

Charleston cedes 'Most Mannerly' title to Savannah

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SAVANNAH, Ga. — They've been rival Southern cities for 276 years, but Savannah and Charleston aren't going to risk their reputations by fighting over which is "America's Most Mannerly City."

After a 12-year reign, Charleston officials have agreed with a survey's organizer that it has held the "Most Mannerly" title long enough, opting to cede it to its Colonial-era sister city on the Georgia coast.

"We've kind of reached the pinnacle," said Cindy Grosso, who owns the Charleston School of Protocol and Etiquette and assumed responsibility in 2007 for tabulating votes in the 32-year-old survey. "I just thought it's time to share the award."

Grosso planned to present the best-mannered city award Thursday to Savannah Mayor Otis Johnson, who applauded Charleston's graciousness. Charleston Mayor Joe Riley earlier this year accepted a separate award from Grosso for his city's long-standing recognition for courtesy.

While the two Southern cities now compete for tourism dollars and business at their bustling seaports, their rivalry dates to shortly after the founding of Georgia's oldest city in 1733. A number of 18th-century settlers left Savannah for Charleston (then Charles Town) in protest over Georgia's short-lived prohibition against owning slaves.

Comedian Stephen Colbert, who grew up in Charleston, has cracked jokes at Savannah's

expense. On Comedy Central's "The Colbert Report," he once referred to "Savannah, the cradle of Southern civility, after Charleston."

For more than a decade, voters choosing the best-mannered city have agreed. Grosso said Charleston finished first in the latest poll with about 25 percent of roughly 1,700 votes — most cast via a link on her Web site. Savannah was the runner-up with 5 percent in the unscientific survey.

Johnson, the mayor since 2004, said the recognition is well-deserved by Savannah, which has long referred to itself as the Hostess City of the South.

"This is another acknowledgment that we have branded ourselves correctly," Johnson said. "I hope we earn it outright next year."

Riley, Charleston's mayor since 1976, said his city's decision to give Savannah a share of the spotlight was simply "the well-mannered thing to do." Still, he hopes visitors planning a trip to the region would consider Charleston first.

"Savannah's a wonderfully hospitable and gracious city," Riley said. "We would like you to stop by here first, that would be good. But if they've got time, we sure don't want them to miss Savannah."

The "Most Mannerly City" survey was started in 1977 by etiquette expert Marjabelle Young Stewart, who wrote more than 20 books on proper manners and tutored the daughters of Presidents Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon in civility.