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“MAJOR LEAGUE CITY”:  
ATLANTA, PROFESSIONAL SPORTS, AND THE MAKING OF A SUNBELT  
METROPOLIS, 1961-1976

a dissertation

by

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*“Major League City”: Atlanta, Professional Sports, and the Making of a Sunbelt Metropolis, 1961-1976*

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This dissertation is a study of how the pursuit, advent, and popular response to professional sports in Atlanta both shaped and reflected the region’s evolving political and consumer culture during the 1960s and 1970s. It examines the concerted effort by municipal elites during this time period to acquire professional sports franchises for their city and its environs. Atlanta’s leadership succeeded at luring four major professional sports franchises to Atlanta in a six-year period (1966-1972) by securing significant public and private investments in two playing facilities in the Central Business District (CBD).

Scholars of the economic history of professional sports describe the increasing geographic mobility of the major leagues in the post-World War II era as “franchise free agency.” Atlanta took advantage of this expanding market by making civic investments in two playing venues as a means of attracting franchises. This dissertation analyzes how the emerging metropolis’ negotiation of “franchise free agency” reshaped the culture, public policy, and urban planning of Atlanta. It shows how Atlanta provided a model employed by future Sunbelt cities as they pursued professional teams of their own, often luring clubs from Rust Belt cities with similarly lucrative offers of public support.

This dissertation proceeds to analyze the response to professional sports in Metropolitan Atlanta in the decade after it achieved major league status. The city’s elites assumed that residents would embrace the teams and transform their tony playing facilities into twin focal points of leisure and communal pride. Instead, Atlantans from all of the region’s racial, socio-

economic, and residential clusters responded apathetically to the teams. The collective shrug with which Atlantans reacted to their new franchises demonstrated the growing cultural divergence which characterized life in the booming Sunbelt center over the course of the 1960s and 1970s. In subsequent decades, civic elites in other rapidly growing Sunbelt centers believed, like their predecessors in Atlanta, that municipal investments in professional sports would provide their communities with a wellspring of unity and prestige. Residents of these metropolitan areas responded to their new stadiums and teams in the 1980s and 1990s with an apathy similar to that of Atlantans toward their teams during the 1960s and 1970s.

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Johnny Trutor has been my foremost peer and mentor during my dissertation years. My mother, Kathy Trutor, is my most-trusted copyeditor.

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## INTRODUCTION

### **“Major League City”: The Frustrating Legacy of a Sunbelt Metropolis in the Age of Professional Sports “Franchise Free Agency”**

“Games lose part of their charm when they are pressed into the service of education, social improvement, and character development.”- Christopher Lasch<sup>1</sup>

In July 1975, the editors of the *Atlanta Constitution* ran a two-part, front page series entitled “Loserville, USA.” Lewis Grizzard, the morning newspaper’s special assignments editor who later became a well-known Southern humorist, authored the provocatively titled series. He detailed the futility of Atlanta’s four major league sports teams in the decade since the 1966 arrival of its first two franchises: the Atlanta Braves of Major League Baseball (MLB)’s National League (NL), who had relocated from Milwaukee, and the Atlanta Falcons, an expansion franchise in the National Football League (NFL). Two years later, in 1968, the Hawks of the National Basketball Association (NBA) relocated to Atlanta from St. Louis, becoming the city’s third professional sports franchise. In 1972, the Atlanta Flames, an expansion team in the National Hockey League (NHL), began play, making Atlanta one of only nine North American cities with franchises in all four major leagues and the first southern city to achieve this distinction. The excitement surrounding the arrival of four professional franchises in Atlanta in a six year period soon gave way to widespread frustration and, eventually, widespread apathy towards its home teams. All four teams struggled in the standings and struggled to draw fans to their games. Every one of the city’s new professional franchises lagged below the league average in attendance. The Braves, Falcons, and Hawks were all vying for dubious distinctions

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Lasch, “The Corruption of Sports,” *The New York Review of Books*, April 28, 1977, 24.

as the worst drawing teams in their respective leagues.<sup>2</sup> “Atlanta’s decade long involvement with major-league sports,” Grizzard wrote in the first of his two philippics, “has been a major-league flop.”<sup>3</sup>

### **“Major League City”**

This dissertation is a study of how the pursuit, advent, and popular response to professional sports in Atlanta, Georgia both shaped and reflected the region’s transforming political and consumer culture during the 1960s and 1970s. It examines the concerted effort by Atlanta’s municipal elite during this time period to acquire professional sports franchises for their city, its burgeoning suburbs, and the Southeastern United States as a whole. Mayor Ivan Allen Jr. (1961-1969), who inherited the bi-racial governing coalition of William B. Hartsfield (1937-1941, 1942-1961), looked to build on Atlanta’s reputation as a racially moderate, economically booming “City Too Busy to Hate.” Allen, who oversaw the end of legal segregation during his first year in office, turned much of his attention to transforming Atlanta into a “Major League City.” He popularized the phrase as a descriptor for the national stature he envisioned for Atlanta once it acquired the most prestigious of late 20<sup>th</sup> century American institutions: professional sports franchises. Allen and his successor, Sam Massell (1970-1974), worked closely with the “Big Mules,” a term used in the local media to describe the core of

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<sup>2</sup> Lewis Grizzard, “Loserville, USA,” *Atlanta Constitution*, July 11, 1975, 1A, 14A; Lewis Grizzard, “Loserville, USA: The Sahara of Pro Sports,” *Atlanta Constitution*, July 12, 1975, 1A, 16A; William Leggett, “Decline of a Brave New World,” *Sports Illustrated*, May 5, 1975, 65; Robert Ashley Fields, *Take Me Out to the Crowd: Ted Turner and the Atlanta Braves* (Huntsville, AL: Strode Publishers, 1977), 22; William A. Schaffer and Lawrence S. Davidson, *The Economic Impact of the Falcons on Atlanta: 1984* (Atlanta, GA: The Atlanta Falcons, 1984), 8; “NHL Attendance Graph 1974,” *HockeyDatabase.com*, 1998. Accessed on January 2, 2015: [http://www.hockeydb.com/nhlattendance/att\\_graph\\_season.php?lid=NHL1927&sid=1975](http://www.hockeydb.com/nhlattendance/att_graph_season.php?lid=NHL1927&sid=1975).

<sup>3</sup> Lewis Grizzard, “Loserville, USA,” *Atlanta Constitution*, July 11, 1975, 1A.

Atlanta's corporate leadership, to secure generous public and private investments in professional sports between the mid-1960s and the early 1970s.<sup>4</sup>

Municipal leaders succeeded at luring four major professional sports franchises to Atlanta in a six year period (1966-1972) by securing significant public and private investments in two playing facilities in the Central Business District (CBD). Atlanta Stadium, which opened in 1965, served as the home field for MLB's Atlanta Braves and the NFL's Atlanta Falcons. The Omni Coliseum, which opened in 1972, became the home arena for the NHL's Atlanta Flames and the NBA's Atlanta Hawks.

Allen campaigned successfully for municipal financing of a multi-purpose stadium, which was co-owned by the City of Atlanta and surrounding Fulton County. He revived the dormant Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium Authority, which facilitated the construction of \$18 million Atlanta Stadium and lured the Milwaukee Braves baseball club to Georgia with a highly favorable lease. In addition, the completion of Atlanta Stadium convinced the NFL to award the city an expansion franchise which became the Falcons. Several years later, Massell negotiated a financing deal for a downtown coliseum with developer Tom Cousins, who had acquired NBA and NHL franchises to serve as the drawing cards to his prospective mixed-use development (MXD). The Stadium Authority agreed to float \$17 million in revenue bonds for construction of the 16,000 seat Omni Coliseum, which opened in 1972 and housed both of Cousins' franchises. In return, Cousins agreed to municipal ownership of the arena and an annual repayment plan which would eventually reimburse the city in full for the construction bond. Cousins also agreed to cover the entirety of the expenses for maintaining the facility.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ivan Allen with Paul Hemphill, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971), 152-164; Jim Minter, "The Mayor Surrenders Atlanta," *Sports Illustrated*, July 12, 1965, 14-17.

<sup>5</sup> Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta: The Atlanta Braves Story* (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1966), 27-51, 176-178; Glen Gendzel, "Competitive Boosterism: How Milwaukee Lost the Braves," *Business History Review* 69.4

Atlanta's successful pursuit of major league teams, which was unprecedented among Southern cities, took place in an increasingly competitive national marketplace for professional sports. Scholars who research the economic history of professional sports describe the expansion of the major leagues and the increasing geographic mobility of teams in the decades after World War II as "franchise free agency."<sup>6</sup> Atlanta took advantage of the newly flexible national sports market by making generous civic investments in two playing venues as a means of attracting franchises. This dissertation uses both a local and a national lens to analyze how the emerging metropolis' negotiation of "franchise free agency" reshaped the culture, public policy, and urban planning of Atlanta, which was one of the first American cities to make the pursuit of professional sports a matter of government business. It will also show how Atlanta provided a model for other Sunbelt cities, such as San Diego, Tampa, and Phoenix, to pursue their own major league teams, often luring clubs from economically struggling Rust Belt cities with lucrative offers of public support to the franchise's ownership.

While the fate of most relocated and expansion franchises proved just as frustrating as those of Atlanta's teams, cities continued to pursue professional sports franchises as a matter of public policy. Many civic leaders believed the mere acquisition of teams was a prestigious civic end in itself, a sign of the noblesse oblige of an emergent ruling class in a rising Sunbelt city. Many of the entrepreneurs who invested in teams believed, often mistakenly, that they could manage a franchise better than other newcomers who had tried before them, underestimating the

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(Winter 1995): 551-563; Ivan Allen, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, 162-164; Jesse Outlar, "Mayor Massell's Party," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 1, 1971, 1D; Jesse Outlar, "A Timely Social," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 30, 1971, 1A.  
<sup>6</sup> John Vrooman, "Franchise Free Agency in Professional Sports Leagues," *Southern Economic Journal* 64.1 (1997), 191-219; Katherine Leone, "No Team, No Peace: Franchise Free Agency in the National Football League," *Columbia Law Review* 97.2 (March 1997), 473-523.

extent to which past experience in this highly specialized industry was indicative of future success.

By focusing on the Sunbelt city that pioneered a distinct, publicly supported means of luring professional sports to its community, this dissertation demonstrates the impact of “franchise free agency” on the political culture of American cities not only in the south and west but also in the Rust Belt. “Franchise free agency” served to reshape the political culture of cities in the urban north, which were seeking to protect their teams from well-heeled poachers in the south and west. This study analyzes in detail the impact of “franchise free agency” on the two Rust Belt cities from which Atlanta lured its professional baseball and basketball franchises: Milwaukee and St. Louis. By examining the struggles for professional sports franchises between Atlanta and each of these historic centers of American industry, we can see how the increasing mobility of a very particular type of capital served to reshape public policies in Rust Belt cities, which followed the Sunbelt’s lead by making their own substantial public investments in professional sports stadiums.

This dissertation proceeds to analyze the public response to professional sports in Metropolitan Atlanta in the decade after it achieved major league status. The city’s civic elite, exemplified by the “Big Mules,” assumed that residents would embrace the newly acquired teams and transform their state-of-the-art playing facilities into the region’s twin focal points of leisure and communal pride. Instead, Atlantans from all of the region’s racial, socio-economic, and residential clusters responded apathetically to the teams. The collective shrug with which Atlantans reacted to their new professional sports franchises demonstrated the growing cultural divergence which characterized life in the booming Sunbelt center over the course of the 1960s and 1970s.

Metropolitan Atlantans' shared indifference to their big league teams took place amid the social and political fracturing of the city's postwar, biracial governing regime. Professional sports proved an insufficient tie to bind the region's divergent communities together. During Atlanta's first major league decade, the city's professional franchises provided neither a catalyst for national prestige nor the source of social cohesion that the civic elite had envisioned. Instead, the "City Too Busy to Hate" turned "Major League City" had become the divided metropolis known pejoratively as "Loserville, USA." This dissertation employs both a local and a national lens to examine the cultural transformation of optimistic "Major League Atlanta" into "Loserville, USA" over the course of a decade. By casting their city as "Loserville," the local sports media contributed to this shift. Initially, the most fervent boosters of the city's professional sports teams, they soon became the architects of the still-prevailing narrative that ignoring Atlanta's typically hapless teams was just part of being an Atlantan. Ironically, the emergence of the "Loserville" narrative served the purposes of civic leaders in other Sunbelt cities eager to invest in professional sports. These cities could employ the methods Atlanta used to acquire professional sports while believing simultaneously that the failure of Atlanta's teams to earn durable local support was reflective of circumstances specific to Atlanta.

### **Placing "Major League" Atlanta's Making and Unmaking in National Context**

Atlanta was not the first city whose leadership played an instrumental role in drawing a professional sports franchise to their community. Beginning in the early 1950s, municipalities offered the owners of professional sports franchises financial incentives to relocate their teams, mirroring efforts by local governments dating back to the 19th century to influence the movement of capital by granting public subsidies to corporations such as railroads and shipping lines. The earliest known example of a municipality offering public subsidies to lure a far-away



professional sports franchise came in 1953. Baltimore convinced the owners of the St. Louis Browns baseball team to move their team to Maryland by building a second seating deck on their municipally-owned stadium.<sup>7</sup> This was the first of a dozen such *ad hoc* efforts by cities during the 1950s and early 1960s to entice a specific franchise or convince a professional sports league to grant them an expansion franchise through municipal largesse.<sup>8</sup>

The push by Atlanta's "Big Mules" to make their hometown a "Major League City" was something quite different. Never before had the leaders of an American city pursued professional sports franchises with the same concerted civic energy they employed when trying to lure corporate investment. Atlanta made the pursuit of professional sports franchises one of the foremost enterprises of its political and corporate leadership during the 1960s and early 1970s. Atlanta's coordinated civic boosting campaign to become a "Major League City" was the first such effort that aimed explicitly to bring all of the major professional sports leagues to one municipality. In 1972, Atlanta's civic elite accomplished their self-assigned duty, becoming the first southern city with teams in all four major leagues. Atlanta's pioneering path to big league status transformed the acquisition of professional sports franchises into a grand civic enterprise. This elite-driven approach became the model that other Sunbelt cities, including Phoenix, San Diego, and Tampa, followed as they sought out major league status.

Following in Atlanta's footsteps, political and corporate leaders in many southern and western cities partnered in the late twentieth century to procure major professional sports franchises by offering individual clubs and professional leagues tens of millions of dollars in

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<sup>7</sup> Mark Rosentraub, "Are Public Policies Needed to Level the Playing Field Between Cities and Teams?" *Journal of Urban Affairs* 21.4 (1999), 377; Glen Gendzel, "Competitive Boosterism," 530-2; Kenneth Shropshire, *The Sports Franchise Game: Cities in Pursuit of Sports Franchises, Events, Stadiums, and Arenas* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 13-19.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Rosentraub, "Are Public Policies Needed to Level the Playing Field Between Cities and Teams?" 377-378.

public subsidies. More often than not, residents of Sunbelt cities responded apathetically to the teams that resulted from these civic investments. Rarely did these second wave Sunbelt franchises become community pillars any more so than their predecessors in Georgia.<sup>9</sup>

The ability of civic boosters in emerging cities like Atlanta to attract franchises with promises of public subsidies perpetuated the increasing mobility of capital in postwar America away from the urban north and toward the “business friendly” Sunbelt.<sup>10</sup> In the decades after World War II, the population growth experienced in the up-and-coming metropolitan areas of the south and west, improvements in the nation’s transportation infrastructure, and the rapidly rising standard of living in many Sunbelt cities made boomtowns like Atlanta seem like desirable locations for professional sports franchises.<sup>11</sup> The willingness of Atlanta and its imitators to make massive public and private investments in professional sports jumpstarted the phenomenon of “franchise free agency.”<sup>12</sup>

At the end of World War II, major professional sports in America existed almost exclusively in center cities in the urban north. Over the course of the next five decades, new southern and western metropolises accumulated dozens of professional sports teams either through the relocation of existing franchises or decisions by the professional leagues to grant them expansion franchises. Nearly two-thirds of the fifty professional sports franchise

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<sup>9</sup> Charles C. Euchner, *Playing the Field: Why Sports Teams Move and Cities Fight to Keep Them*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 5.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Post-war Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post-war Oakland*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Bruce Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1991); Peter Wiley and Bob Gottlieb, *Empires in the Sun: The Development of the New American West* (New York: Putnam, 1982); Mark Rosentraub, “Are Public Policies Needed to Level the Playing Field Between Cities and Teams?”, 377-378

<sup>11</sup> Frank P. Josza, *Big Sports, Big Businesses: A Century of League Expansions, Mergers, and Reorganizations* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2006), 53-54.

<sup>12</sup> John Vrooman, “Franchise Free Agency in Professional Sports Leagues,” 191-219; Katherine Leone, “No Team, No Peace,” 473-523.

relocations and sixty-three expansions approved by major professional leagues between 1946 and 1999 placed teams south of the Mason-Dixon Line or west of the Mississippi River. Three-quarters of these franchise relocations and league expansions to the Sunbelt have taken place since 1966, the year that Atlanta secured its first two professional sports franchises. By 1980, 40 different metropolitan areas hosted major professional teams.<sup>13</sup> The decentralization of American professional sports in the late twentieth century both shaped and reflected the shifting of the nation's political, economic, and cultural "center of gravity" to the suburbs and to the emerging Sunbelt.<sup>14</sup> Atlanta stood at the vanguard of this transformation of mass leisure in late twentieth century America by pioneering the kinds of corporatized civic boosting campaigns that other Sunbelt cities later used to lure professional sports franchises.

The divergence in Atlanta between the civic leadership's vision for professional sports and the residents of Atlanta's anemic response to these teams foreshadowed social divisions that would soon emerge in many Sunbelt cities. George Lipsitz, one of the first scholars to study the history of downtown stadium development, concluded that local decisions on whether or not to provide subsidies for a stadium project "involved larger questions about the nature of each metropolitan area and the amenities it offered its citizens."<sup>15</sup> Beyond their private enthusiasms for spectator sports, Atlanta's civic leaders wanted to bring professional teams to their community for two primary reasons: to enhance the city's national prestige and to foster bonds of social cohesion. Despite its reputation as the "City Too Busy to Hate," the Atlanta of the 1960s and 1970s was increasingly characterized by metropolitan divergence and regional

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<sup>13</sup> Michael N. Danielson, *Home Team: Professional Sports and the American Metropolis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 140-143, 225; Frank Josza, *Big Sports, Big Businesses*, 106-107.

<sup>14</sup> Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Politics, and Society* (New York: Free Press, 2001), xii.

<sup>15</sup> George Lipsitz, "Sports Stadiums and Urban Development," *Journal of Sports and Social Issues* 8 (1984), 1.

fragmentation, its impoverished inner-city black majority cut off from its sprawling, politically autonomous white suburbs.<sup>16</sup> Civic leaders in Atlanta and every Sunbelt city that followed it into the “Major Leagues” desired the “arch-cachet of American cityhood” that came with the acquisition of professional sports franchises.<sup>17</sup> Specific to Atlanta’s situation was the local leadership’s belief that professional sports would constitute a self-perpetuating source of regional and metropolitan consensus. Sources of trans-metropolitan communalism were sorely needed in a city that was being abandoned by white residents unwilling to acquiesce to legally-proscribed integration and avoided by the region’s white-collar newcomers.<sup>18</sup>

In the case of Atlanta, professional sports failed to live up to the city fathers’ grand expectations that they would serve as a lasting source of civic pride and social cohesion. Rather than alleviating Atlanta’s social divisions, professional sports made them more evident, both locally and nationally, as a result of the intense media focus cast on the new “Major League City.” Atlanta’s elite anticipated that the city’s professional teams would receive widespread and durable support from a grateful public, but metropolitan area residents were not given to sacrificing their leisure time to acts of civic devotion. Metropolitan Atlantans’ relationship to their new major league teams was more that of consumers of a new leisure amenity than that of devotees to a long-tenured civic institution. This relationship between spectators and sport differs considerably from the depiction of fan behavior found in the existing literature on the relationship between American cities and professional teams, which posits that fans tend to comply with the imperatives presented to them by team management since fans are “devotees

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<sup>16</sup> Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 276.

<sup>17</sup> James Edward Miller, *The Baseball Business: Pursuing Pennants and Profits in Baltimore* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 297.

<sup>18</sup> Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 13.

rather than consumers,” leading them to acquiesce to the demands of owners for continued public investment and consumer support. Local emotional investment in a team renders citizens unable to challenge leagues and franchise owners who extract ever-more tax and discretionary dollars from them.<sup>19</sup>

In Atlanta, this was not the case. Its elites may have pioneered a soon-to-be standard path to major league status, but residents of the metropolitan area from diverse racial, social, and cultural backgrounds forged what would become the quintessential Sunbelt response to the acquisition of these leisure amenities. Atlantans proved to be discerning consumers, unwilling to simply support teams as an act of civic fealty. By and large, local consumers regarded the city’s teams as mismanaged, they regarded attending a game at the city’s downtown playing facilities as inconvenient and potentially unsafe, and relatively few Atlantans, whether natives or transplants, made the city’s teams a focus of their leisure time. It was largely the investment of cable television entrepreneur Ted Turner, who became the owner of two of his primary sources of broadcasting, the Braves (1976) and Hawks (1977), which kept Atlanta “major league” beyond the mid-1970s. Locals remained indifferent to the franchises while Turner lost millions of dollars operating them for the next two decades.

Atlantans, particularly those living in the city’s ever-expanding suburban rings, were characteristic of what Lizabeth Cohen describes as “purchaser consumers.”<sup>20</sup> They believed that individual consumer choices in a marketplace unfettered by regulations would bring about social good. Within the marketplace of Metropolitan Atlanta, suburbanites displayed a definite preference for locally controlled social experiences situated in communities of their choosing

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<sup>19</sup> Michael N. Danielson, *Home Team*, 65.

<sup>20</sup> Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 8-9.

while shunning the kind of social mixing that outings in downtown Atlanta entailed.

Metropolitan Atlantans' fondness for intentional and ordered social experiences pointed toward an emerging set of cultural preferences in late twentieth century America. As the United States became a majority suburban nation, citizens of different racial and socio-economic backgrounds shared less and less common physical space, especially during their leisure time. They also started to consume in progressively more dissimilar ways. Market segmentation came with a series of trade-offs. It legitimized the place in the consumer market for traditionally disempowered groups while simultaneously strengthening the cultural boundaries between social groups, which in turn further fragmented the society.<sup>21</sup>

The market segmentation that Cohen describes in *A Consumers' Republic* was especially evident in the leisure and consumer marketplace of Metropolitan Atlanta. Rather than embracing the cultural institutions with which the "Big Mules" adorned their city, residents engaged in leisure of their own making. For the mass of suburban whites, the desire to live, shop, and enjoy their free time within self-selecting communities proved paramount among their lifestyle choices. They displayed a strong desire for political and cultural independence from the city and its institutions, including its professional sports franchises and the facilities in which they played. The city of Atlanta's new black majority also demonstrated a cultural autonomy that was inextricably intertwined with its political autonomy. For African American residents of the city and its inner-ring suburbs, desegregation in its social and cultural forms proved to be less a matter of desiring spatial integration than being able to reside, work, and seek services where they wished and to come and go as they desired. Spaces like Atlanta Stadium and the Omni Arena, which were neither fully public nor privatized, nor fully inside the hub of black or white

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 7, 254-265.

Atlanta, made for unsuccessful civic centers of gravity. The agency that Atlantans displayed when they decided how to spend their leisure time helped to foster a local political culture characterized by regional fragmentation and metropolitan divergence. The response of Atlantans to the arrival of professional sports in their city provides an unparalleled prism through which to analyze the transformation of the region's political culture from one characterized by a tenuous, negotiated biracial urban consensus to one characterized by the formation of discreet lifestyle clusters in the region's urban and suburban communities.<sup>22</sup>

During the early 1960s, Atlanta's elites convinced the region's disparate groups that they collectively needed professional sports to endow their city with prestige and to create a civic "center of gravity," as the editorialists at the *Journal* described Atlanta Stadium on its opening weekend in 1965.<sup>23</sup> Initially, Atlantans embraced the idea of being "Major League" and provided each franchise with an ever-shorter honeymoon of enthusiasm. Once the novelty of each franchise wore off, Atlantans, by and large, withdrew their support from these new prestige institutions, preferring familiar leisure activities or those situated within controlled environments to those being offered in the center city. The lifestyle clusters that emerged in Atlanta and its expansive suburbs refused to acquiesce to the longstanding civic elite's visions of mass leisure for their region. As Pierre Bourdieu observed, elites who want to retain a social consensus in line with their worldview must constantly renew their efforts to reproduce belief and reinvigorate the institutions designed to reproduce those beliefs.<sup>24</sup> Once Atlanta's political and economic leadership made their community a "Major League City," they moved onto other grand civic enterprises. The hegemony of Atlanta's political and corporate leadership, the cornerstone of the

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<sup>22</sup> Stephen A. Riess. *City Games: The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 240-245.

<sup>23</sup> "A Spectacular Weekend," *Atlanta Journal*, April 9, 1965, 18.

<sup>24</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "Social Space and Symbolic Power," *Sociological Theory* 7.1 (Spring 1989), 14-25.

Hartsfield-Allen governing coalition, faded as the political culture of Metropolitan Atlanta came to be dominated in the 1970s by two emerging political coalitions: an urban black political leadership backed by the city's now African American majority and an independent, predominately white suburban political regime fiercely defensive of property rights and supportive of post-segregationist barriers to racial and socio-economic integration.<sup>25</sup>

### **Historiography**

This dissertation contributes to and is conversant with a wide range of academic literatures. It engages the existing, extensive scholarship concerning the economic history of professional sports, the political history of stadium development, postwar urban and suburban history, and the political history of the Sunbelt South. At its roots, though, this dissertation is a work of cultural history that analyzes the ways that people in the recent past responded and gave meaning to the forms of mass entertainment they experienced. It analyzes how people's perceptions of mass entertainments both shaped and reflected their perspectives on other aspects of their lives. Through the prism of spectator sports in Atlanta, this dissertation analyzes the ways in which the region's political and spatial fragmentation manifested itself culturally. It examines how the cultural choices of groups and individuals within Metropolitan Atlanta both shaped and reflected the "practice of everyday life" in the region.<sup>26</sup>

Historians of culture and urban politics such as Roy Rosenzweig, Lizabeth Cohen, and Eric Avila pioneered the approach taken in this dissertation.<sup>27</sup> Rosenzweig's iconoclastic study of working class leisure in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Worcester, *Eight Hours*

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<sup>25</sup> See Antonio Gramsci, "The State and Civil Society," *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, eds. (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 501-518.

<sup>26</sup> See Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011).

<sup>27</sup> Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006); Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic*.



for *What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920*, helped to assuage the previous reluctance of historians to study such “non-serious” subjects as leisure. Workers themselves, as Rosenzweig noted, certainly took the choices they made about how to spend their leisure time very seriously. The scholar who aspires to render that worker in his or her full complexity ought to devote significant time to thinking about their leisure pursuits as well, he argued.<sup>28</sup>

In *A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, Lizabeth Cohen demonstrates the extent to which consumer choices contoured the political culture of a suburbanizing nation and shows how public policy shaped the consumer choices available to new suburbanites. Her nuanced analysis of the ways in which the segmentation of mass consumption into discreet lifestyle clusters gave form to the broader fragmentation of postwar American culture has a strong influence on the analysis presented here.<sup>29</sup> Eric Avila’s study of postwar Los Angeles shows how the creation and reception of popular culture served transformative political and social purposes in that metropolitan area. In *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles*, Avila explores the mutually constitutive processes of inner city decline and suburban growth in Los Angeles through then-contemporary mass entertainments.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, this dissertation makes use of the popular culture created in Atlanta as a means of scrutinizing the fragmentation of the region’s culture amid the residential divestment of middle and working-class whites from the city as well as the appropriation of formerly off-limits urban spaces by the city’s new black majority.

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<sup>28</sup> Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will*, 4.

<sup>29</sup> Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic*, 292-301.

<sup>30</sup> Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*, 8.

Roy Rosenzweig's analysis of working class culture in Worcester bore the distinct imprint of Antonio Gramsci's understanding of "cultural hegemony." Workers in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Worcester struggled successfully to protect their leisure time and space from outside encroachment by local political and corporate elites, despite the workers' lack of political clout, control over their working lives, or organizational strength in the form of labor unions.<sup>31</sup> My dissertation offers a Gramscian reading of Atlanta's political culture during the 1960s and 1970s through the prism of spectator sports. The powerful, Gramsci wrote, retain their hegemonic control of the culture not through force alone or controlling state and economic institutions, but by maintaining their cultural hegemony, "winning the spontaneous loyalty of subordinate groups to a common set of values and attitudes."<sup>32</sup> Cultural hegemony, though, is not a permanent condition. It is a participatory process. It is a hierarchical relationship between elites and masses that persists only as long as social elites can cultivate continued support among the masses for their values.<sup>33</sup>

For as long as there have been modern industrial societies, leisure activities and consumerism have provided ordinary people with opportunities to drive wedges into the cultural supremacy of hegemonic elites. Leisure pursuits provide non-elites with a space where they can contest and seek autonomy from the values of the governing or managerial class. Consumers have always shaped the production of culture through their consumption. They have forced elite producers of culture to respond to their demands by withholding their limited discretionary resources unless elites offered them sufficiently appealing products. A number of scholars have noted that leisure activities in modern industrial societies provide ordinary people with an

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<sup>31</sup> Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will*, 1-11.

<sup>32</sup> T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), XV; Antonio Gramsci, "The State and Civil Society," 501-518.

<sup>33</sup> Antonio Gramsci, "The State and Civil Society," 501-518.

opportunity to express their uniqueness and to construct an identity based on something other than their working lives.<sup>34</sup> Robert Edelman, writing about soccer fandom and hooliganism in Stalinist Russia, observed that fans have long made use of spectator sports as a way to manifest their attitudes toward groups, institutions, and social practices.<sup>35</sup>

In the case of Atlanta, the city's civic elites of the 1960s regarded the acquisition of professional sports franchises as an end in itself, a self-perpetuating gift and status symbol to the people of the region. Once the mission was accomplished, Atlanta's city fathers moved on to other civic enterprises including airport expansion, rapid transit, and continued downtown development. Left to their own devices, Atlantans never developed the abiding affection for their new teams or the spaces in which they played that civic leaders assumed would take hold once men wearing the city's name across their chest took the field. Suburban Atlanta consumers who decided against spending their discretionary dollars on shiny new professional sports teams hardly cut the romantic figure of Rosenzweig's or Edelman's leisure rebels: 19th century proletarians challenging the puritanical dictates of robber barons or dissident Soviet workers challenging their totalitarian regime through their exuberance for a soccer team. Hegemony, though, serves as a useful tool of analysis outside the confines of Cultural Marxism's preferred pantheon of heroes. It helps to explain how hierarchical relationships manifest themselves culturally and how individuals or groups can challenge the power of elites.

Civic leaders representing the public and corporate sectors, including those pioneering elites in 1960s Atlanta, have long made the argument that spending tax dollars to build stadiums

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<sup>34</sup> See Davarian Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 2007); Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism: 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).

<sup>35</sup> Robert Edelman, "A Small Way of Saying 'No': Moscow Working Men, Spartak Soccer, and the Communist Party, 1900-1945," *The American Historical Review* 107.5 (December 2002), 1441-1446.

to either lure or keep a professional sports franchise is an economic boon to their cities. They make the argument that publicly financed stadium projects generate temporary, high paying construction jobs as well as permanent employment opportunities at the stadium. They assert that stadiums generate enough revenue through taxes and lease payments over the life of a facility to make up for the initial expenditures. They claim that stadiums provide further indirect economic benefits to the community by channeling spending to nearby dining, retail, and lodging establishments. They argue that professional sports bring new money into the community by attracting tourists. Beyond their economic benefit, civic leaders in cities across North America have argued that sports have an intangible cultural value. They endow cities with an enduring engine of civic unity and pride. Municipal leaders in Atlanta were among the first to successfully articulate to their public both the economic and cultural arguments on behalf of building stadiums for professional sports franchises.<sup>36</sup>

Scholars who have studied the economics of professional sports are almost universal in discrediting the fiscal arguments on behalf of publicly financed stadium building. Public investments in professional sports stadiums, whether aimed at luring a new team to a city or keeping an existing one from leaving a city, create few long-term jobs and concentrate their financial benefits in the hands of ultra-wealthy franchise owners. Moreover, sports franchises are too small a part of a metropolitan area's economy to have a significant impact on the economic growth of a region. They attract a far smaller number of out-of-town tourists to center cities than booster-financed impact studies invariably project. The out-of-towners that do come downtown to watch sporting events spend far less money than anticipated by the hypothetical "multiplier effects" posited in virtually all pro-stadium impact studies. The foot traffic generated

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<sup>36</sup> Roger Noll and Andrew Zimbalist, *Sports, Jobs, and Taxes: The Economic Impact of Sports Teams and Stadiums* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute, 1997), 2; Charles C. Euchner, *Playing the Field*, X-XI.

in downtowns by stadiums benefit a handful of businesses near playing facilities, but the economic impact of a stadium's presence downtown is not transformative. It merely redistributes an insignificant amount of spending within a metropolitan area.<sup>37</sup>

The forms of taxation used for funding stadiums are “reverse Robin Hood schemes,” in the words of Andrew Zimbalist. Nearly one-third of the public funds that went to pay for stadiums during the 1980s and 1990s came from sales taxes whose collective burden fell disproportionately on lower income households.<sup>38</sup> Building stadiums in center-city locations has attracted millions of people to sections of cities where they may not have otherwise ventured, but there is little evidence to suggest that building a downtown stadium has a significant economic impact or impact on residential patterns in those cities.<sup>39</sup>

According to the extensive scholarship on the topic, the primary benefits of cities investing in professional sports facilities come from the cultural prestige and source of common identity they lend to a metropolitan area. Atlanta's civic leaders were among the first to assert that professional sports would endow this intangible value on their city. As this study will demonstrate, the city's civic leaders were strikingly disappointed by the modest cultural benefits that professional sports bestowed on their community, as were the leaders of other Sunbelt cities in the years to follow.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Dean Baim, “Sports Stadiums as ‘Wise Investments’: An Evaluation,” *Heartland Policy Study* 32, Nov 26, 1990; Roger Noll and Andrew Zimbalist, *Sports, Jobs, and Taxes*; Joanna Cagan and Neil deMause. *Field of Schemes: How the Great Stadium Swindle Turns Public Money into Private Profit* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2008); Steven A. Riess, *City Games*; Michael Danielson. *Home Team*; Dennis Coates and Brad R. Humphreys, “The Stadium Gambit and Local Economic Development,” 17-20; Charles Santo, “Beyond the Economic Catalyst Debate,” 455-479; Mark Rosentraub, *Major League Losers*, 448-451.

<sup>38</sup> Andrew Zimbalist, *May the Best Team Win*, 123, 129-130.

<sup>39</sup> David Swindell and Mark S. Rosentraub, “Who Benefits from the Presence of Professional Sports Teams? The Implications for Public Funding of Stadiums and Arenas,” *Public Administration Review* 58.1 (Jan-February 1998), 11-20; Dennis Coates and Brad R. Humphreys, “The Stadium Gambit and Local Economic Development,” 20.

<sup>40</sup> Michael N. Danielson, *Home Team*, 5; Garry J. Smith, “The Noble Sports Fan,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 12 (March 1988), 54-65; Glen Gendzel, “Competitive Boosterism,” 530-2; Kenneth Shropshire, *The Sports Franchise Game*, 1-5; Charles C. Euchner, *Playing the Field*, 185; Robert Trumbour, *The New Cathedrals: Politics*

This dissertation is also framed by the extensive academic literature on post-World War II American cities and suburbs. The Atlanta described in this project, which was characterized by a set of investments and divestments which served to fragment the region politically, socially, and economically, corresponds to the portrait of postwar America that has emerged in the scholarship. Eric Avila describes the Americans who sought out the promised safety and order of postwar suburbs as desiring “a respite from the well-known dangers and inconveniences of the modern city: congestion, crime, pollution, anonymity, promiscuity, and diversity.”<sup>41</sup> The work of Robert Self and Mike Davis, among others, analyzes the social, political, and cultural impact of America’s transformation into a majority suburban nation. They demonstrate how and why these new suburban dwellers developed a conservative populist politics built around their identities as homeowners, taxpayers, and parents: a localist view of government that regarded most public interventions as a hindrance to their personal freedom. Suburban Americans came to understand their social responsibilities and political interests and obligations as existing within discrete spatial boundaries built around their residential decisions.<sup>42</sup> Despite their reticence toward government intervention, suburban residents inhabited a world that was a product of intense government interventions. As Kenneth Jackson has explained, American suburbanization was driven by a broad subsidizing of the emerging middle class by the federal government in the two decades after World War II. When combined with the property-centered

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*and Media in the History of Stadium Construction* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 1-2; Charles Santo, “Beyond the Economic Catalyst Debate,” 455-479.

<sup>41</sup> Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*, XV.

<sup>42</sup> Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 2006), 153-155, 165-173; Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 270-275; William Schneider, “The Suburban Century Begins,” *The Atlantic Monthly* July 1992. Accessed on March 3, 2014: <https://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/politics/ecbig/schnsub.htm>; Robert Self, *American Babylon*, 6-17, 333.

politics that developed in the suburbs, Jackson argues that federally-subsidized suburbanization accelerated the demise of America's New Deal-era communalist politics.<sup>43</sup>

Coinciding with the postwar hyper-investment in suburbanization was not only a relative divestment from urban areas, but also by targeted investments in American cities which fostered racial and class segregation.<sup>44</sup> As described in the work of Arnold Hirsch, urban renewal, slum clearance, and eminent domain laws, created a "second ghetto" produced by significant public investments in racial and class segregation.<sup>45</sup> Ronald Bayor made use of Hirsch's conceptual framework, which was focused on urban renewal in Chicago, to analyze the postwar remaking of Atlanta, arguing that racial issues were a prime factor in the shaping of Atlanta's physical and institutional redevelopment. He demonstrates the role of race in reshaping the city's political coalitions, educational system, annexations, housing policy, mass transit planning, and employment patterns. Bayor, like Hirsch, regards the white backlash against racial integration of the 1960s and 1970s as a white working-class extension of federal efforts to maintain racial separatism through urban renewal policies.<sup>46</sup>

Inextricably intertwined with the emergence of a distinctly suburban politics was the development of a suburban-oriented political culture in the economically booming metropolises of the nation's Virginia-to-California Sunbelt. Atlanta figured prominently in this process. This dissertation builds on the scholarship that has placed the city firmly within the political and cultural regime that Matthew Lassiter has described as the "Sunbelt Synthesis." Lassiter and

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<sup>43</sup> See Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1987).

<sup>44</sup> The foundational work on the study of public housing and class segregation in America is Arnold Hirsch's *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982). Of particular significance to my study is Ronald Bayor's case study of Atlanta, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth Century Atlanta* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

<sup>45</sup> Arnold Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 9-16, 23-24.

<sup>46</sup> Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth Century Atlanta*, 255-256.

Kevin Kruse have added nuance to the existing literature on the Sunbelt's political culture, explaining how the suburbs of southern and western cities served as crucibles for the ideas that shaped the new suburban conservative political consensus.<sup>47</sup>

In the Sunbelt South, this new suburban political culture took on a distinctly regional character, one which led to the ascendancy of politicians who eschewed the rhetoric and policies of massive resistance and instead focused on fostering greater economic development. Regardless of party affiliation, politicians who adopted this new approach looked to economic boosterism and a free market that they regarded as color blind to bring about broader prosperity. This "Sunbelt Synthesis" proved especially appealing to the region's suburban newcomers, many of whom were white collar migrants from the north who had little connection to the cities near which they settled and had little interest in wading into the region's recent history of racial politics. When it came to national politics, these voters were ripe for Richard Nixon's color-blind appeal to law and order because it offered them the promise of security from creeping social pathologies while simultaneously providing them with an alibi from accusations of direct racism.<sup>48</sup>

## **Methodology**

This dissertation employs a bricolage of sources to make its arguments. From these assembled things emerge an analytically driven portrait of a particular place and time, situated within a broader historical context. It makes extensive use of both local and national periodicals

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<sup>47</sup> Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 1-12, 253; Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*, 276; The term "Sunbelt" was coined by political strategist Kevin Phillips in his 1969 book *The Emerging Republican Majority* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1969) to describe the economically libertarian, culturally conservative new population centers of the nation's south and west, which he predicted correctly would enable the GOP to form a successful electoral coalition in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. For a nuanced historical analysis of the creation of the Sunbelt, see Bruce Schulman's *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*.

<sup>48</sup> Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*, 3-5, 9-12; Bruce Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*, 202-208; Stephen Miller, *Billy Graham and the Rise of the Republican South*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 3-12.



as well as periodicals from other American cities, particularly those cities that competed directly with Atlanta for specific professional sports franchises. Despite the indisputable status of most of these periodicals as elite sources, they offer frequent glimpses into the perspectives of ordinary people on the topics covered in this study. Through these periodicals, one can see residents of Metropolitan Atlanta through a host of identities: as fans, taxpayers, locals, transplants, visitors, and apathetic local observers. These observations come from men and women as well as Atlanta residents from a variety of racial and socio-economic backgrounds.

It makes extensive use of archival sources from the Atlanta History Center's Kenan Research Library in Atlanta, Georgia, the archives of the Professional Football Hall of Fame and Museum in Canton, Ohio, and the archives of the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown, New York. From the Kenan Research Library, the personal papers of several of Atlanta's major political and corporate leaders as well as the papers and subject files of sports franchises, stadiums, and booster organizations such as Central Atlanta Progress and Forward Atlanta have been consulted for this project. From the archives of the Professional Football Hall of Fame and the National Baseball Hall of Fame, collections of team communications and publications, documents circulated among league teams, scrapbooks, personal interviews, press releases, photograph collections, and clippings files have also been instrumental.

Additionally, this dissertation makes use of more than thirty personal interviews conducted by the author and dozens of archived and published interviews compiled by the author, which serve collectively to offer vivid descriptions, anecdotes, and snapshots that shed light on Atlantans' experience of acquiring major league teams and living in a newly formed "Major League City." These interviewees include former members of the Atlanta media, longtime sports fans, professional athletes who played in Atlanta, and local political figures.

This long history of franchise free agency and its impact can be better understood through the prism of professional sports and stadium building in Atlanta. Chapter One employs Atlanta's 1961 mayoral race as a starting point for discussing the political, social, and cultural fractures that came to characterize the metropolitan area during the ensuing fifteen-year period as the city pursued and secured major professional sports franchises. It examines the political culture of Atlanta from the city's biracial Hartsfield-Allen governing coalition to Ivan Allen's 1961 campaign platform, the "Six Point Forward Atlanta Plan," which placed plans to build a municipal stadium and sports auditorium at the center of its vision for the city. Chapter two explores the pre-major league sporting culture of Metropolitan Atlanta that would compete with Allen's vision for mass leisure. It also interrogates "franchise free agency," the sets of conditions in the national sports marketplace which made Atlanta's emergence as a major league city possible.

Chapter Three uses both a local and a national lens to examine Atlanta's concerted civic efforts to become "Major League" and the way that its political and corporate leadership prioritized this goal over other public projects, including subsidized housing, which had been promised to the predominately African American residents of the neighborhoods affected by the city's slum clearance program of the late 1950s. This chapter goes on to analyze the processes through which Atlanta acquired its MLB and NFL franchises, both of which exemplify the phenomenon of "franchise free agency": a multi-year legal battle with Milwaukee for control of the Braves baseball franchise and a competition between the AFL and NFL for access to Atlanta's state-of-the-art municipal stadium.

Chapter Four analyzes the planning and construction of the multipurpose Omni Coliseum in Atlanta's CBD and the luring of its two tenants, the Atlanta Hawks basketball team and the

Atlanta Flames hockey team. It examines real estate mogul Tom Cousins' successful efforts to procure professional basketball and hockey for Atlanta, making it the first southern city with teams in all four of the major leagues. This chapter also examines the redevelopment of Atlanta's CBD in the 1960s and 1970s through the prism of Cousins' Omni Coliseum and Omni International Complex, the adjoining mixed use development which the developer believed would inaugurate a revitalization of the center city. Civic elites strongly supported these projects, believing that the arrival of the Omni and its co-tenants would help reassert downtown as the commercial, corporate, and leisure axis in the metropolitan area.

The next chapter explores the reconfiguring of the region's governing regimes and political culture during the 1960s and 1970s. It argues that a series of contentious regional policy disputes, specifically the conflicts between the core city and its surrounding municipalities over housing development, school desegregation, annexation, and rapid transit, played a decisive role in the formulation of distinct and divergent urban and suburban political cultures in Metropolitan Atlanta. The regional political culture that emerged from these controversies was not conducive to the success of institutions like professional sports franchises, for whom a sense of civic unity was essential to their organizational and financial stability.

Focusing on Atlanta Stadium, Chapters Six and Seven examine the social and cultural reasons why neither the new sports arena nor its primary tenants, the Braves and Falcons, proved a durable draw, let alone wellsprings of social cohesion. Chapter Six focuses on the relationship of metropolitan area residents to Atlanta Stadium, arguing that the facility proved to be an undesirable focal point for leisure activities. Chapter Seven examines the rapid and collective divestment of local support from the two franchises, both of which struggled on the field and were characterized by a series of poor management decisions. The apathy displayed by area

residents in response to this potentially cohesive mass leisure amenity served to strengthen existing cultural boundaries in the region.

Examining the histories of the Omni Coliseum and the Omni International Complex, Chapter Eight situates them within the broader efforts of developers to make downtown Atlanta desirable to suburban consumers. While the coliseum brought many new forms of entertainment downtown, it proved to be just one of a number of discreet fortresses erected in the CBD between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s. Conversely, the Omni International Complex was a complete financial disaster, becoming one of the largest real estate foreclosures in US history. Neither structure reoriented Atlanta's leisure, retail, or commercial economy back to the CBD.

Shifting the focus to the Omni's team tenants, Chapter Nine analyzes the relationship between the Hawks and the Flames and the public whose patronage they sought. It delves into the marketing of both franchises by the Cousins organization, the public responses to the two teams, and the long-term failure of both to earn durable support from fans. This chapter demonstrates how the distinct but similarly short-sighted management of both the Hawks and the Flames, neither of which was a labor of love for their majority-owners, circumscribed the potential appeal of both franchises to the region's sporting public.

Finally, the epilogue surveys the events of 1976-2000, showing how the city remained "Major League" in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century due in large part to Ted Turner's civic trusteeship over the city's moribund professional scene. As Atlanta's collective shrug towards its professional sports teams calcified into a permanent posture, other Sunbelt cities including Phoenix, San Diego, and Tampa were making municipal investments in professional sports similar to those made earlier by Atlanta. Residents of these metropolitan areas responded to their new stadiums

and teams in the 1980s and 1990s with a similar apathy to that of Atlanta area residents during the 1960s and 1970s.

## CHAPTER 1

### Election Day 1961: The Political Culture of the “City Too Busy to Hate”

On September 22, 1961, Atlantans elected Ivan Allen Jr. as their 52<sup>nd</sup> mayor. Allen won the race in a landslide, garnering 64 percent of the vote in a runoff against Lester Maddox. Neither candidate had ever held elective office, but both men were well-known figures locally and the city’s standing political coalitions coalesced around them quickly. The editorial pages of Atlanta’s three largest newspapers, the morning *Constitution*, the afternoon *Journal*, and the *Daily World*, the nation’s longest running black-owned newspaper, were unanimous in their praise for the result. In the two weeks since Allen, the racial moderate, and Maddox, the segregationist, had finished first and second respectively in a five-way mayoral primary, all three newspapers had made their preferences known on their editorial pages on an almost daily basis. The election of Allen, all three papers argued, would keep Atlanta on the path of racial peace and economic progress long fostered by the Hartsfield administration.<sup>1</sup> The Atlanta media presented Ivan Allen as a force for social cohesion engaged in a righteous struggle against a regressive, bigoted tempter who encouraged citizens to embrace their worst political impulses. If Lester Maddox won the election, he would follow the course of “massive resistance” to desegregation

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<sup>1</sup> “Charlie Brown Throws Support to Allen,” *Atlanta Journal*, September 15, 1961, 28; “Our Big Decision: Allen or Maddox?” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, September 17, 1961, 6B; “Atlanta’s Call to Greatness: The Ivan Allen Vision,” *Atlanta Constitution*, September 6, 1961, 4. “Allen, Maddox Grimly Attack,” *Atlanta Journal*, September 21, 1961, 1, 13; “C.A. Alexander Endorsement of Ivan Allen, August 19, 1961, WSB-TV,” Ivan Allen Jr. Mayoral Campaign Papers, 1961, Undated, Allen Family Papers, MSS 1014, Box 1, Folder 8, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Georgia.

like leaders in Birmingham and Little Rock, undermining Atlanta's ability to lure northern capital and threatening its status as a "citadel of reason."<sup>2</sup>

Despite the ease with which Allen defeated Maddox in the runoff, the 1961 mayoral race had been Atlanta's most contentious in recent memory. Allen accused Maddox of being a reactionary race baiter with strong ties to the Ku Klux Klan. Maddox accused Allen of being a puppet of the Atlanta newspapers, a mouthpiece for the Chamber of Commerce, a Communist sympathizer, and a tool of "Auburn Avenue Bankers," a codeword for the city's black business community.<sup>3</sup> The contentiousness of the 1961 mayoral race was a product of more than the inflammatory accusations the candidates made about one another. It demonstrated the profound racial and class divisions that existed within the "City Too Busy to Hate." These divisions shaped the troubled context in which Metropolitan Atlanta would pursue, secure, and possess professional sports franchises.

To better understand this context and its implications for professional sports, the following sections examine the political culture of Atlanta in the years before it became "Major League." It profiles the political culture of Atlanta and its environs at the time of the 1961 mayoral race, analyzing the Hartsfield-Allen political coalition of racially moderate white professionals and Black Atlantans as well as the white working and middle-class coalition that constituted the core of Lester Maddox's political base. This examination foreshadows the political transformation of Atlanta during the 1960s and 1970s, namely the assertion of black

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<sup>2</sup> Roy Peter Clark and Raymond Arsenault eds., *The Changing South of Gene Patterson: Journalism and Civil Rights, 1960-1968*, "A Letter to the New Mayor: September 23, 1961," (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2002), 82.

<sup>3</sup> "Allen, Maddox Grimly Attack," *Atlanta Journal*, September 21, 1961, 1, 13; "Allen, Maddox Rip Into Each Other," *Atlanta Journal*, September 19, 1961, 1; "Vote," *Atlanta Journal*, September 7, 1961, Section P; Lester Maddox, *Speaking Out: The Autobiography of Lester Maddox* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 42-44.

political power in the newly African American majority city and the emergence of a suburban white politics fiercely defensive of its autonomy from the city.

For Ivan Allen and his biracial coalition, the development of major league sports and stadiums was a way to diffuse racial tensions and ensure civic unity. With his 1961 campaign platform, the “Six Point Forward Atlanta Plan,” which included plans to build a municipal stadium and auditorium suitable for professional sports, Allen envisioned professional sports as a means of promoting and unifying the rapidly decentralizing metropolitan region. His proposals for highway construction, mass transit, school desegregation, urban renewal, and a municipally orchestrated promotional campaign in the “Six Point Plan,” were crafted with the same civic goals in mind. Allen wanted to cultivate unprecedented national prestige for Atlanta by fostering continued economic growth and endowing the city with amenities both necessary and befitting a city its size, all the while maintaining regional coherence and a common cultural sensibility among its expanding populations.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Hartsfield-Allen Coalition**

Ivan Allen’s 1961 electoral coalition mirrored that of his predecessor, William Hartsfield, who came out in strong support of the Atlanta Chamber President’s mayoral candidacy. The Hartsfield-Allen political base combined racially moderate white voters from the city’s business and professional classes with near-universal support from the city’s African American community. From his earliest days in office, Hartsfield cultivated a strong working relationship with Atlanta’s corporate leaders and its professional class. Hartsfield counted Coca-Cola’s Robert Woodruff and Mills B. Lane Sr. of the Citizens and Southern National Bank (C&S)

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<sup>4</sup> I refer to Allen’s 1961 platform as the “Six Point Plan,” employing the contemporary shorthand descriptor for the program.



among his closest advisors.<sup>5</sup> During his early years in office, Hartsfield relied on his image as a reformer of the city's old ward-based political patronage system and as an enthusiastic civic booster to win over the electorate. The changing legal, demographic, and political circumstances of post-World War II Atlanta forced Hartsfield to change his strategy.

The Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals' invalidation of Georgia's white-only primary system in the 1946 *King v. Chapman* decision opened the door to wider black participation in Atlanta's electoral politics. A voter registration drive led by the Atlanta Negro Voters League in the aftermath of the *King* decision made African Americans an immediate political force in the city. In 1940, approximately 3,000 Black Atlantans were registered to vote out of a population of nearly 105,000. African Americans constituted slightly more than one-third of the city's population in 1940, but less than five percent of the city's voters. By the time of the 1949 mayoral race, African Americans constituted 27.2 percent of the city's electorate with more than 21,000 registered voters.<sup>6</sup> Incumbent mayor William Hartsfield adapted quickly to the demographic transformation of the Atlanta electorate. He won the endorsement of the Atlanta Negro Voters League and the *Atlanta Daily World* for the 1949 mayoral race by agreeing to hire more black police officers, increasing the number of black city employees, and expanding the amount of land available in the still-segregated city for black housing whether public or private. Hartsfield won 82.5 percent of the African American vote in the 1949 mayoral primary, enabling him to earn a majority of the votes cast and avoid a runoff election.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 26-27.

<sup>6</sup> Jack L. Walker, "Protest and Negotiation: A Case Study of Negro Leadership in Atlanta," *Midwest Journal of Political Science* 7 No. 2, (May 1963), 111; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics: Governing Atlanta, 1946-1988* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1989), 27-8.

<sup>7</sup> Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 26; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 28; Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 35.

For the remainder of Hartsfield's term as mayor, African Americans comprised a substantial part of his political base and governing coalition. In the 1953 and 1957 mayoral elections, Black Atlantans continued their bloc voting for Hartsfield. In return, he accepted the demands of black leaders for the gradual though often symbolic desegregation of Atlanta's public spaces and facilities, as well as improvements to the quality of life in black neighborhoods, especially in the form of public works projects. Paved roads, street lights, and modern sanitation came to many of the black neighborhoods west of downtown for the first time during the 1950s.<sup>8</sup> When Atlanta annexed 82 unincorporated square miles of Fulton County in 1952, Hartsfield facilitated the efforts of black entrepreneurs to build dozens of "self-contained" black housing sub-divisions and apartment complexes on the new western periphery of the city.<sup>9</sup>

Hartsfield did not simply seek out the counsel of black leaders in the weeks before an election. He worked closely with Atlanta's powerful black leadership, a long established and widely accepted group of prosperous businessmen, professionals, and religious leaders, in a continuous, behind-the-scenes renegotiation of their covenant. Atlanta's most influential black leaders were the co-founders of the Atlanta Negro Voters League, civil rights attorney A.T. Walden and longtime political activist John Wesley Dobbs. Walden and Dobbs had the most direct contact with Hartsfield among the figures in Atlanta's black leadership. They had taken the lead in organizing black voter registration during the 1940s and cemented the relationship between black leaders and Hartsfield in the run up to the 1949 election. Walden and Dobbs' Atlanta Negro Voters League kept their voter base informed about the candidates in city and

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<sup>8</sup> Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 31-2; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 36-37; Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 78-79; Ronald Bayor, "The Civil Rights Movement as Urban Reform: Atlanta's Black Neighborhoods and a New 'Progressivism,'" *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 77 No.2 (Summer 1993), 289-292.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Weise, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 188.

state-wide races. They made sure that incumbents knew that black voters would hold them accountable for legislative actions that conflicted with their group interests. In the days before an election, the Atlanta Negro Voters League directed highly effective get-out-the-vote drives.<sup>10</sup>

The political power exercised by Walden and Dobbs was a product not only of the vastly increased number of black voters in Atlanta, but also the institutional strength of the city's African American community, which predated the formation of the Hartsfield coalition by decades. Beginning in the 1920s, Atlanta earned the reputation as the American city that provided African Americans with the greatest number of economic and educational opportunities. The 1929 formation of the Atlanta University Center, a consortium of the city's black colleges and universities located southwest of downtown, made Atlanta the hub of American black higher education. Opened in the late 1930s, the Fountain Heights sub-division near Atlanta University was one of the nation's first privately-financed housing developments designed explicitly for black middle-class homebuyers. The bungalows in Fountain Heights afforded black professionals the same large yards and modern utilities that white middle class homebuyers had come to expect in their suburban developments.<sup>11</sup>

To the east of downtown, Auburn Avenue, dubbed "Sweet Auburn" by Dobbs, became the commercial center of Black Atlanta. Retail outlets, professional offices, theaters, and hotels lined Auburn Avenue, which *Fortune* in 1956 called "the richest negro street in the world."<sup>12</sup> "Sweet Auburn" housed several of the largest black-owned businesses in the United States, including the Atlanta Life Insurance Company and the Citizens Trust Bank. Alongside the

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<sup>10</sup> Tomiko Brown-Nagin, *Courage to Dissent: Atlanta and the Long History of the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 2-7, 17-58; Gary Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 14-20, 123-127, 146-148, 180-186.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Weise, *Places of Their Own*, 30; Emmett John Hughes, "The Negro's New Economic Life," *Fortune* September 1956, 248.

<sup>12</sup> Emmett John Hughes, "The Negro's New Economic Life," *Fortune* September 1956, 248.

accumulated black-owned capital on Auburn Avenue were some of Black America's most revered institutions, including the *Atlanta Daily World* and churches that housed some of the most esteemed and influential pastors in the nation. The names of the Ebenezer Baptist Church, Wheat Street Baptist Church, and Big Bethel African-Methodist Episcopal Churches were well-known in black communities across the country. The core of Atlanta's black leadership during the Hartsfield administration emerged from the institutions of the Atlanta University Center and "Sweet Auburn." They included Citizens Trust Bank president Lorimer D. Milton, Morehouse College president Benjamin Mays, Rev. Martin Luther "Daddy" King Sr. of the Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta Life Insurance executive Jesse Hill Jr., *Atlanta Daily World* publisher C.A. Scott, Atlanta University president Rufus E. Clement, and Rev. William Holmes Borders of the Wheat Street Baptist Church.

Hartsfield's new political coalition tightened the already existing relationship between black leaders and the other major constituent group in his political base: the city's corporate establishment. This tri-partite system of civic negotiation that included the mayor, the "Big Mules," and the black leadership came to be known as the "Atlanta Way." During the Hartsfield administration, the leadership of conflicting Atlanta interest groups initiated a long history of joining together in focused large-scale civic efforts.<sup>13</sup> The "Atlanta Way" facilitated the remaking of their community into the economically vibrant, racially tolerant "City Too Busy to Hate," a place northern investors found a sufficiently respectable depository for their investments. "When we were sitting around those conference tables," former mayor Sam Massell recalled, "the whites and the blacks both had Phi Beta Kappa keys and were well traveled and well read...They weren't outsiders. They were us. And we. And that made a

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<sup>13</sup> Martha Ezzard, "The Way We Are: Making Dreams Come True 'The Atlanta Way,'" *Atlanta Journal*, July 29, 1996, 6A; John Huey, "The Atlanta Game," *Fortune*, July 22, 1996, 42-57.

difference in our city.”<sup>14</sup> All sides in this arrangement drove a hard bargain. Hartsfield adopted an explicitly gradualist approach to the negotiations which he described as “go-slow, go-easy, but go.”<sup>15</sup> Leaders in the Atlanta Chamber held divergent views on the proper speed and scale of desegregation. Similarly, there was disagreement among the city’s black leadership on the extent to which they should accommodate the pace of reform favored by Hartsfield and the “Big Mules.” Collectively, this top-down system of civic readjustment created a flexible social consensus whose boundaries corresponded to the recognized contours of their community.

Ivan Allen Jr. was an ideal candidate to replace William Hartsfield as the leader of Atlanta’s biracial governing coalition. He had at least as much name recognition as any other mayoral candidate. Atlantans had been familiar with the name “Ivan Allen” for decades, not only from the office supply business that bore his name, but also from the candidate’s father, Ivan Allen Sr., the founder and namesake of the company. In addition to his success in business, Ivan Allen Sr. had been one of the city’s most vocal boosters since the 1920s. He spearheaded that decade’s “Forward Atlanta” promotional campaign, raising \$685,000 from Chamber of Commerce members to finance advertisements in national publications touting the city’s business friendly environment. The “Forward Atlanta” campaign extolled the city’s first-rate transportation infrastructure, its abundant supply of non-union labor, its welcoming business community, and its short winters. The work of Ivan Allen Sr. and his contemporaries in the Atlanta Chamber attracted millions of dollars in capital investment from the urban north. In the four years after the launch of the 1926 media campaign, Atlanta lured 679 new branch offices,

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<sup>14</sup> Sam Massell, interview by the author, July 2, 2013, 42, transcript.

<sup>15</sup> Harold H. Martin, *William Berry Hartsfield: Mayor of Atlanta* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 47-52.

manufacturing facilities, and warehouses to the city, adding more than 17,000 jobs to the local economy.<sup>16</sup>

The “Forward Atlanta” campaign of the 1920s became the building block upon which twentieth century Atlanta developed into the southeast’s most economically powerful city. When Ivan Allen Sr. started raising funds for the campaign, the list of Atlanta’s corporate giants began and ended with Coca-Cola. By the time his son ran for mayor in 1961, Atlanta had one of the nation’s most diversified economic bases. The reputation Atlanta had earned as a business-friendly city served it well in the intervening decades. Following the economic stagnation of the 1930s, Atlanta flourished during the Second World War as a distribution hub and as a defense industry center for airplane manufacturing. The influx of federal spending to Atlanta during the war undergirded its economic development during the 1940s and 1950s. Atlanta Municipal Airport grew into the nation’s fourth busiest by 1960 as a result of extensive federal and municipal investments, its early adoption of numerous aviation-related technologies, and an aggressive expansion plan which culminated in the 1961 opening of a \$21 million terminal. Atlanta headquartered Delta and Eastern Airlines as well as the aerospace manufacturing giant Lockheed. Four of the southeast’s ten largest banks were based in Atlanta. Between 1940 and 1960, the size of Metropolitan Atlanta’s manufacturing workforce doubled to more than 80,000. Thousands of hourly workers earned their livings at Ford and General Motors’ new Atlanta assembly plants which opened soon after the end of the Second World War. Atlanta retained its status as a ground transportation hub by expanding its rail and trucking services. By 1960, more than 350 of the Fortune 500 companies had branch offices in Atlanta. At the time of the 1961

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<sup>16</sup> Gary Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 13; Clifford Kuhn, Harlon Joye, and E. Bernard West, *Living Atlanta: An Oral History of the City, 1914-1948* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2005), 90-93; Andy Ambrose, *Atlanta: An Illustrated History* (Athens, GA: Hill Street Press, 2003), 101-102.

mayoral race, Atlanta led all metropolitan areas in employment growth. Between 1959 and 1964, the workforce in Metropolitan Atlanta expanded at more than three times the national average.<sup>17</sup>

The younger Allen came of age in the Atlanta that his father's generation of corporate and political leaders had transformed into an economic powerhouse through a combination of cooperative boosting and municipal consensus-building. Deal-making and the accommodation of differing interests were the foundations of Allen's political common sense. He was self-consciously a product of Atlanta's civic establishment and proud of all it had accomplished for the city. Allen became a leading figure in the new generation of politically savvy, racially moderate businessmen who came to power in the Atlanta Chamber after the cementing of the Hartsfield political coalition. Through personal experience, Allen and his peers understood the contours of the city's biracial electoral coalition. They participated directly in the negotiating of Atlanta's governing consensus during the last years of the Hartsfield administration. This group included future Chamber president "Opie" Shelton, Coca-Cola Bottler Arthur Montgomery, and C&S Bank scion Mills Lane Jr., all of whom would play prominent roles in the making of "Major League" Atlanta during the Allen administration. This new generation of "Big Mules" proved adept at working with Mayor Hartsfield to balance Atlanta's different interest groups: African American civic leaders pushing for more opportunities, economic security, and tangible quality of life improvements for their community; corporate leaders who wanted to ensure the continued growth of the region's economy; working class whites in search of plant and

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<sup>17</sup> Harold H. Martin, *William Berry Hartsfield: Mayor of Atlanta*, 39-41, 138-139; "Atlanta Awaits Millionth Citizen," *New York Times*, September 27, 1959, 58; Andy Ambrose, *Atlanta: An Illustrated History*, 163-165; Claude Sitton, "Atlanta: Southern Air Hub," *New York Times*, February 1, 1959, X31; Seymour Freedgood, "Life in Buckhead," 109-110; Jim Montgomery, "Half Million at Work in Metro Atlanta," *Atlanta Constitution*, August 28, 1964, 54; "Atlanta Historical City and County Data Books," *University of Virginia Library*, published 2007, Accessed on June 2, 2013, <http://www2.lib.virginia.edu/ccdb/>; "Atlanta: The Hopeful City," *Fortune*, August 1966, 156; Drew Whitlegg, "A Battle on Two Fronts: Competitive Urges 'Inside' Atlanta," *Area* (June 2002), 128-138.

warehouse jobs; and white homeowners who wanted to maintain residential segregation in the city and its expanding suburbs. The Atlanta Chamber's pragmatic approach to civic affairs provided much of the economic clout and political influence behind Hartsfield's vision of Atlanta as a "City Too Busy to Hate." They tied the rapid economic growth of post-World War II Atlanta not only to its favorable business climate, but also to its image as a progressive oasis in the segregated South.<sup>18</sup>

Ivan Allen cemented his status as the candidate of choice for Atlanta's African American leadership during his 1961 tenure as Atlanta Chamber president. Despite his familiarity with the "Atlanta Way," many black leaders were suspicious of Allen the politician based on his one previous foray into office-seeking. In 1954, Allen ran unsuccessfully for governor on a segregationist platform. He was not alone in this stance. Every candidate in the 1954 Georgia gubernatorial contest favored segregation and expressed their opposition to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision handed down by the U.S. Supreme Court earlier that year. Allen, though, was the only one of them seeking the office of mayor of Atlanta in 1961. The forty-three year-old Allen lost the nine-man 1954 gubernatorial race to segregationist hardliner Marvin Griffin, who campaigned and governed on a "massive resistance" platform. By his actions and his words, though, Allen changed many minds among the city's black leadership in the months before the September 1961 mayoral primary. Over the opposition of many merchants in the Atlanta Chamber, Allen negotiated the desegregation of downtown stores and lunch counters with the city's black leadership in March 1961, ending two years of sit-ins and demonstrations

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<sup>18</sup> Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 55-56; Ivan Allen, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, 30-33; Seymour Freedgood, "Life in Buckhead," 8-12; Claude Sitton, "Personality: Banker Has Good Luck Charm," *New York Times*, March 19, 1961, F3; Matthew Lassiter, *Silent Majority*, 100-104.



by young civil rights activists at Rich's, downtown Atlanta's leading department store. Many white customers cancelled their accounts at Rich's to protest the agreement.<sup>19</sup>

In the weeks before the September primary, the Atlanta Negro Voters League interviewed every mayoral candidate except Lester Maddox to determine their endorsement. Ivan Allen excelled in his interview, expressing his support for the complete desegregation of public facilities, an expedited schedule for school integration, non-discrimination clauses in city contracts, and the expansion of municipal employment opportunities for African Americans. The Atlanta Chamber President also campaigned more openly and vigorously for black votes than any previous candidate for Mayor of Atlanta. Allen held campaign events in a dozen different black churches in the two weeks before the September primary to demonstrate his commitment to racial progress and bi-racial governance in the city. Allen won the endorsement of Black Atlanta's traditional institutional power bases: the Atlanta Negro Voters League, the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the *Atlanta Daily World*. He swept the endorsements of Atlanta's longest-tenured black leaders, including A.T. Walden, John Wesley Dobbs, Martin Luther King Sr., and Atlanta Life's Jesse Hill Jr. State Representative M.M. "Muggsy" Smith presented the only major challenge to Allen for black votes in the primary. He won the primary endorsement of youth-oriented civil rights organizations such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) on the strength of his legislative record of racial progressivism and his attacks on Allen's segregationist past. Despite the challenge

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<sup>19</sup> "Ivan Allen Campaign Pamphlets: Measure the Job—Measure the Man," Ivan Allen Jr. Mayoral Campaign Papers, 1961, Undated, Allen Family Papers, MSS 1014, Box 1, Folder 8, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Georgia; Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth Century Atlanta*, 35-38; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 52-55; Ivan Allen, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, 35-39; Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 268.

presented by Smith, Allen's standing with Black Atlanta's long-established power base enabled him to win more than two-thirds of the African American vote in the primary. The SCLC and SNCC offered Allen their unequivocal endorsements for the runoff election against Maddox, who was explicitly opposed to the very existence of both groups.<sup>20</sup>

### **Lester Maddox's Atlanta**

"If you love your FAMILY, CHURCH, HOME, SCHOOL AND YOUR CITY," read one of Lester Maddox's campaign advertisements, "VOTE FOR LESTER MADDOX! His stand is the same as yours."<sup>21</sup> The arch-segregationist Lester Maddox ran for mayor in 1961 with the same approach he used in 1957. He ran not to balance the city's disparate racial and socio-economic groups, but as the advocate of a constellation of frequently overlapping identities in Atlanta. Maddox's voters were almost exclusively working and middle-class whites. South and west Atlanta homeowners opposed to the integration of their neighborhoods and the institutions they patronized made up the core of Maddox's support. Most of them belonged to conservative Protestant denominations and many of them supported strong restrictions on the sale and consumption of alcohol. A large number of Maddox voters were migrants from rural Georgia or the descendants of rural migrants from earlier in the twentieth century. Displaced by the mechanization of southern agriculture or discouraged by the hard-scrabble life of a tenant farmer, they came to Atlanta to work in its textile mills or one of its industrial plants or distribution centers. The growth of Atlanta proper from a city of 65,000 in 1890 to one of nearly a half

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<sup>20</sup> "Ivan Allen for Mayor Schedule, Week of August 28, 1961," Ivan Allen Jr. Mayoral Campaign Papers, 1961, Undated, Allen Family Papers, MSS 1014, Box 1, Folder 8, Kenan Research Center; "Our Big Decision: Allen or Maddox," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, September 17, 1961, 6B; Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 35-38; Ivan Allen, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, 52-63; Gary Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 292-296; "Ivan Allen for Mayor: Confidential Memorandum Number 6," Ivan Allen Jr. Mayoral Campaign Papers, 1961, Undated, Allen Family Papers, MSS 1014, Box 1, Folder 8, Kenan Research Center; "Ivan Allen Campaign Pamphlets: Measure the Job—Measure the Man," Ivan Allen Jr. Mayoral Campaign Papers, 1961, Undated, Allen Family Papers, MSS 1014, Box 1, Folder 8, Kenan Research Center.

<sup>21</sup> As cited in Gary Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 299.

million residents by 1960 was due in large part to the migration of rural white Georgians to the city.<sup>22</sup>

“The Question is,” Maddox wrote in one of his wordy 1961 campaign advertisements, “will we move BACKWARD TO HONOR, DECENCY AND GOVERNMENT BY THE PEOPLE in ATLANTA...or will we move FORWARD to forced racial integration and amalgamation of the races as supported by the Atlanta papers and my opponent (the people’s opponent) in this race?”<sup>23</sup> Maddox won over “the little people,” as he nicknamed, with more than a hint of irony, his political base later in his career, with stinging attacks on the alleged hypocrisies and efforts at social engineering by Atlanta’s elites in government, the media, and big business. Quick witted and adept in the theatrical, Maddox practiced a brand of southern populism that dated back to the late nineteenth century in Georgia. Like the founding father of Georgia Populism, Tom Watson, Maddox appealed to white nationalism and a producerist ethic that he steeped in the eschatological language of his Baptist upbringing.<sup>24</sup> When explaining his political views, Maddox made use of a set of insights and an idiom that made sense to many blue collar Atlantans. He spoke from their perspective because he had led a life much like theirs.

Lester Maddox was a living, breathing Horatio Alger story, a detail he made frequent mention of throughout his public life. Maddox grew up in the impoverished Tech Flats neighborhood, a crowded mill village populated by rural white migrants that developed around

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<sup>22</sup> Raleigh Bryans, “Allen Pledges ‘Forward City’; Maddox Loser in Mayor’s Race,” *Atlanta Journal*, September 23, 1961, 1, 3; Our Big Decision: Allen or Maddox,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, September 17, 1961, 6B; Bob Short, *Everything is Pickrick: The Life of Lester Maddox* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999), 42-48; Gary Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 287-298; Lester Maddox, *Speaking Out*, 41-44; Bradley R. Rice, “Urbanization, ‘Atlanta-ization,’ and Suburbanization: Three Themes for the Urban History of Twentieth Century Georgia,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 68.1 (Spring 1984), 45-6.

<sup>23</sup> “Lester Maddox Says: It’s Your Decision!” (Advertisement), *Atlanta Journal*, September 19, 1961, 8B. Note that the capitalizations in my direct quotation are those of Maddox.

<sup>24</sup> Gary Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 287-288; Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, 1-8, 9-24.

the Atlantic Steel mill in Northwest Atlanta. By age 13, Maddox was the primary breadwinner in a home strained by his father's long-term unemployment and alcohol abuse and his mother's poor health. The diminutive tenth-grade dropout pulled his family out of poverty with hard work, thriftiness, and entrepreneurial ingenuity. Lester and his wife, Virginia, spent most of their adult lives running a highly successful fried chicken joint near the Georgia Tech campus in Northwest Atlanta known as the Pickrick Cafeteria. The Pickrick served affordable lunches and dinners to a clientele of college students, blue-collar workers from the nearby mills and rail-yards, and families in the surrounding neighborhoods. Despite his frequent suspicion of government activities, Maddox and his restaurant benefitted greatly from the 1948 rerouting of U.S. Highway 41 past his Hemphill Avenue establishment.<sup>25</sup>

The 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which declared segregated education unconstitutional, politicized Maddox. Soon thereafter, he began politicking for “massive resistance” to either federally or locally initiated efforts at desegregating public institutions or places of public accommodation. Maddox made his views on desegregation widely known in the regular “Pickrick Says” advertisements he placed in the city's newspapers. Half a column in length, the “Pickrick Says” advertisements predated Maddox's politicization. In their earlier form, they were the promotional equivalent of a vanity license plate. They included a headshot of Maddox, positive comments from customers to which the restaurateur responded, and the prices of his weekly two and three-piece fried chicken dinner specials. By the mid-1950s, “Pickrick Says” columns consisted primarily of commentary on federal efforts to enforce *Brown v. Board*, “racial amalgamation,” alleged corruption in local politics, and the domestic threat posed by Communism. The *Journal* and the *Constitution* tired of Maddox's antics and

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<sup>25</sup> Lester Maddox, *Speaking Out*, 1-16, 27-28; Bob Short, *Everything is Pickrick*, 22-35.

threatened to increase the rates they charged him for advertisements. Both newspapers backed down when Maddox threatened to expose their decision.<sup>26</sup> Maddox and the Atlanta newspapers had an adversarial relationship for the remainder of his public life. During the 1961 mayoral campaign, *Atlanta Constitution* editor Eugene Patterson went so far as to tip off the Allen campaign to a controversial Maddox advertisement before it ran so that the Allen camp had more time to plan their response.<sup>27</sup>

Maddox found his way into more formal politics by founding the pro-segregationist organization, GUTS, Georgians Unwilling to Surrender, which focused much of its energy on preventing school desegregation. In 1957, Maddox ran for mayor for the first time, challenging Hartsfield in the primary on an anti-desegregation and anti-cronyism platform. The well-known Maddox offered the only major opposition to Hartsfield in the election. Hartsfield responded to Maddox's pointed attacks by emphasizing the political pragmatism of his racially moderate stances. Cities with militantly segregationist reputations like Little Rock, Birmingham, and Montgomery were not luring outside investments like racially moderate Atlanta. Racial peace in Atlanta, Hartsfield argued, would ensure its continued economic progress.<sup>28</sup> Atlantans reelected the longtime mayor by a wide margin, but Maddox tapped sufficiently into populist resentments against the status quo to earn 37 percent of the vote in a low-participation election. Rather than discouraging Maddox, the result encouraged him to concentrate more of his efforts on politics. The growing popularity of his Saturday "Pickrick Says" advertisements boosted weekend newspaper sales. His high-profile pro-segregationist activism with GUTS also kept him in the public eye. In many respects, Maddox never stopped campaigning for mayor at the end of the

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<sup>26</sup> Bob Short, *Everything is Pickrick*, 34-36; Lester Maddox, *Speaking Out*, 31-35.

<sup>27</sup> Gary Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 299.

<sup>28</sup> Harold H. Martin, *William Berry Hartsfield: Mayor of Atlanta*, 129; Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 198; Bob Short, *Everything is Pickrick*, 36-41; Lester Maddox, *Speaking Out*, 41-42.

1957 race. He kept his one-man-show going full force until it was time to file paperwork for his 1961 campaign.

### **“Peace and Progress”**

“Atlanta,” the afternoon *Journal* editorialized, “voted for peace and progress” in its 1961 mayoral election, endorsing Ivan Allen and continuity with William Hartsfield’s governing coalition by a nearly two-to-one margin.<sup>29</sup> Allen described the victory as a “mandate for me to move Atlanta forward.”<sup>30</sup> The Atlanta media seconded the mayor-elect’s interpretation of the result, regarding it as a renunciation of the kind of divisive racial politics that “could have greatly hampered our city.”<sup>31</sup> “Atlanta,” the *Journal*’s editors went on to say, “declared herself too progressive to become sidetracked from its trip to the top, too wise to become ensnared in trouble and hatred.”<sup>32</sup> The leaders of Atlanta’s governing coalition were well represented at Allen’s election celebration. William Hartsfield and A.T. Walden, among others, attended the gathering and praised the result as proof of Atlanta’s civic unity.

The civic establishment’s understandably optimistic assessments of the results of the mayoral race overlooked the divisiveness which the vote reflected in the city. Allen won 64 percent of the vote, a slightly higher percentage than Hartsfield in 1957, but 12,000 more Atlantans voted for Maddox and against the city’s governing coalition in 1961 than in 1957. More than 100,000 Atlantans voted in the 1961 runoff, a record turnout that surpassed the 1957 mark by nearly a third. Ivan Allen won the mayoral race as a result of the outstanding turnout and near unanimous support he received from the black community. Allen received 99.4 percent of the vote in the city’s black wards, defeating Maddox 21,611 to 237. Maddox won a slight

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<sup>29</sup> “Atlanta Voted for Peace and Progress,” *Atlanta Journal*, September 23, 1961, 2.

<sup>30</sup> Raleigh Bryans, “Allen Pledges ‘Forward City,’” *Atlanta Journal*, September 23, 1961, 1.

<sup>31</sup> “Atlanta Voted for Peace and Progress,” *Atlanta Journal*, September 23, 1961, 2.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

majority of the white vote, a feat he had not accomplished in 1957. Allen received more than 80 percent of the vote in upper income white neighborhoods, but less than 30 percent of the vote in lower-income white areas. Maddox won two of the city's eight wards, both located in working class South Atlanta.<sup>33</sup>

Ivan Allen inherited the Atlanta that came into being during the Hartsfield administration. He came to power as the representative of a governing coalition that would fracture over the course of the next fifteen years as the demographics of Atlanta proper and its expanding metropolitan area changed. White flight, the suburbanization of middle class blacks, and the continued influx of outsiders to the counties surrounding the city reconfigured Metropolitan Atlanta into an expansive region in which the vast majority of citizens chose to distance themselves from the experiences of its urban core. On October 10, 1959, the Atlanta Chamber held a celebration honoring the estimated arrival date of the one millionth person in the five-county Atlanta metropolitan area by the U.S. Census Bureau. To commemorate "M Day," as the Atlanta Chamber coined the event, they selected corporate transplant William Smith of Rochester, New York, a sales representative for the Champion Paper Company, to serve as "Mr. Million." They bestowed a 1960 Ford Falcon and a year's supply of Merita Bread on the new resident of suburban Fulton County as housewarming gifts. The celebration of Metropolitan Atlanta's one millionth resident's arrival symbolized the city's spectacular growth since the 1920s, but "M Day" also highlighted the emergence of a suburban majority in the region. By 1960, fewer than half of the residents and fewer than half of the jobs in the metropolitan area were located in the city of Atlanta. Over the course of the next decade, these trends accelerated

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<sup>33</sup> "Results of the Mayor's Race," *Atlanta Journal*, September 23, 1961, 3; Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth Century Atlanta*, 36-38; Ivan Allen, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, 58-63; Gary Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 299-300.

to the point that less than a third of the people and jobs in the metropolitan area resided in Atlanta proper.<sup>34</sup>

To combat the decentralization and fragmentation of Metropolitan Atlanta, Ivan Allen pursued a set of policies aimed at securing Atlanta's continued prosperity by further boosting its national reputation while streamlining the relationship between the city and its suburbs. He incorporated his desire to bring professional sports to Atlanta into his larger vision for the city. "Major League" status would not only serve as a source of prestige and social cohesion, but would draw suburbanites into the city, ensuring that the center city, the traditional anchor of the region's social and commercial life, was not left behind amid the suburban boom. Allen relied on a like-minded civic establishment to help bring his vision to life. Atlanta's civic leadership pursued a set of policies in the 1960s and 1970s that sought to retain Atlanta's status as the center of gravity in the booming metropolitan area. They endorsed a number of expensive civic investments aimed at making downtown Atlanta the focal point of leisure and commerce in the region. The vision Atlanta's civic establishment articulated for the city's future came out of the reform program that Ivan Allen proposed first as Chamber president and then as a mayoral candidate.

### **Ivan Allen's Vision for Atlanta: Creating a "Major League" City**

In the year before he became Atlanta Chamber president, Ivan Allen researched and wrote a broad plan for metropolitan development entitled the "Six Point Forward Atlanta Plan." Allen borrowed the well-known "Forward Atlanta" catchphrase from the highly successful civic boosting campaign his father spearheaded during the 1920s. The Chamber approved Allen's plan unanimously in December 1960 as the organization's platform for the coming decade. They

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<sup>34</sup> William Emerson, "When the Paper Clips Jump...And 'M' Stands for Men, Money, Millions," *Newsweek*, October 19, 1959, 94-96; Bruce Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt*, 159.



published the “Six Point Forward Atlanta Plan” as a white paper in early 1961, months before Hartsfield’s decision that June not to seek another term as mayor. In a move orchestrated by the outgoing mayor and his closest confidants in the Atlanta Chamber, Allen declared his candidacy within days of Hartsfield’s announcement. The “Six-Point Plan” served as a ready-made platform for Allen’s immediately high-profile campaign.<sup>35</sup>

Allen and his contemporaries believed the 1960s would be the decade that Atlanta became a “National City.” In the white paper, he defined a “National City” as an urban center that exerts “a powerful economic force far beyond its normal regional functions.”<sup>36</sup> The Chamber regarded Atlanta’s climb to “National City” status as the economic foundation for its ascension to “Major League City” prestige. The policies endorsed in the “Six-Point Plan” were aimed at helping the city cement its economic position as a “National City” and attain the cultural stature of a “Major League City.” The “Six-Point Plan” called for the timely completion of all approved expressway projects; large scale rapid transit accessible throughout the metropolitan area; Atlanta schools to remain open and to engage in gradual desegregation; further federal and local investment in urban renewal, with a particular focus on providing housing for the city’s growing African American population; the construction of an “auditorium-coliseum” and a stadium suitable for large scale public gatherings, particularly sporting events; and a new “Forward Atlanta” national advertising campaign financed by donations from the local business community.<sup>37</sup>

In many respects, Allen’s platform offered voters a continuation of the policies of Mayor Hartsfield, albeit with an even stronger inclination to rely on public-private partnerships to shape

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<sup>35</sup> Raleigh Bryans, “Mayor Bows Out,” *Atlanta Journal*, June 7, 1961, 1, 4-6; Ivan Allen, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, 30-34, 43-51; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 55-56.

<sup>36</sup> Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 153.

<sup>37</sup> Ivan Allen, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, 32-34.

and execute government policies. Allen regarded continued economic growth as the driving force behind all progress in the city. He argued that Atlanta's economic growth in the 1960s was predicated on its national image as a racially tolerant city, the upgrading of its infrastructure and amenities to the standards of other major cities, and the coordination of economic and political activity across the metropolitan area. Collectively, these elements would guarantee Atlanta's continued reputation as a "business friendly" city, which in turn would lure more investment to the area. Allen pledged to reinforce his development program with a tireless civic boosting campaign that started at the mayor's office. He promised to redouble the city's already extensive efforts to pursue outside capital and federal dollars.<sup>38</sup> "I am willing to personally go anywhere and talk to anybody about the superiority of Atlanta and the practical advantages of moving plants, offices, services, and people to our city," Allen told the audience in his 1962 inaugural address.<sup>39</sup> Allen's description of Atlanta's pursuit of outside capital was a more refined rendition of the same idea that William Hartsfield expressed to *Newsweek's* William Emerson in 1959. "We roll out the red carpet for every damn Yankee who comes in here with two strong hands and some money," Hartsfield told the reporter.<sup>40</sup>

While pushing for unprecedented national status for their city, Atlanta's civic leaders sought to assure their city's position as the core of its sprawling metropolitan area. They wanted Atlanta to serve as the region's economic axis and population center amid the residential and commercial boom in the five suburban counties. Ivan Allen in particular expressed a desire for Atlanta's identity as a "City Too Busy to Hate," unified in economic and cultural purpose, to

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<sup>38</sup> Matthew Lassiter, *Silent Majority*, 109-111; Allen, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, 30-34; "Forward Atlanta (Promotional Pamphlet, 1963)," Forward Atlanta (Subject File), Kenan Research Center.

<sup>39</sup> Herman Hancock, "Ivan Allen Sworn In, Calls for Bond Issue; Plan Means Tax," *Atlanta Constitution*, January 3, 1962, 27.

<sup>40</sup> William Emerson, "When the Paper Clips Jump...And 'M' Stands for Men, Money, Millions," *Newsweek*, October 19, 1959, 94-96.

become an identity embraced by the entire metropolitan area. In the weeks before his inauguration, Ivan Allen traveled to Berlin, West Germany as part of a State Department junket that brought twenty-two American mayors to the divided city. Allen returned from the trip focused on the need for metropolitan-wide unity in both the political and the personal realm. As a matter of policy, Allen said in his inaugural address that “we must pool our resources, our planning, and in many instances our facilities in working out of our problems that are joint problems of the Metropolitan area.” He returned to the theme of metropolitan unity at the end of his address, comparing the situation in Atlanta with what he witnessed in Berlin. “It was in Berlin that the tragic and dramatic lesson of what happens to a divided city came home to me and if I could make you see it as I saw it, you would share with me my feeling that Atlanta must not be a city divided. If we are to achieve our true greatness...we must be a city united, joined by mutual problems, and mutual determinations to solve these problems.”<sup>41</sup> Allen’s juxtaposition of the division of Berlin into two cities and the dangers of metropolitan fragmentation in Atlanta reflected a belief among many Cold War-era liberals that the fate of America’s foreign policy goals were inextricably intertwined with the domestic policy goals of the Civil Rights movement. For America to maintain its prestige abroad, anti-communist liberals thought that the United States needed to present itself to the world as committed to securing equal rights for African Americans, particularly in the diplomatic headache that was the segregated south. For American policymakers focused on winning the allegiance of the Third World, Atlanta’s “City Too Busy to Hate” ethos offered a striking counterpoint to the regularly broadcasted images of violent resistance to desegregation in other parts of the South. Nevertheless, Allen realized that even an

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<sup>41</sup> Herman Hancock, “Ivan Allen Sworn In, Calls for Bond Issue; Plan Means Tax,” *Atlanta Constitution*, January 3, 1962, 27

oasis of racial moderation like Atlanta threatened to devolve into a cluster of separate societies without decisive action on the part of civic leaders.<sup>42</sup>

The expressway building and rapid transit programs endorsed in Allen's "Six-Point Plan" aimed to alleviate the evident inefficiencies in the region's transportation system. By 1960, suburban commuters encountered daily traffic jams on the city's already outmoded Northeast and South Expressways before coming to a standstill every morning and evening when the roads merged into the I-75/I-85 Downtown Connector. Several major expressway construction programs had been approved by state and local bodies, including a proposed highway perimeter around the city known as I-285, but the financing and political will to execute these plans had yet to materialize. Atlanta's mass transit situation was even more problematic. Atlanta and its inner ring suburbs relied on the privately-owned, recently desegregated Atlanta Transit Company (ATC), a bus and trolleybus service, for its mass transit. Less than half of the Metropolitan area's population had access to the service. By 1960, blacks constituted nearly 60 percent of the ATC's ridership, leading some white passengers to abandon mass transit.<sup>43</sup> The formation of an alternative, metropolitan wide system would take some time. Creating a multi-county metropolitan transit authority required the approval of the State General Assembly, a first step which Allen endorsed in the "Six-Point Plan" as a prelude to other battles. Securing local and federal financing for the transit system and seeking out voter approval of the system in each potential member county would be distinct political struggles of their own.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011 edition), 3-17.

<sup>43</sup> Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 157-159; Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth Century Atlanta*, 188-196.

<sup>44</sup> Ivan Allen, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, 32-34; Herman Hancock, "Ivan Allen Sworn In, Calls for Bond Issue; Plan Means Tax," *Atlanta Constitution*, January 3, 1962, 27; Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 157-159; Julie B. Hairston, "MARTA Marks 25 Years of Trains: Next Stop Unknown," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 30, 2004, 1B; Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 188-196

Allen called in the “Six-Point Plan” for immediate action by city agencies on urban renewal programs. Atlanta began its federally subsidized urban renewal program during the 1950s. Federal and local agencies excelled at slum clearance in Atlanta during the Hartsfield Administration, removing more than 900 acres worth of blighted homes and commercial properties, much of it on lots adjacent to the city’s central business district (CBD). As in many cities, urban renewal in Atlanta earned the reputation of “negro removal.” Collectively, 1950s and 1960s slum clearance programs in Atlanta displaced 67,000 residents, mainly African Americans. At the time of Ivan Allen’s election, Atlanta’s black population, which constituted 39% of the city’s total, lived on 17% of the city’s land, in effect forcing black residents displaced by urban renewal to seek out housing in already densely packed neighborhoods or to leave the city. During the 1950s, there had been a boom in home-building in designated “negro expansion areas” in newly-annexed land on the far western side of the city. The homes in these subdivisions were aimed at middle and upper-middle class black homebuyers, not the primarily lower-income African Americans who were displaced by slum clearance from the neighborhoods that ringed downtown Atlanta. Allen’s plan for urban renewal focused on the opportunities it provided for two prongs of his electoral base: African Americans and the city’s business class. When candidate Allen described his plans for urban renewal, he prioritized the construction of additional low-income housing for African American residents. He also made it clear that he considered recently cleared urban renewal land to be a legitimate space for large scale public or private developments that would be an obvious benefit to the community.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 61-63, 153-155; Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 41; “It’s a Long Term Problem,” *Atlanta Journal*, December 27, 1962, 16; Andrew Weise, *Places of Their Own*, 170-171.

By the time Ivan Allen took over in City Hall, Atlanta had succeeded at keeping its public schools open while beginning the process of gradually desegregating them. The 1959 *Calhoun v. Latimer* decision required Atlanta, which had resisted federal court mandates along with the rest of the state, to submit a desegregation plan within one year. The Georgia General Assembly intervened in the matter, forming the Sibley Commission to study the opinions of Georgians on the matter of school desegregation. The Commission held a series of highly contentious hearings around the state of Georgia. Within the city of Atlanta, formal organizations on all sides of the issue lobbied the Commission. Lester Maddox's GUTS and Thomas Wesley's more sedate organization, The Metropolitan Association for Segregated Education (MASE), among other groups, pushed for Atlanta to close its public schools rather than desegregate them, which would have been in keeping with the state's long-term policy of "massive resistance" to federal intervention on civil rights issues. An umbrella group known as OASIS, the Organizations Assisting Schools in September, lobbied the Commission to follow the mandates and to keep the schools open. The Atlanta Chamber, which had endorsed gradual desegregation as a part of the "Six-Point Plan," played a major role in persuading many policy makers, including a majority of the Sibley Commission, to support open schools. In January 1961, the General Assembly adopted the recommendation of the Sibley Commission to keep the state's schools open.<sup>46</sup>

Atlanta's public schools were officially desegregated less than two weeks before the September 1961 mayoral primary. On August 30, 1961, nine black students attended their first day of classes at four previously all-white Atlanta high schools as part of a highly orchestrated,

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<sup>46</sup> Matthew Lassiter, *Silent Majority*, 94-97; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 46-48; Virginia Hein, "The Image of a 'City Too Busy to Hate': Atlanta in the 1960s," *Phylon* 33.3 (Fall 1972), 205-206; Gary Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 259.

covertly executed operation that took place without any serious incidents that day or in any of the succeeding days.<sup>47</sup> The Atlanta Chamber commemorated the event with full page advertisements in both the *Journal* and *Constitution* entitled “How Great is Atlanta?” Partly celebratory and partly cautionary, the “How Great is Atlanta?” ads told city residents that the whole world was watching them, from “Russia and her Communist allies” hoping for “violence to feed their propaganda machines” to “NATO Nations” who “expect Atlanta to prove our country is internally strong, unified, and truly democratic” to “National companies with new plants, new offices- and new jobs...hoping they can come to Atlanta.” The advertisement assured readers that all “2500 member firms of the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce firmly believe that all of us will support the laws of our land and meet this latest in a long series of challenges with order, dignity, and pride in our city.”<sup>48</sup> By desegregating its schools without incident, Atlanta was acting simultaneously in a self-interested and an altruistic manner, the Chamber intimated in its advertisement. The success of Atlanta’s fall 1961 school desegregation plan was a public relations coup for the city, for its outgoing mayor, and for the Atlanta Chamber, whose president, the soon-to-be mayor, had lobbied extensively for open schools.

“The Six-Point Forward Atlanta Plan” led to a renewal of the storied civic boosting campaign that served as its namesake. In 1961, the Atlanta Chamber initiated a new three-year promotional effort, a “program of education, advertising, and research to carry the Atlanta story all over the nation.”<sup>49</sup> Allen kicked off the fundraising drive for the new “Forward Atlanta”

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<sup>47</sup> Margaret Shannon, “Atlanta Desegregation Begins at 4 Schools,” *Atlanta Journal*, August 30, 1961, 1, 8, 12; “Peace Means Progress,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, August 27, 1961, 6B; “High Schools’ Desegregation Begins Here Wednesday,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, August 27, 1961, 1, 20; Margaret Shannon, “Serenity Cloaks Atlanta Schools,” *Atlanta Constitution*, September 5, 1961, 1; “School Guard Kept Up Here,” *Atlanta Journal*, August 31, 1961, 1, 12; Virginia Hein, “The Image of a ‘City Too Busy to Hate,’” 206; Alton Hornsby, “Black Public Education in Atlanta, Georgia, 1954-1973: From Segregation to Segregation,” *The Journal of Negro History* 76 no.1 (Winter 1991), 21-27.

<sup>48</sup> “How Great is Atlanta?” (Advertisement) *Atlanta Journal*, August 27, 1961, 4.

<sup>49</sup> Allen, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, 30-34.

campaign that brought in more than \$1.6 million in donations from the city's business community. He hired a full-time professional staff to conduct research for the campaign. He recruited several "Big Mules" to work with him behind-the-scenes at convincing corporate leaders from other parts of the country to open branches in Atlanta. Like its 1920s predecessor, the "Forward Atlanta" campaign of the 1960s placed numerous advertisements in national publications touting the benefits of doing business in their economically vibrant and now racially progressive city.<sup>50</sup>

The agenda Ivan Allen and the Atlanta Chamber pursued during the early 1960s built onto the framework of urban development crafted by William Hartsfield's generation of city leaders. Allen's vision deviated from Hartsfield's when it came to the issue of civic luxuries. The new mayor believed that the city government and the corporate community should strongly support the construction of a stadium and an "auditorium-coliseum" which would soon be anchored by the professional sports teams they would inevitably lure to Atlanta. Like the leadership in many New South cities, Atlanta's 1960s political and economic establishment invested large-scale construction projects, such as Atlanta Stadium, with deep social and psychological meaning, transfiguring the work of planners and contractors into referendums on the merit of their community. Allen regarded the luring of professional sports teams to Atlanta as a political imperative. The public, Allen wrote in the "Six-Point Plan," desired the entertainment and cultural offerings of a first-tier American city. Moreover, Allen, affirming the long-held sentiments of many of the "Big Mules," considered professional sports teams to be an amenity befitting a city of Atlanta's economic stature. The "Big Mules" believed that professional sports provided cities with an unparalleled showpiece and source of civic unity.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.; Glen Gendzel, "Competitive Boosterism," 551-552; Andy Ambrose, *Atlanta: An Illustrated History*, 177-180; Matthew Lassiter, *Silent Majority*, 100-111.



They also believed that the arrival of professional sports in a community demonstrated that city's momentum and helped to spur further investment in the area.<sup>51</sup>

Many of Atlanta's most prominent civic boosters had long been calling for the construction of a large-scale municipal stadium. For years, columnists on the sports pages of the *Constitution* and the *Journal* had editorialized on behalf of building a stadium and attracting major league teams to the city. All of the nation's professional sports leagues coveted Atlanta. Many "Big Mules" reported that sports executives had told them Atlanta would get its share of teams once it built playing facilities with modern amenities and sufficiently large seating capacities. The Georgia General Assembly even intervened to help Atlanta build a stadium, creating the Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium Authority in March 1960, a public corporation charged with financing, planning, and building a municipally-owned stadium if representatives of Atlanta and surrounding Fulton County chose to do so. The primary person holding up Atlanta's pursuit of professional sports was its incumbent mayor, William Hartsfield. The mayor manufactured a series of delays that prevented the Stadium Authority from convening during the final twenty months of his tenure.<sup>52</sup>

Mayor Hartsfield, in fact, stymied every attempt to involve the city in the planning, financing, or construction of a large stadium or arena. Hartsfield regarded sports and leisure as a private matter beyond the scope of municipal government. He was not opposed to private entities pursuing professional teams or making their own financial arrangements to build a

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<sup>51</sup> Allen, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, 32-34; Glen Gendzel, "Competitive Boosterism," 553; Herman Hancock, "Ivan Allen Sworn In, Calls for Bond Issue; Plan Means Tax," *Atlanta Constitution*, January 3, 1962, 27.

<sup>52</sup> "Profile of Atlanta Stadium," *Braves Banner* June 1983, Atlanta Braves Folders, Cooperstown, NY, Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum Library, Archives Department; "Atlanta Stadium Program: Special Dedication Edition (1965)," Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium (Subject Folder 1 of 4), Kenan Research Center; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 28-29, 45-50; Ivan Allen, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, 152-154; Charles Haddad, "A Major League Dream: Braves' Success a big win for Ivan Allen, who foresaw benefit to city," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 19, 1991, 1G.

stadium, though he feared that big league sports would bring organized crime to the city, namely bookmakers working with the Dixie Mafia. Hartsfield wanted his city government to avoid the nuisances that entanglements in stadium politics would cause for the administration.<sup>53</sup>

“Atlantans speak proudly of the city’s growth...but in the field of sports and convention facilities, Atlanta idles in a puddle of stagnation,” wrote *Journal* sports editor Furman Bisher on the day Hartsfield announced he would not seek another term as mayor. Bisher bemoaned the status of Atlanta’s existing sports infrastructure, explaining that the city’s premier sporting facilities in 1961 were aging minor league and collegiate venues, the same stadiums and arenas that had been Atlanta’s best facilities when Hartsfield first came to office in 1937.<sup>54</sup>

Hartsfield, however, preferred pothole politics to grand projects. He believed tax dollars should be spent on tangible civic needs or spent delivering targeted benefits to specific political constituencies. He thought municipal capital expenditures should be focused on infrastructural improvements to the city’s public and economic functions, not on civic luxuries, no matter how much the project’s boosters touted its economic benefits. From the outset of his political career, Hartsfield’s pet project had been the city’s airport, which would eventually be renamed in his honor. Public investments in forward-looking aviation technology, continuous improvements to its terminal, and an aggressive expansion of its capacity made Atlanta Municipal Airport an engine for the city’s growing prosperity. Spending millions of dollars to build stadiums for non-existent teams struck Hartsfield as an impractical public expenditure.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Sam Massell, interview by the author, July 2, 2013, 41-42, transcript; “Atlanta Stadium Program: Special Dedication Edition (1965),” Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium (Subject Folder 1 of 4), Kenan Research Center; Jesse Outlar, “Stadium Group Calls on Mayor Today,” *Atlanta Constitution*, May 5, 1960, 16; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 6-8; Harold H. Martin, *William Berry Hartsfield: Mayor of Atlanta*, 164.

<sup>54</sup> Furman Bisher, “About That Stadium,” *Atlanta Journal*, June 7, 1961, 40.

<sup>55</sup> Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 78-81; Bill Torpy, “Atlanta’s Visionary,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 13, 2003, 1C; Harold H. Martin, *William Berry Hartsfield: Mayor of Atlanta*, 39-41, 61-72, 86-93, 139.

### **“Having embraced realism in general”**

On July 26, 1963, Ivan Allen testified before the Senate Commerce Committee on behalf of the public accommodations portion of the Civil Rights Act. Allen was the only southern politician to testify on behalf of the legislation that became the Civil Rights Act of 1964. He displayed striking courage in speaking on behalf of the measure, which was wildly unpopular throughout the South and in many sections of his city. Atlanta’s mayor, though, did not present his efforts or those of the city’s leaders to desegregate their community as heroic. Instead, Allen portrayed the gradual desegregation of Atlanta as the product of pragmatic decisions by men whose primary business was business, not the policing of the archaic social boundaries of the Jim Crow South. This was partially a rhetorical device on Allen’s part, one that had been employed by civic leaders in Atlanta for decades to convince undecided residents of the wisdom of gradually desegregating their city. More broadly, though, the practicality of racial moderation in public affairs had become the common sense of Atlanta’s postwar governing consensus. “Having embraced realism in general, we set out to solve specific problems by local cooperation between people of good will and good sense representing both races,” Allen said before laundry-listing Atlanta’s civil rights successes during his year and a half in city government as well as those accomplished during his predecessor, William Hartsfield’s, quarter-century long administration.<sup>56</sup> Allen spoke of Hartsfield’s successful desegregation of public transportation, public schools, city libraries, and municipal golf courses during the 1950s and early 1960s. He spoke of Hartsfield’s decision to hire the first black police officers in Atlanta in 1946 and the 1953 election of Hartsfield-endorsee Rufus Clement, the first black man to serve on the City

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<sup>56</sup> “Copy of Statement by Ivan Allen, Jr. Mayor of Atlanta Before Committee on Commerce, Regarding S. 1732, July 26, 1963,” Ivan Allen, Jr.- Mayoral Papers, 1963-1970, Undated, Allen Family Papers, MSS 1014, Box 1, Folder 9, Kenan Research Center.

Board of Education.<sup>57</sup> Allen then ticked off his own list of accomplishments as mayor, which included a January 1962 executive order banning discrimination in all of Atlanta's public facilities, a March 1962 ban on discrimination in downtown theatres, and, in the month before his testimony before the Senate, a June 1963 agreement to desegregate the hotels, restaurants, and shops of downtown Atlanta, which extended a voluntary desegregation of downtown lunch counters put in place during the last months of the Hartsfield administration.<sup>58</sup>

Atlanta's civic leaders cultivated a political culture during the 1950s and 1960s that linked racial progressivism to pragmatism and economic self-interest. Their community was a more economically vibrant place, one that was more attractive to outside investors, because it had eschewed the confrontational racial politics of its historical peer southern cities. As Atlanta entered the 1960s, the "Big Mules" envisioned something new for their city, a grand civic enterprise that required the old cooperative spirit, but a new desire to endow their community with something grandiose, an amenity exclusive to the first tier of American cities. The pursuit of professional sports by Atlanta's civic elite during the 1960s and early 1970s was the pursuit of an exceptional civic luxury for the city. The language of pragmatism in which Atlanta's leaders steeped their civil rights accomplishments was absent from their discourse on professional sports. Instead, the pursuit of big league baseball and football was an idealistic "assault on the impossible," as Mills B. Lane once described it.<sup>59</sup> The "Big Mules" spoke of the city's push for professional sports in reverential tones akin to those used to describe the then-contemporary Space Program. When Ivan Allen ran for mayor in 1961, he, like many of his peers, saw a city

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid; "Statement by Ivan Allen Jr., City Wide Meeting, January 29, 1964," Ivan Allen, Jr.- Mayoral Papers, 1963-1970, Undated, Allen Family Papers, MSS 1014, Box 1, Folder 9, Kenan Research Center.

<sup>58</sup> "Copy of Statement by Ivan Allen, Jr. Mayor of Atlanta Before Committee on Commerce, Regarding S. 1732, July 26, 1963," Ivan Allen, Jr.- Mayoral Papers, 1963-1970, Undated, Allen Family Papers, MSS 1014, Box 1, Folder 9, Kenan Research Center.

<sup>59</sup> "Atlanta Stadium Program: Special Dedication Edition (1965)," Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium (Subject Folder 1 of 4), Kenan Research Center.

whose sporting culture was in keeping with regional traditions. Allen wanted mass leisure in Metropolitan Atlanta to resemble that in America's other major cities. "It has changed our thinking and the thinking of others around us," Allen said in 1965 of the construction of Atlanta Stadium and the impending arrival of the Braves and Falcons in the city, "There is no provincial small-town attitude here anymore. We're big league."<sup>60</sup> Allen's professed idealism with regards to professional sports and professed pragmatism with regards to civil rights both aimed at achieving the same end. He wanted Atlanta to become a major city among major cities. It could still be a southern city, but it had to be one on national terms, not simply regional ones. In less than a decade, this governing and cultural consensus would unravel in Atlanta, just as the city's professional sports franchises were struggling to build broad local constituencies of their own.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER 2

### The Sporting Marketplace of Pre-“Major League” Atlanta in the Age of “Franchise Free Agency”

Atlanta became a “Major League City” during the 1960s as a result of targeted civic investments in professional sports. The city’s leadership took advantage of the era’s newly flexible national sports marketplace, which has been described by scholars as the age of “franchise free agency.” Atlanta’s civic elites regarded their emerging metropolis as deprived of the mass cultural amenity which, they believed, bestowed a community with major city status: professional sports franchises. In 1964, *Journal* sports editor Furman Bisher characterized Atlanta as “America’s Virgin Territory,” its most significant cultural and economic center without major league teams.<sup>1</sup> As Bisher well knew, Atlanta had a vibrant, diverse, and deeply-rooted sporting culture in advance of the Braves and the Falcons’ 1966 arrival. The following sections examine both the national context which facilitated Atlanta’s ascension to major league status and the local sporting culture in pre-“major league” Atlanta, which offered an on-going challenge to the hegemony of the big leagues in the region’s sporting culture. It argues that the increasingly grandiose public investments made by cities competing for professional sports franchises in the late twentieth century did little to ensure that the public in these metropolitan areas embraced their new teams. Atlanta, like many other Sunbelt cities, developed a robust local sporting culture which predated the arrival of major professional teams. Atlanta’s local sporting culture not only survived but thrived in the face of its new municipally-subsidized, major league competition, anticipating the persistence of local sporting cultures across the

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<sup>1</sup> Furman Bisher, “The Stadium Call to Arms,” *Atlanta Journal*, March 5, 1964, 62, 66.

Sunbelt, even as the region welcomed the lion's share of professional sports relocations and expansions.

### **The History of Professional Sports “Franchise Free Agency”**

Atlanta's rise to “Major League” status was a manifestation of professional sports “franchise free agency,” a term that economic historians use to describe the expansion and increasing mobility of teams and leagues in the decades after World War II. For Sunbelt cities like Atlanta, the acquisition of professional sports franchises served as a rite of passage on the path to national prominence. In the 1950s and 1960s, the likes of Los Angeles, Houston, and Atlanta achieved this status. In subsequent decades, cities like San Diego, Tampa, and Phoenix gained a larger national profile in part because of their inclusion in major professional sports.<sup>2</sup> As the number of cities willing and able to support big league franchises has grown, expansion has proven the path of least resistance for professional sports leagues. Expansion teams allow the league to offer its product in previously underserved markets while avoiding the legal battles and public relations headaches of franchise relocations.<sup>3</sup> The peak period for professional sports expansion took place between 1960 and 1976 as the demand for teams in emerging Sunbelt markets grew considerably. Other major contributing factors to expansion included the political pressure put on the major professional leagues, especially MLB, to replace relocated teams in cities such as New York, Milwaukee, and Washington, D.C. On several occasions, influential members of Congress threatened to push for an end to the special antitrust exemptions enjoyed by professional sports leagues if certain relocated franchises were not replaced. Moreover, the creation of rival professional hockey, basketball, and football leagues as well as a planned but

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<sup>2</sup> Carl Abbott and Becky Nicolaidis, “Professional Sports and Sunbelt Cities,” *OAH Magazine of History* 18.1 (October 2003), 27-28.

<sup>3</sup> Michael N. Danielson, *Home Team*, 169, 179.

never executed rival baseball league forced all four of the major professional sports cartels to expand to avoid losing out on up-and-coming sports markets. In the case of football, hockey, and basketball, mergers between the existing major leagues and their competitors contributed to the expansion of each league. The 1970 merger of the NFL and the rival American Football League (AFL) added ten teams to the major professional loop. More modest mergers between the NBA (1976), NHL (1979), and their respective rivals added just four teams to each league. Between the merger and direct expansion, the NFL grew from a 13-team league in 1960 to a 28-team league by 1976. During the same time period, the NHL expanded from 6 to 18 teams and the NBA grew from 8 to 23 teams. MLB grew from 16 to 26 teams between 1960 and 1976 simply through direct expansion.<sup>4</sup>

During the same time period, the value of professional sports franchises increased considerably. The growing demand for teams and the lucrative new national television contracts signed by the major sports leagues were the primary contributors to the rapid increase in their value. From 1962 to 1972, the gross revenues of professional sports franchises increased more than 200 percent while the gross national product increased only 88 percent. Simultaneously, the price of a professional sports franchise grew considerably, particularly when it came to NFL teams, whose television deal paid them geometrically more than teams in the other professional leagues. In 1964, automobile heir William Clay Ford paid \$5 million for the Detroit Lions. By the mid-1980s, three different NFL franchises had sold for more than \$70 million each.<sup>5</sup>

A number of social, political, and economic factors contributed to the expansion of major professional sports into a continent-wide phenomenon in the postwar era. The three most

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<sup>4</sup> Steven Riess, *City Games*, 237.

<sup>5</sup> Gary Davidson, *Breaking the Game Wide Open*. (New York: Atheneum, 1974), 249; Kevin Baumer, "What Every NFL Owner Paid for Their Team," *Business Insider*, November 16, 2010. Accessed on March 3, 2012: <http://www.businessinsider.com/how-much-did-nfl-owners-paid-for-their-teams-2010-10>.



significant factors in this shift were the economic expansion and population growth of the nation's South and West; the improvement and expansion of the nation's transportation infrastructure, which made transcontinental travel more efficient and affordable; and the increasing amount of discretionary income afforded Americans by the nation's postwar affluence, especially in suburban areas and the nation's emerging Sunbelt.<sup>6</sup>

The United States grew from a country of 132.1 million people in 1940 to a country of 284.1 million in 2000. The regional distribution of the nation's growth skewed markedly to the cities and states of the south and west, endowing many of its emerging urban areas with a sufficient number of inhabitants to support professional sports franchises. In 1940, eight of the nation's ten most populous states were either in the Northeast or Midwest. By the year 2000, three of the nation's four most populous states and six of the top twelve were located in the Sunbelt.<sup>7</sup> In the 1940 Census, twenty-two of the nation's one-hundred largest metropolitan areas were located in the south or west. By the year 2000, a majority were located in these regions.<sup>8</sup>

Accompanying the population growth in the Sunbelt were significant improvements to the nation's transportation infrastructure, which made the expansion of professional sports into all regions of the United States a logistical possibility. Rail travel and the often inefficient pre-World War II national highway system made travel from one city to another, especially those far from the nation's urban centers of the Northeast and Midwest, a cumbersome, time-consuming process. The emergence of commercial jet travel during the late 1950s and the construction of the Interstate Highway System following the passage of the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956

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<sup>6</sup> Frank Jozsa, *Big Sports, Big Business*, 65-71.

<sup>7</sup> California, Texas, and Florida were ranked first, second, and fourth respectively in population in the 2000 Census. Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia were ranked tenth, eleventh, and twelfth respectively; "Selected Historical Decennial Census Population and Housing Counts," *Census.gov*, September 14, 2014. Accessed on January 7, 2015: <https://www.census.gov/population/www/censusdata/hiscendata.html>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

expedited transcontinental travel considerably. For the purposes of professional sports, it made feasible the expansion of the major leagues into the far-flung cities of the south and west.<sup>9</sup> The NFL's once-a-week playing schedule enabled it to embrace the emerging transportation systems most rapidly, placing a franchise in Los Angeles in 1946, a decade before the other professional leagues. The 1958 relocation of two of MLB's most high-profile franchises, the Brooklyn Dodgers and New York Giants to Los Angeles and San Francisco respectively, was the milestone that made the expansion of professional sports to the west coast seem plausible to the other leagues. In the jet age, teams on the Eastern Seaboard could reach California in a matter of hours.

The expansion of the American middle class in the decades after World War II created a larger potential customer base for professional sports in all parts of the country. In 1940, the median household income in the United States was \$956 (approximately \$17,047.54 in 2018 dollars). By 1970, the median household income in the United States was \$7,592, or \$49,783.23 in 2018 dollars. The Sunbelt states in particular increased their household income relative to the rest of the nation during the postwar era. In 1950, the south as a region lagged behind the national average median income by more than 25 percent. By 1975, the median household income gap between the south and the rest of the nation had been cut in half and the purchasing power parity of southerners equaled the national average. While some western states like California and Washington have long enjoyed above average median household incomes, inland western states like Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado barely beat out many southern states in 1950. During the second half of the twentieth century, most states in the inland west cut the gap between their median household income and the national average in half while nearly erasing

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<sup>9</sup> Frank Jozsa, *Big Sports, Big Business*, 65-71.

their gap in purchasing power with the rest of the nation. During the 1970s, the first golden age for professional sports expansion into the south and west, every Sunbelt state increased its per-capita income more rapidly than the national average. As we shall see, the mere demographic and economic growth of these regions did not ensure that these new Sunbelt residents would be ready-made supporters of local professional sports franchises.<sup>10</sup>

### **Who Pays for “Franchise Free Agency”?**

“Professional sports,” Arthur T. Johnson wrote in 1983, “could not exist as we know them without local subsidies and federal antitrust exemptions.”<sup>11</sup> “Franchise free agency” was facilitated by the new willingness of cities to subsidize professional sports, most significantly through the investment of public money into professional sports venues. The local subsidies which individual franchise owners have been able to secure from cities since the 1950s were a product of the legally-proscribed monopoly status enjoyed by the four major professional sports leagues. Cities that wanted professional sports franchises had no other option than to buy into these exclusive clubs. Federal antitrust laws, dating back to the Sherman Anti-Trust Act of 1890, prohibit corporate combinations and contracts that harm consumers and workers by limiting competition for their business and services, leading to a “restraint of trade.” Yet courts have shown a reluctance to intervene in the uniquely internally competitive cartel business model of professional sports. This both explicit and tacit acceptance of the monopoly status of professional sports allow the leagues to decide how many teams will exist, where they will play,

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid; “Historical Income Tables: Household,” *Census.gov*, September 14, 2014. Accessed on January 7, 2015: <https://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/data/historical/household/>; Richard Bernard and Bradley Rice, *Sunbelt Cities: Politics and Growth since World War II* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 18; G. Andrew Bernat, “Convergence in State Per Capita Personal Income, 1950-1999,” *Survey of Current Business* (June 2001), 36-44.

<sup>11</sup> Arthur T. Johnson, “Municipal Administration and the Sports Relocation Issue,” *Public Administration Review* 43 (1983), 519.

and how revenue and talent will be divided among member teams.<sup>12</sup> It enabled individual franchises and entire leagues to negotiate aggressively with cities when coming to terms on the financing, leasing, and revenue distribution of publicly financed playing facilities.<sup>13</sup> The artificial scarcity of the commodity that professional sports leagues possess enabled them to use their monopoly status to restrict the supply of teams. By limiting the supply of franchises, the major professional leagues have been able to successfully pressure dozens of cities into building stadiums at taxpayer expense.<sup>14</sup> In the age of “franchise free agency,” team owners have not borne the true costs of relocations because they have almost always forced the taxpayers in their new city to subsidize a large percentage of their move.<sup>15</sup> A 1995 study conducted by the *New York Times* concluded that 47 North American cities could support MLB teams.<sup>16</sup> None of the four major professional leagues had more than 30 franchises in 1995, providing each one with plenty of options if a city decided not to accede to their demands.

All four major professional sports leagues are protected by explicit statutory federal antitrust exemptions stemming from the Sports Broadcasting Act of 1961. This legislation enabled the franchises that constitute a professional league to pool their national broadcasting rights to sell to networks. The upshot of the Sports Broadcasting Act has been an unwillingness by courts to intervene in the organization of the major professional leagues. Subsequent

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<sup>12</sup> Mark Rosentraub, “Are Public Policies Needed to Level the Playing Field Between Cities and Teams,” 378; John Beisner, “Sports Franchise Relocation: Competitive Markets and Taxpayer Protection,” *Yale Law and Policy Review* 6.2 (1988), 448.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Zimbalist, *May the Best Team Win: Baseball Economics and Public Policy* (Washington, D.C.,: Brookings Institute, 2004), 123, 129-130.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Rosentraub, “Are Public Policies Needed to Level the Playing Field Between Cities and Teams,” 391; John Beisner, “Sports Franchise Relocation: Competitive Markets and Taxpayer Protection,” 448-449; Arthur T. Johnson, “Municipal Administration and the Sports Relocation Issue,” 527.

<sup>15</sup> John Beisner, “Sports Franchise Relocation: Competitive Markets and Taxpayer Protection,” 448.

<sup>16</sup> Mark Rosentraub, “Are Public Policies Needed to Level the Playing Field Between Cities and Teams,” 381.

legislative action by Congress has only strengthened the antitrust exemptions enjoyed by the big four.<sup>17</sup>

The antitrust exemptions enjoyed by the major professional leagues have created a situation in which most municipalities that want to retain or lure a franchise must offer them competitive local subsidies in support of stadium development to keep them from seeking out a new home either inside or outside of their present metropolitan area. Before “franchise free agency,” team relocations were typically the result of the club’s financial collapse and lack of support in their home city. It was typically the last-ditch effort of an owner who wanted to keep his team from folding. Between 1876 and 1950, 35 major professional sports franchises relocated from one city to another while approximately 50 others simply went out of business.<sup>18</sup> By the 1950s, major professional sports franchises became too lucrative a commodity to simply go out of business. In the age of “franchise free agency,” financial enticements offered by other cities have prompted relocations as often as the financial failures of clubs in their home markets.<sup>19</sup>

Beginning in the 1950s, political and corporate leaders in cities sought to maintain or attract professional sports teams by building them expensive playing facilities and promising the

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<sup>17</sup> Andrew Zimbalist, *May the Best Team Win*, 2, 16-17; Long before the Sports Broadcasting Act, federal courts afforded MLB an exemption from antitrust laws, allowing it to become an explicitly sanctioned legal monopoly. In the 1922 Supreme Court case *Federal Baseball Club v. National League*, the court ruled that the Sherman Anti-Trust Act did not apply to MLB. The plaintiff in the case was Ned Hanlon, the former owner of the Baltimore Terrapins, a club in the short-lived Federal League, a competing professional baseball organization that existed for two seasons (1914-1915). MLB hastened the collapse of the rival organization by inviting many Federal League team executives to join the ownership groups of MLB clubs, primarily in the NL. Hanlon was not among the invitees. He sued the NL for conspiring to monopolize professional baseball. Writing the unanimous opinion on behalf of the defendants, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes reasoned that baseball games are purely state affairs not beholden to regulations on interstate commerce. Holmes’ decision was written before modern legal notions of interstate commerce were broadened by the Court during the 1930s. In spite of the Court’s changing interpretation of interstate commerce, it has held up baseball’s antitrust exemption every time it has been brought before them.

<sup>18</sup> Frank Jozsa: *Big Sports, Big Business*, 49-51, 53-54.

<sup>19</sup> Arthur T. Johnson, “Municipal Administration and the Sports Relocation Issue,” 520-1.

teams financial incentives, including attractive stadium and arena leases.<sup>20</sup> By the end of the 1950s, most stadium deals involved more public money than private. Simultaneously, professional leagues in all four major sports were moving rapidly into the south and west in response to financial incentives offered by local governments in the region's rapidly growing cities.<sup>21</sup> In 1950, fewer than half of the NBA and NFL's playing facilities were publicly owned. Only two MLB stadiums were then publicly owned. No NHL arenas were publicly owned in 1950. By 1970, nearly 70 percent of the venues that hosted professional franchises were publicly owned, a figure that grew to more than 80 percent by the early 1990s.<sup>22</sup> Between 1950 and 1995, only three professional sports facilities were built primarily with private money: Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles, Foxboro Stadium in Massachusetts, and Joe Robbie Stadium in Miami.<sup>23</sup>

The first nationwide boom in stadium building took place between the late 1950s and the mid-1970s. The confluence of "franchise free agency," the local bargaining leverage that antitrust exemptions provided team owners, and the new willingness of municipalities to subsidize professional sports made this boom possible. Between 1956 and 1976, 50 new venues which served as the homes of major North American professional sports franchises were built at a cost of \$11.8 billion in 2018 dollars. Three quarters of the funding for these facilities came from the public. In the previous 47 years (1908-1955), only 27 such venues were built in North

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<sup>20</sup> Steven Riess, *City Games*, 239; Dennis Coates and Brad R. Humphreys, "The Stadium Gambit and Local Economic Development," *Regulation* 23.2 (2000), 16.

<sup>21</sup> Judith Grant Long, "Public Funding for Major League Sports Facilities Data Series (5): A History of Public Funding, 1890 to 2005," *Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy Center for Urban Research Working Paper Series*, 2006; Carl Abbott and Becky Nicolaides, "Professional Sports and Sunbelt Cities," 27-28.

<sup>22</sup> Steven Riess, *City Games*, 239; Dennis Coates and Brad R. Humphreys, "The Stadium Gambit and Local Economic Development," 16.

<sup>23</sup> Michael N. Danielson, *Home Team*, 225, 235-236.

America. Collectively, those stadiums cost \$1.1 billion in 2018 dollars with 47 percent of the funding coming from public sources.<sup>24</sup>

In an effort to contain public spending on their professional sports venues, many municipalities chose in the 1960s and 1970s to build multipurpose stadiums. These facilities served as the home for at least two local professional sports franchises as well as a venue for other large civic gatherings and events. Between 1960 and 1971, twelve publicly financed multipurpose stadiums were built in North America. These projects ranged in price from the \$18 million Atlanta Stadium (approximately \$143 million in 2018 dollars) to the \$45 million Houston Astrodome (approximately \$359 million in 2018 dollars).<sup>25</sup>

Following a slowdown in stadium building in the late 1970s and 1980s, the 1990s and early 2000s witnessed a new, unprecedented boom. Between 1990 and 2007, 78 stadiums were built for professional sports franchises in 43 metropolitan areas at a cost of \$28 billion in 2018 dollars. Public sources provided 61 percent of the money for these projects.<sup>26</sup> Several new factors specific to the late twentieth century helped to reinvigorate the market for stadium building. First of all, the further expansion of professional sports created an immediate need for stadiums in the Sunbelt cities that followed Atlanta into the major leagues. Secondly, stadium projects came to be seen by political and corporate leaders in many cities during the 1990s as they were by Atlanta's "Big Mules" during the 1960s: as a magic bullet for revitalizing their downtowns, despite the clear academic consensus that had concluded otherwise. Rust Belt cities like Baltimore, Cleveland, and Detroit made similarly massive civic investments in professional

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<sup>24</sup> Martin Greenberg, *The Stadium Game* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2001), 113-114; Charles Santo, "Beyond the Economic Catalyst Debate: Can Public Consumption Benefits Justify A Municipal Stadium Investment," *Journal of Urban Affairs* 29.5 (2007), 457; Judith Grant Long, "Public Funding for Major League Sports Facilities Data Series (5): A History of Public Funding, 1890 to 2005."

<sup>25</sup> Michael N. Danielson, *Home Team*, 238; Steven Riess, *City Games*, 241-242.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

sports venues during the 1990s, both as a means of keeping away poachers from the Sunbelt and also as a mechanism for revitalizing their downtowns. Many of these projects succeeded at bringing suburban visitors by the millions back downtown for a game and some pre or post event refreshments, but none of them transformed the economy or residential patterns in their respective communities.<sup>27</sup>

Thirdly, many of the stadiums built during the 1990s and 2000s replaced multipurpose facilities constructed during the 1960s and 1970s, virtually all of which have been torn down or are currently in the process of being torn down. In some instances, hastily constructed multipurpose venues like the Omni in Atlanta decayed rapidly and required immediate replacement. In most cases, franchise owners whose teams played in multipurpose venues wanted stadiums of their own. The scheduling inconveniences of sharing a facility with another team had been multi-decade annoyances for dozens of owners. Furthermore, sharing a playing facility with another franchise chafed the aesthetic sensibilities of many owners whose teams were forced to play on often unsightly fields designed to accommodate both tenants. When negotiating with their local civic leaders, though, franchise owners employed primarily economic arguments, telling municipal officials that their teams could not compete financially without additional revenue-generating features in their stadiums such as luxury boxes and club seats. Unlike the revenue that teams derived from normal ticket sales, the revenue generated by these specialty seats did not have to be shared with visiting teams.<sup>28</sup>

To finance the tens of billions of dollars in subsidies they have promised to professional franchises, cities and municipalities have employed a number of creative revenue-generating mechanisms. Before the mid-1960s, most public financing for stadiums came through general

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<sup>27</sup> Michael N. Danielson, *Home Team*, 225, 235-236.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*



obligation bonds secured by cities, counties, or states. Typically, they were repaid through the taxing entity's general revenue from property, income, and sales taxes. Reliance on general obligation bonds to build stadiums became increasingly unfeasible. Exponential increases in the price of stadium building during the 1960s and 1970s made it financially impossible for many municipalities to simply dip into their general revenues to pay for such expensive projects.<sup>29</sup>

As stadium financing came to be dominated by government entities during the 1960s, alternate public funding mechanisms such as special tax bonds and revenue bonds became more common. These bonds were typically project specific or came from specifically pledged sources of revenue. New municipal or state-sanctioned authorities created to facilitate the financing of stadium projects were usually the issuers of these securities. In an effort to limit the financial risk of such projects to a municipality, repayment of these bonds has typically been secured by revenue that derives from the project such as ticket taxes, event fees, or an agreed-upon percentage of the gate, parking revenues, or concessions. Since the 1990s, repayment of these bonds has often been secured through levies presented to the voters as "sin taxes" on lottery tickets, cigarettes, or alcohol or "taxes on out-of-towners," such as rooms and meals taxes or rental car fees. Regardless of the mechanism, funding for professional sports stadiums has fallen largely on local taxpayers. Atlanta, too, adopted similar funding mechanisms as it continued to play the stadium game in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, evolving away from the residentially-based taxation model that Ivan Allen and his allies employed in the city's initial efforts to make their community "Major League."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Martin Greenberg, *The Stadium Game*, 113-114.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 113-116.

## Sports and Leisure in Pre-“Major League” Atlanta

Ivan Allen regarded Atlanta’s sports scene as moribund when he came to power. He wanted major league sports to become one of the focal points of mass leisure in Metropolitan Atlanta. He envisioned Atlanta’s teams becoming socially unifying sources of national prestige. His predecessor, William Hartsfield, believed there was no need for the municipality to play a role in bringing professional teams to the region. Atlantans had proven themselves capable of creating an abundance of spectator sporting choices without bribing the big leagues into coming to town. Atlanta had a long tradition of supporting and participating in a diverse range of athletic pursuits, many of which were popular throughout the South but had yet to develop large audiences in other parts of the country. Sporting events patronized by Metropolitan Atlanta’s social elite flourished as well as those embraced by the working class. Historically, black and white Atlantans had separately supported a number of sports at different levels of competition. By the early 1960s, they were watching them in increasingly integrated settings as the city of Atlanta had desegregated seating at all major sporting events by the summer of 1962, several years ahead of the other cities in the Southeast.<sup>31</sup> Surveying the sporting culture of pre-“Major League” Atlanta, the remainder of this chapter offers a frame of reference for understanding the context in which professional sports came to Atlanta and what it would be up against in the metropolitan area’s competitive marketplace for leisure time and discretionary income.

Football, both at the college and high school levels, was unquestionably the most popular spectator sport in Metropolitan Atlanta. It enjoyed a wide following across the color line and the socio-economic spectrum. By the early 1960s, every Friday night in September and October featured high school football games in the Atlanta area that drew at least 10,000 spectators. The

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<sup>31</sup> Jim Auchmety, “Mayor Kept City Too Busy to Hate,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 6, 2003, 1A; Fred Russell, “Southern Stumbled on Color Line,” *The Sporting News*, April 4, 1962, 13.

*Journal* and the *Constitution* covered the autumn pastime twelve months a year, providing fans with extensive coverage of college recruiting and spring football practices. They sent reporters to eight states across Dixie to cover Southeastern Conference (SEC) and Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) football games in person every fall weekend. Many alumni from SEC and ACC schools who relocated to Atlanta after graduation relied on the *Journal* and *Constitution*'s extensive coverage to follow their alma maters' teams. The Atlanta Touchdown Club, one of the nation's most-well known football organizations, handed out awards to the nation's outstanding collegiate and high school players at an annual dinner that began in 1938. Statewide radio coverage of major college football originated at Atlanta radio stations. WGST, a station owned by Georgia Tech, served as the radio flagship for coverage of the school's football games. WSB, Atlanta's oldest radio station, served as the flagship for radio coverage of the University of Georgia's football games. Atlanta's black colleges, especially Clark College, Atlanta University, and Morehouse College, developed heated local football rivalries and followings that well exceeded their alumni bases.<sup>32</sup>

Atlanta was one of the South's earliest hotbeds of college football. The intense loyalty of local fans to Georgia Tech, Georgia, or another southern football program proved to be a liability for the NFL's Atlanta Falcons, who began play in 1966. Professional football was a permanent afterthought for millions of college football fans in Metropolitan Atlanta, the state of Georgia, and, more broadly, the southern United States. Atlanta's Georgia Tech Yellow Jackets had been one of the nation's premier college football programs for more than half a century. "Most of the city's present population," wrote Furman Bisher in 1965, "grew up with 'Ramblin Wreck,'" the school's fight song, "ringing in their ears."<sup>33</sup> John Heisman, the namesake of college football's

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<sup>32</sup> Andy Ambrose, *Atlanta: An Illustrated History*, 116-118; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 41.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

most prestigious award, the Heisman Trophy, transformed Georgia Tech into a national power in the early 20th century, leading the Yellow Jackets to the first of their four national championships in 1917. Football Saturdays at Tech's Grant Field had long been the centerpiece of the autumn social calendar for the city's elite, many of them alumni of the Atlanta school. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, capacity crowds of more than 44,000 (later, following a 1962 expansion, crowds of 53,300) filled Grant Field to watch nationally ranked Georgia Tech teams compete annually for the SEC and national championships. More than 30,000 Tech fans held season tickets, a remarkable number considering the school's graduate and undergraduate population was just 7,000. More than 12,000 fans purchased tickets through the Georgia Tech athletic department to follow the team on the road to games at cross-state rival Georgia and nearby Auburn, located 100 miles east of Atlanta just across the Alabama border. The popularity of Georgia Tech football was so great in the 1950s that segregationist politicians, including Governor Marvin Griffin, wavered on their "massive resistance" positions when Tech students and fans pressured them to allow the Yellow Jackets to play road games against integrated teams, several years before the 1961 desegregation of the prestigious engineering school.<sup>34</sup>

Seventy miles east of Atlanta in Athens, the University of Georgia (UGA) Bulldogs began to challenge Tech's reputation as the state's most successful and popular college team during the late 1950s. Following a long run of Georgia Tech victories in "Clean, Old Fashioned Hate," the nickname given to the Thanksgiving weekend Georgia-Georgia Tech football game, Georgia won four consecutive meetings from 1957-1960, the final years of Wally Butts' long

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<sup>34</sup> "Georgia Tech Media Guides 1981 and 1982," Stephen Prothero Papers, MS 888, Box 1, Folder 10, Kenan Research Center; Jesse Outlar, "Ticket Boom at Tech," *Atlanta Constitution*, August 21, 1965, 10; Seymour Freedgood, "Life in Buckhead," 11-12; *Engineering for Success: 2011 Georgia Tech Football* (Media Guide) (Atlanta, GA: Georgia Institute of Technology Athletic Department, 2011), 9-10, 140-165, 184; Andy Ambrose, *Atlanta: An Illustrated History*, 116-117; Charles H. Martin, "Racial Change and 'Big Time' College Football in Georgia: 1892-1957," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 80 no. 3 (Fall 1996), 532-4, 551-561.

tenure as the Bulldogs' coach. Following a brief interlude of mediocre seasons and Tech victories in the early 1960s, new coach Vince Dooley took over the program in 1964 and reasserted Georgia's supremacy in the rivalry. Dooley's Bulldogs emerged as the most formidable SEC contender to Bear Bryant and the University of Alabama's football juggernaut, the nation's top program during the 1960s and 1970s. The transformation of the Georgia Bulldogs into a football power corresponded with the growth of the University. In the early 1950s, the student body at the University of Georgia numbered around 6,000 students. By the mid-1960s, more than 20,000 students attended the institution. As UGA's student body grew, a commensurate growth in state funding enabled the institution to commit tens of millions of dollars to new construction. UGA drew thousands of students every year from Metropolitan Atlanta. UGA alumni traveling from Atlanta to Athens caused Saturday traffic backups along I-20 every time the Bulldogs played at home. The University of Georgia expanded the seating capacity of Sanford Stadium from 36,000 to 59,200 between 1963 and 1967 to meet the rising demand for tickets. When the University of Georgia expanded Sanford Stadium's seating capacity to 59,200, it exceeded the seating capacity of Atlanta Stadium by nearly 4,000.<sup>35</sup>

Though not as popular as football, Minor League baseball dated back to the nineteenth century in Atlanta, making it the city's longest tenured spectator sport. The number of people playing baseball still outpaced the number of people playing football in Atlanta in 1960, but football had long ago displaced baseball as the city's most attended sporting event. The struggles of Minor League baseball in Atlanta mirrored those faced by Minor League teams across the nation in the decades after World War II. The rise of television as a rival

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<sup>35</sup> "University of Georgia Football Media Guides, 1952-1966," Stephen Prothero Papers, MS 888, Box 1, Folder 12, Kenan Research Center; "The Fan Explosion," *Atlanta Journal*, October 16, 1968, 16; "University of Georgia Home Football Attendance, 1950-1980," Unpublished Document provided by Michael Terry, University of Georgia Athletic Department, May 15, 2012.

entertainment, the expanding number of cities with MLB teams, and the streamlining of Minor League baseball into formalized farm systems focused more on player development than capturing the interest and loyalty of local fans hurt all Minor League baseball franchises, including Atlanta's 'AA' Southern Association affiliate, the Crackers. Atlanta fans continued to support the franchise throughout the 1950s far better than many of their rivals. The continuity of local support for the Crackers in Atlanta took place not only as Minor League baseball struggled in general, but, more specifically, while the remnants of the Southern Association tried to continue playing as a segregated league within integrated baseball.<sup>36</sup>

The Atlanta Crackers began playing in the Southern League, the precursor to the Southern Association, in 1901. Atlanta had been home to several short-lived Minor League baseball teams since the 1880s, including a team named the "Firecrackers," which played in the 1892 season. The exact origin of the "Crackers" name is unknown. Some historians have speculated that the name was a takeoff on the "Firecrackers" name, while others think it came directly from the well-known epithet for rural white southerners. The Atlanta Crackers' sixty-five year history (1901-1965) corresponded roughly with the time period in which the majority of Atlanta's population were rural white migrants or their immediate descendants. Either way, the team enjoyed enthusiastic support from the very people who would have been described as "Crackers," making this a possible early example of a socially maligned group appropriating a term of disparagement and turning it into a source of communal pride and identity.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Jules Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), 278; Robert V. Bellamy Jr. and James R. Walker, "Did Televised Baseball Kill the 'Golden Age' of the Minor Leagues?" *NINE: A Journal of Baseball History and Culture* 13 no.1 (2004), 59-68; Bob Burnes, "Shaky Southern Teetering Toward Extinction," *The Sporting News*, September 20, 1961, 5.

<sup>37</sup> Tim Darnell, "The Atlanta Crackers," *The New Georgia Encyclopedia*, October 19, 2006. Accessed online July 1, 2013: <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/sports-outdoor-recreation/atlanta-crackers>.

Sportswriters took to calling the Atlanta Crackers the “Yankees of the South” in recognition of their dominance of the Southern Association. Like the Yankees of the North, the Atlanta Crackers were regarded by both their enthusiasts and detractors as the premier organization in their league. Over the course of the team’s history, they won 17 league championships. On seven occasions, they represented the Southern Association in the Dixie Series (1920-1958), a post-season championship series against the winner of the Texas League. The Crackers won twice, in 1938 and 1952. The club’s popularity peaked along with the rest of the Southern Association in the immediate aftermath of World War II. The Crackers drew a league-record 404,584 fans in 1947. Beginning in 1950, the formerly independent Crackers began affiliating with MLB teams as control over the farm systems in professional baseball became more centralized. Between 1950 and 1965, the Crackers served as the affiliates of the Boston/Milwaukee Braves (1950-1959), the Los Angeles Dodgers (1960-1961), the St. Louis Cardinals (1962-1963), the Minnesota Twins (1964), and the Milwaukee Braves (1965). Crackers fans did not necessarily embrace the big league team with whom Atlanta was affiliated at the moment. “Although the Crackers had been the Braves farm team in the 1950s,” Karl Green, a longtime Atlanta baseball fan recalled, “most fans’ allegiance was to the Crackers.”<sup>38</sup>

The Crackers started playing their home games at Ponce De Leon Park in 1907. Located in East Atlanta along Ponce De Leon Avenue, “Poncey” was built across the street from an amusement park and situated amid the yards of the Southern Railway. The original wood-framed Park burned down in 1923 and was replaced the next season by a more permanent concrete and steel structure. Around the same time, Sears and Roebuck’s southeastern distribution center replaced the amusement park, giving the surrounding neighborhood more the

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 33-38; Jesse Outlar, “Braves Settle for Crackers,” *Atlanta Constitution*, November 30, 1964, 12; Karl Green Interview by the author, August 16, 2013, 26-7, transcript.

character of an urban industrial area than a space for mass leisure. Rell Jackson Spiller, the local businessman who owned the stadium, made up for his ballpark's less than bucolic surroundings by incorporating some southern idiosyncrasy into its design. Spiller planted a magnolia tree in centerfield rather than build a fence that went all the way around the outfield. Balls that hit the tree or passed on either side of it remained in play. White blossoms often littered the outfield during its spring bloom.

Poncey served primarily as the home of the Crackers, but the team's ownership also rented out the park for high school and small college football games. Poncey hosted occasional religious services and wrestling matches. The primary sub-tenant for the Crackers were the Atlanta Black Crackers, a professional Negro League baseball team who played from 1920 until 1952. For the vast majority of their history, the Black Crackers played in either the minor league Negro Southern League or as an independent black professional baseball team. During the 1938 and 1939 seasons, the team played in the Negro American League, one of the major Negro Leagues. The Black Crackers were originally made up of former black college baseball players from the Atlanta area before broadening their player recruiting efforts. The Crackers organization donated their old uniforms and equipment to the often financially struggling Black Crackers. Atlanta's Negro League team tended to draw small crowds to Poncey unless they had scheduled exhibition games against the nations' most popular black barnstorming teams, such as the Indianapolis Clowns or the Zulu Giants, both of whom incorporated entertaining skits and comedic on-the-field antics into the game.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Clifford Kuhn, Harlon Joye, and E. Bernard West, *Living Atlanta*, 266-268; Andy Ambrose, *Atlanta: An Illustrated History*, 114; Tim Darnell, "The Atlanta Black Crackers," *The New Georgia Encyclopedia*, November 3, 2006. Accessed online July 1, 2013: <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/sports-outdoor-recreation/atlanta-black-crackers>; Leslie Heaphy, "The Atlanta Black Crackers," *Society for American Baseball Research Biography Project*, 2010. Accessed online July 2, 2013: <http://sabr.org/research/atlanta-black-crackers>. The unprecedented preeminence that the MLB came to enjoy over baseball as a spectator sport in the decades after World War II came as a result of the league's expansion, the growth of television, and the decline or demise of its Minor League,



Sunday doubleheaders at Poncey punctuated the summer calendar of many families living in and around Atlanta. “People came from long distances to see the Crackers play two games for the price of one on those hot, dusty, and frequently bombastic days,” wrote Furman Bisher, conjuring Poncey’s atmosphere as the park approached its 1965 demise.<sup>40</sup> As the Crackers’ status in organized baseball became more tenuous during the late 1950s and early 1960s, fans started to take greater notice of Poncey’s faults. Its lack of surrounding amenities and dearth of available parking became a greater issue for fans in an increasingly suburban and car dependent metropolitan area. Mounting safety concerns about the surrounding residential areas, particularly the deteriorating Virginia-Highland neighborhood just north of the ballpark, discouraged some fans from attending, though not the most stalwart baseball fanatics.<sup>41</sup> “I didn’t live close to Ponce De Leon, but it was close enough that I could walk there,” recalled Joel Gross, whose family relocated from Jersey City to the suburban outskirts east of Atlanta in Fulton County in 1959. On several occasions, the baseball-mad eleven year-old walked with friends to Sunday doubleheaders. “...From North Highland and Ponce De Leon down to the ballpark wasn’t particularly a great neighborhood,” he recalled, “but it wasn’t something my parents said ‘don’t walk through it.’”<sup>42</sup>

The Southern Association suffered from the same problems as the other minor leagues during the 1950s. The addition of segregationist politics to the equation put the Southern

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barnstorming, and Negro League competitors. The near monopoly that the MLB enjoyed over baseball as a spectator sport in subsequent decades had the unfortunate consequence of eliminating much of the showmanship from the game. For those interested in the history of showmanship in professional baseball, I highly recommend Alan J. Pollock’s *Barnstorming to Heaven: Syd Pollock and His Great Black Teams* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2006).

<sup>40</sup> Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 34.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-38, 56; Jesse Outlar, “Requiem for Poncey,” *Atlanta Constitution*, May 24, 1965, 16; Karl Green Interview by the author, August 16, 2013, 26-7; Tim Darnell, “Ponce De Leon Ballpark,” *The New Georgia Encyclopedia*, January 22, 2004. Accessed online July 1, 2013: <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/sports-outdoor-recreation/ponce-de-leon-ballpark>.

<sup>42</sup> Joel Gross Interview by the author, August 15, 2013, 21.

Association in an untenable position. The unwillingness of several Southern Association franchises to desegregate or play desegregated teams led to the 'AA' league's demise in 1961. MLB teams, all of whom had fielded black players by the end of the 1959 season, refused to further accommodate the Jim Crow laws and customs of southern states to the detriment of their farm systems. Several teams in the Southern Association were unable to secure working agreements with MLB franchises, making it impossible for them to field competitive teams any longer. MLB's unmistakably progressive stand on desegregation effectively led to the Southern Association's demise.<sup>43</sup>

The Crackers had tread lightly around the issues of desegregation on the field and in the stands for years. In April 1949, Atlanta hosted its first desegregated professional baseball game, an exhibition between the Atlanta Crackers and the Brooklyn Dodgers, the team that had broken baseball's color line two seasons earlier with the addition of Jackie Robinson to its roster. Dodgers executive Branch Rickey, one of the most successful champions of desegregation in American history, had scheduled a series of exhibition games across the segregated south that spring in front of integrated audiences. The three-game series between the Dodgers and the Crackers would be no different. More than 50,000 black and white fans sat in integrated seating at Ponce De Leon Park for three of, what were then, the most attended baseball games in Atlanta history. They watched a Dodgers team that counted two African Americans, Robinson and catcher Roy Campanella, among their most popular players. Black fans had previously sat in a

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<sup>43</sup> Bob Burnes, "Shaky Southern Teetering Toward Extinction," *The Sporting News*, September 20, 1961, 5; Fred Russell, "Why Did Southern Go Under?" *The Sporting News*, March 28, 1962, 11; Fred Russell, "Southern Stumbled on Color Line," *The Sporting News*, April 4, 1962, 13; Kenneth Fenster, "Earl Mann, Nat Peeples, and the Failed Attempt of Integration in the Southern Association," *NINE: A Journal of Baseball History and Culture* 12 no.2 (2004), 83-84; Earl Mann (Personality File), Kenan Research Center.

segregated leftfield bleacher section at Poncey, but never before in the grandstand or box seats as they did in large numbers that weekend.<sup>44</sup>

Following the 1949 exhibition games against the Dodgers, seating arrangements at Poncey returned to their traditionally segregated designations. The Crackers continued to play segregated baseball against their Southern Association rivals. Much like their home city, though, the Crackers began to gradually desegregate aspects of their operation. Beginning in 1952, the Crackers reserved a section of grandstand seats for black fans. In 1954, the Crackers added Nat Peeples to their roster, the only black player in the history of the Southern Association. Peeples' tenure with the Crackers proved short lived. He excelled in the exhibition season for the Crackers, but only played in two regular season games for the team, going hitless in four at-bats on the road in Mobile, Alabama. Peeples was soon demoted to the Braves' 'A' minor league affiliate in Jacksonville, Florida. Contemporary observers and modern scholars disagree on whether the decision had more to do with his on-field performance or racial discrimination. Despite the Crackers' Hartsfield-like approach to desegregation, the end of segregated Minor League baseball came quickly in Atlanta. Following the demise of the Southern Association, the Crackers became the 'AAA' affiliate of the St. Louis Cardinals in the International League. As dictated by league rules, they fielded an integrated team and integrated the stands of Poncey in 1962, a decision which proceeded with little public notice amid more contentious issues related to desegregation in the city.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 34-40; Jules Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment*, 265-267, 276; Kenneth Fenster, "Earl Mann, Nat Peeples, and the Failed Attempt of Integration in the Southern Association," 83-95; Earl Mann (Personality File), Kenan Research Center.

<sup>45</sup> Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 34-40; Fred Russell, "Southern Stumbled on Color Line," *The Sporting News*, April 4, 1962, 13; Jules Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment*, 265-267, 276; Kenneth Fenster, "Earl Mann, Nat Peeples, and the Failed Attempt of Integration in the Southern Association," 83-95; Jim Auchmety, "Mayor Kept City Too Busy to Hate," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 6, 2003, 1A.

Desegregation posed even fewer problems in the sport of golf. In 1960, the Greater Atlanta area was arguably the nation's most enthusiastic market for golf, both as an activity and a spectator sport. Atlanta was the home of Bobby Jones, America's first golfer to achieve celebrity status. Born into a prominent Atlanta family, Jones spent his entire career as an amateur, although he later made a great deal of money endorsing golf clubs for Spalding and starring in short golf instructional films. Few athletes have dominated their sport as Jones did in the 1920s, winning thirteen major championships between 1923 and 1930. In 1930, Jones became the only golfer in history to win the "Grand Slam," golf's four major tournaments, all in one season. Subsequently, Jones retired from competition and pursued a number of other golf related ventures, including co-founding the Augusta National Golf Club and helping to design its famed golf course, which opened in 1933. The Augusta National Golf Club held the inaugural Masters Tournament the following spring. Immediately, the Masters became one of the most prestigious events on the Professional Golf Association (PGA) calendar and was soon recognized as one of the tour's four major tournaments. By the early 1960s, more than 150,000 spectators attended the four rounds of the nationally televised Masters Tournament in Augusta, located 150 miles east of Atlanta. The free-to-attend practice round the day before the tournament drew as many as 20,000 spectators.<sup>46</sup>

Atlanta's continued reputation as a golf hotbed relied not only on the reputation of Bobby Jones and the city's proximity to Augusta, but also on the large number of metropolitan area residents who took personal pleasure in the sport. Participation in golf extended beyond the local

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<sup>46</sup> Bob Harig, "Unlike Most Practice Rounds, the Masters' Brings Plenty of Passion," *ESPN.COM*, April 7, 2008. Accessed on January 4, 2013: <http://sports.espn.go.com/golf/masters08/columns/story?id=3334899>; Jesse Outlar, "Big League Audition," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 12, 1962, 12; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 40; Furman Bisher, "Masters Opens with Jacks," *Atlanta Journal*, April 8, 1966, 47; Furman Bisher, "Dixie Golf Circle Tour," *Chicago Tribune*, January 11, 1970, 14; Steven R. Lowe, "Bobby Jones," *The New Georgia Encyclopedia*, June 18, 2002. Accessed online July 1, 2013: <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/sports-outdoor-recreation/bobby-jones-1902-1971>.

elite into the white and black middle classes. An estimated 70,000 golfers in Metropolitan Atlanta kept the more than three-dozen public and private courses in the area busy throughout Georgia's nine-month playing season. The range of golf courses available to players in Metropolitan Atlanta reflected the racial and social barriers of the region. Bobby Jones' home course, East Lake, was the city's most exclusive. Owned and operated by the Atlanta Athletic Club, the course became an enclave of segregated white affluence in close proximity to the increasingly black neighborhoods of East Atlanta. The black-owned Lincoln Country Club, a nine-hole course known for its rough conditions, long served as the primary playing venue for Atlanta's black business and professional classes. In December 1955, the U.S. Supreme Court ordered the city of Atlanta to desegregate its five public golf courses. Three years earlier, four African American golfers had filed suit against the city of Atlanta, arguing that a city ordinance banning them from playing on the municipally owned courses was unconstitutional. The plaintiffs in *Holmes v. Atlanta*, the case that desegregated Atlanta's public golf links, challenged the city's policy in part because the board of directors at Lincoln Country Club refused to upgrade the conditions at the course. In spring 1956, African American golfers, including the four plaintiffs in the *Holmes* case, began patronizing Atlanta's well-maintained public courses without major incident.<sup>47</sup>

Other leisure pursuits also proved popular in Greater Atlanta. While boating on the region's many lakes became a favorite pastime in the city's affluent northern suburbs during the 1950s and 1960s, a different motor sport reached unprecedented levels of popularity among working-class Atlantans. Stock car racing drew hundreds of thousands of fans annually to

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<sup>47</sup> Jack McCallum, "Crossing The Line," *Sports Illustrated*, April 3, 2000. Accessed January 17, 2012 from the *SI Vault*: <http://www.si.com/vault/topic/article/atlanta/1900-01-01/2100-12-31/mdd/34/781>; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 40.

raceways and dirt tracks around the region, more than any other sporting event in the Greater Atlanta area. From March through October, legions of predominately white working-class fans attended Saturday night and Sunday afternoon races. In November 1959, the \$1.8 million Atlanta International Raceway (AIR) opened twenty miles south of the city in Hampton, Georgia. The modern high-banked course in Hampton replaced Lakewood Park, a dirt track just south of Atlanta, as the top racing facility in the region. Unlike the notoriously cramped parking facilities at Lakewood Park, AIR had an eight lane entrance and enough parking for 32,000 vehicles. The benefits of AIR's improved parking facilities were tempered by the massive traffic backups that race days caused on Route 41 South to Hampton. The twenty-mile drive down the "South Expressway" to AIR could take Atlanta race fans as long as four hours. Despite the hassle of getting to Hampton in time for a two o'clock Sunday event, stock car racing provided many working-class Atlantans with an affordable, day-long form of entertainment. Racing fans could purchase a \$35 grandstand season pass for 22 races in 1964, less than one-fifth the price of the most inexpensive Braves' season ticket two years later. To showcase the state-of-the art facility, NASCAR (The National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing) granted AIR two brand-new events in 1960: the Dixie 300 in July and the Atlanta 500 in October. By the mid-1960s, both events drew crowds in excess of 60,000 spectators.<sup>48</sup>

Stock Car Racing drew an undoubtedly rowdy crowd, both at Lakewood Park and at AIR. As racing at Lakewood Park grew in popularity in the years after World War II, reform-minded Atlantans raised questions in the local press about the safety of the activity and the behavior of

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<sup>48</sup> "Atlanta International Raceway: Race Information," Auto Racing (Subject File), Kenan Research Center; Bill Blodgett, "Lorenzen Sweeps Third 500 in Row," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 6, 1964, 19; Hal Hayes, "Hurtubise Hurries to '500' Win as 70,000 Fans Watch AIR Classic," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 28, 1966, 33; Al Thomy, "Roberts Fireballs His Way to Torrid Dixie 300 Win," *Atlanta Constitution*, August 1, 1960, 13; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 40-1; "1967 Season Ticket Renewal Brochure," Sports—Atlanta Braves (Baseball) (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center; Marion E. Jackson, "Sports of the World," *Atlanta Daily World*, April 7, 1964, 7.

the crowds that attended these events. During the 1950 race season alone, three separate incidents led the *Journal* to call for an end to racing at Lakewood. A driver named Skimp Hersey died in June from burns he sustained in a crash. Later that season, a spectator standing close to the track was killed by a multi-car crash that jumped Lakewood's modest barrier. That same weekend, Atlanta Police were pelted with rocks by approximately 50 spectators when they tried to arrest a fan for public drunkenness.<sup>49</sup>

There is no indication that the relocation of Atlanta's major raceway to Hampton in 1959 was a product of its organizers' desire to distance their event from the gaze of Atlanta-based custodians of public safety and mores. Building a raceway twenty miles from the city of Atlanta, though, minimized the potential for surveillance of the activity by disapproving civic guardians interested in preserving the wellbeing and reputation of Atlanta. The cultural autonomy that locating AIR in Hampton provided race organizers and fans came with an overlapping political autonomy that enabled them to avoid complying with Atlanta's legal and customary desegregation during the early 1960s. As late as April 1964, three months before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 went into effect, Marion E. Jackson of the *Daily World* complained that many facilities at AIR, including toilets and water fountains, remained segregated and almost no black fans were in attendance at the event.<sup>50</sup> "Henry County isn't Atlanta," Jackson wrote, referring to the rural location of the Hampton raceway. "NASCAR has assured me it would not tolerate racial segregation at sponsored races...I know it is nice to invite me to plush clubs and tell me 'you're an exceptional Negro,' but will the South understand the heartbreak and the disillusionment and know that there are thousands of Negroes with money to spend, good homes, wonderful environments, that are as qualified as Marion E. Jackson Senior to sit anyplace that

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<sup>49</sup> "Lakewood Races Should Be Stopped," June 13, 1950, Auto Racing (Subject File), Kenan Research Center.

<sup>50</sup> Marion E. Jackson, "Sports of the World," *Atlanta Daily World*, April 7, 1964, 7.

their money will permit,” he wrote, months before AIR would be forced by law to fully integrate their accommodations.<sup>51</sup>

Professional wrestling enjoyed a similarly dedicated working-class following in Metropolitan Atlanta. While the Atlanta newspapers covered stock car racing alongside athletics on their sports pages, they all but ignored professional wrestling. Despite its lack of mainstream media coverage, wrestling drew large live and televised audiences. Standing room only crowds filled the 5,500 seat City Armory (later renamed the City Auditorium) every Friday night to watch professional wrestling. Frequent Saturday night wrestling cards filled in other open dates at the air-conditioned, downtown venue. By the mid-1960s, audiences for wrestling at the City Armory included a noticeable black minority while the performers in the ring included wrestlers from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. The proximity of the City Armory to the predominately black east side neighborhoods surrounding Auburn Avenue and the affordable \$1.50 price of admission likely aided in the decisions of many black wrestling fans to attend the Friday night events. While wrestlers, to the delight of the audience, often portrayed the racial or ethnic identity they belonged to or were depicting in an exaggerated or stereotypical manner, Friday night wrestling at Atlanta’s City Armory was undoubtedly the most thoroughly integrated sporting event in pre-“Major League” Atlanta. Promoter Paul Jones began staging weekly Atlanta wrestling cards in 1944 at the cramped Warren Arena east of downtown, a stuffy, dusty dirt-floored venue that uncomfortably hosted as many as 3,000 spectators. Jones ran a regional wrestling promotion known as ABC Booking that also put on events in Georgia’s smaller cities. He moved his Friday night wrestling cards to the City Armory in the late 1940s, around the same time that Atlanta radio station WQXI began airing weekly broadcasts of his shows. In 1954,

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.



ABC affiliate WLWA (later, WAI) began airing *Live Atlanta Wrestling* on Saturday afternoons, a one-hour television program featuring matches between wrestlers from Paul Jones' promotion. To ensure the visual and sound quality of the program, WAI filmed the matches in front of a small audience in their television studio rather than trying to broadcast from the raucous, poorly lit City Armory. The distinction between televised and live events also helped Jones' promotion ensure that fans continued to patronize his City Armory shows. Tickets to the weekly television taping were given away by a drawing to fans that purchased the twenty-five cent *Ringsider* program on Friday night at the City Armory. Immediately, wrestling became one of WAI's highest rated programs. Saturday afternoon wrestling developed into a fixture of Atlanta television, anchoring the early evening weekend programming of affiliates across the Southeast for the next half century. While the management, ownership, and television rights to professional wrestling in Atlanta, specifically, and the Southeast, more broadly, changed on several occasions during the 1970s and 1980s, never did a Saturday afternoon pass by in Atlanta without a wrestling broadcast emanating from one of the city's television studios.<sup>52</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Competition for time and discretionary income between the new major professional sports franchises and existing local spectator and participatory athletic events became a hallmark of the Atlanta marketplace in the late twentieth century. As the preceding sections demonstrate, the national context which enabled Atlanta's civic leadership to buy its way into the big leagues during the 1960s and 1970s was at crosscurrents with Atlanta's long-tenured sporting culture,

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<sup>52</sup> Scott Beekman, *Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in America* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006), 114-123; "Ringsider: Atlanta Wrestling Program, September 23, 1969," Sports—Wrestling (Subject File), Kenan Research Center; Tim Hornbaker, *National Wrestling Alliance: The Untold Story of the Monopoly that Strangled Professional Wrestling* (Toronto, Ontario: ECW Press, 2007), 294-295; "The History of Professional Wrestling in Atlanta": *WATL Channel 36*, documentary (Atlanta, GA: WATL, May 19, 1986), television program; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 41.

which thrived for decades before the arrival of major professional teams. The mere fact that cities chose to invest public money in professional sports franchises did not ensure that area residents would embrace these teams. Quite to the contrary, Atlanta's continued embrace of its local sporting traditions and apathy toward its new big league amenities anticipated the response of many Sunbelt cities to the teams they acquired in the late twentieth century through "franchise free agency."

## CHAPTER 3

### **“The Greatest Location in the World”: Atlanta Builds a Stadium and Lures Major League Baseball and the National Football League, 1961-1966**

The Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium Authority broke ground on a multi-purpose, municipal stadium on April 15, 1964. Ivan Allen, Georgia Governor Carl Sanders, and Stadium Authority chairman Arthur Montgomery turned ceremonial shovels of sand at the Washington-Rawson urban renewal site, the southern CBD location selected for the venue. After lending a brief hand to the physical construction of the stadium, Allen told reporters that the project had swept Atlanta up in a “romance of accomplishment,” a belief that their city could achieve any grand enterprise if it made a concerted civic effort to reach that goal.<sup>1</sup> The following sections examine Atlanta’s pursuit of some of its preeminent municipal ambitions of the 1960s: the acquisition of professional baseball and football franchises and the construction of a stadium to host both teams.

It argues that Atlanta’s elite-driven pursuit of professional sports in the 1960s, which was jumpstarted by the concerted efforts of the municipal and corporate leadership to build a multipurpose, municipally financed stadium, enabled the city to take advantage of “franchise free agency.” The desire of leaders in the city’s bi-racial governing consensus to acquire “major league status” superseded their sense of responsibility to the 5,500 low-income, predominately African American citizens whose homes had been destroyed during Atlanta’s slum clearance program of the late 1950s. When an out-of-town professional sports franchise owner suggested that the Washington-Rawson urban renewal site would be an ideal space for a stadium, city

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<sup>1</sup> “Atlanta Stadium Program: Special Dedication Edition (1965),” Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium (Subject Folder 1 of 4), Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Georgia.

leaders scooped up land that had long been earmarked for affordable housing and fast-tracked it into the site of their football and baseball stadium.

By investigating Atlanta's pursuit and acquisition of professional football and baseball during the 1960s, it shows the phenomena of "franchise free agency" in action. It examines the "Big Mules" efforts to lure franchises from other cities and to convince major professional sports leagues to grant Atlanta expansion teams by promising to build them a state-of-the-art, downtown playing facility. This chapter begins with an analysis of the elite-driven process that led to the construction of Atlanta Stadium. Working with his appointees in the Stadium Authority, Allen expedited the planning, financing, and building of the stadium. The construction of Atlanta Stadium on the Washington-Rawson urban renewal site required the Stadium Authority to acquire the land from the Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA), land that had been the intended site of an affordable housing project. These new homes were supposed to replace the homes of the neighborhood's predominately black residents, which had been destroyed during the city's 1950s "slum clearance" program. The political decisions that led to the repurposing of the Washington-Rawson site for a stadium project serve as a prism through which to examine the city's bi-racial governing consensus' priorities. The city's black and white leadership of the 1960s privileged elite-driven civic enterprises over the tangible and immediate needs of the city's low-income black residents. Collectively, Atlanta's white and black leaders believed that the unique civic benefits of building Atlanta Stadium and acquiring major league teams outweighed the social negatives of not building affordable housing on the site.

The rest of the chapter details the processes through which Atlanta acquired its MLB and NFL franchises. It examines Atlanta's three-year long political, economic, and legal fight with Milwaukee for control of the Braves' franchise which ended in 1966 with the baseball team's

relocation to Georgia. Atlanta and Milwaukee's struggle for the Braves exemplified the kind of intra-metropolitan conflicts that became commonplace in the age of "franchise free agency." The behind the scenes deal-making among civic elites, public displays of fan support or opposition to the relocation, and protracted legal proceedings that took place in Atlanta and Milwaukee between 1963 and 1966 were repeated in dozens of cities during the late twentieth century as major league and aspirant major league cities competed for the artificially scarce commodity of professional sports franchises.

This chapter concludes with an investigation of Atlanta's half-decade long push to attract professional football to the city. Atlanta's lack of a suitable playing facility or a sufficiently well-heeled and interested investor group hamstrung civic efforts during the early 1960s to attract either an AFL or NFL team. Once construction began on Atlanta Stadium, the two professional football leagues both offered the city an expansion club, demonstrating the interrelationship between the public financing of stadiums and "franchise free agency." This section also displays "franchise free agency" in action by analyzing Atlanta's bidding war with St. Louis for their Cardinals' football team, a move that allowed the Cardinals' owners to leverage a more advantageous lease at St. Louis' new downtown stadium by threatening to move their franchise to Atlanta.

### **"On Land We Didn't Own..."**

The selection of a site for Atlanta's municipally owned stadium was driven less by the city's leadership than by the whims of an out-of-town sports franchise owner whose team did not even end up moving to the city. A desire by local doyens to please the first MLB owner who considered moving to Atlanta brought about dramatic changes in the city's urban planning and housing policy. Ivan Allen, the face of Atlanta's stadium push, tabled the project during his first

year in office. Other aspects of his “Six-Point Plan,” especially executing the backlog of approved highway construction projects and managing the continued desegregation of Atlanta’s public life, occupied much of his time in 1962. Allen spent many of his waking hours in 1962 monitoring the completion of a “Downtown Connector” between Interstates 75 and 85 and ensuring that his executive order desegregating all of the city’s public facilities was being enforced. The time he had to devote to a pet project went into his proposed “auditorium-coliseum,” which he regarded as a smaller undertaking than the stadium. Moreover, there was no indication that the arrival of a professional sports franchise in Atlanta was imminent, so the need to break ground on an outdoor stadium lost some of the imperative that Allen had afforded it during the campaign.<sup>2</sup>

Allen described Atlanta’s need for a multipurpose municipal auditorium, suitable for conventions, public performances, and indoor sporting events, especially basketball games, during his January 1962 inaugural address. Accommodating professional basketball, then a second-tier professional sport, let alone any other indoor athletic events, was not the primary purpose of the “auditorium-coliseum,” but one of a number of activities that the convertible facility would be capable of hosting. Allen, in fact, emphasized the proposed auditorium’s desirability as a venue for opera and theatre far more than he did its ability to host basketball games. The “auditorium-coliseum” became the centerpiece of an \$80 million municipal bond package he submitted for public approval. Allen’s bond initiatives faced heavy opposition from middle and working class white voters, many of whom regarded its plans for new investments in

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<sup>2</sup> Sally Sanford, “Plan Offered for Coliseum,” *Atlanta Journal*, February 19, 1962, 1; Ivan Allen, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, 69, 152-154; “Copy of Statement by Ivan Allen, Jr. Mayor of Atlanta Before Committee on Commerce, Regarding S. 1732, July 26, 1963,” Ivan Allen, Jr.- Mayoral Papers, 1963-1970, Undated, Allen Family Papers, MSS 1014, Box 1, Folder 9, Kenan Research Center; “Bond Issue Voting Heavy, But Proposals Apparently Go Down to a Total Defeat,” *Atlanta Daily World*, August 3, 1962, 1,5.

recreational facilities and urban renewal projects around the city as the mayor's repayment to black voters for their support in the recent election. Conversely, the city's predominately black neighborhoods supported all of the bond initiatives by at least a 2 to 1 margin. High voter turnout in predominately white neighborhoods in South and West Atlanta swung the vote tallies strongly against Allen's proposals. Voters turned down every one of the proposed municipal bonds in August 1962, forcing Allen to pursue a smaller \$55 million package the following year with a more modest proposal for an auditorium. The revised 1963 version of the "auditorium-coliseum" plan excluded accommodations for spectator sports. The paired down plan won voter approval in May 1963, facilitating the construction of the Atlanta Civic Center on urban renewal land east of the CBD in the predominately African American Buttermilk Bottom neighborhood.<sup>3</sup>

The Atlanta Civic Center opened in 1967, several years later than initially anticipated. Political controversy stemming from the forced relocation of a predominately African American public school near the construction site led to years of delays in completing the project. Black voters, prompted by enthusiastic support from the black business community for the proposed large-scale construction project in a predominately African American neighborhood, voted heavily for the 1963 bond initiative. When details of the Civic Center plan became public, many blacks in the surrounding districts turned opponents of the project because the proposed site required the destruction of one of their neighborhood's principal institutions. Opposition to the plan eased when Mayor Allen promised expedited residential construction on the remaining acres of the Buttermilk Bottom urban renewal site, reiterating his campaign pledge to build more

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<sup>3</sup> Sally Sanford, "Plan Offered for Coliseum," *Atlanta Journal*, February 19, 1962, 1; Raleigh Bryans, "All Bond Issues Approved in Vote," *Atlanta Journal*, May 16, 1963, 1, 12; Raleigh Bryans, "Final Debates Offered Here on Bonds," *Atlanta Journal*, May 14, 1963, 1, 12; Jesse Outlar, "Letter to the Mayor," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 12, 1963, 46; John H. Britton, "Voters Get the Bond Issue at Polls Today," *Atlanta Daily World*, August 2, 1962, 1,5.

new housing targeted at African American residents. When the Civic Center finally opened, it never achieved the prominent position in civic life its boosters envisioned for the facility. The Civic Center housed an ornate 4,500 seat theater that was soon overshadowed by the 1968 opening of the Memorial Arts Center (later renamed the Woodruff Arts Center), home to the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, the Alliance Theatre, and the High Museum of Art. The Civic Center's convention hall was displaced as the city's top publicly-owned exhibition space within a decade by the state-run Georgia World Congress Center, which opened on the southern edge of the CBD in 1976. Following the approval of his municipal bond package on its second try, Allen declared that the stadium would be the next major construction project on the city's agenda.<sup>4</sup>

Despite Allen's declaration, it was actually Furman Bisher, Georgia's best-known sportswriter, who instigated the stadium building process. For years, the *Journal* sports editor had employed his daily column in support of the cause of bringing big league sports to Atlanta. More importantly, the well-connected journalist worked behind the scenes to pitch Atlanta as a future site for professional sports to insiders in all of the major leagues. Bisher's connections put him in the right place at the right time to be a sympathetic ear for Charlie Finley, the mercurial owner of the Kansas City Athletics (A's) baseball team. Finley accepted an April 1963 invitation from Bisher to visit potential stadium sites around the city. The A's owner and Bisher became acquainted through their charity work in the Easter Seals campaign. Finley led the organization's national fundraising drive while Bisher chaired the Georgia state branch.

Finley wore out his welcome in Kansas City soon after he purchased the team in December 1960. Within weeks of buying the A's, he threatened to move his franchise unless the city agreed to build him a new stadium. During a 1962 dinner meeting on Easter Seals business,

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<sup>4</sup> Ivan Allen, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, 69, 152-154; Bob Spicer, "Stadium Next, Mayor Says," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 17, 1963, 45; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 60-65.



Finley complained to Bisher about the treatment he received from the media and politicians in Kansas City. Bisher told the Athletics' owner that if he was considering moving his franchise, Atlanta's mayor had campaigned on building a stadium and bringing MLB to town. Several months after their initial conversation, Finley called Bisher to tell him he was considering moving his franchise to Atlanta. Earlier that day, the newly elected Kansas City Board of Alderman had terminated a contract for a new municipal stadium Finley negotiated during the final weeks of the previous administration. Finley accepted Bisher's offer and soon traveled to Atlanta for a look at several potential stadium sites.<sup>5</sup>

Finley and Bisher looked at three locations around Atlanta, all of which were either too small or too far from the CBD for Finley's liking. In 1962, Allen expressed his preference for building the stadium at the recently-abandoned Lakewood Park race track, but the A's owner, who surveyed the site on his tour, considered the out-of-the-way location the least desirable of the three. Finley wanted his A's to play in a showpiece, downtown stadium. Bisher consulted with Allen after the unsuccessful tour while the Alabama-born Finley indulged in Atlanta's array of barbecue restaurants. If Finley wanted a center-city location, Allen suggested Bisher take him to the vacant Washington-Rawson urban renewal site, located just south of the state capitol and the CBD. Days earlier, Allen said in his memoir, the idea of building the stadium at Washington-Rawson occurred to him while gazing at the city map on the wall in his office.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 11-14, 51; "Lawyers Title News: Atlanta Stadium (August 1966)," Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium (Subject Folder 1 of 4), Kenan Research Center; Furman Bisher, "Allen Got the Ball Rolling Here," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 3, 2003, 2D; John Logue, "Stadium by 1964 in the Works Here," *Atlanta Journal*, June 6, 1963, 1; Ernest Mehl, "'Build Park or Lose Franchise,' Finley Tells Kaycee City Council," *The Sporting News*, September 29, 1962, 16; Ernest Mehl, "A's Shift More Plausible," *The Sporting News*, July 27, 1963, 4; Jim Minter, "Southside: How Big League Baseball Came to Atlanta," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 9, 1995, 2M; "Atlanta Stadium Program: Special Dedication Edition (1965)," Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium (Subject Folder 1 of 4), Kenan Research Center.

<sup>6</sup> "Profile of Atlanta Stadium," *Braves Banner* June 1983, Atlanta Braves Folders, Cooperstown, NY, Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum Library, Archives Department; Jim Minter, "Southside: How Big League Baseball Came to Atlanta," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 9, 1995, 2M; Ivan Allen, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, 152-155; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 15-18; "Atlanta Stadium Zooms Off Ground, Heads for Reality," *The Sporting*

“I’ve got the greatest location in the world,” Allen told Bisher as a preface to his description of the prospective stadium site.<sup>7</sup> The City of Atlanta cleared Washington-Rawson during their first round of urban renewal slum clearance in the late 1950s, demolishing the homes of more than 5,500 predominately poor and working class black residents of the neighborhood. Over the first half of the twentieth century, Washington-Rawson deteriorated from a stable, middle class neighborhood into one of the city’s worst slums, populated primarily by economically imperiled black migrants from rural Georgia. Atlanta’s black leadership supported the “slum clearance” program in Washington-Rawson, believing it to be one of a number of opportunities for urban renewal projects to improve the long-term housing conditions of African Americans. For years after Washington-Rawson’s clearing, the strategically-situated location sat vacant as the city’s expressway system started to encircle it. The Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA), the agency which owned Washington-Rawson, wanted the 598 acre site to serve as a buffer between the CBD and the impoverished, predominately African American neighborhoods to its south, namely Summerhill, Mechanicsville, and Peoplestown. In their 1957 plan for Washington-Rawson, the AHA envisioned the new neighborhood as having a mix of recreational, commercial, and light-industrial uses anchored by a residential area populated by single family homes. In subsequent years, the AHA encouraged private investors to finance the construction of middle-income housing on the site, but no developers expressed interest. By the time Finley toured the site in April 1963, three interstate highways (I-20, I-75, and I-85) and a thirty-two lane interchange, the largest in the South, encircled Washington-Rawson. Amid the

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*News*, June 22, 1963, 15; Jim Minter, “The Mayor Surrenders Atlanta,” *Sports Illustrated*, July 12, 1965, 14-17; “Atlanta Stadium Program: Special Dedication Edition (1965),” Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium (Subject Folder 1 of 4), Kenan Research Center.

<sup>7</sup> Ivan Allen, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, 154.

sounds of construction and traffic, “nothing but a few trees, some stubborn shrubs, a few scattered jonquils, and a few brick foundations” remained in the former slum area.<sup>8</sup>

Allen visited the site with Bisher and Finley. As Finley looked over Washington-Rawson, Allen described the ongoing expressway development around the site. He explained that the interstates converging on the site would enable three-quarters of Georgia’s population to drive to the prospective stadium within 90 minutes. Nearly 20 million people in the Southeastern United States, none of whom lived in a city with an MLB team, resided within 300 miles of Washington-Rawson site. Allen pointed out the landmarks of downtown Atlanta and described how close each one of them was to the prospective stadium. The Five Points, the historic core of the CBD, stood less than a mile from Washington-Rawson. Finley offered effusive praise for the site, agreeing with Allen that it was the best location in the nation for a municipal stadium.<sup>9</sup>

“Mr. Mayor,” Bisher and Allen recalled Finley saying, “build a stadium here and you will have a major league team.” Finley went so far as to promise to move the A’s to Atlanta once the city completed the stadium.<sup>10</sup> Allen and Finley started discussing what dimensions the A’s owner wanted for the prospective stadium when Bisher interjected, asking if Finley could win league approval for the move. Finley said he would broach the topic with other AL owners when he returned to Kansas City. Before leaving town, Finley met with a group of “Big Mules,”

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<sup>8</sup> Larry Keating, “Atlanta: Peoplestown—Resilience and Tenacity Versus Institutional Hostility,” in *Rebuilding Urban Neighborhoods: Achievements, Opportunities, and Limits*, eds. W. Dennis Keating and Norman Krumholz, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1999), 35-39; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 60-65; Ivan Allen, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, 152-157; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 15-18, 52-3; John Logue, “Stadium by 1964 in Works Here,” *Atlanta Journal*, June 6, 1963, 1; Marion Gaines, “Stadium Near Reality after Citizens Back It,” *Atlanta Constitution*, March 7, 1964, 1,9; Jesse Outlar, “Stadium Kickoff,” *Atlanta Constitution*, June 7, 1963, 49; Andrew Weise, *Places of Their Own*, 170-171.

<sup>9</sup> Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 15-18; Ivan Allen, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, 152-159; Furman Bisher, “Allen Got the Ball Rolling Here,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 7, 2003, 2D; “Super Stadium, Super Market (Lindsey Hopkins and Associates, Promotional Pamphlet),” Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium (Subject Folder 1 of 4), Kenan Research Center; “Atlanta Stadium Program: Special Dedication Edition (1965),” Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium (Subject Folder 1 of 4), Kenan Research Center.

<sup>10</sup> Ivan Allen, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, 156.

including bank executive Mills Lane Jr., one of Allen's closest confidants and a tireless civic booster, to describe his enthusiasm for Atlanta and the potential stadium site at Washington-Rawson.<sup>11</sup>

The prospect of luring an MLB team set Allen, Lane, and the rest of the civic establishment to work on the stadium project immediately. Allen later described the effort as building a stadium "on land we didn't own, with money we didn't have, and for teams we had not signed."<sup>12</sup> After the "Big Mules" meeting with the A's suddenly bubbly owner, Lane advised Allen on how to proceed with the stadium project. Lane asked Allen to recreate the moribund Atlanta-Fulton County Recreation Authority, typically referred to as the "Stadium Authority," with Atlanta Coca-Cola bottler Arthur Montgomery as its chairman and Lane as its treasurer. Allen took Lane's guidance seriously. Lane was known to the public as an eccentric, flamboyant-dressing gadabout, but he was arguably the most influential of the "Big Mules." The Georgia General Assembly had created the Stadium Authority for Atlanta and surrounding Fulton County in 1960, endowing the public corporation with the power to facilitate the financing, planning, and construction of a municipal stadium. The legislation that created the Stadium Authority had enabled the body to issue revenue certificates to finance the building of a stadium, which would later be retired by stadium income. William Hartsfield's opposition to public involvement in the building of a stadium kept the organization dormant during the final years of his administration, but now it would open for business with a clear mandate from the civic elite.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 152-161; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 15-29; Furman Bisher, "Allen Got the Ball Rolling Here," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 7, 2003, 2D.

<sup>12</sup> As cited in Furman Bisher, "Allen Got the Ball Rolling Here," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 7, 2003, 2D.

<sup>13</sup> Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 28-29, 45-50; Jim Minter, "Southside: How Big League Baseball Came to Atlanta," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 9, 1995, 2M; Jim Minter, "The Mayor Surrenders Atlanta," *Sports Illustrated*, July 12, 1965, 14-17; "Atlanta Stadium Program: Special Dedication Edition (1965)," Atlanta-

In exchange for recreating the Stadium Authority, Lane pledged the full credit of his C&S Bank behind the project. Additionally, he agreed to invest \$600,000 of his own money in a feasibility study for building the stadium at the Washington-Rawson site. Allen agreed to Lane's terms for reactivating the nine-member Authority. He made appointments for the six city positions on the Stadium Authority based on Lane's recommendations. The Fulton County Board of Commissioners made their three appointments to the Authority based on recommendations by Lane as well. This approach was business as usual for the "Big Mules," who had shaped a governing consensus in Atlanta that blurred the lines between municipal and corporate power, all in the name of pushing the city forward.<sup>14</sup>

By June 1963, Atlanta had an activist Stadium Authority in place. Allen and Stadium Authority chairman Montgomery continued secret talks with Finley over the details of the stadium plan, negotiating everything from the prospective seating capacity to the dimensions of the field to the number of available parking spaces in the area. Finley haggled over even the most asinine aspects of the stadium's design, demanding that the ballpark be tailor-made in every respect. Montgomery and Allen were inclined to indulge Finley's impulses since he was the only baseball owner who had shown genuine interest in moving his franchise to Atlanta. As negotiations continued through the early summer of 1963, rumors that Finley would not win AL approval for the move reached the Stadium Authority. Finley had floated the idea of relocating his franchise and received uniformly negative responses from his peers. In his brief tenure as owner, Finley had already made a number of enemies. His tacky stadium gimmicks, his

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Fulton County Stadium (Subject Folder 1 of 4), Kenan Research Center; "Profile of Atlanta Stadium," *Braves Banner* June 1983, Atlanta Braves Folders, Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum Library.

<sup>14</sup> Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 27-29, 42-50; "Lawyers Title News: Atlanta Stadium (August 1966)," Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium (Subject Folder 1 of 4), Kenan Research Center; Ivan Allen, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, 157-161; Glen Gendzel, "Competitive Boosterism," 553; Jim Minter, "The Mayor Surrenders Atlanta," *Sports Illustrated*, July 12, 1965, 14-17.

tendency to quarrel with other owners, and the crass and decidedly public way in which he engaged in stadium negotiations with Kansas City put him at odds with the rest of the league. Additionally, many AL owners did not like the idea of wasting a prime market like Atlanta on a retread franchise like the A's with an off-kilter owner like Finley. Others disapproved of the prospective Atlanta move because of the additional travel expenses that trips to the Southeast would force them to incur. "The Big Mules" remained open to the idea of the A's coming to town, but, as their doubts about Finley grew, they decided to broaden their campaign to bring MLB to Atlanta.<sup>15</sup>

Ivan Allen led a booster expedition to Cleveland to meet with interested team owners during the festivities surrounding the 1963 All Star Game. Accompanying Allen on the junket were Montgomery, Lane, Bisher, *Constitution* sports editor Jesse Outlar, and Crackers owner Earl Mann. Allen advised Montgomery to offer flexible stadium leasing terms to interested teams. The mayor encouraged Montgomery to focus more on luring a franchise than driving a hard bargain in these early stages of discussion. Over the three day All-Star Break, they pitched Atlanta as a major league city and described their campaign to build a new stadium. While Finley scuttled his plans to move his club to Georgia during the All-Star Break, the Atlanta delegation held formal meetings with two other franchises during their visit. Montgomery admitted to the media that he was discussing the stadium with organizations other than Kansas City, but he refused to divulge their names. The Atlanta party met first with officials from the hometown Cleveland Indians, who had struggled for years with attendance and an unstable

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<sup>15</sup> John Logue, "Stadium by 1964 in Works Here," *Atlanta Journal*, June 6, 1963, 1; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 30-32, 46-47. Glen Gendzel, "Competitive Boosterism," 553-55; George Ross, "Atlanta Whiffs, Renews Big Time Club," *The Sporting News*, July 20, 1963, 3; Ernest Mehl, "A's Shift More Plausible," *The Sporting News*, July 27, 1963, 4; Ernest Mehl, "Kaycee City Council Trying to Hand Me Rotten Deal, Finley Claims," *The Sporting News*, January 18, 1964, 4.

ownership situation. Discussions with the Indians' owners about moving to Atlanta proved short-lived. Several other cities, including Seattle, Oakland, and Arlington, Texas, were already in negotiations with the Cleveland owners. Atlanta's leaders decided to stay out of the crowded field of cities vying for the Indians, who ended up staying put in Cleveland.<sup>16</sup>

### **“The Rover Boys”**

The Atlanta junket's most promising discussions in Cleveland took place with some of the co-owners of the Milwaukee Braves. In June 1963, Braves co-owner Delbert Coleman met with Montgomery to discuss his team's problems in Milwaukee and learn more about Atlanta's plans for a stadium. A larger party from the LaSalle Corporation, the Braves' ownership group, came to Cleveland that July to listen to Atlanta's pitch. Atlanta's representatives described their plans for the stadium, the city's prospects for continued economic growth, and concluded by offering the Braves generous stadium leasing terms, which included a flexible annual rental fee and control over parking and concession revenues. Additionally, Atlanta officials promised that any team that moved to their city would benefit from its lucrative radio and television market that spanned seven southern states, none of whom had their own major league franchise.<sup>17</sup>

Rumors of the meeting in Cleveland circulated in the press throughout the summer of 1963. The Braves owners denied the rumors vehemently, but, privately, they told the other NL owners about the lucrative deal Atlanta offered them to relocate. “I worked to convince other owners that it's not just the best thing for the Braves, but the best for the National League,”

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<sup>16</sup> Jim Minter, “Sanders, Allen Go to Bat in Cleveland,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 7, 1963, 43; Furman Bisher, “NL Club to Hear Atlanta's Pitch,” *Atlanta Journal*, July 8, 1963, 18; Furman Bisher, “The Foot is in the Door,” July 9, 1963, 14; “Atlanta Dispatches Envoy to Majors,” *Atlanta Constitution*, June 27, 1963, 1; Tim Tucker, “Q&A with Bill Bartholomay,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 12, 2006, 1D; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 54-57; Jesse Outlar, “An Official Pitch,” *Atlanta Constitution*, July 6, 1963, 24.

<sup>17</sup> Furman Bisher, “NL Club to Hear Atlanta's Pitch,” *Atlanta Journal*, July 8, 1963, 18; *A Braves New World DVD*, Dir. by William Povletich (Milwaukee: Wisconsin Historical Society, 2009); Glen Gendzel, “Competitive Boosterism,” 553-55; Tim Tucker, “Q&A with Bill Bartholomay,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 12, 2006, 1D; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 27-28, 54-57.

Braves co-owner Bill Bartholomay later said. Local support for the Milwaukee Braves had declined in recent years. In the five seasons since the Braves won the World Series in 1957, their attendance dropped every single year. The Braves continued to post winning records every season, but kept falling further out of contention for the NL pennant. In 1957, the Braves had drawn more than 2.2 million fans to Milwaukee County Stadium, setting a new NL attendance record. In 1962, the Braves finished eighth out of ten NL teams in attendance, drawing 766, 921 fans to watch a team that fell out of contention by Memorial Day. The Braves' anemic broadcasting revenue proved insufficient to make up for the team's poor gate. The franchise lost money in Milwaukee for the first time that season.<sup>18</sup>

The Milwaukee Braves' economic problems stemmed from more than their declining fortunes on the diamond. Team ownership had become decidedly stingier with their promotions. A 1961 Milwaukee County statute banning fans from carrying in their own beverages dissuaded many fans from attending. Historically, Braves fans came to games with ice chests filled with six packs of beer. Suddenly, fans were expected to purchase twelve-ounce draft beers for 30 cents from stadium vendors. Milwaukee County overturned the unpopular statute after the 1961 season, but the damage to the Stadium's reputation as a fan-friendly environment had been done. The 1961 relocation of the AL's Washington Senators to Minneapolis-St. Paul put the rechristened Minnesota Twins franchise into direct competition with the Braves for the loyalties of fans in the Upper Midwest. The Twins poached a number of the Braves' radio affiliates in Minnesota, Iowa, and northern Wisconsin, cutting the Milwaukee franchise off from this revenue stream and circumscribing the Braves' regional appeal. Many fans in the Upper Midwest

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<sup>18</sup> Glen Gendzel, "Competitive Boosterism," 539; *A Braves New World* DVD; Bill Veeck, *The Hustler's Handbook* (New York: G.P. Putnam's, 1965), 265; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 25, 144-145; "Braves Honeymoon Over at Milwaukee," *Washington Post*, February 3, 1962, C7; Bill Veeck and Ed Linn, "Another Gone with the Wind," *Sports Illustrated*, June 7, 1965, 32-54.



stopped making summer pilgrimages to Milwaukee to watch the Braves and instead made the significantly shorter drive to the Twin Cities to see an MLB game. The emergence of the Green Bay Packers as a professional football power in the early 1960s also diverted a great deal of fan and media interest away from the Braves. The opening of the Packers' summer training camp often coincided with the Braves' fading from pennant contention, making the seasonal transition to football easier for frustrated Wisconsin sports fans. Moreover, the Packers scheduled home and exhibition dates in Milwaukee every season, competing directly with the Braves for the discretionary income of Southeastern Wisconsinites.<sup>19</sup>

Longtime Braves owner Lou Perini decided to sell the franchise after the 1962 season. Unable to find a local buyer, Perini sold eighty-five percent of the team for \$6.2 million to the LaSalle Corporation, a syndicate of young Chicago corporate leaders led by thirty-four year-old insurance executive Bill Bartholomay. The Braves new ownership group consisted primarily of the sons of wealthy industrialists. The group included heirs to the Johnson's Floor Wax, Searle Pharmaceuticals, and Palmer House fortunes as well as current executives at Sara Lee and Johnson & Johnson. Delbert Coleman, founder of Seeburg Jukebox, was the only self-made millionaire among them. *Milwaukee Journal* sports editor Oliver Kuechle nicknamed them the "Rover Boys" after the series of children's books about a mischievous group of young lads. The Rover Boys started complaining about their treatment in the local press as soon as they purchased the team. Kuechle was the group's most vociferous critic. He accused them of sabotaging Milwaukee as a baseball market. The new owners disputed Kuechle's assertion,

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<sup>19</sup> Glen Gendzel, "Competitive Boosterism," 546; *A Braves New World* DVD; "The Team That Made Milwaukee Furious," *Boston Globe*, June 13, 1965, A7; Bob Wolf, "'61 Worst Nosedive Since Move in '53," *The Sporting News*, October 18, 1961, 1,2; "Braves Honeymoon Over at Milwaukee," *Washington Post*, February 3, 1962, C7; "Braves Fans Win Battle of Six Packs," *Chicago Tribune*, June 6, 1962, C2; "Brewtown Broods—as Flag Foam Fades," *The Sporting News*, June 2, 1962, 1.

pointing to a comment he made in a column two years earlier, referring to baseball as a “moribund” sport quickly losing its hold on the American public to professional football. It was hard for Wisconsin sports fans, who witnessed the simultaneous decline of the Braves and ascension of Vince Lombardi’s Green Bay Packers in the early 1960s, not to agree with Kuechle’s assessment.<sup>20</sup>

Soon after the Rover Boys purchased the Braves, they offered 115,000 shares of common stock in the team for sale to Wisconsin residents at ten dollars per share. The idea of the public buying stock in a professional sports franchise was a familiar one to Wisconsinites. Since their founding in 1923, the Green Bay Packers football team had been owned by small, local stockholders, none of whom were allowed to control more than four percent of the team’s stock. The Packers were the only non-profit and community-owned team in professional sports, an organizational model that has since been prohibited for future ownership groups by all four major professional sports leagues. On three prior occasions (1923, 1935, and 1950), the Packers held stock sales to raise funds for the operation of the franchise.<sup>21</sup> When the Rover Boys sold stock in the Braves in the early 1960s, they were not trying to expand the Packers’ community ownership model to the state’s other professional sports franchise. Primarily, the Rover Boys were interested in using the revenue generated by the stock sale to repay the millions of dollars in personal debt they collectively took on when they bought the team. To finance the purchase

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<sup>20</sup> Bill Veeck, *The Hustler’s Handbook*, 266-272; Bobby Bragan and Jeff Guin, *You Can’t Hit the Ball with the Bat on Your Shoulder: The Baseball Life and Times of Bobby Bragan* (New York: Summit Group, 1992), 273; *A Braves New World* DVD; Glen Gendzel, “Competitive Boosterism,” 539-541; “Syndicate Buys Perini’s Braves,” *Boston Globe*, November 17, 1962, 1; Bob Wolf, “Last Li’l Steamshovel Chugs Into Barn,” *The Sporting News*, December 1, 1962, 11.

<sup>21</sup> The Green Bay Packers remain the only community-owned franchise in major American professional sports. The NFL prohibits community ownership of any other franchise, but has grandfathered in the Packers’ community-based ownership arrangement. On two subsequent occasions (1997, 2011), the Packers have held additional stock sales to raise money for improvements to Lambeau Field, their home stadium. See David Maraniss, *When Pride Still Mattered: The Life of Vince Lombardi* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 192-198.

of the Braves, the Rover Boys borrowed \$3 million in the team's name from the First Wisconsin National Bank and an additional \$900,000 from the Marshall & Ilsley Bank of Milwaukee. The Braves promoted the sale of approximately one-third of the team's stock extensively in the local media, but fewer than 1,000 investors purchased a total of 13,000 shares. Few Milwaukeeans wanted to help the Chicago "carpetbaggers," as they were often referred to in the local press, pay off the debts they incurred purchasing the team. Soon thereafter, the Rover Boys began looking for a more agreeable home for their franchise.<sup>22</sup>

When rumors surfaced that the Braves were considering relocation, it was greeted locally and nationally with disbelief. Over the course of their first decade in Milwaukee, the Braves drew more fans than any other franchise in MLB. The Braves had moved to Milwaukee in 1953 after more than eighty seasons in Boston. They had spent decades as the second team in a two-team city, receiving only a fraction of the public support of the Red Sox, their AL neighbor. Between 1917 and 1946, the Boston Braves never finished higher than fourth place in the NL. Even when the Braves put together their best season in decades, winning the 1948 NL Pennant, the Red Sox outdrew them by more than 100,000 fans. By the early 1950s, Braves attendance had fallen dramatically as the team returned to its typical mediocrity. The 1952 Braves drew 281,278 fans in 77 home dates, the second worst attendance by any team since World War II. In March 1953, three weeks before the start of the season, the NL voted to give Braves owner Lou Perini the right to move his franchise to Milwaukee, the first such franchise relocation in MLB in fifty years.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *A Braves New World* DVD; Glen Gendzel, "Competitive Boosterism," 541; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 25; Bill Veeck, *The Hustler's Handbook*, 272; Donald Davidson with Jesse Outlar, *Caught Short* (New York: Scribner, 1972), 89-90.

<sup>23</sup> William Shropshire, *The Sports Franchise Game*, 28; Roger Kahn, *The Boys of Summer* (New York: Harper, 1972), 428; Glen Gendzel, "Competitive Boosterism," 535-536; Pete Van Weiren, *The Braves: An Illustrated History of America's Team* (Atlanta: Turner Publishing, 1995), 85.

Milwaukee greeted the Braves with unprecedented civic enthusiasm. More than 60,000 people welcomed the team to the city at a chilly, late winter parade.<sup>24</sup> “The Braves couldn’t spend a dime in this town or pay for a meal,” sportswriter Frank Deford said, recalling Milwaukee’s infatuation with the team during the 1950s.<sup>25</sup> The players were showered with free cars, groceries, and clothing. “Dry cleaners clamored for the honor of doing their laundry,” Braves Manager Bobby Bragan recalled.<sup>26</sup> Fans from a dozen states across the Upper Midwest and the Great Plains states filled the parking lot of the Braves’ new, \$5 million municipally financed ballpark, Milwaukee County Stadium. In their first season in Milwaukee, the Braves drew more than 1.8 million fans, a new NL attendance record. On the way to their first pennant in Milwaukee, the 1957 Braves broke their own attendance mark, drawing more than 2.2 million fans to County Stadium. Milwaukee faced the heavily-favored New York Yankees in the World Series. Before the first game, Yankees manager Casey Stengel referred to Milwaukee as “Bushville” in an off-hand comment to a reporter. Milwaukeeans embraced the patronizing moniker, filling County Stadium with “Bushville” banners during the seven game series. When the Braves clinched the deciding seventh game in the Bronx, more than 400,000 people gathered in downtown Milwaukee to celebrate the city’s first professional sports championship.<sup>27</sup>

The idea that the Braves would consider moving from Milwaukee, then the nation’s 17<sup>th</sup> largest market, to Atlanta, then the nation’s 24<sup>th</sup> largest market, surprised many of the baseball

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<sup>24</sup> “Big Milwaukee Red Carpet to Greet Braves,” *Chicago Tribune* April 5, 1953, C1; Pete Van Weiren, *The Braves: An Illustrated History of America’s Team*, 87-88; Donald Davidson with Jesse Outlar, *Caught Short*, 55-56.

<sup>25</sup> *A Braves New World* DVD.

<sup>26</sup> Bobby Bragan, *You Can’t Hit the Ball with the Bat on Your Shoulder*, 274.

<sup>27</sup> Milwaukee Braves Folders, Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum Library; Eddie Mathews Folder, Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum Library; Bob Buege, *The Milwaukee Braves: A Baseball Eulogy* (Milwaukee: Douglas American Sports Publications, 1988), 3-4, 14-22, 175-182; Glen Gendzel, “Competitive Boosterism,” 536-537; “Why Should Taxpayers Foot Bill for the Stadium?” *Boston Globe* September 30, 1963, 7; “Braves Attendance Top NL Record,” *Boston Globe*, September 21, 1953, 16; William Povletich, “When the Braves of Bushville Ruled Baseball: Celebrating Andy Pafko and the 1957 Milwaukee Braves,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* no. 90.4 (Summer 2007), 5-6.

insiders with whom the Braves' owners discussed the matter. Atlanta offered to build the Braves a brand new stadium and provide them with a generous rental agreement. Milwaukee had done the same for the Braves a decade earlier when they lured the franchise from Boston. Though their stadium was not as new and their leasing arrangement with Milwaukee County did not offer as many potential revenue streams, Milwaukee was a proven baseball market, one that had supported the Braves enthusiastically for a decade. Atlanta, by contrast, struggled to draw enough fans to support their 'AAA' minor league team. The Rover Boys won over skeptical NL owners by emphasizing the unique regional television market available to an Atlanta team. By placing a club in Atlanta, the media flagship of the Southeast, the NL would assert its television and radio preeminence in Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and the Carolinas before the AL moved teams into these growing markets.<sup>28</sup>

NL owners acceded to the Braves' desire for a freehand in negotiations with Atlanta, even though the other clubs derived no direct benefit from the Braves' potentially lucrative television contract. MLB teams did not pool their local television money. The Atlanta market provided the Braves with the opportunity to maximize their total revenues considerably. Once rumors of the Braves' move to Atlanta went public, Milwaukee boosters tried unsuccessfully to match the television dollars Atlanta offered the team. The Schlitz Brewery offered the Milwaukee Braves a lucrative three-year radio and television deal worth \$535,000 per season beginning in 1965, a significant increase over the \$400,000 they received in 1964. The Braves

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<sup>28</sup> James Quirk, "An Economic Analysis of Team Movements in Professional Sports," *Law and Contemporary Politics* 38 (Winter 1973), 53; Bill Veeck, *The Hustler's Handbook*, 280-283; Glen Gendzel, "Competitive Boosterism," 547-548; "The Team That Made Milwaukee Furious," *Boston Globe*, June 13, 1965, A7; "Milwaukee Braves Offered Fat TV and Radio Contract," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 12, 1964, 42; Bill Veeck and Ed Linn, "Another Gone with the Wind," *Sports Illustrated*, 32-54.

ownership turned down Schlitz's offer. By comparison, Atlanta's WSB had offered the Braves a two-year, \$2.5 million television contract.<sup>29</sup>

### **“Miracle in Atlanta”**

While the Braves' owners continued denying the rumored move, promising the team's return to Milwaukee for the 1964 season, Atlanta officials worked diligently to plan, finance, and prepare to break ground on their new stadium. Two of Atlanta's leading architectural firms, Finch, Alexander, Barnes, Rothschild, and Pascal (FABRAP) and Heery and Heery, collaborated to produce the Mills Lane-financed stadium feasibility study for Washington-Rawson. They recommended the construction of a concrete and steel, three-decked, multi-purpose venue, which they expected would occupy 19.2 acres of the 47-acre section of the Washington-Rawson site that was bounded by the 32-lane interchange. Rather than building a baseball specific stadium, the design team advised Atlanta to build a facility capable of accommodating baseball as well as football, since civic boosters were then in the process of pursuing an NFL franchise. Their proposed design was in keeping with virtually all of the major, municipally financed stadiums built during the 1960s and 1970s: D.C. Stadium (later Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Stadium) in Washington (1961); Shea Stadium in New York (1964); The Oakland Coliseum (1966); Busch Stadium in St. Louis (1966); Jack Murphy Stadium in San Diego (1967); Riverfront Stadium in Cincinnati (1970); Three Rivers Stadium in Pittsburgh (1970); and Veterans Stadium in Philadelphia (1971). Contemporary critics initiated a long tradition of assailing the aesthetics of multi-purpose stadiums for their cookie-cutter “flying saucer” structural designs, their insularity from the surrounding urban landscape or placement in a greenfield far from the city, and the lack

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<sup>29</sup> Bill Veeck, *The Hustler's Handbook*, 280-283 “Milwaukee Braves Offered Fat TV and Radio Contract,” *Atlanta Constitution*, September 12, 1964, 42; Bill Veeck and Ed Linn, “Another Gone with the Wind,” *Sports Illustrated*, 32-54; James Quirk, “An Economic Analysis of Team Movements in Professional Sports,” 53.

of intimacy afforded spectators as a result of their designers' efforts to fit two profoundly different playing fields into the same space. For municipalities that wanted a stadium, the multi-purpose venue proved an economically and spatially convenient development model.<sup>30</sup>

In September 1963, the Stadium Authority, in consultation with the Braves, agreed to the proposed stadium design. The final design expanded the construction site to 62 acres, adding land across the Southeast Expressway for additional parking spaces. The Stadium Authority then began negotiations with the AHA to purchase the 62 acre section of the Washington-Rawson urban renewal site. AHA officials feared that the construction of a stadium on Washington-Rawson would create traffic problems in the surrounding neighborhoods. They expressed concerns that stadium construction would further delay fulfillment of the Authority's nearly decade-old promises to the area's former residents to build new, affordable housing on the site. Mayor Allen intervened, assuaging the concerns of the AHA by promising (and later fulfilling) city participation in the construction of a thousand new, mixed-income housing units on the western-side of Washington-Rawson once the municipality completed the stadium. The Stadium Authority and the AHA agreed to a price of \$1.8 million for the 62-acre site, pending a lease agreement between the City of Atlanta and an MLB team to play at the prospective stadium.<sup>31</sup>

On March 5<sup>th</sup>, 1964, Ivan Allen announced he had made a "verbal contract" with an unnamed MLB team to play in Atlanta the following spring. Allen's proclamation was the product of a winter's worth of secret negotiations with the Braves ownership. The mayor

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<sup>30</sup> John Logue, "Plans Told for Stadium," *Atlanta Journal*, August 6, 1963, 14; "Profile of Atlanta Stadium," *Braves Banner* June 1983, Atlanta Braves Folders, Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum Library; Ivan Allen, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, 160-161; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 48-50, 165-167; "Atlanta Stadium Zooms Off Ground, Heads for Reality," *The Sporting News*, June 22, 1963, 15; John Logue, "Dome Included in Stadium Plan," *Atlanta Journal*, October, 22, 1963, 1; "Atlanta Falcons 1974 Fact Book," Stephen Prothero Papers, MS 888, Box 2, Folder 11, Kenan Research Center.

<sup>31</sup> Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 60-65; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 73-76; Larry Keating, "Atlanta: Peoplestown—Resilience and Tenacity Versus Institutional Hostility," 35-39; Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 153-155; John Logue, "Stadium by 1964 in the Works Here," *Atlanta Journal*, June 6, 1963, 1.

announced that he would seek approval from the Board of Alderman's finance committee for the purchase of the proposed stadium site before seeking the approval of the entire Board of Alderman for the comprehensive stadium plan. A public hearing on the stadium issue drew hundreds of Atlantans to City Hall. Dozens of civic leaders and private citizens voiced unequivocal support for the plan, leading Allen to say that the stadium hearings displayed the "greatest unanimity I've ever seen on any issue." Citizens representing a diverse group of political, community, and business groups as well as Atlanta residents simply speaking for themselves, testified on behalf of the plan.<sup>32</sup>

"The Stadium doesn't just represent the city or even the state," former Atlanta Cracker pitcher Bruce Gruber told the assembled Alderman, "it represents the whole Southeast. Atlanta has efficiency in every area except sports. Now is the opportunity to bring that up to date."<sup>33</sup> Opie Shelton, Allen's successor as Atlanta Chamber President, echoed Gruber's sentiments, speaking of Atlanta's "opportunity to move from the outhouse to the penthouse in sports. Right now, Atlanta is major league in everything from zoos to auditoriums and bush league in sports."<sup>34</sup> Ivan Allen, during the hearing process, expressed the sentiment that the building of a municipal stadium in Atlanta was a collective responsibility for Atlanta, Fulton County, and the State of Georgia with mutual benefits for all parties. "The way I see it," Allen said, "this shouldn't be the burden of Atlanta alone, but a joint undertaking of the city, the county, and the state, who would participate in contributing to a fund from their current revenue to form a base

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<sup>32</sup> Marion Gaines, "Major League Team Accepts 15 Year Lease; Stadium Starts in Week," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 9, 1964, 1, 16; Furman Bisher, "Atlanta Votes Speedy Okay on Park," *The Sporting News*, March 21, 1964, 4; Raleigh Bryans, "Two Bills Propose Stadium Financing," *Atlanta Journal*, March 4, 1964, 1; Raleigh Bryans, "Alderman Caught in Crush of Atlanta Stadium," *Atlanta Journal*, March 7, 1964, 4; Furman Bisher, "Not a Hand Went Up," *Atlanta Journal*, March 8, 1964, 16; Furman Bisher, "Atlanta Launches Crash Program: Stadium by '65," *The Sporting News*, April 18, 1964, 34; Marion Gaines, "Stadium Nears Reality After Citizens Back It," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 7, 1964, 1,9; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 73-76.

<sup>33</sup> Lee Walburn, "Alderman Caught in Crush of Atlanta Stadium," *Atlanta Journal*, March 7, 1964, 4.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*



for the project.”<sup>35</sup> During the March 1964 approval process for the stadium, Governor Carl Sanders offered the state’s assistance in expediting road construction projects to accommodate the stadium. He instructed the highway department to make the completion of access roads from I-20, I-75, and I-85 to the stadium their top priority, once construction commenced on the facility.<sup>36</sup>

Atlanta’s black leadership did not express any public opposition to the proposed use of Washington-Rawson for the new stadium, despite the project’s tangible impact on the economic and domestic lives of thousands of African Americans. Atlanta’s Washington-Rawson slum clearance program of the late 1950s had displaced thousands of Black Atlantans living just south of Atlanta’s CBD on valuable property in close proximity to countless employment opportunities. Moreover, the stadium plan prioritized a civic prestige project over the housing needs of thousands of predominately Black Atlantans, despite the mayor’s campaign promise to end the housing crisis that impacted this core group in his electoral base. Rather than opposing this appropriation of public land originally intended for affordable housing, black political organizations focused instead on ensuring non-discriminatory hiring practices by stadium contractors and that African Americans received an adequate share of the jobs associated with building and maintaining the facility. During the stadium approval process, Atlanta’s black leadership prioritized the access of their constituents to jobs associated with the stadium over the impact that stadium construction had on the housing needs of many black residents.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 50.

<sup>36</sup> Furman Bisher, “A Happy Probability,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 7, 1963, 43; James Cook, *Carl Sanders: Spokesman of the New South* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993), 270-1.

<sup>37</sup> Stanley Scott, “Alderman Reject Non-Racial Clause for Atlanta Stadium,” *Atlanta Daily World*, April 14, 1964, 1; Stanley Scott, “Stadium Plan is Sent to Finance Committee,” *Atlanta Daily World*, April 7, 1964, 1,7.

The approach of the city's black leadership to the stadium issue demonstrated their commitment to the "Atlanta Way." Black leaders displayed a consistent willingness during the Hartsfield-Allen era to make deals on issues of civic controversy with the white leadership so long as their negotiated settlements provided tangible economic benefits to the city's African American community. Specifically, black leaders' endorsement of the stadium proposal was the product of years of hard work by Ivan Allen and his backers to win African American support for the city's urban renewal projects, dating back to Allen's tenure with the Atlanta Chamber. Allen described the redevelopment of the neighborhoods in close proximity to the CBD as an economic partnership between the city's white leadership and its black entrepreneurial class. He built support for urban renewal among the black business communities south and east of downtown, arguing that the large-scale projects planned for the areas, such as the "auditorium-coliseum" and the stadium, would provide an engine for economic development in the surrounding neighborhoods.<sup>38</sup> "The African American community saw and appreciated that it was involved in a major addition to the city," Sam Massell, President of the Atlanta Board of Alderman at the time of the stadium vote recalled, "with the job opportunities and economic impact that was predicted [for the stadium], I think there was a reasonable willingness to accept some changes that would be against the programs of which they were proponents. I think it was a reasonable trade out."<sup>39</sup> Partnering with the white leadership on the stadium issue further cemented the black leadership's position in the city's governing coalition. Supporting the stadium plan made the black leadership co-trustees in the creation of a major civic institution and provided many black Atlantans in the surrounding neighborhoods with access to economic

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<sup>38</sup> Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 60-65; Reece Cleghorn, "Allen of Atlanta Collides with Black Power and White Racism," *New York Times*, October 16, 1966, 32-33, 134-140.

<sup>39</sup> Sam Massell, interview by the author, July 2, 2013, 42, transcript.

opportunities stemming from the construction of the stadium. Rather than holding out for the perfect, Atlanta's black leaders grasped successfully for the possible.

Representatives of the city's most prominent black political organizations expressed unanimous support for the stadium project at the Board of Alderman's public hearing on the matter. Q.V. Williamson of the Atlanta Negro Voters League challenged the mayor and the Alderman to live up to their campaign promises and make sure that stadium construction commenced immediately. The Urban League endorsed the stadium building plan and made non-specific recommendations that housing be built on the remaining acreage of Washington-Rawson, pressing the mayor gently to live up to the promises he made to the AHA when he negotiated a purchase price for the land.<sup>40</sup> Rev. Samuel Williams and Clarence D. Coleman made a joint statement in favor of the stadium plan on behalf of the Atlanta Summit Leadership Conference (ASLC), a coalition of nine civil rights groups including the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Atlanta branch of the NAACP, and Operation Breadbasket. "The Negro community strongly supports the stadium project, providing it is administered so as to protect the interests and rights of all Atlanta and Fulton County citizens."<sup>41</sup> Expressing the consensus of their constituent organizations, the representatives of the ASLC asked for a provision in the contract forbidding discrimination by stadium contractors. They also lobbied for a provision in the stadium lease banning discriminatory hiring practices by future vendors and concessioners. The ASLC conceived of the proposed amendments as part of their broader effort to ensure the de facto desegregation of all public accommodations in the city.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Lee Walburn, "Alderman Caught in Crush of Atlanta Stadium," *Atlanta Journal*, March 7, 1964, 4; Stanley Scott, "Alderman Reject Non-Racial Clause for Atlanta Stadium," *Atlanta Daily World*, April 14, 1964, 1; Stanley Scott, "Stadium Plan is Sent to Finance Committee," *Atlanta Daily World*, April 7, 1964, 1,7; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 60-65; Marion Gaines, "Stadium Near Reality After Citizens Back It," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 7, 1964, 1,9.

<sup>41</sup> Stanley Scott, "Alderman Reject Non-Racial Clause for Atlanta Stadium," *Atlanta Daily World*, April 14, 1964, 1.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

The Board of Alderman rejected 10-4 an amendment aimed at banning racially discriminatory hiring practices by stadium contractors. Despite the widespread support by black political organizations for the amendment, a clear majority of alderman considered the amendment unnecessary, demonstrating a chasm between the white and black leadership's view of the issue. Allen remained silent on the amendment, despite his campaign promise to support non-discrimination clauses in city contracts. White leaders who spoke publicly against the measure, in particular Stadium Authority chairman Arthur Montgomery, displayed a great deal of indignity at the suggestion that such an amendment was needed in progressive Atlanta. Montgomery argued that such legislation was unnecessary since all parties to the project already opposed racial discrimination. Moreover, he stated, all of MLB was desegregated, just like Atlanta. Atlanta's leadership had worked out the contours of the city's desegregation through evolution, not through legal mandates of the kind presented in the amendment. Throughout Atlanta's post-World War II history as the "City Too Busy to Hate," white civic leaders often responded similarly when their priorities or approach to racially sensitive matters of public policy were questioned. Over the course of the 1960s, virtually every major policy issue in Atlanta seemed to manifest itself as an issue steeped in racial meaning. As Atlanta became a majority-black city, the city's white leaders could no longer manage major public decisions from above as they did, arguably for the last time, on the stadium question. By the end of the 1960s, the "Big Mules" lacked the electoral clout to frame such issues on behalf of the city's politically ascendant African American majority. Black Atlantans came increasingly to see their interests as not represented by a civic leadership class that came to expect their support.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Marion Gaines, "City Panel Okays Stadium Financing," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 10, 1964, 1; Marion Gaines, "Big Leaguers Accept Lease," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 9, 1964, 16; Stanley Scott, "Alderman Reject Non-Racial Clause for Atlanta Stadium," *Atlanta Daily World*, April 14, 1964, 1; Stanley Scott, "Stadium Plan is Sent to Finance Committee," *Atlanta Daily World*, April 7, 1964, 1,7.

The municipal bodies that determined the fate of the stadium plan displayed the same unanimity of opinion as expressed by the public during the project's brief comment period. Less than a month after Allen announced the "verbal contract" he made with an unnamed franchise, the Atlanta-Fulton County Recreation Authority awarded the stadium contract to Thompson & Street for approximately \$14 million, pending the approval of the stadium funding plan by the Atlanta Board of Alderman's finance committee and, subsequently, the entire Board. The \$14 million for construction made up the vast majority of the Stadium Authority's proposed \$18 million budget. An additional \$1.8 million went to the AHA for the acquisition of the Washington-Rawson site. The Stadium Authority estimated \$893,000 in engineering and architectural fees for the project plus an additional \$1.32 million in capitalized interest and reserves. Once approved, the Stadium Authority would put \$18 million in 30-year municipal bonds up for sale with an estimated \$10-13 million in interest payments over the life of the revenue bond. The Stadium Authority estimated that annual repayments of the bond would amount to \$1.08 million. An undetermined portion of the annual repayment money would come from their tenants' gross revenues. Two-thirds of the remaining annual bill would be paid by the City of Atlanta while the remaining third would be paid by Fulton County.<sup>44</sup>

The wait for legislative approval proved short lived. The Fulton County Board of Commissioners endorsed the stadium plan unanimously. In their 1964 session, the Georgia General Assembly amended the Stadium Authority Bill to allow Fulton County to finance their portion of the stadium with money from a previously approved county parks improvement tax.

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<sup>44</sup> Marion Gaines, "Stadium a Good Buy, Mayor Says," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 21, 1964, 3; Sally Rugaber, "Ground Breaking Set," *Atlanta Journal*, April 13, 1964, 2; Marion Gaines, "City Panel Okays Stadium Financing," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 10, 1964, 1; Marion Gaines, "Big Leaguers Accept Lease," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 9, 1964, 16; Raleigh Bryans, "Stadium Financing Due Easy Approval," *Atlanta Journal*, April 9, 1964, 1, 66.

In early April, the Board of Alderman's finance committee offered its unanimous endorsement of the Washington-Rawson site and the proposed \$18 million stadium financing package, referring the bill to the entire Board of Alderman, which approved the plan 13-1. Ed Gilliam, a vocal critic of the administration, cast the only 'no' vote. Gilliam did not oppose the building of a stadium, but opposed the proposed financing mechanism and wanted a public referendum to decide the issue. "We're pledging the city and the county's money for 30 years for a total debt of about \$31.5 million," Gilliam said before the vote, reminding the Alderman of the interest payments the city would incur as a result of the project. Within a decade of the stadium's construction, many critics within the city's political leadership class and press corps had come around to Gilliam's view. They regarded the annual debt payments required of the city and the county for Atlanta Stadium as a burden on the community.<sup>45</sup>

On April 15, 1964, Atlanta broke ground on their new stadium. Allen, Sanders, and Montgomery plunged their ceremonial golden shovels into the ground of Washington-Rawson while a bulldozer idled behind them, ready to begin the real work of moving the earth. While a parade of construction machines maneuvered into position for their first day of stadium building, the thousand people who gathered for the ceremony, "Big Mules" in now dust-covered tailored suits, baseball fans who skipped work to watch, and curious children from the surrounding neighborhoods, enjoyed a lunch of hot dogs and Coca-Cola provided by Montgomery. The contractors didn't have time to wait for lunch to start working. Thompson & Street agreed to a provision penalizing them \$3,000 for every day over twelve months it took them to complete the stadium. Atlanta needed the facility ready for the start of the 1965 season for their yet-unnamed

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<sup>45</sup> Raleigh Bryans, "Two Bills Propose Stadium Financing," *Atlanta Journal*, March 4, 1964, 1; Sally Rugaber, "Ground Breaking Set on New City Stadium," *Atlanta Journal*, April 13, 1964, 2; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 73-76; Marion Gaines, "Stadium Near Reality after Citizens Back It," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 7, 1964, 1, 9.

new baseball franchise. Most similar stadium projects took at least two years from ground breaking to grand opening. Atlanta offered the construction firm a \$600,000 premium if they finished the stadium in less than one year. Thompson & Street finished the stadium in a mere 51 weeks.<sup>46</sup>

Furman Bisher dubbed the remarkable speed with which the city planned, approved, and built the stadium the “Miracle in Atlanta,” a phrase he later appropriated for the title of a book on the subject. The construction of municipally-owned stadiums in Northeastern and Midwestern cities like New York and St. Louis during the 1960s was delayed for years by political and jurisdictional fights over prospective stadium sites, civil rights demonstrations protesting the racial makeup of construction workforces, and ongoing labor disputes. Atlanta had avoided all of this. All bodies relevant to the construction of Atlanta Stadium displayed a single-mindedness in finishing the project on time.<sup>47</sup> At the time, Atlanta Stadium, as city officials decided to name the municipally-owned park, was the second largest construction project in the history of the city behind the Grady Memorial Hospital, which opened in 1959.<sup>48</sup> “Sitting as it did beside a hundred-acre expressway interchange where three major interstate highways connect, it’s baby blue seats and gleaming light towers glistening in the sun, the Stadium was visible and literal

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<sup>46</sup> *Braves Banner* June 1983, Atlanta Braves Folders, Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum Library; “Atlanta Stadium Program: Special Dedication Edition (1965),” Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium (Subject Folder 1 of 4), Kenan Research Center; Sally Rugaber, “Empty Steps Lead to Stadium,” *Atlanta Journal*, April 16, 1964, 34; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 42-43; Furman Bisher, “Atlanta Launches Crash Program,” *The Sporting News*, April 18, 1964, 34; Sally Rugaber, “Ground Breaking Set,” *Atlanta Journal*, April 13, 1964, 2; Sally Rugaber, “Ground Broken for Stadium Here,” *Atlanta Journal*, April 15, 1964, 1; Ivan Allen, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, 160-1; Bill Schemmel, “Big League Ball Believed Delayed by Stadium Bids,” *Atlanta Constitution*, April 1, 1964, 1.

<sup>47</sup> “Lawyers Title News: Atlanta Stadium (August 1966),” Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium (Subject Folder 1 of 4), Kenan Research Center; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 2-3; Jim Minter, “The Mayor Surrenders Atlanta,” *Sports Illustrated*, July 12, 1965, 14-17; “Atlanta Falcons 1972 Fact Book,” Stephen Prothero Papers, MS 888, Box 2, Folder 10, Kenan Research Center.

<sup>48</sup> Marion Gaines, “City Panel Okays Stadium Financing,” *Atlanta Constitution*, April 10, 1964, 1; Ivan Allen, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, 160-1; “Atlanta Falcons 1972 Fact Book,” Stephen Prothero Papers, MS 888, Box 2, Folder 10, Kenan Research Center; “Atlanta Stadium Program: Special Dedication Edition (1965),” Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium (Subject Folder 1 of 4), Kenan Research Center.

proof that Atlanta was a big league city,” Allen wrote of the stadium’s completion years later in his memoir, reverentially personifying the structure with language that sounded more like an Italian Futurist manifesto than the words of a big city mayor.<sup>49</sup>

### **Lame Ducks**

Braves officials denied reports of the Atlanta move until the *Sporting News* published an article in July 1964 confirming that the “Rover Boys” had made an agreement with Allen and Montgomery back in March to play at the new stadium in 1965. A month before the *Sporting News* broke the story, Milwaukee County offered to renegotiate their stadium lease with the Braves. They offered to charge the Braves only one dollar in rent for their first million in attendance each season. They offered the Braves a larger portion of concession revenue and promised to reduce maintenance fees. The Rover Boys said they had no problem with the existing lease, which ran through 1965. The Braves stopped denying the move outright after the story went public. Instead, they stated that they did not buy the team simply to move it, but the declining support the Braves received in Milwaukee made it difficult for the franchise to continue operating in the city.<sup>50</sup>

At the end of the 1964 season, the Braves announced they were holding a Board of Directors meeting, fittingly, in Chicago to discuss the future of the franchise. Up until a week before the meeting, Braves owners reiterated that they had not purchased the team with plans to move them to another city. On October 21, 1964, the Braves Board of Directors voted 12-6 to relocate the franchise to Atlanta. The “Rover Boys” voted as a bloc in favor of the move. The

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<sup>49</sup> Ivan Allen, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, 152-153.

<sup>50</sup> C.C. Johnson Spink, “Braves’ Shift Needs Only Okay by N.L.,” *The Sporting News*, July 11, 1964, 1; John Logue, “Braves Won’t Deny Move Here,” *Atlanta Journal*, July 3, 1964, 12; Bill Veeck and Ed Linn, “Another Gone with the Wind,” *Sports Illustrated*, June 7, 1965, 32-54; Huston Horn, “Bravura Battle for the Braves,” *Sports Illustrated*, November 2, 1964, 32-33; Furman Bisher, “Everybody Talks Except the Braves,” *Atlanta Journal*, July 8, 1964, 30; Jesse Outlar, “Braves Play Silent Game,” *Atlanta Constitution*, August 11, 1964, 29.



“no” votes all came from minor Wisconsin-based stockholders. The Braves’ majority owners orchestrated the events leading up to the vote to ensure a smooth transition out of Milwaukee. Milwaukee County, though, made sure that the Braves’ planned exit did not go as intended. A week before the Board of Directors meeting, Bartholomay met with Allen and Montgomery in Atlanta to finalize a 25-year contract for use of the new stadium. Braves officials consulted with the other nine NL clubs to ensure their unanimous support for the move. The NL owners assembled in New York the day after the Braves’ vote to decide whether or not to approve the franchise’s relocation to Atlanta. Before the Braves could make their official relocation request, Wisconsin Circuit Court Judge Ronald Dreschler issued an injunction on behalf of the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors against the team moving to Atlanta for the 1965 season. The Braves’ lease required them to play one more season at Milwaukee County Stadium. Rather than fight the injunction, the NL voted unanimously in early November 1964 to require the Braves to play a lame duck season in Milwaukee in 1965 while granting them permission to move to Atlanta in 1966.<sup>51</sup>

Once the NL signed off on the Braves’ relocation to Atlanta, the “Rover Boys” went ahead and signed a 25-year lease for the team at Atlanta Stadium beginning in 1966. The contract contained provisions allowing for the lease to begin in 1965 if the Braves could find a way to negotiate their way out of Milwaukee over the off-season. The Braves’ lease with the Stadium Authority provided them with numerous potential revenue streams in return for a small percentage of their total gate. The Braves had the right to rent out Atlanta Stadium for any event

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<sup>51</sup> Bob Buege, *The Milwaukee Braves*, 369-370; Glen Gendzel, “Competitive Boosterism,” 543; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 91-96, 102-105; Jack Williams, “Braves’ Move Here Gets OK Wednesday,” *Atlanta Constitution*, October 20, 1964, 1, 32; Marion Gaines, “Milwaukee Braves Make it Official as Directors Vote to Move Here,” *Atlanta Constitution*, October 22, 1964, 1, 8; Jack Nelson and Marion Gaines, “Braves Sign Contract to Play Here 25 Years,” *Atlanta Constitution*, November 11, 1964, 1, 16; “Braves Will Ask League Today for Permission to Shift to Atlanta,” *New York Times*, October 22, 1964, 28; Marion Gaines, “League Delays Transfer of Braves Until Court Removes Injunction,” *Atlanta Constitution*, October 23, 1964, 1.

other than a professional football game. The city retained the right to make a lease with either an NFL or an AFL franchise. The Stadium Authority granted the Braves control over the revenues of 6,000 of the 8,000 parking spaces surrounding the stadium. The Braves agreed to pay the Stadium Authority a fixed 7.5 percent of gross proceeds per event date, baseball or otherwise. The 7.5 percent of gross proceeds constituted the Braves' entire responsibility toward paying off the stadium bonds. The city and county guaranteed the remainder of the \$1.08 million needed annually to pay off the 30-year, \$18 million revenue loan floated by the Stadium Authority. The Braves received an additional \$500,000 for relocation costs. The Stadium Authority agreed to pay \$280,000 for minor league territorial rights to Atlanta for the 1965 season so that the 'AAA' Crackers would be representing the Braves during the franchise's lame duck year.<sup>52</sup>

Never before had a relocating Major League franchise agreed to such generous, multi-faceted leasing terms with public officials in their new home city. Decades later, Arthur Montgomery defended the liberal leasing terms he offered the Braves. He acknowledged that "the Braves lease has been called a 'sweetheart deal,'" but, he said, demonstrating the zeal with which Atlanta pursued the Braves franchise, "we had to entice them into coming here."<sup>53</sup> Future Atlanta mayors proved unwilling to offer professional sports franchises such generous leasing terms.<sup>54</sup>

The prospect of a lame duck 1965 season at their brand new municipal stadium tempered the enthusiasm of Atlantans' reaction to the news of the Braves' relocation. Atlanta officialdom assured the public that the city would negotiate a quick resolution to the legal

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<sup>52</sup> Jack Nelson and Marion Gaines, "Braves Sign Contract to Play Here 25 Years," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 11, 1964, 1, 16; Furman Bisher, "Braves Slated to Sign 25-Year Atlanta Lease," *Atlanta Journal*, November 9, 1964, 1, 10; Jim Minter, "A Happy Homecoming for the Braves," *Atlanta Journal*, October 22, 1964, 34.

<sup>53</sup> Bud Shaw, "The Dinosaur on Capitol Avenue," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 26, 1984, 1C.

<sup>54</sup> Alex Coffin, "Coliseum Deal's 'Pluses' Outlined," *Atlanta Constitution*, December 15, 1970, 2; "Omni Souvenir Dedication Book," Omni (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center.

impasse. The Stadium Authority offered Milwaukee County a \$500,000 cash settlement to buy out the final year of the Braves' stadium contract, more than twice the amount of revenue the club produced for the County during the 1964 season. The Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors rejected the offer 24-0. Milwaukeeans were happy to have the Braves sweat out a lame duck year in town. "Make them conform to the contract," said Milwaukee Mayor Frank Zeidler, supporting Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors chairman Eugene Grobchmidt's hard-line approach to the Braves' lease, "keep them at arms' length. They may learn something about the meaning of responsibility."<sup>55</sup>

"It was hard for us to tell the good guys from the bad guys," Hank Aaron, the Braves' All-Star right fielder said, describing the uncomfortable position the Braves players were in throughout the 1965 season in Milwaukee. "Milwaukee was trying to keep us around, but the people there wanted nothing to do with us."<sup>56</sup> By and large, Milwaukee fans boycotted the lame duck Braves. Local bars and restaurants stopped serving Coca-Cola in protest of Atlanta. Pranksters terrorized the Braves' executives, egging their homes, setting off firecrackers on their lawns, and harassing their children. Attendance at Milwaukee County Stadium plummeted to a new season low of 550,584 for an average of 7,610 per game, less than a quarter of the fans they drew seven seasons earlier.<sup>57</sup> The few fans who showed up "made up for their small numbers with plenty of invective," Braves manager Bobby Bragan wrote of the 1965 season.<sup>58</sup> The

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<sup>55</sup> Glen Gendzel, "Competitive Boosterism," 542-543; "Milwaukee Fans React: Let B's Suffer," *Boston Globe*, June 6, 1965, 57; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 152-154; Jack Williams, "Allen Confab Gets Nowhere," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 16, 1964, 11; Bill Blodgett, "Allen Heads to Chicago for Grobschmidt Talk," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 14, 1964, 11.

<sup>56</sup> Hank Aaron with Lonnie Wheeler, *I Had a Hammer: The Hank Aaron Story* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 174.

<sup>57</sup> Bob Buege, *The Milwaukee Braves*, 397; Bobby Bragan, *You Can't Hit the Ball with the Bat on Your Shoulder*, 291-311; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 77-82, 159-164; William Leggett, "Atlanta You Can Have the Rest, Leave Us Eddie Mathews Our Hero," *Sports Illustrated*, April 26, 1965, Accessed online November 12, 2012: <http://www.si.com/vault/1965/04/26/608987/atlanta-you-can-have-the-rest-leave-us-eddie>.

<sup>58</sup> Bobby Bragan, *You Can't Hit the Ball with the Bat on Your Shoulder*, 305.

Braves lost more than \$1.5 million during their lame duck season in Milwaukee. Coca-Cola softened the financial blow by secretly advancing the franchise money against their future television contract, enabling them to operate in Milwaukee that season without taking on any new loans. Atlanta newspapers highlighted the Milwaukee Braves' poor attendance, taking particular glee in the April and May evenings when fewer than a thousand fans attended games at Milwaukee County Stadium. Through their first twenty-eight home dates, the 1965 Braves drew 164,000 fans in Milwaukee. In the Braves' first five exhibition dates held at Atlanta Stadium, they drew 168,000 fans.<sup>59</sup>

Despite their lack of local support, the Braves fielded a strong team in 1965, one that remained firmly in the pennant race until the final weeks of the season. As late as August 20<sup>th</sup>, the Braves were in first place in the National League before fading to fifth place in September. When the team started to struggle after the All-Star Break, Grobbschmidt implied that the team was tanking to avoid playing a World Series in Milwaukee, a statement that drew broad derision in both Wisconsin and Georgia. Once the court injunction binding the Braves to Milwaukee ended at the conclusion of the 1965 season, the Braves relocated their team to Atlanta, almost a year after the team moved its administration to the Peach State. A federal judge in Houston empowered the Braves to relocate immediately after the season, providing the Stadium Authority with an injunction that required the team to uphold its new lease in Atlanta the following spring.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Bill Veeck and Ed Linn, "Another Gone with the Wind," *Sports Illustrated*, June 7, 1965, 38; "Braves Take Atlanta Tag," *Chicago Tribune*, August 10, 1965, C1; "Braves Boom...But Gate is Poorest Ever," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 28, 1965, 35; "Braves High, Aaron Rips 2; But Crowd Low: 913 Paid," *Atlanta Constitution* May 5, 1965, 43; "B's Acquire Worst Image of All Clubs," *Boston Globe*, June 23, 1965, 43.

<sup>60</sup> Hank Aaron, *I Had a Hammer*, 175; Furman Bisher, Miracle in Atlanta, 159-164; "Bragan Replies to Grobbschmidt Blast at Braves," *The Sporting News*, July 24, 1965, 7; "Bragan Blasts Fans," *Atlanta Journal*, June 13, 1965, 53; "US Judge Orders Braves Here in '66," *Atlanta Journal*, February 24, 1966, 1,4.

The Stadium Authority filled the facility's calendar as best they could during the lame duck season. The Braves worked out a one-year lease for the Crackers, their new 'AAA' International League affiliate, at Atlanta Stadium. The Atlanta Crackers drew sparse crowds to the brand new stadium all summer, never selling more than seven thousand tickets to a single home game. Locals interested in professional baseball were more likely to follow the 55 radio and 18 television broadcasts of the Milwaukee Braves carried that season by WSB than to support the minor league team playing in their new stadium. Atlanta officials predicted that between 300,000 and 400,000 spectators would attend Crackers games in 1965. In 74 home dates, the Crackers drew well under 200,000 fans for the entire season, fewer people than attended the Braves' seven exhibition dates at the stadium that season. The Braves' exhibition games, which were scattered throughout the season, drew more than 211,000 spectators. Atlanta Stadium hosted a pair of NFL preseason games in August 1965 that drew a combined 86,000 fans. Both games featured the lowly Pittsburgh Steelers against teams with high-profile NFL quarterbacks. In the first game, Pittsburgh played against the Minnesota Vikings, who featured former University of Georgia star quarterback Fran Tarkenton. In the second game, the Steelers played against the Baltimore Colts and Johnny Unitas, the league's most popular player.<sup>61</sup>

### **“I Hope and Pray We Don't Go”**

Braves players reacted to the news of the move in very different ways, fostering divisions in a locker room already on edge from the challenges of the lame duck season. Older players like future Hall of Famers Eddie Mathews and Warren Spahn opposed the move. Their tenures

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<sup>61</sup> Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 173; Jesse Outlar, “Atlanta Hosts Braves, Stars?” *Atlanta Constitution*, December 2, 1964, 33; “Crax Draw Top Gate—6959,” *The Sporting News*, July 24, 1965, 42; “Tenth of a Million Fans See Braves Add Stripes on Tigers,” *Atlanta Journal*, April 12, 1965, 14; Jack Williams, “Tarkenton's Raiders Ramble Early, Hold Steelers 31-21,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, August 15, 1965, 55; Jesse Outlar, “Johnny U Spells SRO,” *Atlanta Constitution*, August 26, 1965, 49.

with the Braves dated back to the team's glory years of the 1950s. They had settled their families in Milwaukee and established deep ties with the community. Native white Southerners, including pitcher Billy O'Dell, shortstop Woody Woodward, and manager Bobby Bragan, expressed excitement about returning to their home region.<sup>62</sup> Younger players tended to support the move as well. Many of them looked forward to the opportunity to play in a larger television market in a vibrant, growing city. "I'm ready for Peachtree," Joe Torre, the Braves' twenty-four year-old catcher, told reporters soon after news of the team's departure went public. "I shed no tears about leaving Milwaukee," Torre wrote in his memoir, "I had great memories in Milwaukee...but I liked the idea of going to a more exciting city."<sup>63</sup>

Two of the Braves' African American players expressed a great deal of apprehension about the team's relocation to the South. Lee Maye and Hank Aaron, both of whom were Alabama-natives, made statements about the possibility of playing in the South that received extensive media coverage. Maye expressed the strongest reservations about playing in Atlanta. Maye was a veteran and an above-average Major League outfielder, but not a star like the future all-time home-run king Aaron. "I hope and pray we don't go," Maye told reporters in October 1964 after the Braves' owners voted to relocate the franchise. "I am positive we will face discrimination and I have no intention of moving my wife down to Atlanta. Negroes face discrimination in Atlanta and there is no way it's going to stop overnight because the Braves move there."<sup>64</sup> Maye never had to make the move from Milwaukee to Atlanta. The Braves traded Maye early in the 1965 season to Houston, a far less progressive Southern city than

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<sup>62</sup> Jim Minter, "A Happy Homecoming for the Braves," *Atlanta Journal*, October 22, 1964, 34; Bobby Bragan, *You Can't Hit the Ball with the Bat on Your Shoulder*, 291-311.

<sup>63</sup> James Enright, "Players All Packed and Ready to Hop First Plane for Atlanta," *The Sporting News*, July 18, 1964, 10; Joe Torre, *Chasing the Dream: My Lifelong Journey to the World Series* (New York: Bantam, 1998), 96.

<sup>64</sup> "Maye Fears Negro Players Will face Jim Crow in Atlanta," *Chicago Defender*, October 22, 1964, 38; "Dixie Bias The Real Issue in Braves' Atlanta Move," *Chicago Defender*, July 23, 1964, 38;

Atlanta, in exchange for infielder Jim Beauchamp and veteran starting pitcher Ken Johnson. It is unclear whether or not the trade was motivated in part by Maye's statements the previous fall.<sup>65</sup>

While a player of Lee Maye's caliber could be dealt for comparable talent, Atlanta and the Braves regarded it as imperative that a player of Aaron's ability and stature embrace the move, both as a matter of public relations and ensuring the team's on-the-field stability. "I lived in the South and I don't want to live there again," Aaron told a reporter after the announcement. He never said he would refuse to play in Atlanta. Instead, he emphasized how well he had been treated in Milwaukee. "We can go anywhere in Milwaukee," he said. "I don't know what would happen in Atlanta."<sup>66</sup> Aaron disliked the idea of moving his children out of integrated Milwaukee schools, especially in the middle of the academic year. He feared that his children would have to attend either inferior segregated schools or face hostility in recently desegregated ones. Aaron biographer Howard Bryant stresses Aaron's concerns about his family losing the social position they had attained in Milwaukee. The Braves outfielder feared that his blackness would become his primary identity, not his personal accomplishments. Aaron's wife Barbara was especially vehement in her opposition to returning to the South. She worried that the comforts of home, friendship, and neighborhood their family enjoyed in Milwaukee would disappear amid the racial hostility of Georgia.<sup>67</sup>

Atlanta responded quickly to the star's concerns, lobbying Aaron directly on the merits of the "City Too Busy to Hate" and transmitting him backchannel assurances about the integration of Atlanta and its sports facilities through the "Rover Boys." Georgia State Assemblyman Leroy

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<sup>65</sup> Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 170-171.

<sup>66</sup> "Braves to Atlanta? Aaron Unhappy," *Chicago Defender*, October, 20, 1964, 22; "Milwaukee or Atlanta: Braves Talk Up," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 7, 1964, 31; Bobby Bragan, *You Can't Hit the Ball with the Bat on Your Shoulder*, 311; Howard Bryant, *The Last Hero: A Life of Henry Aaron* (New York: Anchor, 2011), 305-312; "Dixie Bias The Real Issue in Braves' Atlanta Move," *Chicago Defender*, July 23, 1964, 38.

<sup>67</sup> Bobby Bragan, *You Can't Hit the Ball with the Bat on Your Shoulder*, 311; Howard Bryant, *The Last Hero*, 305-312

Johnson, who was the only black state legislator in the South, spoke with Aaron, assuring him that the racial experiences Aaron had growing up in Alabama were not representative of the racial situation in modern Atlanta. Whitney Young of the Urban League and Atlanta NAACP President C. Miles Smith both wrote Aaron, touting Atlanta's racial progressivism and asking him to come to the city for a visit.<sup>68</sup> In response to Aaron's statement, Braves co-owner John McHale met with Allen and Coca-Cola magnate Robert W. Woodruff to discuss the racial situation in Atlanta and its relation to running a professional sports franchise in the city. Allen and Woodruff promised McHale that Atlanta Stadium would have no segregated seating or any nefarious schemes designed to maintain de facto segregation in the stands. They promised that all public facilities at the ballpark would be desegregated. The concessions, bathrooms, and water fountains at Atlanta Stadium would be desegregated just like all the businesses in downtown Atlanta.<sup>69</sup>

Publicly, Atlanta's officialdom expressed their near-offense at the suggestion that theirs was a segregated city. They responded to Aaron and Maye's concerns in a similar fashion to the way they reacted to the proposed non-discrimination amendment to the stadium deal. Representatives of Atlanta's white leadership communicated to both the local and national press how scandalized they were by the suggestion that racial problems persisted in Atlanta. Robert Richardson, attorney for the Stadium Authority, said in an article widely disseminated by the Associated Press that he was amazed that black players were concerned about segregation in Atlanta. "All facilities are integrated. It's a friendly place to live... a large number of negro

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 305-306; "To Be Equal," *Chicago Defender*, November 7, 1964, 9; Howard Bryant, "Atlanta Pro Sports and Integration," *ESPN.Com*, January 12, 2011, Accessed on November 14, 2012: <http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/commentary/news/story?id=6015125>.

<sup>69</sup> Howard Bryant, *The Last Hero*, 310-311.



athletes, both in pro baseball & pro football have come to Atlanta to participate in events and none have had the slightest difficulty in regard to eating or lodging facilities.”<sup>70</sup>

In January 1965, Aaron came to Atlanta for a visit that was thoroughly orchestrated by the city’s black leadership. Aaron went on a tour of the city with several black leaders, who insisted that the Braves star would hold just as prominent a social position in Atlanta as he had in Milwaukee. They showed him the city’s affluent black neighborhoods and introduced him to the social life of elite Black Atlanta. They reassured him about the quality of educational opportunities available to African Americans of his economic stature. Aaron toured Atlanta Stadium with teammate Eddie Mathews. Both were impressed by its state of the art features and hitter-friendly dimensions. Convinced of the city’s suitability, Aaron soon purchased a home in a wealthy black neighborhood in Southeast Atlanta. His family moved into the house the following summer.<sup>71</sup>

In retrospect, Aaron accused reporters of putting words in players’ mouths, including his own, about not wanting to move to Atlanta. He has asserted on a number of occasions that his primary concern was moving his children out of school in the middle of the 1964-1965 academic year. Aaron’s more recent protestations belie his broader concerns about moving back to the South. Atlanta was still surrounded by Georgia, which was still in the Deep South. While Atlanta won Aaron over as an oasis of racial moderation, the communities surrounding the city were far more hostile to the idea of integration. “The Braves were being positioned as a regional team,” Howard Bryant wrote in his Aaron biography, “but outside of Atlanta, interracial

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<sup>70</sup> “Braves’ Players Assured Atlanta Fully Integrated,” *Boston Globe*, October 22, 1964, 45.

<sup>71</sup> Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 170-171; “Aaron, Mathews Pay Visit to Atlanta Stadium,” *Washington Post*, January 31, 1965, C3; Jesse Outlar, “Atlanta Wins Hank,” *Atlanta Constitution*, February 1, 1965, 10; Jesse Outlar, “Hank, Eddie Here, Aaron Denies Fear,” *Atlanta Constitution*, January 29, 1965, 39.

competition was not a concept being met with great enthusiasm...<sup>72</sup> The demographic transformation of Metropolitan Atlanta, the simultaneous decentralization of population, political, and economic power into the surrounding suburban counties and the emergence of a majority black population in Atlanta proper during the 1960s and 1970s, added new layers of complexity to the public response to Aaron and integrated professional sports in Metropolitan Atlanta.

### ***Wisconsin v. The Milwaukee Braves***

As Milwaukee's legal injunction against the Braves approached its end, the State of Wisconsin intervened to try to stop the team from moving. In August 1965, State Attorney General Bronson Lafollette filed suit against the Braves and the NL in state court, alleging that the defendants had deprived Milwaukee of MLB and were conspiring to keep the city from acquiring a replacement expansion team. The lawsuit charged that the NL had violated state anti-trust laws by conspiring to restrain trade in Wisconsin and damage the state's economy by leaving Milwaukee without a franchise. Lafollette offered to drop the anti-trust suit if the NL guaranteed Milwaukee an expansion team the following season. NL officials refused the offer, which they considered an attempt by Milwaukee to hold them hostage. If the NL had given in to Milwaukee and granted them a new team that would have encouraged any city facing a relocation to try to leverage an expansion team out of the situation, thus creating a permanent threat to the league's sovereignty over its size and membership.<sup>73</sup>

*Wisconsin v. The Milwaukee Braves* went to trial in Wisconsin State Circuit Court in February 1966, months after the Braves had physically moved the remaining aspects of their

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<sup>72</sup> Howard Bryant, *The Last Hero*, 312-313.

<sup>73</sup> Glen Gendzel, "Competitive Boosterism," 544-550; *A Braves New World* DVD; "Wisconsin Sues Braves, Cites State Trust Law," *Washington Post*, August 7, 1965, D2; "Milwaukee County Sues Braves, Seeks Triple Damages for Club Move," *The Sporting News*, August 14, 1965, 12.

operation to Atlanta. Following two months' worth of testimony by officials from the Braves, the NL, and Milwaukee County, Judge Elmer Roller ruled that the Braves and the NL had violated Wisconsin anti-trust law by acting as a monopoly in "restraint of trade." The ruling came on April 13, 1966, the same day the Braves played their first regular season home game at Atlanta Stadium. Roller directed the NL to remedy the situation in one of two ways: either return the Braves to Milwaukee immediately or grant Milwaukee an expansion franchise for the 1967 season. The NL appealed the case to the Wisconsin Supreme Court, which ruled 4-3 on behalf of the league in July. The majority on the Wisconsin Supreme Court reasoned that baseball's unique anti-trust exemption stemming from the 1922 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Federal Baseball Club v. National League* superseded Wisconsin's state anti-trust laws. The State of Wisconsin appealed the decision to the U.S. Supreme Court, but the court refused to grant the case a *writ of certiorari*, returning the case to state court and effectively ending the suit.<sup>74</sup>

The largely-behind-the-scenes actions that led to the relocation of the Braves and the construction of Atlanta Stadium were an emotionally taxing process for Atlanta's sports fans. "The mood was a combination of excitement, relief, and some civic pride that Atlanta had arrived on the national sports scene," longtime Atlanta baseball fan Karl Green recalled.<sup>75</sup> Atlanta's wait-hurry-wait path to the NL was not the first example of a city muscling its way into the Major Leagues through municipally-sanctioned lobbying and municipally-subsidized investments in professional sports. In many ways it demonstrated the changing relationship

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<sup>74</sup> Glen Gendzel, "Competitive Boosterism," 544-550; Bob Wolf, "Wisconsin Carries Trust Case to Highest Court," *The Sporting News*, October 23, 1966, 16; Wayne Minshew, "No Support Caused Move—Bartholomay," *Atlanta Constitution*, January 14, 1966, 51; "Wisconsin Court Rules Against Braves' Shift," *Washington Post*, April 14, 1966, C1; "Baseball Called Legal Monopoly," *New York Times*, July 28, 1966, 1; "Braves Heading for Higher Court," *Atlanta Journal*, April 14, 1966, 1; "Braves Drop 2 Verdicts," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 14, 1966, 1.

<sup>75</sup> Karl Green Interview by the author, August 16, 2013, 26-7, transcript.

between cities and professional sports franchises, especially in regard to MLB, long considered by fans and informed observers as the steadiest of professional sports leagues. MLB franchises came to be regarded by their home cities as permanent civic institutions over the first half of the twentieth century. During the 1950s and 1960s, though, professional sports franchises took on a social meaning closer to that of mobile capital than of community pillars. Atlanta was one of the first cities to take advantage of the newly flexible national sports market by making generous civic investments in professional sports facilities as a means of attracting existing teams or convincing one of the major sports leagues to grant their community an expansion franchise. As more cities, especially those in the nation's South and West, became sufficiently populous and affluent to support professional sports franchises, the major professional leagues allowed existing franchises to relocate to these burgeoning metropolitan areas or granted them expansion franchises.

In the case of MLB, five teams moved from one city to another between 1953 and 1961. All of these cities either had another MLB team in the other league or, in the case of Washington, were awarded a replacement expansion franchise when the Senators left for Minnesota. The relocation of the Braves from Milwaukee to Atlanta was the first move by an MLB franchise that left a city without a big league team. At the time, Milwaukee and Atlanta's struggle over the Braves was one of the most public conflicts to date resulting from "franchise free agency," a condition which increasingly came to characterize the relationship between cities and professional sports teams in post-war America. The number of cities that desired big league sports franchises outpaced the number of franchises that monopolistic professional sports leagues were willing to grant, empowering the leagues and their members to largely dictate the terms of franchise relocation or expansion to eager cities.

Competition among municipalities for a limited number of franchises encouraged team owners and civic boosters to embrace their most ruthless impulses. Emerging Sunbelt metropolises like Atlanta tried to leverage teams away from older northern cities like Milwaukee, but, as evidenced by Milwaukee's acquisition of the Braves from Boston in 1953, cities in the urban north competed just as fiercely for teams. In the urban north, suburban areas began to compete with center cities to host their metropolitan area's professional sports franchises, further embattling northern cities' status as the primary home of professional sports. Beginning in the 1960s, suburban communities lured franchises to the urban periphery by building new arenas in greenfields and offering suburban fans more controlled and car friendly environments for spectator sports. By contrast, new "Major League Cities" like Atlanta tended to build their new stadiums in their CBDs as a means of establishing a sense of place within their newly sprawling metropolitan areas. Within a generation, though, many downtown Sunbelt stadiums were threatened by similar offers from their surrounding suburban communities. When placed within the historical context of "franchise free agency," the relocation of the Braves to Atlanta showed that cities were always at risk of losing their teams to other municipalities who provided a new playing facility or offered better leasing terms, or seemed like a more lucrative or appealing market to the owners. Atlanta enticed the Braves' owners in all three of these respects.

### **Atlanta's Push for Professional Football**

A series of near misses, short-lived, underfunded investment groups, and half-baked plans for temporary stadiums characterized Atlanta's push for professional football in the early 1960s. Several Atlanta-based partnerships failed between 1959 and 1964 to persuade either the NFL or the AFL to place an expansion franchise in the city or to convince a franchise from another city to move to Atlanta. Once the city completed Atlanta Stadium, the AFL and NFL

competed vigorously to place a team in the new facility. The open courting of Atlanta in 1965 by the two leagues made a striking contrast to the studied aloofness that AFL and NFL representatives employed in their discussions with earlier Atlanta-based groups, a posture that professional sports leagues had recently started adopting as a negotiating tactic with desperate civic leaders. In the early summer of 1965, the AFL and NFL clashed like never before for the privilege of placing a team in a new stadium in a new market.<sup>76</sup>

Atlanta's push for professional football in the early 1960s anticipated the soon to be standard dynamics of franchise free agency. Cities unwilling to build new facilities were shut out of the major leagues. Cities that invested in publicly funded stadiums dramatically improved their bargaining position, especially during the 1960s and 1970s when rival major leagues challenged all four of the established professional associations. The 1965 turf war between the AFL and the NFL for Atlanta portended a decade's worth of conflict between established professional sports leagues for control of new markets in the Sunbelt South and West.<sup>77</sup>

Before Atlanta became the most coveted expansion city in the history of professional football, it spent a half-decade trying to get either the NFL or the upstart AFL to take one of its numerous bids for a franchise seriously. In 1959, Major Sports Inc., an Atlanta-based partnership that consisted of local businessmen and professionals, pursued the eighth and final charter franchise in the AFL. The group put together plans to build a 75,000 seat stadium at the Lakewood Park race track while working out a temporary deal with Crackers owner Earl Mann

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<sup>76</sup> Furman Bisher, *The Atlanta Falcons: Violence and Victory* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1973), 18-24; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 9-11; Bill Clark, "Atlanta Set for AFL Bid," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 19, 1964, 47; Jesse Outlar, "Letter to Rozelle," *Atlanta Constitution*, August 18, 1964, 35; Jesse Outlar, "NFL Picks Atlanta for '66," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 22, 1965, 1; Ivan Allen, "Atlanta Falcons Preview Section: The Falcons of '66," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, September 4, 1966, 1.

<sup>77</sup> Dennis Coates and Brad Humphreys, "The Stadium Gambit and Local Economic Development," 15-17; Mark Rosentraub, "Are Public Policies Needed to Level the Playing Field Between Cities and Teams?," 377-388; Steven A. Riess, *City Games*, 231-251; Kenneth L. Shropshire, *The Sports Franchise Game*, 7-12.

to set up shop with jerry-rigged bleachers at Poncey. The seven original AFL owners, a like-minded group of young entrepreneurs and trust-funders, voted to grant Atlanta a franchise but changed their minds when Los Angeles Chargers owner Barron Hilton complained that his franchise lacked a west coast rival. The AFL decided instead to grant its final charter franchise to Oakland, which had neither a stable ownership group nor an established playing facility.<sup>78</sup>

Major Sports continued to lobby the AFL to grant Atlanta a franchise throughout 1960. In May 1960, Major Sports chairman Eaton Chalkley convinced AFL commissioner Joe Foss to award Atlanta a franchise for 1961 on the condition that they obtain a temporary lease at Georgia Tech's 44,000-seat Grant Field and demonstrate progress on their plan to build a new football stadium. Major Sports failed on both fronts. Georgia Tech refused to lease its stadium out to a professional sports team, in part because the state-supported educational institution and its facilities were still segregated as a matter of state law. Georgia Tech did not desegregate its student body or its facilities until the fall 1961 semester, matching the timetable for desegregation in the Atlanta Public School System. Meanwhile, the State General Assembly approved the Stadium Authority Bill, but Mayor Hartsfield refused to activate the city-county commission, bringing Atlanta's initial bid for an AFL franchise to an end. Foss encouraged Atlanta to continue its pursuit of an AFL franchise, telling Atlanta's civic leaders that the city would become major league in all sports once it built a modern stadium with a large seating

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<sup>78</sup> Howard Tuckner, "Atlanta Favored for Last Berth in AFL," *New York Times*, January 15, 1960, 15; Jesse Outlar, "Pro Goal in Sight," *Atlanta Constitution*, January 30, 1960, 19; Furman Bisher, "The Wooing of the AFL," *Atlanta Journal*, January 15, 1960, 14; Jesse Outlar, "Sports Action, Inc.," *Atlanta Constitution*, January 20, 1960, 24; Bob Christian, "Major Sports Inc Casts Lot with AFL," *Atlanta Journal*, January 14, 1960, 12; Jesse Outlar, "Atlanta Presents Case to Late Arriving Hunt," *Atlanta Constitution*, January 16, 1960, 8; Bob Christian, "Geography Favors Atlanta in AFL Bid," *Atlanta Journal*, January 16, 1960, 6; Jesse Outlar, "All Stadium Group Needs in Money, Time," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 24, 1960, 13; Furman Bisher, "The Lakewood Stadium," *Atlanta Journal*, January 13, 1960, 17; Jesse Outlar, "Atlanta Grid Group Aligns Ponce De Leon," *Atlanta Constitution*, January 13, 1960, 14; Jesse Outlar, "Oakland Applicants," *Atlanta Constitution*, January 27, 1960, 14; Jesse Outlar, "Dodgers and Chargers," *Atlanta Constitution*, February 5, 1960, 14; Jesse Outlar, "The AFL Spokesman," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 2, 1962, 10; Jesse Outlar, "AFL Now or NFL Later," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 27, 1962, 37.

capacity. Pete Rozelle, the NFL's new commissioner, concurred with Foss' sentiments, stating in 1960 that Atlanta would make a fine NFL city once it had an appropriate stadium.<sup>79</sup>

Considering the less-than-ideal playing facilities used by several AFL franchises in the league's early years, the AFL's firm stance that an Atlanta expansion franchise play its home games at a large, first-rate venue seems, at first glance, to be either unreasonable or a purely manipulative tactic employed against a frantic investment group. The AFL's approach to Atlanta's lingering expansion hopes makes more sense when viewed in the context of the league's bid to secure a national television contract. Major Sports' second effort to persuade the AFL to grant them an expansion franchise in May 1960 coincided with the league's negotiations with ABC to broadcast the league's games every Sunday from September through early January. On June 9, 1960, ABC agreed to a five-year contract with the AFL that paid each of the eight clubs \$2.125 million per season. The AFL's decision to negotiate a television contract that paid all member clubs equally was unprecedented. It served as the model for the NFL's future television contracts, the first of which was negotiated after the 1961 season. This cooperative approach to the distribution of television money provided an engine for the shared prosperity that came to characterize professional football. At the time the AFL made its initial deal with ABC, though, the mere existence of the new league, let alone its long term financial stability, remained in question. ABC included a provision in its television pact with the AFL stating that the addition of any new franchises during their five-year agreement would not lead to an increase in the size of the league's television contract. Adding a ninth or tenth franchise to the AFL would cut significantly into the original eight's television money. If the AFL decided to add a new

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<sup>79</sup> Furman Bisher, "Atlanta Enters Pro Football Loop," *Atlanta Journal*, May 3, 1960, 1, 19; Furman Bisher, "Atlanta in Pro Football," *Atlanta Journal*, May 4, 1960, 32; Al Thorny, "Atlanta Gets Pro Football: AFL Coming '61 or '62," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 4, 1960, 41; Jesse Outlar, "Letter to Rozelle," *Atlanta Constitution*, August 18, 1964, 35.



franchise during the five year span of its first television contract, that franchise's home games had to be a guaranteed moneymaker. AFL teams depended not only on the revenue they generated at their home games for their financial survival, but also the revenue they earned in their away games. Visiting AFL teams received 40 percent of the home team's total gate. The revenue produced by an undersized, archaic stadium like Poncey would never make up for the television money each franchise would have lost from cutting a new club into the deal. Expanding into Atlanta did not make sense for the AFL as long as its potential gate revenues were limited by its lack of a large stadium.<sup>80</sup>

Jim Clay, one of the leaders of Major Sports, continued to pursue a professional football franchise for Atlanta despite its lack of a modern stadium. He convinced the NFL to allow him to schedule two August 1962 preseason games in Atlanta. Scheduling preseason matchups in non-league cities was common in the NFL of the 1960s. Hometown fans balked at the idea of paying to watch a glorified scrimmage, leading to consistently sparse exhibition game crowds. Clay believed that a strong turnout at the exhibition games would convince the league that Atlanta could support a franchise. Both games drew standing room only crowds of 15,000 to Grady Stadium, a facility owned by Atlanta Public Schools. Despite the excellent turnout, NFL leaders remained aloof, reiterating Rozelle's earlier statement that Atlanta would get a team once it built a modern stadium. Privately, league officials came to believe that Clay was not wealthy enough to support a team. Clay tried again in 1963, organizing a Baltimore Colts-Pittsburgh Steelers exhibition game that drew a sold out crowd of more than 18,000 to Poncey. The continued lack of interest from NFL officials led Clay to end his pursuit of a franchise shortly

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<sup>80</sup> Michael MacCambridge, *America's Game: The Epic Story of How Pro Football Captured a Nation* (New York: Anchor Press, 2005), 129-134, 157-159, 172-174; Jeff Miller, *Going Long: The Wild Ten Year Saga of the Renegade American Football League in the Words of Those Who Lived It* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2004), 17-18.

thereafter, but plenty of other Atlanta-based investors took up the quest during the first half of the 1960s.<sup>81</sup>

The most notable and disastrous of these would-be football entrepreneurs was Bill McKane, an Atlanta kitchenware salesman who convinced the AFL to schedule four 1962 exhibition games at “American Field,” a 30,000 seat stadium he promised to build in less than seven months on the site of a former chicken farm in a remote section of DeKalb County.<sup>82</sup> By the early August evening of the first exhibition game, American Field consisted of portable grandstands and lighting fixtures. The teams did not have dressing rooms. The concession stands looked like “1910 fair booths,” according to Furman Bisher, while the playing surface looked like an “Oklahoma Dust Bowl.”<sup>83</sup> Sportswriters dubbed McKane’s improvised field “Erector Set Stadium.”<sup>84</sup> The out-of-town teams and local spectators alike had difficulty finding the field, located in the unincorporated community of Lithonia, miles off the county’s main roads.<sup>85</sup> The first two exhibition games at American Field drew a combined 19,500 fans, according to McKane, a figure that Bisher quipped required “double vision.”<sup>86</sup> The meager gates

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<sup>81</sup> Furman Bisher, *The Atlanta Falcons: Violence and Victory*, 18-24; Jim Minter, “Two NFL Exhibition Games Slated for City for Next Season,” *Atlanta Journal*, January 18, 1962, 14; Rod Spicer, “Halas Favors Atlanta in an Expansion of NFL,” *Atlanta Constitution*, August 11, 1962, 11.

<sup>82</sup> Furman Bisher, *The Atlanta Falcons: Violence and Victory*, 18-24; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 9-10; Jesse Outlar, “McCane Promises Atlanta Stadium,” *Atlanta Constitution*, June 26, 1962, 18; Jim Minter, “AFL’s City Courtship May Be Real Thing,” *Atlanta Journal*, January 20, 1962, 4; “Atlanta Interest in AFL Shown in Exhibitions—Foss,” *Atlanta Constitution*, May 25, 1962, 49; Jesse Outlar, “Adams Digs for AFL,” *Atlanta Constitution*, January 27, 1962, 9; Terry Kay, “Joe Foss Declines Answer on Atlanta Entry in AFL,” *Atlanta Journal*, May 25, 1962, 16; “Bus Service Available for Game Tonight,” *Atlanta Daily World*, August 4, 1962, 5; Marion E. Jackson, “Sports of the World,” *Atlanta Daily World*, August 4, 1962, 5.

<sup>83</sup> Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 9-10.

<sup>84</sup> Furman Bisher, *The Atlanta Falcons: Violence and Victory*, 18-24.

<sup>85</sup> Jim Minter, “AFL’s City Courtship May Be ‘Real Thing,’” *Atlanta Journal*, January 20, 1962, 4; Jesse Outlar, “Adams Digs for AFL,” *Atlanta Constitution*, January 27, 1962, 9; “Bus Service Available for Game Tonight,” *Atlanta Daily World*, August 4, 1962, 5; Marion E. Jackson, “Sports of the World,” *Atlanta Daily World*, August 4, 1962, 5.

<sup>86</sup> Furman Bisher, *The Atlanta Falcons: Violence and Victory*, 18-24;

and poor conditions at American Field led to the cancellation of the final two games and the demise of McKane's career as a football impresario.<sup>87</sup>

### **“Pro Football Cardinals Moving Here”: Atlanta's Dalliance with the Wandering Bidwills**

Atlanta's bargaining position as a potential AFL or NFL city changed dramatically in April 1964 when construction commenced on Atlanta Stadium. On April 10, 1964, less than a week before breaking ground at Washington-Rawson, the *Atlanta Journal* reported that an unnamed NFL franchise made an informal agreement with the Stadium Authority to play at the new facility in 1965. Within days, the local press learned that the St. Louis Cardinals football team, referred to in the media as the “Big Red” to avoid confusion with the St. Louis Cardinals baseball team, was the franchise in question. The Big Red had one year remaining on their stadium lease in St. Louis. According to widely published reports in April 1964, the Big Red would soon seek league approval to move to Atlanta.<sup>88</sup>

The football Cardinals were recent arrivals in St. Louis. Four years earlier in 1960, the team's owner, Violet Bidwill-Wolfner, moved the franchise to Missouri from their longtime home on the south side of Chicago. The Cardinals had played in Chicago since their origins as a semi-professional rugby team in the late nineteenth century, making them the oldest professional football club still in existence. Bidwill-Wolfner inherited the team in 1947 from her late husband, Charlie “Blue Shirt” Bidwill, a businessman and horse-racing impresario with strong ties to Chicago's underworld. During her tenure as owner, she grew tired of the Big Red's perennially second-class status in the city to George Halas' Chicago Bears, one of the NFL's

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<sup>87</sup> Al Thomy, “American Field Death Sighted,” *Atlanta Constitution*, August 11, 1962, 12; Furman Bisher, *The Atlanta Falcons: Violence and Victory*, 18-24; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 9-10.

<sup>88</sup> “Go South, Young Ballplayer,” *Sports Illustrated*, April 20, 1964. Accessed on June 4, 2013: <http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1075859/index.htm>; Jim Minter and Raleigh Bryans, “NFL Football Team to Move Here in '65,” *Atlanta Journal*, April 10, 1964, 1, 27; Marion Gaines, “NFL Football Likely But Not Pledged Yet,” *Atlanta Constitution*, April 11, 1964, 1,9.

most successful and popular franchises. Ever since the Bears won their first league championship in 1921, they enjoyed far more local support than the Cardinals.<sup>89</sup>

Violet Bidwill-Wolfner's second husband, St. Louis businessman Walter Wolfner, convinced her to move the franchise to his hometown based on an offer they received from St. Louis beer maker Joe Griesedieck, president of the Falstaff Brewing Corporation. Griesedieck represented the Civic Center Redevelopment Corporation (CCRC), a coalition of St. Louis corporate leaders who were trying to execute a \$60 million downtown revitalization plan. The co-centerpieces of the CCRC's plan for downtown St. Louis were the construction of a multi-purpose sports stadium and the construction of the long-anticipated Gateway Arch, a project that had been awaiting financing since the late 1940s. St. Louis had cleared blighted nineteenth century buildings from its waterfront during the Great Depression to make way for a large-scale redevelopment of its downtown. More than a quarter century later, civic leaders in St. Louis finally secured the financing necessary to execute their redevelopment plans. The CCRC raised \$20 million in private investments for the stadium, the Gateway Arch, and other associated projects. They secured \$40 million in loans for downtown redevelopment and obtained additional voter-approved bond money from the city for roadwork to facilitate stadium construction. Griesedieck promised Bidwill-Wolfner a place for the Big Red in the soon-to-be built stadium, which they would share with August "Gussie" Busch's Cardinals baseball team. Busch, scion of the Anheuser-Busch fortune and the most high profile figure in St. Louis'

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<sup>89</sup> "Bidwill's Aids Will Carry on Sports Empire," *Chicago Tribune*, April 20, 1947, A1; Robert L. Burnes, *The Big Red: The Story of the Football Cardinals* (New York: Piraeus, 1975), 1-30; Mark Rosentraub, *Major League Losers: The Real Cost of Sports and Who's Paying for It* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 293; Greg Maracek, *The St. Louis Football Cardinals*, 3-15.

business community, had already agreed to make a significant financial contribution to the stadium project in return for naming rights to the facility.<sup>90</sup>

While the CCRC built the new downtown stadium, Bidwill-Wolfner agreed to move their team temporarily to Sportsman's Park, a decaying 32,000-seat ballpark owned by Gussie Busch that had housed the baseball Cardinals since 1920. Sportsman's Park was located on St. Louis' rapidly deteriorating north side. In exchange for relocating to St. Louis, Griesedieck purchased ten percent of the football Cardinals for \$500,000, benefitting Bidwill-Wolfner financially without forcing her to sacrifice any control over the team. Additionally, Griesedieck promised to lead the Big Red's season-ticket sales drive.<sup>91</sup>

When Violet Bidwill-Wolfner died in 1962, her sons William and Charles Bidwill took control of the team, following a prolonged legal struggle with their stepfather, Walter Wolfner. Neither of the Bidwill brothers were enamored of the team's situation in St. Louis. As of April 1964, ground had yet to be broken on the new stadium. The Big Red were stuck as tenants in a small, decrepit baseball park with virtually non-existent parking facilities and only 12,000 seats that provided football spectators with a view from either side of the playing field. The other 20,000 seats in Sportsman's Park were located behind the end zones or in a corner with an obstructed view, far from the game action.<sup>92</sup> The Big Red were forced to work around the baseball Cardinals' home schedule, preventing them from playing home games at Sportsman's Park until after the baseball season ended in early October. Once the baseball season ended,

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<sup>90</sup> George Vecsey, *Stan Musial: An American Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2011), 216-217; Florence Shinkle, "Gussie Busch: Never an Easy Rider as a Horseman or Beer Baron," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 25, 1989, 3D; Dan O'Neill, *Busch Stadium Moments* (St. Louis, MO: St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 2005), 24-31; Peter Hernon and Terry Ganey, *Under the Influence: The Unauthorized Story of the Anheuser-Busch Dynasty* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 248.

<sup>91</sup> Michael MacCambridge, *America's Game*, 116-121; Robert L. Burnes, *Big Red*, 31-35; Greg Maracek, *The St. Louis Football Cardinals*, 16-30; George Lipsitz, "Sports Stadia and Urban Development," 1-7.

<sup>92</sup> Rich Koster, "Stadium is St. Louis' Passport to Big League Professional Football," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, May 8, 1966, 16H; Robert L. Burnes, *Big Red*, 31-35, 42-49, 89-92.

maintenance of the playing field at Sportsman's Park ceased for the winter, according to William Bidwill. "The only water that ever gets on it is the sweat that falls off our players," he said during the 1964 season. Moreover, the Bidwill family's primary business, a horse racing track in Cicero, Illinois also known as Sportsman's Park, remained in Chicagoland. Charles Bidwill ran the day-to-day operations at the racetrack in Illinois while his younger brother managed the Big Red in St. Louis.<sup>93</sup>

Some observers, most notably Furman Bisher, suggested that the Bidwill brothers decided to play "footsie" with Atlanta simply to gain leverage in negotiations over the leasing terms at the new stadium in St. Louis.<sup>94</sup> Busch Stadium would bear not only the family name of their civic pillar co-tenant but had also been planned to meet the needs of the brewer's baseball team. By expressing interest in leaving St. Louis, the Bidwill brothers certainly improved their bargaining position, but the idea that they were not strongly considering moving the club is not borne out by either contemporary accounts of the threatened move or the Bidwills' *modus operandi* as negotiators. The Bidwill family's history as franchise owners has been punctuated by two relocations: the aforementioned 1960 move from Chicago to St. Louis and their 1987 move from St. Louis to Arizona. On both occasions, the Bidwills' displeasure with their stadium situation, subordinate status in the local market, and promises of a new stadium in another city persuaded them to move their franchise. "When we moved here in 1960, we did so with the understanding that old Busch Stadium was temporary," Charles Bidwill told the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat's* Rich Koster in 1966. "Had there been no stadium promised, there would have been

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<sup>93</sup> Robert L. Burnes, *Big Red*, 31-35, 42-49, 89-92; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 89-91; Jim Minter, "St. Louis Fighting to Keep Cardinals," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 31, 1964, 54; Furman Bisher, "Bidwills versus Busches," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 26, 1964, 30; "Cards Brass Meets to Discuss Stadium," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 25, 1964, 13; "St. Louis Solves Seat Problem," *The Washington Post*, October 15, 1964.

<sup>94</sup> Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 89.

no team,” Bidwill said.<sup>95</sup> There is no reason to think Atlanta’s eager civic boosters could not have convinced the Bidwill brothers to move their franchise had the constellation of circumstances and intervening events come together differently.<sup>96</sup>

As late as June 1962, five months after their mother’s death, the Bidwills submitted a letter of intent to the CCRC, assuring the organization that the Big Red would be a tenant at the new stadium. Despite their relatively recent letter of intent, negotiations between the CCRC and the Bidwills were strained by the spring of 1964. The CCRC insisted that the Big Red sign a 30-year lease at Busch Stadium, a requirement in keeping with terms of the \$40 million loan the redevelopment corporation had secured from the Equitable Life Assurance Company of New York. The Bidwills resisted signing such a long-term lease at a stadium where they would again be the secondary attraction, recreating the power disparities the franchise had faced since they shared Chicago with the Bears.<sup>97</sup>

Once the public became aware of the Big Red’s probable move to Atlanta, the Bidwill brothers moved slowly and aloofly on the deal. The Bidwills’ tendency to remain silent and draw out negotiations with cities, football fans in St. Louis and, much later, Arizona learned, was their trademark bargaining tactic. “Nobody could make a decision,” former St. Louis Cardinals All-Pro offensive lineman Tom Banks recalled of the Bidwill organization. “There was always questioning of decisions. It was just a mess.”<sup>98</sup> Atlanta fans responded to the silence by showering the Bidwills with messages encouraging them to relocate their franchise. An Atlanta

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<sup>95</sup> Rich Koster, “Stadium is St. Louis’ Passport to Big League Professional Football,” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, May 8, 1966, 16H.

<sup>96</sup> Bob Broeg, “How Spirit of St. Louis Kept Big Red from Being Big Reb,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 27, 1964, 4C.

<sup>97</sup> Jim Minter, “St. Louis Fighting to Keep Cardinals,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 31, 1964, 54; Jim Minter, “Bidwills Begin St. Louis Talks,” *Atlanta Constitution*, May 27, 1964, 31; “Cards Brass Meets to Discuss Stadium,” *Atlanta Constitution*, May 25, 1964, 13; “Symington Tells Cards to Remain in St. Louis,” *Washington Post*, July 17, 1964, D1; Bob Broeg, “Big Red is Expected to Move to Atlanta,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 10, 1964, 4C.

<sup>98</sup> Tom Banks interview by the author, July 9, 2013, 11, transcript.

motel manager named Dave Cowles coordinated a telegram drive aimed at showing the Cardinals' owners the widespread support they would receive from local football fans. The Bidwills received more than 10,000 telegrams in April and May 1964 from Atlantans who promised to purchase multiple season tickets. Cowles promised in his personal telegram to sell 500 season tickets to friends and family if the team agreed to move to Atlanta. By comparison, the Big Red sold a total of 12,000 season tickets in St. Louis in 1963, little more than a third of the number of season tickets Georgia Tech sold the same year and less than half the number of passes that Griesedieck promised the Bidwills that St. Louis football fans would purchase if they moved to town.<sup>99</sup>

In May 1964, the Bidwills made a public visit to Atlanta to meet with city leaders and tour the stadium construction site. They expressed their pleasure with the plans for the stadium and the speed with which the structure was emerging on Washington-Rawson, a less-than-subtle jab at the grindingly slow planning process for the downtown stadium in St. Louis. Later that month, St. Louis finally broke ground on Busch Stadium. The Bidwills were conveniently out of town that day, one of the most anticipated in St. Louis history. In keeping with the project's track record, the construction of Busch Stadium took nearly twice as long as the construction of Atlanta Stadium. A series of unforeseen circumstances slowed the pace of construction on the \$24 million facility, which did not open until May 1966. A shortage of building materials due to a steel strike, a major fire at a nearby warehouse, and labor stoppages due to conflicts between the building trades union local and the stadium's contractors all contributed to the delays.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Bob Broeg, "No Decision by Big Red," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, June 9, 1964; John Logue, "Bidwill Brothers Talk Atlanta," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 27, 1964, 31; Jesse Outlar, "The Card Deal," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 2, 1964, 12; Jim Minter, "St. Louis Fighting to Keep Cardinals," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 31, 1964, 54; Bob Burnes, *Big Red*, 34-35; "Football Cards Ponder Future—With Atlanta in It as Well as St. Louis," *Chicago Tribune*, May 26, 1964, C4.

<sup>100</sup> "Football Cards Ponder Future—With Atlanta in It as Well as St. Louis," *Chicago Tribune*, May 26, 1964, C4; Wayne Thompson, "Card Owners Visit, Talk of Transfer," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 22, 1964, 12; "Cards Brass



While in Atlanta that May, the Bidwills met with Allen and Montgomery to discuss the terms of the stadium lease. The Stadium Authority offered the Big Red a ten-year stadium lease with two additional five-year renewal options. Rent for Atlanta Stadium would be a flat ten-percent of gate revenues. Atlanta's offer provided the Big Red with more flexibility and a less onerous rental fee than St. Louis' offer of a 30-year lease with twelve percent of gate revenues, the median rate paid by NFL franchises in 1964. Additionally, Cardinals football tickets were subject to a five-percent sales tax in St. Louis while no such tax existed in Atlanta. Montgomery later said that the Bidwills told them that they had already received verbal approval for the move from other NFL owners. The Bidwills were not yet ready to sign the contract though. They said they needed more time to make an informed decision about the future of their franchise. The Bidwills told the Stadium Authority they were conducting a comparative economic and cultural study of the Atlanta and St. Louis markets. A competing bid from New Orleans, Atlanta's chief civic rival, was also making their decision more complex. New Orleans had offered the Cardinals use of the Sugar Bowl for the 1965 season. Allen responded by acquiescing to the indefinite time-table the Cardinals owners gave themselves to make a decision, enabling the Bidwills to stretch the relocation intrigue from April through late July.<sup>101</sup>

During their May meeting, the Bidwills discussed Atlanta's racial situation with Allen and Montgomery. The mayor and the Stadium Authority chairman assured them that Atlanta

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Meets to Discuss Stadium," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 25, 1964, 13; Ted Schafers, "Many People Contributed Much to Success of New Stadium," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, May 7-8, 1966, 2H-12H; "Contract Signed for Stadium and Garage Work To Begin Monday," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 21, 1964, 1; Tim O'Neil, "In 1966, New Busch Stadium was a Tub-Thumping Civic Cause," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* May 11, 2013, D1.

<sup>101</sup> Jesse Outlar, "Bidding on the Bidwills," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 23, 1964, 18; Jesse Outlar, "The Card Deal," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 2, 1964, 12; Jesse Outlar, "Pro Football Cardinals Moving Here," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 11, 1964, 1, 10; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 89-91; Bob Broeg, "Big Red is Expected to Move to Atlanta," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 10, 1964, 4C; Ed Wilks, "Big Red Status is Unchanged," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 1, 1964, 4C; "Grid Cardinals Decide to Stay in St. Louis," *Boston Globe*, July 25, 1964, 13; "St. Louis Eyes AFL Team as Big Red Prepares to Snap Up Atlanta's Offer," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, July 11, 1964; "Big Red Agree to Stay After Rent is Cut," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 27, 1964, 1,5.

was a fully desegregated city and that all stadium facilities would be integrated. The Bidwills asked Montgomery if the presence of black players on the Cardinals would be a problem with Atlanta fans. Montgomery assured them that it would not, stating that “five years ago it would have been, but we’ve gone about integration gracefully.”<sup>102</sup> When the Bidwills made a return visit in July, they met with a delegation from the ASLC that included A.T. Walden and Rev. Samuel Williams to discuss the status of public accommodations and housing situation in the city. In a private meeting, the ASLC leaders made similar assurances to those of Allen and Montgomery about the desegregation of Atlanta.<sup>103</sup> “They were gratified to learn that we have a climate here in Atlanta that a professional football team could move here and be successful,” Williams later said.<sup>104</sup> After the meeting, William Bidwill said that they had completed their survey of Atlanta and “were entirely satisfied with everything, including the racial climate.”<sup>105</sup>

St. Louis’ daily newspapers, the *Post-Dispatch* and *Globe-Democrat*, took a dim view of Atlanta’s self-professed success at desegregating. Doubting the genuineness of Atlanta’s reputation as the “City Too Busy to Hate” was undoubtedly a self-interested position for St. Louis’ papers to take as they tried to embarrass the Bidwills out of moving their team. Nonetheless, the activist journalism by the city’s papers against the Big Red’s move yielded many interesting insights into the political and sporting culture of Atlanta. Rarely did national press coverage of Atlanta during the 1960s cast the city in anything less than the most positive light.

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<sup>102</sup> Ed Wilks, “Segregation Could be Problem for Atlanta Professional Sports,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, June 18, 1964, 4E.

<sup>103</sup> Tom McCollister, “Bidwills Visit Again, Pronounce Atlanta ‘Ready for Pro Football,’” *Atlanta Journal*, July 8, 1964, 16; Robert Morrison, “Atlanta Hopes Rise After Bidwill Visit,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 8, 1964, 12.

<sup>104</sup> Marion Gaines, “Negroes Reassure Football Cardinals,” *Atlanta Constitution*, July 8, 1964, 8.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

One of the most striking articles related to the Cardinals' prospective move to Atlanta included an interview with Atlanta University sociologist Tillman C. Cochran, who expressed his less than optimistic views about the city's racial progress to the *Post-Dispatch*'s Ed Wilks. "Integration in Atlanta is always in a state of flux," the black college professor told Wilks, noting that Atlanta would be a majority African American city by 1970 due to the continued influx of rural blacks into the city and continued white flight to the suburbs. Cochran depicted the desegregation of public accommodations in Atlanta as "wishy-washy" less than a month before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 became federal law, despite Ivan Allen's success at desegregating the businesses in downtown Atlanta and his active support for national civil rights legislation. "The interest generated by professional sports actually may help integration here," Cochran said, "...the city I believe would try to eliminate segregation in order to gain Negro support for the professional teams... The Negroes here are sufficiently organized to make an issue of it. If the city did not desegregate the downtown area, Negroes would picket the Stadium."<sup>106</sup> Cochran predicted that many Black Atlantans would support both professional football and baseball once they came to the city, but not necessarily the Black Atlantans most financially capable of affording tickets. He hypothesized that poor and working class African Americans who wanted to see prominent black athletes from around the country perform in person would be the primary black ticket-buying audience in Atlanta, not members of the city's black middle class, who could more regularly afford to attend games. "Integrated teams will draw for negro stars on visiting teams," Cochran said, "...you'll have many negroes attending games when they can't really afford it." From Cochran's perspective, the desire of black fans to see the individual prowess of

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<sup>106</sup> Ed Wilks, "Segregation Could be Problem for Atlanta Professional Sports," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, June 18, 1964, 4E.

specific black athletes was greater than the desire by black fans to be regular supporters of Atlanta's home teams, a statement that proved quite prescient over the next decade.<sup>107</sup>

On Saturday July 11<sup>th</sup>, the *Constitution* greeted its readers with the headline "Pro Football Cardinals Moving Here," eight days after the news broke that the Braves were the secret MLB team that had agreed to play in Atlanta Stadium in 1965. Bob Broeg, St. Louis' most respected sportswriter, wrote the previous day in the *Post-Dispatch* that the Bidwills were about to finalize a ten-year lease to play in Atlanta. The Bidwills had surveyed their players on the potential move and encountered no opposition. According to Broeg's sources, the Big Red planned to make the decision public in a press conference the next week.<sup>108</sup> The Bidwills and Montgomery denied the reports circulating in Atlanta and St. Louis papers.<sup>109</sup> NFL commissioner Rozelle said the Cardinals had yet to seek formal league approval, but "I don't think they would have difficulty in getting approval." "This office," Rozelle said cryptically, "is not pushing the move. But I think it is up to the city of St. Louis to stand up and let the Bidwills know that they really want the team in St. Louis."<sup>110</sup>

Several Cardinals players, in Atlanta at the time to promote an August 15<sup>th</sup> preseason game the team had previously scheduled at Cheney Stadium, refused to comment on the move, but Cardinals Tight End Taz Anderson, formerly of Georgia Tech, said Atlanta was an ideal site for professional football. "I think we could give this town the kind of football that would build up a good following," he told Jan Van Duser of the *Constitution*. Cardinals assistant coach Charlie Trippi, a Georgia alumnus, told Van Duser he was "hopeful" that the Cardinals would

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Jesse Outlar, "Pro Football Cardinals Moving Here," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 11, 1964, 1, 10; Tom McCollister, "Cards Move Only a Word Away," *Atlanta Journal*, July 11, 1964, 4; Jesse Outlar, "Cards Owners Face Heavy Pressure," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 11, 1964, 10.

<sup>109</sup> Jesse Outlar, "Pro Football Cardinals Moving Here," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 11, 1964, 1, 10.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

move to Atlanta.<sup>111</sup> Other players expressed their opposition to the move in the press, disputing the Bidwill brothers' claim that no players were opposed to the move. Some of the veteran players, understandably, did not want to disrupt the homes they had made for their families in St. Louis. Quarterback Charles Johnson told reporters he wanted to stay to finish his master's degree in engineering at St. Louis University. Running backs Prentice Gautt and Bill Triplett, both African Americans, expressed their concerns about moving to a southern city.<sup>112</sup>

The reports of the Big Red's departure to Atlanta proved premature. The Bidwills faced intense pressure from the St. Louis civic elite and Missouri Senator Stuart Symington to remain in the city. Symington tried to intimidate the Bidwills with talk of legal action, threatening the NFL with an anti-trust suit and congressional action on franchise relocations if they permitted the Cardinals to move out of St. Louis, just as Wisconsin Attorney General Lafollette did the following year to save the Braves for Milwaukee. The Missouri Senator had already stymied Charlie Finley's wanderlust by threatening a similar suit in 1963 against the A's. When Finley's club finally left Kansas City in 1967, Symington leveraged the AL into granting the city an expansion team for 1969.<sup>113</sup> The Bidwills tried to downplay Symington's threat, telling the *Atlanta Constitution* that "our problem is not the anti-trust law...that's such a confused issue that I'm not even sure myself what it's all about."<sup>114</sup>

Big Red minority owner Joe Griesedieck and the baseball Cardinals' owner Gussie Busch took the lead in negotiating a settlement with the Bidwills. Busch said in an open letter to the

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid; "Big Red Going to Atlanta: To Play Vikings," *St Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 5, 1964, 1.

<sup>112</sup> "Football Cards Don't Relish Idea of Move," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 20, 1964, 17; Robert Morrison, "Griesedieck May Be Key to Keeping Big Red," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 19, 1964, 1E.

<sup>113</sup> Jan Van Duser, "Baseball Cards Urging Football Cards to Stay," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 15, 1964, 35; Jan Van Duser, "Cards Face 11<sup>th</sup> Hour Pressure," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 25, 1964, 10; James C. Olson, *Stuart Symington: A Life* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 408-411; "Symington Tells Cards to Remain in St. Louis," *Washington Post*, July 17, 1964, D1.

<sup>114</sup> Jan Van Duser, "Cards Face 11<sup>th</sup> Hour Pressure," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 25, 1964, 10.

brothers that the Big Red were a “great civic asset” and he promised to work with NL executives to create “schedules agreeable to both the baseball and football Cardinals.”<sup>115</sup> Griesedieck came to an agreement with the Bidwills to sell them back the 10 percent stock in the team he purchased in 1960 as a favor to their mother. In the aftermath of their legal battle with their stepfather, the Bidwill brothers decided that they wanted to control 100 percent of the team’s stock to prevent any future legal struggles for control of the franchise. Busch and Griesedieck’s efforts facilitated a new round of negotiations between the CCRC and the Bidwills. The CCRC worked closely with the Bidwills throughout July and drew up a new lease that matched the Atlanta Stadium Authority’s terms, including the enactment of an escape clause that allowed the Big Red to leave Busch Stadium after five years without financial penalty. Additionally, the St. Louis Chamber of Commerce agreed to spearhead a season ticket sales drive and guarantee \$100,000 worth of concessions revenue each season for the Big Red, which was, in essence, an annual subsidy by the local business community for the franchise. The improved leasing terms offered by the CCRC for use of Busch Stadium convinced the Bidwills in late July 1964 to keep their franchise in St. Louis.<sup>116</sup>

When news of the Big Red’s decision to stay in St. Louis broke late on a Saturday night, the Bidwills congratulated Atlanta on their stadium building effort, pronouncing that the southern city would soon have its own professional football team. They said their decision to

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<sup>115</sup> “Busch Urges Cardinals to Remain in St. Louis,” *Washington Post*, July 15, 1964, C2; “St. Louis Fighting to Keep Cardinals,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 31, 1964, 54; Jan Van Duser, “‘It’s Official’ Cards Not Coming,” *Atlanta Constitution*, July 27, 1964, 11; Robert L. Burnes, *Big Red*, 89-92.

<sup>116</sup> Jan Van Duser, “‘It’s Official’ Cards Not Coming,” *Atlanta Constitution*, July 27, 1964, 11; Robert L. Burnes, *Big Red*, 89-92; “Big Red Agree to Stay After Rent is Cut,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 27, 1964, 1,5; Bill Kerch, “It’s Official! Big Red Will Stay,” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, July 27, 1964, 1; Bob Broeg, “How Spirit of St. Louis Kept Big Red from Being Big Reb,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 27, 1964, 4C; Bill Kerch, “Mayor, Civic Groups Pledge Aid to Big Red,” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, July 27, 1964, 1C, 6C; Bob Burnes, “The Battle Has Only Started,” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, July 28, 1964, 12; Robert Morrison, “Joe Griesedieck Boosts Hopes Big Red May Stay,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 18 1964, 7A.

stay in St. Louis was a product of the CCRC's improved offer, not anything that Atlanta officials had done incorrectly. Bill Bidwill promised to be an enthusiastic booster of professional football in Atlanta if the matter came up for a league-wide vote.<sup>117</sup> Ivan Allen responded with what amounted to a concession speech, thanking the Bidwill brothers for acting "most forthrightly all the way through." "I'm fully confident," Allen continued, "that there are other teams not as fortunate as the St. Louis Cardinals in the matter of a new stadium who will want to come to the South's greatest city."<sup>118</sup> The civic elite in Atlanta expressed little open ill-will toward the Bidwills for staying in St. Louis. Like Allen, they understood that Atlanta was competing for a finite resource, just like the city did every time it sought out investment from other parts of the country. Even the most skilled salesmen could not convince everyone to invest every time. Nevertheless, the competition between Atlanta and St. Louis for a professional football franchise left the future of each city's downtown in the hands of a few of powerful civic leaders and sports entrepreneurs.

### **"Gravitating Toward Atlanta": The AFL and NFL's 1965 Fight for Atlanta Stadium**

Ivan Allen adopted a new approach to luring professional football following the city's failure to convince the Cardinals to sign a lease with the Stadium Authority. Atlanta, he decided, needed a well-heeled local investor to buy a professional team and move them to the new stadium. He convinced his close friend J. Leonard Reinsch of Cox Broadcasting, the owner of Atlanta's WSB television and radio stations, to pursue an AFL franchise. Allen considered Reinsch the ideal man to seek out an AFL franchise because of his great personal wealth and his

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<sup>117</sup> Jan Van Duser, "'It's Official' Cards Not Coming," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 27, 1964, 11; Bill Clark, "No NFL Expansion Seen," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 28, 1964, 27; "Grid Cardinals Decide to Stay in St. Louis," *Boston Globe*, July 25, 1964, 13; "Grid Cardinals Turn Down Atlanta Move," *Chicago Defender*, July 27, 1964, 22.

<sup>118</sup> Jan Van Duser, "'It's Official' Cards Not Coming," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 27, 1964, 11.

work with Cox and WSB, Atlanta's NBC affiliate. NBC had recently won the national contract to broadcast AFL games for five seasons beginning in 1965.<sup>119</sup>

Reinsch worked quickly, finding a weak AFL franchise to purchase within weeks of his late 1964 consultations with the mayor. He announced in February 1965 that he had come to terms with the owners of the Denver Broncos to purchase the team for \$4 million and relocate them to Atlanta. The deal for the struggling Broncos franchise fell through within a week. Gerald and Allen Phipps, brothers who were minority stockholders in the Broncos, organized a coup against Reinsch at the meeting the club's many-headed ownership group scheduled to finalize the deal. The Phipps brothers decided they did not want to sell their portion of the team to an owner who planned to move them to another city. They proceeded to buy out the team's other stockholders at the four-hour meeting, forcing Reinsch out of the ownership group.<sup>120</sup>

Reinsch continued working behind the scenes, lobbying AFL commissioner Foss and the league's owners in secret to grant him an expansion franchise. In June 1965, Reinsch announced that the AFL had agreed to award him a team for the 1966 season for the unprecedented price of \$7.5 million. The short supply of AFL franchises and intense demand for teams, combined with the value added to franchises by the league's new \$36 million television deal with NBC, increased the price of franchises considerably in a very short time. Just two years earlier, Sonny Werblin bought the New York Jets from Harry Wismer for \$1 million. Once news of Reinsch's

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<sup>119</sup> Furman Bisher, *Atlanta Falcons: Violence and Victory*, 18-24; Ivan Allen, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, 162-164; "Ex-Cox Executive Leonard Reinsch Dies," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 10, 1991, 1F; Besides his work for Cox, Reinsch was a powerful operative for the Democratic National Committee. He took a leave of absence every presidential campaign cycle to work on behalf of the party's nominee. In 1960, Reinsch played a particularly prominent role in the Kennedy campaign, coordinating their television and radio operations. Reinsch, famously, learned of a knee injury Nixon sustained in the days leading up to the candidates' debate. When negotiating with the Nixon camp over the ground rules, Reinsch asked if the candidates could stand during the debate, a request to which the Nixon camp acceded, forcing the Republican nominee to stand uncomfortably throughout the event.

<sup>120</sup> Furman Bisher, *Atlanta Falcons: Violence and Victory*, 18-24; "Two Bids for Denver Broncos," *Washington Post*, February 16, 1965, C2; Bill Clark, "Broncos Stay in Denver, Atlanta's Bid Rejected," *Atlanta Constitution*, February 16, 1965, 29; Jeff Miller, *Going Long*, 207.



deal with the AFL went public, Allen expressed his desire to finalize the lease agreement between the new expansion franchise and the Stadium Authority as soon as possible, but the NFL intervened immediately to prevent the Atlanta market and its new stadium from joining up with the rival league.<sup>121</sup>

The day after Reinsch's announcement, NFL commissioner Pete Rozelle flew to Atlanta, taking up a standing invitation from the Stadium Authority to discuss expanding to the city. "You've come a long way from Grady Stadium," Rozelle told reporters upon his arrival.<sup>122</sup> The NFL's new interest in Atlanta led the Stadium Authority to issue a statement saying that they were not obligated to sign a lease with the first professional football franchise granted to Atlanta. The Stadium Authority also asserted that they could only take on the lease of one professional football team at Atlanta Stadium. Before meeting with Montgomery, Rozelle headed straight to the State Capitol for an impromptu meeting with Governor Carl Sanders. Rozelle asked Sanders to recommend a potential owner for an Atlanta expansion franchise. Sanders suggested his old University of Georgia fraternity brother, Rankin Smith, scion and Vice President of the Life of Georgia Insurance Company.<sup>123</sup>

Initially, the thirty-nine year old Smith showed only mild interest in the estimated \$4 million investment. Sanders prevailed on his friend for a week until he agreed to make an offer for the team. In the meantime, several other wealthy investors expressed interest in bidding on the Atlanta expansion franchise, increasing the NFL's asking price considerably. The two most serious bidders were Lindsey Hopkins, an Atlanta-based Indy Car racing executive who earned

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<sup>121</sup> Furman Bisher, *Atlanta Falcons: Violence and Victory*, 18-24; Jesse Outlar, "AFL May Beckon, But City to Wait," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 7, 1965, 12; "Atlanta Gets AFL Franchise for '66," *Washington Post*, June 9, 1965, D1; "Cox Group in Atlanta Pays Record 7.5 Million for Franchise in AFL," *New York Times*, June 9, 1965, 55; Furman Bisher, "AFL is Ours, But is NFL Playing Bluff," *Atlanta Journal*, June 8, 1965, 12.

<sup>122</sup> Jack Williams, "Rozelle Hails Atlanta's Pro Look," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 9, 1965, 37.

<sup>123</sup> "AFL May Beckon, But City to Wait," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 7, 1965, 12; Ivan Allen, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, 162-164; James Cook, *Carl Sanders: Spokesman of the New South*, 270-271.

millions as an early Coca-Cola investor and built an even larger fortune in Florida real estate, and William Reynolds of Richmond, Virginia, the heir to the Reynolds Wrap fortune. Hopkins and Reynolds both made offers well in excess of the \$4 million Rozelle quoted Rankin Smith. By the time Smith agreed to make a bid on the franchise, Rozelle more than doubled the price to \$8.5 million, a record fee which Smith still agreed to pay. NFL owners voted 14-0 to approve the Atlanta expansion franchise and its prospective owner Smith, but not before Bears' owner George Halas, the last of the league's founding fathers, cautioned his peers about the potential implications of their war with the AFL for Atlanta. He feared that the AFL would retaliate by placing expansion teams in NFL cities, including Chicago. Halas acquiesced to his fellow owners' desire to scoop up the lucrative Atlanta market, but remained fearful that the upstart AFL and its wealthier group of owners would win future wars for cities and players, forcing a merger between the two leagues.<sup>124</sup>

After five years of struggling to get the attention of either the AFL or the NFL, Atlanta found itself in June 1965 in the enviable position of picking between offers from the competing professional football leagues. To demonstrate the public's preference for their product, the NFL commissioned Lou Harris, the nation's best-known pollster, to conduct a market research study on the preferences of Atlanta-area sports fans. Harris was best known for pioneering the practice of selecting key, swing precincts as bellwethers in presidential and congressional elections, a practice he popularized during the 1960 presidential and 1962 congressional campaigns. Harris' survey of Atlanta sports fans confirmed their enthusiasm for professional football and concluded their strong preference for an NFL franchise. Atlantans preferred an NFL franchise to an AFL

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<sup>124</sup> Furman Bisher, *Atlanta Falcons: Violence and Victory*, 18-24; Jim Minter, "Smith Enters NFL Bid," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 13, 1965, 13; Jack Williams, "Rozelle, Authority Huddle Today," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 8, 1965, 18; "Halas Fears NFL Atlanta Move May Mean AFL Invasion Here," *Chicago Defender*, June 22, 1965, 28.

franchise at a rate of 5 to 1. Both men and women, especially in the coveted 25-44 demographic, preferred football as a spectator sport to baseball. As a whole, Atlantans preferred watching football to watching baseball 39% to 37%. Among the 25-44 demographic, they preferred watching football 47% to 32%. The preference for football was especially pronounced among high income earners. Harris concluded that Atlanta was “well ahead of the national trend on football.” A plurality of American sports fans still preferred baseball to football in 1965, but national polling trends pointed toward a future in America’s sporting culture that looked a lot like Atlanta’s present. 63% of Atlantans said bringing professional football to town was “very important” to them. 14% said they would purchase a season ticket. Another 59% said they would purchase tickets to at least one home game. Harris concluded that Atlanta would have no trouble selling at least 30,000 season tickets, the median number for an NFL franchise in 1965. When the *Journal* and *Constitution* published the results of Harris’ study, several angry readers wrote letters to the papers’ sports departments, asking why professional wrestling and auto racing, two of the region’s most popular sports, were excluded from the list of possible choices, demonstrating the survey’s lack of familiarity with local sporting interests.<sup>125</sup>

“We of the NFL feel that we are just one segment of the entire industrial, economic, and cultural trend that has been gravitating toward Atlanta and the State of Georgia, particularly during the recent period of leadership by Gov. Carl Sanders,” Rozelle said in a press release responding to the positive results of the market research study.<sup>126</sup> Reinsch dismissed the NFL commissioned survey, stating that “any league that needs to do research on the Atlanta market

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<sup>125</sup> “Lou Harris and Associates, Inc. Survey on Professional Football Preferences in Atlanta,” Atlanta Falcons Folders, Canton, OH, Professional Football Hall of Fame, Research Library; “Poll Says Atlanta 5 to 1 for NFL,” *Atlanta Constitution*, June 24, 1965, 19; Jesse Outlar, “The Harris Report,” *Atlanta Constitution*, June 24, 1965, 39.

<sup>126</sup> “Statement from Commissioner Rozelle: 6/23/65,” Atlanta Falcons Folders, Professional Football Hall of Fame, Research Library.

and its new stadium should stay up north.”<sup>127</sup> Fans started submitting their names to Rankin Smith’s Life of Georgia Insurance Company for season tickets, even though the Stadium Authority had yet to make a formal decision on the competing AFL and NFL bids. Reinsch’s chances of securing the lease at Atlanta Stadium became even bleaker when a medical emergency forced him to leave the country. Soon after announcing his AFL expansion franchise, Reinsch traveled with his wife to New Zealand, where she underwent an experimental form of heart surgery. He missed the latter stages of the AFL-NFL war for Atlanta, making only occasional contact with Atlanta or AFL officials as the Stadium Authority finalized its decision.<sup>128</sup>

The AFL did not cede Atlanta without putting on a great show. The league sent an all-star junket down to Georgia to persuade, or possibly just charm, Allen, the Stadium Authority, and the “Big Mules” into selecting Reinsch’s franchise. The AFL junket included Joe Foss, Kansas City Chiefs owner, AFL founder, and billionaire oil heir, Lamar Hunt, New York Jets owner Sonny Werblin, and his prized asset, Joe Namath, the Alabama quarterback whom he had recently signed to the most lucrative deal in the history of professional football: three years for a reported \$427,000. The AFL’s ad hoc diplomatic corps shook every hand, smiled for every picture, and told every one of their top shelf stories over the course of two days in late June 1965, but to no avail.<sup>129</sup> The Stadium Authority, after a few days of deliberation, chose Rankin Smith’s franchise from the older, more prestigious NFL as their new tenant at Atlanta Stadium. Smith agreed to a 10 year stadium lease for 10 percent of the gate. He soon named his club the

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<sup>127</sup> “Atlanta to Join AFL in ’66,” *Atlanta Constitution*, June 5, 1965, 16.

<sup>128</sup> William N. Wallace, “Cox Group in Atlanta Pays Record 7.5 Million for Franchise in AFL,” *New York Times*, June 9, 1965, 55; Furman Bisher, “The Man Who Got the Team,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 17, 1965, 65; Jesse Outlar, “This and That,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 17; Jesse Outlar, “Rozelle’s Choice,” *Atlanta Constitution*, June 30, 1965, 31; July 4, 1965, Furman Bisher, *Atlanta Falcons: Violence and Victory*, 18-24.

<sup>129</sup> Jim Minter, “AFL Escalates Franchise War,” *Atlanta Journal*, June 29, 1965, 1.

Atlanta Falcons, a moniker selected by a local blue ribbon panel from thousands of entries to a “Name the Team” contest sponsored by the local papers. The Stadium Authority stressed that they had chosen not between leagues, but between owners. Everyone involved knew this was not the case.<sup>130</sup> “There was no doubt who we’d take since the AFL was the weak sister still,” Allen said years later in his memoir.<sup>131</sup>

Reinsch learned that the Stadium Authority had selected the NFL entry from a radio broadcast in New Zealand, prompting him to return his franchise to the AFL as soon as he got back to the United States. Reinsch had no interest in owning a professional football franchise in a city other than Atlanta. The AFL awarded the returned franchise to Miami for the 1966 season. Losing out on Atlanta cost Joe Foss his job. The AFL owners replaced him as commissioner with Al Davis, the Oakland Raiders’ ruthless, 36 year-old head coach and general manager. Davis was the living embodiment of Halas’ fears. The Bears’ owner predicted that a more aggressive AFL commissioner would encourage league members to engage the NFL more directly in bidding wars for players and cities, which would eventually force the NFL to seek a merger to prevent further losses to its assets. During Davis’ four months as AFL commissioner in the spring of 1966, the league’s franchises made a concerted effort to outbid NFL franchises for the services of their star players. Simultaneously, the AFL’s inner circle of owners negotiated a merger with the NFL. The NFL’s owners agreed to the merger in large part to prevent AFL teams from poaching players from their rosters, placing new expansion franchises in established NFL markets, or engaging in bidding wars for new markets like they had in 1965 in Atlanta. On June 8, 1966, less than a year after Atlanta selected the more prestigious NFL

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<sup>130</sup> Jan Van Duser, “Atlanta Selects NFL After Rankin Smith Is Awarded Franchise,” *Atlanta Constitution*, July 1, 1965, 1, 48; Furman Bisher and Jim Minter, “NFL Awards Atlanta ’66 Berth; Rankin Smith Gets Franchise,” *Atlanta Journal*, June 30, 1965, 1, 14.

<sup>131</sup> Ivan Allen, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, 164.

over the second-class AFL, the two leagues announced a merger that would become permanent in the 1970 season.<sup>132</sup> Atlanta, it turned out, paid more money to play in the more difficult conference in the league they would have ended up a part of anyway.

## **Conclusion**

The consulting firm of Eric Hill and Associates (EHA) submitted a feasibility study to the Stadium Authority in March 1964 which, among other things, described the impact they foresaw a municipal stadium and professional sports having on Metropolitan Atlanta. EHA's report said that building a stadium would serve as "a symbol to the nation of Atlanta's growth in spirit... this special quality of Atlanta – this spirit – it is the spirit of progressive action that the rest of the nation has come to expect of Atlanta and which will be enhanced when the Stadium is built and major league contests are held."<sup>133</sup> The elite-driven effort to build a municipal stadium and lure professional baseball and football to Atlanta were manifestations of the civic self-confidence and self-mythologizing on display in the quote from EHA's feasibility study. Atlanta's municipal leadership had long believed their city to be unique among its regional peers, both for its economic dynamism and racial moderation. Atlanta's civic leaders' decision to try to make their community a "Major League City" reflected a desire on their part to assert Atlanta's cultural uniqueness from the rest of the South while simultaneously becoming its primary point of reference, both for the region and the nation. To achieve this grand civic enterprise, Atlanta's leaders, both black and white, prioritized stadium building above many other municipal ventures, especially the city's commitment to building affordable housing to replace the thousands of units destroyed during the city's "slum clearance" campaign of the 1950s. The stadium was not the

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<sup>132</sup> Michael Maccambridge, *America's Game*, 219-233; Furman Bisher, *Atlanta Falcons: Violence and Victory*, 23-24.

<sup>133</sup> "Atlanta Stadium Program: Special Dedication Edition (1965)," Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium (Subject Folder 1 of 4), Kenan Research Center.

first or the last civic enterprise prioritized ahead of housing construction. Both highway construction and the building of the Atlanta Civic Center proceeded on land adjacent to the CBD that had been cleared during the 1950s as part of urban renewal, but the city's political and economic leadership invested neither of those developments with the kind of social and cultural meaning that they did with Atlanta Stadium. The Stadium, in the words of Ivan Allen, had "sprung from a previously blighted area, like the mythological Phoenix from the ashes." It transformed Atlanta from a regional center into a "truly cosmopolitan city."<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> "Lawyers Title News: Atlanta Stadium (August 1966)," Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium (Subject Folder 1 of 4), Kenan Research Center.

## CHAPTER 4

### **“The Madison Square Garden of the Southeast”: The Omni Coliseum and the Arrival of Professional Basketball and Hockey in Atlanta**

The publicly subsidized construction of Atlanta Stadium made the city a newly viable destination for professional sports franchises in the mid-1960s. It lured the Braves to Atlanta and led to a turf war between the two major professional football leagues for the right to place a team in the new multipurpose stadium, a struggle that ended in the establishment of the expansion Falcons franchise in the NFL. The luring of these two teams proved to be just the opening round in the campaign to make Atlanta a major league city. The relocation of a professional basketball franchise to Atlanta in 1968 and the 1972 placement of an expansion hockey club in the city proved just as dependent on efforts by civic leaders to plan, finance, and build a state-of-the-art facility to house both teams. Tom Cousins, the majority owner of both the relocated Hawks of the NBA and the expansion Flames of the NHL, spearheaded the effort to build an indoor coliseum suitable for professional sports and other large-scale events in downtown Atlanta. The \$17 million arena, which opened in October 1972, was named the Omni Coliseum.

An advertising agency hired by Bill Putnam, general manager for the arena as well as the Hawks and the Flames, suggested the grandiose moniker. “Omni,” Latin for “all,” was meant to evoke the inclusive vision the arena’s creators had for the venue as a regional entertainment center. The management of the new enclosed arena sought out patronage from a diverse spectrum of Metropolitan Atlantans by hosting a wide range of mass-interest events besides basketball and hockey. The Omni would be the Southeast’s premiere indoor venue for circuses, national conventions, ice skating shows, rock concerts, religious revivals, and, of course,



professional wrestling. Initially, the Stadium Authority, which had final say on naming the facility, resisted the flamboyant name but a 4-3 majority eventually acquiesced to the moniker, which appealed to the deep-seated civic boosting instincts of the municipal leadership and had already been embraced by the Atlanta press corps. Calling the new arena the “Omni” transformed it into a signature building for downtown Atlanta, a civic asset and new point of prestige at the center of the sprawling metropolitan area.<sup>1</sup>

The opening of Tom Cousins’ Omni Complex in 1976 was the end point of a development process that began back in 1960 when Ivan Allen presided over the Atlanta Chamber and released his “Six Point Plan” which championed a developer-driven vision for the revitalization of the center city. Though considerably younger than the municipal leadership of Allen’s generation, Cousins embraced the sense of civic trusteeship that was common sense within the Atlanta Chamber. Cousins had been a lifelong participant and spectator of sports, but he was not a typical gentleman-sportsman like the Falcons’ owner Rankin Smith or the Rover Boys, the Braves’ ownership group. Buying a professional sports franchise was not an extravagant diversion or a pleasurable side business for him. Instead, Cousins was a real estate developer who wanted to make a series of major investments in downtown Atlanta.<sup>2</sup> Cousins became the leader of a new generation of Atlanta civic boosters whose primary focus was the revitalization of downtown through massive redevelopment. He became so closely associated with his large downtown development projects that the media started referring to him as “Mr.

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<sup>1</sup> “Omni Souvenir Dedication Book,” Omni (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Georgia; Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter: An Inside History of Atlanta Flames Hockey* (Huntsville, AL: Strode Publishers, 1975), 16-17, 22-23; “Atlanta Returns to ‘Omni’ as Stadium Name,” *The Washington Post*, August 11, 1972, D8; Jon Nordheimer, “Life-Sized Puppets to Join Atlanta’s Battle on Blight,” *New York Times*, February 7, 1975, 66; “Putnam Head of Atlanta Team in NHL,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 28, 1971, C2; Frank Wells, “Coliseum Adds to City’s Big League Image,” *Atlanta Constitution*, January 19, 1973, 12C; Tom Linthicum, “Omni is Out, It’s Atlanta Coliseum,” *Atlanta Constitution*, June 9, 1972, 8A.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 163; Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 13.

Atlanta.” As a suburban developer turned urban redeveloper, Cousins was simultaneously one of the primary beneficiaries of the decentralization of Metropolitan Atlanta and one of the foremost champions of saving downtown Atlanta from becoming the hole in the center of a sprawling suburban donut. Cousins helped create the need for downtown redevelopment in Atlanta and then purported to have the solution to the problem.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter analyzes the planning and construction of the Omni Coliseum in Atlanta’s CBD and the luring of its two tenants, the Atlanta Hawks basketball team and the Atlanta Flames hockey team, to the city. The young suburban developer used professional sports as his entryway into the field of large-scale urban real-estate projects. The building of the Omni Coliseum and its accompanying entertainment, commercial, and corporate complex was emblematic of the boom in mixed-usage, inward-oriented developments in downtown Atlanta during the late 1960s and 1970s. The construction of MXDs in downtown Atlanta was another grand civic enterprise widely supported by the civic elite. Cousins and his peers envisioned MXDs as developments that would reestablish downtown Atlanta as the commercial, corporate, and leisure center of gravity in the metropolitan area, complementing the redevelopment of the CBD that was inaugurated by the construction of Atlanta Stadium.

This story begins with an examination of Tom Cousins’ successful efforts to procure a professional basketball and a professional hockey franchise for Atlanta, making it the first southern city with teams in all four of the major professional sports leagues. To place both stories within the broader historical context of “franchise free agency,” the opening sections employ a national lens to investigate the arrival of the Hawks and the Flames in Atlanta. It

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<sup>3</sup> Steven P. Miller, *Billy Graham and the Rise of the Republican South*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 169; Walter Woods, “Tom Cousins: Atlanta Power Player Retires,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, December 7, 2006, 1B.

delves further into the national story of “franchise free agency” by examining the Hawks’ relocation from St. Louis and the placement of the expansion Flames franchise in a non-traditional hockey market. As we will see, the move to Atlanta was the culmination of a twenty-two year process, in which the Hawks endured five relocations from one metropolitan area to another.

The Hawks’ frequent relocations in the decades after World War II exemplified the instability that came to characterize the era’s professional sports marketplace as an ever-increasing number of cities tried to secure major league franchises of their own. The story of the Flames’ 1972 arrival in Atlanta as Dixie’s first NHL franchise reflects the troubled growth and diversification of the national sports marketplace in the 1970s. Civic boosters in cities like Atlanta with no historical relationship whatsoever to hockey started competing for professional hockey franchises. Atlanta’s “Big Mules” cheered Cousins’ efforts to secure an NHL team, regarding it as another source of civic pride, a suddenly fashionable, prestigious leisure amenity that would be the envy of its civic rivals. Little did it matter to civic leaders in Atlanta, or a handful of other Sunbelt imitators that soon procured their own hockey teams, that their citizens had almost no familiarity with the sport they were now expected to support fervently and consistently.

### **Repaying a Debt to the City and State”**

In 1958, twenty-six year-old Tom Cousins started a real estate company with his father, which focused on the emerging suburban housing market outside of Atlanta. By the early 1960s, Cousins Properties was Georgia’s largest homebuilder. The younger Cousins soon diversified his business by taking on large-scale office development projects, the first of which was the Piedmont-Cain building in downtown Atlanta, which opened in 1965. Cousins, then in his early

thirties, became the “token youth,” as he later put it, among Atlanta’s “Big Mules.” Like his peers in the city’s establishment, Cousins became preoccupied with the revitalization of downtown Atlanta.<sup>4</sup> In 1966, Cousins acquired land on the west side of downtown in an area known as the “Gulch,” a dilapidated old train depot, as a prospective site for an MXD.<sup>5</sup> Cousins wanted to build a sports arena on the site, which he regarded as a beachhead from which a much larger development would spring. He envisioned an adjoining mixed-usage complex that would combine luxury accommodations, upscale shopping, hundreds of thousands of square feet of corporate office space, and a number of unique entertainment opportunities.<sup>6</sup>

Tom Cousins convinced Atlanta’s civic elite of the virtues of building a downtown arena by creating an immediate need for it. He bought a professional basketball team. On May 3, 1968, Cousins and former Georgia governor Carl Sanders held a press conference in Atlanta to announce that they had purchased the St. Louis Hawks basketball team. Cousins and Sanders said that they planned to relocate the franchise to Atlanta for the 1968-1969 season, pending league approval. Mayor Allen joined them behind the microphones at the press conference, sitting beside the pair at a folding table, obscured by a basketball that had been stenciled “ATLANTA HAWKS” in all capital letters. Like the Falcons and the Braves before them, the Hawks were the first major league team in their sport to set up shop in the South. Initially, the Atlanta papers reported the purchase price as \$2 million, but several weeks later Ben Kerner, the St. Louis Hawks’ longtime owner, told reporters that he had sold the franchise to Cousins and Sanders for \$3.5 million, then a record for an NBA franchise. Cousins paid the vast majority of

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Woods, “Tom Cousins: Atlanta Power Player Retires,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, December 7, 2006, 1B.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid; Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 13.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 164; Tom Walker, “Omni Complex to Help City’s Global Look,” *Atlanta Journal*, October 11, 1972, 1A, 9A; Bob Hertzler, “Study Shows Atlanta Wants Arena,” *Atlanta Journal*, May 7, 1968, 4-D.

the purchase price. Sanders was largely a symbolic partner that lent more prestige and political clout to the venture than he did capital.<sup>7</sup> The news of the developer Cousins and ex-Governor Sanders' buying the Hawks came as a shock even to Atlanta insiders. Kerner described the sale as "the best kept secret I've ever known in sports."<sup>8</sup>

"Carl Sanders and I got into this simply because we thought Atlanta deserved a professional basketball team, and especially a winning team," Cousins said at the press conference announcing the move, "and I felt if we got the team, the city would get the coliseum, which it also deserves."<sup>9</sup> "The possibility of owning an expansion team had no appeal to me at all or to Carl," Cousins went on to tell reporters.<sup>10</sup> Cousins described his plans to build a "Madison Square Garden type" arena at the press conference.<sup>11</sup> Before pursuing the Hawks, Cousins met with Allen to tell him of his interest in financing and building a coliseum in downtown Atlanta and buying a professional basketball team to play in the new facility. Allen advised Cousins to acquire a franchise, find a short-term home for the team in Atlanta, and then build a coliseum.<sup>12</sup> At the introductory press conference, the Hawks new owners announced that they had made a temporary arrangement with Georgia Tech President Edwin Harrison to play at the Alexander Memorial Coliseum, the 7,000 seat basketball arena on the Tech campus, until they completed the proposed downtown arena, pending approval from the University's Board of

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<sup>7</sup> "Atlanta Hawks Give City Third Big-Time Sport," *The Sporting News*, May 18, 1968, 42; "St. Louis Hawks Sold to a Group in Atlanta," *New York Times*, May 4, 1968, 52; Mickey McCarthy, "Hawk Sale Approved," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 8, 1968, 51; "Omni Souvenir Dedication Book," Omni (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center.

<sup>8</sup> Furman Bisher, "Hawks: 'Stolen' From Milwaukee," *Atlanta Journal*, May 7, 1968, 1-D.

<sup>9</sup> Jim Minter, "NBA Expected to Approve Hawks' Move," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 5, 1968, 1-H; WSB TV News Clip, May 1, 1968, *Digital Library of Georgia*, Accessed on July 20, 2014: <http://dbsmaint.galib.uga.edu/cgi/news?query=id:wsbn39332>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Jim Minter, "Tommy Cousins Plans New Roost for Hawks," *Atlanta Journal*, May 4, 1968, 1-B.

<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey Denberg et al., *From Sweet Lou to 'Nique*, 31; "Atlanta's Hawks Covet New Coliseum," *Washington Post*, May 7, 1968, D5.

Regents.<sup>13</sup> Sanders and Cousins told reporters that they planned to hire experts to run the franchise. They did not want to manage a basketball team. They were merely acting as civically-minded capitalists. “An NBA team and a coliseum will help the city and what helps Atlanta helps my business,” Cousins said.<sup>14</sup> He and Sanders had commissioned a private study which they said showed strong local interest in professional basketball. Buying the Hawks, Cousins said, speaking on behalf of both of them, was “repaying a debt to the city and state. Atlanta and Georgia have been good to us,” presenting their business venture as purely altruistic.<sup>15</sup>

Sanders doubled down on Cousins’ description of the project, stating “we definitely feel there is a need for a facility similar to Madison Square Garden in the Southeast and we saw an opportunity to bring it here through the purchase of this franchise. Atlanta deserves this...and we hope the community will bring this facility into being.”<sup>16</sup> Without going into detail, Cousins said he was willing to build an arena provided he had the backing of the Stadium Authority or received some other form of “tax considerations” from the city.<sup>17</sup> Allen endorsed the idea of the Stadium Authority facilitating Cousins’ work on a downtown arena, but, he said, “it’s almost impossible to do it through general obligation bond issues.”<sup>18</sup> “These are subject to public whims and negative votes and do not generally reflect the will of the people,” he said, referring to his own failed efforts in 1962 to win public support for an \$80 million initiative that would

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<sup>13</sup> Bill Clark, “Atlanta Gets Profesional Basketball,” *Atlanta Constitution*, May 4, 1968, 1, 16; Furman Bisher, “Atlanta Hawks for Sale to Right Party,” *Atlanta Journal*, May 6, 1968, 1-C; “Atlanta’s Hawks Covet New Coliseum,” *Washington Post*, May 7, 1968, D5; Greg Maracek, *Full Court: The Untold Stories of the St. Louis Hawks* (St. Louis: Reedy Press, 2006), 214.

<sup>14</sup> Jim Minter, “NBA Expected to Approve Hawks’ Move,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 5, 1968, 1-H.

<sup>15</sup> Bill Clark, “Tech Gave us Chance to land a Winner’-Cousins,” *Atlanta Constitution*, May 4, 1968, 17.

<sup>16</sup> “Atlanta’s Hawks Covet New Coliseum,” *Washington Post*, May 7, 1968, D5.

<sup>17</sup> Jim Minter, “NBA Expected to Approve Hawks’ Move,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 5, 1968, 1-H; Al Thomy, “Young Lions Bought Hawks Because City Deserved ‘Em,” *Sporting News*, June 1, 1968, 46.

<sup>18</sup> WSB TV News Clip, May 1, 1968, *Digital Library of Georgia*.

have financed a Civic Center capable of hosting indoor sporting events.<sup>19</sup> Campaigning on behalf of referendums was not only a part of Allen's past in May 1968, but also his present. He was in the midst of another unsuccessful effort to secure public financing for a large-scale municipal project. This time, he was in the early stages of campaigning in Atlanta and the outlying suburban counties for funding for the construction of a metropolitan-wide rapid transit system under the auspices of MARTA. During the Hawks' introductory press conference, Sanders tried to tie the construction of an arena for the Hawks to construction of the rapid transit system, explaining that the completion of a rapid transit system would make it easier for fans to access the proposed arena.<sup>20</sup>

Kerner, Cousins, and Sanders had been negotiating the sale of the Hawks in secret for several weeks, shuttling back and forth between St Louis and Atlanta in April and early May 1968. The cloak-and-dagger character of negotiations suited both sides. The Atlantans wanted to keep negotiations private because they knew that investors from two other southern cities, New Orleans and Memphis, were also trying to buy the Hawks. Cousins and Sanders wanted to keep the story from becoming a front-page bidding war in which the honor of three of the South's most prestigious cities came into question. Kerner wanted to keep negotiations out of the St. Louis papers to avoid a box-office backlash as his excellent 1967-1968 Hawks team competed in the NBA playoffs. Moreover, St. Louis fans had been largely supportive of the Hawks franchise during their thirteen year tenure in the city (1955-1968). Kerner wanted to make the team's relocation as painless as possible for St. Louis fans and himself.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Jim Minter, "NBA Expected to Approve Hawks' Move," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 5, 1968, 1-H.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.; Bob Hertz, "Hawks Purchase: 'Now or Never,'" *Atlanta Journal*, May 6, 1968, 1-C; WSB TV News Clip, May 1, 1968, *Digital Library of Georgia*.

## **Bison, Blackhawks, and Hawks**

At the time he sold the Hawks, Ben Kerner was the NBA's longest tenured owner and the only owner in the league who controlled 100 percent of his team's stock. Kerner was the lone surviving owner from the early days of the NBA in the immediate aftermath of World War II. The history of the Hawks franchise epitomized the NBA's instability in its early years. More broadly, the NBA's early instability was an example of "franchise free agency" in action, as a professional sports league that was originally based in smaller Midwestern cities tried to remake itself into a national organization with franchises in all of the largest markets. Virtually every NBA franchise teetered on the brink of bankruptcy well into the 1960s. Multiple teams relocated from one city to another almost every season, seeking larger or more basketball friendly markets. Several NBA franchises disbanded when their owners failed to find buyers for their teams. Before settling in St. Louis, Kerner's club leapfrogged around the Midwest throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s, always earning enough money to keep the franchise going for another season. Unlike the hobbyists and gentleman sportsmen who owned many of the other clubs, the Hawks were Kerner's primary source of income.<sup>22</sup>

Thirty-two year old Ben Kerner paid \$1,500 in 1946 for the rights to place a National Basketball League (NBL) expansion franchise in his hometown of Buffalo. Founded in 1937, the NBL merged with the Basketball Association of America (BAA) to form the NBA in 1949. The expansion Buffalo Bisons lasted thirteen games in western New York, receiving almost no support from local fans. Kerner moved his team in the middle of the 1946-1947 season to

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<sup>22</sup> Charley Rosen, *The First Tip-Off: The Incredible Story of the Birth of the NBA* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2009), 11-36; Jeffrey Denberg et al., *From Sweet Lou to 'Nique*, 17-19; "Pro Basketball Era Ends with Kerner," *Sporting News*, January 21, 1967, 12; Keith Schildroth, "Friends Remember Kerner as a 'Pioneer,'" *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 26, 2000, F7.



Moline, Illinois where he rechristened them the “Blackhawks” in reference to the locally significant 1832 Black Hawk War. The Tri-Cities Blackhawks, as they were known in subsequent years, represented Moline and Rock Island, Illinois as well as Davenport, Iowa, just across the Mississippi River, in the NBA. They played at Wharton Field House, a 6,000 seat arena in Moline, drawing strong enough crowds for Kerner to turn a profit every year his team played in the Tri-Cities. Despite Kerner’s box office success in Western Illinois, NBA owners pressured him to move his franchise into a larger market. They aspired for the NBA to be counted among the major leagues, a status it was hard for them to claim when Fort Wayne, Providence, and Moline had franchises, but many of the Midwest and Northeast’s largest cities did not. Kerner refused to stand in the way of the league’s ambitions for major league status. He accepted an offer from Milwaukee in 1951 to move his franchise to their new city arena. Kerner abbreviated his team’s name to “Hawks” when he shifted his franchise to Milwaukee, removing the local specificity of the “Blackhawks” moniker.<sup>23</sup>

Greater Milwaukee’s population of nearly 1.1 million was three times larger than the population of the Tri-Cities region in 1950, but Wisconsin proved a far less hospitable home for Kerner’s franchise. The Milwaukee Hawks struggled on the court and drew light crowds to their home games. Their average attendance never surpassed 2,000 fans per game. The City of Milwaukee charged Kerner a flat \$25,000 per season to rent the city arena, one of the highest rental fees paid by an NBA franchise at the time. The imbalance in the team’s ledger forced Kerner to sell off his best players to keep the franchise from folding.<sup>24</sup> The team’s finances got so dire that Hawks players were known for “struggling to beat their checks to the bank in the

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<sup>23</sup> Jeffrey Denberg et al., *From Sweet Lou to ‘Nique*, 17-19.

<sup>24</sup> “Milwaukee’s Pro Basket Club for Sale,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 21, 1954, A2; Jeffrey Denberg, Roland Lazenby, and Tom Stinson, *From Sweet Lou to ‘Nique*, 17-19.

early 50's."<sup>25</sup> The Hawks four-year tenure in Milwaukee coincided with the NBA's most economically desperate era. As the league struggled to place teams in viable markets, the number of franchises dwindled from eleven in 1950 to eight in 1955. Kerner tried unsuccessfully for several seasons to find a local buyer in Milwaukee. In 1955, he accepted an offer to move the Hawks to St. Louis, then the nation's ninth largest metropolitan area and home to 700,000 more people than Greater Milwaukee. St. Louis, though, was just as devoid as Milwaukee of professional basketball tradition.<sup>26</sup>

The prospects of the Hawks flourishing in St. Louis seemed remote. The city's previous entry in the NBA, the St. Louis Bombers, struggled through four seasons before folding in 1950. St. Louis proper was in the midst of a white-flight driven population decline that reduced the city's population from greater than 850,000 in 1950 to just over 450,000 in 1980, cutting significantly into the middle and working class urban white population that made up much of the early NBA's spectatorship. A confluence of events, including the deindustrialization of St. Louis proper, the creation of a vast, virtually-all black second ghetto on St. Louis' northside through restrictive housing covenants and urban renewal, and the rapid incorporation of all-white suburban communities in St. Louis County, transformed the once booming manufacturing center into one of the nation's most racially and economically segregated metropolitan areas.<sup>27</sup>

The Hawks' home court in St. Louis was the Kiel Auditorium, an aging municipally-owned facility that combined a 9,000 seat sports arena with an Opera House. The arena and the Opera House were separated by a far-too-thin wall. If the Opera House and the arena hosted events on the same evening, cheering from the arena's balcony bled into the concert hall while

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<sup>25</sup> Furman Bisher, "Hawks: 'Stolen' From Milwaukee," *Atlanta Journal*, May 7, 1968, 1-D.

<sup>26</sup> Jeffrey Denberg et al., *From Sweet Lou to 'Nique*, 17-19.

<sup>27</sup> See Colin Gordon, *Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the Fate of the American City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

the orchestra provided background music for the action on the basketball court. Despite these obstacles, the Hawks became the NBA's second most popular and successful franchise of the late 1950s and early 1960s, dominating play in the league's Western Division while coming up short in the NBA Finals on three out of four occasions against the dynastic Boston Celtics of the Eastern Division. The St. Louis Hawks won five consecutive Western Division regular season championships (1957-1961), reached the NBA Finals four times (1958, 1959, 1960, 1961), and won the NBA Championship in 1958, defeating their perennial nemesis Boston in a six game series. The Hawks' were led by their "Big Three" of Cliff "Lil' Abner" Hagan, an undersized forward from Owensboro, Kentucky who used his masterful hook shot to become one of the league's leading scorers; Slater Martin, a veteran point guard from Texas with exceptional ball-handling and playmaking skills who played on all five of the Minneapolis Lakers' championship teams in the late 1940s and early 1950s; and Bob Pettit, a 6'9 Baton Rouge native who was the premier scoring and rebounding forward of his generation. The darling of the St. Louis fans, Robert E. Lee Pettit Jr. garnered All-NBA honors in 10 of his 11 seasons and retired in 1965 as the NBA's all-time leading scorer. The Hawks' built their Western Division dynasty around Pettit, whom they drafted out of Louisiana State University (LSU) in 1954, the year before the franchise moved to St. Louis.<sup>28</sup> Pettit was arguably the most popular professional athlete in St. Louis history who did not play for the Cardinals baseball team. As Pettit's career came to a close, the *Sporting News* intoned on his legacy, stating "St. Louis has been blessed with two of

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<sup>28</sup> Bob Burnes, "Bob Pettit: NBA Answer to Musial," *The Sporting News*, February 15, 1964, 31; "Pettit Leaving Super-Star Imprint on NBA," *The Sporting News*, March 13, 1965, 32; Jeffrey Denberg et al., *From Sweet Lou to 'Nique*, 22-26; "Pettit Says Official Good-Bye to City," *Chicago Defender*, March 27, 1965, 20; Bernie Miklasz, "Pettit is One of St. Louis' Biggest Sports Stars," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 22, 2004, 3; Lowell Reidenbaugh, "Peerless Pettit Powers Hawks to Pro Cage Prize over Celtics," *The Sporting News*, April 23, 1958, 17.

the all-time great sports heroes- No. 6 Musial with the Cardinals and no. 9 Pettit, with the Hawks.”<sup>29</sup>

Throughout the Hawks’ run as the NBA’s top Western Division franchise, they enjoyed outstanding local support. Boisterous crowds that averaged well over 8,000 per night at Kiel in the late 1950s and early 1960s gave the Hawks a decided home court advantage. On a number of occasions, the Hawks predominately blue collar fans displayed a willingness to intervene in the action, getting into fistfights with opposing fans and players, egging the benches of visiting teams, and shouting often racially-charged invective at opposing players.<sup>30</sup> “It was always a packed house at Kiel... and it was smoke-filled up to the ceiling,” Cliff Hagan recalled for a 1998 *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* retrospective on the team.<sup>31</sup> “We had the noisiest, most hard-core fans in the league,” Bob Pettit said of the Hawks’ supporters at Kiel, “...some of those games we had with the Celtics in St. Louis. I still get a chill thinking about the atmosphere.”<sup>32</sup> The box-office success of the Hawks in St. Louis helped make Kerner a very wealthy man and the toast of the city. For several consecutive seasons during the team’s late 1950s and early 1960s heyday, the Hawks ran the most profitable organization in the NBA. In February 1961, the civic booster organization Downtown St. Louis Inc. honored Kerner at half-time of a nationally televised game on NBC for his role in helping to renew the vitality of commerce in the center city.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Cy Perkins, “Pettit Leaving Super-Star Imprint on NBA,” *The Sporting News*, March 13, 1965, 32.

<sup>30</sup> Greg Maracek, *Full Court*, 59-61, 194-195; “Pro Basketball Era Ends with Kerner,” *Sporting News*, January 21, 1967, 12; Keith Schildroth, “Friends Remember Kerner as a ‘Pioneer,’” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 26, 2000, F7; “Celtics Pelted with Eggs in Loss to Hawks,” *The Washington Post*, December 29, 1960, D2; “Fans Listen to Auerbach, Throw Eggs,” *The Washington Post*, January 29, 1959, D3; Milton Gross, “Bigots Insulted Russell’s Kids,” *Boston Globe*, February 24, 1966, 51.

<sup>31</sup> Tom Wheatley, “Hawks Recall Their Big Championship Moment,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, January 19, 1998, C5.

<sup>32</sup> Bernie Miklasz, “NBA’s Boom Still a Bust in St. Louis,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 1, 1990, 1F.

<sup>33</sup> “Downtown Business Group to Honor Kerner,” *Sporting News*, February 8, 1961, 3; Lowell Reidenbaugh, “Kerner Cashing in as Promotion King,” *The Sporting News*, March 23, 1960, 1, 2.

Much like the St. Louis Cardinals baseball team, the Hawks took on the character of a regional team. Like the baseball Cardinals, radio and television coverage of the Hawks emanating from St. Louis' KMOX and KPLR served as the flagship for a media network that included stations in more than a half-dozen states. The surrounding states to the south and west of Missouri did not have professional basketball. Any media coverage that professional basketball received in these regions focused on the Hawks, mirroring the Cardinals' decades-old radio network which spanned the Old Southwest. Moreover, virtually all of the Hawks' stars during the late 1950s and early 1960s were white southerners with roots in the Old Southwest, just like the Cardinals' baseball teams of the first half of the twentieth century, which relied heavily on their extensive scouting and farm systems in the western half of Dixie.<sup>34</sup>

The Hawks' preeminence in the Western Division ended in the early 1960s when the recently relocated Los Angeles Lakers superseded the aging St. Louis team in the standings. The placement of the Wilt Chamberlain-led San Francisco Warriors franchise in the Western Division following their 1962 relocation from Philadelphia made it even more difficult for the Hawks to compete. The Hawks' declining fortunes on the basketball court coincided to a great extent with their waning local support, which dropped to an average of 6,641 attendees per game in the 1964-1965 season.<sup>35</sup> Kerner responded to the Hawks' diminishing attendance by

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<sup>34</sup> Bob Burnes, "Bob Pettit: NBA Answer to Musial," *The Sporting News*, February 15, 1964, 31; "Pettit Leaving Super-Star Imprint on NBA," *The Sporting News*, March 13, 1965, 32; Jeffrey Denberg, Roland Lazenby, and Tom Stinson, *From Sweet Lou to 'Nique*, 22-26; "Pettit Says Official Good-Bye to City," *Chicago Defender*, March 27, 1965, 20; Bernie Miklasz, "Pettit One of St. Louis' Biggest Sports Stars," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 22, 2004, 3; Lowell Reidenbaugh, "Peerless Pettit Powers Hawks to Pro Cage Prize over Celtics," *The Sporting News*, April 23, 1958, 17; Lowell Reidenbaugh, "Kerner Cashing in as Promotion King," *The Sporting News*, March 23, 1960, 1, 2.

<sup>35</sup> Jeffrey Denberg et al., *From Sweet Lou to 'Nique*, 24-26; Mark Kriegel, *Pistol: The Life of Pete Maravich* (New York: Free Press, 2008), 185-189.

scheduling several games each season in cities without NBA franchises, primarily Memphis and Miami.<sup>36</sup>

Falling out of the first tier of the Western Division was not the only reason attendance declined at Kiel Auditorium. Several other factors played into the lack of local interest in the latter day St. Louis Hawks. All of a sudden, St. Louis sports fans had a number of appealing new options competing for their discretionary income. The opening of state-of-the-art Busch Stadium in 1966 made attending a Cardinals baseball or Big Red football game a novel and likely far more comfortable experience than attending a Hawks game. The Depression-Era amenities of Kiel could not compete with the comforts of the city's new stadium. Collectively, the baseball and football seasons at Busch Stadium stretched from April through December, cutting off the Hawks from some of their potential customers during the opening and closing months of their schedule.<sup>37</sup>

For years, the Hawks had been the only winning team in town, garnering division championship after division championship while the baseball and football Cardinals posted consistently mediocre records. As the Hawks of the mid 1960s faded in the standings, the city's oldest and most popular team returned to its traditional position as a perennial pennant contender. The reemergence of the St. Louis Cardinals baseball team as an NL power after more than a decade as an also-ran proved a further obstacle to maintaining public interest in the Hawks. In the 1964 and 1967 seasons, the Cardinals won the World Series, drawing a franchise record 2,090,145 fans to Busch Stadium in 1967. The football Cardinals, who had yet to move to St. Louis when the Hawks won their only championship in 1958, fielded increasingly

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<sup>36</sup> Darrell Simmons, "Fan Interest Make Hawks Fly," *Atlanta Journal*, May 17, 1968; Jeffrey Denberg et al., *From Sweet Lou to 'Nique*, 24-26; "Hawks Dropping Memphis Games," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, April 24, 1967, 3C.

<sup>37</sup> Darrell Simmons, "Fan Interest Make Hawks Fly," *Atlanta Journal*, May 17, 1968, 4-D; Mark Kriegel, *Pistol*, 185-189.

competitive football teams during the mid-1960s as well. The Big Red's success in the standings and the lure of watching them play at the new Busch Stadium helped the team expand its season ticket holding base from 12,000 to more than 30,000 for the 1966 season.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, the success of the football and baseball Cardinals in the mid-1960s shifted local media coverage away from the Hawks, both in the city's two daily newspapers and on radio and television. By the 1967-1968 season, the Hawks' radio and television ratings sank to the point that Kerner's friend Gussie Busch started quietly underwriting the poorly rated broadcasts simply to keep them on the air.<sup>39</sup>

The arrival of the St. Louis Blues, one of six expansion franchises that formed a new Western Division in the NHL for the 1967-1968 season, made the Hawks' position even more precarious. The Blues competed directly with the Hawks, playing an October through April schedule just like the incumbent basketball franchise. Blues owner Sid Salomon III invested \$1.5 million in the revitalization of his team's rink, the St. Louis Arena, a long decrepit facility that was built during the 1920s to host regional agricultural fairs. Salomon purchased the St. Louis Arena soon after the NHL granted him an expansion franchise. He made attending a Blues game a markedly more fan-friendly experience than attending a Hawks game by upgrading the lighting, restrooms, and concessions at the Arena to contemporary standards. Kerner and the city of St. Louis failed to make any similar improvements to the municipally-owned Kiel Auditorium during the Hawks' decade in residence. Salomon installed plush, movie theatre-style chairs in the Arena's box seats. Conversely, most of the seats at Kiel had been in place since the 1930s.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Maracek, *Full Court*, 152-153; Darrell Simmons, "Fan Interest Make Hawks Fly," *Atlanta Journal*, May 17, 1968, 4-D; Mark Kriegel, *Pistol*, 185-189.

<sup>39</sup> Maracek, *Full Court*, 152-153; Bob Broeg, "Hawks' Bubble Burst in Inflated Sports Market Here," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 5, 1968, 2C.

<sup>40</sup> Wally Cross, "The Bashing Sport," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 8, 1967, 3; Dan O'Neill, "Years of Change: Colorful History: Stillman's group will be eighth to own the Blues," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 10, 2012, C1;

Attending a Blues game became the city's most fashionable evening out almost immediately. Women in furs and their finest jewelry accompanied men in suits and Stetson hats to Blues games at the frequently sold out 14,000 seat St. Louis Arena. "Hockey became a social symbol in St. Louis," *Globe-Democrat* sports editor Bob Burnes wrote, reflecting back on the appeal of the novel sport to the city's affluent set.<sup>41</sup> The allure of professional hockey to St. Louisans in the late 1960s was not simply a matter of the game's novelty or the comfortable environs in which it was played. The Blues' immediate success on the ice contributed greatly to the team's box office appeal. Guided by their thirty-seven year-old goaltender Glenn Hall, the Blues made a run through the 1968 Western Division playoffs to the Stanley Cup, where they lost to the Montreal Canadiens in four games. The Blues' success in their inaugural season overshadowed the upstart 1967-1968 Hawks, who won their division and posted their best regular season record in franchise history. Despite their reemergence as one of professional basketball's premier teams, the Hawks made a surprisingly early playoff exit in May 1968, playing in front of crowds of fewer than 3,000 at Kiel Auditorium, less than a quarter of the number of people who paid to watch the Blues during the Stanley Cup Playoffs.<sup>42</sup>

Notwithstanding the variety of new distractions available to St. Louis sports fans, the renaissance of the Hawks' fortunes during the 1967-1968 season seemed like the perfect thing to renew local interest in the club. But as it turned out, the Western Division champion Hawks of 1967-1968 drew the smallest crowds in the franchise's history in St. Louis. The Hawks sold out one game at Kiel that season, a doubleheader with the Harlem Globetrotters. Despite St. Louis'

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Bob Burnes, "In Brighter Days, Blues Hockey was a Social Symbol," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, January 13, 1983, 6B; Darrell Simmons, "Fan Interest Make Hawks Fly," *Atlanta Journal*, May 17, 1968, 4-D.

<sup>41</sup> Bob Burnes, "In Brighter Days, Blues Hockey was a Social Symbol," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, January 13, 1983, 6B; Greg Maracek, *Full Court*, 199-200; Richard Caldwell interview by the author, October 27, 2011, 17.

<sup>42</sup> Bob Burnes, "In Brighter Days, Blues Hockey was a Social Symbol," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, January 13, 1983, 6B; *John J. Archibald*, "Guerin's Always the Boss," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 5, 1968, 4-H; Darrell Simmons, "Fan Interest Make Hawks Fly," *Atlanta Journal*, May 17, 1968, 4-D; Mark Kriegel, *Pistol*, 185-189.



fans' willingness to subject opposing players to racial epithets, the Globetrotters had been an outstanding draw in St. Louis throughout the Hawks tenure in the city. The Hawks' predominately white fan base that displayed striking racial animosity toward black opponents was willing to cheer on the all-black Globetrotters in their entertaining exhibition games. The Globetrotters came to St. Louis for doubleheaders with the Hawks once or twice every season. In the Hawks' later years in St. Louis, doubleheaders with the Globetrotters were one of the few reliable ways to draw large crowds to the Kiel Auditorium. In the only Hawks-Globetrotters doubleheader during the 1967-1968 season, a full house at Kiel watched the Globetrotters extend their winning streak against the Washington Generals in the opening exhibition game. Thousands of fans left immediately after the Globetrotters' game, leaving a half-empty arena by the time the first-place Hawks even took the court.<sup>43</sup>

Persistent rumors that Kerner wanted to sell the Hawks and that he could not find a local buyer for the club did considerable damage to already weakened fan morale. In January 1967, Kerner announced he was putting the team up for sale because of his declining health. Rheumatoid arthritis limited Kerner's mobility to the point that he could no longer be the hands-on operator of his club. Rather than maintain mere titular control of the franchise, he wanted to sell the team to an energetic local buyer who would restore the Hawks to their past glory. Kerner said that despite the recent downturn in fan support and the team's less-than-ideal arena, he had made money all twelve of his years in St. Louis. Kerner received offers in excess of \$3 million from potential buyers in New York, Chicago, Houston, and New Orleans, all of whom wanted to move the team to their cities, but none from investors in St. Louis. Rather than sell the Hawks to

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<sup>43</sup> Darrell Simmons, "Fan Interest Make Hawks Fly," *Atlanta Journal*, May 17, 1968, 4-D; Lowell Reidenbaugh, "Kerner Cashing in as Promotion King," *The Sporting News*, March 23, 1960, 1, 2; "Pro Basketball Era Ends with Kerner," *Sporting News*, January 21, 1967, 12; Keith Schildroth, "Friends Remember Kerner as a 'Pioneer,'" *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 26, 2000, F7.

owners who would surely move the team, Kerner announced that he was going to hang on to the team indefinitely, until he could find an appropriate local buyer for the club.<sup>44</sup>

Months before Kerner announced his plans to sell the team, he told local reporters that the city needed to build a new arena or significantly upgrade Kiel if they wanted his Hawks to stay in St. Louis permanently. In August 1966, Kerner said that Kiel Auditorium, with its lack of easily accessible parking lots, well-worn amenities, and small seating capacity, was preventing the Hawks from generating enough revenue to compete financially against larger market teams playing in new arenas with twice the seating capacity of St. Louis' decrepit facility.<sup>45</sup> When the Hawks moved into Kiel in 1955, it had the NBA's third largest seating capacity and was in no worse shape than at least half of the arenas in the league. By 1967, the Hawks were playing in the league's smallest arena and undoubtedly its most poorly maintained.<sup>46</sup> Soon after the Blues' arrival in St. Louis, Salomon offered Kerner a lease at the newly upgraded St. Louis Arena. City leaders pressed Kerner to accept Salomon's proposal, but the Hawks owner, fearing scheduling conflicts and the loss of face that becoming his direct competitor's tenant entailed, refused the offer.<sup>47</sup> The city's unwillingness to help the Hawks build a new arena frustrated Kerner tremendously, considering St. Louis' recent benevolence toward the baseball and football Cardinals. In 1960, the city's political and corporate elite campaigned successfully for public approval of a municipal bond that helped to subsidize the construction of Busch Stadium. In

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<sup>44</sup> "Hawks Not for Sale, Kerner Says," *Chicago Tribune*, February 2, 1967, E5; "Put Hawks Up for Sale in St. Louis," *Chicago Tribune*, January 4, 1967, C3; "3 Groups Bidding for NBA Club," *Chicago Tribune*, January 5, 1967, E4; "Schoenwald Group May Go After Hawks," *Chicago Tribune*, January 6, 1967, C6; "Hawk Flip-Flop Takes Heavy Toll on Ben's Health," *Sporting News*, February 21, 1962, 2; Greg Maracek, *Full Court*, 207-213; Bob Broeg, "Hawks' Bubble Burst in Inflated Sports Market Here," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 5, 1968, 2C; "Pro Basketball Era Ends with Kerner," *Sporting News*, January 21, 1967, 12; Keith Schildroth, "Friends Remember Kerner as a 'Pioneer,'" *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 26, 2000, F7.

<sup>45</sup> "Hawks Need New Arena, Owner Says," *The Washington Post*, August 18, 1966, C2; "Ben Kerner Hopeful of New Arena," *Washington Post*, February 9, 1968, D3; Greg Maracek, *Full Court*, 210.

<sup>46</sup> Frank Deford, "Fast Start for Ben's Hawks," *Sports Illustrated*, November 13, 1967, 24.

<sup>47</sup> "Ben Kerner Hopeful of New Arena," *Washington Post*, February 9, 1968, D3.

1964, civic leaders convinced the Bidwills not to move the football Cardinals to Atlanta by offering them an array of financial benefits. When Kerner sought out financial assistance for the Hawks, city leaders remained aloof.<sup>48</sup>

When Bob Burnes of the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* offered up his post-mortem of the Hawks' move to Atlanta, he cited three primary factors for the team's decline in local popularity: competition from other sports, the Hawks' archaic arena, and what he euphemistically called "the racial factor."<sup>49</sup> Retrospectives on the Hawks tend to either lean heavily on the issue of race in the team's departure or, conversely, protest too much against it being a factor in their declining popularity. Wherever the truth of the matter actually lies, "the racial factor," as Burnes described it, reshaped the relationship between the Hawks and their fans during their last years in St. Louis. The racial transformation of the Hawks roster undoubtedly contributed to the declining local support for the team. Even as the team returned to the top of the standings in the 1967-1968 season, St. Louis' predominately white basketball fans proved unwilling to support a team that no longer looked like they did. Relatively few African Americans from the city's still-small black middle class attended Hawks games.<sup>50</sup>

No longer were the Hawks a team led by white southerners. Pettit, Martin, and Hagan had all retired, muting the Hawks' identity as a regional team for the Old Southwest. By the time of the 1967-1968 season, all five of the team's starters and all of their regularly playing backups were black. Several of the Hawks black players were southerners, including center Zelmo Beaty and small forward Joe Caldwell, both of whom were Texans, but their southern heritage was

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<sup>48</sup> Bob Broeg, "Hawks' Bubble Burst in Inflated Sports Market Here," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 5, 1968, 2C.

<sup>49</sup> Bob Burnes, "Hawks Sold, Will Move to Atlanta," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, May 4-5, 1968, 1, 7G.

<sup>50</sup> Jeremy Rutherford, "Departure of Hawks Still is Bittersweet Affair," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 26, 1999, D16.

clearly insufficient for many previous Hawks fans.<sup>51</sup> “I vividly recall people saying to me that if ‘I want to go see the Harlem Globetrotters, I will go see the Globetrotters,’” longtime St. Louis sports broadcaster Ron Jacober said of the attitudes of the city’s sports fans towards the 1967-1968 Hawks.<sup>52</sup> “There were a few of the season ticket holders who were honest,” former Hawks ticket manager Norm Goette told the *Post-Dispatch* in 1999, “they’d tell me: ‘I’ll take the kid down and tell him to be like Cliff Hagan. But Cleo Hill,’” Goette said, referring to one of the team’s first black players.<sup>53</sup> Fans who had heckled the Celtics’ Bill Russell with shouts of “go back to Africa” and “watch out, Pettit, you’ll get covered with chocolate,” were, not surprisingly, disinclined to embrace the transformation of their own team’s roster into a predominately African American one.<sup>54</sup>

Reinforcing the evident racial divide between the Hawks’ players and their fan base was the depiction of the team in the press. The local and national media described the Hawks play with language steeped in racial meaning, characterizing their style of play as being built around aggressiveness and athleticism more than ball-playing skill. “Their players are heavy in muscle and quickness. They are below average by NBA standards in height and out-court shooting skill,” John J. Archibald of the *Atlanta Constitution* wrote of the Hawks after Cousins and Sanders announced the franchise’s move to Atlanta, reflecting the consensus view of the team in the national media.<sup>55</sup> The idea that the St. Louis Hawks of the late 1960s played a different style of basketball than the Hawks of the late 1950s was grounded in reality. Their starting front-court

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<sup>51</sup> Mark Kriegel, *Pistol*, 185-189; John J. Archibald, “Guerin’s Always the Boss,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 5, 1968, 4-H.

<sup>52</sup> Ron Jacober interview by the author, June 13, 2013, 39, transcript.

<sup>53</sup> Jeremy Rutherford, “Departure of Hawks Still is Bittersweet Affair,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 26, 1999, D16.

<sup>54</sup> Milton Gross, “Bigots Insulted Russell’s Kids,” *Boston Globe*, February 24, 1966, 51.

<sup>55</sup> John J. Archibald, “Hawks Play ‘Inside’ Game To Earn Aggressive Label,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 5, 1968, 3-H.

of Zelmo Beaty, Bill Bridges, and Paul Silas were all highly athletic players who displayed more lateral and vertical mobility than their predecessors Cliff Hagan and Bob Pettit. The 1967-1968 Hawks starting backcourt of Lenny Wilkens and Lou Hudson certainly displayed greater agility and quickness than Slater Martin. Hawks coach Richie Guerin built his team's strategy around their superior athleticism and toughness compared to most of their opponents. "They win with hustle, cunning and brawn and are rewarded with anonymity...it's a running and pressing team," Guerin told *Sports Illustrated's* Frank Deford in late 1967, begrudging the lack of stardom his outstanding cast of players enjoyed locally and nationally.<sup>56</sup> It was impossible not to notice the striking athleticism of Richie Guerin's Hawks teams of the late 1960s, but the idea that his Hawks were somehow lacking in manual skill relative to their predecessors was the problematic part of the media narrative surrounding the team.<sup>57</sup> The pigeonholing of the Hawks as an athletically-superior but skill-deficient team reflected a broader anxiety in the sports media about the transformation of professional basketball into a majority-black league, an anxiety that has manifested itself in different forms in different time periods across a wide range of athletic pursuits since the integration of professional sports began in the post-World War II era.<sup>58</sup>

The strongest argument against the "racial factor" being the major reason for the Hawks' declining popularity in St. Louis was the enthusiastic support of St. Louisans for the baseball Cardinals' strikingly diverse teams of the mid-to-late 1960s. The St. Louis baseball Cardinals underwent a similar demographic transformation to the Hawks during the 1960s, going from a team that had, for decades, consisted primarily of white southerners recruited from the team's

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<sup>56</sup> Frank Deford, "Fast Start for Ben's Hawks," *Sports Illustrated*, November 13, 1967, 24.

<sup>57</sup> Greg Maracek, *Full Court*, 204-206; John J. Archibald, "Guerin's Always the Boss," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 5, 1968, 4-H.

<sup>58</sup> For a concise entry into the discussion of this multi-faceted topic as it relates to basketball, see David Halberstam's *The Breaks of the Game* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981), 35-36.

extensive Southern scouting network to one whose standout players were primarily black. Rather than shunning the increasingly diverse Cardinals, their predominately white fan base broke franchise attendance records to watch their World Series winning teams in 1964 and 1967. Most of the star players on both of those Cardinals' championship teams were black players, including Bob Gibson, Lou Brock, Orlando Cepeda, and Curt Flood. Just like the Hawks, the Cardinals developed a reputation for aggressive play: their speed on the bases, their spectacular defensive plays, and the brush back pitching of Bob Gibson, baseball's most intimidating pitcher of the era. Evidently, the enduring popularity of baseball in St. Louis transcended racial and socio-economic differences in the city more easily than professional basketball, which appealed at the time primarily to the city's shrinking urban white working class.<sup>59</sup>

Whether racial issues, competition from other professional sports franchises, or the poor conditions at the Kiel Auditorium constituted the most significant reason for the Hawks' departure from St. Louis, it was clear that by the spring of 1968 Ben Kerner wanted to sell his basketball franchise. A year removed from his 1967 dalliance with the idea of selling the Hawks, Kerner was now willing to sell the franchise to investors that wanted to move the team to another city, so long as they provided the Hawks with a playing facility that suited the NBA's desire to upgrade the league's current stock of arenas.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Doug Feldman, *El Birdos: The 1967 and 1968 St. Louis Cardinals* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2007), 111-127; Davarian Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 192; Peter Golenbock, *The Spirit of St. Louis: A History of the St. Louis Cardinals and Browns* (New York: It Books, 2001), 464-502; William Leggett, "Speed Won the Series," *Sports Illustrated*, October 26, 1964, 10. "Story of 1967 Cardinal Pennant in a Word: Balance," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 1, 1967, 12J; Mike Eisenbath, "Era of Good Feeling in Turbulent '60s, Cards were One for All," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 5, 1992, 1F.

<sup>60</sup> Greg Maracek, *Full Court*, 214; Bob Hertz, "Hawks Purchase: 'Now or Never,'" *Atlanta Journal*, May 6, 1968, 1-C; Bill Clark, "Will NBA Come Here?" *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 9, 1967, 33.

## **Avoiding a “Bidwill Reenactment”**

When Cousins and Sanders first approached Ben Kerner in early 1968 about selling the team, the Hawks owner expressed his reluctance because of their lack of a suitable arena in Atlanta. Kerner was eager to sell the team, but he did not want the Hawks to settle for another subpar arena. Such a move would have tainted his legacy as owner. It would have demonstrated Kerner’s lack of concern about the franchise’s future stability and his unwillingness to help the NBA meet its goal of placing its franchises in North America’s premier playing facilities. When Kerner consulted with NBA Commissioner Walter Kennedy about the possibility of moving the Hawks to Atlanta, the Commissioner expressed strong reservations. Kennedy said that he doubted the Atlanta group would gain league approval for a relocation unless they secured a permanent playing facility for the 1968-1969 season, reiterating the league’s standing concern about placing a team in the city. Several years earlier, when the NBA was considering expanding for the 1965-1966 season, the league commissioned a survey that analyzed the potential success of professional basketball in a number of North American cities. The survey concluded that Atlanta’s lack of a suitable playing facility made it an unfeasible choice for expansion. The city’s largest available public or private auditorium for professional basketball in 1965 was the 5,000 seat City Armory, which would have been the smallest facility in the league. Georgia Tech’s 7,200 seat Alexander Memorial Coliseum was the city’s largest basketball arena, but the University had made it clear to professional sports leagues for many years that it would not consider renting out its facilities for anything but amateur athletics.<sup>61</sup>

Following his meeting with Kennedy, Kerner asked Cousins and Sanders to come back to St. Louis for further discussions on the Hawks sale. Kerner suggested that if they still wanted to

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<sup>61</sup> Bob Hertzler, “Hawks Purchase: ‘Now or Never,’” *Atlanta Journal*, May 6, 1968, 1-C; Bill Clark, “Will NBA Come Here?” *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 9, 1967, 33.

buy the team, they should leave the franchise in St. Louis temporarily while Cousins built his proposed downtown coliseum in Atlanta.<sup>62</sup> Cousins and Sanders were familiar with the unpleasantness of a lame duck season from Atlanta's recent struggle with Milwaukee for the Braves. They were also familiar with Atlanta's recent courting of the St. Louis Cardinals' football team and the bidding war that ensued between the two cities while the Bidwills weighed their options.<sup>63</sup> "The people of St. Louis would have seen an Atlanta ownership and would have known what was going on," Cousins said of the possibility of buying the Hawks and leaving them temporarily at Kiel.<sup>64</sup> To "avoid a Bidwill reenactment," as Furman Bisher later put it, Cousins contacted Georgia Tech president Edwin Harrison to see if he could rent out the Alexander Memorial Coliseum temporarily while he built the new arena.<sup>65</sup>

For years, Georgia Tech had been unwilling to cooperate with civic efforts to bring professional sports to the city, particularly professional football. They refused to allow prospective AFL or NFL franchises to use Grant Field as a temporary home while the city built Atlanta Stadium. Georgia Tech refused to allow even one-off exhibition football games to be held at Grant Field.<sup>66</sup> Tech's "resolute aloofness to such coarse and unwashed games," as Furman Bisher described it, was a product of several circumstances.<sup>67</sup> Most importantly, Georgia Tech's institutional identity was inextricably intertwined with the history and tradition of Grant Field. Fall Saturdays at Grant Field made visible not only Georgia Tech's status as a national football power, but the school's position as a pillar of Atlanta's social and cultural life.

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<sup>62</sup> WSB TV News Clip, May 1, 1968, *Digital Library of Georgia*; Bob Hertz, "Hawks Purchase: 'Now or Never,'" *Atlanta Journal*, May 6, 1968, 1-C; Bill Clark, "Will NBA Come Here?" *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 9, 1967, 33.

<sup>63</sup> Furman Bisher, "Hawks: 'Stolen' From Milwaukee," *Atlanta Journal*, May 7, 1968, 1-D.

<sup>64</sup> Bob Hertz, "Hawks Purchase: 'Now or Never,'" *Atlanta Journal*, May 6, 1968, 1-C.

<sup>65</sup> Furman Bisher, "Hawks: 'Stolen' From Milwaukee," *Atlanta Journal*, May 7, 1968, 1-D.

<sup>66</sup> Jim Minter, "NBA Expected to Approve Hawks' Move," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 5, 1968, 1-H.

<sup>67</sup> Furman Bisher, "Atlanta Hawks for Sale to Right Party," *Atlanta Journal*, May 6, 1968, 1-C.



Tech administrators and alumni feared that professional sports would taint the prestige of their hallowed field, especially if, as Mayor Hartsfield had suggested, the baggage of the big leagues included bookmaking and organized crime. Allowing professional teams to play at Grant Field would also have encouraged new and direct competition with Tech for the discretionary dollars of local football fans. Conversely, Tech alumni endowed the Alexander Memorial Coliseum, a domed, indoor arena that opened in 1956 and housed Georgia Tech's far less prestigious basketball program, with none of the reverence they did for their half-century old football field. The ambiguity of integration in Atlanta during the early 1960s also played into the unwillingness of Georgia Tech to rent out its facilities. By 1968, public facilities in Atlanta had been integrated for several years, but when the AFL and NFL asked Georgia Tech if they could rent Grant Field the law and the local political consensus on desegregation were far murkier.

Partnering with Carl Sanders helped Cousins immensely when it came to negotiating with Georgia Tech President Edwin Harrison for use of Alexander Memorial Coliseum. Former Governor Sanders, who was prohibited by state law from running for a second consecutive term in 1966, was the presumptive favorite in the 1970 Georgia governor's race. Harrison found himself in a difficult bargaining position relative to Sanders, whose institution was dependent on state money. Sanders downplayed the extent to which his political status influenced Harrison's decision. Instead, the former Governor told reporters that Georgia Tech's primary motivation for allowing the Hawks to play at Alexander was that they liked the idea of being associated with a winner. The defending Western Division champion Hawks, Sanders said, speaking reverently of his own alma mater's arch rival, merited a place on the campus of an esteemed university like Georgia Tech far more than its previous professional sports suitors, which had all been expansion football teams. In addition to Sanders' powers of persuasion and flattery, Cousins

asked a number of “Big Mules” to contact Harrison privately, asking him to allow the Hawks to use Georgia Tech’s arena. Atlanta would have to wait indefinitely for professional basketball unless Georgia Tech allowed the Hawks to play on their campus, they emphasized in their messages to Harrison. Rather than forcing Atlanta’s civic boosters to fight it out with the boosters from every other interested city for an expansion franchise, Harrison could guarantee Atlanta a professional basketball team by renting out their Coliseum for forty-nights a year. Harrison bowed to civic pressure. On April 30<sup>th</sup>, he called Tom Cousins to assure him that he would convince the Georgia Tech Board of Regents to let the Hawks use the arena on a temporary basis. Harrison agreed to rent Alexander for \$1000 per game until Cousins completed construction on his downtown arena. The arrangement with Georgia Tech enabled Cousins and Sanders to finalize their deal with Kerner. One week after Cousins and Sanders announced their purchase of the Hawks, the Georgia Tech Board of Regents voted unanimously to approve the lease that Harrison had negotiated with Cousins.<sup>68</sup>

### **“Probably Room for Basketball”**

The day after the Georgia Tech Board of Regents voted to approve the lease at Alexander, NBA owners met in New York to ratify the sale and relocation of the Hawks. They voted unanimously to approve the sale of the franchise to Cousins and Sanders and endorsed the Hawks’ transfer to Atlanta.<sup>69</sup> Even with an agreement for a temporary arena in place, longtime Hawks General Manager Marty Blake suggested in an interview two decades after the Hawks’ move to Atlanta that the NBA’s approval of the franchise’s relocation was more

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<sup>68</sup> Jim Minter, “NBA Expected to Approve Hawks’ Move,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 5, 1968, 1-H; Bill Clark, “Atlanta Gets Professional Basketball,” *Atlanta Constitution*, May 4, 1968, 1, 16; Furman Bisher, “Hawks Approval Certain,” *Atlanta Journal*, May 7, 1968, 1-D; Bob Hertz, “Regents Approve Hawks Use of Tech,” *Atlanta Journal*, May 8, 1968, 1-D; Bob Hertz, “Hawks Purchase: ‘Now or Never,’” *Atlanta Journal*, May 6, 1968, 1-C; Pat Zier, “Pros Won’t Damage Tech, Say Owners,” *Atlanta Constitution*, May 7, 1968, 43.

<sup>69</sup> Furman Bisher, “Hawks Approval Certain,” *Atlanta Journal*, May 7, 1968, 1-D; Bob Hertz, “Regents Approve Hawks Use of Tech,” *Atlanta Journal*, May 8, 1968, 1-D.

an expression of their loyalty to Kerner than an endorsement of Alexander Memorial Coliseum. “There was no way the NBA should have approved the Hawks playing at Georgia Tech,” Blake said. “The Tech people were great to us and very gracious. But it was a bad building. It had terrible locker rooms and only seated about 7,200. The league wouldn’t have approved it, but Benny Kerner was one of the pioneers of pro basketball, and the league people wanted to see him get out of the business with some money.”<sup>70</sup> The Hawks played at Alexander during their first four seasons in the NBA (1968-1972). Alexander’s seating capacity was the smallest in the NBA, even smaller than the Hawks’ home court in St. Louis, the Kiel Auditorium. The poor conditions and small seating capacity at Alexander proved to be a major impediment to the Hawks’ financial success in their early years in Atlanta. In many respects, the Hawks inaugural seasons in Atlanta looked a lot like their waning years in St. Louis.

Response to the Hawks’ move proved decidedly muted in St. Louis, reinforcing Kerner’s belief that the region’s population had simply lost interest in professional basketball.<sup>71</sup> Many locals expressed their disappointment in the Hawks’ departure when asked by reporters from the *Globe-Democrat* or the *Post-Dispatch*, St. Louis’ two daily newspapers. “It really gripes me,” Hawks season ticket holder Pierce Lieberman told Bud Thies of the *Globe-Democrat*, “I think Kerner made money with the club last year. Everyone always said he’d do something like this. I guess they were right.”<sup>72</sup> Most interviewees, though, recognized that the lack of fan support the Hawks received in recent years made it impossible for them to stay in the city. Mitch Murch, a season-ticket holder for the Hawks’ entire twelve-year stay in St. Louis, spoke of the team’s departure with a clear-eyed fatalism that reflected the viewpoint of the lion’s share of the team’s

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<sup>70</sup> Jeffrey Denberg et al., *From Sweet Lou to ‘Nique*, 32.

<sup>71</sup> Leonard Koppett, “The Dismal Science,” *New York Times*, July 28, 1968, 148; Bob Burnes, “Hawks Sold, Will Move to Atlanta,” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, May 4-5, 1968, 1, 7G.

<sup>72</sup> Bud Thies, “Wilkens, Bridges May Balk at Atlanta Move,” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, May 4-5, 1968, 1, 5G.

partisans. “It doesn’t surprise me at all,” Murch said, “Everything led me to believe it would happen. I don’t think Ben ever really took them off the market. I think it was inevitable we’d lose them. The playoff attendance was very disappointing. I was embarrassed to go down there with only 4200 or 4400. In a way, it’s almost a relief they’re gone...For the organization to make it in St. Louis was virtually impossible now.”<sup>73</sup> Murch’s perspective on the team’s departure was not dissimilar to the franchise’s longtime owner. “St. Louis just doesn’t want my product anymore,” Kerner said at the time of the sale, a sentiment disputed by few St. Louis residents.<sup>74</sup> No organized opposition to the move emerged in St. Louis. “No wounded shrieks. No charges of economic rape or traitorism. They’re gone, goodbye, and God bless ‘em. The attitude has been just peachy,” Bisher editorialized about St. Louis’ reaction to the move.<sup>75</sup>

By contrast, the sudden arrival of the Hawks astonished Atlanta sports fans. After two seasons of futility by the Falcons and underachievement by the Braves, Atlanta was home to a winning team, a defending divisional champion, in 1968, thanks primarily to the clandestine efforts of two of its leading citizens. Talk of a new downtown arena added another layer of suspense to the unexpected revelation. Sports fans interviewed by *Atlanta Constitution* reporters near the paper’s downtown office on the day of the announcement expressed a mix of surprise and near pessimism about the prospects of the Hawks’ success in Atlanta. Judging from their occupations as well as their perceptions of the team and its chances for success in Atlanta, the interviewees were most likely suburbanites who commuted into the city for work, just the people the Hawks regarded as their potential ticket buyers. Joe Patrick, a sales representative at a bank supply company, said “I think Atlanta is a football town, but there’s probably room for

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<sup>73</sup> Bud Thies, “Wilkens, Bridges May Balk at Atlanta Move,” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, May 4-5, 1968, 1, 5G.

<sup>74</sup> “Kerner Proved Value of Hard Work,” *The Sporting News*, May 25, 1968, 44; “NBA Hawks to Atlanta,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 4, 1968, A1.

<sup>75</sup> Furman Bisher, “A Very Tall Luncheon,” *Atlanta Journal*, May 17, 1968, 1-D.

basketball too and I believe it will do alright here whether or not I go.”<sup>76</sup> Insurance agency president John Maher said that most of his friends preferred participatory outdoor sports, but “the fishermen, gardeners, automobile and boat enthusiasts will have time on their hands in the cold winter and pro basketball should pull some of them in.”<sup>77</sup>

Fellow insuranceman William C. Fox questioned whether or not Atlantans would support the Hawks. “I don’t think basketball would go well at all except with a first class team,” he said. “I think too, that they will need to acquire Southern ball players. They’ll have to have a local image,” Fox said, mirroring the attitudes of St. Louis basketball fans who shunned the Hawks when their roster ceased to look like their spectators.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, Fox said “they’ll have to be in a first class location with first class parking,” unlike, by inference, Atlanta Stadium, which stood in close proximity to some of the city’s poorest and most high crime neighborhoods and lacked sufficient on-site parking to host all of its customers for well-attended events.<sup>79</sup> Fox’s statement foreshadowed one of the major problems faced by Atlanta’s professional sports teams as they tried to earn consistent box-office patronage from a predominately suburban consumer base. Suburbanites in Metropolitan Atlanta were apprehensive about spending their leisure time in downtown Atlanta, no matter how hard the city’s professional sports franchises and arena operators worked to cater to their demands for comfort, accessibility, and safety. The Hawks’ potential fan base, just like the potential fan base of Atlanta’s other professional teams, were discerning consumers, not devotees.

The Hawks owners viewed the team’s prospects in Atlanta far more optimistically. The Hawks were a championship caliber team that would garner a substantial share of Atlanta sports

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<sup>76</sup> Charlie Roberts, “Hawks Will Fly Into Open Arms,” *Atlanta Constitution*, May 4, 1968, 19.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

fans' discretionary income. "I don't believe the Atlanta sports dollar is being stretched too thin," Sanders said. Nor did he think there would be any problems "promoting a sport dominated by Negroes" in the Deep South. "I don't think color will make a difference to fans. That time is past in the South. As long as they're good, clean athletes and play a good brand of ball, the fans will support them," he said.<sup>80</sup> In an interview with the *Atlanta Constitution's* Pat Zier, Carl Sanders said the Hawks would try to acquire local and regional players whenever possible. Sanders made it clear that regional players was a euphemism for white players when he made specific reference to pursuing Pete Maravich, LSU's standout shooting guard who had just broken national scoring records as a sophomore, two basketball seasons before NBA rules allowed him to declare for the league's annual draft. The southern *bona fides* of Maravich, the grandson of Serbian immigrants who spent much of his childhood in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, were questionable. He moved to the South as a nine-year-old when his father Petar "Press" Maravich became the head basketball coach at Clemson University. By comparison, current Atlanta Hawks Zelmo Beaty and Paul Silas, natives of Texas and Arkansas respectively, fit the bill of regional players far more than Maravich, but the LSU guard's status as the nation's best known white collegiate player made him the ideal target for a Southern team in search of a face for their franchise.<sup>81</sup>

When a reporter asked NBA commissioner Walter Kennedy in 1967 about the possibility of the league expanding into Atlanta, he said he was unconcerned about the issue of integration in the city, stating that he had been reassured about their racial situation by remaining in "constant touch with Atlantans who are close to the local scene."<sup>82</sup> Integrated or not, the

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<sup>80</sup> Pat Zier, "Pros Won't Damage Tech, Say Owners," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 7, 1968, 43.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Bill Clark, "Will NBA Come Here?" *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 9, 1967, 33.

question remained whether basketball would become a sport of mass appeal in Atlanta. Unlike football and baseball, which were popular pastimes in Atlanta long before the Braves and Falcons came to town, basketball was a sport of secondary interest to the local population. Despite their on-court success, the Hawks' all-black starting five were hardly the easiest lineup to promote to the white suburban fans the owners expected to patronize their games. Hawks' coach Richie Guerin, a mid-century, Bronx wise-guy straight from central casting, was himself a less than ideal ambassador to the Atlanta public, far more foreign to the sensibilities of Georgians than the Hawks' African American players. The Atlanta papers spent the spring and summer of 1968 touting the city's new NBA team, but early ticket sales were slow and local broadcast media made only a modest commitment to the team. WSB agreed to televise an eight-game slate for the 1968-1969 season while broadcasting the full schedule on its radio station.<sup>83</sup>

Financially, the Hawks entered their first season in Atlanta in an already precarious position. The club had an extremely wealthy owner in Tom Cousins, but his plans to invest in a downtown arena, which would be the starting point for a much larger mixed-usage complex, left him with limited resources to invest in the basketball franchise. Simultaneously, the Hawks' local media revenue and prospective gate revenue from Alexander were well below the league average. Television money from the league's national broadcasting contract with ABC hardly made up for the Hawks' deficiencies in its other revenue streams. In the late 1960s, NBA franchises received modest national television revenues of less than \$100,000 each from ABC, hardly enough money to pay the salary of even one of the league's elite players. Entering the 1968-1969 season, the Hawks' five starters were all among the best players at their positions in the league. None of them were earning even close to \$100,000 a year in St. Louis and every one

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<sup>83</sup> *John J. Archibald, "Hawks Play 'Inside' Game To Earn Aggressive Label," Atlanta Journal-Constitution, May 5, 1968, 3-H; John J. Archibald, "Guerin's Always the Boss," Atlanta Journal-Constitution, May 5, 1968, 4-H.*

of them was seeking out a pay raise.<sup>84</sup> Professional basketball's honeymoon in Atlanta would be short-lived.

### **“The Logical Choice”: The National Hockey League Selects Atlanta**

An article published in the *Atlanta Journal* the week after the announcement of the Hawks' relocation ruminated on the possibility of Tom Cousins acquiring a hockey team to join his basketball team in his yet-to-be financed, approved, or built coliseum. Cousins mentioned on several occasions the possibility of bringing professional hockey to Atlanta when discussing his plans for the coliseum.<sup>85</sup> He later said that he considered a hockey team essential to the success of the downtown venue because he needed to “keep the Coliseum busy practically every day to make a financially sound venture.”<sup>86</sup> “My primary interest in this,” Cousins said several years later of his efforts to buy a professional hockey team, “was to round out a program for the coliseum. A stadium needs baseball and football and a coliseum needs basketball and hockey.”<sup>87</sup> Investment in an arena created an incentive for Cousins to bring another sports franchise to Atlanta. While Cousins believed that the acquisition of an NHL franchise would contribute to the financial stability of his planned arena, adding another professional franchise to the city's roster so quickly threatened to further saturate the city's suddenly crowded sports market. In May 1965, Atlantans did not have a major league franchise in their market. By May 1968, city leaders were seriously considering the acquisition of a fourth franchise.

As the prospective proprietor of a downtown arena, Tom Cousins found himself in an odd position. Historically, most North American arena operators adding a second franchise to

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<sup>84</sup> Greg Maracek, *Full Court*, 206-208; Jeremy Rutherford, “Departure of Hawks Still is Bittersweet Affair,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 26, 1999, D16; David Halberstam, *The Breaks of the Game*, 9-16, 34-36.

<sup>85</sup> Bob Hertz, “Atlanta Five Years from Professional Hockey,” *Atlanta Journal*, May 7, 1968, 4-D; Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 13.

<sup>86</sup> “Plan Sports Arena for Atlanta's Newest Pro Teams,” *Chicago Defender*, May 14, 1968, 24; “Atlanta Aims for Arena, Pro Hockey,” *Washington Post*, May 14, 1968, D2.

<sup>87</sup> Al Thomy and Wayne Minshew, “No Problem on Owners,” *Atlanta Constitution*, November 10, 1971, 1-C, 5-C.



their lineup added a professional basketball team to support their already established hockey club. The desire of Northeastern and Midwestern arena operators, many of whom owned NHL or profitable minor league hockey franchises, to lock up additional dates on their winter calendars played an important role in the formation of the NBA in the late 1940s. Cousins was one of a number of arena operators in non-traditional hockey markets during the late 1960s and early 1970s who found themselves in the inverse position. Bob Hertzelt noted in his May 1968 *Atlanta Journal* article on hockey's prospects in the city that Cousins was not the area's only franchise owner interested in the sport. Atlanta Braves co-owner Bill Bartholomay owned a piece of the Pittsburgh Penguins hockey franchise, one of the NHL's new expansion clubs. Bartholomay did not want to compete with Cousins for ownership of an Atlanta hockey franchise. Instead, he expressed his interest in becoming the partial owner of any expansion or relocated hockey club in Atlanta, perhaps alleviating some of the financial burden Cousins would face trying to own two professional teams while building an indoor arena and a multi-purpose, \$100 million complex.<sup>88</sup>

Hertzelt had looked into the realities of obtaining a hockey franchise and concluded in May 1968 that "the only way Atlanta can obtain a National Hockey League team in less than five years-indoor arena or not- is to purchase an established franchise."<sup>89</sup> "We've just had a big expansion," NHL Commissioner Clarence Campbell told Hertzelt, referring to the league's six team expansion in 1967, which doubled the number of franchises in hockey's top professional league to twelve.<sup>90</sup> "We have to give ourselves a chance to digest that expansion before we

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<sup>88</sup> Bob Hertzelt, "Atlanta Five Years from Professional Hockey," *Atlanta Journal*, May 7, 1968, 4-D; Wilt Browning, "'Interested in the NHL—Bartholomay,'" *Atlanta Constitution*, November 3, 1971, 1-C; Hal Hayes, "Atlanta Contending for Team in NHL," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 12, 1969, 2-D.

<sup>89</sup> Bob Hertzelt, "Atlanta Five Years from Professional Hockey," *Atlanta Journal*, May 7, 1968

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

consider expanding again,” Campbell said. The NHL Commissioner predicted it would be at least five years before the league considered another expansion. Less than a year after Campbell made that prediction, the NHL approved expansion franchises in the hockey-mad markets of Vancouver and Buffalo for the 1970 season.<sup>91</sup> Hal Hayes of the *Atlanta Constitution*, reacting to the NHL’s decision to pass over Atlanta for more traditional hockey towns in its 1970 expansion, assured readers that “absence of a coliseum appeared the only detour in professional hockey’s cruise onto the bustling Atlanta sports scene.”<sup>92</sup>

Hayes’ assertion that Atlanta was one detour away from being an ideal market for hockey expansion sounded as unbelievable then as it does now. Beyond its lack of a playing facility and the NHL’s proclaimed hesitance to expand any further, the Atlanta of 1968 seemed about as unsuitable a home for professional hockey as one could imagine in the continental United States. Metropolitan Atlanta did not have a permanent ice rink, let alone a hockey arena. The state of Georgia had never been home to a high school or college hockey team. The closest city to ever host a professional hockey team was 200 miles away in Knoxville, Tennessee. Formed in 1961, the Knoxville Knights of the Eastern Hockey League were in the process of disbanding in the spring of 1968. Hockey did not make regular appearances on any Georgia television stations until late in 1969 when WAGA-TV, Atlanta’s CBS affiliate, started showing an NHL game of the week.<sup>93</sup>

The plausibility of Atlanta garnering a professional hockey franchise increased considerably in September 1971 with the launching of the World Hockey Association (WHA), a well-financed rival professional hockey league scheduled to begin play the following autumn. At

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid; Hal Hayes, “Atlanta Contending for Team in NHL,” *Atlanta Constitution*, September 12, 1969, 2-D.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Steve Clark, “Atlanta Enters Hockey Arena Ice Cold,” *Atlanta Constitution*, November 10, 1971, 7-C.

their inaugural press conference, WHA founders Dennis Murphy and Gary Davidson, the pair whom four years earlier had created the American Basketball Association (ABA), a rival to the NBA, announced that they were seeking out investors to form a ten (later twelve) team North American hockey league. The WHA considered both traditional and non-traditional hockey markets as locations for its franchises, including Atlanta. In the lead-up to the November 1971 announcement of the ten original WHA cities, sportswriters in Atlanta and hockey writers across the nation speculated that Cousins would receive one of the bids. The WHA surprised many hockey insiders by passing over Atlanta, its well-heeled owner, and the new coliseum which they broke ground on seven months earlier. Instead, the WHA awarded its first southern franchise to Miami on the assumption that its large population of elderly snowbirds from the Northeast and Canada would support the team. This proved to be the first of numerous failed attempts by investors to establish the sport in Florida. Many fortunes have been lost in the Sunshine State based on the belief that a rabid core of seasonally-residing hockey aficionados wants to spend their discretionary income on sitting inside a cold arena. Professional hockey's first pass in Florida did not even get to the cold arena part. The fundamental problem faced by the Miami WHA franchise was their lack of a playing facility. Like Atlanta, the Florida city lacked a permanent ice rink. Unlike Atlanta, Miami had yet to break ground on a hockey arena. Unable to win local approval for a privately financed arena project, the Miami WHA franchise relocated to Philadelphia in 1972 before ever playing a game.<sup>94</sup>

WHA founder Dennis Murphy said after the announcement of the league's first ten franchises that Atlanta's standing bid would receive strong consideration for one of the two final

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<sup>94</sup> Jim Huber, "New Hockey League Names Ten; Atlanta Next?" *Atlanta Journal*, November 1, 1971, 6-D; Ed Willes, *The Rebel League: The Short and Unruly Life of the World Hockey Association* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2005), 25-27.

spots in the WHA, which they planned to announce in early 1972.<sup>95</sup> Bob Cousins, Tom's brother, the president of the Atlanta Hawks, and a major player in all of his downtown ventures, expressed his preference for a WHA club to an NHL one the day after the new league announced its charter members. "We are a bit uneasy as to what our chances for a winner would be in that league," Cousins said of the NHL. "Expansion clubs don't do very well. In the WHA, all the teams would be starting out on the same footing and our chances of a championship the very first season would be as good as anyone's," he said.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, any potential NHL expansion team in the coming seasons would be forced to build its roster from a far more diluted talent pool. Competition from the WHA's 12 franchises for available professional players would make it even harder for an NHL expansion team to produce a competitive club. Despite Bob Cousins' protestations, the NHL and the Cousins group came to an agreement to place a franchise in Atlanta for the 1972-1973 season less than ten days after the WHA passed on the city.

The arrival of professional hockey in Atlanta in 1972 was the result of a marriage of convenience between developer Tom Cousins and the NHL. Cousins wanted a hockey team to fill up dates on the winter calendar of his new arena. The NHL wanted to keep the WHA out of large, affluent North American markets like Atlanta, whose earlier application for a franchise the league had kept on hand in case future circumstances dictated a second look at the city. The National Hockey League's willingness to place a franchise in Atlanta was primarily a product of their emerging turf war with the rival WHA. Non-traditional hockey markets from Los Angeles to Phoenix to Houston to Atlanta garnered franchises in either the WHA or the NHL during the 1970s as a result of the game of *Risk* the competing leagues played across the North American continent, seizing territory for the sake of seizing territory with little concern for the prospective

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<sup>95</sup> Jim Huber, "New Hockey League Names Ten; Atlanta Next?" *Atlanta Journal*, November 1, 1971, 6-D.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

city's history, culture, or climate. The fifty-five year-old NHL, which had grown from six to fourteen members in less than five years, tried to maintain its preeminence in professional hockey by "squash[ing] the bugs scurrying along the tidy floor," in the words of WHA historian Ed Willes.<sup>97</sup> More specifically, granting Atlanta a franchise blocked the WHA from access to Tom Cousins' money and his state-of-the-art arena.<sup>98</sup>

In May 1968, the NHL's leadership told Atlanta it would be years before they would consider another expansion, especially to a non-hockey playing market like Atlanta. Less than three years later in January 1971, NHL Finance Committee Chairman William M. Jennings said Atlanta was the "logical choice" among several Southern cities seeking out a franchise, a statement that seemed equally unbelievable for its perspective on Atlanta as a hockey market and the statement that a handful of cities in Dixie wanted hockey teams. Cousins' continued eagerness to procure a hockey franchise and the impending groundbreaking for the Omni Coliseum counted foremost among a number of promising signs from the Atlanta market, Jennings said.<sup>99</sup> Additionally, weekly broadcasts of NHL games that began late in 1969 on WAGA-TV had been drawing increasingly impressive ratings, demonstrating a new local interest in the sport. Joe Watkins, who later served as president of a fan club for the defunct Atlanta Flames franchise, remembers becoming a hockey fan as a result of those broadcasts on the local CBS affiliate. "Back in '71, CBS was playing hockey games and I got watching them and they looked interesting, and I got hooked," Watkins said, who became a diehard Atlanta Flames fan during their eight-year stay in the city.<sup>100</sup> WAGA station manager Jim Ferguson said that during the 1970-1971 season as many as 70,000 Atlanta area households watched their

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<sup>97</sup> Ed Willes, *The Rebel League*, 18.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> Stan Fischler, "New NHL Expansion Seen by 1974," *The Sporting News*, January 30, 1971, 27.

<sup>100</sup> Joe Watkins interview by the author, July 3, 2013, 19, transcript.

winter afternoon hockey broadcasts.<sup>101</sup> Jennings went on to cite a study commissioned by Cousins that found that as many Atlantans wanted to watch professional hockey as wanted to watch professional basketball. “The people there are very cosmopolitan. It’s not a sleepy city of the old South,” he said of Atlanta and its residents.<sup>102</sup> Two months later in March 1971, NHL Commissioner Campbell concurred with Jennings, stating that “Atlanta is a major league city and Atlanta will be welcomed if and when expansion comes about.” He said that Atlanta’s history of supporting football, another contact sport, bode well for hockey’s future in the city.<sup>103</sup>

The comments by NHL officials about Atlanta’s increasing potential as a hockey market came months before Murphy and Davidson announced the formation of the WHA. The combined presence of a suitable owner, the groundbreaking for a new arena, and the tangible proof that hockey interested many Atlantans made for a strong case for granting the city an expansion franchise. Additionally, the half-dozen NBA franchise owners who also owned NHL franchises got to know Tom Cousins as the owner of the Hawks over the intervening years. They observed that Cousins was an understated, steady, consensus building presence in the league, which served as a recommendation for him as a potential NHL owner.<sup>104</sup>

The NHL coveted Atlanta’s television market, which served as the gateway to the broader Southeastern United States television market. A foothold in the Southeast would help the NHL achieve two of its broader goals: getting more Americans access to its product on television and, by extension, increasing the amount of money the league could negotiate for its American teams in television money when its American national contract with CBS ended after the 1971-1972 season. In the 1970-1 season, the 11 U.S. based NHL teams received only

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<sup>101</sup> Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 21.

<sup>102</sup> Stan Fischler, “New NHL Expansion Seen by 1974,” *The Sporting News*, January 30, 1971, 27.

<sup>103</sup> Stan Fischler, “Atlanta a Likely Site for NHL Club,” *The Sporting News*, March 27, 1971, 14.

<sup>104</sup> Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 13.

\$70,000 per franchise from CBS to broadcast its games. By comparison, NFL teams received \$1.4 million each from their network television contract partners to broadcast league games. Canada's three NHL teams, like MLB teams, negotiated their own contracts with Canadian television stations and averaged approximately \$900,000 for the 1970-1971 season.<sup>105</sup> The high ratings that WAGA had been drawing in Atlanta the previous two winters showing NHL games encouraged the league to take seriously the idea of bringing their game to the South and selling it to the region's local television affiliates, especially with the region's influx of northern transplants, nearly 200,000 of whom had moved to Georgia since 1960.<sup>106</sup> Atlanta had become, in the words of William Hartsfield, "a southern city with a heavy infusion of Yankee blood."<sup>107</sup> "The city was a natural," Mayor Sam Massell later said of its interest in hockey, "because of the influx of hockey fans from all over the country, fans who had been denied the sport since they arrived in Atlanta."<sup>108</sup>

Before the WHA announced the cities in which it would place its first ten franchises, the NHL made an impromptu decision to expand to sixteen teams for the 1972-1973 season. The NHL's decision to add two new franchises was in large part an effort to inoculate its member clubs from the financial strain that their turf war with the WHA would inevitably cause them. The emergence of rival professional football and basketball leagues had forced the NFL and ABA into costly bidding wars for the services of their players. The NHL would certainly face a similar challenge from the WHA. The NHL told potential bidders in early November 1971 that it expected the two successful franchisees to pay an expansion fee of \$6 million which would be

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<sup>105</sup> Jim Huber, "NHL Ready to Open in Atlanta in 1972," *Atlanta Journal*, November 8, 1971, 1-D; Wayne Minshew, "Atlanta Isn't In NHL Yet," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 9, 1971, 1-D.

<sup>106</sup> Al Thomy and Wayne Minshew, "No Problem on Owners," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 10, 1971, 1C, 5C.

<sup>107</sup> "The Other Face of Dixie," *CBS News Video*, October 24, 1962, report hosted by Harry Reasoner. Accessed on June 11, 2013: [www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=2681311n#ixzzljBBOh3B6](http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=2681311n#ixzzljBBOh3B6).

<sup>108</sup> Al Thomy and Wayne Minshew, "No Problem on Owners," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 10, 1971, 1C, 5C.

distributed evenly among the league's 14 existing teams. Including Atlanta, applicants from five locations made serious bids for the two expansion franchises: Kansas City, Cleveland, San Diego, and Nassau County, New York. Nassau County, like Atlanta, had recently begun construction on a coliseum, a \$35 million structure in Hempstead whose builders aspired to turn their facility into a new focal point for Long Island. Nassau County's prospective coliseum sat less than 50 miles from Madison Square Garden, the home of the New York Rangers, triggering a provision in league by-laws that would require the Nassau County franchise's owners to pay a \$5 million indemnity to the Rangers owner for impinging on their market, if they were granted a franchise.<sup>109</sup> None of Atlanta's other competitors had a modern facility suitable for an NHL franchise. Less than two weeks after the WHA left Cousins' bid for an expansion franchise on their waiting list, Atlanta was, all of a sudden, the most desirable open hockey market in North America.

The NHL selected Atlanta and Nassau County, New York as its two newest expansion sites on November 9, 1971, favoring the bids that placed the league in two brand new coliseums and kept the WHA out of these prestigious and potentially lucrative venues.<sup>110</sup> Atlanta's old suitor Charlie Finley, owner of the floundering California Golden Seals franchise, whom he clad in the same green and gold as his Oakland A's baseball team, nearly derailed the expansion process while the league negotiated with the Atlanta and Nassau County ownership groups. League rules mandated a unanimous vote by club owners on behalf of all expansion bids. While every other NHL owner favored both expansion sites, Finley opposed the idea altogether. He

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<sup>109</sup> Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 11-15; Bob Verdi, "NHL Expands to 16 in '72," *Chicago Tribune*, November 10, 1971, C1; Jim Huber, "NHL Ready to Open in Atlanta in 1972," *Atlanta Journal*, November 8, 1971, 1-D.

<sup>110</sup> Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 9-12; Bob Verdi, "NHL Expands to 16 in '72," *Chicago Tribune*, November 10, 1971, C1.



questioned the wisdom of the NHL expanding further while some franchises, notably his own, were in financial trouble. Finley opposed a planned redistributive expansion draft which would stock the two new teams with players from the rosters of the league's existing franchises.<sup>111</sup> Expansion and an expansion draft would "further dilute the already weak club," Finley said of his Golden Seals.<sup>112</sup> The league's other owners circumvented Finley's definite "no" vote by voting to lower the number of required 'yes' votes for expansion to twelve of the NHL's fourteen franchises, stripping Finley of his veto powers.<sup>113</sup>

For weeks following the inauguration of "Atlanta's Ice Age," as the advertisements for Cousins' expansion hockey franchise described it, the sports pages of the Atlanta papers commenced with an educational campaign, explaining the rules and culture of hockey to Georgians. The Atlanta papers taught its readers about the history of the NHL and ran feature stories about the league's biggest stars. They touted the wonders that awaited fans the next fall at the Omni and kept Atlantans up to date on the staffing of the team's front office.<sup>114</sup> Team officials tried to get Atlantans excited about watching hockey while simultaneously managing their expectations for the team. Atlanta General Manager (GM) Cliff Fletcher, formerly the GM of the St. Louis Blues teams that pushed the Hawks out of town, warned curious fans across the Southeast that they "will have to accept the fact that all we'll get in next summer's expansion draft will be a few fringe players and some aging veterans."<sup>115</sup> Furthermore, as Fletcher failed to

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<sup>111</sup> Jim Huber, "NHL Ready to Open in Atlanta in 1972," *Atlanta Journal*, November 8, 1971, 1-D; Wayne Minshew, "Atlanta Isn't In NHL Yet," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 9, 1971, 1-D.

<sup>112</sup> Bob Verdi, "NHL Adding Today?" *Chicago Tribune*, November 9, 1971, D3.

<sup>113</sup> Bob Verdi, "NHL Expands to 16 in '72," *Chicago Tribune*, November 10, 1971, C1; Stan Fischler, "'It's Good Business...So NHL Expands Early,'" *The Sporting News*, November 27, 1971, 39.

<sup>114</sup> Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 15.

<sup>115</sup> Leo Monahan, "Fletcher Warns Atlanta Fans," *The Sporting News*, February 19, 1972, 11; Tony Petrella, "Fletcher Smooth Behind Scene," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 28, 1972, 1-D.

mention, the most talented hockey players previously not under contract in North America and Europe had virtually all been recruited to play in the WHA.

Working with the *Constitution* and the *Journal*, the management of the expansion Atlanta hockey team promoted a “Name the Team” contest which received more than 10,000 entries. Popular entries included the “Thrashers,” a name used decades later by Atlanta’s second NHL franchise, and the “Phoenix,” a tribute to Atlanta’s rising from the ashes after the Civil War. A 19-year-old college student named Mickey Goodman, thinking in a similar vein to those who advocated the name “Phoenix,” suggested “Flames” as a moniker for the team, which was also suggestive of the city’s destruction a century earlier at the hands of Sherman’s Army and its subsequent resurgence. Team management liked the juxtaposition of heat and “Flames” with hockey’s ice playing surface, which they thought emphasized the team’s southern identity. The expansion franchise announced that their team would be known as the “Atlanta Flames” at a March 1972 press conference with an extravagant ice sculpture of the team’s flaming “A” logo as a backdrop.<sup>116</sup> The Flames’ extensive promotional efforts in the eleven months between the franchise’s establishment in November 1971 and the team’s first game in October 1972 were only partially successful in the *Sporting News*’ tongue-in-cheek estimation. Only four of the ten Atlantans one of their writers called at random two weeks before the hockey club’s debut at the Omni knew that they were named the “Flames.”<sup>117</sup>

### **“The Developer is Boss”: The Making of the Omni and the Remaking of the CBD**

While negotiating in secret with Ben Kerner over the price and terms for the sale of the Hawks, Cousins commissioned a survey from the Marketing Information Service of Atlanta

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<sup>116</sup> Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 21; “Omni Souvenir Dedication Book,” Omni (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center.

<sup>117</sup> Dan Stoneking “Will Atlanta Embrace Hockey?” *The Sporting News*, October 7, 1972, 57.

asking residents of the metropolitan area if they thought their city needed a large indoor coliseum for sporting events. Three-quarters of the people surveyed agreed with the statement that the city needed an arena suitable for indoor sports. Forty-five percent said they would attend professional basketball games at such a facility. Forty-three percent said they would come to the Coliseum to watch professional hockey games.<sup>118</sup> Many respondents to the survey told their questioners that the city needed a large indoor arena capable of hosting large concerts, performing arts events, and religious revivals.<sup>119</sup> “The truth is Atlanta has missed numerous entertainments because the city lacked a facility large enough and versatile enough to assure sufficient box office return and to accommodate the physical problems of certain productions,” the *Atlanta Journal*’s Terry Kay wrote of the city’s lack of a large arena. Kay, who later became one of Georgia’s most revered novelists, worked as both a sportswriter and an arts critic for the paper. He cited the failure of promoters to book acts like Tom Jones, Andy Williams, Disney on Parade, or the Ringling Brothers’ Circus for performances in the city as evidence of the need for a large arena. “In a 4,500 seat auditorium, it would be impossible to book Jones,” Kay said, concluding that the city’s three year old Civic Center was too small to hold the Welsh heartthrob’s legion of fans in Metropolitan Atlanta.<sup>120</sup>

Six years earlier, the same citizenry who now felt deprived by their lack of a large coliseum voted down financing for a municipal civic center that would have supported many of the indoor sporting and cultural events they desired. The results of the 1968 survey commissioned by Cousins confirmed his belief that Atlantans wanted an arena suitable for large,

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<sup>118</sup> Bob Hertzell, “Study Shows Atlanta Wants Arena,” *Atlanta Journal*, May 7, 1968, 4-D.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.; WSB TV News Clip, March 31, 1971, *Digital Library of Georgia*, Accessed on July 20, 2014: <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/cgi-bin/meta.cgi?userid=public&db=meta&action=retrieve&recno=4&rset=005&format=dlg&h2=wsbn>

<sup>120</sup> Terry Kay, “Coliseum Will Assure Shows,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, December 20, 1970, 9-F.

indoor events but he doubted that they had changed their mind about paying for it. Cousins made it clear to everyone when he purchased the Hawks that he planned to build them an arena, preferably with the backing of the Stadium Authority in the form of municipal bonds or some other financing mechanism. “That’s the reason I bought the Hawks,” Cousins told Bisher decades later, “I needed them to get the development going,” to create momentum for another large-scale civic building project that would require concerted effort by the municipal government and the city’s corporate elite.<sup>121</sup> “I was concerned with developing 60 acres of downtown Atlanta,” Cousins said. “A coliseum was the key to the whole thing, some focal point to build around.”<sup>122</sup> In the end, Cousins planned to pay for the facility through the revenue it generated. The Stadium Authority’s involvement in the financing would help him secure government backed bonds, which would make for significantly lower interest rates on his repayments, potentially saving Cousins and his investment group millions of dollars. Initial public support for his downtown development project would help him jumpstart a much larger, privately financed downtown complex.<sup>123</sup>

Civic boosters backed Cousins’ plan to build a downtown coliseum, just like they had supported Ivan Allen’s efforts to build a municipal stadium once the possibility of luring an MLB team to Atlanta seemed like a sure thing. The Atlanta Chamber and Central Atlanta Progress, a consortium of downtown business interests who made a refrain of the phrase “favorable business climate,” enthusiastically supported Cousins’ plans to build an arena on “The Gulch” property west of downtown.<sup>124</sup> They lobbied the Stadium Authority to work out a

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<sup>121</sup> Jeffrey Denberg et al., *From Sweet Lou to ‘Nique*, 31.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>123</sup> “Atlanta Aims for Arena, Pro Hockey,” *Washington Post*, May 14, 1968, D2; Alex Coffin, “Coliseum Deal’s ‘Pluses’ Outlined,” *Atlanta Constitution*, December 15, 1970, 2.

<sup>124</sup> Sam Hopkins and Alex Coffin, “Top Atlanta Leaders Urge Coliseum Okay,” *Atlanta Constitution*, December 15, 1970, 1.

financing plan with Cousins to support the construction of the facility. In the meantime, Cousins assembled local investors into an entity he later incorporated as the Omni Group. The Omni Group served as the ownership group of the Hawks and the Flames. Later, the Omni Group added a third leg, the Coliseum Management Corporation, which oversaw operations at the new arena. Most of the investors were in the real estate business, either as developers or contractors. Many of them, like Cousins, were newcomers to large-scale downtown real estate and redevelopment projects. Among the investors in the Omni Group was Herman Russell, Georgia's wealthiest black contractor, who became the first African American co-owner of a major league sports franchise.<sup>125</sup>

Local politics intervened before Cousins and his associates finalized plans with the city for the arena. In January 1969, Ivan Allen announced that he would not seek a third term as mayor, citing his family and friends' advice "to not stretch myself out too far" after eight trying years in office.<sup>126</sup> The fall 1969 mayoral runoff pitted Vice Mayor Sam Massell, a liberal Democrat, against State Representative and City Alderman Rodney Cook, a moderate Republican. Both candidates had close ties to the city's business community. Massell was an attorney who became wealthy in the commercial real estate business, specializing in the development of professional buildings. His uncle, Ben Massell, was Atlanta's foremost real estate developer of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Mayor Hartsfield referred to Ben Massell as a "one-man boom" for the role he played in the formation of Atlanta's skyline. Rodney Cook came from one of Atlanta's leading commercial families. His father owned haberdasheries across the Southeast. Following his education at Washington and Lee University and decorated service in

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<sup>125</sup> Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 16.

<sup>126</sup> WSB TV News Clip, January 6, 1969, *Digital Library of Georgia*, Accessed on July 20, 2014: [http://crdl.usg.edu/cgi/crdl?query=id%3Augabma\\_wsbn\\_44605&\\_cc=1&Welcome](http://crdl.usg.edu/cgi/crdl?query=id%3Augabma_wsbn_44605&_cc=1&Welcome).

the U.S. Navy during World War II, the younger Cook created his own fortune in the insurance business.<sup>127</sup>

The vast majority of leaders in Atlanta's business community as well as Mayor Allen supported Cook in the election. They regarded Cook as more in line with Atlanta's incumbent governing coalition which allowed the "Big Mules" to maintain a civic trusteeship over political decision-making in the city. Massell, despite his strong ties to the business community, was regarded as too liberal. He had been an activist Vice Mayor, unlike any of his predecessors in the post, pushing the Allen administration to demand greater racial equity in the administering of city programs and, more broadly, advocating greater economic equality in metropolitan Atlanta. He questioned the degree to which Atlanta's corporate elite dictated public policy and won strong support from the city's predominately African American municipal employees unions. In addition, Massell's progressive politics helped him earn the endorsement and aid of a number of the city's most prominent black leaders, including Jesse Hill, Ralph Abernathy, Leroy Johnson, and Martin Luther King, Sr.<sup>128</sup> Massell said during the campaign that civic elites including his two-term partner at City Hall, Ivan Allen, bank executive Mills Lane, and new Atlanta Chamber President Frank Carter were campaigning against him because they knew "they couldn't control him and thus opposed him."<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> "Chronological History: Sam Massell," Sam Massell (Personality File), Kenan Research Center; Sam Massell 1969 Campaign Ephemera, Sam Massell (Personality File), Kenan Research Center; "Massell Enters the Race," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 17, 1969, 1; "Massell 6<sup>th</sup> Man in Mayoralty Race," *Atlanta Journal*, June 17, 1969, 1; Jon Nordheimer, "Massell Elected Atlanta Mayor; Negro Support Major Factor," *New York Times*, October 22, 1969, 1.

<sup>128</sup> Bill Shipp, "Cook, Massell Head for Runoff," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 8, 1969, 1; Alex Coffin, "Massell Charges Plot to 5," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 21, 1969, 1-A, 8-A; Bob Hurt, "Abernathy Assails Allen's Call for Massell Withdrawal," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 21, 1969, 12-A; Bruce Galphin, "Mayoral Race is Splitting Atlanta's Ruling Coalition," *The Washington Post*, September 7, 1969, 6; Alex Coffin, "Cook, Massell Swap Heated Accusations," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 24, 1969, 1; Alex Coffin, "Mayoral Candidates Stress Experience, Crime, Brutality," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 26, 1969, 1; Alex Coffin, "Massell Tangles with Militants," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 15, 1969, 12-A.

<sup>129</sup> Alex Coffin, "Massell Charges Plot to 5," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 21, 1969, 1-A

Cook himself was a racially progressive politician, taking unpopular pro-civil rights stances while a member of the Georgia legislature, but Massell's combined appeal to the political empowerment of the city's near-majority black population and his willingness to criticize the influence of Atlanta's boardrooms on its public policies turned many "Big Mules" into Cook supporters. The 1969 Atlanta mayoral campaign proved one of the city's most contentious. Proxies of the Cook campaign, including Allen, accused Massell of misusing his powers as Vice Mayor to secure campaign contributions. Massell denied the charges and accused the "downtown power structure" of blackballing him because he was Jewish. A number of "Big Mules," including Allen, denied the charge vehemently. Massell won the closely contested election with a coalition built around his strong support from the black community, which by the time of the election constituted nearly half of Atlanta's population.<sup>130</sup> For the first time since the formation of the city's post-World War II, bi-racial governing coalition, the city's black voters split from the white corporate elite in a mayoral election. In doing so, they demonstrated that the demographic transformation of the city had reconfigured the terms of future coalitions between the city's corporate elite and its black community.

Throughout the campaign Massell expressed his support for Cousins' plan to build a coliseum in downtown Atlanta, but the soon-to-be mayor demanded contractual assurances from the developer that the municipality would not end up paying for the project. Massell held firmly to both pledges when he became mayor. "I feel a city and its people are entitled to luxuries. But there is a limit," Massell said, reflecting on his role in the coliseum deal forty years later.<sup>131</sup> The

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<sup>130</sup> Alex Coffin, "Massell Winner with 61,558, Polls 55.5 Pct to Defeat Cook," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 22, 1969, 1; Bill Shipp, "Reported to Chief—Massell," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 21, 1969, 1; Jon Nordheimer, "Massell Elected Atlanta Mayor; Negro Support a Major Factor," *New York Times*, October 22, 1969, 1; "City Leans Liberal—Massell," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 27, 1969, 8A. Included in Sam Massell (Personality File), Kenan Research Center.

<sup>131</sup> Sam Massell, interview by the author, July 2, 2013, 42, transcript.

new mayor's expertise in commercial real estate, his familiarity with the city's political realities, and his commitment to limiting Atlanta's financial exposure in the deal made him a formidable and hands-on negotiator. "I had a foundation from which I could take a sharp pencil and paper and do something that another person could or might not have been able to," Massell said of his ability to employ his background in the planning of the project.<sup>132</sup>

Throughout 1970, the new mayor negotiated the terms of the city's involvement in the coliseum project with Cousins. Under pressure from the NBA to break ground on an arena, Cousins conceded to many of the terms proposed by the mayor. Massell and Cousins worked out a plan whereby the Atlanta-Fulton County Recreation Authority agreed to sell \$17 million in revenue bonds to finance construction of the Coliseum. Cousins Properties formed a subsidiary known as the Coliseum Management Corporation which leased the arena for the 25 year life of the bond from the City of Atlanta and Fulton County. When the Coliseum Management Corporation finished paying off the bond, Cousins agreed to let the city and county retain ownership of the facility. Since the coliseum would be municipally owned and the bonds issued to pay for it would be government bonds, both would be tax-exempt.<sup>133</sup>

In return, the Coliseum Management Corporation agreed to pay the principal and interest annually for the life of the bond and cover the entire cost of operating and maintaining the facility. As part of their lease arrangements with the building, Cousins' Hawks and Flames agreed to contribute fifteen percent of their total gate revenues every game toward the annual repayment of the bond and the maintenance and operations of the Coliseum. In addition, the

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 42-43.

<sup>133</sup> Alex Coffin, "Coliseum Deal's 'Pluses' Outlined," *Atlanta Constitution*, December 15, 1970, 2; Sam Massell, interview by the author, July 2, 2013, 42, transcript; "State of the City Annual Message, January 4, 1971," Sam Massell (Personality File), Kenan Research Center; "Omni Souvenir Dedication Book," Omni (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center.



Coliseum Management Corporation had to contribute fifteen percent of the gate from all other events held at the new facility toward annual repayments, Coliseum operations, and maintenance. Cousins Properties, the developer's primary corporate entity, agreed that all revenue over \$225,000 per year generated by his 1,950-space, privately-financed parking garage known as "The Decks" would be made available to pay off the principal and interest from the bonds and pay for the maintenance of the facility if revenue from the events at the Coliseum were insufficient to cover the entirety of their annual bill. This massive parking garage was being built to support a Cousins-developed luxury hotel next to the prospective arena site. Revenue from "The Decks," in essence, served as a "cushion" against fan apathy at the new Coliseum.<sup>134</sup> "We created an arrangement where if they never sold a single ticket there would be no bill for the taxpayer...it was just purely a real estate deal," Massell said of the city's pact with Cousins.<sup>135</sup>

In December 1970, the Atlanta Board of Alderman and the Fulton County Board of Commissioners approved the Coliseum deal at separate meetings. Atlanta's corporate leadership backed the plan with predictable enthusiasm. During the public comment period, the Atlanta Chamber issued a statement that said building a coliseum "has been one of the principal objectives of the Chamber since 1960," a reference to Allen's unsuccessful effort to build an "auditorium-coliseum." "Such a coliseum," the statement on behalf of the Chamber continued, "will help to further cement Atlanta's position as a major league city, not only in sports but in other areas which add to the life quality of a city." The Chamber applauded Massell's

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<sup>134</sup> Tom Walker, "Omni Complex to Help City's Global Look," *Atlanta Journal*, October 11, 1972, 1A, 9A; Alex Coffin, "Coliseum Deal's 'Pluses' Outlined," *Atlanta Constitution*, December 15, 1970, 2; Ron Taylor and Maurice Fliess, "'Beautifuls' Hail Sold-Out Omni," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 15, 1972, 1, 12; Richard Miles, "Plan for Coliseum to Face City and County Opposition," *Atlanta Constitution*, December 14, 1970, 1; Sam Massell, interview by the author, July 2, 2013, 42, transcript.

<sup>135</sup> Sam Massell, interview by the author, July 2, 2013, 42, transcript.

negotiation of a contract “which appears to reduce the exposure of tax demands on the taxpayers of the city and county to a minimum.”<sup>136</sup> As far as grand civic enterprises go, Cousins’ vision for the Omni was more in line with the direction that the city’s corporate leadership took during the 1970s as it planned and executed a series of redevelopment projects in downtown Atlanta. Unlike Allen’s pursuit of a purely publicly financed stadium, Cousins rooted his plan for a Coliseum in the private sector. This decision, which was shaped in large part by Sam Massell’s decisive action on behalf of Metropolitan Atlanta taxpayers, served both to alleviate taxpayer concerns about paying for non-essential civic functions and to direct investment in downtown Atlanta toward privatized, secure, and enclosed spaces.

Atlanta’s black leadership expressed their strong support for the coliseum plan as well. The project received the ardent endorsement of Vice Mayor Maynard Jackson, who was elected along with Massell in 1969 and was the first African American in the city’s history to hold that position. Jackson endorsed the arena financing plan and expressed particular enthusiasm about the prospective site of the arena in the commercial desert near the Techwood Viaduct on the west side of downtown Atlanta. He said the arena and future developments on Cousins’ sixty acre property would serve as a hub of employment opportunities for black residents in the surrounding neighborhoods.<sup>137</sup> Atlanta Braves star Hank Aaron and African American State Senator Leroy Johnson both served on the Stadium Authority at the time of the vote and supported the Coliseum financing proposal.<sup>138</sup>

Little opposition to the arena financing plan emerged from the public or members of either the city or county’s governing bodies. The most vocal opponent of the plan was Fulton

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<sup>136</sup> Sam Hopkins and Alex Coffin, “Top Atlanta Leaders Urge Coliseum Okay,” *Atlanta Constitution*, December 15, 1970, 1.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*; “Omni Souvenir Dedication Book,” Omni (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center.

County Commissioner and former Atlanta Alderman Milton Farris, who said that the \$17 million figure cited for the cost of the Coliseum was deceptive. With interest, the total repayment of the revenue bonds would come to an estimated \$33 million. Farris feared that the revenue sources from Cousins' enterprises that were obligated to repay the debt and maintain the facility were not as failsafe as presented. If the arena and the accompanying downtown development projects planned by Cousins failed to materialize or failed to draw sufficiently large crowds, then the City of Atlanta and Fulton County were responsible for two-thirds and one-third of the bill respectively. Atlanta Alderman E. Gregory Griggs opposed any city involvement in the coliseum project, arguing that the new facility would cost the city money by poaching events that would have otherwise been scheduled at the new Civic Center, putting the rental money in Tom Cousins' pocket rather than in city coffers.<sup>139</sup>

The coliseum financing plan won approval easily in both bodies in December 1970. In January 1971, the Atlanta-Fulton County Recreation Authority sold nearly \$17 million in revenue bonds at a 5.0365 percent interest rate, a far lower rate than Cousins could have secured privately.<sup>140</sup> For the first five years, the Coliseum Management Corporation was obligated to pay \$1.1 million per year. For the next twenty years, they were obliged to pay \$1.4 million annually, bringing the total cost of repaying the bonds to \$33.5 million.<sup>141</sup> Massell and Cousins broke ground for the Omni Coliseum on March 31, 1971. Twenty months later, the Ira Hardin Construction Company finished the 16,500 seat arena, just in time for the beginning of the

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<sup>139</sup> Richard Miles, "Plan for Coliseum to Face City and County Opposition," *Atlanta Constitution*, December 14, 1970, 1.

<sup>140</sup> Ron Taylor and Maurice Fliess, "'Beautifuls' Hail Sold-Out Omni," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 15, 1972, 1, 12; Margaret Hurst, "Coliseum Wins County Okay," *Atlanta Constitution*, January 21, 1971, 1A; "State of the City Annual Message, January 4, 1971," Sam Massell (Personality File), Kenan Research Center.

<sup>141</sup> Alex Coffin, "Coliseum Deal's 'Pluses' Outlined," *Atlanta Constitution*, December 15, 1970, 2.

professional basketball and hockey seasons in October 1972.<sup>142</sup> When seeking reelection in 1973, Massell cited the arena's financing plan and its efficient construction schedule among the greatest achievements of his first term. In a campaign flier entitled "Win It Again, Sam," the Massell campaign described the incumbent mayor's success as a negotiator relative to his predecessor, Ivan Allen: "The Omni could have been another tax-supported sports complex like the stadium. But Mayor Massell thought we could do better than that. And we did... The mayor negotiated with private enterprise to pay the full cost of financing the building, regardless of what number of tickets are sold."<sup>143</sup>

The recently incorporated architectural firm of Thompson, Ventulett, Stainback and Associates (TVS) designed the Omni Coliseum. The Omni stood more than 11 stories high. More than 6,200 parking spaces sat less than two blocks from the arena, including 1,950 spaces in Cousins' "Decks," which were connected to the arena by a dedicated, underground walkway.<sup>144</sup> Advertisements for events at the Omni emphasized that the walkway to the "Decks" was "well-lit and patrolled," in an effort to assuage suburbanites' concerns about the safety of downtown Atlanta.<sup>145</sup> For events that required little floor space, like religious revivals or rock concerts, the Omni could host as many as 18,000 spectators. Indoor events of that scale proved to be frequent occurrences in the facility's early years. The arena booked Disney on Ice,

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<sup>142</sup> Jesse Outlar, "A Timely Social," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 31, 1971, 1-D; Alex Coffin, "Massell, Cousins Get Together on Coliseum Event," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 30, 1971, 2-A; Alex Coffin, "Massell Plays Ball at Coliseum Site," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 1, 1971, 1-A; "Getting to the Omni is a Lot Easier Done Than Said (Advertisement)," *Atlanta Journal*, October 13, 1972; Ron Taylor and Maurice Fliess, "'Beautifuls' Hail Sold-Out Omni," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 15, 1972, 1, 12; Jim Stewart, "Omni Doors Open to Atlanta Tonight," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 14, 1972, 1, 12.

<sup>143</sup> "Massell for Mayor 1973 Campaign Materials," Sam Massell (Personality File), Kenan Research Center.

<sup>144</sup> Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 24; Robert M. Craig, "Thompson, Ventulett, Stainback, and Associates" *The New Georgia Encyclopedia*, September 19, 2013. Accessed online July 22, 2014: <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/arts-culture/thompson-ventulett-stainback-and-associates-tvs>

<sup>145</sup> "Getting to the Omni is a Lot Easier Done Than Said (Advertisement)," *Atlanta Journal*, October 13, 1972; "Omni Souvenir Dedication Book," Omni (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center.

the Ringling Brothers' Circus, the Harlem Globetrotters, Ice-Capades, and a number of rock, jazz, and soul music concerts in the twelve months after it opened.<sup>146</sup> The Omni could accommodate just over 15,000 for Hockey, the event which required the greatest amount of floor space. TVS emphasized the Omni's superior sight lines to those of Madison Square Garden. No spectator would be more than 150 feet from the playing surface, while many seats at Madison Square Garden were more than 200 feet from the action.<sup>147</sup> The Omni's design won wide acclaim from architectural critics for its innovative use of materials and avant-garde structural design. Diagonal rows of reddish-brown pyramids, each the size of a three story house, covered the arena's rooftop. TVS used rust-colored Cor-Ten weathering steel on the roof, pioneering a short-lived architectural trend in the United States.<sup>148</sup>

U.S. Steel patented Cor-Ten steel alloys during the 1930s. The new technology, they believed, would cut down on the need for seasonal maintenance on steel structures. Researchers at U.S. Steel found that, over the course of several years of exposure to weather, Cor-Ten formed a solid, rust coating that kept moisture out of steel structures. Cor-Ten not only prevented corrosion. It strengthened steel structures with age. U.S. Steel tried unsuccessfully for years to persuade entrepreneurs and planners to use Cor-Ten in their building projects. It would enable

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Frank Hyland, "Coliseum Ready in '72?" *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, December 13, 1970, 1-H; Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 24; "Omni Souvenir Dedication Book," Omni (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center.

<sup>148</sup> Robert M. Craig, "Thompson, Ventulett, Stainback, and Associates" *The New Georgia Encyclopedia*, September 19, 2013. Accessed online July 22, 2014: <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/arts-culture/thompson-ventulett-stainback-and-associates-tvs>; Elizabeth A. Harris, "Constructing a Façade Both Rugged and Rusty," *The New York Times*, August 27, 2012. Accessed on July 22, 2014: [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/28/nyregion/building-with-weathering-steel-both-rugged-and-rusty.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/28/nyregion/building-with-weathering-steel-both-rugged-and-rusty.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0); "COR-TEN: Making its 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary on the Market," *Nippon Steel News* 377, March 2010. Accessed online July 22, 2014: <http://www.steel.org/~media/Files/SMDI/Construction/Bridges%20-%20All%20-%20News%20-%20COR-TEN%2050th%20Anniversary%20on%20the%20Market.pdf>; Tom Walker, "Omni Complex to Help City's Global Look," *Atlanta Journal*, October 11, 1972, 1A, 9A.

businesses and municipalities to avoid the costs of regularly repainting their steel structures by virtually eliminating corrosion, U.S. Steel argued. The steelmaker failed to convince very many investors to embrace the bizarre-looking steel that changed color from a goldenrod yellow to a deep brown rust within a couple of years. U.S. Steel's innovative weathering-steel technology was little used until Japanese steelmakers employed Cor-Ten in the production of structural frames beginning in the late 1950s. Japanese steelmakers had great success marketing Cor-Ten as an economical and durable building material. Eventually, U.S. Steel followed suit, convincing skeptical North American architectural firms in the late 1960s and early 1970s to make use of the newly-trendy technology in large-scale projects. The Omni was one of the first high-profile projects in the United States to make use of Cor-Ten technology.<sup>149</sup> Within seven years, TVS said, the 160,000 square foot roof of the Omni would form a permanent coating. Instead, the permanently humid climate of the Southeast prevented the Cor-Ten from forming a permanent bond as it had in the four season weather patterns of Japan. Atlanta's heat and humidity ate through the Cor-Ten roof over the course of two decades, which led to the Omni's demise during the 1990s less than a quarter century after it opened. During construction of the facility, TVS said the roof would eventually turn purple. Instead, the rusty pyramids matured into a darker brown.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Robert M. Craig, "Thompson, Ventulett, Stainback, and Associates" *The New Georgia Encyclopedia*, September 19, 2013. Accessed online July 22, 2014: <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/arts-culture/thompson-ventulett-stainback-and-associates-tvs>; Elizabeth A. Harris, "Constructing a Façade Both Rugged and Rusty," *New York Times*, August 27, 2012. Accessed on July 22, 2014: [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/28/nyregion/building-with-weathering-steel-both-rugged-and-rusty.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/28/nyregion/building-with-weathering-steel-both-rugged-and-rusty.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0); "COR-TEN: Making its 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary on the Market," *Nippon Steel News* 377, March 2010. Accessed online July 22, 2014: <http://www.steel.org/~media/Files/SMDI/Construction/Bridges%20-%20All%20-%20News%20-%20COR-TEN%2050th%20Anniversary%20on%20the%20Market.pdf>; Tom Walker, "Omni Complex to Help City's Global Look," *Atlanta Journal*, October 11, 1972, 1A, 9A.

<sup>150</sup> Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 25; Ron Taylor and Maurice Fliess, "'Beautifuls' Hail Sold-Out Omni," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 15, 1972, 1, 12; "Omni Souvenir Dedication Book," Omni (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center.

Fans and sports media gave the Omni generally good reviews, except for the Cor-Ten roof, which became an immediate subject of local ridicule. Opening night 1972 Flames fan Cindy Rogers said all the pyramids on top of the building made it look “like a launching pad.”<sup>151</sup> Furman Bisher called the Omni the “rusty egg carton” because of its roof. Bisher’s nickname caught on among Atlantans and “the rusty egg carton” became the arena’s unofficial moniker.<sup>152</sup> The interior of the Omni drew near-universal praise from fans and local media outlets. The new arena provided spectators with excellent sight-lines for hockey and basketball. The proximity of every seat in the Coliseum to the on-court or on-ice action made for an intimate spectator experience. Its red, cushioned seats were far more comfortable than the wooden bleachers at the Alexander Memorial Coliseum.<sup>153</sup> Attending a game at the Omni was an experience in a “total environment,” Ron Taylor and Maurice Fliess, writing for the Sunday *Journal-Constitution*, said of the facility after attending an early Flames game. “Inside this environment, the developer is boss,” they wrote, describing the controlled, enclosed space Cousins had created amid the unpredictable, open urban environment surrounding them.<sup>154</sup> Taylor and Fliess’ comments anticipate Cousins’ larger Omni Complex project, which aimed to create an enclave of inward-oriented predictability within a center city that seemed increasingly unfamiliar and unwelcoming to suburbanites.

Cousins Properties unveiled plans for the broader Omni International Complex on October 10, 1972, two days before the opening of the Omni Coliseum. They announced that the Omni Complex would include a luxury hotel, an entertainment complex, and hundreds of

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<sup>151</sup> Jim Stewart, “Omni Doors Open to Atlanta Tonight,” *Atlanta Constitution*, October 14, 1972, 1, 12.

<sup>152</sup> Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 23.

<sup>153</sup> “Omni Souvenir Dedication Book,” Omni (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center.

<sup>154</sup> Ron Taylor and Maurice Fliess, “‘Beautifuls’ Hail Sold-Out Omni,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 15, 1972, 1, 12.

thousands of square feet in office space.<sup>155</sup> Entirely separate from the existing retail in downtown Atlanta, namely Rich's and Famous department stores, the Omni Complex was intended to serve as a new focal point for retail, business, and entertainment in the center of the city.<sup>156</sup> Building substantially onto his original group of backers, Cousins brought together a high-profile group of investors for the project that included David Rockefeller, shipping tycoon Stavros Niarchos, and the Ford Foundation.<sup>157</sup> The announcement of the \$100 million mixed-use project reinforced Cousins' frequently repeated statement that the Coliseum was just the first section of a much larger campus he planned to build in downtown Atlanta.

The October 10th announcement of the Omni Coliseum served another purpose. It upstaged the announcement the previous day by John Portman, Cousins' primary rival among Atlanta developers, that he planned to build a 70 story luxury hotel at Peachtree Center, the city's original MXD. Peachtree Center was located just north of the Five Points, the historic hub of downtown Atlanta's CBD. Cousins' Omni Complex would soon stand just across the Five Points from Portman's Peachtree Center: twin behemoths that would frame the redevelopment of downtown Atlanta.<sup>158</sup> Portman's vision for downtown Atlanta mirrored and, evidently, inspired that of Cousins. In an August 1966 interview with the *Chicago Tribune*, Portman described his efforts to ensure downtown Atlanta's future as a commercial, residential, and entertainment center in a rapidly decentralizing city. "A downtown cannot be a 'day time only' place and live," Portman said. "To get people to want to be in the core city, we've got to plan the city to the human scale," he said, before describing his "coordinated unit" vision for downtown

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<sup>155</sup> Tom Walker, "Omni Complex to Help City's Global Look," *Atlanta Journal*, October 11, 1972, 1A, 9A.

<sup>156</sup> Sam Massell, interview by the author, July 2, 2013, 41, transcript.

<sup>157</sup> Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 165.

<sup>158</sup> Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 161-162; Alfred Borcover, "Fantasy in Atlanta's Omni," *Chicago Tribune*, June 13, 1976, C1



redevelopment, a proposal for ensuring the human scale in urban planning through the intense management of urban space. Portman, like Cousins, wanted people living or working in downtown Atlanta to be able to access all of the amenities they could in a suburban environment plus the signature amenities of a center city within a safe, controlled, and enclosed atmosphere. The Peachtree Center, like the Omni Complex, aimed to bring this vision of a “coordinated unit” to life.<sup>159</sup>

Portman completed the first building in what became the Peachtree Center complex, the twenty-two story Atlanta Merchandise Mart, in 1962. During the 1960s, Portman and his development group, which included Ben Massell, the future mayor’s uncle, bought up the adjoining land north of the Five Points. They built three towers on this land during the 1960s, each more than twenty-five stories tall and containing hundreds of thousands of square feet in office space. Portman connected all his buildings with a series of skyways that enabled people to move throughout the complex without ever venturing into the surrounding streets. In addition, Portman built the Hyatt Regency Hotel at Peachtree Center, which opened in 1967. The Hyatt Regency was the first hotel in Atlanta to contain a curvilinear atrium, which became a signature of the numerous luxury hotels that soon clustered around the Five Points. The grandiose new hotel that Portman announced in October 1972 became the 73 story Western International Hotel, which opened in 1976 and was briefly the tallest hotel in the world. By the late 1960s, Peachtree Center’s inwardly focused cluster of skyscrapers had become the Southeast’s corporate address of choice. Like Atlanta Stadium and, later, the Omni, Peachtree Center symbolized Atlanta’s new status as a major American city. Several other cities hired Portman to design MXDs for them in keeping with the approach he used in Atlanta. San Francisco’s

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<sup>159</sup> Anthony Monahan, “Atlanta: The Southern City That Isn’t,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 21, 1966, 133.

Embarcadero Center (1971) and Detroit's Renaissance Center (1977) are the most prominent examples of Portman's subsequent MXD projects.<sup>160</sup>

“Eager to convey the impression of a modern city on the move in the late 1960s and early 1970s a new generation of Atlanta developers increasingly eschewed single buildings in favor of massive, enclaved complexes combining various magic mixes of office, hotel, retail, entertainment, and convention space,” Charles Rutheiser writes of Atlanta developers’ enthusiasm for building MXDs. Developers across the country embraced MXDs as magic bullets for revitalizing center cities, but few cities built as many or as large complexes as developers in Atlanta. The Omni Complex was one of several MXDs built on the periphery of the Five Points, including Portman’s Peachtree Center (1967) and the state-owned Georgia World Congress Center (GWCC) (1976). Between 1962 and 1976, MXDs added nearly ten million square feet of new office space in downtown Atlanta.<sup>161</sup>

Four years after announcing concrete plans for an MXD in October 1972, Cousins opened the Omni International Complex, more than a year later than he had originally anticipated. Construction delays caused the project to fall behind schedule. Moreover, the impending opening of the state-run GWCC led Cousins to repurpose a large section of the complex that he had intended to serve as a “world trade center,” a concept which the GWCC was also planning to incorporate into their facility. Built onto the Omni Coliseum, the broader Omni Complex included hundreds of thousands of square feet of corporate office space, an upscale shopping center designated an “international bazaar,” six movie theaters, numerous restaurants, and an indoor amusement park, the World of Sid and Marty Krofft, which was based on the

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<sup>160</sup> Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 161-162; Alfred Borcover, “Fantasy in Atlanta’s Omni,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 13, 1976, C1; Jim Montgomery, “Biggest Dixie Hotel Rising on Peachtree,” *Atlanta Constitution*, January 16, 1964, 1; Horace Sutton, “Atlanta Grows ‘Up,’” *Chicago Tribune*, August 22, 1976, C2.

<sup>161</sup> Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 165.

Krofft brothers' high-concept children's television programs. A series of walkways, bridges, and escalators that rose more than 200 feet facilitated movement within the complex.<sup>162</sup> Ten years after buying up land in "The Gulch," Tom Cousins had transformed the property into a luxurious, expansive edifice that he believed would draw consumers from across the metropolitan area back into the center city. Cousins' vision for the Omni Complex, however, stood in stark contrast to the demographic realities and evolving consumer culture of Metropolitan Atlanta. At the time of the Omni's opening in 1976, the consumers in Metropolitan Atlanta with enough disposable income to patronize the Complex's shopping, dining, and entertainments were "concluding a two-decade long exodus to the paler pastures of the northside and Dekalb and Cobb Counties."<sup>163</sup>

### **Breaking Ground**

On the last day of March in 1971, Tom Cousins and Sam Massell turned dirt with ceremonial shovels in "the Gulch" at the groundbreaking ceremony for the Omni Coliseum. News of the occasion was a major story across Georgia, but not nearly as striking an event as the groundbreaking of Atlanta Stadium had been seven years earlier. By the early 1970s, everyone in the region and in the nation knew that Atlanta was "Major League." The groundbreaking at "the Gulch" was just another variant on a coronation that started when Atlanta lured the Braves from Milwaukee. The story of the city's mayor and its best known developer shoveling red dirt into ceremonial souvenir jars for the 100 children selected to be the feel-good dignitaries for the day did not even make it above the fold in any of Atlanta's daily newspapers. Instead, the

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<sup>162</sup> Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 165; Tom Walker, "Omni Complex to Help City's Global Look," *Atlanta Journal*, October 11, 1972, 1A, 9A; Tom Walker, "Omni May Wind Up Close to Original Concept," *Atlanta Constitution*, December 11, 1983, Omni (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center; Frederick Allen, *Atlanta Rising* (Atlanta: Longstreet Press, 1996), 196-197.

<sup>163</sup> Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 164.

sentencing of Lt. William Calley before a military court at Fort Benning, two hours Southwest of Atlanta down I-85, to life-imprisonment for the murders of 22 South Vietnamese men, women, and children at My Lai captured the headlines both locally and nationally.<sup>164</sup>

More interesting than anything that happened at “the Gulch” that afternoon were the negotiations between Cousins and Massell over the groundbreaking event. Cousins wanted to hold a formal blue ribbon ceremony that amounted to a cocktail party for the “Big Mules.” Massell protested Cousins’ plan, insisting that the public be invited and allowed to participate in the groundbreaking of a building they were helping to finance and which would eventually become their property. Moreover, the mayor believed that a building being christened the “Omni” should welcome the public it purported to serve. Following a private negotiating session with Cousins’ representative and a week’s worth of public negotiations through the city’s newspapers, Massell convinced Cousins to hold a public ceremony, offering free hot dogs and soft drinks to all who attended.<sup>165</sup>

This trivial dispute between Massell and Cousins was hardly a decisive moment in the history of Metropolitan Atlanta, but it was emblematic of the problems “Major League” Atlanta would face in the coming years as it struggled to live up to its cultural aspirations. The civic elite’s 1960s dream of using professional sports as a metropolitan center of gravity failed in the 1970s. In a seven year period between 1965 and 1972, Atlanta had opened two state-of-the-art playing facilities for professional sports and had lured four major league franchises to the city. The city’s political and corporate leadership, the people who managed the concerted civic effort to acquire these amenities, made it clear that the primary social and cultural purposes for the

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<sup>164</sup> Alex Coffin, “Massell Plays Ball at Coliseum Site,” *Atlanta Constitution*, April 1, 1971, 1A, 20A; Jesse Outlar, “Mayor Massell’s Party,” *Atlanta Constitution*, April 1, 1971, 1D; Alex Coffin, “Massell, Cousins Get Together on Coliseum Event,” *Atlanta Constitution*, March 30, 1971, 2A.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

acquisition of professional sports franchises were increasing the city's national prestige and serving as a unifying force in the region. Once these amenities were in place, though, it became increasingly unclear just who would be supporting Atlanta's teams and how they would do so. Massell's inclusive vision and Cousins' exclusive vision of who should have been the focus of the Omni's groundbreaking ceremony evoked the political and cultural divides that shaped the remaking of Metropolitan Atlanta in the late twentieth century. In particular, they display the two primary visions of Metropolitan Atlanta's future articulated by the civic elite during the 1960s and 1970s. Despite his conflicts with his predecessor, Massell represented a continuation of the post-World War II Atlanta ethos of inclusive, negotiated settlement and coalition building. From Massell's perspective, Atlanta's significant municipal investments in mass leisure were aimed at providing all of Metropolitan Atlanta with a broadly-beneficial civic luxury. Cousins, by contrast, wanted to reinvigorate the center city by satisfying the desires of the affluent suburbanites who had either abandoned the city or, as newcomers, avoided it altogether. Neither appeals to metropolitan unity or efforts to appeal to the variety of consumers across Metropolitan Atlanta won a lasting core of patrons back to the amenities of the center city, despite the presumed appeal of professional sports.

## CHAPTER 5

### The Politics of Metropolitan Divergence in Atlanta, 1961-1975

“What folks will do to avoid having to live in the city is amazing,” Steve Suitts of the Southern Regional Council, an Atlanta-based civil rights organization, told the *Boston Globe*’s Robert Scheer in 1979. “All you have to do is sit on the rail of one of those super highway bridges and look down at the cars that come in at 7:30 in the morning and you’ll see just one white face after another,” Suitts said, attributing the extraordinary efforts made by Atlanta commuters to avoid living in the city to two factors. He explained that white residents in suburban Atlanta shared a nearly universal desire to avoid living in integrated neighborhoods and sending their children to integrated schools, a fact that was as widely known as it was practiced, but was rarely stated publicly in such explicit terms, especially by its practitioners.<sup>1</sup>

The phenomenon Suitts described, the hasty back and forth of commuters between Atlanta’s ever-expanding suburban frontiers and the city’s CBD, was a product of choices made over the previous half century by both civic elites and ordinary citizens, more than 2.5 million of whom lived in the metropolitan region by the end of the 1970s. These included decisions made by disproportionately influential figures including local, state, and federal policy makers, urban planners, corporate leaders, and investors from outside of Georgia. Just as significantly, they included choices made by ordinary citizens in their overlapping public and private roles as voters, shoppers, taxpayers, homebuyers, renters, neighbors, and parents. Collectively, the decisions made by every one of these constituent and often overlapping enclaves remade

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Scheer, “Tourists Seldom See the Real Face of Atlanta,” *Boston Globe*, February 18, 1979, A3.

Metropolitan Atlanta into a highly decentralized, politically and culturally fractured region whose denizens resisted the kind of mass cultural forces that frequently fostered a sense of civic unity, such as professional sports franchises.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter analyzes the reconfiguring of Metropolitan Atlanta's governing regimes and political culture during the 1960s and 1970s. It argues that a series of contentious regional policy disputes, specifically conflicts between the core city and its surrounding counties on the issues of housing development, school desegregation, annexation, and rapid transit, played a decisive role in the formulation of distinct and divergent urban and suburban political cultures in Metropolitan Atlanta. The metropolitan political culture that emerged from these controversies created an atmosphere in which institutions like professional sports franchises, for whom commodifying a sense of civic unity within their regional market was essential to their organizational and financial stability, were hard-pressed to win over a broad or consistent fanbase for their product. As Atlanta became a "Major League" city, the bi-racial, political coalition that had facilitated its economic and cultural ascension was in the process of unraveling. This changing political and cultural climate left civic institutions such as the city's sports franchises, without a dependable, durable, or diverse base of supporters. Institutions that sought out cross-metropolitan fealty thus failed to unify the region as their respective architects had envisioned. As we shall see, this applied at least as much for trans-metropolitan public authorities, specifically those charged with the management of the region's mass transit, schools, and housing, as it did to professional sports franchises.

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<sup>2</sup> Charles C. Euchner, *Playing the Field*, 3-22; Michael N. Danielson, *Home Team*, 102-116; Steven Riess, *City Games*, 240-245; Mark Rosentraub, *Major League Losers*, 33-72.

## The Unmaking of the Hartsfield-Allen Coalition

The Hartsfield-Allen coalition, whose core consisted of the city's black and white business and professional classes, had negotiated the contours of civic governance with consistent support from black voters and a clear majority of white voters since the 1940s. During the 1960s and 1970s, however, Atlanta's bi-racial electoral coalition succumbed to the demographic transformation of the city and its suburbs during the 1960s and 1970s. At the end of Ivan Allen's two terms as mayor, 60,000 fewer whites and 70,000 more blacks lived in the city of Atlanta than did at the time of his inauguration, transforming Atlanta into a majority black city by the time of the 1970 Census. By 1980, African Americans constituted more than two-thirds of Atlanta's 425,000 residents while whites constituted more than eighty percent of the two million people living in its suburbs.<sup>3</sup>

In place of the consensus-building Hartsfield-Allen regime emerged a fragmented regional political culture built around two distinct power bases: black political leadership in the majority African American city of Atlanta and a predominately white suburban politics that asserted its civic autonomy from Atlanta. The extent to which suburban Atlanta asserted its political independence increased as the population and economic clout of the five core counties expanded well beyond that of the center city. Race proved to be the most significant of prisms through which metropolitan area residents gave meaning to the social, political, and spatial transformation of their region during the 1960s and 1970s.

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<sup>3</sup> "1980 Atlanta Profile: County and City Data Book," University of Virginia Library Census Data Base, Accessed on June 10, 2014: [http://ccdb.lib.virginia.edu/ccdb/ccdb/choose\\_variables?year=historic&type=city&state=13&items%5B%5D=1300](http://ccdb.lib.virginia.edu/ccdb/ccdb/choose_variables?year=historic&type=city&state=13&items%5B%5D=1300); Jeffrey Scott, "Barricade was Turning Point for Allen," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 4, 2003, 1D; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 77.



Undoubtedly, race has always played a major role in Atlanta politics. Its tangible impact on electoral politics became more evident, though, following the 1946 *Chapman v. King* decision that declared Georgia's white-only primary unconstitutional. Beginning in the late 1940s, registration drives orchestrated by the Atlanta Negro Voters' League made African Americans, then approximately one-third of the population, a force in city politics. Black Atlantans' bloc support for Hartsfield and his allies made them an even more decisive presence in municipal elections. When African Americans became an electoral majority in Atlanta during the early 1970s, race played just as profound a role in reshaping local political coalitions. The emergence of a black electoral supermajority in Atlanta and a suburban white electoral supermajority set the parameters for the region's political culture, creating a recurring set of coalitions, norms, and taboos that privileged group or local interests over trans-metropolitan cooperation.

The unmaking of the Hartsfield-Allen coalition and its replacement with divergent urban and suburban political cultures in Metropolitan Atlanta took place over the course of three mayoral administrations: Ivan Allen (1962-1970), Sam Massell (1970-1974), and Maynard Jackson (1974-1982). The metropolitan-wide struggles over housing, school desegregation, annexation, and rapid transit during these three administrations played a decisive role in cementing the region's divergent urban and suburban political cultures. Massell, who had served as Allen's vice mayor, figured prominently in each of these struggles, as he tried to balance competing interests in a city that had virtually equal numbers of white and black voters in the early 1970s. Simultaneously pragmatic and idealistic, Massell tried to solve controversial municipal and metropolitan issues in ways that fostered regional stability and convergence. He championed metropolitan-wide rapid transit, the annexation of affluent, tax-base preserving communities into Atlanta proper, and the distribution of public housing throughout the region.

Each of these positions provoked fierce opposition from numerous interest groups representing the region's different racial, socio-economic, and regional enclaves, preventing him from bringing about the kind of metropolitan economic and social convergences he envisioned.

Massell's landslide defeat in the 1973 mayoral runoff by his African American vice mayor Maynard Jackson, the first election in which African Americans constituted a majority of the electorate, brought about the ascension of black political leadership in the city. Jackson's victory calcified an already hardening suburban consensus against political cooperation with the city. Between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s, Atlanta's predominant political culture changed from one that was characterized by cooperation and consensus to one that privileged autonomy and avoidance. This political and social climate, in which group interests rather than mutual metropolitan interests became the endpoint of civic aspirations, proved inhospitable to institutions which sought out the patronage of potential customers from across the region's demographic landscape. Professional sports proved to be as much a victim of the new political and cultural sensibilities as metropolitan-wide plans for rapid transit or annexation.

### **Residential Divergence in Metropolitan Atlanta, 1960-1980**

Desegregation in Atlanta, wrote Matthew Lassiter, consisted of a labyrinth of avoidance, "a sophisticated combination of socioeconomic and geographic barriers designed to accommodate the class prejudices of the northside and to manage the racial anxieties of the southside."<sup>4</sup> Lassiter's description is a starting point for understanding the residential divergence of Metropolitan Atlanta during the 1960s and 1970s. Collectively, urban renewal, housing desegregation, and the economic growth of the region prompted responses by citizens from

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew Lassiter, *Silent Majority*, 106-7

varying social backgrounds that contributed to the decentralization of Metropolitan Atlanta into spatially discreet socio-economic, racial, and lifestyle clusters.

The implementation of policies aimed at residential and school desegregation provoked broader opposition among white Atlanta residents than any of the other progressive reforms enacted by municipal leaders during the 1960s and 1970s. Many white residents who tolerated living in a municipality where African Americans could eat at a downtown lunch counter could not countenance life in a city where everyday racial mixing occurred in one's own section of town. The social intimacy involved in sharing a neighborhood or a classroom with blacks had a significantly greater impact on the practices of their everyday life than the desegregation of the CBD. As Kevin Kruse explained, a broad consensus of white residents in Atlanta and its environs came to see the extension of the rights of citizenship to African Americans as threatening their own freedoms. Specifically, many white Atlantans regarded desegregation as an affront to their freedom to associate with people of their choosing and to govern their community's affairs without government interference.<sup>5</sup>

Once federal courts compelled city administrators to remove all remaining legal barriers to neighborhood or school desegregation, the white residents of the Atlanta wards most affected by the changes voted with their feet. The end of legally-sanctioned residential and school segregation in Atlanta proved to be the primary catalyst for white abandonment of the city, resulting in a net loss of 164,000 white residents between 1960 and 1980, a fifty-five percent decline in the city's white population. In twenty years, Atlanta went from a city that was roughly two-thirds white to a city that was more than two-thirds black.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 1-12.

<sup>6</sup> "1980 Atlanta Profile: County and City Data Book," University of Virginia Library Census Data Base.

Middle and working class white Atlantans bore the social brunt of desegregation. Theirs were the neighborhoods that became destabilized as a result of court mandates, not the tony Northside neighborhoods in which progressives like Ivan Allen resided. Predatory realtors helped to accelerate the white abandonment of South, East, and West Atlanta through a multi-faceted campaign of harassment. White homeowners living in transitional neighborhoods received dozens of phone calls and mail solicitations from real estate brokers each week, often offering them as much as one and a half times the recently prevailing market values of their homes. Some realtors played up racial fears among children, approaching them as they walked home from school and telling them that they would be unwelcome in their soon-to-be all-black neighborhoods.<sup>7</sup> George Coleman of the *Daily World* accused some block-busting realtors of “moving unkempt blacks into [the neighborhood] temporarily and then pointing to them as ‘the type of neighbors you will get if you stay here.’”<sup>8</sup> Whether provoked by predatory realtors or not, white residents of transitional neighborhoods left Atlanta so quickly that the Board of Alderman considered banning the placement of “for sale” signs on residential properties. In 1967, the West End Business Men’s Association petitioned for the ban, which, they argued, would help to stabilize neighborhoods that were changing overnight from all-white to all-black once “for sale” signs started appearing outside homes. The Board of Alderman voted against the ban, which a majority of its members considered an affront to the free enterprise system.<sup>9</sup>

The decline in Atlanta’s white population during the 1960s was directly related to the simultaneous growth of Atlanta’s black population, which expanded to more than a quarter-

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<sup>7</sup> “An Answer to Block-Busting,” *Atlanta Constitution*, May 16, 1967, 4; George M. Coleman, “Scare Tactics Have Failed to Create All Black City,” *Atlanta Daily World*, November 5, 1971, 1, 4.

<sup>8</sup> George M. Coleman, “Scare Tactics Have Failed to Create All Black City,” *Atlanta Daily World*, November 5, 1971, 1, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Alex Coffin, “City Asked to Ban Home ‘Sale’ Signs,” *Atlanta Constitution*, May 19, 1967, 1; Alex Coffin, “City Rejects Signs Ban for Homes,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 4, 1967, 1.

million during the decade. Black residential expansion in Southwest Atlanta was the primary engine of the city's demographic transformation. In 1960, Southwest Atlanta was a de facto all-white community. By 1970, African Americans constituted a supermajority of its residents. More than half of Southwest Atlanta's new African American residents had migrated there from the city's traditional black enclaves that formed a "U" around the CBD. As Black Atlantans took advantage of the legal desegregation of housing in the city, white borrowers found it increasingly difficult to secure home loans in Southwest Atlanta, making it economically unfeasible for white residents of modest means to stay. Black residential expansion into Southwest Atlanta was soon followed by expansions onto the city's west and east sides and, eventually, into Southeast Atlanta, the urban core of "Maddox Country." Once breached by large-scale black settlement, whites abandoned each of these areas, rendering virtually every Atlanta census tract south of I-20 more than 75 percent black by 1970.<sup>10</sup>

White enclaves of privilege on Atlanta's northside avoided the most tangible aspects of desegregation while accruing the economic benefits and cultural prestige that outsiders afforded to the ruling class of the region's most enlightened city. The "Forward Atlanta" promotional campaign, which transformed Atlanta's corporate class into one of the nation's most powerful by luring hundreds of millions of dollars in outside investment, would not have been possible without the continued cultivation of the city's reputation as a progressive oasis in the Segregated South. The greatest beneficiaries of the inflow of capital investment to the "City Too Busy to Hate" proved to be the people who sacrificed the least to maintain this reputation. As a result, Atlanta was transformed during the 1960s and 1970s into a city whose population consisted

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<sup>10</sup> Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 234-245; Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Making of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 62; "1980 Atlanta Profile: County and City Data Book," University of Virginia Library Census Data Base; Andy Ambrose, *Atlanta: An Illustrated History*, 187; Truman A. Hartshorn, *Metropolis in Georgia*, 45.

primarily of a socio-economically diverse black population and an affluent white population whose daily lives were increasingly distant from those of the city's racial majority. The combined influx of impoverished rural blacks into the city, the departure of middle income whites for the suburbs, and the growing prosperity of Atlanta's corporate class fostered a steep increase in income inequality during the 1960s. The annual income gap between the city's white and black residents jumped from approximately \$2700 in 1960 to more than \$4200 in 1970.<sup>11</sup>

The residential instability of Atlanta during the 1960s and 1970s was, to a great extent, a product of the residential disruptions which began during the city's urban renewal campaign in the 1950s. In Atlanta, like dozens of other cities, urban renewal became synonymous with "negro removal." Between 1956 and 1966, federally-subsidized slum clearance and expressway building programs as well as locally-initiated downtown redevelopment efforts led to the destruction of 21,000 predominately low-income housing units and the displacement of 67,000 predominately African American residents from the neighborhoods immediately to the east, west, and south of the CBD. Atlanta's black leadership endorsed the city's urban renewal program—including the Stadium and Civic Center redevelopment projects erected on the sites of demolished black neighborhoods-- as engines of economic development and employment for the residents of nearby African American neighborhoods. Moreover, both the Hartsfield and Allen administrations had promised black leaders that they would build tens of thousands of new public housing units near the CBD while making more land available on the city's westside to black real estate developers for the construction of single-family homes. Whether intended as barriers or not, Atlanta Stadium on the Washington-Rawson site, the Atlanta Civic Center on the

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<sup>11</sup> "1980 Atlanta Profile: County and City Data Book," University of Virginia Library Census Data Base; "1970 Atlanta Profile: County and City Data Book," University of Virginia Library Census Data Base; Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 234-45; Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Making of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 62.; Truman A. Hartshorn, *Metropolis in Georgia*, 45-6; "The Ghetto Spreads," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 28, 1968, 4.

Bedford-Pine site, and the Downtown Connector (1964), a north-south expressway which cut Sweet Auburn in half, all destroyed significant portions of the city's traditional black neighborhoods while reconfiguring the spatial boundaries of white and black Atlanta.<sup>12</sup>

The destruction of many traditionally black neighborhoods by urban renewal and the subsequent loosening of tacit and explicit municipal restrictions on black residential expansion led to a profound reconfiguration of the city's residential life during the 1960s. Black middle class residents in search of quality housing began purchasing homes across Southwest and Southeast Atlanta, leading to the virtual abandonment of both sections of the city by white residents. Civic-minded progressives lamented the unwillingness of blacks and whites to share South Atlanta's neighborhoods. Black newcomers to South Atlanta proved as indifferent as the whites who abandoned these neighborhoods to the harangues of social commentators who decried the resegregation of the area. Atlanta's black middle class was focused on taking advantage of the end of legal segregation, not ensuring the lasting integration of their new neighborhoods, an issue over which they had almost no control. The area's new residents were motivated primarily by a desire to secure the individual, familial, and communal comforts of middle-class citizenship. African Americans cultivated a civil society of their choosing in the numerous stable neighborhoods they recreated in Southwest Atlanta. They made places that combined the trappings of middle-class domesticity with a familiar network of black-run institutions that attended to the community's religious, commercial, and associational needs.<sup>13</sup>

Many African Americans who could not find affordable housing in Atlanta during the 1960s moved eastward into DeKalb County or southwest of the city limits into Fulton County in

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<sup>12</sup> Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 61-62, 153-155; Truman A. Hartshorn, *Metropolis in Georgia*, 41-48; Andy Ambrose, *Atlanta: An Illustrated History*, 167-169.

<sup>13</sup> "A City Responds to the Crisis," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 26, 1968, 9A; Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 61-62; Truman A. Hartshorn, *Metropolis in Georgia*, 41-48

the region's first wave of black suburbanization. "Blacks today own a piece of suburbia," George Coleman of the *Daily World* wrote in 1971. "Greenbriar, Lenox Square, all of these beautiful suburban shopping centers which were set up to comfort the white exodus from downtown, serve the black people of this area equally." Describing the black suburbanite who "has progressed to the point that he has a car, and advanced socially to the extent that he now knows the best foods, best clothing and best prices," Coleman highlighted an emerging black middle class that was making use of these new amenities for their own purposes.<sup>14</sup> One in five of the region's more than half-million black residents lived in the suburbs by 1970, a proportion twice as high as in 1960. The growth of Dekalb's black population during the 1960s was particularly pronounced, increasing by more than 250 percent from 22,171 to 57,869. Black newcomers clustered in Dekalb's westernmost sections, which included a small portion of the city of Atlanta.<sup>15</sup>

The black migration from Atlanta to Dekalb was part of a larger population boom in the county. Between 1960 and 1970, Dekalb's population grew by nearly 62 percent from 256,782 to 415,387. The cultural divergence that came to characterize the metropolitan area as a whole could be seen in microcosm in Dekalb. The African Americans who settled in DeKalb during the 1960s were primarily native Georgians who held blue collar, service, or entry-level government jobs. Black residential migration into Dekalb had itself fostered a second round of white flight for thousands of middle-income whites who had left the city for the nearby county earlier in the 1960s. Many native-born whites who left South Atlanta in response to housing

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<sup>14</sup> George M. Coleman, "One Race Downtown Section Must Be 'Impossible Dream,'" *Atlanta Daily World*, November 4, 1971, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Laub, "Single Family Residential Development: Dekalb County 1945-1970," Georgia State University Historic Preservation Program (Unpublished Paper), Spring 2010. Accessed Online October 1, 2014: <http://www.dekalbhistory.org/documents/Single-FamilyResidentialDevinDeKalbCounty.pdf>; Gary Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 340-342.



integration left their new neighborhoods in DeKalb just a few years later under similar circumstances. A third population cluster, consisting of corporate transplants, contributed to Dekalb's staggering growth during the 1960s. More than a third of Dekalb's new residents had moved to the region from out of state. The parameters of social interaction in booming DeKalb County were shaped beginning in the 1960s not only by racial and socio-economic differences, but also by the cultural differences between its native-born and transplanted populations.<sup>16</sup>

Amid the residential transformation of Atlanta and its inner-ring suburbs, the quality of life in the city's poorest neighborhoods deteriorated further. The density of population in Atlanta's traditionally black neighborhoods continued to grow as a net migration of 70,000 African Americans, primarily from rural Georgia, moved to Atlanta during the 1960s, adding further stress to the city's housing crisis.<sup>17</sup> The vast majority of homes in the historically black neighborhoods surrounding the southern half of the CBD, including Summerhill, Vine City, and Mechanicsville, had become dilapidated and overcrowded. Many such homes served as the residences of several families simultaneously. Less than a quarter of the African American migrants from rural Georgia who came to Atlanta had even a ninth grade education. Even fewer had job skills applicable to the local economy. Almost none of them had sufficient financial resources to maintain the homes into which they moved.<sup>18</sup>

Atlanta's civic leadership proved unwilling and unable to meet the demands for publicly subsidized housing from its new or old residents, building a total of five thousand units between 1957 and 1967, less than a quarter of the number required to provide housing for just those

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.; Richard Laub, "Single Family Residential Development: Dekalb County 1945-1970"; Truman A. Hartshorn, *Metropolis in Georgia*, 45-46; "1980 Atlanta Metropolitan Area Profile: County and City Data Book," University of Virginia Library Census Data Base.

<sup>17</sup> Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 61-62; Truman A. Hartshorn, *Metropolis in Georgia*, 41-48; "A City Responds to the Crisis," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 26, 1968, 9A.

<sup>18</sup> Tomiko Brown-Nagan, *Courage to Dissent*, 254-272; "A City Responds to the Crisis," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 26, 1968, 9A; Bill Shipp, "Is This Atlanta's Face?" *Atlanta Constitution*, March 3, 1964, 1.

residents who had been displaced by urban renewal. Less than one in eight Atlanta residents displaced by its slum clearance program ever resided in one of the city's new public housing units. In January 1966, the AHA declared the city in need of 20,000 additional housing units. White residents fought the placement of public housing in their neighborhoods as vociferously as they had the integration of the private housing market. In particular, residents of still-predominately white neighborhoods on Atlanta's affluent Northside, Allen's white political base, proved adept at fighting the issuance of building permits for low-income housing.<sup>19</sup>

Allen's usually steadfast allies in the business community opposed his efforts to build low-income housing almost anywhere in Atlanta, fearing that any new housing would hasten its transformation into a majority black city. Central Atlanta Progress (CAP), a lobbying group for downtown business interests, called repeatedly for a regional solution to the city's housing crisis, but suburban governments stymied all such efforts.<sup>20</sup> Communities in Fulton and Dekalb Counties created their own housing authorities and laid claim to nearby unincorporated land to preempt plans by AHA to build developments in these areas. Once under the control of a suburban housing authority, local governments often rezoned the land in question as commercial or industrial to avoid its future use as housing.<sup>21</sup>

Ivan Allen had promised "an assault on the city's worst slums" during his second term, renewing his pledge to "work with all agencies concerned in locating new housing opportunities for the negro population" as part of the city's continued urban renewal program.<sup>22</sup> Living conditions in the city's most impoverished neighborhoods had worsened during his first term. A

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<sup>19</sup> Lorraine Bennett, "Housing Needs Attention," *Atlanta Journal*, September 8, 1969, 1A, 4A; Truman A. Hartshorn, *Metropolis in Georgia*, 43-48; Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 154-155; Reese Cleghorn, "The South is Marching to Forward Atlanta," *New York Times*, January 8, 1968, 86.

<sup>20</sup> Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 61-73.

<sup>21</sup> Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 250.

<sup>22</sup> Marion Gaines, "Mayor Allen Wins by 2-1 Margin," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 9, 1965, 1; Ivan Allen, *Mayor: Note on the Sixties*, 33; Gary Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 259.

1965 AHA survey determined that 31 percent of Atlantans, or 160,000 residents, lived in substandard housing, an increase from 21 percent in 1960. Grady Hospital reported a dramatic increase between 1960 and 1967 in the number of children it admitted from the city's slums for treatment for rat bites.<sup>23</sup> Simultaneously, demand for public housing had increased considerably. One-quarter of city residents in 1965 met the eligibility requirements for low-income housing, creating a waiting list several thousand names long. Many of the families on the waiting list were recent arrivals from rural Georgia, leading the city to institute a 12 month residency requirement for access to public housing.<sup>24</sup>

Fear that the civil disturbances which had affected northern cities in the summers of 1964 and 1965 would spread to Atlanta prompted Allen's renewed "assault" on slums. In his first term, Allen made filling the land cleared during the Hartsfield administration with prestigious, municipally financed developments like Atlanta Stadium and the Atlanta Civic Center his top urban renewal priorities.<sup>25</sup> "The city built its status symbol stadium in the area of some of its worst slums," the *New York Times*' Reese Cleghorn wrote in an otherwise hagiographical 1966 profile of Allen's progressive political record in Atlanta.<sup>26</sup> The civil disturbances feared by Atlanta's civic elite came to pass in the summer of 1966 in the very neighborhoods that surrounded its "status symbol stadium" and new civic center: Summerhill and Bedford-Pine.

Though much smaller in scale than the riots that took place in cities like Newark or Los Angeles,

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<sup>23</sup> "Slums are Gaining Ground," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 19, 1966, 1; "And Still, 160,000 Abide in Sleazy Dwellings," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 31, 1965, 1; "Atlanta Losing Headway in Control of Rats," *Atlanta Constitution*, August 3, 1967, 1.

<sup>24</sup> "Fourth of Atlanta's Families Eligible for Rent, Housing," *Atlanta Constitution*, August 1, 1965, 1; "Slums are Gaining Ground," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 19, 1966, 1; "And Still, 160,000 Abide in Sleazy Dwellings," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 31, 1965, 1; "Year Residency Requirement Set for City's Public Housing," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 19, 1966, 8.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 61; Ivan Allen, *Mayor: Note on the Sixties*, 33; Gary Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 259; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 61-73.

<sup>26</sup> Reese Cleghorn, "Allen of Atlanta Collides with Black Power and White Racism," *New York Times*, October 16, 1966, 136.

Allen believed that decisive action on affordable housing was the only way to stave off more violent urban uprisings. In November 1966, Allen called the Mayor's Conference on Housing, a gathering that included voices from the city's white and black leadership as well as unprecedented input from residents of the city's most blighted neighborhoods, a decision in keeping with federal anti-poverty proscriptions that placed greater value on participation by neighborhood organizations in the planning of publicly-financed projects. Participants in the conference made recommendations based either on their experiences living in these troubled neighborhoods or insights that they had gained from touring these areas in the aftermath of the riots. The Housing Conference set a five year goal of building 17,000 new affordable housing units in the city with a crash program aimed at building 9,800 of those units in two years.<sup>27</sup>

The Allen Administration married its plans to expand Atlanta's affordable housing stock to the city's participation in the Model Cities Program, a Great Society housing and anti-poverty initiative administered by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Model Cities sought to upgrade the total environment of blighted inner-city neighborhoods by focusing intense investment on relatively small sections of cities while purporting to seek out the input of area residents to help plan their neighborhood's revitalization. Allen realized that far more cities would want to participate in the program than there were federal dollars to support them. He ordered the AHA to submit a Model Cities application as soon as the program became law in March 1967. AHA's decisive action earned Atlanta the first spot in the program. Model Cities focused more than \$30 million in federal spending, channeled through twenty-eight different public and private agencies, on the revitalization of six adjoining, impoverished neighborhoods east, west, and south of I-20 and the CBD: Mechanicsville, Pittsburgh, Summerhill, Vine City,

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<sup>27</sup> Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 61-73; Ronald Bayor, "The Civil Rights Movement as Urban Reform," 303, 307-309; Truman A. Hartshorn, *Metropolis in Georgia*, 41-48.

Peoplestown, and Grant Park. Atlanta's Model Cities site covered 3000 acres of inner-city land and contained 50,000 people, ninety-five percent of whom lived below the poverty line.<sup>28</sup>

In Atlanta's Model Cities application, AHA explained that 71.8 percent of the 13,609 housing units in the six neighborhoods had been deemed substandard by the city. Atlanta officials said that the proposed Model Cities site required a minimum of 6,000 new units to alleviate its housing crisis. More than 4,800 of the existing units in the six neighborhoods were dilapidated beyond the point of repair.<sup>29</sup> Beyond the mere construction of new housing, Atlanta officials envisioned a cluster of social improvements that the federally-subsidized revitalization effort would bring to the community, including the remaking of the area into "a satisfying living environment," an effort to "improve and encourage development of stores, theatres, and other commercial facilities," a desire to "achieve harmonious, stable neighborhoods attractive to family groups," and an imperative to "prevent and control the outbreak of crime."<sup>30</sup>

Virtually none of the aspirations for the Model Cities area materialized. Fewer than 350 new homes were built in the Model Cities area between 1968 and 1973. Approximately 1000 homes received grants from Model Cities for rehabilitation or repairs, but many of these homes showed little in the way of improvement. The population in the Model Cities area actually declined by about 5,500 during the five year program. Bureaucratic inefficiency and infighting among different factions inside and outside the Model Cities community prevented significant

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<sup>28</sup> Sam Hopkins, "Model Cities Didn't Solve Crime, Housing," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 12, 1973, 1; Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 119-20, 154; "Model Cities," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 9, 1969, 4; ; Duane Rinier, "\$14 Million Spent; No New Homes Yet," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 30, 1971, 2A.

<sup>29</sup> Fletcher Thompson, Comptroller General of the United States, *Review of Certain Aspects of the Model Cities Program in Atlanta, Georgia*, Department of Housing and Urban Development Publications, GA-11326, (Washington, D.C., August 1971), 1-6. Accessed on June 11, 2013: <http://gao.gov/assets/120/113326.pdf>; Sam Hopkins, "Model Cities Didn't Solve Crime, Housing," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 12, 1973, 1.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

progress on any of the program's goals.<sup>31</sup> Homeowners in the Model Cities area frequently clashed with the area's highly transient population of renters, whom the homeowners regarded as the primary source of social ills in the neighborhoods, particularly the area's escalating crime rate. Reports of violent crime soared in the already dangerous neighborhoods that constituted the Model Cities area during the program's five years. In 1965, residents of the six neighborhoods reported one major crime for every twenty-four residents. In 1973, one in seventeen area residents was the victim of a major crime. During the five years of Model Cities, forty percent of the city's staggeringly high number of homicides took place in the six neighborhoods.<sup>32</sup>

"There is a constant fear of being robbed or having one's apartment burglarized," a 1973 Model Cities report explained.<sup>33</sup> Distrust of city leaders by area residents made the formation of durable political cooperation difficult. City officials tired quickly of participating in meetings in the Model Cities area, which often devolved into harangues by the handful of area residents who bothered attending the meetings. At the same time, residents of the Model Cities area tired quickly of participation in the program, which they deemed ineffectual. Few residents bothered to wade through the maze of overlapping agencies and jurisdictions that made the actual receipt of benefits from the Model Cities programs difficult.<sup>34</sup> Commenting on the program's legacy in Atlanta, Model Cities executive board member Weldon Samples said that "the neighborhoods look worse and more run down now than they did four years ago when Model Cities started."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid; Duane Riner, "\$14 Million Spent; No New Homes Yet," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 30, 1971, 2A; Fletcher Thompson, *Review of Certain Aspects of the Model Cities Program in Atlanta, Georgia*, 1-6.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid; Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 119-120; Sam Hopkins, "Model Cities Didn't Solve Crime, Housing," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 12, 1973, 1.

<sup>33</sup> Sam Hopkins, "Model Cities Didn't Solve Crime, Housing," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 12, 1973, 1.

<sup>34</sup> Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 61-73; Duane Riner, "\$14 Million Spent; No New Homes Yet," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 30, 1971, 2A; "Model Cities Rally Draws Only 300," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 22, 1968, 8.

<sup>35</sup> Sam Hopkins, "Model Cities Didn't Solve Crime, Housing," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 12, 1973, 1.

Though far short of the goals proposed by the Mayor's Conference on Housing, Atlanta's low-income housing stock grew considerably during the Allen and Massell administrations, primarily outside of the Model Cities area. The city's public housing system grew from 8,000 units in 1965 to nearly 14,000 units in 1973, which were home to approximately 50,000 residents.<sup>36</sup> In spite of these gains, a 1972 Research Atlanta study indicated that 130,000 city residents still lived in substandard housing. Most of the new housing units were placed on Atlanta's then-sparsely developed far west and south sides, miles from the employment centers of the CBD. New federal regulations adopted during the Johnson administration limited the amount of public housing that could be built in census tracts with large existing concentrations of minority populations. These restrictions limited the amount of new affordable housing that could be built in the historically black neighborhoods that ringed Atlanta's CBD, unless that housing was built as part of a special federal program such as Model Cities.<sup>37</sup>

Atlanta remained a highly segregated city throughout the 1960s despite the expansion of residential opportunities for black Atlantans. A 1969 AHA survey revealed that Atlanta's near-majority black population lived on just twenty percent of the city's land, only slightly more than they had in 1950.<sup>38</sup> A 1970 study by Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton argued that Atlanta was more segregated at the end of the 1960s than it was at the end of the 1930s. White flight may have opened more neighborhoods to black residents, but it also heightened the concentration of blacks and whites in discreet sections of the city and the suburbs, parallel communities with

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<sup>36</sup> Research Atlanta, *Public Housing in Atlanta* (Atlanta, GA: Research Atlanta, Inc, 1983), Research Atlanta Archive, Kenan Research Center; Renee Lewis Glover, "The Atlanta Blueprint: Transforming Public Housing Citywide," (Atlanta, GA: *Atlanta Housing Authority*, 2012), 8. Accessed on July 2, 2015:

[http://www.atlantahousing.org/pdfs/Chapter8\\_TheAtlantaBlueprint.pdf](http://www.atlantahousing.org/pdfs/Chapter8_TheAtlantaBlueprint.pdf); Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 61-73.

<sup>37</sup> Lorraine Bennett, "Housing Needs Attention," *Atlanta Journal*, September 8, 1969, 1A, 4A; Truman A. Hartshorn, *Metropolis in Georgia*, 43-48; Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 154-155; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 61-73; Alex Coffin, "City's Slum Housing Increasing," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 12, 1972, 2.

<sup>38</sup> Lorraine Bennett, "Housing Needs Attention," *Atlanta Journal*, September 8, 1969, 1A, 4A

little cultural or spatial common ground. Atlanta had, essentially, an all-white Northside and an all-black Southside, Westside, and Eastside by the early 1970s. Its suburbs were sprawling white enclaves with pockets of black residential growth in discreet sections of Fulton and DeKalb County. In the words of Massey and Denton, “the two sides came together in municipal politics and economic issues, but they rarely interacted in any meaningful social sense.”<sup>39</sup>

The remaking of Atlanta proper led to a broader cultural remapping of metropolitan Atlanta. Metropolitan Atlanta, by 1970, was characterized by the formation of discreet residential, socio-economic, and cultural enclaves, all of which were undergirded by the region’s racial divide. Firm demographic divisions between a far narrower white northside and the rest of the city emerged as did a more comprehensive division between a shrinking, majority black city and growing, preponderantly white suburbs, which themselves were divided by the black residential growth in sections of Fulton and Dekalb counties. By 1970, 80 percent of Metropolitan Atlanta’s black population lived in the city of Atlanta, one-third more than in 1960. In 1940, 17 of the city’s 75 census tracts were more than 75 percent black. By 1970, more than half of the city’s census tracts were at least three-quarters African American. Nearly 90 percent of blacks in the region lived in Fulton or Dekalb Counties in 1970. By 1980, blacks constituted a slight majority in Fulton and nearly one third of the population in Dekalb. Simultaneously, white flight and migration to the region created a metropolitan area in 1980 where 80 percent of its white population lived in the suburbs, a majority of them outside either Fulton or Dekalb.<sup>40</sup>

The patterns of Atlanta’s residential divergence became recognizable during the 1960s as Atlanta’s five suburban counties added 360,000 residents. Roughly half of these people settled

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<sup>39</sup>As cited in Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 237.

<sup>40</sup>Truman A. Hartshorn, *Metropolis in Georgia*, 45-46; “The Ghetto Spreads,” *Atlanta Constitution*, May 28, 1968, 4; “1980 Atlanta Metropolitan Area Profile: County and City Data Book,” University of Virginia Library Census Data Base; Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 244-245.



north of the city in Fulton, Cobb, and Gwinnett Counties, including more than two-thirds of the 67,000 new residents who came from outside Metropolitan Atlanta. Whites constituted more than 98 percent of the settlers in North Fulton, Cobb, and Gwinnett Counties during the 1960s.<sup>41</sup> Metropolitan Atlanta's residential patterns diverged even more strikingly over the next twenty years. The population of Atlanta shrunk from nearly a half-million in 1970 to 394,017 in 1990, paralleling its transformation from a city with a slight black majority to a city that was more than two-thirds African American. As Atlanta shrunk, its suburban population doubled in the same twenty year period. The metropolitan area's population grew from 1.56 million in 1970 to nearly three million in 1990. More than 60 percent of the region's population growth during the 1970s and 1980s took place in its northern suburbs as newcomers followed I-75 northward into Cobb, Clayton, northern Dekalb, and Gwinnett counties beyond the I-285 perimeter road, which locals, at the time of its 1969 opening, regarded as the outer limits of the metropolitan area.<sup>42</sup>

White newcomers to metropolitan Atlanta chose to settle almost exclusively in white enclaves, keeping the populations of transplant-heavy Cobb, Gwinnett, and Clayton counties more than 90 percent white through the end of the century. Transplants tended to settle near other newcomers. In Gwinnett County, for example, Census data shows that a majority of its residents were born outside the state of Georgia in 1980, 1990, and 2000. The county's population remained more than 95 percent white in each census.<sup>43</sup> As Atlanta's center of gravity shifted away from its urban core, its suburban residents inhabited a cultural orbit that shared ever less with the residents of the center city. Most white suburbanites sent their children to almost

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid; Charles Jaret et al, "The Legacy of Residential Segregation," *Sprawl City*, 122-129; Frederick Allen, *Atlanta Rising*, 197; Truman A. Hartshorn, *Metropolis in Georgia*, 45-46; "The Ghetto Spreads," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 28, 1968, 4; "1980 Atlanta Profile: County and City Data Book," University of Virginia Library Census Data Base.

<sup>42</sup> Charles Jaret et al, "The Legacy of Residential Segregation," *Sprawl City*, 122-129; Frederick Allen, *Atlanta Rising*, 199; "1980 Atlanta Profile: County and City Data Book," University of Virginia Library Census Data Base; Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 101-107.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

exclusively white schools. They did most of their shopping far from the center city. They spent their leisure time within the confines of their own residential and lifestyle cluster.<sup>44</sup> Those who commuted regularly into Atlanta traveled along interstate highways that rendered the city invisible to them, obscuring with concrete barriers the neighborhoods they sought to avoid.<sup>45</sup>

Suburban Atlantans, particularly those with no historic ties to the city, found few reasons to patronize the services offered in the center city once these services were duplicated in nearby retail centers. The merits of more convenient alternatives made even native-born suburban consumers infrequent patrons of the goods and services offered in the CBD.<sup>46</sup> In 1963, 52.2 percent of the retail stores in the five counties were located in Atlanta. By 1972, 63.3 percent of retail stores in the five counties were located outside of the city. Retail sales in suburban Atlanta surpassed those in the city for the first time that year.<sup>47</sup> The “Golden Crescent” at the northern end of the I-285 Perimeter became the first of many upscale retail development areas in suburban Atlanta. Located in northern Fulton County, the “Golden Crescent” began with a relatively modest shopping center (Phipps Plaza, 1969) and enclosed shopping mall (Northlake Mall, 1971). Both Phipps Plaza and Northlake Mall proved wildly popular, encouraging more ambitious suburban shopping developments, including the Cumberland/Galleria (1975), which was placed strategically at the intersection of I-75 and I-285, and the Perimeter Center (1971), located at the intersection of I-285 and Georgia 400.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Frederick Allen, *Atlanta Rising*, 199.

<sup>45</sup> Matthew Lassiter, *Silent Majority*, 328.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 276, 328; Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 245-251.

<sup>47</sup> Charles Moore, “Atlanta Tops U.S. Job Gains,” *Atlanta Constitution*, January 2, 1965, 6; Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 49; Donald Sabath, “Atlanta: City Renaissance at its Best,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, May 15, 1966, 32; Ivan Allen, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, 130-147; “A City in Crisis,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 30, 1975, 1A, 12A; Andy Ambrose, *Atlanta: An Illustrated History*, 183-185.

<sup>48</sup><sup>48</sup> Brian O’Shea, “Perimeter Mall Turns 35,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, August 17, 2006; B. Drummond Ayres, “What’s Doing in Atlanta,” *New York Times*, July 24, 1977, XX7; Leon Lindsay, “Atlanta: More than a City to Just Pass Through,” *Washington Post*, February 6, 1972, H8.

The politics of suburban Atlanta mirrored the cultural inclinations of its residents. The desire of suburban Atlantans for autonomy from the city fostered a political culture whose first impulse was resistance to administrative association with Atlanta proper or to metropolitan-wide policy solutions. Residents of the five counties proved incredibly successful in the 1960s and 1970s at isolating themselves from the city's problems. They either defeated or curtailed efforts to expand mass transit, public housing, school busing, or to annex portions of the suburbs into Atlanta proper. Indeed, many an office-seeker in the five suburban counties made a career out of responding to their constituents' preference for avoiding cooperation with Atlanta.<sup>49</sup>

### **“A Wide Berth”: The Resegregation of Metropolitan Atlanta Schools**

School desegregation in Metropolitan Atlanta followed a similar pattern to housing desegregation in the region. City leaders tried to manage a gradual desegregation of Atlanta schools, but continued agitation by civil rights activists led to a series of court decisions that forced the Board of Education to proceed more quickly than they desired. Most white Atlanta residents proved unwilling to send their children to integrated public schools. Some parents sent their children to one of the proliferating number of private schools in the region. Far more families relocated to the suburbs and their children to nearby public schools. By the time Atlanta school leaders came to a final desegregation settlement in 1973 with local civil rights groups, white residents had enacted a de facto resegregation of the region's schools by moving beyond the boundaries of Atlanta and its busing program.

Atlanta Public Schools (APS) followed the lead of Hartsfield and Allen on desegregation. They proceeded slowly, fearing that any rapid transformations within the school system would cause whites to abandon it immediately. Atlanta's school desegregation program began in

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<sup>49</sup> Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 245-251; Matthew Lassiter, *Silent Majority*, 276, 327-328.

August 1961 with the highly orchestrated and, after-the-fact, widely publicized enrollment of nine black students in four city high schools. Once token school desegregation had taken place, the white establishment, including Allen, declared victory on the issue. Mirroring his response to housing desegregation, Allen remained aloof from the ongoing process of school desegregation, even after his progressive turn late in his first term. Allen endorsed school desegregation in the “Six Point Plan,” but did little to encourage the large-scale integration of public education. School desegregation, like housing desegregation, had a more direct, day-to-day impact on the lives of citizens than the mere desegregation of public accommodations, which one could choose to avoid. Allen viewed the extension of APS’ desegregation plan as an administrative process to be undertaken carefully by the school system itself.<sup>50</sup>

APS proceeded with its desegregation plan slowly, adding a few dozen black students to white classrooms during the 1961-1962 and 1962-1963 school years. Civil rights organizations, including the SCLC and the NAACP, accused the Atlanta schools of maintaining a de facto segregated system. An October 1962 CBS News Special entitled “The Other Side of Dixie” made the slow pace of desegregation obvious to viewers across the country. The broadcast included footage from a pep rally at Murphy High School, one of Atlanta’s successfully desegregated institutions. When the camera panned the crowd during the assembly, only a handful of black faces could be seen among the school’s hundreds of students.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 48; Jim Auchmutey, “Mayors Kept City Too Busy to Hate,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 6, 2003, 1A; Alton Hornsby, “Black Public Education in Atlanta, Georgia, 1954-1973: From Segregation to Segregation,” *The Journal of Negro History* 76 No. 1 (Winter-Autumn 1991), 30-31; Elsie Carper, “Atlanta Ends School Segregation in Quiet,” *Washington Post*, August 31, 1961, A2

<sup>51</sup> Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 48; Jim Auchmutey, “Mayors Kept City Too Busy to Hate,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 6, 2003, 1A; Anthony Lewis, “Court Asks For Faster Integration,” *New York Times*, May 31, 1964, E5; Alton Hornsby, “Black Public Education in Atlanta, Georgia, 1954-1973,” 30-31; Elsie Carper, “Atlanta Ends School Segregation in Quiet,” *Washington Post*, August 31, 1961, A2; Virginia Hein, “The Image of a ‘City Too Busy to Hate’: Atlanta in the 1960s,” *Phylon* 33 no. 3 (Fall 1972), 206; “The Other Face of Dixie,” *CBS News Video*, October 24, 1962, report hosted by Harry Reasoner. Accessed on June 11, 2013: [www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=2681311n#ixzzljBBOh3B6](http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=2681311n#ixzzljBBOh3B6).

After several school years' worth of small upticks in the number of desegregated APS classrooms, the Justice Department filed suit, accusing the school system of violating the terms of its desegregation plan. The Justice Department alleged that APS maintained separate white and black school systems while engaging in token desegregation.<sup>52</sup> The suit infuriated APS officials, who said they had "bent over backward" to comply with federal mandates, unlike virtually every other Southern city, many of which had yet to desegregate even one of their classrooms.<sup>53</sup> In May 1964, the U.S. Supreme Court found on behalf of the Justice Department and required Atlanta to expand its desegregation plan under the federal agency's supervision.<sup>54</sup>

Following the Court's decision, APS officials worked quickly to rectify the situation, fearing that the unfavorable ruling would harm the city's progressive image. They set up an expedited school desegregation plan based on the recommendations of federal officials. By January 1966, 8,831 of the 61,344 black APS students attended desegregated institutions, nearly five times as many as during the previous academic year. Civil rights activists remained critical of APS' renewed desegregation efforts, characterizing the reforms as more tokenism in keeping with the district's previous policies. Activists pointed out that only six schools in the entire district had student bodies that were at least ten percent white and ten percent black for the 1965-1966 school year, the standard set by federal courts for deeming a school desegregated. Conversely, many white Atlanta parents regarded the pace of school desegregation as too rapid. In August 1961, whites constituted 56 percent of APS students, a proportion roughly comparable to the city's white population. By August 1965, whites, who remained a majority of the city's

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<sup>52</sup> Hal Gulliver, "Supreme Court Restudying Grade-a-Year Desegregation," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 30, 1964, 7; "Court Asks For Faster Integration," *New York Times*, May 31, 1964, E5; Alton Hornsby, "Black Public Education in Atlanta, Georgia, 1954-1973," 30-31; Virginia Hein, "The Image of a 'City Too Busy to Hate,'" 206.

<sup>53</sup> "Atlanta Prodded in Integration," *New York Times*, March 7, 1964, 52.

<sup>54</sup> Ted Lippman, "Review in Atlanta is Asked," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 26, 1964, 1; Anthony Lewis, "Court Asks For Faster Integration," *New York Times*, May 31, 1964, E5.

population, accounted for only 40 percent of APS students, demonstrating the unwillingness of many white parents to send their children to even marginally desegregated schools. Moreover, it exposed the impact of suburban flight on the demographics of the Atlanta school system. During the 1960s, a net of 60,000 white residents left the city of Atlanta, a social change caused in no small part by parents' desire to pull their children out of integrated APS schools.<sup>55</sup>

Atlanta's court-ordered, expedited 1965 desegregation plan was far from the endpoint of legal challenges to the racial composition of APS. Throughout the 1960s, the NAACP used a variety of legal means to try to force APS to accelerate the pace of its desegregation program. Federal courts gave APS a great deal of leeway in executing the 1965 plan, but, eventually, lost their patience, ruling that the school system had to accelerate its desegregation program to conform to new federal court precedents. In October 1969, the US Supreme Court ruled in *Alexander v. Holmes County (MS) Board of Education* that "all deliberate speed" was no longer an applicable standard for school desegregation. Schools, the court ruled, must completely desegregate their student bodies and staffs immediately. The Court's decision led to new rounds of litigation challenging the desegregation programs in hundreds of Southern school districts, including Atlanta's. The Atlanta NAACP filed suit once again against APS, seeking complete desegregation of all city schools through a busing program that would ensure the racial makeup in all public schools reflected the racial makeup of the entire city's student population. Under the NAACP's plan, more than 30,000 students would have been bussed from one part of the city to another to achieve a more representative racial distribution of students throughout the district.

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<sup>55</sup> Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 48, 77, 103-106; Anthony Lewis, "Court Asks For Faster Integration," *New York Times*, May 31, 1964, E5; "Atlanta Prodded in Integration," *New York Times*, March 7, 1964, 52; Alton Hornsby, "Black Public Education in Atlanta, Georgia, 1954-1973," 30-31; Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 237-238. Note that all twenty Catholic Schools in Georgia desegregated for the 1962-1963 school year, just as white parents in Atlanta began seeking them out as an alternative to integrated public schools.

As a result, every school in APS would become majority African American while none of them would be more than 87% black. By the 1969-1970 school year, the year during which the NAACP's suit was filed, black students outnumbered white students in Atlanta schools by a rate of two to one. Four out of five of these students still attended schools that were either more than 90% black or 90% white, failing federal standards for desegregation.<sup>56</sup>

While the courts worked through a new round of litigation, school desegregation remained a catalyst for metropolitan divergence, fostering a suburban political culture built around the interrelated identities of parent, homeowner, and taxpayer. As homeowners and taxpayers, many white metropolitan area residents did not want to subsidize Atlanta schools which they would not be using, regarded as failing its students, or whose constituents they regarded with racial animus. As parents, many white middle and working class Atlantans did not want their children attending integrated city schools they regarded as unsafe and unsatisfactory in their performance. Parents from all backgrounds had good reason to question the quality of instruction students were receiving in APS institutions by the late 1960s. Despite years of federally-funded interventions like Better Schools Atlanta (BSA), the reading, writing, and math skills of APS students, particularly those who attended predominately black schools, lagged as many as three years behind the averages of their peers across the country. An exodus of highly experienced white teachers that began in the mid-1960s contributed to the abysmal results, as many veteran educators left APS for jobs in expanding suburban school districts. The pace of white departures from APS accelerated considerably after March 1970 when the district transferred 400 white and 400 black teachers by lottery to schools in which they were racial minorities. The Board of Education indicated that the March 1970 lottery was just the beginning

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<sup>56</sup> Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 237-238; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 103-106; Steve Stewart, "'Majority Black' Plan is Urged for Schools," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 20, 1973, 6A.

of a larger teacher transfer program. White teachers responded by leaving APS at four times the rate of black teachers during the 1970s.<sup>57</sup>

The still-unsettled issue of cross-district busing provided parents with even greater motivation to move far away from the city. The 1971 Supreme Court decision in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* gave federal courts the latitude to use busing as a tool to remedy continued discrimination. Counties outside of the core metropolitan five, such as Douglas County, to the Northwest of Fulton, experienced rapid growth in the early 1970s in part because of fears that students from inner-ring suburban areas would be subject to cross-district busing. The departure of white families from Atlanta and the decisions by most newcomers to settle in outlying areas created in the words of Dr. Benjamin Mays, who became the first African American president of the Board of Education in 1967, a “white doughnut” of de facto segregated school systems surrounding the city.<sup>58</sup>

Suburban Atlanta school districts struggled to build and staff enough facilities to keep up with the influx of new students. Clayton County’s school enrollment more than doubled during the 1960s to 27,000 while Gwinnett County’s enrollment nearly doubled to 19,000. The growth rates of schools in DeKalb and Cobb Counties was even more drastic. Between 1950 and 1970, DeKalb’s school enrollment increased by more than 800 percent while Cobb County Public Schools grew by more than 500 percent. By 1970, three-quarters of APS students were black, while public schools in Cobb (97%), Gwinnett (95%), Clayton (93%), DeKalb (90%), and suburban Fulton County (90%) were all more than 90 percent white. By near necessity, voters

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<sup>57</sup> Tom Linthicum, “Where Do The Whites Go?” *Atlanta Constitution*, November 4, 1971, 1A, 20A; Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 1-12; Junie Brown, “Blacks’ Reading Said Still Lagging,” *Atlanta Constitution*, May 14, 1972, 1A.

<sup>58</sup> Tom Linthicum, “Where Do The Whites Go?” *Atlanta Constitution*, November 4, 1971, 1A, 20A; Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 1-12; George Rodrigue, “Central City Losing Both Housing and Residents,” *Atlanta Constitution*, April 13, 1981, 1A.



across suburban Atlanta approved generous new bonds almost every year in the 1960s and 1970s to finance the construction of additional schools in their districts, demonstrating their willingness to support public spending if they saw it as directly beneficial or regarded its beneficiaries as deserving of largesse.<sup>59</sup>

For a 1971 *Constitution* multi-page feature story entitled “Where Do the Whites Go,” reporter Tom Linthicum interviewed both suburban parents and school administrators to try to get a handle on why these rapid changes were taking place. Most parents of new enrollees in suburban schools, few of whom were willing to be quoted directly, cited a fear of busing as the primary reason they moved their families out of Atlanta. Among newcomers to the region, many cited a desire to live in close proximity to other employees from their firm as much as they did a desire to avoid busing. Other interviewees told Linthicum that they moved to the suburbs to avoid crime or to avoid living in a dangerous urban neighborhood. Some interviewees told Linthicum they did not want to pay taxes for city services they would not be using, namely public schools. Even speaking anonymously, most interviewees avoided direct references to race. This reflected a new suburban political ethos, a homeowner populism focused on individual rights and family rather than the explicit appeals to racial conflict at the core of segregationist “massive resistance” politics.<sup>60</sup> “Each man has his own reasons,” Linthicum wrote, “and he may not give you the real ones if you ask him.” Linthicum believed that even the frankest of his interviewees were engaging in self-censorship.<sup>61</sup>

School administrators spoke more frankly with Linthicum about the reasons for the explosion of new students in their schools. “Most of those who do come here from Atlanta are

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<sup>59</sup> Tom Linthicum, “Where Do The Whites Go?” *Atlanta Constitution*, November 4, 1971, 1A, 20A.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid; Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*, 3-12; Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 1-12, 253.

<sup>61</sup> Tom Linthicum, “Where Do The Whites Go?” *Atlanta Constitution*, November 4, 1971, 1A, 20A.

from neighborhoods that are changing from white to black,” Clayton County Superintendent Ernest Stroud told Linthicum. “People have told us that whole streets have just moved out of Atlanta and come out here,” Douglas County Superintendent Frank Cloer said, echoing Stroud’s sentiments.<sup>62</sup> Fulton County Superintendent E.E. Baker told Linthicum that “back in 1967, I think it was abundantly clear that we were receiving quite a number of students from the City of Atlanta...but now with recent court decisions, people just aren’t stopping in Fulton County any more... People are giving the downtown area of Atlanta a wide berth.”<sup>63</sup> Baker chalked these housing decisions up to more than a desire among white parents for their children to attend predominately white schools. He cited the lifestyle preferences of the people who chose to live in the suburbs, particularly those new to the Atlanta area. Instead of the hustle and bustle of an unfamiliar city, Baker said, “many of them tend to enjoy a relaxed little community that they can personally identify with,” Baker said, “and that’s why you find them moving to places like Alpharetta, Roswell, Morrow, and even Griffin.”<sup>64</sup>

The peak years for white abandonment of city schools corresponded with the final stages of the legal desegregation of APS. After a half-decade of negotiation, the Atlanta NAACP and the APS Board of Education reached a settlement on school desegregation. Dubbed the “Second Atlanta Compromise,” the February 1973 agreement brokered by Atlanta NAACP President Lonnie King and APS chief negotiators William Van Landingham and Frank Smith gave Atlanta’s black leadership decisive control over the school system, but compromised on the demand for genuine school integration. The Atlanta NAACP, the institutional force behind the litigation since the 1950s, negotiated a quintessentially Atlanta style deal with the Board of

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

Education. White and black corporate, governmental, and community leaders hashed out the details of the covenant in a series of behind-the-scenes negotiations. “The Second Atlanta Compromise” guaranteed that African Americans would hold a majority of executive positions in the school system, including superintendent. The plan further integrated school staffing to bring the composition of each school in line with the demographics of the entire system. Additionally, the “Compromise” created a system of biracial magnet schools designed to attract talented black and white students from across the city. In return, the NAACP dropped its demand for a broader cross-district busing program. “The Settlement of 1973” increased the number of race-based school transfers, but only slightly. That September, 3,000 new students joined the city’s busing program, not the 30,000 demanded by the NAACP two years earlier.<sup>65</sup>

“We just felt it was too late to get real integration,” Atlanta NAACP executive director Jondell Johnson told the *Washington Post*. “So we thought it would be better to gain control and assure our kids quality education.”<sup>66</sup> After fifteen years of litigating the matter, Atlanta NAACP leaders wanted to bring the episode to an end. White leaders, Lonnie King realized, would not agree to a compromise that involved large-scale forced busing. Moreover, King understood that any deal requiring significant busing would simply hasten the flight of APS’ remaining white students.<sup>67</sup> King argued that most black Atlantans agreed with his decision to prioritize administrative control of city schools over widespread integration. Certainly, this was the case among the upper and middle-income blacks with whom King had the most contact. Atlanta’s

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<sup>65</sup> Steve Stewart, “School Plan Approved; 4 Appeals Are Expected,” *Atlanta Constitution*, April 5, 1973, 1; “City School Agreement Assailed,” *Atlanta Constitution*, May 3, 1973, 22A; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 103-106; Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 239; Tomiko Brown-Nagin, *Courage to Dissent*, 393-402, 436.

<sup>66</sup> Susanna McBee, “Atlanta Blacks Trade Busing for Power,” *Washington Post*, March 4, 1973, E1.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*; Gary Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 395; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 103-106.

black professional classes supported the settlement enthusiastically, particularly the creation of a network of high-quality magnet schools.<sup>68</sup>

The national NAACP regarded the “Second Atlanta Compromise” as a sellout. They considered it a retreat from the organization’s policy of seeking the greatest degree of integration possible in all public institutions.<sup>69</sup> The national NAACP threatened to suspend the Atlanta branch from the organization but instead fired King as branch president.<sup>70</sup> Most black residents of the city’s poorest neighborhoods, those whose children attended the city’s worst schools, shared the national NAACP’s hostile reaction to the “Settlement of 1973.” They wanted their children to have the opportunity to attend the city’s best schools. The settlement foreclosed on that opportunity for all but the most gifted students in the city’s most impoverished neighborhoods. Instead, underprivileged children in Atlanta remained primarily in the city’s worst schools, far from whites and far from the children of the city’s black professional classes. The merit-based, magnet school system created by the settlement served primarily academically well-prepared children from the city’s black middle class. The “Settlement of 1973” had, in effect, consolidated the black professional class’ control over one of Atlanta’s foremost public institutions and distributed its benefits disproportionately to black middle class families.<sup>71</sup>

The 1973 compromise ended the legal struggle over school desegregation in Atlanta, but it failed to stem white flight from the city’s schools. In 1973, whites constituted 23 percent of the students in APS. By 1985, whites constituted six percent of APS students.<sup>72</sup> The muting of concerns about cross-metropolitan busing after the 1974 *Milliken v. Bradley* decision provided

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<sup>68</sup> Tomiko Brown-Nagin, *Courage to Dissent*, 5-6, 358-408

<sup>69</sup> “City School Agreement Assailed,” *Atlanta Constitution*, May 3, 1973, 22A; Susanna McBee, “Atlanta Blacks Trade Busing for Power,” *Washington Post*, March 4, 1973, E1; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 103-106; Gary Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 395

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Tomiko Brown-Nagin, *Courage to Dissent*, 385-406; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 103-106.

<sup>72</sup> Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 239.

white Atlantans with further impetus to move to districts they knew would not be integrated by court orders. The Supreme Court deemed cross-metropolitan busing an inappropriate remedy for school segregation because of the restrictions it imposed on the local control of schools. The sense among white parents that Atlanta's schools were unusable became more entrenched as they became more segregated. In a 1975 survey, Atlanta realtors cited the unwillingness of whites to send their children to city schools as the primary obstacle they faced in selling homes.<sup>73</sup>

### **“A Sound Ratio of Population”: The Failure of Annexation in Metropolitan Atlanta**

The metropolitan-wide political struggles over annexation and the extension of public transit were pivotal moments in the remaking of Atlanta's political culture during the 1960s and 1970s. In both instances, the efforts of civic elites to steward through trans-metropolitan solutions to these issues met the opposition of the region's two politically ascendant constituencies: Atlanta's emerging black electoral majority and the region's predominately white and numerically larger suburban majority. Metropolitan Atlanta's new urban and suburban consensuses were built around their respective demands for political and economic autonomy from the management of the city and region's tenured civic elites. In the case of annexation, city leaders who tried to manage Atlanta's racial transformation during the 1960s and 1970s fostered widespread mistrust among both white and black voters towards trans-metropolitan political reforms. In their failed efforts to manage the demographics of Atlanta's electorate and tax base, civic elites convinced an enduring supermajority of the metropolitan area's residents that plans for regional policy management would have an adverse impact on their lives.

The city of Atlanta annexed adjoining unincorporated land on a number of occasions in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Even so, Atlanta constituted a mere 37 square miles within

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<sup>73</sup> Curtis Wilkie, “Atlanta- A Resilient City,” *Boston Globe*, September 5, 1976, A2; “Atlanta: A City in Crisis,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 23, 1975, 1A, 16A.

535 square mile Fulton County at the end of World War II. During the 1930s, Atlanta and Fulton County officials discussed the possibility of consolidating into one political entity, but negotiations never got beyond the planning stage. City leaders feared that taxpayers would resent the idea of subsidizing services for residents of sparsely populated sections of the county.<sup>74</sup>

The demographic transformation of Atlanta during World War II made the targeted annexation of populated sections of Fulton County, particularly the white and affluent settlements north of the city limits, a newly pressing priority for the city's political and business establishment. Even before America entered the war in December 1941, a new wave of tens of thousands of job-seeking African Americans began migrating to Atlanta from rural Georgia, the latest in a half-century long migration of whites and blacks from the state's hinterlands. This wave of migration did not end with the war. Atlanta's continuing post-war economic boom and the coinciding mechanization of rural agriculture convinced even more black Georgians to migrate to the city. Atlanta's already congested black enclaves became even more overcrowded. By 1950, almost 40 percent of the city's black residents lived in homes that averaged more than one resident per room, three times the rate of white residents. The 1950 Census indicated that African Americans constituted nearly 40 percent of the city's population, ten percent more than in 1930. The Census Bureau projected that Atlanta would become a majority African American city by the mid-1960s if the city's continued in its current demographic trends.<sup>75</sup>

“Our Negro population is growing by leaps and bounds. They stay right in the city limits and grow by taking more white territory inside Atlanta,” Mayor Hartsfield wrote in a race-

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<sup>74</sup> Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Making of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 85-92.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid; Larry Keating, *Atlanta: Race, Class, and Urban Expansion* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 64.

baiting, private note to a number of “Big Mules” in 1950, explaining the necessity of annexation. Atlanta, he believed, needed an influx of affluent, white residents to ensure that the city’s tax base could withstand the strains being placed on municipal agencies by the migration of tens of thousands of impoverished, low-skilled, and poorly educated African Americans into the city.<sup>76</sup> Beyond the merely pragmatic budgetary concerns articulated by Hartsfield, “The Big Mules” feared that the transformation of Atlanta into a majority black city would destabilize their community politically, economically, and socially. Despite their collective racial progressivism relative to leaders in other southern cities, Atlanta’s city fathers analyzed the demographic transformation of their community through a racialized prism that reflected the prevailing sensibilities of their era and their region. They regarded white political and economic control of the city as imperative to its continued development and the maintenance of its civil society.<sup>77</sup>

Hartsfield addressed the annexation issue in a manner that maintained the stability and racial status quo of Atlanta while simultaneously helping him consolidate his support among the city’s white and black leadership. He pushed for the annexation of the affluent northside Buckhead and Druid Hills suburbs as part of the city’s 1951 plan of improvement, which residents of both communities approved by referendum later that year. The 1952 annexation increased the size of Atlanta proper from 37 to 118 square miles. It boosted the city’s population by close to 100,000 residents, more than ninety-five percent of whom were white. The 1952 annexation increased the white proportion of Atlanta’s population temporarily to almost seventy percent.<sup>78</sup> Hartsfield sold leaders in Druid Hills and Buckhead on the plan by arguing that the execution of parallel services in the city and new suburban communities was financially

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<sup>76</sup> Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Making of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 88.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 85-92; Harold H. Martin, *William Berry Hartsfield: Mayor of Atlanta*, 25-26, 41-42, 141-142.

<sup>78</sup> Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Making of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 85-92.

burdensome to both parties. Merger, he argued persuasively, would benefit everyone in terms of taxes and water rates. Hartsfield made sure to keep his primary motivation for pursuing annexation out of the public eye, fearing that the electorate's input would enflame tensions within the city or compromise his negotiations with urban black or suburban white leaders.<sup>79</sup>

Hartsfield won the support of the city's African American leadership for annexation by helping black entrepreneurs secure zoning clearances to build dozens of racially "self-contained" sub-divisions and apartment complexes on the city's western periphery. The mayor's support for black residential expansion in the 1940s and 1950s improved the quality of housing stock available to middle-income African Americans considerably. Simultaneously, it served the civic elite's goal of preventing the creation of even more densely packed black neighborhoods around the CBD, which, city leaders feared, would discourage whites from patronizing downtown businesses. Moreover, it engendered goodwill for Hartsfield among white middle and working class residents by forestalling the integration of their neighborhoods. Middle-income whites had griped for years that Hartsfield put black political interests ahead of their own.<sup>80</sup>

By the early 1960s, city leaders realized that the 1952 annexations would only ensure a white electoral majority for a few more years. Less than a decade after adding nearly 100,000 white citizens, Atlanta's population was, once again, nearly 40 percent black. The city's black population grew from 121,146 in 1950 to 186,820 in 1960, an increase of 54.2 percent. The continued influx of African Americans from rural Georgia and accelerated flight of white residents from the city's newly integrated neighborhoods during the early 1960s made the possibility of a majority-black Atlanta an issue that moved beyond the whispers of elite circles. It became a preoccupation of the local media and, in turn, area residents. A new round of

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Andrew Weise, *Places of Their Own*, 188; Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 35-38.



annexation plans emerged late in Ivan Allen's first term in response to these popular concerns. Even progressives like Allen made it clear that they wanted to maintain the city's white majority. Despite his poor showings among non-elite white voters both in 1961 and 1965, Allen regarded the preservation of a white electoral majority as essential to maintaining social peace in Atlanta and preventing further erosion of its tax base. The disappearance of white homeowners from the southern half of the city was the second major disruption of the city's tax base in less than a decade, compounding the destruction of thousands of taxable properties during urban renewal. Allen saw the protection of the city's tax base and the maintenance of civil society in bi-racial Atlanta as interrelated issues. He believed that the preservation of social peace in the city was predicated largely on its ability to deliver services to its neediest residents.<sup>81</sup>

Hartsfield was the loudest booster of an Allen and Atlanta Chamber-backed plan to annex the unincorporated northern Fulton County suburb of Sandy Springs, home to 38,000 predominately affluent, almost exclusively white residents. The former mayor had been badgering Sandy Springs to join Atlanta since the late 1950s, employing similar arguments about taxation and efficiency to those he used earlier that decade in Buckhead and Druid Hills. During the 1965-1966 public debate over the Sandy Springs annexation plan, Hartsfield spoke far more bluntly about the racial implications of the proposal. The former mayor served as a mouthpiece for the views of the civic elite, allowing them to avoid making such frank public statements. Hartsfield argued that Atlanta would lose its major city status if it became majority black. In Hartsfield's mind, public life in a majority-black Atlanta would devolve into a perpetual,

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<sup>81</sup> Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 247-248; Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Making of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 85-92; Raleigh Bryans, "The Anxious Suitor Gets Answered Wednesday," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 8, 1966, 16.

racially-charged battle for political power.<sup>82</sup> “We have only five or six more years until the racial balance is 50-50,” Hartsfield said, “and then on its way to further racial imbalance at an accelerated pace. What are we waiting on?”<sup>83</sup>

Other civic elites, notably Allen, prominent members of the Atlanta Chamber, and the editorialists of Atlanta’s major daily newspapers, shied away from the racial politics of annexation. Instead, they campaigned on behalf of the Sandy Springs plan by arguing that unification would reduce everyone’s taxes by eliminating redundant municipal services.<sup>84</sup> Allen, in particular, tried to make the addition of Sandy Springs to Atlanta sound like a benevolent act on the city’s part rather than a plan to maintain its white majority. Sure, it helped Atlanta “maintain a sound ratio of population,” as he described it euphemistically, but annexation would, more importantly, enable the city to help their “good neighbors in the rapidly growing suburbs” by “making the benefits of our municipal services available at a reasonable cost...”<sup>85</sup>

A deal between white and black legislators in the state legislature led to the inclusion of Boulder Park, a predominately African American, unincorporated section of Fulton County southwest of the city limits, in the May 1966 annexation referendum with Sandy Springs. Boulder Park and its fewer than 7,000 residents remained an afterthought throughout the referendum debate, but they provided annexation supporters with a defense against accusations that the entire process was an unmitigated grab for white votes.<sup>86</sup> In an unsigned editorial, the *Constitution* characterized annexation as a source of “good government and a good bargain for the people of Sandy Springs and Boulder Park” since “decisions made by the mayor, the

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<sup>82</sup> Harold H. Martin, *William Berry Hartsfield*, 178-182; Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 247-248; Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Making of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 85-92; Raleigh Bryans, “The Anxious Suitor Gets Answered Wednesday,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 8, 1966, 16.

<sup>83</sup> Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 247.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 248; Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Making of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 85-92.

<sup>85</sup> Marion Gaines, “City’s Expansion Put First by Mayor,” *Atlanta Constitution*, January 5, 1965, 1.

<sup>86</sup> Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Making of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 85-92.

alderman and Atlanta school officials affect the whole metropolitan region.” The *Constitution* expressed hope that the success of the 1966 annexation referendum would encourage city and suburban leaders to pursue a broader incorporation of Fulton County. If the borders of Atlanta city included the actual parameters of residential growth in Fulton County, the *Constitution* editorialist argued, then a broader metropolitan consensus could be reached on issues that affected people both inside and outside the confines of the present city limits.<sup>87</sup>

“An Atlantan” responded to the *Constitution*’s support for annexation with a letter to the editor that expressed the unvarnished sentiments of many suburbanites toward the issue. The letter’s anonymous promulgator explained that “the people would not have moved out there if they had not wanted to get away from Atlanta and especially the colored race...”<sup>88</sup> Whether cloaked in language expressing their fear of crime, desire to send their children to safe, quality schools, or to preserve their property rights, the residents of suburban Atlanta demonstrated their profound desire to avoid political attachment to the center city. Lacking the stomach for the confrontational politics of massive resistance, they created their own politics of avoidance, a resistance to all political connections between the city and its suburbs. This approach, which relied on spatial, socio-economic, and municipal barriers to avoid integration, proved tactically superior to the politics of Lester Maddox. Convinced of its political necessity, a large majority of whites in Atlanta backed the idea of annexing Sandy Springs. Conversely, a large majority of Sandy Springs’ predominately white electorate opposed the plan vehemently.<sup>89</sup>

An organization called “Save Sandy Springs” led local opposition to the plan, arguing that a vote for annexation was a vote for black political control over their community since

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<sup>87</sup> “Annexation: A Summation,” *Atlanta Constitution*, March 16, 1966, 4.

<sup>88</sup> “Letters to Editor,” *Atlanta Constitution*, March 15, 1966, 4.

<sup>89</sup> Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*, 3-5, 10-12; Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 1-12, 247-248.

Atlanta would almost certainly have a black electoral majority in a few years. Annexation, they argued, would lead to busing to and from Atlanta's black neighborhoods, the placement of public housing in Sandy Springs, and the takeover of public parks by African Americans.<sup>90</sup> A delegation of city leaders including Ivan Allen and Alderman Rodney Cook went to Sandy Springs for a March 1966 meeting to assuage fears raised by anti-annexation groups. Virtually every resident who spoke at the meeting expressed their opposition to the plan, many of them citing fears that their children would be transferred to inner-city schools if voters approved the measure. Allen chalked up their "emotionalism" to rumors he attributed to "Save Sandy Springs" and the local school bus drivers' association.<sup>91</sup> In May 1966, Sandy Springs voted against annexation by a margin of more than two to one. Boulder Park voted separately to join the city of Atlanta. A referendum that began as an elite-driven effort to retain Atlanta's white majority in fact led to a small increase in the size of the city's black electorate.<sup>92</sup>

The issue of annexation remained dormant for the remainder of the Allen administration. In December 1971, Allen's successor, Sam Massell, proposed a legislative annexation of then-almost entirely white northern Fulton County into the city, including Sandy Springs. Massell and his allies in the Georgia General Assembly pursued annexation through the legislature rather than a referendum to circumvent the consistently fervent opposition to any such measure in the city's northern suburbs. Massell had opposed annexation during his 1969 mayoral run, describing it as a plan aimed at weakening the power of the city's black voters, the constituency whose bloc support served as the base of his electoral coalition. Less than two years into his term, Massell came to the same conclusion that Hartsfield and Allen had years earlier. Atlanta

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.; Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Making of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 85-92.

<sup>91</sup> Jeff Nesmith, "City Meets Match at Sandy Springs," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 16, 1966, 4.

<sup>92</sup> Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Making of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 85-92.

would face economic peril if it did not annex outlying affluent areas of Fulton County. Like his predecessors, Massell feared that Atlanta would be unable to afford the public services it provided to citizens without a boost to the city's tax base through the annexation of additional high-income earning residents. Between 1965 and 1971, the city's tax base grew by an average of 1.5% per year while its expenses grew by an average of 15%, a consequence of the demands placed on city services by the departure of many middle income residents and their replacement by an increasingly impoverished population. Additionally, Massell feared that public awareness of Atlanta's new black majority would only exaggerate the problems of white flight, encouraging more affluent white residents to leave the city. Massell knew that he would soon need their votes as well as their tax dollars. He wanted annexation to go into effect by the time of the 1973 mayoral election. Despite the widespread support Massell received from black voters in 1969, African Americans would almost certainly support Vice Mayor Maynard Jackson in 1973, who had made known his intentions to run for mayor.<sup>93</sup>

In his annexation proposal, Massell called for the consolidation of Fulton County into two large cities: Atlanta and South Fulton City. The proposal would have doubled the size of Atlanta from 137 square miles to 310 square miles and increased its population from 496,000 to just under 550,000. Simultaneously, it called for the consolidation of southern Fulton County into a 134 square mile, 60,000-person municipality centered on the city of College Park. Southern Fulton County had been the site of significant black suburban settlement and projected to be a majority African American city by 1980. The 1970 Census recorded Atlanta's population

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<sup>93</sup> "Mayor of Atlanta Urges Annexation," *New York Times*, December 29, 1971, 19; "'Abolish Atlanta' Gains in Georgia," *New York Times*, November 9, 1969, 65; "Plan to Expand Atlanta Encounters Opposition," *Boston Globe*, December 29, 1971, 8; Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Making of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 85-92; Bill Seddon, "Sorry, Annex-Backers- It Wasn't Horseshoes," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 12, 1972, 14A.

as 50.2 percent African American. Massell's plan would have boosted the percentage of whites in the city to 53% and increased the proportion of white students in APS to 35%.<sup>94</sup>

Massell tried to negotiate the contentious politics of annexation by appealing to economic pragmatism. He prided himself on constructing an inclusive administration that, to an unprecedented extent, maintained a fragile balance among the different racial and socio-economic groups that made up Atlanta.<sup>95</sup> He asked black legislators and their constituents to "think white," to try to understand the concerns of white citizens who feared losing political control of the city. Channeling Hartsfield, Massell said that his plan would not prevent an eventual black electoral majority in Atlanta, but would instead help white residents adjust to the city's new governing regime.<sup>96</sup> To avoid the fate of "all poor" cities like Newark and Detroit, Massell said that the temporary maintenance of bi-racial governance through annexation would prevent even larger numbers of white taxpayers from relocating.<sup>97</sup> Expecting the "needs of the disadvantaged to be paid for by the poor" was an "impossible situation," Massell said.<sup>98</sup>

In some respects, elite and popular responses to Massell's plan were predictable. Then Lt. Governor Lester Maddox strongly opposed the annexation plan, calling it an unconstitutional overreach of state power as he had all previous annexation plans. The dormant "Save Sandy Springs" organization reformed immediately to combat the proposal. Opposition was vociferous in the sections of northern Fulton County slated for incorporation into Atlanta as well as the communities placed within the new "South Fulton City." The mayors in the incorporated

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<sup>94</sup> "Mayor of Atlanta Urges Annexation," *New York Times*, December 29, 1971, 19; "'Abolish Atlanta' Gains in Georgia," *New York Times*, November 9, 1969, 65; "Plan to Expand Atlanta Encounters Opposition," *Boston Globe*, December 29, 1971, 8; Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Making of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 85-92.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Matthew Lassiter, *Silent Majority*, 112-113.

<sup>98</sup> Tom Linthicum, "Massell Asks Duty, Not Politics," *Atlanta Constitution*, January 2, 1973, 14A; "Black is 1<sup>st</sup> in Atlanta Mayor Vote," *Chicago Tribune*, October 3, 1973, 1.

sections of southern Fulton County expressed particular outrage at the proposed mechanism for deciding the “South Fulton City” referendum: a collective “yes” or “no” vote by all of the areas included in the proposal. Mayors in southern Fulton County demanded that each community be able to decide whether or not they wanted to join the new city individually. Pointing out the widespread opposition to annexation in most of the affected communities, Massell mocked the idea that his proposal would benefit him electorally, asking reporters which constituency among those forced to join Atlanta would be supporting his reelection bid.<sup>99</sup>

In other respects, the response to Massell’s annexation plan was exactly the inverse of his electoral coalition two years earlier. Atlanta’s business establishment, which bitterly opposed the proudly liberal Massell in 1969, supported his efforts at legislative annexation. Black Atlantans, more than 90 percent of whom had supported Massell in the runoff, strongly opposed the proposal to make them once again an electoral minority without even the courtesy of a public referendum.<sup>100</sup> State Senator Leroy Johnson led the black legislative caucus’ opposition to the measure. Echoing the sentiments of his colleagues, Johnson said the primary motivation for Massell’s plan was limiting black political power, not increasing tax revenue.<sup>101</sup> He offered an alternative annexation plan that incorporated sparsely populated, but revenue-producing industrial districts to the south and west of the city limits into Atlanta proper while maintaining nearly equal numbers of black and white residents in the city. Johnson’s plan, which doubled the geographic size of the city, aimed to create a black-white balance in city politics by

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<sup>99</sup> Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Making of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 85-92; “Abolish Atlanta’ Gains in Georgia,” *New York Times*, November 9, 1969, 65; “Seeks to Double Size of Atlanta,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 29, 1971, B11; Bill Seddon, “Sorry, Annex-Backers- It Wasn’t Horseshoes,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 12, 1972, 14A.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid; Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Making of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 85-92; “Abolish Atlanta’ Gains in Georgia,” *New York Times*, November 9, 1969, 65; “Plan to Expand Atlanta Encounters Opposition,” *Boston Globe*, December 29, 1971, 8.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid; “Seeks to Double Size of Atlanta,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 29, 1971, B11; Bill Seddon, “Sorry, Annex-Backers- It Wasn’t Horseshoes,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 12, 1972, 14A.

reconfiguring the sixteen member Board of Alderman into a 20 person body that consisted of 10 ward representatives and 10 at-large alderman.<sup>102</sup> Both Massell and Johnson's annexation plans failed during the 1972 legislative session. The following year, Johnson revived his plan, making use of the additional time to build support in the Georgia General Assembly among a coalition of black and suburban legislators who shared a common interest in keeping additional white residents out of the city of Atlanta. Lester Maddox killed the measure in the Georgia Senate, using his powers as Lt. Governor to prevent the bill from getting a floor vote.<sup>103</sup>

Changing political circumstances in Atlanta brought the legislative momentum for annexation to a halt. The assertion of black political power in Atlanta with the 1973 election of Maynard Jackson, who had opposed all annexation proposals, combined with the continued white flight from and black migration to the city during the 1970s, made the possibility of a large-scale annexation of populated sections of Fulton County increasingly politically unfeasible. Neither white suburban political leadership nor the city's black political leadership saw it as in their interest to sacrifice power. Suburban legislators who had been willing to cede control of sparsely populated sections of Fulton County to a white-led administration were suddenly unwilling to do so to a black-led administration, fearing that Jackson would subject businesses in the newly annexed territories to burdensome taxes and racial hiring quotas. Jackson's election, though, did not bring an end to the talk of consolidating Metropolitan Atlanta. Throughout the 1970s, a number of metropolitan incorporation plans surfaced and many prominent political

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<sup>102</sup> "Atlanta Blacks Back Annexation Plan," *New York Times*, February 1, 1972, 23.

<sup>103</sup> Bill Seddon, "Sorry, Annex-Backers- It Wasn't Horseshoes," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 12, 1972, 14A; Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Making of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 85-92.



leaders expressed their general support for the concept, but none of the new proposals came as close to fruition as those proposed by Massell and Johnson in the early 1970s.<sup>104</sup>

Former Governor Carl Sanders offered a comprehensive plan for metropolitan consolidation that garnered a great deal of attention in 1975. He presented a plan for a trans-metropolitan government that incorporated the five core metropolitan counties into a super-city called the Greater Atlanta Federation (GAF). The GAF would have overseen core aspects of municipal governance including police, mass transportation, construction projects, highway maintenance, and public water while allowing for local control over schools, fire departments, libraries, local road construction, and sanitation. Many leaders in the city and the suburbs expressed support for Sanders' concept, but insufficient political will emerged across the metropolitan area to make the former governor's plan a reality. Even with the exclusion of schools from the list of trans-metropolitan public institutions, many suburban political leaders feared that the GAF would be used as a mechanism for cross-metropolitan busing.<sup>105</sup>

Like his predecessors, Jackson warmed to the idea of annexation during his second term, concluding that the city could not fund his anti-poverty proposals without additional tax revenue streams. Jackson advocated an annexation plan similar to Leroy Johnson's, which included sparsely populated but taxable property to the south and west of Atlanta, enabling the city to retain its new black supermajority while giving it access to more financial resources. Most black leaders in Atlanta opposed Jackson's plan, fearing it would open the door to broader metropolitan incorporation schemes that jeopardized their newly achieved power. The few residents of the areas proposed for annexation opposed the plan, preferring local control to the

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<sup>104</sup> Frederick Allen, *Atlanta Rising*, 191-193; Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Making of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 85-92.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid; James Cook, *Carl Sanders: Spokesman of the New South*, 343.

municipal amenities Jackson promised them.<sup>106</sup> Broad opposition led Jackson to scrap the plan soon after proposing it. Since the late 1970s, urban and suburban opposition has stymied any subsequent discussion of expanding the size of Atlanta proper. Annexation has proven a racially charged issue that does neither black nor white politicians any benefit to pursue. Their respective constituencies prefer to preserve their power bases through local control than to pursue any plan for annexation, despite promises of more efficient distribution of government services.<sup>107</sup>

### **Rapid Transit and the Remapping of Metropolitan Politics**

The debate over rapid transit in Metropolitan Atlanta further enshrined the region's fault lines for trans-municipal political cooperation. In particular, the 1968 and 1971 referendums seeking approval for the construction of a regional rapid transit system demonstrated the strong normative divisions between elite and popular, black and white, and urban and suburban opinions on the nature and scope of metropolitan governance. The controversies surrounding both referendums made evident the formation of distinctly black and urban as well as white and suburban political cultures with different ideas about the aims of local government and the distribution of the services rendered by local governmental agencies. This section shows how Metropolitan Atlanta's unwillingness to support comprehensive rapid transit was a product of the fragmentation of Atlanta's postwar governing consensus into distinctly urban and suburban powerbases. The political fragmentation of Metropolitan Atlanta provided numerous demographic enclaves within the region with a virtual veto over new plans for metropolitan-wide forms of political cooperation. Atlanta's lack of regional rapid transit and unwillingness to

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<sup>106</sup> Frederick Allen, *Atlanta Rising*, 191-193; Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Making of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 85-92.

<sup>107</sup> Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Making of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 85-92.

support the rapid transit system put in place after the 1971 referendum are a product of the political culture forged during this debate.

Elite opinion in Atlanta long favored metropolitan-wide solutions to mass transit. Years before the 1962 creation of the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA), Atlanta's leadership endorsed the idea of making substantial municipal investments in public transportation. A blue-ribbon, Atlanta Chamber-laden commission created a transportation plan for Atlanta in 1946 which called for the development of a public system of buses and passenger rail lines to support the freeway system they proposed for the city.<sup>108</sup> Atlanta's political leadership conceived of rapid transit as a status symbol for the growing city. Unlike more commonplace bus systems, rapid rail transit was a signature amenity, a municipal investment which Atlanta's leaders believed would cement their community's national stature as a modern and urbane community. More importantly, the "Big Mules" believed that efficient rail transit in and out of the CBD would help downtown retain its traditional commercial role in the regional economy as suburban business recreated those offered in the center city. Civic elites envisioned a commuter-oriented system that would serve as connective tissue between the CBD and the suburbs, bringing high-income earners and consumers to nodal points within downtown Atlanta. The legal desegregation of downtown made the construction of just such a transit system increasingly imperative in the mind of the "Big Mules". Rapid transit, they believed, would create a controlled environment through which suburbanites, who regarded downtown as increasingly perilous, could access the CBD's foremost institutions.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> H.W. Lochner and Company, "Highway and Transportation Plan for Atlanta, Georgia," Georgia State Highway Department, (Chicago: January 1946). Accessed through The Georgia Institute of Technology Library Online. Accessed on June 12, 2013: <https://smartech.gatech.edu/handle/1853/36611?show=full>; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, x-xi; David Pendered, "Plans to Nowhere," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 24, 2004, 1E.

<sup>109</sup> Frederick Allen, *Atlanta Rising*, 198.

Moreover, city leaders realized that simply building more roads would not solve Atlanta's transportation woes. Despite recent expansions of I-20, I-75, I-85, and the 1964 opening of the Downtown Connector, intense suburban growth had led to incredible congestion on every major road leading into the city. By 1964, motorists from north Fulton County faced commutes that often lasted one hour each way.<sup>110</sup> A 1968 traffic survey found that more than 550,000 cars either entered or exited Atlanta each weekday, twice as many as in 1960.<sup>111</sup>

Convincing large numbers of Atlanta area residents that the city had a transportation crisis was one thing. Convincing large numbers of suburban commuters to adopt a desegregated, public option for their transportation was quite another. Historically, mass transit in Atlanta had been privately owned and segregated. Discriminatory seating practices on Atlanta Transportation Company (ATC) buses and trackless trolleys did not end until 1959. Following the Supreme Court's decision in *Browder v. Gayle*, which ended bus segregation in Montgomery, Alabama, the Atlanta NAACP and a coalition of black ministers led by Rev. William Holmes Borders filed suit against the city of Atlanta. With the support of Mayor Hartsfield, they challenged the city's transit segregation laws. In 1959, a federal judge deemed Atlanta's Jim Crow-era statutes on transportation unconstitutional, forcing the privately-owned ATC to open all of its seats to all of its customers.<sup>112</sup> ATC argued that desegregation of their buses and trolleys would lead to a precipitous decline in their majority-white ridership and cause irreparable damage to their business. ATC's fears proved out almost immediately. By the end of 1960, blacks constituted nearly 60 percent of ATC riders despite a tiny post-desegregation uptick

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<sup>110</sup> Marion Gaines, "Freeway Link-Up Expected to Be Ready by Oct. 1," *Atlanta Journal*, June 8, 1964, 2A; Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 248-249.

<sup>111</sup> "Atlanta Flow Compared to Other Cities," *Atlanta Journal*, September 21, 1969, 10.

<sup>112</sup> Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 188-196.

in their patronage. Almost immediately, white residents abandoned a transit system whose customer base would be four-fifths African American by the time of the 1968 referendum.<sup>113</sup>

The Allen administration pursued a regional rapid transit system immediately. In his first State of the City address, Allen proposed a five-county, metropolitan wide public transit system that consisted of both rail lines and buses. He envisioned a system targeted primarily at suburban customers: commuters who could be brought in and out of the center city for work and, to a lesser extent, families in search of retail, dining, and entertainment. The patrons that Allen envisioned for public transportation were quite different from the majority-black, inner-city ridership that increasingly characterized the ATC's customer base.<sup>114</sup>

Creating a metropolitan-wide transit system proved a highly contentious, drawn out process that lasted far beyond Ivan Allen's two terms as mayor. The planning, approval, and execution of a mass-transit system anchored by a rapid railway involved numerous legislative, bureaucratic, and voter approvals that were frequently disrupted by the disapproval of both urban and suburban political constituencies. The creation of a metropolitan rapid transit system required cross-metropolitan support. It proved an issue through which the city's new black political leadership and the region's suburban political leadership asserted their clout, vetoing ideas unpopular among their constituencies while procuring material benefits for them through negotiation. The unprecedented assertion of political power by new urban and suburban majorities during the rapid transit debate created a system that almost no one liked. MARTA proved neither cross-metropolitan in scope nor a source of civic mutuality. It was neither the

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> If Suburbs Cannot Agree on Transit Now, Let's Begin on Smaller Scale," *Atlanta Constitution*, January 23, 1965, 4; "Rapid Transit: Who Will Be Taking Part?" *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 6, 1965, 6-B.

suburban commuter rail its original proponents envisioned nor the inclusive trans-metropolitan circulator into which many progressive critics had hoped to reform it.

The creation of a metropolitan-wide transit system required action by state voters and legislative approval from the Georgia General Assembly. These two prerequisites were the first of more than a decades' worth of requirements the system had to fulfill before construction began on the project. The creation of a metropolitan transit authority required voter-approval of an amendment to the state constitution. Completing even this pre-planning stage took several years. Statewide voters turned down the rapid transit amendment by a wide margin in November 1962 despite majority support for the measure in Fulton and DeKalb Counties. Two Novembers later, Georgia voters approved a modified amendment that allowed for the establishment of regional transit authorities while granting the legislature the power to pass an enabling law to create an authority in Metropolitan Atlanta.<sup>115</sup>

In March 1965, the Georgia General Assembly approved an enabling law that allowed the core five counties surrounding Atlanta to establish MARTA. The statute set a June 1965 date for Atlanta city and the five suburban counties to all vote separately on whether or not they wished to join the Authority as it planned the future of mass transit in the region.<sup>116</sup> The “Big Mules” made Ivan Allen the de facto spokesman for the referendum. Allen sold participation in MARTA to Atlanta area voters as a windfall of federal money they could not afford to miss. Congress had recently passed a law offering substantial subsidies to cities that approved rapid transit systems like the one MARTA’s proponents envisioned. “Uncle Sam will be the major

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<sup>115</sup> United States Congress Office of Technology Assessment. *An Assessment of Community Planning for Mass Transit: Volume 2, Atlanta, Georgia*, GAO-67351 (Washington, D.C., 1976), 1-11. Accessed online on June 12, 2013: <http://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc39346/>; Andy Ambrose, *Atlanta: An Illustrated History*, 183.

<sup>116</sup> Larry D. Schroeder and David L. Sjoquist, “The Rational Voter: An Analysis of Two Atlanta Referenda on Rapid Transit,” *Public Choice* 33 No. 3 (1978), 31.

stockholder and yet he has not asked for any representation at all on the authority,” Allen told state legislators, claiming that the federal government would cover two-thirds of the project.<sup>117</sup>

On June 16, 1965, the city of Atlanta and four of the five suburban counties passed the referendum authorizing participation in MARTA, all by large margins.<sup>118</sup> The measure failed in Cobb County, despite support for the measure by area political and business leaders. Defense manufacturer Lockheed, the county’s largest employer, had been particularly loud in its support for MARTA. In public pronouncements, Lockheed executives characterized MARTA as an affordable source of transportation for their employees and a pipeline to additional labor. More than 60 percent of voters in Cobb County thought otherwise. Many residents told pollsters that they balked at the system’s anticipated \$300 million price tag, fearing that a “yes” vote would force the county to assume a heavy public debt load.<sup>119</sup> The 1965 “no” vote in Cobb County lacked the explicitly racial politicking which characterized later MARTA votes, but it foreshadowed subsequent suburban opposition to policies reliant on cross-metropolitan cooperation. An unsigned January 1965 editorial in the *Constitution* anticipated the problem. The editorialist feared that the inclusion of still much smaller Gwinnett, Cobb, and Clayton Counties, who constituted just one-quarter of the metropolitan area’s tax base, would veto any aspect of the system not tailored to their needs, delaying the system’s eventual completion. In its place, the author proposed a smaller Atlanta city, Fulton, and DeKalb County transit system.<sup>120</sup>

Following the June 1965 referendum, Atlanta and the four participating metropolitan counties appointed representatives to the ten-member MARTA board of directors. The board

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<sup>117</sup> “Allen Calls for Accord in Rapid Transit Plan,” *Atlanta Journal*, January 22, 1965, 2.

<sup>118</sup> Dick Hebert, “Rich Bids for Bus Company and Merged Transit Accord,” *Atlanta Constitution*, December 13, 1967, 1, 14; “If Suburbs Cannot Agree on Transit Now, Let’s Begin on Smaller Scale,” *Atlanta Constitution*, January 23, 1965, 4; “Rapid Transit: Who Will Be Taking Part?” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 6, 1965, 6-B.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> “If Suburbs Cannot Agree on Transit Now, Let’s Begin on Smaller Scale,” *Atlanta Constitution*, January 23, 1965, 4.

included four Atlanta representatives, two from Fulton and DeKalb Counties, and one each from Gwinnett and Clayton Counties. Much like the committee that put together the 1946 metropolitan transportation plan, the MARTA board aimed for a blue ribbon panel image. Corporate officials dominated the board of directors, as they had every significant municipal body during the Hartsfield-Allen era.<sup>121</sup>

The composition of the MARTA board made it clear that the corporate commuter class was the intended ridership for the rail system, not the potentially massive black customer base for rapid transit. The selection of downtown department store scion Richard Rich as board chairman led a DeKalb County weekly newspaper to question how impartial he could be in planning a rapid transit system that amounted to “a railroad to Rich’s,” one designed to save his business from the white abandonment of the CBD.<sup>122</sup> The only non-white MARTA board member was banker Lorimer D. Milton, a stalwart of the black business establishment.<sup>123</sup>

Critics and supporters of rapid transit alike criticized the MARTA board for its secrecy and lack of interest in public input. The board held just two open meetings in the three years between its formation and the November 1968 referendum vote. Tunnel vision and aloofness did not endear voters to the MARTA board’s plans for a rapid transit system.<sup>124</sup> When the board submitted its three-years-in-the-making referendum proposal, a diverse group of constituencies in metropolitan Atlanta refused to support a plan into which they had virtually no input.

MARTA’s proposal called for the construction of a commuter-oriented 41 mile, 32 station rapid rail line extending from the city of Atlanta into Fulton and DeKalb Counties.

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<sup>121</sup> Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 98-102; Andy Ambrose, *Atlanta: An Illustrated History*, 182-183.

<sup>122</sup> Walker Lundy, “MARTA Friend, Foe Collide,” *Atlanta Journal*, October 31, 1968, 2A.

<sup>123</sup> Gary Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 378-379; Andy Ambrose, *Atlanta: An Illustrated History*, 182-183; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 98-102; Larry D. Schroeder and David L. Sjoquist, “The Rational Voter,” 27-28; Walker Lundy, “MARTA Friend, Foe Collide,” *Atlanta Journal*, October 31, 1968, 2A.

<sup>124</sup> Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 98-102.



Expansion into outlying Gwinnett and Clayton Counties would soon follow. In addition to the rapid rail line, MARTA would manage an expanded system of feeder bus lines that built onto the service already offered by the ATC. MARTA had worked out an agreement with ATC to purchase the private system for \$15 million. The referendum employed the only constitutionally acceptable local funding mechanism for the system: a property tax. Almost all proponents of the plan would have preferred using a sales tax to finance the system, but, after years of delays, the MARTA board wanted to proceed as quickly as possible. Waiting for a new legislative session to lobby for another constitutional amendment seemed like a greater evil than seeking public approval with a less-than-ideal tax proposal. The bond initiative asked taxpayers in Atlanta, Fulton, and DeKalb to spend \$377.6 million on the comprehensive public transit plan. MARTA estimated the entire cost of the project at \$751 million. By 1968, the MARTA board expected state and federal funds to cover just one-half of the project's cost, far less than the two-thirds once touted by rapid transit supporters.<sup>125</sup>

“In short,” Lester Maddox wrote in his memoir, “the establishment” constituted the driving force behind passage of the MARTA referendum. Never one to shy away from confronting his opponents, Maddox explained exactly who he meant by the establishment: “the Atlanta papers, the banks, the TV stations, radio, and the large property owners”<sup>126</sup> Numerous contemporary media accounts referred to the intense pressure that pro-referendum civic leaders put on their less-enthusiastic peers to publicly endorse the referendum.<sup>127</sup> City Councilor and former Gulf Oil executive Everett Millican, one of the few members of the white leadership to

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<sup>125</sup> Larry D. Schroeder and David Sjoquist, “The Rational Voter,” 27-31; Walker Lundy, “Rapid Transit Fails By Heavy Margin,” *Atlanta Journal*, November 6, 1968, 2A; “A Landmark Decision on Rapid Transit,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 13, 1968, 22A; Gary Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 378; “Rapid Transit Question Box,” *Atlanta Journal*, October 31, 1968, 2A.

<sup>126</sup> Lester Maddox, *Speaking Out*, 149.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 149-154; Duane Riner, “Maddox Asks Free TV Time to Air Rapid Transit Debate,” *Atlanta Constitution*, March 27, 1968, 2; “‘Phooey’ on Rapid Transit,” *Atlanta Constitution*, April 13, 1968, 4.

oppose the 1968 referendum, wrote in one of his many self-financed anti-referendum advertisements that “never before have I seen the great pressure and arm twisting that has been put on some public officials and other individuals trying to get them to endorse this proposal.”<sup>128</sup>

The Atlanta, Fulton, and DeKalb Chambers invested heavily in the 1968 referendum, filling the local media with advertisements sponsored by “The Committee for Rapid Transit Now.”<sup>129</sup> “Sure-we can get by without Rapid Transit,” read the Committee’s standard print advertisement, “but we can’t progress. We go backwards...And the price of building a Rapid Transit system continues to soar—to the tune of 50 million dollars a year,” evoking the inevitability of rapid transit if Atlanta wanted to remain a major city.<sup>130</sup> Executives at Coca-Cola, Delta, and Gulf Oil wrote open letters to their employees, asking them to vote “yes.” The *Journal* and *Constitution* bolstered their editorials on behalf of the plan with unprecedented front-page coverage for local traffic fatalities in the weeks before the referendum.<sup>131</sup>

Demonstrating a rather optimistic opinion of their readership’s cosmopolitanism, disposable income, and desire to live in high-density urban spaces, both Atlanta papers implored their readers to visit Montreal and Toronto to see an efficient train system at work before they voted on MARTA. If Atlanta was to be “the next great international city,” the Atlanta papers argued, adopting the city’s latest slogan, it required nodes for downtown economic development, just like those that the Montreal and Toronto metro systems created in their respective cities.<sup>132</sup> The Sunday *Journal-Constitution* editorialized that the city’s status was at stake in the November

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<sup>128</sup> “Vote ‘No’ on 228 Advertisement,” *Atlanta Journal*, November 4, 1968, 11.

<sup>129</sup> Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 98-102.

<sup>130</sup> “Committee for Rapid Transit Now Advertisement,” *Atlanta Journal*, October 28, 1968, 6.

<sup>131</sup> “Transit urged in DeKalb,” *Atlanta Constitution*, October 25, 1968, 1; “Farris Endorses Rapid Transit Plan,” *Atlanta Journal*, November 2, 1968, 10.

<sup>132</sup> Raleigh Bryans, “How to Cure a MARTA Skeptic,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 16, 1968, 12; Jack Spalding, “Rapid Transit: What is Good for Rich and Poor Alike?” *Atlanta Constitution*, June 23, 1968, 4; “The Impact of Rapid Transit,” *Atlanta Constitution*, February 12, 1968, 4.

1968 vote: “the great surge of energy and optimism which has brought Atlanta so far since World War II will have ended. Without the energizing effects of rapid transit and the solution to our traffic problem, we could become just another second-class American city.”<sup>133</sup>

Everett Millican and Lester Maddox were the two most prominent among a very short list of white leaders in Metropolitan Atlanta who expressed their opposition to the referendum. Governor Maddox, in fact, played only a minor role in opposing the MARTA referendum, warning voters that the costs of the program would likely double, as they had earlier in the decade for the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) rail system. It was Millican who galvanized nascent public opposition to the MARTA referendum. Prominent MARTA supporters regarded Millican, the seventy-year-old Alderman who first served on the Board in 1928, as a paleolithic curmudgeon whose antiquated ideas would appeal to only the most recalcitrant Maddoxites. MARTA supporters accused Millican of opposing the rapid rail system because of the threat it posed to his financial interests in the oil industry. Millican, rapid transit supporters believed, was a self-interested figurehead who represented little more than a loud minority of cranks.<sup>134</sup>

Whatever his motivations, Millican made an outstanding foil to the triumphalist Committee for Rapid Transit Now, which presented the MARTA rail system as an inevitability. Millican became the local media’s go-to anti-referendum voice during the campaign. He helped to focus existing displeasure with the plan by providing its opponents with a core of dispassionate policy objections to the referendum. Millican’s arguments resonated in suburban areas where the home-owning supermajority all faced a property tax increase if the referendum

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<sup>133</sup> “A Landmark Decision on Rapid Transit,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 13, 1968, 22A.

<sup>134</sup> Walker Lundy, “MARTA Friend, Foe Collide,” *Atlanta Journal*, October 31, 1968, 2A; “To the Voters of Atlanta, Fulton and DeKalb,” *Atlanta Journal*, November 4, 1968, 32; Lester Maddox, *Speaking Out*, 149-154; Duane Riner, “Maddox Asks Free TV Time to Air Rapid Transit Debate,” *Atlanta Constitution*, March 27, 1968, 2; “‘Phooley’ on Rapid Transit,” *Atlanta Constitution*, April 13, 1968, 4; “Approval of Rapid Transit Means ‘Go,’” *Atlanta Journal*, November 4, 1968, 4A.

passed. Many homeowners, large numbers of whom had no intention of using the system, regarded the property tax as unfairly burdensome.<sup>135</sup> Millican also made a strong case that many of MARTA's most enthusiastic supporters did not understand the future financial obligations to which they were committing the region's residents. He charged that not one government official in Metropolitan Atlanta had read the entire 116 page MARTA proposal, a claim that referendum supporters left largely unrebuked. Citing recent shortfalls in federal funding for Atlanta's airport, Millican asked the Committee for Rapid Transit Now to produce documentation guaranteeing the promised federal funding for half of the system's anticipated costs, something the Committee proved either unwilling or unable to do.<sup>136</sup>

Anger with the rapid transit system's proposed funding mechanism and the appeal of Everett Millican's trenchant critiques of the MARTA proposal were not the only reason that the majority of white, particularly suburban, voters opposed the referendum. Locally and nationally, the cultural politics of 1968 were quite different from those of 1965, the year that voters in Atlanta and four suburban counties agreed to form MARTA. In the context of Metropolitan Atlanta, the divide between the city's increasingly politically assertive near-majority black population and the regional suburban white supermajority had become far more pronounced. A cluster of events and policy controversies with local and national consequences, including urban riots, the white voter backlash of 1966, the death of Martin Luther King Jr., the enactment of new federal housing legislation, and the prospect of court-mandated busing all made the issue of

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<sup>135</sup> Walker Lundy, "MARTA Friend, Foe Collide," *Atlanta Journal*, October 31, 1968, 2A; "To the Voters of Atlanta, Fulton and DeKalb," *Atlanta Journal*, November 4, 1968, 32; Lester Maddox, *Speaking Out*, 149-154; Duane Riner, "Maddox Asks Free TV Time to Air Rapid Transit Debate," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 27, 1968, 2; "'Phooey' on Rapid Transit," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 13, 1968, 4.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid; "Vote 'No' on 228 Advertisement," *Atlanta Journal*, November 4, 1968, 11; Walker Lundy, "Rapid Transit Fails By Heavy Margin," *Atlanta Journal*, November 6, 1968, 2A; Larry D. Schroeder and David Sjoquist, "The Rational Voter," 27-28; "Atlanta's Hopes for Rapid Transit Rise," *New York Times*, March 14, 1971, 72; Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 248-249.

race a more conspicuous concern in the debates over many public policies, including the 1968 MARTA referendum. A racial politics steeped in the desire of suburban residents to protect their homes and families from the perceived threats of spatial integration helped fuel white opposition to the rapid transit referendum in the five counties. By the time of the November 1968 vote, a significant percentage of suburban residents had come to regard institutional associations between their community and Atlanta proper as a threat to their wellbeing. Rather than a means of commuting downtown, the MARTA rail system came to be seen by a majority of suburban residents as a conduit for crime, cross-metropolitan busing, and housing integration.<sup>137</sup>

While the opposition of many suburban voters and the elements of the Maddox coalition that remained in Atlanta imperiled the MARTA referendum, it was the significant black opposition to the proposal that doomed the November 1968 vote. Atlanta's black voters and leadership saw the rail system proposed by MARTA in 1968 for what it was: a rapid transit system designed to accommodate white commuters.<sup>138</sup> Atlanta Life Insurance Company CEO Jesse Hill, Jr., then the most prominent black member of the Atlanta Chamber, predicted in 1966 that most black voters would oppose the measure due to the lack of input that prospective black riders had been given in planning a system which excluded significant sections of the city.<sup>139</sup>

Widespread black institutional and popular opposition to the proposed rapid transit system became evident in late 1966 when the Atlanta Summit Leadership Conference (ASLC), a civil rights coalition that had been broadly supportive of Allen's policies, came out against the plan. ASLC leaders said they would only support the proposal in a significantly revised form that more directly benefitted their constituents. They demanded an extension of the service into

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<sup>137</sup> Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 248-249; Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 156.

<sup>138</sup> Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 98-102.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*; Gary Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 378.

more black neighborhoods, specifically the city's entirely un-served Westside and the Model Cities neighborhoods in Southeast Atlanta, which were home collectively to nearly 100,000 people. According to ASLC estimates, only 4.3 miles of the 41 mile system served predominately black areas, a pittance considering the black community's near electoral majority in the city and the large potential black ridership for the system. The ASLC demanded guarantees not only of non-discrimination in employment but also guarantees that blacks would receive a demographically proportional number of new MARTA jobs, as civil rights groups in other cities had started seeking.<sup>140</sup> In the words of the ASLC's Malcolm Dean, black leaders wanted to ensure that "some Negroes will be driving those shiny new rail cars that go out to the suburbs to pick up the white folks who moved out there to get away from us Negroes."<sup>141</sup>

MARTA tried to negotiate a settlement with the ASLC to ensure black support for the referendum. MARTA officials promised African American leaders they would enact an affirmative action program for recruiting and job training but refused to extend the western or southern terminus of its rapid rail plans, arguing that such an expansion would lead to hundreds of millions of dollars in additional expenses.<sup>142</sup> MARTA's unwillingness to provide more African Americans with access to the service led the ASLC to continue to withhold its endorsement. The black leadership's new willingness to challenge the white leadership's plans for the city was a product not only of increasing black electoral power, but a skepticism that grew out of their experiences with urban renewal, a similarly comprehensive civic program pushed by the white establishment. Urban renewal had a profoundly detrimental impact on the

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.; Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Making of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 188-196; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 98-102; Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 156.

<sup>141</sup> Philip Gailey, "Transit Ignores Them, Negroes Say," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 24, 1968, 31; "MARTA Meets the Public," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 18, 1968, 4; "Open Season on Rapid Transit," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 25, 1968, 4; Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 188-196.

<sup>142</sup> "MARTA Meets the Public," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 18, 1968, 4; "Open Season on Rapid Transit," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 25, 1968, 4; Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 188-196.

lives of tens of thousands of black residents. Before endorsing rapid transit, Atlanta's black leaders wanted to make sure that it benefitted their constituents.<sup>143</sup>

The opposition of the ASLC to the referendum encouraged popular black suspicion of the white city officials who advocated the plan. Many Black Atlantans regarded the 1968 rapid transit plan as a gift the downtown business interests had decided to give to themselves.<sup>144</sup> An October 1968 public meeting organized by the MARTA board made evident these popular sentiments in the black community. For more than two hours, dozens of black speakers made use of the public comment period to chastise MARTA officials for excluding African Americans from the planning of the system and limiting black access to its services in their station plan. When a MARTA official questioned the feasibility of building a western spur to the rapid transit, an African American woman in the audience shouted "Why won't you go to a little inconvenience to help black people?" Her sentiments were echoed by the next officially recognized speaker, the ASLC's Malcolm Dean, who explained that his constituents "don't have any more confidence in the Highway Department than we have in MARTA," he said, referring to the destruction wreaked on black neighborhoods by the forces of slum clearance, urban renewal, and road construction. "Both are lily-white," Dean said, emphasizing the racial implications of the referendum, "you folks really messed this thing up by excluding Negroes. We're going to do what we can to defeat it November 6<sup>th</sup>," he told the members of the MARTA board.<sup>145</sup>

On November 6, 1968, the day that Americans elected Richard Nixon president, voters in Atlanta, Fulton County, and DeKalb County defeated the rapid transit referendum. The proposal

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<sup>143</sup> Gary Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 379.

<sup>144</sup> "MARTA Meets the Public," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 18, 1968, 4; "Open Season on Rapid Transit," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 25, 1968, 4; Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 188-196.

<sup>145</sup> Philip Gailey, "Transit Ignores Them, Negroes Say," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 24, 1968, 31; "Open Season on Rapid Transit," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 25, 1968, 4; Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 188-196.

lost decisively in Atlanta and Fulton County, where 58 percent and 64 percent of the citizens voted “no” respectively. A slightly smaller proportion of voters in Dekalb County (54 percent) turned down the referendum. Despite the widespread media coverage of the referendum campaign, fewer than one-half of the 270,000 metropolitan-area residents who submitted their ballot that day bothered to vote on the measure, which, in some jurisdictions, was located near the end of the twelve page presidential year ballot.<sup>146</sup> The defeat of the referendum was a stunning political blow to Ivan Allen, his greatest defeat since the 1962 bond initiative.<sup>147</sup> More broadly, it signified the fracturing of the Hartsfield-Allen coalition as the region’s major political force. The suburban electoral majority was in no way beholden to the aspirations of Atlanta’s governing elite. Through the MARTA vote, they practiced a politics of avoidance that circumscribed Atlanta’s political, economic, and cultural influence within the metropolitan area. Simultaneously, the defeat demonstrated the political strength of Atlanta’s emerging black electoral majority. No longer conjoined to the white leadership for political advancement, black leaders and their constituents showed a new willingness to break their coalition with the city’s business elite.<sup>148</sup>

The results of the 1968 referendum convinced Atlanta’s civic elites that they could no longer expect black voters to simply rubber stamp their proscriptions on major civic projects, especially on issues like rapid transit that required voter approval. The defeat of the 1968 MARTA proposal inaugurated a remaking of Atlanta’s biracial governing coalition. The emerging black electoral majority provided the city’s newly assertive black political leadership

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<sup>146</sup> Walker Lundy, “Rapid Transit Fails By Heavy Margin,” *Atlanta Journal*, November 6, 1968, 2A; “A Landmark Decision on Rapid Transit,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 13, 1968, 22A; Gary Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 378; Larry D. Schroeder and David L. Sjoquist, “The Rational Voter:,” 27-28.

<sup>147</sup> Gary Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 378.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 378-379; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 78-79, 98-102.



with unprecedented leverage to negotiate the terms of major civic projects in ways that offered greater benefits to their constituents. In the case of MARTA, the city's black leadership leveraged the board's need for black votes in a subsequent referendum into concessions that included expanded access to the service in predominately African American neighborhoods, guarantees of fixed-affordable fares, and the implementation of hiring quotas that required MARTA to provide African Americans with a representative proportion of the temporary and permanent jobs created by the construction and execution of the system.<sup>149</sup>

Ivan Allen set to work almost immediately after the failed referendum, trying to mediate the impasse between the white civic elite and black city leaders and their constituents. He used his executive powers to enact a series of reforms aimed at winning over black voters. Allen appointed Jesse Hill, the harshest black critic of the 1968 proposal, to the MARTA board. Pressure from City Hall caused the board to conduct a quick restudy of the proposed rapid transit routes that led to the approval of a new plan that greatly expanded service to the predominately black Westside. Upon purchase of the ATC, the Board agreed to expand bus service from black neighborhoods to downtown as well as a number of new employment centers in outlying areas of Fulton and DeKalb Counties. The MARTA board agreed to an even more progressive affirmative action program and required contractors doing business with MARTA to employ demographically representative workforces. At the suggestion of Hill, MARTA hired a community relations director and a black-run public relations firm to persuade black voters that the revised rapid transit plan would benefit them more directly.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 98-102.

<sup>150</sup> Alex Coffin, "Blacks Withhold MARTA Support," *Atlanta Constitution*, August 26, 1971, 8A; Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Making of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 188-196; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics* 98-102; Gary Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 395.

While the Allen Administration made significant progress during its final years in reformulating MARTA's mission into an electorally feasible program, it was the work of his successor Sam Massell that secured the passage of the second MARTA rapid transit referendum in November 1971. Massell took the lead in shaping a new rapid transit financing plan and played a highly visible role in promoting the second referendum's passage.<sup>151</sup> Whether annexation, civil service reform, or mass transit, Massell pursued policies aimed at mitigating the consequences of metropolitan divergence. Through his support for regional rapid transit, metropolitan incorporation through annexation, or civil service reforms that offered women and minorities unprecedented positions of power in local government, Massell strove to create spatially and demographically inclusive public institutions. Today, the former mayor characterizes his policy program as less visionary than pragmatic: "we took one project at a time," he said in 2013. "I don't know that I had that much vision. We took every opportunity as it presented itself."<sup>152</sup> Despite his reticence to ascribe broader cultural meaning to his policies, Massell envisioned a social role for public transit beyond the mere improvement of the region's transportation system. He believed MARTA would help foster a more urbane, shared metropolitan culture. "Not only will such a system serve the largest number of patrons—with proportionate relief to automotive traffic congestion," he said of MARTA's potential benefits in his 1971 State of the City address, "but a society that has free transit can get to the park to see a free art show, can get to the clinic to receive medical attention, and visit friends and family and get to and from the job and then to shopping places to spend their earnings."<sup>153</sup> Massell's ascription of social and cultural goods to public transit was nothing new. As a city councilor, he

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<sup>151</sup> Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 98-102.

<sup>152</sup> Sam Massell, interview by the author, July 2, 2013, 41, transcript

<sup>153</sup> "State of the City Annual Message, January 4, 1971," Sam Massell (Personality File), Kenan Research Center.

campaigns unsuccessfully for Atlanta to purchase the model rail from the 1964 New York World's Fair and re-erect it as a people mover through downtown Atlanta.<sup>154</sup>

Perhaps the most significant thing that Massell did to bring his vision for mass transit into being was brokering a deal between the city's white and black leadership on the funding mechanism for the second rapid transit referendum. Massell's deal was predicated on the new legislative support that rapid transit enjoyed in the State House. In March 1971, new Governor Jimmy Carter signed a bill authorizing a new funding mechanism for MARTA: a ten-year, 1% local sales tax in the counties that voted to join the system. Pro-MARTA legislators approved the new funding mechanism in an effort to win over homeowners who voted against the 1968 referendum because of its proposed property tax increase. Instead, the new law threatened to turn still-skeptical black leaders against the 1971 referendum. Black state legislators favored a local income tax to fund rapid transit instead of the sales tax proposal, which they regarded as regressive. Massell responded to the legislation by working with MARTA officials to revise their proposal once again to win black support. He convinced the board to offer patrons on city buses a fare reduction from 40 cents to 15 cents for the first seven years after it purchased the ATC. This trade-off would guarantee Atlanta bus riders the nation's lowest fare. Massell's compromise won over virtually all of the city's black leadership for the 1971 referendum.<sup>155</sup>

Before the sales tax controversy, most black leaders had already been inclined to support the 1971 referendum, which provided much greater access to their constituents than the 1968 proposal. MARTA estimated that their 1971 rapid transit plan would take ten years to complete

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<sup>154</sup> Marion Gaines, "Massell Asks Monorail for City," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 19, 1964, 1.

<sup>155</sup> "Massell for Mayor 1973 Campaign Materials," Sam Massell (Personality File), Kenan Research Center; Hugh Nations, "Shift in the Balance of Power," *Atlanta Journal*, November 5, 1971, 1A, 10A; Larry D. Schroeder and David Sjoquist, "The Rational Voter: An Analysis of Two Atlanta Referenda on Rapid Transit," 27-31; "Atlanta's Hopes for Rapid Transit Rise," *New York Times*, March 14, 1971, 72; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 98-102.

and cost \$1.42 billion, including \$42.8 million to purchase the ATC and improve the bus system.<sup>156</sup> The 1971 proposal called for the construction of a 37 station, 50.1 mile rail system which offered greater access to patrons living on the east and west sides of the city. The addition of a “Proctor Creek Branch” that terminated at the Perry Homes would enable tens of thousands of low-income, west side residents to access rapid transit. Proposed improvements to the bus system included the purchase of 490 new air conditioned buses, the construction of 100 bus stop shelters, and the addition of eight new downtown and crosstown routes aimed primarily at providing black residents in South, East, and West Atlanta with access to employment centers.<sup>157</sup>

The inclusion of the fifteen cent fare in the 1971 referendum ensured near universal support from the city’s black leadership. ASLC sponsored a get-out-the-vote campaign among its member organizations on behalf of the referendum. The *Daily-World*, which opposed the 1968 plan, endorsed the 1971 proposal because of the cheaper fare and the institutional power newly asserted by black leaders in MARTA. Atlanta’s two largest black denominational organizations, the African Methodist-Episcopal (AME) Ministers Union and the Baptist Ministers Union, charged their members with cultivating support for the referendum. Citing their opposition to the sales tax, the SCLC’s Operation Breadbasket was the only major black Atlanta institution to oppose the referendum.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Sharon Bailey, “MARTA’s Cost Rises \$450 Million,” *Atlanta Constitution*, October 9, 1973, 3; Larry D. Schroeder and David Sjoquist, “The Rational Voter,” 31.

<sup>157</sup> “Here’s How Proposed Transit System Works,” *Atlanta Constitution*, November 8, 1971, 6A; Alex Coffin, “Blacks Withhold MARTA Support,” *Atlanta Constitution*, August 26, 1971, 8A; Larry D. Schroeder and David Sjoquist, “The Rational Voter,” 27-31; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 98-102

<sup>158</sup> R.S. Allison, “MARTA a Must for Metro-Atlanta Poor,” *Atlanta Daily World*, October 31, 1971, 1,4; “Rapid Transit Gets \$30 Million Boost,” *Atlanta Daily World*, November 7, 1971, 1; “Clergymen Here Urge ‘Yes’ Vote for Rapid Transit,” *Atlanta Daily World*, November 9, 1971, 1; Philip D. Carter, “Vote Mass Transit, Atlantans Urged, to Miss the Crunch,” *Washington Post*, November 8, 1971, A2; “MARTA Foe Calls Timing of Grant Influence Tactic,” *Atlanta Journal*, November 6, 1971, 1A, 4A.

Massell put on the hard sell in the weeks before the referendum, cajoling commuters from a loud speaker on a hovering helicopter to support MARTA: “If you want to get out of this mess, vote yes!” he yelled from on high.<sup>159</sup> He rode ATC buses around the city each morning to encourage the existing patrons of mass transit to get out to vote for its extension. An Atlanta meeting of the Legislative Action Council of the US Conference of Mayors coincided with the run-up to the referendum vote. Massell took advantage of the situation to give the likes of New York’s John Lindsay, Baltimore’s Tommy D’Alesandro, and New Orleans’ Moon Landrieu a highly publicized aerial tour of the city’s expressway traffic, highlighting Atlanta’s need for greater mass transit. MARTA’s leadership joined Massell on the campaign trail, speaking to as many civic groups and journalists as possible. Executive director Terrell Hill gave more than 500 speeches on behalf of the revised plan between January 1970 and November 1971.<sup>160</sup> “In three years, a driver’s license will be a passport to a psychiatrist’s couch,” Hill told hundreds of audiences, tailoring his message to commuters who had no intention of using the system but might consider supporting it as a means of getting other motorists off the road.<sup>161</sup>

The Committee for Sensible Rapid Transit, the rechristened Atlanta Chamber-backed “yes” organization, commissioned a far more visceral collection of advertisements than its 1968 predecessor. Their full-page “Will Atlanta Be the Next Traffic Fatality?” advertisement highlighted their print campaign. Featuring an image of rush hour traffic on the Downtown Connector, the advertisement combined striking statistics with clear, concise arguments for the

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<sup>159</sup> Paul Gapp and Stanley Ziemba, “How One City- Atlanta- Attacks Mass Transit Crisis,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 25, 1973, 1.

<sup>160</sup> Bill Seddon, “Massell Shows City to 12 Other Mayors,” *Atlanta Constitution*, November 4, 1971, 16-A; Maurice Fleiss, “Mayors Issue Transit Alert,” *Atlanta Journal*, November 4, 1971, 1; Maurice Fleiss, “Mayor Rides for MARTA,” *Atlanta Journal*, November 3, 1971, 2A; “Obituaries: Atlanta: Terrell W. Hill, 72, MARTA Executive,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 8, 2002, 6C.

<sup>161</sup> Alex Coffin, “Transit Road Rocky, Uphill,” *Atlanta Constitution*, March 29, 1971, 7A; “Obituaries: Atlanta: Terrell W. Hill, 72, MARTA Executive,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 8, 2002, 6C.

system. “Last year 271 residents of the Metro area died in traffic accidents,” one version of the advertisement read, roughly as many people as had died in homicides in 1971 in the city of Atlanta. This irony was not lost on the pro-referendum Committee, which realized that suburbanites who avoided the city out of a fear of crime were subjecting themselves to comparable dangers everyday on the region’s roadways. “They were not the only traffic casualties,” the advertisement continued, “When a city stops moving, it begins to die,” it stated, appealing to Atlanta’s perennial fear of losing its major city status. An Atlanta without rapid transit, the advertisement stated, would soon become an unproductive one in which its most industrious citizens sat in traffic all day, and where “fumes from 793,000 automobiles made our skyline blurred, our eyes smart, our sinuses ache.”<sup>162</sup> “TRAFFIC KILLS TIME. TRAFFIC KILLS PEOPLE. TRAFFIC KILLS CITIES TOO,” another variant of the advertisement read. “If you still have the slightest doubt,” the advertisement implored readers, “do one thing. Drive down one of our freeways tomorrow afternoon at five. Or at least try.”<sup>163</sup>

Just like in 1968, pro-referendum groups heavily outspent the plan’s opponents. Organizations favoring the referendum spend \$381,715.22 on the 1971 campaign, more than eight times as much as their opposition.<sup>164</sup> Few elected officials in any of the affected jurisdictions expressed opposition to the proposal. All but three Atlanta City Councilors and majorities on all four county commissions endorsed the plan. The *Constitution* and *Journal* endorsed the 1971 plan emphatically.<sup>165</sup> Everett Millican again figured prominently in the debate, covering similar terrain in the anti-referendum advertisements he once again bankrolled.

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<sup>162</sup> “Committee for Sensible Rapid Transit Advertisement,” *Atlanta Journal*, November 2, 1971, 9A.

<sup>163</sup> “Committee for Sensible Rapid Transit Advertisement,” *Atlanta Constitution*, November 8, 1971, 14.

<sup>164</sup> Reg Murphy, “High Cost of Selling Rapid Transit,” *Atlanta Constitution*, November 11, 1971, 4A.

<sup>165</sup> Alex Coffin, “Transit Road Rocky, Uphill,” *Atlanta Constitution*, March 29, 1971, 7A; Maurice Fleiss, “MARTA Foe Maps City Transit Buy,” *Atlanta Journal*, November 2, 1971, 8A; Raleigh Bryans, “Transit Vote Result Cloudy,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 7, 1971, 1A, 21A; “The MARTA Vote,” *Atlanta Constitution*, November 8, 1971, 4A.

He characterized the 1971 referendum as the same “white elephant” proposed in 1968, a tax-free “super government” with the power to condemn property, fix fares, and self-police that would bind the region together into one political entity for the next fifty years.<sup>166</sup>

Attorney and businessman Moreton Rolleston Jr., a staunch segregationist who joined Lester Maddox in challenging the legality of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, published his own series of far more racially pointed anti-referendum advertisements. He feared that a large metropolitan transit system would spread the inner-city’s pathologies throughout the region, turning Atlanta into “another city like New York,” a massive, interconnected metropolis that decanted its problems over a vast territory. Rolleston questioned the safety of the system, considering inner-city Atlanta’s exploding violent crime rate. Rolleston questioned the lack of direct access to either the new Civic Center or Atlanta Stadium, both of which required more than ¾ mile long walks from the nearest station. “MARTA’s rapid transit will be used primarily by the people who are now using the bus system,” Rolleston said in a full-page advertisement. “Over 60% of the present riders are black and their trips are primarily within a three mile radius of Five Points.” Rolleston focused heavily on the temporarily reduced bus fare in his advertisements. “Who will pay for MARTA? Certainly not the passengers who use it at a \$.15 fare. Practically all of the expenses will be paid by those who do not use the system,” one of Rolleston’s advertisements read. Rolleston characterized the 15 cent fare as “another free ride on your tax dollars...”<sup>167</sup> Rolleston’s advertisements gave credence to the claim by Gerald Rafshoon, the

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<sup>166</sup> Raleigh Bryans, “Rapid Transit Gets Green Light in Fulton-DeKalb Cliff-Hanger,” *Atlanta Journal*, November 10, 1971, 1A, 8A, 20A; “Rapid Transit: Two Views,” *Atlanta Constitution*, November 8, 1971, 1A, 6A.

<sup>167</sup> “Questions About MARTA’s Rapid Transit Advertisement,” *Atlanta Journal*, November 3, 1971, 12.

advertising executive who masterminded MARTA's 1971 referendum advertising campaign, that the "the 15-cent fare became a code word for 'nigger'" among opponents of rapid transit.<sup>168</sup>

Referendum supporters complained that its opponents were relying on "statements that are biased and prejudicial intending to appeal to the fears of people rather than to speak to the merits of the case," in the words of the *Constitution's* Roy Blount.<sup>169</sup> For many voters, whether suburban or urban, race served as the prism through which they viewed the 1971 referendum vote, arguably to a greater extent than even in 1968. Polls conducted in the weeks before the vote indicated that a fear of crime spreading from the inner-city and fears that MARTA would be used to facilitate residential and school integration were the most important factors determining suburban white voters' views on the referendum. Moreover, many suburban voters expressed anger that they were being asked to pay for a system they had no intention of using. Conversely, black voters who continued to oppose the rapid transit plan believed that the system, even in its reformed version, was designed primarily for white patrons. Many black opponents of MARTA's plan feared that they would be displaced by rapid transit construction, just as tens of thousands of African Americans had been as a result of urban renewal.<sup>170</sup>

The 1971 rapid transit referendum passed narrowly in Fulton (including Atlanta) and Dekalb Counties, which was legally sufficient for MARTA to begin construction. Voters in Gwinnett and Clayton Counties both rejected the referendum by margins of more than four to one. In Fulton County, the referendum passed by a mere 461 of the 110,000 votes cast while 52 percent of DeKalb County voters supported the referendum. Black and white residents of the

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<sup>168</sup> Raleigh Bryans, "Rapid Transit Gets Green Light in Fulton-DeKalb Cliff-Hanger," *Atlanta Journal*, November 10, 1971, 1A, 8A, 20A.

<sup>169</sup> "Rapid Transit: Two Views," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 8, 1971, 1A, 15A.

<sup>170</sup> Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Making of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 188-196; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 98-102; Gary Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 395; Philip D. Carter, "Vote Mass Transit, Atlantans Urged, to Miss the Crunch," *Washington Post*, November 8, 1971, A2.



city of Atlanta supported the referendum at nearly equal percentages: 54.8 and 54.7 percent, respectively, just enough to overcome strong suburban opposition. Demonstrating their traditional sense of civic trusteeship, Atlanta's affluent northside voted heavily for the measure. Conversely, the most impoverished, predominately black sections of the city opposed the referendum, confirming their continued mistrust of the plan and its proponents. Fearing an influx of underclass black residents from the inner-city, white and black middle class homeowners in southern DeKalb County voted heavily against the referendum. Strong support for the measure in affluent, predominately white sections of northern DeKalb County as well as economically depressed, predominately black wards in the southern section of the county ensured the referendum's passage.<sup>171</sup>

"The black community is responsible for the MARTA victory," Maynard Jackson proclaimed the day after the referendum. Jackson said that the decision of black leaders to put their political clout behind the effort demonstrated the black community's new, central role in civic decision making. The terms of the old biracial electoral coalition were clearly no longer enforceable. The two MARTA votes demonstrated the new assertiveness and sense of agency among black Atlanta voters, a majority of whom held out on supporting the plan until it provided their community with greater access, more guaranteed jobs, lower fares, and a role in its planning. Less than two years after the MARTA referendum, bloc-support from African American voters made Jackson the city's first black mayor.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Larry D. Schroeder and David Sjoquist, "The Rational Voter," 27-28; Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 248-249; Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Making of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 188-196; "Rapid Transit Gets Green Light in Fulton-DeKalb Cliff-Hanger," *Atlanta Journal*, November 10, 1971, 1A, 8A, 20A; "Fulton, DeKalb Voters Approve MARTA Plan," *Atlanta Daily World*, November 11, 1971, 1; Alex Coffin, "Voters in Fulton, DeKalb Okay Rapid Transit," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 10, 1971, 1; "Fulton, DeKalb Voters Approve MARTA Plan," *Atlanta Daily World*, November 11, 1971, 1; "Middle, Upper Income Whites Put It Over," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 10, 1971, 10A; Alex Coffin, "Recount Cuts MARTA Edge," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 11, 1971, 1;

<sup>172</sup> Bill Seddon, "Blacks Claim Credit for MARTA Win," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 11, 1971, 7A; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 78, 98-102.

The passage of the 1971 rapid transit referendum proved an immediate boon to black employment and affordable transportation in the metropolitan area. MARTA's minority job training, affirmative action, and construction contract preference programs ensured that nearly 88 percent of the new employees hired by the authority in the year after the referendum were African American. Most new employees became bus drivers once MARTA completed its voter-approved purchase of ATC in early 1972. By the end of 1973, the percentage of black bus drivers in Atlanta doubled to nearly 40 percent.<sup>173</sup> New MARTA express bus routes provided residents of black neighborhoods with expanded access to jobs in outlying industrial parks, hospitals, and shopping centers.<sup>174</sup> MARTA's fifteen cent fare was the cheapest in the nation for seven straight years. Even as cost-overruns forced MARTA to increase the project's estimated price from \$1.32 billion to \$1.8 billion, the board refused to consider ending the fifteen cent fare, knowing that the core constituency of the project supported it in large part because of the fare.<sup>175</sup>

Construction began on the MARTA rapid transit rail in 1975 with service commencing on June 30, 1979. The Jackson Administration used its clout in MARTA to push successfully for the opening of the East-West line that served primarily black neighborhoods before the opening of the commuter-oriented North-South line, which had been the system's planner's original purpose for proposing metropolitan rail transit. Although the North-South line opened less than two years after the East-West line, the prioritization of the East-West line reinforced the idea among suburban whites that MARTA rail service was a black space no different from the MARTA buses that white commuters had all but abandoned. Many suburban residents pointed

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<sup>173</sup> Joseph Kraft, "Atlanta Transit Plan Boosts Black Cause," *Boston Globe*, February 25, 1973, A7; Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 188-196; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 98-102.

<sup>174</sup> Joseph Kraft, "Atlanta Transit Plan Boosts Black Cause," *Boston Globe*, February 25, 1973, A7.

<sup>175</sup> Ralph Blumenthal, "50 Cent Fare? It's 15 Cents in Salt Lake City and Atlanta," *New York Times*, August 31, 1975, 28; Sharon Bailey, "MARTA's Cost Rises \$450 Million," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 9, 1973, 3.

to MARTA's failure to expand to the airport, one of the primary potential uses of the system by commuters, until 1988 as further proof of the system's focus on its black ridership. The adoption by many metropolitan area residents of the racially charged MARTA sobriquet "Moving Africans Rapidly Through Atlanta" most clearly expressed this sentiment.<sup>176</sup>

Ever so briefly, a wide swath of the region's residents regarded MARTA as a source of pride and prestige. Its sleek, clean cars, closed-circuit monitored stations, and upholstered seats counted as a luxurious urban amenity in the minds of many citizens who never used the system. In their early years, MARTA's trains remained vandalism-free relative to their competitors in other cities.<sup>177</sup> By the mid-1980s, a noticeable increase in vandalism and a series of high-profile violent crimes in and around MARTA trains and stations further unnerved a suburban public already inclined to regard the system as unsafe. MARTA leaders disputed claims that their system was unsafe, pointing out that the vast majority of patrons on the 55,000,000 annual trips taken on its rails each year were not subjected to violent crime. In 1985, for example, MARTA police statistics cited 43 armed robberies and 33 aggravated assaults within the confines of their system, a number that many in the public did not regard in nearly as off-hand a manner as the authority's leadership.<sup>178</sup> Critics said the crime statistics were misleading since people spent so little of their day on the trains. Moreover, they accused MARTA police of manipulating their

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<sup>176</sup> Frederick Allen, *Atlanta Rising*, 198-199; William E. Schmidt, "Atlanta's Rapid Transit System to Reach Out today for Suburban Riders," *New York Times*, December 15, 1984, 10; Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 157-159; Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 188-196. Note that many MARTA patrons on Atlanta's predominately black West Side regarded the delayed opening of the Proctor Creek Spur until 1993 as proof that the rail system was fundamentally oriented toward white riders.

<sup>177</sup> William E. Schmidt, "Graffiti and Vandals' Attacks Rub Gloss Off Atlanta Transit," *New York Times*, November 8, 1985, A20.

<sup>178</sup> Dudley Clendinen, "Crime Reports Spoil Atlanta's Pride in Rapid Transit System," *New York Times*, May 22, 1986, A20.

crime statistics, reclassifying violent offenses to make them seem either less serious or erasing the crime entirely by deeming it as off MARTA property.<sup>179</sup>

MARTA failed to alleviate sprawl in the Atlanta area or to become a comprehensive, metropolitan-wide system.<sup>180</sup> Moreover, it has spent much of the last 30 years on the verge of financial collapse. Between 1970 and 1985, MARTA received substantial federal investments totaling in excess of two billion dollars of federal money, more than any other metropolitan transit system. Deep cutbacks in federal support beginning in the late 1980s placed the system in a state of perpetual financial peril.<sup>181</sup> Suburbanites who asserted their political autonomy in voting against the MARTA referendums continued to vote with their feet against the transit system. Metropolitan Atlanta continued to sprawl outward even after MARTA rail service commenced in 1979. By the mid-1980s, nearly two-million automobiles were registered in Metropolitan Atlanta, two and a half times as many as in 1970. Commuters in the region averaged more than 30 miles driven each work day, more than any city in the United States. Atlanta area drivers in the early 1980s traversed a highway system that had more than quadrupled its capacity since the end of World War II, but was more crowded than ever with morning and afternoon commutes that vacillated between standstills and breakneck jockeying for position well above the speed limit.<sup>182</sup>

During the 1970s and 1980s, corporate transplants from across the country filled Cobb, Gwinnett, and northern DeKalb counties with more than a half-million new residents, creating a housing boom of unprecedented scale in the region. The new residents of these counties were

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 157-159.

<sup>181</sup> William B. Schmidt, "Atlanta is Finally Flowing," *New York Times*, December 8, 1985, E5; Dudley Clendinen, "Crime Reports Spoil Atlanta's Pride in Rapid Transit System," *New York Times*, May 22, 1986, A20; Julie B. Hairstone, "MARTA Marks 25 Years of Trains," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 30, 2004, 1B.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 83-84, 123; Robert D. Bullard et al, "Dismantling Transportation Apartheid: The Quest for Equality," *Sprawl City*, 51-52; William B. Schmidt, "Atlanta is Finally Flowing," *New York Times*, December 8, 1985, E5.

resolutely automobile commuters. They resisted any proposed expansion of MARTA with equal vociferousness as their predecessors in the suburbs.<sup>183</sup> Cobb County commissioner Emmett Burton promised to “stock the Chatahoochee with piranha” if that were necessary to keep MARTA away.<sup>184</sup> On several occasions during the 1980s, blue ribbon panels proposed the expansion of MARTA into Clayton, Gwinnett, and Cobb Counties, but the residents of these jurisdictions voted heavily against any proposal to expand the service into their communities. In a 1980 survey commissioned by Central Atlanta Progress, forty-four percent of suburban residents admitted that if rapid transit service was made available in their community it would be a more efficient way for them to commute than driving. Despite this admission by a significant percentage of the suburban population, racially explicit fears of inner-city crime spreading to the suburbs shaped the debates surrounding MARTA expansion in suburban Atlanta.<sup>185</sup> “The development of a regional transit system in the Atlanta area is being held hostage to race,” MARTA chairman J. David Chestnut said in 1987, bemoaning the continued resistance to metropolitan-wide mass transit in the suburbs. Chestnut’s frankness failed to convince suburban Atlantans to embrace rapid transit.<sup>186</sup>

Since the passage of the 1971 referendum, downtown developers, most notably Tom Cousins and John Portman, thought that the rail system would help Atlanta create clusters of high rise development and vitality around the stations, luring upscale residents and consumers

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<sup>183</sup> Dave Whitelegg, “A Battle on Two Fronts: Competitive Urges ‘Inside’ Atlanta,” *Area* 34.2 (June 2002), 129; Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 188-196; David Pendered, “Plans to Nowhere,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 24, 2004, 1E; Frederick Allen, *Atlanta Rising*, 198-199; Ariel Hart, “Mass Transit: A Must-Have or a No-Win?” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, January 17, 2012, 1A.

<sup>184</sup> Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 248-249.

<sup>185</sup> “Central Area Survey II, 1980-Present (1987),” Central Atlanta Progress, Inc. Records, MSS 591, Box 54, Folder 2, Kenan Research Center; Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 248.

<sup>186</sup> William E. Schmidt, “Racial Roadblock Seen in Atlanta Transit System,” *New York Times*, July 22, 1987, A16; Keith R. Ihlanfeldt, “Rail Transit and Neighborhood Crime: The Case of Atlanta, Georgia,” *Southern Economic Journal* 70.2 (October 2003), 274.

back into the center city.<sup>187</sup> Certainly, some MARTA stations became hubs for burgeoning, high density development, most notably the corporate headquarters boom near the Midtown station and the emergence of Buckhead as an upscale commercial center around the Lenox Square station. The vast majority of development in Metropolitan Atlanta, though, continued to take place in its ever-expanding suburbs, far beyond the reach of public-transit dependent job seekers in the center city. MARTA had been envisioned as a means of moving commuters efficiently in and out of downtown Atlanta. By the late 1980s, it had become primarily the domain of out-of-town conventioners and the urban poor.<sup>188</sup>

### **“Vision and Judgment”**

“The only limit that can be put to the future promise of this city will be a self-imposed failure of vision and judgment,” the *Constitution* editorialized in October 1966, attesting to the ability of Atlanta’s civic elites to maintain social peace in the city while overseeing a seemingly endless boom.<sup>189</sup> Unbeknownst to the *Constitution*’s unnamed editorialist, the civic elite that had overseen Atlanta’s rise to “Major League” status was on the verge of losing the controlling interest in municipal affairs that it had possessed for decades. The postwar, corporate-centered bi-racial governing coalition that facilitated Atlanta’s emergence as the Southeast’s premier economic center was about to be displaced by competing urban and suburban powerbases. Atlanta’s economic boom did not end when the Atlanta Chamber-centered governing coalition lost the strength to impose its “vision and judgment” on the region. Despite some hiccups in the late 1970s, the city and its environs continued to grow rapidly upward and outward for the remainder of the twentieth century. Yet, the decline of Atlanta’s governing consensus did have a

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<sup>187</sup> Frederick Allen, *Atlanta Rising*, 198-199.

<sup>188</sup> Sally Salter, “Atlanta: Rapid-Transit Station is the Hub of Burgeoning Buckhead Area,” *New York Times*, May 12, 1985, CR16; Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 248-249.

<sup>189</sup> “Atlanta—Going Up,” *Atlanta Constitution*, October 31, 1966, 4.

tangible and negative impact on the metropolitan area. It contributed to and was a product of the political and cultural fragmentation of the region, which has been analyzed in this chapter through the prism of the trans-metropolitan policy controversies over school and housing desegregation, annexation, and rapid transit.

Urban and suburban residents of Metropolitan Atlanta likewise diverged in their attitudes toward leisure pursuits, resulting in a shared unwillingness to embrace the “Major League” amenities that the old civic leadership had brought to the city. The acquisition of professional sports franchises in the 1960s and 1970s provided Atlanta boosters with a glamorous new selling point to use when trying to convince businesses and young professionals to relocate to the area. The investment of billions of dollars of outside capital in Metropolitan Atlanta had drawn hundreds of thousands of ambitious people to the region in search of prosperity. Downtown Atlanta gleamed with the glass and steel of dozens of newly constructed skyscrapers. For the commuters that occupied these offices during business hours, suburban developers had created environments that were physically, culturally, and psychologically distant from the city. Atlanta’s civic leaders had also gone to great lengths to provide the region’s residents with entertainments befitting a city of their newfound stature. “Major League” Atlanta may have offered its residents a range of amenities that rivaled almost any city, but Atlantans new and old demonstrated an unwillingness to consistently patronize the very institutions that lent their city its new stature.

## CHAPTER 6

### **The Failure of Atlanta Stadium to Become a Metropolitan “Center of Gravity,” 1965-1976**

On April 9, 1965, an unsigned editorial in the *Atlanta Journal* commemorated the opening that evening of the city’s \$18 million multi-purpose municipal stadium. Atlanta’s investment in the stadium had enabled it to lure both professional baseball and professional football to the Southeast for the first time. The editorial struck a triumphant tone, describing the opening of Atlanta Stadium as an event that would bind the rapidly growing region together socially, culturally, and economically. In a place where divisions between native and newcomer, black and white, and city and suburb were striking, the *Journal*’s unnamed editorialist predicted that the stadium would serve as a crucible for metropolitan consensus.

“Interest in the stadium certainly indicates a great lift in civic morale and a revival of the famous Atlanta spirit,” the editorialist wrote. “It provides a center of gravity for a city which was beginning to need one. Suburban growth was producing a sort of centrifugal force which could make downtown unnecessary in time. But the stadium will be a great center of interest, a meeting place and rallying point for all of us, a source of civic pride and a promoter of civic loyalty,” the editorialist wrote, evoking the heady optimism that comprised the common sense of Atlanta’s civic elites for much of the 1960s.<sup>1</sup>

Mayor Ivan Allen, the most high-profile purveyor of the city fathers’ booster ethos, struck a similarly and understandably triumphant note on Atlanta Stadium’s opening night, an exhibition baseball game between the Milwaukee/Soon-to-Be Atlanta Braves and the Detroit Tigers. Speaking during a pre-game ceremony, Allen, as he often did, evoked the legacy of

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<sup>1</sup> “A Spectacular Weekend,” *Atlanta Journal*, April 9, 1965, 18.



Sherman's destruction of Atlanta during the Civil War. He characterized the stadium's completion as the end point in Atlanta's century-long remaking into a major American city.<sup>2</sup> "In eleven months and three weeks Atlanta has broken the shackles of complacency and the shackles of those who said it couldn't be done and that we must go second-class with a provincial attitude... With great respect for the past, but with an even greater hope for the future, we welcome Major League Baseball here in the form of the National League Braves," Allen said before turning the remainder of the evening over to the Detroit and Milwaukee baseball teams.<sup>3</sup>

Atlanta boosters from Henry Grady to Margaret Mitchell to Ivan Allen's own father had evoked the narrative of the city's rise from the ashes of 1864, making its modern triumphs seem all the more magnificent by juxtaposing the agony of its romantic past with the ecstasy of its present. Like his predecessors, Allen transformed the remaking of Atlanta into a sacred duty.<sup>4</sup> As Allen spoke to the cultural significance of the stadium for which he was largely responsible, he stood at the fulcrum of a city that looked to have avoided the most evident pathologies of both the urban north and the urban south. Atlanta had thus far been spared the destructive riots that had enveloped Harlem and North Philadelphia the previous summer. Instead, Atlanta's municipal leadership was planning to build thousands of units of affordable housing and reinvest in its residential core by participating in the Model Cities program. While civic rival Birmingham mired itself in "Massive Resistance," leaders in Atlanta's black and white communities had negotiated the terms of its desegregation peacefully.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "37,232 Watch Braves Cage Tigers, 6-3," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 10, 1965, 1, 16; "Braves Win in Atlanta's New Stadium," *Chicago Tribune*, April 10, 1965, C3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 21.

<sup>5</sup> Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 67-75.

Atlanta celebrated the fruits of its municipal peace and prosperity at their new stadium's opening night, as an integrated audience (an afterthought in almost every account of the game) watched their Braves in person for the first time. It all seemed like living proof that Atlanta's civic establishment had built a "City Too Busy to Hate," largely from the top-down.<sup>6</sup> The crowd that evening seemed like a rejection of the Atlanta envisioned by Ivan Allen's 1961 mayoral rival, Lester Maddox, who had become internationally famous the previous summer for chasing three black Georgia Tech students away from his Hemphill Street restaurant with an ax-handle. When ordered by a federal judge to integrate the Pickrick, Maddox instead chose to close his establishment. The opening night crowd at Atlanta Stadium, though predominately white, bore no outward signs of the kind of racial hostility Lester Maddox displayed the previous July outside his restaurant.<sup>7</sup> Atlanta's fans matched the *de jure* integration of the stands with a willingness to cheer lustily for a home team that fielded five black and four white starters.<sup>8</sup> "During my lifetime," former mayor Sam Massell recalled, "I don't know any other undertaking or activity that had as much of an impact on improving race relations as professional sports. Having whites and blacks sit together, which they had not done before, and being able to scream together to kill the same guy or support the same guy was very healthy."<sup>9</sup>

On opening night 1965, Atlanta's civic elites could rightfully look upon their new stadium as a new metropolitan "center of gravity," as the editorialist in the *Journal* had described it that morning. This center, though, failed to hold, as residents of Metropolitan Atlanta demonstrated a long-term preference for spending their leisure time within the confines of their

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<sup>6</sup> Jay Jenkins, "And Everybody Was Having a Ball," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 10, 1965, 16; Robert E. Baker, "Atlanta Busy Polishing Blurred Racial Image," *Washington Post*, March 1, 1964, E3.

<sup>7</sup> Furman Bisher, "Great Night, Weak Plot," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 11, 1965, 51.

<sup>8</sup> William Leggett, "Atlanta You Can Have the Rest, Leave Us Eddie Mathews Our Hero," *Sports Illustrated*, April 26, 1965, 24; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Sam Massell, interview by the author, July 2, 2013, 39, transcript.

lifestyle and demographic clusters rather than in a shared civic space. This chapter analyzes the failure of Atlanta Stadium to become a metropolitan “center of gravity” in the 1960s and 1970s. Contrary to the forecasts of civic elites, the prestige and pride that Atlanta Stadium afforded its city dissipated quickly. The city fathers who shepherded Atlanta Stadium into being believed the venue would become one of the region’s focal points of mass leisure and entertainment. Much to their collective dismay, neither Atlanta Stadium nor its primary tenants, the Braves and Falcons, proved a durable draw, let alone wellsprings of social cohesion.

Rather than an engine of civic vitality, Atlanta Stadium, the Braves, and the Falcons were beholden to the same forces of market segmentation as any other product or service available in the metropolitan area during the 1960s and 1970s. Atlantans thought of themselves as consumers of local professional sports rather than devotees of the city’s franchises, all of which were a long way from becoming tenured civic institutions. Surprisingly few citizens of Metropolitan Atlanta developed an abiding affection for their new teams or the spaces in which they played. The collective shrug with which most metropolitan area residents came to regard the city’s professional sports franchises demonstrated the cultural divergence that increasingly characterized the practice of everyday life in greater Atlanta. Most residents found their leisure within the confines of their geographic, demographic, or lifestyle communities rather than in the public sphere at the center of the city.

Metropolitan area residents found Atlanta Stadium to be an undesirable focal point for their leisure activities for many reasons. The futility of the Braves and Falcons franchises, which will be discussed at greater length in the next chapter, contributed significantly to the lack of local affection that developed for Atlanta Stadium during the 1960s and 1970s, but it was far from the only reason that metropolitan area residents preferred to spend their leisure time

elsewhere. Events of all kinds at Atlanta Stadium failed to engender any widespread emotional investment in the venue. As discussed later in this chapter, Atlanta Stadium proved just as unsuccessful at becoming a metropolitan “center of gravity” for non-sports gatherings. The special events held at the stadium, including rock concerts, religious meetings, and political rallies, drew frequently underwhelming crowds.

A number of other related factors contributed to the lack of local interest in attending games or special events at Atlanta Stadium. Foremost among these was the decentralization of the region’s population during the 1960s and 1970s. By and large, suburban residents living “Outside the Perimeter” of I-285 found the commute to and from the Stadium to be more trouble than it was worth. They proved unwilling to regularly navigate Atlanta traffic to see events at the Stadium. Commuting options for fans in outlying areas were further limited by the dearth of mass transit in Metropolitan Atlanta during the 1960s and 1970s. Voters in the outlying metropolitan counties had prevented the extension of MARTA into their communities, severely limiting the opportunities for suburban fans to use mass transit to get to the downtown facility.

Moreover, the experience of attending a game at Atlanta Stadium discouraged many suburban consumers from regularly patronizing the Braves or Falcons. Fans and players alike complained that the multipurpose municipal stadium lacked personality, deteriorated quickly due to its break-neck construction schedule, and was unpleasantly hot and humid all summer. Atlanta Stadium’s environs further served to dissuade suburban fans from taking in an event at the ballpark, which required social interactions that provoked their racial and class anxieties. Visitors found few amenities around the Stadium, whose closest commercial facilities were found in a deteriorating shopping district patronized primarily by the impoverished African American residents of nearby neighborhoods, which had been fractured by the combined forces

of urban renewal and stadium development. Concerns about the safety of Atlanta Stadium's environs deterred many potential patrons, suburban or not, from attending events at the venue. Built on the southern edge of downtown, the Stadium sat in close proximity to the impoverished and high crime Summerhill neighborhood, the site of a 1966 riot. Game attendees were frequently the victims of petty crimes, such as car break-ins, and occasionally the victims of violent crimes, including a number of high profile assaults and robberies.

Atlanta Stadium and its tenants faced challenges from rival entertainments, both novel and familiar, which cut significantly into their revenue streams. Radio and television coverage of the Braves and Falcons made it possible for fans to follow both teams without the hassle of going downtown. The arrival of four major professional sports teams in Atlanta between 1966 and 1972 caused the novelty of watching "the big leagues" to diminish rapidly while simultaneously forcing the fledgling franchises to compete against one another. An explosion of family-oriented leisure attractions and recreational areas in suburban Atlanta during the 1960s and 1970s enabled many area residents to choose more familiar and child-friendly environments in which to spend their free time. Many Atlanta natives were passionate sports fans long before the arrival of the Major Leagues in town, devotees of a diverse range of traditional regional pastimes including college football, golf, and auto racing. Few Atlanta natives traded in their historical sporting devotions for a comparable commitment to the city's new professional teams. The transplants who made up a sizeable percentage of the region's suburban population often maintained loyalties to professional teams from back home. Newcomers rarely remade themselves into durable devotees of the city's franchises.

## **“They Don’t Like to Come Into the City”**

Foremost among the factors that discouraged metropolitan area residents from attending games at Atlanta Stadium was the decentralization of the region’s population. Commuting to and from the stadium became an increasingly arduous task as the vast majority of the region’s population settled ever further from the city proper. Metropolitan area residents living “Outside the Perimeter” of I-285 proved unwilling to come back into the city in large numbers on weeknights or weekends to watch the lackluster teams that played downtown. Braves manager Bobby Bragan characterized his 1966 commute into the stadium as a “30 minute ride taken on freeways that more closely resembled the Indianapolis 500.”<sup>10</sup> “We’re such a suburban city and when they’re already out there, they don’t like to come into the city. People in the suburbs really don’t like to go downtown,” former *Constitution* editor Jim Minter said, describing the view of the center city that had calcified quickly into the consensus in the outlying metropolitan counties.<sup>11</sup> Working one’s way through Atlanta’s freeway traffic to see the Braves or the Falcons was simply too much work for too little pay off for most of the region’s consumers. This dynamic had the most profound impact on the Braves, whose marathon 162-game spring and summer schedule required the greatest commitment from spectators and took place outdoors during Georgia’s hottest and most humid months.

By opposing the extension of MARTA, suburban voters had created a line of demarcation in trans-metropolitan transit that made automobiles the only viable means of traveling from the region’s outer rings to its inner-ring. Any desire residents of Cobb, Clayton, and Gwinnett County may have had to use mass transit to access the amenities of downtown Atlanta were

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<sup>10</sup> Bobby Bragan, *You Can’t Hit with the Bat on Your Shoulder* (New York: Summit, 1992), 316.

<sup>11</sup> Jim Minter interview by the author July 9, 2013, 17-18.

overshadowed by a broad political consensus in each county shaped by the fear that MARTA would spread crime and foster racial integration in their communities.<sup>12</sup>

Certainly, many suburban Atlantans believed that the extension of MARTA into the outer-ring suburbs would lead to an outflow of urban pathologies. The provocative “Share Crime: Support MARTA” yard signs and bumper stickers that appeared during the 1970s and 1980s in jurisdictions considering joining the rapid rail system were the most evident popular manifestation of the suburban racial and class anxieties that surrounded the issue.<sup>13</sup>

The vigorous opposition to MARTA in suburban Atlanta, though, was not simply a matter of racial politics, but also an expression of a lifestyle preference. The residents of suburban Atlanta demonstrated an individualist ethos which was quickly becoming the common sense of suburban America. They simply preferred driving to making use of mass transit. Paul Becker, a resident of Douglasville, Georgia who was a Falcons’ season ticket holder during their tenure at Atlanta Stadium, summed up the preference of suburban Atlantans for driving succinctly in a 2000 letter to the *Journal-Constitution*. He explained that he stopped renewing his Falcons season ticket when the team moved to the Georgia Dome in 1992 because he was not granted one of the assigned parking spots in the dome lot. “I don't like MARTA; I don't want to be forced to ride MARTA. I like to leave when I want to leave, not when MARTA is ready to leave,” he wrote.<sup>14</sup> Becker’s views represented a demonstrable consensus in the region. In 1980, the 2.3 million residents of metropolitan Atlanta registered more than 1.5 million cars while fewer than 1 million of them even had direct access to MARTA. Approximately five percent of

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<sup>12</sup> Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 156.

<sup>13</sup> Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 248; Drew Whitelegg, “A Battle on Two Fronts: Competitive Urges ‘Inside’ Atlanta,” *Area* 34 No. 2, 129-132; “Racial Roadblock Seen in Atlanta Transit System,” *New York Times*, July 22, 1987, 48; Ken Wills, “Cobb is Debating MARTA Proposal,” *Atlanta Constitution*, June 27, 1980, 1C.

<sup>14</sup> “Sound Off: Falcons Attendance,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 1, 2000, 4D.

metropolitan area residents used mass transit to commute in 1994, roughly the same percentage as in 1970, when the privately-owned Atlanta Transit System bus company was the region's primary mass transit operator.<sup>15</sup>

Non-MARTA mass transit options emerged in the suburban counties during the 1970s and 1980s, including both government-run authorities, such as in Cobb County, and privately owned services, which offered downtown shuttles to commuters from a variety of outer-ring locations. Collectively, the public showed almost no interest in patronizing these services. A shuttle bus service that connected Gwinnett County to downtown Atlanta in the late 1970s and early 1980s did not draw "enough riders to start a card game," in the words of the County's Assistant Executive director Wayne Shackelford, and soon went out of business.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, the MARTA rail lines that offered commuters in Fulton and Dekalb County access to downtown Atlanta did not open until 1979, more than a decade after the Braves and Falcons arrived in the city. The first MARTA rapid rail line was, in fact, an east-west line that served primarily inner-city residents, offering little service to suburban riders until a north-south line opened in 1984. While the Omni Coliseum had its own station, the trip from a MARTA station to Atlanta Stadium required either a shuttle bus ride from the Five Points or a 20 minute walk from the stop at Georgia State University.<sup>17</sup> Suburbanites predisposed to dislike the system

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<sup>15</sup> David Pendered, "Plans to Nowhere," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 24, 2004, 1E; Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta: The Politics of Place in the City of Dreams* (New York: Verso, 1996), 82; Drew Whitelegg, "A Battle on Two Fronts," 130-131; Robert D. Bullard, Glenn S. Johnson, and Angel Torres, "Dismantling Transportation Apartheid," in *Sprawl City: Race, Politics, and Planning*, eds. Robert D. Bullard, Glenn S. Johnson, and Angel Torres (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2000), 51-59.

<sup>16</sup> David Johnson, "Gwinnett Feeling Much the Same as it Did in 1971: Anti-MARTA," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 7, 1982, 8A.

<sup>17</sup> John Brady, "MARTA's Drive to Cut Parking Lot Vandalism Paying Off," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 5, 1984, 23A; "MARTA Security is Close to Perfect," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 29, 1983, 24A; Sharon Bailey, "MARTA Keeps TV 'Eyes' Open for Crime in the Station," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 27, 1980, 1C; Dudley Cleninden, "Graffiti and Vandals' Attacks Rub Gloss off Atlanta Transit," *New York Times*, November 8, 1985, 22; William Schmidt, "Crime Reports Spoil Atlanta's Pride in Rapid Transit System," *New York Times*, May 22, 1986, 8.



decided quickly that MARTA trains were not only inconvenient but also unsafe. MARTA's leadership used the media to try to persuade residents of Fulton and DeKalb Counties to use their trains to patronize the city's amenities by showing off the cleanliness of the cars and the rapid rail line's closed-circuit television security system. But media coverage of a series of high-profile assaults and robberies in and around trains and stations in the mid-1980s, including a 1986 near-fatal random stabbing outside of the Omni, resonated more loudly in the suburbs.<sup>18</sup>

"During the day games MARTA was pretty safe," longtime Atlanta sports fan David Hewes said of the service, which he used in the late 1970s and 1980s to attend games at both the Omni and Atlanta Stadium. "You did not want to use it at night for late games. It was unsafe."<sup>19</sup> Patricia "Ms. Pat" Williams, an African American comedian who grew up in Atlanta's West End during the 1970s and 1980s, joked in a 2014 interview that the only time she saw "white folks on MARTA was on the way to Braves games."<sup>20</sup> Williams' comment evokes not only the demographic realities of the system's ridership, which was nearly 80 percent African American, according to a 1985 study. It also suggests that many white suburban baseball fans who rode MARTA to the ballpark were entering a largely unfamiliar and for many uncomfortable environment, one that only those with a strong commitment to watching Braves baseball in person would undertake regularly.<sup>21</sup>

Beginning in 1965, the Falcons and Braves offered a dedicated shuttle bus service that dropped fans off directly in front of the stadium. It made seven (eventually, nine) stops on its

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<sup>18</sup> John Brady, "MARTA's Drive to Cut Parking Lot Vandalism Paying Off," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 5, 1984, 23A; "MARTA Security is Close to Perfect," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 29, 1983, 24A; Sharon Bailey, "MARTA Keeps TV 'Eyes' Open for Crime in the Station," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 27, 1980, 1C; Dudley Cleninden, "Graffiti and Vandals' Attacks Rub Gloss off Atlanta Transit," *New York Times*, November 8, 1985, 22; William Schmidt, "Crime Reports Spoil Atlanta's Pride in Rapid Transit System," *New York Times*, May 22, 1986, 8.

<sup>19</sup> David Hewes interview by the author, December 19, 2011, 10 transcript.

<sup>20</sup> Ari Shaffir. "Blacklanta (with Ms. Pat and Big Jay Oakerson)," *Ari Shaffir's Skeptic Tank*. Published on June 8, 2014. Accessed online on July 14, 2014: <http://shaffir1.libsyn.com/169-blacklanta-comediennemspat>.

<sup>21</sup> Robert D. Bullard, Glenn S. Johnson, and Angel Torres, "Dismantling Transportation Apartheid," 51-59

route, which included both downtown parking garages as well as a number of suburban shopping centers with large parking lots. All but one of the shopping centers was located on the city's affluent northside, demonstrating the two teams' focus on white and suburban fans as the core of their support. Collectively, the Braves and Falcons shuttles stopped at parking areas with upwards of 25,000 spaces. Initially, the shuttle services were administered by the private Atlanta Transit Company (ATC). MARTA took over the operation of the shuttle services in 1973 when it purchased the private bus company.<sup>22</sup>

The Braves shuttle was widely promoted by the franchise and the ATC in advance of the club's debut in the city. Radio and newspaper advertisements as well as a mass-mailing of 250,000 copies of the seven-stop stadium shuttle bus route ensured that the vast majority of metropolitan area residents had been made aware of the service. The advertising campaign certainly worked on opening night in April 1965, when the lame duck Milwaukee Braves played their first of seven exhibition games in Atlanta that season. More than 15,000 fans took advantage of the Braves shuttle service, which began two hours before the pre-game festivities and ran for an hour after the conclusion of the game.<sup>23</sup>

The willingness of large numbers of Atlantans to use mass transit to attend a special event like opening night was one thing. Getting them to become regular patrons of mass transit was quite another. A survey conducted by the Georgia Tech School of Management after the 1966 season found that 81% of Braves spectators drove to the ballpark, a figure that remained steady throughout their first decade in the city. In what was likely a self-reinforcing trend,

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<sup>22</sup> "Baseball 1967," *Atlanta Journal*, April 10, 1967, 4B; "What the Braves Fans Spent," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 14, 1966, 4; Wilt Browning, "Braves Pad Atlanta's Purse with \$30 Million," *Atlanta Journal*, November 8, 1966, 44; Jim Minter, "America Watches Atlanta In Its Moment of Glory," *Atlanta Journal*, April 13, 1966, 74.

<sup>23</sup> Harry Murphy, "Victory Christens Atlanta's Stadium," *Atlanta Journal*, April 10, 1965, 1; "Braves Win in Atlanta's New Stadium," *Chicago Tribune*, April 10, 1965, C3; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 2; Joe Strauss, "Braves and Stadium Starred 25 Years Ago," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 13, 1991, 8; "37,232 Watch Braves Cage Tigers, 6-3, in Rousing Debut of Stadium," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 10, 1965, 1, 16.

Atlanta Stadium's notably small 4,000 space parking lot proved large enough to handle most of the baseball crowds the team drew during its first decade in the city.<sup>24</sup>

While Atlanta Stadium's parking lot was large enough to handle the turnout at most of the Braves' 81 regular season home dates each season, it was never adequate for the Falcons' seven to nine annual regular and exhibition home dates. A 1970 Model Cities survey suggested that an additional 7,000 parking spots were needed each Sunday to accommodate Falcons game attendees. As a result, the Falcons proved far more successful at convincing their fans to patronize the ATC, and later MARTA, operated shuttle. The "Falcons Flyer" charged fans 75 cents each way to travel to and from the Stadium beginning 90 minutes before and ending 90 minutes after each game.<sup>25</sup>

A 1966 survey conducted for the Falcons indicated that just 16 percent of game attendees used the club's shuttle service to get to the stadium. Sixty percent of fans had either parked in the stadium lot or in a private lot in the surrounding neighborhoods. Another 10 percent had taken a charter bus to the game, which had long been a favorite mode of transportation to Georgia Tech football games among the Atlanta-area country club set. By 1972, the same researchers found that the percentage of fans who used the Flyer to get to the stadium had nearly doubled to 31 percent. The percentage of fans who parked in the stadium lot or in a nearby neighborhoods had fallen to 50, a slight majority of whom parked in 'wildcat' lots, creating an estimated \$38,000 in revenue that season for residents of nearby neighborhoods. The percentage of fans who arrived on charter buses stayed roughly the same at 9 percent.<sup>26</sup> The crowd that took

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<sup>24</sup> "Baseball 1967," *Atlanta Journal*, April 10, 1967, 4B; "What the Braves Fans Spent," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 14, 1966, 4; Wilt Browning, "Braves Pad Atlanta's Purse with \$30 Million," *Atlanta Journal*, November 8, 1966, 44; Jim Minter, "America Watches Atlanta In Its Moment of Glory," *Atlanta Journal*, April 13, 1966, 74; Carole Ashkinaze, "The State of the Stadium," *Atlanta Journal*, August 13, 1978.

<sup>25</sup> "Atlanta Falcons Pre-Season Prospectus 1969," Atlanta Falcons Folders, Professional Football Hall of Fame Archives; "*Falcon Facts* January 1971," Atlanta Falcons Folders, Professional Football Hall of Fame Archives

<sup>26</sup> William A. Schaeffer & Lawrence S. Davidson, *The Economic Impact of the Falcons on Atlanta, 1973*, 7.

the Falcons Flyer to the game tended to be shuttle regulars but not regular riders of public transportation. A 1968 survey commissioned by the Falcons found that three-quarters of Flyer patrons rode the shuttle frequently to games while a mere 16 percent of riders used public transportation for their daily commutes.<sup>27</sup>

The opening of several mixed-use developments with large parking garages in downtown Atlanta during the 1970s and the opening of the initial MARTA rapid rail lines in 1979 and 1984 cut into the business of the Falcons Flyer considerably. By 1984, just five percent of game attendees used the suburban-oriented shuttle bus service. Approximately 30 percent of fans parked downtown, the majority of whom took a new direct shuttle from the CBD parking lots to the stadium. Another 10 percent of fans used MARTA trains while roughly half of Falcons game attendees still parked at the stadium lot or in a nearby private spot. Still, an estimated 85 percent of Falcons fans used their automobile for at least part of their trip to the stadium.<sup>28</sup>

### **“Our Plate was Too Full”**

A 1968 UPI report suggested that the owners of Atlanta’s professional sports teams were “finding out there isn’t as much spectator gold in these hills as they had hoped.” The arrival of new franchise after new franchise had diminished the novelty of professional sports in the city, leading to “waning enthusiasm in the face of a play for pay onslaught that included baseball, football, soccer, and basketball.”<sup>29</sup> Not only did Atlanta’s professional teams have to compete for attention with the city’s diverse and robust pre-major league sporting culture, which included

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<sup>27</sup> “Market Operations Research: The Demographic Characteristics of People Who Ride Buses to Atlanta Falcons Games,” Atlanta Falcons Folders, Professional Football Hall of Fame Research Library.

<sup>28</sup> William A. Schaeffer & Lawrence S. Davidson, *The Economic Impact of the Falcons on Atlanta, 1973* (Atlanta: Atlanta Falcons, 1973), 7-10; William A. Schaeffer & Lawrence S. Davidson, *The Economic Impact of Falcons on Atlanta, 1984* (Atlanta: Atlanta Falcons, 1984), 1-6, 9-12; “Sound Off: Falcons Attendance,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 1, 2000, 4D.

<sup>29</sup> “Atlanta No Windfall for Sports Ventures,” *UPI Report*, June 7, 1968: Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium (Subject Folder 1 of 4), Kenan Research Center.

such popular regional spectacles as college football, golf, auto racing, and professional wrestling. Atlanta's new franchises also had to compete with one another for the discretionary dollars of the region's discerning consumers, who, whether native or newcomer, demonstrated little fealty to the city's new professional teams.

The Braves' April 1965 opening weekend at Atlanta Stadium offered a preview of the consistent competition that Atlanta's professional teams faced from the region's traditional sporting culture. On April 9, 1965, Atlanta hosted its first event at their new municipally financed stadium, a pre-season exhibition baseball game between the Milwaukee Braves and the Detroit Tigers. The Friday night contest was the first in a three-game weekend series that served as detour on the Braves' trip back to Wisconsin from Spring Training in West Palm Beach, Florida. An injunction granted to the Milwaukee Board of Supervisors by a Wisconsin Superior Court in October 1964 prevented the Braves from moving their operations to Georgia until their local stadium lease expired after the 1965 season. The Braves' April 1965 exhibition games with the Tigers, the first of seven the Braves played at Atlanta Stadium that season, was the first opportunity fans in Georgia had to see the team play in person.<sup>30</sup>

The temporary legal set-back did little to dampen Atlanta's enthusiasm for their brand new major league team. The city celebrated the April 1965 preview of their forthcoming team in grand fashion, feting the Braves with a downtown parade that drew an estimated 60,000 people to Peachtree Street, a crowd twice as large as the one that welcomed President Johnson to the city the previous May. Atlanta and Fulton County schools dismissed their students two hours

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<sup>30</sup> William Leggett, "Atlanta You Can Have the Rest, Leave Us Eddie Mathews Our Hero," *Sports Illustrated*, April 26, 1965, 24-25.

early so that the children could secure spots for their families along the parade route.<sup>31</sup> More than 6,000 fans, hundreds of whom brought homemade signs, greeted the Braves' chartered flight from Florida. After an hour of signing autographs and posing for pictures with well-wishers, the players, coaches, and executives boarded convertibles and joined a fifty-car motorcade which snaked 11 miles north toward the Five Points along the city's recently expanded freeways.<sup>32</sup> Atlanta's soon-to-be-baseball team rolled down Peachtree Street behind a banner that read "Welcome South Braves," waving to fans while the Southern Belles accompanying them in the backseats tossed baseballs to children in the crowds. The clamor of the dozen marching-bands positioned throughout the motorcade drowned out the sound of a crowd that looked on with a hushed admiration.<sup>33</sup> "People were rather quiet," Furman Bisher wrote of the parade, "it was an almost reverent atmosphere."<sup>34</sup>

Ivan Allen described the arrival of the Braves and the opening of the new stadium as "the most important occurrence in Atlanta in 100 years" at a post-parade luncheon put on by the Braves 400, a new booster club made up primarily of "Big Mules."<sup>35</sup> The Mayor's triumphant statement echoed widespread civic sentiments that April. The day before the Braves' arrival, *Atlanta Journal* columnist Lee Walburn wrote that the Braves' exhibition game against the Tigers would be the "most significant premiere in Atlanta since *Gone with the Wind* debuted in

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<sup>31</sup> Hal Hayes, "It's Play Ball in New Stadium," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 9, 1965, 1, 17; Hal Hayes, "Sanders on Mound, Mayor 1<sup>st</sup> Hitter for Opening," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 9, 1965 53; "Braves Win in Atlanta's New Stadium," *Chicago Tribune*, April 10, 1965, C3; Joel Gross, interview by the author, August 15, 2013, 23 transcript.

<sup>32</sup> John Pennington, "Happy Atlantans Welcome Braves," *Atlanta Journal*, April 9, 1965, 1, 6; William Leggett, "Atlanta You Can Have the Rest, Leave Us Eddie Mathews Our Hero," *Sports Illustrated*, April 26, 1965, 24-25; "60,000 Fans Greet Braves in Atlanta," *The Washington Post*, April 10, 1965, 43.

<sup>33</sup> William Leggett, "Atlanta You Can Have the Rest, Leave Us Eddie Mathews Our Hero," *Sports Illustrated*, April 26, 1965, 24-25; "60,000 Fans Greet Braves in Atlanta," *The Washington Post*, April 10, 1965, 43.

<sup>34</sup> Furman Bisher, "A Snow Job, or, It was Love at First Sight," *Atlanta Journal*, April 10, 1965, 6.

<sup>35</sup> Jesse Outlar, "This is Atlanta Stadium's Debut," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 10, 1965, 15; John Pennington, "Happy Atlantans Welcome Braves," *Atlanta Journal*, April 9, 1965, 1, 6.

the city in December 1939 at the Loew's Grand Theatre." Editorialists for the *Atlanta Constitution* also likened the Braves' debut to the premiere of *Gone with the Wind*.<sup>36</sup>

The civic huzzahs continued during a drawn-out stadium dedication ceremony that preceded the Friday night exhibition game. The 37,232 fans in attendance, the largest crowd to watch a baseball game in Georgia history, applauded at the appropriate times from the baby-blue seats of the three-quarter filled stadium as an assortment of politicians, city fathers, and Braves representatives gave speeches commemorating the occasion. The patience of the fans was particularly noteworthy, considering that they had just navigated their way into a stadium whose environs looked more like an urban renewal construction site than a ballpark.<sup>37</sup> Stadium Authority officials warned fans to be cautious on the muddy, largely still-unpaved acres surrounding the facility because "they might stumble over some building materials that were still lying around the premises."<sup>38</sup> "Women in high heels struggled toward the stadium across the raw, soft dirt of a construction site," the *Journal's* Harry Murphy wrote of the scene outside Atlanta Stadium. As Murphy well knew, the members of Atlanta society whom he was describing had always been willing to endure temporary hardships to be part of a grand event.<sup>39</sup>

106,118 fans watched the Milwaukee Braves sweep the Tigers in the three game exhibition series at Atlanta Stadium that weekend. The Friday night crowd was larger than any that would see the Braves in Milwaukee that season.<sup>40</sup> "A funny thing happened on the way to

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<sup>36</sup> Lee Walburn, "'Atlanta' Braves Due for Stadium Inaugural," *Atlanta Journal*, April 8, 1965, 1; "Big League Atlanta Welcomes Braves," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 9, 1965, 4.

<sup>37</sup> Jesse Outlar, "Braves, Stadium: Plenty to Cheer About," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 13, 1965, 12; Harry Murphy, "Victory Christens Atlanta's Stadium," *Atlanta Journal*, April 10, 1965, 1.

<sup>38</sup> John Pennington, "Happy Atlantans Welcome Braves," *Atlanta Journal*, April 9, 1965, 1, 6; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 2; Joe Strauss, "Braves and Stadium Starred 25 Years Ago," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 13, 1991, 8.

<sup>39</sup> Harry Murphy, "Victory Christens Atlanta's Stadium," *Atlanta Journal*, April 10, 1965, 1.

<sup>40</sup> Bill Clark, "Cline's 9<sup>th</sup> Inning Dash Gives Braves the Sweep," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 12, 1965, 16; William Leggett, "Atlanta You Can Have the Rest, Leave Us Eddie Mathews Our Hero," *Sports Illustrated*, April 26, 1965, 24-26; "Braves Sweep Series in Atlanta," *Atlanta Journal*, April 11, 1965, 14; Jesse Outlar, "Teams Scores a

Milwaukee,” The *Atlanta Journal*’s Lee Walburn said of the weekend series, “Atlanta held a house-warming party that lasted three days and one-tenth of a million people showed up. With a critical nation ready to leap upon any show of apathy, the 106,118 Rebel-yelling baseball fans in Atlanta Stadium saw the Milwaukee Braves dust off the Detroit Tigers three straight games.”<sup>41</sup>

Despite these impressive box-office figures, Braves baseball was only the third best-attended sporting event in Georgia that weekend. On Sunday, 60,000 spectators watched Jack Nicklaus pull away from Gary Player and Arnold Palmer for a nine stroke victory in the final round of the Masters Golf Tournament in Augusta. A total of 150,000 fans attended the Masters over the course of the four day tournament. Twenty miles south of the Atlanta city limits in Hampton, Georgia, 50,700 stock car racing fans watched Indy Car legend A.J. Foyt take over for an ill Marvin Panch 212 of the 334 laps into the Atlanta 500. Foyt drove Panch’s 1965 Ford to victory and \$76,000 in prize money, more than three times the payday Nicklaus received for winning the Masters.<sup>42</sup> Atlanta’s support for the Braves in their first home weekend series demonstrated the capacity for major league sports to serve at least momentarily as a source of metropolitan cohesion, but not a unique ability among the region’s leisure activities to bring people together. That same weekend, larger crowds at the Masters and the Atlanta 500 demonstrated the hold that each of those events had over its respective enclaves of support.

“Our plate was too full all of a sudden,” *Constitution* editor Jim Minter said of the glut of professional sports teams which were jerry-rigged onto the city’s already robust sporting culture

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Victory,” *Atlanta Constitution*, April 16, 1965, 16; “Braves Boom...But Gate is Poorest Ever,” *Atlanta Constitution*, April 28, 1965, 35; Jesse Outlar, “No Boos, No Pickets...Just a Rebel Flag, Cheers,” *Atlanta Constitution*, April 16, 1965, 16

<sup>41</sup> Lee Walburn, “Tenth of a Million Fans Sees Braves Add Stripes on Tigers,” *Atlanta Journal*, April 12, 1965, 14.

<sup>42</sup> Bill Blodgett, “Panch, Foyt Share ‘Wheels’ In Speeding to ‘500’ Victory,” *Atlanta Constitution*, April 12, 1965, 11; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 4; Furman Bisher, “Love at First Sight for Braves in Dixie,” *The Sporting News*, April 24, 1965, 7; Jesse Outlar, “The Sport State,” *Atlanta Constitution*, April 13, 1965, 18.



in the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>43</sup> The greatest competitor for suburbanites' attention to Atlanta's full plate of professional sports may have been the region's frequently balmy weather. Outdoor leisure activities won a far greater share of suburban Atlantans' discretionary dollars than any of the city's professional sports teams. While Metropolitan Atlantans' embrace of outdoor leisure mirrored national trends, Georgia's climate enabled them to embrace such activities for a longer period each year than residents of most other states. Unlike northern cities with established professional sports franchises, Atlantans also lacked a commitment to their new teams that would have competed with their desire for outdoor recreation. As early as September 1967, *Constitution* sports editor Jesse Outlar cited outdoor activities as a reason for the Braves' sagging attendance. Outlar explained that most suburban families would rather partake in relaxing activities like picnicking, boating, or golfing than commute back into the city on a weekend to watch a mediocre baseball team.<sup>44</sup>

An explosion of family-oriented leisure infrastructure in suburban Atlanta in the 1960s and 1970s, both public and private, paralleled the emergence of Atlanta as a "Major League City." Boating and golfing, which appealed to both natives and newcomers, thrived as upscale leisure activities in metropolitan Atlanta. Each of the suburban counties made generous municipal investments in parks and recreation, providing their citizens with numerous well-maintained public facilities that skewed toward the upscale. It is unlikely that any previous population in human history had access to as many publicly supported golf courses, tennis courts, horse stables, or boathouses as suburban Atlantans in the 1970s. DeKalb County's Stone Mountain National Park and Cobb County's Six Flags over Georgia amusement park both drew far more visitors annually than any of the city's professional sports teams. During the 1970s,

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<sup>43</sup> Jim Minter, interview by the author, 16.

<sup>44</sup> Jesse Outlar, "Lost Tribe," *Atlanta Constitution*, September, 15, 1967, 1D.

Stone Mountain drew more than three million visitors each year. Six Flags over Georgia, which opened ten miles west of downtown Atlanta in 1964, drew more than two million visitors annually in the 1970s while charging customers three times as much for a day of amusement as the most expensive ticket to an Atlanta Braves game.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, local radio and television coverage of the Braves and Falcons made it possible for fans to follow both teams without the hassle of going to Atlanta Stadium. During the late 1960s, the Atlanta Braves had one of the largest radio and television networks in baseball. Atlanta's WSB, the largest station in Cox Communications' media empire, served as the flagship for a six-state, 39 affiliate radio broadcast network that brought all 162 Braves games to homes across the Southeast. Cox's WSB-TV televised 20 Braves games annually to 21 television affiliates across the same six Southeastern states. To avoid hurting the gate at Atlanta Stadium, all Braves television broadcasts on WSB were road games. Team management asserted that the Braves' modest television broadcast schedule would increase the novelty of attending a game at Atlanta Stadium. Moreover, Braves executives said that they were sensitive to the concerns of the South's many struggling minor league baseball franchises that frequent televising of big league games would put them out of business. The Braves earned \$2.5 million over four years from its initial radio and television contract with WSB. Two-thirds of the money WSB paid to the Braves went towards their radio broadcasting rights, which, due to the limits then placed on televising games, was a more lucrative revenue stream for Major League franchises.<sup>46</sup> Braves broadcasts, particularly the more novel televised games, received excellent ratings across the

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<sup>45</sup> Beau Cutts, "The Grass is Greener in the Suburbs," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 29, 1980, 1B; B. Drummond Ayres, "What's Doing in Atlanta," *New York Times*, July 24, 1977, XX7; Leon Lindsay, "Atlanta: More than a City to Just Pass Through," *Washington Post*, February 6, 1972, H8.

<sup>46</sup> Dick Grey, "Forget the Tube, Braves are Here," *Atlanta Journal*, April 12, 1966, 56; "Braves to Get \$2.5 Million," *Atlanta Constitution*, February 4, 1966, 14; "Pow-Wow October 1971," Atlanta Braves Folders, Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum Library; Charlie Roberts, "Image Boost Aim—McHale," *Atlanta Constitution*, December 2, 1965, 53.

region. In 1971, Cox asserted that Braves games had been the best rated television program each of the previous six summers in the Southeastern United States. Braves baseball drew an average of 56 percent of the region's television viewers during their summer evening telecasts. While that figure sounds impressive, the Braves' early televised games faced little competition from other stations during the year's most lightly watched and programmed broadcasting season.<sup>47</sup>

WTCG (later, WTBS), Ted Turner's local UHF channel turned cable television "superstation," outbid WSB for the Braves' television rights for the 1973 season, offering the club \$600,000 per year for five years to broadcast 60 Braves games, both home and away. The Braves' contract with WTCG tripled the number of Braves television broadcasts as well as their annual television revenue. The WTCG deal, which increased the Braves' annual local broadcast media contract to \$1,000,000, brought the club's television and radio revenue back up into the middle of the pack in Major League Baseball. During the early 1970s, the Braves' media contract lagged behind the increasingly lucrative television and radio deals being signed by most other franchises.<sup>48</sup>

WTCG's innovative use of new satellite transmission technology expanded the television reach of the Braves to cable subscribers across the South and, eventually, the United States. By the end of 1976, WTCG could be seen in 2 million homes. Within five years, its successor station, WTBS, could be seen in more than 40 million homes. The reach of Braves baseball, though, far exceeded the grip of the team on local fans. Braves attendance continued its nosedive in the mid-1970s, corresponding with the far-broader exposure it received on local television. Following the 1975 season, Turner purchased the cash-strapped Braves and began

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<sup>47</sup> Wayne Minshew, "Braves' Telecasts Earn No. 1 Rating in Southeast," *Sporting News*, February 5, 1972, 45.

<sup>48</sup> "Club by Club Air Income," *Sporting News*, March 24, 1973, 42; Francis Kinlaw, "The Franchise Transfer that Fostered a Broadcasting Revolution," *Society for American Baseball Research*, 2010. Accessed online on June 23, 2014: <http://sabr.org/research/franchise-transfer-fostered-broadcasting-revolution>.

broadcasting all 162 of their games on WTCG. The Braves continued to draw strong regional television ratings while attendance at the stadium failed to reach the modest annual threshold of one million spectators again until 1980.<sup>49</sup>

WAGA, Atlanta's CBS affiliate, broadcast Falcons games locally as part of CBS' share of the lucrative national television contract with the NFL, which earned each of the league's 26 franchises \$7.7 million annually starting in 1974. Until 1973, only the Falcons' road games were broadcast on CBS. Previously, the NFL required networks to black out games in a 75 mile radius of their city of origin, whether or not the game had sold out. In response to a threatened federal anti-trust intervention, the league agreed to broadcast games in and around their city of origin if the game had sold out 72 hours in advance of kickoff.<sup>50</sup> Falcons games in the early 1970s averaged a local Nielsen rating of 20, meaning that roughly one-half of television viewers in Metropolitan Atlanta during their Sunday afternoon broadcasts were tuned to their games.<sup>51</sup> Atlanta radio station WQXI served as the flagship of the Falcons Radio Network, which consisted of 40 stations across five Southeastern states and averaged approximately 200,000 listeners per game in the late 1960s.<sup>52</sup> While severely limited when compared to contemporary sports media coverage, radio and television broadcasts of the Braves and Falcons during the 1960s and early 1970s allowed local sports fans to always listen to and often watch the home teams in action.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Arthur T. Johnson, "Congress and Professional Sports: 1951-1978," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 445 (September 1979), 113-114.

<sup>51</sup> Wayne Minshew, "Braves' Telecasts Earn No. 1 Rating in Southeast," *Sporting News*, February 5, 1972, 45.

<sup>52</sup> William A. Schaeffer & Lawrence S. Davidson, *The Economic Impact of the Falcons on Atlanta*, 1973, 4, 15; "Falcons 1972 Media Guide," Atlanta Falcons Folders, Professional Football Hall of Fame Archives; "Atlanta Falcons Pre-Season Prospectus 1969," Atlanta Falcons Folders, Professional Football Hall of Fame Archives.

### **“Outside the Stadium, It’s the City.”**

Visitors to the Stadium found few amenities in its immediate environs. Most of downtown Atlanta’s restaurants, shops, and hotels were located more than a mile north of the Stadium, clustered around the Five Points district. “When will the physical needs of stadium visitors be accounted for?” Charles E. Zink of Atlanta wrote to the *Constitution* in March 1967. He feared that the absence of nearby eateries and lodging would deter visitors from making return visits to the Stadium. “When visitors come to see a ball game in our beautiful stadium from other sections of our state or from sister states, North and South Carolina, Florida, Alabama, and other states and see the condition of the few remaining stores on Georgia Avenue right next to our beautiful stadium what do you think is their reaction?” he wrote.<sup>53</sup>

By the late 1960s, the southern sections of the CBD, which stood between Atlanta Stadium and the Omni, had deteriorated from the bustling Whiteboard-Hall shopping district of a decade earlier into a languishing, largely abandoned commercial zone patronized primarily by the impoverished African American residents of the surrounding neighborhoods. Rich’s, the city’s most glamorous department store, hung on in a depleted form in the neighborhood, but virtually every other major retailer in the southern CBD had disappeared as the area became predominately African American.<sup>54</sup>

Located on the southern edge of the CBD, Atlanta Stadium’s proximity to some of the city’s most impoverished and high crime neighborhoods deterred many potential suburban patrons from attending events at the facility. In a general sense, the demographic transformation of Atlanta proper in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly its CBD and the residential neighborhoods that surrounded it, deterred white suburbanites from patronizing commercial areas and

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<sup>53</sup> “Hotels Near Stadium,” *Atlanta Constitution*, March 18, 1967, 4.

<sup>54</sup> Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 160.

entertainments that required social encounters with large numbers of African Americans. Between 1960 and 1980, Atlanta was transformed from a city whose population was slightly less than two-fifths African American to a city that was two-thirds African American.<sup>55</sup> More specifically, the proximity of Atlanta Stadium to the volatile Summerhill neighborhood stoked suburban fears about the safety of attending a Braves or a Falcons game.

Five days before the Falcons played their first regular season home game, a civil disturbance erupted in Summerhill, the city's largest in six decades. Though minor in comparison to the urban insurrections that engulfed other American cities the previous three summers, the Summerhill Riot accentuated fears among metropolitan area residents about the stadium's environs. On September 6, 1966, inhabitants of the predominately African American Summerhill neighborhood protested the police shooting of a robbery suspect in the area. The demonstration escalated into a riot, as many of the estimated one-thousand protestors began overturning cars and hurling rocks as the ranks of riot-gear clad Atlanta police officers and Georgia state troopers on the scene swelled into the hundreds.<sup>56</sup>

Mayor Allen and two dozen allies from the black clergy waded into the middle of the crowd and tried to defuse the situation. Allen and Ralph Abernathy took to a loudspeaker and encouraged the protestors to clear the usually busy Capitol Avenue thoroughfare and follow them to the nearby stadium parking lot for a grievance meeting. Moving the protestors to the stadium parking lot would have also helped Allen assert greater control over the crowd, as one-

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> "15 Injured as Hundreds of Negroes Riot, Toss Rocks at Police, Smash Cars here," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 7, 1966, 1, 12; Reese Cleghorn, "Allen of Atlanta Collides with Black Power and White Racism," *New York Times*, October 16, 1966, 251; Tom Dunkin, "Allen and Jenkins Blame SNCC," *Atlanta Journal*, September 7, 1966, 1, 16; Orville Gaines and Raleigh Bryans, "2 Officials Pledge to Take Firm Action," *Atlanta Journal*, September 7, 1966, 1, 16; Paul Hemphill, "Pop Bottles, Bricks Fly in Troubled Area Here," *Atlanta Journal*, September 7, 1966, 1, 16; Gary Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 344-350; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 61-73.

hundred additional shotgun-bearing state patrolmen and dozens of off-duty Atlanta police officers were hidden from view inside the stadium and awaiting the mayor's orders. The crowd, which had been aroused by Stokely Carmichael and the local SNCC leadership, shouted down the idea and began jeering the Mayor and the ministers. The demonstrators surged forward and started rocking the police car on which Allen stood back and forth, knocking him to the ground. When Allen regained composure, he ordered the re-agitated crowd dispersed. Police fired warning shotgun blasts and deployed canisters of teargas, breaking up the unruly gathering. While SNCC claimed widespread police brutality during the riot, Allen complimented his police force for their restraint in Summerhill.<sup>57</sup>

The dispersal of the crowd from Capitol Avenue did not mean the end of the urban unrest in Summerhill. Despite the presence of hundreds of Atlanta police and state troopers for the next two nights, looters devastated many of the remaining businesses in the Summerhill area while motorists on nearby roadways faced a barrage of bricks and stones. A group of young men viciously beat a WSB reporter and camera operator covering an Allen-organized grievance meeting at Calvary Baptist Church the evening of the riot. The Summerhill Riots were the most destructive incidence of racial violence in Atlanta in sixty years, leading to 73 arrests and more than two-dozen injuries.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid; "15 Injured as Hundreds of Negroes Riot, Toss Rocks at Police, Smash Cars here," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 7, 1966, 1, 12; "Atlanta Arrest Sets Off Riot," *Boston Globe*, September 7, 1966, 1; Gary Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 344-350; Paul Hemphill, "Pop Bottles, Bricks Fly in Troubled Area Here," *Atlanta Journal*, September 7, 1966, 1, 16; Reese Cleghorn, "Allen of Atlanta Collides with Black Power and White Racism," *New York Times*, October 16, 1966, 251; Dick Hebert, "In the Middle of Mob—The Mayor," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 7, 1966, 1; "Defendants in Riot Cases Fined in Municipal Court," *Atlanta Journal*, September 7, 1966, 1.

<sup>58</sup> Bill Winn, "'You Should've Seen It, Man... It was a Bad Scene,'" *Atlanta Journal*, September 7, 1966, 13; "15 Injured as Hundreds of Negroes Riot, Toss Rocks at Police, Smash Cars here," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 7, 1966, 1, 12; Dick Hebert, "In the Middle of Mob—The Mayor," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 7, 1966, 1; "Defendants in Riot Cases Fined in Municipal Court," *Atlanta Journal*, September 7, 1966, 1; Gary Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 344-350; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 61-73; "15 Injured as Hundreds of Negroes Riot, Toss Rocks at Police, Smash Cars here," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 7, 1966, 1, 12;

Several days after the Summerhill riot, another civil disturbance took place just to the east of the Stadium in the Bedford-Pine neighborhood. Provoked by the murder of a black teenager by a middle-aged white man, two weekend nights of rioting led to 90 arrests. Mayor Allen, whose family had personally consoled the murdered teenager's mother and offered a \$10,000 reward in the case, tried to talk down the crowd from violence both evenings while angry protesters screamed in his face. The disturbance in Bedford-Pine ended as quickly as it started when police arrested the assailant, who was later convicted of first-degree murder.<sup>59</sup> The following summer, another disturbance in Southwest Atlanta, this time in the Dixie Hills neighborhood, emerged just blocks from Atlanta Stadium. On the afternoon of June 19, 1967, a white shopkeeper shot and killed a black man he accused of trying to rob his store. That evening, bricks, bottles, and Molotov cocktails rained down on the police who remained on the scene after the shopkeeper was arrested. The rioters were soon dispersed with teargas and eight people were arrested. Concerns about the safety of Atlanta Chiefs soccer fans leaving a game at Atlanta Stadium led police to detour traffic away from the four block area at the core of the disturbance, which was a common route to the South Expressway from the stadium parking lot.<sup>60</sup>

While minor by standards of racial violence in other cities, the proximity of these events to the Stadium was uncomfortably close for many suburbanites. It stoked existing fears in the outlying counties that Atlanta was not only unsafe but that much of the city had descended into

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"Carmichael May Face Insurrection Charge," *Atlanta Journal*, September 8, 1966, 1, 8; Keeler McCartney, "Carmichael Arrested on Riot Charges in Raid on Snick Office," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 9, 1966, 1.

<sup>59</sup> Don Winter, "Boulevard Riot Area Opened for Traffic," *Atlanta Journal*, September 12, 1966, 1, 10; Orville Gaines, "Gunshot Survivor Picks Out Photo," *Atlanta Journal*, September 14, 1966, 1; Orville Gaines, "Couple Held Here In Boulevard Death," *Atlanta Journal*, September 13, 1966, 1; "Fire Bombs Exploded in Boulevard Violence," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 12, 1966, 1, 7; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 61-73.

<sup>60</sup> Joe Brown and Duane Riner, "Negro Killed, 3 Shot in Dixie Hills; Mayor Declares Emergency," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 21, 1967, 1, 8; Joe Brown and Duane Riner, "Dixie Hills Quiet Under Late Curfew," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 22, 1967, 1, 17; "Mob in Atlanta Stone Police After Speech by Carmichael," *Cleveland Press*, June 20, 1967, 1; Don Winter and David Nordan, "Rocks, Bottles Fly at Policemen Here," *Atlanta Journal*, June 22, 1967, 1; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 61-73.



lawlessness. It also led many white suburbanites to conflate urban unrest with the city's rising crime rate, transforming two of the era's distinct urban concerns into a pathologized and racialized leviathan. In the years following the Summerhill Riot, numerous incidents in the neighborhoods surrounding Atlanta Stadium contributed to the widespread unease about the facility's surroundings. As War on Poverty spending in the adjoining Model Cities area failed to meet the needs of its predominately poor and African American residents, crime rose dramatically in neighborhoods which had been fractured by slum clearance and stadium development during the 1950s and 1960s. Car break-ins and muggings were well-known potential hazards for visitors to the stadium in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly for those motorists that parked on the surrounding streets rather than paying for a spot in the stadium lot.<sup>61</sup>

An August 1979 *Atlanta Journal* report on security at Atlanta Stadium tried to reassure fans that they were safe attending games, despite the stadium's proximity to some of the city's most dangerous neighborhoods amidst a record crime wave in the city. Atlanta tallied the nation's highest per-capita homicide rate for the fifth time in eight years in 1979 with a record 368 unlawful killings (51.0 per 100,000 citizens). During every game, the article assured fans, twenty-five Atlanta police officers patrolled the Stadium itself while thirty Georgia State Troopers, thirty-five armed private security guards, and a team of plainclothes Atlanta police officers patrolled the Stadium's environs. Not coincidentally, the story was published soon after

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<sup>61</sup> Keeler McCartney, "Violence at Stadium Brings Warnings," *Atlanta Constitution*, December 2, 1970, 6A; Bill Montgomery, "Police Step Up Stadium Force," *Atlanta Journal*, August 22, 1979, C1, C6; Sam Hopkins and Barry Henderson, "Foot Patrol at Stadium is Ordered," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 9, 1973, 1A, 15A; Tom Henderson and Art Harris, "Fence Studied for Stadium Parking Lots," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 15, 1973, 1A, 2A; Bernard Headley, *The Atlanta Child Murders and the Politics of Race* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998), 59; At an Atlanta Chamber breakfast in early 1976, a Chamber member asked new Braves owner Ted Turner what he planned to do about the frequent break-ins and muggings in the stadium parking lot. Turner deflected the question with humor, stating that he would run shuttle buses during games for criminals from the stadium parking lot up to the affluent neighborhoods of the city's northside. Then, the criminals could burglarize the rich people's homes in peace while the rich people enjoyed the baseball game in safety ((see Bob Hope, *We Could've Finished Last without You* (Atlanta: Longstreet Press, 1991), 82.))

a rash of car break-ins and muggings of Braves fans, most of which took place in private parking areas outside the stadium lot.<sup>62</sup>

The dangers of parking outside the stadium lot were made evident years earlier on one of the most high profile nights in Falcons' history: November 30, 1970, the first time that Atlanta hosted ABC's *Monday Night Football*. As usual, the stadium lot was filled to capacity for a Falcons home game, leading many of the remaining fans who traveled by car to seek out parking on a nearby street or in one of the many informal lots in the adjacent neighborhoods. Rarely did Falcons fans park in these high crime areas at night, though, leading the club to more than double the size of its stadium area security detail for the game. While the Miami Dolphins defeated the Falcons 20-7 on national television, looters broke into dozens of automobiles parked outside the stadium lot. Two cars parked on streets adjacent to the stadium were set on fire. Fans reported two armed robberies and five separate assaults that took place as they returned to their cars after the game's midnight conclusion. All of this transpired despite an unprecedented police presence in the area before, during, and after the game. Captain M.G. Redding of the Atlanta Police, who led the stadium security detail that evening, assured fans that those who parked in the 4,000 spot stadium lot or the 17,000 spectators who shuttled into the stadium on the Falcons Flyer faced no such incidents.<sup>63</sup>

When reflecting on the safety of Atlanta Stadium's environs, many diehard Braves and Falcons fans insist that they personally were not intimidated by the area, but that many other potential patrons felt that fear. Former Braves beat writer Wayne Minshew emphasized the

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<sup>62</sup> Bill Montgomery, "Police Step Up Stadium Force," *Atlanta Journal*, August 22, 1979, C1, C6; "Metropolitan Atlanta Crime Commission: 1975-1979" (Metropolitan Atlanta Crime Commission: Atlanta, GA, 1980), 1-6, Metropolitan Atlanta Crime Commission (Subject File), Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Georgia; Metro

<sup>63</sup> Keeler McCartney, "Violence at Stadium Brings Warnings," *Atlanta Constitution*, December 2, 1970, 6A.

significant police and private security presence both inside and outside the stadium during games.<sup>64</sup> Beginning on the stadium's opening night in 1965, Atlanta police patrolled the stadium parking lot on foot to "prevent car looting" while officers on motorcycle trolled the surrounding neighborhoods on the lookout for trouble.<sup>65</sup> Minshew stressed that most crimes committed against fans in the vicinity of Atlanta Stadium happened to "people who parked away from the stadium, where they did not have to pay and where security did not exist," noting that "it takes only one incident to create a feeling of fear or dread."<sup>66</sup>

Longtime Braves fan Alan Morris stated that he had "no safety concerns about attending games at the Stadium during the 60s and 70s." Like many other stadium regulars, though, Morris admitted that his views were far from the norm. "There is a significant suburban population in Metro Atlanta who live 'Outside the Perimeter (OTP)' who often complain in loud voices about 'crime in Atlanta,' who largely avoided events in downtown Atlanta, including sporting events." Morris noted the high incidence of panhandlers in downtown Atlanta during this era, but said that a large police presence downtown during sporting events helped to maintain order.<sup>67</sup> "Safety was mostly a perception issue," Braves fan Karl Green recalled, "but with small crowds, and large parking lots on the edge of a down-at-the-heels section of town, folks just felt insecure." He, too, stressed that most personal and property crimes committed against Braves fans involved those who parked outside the stadium lot in the surrounding neighborhoods.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Wayne Minshew interview by the author July 1, 2013, 50 transcript.

<sup>65</sup> "37,232 Watch Braves Cage Tigers, 6-3," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 10, 1965, 1, 16.

<sup>66</sup> Wayne Minshew interview by the author, 50.

<sup>67</sup> Alan Morris, interview by the author, August 13, 2013, 3 transcript.

<sup>68</sup> Karl Green, interview by the author, August 13, 2013, 24, 27 transcript.

The most infamous violent crime that took place in the environs of Atlanta Stadium did in fact happen in the stadium parking lot: the October 1973 armed robbery and shooting of *Constitution* sports editor Jesse Outlar as he returned to his car following a Falcons game.<sup>69</sup> Outlar, the *Constitution's* sports editor since 1957, was attacked as he left the stadium around two hours after a Falcons defeat. He had just finished filing his column on the game by phone from the press box.<sup>70</sup> A young black male approached Outlar and asked him for a ride as he walked to his car in the deserted stadium parking lot. When Outlar refused, the young man pulled a pistol out of a paper bag and shot the sportswriter twice in the torso. The assailant took Outlar's briefcase, which was later found a few blocks south of the Stadium, and ran towards the Summerhill neighborhood.<sup>71</sup> The Outlar shooting was the third high-profile assault in the stadium area in less than two months. Three nights earlier, Braves assistant public relations director Jim Schultz had been mugged in the stadium lot. In mid-August, a fan sitting in the stands during a Falcons preseason football game was struck in the leg by a stray bullet. Investigators determined that the shot had been fired from outside of the stadium.<sup>72</sup>

Atlanta police arrested a DeKalb County teenager named Carl Henry for the Outlar shooting. Henry was already in custody on an aggravated assault charge, the victim of which was the primary witness against him in the Outlar case. Minutes after the Outlar shooting, Henry had allegedly pointed a gun at the middle-aged man as he stood on the porch of his Capitol Avenue home. The Summerhill resident had gone outside after hearing the gunshots and saw Henry, who had once dated his daughter, running from the direction of the stadium while trying

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<sup>69</sup> Jim Minter interview by the author July 9, 2013, 17-18.

<sup>70</sup> Jesse Outlar, "The Non-Spectaculars," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 8, 1973, 1D.

<sup>71</sup> Jim Gray, "Jury Deadlock Brings Outlar Case Mistrial," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 15, 1974, 6A; "Youth is Suspected in Atlanta in Sports Editor's Shooting," *New York Times*, October 9, 1973, 34.

<sup>72</sup> Harry Henderson, "Jesse Outlar Wounded by Gunman at Stadium," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 8, 1973, 1A, 12A.

to eject the cartridge from his pistol.<sup>73</sup> Nine days after the incident, the sixteen year-old was indicted for armed robbery and aggravated assault in the Outlar case as the *Constitution* sports editor lay in critical condition at Piedmont Hospital. Henry's legal defense, engineered by city councilor Marvin Arrington, one of the city's most prominent black attorneys, focused on Outlar's failure to pick Henry's mugshot out of a lineup. Outlar's inability to identify Henry led to a hung jury and the declaration of a mistrial in the case, despite his conviction for the other aggravated assault charge.<sup>74</sup> Outlar recovered from the incident, returning to work in early 1974, but suffered from nerve damage, bowel perforations, and recurrent internal hemorrhaging as a result of his wounds. One of the bullets remained lodged in Outlar's back for the rest of his life.<sup>75</sup>

"The first responsibility of government is public safety," the *Journal* editorialized the day after the shooting, "The city of Atlanta is not doing its job as long as the stadium area is unsafe even two hours after a major event there."<sup>76</sup> Outlar's own paper, the *Constitution*, noted that the shooting was "by no means the first assault in the stadium parking lot" and reflected broader social pathologies in a city where "random assaults have become a common practice."<sup>77</sup> "There is an awful irony in the fact that Jesse Outlar was shot just outside the stadium," Outlar's colleague Reg Murphy wrote, since "a hundred times he talked and wrote about the stadium and

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<sup>73</sup> Sam Hopkins and Barry Henderson, "Foot Patrol at Stadium is Ordered," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 9, 1973, 1A, 15A; "Youth Charged with Shooting Sports Editor," *Atlanta Daily World*, October 17, 1973, 1; Orville Gaines, "Outlar Wounded, Gunman Hunted," *Atlanta Journal*, October 8, 1973, 1A, 6A; Jim Gray, "I Cannot Identify Suspect, Outlar Says," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 15, 1974, 6A.

<sup>74</sup> Jim Gray, "I Cannot Identify Suspect, Outlar Says," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 15, 1974, 6A; Jim Gray, "Jury Deadlock Brings Outlar Case Mistrial," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 15, 1974, 6A; "Outlar Rules Out Youth as Suspect," *Atlanta Journal*, October 9, 1973, 1A.

<sup>75</sup> Jim Gray, "I Cannot Identify Suspect, Outlar Says," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 15, 1974, 6A; Jim Gray, "Jury Deadlock Brings Outlar Case Mistrial," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 15, 1974, 6A.

<sup>76</sup> "A Brutal Assault," *Atlanta Journal*, October 9, 1973, 14A.

<sup>77</sup> "Stadium Violence," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 9, 1973, 4.

how it promoted racial integration. It was the only place where the races got together and had fun.”<sup>78</sup>

Maynard Jackson latched onto the Outlar shooting as an issue during the 1973 mayoral runoff, as it provided him with a high-profile example of the crime epidemic that he accused incumbent mayor Sam Massell of allowing to fester in black neighborhoods, particularly in the Model Cities neighborhoods that surrounded Atlanta Stadium. Jackson said that incidents like the Outlar shooting were products of the “\$36 million heroin industry” that was thriving in predominately black neighborhoods like Summerhill. Citing the Outlar case, Jackson said inaction on street crime was greatly accentuating the flight of white residents from the city.<sup>79</sup>

Stadium Authority officials responded by adding more lighting to the stadium lots. The Falcons doubled the size of their security force inside and outside the stadium to nearly 300, approximately 75 of whom were Atlanta Police officers. Additionally, the Falcons extended the hours of their security forces until all team representatives, journalists, and automobiles left the lot. City police responded by making Atlanta Stadium its own precinct and designating its environs as a permanent walking beat. Talk of building a fence around the stadium parking lot was quickly shelved after the Stadium Authority decided it would lead to severe traffic bottlenecks before and after games.<sup>80</sup> Despite these measures, fans remained skeptical of the stadium’s security. At the next Falcons’ home game, fans made ten separate reports of car

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<sup>78</sup> Reg Murphy, “Who’s Ready to Stop the Violence?” *Atlanta Constitution*, October 9, 1973, 4A.

<sup>79</sup> Joe Ledlie, “Jackson Says Massell Allowed Outlar Attack,” *Atlanta Journal*, October 8, 1973, 1; “Stadium Crime,” *Atlanta Journal*, October 10, 1973, 4A.

<sup>80</sup> Orville Gaines, “Outlar Wounded, Gunman Hunted,” *Atlanta Journal*, October 8, 1973, 1A, 6A; Sam Hopkins and Barry Henderson, “Foot Patrol at Stadium is Ordered,” *Atlanta Constitution*, October 9, 1973, 1A, 15A; Sam Hopkins, “Stadium Crime Curbs Expected,” *Atlanta Constitution*, October 12, 1973, 8A; Tom Henderson and Art Harris, “Fence Studied for Stadium Parking Lots,” *Atlanta Constitution*, October 15, 1973, 1A, 2A.

break-ins, a total that city police said was, as always, significantly smaller than the actual number of incidents that took place around the stadium that afternoon.<sup>81</sup>

The *Constitution's* Tom Henderson and Art Harris reported on the fear of Falcons fans leaving the stadium that afternoon. After the game, they overheard one woman saying to another woman “let’s see if we can get up enough guts to walk out in the parking lot.” Falcons season ticket holder Wayne Elliott told the reporters that he only felt safe walking back to his car “if I stay with a group.” An unnamed fan they spoke with told the reporters that he was “mad as hell” about Outlar, “But after they catch the guy they’ll let him go so what difference does it make any way,” expressing a sentiment demonstrative of many suburbanites view of crime in Atlanta.<sup>82</sup>

The Outlar shooting, *Constitution* editor Jim Minter recalled, was not a turning point in the public perception of the stadium since “everybody knew that the stadium was not adjacent to a really great neighborhood.” Instead, it highlighted the hazards that came with attending a game at Atlanta Stadium. Incidents like the 1973 Outlar shooting, though, “tended to make suburban people think twice,” he said.<sup>83</sup> Braves Vice President Dick Cecil admitted to reporters that there was only so much the teams could do to protect their fans, because “outside the Stadium, it’s the city,” a place that many metropolitan area residents preferred to avoid.<sup>84</sup>

While many suburban Atlantans questioned the safety of the stadium’s environs, the men of color who played professional sports in Atlanta were frequently given good reason to question their own safety in a city whose police department had come to be seen by many black residents as a draconian, occupying force in their neighborhoods. The brutal August 1971 beating of

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid; Sam Hopkins and Barry Henderson, “Foot Patrol at Stadium is Ordered,” *Atlanta Constitution*, October 9, 1973, 1A, 15A.

<sup>82</sup> Tom Henderson and Art Harris, “Fence Studied for Stadium Parking Lots,” *Atlanta Constitution*, October 15, 1973, 1A, 2A.

<sup>83</sup> Jim Minter interview by the author, 17-18

<sup>84</sup> Barry Henderson, “Jesse Outlar Wounded by Gunman at Stadium,” *Atlanta Constitution*, October 8, 1973, 1A, 12A.

Atlanta Braves' black Dominican star Rico Carty by three Atlanta police officers demonstrated to the city's professional athletes that even wealthy and famous people of color were subject to such atrocities in the "City Too Busy to Hate." Carty, who had spent more than a decade with the Braves' organization, was part of a cadre of Latino standouts on Atlanta's roster during the late 1960s and early 1970s that also included Orlando Cepeda and Felipe Alou.<sup>85</sup> The Dominican outfielder was one of the era's best hitters, earning the NL's batting championship in 1970. He was also a fan favorite in Atlanta, beloved both for his on-the-field theatrics and the many hours he spent with fans signing autographs, taking pictures, and chatting about the game. The local press nicknamed him "Beeg Boy," an exaggeration of the way he said "big boy," the sobriquet by which he addressed almost everyone he met.<sup>86</sup>

Carty and his brother-in-law, Carlos Ramirez, were beaten by three Atlanta police officers, two of whom were off-duty at the time, in the early morning hours of August 24, 1971. The Braves outfielder was returning home from the barbeque restaurant he had recently opened near Oglethorpe University, northeast of downtown Atlanta. The assault took place after Carty and Ramirez got into a traffic dispute with two intoxicated off-duty Atlanta police officers near the North Avenue/Georgia Tech exit on the city's North Expressway. A patrolling police officer pulled up to the simmering altercation, recognized the two officers, and proceeded to join them in assaulting Carty and Ramirez. The on-duty officer pummeled Carty repeatedly with a slapjack, resulting in permanent damage to his right eye.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Charlie Roberts, "Braves Have the Latin Look," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 6, 1969, 1D.

<sup>86</sup> Wayne Minshew, "Atlantans Up in Arms at Carty Snub," *Sporting News*, May 30, 1970, 12; Hank Aaron & Furman Bisher, *Aaron*, (New York: Crowell, 1974), 199; Wayne Minshew, "Shoe Salesman in Deep Shock; Carty Buys 25 Pairs at a Clip," *Sporting News*, July 22, 1967, 20.

<sup>87</sup> "Carty: Beating Caused Eye Damage," *Chicago Tribune*, August 27, 1971, C6; Hugh Nations, "Jury to Hear Carty Affair," *Atlanta Journal*, August 28, 1971, 1; Hank Aaron & Furman Bisher, *Aaron*, 199, 210-1; "Highlight," *Sports Illustrated*, July 3, 1967, 12; Milo Hamilton, *Making Airwaves: 60 Years at Milo's Microphone* (Champaign, IL: Sport Publishing, 2006), 142-143; Hank Aaron, *I Had a Hammer*, 185, 215.



Carty and Ramirez were arrested on the scene, but the truth of the matter soon became evident. More than a dozen witnesses interviewed by investigators stated that the officers had been the aggressors in the incident. The on-duty officer had lied to investigators, telling them he did not know the two off-duty men when in fact they had been longtime acquaintances. Charges against Carty and Ramirez were quickly dismissed. The focus of the investigation turned to what Mayor Sam Massell described as the “blatant brutality” of the three officers. Massell called for the officers not only to be fired, but held criminally liable for their actions.<sup>88</sup> Police Chief Herbert Jenkins referred to the incident as the “worst case of misconduct of a police officer I’ve ever seen.”<sup>89</sup> The three officers were all fired from their jobs and later pled guilty to charges ranging from public intoxication to assault. Such incidents served, more broadly, to increase distrust of the Atlanta police in black neighborhoods even as those communities called for better police protection amid rising crime.<sup>90</sup>

### **“The Dinosaur on Capitol Avenue”**

However one got to the stadium, the actual experience of attending a game there discouraged many potential spectators from patronizing it with any frequency. Fans and players alike complained about its steamy conditions during the summer. “It was so hot and humid that a player could wear himself down by the Fourth of July,” Hank Aaron said of playing a season’s worth of home dates at Atlanta Stadium.<sup>91</sup> Baseball and football players complained that the efforts of the multi-purpose stadium’s management to accommodate both franchises as well as special events ensured that the playing surface and amenities at Atlanta Stadium deteriorated

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<sup>88</sup> Alex Coffin and Sam Hopkins, “3 Policemen Suspended in Carty Fight,” *Atlanta Constitution*, August 26, 1971, 1; “Free Rico in Assault,” *Chicago Defender*, September 25, 1971, 41; “Atlanta Suspends Police in Carty Case,” *Boston Globe*, August 26, 1971, 40; Hugh Nation, “Jury to Hear Carty Affair,” *Atlanta Journal*, August 28, 1971, 1; Alex Coffin, “Chief Raps 3 Policeman,” *Atlanta Constitution*, August 27, 1971, 1.

<sup>89</sup> Alex Coffin, “Chief Raps 3 Policeman,” *Atlanta Constitution*, August 27, 1971, 1.

<sup>90</sup> “3 Cops Fired in Beating of Carty,” *Chicago Defender*, September 4, 1971, 1.

<sup>91</sup> Hank Aaron, *I Had a Hammer* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 186.

quickly into one of the worst in each of their respective leagues.<sup>92</sup> Like many multipurpose municipal stadiums built during the 1960s, Atlanta Stadium aged quickly. In an unflattering 1984 *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* feature on the facility entitled “The Dinosaur on Capitol Avenue,” longtime stadium manager T. Herman Graves described how the 51-week “hurry up construction” on Atlanta Stadium, as well as Georgia’s hot and humid climate, had made its interior prematurely grimy. “Concrete concourses that might have been sealed were not,” Graves said, and “thus all kinds of gum and ground in dirt” from years earlier caked the walkways of the stadium.<sup>93</sup>

Fans who had been awed by Atlanta Stadium’s modern design in the mid-1960s described it as lacking in personality, intimacy, and amenities by the early 1970s.<sup>94</sup> “I just felt so far removed from the field of play,” Falcons center Jeff Van Note said of the one game he attended as a spectator at the Stadium, the 1972 Peach Bowl.<sup>95</sup> Baseball fans sitting in high-priced box seats complained frequently about their distance from the diamond, but their gripes were minor when compared to those of football fans at Atlanta Stadium, virtually none of whom had a great view of the action. When reconfigured for football, the seats at the 50 yard line, traditionally the premier seats at a football game, were further from the field than any other ground level seats. Moreover, they were situated so close to the ground that the players standing on either sideline blocked these fans’ view of the game. Sold as “Partially Obstructed,” the seats near the 50 yard line were the cheapest in the stadium. The seats closest to the action at a

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<sup>92</sup> Tommy Nobis interview by the author, July 22, 2013, 47; Jack Wilkinson, “Goodbye Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, September 15, 1996, 13E; Ron Reed interview by the author, July 8, 2013, 36; Lou Kirouac interview by the author, August 13, 2013, 30, 31; Jeff Schulz, “Final Home Opener at Stadium Brings Falcons Memories,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, September 7, 1991, D3

<sup>93</sup> Bud Shaw, “The Dinosaur on Capitol Avenue,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 26, 1984, 1C.

<sup>94</sup> Carole Ashkinaze, “The State of the Stadium,” *Atlanta Journal*, August 13, 1978, B1; Karl Green interview by the author, August 16, 2013, 27.

<sup>95</sup> Bud Shaw, “The Dinosaur on Capitol Avenue,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 26, 1984, 1C.

Falcons game were those that encircled the end zone, which were traditionally among the lowest priced tickets at football stadiums.<sup>96</sup>

At the time of the stadium's opening, most fans expressed awe over the brightly lit new ballpark, its novel baby blue seats, and its streamlined, space-age design, which bore more than a passing resemblance to the critically-acclaimed architecture of Los Angeles' recently erected Dodger Stadium (1962).<sup>97</sup> "Most fans impressions of Atlanta Stadium were in comparison to Ponce De Leon Park," Karl Green said, referring to the well-worn East Atlanta ballfield that served as the Crackers' home from 1907 to 1964. "The intimacy everyone craves today wasn't considered desirable in 1966. Atlanta Stadium was new. It was clean. It looked modern. There were large parking lots and it was easy to get to from the mostly new interstates."<sup>98</sup> Alan Morris recalled that the foremost complaint about Atlanta Stadium in its early years was its concessions, its "bad hotdogs and stale buns with always empty mustard dispensers."<sup>99</sup>

"Sure we were impressed with a brand-new ballpark," Braves announcer Milo Hamilton said, remembering the first time he saw Atlanta Stadium in 1965. At the time, Hamilton said, "people didn't realize that multi-purpose stadiums would become cookie cutters," across the urban landscape of North America.<sup>100</sup> "No one seemed to particularly mind the distance from the field," Karl Green recalled, citing a frequent fan complaint about the stadium in later years. If anything, the standardization of urban renewal-era, multi-purpose facilities like Atlanta Stadium and the distance they created between spectators and performers seemed modern, while the proximity of the players to the fans at a brick-and-mortar ballpark like Poncey seemed like a

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<sup>96</sup> John Logue, "Football in the Round," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, September 4, 1966, 16; "Falcon Facts January 1971," Atlanta Falcons Folders, Professional Football Hall of Fame Research Library.

<sup>97</sup> "Bright, Colorful Ballpark," *Sporting News*, April 3, 1965 44; Johnny Tallant interview by the author, August 18, 2013, 24.

<sup>98</sup> Karl Green, interview by the author, 27.

<sup>99</sup> Alan Morris interview by the author, 2.

<sup>100</sup> Milo Hamilton interview by the author, July 11, 2013, 32.

crass relic from a more informal, less sophisticated era.<sup>101</sup> As the public started to recoil from the scale and approach of many urban renewal projects, a broad and similar contempt emerged across the country for many of the features of larger-than-life multi-purpose stadiums, particularly the physical distance they so often established between fans and the on-field action. The Braves responded to this emerging desire for ballpark intimacy in 1972 by moving box seats 12 feet closer to the field. The Falcons had no leeway to alter the physical configuration of their playing surface, forcing their paying fans to endure some of the worst vantage points in major professional sports.<sup>102</sup>

Atlanta Stadium's failure to become a celebrated local venue for mass gatherings extended beyond the Braves and Falcons. The initial stream and, later, trickle of special events booked for the stadium proved largely unsuccessful. From the outset, Atlanta Stadium failed to consistently draw large enough crowds to its special events to be considered a regional "meeting place" or "center of gravity," as its boosters had envisioned.<sup>103</sup> Braves, Inc., which controlled the scheduling of all stadium events other than professional football, tried to fill as many of the venue's dates as possible during the lame duck calendar year that spanned from April 1965 until April 1966. The Braves played seven exhibition games at Atlanta Stadium that season, which drew approximately 211,000 spectators.<sup>104</sup> The Atlanta Crackers, who became the Braves' 'AAA' International League affiliate in 1965, left Ponce De Leon Park for their sixty-fifth and final season of professional baseball. Before relocating to Richmond, Virginia in 1966, they helped to break-in the brand new stadium, playing in front of crowds just as tiny and apathetic as

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<sup>101</sup> Karl Green interview by the author, 27-28.

<sup>102</sup> Frank Hyland, "It's a Whole New Ball Game," *Atlanta Journal*, March 28, 1972, 2D.

<sup>103</sup> "A Spectacular Weekend," *Atlanta Journal*, April 9, 1965, 18.

<sup>104</sup> Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 173; "Braves Frolic in Stadium Again, 24,436 Fans Watch 5-1 Wrecking," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 15, 1965, 14; "Braves Take Fifth at New Home, 6-4," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 22, 1965, 12.

the ones that saw them play their last seasons in the Southern Association at Poncey. The Braves drew more fans to Atlanta Stadium in seven dates than the Crackers did in seventy-four.<sup>105</sup>

The Stadium Authority maintained the footprint of professional football in Atlanta during the 1965 season by scheduling a pair of August exhibition games. The preseason matchups, both of which featured the last place Pittsburgh Steelers, drew a combined 86,000 fans. The impressive attendance figures were buoyed by the presence of two of the NFL's top quarterbacks on the opposing teams: the Baltimore Colts' Johnny Unitas and Minnesota Vikings' Fran Tarkenton, who had starred several years earlier for the Georgia Bulldogs.<sup>106</sup> In late 1965, the Stadium Authority tried to convince the AFL and the NFL to host their first Super Bowl in Atlanta, but the stadium's relatively limited seating capacity of 57,000 prevented it from receiving serious consideration for the January 1967 game. Other warm-weather cities, such as Los Angeles, New Orleans, and Miami, became frequent Super Bowl sites. The first nine Super Bowls were held in those three cities, each of which had a stadium that could accommodate more than 75,000 spectators. Despite its mild winters, Atlanta never hosted a Super Bowl at its "Miracle" Stadium.<sup>107</sup>

Similarly, the Stadium Authority tried to organize a Christmas-Day college football game. Southern cities had hosted major post-season bowl games for decades, most notably Dallas' Cotton Bowl, Miami's Orange Bowl, and New Orleans' Sugar Bowl. In its aspiration to host both a professional football team and a major bowl game, Atlanta's civic leadership exhibited its perpetual desire to possess the signature amenities of both the north and the south.

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<sup>105</sup> "Atlanta's Last Season," *The Sporting News*, May 1, 1965, 20; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 173; Bill Clark, "Cline's 9<sup>th</sup> Inning Dash Gives Braves the Sweep," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 12, 1965, 16; William Leggett, "Atlanta You Can Have the Rest, Leave Us Eddie Mathews Our Hero," *Sports Illustrated*, April 26, 1965, 24-26; "Braves Sweep Series in Atlanta," *Atlanta Journal*, April 11, 1965, 14.

<sup>106</sup> Jack Williams, "Tarkenton's Raiders Ramble Early, Hold Steelers 31-21," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, August 15, 1965, 55; Jesse Outlar, "Johnny U Spells SRO," *Atlanta Constitution*, August 26, 1965, 49.

<sup>107</sup> "Atlanta Asks for Superbowl," *Washington Post*, November 24, 1966, M4.

The Stadium Authority worked closely with CBS to arrange the details of the game. In exchange for a late afternoon Christmas timeslot, the network insisted that Atlanta organizers call the game the “Santa Claus Bowl.” The Southeastern Conference (SEC) made a conditional arrangement with bowl organizers to send one of its top teams annually to play a nationally ranked, at-large opponent in exchange for a \$200,000 payout, which would have made the game one of college football’s most lucrative post-season contests. In January 1965, CBS, the SEC, and the Stadium Authority brought their proposal for the game to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA).<sup>108</sup>

The NCAA deferred their application to create the “Santa Claus Bowl,” citing a hesitance among committee members to sponsor a game on Christmas, which “may be out of the question for some schools and be distasteful to some persons.”<sup>109</sup> Additionally, the NCAA disapproved of the central role that CBS played in concocting the new game. If approved, the NCAA feared, quiet presciently, that that other networks would campaign for their own made-for-television bowl games, threatening the amateur status of college football and lowering the quality of competition in bowl games.<sup>110</sup> While the Stadium Authority awaited final word on the Santa Claus Bowl, they convinced the organizing committee of the Coaches’ All-America East-West Football Game to relocate their event to Atlanta Stadium in 1966. A summer showcase for incoming AFL and NFL talent, the Coaches’ All-America Game had been played previously at Buffalo’s Works Progress Administration (WPA)-built War Memorial Stadium. The American Football Coaches

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<sup>108</sup> “Peach Bowl for Atlanta?” *Atlanta Constitution*, December 11, 1966, 4; Jack Williams, “Stadium Sure to Get ’65 Exhibition Games; Football Bowl Studied,” *Atlanta Constitution*, November 10, 1964, 1; Gordon S. White, “Network Urges Atlanta Contest,” *New York Times*, January 12, 1965, 43; Bill Clark, “ABC Network Enters Atlanta Bowl Picture,” *Atlanta Constitution*, January 13, 1965, 32; Mickey McCarthy, “CBS Eyes Atlanta Stadium For Santa Claus Bowl Site,” *Atlanta Constitution*, January 11, 1965, 11.

<sup>109</sup> Gordon S. White, “Network Urges Atlanta Contest,” *New York Times*, January 12, 1965, 43.

<sup>110</sup> Mickey McCarthy, “CBS Eyes Atlanta Stadium For Santa Claus Bowl Site,” *Atlanta Constitution*, January 11, 1965, 11; “Proposed Santa Claus Bowl Faces Lengthy NCAA Study,” *Atlanta Constitution*, January 12, 1965, 12; Cooper Rollow, “NCAA Defers Bowl Application by CBS,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 12, 1965, B1.

Association (AFCA), the game's sponsor, believed that Atlanta's larger metropolitan population, modern stadium, and traditional support for college football would increase attendance significantly. Instead, the Coaches' All-America Game flopped in Atlanta, drawing significantly smaller crowds than they had in Buffalo. Every year, the game was played on an unbearably hot and sticky June night in Georgia. After four seasons, the AFCA moved the game to Lubbock, Texas, a metropolitan area one-quarter the size of Greater Atlanta.<sup>111</sup>

Following a review process that lasted several years, the NCAA approved a college bowl game for Atlanta, albeit with a much different plan than the original "Santa Claus" proposal. The NCAA approved the creation of the "Peach Bowl," a game that was to serve as a fundraiser for the Georgia Lions Club's Lighthouse Foundation, which conducted charitable work on behalf of the state's deaf and blind populations.<sup>112</sup> First played in December 1968, the Peach Bowl was strictly a second-tier bowl game, pitting also-rans from the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) and the SEC against one another in contests that typically drew small crowds and were played, more often than not, in drizzly, near freezing conditions. Initially, the Peach Bowl was not even played at Atlanta Stadium. The first three Peach Bowl games were played at Georgia Tech's Grant Field due to conflicts between the Bowl's schedule and the final stretches of the Atlanta Falcons' seasons. The regionally-based television broadcasts of the early Peach Bowls reached few homes outside of the Southeast while the payouts the schools received for participating

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<sup>111</sup> "All-American Football Game Shifts to Atlanta in 1966," *New York Times*, September 2, 1965, 26; Mickey McCarthy, "Beban's Last Second Bombshell Explodes West to 34-20 Win Before Only 21,120," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 29, 1968, 10; Mark Ford, "The Coaches' All-America Game," *The Coffin Corner* 25 No. 2 (2003), 15-18.

<sup>112</sup> "Lions Approve Bowl Project," *Atlanta Journal*, June 14, 1965, 18; "New Yorker Reveals Plans for Bowl Game in Atlanta," *Atlanta Journal*, June 8, 1965, 20; Wayne Minshew, "No Ruling on Atlanta Bowl Expected Until Next Year," *Atlanta Constitution*, January 6, 1966, 43.

barely covered their travel expenses. The game teetered on the brink of bankruptcy for much of the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>113</sup>

Atlanta Stadium hosted a number of non-sporting events during its lame duck year, most of which failed to meet their organizers' expectations for attendance. None of the events cemented for Atlanta Stadium a status as the region's premiere venue for large gatherings, calling into question almost immediately the stadium boosters' belief that the facility would serve as a social and cultural center of gravity for the metropolitan area. Grace Methodist Church, one of the area's largest congregations, rented Atlanta Stadium for a sunrise Easter 1965 service, which was co-sponsored by 150 churches from throughout the metropolitan area. The event, which featured testimonials by New York Yankees star Bobby Richardson and Minnesota Vikings quarterback Fran Tarkenton, drew 18,000 worshippers, far short of the organizers' goal of 25,000.<sup>114</sup>

The most successful non-sporting event held at Atlanta Stadium during the lame duck season was a Beatles concert. On August 18, 1965, the band played for thirty-four minutes to a

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<sup>113</sup> David Davidson, "The State of the Peach," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, January 2, 1977, 2-D; Jim Minter, "50 Years of Furman," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 14, 2000, 2H; Gary Stokan interview by the author, July 10, 2013, 11-13, transcript; Jim Minter, interview by the author, July 9, 2013, 16-17, transcript; "Lions Approve Bowl Project," *Atlanta Journal*, June 14, 1965, 18; "New Yorker Reveals Plans for Bowl Game in Atlanta," *Atlanta Journal*, June 8, 1965, 20; Wayne Minshew, "No Ruling on Atlanta Bowl Expected Until Next Year," *Atlanta Constitution*, January 6, 1966, 43; Mike Fish, "The Peach Bowl: Robust Peach owes its rescue to chamber," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, December 26, 1999, 7G; Al Thomy, "Peach Bowl or Mud Bath? No Problem for Ole Miss," *The Sporting News*, January 15, 1972, 20; Georgia Institute of Technology: Department of Athletics, *Engineering for Success: Georgia Tech Football Media Guide 2011*, (Atlanta: Georgia Institute of Technology, 2011), 160-165. The Peach Bowl's fortunes began to turn around in 1985 when the Atlanta Chamber took control of the game's management, stabilizing its shaky finances and securing the game a spot in the newly constructed Georgia Dome in 1992. In 1993, Atlanta-based Chik Fil-A became the game's title sponsor, providing it with the financial clout to offer the multi-million dollar payouts to participating school. In short order, the Chik Fil-A Peach Bowl secured a plum New Year's Eve night television spot on ESPN and agreements with the SEC and ACC to send top-caliber teams to play in the game. During the late 1990s and 2000s, the Peach Bowl became one of college football's best attended bowl games, enjoying a streak of seventeen consecutive sellouts, and highest rated televised bowl games, frequently earning the most viewers for a non-Bowl Championship Series game.

<sup>114</sup> "Sports Stars, Pastor Speak Easter at Atlanta Stadium," *Atlanta Constitution*, February 12, 1966, 6; Billie Cheney Lovell, "Let's Fill Stadium for Christ," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 3, 1966, 2; Margaret Hurst, "18,000 at Stadium Hail Resurrection," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 11, 1966, 1, 9.



crowd of 36,000 screaming fans on a soupy late summer night. Beatles Manager Brian Epstein told local reporters that the Beatles enjoyed their Atlanta performance more than any other show on the tour. To protect the grass playing surface, stadium officials sold tickets only in the stands. The distance between the audience and the stage enabled the Beatles to hear themselves play for the first time in months. While pleasing to the performers, this decision cut significantly into Braves, Inc.'s revenue for the evening, which they only began to count after doling out the Beatles' \$200,000 guarantee for the show.<sup>115</sup>

Stadium Authority-imposed restrictions on seating spectators on the playing field discouraged future concert promoters from renting out the venue. Aside from a Barbara Streisand concert in August 1966, the Stadium did not host another concert for the next five years. In June 1970, the Stadium hosted "Cosmic Carnival," a music festival which featured performances by such rock luminaries as the Allman Brothers Band, Mountain, and Traffic. Regulations on the event which included volume restrictions, a midnight curfew, and a requirement that fans remain in their assigned seats convinced the concert's promoters to seek out a different venue for future Atlanta-area rock festivals. For the remainder of the 1970s, Atlanta Stadium served as an occasional host for music festivals or major drawing acts, such as Elton John and Led Zeppelin, but it never became a regular part of the era's stadium rock touring circuit.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> "Beatles Perform in Atlanta," *New York Times*, August 19, 1965, 36; Dick Gray, "The Scream- One Gigantic Shriek," *Atlanta Journal*, August 19, 1965, 1, 12, 19; Walker Lundy, "1<sup>st</sup> Beatle Fans Arrive at 4 A.M.," *Atlanta Journal*, August 18, 1965, 1, 12; "Memories are Safe at Home in the Heart," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 27, 1996, 9-J; Dick Bowman, "Congratulations Atlanta!" *San Diego Union*, October 10, 1965, 1C.

<sup>116</sup> "Atlanta Stadium," *Setlist.FM*. Published on March 17, 2013. Accessed online on June 23, 2013: <http://www.setlist.fm/venue/atlanta-stadium-atlanta-ga-usa-13d6551d.html>; Patrick Edmondson, "Cosmic Carnival 1970," *The Strip Project*. Published on February 13, 2014. Accessed online on January 7, 2016: <http://www.thestriproject.com/cosmic-carnival-1970/>.

The most heavily promoted event at Atlanta Stadium during its lame duck year also drew its most disappointing crowd. An Emory undergraduate student named Remar Sutton decided in November 1965 that he wanted “to do something to show the world how most Americans feel” about the Vietnam War.<sup>117</sup> Working with a group of like-minded Emory students, Sutton organized an event called “Affirmation Vietnam,” a pro-war rally at Atlanta Stadium scheduled for Saturday, February 13, 1966. Organizers said the event would demonstrate that Georgians “cast an affirmative vote for the United States’ commitment in Viet Nam.”<sup>118</sup> In the lead-up to the event, the “Affirmation Vietnam” organization on the Emory campus, which by the time of the rally numbered in the hundreds, gathered signatures from Georgians expressing their support for American policy in Southeast Asia. Branches of “Affirmation Vietnam” sprung up on 52 other campuses across Georgia and commenced with their own signature gathering campaigns. By the time of the rally, 2S college students had collected the signatures of more than 200,000 Georgians in support of the Vietnam War.<sup>119</sup>

The local media promoted the “Affirmation Vietnam” event extensively and enthusiastically. Atlanta corporate sponsors provided the student-organization with generous contributions, enabling them to saturate radio and television with advertisements for weeks in advance of the rally. Bob Hope filmed a television special to promote the event, which was shown on stations across Georgia.<sup>120</sup> Former Vice President Nixon, in town the day before the rally for a Republican fundraising dinner, described “Affirmation Vietnam” as “one of the most

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<sup>117</sup> Wayne Kelley, “Thousands Gather for Viet Rally Here,” *Atlanta Journal*, February 12, 1966, 1, 8.

<sup>118</sup> John Askins, “50,000 Seen Backing War,” *Atlanta Journal*, February 11, 1966, 1, 8.

<sup>119</sup> Wayne Kelley, “Thousands Gather for Viet Rally Here,” *Atlanta Journal*, February 12, 1966, 1, 8; “50,000 Expected in Atlanta to Back War Policy Today,” *New York Times*, February 12, 1966, 10; Gene Roberts, “10,000 Rally in Atlanta to Back Vietnam Policy,” *New York Times*, February 13, 1966, 2.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

encouraging developments I have heard in my travels throughout this country.”<sup>121</sup> Atlanta newspapers provided “Affirmation Vietnam” with days of front-page coverage. The papers emphasized that the event was free, that free downtown parking and free shuttle buses would ferry people to the stadium, and that “Affirmation” organizers had put together an inspiring and entertaining program. Headliners included Hope, Anita Bryant, Georgia native and Secretary of State Dean Rusk, as well as Staff Sergeant Barry Sadler, fresh off the debut of his new single, “The Ballad of the Green Beret,” Billboard’s number one song of 1966, on the *Ed Sullivan Show*.<sup>122</sup>

“Affirmation Vietnam” organizers anticipated 50,000 attendees at the rally, but fewer than 15,000 supporters actually showed up on the continuously rainy February morning.<sup>123</sup> The two-hour event included brief speeches by virtually every major elected official in the state, abbreviated performances by the assembled celebrities, and the presentation of the 200,000 rain soaked signatures to South Vietnamese Ambassador Nguyen Duy-Lien.<sup>124</sup> Forty protestors from Atlanta’s nascent anti-war movement, representing nearly as many groups as there were demonstrators, marched the mile and a half from Atlanta University, a hot bed of civil rights activism, to Atlanta Stadium and picketed against the rally. The only person arrested at the event

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<sup>121</sup> Wayne Kelley, “Thousands Gather for Viet Rally Here,” *Atlanta Journal*, February 12, 1966, 1, 8; “50,000 Expected in Atlanta to Back War Policy Today,” *New York Times*, February 12, 1966, 10.

<sup>122</sup> Gene Roberts, “10,000 Rally in Atlanta to Back Vietnam Policy,” *New York Times*, February 13, 1966, 2; John Askins, “50,000 Seen Backing War,” *Atlanta Journal*, February 11, 1966, 1, 8; Wayne Kelley, “Thousands Gather for Viet Rally Here,” *Atlanta Journal*, February 12, 1966, 1, 8; ; Joe Brown and Margaret Hurst, “Viet Nam Rally to Pack City’s Stadium Today,” *Atlanta Constitution*, February 12, 1966, 1; “Plan ‘Affirmation: Viet Nam’ Rally in Atlanta,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 30, 1966, 2.

<sup>123</sup> John Askins, “50,000 Seen Backing War,” *Atlanta Journal*, February 11, 1966, 1, 8; Wayne Kelley, “Thousands Gather for Viet Rally Here,” *Atlanta Journal*, February 12, 1966, 1, 8; John Askins, “15,000 Wet Georgians Affirm Viet Nam Policy,” *Atlanta Journal*, February 13, 1966, 1, 18, 24; Joe Brown and Margaret Hurst, “Viet Nam Rally to Pack City’s Stadium Today,” *Atlanta Constitution*, February 12, 1966, 1; “Plan ‘Affirmation: Viet Nam’ Rally in Atlanta,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 30, 1966, 2.

<sup>124</sup> John Askins, “15,000 Wet Georgians Affirm Viet Nam Policy,” *Atlanta Journal*, February 13, 1966, 1, 18, 24; Don McKee, “Viet Policy Cheered in Big Atlanta Rally,” *Boston Globe*, February 13, 1966, 18; John Askins, “50,000 Seen Backing War,” *Atlanta Journal*, February 11, 1966, 1, 8; Wayne Kelley, “Thousands Gather for Viet Rally Here,” *Atlanta Journal*, February 12, 1966, 1, 8.

was an “Affirmation Vietnam” supporter who assaulted an anti-war demonstrator outside the Stadium.<sup>125</sup>

The most high-profile non-sporting event hosted by Atlanta Stadium during its first decade in operation was a Billy Graham Crusade in June 1973. While the local elites who organized the Crusade envisioned it as a socially unifying event, instead it laid bare the mounting racial and class divisions in the region. The six-night religious revival proved to be one of the most politically contentious in Graham’s seven decade-long ministry. The tensions which surrounded the event were a product not only of the era’s contentious national political culture, but also a metropolitan political culture in which every public matter renewed the local discourse on race. The Crusade was yet another attempt by Atlanta’s elite to foster social cohesion by bringing a prestigious event to the city. Instead, the Atlanta ’73 Crusade became a source of political and social conflict.

Local developer and sportsman Tom Cousins served as chairman of the Atlanta Crusade, which he proposed that Graham hold at his newly opened Omni Arena. While most corporate leaders that chaired Graham’s Crusades served primarily in a titular capacity, Cousins insisted on spending a significant amount of time and money boosting the event. He believed that the Crusade would foster a community-wide spiritual awakening, one that would ameliorate the tensions that had become evident in Metropolitan Atlanta’s corridors of power, its public spaces, and its resegregated neighborhoods and communities. In March 1972, Cousins spearheaded the formation of a bi-racial, denominationally diverse Crusade organizing committee that included representatives from African American, Evangelical, and mainline Protestant churches as well as Jewish synagogues. The organizing committee named newly elected Congressman and civil

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<sup>125</sup> Wayne Kelley, “Thousands Gather for Viet Rally Here,” *Atlanta Journal*, February 12, 1966, 1, 8; John Askins, ““Affirmation: Viet Nam’ Faces Pickets at Stadium,” *Atlanta Journal*, February 12, 1966, 1, 10.

rights leader Rev. Andrew Young its co-chair to demonstrate their commitment to making the Crusade a bi-racial gathering. The *Journal*, *Constitution*, and *Daily World* heaped praise on Cousins for his work on the Crusade while the Atlanta Chamber and Governor Jimmy Carter expended considerable resources helping him plan and promote the event.<sup>126</sup>

The outpouring of institutional support for the event convinced organizers to move the event from the 16,000 seat Omni to 57,000 seat Atlanta Stadium. The Stadium had held large religious gatherings on several previous occasions. A local council of Protestant churches had tried in the mid-1960s to make sunrise Easter services at the Stadium a local tradition, but failed to draw much interest. The most successful religious gatherings at the Stadium had been a pair of multi-day meetings of Jehovah's Witnesses that each drew in excess of 40,000 congregants.<sup>127</sup>

In the weeks before the Crusade, Graham's steadfast support for President Nixon galvanized opposition to the event from civil rights activists, including many leaders in the SCLC. Hundreds of predominately African American activists protested the Crusades, holding signs that accused Graham of shirking his responsibilities to the urban poor, criticizing his support for the death penalty, and challenging him to speak out against Nixon for the Watergate scandal. The Crusade's supporters portrayed their event as being above earthly politics. They defended Graham's record on civil rights, citing the desegregated Crusades he had been holding in the South since 1953 and his early support for Martin Luther King, Jr. They pointed out that

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<sup>126</sup> Steven P. Miller, *Billy Graham and the Rise of the Republican South* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 167-173; "Atlanta '73," Billy Graham (Personality File), Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Georgia; Gayle C. White, "Billy Graham Crusades," *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, October 4, 2013. Accessed on August 10, 2014: <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/arts-culture/billy-graham-crusades>.

<sup>127</sup> Colleen Teasley, "Witnesses Open Meeting," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 26, 1973, 1; Colleen Teasley, "Witnesses Start 5-Day Meeting Here," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 25, 1973, 10-A; "Braves Capture Division Crown, Playoff Will Start Here Saturday," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 1, 1969, 1; Steven P. Miller, *Billy Graham and the Rise of the Republican South*, 167-173.

many black ministers endorsed the event, including Martin Luther King, Sr., who appeared on stage at the Crusade.<sup>128</sup>

Approximately 228,000 people participated in the six-night Atlanta '73 Crusade. African Americans formed a conspicuously small minority on every evening. Graham estimated that Blacks constituted about five percent of Atlanta '73's attendees, a much smaller percentage of the crowd than at every other Crusade he held in the South during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Cousins blamed an ongoing strike by ATS bus drivers for the small number of African Americans in attendance.<sup>129</sup> Some Black pastors told Graham that many of their congregants did not attend the Crusade because they were fearful of being robbed if they left their homes at night.<sup>130</sup> Regardless of the reasons for the small African American turnout at the 1973 Crusade, the event failed to serve as a regionally unifying event and instead made the racial and cultural divisions in Metropolitan Atlanta more evident.

## **Conclusion**

By the mid-1970s, the collective shrug with which most metropolitan area residents had responded to both sporting and non-sporting events at Atlanta Stadium made it evident that the municipally financed facility had not become a regional "center of gravity." The response of Atlantans to their new stadium and their new home teams proved to be the archetypal metropolitan Sunbelt response to the arrival of professional sports in their cities. By putting professional sports in the service of lofty civic goals, elites in Atlanta and numerous other Sunbelt cities set themselves up for disappointments as grand as the enterprises they undertook on behalf of their communities. In the case of Atlanta, a passing civic elite adorned its city with

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<sup>128</sup> Steven P. Miller, *Billy Graham and the Rise of the Republican South*, 172-173

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 173-176.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

a set of cultural institutions they hoped would cultivate communal bonds and propel their community's rise to national prominence. Atlanta's city fathers expected their new stadium and their new teams to quickly emerge as community pillars, but none of the region's demographic or lifestyle clusters adopted the space or the teams that inhabited them. Instead, most metropolitan area residents preferred to partake in leisure and entertainments that took place within familiar spatial, cultural, and demographic confines.

## CHAPTER 7

### **“A Disappointing Success”: the Braves and Falcons at Atlanta Stadium, 1965-1976**

“On your next visit to a Braves game, take a look around the bleachers of Atlanta Fulton County Stadium. If your experience is typical, you will notice that fewer than one-fourth of the 57,000 rainbow colored seats are occupied,” the *Journal*’s Carole Ashkinaze wrote in a 1978 article, assessing the legacy of the city’s thirteen-year-old municipally financed stadium.<sup>1</sup> More than a decade into its run as a “Major League City,” Atlanta had failed to become a hotbed of enthusiasm for either of the stadium’s primary tenants. This chapter analyzes the failure of the Braves and Falcons to earn consistent support from the residents of Metropolitan Atlanta. While the previous chapter explored the broader social issues contributing to Atlanta Stadium’s failure to become a regional “center of gravity,” this chapter analyzes the experiences of the Braves, Falcons, and their respective fan bases at Atlanta Stadium during the 1960s and 1970s. Taken together, they serve as illustrative case studies for the failure of many of the professional sports franchises established in the Sunbelt during the late twentieth century to become treasured local institutions. Neither the Braves nor the Falcons became the durable sources of prestige and social cohesion that their civic boosters had envisioned.

In the decade between the Braves and Falcons arrival in Atlanta in 1966 and the sale of the financially struggling Atlanta Braves to Ted Turner after the 1975 season, Atlanta’s professional baseball and football franchises earned reputations for futility on the field and fan apathy in the stands. Both franchises gained national notoriety for their front-office

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<sup>1</sup> Carole Ashkinaze, “The State of the Stadium,” *Atlanta Journal*, August 13, 1978, B1.



mismanagement, discouraging area residents from supporting the consistently mediocre Braves and the consistently dreadful Falcons. Regardless of the teams' records, Metropolitan Atlantans proved to be a hard sell when it came to supporting the region's new MLB and NFL franchises. Relatively few newcomers to Atlanta, even those who were passionate sports fans, adopted the Braves or the Falcons as their primary sporting passion, preferring instead teams from their home regions. Relatively few natives traded in their traditional sporting passions for an abiding affection for either of Atlanta Stadium's tenants. Despite the Braves' substantial promotional efforts aimed at suburban families, the team failed to draw consistent support from suburban consumers, who, by and large, preferred spending their leisure time within the familiar, privatized, and demographically homogenous confines of the metropolitan area's outer ring. Football-mad Atlantans retained their affections for local college and high school teams rather than transferring them to the Falcons. For many working class African Americans, Atlanta Stadium served more as a site of labor than one of leisure. The Stadium was a significant low-waged employer in the predominately impoverished and African American neighborhoods just south of downtown. It became a contested space shaped by the competing interests of the Stadium's predominately African American workforce and its predominately white patrons. This chapter places the institutions that made use of the stadium in conversation with the diverse publics that largely rejected the stadium as a site of mass leisure.

The professional sports franchises which represented Atlanta failed to capture the public's interest or meet the civic elite's grand expectations. They proved an insufficient tie to bind the region's divergent communities together. Rather than alleviating Atlanta's social divisions, professional sports made them more evident, both locally and nationally, as a result of the intense media focus suddenly cast on the new "Major League City." The failures of

Atlanta's teams and the indifference of their prospective fan bases made professional sports in Atlanta a topic of ridicule both locally and nationally. Less than a decade after Atlanta's papers toasted their "Major League City," they spoke dismissively of the Southeast's first professional teams, rechristening their metropolis as "Loserville, U.S.A." The "Loserville" reputation remained the prevailing national media narrative for professional sports in the city for decades to come.

Atlantans in the 1960s and 1970s forged the quintessential Sunbelt response to the acquisition of these luxurious leisure amenities. Residents from diverse racial, social, and cultural backgrounds all proved to be discerning consumers of professional sports, unwilling to be manipulated by civic elites or team owners into supporting the local clubs. They refused to inconvenience themselves to support the subpar teams in their suddenly oversaturated market. While Atlantans displayed an admirable and rare degree of agency in their relationships with their local professional teams, the collective divestment of area residents from this potentially cohesive source of mass leisure served to strengthen existing cultural boundaries in the region.

### **The Perennially Underachieving Braves**

While Atlantans expected the expansion Falcons to struggle in their early years, they figured the star-laden Braves would start hoisting championship banners soon after they settled in at the stadium. The Braves looked like sure fire winners when they arrived in Atlanta, but they underachieved in their early years in the city. Atlanta inherited a talented, if aging Milwaukee Braves roster that included perennial all-stars Hank Aaron and Eddie Mathews, as well as a core of young standouts like Joe Torre, Felipe Alou, and Rico Carty. Baseball writers across the country considered the Braves, who contended for the pennant in 1965, one of the favorites to win the NL in 1966. Braves manager Bobby Bragan told reporters during Spring Training that

he expected his team to win the pennant. Team management relieved Bragan of his duties that August when the club failed to contend for a championship.<sup>2</sup> The 1966 Braves, like many subsequent Atlanta teams, combined great offensive prowess with poor pitching. The 207 homeruns hit by the Braves led the NL, but Atlanta pitchers' inability to prevent opposing clubs from generating similarly gaudy offensive numbers kept the club mired in mediocrity. Between 1966 and 1968, the Braves won roughly as many games as they lost and never seriously challenged for the NL pennant.<sup>3</sup>

The climate and topography of Atlanta exaggerated the strength of the Braves' offense and the weakness of their pitching. More than 4,000 feet above sea level, Atlanta was, at the time, the major league city situated at the highest elevation. The warm, thin air of a hot and humid Georgia summer caused balls to carry noticeably further at Atlanta Stadium than at other ballparks. Many pitchers claimed that the conditions at the stadium prevented their curveballs, sinkers, and sliders from moving properly. *Constitution* sportswriter Wayne Minshew popularized a nickname that Braves pitcher Pat Jarvis coined for the hitter-friendly ballpark: "The Launching Pad."<sup>4</sup> Many batters at Atlanta Stadium disregarded conventional baseball offensive wisdom to try to take advantage of its atmosphere. Rather than trying to hit line drives that dropped in among the fielders, players tried to hit the ball high into the air in the hopes that the elements would carry their fly balls over the fence. Frequently, Atlanta finished near the top

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<sup>2</sup> Jim Minter "Braves Among Favorites," *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution Magazine*, April 10, 1966, 9; Bobby Bragan, *You Can't Hit with the Bat on Your Shoulder*, (New York: Summit, 1992), 317-26; Walt Browning, "Bragan Waves '66 Flag," *Atlanta Journal*, April 9, 1966, 47; Wayne Minshew, "Joe Torre Signs, Sees Braves Flag," *Atlanta Constitution*, February 19, 1966, 41.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Stinson, "66 Braves Just a Start for Some," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 13, 2016, 3D.

<sup>4</sup> "Stars Agree-Stadium Tops," *Atlanta Journal*, April 9, 1965, 1; Joe Torre and Tom Verducci, *Chasing the Dream: My Lifelong Journey to the World Series* (New York: Bantam, 1997), 97; Ron Reed interview by the author, July 8, 2013, 36 transcript; "Braves Banner August 1984," Atlanta Braves Folders, Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum Library Wayne Minshew interview by the author July 1, 2013, 51 transcript.

of the NL in both homeruns and homeruns allowed. In 1973, the Braves became the first team in baseball history with three players to hit at least 40 homeruns in a single season.<sup>5</sup>

In 1969, the Braves made their only playoff appearance during their first 25 years in Atlanta, winning the newly formed NL Western Division. The emergence of Phil Niekro and Ron Reed as all-star caliber starting pitchers and the acquisition of future Hall of Fame reliever Hoyt Wilhelm boosted the Braves' pitching enough to make them a contender. A September surge helped the Braves build a lead in the Western Division that they never relinquished. Atlanta's moment of triumph proved short-lived, as the eventual World Champion New York Mets swept the Braves in three games in the inaugural National League Championship Series.

Following their 1969 divisional championship, the Braves spent the early 1970s mired in a mediocrity that resembled their early years in Atlanta. Once again, the Braves disappointed in the standings while posting superb offensive and dreadful pitching statistics. Contrary to local mythology, the Braves did not become a genuinely awful team until the summer of 1975, which prompted the *Constitution* to published its "Loserville, U.S.A." series. The 67 win Braves of 1975 finished 40 games out of first place and drew a mere 534,672 fans to Atlanta Stadium, the second worst total in all of baseball. It was not until 1976, though, the year that Ted Turner purchased the franchise, that the Braves began their period of greatest on-the-field futility. Atlanta finished in last place in 8 of the 15 seasons between 1976 and 1990, including four consecutive last place finishes between 1976 and 1979.

### **"Not Catching On Around Town"**

The disastrous 1975 season was hardly the starting point of the Braves' attendance problems. Fan apathy preceded the team's decline in the standings. The 1960s Atlanta Braves

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<sup>5</sup> Hank Aaron, *I Had a Hammer*, 181-186; "Braves Banner August 1984," Atlanta Braves Folders, Baseball Hall of Fame Archives.

drew middling attendance numbers, surprising the team's management as well as the civic elites who expected professional baseball to be an immediate and durable box office hit in the city. During the 1970s, the Braves became one of baseball's worst drawing teams, years before they established themselves as one of the league's worst performing teams.

Before the Braves even played their first official game in Atlanta, concerns emerged in the press about the team's attendance. The Braves had expected to sell 10,000 season tickets for their 1966 home slate, but in fact sold fewer than 3,000.<sup>6</sup> Team executives downplayed their disappointing sales numbers, noting that baseball clubs always sold far fewer of their 81-date season tickets than football teams, who sold most of their tickets through seven-game season passes. Braves officials asserted that wealthy patrons would buy large numbers of season tickets once the stadium club acquired a liquor license, which, the team argued, would make the ballpark a far more attractive place for local corporate leaders to entertain their guests. A lawsuit backed by the state's still-strong temperance lobby held up the issuance of the license until midway through the 1966 season. Contrary to the projections of team management, the privilege of buying cocktails at a members' only stadium bar inspired no uptick in the number of season tickets the team sold to its fans, affluent or otherwise. The Braves never sold more than 3,000 season tickets during the team's first decade in Atlanta.<sup>7</sup>

Atlanta consumers' unwillingness to invest in season tickets displayed a collective "show me" attitude toward the Braves, according to the *Sporting News*' Barney Kremenko. "They'll show up if the team is in the pennant race and to see the likes of Koufax and Mays," an unnamed local reporter told Kremenko, explaining that football was the only sport that inspired mass

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<sup>6</sup> "Atlanta Greets Braves with Downtown Parade," *Washington Post*, April 13, 1966, D3.

<sup>7</sup> "The Score in Atlanta: Football 45,000, Baseball 3,000," *New York Times*, April 24, 1966, 53.

devotion in the region.<sup>8</sup> The unnamed source proved prophetic, as the Braves' best drawing game in 1966 was a Tuesday night in August against the Los Angeles Dodgers which featured Sandy Koufax's only career start in Atlanta. 52,270 fans watched Koufax outduel the Braves' Denny LeMaster 2-1, more fans than had attended their previous four home games combined.<sup>9</sup>

Atlantans' willingness to turn out in large numbers on a weeknight to see Koufax, but not in any similar fashion for a typical Braves home game, exemplified the relationship that many area residents developed with the local professional sports teams. Tens of thousands of metropolitan-area residents went to great expense and trouble to be spectators at events they regarded as novel or prestigious, but few chose to become regular patrons of the area's professional teams. Atlanta consumers' response to the Braves in 1966 anticipated the fickleness that area residents would display towards all of the city's franchises over the next decade.

Atlanta sports fans displayed surprising nonchalance toward the Braves even in their first full week in town. A near capacity crowd of 50,671 fans attended the Braves' first official game at Atlanta Stadium on April 12, 1966, the vast majority of whom stayed until well after midnight to see them lose to the Pittsburgh Pirates in thirteen innings. Earlier that day, 150,000 people watched the Braves parade through downtown as the centerpiece of the city's annual Dogwood Festival.<sup>10</sup> The next evening, nearly 40,000 fewer fans attended the Braves second home game.<sup>11</sup> Pittsburgh manager Harry Walker called the poor turnout by Atlanta's "so-called fans, one of the most disgusting things I've ever seen. There's no excuse for the way their fans didn't turn out

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<sup>8</sup> Barney Kremenko, "'Show Me,'—Atlanta Decision on Braves," *Sporting News*, May 14, 1966, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Wayne Minshew, "54,000 See L.A. Edge Braves, 2-1," *Atlanta Constitution*, August 10, 1966, 1.

<sup>10</sup> Ted Simmons, "50,671 Fill Stadium, Usher City into Majors," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 13, 1966, 1; Wayne Minshew, "Braves Fall to Pirates 3-2 in 13," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 13, 1966, 1; "City Going All Out Today As Its Braves 'Play Ball,'" *Atlanta Constitution*, April 12, 1966, 1; Tom McCollister, "Atlanta Prepares for Big 'World Premier,'" *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 3, 1966, 61.

<sup>11</sup> Tim Tucker, "Q&A/Bill Bartholomay," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 12, 2006, 1D.

tonight.”<sup>12</sup> The *Constitution*’s Furman Bisher agreed, writing that “it cut deeply that only 12,721 people in the South cared enough to come out and sit at the bedside of the Braves.”<sup>13</sup>

One week earlier, the Braves had drawn surprisingly small crowds for an exhibition series against the New York Yankees, baseball’s most successful and high profile franchise. As recently as eight years earlier, a survey of Crackers fans indicated that the Yankees were Atlanta’s second favorite Major League team behind the Milwaukee Braves, the professional club with whom the Crackers were then affiliated. Approximately 50,000 fans attended the three-game April 1966 series, leaving Atlanta Stadium nearly two-thirds empty for the Friday evening and weekend afternoon games. Two hours west in Augusta, the Masters Golf Tournament drew more than three times as many paying spectators that same weekend.<sup>14</sup> Braves executive John McHale dismissed the sparse crowds at the exhibition games as meaningless, but the small turnout to see Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris play in person portended the box office struggles the franchise endured even in their early years in Atlanta.<sup>15</sup>

Anthony Monahan of the *Chicago Tribune* characterized the 1966 Braves as a “disappointing success,” not only because of their fifth place finish, but also because they drew significantly smaller crowds than the team had during its first year in Milwaukee. The 1966 Atlanta Braves finished sixth out of ten teams in the National League in attendance with 1,539,801 spectators, well short of the 1953 Milwaukee Braves’ then-record breaking draw of 1,826,397.<sup>16</sup> Even when Atlantans turned out in large numbers for the Braves, they were notably

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<sup>12</sup> Tom McCollister, “Atlanta Fans Lashed by Pirates’ Walker,” *Atlanta Journal*, April 14, 1966, 45.

<sup>13</sup> Furman Bisher, “The Law Hath No Mercy,” *Atlanta Journal*, April 14, 1966, 45.

<sup>14</sup> “Yankees Rebel Nip Braves, 5-4,” *Atlanta Constitution*, April 9, 1966, 13; “Go Braves!” *Atlanta Constitution*, April 8, 1966, 4; Walt Browning, “Yanks Edge Braves 2-1,” *Atlanta Journal*, April 10, 1966, 10; Tom McCollister, “The Yankees are Coming,” *Atlanta Journal*, April 7, 1966, 7; “An Analysis of Local Attitudes Toward the Atlanta Baseball Club,” Atlanta Crackers Folders, Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum Library.

<sup>15</sup> “The Braves Don’t Panic Over Fans,” *Atlanta Journal*, April 9, 1966, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Anthony Monahan, “Atlanta: The Southern City that Isn’t,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 21, 1966, 133.

passive spectators. “The fans didn’t know what to do at a ball game,” Braves catcher Joe Torre wrote of Atlanta’s fans in his memoir, referring specifically to a late July night in 1966 when fans filled the stadium to see Willie Mays play in person. “At a game against the Giants, there were 45,000 fans in the stands and you could hear a pin drop.”<sup>17</sup>

Despite the weekday presence of nearly two hundred thousand workers in downtown Atlanta, relatively few patronized Braves games. By the second half of the 1967 season, fewer than 4,000 fans attended many of the seventh place team’s weeknight dates. When the Braves drew little more than 20,000 fans to their 1968 home opener, the *Constitution*’s Furman Bisher asked his readers why “32,000 people decided they could pass up opening night this year that couldn’t pass it up two years ago?”<sup>18</sup> Readers wrote Bisher with numerous explanations, ranging from the game coinciding with Good Friday to the uncertain political situation in Atlanta in the aftermath of the King assassination. A self-described “thrifty housekeeper” named H.C. Fargeson explained that she “would be more inclined to go out and watch them lose if they had not upped the admission price.” Bisher concluded that “life in 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> place,” referring to the Braves’ finishes the two previous years, “was not catching on around town,” noting that nearly 200,000 spectators saw fit to attend the Masters the following weekend.<sup>19</sup>

One year later, Atlanta fans proved comparably fickle, even in the team’s moment of post-season glory. On September 30<sup>th</sup>, 1969, 46,357 fans erupted in wild celebration at Atlanta Stadium as they watched the Braves clinch the NL Western Division Championship. Several thousand fans stormed the field and streamed it with toilet paper while the team retreated to the locker room to douse each other and Mayor Allen with champagne. Car horns blared and

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<sup>17</sup> Bob Hope, *We Could’ve Finished Last without You* (Atlanta: Longstreet Press, 1991), 8.

<sup>18</sup> Furman Bisher, “Behold, the Enlightenment,” *Atlanta Journal*, April 30, 1968, 1D.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*



revelers howled in downtown Atlanta into the early hours of the next morning. The Braves had treated Atlanta to its first pennant race, ascending from fourth place to first in the month of September by winning 17 out of their last 20 games. When the Braves returned from a road trip on September 24th in first place, more than 5000 fans greeted them at the airport.<sup>20</sup> Two and a half weeks earlier, the fourth-place Braves had drawn as few as 6,317 fans at home as the team appeared headed toward a third straight season of declining attendance.<sup>21</sup> “We might have been out here with 2000 people in the stands booing us tonight. Even if we had the same overall record,” Braves third baseman Ken Boyer said of the sudden enthusiasm for the Braves as they competed for a divisional championship.<sup>22</sup>

The Braves hosted the Mets for National League Championship Series (NLCS) games on Saturday October 4<sup>th</sup> and Sunday October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1969. Baseball fans filled downtown Atlanta’s restaurants and hotels, finally fulfilling civic leaders’ predictions that the Braves would draw large numbers of out-of-town visitors into the center city. More than 50,000 fans attended each of the Braves’ post-season games at Atlanta Stadium, but three football games in the region, two of which drew larger crowds than either NLCS game, drew a great deal of attention away from the city’s first baseball playoff series. On Saturday, Georgia Tech hosted a home game at Grant Field that drew a standing-room-only crowd of 50,224 spectators. On Sunday, Georgia Tech housed the NLCS-displaced Falcons at Grant Field, setting up temporary bleachers around the stadium to accommodate the 57,806 fans who purchased tickets to see Atlanta play the defending NFL champion Baltimore Colts. The state’s best attended sporting event that weekend took

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<sup>20</sup> “*Braves Banner* September 1964,” Atlanta Braves Folders, Baseball Hall of Fame Archives; Wayne Minshew, “Even the Mayor Doused in Atlanta Celebration,” *Sporting News*, October 18, 1969, 22; Jim Minter, “Braves Bubble Home in West,” *Atlanta Journal*, October 1, 1969, 1A; “Cheers! Braves Knock Off Redlegs to Take Western Division Pennant,” *Atlanta Constitution*, October 1, 1969, 1D.

<sup>21</sup> Howard Bryant, *The Last Hero*, 346-349; Wayne Minshew interview by the author, 49; Charlie Roberts, “This One ‘Biggest,’” *Atlanta Constitution*, October 1, 1969, 3D.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

place 70 miles west in Athens as the University of Georgia drew a capacity crowd of 59,442 to its home game against South Carolina.<sup>23</sup>

The run to the NL West championship helped the Braves boost their attendance in 1969 to 1,458,320, nearly 300,000 more fans than they drew in 1968 but nearly 100,000 fewer than the 1966 club. The Braves' improved gate in 1969 proved to be a positive hiccup on a long-term downward trajectory in their attendance. The fifth place 1970 Atlanta Braves drew 1,078,848 spectators, a 27 percent decline from the previous season. In 1971, the Braves hosted their 1,000,000<sup>th</sup> fan of the season in their next-to-last home game, enabling the franchise to cross the era's most modest threshold of acceptable MLB attendance. In the strike-shortened 1972 season, the Braves drew slightly more than 750,000 fans, beginning a streak of eight consecutive seasons when the Braves failed to draw one million spectators (1972-1979). The Braves drew an average of 798,448 fans per season during the 1970s, the lowest total in MLB.

"You could buy a general admission ticket, walk in, and go sit behind home plate because the team wanted the TV cameras to see people at the game," longtime Braves fan David Hewes said, describing the atmosphere at Atlanta Stadium during the 1970s.<sup>24</sup> "It's hard to describe," Braves Outfielder Dale Murphy said of his first experience playing at Atlanta Stadium in September 1976, "because no one draws crowds like that now. I was playing in front of more people in Triple-A," the top level of minor league baseball.<sup>25</sup> "There were always plenty of hecklers. Because the crowds were so small, a leather-lunged guy could really get heard by his target," Braves fan Mike Holcomb recalled.<sup>26</sup> "There were as many people pulling for the

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<sup>23</sup> Teague Jackson, "Braves Try Again after Wipe Out," *Atlanta Journal*, October 6, 1969, 1D; "Playoffs Give Atlanta a \$7.5 Million Boost," *New York Times*, October 7, 1969, 54; Sam Hopkins, "Wild Weekend Here for Fun and Games," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 4, 1969, 1D; Furman Bisher, "Operator, Dial a Miracle," *Atlanta Journal*, October 6, 1969, 1D.

<sup>24</sup> David Hewes interview by the author, December 9, 2011, 9 transcript.

<sup>25</sup> "Goodbye Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, September 15, 1996, 13E.

<sup>26</sup> Mike Holcomb, interview by the author, September 6, 2016, 51 transcript.

opposing team as the Braves at the stadium,” Braves fan Alan Morris said, recalling the large number of transplants who resided in the metropolitan area but only attended Braves games when their hometown team visited.<sup>27</sup>

“You could hear the echoes in a mostly empty stadium, especially in ’75, which was by far the worst year ever,” *Constitution* sportswriter Wayne Minshew recalled.<sup>28</sup> The 1975 Braves were a genuinely horrendous team, finishing 40 games out of first place. Moreover, the club lacked the drawing power of Hank Aaron, who had been traded to Milwaukee in the off-season. Accordingly, Braves attendance dwindled to 534,672, the second worst total in baseball. The 1975 Braves threatened to draw fewer than 1,000 fans to Atlanta Stadium on several muggy August weeknights. Finally, they reached that dubious distinction on Monday September 8<sup>th</sup> against the Houston Astros, when a mere 737 fans made it out for the game. Braves officials blamed the especially tiny crowd on the Alabama-Missouri college football matchup being broadcast on ABC that same evening.<sup>29</sup>

“I think the tone changed in part because the Braves performance was so poor in the mid-to-late 70s. Atlanta was used to having winning baseball teams with the Crackers,” Braves fan Karl Green recalled.<sup>30</sup> The Atlanta Crackers minor league baseball team had won 9 Southern Association championships between the end of World War II and the 1966 Braves arrival in Atlanta. They had drawn consistently large crowds to East Atlanta’s Ponce De Leon Park during the 1940s and 1950s. By the time the Braves arrived, though, support for the Crackers had waned, reflecting a broader decline in the popularity of minor league baseball which is often attributed to the expansion of MLB and the emergence of television as a rival entertainment. In

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<sup>27</sup> Alan Morris interview by the author, August 13, 2013, 2 transcript.

<sup>28</sup> Wayne Minshew interview by the author, 49.

<sup>29</sup> Robert A. Fields, *Take Me Out to the Crowd: Ted Turner and the Atlanta Braves* (Atlanta: Strode, 1977), 55-63

<sup>30</sup> Karl Green interview by the author, August 13, 2013, 28 transcript.

the case of the Crackers, playing at a decrepit ballpark in a rough neighborhood made attending their games increasingly undesirable for many of their traditional fans. Additionally, the death of the segregationist Southern Association, the league in which the Crackers had played for six decades, unmoored the club from its traditional rivalries. Nevertheless, the idea that the Crackers were always popular and winners while the Braves of the 1960s and 1970s were always unpopular and losers persists in the memory of many Atlanta baseball fans.<sup>31</sup>

“There was a change in the attitude,” Braves announcer Milo Hamilton said of Atlanta fans in the early 1970s, “because they felt that the ballclub just wasn't winning enough when you have all those stars,” he said, referring specifically to Aaron, Niekro, and Rico Carty.<sup>32</sup> Hamilton had been the Braves’ radio and television play-by-play man since the team’s arrival in Georgia. Hired because of his familiarity to Southern audiences, Hamilton spent five years (1961-1965) as an announcer on the 90-station Chicago White Sox radio network, which was heard on stations throughout Dixie, including Atlanta’s WGST.<sup>33</sup> The highly opinionated Hamilton presented himself as a Braves partisan, leading to criticisms from fans and media alike that he spent too much time “cheerleading and ticket selling” during telecasts.<sup>34</sup> Despite consistent radio and television ratings, Braves management fired Hamilton after the 1975 season.<sup>35</sup> A widely publicized on-air rant following a Fourth of July weekend home game that drew 3,728 fans likely sealed Hamilton’s fate. “All I hear around town is negativism about the Braves’ management, managers, and players,” Hamilton said, “But it is time somebody stood up and said something positive about this ball club. And if you take a little stock in this town, it wasn’t built to bring a

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<sup>31</sup> Tim Darnell, “Ponce De Leon Ballpark,” *The New Georgia Encyclopedia*; Lloyd Johnson and Miles Wolf, *The Encyclopedia of Minor League Baseball* (Durham, NC: Baseball America, Inc., 1993), 33-34.

<sup>32</sup> Milo Hamilton interview by the author, July 11, 2013, 33 transcript.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>34</sup> Dick Gray, “Mellow Milo Hardsells the Braves,” *Atlanta Journal*, June 28, 1966, 35; Alan Morris interview by the author, 2.

<sup>35</sup> Jesse Outlar, “Milo Had No Inkling of Firing,” *Atlanta Constitution*, October 9, 1975, 1G.

Major League baseball team here.” Atlanta fans proved immune to Hamilton’s efforts to cajole them into the ballpark. He could not call upon some collectively ingrained loyalty to the old town team, but instead had to convince consumers to buy a product that required their presence and their participation, two things that relatively few of them proved willing to give.<sup>36</sup>

“The media, generally, did not want to be associated with losing teams, especially columnists and broadcast media, as if the association made them losers,” *Constitution* sportswriter Wayne Minshew recalled. During the 1975 season, the *Constitution* stopped sending a beat writer on the road with the Braves, characterizing it as a cutback brought on by the energy crisis. *Constitution* writers covered road games by simply listening to the radio broadcasts on WSB, a practice which the *Journal*, too, soon adopted.<sup>37</sup> Atlanta’s press corps had ceaselessly boosted its professional sports teams in the mid-1960s. By the mid-1970s, most of the local media had adopted an aloof, condescending posture toward the city’s franchises, particularly the Braves, whom they were expected to cover day-in and day-out for eight months each year. Moreover, the Braves’ history as Atlanta’s first major league team, their membership in the nation’s oldest professional sports league, and their participation in the national pastime made them the city’s most visible franchise. As a result, the Braves bore the heaviest burden from Atlanta’s “Loserville, U.S.A.” reputation.

### **“Atlanta Doesn’t Deserve Henry Aaron’s Drama”**

Atlanta’s attendance problems remained a local news item until Hank Aaron’s pursuit of Babe Ruth’s all-time career homerun record during the 1973 and 1974 seasons made every Braves game a national news story. The small crowds that turned out at Atlanta Stadium to see Aaron chase the most revered record in American sports shocked the national press corps.

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<sup>36</sup> “Hamilton Rips Fans,” *Sporting News*, July 26, 1975, 29.

<sup>37</sup> Wayne Minshew interview by the author, 49-50.

“Atlanta is the disgrace of baseball,” the *New York Times*’ Dave Anderson wrote, “...Atlanta doesn’t deserve Henry Aaron’s drama. He’d be better off on a barnstorming tour.”<sup>38</sup> The Braves finished next-to-last in attendance in the NL in both 1973 and 1974. Large crowds turned out in every other NL city to see Aaron and honor his every at-bat with a standing ovation. In 1973, more than 2.4 million fans watched Aaron and the Braves play on the road, three times as many as saw him at home. In 1974, nearly 1.7 million fans watched the Braves play on the road, almost twice as many as the 981,085 who saw them play in Atlanta that season.<sup>39</sup>

The Braves’ poor attendance during the 1973 season, the entirety of which Aaron spent in pursuit of Ruth’s record, was particularly striking. The team drew just 800,655 fans to Atlanta Stadium, despite the intense local and national media attention focused on the homerun chase. Though not a winning team (76-85), the 1973 Braves were one of the greatest power-hitting teams in baseball history, making their poor attendance figures all the more noteworthy. They were the first team in Major League history to have three players (Aaron, Dave Johnson, and Darrell Evans) hit 40 home runs in one season, an attraction that would almost certainly boost attendance in any city.<sup>40</sup> “All year long, Atlanta overwhelmed me with indifference,” Aaron recalled. “I would get standing ovations in New York and Los Angeles and Chicago and St. Louis...but it seemed like Atlanta frankly didn’t give a damn. Our crowds were so pitiful you could practically hear someone crack open a peanut...The way I saw it, the only thing Atlanta was too busy for was baseball.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Dave Anderson, “Empty Seats for the Aaron Drama,” *New York Times*, September 28, 1973, 39.

<sup>39</sup> Louis Harris, “Most Root for Aaron,” *Washington Post*, September 17, 1973, D12; Hank Aaron, *I Had a Hammer*, 242-249; Jesse Outlar, “A Letter to Lou,” *Atlanta Constitution*, August 9, 1975, 1C.

<sup>40</sup> Bob Hope, *We Could Have Finished Last Without You*, 43-55; Furman Bisher, *The Furman Bisher Collection*, 178-180; Jesse Outlar, “Two More Fences,” *Atlanta Constitution*, October 1, 1973, 1D.

<sup>41</sup> Hank Aaron, *I Had a Hammer*, 231-232.

Braves management assumed that the homerun chase would bolster attendance, but, outside of the nights when Aaron was pursuing a particular milestone, this did not happen. Fewer than 10,000 spectators witnessed several of Aaron's home runs between 700 and 712 during the 1973 season. Many of the fans that bothered to attend these games crammed into the left field bleachers, hoping to catch one of the right-handed hitting Aaron's homerun balls while the rest of the stadium remained largely empty. A mere 1,362 fans witnessed Aaron's 711<sup>th</sup> home run on a Monday night at Atlanta Stadium in September 1973, fewer people than had attended several dozen different high school football games in metropolitan Atlanta the previous weekend.<sup>42</sup> "When school and football games begin in late August, you can forget about drawing crowds to baseball games in Georgia. It didn't matter if we were playing for a pennant or if somebody was trying to break the homerun record," Aaron wrote in his memoir.<sup>43</sup>

Longtime Braves fans and the media that covered the team chalk up Atlanta's apathetic response to the homerun chase to the blasé attitudes that locals had already developed toward their professional teams. Atlanta sports consumers proved unwilling to turn out in large numbers for a big league game unless it promised to be an event. "The city loved Hank and supported him. Everyone knew he would eventually break the record. The team did not perform well enough to generate fan interest," Alan Morris recalled.<sup>44</sup> Karl Green remembered that "Aaron's personality, low-key and reserved, didn't generate excitement among the fan base." Aaron had been a steady homerun hitter throughout his career, but never threatened to break the single-season homerun mark. Steady success on a frequently underachieving team had not made Aaron

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<sup>42</sup> Henry Aaron & Furman Bisher, *Aaron*, 215-7; "Only 1362 Fans See Aaron Clout," *New York Times*, September 18, 1973, 49; Mike McKenzie, "Just Another Memory," *Atlanta Journal*, July 21, 1973, 12A; George Plimpton, "Final Twist of Drama," *Sports Illustrated*, April 22, 1974, 22.

<sup>43</sup> Henry Aaron, *I Had a Hammer*, 250-251.

<sup>44</sup> Alan Morris interview by the author, 3

a transcendent figure in the city or one that cultivated deep bonds of affection among the fanbase. “It was as if they knew he could not hit five or ten in one game to break the record, and that’s what they seemed to be waiting for,” Wayne Minshew recalled.<sup>45</sup>

Despite the recollection of Braves fans, the evidence suggests that race played a role in engendering local apathy toward Aaron. Undoubtedly, the national media narrative surrounding Aaron’s homerun chase focused far more explicitly on race than it did in the Atlanta market, where discussions of race already permeated every public issue of the day. In 1973, Aaron received 930,000 pieces of mail, fifteen times more than the next closest American celebrity, Dinah Shore. A clear majority of the parcels he received offered words of encouragement, especially after he told reporters that he was receiving thousands of hateful letters as he pursued Ruth’s record.<sup>46</sup> In May 1973, Aaron informed a group of sportswriters in Philadelphia that he had directed his secretary to save all of the abusive mail he had been receiving that season. When the story broke nationally, “I guess people were stunned by what they read,” Aaron said, “because thousands and thousands of them started writing me positive letters.”<sup>47</sup>

The public responded to the news of Aaron’s hate mail with simultaneous revulsion and collective protestations of white racial innocence. Sixty-eight percent of fans told a 1973 Harris Survey that they were cheering for Aaron to break Ruth’s record. Another 62 percent expressed shock that Aaron was attracting hate mail as a result of the chase.<sup>48</sup> Braves fans recall that open expressions of racial hostility toward Aaron were rare in Atlanta at the time of the homerun

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<sup>45</sup> Wayne Minshew, 42.

<sup>46</sup> Joseph G. Preston, *Major League Baseball in the 1970s: A Modern Game Emerges*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004), 98-100; Hank Aaron, *I Had a Hammer*, 233-234, 242-9.

<sup>47</sup> “On No. 715, Thank God It’s Over,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 2, 1991, , E1

<sup>48</sup> Louis Harris, “Most Root for Aaron,” *Washington Post*, September 17, 1973, D12; Hank Aaron, *I Had a Hammer*, 242-249.



chase. “I am sure there were some who held prejudice against a black man eclipsing a white baseball legend but I never personally heard any of this,” Alan Morris said.<sup>49</sup>

Receiving vicious letters was nothing new for Aaron. The Braves star had received a steady stream of them since 1968, when *Jet* magazine published an interview in which he complained about the outsized scrutiny that black athletes received when they earned large salaries. Prior to the homerun chase, most of this hate mail originated in the Southeast, where Braves baseball was followed most closely. As Aaron approached Ruth’s record, the amount of hate mail he received increased exponentially and came from all regions of the United States, but much of it focused on the same themes.<sup>50</sup> The amount of money that Aaron made preoccupied the writers of the abusive letters he received both before and during the homerun chase. In 1972, Aaron had signed a three year deal worth a then-record \$600,000.<sup>51</sup> During the homerun chase, many letter writers told Aaron that he was an unworthy heir to Ruth. Sometimes, the writers cited statistical reasons for their views. More often, they relied on vulgarity and racial epithets. Hundreds of letters directed specific threats at Aaron which included times, dates, and locations where the slugger would be harmed. Atlanta Police regarded many of the threats as credible and assigned an officer to serve as Aaron’s personal security for the duration of the home run chase.<sup>52</sup> Braves teammate Ron Reed, who was the starting pitcher the night that Aaron broke Ruth’s record, said that the 1973-1974 homerun chase was one of the few times that he remembers race being discussed openly in the team’s locker room. The unprecedented amount

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<sup>49</sup> Alan Morris interview by the author, 3

<sup>50</sup> Hank Aaron, *I Had a Hammer*, 187.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*; 216; Al Thomy, “\$600,000 Cushion to Aid Aaron’s Bid for Ruth Mark,” *Sporting News*, March 18, 1972, 34; Wayne Minshew, “Aaron Slurred as He Assaults Ruth’s Mark,” *Sporting News*, May 26, 1973, 5; “Insiders Say,” *Sporting News*, May 24, 1975, 6.

<sup>52</sup> Henry Aaron, *I Had a Hammer* 236-9, 242-9.

of hate mail that Aaron received during the homerun chase was “the only way that a lot of us had any contact with any racial problems.”<sup>53</sup>

In addition to the bags of hate mail, Aaron and his family faced two direct, high-profile physical threats during the homerun chase. An Aaron hater stalked his eighteen-year-old daughter Gaile during her freshman year at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee.<sup>54</sup> In May 1973, Aaron nearly came to blows with a group of straight-out-of-central-casting bigots in Atlanta Stadium’s right field stands. The incident received extensive coverage in the national sporting press, calling into question Atlanta’s reputation as a progressive oasis. The group of men had been harassing Aaron from the nearly empty section for several consecutive nights. Their caterwauling taunts echoed throughout the largely vacant stadium. Such back-and-forth between fans in the usually empty bleachers and the outfielders had been common for years at Atlanta Stadium. In the past, fans complained that it was the players directing foul language towards them, but, in this instance, it was fans hurling abusive language at the players.<sup>55</sup> “At first, it was the same stuff I was used to hearing, mostly about all the money I was making for striking out and hitting into double plays, but as they became drunker and louder they became more obscene and personal,” Aaron recalled.<sup>56</sup> He confronted the men directly before the ninth inning of a May 8<sup>th</sup> game against the Mets. Stadium security intervened before a fight broke out,

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<sup>53</sup> Ron Reed interview by the author, 37-38.

<sup>54</sup> “On No. 715, Thank God It’s Over,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 2, 1991, E1; “Abuse by Atlanta Fans Closes in on Aaron,” *Washington Post*, May 9, 1973, E1; Joseph G. Preston, *MLB in the 1970s*, 98; Wayne Minshew, “Aaron Slurred as He Assaults Ruth’s Mark,” *Sporting News*, May 26, 1973, 5; Hank Aaron, *I Had a Hammer*, 235; Henry Aaron & Furman Bisher, *Aaron*, 215-7

<sup>55</sup> Frank Hyland, “Trouble... Trouble,” *Atlanta Journal*, April 4, 1974, 20S; “Abuse by Atlanta Fans Closes in on Aaron,” *Washington Post*, May 9, 1973, E1; Henry Aaron & Furman Bisher, *Aaron* 215-7; “N.L. Flashes,” *Sporting News*, August 29, 1970, 38.

<sup>56</sup> Hank Aaron, *I Had a Hammer*, 231-232.

escorting the men out of the stadium. After the confrontation, the Braves banned the group from the ballpark and assigned a fulltime security detail to Aaron.<sup>57</sup>

Aaron had spent much of his career as an under-the-radar superstar, but the reticent celebrity became the focus of extensive national media coverage during the 1973-1974 home run chase. *Time* and *Newsweek* profiled him during the 1973 season. During the 1973-1974 offseason, he appeared on Merv Griffin, Dean Martin, and Dinah Shore's television programs. Aaron had been largely ignored by Madison Avenue for the first two decades of his career, but in 1973 Aaron signed an exclusive five year, \$1 million endorsement deal with Magnavox. The local media's focus on Aaron proved just as intense. The Braves posted 20 billboards around the city bearing his image. They issued an average of 400 press credentials per game. The *Constitution* and *Journal* published separate special sections on Aaron while the Atlanta Chamber established a college scholarship fund in his name. Autograph seekers hounded Aaron everywhere he traveled.<sup>58</sup>

All of the attention did not suit the aloof Aaron. Teammates, Braves employees, and members of the local media remember Aaron as a distant and brooding figure. Aaron socialized rarely with his typically much younger Atlanta teammates, whether white or black.<sup>59</sup> He mistrusted the media, which he believed undervalued him relative to fellow NL stars Willie Mays and Roberto Clemente, both of whom he developed public rivalries with during the late

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid; Frank Hyland, "Trouble... Trouble," *Atlanta Journal*, April 4, 1974, 20S; "Abuse by Atlanta Fans Closes in on Aaron," *Washington Post*, May 9, 1973, E1; Henry Aaron & Furman Bisher, *Aaron*, 215-7

<sup>58</sup> "Pow-Wow, January 1974," Hank Aaron Folder, Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum Library Archives; Aaron, *I Had a Hammer*, 223-225, 286; Philip Dougherty, "Advertising: Aaron's Big Blast" *New York Times*, April 10, 1974, 63; Tom Buckley, "The Packaging of a Home Run" *New York Times* March 31, 1974, 262; "Privacy hard for Aaron to Find" *Chicago Defender* June 26, 1974, 30; Howard Bryant, *The Last Hero*, 362-364; Wayne Minshew, "Aaron Giving Sherman Tips on How to Capture Atlanta," *Sporting News*, September 29, 1973, 12; Frank Hyland, "The Long Winter," *Atlanta Journal*, April 4, 1974, 4S.

<sup>59</sup> Howard Bryant, *The Last Hero*, xii-xv, 324-326, 415; Frank Hyland, "Trouble... Trouble," *Atlanta Journal*, April 4, 1974, 20S.

1960s. In 1969, Aaron threatened to quit baseball when he came to believe that Braves announcer Milo Hamilton had suggested that Clemente was the NL's top right-fielder.<sup>60</sup>

Ten years before the home run chase, Aaron had expressed serious reservations about the Braves' relocation to Atlanta. He feared that white southerners would not accept a black superstar, a concern shared by the Braves' ownership. A 1965 visit to Atlanta orchestrated by Atlanta's black leadership assuaged enough of Aaron's fears to convince him to endorse the move, but his then-wife Barbara remained hesitant to move her family to Georgia. Barbara Aaron's concerns were not alleviated by her earliest experiences in the city. In the stands, she heard fans referring to her husband casually as a "jigaboo" and a "nigger." Once she smushed a mustard-covered hamburger in the face of a particularly odious bigot seated behind her. In July 1966, she was refused entry to the player's parking lot by an Atlanta Police officer who said he did not recognize her. She was temporarily placed under arrest after she drove through the gate against his order. Charges were never filed and the officer was reprimanded for the incident.<sup>61</sup> By the early 1970s, racially-tinged criticism of Aaron and his family came in a more nuanced form. Aaron's second wife, Atlanta morning television host Billye Williams, the widow of civil rights activist Dr. Sam Williams, was accused by some in the Atlanta press of trying to "politicize" the Braves right-fielder. Aaron responded to a column by the *Journal's* Frank

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<sup>60</sup> Wilt Browning, "Aaron Target Won't Be Still," *Atlanta Journal*, April 17, 1969, 1D; Al Thomy, "\$600,000 Cushion to Aid Aaron's Bid for Ruth Mark," *Sporting News*, March 18, 1972, 34; William Leggett, "Hank Becomes a Hit," *Sports Illustrated*, August 18, 1969, 34; Frank Hyland, "Trouble...Trouble," *Atlanta Journal*, April 4, 1974, 20S; Henry Aaron, *I Had a Hammer*, 191-192, 220-222; Milo Hamilton interview by the author, 34, 35; Howard Bryant, *The Last Hero*, 353; Walt Browning, "Aaron: Get Milo Off My Back" *Atlanta Journal* September 9, 1969, 1C; Wayne Minshew, "Feud Over—Aaron, Milo Reach Truce," *Sporting News*, September 27, 1969, 13; Hal Hayes, "Aaron, Milo 'Happy,'" *Atlanta Constitution*, September 11, 1969, 16.

<sup>61</sup> Howard Bryant, *The Last Hero*, 305-9; Henry Aaron, *I Had a Hammer*, 183-184; Frank Hyland, "Trouble...Trouble," *Atlanta Journal*, April 4, 1974, 20S.

Hyland that suggested as much by smashing a container of strawberries into Hyland's face during the Braves' 1974 Farmer's Night.<sup>62</sup>

A full house of 53,775 turned out for Atlanta's April 8, 1974 home opener, the night Hank Aaron hit his record-breaking 715<sup>th</sup> home run. The nationally televised game was nearly blacked out locally because the Braves failed to sell out the stadium 72 hours in advance of the first pitch. In a rare moment of leniency, NBC waived its blackout rule and allowed Atlantans to watch the game along with the 35 million other television viewers. The drizzly and cold evening commenced with pre-game pomp and circumstance that included a performance of the national anthem by Pearl Bailey, the release of 1000 doves, and a "This is Your Life, Hank Aaron" segment featuring reunions with old coaches, friends, and teammates. Braves public relations director Bob Hope spent the off-season planning out the event, a responsibility he regarded as deeply socially significant. Hope grew up an hour north of Atlanta in Forsyth County, which prohibited African American residents until the mid-1960s. Less than a generation later, he was charged with honoring a black man in Georgia for his contributions to professional sports.<sup>63</sup>

Aaron's fourth inning two-run, homer off the Dodgers' Al Downing and the subsequent ten-minute in-game ceremony to commemorate the record proved to be the end of the evening for the vast majority of those in attendance. Large numbers of fans began leaving the chilly Monday evening, work-night/school-night game. The bleachers and the designated VIP section emptied out with comparable speed. By the time Dodgers' outfielder Manny Mota lined out to Braves' right-fielder Dusty Baker to end the game, *Journal* reporter Frank Hyland estimated that

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<sup>62</sup> Henry Aaron, *I Had a Hammer*, 282-3; Henry Aaron & Furman Bisher, *Aaron*, 207; Mike McKenzie, "Aaron's 'Secret' Official Now," *Atlanta Journal*, July 20, 1973, 1D.

<sup>63</sup> Furman Bisher, "I Just Thank God It's Over," *Atlanta Journal*, April 9, 1974, 1, 8H; Wayne Minshew, "The Hammer Hails the Big One," *Sporting News*, April 27, 1974, 7; Frank Hyland, "It's Over: Hammerin' Hank Stands All Alone at 715" *Atlanta Journal*, April 9, 1974, 1A; "Aaron Hammers No 715 And Moves Ahead of Ruth," *Atlanta Constitution* April 9, 1974, 1; Henry Aaron, *I Had a Hammer*, 267, 279; "Return of Ol' 693," *Atlanta Journal* April 9, 1974, 1D, 4D; Howard Bryant, *The Last Hero*, 365-366.

fewer than 10,000 fans remained in the stadium. Hyland quoted a pair of “press box veterans” who said that Atlanta Stadium look liked “...a Falcon game in the fourth quarter” by the time of Aaron’s next at-bat in the fifth inning.<sup>64</sup> “It seemed more like a Braves game,” Aaron wrote of the sparse remaining crowd he witnessed in his next trip to the plate, “It was drizzling earlier, but you’d have thought there was a flash flood in the grandstand.”<sup>65</sup>

“I think the fans showed poor taste...I think they should have stayed for the game,” Braves manager Eddie Mathews told reporters.<sup>66</sup> “It was cold. People in Atlanta don’t like cold all that much...everybody there just expected him to hit it and when he did, that was it,” game attendee Joel Gross, who stayed for all nine innings, recalled.<sup>67</sup> “They came to see a home run by Hank and the game second,” Braves pitcher Buzz Capra said, evoking Atlantans’ persistent desire to be a part of an event.<sup>68</sup> Few fans proved interested in taking an after-the-fact victory lap with Aaron and the Braves. Atlanta’s attendance returned to the mean in the aftermath of 715. The night after Aaron broke Ruth’s record, the Braves drew 10,648 to Atlanta Stadium. In six of the Braves’ next twelve home dates, attendance fell below 3,500.<sup>69</sup> Despite fielding a competitive 88-74 team, Braves attendance fell below one million for the third straight season in 1974. A mere 11,081 turned out for the Braves’ 1974 home finale, a game that many fans and media insiders believed correctly would be Aaron’s last in Atlanta. “It hurt me to know that so few cared enough to buy a ticket for my last of 3076 games as a Brave,” Aaron wrote in his

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<sup>64</sup> Frank Hyland, “Mathews Upset for Fans Leaving Early,” *Atlanta Journal*, April 9, 1974, 1D, 4D; Furman Bisher, “HOME RUN NO. 715,” *Atlanta Journal*, April 9, 1974, 8H.

<sup>65</sup> Henry Aaron, *I Had a Hammer*, 272.

<sup>66</sup> Frank Hyland “Mathews Upset for Fans Leaving Early,” *Atlanta Journal*, April 9, 1974, 1D, 4D.

<sup>67</sup> Joel Gross interview by the author, August 15, 2013, 23 transcript.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Frank Hyland, “Aaron Takes Night Off; Braves Suffer Post-715 Blahs,” *Atlanta Journal*, April 10, 1974, 1E; Ray Kennedy, “Warning: Dangerous Slurves Ahead,” *Sports Illustrated*, July 8, 1974, 17; Wayne Minshew, “Johns Too Much for Braves, 4-0,” *Atlanta Constitution*, April 11, 1974, 1E.

memoir. That November, the Braves traded Aaron to the Milwaukee Brewers after the new homerun king balked at the ceremonial front-office position Atlanta offered him if he retired.<sup>70</sup>

For decades, Atlantans have taken great pride in Aaron's record breaking homerun chase, regarding it as a shared civic accomplishment. Ted Turner's embrace of Aaron, whom he hired almost immediately to an upper-level player development position in team management, and of the legacy of Aaron's record, which the franchise honors regularly, played a significant role in shaping the public memory of 715. The memory of Aaron's pursuit of Ruth's record, though, has little to do with the striking apathy that residents of Metropolitan Atlanta actually showed toward the man and his team as he chased professional sports' most cherished milestone.

### **Creating a Family-Friendly Environment**

The Braves' consistently lackluster attendance was not for a lack of trying to promote the team. The club sold an evening at Atlanta Stadium as an affordable and enticing event while presenting their players and management as excellent citizens and role models. In particular, the franchise made civic engagement a centerpiece of their public relations strategy from the time they arrived in Georgia. Braves representatives made 395 appearances across the Southeast in 1966 alone. During the 1965-1966 offseason, Braves players, coaches, and executives caravanned across the Southeast on a 6-state, 24-city tour. Participating in the multi-state junket became an annual rite of passage for young Atlanta Braves. Every year, Braves players and executives visited thousands of patients at hospitals across Georgia, a time-consuming goodwill gesture that became a fixture of the franchise's off-season enterprises.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Henry Aaron, *I Had a Hammer*, 288.

<sup>71</sup> "What the Braves Fans Spent," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 14, 1966, 4; Jesse Outlar, "Braves on Parade," *Atlanta Constitution*, February 12, 1966, 19; "Braves Go Visiting on Caravan," *Atlanta Journal*, April 10, 1967, 11B; "Hospitals, Schools Prime Stops for Braves' Caravan," *Sporting News*, February 25, 1967, 17.

The team's promotional department boasted frequently in their advertisements that Braves tickets were among the most affordable in MLB. While the \$5 dugout level seats offered at Atlanta Stadium were the NL's most expensive in 1968, the majority of Braves tickets were priced below the league average of \$2.50. Braves season ticket packages for 1975 ranged in price from \$250 to \$375 for 81 dates, the same prices they charged for their 1966 season tickets. In an effort to create a family-friendly environment, the Braves offered 50 cent general admission passes for children well into the 1970s, the cheapest ticket of any kind in the Major Leagues. A 1971 internal study indicated that relatively few families took advantage of these inexpensive general admission passes. Fifty-cent passes constituted a mere 6 percent of Braves ticket sales that season.<sup>72</sup> Despite the team's best efforts, the audience at most games at Atlanta Stadium consisted largely of chain smoking, middle aged males. "To this day, that mix of cigarette and pipe odor takes me straight back to the Launching Pad," longtime Braves fan Mike Holcomb said of Braves crowds in the 1970s.<sup>73</sup>

The Atlanta Braves were among the first franchises to present professional baseball games explicitly as a family-friendly environment. Their efforts to expand their spectatorship beyond the majority adult and male constituency that inhabited most ballparks made sense in profoundly suburban metropolitan Atlanta. Moreover, the club's cultivation of a family-friendly stadium environment helped the franchise fulfill its often-stated goal of becoming a regional draw. Families from across the Southeast planned summer trips around a visit to the ballpark. The cultivation of a family-friendly ballpark environment by Major League teams proved a

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<sup>72</sup> "Season Ticket Information: 1966-1970," Atlanta Braves Folders, Baseball Hall of Fame Archives; "Braves 1975 Season Ticket Fact Sheet," Sports—Atlanta Braves (Baseball) (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center; "1967 Season Ticket Renewal Brochure," Atlanta Braves (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center; Lester Smith, "Eight Clubs in Majors Boosting Ticket Prices," *Sporting News*, April 6, 1968, 23; "Baseball Ticket Sales and Concessions Information, 1971-1972," Ivan Allen, Jr. Organizations—Atlanta Braves, Inc., 1969-1972, Allen Family Papers, MSS 1014, Box 2, Folder 10, Kenan Research Center.

<sup>73</sup> Mike Holcomb, interview by the author, 51.



broadly and highly successful strategy, helping professional teams double their average attendance between the mid-1970s and the early 1990s. In Atlanta, though, the approach had mixed results.<sup>74</sup>

Clearly, the Braves understood that many suburbanites did not want to venture in or out of Atlanta after dark. To this end, the team tried to accommodate fans with earlier start times. In 1971, the Braves added a number of weekday afternoon games to their summer months' schedules. Additionally, the team moved most weekend games up to the early afternoon or earlier in the evening. The team's promotional department predicted that the earlier weekday start times would entice suburban parents to bring their children to Atlanta Stadium, but the Braves drew even sparser crowds for these games than they had on weeknight evenings. Moving up the starting times of weekend games had no discernable impact on attendance.<sup>75</sup>

During the early 1970s, the Braves embraced nightly promotions and contests, particularly ones oriented towards children, as thoroughly as any team in the Major Leagues. The Braves held an annual contest night offering prizes for the best homemade banners. They hosted several picture days each season with players and celebrity guests. Weekend home games concluded with fireworks displays. The team handed out jackets, pennants, hats, balls, and miniature bats to children while featuring season-long contests that gave away automobiles to adults. Virtually every home game served as a discount night tailored to the residents of specific neighborhoods, towns, counties, and states. In 1972, the Braves adopted a crowd-pleasing "mod new look," adorning players and team representatives in garish, fashion-forward regalia. The team donned bright blue and red uniforms that would not have been out of place in a recreational

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<sup>74</sup> Bill James, "The Prisoner's Dilemma," *Grantland*, March 21, 2012. Accessed online on March 22, 2012: <http://grantland.com/features/the-connection-fan-inmate-behavior/>.

<sup>75</sup> Al Thomy, "Nights Made for Sleeping, Not Baseball," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 3, 1974, 2D.

softball league. Relief pitchers commuted to the mound in a bullpen cart that resembled the Apollo moon buggy and bore the team's new, lower-case red cursive 'a' logo. The suddenly "mod" Braves also embraced the recent revolution in mores by hiring a new, largely blonde troop of usherettes, whom they clad in hot pants and revealing blue and red tops, sending mixed messages to fans they drew with their marketing as a "family friendly" entertainment.<sup>76</sup>

The Braves added a live mascot named Chief Nock-A-Homa (Knock-a-Homer) in 1969 as an off-the-field, in-game entertainment. He replaced a 22 foot tall styrofoam statue of a Mohawk-wearing, tomahawk-wielding American Indian named "Big Victor" that stood in right-field in 1967 and 1968. The character of Chief Nock-A-Homa was portrayed by a fully enrolled Chippewa Indian named Levi Walker. The Chief spent most of the game horsing around with children or attempting to rile up the crowds at Atlanta Stadium with antics that would draw cringes from many 21<sup>st</sup> century observers. Adorned in moccasins, buckskins, and a headdress, Walker would breathe fire, war whoop, and partake in rain dances. He raided the opposing dugout on horseback and blew smoke signals from his teepee behind the left field wall. The Chief remained a genuinely popular attraction at the ballpark until the club phased him out of their in-game entertainments during the mid-1980s.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> "Promotions," Atlanta Braves Folder, Baseball Hall of Fame Archives; "Pow Wow Spring 1969," Hank Aaron Folder, Baseball Hall of Fame Archives; "Buckhead Community Night," Atlanta Braves (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center; Frank Hyland, "It's a Whole New Ball Game," *Atlanta Journal*, March 28, 1972, 2D.

<sup>77</sup> "Braves 1969 Official Game Program," Atlanta Braves (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center; "Braves Banner May 1985 and June 1983," Atlanta Braves Folder, Baseball Hall of Fame; "Noc-A-Homa," Mascot Folder, Baseball Hall of Fame Archives; Bob Hope, *We Could've Finished Last Without You*, 36-8; "The Fans Remember," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, September 16, 1996, 1E; Jane Harris, "Real Injun is Braves' Mascot," *Sporting News*, October 11, 1969, 8. In the late 1980s, the Braves replaced Chief Nock-A-Homa with "Homer," a cartoon-character like American Indian mascot with a full body suit. In subsequent decades, the franchise has deemphasized performing American Indian mascots as the practice has become more controversial.

## **“The Forks of the Creeks and the Boondocks”**

The Braves attracted a fanbase during the 1960s and 1970s that was largely white and middle class, skewing toward the white collar. Weeknight games were largely the domain of young adults while weekend games drew large numbers of families.<sup>78</sup> When the Braves arrived in Atlanta, Georgia Senator Richard Russell said “your Braves fans will come not only from the city, but from the forks of the creeks and the boondocks.”<sup>79</sup> Russell was correct when he asserted that many of the Braves’ most fervent fans would come from outside metropolitan Atlanta. A Georgia Tech School of Industrial Management study suggested that the Braves’ appeal in the “boondocks” extended out from rural Georgia across the Southeast. The study found that 41 percent of Braves spectators in 1966 came from outside metropolitan Atlanta. Forty-three percent of out-of-towners came from elsewhere in Georgia while significant numbers of out-of-town fans came from all of the Southeastern states, including 13 percent from Alabama, 11 percent from Tennessee, 9 percent from each of the Carolinas, and 5 percent from Florida.<sup>80</sup>

“Once school was out, a significant amount of the attendance came from this regional base,” Karl Green recalled.<sup>81</sup> Frequently, these fans came in large groups from out of state, often organized through Little League teams, Boy Scout troops, and church groups. Many families across the Southeast made a trip to Atlanta Stadium the centerpiece of their summer vacations, witnessing in person the players they followed through the team’s regional radio and television networks. Out of town visitors traveled an average of 146 miles in 1966 to attend Braves games,

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<sup>78</sup> Johnny Tallant interview by the author, August 18, 2013, 25 transcript; David Hewes interview by the author, 7; Alan Morris interview by the author, 2; Joel Gross interview by the author, 23.

<sup>79</sup> Charlie Roberts, “Braves ‘Take It All’ As Hoopla Climaxes,” *Atlanta Constitution*, April 12, 1966, 39, 44.

<sup>80</sup> “What the Braves Fans Spent,” *Atlanta Constitution*, November 14, 1966, 4; Wilt Browning, “Braves Pad Atlanta’s Purse with \$30 Million,” *Atlanta Journal*, November 8, 1966, 44.

<sup>81</sup> Karl Green interview by the author, 28.

making use of the 32 lanes of interstate traffic that converged on Atlanta Stadium, as city boosters often pointed to with pride. At the time of its construction, Atlanta Stadium sat less than 200 miles from the homes of 14.5 million Southeast residents, tens and thousands of whom trekked to the region's metropole every summer to watch MLB in person. Civic boosters tended to overestimate the extravagance of the fans who traveled to Atlanta to see the Braves, many of whom stayed with relatives who had relocated to the area or returned home immediately after the game on touring buses. Either way, one of the reasons that attendance dropped so dramatically at late season Braves games was the lack of large groups from out-of-town.<sup>82</sup>

Many baseball enthusiasts in Metropolitan Atlanta were already the fans of other teams when the Braves arrived, making it difficult for the city's new Major League franchise to win their affection. The resettlement of more than 100,000 non-Georgians in the metropolitan area during the 1960s, many of whom hailed from the urban north, ensured that significant portions of the crowd during visits to Atlanta Stadium by the New York Mets, Chicago Cubs, and St. Louis Cardinals would be cheering for the opposing team. The net migration of nearly 1.1 million people to the state of Georgia between 1970 and 1990 exaggerated this phenomenon at Atlanta Stadium considerably. Many transplanted baseball fans went to Atlanta Stadium to cheer on their visiting hometown team, but did not otherwise patronize Braves games.<sup>83</sup>

### **African Americans, Atlanta Stadium, and the Braves**

“The percentage of black fans at the ballpark—like all the ballparks in the major leagues—was very low,” Hank Aaron said of Atlanta Stadium in his memoir.<sup>84</sup> Despite the

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.; Alan Morris interview by the author, 2; Johnny Tallant interview by the author, 25; Wayne Minshew interview by the author, 49.

<sup>83</sup> Karl Green interview by the author, 28; Wayne Minshew interview by the author, 50; Alan Morris interview by the author, 3; “1960-1980 Atlanta Profile: County and City Data Book,” University of Virginia Library Census Data Base.

<sup>84</sup> Henry Aaron, *I Had a Hammer*, 184-185

emergence of a black majority in the city of Atlanta during the 1960s, few African Americans attended Braves games.<sup>85</sup> During the homerun chase, a number of sportswriters expressed their surprise at the dearth of black fans in the stands supporting Aaron at Atlanta Stadium. The *New York Times*' Dave Anderson attributed the lack of black spectators at Braves games to high ticket prices, which kept African Americans out of the ballpark.<sup>86</sup> Undoubtedly, many black residents could not afford to attend a game at Atlanta Stadium, despite the relative affordability of Braves tickets when compared to the rest of MLB. Twenty-nine percent of blacks in Atlanta lived below the poverty line in 1970, more than two-and-a-half times the national average and four times the rate of their white neighbors in the city. At the same time, though, Metropolitan Atlanta had the nation's largest and most economically diverse black middle class, one that included both an established urban professional and commercial class and a class of middle-income suburban homeowners centered in Fulton and Dekalb Counties. By 1980, forty-three percent of African Americans in the five county area resided in households in the top sixty percent of annual income, the highest percentage in any metropolitan area. For the most part, though, African Americans in metropolitan Atlanta who could afford to attend professional baseball games chose to spend their discretionary dollars elsewhere.<sup>87</sup>

The dearth of black fans in attendance at Braves games reflected the well-documented decline in interest in baseball among African Americans as both a participatory and spectator sport during the 1960s and 1970s, particularly among the young and those that lived in cities. In a 1960 Gallup poll, 43 percent of African Americans named baseball as their favorite sport,

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<sup>85</sup> David Hewes interview by the author, 7; Johnny Tallant interview by the author, 25; Alan Morris interview by the author, 2; Joel Gross interview by the author, 23.

<sup>86</sup> Dave Anderson, "Empty Seats for the Aaron Drama," *New York Times*, September 28, 1973, 39.

<sup>87</sup> "1960-1980 Atlanta Profile: County and City Data Book," University of Virginia Library Census Data Base; "Atlanta, Mecca for Middle-Class Blacks, Also Harbors Poverty," *New York Times*, January 20, 1986, A16.

twice as many as football and basketball combined. By 1981, just 17 percent of black respondents told Gallup that baseball was their favorite sport, roughly the same number that selected basketball and roughly one-half as many as preferred football.<sup>88</sup> The shifting preferences of Atlanta's black sports fans reflected these broader national trends. In the late 1940s and 1950s, African American spectators filled the segregated sections of Poncey to watch the minor league Atlanta Crackers. Despite inconsistent fan support, the Atlanta Black Crackers played organized black professional baseball at Poncey from 1920 until 1952. By the late 1970s, African American fans, who were few in number at Braves games, became a notable presence at Falcons and Hawks games, particularly when a major black star, such as the NBA's Julius Erving or the NFL's O.J. Simpson, was playing on the visiting team.<sup>89</sup>

Beyond their specific feelings toward baseball, many black Atlantans' relationship to the Braves was profoundly shaped by their relationship to the development of Atlanta Stadium. The erection of the stadium on urban renewal property originally designated for affordable housing initiated an often-conflictual relationship between African American residents of nearby neighborhoods and the Braves, the stadium's primary tenant and a looming institutional force in Summerhill for most of the year. A place that had once been a predominately black neighborhood had been privatized into a leisure space that accommodated primarily white patrons. Despite the broad support among Atlanta's black leadership for the stadium project, the "Miracle in Atlanta" demonstrated to many black residents the civic establishment's prioritization of professional sports over the housing needs of genuinely destitute people. The

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<sup>88</sup> Jeffery M. Jones, "The Declining Black Baseball Fan," *Gallup.com*, July 15, 2003. Accessed on June 19, 2011: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/8854/disappearing-black-baseball-fan.aspx>.

<sup>89</sup> Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 34-40; Fred Russell, "Southern Stumbled on Color Line," *Sporting News*, April 4, 1962, 13; George Cunningham, "Dr. J. Erving, Talent-Laden 76ers Seek Identity Before Record Crowds," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 20, 1976, 1C, 5C; "Sellout Home Crowd at Hawks-76ers Game," *Atlanta Daily World*, November 23, 1976, 5; "A Depressing 49er Finish," *San Francisco Examiner*, December 17, 1979, 1, 55.

thousands of Summerhill residents displaced by urban renewal in the 1950s were led to believe that they would be able to return to their neighborhood once new affordable housing was built in the area. Instead, the stadium made a permanent intrusion on the neighborhood, one that brought with it impositions on their community by thousands of outsiders all spring and summer.<sup>90</sup>

Residents of the neighborhoods surrounding Atlanta Stadium found their streets clogged with visitors' cars during games. Noise and light pollution intruded on their homes for much of the year. Moreover, the presence of predominately white and suburban visitors in Summerhill for sporting events formed a spatial continuum with the assertion of state power over the area through urban renewal in the 1950s and 1960s as well as the ongoing conflicts between area residents and the Atlanta Police. On game days, residents found many ways to reassert control over their neighborhood, primarily through the individual financial and material benefits they acquired as a result of their visitors' presence. Many Summerhill homeowners and renters alike transformed their properties into informal game-day parking lots. Other neighborhood residents convinced visitors to pay them to watch their cars, which the visitors had parked on side streets or in alleys while they attended the game. Still other neighborhood residents took advantage of the presence of these unfamiliar vehicles by engaging in petty acts of larceny.<sup>91</sup>

The Braves made noteworthy efforts to cultivate a friendly relationship with the residents of the predominately African American neighborhoods surrounding the stadium. The franchise

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<sup>90</sup> Larry Keating, "Atlanta: Peoplestown—Resilience and Tenacity Versus Institutional Hostility," in *Rebuilding Urban Neighborhoods: Achievements, Opportunities, and Limits*, eds. W. Dennis Keating and Norman Krumholz, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1999), 35-39; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 60-65; Henry Aaron, *I Had a Hammer*, 184-185; Rebecca Burns, "The Other 284 Days," *Atlanta Magazine*, June 21, 2013. Accessed online on August 1, 2013: <http://www.atlantamagazine.com/great-reads/turner-field-development/>.

<sup>91</sup> Sam Hopkins and Barry Henderson, "Foot Patrol at Stadium is Ordered," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 9, 1973, 1A, 15A; Tom Henderson and Art Harris, "Fence Studied for Stadium Parking Lots," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 15, 1973, 1A, 2A; Bill Montgomery, "Police Step Up Stadium Force," *Atlanta Journal*, August 22, 1979, C1, C6; John McCosh, "Out of the Ballpark," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 13, 2000, 1JD; Bob Hope, *We Could Have Finished Last Without You*, 62; Keeler McCartney, "Violence at Stadium Brings Warnings," *Atlanta Constitution*, December 2, 1970, 6A; William A. Schaeffer & Lawrence S. Davidson, *The Economic Impact of the Falcons on Atlanta, 1973*, 7.

created a “Good Neighbor Program” that sponsored the construction and maintenance of a local recreational center. Players held frequent baseball clinics at the center, which included ticket and equipment giveaways. Additionally, the Braves organization participated in or sponsored many community events in the surrounding neighborhoods. These programs may have smoothed over some of the rough edges in the Braves’ relationship with their neighbors, but it hardly turned the predominately underprivileged residents of the Model Cities neighborhoods into enthusiastic supporters of the franchise, let alone regular ballpark patrons.<sup>92</sup>

For many residents of the neighborhoods surrounding the stadium, their most tangible relationship to the Braves was as an employee rather than as a fan. Atlanta Stadium offered much needed employment opportunities to residents of Southeast Atlanta, though most jobs at the ballpark were low-waged, seasonal positions as ushers, security guards, ticket-takers, or concessioners. From the time of the stadium’s opening, the majority of the stadium’s employees were African American, a proportion that grew as Atlanta itself became a supermajority black city. As a result, Atlanta Stadium became a workplace with a predominately black labor force that was managed by the Braves’ largely white corporate leadership. While scant evidence exists for sustained conflict between labor and management in regards to stadium operations, it is clear that tensions emerged during the 1960s and 1970s between the predominately white attendees of Braves games and Atlanta Stadium’s predominately black workforce.<sup>93</sup>

The adoption of the rhetoric of color-blindness by middle-class white Southerners in the 1960s and 1970s transformed open expressions of racial animus into cultural taboos. As a result, it is difficult to find open expressions of fan hostility toward the stadium’s predominately

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<sup>92</sup> Hank Aaron, *I Had a Hammer*, 184-5; “Promotions,” Atlanta Braves Folders, Baseball Hall of Fame Archives.

<sup>93</sup> Aaron, *I Had a Hammer*, 184-185; Mike Holcomb, interview by the author, 54; Lee Walburn, “Bill Lucas,” *Atlanta Magazine*, May 1, 2011. Accessed online on July 7, 2014: <http://www.atlantamagazine.com/great-reads/bill-lucas/>.



African American workforce. A careful reading of contemporary fan accounts of the staff at Atlanta Stadium suggests that numerous interactions between the customers and employees at Braves games took on an evident racial meaning. The Braves' predominately African American stadium workforce became the de facto around-the-field face of the organization, resulting in these low-waged workers drawing much of the ire of fans who were unhappy with the management of the franchise.

"I don't feel like a welcome customer any time I have attended Atlanta Stadium. Everyone I had contact with made me feel as if they were doing me a favor to allow me to watch the game," C.N. DeCourcy wrote in response to an April 1968 column by the *Constitution's* Furman Bisher, asking why so few fans had attended the Braves' home opener.<sup>94</sup> "The Atlanta Braves management should write a book on how not to run a baseball team or how to discourage attendance from games," Steve Carrington of Atlanta wrote into the *Journal-Constitution* in 1971. Carrington focused on his experiences at Atlanta Stadium's ticket office, where "the agents could care less about helping the fans and they make no effort to be friendly. I have waited for over 40 minutes for one girl to count money and chat with her co-worker while the line grew."<sup>95</sup> "Stadium ushers are uncooperative," an anonymous man from the Atlanta-area wrote to the *Sporting News* in 1975. In the same letter, the writer noted that nearly all game attendees were white while most stadium employees were black. To illustrate his point, he related a recent incident at a nearly empty Atlanta Stadium in which "I tried after the fifth inning to move several rows down from my ticketed seat in the upper deck. An usher stopped me and that has to take the cake for high-handed pettiness." Collectively, these interactions suggest that

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<sup>94</sup> Furman Bisher, "Behold, the Enlightenment," *Atlanta Journal*, April 30, 1968, 1D.

<sup>95</sup> "Braves Handicap," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, September 26, 1971, Atlanta Braves (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center.

both racial and class dynamics served to exaggerate the complaints that some of the Braves' predominately white fan base had with the execution of the stadium's operations by its predominately black and low-waged workforce.<sup>96</sup>

### **The Braves' Financial Woes**

The Braves' declining attendance in the early 1970s led to significant financial strains for the organization. Legally mandated publication of the profits and losses of the corporation that owned the franchise, Atlanta Braves, Inc., a shareholder-owned subsidiary of the Atlanta-LaSalle Company created while the club was still in Milwaukee, clarify the Braves' financial situation during their first decade in Georgia. Atlanta Braves, Inc. turned a profit in each of its first five seasons (1966-1970). It offered shareholders dividends for 1968 (\$1.00 per share) and 1969 (\$1.12 per share). All told, the Braves organization earned \$3,950,276 between 1966 and 1970, more than half of which came from the \$2 million in NL expansion fees they received from the fledgling Montreal Expos and San Diego Padres franchises in 1968. Atlanta Braves, Inc. benefitted further from a series of corporate tax credits. In 1966, a corporate relocation credit enabled Atlanta Braves, Inc. to avoid paying any federal taxes that year. In 1968, the organization was allowed to write off \$492,000 in operating losses. Additionally, Atlanta Braves, Inc. could deduct 68 percent of its players' salaries, which totaled nearly seven million dollars between 1966 and 1975, as depreciating assets for their first ten years as a corporation. Without the 1968 NL expansion fee and significant federal tax benefits, the Braves organization would have either lost money or barely broken even in each of their first five seasons.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Oscar Kahan, "What Ails Braves? Just Ask the Fans!" *Sporting News*, November 8, 1975, 43.

<sup>97</sup> "1967 Season Ticket Renewal Letter," Atlanta Braves (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center; Lester Smith, "Eight Clubs in Majors Boosting Ticket Prices," *Sporting News*, April 6, 1968, 23; "Atlanta Braves, Inc.: Consolidated Statement of Earnings, 1971-1972," Ivan Allen, Jr. Organizations—Atlanta Braves, Inc., 1969-1972, Allen Family Papers, 2.10, Kenan Research Center; Lester Smith, "Braves' Gate, Operating Income Improved in '69," *Sporting News*, January 31, 1970, 47; Lester Smith, "Tax Losses Aid Braves' Banner Profits for '66," *The*

In spite of continued depreciation write-offs, Atlanta Braves, Inc. lost money in four of its last five seasons operating the baseball club. In 1971 and 1972, the Atlanta-LaSalle subsidiary lost more than \$375,000 as revenue from ticket sales declined.<sup>98</sup> Atlanta Braves, Inc. showed a profit of \$345,865 in 1973. In 1974, it fell just short of breaking even, despite the publicity from Hank Aaron's homerun chase. Atlanta Braves, Inc. lost nearly a half-million dollars in 1975, its least successful year of operation. In January 1976, the Atlanta-Lasalle Corporation sold the Braves to emerging media magnate Ted Turner for \$10 million, which they allowed him to pay off over a 10 year period. Atlanta-LaSalle agreed to the liberal payment terms to get out from under a subsidiary that was bound to lose even more money now that its depreciation allowance had come to an end.<sup>99</sup>

A significant contributor to Atlanta Braves, Inc's indebtedness was the investment it made in professional soccer between 1967 and 1972. The Atlanta-LaSalle subsidiary established the Atlanta Chiefs franchise of the nascent North American Soccer League (NASL). The Chiefs posted losses of nearly \$1.5 million for the corporation.<sup>100</sup> Braves executives Bill Bartholomay and Dick Cecil spearheaded the formation of the club in 1967. Like millions of other Americans, Bartholomay and Cecil became soccer fans while watching the 1966 World Cup. England's championship run on their home soil drew high Nielsen ratings for NBC, leading many wealthy investors to believe that professional soccer would become a breakout television hit as professional football had in the late 1950s. From the perspective of Atlanta Braves, Inc.,

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*Sporting News*, January 14, 1967, 28; "Braves Report 1969 Profit of \$347,000," *Washington Post*, January 1, 1970, E2; Lester Smith, "Expansion Inflates Braves' Income," *Sporting News*, March 29, 1969, 27.

<sup>98</sup> "Atlanta Braves, Inc.: Consolidated Statement of Earnings, 1971-1972," Ivan Allen, Jr. Organizations—Atlanta Braves, Inc., 1969-1972, Allen Family Papers, 2.10, Kenan Research Center; Lester Smith, "Tax Losses Aid Braves' Banner Profits for '66," *The Sporting News*, January 14, 1967, 28

<sup>99</sup> Lester Smith, "Braves Move Out of Red- Show Profit of 345,865," *Sporting News*, March 9, 1974, 28.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*; Lester Smith, "1972 Braves Lost 333,327—Even with Benefit of Tax Credit," *Sporting News*, January 27, 1972, 50; Lester Smith, "Braves Post First Loss Since Move to Atlanta," *Sporting News*, January 29, 1972, 39.

professional soccer helped them fill many empty warm-weather dates on the stadium's calendar.<sup>101</sup>

Bartholomay and Cecil joined a number of other well-heeled sportsmen, including Los Angeles Lakers owner Jack Kent Cooke, Kansas City Chiefs owner Lamar Hunt, and Detroit Lions owner William Clay Ford, in forming NASL in 1968, merging two rival professional leagues formed immediately after the World Cup. NASL negotiated a ten-year, multi-million dollar television deal with CBS that placed their games in regular spring and summer weekend timeslots, mirroring the network's presentation of football in the fall. CBS' hopes for a ratings bonanza soon evaporated. Dreadful Nielsen numbers led CBS to cancel its soccer broadcasts after two seasons. No other network dared broadcast NASL games again until 1974.<sup>102</sup>

In their early years, the Chiefs were among the league's best drawing and best performing teams. Atlanta Braves, Inc. hired Welsh soccer star Phil Woosnam to coach the Chiefs and manage its personnel. The Welshman signed up a talented roster of European players that asserted itself almost immediately as one of the league's top teams. Woosnam cut a dashing figure in Atlanta: the British gentleman who captained his cosmopolitan legion from victory to victory. In 1968, he led the Chiefs to an NASL title, the city's first major league championship of any kind. After the season, Woosnam went from being the face of the Atlanta franchise to the face of the entire league. He left the Chiefs to become NASL's executive director, a position he held until the league's demise in 1984. Despite continued success on the field, the Chiefs never recovered the public profile they enjoyed during Woosnam's tenure.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Furman Bisher, "Will Soccer Become Our Cup of Tea?" *Atlanta Journal*, April 21, 1967, 51; "Atlanta Chiefs Official Tara Stadium Program," Sports—Atlanta Chiefs (Subject File), Kenan Research Center.

<sup>102</sup> Martin Kane, "The True Football Gets Its Big Chance," *Sports Illustrated*, March 27, 1967, 16; Dave Brady, "TV Loot is Newest Soccer Goal," *Washington Post*, October 2, 1966, C4; Paul Gardner, "NASL Turning to College Grads in Attempt at Americanization," *Sporting News*, March 24, 1973, 27.

<sup>103</sup> Tom Dial, "Chiefs Anxious to Get Rolling," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 27, 1969, 60.

While the Chiefs remained one of the NASL's winningest teams, the franchise struggled at the box office. In a 1967 letter to their stockholders, Atlanta Braves, Inc. estimated that the new soccer club would draw an average of 15,000 spectators per home date. Even at their peak of popularity, average attendance never reached even half that much. In 1967, the club averaged 6,691 spectators per game. In their 1968 championship season, average attendance fell to 5,794. By 1970, the average crowd at a Chiefs' game was barely 3,000.<sup>104</sup> The best crowds the Chiefs ever drew to Atlanta Stadium were for the exhibition games they played in the 1967 and 1968 seasons against well-known foreign teams, including the British club Manchester City and the Brazilian club Santos, which featured Pele, the world's best known soccer player. These exhibition matches, which were a part of promotional tours in support of NASL, drew an average of 27,000 spectators. Most of these spectators were not regular Chiefs patrons but instead Atlanta consumers in search of a novel event and experience. Many of them likely never saw another Chiefs game in person.<sup>105</sup>

Atlanta's major institutions were enthusiastic boosters of the Chiefs. Local broadcast and print media provided the team with ample coverage in its early years. The city's newspaper columnists, always on the lookout for amenities that made Atlanta seem more cosmopolitan, were fervent supporters of the Chiefs. The arrival of professional soccer, numerous local columnists pronounced, demonstrated Atlanta's new stature as an international city. The Braves introduced the Chiefs to their fans by holding a 10 minute, inter-squad exhibition match at Atlanta Stadium right before an April 1967 game. Governor Lester Maddox declared April 16<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Furman Bisher, "Chiefs Cannot Continue as Charity Case," *Atlanta Journal*, September 25, 1968, 1D; Norman Abey, "Atlanta May Lose Chiefs," *Atlanta Journal*, September 12, 1971, 1D; "Atlanta Chiefs History," Sports—Atlanta Chiefs (Subject File), Kenan Research Center; "Atlanta No Windfall for Sports Ventures," *UPI Report*, June 7, 1968: Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium (Subject Folder 1 of 4), Kenan Research Center.

<sup>105</sup> "Atlanta Chiefs Official Tara Stadium Program," Atlanta Chiefs (Subject File), Kenan Research Center; "Woosnam of Atlanta Voted Top Coach in Pro Soccer," *Sporting News*, September 28, 1968, 46; "Soccer to 'Em Phil," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 8, 1968, 4; "Welcome Champs," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 25, 1968, 8.

through 23<sup>rd</sup> 1967 as “Soccer Week.” The Georgia Department of Health sponsored clinics throughout the state with Chiefs players during “Soccer Week,” teaching children how to play the sport. “Soccer Week” kick-started the formation of municipal youth soccer leagues throughout the region. The number of amateur soccer players in metropolitan Atlanta increased from 200 in 1967 to more than 20,000 by 1972.<sup>106</sup>

Enthusiasm for soccer as a youth participatory sport in suburban Atlanta did not translate into financial success for the Chiefs. During the Chiefs’ first five years of play (1967-1971), Atlanta Braves, Inc. reported annual losses of between \$200,000 and \$300,000 on the team. Beginning in 1971, the losses incurred by the Chiefs, when combined with the Braves baseball club’s dwindling revenue, were significant enough to put the entirety of Atlanta Braves, Inc. into the red for the first time. Tom Cousins’ Omni Group purchased the Chiefs in 1973 but ended up disbanding them after one, highly unprofitable season. The financial struggles of the Chiefs were not unusual in NASL. Twelve of the league’s 17 teams folded between 1968 and 1972, making the Chiefs one of the longest tenured of the league’s original franchises.<sup>107</sup>

The Braves’ financial struggles proved costly for Atlanta taxpayers, who were obligated to pay two-thirds of the annual balance toward stadium bond retirement not covered by ticket sales at the facility. As revenue from ticket sales dwindled, the city of Atlanta was forced to

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<sup>106</sup> “Atlanta Chiefs Official 1967 Program,” Atlanta Chiefs (Subject File), Kenan Research Center; “Soccer Gets Solid Round of Applause,” *Atlanta Constitution*, April 8, 1967, 8; Jim Minter, “Love Affair Born as Soccer Debuts,” *Atlanta Journal*, April 23, 1967, 53; “Atlanta Chiefs Official Tara Stadium Program,” Atlanta Chiefs (Subject File), Kenan Research Center; “Mayor Allen Kicks Off Youth Soccer Program,” *Atlanta Constitution*, June 21, 1968, 17.

<sup>107</sup> “Atlanta Braves, Inc.: Consolidated Statement of Earnings, 1971-1972,” Ivan Allen, Jr. Organizations—Atlanta Braves, Inc., 1969-1972, Allen Family Papers, 2.10, Kenan Research Center; “Braves Report 1969 Profit of \$347,000,” *Washington Post*, January 1, 1970, E2; Wayne Minshe, “Braves Show Profit Despite a \$300,000 Soccer Club Deficit,” *Sporting News*, February 3, 1968, 29; Furman Bisher, “Chiefs Cannot Continue as Charity Case,” *Atlanta Journal*, September 25, 1968, 1D; Wayne Minshe, “Soccer Drops \$300,000, Say Braves,” *Atlanta Constitution*, April 15, 1968, 1D; “Braves Say They Lost Over a Million in Soccer,” *New York Times*, January 9, 1972, S9; “Soccer Ran, Fell, Now Tries Walking,” *Atlanta Constitution*, April 12, 1972, 3D; “Atlanta Chiefs Official Tara Stadium Program,” Sports—Atlanta Hawks (Subject File), Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Georgia; Alex Yanniss, “Atlanta Soccer Will Be Revived,” *New York Times*, January 7, 1973, 278.

contribute increasing amounts of money toward the retirement of the \$18 million in municipal bonds issued to finance the stadium. In 1965, the Braves, the primary tenants of Atlanta Stadium, had agreed to pay 7.5 percent of gross proceeds per event date for 25 years to the Stadium Authority toward the \$1.08 million required annually for repayment with interest. In 1971, the first year that the Braves were contractually obligated to contribute to the debt repayment, the Stadium Authority assumed that excises on Braves' tickets would contribute approximately \$500,000 toward the bond's retirement, but declining attendance limited the Braves' contribution to \$313,531. The city delved into its parks improvement fund to make up the difference. The following year, the Braves contributed a mere \$163,000 towards bond retirement, forcing the city to once again dip into its discretionary funds.<sup>108</sup> Falcons' ticket sales, which consisted primarily of season ticket purchases, proved a far more consistent contributor toward bond repayment. Excises from Falcons tickets contributed approximately \$300,000 per season, or 30%, toward the annual stadium bond repayments. Parking income from Falcons games, which was subject to the 7.5 percent tax on stadium event day revenue, contributed an additional \$250,000 annually toward bond retirement.<sup>109</sup>

“We never envisioned the stadium completely paying for itself. We did expect some bonanza years though,” Stadium Authority chairman Arthur Montgomery said, trying to explain away the lack of revenue produced by the municipally financed venue. Debt from Atlanta Stadium, which was rechristened into the more inclusive Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium in 1976, proved to be a quarter-century long drain on the city's recreation budget and the county's general fund, costing local taxpayers more than \$30 million between 1965 and 1991, more than

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<sup>108</sup> Jim Stewart, “Empty Seats Cost Us \$800,000,” *Atlanta Constitution*, October 3, 1972, 1A.

<sup>109</sup> William A. Schaeffer & Lawrence S. Davidson, *The Economic Impact of Falcons on Atlanta, 1984* (Atlanta: Atlanta Falcons, 1984), 14; William A. Schaeffer & Lawrence S. Davidson, *The Economic Impact of the Falcons on Atlanta, 1973* (Atlanta: Atlanta Falcons, 1973), 12.

the original cost of building the facility. Roughly \$16 million of the cost came from debt service for the original stadium bonds while an additional \$14 million in taxes accrued from a 1985 bond issued to pay for improvements to the decaying facility. In 1993, the privately-financed Atlanta Olympic Committee, which brought the summer games to the city three years later, earmarked \$11 million in its \$1.7 billion budget to retire the remaining debt on Atlanta Stadium.<sup>110</sup>

### **The Futility of the Falcons**

The “Loserville” epithet applied not only to the Braves. The expansion Atlanta Falcons of the NFL, the Braves’ co-tenant at Atlanta Stadium, earned an even stronger reputation for futility. Ten years into their existence, Furman Bisher characterized the Falcons as a franchise that “still hasn’t been able to get out of the starting gate.”<sup>111</sup> The Falcons, who debuted in 1966, posted two winning seasons in their first ten. They failed to make the NFL playoffs until 1978, their thirteenth season in the league. The Falcons earned playoff births on only three occasions during their quarter-century tenancy at Atlanta Stadium. The football crazy Atlanta metropolitan area supported a season ticket base of nearly 40,000 through many lean years of Falcons football, but as the 1960s turned into the 1970s, fan patience wore out.

The futility of the Falcons in their early years must be credited in large part to team owner Rankin Smith’s reliance on close associates with little or no experience in professional football to manage the operations of the franchise. “I don’t know anything about football,” Smith was widely quoted as saying when he purchased the Falcons, stating on numerous occasions that he intended “to hire knowledgeable, capable individuals to handle the technical aspects of the game.”<sup>112</sup> The aloof Smith did not turn control of the franchise over to experts

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid; “The Stadium Deal: A Final Hurdle,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 3, 1993, D4;

<sup>111</sup> Furman Bisher, “NFC Western,” *Sporting News*, September 11, 1976, 56.

<sup>112</sup> John Logue, “Smith Begins Life at 40 Certain of Grid Success,” *Atlanta Journal*, July 1, 1965, 1; “Owner Rankin Smith Will Let Football Men Run Atlanta Team” *Washington Post*, July 25, 1965, C3.



though. The friends and business associates he empowered in the Falcons organization proved unable to meet the challenges of managing a professional football team. Throughout his ownership, Smith remained behind-the-scenes, avoiding media scrutiny especially when the team played poorly.<sup>113</sup>

“Right from the get-go, you didn’t have football people running the organization and they still haven’t let go,” former Atlanta Falcon Lou Kirouac said shortly before Rankin Smith’s 1997 death.<sup>114</sup> Kirouac’s views reflected a broad and durable consensus among the Atlanta media and area football fans. Smith and his associates remained stationary targets for fan outrage for decades. This critique of the Falcons organization had calcified into common sense by the late 1960s and lasted until Smith’s family sold the club to Home Depot founder Arthur Blank in 2002.<sup>115</sup>

Insurance executive Frank Wall, a Smith confidante, served as the franchise’s first general manager, directing team personnel decisions from 1966 until he stepped down in 1970. Wall continued to play an important role in player-personnel for years after he dropped the general manager’s title. His failures as a judge of player talent hamstrung the Falcons’ coaching staff as they tried to build a competitive team. Most notoriously, Wall was the architect of the Falcons’ 16-member 1967 draft class, which was arguably the worst in NFL history. None of the 16 players that Wall drafted played well enough in training camp to earn a spot on the Falcons’ roster, which was already one of the weakest in the league.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Lou Kirouac interview by the author, August 13, 2013, 30, 31; “The Falcons of 66,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, September 4, 1966, 1-2.

<sup>114</sup> “The Fans’ Corner: Where are They Now?” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* November 17, 1996, 2E.

<sup>115</sup> Lucy Soto and Doug Payne, “Rankin Smith, 1924-1997,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 27, 1997, 1; “Fans’ Patience with Falcons has Flown the Coop,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, December 8, 1996, 13J; Rankin Smith, “Falcon Owner Turns on His Critics,” *Pro Football Weekly*, September 1, 1968, Atlanta Falcons Folders, Professional Football Hall of Fame Research Library.

<sup>116</sup> “*Falcons Facts*: February 1967,” Atlanta Falcons Folders, Professional Football Hall of Fame, Research Library.

Wall and Smith mishandled the hiring of their first head coach, settling on a questionable candidate after they spent months pursuing two of the best known coaches in the country. The Falcons offered their coaching job to both the Green Bay Packers' Vince Lombardi and former Cleveland Browns coach Paul Brown. Smith offered both men contracts that would have given them complete control over team operations and annual salaries that would have made them the highest paid coaches in football, but both turned down the Falcons job.<sup>117</sup> Atlanta settled on Packers assistant Norb Hecker in January 1966, two months after Smith and his associates made the unprecedented move of conducting the team's collegiate draft without a head coach in place. Smith called Lombardi seeking out a reference on Hecker, but the Packers coach refused to recommend his assistant for the job. The Falcons owner decided to hire Hecker anyway, believing that Lombardi was bluffing him in hopes of keeping the 39-year old on his staff.<sup>118</sup>

Constraining the Falcons even further in their early years was the lack of player talent available to them. The Falcons culled most of their 1966 roster from a league-organized expansion draft. The other 14 NFL clubs were allowed to protect 29 of their 40 roster players from selection, forcing Atlanta to build its team from a collection of marginal professional players. Inevitably, expansion clubs face serious challenges as they try to assemble a competitive roster, but the quality of players available in the 1966 league-sponsored draft was further diminished by the existence of the rival AFL. The 400 players signed to the AFL's nine teams sapped the pool of available professional football talent even further. Moreover, the AFL and NFL were in the midst of a bidding war for talented players, which drove up the

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<sup>117</sup> "Paul Brown Talks NFL Atlanta Post," *Washington Post*, August 6, 1965, 14; "Lombardi, Atlanta Had 'Serious' Talks" *Atlanta Journal*, December 23, 1965, 1.

<sup>118</sup> Furman Bisher, *Atlanta Falcons: Violence and Victory* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 29; Jack Wilkinson, "The Fans' Corner: Where are They Now?" *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 17, 1996, 2E; Jesse Outlar, "Falcons Hire Norb Hecker," *Atlanta Constitution* January 27, 1966, 47.

price of competent available players considerably. NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle characterized the expansion draft as being “as liberal as possible,” noting that the team had also received an extra selection in each of the first five rounds of the November 1965 NFL collegiate draft.<sup>119</sup> Falcons linebacker and 1966 team captain Bill Jobko characterized the roster that Wall and Smith had assembled quite differently, describing it bluntly as “a bunch of old guys nobody wanted anymore.”<sup>120</sup>

Hecker, who had served as a Lombardi assistant for six seasons, tried to transform the Falcons’ ragtag roster into something resembling the world champion Packers by running his 1966 training camp in the style of his old boss. The Falcons coach brought his team to a Baptist retreat deep in North Carolina’s Blue Ridge Mountains, taught them the Packers’ playbook, and put them through a rigorous conditioning program that resembled Marine boot-camp.<sup>121</sup> “We were running Green Bay’s offense,” Falcons tight end Taz Anderson said years later, “but unfortunately, we had Atlanta’s personnel.”<sup>122</sup>

The 1966 Atlanta Falcons played unequivocally inspired football for Hecker, winning three of their fourteen games, a promising start for an expansion club built from other team’s spare parts.<sup>123</sup> The Falcons’ defense, led by NFL Rookie of the Year and number one draft pick Tommy Nobis, helped the team remain competitive in many games while their offense sputtered.<sup>124</sup> Throughout their early seasons, the Falcons were perpetually “losing but

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<sup>119</sup> “1966 Atlanta Falcons Fact Book,” Atlanta Falcons Folders, Professional Football Hall of Fame Research Library; “Falcons Await NFL ‘Freeze,’” *Chicago Defender*, February 10, 1966, 40; “Rozelle Asks Help for Falcons,” *Chicago Defender*, January 25, 1966, 28; Jim Minter, “Rozelle: Atlanta Gets 1965 Break,” *Atlanta Journal*, July 1, 1965, 70; “Falcons to Get Choice of 8 or 10,” *Atlanta Constitution*, February 14, 1966, 1D.

<sup>120</sup> Jack Wilkinson, “Where are They Now?” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 17, 1996, 2E.

<sup>121</sup> Furman Bisher, *Atlanta Falcons: Violence and Victory*, 29; Jack Wilkinson, “The Fans’ Corner: Where are They Now?” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 17, 1996, 2E; Jesse Outlar, “Falcons Hire Norb Hecker” *Atlanta Constitution* January 27, 1966, 47; “ATL Falcons” *Sports Illustrated*, September 12, 1966, 44.

<sup>122</sup> “Where are They Now?” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 17, 1996, 2E.

<sup>123</sup> Jim Minter, “Falcons Pull It Off Big; ‘Capitol Ave Miracle,’” *Atlanta Journal*, December 12, 1966, 53.

<sup>124</sup> Jack Wilkinson, “Where are They Now?” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 17, 1996, 2E

improving,” a phrase that Hecker used repeatedly in post-game press conferences. “Losing but improving” contented the fans and the media in year one but quickly became a public relations cliché that aggravated the denizens of the stands and the press box in equal measure.<sup>125</sup>

Hecker tried to emphasize how well his team played against top-notch NFL talent, but when his “losing but improving” Falcons failed to remain competitive at home, fans developed the habit of leaving games early in large numbers. Less than a month into the Falcons’ inaugural season, most fans had started responding to large Falcons deficits by heading for the exits, often during the third quarter. A 56-3 drubbing by the Packers in late October 1966 was likely the most painful instance of this for Hecker, especially after his old boss Vince Lombardi told reporters after the game that the Falcons were “not a tough team.”<sup>126</sup> By the end of the 1967 season, Atlanta Stadium fans treated the struggling Falcons to frequent rounds of hometown boos. By the end of the 1968 season, fewer than 26,000 of the more than 55,000 fans who bought tickets to the last place Falcons’ home finale against San Francisco bothered to attend.<sup>127</sup>

Rankin Smith fired Norb Hecker, who had compiled a 4-26-1 record, early in the 1968 season, replacing him with an even sterner taskmaster, former Minnesota coach Norm Van Brocklin. A legendary former player, Van Brocklin had been a successful coach for the Vikings, but was fired after earning the enmity of virtually everyone in that organization. Van Brocklin

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<sup>125</sup> “Falcons Follow Form, ‘Losing and Improving’” *Atlanta Journal*, October 31, 1966, 10; Jim Minter, “Falcon ‘moral victory’ An Affair to Remember,” *Atlanta Journal*, November 14, 1966, 1D; Jim Minter, “Should Have Won, Will Win, Vow Mad Falcons,” *Atlanta Journal*, September 12, 1966, 47.

<sup>126</sup> Jim Minter, “Lombardi: Falcons Not ‘Tough’ Team,” *Atlanta Journal*, October 24, 1966, 54; Al Thomy, “Packers ‘Can’ Falcons, 56-3,” *Atlanta Constitution*, October 24, 1966, 39; “Falcons Spirit Willing But Flesh Still Weak,” *Atlanta Journal*, October 3, 1966, 12.

<sup>127</sup> Darrell Simmons, “Falcons Miss Chances During Frozen Finale,” *Atlanta Journal*, December 16, 1968, 1D; Al Thomy, “Eagles Fly High Early to Rap Falcons, 38-7,” *Atlanta Constitution*, October 9, 1967, 12; Charlie Roberts, “49ers Defend Atlanta’s Defenseless Forces,” *Atlanta Constitution*, October 17, 1966, 38; Furman Bisher, *Atlanta Falcons: Violence and Victory*, 46, 51-52, 75.

shared Hecker's boot camp-like approach to training, but steeped it in his far more antagonistic personality, leading several players to quit soon after he took command. Van Brocklin wrestled control over personnel decisions away from Wall and cleaned house, replacing all but 14 players from the 1968 roster by the start of the 1969 season.<sup>128</sup> Van Brocklin helped improve the Falcons considerably, posting winning records in 1971 (7-6-1) and 1973 (9-5), but fans, players, and media alike clamored successfully for the unpopular coach's firing when the team's fortunes again faded during a last-place 1974 campaign.<sup>129</sup>

Von Brocklin had a notably poor rapport with his players, particularly the African American players on the Falcons' roster. Numerous African American players accused Van Brocklin of being a racist, not only in the manner that he addressed them, but also in his roster and playing time decisions. Other black players disagreed with the assessment, noting that their highly unpopular, self-described curmudgeon of a coach was mean-spirited and crass in all of his dealings.<sup>130</sup> The mutual hostility that developed between Van Brocklin and his black players was one of several instances of strained race relations during the early history of the Atlanta Falcons. In 1969, a group of black players complained to management that they received fewer off-season speaking engagements from non-profits and endorsement offers from local businesses than their white teammates. Falcons' management deflected the issue, characterizing it as a product of local preferences and beyond the control of the organization.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 46-52; "Falcons Fire Brocklin," *Chicago Defender*, November 6, 1974, 35; Al Thomy, "I'm Glad It's Over," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 2, 1968, 25; Steve Hummer, "NFL: Is this the Worst Falcons Season Ever? The Five Most Miserable Years," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 4, 2007, 6E.

<sup>129</sup> "Colorful Van Brocklin Takes Tough Job," *Chicago Tribune*, October 2, 1968, E3; Al Thomy, "Norm's Exit from Atlanta Marked By Bitter Volleys," *Sporting News*, November 23, 1974, 18.

<sup>130</sup> Lewis Grizzard, "Dutchman Blasted by Ex-Falcons," *Atlanta Journal*, October 26, 1972, 1D; Frank Hyland, "Van Brocklin," *Atlanta Journal*, October 31, 1972, 1D.

<sup>131</sup> Jim Minter, "Let's Not Discriminate," *Atlanta Journal*, January 10, 1969, 1D.

In 1968, the Atlanta NAACP accused the Falcons of having a “racial policy” which led to the trade of several black players. The organization said the Falcons had one of the league’s whitest rosters and complained that the team had allowed “Dixie” to be played at a 1967 game. Smith denied the accusations adamantly, noting that the Falcons were one of the few Atlanta institutions that had a policy against the playing of “Dixie” at its events, which one marching band had violated the previous season. Additionally, Smith said that the Falcons had the league’s only full-time African American scout. At the time of the accusation, the Falcons had seven African American players (four of whom were starters) on their roster, including Junior Coffey, the team’s 1967 Most Valuable Player. Despite Smith’s protestations, the team’s earliest signings included few black players, but the demographics of the Falcons’ roster had changed considerably by the time the Atlanta NAACP filed their complaint.<sup>132</sup>

The collapse of Van Brocklin’s Falcons into a last place team in 1974 revealed a larger problem for the organization: a failure to win the durable allegiance of their season ticket holding base, who had grown frustrated with the direction of the perpetually flagging organization. Falcons’ ticket buyers broke an NFL record for no shows during the 1974 season. Approximately 35.1 percent (143,488) of the tickets purchased to Falcons games at Atlanta Stadium that season went unused, more than four times the league’s average no-show rate that season.<sup>133</sup> More than 40,000 purchased tickets to each of the Falcons’ final two home dates went unused. On December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1974, 40,302 ticket holders passed up the Falcons’ four o’clock

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<sup>132</sup> “Falcons Deal Off Ron Smith, Deny Racial Discrimination,” *Washington Post*, January 9, 1968, D3; “Falcons Deny Unfair Race Practices,” *Chicago Defender*, January 9, 1968, 26; Bob Hertz, “NAACP Protests Falcon ‘Policy,’” *Atlanta Journal*, January 8, 1968, 1C; Bob Hertz, “NAACP Complaints a Falcon Puzzle,” *Atlanta Journal*, January 9, 1969, 1C; “‘Dixie’ strikes sour notes in Dome,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, September 12, 1992 A14; “White Falcons,” *Atlanta Constitution*, January 22, 1966, 4.

<sup>133</sup> David Moffit, “Falcons Whip Packers in Atlanta’s ‘No-Show Bowl,’” *Sporting News*, December 28, 1974, 16; “48,830 Fail to Show for Falcon Game,” *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, December 16, 1974, 1; William A. Schaeffer & Lawrence S. Davidson, *The Economic Impact of Falcons on Atlanta*, 1984, 3-8.

Sunday divisional matchup against the Los Angeles Rams, breaking the league's previous record for no-shows by more than 7,000. The *Journal* and the *Constitution* blamed the crowd of 18,648, the smallest in Falcons history, on the 36 degree game-time temperature and the availability of the game on local television. On December 15<sup>th</sup>, 1974, the Falcons hosted the Packers for their home finale on a similarly brisk Sunday afternoon. This time, 48,830 ticket buyers passed up the game, enabling the Falcons to break their own NFL single-game no-show record by more than 8,000.<sup>134</sup>

### **The Falcons' Fan Base**

The lack of local interest in the Falcons, even among their season ticket holders, by the mid-1970s was remarkable, considering the early enthusiasm for professional football in Georgia. When the NFL granted Atlanta an expansion franchise in June 1965, fans swamped Rankin Smith's business office with ticket requests. Season ticket sales began in late October, weeks before the team had any players and months before it had a coach. In January 1966, the Falcons cut off season ticket sales at 45,000, a middle-of-the-pack figure in the NFL but nearly twice as many as the previous expansion club, the Minnesota Vikings, had sold five years earlier.<sup>135</sup> Adopting a common league practice, Smith capped season ticket sales to allow fans who could not afford \$48 season passes the opportunity to see the team in person. "We don't want this to be a rich man's show," Rankin Smith said of his decision, "you take a young fellow

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid; Ron Hudspeth, "Falcon Diary," *Atlanta Journal*, December 3, 1974, 1D; Al Thomy, "An Icy Cold Holding Ending: LA Easy Victor in Studio Game," *Atlanta Constitution*, December 2, 1974 1D; "Bad Weather, Bad Team" *Atlanta Journal*, December 2, 1974, 1D; David Moffit, "40,000 Empty Seats at Ram Feast," *Sporting News*, December 14, 1974, 24; Furman Bisher, "Failure Over-Exercised," *Atlanta Journal*, December 3, 1974, 1D; David Moffit, "Falcons Whip Packers in Atlanta's 'No-Show Bowl,'" *Sporting News*, December 28, 1974, 16; "48,830 Fail to Show for Falcon Game," *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, December 16, 1974, 1.

<sup>135</sup> "Atlanta Tickets Buyers Learn Location Facts," *Kansas City Times*, March 23, 1966, 15; "Falcon Fans Unhappy," *Chicago Tribune*, March 23, 1966, C2; "Atlanta to Stop Ticket Drive, 40K Sold," *Washington Post*, December 23, 1965, B5; Bill Clark, "Falcons Set to Launch Ticket Drive," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 29, 1965, 53; "Falcons Tickets Top Vikings' NFL Record," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 25, 1965, 42.

who wants to take his wife and another couple to a game. That's \$24 in tickets and maybe he has to spend \$6 for a babysitter. He couldn't afford to do that all season, but he could do it for one or two games."<sup>136</sup>

"A lot of times people were buying tickets for the show that was going to be there," Falcons linebacker Tommy Nobis said.<sup>137</sup> NFL stars like the Baltimore Colts Johnny Unitas and the Cleveland Browns Jim Brown drew standing ovations from the Atlanta Stadium crowd. Many spectators at early Falcons games were more interested in the novelty of gazing at professional football's stars than they were in supporting the hometown team, mirroring a common phenomenon at Braves games. Plenty of local customers at every Falcons game were there to cheer on the team from their original hometown. Unlike baseball, football was already a mass spectator sport in Georgia. The Falcons struggled to win the fealty of fans whose primary commitments were to collegiate and high school programs, but they succeeded at selling tickets to fans who wanted to see top-notch professional talent.<sup>138</sup>

Virtually everyone I interviewed characterized Falcons spectators in the 1960s and early 1970s as predominately white and even more predominately white collar than the Braves' fanbase. In 1977, *Sports Illustrated's* Roy Blount Jr. wrote that, in the franchise's early years, the Falcons "sold plenty of season tickets to corporations and to upper class families who rode buses to the stadium from their private clubs, the wives in the same sort of dressy dresses and crisp corsages they wore to Tech games."<sup>139</sup> A 1968 market research study of the Falcons shuttle bus ridership indicates that the demographics of the team's spectators mirrored the widely-held

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<sup>136</sup> Bill Clark, "Falcons Slate Prices; Choose Team Emblem," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 5, 1965, 17.

<sup>137</sup> Tommy Nobis interview by the author, July 22, 2013, 47 transcript.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid; "Unitas Pulls the Trigger—Falcons Surrender, 49-7," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 13, 1967, 1D; Karl Green interview by the author, 27; Matt Winkeljoh, "Low fan ceiling," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, December 2, 2001, 1D; Wayne Minshew interview by the author, 51.

<sup>139</sup> Roy Blount, "Losersville U.S.A.," *Sports Illustrated*, March 21, 1977, 80.



perception that the Sunday afternoon crowd at Atlanta Stadium consisted primarily of the well-to-do. Pollsters surveyed 205 patrons from all eight shuttle bus stops on a gorgeous Sunday afternoon without any other major conflicting events in the city. At the time, one-quarter of Falcons fans used a shuttle service to get to the stadium. All 205 patrons surveyed were white while three-quarters of them were male. Sixty percent of adult riders were college-educated and 77 percent of them earned more than \$10,000 annually, which was approximately one and one-third times the nation's median household income in 1968.<sup>140</sup>

As the novelty of professional football in Atlanta faded, the Falcons' fanbase became more broadly suburban, but not more broadly regional. Simultaneously, the presence of the metropolitan area's traditional elite became less pronounced as Sunday afternoons at Atlanta Stadium grew unfashionable. A 1973 market research study commissioned by the Falcons estimated that 71.3 percent of game attendees between 1966 and 1972 came from the five-county metropolitan area. Nearly three-quarters of game attendees from the metropolitan area came from either Northeast or Northwest Atlanta and its adjoining suburbs. A mere seven percent of attendees came from out-of-state, dispelling the idea that the team would become a major regional draw. The penetration of big-time college football across the Southeast and the loyalty of local fans to their state schools limited the regional spectator appeal of professional football relative to MLB, on which Atlanta held a regional monopoly. Moreover, the Braves' extensive regional media footprint enabled them to market their product far more effectively across the Southeast than the Falcons.<sup>141</sup> A similar 1984 study found that 70 percent of Falcons live

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<sup>140</sup> "Market Operations Research: The Demographic Characteristics of People Who Ride Buses to Atlanta Falcons Games," Atlanta Falcons Folders, Professional Football Hall of Fame Research Library.

<sup>141</sup> William Schaeffer & Lawrence Davidson, *Econ Impact of Falcons on Atlanta, 1973*, 1, 6-8.

spectators between 1966 and 1983 had come from the then-seven core metropolitan counties, six out of seven of whom came from the suburbs rather than Atlanta proper.<sup>142</sup>

As the appeal of the Falcons broadened, it failed to deepen. No longer a novelty, Falcons tickets, which entitled a customer to watch the frequently atrocious team, got lost in the shuffle of the abounding leisure options available in Metropolitan Atlanta. Falcons attendance fell below the NFL average in 30 of their first 35 seasons. Between 1966 and 1971, the team supported a steady season ticket base that vacillated between 45,000 and the high 30,000s. Average attendance in each of those seasons reached 50,000 per game, although Falcons ownership was disturbed by the growing number of Atlanta Stadium no-shows. In 1968, approximately 17 percent of Falcons tickets purchased went unused, depriving the team of the additional in-stadium revenue their presence would have generated. Moreover, the empty patches that no shows created in the stadium made the team's product look undesirable to television viewers. The team found it increasingly difficult to sell out its stock of individual game tickets, leaving thousands of seats unsold for each of their 1970 home dates.<sup>143</sup>

To shore up the team's ticket revenue, the Falcons tried to eliminate the problem of selling seats to individual games in 1971 by increasing the number of season tickets it offered for sale. Between 1971 and 1974, the franchise increased the number of season passes it offered fans from 45,000 to 55,000, turning virtually every seat in the stadium into the domain of a season ticket holder. The decision corresponded with an uptick in the team's performance under Van Brocklin, enabling the franchise to meet a resurgent local demand while inoculating itself against dips in revenue and, starting in 1973, local television blackouts if the team's fortunes

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<sup>142</sup> William Schaeffer & Lawrence Davidson, *The Economic Impact of the Falcons on Atlanta, 1984*, 1, 5-6, 11

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7; "Atlanta Falcons Pre-Season Prospectus 1969," Atlanta Falcons Folders, Professional Football Hall of Fame Research Library; "Atlanta Falcons, Pre-Season Prospectus, 1971," Atlanta Falcons Folders, Professional Football Hall of Fame, Research Library; Furman Bisher, *Atlanta Falcons: Violence and Victory*, 75.

turned for the worse. The expansion of season ticket sales backfired during the Falcons' disappointing 1974 season, as average attendance fell below 38,000 and the spectacle of no-shows at Atlanta Stadium made the team a national laughingstock. Falcons season ticket sales fell off by more than 12,500 seats that off-season, leading the team to stop providing the press with firm sales figures for several seasons. In the late 1970s, the Falcons started making their season ticket sales numbers public again once the total surpassed 40,000, corresponding to an uptick in the team's performance.<sup>144</sup>

### **The Falcons and the Media**

The spectacle of no-shows at Atlanta Stadium during the 1974 season was one of the few times that the national sports media paid much attention to the Falcons. The team remained virtually invisible on the national stage for their entire tenure at Atlanta Stadium. During the 1970s, the Falcons made the fewest appearances (3) of any NFL franchise on ABC's *Monday Night Football*, the premiere national television showcase for professional football.<sup>145</sup> In 1974, CBS made the fateful decision to feature the promising, young Falcons team on seven of its national broadcasts, offering the club more national appearances in one season than in their previous four years combined. The 1974 Falcons proved to be a ratings debacle for the network. The three-win team drew the league's lowest national television ratings. That season, the Falcons also endured their worst local television ratings in franchise history.<sup>146</sup>

The local media, too, proved notably unsympathetic to the Falcons, often with good reason. Before the Falcons even played a regular season game, the team had developed a

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<sup>144</sup> William Schaeffer & Lawrence Davidson, *The Economic Impact of the Falcons on Atlanta, 1984*, 7; Al Thomy, "Falcon Ticket Figures are Vague," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 18, 1975, 1C; "Falcons Fast Facts 1974," Atlanta Falcons Folders, Professional Football Hall of Fame Research Library; Furman Bisher, *Atlanta Falcons: Violence and Victory*, 15; Al Thomy, "Falcon Patrons Down 12,564," *Atlanta Journal* April 3, 1975, 1D; Al Thomy, "Falcon Sales Take Nosedive," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 3, 1968, 59.

<sup>145</sup> "Falcons Newsletter Fall 1974," Atlanta Falcons Folders, Professional Football Hall of Fame, Research Library.

<sup>146</sup> Al Thomy, "TV Flop: Falcons a Disappointment to CBS, Too," *Atlanta Constitution*, December 9, 1974, 1D.

contentious relationship with the Atlanta press. Norb Hecker accused the media of “leaking” information to opposing teams prior to their September 1966 home opener, setting the tone for his rapport with local sportswriters.<sup>147</sup> “Mr. Falcon” Tommy Nobis, the linebacker who became the face of the franchise, had numerous run-ins with the Atlanta media. While the All-Pro linebacker won the universal respect of teammates, coaches, and opponents, his intense and brooding personality clashed with a local press that often went straight to him for answers on the Falcons’ shortcomings.<sup>148</sup>

The hostility between the press and Hecker’s successor, Norm Van Brocklin, reached the point of physical violence. During the Falcons’ 1971 training camp in Greenville, South Carolina, Van Brocklin choked the *Atlanta Journal*’s Frank Hyland by his necktie for “smart-alecking” during a welcome dinner the team held for its traveling press corps. Assistant coaches restrained Van Brocklin, who, remarkably, kept his job after the physical confrontation, which was far from the first of his career.<sup>149</sup> For a franchise that gave its head coach enough leeway to keep his job after assaulting a reporter, the Falcons proved awfully sensitive to press criticism. In 1976, the Falcons pulled their advertising from the *Journal* for the season after two columnists wrote unfavorably about the way the club was being managed.<sup>150</sup>

The Falcons tried to improve their public image by obliging their players and coaches to participate in the team’s extensive charitable enterprises. During the 1960s and 1970s, Falcons players and coaches made an average of 150 appearances per year for local charities with a

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<sup>147</sup> Jim Minter, “NFL ‘Leaks’ Burn Hecker,” *Atlanta Journal*, September 10, 1966, 10.

<sup>148</sup> Al Thomy, “Nobis, NFL Rookie of Year, Bargain at Any Price—Hecker,” *Sporting News*, January 7, 1967, 5; Jesse Outlar, “Mr. Nobis Makes His Point(s), And All the Falcons Say Thanks,” *Atlanta Constitution*, October 30, 1967, 37; Furman Bisher, *Atlanta Falcons: Violence and Victory*, 105-106.

<sup>149</sup> “Dutchman, Writer Get into Scuffle,” *Atlanta Constitution*, August 26, 1971, 1D; Bob Oates, “NFC Western,” *Sporting News*, September 25, 1971, 46; “Van Brocklin and Writer Involved in Heated Row,” *Atlanta Journal*, August 9, 1971, 1D; “Scorecard,” *Sports Illustrated*, September 13, 1971, 12.

<sup>150</sup> “Falcons, Hometown Paper Feuding,” *Sporting News*, August 3, 1976, 44.

particular emphasis on hosting football camps for boys in underprivileged sections of Atlanta. Much like their Braves counterparts, Falcons players made goodwill junkets throughout the Southeast, spoke at civic organization dinners across Georgia, and sat for frequent autograph sessions at Rich's department store branches throughout the metropolitan area. For a number of years, Falcons players formed a traveling, off-season all-star basketball team that raised funds for charities throughout the Southeast.<sup>151</sup> Despite the best efforts of Falcons players, the franchise had the least favorable public image among Atlanta's franchises.

### **The Falcons and Atlanta Stadium**

The Falcons organization blamed many of its problems on their status as tenants at Atlanta Stadium, which forced them to share gameday revenue with the Braves as well as the Stadium Authority. In 1971, owner Rankin Smith threatened to move the team's preseason games permanently to Georgia Tech's Grant Field, but failed to reach a revenue agreement with the school. In 1973, he responded to a proposal by Fulton County to impose a new excise tax on tickets by threatening to move the Falcons games and operations to a neighboring county when his initial ten-year lease ended in 1975. Smith ended up renewing his lease at the Stadium for an additional fifteen years when the tax proposal floundered. Moreover, he could not find a suburban government interested in helping him finance a new playing facility.<sup>152</sup> Rumors persisted throughout the 1970s that the Falcons owner was hurting financially and looking to sell the franchise. A 1974 dispute between Smith and the IRS over the amount of depreciation from player salaries he claimed on his income taxes convinced some league insiders that the expenses

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<sup>151</sup> "Falcons Facts: May 1967, July 1967, June 1969, June 1972," Atlanta Falcons Folders, Professional Football Hall of Fame Research Library; William Schaeffer & Lawrence Davidson, *The Economic Impact of the Falcons on Atlanta, 1984*, 1.

<sup>152</sup> "Falcons to Tech?" *Atlanta Journal*, August 9, 1971, 1D; Bud Shaw, "The Dinosaur on Capitol Avenue," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 26, 1984, 1C.

of owning an NFL franchise had imperiled his estimated \$50 million fortune. Smith won the suit but whispers continued about his intentions for the franchise. In 1978, Smith cut the club's operational expenses considerably by moving the team's headquarters out of Atlanta Stadium and into an office complex in Gwinnett County. Relocating 30 miles northeast of downtown slashed the club's rent by more than half and offered it greater autonomy as it planned for a future at a new playing facility.<sup>153</sup>

While metropolitan Atlanta was one of the most football-crazy markets in the country, the intense local and regional passion for the high school and college game and the expansion of the NFL into New Orleans served to circumscribe the Falcons' appeal. Sunday afternoon NFL football was, chronologically, the third and, often, the third most important game of the weekend for Southern fans who had spent Friday night cheering on their high school team and their Saturday supporting their college team. Locally, the Falcons lagged in popularity behind that of the state's two traditional college football powers: Georgia Tech and the University of Georgia (UGA). Neither Dallas nor Houston, both of which were larger metropolitan areas but were comparable to Atlanta in their enthusiasm for football and their status as new Sunbelt professional football markets, had such nearby competition from major college football programs. The University of Texas, the University of Oklahoma, and Texas A&M, all national powers in the 1960s and 1970s, were each more than a three hour drive from Dallas and at least a two hour drive from Houston. The Dallas Metroplex's top college programs (Southern Methodist and Texas Christian) as well as Houston's (Rice and Houston) struggled for much of the 1960s and early 1970s.

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<sup>153</sup> Al Thomy, "Falcons for Sale? Could Be," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 25, 1974, 1C; "Owner Views Tax Plan as Threat to Falcons," *Washington Post*, January 19, 1973, D6; Frederick Andrews, "Club Owners Face Bombshell in Falcon Suit," *Sporting News* November 2, 1974, 39; Bud Shaw, "The Dinosaur on Capitol Avenue," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 26, 1984, 1C.

“College football was king,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* editor Jim Minter said of the region’s sporting culture, both before and after the arrival of professional teams in the city.<sup>154</sup> “The SEC was so big,” former Falcon Lou Kirouac said, “it was well established before the Falcons came in.”<sup>155</sup> Ivan Allen once wrote that college football had a comparable cultural meaning to Georgians to “what the bullfight has to the Latins...”<sup>156</sup> The year before the Falcons arrived in Atlanta, 45,000 spectators paid to see Georgia and Georgia Tech’s freshman teams play at Grant Field, more people than watched all but eleven Braves games in the history of Atlanta Stadium.<sup>157</sup> Atlanta newspapers covered college football year round. In addition to the tens of thousands of area residents who went to Georgia Tech or Georgia home games, thousands more metropolitan Atlantans traveled back to their home states and/or alma maters every fall Saturday to attend Auburn, Alabama, South Carolina, Clemson, Tennessee, or Florida games. Though smaller in scale, local black college football games, which featured the likes of Morehouse, Morris Brown, Clark, and Atlanta University, drew crowds of as many as 15,000 spectators during the 1960s and 1970s. Thousands of Atlanta-based alumni of historically black colleges and universities from throughout the Southeast visited their alma maters every autumn for homecoming and rivalry games in the Southwestern Athletic Conference (SWAC), Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (SIAC), and Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference (MEAC).<sup>158</sup>

During the late 1960s and 1970s, UGA football, under the leadership of Vince Dooley, was the foremost challenger to Bear Bryant and the University of Alabama’s reign as the premier team in the Southeastern Conference (SEC), college football’s strongest league. At the time of

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<sup>154</sup> Jim Minter interview by the author, July 9, 2013, 52 transcript.

<sup>155</sup> Lou Kirouac interview by the author, 30.

<sup>156</sup> Ivan Allen, “Atlanta’s New Glamour,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution Magazine*, September 4, 1966, 5.

<sup>157</sup> “The Score in Atlanta: Football 45,000...Baseball: 3000.” *New York Times*, April 24, 1966, 16.

<sup>158</sup> Matt Winkeljoh, “Low Fan Ceiling,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, December 2, 2001, 1D; Warren St. John, *Rammer Jammer Yellow Hammer: A Road Trip into the Heart of Fan Mania* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004), 253-258.

the Falcons' arrival in Atlanta, 101 chapters of the Bulldog Club, UGA's football booster organization, operated across the state.<sup>159</sup> To meet the demands of their exuberant fanbase, UGA expanded the seating capacity at Sanford Stadium from 43,000 to 59,200 in 1967. The 1967 expansion soon proved insufficient to meet demand, leading UGA to sell thousands of additional standing-room-only tickets to most home games. In 1981, UGA unveiled a new 82,000 seat configuration at Sanford Stadium, making it one of the nation's ten largest stadiums.<sup>160</sup>

Georgia Tech, a college of barely 8,000 undergraduate students, averaged nearly 50,000 fans at its home games at Grant Field in 1966. Tech sold more than 30,000 season tickets annually while maintaining a waiting list several thousand names long. Some Yellow Jackets fans monitored the *Journal* and *Constitution's* obituary sections for the names of Tech alumni, then offered the recently deceased's family significant sums of money for their season tickets. Tech was an explicit non-participant in the process that brought professional football to Atlanta. They refused to rent out Grant Field to professional teams and expressed no interest in playing at Atlanta Stadium.<sup>161</sup> Longtime Tech coach Bobby Dodd said in 1966 that he was not concerned about the Falcons cutting into their popularity. Instead, he feared that the Braves, who played continuously from April through September, would cut into the local sports media's 12 month coverage of Yellow Jacket football. Dodd's fear proved out, as coverage of Tech football, more often than not, moved to the back of the sports section during its off-season.<sup>162</sup> Moreover, Georgia Tech football floundered in the years after Dodd's 1966 retirement, fading from a

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<sup>159</sup> "Georgia's Crowned," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 30, 1966, 1D.

<sup>160</sup> "UGA Home Attendance, 1965-1980," Unpublished spreadsheet compiled by the University of Georgia Athletic Department, Athens, GA, May 15, 2012.

<sup>161</sup> Ivan Allen, "Atlanta's New Glamour," *Atlanta-Journal Constitution Magazine*, September 4, 1966, 5; Jack Thompson Interview with the author, May 12, 2012, 14; "Pros No Worry to Bobby Dodd," *Washington Post*, January 22, 1966, D2; Pepper Rodgers and Al Thomy, *Pepper!: The Autobiography of an Unconventional Coach* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 165; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta*, 34-40.

<sup>162</sup> "Pros No Worry to Bobby Dodd," *Washington Post*, January 22, 1966, D2; Wayne Minshew interview with the author, 11; Pepper Rodgers and Al Thomy, *Pepper!*, 165.



perennially ranked national power into an also-ran that lost almost as many games as it won. Despite the Yellow Jackets' futility on the field, Tech continued to draw capacity or near-capacity crowds to Grant Field for almost every home game in the late 1960s and early 1970s, though the waiting list for season tickets diminished considerably.<sup>163</sup>

Interest in Tech football surged again during the coaching tenure of Franklin "Pepper" Rodgers (1974-1979), whose colorful persona proved highly marketable in the swinging Atlanta of the 1970s. The virtual opposite of the Falcons' Van Brocklin, Rodgers commuted to campus on a motorcycle, wore a sailors' cap on the sideline, and kept his hair longer than many of his players. While Van Brocklin told a player who wore a headband to practice to quit football and "get a job as an Indian in a cowboy movie," Rodgers encouraged his players to embrace the youth culture of the moment by wearing their hair and clothing as they liked. Tech made Rodgers the center of its marketing campaign, helping the school's sports brand stand out in the major league city. Funky "Pepper Power" stickers adorned the bumpers of cars across the five county area. Rodgers hosted a popular weekly television program which focused less on football and more on celebrity guests, many of whom he had become acquainted with while coaching at UCLA. The *Pepper Rodgers Show*, whose guests included the likes of Burt Reynolds, Julia Child, and Evel Knievel, drew an average local Nielsen Rating of 11 in 1975, more than 500 percent higher than the ratings for the Falcons' weekly highlight show that season.<sup>164</sup>

Competition from more than just the pulpit soon threatened the Falcons' domain over even Sunday afternoons. Atlanta's monopoly on professional football in the Southeast proved short lived. A confluence of events in the fall of 1966 hastened the arrival of the NFL in New

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<sup>163</sup> Georgia Institute of Technology: Department of Athletics, *Engineering for Success: Georgia Tech Football Media Guide 2011*, (Atlanta: Georgia Institute of Technology, 2011), 160-165, 170-172.

<sup>164</sup> Pepper Rodgers and Al Thomy, *Pepper!*, 6, 24-28, 164-167; "Ever See So Many Geniuses," *Sports Illustrated*, September 16, 1974, 34.

Orleans, Atlanta's oldest civic rival. Atlanta had long outpaced New Orleans as an economic center, but Atlanta's civic leaders remained envious of the Crescent City's cultural import. Conversely, New Orleans' city fathers envied Atlanta's status as the New South's economic fulcrum. Leaders in both cities had been competing to become the region's hub for major professional sports since the late 1950s.<sup>165</sup>

In October 1966, the NFL and AFL went to the House Judiciary Committee, seeking out an anti-trust exemption that would allow them to merge. House Judiciary Committee chairman Rep. Emanuel Celler (D-NY), who regarded the proposed merger as monopolistic, blocked the anti-trust exemption bill from receiving a vote in his committee. Louisiana's two most powerful members of Congress, Senator Russell Long and Representative Hale Boggs, intervened in the matter, promising to use their legislative clout to push through the anti-trust exemption if the league agreed to give New Orleans an expansion franchise immediately. Long, the chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, and Boggs, the House Majority Whip, evaded Celler by attaching the exempting legislation to a budget bill, earning it a successful floor vote in both Houses. Weeks later, the NFL announced a 1967 expansion franchise for New Orleans which would play temporarily at Tulane Stadium.<sup>166</sup>

Once New Orleans had its expansion franchise, city leaders commissioned local architectural firm Curtis and Davis to design them a signature stadium. Curtis and Davis presented city leaders with a plan for a 90 million cubic foot, domed facility that would be the world's largest indoor stadium. City and state officials endorsed the plans for the Louisiana Superdome, as the facility came to be known, which would supplant Houston's Astrodome,

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<sup>165</sup> J.D. Reed, "The Louisiana Purchase," *Sports Illustrated*, July 22, 1974, 66-72; "Seven Cities Bid for 16<sup>th</sup> NFL Franchise," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 19, 1966, 1.

<sup>166</sup> Jesse Outlar, "Welcome Saints!" *Atlanta Constitution*, November 2, 1966, 35; Michael MacCambridge, *America's Game*, 228-230.

Miami's Orange Bowl, and Atlanta Stadium as the South's most prestigious playing facility. In 1969, Louisiana Governor John McKeithen guided a bill through the state legislature that approved lodging and amusement taxes to secure \$129 million in state-issued bonds, which financed the stadium's construction. In August 1975, nearly four years after breaking ground, the astroturf-carpeted, 75,000 seat dome opened for business.<sup>167</sup>

When adjusted for inflation, the Superdome cost nearly six times as much as Atlanta Stadium. The multipurpose stadium in Atlanta also never inspired awe like the Saints' grandiose new home. Less than five months after opening, the Superdome hosted Super Bowl IX, the first of seven held at the world famous venue. Atlanta Stadium, conversely, never hosted a Super Bowl. Additionally, the Superdome served as the home of the expansion New Orleans Jazz basketball franchise. Officials in New Orleans tried unsuccessfully to convince the poor-drawing Braves to split their schedule between Atlanta Stadium and the Superdome. The plan fell through in January 1976 when Ted Turner purchased the Braves, who held firm to his promise to keep the club in Atlanta.<sup>168</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has analyzed the response of metropolitan area residents to Atlanta's first two major professional sports franchises: the Atlanta Braves and the Atlanta Falcons. Both franchises began their tenancies at Atlanta Stadium with great expectations for on-the-field success and durable box office support from local sports fans. This chapter demonstrates the striking apathy that metropolitan area residents displayed toward both franchises during the late

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<sup>167</sup> "New Orleans Sports Civic Leaders Shoot for 'Instant' Domed Stadium," *Atlanta Constitution*, February 3, 1966, 51; J.D. Reed, "The Louisiana Purchase," *Sports Illustrated*, July 22, 1974, 66-72; "Seven Cities Bid for 16<sup>th</sup> NFL Franchise," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 19, 1966, 1.

<sup>168</sup> Al Thomy, "New Orleans Wants Major Leagues in Dome," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 26, 1972, 6C; "Superdome to Host Super Bowl in 1975," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 4, 1973, 6C.

1960s and early 1970s, rendering the arrival of professional sports in Atlanta a “disappointing success,” in the words of the *Chicago Tribune*’s Anthony Monahan. Through the prism of consumer interest in professional sports, this chapter serves as a cultural history for a transitional period in the history of Atlanta and its environs. The unwillingness of residents to embrace the mass leisure amenities that the “Big Mules” had worked so tirelessly to bring to the city was reflective of a broader unmooring of the emerging metropolis from the elite-dominated social and political consensus that had governed Atlanta’s civic life for much of the twentieth century. As political power in the city shifted to an ascendant black majority in Atlanta proper and consumer power in the region shifted to the suburbs, Greater Atlanta’s shared cultural terrain evaporated in favor of an increasingly segmented marketplace. Whether native or newcomer, black or white, suburban or urban, residents of metropolitan Atlanta proved too discerning in their consumption patterns to patronize events lacking in novelty or prestige in spaces they found uncomfortable or unfamiliar. Despite the interest that many metropolitan area residents had in either baseball or football, they could satiate their passions either through existing institutions (such as high school or college athletics) or newly created, family-oriented ones within their lifestyle clusters (such as youth athletics or other organized outdoor activities). Despite the civic elite’s efforts, Atlanta Stadium and its co-tenants had failed to monopolize mass leisure in the region.

## CHAPTER 8

### **“Instant City”: The Omni and the Unmaking of Downtown Atlanta, 1966-1980**

“I have no particular feeling about it being taken down,” developer Tom Cousins said in July 1997, days before the Omni Coliseum was imploded to make way for a new arena in downtown Atlanta.<sup>1</sup> The Omni had hosted Cousins’ professional sports empire, which he believed would anchor a broader revitalization of the CBD. Cousins’ building had not evolved into the dynamo of commercial vitality that he envisioned, but it served admirably as Atlanta’s indoor home for professional sports. The Omni housed the Atlanta Hawks for 25 years (1972-1997) and the NHL’s Atlanta Flames for eight years (1972-1980) until Cousins sold the team to investors in Calgary, Alberta. By comparison, the Omni International Complex, the MXD which Cousins opened in 1975 as an extension of the coliseum, could not even be characterized as marginally successful. It failed to revive its commercially barren environs in the southern CBD. By the end of the 1970s, Cousins’ sprawling, insular Omni campus was a white elephant, contributing to the CBD’s reputation as a ghost town.<sup>2</sup>

At the time of the Omni Coliseum’s opening in October 1972, Atlanta’s civic leadership thought that the building would become much more than just an indoor venue for hockey and basketball. They believed that they had heralded into existence “the most magnificent sports arena in the world,” in the words of Omni group president Bill Putnam.<sup>3</sup> City leaders in the early

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<sup>1</sup> “Tom Cousins: Atlanta Power Player Retires,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, December 7, 2006, 1B.

<sup>2</sup> Jim Galloway, “Turner Wants to Tack CNN Onto Name of Omni Arena,” *Atlanta Journal*, March 6, 1987, Omni (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center; Furman Bisher, “Omni Offered Moments of Splendor,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 20, 1997, 18E; Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 217-218.

<sup>3</sup> “Omni Praised by Capacity Crowd,” *Atlanta Daily World*, October 17, 1972, 1.

1970s foresaw the \$17 million Omni jumpstarting the revitalization of a section of downtown Atlanta that had been home to a derelict train yard. As the Omni Coliseum was set for demolition in 1997, Cousins asserted that the Coliseum had served its primary purposes. It had housed two professional sports franchises and served as a venue for concerts, performances, and large gatherings. The developer spoke of the utility of the Omni, as if it were just another one of the more than 70 commercial and residential developments he completed over the course of his half-century long career. Twenty-five years before Tom Cousins expressed no particular feelings at the Omni's destruction, he had expressed far grander aspirations for the building— aspirations that had won him the support of his peers in the civic establishment. Cousins envisioned the arena as the starting point for a broader remaking of Metropolitan Atlanta. In less than a decade, Cousins had transformed “the Gulch,” an abandoned train yard he purchased in 1966, into the municipally owned Omni Coliseum and the surrounding, privately held Omni International Complex. He tried to lure suburban consumers back to a center city they had come to find unpredictable, unwelcoming, and, unfamiliar by offering them signature urban amenities within a controlled, enclosed space. Cousins reasoned that his arena and MXD would become the spaces where suburban Atlantans met their desires for leisure, shopping, and entertainment.<sup>4</sup>

The twin Omni complexes proved to be a rare financial disaster for real estate tycoon Tom Cousins. More significantly, though, Cousins' arena and MXD did not achieve the broader civic aspirations he ascribed to them. This chapter analyzes the failure of Tom Cousins' downtown empire, which included both the Omni Coliseum and the mixed-use Omni International Complex, to reorient the social, commercial, and cultural focus of Metropolitan Atlanta back towards the Five Points District, the core of the city's historic CBD. Neither

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<sup>4</sup> Ron Taylor, “‘Beautifuls’ Hail Sold-Out Omni,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 15, 1972, 1, 12; Furman Bisher, “Omni's 20 Years of Memories,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, February 21, 1993, G1.

structure proved to be the vanguard of downtown revitalization that Cousins had envisioned. The efforts of Cousins and likeminded developers to rebuild downtown Atlanta around grand and insular structures instead hardened the divide between the center city and the decentralizing region. Rather than winning steady suburban business back to the CBD, Atlanta's developer class created massive, inward-oriented campuses in the 1960s and 1970s that reinforced anxieties about the safety of the center city, precluding any genuine street-level vibrancy from developing downtown. The failure to revitalize Atlanta's CBD in the 1970s was certainly not Cousins' alone, but his notoriety, which was due in large part to his ownership of the Omni's two professional sports teams, made him the public face of the city's downtown real estate bust.

Residents of suburban Atlanta proved unwilling to consistently patronize the leisure, retail, and entertainment offerings in downtown Atlanta, no matter what the creators of these developments did to make their spaces comfortable, accessible, and safe. While the Omni Coliseum brought many new forms of entertainment to downtown Atlanta, including professional sports and dozens of live performances each year, it ended up becoming just one of the many discreet fortresses erected around the Five Points between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s. The surrounding Omni Complex, on the other hand, proved to be an unmitigated boondoggle for all involved. Not only did the MXD fail to reorient commerce in Metropolitan Atlanta back to the CBD. It became one of the largest real estate foreclosures in U.S. History.

This chapter will examine the history of the two Omnis and situate these stories within the broader efforts of developers to make downtown Atlanta desirable to the region's suburban majority. It will also explain why suburban consumers rejected these new offerings in the CBD. The unwillingness of suburban Atlantans to patronize the new amenities downtown stem largely from two impulses. Firstly, these consumers considered the new offerings downtown less

convenient than the new retail and leisure alternatives closer to home. Secondly, a demonstrable majority of suburban residents regarded downtown as unsafe, due to genuine fears shared by Atlantans of all demographics about the safety of the CBD in a city that was America's annual "violent crime capital" on four occasions during the 1970s. For suburbanites, these fears were further exaggerated by racial and class prejudices that cast the predominately poor African American residents of the neighborhoods around the southern CBD as a menacing force that had made downtown an undesirable place to patronize.

### **From "The Gulch" to "The Omni"**

In 1966, Tom Cousins purchased "the Gulch," twelve acres of defunct railyard in the southwestern corner of downtown, with plans to remake the area into a multi-faceted urban development. Cousins had made a fortune building suburban housing and commercial tracts over the previous decade, catching the first wave of Atlanta's post-war development boom. His investment in "the Gulch" was his first foray into the downtown market. It proved to be a grand one. Cousins envisioned the undeveloped area as a future destination for the region's rapidly decentralizing consumer base. He intended to foster suburban demand for his urban development by creating a space that fused retail, residential, commercial, and recreational uses.<sup>5</sup>

Cousins decided that the best way to achieve this goal was to emulate the "Big Mules," who had just shepherded into existence a municipally-financed sports stadium which they believed would serve as a new metropolitan center of gravity. With that in mind, the thirty-six year old developer decided to build an arena and pursue two permanent tenants for the building: franchises from the NBA and NHL, the two major North American professional

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 164; Tom Walker, "Omni Complex to Help City's Global Look," *Atlanta Journal*, October 11, 1972, 1A, 9A; Bob Hertzler, "Study Shows Atlanta Wants Arena," *Atlanta Journal*, May 7, 1968, 4-D; Frederick Allen, *Atlanta Rising*, 198-199.



sports leagues which had yet to migrate to Atlanta. The regularly scheduled events of his major league tenants, Cousins reasoned, would transform the arena into a beachhead of vibrancy around which to expand his downtown development. Professional sports would provide suburban consumers with a consistent reason to visit the long derelict section of downtown.<sup>6</sup>

Cousins' vision for "the Gulch" amounted to a revival of Ivan Allen's plans earlier in the decade to build a new downtown center around a multi-purpose arena and auditorium. City voters rejected a "Big Mule"-backed 1962 bond initiative which would have financed the plan, putting talk of a downtown arena on hold for a number of years.<sup>7</sup> The city's most prominent booster organizations, notably the Atlanta Chamber and Central Atlanta Progress (CAP), threw their enthusiastic support behind Cousins' plans for "the Gulch" once they became public knowledge. Atlanta's civic leadership saw fit to make substantial investments of their time, money, and influence to ensure the building of Cousins' coliseum. Their support for the plan demonstrated a renewed commitment among Atlanta's elites to the use of professional sports as a catalyst for urban development. The "Big Mules" and their booster institutions echoed Cousins' belief that the remaking of "the Gulch" would spur a broader revival of the southwestern CBD, a one-time commercial hotbed that had deteriorated into a marginalized shopping district patronized primarily by the impoverished African American residents of the surrounding neighborhoods. Cousins' forthcoming MXD would, in turn, build on the momentum initiated by the arena. The twin complexes would serve as connective tissue among several discreet yet proximate developments in the southern CBD, including Underground Atlanta, Rich's

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Sally Sanford, "Plan Offered for Coliseum," *Atlanta Journal*, February 19, 1962, 1.

Department Store, the state capitol complex, and, eventually, MARTA, which would move people from one nodal point to another downtown.<sup>8</sup>

Cousins planned to pay for the facility through the revenue it generated, though he followed the advice of civic elites who suggested he seek out the aid of the Atlanta-Fulton County Recreation Authority to finance the project. The Authority helped Cousins and his circle of investors save millions of dollars by securing government-backed bonds for arena construction, enabling them to lock in significantly lower interest rates than they could have by borrowing money on the open market. This upfront public subsidy freed Cousins to pursue private financing for his much larger, mixed-use downtown development.<sup>9</sup>

By the time arena financing negotiations got underway in 1970, Cousins and the civic elites were working with a new mayor, Sam Massell. While certainly pro-downtown development, Massell demanded assurances that taxpayers would not end up paying for the arena, as they had Atlanta Stadium. The new mayor's extensive background in the commercial real estate business made him a formidable negotiator. Massell made use of the bargaining leverage the NBA had unintentionally given him. League executives pressured Cousins publicly throughout 1969 to break ground on a new arena and get his team out of Georgia Tech's small and spartan Alexander Memorial Coliseum. Massell and Cousins agreed to a plan which authorized the Atlanta-Fulton County Recreation Authority to sell \$17 million in tax-exempt revenue bonds to finance arena construction. In exchange, Cousins allowed the Authority to retain ownership of the building. A Cousins subsidiary would then lease the coliseum for the life

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<sup>8</sup> Frederick Allen, *Atlanta Rising*, 198; Alex Coffin, "Coliseum Deal's 'Pluses' Outlined," *Atlanta Constitution*, December 15, 1970, 2; Sam Hopkins and Alex Coffin, "Top Atlanta Leaders Urge Coliseum Okay," *Atlanta Constitution*, December 15, 1970, 1.

<sup>9</sup> "Atlanta Aims for Arena, Pro Hockey," *Washington Post*, May 14, 1968, D2; Alex Coffin, "Coliseum Deal's 'Pluses' Outlined," *Atlanta Constitution*, December 15, 1970, 2.

of the bond while paying the entirety of the bond's annual principal and interest. The subsidiary would also cover the entire cost of operating and maintaining the facility. Fifteen percent of gate receipts from all events booked at the arena would be contributed toward repayment as well as all revenue over \$225,000 generated annually by an adjacent, Cousins-owned parking garage known as "The Decks." The Atlanta Board of Alderman and Fulton County Board of Commissioners both approved the favorable financing deal in December 1970. Three months later, Cousins broke ground in "the Gulch."<sup>10</sup>

"This was a new focal point physically," former mayor Sam Massell said of the Omni Coliseum.<sup>11</sup> At the time of the arena's opening, he characterized it as "a milestone for Atlanta which completes our membership among the capitals of major league sports," echoing Cousins' sentiments if not entirely sharing his vision for the facility.<sup>12</sup> Massell viewed the Omni slightly differently than Cousins, who conceived of the project as a commercial dynamo. The mayor described the Omni as a "civic luxury," a broadly beneficial and publicly owned amenity in keeping with the city's politically inclusive post-World War II consensus.<sup>13</sup> The social good generated by the Omni, in Massell's mind, was its capacity to serve as a metropolitan unifier, not simply as a space for individual consumption and leisure. While the Omni Arena proved to be a valuable civic amenity, it failed to achieve the ends that either Massell or Cousins intended for the building. It was neither a durable source of metropolitan unity nor a generator of steady investment by suburban consumers in the center city.

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<sup>10</sup> "Omni Souvenir Dedication Book," Omni (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center; Alex Coffin, "Coliseum Deal's 'Pluses' Outlined," *Atlanta Constitution*, December 15, 1970, 2; Sam Massell, interview by the author, July 2, 2013, 42-44, transcript; "State of the City Annual Message, January 4, 1971," Sam Massell (Personality File), Kenan Research Center; Tom Walker, "Omni Complex to Help City's Global Look," *Atlanta Journal*, October 11, 1972, 1A, 9A; "Top Atlanta Leaders Urge Coliseum Okay," *Atlanta Constitution*, December 15, 1970, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Sam Massell, interview by the author, July 2, 2013, 39-41 transcript.

<sup>12</sup> Ron Taylor, "'Beautifuls' Hail Sold-Out Omni," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 15, 1972, 1A.

<sup>13</sup> Sam Massell, interview by the author, July 2, 2013, 39-41 transcript.

## **“A Beautiful Place to Play”**

The Omni Arena opened in October 1972, eighteen months after Cousins broke ground in “the Gulch.” The coliseum had primary tenants in place well in advance of its opening: the NBA’s Atlanta Hawks and the NHL’s expansion Atlanta Flames. The arena’s management had also scheduled a full slate of concerts and special events for the next twelve months. Arena project General Manager Bill Putnam had lobbied successfully for the “Omni” moniker, believing the grandiosity of its name would define it as having a purpose beyond hosting the aforementioned events. The name, Putnam argued, would ensure its national notoriety and articulate its creators’ sense of civic purpose and aspirations for the building. Omni architects Thompson, Ventulett, Steinbeck, and Associates (TVS) ensured that the arena would make a unique contribution to Atlanta’s skyline. They won acclaim within their industry for the building’s avant-garde design and use of briefly trendy Cor-Ten weathering steel on the Omni’s roof. While some fans defended the arena’s modern exterior architecture, a larger share mocked the “rusty egg crate,” as Furman Bisher nicknamed its maroon pyramid covered roof. Conversely, few fans mocked the “Omni” name. Atlantans’ embrace of the arena’s grandiose moniker was demonstrative of a sensibility that had emerged years earlier among many of the region’s residents. Plenty of people who embraced the praise Atlanta received for its progressive reputation showed no interest in participating in the events or institutions which had earned the city that reputation. In a related sense, many suburban Atlantans praised the civic achievement of the Omni complexes while demonstrating little interest in frequenting them.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ron Taylor, “‘Beautifuls’ Hail Sold-Out Omni,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 15, 1972, 1A; Jim Stewart, “Omni Doors Open to Atlanta Tonight,” *Atlanta Constitution*, October 14, 1972, 1, 12; Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 16-17, 22-25; “Omni Souvenir Dedication Book,” Omni (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center; Frank Wells, “Coliseum Adds to City’s Big League Image,” *Atlanta Constitution*, January 19, 1973, 12C.

Regulars at the Omni found it a pleasant place to watch a sporting event. “I really liked the Omni. The sight lines and the seats were better for me,” Flames Fan Club co-president Joe Watkins said, noting that the Omni’s slightly smaller than NHL average seating capacity of 15,078 enabled its operators to install slightly larger seats. The extra leg room made watching a game at the arena a significantly more comfortable experience for Watkins, a 6’4 former Marine.<sup>15</sup> TVS promised and delivered unobstructed sight lines from all seats in the Omni. The installation of a state-of-the-art lighting system made the arena’s playing surface look like a car showroom, both in person and on television. Moreover, no spectator at the Omni sat more than 150 feet from the floor, though some fans complained that the sharp ascent of the upper deck sections forced them to look straight down on the action.<sup>16</sup> “You were closer to the ice instead of being stacked on top of each other,” Flames Fan Club co-president Betsy Watkins recalled, comparing it to older NHL arenas she visited, such as the Boston Garden, where fans sat cheek-by-jowl.<sup>17</sup> Hawks fans who endured the wooden bleachers at Alexander, the team’s original Atlanta home, found the Omni’s plush, movie theatre-style seats to be a significant upgrade.<sup>18</sup>

Unlike Atlanta Stadium, the Omni had ample and secure public parking in close proximity to its entrances. According to Omni promotional materials, fans could choose from 6,200 spaces within two blocks of the arena or more than 10,000 public parking spots within a five block radius. The two well-lit and heavily patrolled lots closest to the Omni were connected to the building by special aboveground and underground walkways. Print and radio

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<sup>15</sup> Joe Watkins, interview by the author, July 3, 2013, 19 transcript.

<sup>16</sup> “Omni Souvenir Dedication Book,” Omni (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center; Tom Van Aarsdale, interview by the author, July 10, 2013, 43; Paul Jones, “Omni Only 92 Percent Ready for Opening,” *Atlanta Constitution*, October 3, 1972, 6A; Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 24-25.

<sup>17</sup> Betsy Watkins, interview by the author, July 3, 2013, 19 transcript.

<sup>18</sup> “Omni Souvenir Dedication Book,” Omni (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center; Leo Monahan, “Atlanta Fans Warming Up to Fast-Charging Flames,” *Sporting News*, December 23, 1972, 4; Jim Huber, “Atlanta Inaugurates Omni as Sports Palace of South,” *Sporting News*, October 28, 1972, 45.

advertisements in 1972 boasted that the Omni had more public parking spaces within a five block radius than any other arena in the NBA or NHL. Nevertheless, many suburban patrons found working their way through freeway traffic and then navigating downtown streets sufficiently unpleasant to dissuade them from taking advantage of the Omni's excellent parking facilities.<sup>19</sup> "It's a tremendous hassle to have to stick a half-hour into your travel itinerary for wiggle room in case you get stuck in traffic. And you will get stuck in traffic, especially if you're coming in from the north," Mike Holcomb, a Buford, Georgia native who frequently attended professional wrestling at the Omni during the 1970s, said of the commute into the arena.<sup>20</sup> Arena-bound commuters had few public transit options until MARTA rapid rail service commenced in 1979. Despite the Flames and Hawks' efforts to encourage their fans to patronize MARTA, relatively few made their way to the arena by rail, which many potential suburban customers found inconvenient or considered unsafe.<sup>21</sup>

Professional athletes, too, spoke highly of the Omni Arena and, later, the adjoining Omni International Complex.<sup>22</sup> "It was so convenient. I loved the venue," Flames center Bill Clement recalled. "It was connected to the hotel complex where there were bars and restaurants and we could walk out of our locker room after a game and walk right into the complex and have a beer and a bite to eat."<sup>23</sup> "This is a beautiful place to play," Hawks coach Cotton Fitzsimmons said of the Omni after their first home game in the new venue. "The floor is excellent and the lighting is much better than at Tech," he said, comparing it to

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<sup>19</sup> Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 24-25; David Hewes, interview by the author, December 19, 2011, 10 transcript; "Omni Souvenir Dedication Book," Omni (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center; "Getting to the Omni is Easier Done than Said (Advertisement)," *Atlanta Journal*, October 13, 1972, 4A.

<sup>20</sup> Mike Holcomb, interview by the author, September 6, 2016, 52-54 transcript.

<sup>21</sup> Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 24-25; David Hewes, interview by the author, December 19, 2011, 10 transcript; "Omni Souvenir Dedication Book," Omni (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center.

<sup>22</sup> Mike McKenzie, "Lucas' Magic Not Enough for the Hawks," *Atlanta Journal*, October 16, 1972, 1D; Tom Van Aarsdale, interview by the author, July 10, 2013, 43.

<sup>23</sup> Bill Clement, interview by the author, June 26, 2013, 5-6 transcript.

the team's previous home, Georgia Tech's Alexander Memorial Coliseum.<sup>24</sup> Fans and athletes alike marveled at the ability of the Omni staff to change the arena over from hockey to basketball or another iceless event in less than two hours. Some players complained that the Omni smelled like manure for days after traveling circuses performed in the building.<sup>25</sup>

When the Omni Coliseum opened, its assortment of amenities catered to upscale consumers more than virtually any existing NBA or NHL venue. The building offered VIP parking, a full-service restaurant inside the arena, and two separate private clubs for season ticket holders. In little more than a decade, though, the Omni's extravagances seemed pedestrian when compared to those offered in newer facilities. Every NBA or NHL arena built after the Omni included luxury suites or club-level seating, both of which drew significant corporate patronage in most league cities. Luxury suites also served as an important source of revenue for NBA and NHL franchises. According to the statutes of both leagues, the earnings that franchises generated from such specialty seating did not have to be shared with the visiting team, as did traditional gate receipts. By the late 1980s, most NBA franchises earned between \$5 million and \$10 million annually from luxury seating. As much as anything, the lack of corporate-oriented luxury seating led to the Omni's early demise.<sup>26</sup>

Once the arena's novelty wore off, fans with more modest budgets, too, found some of the amenities at the Omni lacking, particularly its dining options. Even in its early years, the arena's food service infrastructure was limited when compared to the operations in other arenas. For most spectators, dining at the Omni consisted of little more than hot dogs, soda, and

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<sup>24</sup> Art Chansky, "Forwards Fight in Hawks Win," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 16, 1972, 3D.

<sup>25</sup> Tony Patrella, "A Twinbill 'No Big Deal,'" *Atlanta Constitution*, January 15, 1973, 3D; Ron Hudspeth, "Meanwhile at the Omni," *Atlanta Journal*, January 15, 1973, 1D; "Omni Souvenir Dedication Book," Omni (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center.

<sup>26</sup> Kenneth Shropshire, *The Sports Franchise Game*, 9-10, 75.

frequently stale popcorn. Those who sought out the Omni's limited refreshments complained that its cramped concourses made it all the more difficult to access the arena's limited number of kiosks. The greatest indignity suffered by Omni spectators came during the 1975-1976 season, just three years after the building's grand opening. Due to a plumbing mishap, the arena's water fountains remained out of order for months. Instead of offering complimentary water, the arena charged fans 30 cents each for twelve ounce paper cups of ice water.<sup>27</sup>

The Omni Coliseum's avant-garde design also contributed to its sudden demise. By the early 1980s, sizeable holes had opened up in several spots on its rapidly oxidizing roof. As soon as contractors patched the rusty roof, new holes started developing. Later in the decade, holes developed on the Cor-Ten covered sides of the building, requiring the arena to install chain link fences around the perimeter. Frequent dripping from the ceiling into the stands and, eventually, on to the court detracted further from the spectator experience at the Omni while endangering the game's participants. The arena's maintenance staff maintained a steady supply of towels to mop up the nightly messes. More disturbingly, the corrosion of the Omni's roof gave Atlanta's abundant vermin population easy entryway into the facility. Horror stories about the creatures that roamed its bathrooms and concession stands were a fixture of latter day Omni lore.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> "Flames Notes," *Atlanta Constitution*, January 3, 1976, 4C; Jim Stewart, "Omni Doors Open to Atlanta Tonight," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 14, 1972, 1A; Furman Bisher, "Omni Offered Moments of Splendor," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 20, 1997, 18E; Teddy Greenstein, "All Concerned Agree: It's Good To Rid Atlanta Of Omni," *Chicago Tribune*, May 12, 1997, 2D.

<sup>28</sup> "Omni Souvenir Dedication Book," Omni (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center; Teddy Greenstein, "All Concerned Agree: It's Good to Rid Atlanta of Omni," *Chicago Tribune*, May 12, 1997, 2D; Robert M. Craig, "Thompson, Ventulett, Stainback, and Associates" *The New Georgia Encyclopedia*, September 19, 2013. Accessed online July 22, 2014: <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/arts-culture/thompson-ventulett-stainback-and-associates-tvs>; Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 25; Ron Taylor, "'Beautifuls' Hail Sold-Out Omni," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 15, 1972, 1, 12; Elizabeth A. Harris, "Constructing a Façade Both Rugged and Rusty," *The New York Times*, August 27, 2012. Accessed on July 22, 2014: [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/28/nyregion/building-with-weathering-steel-both-rugged-and-rusty.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/28/nyregion/building-with-weathering-steel-both-rugged-and-rusty.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0); Tom Walker, "Omni Complex to Help City's Global Look," *Atlanta Journal*, October 11, 1972, 1A, 9A.



## **“Second to None”: The Omni as a Host of Major Events**

“The unfortunate thing was that the Omni was out-of-date when it opened,” Atlanta Flames General Manager Cliff Fletcher said, in retrospect, “It was a great building in which to watch hockey and the atmosphere was second to none,” he said, clearly focusing on the franchise’s early years at the Omni.<sup>29</sup> Fletcher’s recollection is a good starting point for examining the arena’s legacy as a host of major events. While the Omni succeeded at bringing exciting events to downtown Atlanta, the arena failed in the long-term as an initiator of momentum for the CBD. The people who attended events at the Omni, whether it was a Hawks or Flames game or a one-off special event, displayed varying amounts of enthusiasm for them, but the arena functioned as a discreet site of entertainment rather than a wellspring of downtown patronage.

Neither of the Omni Coliseum’s primary tenants drew consistently strong crowds during the 1970s, short-circuiting Tom Cousins’ arena-centric vision for downtown redevelopment. The Hawks and the Flames simply did not bring in enough spectators to be considered a catalyst for vibrancy in the CBD. As described in detail in the next chapter, the Atlanta Hawks were a historically poor box office draw, finishing below the league average for attendance in 18 consecutive seasons, the last 14 of which were played at the Omni. The Hawks finished last in attendance for three straight seasons (1974-1977) and on five occasions drew less than one-half of the league’s average attendance. The Flames, whose experience at the Omni is also analyzed in the next chapter, drew surprisingly well in their early years due to their on-ice success, the novelty of their sport in the region, and the organization’s top-notch marketing of the team. In

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<sup>29</sup> John McGourty, “Former Flames Recall Hot Times in Atlanta,” *NHL.com*, January 24, 2008. Accessed Online: July 23, 2014: <https://www.nhl.com/news/former-flames-recall-hot-times-in-atlanta/c-370370>.

the early to mid-1970s, the Flames drew large, enthusiastic, and, sometimes, sellout crowds to the Omni, but, as the novelty of hockey wore off and rumors abounded that the financially-imperiled Cousins was looking to sell the team, attendance dropped considerably during their final years in the city.<sup>30</sup>

The most popular sporting event held at the Omni during the 1970s was neither professional basketball nor professional hockey. Instead, professional wrestling proved to be the arena's most consistent draw. Beginning in 1973, Georgia Championship Wrestling (GCW) ran between six and twelve "supercards" at the Omni each year. Virtually every show drew at least 10,000 paying customers. Many GCW events drew sellout crowds to the Omni, particularly holiday shows, such as their annual Thanksgiving night spectacular. Besides its own weekly television program, GCW received virtually no coverage in Atlanta's mainstream media but still drew massive live audiences to the Omni. The local print and broadcasting fraternities, particularly sportswriters, dismissed the spectacle, regarding it with the same condescension in the 1970s as they had decades earlier when wrestling emerged as one of the region's best drawing live events.<sup>31</sup>

The lucrative gates that professional wrestling attracted at the Omni were unsurprising. By the time then-vice mayor Maynard Jackson served as a guest ring-announcer at GCW's first "supercard" in May 1973, the promotion and its forerunners had established themselves for more

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<sup>30</sup> "NBA/ABA Attendance Totals," *Association for Professional Basketball Research*, 2013. Accessed online: January 5, 2014: <http://www.apbr.org/attendance.html>; Alan Truex, "The Ice Age: From Blizzard to Meltdown," *Atlanta Journal*, May 23, 1980, D1.

<sup>31</sup> Since the 1940s, Paul Jones' Atlanta-based ABC Booking, the forerunner of GCW, had been the state's top wrestling promotion. ABC Booking and, later, GCW possessed territorial rights to the region through the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA), a cartel of regional promoters who controlled virtually all of the top wrestling talent in the United States and Canada between the late-1940s and the mid-1980s; Scott Beekman, *Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in America* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006), 112-114; Mark James, *Wrestling Record Book: Atlanta, GA, 1960-1984* (Memphis: Memphis Wrestling History, 2014), 87-124; "The Omni: 1973-1979," *History of the WWE*, 2014. Accessed online on June 1, 2016: <http://www.thehistoryofwwe.com/omni70s.htm>; David Shoemaker, *The Squared Circle: Life, Death, and Professional Wrestling* (New York: Avery, 2013), 8-14.

than a quarter-century as one of Atlanta's most popular television programs and live spectacles. Even after the city became "major league," capacity crowds approaching 5,000 watched professional wrestling every Friday night at the Municipal Auditorium, Atlanta's Edwardian-vintage armory. GCW "armory shows" often outdrew the Hawks when they ran head-to-head, even after basketball superstar Pete Maravich joined the team and the club moved to the Omni.<sup>32</sup>

Professional wrestling had been a Saturday afternoon staple on Atlanta television since the Truman administration. Taped at WAII (later known as WQXI) studios in downtown Atlanta, *Live Atlanta Wrestling* drew excellent ratings with its mix of matches and in-ring interviews, both of which helped to promote GCW's Friday night "armory shows." In December 1971, Ted Turner's WTCG outbid WQXI for the rights to broadcast the program. Turner kept *Georgia Championship Wrestling*, as the program was rechristened, in its traditional Saturday 6 PM timeslot. The program served as a building block in the transformation of Turner's tiny UHF station into a highly-rated local and regional television phenomenon, one that later evolved into the pioneering TBS national cable network.<sup>33</sup> Beginning in 1976, the TBS "Superstation" broadcast *Georgia Championship Wrestling* via satellite to cable subscribers nationwide. By broadcasting their program directly into other markets, GCW became the first wrestling promotion in decades to transgress the regional boundaries instituted in the 1940s by the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA), the industry's well-established cartel of promotions. Barely a decade after GCW began broadcasting their program nationwide, the two-dozen profitable promotions that made up the NWA had folded or merged into two major nationally

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<sup>32</sup> "Gordon Solie Interview," *Solie's Vintage Wrestling*, 1998. Accessed online: January 17, 2014: <http://www.solie.org/interviews/solie2.html>; Scott Beekman, *Ringside*, 112-114; Mark James, *Wrestling Record Book: Atlanta, GA*, 87-124; "The Omni: 1973-1979," *History of the WWE*, 2014; "NBA/ABA Attendance Totals," *Association for Professional Basketball Research*, 2013.

<sup>33</sup> Scott Beekman, *Ringside*, 112-114; "Gordon Solie Interview," *Solie's Vintage Wrestling*, 1998.

televised companies: Vince McMahon's northeastern-based World Wrestling Federation (WWF) and World Championship Wrestling (WCW), the Ted Turner-owned descendent of GCW.<sup>34</sup>

Professional wrestling in Atlanta drew not only large, loyal, and enthusiastic crowds, but also a strikingly diverse spectatorship. Audiences at wrestling shows included a far greater cross-section of the region's population than any other major sporting event held in the metropolitan area.<sup>35</sup> "Anybody who is about to write off Atlanta sports on racial grounds ought to go to the wrestling matches," Roy M. Blount wrote in a 1977 *Sports Illustrated* feature on the city's sports scene, "...wrestling draws not only capacity crowds but also the most integrated audiences you will see anywhere. Somehow all those bizarre porcine figures flinging each other in and out of the ring arouse the kind of transcendent affection that real sports are supposed to," he wrote.<sup>36</sup>

Mike Holcomb, a frequent attendee of the Omni's GCW "supercards," notes that even among the diverse crowds drawn to the arena, clear racial boundaries existed. "Crowds at the Omni were almost completely segregated," Holcomb recalls. "At that time, there were three price levels for wrestling tickets at The Omni...it was, simply put, whites downstairs and African Americans upstairs," with the more expensive ringside and lower bowl seats occupied largely by whites and the upper bowl tickets occupied primarily by blacks. Holcomb, a wrestling devotee who traversed the state during his adolescence with a group of likeminded friends to watch GCW shows, recalls that this clear racial seating division was almost exclusive to Atlanta. Similar seating dynamics were not evident in the wrestling audiences he witnessed in Georgia cities such as Macon and Athens, which also included large numbers of African American fans. The lack of

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<sup>34</sup> Scott Beekman, *Ringside*, 114-123; Mark James, *Wrestling Record Book: Atlanta, GA*, vii-xi, 162-163.

<sup>35</sup> "Gordon Solie Interview," *Solie's Vintage Wrestling*, 1998; Mark James, *Wrestling Record Book: Atlanta, GA, 1960-1984*, 87-124; Scott Beekman, *Ringside*, 114-123.

<sup>36</sup> Roy M. Blount, "Losersville, U.S.A.," *Sports Illustrated*, March 21, 1977, 85.

racial divisions in the Macon and Athens wrestling crowds may have been reflective of the political cultures in these cities during the 1970s, which were less preoccupied with racial issues at the time than the political culture of Metropolitan Atlanta. Moreover, GCW's primary venues in these cities, the J&J Center in Athens and the Macon Coliseum, were significantly smaller buildings than the Omni and allowed for less segmentation in the crowds.<sup>37</sup>

Despite the racial and socio-economic distinctions in the seating patterns at Omni "supercards," the crowds were nearly unanimous in their opinions on which grapplers deserved praise and which ones deserved censure. Blount described how blacks and whites, men and women, young and old at Atlanta wrestling shows all showered affection on the faces (heroes), no matter the wrestler's race, and jeered the heels (villains), no matter their race. Until 1970, wrestling matches in Atlanta were contested exclusively by wrestlers of the same race, but white and black fans had sat in integrated seating at Municipal Auditorium since the early 1960s. With virtual unanimity, Atlanta wrestling audiences had cheered on the faces and booed the heels that competed for the men's and women's NWA "Southern Negro Titles," including Bobo Brazil, Matt Jewell, Willie Love, Tiny Jackson, Sweet Georgia Brown, and Dinah Beamon.<sup>38</sup>

The integration of matches did almost nothing to change the rooting dynamics of Atlanta wrestling. Fans continued to cheer on the faces and boo the heels, regardless of their race. Some of GCW's most popular stars of the 1970s were African Americans, including Tony Atlas, Thunderbolt Patterson, and Bobo Brazil. At the same time, Black GCW fans embraced a white superstar named Dusty Rhodes more enthusiastically than any other performer in the territory. Rhodes, whose persona was that of a perpetual underdog, lacked the bodybuilder's physique of

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<sup>37</sup> Mike Holcomb, interview by the author, September 6, 2016, 52-54 transcript.

<sup>38</sup> Roy M. Blount, "Losersville, U.S.A.," *Sports Illustrated*, March 21, 1977, 85; "Gordon Solie Interview," *Solie's Vintage Wrestling*, 1998; Mike Holcomb, interview by the author, September 6, 2016, 52-54 transcript.

other performers but won fans over with his unique charisma. Rhodes donned ostentatious clothing and jewelry and entertained in the ring with a funk-inspired swagger. He spoke frequently of his humble origins and appealed explicitly to “all my soul brothers and sisters out there” in televised and in-ring interviews. Few athletes have ever been as beloved by their fans as Dusty Rhodes was by his admirers in Georgia during the 1970s.<sup>39</sup>

Besides professional wrestling, the Omni booked a wide range of other spectacles to fill the calendar when the Hawks and Flames were not in action. Cousins hired Bob Kent, an experienced arena operator who had previously managed the regionally famous Greensboro Coliseum, to oversee the day-to-day business of the Omni. Kent worked aggressively to book major acts and events for the arena. Initially, he focused his booking efforts on entertainers that had never before performed in Atlanta. Throughout the 1970s, the Omni hosted between 100 and 150 events each year, including the approximately 80 combined home dates of the Hawks and Flames. One-off events, such as concerts and performances by touring ensembles, often did well at the Omni. They offered metropolitan area residents with sufficient disposable income the opportunity to enjoy novel entertainment experiences each year. Unlike professional sports, such events did not require durable patronage from consumers.<sup>40</sup>

The Omni Coliseum became one of the region’s leading venues for live events and performances. If floor space was available, the building could accommodate up to 18,000 spectators for staged shows, nearly four times as many people as Atlanta’s traditional concert venue, the Municipal Auditorium. The Omni’s large seating capacity enabled Kent to book many of the country’s most popular entertainers, some of whom had never before played in

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid; Mark James, *Wrestling Record Book: Atlanta, GA, 1960-1984*, 87-124.

<sup>40</sup> “Omni Souvenir Dedication Book,” Omni (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center; Furman Bisher, “Omni’s 20 Years of Memories,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, February 21, 1993, G1; Jim Huber, “Atlanta in NHL, New League Says,” *Atlanta Journal*, November 2, 1971, 1-C.

Atlanta. Elvis Presley, Bob Hope, and Frank Sinatra all performed at the Omni on a number of occasions during the 1970s. Major country acts such as Willie Nelson and Dolly Parton also filled the venue during this time period. Family-friendly events, including Ice Capades, the Ringling Brothers' Circus, and Disney on Parade, performed for the first time in Atlanta at the new arena. The Omni hosted college basketball's Final Four in 1977, which drew sell-out crowds, as well as professional tennis, which drew poorly.<sup>41</sup>

Considering Atlanta's demographics, namely the city's majority African American population and the presence of a large black middle class in Fulton and DeKalb Counties, surprisingly few major black performers or events aimed at predominately African American audiences were held at the Omni during the 1970s. The ten most frequently featured entertainers at the Omni during the 1970s were all white. Certainly, some major events held at the Omni, particularly in its first year, featured black performers or events that were marketed explicitly to black audiences. Local civil rights groups sponsored a Martin Luther King Day benefit at the Omni in January 1973 featuring Wilson Pickett. Later that year, a gospel music festival headlined by the Soul Stirrers drew a predominately black audience. Other notable black musicians to perform at the Omni during its first calendar year included the Temptations, the Spinners, and Atlanta natives Gladys Knight and the Pips.<sup>42</sup>

Several factors contributed to the dearth of black entertainers who performed at the Omni. Certainly, the income disparity between white and black consumers in metropolitan

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<sup>41</sup> "The Omni: Atlanta, Georgia," *Setlist.FM*, 2014, Accessed Online: January 17, 2015: <https://www.setlist.fm/venue/the-omni-atlanta-ga-usa-4bd637ba.html>; Beau Cutts and Randy Donaldson, "Omni is a Success," *Atlanta Constitution*, January 8, 1973, 6D; Furman Bisher, "Omni's 20 Years of Memories," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, February 21, 1993, G1; "Omni Planning College Basketball Program," *Atlanta Journal*, April 1, 1976, 3D; "Ice Capades Opens at Omni Thursday Night," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 14, 1972, 1A; Maurice Fliess, "Omni Unfinished but Will Open to 'All,'" *Atlanta Journal*, October 11, 1972, 18A

<sup>42</sup> "RCA Records King Benefit Concert for Social Center," *Chicago Defender*, January 17, 1973, 1; "The Omni: Atlanta, Georgia," *Setlist.FM*, 2014.

Atlanta left African Americans with less disposable income to spend on concert tickets. For many African American residents of Atlanta, merely leaving their homes at night was a dangerous proposition, considering the high-crime rates in so many inner-city neighborhoods. The city's inefficient mass transit system likely discouraged attendance as well since many inner-city black patrons had to rely on infrequent late night buses for their return trip from the Omni. The dynamics of the music business may have also contributed to the dearth of black artists who performed at the Omni in this time-period. During the early 1970s, many well-known African American musicians worked for subsidiary or independent record labels, which lacked the financial wherewithal to support even their most prominent artists on extensive national arena tours. Moreover, few of the era's African American concert promoters had enough liquid capital to market arena-sized shows properly. In general, African Americans proved to be a small percentage of attendees at most events at the Omni, with the exception of professional wrestling and professional basketball games.<sup>43</sup>

Beyond these broader contextual explanations, there is another possible reason for the relative dearth of black artists booked at the Omni during the 1970s. Black artists had good reason to fear boycotts by local civil rights groups if they did not have black management. In November 1973, SCLC leader Hosea Williams, by then the city's most influential civil rights activist, led a boycott of Al Green's Thanksgiving weekend concert, his second at the Omni that year. Fresh off a run for vice mayor, Williams had turned his attention from electoral politics toward direct issues of economic empowerment in Atlanta's black community.

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<sup>43</sup> "Gordon Solie Interview," *Solie's Vintage Wrestling*, 1998; Roy M. Blount, "Losersville, U.S.A.," *Sports Illustrated*, March 21, 1977, 77-84; Nelson George, *Where Did Our Love Go: The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound* (New York: Omnibus, 2003), 140; Scot Brown, "'And the Beat Goes On': SOLAR-The Sound of Los Angeles Records," *Issues in African-American Music: Power, Gender, Race, Representation*, Portia K. Maultsby and Mellonee V. Burnim eds. (Abington, UK: Routledge, 2016), 165-171.



Williams called for a boycott of Green's return date at the Omni because of the soul singer's alleged history of "consistently selling himself exclusively to lily-white concert promoters and foreign record companies."<sup>44</sup>

Days before the show, thousands of tickets remained unsold, just five months after Green had drawn a sold out crowd to the venue. Williams announced plans to organize protests against Green not only in Atlanta, but also in the remaining cities on the soul singer's tour. Green's management company avoided Williams-led pickets at his concerts by making a "substantial contribution" to the SCLC. After performing to a half-filled arena, the singer never returned to the Omni and has only made rare concert appearances in Atlanta ever since. Whether coincidental or not, few African American artists performed at the Omni during the mid-to-late 1970s aftermath of the Al Green boycott. Among the few events targeted at African American audiences held at the Omni during the mid-1970s was a 1976 black gospel music festival which drew protests from civil rights groups because of its reliance on white promoters, though Williams did not personally endorse this round of protests. In 1974, Williams himself promoted a series of poorly-attended wrestling shows at the Omni which featured primarily black performers. The civil rights leader's "International Wrestling Alliance" closed up shop shortly after Williams won a seat in the Georgia State Senate that November.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> "SCLC Calls Off Green Boycott," *Chicago Defender*, November 26, 1973, 4.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid; "Al Green Boycotted by SCLC," *Amsterdam News*, December 1, 1973, A1; Charlie Cherokee, "Charlie Cherokee Says," *Chicago Defender*, November 27, 1973, 8; "Al Green," *Setlist.FM*, 2014, Accessed Online: January 17, 2015: <https://www.setlist.fm/setlists/al-green-bd6b9a6.html>; "Hosea Calls Planners of Boycott Wrong," *Atlanta Daily World*, April 30, 1976, 2; "Wrester Has Hosea in Court Again," *Atlanta Daily World*, October 12, 1978, 2.

## **“A Place of Bored Clerks”**

The Omni Coliseum may not have transformed downtown Atlanta into a vibrant commercial district, but it had served its most basic purposes as a venue for games and performances. Moreover, it was brought into existence by a great real estate deal. Its construction costs, operating expenses, and debt service were covered entirely by its tenants, insulating taxpayers from any financial responsibility for the municipally-owned facility. Conversely, the Omni International Complex was a once-in-a-generation real estate boondoggle. Cousins announced plans for the MXD on October 10, 1972, making use of the publicity from the Omni Coliseum’s grand opening to promote the new project. Billionaire investors, including David Rockefeller and Greek shipping magnate Stavros Niarchos, were among the major stakeholders in the \$100 million project. Cousins presented the Omni International Complex as the second step in an even larger, interrelated group of developments he planned to build in the southern CBD. He planned to open a wholesale retail market called “The Atlanta World Trade Center,” which would compete with John Portman’s Atlanta Merchandise Mart, one of the earliest developments in his Peachtree Center complex, for the region’s retail trade show business. In addition, Cousins planned to build a second, more residentially-oriented multi-use complex called “OmniSouth” by the end of the 1970s. Collectively, Cousins wanted his developments to serve every need of Atlanta’s consumers. He wanted the Omni to be the place where they were entertained, where they shopped, where they dined, and, eventually, where they called home.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> “OmniSouth-1979,” Central Atlanta Progress, Inc. Papers, MSS 591 Box 97 Folder 3 Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Georgia; Tom Walker, “Omni Complex to Help City’s Global Look,” *Atlanta Journal*, October 11, 1972, 1A, 9A; Sam Massell, interview by the author, July 2, 2013, 41, transcript; Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 165.

The Omni International Complex finally opened in late 1975, three years after the Omni Coliseum, which had yet to become the beachhead of vibrancy envisioned by its boosters. The \$100 million, 5.5 acre Omni International Complex was just as grandiose and impressive as its boosters had predicted. Its twin 14 story office towers framed a development that included an Olympic regulation skating rink, an amusement park, ten restaurants, two discotheques, and a half-dozen movie theatres. The complex included the luxurious 500 room Omni International Hotel. It featured both a shopping mall and an “International Bazaar” that included the likes of Gucci, Givenchy, and Hermes.<sup>47</sup>

The question that plagued the Omni International Complex from the outset was who exactly would be the target audience for all of its offerings. Some of the amenities available at the complex were also available in suburban locations around the metropolitan area. Others, notably the specialty shops, appealed only to a narrow, upscale clientele. Hawks and Flames fans did not flock to the complex either. There is little evidence to suggest that events at the Omni Arena did much to help business at the Omni International Complex, or vice versa. Between 1976 and 1978, more than three-quarters of the hotel guests at the Omni International were conventioners, typically at the nearby Georgia World Congress Center (GWCC). Relatively few people stayed overnight at the Omni’s hotel to watch the Hawks, the Flames, or any of the special events held at the arena. Instead, most arena spectators were locals who drove-in and drove-out of one of the nearby parking lots, soon-before and soon-after their event. Customers who wanted to use the voter approved MARTA rapid-rail system to access the

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<sup>47</sup> Tom Walker, “Omni May Wind Up Close to Original Concept,” *Atlanta Constitution*, December 11, 1983, Omni (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Georgia; Mary Greenbaum, “Atlanta Sobers Up,” *Fortune*, June 1978, 118; Horace Sutton, “Atlanta Grows ‘Up,’” *Chicago Tribune*, August 22, 1976, C2; Alfred Borcover, “Fantasy in Atlanta’s Omni,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 13, 1976, C1; Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 161-165; Frederick Allen, *Atlanta Rising*, 200.

complex had to wait until the 1979 opening of the Five Points Station to do so. Most customers at the Omni International Complex proved to be conventioners in search of souvenirs or supper, not locals lingering after a game or on the lookout for the latest in *haute couture* at the International Bazaar.<sup>48</sup>

Throughout its history, the Omni struggled with high vacancy rates and low sales. In January 1985, as the Omni was going through a second debt reorganization in less than ten years, the complex had a 40% vacancy rate, more than twice as high as the rest of downtown, which itself had the highest vacancy rate of any major American city. “The Omni,” Jim Auchmutey of the *Journal-Constitution* wrote that January, “is a place of bored clerks, dark windows, and a few dozen people milling about looking for something.”<sup>49</sup>

The most high profile amenity at the Omni International Complex was “The World of Sid and Marty Krofft,” the first indoor amusement park ever constructed. “The World of Sid and Marty Krofft” featured the famed puppeteers’ signature characters, most notably Saturday morning television stalwart, H.R. Pufnstuf. The \$14 million amusement park drew huzzahs from virtually everyone who journeyed up and down its 205 foot escalator, the mechanism by which guests moved from one attraction to the next. Spread over eight stories, the park invited families into a day-long fantasyland that included not only performances by the Krofft’s well known puppets, but a wide-range of unique shows, exhibits, and rides. Visitors wandered through a village of giant, talking hats called Lidsville. They rode around on a three-tiered, mirrored carousel adorned with mythological beasts. The best known ride at “The World of Sid and

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<sup>48</sup> Atlanta Regional Commission, *A Preliminary Analysis of the Impact of MARTA’s Omni Station on Omni International Atlanta*, 1981, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Georgia; Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 161-165; Frederick Allen, *Atlanta Rising*, 200.

<sup>49</sup> Jim Auchmutey, “The Omni: Neat, Clean, and Empty,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, January 6, 1985, Omni (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center.

Marty Krofft” was a human pinball machine, which placed riders inside plastic-domed pinballs that were then batted around by flippers and bumpers amid a brightly-colored platform. Like the complex itself, “The World of Sid and Marty Krofft” impressed people conceptually, but did not earn the mass patronage necessary to sustain its operations. Park leadership tried to undercut their outdoor suburban competitor, “Six Flags Over Georgia,” by charging one-third as much for admission. This strategy failed to either jumpstart the gate at “The World of Sid and Marty Krofft” or lure business away from the well-established park. Ten times as many people visited Six Flags as the Krofft’s attraction during the 1976 season, the one year that the parks were in competition. The decision to keep admission prices low expedited “The World of Sid and Marty Krofft’s” demise by cutting it off from the revenue it needed to sustain its expensive operations. The park closed in November 1976, six months after it opened.<sup>50</sup>

The Omni International Complex opened into an already dramatically overbuilt downtown Atlanta real estate market. The CBD was already full of brand new commercial and retail properties, office space, condominiums, and hotel rooms, all in search of occupants. The entry of the Omni into the marketplace made the already cut-throat competition for business among downtown realtors all the more fierce.<sup>51</sup> In March 1978, less than 30 months after the Omni opened, lender Morgan Guaranty Trust announced plans to foreclose on the property. At the time, the foreclosure on the Omni was the largest in the history of American real estate. The Omni’s investors had defaulted on their loans, failing to service the \$91 million (\$77 million in principal and \$14 million in interest) in debt remaining on the MXD. In May 1978, a consortium

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<sup>50</sup> Frederick Allen, *Atlanta Rising, 196-197*; Alfred Borcover, “Fantasy in Atlanta’s Omni,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 13, 1976, C1; “Omni Complex to Help City’s Global Look,” *Atlanta Journal*, October 11, 1972, 1A, 4A; Wayne King, “Atlanta’s Upward Surge Stalls as Omni Building Complex Falts,” *New York Times*, February 11, 1978, 45.

<sup>51</sup> Douglas R. Sease, “Atlanta Sobered by Real Estate Bust,” *Washington Post*, March 4, 1978, E1; Beau Cutts, “Omni May Get Loan Refinancing,” *Washington Post*, May 13, 1976, E12.

of national banks orchestrated a debt restructuring plan that enabled the Omni to remain open. A similar debt reorganization deal in 1985 kept the MXD going amid renewed foreclosure threats by creditors. The financial failure of the Omni International Complex brought Cousins himself to the brink of bankruptcy. Between 1974 and 1977, he lost \$33 million as a result of his MXD.<sup>52</sup>

The near-bankruptcy of the Omni International Complex forced Cousins to scrap OmniSouth, a proposed 22 acre, residentially-oriented expansion of the MXD. The new development would have linked the Omni's campus directly to Rich's Department Store, which was planning to make a significant investment in the project. Like the Omni, Rich's was struggling to keep open the doors of its southern CBD location. OmniSouth would have created a nodal point in the southern CBD linking downtown's newest developments to the city's most historically revered retailer. Considering the track record of the Omni International Complex and the estimated \$265 million price of the OmniSouth extension, few investors showed interest in the project.<sup>53</sup>

The catastrophic economic failure of the Omni International Complex and the disappointing, if not altogether unsuccessful, track record of the Omni Coliseum were a product in large part of the broader phenomena which prevented Atlanta's "major league" downtown of the 1960s and 1970s from drawing steady patronage from suburban consumers. Metropolitan area residents proved unwilling to drive back into the city for games and, by virtue of their political decisions, had limited access to public transportation to attend events in Atlanta. Many

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<sup>52</sup> Wayne King, "Atlanta's Upward Surge Stalls as Omni Building Complex Falter," *New York Times*, February 11, 1978, 45; Jim Auchmutey, "The Omni: Neat, Clean, and Empty," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, January 6, 1985, Omni (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center; Tom Walker, "Resolution Said Close on Omni Troubles," *Atlanta Journal*, March 6, 1978, Omni (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center; Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 161-165.

<sup>53</sup> Frederick Allen, *Atlanta Rising*, 200.

residents were recent transplants with little connection to a center city they regarded as unsafe. A clear majority of metropolitan Atlantans preferred recreations closer to home and, if inclined to follow the city's teams, could do so through print or broadcast media.

In addition to these broader issues, several specific factors kept the Omnis from becoming the vanguard of a commercial revival downtown. Firstly, the close proximity of three other recently constructed, multi-million square foot developments created a great deal of competition for customers around the Five Points, the historic core of Atlanta's CBD. Simultaneously, the inward-orientation of each downtown campus stifled the potential flow of customers from one development to another. Secondly, competition from rapidly expanding retail and commercial options in suburban Atlanta, particularly in and around the affluent Northside neighborhood of Buckhead, further dissuaded metropolitan area residents from returning to the center city to go shopping, have dinner, or seek out after-hours entertainment. Finally, a fear of crime in the Omni's southern CBD environs, which were exaggerated by the demographic transformation of downtown Atlanta during the 1960s and 1970s, contributed significantly to the unwillingness of many suburban customers to patronize the Omni regularly. While many Atlantans had long been leery of the high-crime neighborhoods adjacent to the CBD, the perception that downtown itself was dangerous became a broadly shared sensibility in the metropolitan area during the 1970s. The remainder of this chapter delves into these specific factors which detracted from the Omni Coliseum and the Omni International Complex's appeal to many metropolitan area residents.

### **MXDs and the Unmaking of Downtown Atlanta**

The Omni International Complex was one of several massive commercial developments built in and around Atlanta's CBD between the late 1960s and the mid-1970s. Cousins' campus

was erected during a downtown building boom that also included the construction of the Peachtree Center (1967), Colony Square (1973), and the Georgia World Congress Center (1976). Like the Omni, the other three developments were all built in close proximity to the Five Points, the historic core of Atlanta's CBD. Collectively, these four campuses added nearly ten million square feet of office and exhibition space to downtown Atlanta in less than a decade.<sup>54</sup>

Elites in Atlanta, as in other American cities, regarded MXDs, with their combinations of inward oriented amenities such as hotels, retail, restaurants, office space, convention halls, and entertainments, as one-size fits all solutions to the decline of their CBDs. In most cities, they became downtown fortresses, sapping the surrounding streets of any remaining vibrancy and failing to meet the lofty commercial expectations predicted by their boosters. Municipal leaders in few North American cities embraced MXDs as thoroughly as those in Atlanta. By situating a wide range of amenities within secure, insular spaces, a series of developers believed that they could help downtown Atlanta reassert its preeminence in the economic and cultural life of the region. Civic leaders and investors alike thought MXDs would provide Atlanta with instant vibrancy, creating momentum for their downtown by their mere construction. In each instance, the MXDs built in Atlanta proved to be discreet campuses which added little to the vitality of the center city. The successes these developments enjoyed were narrowly focused around their roles as convention hotels and hosts, not as magnets for the discretionary dollars of metropolitan area residents.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 165; Paul Gapp, "Atlanta: Capital of the New South," *Chicago Tribune*, March 26, 1980, 1.

<sup>55</sup> Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 164-165, 180-184; Tom Walker, "Omni Complex to Help City's Global Look," *Atlanta Journal*, October 11, 1972, 1A, 9A; Bob Hertz, "Study Shows Atlanta Wants Arena," *Atlanta Journal*, May 7, 1968, 4-D.



Developer John Portman's Peachtree Center opened in 1967 less than a half-mile from the eventual site of the Omni International Complex, stretching for twelve blocks to the north of the Five Points. The Peachtree Center was as intensely managed and inwardly focused as the Omni. Portman, like Cousins, wanted people living, working, and visiting downtown Atlanta to be able to access the comforts of suburbia as well as the signature amenities of a center city all within a safe and controlled atmosphere. A system of skyways connected Peachtree's buildings, enabling visitors to move throughout the entire complex without ever touching down on the streets. The Peachtree Center featured two luxury hotels: the Hyatt-Regency, which opened in 1967, and the 73 story Western International Hotel, which, at the time of its 1976 opening, was the tallest hotel in the world. Portman's MXD included five office buildings of 25 or more stories. The first MXD of its kind in downtown Atlanta, Peachtree Center was the metropolitan area's corporate address of choice for several years until a series of competitors around the Five Points, including the Omni and Colony Square, and north of the CBD, namely in Buckhead, threatened its preeminence. The entirely inwardly focused Peachtree Center did not benefit from any of the new development that surrounded it. Each new project functioned discreetly, thwarting the flow of commerce from one downtown campus to the next. The rapid decline of Portman's development as Atlanta's corporate address of choice and its failure to cultivate a local market for its services left the complex's fate entirely in the hands of visitors. The convention hotel business proved to be the lifeline of the Peachtree Center, providing it with steady, insular business from out-of-towners who slept, ate, and gathered within its confines.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Sam Massell, interview by the author, July 2, 2013, 39-41 transcript; John Portman, "The Architect as Developer," Lecture, The Royal Institute of British Architects, April 27, 1982. Accessed online: July 3, 2016: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZR4XUT3RIOk>; Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 161-162; Horace Sutton, "Atlanta Grows 'Up,'" *Chicago Tribune*, August 22, 1976, C2; Anthony Monahan, "Atlanta: The Southern City That Isn't," *Chicago Tribune*, August 21, 1966, 133.

Colony Square opened in 1973 just ten blocks northeast of the Omni Coliseum, further squeezing Atlanta's downtown real estate market. Located in the Midtown neighborhood, Colony Square added yet another \$100 million MXD to the CBD's environs. Designed by noted modernist architect Henri Jova, the brutalist towers of Colony Square included the luxurious Fairmont Hotel, penthouse apartments and condominiums, a skating rink, and a shopping mall anchored by Neiman Marcus. Colony Square faced similar problems to the Omni International Complex and met the same fate. In March 1977, the \$98 million MXD went into foreclosure and was later reorganized in bankruptcy court. Colony Square has functioned in subsequent years primarily as office space. Periodic investments in its shopping mall have consistently failed to transform it into a center city shopping destination.<sup>57</sup>

The \$50 million state-owned and financed Georgia World Congress Center (GWCC) opened in 1976 adjacent to the Omni International Complex. It has been the most successful of the era's major developments in downtown Atlanta and, not coincidentally, its most narrowly focused. Cousins convinced Governor Jimmy Carter to build the 718,000 square foot trade show-dedicated GWCC next to the Omni by promising not to build a competing "World Trade Center" as a further extension of his MXD. Initially, Georgia lawmakers had planned the GWCC for just north of Portman's Peachtree Center. The GWCC, which was expansive enough to draw the largest of national conventions, kept the already financially troubled Omni International Complex from going out of business. The steady hotel business which conventioners provided for the Omni's restaurants, services, and luxury accommodations proved

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<sup>57</sup> Gene Tharpe, "Atlanta Seems Destined to Be a World Super City," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 12, 1973, 18D; Horace Sutton, "Scarlett O'Hara would never recognize Atlanta Today," *Boston Globe*, October 24, 1976, 57; Douglas R. Sease, "Atlanta Sobered by Real Estate Bust," *Washington Post*, March 4, 1978, E1

to be its primary source of revenue. When the GWCC opened in September 1976, its meeting rooms, ballrooms, and exhibition spaces had been booked completely for the next two years.<sup>58</sup>

### **The Suburbanization of Shopping**

The competition that Atlanta's MXDs faced from rapidly expanding suburban commercial enterprises was the most significant reason these downtown developments failed to reorient the consumption patterns of metropolitan area residents back towards the center city. By the time Tom Cousins announced his plans to build an MXD in "the Gulch," the core of the region's retail business had already been unmoored from Atlanta's CBD. In 1963, 4276 of the 8146 retail stores in the five county area, or 52.2 percent, were located in Atlanta. By 1972, 7948 of the 12553 retail stores in the five county area, or 63.3 percent, were located outside the city of Atlanta. Annual retail sales in suburban Atlanta jumped 286 percent between 1963 and 1972 from \$603 million to \$2.3 billion. Sales receipts in Atlanta proper increased a comparatively small 78 percent from \$1.05 billion to \$1.8 billion during the same ten year period. In one decade, Atlanta's share of the region's retail sales fell from 66 to 44 percent. By 1975, just seven percent of the region's retail business took place in Atlanta's CBD. A mere 12 percent of the jobs in metropolitan Atlanta were located downtown by 1975, two-fifths fewer than in 1960.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Sam Massell, interview by the author, July 2, 2013, 39-41 transcript; Barbara L. Jackson, "Desegregation: Atlanta Style," *Theory into Practice* 17.1 (1978), 43-45; William H. Jones, "Atlanta Center: A Success Story," *Washington Post*, May 19, 1978, F1; Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 165; Tom Walker, "Omni Complex to Help City's Global Look," *Atlanta Journal*, October 11, 1972, 1A, 9A; Tom Walker, "Omni May Wind Up Close to Original Concept," *Atlanta Constitution*, December 11, 1983, Omni (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center; Frederick Allen, *Atlanta Rising*, 196-197.

<sup>59</sup> Charles Moore, "Atlanta Tops U.S. Job Gains," *Atlanta Constitution*, January 2, 1965, 6; Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 49; "Atlanta: City Renaissance at its Best," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, May 15, 1966, 32; Ivan Allen, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, 130-1, 145-147; "A City in Crisis," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 30, 1975, 1A, 12A; Andy Ambrose, *Atlanta: An Illustrated History*, 183-185; Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 243.

Thirty-four major shopping centers were operating in suburban Atlanta by the time Cousins unveiled plans for the Omni International Complex in October 1972. The success of the Lenox Square Mall (1959) in the affluent North Atlanta neighborhood of Buckhead, located four miles north of the CBD, encouraged developers to open new and larger complexes further outside the center city. Just as the downtown MXD boom was gearing up, massive shopping centers including Phipps Plaza (1969), the Northlake Mall (1971), and the Perimeter Mall (1971) expanded the retail options on Atlanta's Northside considerably. They catered to an ever-expanding suburban customer base that was happy to do their shopping closer to home in spaces they found convenient and safe.<sup>60</sup>

### **Buckhead and the Making of a Northside Downtown**

The shifting of metropolitan Atlanta's commercial and cultural center away from downtown during the second half of the twentieth century could be seen most clearly in Buckhead. This longtime enclave of privilege evolved into a thriving retail, leisure, and commercial center. It had become the de facto downtown of the Northside by the time Tom Cousins broke ground on the Omni. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Buckhead served as a summer retreat for Atlanta's elite, a twenty-eight square mile unincorporated community just north of the city. Palatial Tudor and Georgian homes, luxurious lawns, and lush gardens became the trademarks of its landscape during the Gilded Age. The automobile remade Buckhead into the permanent address of many of the region's wealthiest residents. The community became the axis of the city's social calendar: home to summer debutante balls, gatherings at the Piedmont Driving Club, and parties before and after Georgia Tech football games. In 1951, Atlanta won

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<sup>60</sup> Brian O'Shea, "Perimeter Mall Turns 35," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, August 17, 2006, 1JH; Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 49; "A City in Crisis," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 30, 1975, 1A, 12A; Andy Ambrose, *Atlanta: An Illustrated History*, 183-185.

state legislative approval to annex Buckhead into the city, despite loud opposition from community residents who feared, quite presciently, that the plan would increase their property taxes significantly. Atlanta mayor William Hartsfield campaigned for years to annex Buckhead, arguing that its incorporation into Atlanta would be mutually beneficial. Buckhead would benefit from access to big city resources such as municipal water and a professional fire department while Atlanta would benefit from an expanded tax base. Privately, Hartsfield and the civic establishment championed the annexation plan to ensure a continued white electoral supermajority in the increasingly black city.<sup>61</sup>

Buckhead's annexation into Atlanta did little in the short term to alter the community's status as a genteel suburban retreat. Instead, it was the 1959 opening of the Lenox Square Mall, the largest shopping center in the South, which transformed Buckhead, turning it overnight into a commercial epicenter. The shopping center changed the routines of Northsiders immediately, drawing thousands of consumers away from the services offered in the CBD every day. The Lenox Square Mall included 60 specialty shops, a drive-thru bank, a five-and-dime store, a supermarket, and a movie theatre, all of which were situated in a meticulously manicured landscape that included several dozen acres of parking spaces. The mall was anchored by the first branch campuses of Rich's and Davison's department stores, signaling the reorientation of Atlanta's two most prominent retailers toward the suburban market.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Sallye Salter, "Atlanta: Rapid Transit Station is the Hub of Burgeoning Buckhead Area," *New York Times*, May 12, 1985, CR16; Susan Kessler Barnard, *Buckhead: A Place for All Time* (Athens, GA: Hill Streets Press, 1996), 7-14; Harold H. Martin, *William Berry Hartsfield: Mayor of Atlanta*, 85.

<sup>62</sup> "Lenox Square Mall," *MallHistory.com*, 2013. Accessed Online: July 3, 2015: <http://www.mallhistory.com/malls/lenox-square-mall-atlanta-ga>; Sam Massell, interview by the author, July 2, 2013, 39-40 transcript; Sallye Salter, "Atlanta: Rapid Transit Station is the Hub of Burgeoning Buckhead Area," *New York Times*, May 12, 1985, CR16; Susan Kessler Barnard and Franklin Garrett, *Buckhead: A Place for All Time*, 67-76, 121-134, 201-204.

The opening of the Lenox Square Mall created a new commercial center of gravity in Metropolitan Atlanta. It offered consumers from predominately affluent north Fulton, Cobb, and Gwinnett counties a safe, predictable, and convenient retail destination. In the wake of the shopping center's success, a number of other commercial developments emerged in Buckhead. A series of mid-rise commercial buildings went up during the 1960s as well as a second major shopping mall, Phipps Plaza, which opened in 1969. The 1974 opening of Tower Place, Buckhead's first skyscraper, inaugurated an office building boom in the neighborhood which lured many potential corporate patrons away from the CBD, exacerbating downtown's already mounting real estate bubble. Between 1974 and 1985, more than 6 million square feet of office space were built in Buckhead as well as three luxury high-rise hotels.<sup>63</sup>

By 1985, the neighborhood was home to one-third of the city's high-rise buildings. As Buckhead emerged as Atlanta's new corporate hub, it also became the city's most popular after-hours haunt. Buckhead Village, a triangle of commercial streets located on the neighborhood's east side, emerged as a lively nightspot with clubs, bars, and restaurants that catered to students at nearby Emory and Georgia Tech as well as residents of the Northside's "Golden Crescent." Complaints by neighborhood residents about the traffic and noise pollution became a regular feature of civic discourse. Within a quarter century of its annexation, Buckhead had been transformed into the Southeast's commercial and corporate address of choice. It had become Atlanta's alternative downtown, located just four miles north of the city's traditional CBD and oriented largely toward the commercial and recreational desires of white and affluent northsiders. By the early 1990s, Buckhead residents, who constituted 15% of the city's

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<sup>63</sup> Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 63; Sallye Salter, "Atlanta: Rapid Transit Station is the Hub of Burgeoning Buckhead Area," *New York Times*, May 12, 1985, CR16; Sam Massell, interview by the author, July 2, 2013, 39-40 transcript; Geoffrey Booth, *Transforming Suburban Business Districts* (Washington, D.C: Urban Land Institute, 2001), 169-172.

population, paid more than 45% of its property taxes. Any desire among Buckhead residents to leave Atlanta proper were muted by the neighborhood's corporate community, which emphasized the benefits their businesses derived from the city's reputation, institutions, and infrastructure. Simultaneously, Atlanta city leaders acknowledged the role that Buckhead residents and businesses played in shouldering the municipal tax burden by granting the neighborhood significant autonomy over local affairs, including zoning, security, and neighborhood planning.<sup>64</sup>

### **“I Don't Like to Come Downtown Anymore”**

For years in advance of the Omni Coliseum and Omni International Complex's opening, many white consumers considered the southern half of the CBD into which the developments opened an unwelcoming, decrepit, and largely African American business district. “Only the young, and the unfortunate, without better transportation, except those who still work in the area, shop downtown regularly,” wrote the *Atlanta Daily World's* George Coleman in a 1971 editorial that described the deterioration of the southern CBD into a high crime neighborhood that consisted largely of vacant store fronts and marginal businesses.<sup>65</sup>

While Atlanta's black middle class was beginning to settle into formerly all-white neighborhoods in Southeast and Southwest Atlanta as well as suburban enclaves in southern Fulton and DeKalb Counties, the city's black underclass was becoming increasingly concentrated in the impoverished neighborhoods that encircled downtown. By the early 1960s, the residential neighborhoods around the Southern CBD were populated primarily by low-

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<sup>64</sup> Geoffrey Booth, *Transforming Suburban Business Districts*, 169-172; Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 63; Sallye Salter, “Atlanta: Rapid Transit Station is the Hub of Burgeoning Buckhead Area,” *New York Times*, May 12, 1985, CR16; Ernie Suggs, “The Mayor of Buckhead,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, December 6, 1999, 1B.

<sup>65</sup> George M. Coleman, “One Race Downtown Section Must Be ‘Impossible Dream,’” *Atlanta Daily World*, November 4, 1971, 1.

income African Americans, many of whom were either recent migrants from rural Georgia or longtime Atlanta residents who had been displaced from stable neighborhoods by the city's urban renewal programs. Many of the social problems in the Southern CBD during the 1970s were, in large part, the product of decisions made by urban elites during the 1950s and 1960s in the name of slum clearance. In the case of Atlanta, as in many other American cities, urban renewal and, later, the Model Cities program proved a destabilizing force in many African American neighborhoods.<sup>66</sup>

*Atlanta Daily World* columnist George Coleman traced the early 1970s surge in crime in the Southern CBD and the surrounding neighborhoods to “the uprooting of the old ‘Buttermilk Bottom’ people, who were chased out of the neighborhoods near Peachtree Street to make room for luxury hotels, sports stadiums, and state office buildings.”<sup>67</sup> The social disorder that suburbanites feared in the Southern CBD was in no small part produced by the efforts of civic leaders to make Atlanta a “major league city.” Rather than investing in affordable housing, city leaders made use of public lands to build Atlanta Stadium, cramping residents of the city's historic black neighborhoods into smaller enclaves around the CBD. Moreover, changes in federal policy, namely the replacement of the Johnson administration's “War on Poverty” programs with the “War on Crime” programs favored by the Nixon administration cut significantly into public investments aimed at providing economic opportunities to underprivileged Americans. Public policies focused on reducing income inequality were replaced with new policies focused more on policing, surveillance, and punishment. Within the

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<sup>66</sup> Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics*, 61-73; Ronald Bayor, “The Civil Rights Movement as Urban Reform,” 303, 307-309; Truman A. Hartshorn, *Metropolis in Georgia*, 41-48; Fletcher Thompson, *Review of Certain Aspects of the Model Cities Program in Atlanta, Georgia*, 1-6.

<sup>67</sup> George M. Coleman, “All Share Guilt in Fears, Frustrations of this Area,” *Atlanta Daily World*, November 2, 1971, 1.



context of Metropolitan Atlanta, the city's predominately African American underclass bore the burden of these significant changes to federal policy during the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>68</sup>

A trip to Rich's, Atlanta's most famous department store, was the only reason that many white customers ever visited the Southern CBD, a journey that became unnecessary once the retailer started opening suburban locations, beginning with the Lenox Square Mall in 1959. Rich's Whitehall Street location, which had operated since the 1920s, struggled to stay open despite significant investments during the 1960s in a modern, heavily patrolled parking deck and upgrades to the store's interior.<sup>69</sup> Unfortunately, Rich's location in the Whitehall-Broad Street section of downtown placed it in one of the Southern CBD's most dangerous areas. In October 1972, Mayor Massell added dedicated foot patrols to Whitehall-Broad Street after a Community Chest employee was randomly stabbed at a bus stop outside Rich's. Numerous armed robberies had already taken place that fall at nearby Park Plaza, which sat between the store and the neighborhood's other two major landmarks, Underground Atlanta and the just opened Omni Coliseum.<sup>70</sup> The string of violence was, in the words of a *Constitution* editorial, driving "law abiding citizens, already cautious about going anywhere in downtown Atlanta at any time of day" away from Whitehall-Broad Street's major institutions.<sup>71</sup>

The hesitance of white customers to patronize businesses in the southern CBD was, in fact, just a more exaggerated version of the broader discomfort many white Atlantans felt about

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid; "Atlanta and Crime," *Atlanta Daily World*, April 4, 1972, 6; Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*, 1-6.

<sup>69</sup> "Downtown Issues, 1974," Central Atlanta Progress, Inc. Records, MSS 591, Box 93, Folder 3 Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Georgia; Robert Scheer, "Tourists Seldom see the real face of Atlanta," *Boston Globe*, February 18, 1979, A3; Frederick Allen, *Atlanta Rising, 196-197*, 206-8.

<sup>70</sup> Keeler McCartney and Frank Brock, "Atlantan is Slashed at Mid-City Bus Stop," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 10, 1972, 1A. Sam Hopkins, "Downtown Patrolmen Increased," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 11, 1972, 1A, 24A; "Crime on Campus," *Atlanta Daily World*, October 25, 1972, 2; "Crime in the Streets," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 24, 1972, 4.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

the demographic transformation of downtown during the 1970s. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the blocks surrounding the Five Points district had been the domain of white office workers. The social complexion of downtown Atlanta became steadily more diverse beginning in the 1960s as a result of several related trends. Firstly, urban renewal pushed the residents of a number of predominately black neighborhoods in the center city into a series of ever smaller enclaves to the south, west, and east of the CBD. Slum clearance exacerbated an already mounting housing crisis in Atlanta's Black Belt. Every year, thousands of new unemployed and low skilled migrants were arriving in the city from rural Georgia in search of housing in neighborhoods that were cramped even before urban renewal.<sup>72</sup>

Secondly, the affirmative action program put in place for municipal employment by the Massell administration led to a considerable increase in the number of black office workers downtown during the early 1970s, further diminishing white hegemony in Atlanta's CBD. Thirdly, the election of an African American mayor in 1973 and his hiring of a socially progressive black police chief named Reginald Eaves improved the perception of law enforcement among many black residents. The Eaves-era Atlanta Police Department (APD) seemed less aggressive and intimidating to many African American residents, who felt more comfortable spending time downtown without fear of continual harassment from law enforcement. Conversely, many Atlanta residents, both white and black, complained that, under Eaves' leadership, the APD became too permissive of petty offenses being committed downtown. White and black residents alike complained during the late 1960s and 1970s about the significant increase in incidences of aggressive panhandling and threatening behavior,

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<sup>72</sup> Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Making of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 85-92; Frederick Allen, *Atlanta Rising*, 196-197, 206-8.

particularly towards women, by the CBD's growing population of street dwellers, who were predominately African American.<sup>73</sup>

"You walk down the streets and you hear some of the most vile epithets that human mouths can utter," George Coleman of the *Atlanta Daily World* wrote in November 1971, describing the increasingly threatening atmosphere he found on downtown Atlanta streets.<sup>74</sup> Five months later, Coleman wrote of the fear that most residents felt when they had to interact with "the men who curse and threaten those who pass by," that were increasingly populating the streets of the CBD. Many of "the men" described by Coleman were recently deinstitutionalized patients from the state's mental health hospitals.<sup>75</sup> In its 1981 annual report, CAP noted that "behavioral signs of disorder" in downtown Atlanta had grown rapidly over the previous decade. The downtown booster organization called for strict enforcement of quality of life codes, which was in keeping with the "broken windows" approach to law enforcement then becoming popular among some urban leaders.<sup>76</sup>

"I know this sounds racist," a white female office manager interviewed in 1974 by the *New York Times*' Wayne King said, "but I don't really like to come downtown any more on the weekends because it's really just black. I don't feel like it's my city anymore. Even the stores seem to be black," she said. The interviewee, an Atlanta native who worked downtown and asked the *Times* to remain anonymous, reflected a common sensibility among Atlanta's white middle class. Unusual in her frankness, the interviewee demonstrated the simultaneous desire of

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 196-197, 206-208; "Downtown Issues, 1974," Central Atlanta Progress, Inc. Records, MSS 591, Box 93, Folder 3 Kenan Research Center; Robert Scheer, "Tourists Seldom see the real face of Atlanta," *Boston Globe*, February 18, 1979, A3..

<sup>74</sup> George M. Coleman, "All Share Guilt in Fears, Frustrations of this Area," *Atlanta Daily World*, November 2, 1971, 1.

<sup>75</sup> "Atlanta and Crime," *Atlanta Daily World*, April 4, 1972, 6.

<sup>76</sup> "Central Area Survey II, 1980-Present (1987)," Central Atlanta Progress, Inc. Records, MSS 591, Box 54, Folder 2, Kenan Research Center.

many white residents to avoid close interaction with blacks while fearing the negative social consequences of publicly expressing racially intolerant viewpoints.<sup>77</sup>

“Whites don’t like to be outnumbered by blacks. Even well-to-do blacks don’t like to be surrounded by low-class blacks,” Underground Atlanta restaurateur Dante Stephensen told the *Wall Street Journal*’s Janet Guyon in 1980 for a feature story focused on downtown Atlanta’s struggles. The proprietor of “Dante’s Down the Hatch” said openly and crassly what many others said in private. Moreover, he described accurately the attitudes of a clear majority of the region’s middle class residents, both white and black, toward Atlanta’s CBD, which was viewed by the suburban majority through the combined lenses of race and class.<sup>78</sup> Long before Stephensen made this pronouncement, the metropolitan area’s middle classes left the streets of the center city, particularly at night, to conventioners and the predominately impoverished African American residents of the surrounding neighborhoods.<sup>79</sup> Even downtown boosters CAP said as much in their 1979-1980 annual report. “Atlanta has made great strides in race relations, but it’s a sad fact that many people won’t come downtown because they don’t like rubbing shoulders with black people,” the report stated, conceding that “our city is becoming more and more segregated, both economically and socially...”<sup>80</sup>

Mere racism does not entirely explain the fears that many metropolitan area residents felt towards downtown Atlanta. By the early 1970s, the city of Atlanta, including its CBD, had become a genuinely dangerous place. For most suburban residents, trips downtown for

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<sup>77</sup> Wayne King, “Atlanta’s Confident Hope is Faltering,” *New York Times*, October 7, 1974, 73.

<sup>78</sup> Janet Guyon, “Bustling Atlanta Seems Built More for Outsiders Than Its Own,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 23, 1980, 37.

<sup>79</sup> Frederick Allen, *Atlanta Rising*, 206-208; Curtis Wilkie, “Atlanta- a resilient city,” *Boston Globe*, September 5, 1976, A2.

<sup>80</sup> “Central Atlanta Progress Annual Report (1979),” Central Atlanta Progress, Inc. Records, MSS 591, Box 38, Folder 3, Kenan Research Center.

work, shopping, or leisure were their primary reasons to enter the city limits, thus situating their anxieties about Atlanta proper primarily within the CBD.

Violent crime grew exponentially across the United States during the period in question, increasing 135 percent nationally between 1960 and 1975. The crime rate in Atlanta, which had ranked as one of America's most violent cities for as long as the Justice Department had maintained national crime statistics, accelerated even more dramatically than the country as a whole in every major category of offense. Between 1960 and 1975, Atlanta's homicide rate increased 270 percent while reported aggravated assaults (625%), armed robberies (1314%), and sexual assaults (900%) grew at even more staggering paces. On four occasions during the 1970s, Atlanta had the highest homicide rate of any major city. In all four of those years, more than 90 percent of the perpetrators and victims had been African American. An October 1975 *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* survey indicated that nearly one-half of city residents, including a majority of black residents, regarded crime as the city's greatest problem.<sup>81</sup>

Violent crimes in downtown Atlanta attracted the attention of the city's two largest newspapers, the *Journal* and the *Constitution*, to the extent that they impacted high profile white victims. An unprecedented outburst of downtown assaults and robberies committed in broad daylight prompted a serious media outcry in 1972. The city's police department responded in the short term by organizing a series of free self-defense clinics for women, providing attendees with tips on "fighting dirty." APD officers taught those in attendance the proper way to use one's car

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<sup>81</sup> Metropolitan Crime Commission, *Crime in Metropolitan Atlanta, 1975-1979* (Atlanta: Metropolitan Atlanta Crime Commission, Inc., 1980), 2-5, 8, 11; U.S. Department of Justice: National Criminal Justice Information and Statistics Service, *Crime in Eight American Cities: Advance Report* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Justice Department, July 1974), 7, 24-25; "Atlanta: A City in Crisis," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 23, 1975, 16A; Frederick Allen and Jim Merriner, "Library, No; Streets, Yes, Atlantans Say," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 3, 1975, 1A; Bernard Headley, *The Atlanta Youth Murders and the Politics of Race*, 28-32; "1980 Atlanta Profile: County and City Data Book," University of Virginia Library Census Data Base.

keys to gouge out an assailants' eyes or employ hairspray as a weapon. For a small fee, the department offered handgun training to both men and women.<sup>82</sup>

The Massell administration responded to the explosion in crime, especially in downtown Atlanta, by pursuing new federal anti-crime grants. Massell pursued federal "War on Crime" money in the early 1970s as vigorously as Allen had pursued "War on Poverty" money in the mid-1960s. Atlanta was one of eight cities to secure federal funding from the Department of Justice's High Impact Crime Control Program, giving the city access to \$20 million for law enforcement. Federal anti-crime money enabled Atlanta to hire several hundred more police officers. The force grew from 950 in 1970 to 1415 in 1975. Massell instructed the APD to expand foot patrols in high crime areas, including several sections of the CBD. Despite the expanded presence of law enforcement in Atlanta generally and downtown specifically, violent crime remained a major problem, though the rates for major offenses remained relatively stable, if still atrocious, in the mid-1970s.<sup>83</sup>

Despite the efforts of city leaders to curb crime downtown, a 1974 survey commissioned by CAP found that the perception that the CBD was dangerous was the top reason why suburban consumers did not frequent the area. Lack of parking and a lack of interesting activities followed closely behind in the survey, but participants said that to an even greater extent they feared jostling from panhandlers, muggers, and loiterers when they walked around downtown, especially at night when the streets were empty. CAP called for improved street

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<sup>82</sup> Hugh Merrill, "Fight Dirty, Atlanta Women Advised," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, December 20, 1970, 2A.

<sup>83</sup> "1975 Atlanta Profile: County and City Data Book," University of Virginia Library Census Data Base; "Cutting Crime," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 3, 1971, 4A; "Massell's State of the City Address," *Atlanta Constitution*, January 3, 1973, 10A; "City Seeks to Increase Parks Police," *Atlanta Constitution*, August 5, 1971, 4A; Gary Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, 443; "Massell for Mayor 1973 Campaign Materials," Sam Massell (Personality File), Kenan Research Center.

lighting, an increased presence and vigilance by police and private security, and prompt construction of the MARTA rapid rail line downtown.<sup>84</sup>

Among the victims of downtown Atlanta's declining reputation was Underground Atlanta, a gas-lit, subterranean festival marketplace and entertainment district that was Atlanta's hottest nightspot ever so briefly in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Perceptions of Underground Atlanta, like the other major institutions of the southern CBD, were shaped by a combination of racial anxieties, competition from newer entertainment and commercial alternatives, and genuine concerns about the venue's safety. Situated across the Five Points from the Omni Complex, Underground Atlanta opened in May 1969, two years after businessmen Jack Paterson and Steven Fuller purchased an abandoned, four block section of storefronts located beneath the city's primary railroad viaduct. The pair soon formed Underground Atlanta, Inc. and invested \$10 million in the project. The streets that became Underground Atlanta had been the city's commercial and entertainment hub in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, but had been uninhabited since the 1920s, when merchants moved their stores to street level to appeal to automobile traffic. Inspired by historically restored commercial districts in St. Louis (Gaslight Square) and San Francisco (Ghirardelli Square), Paterson and Fuller sought to transform their site into a Gay Nineties themed nightspot, juxtaposing a romanticized recreation of Jim Crow-era Atlanta with the massive glass skyscrapers that had emerged around the city's former merchant's row. Underground Atlanta was famous from the day it opened, as Paterson and Fuller had promoted the venue's launch heavily in both local and national publications.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> "Goals, 1974," Central Atlanta Progress, Inc. Records, MSS 591, Box 5, Folder 3, Kenan Research Center.

<sup>85</sup> "Visitor's Guide and Map to Underground Atlanta," Underground Atlanta (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Georgia; Jon Nordheimer, "Atlanta Brightens Its Cellar," *New York Times*,

In the demimonde days of Underground Atlanta, young adults, nightlife-seeking suburbanites, and conventioners crowded in among the district's gas-lit street lamps, masonry archways, and colored glass windows on both weekends and weeknights. The Underground became Atlanta's closest cousin to New Orleans' French Quarter, with its assortment of antiquarian-themed cabarets, cocktail lounges, boutiques, and off-beat restaurants. The shambolic atmosphere of the Underground established the city's 1970s reputation as "Hot-Lanta." At its early 1970s peak, the adult-oriented attraction averaged nearly 3,000,000 visitors per year, roughly as many visitors as Dekalb County's family-friendly Stone Mountain Park, a remarkable feat in a region whose entertainment choices had skewed in recent years toward the suburban and family oriented.<sup>86</sup>

In early 1974, business at the Underground began a noticeable and steep decline. Total receipts dropped by at least 10 percent each year for the rest of the 1970s. Between 1973 and 1980, the number of businesses in the festival marketplace declined from 68 to 20. By 1977, Underground Atlanta, Inc. offered new tenants one year of free rent if they agreed to sign a five year lease. The rapid decline of the Underground can be attributed to many factors. Almost certainly, the novelty of Underground Atlanta wore thin for many residents as new entertainment options, including those at the Omni, Colony Square, and, especially, the emerging nightlife in Buckhead Village, competed for their business. The recession of the mid 1970s cut into the disposable income of the Underground's local and out-of-town patrons. Moreover, the abolition

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September 11, 1969, 49; Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 166-167; Lee Simowitz, "Underground Atlanta Finds It's 1900 Again," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 9, 1969, 1.

<sup>86</sup> William A. Evans, "While Atlanta Grows Upward It is Spreading Underground (Promotional Flier)," Underground Atlanta (Subject File), Kenan Research Center; Peter Applebome, "Atlanta Places Its Bets on a New Underground," *New York Times*, June 11, 1989, 26; "Underground Atlanta to Return to Gay Nineties," *New York Times*, April 20, 1969, R8; Jon Nordheimer, "Atlanta Brightens Its Cellar," *New York Times*, September 11, 1969, 49; Leon Lindsay, "Atlanta: More than a City to Just Pass Through," *Washington Post*, February 6, 1972, H8; Jon Nordheimer, "Atlanta Brightens Its Cellar," *New York Times*, September 11, 1969, 49.



of blue laws prohibiting sales of mixed drinks in several suburban counties eliminated the primary incentive for many local customers to venture into the city for a night on the town.<sup>87</sup>

As great a deterrent to Underground Atlanta's continued success as any economic matter was the perception among locals and visitors alike that the entertainment district and its environs had become unsafe. In part, this perception emerged among white patrons as a result of the racial, socio-economic, and gender makeup of much of the Underground's clientele. The proximity of the district to several impoverished and predominately African American neighborhoods ensured that many groups of young, black males made the Underground a regular hangout. Additionally, aggressive, primarily black solicitors offering either marginal or illegal products both inside and outside the Underground deterred many potential customers from visiting the area.<sup>88</sup> "There are five elements that scare people," the ever outspoken Dante Stephenson, proprietor of "Dante's Down the Hatch," one of Underground Atlanta's most popular restaurants, told the *New York Times* in 1975, "the beggars, the winos, the pimps, the panhandlers, and imposing religious fanatics."<sup>89</sup> Mere prejudice or discomfort with the demographics of the Underground's environs do not explain entirely why people perceived the area as unsafe. Property and violent crime were genuine problems in and around the festival marketplace. Muggings, particularly on the Park Plaza side of the Underground, were a regular late-night occurrence, even when the district was at its early 1970s peak.<sup>90</sup>

Underground Atlanta officials pleaded with local legislators to grant them broader controls over the area to ensure the safety of their customers. Local lawmakers, who had already

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<sup>87</sup> Wayne King, "Underground Atlanta Complex is Beset by Problems," *New York Times*, February 19, 1975, 16; Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 166-167; "Atlanta: Another Struggle," *Boston Globe*, July 31, 1977, B18; Frederick Allen, *Atlanta Rising*, 196-197.

<sup>88</sup> Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 164.

<sup>89</sup> Wayne King, "Underground Atlanta Complex is Beset by Problems," *New York Times*, February 19, 1975, 16.

<sup>90</sup> David Morrison, "City Police to Fight Muggings," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 30, 1972, 1A.

ceded significant powers over the formerly public space to Underground Atlanta, Inc. by designating it a state and municipal historic site, granted the corporation even broader privileges to police the area. The city rechartered the public streets crisscrossing the district and granted Underground Atlanta, Inc. the authority to fence off the entire district. The corporation started charging a 25 cents admission fee after six PM.<sup>91</sup>

“Underground Atlanta failed because people were afraid of black youth, and Underground Atlanta is filled with black youth,” civil rights activist Julian Bond said in 1979, three years after the new evening admissions policies were enacted. “They fenced it in and charged a quarter to keep the riff raff out. It doesn’t work. I mean even the riff raff has a quarter,” he said, mocking the undoubtedly racially motivated policy.<sup>92</sup> Underground’s efforts to manage its clientele and, by proxy, improve its image failed to draw back in locals or the large number of tourists who had been told to steer clear of the place. In February 1982, Underground Atlanta closed its doors, a year and a half after a destructive fire that spread from an adjacent abandoned hotel forced most of the remaining operators out of business. Less than a decade removed from its early 1970s heyday, Underground Atlanta ceased operations, having failed to earn the durable patronage of locals or visitors.<sup>93</sup>

The failure of major southern CBD institutions, including Underground Atlanta, the Omni, and Rich’s Department Store, to win over consistent patronage from suburban consumers was in large part a product of long-standing perceptions about the safety of their environs. Remarkably, the events of the final months of the 1970s did strikingly more damage to the area’s

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<sup>91</sup> Wayne King, “Underground Atlanta Complex is Beset by Problems,” *New York Times*, February 19, 1975, 16.

<sup>92</sup> Robert Scheer, “Tourists Seldom See the Real Face of Atlanta,” *Boston Globe*, February 18, 1979, A3.

<sup>93</sup> Suzanne Dolezal, “9 Alarm Blaze Guts Unoccupied Hotel, Underground Firms,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 29, 1980, 6A; Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 166-167; Paul Gapp, “Atlanta: Capital of the New South,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 26, 1980, 1.

reputation. Two particularly brazen homicides in downtown Atlanta in 1979 capped a decade in which the civic retreat from the center city was driven to a great extent by a fear of crime. On June 28<sup>th</sup>, Dr. Marc Tetalman, the chair of the nuclear medicine division at the Ohio State University Hospital, was shot and killed in front of his wife by a pair of assailants during an armed robbery. Tetalman had presented earlier in the day at a national nuclear medicine convention and was returning to his hotel room at the Hyatt-Regency after dinner. Following the attack, Maynard Jackson visited Tetalman's colleagues at the hotel to offer his condolences and assistance. In a less than charitable mood, conventioners berated the Mayor for an hour, complaining that members of their convention party had reported 40 separate incidents to the APD that weekend, including 12 strong-armed robberies.<sup>94</sup>

Part of the problem Jackson faced in combatting crime in the late 1970s was that he simply had fewer police resources than his predecessor. The sunset of federal anti-crime grants secured during the Massell administration and subsequent unwillingness of the city council to appropriate money to compensate for the lost funding forced the APD to lay off one-quarter of the force between 1975 and 1979. To try to stem the city's crime wave in the summer of 1979, Governor George Busbee charged the Georgia State Police with enforcing municipal traffic laws so that more APD resources could be targeted at deterring violent crime, especially in downtown Atlanta.<sup>95</sup>

The increased police presence downtown that summer did little to curb crime in the CBD, where the rates of violent offenses matched the shocking numbers of the previous year. Nor did the large number of officers in the CBD prevent an even more gruesome incident later that year.

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<sup>94</sup> Bernard Headley, *The Atlanta Youth Murders and the Politics of Race*, 28-32; Frederick Allen, *Atlanta Rising*, 206-208.

<sup>95</sup> Bernard Headley, *The Atlanta Youth Murders and the Politics of Race*, 28-32; Brenda Mooney, "Crime Soaring in Southeast," *Boston Globe*, August 17, 1979, 16.

Twelve weeks after the Tetelman homicide, the October 1979 murder of Patricia Barry, a 26 year old legal secretary on her lunch break, provoked even more outrage about the unsafe conditions in downtown Atlanta. Barry was abducted and shot in the head at point blank range in front of hundreds of onlookers just after 12 PM as she was walking to a restaurant to meet friends on her birthday. Her killer was a recently deinstitutionalized, mentally-ill Vietnam veteran. The Atlanta press berated Jackson, accusing him of indifference towards the dangers that pedestrians faced downtown. Former governor Carl Sanders, one of the partners in the firm for whom Barry worked, wrote a blistering letter to Jackson, accusing him of being soft on crime to appease his predominately African American electoral base. Jackson responded to the heat by moving even more officers out of the city's highest crime neighborhoods and into regular patrols in downtown Atlanta. This decision had the unforeseen consequence of decreasing police resources in many African American neighborhoods just as Wayne Williams began luring and then killing young black males in late 1979: homicides which drew far less media attention initially than the deaths of two whites downtown. Between July 21, 1979 and June 21, 1981, Williams murdered 31 boys and adolescent males in one of the nation's most notorious serial killing sprees, a heinous series of crimes which came to be known as the "Atlanta Child Murders."<sup>96</sup>

### **Convention City**

Despite their aspirations and success at winning over investors, Tom Cousins and the rest of Atlanta's developer class failed to revitalize its downtown by filling it with massive, insular MXDs. By the late 1970s, metropolitan area consumers made clear their unwillingness to regularly patronize the center city's new retail and entertainment options. The major commercial developments in the southern CBD, in particular, struggled to stay

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<sup>96</sup> Bernard Headley, *The Atlanta Youth Murders and the Politics of Race*, 28-32; James Cook, *Carl Sanders: Spokesman of the New South*, 344-345; Frederick Allen, *Atlanta Rising*, 206-208.

open. Over the course of the next decade, the Omni International Complex (1987), Underground Atlanta (1982), and Rich's flagship store (1991) would either close or be radically reorganized and used for another purpose. "Most natives seek their nightlife in the suburbs. Without conventions, downtown would be totally dead," Donald Ratajczak, an economist at Georgia State University, told the *Wall Street Journal* in 1980.<sup>97</sup> Evie Wolfe of the Atlanta Convention Planners bureau admitted to a reporter from the *Boston Globe* in 1976 that "local business downtown isn't very good. People who work there eat lunch downtown but people just don't go downtown after dark."<sup>98</sup>

In the midst of the fortification of the CBD, Atlanta had become the nation's third largest convention city as a result of its outstanding combination of facilities: its busiest-in-the-nation airport, its 4000 downtown hotel rooms, and its millions of square feet of nearby exhibition space. It was the convention business, not local patronage, which kept the establishments in the CBD open. Downtown had come to serve a much narrower purpose, both economically and socially, within the metropolitan area than its developer-boosters had envisioned a decade earlier.<sup>99</sup> By the end of the 1970s, the CBD was no longer the retail, leisure, or commercial center of metropolitan Atlanta. Despite the quadrupling of downtown's available office space during the 1970s, a mere 10 percent of workers in the metropolitan area were employed in the CBD by decade's end, one-half of the proportion of ten years earlier. Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, Atlanta's office vacancy rate was usually the highest among major American cities, never dipping below 11 percent. When

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<sup>97</sup> Janet Guyon, "Bustling Atlanta Seems Built More for Outsiders than Its Own," *Wall Street Journal*, September 23, 1980, 37.

<sup>98</sup> Curtis Wilkie, "Atlanta- a resilient city," *Boston Globe*, September 5, 1976, A2.

<sup>99</sup> Janet Guyon, "Bustling Atlanta Seems Built More for Outsiders Than Its Own," *Wall Street Journal*, September 23, 1980, 37; Curtis Wilkie, "Atlanta- a resilient city," *Boston Globe*, September 5, 1976, A2.

Tom Cousins decided to turn the land in “the Gulch” into an arena and a multi-faceted urban development, this was not the downtown he thought he was making.<sup>100</sup>

The Omni Coliseum met its fate in the 1990s when a new generation of Atlanta leaders followed in the footsteps of their predecessors, mooring downtown revitalization to professional sports. In many respects, the demise of the Omni Coliseum began in 1977 when a debt-ridden Tom Cousins sold the Hawks to Ted Turner for \$1.5 million, half of what he paid for the team in 1968. Turner assumed the franchise’s \$10 million in debt as well as the lease on the Coliseum. This proved to be the first of many retreats by Cousins from his original vision for the Omni. Turner proved to be the perpetual savior of Cousins’ downtown empire. He purchased the entire Omni International Complex from Cousins in 1986, just eleven years after the opening of the \$100 million MXD. Turner paid Cousins properties a mere \$21.8 million for the white elephant and agreed to assume its \$45 million in debt. The cable television entrepreneur remade the complex into the CNN Center, the headquarters for his television operations.<sup>101</sup>

Several years after Turner finished paying off the Omni Coliseum in the early 1990s, he worked out a deal with Atlanta officials to build a new downtown arena. The building would house the Hawks and be used to lure the NHL back to Georgia. To procure an expansion hockey team, they needed a state-of-the-art facility that was laden with luxury boxes, which were suddenly generating millions of dollars annually for professional sports franchises. Just as they did in the 1960s, Atlanta’s leadership rose to a self-imposed challenge

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<sup>100</sup> “Central Area Survey II, 1980-Present (1987),” Central Atlanta Progress, Inc. Records, MSS 591, Box 54, Folder 2, Kenan Research Center; Paul Gapp, “Atlanta: Capital of the New South,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 26, 1980, 1; Janet Guyon, “Bustling Atlanta Seems Built More for Outsiders Than Its Own,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 23, 1980, 37; Frederick Allen, *Atlanta Rising*, 206-208.

<sup>101</sup> Jim Galloway, “Turner Wants to Tack CNN Onto Name of Omni Arena,” *Atlanta Journal*, March 6, 1987, Omni (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center; Furman Bisher, “Omni Offered Moments of Splendor,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 20, 1997, 18E; Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 217-218.

to prove its major league status. This time it took place in the afterglow of the city's successful bid to host the 1996 Summer Olympics. While the replacement arena opened several years after the Atlanta games, it was a product of the civic boosterism that enabled the city to raise 1.8 billion public and private dollars to host the event. Turner contributed \$20 million toward arena construction while the Atlanta-Fulton County Recreation Authority sold \$130.75 million in revenue bonds and excised \$62.5 million in car rental fees to pay for the Omni's successor. The Authority also employed a newly fashionable financing mechanism, covering most of its bond and debt service responsibilities by selling the building's naming rights to electronics giant Philips for \$180 million. Philips Arena became the home of the Hawks and the expansion Atlanta Thrashers hockey team, who spent 12 years in the city (1999-2011) before following the Flames to Canada, relocating to Winnipeg, Manitoba.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Richard Sandomir, "Philips to Pay \$180 Million to Name New Atlanta Arena," February 3, 1999, *New York Times*, 47; Furman Bisher, "Omni Offered Moments of Splendor," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 20, 1997, 18E; Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 217-218; Fulton County Commission, "Minutes of Special Call Meeting 11/29/95," *FultonCountyGa.Gov*, November 29, 1995. Accessed Online: June 7, 2016: <http://agendaminutes.fultoncountyga.gov/sirepub/urncgkly0ko35qtdedqyxgav/18363210172017101934391.PDF>

## CHAPTER 9

### **“Some Focal Point to Build Around”: The Hawks and the Flames at the Omni, 1972-1980**

“I’d never even seen a pro basketball game myself. The only guy I’d ever heard of was Wilt Chamberlain,” Atlanta Hawks owner and Omni developer Tom Cousins said in 1977, when discussing his decade of involvement in the NBA with *Sports Illustrated*’s Roy Blount.<sup>1</sup> Despite his lack of knowledge of professional basketball, Cousins became the majority owner of the Hawks in 1968. Four years later, he became the owner of an NHL franchise, the expansion Atlanta Flames. Cousins was not a classic American sports entrepreneur. He was not a businessman or scion in search of something fun to do with his money. Instead, Cousins became involved with professional sports as a by-product of his work as a real estate developer. He acquired two major league franchises because he wanted to build a “Madison Square Garden type arena” in downtown Atlanta.<sup>2</sup> “I was concerned with developing 60 acres of downtown Atlanta,” Cousins said of his plunge into professional sports and arena development. “A coliseum was the key to the whole thing, some focal point to build around.”<sup>3</sup>

Cousins envisioned professional basketball and professional hockey as twin focal points in his new, mixed-use, downtown development, entertainments that would serve as a steady source of revenue in his 15,000-seat arena. For somewhat different reasons, neither the Hawks nor the Flames proved to be the durable draw that Cousins foresaw when he decided to invest in

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<sup>1</sup> Roy M. Blount, “Losersville, U.S.A.,” *Sports Illustrated*, March 21, 1977, 82.

<sup>2</sup> Jim Minter, “NBA Expected to Approve Hawks’ Move,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 5, 1968, 1-H; WSB TV News Clip, May 1, 1968, *Digital Library of Georgia*.

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Denberg et al, *From Sweet Lou to ‘Nique*, 31-32.



professional sports. As the struggling Omni Complex enveloped his fortune, Cousins sold off the Hawks in 1977 to Ted Turner, who kept the team in Atlanta, and the Flames in 1980 to a group of Canadian investors, who moved them to Calgary, Alberta.

This chapter analyzes why the Omni's co-tenants failed to earn consistent patronage from metropolitan area residents. It moves beyond broader social explanations for Atlantans' apathetic response to professional sports during the 1960s and 1970s. Instead, it delves into the marketing of both franchises by the Cousins organization, the public response to the teams, and their long-term failure to earn durable support from fans. The distinct but similarly short-sighted management of both the Hawks and the Flames, neither of which was a labor of love for their majority-owner, circumscribed the potential appeal of the franchises to the region's sporting public. The Cousins organization made bold and, ultimately, shortsighted investments when it brought two professional franchises to Atlanta, neither of which played sports with histories as a popular attraction in the city, and expected them to flourish in its new downtown arena.

The first section of this chapter examines the failure of the Hawks franchise to garner a significant live or televised audience for professional basketball in Atlanta. The Atlanta Hawks finished below the league average in attendance in each of their first 18 years (1968-1986) and drew such dreadful television ratings that local network affiliates cancelled their broadcasting deals with the club in the mid-1970s. The Hawks organization courted a white, suburban, and largely Northside clientele, whom they failed to convince in large numbers to attend games at either Georgia Tech's archaic Alexander Memorial Coliseum or the CBD-situated Omni. The Hawks acquired a white superstar in Pete Maravich in the hopes that his presence would be a draw for white fans who were not interested in supporting the NBA, which had become a majority-black league over the course of the 1960s. Maravich's arrival led to a brief uptick in

attendance that subsided well in advance of his 1974 departure from Atlanta. Simultaneously, the Hawks made little effort in their early years to cultivate support among African Americans, who constituted a majority of Atlanta's population and whose interest in basketball had expanded rapidly, both locally and nationally, during the 1960s and 1970s. Despite the Hawks' tepid efforts to attract African American spectators, Atlanta's emerging black middle class became a significant portion of the team's live audience by the mid-1970s.

The second section of this chapter analyzes the swift rise and fall of the Flames, who failed to win long-term support from Atlanta spectators despite their initial box office appeal to the affluent white consumers that all four of the city's professional franchises sought as their core fanbase. For several years in the early-to-mid 1970s, the Flames were unquestionably Atlanta's most financially successful and best performing club. A clever initial marketing and public relations campaign convinced thousands of young white urban professionals to join "Atlanta's Ice Society," making an evening spent watching the novel sport at the Omni the fashionable new night out in the city. By the latter half of the decade, though, Flames attendance declined sharply as the franchise developed a pattern of playoff futility and pinched pennies on its marketing as Cousins' fortune declined. From the outset, the Flames marketed their product as an exclusive one, cutting themselves off from any potential mass market of fans. When the novelty of Atlanta hockey wore off, the team was left with a rabid core of devotees but few casual supporters. The Flames never secured a lucrative or comprehensive broadcast media contract, further disenfranchising potential fans who might have followed them primarily on television or radio. After several years of shopping his team, Cousins cut his losses and sold the Flames to a group of Canadian investors for a then NHL record \$16 million.

## **“Blasé about Basketball”: Atlanta’s Underwhelming Response to the Hawks**

In May 1968, Tom Cousins became the majority owner of the St. Louis Hawks basketball franchise, purchasing the club from long-time operator Ben Kerner for \$3.5 million. Cousins and titular co-owner Carl Sanders, the former Georgia governor whose involvement lent the venture a degree of civic gravitas, began pushing immediately for public support for a new downtown arena for the forthcoming Atlanta Hawks. Atlanta’s business elite, ever on the lookout for a grand municipal enterprise, lent their immediate and nearly universal support to the franchise. Thanks to the acquiescence of Georgia Tech, the Hawks had the 7,200-seat Alexander Memorial Coliseum to call home until the new arena was built. Cousins, the Hawks, and the “Big Mules” sought to make the franchise’s stay at Alexander as brief as possible. NBA observers regarded Alexander as one of the league’s worst facilities, with its primeval locker rooms, dim lighting, high school gymnasium quality bleachers, and tiny seating capacity.<sup>4</sup>

The poor conditions at Alexander did not go unnoticed by fans. The arena’s many faults proved a major impediment to the Hawks’ financial success during the four seasons they spent at Georgia Tech (1968-1972). Fans and players alike found Alexander dark and dingy. Spectators complained that an evening spent on Alexander’s wooden slat bleachers left them sore for days. Players said the floor was covered in dead spots and griped that their dressing room was more suitable for a junior varsity basketball team. Though located on the Northside, affluent consumers who might have found the arena’s location enticing were deterred from attending by its dearth of convenient parking spaces. Those in search of nearby public transportation were out

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<sup>4</sup> “Omni Souvenir Dedication Book,” Omni (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center; “Hawk Sale Approved,” *Atlanta Constitution*, May 8, 1968, 51; Jim Minter, “Tommy Cousins Plans New Roost for Hawks,” *Atlanta Journal*, May 4, 1968, 1-B; “Atlanta’s Hawks Covet New Coliseum,” *Washington Post*, May 7, 1968, D5; Bill Clark, “Atlanta Gets Professional Basketball,” *Atlanta Constitution*, May 4, 1968, 1; Bob Hertzler, “Regents Approve Hawks Use of Tech,” *Atlanta Journal*, May 8, 1968, 1-D; Pat Zier, “Pros Won’t Damage Tech, Say Owners,” *Atlanta Constitution*, May 7, 1968, 43.

of luck. During the Hawks' home debut in October 1968, rainwater dripped from the ceiling into the stands and, more dangerously, onto the floor. Officials stopped play more than a dozen times to mop up the slippery playing surface. The conditions at Alexander on opening night did little to encourage the 5606 attendees to become regulars. The sparse attendance that evening was at least as embarrassing to the Hawks leadership as the dripping ceiling. Nearly 2000 seats remained empty for the team's Atlanta debut. As humiliating as the team's leadership found their opening night box office, it proved to be one of their largest crowds of the season.<sup>5</sup>

Attendance at Alexander was an immediate and consistent problem for the Hawks. The franchise had enjoyed boisterous support in St. Louis from a largely urban, blue collar, white, and male fanbase, demographics which characterized most early NBA spectators. Even as attendance waned in the Hawks' later seasons in St. Louis, they drew, at their worst, an average of 6,288 spectators per game. The crowds at Kiel Auditorium were always loud and often rough-and-tumble. In Atlanta, the Hawks drew a mere 4,474 spectators per game in 1968-1969, 30 percent fewer fans than their worst season in St. Louis. In 1969-1970, the Hawks again failed to match their lowest St. Louis attendance figure, drawing an average of 5,210 spectators to Alexander. Only two of the NBA's 14 teams drew fewer fans than the Hawks that season. Even the Hawks' playoff games drew small crowds. Post-season attendance at Alexander topped 5,000 just once during the team's consecutive runs in 1969 and 1970 to the Western Division Finals. It was not until the Atlanta Hawks moved into the Omni for the 1972-1973 season that their average game attendance finally surpassed the franchise's worst figure in Missouri.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Jesse Outlar, "Hawks Try 'Big O,' Get Only Zero," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 17, 1968, 47; Paul Delaney, "More Black Fans Sought by Hawks," *New York Times*, June 25, 1972, S4; "Hudson-Led Hawks Rip Milwaukee," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 20, 1968, 1D; Frank Hyland, "Hawks Can't Beat Atlanta Tradition," *Atlanta Journal*, October 17, 1968, 1D; Frank Hyland, "Hawks Start at the Top," *Atlanta Journal*, October 15, 1968, 4C; Paul Delaney, "More Black Fans Sought by Hawks," *New York Times*, June 25, 1972, S4.

<sup>6</sup> "Pro Basketball Era Ends with Kerner," *Sporting News*, January 21, 1967, 12; Mark Kriegel, *Pistol*, 191; "NBA/ABA Attendance Totals," *Association for Professional Basketball Research*, 2013. Accessed online: January

Many contemporary observers attributed the Hawks' poor attendance to an unwillingness among the region's white majority to embrace the team's predominately black roster. Hawks co-owner Carl Sanders tried from the outset to dispel this notion, declaring in May 1968 that "promoting a sport dominated by Negroes" would not be a problem in Atlanta since his players were "...good, clean athletes and play a good brand of ball."<sup>7</sup> At the time, approximately half of the NBA's players were African American while every noteworthy player on the Hawks roster was black.<sup>8</sup> Sports fans interviewed by the *Constitution* shortly after Sanders made this statement suggested that the race of the players strongly informed local perceptions of the team. Atlanta insurance salesman William Fox said he would support the team if it "acquired southern players" and cultivated a "local image," a sentiment echoed by several interviewees. The "local image" to which Fox was referring certainly included their race. Several Hawks players had grown up in the South, but as African Americans their image was not the right kind of local for some potential white fans. Atlantans' unwillingness to embrace their city's predominately black NBA team was not unique. The entire league struggled with attendance throughout the 1970s in part because many white fans responded negatively to the NBA's demographic transformation. The growing aversion of white fans to a now-predominately black NBA proved more debilitating to Atlanta's franchise than to clubs in most other NBA cities, many of which were located in regions with long histories as basketball hotbeds. Moreover, as the NBA's first southern outpost, Atlanta was the only league city that had recently enforced legally-mandated segregation.<sup>9</sup>

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5, 2014: <http://www.apbr.org/attendance.html>; "Hudson, Hawks Topple San Diego," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 28, 1969, 65; "Hawks Turn on the Heat While Mopping Up Lakers," *Atlanta Journal*, April 16, 1969, 4E.

<sup>7</sup> Pat Zier, "Pros Won't Damage Tech, Say Owners," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 7, 1968, 43.

<sup>8</sup> "Atlanta Hawks 1968-1969 Media Guide," Sports—Atlanta Hawks (Subject File), Kenan Research Center.

<sup>9</sup> David Halberstam, *The Breaks of the Game*, 15-16, 35-36; Charlie Roberts, "Hawks Will Fly Into Open Arms," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 4, 1968, 19.

Rarely did Atlantans acknowledge publicly that their lack of interest in the Hawks had a racial component. *Daily World* columnist James Heath overheard a man at an early Hawks game saying “I’m going to tell Governor Lester Maddox about this and see if he can’t get some white boys on the team,” but the sportswriter said that he rarely heard people expressing such ideas within his earshot.<sup>10</sup> Instead, most Atlantans who addressed the matter in public forums said that they would support the team if it were a winner. “I disagree that racism underlies the Hawks’ inability to draw. Cousins and friends have simply never put a winner in the Omni,” Bob Woodland of Atlanta wrote to *Sports Illustrated* in 1977. Woodland was responding to a profile of the city’s sports scene that attributed the Hawks’ poor attendance to the racial attitudes of the region’s residents.<sup>11</sup> The team had, in fact, been a winner in its early years in the city, but relatively few white patrons embraced the Hawks’ all-black starting five or their less-than-ideal playing venue, despite the team’s consecutive trips to the Western Division Finals in 1969 and 1970. Attendance improved slightly with the arrival of a white star in Pete Maravich and the team’s relocation to the state-of-the-art Omni Coliseum, but neither factor prevented the Hawks from finishing below the league attendance average in each of their first 18 years in Atlanta.<sup>12</sup>

Fear that white Southerners would not embrace a predominately black team were common among the Hawks roster. Several players expressed their reticence about playing in Georgia. Team captain Lenny Wilkens, who was traded before playing a game in Atlanta, doubted he would be able to secure a good off-season job like he had in St. Louis. Bill Bridges expressed similar economic fears and predicted that the Hawks’ all-black starting lineup would not draw well in Dixie. Prairie View, Texas native Zelmo Beaty demonstrated his nuanced

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<sup>10</sup> James Heath, “Sports Note Pad,” *Atlanta Daily World*, July 13, 1975, 6.

<sup>11</sup> “Letters,” *Sports Illustrated*, March 28, 1977, 10.

<sup>12</sup> “NBA/ABA Attendance Totals,” *Association for Professional Basketball Research*, 2013.

understanding of the region's racial dynamics when he stated that the intimacy of live basketball would transgress southern cultural taboos. "I never had any doubt that the south was ready for professional football. I just hope it's ready for basketball. This racial thing, of course, is what I refer to. People are up so close to the court that they get to know the players almost, every little mannerism," he said, describing the proximity of the game's predominately black performers to its predominately white audience. Beaty's predictions came true. While the Hawks played to nearly empty arenas throughout their first decade in Atlanta, their Omni co-tenants, the Flames, drew consistently larger crowds. One of the things fans liked most about attending Flames games was the very sense of intimacy that Bridges described, the sense that spectators were experiencing the action along with the players. Atlanta fans proved far more comfortable living vicariously through the Flames' exclusively white roster than the Hawks' largely black one.<sup>13</sup>

The Hawks' struggles at the gate in their early years were not simply a matter of race or their off-putting homecourt. The franchise's inability to find an audience in Atlanta was in no small part a product of the sudden glut in the city's sports market. The Hawks were the third major league team to arrive in the city in three years. They played a sport that was familiar to the locals but was hardly a widespread passion. To their chagrin, the term "oversportsed" emerged in the local parlance soon after the Hawks' arrival as a descriptor for the region's sudden saturation with professional teams.<sup>14</sup> "For a moment, we felt like a wife whose husband has brought her home 300 pounds of bass, and no deepfreeze," an unsigned 1968 editorial in the *Journal* read, describing the city's recent acquisition of yet another franchise.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Bill Clark, "Hawks' Negro Standouts are Honestly a Bit Wary," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 17, 1968, 2B.

<sup>14</sup> Jim Minter, interview by the author, July 9, 2013, 16; Pat Zier, "Pros Won't Damage Tech, Say Owners," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 7, 1968, 43; Charlie Roberts, "Hawks Will Fly Into Open Arms," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 4, 1968, 19.

<sup>15</sup> "Atlanta Hawks 1968-1969 Media Guide," Sports—Atlanta Hawks (Subject File), Kenan Research Center.

By contrast, the Flames were less affected by the saturation of the local sports market. When the professional hockey club arrived in 1972, they had the advantage of playing a novel game and of marketing it to a public that, by then, had several years to digest its previous acquisitions. Neither the Hawks nor Flames received nearly as much press coverage as the Braves and Falcons, who played sports with long histories of local support and competed in well-established leagues. The Flames proved far more adept at negotiating their lower billing than the Hawks. The hockey club's affable head coach, Bernie "Boom Boom" Geoffrion, made frequent public appearances and became its best promotional tool. Conversely, the Hawks lacked a marketable public face. Neither their Patterson, New Jersey-born General Manager (GM) Marty Blake nor their Bronx-raised head coach Richie Guerin sold many Georgians on the merits of professional basketball. Both were simply too blunt and confrontational to function as ambassadors for their game in the Southeast. Before the arrival of Maravich, the Hawks did little to present the players on their predominately black roster as the face of the franchise.<sup>16</sup>

"In general, I thought the fans in Atlanta were a lot more blasé about basketball. I grew up in the Midwest and I was used to basketball being number one," Hawks guard Tom Van Arsdale said of the team's local support. "I just felt like Atlanta's priorities were football, especially college football, baseball, and then basketball. There wasn't nearly as much enthusiasm for the sport there as I was used to." Van Arsdale, who played for five NBA teams, said Atlanta was his least favorite stop in his career. "I never felt like I was a part of the city."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.; Roy M. Blount, "Losersville, U.S.A.," *Sports Illustrated*, March 21, 1977, 82; John J. Archibald, "Guerin's Always the Boss," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 5, 1968, 4-H; Frank Deford, "Beware of the Hawks," *Sports Illustrated*, April 13, 1970, 48; Rembert Browne, "A Hawks Homecoming," *Grantland*, November 2, 2012. Accessed online on November 2, 2012: <http://grantland.com/features/a-lifelong-fan-returns-atlanta-search-city-third-team/>.

<sup>17</sup> Tom Van Aarsdale, interview by the author, July 10, 2013, 43.



In their early years, the Hawks tried to sell Atlantans on professional basketball by contrasting the team with the poor performing Braves and Falcons. The franchise presented itself, quite legitimately, as an immediate contender for the NBA Championship, but this failed to sell many advance season tickets.<sup>18</sup> When the opportunity to see a winner failed to fill up Alexander, the team started focusing its promotional campaigns on the Hawks' opponents, presenting their game as an opportunity to see NBA superstars such as Oscar Robertson and Wilt Chamberlain. The club employed a similar promotional tactic throughout the 1970s, pitching casual fans on the chance to see the likes of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Julius Erving. Implicit in this marketing strategy was the understanding that Atlantans were not inclined to become consistent patrons of their product but might go out of their way to witness a novel entertainment experience. The Hawks organization, therefore, was expecting a predominately white consumer base (that was unwilling to support its own team's black stars) to buy tickets to see the better-known black stars on other clubs. Not surprisingly, this strategy failed.<sup>19</sup>

The Hawks relied heavily on promotions, giveaways, and contests to try to improve their attendance. The most outrageous of their promotion men was Pat Williams, who took over as GM in 1973. The thirty-three year old executive, who went onto great success in NBA front offices during the 1980s and 1990s, had already developed a reputation for staging wild halftime promotions during his brief tenures as GM in Philadelphia and Chicago. "Atlanta is a live-wire city and I'm confident that pro basketball can be merchandized, hustled, and sold to the public," Williams told reporters at the time of his hiring.<sup>20</sup> Williams brought his halftime staples down to

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<sup>18</sup> Frank Hyland, "Hawks 'Feel' Another Title," *Atlanta Journal*, October 16, 1968, 1D; "Atlanta's Newest Pro Athletes," *Atlanta Journal*, October 15, 1968, 3C.

<sup>19</sup> Jesse Outlar, "Hawks Try 'Big O,' Get Only Zero," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 17, 1968, 47; Chico Renfroe, "This and That in Sports," *Atlanta Daily World*, November 28, 1978, 7.

<sup>20</sup> "Williams Quits Bulls for Atlanta," *Chicago Tribune*, August 5, 1973, B2.

Atlanta with him, including Victor the Wrestling Bear and Little Arlene, the era's most famous competitive eater. Interspecies wrestling matches and hotdog eating contests became the midgame norm during the 1973-1974 season. On other occasions that winter, the Hawks gave away prizes for the fan with the largest feet in the arena and for fans that weighed in at more than 250 pounds. Williams also added an Easter Egg Hunt, Secret Santa, and Trick or Treat nights to the Hawks' promotional slate. Despite the Hawks' exciting program of off-court features, attendance remained flat as the club struggled to a 35-47 record and Williams left after one season. His successor, Bud Seretean, tried to improve the Hawks' gate by making their schedule more family-friendly in 1974-1975. He negotiated an in-house deal with the Omni Group that moved 24 of the Hawks' 41 home dates to Saturday or Sunday evenings at 7 PM, virtually eliminating Friday nights from the schedule. The Hawks hoped that the earlier weekend start time would enable suburban families to make it home from their games at a more reasonable hour. The shift to an earlier start-time proved unsuccessful, as it corresponded with a slight decline in their weekend attendance.<sup>21</sup>

The failure of the Hawks to draw even respectable crowds during their early years in Atlanta is all the more remarkable when one considers the caliber of team that had relocated to their city. The Hawks arrived in Atlanta in 1968 as the defending NBA Western Division champions. They performed like a championship team during their early years in the city, posting consecutive 48-34 records in their first two seasons. The Hawks reached the 1968-1969 and 1969-1970 Western Division finals, losing both times to the Los Angeles Lakers. The franchise failed to make a comparable playoff run for the next 45 years. "We were a close-knit

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid; Peter Carry, "He's Shooting the Works," *Sports Illustrated*, November 12, 1973, 50; "Hawks Open at Home Against the Pistol," *Atlanta Constitution*, August 12, 1975, 1D; Pat Williams and James Denney, *Ahead of the Game: The Pat Williams Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 61-64; "Hawks Host Pistons Tonight," *Atlanta Daily World*, November 8, 1973, 7; "Free Hawks Tickets by WSB," *Atlanta Daily World*, January 22, 1974, 2.

team, which made us a tough team,” coach Richie Guerin said of the club that arrived in Atlanta.<sup>22</sup> Despite the loss of team leader Lenny Wilkens just before their Atlanta opener, the core of the latter day St. Louis roster remained in place: quick, physical forwards Bill Bridges, Joe Caldwell and Paul Silas, offensive minded center Zelmo Beaty, and twenty-four-year-old guard “Sweet” Lou Hudson, who was emerging as one of the league’s top scorers. The Hawks wore out opponents with their trademark aggressive, up-tempo style of basketball which carried over from their time in St. Louis. They just could not get past a Lakers team that included three of the greatest players in NBA history: Elgin Baylor, Jerry West, and Wilt Chamberlain.<sup>23</sup>

Some sportswriters attributed the Hawks’ playoff failure to its predominately African American roster. In columns laden with garden variety racial stereotypes, a number of basketball writers characterized the Hawks as uniquely unable to persevere in high-pressure situations. If the Hawks wanted to win a championship, the logic went, they needed to rebuild their roster, presumably around a white star and on-court leader. The emergence of this idea among basketball authorities dovetailed with the sentiments of the Hawks ownership, which had sought to acquire a prominent white and preferably southern player to foster local interest in the team.<sup>24</sup>

The demolition of the Hawks’ championship-caliber team began amid its triumphs of the late 1960s. By the summer of 1970, Atlanta’s roster was significantly different and weaker than it had been when the team arrived in Georgia two years earlier. Contract disputes that pitted GM Marty Blake and coach Richie Guerin against Lenny Wilkens, Zelmo Beaty, and Joe Caldwell led to the departure of three of the team’s most prominent players in less than 20 months. Team

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<sup>22</sup> Ailene Voisin, “Atlanta’s First Hawks Willing to Share Place in History,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, December 8, 1993, E1.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid; Jeffrey Denberg et al., *From Sweet Lou to ‘Nique*, 31-32.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid; David Halberstam, *The Breaks of the Game*, 35-36; Ailene Voisin, “Atlanta’s First Hawks Willing to Share Place in History,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, December 8, 1993, E1.

leader Lenny Wilkens, a thirty-three year old point guard who had finished second in Most Valuable Player (MVP) balloting the previous season, refused to report to the club's 1968 training camp unless he received a pay increase. Wilkens sought out an annual raise from \$30,000 to \$60,000, which would have made him the team's highest paid player but still would have reaped him less than one-quarter as much as league MVP Wilt Chamberlain. Team management balked at signing an aging player to so lucrative a contract and instead traded him to Seattle. Similar contract disputes led to the departures of All-Stars Beaty and Caldwell after the 1969 and 1970 seasons respectively. Both players accepted offers from the rival American Basketball Association (ABA) which more than doubled their salaries.<sup>25</sup>

#### **“A White Player of His Ability is Just What Atlanta and the NBA Need”**

As the Hawks imploded their roster, they fell into an opportunity to rebuild around Louisiana State University (LSU)'s Pete Maravich, whom they acquired with the third pick in the 1970 NBA Draft. Maravich met the Hawks' prerequisites as a white star from a southern school, but his value as a gate attraction went far beyond his demographics. “Pistol Pete” was the leading scorer in National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) history and was probably America's most famous basketball player at the time. Maravich's arrival in Atlanta led to a brief surge in attendance and a tremendous increase in the franchise's media visibility, but local affection for the “Pistol” proved short-lived. His presence did not translate into durable public support or continued on-court success for the Hawks. By the end of Maravich's four year run with the team (1970-1974), the Hawks had become a losing club with a depleted roster. Though Maravich and the Hawks moved to the Omni for the 1972-1973 season, the crowds they drew

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<sup>25</sup> Jeffrey Denberg et al., *From Sweet Lou to 'Nique*, 32-33; “Wilkins, Hawks in \$\$ Squabble,” *Chicago Defender*, September 26, 1968, 42; Mark Kriegel, *Pistol*, 189-190.

towards the end of the former LSU star's stay in Atlanta were just as small as those that had turned out to see the team during their residency at Alexander.

Atlanta acquired the pick they used to select Maravich from the San Francisco Warriors in exchange for the future NBA rights to former Hawks star Zelmo Beaty, who had jumped to the ABA the previous season. The *de facto* swap of the established Beaty for the unproven Maravich made evident the racial motivations for the Hawks' roster overhaul, particularly once the details of the rookie's first contract became public knowledge. "Pistol Pete" signed the largest contract in the history of professional basketball, a five year deal worth \$1.9 million. From the moment he purchased the Hawks, Cousins had coveted LSU's then-sophomore sensation. Without consulting coach Guerin or GM Blake, Cousins decided to select Maravich, believing the college star would win Atlantans over to his NBA franchise. Cousins used Omni manager Bob Kent, an acquaintance of Press Maravich, the star's father and college coach, to convince the LSU guard to sign with Atlanta rather than the ABA team that drafted him. Both Guerin and Blake were furious that they had been kept out of the loop. While Guerin believed the Hawks should have used the pick to select a frontcourt replacement for Beaty, Blake was enthusiastic about Maravich's potential contribution to the team. Nevertheless, Blake thought intolerable the idea of signing a rookie to a multi-million dollar contract after being forced to turn down immensely more modest salary demands by established stars like Wilkens, Beaty, and Caldwell. Blake resigned after sixteen years on the job, setting in motion a parade of front-office shakeups that rendered the Hawks' management unstable for the remainder of the 1970s.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> "Merger, Madness and Maravich," *Sports Illustrated*, April 6, 1970, 47; "Maravich Signs with NBA Hawks," *Washington Post*, March 27, 1970, D1; Jeffrey Denberg et al., *From Sweet Lou to 'Nique*, 34; Thomas Stinson, "Pistol Pete Misfired for Hawks," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 26, 2005, 1E.

Initially, Hawks players were enthusiastic about the decision to draft Maravich. Walt Hazzard, whom Maravich soon replaced at point guard, said it was proof that they were “in the process of building a dynasty.”<sup>27</sup> Hawks forward Bill Bridges hailed the signing of a “great white hope,” believing it would increase ticket sales at Alexander considerably. “Let’s face it,” Bridges said, “a white player of his ability is what Atlanta and the NBA need. He may be the greatest gate attraction to come in the league, and that doesn’t hurt. It could mean a couple of hundred thousand dollars to all of us Hawks.”<sup>28</sup>

Excitement about the Maravich acquisition soon dissipated in the Hawks locker room. Shortly after he arrived, Maravich, in the words of his biographer Mark Kriegel, became a “collecting vessel for the team’s resentments.”<sup>29</sup> Racially fueled divisions emerged within the organization once Maravich signed his contract. A consensus developed on the Hawks’ predominately black roster that Maravich and Cousins constituted one faction and the rest of the organization constituted another. The Maravich acquisition was the culmination of the dismantling of the Hawks’ highly successful roster. Hawks players had remained relatively anonymous and poorly paid while performing at an elite level during the late 1960s. Maravich, on arrival, was far better paid and far more well-known than all of his teammates combined.<sup>30</sup>

Socially, the aloof Maravich did himself no favors by rarely engaging his teammates either in the locker room or outside of basketball. When he did socialize with other players, he annoyed many of them by talking primarily about retiring early from basketball or his

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas Stinson, “Pistol Pete Misfired for Hawks,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 26, 2005, 1E.

<sup>28</sup> “Maravich, Hawks ‘Great White Hope,’” *Chicago Defender*, March 28, 1970, 34.

<sup>29</sup> Mark Kriegel, *Pistol*, 197.

<sup>30</sup> Al Thomy, “That Old Gang,” *Atlanta Constitution*, January 5, 1973, 1D; Furman Bisher, “Omni-Potence,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 19, 1972, 4D; Furman Bisher, “One Man- But No Team,” *Sporting News*, February 16, 1974, 2; George Cunningham, “Losing Hawks Talk It Over,” *Atlanta Constitution*, November 5, 1971, 5D; Richard Hyatt, “Those Were the Days...Or Were They?” *Atlanta Constitution*, April 10, 1972, 10D; Mark Kriegel, *Pistol*, 191-195; Frank Deford, “The Hawks: Fouled Up but Flourishing,” *Sports Illustrated*, March 8, 1971, 42.

preoccupation with extraterrestrials. When he went out to eat with his teammates, he tried to win them over by picking up the check. This only served to remind them of how much money he was making, which, in turn, engendered more resentment toward the young star. In addition to his larger paycheck, Maravich's instant celebrity proved a further irritant to his teammates. He was suddenly Madison Avenue's favored NBA pitchman, hocking Keds sneakers, a "Pistol Pete" basketball, and, most notably, Vitalis Dry Control Hair Spray, which kept those shaggy locks of his in place on the court. Maravich was slated to co-star with Karen Black in a Jack Nicholson-directed film about a college basketball star called *Drive, He Said*, but backed out due to a scheduling conflict.<sup>31</sup>

On the court, Maravich's teammates resented his flamboyant style of play. "Pistol Pete," they believed, monopolized the ball, expended little effort on defense, and made his teammates look bad by whizzing no-look passes in their direction, which sometimes flew past them unexpectedly or bounced off their foreheads. At one point during Maravich's rookie season, teammates Walt Hazzard and Bill Bridges grew tired of accommodating "Pistol Pete" and refused to pass him the ball. Maravich made matters worse by quickly developing a strained relationship with the local press, which blamed the rookie for the team's declining fortunes. Coach Richie Guerin had the unenviable task of trying to keep the peace on the team.<sup>32</sup>

Expecting Guerin to mediate between Maravich and his teammates was a difficult task for the veteran coach. As bad as Maravich's relations with his fellow Hawks were, they were

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<sup>31</sup> Mark Kriegel, *Pistol*, 193-194, 204-205, 227-230; Noah Sanders, "Pistol Pete Now is Up Against the Pros," *New York Times Magazine*, October 11, 1970, 32-34; Jesse Outlar, "Maravich: A Sad End," *Atlanta Constitution*, January 12, 1980, C1.

<sup>32</sup> Furman Bisher, "Omni-Potence," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 19, 1972, 4D; Furman Bisher, "One Man-But No Team," *Sporting News*, February 16, 1974, 2; George Cunningham, "Losing Hawks Talk It Over," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 5, 1971, 5D; Richard Hyatt, "Those Were the Days...Or Were They?" *Atlanta Constitution*, April 10, 1972, 10D; Mark Kriegel, *Pistol*, 191-195; Frank Deford, "The Hawks: Fouled Up but Flourishing," *Sports Illustrated*, March 8, 1971, 42.

arguably worse with his coaches. Maravich had contentious relationships with his two coaches in Atlanta, Richie Guerin (1970-1972) and Cotton Fitzsimmons (1972-1974), both of whom tried unsuccessfully to alter his approach to the game. “Pete’s style of play offended me as a coach and our players,” Guerin recalled twenty years later.<sup>33</sup> Guerin, whose coaching philosophy focused on vigorous defensive effort and unselfishness with the ball, clashed with Maravich over his shot selection, his reliance on fancy ball-handling to create shots, and his defensive indifference.<sup>34</sup> After two seasons coaching Maravich, the Hawks replaced Guerin with the offensive-minded Cotton Fitzsimmons, whose approach to the game appeared to be more in line with the “Pistol’s.” In the short term, longtime Hawk “Sweet” Lou Hudson starred along Maravich in Cotton Fitzsimmons’ offensive-friendly system, leading the Hawks to a brief resurgence in 1972-1973, when the team posted a 46-36 record but made a quick playoff exit. In the long run, Fitzsimmons proved no more successful than Guerin at harnessing Maravich’s talents. The young star proved unwilling to accommodate Fitzsimmons’ vision for him as a distributor of the ball and not simply a scorer. Fitzsimmons suspended the “Pistol” for two games for insubordination during the Hawks’ dreadful 1973-1974 season, signaling the beginning of the end of Maravich’s tenure in Atlanta. The Hawks traded Maravich in May 1974 to the expansion New Orleans Jazz in his adopted home state of Louisiana for two players and four draft picks. Neither of the players Atlanta acquired made significant on-court contributions. More discouragingly, the two most prominent players they selected with their compensatory draft picks signed on instead with the rival ABA.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Roy M. Blount, “Losersville, U.S.A.,” *Sports Illustrated*, March 21, 1977, 82.

<sup>34</sup> Mark Kriegel, *Pistol*, 194; Jeffrey Denberg et al., *From Sweet Lou to ‘Nique*, 36.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 40-41; Mark Kriegel, *Pistol*, 227-230; “Maravich to Accept Trade,” *Atlanta Constitution*, May 3, 1974, 1D; Thomas Stinson, “Pistol Pete Misfired for Hawks,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 26, 2005, 1E



As much as anything, teammates' resentment of Maravich stemmed from the Hawks' decline in the early 1970s. While the club's roster had been severely compromised by the time of Maravich's arrival, the decision by management to invest in the rookie rather than the Hawks' veterans stung ever more as they faded from a contender into an also-ran. The Hawks went 153-175 during Maravich's four years in Atlanta, posting losing records on three occasions. The 1973-1974 Hawks snapped the franchise's 12-year streak of NBA playoff appearances. Maravich played hard and played well for the Hawks, emerging quickly as one of the league's top scorers. He displayed genuine grit as he played through a series of injuries and illnesses, including a bout of mono in his second season. Maravich, though, failed to lead his team to the championships that had been expected of him when he arrived in Atlanta.<sup>36</sup>

Fans did not share in the animosity that Maravich's teammates, coaches, or the media felt towards him. Ever so briefly "Pistol Pete" made Alexander a fashionable place to spend an evening. Maravich's flashy ball-handling, offensive prowess, and national notoriety brought in many spectators who were not basketball devotees, but, instead, seeking out a novel entertainment experience. Most notably, Maravich's arrival in Atlanta caused an uptick in female attendance. Professional basketball games in Atlanta, as in most other NBA cities, had largely been a male domain.<sup>37</sup> The *Constitution's* Richard Hyatt described a groundswell of "long-stemmed mini-skirted chicks" attending Hawks games, sitting in a sweaty gymnasium alongside the regulars.<sup>38</sup> Maravich's female devotees whistled at his every move on the court. A

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<sup>36</sup> "Next Season (Season Ticket Promotional Flier for 1970-1971)," Sports—Atlanta Hawks (Subject File), Kenan Research Center; Al Thomy, "That Old Gang," *Atlanta Constitution*, January 5, 1973, 1D; Peter Carry, "He's Shooting the Works," *Sports Illustrated*, November 12, 1973, 50; Frank Hyland, "'The Pistol' Fires a Blank," *Atlanta Journal*, March 16, 1972, 1E; "Losing Hawks Talk It Over," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 5, 1971, 5D; Richard Hyatt, "Those Were the Days...Or Were They?" *Atlanta Constitution*, April 10, 1972, 10D.

<sup>37</sup> "Pete Maravich: Problems of Adjustment Over," *New York Times*, February 28, 1971, S6; George Cunningham, "Hawks Forming Circus Act?" *Atlanta Constitution*, April 11, 1972, 1D.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Hyatt, "Those Were the Days...Or Were They?" *Atlanta Constitution*, April 10, 1972, 10D

dedicated group of female followers pursued the notably shy Maravich off the court as well. Whether at home or on the road, Maravich snuck out the back entrance to avoid the admirers who stalked him before and after games.<sup>39</sup>

“Personally, I would trade any number of wins for the thrill of having seen Pete Maravich a few more times at his very best. That incredible pass between his legs while in midair is simply unforgettable. I couldn’t care less whether they won or lost the game,” Keith Coulbourn of Atlanta wrote to the *Constitution* soon after his trade, describing Maravich’s appeal to the casual fan.<sup>40</sup> “He was what basketball has become, which is a game that is as much entertainment as it is sport. And he was the penultimate entertainer,” Hawks CEO Steve Koonin, an Atlanta native who grew up idolizing “Pistol Pete,” said of Maravich’s appeal.<sup>41</sup> “I played for the fans. There’s no doubt about that, but sometimes my teammates didn’t appreciate that,” Maravich admitted in 1987, weeks before succumbing to a heart attack at age 40.<sup>42</sup> High school basketball players across Dixie adopted Maravich’s look and style, sporting his shaggy hair cut and experimenting with his no-look passes, much to the chagrin of their coaches. Maravich’s proclivity to indulge in fancy ball handling and take the majority of shots every game was, in part, a product of his desire to please fans who chanted “shoot, shoot, shoot” whenever he touched the ball.<sup>43</sup>

Few of the fans that went to Hawks games to see Maravich the attraction became sustained patrons of the team. Hawks season ticket sales hovered around 2,000 during their first two years in Atlanta. Considering all the publicity it received, Maravich’s signing did

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<sup>39</sup> Peter Carry, “He’s Shooting the Works,” *Sports Illustrated*, November 12, 1973, 27; Darrell Simmons, “Pete: Love Story,” *Atlanta Journal*, October 16, 1973, 1D; Mark Kriegel, *Pistol*, 204-205.

<sup>40</sup> Jeffrey Denberg et al., *From Sweet Lou to ‘Nique*, 42.

<sup>41</sup> “Pete Maravich Jersey Retirement 03.03.17,” *NBA.com*, March 3, 2017. Accessed on March 4, 2017: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kij9Dv\\_ISLw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kij9Dv_ISLw).

<sup>42</sup> “Reflections on Pistol Pete Maravich,” *NBA.com*, February 13, 2014. Accessed online: June 2, 2016: [http://www.nba.com/video/channels/originals/2014/02/13/pistol-pete-jim-huber-feature.nba#](http://www.nba.com/video/channels/originals/2014/02/13/pistol-pete-jim-huber-feature.nba#/).

<sup>43</sup> Mark Kriegel, *Pistol*, 201; Peter Carry, “We Have a Slight Delay in Showtime,” *Sports Illustrated*, October 26, 1970, 31.

surprisingly little to improve these numbers. Season-long sales grew to just 2,400 during his first winter in Atlanta. Hawks attendance as a whole improved considerably after Maravich's arrival, but remained well below the league average. Atlanta averaged nearly 6,000 fans per night during Maravich's first season, almost 800 more than the previous year but well under the league's average crowd of 7,648 during the 1970-1971 season. When the Hawks moved to the Omni in 1972, sales of season passes jumped to nearly 3,200 while average attendance increased to nearly 7,500, demonstrating that the addition of Maravich to the team's roster had less of an impact on their nightly gate than relocating to a better building. Many of the new 1972-1973 season ticket holders were professionals or corporations who added this bill to their expense accounts. Even so, the Omni remained half-empty for most Hawks games and the team's nightly attendance remained more than a thousand off the league average. Moreover, the Hawks' season ticket base paled in comparison to that of their Omni co-tenant, the Atlanta Flames. The fledgling hockey franchise sold more than 7,200 season tickets for 1972-1973, charging virtually the same price for the exact same number of games as the Hawks.<sup>44</sup>

Much like the Hank Aaron-led Braves of the early 1970s, the Hawks drew disappointing home crowds, but were the NBA's second best-drawing road team behind the Celtics in three of Maravich's four seasons in Atlanta.<sup>45</sup> ABC was so excited by the arrival of Maravich that the network paid the NBA an extra \$75,000 simply to purchase the broadcasting rights to his professional debut. The network had yet to cover an Atlanta Hawks home game and was forced to equip the poorly illuminated Alexander Memorial Coliseum with extra lighting for their

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<sup>44</sup> "Flames Magazine 2," Sports- Atlanta Flames (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center; "Atlanta Hawks 1974-1975 Media Guide," Sports—Atlanta Hawks (Subject File), Kenan Research Center; Beau Cutts and Randy Donaldson, "Omni is a Success," *Atlanta Constitution*, January 8, 1973, 6D; "Omni Doors Open to Atlanta Tonight," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 14, 1972, 1A; Peter Carry, "He's Shooting the Works," *Sports Illustrated*, November 12, 1973, 50; "NBA/ABA Attendance Totals," *Association for Professional Basketball Research*, 2013.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid; Jesse Outlar, "Maravich: A Sad End," *Atlanta Constitution*, January 12, 1980, C1; Jeffrey Denberg et al., *From Sweet Lou to 'Nique*, 36.

telecast. The once-anonymous Hawks made five more appearances on national television that season, tying for the league-high.<sup>46</sup>

### **The Hawks and African American Fans, 1968-1980**

The desire of the Hawks ownership to make their product appealing to white customers was evident from the player-personnel decisions they made during the club's early years in Atlanta. To the team's detriment, the Hawks dismantled their predominately black, championship-caliber team of the late 1960s and rebuilt around a white star. This strategy failed to earn the franchise durable support from local customers and transformed the team into perennial also-rans. Simultaneously, the club expended minimal effort promoting their product to African Americans, who constituted a majority of Atlanta's population and were becoming increasingly enthusiastic basketball fans. This missed opportunity by the Hawks to earn durable support from black patrons exemplified the franchise's tone-deafness to issues related to race.

During the Hawks' early years in Atlanta, African Americans constituted a tiny presence in their crowds at Alexander. The club put little effort into attracting black patrons and it showed. A survey commissioned by the NBA during the 1971-1972 season found that African Americans made up only 8 percent of the spectatorship at Atlanta Hawks games. Just 9 of the Hawks' 2398 season ticket holders that year were black. In cities with similar demographics to Atlanta, such as Baltimore and Detroit, African Americans made up nearly one-third of the live audience for professional basketball. African Americans, in fact, made up a larger percentage of the NBA crowds in both Portland and Seattle, cities where blacks made up two and seven percent of the population respectively, than they did in majority-black Atlanta.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Frank Deford, "The Hawks: Fouled Up but Flourishing," *Sports Illustrated*, March 8, 1971, 42; Peter Carry, "We Have a Slight Delay in Showtime," *Sports Illustrated*, October 26, 1970, 31; Mark Kriegel, *Pistol*, 195-199; Noah Sanders, "Pistol Pete Now is Up Against the Pros," *New York Times Magazine*, October 11, 1970, 32.

<sup>47</sup> Paul Delaney, "More Black Fans Sought by Hawks," *New York Times*, June 25, 1972, S4.

The lack of black spectators at Hawks games during the late 1960s and early 1970s was in no way reflective of the game's popularity among the region's African American population. Over the course of the 1960s, African Americans in Atlanta, like those in cities across the United States, embraced basketball to an unprecedented extent, both as a form of recreation and as a spectator sport. By the end of the decade, national surveys indicated that basketball had overtaken baseball's popularity among black fans, challenging football for the designation as African Americans' favorite sport. While football had long been a pastime in Atlanta's black belt, basketball became a playground fixture in the neighborhoods to the south, west, and east of downtown during the 1960s. Highly competitive summer recreational leagues and winter high school basketball games drew consistently large crowds in predominately black Atlanta neighborhoods. Largely African American city schools such as Carver, Southwest, and West Fulton became major powers in the Georgia state high school basketball tournament during the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>48</sup>

"That's appalling for a city with Atlanta's reputation as a sports center and where there are more prosperous blacks than any other city in the National Basketball Association," African American insurance executive Jesse Hill Jr. said of the league-commissioned report on black spectatorship. Hill organized a 1972 meeting with Hawks management aimed at increasing the number of black season ticket holders. He attributed the dearth of black attendance at Hawks games to the Northside location of their home court. "The Hawks' problem is that their games were played at Georgia Tech where blacks have no history of attending games," Hill said. He

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<sup>48</sup> Justin Felder, "Carver Celebrates Anniversary of Milestone Basketball Championship," *Fox5Atlanta.com*, March 20, 2017. Accessed online: March 23, 2017: <http://www.fox5atlanta.com/sports/carver-celebrates-anniversary-of-milestone-basketball-championship>; "GHSB Boys Basketball Champions," *GHSB.net*, 2017. Accessed online: March 1, 2017: <https://www.ghsa.net/ghsa-boys-basketball-champions>; A.R. Shaw, "Street Ball Returns to Atlanta with AEBL Basketball Tournament," *Rollingout.com*, May 5, 2014. Accessed online: March 1, 2017: <https://rollingout.com/2014/05/05/streetball-returns-atlanta-aabl-basketball-tournament>; Mark Kriegel, *Pistol*, 191.

believed that the opening of the Omni in the southern CBD that fall would prove a more welcoming setting for black fans than Alexander. Construction magnate and Hawks stockholder Herman Russell, the first African American to own a percentage of a major professional sports franchise, worked with Hill to organize gatherings in the homes of prominent black Atlantans which amounted to season ticket sales pitches for their friends and business associates. There is no indication that these gatherings did much to increase the number of season tickets that were sold to members of the city's black professional class.<sup>49</sup>

While Hill's season ticket drive proved ineffective, his prediction that African Americans would constitute a larger percentage of the crowd at the Omni came to fruition. "There were noticeably more African American fans at the Omni to see the Hawks," frequent attendee Mike Holcomb said of the basketball crowds he witnessed in the late 1970s, "though even then I would say the crowds were probably at least 60% white."<sup>50</sup> A notable uptick in black attendance at Hawks games during the mid to late 1970s correlated with the team's move to the southern CBD. The increasing number of black spectators at Hawks games also corresponded with a broader socio-economic change in the region, namely the expansion of Metropolitan Atlanta's black middle class. Affirmative Action programs put in place during the 1970s by the Massell and Jackson administrations for municipal jobs and municipal contracts respectively contributed to a substantial increase in the number of African American residents with sufficient disposable income to attend professional sporting events. While relatively few of Atlanta's black elites had embraced mass spectator sports outside of those being played at historically black colleges, the cultural preferences of the city's expanding black middle class corresponded closely with those

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<sup>49</sup> Paul Delaney, "More Black Fans Sought by Hawks," *New York Times*, June 25, 1972, S4.

<sup>50</sup> Mike Holcomb, interview by the author, September 6, 2016, 52-54 transcript.

of Atlanta's black proletariat, leading to an increase in the number of African Americans who attended professional sporting events in the city.<sup>51</sup>

Hawks officials estimated in the mid-1970s that African Americans constituted between 15 and 25 percent of their live audience on most evenings, a fact that team officials feared was discouraging attendance by white customers who would have regarded any discernable presence of black fans at the games as unacceptable. "White Atlantans who stay away from Hawks games are likely to tell you that the percentage is as high as 60," Roy Blount quipped in a 1977 profile of the Atlanta sports scene for *Sports Illustrated*.<sup>52</sup> Visits to Atlanta by prominent African American stars such as Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Walt Frazier, and, especially, Julius Erving, drew far larger contingents of black fans to the Omni, suggesting that many of these patrons were fans more generally of professional basketball and the individual, stylized prowess of its premiere black performers than of the Hawks in particular. Appearances by Erving, "Dr. J," who joined the NBA's Philadelphia 76ers in 1976 after six seasons as the rival ABA's top drawing card, drew large crowds in every NBA city during the late 1970s, including Atlanta. Sportswriters in many cities noted that the crowds that came out to see "Dr. J," who helped popularize the "slam dunk," included an unprecedentedly large percentage of black spectators. Erving made his first professional appearance in Atlanta on November 20, 1976, drawing a sellout crowd to the Omni for the first time in three seasons. The majority-black crowd that evening cheered on Erving every time he touched the ball. The next night, the Hawks drew 1,076 fans for a home date against the Kansas City Kings, the franchise's smallest crowd since moving to Atlanta in 1968.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Joel Gross, interview by the author, August 15, 2013, 23 transcript; Roy M. Blount, "Losersville, U.S.A.," *Sports Illustrated*, March 21, 1977, 77-84; Ronald Bayor, *Race and the Making of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*, 188-196; Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics* 98-102

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> "Sellout Home Crowd at Hawks-76ers Game," *Atlanta Daily World*, November 23, 1976, 5; George Cunningham, "Dr. J, Erving, Talent-Laden 76ers Seek Identity Before Record Crowds," *Atlanta Journal*, November 20, 1976, 1C, 5C; "NBA Central," *Sporting News*, December 11, 1976, 28; Roy M. Blount, "Losersville, U.S.A.," *Sports*

## **“The Worst Time I’ve Ever Had in Basketball”**

The seasons the Hawks experienced following the departure of Pete Maravich were some of the dreariest ever endured by a major professional sports franchise. The club struggled to its third, fourth, and fifth consecutive losing seasons between 1974 and 1977, leading to the dismissal of coach Cotton Fitzsimmons. Unable to draw even when the team was good, the club’s poor performance exacerbated its attendance struggles. The Hawks finished last in attendance for three consecutive seasons (1974-1977), drawing fewer than 5,600 spectators per game each year. Frequently, the team drew fewer than 3,000 spectators, especially late in the season. At the time, the league’s average attendance was more than 10,000 per game.<sup>54</sup> Many of the fans whom Maravich had drawn to the Omni simply tuned the team out after his departure. “I’ve bought eight season tickets every year. I’ll never buy them again,” an unnamed fan announced to a *Journal* reporter when he learned of the Maravich trade.<sup>55</sup> Hawks stalwart Lou Hudson, who remembered the sparse crowds that came to see them play at Alexander in the late 1960s, described the post-Maravich era as “the worst time I’ve ever had in basketball.”<sup>56</sup>

As the Hawks’ on-the-court fortunes were fading, the franchise’s owner was dealing with the deterioration of his own fortune. The failure of the Omni International Complex to become an instant commercial hub in downtown Atlanta cost Tom Cousins tens of millions of dollars during the mid-to-late 1970s. Cousins’ flagging investment in the twin Omnis left him with few resources to invest in his basketball team. Exaggerating Cousins’ financial troubles was the

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*Illustrated*, March 21, 1977, 82; Nelson George, *Elevating the Game: Black Men and Basketball* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), xviii.

<sup>54</sup> Malcolm Moran, “Atlanta Fans Learn to Care for Hawks,” *New York Times*, April 22, 1979, S10; George Cunningham, “Hawks Lose, Drew is Fined,” *Atlanta Constitution*, March 26, 1975, 1D; “NBA Eastern,” *Sporting News*, October 25, 1975, 36; Tom Van Aarsdale, interview by the author, July 10, 2013, 43 transcript; George Cunningham, “The Hustling Hawk,” *Atlanta Constitution*, November 25, 1974, 2C.

<sup>55</sup> “Stick ‘Em Up! Hawks Make ‘Em Pay,” *Atlanta Constitution*, May 4, 1974, 1C.

<sup>56</sup> Darrell Simmons, “Hawks Reach All-Time Low,” *Atlanta Journal*, April 6, 1976, 1D; George Cunningham, “Hawks’ Streak at 13,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 4, 1976, 3D.



tendency of his organizations, sports, real estate, or otherwise, to rely on interlocking directorates. Many of the investors he assembled into the Omni Group played prominent roles in the Hawks and Flames organizations, the management of the arena, and even the Omni International Complex simultaneously. Omni Coliseum president Bill Putnam, for example, served at different times as the general manager of the Hawks and the Flames. Unlike Putnam, who had extensive experience in sports and entertainment, many of the investors in Cousins' developments came out of the real estate business and had no experience in professional sports, arena operation, and little background in downtown property management. Since Cousins' core group of investors held stakes in several of his ventures simultaneously, the financial troubles of any one arm of the organization ended up causing the entire entity to struggle. Weaker parts of the business sopped up the money and momentum of the stronger parts of the organization.<sup>57</sup>

The Hawks' precarious financial situation was amplified further by the lack of broadcast media revenue they had generated since their arrival in 1968. Televised Hawks games drew such scant Nielsen numbers that it discouraged local stations from investing more heavily in their product. In the Atlanta Hawks' inaugural season, WSB agreed to broadcast all 82 of their games on the radio, but televised only an eight-game slate. WSB held onto the local broadcasting rights for Hawks basketball for six seasons, televising just eight games each year. The Hawks never earned more than \$250,000 per season from WSB for their combined over-the-air broadcasting rights. Interest in newcomer Pete Maravich enabled WSB to expand its Hawks radio network to 18 stations and its television network into four states for the 1970-1971 season, but this did little to improve the club's broadcast revenue. The team was in the midst of a long-term contract with

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<sup>57</sup> Jeremy Rutherford, "Departure of Hawks Still is Bittersweet Affair," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, September 26, 1999, D16; David Halberstam, *The Breaks of the Game*, 9-16, 34-36; Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 16; "Omni Foreclosure Looms," *Washington Post*, March 4, 1978, 17.

the flagship Atlanta station. The tepid Nielsen numbers the Hawks continued to draw that winter stymied whatever leverage they had to negotiate a new deal.<sup>58</sup>

Broadcasts of nationally televised NBA games were also a consistent ratings loser on Atlanta television during the 1970s, despite frequent appearances by the Pete Maravich-era Hawks. In each of Maravich's four seasons with the Hawks, the team appeared an additional six to twelve times on Atlanta television, either on WQXI, the city's ABC affiliate, or WAGA, its CBS affiliate. On several occasions, ABC blacked out early 1970s Hawks home playoff games in the Atlanta area because of the poor advance ticket sales. WQXI was forced to telecast playoff games from another part of the country while the hometown team was competing in the same playoffs just a few blocks from their studio. Consistently poor ratings caused WQXI (1973) and WAGA (1974) to cancel their Sunday afternoon "NBA Game of the Week" in the midst of successive seasons. During the 1974-1975 season, Atlanta was the only NBA market without access to national broadcasts of professional basketball.<sup>59</sup> "Sports other than football do not really please a majority of your viewers," WQXI general manager John Tyler told the *Constitution* in 1973. Tyler replaced WQXI's basketball doubleheaders with double-features of Westerns from the 1950s, which drew nearly twice as many viewers each Sunday.<sup>60</sup>

Ted Turner's WTCG came to an agreement with the Hawks to broadcast their games during the 1974-1975 season after WSB-TV refused to renew their contract. WTCG paid the Hawks a mere \$100,000 for the season, but agreed to carry a slate of 25 games, all of them on

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<sup>58</sup> "Guide to Georgia: Fall 1971," Sports—Atlanta Hawks (Subject File), Kenan Research Center; Atlanta Regional Commission, "Report to the Atlanta Regional Commission on Public Response and Survey Aspects of WSB TV Shows," 1974, Kenan Research Center; "25 Hawks Road Games Set for Television," *Atlanta Daily World*, September 15, 1974, 7; "Hawks on TV," *Atlanta Journal*, October 16, 1968, 2C.

<sup>59</sup> Atlanta Regional Commission, "Report to the Atlanta Regional Commission on Public Response and Survey Aspects of WSB TV Shows," 1974, Kenan Research Center; William Leggett, "Decline of a Brave New World," *Sports Illustrated*, May 5, 1975, 40; George Cunningham, "NBA Games Off Atlanta TV," *Atlanta Constitution*, January 13, 1973, 4D; "Hawks and TV Vie for Fans," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 8, 1973, 1D.

<sup>60</sup> George Cunningham, "NBA Games Off Atlanta TV," *Atlanta Constitution*, January 13, 1973, 4D.

the road. The Hawks were willing to accept a 20% cut in their meagre television revenue for an expanded schedule of televised games which would not compete directly with their gate at the Omni. The following year, WTCG expanded its coverage of professional basketball beyond the Hawks, convincing the NBA to allow them to take on an additional syndicated package of regular season games from across the country. Despite the league's reticence to sell its product to a UHF station, the deal with WTCG provided the NBA with unprecedented access to the southeastern market, enabling viewers in the five state area that carried Turner's station to watch far more professional basketball than at any time since the Hawks' arrival.<sup>61</sup> WTCG's ratings for NBA games, Hawks or otherwise, proved low, but the addition of another major professional league to the station's programming further enhanced its prestige as a broadcaster. "Our profit will be minimal at best from the games," WTCG Station Manager Sid Pike told *Sports Illustrated*, "if we ran movies instead we could make much more money," he said, referring to the kind of programming that had previously been the station's bread-and-butter.<sup>62</sup>

By 1975, Cousins was looking to shed the Hawks from his portfolio. For the next two years, he entered into negotiations with several interested parties, but each one balked when they learned that purchasing the team would make them responsible for the franchise's estimated \$10 million in debt. In January 1977, Ted Turner, whose WTCG had been broadcasting Hawks games for three seasons, purchased a majority stake in the team for a mere \$1.5 million while assuming the lion's share of its debts. Turner, who had purchased the Braves on a ten-year, \$1

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<sup>61</sup> "25 Hawks Road Games Set for Television," *Atlanta Daily World*, September 15, 1974, 7; Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 183-184.

<sup>62</sup> William Leggett, "Decline of a Brave New World," *Sports Illustrated*, May 5, 1975, 40.

million per year installment plan just twelve months earlier, had quickly become the primary trustee of Atlanta's moribund professional sports scene.<sup>63</sup>

"It was only after all other avenues failed that Ted finally got into the deal," Hawks executive Mike Gearon said of the negotiations. Much of Atlanta's civic elite viewed Turner skeptically, both for his renegade persona and their belief that his television fortune existed merely on paper. Cousins and, in turn, the NBA acquiesced to Turner because they had no clear alternatives if they wished to keep professional basketball in the Southeast.<sup>64</sup> Turner ran the Hawks on a shoe-string budget in the late 1970s, leaving the operation of the franchise almost entirely to his associates as he insinuated himself into the cable television business. Turner ran the team's promotional department out of the Braves' offices. He hired longtime business associate Stan Kasten as general manager and Mike Gearon, a casual friend whom he knew often attended Hawks games, as team president. Collectively, the Turner-owned Hawks dumped all of the team's large contracts and tried to rebuild the organization as if it were an expansion franchise.<sup>65</sup>

### **"The Misconception is that Hockey Failed in Atlanta"**

Less than three years after WAGA-TV presented Georgians with their first televised hockey game, the NHL's Atlanta Flames skated onto the ice at the Omni in October 1972. The addition of professional hockey to Atlanta's sports marketplace served many masters. It fulfilled the "Big Mules'" desire to adorn their city with yet another "Major League" amenity. It helped arena operator Tom Cousins secure more than 40 revenue-generating dates each year on the

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<sup>63</sup> Malcolm Moran, "Atlanta Fans Learn to Care for Hawks," *New York Times*, April 22, 1979, S10; "NBA Central," *Sporting News*, January 15, 1977, 33.

<sup>64</sup> Jeffrey Denberg et al., *From Sweet Lou to 'Nique*, 46-47.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 39; Roy M. Blount, "Losersville, U.S.A.," *Sports Illustrated*, March 21, 1977, 82; Rick Reilly, "Peach State Lemons," *Sports Illustrated*, October 3, 1988, 34; Furman Bisher, "Cheaper by the Dozen Hawks," *Sporting News*, November 12, 1977, 2.

Omni's calendar. It enabled the NHL to keep its upstart rival, the World Hockey Association (WHA), out of a state-of-the-art arena as well as a large, rapidly growing television market. It made sense in every respect but the most obvious ones: few Atlantans had ever seen hockey in person, let alone played it themselves. Until the opening of the Omni, there was nowhere to host a hockey game in Atlanta. In the words of the *Journal's* Frank Hyland, the Flames were "lobsters in a catfish town."<sup>66</sup>

The sheer strangeness of placing a professional hockey team in Georgia in the early 1970s colors the largely inaccurate public memory of the Atlanta Flames' eight-year history. The dismissive standard narrative surrounding the franchise can be encapsulated in the *Sporting News's* Al Morganti's characterization of the Flames' tenure in Atlanta as a "seven year (sic) exercise in futility."<sup>67</sup> Writing in the early 1990s as the NHL had once again placed franchises in Dixie, Morganti's statement was demonstrative of a broad and understandable ethos among hockey purists who believed that the league's expansion into the Sunbelt was economically unwise and a destabilizing force in the sport's culture. The specific characterization of professional hockey's first gambit in Atlanta as an "exercise in futility," though, was simply not true. The Flames were a continuously competitive team and they enjoyed the most consistent and enthusiastic support of Atlanta's four major professional sports franchises during the 1970s.

"We went to the playoffs, we had some good teams. And the city supported them," Flames forward Tim Ecclestone said, assessing the team's legacy concisely in 2008.<sup>68</sup> "The misconception is that hockey failed in Atlanta but the truth is the owner of the team saw a chance to capitalize on the big profits of the sale of the team," Flames center Bill Clement said of the

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<sup>66</sup> Frank Hyland, "The Flames' Dilemma: Lobsters in a Catfish Town," *Atlanta Journal*, April 3, 1980, 2C.

<sup>67</sup> Al Morganti, "A Stormy Start," *The Sporting News*, November 25, 1991, 38.

<sup>68</sup> Craig Culance, "Old Flame(s)," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, January 23, 2008, 1D.

team's departure from Georgia.<sup>69</sup> The apologies offered by these former Flames are entirely accurate. The Flames performed well during their eight years in Atlanta, earning playoff bids on six occasions. The franchise's first two seasons were their only losing years in Atlanta. In addition, the Flames proved an excellent gate attraction for the vast majority of their tenure in the city, drawing more than 10,000 spectators to more than three-quarters of their games at the Omni. The team's departure from the city was due in large part to owner Tom Cousins' financial struggles, but also due to the waning of hockey as a novel attraction in the city, the franchise's lack of broadcast media revenue, and the inability of the team to broaden its appeal to more casual spectators. The vast majority of Flames diehards proved to be well-to-do Northsiders and transplants from the northern United States.

The Flames' on-ice success was built from the top down. Unlike the Falcons, Atlanta's other expansion franchise, the Flames' ownership hired experienced sports executives to run their organization. Flames GM Cliff Fletcher, who worked closely with head coaches Bernie "Boom Boom" Geoffrion (1972-1975) and Fred Creighton (1975-1979), oversaw the creation of a consistently competitive on-ice product in Atlanta. The decision in January 1972 to hire Fletcher, a thirty-eight year old player-personnel expert, was arguably the shrewdest in the franchise's history. A protégé of Montreal Canadiens GM Sam Pollock, Fletcher developed great expertise in talent assessment during his tenure with the league's premiere franchise. He assisted Pollock in the construction of Montreal's 1965 and 1966 championship clubs before moving on to St. Louis, where he built the expansion Blues into three-time defending Western Division champions (1968-1970).<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Bill Clement, interview by the author, June 26, 2013, 5-6 transcript.

<sup>70</sup> Roy M. Blount, "Losersville, U.S.A.," *Sports Illustrated*, March 21, 1977, 83; Dick Beardsley, "Five Year Plan," *Atlanta Journal*, April 1, 1974, 6D; Leo Monahan, "Atlanta Fans Warming Up to Fast-Charging Flames," *Sporting News*, December 23, 1972, 4; Mark Mulvoy, "Trouble in Paradise, But Not Very Much," *Sports Illustrated*,

Following the approach he took in St. Louis, Fletcher built the Atlanta club around strong defense. He used his first two expansion draft picks to select the talented young goalies Dan Bouchard and Phil Myre, a tandem which became the cornerstones of the club's early success. Atlanta's games were frequently low-scoring affairs, as the team employed a defense-first strategy to accentuate its strength in net. Opposing teams complained that warm weather Atlanta's notoriously soft home-ice further augmented the Flames' defensive strength by slowing down teams with superior athletes.<sup>71</sup> "We're used to it by now so it doesn't bother us as much," Flames forward Buster Harvey admitted to the *Sporting News* in 1974, "it's the heat and humidity. The ice can't help but get mushy. You never can be sure just what the puck's going to do, but at least we have a better idea than the visitors."<sup>72</sup>

Fletcher did more than just play the angles to build a successful team. His skill at assessing young talent enabled him to sign a number of future NHL stars before other franchises recognized their potential, including Tom Lysiak, Eric Vail, and Willi Plett. Fletcher's achievements look all the more remarkable when one considers that his competition for talent in the early 1970s consisted not only of other NHL clubs but also the well-financed franchises in the rival WHA. By contrast, The New York Islanders, the NHL's other 1972-1973 expansion club, spent their early years at the bottom of the standings, far out of contention. Rivals referred to the Flames as "Montreal South," as Fletcher acquired a half-dozen players who had been groomed in the Canadiens' farm system, including Myre and Lysiak. Unlike many expansion franchises, which acquire well-known players to draw in fans, Fletcher felt no pressure to sign up

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December 3, 1973, 28; "Atlanta Flames Fact Book 1974-1975," Sports- Atlanta Flames (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center.

<sup>71</sup> Gary Mueller, "Flames Break Up Goalie Tandem," *Sporting News*, December 31, 1977, 38; Gary Mueller, "Low-Scoring Flames Buttress a Strong Defense," *Sporting News*, October 25, 1975, 55; "Atlanta Flames Fact Book 1974-1975," Sports- Atlanta Flames (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center.

<sup>72</sup> "NHL Hockey," *Sporting News*, December 28, 1974, 31.

any aging stars. Atlanta fans, he understood, would not have known who they were anyway. Fletcher managed expectations for the team in the local press while he built a young, competitive, and compatible club, one whose striking and immediate success confounded even their staunchest boosters.<sup>73</sup>

Just as essential to the Flames' early success as Fletcher was the head coach that he hired: Hockey Hall of Famer Bernie "Boom Boom" Geoffrion. Accentuating the franchise's reputation as "Montreal South," Canadiens legend Geoffrion inspired fierce loyalty from his players while he won over Atlantans with his jaunty personal charisma.<sup>74</sup> "You have to give Cliff Fletcher a lot of credit," Flames announcer Jiggs McDonald said of the GM's selection of Geoffrion. "He hired a salesman, he hired a motivator...the outpouring of love and support for Boom was incredible."<sup>75</sup> "I thought it was of paramount importance to bring in a coach with a good personality," Fletcher said in 2008. "He [Geoffrion] captured the imagination of the sporting public in Atlanta. He was one of, if not the most important reasons hockey was able to make such an impact."<sup>76</sup>

"Boom Boom" came off simultaneously as a profane tough guy and a slick showman. His Quebecois accent was equal parts enchanting and amusing to Southern ears. Geoffrion made hundreds of personal appearances on behalf of the team, convincing many metropolitan area residents to give hockey a try. As a result, Geoffrion became the face of the franchise. "The

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<sup>73</sup> "Atlanta Flames Fact Book 1974-1975," Sports- Atlanta Flames (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center; Leo Monahan, "Fletcher Warns Atlanta Fans," *The Sporting News*, February 19, 1972, 11; Tony Petrella, "Fletcher Smooth Behind Scene," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 28, 1972, 1-D; Mark Mulvoy, "Trouble in Paradise, But Not Very Much," *Sports Illustrated*, December 3, 1973, 28; Mark Mulvoy, "A New Southern Rising," *Sports Illustrated*, December 4, 1972, 17-18.

<sup>74</sup> Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 9-10.

<sup>75</sup> Rick Carpinello, "An Interview with Jiggs McDonald on Boom Boom Geoffrion," *LoHud.com*, July 14, 2014. Accessed Online: July 23, 2014: <http://www.lohud.com/story/sports/nhl/rangers/2014/07/14/guest-blogger-george-grimm-interview-jiggs-mcdonald-boom-boom-geoffrion/12616265/>.

<sup>76</sup> John McGourty, "Former Flames Recall Hot Times in Atlanta," *NHL.com*, January 24, 2008. Accessed Online: July 23, 2014: <https://www.nhl.com/news/former-flames-recall-hot-times-in-atlanta/c-370370>.



Boomer,” as the gregarious Geoffrion came to be known locally, was the Atlanta-area’s most in-demand pitchman, after-dinner speaker, and media personality for much of the 1970s. Fans chanted “Boom! Boom!” nearly incessantly at home games.<sup>77</sup> Nagging health problems and a deteriorating relationship with Fletcher caused Geoffrion to resign as coach in February 1975. He accepted a front-office position with the Flames that consisted mostly of making public appearances. Nevertheless, the loss of Geoffrion as coach deprived the franchise of its best promotional tool, creating a public relations void from which it never recovered.<sup>78</sup>

### “Atlanta’s Ice Society”

The Flames promotional department, which was overseen by Fletcher and team president Bill Putnam, did an excellent job at presenting hockey tickets as a scarce, prestigious, and valuable commodity. At press conferences and in their promotional materials, the Flames invited area residents to join “Atlanta’s Ice Society,” portraying hockey night at the Omni as the new glamorous evening out for the region’s upper crust.<sup>79</sup> Advertisements presented Flames tickets as the cover charge to an exclusive club, imploring prospective members of the “Ice Society” to “Get Your Tickets Before the Freeze.” “Radio commercials done by a guy who sounds like he’s depicting a recreation of Pearl Harbor tell us to rush and buy those tickets or there won’t be any left,” the *Journal*’s Ron Hudspeth wrote of the Flames’ promotional

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<sup>77</sup> “Atlanta Flames Fact Book 1975-1976,” Sports- Atlanta Flames (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center; Phil Garner, “Southern Fans Love Mayhem on Ice,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution Magazine*, January 7, 1973, 14-23; Leo Monahan, “Atlanta Fans Warming Up to Fast-Charging Flames,” *Sporting News*, December 23, 1972, 4; Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 30-33, 59, 154-158; Al Smith, “Boomer Leaves Flames, NHL,” *Atlanta Constitution*, March 14, 1975, 1D.

<sup>78</sup> Joe and Betsy Watkins, interview by the author, July 3, 2013, 19-21 transcript; Furman Bisher, “Geoffrion Sows Well,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 29, 2001, 4D; Al Smith, “Boomer Leaves Flames, NHL,” *Atlanta Constitution*, March 14, 1975, 1D; Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 30-33, 154-158; Alan Truex, “The Ice Age: From Blizzard to Meltdown,” *Atlanta Journal*, May 23, 1980, D1; Furman Bisher, “Old Flame Dies in Atlanta,” *Sporting News*, February 22, 1975, 2; Jack Wilkinson, “An Old Flame,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 26, 1999, 4D; “Atlanta Flames Fact Book 1975-1976,” Sports- Atlanta Flames (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*; Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 9-10, 21.

campaign. Conversely, Geoffrion and Fletcher, who made dozens of personal appearances during the summer of 1972, adopted a softer sales approach. They presented themselves more as representatives of the sport than pitchmen for the franchise. Both methods clearly worked. The Flames sold more than 7,150 season tickets in advance of their first home game, more than the Braves and the Hawks sold combined for any one season during the 1960s or 1970s.<sup>80</sup>

The success the Flames showed at selling advance season tickets was a textbook example of targeted marketing. Despite the Flames' substantial advertising budget of \$300,000, a team-commissioned survey found that only 4 in 10 metropolitan area residents recognized the "Flames" moniker just one week before their home opener. Just one-third of respondents had ever seen hockey on television and less than three percent had ever attended a game. More than sixty percent of interviewees expressed interest in learning more about hockey, but the franchise decided to seek out the devotion of a more exclusive audience. They sought out customers who might buy a season ticket as they would an annual subscription to the theatre rather than a more inclusive audience, which could have provided them with a more substantial television viewership. The Flames' very name evoked a purposeful and playful cultural distance. Almost certainly, more fans would have recognized the team's name if it had adopted the more populist moniker that Fletcher favored for the team, "Rebels." The GM envisioned the "Atlanta Rebels," cloaked in grey and red, skating on to the ice to the strains of "Dixie" as played by a corps of buglers in the stands. The franchise's local ownership vetoed the Canadian GM's vision, believing it would damage Atlanta's reputation as the "City Too Busy To Hate." Instead,

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 15; Mark Mulvoy, "A New Southern Rising," *Sports Illustrated*, December 4, 1972, 17-18; Ron Hudspeth, "For Atlanta's Suave Set, A New Love: Pro Hockey," *Atlanta Journal*, January 12, 1973, 2D.

Fletcher and Putnam went with their second choice, "Flames," which evoked the city's Civil War past and juxtaposed nicely with the game's ice playing surface.<sup>81</sup>

The Atlanta Flames' October 14, 1972 home debut was the first event ever held at the Omni Coliseum. Less than an hour before the opening faceoff, laborers were still bolting in seats for the evening's game, 500 of which they failed to complete in time. A sellout crowd of 14,568 watched the Flames and Buffalo Sabres skate to a 1-1 tie in what was likely the first hockey game that most attendees had ever seen in person.<sup>82</sup> Like every opening night in Atlanta, fans came dressed to the nines. "It looked like you were going to a ball," Geoffrion recalled, noting that most fans showed up at every game thereafter dressed in similarly formal clothing.<sup>83</sup> It was "a very social crowd doing the in-thing to do," the *Journal's* Jim Huber and Tom Saladino wrote of the attendees that evening, "bejeweled and spit polished to perfection."<sup>84</sup> Atlanta fans bundled up for their night on the town, many in brand new winter coats and furs, unaware that the arena was climate controlled to keep the seating areas warmer than the ice.<sup>85</sup>

Newly inducted Flames fans displayed a predictable lack of hockey knowledge. "The game began and people jumped out of their seats to watch a couple of players battling for the puck at center. 'Sit down, sit down,' I told them, 'nothing has happened yet,'" Warren Argy, an Upstate New York transplant in attendance said of the crowd.<sup>86</sup> Spectators cheered on all movement of the puck, responding to any progress by the rubber disc as if they were the strides

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<sup>81</sup> "Omni Souvenir Dedication Book," *Flames Magazine 1*, Sports- Atlanta Flames (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center; "NHL Hockey," *Sporting News*, June 3, 1972, 48; Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 9-10, 20-21; "Will Atlanta Embrace Hockey?" *The Sporting News*, October 7, 1972, 57

<sup>82</sup> Ron Taylor and Maurice Fliess, "'Beautifuls' Hail Sold-Out Omni," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 15, 1972, 1A; Jim Huber, "Flames Tie Christens Omni," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 15, 1972, 1D.

<sup>83</sup> Jack Wilkinson, "An Old Flame," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 26, 1999, 4D.

<sup>84</sup> Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 57

<sup>85</sup> "Flames Magazine 1 (1972-1973 Game Program)," Sports- Atlanta Flames (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center.

<sup>86</sup> Mark Mulvoy, "A New Southern Rising," *Sports Illustrated*, December 4, 1972, 17-18.

of a thoroughbred hitting the home stretch of the Belmont Stakes. They honored the most pedestrian of Flames goaltender Phil Myre's saves with standing ovations. The scoreboard read "Myre-Aculous" when the goalie made his first save of the game, stopping a slow-rolling puck that dribbled down the ice into his glove.<sup>87</sup> "I didn't know what the hell happened," Myre said, "I almost got caught looking up in the stands to see what was going on. I kinda thought somebody started a fight or something."<sup>88</sup>

The hockey cognoscenti found great humor in Atlantans' simultaneous enthusiasm for the game and ignorance of it during the Flames' first seasons.<sup>89</sup> Players, too, recognized that Atlanta fans were far from hockey experts, but they sure had a great time at the games. "The fans loved us in Atlanta but it almost just seemed like they were there for a festival on a lot of nights. As opposed to caring whether the team won or lost... With hockey fans in Atlanta, it was more 'let's have a party and cheer our rear ends off, and then let's have a party after the game,'" Flames center Bill Clement said.<sup>90</sup> "You can go to the Omni, which is the new home of indoor sports culture in Atlanta, and feel at ease," the *Journal's* Furman Bisher explained in February 1973. "That's because you figure everybody's on the same ground. Nobody knows any more hockey than you do." While Bisher aimed to make light of the situation, he illuminated an important truth about the Flames' fanbase. Unfamiliarity with the sport was not a taboo among Flames spectators. Part of the appeal of going was that virtually everyone in attendance was learning the game together and at the same time.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid; Jack Wilkinson, "An Old Flame," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 26, 1999, 4D; Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 57-59.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>89</sup> Phil Garner, "Southern Fans Love Mayhem on Ice," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution Magazine*, January 7, 1973, 14-23; Mark Mulvoy, "Trouble in Paradise, But Not Very Much," *Sports Illustrated*, December 3, 1973, 28; Jack Wilkinson, "An Old Flame," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 26, 1999, 4D.

<sup>90</sup> Bill Clement, interview by the author, June 26, 2013, 5-6 transcript.

<sup>91</sup> Furman Bisher, "Hockey Madness Sweeps Atlanta," *Sporting News*, February 17, 1973, 32.

The full house that watched the Flames' October 1972 debut was not a fluke. Few expansion franchises in the history of professional sports have proven as immediate a box office success as the Atlanta Flames. Midway through their first season, the Flames had a winning record and were drawing frequent sellout crowds to the Omni. The franchise averaged better than 12,500 spectators per game during their first season, providing largely young and well-heeled audiences with a novel entertainment experience. Partial Flames season tickets proved a popular holiday gift among affluent Atlantans in 1972. The club sold 4,000 of them as part of a Christmas sales campaign.<sup>92</sup>

The Flames' popularity at the gate peaked during their second and third seasons when they averaged more than 14,000 spectators per game. Atlanta's full season ticket sales grew to approximately 8,300 in 1973-1974 before reaching an all-time high of more than 9,800 in 1974-1975.<sup>93</sup> "The one game that's still playing to full houses is the one the Flames brought to town," the *Journal's* Furman Bisher wrote in February 1975, as the city found itself in full "Loserville, USA" mode.<sup>94</sup> "It's been amazing the way hockey has been accepted here," Fletcher said of the franchise's immediate fan support, "We know the fans were not bred on it as they were in the upper United States and Canada, but they're catching on quickly and they seem to like it."<sup>95</sup> On April 7, 1974, thousands of fans lined up at the Omni's box office to purchase Flames playoff tickets. At the time, several thousand tickets remained unsold for the Braves' April 8<sup>th</sup> home opener, which proved to be the night that Hank Aaron broke baseball's all-time career home run

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<sup>92</sup> "Atlanta Flames Fact Book 1974-1975," Sports- Atlanta Flames (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center; Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 51; Jim Huber, "Flames Debut: The End and the Beginning," *Atlanta Journal*, October 14, 1972, 11A; Leo Monahan, "Atlanta Fans Warming Up to Fast-Charging Flames," *Sporting News*, December 23, 1972, 4; Alan Truex, "The Ice Age: From Blizzard to Meltdown," *Atlanta Journal*, May 23, 1980, D1.

<sup>93</sup> Al Smith and Warren Newman, "Skating on Thin Ice," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 30, 1980, 1D, 15D.

<sup>94</sup> Furman Bisher, "Old Flame Dies in Atlanta," *Sporting News*, February 22, 1975, 2.

<sup>95</sup> Leo Monahan, "Atlanta Fans Warming Up to Fast-Charging Flames," *Sporting News*, December 23, 1972, 4.

record.<sup>96</sup> "I was kinda scared at first," Geoffrion said about Flames' attendance, "because you were down South. Our games were on Friday. You had to fight high school football. But we conquered them. We outdrew high school football. And the Hawks and Braves were terrible."<sup>97</sup>

The Flames drew a largely young, professional, and affluent crowd to the Omni. Contemporary images and accounts display a well-dressed audience that consisted largely of men in suits and bejeweled women in long dresses.<sup>98</sup> "There were quite a few young kids going, who took on hockey pretty well," *Constitution* editor Jim Minter recalled, "you could call it a social thing. It was real trendy at the time."<sup>99</sup> "Cheering them on from a season-long seat in the Omni was the thing to do on a winter's night in Atlanta," Al Smith and Warren Newman of the *Journal-Constitution* said of the Flames' first years in the city.<sup>100</sup> "It used to be the cool, charming suave sophisticated fellow about town was the one who had two tickets to a Falcons game," the *Journal's* Ron Hudspeth wrote in January 1973, "but now, it's hockey." He described Flames games as the new evening haunt of Atlanta's fashionable set, "an Omni full of suave, sophisticated Joes and little blondes."<sup>101</sup>

The *Journal's* Alex Truex described the Flames as having a "narrow base of support, mostly upper-crust north-siders," an assessment which many of their fans would have embraced, particularly in the team's early years.<sup>102</sup> "Hockey fans are far above the average sports fan," Flames Fan Club founder Howard Zinsenhelm explained in 1973, "They're more loyal and

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<sup>96</sup> Dick Beardsley, "Second-Year Expansion Team, Huh?" *Atlanta Journal*, April 8, 1974, 1D.

<sup>97</sup> Jack Wilkinson, "An Old Flame," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 26, 1999, 4D.

<sup>98</sup> Joel Gross, interview by the author, August 15, 2013, 23 transcript; Joe and Betsy Watkins, interview by the author, July 3, 2013, 19-21 transcript; Leo Monahan, "Atlanta Fans Warming Up to Fast-Charging Flames," *Sporting News*, December 23, 1972, 4; "Atlanta Flames Fact Book 1974-1975," Sports- Atlanta Flames (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center; Jack Wilkinson, "An Old Flame," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 26, 1999, 4D.

<sup>99</sup> Jim Minter, interview by the author, July 9, 2013, 16.

<sup>100</sup> Al Smith and Warren Newman, "Skating on Thin Ice," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 30, 1980, 1D, 15D.

<sup>101</sup> Ron Hudspeth, "For Atlanta's Suave Set, A New Love: Pro Hockey," *Atlanta Journal*, January 12, 1973, 2D.

<sup>102</sup> Alan Truex, "The Ice Age: From Blizzard to Meltdown," *Atlanta Journal*, May 23, 1980, D1.

they're from a higher income level," he said, describing the appeal of the game to Atlanta's upscale consumers, who had previously proved unwilling to sweat in the stands alongside people of more modest means.<sup>103</sup> Like Zinsenheim, a transplanted New York insurance executive, many early Flames supporters were relocated northerners. "But the natives caught on quickly," current Fan Club co-president Joe Watkins recalled. Joe and his wife, Betsy Watkins, joined the group in 1976 and have kept it going for the more than 30 years since the team left Atlanta.<sup>104</sup>

As natives caught on, the demographics of the fanbase changed to some extent. The official Flames Fan Club that Zinsenheim had formed peaked in membership at around 800 in 1973, when it consisted primarily of the well-to-do transplants who made up much of the Flames' early, business class crowd. The organization held monthly luncheons and dinners which featured talks by Flames players or those from opposing teams. The club often met at Dante's Down the Hatch, famed man-about-town Dante Stephensen's popular fondue restaurant in Underground Atlanta. Fan Club members formed many friendships with Flames players, especially in the group's later years as its membership waned to a more heavily native and more committed base. It was not uncommon for several Flames players to meet up for beers after the game with the friends they had made in the group. The Fan Club also followed the team on the road, making well-planned excursions for out of town games or to attend the NHL All-Star Game, as the group did on five occasions. Long before sports apparel merchandizing became widespread, club members purchased red Atlanta Flames jackets, which made for a striking display when they sat as a group at the Omni.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Phil Garner, "Southern Fans Love Mayhem on Ice," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution Magazine*, January 7, 1973, 14-23.

<sup>104</sup> Joe and Betsy Watkins, interview by the author, July 3, 2013, 21, transcript.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 19-21; Jim Huber, "Flames Can Smell that Playoff Loot," *Atlanta Journal*, January 13, 1973, 10A; Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 64-65; Craig Custance, "Old Flame(s)," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, January 23, 2008, 1D; Phil Garner, "Southern Fans Love Mayhem on Ice," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution Magazine*, January 7, 1973, 14-23.

Flames fans were loud and enthusiastic throughout the team's eight year run in Atlanta. They lined the rafters at every game with homemade banners in support of the team. The 1974-1975 Flames may be the only team in NHL history that left the ice to a standing ovation after losing a regular season game which knocked them out of playoff contention.<sup>106</sup> "Till the last season it was pretty rocking," Fan Club co-president Betsy Watkins said of the atmosphere at the Omni during a hockey game.<sup>107</sup> "They would blow the roof off," Flames center Bill Clement said of the noise at the Omni.<sup>108</sup> The Omni's organist, who made "Happy Days Are Here Again" a team anthem, would whip the crowd up into a screaming and singing assemblage, cultivating an atmosphere at the arena similar to that of the cabarets across the street at Underground Atlanta.<sup>109</sup> Atlanta fans showed great enthusiasm for the spectacle of hockey fights, reserving some of their loudest cheers every evening for Flames brawlers Bob Paradise and Willi Plett.<sup>110</sup>

Young women formed a significant portion of the Flames' following. Certainly, "little blonde secretaries," in the words of the *Journal's* Ron Hudspeth, went on many a dates at Flames games, but the hockey team also drew consistent and durable support from young women who attended the games in groups.<sup>111</sup> "Hockey is drawing more women's support than any sport in this town," Flames public relations director Ed Thilinius told the *Constitution* in 1975.<sup>112</sup> That

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<sup>106</sup> Tony Petrella, "Fans Great, But Ice Greater," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 15, 1972, 12D; Joel Gross, interview by the author, August 15, 2013, 23 transcript; "Flames Trying for Home Ice, Battle Flyers," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 30, 1980, 6D; David Hewes, interview by the author, December 19, 2011, 7 transcript; Jack Wilkinson, "An Old Flame," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 26, 1999, 4D; "Dignity in Defeat," *Atlanta Journal*, April 5, 1975, 9A; "Only the Flames Flamed Out," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 5, 1975, 1C.

<sup>107</sup> Joe and Betsy Watkins, interview by the author, July 3, 2013, 19 transcript.

<sup>108</sup> Bill Clement, interview by the author, June 26, 2013, 5-6 transcript.

<sup>109</sup> Tony Petrella, "Flames, Islanders End Season with 4-4 Tie," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 3, 1973, 2C.

<sup>110</sup> "Flames Magazine 1 (1972-1973 Game Program)," Sports- Atlanta Flames (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center; Tony Patrella, "They Don't Look for 'The Dentist,'" *Atlanta Constitution*, October 16, 1972, 4D; Alan Truex, "The Ice Age: From Blizzard to Meltdown," *Atlanta Journal*, May 23, 1980, D1; Ron Hudspeth, "For Atlanta's Suave Set, A New Love: Pro Hockey," *Atlanta Journal*, January 12, 1973, 2D; Jack Wilkinson, "An Old Flame," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 26, 1999, 4D.

<sup>111</sup> Ron Hudspeth, "For Atlanta's Suave Set, A New Love: Pro Hockey," *Atlanta Journal*, January 12, 1973, 2D; George Cunningham, "Only the Flames Flamed Out," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 5, 1975, 1C.

<sup>112</sup> Wayne Minshew, "Flames Turn on the Gals," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 7, 1975, 2D.



October, the club held a free hockey clinic for female fans which drew more than 1,500 attendees. Flames players found it amusing that the women at the clinic hooted, hollered, and catcalled them as they demonstrated different aspects of the game. Flames goalie Dan Bouchard said the clamorous response they received from the female fans was typical. “When they come to a hockey game, they leave their manners in the powder room or someplace,” he said. Kay Davis, an Atlanta secretary who attended, said she loved hockey because she “loves the fights.” Davis also cited an intimacy she felt with the helmetless skaters in hockey that she did not in other sports. “There aren’t so many players that you can’t have a rapport with them,” she said, “like football, I mean, which is so mechanical.”<sup>113</sup>

Part of the appeal of hockey to young white female fans was almost certainly that the sport’s participants were young, wealthy, fashionably dressed and coiffed white men. Moreover, the French names and accents of many of the players made them seem exotic. Young white women cheering on the likes of Jacques Richard and Leon Rochefort would not have been perceived by most white Atlantans as socially transgressive. If these same women had whooped it up for anyone but Pete Maravich in the Hawks’ predominately African American lineup, they would have been crossing into culturally taboo terrain, even though the Hawks’ players were just as wealthy and well-dressed as the ones on the Flames.<sup>114</sup> “It is not pleasant to admit, but there are also those fans who watch hockey because it is a lily white sport,” the *Journal*’s Ron Hudspeth wrote of the support that the all-white Flames received from both male and female fans

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<sup>113</sup> Wayne Minshew, “Flames Turn on the Gals,” *Atlanta Constitution*, October 7, 1975, 2D.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.; Furman Bisher, “The Omni: A New World of Splendor,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 15, 1972, 12D; Phil Garner, “Southern Fans Love Mayhem on Ice,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution Magazine*, January 7, 1973, 14-23

relative to the support that fans gave to the predominately African American Hawks, even after Pete Maravich joined the club in 1970.<sup>115</sup>

“Atlantans would rather watch a Canadian do something they only vaguely comprehend than watch a black American do something they used to try to do through hoops nailed to their garages,” *Sports Illustrated*’s Roy Blount wrote in 1977.<sup>116</sup> Blount’s characterization was entirely accurate. Atlantans in the 1970s demonstrated a clear preference for attending the games of the Flames, who played a foreign but almost exclusively white professional sport, rather than the Hawks, who played a familiar but predominately black one. The Flames outdrew the Hawks in all eight of the seasons that they shared the Omni. The most dramatic difference in attendance came during the 1973-1974 season, when the Flames averaged 14,162 spectators per game, nearly twice as many as the Pete Maravich-led Hawks, who averaged 7,612. The Omni’s co-tenants charged roughly the same amount for tickets and played roughly the same number of games. Hawks and Flames tickets topped out at \$7 and \$7.50 respectively. The lowest priced Hawks tickets were \$3 while the cheapest passes to Flames games were \$3.50. The Hawks offered their fans giveaways and special promotions almost nightly while the Flames rarely did either.<sup>117</sup>

Considering that the team was nearly named the “Rebels,” it is not surprising that the Flames put minimal effort into attracting African American fans. A 1972 team-commissioned survey indicated that nearly 60 percent of black males in the region were interested in learning

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<sup>115</sup> Ron Hudspeth, “For Atlanta’s Suave Set, A New Love: Pro Hockey,” *Atlanta Journal*, January 12, 1973, 2D.

<sup>116</sup> Roy M. Blount, “Losersville, U.S.A.,” *Sports Illustrated*, March 21, 1977, 77-84.

<sup>117</sup> Mark Mulvoy, “Trouble in Paradise, But Not Very Much,” *Sports Illustrated*, December 3, 1973, 28; Al Smith and Warren Newman, “Skating on Thin Ice,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 30, 1980, 1D, 15D; “NBA/ABA Attendance Totals,” *Association for Professional Basketball Research*, 2013; Jim Stewart, “Omni Doors Open to Atlanta Tonight,” *Atlanta Constitution*, October 14, 1972, 1A; “Flames Magazine 2 (1972-1973 Game Program),” Sports- Atlanta Flames (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center.

more about hockey, but the team did little to pursue this audience.<sup>118</sup> As Flames attendance started to decline in the mid-1970s, the *Daily World's* Marion Jackson encouraged the franchise to “spread a little of that advertising in the black market,” advice which the club did not heed.<sup>119</sup> “Remember Atlanta may be a city too busy to hate, but Flames fans come from throughout Georgia and the southeastern states. Sure, there are some blacks who attend hockey games, but the Flames are the only game left in town for whites,” the *Daily World's* James Heath wrote in 1975, recognizing that at least some of the Flames audience considered the white hegemony in hockey among its attributes.<sup>120</sup>

### **“We had the Inkling that Cousins was in Trouble”**

Despite its strong debut, “Atlanta’s Ice Society” shrank precipitously during the mid-1970s. Flames season ticket sales fell nearly forty percent between 1974-1975 and 1977-1978 from an all-time high of more than 9,800 to fewer than 5,700. Average game attendance during the same three-year period declined from better than 14,000 to just over 10,500. An aggressive season ticket campaign engineered by Flames president Bob Kent helped the club improve season ticket sales to 6,400 for the 1978-1979 season, but sales plunged to an all-time low of 5,400 in 1979-1980. Average game attendance fell below 10,000 for the first time in 1979-1980 as rumors of the team’s departure, which began several seasons earlier, grew to a roar.<sup>121</sup>

The sudden decline of the Flames’ box office appeal is a product of several factors. Some of these factors, which were described in detail in Chapter 8, were related to playing in

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<sup>118</sup> “Black Players for Flames Hoped For,” *Atlanta Daily World*, October 20, 1972, 1.

<sup>119</sup> Marion Jackson, “This and That in Sports,” *Atlanta Daily World*, May 21, 1976, 8.

<sup>120</sup> James Heath, “Sports Note Pad,” *Atlanta Daily World*, July 13, 1975, 6.

<sup>121</sup> Al Smith and Warren Newman, “Skating on Thin Ice,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 30, 1980, 1D, 15D; Alan Truex, “The Ice Age: From Blizzard to Meltdown,” *Atlanta Journal*, May 23, 1980, D1; Alan Truex, “Flames Won’t Reveal Ticket Sales,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 23, 1975, 12D; Alan Truex, “Flames’ Ticket Sales Down,” *Atlanta Journal*, August 7, 1975, 4D; Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 75; Roy M. Blount, “Losersville, U.S.A.,” *Sports Illustrated*, March 21, 1977, 83;

downtown Atlanta at the Omni and impacted the Hawks just as strongly. Most suburban patrons regarded downtown Atlanta as increasingly uninviting, inconvenient, and unsafe during the 1970s. As suburban retail and leisure opportunities expanded, their impetus for a day or a night in the center city declined. Several other factors specific to the Flames' relationship with their fans also contributed to the decline. As hockey's novelty waned in Atlanta, the Flames were in the process of gaining a reputation for playoff futility. Despite consistently strong regular season performances, the club failed to advance beyond the opening round of the Stanley Cup playoffs on all six occasions. "We never won a playoff round when we were there and I think that ultimately was the greatest thing that led to our demise," Flames center Bill Clement said. Playoff failures cultivated fan frustration and, eventually, apathy towards the team.<sup>122</sup>

The national economic downturn of the mid 1970s, even in perpetually booming Atlanta, contributed to the tightening of discretionary budgets, including those of the professionals and corporations, who had, collectively, purchased many Flames season tickets each season. Additionally, the Omni Group's doomed effort to boost the poor-drawing Hawks' attendance by poaching many of the Flames' Saturday evening dates cut into the hockey team's best night of business. Moreover, the 1975 resignation of the Flames' wildly popular coach, "Boom Boom" Geoffrion, left the franchise without a genuine public face. The loss of Geoffrion as coach corresponded to significant cuts to the team's marketing budget, lowering the public profile of the franchise just as it started to struggle at the gate.<sup>123</sup>

In a more general sense, media visibility emerged quickly as one of the franchise's major weaknesses. While the Flames became disinclined to invest in self-promotion, the Atlanta

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<sup>122</sup> Bill Clement, interview by the author, June 26, 2013, 5-6 transcript.

<sup>123</sup> Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 75; Roy M. Blount, "Losersville, U.S.A.," *Sports Illustrated*, March 21, 1977, 83; Al Smith and Warren Newman, "Skating on Thin Ice," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 30, 1980, 1D, 15D.

media, too, lost interest in serving as a public relations arm of the franchise. Like the Hawks, the Flames received decidedly less press coverage than their baseball and football counterparts. After an initial burst of publicity, the local media relegated the Flames to the inside pages of the sports section and to infrequent television coverage. “After the first couple of years,” Flames Fan Club president Joe Watkins recalls, “the media was nice to them, but did as little as possible for hockey coverage...they went back to high school football or college football.”<sup>124</sup> Former Flames center Bill Clement characterized the local media coverage of the team as “friendly” and “never challenging,” but noted that they were mainly “reporting the facts” rather than boosting the franchise.<sup>125</sup> In the Flames’ early years, the *Journal* and the *Constitution* did an excellent job explaining the rules and terminology of hockey as well as the history of the sport in frequent sidebars, augmenting the education being done in team promotional materials as well as by the Omni’s public address announcer, who explained the rule being enforced each time the whistle was blown during a game. Nonetheless, the Flames were never the primary or even secondary focus of the Atlanta sports media.<sup>126</sup>

“I’ve always felt that between 1974 and 1976, there should have been a strong marketing program,” Fletcher said in 1980, “But because of the success of the team the first two seasons, I guess they thought that they could get by without it.”<sup>127</sup> Fletcher spoke openly during the late 1970s about the necessity of averaging 13,000 fans per home date and 10,000 season ticket sales simply for the club to break even. Unlike many other franchises, they could not rely on luxury or club seating to serve as an additional revenue source, since the Omni contained no such sections.

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<sup>124</sup> Joe Watkins, interview by the author, July 3, 2013, 19-20 transcript

<sup>125</sup> Bill Clement, interview by the author, June 26, 2013, 5-6 transcript.

<sup>126</sup> Leo Monahan, “Atlanta Fans Warming Up to Fast-Charging Flames,” *Sporting News*, December 23, 1972, 4; “Omni Souvenir Dedication Book,” “Atlanta Flames Fact Book 1974-1975,” Sports- Atlanta Flames (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center.

<sup>127</sup> Al Smith and Warren Newman, “Skating on Thin Ice,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 30, 1980, 1D, 15D.

Nor could the Flames fall back on a robust broadcast media contract to support their operations.<sup>128</sup>

One of the Flames' weaknesses as a franchise was the instability and size of their broadcast media contracts. During the Flames' first three years in Atlanta, WSB televised 20 games each season while WGST carried all 78 games on the radio. In year one, the club garnered excellent television ratings, drawing the third largest per capita local viewership in the NHL. While radio drew a steady but small audience, television ratings declined precipitously in subsequent years along with the novelty of televised hockey in the region. The Flames television numbers dropped in years two and three into the lower echelon of the league's local ratings despite their presence on a powerful NBC affiliate. WSB, which also carried NBC's national coverage of the NHL, dropped both the Flames and its syndication of the *Game of the Week* after the 1974-1975 season. As a regional flagship station, WSB served as the epicenter of NBC's efforts to build a television audience for hockey in the South. In spite of several rounds of regional advertising campaigns and numerous efforts to wine-and-dine local affiliate bosses into supporting the sport, southern stations, including WSB, considered the ratings for hockey too dreadful to continue broadcasting games. Nielsen numbers for both the Flames and the *Game of the Week* on WSB fell below a 5 in the 1974-1975 season, half as many viewers as NHL games drew in most northern markets.<sup>129</sup> "We get fives on this station for test patterns" WSB-TV Program Director Van Cantfort told *Sports Illustrated's* William Leggett in 1975, explaining that

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid; Roy M. Blount, "Losersville, U.S.A.," *Sports Illustrated*, March 21, 1977, 83; Alan Truex, "Flames' Ticket Sales Down," *Atlanta Journal*, August 7, 1975, 4D; Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 183-184; William Leggett, "Decline of a Brave New World," *Sports Illustrated*, May 5, 1975, 34.

<sup>129</sup> "Flames Magazine 1 (1972-1973 Game Program)," "Atlanta Flames Fact Book 1974-1975," "Atlanta Flames Fact Book 1975-1976," Sports- Atlanta Flames (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center; Jack Craig, "NBC to Woo the South for Hockey," *Sporting News*, December 15, 1973, 26; William Leggett, "Decline of a Brave New World," *Sports Illustrated*, May 5, 1975, 34; Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 55, 87; Tony Petrella, "Flames: The Omni Welcomes Ice Age," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 14, 1972, 1D; "Flames and WSB Announce 1974-75 TV Schedule," *Atlanta Daily World*, September 19, 1974, 6.

almost any movie shown on the station on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon would draw a better rating than any hockey game. For the duration of the Flames' stay in Georgia, they played in the only NHL market without regular national broadcasts of league games or television coverage of the Stanley Cup finals.<sup>130</sup>

Atlanta's largely-upscale hockey spectators demonstrated a clear preference for the live product. Many fans found hockey much easier to follow in person and believed that there was a more significant drop-off in their enjoyment of the televised game relative to other sports. In the long run, hockey proved popular in Atlanta with affluent, nightlife-seeking young people as well as a loyal core of diehards, but not a mass television audience. In certain respects, Atlanta's consumers had a similar, if more exaggerated, response to nationally televised hockey as other viewers across the country. NBC affiliates' ratings for regular season hockey even in northern states lagged behind the numbers other stations in their markets drew for their competing programming. In 1976, NBC decided not to renew its contract with the NHL, leaving the league without a national regular-season broadcasting contract for the next thirteen years. The end of the NHL's national television deal forced franchises to fend largely for themselves for broadcasting revenue.<sup>131</sup>

Ted Turner's media enterprises preserved Flames hockey on television for Atlantans, just as they had several years earlier with Braves baseball. Knowing that televised hockey would draw only modest ratings, WTCG Channel 17 offered the Flames only a modest television contract. The station agreed to broadcast 22 Flames games during the 1975-1976 season for a mere \$125,000, the smallest television package in the league. By comparison, broadcasters in

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<sup>130</sup> William Leggett, "Decline of a Brave New World," *Sports Illustrated*, May 5, 1975, 34.

<sup>131</sup> "Atlanta Flames Fact Book 1974-1975," Sports- Atlanta Flames (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center; Jim Minter, interview by the author, July 9, 2013, 16; Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 87; Tony Petrella, "Flames: The Omni Welcomes Ice Age," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 14, 1972, 1D.

established NHL markets, such as Boston and Montreal, paid more than \$2 million that season for the local television rights to their hometown teams. The Flames' television revenue gap widened by the year. While other clubs negotiated new and larger broadcast packages, they sold their television rights to WTCG in each of the next five seasons for the same \$125,000. During the same five year stretch, a succession of radio stations paid \$130,000 annually for the right to broadcast all Flames games not televised on WTCG, a schedule which confused fans that did not keep a close eye on the listings.<sup>132</sup>

As much as any financial struggle the Flames faced during the late 1970s, the franchise's 1980 departure from Atlanta was a product of the declining fortunes of Tom Cousins' real estate empire. The persistently high vacancy rate at the Omni International Complex and its adjoining developments made Cousins' ambitious plans for downtown Atlanta economically unsustainable. Cousins lost an estimated \$33 million on the Omni International Complex between 1975 and 1978, diminishing his ability to support the franchise, especially after a series of early investors sold their stakes in the Flames as the organization started losing money.<sup>133</sup>

Originally, Cousins owned a mere 20 percent of the team. Six other businessmen, including team president Bill Putnam, each owned 10 percent of the Flames while four additional investors each held a five percent stake. All 10 of Cousins' co-owners were, in addition, investors in the Omni Group, which owned the Hawks and managed the arena. Despite the big splash the Flames made in the Atlanta marketplace in 1972-1973, the majority of co-owners believed that Putnam had jeopardized their investments by spending too much money marketing the team. In July 1973, a majority of Flames stakeholders overruled Cousins and fired Putnam as

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<sup>132</sup> "Atlanta Flames Fact Book 1975-1976," Sports- Atlanta Flames (Subject Folder), Kenan Research Center; Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 183-184; Al Smith and Warren Newman, "Skating on Thin Ice," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 30, 1980, 1D, 15D.

<sup>133</sup> Alan Truex, "The Ice Age: From Blizzard to Meltdown," *Atlanta Journal*, May 23, 1980, D1.



team president, replacing him with co-owner John Wilcox, an attorney with no previous experience in the sports business. Wilcox channeled much of the Flames advertising budget into the Hawks' coffers, using it to promote the struggling basketball franchise in which most Flames co-owners had also invested. In the long run, this decision served to sink both ships.<sup>134</sup>

A decline in attendance during the mid-1970s turned the briefly profitable Flames into a financial burden for its penny-pinching owners. The club lost more than \$1 million during the 1974-1975 season, a descent into the red that got worse by the year. Flames ownership responded to their shrinking box office by freezing ticket prices at their 1974-1975 level, hoping to win back wayward customers. The price freeze served primarily to cut the franchise off from much needed revenue. The combination of declining ticket revenue and a measly broadcast media contract put the Flames in a terrible financial position as they tried to keep up with rapidly increasing player salaries. The NHL's personnel-war with the WHA caused professional hockey salaries to increase by an average of fifteen percent each season during the 1970s. By the time of John Wilcox's departure as team president in December 1975, several co-owners had dropped out of the organization, leaving Cousins the club's majority owner. For the remainder of the Flames' tenure in Atlanta, Cousins turned day-to-day control of the organization over to Fletcher and Omni manager Bob Kent.<sup>135</sup>

By December 1976, Cousins and his suddenly small ownership group were having trouble making weekly payroll. Rumors that the Flames would be relocating the next spring were followed by reports that Cousins had sought out financial assistance from Georgia Governor George Busbee, who was a fervent supporter of the franchise. The Governor

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<sup>134</sup> Al Smith and Warren Newman, "Skating on Thin Ice," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 30, 1980, 1D, 15D; Jim Huber and Tom Saladino, *The Babes of Winter*, 83.

<sup>135</sup> Bruce Baake, "Flames to Offer Number of Incentives in 1976," *Atlanta Daily World*, May 25, 1976, 2; Al Smith and Warren Newman, "Skating on Thin Ice," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 30, 1980, 1D, 15D.

responded by spearheading a corporate fundraising campaign. He convinced 13 large Georgia-based companies to purchase \$750,000 in tickets on expense account to help steady the franchise's finances for the remainder of the season. Against the advice of their union, Flames players demonstrated their desire to stay in Atlanta by purchasing \$25,000 in tickets for local charities and offering to accept salary reductions in their off-season negotiations. In an effort to stabilize Cousins' franchise, his fellow NHL owners agreed to forgo the \$2 million in expansion fees that Cousins had yet to pay them, revealing how invested the entire league was in the success of the fledgling southern franchise.<sup>136</sup>

"We had the inkling that Cousins was in trouble because his real estate empire was crumbling," Fan Club co-president Betsy Watkins said, acknowledging that Flames' supporters realized well in advance of the franchise's departure that its future in Atlanta was in jeopardy.<sup>137</sup> Cousins, in fact, spent the late 1970s looking for a buyer for his hockey team. In January 1977, the *Journal* and the *Constitution* reported that Cousins was considering selling the Flames to Miami businessman Earl Thomas for \$5.2 million. Cousins pulled out of the deal when the news broke, fearing that Busbee would end his ongoing season ticket drive if he got the impression that Thomas intended to move the team to Florida. In July 1978, Ted Turner considered buying the Flames but balked at the additional debt Cousins expected him to take on with the purchase. Later that year, actor Glenn Ford made his first of several offers for the team, which he stated publicly he would keep in Atlanta. Nothing ever materialized from the *Blackboard Jungle* star's bids. Cousins regarded Ford's offers as less serious than those that corporate and municipally-

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<sup>136</sup> Alan Truex, "The Ice Age: From Blizzard to Meltdown," *Atlanta Journal*, May 23, 1980, D1; Al Smith and Warren Newman, "Skating on Thin Ice," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 30, 1980, 1D, 15D; Roy M. Blount, "Losersville, U.S.A.," *Sports Illustrated*, March 21, 1977, 78; "Gate Slumping at Half-Million Rate," *Sporting News*, December 18, 1976, 33.

<sup>137</sup> Joe and Betsy Watkins, interview by the author, July 3, 2013, 20-21 transcript.

backed organizations in other cities were starting to make for the franchise. By the time the Flames began what proved to be their final season in Atlanta, ownership groups in northern New Jersey, Dallas, and Calgary were vying publicly for Cousins' attention, leading even casual observers to believe that the club would relocate after the 1979-1980 campaign.<sup>138</sup>

Even as Cousins was shopping around the franchise, the Flames tried to boost their home attendance to attract a local buyer. To this end, the Flames signed U.S. Olympic goalie Jim Craig, whom the club had drafted three years earlier while he starred at Boston University. Craig was one of the marquee names on the "Miracle on Ice" team that had upset the Soviet Union en route to the gold medal at the February 1980 winter games in Lake Placid. Craig made his NHL debut at the Omni on March 1, 1980, one week after ascending the medal stand in upstate New York. Craig's presence in net helped the club draw its first sellout crowd of the season. Members of the Flames Fan Club handed out 8,000 miniature American flags to spectators. Chants of "USA! USA! USA!" reverberated throughout the Omni from the moment Craig came on the ice until the conclusion of the Flames' 4-1 victory over the Colorado Rockies. ABC, the network which carried the "Miracle on Ice," bought the television rights to Craig's Atlanta debut and showed the game nationally.<sup>139</sup>

Though Craig struggled for the remainder of the season, his presence helped the Flames increase their average home attendance from just over 9,000 to just under 10,000 per game. Craig spent a sleepless month with the Flames: responding to constant media requests, receiving

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<sup>138</sup> Vic Dorr, "Flames for Sale? Cousins Says 'No,'" *Atlanta Constitution*, January 5, 1977, 1C; Alex Truex, "Cousins Puts End to Flames Sale Rumor," *Atlanta Journal*, January 7, 1977, 1D; Alan Truex, "Cousins: Flames Not for Sale," *Atlanta Journal*, January 5, 1977, 1D; Alan Truex, "The Ice Age: From Blizzard to Meltdown," *Atlanta Journal*, May 23, 1980, D1; Gary Mueller, "NHL Hockey," *Sporting News*, January 29, 1977, 22.

<sup>139</sup> Tom Tucker, "Craig Debut is Golden," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 2, 1980, D1; Kathy Blumenstock, "The Flame is Still Burning Brightly," *Sports Illustrated*, March 10, 1980, 22; "Craig in the Nets as Flames Tackle 'Home Ice' Dilemma," *Atlanta Journal*, April 25, 1980, 1D; Jim Naughton, "Craig, Olympic Hero, Caught in Dual Role," *New York Times*, March 30, 1980, S6; "This Flame is Red Hot," *Boston Globe*, March 3, 1980, 32.

honors from civic groups in Atlanta and back home in Massachusetts, and jetting around the country to appear on morning programs or in advertisements. All of this left him little time to prepare to play goalie in the NHL. When he did appear with the Flames, he engendered resentment from many teammates, who felt he was displacing the team's standout goalie Dan Bouchard. After the season, the Calgary-bound Flames honored Craig's request for a trade to an American team, where his value as a box-office attraction would be significantly higher. Craig was sent to his hometown Boston Bruins, where he failed to develop into an effective NHL goaltender. He retired from professional hockey three years later at the age of 26.<sup>140</sup>

At the end of the 1979-1980 regular season, Fletcher told his players and the local media that if the Flames drew sellout crowds and won their opening round playoff series against the New York Rangers, the team's ownership group would give them a one-year reprieve from moving. Fans and athletes alike came to regard Fletcher's talk as a cynical motivational and marketing ploy, especially after the franchise announced a 25% hike in ticket prices for the playoffs. The Flames drew large though not capacity crowds to both of their home playoff games. Homemade banners reading "Keep the Flames Burning" hung throughout the arena. After the Rangers eliminated the Flames, Fletcher changed his tune and said he had no idea whether or not the team would stay in Atlanta.<sup>141</sup>

On April 15, 1980, three days after the Flames' elimination from the playoffs, Tom Cousins announced that he was "actively discussing offers involving relocation and sale of the team." Cousins said he had lost \$12 million on the Flames during their eight years in Atlanta,

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<sup>140</sup> "NHL Notes," *Sporting News*, June 14, 1980, 50; Jim Naughton, "Jim Craig: He Reinforces What's Right," *New York Times*, June 8, 1980, S1; Kathy Blumenstock, "The Flame is Still Burning Brightly," *Sports Illustrated*, March 10, 1980, 22; Jim Naughton, "Craig, Olympic Hero, Caught in Dual Role," *New York Times*, March 30, 1980, S6; Tom Tucker, "'Big Mouth' Bouchard Rips Flames Again," *Atlanta Journal*, April 4, 1980, 1D.

<sup>141</sup> Bill Clement, interview by the author, June 26, 2013, 5 transcript; Al Smith, "Flames Not Dead Yet," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 12, 1980, 1C; Tom Tucker, "Mac the Knife is Back," *Atlanta Journal*, March 21, 1980, 1D; Tom Tucker, "Flames Flicker Out, 5-2," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 13, 1980, 1D.

including a record \$2.8 million in the 1979-1980 season. The club had generated just over \$2 million in revenue that season while its expenses were close to \$5 million. Cousins blamed the franchise's financial woes primarily on its inability to secure a lucrative broadcast media contract. Alberta oil speculators Daryl and Byron Seaman emerged quickly as the front-runners to buy the franchise. The Seaman Brothers were working closely with the city of Calgary, which had already won municipal approval to build an \$80 million, 20,000 seat hockey arena as part of its bid for the 1988 Winter Olympics. While negotiating with officials in Calgary, Cousins and team president Bob Kent pursued local buyers, as they had for several years, but to no avail.<sup>142</sup> "We offered the team to the primary sponsors like Delta. We offered to give them the team to keep them here. It just didn't work," Cousins said in 2008.<sup>143</sup>

A "Save the Flames" campaign sprung up in response to Cousins' announcement. The organization tried in vain to put together a group of local investors to purchase a portion of the team. They also held a rally at the club's practice rink in Marietta.<sup>144</sup> As much as anything, the organization demonstrated that the Flames had a corps of devoted fans who were tired of being a "convenient target for everyone's slings and arrows," as Peter Wilson, a member of "Save the Flames" explained in a June 1980 letter to the *Sporting News*.<sup>145</sup>

On May 21, 1980, Cousins announced the sale of the Flames for a league record \$16 million to Vancouver real estate mogul Nelson Skalbania, who was heading an ad hoc investment group that planned to move the club to Calgary. Initially a rival bidder to the

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<sup>142</sup> "Flames' Owner Considers Bids to Sell Hockey Team," *New York Times*, April 17, 1980, B27; Tom Tucker, "Flame Playoff Failure Fuels the Rumor Mill," *Atlanta Journal*, April 14, 1980, 7D; Al Smith and Warren Newman, "Skating on Thin Ice," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, March 30, 1980, 1D, 15D; Tom Tucker, "Flames Put Out the 'For Sale' Sign," *Atlanta Journal*, April 16, 1980, 1D.

<sup>143</sup> Craig Custance, "Old Flame(s)," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, January 23, 2008, 1D.

<sup>144</sup> Joe and Betsy Watkins, interview by the author, July 3, 2013, 19-20; "Flames to Calgary? Fans React," *Sporting News*, May 17, 1980, 60.

<sup>145</sup> "Voice of the Fan," *Sporting News*, June 14, 1980, 4.

Seamans, Skalbania merged his offer with the Brothers' as well as bids by other Calgary-based investors, helping the out-of-towner win the endorsement of the city's municipal leadership. The NHL approved the move quickly, paving the way for the Calgary Flames to begin play in the fall of 1980. Ironically, one week before the announcement, the New York Islanders, the NHL's other 1972 expansion franchise, who had struggled as the early Flames flourished, claimed their first of four consecutive Stanley Cup Championships.<sup>146</sup>

The Flames proved an immediate success in hockey-mad Calgary, drawing some of the league's largest crowds for decades to come at the Saddledome, as the arena was christened. Skalbania retained Cliff Fletcher as general manager, who continued to build consistently winning teams. The steady success cultivated by Fletcher culminated in a Stanley Cup Championship for the franchise in 1989, three years after the departure of the last player who skated in Atlanta. The Flames' success in Calgary was, in certain respects, a defeat for the NHL. The relocation of the Flames to Calgary further concentrated the league in Canada and the northern United States, stymieing the NHL's aspirations to be a genuinely continental league for the first of many times.

Flames players appreciated the enthusiastic support they received in Calgary, but many of them missed Atlanta. "It was very close to perfection for me there in the 70s," Bill Clement said of his time in the city. Clement, who resided near the team's practice rink in Marietta, found the people friendly, appreciated the low cost of living, and took to Georgia's warm weather climate.<sup>147</sup> Calgary, by comparison, lacked many of the big city amenities that players like

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<sup>146</sup> Craig Custance, "Old Flame(s)," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, January 23, 2008, 1D; "Skalbania Buys Flames," *Sporting News*, June 14, 1980, 50; Eric Duhatschek, "Skalbania's New Flame is Calgary," *Sporting News*, October 18, 1980, 30; Tom Tucker, "Kent Denies Story of Bid for Flames," *Atlanta Journal*, April 17, 1980, 1D; Alan Truex, "The Ice Age: From Blizzard to Meltdown," *Atlanta Journal*, May 23, 1980, D1.

<sup>147</sup> Bill Clement, interview by the author, June 26, 2013, 5-6 transcript.

Clement had grown used to in Atlanta, including a hopping nightlife, upscale shopping, and fancy restaurants. The significantly higher taxes that greeted players in Canada also left many of them yearning for Georgia. Many former Flames retained a home in the area or moved back to Georgia when their careers ended, often trading in on their fame to jumpstart small businesses. Former Flames Tim Ecclestone, Eric Vail, and Dan Bouchard all became successful restauranteurs in suburban Atlanta while Willi Plett ran a popular sports-centered theme park in Cherokee County. “Boom Boom” Geoffrion resettled much of his extended family in Atlanta, where he remained a fixture at numerous charity events well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>148</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The failure of professional basketball or professional hockey to build a durable audience in Atlanta during the 1970s was a product of social, cultural, and economic factors which effected all of the new franchises in the suddenly “Major League City.” As this chapter demonstrates, those were not the only or even the primary reasons that the Hawks and Flames could not win over a mass audience in Metropolitan Atlanta. The inability of the Omni’s co-tenants to earn sufficient live, televised, or radio audiences to support Tom Cousins’ continued involvement in the sports business was the result of specific choices made by both franchises. Besides an unwillingness during the Cousins ownership to market the team explicitly to black fans, the Hawks never had a firm grasp on who exactly was going to follow their team in a market with little history of supporting basketball. While the Flames cultivated an “Ice Society” in their early years, the team’s appeal to an audience that consisted primarily of transplants, diehards, and affluent Northsiders was insufficiently broad to support the team as its popularity

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<sup>148</sup> Parton Keese, “Flames Struggling to Thaw Out in Calgary,” *New York Times*, December 14, 1980, S1; Craig Custance, “Old Flame(s),” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, January 23, 2008, 1D; Tom Tucker, “Flames Put Out the ‘For Sale’ Sign,” *Atlanta Journal*, April 16, 1980, 1D; Jack Wilkinson, “An Old Flame,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 26, 1999, 4D.

waned and its owner found himself in difficult financial circumstances. Professional sports may have provided Cousins with something around which to build his multi-purpose arena, but the short-sighted approaches that both of his franchises took to building robust fanbases prevented either club from becoming the institutional foundations he coveted for his MXD.



## EPILOGUE

### **“Loserville No More”: The Legacy of Professional Sports in Atlanta and the Sunbelt’s Frustrating Career in the Major Leagues, 1976-2000**

“I don’t wanna see any more headlines in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, bless their souls, that call Atlanta, ‘Losersville, U.S.A.,” Ted Turner said at the January 1976 press conference he called to announce his purchase of the Atlanta Braves.<sup>149</sup> Turner’s purchase of the Braves in 1976 and subsequent acquisition of the Hawks in 1977 initiated his quarter-century long trusteeship over Atlanta’s “Major League” status. While Atlantans remained mercurial consumers of the city’s professional franchises, the cable television pioneer turned professional sports franchise owner was the primary reason that the city retained its big league baseball and basketball. Pragmatically, the franchises stocked Turner’s TBS and TNT cable networks with dependable and inexpensive programming. At the same time, Turner lost millions of dollars annually on the Braves and Hawks through many lean years in the 1970s and 1980s, demonstrating his civic commitment to a pair of institutions he clearly regarded as more important to the region than did the region’s residents.

As Turner initiated his efforts to rejuvenate Atlanta’s moribund sports scene, the municipal and corporate leadership in a number of other Sunbelt cities were embarking on quests to become “Major League,” just as Atlanta had a decade earlier. Civic elites in rapidly growing cities such as Phoenix, San Diego, and Tampa believed, like their predecessors in Atlanta, that

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<sup>149</sup> Robert Ashley Fields, *Take Me Out to the Crowd: Ted Turner and the Atlanta Braves* (Huntsville, AL: Strode Publishers, 1977), 34.

by making municipal investments in professional sports, they would provide their communities with a wellspring of unity and prestige. Residents of these metropolitan areas responded to their new stadiums and teams in the 1980s and 1990s much like Atlantans did to theirs during the 1960s and 1970s. Few of the franchises established in Sunbelt cities during the last quarter of the century became objects of civic devotion. In most instances, they drew collective shrugs that calcified quickly into permanent postures, except when these teams were competing for a league championship.

The failures of Tampa, San Diego, and Phoenix to become hotbeds of support for their new professional sports franchises stem from many of the same reasons that the teams in Metropolitan Atlanta failed to ignite durable local passions. In each instance, civic boosters engaged in an unsuccessful, top-down effort to construct a sense of community through professional sports. Much like Atlanta, population growth in these emerging metropolises skewed heavily toward the suburbs, which circumscribed the appeal of live events held primarily in the center city. Moreover, much of the population growth in Sunbelt cities came as a result of the migration of people from other parts of the country. Newcomers who were inclined to follow spectator sports brought with them loyalties to far-away professional franchises that did not translate into consistent support for the teams representing their new cities. At the same time, locals in each of these regions had developed distinct spectator and participatory sporting cultures in the absence of the big leagues. The pre-major league sporting culture in each of these Sunbelt cities remained popular long after the arrival of the big leagues. Furthermore, many of the activities that appealed to locals, particularly outdoor activities that took advantage of the Sunbelt's balmy weather, proved popular among newcomers as well, pulling even more potential discretionary dollars away from the new professional sports franchises. Even the residents of

newly “Major League” cities that were inclined to support their new franchises were frequently frustrated by their team’s poor performance. In most instances, the owners of new Sunbelt teams were well-heeled but inexperienced at managing professional franchises. Their managerial ineptitude ensured that most new Sunbelt sports franchises developed reputations for on-the-field futility that exaggerated the social and cultural factors already limiting their local appeal.

Atlanta’s experience as a “Major League City” proved to be far from anomalous. This epilogue will demonstrate how other Sunbelt cities followed Atlanta’s pioneering path into the major leagues and how the residents of these metropolitan areas responded to their new franchises with similar apathy. It will also show how Atlanta has negotiated its status as a “major league city” since the mid-1970s. Civic elites have remained committed to the idea that professional sports endow the city with cultural prestige but, beginning in the 1990s, municipal investments in professional sports have become more circumscribed in response to the region’s volatile support for the teams. Taxpayers and political elites in Metropolitan Atlanta, particularly those in Atlanta proper, have become increasingly leery of making grand civic expenditures in professional sports stadiums, holding out on making such deals unless significant concessions were made by the project’s boosters.

### **San Diego**

The making of “major league” San Diego has two corresponding creation stories: one which involves its civic elites and one which involves a single-minded but cash-poor sports enthusiast. Neither quest to make San Diego a city with a vibrant professional sporting scene succeeded. In the early 1960s, San Diego, like Atlanta, seemed readymade for professional sports expansion. Buoyed by a booming aerospace industry and the steady presence of the U.S. Navy, San Diego County’s 1.1 million residents enjoyed a high per-capita income and the

purchasing power of their dollars was among the best in the nation. Despite the significant amount of discretionary income available in the region, professional sports proved no match for San Diego's robust leisure culture, which was built around its gorgeous weather and 70 miles of beaches. Boating, surfing, and golf were yearlong past times for San Diego's middle and upper income residents. For those inclined toward spectator sports, the region's athletics calendar included professional golf tournaments, minor league baseball, and San Diego State football, which ranked among the nation's top small college programs. Nevertheless, a number of municipal elites wanted San Diego to possess leisure amenities like those available in Los Angeles and San Francisco. Civic boosters' efforts to make San Diego "major league" followed closely on the heels of Atlanta's and met with similar results.<sup>150</sup>

Much like in Atlanta, a prominent sportswriter helped kickstart San Diego's push for professional sports. *San Diego Union* sports editor Jack Murphy played a decisive role in organizing the civic elite's efforts to make theirs a "Major League City." In 1961, he persuaded hotelier Barron Hilton to move his AFL Chargers south after one season in Los Angeles, which had been an NFL stronghold since the 1940s. Initially, the San Diego Chargers played in Balboa Stadium, a World-War I era municipal park which they shared with San Diego State. Murphy convinced the dormant San Diego County Stadium Authority to seek public financing for a multipurpose facility capable of hosting not only professional football but also MLB, which city leaders had already started pursuing. The Stadium Authority put a \$27.75 million bond initiative before county taxpayers in November 1965. Stadium boosters, which included virtually all of the city's business, corporate, and media establishment, mounted a well-financed campaign on behalf of the plan, which passed with 72 percent of the vote. In August 1967, San Diego

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<sup>150</sup> Richard W. Johnson, "A Playground Divided," *Sports Illustrated*, November 8, 1971, 32-43.

Stadium, soon to be renamed Jack Murphy Stadium, debuted as the home of the NFL Chargers and the San Diego State Aztecs football team.<sup>151</sup>

The Chargers proved to be a well-run but only occasionally well-loved organization. They have had three owners: Barron Hilton (1961-1966), insurance executive Gene Klein (1966-1984), and construction magnate Alex Spanos (1984-present). The team enjoyed several periods of great success, including the 1960s, early 1980s, mid 1990s, and mid-2000s, which brought about upswings in local support. In general, though, San Diegans proved fickle in their affections for the Chargers, leading to several stretches in the 1970s and late 1980s when many home games were blacked out on local television because they failed to sell out in advance. Current owner Alex Spanos blamed aging Jack Murphy Stadium for his team's lack of support. He threatened to move the team on several occasions beginning in the late 1980s. The generation of San Diegans succeeding the ones that made their city "Major League" refused to make a similar investment in a modern football stadium. In November 2016, San Diego County voters turned down a ballot initiative which would have provided financing for a new Chargers stadium, setting in motion the already league-approved relocation of the franchise to Los Angeles for the 2017 season.<sup>152</sup>

San Diego's path to MLB proved swift but local support for the team has proven tenuous from the start. With a modern stadium in place, San Diego was in an excellent position to secure an MLB team. Banker Arnholt Smith, the owner of San Diego's minor league baseball club, paid a \$10.2 million expansion fee for an NL franchise which began play in 1969. Smith's San

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> "The Owners," *Sports Illustrated*, September 13, 1993, 40-44; "Game Over," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, January 12, 2017, 1; Michael MacCambridge, *America's Game*, 161; William Mack, "Another View From the Top," *Sports Illustrated*, May 9, 1988. Accessed on March 2, 2017: <https://www.si.com/vault/1988/05/09/117615/another-view-from-the-top-just-four-years-ago-gene-klein-fled-the-nfl-and-lit-into-racing-with-a-daring-strategy-and-a-big-bankroll-now-hes-americas-most-successful-owner-of-thoroughbreds>.

Diego Padres proved to be an unmitigated disaster. From the outset, the Padres played as poorly as they drew. The notoriously stingy Smith maintained one of the league's smallest payrolls as well as its worst record, finishing in last place in each of the five seasons that he owned the club (1969-1973). During that same stretch, the Padres finished last in attendance each season, never drawing more than 644,273 fans annually to Jack Murphy Stadium.<sup>153</sup> By 1972, Smith was weighing offers for the club from investors in a half dozen North American cities. At the time, Smith's U.S. National Bank was under investigation by the Securities and Exchange Commission and Internal Revenue Service for embezzlement and tax evasion. In 1979, Smith was convicted and sentenced to three years in prison for tax fraud, six years after U.S. National Bank became the largest bank failure in American history.<sup>154</sup>

The Padres nearly moved to Washington, D.C. in 1974 after Smith agreed to a \$12 million deal with Mid-Atlantic grocer Ray Danzansky. A last minute matching offer by McDonalds' executive Ray Kroc kept the Padres in San Diego. Kroc's family strove to turn around the franchise's fortunes on the field and at the box office for the next 16 years with some success. Under Kroc's ownership, the Padres fielded an often respectable team, even winning an NL Pennant in 1984. The Padres' attendance improved briefly, ascending to the middle of the pack in the NL before cycling back toward the bottom even when the team played well. In 1990, the Kroc family sold the Padres to a group of 14 investors headed by television executive and future Boston Red Sox owner Tom Werner. The stability created in the organization by the Kroc family eroded soon thereafter. The product on the field deteriorated as did fan support, leading majority owner Werner and his partners to make drastic cost-cutting measures. In 1992 and 1993, the Padres engaged in a notorious "fire sale" of their roster, trading off virtually all of their

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<sup>153</sup> Richard W. Johnson, "A Playground Divided," *Sports Illustrated*, November 8, 1971, 32-43.

<sup>154</sup> "The Owners," *Sports Illustrated*, September 13, 1993, 40-44.

marquee players. Season ticket holders filed a class-action lawsuit against the team, claiming that the Padres had deceived them in an off-season letter asserting that the team was going to make every effort to keep its remaining high-caliber players. The parties settled out of court, resulting in a partial refund for season ticket holders. In 1994, Werner sold his majority stake in the Padres, capping off the frustrating first quarter century of MLB in San Diego.<sup>155</sup>

A sports enthusiast and laundromat owner named Bob Breitbard engaged in his own quixotic effort to make San Diego “Major League.” Working outside the civic elite, Breitbard brought professional basketball and hockey to San Diego, neither of which gained a foothold in the city. In 1965, Breitbard paid \$25,000 for a franchise in the Western Hockey League. Unable to convince municipal leaders to build him a hockey rink, Breitbard erected the \$6 million, 14,000 seat San Diego Sports Arena with bonds backed privately by the Union Oil Company. The minor league San Diego Gulls hockey team began play at the new building in 1966, making them the first professional hockey team in Southern California. In 1967, Breitbard borrowed an additional \$1.75 million to purchase an NBA expansion franchise to join the Gulls at the new arena. Just like the Gulls, the San Diego Rockets basketball team proved short-lived in the city. The shockingly overextended Breitbard could not convince enough San Diegans to patronize games at the Sports Arena to make either club financially viable. In 1971, Breitbard sought tax relief from the city, which had not only built the Padres and Chargers a stadium but was providing them with money to spend on advertising. When the city refused to subsidize Breitbard’s teams, he sold the Rockets for \$5.6 million to a group of investors who moved the team to Houston. The Gulls simply went out of business.<sup>156</sup> Subsequent investors have tried unsuccessfully to make a go of it with both professional hockey and basketball in San Diego. A

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<sup>155</sup> Ray Kennedy, “Who Are These Guys,” *Sports Illustrated*, January 31, 1977, 54.

<sup>156</sup> Richard W. Johnson, “A Playground Divided,” *Sports Illustrated*, November 8, 1971, 32-43.

Canadian entrepreneur named Peter Graham brought ABA and WHA franchises to the city briefly during the mid-1970s. The NBA returned to San Diego in the late 1970s in the form of the Clippers, who had relocated from Buffalo in 1978. The Clippers lasted six unsuccessful and unprofitable seasons at the San Diego Sports Arena before moving to Los Angeles in 1984. Neither the NBA nor the NHL has since placed a franchise in San Diego. With the loss of the NFL Chargers in 2017, San Diego stands as the largest market in the United States with just one major professional sports franchise.<sup>157</sup>

### **Tampa Bay**

The Tampa Bay region, with its massive population of northern transplants, agreeable climate, and ambitious civic leadership, has succeeded in luring the NFL, MLB, and NHL to the cities of Tampa and St. Petersburg. Yet none of Tampa Bay's franchises have won over a sizeable or resilient enough audience to be characterized as a treasured local institution.

Investors in Tampa-St. Petersburg began actively pursuing an NFL franchise in 1970, when a group of Hillsborough County business leaders met with New England Patriots owner Billy Sullivan to discuss purchasing his moribund franchise. In 1972, a similar group met with NFL commissioner Pete Rozelle to campaign for an expansion franchise in Tampa. That same year, Baltimore Colts owner Carroll Rosenbloom played three of his team's exhibition games at Tampa Stadium, a no-frills, 46,000 seat facility that the city had built in the mid-1960s to serve as a home for the University of Tampa's football team. Rosenbloom sought unsuccessfully to win league approval to relocate the Colts to Hillsborough County. Tampa's aggressive pursuit of professional football paid off soon thereafter, when the NFL decided to place a new franchise in

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<sup>157</sup> Ed Willes, *The Rebel League*, 6-7; Jerry McGee, "San Diego Sports Icon Bob Breitbard Dies at 91," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, May 17, 2010. Accessed on January 3, 2016: <http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-visionary-sportsman-bob-breitbard-dies-champions-2010may17-story.html>.



the rapidly growing metropolitan area for the 1976 season, precluding the expansion of the short-lived but well-financed World Football League (WFL) into the region. Tax attorney Hugh Culverhouse, one of the region's early pro football boosters, paid a \$16 million expansion fee for the franchise that became the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. In preparation for the Buccaneers, the City of Tampa spent \$13 million renovating its municipal stadium, more than three times the original cost of the facility, expanding its capacity by more than 27,000 seats.<sup>158</sup>

Culverhouse made an extensive survey of the NFL's recent expansion into Atlanta, hoping to avoid the pitfalls of the Buccaneers' poorly performing and drawing predecessor in the Southeast. Rather than relying on friends and family to run the team, Culverhouse worked closely with NFL commissioner Rozelle to find suitable candidates to fill his front-office. He interviewed dozens of coaches, players, and general managers to gain an understanding of the league's inner workings. He hired an up-and-coming league insider named Ron Wolf to run the team's personnel department and the University of Southern California's legendary John McKay to coach the team. Additionally, Culverhouse built the Buccaneers an office complex and training center to ensure that they did not have to struggle for space and practice time at a shared, publicly owned facility like the Falcons had at Atlanta Stadium. Culverhouse's assumption that the Falcons' problems were primarily managerial rather than a product of both the team's leadership and the particulars of the Atlanta marketplace proved incorrect. In spite of his best efforts, the Buccaneers proved to be one of the NFL's worst drawing and worst performing teams during the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Mirroring the situation in Georgia, college football proved to be a greater beneficiary of Florida's population explosion than the professional game. While Floridians flocked northward on fall Saturdays to watch the emerging

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<sup>158</sup> David Harris, *The League*, 109-111, 132-135, 157-159; Jon Morgan, *Glory for Sale*, 102; John Vrooman, "Franchise Free Agency in Professional Sports Leagues," *Southern Economic Journal* 64.1 (1997), 209.

national powers at the University of Florida in Gainesville and Florida State University in Tallahassee, Tampa Stadium remained largely vacant on Sundays, leading to local television blackouts of dozens of Buccaneers home games during the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>159</sup>

In 1989, Culverhouse met with government officials from Sacramento, Baltimore, and St. Louis to discuss moving his team to their cities. In addition, the Buccaneers owner spoke with officials in Orlando about hosting three of his teams' eight annual home games in their municipally owned stadium, the Citrus Bowl. Health problems prevented Culverhouse from proceeding with any relocation plans. In 1992, he turned control of the team over to a group of trustees as he sought cancer treatment. When Culverhouse died in 1994, his estate put the franchise up for sale and talk of the Buccaneers' relocation commenced immediately. Eventual buyer Malcolm Glazer, a shopping mall baron who resided seasonally in Tampa, seemed an unlikely candidate to move the team, but he held out the possibility of relocating the Buccaneers if local taxpayers refused to approve funding for a new football stadium. In 1996, Tampa voters narrowly approved a half-cent, 30-year "community investment tax," a Trojan horse sales tax that paid for the \$168.5 million in bonds required for stadium construction as well as a range of other municipal projects totaling up to \$2.7 billion. Polling in the weeks leading up to the vote indicated that Tampa voters would have turned down the ballot initiative if it had been focused exclusively on the football stadium.<sup>160</sup>

Tampa Bay's aspirations for MLB have proven similarly expensive and no more successful upon its eventual arrival. In an effort to lure an MLB team, the city of St.

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<sup>159</sup> Ray Kennedy, "Who Are These Guys," *Sports Illustrated*, January 31, 1977, 50.

<sup>160</sup> Vito Stellino, "NFL Owners Love the Stadium," *Sporting News*, October 9, 1989, 42; Nick Pugliese, "Mr. C," *Sporting News*, September 5, 1994, 6; Paul Attner, "Seeing is Deceiving," *Sporting News*, September 23, 1996, 28; Costas Spirou and Larry Bennett, *It's Hardly Sportin': Stadiums, Neighborhoods, and the New Chicago* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003), 20; Jon Morgan, *Glory for Sale*, 310; Jeff Testerman, "We Paid for It; It Paid Off," *St. Petersburg Times*, January 25, 2001, 1.

Petersburg built the \$130 million Suncoast Dome, which opened in 1990 without a tenant. Civic leaders in the Tampa Bay region came close to convincing both the San Francisco Giants and Chicago White Sox to take up residency at the dome, but a largely privately financed stadium deal in San Francisco and a largely publicly financed one in Chicago convinced the owners of both MLB clubs to stay in their home markets. Eight years after its opening, the Suncoast Dome (by then, Tropicana Field) became home to an MLB club, the expansion Tampa Bay Devil Rays. The Tampa Bay MLB club has long proven to be a box-office loser, drawing some of the league's most meagre crowds and television deals even when the team performs well. The Rays' transplant-filled market ensures that when clubs from New York, Boston, or Chicago come to town, fans of the visiting team almost always outnumber those cheering for the hometown Rays. Rumors of the Rays leaving town have existed for nearly as long as the franchise.<sup>161</sup>

The NHL, too, has tried to crack the Tampa Bay market but with limited success. The league renewed its ambitions to expand across the Sunbelt in 1990 when it voted to award a franchise to Tampa-St. Petersburg. Expanding into Florida proved an immediate boondoggle. The NHL nearly pulled Tampa's bid when the new franchisees fell four months behind on the first of two \$22.5 million expansion fee payments. Absentee majority owner Takahasi Okubo, a Japanese resort baron who never saw the team play in person, promised the league that his franchise would sell 10,000 advanced season tickets and put together a public-private deal to build a hockey arena in the region. In fact, the Tampa Bay Lightning, as they were named, sold barely 3,500 season tickets for its first campaign, which the team played at the Florida State

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<sup>161</sup> Frank Jozsa, *Major League Baseball Expansions and Relocations*, 37; "Which Expansion Team Has the Brighter Future," *Sports Illustrated*, April 20, 1998, 28; E.M. Swift, "Hey Fans, Sit on It," *Sports Illustrated*, May 15, 2000, 38; "Baseball Panel Backs Phoenix, Tampa Bay," *Arizona Republic*, March 8, 1995, A1, A16.

Fairground Exposition Hall, a converted livestock exhibition barn. The team spent the next three seasons (1993-1996) at the Suncoast Dome, which had yet to acquire an MLB team. Okubo refused to invest in a scouting department for the Lightning, making them the only team in major professional sports without one. Not surprisingly, the team performed terribly, missing the playoffs in 9 of its first 10 seasons.<sup>162</sup>

The Tampa Stadium Authority, in the meantime, had floated \$86 million in municipal bonds to help pay for a hockey arena. The omnibus sales tax that funded the Buccaneers' new stadium also provided the public financing for the downtown hockey arena, the Ice Palace. In spite of Okubo's frugality and the public support they received for their arena, the Lightning managed to lose \$102 million between 1992 and 1999, making them professional sports' most indebted franchise. The Lightning had only a modest television deal and were one of the few teams in the league that regularly drew fewer than 10,000 spectators during the 1990s. Okubo sold the team in 1998 to a South Florida businessman named Art Williams for \$130 million. Williams, who tried to introduce Floridians to live hockey by simply giving away 100,000 tickets, proved to be the first of a succession of new owners or ownership groups that have possessed the Lightning since the late 1990s. Despite frequent ownership changes, the Lightning have stabilized into a common market position for Sunbelt NHL teams. The club's continued existence is supported by a rabid, affluent season-ticket holding base which numbers about 10,000. Much like in Atlanta in the 1970s, few locals outside its zealous base pay much attention to the team. The price of NHL tickets has increased well beyond the rate of inflation since the 1970s, enabling clubs like the Lightning to survive almost exclusively on their ticket sales. Even so, the Lightning are supported by one of the

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<sup>162</sup> Al Morganti, "A Stormy Start," *Sporting News*, November 15, 1991, 38; Stan Fischler, *Cracked Ice: An Inside Look at the NHL in Turmoil* (New York: McGraw, 2000), 309-313.

league's most meagre revenue streams. In 2014-2015, Lightning tickets averaged \$45.13, well-below the league median of \$62.18.<sup>163</sup>

## **Phoenix**

Well ahead of Phoenix's concerted civic efforts in the 1980s and 1990s to become "major league," the city secured a professional basketball team. In 1968, a dozen-headed local investment group paid \$2 million for an NBA franchise. Many league observers questioned the move, regarding Metropolitan Phoenix, which had just cracked the one million resident plateau, as too small, remote, and insufficiently urban to support major professional sports. These observers were soon proven wrong, as Maricopa County became an NBA hotbed. Unlike many Sunbelt expansion teams, the Suns proved to be a well-run organization. In 1968, the franchise hired twenty-nine year-old Chicago Bulls junior executive Jerry Colangelo as GM. Colangelo spent the next 35 years in the position, transforming the Suns into a fixture in the Western Conference playoffs and the Suns' perpetually filled arena, the Arizona Veterans Memorial Coliseum, into one of the loudest buildings in professional sports. Colangelo ended up leading an investment group which purchased the team in 1987, ensuring its stability into the next century. Beyond their exemplary leadership, the Suns benefitted greatly from a lack of local competition. While the Atlanta and San Diego markets crowded rapidly, the Suns had two decades to establish themselves in the local marketplace before they faced competition from other big league teams in the 1980s and 1990s. The Suns' strong management and ability to

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid; Al Morganti, "A Stormy Start," *Sporting News*, November 15, 1991, 38; E.M. Swift, "Hey Fans, Sit on It," *Sports Illustrated*, May 15, 2000, 38.

build a robust fanbase over many years in a one-professional sport market account in large part for the success of professional basketball in Phoenix relative to Atlanta and San Diego.<sup>164</sup>

Nevertheless, the steady success of the Suns franchise has proven anomalous in the Metropolitan Phoenix professional sports market. For the most part, the “Valley of the Sun” has struggled as an MLB, NHL, and NFL market in the decades since their arrival in the 1980s and 1990s. Like many other Sunbelt cities, Phoenix’s disappointing career as a pro sports town followed decades of determined effort by civic boosters to make their city “major league.” Public officials and private boosters in Maricopa County started working closely in the early 1970s to bring professional football to the Valley. Phoenix made a serious bid for a 1976 NFL expansion team, but league insiders regarded Arizona State’s then 50,000 seat Sun Devil Stadium, the prospective home of a Phoenix-area team, as less NFL ready than either Seattle’s new taxpayer-financed dome or Tampa’s recently expanded municipal stadium. The apparent inadequacy of Sun Devil Stadium for the NFL nudged forward a proposed 20,000 seat expansion, which was already in the works to accommodate emerging football power Arizona State’s growing fanbase. Arizona State’s newly attractive stadium brought a series of professional football suitors to the region during the 1980s. Between 1983 and 1985, Sun Devil Stadium served as the home field of Phoenix’s first professional football team, the Arizona Wranglers of the short-lived United States Football League (USFL). With no forthcoming plans for NFL expansion, civic boosters in the Valley courted several franchises that were then considering relocating. In January 1984, Phoenix businessman Anthony Nicoli came to an agreement with Baltimore Colts owner Robert Irsay to buy the team for \$50 million, but a public

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<sup>164</sup> Bob Logan, “Colangelo Has Suns Climbing for Summit,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 23, 1976, B3; “Jerry Colangelo,” *Arizona Republic*, May 12, 1995, BB2; Joe Gilmartin, “Suns’ Colangelo NBA Executive of the Year,” *Sporting News*, May 16, 1981, 46.

relations backlash caused Irsay to back out of the deal. Two months later, Irsay moved his team to Indianapolis instead, sneaking them out of Maryland in the middle of the night with a fleet of out-of-state Mayflower moving vans. In 1985, Phoenix went through another very public franchise relocation drama, as Philadelphia Eagles owner Leonard Tose failed to win league approval to move his team to Arizona.<sup>165</sup>

The NFL finally came to Maricopa County in 1988 when St. Louis Cardinals owner Bill Bidwill convinced his fellow executives to support his bid to relocate to Sun Devil Stadium, three years after he first announced his attentions to move his franchise to Arizona. Bidwill, who had long clashed with St. Louis officials over his shared municipal stadium, soon became disenchanted with Sun Devil Stadium, which he shared with Arizona State. The Cardinals drew poorly from the start, leading to local television blackouts of their almost never sold out games. Arizonans, who were used to low-cost amenities and entertainments, balked at paying an average of \$45 per ticket, nearly one-third higher than the league's average, during the Cardinals' first season in the desert. Locals accustomed to attending Arizona State's night games at Sun Devil Stadium were hesitant to attend the day games that the NFL required for the majority of the Cardinals' home schedule. Those inclined to spend an afternoon at Sun Devil Stadium frequently left early to avoid the scorching sun that enveloped the field's largely exposed seating. When the Cardinals did draw well, it was often the result of visiting fans. Large numbers of transplants who lived in the area showed up to Cardinals games to cheer on their hometown teams from Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia. Additionally, inexpensive flights from

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<sup>165</sup> David Harris, *The League*, 132, 157, 208, 562-5; John F. Steadman, *From Colts to Ravens: A Behind the Scenes Look at Baltimore Professional Football* (Baltimore: Tidewater, 1997), 6-7, 217; Michael MacCambridge, *America's Game*, 354.

Dallas, Denver, and San Francisco ensured that the crowds at Sun Devil Stadium were often the domain of the visiting team.<sup>166</sup>

Bidwill threatened to move the Cardinals out of Arizona on several occasions. He finally earned public support for a new, football-only stadium in November 2000 in a referendum put forth by the newly-created, state-run Arizona Sports and Tourism Authority. Fifty-two percent of Maricopa County voters approved a rental-car tax to support construction of a \$455 million domed stadium in Glendale, a bedroom community in Phoenix's West Valley. \$154.5 million of the price tag was paid for by the for-profit University of Phoenix, who purchased the naming rights for the building, which opened in 2006.<sup>167</sup>

Jerry Colangelo proved to be the driving force behind the arrival of both the MLB and NHL in Arizona, bringing organizational experience and stability to both franchises, baseball's Arizona Diamondbacks and hockey's Phoenix Coyotes. The trusteeship over both projects taken on by Colangelo, who has long cultivated a reputation as an above-the-fray, force for continuity within Arizona's often transient business community, ensured the support of Maricopa County's municipal leadership for both ventures. Despite the prominent role that Colangelo and his associates played in bringing both franchises to the region, neither team has proven a durable local draw.

Colangelo was far from the first person to bring high-level baseball to Arizona. Baseball had long been a popular spectator sport in the region. Since 1947, a number of MLB teams have held their spring training exercises in Arizona, forming the pre-season "Cactus League" in 1952. At the time that Colangelo's group starting seeking an MLB franchise, the Cactus League hosted

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<sup>166</sup> Jon Morgan, *Glory for Sale*, 22-23, 158; Frank Jozsa, *Football Fortunes*, 61-62; John F. Steadman, *From Colts to Ravens*, 24, 260; Michael MacCambridge, *America's Game*, 354.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid; Jon Morgan, *Glory for Sale*, 22-23, 158; Frank Jozsa, *Football Fortunes*, 61-62; John F. Steadman, *From Colts to Ravens*, 24, 260.



14 of MLB's 28 teams each February and March. Arizona State has been a national college baseball power since the mid-1960s, appearing in 22 College World Series and winning five national championships. Considering its baseball pedigree, Phoenix seemed like a surefire site for the MLB expansions that were being proposed in the late 1980s, just as the metropolitan area's population reached 2 million.<sup>168</sup>

Martin Stone, the owner of the San Francisco Giants' minor league affiliate in Phoenix, began a public pursuit of an MLB franchise in 1987, seeking out municipal financing for a downtown stadium to lure a team to Arizona. Initially, Stone tried to make a deal with Phoenix Cardinals owner Bill Bidwill to join forces in pursuit of a multipurpose dome, but Bidwill chose instead to sign a lease at Sun Devil Stadium. Phoenix mayor Terry Goddard continued to support Stone's domed stadium plan and helped to bring a bond initiative on its behalf before city voters in October 1989. More than 60 percent of Phoenicians voted against the plan, which would have used a property tax increase, a highly unpopular funding mechanism in any situation, to finance a \$100 million dome for a team that did not yet exist. The vote prevented Phoenix from making a serious bid for the round of MLB expansion that granted Denver and Miami franchises for the 1993 season. In 1990, the Arizona State Legislature made any future attempt to finance a stadium significantly easier by granting the five-member Maricopa County Board of Supervisors the right to raise sales taxes .25 percent without a referendum if any municipality in the county acquired an MLB team. At the time, this statute received little attention, but in a few years it became wildly controversial.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Rick Thompson, "A History of the Cactus League," *Spring Training Magazine*, March 1989. Accessed on June 17, 2016: [springtrainingmagazine.com/history4.html#cactus](http://springtrainingmagazine.com/history4.html#cactus); Gary Rausch, "The Cactus League Is a Major League Tourist Attraction in Arizona," *Chicago Tribune*, February 26, 1989, M23.

<sup>169</sup> Dean Baim, "Sports Stadiums as 'Wise Investments': An Evaluation," *Heartland Policy Study* 32, Nov 26, 1990, 15-16.

When word spread that MLB planned another round of expansion for the late 1990s, a group of baseball boosters, including Phoenix sports attorney Joe Garagiola, Jr and Maricopa County Supervisor Jim Bruner coalesced around Colangelo. In 1993, the Suns owner proceeded to create Arizona Baseball, Inc., an organization created to submit an expansion proposal to MLB and raise \$125 million for the anticipated expansion franchise fee. As president of Arizona Baseball, Inc., Colangelo took on the responsibility of negotiating any future stadium deals with local municipalities. Arizona Baseball, Inc.'s proposal was received enthusiastically by MLB in 1995. Greater Phoenix was a rapidly growing market with a long history of supporting baseball. Arizona Baseball, Inc. was a well-financed operation which had secured investments from more than two-dozen of the region's top corporate leaders. The organization's bid was also buoyed by strong endorsements from the well-connected Colangelo's close friends: league commissioner Bud Selig and Chicago White Sox owner Jerry Reinsdorf. In March 1995, MLB awarded Arizona Baseball, Inc. an expansion franchise, which would be named the Arizona Diamondbacks and begin play in 1998.<sup>170</sup>

The greatest drama related to Arizona Baseball, Inc.'s efforts to lure MLB came in early 1994 when the contentious debate surrounding the stadium sales tax reached the Maricopa County Board of Supervisors. Approval of the .25 percent sales tax to raise \$238 million for stadium construction required only a simple majority of the five-member board, leading to a contentious debate over the measure which won a 3-1 majority with one recusal. In 1995, Maricopa County broke ground on a domed baseball stadium that came to be known as Bank One Ballpark. Bank One paid \$140 million for the naming rights to the Diamondbacks' stadium,

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<sup>170</sup> "Baseball Panel Backs Phoenix, Tampa Bay," *Arizona Republic*, March 8, 1995, A1, A16; "DBacks Ownership a Mixed Bag," *Arizona Republic*, March 30, 1998, C33; Richard Obert, "Floating on Air, Colangelo Readies Big Party Today," *Arizona Republic*, March 11, 1995, C1.

following a pattern Colangelo helped initiate in 1989 by orchestrating the sale of the Suns' arena's naming rights to America West Airlines. Support for the measure had severe consequences for all three "yes" voters. Sales tax supporter Ed King lost his reelection bid to an anti-tax candidate while an affirmative vote derailed a nascent congressional bid by Jim Bruner, who had in fact driven a hard bargain with Colangelo on the terms of stadium financing. Sales tax supporter Mary Rose Wilcox suffered, by far, the most serious consequences. More than three years after the vote, a mentally ill man who opposed the tax shot and wounded Wilcox in the back as she left an August 1997 Board of Supervisors meeting. The assailant, Larry Naman, had been preoccupied with the stadium tax issue for years, an obsession stoked by several venomous local talk radio programs that had lambasted all three "yes" voting Supervisors since the day they supported the measure.<sup>171</sup>

With a franchise and a stadium deal in place, the Colangelo organization proceeded to build a top-notch player-personnel and marketing organization for the Diamondbacks. As a result, the franchise enjoyed a great deal of success in their early seasons, finishing in the top half in NL attendance in each of their first five campaigns (1998-2002), which also corresponded with their greatest period of success. The franchise secured a great deal of early fan interest by cultivating a "family friendly" stadium environment, keeping ticket prices below the league average and allowing fans to pack lunches to bring to the ballpark. Just as importantly, the team invested heavily in free agents, building a highly competitive team which culminated in a 2001 World Series championship. The Diamondbacks' "win now" approach faltered soon after 2001.

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<sup>171</sup> "County Close to Deal on Ballpark"; *Arizona Republic*, January 9, 1994, A1; David Schwartz and Eric Miller, "Negotiators Strike Deal on Big-League Ballpark," *Arizona Republic*, January 15, 1994, A1; "Decision Cost Jim Bruner His Dream of Serving as U.S. Congressman"; Mike McCloy, "Supervisor Is Shot," *Arizona Republic*, August 14, 1997, A1, A12; William Hermann, "Suspect: Tax Spurred Shooting," *Arizona Republic*, August 14, 1997, A1, A12; Mike McCloy, "Wilcox Snags 50 Tickets for Opening," *Arizona Republic*, March 31, 1998, A1; Mike McCloy, "Guy has a Gun," *Arizona Republic*, August 15, 1997, A1; Frank Fitzpatrick, "Stadium Issues Can Explode: Take Phoenix," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 13, 1999, E1.

As the more lucrative back ends of free agent contracts approached, the team traded away many of its best players, claiming that it was unable to afford the payments because of their small television contract and affordable ticket prices relative to major market teams. In the years since their lone championship, the Diamondbacks have yet to reach the heights of their early years but have often fielded a competitive team, earning four additional post-season appearances. Despite this success, the Diamondbacks have not retained their strong local support in a market that shares many similarities to Atlanta, including its high percentage of transplants, warm climate, and highly decentralized population. Both the Atlanta and Arizona franchises have long promoted their “family-friendly” stadium environments but, in both cases, this seems to have done little to ensure steady attendance figures. Since 2004, the Diamondbacks have failed to finish in the top half in NL attendance and maintain one of MLB’s smallest local television deals despite Phoenix’s status as the nation’s 11<sup>th</sup> largest metropolitan area.<sup>172</sup>

Jerry Colangelo also played a prominent role in bringing the NHL to Arizona, but soon receded to the background of the franchise, which has teetered on the brink of bankruptcy since its arrival in the Valley. Whether it was a product of his hubris or his widely publicized sense of noblesse oblige for his adopted hometown, Colangelo regarded himself as the connective tissue between metropolitan Phoenix, whose full potential as a professional sports marketplace, he believed, remained unexploited, and the corridors of power in the major leagues. In December 1995, the Suns owner took the lead in a group of local investors that purchased the NHL’s Winnipeg Jets, sparking an outcry among hockey

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<sup>172</sup> Ken Rosenthal, “All Arizona Has to Do Now, Right Now, Is Win,” *The Sporting News*, March 12, 2001, 49; Nick Piccoro, “Jerry Colangelo’s Shadow Remains Prominent Over Diamondbacks,” *AZCentral.com*, September 27, 2014. Accessed on June 3, 2016: <https://www.azcentral.com/story/sports/mlb/diamondbacks/2014/09/27/jerry-colangelos-shadow-remains-prominent-diamondbacks/16344607/>.

fans across North America who decried the movement of professional hockey away from its traditional Canadian hotbeds in favor of potentially lucrative but hockey-illiterate markets. Conversely, many NHL officials, including Commissioner Gary Bettman, were enthusiastic supporters of the move, which they believed would help the league further establish itself in the Sunbelt. The Phoenix Coyotes, as the franchise was rechristened, took up residency initially in America West Arena, the home of the Phoenix Suns, before moving in 2003 to the \$220 million Glendale Arena, which was financed by the residents of the West Valley city. The Coyotes failed to turn a profit in each of their first 10 seasons, leading Colangelo's group to sell the team in 2006 to Phoenix-area trucking magnate Jerry Moyes. After three years of financial losses, Moyes tried to sell the team to Blackberry executive Jim Balsillie, who intended to move the Coyotes to his hometown of Hamilton, Ontario. NHL owners voted 26-0 against the move, fearing that a departure from Phoenix would once again signal the league's retreat from its aspirations for continent-wide appeal. Instead, the NHL itself purchased the team from Moyes, who had declared bankruptcy. For four seasons, the NHL ran the Coyotes franchise before finally selling the team to a consortium of Phoenix-area business leaders called IceArizona in 2013.<sup>173</sup>

The experiences of San Diego, Tampa, and Phoenix as they pursued professional sports franchises in the late twentieth century differed in substantial ways from Atlanta's quest for "major league status" in the 1960s and 1970s. While San Diego, Tampa, and Phoenix all, to a greater or lesser extent, tied their push for big league teams to broader efforts at downtown redevelopment, none of these Sunbelt cities connected its urban renewal plans as explicitly or thoroughly to stadium construction as the civic leadership in Atlanta. The

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<sup>173</sup> Michael Farber, "Out of the Ashes," *Sports Illustrated*, September 21, 2009, 34.

racial politics of Metropolitan Atlanta also differed significantly from those found in the aforementioned Sunbelt cities. The emergence of a black political leadership class in Atlanta that won municipal power away from the city's hegemonic white leadership, the "Big Mules" who pushed for significant public investments to make Atlanta "major league," has no parallel in Phoenix, Tampa, or San Diego, where the city's traditional white business classes remain ensconced in city hall.

Despite these differences, the Sunbelt cities that have joined Atlanta in major professional sports share a common set of market dynamics and a common set of outcomes in their respective quests to become "big league." In each instance, the corporate and political classes in a Sunbelt boomtown made a top-down push to acquire major professional sports teams. A combination of desires among civic elites, namely a yearning for big city amenities, novel attractions in the center-city, and a wellspring of regional unity, led them to push for substantial municipal investments in the form of stadiums for professional sports teams just as the national marketplace for such franchises became increasingly flexible. In each instance, the cluster of professional sports franchises that settled in a Sunbelt city failed to live up to the local elite's expectations. The tendency of cities to acquire several teams in succession left markets oversaturated long before any one of the teams developed a steady fanbase. Often, the owners of Sunbelt franchises were new to the sports business and mismanaged their franchises into the bottom rungs of their respective leagues. Most significantly, professional sports franchises in Sunbelt cities often failed to connect with the constituent populations in these new metropolises. Many locals held firm to the recreational and spectator pastimes they enjoyed in the absence of the major leagues. Most newcomers did not become stalwart supporters of the new, unfamiliar teams and, sometimes, unfamiliar sports being marketed to

them in the local media. Sunbelt newcomers proved more likely to take up the warm weather recreational pursuits of their new neighbors than to become diehards of the new local professional sports franchises, a passion that proved more contingent on a set of experiences common to the urban north than many Sunbelt investors had anticipated. The durable support that many franchises in the urban north enjoyed amid “franchise free agency” proved to be as much a product of tradition and familiarity as it did success on the field. In Atlanta, professional sports entrepreneurs, especially Ted Turner, renewed their efforts in the late twentieth century to develop local affections for its big league teams with mixed results.

### **The Frustrating Legacy of Major League Atlanta: 1976-2018**

When Ted Turner purchased the Atlanta Braves in 1976, he was making a long-term investment in programming for his television station. Three years earlier, his WTCG bought the rights to broadcast Braves baseball for \$600,000 per season, one of the lowest rates in MLB. Braves games drew steady ratings for his UHF station, which was making hefty profits by broadcasting family friendly, low cost programming to viewers across the Southeast. NL owners regarded Turner as a fly-by-night operator, one who had purchased the Braves on the installment plan (\$1 million per year for 10 years) from a cash strapped ownership. The league wanted the Braves to accept a standing offer from Canadian investors to relocate the team to Toronto. NL officials acceded to a Turner ownership only when the television operator agreed to keep former Braves principal owner Bill Bartholomay.<sup>174</sup>

As it turned out, it was Ted Turner’s leadership that ensured Atlanta’s continued “Major League” status, keeping MLB and the NBA in the city as metropolitan area residents remained non-committal toward its professional sports franchises and municipal leaders, particularly those

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<sup>174</sup> Ted Turner and Bill Burke, *Call Me Ted* (New York: Hachette, 2008), 109-112; Christian Boone, “A Brave(s) new world for Turner,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, January 1, 2009, 1E.

in Atlanta proper, became more skeptical of investing in stadium building. In hindsight, Turner's tenure as Braves (1976-1997) and Hawks (1977-1997) owner amounted to a trusteeship over "Major League" Atlanta that ended just as civic boosters embraced another sports-related grand municipal enterprise. The city's bid for the 1996 Summer Olympics galvanized a new round of local investments in sports facilities, which guaranteed Atlanta's "Major League" future but failed to transform the city into the durable professional sports hotbed long envisioned by civic leaders.

"Ted's enthusiasm was contagious," *Constitution* sportswriter Wayne Minshew recalled, "Ted was a great, great salesman, and a visionary."<sup>175</sup> Such enthusiasm was necessary to keep baseball in Atlanta. The team had finished 40 games out of first place in 1975, drawing barely 534,000 fans to Atlanta Stadium, one of MLB's smallest draws of the past half-century. "No one much cared if the Braves left town," Braves public relations official Bob Hope said, "baseball was not really ingrained in the culture down here."<sup>176</sup> For the remainder of the 1970s, the Braves performed poorly on the field, worse than they ever had under their previous ownership. Atlanta finished in last place for four consecutive seasons (1976-1979). Despite the Braves' unprecedentedly poor performance, the promotional guile of Turner and his associates helped the club inch up in attendance over the latter half of the decade, finally reaching the modestly respectable 1,000,000 fan threshold in the 1980 season. Turner's Braves sponsored countless promotions, the most popular of which featured the owner himself. Turner participated in mattress stacking competitions, cash grabs, and home plate weddings. One evening, he bloodied his face pushing a peanut down the third base line as part of a Georgia produce-themed race.

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<sup>175</sup> Wayne Minshew interview by the author July 1, 2013, 54 transcript.

<sup>176</sup> Christian Boone, "A Brave(s) new world for Turner," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, January 1, 2009, 1E.



Turner also purchased one of the league's first video animation scoreboards for the stadium.<sup>177</sup> "There were also a lot of college students from Tech and Agnes Scott and Atlanta University who attended the games because the beer vendors did not check IDs regularly," Braves regular Alan Morris recalled.<sup>178</sup>

As the Braves' live audience inched toward respectability, its television viewership expanded exponentially. In 1976, WTCG began its ascent from a regional phenomenon to a national one, as Turner invested in satellite technology to beam his network, which was soon rechristened TBS, to cable subscribers across the country. By the end of 1978, satellites beamed TBS' nightly telecasts of Braves baseball to all 50 states. MLB challenged the legality of TBS' distribution of Braves games into other team's markets, but the FCC ruled that as long as the station's signal was distributed by a commonly available carrier, it could continue to broadcast as many games as it chose on cable television.<sup>179</sup>

The convergence of the Braves' appeal on cable television, ability to draw a live crowd, and win baseball games came during the 1982 season, when Atlanta captured their first division title in 13 years. TBS branded the club "America's Team," a moniker that befitted the genuinely national audience of seven million viewers that watched their every game on the Superstation. The Braves developed a national bandwagon that *Sports Illustrated* described in a profile that season as stretching to as far flung places as Bismarck, North Dakota, Reno, Nevada, and Juneau, Alaska. National television exposure transformed the Braves' amiable, clean living superstar slugger Dale Murphy, the NL's Most Valuable Player

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<sup>177</sup> Robert Ashley Fields, *Take Me Out to the Crowd*, 49-51; "Braves Banner June 1983," Atlanta Braves Folders, Cooperstown, NY, Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum Library, Archives Department; Roy M. Blount, "Losersville, U.S.A.," *Sports Illustrated*, March 21, 1977, 76-80; David Hewes interview by the author, December 19, 2011, 9 transcript.

<sup>178</sup> Alan Morris, interview by the author, August 13, 2013, 2 transcript.

<sup>179</sup> Ted Turner and Bill Burke. *Call Me Ted*, 133-138.

in 1982 and 1983, into one of the sport's most beloved figures. The voices of announcers Ernie Johnson, Skip Caray, and Pete Van Weiren became some of the best known in television broadcasting. The 1982 team even drew well at Atlanta Stadium, pulling in 1.8 million spectators, the franchise's best figure since it played in Wisconsin.<sup>180</sup>

The Braves' early 80s moment as local and national favorites proved short-lived. The team faded quickly from the top of the standings, retreating back to last place in 1986, a position the team held in four of the next five seasons. Predictably, Braves attendance collapsed during the mid-to-late 1980s, dropping from a franchise record of 2,119,935 in 1983 to less than one million in 1988, a dubious distinction the team reached in each of the next three seasons. Several minor league teams outdrew Atlanta during this time period. Those who did attend Braves games returned home with stories of rat infestations and filthy bathrooms in the always empty stadium. The Braves' national television ratings fell by more than one-half. Certainly, the team's poor performance figured prominently in the ratings drop, but the expanding cable distribution of Chicago's WGN and New York's WOR brought new competition to TBS, as tens of millions of viewers could now choose among daily broadcasts of Cubs, Mets, and Braves games. As MLB sought to expand its reach on cable television, Turner considered selling the Braves and buying into a new, league wide baseball television package.<sup>181</sup>

During the 1980s, Turner played an ever smaller role in the day-to-day operations of the Braves. Instead, he turned his attention to the expansion of his cable television empire,

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<sup>180</sup> "Braves Banner June 1985, May 1984," Atlanta Braves Folders, Cooperstown, NY, Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum Library, Archives Department; Furman Bisher, "Van Weiren's Voice A Perfect Guide," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, January 25, 2009, 2C; Ted Turner and Bill Burke. *Call Me Ted*, 133-138; Michael Hirsley, "Atlanta Ponders Image—Peachy or the Pits?" *Chicago Tribune*, October 10, 1982, B14.

<sup>181</sup> Rick Reilly, "Peach State Lemons," *Sports Illustrated*, October 3, 1988, 44; Alan Morris, interview by the author, August 13, 2013, 3 transcript; Joel Bierig, "Brave New World," *Sporting News*, May 27, 1991, 9; Peter Pascarelli, "Braves Established a Blueprint for Failure," *Sporting News*, April 11, 1989, 10; Bill Zack, "Last Place: Home of the Braves," *Sporting News*, October 8, 1990, 10.

pioneering 24 hour a day news with CNN (1980) and Headline News (1982). Additionally, Turner created a second cable network TNT (1988), which created far more original programming and competed with the major television networks and ESPN for the broadcasting rights to nearly every major American sport. Beyond their coverage of the Hawks and the Braves, Turner's networks began carrying packages of NASCAR races (1983), NBA games (1984), World Championship Wrestling (1988), World Cup Soccer (1990), the Winter Olympics (1992), and Sunday Night NFL football (1990). Turner went so far as to create his own, made-for-television international athletic competition, the Goodwill Games, which aimed to improve Soviet-American relations in the aftermath of their reciprocal boycotts of the 1980 and 1984 Summer Olympics. Collectively, four summer and one winter Goodwill Games cost Turner's companies more than \$100 million.<sup>182</sup>

Just as Turner considered selling the Braves, the team's new GM John Schuerholz, the first Turner hired from outside the TBS orbit, was in the process of remaking the Braves into once-in-a-generation winners. In 1991, the Braves won their first NL pennant since the franchise played in Milwaukee, achieving the greatest single-season turnaround in baseball history. Just as in 1982, Atlanta Stadium became the place to be in Metropolitan Atlanta. The Braves' quickly reasserted their identity as "America's Team," drawing huge television audiences on TBS and excellent home crowds. Spectators adopted the controversial "Tomahawk Chop" and chant as the team's signature cheer, which, for better or worse, gave Atlanta fans a national identity based on something other than their collective apathy for the

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<sup>182</sup> Furman Bisher, "After Merger, Turner's Heart Still with Braves, Hawks," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 13, 1996, 1; Dave Nightengale, "Goodwill But Not Much Excitement," *The Sporting News*, August 13, 1990, 45; Michael Knisley, "Mr. Universe," *Sporting News*, January 3, 1994, S-2; "Turner Has Made it to the Top of the Sports Hill," *Sporting News*, May 7, 1990, 53; Ted Turner and Bill Burke. *Call Me Ted*, 215-221; "Farewell, Goodwill?" *Sports Illustrated*, April 30, 2001, 10.

first time. 1991 proved to be the starting point of a Braves dynasty that included 14 consecutive division titles, five NL Pennants, and a World Series championship in 1995.<sup>183</sup>

The breakthrough of the Atlanta Braves in the 1990s contrasted with the continued futility and frustration of their stadium co-tenants. The perennially weak Falcons made just four playoff appearances during their quarter century at the stadium (1966-1991). Their local television numbers were consistently among the NFL's lowest and they finished below the league average in attendance in 23 of their first 25 seasons. During the 1980s, the Falcons finished last in averaged attendance on four occasions, playing to "bipartisan crowds," as Falcons offensive tackle Mike Kenn referred to the audience at a 1988 home game where boisterous New Orleans Saints fans drowned out Atlanta supporters at the stadium. Team owner Rankin Smith's family came to be known locally as "The Clampetts." Like the leading family on the *Beverly Hillbillies*, their critics regarded them as wealthy, genial rubes. Rankin's reliance on sons Rankin Jr. and Taylor, neither of whom displayed a particular aptitude for professional football, to run the perpetually dreadful franchise during the 1980s and 1990s encouraged this comparison.<sup>184</sup>

In the early 1980s, Rankin Smith considered moving the Falcons out of their tenancy at Atlanta Stadium. Smith's most serious suitors came from Jacksonville, Florida, equipped with an existing, NFL style stadium in the Gator Bowl. Public and private boosters in Jacksonville offered Smith guarantees of nearly \$19 million in annual stadium revenue, more than twice as much as the club was generating each season at Atlanta Stadium. Smith's public dalliances with

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<sup>183</sup> Furman Bisher, "After Merger, Turner's Heart Still with Braves, Hawks," *Atlanta Constitution*, September 13, 1996, 1.

<sup>184</sup> Rick Reilly, "Peach State Lemons," *Sports Illustrated*, October 3, 1988, 44; Matt Winkeljohn, "The Sale of the Falcons," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, December 7, 2001, 12; William A. Schaeffer & Lawrence S. Davidson, *The Economic Impact of the Falcons on Atlanta, 1984*, 4-8.

Jacksonville provided him with enough local leverage to convince the civic leadership that losing the Falcons would tarnish Atlanta's "major league" image. Furthermore, the Falcons persuaded city and Fulton County officials that their football-mad constituents would finally embrace the team once it had a high-quality stadium of its own.<sup>185</sup> In 1989, the Fulton County Commission and Atlanta City Council approved 1 percent hotel tax increases to finance the \$210 million Georgia Dome. The 14 acre complex was built adjacent to the Omni and the Georgia World Congress Center (GWCC), which owned and operated the stadium. The Falcons signed a 20 year pact to play at the 72,000 seat Dome, which, supporters asserted, was being paid for primarily by visitors. Showing more concern for the surrounding neighborhood than the previous generation of civic boosters, Atlanta officials stipulated that the Falcons pay for the relocation of two black churches and set up a \$10 million housing trust for area residents displaced by stadium construction. Additionally, minority owned firms were guaranteed 35 percent of stadium construction contracts and the city of Atlanta gained permanent representation on the state-run GWCC's board.<sup>186</sup>

"The Georgia Dome is a wonder, a marvel, a sensory delight. It will be a source of pride for this city for the next 30, 40, 50 years," wrote the *Journal-Constitution's* Mark Bradley in August 1992, weeks before its grand opening. Bradley raved over the stadium's 150 gaudy luxury boxes, its maze of food courts, and excellent sightlines from every seat. A quarter of a century later, it was imploded to provide parking for another new Falcons

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<sup>185</sup> Peter Applebome, "Atlanta in Accord on Plans for a Domed Stadium," *New York Times*, June 7, 1989, A16; Matt Winkeljohn, "The Sale of the Falcons," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, December 7, 2001, 12; William A. Schaeffer & Lawrence S. Davidson, *The Economic Impact of the Falcons on Atlanta, 1984*, 14.

<sup>186</sup> "The Georgia Dome," *Sporting News*, June 19, 1989, 63; "Falcons '93," Atlanta Falcons Folders, Canton, OH, Professional Football Hall of Fame and Museum Library, Archives Department; Peter Applebome, "Atlanta in Accord on Plans for a Domed Stadium," *New York Times*, June 7, 1989, A16; "The Spectacular Georgia Dome (1994)," "Georgia Dome: A New Experience for Falcons Fans (1991)," "Georgia Dome Questions and Answers (1992)," Atlanta Falcons Folders, Professional Football Hall of Fame Archives; Mark Bradley, "Dome An Apt Symbol of Vibrant Sports City," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, August 24, 1992, 1D.

stadium.<sup>187</sup> The opening of the Georgia Dome produced an expected honeymoon effect, increasing Falcons' season ticket sales from just over 36,000 in 1991 to just over 57,000 in 1992.<sup>188</sup> The initial enthusiasm for the dome proved short lived, but the move to the dome did correspond to a notable upswing in attendance by African American fans. This likely had less to do with the dome itself than with the growth of the city's black middle class which also helped improve the Hawks' attendance during the 1980s. Additionally, the emergence of a pair of African American players as the team's most high-profile members also contributed to the Falcons' appeal to black spectators. In the early 1990s, the franchise enjoyed a vogue which corresponded with the emergence of Deion "Prime Time" Sanders and Andre "Bad Moon" Rison as two of the league's most popular players. Sanders and Rison became the NFL's first two players strongly associated with hip-hop culture. The Falcons' all-black jerseys, reintroduced in 1991 as a tribute to the team's original uniforms, soon became a youth fashion staple, due in large part to their association with the Falcons' stars.<sup>189</sup>

Well in advance of the Falcons' move to the Georgia Dome, the Braves had been looking into an upgrade or a replacement for rapidly aging Atlanta Stadium. Initially, the Braves considered several suburban sites for a new stadium, but Atlanta's successful bid for the 1996 Summer Olympics altered these plans. Doing what Atlanta has always done best, the city's civic elite engaged in a multi-faceted promotional campaign, convincing the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to award them the games in September 1990. The city's corporate leadership, most notably Coca-Cola, CNN, and Delta, financed the local

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<sup>187</sup> Mark Bradley, "Dome An Apt Symbol of Vibrant Sports City," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, August 24, 1992, 1D.

<sup>188</sup> "Falcons '92," Atlanta Falcons Folders, Professional Football Hall of Fame Archives.

<sup>189</sup> "This Year the Falcons are Back in Black," *Sporting News*, September 17, 1990, 4; "Falcons Newsletter 1991," Atlanta Falcons Folders, Professional Football Hall of Fame Archives; Andy Friedlander, "The Marketing of Deion Sanders," *Sporting News*, June 12, 1989, 47.

Olympic organizing committee while providing Atlanta with continuous visibility as the voters made up their minds. Former Atlanta mayor and U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young made use of his enduring global popularity to stress Atlanta's legacy in the Civil Rights Movement. He swayed many African IOC representatives by emphasizing the opportunity they had to place the games in a majority black city for the first time.<sup>190</sup>

The Atlanta Organizing Committee spent \$1.8 billion (\$500 million of U.S. taxpayer dollars and \$1.3 billion in privately raised funds) to prepare for the games, building 12 new playing facilities in which to host Olympic events. The largest of these venues was an 80,000 seat, \$209 million Olympic Stadium, which hosted the opening ceremony as well as track and field events. Following the Summer Olympics, the stadium was reconfigured into a 50,000 seat baseball park, the cost of which was incorporated into the original construction budget. The remaking of Olympic Stadium into Turner Field, the Braves' new home, transformed the venue into a quintessential 1990s ballpark. Architects from Heery International, Rosser International, and Ellerbe Beckett created a stadium which juxtaposed nostalgic homages to the game's past with posh amenities aimed at upscale consumers, including a pair of tony steakhouses and a veritable shopping mall of a team store. Many of these niceties were named in honor of Hank Aaron, who had developed a close relationship with Ted Turner and worked for the Braves in scouting for a number of years. Atlanta fans had long since reversed their indifference toward the slugger, embracing his legacy as the singular moment in the team's history. At Turner Field, Aaron's legacy became ever-present and consumable.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Russell Shaw, "Whistling Victory in Dixie," *Sporting News*, October 1, 1990, 8.

<sup>191</sup> "Tomahawk Magazine April 1997," Atlanta Braves Folders, Cooperstown, NY, Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum Library, Archives Department; Gary Caruso, *Turner Field: Rarest of Diamonds* (New York: Taylor, 1997), 21-83.

Atlanta's successful 1996 Olympic bid also facilitated the construction of a new basketball arena for the Turner-owned Atlanta Hawks. Despite frequent national television coverage on TBS, the Hawks had struggled on the court and at the box office for much of Turner's tenure as owner. By the mid-1990s, the Hawks were in the middle of a 45 year drought of advancing beyond the final eight teams in the NBA playoffs (1970-2015). The franchise had enjoyed one genuine era of on-court and box office success during Turner's ownership: the late 1980s. Between 1985 and 1989, the Hawks posted four consecutive 50 win seasons, the mark of excellence in the NBA. Nicknamed "Air Force One" for their awe-inspiring slam dunks, the Hawks clubs of the late 1980s were one of the league's most exciting teams. Hawks star and Georgia native Dominique Wilkins rivaled Michael Jordan as the league's most dynamic player. Like Jordan, Wilkins was also a highly marketable star, serving as a pitchman for Coke, Minute Maid, and Reebok. Turner placed the wildly popular team on the global stage, sending them on a two-week 1988 tour of exhibition games in the Soviet Union. The Hawks enjoyed significant box office success during this time period as well, drawing nearly 13,400 spectators per game in 1986-1987, the first time the franchise finished above the league average in attendance since moving to Atlanta. African American fans, who had started attending Hawks games in notably larger numbers beginning in the mid-1970s, figured prominently in the Hawks' expanding audience. The city's growing black middle class embraced the finally winning team and its exciting, locally grown superstar.<sup>192</sup>

By the mid-1990s, though, the franchise had faded back into mediocrity and its attendance figures were again among the league's lowest. The Hawks sought out a replacement

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<sup>192</sup> Remembert Browne, "A Hawks Homecoming," *Grantland*, November 2, 2012. Accessed online on November 2, 2012: <http://grantland.com/features/a-lifelong-fan-returns-atlanta-search-city-third-team/>; Jeffrey Denberg, Roland Lazenby, and Tom Stinson, *From Sweet Lou to 'Nique*, 63-69.



for the rapidly aging Omni Arena in the midst of the Olympic building boom, enabling the franchise to benefit from the surge in civic vitality that accompanied the 1996 summer games. Turner contributed \$20 million toward arena construction while the Atlanta-Fulton County Recreation Authority sold \$130.75 million in revenue bonds and excised \$62.5 million in car rental taxes to pay for Philips Arena, a building whose corporate naming rights fee covered the vast majority of the bond's repayment. Replete with state-of-the-art, upscale amenities, Philips Arena was intended to revitalize local support for the Hawks and help the city reestablish itself as an NHL market. On both accounts, the founders' intentions went largely unmet. By the time Philips Arena opened in 1999, the Hawks had been sold to Time Warner as part of its multi-billion dollar deal with the Turner organization. The NHL returned to Atlanta that same year in the form of the Time Warner-owned Thrashers, who played 12 seasons (1999-2011) in Georgia before joining the Flames in Canada, relocating to Winnipeg, Manitoba. Like the Flames, the Atlanta Thrashers appealed to a core of season-ticket holding diehards but lacked broad popular support. Mayor Kasim Reed refused to support significant municipal investments in saving a franchise that appealed only to a niche audience in the metropolitan area and an even smaller one among his core constituencies in the city. Both the Hawks and Thrashers had been purchased in 2004 by a consortium of East Coast business leaders called Atlanta Spirit, LLC. The most-prominent figures in Atlanta Spirit were self-professed basketball enthusiasts, but their ownership of the Hawks proved just as frustrating as Turner's or Cousins' and ended in far more troubling fashion. In September 2014, Atlanta Spirit majority owner Barry Levenson admitted to sending a 2012 email to team GM Danny Ferry that argued that the Hawks' consistently poor ticket sales were due to the high percentage of African American fans who attended the team's games. In January 2015, the entire Atlanta Spirit ownership group agreed to put the team up for

sale following the public and media backlash in response to Levenson's email. Private equity billionaire Tony Ressler purchased the team from Atlanta Spirit in June 2015.<sup>193</sup>

The 1997 debut of Turner Field for the now perennially contending Braves led to a short-lived explosion in the team's season ticket base from 5,000 to better than 30,000. Despite the Braves' continued success on the diamond, the novelty of Turner Field soon faded. The team's consistent regular season success and post-season futility soon fostered apathy among its new fanbase. Braves attendance had peaked at more than 3.8 million in 1993, but fell steadily in subsequent years. By the early 2000s, the Braves had faded to the middle of the pack in attendance, despite their ongoing streak of divisional titles. The inability of the Braves to draw sellout crowds even during the playoffs renewed old taunts about the fickleness of Atlanta sports fans. Between 1997 and 2005, the Braves failed to sellout more than three-quarters of their home playoff games at Turner Field, displaying a fan apathy unrivaled among the era's contending franchises. While virtually every other club's post-season games drew at or near capacity crowds, the Braves often had more than 10,000 empty seats for playoff games. Turner had long since sold the team as part of his media empire's 1996 merger with Time Warner. In 2007, Time Warner sold the team to another corporate behemoth, Liberty Media, a telecommunications company that held a large minority share in the Braves' parent company.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> "Meet the Owners: Atlanta Hawks and Atlanta Thrashers," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 4, 2004, 1A; Jeff Z. Klein, "Atlanta Loses Thrashers as NHL Returns to Winnipeg," *New York Times*, May 31, 2011. Accessed on June 2, 2017: <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/01/sports/hockey/atlanta-loses-thrashers-as-nhl-returns-to-winnipeg.html>; Richard Sandomir, "Philips to Pay \$180 Million to Name New Atlanta Arena," February 3, 1999, *New York Times*, 47; Furman Bisher, "Omni Offered Moments of Splendor," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 20, 1997, 18E; Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta*, 217-218; Adi Joseph, "Barry Levenson Will Sell Atlanta Hawks After Releasing Racist Email," *USA Today*, September 7, 2014. Accessed on September 7, 2014: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/nba/hawks/2014/09/07/bruce-levenson-racist-email-atlanta-owner-sell-team/15241591/>

<sup>194</sup> Mark Bradley, "Does Atlanta Care About the Braves," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 2, 2002, 1A; Gary Caruso, *Turner Field*, 21-83; Furman Bisher, "After Merger, Turner's Heart Still with Braves, Hawks," *Atlanta*

Soon after ownership of the Braves passed into Liberty Media's hands, team executives announced that Turner Field would require \$150 million in infrastructural upgrades if the franchise was going to stay in the stadium beyond the end of its lease in 2016. The administration of Atlanta mayor Kasim Reed showed little interest in making a new round of investments in a stadium that was barely a decade old. Reed, a product of the black governing coalition that had dominated Atlanta electoral politics since the 1970s, was willing to accommodate the development priorities of the city's corporate establishment but not without substantial material concessions in the form of employment guarantees or municipal investments. There was no indication that the Braves' new ownership was willing to make such a deal. Instead, the new owners levied complaints about Turner Field's center city surroundings that sounded a lot like the complaints that had emerged among the franchise's original owners about Atlanta Stadium's environs. The new owners complained that a lack of parking, traffic congestion, and a dearth of amenities in the surrounding neighborhoods discouraged suburbanites from attending Braves games. They also complained that attending games at Turner Field was inconvenient for their predominately suburban fan base. In 2012, the club released a Geographic Information System (GIS) map displaying the distribution of their season ticket holders across the metropolitan area. The vast majority of red dots on the map were located in the predominately white and affluent northern suburbs of Fulton and Cobb Counties.<sup>195</sup>

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*Constitution*, September 13, 1996, 1; "Atlanta Braves Team History & Encyclopedia," *Baseball-Reference.com*, 2017. Accessed on June 2, 2017: <https://www.baseball-reference.com/teams/ATL/index.shtml>.

<sup>195</sup> Max Blau, "Bye Bye Braves," *Creative Loafing*, November 19, 2013. Accessed Online: November 19, 2013: <https://www.creativeloafing.com/news/article/13076424/byebye-braves>; Andy Walter, "Mapping Braves Country," *Atlanta Studies*, November 2, 2015. Accessed Online: June 1, 2016: <https://www.atlantastudies.org/mapping-braves-country/>; Charlie Harper, "A New Cobb," *Creative Loafing*, November 27, 2013. Accessed Online: December 2, 2013: <https://www.creativeloafing.com/news/article/13076498/a-new-cobb>; Ernie Suggs, "A Champion for Atlanta," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 29, 2003, 12E.

In late 2013, Braves officials acted upon their threats, announcing that they had negotiated a stadium deal with Cobb County officials in secret. The plan called for a \$392 million public contribution toward the construction of a \$622 million stadium, which would be owned by the Cobb-Marietta Coliseum and Exhibit Hall Authority. The Braves, who agreed to a 30 year lease at the facility, would pay for the balance. The county planned to pay back the stadium revenue bonds by channeling money from existing rooms and car rental taxes. Additionally, a special, self-taxing zone known as the Cumberland Community Improvement District (CCID), a local business association created in the early 1990s to encourage investments in municipal infrastructure, imposed a series of new fees and a property tax increase to help pay back the bonds. Since the stadium deal imposed no new countywide taxes, it required only a simple majority “yes” vote from the five-person Cobb County Commission. Despite vigorous opposition by the county’s powerful Tea Party organization, the measure passed 5-0 in November 2013. Construction on the stadium began in September 2014 on a 60 acre piece of land within the CCID. The stadium was built between I-285 and I-75 near the upscale Cumberland Mall, an office park, and a convention center. It was eight miles from the closest MARTA stop. Despite the Braves’ protests about the gridlock surrounding Turner Field, nearly as much daily traffic passed by their new ballpark as their previous one in the southern CBD. Apparently, getting out of traffic was much less of a concern to the Braves than getting out of the center city. The Braves took up permanent residence at SunTrust Park in April 2017.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Charlie Harper, “A New Cobb,” *Creative Loafing*, November 27, 2013. Accessed Online: December 2, 2013: <https://www.creativeloafing.com/news/article/13076498/a-new-cobb>; Dan Klepal and Brad Schrade, “Cobb Commissioners approve Braves Stadium Deal,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 28, 2014. Accessed on November 2, 2014: [http://www.ajc.com/news/news/cobb-commissioners-set-to-vote-on-braves-stadium-a/nf729/?icmp=ajc\\_internallink\\_textlink\\_homepage](http://www.ajc.com/news/news/cobb-commissioners-set-to-vote-on-braves-stadium-a/nf729/?icmp=ajc_internallink_textlink_homepage); Max Blau, “Bye Bye Braves,” *Creative Loafing*, November 19, 2013. Accessed Online: November 19, 2013: <https://www.creativeloafing.com/news/article/13076424/byebye-braves>

Just as the Braves were preparing to leave Turner Field, the Falcons, their former Atlanta Stadium co-tenants, were getting ready to move out of the Georgia Dome, which the team's new owner, Home Depot co-founder Arthur Blank, regarded as anachronistic and in need of significant repairs. Blank purchased the Falcons from the Smith family in 2001 for \$545 million. Beginning in the late 2000s, Blank expressed his desire to build a new, state of the art facility for the Falcons and his expansion Major League Soccer (MLS) franchise. Initially, Blank stated that he wanted an outdoor arena for the Falcons, but ended up pushing for a downtown domed stadium with a retractable roof. Unlike previous owners, Blank was willing to pay for the lion's share of the new stadium. Blank's willingness to foot most of the bill was, in large part, a product of the skepticism that Atlanta officials, particularly Kasim Reed, expressed in response to the Falcons' claims that the stadium needed replacing. As a result, the public contribution to Atlanta's third downtown stadium project proved significantly more modest than in previous agreements. When accounting for inflation, the municipal investment in what came to be known as Mercedes-Benz Stadium was comparable to the \$18 million one the city made in Atlanta Stadium back in the mid-1960s. In exchange for ownership of the stadium, the GWCC Authority agreed in 2013 to issue \$200 million in municipal bonds to support the project. The city of Atlanta agreed to direct money from an existing rooms tax towards the repayment of the bond. AMB Group, the Blank-owned parent company of the Falcons and the Atlanta United soccer team, signed a 30 year lease at the facility and agreed to cover the remainder of construction costs, which totaled a record \$1.6 billion. In a deal similar to their Georgia Dome agreement, the Falcons agreed to invest \$30 million into housing redevelopment in the

surrounding Vine City neighborhood and to secure at least 31% participation by female and minority contractors.<sup>197</sup>

By the time Mercedes-Benz Stadium opened in August 2017, Atlanta’s municipal leadership had made evident its new approach to negotiating with professional sports franchises. City leaders would only agree to municipal subsidies of stadiums and arenas in so far as these facilities offered tangible economic benefits to their core constituents—including Atlanta’s black residents. This new, pragmatic approach adopted during the Reed administration in its negotiations with the Braves, Thrashers, and Falcons mirrored the attitude that metropolitan area residents had always taken towards professional sports. Civic leaders in Atlanta proper had ceased to be devotees of professional sports, enabling them to display unprecedented agency in their dealings with the franchises. Atlanta fans had always acted this way, perceiving of the teams as they would any other consumer product. The civic establishment has finally adopted this tactic, learning not only from the experiences of previous generations of Atlanta leaders but also municipal leaders in other Sunbelt cities that sought out “Major League” status. Atlanta’s leadership has decided to leave grand municipal investments in professional sports to suburban municipalities and the private sector. This lesson may have dawned on civic elites in Atlanta but it appears to be years away from becoming the common sense among big city leaders, particularly those in communities still looking for tangible and obvious ways to assert their “major league” status.

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<sup>197</sup> Thomas Wheatley, “Mayor and Falcons Strike Stadium Deal,” *Atlanta-Journal Constitution*, March 7, 2013, 1; Matt Winkeljohn, “The Sale of the Falcons,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, December 7, 2001, 12.

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