

## Mad About Madison

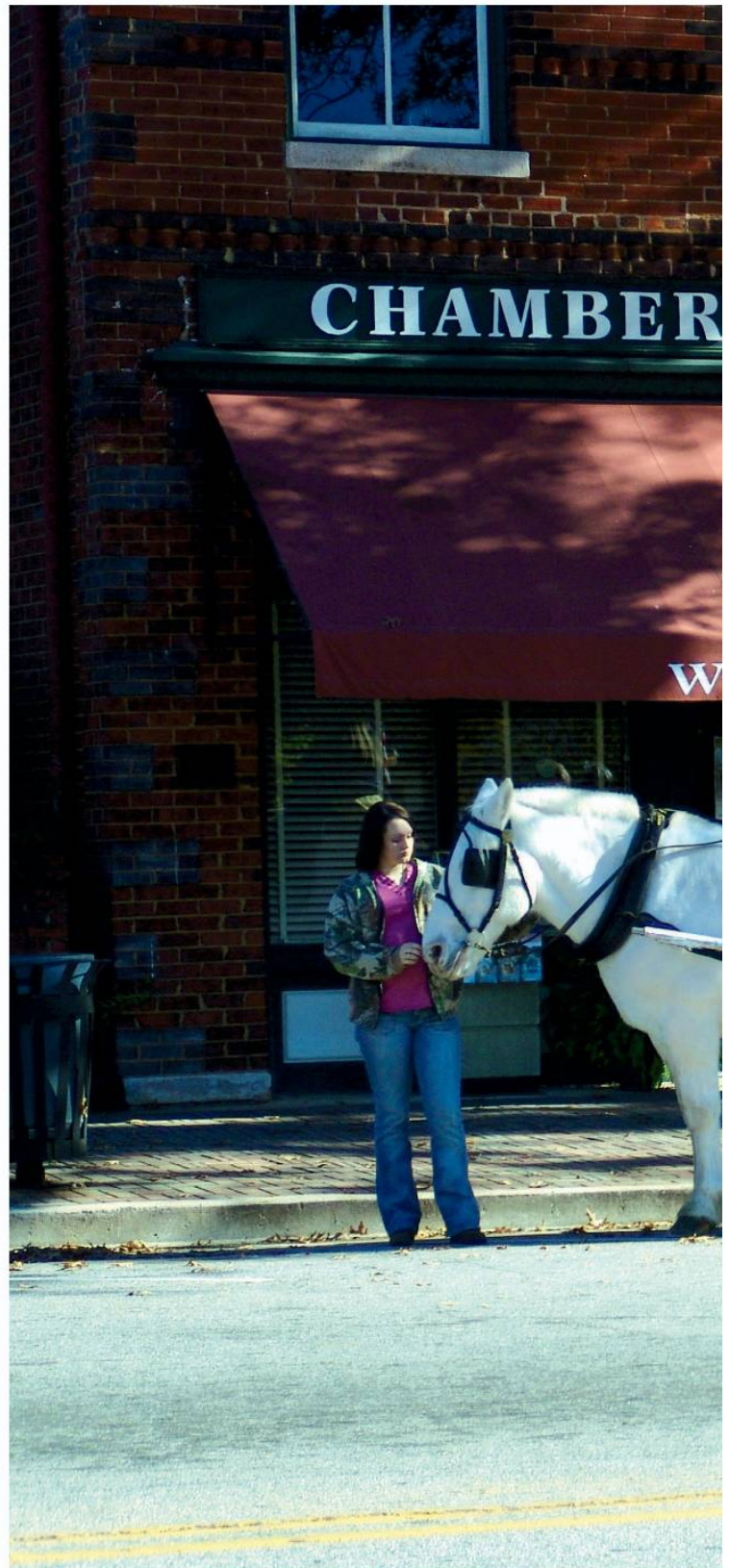
A link to Georgia's Antebellum past

By Hope S. Philbrick

Love at first sight is a common occurrence in Madison. Just ask Dianne Simmons. "I was just hooked immediately," she says of her first visit. "Madison is a delightful little town, so charming." Arriving with friends for the annual Holiday Tour of Homes (held the first weekend in December; a spring tour is held each May), Dianne quickly realized she had discovered "this perfect little town" to start the bed and breakfast she and her husband Roger had been planning. "I was drawn in, so impressed by the quality of the town, the historic district, the beautiful homes," she says. "I'm kind of embarrassed to admit that we had lived in the Atlanta area for so many years, and all along this little jewel of a town was so close by but we didn't visit it."

An hour east of Atlanta on I-20, Madison attracted more than 63,000 visitors in 2006—an impressive figure for a town with a population of only 4,500 in a county of around 20,000. And yet traffic is a non-issue because once here, using a car is strictly optional.

Madison was incorporated as a city in 1809; exploring its streets is like taking a trip through time. That mood is achieved through historic buildings that have been carefully restored, plus a downtown filled exclusively with independently owned businesses. During the Civil War Madison earned the title, "The Town Sherman Refused to Burn"—perhaps out of love. The official story is that the Union Army spared Madison from destruction honoring a gentleman's agreement between General Sherman and Madison resident Joshua Hill. But the "unsubstantiated rumor is that there was a





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## travel

woman here in Madison [that Sherman] was attracted to," says Ruth Felicks, docent at Heritage Hall.

The absence of national chains gives Madison a unique personality. The streets are lined instead with more than 60 diverse shops—all independently owned. It's possible to spend hours browsing, but expect to be tempted by eclectic and whimsical collections like those at Attic Treasures. "You don't know you need it until you see it," says Joann Stewart of the antiques available at the shop she owns with her husband, Charles. Dog Ear Books specializes in regional authors and also stocks a hefty supply of volumes about Antebellum homes. Madison Markets, a multi-dealer mall with more than showroom spaces, carries new and antique home furnishings and decorative items. The Creative Mark represents more than 40 local and regional artists who create specialties like oil paintings, wood bowls, blown glass and jewelry.

Fifteen restaurants offer a wide variety of dining options. The menu at Perk Avenue Café features regular and specialty coffees, soups, sandwiches, wraps, salads and bakery goods. Scoops boasts 16 ice cream flavors and 36 custom mix-ins plus refreshing fruit



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Madison Oaks Inn

smoothies and organic fruit juices. Train Wreck is a burger joint (housed in an old box!) where daily specials range from fried fish to chili cheese dogs. Ye Old Colonial cafeteria-style restaurant has been run by the same family for 50 years. O'Hara's, a relatively new addition to Madison's dining scene, offers an upscale menu that changes daily.

Several in-town parks invite outdoor recreation, from picnics to Frisbee. Nearby Hard Labor Creek State Park invites you to golf, boat, fish, horseback ride and hike.

While honoring its past, Madison prepares for the future: "We're building a Bicentennial Park," says Bruce Gilbert, owner of Madison Hardware and former mayor. It will open in 2009 to commemorate the town's 200-year anniversary. "We purchased a whole new city block right off the square; it will become the new center of town," Gilbert says. Many new shops and restaurants already surround the space, and a new hotel is under construction. James Madison Hotel will add 19 rooms and two suites to the current lodging options, which include campsites, cottages, a ranch, country inns, modern hotels and of course, B&Bs.

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## What To Do...

**Madison hosts a variety of events throughout the year; some upcoming options include:**

The Madison Fest & Bluegrass Jamboree, held the last weekend in April, features arts and crafts, bluegrass competitions, baking contests and evening concerts.

Madison's Antebellum and Victorian homes are showcased during the Spring Tour of Homes the first weekend in May.

World-class classical musicians stage 10 distinct performances during the Chamber Music Festival the first two weeks in June.

For more information about these and many other festivities, call the Welcome Center at 800.709.7406 or visit [madisonga.org](http://madisonga.org).

The Simmons, who moved to Madison a year after their first visit, share their luxurious Madison Oaks Inn & Gardens with a "wide range of guests" from all over the world, Roger says. A 1905 Greek Revival mansion—which, by Madison standards, is actually quite young—Madison Oaks has been lovingly restored. It boasts four guest rooms, each with private baths and amenities like plush robes, satellite TV and early morning coffee and tea service (a mere warm-up for the multi-course gourmet breakfast served at 9 a.m.). Its unique blend of historic architecture, modern amenities and Southern hospitality draws consistent raves. "Guests are always commenting, 'I could live here,'" Dianne says. The relaxed, comfortable atmosphere is thanks in part to a casual, arts-and-crafts-style décor. From its heart pine floors to its stained-glass windows, the interior is warm and inviting. But the six-acre property beckons guests to explore the outdoors as well, even if simply from a rocking chair on the front veranda flanked by four 24-foot columns. The breathtaking view of oak trees and gardens is "almost exactly as it was 100 years ago," Dianne says, "except that the trees are more mature."

The opportunity to experience life in an older home is one of Madison's key attractions. Walking or driving past the dozens of well-preserved Antebellum and Victorian homes that define Madison—which is one of Georgia's largest designated historic districts—is a key attraction for overnight visitors and day-trippers. Many of these homes are privately owned, but several shelter businesses are open for tours. Highlights include Rogers House, a Piedmont Plain-style home (circa 1810) with mid-19th-century furnishings, adjacent to the Rose Cottage (circa 1891), the home of a former slave. Heritage Hall now houses the Morgan County Historical Society but was built in 1811 as the family home of Dr. Elijah E. Jones. Visitors are treated to an oral history of the house and given the chance to explore its rooms, which are filled with period antique furniture and accessories, from quilts to medical instruments. Some folks have reported glimpsing a grieving ghost that resides in one of the bedrooms—perhaps a spirit simply unwilling to leave Madison.

Its citizens—both dead and alive—most characterize Madison. Making friends can be as easy as spending a night at The Brady Inn. "We treat guests as friends," says Peter Wibell, who, along with his wife Karen, purchased the 1885 property in May 2006. Karen says the couple was drawn to the business because "we just enjoy the B&B experience." Peter adds that Madison is an ideal location because "the town does a nice job of welcoming people from near and far."

The Brady Inn is comprised of two Victorian-era homes; the sprawling bungalow design enhances the feeling of privacy. The property possesses seven rooms, some of which can be combined to create suites. All have private baths, some with clawfoot tubs.

Recent restorations have upgraded the Victorian décor while simultaneously improving accessibility for disabled guests.

"We've worked hard to create a unique mood and atmosphere in each room," Peter says, adding that guestrooms all share the same amenities, like extra pillows and new, custom-made mattresses. "Everybody has commented on how great the sleeps are."

"We want people to feel like they are in our home or their own home," Karen says. "We want them to come back and stay with us." And they do, for a myriad of reasons—even to get a recipe that Peter promised to share.

It's appropriate that upon the walls of a sitting room the Wibells stenciled a lyric from a traditional Shaker song: "When we find ourselves in a place that's right 'twill be in the valley of love and delight." ♦





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### If You Go...

#### Madison Oaks Inn & Gardens

Owners: Dianne & Roger Simmons  
766 East Avenue  
706.343.9990  
madisoaksInn.com  
Rates from \$185 (+ tax) per night

#### Brady Inn

Owners: Karen & Peter Wibell  
250 North Second Street  
706. 342.4400  
bradyinn.com  
Rates from \$125 (+ tax) per night

#### Madison Convention & Visitors Bureau

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