

Prologue: Early Racing in Savannah

How did a small Southern city, barely known in today's world of motorsports, ever come to host the first American Grand Prix—known in English as “Grand Prize”? This race, which is strongly related to the prehistory of Formula One, was held in Savannah in 1908. It was not a fluke that Savannah was chosen as its site. Various forms of racing had taken the city by storm in the decades before auto racing arrived. Racing was an exciting new pastime which began shortly before the turn of the century and Savannahians had truly caught the bug. They enjoyed watching any type of race: yacht racing, foot racing, bicycle racing, motorcycle racing, horse racing—even bicycles racing horses! The earliest locations for racing events in Savannah were Doyle's Race Track alongside the Warsaw River and Wheelmen's Park, which was located on the northeast corner of Victory Drive and Skidaway Road. The Savannah Electric Company was one of the city's prominent patrons of sporting events; it even partnered with the Thunderbolt Casino to put on a bicycle “race” of sorts where the cycles traveled across a high wire, 90 feet in the air above a man-made lake, while acrobats hung on to them from below.¹

The bicycle and racing craze was a crucial factor in the origins of auto racing in Savannah and in America. Several very important automobile inventors and racers of the pioneering days came directly from the bicycle industry. Among these were the famous Duryea Brothers; Edgar Apperson, who raced in Savannah's first automobile races in March 1908; and Alexander Pope, who entered the Pope-Hummer in Savannah's Vanderbilt Cup race in 1911. The lessons learned from early bicycle technology also led to aviation inventions by Orville and Wilbur Wright in Dayton, Ohio, where the brothers built and repaired bicycles.

A club for bicycle enthusiasts in America was formed in 1880. Known as the League of American Wheelmen (L.A.W.), it was the premier group for bicycle development, racing and related sports. Like many early automobile clubs, the group worked with the government to enact changes to bicycling laws and encouraged the Good Roads Movement. The League of American Wheelmen was heavily involved in providing financial and intellectual support to Congress for the appropriation of \$10,000 to launch an inquiry regarding roads. This led to the formation of a new government department: the U.S. Office of Road Inquiry, which later became the Federal Highway Administration.²

National bicycle racing events were held on the east side of Savannah, in a town called Warsaw, also known as Thunderbolt, in 1893. Savannah had a population of 61,000 at that time, so the attendance of 1,500 spectators was a very good turnout from the locals. The



League of American Wheelmen at their national meeting in Hartford, Connecticut. The L.A.W. was the organization responsible for financially supporting the establishment of the U.S. Office of Road Inquiry, which later became the Federal Highway Administration.

Savannah Electric Company owned and ran the streetcar service out to Thunderbolt. It was thrilled with the high turnout, but unfortunately, put too many cable cars on the tracks to transport spectators to the event and inadvertently overloaded the circuit. The transportation breakdown lowered the number of spectators who could travel to the events, as hundreds of people were unable to make the trip to the east side by other means. The Savannah Electric Company was very involved in sponsoring these events because its revenues came from the fares it charged to use the electric streetcars or subway lines of the early period. One of its most popular routes was out to Thunderbolt along what is now Victory Drive.

Bicycle races were extremely profitable for the organizers. One of the favorite entertainments for the crowds was the bicycle “trick riding” by Charles L. Williams. His ability to get his bicycle airborne on jumps and to seemingly twist the bicycle into a pretzel astounded the crowds. There were also a lot of eyes on the panel of celebrity judges, who were housed in a special box near the grandstands. The celebrities were a mix of men from the local community and the bicycle racing world. They included Jack Prince, H.C. Wheeler and Whitaker. Members of Savannah’s own local cycling club, known as the Savannah Wheelmen, were quite a presence at the events they helped to organize. The Savannah Wheelmen had a bicycle race of their own during the events, which was won by R.V. Connerat in 2 minutes and 51 seconds. He was closely followed by F.W. Williams at a time of 2 minutes and 52 seconds.

Two Charleston brothers, John and Isaac Baird, did very well at the Savannah races, with Isaac breaking records in the one-mile handicap race with a time of 2 minutes and 37 seconds. This set the bar high for the Southern riders in the sport that year. Isaac Baird raced

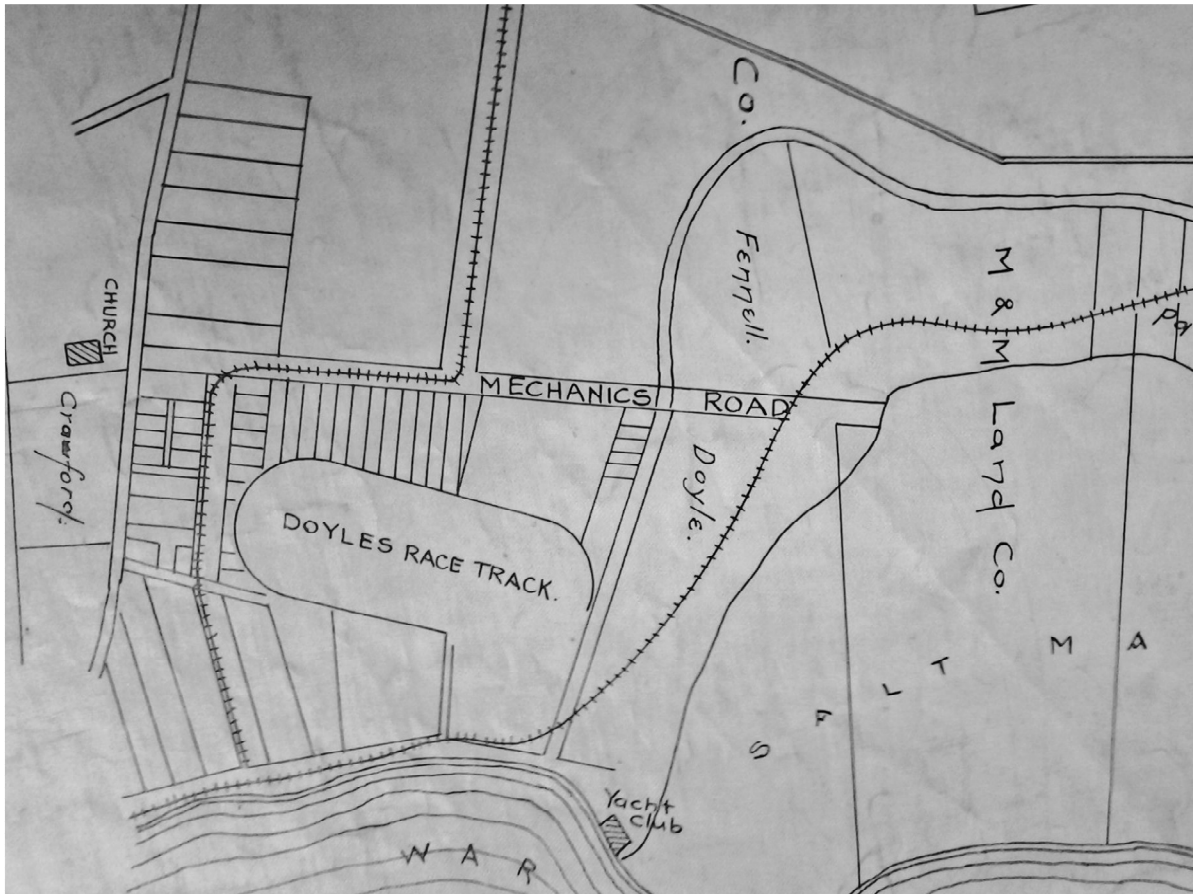


The Thunderbolt Casino in 1908 on the Wilmington River was the place where many of the drivers and teams held celebratory dinners during the racing events of 1908–1911.

in the exhibition with the renowned August Zimmerman to open the events, then entered two one-mile races and the quarter-mile open. Both brothers entered the three-mile handicap and the one-mile handicap. John Baird won the three-mile handicap race with a time of 8 minutes and 9.5 seconds.

Thunderbolt was called Warsaw at that time, after the Warsaw River. This was the place where curiosity seekers and high society alike went to play. The Thunderbolt area had multiple music venues situated on the banks of the river in band shells, formal gardens, restaurants, recreational facilities and sporting venues. Entertainment from the mid-1800s to the turn of the century included many forms of racing, most of which began alongside the river, which is now named the Wilmington River and is part of the intracoastal waterway. A yacht club played a prominent role in the early events; with its location between the salt marsh and a picturesque bend of the river, it was the perfect spot for regattas and sailboat races, especially as Doyles' Race Track was located right next to it and offered horse racing. The Thunderbolt Casino was also located in this early recreation district and drew people from all over the country. In the heart of this entertainment and sports lover's mecca was Mechanic's Road, a very unassuming street in Thunderbolt, today housing the Thunderbolt Museum. However, it was one of the earliest roads in the area from the mid-1800s through to America's first Grand Prix auto race of 1908. Mechanic's Road was the heart of racing in Savannah. It would become part of the excellent hairpin turn used in the Grand Prize Race of 1908 and backed onto Doyles' Race Track, which was the camp for the Fiat team that won the Grand Prix in 1908.

The Coliseum at Wheelmen's Park was the first racing venue in Savannah to receive significant national attention. It began as a simple oval-shaped bicycle racing track and was located directly on the Thunderbolt streetcar line. This track was significant to bicycle racing

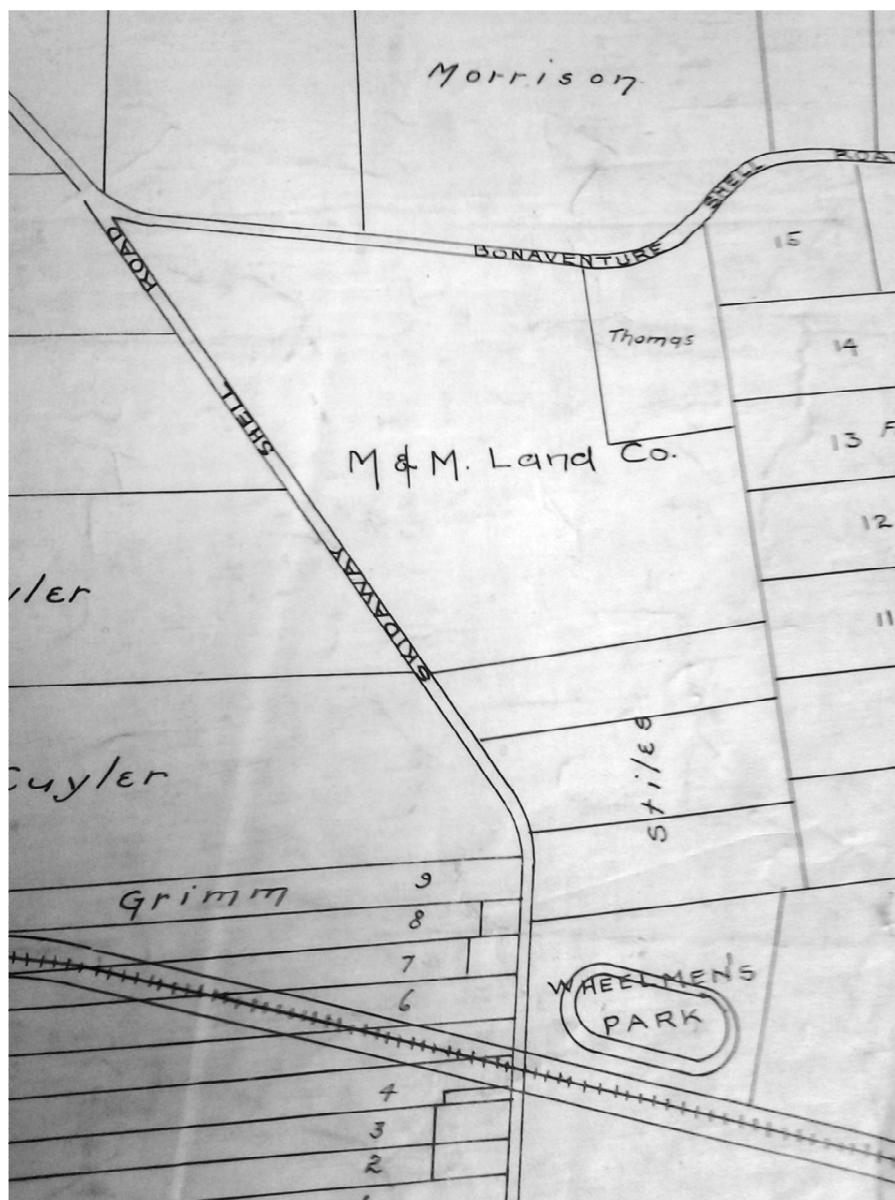


Doyles' Race Track in Thunderbolt, Georgia, was the center of the racing world in Savannah at the turn of the century. Horses, and later cars, were raced on the track, which was located close to the banks of the Wilmington River, where yacht races were held from the late 1850s onward. Teams such as Fiat made their camp at Doyles' Race Track during the Grand Prize races (courtesy City of Savannah, Research Library and Municipal Archives, 3121-007).

due to its modern construction and the fact that champion racers came from all over America to race on it in the earliest days of the sport. The track, which was the first paved cement bicycle track in America, opened in February 1893. It quickly attracted the attention of the League of American Wheelmen, the organization that comprised the top riders in the country in that time who competed at the national and international level. The Savannah race was the first League of American Wheelmen race to be held in Georgia.³

Savannah's Wheelmen's Park was unique because the only other cement course in the world at that time was the famous "Buffalo Velodrome" in Paris, France. The Savannah track was part of a larger complex on the Thunderbolt Shell Road. It contained a pit complete with telephones, grandstands and bleachers seating 3,500 people. Within the track was an athletic field for baseball, football and a 200-yard rifle range alongside the grandstand. The track itself was a four-lap track with banked curves measuring 1 foot in 5 feet. The front stretch of the track was 30 feet wide and the back stretch narrowed to 15 feet. Several prominent men in Savannah were responsible for building the \$10,000 track, including C.S. Richmond, S.M. Whitesides, R.H. Polk, W.J. Lindsay, and Henry MacAlpin.⁴

World champions of the era such as Zimmerman, Smith and Johnson raced on the



Wheelmen's Park was located at Skidaway and Victory Drive in Thunderbolt, Georgia. The park was first built in 1866 as a sod track by Abraham Beasley, a well-known black businessman in Savannah. It later became home to the Savannah Electrics baseball team and the Bicycle Racing Coliseum (courtesy City of Savannah, Research Library and Municipal Archives, 3121-007).

track, and famous trainer T. Eck arrived to survey the track and winter events.⁵ August Zimmerman of Camden, New Jersey, was famous for his graceful riding and many victories. He was the first hero among American cyclists, winning acclaim from the press everywhere he went. Many believed he was the greatest cyclist of all time—and the fact that he could draw up to 30,000 spectators went far in supporting the claim. A typical racing weekend would offer purses of \$500 and up to the riders.

Although few words have been published about the Savannah track, it was well known among the national pioneering circuits in bicycle racing. As soon as it was built, the experts in the sport touted its speed and excellent location as making it a superior venue for bicycle

racing. Four thousand spectators showed up to witness the first events. More than 26 electric rail cars took people directly to the course, and people also arrived on foot and by carriage. Hundreds of Savannah's ladies showed up with the male spectators, wearing the colors of the Savannah Wheelmen. They enjoyed the racing and the live music provided at the grandstand and bleacher areas. The sport was new and exciting to the people of Savannah, but the world champions Zimmerman and Isaac Baird truly captured their attention and catapulted bicycle racing into a phenomenon in the region. The novelty of seeing a state-of-the-art concrete track—which was built at a time when many had never seen concrete on a road, let alone a race track—drew thousands to see this wondrous technology over the next few years.⁶

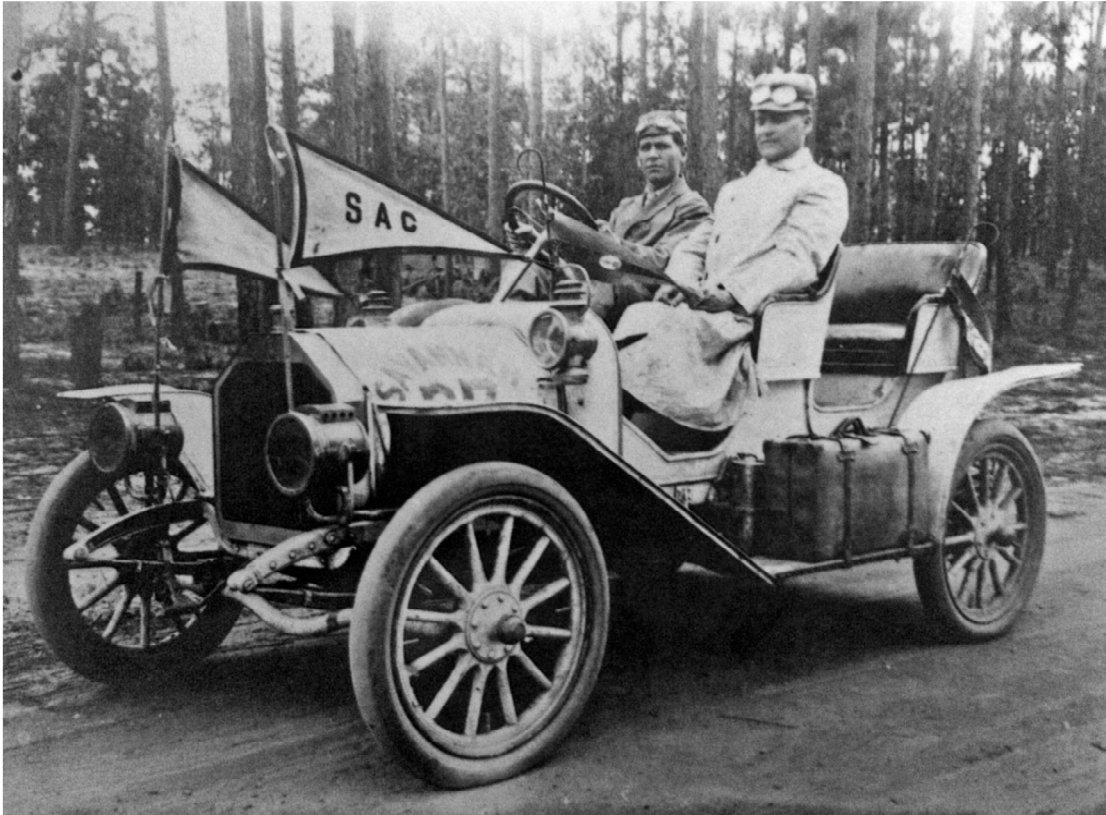
Several races were held on the course over the cool, windy days of February 22 and 23, 1893. The first race was at three o'clock in the afternoon. More than 200 riders attended the meet. All of the racers met at the DeSoto Hotel on Liberty Street in downtown Savannah and were transported to the track in Thunderbolt by carriage. The day began with a quarter-mile exhibition race between the popular champion Zimmerman and H.C. Wheeler of New York. Wheeler was given a handicap of 20 yards.

The first day of racing was primarily made up of local matches and short sprints to warm up the crowd for the big events on the second day. As was customary for the bicycle races, the first race held was a novice race for local cyclists from Savannah and Brunswick, Georgia, and from Charleston, South Carolina. The men who raced included Charles Williams, T.P. Whaley and J.L. Johnson of Charleston; W.C. O'Byrne, W. Gross, and R.V. Conneras of Savannah; and R.E. Schuman of Brunswick. It was a close race, won by J.L. Johnson, who finished the quarter mile in 3 minutes and 12.5 seconds. He was very closely followed by W.W. Gross, who came in second with a time of 3 minutes and 14 seconds.⁷ The local cyclist races were thought to have the twin benefits of attracting local spectators and finding talent in the sport that might be undiscovered.

The second race was the one-mile open featuring M. Ed Wilson of Savannah; Isaac Baird and Steve Welsh of Charleston, H.R. Steensen of Rockaway, New Jersey; and H.C. Wheeler of New York. Baird won the race in 2 minutes and 46 seconds, 8 seconds ahead of the second-place winner Welsh, who completed the mile in 2 minutes, 54 seconds.⁸

Several unusual events were also included in the first day's events. One was an egg race, although not as we know such races today. For these races, the egg had to be carried by the bicycle riders back and forth to designated locations and switched for other eggs. The other event involved a "diminutive rider" who was apparently teased about his speed and the 10-inch-wheel bicycle he rode in a sort of clownish comedy routine. As in many races, one of the day's biggest talking points was a collision which occurred during the novice race. Each moment could bring awe, fear, excitement and despair to the crowds. Bicycle racing was an instant hit! Savannahians could not wait for the bicycle races to return to their beautiful new Coliseum.

One infamous event occurred in later years. Marshal Major Taylor, a black world champion racer who had raced bicycles around the world, arrived in Savannah to race at Wheelmen's Park in 1898. He encountered some hostility due to his race and, immediately upon arriving, had to change rooming houses in order to reside with a black family on Lincoln Street during his visit. His time in Savannah was very unfortunate. The owners of Wheelmen's Park did not permit black racers to ride and he was turned away. Taylor turned to the roads to train, most notably on the Louisville Road. However, even on the public roads he encountered criticism. A group known as "The White Riders" were not happy to share the road with Taylor as he trained. One day, they chased him from the outskirts of town where



The Savannah Automobile Club Car was used on the course after work was completed each year, to test it out before any drivers or teams arrived for the races. The occupants are unknown (courtesy Pratt Matthews family).

Louisville Road is located, back into the city. The following day he received a letter from the group telling him to leave town.

Over time, the earlier bicycle racing began to change in form. If you lived in America at the turn of the century and you hadn't heard of the motor-paced bicycle racing craze, then you didn't know Jack—Jack Prince, that is. Jack was born John Shillington Prince in Coventry, England, in 1859. Prince was a world champion bicycle racer who had assisted with the organization of the earlier Savannah races. He was one of the leading promoters in America for the sport by the late 1890s. Prince oversaw the building and management of circular wooden bicycle racing tracks, also known as velodromes. Several of these were coliseums located in Southern cities such as Atlanta and Jacksonville, Florida. Prince's tracks were usually sketched out hastily, rather than being designed via formal architectural plans. Their creator seemed very well-to-do and was famous for wearing a Derby hat. Prince was described in the Savannah newspapers as "a hustler" who could get things done quickly and efficiently.⁹ Prince would simply scope out the potential for spectators in a city, visit a promising site and get to work driving wooden stakes into the ground for the new coliseum—that is, an open-air race track. In a matter of days or weeks, dozens of carpenters would arrive, along with railroad cars full of lumber and steel spikes. The coliseums would take shape quickly, within a month or so, and grandstands and boxes for officials would be built last.¹⁰ It was a slightly different setup in Savannah, however, with its cement course.

Motor-paced racing was almost a mixed genre falling somewhere between motorcycle

races and bicycle races. The bicycle riders were paced for time by a motorized bike that rode with them. These events were among the earliest type of motor racing seen in most places in the world. Savannah was no exception. The motor-paced races of 1902 and onward were, in a way, a restructuring of the bicycle racing sport. They provided excitement, new technology and a heightened level of danger to the riders and spectators. Bicycle tires often had difficulty keeping up with the pacer speed and were known to burst at such high speeds, especially in longer races. It is also quite important to note that it was during this time of high popularity for motor-paced racing in America that the first major road race took place: the Vanderbilt Cup, which was held on Long Island in 1902. The Vanderbilts, who were already familiar with the Georgia coast, would likely have followed the racing in Savannah. It was no coincidence that the city had such a significant reputation in racing that the AAA and ACA might vie to hold races here. Some of the finest racing courses of their time had been built for the bicycle races at Wheelmen's Park and for yacht races and horse races in Thunderbolt. At the turn of the century, Savannah was already a racing mecca, far ahead of cities that rose in prominence relative to racing much later such as Indianapolis and Daytona.

The racers who came to the Coliseum were generally the top men in the industry. They raced a circuit each fall from September to December. Dominating the sports headlines of the newspapers on an almost daily basis, the feats of the racers were enjoyed all over America and especially in Savannah, where the baseball season was just finished. Beginning September 10, 1902, the "motor-bicycles" raced in the Coliseum in Savannah under Prince's direction. Prince arrived in the city at the start of the new season with three of the sports' top racers, motors for the bicycles, and safety equipment for the track.¹¹

The racers were famous across America: Jay Eaton; Gus Lawson, also known as "the Terrible Swede"; Charles Turville; and Dare-Devil Callahan, of Philadelphia. To begin the season, a six-night event took place at the Coliseum, where each of the men would ride beginning at 9 p.m. and continue for 30 minutes. The racer who had completed the most miles in that time was the winner. However, the long-distance events were preceded each evening by short sprints between the racers. There were also opportunities for amateur racers to try their hand at racing in the velodrome. Prince structured the races this way both to heighten community support and as a way of discovering new talent. When a new racer emerged from the amateur ranks, Prince would train and work with him, as he did with Atlanta's Bobby Walthour. Walthour himself became well known in Savannah, most especially after he rode against a racehorse in November 1902. A street on Wilmington Island, just east of downtown Savannah, is named after him.

Interest in the Savannah series spread well beyond the region and the results were reported in cities as far away as New York. Notably, Jay Eaton was a world champion who not only raced bicycles, but also participated in foot races and long-distance walking events, such as New York's Six Day Walk in 1902.¹² He raced in the American circuit organized by Jack Prince.

The only other sports to compete with turn-of-the-century bicycle racing for widespread public attention were baseball and boxing (prize-fighting). The automobile and auto racing were introduced briefly to the people of Savannah as early as 1901, although formal races were not held. Race cars owned by the Rainey Brothers and a Mr. Baxter of New York came to Savannah in the spring and winter of that year, visiting T.A. Bryson. Bryson owned the bicycle shop and garage at Bull Street and persuaded the men to return with their race cars in the winter of 1902 for a racing festival to be held in December.

Savannah had made its start with bicycle racing, and it had built one of the premier

coliseums in the world. Soon, automobile racing would evolve out of the bicycle races. The city had positioned itself very well to become a contender for top auto racing events in the pioneering days of the sport. Savannah had successfully established a strong record for excellence by building a top-notch racing facility at the Coliseum. The local clubs and city leaders were very capable of drawing one of the world's best bicycle racing organizers and world champion racers to the city. It was natural, then, that Savannah would soon become the focus of top automobile clubs in America and host the biggest auto races in the world. The stage was almost set for America's first Grand Prix to begin in the southern port city.