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The Winter Resort of the South

Why did a small town in South Georgia become a popular tourist destination from the 1870s to 1905? To begin with, what are the important components of a vacation destination? What draws people there? Richard H. Gassan in his book The Birth of American Tourism, defines the three elements of tourism as: “a compelling destination with homelike accommodations, a comfortable travel infrastructure, and a cultural infrastructure that gives the tourist a model of thinking about what he or she is experiencing” (5). Under these boundaries of travel, Thomasville, Georgia was an ideal vacation spot that appealed to tourists considered to be wealthy. This is in part due to the idea of leisure class and tourism in the late 1800s. Thorstein Veblen explains it in his book The Theory of Leisure Class as “conspicuous abstention from labour therefore becomes the conventional mark of superior pecuniary achievement” saying that the wealthy were the people who went on vacation to places like Thomasville because their wealth was known when they were not having to work (38). This paper is divided into why tourists came to Thomasville, why they stayed, and eventually why tourism generally declined with some exceptions. The overlying factor of tourism in Thomasville that impacted all three of these tourist stages is the railroad. It brought tourists to Thomasville, kept them coming, and eventually took them past Thomasville into Florida. Although the railroad was the overlying reason for tourism in Thomasville, there were many reasons why tourists came, stayed, and then moved on.
“Jump on the train and come South for fresh pine air guaranteed to make you healthy!”

“Escape those cold, brutal winters, it’s warm and sunny in the beautiful South Georgia!”  “Need to relax? Come enjoy some old fashioned fishing and hunting in a real, charming plantation town!” These were the kinds of ideas that drew tourists to Thomasville. According to the 1870 United States Census Bureau, Thomasville had a population of 1,651 residents, but what the town lacked in people, it made up for in location. In 1867, Thomasville, Georgia was fortunate enough to be the last stop on the railroad from Savannah. Northerners could get on a train and take it as far south as they wanted and end up in the small town. As stated in an article from southern journal Porter-Briggs, the railroad offered “travelers an easy introduction to the city.”

Gassan’s second rule of tourism is that there must be a comfortable way of travel. The train was a luxury transportation option and families like the Rockefellers and the Vanderbilts were willing to take the train because it met their class expectations. The Denver Post wrote an article in 2011 on the history of the hidden gem that is Thomasville in which it was said that “wealthy snowbirds flocked… for its clean, pine scented air, to escape the cold from “up north,” and to hunt and fish its verdant pastures.” In the late 1800s, Americans who had fallen ill from tuberculosis and other respiratory illnesses were searching for any remedy. In the early 1900s, the New England Journal of Medicine published an article in their journal that mentioned Thomasville by name as a place to go for fresh pine resin air guaranteed to heal the ailing. The New England Journal of Medicine was the primary authority on medicine and illness cures at the time so when they published Thomasville as the place go, Northerners flocked to the area’s pine barrens. The sick went to be healed and the healthy went to ensure their health. If one aspired to be healthy then why spend winters in the freezing ice and snow of the North? The main reason that many of the tourists in Thomasville were from big northern cities in the US was because
they wanted to escape the harsh, bitter winters. In 1887, Harper’s Magazine, the oldest monthly magazine in America dubbed Thomasville “the best winter resort on three continents” virtually creating the tourist industry in Thomasville. While so many people were dreaming of a white Christmas, Northerners were looking for a home in the warmth of the South. Many of them found this in Thomasville. An article in the southern magazine, Porter-Briggs, noted that “Thomasville offered the same climate of Florida yet lacked the pesky accompaniment of malarial mosquitoes, making it the perfect destination for those seeking a warm respite from harsh winters—without a death wish.” Florida was known for disease ridden insects and Georgia was the perfect combination of a healthy atmosphere and warm weather. Beyond the health benefits and beautiful weather, tourists to Thomasville had a more unconscious reason for visiting. Many northerners, especially city folk, were drawn to the idea of “playing Southern.” They had read books or heard stories about passing the days hunting, fishing, admiring large beautiful plantation homes, and walking through the countryside. Many residents of New York, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Boston, and other northern cities wanted to get away from the hustle and bustle of city life. The thought of living the simple life enthralled them. They wanted to be southern belles and gentlemen for a few weeks. They could sit on the front porch and make believe they were wealthy plantation owners or their favorite character from Gone with the Wind. They loved this southern small town lifestyle that they made believe was their life. They acted the part of wealthy southern folk of Thomasville, Georgia.

The train continued to bring tourists once the northerners realized all the reasons there were to visit. But why did they keep coming? The third element that Gassan mentions of a good tourist location is that it has a cultural infrastructure that makes a tourist think. The community in Thomasville provided this cultural infrastructure. It was the southern hospitality that Northerners
expected. They wanted that small town feel where everyone knew everyone, a lifestyle that they
did not have in the big cities they called home. In 1899, Reverend J. Harris Knowles published a
book, *From Summer Land to Summer* in which he recounted his journey from Thomasville, Ga
to New York. In his book, Knowles wrote, “The portico was the scene of many a pleasant call
from Southern friends… What can be more enjoyable than the free, easy flow of refined
conversation, gliding on from topic to topic…? Certainly the Southern women have wonderful
talents in this relation, and their soft voices and bright eyes give value and emphasis to their
every utterance” (40-41). Northern women loved the company of a southern woman. They sat on
the front porch of their plantation homes, drinking tea and gossiping. Wealthy northerners and
southerners spent time together living the southern life. Now remember that this is only a decade
after the Civil War so tension between the North and South was still very prevalent. Many towns
in the South refused to host northern guests. Many Northerners were surprised and delighted by
the southern hospitality and community found in Thomasville. In 2005, The Florida-Times
Union wrote an article on the history of Thomasville. The newspaper interviewed Thomasville
Museum curator Tom Hill for the article who said that Thomasville residents were willing to do
what other Southerners would not do back then, "smile at a Yankee tourist," Hill said. "We soon
found out that a Yankee was worth two bales of cotton and twice as easy to pick." The reality of
the hospitality shown to Northerners was that the people of Thomasville realized how much
money they made from tourists and put monetary benefit over their complicated past. However,
this became more complicated when it came to race. Southern whites glazed over race issues and
northern tourists saw the African Americans as visitor attractions. Idealized southern society did
not include African Americans, but they were part of the southern lifestyle. There was a contrast
between the southern community and remnants of the slave and war-torn South. Thomasville
residents made Thomasville seem like a harmonious portrayal of race relations. For tourists, the landscape and community underscored the real racial tensions. In his book *From Summer Land to Summer*, Reverend J. Harris Knowles wrote that “the tragedy of it all is that this progress does not smooth away difficulties in social conditions, but rather emphasizes them… Time must be then the great healer… it is a fearful thing to be ever brought face to face with a constantly increasing factor in the social state, compared with… ignorant portions of our Northern communities…” (51-52). While white Southerners glazed over race issues because they were not sure what to do with their former slaves, northern visitors were ignorant of the fact that the relationship between races was more strained than either race let on in the South. Gassan’s first rule of travel was that the place had a homelike infrastructure. One of the main reasons that Northerners kept coming back to Thomasville was because of the high end hotels and homes. Going back to the idea of “playing Southern”, many wealthy Northerners could enjoy the country while still living lavishly in plantation homes they bought, built, or renovated, grand hotels downtown, or spending time at the exclusive country club. Families like the Hannas, Vanderbilts, and Goodrichs owned plantations in Thomasville. According to Porter-Briggs, these wealthy industrialists became so fond of Thomasville that they invested in the town, scooping up the dozens of plantations that lined its periphery. In the Florida Times Union article about Thomasville, it is said that the affluent visitors “built magnificent winter "cottages” up and down the streets.” The wealthy built these homes and came back to them every year. Melhana Plantation was owned by the Hanna family of Cleveland who visited annually. Their plantation home kept them coming back. Other homelike infrastructure included grand hotels. According to the southern magazine, Porter-Briggs, “Thomasville became a meeting ground for the affluent. By 1885, two sprawling luxury hotels had opened in the center of town, the Mitchell House and
Piney Woods.” These hotels were still quaint enough to fulfill Southern small town fantasy but also nice enough to meet the class of wealthy tourists. Glen Arven Country Club made wealthy northern men very happy. They could play golf whenever they wanted because the weather was always nice. And while the women sat and chatted on front porches, the men discussed business and pleasure on the golf course. The community feel and homelike infrastructure kept tourists coming back, despite strained race relations.

The final theme of this paper addresses why tourism declined in Thomasville. In 1905, the railroad moved farther south into Florida and the tourists who came to Thomasville discovered cheap tourism and beach vacation in the Sunshine State. According to Porter-Briggs, “Thomasville’s Resort Era is generally defined as ending in 1905. The year following, the Piney Woods burned down, and what with that and the 1899 prohibition enacted by the county, tourism turned quickly from a gush to a trickle… But… the rich tourists had turned into rich investors and they continued to sustain the town as residents.” Although general tourism rates decreased in Thomasville, it still remained a popular tourist destination among famous people and among those wealthy Northerners who continued to own and visit their plantation homes. In 1956, President Eisenhower visited Thomasville to recover after a heart attack. His favorite place was the golf course at Glen Arven Country Club. According to the local Thomasville newspaper, The Times Enterprise, Eisenhower made the decision to run again as the result of a round of golf at Glen Arven. The newspaper wrote, “There is a steep hill leading up to the 18th green at Glen Arven, and Eisenhower believed that if he could walk up “Cardiac Hill” without exhaustion or pain, he would be fit enough to run again.” He made it up the hill and announced his decision to run for reelection. In 1963, Jackie Kennedy visited Thomasville to get out of D.C. after her husband’s assassination. She stayed at Greenwood Plantation, then owned by dear friends of the
Kennedys. Fifty years after her visit, the Florida State University newspaper released an article commemorating Jackie Kennedy’s visit to Thomasville. According to author Setareh Baig, there were so many places Mrs. Kennedy could have gone after her husband’s death. She went to Thomasville perhaps because “it was the quaint and mystical charm of the sleepy town in South Georgia… the seclusion away from the incessant Washington reporters or the promise of safety for herself from the anonymous marksman who took her life companion away from her.” She found safety and peace in Thomasville. After 1905, tourism may have declined but today the small town in South Georgia still draws many annual visitors to shop on the bricks downtown, hunt on the plantations, and even famous and wealthy individuals to stay at the plantations without the fear of being found by the press. This past year, over 5,000 tourists visited the town according to numbers by the Thomasville Visitors Center. It was quoted in an article written just last month by Southern Living that, “Thomasville is still a hunting mecca (and still surrounded by pine), but over the course of the last decade, it has emerged as a different sort of hot spot—thanks not to its woods but instead to its walkable, quaint, brick-paved downtown. This eight-block area draws both day-trippers and nightlife enthusiasts with its growing list of innovative restaurants and locally owned one-of-a-kind shops. Beyond the bricks, streets lined with majestic live oaks and rows of gorgeously preserved and restored historic houses give this small town a timeless quality.” Downtown Thomasville has become a very popular tourist destination post resort-era as the idea of tourism has shifted. Every April since the 1920s, Thomasville, also known as the City of Roses, has celebrated the Rose Festival. According to an article in the Denver Post, “With parades, pretty blossoms, and parties galore, the beloved festival has been voted a Top 20 Event in the Southeast by the Southeast Tourism Society.” The city explodes with roses and the beauty of nature which the whole town and many tourists come out to
appreciate. Victorian Christmas every December is a celebration of the Thomasville of the late 1800s. Take a horse drawn carriage around the brick streets. Join the boy scouts roasting chestnuts over an open fire. Admire the commitment of members of the community who dress up in Victorian attire. Tourists love to take a journey back in time to that beloved resort era and appreciate Thomasville for its current beauty and its historic importance. In May of 2016, USA Today published a list of America’s favorite small towns and Thomasville, Georgia made number two on the list. Now the town is easily accessible by car instead of train, but it still draws tourists for the same reasons. The remnants of old South plantation living still remains in the small town. Many of the plantations are privately owned, but Pebble Hill Plantation is open to the public for tours and South Eden Plantation has been converted into a charming southern place to stay and eat and “play southern”. The Piney Woods hotel is long since gone and the Mitchell house has been converted into condos for citizens of Thomasville, but historic bed and breakfasts like The Paxton House still offer a quaint place to stay for a visit. The fresh pine air is still good for health and winters are still warm. The racial tension has been a constant effort of the community to resolve the last hundred years, but unfortunately African-Americans are still often excluded from the community designed to entertain northern guests. If a tourist was to walk down the street they would still be met with a friendly “Good morning to you!” or “Hey, how are y’all doing today?” or “We sure hope you enjoy your time here!” as the community is still the source of Thomasville’s pride. So take a trip to Thomasville, Georgia. Discover for yourself what tourists of the past saw and tourists of the present see in a small town in the middle of nowhere. You will not be disappointed.
Works Cited


The South Carolina Council for History Education believes that teachers and cultural institutions have the responsibility of fostering inquiry and citizenship through an honest and transparent evaluation of the past. We believe that our democracy is best served by providing a comprehensive look through documents and analysis of the significant, inspirational and in many instances challenging decisions in the American narrative.

The school year has started in many parts of the country. My students will return after Labor Day. I've been at this for a number of years. October 1 – December 20 See right-side block for each seminars’ specific Flyer and Application. See More. University of Colorado Boulder. First-Year Seminars Connected to the What Now? Network of First-Year Seminars. The first grouping of seminars are part of the What Now? network of first-year seminars. Part of the What Now? network of first-year seminars. Professor: Adam Hollowell. Adam Hollowell, Ph.D. (University of Edinburgh) serves as Senior Research Associate at the Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity and Faculty Director of the Benjamin N. Duke Memorial Scholarship Program. Students will also analyze lesser known Civil Rights Movement history and historical figures. Lastly, students will use the medium of Hip Hop and Civil Rights to scrutinize, ascertain, and search for the purpose of life. Part of the What Now? network of first-year seminars. Professor: Martin Paul Smith. December 4: Gabe Mathy, American University Title: "Unemployment Persistence in the Recoveries from the Great Depression and the Great Recession". Spring 2013. December 1 (Co-sponsored by the Office of the Provost) Peter Doeringer, Boston University "Can Small-Scale Industries Be Rescued from Industrial Decline? Labor Market Regulation, Workplace Efficiency, and Economic Performance in the Los Angeles and New York Garment Districts" *East Quad Building Lounge* *please note that this seminar is at a different location.*

March 5 Economics of Education: A 50-year Anniversary Recap George Psacharopoulos, formerly at the London School of Economics, University of Chicago, and World Bank. The 2017–18 North American winter refers to winter in North America as it occurred across the continent from late 2017 through early 2018. Similar to the previous winter, a La Niña was expected to influence the winter weather across North America. Winter weather patterns were very active, erratic, and protracted, especially near the end of the season. Significant events included rare snowfall in the South, a strong cold wave that affected the United States during the early weeks of January, and a