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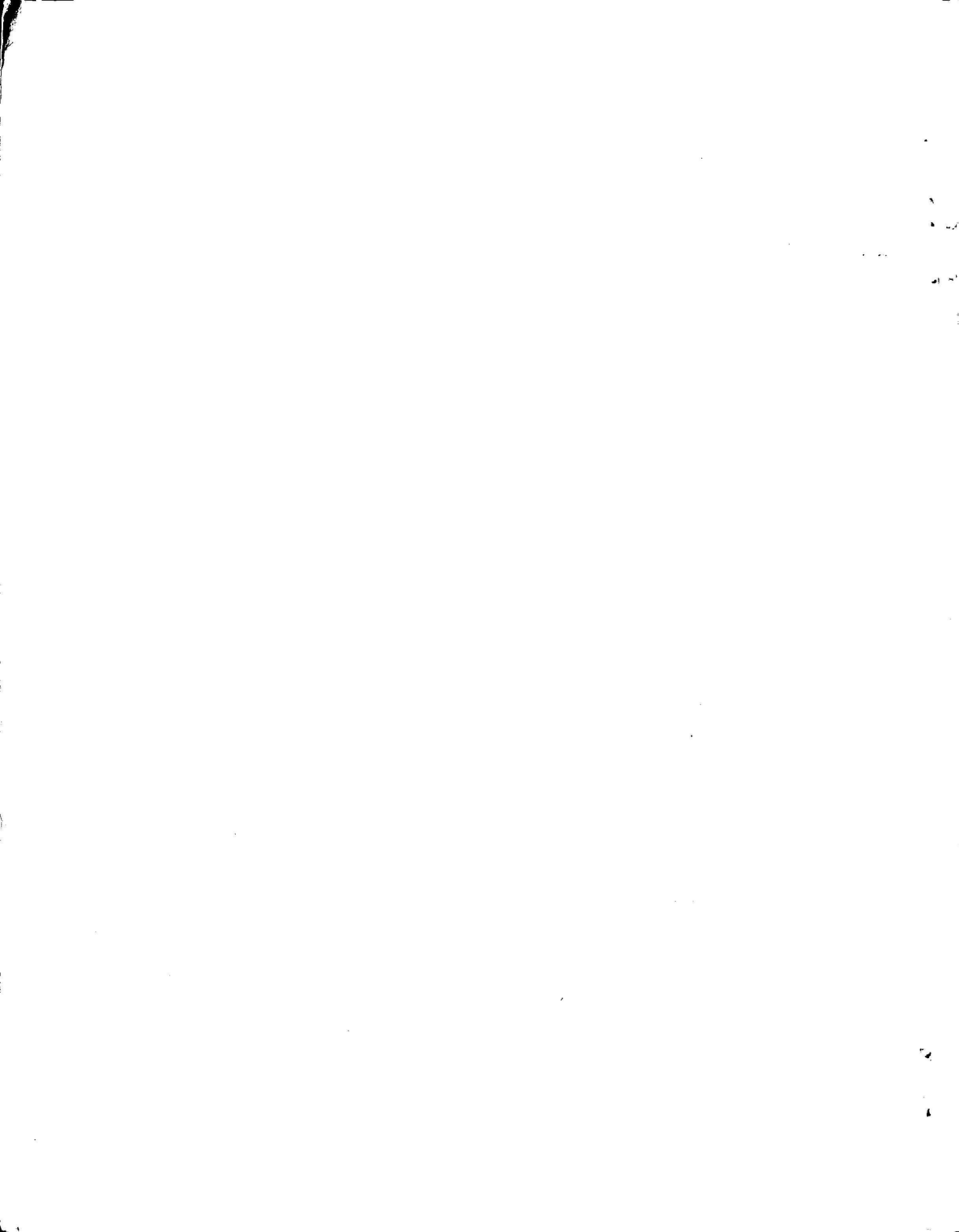
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SIEGE OF SAVANNAH BATTLE SITE, 1779

Georgia

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## SIEGE OF SAVANNAH BATTLE SITE, 1779

### Georgia

Location: The Revolutionary battle site is bounded by Louisville Road on the north, West Boundary Street to the west, West Broad Street on the east, and Interstate Highway 16 on the south within the City of Savannah. In addition, Central of Georgia Railroad property in the section bounded by Hull Street on the north, West Boundary Street to the west, West Broad Street on the east, and Louisville Road on the south is to be considered.

Ownership:

The land from Hull Street south to Jones Street is owned by the Central of Georgia Railroad. The land south of Jones Street is owned by various individuals.

### Significance

Late in the year 1778, the British changed the theatre of the war from the North to the South. The fortunes of war had given the Americans victory in campaigns in New England and the middle states, but the British expected aid from the back-country loyalists of the South. The plan of campaign contemplated a beginning in Georgia and a northward advance which would roll up the South.

A beginning was made in this campaign by the capture of Savannah late in December, 1778. No serious opposition was offered, and the British spread into the interior with the assistance of a force that came from St. Augustine, under the command of General Augustine Prevost. When it became clear that the attack on the South was no mere raid but was the beginning of a serious attempt at occupation, a few thousand

men were detached from the main continental army and sent southward under the command of Benjamin Lincoln, who had gained fame in the Saratoga Campaign.

The seemingly easy conquest of Georgia encouraged General Prevost to consider an invasion of South Carolina and an attempt upon Charleston. Meanwhile General Lincoln began to rally patriot forces in South Carolina; and Governor John Rutledge, given almost dictatorial powers by the South Carolina Legislature, called up several thousand militia. Prevost was unable to capture Charleston, although he seriously threatened it. On the other hand, Lincoln, while he was able to compel Prevost to let go his hold on Charleston, could not turn him out of Savannah.

Rutledge and William Moultrie were alarmed for the safety of the South. Should the British take the offensive in the fall, should the Tories of the Carolinas simultaneously take up arms, Charleston and the South to the border of Virginia would be in grave danger. They begged for help from Admiral Charles Henri d'Estaing, who was still cruising in the West Indies; and their pleas were supported by the Marquis de Brétigny, a French officer serving in South Carolina who told D'Estaing that only he could save Charleston. The French admiral, receiving their urgent messages, had others from Washington's headquarters seeking his aid in an attack on New York or Newport. It would seem that D'Estaing, soon to return to European waters, wanted to add to his

record in the New World a triumph on the mainland and that he saw an opportunity for quick success at Savannah. Whatever were his reasons, the British were startled and alarmed on September 8 when they learned that he was anchoring off Tybee Bar with twenty-two battleships of the line, ten frigates, several other craft, and four thousand troops. The British did not need to fear bombardment by D'Estaing's ships, since most of the ships of the French fleet could not come close enough to use their guns upon the town. They feared, however, that they would not be able to hold off the French troops and the Americans hastening to join D'Estaing. With the American forces was Count Casimir Pulaski, the Polish officer who commanded a cavalry detachment in Continental service. The Americans were remarkable for their quality rather than quantity. They numbered no more than 1,350, including Continentals and militia. With 3,500 men put ashore by D'Estaing, they made a formidable army.

The British had been caught napping. Clinton had been unable to send reinforcements to Prevost, and the British commander in the town had available immediately for its defense no more than 1,700 troops. The appearance of the French fleet and army in the hurricane season was almost incredible to Prevost. He urgently sought help from British forces at Beaufort, South Carolina, ordered James Moncrief, an able engineer, to repair the town's fortifications, and began parleys with D'Estaing in order to gain time. There is some reason to believe that he considered surrendering in the face of greatly superior forces. He did not; and troops

from Beaufort succeeded in a desperate attempt to come to the rescue, slipping rapidly through the unguarded inland waterways and making their way between the French fleet and the Franco-American army into the town on September 16 and 17. These forces brought new vigor to the British command. Moncrief, with hundreds of Negro slaves, solidified the British lines, fortified them with redoubts, and brought up cannon to cover those parts of Savannah not protected by the river on the east and marshes to the north. The river was blocked by sunken vessels and a boom of logs. The allies then had two choices-- to assault the lines or depart. With his fleet in open sea and exposed to hurricane, D'Estaing could not stay long on the Georgia coast.

Disappointed because Prevost failed to give up without a fight, D'Estaing and his men quarreled with the Americans and among themselves; brought ashore heavy guns from the fleet; and, with the patriots, began to approach the British entrenchments on September 23. The guns, with others on small French craft in the river, began to bombard the town on October 4, but caused little damage. It became apparent that the town must soon be taken by assault, or not at all. D'Estaing would not for the third time abandon a Franco-American project without desperate effort. He laid plans to try to storm the British lines on October 9 and General Lincoln could only agree. Feinting to the right and left, he and Lincoln led French infantry and South Carolina Continentals forward at dawn against the weakest point in the British line, the Spring Hill redoubt and its vicinity. Informed by spies or deserters of the time of the attack,

Prevost was ready. The feints were easily repulsed; and after bitter hand-to-hand fighting and heavy losses, D'Estaing and Lincoln had to fall back from Spring Hill. Nearly half the allies who engaged in the main attack were killed or injured; in all they had 244 slain, 584 wounded. Pulaski and many American officers were killed. D'Estaing, twice wounded, had fought like a grenadier. He was urged by the patriots to continue the siege or to take position at Charleston, but he could do neither. The allies raised the siege without molestation, and the Admiral sadly set sail for France.

The news of the bloody defeat of the French and Americans at Savannah and the departure of D'Estaing for Europe made it possible for Clinton to attack Charleston. When D'Estaing's fleet left American waters, New York, well fortified against assault from the land, became temporarily safe. In December, 1779, leaving his base under the command of the German general Baron William von Knyphausen, Clinton with 8,500 troops sailed southward.<sup>1</sup>

Americans' assumption that the war was as good as won was rudely shattered in 1779-1780 by the British conquest of Georgia and South Carolina and the destruction of two American armies, each as large as the force that Burgoyne had surrendered at Saratoga. By shifting their attack from the North to the South, the enemy, in short, not only revived the American war but scored successes that brought the patriot cause to the verge of disaster.<sup>2</sup> Had Georgia been lost, the only

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<sup>1</sup> John Richard Alden, The South in the Revolution 1763-1789, 232-239 passim.

<sup>2</sup> John C. Miller, Triumph of Freedom 1778-1783, 513.

foothold remaining to George III in his American colonies would have been the city of New York. British morale was tremendously boosted by the victory at Savannah which steeled the Ministry in its decision to continue the effort to subdue America. The victory permitted the transfer of the main theatre of war to the lower South. Three cruel years of civil war that followed in Georgia and the Carolinas might have been spared if Savannah had fallen to the allies in 1779.<sup>3</sup> Instead, the British were now able to proceed with their new plan of warfare in America, the reduction of the Southern colonies one by one.

Another element to be considered in the evaluation of the Savannah battle site is the subsequent development in the area of a well-designed terminal complex by the Central of Georgia Railroad. The Central of Georgia was organized in 1833; its terminal facilities in Savannah are interesting both technically and architecturally. The old offices of the road are at 227 W. Broad Street. This is a fine Greek Revival building with an imposing Doric portico. It is two stories and of brick painted grey. To the rear a series of warehouse bays extends for two blocks. Next door at 233 W. Broad there is a large red brick, three-story office building built in 1887. The ground floor is of granite and there are dormers on each side. Romanesque influences can be seen in the arched doorways and windows. Immediately south of this newer office building--entered through gates with unusual castellated brick gate houses--there is an open area for tracks in which there are two newer buildings with

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<sup>3</sup> Alexander A. Lawrence, Storm Over Savannah, The Story of Count d'Estaing and the Siege of the Town in 1779, viii-ix.



private commercial occupancy. Just south of this is the old (and still used) passenger depot with an open, arched train shed behind it. The depot is a simple two-story brick structure. Pilasters ornament the entrance facade and its windows are arched. To the west of this terminal grouping two very graceful arched, brick viaducts bring the tracks in over Highway 17A. The northern of the two viaducts is somewhat spoiled because a cement products company has built under the shelter of one of the arches. Across Louisville Road is the yard area with its round house and repair shops.

The completeness and architectural merit of these terminal facilities as they existed in the 1850's was recognized by Colburn's New York Railroad Advocate in 1855. "We have many large and elegant depot buildings, and quite as many great and excellent repair shops, but we are now speaking particularly of a great and complete station for the accommodation of the freight and passenger business, and for the construction and repair of the entire machinery of a great road."

"To say that Savannah, Georgia is likely to have the most complete and elegant railroad in the county (besides its also being one of the very largest), may be a matter of some surprise...."

Use of the terminal facilities has declined severely as a result of modern changes in operating conditions for railroads. Some of the structures and land have been switched to other than their original uses. The terminal still, however, provides an unusually complete and interesting railroad complex. It is interesting as an example of industrial architecture as well as from the standpoint of railroad history.

### Condition of the Site

The site of the Revolutionary battle is today occupied by railroad yard and repair facilities, commercial structures along one side, and a sprawling residential slum. The area of the Spring Hill redoubt, where decisive action occurred, lies beneath the round house, yards, and repair shops located between Louisville Road and Jones Street. The Central of Georgia Railroad (now controlled by the Southern Railway) would like to clear this land for sale. The brick buildings were sold to an Atlanta concern which had begun wrecking them. Much of the round house has been torn down. The wrecking firm values the buildings at \$52,000. Work has been temporarily halted, and the Revolutionary Battle Park Incorporated has borrowed \$20,000, which is being held as a down payment on the bricks.

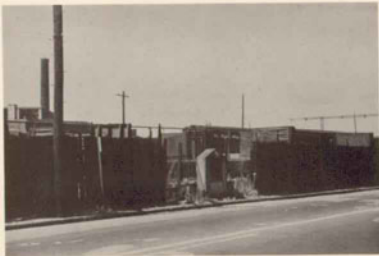
A section of the battle site lies between Jones Street and I-16, which is now under construction. This is a sprawling slum with irregular streets, some of which are little more than worn dirt roads. Most of the houses are extremely dilapidated one-and-two-story frame tenements. A few are of brick and stucco construction. The buildings facing on West Broad Street are mostly commercial and are in better condition.

The railroad buildings between Hull Street and Louisville Road are still in use. The best of these is the old office building at 227 West Broad. It is very well maintained; the warehouses to the rear also continue in use by various businesses. The office building at 233 W. Broad

is well kept, but plans have already been announced for its demolition. The passenger terminal is much less used than formerly and is not kept in first-class condition. The viaducts over U. S. 17-A are in good condition. The northernmost viaduct has, however, been marred by the construction of a cement products building beneath it.

As has already been indicated, the round house and repair shops of the yard area have been scheduled for demolition and the land is to be cleared. It should be noted, therefore, that there is overlapping and a certain amount of conflict in the effort to clear and reclaim the land on which the Siege of Savannah took place and at the same time preserve the Central of Georgia terminal complex. The rail yard and its buildings have been constructed on the land where the key Spring Hill road was located.

References: John Richard Alden, The South in the Revolution (Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1957); Edward Channing, The American Revolution, 1761-1789, Vol. III of A History of the United States (New York, 1937); Alexander A. Lawrence, Storm Over Savannah, The Story of Count d'Estaing and the Siege of the Town in 1779 (The University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1951); John C. Miller, Triumph of Freedom 1775-1783 (Boston, 1948); E. Merton Coulter, Georgia, A Short History (The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1947); William B. Hesseltine and David L. Smiley, The South in American History (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1960).



1. Marker identifying site of Spring Hill Redoubt  
(NPS Photo 8/20/65)



2. Portion of partially demolished roundhouse in area  
of Spring Hill Redoubt (NPS Photo 8/20/65)



3. Looking west down Harris Street toward roundhouse (NPS Photo 8/20/65)



4. Unpaved roads in area south of Jones Street and roundhouse (NPS Photo 8/20/65)



5. Business establishments on West Broad Street  
boundary of suggested park project (NPS Photo  
8/20/65)



6. Construction of West Broad Street overpass I16 at  
south boundary of project (NPS Photo 8/20/65)



7. Central of Georgia passenger terminal West Broad Street and Louisville Road (NPS Photo 8/20/65)



8. Interior of terminal train shed showing historical markers (NPS Photo 8/20/65)



9. Central of Georgia offices at 227 West Broad St.  
(NPS Photo 8/20/65)



10. Central of Georgia offices showing freight bays  
to rear (NPS Photo 8/20/65)

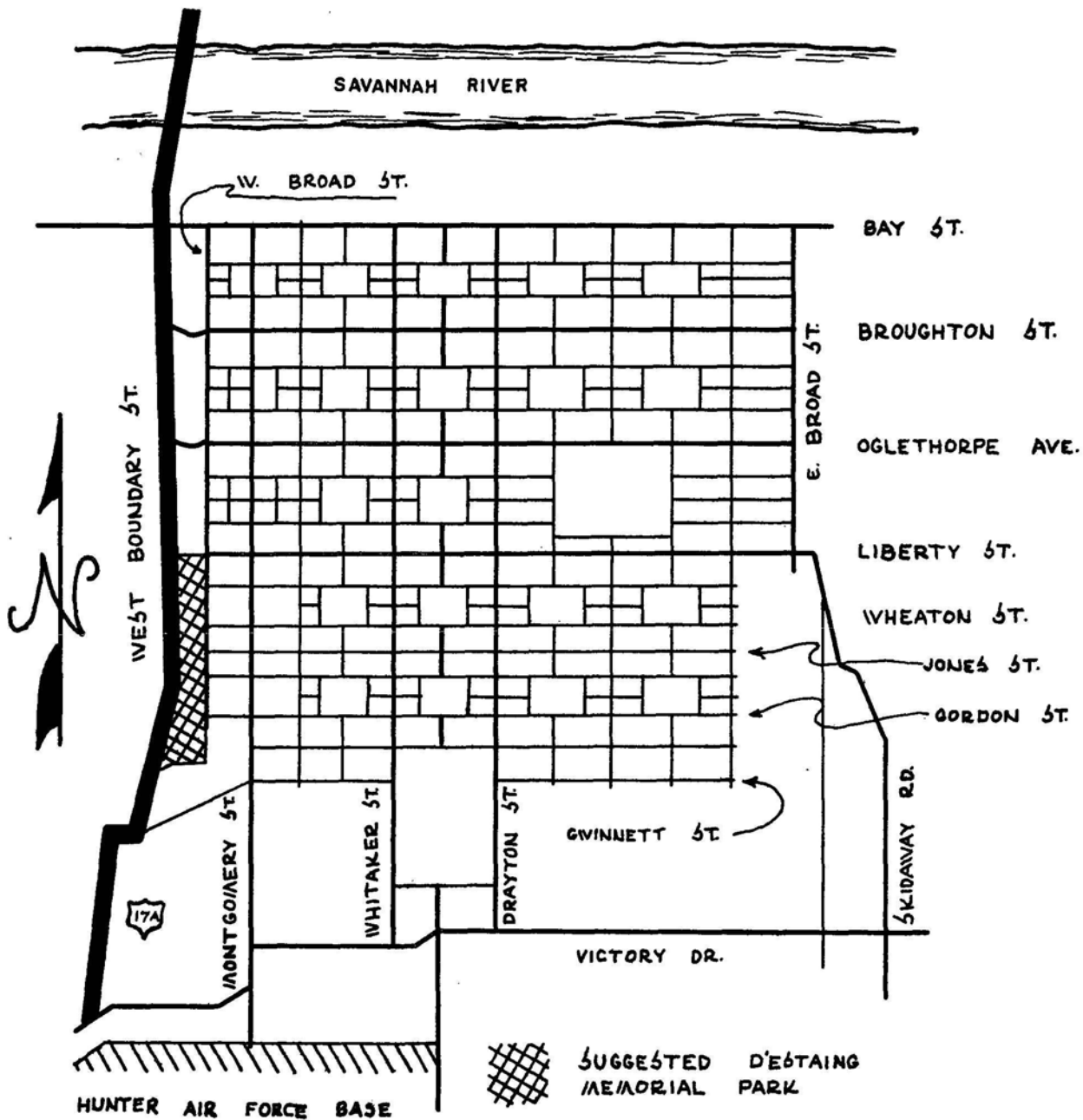




11. Central of Georgia offices at 233 West Broad St.  
(NPS 8/20/65)



12. Southernmost of two Central of Georgia brick viaducts spanning Highway 17A (NPS Photo 8/20/65)



# SAVANNAH, GEORGIA