

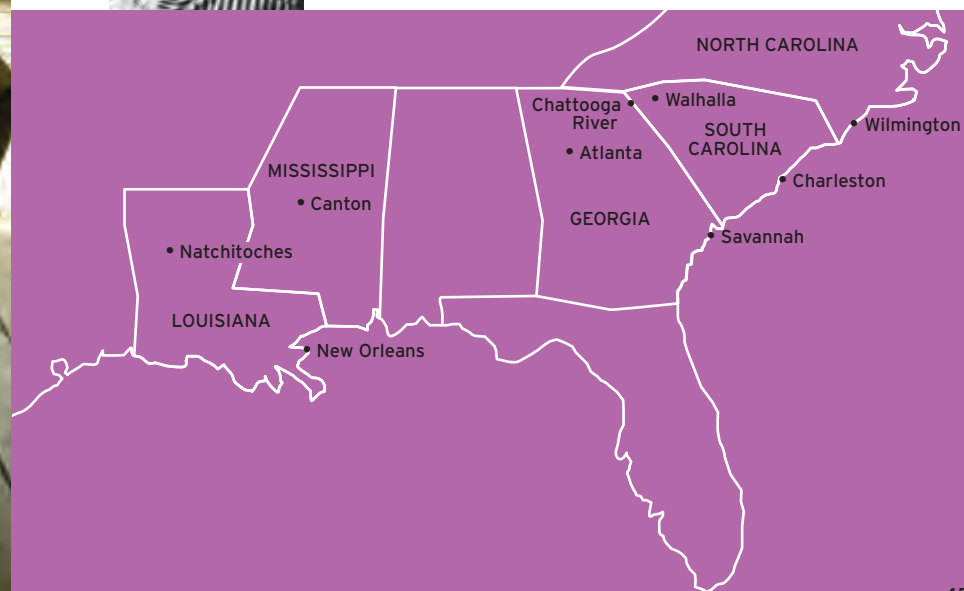
# AN IMAGINARY SOUTH

## SOUTHERN USA



### MEAKIN ARMSTRONG

Most memorable experience in film/travel: My MFA qualifies me to either teach film or manage any video store in the country but I've never taken advantage of either.





**Fried chicken and sweet tea.** The sound of a genteel accent. Someone wilting in the heat and humidity. The Civil War. Flashes of deviance, wild passion, extreme violence. All are tied-up in the mythology of the American South. Here, the combination of poverty and wounded Confederate pride—not to mention the tragedy of Jim Crow—yielded a cultural landscape unlike any other. This landscape is the inspiration for countless memorable lines such as, “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn” and “I have always depended upon the kindness of strangers.”

Much of the filmic South, however, isn’t Southern at all. *Gone with the Wind* (1939), sacred to many below the Mason-Dixon Line, was shot entirely in California. And its leading lady, Vivien Leigh, wasn’t even American, but British. When Leigh later starred in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), she and Marlon Brando worked mostly on a soundstage. The “realism” of 1967’s *In the Heat of the Night* was contrived in small-town Illinois. As for TV’s *The Andy Griffith Show*, a noted celebrant of the quieter aspects of the down-home lifestyle? It was shot on the same back lot as *GWTW*, with the abandoned Tara Plantation set rotting just up the hill from Mayberry.



One could justifiably wonder if the South only exists as a construct of directors and novelists: the dozens of businesses and individuals named after fictional characters, such as Scarlett, Rhett, and Tara can lead one to think so. Enough people seem to view the imaginary South as actual history that the sextant at one of the old-line church cemeteries in Charleston, South Carolina used to point at a damaged, unreadable gravestone, and say: “There lies Rhett Butler.” Of course Rhett never existed, but as a well-heeled ne’er-do-well from an aristocratic background, he is an archetype of the region, especially Charleston—as are permutations of the always-polite Melanie Wilkes, the out-of-towner Mr. Tibbs, the tough talking beauty-shop steel magnolia, or even the manipulative Scarlett O’Hara herself.

▲ *Gone With The Wind*, 1939. photo: ©Everett Collection

◀ Mansion, New Orleans photo: ©Natalia Bratslavsky



A large part of living in the South is living with the tragedy of the past, Race relations are an unavoidable issue here, despite the great amount of progress made. After all, not too long ago, this is where gross governmental neglect allowed the African American community of New Orleans to suffer and die in the Superdome, as seen on televisions everywhere and in Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke* (2006).

### ATLANTA, GEORGIA

The south has changed and is changing still—it's home to a highly successful black-owned film studio (Tyler Perry Studios is located in southwestern Atlanta). Increasingly, films are being made about the South in an honest and forthcoming way. In several of its cities, African Americans also hold leadership positions. **Atlanta** is often cited as an example of that—a place where blacks and whites are reinventing their relationship and thereby reinventing the South as a whole. Atlanta is also the logical starting point of any tour of the South—it's the *de facto* capitol. Currently festooned with glass towers and highways, it's the birthplace of *Gone With the Wind* author Margaret Mitchell. Her former home, the **Margaret Mitchell House & Museum**, has among its possessions the front door to Tara along with the portrait of Scarlett O'Hara, both lifted from the set. The painting of Scarlett, as seen in Rhett's house, still bears a liquor stain from the drink that Rhett Butler (played by Clark Gable) threw at it.

Twice, Mitchell's home has, for reasons unknown, been a victim of arson. Perhaps that's because the author's work is now controversial for avoiding issues of slavery and racism. *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989), however, would touch on the region's dark history, using a home on **Lullwater Road** in Druid Hills as a location for Daisy Werthan's house. This privileged district, with its multimillion-dollar residences—such as the one on Springdale Road built by the man who designed the Coke bottle—were ideal for dramatizing the economic disparity between the white Miss Daisy (Jessica Tandy) and her African-American driver, Hoke Colburn (Morgan Freeman).

Since the end of segregation, Atlanta has become one of the fastest growing cities in the developed world. *Sharkey's Machine* (1981), a gritty and underrated film directed by and starring Burt Reynolds, shows Atlanta bursting in all directions. The '80s were a transitional time for the area, since the "new" South was still emerging from the old. Much of what's



visible in the background for *Sharkey* is lost, but the hotel where they filmed that record-breaking, 220-foot free-fall from the **Westin Peachtree Plaza** exists. Stand on the street, look up, and see how far that daring stuntman jumped.

Because of its size, many dissociate Atlanta with the South; it's as though the sprawling metropolis were an accident of geography and nothing more. Southerners, like Talmudic scholars, often argue about which areas below the Mason-Dixon Line are truly a part of Dixie. What side did they fight for in the Civil War? Kentucky, Maryland and West Virginia wouldn't qualify. How many Yankees have taken over the area? Vast parts of Florida and Virginia, therefore, lose out. Even New Orleans is considered dubious, for being too freewheeling—too *French*.

## SAVANNAH, GEORGIA



Self-appointed scholars of the region probably all agree that **Savannah** is integral to the Southland holy writ. Known for its hospitality and charm, this port city lies on the Intracoastal Waterway and is graced with

miles of stately homes. Savannah has a rich antebellum history, but for over a decade, it has been best known as the site of the infamous '81 murder recounted in the best-seller-turned-film *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* (1997).

A primer on the Southern penchant for gothic behavior, *Midnight* still lures visitors to Savannah. And it's possible to see the many of the locations featured in the movie, such as **Club One** (where Lady Chablis occasionally performs) and the **Mercer House**, site of the killing, on Monterey Square. (Incidentally, the house was also in the 1989 movie, *Glory*.) Nearby you'll find **Bonaventure Cemetery**—that's where Miss Minerva (Irma P. Hall) uttered her incantations.





Savannah's historic district is made up of 21 squares that vary in size and personality. Some are formal, with fountains and monuments, others are so small they're basically playgrounds. (Three additional squares were lost during the 1950s and '60s and may eventually be restored.) In **Chippewa Square**, Tom Hanks sat on a bench for 1994's *Forrest Gump* and ate his box of chocolates. That bench was a prop, but it can be visited at the **Savannah History Museum**, where it's on permanent display.

## SOUTH CAROLINA

**Charleston**, also an antebellum jewel, is in many ways a rival to Savannah. But the South Carolina city wins the competition when it comes to real-world history. Off the tip of its peninsula, at a place called the Battery, troops fired upon Fort Sumter and started the Civil War. Located at the junction of the Ashley and Cooper Rivers, Charleston—perhaps the most aristocratic city of the South—has a sprawling historic district packed with colonial homes. In *Gone With the Wind*, it's the hometown of Rhett Butler (“He’s from Charleston. He has the most terrible reputation”) and the place where Rhett returned after abandoning Scarlett (“I’m going back to Charleston, back where I belong”).

**The College of Charleston**, founded in 1770, is a frequent choice for moviemakers. Located downtown, its campus flows seamlessly into the surrounding city. In fact, many of the college’s administrative buildings are former homes. This downtown locale—peppered with antebellum mansions



and on nearby **King Street**, charming shops—provided a backdrop for the colonial thriller *The Patriot* (2000), the Civil War drama *Cold Mountain* (2003) and the contemporary romance *The Notebook* (2004).

Additional scenes in *The Notebook* were filmed at **Boone Hall Plantation**, just outside the city. The estate is one of several plantations in the Charleston area that can be visited by the public, and it’s easy to imagine that it was the inspiration for **Twelve Oaks**, the home of *Gone With the Wind*’s gentleman waffler, Ashley Wilkes. The ancient trees at Twelve Oaks were artifice and special effects, but Boone

▲ *The Notebook*, 2004. photo: ©New Line/Everett Collection

◀ **King Street, Charleston** photo: ©Simply Living

[next page] **Chattooga River** photo: ©L Barnwell



Hall has a genuine **Avenue of Oaks**, a three-quarter-mile-long row of trees approaching the plantation house. While there, be sure to visit the slave quarters—occupied by sharecroppers into the twentieth century—for a vantage point of the Southern past that is decidedly at odds with romantic puffery.

Charleston is the capital of the South Carolina Lowcountry—an often-marshy coastal spot seen in *The Prince of Tides* (1991) and *The Big Chill* (1983). The Low country includes unspoiled **Edisto Island**, a cinematic locale featuring a peaceful beach dotted with seashells, some of the state’s tallest palmetto trees, and a maritime live oak forest known for its gnarled branches dripping with Spanish moss. Look for it in *Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls* (1995), *The Patriot*, and *The Notebook*.

The foothills of the Appalachian Mountains along the South Carolina and Georgia border are one of the South’s most famous locations. It’s where director John Boorman filmed 1972’s *Deliverance*. The **Chattooga**



**River**, where much of the drama takes place, is an official National Wild and Scenic River, with Sumter National Forest on the South Carolina banks and Chattahoochee National Forest on the Georgia side. The

Chattooga is a 50-mile stretch of wilderness and one of the southeast’s few remaining free-flowing streams. Once a little known body of water, it has attracted many attempting to navigate the same route traveled by *Deliverance*’s Burt Reynolds, Jon Voight and Ned Beatty. Large portions of the film were shot on the part of the river called at **Woodall Shoals**, located due west of a town called Walhalla. Much of the Chattooga is safe for canoeing, though the rapids at Woodall Shoals are very dangerous.

## MISSISSIPPI

Small-town life is intrinsic to Southern living: it’s the setting of the church supper, sweet-tea sipping and a slower pace. In the tiny towns of Dixie, the past isn’t as easily paved over. **Canton** has increasingly





become the quintessential small Southern town, thanks to appearances in *Thieves Like Us* (1974), *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *A Time to Kill* (1996), *My Dog Skip* (2000) and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000). The central square, built around a pristine 1827 Greek Revival courthouse, gives Canton a picture-perfect, Mayberry appeal. The city, in turn, preserves its cinematic heritage with its **film museums** at which sets have been preserved.

## NORTH CAROLINA

**Wilmington**, found on North Carolina's Cape Fear Coast, boasts a historic district (with neighborhoods ideal for strolling) that's one of the largest in U.S., according to the National Register of Historic Places. It also ranks third among American film-production sites, after Hollywood and New York City. A great many movies have been made around the city and on its soundstages and in the nearby **Wrightsville Beach** and **Carolina Beach**—from *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (2002) to *Nights in Rodanthe* (2008) and *The Secret Life of Bees* (2008). Even years after *Dawson's Creek* (1998–2003) left the air, the TV show continues to inspire a steady stream of visitors in search of spots where the series was filmed, many still standing and open to the public.

## NATCHITOCHEs, LOUISIANA

The portrayal of the typical Southerner has evolved from the early days of film through the present. In former times, white folks dithered among their ghosts and bric-a-brac while African Americans waited on them as humble servants. The prior spoke poetically of loss and degradation, often in long paragraphs. In the modern paradigm, roles for African Americans are still evolving—and with the rise of Tyler Perry and others, they will continue to. However, for the Southern white woman in particular, the change is obvious. She is now plain-speaking and less patient with elision and delicacy. She is no longer a wan Vivien Leigh, but a Sandra Bullock or Julia Roberts, fighting the pressure to be always polite.

Along with 1991's *Fried Green Tomatoes* ("You know what we need instead of this baloney? Assertiveness training for Southern women. But that's a contradiction in terms, isn't it?"), 1989's *Steel Magnolias* played a major part in this filmic sea change. Shot entirely in **Natchitoches** (pronounced NAK-uh-tush) and written by a local resident, *Steel Magnolias* is an anthem to the South and its women. Visitors can still find many of the locations used







in *Magnolias*, such as the **Cook-Taylor House** (now the Steel Magnolia Bed and Breakfast) where Drum and M'Lynn Eatenton (Tom Skerritt and Sally Field) lived and the **American Cemetery** where Shelby (Julia Roberts) was buried. The oldest permanent settlement within the borders of the Louisiana Purchase, the area is dotted with Creole plantation homes, and its entire 33-block downtown district is a designated National Historic Landmark. Natchitoches Parish is also where John Wayne and William Holden filmed *The Horse Soldiers*, in 1959

In some ways, film preserves the South and keeps its myths at the forefront of the American imagination—for both better and worse. It has romanticized the slave era but also demonized Jim Crow. It reminds Southerners of their history, and what sets them apart—even if that so-called history is propaganda or fiction. Many of its stock characters are also clichés—the pot-bellied and cruel police chief and toothless backwoods yahoo are but two examples. No doubt, the steel magnolia will soon join them in that netherworld of the forgotten, replaced by a new paradigm. Clichés, after all, are just tired ideas that have outlived their usefulness. It requires new characters and new movies shot in new locations because it is an ever-changing place under pressure to change even more. As Hollywood leaves the backlot and moves deeper into Dixie, one hopes it will help the South to continue to thrive in both myth and reality, and bring about even better South. s

Meakin Armstrong is fiction editor of *Guernica* ([guernicamag.com](http://guernicamag.com)) and a freelance writer working on his first novel. He is additionally, a contributor to the anthology, *New York Calling: From Blackout to Bloomberg* (Reaktion/University of Chicago Press). Among the awards and grants he received is a 2007 fiction scholarship to the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference.