



Vernonburg
Georgia

Drawn to the white bluffs along the Vernon River, German settlers began their occupation of the hamlet dubbed Vernonburg in 1742. Since then, a calming breeze from the waters has blown through the hearts and minds of both visitors and inhabitants of this tiny town. Through the years, the tiny town has become a "state of mind" for those who call the tranquil waters and lush landscapes home. As a point of retreat during warmer months or as a prime backdrop in which to settle and raise children, Vernonburg and its river bend has exceeded the wants and needs of those longing for experiences both neighborly and natural.

From Ship to Shore: the Settlement of Vernonburg

The tiny town of Vernonburg, established primarily by German, Swiss, and Palatine indentured servants, was a planned and settled community by 1742.

In 1737, a group of 78 males and 82 females stepped aboard the ship *Three Sisters* in what is now southwestern Germany to begin their journey toward new lives on October 8, 1737. Selling themselves and their children into five years of veritable slavery, the future settlers of Vernonburg landed off of Tybee Island on December 4, 1737 in hopes of finding better lives in the promising lands of North America following their servitude.

Described as well behaved and industrious, the group of about 40 indentured servants began making their case for land in September 1742. It was at this time that Colonel William Stephens, Trustees' secretary for Georgia, reported:

"The Body of Dutch Servants (some of them now free and the Rest being so at Christmas next) applying to the Board that they might have lands granted to them at a Place now called the White Bluff on Vernon river, were told that the Person lately employ'd in running out Lands, was ill, but that as soon as he was able, or some other Person could be found, a Town on the said White Bluff should be immediately laid out and each Man should take out his equal Chance by Lott, And the Farm Lotts or Lands thereunto belonging should also as soon as possible be laid out..."

Proposed by surveyor Joseph Avery in October 1741, lots on the Vernon River just south of the previously settled German hamlet of Hampstead were to be set aside for the hardworking servants. The 64 lots, 60 feet by 90 feet in all, were laid out by Avery in a long, narrow fashion so as to accommodate the wishes of the settlers in allowing for close community and security. It is believed by some that the wish for long and narrow tracts of land was an imitation of Salzburger's previously adapted method of dividing lands so that settlers received equal portions of good and bad land. Some historians have also found that Avery, not wishing to survey the land into such long strips, had to be threatened with bodily harm before consenting to the settlers' desires.

As part of the town's original layout, the lots were bisected by the east-west axis of Center Street and surrounded by 50-acre tracts within the larger Vernonburg township. Although Avery's plan has not survived in visual form, it is known that lots on the north side of the new town were the first to be granted in a land lottery of December 1742. The surnames of the grantees from this period include Randner, Deigler, Fiercer, Plessy, Nobellet, Havener, Bellingout, Densler, Keelor, Keifer, Fritz, Gardner, Young, Steinhavell, Nongazer, Sheifer, Theiter, Blume, Dice, Berrier, Sniden, Dowle, and Rheinsettler. Other earlier settlers of Vernonburg included former soldiers who disbanded from Oglethorpe's Regiment in 1748.

Naming their community "Vernonburgh," after the river on which it sits, the settlers also paid homage to the river's namesake, James Vernon. As one of the trustees of Georgia, Vernon was instrumental in promoting indentured servitude to this European group and granting their passage to the colony. Some historians believe that the Vernon River was not, however, named for James Vernon, but was instead named for Admiral Vernon, commander of England's West Indian fleet giving support to Oglethorpe. It is also believed by some that Colonel Stephens actually named the town instead of its settlers.





By the late 1740s, the industrious Vernonburgers were planting and harvesting flax in quantities large enough to weave cloth to meet their own needs with surpluses to sell at market. Crops supporting the production of silk did not fare as well; however, cotton was reported as the settlers' agricultural forte. Some historians believe that the production of such in Vernonburg was the first occasion in Georgia's history that a quantity sufficient for the production of cloth was developed.

Despite some successful crops as well as aid from the Trustees through the transfer of land, farming supplies, and livestock, life at Vernonburg was difficult during the early, severe years of settlement. The first settlers labored against the untamed land, finding, in the case of silk at least, inhospitable soils and near-barren crops. As a result, several of the original settlers found themselves abandoning the granted lots and moving on to more proven population centers like Augusta and Savannah. Some historians believe that the decline of the early settlement was a direct effect of British mercantilist policy stating, "only such fabriques and manufacturers would be allowed to erect in Georgia which don't hinder those in Great Britain." Subsequently, the Trustees responded to the initial success of flax and cotton crops with discouragement, while silk production, though unsuccessful in the small community, was favored above all else.

Others in Vernonburg had likely fallen ill from pica, a disorder characterized by an appetite for non-nutritive substances such as clay or sand. According to early accounts from nearby New Ebenezer settler, Reverend Boltzius, "...some grown people in Vernonburg also ate all strange sorts of things, such as sand and clay, and damaged their health considerably. The children in this country do these things frequently, complaints on that are common. Some of them have died already..." Others perhaps perished from fever or starvation during these early times.

While information on the settlers is scarce during the remainder of the eighteenth century, it is known that the land on which the town was settled was placed in legal dispute in 1765. As part of the South Carolina barony predating the granting of lands to the Trustees of the Colony of Georgia, the disputed land of Vernonburg was appealed as belonging to original London holders of the barony grants. The grant holders, prepared to take possession of their property, began a legal confrontation with Vernonburgers that would only be stifled by the coming Revolution.

Detail from Campbell's 1780 map of Georgia's northern frontiers showing the "Vernonberg" settlement.



Calmng Waters, Cooling Breezes, Coming War

By the mid-nineteenth century, settlement in Vernonburg had changed from a place of new beginnings for former indentured servants to a spot of summer homes and residential havens away from the hustle and bustle of Savannah's busy city life and the stifling, breezeless heat of summer in the metropolis.

The refreshing breeze along the banks of the Vernon River became something of a status symbol during the nineteenth century. Those passing their time "on the Salts" along the river formed friendly rivalries related to the gentle wind.



Laura Lawton recalled an anecdote passed down through her family about the Vernon winds. One night, while the Adams' visited the Habershams, a discussion of the winds arose. Mrs. Adams insisted that the breeze at her home on the bluff was "so great it just blows the silver off the table." William Neyle Habersham was quick with a clever

response: "Well, that's because the Adams' silver is much lighter than the Habershams silver."

Despite its natural beauty and inherent peacefulness, Vernoburg, also called White Bluff at this time for its steep white sand bluffs along river, was fraught with stress during the Civil War.



In July of 1863, Josephine Habersham recalled the day of her family's arrival to their summer home, Avon:

So thankful to meet all well and were it not for the fearful anxieties of this terrible war, our sweet summer home looks as if we might be very happy here. Everything looks clean and neat, verdant and prosperous, even the old fences and Bath-house have been nicely "fixed up."



A year later, Josephine's anxieties would be met with sorrow, as news that her two Confederate Soldier sons, Joseph Clay and Willie, had perished at the Battle of Atlanta.

On December 19, 1864 the Confederates burned their

own USS Water Witch to prevent its capture. Stationed at White Bluff in the Vernon River, the sidewheel gunboat became the backdrop of many a lazy day at Vernonburg.

The posting of the Water Witch at White Bluff led to a number of romances and friendships between young ladies of the town and



(Opposite Top) Constructed around 1840, Avon Hall was the home of the Habersham family. (Top Left) Although Avon Hall burned in 1970?, a slave cabin still sits at its original site. (Right Column) Plaque set in the brick walkway leading to Avon Hall by William Neyle Habersham, 1817-1899. (Top Right) Water Witch Illustration and Marker. (Right) Along the Vernon--The parade grounds of the Georgia Hussars, Company A of the Fifth Georgia Cavalry

young officers stationed aboard the ship. Fifteen-year-old Anna Wyllly Habersham refers to the ship in her journal kept during the summer and autumn of 1864.

Describing a teenage romance with John Thomas Scharf, young Anna reflects on the "handsome" Johnie from Baltimore in her diary of 1864:

The "Water Witch" is again moved in front of the Cohens'. Capt. Waily has gone to take command of a vessel in Plymouth, Carolina, so Midshipman Vaughn is in command of the boat until the a commander comes from town. Scharf is acting first lieutenant.

Johnie, a member of the Confederate Navy, was stationed upon the ship at the time of their courtship.

A line drawing upon Vernonburg's official town seal has forever captured the mystique of the Water Witch its Vernon River occupation.





River Retreat

Following the Civil War, White Bluff became something of a resort town, reaching peak popularity as a vacation spot for wealthy Savannahians in the Gay Nineties. At this time, guest-houses at White Bluff boasted amenities such as dancing platforms, bars, tenpin alleys, delectable cuisine, billiards rooms, and floating bathhouses.

The historic, oak-lined roadway, White Bluff Road, continues to lead into Vernonburg from the city of Savannah, sharing the moniker of the little town's early days. This road, believed to be the oldest in the country, was only one route by which the river's visitors would reach its bluffs.

The river itself was the main transportation route to and from the small community for several years. The result of the waterway travel led to the construction of "front" façades along the river, while more private façades faced roadways, gardens, and courtyards.


The Smalley House is believed to have been the depot for the Savannah, Skidaway, and Seaboard Railroad, which ran a spur to and from White Bluff between 1871 and 1879. The track, which likely ran along present-day Dancy Ave, spanned the Vernon River through a drawbridge measuring twenty feet in length.

(Above) White Bluff Road(1890s).
(Below) Various Views of The Smalley House.



This advertisement from 1954 describes the Smalley House as a “traditional residence.” According to the announcement, the house was first called “Waldmere.” Described as a “German Inn,” the advertisements states that this former lodging house was “renowned for its fine foods.”

Historical Waterfront Home



WALDMERE

This stately old cypress manor house was built over 150 years ago and known then as Waldmere, a German Inn, renowned for its fine foods. It remains now as it did then amidst the irrefragable charm of majestic oaks and towering pines, facing a picturesque view of the river from a site chosen back when there was much to choose from. There is holly, camphor, cherry laurel and other assorted Southern shrubs on this estate which fronts 268' along the Vernon River and extends 600' in depth to Dancy Avenue at White Bluff. It was more recently the country home of a prominent Savannah family. The value of the land itself, representing as it does the greater part of the sales price, makes this an unusual opportunity for the restoration of a charming old traditional residence which has nine rooms, two tile baths and a hot and cold air heating system. Call Lou Berman for further information. Sunday Phone 6-1761.

\$31,500



The Savannah Yacht Club, pictured here near Thunderbolt, frequented the Vernon River during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.



The Hungerpiller House, constructed in 1924, doubled as a tea-house for a short time after its construction. Historically dubbed “Brushwood-on-the-Vernon,” this house is set on the site of the former Vernon House, a guest inn that featured “famous” seafood dinners and an impressive hall of a width of 60 feet. The guest-house prospered as a retreat destination during the 1860s and 1870s until its demise by fire in 1878.

“Impromptu sailboat races were frequent and there was even a rowing club among the girls who became quite adept at the handling of the oars.”

“At White Bluff there could always be a lovely party to look forward to given by the W.W. Chisholms for their four lovely daughters whose charm and aquatic prowess were by-words.”

—from George Noble Jones

“Vernon River and the Gay Nineties”





Automobile Road Course
map from 1908, featuring
Savannah's environs.

Shifting Tides

Despite the rising popularity of the automobile in the Savannah area, Vernonburg remained relatively isolated for most of the twentieth century. By the 1940s, most of the resort feel of the town had dwindled and permanent residency was more common. Many people settling along the bluffs during the twentieth century found themselves lucky in seeking to move to the small town.

“We just felt like we were going to heaven when this became available.”

—Page Hungerpillar

VERNONBURG:

**Chatham Municipality's Residents Keeping
Out the Creeping Masses of Development**

Since the 1950s, citizens of Vernonburg have been active in applying zoning ordinances that would aid in maintaining the historic integrity and overall feeling of their centuries-old community. Dividing zoning into areas “A” and “B,” a planning board of five people laid out new standards for the community in 1957. With edicts preventing the opening of retail stores, mandating setbacks, and other stipulations, the town of Vernonburg was setting standards that would allow for preservation-minded growth in coming years.

By the 1970s, growth in Chatham County was extending from Savannah proper at an increasingly rapid pace. Mass construction and deforestation was looming on Vernonburg's horizon. Protests against the construction of a nearby 21-acre, 84-home subdivision site did not, however, prevent the county's

Subdivision Cleared In Pollution Dispute

Vernonburg Plan
Approved by MPC

Metropolitan Planning Commission from giving the plan the go-ahead. The construction in this area would forever alter the White Bluff area, but the citizens of Vernonburg remained intent on keeping the integrity of their beloved community intact.

“We can kind of control our own destiny out there.” —Andy Chisholm

During the twentieth century, Vernonburg became a bedroom community of close-knit families. From neighborhood oyster roasts to group meteor-shower watch parties, the little town maintained a feeling of refuge and relaxation while building a strong community through neighborly ties.

“The people out there really look after each other. I just can't really emphasize that enough. It's amazing how people just really look after each other.” —Will Monroe



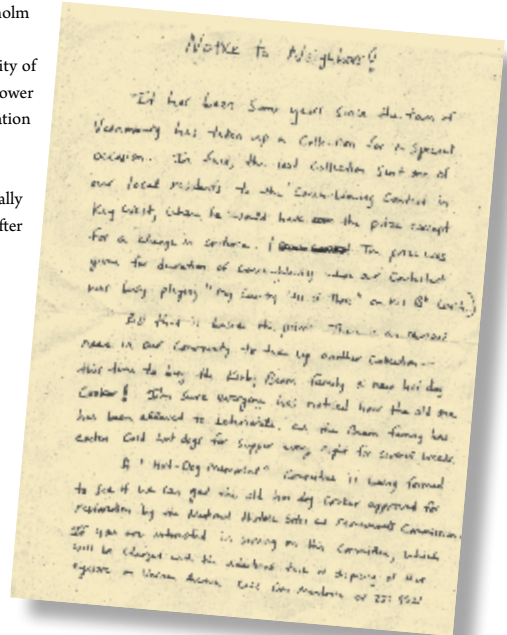
As a young woman working for the Chatham County Engineers' Office, Susanna Rockwell overheard a phone conversation about concrete fencing around the area. The man at her office gave the person on the phone the name Nick Lucken. “He never advertises. He doesn't have to.”

When Nick Lucken showed interest in concrete fencing at Henry Ford's plantation outside of Savannah, the town of Vernonburg was in for a treat. Lucken, admiring the fences and the molds, was given half a dozen molds to begin producing concrete fencing on his property at White Bluff.

Throughout much of the twentieth century, Lucken supplied not only several southeastern plantations with his wares, but also graced his own town with numerous fences, mailbox posts, birdbaths, and grape arbors.

A proud perfectionist, Lucken traveled to install all of his fences himself. Near Petersburg, Virginia, a full mile of Lucken's concrete fences runs throughout picturesque countrysides and former Civil War battlefields.

A philanthropist in his own right, Lucken constructed benches and other goods from his small plant off of Dancy Avenue for churches and schools at no cost.



A "Clean River" Community: Environmental Activism in Vernonburg

An intrinsic urge to maintain Vernonburg's historic feel has activated the town's citizens to fight for their community's most valuable resource: nature. The river itself, its bluffs, its native wildlife, and its ancient trees have all helped to maintain Vernonburg's historic integrity, its peaceful spirit, and its private nature.

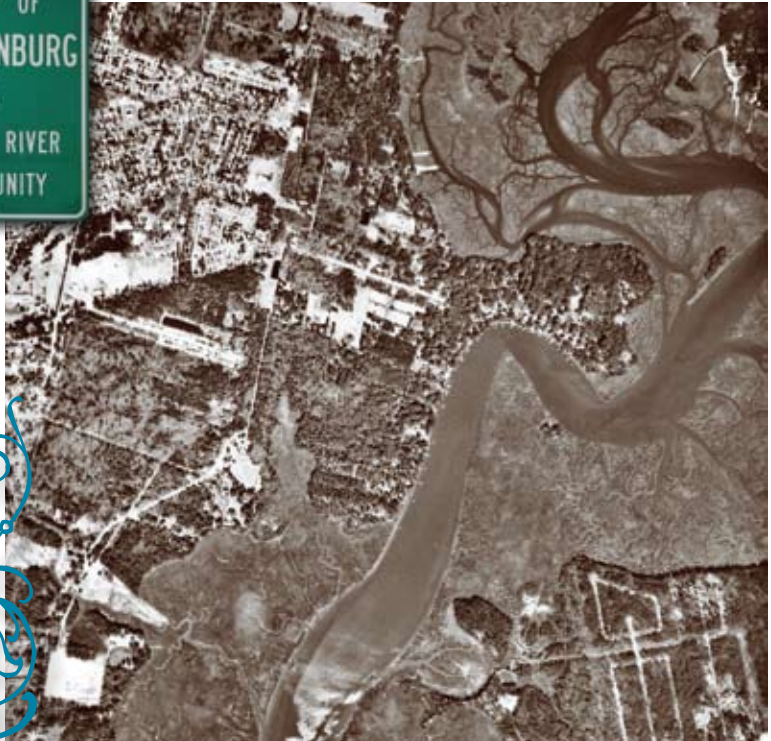
"For us, the river was just a backyard."—Jimmy Hungerpiller

Vernonburg's zeal in maintaining its beautiful "backyard" met an adversary in the City of Savannah when pollution of the waters of the Vernon River was challenged by a lawsuit brought about by the tiny town toward its much larger counterpart. The fight, led by the late defender of Georgia's coastal land and former Vernonburg intendant Nick Williams, led to the construction of a major water treatment center. Gaining nationwide attention by environmentalist Ralph Nader and writer James M. Fallows, the actions of the pollution, the town of Vernonburg, and the results of the lawsuit were captured in what is now considered to be one of the most influential and informative books on water pollution: *The Water Lords: Ralph Nader's Study Group Report on Industry and Environmental Crisis in Savannah, Georgia*.

The town of Vernonburg now hires its own consultants to test the waters of the Vernon River on a regular basis.



1974 Aerial View of the
Town of
Vernonburg.





Topographic map showing water testing sites along the Vernon River.



RIVER AND MARSH

Placing Protective easements on much of Vernonburg's land has helped the community to preserve its marshland and lush maritime forest.



WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

Likely the result of encroaching development and other growth concerns, the entire WILDLIFE SANCTUARY. Likely the result of encroaching development and other growth concerns, the entire town limits of Vernonburg is now an official place of refuge for countless forms of wildlife.

"My daughter, who is eighteen, she had a real issue about moving back to the city. We lived on 1,400 acres. She goes, 'You know, when I get up in the morning and I go to bed, I can hear the owls hooting.' And the oddest thing is that there's an eagles' nest right on the edge of our lot. And she says, 'Well, you know, it's not so bad. I've just traded owls for eagles.'"

"It is quiet, it is private, and it is wild."

- Will Monroe



Eagles Nest



