordered the burning of numerous buildings, including Christ Church, which was destroyed. After the war, Vestryman Francis Adam made a strong effort to get Northern aid to rebuild the church, but it wasn't until 1885 that services began anew for the congregation. The current historic chapel was consecrated in 1889.

Pratt-Gillican House

401 Wheeler Street – This house was built about 1821. The house is also called Pratt's Study and the Cannon Ball House. This house was originally located on the Orange Hall property and moved to its current location in 1839 when Jane Aldrich bought it and the entire block that it sits on from Reverend Horace Pratt.

Orange Hall 311 Osborne Street – There is some controversy about the date of its origin, but local history says the house was built between 1829 & 1833 for Horace Pratt and his wife, Jane Wood Pratt by her father, John Wood. Both Jane and her father died before construction began. Jane, her father, and her mother are buried behind the Presbyterian parsonage. Horace Pratt later remarried Jane's best friend and cousin. He remained in St. Marys until 1839 when he left to be a professor of English Literature at the University of Alabama. The house remained in the Pratt Family until the late 1840s. The house has served many purposes. In 1951, the Kraft Corporation bought the house to be used as employee housing and in 1960 it was sold to the City of St. Marys for \$1.

First Presbyterian Church 100 W. Conyers Street – The oldest Church Building in St. Marys. It was built in 1808 as a Union Church. In 1821 when Horace Pratt, an ordained Presbyterian Minister, came to St. Marys it became a Presbyterian Church. Originally there was a double-sided staircase on the east side of the building and the bell tower was on the north end. Legend has it that smugglers needed a distraction to allow them to unload their contraband and leave St. Marys undetected, so they captured the minister's horse and hoisted him into the belfry. His movements would cause the bell to ring continuously. This was a cause for alarm back then and people were indeed preoccupied with the ringing bell while the smugglers unloaded their contraband and left St. Marys undetected. During the Civil War the Ninth Maine Regiment attempted to burn the Church but the congregation prayed for rain and the fire was ousted by rain. The front part of the Church burnt in 1956 and Historic Preservationist said it should be restored as built because it was one of the finest examples of Church Architecture of that period. Open daily.

Washington Oak Stump & City Well Pump Conyers & Osborne Street – St. Marys was laid out in Town Squares with a well & pump in each Square. This was the last of the wells and it was polluted in a Tidal Wave in 1819. On the day that George Washington was buried at Mount Vernon, to honor his memory, a ship came into port carrying a flag draped symbolic casket. A horse drawn cart brought the casket to this spot and with due ceremony and firing guns they buried the coffin next to the well. To commemorate the occasion, they planted 6 live oak trees. The last of the oak trees was cut down in 1987 in a memorable ceremony, and the wood from that tree went into the restoration of the USS Constitution.

Toonerville Trolley next to 400 Osborne Street – Originally a rail car and the main means



of transportation between St. Marys and Kingsland. Later, the trolley was motorized and in 1990 it was restored. Now used for special events & parades. Cartoonist Roy Crane, who drew "Wash Tubbs & Easy" in the 1930s, visited St. Marys and drew local people riding the Trolley. They would see each other in the comic strip and so "see you in the funny papers" became an adage

started in St. Marys.

Ratcliff-Hopper-Todd House 502 Ready Street – Sea Captain George W. Ratcliff of Maine bought this lot and built his house in 1840. The two-story mortise and tenon brace frame house has chamfered posts and balusters on its single story front porch with Italianate arched glazing in the paired doors. The home had a ballast stone walkway, built with the ballast stones from Captain Ratcliff's ship. He sold his 2 acres in 1849 and headed to California for the gold fields where he died.

Davis-Tompkins-Long House 314 Ready Street – In 1873, Jane S. Davis acquired this lot and built her home in the Queen Anne Style. It was built from hand hewed heart pine and the floors have 30 foot timbers. The home was extensively altered and exhibits Folk-Victorian elements including stained glass windows, lozenge lights, stained glass transom and sidelights, boxed columns with arched capitals, decorative lattice work and the front gables's Palladian window. It's said to have had the first modern bathtub in St. Marys.

St. Marys United Methodist Church

105 E. Conyers Street – The oldest congregation in St. Marys. The Church was founded in 1799 when George Clark was sent to the banks of the St. Marys River. It's also the home of Florida Methodism because missionaries were sent from St. Marys River down into Spanish Florida. The original building was built in 1812 and later moved when the congregation decided they needed a new chapel. This new chapel was built from 1856 - 1858. During the Civil War the Quartermaster Corps of the Ninth Maine Regiment used the building as a butcher shop. Bishop Arthur J. Moore, a world-renowned Methodist Minister, began his ministry in this chapel in 1909. The current church administration inherited \$62 million dollars in 2000 when the owner of the telephone company, Warren Bailey, left the bulk of his estate to the church. The church placed the money into a charitable foundation that supports worldwide causes.

Archibald Clark House

314 Osborne Street – Private Home.
Built in 1801, by Revolutionary War soldier Charles Jackson, this is the oldest structure in town. In 1804, Major Clark bought the home and it's been known as the Archibald Clark House since. He was the mayor of town, and President Jefferson appointed him Customs Agent to collect taxes from ships in the port of St. Marys.



During the War of 1812, the British Admiral of the Primrose sailed on St. Marys with the intent of taking customs money that Clark had already spirited out of town for safe keeping. The British then commandeered the home as their headquarters. It's said the Clark's had a rug with the Crown of England woven into it and the Admiral said to Mrs. Clark, "Madam, I see you have the Crown of England in your home," and she replied, "Yes Sir, but it is beneath your feet." Vice-President Aaron Burr stayed here while fleeing after his infamous duel with the Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton! Hamilton was one of the Founding Fathers of our country. When Thomas Jefferson and Burr ran for President in 1800, Hamilton supported Jefferson, and was instrumental in Burr's defeat. Hamilton despised Burr and criticized him publicly, which led to Burr's political downfall and the resulting duel. Initially, the house had only two rooms on the first floor, which served as Clark's law office (now Judge Federal's law office), and a living suite upstairs. Clark added on to the home, but the original upstairs suite is where Burr stayed. General Winfield Scott later enjoyed a stay here enroute home from the Indian Wars in Florida.

In 2004, the great-great-great grandson of Clark renovated and modernized. Current owners, Judge & Rebecca Federal have established an exclusive vacation rental and outfitted The Federal Quarters, so guests enjoy a superlative vacation experience.

Sterling's Grocery Store

219 Osborne Street – Sterling's was the longest operating business in St. Marys until Mr. Tom Sterling died in 1997. The building was built in approximately 1886 and was located across the street. His parents started a grocery store in this building in 1896 when they moved the building to its current location, and it continued to operate as a grocery store until Mr. Sterling's death. The building is still owned by a member of the Sterling Family

Bachlott-Porter House

220 Osborne Street – John Bachlott had his house built in 1911 at a cost of \$4,500. He died in 1934 and his widow Signora Brandon Bachlott lived there until her death in 1948. Gilman Paper Company bought it to provide space for local medical services. The medical clinic was on the first floor and a dental clinic was in the back of the house. Dr. G.W. Barker and his family lived on the second floor of the home. A koi pond was in the garden behind the gazebo. This house is described as Queen Anne architecture style, neoclassical revival in the amendment: St. Marys Historic District Update, Page 6, National Register of Historic Places. The building immediately behind this home was originally the stable and later converted into a house for three other Brandon sisters.

The Goodbread House

209 Osborne Street – A carefully restored Victorian home built in 1870 by Louis B. Sandiford to serve as a single-family home. It was later purchased by Captain Goodbread who ferried the ship, Hildegard, to and from Cumberland Island. The captain enlarged and remodeled the home. The Goodbread House was a rooming house and apartment in the 1940s. Today it is operated as a bed & breakfast with rooms themed for famous lovers like Rhett & Scarlet. High ceilings, pine floors, and magnolia shaded verandahs are popular features.



The Rudolph & Flood Oaks

Median on Osborne Street & Weed Street –

The trees are members of the Louisiana Garden Club Federation Society of Live Oaks. To be a member of the society, a tree must be 100 years old and a live oak.

Our Lady Star of the Sea Catholic Chapel

201 Osborne Street – The building was



originally built as the Bank of St. Marys in the 1830s. The Bank went broke and in 1840 the Louis DuFour Family bought it to be used as the Catholic Church. It was used as the Catholic Church until the late 1950s when the congregation built a much larger Church. Today it is used by Catholic Parishioners for small weddings & christenings and mass. It is also the oldest standing masonry bank building in the State of Georgia.

Spencer House Inn

200 Osborne Street – Built as a hotel in 1872 by William Tobias Spencer and his Wife, Harriet Louise for a cost of \$3,600. After 3 years, they either sold it to his brother or left it in his care. Approximately a year later, Dr. Long, the town Doctor, bought it at a Sheriff’s Auction for \$1,000. The Long Family continued to operate it as a hotel. In the late 1940s Mrs. C. W. Westberry bought the property. She operated a rooming house until her death. The property was sold to two businessmen who intended to use it as an office building, but it was not very practical. In 1990 several business people bought the building and restored the house and its integrity and made it into a bed & breakfast. Apart from a very short period it has always been a facility that housed guest.



Frohock-Lockhart House 201 Ready Street – in 1906, Lester Frohock constructed this spacious house by joining a house already on the site with one moved from the adjacent lot. His renovations included the use of columns, molding & other lumber brought from buildings being torn down on Cumberland Island.

Arnow-Miller-McClendon House

206 Ready Street – The Joseph Arnow house was built shortly after Mr. Arnow purchased the property in 1834. On this block, it is said, he planted the first pecan trees in Georgia.

Stone-Bunkley-Guy House

207 Ready Street – This house was built about 1885 by Elias Stone. Stone was Captain of the Hildegard that provided transportation between St. Marys and other coastal settlements. Between 1908 & 1909 the property value went up to \$800 from \$600.

Collier-Casey House 203 Bryant Street – Circa 1874 – The Collier-Casey House is classified as a Folk Victorian, neo-classical cottage that was typical of construction in the area during the mid-to-late 1800s. It is believed that the house was constructed on “January 11, 1874 as inscribed on a beam discovered during an extensive renovation in 1985 with this date and included in the inscription, “St. Marys, GA”. On the rear of the property along the marshes’ edge is a separate cottage bearing a sign “Commissary”. This building is said to be “the original railroad Commissary Building” dating back to the 1800s and where railroad workers bought their wares. The building is believed to have been moved to the property at some point during the last 60-70 years. Earlier records have indicated that the railroad originally ran parallel to what is now the marshes’ edge along the property. John Collier built the home and at his death in 1886, the Collier Estate appraised the property value at \$1,000. In 1914 the property was sold to W. N. Casey, Sr. and remained in the Casey Family until 2010 when it was sold to Don Pierce.

Cumberland Island National Seashore Museum 129 Osborne Street –

The museum houses a collection of artifacts from Cumberland Island including memorabilia from the time of the Timucuan Indians who once inhabited the island and remembrances of the gilded age of the Carnegies. A moving exhibit on the War of 1812, The Forgotten Battle, demonstrates the dramatic events that occurred when one of the last battles of the War of 1812 was fought at St. Marys’ Point Peter area.



Lemuel Johnson Park Median at Osborne & St. Marys Street – This park was built in 1918 and honors the founder & builder of the St. Marys Railroad. Captain Johnson came to St. Marys from Waycross in 1906. He dreamed of connecting the port of St. Marys with the West. He built the railroad to Kingsland, connecting it with Seaboard, helped start a bank, was influential in getting a school built, built a sawmill, and a turpentine still. The planters and walls in the park are made of ballast rock recovered from the St. Marys River. They were brought in by the thousands of sailing vessels coming into the St. Marys Harbor over the years. One of St. Marys two Cannons is displayed here.

THANK YOU FOR VISITING HISTORIC ST. MARYS!

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