



Azalea Inn

A History of Walter K. Coney, the Mercantile Executive & Yachtsman s Mansion and Glimpses of Savannah s Victorian South

Residence: 217 East Huntingdon Street, Historic Savannah Georgia 31401

The Azalea Inn is the Queen Anne Italianate home built in 1889 for Walter K. Coney and his growing family. This Victorian-era executive mansion is set within yesterday's gardens of Georgia's first colonial settlers.

SUMMARY OF SAVANNAH GEORGIA HISTORY

On November 1732, Parliamentarian James Edward Oglethorpe and 114 colonists set sail on the "Anne" from England and arrived at the Yamacraw Bluff on the Savannah River on February 12, 1733. In April 1733, King George III granted a charter for England's thirteenth American colony – Georgia.

Oglethorpe and William Bull laid out the town of Savannah with wards built around central squares and trust lots on the east and west sides of the squares for public buildings and the remainder of the lots, known as tithing lots, were for the settlers homes on the north and south sides of the squares with secondary access alleys at the back of the tithing lots. Each Settler was given a tithing lot of 60 feet by 90 feet with in the town of Savannah.

The town limits were bounded by East Broad Street on the east and West Broad Street (today known as Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard) on the west, the Savannah River to the north, and Gaston Street to the south. The settlers were also given 5-acre-garden plots, initially located beyond East Broad Street that followed south to Gwinnett Street. The southern garden plots were bounded by Gaston Street to the north and Gwinnett Street to the south and followed from east to west, between East Broad Street to West Broad Street. The plan was to have the gardens within an easy walk from the owner's home. Farm plots of 44 and 7/8ths acres were allotted to each settler, set between what is now known as Gwinnett Street and DeRenne Avenue, which made the farm an easy ride from the home of the owner.

AZALEA INN MANSION

Located at 217 East Huntingdon, the mansion was built in 1889, a mere 39 years after Stephens Ward was named in planning for Savannah's expanded residential growth. Stephens Ward, named for Alexander Stephens, Vice-President of the Confederacy, is bounded by East Gaston Street, for William Gaston a prominent Savannah financier, to the north and East Gwinnett Street, named for Button Gwinnett Declaration of Independence signer, to the south and Abercorn Street, for the Right Honorable James, Earl of Abercorn, benefactor of the Savannah colony, to the west and Price Street, named for a siege of Savannah hero Charles Price, to the east. The Inn is nestled near the heart of Stephen's Ward on Huntingdon Street, which was named after the "Patroness of Bethesda," Selina Shirley Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon. The Countess, a distant cousin of George Washington, was very involved with Bethesda orphanage by raising great sums of money in England and when George Whitefield died, his will left the orphanage in trust to her.

Today's Azalea Inn was the Queen Anne Italianate home built for Walter K. Coney and his growing family. Walter K. Coney was born in Wilmington, NC, on August 25, 1848, to John Richard Coney and Margaret Melvina Fraley.

CAPTAIN CONEY BEGINS MILITARY SERVICE AT A YOUNG AGE

At the beginning of the War Between the States aka Civil War, Walter was too young to bear arms but he did his service for his beloved South by serving on steamers running the blockades of the Federal Government between the Southern cotton ports and the West Indies. He served on several steamers



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during the conflict but toward the end of the war Walter, at the age of 16, was serving on the “Hattie” commanded by Captain Lebby.

When the War Between the States ended, Walter found himself in Havana Cuba with a still-well-maintained blockade to maneuver around in order to return home in North Carolina. Reaching home by way of Nova Scotia and New York, he enlisted with the Wilmington Light Infantry and soon became their captain.

Walter was known for being the best command in the state of North Carolina Guard. Captain Coney was the 11th captain of the Wilmington Light Infantry. In 1871, Walter married Mary J. McLaurin the daughter of Joseph McLaurin and Nancy Wilbor of Wilmington. Mary J. McLaurin Coney is a descendent of John Howland & Elizabeth Tilley both Mayflower passengers.

BUSINESS IN SAVANNAH GEORGIA

Walter came to Savannah in 1882 as a reprehensive for Alexander Sprunt & Son, a naval exporting business headquartered in Wilmington, North Carolina. He worked in Savannah for two years running the naval store/office until he was transferred to Charleston to set up a new store/office there. He returned to Savannah in 1886 where he spent the remainder of his life managing the naval store/office and presiding as the Vice-President of Paterson Dawning Company.

During Walter K. Coney’s life, he made many friends, was a much respected businessman and devoted father. He was sought out by many for his opinions; however, he did not allow his popularity to inflate his ego. Walter Coney’s business accomplishments included his role as a founding member of the Savannah Board of Trade, to which he was a founding director (along with next door neighbor William B. Stillwell) at its inception in 1883. He was a director of several business and societies including the Savannah Bank and Trust, the Evergreen Cemetery Company (now Bonaventure Cemetery), and the Savannah Port Society (predecessor to Georgia Ports Authority).

HUMBLE YET COMPETITIVE PACE-SETTER

Walter served as the first Vice-President and Chairman of the Board of Governors of the North Carolina Society and a member of the Savannah Cotton Exchange. He was a joint owner of the steamer “William Nyce” and the business Lemmerman & Coney, an extensive lighterage business on the Savannah River.

Walter was a yachting enthusiast who was a member of the Carolina Yacht Club of which he won for several consecutive years their championship flag which flew over his yacht the “Little Walter.” He was a trustee of the Pulaski Council of the Royal Arcanum and a Pilot Commissioner. Walter was a man of faith which is evident through his being an officer of the First Presbyterian Church.

SAVANNAH MOURNS WALTER CONEY’S PASSING

Walter K. Coney died of a brain hemorrhage on September 6, 1905. He was survived by his wife, children, brother, Edgar E. Coney, sister, Minnie M. Coney Greenlee, and half-brother John H. Calais.

The funeral for Walter L. Coney was held on September 9th 1905 at the First Presbyterian Church officiated by Rev. W. A. Nisbet. The pallbearers were J. F. C. Myers, J. Cooper Harris, H. H. Bruen, Thomas McMillan, Theodore Wells, W. F. McCauley, W. K. Pearce and Mant Hood. He had floral



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offerings come from as far as New York. Walter's funeral cortege was unusually large. It was reported in the *Savannah Morning News* that the church was packed with people wishing to offer their respects to Walter Coney. Representatives of several trade companies and businesses attended the funeral; among them were 40 members of the Savannah Board of Trade. It was reported that several business closed for the day or the time of Walter Coney's funeral and two of the major businesses that closed were the Savannah Cotton Exchange and the Savannah Board of Trade.

At the end of the funeral Reverend Nisbet left his final thoughts on Walter Coney, "In Life every man preaches his own funeral and builds his own monuments, so it has been with our friend." The interment of Walter K. Coney is in Bonaventure Cemetery. Flags were at half mast at many Savannah businesses in honor of Mr. Coney, as well as at the Wilmington Light Infantry armory in Wilmington, NC. Soon after Walter's death Notices of Tribute were posted in the newspapers and in the minutes of organizations that Mr. Coney was a member of or attended, namely the Savannah Bank & Trust, Savannah Board of Trade and the North Carolina Society of Savannah, to name a few.

WALTER K. CONEY'S ACCOMPLISHMENTS AT HOME

Walter K. Coney fathered four sons, two daughters and was a good provider for his wife and family who enjoyed the many luxuries of Victorian life. The neighborhood he chose to build his home was one shared by William B. Stillwell, George W. Tideman and Irwin S. Tideman, all leading citizens of Savannah and Georgia.

Walter and Mary's children were:

Walter E. Coney who married Florence Fechner and they had 3 children, Charles, Ludmila, and Mary.

John R. Coney who married Alice May Bright and they had 5 children, Florence, Katherine, John R. Jr., Joseph , and Alice

Wilbur M. Coney married [unknown] and they had 1 child, Retta Coney.

Nannie Coney

Neill M. Coney who married Mary A. Fravel and they had 1 child, Neill M. Jr.

Mellie C. Coney

Joseph P. Coney

WALTER K. CONEY'S POSTERITY

Walter K. Coney's family has contributed to the pages of American history. His oldest son, Walter E. Coney, followed in his father's footsteps in business to which he converted the store his father ran into his own business, "Walter E. Coney Naval Stores." In 1938, Walter celebrated his 50th anniversary in the naval store business. He was appointed Vice-President of the Antwerp Navel Stores Company when he was sent to Pensacola, Florida to manage a new store there. He returned to Savannah in 1919 and resumed his duties as manager and Vice President in Savannah until the Antwerp Naval Stores Corporation moved their offices from Savannah to Jacksonville, Florida, it was then that Walter became the owner of his own naval stores but retained the vice-presidency with Antwerp until his death in 1941. Walter E. Coney was a veteran of the Spanish-American War during his military duty with the old Savannah Cadets he attained the rank of 2nd Lieutenant and for several years he was commander of the Worth Bagley Camp of the Spanish-American War veterans. He attained the rank of colonel during his



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tour of duty with the United States Army during World War I and was placed in command in Brest, France at Camp President Lincoln near Bordeaux. Walter was a deacon of the First Presbyterian Church and was devoted for several years in the activities of the young people and the Y.M.C.A. He was a gentle, unassuming man who was a virile force in the community, a man who was ever ready to lend a hand in the promotion of any cause which was deemed as right or worth while.

Walter's nephew, Lieutenant William B. (Devoe) Coney, son of Edgar F. Coney & Martha Dillon, of the U.S. Army Air Service, today known as U.S. Air Force, set a record in solo transcontinental flight on February 24, 1921. A remarkable achievement completed in a DH-4, known during the World War I as the "flying coffin" due to its clumsy handling and heaviness. Amazingly, the plane flew from Rockwell Field near San Diego, California, to Pablo Beach near Jacksonville, Florida, in 22 hours and 27 minutes with only one refueling stop in Dallas, Texas. On March 26, 1921, Lieutenant Coney attempted to make an east to west record trans-continental flight and to break his own time, but he was forced to land in Mississippi due to problems with the engine. Upon landing, he was thrown from the cockpit critically injuring him. A few days later the 27-year-old Lieutenant Coney passed away from his injuries in a Natchez, Mississippi, hospital.

Walter's grandson, Charles E. Coney, the son of Walter E. Coney, was one of the youngest lieutenant commander's in the history of U.S. Navy before the First World War. He was placed on the U.S.S. Idaho as her chief engineer in 1918, upon his graduation from the Naval Academy after completing his studies within three years, an accomplishment normally done in four.

Walter K. Coney had another grandson, Neill M. Coney, Jr., son of Neill M. Coney, who became a diplomat when he was called by the U.S. State Department into the Foreign Service. His appointment came due to his long experience in civil and military service. As a student Neill was on the Deans list of distinguished students, he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa in 1931 and while a graduate student he held the DuPont Senior Fellowship in Economics. His military achievements started in July of 1942 when he was called to duty as a first lieutenant of the Air Corps and by 1944 he had achieved the rank of Major. Neill served as an assistant to the Inspector General of the Command Headquarters in Washington DC and as the Inspector General of the Southwest Pacific Wing ATC in Manila. He was awarded the Bronze Star Medal, the Army Commendation Ribbon with one oak leaf cluster, the Philippine Liberation medal with a bronze star and the Asiatic-Pacific ribbon with a bronze star. In 1946 Neill Coney married the widow of Captain Achmed Abdullah, a distinguished British soldier and novelist.

SUCCESSORS TO THE CONEY FAMILY MANSION

The Azalea Inn was the Coney family home until well into the 1940s. In 1995, James Caskey (a multi-talented tour guide who authored the book *Haunted Savannah*) and Michelle DePersia were commissioned by Tom and Maria Burns, the first owners of the Azalea Inn bed and breakfast, to create a mural in the dining room. In what was to be a short 6-week painting project, for James and Michelle the mural grew into seven scenes depicting Savannah history, taking over a year to create. In depicting elements of Savannah's history, the painters also incorporated an interesting sense of humor into their paintings. To discover the humor, one must see the pictures; enjoy the history, and reactions from those who enter this room.



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Two examples from the mural include the painting of Juliette Gordon Low, founder of Girls Scouts, with a fan in her hand. The “fan message” she is sending is “wait for me.” Thus, the artists portrayed Mrs. Low prior to her marriage. The painter’s liberties show Teddy Kennedy’s face among the city’s people.

Sitting upon the porch, perhaps sipping a cool drink, one can visualize where young gentlemen were long ago thrilled by the mere glimpse of a lady’s ankle. Standing on the balcony, in your mind’s ears and eyes you may hear the cheers and see the torch light parade of men as they pass by, as was the occurrence throughout Savannah in 1884, celebrating with great joy the election of Grover Cleveland, the first democratic President of the United States since the War Between the States.

HISTORY BETWEEN CAPTAIN CONEY AND THE AZALEA INN

This Victorian mansion was spared the need for saving from zealous developers’ ideas in the new and improved Savannah – the one which was tearing down old buildings in favor of new parking lots and big, modern business and apartment buildings. Why, one may ask? That may be due to the fact that in the mid-1970s the house was used as the offices for Barrett & Exley surveying. Then, in the mid-1980s Vawter & Vawter, an advertising agency, utilized the building as an office. By the early 1990s, the mansion was the professional offices of Lee Meyer Architects.

In 1995, the old southern mansion blossomed again as it was restored into a bed and breakfast, a homey place once again greeting people home into its welcoming walls and rooms. Within the Inn’s walls, the history and romance of the Victorian era reaches out and draws the unsuspecting visitor into the images of days gone by. At the Azalea Inn guests can sit in the front parlor with reflections of ladies dressed in lovely dresses carrying fans and sending their silent messages through the language of the fan to their intended gentlemen.

SAVANNAH’S SOCIAL LIFE AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

Victorian meals were events that the whole family enjoyed together. Breakfast was the time for the family to lay the plans for the day. Dinner (lunch) for most business men of this time was from 2PM – 4PM, and a nap followed after dinner. The supper table was the place where the news of the day was shared with the family, like the evening when the Coney’s next door neighbor, William B. Stillwell, enjoyed his status at the first paying customer for electric lights through Savannah Electric & Power Company. The forerunner of Savannah Electric, Brush Electric, had first installed electricity at the mansion of Samuel P. Hamilton, now Hamilton-Turner Inn.

This was a time when springtime was celebrated with May pole dances in Forsyth Park, debutante’ balls and the announcement of marriageable young ladies. Among many of the Savannah families there was wealth during this time and many lovely entertainments were given in their elegant homes. Skating was the rage and bicycles were a young man’s pride and joy. The period was a time of the invention of the tabulating machine; Columbia phonograph; and changing attitudes about acceptable activities for women, which made sportswear popular for women, with such notable examples as the bicycling dress and the tennis dress.

Forsyth Park was the place to be seen on sunny days in the fall, winter and spring. People would parade down Bull Street to the park after church. The men wore their best silk hats, frock coats and spats and the ladies wore the latest fashionable dress and hat, it was a veritable fashion show. Special events were



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announced by shooting off cannons in the old forts calling one and all to Forsyth Park. It was here on military holidays and remembrances that the Chatham artillery, the Georgia Hussars, the Savannah Volunteer Guards, the Irish Jasper Greens, the Oglethorpe Light Infantry, the First Regiment with all its numerous companies and others would parade and hold extensive ceremonies in Forsyth Park's parade grounds. It was called in those days and referred to as the "Extension."

Road and minstrel shows packed the Savannah Theatre. On Summer Sundays after church Savannahians enjoyed the sites, thrills and refreshments of Seilers Concordia amusement Park at 37th and Bull. Leisurely strolls through the squares and parks were times to exchange the news of the day and upcoming events. Afternoon teas and luncheons in the homes were times of new acquaintances and renewing old friendships. These were the days where life was slow and easy, yet intellectually and culturally stimulating for Savannah's prominent citizens.

Unpaved streets were cause of infliction for many homes due to the dust raised by the traffic; thus, many home owners found it necessary to water the street in front of the home. The city's water supply was discolored and before it was used in the home it was clarified by running it through charcoal and bathtubs had to be repainted with white enamel to make the bath water look inviting.

The turn of the century was a time when Savannah was the first naval store port and the third cotton port of the nation. City Hall had not been built and the building that stood there was one that had been there for many generations. It was known as the "City Exchange" not to be confused with the "Cotton Exchange" which resided on the same street. The telephone and electric lights were in their infancies. Automobiles were rare and status-setting for those who could afford them.

CHRISTMAS IN THE OLD SOUTH

Christmas time in Victorian Savannah had homes ablaze with candles, oil lamps and in some homes electric lights. Garland, wreaths, vases of winter flowers adorned the doors, tables, fireplaces and banisters of homes. Mistletoe was suspended in the arches where kisses were stolen and young ladies blushed. Merry throngs gathered sipping eggnog or mulled cider while minuets sedately moved around the room and country dances rollicked with fun and laughter. Midnight suppers of almonds, raisins, apples oranges, jelly, custard, candy, sugar-plums, cake and [Joy Tea Cakes](#), with daily fair including meats and vegetables.

Marriageable young men came to call at the home of the ladies of their fancy to leave their calling cards in the afternoon, in the hopes that the lady would grace them with a dance that evening at the party held at a friend's or neighbor's home. Christmas was a time when parents and marriageable ladies and gentlemen partied at holiday balls, teas, and dinners. The winter social holiday season was the time of merry making and courting, for weddings were held in the spring. It was a time when children were in their beds while their parents were partied dreamed of sweats, treats and gifts they would get, if they were good, from that jolly old elf, Santa.

The Coney home was such a house at Christmas time. Walter Coney and his family shared in the joys of Savannah. Once again the Azalea Inn will share her stories with her guests during a visit and sample the southern comforts of the garden district of Huntingdon Street in historic Savannah, Georgia.



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MODERN CHRISTMAS IN SAVANNAH

Traditions kept alive through the years have made the holidays special in Savannah today, with a Christmas trees and holly wreaths throughout town, Victorian Christmas decorations in City Market, a Christmas parade and festival on River Street, a Christmas tour of homes, an inn tour, trolley tours, caroling, ice skating, a festival of trees and lights, dramatizations of Christmas during the Civil War, incredulous Christmas feasting, and even a reenactment of the Yule Log ceremony.

On the dining front, today's restaurant scene is equally varied. It's easy to find treasures of the sea, like shrimp, oysters, and crab, but you shouldn't leave Savannah without trying regional specialties, like hush puppies, gumbo, grits, red rice, southern fried chicken, or barbecue. If you're in Savannah on New Year's Day, the coming year hinges on eating the mandatory Hopping John dish, combining the ubiquitous rice and cowpeas of the area, with pickled pork, pig tails or hog jowls, and lots of vinegar or hot pepper to zip up the traditional dish. Add collard or turnips and hot-buttered cornbread and you'll just consider yourself lucky to be in Savannah more often in the coming year.

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