

# On The Road

[Savannah, Georgia]

## Mapping Through History

In 2014, Michael Karpovage was visiting the historic Bonaventure Cemetery in Savannah, Georgia. He used a map supplied by the cemetery office and soon got lost. That frustration gave him an idea. *Stan Goldstein reports*

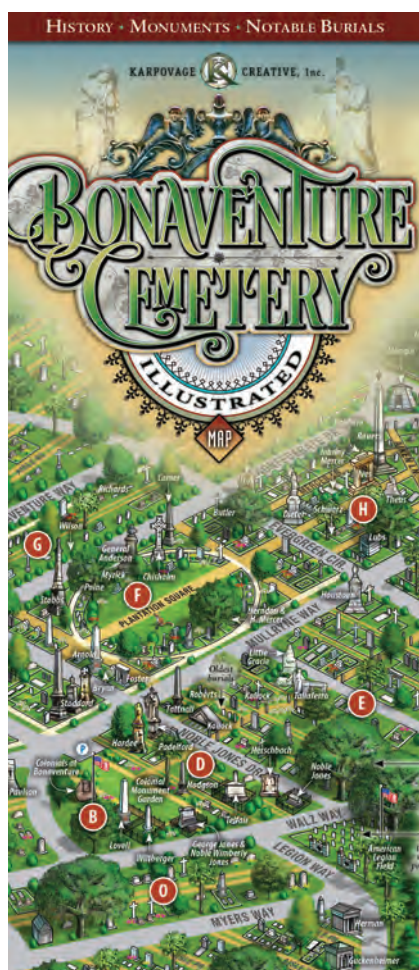
“The cemetery is worthy of a real good illustrated map,” said Karpovage, 51, of Roswell, Georgia. “It is such an historical attraction, and it’s worthy of something much better than the map the cemetery had. I had already put out two maps of Savannah and knew I could do this for the cemetery.”

Karpovage, an author, designer and cartographer, in 2012 put out an illustrated double-sided map of Savannah’s Historic District. The map features pictorial depictions of popular landmarks. It’s printed 4 inches by 9 inches folded and unfolds to an 18 inch by 27 inch poster. He followed that up in 2015 with a Haunted Savannah illustrated map.

“The Savannah map is highly detailed. It includes historical factoids, and I condensed them down to little blurbs. They are geared toward the tourists,” Karpovage said. “I then did the Haunted Savannah map; many tourists there take a ghost tour, so I knew there was a market.

“I just love visiting there. The historic district has so much to do and the riverfront,” he added. “The maps they give out are filled with advertisements, and I saw a marketing opportunity to do better.”

His Haunted Savannah map was filled with ghost stories, many associated with Bonaventure Cemetery, which was founded as Evergreen Cemetery in 1846. It features 44 haunted locations plus museums and attractions, top-ranked ghost tour companies, and information on free public transportation and docking regulations.



**The cover of the Bonaventure Cemetery Illustrated Map. (Photo courtesy of Michael Karpovage)**

Karpovage had already visited Bonaventure Cemetery four times by 2014. The map he had used that got him lost was in a brochure that sold for \$5 at the cemetery office. He approached the Bonaventure Historical Society with his idea of putting together a better map. The historical

society is responsible for the preservation and conservation of the cemetery.

### Making His Pitch

“I pitched to them in 2015 that I could improve so much on the map and put out something like I had done with my previous two maps,” he said. “I told them I would sell the maps to them at my wholesale price and they could use it as a fundraising tool.

“I had the Savannah maps under my belt and I could tout the success of that. The first map has sold more than 20,000 copies,” Karpovage added. “They could see the quality I would bring to a Bonaventure Cemetery map. My maps sell themselves because of the visual quality to them.”

Karpovage received permission from the historical society and the director of The City of Savannah Cemeteries Division to proceed.

“Lee Maltenfort, who was chairman of the Bonaventure Historical Society, championed my map proposal. Lee, who died in 2018, really backed me and helped me out quite a bit,” Karpovage said. “I gave the historical society final say on content, so everything is accurate. Some of the tourist guides I see make stuff up and that is so disrespectful to the families.”

In 2016, the Bonaventure Cemetery Illustrated Map was printed. It sells for \$7.95 with Karpovage keeping \$4 and the historical society \$3.95 for every map sold.

“The key is to keep it under \$10, that’s a tourist’s price. We have sold 14,000 of them so far,” Karpovage said.



**Michael Karpovage, left, with Lee Maltenfort, then-chairman of the Bonaventure Historical Society with the map in April 2016. Above: The Little Gracie Watson statue is the most visited grave at Bonaventure Cemetery, according to Karpovage. (Photos by Michael Karpovage)**

*The map's description reads: Our three-dimensional, birds-eye-view pictorial map gives you the big picture of beautiful Bonaventure Cemetery in Savannah, Georgia. Step inside a centuries-old art form of oblique angle mapping and find the hidden gems of Bonaventure's historical residents. View their luxurious funerary art, learn of their past accomplishments and experience the lush floral landscape that makes this charming garden cemetery such a popular tourist destination the world over.*

### **Notoriety from a Book**

The 103-acre Bonaventure Cemetery became an even bigger tourist attraction in 1994 when the cover of the best-selling book "Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil" featured a photo of the Bird Girl statue that was set up at a family's plot at the cemetery. The family renamed it "Little Wendy."

The nonfiction novel by John Berendt was on the New York Times Best Seller list for 216 weeks following its debut. The book follows the story of an antiques dealer on trial for the murder of a male prostitute in Savannah. It was turned into a 1997 movie produced by Clint Eastwood and starring John Cusack and Kevin Spacey.

The Bird Girl statue was also featured on the movie poster.

People began flocking to Bonaventure Cemetery to see the statue. Some began chipping off pieces at its base for souvenirs. "It got so popular and due to the concern about the amount of traffic at the gravesite, the family had the statue moved out of the cemetery," Karpovage said. "It's now at the Telfair Academy building, part of the Telfair Museums in Savannah's historic district."

The most popular grave at Bonaventure Cemetery is known as "Little Gracie" according to Karpovage.

"Gracie Watson was 6 years old when she died from pneumonia in 1889. She's known as Savannah's most beloved girl," Karpovage said. "Little Gracie was loved by Savannah's elite. Her parents owned a luxurious hotel and this little girl would run around there. Everyone loved her; the street vendors knew her and those who passed by the hotel. Thousands attended her funeral."

Gracie's father had sculptor John Walz carve a monument to honor his daughter. Using a photograph as a reference, Walz sculpted the monument that sits upon Little Gracie's gravesite. It became popular to leave presents for

Gracie, especially around Christmas. That custom still continues.

"She's so popular that they had to put a fence around her," Karpovage said. He points out on his map how "Gracie's name is written with acacia branches symbolizing the immortality of the soul."

### **More Than a Map**

In addition to pointing out all the famous sites at Bonaventure Cemetery, Karpovage's map has write-ups on funerary art and symbols, cemetery etiquette, the history of Bonaventure and the lost art of sculptures in cemeteries.

"I always wondered what the different symbols on graves meant. I did a lot of research and put together my own glossary of funerary art and symbols and that's on the map," Karpovage said. "The symbolic carvings act as visual obituaries to the dead."

He explains the background on close to three-dozen symbols, including a butterfly – "a symbol for metamorphosis, and in time of mourning a butterfly carved onto a gravestone signifies rebirth" and a lion – "symbolizes majesty, strength, courage, honesty and power."

Karpovage also explains the