

# The Journal

## Dahlonega: The 'Hills of Gold' in Georgia

[Sunday Living](#)

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The 14-foot long, 8-foot high diving bell constructed especially for gold mining in Dahlonega, is a revered monument after spending more than a century lost and forgotten in the Chestatee River.

DAHLONEGA, Ga. — Dahlonega is a Cherokee word for gold, which the Indians began mining in the north Georgia mountains in the 1540s.

The Spanish joined in mining the precious metal two hundred years later. But it took a Georgian deer hunter to begin America's first gold rush when he happened on gold rocks in 1828. A decade later so much gold was taken from the area that one of the first three federal branch mints was located in Dahlonega. The purity of Dahlonega gold was legendary, among the highest in the world.

Tragedy is also part of the gold rush story. The Cherokee were ultimately pushed off their land, which was turned into 35,000 gold lots. The tribes were forcibly relocated west in 1838 with thousands of Cherokee dying along the Trail of Tears.

One thing is for certain: all the best Dahlonega stories, even today, come from gold.

Four years ago, local citizens unveiled a peerless oddity enshrined in a pavilion just a block off the historic square. The world's oldest remaining diving bell, designed to mine gold, had been lost in the Chestatee River when the barge on which it was mounted sank under mysterious circumstances less than a year after its launch in 1875. Pulled from its watery grave more than a century later, it took another couple decades and some restoration before it was recognized as a one-of-kind artifact and turned into a downtown attraction.



Outlaw Jerky and Trail Grub, which also sells organic pet food, may be the most distinctive shop in a town that has the Gold Shop, an impressive General Store and Paul Thomas Chocolates called by the Food Network “the best sweet shop in Georgia.”

No matter how alluring the history of a place is, travelers want to know what’s happening now. The answer in Dahlonega? Lots is happening.

The Public Square, marked out as such when the town was formed during the gold rush, captures the heart of anyone with even the slightest romantic urge especially in December and January when all the two-story buildings on the Square are extravagantly lit. Streets of the square surround the oldest courthouse in Georgia home to the Gold Museum since 1965. More than 40 distinctive shops, galleries, eateries, wine tasting rooms and lodging places fill up the four blocks around the museum turning a 10-minute stroll into a daylong adventure.

It took just a few steps for us to eat, sleep and shop on our visit.

A short walk off the square is North Georgia University, still accredited as a military college with a nod to its late 19th century history. It provides one of the most distinctive auditory memories of any stay, with reveille played daily at sunrise and taps at dusk, the sound wafting through the town and setting the rhythm for the day.

With dozens of restaurants from which to choose, no one starves in Dahlonega. We chose traditional Southern comfort food for lunch at Smokin' Gold BBQ. The meat sandwiches were substantial, the three special sauces tasty and the side of corn casserole so delicious I wanted to send everything else back and simply eat the whole baking pan of it. You know a place is serious about eating when they place a roll of paper towels sitting upright on a stainless steel holder on each table.



Photos by Jeanne Mozier Le Vigne Restaurant offers fine dining overlooking some of the Montaluce Wineries 11.5 acres of vines set on a 400-acre, Tuscan-themed mountain estate. There are daily tastings.

That evening we had a meal less traditional for the Georgia mountains. Back Porch Oyster Bar has a fanatic commitment to serving fresh seafood to visitors not expecting it, one reason for their back-to-back wins of Wine Spectator's prestigious award. They fly their raw material in daily, including white tuna from Hawaii for their ceviche. Although we feasted on crab cakes and crab dip and crab soup, it was the Thai Chili Calamari that had us fighting over the last scrap. We had no hunger left to do more than wonder about the list of seafood dinners each "*with secret sauce.*"

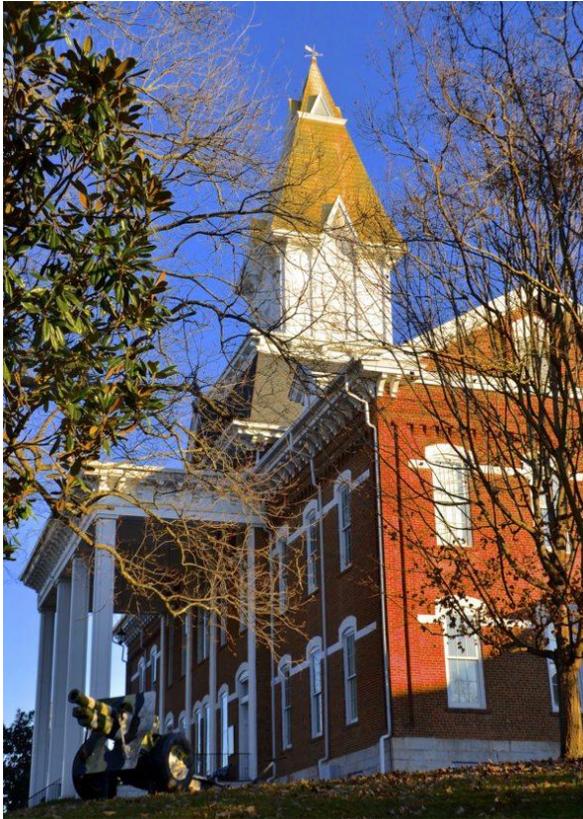
For traditional family-style dining that has been a magnet for more than 50 years, choose Smith House Inn, which comes with a legend that proved true. The rumored gold mine underneath the structure was discovered during renovation to be fact. Smith House is also a charming historic hotel.

Although exploring town is almost a full-time occupation, there are other wonders to see and experience. More than 60 acres are planted in vines among a collection of five wineries. The varied vintages have garnered so many awards in the past 20 years that the Dahlonega Plateau is on track for being rated a

wine region on a par with Sonoma and Napa. Each of the wineries has tastings and there are four additional tasting rooms downtown. If you want to drink like a knowledgeable local, try the merlot.

Outdoors is as popular as the quaint town. The Appalachian Trail begins nearby and there are more than 20 other mountain hiking trails. Two rivers provide both white and flat water. Nearly two dozen trout streams are open year-round.

One of the most appealing outdoor attractions is more than 30 waterfalls including Amicalola Falls. We took the short walkway to the falls, which is easy on the feet, having been made from recycled shredded tires.



Price Hall was built on the foundation of the U.S. Mint in Dahlonega. Its tower peak is leafed in local gold, as is the Capitol dome in nearby Atlanta.

Among the nearly 20 special events and festivals staged in the Dahlonega area is the famed Six Gap Century Bicycle Ride that draws 2,400 riders from around the world annually. Other festivals range from Bear on the Square in April to Gold Rush Days in October. Appalachian Jam Saturdays on the square April through October are the centerpiece of a lively local music scene.

Travelers with children mark two wildlife centers as must-do activities. Chestatee Wildlife Zoo is open daily. Exotic and native species including white Siberian tigers, leopards, alligators and water buffalo are housed on a 25-acre park with natural pathways. Private encounters can be arranged. The North Georgia Zoo and Farm has a large variety of miniature and rare breed farm animals. It offers wildlife walks and camel encounters.

Let's come back to gold and its presence today. Once, there were 250 working deep mines including Consolidated, the biggest gold plant east of the Mississippi with its 500-foot tunnel. Today there are only two, Consolidated and Crisson, and both are open for tours as well as gold and gemstone panning. And yes, Mark Twain's famous line: there's gold in them thar hills, came from his hearing about the Dahlonega gold rush.

Dahlonega is about 70 miles northeast of Atlanta on U.S. 19, making it an ideal stop for folks traveling back and forth to Florida. Contact [www.dahlonega.org](http://www.dahlonega.org) for more information.