



Are you interested in Architecture, Historic Tiles, Terra Cotta & Bricks in Savannah?

Tile Heritage maintains an archival file on Savannah, GA.

... While visiting look up & look down and all around you in the Historic District especially... the historic buildings, sidewalk and street bricks are amazing.

For information on these sites (below) connect with:

The Savannah History Museum (912) 651-6850

The Georgia Historical Society. (912) 651-2207

(some sites are by appointment or have special hours)

Bonaventure Cemetery (*garden tiles/ slave tiles)

Laurel Grove Cemetery & Friends of Laurel Grove (*garden tiles/slave tiles)

Colonial Cemetery (glazed sidewalk tiles and bricks)

City Hall

The Old County Courthouse

Cotton Exchange & The Lion Fountain (Perth Amboy carved brick and terra cotta)

The DeSoto Hilton Hotel

George Johnson Baldwin House

Davenport House

Owens-Thomas House

Andrew Low House (*garden tiles)

Juliette Gordon Low Birthplace

Telfair Museum

The Pink House

Green Meldrim House

City Market

Cathedral of St John the Baptist 9(tiles from the UK)

King-Tisdell Cottage

Magnolia Place Inn

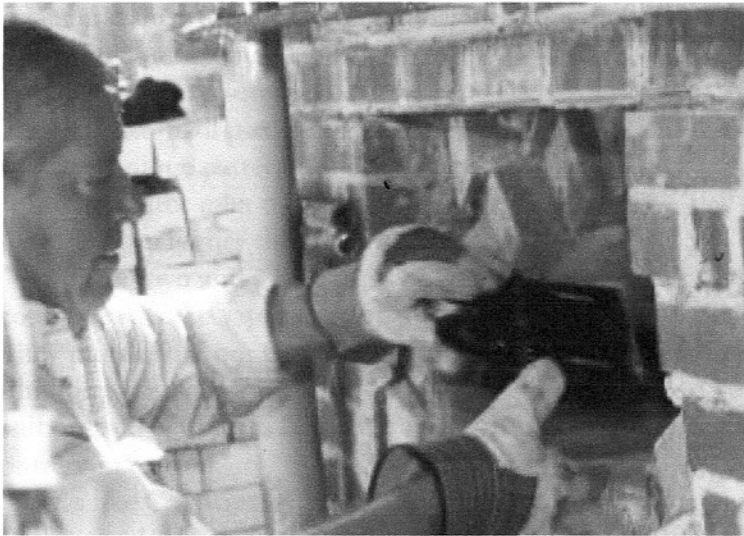
Fox & Weeks Funeral Home (terra cotta)

E. J. Scandals, Inc.

(Of Note: Many original rare, slave-made, burial plot/garden tiles have been 'spirited away.' That is, 'stolen' for an ever open market. To assist in quenching this activity many historic sites have pulled up the originals and moved them for safekeeping. In the late 1990's ceramic artist **Chris Phillips** and a colleague started to successfully and authentically reproduce these tiles. This allowed the local historic sites to replace the rare originals with very exact reproductions. Tile Heritage investigated the illegal sale of original slave tiles in the 1990's .. often meeting with a cold 'trail.' We do hold a few of the reproductions made by **Chris Phillips** in the THF collection as well as images of historic tiles, bricks and terra cotta from around Savannah.)

Savannah craftsman hopes his slave tiles become a hot commodity

Posted: December 14, 2007 - 8:24am | **Updated:** December 14, 2007 - 8:25am



Chris Phillips removes a hot slave tile from the kiln in his backyard. The kiln reached a temperature of about 2,300 degrees and had more than 300 tiles and pieces of pottery packed inside of it. (Steve Bisson/Savannah Morning News)

By Chuck Mobley

Chris Phillips has held a shard of local history close to his heart for several years, planning, working and hoping to duplicate the patina of that small portion of a slave tile he picked up at Bonaventure Cemetery.

This week, the experimentation ended.

"I've been working for five years to get this color," Phillips said, holding up the shard and comparing it to a hand-made, hand-fired slave tile he'd just pulled out of the hand-made, wood-fired brick kiln in his backyard.

Phillips painstakingly puts the slave tiles together in a small shop at the edge of his driveway. The Victorian-era tiles were once frequently found at Savannah cemeteries where they marked grave plots. The passage of time and the proficiency of thieves have greatly reduced their number, however, and they can now principally be found lining garden plots.

An experienced preservationist, Phillips saw opportunity in that paucity.

He's produced slave tiles for several years, and they've been for sale at several historic sites, including Wormsloe. But, even as he put together and produced the tiles in five distinct patterns, Phillips constantly sought to make them more like that Bonaventure shard.

To reach that goal, he contacted a couple of local artisans - sculptor Haywood Nichols and potter David Peterson - for assistance.

Phillips said Nichols has helped him produce sharper, cleaner molds. This has been particularly important as Phillips has expanded his line to include reproductions of 19th-century French tiles. These feature ornate floral patterns and a French manufacturer's mark. A Standard French Dictionary now sits on Phillips' workbench, next to a collection of tiles and tools. Some of the

markings can mean about six different things, Phillips said, holding up a 5-pound tile and pointing to a smudged and worn legend on its reverse side.

Once the tiles have been molded and set, they are ready for the kiln, and this is where Peterson comes into the process.

A ceramics instructor in Savannah's Department of Cultural Affairs, Peterson put together several pieces, including several face jugs, for the firing. He and Phillips worked hard on the glazing portion of the firing, Peterson said.

They placed small pieces of glass atop the face jugs, and the kiln got so hot that the glass melted, forming unique patterns and colors.

It took all three men to monitor the kiln during its two-day firing, an arduous process that produced temperatures higher than 2,300 degrees.

"We put in two and a half cords of wood," Phillips said. "It got so hot there was no smoke. All you could see was the vapor coming out of the chimney."

They put the fire out Saturday evening, but the kiln remained too hot to open until Tuesday.

Phillips pulled a few pieces out that morning, but he said he couldn't keep putting his arm into the still oven-like interior. Later that evening, however, he and Peterson began removing the tiles and pottery in earnest.

"It was like Christmas," Peterson said. "I couldn't wait to see what was in there."

Phillips and Peterson were pleased with the firing, their first collaborative effort.

"The stuff he makes is so authentic," Peterson said of the slave tiles.

"This is the way it was done 200 years ago."

Savannah craftsman Phillips remembered for individuality

Posted: April 7, 2013 - 12:38am | **Updated:** April 10, 2013 - 4:08pm

By Dash Coleman

Friends remember Chris Phillips as a hard-working and talented craftsman who always went his own way.

"He marched to his own little drumbeat," said Savannah's Frances Smith.

A brick, stone and marble mason who spent years in Savannah, the 63-year-old Dowagiac, Mich., native died March 20 at his brother's home in Fairvern, according to an obituary published Thursday on leaderpub.com, a Michigan news outlet.

A graduate of Atlanta College of Art, Phillips' work in Savannah includes restored masonry at the Owens-Thomas house and the restored smokestack at the Georgia State Railroad Museum, according to stories in the Savannah Morning News.

"That stack had been the thing that sort of spurred the focus on the roundhouse complex," said Smith, whose husband, Scott, is president of the Coastal Heritage Society, which operates the railroad museum. "Chris was just a magic part of that — getting that stack done."

The Smiths had known Phillips more than 30 years, and last saw him March 16, when he spent the night with them before heading back to the Atlanta area.

Phillips, whom Smith called a "sweet, rogue of a man," had spent most of his time away from Savannah the last few years, but she said she and her husband have many memories to cherish.

"Maybe more than 20 years ago, we used to live out on Whitmarsh, and Chris would come around periodically, usually on a full moon, and we'd get chairs out and drink whiskey and smoke cigars as the moon came up," she said. "That was a Chris thing to do."

In the mid-2000s, Phillips became known locally for recreating Victorian-era "slave tiles" in his massive backyard kiln, according to previous stories.

Local sculptor Haywood Nichols often helped Phillips when the tiles were being fired in the kiln. The process could take several days, and Nichols praised Phillips' dedication.

"I don't know where he got the energy," he said.

The two met in college, and Nichols said Phillips was a self-sufficient person who led an adventurous life, often traveling to Europe and taking on new ventures.

"He was a wild man, and I'll miss him," Nichols said. "When Chris was coming to town, you could always tell things weren't going to be exactly like everything else. He was a fine craftsman."

[Back to Top](#)



Tile tale produces some questions, but few solid answers

By Chuck Mobley

912.652.0323 • cmobley@savannahnow.com

Everyone agrees that these Victorian-era tiles are a gorgeous addition to local gardens and cemeteries, but disagree over some of the tiles' historical antecedents.

They've often been sold as "slave tiles," but several historians adamantly maintain that label is mere window dressing.

Most of the tiles in places like Laurel Grove Cemetery were made at brick companies in Macon and Milledgeville, said Jim Cothran, an Atlanta outdoor architect and garden historian. "I don't think many of them were made in Savannah," Cothran said.

The tiles were largely shipped here after the Civil War, a by-product of Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman's decision to spare the city in December of 1864 so he could give it to President Lincoln as a Christmas gift. The city wasn't burned so "Savannah still had the economy to buy these tiles."

And that surviving economy meant people here weren't as impoverished as, for instance, those in Charleston. "Savannah thus kept up with gardening styles."

One of those styles, Cothran said, was "parterre," or patterned gardens. Two particular examples of this style are the Andrew Low House and the Green-Meldrim House.

The tiles also found their way into Laurel Grove by the thousands. After the Civil War, Cothran said, many people couldn't afford – or just couldn't acquire – marble to mark grave plots, so they turned to these border tiles instead.

Local historians Hugh Golson and John Duncan agree that the use of "slave tiles" is more a marketing tool than an accurate historical appellation.

Chris Phillips isn't so sure.

"Any tiles made before 1860 were certainly made by blacks," Phillips said. And black craftsmen probably "had their hand in" at plants in middle Georgia.

Paul Muller, chairman of the Bonaventure Historical Society, said it seems likely some of these tiles were made at Savannah-area plantations, especially when you consider the number of local kilns already manufacturing bricks by the thousands.

The same split appears concerning another peculiarity about the tiles – the geographic area in which they are concentrated.

"There's more in Savannah than in any other city I've found," Cothran said, again attributing that to Savannah's comparatively robust economy during Reconstruction. Charleston simply doesn't have these tiles in any great number, he said, a result of that city's structure and economy being destroyed by Union attacks.

Golson agreed, saying, "These tiles seem to be very specific to Savannah."

Again, Phillips said his personal observations led to other conclusions.

"I have found these tiles as far away as north Georgia," he said, adding that he has also found them at several locations in middle Georgia, especially in Eatonton.

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3&4

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claymation

Steps to making plantation tiles:

- 1 Procure a supply of raw clay.
- 2 Mix the clay, along with some additives Phillips didn't want to disclose, and hand-press it into individual molds.
- 3 Place the molds into sunlight to dry.
- 4 Once dried, set the tiles aside. Be careful how they're stored – if they get wet before firing, they simply melt.
- 5 The tiles undergo two firings. The first is the "bisque" firing in the kiln. This four- or five-hour process is to make sure they won't break down.
- 6 The second firing is the "big fire." This is done when enough tiles – 300 to 350 – are ready. The kiln is stoked to 2,000 to 2,200 degrees Fahrenheit and kept at that temperature for nearly a full day.

Grave (and garden) concerns

*Business produces new tiles
using an old process.*

By Chuck Mobley • Photos by Steve Bisson

Savannah Morning News

With an assembly line that goes from his driveway to his backyard, Chris Phillips is anything but your prototypical businessman.

But then again, he's not producing a typical — or even a 21st century — product.

Phillips spends much of his business day either standing on that concrete driveway or bent over a bench, pressing what looks like a scoop of mud into a mold.

His slow, hands-on method is purely by design.

"Anything modern I try in this process seems to backfire," Phillips said.

The end product of that "process" is a storied Savannah feature — the colorful Victorian tiles that line local graves and gardens. These tiles, "like Savannah gray bricks and tabby, are lasting pieces of our local history," he said.

Phillips has spent years studying the product and the process.

The backyard of his eastside home is filled with a massive brick kiln that took more than a year to build. Wood to fire the kiln is stacked 6- to 8-feet-high along the side of his workshop. Rather than a car or a truck, his parking shed protects stacks of tiles waiting to be fired.

The tiles serve as silent sentinels to Phillips' research and determination to revive this local tradition. The process for making them, he said, hasn't changed much since the 19th century.

An electric-powered clay mixer is his only concession to modern technology, he said, up to his elbows in the metallic container

filled with mixed clay.

The rest of the process is slow and laborious, but Phillips has learned not to hurry it.

"If you don't do it right," he said, "you won't believe how bad the tiles look."

The search for authenticity

Phillips has taken great pains to make sure his tiles look exactly like those that gained great popularity on both sides of the Atlantic during the Victorian era.

"There were 12 identified local patterns," he said. "I have five available for sale — starburst, tic-tac-toe, silver dollar, gothic cathedral and rope." He plans to sell tiles with those specific patterns for \$35 apiece.

He's called museums and experts all over the state, picking up the facts and opinions that have helped mold his product.

Several recognized authorities have praised the work's authenticity.

"The craftsmanship of the tiles is very good," Jim Cothran said. "They look very authentic."

Cothran is a landscape architect and urban planner in Atlanta. He also teaches a graduate course on historic American gardens at Georgia State University, and is the author of "Gardens of Historic Charleston."

Paul Muller, chairman of the Bonaventure Historical Society, is likewise impressed.

Bonaventure, a Victorian-era Savannah landmark, has thousands of original tiles, and Muller



Chris Phillips hand presses a mixture of clay, water and other additives

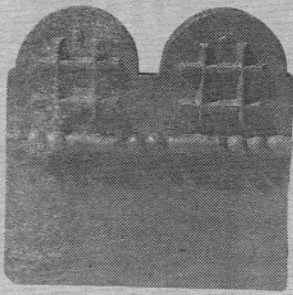
the first sale

His first order, Chris Phillips said, was for 120 tiles to a "rich guy in Vermont." "It took me three days to pack the order," he said.

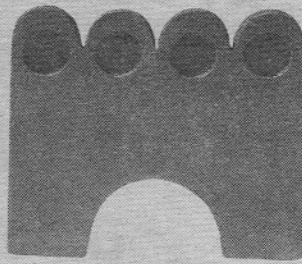
The tiles weigh 5 to 6 pounds each. He could only pack 18 to 20 in a FedEx box. "They can be shipped," he said, "but you have to be very careful because they are brittle."

To make sure the tiles didn't rub together, he started looking around for insulation. "I wound up taking just about all the insulation out of my attic," he laughed. "It took me a long time, and the tiles were protected."

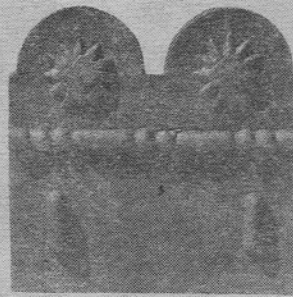
chris phillips' slave tiles



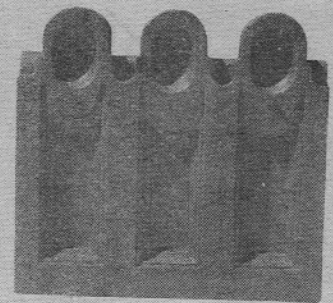
Tic-tac-toe pattern



Silver dollar pattern



Starburst pattern



Cathedral pattern

where to buy them

Phone: Call Chris Phillips at 353-7212.

Cost: Individual tiles are \$35.

Outlets: Andrew Low House curator Tania Sammons said the historic home's gift shop would soon begin selling the five patterns Phillips made. In the future, she said, Phillips will replicate the distinctively patterned tiles in the Low House garden. Those tiles will be available in the gift shops at other sites in Savannah, including the gift shops at the Davenport House and the Savannah History Museum.

Tiles

Continued from page 10

said Phillips' work compares well with them.

"The actual quality of (Phillips') work is excellent," Muller said.

Echoing that praise is Tania Sammons, curator of the Andrew Low House.

"I think they look great. It's amazing what he's been able to do."

Targeted by thieves

The 53-year-old Phillips moved to Savannah in 1991. He's worked on several local preservation projects over the years, including rebuilding the smokestack at the Roundhouse Railroad Museum.

He became interested in the tiles after finding some at a house he was working on.

"I went to an antiques store and started asking around for a set of these tiles," Phillips said.

"They looked at me like I was trying to buy pot. That's when I found out you can't buy the real ones anymore."

Many of the "real ones" are still in Laurel Grove Cemetery, lining 19th-century graves. There are some 100,000 of them in the cemetery, said Hugh Golson, Savannah-Chatham County School Board president and a respected local historian and preservationist.

The tiles' collectability – Golson said he's seen them advertised for \$75 apiece in an antiques catalog – make them a target for thieves.

It's estimated that hundreds were stolen from Laurel Grove in the mid-1990s and sold for \$15 to \$75 each, depending upon their quality.

That market has largely been shut down, Golson said. Word has gone out to local merchants that any tiles brought in were likely stolen.

The last legal sale occurred about 20 years ago when Catholic Cemetery removed its tiles, and all other impediments to

mowers, said John Duncan, a retired history professor at Armstrong Atlantic State University.

A slow start

Phillips saw opportunity in this scarcity.

"When I found out that they were rare, and that the only ones for sale were stolen, I thought there might be a business opportunity there."

He was also looking for something different, having grown tired of brick-intensive projects like the smokestack.

Phillips thus began to study the tiles, even as he continued to work on other preservation projects in Savannah and other parts of the Southeast.

"I usually don't work on a project unless it's a hundred years old," he said.

He talked with woodworkers, potters and mold-makers. The Hewell family of Gillsville in north Georgia, who've been making wood-fired pottery since before the Civil War, was a particularly good source of

information.

That research went on for about five years, Phillips said.

Light my fire

Armed with the knowledge to do the job, Phillips set out to acquire the necessary expertise.

He quickly found it wouldn't be easy.

"There are many steps in the process, and each requires complete attention," he said. "There are no shortcuts. The work is very labor intensive, but the end product is certainly worth it."

Phillips devoted a lot of attention to the last step of the process – wood firing in his homemade kiln.

"I'll use just about any kind of wood I can get," he said.

Much of it is odd pieces and scraps he gets from area sawmills, often for free. He places 300 to 350 tiles into the kiln in a single firing.

"I burn it at night," he said. "The temperature is so high, so hot, that there's almost no smoke."

"When I found out that they were rare, and that the only ones for sale were stolen, I thought there might be a business opportunity there."

Chris Phillips, Slave tile maker

THE Exchange

Business & Employment Magazine

• October 12, 2003

FIND OUT ...

- Why mayoral candidate Frank Rossiter would make a good financial adviser, Page 2
- Eight things to know before you go to that job interview, Page 3
- What employees want but many employers aren't offering, Page 4
- Why the SEC wants to make it easier for large shareholders to put directors on boards, Page 8

HOT COMMODITY

A Savannah man looks to the past to produce a new business – historic tiles fired in a giant brick kiln in his backyard.
Page 10

