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# Georgia Historical Society, Georgia Southern University recognize Armstrong State University with historical marker on Savannah campus

December 17, 2019



*(L-R) Otis Johnson, W. Todd Groce, Chairman Don Waters and President Kyle Marrero unveil the Armstrong State University historical marker.*

In recognition of Armstrong State University's contributions to the city of Savannah, its students and its legacy in Georgia Southern University's history, the Georgia Historical Society and Georgia Southern dedicated a new historical marker today. The historical marker, located on Georgia Southern's Armstrong campus in the quad behind Burnett Hall, commemorates Armstrong State University's history from its beginning as a two-year college through its consolidation with Georgia Southern University.

W. Todd Groce, Ph.D., president and CEO of the Georgia Historical Society, noted that the marker program, which now includes Armstrong State University, is an important tool for furthering an understanding of Georgia history and promoting tourism in the state.

"I want to congratulate Georgia Southern on receiving this marker today about Armstrong and its history, which played such a crucial role in the development of our city during the 20th and into the 21st century," said Groce. "It is an important story that needs to be told. As Armstrong now goes forward in its next chapter under its new name and its association with Georgia Southern University, this is an important part of continuing to understand who we are as a city, as a state, as a nation, as a university, and as a university community."

The marker reads:

*Armstrong State University*

*Armstrong Junior College was founded in 1935 by Savannah Mayor Thomas Gamble as a two-year college. It held classes in the donated former home of businessman George Armstrong, adjacent to Forsyth Park. In 1959, through the leadership of President Foreman Hawes and alumnus Frank Cheatham, Armstrong became part of the University System of Georgia. To accommodate Armstrong's growth, in 1962 the Mills B. Lane Foundation and Donald Livingston donated 250 acres on Savannah's southside for a new campus that opened in 1966. In 1963 future Savannah Mayor Otis Johnson became the first African American to attend Armstrong, graduating the next year with an associates degree as the College received four-year status from the Board of Regents. In 1996 the college attained university status. The Regents consolidated Armstrong and Georgia Southern University in 2017 to better serve the needs of students in southeast Georgia.*

*Erected by the Georgia Historical Society, Waters Foundation, Inc., and Georgia Southern University Foundation, Inc.*



*President Kyle Marrero*

Georgia Southern University President Kyle Marrero thanked fellow event speaker Don Waters, who serves on the Board of Regents as chairman and on the Georgia Historical Society Board of Curators, and the Waters Foundation, Inc. for the leadership and philanthropic support that made the marker possible.

Marrero, praising the dedicated community leaders, faculty, staff, alumni and students who make the Armstrong Campus the unique place that it is today, promised that Georgia Southern will continue to elevate all that makes the campus distinct while ensuring it continues to bolster the economic impact of the region and provide substantial opportunities for students.

“This is an important marker for us today as we enliven and bring forward our history, the legacy of Armstrong and what it is today as a part of Georgia Southern,” stated Marrero. “We will enhance it together as two very distinctive campuses under one umbrella, Georgia Southern University. We will grow together to not only impact ourselves, but others.”

Armstrong State University alumnus Otis Johnson, Ph.D., recognized for his perseverance and dedication to education, was the first African American student to attend Armstrong College.



*Johnson (left) greets guests at the event.*

Johnson, former mayor of Savannah and scholar-in-residence at Savannah State University, reflected that the time was right for him to attend Armstrong College the same year other students desegregated the public school system in Savannah. He acknowledged the staff and faculty who supported him along the way and changed the trajectory of his career, helping him make the best of his American dream.

“When you look at the fact that I was one, and now look at the number of African Americans, Hispanics and others on these two campuses now, I am very happy to be able to say that I was a part of changing the way things were,” said Johnson.

“I want to thank Armstrong for what they did in providing me that opportunity that changed my life,” he continued. “I want to also thank Armstrong for the way they have received me over the years. Armstrong, over the years, has affected me and treated me with dignity and I am eternally grateful for that.”

The Georgia Historical Society erected the Armstrong State University historical marker with support from the Waters Foundation, Inc. and Georgia Southern University Foundation, Inc.

#### ABOUT GEORGIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Georgia Historical Society (GHS) is the premier independent statewide institution responsible for collecting,

examining, and teaching Georgia history. GHS houses the oldest and most distinguished collection of materials related exclusively to Georgia history in the nation. To learn more visit [georgiahistory.com](http://georgiahistory.com).

#### ABOUT GEORGIA SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY

Georgia Southern University, a public Carnegie Doctoral/R2 institution founded in 1906, offers 141 degree programs serving more than 26,000 students through nine colleges on three campuses in Statesboro, Savannah, Hinesville and online instruction. A leader in higher education in southeast Georgia, the University provides a diverse student population with expert faculty, world-class scholarship and hands-on learning opportunities. Georgia Southern creates lifelong learners who serve as responsible scholars, leaders and stewards in their communities. Visit [GeorgiaSouthern.edu](http://GeorgiaSouthern.edu).