THE ORGANIZED COMMUNITY: VISIONS OF THE NEW SOUTH IN BLACK ATLANTA, 1880-1922

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Abstract

At the turn of the 20th century, the city of Atlanta flaunted its status as capital of the New South – filled with civic pride, focused on commerce, and devoid of racial conflict. W.E.B. Du Bois commented that the nation “talked of [Atlanta’s] striving,” an image effectively projected by the city’s elite Black and white communities. For all of its New South aspirations, however, inequality along lines of race, class, gender, geography, and access to the Atlanta’s many resources defined daily life. In September 1906, a violent massacre – which left dozens of Black Atlantans dead at the hands of a white mob – tarnished Atlanta’s New South veneer and made clear the ways in which competing visions of a “New South city” were playing out in Atlanta’s streets, saloons, and neighborhoods. This thesis focuses on these many visions, primarily from the perspective of diverse community organizers, social workers, educators, and preachers who articulated their worldviews and put them into action. Using personal papers, maps, city ordinances, conference proceedings, and newspaper archives, this thesis tells the story of how Black Atlantans made claims upon, and asserted a right to, a rapidly changing Atlanta from 1880 to 1922.
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Preface

Any work of history is political. In researching and writing this thesis, I made specific choices about the stories I would tell and how I told them. I paid careful attention to the biases inherent in some sources to decide what was probably true and what was racist fear-mongering, or an intentional misrepresentation. I also discussed, as much as possible, the lives of working-class and poor people, who are often marginalized in historical scholarship. I capitalize the “B” in Black in accordance with the reasons stated in the following footnote – in short, to indicate that I’m talking about a specific group of people and their history.\(^1\) Finally, I use the term “slum” at different points to describe low-income, disinvested neighborhoods as they would have been described at the time. I want to make clear that I do not use “slum” in a pejorative manner, and I make every attempt to emphasize the rich vitality of these neighborhoods.

Finally, I recognize and acknowledge the immense privilege and responsibility I have in writing a story predominantly about Black people in Atlanta. To that end, I made sure that the secondary literature I consulted reflected the analysis of Black writers, thinkers, and historians. I chose primary sources written by and for Black Atlantans at the time. I treated my subject matter carefully, and avoided making broad claims absent of nuance or critical thought. I am also using this space to urge you, reader, to support Black-led organizations addressing urban inequality and dismantling white supremacy today. I named a few of these organizations in the Acknowledgements section.

Introduction

I am inclined to use the words of the Apostle Paul: ‘For we have no continued city, but seek one to come’. . . the Black Side of this city has surmounted obstacles, leaped over impediments, gone ahead, purchased the soil, erected houses of business and reared dwellings. . . and . . . if given a white man’s chance and let alone, will accomplish what any other race has accomplished or can accomplish.

- The Reverend E. R. Carter, *The Black Side*, 1894

In 1894, Edward Randolph Carter was the relatively young pastor of Friendship Baptist Church, the city’s second-oldest Black congregation headquartered in Atlanta’s western section, at the corner of Haynes and Mitchell Street. A graduate of Atlanta Baptist Seminary, later known as Morehouse College, Carter followed the wildly successful tenure of lay minister Frank Quarles. Quarles, born enslaved, had partnered with the American Missionary Association and the activist educator Edmund Asa Ware to transform the congregation of Friendship Baptist Church from a boxcar of thirty congregants in 1859 to a towering brick building for over fifteen hundred by the 1870s. Friendship Baptist served as the foundation for some of Black Atlanta’s most prominent and influential institutions – Atlanta University, Spelman College, Wheat Street Baptist Church, and Carter’s own alma mater, to name a few.

From his powerful perch, rooted in the legendary origins of Black Atlanta, Carter penned *The Black Side* – in part a rebuke to the arguments put forth by white supremacists like Mississippi governor James K. Vardaman, which asserted that the project of emancipation and freedom had

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failed. In his preface, Carter writes, “Yet we may, as we go, on speak of what we have done for our own encouragement and inspiration of those who are to follow in our footprints.”7 *The Black Side*, in a series of vignettes, introduced readers to the prolific work done by individuals, institutions, and social groups in Atlanta, an attempt to recover a usable past for future generations — a past not solely tied to histories of slavery, dispossession, and violence, but rather a story of Black Atlantans’ resilience despite overwhelming barriers.

*The Black Side* was not only a product of Carter’s hope for the city to come, but a reflection of Atlanta’s emerging prominence in the South and in the nation among all Americans. A year after the book’s publication, Atlanta hosted the Cotton States and International Exposition, attracting visitors from all over the country and the world to boast of the South’s industrial progress since the Civil War. The 1895 Exposition displayed the first “Negro Exhibit,” a testament to the “negro’s upward tendency during thirty years of freedom,” a platform to showcase the progress written about in *The Black Side*.8 Booker T. Washington, educator and founder of the Tuskegee Institute, gave his famous “Atlanta Compromise” speech at the Exposition as well, articulating an argument for Black uplift through commerce and business while renouncing more militant demands for political rights and social equality.9 Though *The Black Side* was a sincere attempt to write an honest history where none existed before, its author also hoped to boost the city’s reputation by emphasizing its unmatched prosperity, particularly among African Americans — motivations it shared with the city’s boosters and business elite who organized the 1895 Exposition.

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The Cotton States and International Exposition followed a series of similar events held across the nation in the late 19th century, but they were especially significant in Southern cities like Nashville and Atlanta. Both cities were burgeoning Southern metropolises competing for status and business in the region. Yet, when the International Cotton Exposition came to Atlanta in 1881, Georgia’s capital won the opportunity to define what came to be called the “New South” in the lingering aftermath of the Civil War.

If there was any single turning point in postwar Atlanta’s history, any element that was crucial in galvanizing the city’s business leadership, it was the rush of confidence that came with the successful staging of the 1881 exposition. More than any other event, the exposition launched the New South movement, both as a publicity crusade and as a campaign for economic development, and it placed Atlanta at the vanguard of that movement.10

Atlanta’s leading figures – mostly white businessmen – vigorously spread the gospel of the New South. No person had greater impact than Henry Grady, eventual editor of the Atlanta Constitution. His 1874 editorial in the Atlanta Daily Herald was among the first to argue for the South to embrace rapid industrialization. In an 1886 speech given in New York City, Grady began with “There was a South of slavery and secession—that South is dead,” and continued later, “The Old South rested everything on slavery and agriculture, unconscious that these could neither give nor maintain healthy growth. The New South presents a perfect democracy…and a diversified industry that meets the complex needs of this complex age.” Of the status of Black Southerners, Grady asserted that the New South’s “very existence” depended on the “close and cordial” relations between the two groups.11 Booker T. Washington agreed: “[Racial cooperation], coupled with our material prosperity, will bring into our beloved South a new heaven and a new earth.”12

12 Washington, “Atlanta Compromise.”
The New South became short-hand for Southern aspiration, one of the few areas where the region’s elites found common cause. Atlanta, Georgia was its flagship — wealthy, rapidly growing, and best positioned to attract Northern capital for raw material processing and manufacturing, made possible by multiple railroad lines crossing through the city. Nonetheless, the New South also reflected something far more complex in the collective Southern psyche, and lent itself to numerous, sometimes contradictory interpretations. In historian C. Vann Woodward’s authoritative account *Origins of the New South*, he writes:

> From the beginning [the New South] had the color of a slogan, a rallying cry. It vaguely set apart those whose faith lay in the future from those whose heart was with the past. It suggested moods ranging from forthright recantation to an affable and uncritical optimism. It was invariably ladened with a hopeful nationalism suggesting that the lately disaffected South was at last one in faith with the country—or would be as soon as a few more bonds were sold, another appropriation was passed, the depression was ended, or the new railroad was completed…War and Reconstruction, while removing some of the South’s peculiarities, merely aggravated others and gave rise to new ones.¹³

Woodward’s framework is instructive, guiding us to reject any notion of a monolithic South at the twilight of the 19th century. The process of defining the in-progress New South was contingent and contested, often with violence, and fought within white and Black communities as much as between them. The New South’s story goes far deeper than the consensus forged by the likes of Grady and Washington, and no place better epitomizes the region’s postwar challenges than Atlanta’s ever-changing city-scape at the turn of the 20th century.

In reality, despite the lofty rhetoric of the city’s boosters, Atlanta was a starkly unequal city. For all of its prosperity, the vast majority of the city’s Black residents (and a sizable number of its working-class white communities) struggled to find decent housing in healthy environments, adequate healthcare, and opportunities for economic security. Black Atlantans frequently dealt

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with unemployment, violent policing and imprisonment, and battles over their precarious rights to vote, serve on juries, and have any say in municipal policy. They also lived in a state where, between 1890 and 1900, white mobs lynched on average one person per month, including the murder of a Black teenager on Atlanta’s outskirts in 1889. Though the “Gate City” represented the “junction of everything finest and most foul” about the New South, Black residents nevertheless found ways to survive, rebel, build, work, relax, and imagine something different for themselves and their families.

Therefore, we cannot fully understand early 20th century Atlanta, and the ideological project of the New South, without taking seriously the diverse ways in which Black residents constructed their own alternative visions of the city. In turn, to make sense of these visions, we must recognize that claims made upon or about Atlanta are inherently spatial, and infused with a dynamic, evolving, and socially-constructed sense of place. That is, where Black Atlantans found themselves in the city, and how they both made meaning of and behaved in those locations, significantly informed how they shaped the built environment, established institutions, contested issues, navigated daily life, and imagined new futures. Making claims upon particular spaces, however, meant that the city’s geography became a battleground not only between white and Black Atlanta, but within Black communities themselves – struggles about power inevitably shaped by gender, race, class, and status. In other words, Atlanta’s urban geography foregrounds how Black residents asserted a right to their city, developed community, and attempted to make real the city to come.

My analysis is shaped by a diverse set of historians and thinkers; its foundation consists of Southern and Atlanta-specific histories. In particular, I follow more revisionist approaches to

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Southern history, a field which exploded in the mid-20th century with the rise of the modern Civil Rights Movement and served to discredit and reject racist myths about Reconstruction and late 19th century America. These histories were also attempts to make sense of an unprecedented upheaval in Southern race relations, which sparked fascination with the origins and meanings of what came to be named the New South.

C. Vann Woodward’s scholarship is a paradigmatic example of this literature, which invited more critical investigations of the South within American history. He departed significantly from the historians who made up the Dunning School and their adoption of Lost Cause mythology. The Dunning School, based at Columbia University and extremely influential in the first half of the 20th century, contrived conservative and white supremacist justifications for the failure of Reconstruction and the subjugation of Black Americans via Jim Crow. Woodward, on the other hand, was born and raised in Arkansas and a student in Atlanta during the early 1930s, later becoming a professor at Johns Hopkins and Yale. He eventually translated his Southern upbringing and liberal support for African American civil rights into a re-writing of the South’s postwar history.

Woodward took seriously unsettled questions about the New South in an attempt to chart its development and relevance. His other famous work, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* adopted a similar approach to *Origins*. They each upended the notion that the South’s political economy, which rested upon segregation and Jim Crow, was an inevitable development. According to

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Bertram Wyatt-Brown, “In the years following World War II almost singlehandedly Woodward demonstrated the region’s complexity and its record of historical discontinuity.”¹⁷

Some of the scholarship following in Woodward’s wake narrowly focused on the exploits and eccentricities of the region’s elite white businessman as a way to explain postwar Southern history. Don Doyle’s book, *New Men, New Cities, New South*, made the argument that rags-to-riches business tycoons like Atlanta’s George Adair, Asa Candler, and Hannibal Kimball, and newspaper boosters like Henry Grady, defined and set the course for the New South which privileged the development of Southern cities.¹⁸ In this period, Franklin Garrett, the first and only official historian of Atlanta, wrote multiple lengthy volumes under the title *Atlanta and its Environs*. He covered the year-by-year happenings in the city and again emphasized the role of powerful businessmen in building modern Atlanta.¹⁹

Clarence Bacote, a Black scholar and activist at Atlanta University, instead excavated histories of the South not corrupted by Confederate nostalgia. Bacote, born in 1906, specialized in Reconstruction-era history and emphasized Black Georgians’ political and historical education. His writings covered a variety of Atlanta figures and institutions, including a book on Atlanta University, journal articles on Black politics in Atlanta, and the story of William Finch, Atlanta’s first Black city councilperson.²⁰ Bacote and his contemporary Charles Crowe, a historian at the University of Georgia, also narrated the story of disenfranchisement in Georgia as a function of

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¹⁸ Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South*.


prohibition campaigns seeking the “purification” of Atlanta’s politics. Finally, Bacote worked alongside scholars like Eugene Watts, Ronald Bayor, and Howard Rabinowitz who contributed important insights into Atlanta’s politics, residential distribution, and geography.²¹

John Dittmer, who published *Black Georgia in the Progressive Era* in 1977, drew from Bacote’s legacy, devoting more study to the actual experiences of Black people. Dittmer’s history of Black Georgia was “the struggle of men and women to develop their own institutions, improve their economic conditions, educate their children, gain political rights, and maintain a sense of dignity” during the “nadir of Afro-American history.”²² Crucially, Dittmer highlights the unequal fruits of the American Progressive era, namely in the unequal access to new urban amenities and resources, and highlights the ways in which social reformers took on these issues themselves.

Jay Winston Driskell’s *Schooling Jim Crow* complements Dittmer by arguing that this period is also the root of Black protest politics, which gradually became less tied to a politics of respectability and interracial cooperation, and more concerned with building grassroots power. Because we cover a similar set of events and figures, Driskell’s work is essential to my thesis – though I seek to build upon his and Dittmer’s conclusions by emphasizing the importance of spatial considerations in Progressive Era Atlanta.²³

My arguments in this thesis are also considerably influenced by scholarship on working-class and poor people, women, and socio-cultural formations of community, space, and gender. Allison Dorsey’s *To Build Our Lives Together* charts Black community formation in Atlanta from 1875 to

the eve of the 1906 race massacre, detailing the intricacies of robust community institutions and relationships which were targeted by white Atlanta in ways both violent and subtle. Less focused on political and legal events, Dorsey maps various social institutions like churches, fraternal organizations, clubs, and grassroots movements for better education.24 One of Dorsey’s essential contributions is the notion that status, a performance of certain behaviors, rather than class based on income or wealth, was a more meaningful way to describe divides within Black Atlanta. An heir, in some ways, to the Reverend E. R. Carter, Dorsey’s scholarship is crucial to my first chapter on aspirations and challenges of Black life in Atlanta prior to 1906.

My knowledge of working-class life in Atlanta primarily comes from Tera Hunter’s To ‘Joy My Freedom, which chronicles Southern Black women’s daily lives and community organizing prowess, most notably during the 1881 Atlanta washerwomen’s strike. Tracing Black women’s history from the Civil War to the Great Migration, Hunter uncovers the indispensable labor of laundresses, cooks, domestic servants, peddlers and more in sustaining their communities and propping up the indulgent lives of the city’s white elite.

To ‘Joy My Freedom made clear that Black women, in a post-Civil War Atlanta, were determined to make freedom mean something more than endless labor; rather, freedom was an opportunity for collective and individual pleasure, relaxation, and self-determination. In addition, I place Hunter’s framework alongside Robin Kelley’s. Kelley defined a dissident political culture hidden in daily acts of resistance and survival by millions of Black working-class people across time, a group of people monolithic only in that their survival depends on work or some sort of income.25 Kelly and Hunter challenged me to meaningfully assess the actions of wage-earning

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24 Dorsey, To Build Our Lives Together.
Black residents who didn’t conform to the Victorian moral code of the city’s elites, but who nonetheless made up the bulk of Black Atlanta and asserted their own political and social claims upon the city’s geography.

Cities tend to be places where socialized gender roles are challenged and reshaped, and Atlanta is no exception. Men, regardless of race, mediated their anxieties about urbanization and social disorder through working-class women, whereas these same women found new ways to make use of cities to forge independent identities. According to Georgina Hickey, working women “functioned as the ideological territory for the contested work of city building. [They] represented both the city’s best hope and the greatest threat to its future” – in large part because working women sought autonomy rather than rigid social norms imposed by urban elites regardless of gender.26

Black working women in particular were responding to what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, in her seminal work on Black Baptist women, called a politics of respectability. The politics of respectability “emphasized reform of individual behavior and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform of the entire structural system of American race relations,” a vehicle by which Black elites – but middle-class clubwomen in particular – believed they could “lift up” working class and poor people. Black Southern women specifically viewed themselves as role models, as responsible for advancing the entire community, and this motivation served as a major force behind the development of homegrown Atlanta institutions like the Neighborhood Union and the Gate City Free Kindergarten Association. Throughout the period covered in this thesis, Black and white elites repeatedly used respectability rhetoric with varying degrees of intensity in

an attempt to dictate the behavior of working women and poorer neighborhoods in general. To that end, the role of gender and class in Atlanta’s urban development is at the forefront of this thesis.27

Equally important, I am indebted to the scholars who gave me the vocabulary to talk about the politics of defining places within space and time. Doreen Massey considers place to be a socially meaningful if unstable concept, and a method by which the patriarchal gaze attempts to fix women “in their place” – all to say that place and space can be wielded either for a politics of liberation or oppression. Sarah Deutsch vividly illustrates these concepts in her turn-of-the-century case study of working women in Boston who manipulated and shaped urban space so as to create an alternative feminist geography of the city. More locally, LeeAnn Lands applied a spatial lens to Atlanta’s race and housing landscapes in charting the emergence of a “park-neighborhood aesthetic” in white Atlanta alongside the deterioration and spatial confinement of poor Black neighborhoods. Taken together, these scholars underpin the major intervention of my thesis, which asserts the primacy of geography and place in understanding Black Atlanta and the New South.28

My approach builds on the work of these scholars and makes a few additional interventions. First, this thesis minimizes, but does not eliminate, the role of white male elites and traditional power-brokers who have already received ample coverage in historical annals. Next, I connect the racial violence of the 1890s and early 1900s, which had national reverberations, to the hardening of segregation and resource deprivation in Progressive Era Atlanta, making social welfare projects and political organizing increasingly necessary. This is a foundational moment in Atlanta’s history:

the political alliances formed after the 1906 massacre and the formation of racialized urban planning determining who lived where in the 1920s would have serious consequences for Atlanta’s future growth. Black residents were both dissidents and participants, and thus an intimate understanding of the city at the turn of the century is vital.

Moreover, I contribute to the scholarly discourse on Atlanta and the South by privileging the city and its spatial dimensions. Parsing through Black residents’ molding of Atlanta, both in its built environment and its municipal politics, makes way for new understandings of community development. I pay attention to the role of space, gender, and class in late 19th century discussions on racial inequality; internal dissent about progress, prosperity, and the meaning of freedom within Black Atlanta; and how territorial fights between white and Black people led to violence and residential segregation within the New South’s flagship city.

The relationship between Black Atlanta and competing visions of the New South can offer insights into the challenges afflicting grossly unequal Southern cities in 2020 – poverty, gentrification, over-policing, inadequate healthcare, and unhealthy living conditions remain persistent features of the Southern urban landscape. In making the case for the relevance of this time period in understanding the modern South, the historian Casey Cater writes:

Many historical accounts lock the New South into the three- or four-decades following Reconstruction or imply that the more or less discreet goals of the program went unrealized until well after the Second World War – if ever – and focus largely on cotton mill magnates, planters, and race-baiting politicians. By contrast…I conceive of a “long new South,” an ongoing project that persisted well past the Second World War…29

Like Cater, I hope to situate the events and stories in this thesis within a long New South where the rhetorical and material legacies of this early 20th century moment can still be found in today’s

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Atlanta. Cater also places racialized industrial capitalism at the heart of mainstream visions of New South urban progress, a set of socio-economic relations responsible for much of the urban inequality described in this thesis. The analysis offered by Cater and other historians colors everything written in this text.

The first chapter orients us to Atlanta and the politics of Black urban presence and community building from the mid-1880s to 1906. I offer a snapshot of living conditions as influenced by housing, crime, education, municipal service delivery, the environment, employment, business and more. This chapter explains why location matters in thinking about Atlanta’s development and residents’ quality of life; discusses Black citizens’ heterodox political, social, and cultural beliefs; and sets the stage for how this aspirational New South city descended into utter chaos in September 1906.

At the turn-of-the-century, a new discourse drawing a relationship between Blackness and criminality took shape across the United States, and Atlanta was no exception. The second chapter unpacks this discourse, highlighting white Atlantans’ interpretation of urban Black mobility, freedom, and progress as a threat to social order, patriarchal manhood, and white supremacy. Georgia politicians and tabloids manipulated these beliefs for political and commercial gain by conjuring the image of a Black male rapist threatening the sexual purity of white Southern women. Sensationalized moral panics over this fabricated epidemic of sexual assault played a role in precipitating the Atlanta Race Riot of 1906, which itself was a manifestation of socio-economic anxieties and contests over the city’s development. The Riot marks a turning point in Atlanta’s racial politics as Black residents responded in different ways to the expansion of Jim Crow segregation.
In the third chapter I describe the mechanisms by which the riot, disenfranchisement and segregation provoke new methods of community development and organizing. The Georgia Suffrage League, hyper-masculine rivalries over “race leadership,” and the prodigious organizing of the Neighborhood Union map, make use of, and create Black urban spaces while also building new institutions reflecting specific visions of “race uplift” – some more democratic than others. I urge us to reconsider the Black Southern reform tradition and complicate our understanding of middle-class and working women in community development initiatives. Both in this chapter and in the final section, I also challenge the traditional framework pitting Booker T. Washington against W. E. B. Du Bois by showing the nuance and diversity in Black Atlantans’ many visions of progress in the 1910s and 1920s.

My final chapter details the advent of racialized city planning in response to Black and white contests over territory, largely in the city’s Fourth Ward. I build on the first three chapters to describe how working people expressed their autonomy and defended community spaces in the city’s vice districts and their own neighborhoods. Small and large acts of resistance in the riot’s wake, however, triggered a white supremacist backlash which attempted to authoritatively dictate the city’s racial geography for decades to come. The Great Atlanta Fire of 1917, itself a product of municipal neglect and racial inequality embedded within the built environment, intervened at a crucial moment in this battle over housing and where Black Atlantans could live for decades to come.

In the course of writing this thesis I employed a variety of primary sources, including letter correspondence, pamphlets, newspaper articles, contemporary books like The Black Side, conference proceedings, maps, census information, and city directories. The (white) mainstream Atlanta Constitution and the Black-owned Atlanta Independent are two of the major foundations
for my primary source research. I also make ample use of texts like Ray Stannard Baker’s 1908 *Following the Colour Line* and the sociological studies conducted at “The Atlanta Conferences,” which took place from 1896 to the mid-1910s. Historical evidence of the lives and labors of the city’s working-class and poor citizens comes largely from works like Tera Hunter’s and careful, alternative readings of events and people depicted in the era’s newspapers.

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The Reverend E.R. Carter would live through the entirety of this tumultuous period in Atlanta’s history. He celebrated his 60th anniversary as pastor of Friendship Baptist Church in April 1942.\(^{30}\) While we cannot know for sure, Reverend Carter must have recognized that his visions of Black Atlanta conjured in 1894 had never died, but rather were taken up by succeeding generations of reformers, activists, organizers, and thinkers who reimagined and fought for the city to come. By delving into their stories, I hope we gain a new understanding of Southern urban history, of the people who believed fiercely in taking care of their neighbors and building a more democratic city, and of ourselves, who still struggle today for racial and economic justice in the South.

Chapter I

New South Aspirations, New South Realities

South of the North, yet north of the South, lies the City of a Hundred Hills…[T]hey of Atlanta turned resolutely toward the future; and that future held aloft vistas of purple and gold:—Atlanta, Queen of the cotton kingdom; Atlanta, Gateway to the Land of the Sun; Atlanta, the new Lachesis, spinner of web and woof for the world. So the city crowned her hundred hills with factories, and stored her shops with cunning handiwork, and stretched long iron ways to greet the busy Mercury in his coming. And the Nation talked of her striving.


Turn-of-the-century Atlanta strove fiercely to bring a New South into existence. The city of approximately 115,000 people in 1905 – a nearly 30 per cent increase from 1900 – sought the riches of economic modernity and industrialization from its perch as the Gateway City of the South.\(^1\) The city’s prime geographic position made it a regional railroad and economic hub for commodity distribution and trade in raw material from the rural South. In turn, Atlanta became the favored recipient of Northern capital investment for later manufacturing development.\(^2\) The city’s Chamber of Commerce and its proudest defenders, including late 19\(^{th}\) century Atlanta *Constitution* editor Henry Grady, constantly propagandized Atlanta’s burgeoning economic might and pristine reputation to the nation.\(^3\)

Their efforts largely worked: an April 1906 clipping in California’s *San Jose Evening News* called Atlanta the “Chicago of the South…Atlanta is full of new men, new industries, new buildings, and the new spirit which is making a New South.”\(^4\) By September 1906, on the eve of one of the most violent urban massacres in American history, Atlanta’s success appeared unstoppable.

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\(^2\) Godshalk, *Veiled Visions*, 13-17.

\(^3\) Grady, “New South.”

Yet, despite the best efforts of Atlanta’s boosters, business-as-usual in the Gate City could not fully obscure contests over urban space, resources, and power between the city’s Black and white communities. New South ideology, in white minds, accepted the end of slavery but could not permit the political, economic, or social equality of African Americans – in the words of journalist Ray Stannard Baker, “[whites] wanted the New South and the Old Negro.” Urban life for Black Atlanta, then, meant structural barriers to municipal resources, decent housing, healthcare, education, and economic opportunity. De facto segregation, disease and death, over-policing, and marginal political power were the norm. While a small number of Black Atlantans achieved a precarious middle-class and even wealthy lifestyle, the vast majority were working-class and poor laborers or domestic servants. Nonetheless, they aimed for better and resisted in conventional and unconventional ways, adopting New South ideology while also negotiating its terms, provoking conflict with whites and stoking dissent within the Black community itself.

In this chapter I illustrate the major themes and conditions of Black life in Atlanta up to the infamous riot of September 22nd, 1906. Specifically, we will focus on the period starting in the mid-1880s. The first section maps the city and its institutions, describing where and how Black Atlantans lived, later transitioning to significant political battles over education, prohibition, and other issues. These conflicts offer a window through which we can analyze Black and white perspectives on a changing city – which includes a pattern of racial violence, differences in addressing the “Negro problem,” and the implications of these many discourses for our understanding of Atlanta. I introduce the argument that the experiences of Black Atlanta are both emblematic of and in tension with the ideological project of the New South, an unpredictable

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position all Black Atlantans occupied in the context of Jim Crow’s emerging dominance in the South.

**Mapping Black Atlanta**

*Geography, Housing, Health, Education, and Daily Life*

Atlanta’s downtown central business district (CBD), situated roughly ½ mile in every direction from the union depot between Pryor and Central Avenue on present-day Wall Street, marked the bustling heart of commerce and city-building for the 65,533 Atlantans living there in 1890. The intersection of Gain Street and Peachtree Street to the north, Fair Street to the South, and the intersection of Butler Street and Edgewood Avenue to the east formed the approximate boundaries of the CBD. Politically, the city divided into six wards which extended radially from the core toward the city’s limits, about 1 ¾ miles from union depot. Atlanta remained relatively compact until the 20th century, which meant much of its population actually lived at the periphery or outside of the city limits. Black neighborhoods resided largely outside the CBD, approximately ½ to 1 mile from the city center. In fact, data from 1876 indicates that about 60 per cent of Black Atlantans lived within this radius and 24 per cent lived either more than 1 mile from the city center or outside the city limits entirely.

Black residents lived in communities dispersed throughout the city; early settlements were small, poorer clusters of shanty homes which grew quickly in the Civil War’s aftermath. Many settled in what became the Fourth Ward, bounded by Butler Street and the curving path of the Southern Railway. Two poor neighborhoods, colloquially known as Shermantown and Darktown, as well as the prosperous home of Black business, Auburn Avenue, were located in the Fourth

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7 Russell, 472.
Ward. Shermantown, named for the famous Union general who decimated Atlanta in 1864, was one of the larger and more established communities before 1900. Darktown, a notorious urban slum, stretched from Peachtree and Courtland streets toward Jackson Street in the east and bordered the elite homes on Auburn. Just a few blocks to the south of Darktown, a popular “vice” district known for saloons, dance halls, and sex workers centered on Decatur Street – places infamously known as dives.

To the south, in the Second and Third Wards, one could find working and middle-class neighborhoods called Summerhill, Mechanicsville, and Brownsville – the latter also the site of Gammon Theological Seminary and Clark College. Finally, to the west of downtown, in the First Ward, Black communities surrounded Atlanta University and the forerunner institutions of Morehouse and Spelman Colleges, near Hunter and Fair streets.8

A short column in the *Atlanta Constitution* from July 1881 described a few of the various Black enclaves near downtown Atlanta. On Ivy Street, the reporter encountered a popular “negro lunch house” serving fried fish, boiled ham, and bread. He then made his way to an undertaker’s business; a dance hall and saloon in a slum known as Beaver Slide, “a fit place to bear a harvest of criminals;” and onto Mechanicsville near Whitehall Street, which “[was] once [a] very bad [locality], but [has] improved [its] morals.” To be sure, the author’s tone is condescending and racist, and his description of Black people as “lusty” or criminal prevents us from receiving a more honest portrayal of Black life in urban neighborhoods. Nonetheless, places like lunch houses and funeral homes were common touchpoints for working-class people, and the *Constitution*’s report

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revealed that these ubiquitous aspects of daily life did not escape visibility, even if white reporters could not fully make sense of their significance.\(^9\)

Black working-class life was far more nuanced than portrayed in the *Constitution*. Historian Tera Hunter describes the grueling laundry and domestic work done by Black women, and the community support system that emerged among them in the form of sharing gossip and, as needed, informal childcare. On Ivy, Harris, Peters, and Decatur Streets, workers out on the town found theaters, billiard rooms, restaurants, saloons, and dance halls where they could relax, drink, and converse, at times alongside white people. This district’s attractions often pulled in Black people from the rural hinterlands surrounding Atlanta, highlighting the kind of community spaces only possible in the city.

While formal wages were often low – Black laundresses on average made $4-$8 a month – working people could turn to pan-toting, scavenging, sex work, or numerous odd jobs to make ends meet.\(^10\) Making enough money could be its own herculean task, however, as average rents in 1897 were about $4 a month – roughly equivalent to what a laundress made in the same period.\(^11\)

Individual census information grounds us even more intimately in the character and make-up of Atlanta’s neighborhoods. A sample of fifty-nine people living on Ponder’s Alley, a street located off Forrest Avenue in the heart of Darktown, reveals that these residents were, on average, twenty-six years old. The street was entirely Black, and the most common occupations included “Day Laborer,” “Cook,” “School Teacher,” and “Laundress.” None of the houses were owned –

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\(^9\) “The Haunts of the Lowly and the Vicious,” *Atlanta Constitution*, July 20, 1881. Beaver Slide earned its name when a former Atlanta police chief surveying the neighborhood slipped down a hill.


only rented – and while most of the children who lived on the street could read and write, the majority of adults could either read, write, or were completely illiterate.

Some of the families were quite large. William Dunahoo, a street peddler, lived with his wife and five children under the age of fourteen. Others took in boarders in addition to large families. Benjamin Fuller, born in 1865, worked as a day laborer while his wife worked as a cook to support a household of six children. Two boarders – the sixty-five-year-old Lucinda Cloud and the forty-year-old Nathan Coleman – held jobs as a cook and a school janitor, respectively. However, each had been unemployed for more than three months by the time government officials recorded census information.  

Just a few blocks south, along famous Auburn Avenue and its intersection with Hilliard street, a different picture emerges. Home to the prominent Atlanta physician Henry Rutherford Butler and the contractor Alexander Hamilton, the street was not racially uniform – one white family, the jeweler John Rose and his son, lived at 263 Auburn Avenue. Most of the street’s residents could read and write, the average age was approximately 22, and several of the families owned their homes. To a certain extent, a few cooks and washerwomen mixed with teachers, a dentist, a tailor, and multiple carpenters. In general, Black residents of this section of Atlanta existed in a separate, higher socio-economic class than the residents of Ponder’s Alley despite the neighborhoods’ close proximity to each other.  

While Black and white people did not yet live in strictly segregated communities, and different neighborhoods consisted of varying levels of integration, neighborhoods tended to be relatively homogenous and aligned with specific patterns – e.g. working-class white neighborhoods’

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13 U.S. Census Bureau.
proximity to railroads and industrial sites while Black people often lived alongside streams and creeks in the eastern, western, and southern portions of the city. The comparison between Ponder’s Alley and Auburn Avenue highlights the degree to which Atlanta’s urban development already produced pockets of relative poverty and wealth within a city which already disadvantaged its Black citizens.

Residential location determined who gained access to Atlanta’s municipal resources. City government built most basic urban amenities – paved streets, sewer and water lines, sanitation and trash disposal, etc. – in the CBD, for wealthy white inner-city homes along Peachtree Street, and in planned white suburbs like Inman Park. For many working-class white neighborhoods and virtually all Black neighborhoods, paved streets, hospitals, fire protection and similar services did not exist, conditions which persisted even through the advent of World War II. A nonexistent sanitation system meant uncovered “trunk” sewers functioned as disposal systems carrying both rainwater and raw sewage toward streams at the city outskirts. Given the frequency with which Black people lived close to Atlanta’s creeks, this meant they were disproportionately exposed to dirty water, disease, and devastating floods. Peripheral poor neighborhoods were also dumping sites for huge amounts of trash and debris collected by “scavenger” carts in the CBD and transported outward.

Similarly, fires threatened poorly constructed, wooden frame dwellings in their neighborhoods, and residents could expect no assistance from the fire department, which was limited by the pitiful reach of the city’s waterworks. Infrastructure improvements for city residents on the margins were

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rare and the results could be deadly.\textsuperscript{17} The \textit{Constitution} reported on the destruction caused by a large fire in Darktown on September 24\textsuperscript{th}, 1899, which “gained considerable headway before the alarm was sent in.” Three houses were destroyed, two others only partially. Combined with unpaved streets and a lack of electrification, the built environment of Atlanta’s poorer neighborhoods and the inaccessibility of city services made many Black residents distinctly vulnerable to violence, disaster, and disease.\textsuperscript{18}

Turn-of-the-century residential geography in Atlanta was not yet formally segregated by race and class, but disparate treatment and exploitation still shaped housing conditions. As historian Allison Dorsey notes, “Exorbitant rents rather than de jure segregation established the pattern of black settlement in Atlanta.”\textsuperscript{19} Like in Ponder’s Alley, most of Atlanta’s working-class population lived in rental housing – 75\% by 1910. Post-Civil War, real estate speculators had pounced on the heavy migration of rural Black and white people into a rebuilding Atlanta, erecting cheaply-made housing.

However, supply still couldn’t keep up with demand – rents rose as the city experienced a shortage of affordable housing, which real estate investors and brokers manipulated for increased profit. This process spread working families across the city yet Black people often received the bulk of wooden, lower-grade, shotgun or duplex-style housing.\textsuperscript{20} Photos of tenements from 1906 show all-wooden homes clustered close together, uniform, often with stairs leading to a raised porch – needed, perhaps, in the case of flooding.\textsuperscript{21} Even absent formal segregation measures,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17} “More Light for the City,” \textit{Atlanta Constitution}, September 17, 1884; “Atlanta’s Greatest Year, Says the Retiring Mayor,” \textit{Atlanta Constitution}, January 3, 1905.
\item \textsuperscript{18} “Big Blaze in Darktown,” \textit{Atlanta Constitution}, September 25, 1899
\item \textsuperscript{19} Dorsey, \textit{To Build Our Lives Together}, 35.
\item \textsuperscript{20} LeeAnn Bishop Lands, “‘SPECULATORS ATTENTION!’ Workers and Rental Housing Development in Atlanta, 1880 to 1910,” \textit{Journal of Urban History} 28, no. 5 (July 2002), 546-549; Du Bois, “Social and Physical Conditions,” 51.
\item \textsuperscript{21} See appendices.
\end{itemize}
“Atlanta in 1900 was more segregated than older communities like Savannah and Augusta.” In the 1910s, Atlanta would be among the first cities to attempt residential segregation by law.\textsuperscript{22}

In turn, living conditions precipitated a health crisis among Black Atlantans, with death rates soaring far above those of whites. An 1896 conference at Atlanta University hosted by W.E.B. Du Bois produced a report titled “Mortality Among Negroes in Cities,” in which they documented the deadly diseases ubiquitous in urban life. In 1890, the 28,117 Black people living in Atlanta experienced a death rate of 322 per 10,000 from causes like tuberculosis, cholera, and pneumonia, at a rate 70 per cent higher than the white population. Averages calculated in an 1897 found that they had a cumulate death rate 87\% higher than whites. Atlanta’s death rate was second only to Charleston in the South, and higher than Baltimore’s, Memphis’, and Richmond’s.\textsuperscript{23}

Dr. H.R. Butler, the physician from Auburn Avenue, contributed to this conference’s published collection, citing negligence as the cause of extreme mortality. Butler pointed to poverty, hard labor, and a lack of public health knowledge. Even more, he noted that the city only had fifty to sixty beds for Black people in a small wooden annex adjacent to Grady Hospital, ostensibly to serve the nearly 40,000 living in the city in 1896. Dr. Butler also pushed back on the discourse positing these death rates as a biological sign of Black inferiority; rather he criticized the city’s neglect of its residents:

The city has neglected and is still neglecting the colored people, and especially that class of them which is dependent upon its charity in times of sickness. It has millions to build prisons with, but not a dollar with which to build charitable institutions. It allows money grabbers to build small huts and crowd into them five times the number of people that should be allowed; it has no law by which the owners of this property can be made to keep it clean. The houses are never painted, the wells are filled with the filth of the neighborhood and the fences are never white-washed, and the city is powerless to interfere. Family after family move into these places, and often only one or two are left to tell the story. My friends, it is one thing to stand here in this clean, well-lighted hall and read papers on this subject, but it

\textsuperscript{22} Dittmer, \textit{Black Georgia in the Progressive Era}, 1913.
is altogether different to go down into those dark, poor and humble homes and see death going through destroying the old and the young because of the negligence on the part of those in authority.24

Dr. Butler’s scathing critique is notable for a few reasons. First, he directly blamed the city’s negligence for the lack of adequate healthcare, which is rare in a moment where most leaders urged moral and educational self-improvement to counteract the spread of disease – skirting the question of government responsibility altogether. Implicitly, Dr. Butler argued that as citizens and residents of the city, Black people were entitled to more than the city’s passive resistance in the face of predatory landlords, filthy living conditions, and deeper investment in prisons and incarceration. While Dr. Butler doesn’t make a case for integration – which risked dangerous accusations of encouraging “social equality” – he does demand proportional material investment for his community.

Moreover, Dr. Butler’s analysis tied together the key problems facing Black Atlanta in the early 20th century. Housing, criminal justice, and environmental hazards had compounding effects on their lives. Later in the piece, he also addressed the majority of educated elites who, he argued, have done little to patronize their community’s businesses, start charities, and provide assistance to poor. He concluded his paper by identifying all the areas of city life made available to white people and nonexistent for Black people – parks, libraries, hospitals, gyms – and asked, “Now, my friends, in the face of all these disadvantages do you not think we are doing well to stay here as long as we do?”25 To Butler, living in Atlanta meant all its residents had a right to access and make use of its amenities and resources.26 In effect, Dr. Butler forced this collection of academics and

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25 Chase, Mortality among Negroes, 16.
26 See Driskell, Schooling Jim Crow, for more discussion around the significance of Progressive Era urban amenities.
social reformers to take seriously a connected set of issues, exacerbated by the unequal spatial distribution of poverty and violence in Black urban communities.

Not all people who took part in the conferences hosted by Atlanta University agreed with Dr. Butler, however. Indeed, a subsequent conference in 1897 rebuked Butler’s conclusion, writing, “The excessive mortality of [Black] people cannot be attributed in any large degree to unfavorable conditions of environment [and economics], but must be chiefly attributed to the ignorance of the masses of the people and their disregard of the laws of health and morality.”27 Later in the conference summary, the attendees rejected the notion that erecting higher-quality housing or demanding more appropriations from the city would solve the health conditions facing poor people, asserting instead that Black people chose to die in cities rather than move to the suburbs.28 Given most jobs could only be found closer to the urban core and the limited reach of streetcar transportation infrastructure, the 1897 conference’s conclusions seem erroneous. Nonetheless, this explanation reveals a large gap between the experiences of higher status residents and the working poor, and the pervasiveness of individualistic respectability rhetoric which shamed poor communities for not vigorously pursuing self-improvement.

The 1897 conference also put the onus on churches and social reform groups to correct poor people’s “irresponsibility.” Minnie Wright Price, an 1888 graduate of Atlanta University, submitted a paper calling for the educated and wealthy to spend more time in poor neighborhoods, which need “sympathy and cheer that a friendly visit from you would give, but you withhold yourself because they are a little lower in the social scale than you are.”29 Fortunately, friendly visits were not the only suggestions raised – alternative programs proposed by people like Dr.

28 Du Bois, 19.
29 Du Bois, 58.
Butler’s wife, Serena Sloan Butler, offered more material support. Debates over how to address social problems found expression in the types of institutions Black Atlantans created in this period. 

*Social, Cultural, Religious, and Educational Institutions*

Despite numerous obstacles, African Americans in Atlanta found ways to build long-lasting institutions and community. Most of these institutions, like churches, schools, protective societies, and benevolent groups, were led or established by prominent, educated elites who believed they had a responsibility to “uplift the race.” Though somewhat divided by economic class and social status, Black Atlantans were often tied together by kinship, similar aspirations, and a common experience of subjugation in the Jim Crow South. Though these strong connections do not preclude the existence of dissent and conflict, it does explain the emergence of a vibrant and diverse community.

Churches and their pastors served as political, religious, and social leaders. “Next to the family, the church was the most important institution, the religious and social center of [Black] life.” Catering to mostly poor and working families, religious institutions, including Baptist, African Methodist Episcopal, Colored Methodist Episcopal, and Congregational churches, often underpinned the development of schools, secret societies, and benevolent or charitable organizations. Atlanta’s three major churches included First Congregational Church, led by the Reverend Henry Hugh Proctor; Friendship Baptist, led by the Reverend Edward Randolph Carter, and Big Bethel AME, led by Bishop Wesley Gaines. First Congregational and Big Bethel, along with the smaller yet still prominent Wheat Street Baptist Church, clustered near Auburn Avenue;

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Friendship Baptist was located on the west side of town, on the corner of Haynes and Mitchell Street near Atlanta University.\textsuperscript{32}

Churches were the “centers of systematic relief and reformatory work,” in part because the vast majority of their parishioners lived in shoddy wooden homes and poor tenements surrounding the churches themselves. Examples of their “benevolent” work abound: an all-women’s seminary which became Spelman College first originated in the basement of Friendship Baptist Church in 1881; the Haynes Street School, among others, also emerged from Friendship Baptist. Friendship funded the Carter Home for the Aged and a chapter of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, led by Reverend Carter’s wife. Friendship Baptist’s robust efforts on behalf of vulnerable communities also reflected the congregation’s origins among poor, newly-freed slaves who relied on mutual aid and cooperation to ensure their church survived.\textsuperscript{33}

First Congregational, originally established within Shermantown as an interracial church in 1877, experienced tremendous growth as a community center with the arrival of Reverend Proctor in 1894, especially for the meetings of the YMCA and YWCA. During his time in Atlanta, Proctor frequently appeared at the Atlanta University’s conferences and in publications like the Atlanta Constitution, Voice of the Negro, and the Atlanta Independent, raising awareness about First Congregational’s charitable efforts.\textsuperscript{34} Big Bethel AME, as the oldest Black church, engaged in substantial social service work as well, specifically in providing sick relief and burial services for its members. Further, under Bishop Gaines’ leadership, Bethel established Morris Brown College

\textsuperscript{32} Dorsey, To Build Our Lives Together, 59-66.
\textsuperscript{34} John Hope, “Our Atlanta Schools,” Voice of the Negro, January 1904.
in 1881. In significant ways, Black communities depended on these churches, both as safe gathering spaces and the foundation for building new institutions after emancipation.\(^{35}\)

Reverends, pastors, and bishops, exclusively male, were looked to as political and moral figures guiding the community writ large. Religious figures often encouraged hygiene, sexual chastity, and moral self-discipline, and enforced these values within their congregations. For example, an essay written by a sympathizer in Reverend E. R. Carter’s book *The Black Side* referred to Carter as a “hero” of the temperance cause – a major political battle in the late 1880s – a man dedicated to elevating his church members to a “higher standard in life.”\(^{36}\) Some practiced a more populist form of leadership: AME Bishop Henry McNeal Turner, led boycotts of Atlanta’s streetcars after a 1903 segregation ordinance and opened his church, called the People’s Tabernacle, to vaudeville shows and musical performances.\(^{37}\) Bishop Turner, like Reverend Carter, was not a stranger to bold political action – he had a prominent platform in Atlanta politics as an advocate for the Back-to-Africa movement and Black nationalism in his publication, *Voice of the Missions*.\(^{38}\) Carter, Turner, and Proctor were only a few of the many clergy members who took on the responsibility of leading political and social campaigns.

Churches also played a crucial role in establishing an educational system after the Civil War, drawing from widespread enthusiasm for formal instruction. Freed-people across the South prioritized education, demanding any and all opportunities to learn reading and writing. The Freedmen’s Bureau and organizations like the American Missionary Association helped to establish the first schools in Atlanta, like Storrs School and Atlanta University. William Finch, the

\(^{35}\) Dorsey, *To Build Our Lives Together*, 54.


\(^{37}\) “The Boycott and Bishop Turner,” Atlanta *Independent*, February 6, 1904. Ads for events at his church appeared in the *Independent* throughout the first two decades of the 20\(^{th}\) century.

first and only Black person elected to Atlanta’s city council until the mid-20th century, also pushed vigorously for a public education system enrolling all students.39 Battles over city funding and the hiring of Black teachers for their schools led to an unequal, two-tiered system in which white public schools received adequate funds but Black schools did not; by the 1890s, multiple Black primary schools existed, but with overcrowded classes studying in unhealthy conditions.40 Yet, illiteracy had decreased by 58% since 1860 across all of Black America and illiteracy in Atlanta stood only at 35% in 1904 – a remarkable achievement in a relatively short period.41

Atlanta’s Black colleges and universities shouldered much of the educational load at the beginning of the 20th century. In 1904, these schools – including Gammon Theological Seminary, Clark College, Atlanta University, Atlanta Baptist Seminary, Spelman Seminary, and Morris Brown College – enrolled over two thousand students. Atlanta University, home of W.E.B. Du Bois until 1910, stood out by facilitating the Atlanta Conferences, sociological gatherings dedicated to studying urban conditions. Du Bois’ leadership of these conferences marked the first systematic effort to collect data on the lives of Black people in America’s cities, and Atlanta University led in this field for over twenty years.42 The spatial proximity of some of these institutions on the city’s west side, and the resources they possessed, incubated robust scholarly work as well as later social and community initiatives.

Du Bois, in a 1940 talk at First Congregational Church, noted that Atlanta University’s President Horace Bumstead received inspiration for the conferences from Booker T. Washington’s

39 Bacote, “William Finch.”
40 Dorsey, To Build Our Lives Together, 93-94.
similar gatherings to study rural life, held at the Tuskegee Institute. Reports from Atlanta’s conferences were so influential, in fact, that their specific studies on social and physical conditions in cities, and another on business cooperation, jumpstarted the effort for a free kindergarten service and Washington’s organization of the National Negro Business League in 1900. Their reports also provide an incredible amount of data about turn-of-the-century living conditions which would otherwise be unknown to us today.

Though Atlanta’s many institutions of higher education made the city distinctive, by 1910 Atlanta still only provided eleven public schools for Black children, and a public high school would not exist until the 1920s. The student-teacher ratio was an astounding 64:1. These schools were scattered in east, west, and south sides of the city, in awful shape, and so overcrowded as to force a “double sessions” system where most children could only attend school half a day. In response, women-led efforts to form supplemental educational institutions helped meet families’ demand for higher quality childhood education.

In papers written at the 1897 Atlanta conference, Selena Sloan Butler and Rosa Morehead Bass argued for day nurseries and kindergartens, respectively, to support working-class women and, in their view, prevent children from engaging in criminal activity. A separate paper from Georgia Swift King expanded on the need for “Mothers’ Meetings” where women could discuss shared challenges and formulate plans to address them, especially around education. She wrote, “the destiny of the Negro race is largely in the hands of its mothers.” By 1905, a group of mothers would take advantage of these meetings to form the Gate City Free Kindergarten Association. To

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43 “The Atlanta University Studies.”
45 Hunter, To ‘Joy My Freedom, 136-137.
47 Du Bois, 61.
an important extent, much of the most radical efforts for social reform, institution-building, and collective uplift were started and implemented by middle-class and working women, as would become even more clear in the 1910s.48

Reformers and activists would continue to center their community’s educational needs throughout the next three decades. The Black-owned Atlanta Independent published an editorial titled “Our City Schools Again” in response to changes in educational budgets after a vote in favor of $400,000 in municipal bonds for school improvements, which underscored the importance of schools while also reaffirming the leadership roles of local preachers.

[T]he Negro was promised that if he would for bonds, we would be given additional school houses and teachers. The Negro took the white man at his word…But we only have to read the January money sheet prepared by the city council to find out how well those in authority have kept their promises…The Negro is thinking and will not always be deceived, no more than can Atlanta reach the highest development on all her resources by discrimination against a part of her citizens. Here is work for our Negro preachers, who have so much influence with the white press…Let us have better school facilities…We will not be long denied.49

The Independent’s editorial demonstrated the priority residents placed on education and the tensions it generated with white elected officials. Despite some sense that white elites perhaps cared about the welfare of Black people – only insofar as they were considered a crucial labor force in the New South economy – the city’s backtracking on promises for better school funding revealed the limits of their paternalism. Additionally, the Independent’s mention of the role of preachers once again underlines the prominence of the clergy, who were likely viewed as more “respectable” representatives of Black Atlantans in front of white audiences. Bond issues would remain contentious sites of urban politics since Black people retained the vote in municipal elections. In the late 1910s and early 1920s, frustrated by years of white duplicity, these voters

49 “Our City Schools,” Atlanta Independent, 1904.
would mobilize to force monetary investment in a public high school via an expensive bond referendum.\footnote{Driskell, \textit{Schooling Jim Crow}, 2014.}

Recognizing the lack of institutional and government support for a social safety net, Black entrepreneurs started their own. These ventures took many forms: insurance, commonly known as protective associations, emerged as small fund pools which provided for less well-off people in case of illness, injury, or death. Secret societies, typically among elite men and joined by women’s auxiliary groups, conducted similar charity work while providing an exclusive social gathering space. Other cooperative business ventures in areas like real estate fueled an impressive accumulation of wealth among a few prominent men. To be sure, the vast majority of people in this period were lucky to make a few dollars a week, and a small number owned more than $1,000 in taxable property – nonetheless, a small elite class found room to thrive in early 20\textsuperscript{th} century Atlanta.\footnote{Dorsey, \textit{To Build Our Lives Together}, 45.}

Protective associations, in particular, represented desires for collective racial uplift, often led by wealthier, self-made men. In \textit{The Black Side}, Carter described one of these associations. “The Colored Men’s Protective Association [is] one of those enterprises which render many a poor man, washerwoman and mechanic’s condition in time of sickness or disability less burdensome than it otherwise would have been without the existence of such an enterprise.” In six years, the Association had paid out $842.75 in sick benefits (equivalent to $24,600 today), $275 for funeral costs, and $40.90 for additional charity expenses.\footnote{Carter, \textit{The Black Side}, 56.}

Since few Black businesses could obtain the capital necessary to fund large ventures because of the inaccessibility of white banking and credit institutions, the amount raised and distributed by
the Colored Men’s Protective Association is notable. Protective and relief associations became ubiquitous – organizations like the Union Mutual Relief Association and the Georgia Co-Operative Fire Association plastered their advertisements across the pages of the Atlanta Independent in the mid-1900s. Some of these proto-insurance organizations eventually grew into large and wealthy companies, like Alonzo Herndon’s Atlanta Life Insurance Company.53

Secret societies, or fraternal organizations, also became places for camaraderie, socializing, and networking for men and women. The Odd Fellows, Free Masons, and Knights of Pythias were some of the most prominent, but in total dozens of different societies existed. Membership in these societies not only meant access to basic social services largely denied by white society, similar to protective associations and insurance collectives, but they also became a way to “improve one’s social status within the larger black community.”54

Some successful organizations, like the Odd Fellows, raised enough money to build a stately, four-story building on Auburn Avenue which long served as the headquarters for the Atlanta Independent and other small businesses. In general, these societies could distribute funds for charity or aid during tragedy; a paper from the 1898 Atlanta Conference on “Some Efforts of American Negroes for their Own Social Betterment” estimated that secret societies, collectively, raised more than $25,000 a year (approximately $777,000 in today’s figures).55 Within these fraternal organizations, elites practiced mutual aid and cultivated notions of responsibility toward lower-status and poor families, a way to “lift as they climbed” and guarantee the entire community’s success.

Benevolent groups and social welfare organizations also dotted the urban landscape and stemmed from similar motivations as protective associations and secret societies. These organizations were distinguished, however, by their exclusive focus on marginalized, neglected, or socially “deviant” populations like orphans and children, the elderly, or sex workers. Rhetorically, individuals organizing and leading these efforts, usually from religious backgrounds, focused on collective race uplift, the need for individual moral improvement, and preventing crime – but without a simultaneous demand for the city to take a more active role. The existence of these benevolent groups indicates that organizers knew they had to take care of each other, but they possessed little enthusiasm for challenging government authority in a precarious moment for Black political and social rights in the Redeemer South.

The Carrie Steele Orphan Home was one of the most famous examples of social welfare initiatives in late 19th century Atlanta – in fact, it still operates today in the form of the Carrie Steele-Pitts Home. Carrie Steele, born into slavery, worked as a stewardess at the union depot in downtown Atlanta in the late 1880s. According to Reverend Carter, upon seeing large numbers of orphaned children in Atlanta, she resolved to save her paycheck, write and sell a short autobiography, and solicit philanthropic donations to purchase a property on Wheat Street and build a $5,000 three-story brick orphanage. She opened her orphanage to “all homeless, friendless children of the city of Atlanta” who “were mostly ignorant and uncouth, but [became] tidy, trained and [taught] to read,” pray, do farm work, and attend school.\textsuperscript{56} The Carrie Steele Orphan Home displayed the hallmarks of Black benevolent work – religious and moral education supported by the philanthropic inclinations of elites, financial support necessary for much charitable work in the city. Like other social welfare efforts, the Orphan’s home also served to push back on discourses

\textsuperscript{56} Carter, \textit{The Black Side}, 35-36.
contending that uneducated, homeless, or unemployed Black people were criminals and a threat to urban peace.57

Similar institutions emerged across Atlanta in this period, including the Leonard Street Orphan’s Home in 1890, the Carter Home for the Aged, and the Baptist Center for Wayward Youths. Nurseries, daycares, and kindergartens became regular, if sometimes fleeting endeavors in various neighborhoods. Alongside a small wealthy class, churches funded the bulk of this work. In 1898, nine churches contributed approximately $271.45 to charity work in Atlanta.58 Institutions developed in the late 19th century provided a significant base for additional efforts in the following decades, exemplified by groups like the Neighborhood Union and the Urban League, mobilizing Black communities to find support and protection in each other.

*Political and Social Contests: Asserting a Right to the City*

Black Atlantans played a major role in the city’s late 19th century politics both as individuals and larger collectives. Groups like the Cooks’ Union, the Colored Working Women and Laundry Women associations, Washing Societies, and the Gospel Aid Society enabled working women to look out for each other and act together if their interests were threatened. Most notably, a Washing Society formed in the Summerhill neighborhood in 1881 organized a massive washerwomen’s strike on the eve of Atlanta’s highly anticipated International Cotton Exposition. The striking washerwomen, Tera Hunter argued, “expose[d] the underside of the New South image” by debunking the myth of docile, unorganized Southern laborers, eventually forcing their employers and the city to bargain with them.59 In another instance a year before, on Monday, August 2nd, 1880, hundreds of people congregated at Morgan’s hall across from Wheat Street Baptist Church

58 Du Bois, 50. This figure would amount to approximately $8,300 today.
to protest the recent lynching of a Black family in Jonesboro, Georgia and demand action from state officials. Among those more involved in electoral and party politics, newspapers like the *Weekly Defiance* and *Independent* consistently voiced critiques of local politicians and engaged substantively in state-wide and national Republican Party issues.

The Atlanta *Independent*, founded by the Republican politico Ben Davis in 1903, became a consistent voice in Atlanta and Georgia politics over the next two decades. A maverick who severely denounced lynching, racism, and inequality, he admired Booker T. Washington and was despised by elites for his “opportunism and flamboyant lifestyle.” The *Independent* also served as the official organ for fraternal organizations like the Knights of Pythias and the Odd Fellows, endlessly covering their activities and boosting the reputation of men like Davis and his associates. Ben Davis remained the most influential Black journalist in Atlanta, and the *Independent* the most influential publication, until the advent of the Atlanta *Daily World* in 1928, which focused less on politics and more on Black Atlanta’s social calendar.

The prohibition and temperance battles of the 1880s, where Reverend Carter lent his “heroic” advocacy, showcased the ways in which Black people flexed considerable political muscle. Interracial “citizens committees,” created in 1884 as semi-democratic, populist vehicles to settle municipal prohibition issues, became spaces in which Black leaders demanded recognition and representation of their issues. Men like Bishop Gaines and activists like W. A. Pledger and Jackson McHenry mobilized voters and worked alongside white anti-prohibitionists to secure an initial victory in 1887.

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60 “Africa in Council,” Atlanta *Constitution*, August 3, 1880
In 1888, when prohibition again became a hot political topic, Gaines, Pledger, McHenry and others demanded substantive participation on citizens committees and in elected office, stating “No ticket, conservative or otherwise, can be elected without the colored vote.” Again, schools, as well as political representation, dominated their concerns. Ultimately, these activists were unsuccessful. By 1890, whites on each side of the prohibition issue, fearful of growing Black political power, joined forces to stifle Black demands, which had benefitted from white activists’ split over prohibition. Prohibition waxed and waned as a political issue well into the 20th century, but the issue had boosted Black political power in the 1880s, which in turn generated white backlash in the 1890s as municipal and state legislators implemented new burdens on voting rights like white primaries and poll taxes, intended to decrease the number of registered Black voters.63

Prohibition also revealed divisions within Black politics, tension stemming from the degree to which activists internalized New South rhetoric about progress and respectability. Some leaders, like Gaines, Pledger, and McHenry, pushed for vigorous collective action and representation in elected positions, whereas moral reformers like Carter and Proctor stood resolutely on the side of prohibitionists in favor of reducing the “immoral” influence of alcohol. The former group of activists refused to accept a subordinate political position, while the latter concerned themselves more with individual religious and social behavior – both had to make tenuous alliances with white people. Marking this distinction is essential for understanding tensions within Black communities as they negotiated their ever-shifting political and social positions.

Political divisions did not disappear. In 1895, on the eve of Atlanta’s Cotton States and International Exposition, community leaders met at Big Bethel Church to fight over their role in the “negro exhibit” at the Exposition. Some attendees, unnamed, objected to their participation in

63 Watts, “Black Political Progress,” 276-284; Dittmer, Black Georgia in the Progressive Era, 94-104.
the Exposition because of the small space allotted for the exhibit, persistent segregation on city streetcars, and the local jail’s longstanding exploitation of Black convict labor. Dr. H.R. Butler, surprisingly, and exhibit commissioner I. Garland Penn, refuted the opposition by arguing that this Exposition would be one of the few opportunities for Black Atlantans to show off their side of the city to the world. Thus, they should make the trade-off and sacrifice their concerns over white attempts to politically disenfranchise and socially segregate them.64

Leaders like Dr. Butler could simultaneously criticize economic and municipal inequality and engage wholeheartedly in a New South-esque desire to boast of their progress to the rest of the country. They had to carefully navigate a dangerous political environment, which sometimes meant accommodating themselves to certain Jim Crow indignities if they believed it would benefit their community in the long run. However, Penn and Butler’s leadership in this situation also reflected their belief that merely showcasing their progress would be enough to win white people’s respect, which eventually proved to be an unreliable tactic.

No matter what, Black Atlantans operated in a world where capricious white violence could take place at any moment. Despite the city’s white boosters proclaiming Atlanta free of the racial violence that characterized the antebellum South, lynchings, mob violence, and fear-mongering were a palpable threat. In September 1889, white Atlantans traveled six miles to participate in the lynching of teenager Warren Powell in East Point, an Atlanta suburb.65 Five months earlier in April, whites lynched Samuel Hose in Palmetto, Georgia, about twenty-seven miles southeast of Atlanta. Hose’s brutal murder had a considerable impact on people like Du Bois, a newly minted professor at Atlanta University.66 Black death at the hands of white mobs was treated as routine –

64 “The Colored Exhibit,” Atlanta Constitution, April 3, 1895
65 “Trouble at East Point,” Atlanta Constitution, September 6, 1889.
66 Dorsey, To Build Our Lives Together, 144.
the 1906 Democratic gubernatorial primary between newspaper editors Hoke Smith and Clark Howell devolved into an open competition over who could stir up more fear of Black people, with both arguing for statewide disenfranchisement and violence if necessary. Their primary played a significant role in precipitating the 1906 riot, but the stage had already been set by a pattern of extralegal violence against those who dared challenge white supremacy.

Nonetheless, Atlanta’s Black community found creative and indirect ways to resist, especially by poorer, less “respectable” people. In seemingly non-political ways, many ordinary people asserted a right to exist equally in urban space, which disturbed white Atlanta. On April 29th, 1889, for instance, white Atlantans took offense at a crowd of “insolent negroes” who took up the majority of a section in Grant Park and then attempted to take most of the seats in a streetcar. After the Black passengers were asked to leave, a request they refused, white men on the streetcar attempted to force them off. As the Constitution reported, “One darkey, more obstreperous than his companions, refused to be ejected or moved out, whereupon the crowd threw him out of the window of the car.”67 While obviously racist, the Constitution indirectly shows us how one person rejected white demands for deference, and the violence that met his resistance, an inevitable situation in a city clinging to the veneer of New South liberalism while retaining allegiance to the social rules of white supremacy.

The incident in Grant Park and on the streetcar was not uncommon, especially within Atlanta’s transportation spaces. Seven years later, on August 3rd, 1906 – just six weeks before the riot – Charles Wickersham, a board member overseeing Atlanta’s Terminal Station, sent a letter to Booker T. Washington to smooth over another controversy. Wickersham likely sent the letter given Washington’s prominence and to prevent his organization, the National Negro Business League,

67 “At the Park,” Atlanta Constitution, April 29, 1889
from canceling their upcoming conference in Atlanta.68 The board member’s condescending tone pervades the letter: “Yourself and other thoughtful and conservative leaders of your race have always preached, as I understand it, that you do not desire the same accommodations as the Whites, but you did desire equal accommodations.” Wickerson emphasizes that the Terminal constructed separate yet equal facilities for Black passengers, assuring Washington that they were just as “luxurious” as the waiting rooms and toilets provided for white people. Wickerson finally pivots to the incident involving a woman who refused to leave the white waiting room area at the station. He wrote:

We had one unfortunate case of a woman who [sat defiantly in the white waiting room]…she did not evince a disposition to proceed to the Negro apartments, and one of the Station officials spoke to her. She went out then, but when this official went away she came back, and the next time she was asked to leave she became abusive and…profane, creating so much disorder that it was finally necessary to have the police take charge of her.69

Although Wickerson clearly did not condone this woman’s behavior, he inadvertently provided us another portrait of a courageous individual willing to transgress segregated facilities despite potential police or mob violence. She rebelled against what was expected of her as a woman in public space, deploying profanity and, presumably, physical violence in response to the humiliation of segregated waiting areas. Her individual act of resistance, akin to the behavior of those “insolent” people in Grant Park, marked one of thousands of attempts to reclaim autonomy within forbidden territory.

From Bishop Turner’s boycotts to the piercing editorials of the Independent and streetcar scuffles, Black Atlantans resisted white supremacy in subtle and overt ways which often diverged by status norms delineating respectable and unrespectable behavior. Their political action could

69 Letter from Charles Wickerson to Booker T. Washington, 3 August 1906, Long, Rucker, and Aiken Family Papers, MSS 468, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Ga.
be contingent and uneven, especially when in competition with the city’s white power structure, and different organizations formed and died regularly. Preachers, Republican activists, women, politicians, businessmen, and working people approached their daily negotiations of urban space and municipal issues in slightly different ways, each articulating their own response to New South Atlanta, making their politics far from uniform.

**Segregation, Integration, Deportation: Debating the Race Problem**

Instances of spectacular, gruesome racial violence, often connected to tensions over urban inequality and perceived violations of a patriarchal white supremacist social order, produced intense arguments over the future of Southern race relations. Following Sam Hose’s 1899 lynching – where the mob removed his fingers, ears, genitals, and skin and subsequently burned him alive – the viciously racist newspaper editor John Temple Graves wrote a lengthy opinion column in the *Constitution* titled “The Race and Social Problem.” In a difficult piece to read, Graves commended the lynch mob for implementing the only “legitimate” punishment for the crime of rape, a crime which would never cease to be a problem until that “infernal lust for white women” be swept from the “hearts of black fiends.” Portraying Black people as inhuman monsters who no longer feared the “ballot or the noose,” Graves saw lynching as the only effective methods to terrorize them into subordination – perhaps, he suggests, only if castration did not work better.70

Graves concluded that, in light of Hose’s lynching, “separation is the logical, the inevitable, the only solution of this great problem of the races.” The races were “inherently and universally antagonistic,” and that the last, best hope for “the white man and the negro” in their struggle “for the mastery of this continent” was separate development.71 That such despicable speech was

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71 Graves, “The Race and Social Problem.”
published in the oldest and largest Atlanta newspaper illustrates further the routine, blatant violence Black Southerners faced. While Graves suggested complete segregation, his depiction of an inherent antagonism and struggle between Black and white people seems to imply an openness to total extermination. Graves’ rhetoric, by no means unique in white public opinion, made future violence all the more likely.

Graves’ anxiety over white women’s purity and protection also reflected larger fears over threats to white patriarchal domination, thought to be waning in an urbanizing South. Moving to cities presented an opportunity for white women to gain jobs and economic self-sufficiency in greater numbers and, in turn, increased freedom. This raised concerns among white women’s brothers, fathers, and other male family members as urban life allowed for less control over women’s lives than rural settings. “Adrift” women, combined with perceptions of a secluded, mobile, and ascendant Black population outside of firm white control, fed fears that unrestrained Black men would sexually assault white women and usurp white men’s authority.72 In other words, Graves’ piece is as much about the fear of imagined Black male rapists as a manifestation of anxiety over shifting gender norms provoked by the supposed depravities of city life.

On August 30th of that same year, Bishop Lucius Holsey of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church responded to Graves’ article in the Constitution, seeking to provide a “solution [for] the greatest problem that now confronts the American people.” Holsey argued that the “negro race…is destined to be exterminated” unless a new remedy is proposed: separation, but separation by removal of seven to eight million Black Southerners to public domains in the West whereby they’d establish a new state of and for themselves, but still part of the United States.73 Holsey’s position

72 Godshalk, Veiled Visions, 23.
was not unique – as mentioned earlier, Bishop Turner spent much of the 1890s trying to organize a Back-to-Africa movement. Both were forerunners to the Black nationalist rhetoric espoused by Marcus Garvey in the late 1910s.\textsuperscript{74} As Black people gained access to education and economic opportunity, they would inevitably run into opposition from the white establishment. In Holsey and Turner’s view, there was no future for them other than in an independent state.

The editorial board of the \textit{Constitution} responded the same day, calling the “transportation or deportation of the negro to foreign parts, or the segregation of the two races in this country…simply a dream.” Surprisingly, the editorial placed faith in a future with minimal racial strife as more people became educated and owned businesses – of course, so long as Black citizens always remained second-class.

One potential motive for the \textit{Constitution}’s position was the undeniable importance of the Black working-class to the South’s economy – either as sharecroppers, factory men, or leased convicts – and the destabilizing consequences of mass migration westward. For example, the state of Georgia turned profits on average of $81,000\textsuperscript{75} per year leasing Black convicts (who made up 89% of Georgia’s incarcerated population) from 1901-1903. Combined, these contracts were worth over $6.5 million in today’s dollars by 1904.\textsuperscript{76}

Holsey responded again, reiterating his position that Black and white people were so distinct as to make their differences irreconcilable, and because de facto segregation already existed, why not make it permanent? The \textit{Constitution} published Holsey’s response again on September 29\textsuperscript{th}, reflecting, in part, religious figures’ privileged access to a public platform made available likely because Holsey’s advocacy didn’t raise any fundamental objections to white supremacist rule.\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{74} Dittmer, \textit{Black Georgia in the Progressive Era}, 177.
\textsuperscript{75} Approximately $2.3 million today.
\textsuperscript{77} Holsey, \textit{Bishop Holsey on the Race Problem}.
If John Temple Graves and Bishop Holsey advocated for more extreme solutions to the “race problem,” others sought to carve out moderate positions which would eventually lead to full equality. Booker Washington’s Atlanta Compromise speech represented one of the dominant wings of Black political thought, urging his people to “cast down your bucket where you are” and create material prosperity on the way to eliminating “racial animosities and suspicions.” Bishop Turner sounded a similar charge in the introductory pages to The Black Side in 1894, writing, “The time is ripe for the Negro to fight his own battles, seek his own fame, achieve his own greatness and immortalize his own name,” prioritizing self-sufficiency over demands for political and social equality. W.E.B. Du Bois took a slightly different route, organizing the Niagara Conference in 1905 to issue more militant and uncompromising calls for social and political equality. Holsey, Carter, Turner, Du Bois and Washington all understood the violence and inequality pervasive in the South, but differed significantly in what they believe to be the proper path forward.

An editorial in the Independent, usually a reliable organ for Washingtonian rhetoric, issued a bolder claim for equality, going beyond the rhetoric of Atlanta’s leading preachers who presumed racial and economic progress came before political and social equality. While less a proposed solution to racial tensions, Ben Davis’ newspaper fiercely defended the oft-questioned humanity of Black people.

The white man’s strenuous and industrious efforts to discriminate against the Negro and deny him the rights of a man is the highest evidence that he does not believe his superior doctrine…Was there any more cowardice and hypocrisy exhibited by a race than the white man who possesses all the wealth and intelligence of the country made possible by 250 years of our unpaid labor? The white man does not believe the Negro innately inferior.

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78 Washington, “Atlanta Compromise.”
80 “The white man does not believe the negro innately inferior,” Atlanta Independent, May 21, 1904.
Davis’ editorial also points to the material incentives held by white people in maintaining the fiction of Black inferiority – hoarding the access to resources, privileges, and rights derived from centuries of enslaved labor. There were no inherent racial differences – just disparate opportunities to attain a comfortable life and participate in democratic government.

The actions of working people once again stand apart from the elite strategies. Conflict on streetcars, in city parks, between everyday individuals and brutal police officers constituted both quotidian resistance to oppression and a belief that they had the same right to the city as white Atlantans. That is, they let their beliefs play out on the street. During the riot and its immediate aftermath, for instance, poorer Black people took up arms to defend their neighborhoods and engaged in street skirmishes with white marauders.\(^{81}\) While most assessments of Black politics in this period collapse into either a Washingtonian or Du Boisian framework, these episodes should caution us to remember serious divisions in political thought and action, tools used and discarded dependent on what best ensured daily survival.

**Conclusion**

Du Bois’ glowing and poetic description of Atlanta at the dawn of the 20\(^{th}\) century did not exactly match the daily lives facing most Black residents. Most people, regardless of race, were excluded from Atlanta’s material prosperity. Where a person lived seriously impacted both their quality of life and the degree to which they live self-determined lives. Municipal neglect meant that most Black residents went without basic needs. In response, they mobilized within communal places like churches, political and social groups, businesses, on street corners and in dives to organize and distribute cash assistance, protection, childcare, and other forms of aid. Moreover, some entered politics and civic life to argue for better redistribution of municipal resources.

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Black Atlantans adopted and subverted aspects of New South ideology, proselytizing individual moral reform and social uplift while remaining concerned about collective well-being and keenly aware of the tenuous position they occupied in the South. Working-class people, for their part, often took matters into their own hands, believing they were as entitled to enjoy urban amenities and public spaces as anyone else. The legacy of this period, in the form of institutions built, lessons learned, and battles fought would soon prove crucial in Atlanta’s coming riot, and influence an emerging cohort of reformers, leaders, and rebels.
Chapter II

The Tragedy at Atlanta

Here we have worked and prayed and tried to make good men and women of our colored population, and at our very doorstep the whites kill these good men. But the lawless element in our population, the element we have condemned fights back, and it is to these people that we owe our lives.

- William H. Crogman, President of Clark College, 1906

The massacre which took place in downtown Atlanta in September 1906 was no accident. Rapid growth, which strained Atlanta’s infrastructure, created an urban geography unthinkable in the decades prior – independent and ascendant Black communities competing for a slice of New South prosperity. They had built their own institutions and escaped the terror and surveillance which still characterized life in rural Georgia. Their progress, however, flew in the face of the white supremacist worldview, unfamiliar with autonomous Black people who dared claim space in urban life. The city’s elite, which hoarded most of Atlanta’s wealth, frequently leveraged the tensions produced by urban life to pit Black and white men against each other; politicians invoked threats of “Negro domination” designed to prevent multiracial political alliances.

Over time, white politicians and press outlets carefully constructed an image of the “criminal Negro,” usually male, prone to assaulting white women, beyond redemption and an existential threat to Atlanta’s future. White elites intertwined anxiety over Black material progress with affronts to white Southern manhood – the sense that white men could no longer protect or control their daughters and wives. So successful was this campaign that by 1906, there was little questioning of the false connection between Black people and criminal behavior. On the eve of the riot, the city was primed for violence.

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1 Dittmer, Black Georgia in the Progressive Era, 127.
In this chapter, I detail the ways in which white Atlanta criminalized Blackness at the turn-of-the-century, a process which hinged on casting certain places within the city, like the Decatur Street Dive or poor neighborhoods, as breeding grounds for unlawful and criminal activity. Like many other historians, I walk through how this discourse fueled the 1906 riot and forever altered the city’s racial politics. At the same time, I detail how Black people responded to their precarious position in Atlanta, including the heroic attempts by those considered “worthless” and irredeemable in resisting the white mob’s attempted evisceration of Black life – which, to the astonishment of well-to-do figures like William Crogman, likely saved thousands of lives.

A Narrative of Criminality

Khalil Gibran Muhammad’s 2010 book, *The Condemnation of Blackness*, describes the process by which crime statistics became foundational to the notion that Black people were inherently “criminal.” Though Muhammad situated his analysis in the urban North – Philadelphia, specifically – his argument lends itself to a clearer understanding of the early 20th century moment in Atlanta as well. In his introduction, Muhammad writes, “For white Americans of every ideological stripe – from radical southern racists to northern progressives – African American criminality became one of the most widely accepted bases for justifying prejudicial thinking, discriminatory treatment, and/or acceptance of racial violence as an instrument of public safety.”

Images of Black criminality permeated mass media in Atlanta. In the Atlanta Constitution, when Black people were discussed or mentioned in any detail, it was largely in the context of prisons, policing, violence, and crime. Periodically, the paper published notes about the city’s prison. In one of its earlier editions, from September 17th, 1884, the first paragraphs describe the reckless driving of Lon Wright and Jim Phillips, draymen who threatened the safety of children.

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and other pedestrians because of their speed. Later, the Constitution mentions the case of Willis Johnson, the “notorious negro burglar,” whose case was apparently so open-and-shut that he was immediately sent to the city prison.

However, Frank Sellie, a young white man, received different treatment. After he “raised a row” at a “disreputable house” on Alabama Street, he faced fines of only $15 – though evidence showed he gave a “terrible beating” to one of the Black women occupying the house. The Constitution made sure to note that he was young and “of good appearance.” Black people accused of far more minor offenses received none of the charity Sellie did – indeed, one could read the Constitution’s account and conclude that Sellie’s behavior was aberrant, and fundamentally justified because he provided moral discipline for “disreputable” Black women.

Instances of criminality appeared frequently in the pages of the Constitution throughout the 1880s and 1890s. The headline announcing the lynching of Warren Powell in September 1899 stated, “The Rope Route is the course taken by a colored ruffian. An attempted outrage on a White School girl—The perpetrator is Swung to the Limb of a tree.” The Constitution worded the headline so as to suggest the responsibility for the lynching was entirely Powell’s – no other actors were present – and that even the mere possibility of assault upon a white woman justified the mob’s response.

Sensationalized, graphic headlines were designed to inflame and outrage white Atlantans. On February 25th, 1891, the Constitution titled one of its reports, “A Lady’s Throat Cut by a Burly Negro Yesterday Evening. She Was Returning Home From Her Work When She Was Assailed by

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3 Draymen are people who deliver beers for a brewery.
4 “About the city prison,” Atlanta Constitution, September 17, 1884.
5 “The Rope Route is the course taken by a colored ruffian,” Atlanta Constitution, September 5, 1889.
the Fiendish Negro—Talk of Lynching.” The writer, unnamed, seems to relish the notion that the “black rascal” would receive his “just deserts” if caught.⁶

More encounters between police and Black people, in suburbs like East Point and inner-city areas like Darktown, received the same scandalous treatment in the papers. Patrolman Phillips, policing a “dark alley in Darktown,” got into a hand-to-hand fight with “a desperate negro,” which resulted in only a “hairbreadth escape from death.”⁷ White Atlanta obsessed over Darktown in particular, filling comics, newspapers, and books with false images of a lawless and mysterious neighborhood, an object of both fear and fascination.⁸

The story of Phillips’ encounter in Darktown marks how Black urban neighborhoods, already considered disease-ridden, violent slums, came to be deemed so dangerous that not even armed police officers were safe. Prisons often became the only way to “tame” Black people – Atlanta’s Judge Broyles, the city recorder, while pleading for the creation of a juvenile reformatory for white youth left out Black children. “I have never sent young white boys or white girls to the stockade, as I have realized that would mean their complete ruin.” Presumably, Black children were already criminal and “ruined,” which made prison the only logical place for them. These accounts manufactured a white imagination depicting Black “criminals” lurking at every corner, ready to steal, assault, and murder.⁹

Newspapers manipulated discourse conflating Blackness and criminality, selling papers by generating fear of Black men. From 1905 to 1906, papers like the Atlanta Georgian, the Journal,

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⁶ “A Lady’s Throat Cut by a Burly Negro Yesterday Evening,” Atlanta Constitution, February 25, 1891.
⁷ “In Fulton County Jail,” Atlanta Constitution, September 11, 1891; “In a Dark Alley,” Atlanta Constitution, September 28, 1892.
⁸ One item in the Schomburg Center’s collection was a 1901 short story called “Fred Fearnot in Atlanta, or, The Black fiend of Darktown.” I do not cite from this story here, but it is a strange example of fiction, ostensibly for children, which likely circulated in Atlanta during this period.
and the *Constitution* published dozens of riveting accounts depicting brawls on Atlanta’s trolleys and streetcars.¹⁰ On the day of the Atlanta race riot, September 22nd, 1906, the front pages of Atlanta’s four major papers broadcasted the alleged assaults committed by Black men on white women, the *Journal* going so far as to say, “Angry Citizens in Pursuit of Black Brute Who Attempted Assault.”¹¹ As noted by commentators writing in the riot’s aftermath, and later historians of the Atlanta race riot, the newspapers played an outsized role in encouraging white men to form lynch mobs terrorizing the city.

A 1904 Atlanta Conference on crime in Georgia directly confronted issues of Black criminality and came to different conclusions. In 1903, the city of Atlanta made over fourteen thousands arrests, of which 60% were Black people, despite then making up only 40% of the city’s population. In comparison, police in St. Louis made only eighteen-hundred more arrests despite the city’s population being six times greater than Atlanta’s.¹² Even Atlanta’s mayor, James Woodward, lamented the fact that the city’s courts tried over 17,000 cases in 1904, and he vowed to crack-down on the city’s over-policing issue.¹³ The 1904 Conference concluded that the real causes of high crime numbers were institutional racism, the lack of equal police protection, implementation and exploitation of vagrancy laws, and a racialized double-standard in the administration of justice. The report noted, “the methods of punishment of Negro criminals [including lynching] is calculated to breed crime rather than stop it.”¹⁴

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¹³ Du Bois, 52.

¹⁴ Du Bois, 65.
Still, the largely exaggerated crisis of criminal behavior became a major target of social reform organizations, which had been reflected in the mission of the Carrie Steele Home discussed in Chapter I. For example, the Florence Crittenton movement, started in 1883, sought to provide spaces to “save” prostitutes and other “fallen” women. By 1898, these Crittenton homes existed in Atlanta, too, and mostly targeted women working in places like Courtland Street, an infamous prostitution locale. In a paper titled “The Church as an Institution for Social Betterment,” the leader of First Congregational Church, Reverend Proctor, exemplified the attitude and tone Atlanta’s social reformers took toward sex workers or unwed pregnant women, deemed to be engaging in criminal or immoral behavior.

All churches should unite to support the New Florence Crittenden Home, just established by the Negroes of this city of Atlanta. [Rescue] circles should be formed in every church. The shameless districts should be regularly canvassed, and a way of escape be made for every erring girl that wants to lead a pure life. Is it not high time we stop our shouting, be sober, open our eyes, and do something to save the little black girls that are tripping head long down to hell? I lay this question solemnly upon the consciences of the colored churches of Atlanta.¹⁵

Undoubtedly, constrained economic opportunity for Black folks meant that income-generating activities were difficult to find, especially for women. Beyond domestic service, laundry or washing, or informal street vending, sex work presented one of the few additional jobs available to all women. Few reformers in this period, however, considered the reality of sex work and instead focused on its supposed immorality, and the responsibility of all religious Atlantans to save these women and provide them a different life path – one of domesticity. Absent, typically, were the perspectives of sex workers themselves, who not only endured the violence and vulnerability of sex work but also found themselves subject to both white and Black condemnations of their choices.

Beliefs in an inherent relationship between Blackness and criminal behavior permeated the imaginations of prominent white Atlantans, and even some Black elites. One observer, generalizing from his interactions, argued, “The better-class Negroes have two sources of fear: one of the criminals of their own race…and the other the fear of the white people.”

Caught in the middle, elites likely internalized some of the rhetoric about Black lawlessness while also cognizant that they could be considered criminal threats at any point. Thus, anti-Black beliefs firmly entrenched, white Atlanta was convinced Black criminality menaced their civilization and the New South city they worked so hard to build.

**Black Self-Defense and White Rage**

By September of 1906, as the sweltering Georgia summer collapsed into a mild autumn, tensions in Atlanta had reached an untenable level. For months, inflammatory newspaper headlines relayed story after story of gruesome assaults on white women, supposedly by lust-filled, beast-like Black men. In all, these headlines documented twelve alleged crimes, seven of which were later revealed to be based on dubious evidence, exaggerations, or outright lies. Yet, white Atlantans were intensely preoccupied with this fantasy of a “negro savage” terrorizing and raping white women, and commonplace rhetoric connecting criminal Black men to urban disorder bolstered their fears.

News of “unprovoked” attacks in Anderson County, South Carolina on September 14th only increased the perception that Atlanta would be next.

Though eventually every case failed to produce concrete evidence of a criminal epidemic, sensationalized coverage of these events produced such anxiety where “many white women in Atlanta dare not leave their homes after dark [and] many white men carry arms to protect...”

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17 Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness*.
themselves and their families.” Black Atlantans found themselves either presumed dangerous, and thus vulnerable to white vigilante justice, or accused of protecting Black “criminals.”

Throughout 1906, gubernatorial candidates Hoke Smith and Clark Howell had also leveraged white fears of rampant Black criminality for electoral advantage. Howell, a Georgia state politician, owned a majority stake in the Constitution and later became its editor; Smith, a prominent white supremacist, was the one-time owner of the rival newspaper in Atlanta, the Journal. Both weaponized their ties to the city’s dailies to support their candidacies and stir racist hatred. In the primary as well as in the general, disenfranchisement was the central issue. Smith proposed complete removal of the vote, and even the use of physical violence, as a way to eliminate the threat of “Negro domination,” or what Populist leader Tom Watson called “social and industrial chaos” as a result of Black rape. Smith asked voters, “Shall it be ballots now or bullets later?” In case Smith did not clearly convey his point, he often fondly invoked the memory of racial massacre in Wilmington, North Carolina just eight years earlier. In post-Redemption Georgia, provoking racist fear and hostility proved to be a political winner – and a harbinger of violence to come.

Different public spaces heightened a perceived sense of urban disorder. Commentators considered the vice districts, filled with saloons and dance halls around Decatur, Peters, and Marietta streets, as a major source of crime. In addition, numerous clashes on streetcars, coupled with the conjured threat of Black rapists, brought “the best known and most influential” white citizens together to “suppress crime.” They recommended the city close its dives and enforce segregation on trolleys to “protect white women from negro brutes” and end the “Reign of Terror” taking place in Atlanta. Prudently – at least, from their perspective – these citizens did not call for

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20 Godshalk, Veiled Visions, 25.
any “white cap organization or [ku klux klan]” because, though perhaps composed of “good men,” they “cannot be properly controlled” – and this particular group of citizens was law-abiding and progressive.22 White Atlantans’ reactions had quickly escalated.

One letter to the editor in the Atlanta Georgian stated that “patience has ceased to be a virtue” and, less than twenty-four hours before the riot, an Atlanta News editorial called white men to action, asking them, “Shall these black devils be permitted to assault and almost kill our women, and go unpunished?”23 Sensational journalism and political calculations made mob violence the only viable option for white men to retain their masculine virtue and save their prosperous, gleaming city from Black men. That is, white supremacy grasped for the familiar cudgel of extralegal violence and murder to quell the appearance of insubordination, which threatened to upend the social and racial order of the New South’s flagship city.

Violence began early in the evening on Saturday, September 22nd. Newsboys paraded through the streets with special editions of the city’s newspapers, announcing two new assaults on white women by Black men and setting the city’s weekend revelers on edge.

Soon after, an innocent drunken tussle between some white laborers and a Black man, just outside Decatur Street bars patronized by blue-collar people regardless of race, quickly turned serious. A white mob formed, and shouts rang out calling for attacks on Black men as revenge. For the next few days, in an event which garnered national and international headlines as far away as Paris and Manchester, white mobs tore through the city, indiscriminately murdering any Black citizen they found.24

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22 “Meeting of Citizens to Suppress Crime,” Atlanta Constitution, September 1, 1906.
24 Godshalk, Veiled Visions.
The mob descended first upon a young disabled bootblack, who they beat to death in the street. The white male mob – which at some point measured over 10,000 – stabbed Black men in the streets, threw them off incoming streetcars, and chased others through downtown Atlanta. They targeted and destroyed businessman Alonzo Herndon’s barbershop on Peachtree Street and nearly killed a young man named Milton Brown who stumbled upon the mob on Peters Street. The mob almost made its way to the nearby campuses of Atlanta University, Spelman Seminary, and Atlanta Baptist College, threatening to “burn all Negro colleges,” but likely turned back at the prospect of battling with a large group of prepared men who, by that point, had received word of the mob’s rampage and stood ready to defend the campus.25

By 8pm on Saturday night, the mob continued to grow, coalescing around Decatur Street despite appeals from some prominent white citizens, like Mayor James Woodward, to stand down. Woodward’s attempts were likely tepid, at best – later he would be quoted as saying that the only way to prevent a race riot was to “remove the cause” by “unceremoniously” dealing with “black brutes.”26 Frenzied, the mob moved on, indiscriminately fired thousands of gunshots, damaged business storefronts, threw streetcars off their rails, and called for killing every last Black man in the city.27 The Atlanta Constitution echoed the rioters’ genocidal calls, arguing that the riot’s end depended on Black people who had it “in their power to Stop Trouble or bring on War of Extermination.”28 As evening turned into the early morning on September 23rd, corpses were dragged to Marietta Street and laid at the base of the statue of Henry Grady, the late apostle of the New South.29

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27 Godshalk, Veiled Visions, 88-91.
28 “Riot’s End All Depends on Negroes,” Atlanta Constitution, September 25, 1906.
29 Godshalk, Veiled Visions, 93.
The mob continued to terrorize the city as Black Atlantans fled to the refuge of their neighborhoods. The police did “practically nothing” to stop the violence. Throughout the city, white vigilante groups skirmished with small groups and individuals. At the same time, in East Point, the riot’s hysteria provoked another lynching of a man named Zeb Long. Local militia, finally called in by Governor Joseph Terrell, helped to quell some of the mob’s violence yet they did nothing to disarm the white men patrolling the city. According to W.E.B. Du Bois, one hardware firm alone sold $16,000 worth of weapons to white people. However, in response to rumors of potential counterattacks on white areas of the city, militia members did move into Black communities searching for weapons and ammunition. If they received advanced word of the militia’s searches, Black Atlantans hid weapons they had smuggled into the city over the past month, having read the signs that such a riot could break out at any time.

Black resistance to the mob’s advances took place in two historic, tight-knit communities – Darktown, just north of the riot’s origins, and Brownsville, a middle-class settlement near Clark College and Gammon Theological Seminary just four miles away in a suburb called South Atlanta. In Darktown, armed residents shot out the lights and boldly welcomed the mob. The rioters approached but quickly retreated once Darktown’s residents fired two initial volleys, unexpectedly dazed by the fierce resistance offered by the section’s mostly poor residents. Darktown remained on high alert for the next few days – on Monday, at the corner of Harris and Butler streets, a group of Darktown residents chased and nearly killed a white man named Frank DeVos, signaling a fierce desire to protect their homes from any white intrusion.

30 Article on the Atlanta race riots broken into two parts: "From the point of view of the whites" by John Temple Graves, and "From the point of view of the Negroes" by W. E. B. Du Bois. Published in "The World Today," 1173. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312) Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts. Amherst Libraries.
32 Godshalk, Veiled Visions, 102.
33 “Darktown Mob is Investigated,” Atlanta Constitution, September 29, 1906.
Rumors that residents of Brownsville – who were terrified themselves – planned to attack white settlements brought police officers led by Henry Poole and Jim Heard to Jonesboro Road, just outside the boundaries of the village. Described as the “industrious, property-owning sort,” Brownsville residents and the county police officers began exchanging shots, the citizens of Brownsville believing that these white men were vigilantes, not police officers. Once the officers called in reinforcements, they soon overtook the settlement, assaulting, arresting, and killing multiple people. Gammon President J.W.E. Bowen was hit in the head with the butt of a rifle. A couple hundred were arrested and transported into Atlanta; four Brownsville residents were left dead, including the grocer Frank Fambro.34

The state militia eventually regained control over the city, placing it “practically under martial law.”35 While the city’s official death toll counted twelve, this number is highly disputed. Both Black and white citizens declared that the number was dozens more, if not hundreds.36 In the riot’s aftermath, many Black Atlantans lost jobs, family members, and some ultimately made the decision to flee the city. The Savannah Tribune cautioned “good colored people” to be “discreet and law-abiding” and join hands with the “good white people” to “put down lawlessness.” Jesse Max Barber, editor of the Atlanta-based Voice of the Negro and forced to flee the city after criticizing the white press, responded with justifiable anger, calling Atlanta “the city that struts before the world as the liberal gateway…but which is really the same old Atlanta steeped in the foul odours of ante-bellum traditions and held firmly in the remorseless clutch of a vile and unreasonable race prejudice.”37 Barber also claimed to have evidence that white men in blackface

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35 Jesse Max Barber, “The Atlanta Tragedy,” The Voice, November 1906.
36 For years after the riot, Black undertaker David T. Howard would tell friends stories of how the city asked him to secretly take care of victims’ bodies, white and Black, not wanting to include them in the official death count.
37 Barber, “The Atlanta Tragedy,” The Voice, 474.
had staged the reported assaults on white women, suggesting a more intentional conspiracy to plunge the city into violence.

For Barber, the riot revealed Atlanta’s true colors, tolerant of its Black populace only insofar as they presented no material, physical, or psychological threat to white supremacy – which took form as property-holding, integrated public spaces, or (largely fictional) accounts of assaults on white women by Black men. Adrienne Herndon expressed similar fears about the future and her initial desire to move her family north.38 While Atlanta ultimately didn’t experience a sustained Black exodus from the city, it did alter how people like W.E.B. Du Bois, John and Lugenia Burns Hope, Reverend Proctor, and many others would strategize for their continued survival in the Gate City.

The massacre’s quiet ending ushered in efforts to restore law and order, repair Atlanta’s reputation, restart the economy, and maintain white supremacy while finally finding a solution to the “race problem.”

*Atlanta’s Reconstruction*

The massacre stopped all economic activity in Atlanta for a week – factories were closed, streets were empty, and hundreds of domestic servants and laborers didn’t report to work. Mob violence had shattered the image of Atlanta as an enlightened and progressive city where commerce reigned supreme. Northern investors were suddenly nervous that Atlanta wasn’t as stable an investment as previously thought. The Atlanta Clearing House Association, “the best and most reliable business and commercial thermometer,” reported Atlanta’s first decrease in monthly bank clearings in years. During the same week in September 1905, bank clearings were $200,000

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higher than in 1906, nearly $6 million in today’s figures.39 The city’s white elite, embarrassed by
the economic hit caused by the riot, castigated the “ignorant” white mob and Black “criminals” for
ruining Atlanta’s good name.

Black and white observers speculated intensely as to the riot’s cause. Jesse Max Barber was a
lone voice blaming white supremacist politicking, exposing the myth of rampant Black-on-white
assault. Du Bois echoed his future Crisis colleague Barber, writing, “The real cause of the riot was
two years of vituperation and traduction of the Negro race by the most prominent candidates for
the governorship, together with a bad police system and a system of punishing crime which is a
disgrace to any civilized state.”40

Du Bois, likely drawing from data uncovered at the 1904 Atlanta University Conference,
demonstrated why Black residents considered the Atlanta police “their oppressors,” pointing to the
city’s extremely disproportionate arrest rate compared to New Orleans and Savannah, designed to
drag people into the state’s brutal but profitable convict-leasing system.41 On the Sunday before
the riot, the Independent described a scene where a “big, strapping” policeman “knocked [a] poor
Negro about like a dog” just for “a little saucy” talk, although he was already under arrest.42 Du
Bois’ analysis revealed Black people’s distrust in city leadership, how threats of carceral
punishment policed their ability to move freely throughout the city, and white people’s ability to
act with impunity.

If Du Bois and Barber focused their criticisms on white authorities, Ben Davis toed a more
moderate line. From his perch in the Independent, Davis preached the need for law and order long

(MS 312) Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts. Amherst Libraries.
41 See note above.
before the riot and upped his intensity in the following weeks. He had “no patience for any brute” who assaulted women, but he had equally little patience for the lynch mob, preferring that the normal mechanisms of criminal justice take their course. Davis railed against the “loafers, gamblers, and bums who steal, commit rape, and do all manners of crime” after their weekend nights in Atlanta’s dives. In the edition of the Independent published the day before the riot commenced, Davis joined with Reverend Proctor to argue for “apply[ing] the knife to the root” and finding the courage to run criminals out of the city by closing the dives.

Though undoubtedly shaken by the riot’s violence, the editorial pages of Davis’ paper attempted to draw a clear line between his respectable, middle-class community and the working-class people thought to be the source of Atlanta’s crime. Davis called for “Wisdom, Justice, and Moderation” in dealing with white Southerners “who are our best friends” and equally disinterested in “[paralyzing] social and industrial conditions by stubbornness, [or] wholesale exodus.” In the months following the massacre, Davis consistently called for the evenhanded application of justice while crusading for the inherent dignity of Black Atlantans, even if that meant accepting the criminalization of a certain segment of the city’s residents. Davis’ rhetoric invited an alliance between elite men across race by emphasizing shared notions of status and upstanding behavior.

Still others expressed their shock, anger, and dismay at the riot in raw, emotional terms. An anonymous young student, who eventually fled Atlanta with hundreds of others, spoke to the indignity and violence all Black people faced every day, not just during the riot, and regardless of socio-economic status. He wrote:

“But listen: How would you feel, if with our history, there came a time when, after speeches and papers and teachings you acquired property and were educated, and were a fairly good man, it were impossible for you to walk the street (for whose maintenance you were taxed) with your sister without being in mortal fear of death if you resented any insult offered to her? How would you feel if you saw a governor, a mayor, a sheriff, whom you could not oppose at the polls, encourage by deed or word or both, a mob of ‘best’ and worst citizens to slaughter your people in the streets and in their own homes and in their places of business? Do you think you could resist the same wrath…to throw bombs? I can resist it, but with each new outrage I am less able to resist it.”

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On the other hand, Atlanta’s white leaders wasted no time condemning the mob’s violence while validating some of its underlying motivations. A September 27th editorial in Clark Howell’s Constitution called for law and order, lamenting the fact that “Atlanta must shoulder the malodorous credit for this thing” as “thousands of negroes, the best class of the race, the law-abiding class” had left the city and business stagnated for three days. Neither “representative citizens,” the “conservative element,” nor “confederate soldiers…[who had] lived in the days of genuine negro peril” were responsible, but rather that “irresponsible class” driven by “passion and bloodmania.” Calling for more stringent and aggressive policing, the Constitution nevertheless reiterated its support for “supreme measures for the protection of our women, utterly regardless of the cost.” In other words, the Constitution found fault only in the mob’s uncontrollable rage, which had threatened the city’s business interests and national reputation – the paper still sympathized with the mob’s self-imposed responsibility to protect white women.

John Temple Graves, having long proved his affinity for white supremacist violence, wrote opposite of Du Bois “from the point of view of the whites.” He once again cast white and Black people as members of “antagonistic races.” To boost his legitimacy, Graves made clear that he was

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48 “After the Mob—What, if not Law and Order?” Atlanta Constitution, September 27, 1906.
a “dispassionate” student of the South’s racial tensions, and even sympathetic toward Black citizens who he claimed to defend during the riot’s most dangerous moments. While Graves professed no explicit defense of the mob, he described their actions as derived from the same instinct “that moves the gentlest of doves to fight for the birdlings in her nest,” a manly stand to save Georgia’s “noble women” from a “reign of terror.” Comparing the “Negro criminal” to cholera and yellow fever, Graves saw post-riot autopsies as an opportunity to find the “germ” in the “diseased conditions of the criminal Negro’s body,” which presupposed that each riot victim was deserving of their fate. Graves wielded immense influence in post-riot Atlanta as editor of the Georgian along with a national platform wedding white supremacy to law and order rhetoric.

The national press, on the other hand, offered disparate perspectives on the events in Atlanta. The Constitution devoted a full page to commentary from the Southern and Northern press given business leaders’ fears over the collapse of Atlanta’s carefully built progressive image. Some outlets, like those in Houston, New York, Savannah, and Chicago, were more sympathetic to Black Atlantans, blaming the violence on yellow journalism and race-baiting public officials. Others, like those in New Orleans, Knoxville, and Richmond blamed Black victims for bringing the riot on themselves with repeated assaults of white women.49 Southern papers in cities with sizable Black populations tended to sympathize with the mob, even if they disapproved of its “lawlessness.” Reactions from across the nation likely had a material impact on the perspectives of Atlanta’s elite, who had placed such a high premium on building the city’s reputation to attract capital and commerce.

In the week following the riot, “prominent Atlantans” met multiple times to determine how best to restore peace to the city. The Constitution reported that “substantial Negro leaders,”

49 “Press Comment on Atlanta’s Outbreak,” The Atlanta Constitution, September 26, 1906.
including Alonzo Herndon, Bishop Turner, Bishop Holsey, Reverend Proctor, Dr. Slater and Reverend R.D. Stinson, called for a conference with Mayor Woodward and Colonel Clifford Anderson, commander of the militia troops. Their meeting took place at 11am on the 25th. While the contents of this meeting are unknown, the leaders who attended reflected those traditionally called to the helm, and it was these individuals who would hold the most sway in leading mainstream Black cooperation with whites during Atlanta’s “reconstruction.” Booker T. Washington, who had close relationships with many of Atlanta’s leading men, had also “strongly urge[d] the best white people and the best colored people [to] come together in council [in order to] stop the present disorder.”

Later that afternoon, a larger group numbering approximately one thousand citizens met at the Fulton County courthouse to discuss the riot’s causes and future preventive measures. During the meeting, a physician, Dr. W.F. Penn, appealed to the white men in attendance for protection and help – in response a Confederate veteran named A.J. McBride stood and vowed to protect Penn. This story spread quickly in the pages of Atlanta’s newspapers, an opportunity to project an image of the city’s best citizens taking seriously the need for cross-racial collaboration and the restoration of business-as-usual Atlanta.

Moreover, this group quickly established a fund to support the recuperation of property damaged in the riot, contributing $4,000 to which the City Council would add $1,000 more. Following this meeting, Atlanta’s upper-class white men formed the Atlanta Civic League, with its elite Black men forming the Colored Co-Operative Civic League led by Reverend Proctor. The Civic League promised to ensure fair treatment for the city’s Black citizens in the courts, in interactions with police, and on the city’s streetcars. Lugenia Burns Hope, wife of Atlanta Baptist

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College President John Hope, wrote retrospectively in her private journal that “the white man learned [that] there must be cooperation.”\textsuperscript{52} Ray Stannard Baker, a northern journalist, echoed Hope, calling this “\textit{the first important occasion} in the South…to get the two races together for any serious consideration of their differences.”\textsuperscript{53} The Civic Leagues also committed themselves to addressing future problems in Atlanta through elite consensus under the implicit assumption that there must be no challenge to white hegemony.

Charles T. Hopkins, leader of the Civic League, summarized the group’s position and their motivations succinctly – his speech is the clearest indication of mainstream white Atlanta’s opinion on the causes and consequences of the riot:

Saturday evening at eight o’clock…the credit of Atlanta was good for any number of millions of dollars in New York or Boston or any financial center; to-day we couldn’t borrow fifty cents. The reputation we have been building up so arduously for years has been swept away in two short hours. Not by men who have made and make Atlanta, not by men who represent the character and strength of our city, but by hoodlums, understrappers and white criminals. Innocent negro men have been struck down for no crime whatever, while peacefully enjoying the life and liberty guaranteed to every American citizen. The negro race is a child race. We are a strong race, their guardians. We have boasted of our superiority and we have now sunk to this level—we have shed the blood of our helpless wards. Christianity and humanity demand that we treat the negro fairly. He is here, and here to stay…it is our Christian duty to protect him. I for one, and I believe I voice the best sentiment of this city, am willing to lay down my life rather than to have the scenes of the last few days repeated.\textsuperscript{54}

Hopkins’ statement illustrates the brand of paternalist racism that would come to dominate Atlanta’s politics – a desire to “civilize” African Americans, treat them fairly, but never in any way that would upset the foundations of white supremacy. Hopkins noted the economic threat posed by the riot and the city’s desire to quickly restore confidence in Atlanta’s market. Further, in completely dismissing the perspectives of the white working class, who made up the bulk of the

\textsuperscript{52} Rouse, \textit{Lugenia Burns Hope}, 44.
\textsuperscript{54} Baker, 14-15.
rioters (though evidence suggests that many middle- and upper-class white Atlantans took part in the violence, and perhaps orchestrated it) he demonstrated a distaste for poorer citizens who, in his view, did not contribute to Atlanta’s prosperity but attempted to destroy it. At the same time, like Graves, Hopkins invoked the collective “we” in his statement, hinting that the rioters’ whiteness shielded them from full condemnation for the riot’s consequences.

As commentators in Atlanta and across the South began to think of solutions to prevent future race riots, Hopkins’ beliefs became a widely accepted paradigm. In the following year, former Georgia governor W.J. Northen attempted to start civic league branches throughout the state, though it appears to have been a short-lived effort.\[55\]

Atlanta’s political leadership quickly cracked down on the institutions blamed for the violence. On the 26th, the city council condemned “lawless negroes” and moved to revoke all alcohol licenses from business establishments on Decatur and Peters streets starting October 1st. The city also sought to mandate racial segregation in saloons and dance halls and they even considered fully prohibiting alcohol sales to Black people. The council proposed another discriminatory measure to raise the cost of liquor licenses, which would, in Independent’s view, force many barkeepers out of business and grant a monopoly to white saloon-owners.\[56\] The Georgia state legislature eventually mandated statewide prohibition in 1908 – temperance campaigns boosted by arguing alcohol encouraged Black-on-white sexual violence – though authorities had trouble preventing multiracial groups from congregating in the “near-beer” saloons popular after prohibition’s passage. While alcohol was condemned as a moral evil, white Atlanta clearly thought only Black citizens needed to be regulated and forced from the popular dives.

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\[55\] The Atlanta Constitution stops covering Northen’s activities, and news of the Civic League, in early 1907. 
\[56\] City Council Minutes, September 25-26, 1906, Row 5, Section C, Shelf 5, City of Atlanta Records, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Georgia.; “The Problem Solver Much in Evidence,” Atlanta Independent, October 13, 1906.
Throughout October, Davis grew more strident in criticizing the city’s crackdown on vice, making Black people feel that “every city ordinance is made for [their] punishment.” He nonetheless still sought common cause with the city’s respectable whites, who quickly recruited more Civic League participants and prevented a resurgent lynch mob from attacking another man, Joe Glenn, accused of rape in December. Glenn worked through the Civic Leagues, calling first on Davis who cooperated with Hopkins and two other white men defending Glenn in court and winning an innocent verdict. Unfortunately, Glenn was forced to clandestinely flee the city to escape a potential lynching.

From October to December, multiple bodies issued reports on the riot’s causes and consequences. A Fulton County Grand Jury strongly critiqued the inefficacy of the city’s police force for neglecting their duties, potentially due to their “active sympathy with the rioters.” A white committee led by W. G. Cooper, secretary of the Chamber of Commerce, and George Muse, a merchant, authored a report stating that riot did little to prevent crime but rather led to the slaughter of many innocent people who “left behind small children and widows,” orphans, and led to permanent disfigurement and disability for many of the riot’s wounded. The report concluded by emphasizing the good character of the majority of Atlanta’s citizens, and a determination to not let a lawless few ruin the city’s good name.

By January 1907, it appeared that Atlanta had found a workable solution to the riot’s consequences, seeking cooperation when racial tensions flared and restoring normal business operations to the city. In December, Ben Davis led one of his editorials with “It is time for

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60 Baker, 10.
constructive work.” Reverend Proctor, at the invitation of Booker T. Washington, spoke at Tuskegee on December 5th, predicting a “moral revolution” which would “extend over the whole South” as Atlanta embarked on its post-riot “reconstruction.” A new normal, with new leaders, took root.

The riot’s legacy deeply impacted the city while extending far beyond its borders. The events of September 1906 instigated Ray Stannard Baker’s *Following the Colour Line*, pushing the journalist to journey throughout the North and South to ascertain the true nature of American race relations, which would become an authoritative account for decades to come. Such violence also shook people like Du Bois to the core, forced many of Atlanta’s leading Black citizens to leave the city, and set the tone for continual waves of racial violence which rocked Southern and Northern cities and culminated in the bloody summer of 1919.

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The 1906 Atlanta Race Riot, which was less riot and more a mass lynching, fundamentally reconfigured Atlanta’s racial politics and laid bare the façade of the New South. Built on a carefully assembled discourse conflating Black people with criminal behavior, the riot also reflected socio-economic conflict, threatened white manhood, and the complex reactions of Black residents trying to make sense of their continued place in Atlanta. The specter of the riot’s potential reemergence at any given moment haunted a generation of Black and white leaders. The massacre shattered the illusion of Atlanta as a racial haven, set apart from the violence which characterized the rest of the South; it forced Black Atlantans to re-negotiate their efforts to build institutions, take care of their communities, accumulate wealth, and guarantee daily survival.

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63 Godshalk, *Veiled Visions*, 197.
Chapter III

Organizing Black Atlanta

The healthful growth of our democratic civilization is dependent upon the development of this more completely healthful environment – the organized community.

- Lugenia Burns Hope, personal notes, 1920s

In the decade and a half following those harrowing days in September 1906, Black Atlantans more vigorously staked out their territory, even in the face of hardening Jim Crow segregation and persistent attempts by white citizens to spatially confine and marginalize them. They made their own vision of the New South city even more tangible, more thoroughly part of the city’s built environment – but these citizens took different routes, divided along contentious lines of class, gender, and space. Creating place within de facto Black territory became even more meaningful as all, particularly women, built new institutions and networks where they established ownership and claimed a sense of belonging. The notion of an organized community became the basis for cooperation and collective survival from Auburn Avenue, to Darktown, Beaver Slide, and Summerhill – though, who exactly comprised the community remained an open question.

In this chapter I cover two major developments in how Black residents organized themselves and fought for badly needed resources and opportunities in post-massacre Atlanta. First, we start with the fall of a fragile multi-racial coalition as the state of Georgia moved to permanently disenfranchise its Black citizens. Next, we’ll discuss the community organizing model developed by Lugenia Burns Hope and the Neighborhood Union, and their more democratic methods to improve the everyday conditions faced by poor and working-class people. The Neighborhood

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1 Lugenia Burns Hope’s Personal Notes, “The Organized Community,” undated, Box 1, Folder 22, Neighborhood Union Collection, Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center, Atlanta, Georgia.
Union’s program broadens our understanding of the Southern reform tradition – rather than an entirely top-down imposition of middle-class values, the Union practiced an early example of place-based, social transformation guided by grassroots leaders themselves, a departure from pre-riot reform projects.

**Jim Crow, Disenfranchisement, and Atlanta’s New Normal**

From 1907-1908, Black people in Atlanta and throughout Georgia endured a spate of repressive measures intended to stamp out the supposed causes of the riot’s violence – alcohol, rape, criminality, and dancing hidden away in saloons, dives, and brothels. As if to foreshadow the measures to come, white Atlantans gathered in May 1907 to celebrate the culmination of a three-year long campaign to erect a Confederate monument on the grounds of Georgia’s capitol, just a few blocks away from some of the massacre’s most brutal violence.²

First, to contain the idle, “vagrant,” and thus “worthless Negro,” most of the city’s saloons had their liquor licenses revoked, were forced by the city to close temporarily, and later mandated via ordinance to no longer serve Black and white people in the same establishment. In May 1907, saloon proprietors advertised businesses like the “Butt-in Saloon, For Colored People Only,” an indication of a growing segregationist impulse in the riot’s wake. White Atlantans believed intoxication caused Black men to act savagely and made crime more likely – thus, groups like the Georgia Anti-Saloon League wielded the riot as a warning to those legislators not in favor of prohibition. Newly elected Governor Hoke Smith eventually signed legislation implementing prohibition in Georgia in 1908.³

In the meantime, police repeatedly raided bars and pool halls and made it impossible for any Black businessman to own establishments which could sell alcohol. The city and state’s repressive

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measures, however, could not prevent widespread violation of both prohibition and segregation in the vice districts, and businesses called “near-beer” saloons (which sold a slightly less alcoholic beer in order to evade state law) emerged in the same districts around Decatur, Edgewood Avenue, and Peters Street as they had pre-riot.

Prohibition measures, if weak, still signaled a concerted attack on the city’s working-class who made use of dives as refuges from white surveillance and an opportunity to relax, dance, let off steam, find sex, and have fun. Moreover, repressive legislation ensured these spaces were more or less controlled by white people and subject to violent policing – even if the dive’s patrons routinely contest the city’s authority. Respectable Atlanta considered the dives hedonistic dens of temptation and vice, a cancer on the city. For the Independent’s part, Davis called for all “self-respecting negroes” to join the side of prohibition rather than submit to white domination over the liquor or near beer trade.4

Hundreds of rural Black and white people came to the city’s saloons every weekend, and a quasi-form of social equality usually allowed for multiracial groups to drink or play pool together. More scandalous, reports circulated that sons and daughters of the city’s leading families could often be found dancing and drinking the night away in a Decatur Street dive. Makeshift dance floors, heavy with cigar smoke and filled with the sound of an emerging music form called the blues were safe places for workers to sing and dance. Upper-class white and Black Atlanta feared what they could not see, and initiated a cultural and social war against these “hurtful” amusements.5

Additional punitive measures targeted Black Atlantans rather than the white mob. Through the end of 1906 and the first half of 1907, more stringent segregation rules became the norm on the

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4 Editorial Commentary, Atlanta Independent, July 27, 1907.
city’s streetcars, and the Carrie Steele Orphans’ Home temporarily lost its appropriation from the city, though it was soon restored by the Civic League. Atlanta’s Board of Health threatened to only hire white laborers in the city’s sanitation department, which in late 1906 employed over 240 Black people at rates of $1.15 a day. Segregation extended to public parks (of which none existed for Black people), in the city prison and cemeteries, not to mention longstanding segregation in public education. In July 1907, the Georgia legislature even considered a bill to tax secret societies out of existence, a tactic to disrupt the social and cooperative functions of these groups, often the only source of insurance for Black families experiencing hardship. Jim Crow Atlanta weaponized government authority in an attempt to eliminate Black people from public spaces and public life, weaken self-sufficient communities by reducing their economic power, and spatially confine their presence either to impoverished neighborhoods or the backyard shacks of their white employers’ homes.  

Nonetheless, Black Georgians in cities like Atlanta, Macon, and Savannah faced their toughest challenge when Governor Smith sought to fulfill his signature campaign promise and disenfranchise specific voters via constitutional amendment. By June 1907, disenfranchisement became a weekly issue in the editorials of the Atlanta Independent, which considered the loss of the vote threatening to the “very foundation of our citizenship” and called for organizing against disenfranchisement as the “plain duty” of the race. The Georgia Suffrage League, made up of Georgia’s most prominent Black men, organized quickly. On June 29th, the front page of the Independent advertised an upcoming rally at Bishop Turner’s Tabernacle on Yonge street, assuring its multiracial audience that there was “No politics in it – simply a stand up for human rights. It is

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manhood rights vs. politics.” Indeed, in the eyes of Ben Davis, fighting against disenfranchisement not only affirmed Black citizenship, but preserved their manhood.

Davis claimed that over three thousand people turned out for the rally to hear figures like Wheat Street Baptist Church pastor Peter James Bryant, becoming “spell bound” by the first salvo in the “fight for freedom.” The Georgia Suffrage League urgently advertised multiple rallies throughout the summer and urged property-holding men pay their taxes so they could register – the Independent considered Atlanta the head of this movement. C.P. Goree, president of the League, and local lawyer Peyton Allen wrote columns to educate readers on the exact procedures required for them to vote. On July 28th, an eleven-page pamphlet published by the Georgia Suffrage League and signed by men like Herndon, Dr. H.R. Butler, druggist Moses Amos, Republican political appointee Henry Rucker, and representatives from Augusta, Macon, and Savannah, outlined their opposition to disenfranchisement.

Once again invoking the riot’s legacy, this statement called disenfranchisement “provocative of political agitation and racial strife,” liable to disrupt the “cooperative movements for law and order” represented by the Civic Leagues. The Suffrage League’s statement also pointed out that disenfranchisement was undemocratic and unconstitutional. They concluded their pamphlet with an appeal to the decency and better natures of white legislators:

We have contributed in our way no little to the prosperity of this state. We have cleared your forests and tilled your fields; we have constructed your railways and spanned your streams with bridges; we have built your houses and tended your cattle; we have cooked your food and cared for your little ones; we have served you by night and by day, in the time of peace and on the field of battle; we have done for you the best that we could. And now in this hour when our liberties are in the balance and while all the world looks on, we ask you to do to us as you would have us do to you...our ablest leaders have advised their people to trust you and withdraw themselves from politics...Will you now disregard your solemn vow and trample your honor in the dust by passing this bill?

7 “‘It Will Hurt My Business,’” Atlanta Independent, June 8, 1907.; Front Page, Atlanta Independent, June 29, 1907.
8 “Negroes Protest Against Bill,” Atlanta Constitution, July 28, 1907.
The Suffrage League, in effect, called the Civic League’s bluff. Would white citizens uphold the promises made after Atlanta’s riot, or would they choose white supremacy? These men explicitly claimed their right to belong in the South and in Georgia because their labor, their shaping of earth and infrastructure, mostly exploited and unfree, had made the South’s prosperity possible. As Ben Davis would write repeatedly in the *Independent*, the South was their home too, and they would fight for their continued place in it.

Nonetheless, by late August, the legislature passed its disenfranchisement amendment to the state constitution, which won overwhelming popular support in the 1908 general election. The Georgia Suffrage League’s robust attempts to register Black voters to prevent the coming “state of political serfdom” fell short.⁹ Georgia became one of the last Southern states to ratify disenfranchisement, a movement began by Mississippi in 1890. Davis mourned the passage of this amendment, considering it a stab in the back to those who thought white elites were ready to cooperate on racial issues, just so long as Black people did not overtly seek social or political equality. The *Independent* editorial staff joked that a bill would be raised in the next legislature to “make all Negroes ineligible for heaven, except those who can qualify under the grandfather clause.”¹⁰

The Georgia Suffrage League lost, despite taking advantage of the disenfranchisement battle to mobilize voter registration. Black Atlantans could now only vote in municipal elections, and their votes only mattered when the white primary did not guarantee a consensus candidate or an issue where their votes could play a tiebreaking role, much as they did during the prohibition battles of the 1880s. Crucially, disenfranchisement exposed the hollowness at the core of post-riot

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cooperation – legislators carefully constructed the amendment so as to ensure all white men, even those who had participated in the riot, could still vote. White Georgians preferred a totalizing form of white supremacy over good faith efforts to adjudicate Southern racial tensions.

*Proctor vs. Davis: Two Washingtonian Visions for Atlanta*

The end of disenfranchisement as a political issue severed the unity among Atlanta’s leading Black men, who each adapted somewhat differently to Jim Crow, even if they still frequently cooperated in business or charitable ventures. The conflict over which man would emerge as a “race leader” is seen most clearly in the split between First Congregational’s Reverend H. H. Proctor and the *Independent’s* Benjamin Davis. Less prominent at first but carried on by followers like John Hope, was the slow growth of the Niagara Movement and more vocal calls for political equality.

Reverend Henry Hugh Proctor, the graduate of Nashville’s Fisk University and Yale Divinity School, surged to national prominence after the Atlanta race riot, working closely with Tuskegee’s Booker Washington to present Atlanta as the leader in racial reconciliation. As noted by historian David Godshalk, Proctor’s interpretation of the riot’s aftermath, of engaged citizens coming together to promote order and social harmony, gained national influence especially as he toured the country raising money for his church.\(^\text{11}\) Even before the riot, Proctor was a fixture in Atlanta’s Black community, preaching to the city’s second-oldest congregation and frequently contributing to programs like the Atlanta University Conferences. In the following years, Proctor focused his efforts on eliminating crime and vice, making his church into a community center for Black Atlanta’s basic social and physical needs.

\(^\text{11}\) Godshalk, *Veiled Visions*, 203.
Proctor envisioned Black advancement predicated on wealth accumulation, upstanding moral behavior, religious piety, and educational excellence, qualities he embodied. His condemnations of criminality and vice won him a platform in the Atlanta Constitution, which singlehandedly anointed the minister as a leader of his community. In an edition called “Negro Progress,” published in the Constitution on October 30th, 1912, Proctor described how “Education and Religion Work Together for the Negro’s Good,” explaining that the church must become a dynamic and active force in daily life. For instance, instead of building a large and wasteful spire, Proctor boasted that First Congregational invested in its basement, which included facilities for a library, kindergarten, gym, bath, kitchen and rest rooms. Proctor described his own revelation about how churches must become the site of “amusements” in place of brothels or saloons.

For a number of years I sat on my doorstep and saw the people pass by my church on to the dive, the saloon, the brothel, the prison, the gallows. I asked myself why this was...the answer was at hand. The dive was wide open and illuminated. My church was locked and barred and dark. I decided to open the church and make it just as attractive, just as inviting as the dive...it would go a long way toward the effective redemption of the race to higher living.12

Proctor believed that his church, which loomed over the corner of Houston and Courtland streets, just a block north from Auburn Avenue, could become the social home of Atlanta’s Black community, a sanctuary amidst the moral evils of urban life and an opportunity for “the race” to find salvation and redemption. He hoped his church could play savior for the “colored working girl” too, vulnerable to sex work or exploitation at the hands of “bad people.” To Proctor, “Womanly chastity is the pedestal of racial stability,” adopting some of the language white men applied to Southern white women. To be clear, Proctor’s language is not equivalent to the rhetoric of patriarchal white manhood, but rather a clever, if sexist, use of respectable discourse to signal progress for a white audience reading the Constitution.

12 “Negro Progress,” Atlanta Constitution, August 30, 1912.
Proctor concluded his article by noting the praise his church received from the likes of President William Howard Taft, Booker T. Washington, and Bishop Henry McNeal Turner. He was convinced his model of “practical Christianity” could spread throughout the South, starting in Atlanta. “Lift up your eyes and see the hills around the city covered with colleges for colored youth…As they go back to their homes they will carry the vision of a practical Christianity for their people” and further racial progress.\textsuperscript{13} Throughout the 1910s, Proctor applied his philosophy to future campaigns to shut down dance halls and dives, at times opposing racial segregation in housing while at others cooperating with white leadership to drive the city’s Black workers to his church. Proctor and First Congregational, initially the only interracial church in Atlanta in the late 1860s, positioned themselves as intermediaries between white and Black Atlanta.

Ben Davis, the strategic, crafty newspaper editor and District Secretary for the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows in Georgia, considered himself both the paragon of middle-class upward mobility and a tribune for the masses. He detested the likes of Du Bois, Henry Rucker, and eventually Reverend Proctor, who he believed selfishly claimed leadership while doing nothing to materially improve their communities. Like Washington, Davis believed in industrial education and racial cooperation in business, but he also fiercely critiqued white neglect of the city’s Black public schools, of attempts at residential segregation and disenfranchisement, and the “loafers” and “vagrants” who he believed impeded Black progress.\textsuperscript{14}

The purest expression of Davis’ vision for Black Atlanta took the form of the Odd Fellows Block, a piece of property valued at over $300,000 ($8.8 million today) which stretched from Butler to Bell streets on Auburn Avenue. Davis’ considerable influence within the Odd Fellows enabled him to pool the organization’s funds and make the purchase, claiming that it was the most

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} For examples, see \textit{Independent} editorials in 1904, 1906, 1907, and 1908.
“costly and spacious Negro property in the world.” Booker Washington called it “Atlanta’s monument.”15 The Odd Fellows office building housed multiple Black-owned businesses, including the Atlanta State Savings Bank, North Carolina Mutual, the Gate City Drug Store, and the offices of longtime Atlanta physician H.R. Butler. In the Independent’s coverage of the building’s development, Davis never shied from highlighting his own role in making it possible.16

By 1915, the Odd Fellows block also contained an auditorium used for showing films and different vaudeville or musical performances. Atop the office building, the Roof Garden provided a space for “respectable” dancing high above the traditional dives just a few blocks away. This scene functioned as a visual and physical manifestation of Davis’ hope that lower-status Black people would see the Odd Fellows block and aspire to the trappings of respectability. The Odd Fellows block also vindicated Davis’ belief that cooperation could produce a space all their own, without any reliance on white citizens and absent the indignities they suffered in segregated public spaces.17

Taking this belief a step further, Davis and the Odd Fellows even advertised the purchase of cheaply available land in Twiggs County, Georgia for the construction of the “Odd Fellows City,” reminiscent of John Hope and W.E.B. Du Bois’ early dreams of an all-Black city on the Georgia coast. While this city never came to fruition, it demonstrated the extent to which Davis believed the future of urban life depended on the creation of distinctly Black-run spaces which reflected the best “the race” had to offer.18 This vision was as much about collective uplift as it was Davis’ own ambition – he clearly considered himself the rightful inheritor of Booker Washington’s legacy. On

16 “A Visit to the Odd Fellows’ Building,” Atlanta Independent, July 12, 1913
18 “Odd Fellow City as Laid Off by Engineer,” Atlanta Independent, October 25, 1913.
the same day the *Independent* announced Washington’s death in 1915, Davis placed a full-page advertisement with the headline, “Ben Davis, Atlanta’s Leading Colored Citizen, And the Great Work is He Doing for His Race.”

Davis viewed Proctor as a threat to his bid for leadership and repeatedly blasted the Reverend in his editorials. In March 1912, Davis began criticizing the *Constitution*’s self-appointing of race leaders, a swipe at figures like Proctor and Reverend Stinson, superintendent of the white-backed Atlanta Normal and Industrial Institute. In August, Davis specifically attacked Proctor, blaming the collapse of the post-riot Civic League on Proctor’s need to “take all the glory to himself at the expense of the other pastors in the city,” thereby killing the movement. Davis accused Proctor of removing himself from Black cultural and civic life, preferring only to promote himself. This editorial apparently provoked Proctor to devote an entire sermon to the *Independent*, denouncing the paper and Ben Davis as liars – to which Davis replied with, “There is no need of the good Doctor losing his head. Keep cool, and answer these queries. Don’t be a coward.”

In October 1915, Davis accused Proctor of trying to incite another race riot – a testament to the power of the riot’s legacy almost a decade later. Over the summer, Ben Davis and the Odd Fellows had opened their Roof Garden as an alternative upscale dancing establishment. Reverend Proctor, cooperating with city leadership in a renewed campaign to close the dance halls, apparently lumped together the Odd Fellows’ hall with run-of-the-mill dives, delaying the permitting process the Odd Fellows needed to operate their space. Proctor went further, blaming dance halls for producing “Black rapists” and instigating the 1906 riot, thus accusing Davis of

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20 “Crucify the Race to Save One,” Atlanta Independent, March 30, 1912.
21 “There is Nothing New Under the Sun,” Atlanta Independent, August 31, 1912.
replicating these same conditions in 1915. Davis took serious offense, especially at the suggestion that the riot’s causes lay entirely with young Black men, accusing Proctor of “hitting below the belt.” Their quarrel also reflected that both men had established imposing claims to lead Black Atlanta’s future development – both financial and reputational consequences were at play.23

Davis further used the opportunity to cast Proctor again as an out-of-touch elitist who created a double standard for his own congregants and others along color lines. “The dances in the Odd Fellows Roof Garden are as moral and as decent as the dances where Henry Rucker’s daughters and Proctor’s daughters dance [even though] the men and women who attend the Roof Garden are not mulattoes.” Skin color, in addition to status, provoked internecine conflicts, a touchy subject lying just beneath the surface of Black Atlanta’s high society.

Later in the same editorial, Davis made clear that the Independent was opposed to dance halls, “blind tigers” (illegal saloons and bars), adultery, gambling, and sin, that their Roof Garden was nothing like the establishments frequented by poorer patrons. Taking Proctor and Rucker’s campaign as a personal attack, Davis concluded by outlining the difference between him and Proctor. “The Odd Fellows have brought thousands and millions to Atlanta; pays out thousands in taxes and pay rolls…But these wide mouthed preachers [and] peanut politicians do nothing but stir up strife.”24 To Davis, Proctor was thin-skinned and shallow.

While Proctor and Davis operated from shared assumptions about the necessity of moral and racial uplift, their efforts to claim sole leadership of Black Atlanta’s direction put them in conflict. Both reshaped the landscape of their communities, constructing beautiful structures which provided services the city’s white leadership refused to support; their buildings also physically

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projected their vision of progress. In turn, their activities marked the lower Fourth Ward as distinctly Black territory within the New South city.

Though they each claimed to speak for laborers, domestic servants, and other workers, they more closely pandered to the upper-crust elite which subscribed to their paper, attended their church, and concerned itself with apolitical commercial and religious progress. Significantly, however, these efforts took place within the dangerous status quo set in motion by the riot and its aftermath, where both lived under the threat of continued white violence either through political suppression or physical confrontation. Still, the riot seemed to make more urgent the creation of self-sufficient and secluded safe spaces. While Proctor, Davis, and other Black men warred over leadership in post-riot Atlanta, a distinctly feminist and democratic vision of community building started to spread just a few miles away in the city’s west side.

**The Neighborhood Union in Atlanta’s West Side, 1908-1924**

Atlanta, a “progressive,” civic-minded, capitalist city, proved just as susceptible to the impulses of white supremacist violence. Social reformers and civic leaders quickly sought avenues through which to prevent another outbreak, control the behavior of “criminal” working-class and poor communities, and restart Atlanta’s robust economic engine. Through hastily created bodies like the Civic League, Black and white elites (largely male preachers and businessman) attempted to stabilize the city by emphasizing law and order.

One other significant consequence of the 1906 riot, however, was the expansion of community organizing and social welfare work by Black women. Rooted in a long tradition of collective efforts for social and economic uplift, women like Lugenia Burns Hope, wife of Morehouse College president, educator, and activist John Hope, took seriously the increasingly segregated, entrenched poverty characterizing Black neighborhoods on the eastern and western ends of the
city. Inspired by the riot, connected to a nationwide settlement house movement represented by Chicago’s Jane Addams, and adopted from her own previous organizing, Lugenia Hope founded the Neighborhood Union in 1908 – perhaps the best organized, most impactful social work and community organization in the South in the early 20th century.

Long before the 1950s and 1960s, the Neighborhood Union piloted a robust organizing tradition in the South while asserting social and spatial claims to Atlanta’s geography. Not without its moralistic crusading and penchant for elite condescension toward poorer people, the Neighborhood Union effectively manipulated respectability politics to disguise their work as solely confined to “women’s concerns,” but in practice engaged in radical advocacy to change the material conditions facing impoverished Black communities.25 In the process, the Neighborhood Union and its founders articulated a vision of the New South built on a bedrock of cross-class solidarity, self-sufficiency, and community-based organizing practical enough to win crucial changes in their neighborhoods.

LuGencia Burns Hope and the Neighborhood Union’s Origins

In 1897, Lugenia Hope moved from Chicago to Atlanta with her husband, John Hope, who had recently taken a position at Atlanta Baptist College (soon to become Morehouse College). Hope received her settlement work training from Jane Addams, the two retaining a close relationship long after Hope’s move to the South’s Gateway City.26 Lugenia arrived during a precarious but nonetheless dynamic moment in Black Atlanta. In May 1898, she attended Professor W.E.B. Du Bois’ third “Conference for the study of the Negro Problems,” focused on “Some Efforts of American Negroes for their Own Social Betterment.”27

25 Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent.  
26 “Hull House” Yearbook, 1921, Box 1, Folder 21, Neighborhood Union Collection, Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center, Atlanta, Georgia.  
27 Rouse, LuGenia Burns Hope, 1928.
There, Hope would have heard about the social and economic infrastructure knitted together by churches, secret societies, mutual aid organizations, fraternities, and cooperative business ventures. She likely encountered members of organizations like the Women’s Club of Atlanta, founded in 1895, and the well-established Carrie Steele Orphanage; fierce advocates like Dr. H.R. Butler and Reverend Henry Proctor; and exhortations by conference organizers for the “better educated classes [to] recognize the fact that the chief work of the social reformation of the masses devolves upon them.” Moreover, the annual Atlanta University Conferences presented a convenient space for “Mother’s Meetings” where women shared challenges around family and domestic life while receiving systematic data and survey information from academics and other professionals. Attendees regularly discussed a desperate need for better housing and sanitary conditions, educational and recreational activities for children, and daycare services for working women.

Organizing at these conferences directly influenced the creation of the Gate City Free Kindergarten Association in 1905, a network of day nurseries which first opened on Cain Street and eventually cared for over three thousand children by 1917. Hope partnered with other middle-class women like Harriet McNair Towns and Alice Dugged Carey to build these childcare institutions, which served as partial relief for Atlanta’s many washerwomen and domestic workers. As in the case of the Carrie Steele Orphanage, creating new social institutions like the Gate City Kindergarten required relationships built slowly over time; financial support generated from a small wealthy class; and intellectual and social resources provided by Atlanta’s Black colleges. Such organized efforts among Black women in Atlanta were not new, but rather stemmed from a

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legacy extending as far back as the 1881 washerwomen’s strike. These various efforts were crucial forerunners to the Neighborhood Union.\textsuperscript{30}

It was Atlanta’s riot, however, which provided a different sort of inspiration for Lugenia Hope’s idea to start a settlement movement in Atlanta. During the massacre, as white mobs descended upon neighborhoods like Darktown and Brownsville, residents organized for their defense. They pooled and distributed weapons and shot out streetlights to impair the mob’s vision – in some cases, men chased individual whites through the streets in retaliation.\textsuperscript{31} As noted by William Crogman, many were surprised to learn that working-class and poor communities were some of the only organized resistance to the white mob’s rampage through the city, and in the case of Darktown, likely prevented further carnage in the east side. The historian Jacqueline Rouse noted that community solidarity generated in the crucible of the riot left a lasting impression on Lugenia and the future Neighborhood Union’s programs.\textsuperscript{32}

During the riot, Hope had probably feared that the mob would descend upon her community near Atlanta Baptist College. The campus grounds stood only about two miles from the epicenter of the riot, and some of Hope’s personal papers indicate that she could hear the screams of the riot’s victims.\textsuperscript{33} Like Jesse Max Barber and W.E.B. Du Bois, the Hopes were deeply shaken by the violence and the degree to which their class and educational status barely protected them. For Lugenia, “the plight of Black Atlanta became a stark reality.”\textsuperscript{34} The mob was interested not only in policing and suppressing what they saw as Black men’s rampant sexuality, but also destroying the physical embodiments of Black Atlanta’s growing wealth.

\textsuperscript{30} See again To ‘Joy My Freedom and To Build Our Lives Together.
\textsuperscript{31} Hunter, ‘To Joy My Freedom, 128. For more, see Chapter II.
\textsuperscript{32} Rouse, Lugenia Burns Hope, 44-45.
\textsuperscript{33} Rouse, 43-44.
\textsuperscript{34} Rouse, 45.
Blows dealt in the form of segregation, prohibition, and disenfranchisement, made their status even more precarious while contending with the same basic housing, sanitary, municipal infrastructure, and labor issues endemic in Black neighborhoods since the end of Reconstruction.\textsuperscript{35} Many still lived near dumping grounds and incinerators, had little access to adequate public school facilities, and, if they had employment, worked long hours for low pay on public works or in upper-class white neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{36}

While these conditions undoubtedly weighed on Hope’s consciousness, a death in her neighborhood was the event that most acutely stirred the creation of the Neighborhood Union. A woman who “sat on her front porch a great part of the day” and had no association with her neighbors had fallen ill, died, and no one had noticed. She left behind three children, and her death was considered a “Community problem that called for united action.”\textsuperscript{37} On July 8\textsuperscript{th}, 1908, a group of nine women, most of whom knew each other already from efforts like the Gate City Kindergartens, met at Hope’s home on the grounds of Atlanta Baptist College. Historian Tera Hunter’s analysis informs us that working-class women were indispensable to the Neighborhood Union from the beginning, which included domestic worker Laura Bugg among the Union’s original nine organizers. Ultimately, these women agreed to the notion that settlement work was needed in the community, both to become better acquainted with each other and to improve the neighborhood. Once they agreed to form their organization, they quickly began charting a strategy for surveying and uniting their neighborhood.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{35} See Chapter I for discussions on Black living conditions in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century.

\textsuperscript{36} Godshalk, \textit{Veiled Visions}, 230.

\textsuperscript{37} Organizational History, 1926, 1931, “The History of the Neighborhood Union,” undated, Box 2, Neighborhood Union Collection.

\textsuperscript{38} Organizational Plan and History, undated, Handwritten Story of the Neighborhood Union, undated, Box 2, Neighborhood Union Collection.; “Atlanta Thanks College Women for Community Service Center,” \textit{Chicago Defender}, October 31, 1925.
Multiple factors coalesced to make the Neighborhood Union possible in 1908. First, Lugenia Burns Hope and other Black women reformers’ extensive organizing experience in Atlanta prepared them with all the necessary tools they needed once a crisis emerged. Second, as noted by many historians, their work as middle-class women appeared less threatening to established political and social order in comparison to the work of Atlanta’s prominent men who organized primarily around voting rights and commercial interests. They had cover and a degree of support from the male establishment to conduct their work. Crucially, the presence of working women among the original founders must have also engendered some trust and buy-in as the Union began canvassing neighborhoods. The somewhat covert nature of women reformers’ work would pay off well for Hope’s crew as they moved rapidly to survey their community and expand the Neighborhood Union model throughout the rest of Atlanta.

Thy Neighbor as Thyself: The Neighborhood Union’s Mission, Structure, and Campaigns

The Neighborhood Union’s 1908 Constitution begins with “We, the people of Atlanta, organize ourselves to do social settlement work.” Article II continues, stating, “The object of said organization is the moral, social, intellectual, and religious uplift of the community and neighborhood.” This section lists various activities the Union hoped to take on, including lecture courses on taking care of one’s family, “breaking up dens of immorality and crime [and] suppressing vice” to encourage “wholesome” thoughts and actions, and to maintain a census of the community in order to have an accurate sense of its needs. The rest of the document outlines the elaborate structure devised by Hope to organize each neighborhood into zones with district

leaders, Boards of Directors, and more. The NU’s Constitution even won the praise of Du Bois, who, in his own handwriting, called it a “very important document.”

One of the Neighborhood Union’s brochures from the mid-1910s offers a more comprehensive explanation of the organization’s intentions, goals, and achievements. Called “an organization for the moral, economic, and social advancement of Negroes” with the motto, “thy neighbor as thyself,” the Union stressed the overall importance of forging strong ties between members of a neighborhood. Among its nine listed aims, the Union included: to “bring about a better understanding between the races,” “to improve the sanitation of homes and streets,” and to establish playgrounds, clubs and neighborhood centers where local people could congregate. This brochure also carefully noted that the effort was started by a “number of Negro women.” The Neighborhood Union’s vision, expressed in its brochures and governing documents, marked one of the first efforts of its kind in Atlanta – the beginning of systematic Black social work.

Hope and the Neighborhood Union’s founders possessed a keen sense of why they engaged in this work, and what made them particularly effective as women and mothers. To prevent crime, exploitation, and even death, communities needed the unique experiences of mothers – and women needed more prominent roles in public affairs. In her personal handwritten notes, she wrote:

Who knows more about the beginning of crime than a mother — who can better train and reform than a woman. What does a father know about the need of playgrounds and recreation centers when he is away from the children all day — what does he care about child labor and the exploitation of women — so long as he is a successful business man. He is perfectly willing to make her do more work and pay her half his salary…Did it ever occur to you that all of the economic problems…are often all simply problems of domestic economy and can be treated on the same basis as the internal management of the home. And the problems of the home cannot be done away with until the women help to select the law-makers. We must organize unions – of every branch industry – so that we can be effective. Get

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40 Constitution, 1908, 1925, Envelope and Note from W.E.B. Du Bois, undated, Box 2, Neighborhood Union Collection.
41 Brochures, Pamphlets, Programs, 1910-1933, Brochure—“The Neighborhood Union,” 1911, Box 8, Folder 2, Neighborhood Union Collection.
all of your teachers, housekeepers, cooks, nurses, washerwomen…organized for their own development and the improvement of the race.\textsuperscript{42}

Despite her class status, this excerpt reveals Hope to be conscious of the gender, race, and class oppression experienced by Black women. She specifically encourages women from the lowest-income occupations to organize so they could affect public policy and participate in the project of racial uplift. She criticized the ways in which men ignore women’s and family’s issues (which Hope conflates as one in the same), perhaps influenced by recurring tension in her own marriage.\textsuperscript{43} Likely written in the 1920s after the passage of the 19\textsuperscript{th} Amendment – though Black women were still effectively disenfranchised – Lugenia’s notes also reflected accumulated wisdom after more than two decades in social work, which convinced her that the moral improvement of the home and family was foundational to a stable community. This vision wasn’t shared by all women, and at times the conflation of motherhood and respectability caused problems – but it remained an essential part of Lugenia’s perspective.

Hope believed that Atlanta’s neighborhoods – and indeed, urban communities across the country – needed organized Black women collectives highlighting the specific issues they faced. In the words of Ella Baker, Hope saw that strong people did not necessarily need strong leaders, if properly organized and supported. While Hope does not often showcase this more critical perspective in the Neighborhood Union’s public-facing documents, perhaps due to her frequent collaborations with men and white people in general, we can see how her well-honed political and social worldview permeated the causes taken on by the NU.

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\textsuperscript{42} Mrs. Lugenia Burns Hope, 1908-1933, Lugenia Burns Hope’s Handwritten Notes, undated, Box 1, Folder 22 Neighborhood Union Collection.

After the founders’ initial meetings in the summer of 1908, they immediately went to work, surveying the areas of the city they intended to organize. Atlanta Baptist College was situated nearby a few well-known slums and vice districts – Beaver Slide, centered on Roach street in the shadow of Atlanta University; Lightning, situated around Peters Street and notorious as a red light district; and smaller hubs for crime, gambling, sex work, and dumping in places like Battles’s Alley, Vine City, and, of course, Decatur Street and Darktown to the west. These areas were deemed the “dens of immorality and crime” which the Neighborhood Union targeted for clean-up. While the Neighborhood Union’s organizers deplored the conditions which characterized so many neighborhoods, and thought individuals could make better choices, they incorporated into their work an acknowledgement that the city’s neglect of Black people’s needs played a role in generating overcrowded, unhealthy, and violent neighborhoods.

Lugenia, elected as President, defined the boundaries of their surrounding neighborhood, where they would begin surveying and mapping. Ashby street on the west, Beckwith street to the north, Walnut street on the east and Green’s Ferry to the south created a more or less rectangular zone which was further divided into sections. Each of the nine women were assigned a specific section and told to visit each home, collecting the names and ages of parents and children, especially young girls between eight and twenty-two, who would make up the Neighborhood Union’s programmatic focus.44

The NU prioritized children because they considered them future citizens still in a position to be saved from a life of crime and vagrancy. In a 1911 appeal to the Constitution from the Gate City Free Kindergarten Association, which overlapped heavily with the work of the Neighborhood Union by this point, stated that they “took it upon themselves to begin in the cradle to help to

44 Organizational Plan and History, undated, Handwritten Story of the Neighborhood Union, undated, Box 2, Neighborhood Union Collection.
rescue the negro youth from the temptations of crime and vagrancy...[or else] we shall soon be overrun with a large number of untrained and possibly worthless youths.”

Within two weeks, the women had identified seventy-seven girls eligible for the Neighborhood Union’s planned educational workshops in the essentials of domestic science. Survey work and one-on-one conversations soon revealed some of the key issues facing poor communities – overcrowded and underfunded schools, no recreational areas, too few social institutions for childcare and early education, lack of access to healthcare, environmental hazards caused by poor housing and the city’s sewerage and trash systems, exploited labor, weak community bonds, and many more. If the city wouldn’t pay attention to inhumane conditions in Black neighborhoods, these women would.

The Neighborhood Union went door-to-door educating parents on how to improve conditions in their homes and recruiting them to join the Union. On Henry Street, for example, the Neighborhood Union recorded survey findings on typical families engaged and brought into the Union’s work. Of the 14 women canvassed, all worked as domestic servants except Sadie Sems, a dressmaker, Mrs. S.S. Rempall, a teacher, and one other nurse. Seven had children in school and lived in households with as many as eight members. The Union also included a column noting if these women had paid the nominal dues owed to the organization which some, like Ophelia Johnson, had not yet done. While this survey asked about school enrollment, others ask about housing conditions, if people had paid their poll taxes for voter registration, and if they owned

46 Organizational Plan and History, Neighborhood Union Collection.  
47 Mrs. Lugenia Burns Hope, 1908-1933, Research Notes, undated, Notes of Typical Community Problems to Take Up, undated, Box 1, Folder 22, Neighborhood Union Collection.
their home or belonged to other social organizations. Bit by bit, the Union comprehensively recorded the lives and networks of thousands of women.  

From 1908 to 1911, the Neighborhood Union established the city’s first playground for Black children on the grounds of Atlanta Baptist College, expanded their zones into the communities of Summerhill, Pittsburgh, South Atlanta, and the Fourth Ward, opened their first health clinic on the corner of West Fair and Mildred streets, and raised funds for their first community center, the Neighborhood House, built on Lee Street in 1910. The Neighborhood House, in particular, demonstrated Lugenia’s ability to win concessions from wealthy white Atlantans – “The Club of Ten,” a group composed of prominent white men, donated $50 (a considerable sum in 1909) to aid in the purchase of the Lee Street property. Neighborhood Houses eventually offered a wide range of classes in everything from domestic work to millinery and lectures on citizenship.

Tera Hunter argued that the brilliance of the Neighborhood Union was that it “built on the strength of Atlanta as a city of neighborhoods.” To be sure, the Neighborhood Union’s structure was unprecedented and unparalleled, building the type of network which, at its peak, could share information among 42,000 Black Atlantans within a few days. At its fullest extent, the NU was able to divide the city’s Black neighborhoods into sixteen different zones, each zone divided into a neighborhood, and each neighborhood into districts with directors in charge of the area’s affairs – often leaders chosen by the neighborhood people themselves, and who possessed intimate knowledge of the social and economic conditions of their district. The NU had also succeeded in

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49 Minutes, 1908-1961, Minutes, Dec. 14, 1909, Box 4, Folder 1, Neighborhood Union Collection.
51 Hunter, 139.
52 Godshalk, Veiled Visions, 234.
laying the groundwork for a political machine which proved pivotal when the NAACP came to town in 1917.\textsuperscript{53}

District directors were organized into a Board of Directors, which reported to a Neighborhood President. Finally, the Board of Directors and Neighborhood presidents reported to Zone Chairpersons which coordinated with the citywide Board of Managers. The Board of Managers exercised governing power over the entire scope of the organization and managed various departments in charge of activities like recreation, literature, and child welfare.\textsuperscript{54} The Neighborhood Union was so well organized that after their legal incorporation in 1911, the City of Atlanta essentially divested from all responsibility for Black social work, turning it over to Lugenia’s creation – indirectly granting them the status of a shadow government.\textsuperscript{55} When the Red Cross attempted to aid the victims of Atlanta’s Great Fire in 1917, they botched their own relief efforts so significantly that they too had to rely on the Neighborhood Union’s expertise.\textsuperscript{56}

This thorough level of organization was not only an efficient way to run the Neighborhood Union, but also a method to facilitate democratic decision-making by neighborhood residents. Lugenia described “The Neighborhood” as being “organized by a group of neighbors meeting together to discuss plans for the community betterment and to make effects to meet the local needs; they decide on the territory to be covered by the Neighborhood, and solicit the cooperation of each home, church, store, and every activity in the Neighborhood. Then it is ready to organize the Neighborhood.”\textsuperscript{57} As opposed to Proctor and Davis’ more self-interested notions of racial

\textsuperscript{53} Rouse, \textit{Lugenia Burns Hopes}, 68.; District Maps, undated, Box 13, Folder 48, Neighborhood Union Collection.
\textsuperscript{54} Organizational Plan and History, undated, Organization of a Neighborhood, undated, Box 2, Folder 10-11 Neighborhood Union Collection.
\textsuperscript{56} Shivery, “The Neighborhood Union,” 154.
\textsuperscript{57} Organizational Plan and History, undated, Place of Organization, undated, Box 2, Folder 10-11 Neighborhood Union Collection.
progress, the Neighborhood Union valued the input of the women and community members who
made up its base.

Other than upper-level NU campaigns to eliminate vice and enlist police cooperation in closing
down brothels or dives, there’s no evidence that Neighborhood Union leadership interfered in the
majority of grassroots organizing taking place in the various zones. In her notes, Lugenia presented
a model for Black ownership over the places people lived, specific to the needs of that particular
place – hence the capitalization of the “N” in Neighborhood. These communities were not just any
place, but instead homes which could be made healthier and more connected via organized
cooperation. Physical maps created by the Union and used to identify different zones conceptually
reconfigured Black neighborhoods in the minds of their residents, crafting an alternative
geography of Atlanta specific to their needs, visions, and goals.\footnote{District Maps, undated, Box 13, Folder 48, Neighborhood Union Collection.}

The Neighborhood pursued various activities from 1911 onward, including petitions for better
street lighting, garbage removal, water and sewer connections, even procuring a probation officer
to divert Black children away from prison and jail in the city’s courts. The data substantiating their
numerous petitions and reports sent to Atlanta’s decisionmakers always came from the robust
surveys conducted door by door in each neighborhood, ensuring that specific needs would be
advocated for. Surreptitiously, the Neighborhood Union also took opportunities to crack down on
gambling dens, liquor joints, “undesirables,” and houses rumored to contain activities contrary to

Class and status tensions did exist underneath some of the Neighborhood Union’s more
moralistic crusades, complicating both the role of working women in the Union and their
Treatment. Black women faced particularly harsh repression from both white law enforcement and
the upper classes. Gender conventions in public space made their transgressions, either through dancing, drinking, or sex work, particularly offense to elite observers. A police committee meeting in June 1908 specifically called for the elimination of “negro women congregating about near beer saloons,” and Reverend Proctor singled out Black women domestic servants for dancing and attending dives instead of devoting themselves to their labor.\textsuperscript{60} Despite the fact that many of the lunch counters and restaurants on Decatur Street were run by Black women, some saw these women only as threats and subject to additional police surveillance and harassment.\textsuperscript{61} Black women were disproportionately arrested for drinking, gambling, using cocaine, and running “blind tigers” compared to white women.\textsuperscript{62}

Ben Davis’ editorials in the \textit{Independent} showed that men remained preoccupied with the proper behavior of wage-earning women. In multiple pieces titled “Our Working Girls,” Davis complained that young women were more concerned with receiving respectful treatment from their bosses, or leaving work early to go out on the town, than to work productively in the office or in their employers’ homes. Jackson McHenry, a long-time political figure, chastised “our working girls” for talking to loafers instead of working, instructing them to maintain their “self-respect” by refusing to talk to these men. Though in other situations Davis used his columns to advocate for better housing and fair wages for laborers, and even called for women’s suffrage as early as 1914, he maintained strict class and gender lines by publicly shaming behavior not in accordance with his more elite sensibilities.\textsuperscript{63}

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\textsuperscript{61} Hunter, 148, 152. \\
\textsuperscript{62} Hunter, 165. \\
\textsuperscript{63} “The Servant Problem,” Atlanta \textit{Independent}, August 14, 1915.
\end{flushleft}
On the other hand, middle-class clubwomen, like the Neighborhood Union’s leaders, concerned with uplifting the race genuinely viewed strict adherence to Victorian moral codes as essential to their survival and prosperity. All Black Americans, but particularly women, found themselves in a double-bind, living in a society permeated by white supremacist violence and in cities where mainstream press coverage treated their issues in demeaning ways. Though class and social tensions existed across the spectrum of community life, Jim Crow subjected all Black people to discrimination, racial profiling, and racial terror lynchings. Middle-class reformers were part and parcel of the Victorian moral milieu, adopting certain white cultural practices while staying fiercely dedicated to the betterment of all Black people. Still, working people’s behaviors meaningfully differed from others, and they articulated their vision of a self-determined life in different ways.

The Neighborhood Union’s leadership, even if it sometimes attempted to impose its own vision of respectable motherhood, evolved as it spent more time organizing in poor neighborhoods. As John Hope explained in 1935, “When you made a survey, you found that” those being questioned “were not all evil people just poor and couldn’t do any better…you found that the whole community was not simply a blind tiger community, but people who through the fortuities of life just got caught in the maelstrom.”64 The Neighborhood Union’s leadership could not fully shake the class biases which accompanied their work, but part of the power of their organizing came in learning and solidarity forged across social divisions.

Two major campaigns defined the Neighborhood Union in the mid 1910s – a 1913 campaign for better elementary schools and recurring public health campaigns with Atlanta’s Anti-Tuberculosis Association from 1915 onward. Education had been central to community-building

64 Godshalk, *Veiled Visions*, 244.
efforts since the end of the Civil War. Throughout the 1870s-1890s, organizers fought for the development of a public education system that included Black teachers and students. Ben Davis frequently criticized conditions in schools and successive municipal bond issues failing to make appropriations for new schools or improved physical conditions.  

In 1911, the Atlanta University Conference studied Atlanta’s school system. The city only had eleven public schools for Black children – none having been built since 1890, and despite making up more than a third of Atlanta’s public-school students – and Black citizens received far less in funding than they were owed in taxes. After a 1910 bond issue, their schools received $35,000 out of a total $600,000. By 1913, seating capacity numbered 4,102 for over 6,163 enrolled Black children, with most forced to attend double sessions which limited their education to only a few hours each day, either in the morning or afternoon.  

Led by the Women’s Social Improvement Committee, over one hundred women embarked on a systematic survey of Atlanta’s Black elementary schools. They enlisted the support of white women, showing them firsthand the conditions in these schools, eventually producing a full-length report written by Isma Dooly in the Constitution in October 1913. The four major findings of their surveys over six months included lighting and ventilation issues, unclean conditions threatening children’s health, congestion, and double sessions. Members of the NU’s Committee visited members of the City Council in person, including the mayor and prominent white pastors. They held multiple mass meetings educating parents and concerned citizens on school conditions.

An August 19th petition to the city council identified Houston, Mitchell, Pittsburgh, and L&N schools as in dire need of improvement; that the construction of bathrooms tended to “immorality,”

65 See To Build Our Lives Together and Chapter I.
66 “Our Neighbors Ought to be Fair,” Atlanta Independent, December 13, 1913.; Dittmer, Black Georgia in the Progressive Era, 147.
and that the existence of double sessions encouraged “shiftlessness.” Their petition intentionally couched itself in language activating typical white fears about “idleness” and sexual criminality, but in hopes of winning material improvements.\textsuperscript{68} Though the Neighborhood Union succeeded in putting educational issues on the city’s agenda, sparking editorials and exposes in the city’s newspapers, the campaign failed to win any significant changes.\textsuperscript{69} Nonetheless, the 1913 effort paved the way for future success and a widespread effort to win a public high school in the early 1920s.

By 1915, concerns over public health, particularly tuberculosis, caused hysteria in white Atlanta, which believed that domestics carried the disease from slums to white homes. Called the “Negro Servant’s disease,” though actually caused by municipal neglect and poverty, tuberculosis wreaked havoc on Black communities without robust healthcare infrastructure, located in neighborhoods nearby city dumping grounds, incinerators, or industrial centers. Before residential segregation took root in the city’s urban geography, many servants and washerwomen lived behind white homes in densely-packed tenements, facilitating close contact. Middle-class Black women had led multiple efforts to “clean up” Atlanta prior to 1915, including a likely Neighborhood Union effort led by Alice Carey. An editorial in the \textit{Constitution} praised Carey’s efforts, calling the “unsanitary negro hovel” a “menace to the immaculate [white] community.”\textsuperscript{70}

White employers fears’ that washerwomen and domestic servants spread the contagion led to swift repression. In 1912, partially in response to charges that washerwomen were stealing their employers’ clothing, a coalition of Black Baptist ministers issued a plea to the city to reverse a recent decision to register, tag, and track the movements of washerwomen, who apparently

\textsuperscript{68} Correspondence, 1911-1936, Letter Regarding School Conditions, August 19, 1913, Box 2, Folder 19, Neighborhood Union Collection.
\textsuperscript{69} Annual Reports, 1913-1927, Annual Report 1913-1914, Box 5, Folder 27, Neighborhood Union Collection.
threatened to quit in the face of such humiliation. Theft was a major complaint, but so was the threat of disease – among other suggestions, the ministers asked for funding to install sanitary appliances in tenants’ homes to reduce the probability of “disease germs” to a minimum.71

A month prior, the Constitution demanded the city “clean up these incubators of disease among the negroes.”72 Isma Dooly wrote a more comprehensive and nuanced approach to the issue in a 1914 report, including commentary from Dr. Edward Ware, President of Atlanta University, about the city’s responsibility to pass a housing ordinance. Dooly even quoted Lugenia Hope, who explained the Neighborhood Union’s model of tracking conditions in different neighborhoods, but stated unequivocally that progress could not be made without the backing of white people and new laws. Flexing the success of the NU, she even offered their assistance in addressing unsanitary conditions, stating, “through our committees we know almost exactly the conditions of all homes and the grades of people in them.”73

In 1915, Lugenia would get her wish as the Neighborhood Union partnered with Atlanta’s Anti-Tuberculosis Association in a public health campaign which kicked into high gear in 1917. The NU set up medical clinics in Summerhill, White’s Alley, on Rock St., and in Mt. Olive Baptist Church, among others, treating various health conditions in communities with limited healthcare options. Black Atlanta had few places to go beyond independent clinics, a segregated ward in the public Grady Hospital, Spelman’s MacVicar hospital, and places like the Fair Haven Infirmary.74 Over fourteen weeks, they treated approximately 641 residents. In addition to clinics, the NU’s 1917 campaign reached twenty-seven churches and Sunday schools, held mass meetings for over

71 “A Plea for Negro Washerwomen by Negro Ministers,” Atlanta Independent, October 5, 1912.
72 “The City and the Plague Spots,” Atlanta Constitution, September 15, 1912.
73 “Atlanta Housekeepers Should Make Organized Effort to Improve Conditions Surrounding Homes of Servants,” Atlanta Constitution, February 8, 1914.
74 Health Clinic Reports, 1917, Box 5, Folder 13-14, Neighborhood Union Collection.
thirteen thousand people, and, for their work on Atlanta’s Negro Health Week, received high honors from the National Negro Business League.\textsuperscript{75}

By 1919, Lugenia’s work with the Anti-Tuberculosis Association took up more of her time, and she stepped down from the Neighborhood Union’s presidency, though she remained heavily involved in the organization and community life. In 1918 and 1919, she organized the Social Service Institute at Morehouse College, which led directly to the establishment of the Atlanta School of Social Work in 1920, on the site of the old Lee Street Neighborhood House. The Social Service Institute followed closely in the legacy left by the Atlanta University Conferences, by then mostly defunct. Prominent sociologist E. Franklin Frazier spent time in Atlanta’s Social Work school in the 1920s, and attributed much of the social work infrastructure in the city to the Neighborhood Union’s efforts.\textsuperscript{76}

Beyond her Atlanta-based work, Lugenia also envisioned the Neighborhood Union’s model spreading throughout the country, and she retained connections with different national organizations. In correspondence with the National League on Urban Conditions Among Negroes, the Urban League’s forerunner organization, Executive Secretary Eugene Kinckle Jones shared news about duplication of Lugenia’s organizational structure in cities across the country. The Urban League later proved to be a thorn in the Neighborhood Union’s side – when the organization set up a branch in Atlanta in the 1920s, they almost forced the Union out of existence by claiming their work was unnecessary and a copy of the Urban League, which supposedly had existed first. The Urban League, a significant facilitator of social work in the city, showcased the arrogance of

\textsuperscript{75} Shivery, “The Neighborhood Union,” 154.
\textsuperscript{76} Social Service Institute, 1919, Box 2, Folder 16, Neighborhood Union Collection.
its mostly male leaders in attempting to erase more than a decade of women-led organizing. After a public battle, the Neighborhood Union succeeded in setting the record straight.77

In 1915, the Woman’s American Baptist Home Mission Society approved funding for a matron in the NU’s new Neighborhood House on 41 Leonard Street. In 1918, Lugenia spoke at the National Urban League Conference and throughout the rest of her life her insights were in high demand, even being appointed by President Herbert Hoover to oversee relief efforts for victims of Mississippi flooding in 1927.78 In her personal and professional life, Lugenia took multiple opportunities to expand her community-based vision.

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At the close of 1910s, the Neighborhood Union had taken the first concrete steps to transform conditions facing Black Atlantans. Not only did the NU provide services nonexistent beforehand, they had created the social infrastructure to sustain future campaigns for the first Black high school, for the proliferation of numerous poverty relief and social work organizations in the 1920s, and the first public housing units erected in the 1930s, including the John Hope Homes constructed on the former neighborhood of Beaver Slide. Tens of thousands of people took control over the destiny of their homes and families, provided their kids supplemental education in the Neighborhood Union’s classes, and mobilized to demand more from a city that just a few years earlier devolved into a frenzy at the idea of Black prosperity.

Lugenia Hope and the Neighborhood Union accomplished these changes through a distinctly Black women’s vision that valued domestic and childrearing work but imagined roles for women transcending the traditional public-private dichotomy. Their efforts meaningfully contrasted with the likes of Proctor and Davis, and they occupied a meaningful leadership position only challenged

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77 Shivery, “The Neighborhood Union,” 159.
78 Rouse, *Lugenia Burns Hope*, 4, 85-86.
by the arrival of the NAACP and the Urban League. In Neighborhood Centers, health clinics, and public schools, Black women recast the places they occupied and defined the city’s geography in terms they cared about – whether it was the absence of streetlights, the poor conditions in their schools, or the alleyways and tenement houses they so fiercely defended during the riot but now demanded better. In ways both implicit and explicit, the Neighborhood Union and its voluntary network of mothers, families, churches, and businesses reaffirmed that Atlanta was their city.

79 Argued by Jay Winston Driskell in Schooling Jim Crow.
Chapter IV

*Vexing Jim Crow*

The Atlanta “cracker,” newborn to good wages and political power, is jealous of ambitious black folk. If he can take a black man’s vote away why can he not take his home and force him back to the alley, whence he came?

- Editorial in *The Crisis*, December 1910

After the 1906 massacre, poor and working people stubbornly refused to relinquish their autonomy, asserting their right to freely occupy public space, drink, dance, and work when needed. Yet, this did not prevent white residents, particularly in the city’s Fourth Ward, from attempting to repel the “invasion” of “unsanitary” Black “criminals.” Their conflict led to unprecedented efforts to inscribe residential segregation by race into municipal law, and in the process “purify” the New South city. In this chapter, we parse through working-class life, which generated racist images of vagrancy and “loafing” that fed white Atlanta’s hysteria in the 1910s and became a significant factor in multiple campaigns to expel Black people from Atlanta’s neighborhoods.

We conclude with the story of the Great Fire of 1917 – immensely consequential and yet under-discussed as a culminating moment for the type of racial politics which emerged in post-massacre Atlanta. The Fire proved to be the latest in a long line of challenges faced by community organizers, social workers, preachers, businessmen, and workers who nonetheless persisted in defending the buildings, institutions, and relationships that defined their communities.

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**Working-class Rebels**

The first Southern vagrancy laws came into effect in the form of Black Codes passed during Reconstruction, allowing police to round up formerly enslaved people for minor infractions, including the appearance of unemployment or homelessness. Though the Republican Congress quickly forced Southern states to roll back these bills, the roving, mysterious, “loafing Negro” who could commit criminal acts at any moment lingered in the Southern white psyche.²

Before and after the riot, the editorial pages of the *Constitution* called for “driving out the vagrants” who did nothing but drink, assault white women, and refuse to labor for an honest living.³ The Atlanta *Independent* joined the *Constitution* and other white dailies in condemning vagrants often found lounging on street corners outside the dives. One 1911 editorial summarized white Atlanta’s perspective on “loafers” succinctly: “If he will not labor of his own volition, he must be made to do so by the lash of law,” which often meant forced labor on public works via the city or state’s chain gang.⁴ The threat was real – just weeks before the riot, Judge Calhoun sentenced a group of six men to twelve months on the chain gang for vagrancy.⁵ In August of 1906, to demonstrate the problem, the *Constitution* had taken it upon itself to count over 376 Black people “loafing” outside the city’s saloons.⁶

Gordon Noel Hurtel, a writer for the *Constitution*, in a feature titled “Police Matinee Pen Shots,” wrote satirical stories about typical Black vagrants and criminals who appeared in the court of longtime Recorder Judge Broyles – or, in Hurtel’s demeaning use of Black vernacular English, “Jedge Briles.” Portraying his subjects as uneducated, lazy, and clueless, Hurtel made fun of

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³ “Drive Out the Vagrants,” Atlanta *Constitution*, August 26, 1906.
⁵ “In the Courts,” Atlanta *Constitution*, September 8, 1906.
“Hannah Morris,” accused of selling whiskey illegally in her blind tiger, and Bob Hicks, a baseball player. Judge Broyles, written as the savior for these stereotypical happy-go-lucky, “ignorant negroes,” exacted harsh punishments. Hurtel’s feature reflected intense fascination with the behavior of poor Black people among white Atlantans, who regarded them simultaneously as sources of amusement and objects of terror.7

White policymakers resented Black people’s prerogative to control their time and activity as they saw fit, spinning loafing and vagrancy into a pathological condition “menacing” the city. In 1909, Police Chief Henry Jennings gave orders to “strip the railroad yards, dives, pool rooms, and other places of the idle and unemployed” in mass arrests of workers.8 However, police raids never fully eliminated the problem, as reports of loafers and vagrants filled newspapers throughout the decade following the riot.

Though traditional newspaper coverage discussed working people in typically racist and classist tones, as present-day readers we can alter our understanding to instead view the longevity of the “vagrancy problem” as a set of small rebellions by people who were successful in avoiding removal from city streets, even in light of constant harassment. As mentioned in previous chapters, working-class life was also far richer than most surviving sources describe, and much like how the Neighborhood Union made claims upon territory in neighborhoods across the city, or how Darktown residents fiercely defended their homes in 1906, working people exercised bodily autonomy in order to maintain social outlets and communities they built in saloon basements, on dance floors, in theaters, and during vaudeville shows.

On any given week throughout the 1910s, Black people could stroll through the gleaming Luna Park storefronts on 99 Decatur street, attend a minstrel show hosted by Bishop Turner in The

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7 “Police Matinee Pen Shots,” Atlanta Constitution, May 17, 1907.
8 “‘The Vagrant Must Go’ is Order of Chief,” Atlanta Constitution, January 19, 1909.
People’s Tabernacle, watch Atlanta’s hometown Whitman Sisters perform on stage, or see a show at the famous Eighty One Theater. Drinking, brothels, gambling, and the chance to listen to experimental blues and ragtime melodies were only a few of the many appeals of Atlanta’s vice district. Tera Hunter argued that wage-earners resisted social reformers’ efforts to encourage abstinence from drinking, and even when the city attempted to force segregation on near-beer saloons, working people openly violated the law by patronizing “dago bar joints.” Despite press coverage focusing solely on Black people’s presence along Decatur or Peters streets, this district was also incredibly cosmopolitan, populated by Italian, Jewish, German, and Chinese immigrants who all mingled in the quintessential Decatur Street Dive.

In some instances, working people publicly criticized their social “betters.” On November 6th, 1915, a “poor laboring woman” named Josephine Fitzpatrick blasted Reverend Henry Proctor in the pages of the Independent for insulting her and denying her employment in his home. According to Fitzpatrick, because she had stayed in a Working Girls’ Home, Proctor would not have Josephine serve his wife as domestic help. She wanted the public to know about the “dirty trick” pulled by this “great man of God,” and Ben Davis was more than willing to help her publicize the accusations. While Josephine’s claims were never mentioned again, the controversy not only reaffirms the existence of class and status tensions within Black communities, but demonstrated a willingness by working people to vocally defend their own self-worth against pervasive messages describing them as immoral or lazy.

Hunter’s account of working-class life in To ‘Joy My Freedom detailed the activities of men and women in the city’s many dance halls whose moves included the Funky Butt, the Grind, and

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9 Nightlife advertisements appeared in the pages of the Independent throughout this era.
Ballin’ the Jack. In her analysis, dancing was a way for domestic servants, laborers, washerwomen, and many others to derive pleasure and work hard at something outside the capitalist society which exploited their labor. Their affinity for “lowdown” dancing also flew in the face of a “modern Black bourgeoisie” which claimed to “define and direct” racial progress. Loafing or vagrancy, too, reflected a similar impulse to control one’s own body and the terms upon which it would labor, a right long denied after centuries of enslavement and decades of restrictive laws passed by Southern legislatures.¹²

Collective action among wage-earners also took forms more disruptive to Atlanta’s political economy. In May 1919, eighty-four Black cart drivers in the city’s sanitation department walked off the job even though, according to the Constitution, there was no forewarning about the strike or a list of demands, besides rumors that the cart drivers wanted to increase their pay from $2.25 per day to $3.¹³ Following in the cart drivers’ footsteps a few months later, a group of janitors in fifteen Atlanta public schools threatened Superintendent W.F. Dykes with a strike by the entire force of eighty janitors unless they received higher monthly wages.¹⁴ The origins of these workers’ actions are unclear, but they possibly reflected a renewed sense of self-efficacy and confidence as a result of Black soldiers returning from the frontlines of World War I.¹⁵

While the cart drivers and janitors did not sustain their work stoppages like the 1914-1915 strikes at Atlanta’s Fulton Mills, or the 1916 streetcar strikes – organized mostly by white male workers – they exemplify a growing sense that workers could demand and win better labor conditions. By the late 1910s, Black workers possessed three distinct advantages over their employers – one, the opportunity to exploit Southern capitalists’ boasts that the South had a

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¹² Hunter, To ’Joy My Freedom, 186.
¹⁴ “Dykes Intervenes to Prevent Strike of Negro Janitors,” Atlanta Constitution, September 23, 1919.
¹⁵ See Adriane Lentz-Smith’s Freedom Struggles: African Americans and World War I
“docile” and non-union workforce; two, white Southerners’ panic over the Great Migration; and three, the essential work they performed keeping Southern urban economies afloat. The Independent, listing the main drivers of northern immigration, which included segregation, lynching, low wages, poor schools, and many others, wrote to Southern white leaders:

These are the agents that are moving your cooks, your wash-women, your carriage ditcher, your maid, your street cart driver, your street sweeper, trash hauler, bootblack and your menial servant, to a land where he can vote, go to the parks, ride in a boat and on a street car without being insulted by poor white trash or beat up and clubbed by a street car conductor with police power.16

Whether wage-earners loafed on city streets, drank whiskey or beer in the dives, walked out on work or took it upon themselves to travel North in search of better opportunity, they refused to submit to the totalizing force of white supremacy, which deputized all white people, not just police or prisons, to control the bodies and behavior of Black people. It was precisely in response to the ungovernability of these workers, however, that white Atlantans began to draw up the first residential segregation schemes in neighborhoods like the Fourth Ward.

Setting Deadlines: Residential Segregation in Atlanta’s Neighborhoods, 1910-1917

By 1910, many white Atlantans feared Black progress and mobility, expressed in moral panics over vagrancy, tuberculosis, Black-on-white sexual assault, dancing, and drinking. However, the legacy of the riot, and its effects on the city’s business interests, made large-scale mob violence an unpalatable option for controlling and confining Black Atlanta. Instead, whites sought the spatial marginalization of Black communities – and thus, social and economic marginalization – first through persuasion and later by leveraging the city’s legislative and policing powers. Segregationist leaders in Atlanta did not hesitate to weaponize lingering fears over a resurgence in

16 “Immigration Agents,” Atlanta Independent, June 9, 1917
mob violence to achieve their goals, but they underestimated the degree to which Black Atlanta would stubbornly refuse to cede territory in the battle for space and place in the city’s streets.

The movement to push Black people out of Atlanta’s Fourth Ward, located just east of the central business district, began with an offer by white Fourth Ward residents – most of whom lived in the upscale Jackson Hill neighborhood – to purchase Morris Brown College. Built by the African Methodist Episcopal Church on the corner of Houston Street and North Boulevard in 1881, a few blocks north of Auburn Avenue, Morris Brown was the only educational institution in Atlanta wholly founded and controlled by Black people. In January 1910, when a fire damaged portions of the historic building, whites pounced on a perceived opening to reshape the Fourth Ward’s built environment. At a meeting in early March, Black leaders, including Bishop Turner and Morris Brown President E.W. Lee, met with lawyer Walter McElreath and other white citizens at city hall. White residents sought the Morris Brown property for “the greater white development of that section of the city,” pitching to Morris Brown’s leaders the availability of property in the west side where a new industrial department for the school could be built.17

Convinced that plans for purchasing the property would move forward, and bolstered by Jackson Hill residents’ assurances that the property would be used for a white public school, the Constitution reported on March 20th that the mayor and city council had commissioned a report to ascertain the amount of money needed to purchase the lot, estimated at $80,000 - $100,000 (over $2 million today).18 Perhaps to sweeten the offer, the city’s Park Commission General Manager Dan Carey offered to locate a new playground in two different locations closer to the heart of the Black Fourth Ward. Playgrounds were, and this offer was made possible, in part, by Reverend

Proctor’s assistance in the negotiations – though Black women social workers had already spent years agitating for more recreational areas.19

Debate over the future of Morris Brown caused friction within the college, as President Lee stood in direct, and sometimes public, opposition to people like Reverend Stinson, who loudly favored a move to the city’s west side and the remaking of Morris Brown into a center for industrial education.20 It seemed that Jackson Hill’s offers proved unappealing, however – Morris Brown’s leadership refused to move, and an April 23rd headline in the Independent declared that “Morris Brown has a bright future.”21 Though white residents had attempted to make Morris Brown into an issue of urgent public policy, thus invoking government authority, the college’s leadership stood its ground – the school would not leave the Fourth Ward until 1932, when John Hope assembled the Atlanta University Center on the city’s west side.22

Tensions simmered over the summer of 1910, provoked by even more attention on the supposed moral evils of the city’s technically non-alcoholic establishments. Reverend Proctor, joining with the city police, led a renewed crusade to clear out near-beer saloons and “questionable houses” from the streets surrounding his church. Eye-catching headlines in the Constitution called the “Criminal Negro A Growing Menace to White Civilization” – just a few weeks after reports of a “riot,” which was closer to a drunken brawl, in Darktown.23 In October, having failed to remove Morris Brown (clearly viewed as a beachhead in a growing Black “invasion”), white residents aggressively renewed their battle.

20 Lands, The Culture of Property, 83.
22 Lands, The Culture of Property, 85.
On October 12th, Jackson Hill neighbors met at Grace Methodist Church. They were concerned about the “steady influx” of Black people into their neighborhood, resolving to draw fixed boundary lines and urging real estate agents to cease renting to Black people within these boundaries. One resident, J.C. Baldwin, even accused one of Morris Brown’s bishops, C.S. Smith, of starting the trouble in the first place by secretly recruiting new renters to Jackson Hill. Baldwin’s inflammatory accusation revealed the less-than-benevolent sentiments of white residents throughout this episode. Other participants at the meeting charged the problem to a change in streetcar service, which now ran through the “negro section” on its way to Jackson Hill. The boundaries set by what would become the Fourth Ward Progressive Club – progressive implied as the removal of Black residents – ran east of Hilliard street and Summit avenue, and north of Irwin and Houston streets. Of course, white citizens made an exception for their own domestic servants to occupy cramped shanty homes within the newly drawn borders, provided they were situated out-of-sight in the alleyways behind white homes.24

Real estate agents and Black residents took the Fourth Ward Progressive Club’s message seriously – Bishop Smith ran a small notice the next day disavowing any connection with a movement to move families into the Fourth Ward to “mix with white people.”25 By November 4th, Jackson Hill had succeeded in persuading fifty real estate agents to promise not to sell or rent to Black families within the boundaries prescribed by the Club. Stinson, the now estranged former teacher of Morris Brown, actively encouraged the Club’s actions in the white press.26

When the dentist Dr. J.T. Holsey attempted to purchase a house at 114 Irwin Street in late October, he was promptly informed that “No negroes [are] wanted in this territory.”

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residents issued thinly-veiled threats demanding that current Black residents of their section must be “gotten rid of as smoothly as possible,” or else. These were not empty threats. About seven months earlier, a Black tenement apartment building on 44 Evans Street, in the city’s mostly white West End neighborhood, was burned to the ground after multiple anonymous warnings.

On November 8th, Atlanta’s Mayor Robert Maddox attempted to broker a ceasefire, inviting Bishop Smith, Reverend Proctor, President Lee, Reverend W.G. Alexander, and Dr. Cornelius Manning to meet with Alderman E.E. Pomeroy, Walter McElreath, and Eugene Mitchell. Maddox tasked the group with finding a peaceful solution, both sides apparently favoring some kind of agreed-upon racial separation. In a pattern first sparked by the riot, Atlanta’s elites once again tried to forge consensus and defuse racial tensions.

It is unclear to what extent these events actually changed the composition of Jackson Hill or the Fourth Ward, especially in a city which, to this point, had consisted of fairly diverse neighborhoods. That is, residential patterns in Atlanta to this point had developed haphazardly as the city grew rapidly, and streets were more divided along lines of class and proximity to employment, rather than race. Nevertheless, the Fourth Ward Progressive Club’s campaign marked an entirely new moment in Atlanta’s racial politics – one likely influenced by numerous factors, including aspirations by the Jackson Hill elite to mold their neighborhood in the likeness of the city’s shiny, exclusive suburbs in Druid Hills and Ansley Park.

Ben Davis, while not condoning residential integration, did deride the Fourth Ward Progressive Club’s attempts to deprive citizens of their duly earned property. Noting the multiple Black homes already within the Club’s newly drawn boundaries, he asked the “race haters” how they possibly

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27 “No Negroes Wanted in this Territory,” Atlanta Constitution, October 26, 1910.
30 Lands, “SPECULATORS ATTENTION.” See Chapter I.
planned to remove that many residents through legal means. While no evidence of physical attacks exists, Jackson Hill residents likely employed some degree of intimidation and hostility in an effort to induce residents to move.

Over the next few years, Black Atlantans continued to face hostility and forced removal from the places they lived, worked, and played. In November 1910, just a few weeks after the controversy in Jackson Hill, white citizens succeeded in expelling near-beer saloons from Edgewood Avenue, the historic thoroughfare connecting Atlanta’s downtown to its first exclusive suburb, Inman Park. Joel Hurt, a businessman and early land developer in Atlanta, indignantly criticized the expansion of near-beer saloons with Black patrons on Edgewood, which Hurt considered identical in prominence to Peachtree Street – in other words, belonging only to wealthy white members of the city’s highest society.

In April 1911, controversy erupted again over a proposed attempt by real estate developer W.E. Wimpy to build Black tenements in the Seventh Ward, near Ashby and People’s streets. At a meeting attended by over 250 angry white residents, these Seventh Warders resolved to stand against Wimpy’s plan to “[colonize] negros in our residence section,” and advised him that if he went through with it, he would have to provide “bullet-proof armor” and “aeroplanes” to the tenement’s residents. Though initially dismissive of the opposition, Wimpy finally settled with Seventh Ward citizens a week later. The neighborhood’s residents collectively bought the property from Wimpy, thereby preventing a “war of the seventh ward.” Three weeks later, Wimpy’s

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32 “Negro Saloons to be Removed,” Atlanta Constitution, November 30, 1910.
33 “Angry Citizens Close Up Alley to Wimpy Lot,” Atlanta Constitution, April 30, 1911.
neighbors got him arrested on a “nuisance charge”, ostensibly because he kept mules in a stable on East Pine Street.\(^34\)

In 1913, meddlesome Fourth Ward residents once again pushed racial segregation, this time enshrined in municipal ordinance. Fourth Ward City councilman Claude Ashley proposed the legislation, copying a similar segregation ordinance adopted in Baltimore, and made Atlanta among the first cities in the country to attempt racial zoning by law.\(^35\) The law applied racial designations to every block in the city, generating national coverage in Black periodicals. City attorney James Mayson called the Ashley segregation ordinance an “admirable method of harmonizing the races,” while Reverend Proctor stood in opposition, fearing the ordinance would unwisely provoke racial conflict.\(^36\) Ashley aggressively lobbied for his ordinance, winning the support of the Atlanta Federation of Trade and the same West End residents already successful in beating back previous attempts at residential integration in 1911.\(^37\) Ashley and his supporters often spouted unsubstantiated claims that even one Black family moving into white areas ruined property values.\(^38\)

Prominent whites, including Chamber of Commerce President Wilmer Moore and Reverend John White of Second Baptist Church, publicly opposed Ashley’s efforts. Like Proctor, they considered the law a dangerous move in a city on edge.\(^39\) A well-timed opinion column published on June 4\(^{th}\) by Mrs. Naomi Hammond, a white woman, called for “justice and opportunity” for

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\(^34\) “Dove of Peace is at West End,” Atlanta Constitution, May 7, 1911.; “Col. Wimpy Arrested on a Nuisance Charge,” Atlanta Constitution, May 24, 1911.
\(^38\) “Committee Favors Segregation Law,” Atlanta Constitution, June 13, 1913.
\(^39\) “Race Segregation Ordinance Argued,” Atlanta Constitution, March 8, 1913.
poor Black residents, to no avail. On June 16th, Ashley’s ordinance became law. Supporters hailed the legislation as a firm step in stopping the “encroachment” and “invasion” of Black residents, and Ashley vowed to fight any legal challenges in defense of Fourth Ward white citizens’ rights. In July, the Constitution proudly reported that the segregation law was “working” as residents of Houston street filed a petition for their block to be considered white. Ben Davis, again claiming that no “self-respecting” person would want to live in an integrated neighborhood anyway, protested what he claimed was an attempt by white Atlanta to prevent Black progress by limiting their housing options.

Surprisingly, the Supreme Court of Georgia nullified the Ashley ordinance in 1915 in *Carey v. Atlanta*, objecting to a section which allowed an existing white resident to object to a Black family moving in. This violated the due process rights of the previous owners, who had the prerogative to dispose of their property as they saw fit. In other words, the Court concerned itself more with white property rights than any sense of fairness. White residents did not take the Court’s decision lightly. In October, Fourth Warders led by Ashley established a “citizens’ vigilance committee” to keep back the “Black Tide” in the Fourth Ward by fixing “dead lines” on certain blocks, threatening to prevent Black families from moving into the neighborhood by “peaceable means, if possible.” Ashley justified the citizens’ independent actions because of the Court’s nullification of the segregation ordinance, these “dead lines” deemed necessary to “maintain the superiority of our race in this community.”

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41 “Committee Favors Segregation Law,” Atlanta Constitution, June 13, 1913.
42 “Atlanta’s Strides, Day by Day,” Atlanta Constitution, July 3, 1913.
43 “Segregation,” Atlanta Independent, June 21, 1913.
44 “Segregation Law Killed by Decision of Supreme Court,” Atlanta Constitution, February 13, 1915.
45 “Fourth Warders to Fix ‘Dead Lines’ to Keep Out the ‘Black Tide,’” Atlanta Constitution, October 6, 1915.
Ward adopted an even more racist and violent tone, forcing yet another bi-racial committee to negotiate a peaceful settlement.46

Despite some racial cooperation in public health and efforts to shut down the city’s dives, white Atlantans pushed forward in mandating residential segregation by law. In April 1916, Councilman Renfroe of the First Ward drew up a new segregation ordinance, identical to Ashley’s except revised to meet the standards of Georgia’s Supreme Court. Renfroe succeeded in winning Mayor Woodward’s signature ten days later, at the same time as the city’s legislators monitored the progress of a lawsuit over a similar law in Louisville, Kentucky. This suit would make its way to the Supreme Court of the United States in a seminal ruling against racial zoning in Buchanan v. Warley (1917).47 In September 1916, Annie Johnson, a laundress, and Morgan Ryan, a janitor, were both fined and ordered to move from their homes on Ashby Street and 65 West Cain Street, respectively, because City Attorney Mayson had declared both of these streets to be white blocks.48 In April 1917, Reverend James Bond, pastor of Rush Memorial Congregational Church, challenged the constitutionality of the new ordinance in court – one of many courageous attempts to resist unjust and discriminatory legislation.49

Battles over where people could live throughout the 1910s revealed a number of key aspects about white supremacy and Black resistance in post-riot Atlanta. First, according to an analysis by LeeAnn Lands, aggressive white attempts to push Black people out of the Fourth Ward eventually had substantial effect in tying race more closely to where one lived. Over the course of the decade, it became less likely to see racially diverse streets. Auburn Avenue and the lower Fourth Ward

46 “Agreement Reached in Fourth Ward,” Atlanta Constitution, October 9, 1915.
49 “Segregation Law Will Be Assailed in Superior Court,” Atlanta Constitution, April 14, 1917.
remained a solid Black community, but many residents had to contend with white citizens unafraid to invoke the chaos and violence of the 1906 massacre in order to safeguard their neighborhood from integration.

Black people, seen as criminals, disease carriers, or threats to property values, were deemed unworthy of even being seen in white neighborhoods, and thus a scourge to be removed by any means necessary. To be sure, they resisted these attempts, but as frequent bi-racial committee formations can attest to, they still had to carefully negotiate their way out of racial violence. Black residents were keenly aware that segregation measures had no benevolent intentions, but rather were measures to cement social and economic inequality by depriving their communities of resources. Ben Davis, in an ultimately premature announcement, would call the Buchanan decision a vindication of the twelve million Black Americans who had “rights that all men are bound to respect.” Unfortunately for Davis and the Fourth Ward, tragedy would soon strike once again – accelerating the process of racial segregation in Atlanta’s urban geography.

The Great Fire of 1917

On May 21\textsuperscript{st}, 1917, sparks originating from Woodward Avenue were carried by the wind to the intersection of Fort and Decatur in Atlanta’s Fourth Ward. Most homes in this district, largely occupied by poor Black people, were wooden frame dwellings with shingle roofs, extremely susceptible to fire. Around noon, at 27 Fort Street, sparks transformed into a massive fire which quickly spread northeast through the heart of the Fourth Ward. Ten difficult hours later, Atlanta’s firemen finally put the fire out, forced to dynamite homes along Ponce de Leon Avenue to stop the fire’s rampage. The damage was extensive, unprecedented in Atlanta’s history. In all, it devastated 300 acres, destroyed 1,938 buildings, caused roughly $5.5 million in property damage (over $100

\footnote{“Segregation Law Unconstitutional,” Atlanta \textit{Independent}, November 10, 1917.}
million today), and made close to ten thousand people homeless. The vast majority were poor residents who lost everything they owned. Among the fire’s casualties was the historic Wheat Street Baptist Church.\textsuperscript{51}

While the fire raged, neighborhood residents panicked as they sped back to their homes and attempted to recover as many belongings as they could. According to the Constitution's coverage of the event, people screamed, others stood dumbfounded, and Black residents “shouted” when the Church toppled over. A street car conductor considered the fire a warning from God against the United States’ participation in World War I. Volunteers assisted families in removing their cherished belongings, and a laundryman named Charlie Marchman stood helplessly by as $600 in savings burned in his home on Hilliard street.\textsuperscript{52} Darktown stood decimated, easy tinder for the fire’s advance. Thousands wandered in search of relief.

Fortunately, the city’s social welfare infrastructure mobilized to aid the fire’s victims. The Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, Associated Charities, and the Red Cross held two meetings the following day. Just like after the 1906 riot, wealthy white businesses and individuals raised over $50,000 for a relief fund, with $15,000 more coming from the city.\textsuperscript{53} The Red Cross, unable to quickly develop an effective relief system, called upon the Neighborhood Union to canvass the newly homeless and ascertain their needs.\textsuperscript{54} Ben Davis and the Odd Fellows opened the Roof Garden and the Auditorium to some of the fire’s victims, setting up hundreds of army cots and providing sandwiches and hot coffee. The auditorium doubled as the temporary home for Wheat Street congregants.\textsuperscript{55} The Colored YMCA, Alonzo Herndon’s Atlanta Mutual Insurance

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\textsuperscript{51} Travelers Insurance records of the 1917 Atlanta fire, MSS 688f, James G. Kenan Research Center at the Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Georgia.
\textsuperscript{52} “Flashes of Human Interest from Yesterday’s Great Fire,” May 22, 1917.
\textsuperscript{53} Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce records, Chamber of Commerce Meeting Minutes, Vol. XI, 1917-1918 MSS OS Box 4.469, Kenan Research Center at the Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Georgia.
\textsuperscript{54} Shivery, “The Neighborhood Union.”
\textsuperscript{55} “The Great Conflagration,” Atlanta Independent, May 26, 1917.
Company, and the city’s pastors also set up relief efforts to meet the fire victims’ financial, housing, and physical needs. In times of crisis, decades of Black community building could be leveraged to mitigate suffering and recover quickly.

While most considered the fire an accident, a clear pattern of municipal neglect certainly made possible its extensive destruction. As early as 1909, the Committee on Fire Prevention of the National Board of Fire Underwriters warned the city that shingle-roofed frame dwellings, which predominated in slum districts, were especially vulnerable to fire. The city was warned again in 1914, and even though an ordinance was passed to remove shingle roofs, it wouldn’t go into effect until July 1, 1917 – and even that legislation appropriated inadequate funding to replace all roofs. A report on the fire’s aftermath urged the city to motorize its fire department, improve streets, and implement more extensive alarm systems. In addition, the city possessed a faulty waterworks system forced to operate at full capacity without backups, a potentially catastrophic situation if any part of the system had failed. While no arson was committed in May 1917, the city’s systemic neglect of its municipal infrastructure, disproportionately in Black communities, made the Great Fire of 1917 all but inevitable.

Before the dust could settle, and while many thousands of wage-earning Atlantans struggled to rebuild, white Fourth Ward residents saw an opportunity to mandate residential segregation – permanently. As soon as May 23, two days later, white residents launched a “City Beautiful” plan for the now barren Fourth Ward, and white residents called for a meeting the next day. As reported in the Constitution, attendees raised the issue that “the old [racial] restriction throughout [the Fourth Ward] is not thought satisfactory to property owners who are contemplating

56 Ibid.
57 Travelers Insurance records of the 1917 Atlanta fire, MSS 688f, James G. Kenan Research Center at the Atlanta History Center.
The City Council, sweeping into action, proposed a plan to completely segregate residents by building a series of parks linking Piedmont Park to the north and Grant Park to the south, creating a natural, “beautiful” barrier.

White commentators both in the city and across the country callously relished this newly available opportunity. City planning experts considered Atlanta’s “Big Fire Disaster” to be a potential benefit, and Mrs. Lucy Cook Peel, president of the City Beautiful club, heartily endorsed the new parks plan now that the fire had wiped out “that district which was a menace to health, life, and property.” County engineers drew up plans for a revitalized Fourth Ward with ample green space, and New York landscape architect C.W. Leavitt urged Atlantans to “profit by the fire” and create a more orderly plan for the neighborhood. By late summer, it was clear that a significant, if not primary goal of the Fourth Ward’s rebuilding efforts, was the retrenchment of race-based segregation.

Black Atlantans, though the overwhelming victims of the fire, did not stand idly by as white citizens attempted to push them out of the Fourth Ward yet again. White residents did not even enlist Black cooperation in rebuilding until late June 1917, after Black citizens met at Big Bethel church to discuss the planned reconstruction. At that meeting, “the colored people [declared] opposition to the plans suggested by the commission.” With prescient insight, and careful to avoid any hint of desire for racial or social equality, the Big Bethel attendees stated their opposition to segregation because it meant “all improvements needed by negroes would be refused by the city council, [that] as soon as a community of negroes is formed that instant marks the end of

59 Ibid.
60 “One of Atlanta’s Foremost Champions of Progress Makes Pertinent Comment on Some Important Topics,” Atlanta Constitution, May 27, 1917.
appropriations for streets and alleviation of insanitary conditions.”62 Residents clearly understood the end result of attempts to enforce spatial marginalization – economic and resource inequality which would only exacerbate their suffering.

The Independent joined in, criticizing “Christian Atlanta” for pursuing segregation even in “our hour of distress and sorrow.” Davis wrote, “Many honest, hard-working Negroes, who are suffering from the fire, feel indignant and will refuse to accept relief if they are to be humiliated like this.”63 Three prominent Black men – Harry Pace, Rev. E.H. Oliver, and Alonzo Herndon – would eventually receive appointments to the Fourth Ward’s Rehabilitation Committee, marking a rare moment where Black interests were recognized. Ben Davis still called white proponents of the plan “hypocrites” and claimed that the “Negro hater [had] been much in evidence” ever since the fire ended.64 One bright spot in the fire’s mess was the coming completion of the Butler Street YMCA building, destined to become a community fixture.65

Despite white Atlanta’s lofty visions for a racial utopia in the Fourth Ward, the plan fell apart, and more than a year later much of the burned area remained empty. The rebuilding efforts’ failure was likely due to the city government’s inability to compel property owners to voluntarily join their plan – the city’s lawyers attempted to convince white landowners to deed their properties to the city, thereby preventing any chance for someone to sell their home to a Black person. The city lacked, however, the force of law to make anyone do anything.66

Nevertheless, the fire set in motion two events critical to the racial geography of the city, both of which aligned with white Atlanta’s long-standing efforts to divide the city. First, since many

63 “Not Even in Our Hours of Distress and Sorrow,” Atlanta Independent, June 2, 1917.
65 Photo of YMCA Building, Atlanta Independent, June 30, 1917.
66 “Convicts Cutting Wood in Burned District to Relieve Distress,” Atlanta Constitution, January 15, 1918.
Black Atlantans lost all their property on uninsured homes, their only option was to migrate to cheaply available housing in other parts of the city. This meant that some former residents of Darktown, among others, found space only in the southwest sections of the city. The Black west side thus gained in prominence as a massive westward migration took place, though Auburn Avenue remained a commercial hub in the city and throughout the South.67

Second, the fire taught white Atlanta about the absolute necessity of comprehensive city planning, a Progressive Era innovation which had yet to fully make its way to the urban South. Without an increase in the city’s policing and regulatory power, it could not hope to control Atlanta’s built environment or socially engineer the city to ensure racial segregation. In 1921, Mayor James Key appointed a City Planning Commission which included Hoke Smith, Joel Hurt, and nationally-renowned consultant Robert Whitten who collaborated to issue Atlanta’s first comprehensive plan in 1922.

The Report’s detailing of its own inception stated that “soon after the big fire of 1917,” the Real Estate Board, headed by Robert R. Otis, sought to establish a planning commission “mainly for the purpose of taking steps toward converting a portion of the fire swept area into an esplanade to separate the two races.”68 Seeking to promote homeownership and clear out tenement areas, the report also urged passage of the city’s first zoning ordinance, which created two residential class districts for “White” and “Colored,” intended to promote “public peace, order, safety and general welfare.”69

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67 Dorothy Slade, “The Evolution of Negro Areas in the City of Atlanta” (Master of Arts, Atlanta, Ga., Atlanta University, 1946).
68 Map collection, Tentative Zone Plan, Atlanta, Ga., City Planning Commission, 1922, VIS 290.001.010.011, Folder 5, Kenan Research Center at the Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Ga.
69 Tentative Zone Plan, 27.
On January 1st, 1922, the city released a zoning map denoting “Colored Districts,” which largely mapped onto existing Black neighborhoods on the west side, in Summerhill, and in a greatly reduced section around Auburn Avenue. Though the new city plan did not become law – an issue Atlantans wouldn’t touch again until the 1930s – the racial zoning map informally set the terms for where Black and white people could live, a geography incredibly distinct from the more racially mixed Atlanta fifteen years prior. The city remained obsessed with confining Black Atlanta to certain neighborhoods, utilizing public housing, slum clearance, highway construction, and urban removal programs from the 1930s onward. A 1938 map created by the Atlanta Housing Authority showed that Atlanta’s racial distribution was mostly unchanged – and that Black Atlantans still disproportionately lived in the city’s low-quality housing stock.

Jesse Max Barber’s evisceration of Atlanta’s shallow progressive veneer in the 1906 riot’s aftermath proved more accurate than perhaps he imagined. White supremacist politics, from the race riot, to the Fourth Ward Progressive Club, and finally to the 1922 City Planning Commission, seemingly had the upper hand, even if white remained totally ignorant of robust, resilient, and intimate Black communities. The riot’s memory also provoked repeated clashes in a street-by-street battle to define the Gateway City of the South.

The period from 1906 to 1922 shows us, however, that Black Atlanta was far from a monolith, that not all individuals shared the same kind of politics, behavior, and future visions of what kinds of lives they wanted. They fought for control over leadership and pioneered different models of community-based organization. In all, Black Atlantans shared a deep commitment to defending the communities they built, tied to specific places and institutions which they imbued with a

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70 “Zone Plan for Atlanta Ready for Meeting of Commission Monday,” Atlanta Constitution, January 1, 1922.
71 Slade, “The Evolution of Negro Areas.”
dynamic sense of personal meaning. They held fast to an aspirational faith in what Atlanta, a city
built from scratch in the ashes of the Civil War, could make possible for all its citizens.
Conclusion

The [Old] South dies hard, but its doom is written in the stars.

- *The Crisis*, July 1913

In 2019, the Fulton County Remembrance Coalition partnered with the Equal Justice Initiative and Project South to recognize the history of racial violence in Atlanta and surrounding communities. During a public event, the Coalition collected soil from the sites of twenty-five victims of Atlanta’s 1906 massacre in order to “reconnect with and honor” their lives. The soil acted much like a thread stretching across time, tying together two separate groups of people. Its earthy permanence reminded those who took part in the ceremony that this city’s particular history remained all around them – in streets, buildings, and memory. The FCRC believed direct confrontation with this history could promote reconciliation and justice in Atlanta today.

Over a century later, Atlanta is still the South’s leading city. Community organizing in the early 20th century precipitated the advent of public housing, voter education and registration drives, and institutionalized social work programs. Lugenia Hope, much like Septima Clark, ran citizenship schools in the early 1930s, and the Neighborhood Union organized monetary relief for poor families during the Great Depression. In the 1950s and 1960s, Atlanta served as the headquarters for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. In 1973, Maynard Jackson became the city’s first Black mayor. Today, Atlanta is a sprawling Southern metropolis, considered a shining beacon for the region.

At the same time, the city remains remarkably unequal. In the 1950s, Interstate 85 plowed through Auburn Avenue, proving more consequential for Black community life in the Old Fourth

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2 “Fulton Country Remembrance Coalition,” [https://fultonremembrance.org/](https://fultonremembrance.org/)
Ward than any other event. Almost seventy years later, gentrification spurs the creation of luxury housing developments, pushing poorer residents out of their neighborhoods. Atlanta has become known for dramatic levels of wealth inequality and wicked segregation, a function of mega-roads like Interstate 85 turning downtown into a chaotic cluster of overpasses and highways. The plight and prosperity of modern Atlanta stems from a long history, most significantly from the turn-of-the-century moment covered in this thesis – a moment the Fulton County Remembrance Coalition urges us to tackle.

Atlanta in the early 20th century defied easy definition. Aspirations for a New South city lent itself to multiple competing visions which shared only a desire to leave the Old South behind. The wide streets and dark alleyways of a patchwork, bustling Atlanta served as the terrain upon which its residents frequently clashed – over resources, territory, labor, relaxation, voting, municipal bonds, and more. In particular, I hoped to show how Black Atlantans expressed, in their words and actions, in their editorials and institution-building, a complex and ever-changing sense of what their city made possible. I also hoped to make clear that a framework for conceiving of New South city-building necessarily included an understanding of gender, class, race, space, and place.

In the last decades of the 19th century, many Black Atlantans shared the Washingtonian sentiment that by “casting their bucket” where they were, they could thrive. For many residents, this still meant contending with unpaved streets, poor water, fire, and electrical coverage, inadequate schools, violent policing, precarious employment, disease, crime, and almost complete exclusion from the city’s politics. By necessity, they built community to ensure their own survival, whether clustered around Atlanta University, in the Fourth Ward, in working-class neighborhoods like Pittsburgh, Mechanicsville, and Brownsville, or in the slums of Beaver Slide and Darktown. From the 1881 washerwomen’s strike, to the Atlanta University conferences and creation of the
Gate City Kindergarten Association, Black Atlantans militantly and steadfastly worked to not only ensure daily survival, but to create Black spaces entirely their own.

Atlanta’s massacre in 1906 severely tested, but did not break, community formed over decades. Violence made clear, however, that Black citizens needed new ways of practicing solidarity and guaranteeing their future in Atlanta – disenfranchisement and segregation in public spaces had quickly become the new normal. In response, Lugenia Hope and the Neighborhood Union formed a more democratic, place-based vehicle for community organizing informed by people’s everyday lived experiences, a model replicated across the country yet unique within the Southern reform tradition.

Lugenia’s organization succeeded in bringing people together around mutual aid, better schools, and public health. In the process, they reconstituted the geography of the city according to their needs, started Black social work in Atlanta, and created such a powerfully organized body that male-dominated Atlanta branches of the NAACP and Urban League owed their success to the Neighborhood Union’s foundational work. Historian Anne Firor Scott believed the Neighborhood Union represented the furthest limits of what was possible in the post-Reconstruction South.3 The organization was still imperfect, immersed in a politics of respectability and moral uplift, but its activities proved that a proto-organizing tradition addressing urban inequality took root early in postwar Southern history.

Laborers, washerwomen, domestic servants, draymen and other workers always made up the vast majority of Atlanta’s citizens. Though their stories are harder to capture, they made their presence felt on streetcars and in parks, in dance halls and newspaper reports, preserving as much of their autonomy as they could. Vilified in the press, portrayed as criminals, and subject to

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3 Scott, “Most Invisible of All,” 15.
virtuous moralizing by preachers and businessmen, workers found ways to make the New South a home against all odds. White Atlanta aggressively enacted violence against the Black working poor through policing, segregation, municipal neglect, and arbitrary physical attacks. The many who did not make it, who lie in unmarked graves because of white supremacy, also deserve recognition – their lives mattered. Histories told from below, from the grassroots, are essential.

Black community-building could not fully prevent the city’s reordering in the 1910s, as residential segregation, a massive fire, and Progressive urban planning set Atlanta’s racial geography in stone, guiding decades of future growth. White Atlantans consistently sought to undermine Black demands for better municipal infrastructure and resources and thereby prevent them from staking an equal claim in the New South. Control over space, and the power to define space, colored every event in this period. Community-building did ensure that Black places endured, that their resistance remained omnipresent – proven in municipal bond elections in 1919 and 1921 which hinged on their votes – and that their solidarity sustained segregated communities throughout the 20th century.

Understanding the spatialized, racialized, and gendered contests over urban inequality in early 20th century Atlanta, and how organized communities waged those contests, lends us a more nuanced sense of America’s urban history beyond the metropolises of New York City, Chicago, or Boston. The urban South was both distinct and typical, captured and exploited by a commercial-civic elite but never devoid of grassroots communities who demanded better, re-shaped and claimed ownership in certain places, and cultivated a sense of belonging. Moreover, their experiences proved that there is no singular New South, but rather many New South(s).

In July 1913, the NAACP magazine *The Crisis* and its editor, W.E.B. Du Bois, believed the Old South’s demise was destined. As students of this history, however, we can slightly adjust Du
Bois’ prophecy. The Old South’s demise is destined – a more honest New South, and a more just horizon is possible – but only if we organize, take care of our neighbors, center the experiences of marginalized and vulnerable people, and demand economic, racial, environmental, and gender justice in community development. In other words, the legacy of this New South moment is that a better future is ours for the shaping, but it requires all of us to strive for the cities and places to come.
Appendix A: Maps of Atlanta

i: “Map Of Atlanta, Georgia Showing The Lines Of The Georgia Railway And Electric Company, 1902.” Courtesy University Of Texas Libraries. Pulled from article by Casey P. Cater in Atlanta Studies, April 2020.
ii: Land Use Map of Atlanta, Atlanta Housing Authority, 1938
Appendix B: Photos

iv: Typical Black Tenement Housing, 1906. Courtesy of Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

iii: Lugenia Burns Hope, circa 1930s
vi: Postcard Depicting Odd Fellows Block on Auburn Avenue

v: Neighborhood Union House, early 1910s
vii: Residents scrambling to save their belongings during the Great Atlanta Fire of 1917. Courtesy of the Atlanta History Center
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