RIVER STREET INN

History of the River Street Inn

To learn the history of the building now housing the River Street Inn is to learn a portion of the history of the Savannah riverfront. Similar to many of the buildings along the river, the original structure of the Inn was built for the storage, sampling, grading, and export of raw cotton. By early in the 19th century, Savannah was the world's 2nd largest cotton seaport, due in large part by the invention of the cotton gin.

In 1793, the widow of General Nathaniel Green invited a gentleman by the name of Eli Whitney to Savannah to tutor her children. During his stay, Mrs. Greene mentioned to Mr. Whitney the difficulty in separating cottonseed from the fiber. According to local tradition, Mr. Whitney locked himself in the barn, and within 10 days had invented the cotton gin. The cotton gin allowed growers to process and export cotton at a much faster rate, increasing the demand for warehouse space along the riverfront.

River Street Inn's original two floors, built in 1817 out of recycled ballast stone, were soon inadequate to house the increasing amount of cotton moving through the port. As the building has the Savannah River north, and a high bluff to the south with buildings on either side, the only way to expand was to go higher. On the lower floors are wide, arched doorways that were necessary to accommodate moving large bales of cotton. In 1853, the top three floors were added, allowing additional storage on the third floor and an office on the fourth and fifth. Since the upper three levels were used for office space, there are floor to ceiling windows which allowed the maximum amount of light, fireplaces for warmth, and probably most significant, the balconies that provided the factors with the opportunity to observe the arrival, departure, loading, and unloading of cargo ships.

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It was also necessary to have outside access to each level for the storage and removal of the large cotton bales, and this need resulted in the creation of a series of alleys and walkways on the bluff. These alleys became known as "Factor's Walk" after the professionals who graded the cotton. These alleys add to the character and unique, historic design of the Inn. Additionally, the riverside streets and surrounding structures of ballast stone were once ballast in the numerous ships that traveled to Savannah from all over the world.

Savannah and the Civil War

The South suffered greatly from the Civil War, but Savannah fared better than most cities. In 1864, General William Sherman ended his "March to the Sea" at Fort McAllister, and after refitting his troops, proceeded towards Savannah. He was met by city officials who promised there would be no resistance if Savannah was spared. Sherman telegraphed President Lincoln, and offered Savannah to Lincoln as a Christmas present – and in this way Savannah was saved the fate of many other cities that were burned. The Union Army continued to occupy Savannah until the end of 1865.

After the Civil War as prices plummeted, the Savannah cotton warehouses fell into disuse. The building now housing the River Street Inn became a warehouse for various shipping concerns until redevelopment in 1987. In 1998, the River Street Inn expanded from its original structure containing forty-four guest rooms into the adjoining building.