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Savannah's New South:

The Politics of Reform, 1885-1910

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in History

by

Lauren Beth Acker

2012

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Savannah's New South:
The Politics of Reform, 1885-1910

by

Lauren Beth Acker
Doctor of Philosophy in History
University of California, Los Angeles, 2012
Professor Joan Waugh, Chair

My dissertation is a cultural and political history of Savannah, Georgia. Exploring the role of ethnic and racial groups in movements for municipal reform, this work complicates historical interpretation of the processes and experiences that shaped political development in the South. Many historians view white supremacy as the only animating feature of southern politics, obscuring the dynamic interaction of immigrant communities, religious minorities, and black southerners within the region's political culture. At the turn of the twentieth century, Savannah was striving to be a progressive, prosperous, and modern city. While still beholden to the broad outlines of the South's racial hierarchy, Savannah's political movements for municipal reform created a fluid political climate. White ethnic minorities carved out a prominent place for themselves in the city's factional political culture, which also provided space for black residents to influence politics and hope for greater enjoyment of their citizenship rights. While ultimately

the forces of white supremacy and Jim Crow segregation would temper the depth of reform in Savannah, further examination of municipal politics reveals important contingent moments in the history of the New South.

To illuminate varying political perspectives and experiences, I employ a biographical approach, focusing on the careers of two of Savannah's most influential leaders, Herman Myers and Sol C. Johnson. Herman Myers was a German Jewish immigrant and prominent businessman who served as mayor of Savannah for ten years at the turn of the century. At the forefront of a local progressive political realignment, Myers played a formative role in Savannah's transformation into a modern city. Sol C. Johnson, editor of the weekly African American newspaper, *The Savannah Tribune*, was a community leader and fierce advocate of black rights both in Savannah and the South. Johnson used the *Tribune* as way to encourage black political participation and protest Jim Crow segregation, and helped lead an eighteen-month boycott of Savannah's segregated streetcars. Drawing primarily from newspapers, pamphlets and public records, this study traces the careers of Myers and Johnson, and the political colleagues and opponents they encountered, through several major local political contests. The story of Myers, Johnson, and Savannah's distinctive New South evolution, highlights the power of the rhetoric of reform, and the saliency of racial, ethnic and religious identity in southern political culture.

The dissertation of Lauren Beth Acker is approved.

David O. Sears

Brenda Stevenson

Joan Waugh, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2012

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INTRODUCTION

In November of 1894, Savannah was in the midst of a contentious political realignment as factions within the Democratic Party vied for control. The primary topic of political debate was municipal reform, but as the campaign season progressed, it was the city's diverse ethnic, religious and racial landscape that was on display. Leading one of the factional tickets was Herman Myers, a German Jewish businessman making a bid for mayor after nearly a decade as a city alderman. Although he had won broad support from Savannah citizens in the past, his candidacy proved divisive. Responding to rumblings of ethnic and religious prejudice against Myers within Savannah's political community, the local newspapers roundly condemned "narrow prejudice...invoked against men because of their race or religion," asserting that such attitudes had no place in "a liberal and progressive community like Savannah." Rather, "the best American sentiment is that of fair play," and both papers demanded it, unequivocally, for all political candidates.¹

"Savannah's New South: The Politics of Reform, 1885-1910" provides a glimpse into the vibrant, factional political culture of a city that defies common perceptions of the South. At the turn of the twentieth century, Savannah was striving to be a progressive, prosperous, and modern city. While still beholden to the broad outlines of the South's racial hierarchy, Savannah's political movements for municipal reform revealed a more fluid political climate than is often recognized in the region. White ethnic minorities carved out a prominent place for themselves in the city's factional political culture, which provided space for black political influence and hope for greater enjoyment of their citizenship rights. While ultimately the forces of white supremacy

¹ "Mr. Herman Myers," *Savannah Press*, November 22, 1894.

and Jim Crow segregation would check the depth of reform in Savannah, exploration of municipal politics reveals the saliency of racial, religious and ethnic identity in southern political culture. “Savannah’s New South,” meaning the city’s distinctive experience of this transformative period in the region’s history, reveals important contingent moments and new perspectives on political development in the South.

To illuminate the experience of electoral politics and varying political perspectives, this dissertation employs a biographical approach, focusing on the careers of two of Savannah’s most influential leaders, Herman Myers and Sol C. Johnson. Herman Myers, a German Jewish immigrant and prominent businessman, served as mayor from 1895 to 1897 and 1899 to 1907. Myers was part of a new commercial-civic elite, or a rising class of businessmen and professionals, that entered urban politics in the South in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Styling himself as a champion of municipal reform, Myers emphasized efficiency and modernization, and a non-partisan “businesslike” administration of city affairs. He won broad support from Savannah voters, and played a formative role in Savannah’s transformation into a modern city. Sol C. Johnson was a prominent African American leader and editor of the weekly black newspaper, *The Savannah Tribune*. Although Johnson never held local political office, an option not open to men of his race after Reconstruction, he used the *Tribune* as a way to encourage political participation and insert the black community into Savannah’s political process. The prime architect of a yearlong boycott against segregated streetcars, as well as a self-made man who fostered economic development within his community, Johnson was at the center of black Savannah’s most important political and cultural transformations. Due to a dearth of manuscript sources authored by Johnson and Myers, their lives and political careers are constructed primarily through newspapers, pamphlets and public records. These two notable men,

and the local politicians and opponents they encountered, represent different perspectives on political engagement and reform in a crucial period in southern history.²

Inserting ethnic and religious diversity into the history of the New South is a contribution of this research. Historians offer two primary narratives for the period from the end of Reconstruction to World War I in the South. On one hand, this was a time when enthusiasm for economic development, urbanization and modernization elicited rapid change, hope and anxiety, and, on the other hand, a time when white southerners used legal and extralegal means to consolidate their power, stifle black self-determination, and create a rigid racial caste system. While there has been debate about the economic and regional backgrounds of the men leading these political and social movements, they have often been treated as an otherwise monolithic group defined primarily by their white identity.³ Only fleeting mention has been made of ethnic and religious minorities within these narratives, despite evidence they wielded a disproportionate amount of power over local political developments. Still fewer scholars, among them John

² The only comprehensive work on Herman Myers' political career is David J. Goldberg, "The Administration of Herman Myers as Mayor of Savannah, Georgia, 1895-1897 and 1899-1907," (Masters Thesis, University of North Carolina, 1978). For other works on ethnic groups in Savannah, see Edward M. Shoemaker, "Strangers and Citizens: The Irish Immigrant Community of Savannah, 1837-1861" (Dissertation, Emory University, 1990); Mark I. Greenberg, "Creating Ethnic, Class and Southern Identity in Nineteenth Century America: The Jews of Savannah, Georgia, 1830-1880" (Dissertation, University of Florida, 1997).

³ In his seminal volume, *Origins of the New South*, C. Vann Woodward argued that in the late nineteenth century, the plantation elite that had once dominated political leadership in the South fell from prominence, giving way to a new business and industrial class determined to fundamentally transform the region in the mold of the North. This argument stood in contrast to that of W.J. Cash, who in the *Mind of the South*, argued for the persistence of the plantation elite in guiding political action and social mores. This "continuity-change debate" has generated a great deal of scholarship, and historians have since demonstrated that within the South there was striking regional variation in terms of postwar political leadership. A new elite of businessmen and industrialists did rise in the South, but the degree to which they worked with, were excluded by, or replaced the planter elite was highly dependent on local factors. C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971); W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1991); J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880-1910* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); Jonathan M. Weiner, *Social Origins of the New South: Alabama, 1860-1885* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978); Dwight Billings, *Planters and the Making of a New South: Class, Politics and Development in North Carolina, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979); James Cobb, "Beyond Planters and Industrialists," *The Journal of Southern History* 54, no. 1 (1988): 45-68; Don Harrison Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1860-1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

Shelton Reed and David R. Goldfield, have viewed ethnicity and religion as a useful analytical approach to southern history and regional and racial identity. The political participation of ethnocultural minorities, or groups that share common national heritage, and/or cultural and religious traditions that differ from that of the dominant population, complicate our understanding of the white South in a period of transformation and escalating white supremacy.⁴

Examination of Herman Myers' political career brings to the forefront the history of Jews in the South as an example of how ethnocultural minorities shaped southern history in interesting and important ways. Between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of World War I, cities across the South elected at least nineteen Jewish mayors, and many more aldermen, police chiefs and municipal officers. Considering that Jews made up less and one half of one percent of the total population of the region, and at most two or three percent of any given city, this visibility is striking. However, by the 1890s, Jews that had once served in local office were finding it more difficult to be elected. This coincided with increasing exclusion of Jews from social institutions, and a rising tide of anti-Semitism throughout the country. Many historians have explained the reasons for Jews' declining political and social options, as well as how they sought to define themselves as a religious community within the overwhelmingly Protestant South. However, only a few scholars, including Steven Hertzberg and Mark Bauman, have explored how Jews were elected, what these politicians accomplished while in public office, and how they shaped southern urban growth. Questions related to Jews' contributions and ability to navigate the

⁴ Works that have explored ethnic and religious minorities in the South, and how they enrich studies of the region, include George Brown Tindall, *The Ethnic Southerners* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976); John Shelton Reed, *One South: An Ethnic Approach to Regional Culture* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982); David R Goldfield, *Region, Race, and Cities: Interpreting the Urban South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997). Discussion of ethnocultural minorities in politics is usually confined to political histories of the North, which often claim that by the 1890s such "ethnocultural models" of political association were breaking down and not thriving as they did in Savannah. Paul Kleppner, *Continuity or Change in Electoral Politics, 1893-1928* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987); Jon C. Teaford, *The Unheralded Triumph: City Government in America, 1870-1900* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984).

southern political landscape animate this study, and provide an entry point to study the experiences of ethnocultural minorities in the history of politics and urban development in the region.⁵

Far more numerous in the South than white ethnocultural minorities were African Americans. Half of Savannah's residents were black, and, while restrictions on voting and office holding prevented black residents from exerting their full political strength, they remained an important force in Savannah's political culture. In this case, political culture refers to the attitudes, ideologies, and rhetoric that in turn shape political behavior. Recognizing that political influence cannot just be measured by ballots, this dissertation follows in the footsteps of Jane Dailey, Glenda Gilmore, Robin Kelley and other historians that move "from the polling place and voter returns toward a broader definition of the political," in order to "complicate electoral politics and to uncover sites of resistance" and black protest.⁶ Savannah's black community

⁵ For information on Jews in the South, see Eli N. Evans, *The Provincials: a Personal History of Jews in the South* (New York: Atheneum, 1973); Leonard Dinnerstein and Mary Dale Palsson, *Jews in the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973); Steven Hertzberg, *Strangers Within the Gate City: The Jews of Atlanta, 1845-1915* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1978); Mark K. Bauman, ed., *Dixie Diaspora: An Anthology of Southern Jewish History*, Judaic Studies Series (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006); Marcie Cohen Ferris and Mark I. Greenberg, eds., *Jewish Roots in Southern Soil: A New History* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2006). For discussions of "whiteness" see Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth Century America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Verso, 2003); David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, (New York: Verso, 1991); Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006). For a list of Jewish mayors elected in the South, see "Southern Jewish Mayors Throughout History," The Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life, 2006, http://www.isjl.org/history/archive/archive_mayors.htm.

⁶ Jane Elizabeth Dailey, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, and Bryant Simon, eds., *Jumpin' Jim Crow: Southern Politics from Civil War to Civil Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 4. This definition of political culture builds upon Daniel Walker Howe's articulation in Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 2-7. For additional scholarly works with an expansive view of political action and culture in the South, see Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Jane Elizabeth Dailey, *Before Jim Crow: The Politics of Race in Postemancipation Virginia*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

worked to exploit factional divisions among white leaders, and actively participated in the local rallies and debates that characterized political life in Savannah. In the beginning of Herman Myers' mayoral career, Johnson expressed confidence that under his tenure the black community would finally be given some representation in city offices. Early on Johnson's trust was rewarded, but over time Myers would lose the support of black Savannah. Even so, black residents continued to wield their remaining votes, looking for new ways to fight against their political exclusion and for a place in Savannah's future. While Johnson and black leaders recognized that the cards were stacked against them, they did not count themselves out. This study thus contributes to a growing field of scholarship that establishes race relations in the South were the result of a continually evolving dynamic between white supremacy and black protest, and African Americans wielded political influence in a variety of ways.⁷

This project also brings into relief important aspects of the history of segregation. C. Vann Woodward asserted that segregation was not an institution created in slavery, but a legal regime engineered in the 1890s and early 1900s to restrict black efforts to enjoy full citizenship rights. Historians have since challenged Woodward's thesis, some arguing that legal segregation merely codified customary, or de facto segregation, or that segregation merely replaced exclusion rather than the possibility of integration. Historians of the last few decades have refined the debate, acknowledging that while de facto segregation persisted from before the Civil War, legal segregation marked a distinct shift in the severity and rigidity of racial discrimination in the South. Originating in southern cities, segregation was styled by white politicians as a Progressive Era reform meant to alleviate racial strife and bring order to the chaos of urban life.

⁷ For works that explore black protest, see previous note, and Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999); Paul Ortiz, *Emancipation Betrayed: The Hidden History of Black Organizing and White Violence in Florida from Reconstruction to the Bloody Election of 1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Blair L. M. Kelley, *Right to Ride: Streetcar Boycotts and African American Citizenship in the Era of Plessy V. Ferguson*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

Black southerners saw segregation for what it was, a tool of racial domination, and protested with legal suits and then with boycotts. However, campaigns for progressive municipal reform in Savannah in the 1890s did not stress segregation. White politicians accepted the South's racial hierarchy, but not all of these men saw the maintenance of white supremacy as the primary objective of reform. Savannah has been known for comparatively calm race relations when compared with other cities throughout the South, and was one of the last cities to segregate its public transportation facilities. While none of the city's white politicians ever squarely defended black rights to equal citizenship, ethnocultural diversity might offer one explanation for Savannah's slower adoption of racial segregation.⁸

This dissertation also makes an important contribution to the study of urban development in the New South. Historian Don Doyle argues that port cities that thrived before the Civil War ceased to be relevant during the New South movement. This was partly the result of changes in railroad routes and commercial patterns after the Civil War, which favored burgeoning New South cities like Atlanta and Birmingham. However, Doyle also asserts that, while politicians in those places were pushing for economic development and diversification, Charleston and Mobile "failed to define and carry out an effective strategy of development," and "rejected modern definitions of progress and the ideals of the New South."⁹ Savannah, however, challenges the idea that New South cities thrived while Old South cities died. Savannah never became a

⁸ For discussion of segregation, see C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955); Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Howard N. Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Edward L. Ayers, *Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction*, 15th Anniversary ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). For comparative interpretation of segregation, see John W. Cell, *The Highest Stage of White Supremacy: The Origins of Segregation in South Africa and the American South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982). For the cultural dimensions and implications of segregation see Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998); Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow*.

⁹ Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South*, xiv.

manufacturing center like Atlanta or Birmingham, but by 1905 it was the leading port in the South Atlantic, and had the highest bank clearances of any city in Georgia. The population of the city expanded impressively, keeping Savannah among the top ten cities in the South until 1910. After 1910 Savannah's period of growth did stagnate, but this should not diminish the period of enthusiasm and development that the city experienced.¹⁰

This dissertation begins with a Prologue, discussing Savannah's founding in the early eighteenth century. While predating the subject of this dissertation by a substantial number of years, the colonial founders' vision for Savannah points to a distinctive history of reform and ethnocultural diversity that informs later discussion of the city. The men who conceived of the Georgia colony imagined a utopian community, and decided to ban slavery in order to create an atmosphere of equal opportunity. Ethnic and religious minorities found their way to Savannah because of the settlement's progressive promise, but these hopes for Savannah's future tragically collapsed after just a few decades. Chapter 1 then provides crucial background on Savannah's population and political culture in the mid-nineteenth century. Beginning with Savannah's rise to a place of commercial prominence in the 1830s, this chapter situates the local ethnic, racial and religious groups. The chapter then discusses the impact of the Civil War on the city, and how new political and economic forces created a rising commercial-civic elite, ready to take charge of Savannah's municipal affairs.

Chapter 2 examines factional politics and ethnocultural networks in Savannah through close analysis of the 1895 municipal election. The chapter follows the successful mayoral campaign of Herman Myers, and the ethnic and religious loyalties his nomination exposed. Arguing that ethnic and religious alliances influenced factions and electoral outcomes, this

¹⁰ Ibid; Lawrence H. Larson, *The Rise of the Urban South* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1985).

discussion also illuminates the lively world of municipal politics in the Forest City. Campaigns for efficiency and modernization in particular engaged ethnocultural groups, and in doing so gave black residents hope that political conditions might shift for the better. However, Chapter 3 demonstrates the limitations of progressive municipal reform in the South. Herman Myers' first term as mayor was by many measures a success, but he lost the next mayoral election to Peter Meldrim, a native-born, white Protestant of Irish heritage. Questions about what constituted effective reform, and who should shape major changes to municipal bureaucracy in a southern city, elicited a great deal of conflict between opposing factions. This close political contest augmented the political power of Savannah's black community, but ultimately rampant fraud called into question each faction's claims to represent a progressive political agenda. Myers would go on to win future elections, but the possibility for major reform had been taken away.

Chapter 4 departs from the previous two sections, adopting a thematic approach to explore Savannah's transformation into a modern city. Myers was elected to city government in 1899, and then again unopposed in 1901, 1903 and 1905, ushering in a new era of prosperity and political consensus in Savannah. Myers emphasized the need to balance fiscal responsibility with projects that would help Savannah have a more prosperous future. Looking largely at tourist and booster literature, this chapter argues that Savannah's city government and boosters worked to craft an image of Savannah that would attract investment. In the beginning of the twentieth century, Savannah was advertised as the perfect blend of history and modernity, which was the outward representation of Myers approach to municipal administration. While Savannah's black community was engaged in its own internal campaign for economic uplift, black residents became increasingly marginalized in local politicians' visions of urban reform.

The final chapter examines the end of Herman Myers political career and simultaneous efforts by Savannah's black community to fight Jim Crow segregation. After a few years of rigorous urban development, while Myers had completed many of his stated goals, his coalition's unity was deteriorating amidst charges of corruption and an increasingly volatile political climate. State and regional Progressive campaigns that emphasized white superiority and Protestant moral reform, not only spelled disaster for the state's black community, but undercut ethnocultural minorities' claims to municipal power and the ability to represent Savannah residents. In the fall of 1906, Savannah's city council decided to implement an ordinance segregating local streetcars. Savannah's black community responded by launching a yearlong boycott. However, their efforts were unsuccessful, and segregation became a major cornerstone of modern Savannah. At the same time, Myers left political office following a factional realignment that ushered in a new era in the city's history.

The careers of Myers and Johnson not only highlight the experience of the South's local political process, but also major themes that run through Savannah's political evolution. Foremost in the history of the city is the saliency of racial, ethnic and religious identity. Divisions between white and black were more fluid than we often recognize, as were political relationships between different constituencies in the South. This points to yet another theme: the complexity of motivations driving urban development and segregation. Rhetoric bandied about in Savannah's political contests did not deny white supremacy, but did employ many calls for tolerance and fair judgment associated with more contemporary views of politics. It cannot be ignored that white supremacy was the most potent force in southern politics at this time, but that does not mean it was all encompassing, and did not coexist with other complex political views that were not based on racial prejudice. Finally, this research demonstrates the ways in which the

rhetoric of reform was used as both an inclusive and exclusive political and social force. Overall, this study of Savannahs' New South makes a case for greater exploration of municipal politics, and a deeper portrait of political life in the region.

A DEBTOR'S UTOPIA: THE ORIGINAL PLAN OF SAVANNAH, 1773-1752



Savannah was designed as a utopian community. Georgia's founders sought to establish a colony predicated on the power and possibility of new beginnings. Savannah was to be a place where debtors from London could escape poverty and want, and thrive on the fruits of their labor. Slavery, an institution contrary to the redemptive mission of the colony, was banned despite its prevalence throughout the Atlantic World. The promise of this new community

² Walter J. Fraser, *Savannah in the Old South* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 15.

connected with displaced persons throughout Europe, and soon Savannah became a haven for oppressed ethnic and religious communities. Working to imprint their dream on the physical foundations of the colony, the founders implemented a town plan that concretized their belief in equal opportunity. Despite these expansive goals, the founders' vision for Savannah would remain unfulfilled.³

In 1732 the Trustees for Establishing The Colony of Georgia secured a charter for a new settlement from King George II. The Trustees, a group of twenty-one politicians, nobles and philanthropists, then went on a campaign to explain to the English people why this thirteenth colony was an asset to the crown. First, the Trustees argued that the proposed location of the new colony would serve a patriotic purpose, occupying land that would check Spanish expansion north of Florida and prevent further incursions towards the British sphere of influence. Second, supporters enticed British subjects with tales of luxuries the colony would produce. Based on the latitude of the proposed territory, as well as early surveyor's enthusiastic descriptions of the "new Eden" that awaited settlement, the Trustees believed the colony would not only be able to support itself in abundance, but produce silk, wine and olive oil, luxuries then acquired from the Middle and Far East. Patriotism and prosperity were exciting aspects recommending the colony, but the Trustees saw these as secondary to the primary mission of the colony: to serve as a charitable settlement for the deserving poor. Indeed, it was the idea of a debtors' utopia that

³ For general factual information on the founding of Georgia, see James Cobb, *Georgia Odyssey: A Short History of the State* (Athens: University of Georgia, 2008); Fraser, *Savannah in the Old South*. For essays discussing different aspects of the colonial period in Georgia, including the city plan for Savannah, see Harvey H. Jackson and Phinizy Spalding, eds., *Forty Years of Diversity: Essays on Colonial Georgia*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984). For information on James Edward Oglethorpe in particular, see Phinizy Spalding and Harvey H. Jackson, eds., *Oglethorpe In Perspective: Georgia's Founder After Two Hundred Years* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989); Phinizy Spalding, *Oglethorpe in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

captured the imagination of the British people, deeply influencing the colony that was to develop.⁴

The Trustees' philanthropic goals for Georgia were in the spirit of reform movements then sweeping early-eighteenth century Britain. Although the country was increasing its wealth through trade and commercial agriculture, the gap between the rich and the destitute was widening. The numbers of debtors languishing in prison or in dire circumstances on the streets of London appeared to be increasing without end, and they had little hope of escaping the cycle of debt and poverty in which they were caught. London's upper-class became increasingly disturbed by this collection of people in abject poverty. They were in part concerned for humanitarian reasons, but also because these individuals were not productive citizens and put a burden on the state. Believing that poverty was the result of deficient morals and indolence, London's elites sought ways to transform London's poor. The most popular solution was to establish workhouses that would teach men, women and children how to support themselves and be productive citizens.⁵

Extending the concept of the workhouse then in vogue in London, and building on the historical precedent of using colonies to resettle those needing a new start, the Trustees conceived of a charitable colony in which worthy members of London's poor would be given free passage to Georgia. In addition, the settlers would be provided with the land and supplies necessary for their personal subsistence until they could create a self-sustaining colony. Believing that laziness and improvidence were the handmaidens of poverty, the Trustees also pledged to give the settlers the moral and religious instruction necessary to transform paupers

⁴ Cobb, *Georgia Odyssey*, 2-6; Fraser, *Savannah in the Old South*, 1-6.

⁵ Ibid.; Milton L. Ready, "Philanthropy and the Origins of Georgia," in *Forty Years of Diversity*, 46-59.

into productive citizens. To reaffirm their charitable intentions, the Trustees renounced any profit that might be made from venture, and expected the colony would be supported by charitable donations and grants from Parliament. To achieve this goal, the Trustees had to convince both parliament and the public that Georgia was a charitable cause worth supporting. James Edward Oglethorpe, one of the most well known Trustees, took an especially prominent role in advertising the colony.⁶

“An Appeal for the Georgia Colony,” attributed to Oglethorpe and published in 1732, best embodied the Trustees’ charitable concept. Oglethorpe was a man of influence, a noble and a soldier, but his political career was intertwined with reform efforts aimed at London’s poor. Oglethorpe first served in parliament in 1722, when that body passed the Workhouse Act, and later the statesman would lead a crusade to reform London’s debtor prisons. In “An Appeal” Oglethorpe lamented the condition of the “numberless...lower sort of people,” who came to London with hopes of better wages, only to find themselves without allies, credit or an opportunity to make themselves “useful in *England*.”⁷ Settlement in the new Georgia colony would “save these wretched People, and give them once again an Opportunity of using their industry, once again a chance of living comfortably; they will deserve that unutterable Pleasure, but they cannot but reach” without aid.⁸ Thanks to Oglethorpe’s appeals and those of its other

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ James Edward Oglethorpe, “An Appeal for the Georgia Colony (1732),” in *The Publications of James Edward Oglethorpe*, ed. Rodney M Baine (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1994), 163.

⁸ Ibid., 164.

supporters, Georgia “soon came to enjoy an extraordinary vogue” in Britain. The fledgling venture became the beneficiary of desired charitable giving and grants from Parliament.⁹

The Trustees dedication to the philanthropic cause of their venture and the rules they instated to realize their charitable vision set Georgia apart from other colonial settlements. The founders banned hard alcohol, believing that intoxicating liquors would undermine the industrious habits they wanted the colonists to embrace. For similar reasons the Trustees also banned slavery. They believed slaves taught men to be idle, and seek wealth based on the labor of others. The Trustees, and Oglethorpe in particular, also thought that slavery would interfere with the equality of opportunity they sought to engineer on this virgin land. Carolina’s wealthy planters had expressed interest in setting up plantations in the new colony, and outlawing slavery would prevent encroachment of the wealthy into a haven for the poor. While their public justifications for outlawing slavery in Georgia were not based on arguments concerning the inalienable rights of African men and women, the policy went against the grain. The Trustees privileged a set of moral convictions over the promise of great wealth that slave labor offered.¹⁰

Oglethorpe volunteered to lead the first Georgia settlers to their destination, and like the other Trustees who renounced personal profit from the endeavor, he took the position without the expectation of fortune. Oglethorpe was in his mid-30s at the time, and had the combination of hubris and paternalism necessary for the expedition. He was a parliamentarian, champion of the poor, and a military man, having fought against the Turks in his young adulthood. In November

⁹ Ibid., 160-166. Louis De Vorsey asserts there was “no doubt that Georgia’s founder and designer of Savannah’s city plan and squares...was a utopian.” Louis De Vorsey, “The Origin and Appreciation of Savannah, Georgia’s Historic City Squares,” *Southeastern Geographer* 52, no. 1 (2012), 90. Ready, “Philanthropy and the Origins of Georgia.”

¹⁰ Betty Wood, “James Edward Oglethorpe, Race and Slavery,” in *Oglethorpe In Perspective*, 66–79. Wood asserts that Oglethorpe may have believed slavery to be a violation of the natural rights of Africans, but neither Oglethorpe nor the Trustees’ advanced this argument as a reason to ban slavery in Georgia.

of 1732 Oglethorpe set sail aboard the *Ann* with 114 English colonists, including women and children. Eight weeks later they found themselves on the shores of the New World.¹¹

Oglethorpe chose Yamacraw bluff as the site for the new settlement, an elevated spot overlooking the Savannah River, just a few miles from the Atlantic.¹² Situated on twenty-four acres, Oglethorpe planned four evenly spaced public squares. Surrounding each square were forty town lots, measuring approximately sixty feet by ninety feet. The lots were lined up along four blocks, called tithings, each bounded by a street and an alley. The forty town lots were split evenly to the north and south of each square, while to the east and west he outlined lots reserved for public buildings, known as Trustee lots. Each square and its associated lots were designated as a ward. As the city grew residents replicated the ward organization, so that by 1770 the original four wards and increased to six. Beyond the city lots, Oglethorpe also laid out garden and farm lots for the colony. Colonists were assigned three separate portions of land, a town, garden and farm lot, equaling 50 acres in total.¹³

Savannah's plan was like no other colonial city, and for this reason historians have debated the influences of its design.¹⁴ Evidence suggests that the plan was developed with great

¹¹ Fraser, *Savannah in the Old South*, 5-6; Cobb, *Georgia Odyssey*, 2-6.

¹² Historian Joan Niles Sears argues that Colonel William Bull, a surveyor from Charleston, actually chose the site for Savannah, while Oglethorpe was responsible for the city plan. Joan Niles Sears, *The First One Hundred Years of Town Planning in Georgia* (Atlanta, Ga.: Cherokee Publishing Company, 1979), 6.

¹³ John W. Reps, "C2 + L2 + S2? Another Look at the Origins of Savannah's Town Plan," in *Forty Years of Diversity*, 2; Sears, *First One Hundred Years of Town Planning in Georgia*; Mark Reinberger, "Oglethorpe's Plan of Savannah: Urban Design, Speculative Freemasonry, and Enlightenment Charity," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 81, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 839-862. De Vorse, "The Origin and Appreciation of Savannah, Georgia's Historic City Squares."

¹⁴ John Reps provides an extensive accounting of the possible influences of Savannah's plan, as well as evidence that the plan was designed amongst the Trustees before Oglethorpe arrived on Yamacraw Bluff. Both Frasier and Sears suggest that Oglethorpe based his design off of London, both in terms of what he liked and disliked about his native city's organization. Other historians suggest he had much more exotic influences, such as the design of Peking, while Reinberger argues that descriptions of biblical city plans, which were discussed among freemasons of the day, might have influenced Oglethorpe's design.

care among the Trustees prior to the colonists' arrival, so Oglethorpe was executing a well-thought out directive. First, the wards created easy units of organization for coordinating defense, while also serving as the basis for political representation. Easily replicated, the plan also allowed for orderly growth, and the open, intermittent squares would combat the unhealthful and congested conditions then persisting in London's poorer quarters. The carefully thought out plan no doubt appealed to Oglethorpe's military sensibilities, but the spacious and orderly city also offered the exact opposite of the chaotic, mean streets the colonists were used to. The appeal of the design was evident, in that Savannah residents would follow its logic as the city expanded for the next 100 years, until there were over 20 squares in the city.¹⁵

While pleasant and utilitarian, the plan also reinforced Oglethorpe and the Trustees' charitable goals for the colony. The layout of the city was meant to nourish a sense of community among settlers. One way was through the ward organization, which encouraged interaction and cooperation among neighbors. Housing lots were all equally sized, and while wealthier residents could eventually purchase multiple lots, the colonial charter did restrict the amount of land that could be owned by one individual, preventing large land consolidation – another guarantor of even opportunity. The plan also did not make centers of authority a focal point, in that government structures, churches and other public buildings were scattered throughout the city and not concentrated in a place that would become the locus of power. The city was thus truly designed as a communal space, in which government and religion shared space with the citizenry.¹⁶

¹⁵ Reps, "C2 + L2 + S2? Another Look at the Origins of Savannah's Town Plan;" Sears, *The First One Hundred Years of Town Planning in Georgia*; Reinberger, "Oglethorpe's Plan of Savannah."

¹⁶ Fraser, *Savannah in the Old South*, 11-12; Reinberger, "Oglethorpe's Plan of Savannah: Urban Design, Speculative Freemasonry, and Enlightenment Charity."

The utopian vision of Georgia came to attract other dispossessed groups who made their way to the new settlement. Only a few months after Oglethorpe first landed on Yamacraw Bluff, forty-one Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews arrived wanting to settle in the new colony.¹⁷ Oglethorpe was unaware that the Trustees back in London had voted to bar their entry, so when a Charles Town lawyer (the city was officially named Charleston in 1783) said the charter did not explicitly bar Jewish settlers – only Catholics – Oglethorpe allowed them to disembark. When the Trustees learned that Jews had been allowed into the colony, they demanded that Oglethorpe send them on their way and not allow them to become permanent residents. Oglethorpe ignored their directives and assigned city lots to the Jewish migrants. The Jewish settlers were soon full colonial citizens.¹⁸

Subsequently, Oglethorpe defied the colony's specific ban against Catholic colonists. When a ship of forty impoverished Irish indentured servants also found their way to Savannah, Oglethorpe purchased their labor for needy Savannah residents as an act of charity on both sides. While most of these newcomers were probably Protestant, since they came from northern Ireland, at least a few were Catholic. Thus Oglethorpe's altruistic gesture brought "Papists" into the Anglican colony. That same year ninety Scots and seventy-eight German Salzburger also

¹⁷ Sephardic Jews trace their roots to the Iberian Peninsula, while Ashkenazic Jews are of Germanic background. The two groups have distinct religious and cultural practices, and are also divided by language, tradition and historical experiences. Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism: a History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 5.

¹⁸ Most historians suggest that the main reason that Oglethorpe allowed the Jews to settle in the colony was because there was a physician on the *William and Sarah* (the colony's doctor had died and settlers were in the midst of a yellow fever outbreak), and they had young able-bodied men and some wealthier migrants. Oglethorpe was also apparently impressed by the conduct of the proposed settlers, which might have softened any prejudices he may have had. Greenberg, Mark I, "One Religion, Different Worlds: Sephardic and Ashkenazic Immigrants in Eighteenth-Century Savannah," in *Jewish Roots in Southern Soil: A New History* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2006), 27–45. Jews also numbered among the wealthy in London who helped gather charitable subscriptions of the colony, and who organized the *William and Sarah*'s voyage even after the Trustees banned Jews in the colony and prevented their participation in fundraising. B.H. Levy, "The Early History of Georgia's Jews," in *Forty Years of Diversity*, 163–178. For information on Jewish settlement throughout the colonial period, see William Pencak, *Jews and Gentiles in Early America, 1654-1800* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

came to Savannah. The Salzburgers (a sect of Protestants expelled from their Catholic dominated province in present day Austria) did not settle as a unit within Savannah proper, instead founding the town of Ebenezer. Although Anglicanism was supposed to be the official religion of the settlement, towards the end of the Trustee period, only 23 out of 600 residents were active in the Anglican Church. In addition to Anglicans, there were Presbyterians and a range of Protestant dissenters, as well as the Jews and Catholics, making for a religiously diverse colonial city.¹⁹

Although Oglethorpe and the Trustees had high hopes for their colony, most of the goals for their social experiment were frustrated. The only clear accomplishment of their venture was the containment of Spanish settlement in Florida. Oglethorpe secured Georgia for the English crown during King George's War when he defeated the Spanish at the battle of Bloody Marsh in 1742. British dominance was thus assured in the southern colonies. Soon after his military triumph Oglethorpe returned to London permanently, weary of his New World escapades and frustrated by the problems that plagued the Georgia colony. By the time he left it was clear the colony had not become the thriving debtor's utopia that he and the Trustees had envisioned.

In large part, the humanitarian mission was compromised even before the *Ann* left London. The colonists who were chosen to go to Georgia were not actually the debtors the Trustees supposedly had called for. The Trustees' offer of free passage, land and supplies to colonists attracted many applicants, and so the selection process became surprisingly competitive. With many settlers to choose from, the Trustees mostly picked small businessmen and out-of-work laborers. These individuals were indeed poor, but not actually debtors, and their

¹⁹ Fraser, *Savannah in the Old South*, 33. The Salzburgers and their expulsion from a Catholic nation was cited in Oglethorpe's "An Appeal for the Georgia Colony," suggesting that from the beginning it was expected they would settle in Georgia. For more information about the Salzburgers and their trip to Savannah, see Dietmar Herz and John David Smith, "'Into Danger but Also Closer to God': The Salzburgers' Voyage to Georgia, 1733-1734," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 80, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 1-26; George Fenwick Jones, *The Salzburger Saga: Religious Exiles and Other Germans Along the Savannah* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984); Herbert Weaver, "Foreigners in Ante-Bellum Savannah," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (March 1953): 1-17.

prior occupations did little to prepare them to cultivate food for their subsistence, let alone the silk and wine the Trustee's had envisioned as the colony's staple crops. The farmer-citizen-soldiers that Oglethorpe had expected to flourish did not exist. Rather, Oglethorpe reported that the colonists were "mutinous and Impatient of Labour and Discipline."²⁰ And soon, a large faction of colonists began pressuring the Trustees to remove the ban on slavery.

Life in colonial Georgia was less pleasant than the colonists had imagined. The threat of Spanish invasion was palpable for the first decade of settlement, and the area's climate proved deadly to the health of many colonists as yellow fever and other diseases ran rampant. The climate was also inhospitable to silk worms or the production of the other commodities the Trustees had envisioned, and the colony struggled to be even marginally self-supporting. Soon the colony became a drain on the Trustees and Parliament, the colonists needed basic supplies from England or neighboring colonies just to survive. As Savannah struggled to exist, the Carolinas were thriving, and colonists believed that the introduction of slave labor would allow them to get rich as well. They had little patience for the moral dictates of a group of men across the Atlantic Ocean, and worked to undermine the Trustees' authority in the colony and in England. By 1752 the Trustees had tired of sinking money into their New World venture (and of dealing with the growing number of "malcontents") and they gave the colony back to the crown. Soon a royal governor was dispatched to govern the colony, and the institution of slavery, no longer held at bay, thrived.²¹

When the Trustee period in Georgia came to an end, so too did the colony's philanthropic vision. The settlement eventually prospered, but because of enslaved labor, an institution

²⁰ Oglethorpe as quoted in Wood, "James Edward Oglethorpe, Race and Slavery," 72.

²¹ For historical evaluation of colonial Georgia, see Jack Greene, "Travails of an Infant Colony: The Search for Vitality, Coherence and Identity in Colonial Georgia," in *Forty Years of Diversity: Essays on Colonial Georgia*, 278–309.

antithetical to the principle of equal opportunity undergirding the Trustees' venture. Savannah's identity soon became inextricably bound up with slavery, and the prejudice and inequality that system bred. The city's streets and squares persisted as a reminder of the colony's original vision, a promise that as of yet, remained unfulfilled.

CHAPTER 1:

THE FOREST CITY

A new political organization called the Citizens' Club was founded in Savannah in the early 1880s. The group was made up of businessmen and professionals who wanted to see municipal government do a better job managing city services and promoting economic development. While all white men of means, the group was far from monolithic. Some were members of Savannah's antebellum elite, but many were self-made men from humbler beginnings. Immigrants from Germany and Ireland, Catholics, Protestants, and Jews, were all represented within this new class of leaders. The men of the Citizens' Club had prospered in Savannah's postwar order, and worked to seize a greater role in local government. The Citizens' Club would shape urban development at the turn of the twentieth century, and guide Savannah's transformation into a modern southern city.

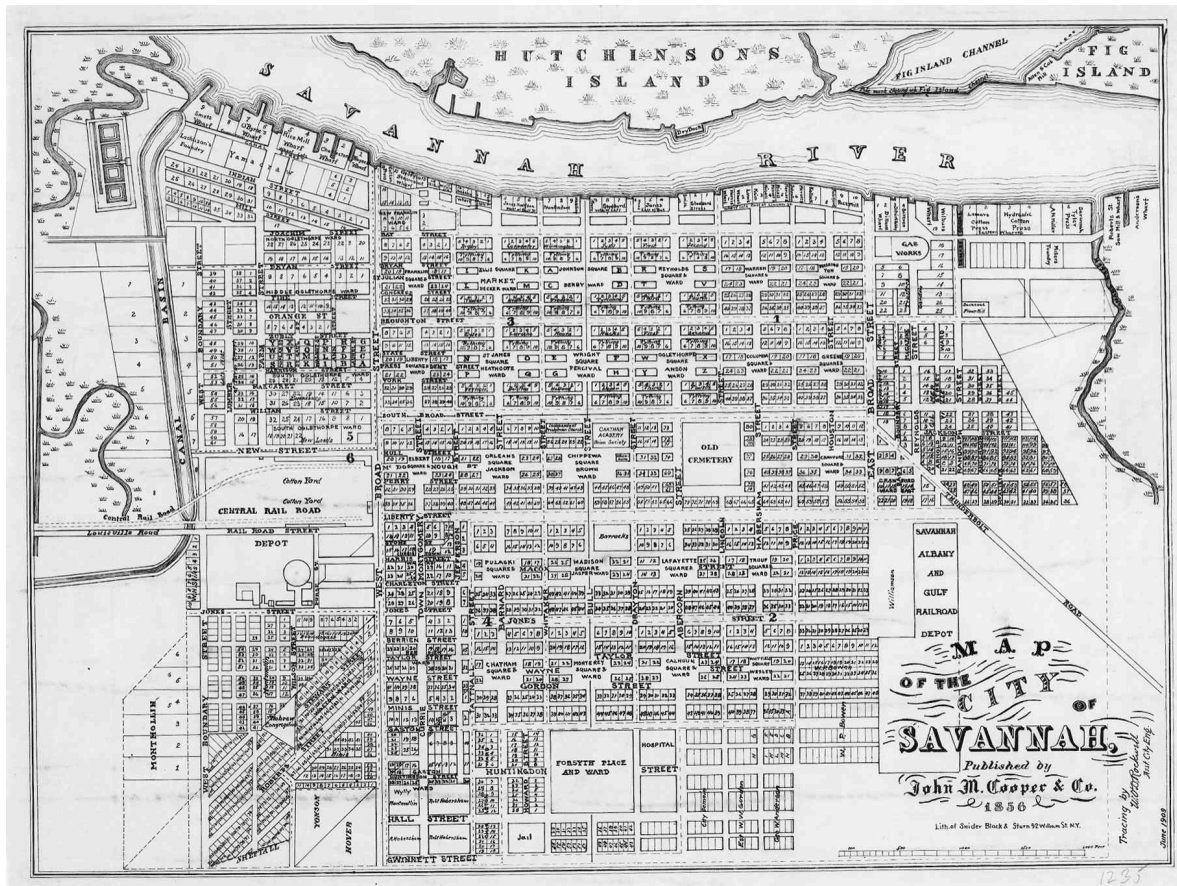
This chapter outlines the evolution of conditions in Savannah that would situate the Citizens' Club to seize control of local politics. The first section examines Savannah's commercial boom in the three decades leading up the Civil War, prosperity that was deeply intertwined with the city's slave economy. Attracted by economic opportunity, white immigrants came to Savannah and found ways to build community in a city starkly divided by class and race. These groups began to engage in Savannah's political process, but constituted a nascent political force that would grow in influence only after the Civil War. Outlining Savannah's experience in the Civil War and during Reconstruction, this chapter then highlights some of the major upheavals that permanently altered local politics and society in the city. Seeking to control the new order of things, Savannah's municipal government worked to keep black men and women

from exercising their rights as citizens. The emergence of Savannah's new commercial-civic elite from the end of Reconstruction to 1885 is discussed, along with new challenges Savannah faced as a growing city in the New South.

The Making of a Commercial City, 1830-1861

For the first half of the nineteenth century, slavery was the primary force shaping Savannah's development. Slave labor had been banned in Georgia for the first few decades of settlement, but in 1750 the British parliament authorized the practice in the last of the thirteen colonies. Just a decade later enslaved inhabitants accounted for nearly a third of Georgia's population, and by the Revolution they constituted almost half. Slaves were brought into Georgia specifically to harvest rice, the staple crop of the swampy, low-lying lands along the South Carolina and Georgia coast, known as the "lowcountry." White Europeans believed African slaves were naturally better suited to do the arduous work of flooding and draining rice fields in hot and unhealthy conditions, especially those slaves who had grown rice in their homelands in West Africa. In patterns that echoed the cultivation of sugar in the Caribbean, rice was usually produced on a large scale, with substantial holdings of both land and slaves. While rice remained a lucrative commodity, lowcountry planters also began to cultivate Sea Island, or long-staple, cotton.¹

¹ For conflict over the ban on slavery in Georgia during the Trustee period see Betty Wood, "James Edward Oglethorpe, Race and Slavery," in *Oglethorpe In Perspective: Georgia's Founder After Two Hundred Years*, ed. Phinizz Spalding and Harvey H Jackson (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989), 66–79. For general information on Savannah's economy and slavery, see Whittington B Johnson, *Black Savannah, 1788-1964* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1996); Walter J. Fraser, *Savannah in the Old South* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2003). For more information on the origins of rice cultivation in the lowcountry, and labor practices, see Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619-1877* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003); Philip D Morgon, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).



Map of Savannah, 1856²

The map shows that Savannah residents replicated the city plan James E. Oglethorpe first developed when he settled the Georgia colony in 1733. Some exceptions to this are slums on the edges of the city, particularly Yamacraw, in which housing was not organized facing green spaces.

²John Cooper, "Map of the City of Savannah" [1856], Neg 6859A, *Courtesy of Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library / University of Georgia Libraries*.

Savannah and Charleston were the two coastal ports from which lowcountry planters exported their crops, but merchants also expanded their trade to the interior of Georgia. After the invention of the cotton gin the cultivation of short-staple cotton ballooned, and plantations began stretching farther from the state's coast. Situated at the juncture where the Savannah River meets the ocean, Savannah worked to capture the cotton trade from the core of Georgia, as well as the most southern parts of South Carolina. By the early nineteenth century warehouses on the Savannah bluff held large quantities of both rice and cotton, all generated by enslaved labor.³ Proximity to waterways and fertile lands made Savannah a moderately prosperous coastal town, but the construction of railroads in the 1830s and 1840s turned Savannah into a competitive commercial port. The Central of Georgia Railroad became the most lucrative in the region, and its Savannah-to-Macon line in particular became the envy of other companies. The railroad allowed Savannah merchants to efficiently serve inland markets, increasing the city's business capacity and biting into commerce that had before gone to Charleston. By the 1850s cotton made up over four-fifths of the value of Savannah's exports, and by 1860 the Forest City was the third largest cotton port in the country, ahead of Charleston. The railroad's expansion had fueled further improvements to the port's waterways, allowing for larger vessels to come into the harbor, increasing trade once again. The financial opportunities this commercial boom provided, both for entrepreneurs and workers, swelled the population of the city.⁴ Savannah counted 7,776 residents in 1830, but by 1860 the number had grown to 22,202. On the eve of the Civil War Savannah was the sixth largest city in the South and a center of southern commerce.⁵

³ Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619-1877*; Fraser, *Savannah in the Old South*, 241-248.

⁴ Ibid., Jacqueline Jones, *Saving Savannah: The City and the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 52-53.

⁵ Ibid.; Population statistics from, *1880 (Tenth) Census*, Census Statistics (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Interior), <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/1880.html>; For information on the largest southern cities in 1860, see Don Harrison Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1860-*

Savannah's economy generated incredible wealth, but the city's white population was starkly divided between rich and poor. A small elite made up of landowners, merchants, and professionals controlled the vast majority of the city's profits, as well as city government – an arrangement favorable to their interests. These elites were involved in the cotton trade, while middling residents supported themselves as craftsmen and small business owners. The majority of the city's white men labored in unskilled and semi-skilled occupations, working on the docks or in the railroad yards. Such labor often provided a meager existence, and was seasonal, dependent on the growing seasons of rice and cotton. Many of these jobs, however, were not the sole province of white men. Savannah's white working class community worked alongside black men, both free and enslaved.⁶

In his detailed census of Savannah in 1848, Joseph Bancroft counted 5,686 black slaves and 637 free persons of color in a city of 13,573 residents, or approximately 45% of the population.⁷ Compared with life on rural plantations, Savannah's enslaved population enjoyed a greater degree of freedom in their daily lives. This was in large part due to the practice of hiring out. In return for a monthly fee, some slave-owners let their charges work outside of their purview for other individuals or businesses. Lucrative and easy for the owner, the arrangement also provided black men and women a measure of autonomy. Moving about the city as they pleased, managing their own affairs and earning supplemental income, some slaves could enjoy a comfortable existence. Hiring-out was a common practice throughout the urban South, but the

1910 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 15-16. For information on the Central of Georgia Railroad, also see Scott Reynolds Nelson, *Iron Confederacies: Southern Railways, Klan Violence, and Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 13-14 and 28.

⁶ Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 39-41. For detailed information about Savannah's economy, population and culture before the war, see Fraser, *Savannah in the Old South*.

⁷ Joseph Bancroft, *Census of the City of Savannah* (Savannah: E. J. Purse, Printer, 1848), Digital Version from Internet Archive, <http://www.archive.org/details/censusofcityofsa00banc>, 8.

independence of blacks frightened some of the city's white elite. They feared the lack of supervision and plantation discipline would give slaves aspirations of freedom, and maybe even foment rebellion.⁸

The general fluidity and anonymity of the black population in Savannah was the primary source of white concern. Masters from the countryside brought slaves with them when they travelled to the city for short or long periods, creating turnover in the population that made new faces commonplace. These transients, in combination with the large number of slaves living independently from their masters, made Savannah a haven for escaped slaves. Runaways could easily find work, as was the case with Jane, a slave who absconded from Reverend Charles C. Jones' Maybank plantation in Liberty County, Georgia. The son of Reverend Jones, Charles C. Jones, Jr, a lawyer and future mayor of Savannah, found Jane working as maid for a widow in the city. Jones lamented that in Savannah "hundreds of Negroes...go about from house to house – some carpenters, some house servants, etc. – who never see their masters except at pay day, live out of their yards, hire themselves without written permit, etc." According to Jones this system was not only "very wrong," but also "injurious" to the master-slave relationship that formed the very foundation of southern society. The fear that Jane would return to Maybank and induce others to escape with "tales of Savannah and of high life in the city," prompted Jones to sell Jane and her family.⁹ The slave auction in Savannah was located on Bryan Street. Men,

⁸ Johnson, *Black Savannah*, 85-106; For discussion of enslaved men and women beyond Savannah, including family life, labor, and relationships with whites, see Brenda E. Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1998); Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003); Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619-1877*.

⁹ Letter from Mr. Charles C. Jones, Jr. to Rev C.C. Jones, Savannah, Wednesday October 1st, 1856 in Robert Manson Myers, ed., *The Children of Pride: A True Story of Georgia and the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 241. The incident with Jane and the Jones family is described in Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 65.

women and children were held in “pens” throughout commercial district until the first Monday of every month, when the “time for this traffic in slaves, and the souls of men” arrived.¹⁰

Savannah therefore provided a measure of freedom for black men and women, but not without constant reminders of the barbarities of the slave system.¹¹

Savannah did have a small free black population, numbered at 637 in Bancroft’s census, but they lacked the same rights as white inhabitants. Not considered citizens, free blacks were subjected to a harsh labyrinth of restrictive city ordinances and state laws. Free blacks had to register yearly with the local government, find a white guardian to oversee their affairs, and give up to 20 days of labor to the city without compensation. Laws also put prohibitions on teaching reading or writing, from congregating in certain places at certain times, owning property (though some guardians helped circumvent this law), and starting in 1857 free blacks had to pay \$100 just for moving to Savannah. While often laxly enforced, these restrictions were meant to discourage free black settlement. Denied citizenship, these men and women were still not free in the fullest sense.¹²

Aside from legal distinctions, little differentiated the daily lives free blacks and slaves in Savannah. These populations labored at the same jobs, attended the same churches and lived in the same parts of the city. The majority of black men worked as longshoremen, railroad laborers, and draymen, and a small portion worked in skilled trades, or in personal services, such as barbering and tailoring. The most common jobs for black women were as laundresses,

¹⁰ Quoted in Preston Russell and Barbara Hines, *Savannah: A History of Her People Since 1733* (Savannah, Ga: Frederic C. Beil, 1992), 100-101.

¹¹ For information on the slave trade in Savannah, see Johnson, *Black Savannah*, 88-89. For general discussion of the domestic slave trade see Walter Johnson, *Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999); Steven Deyle, *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹² Johnson, *Black Savannah*, 37-54.

seamstresses, bakers and household servants, as well as hucksters, selling produce at the City Market. Relegated largely to menial occupations, the social heart of Savannah's black community resided in churches throughout the city. Savannah had dynamic black religious institutions, including the first independent black church in the South. Andrew Bryan founded the First African Baptist Church in 1788, and within the next hundred years several other Baptist congregations formed. These churches provided the only space where black men and women could take positions of leadership. The Methodists were another large denomination, but worship was overseen by white co-religionists, as was the case with bi-racial Catholic and Presbyterian churches. Black Savannah was divided amongst many different churches and denominations, and churches serving black congregant's were scattered throughout the city.¹³

The geographic spread of religious institutions reflects that Savannah was a walking city, with racially diverse neighborhoods. The city's wealthy white community built elaborate homes in the center of the city along the squares that James Oglethorpe had first surveyed for the city in the 1730s. These areas of the city brought black and white into close proximity, since black servants often lived in back alleyways behind their masters' homes. This arrangement catered to white masters, who wanted the convenience and the control of having their slaves nearby, but in turn created mixed neighborhoods. The city's slums of Yamacraw, Old Fort and Currytown, to the eastern and western edges of the city, were also not segregated or dominated by a particular racial group. Nearly every ward in the city was split almost evenly between black and white. Yamacraw, within Oglethorpe Ward, had been settled by freed slaves early in the city's history, and for this reason the neighborhood has historically often associated with black residents. This area did have the highest concentration of black residents in the city, but only because of high

¹³ Ibid, 7-35.

population density, and not because black inhabitants had a clear majority in the ward. Joining black residents in these slums were poor southern-born whites, but also a growing number of immigrants who came to Savannah in search of opportunity.¹⁴

During the commercial boom of the 1830s and 1840s, Irish workers flocked to Savannah, escaping famine in their home country for promise of work abroad. With scant resources, the Irish swelled Savannah's unskilled and semi-skilled labor force, taking jobs building railroads and as stevedores, warehousemen, draymen and cotton pressers at the port. A substantial number of German immigrants also arrived in Savannah. Germans typically arrived with more financial resources than their Irish counterparts, joining Savannah's economy in semi-skilled and skilled labors, and as merchants and businessmen. The effects of this in-migration were staggering, and changed the character of the city's population. By 1860 51% of Savannah's white male population over the age of 18 was foreign born. In addition, 15% of white men were Yankees born in the North, leaving only 33% "native" white southerners. The Irish were a distinct majority of this foreign born population, constituting approximately 31%, and second were the Germans, who constituted almost 10% of the foreign-born population prior to the Civil War.¹⁵ Needing cheap quarters, white immigrants had little choice but to pack themselves into tenements and live among the city's black population. The Irish moved into Yamacraw and Oglethorpe Ward on the west side of the city, and an area on the east side of the city referred to

¹⁴ Joseph Bancroft, *Census of the City of Savannah* (Savannah: E. J. Purse, Printer, 1848); Johnson, *Black Savannah*, 139; Fraser, *Savannah in the Old South*, 216-217. For more information about Savannah neighborhoods, see Roulhac Toledano, *The National Trust Guide to Savannah: Architectural and Cultural Treasures* (New York: Preservation Press, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997); Hoskins, Charles Lwanga, *Out of Yamacraw and Beyond: Discovering Black Savannah* (Savannah: Gullah Press, 2002).

¹⁵ Statistics from Dennis C. Rousey, "From Whence They Came to Savannah: The Origins of an Urban Population in the Old South," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 79, no. 2 (1995): 305-336; Jacqueline Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 47-51. See also, Herbert Weaver, "Foreigners in Ante-Bellum Savannah," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (March 1953): 1-17; Mark I Greenberg, "Creating Ethnic, Class and Southern Identity in Nineteenth Century America: The Jews of Savannah, Georgia, 1830-1880" (Dissertation, University of Florida, 1997).

as the Old Fort – since it developed within the walls of Old Fort Wagner. Wood tenements, overcrowding, and poor sanitation, characterized these neighborhoods, as did interracial gambling houses and rowdy saloons. While white elites complained about the vice in these neighborhoods, they largely stayed out of them, mixing with poor immigrants only in the city’s official commercial spaces such as the docks and City Market.¹⁶

These immigrants added a new ethnocultural element to city life, particularly the Irish. Some earlier Irish immigrants had been Protestant, but the majority of the recent immigrants were Catholic. Despite prevalent anti-Catholic prejudice throughout the United States at this time, Catholics in Savannah practiced their faith unmolested, and the influence of the Catholic Church increased as the Irish population grew. The Irish also celebrated cultural holidays in Savannah, most famously St. Patrick’s Day, and established volunteer fire and militia companies to display their public spirit. In addition, the Irish created institutions dedicated to the welfare of their community. On such group, the Hibernian Society, was dedicated to “the maintenance of a filial attachment for the Mother Country; the aid of distressed Irishmen and their descendants; the relief of indigent widows and orphans of Irishmen and their descendants,” along with the basic aim of giving charity.¹⁷ The Irish came to the city for economic opportunity, and some remained transient workers, but soon the Irish created a self-sustaining cultural community in Savannah.

German immigrants shared some aspects of the Irish immigrant experience, but were less cohesive than the Irish as an ethnocultural community. While also coming into Savannah in

¹⁶ Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 41-42; Fraser, *Savannah in the Old South*, 216-217; David T Gleeson, *The Irish in the South, 1815-1877* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 58. For general information on the Irish in Savannah, see Edward M. Shoemaker, “Strangers and Citizens: The Irish Immigrant Community of Savannah, 1837-1861” (Dissertation, Emory University, 1990).

¹⁷ Arthur O’Hara, *The Story of a Century: The Hibernian Society of Savannah Georgia, 1812-1912* (Savannah: Braid and Hutton, 1912), 133; Edward M. Shoemaker, “Strangers and Citizens.”

growing numbers, Germans immigrants were often more skilled workers or involved in commercial trade. The cotton market remained predominantly in the hands of landowners and native whites, while Germans typically owned groceries and soon dominated the markets of the dry goods and wholesale trade. Unlike the Irish, who became increasingly associated with the Old Fort neighborhood, Germans were more upwardly mobile and soon spread throughout the interior of the city with no distinct neighborhood. Spatially scattered, German immigrants were also divided by religious affiliation, a mixture of Catholics, Protestants and Jews, and thus spread across religious institutions. This is not to say that Germans rejected their ethnic ties – quite the contrary. Germans established cultural organizations and mutual aid societies, and hosted cultural events. Germans might not have exerted the same physical and political influence in Savannah that the Irish did, but they did have a presence, and as their community grew in numbers and financial strength, so did their power in civic affairs.¹⁸

The Jewish population was both a small and diverse enclave in Savannah. Jews had come to Savannah in its first year of settlement, and even then the population was divided between Ashkenazim, of German and Eastern European descent, and Sephardim, of Iberian heritage.¹⁹ Together these groups founded one of the first Jewish congregations in North America, called Mickve Israel, or the Hope of Israel. By the mid-nineteenth century the descendants of these early Jewish settlers were fully assimilated southerners, and many owned slaves and participated in various social organizations with white Christians, including the Freemasons and Union Society. In 1850 there were a total of 139 Jews in Savannah, and by 1860 there were 345. In both counts Jews born in the United States predominated, many coming from other locals in the South

¹⁸ Rousey, “From Whence They Came to Savannah”; Herbert Weaver, “Foreigners in Ante-Bellum Savannah”; Greenberg, “Creating Ethnic, Class and Southern Identity.”

¹⁹ Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: a History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 5.

and from the North during the city's commercial boom. However, the percentage of German Jews jumped from 24.5% to 32.5% over the course of the decade, shifting the ethnic affiliations of the Jewish community as a whole.²⁰

These immigrants soon became engaged in local politics, but as constituents and not as political leaders. Savannah's city government remained firmly in the hands of the wealthy, "a tight-knit directorate of merchants, bankers, planters, physicians, and lawyers."²¹ In the decade before the Civil War, only 136 men ran for the 143 available positions of mayor and aldermen. Some German and Irish immigrants were able to succeed enough financially to count themselves among the city's wealthy class, but government remained predominantly native-born and protestant. Even so, elites depended on the white laborers for their political power. To curry favor with the city's working poor, politicians mitigated city court sentences, handed out political jobs, and reminded white laborers of their shared racial status.²²

In Savannah the Irish in particular proved to be adept political organizers, and presented a unified front that made them a force in local politics. The requirements for voting in city elections were not particularly restrictive. One just had to be white, twenty-years old, and have lived in Georgia for one year and Savannah for just four months. The door to political participation open, the Irish gained a reputation for actively courting patronage positions and sometimes used bullying and violence to sway elections. White elites in Savannah certainly did not appreciate this new faction in their midst, but they were too numerous to be sidelined. In fact,

²⁰ Greenberg, "Creating Ethnic, Class and Southern Identity," 64. Greenberg argues that Jews in Savannah developed multiple and overlapping identities, complicating the idea that there was one ethno-religious identity shared by all Jews in Savannah. For a comprehensive chronicle of Jewish life in Savannah, see Saul Jacob Rubin, *Third to None: The Saga of Savannah Jewry, 1733-1983* (Savannah: S.J. Rubin, 1983).

²¹ Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 41.

²² *Ibid.*, 39-43.

several Irish-Catholics managed to get elected city aldermen. However the city's at-large municipal election diluted the influence of ethnocultural groups like the Irish. The mayor and alderman had to be elected with broad support from all of Savannah, and not just one constituency.²³

On the eve of the Civil War Savannah was a burgeoning commercial port with a diverse population of residents. The city had grown around the trade of rice and cotton, staples produced by slave labor. Slaves themselves were an integral population in Savannah, involved in every sector of the city's economy even as they were relegated to the bottom rung of southern society. Over time immigrants settled in Savannah, shaping the dynamics of urban culture and politics as they sought economic opportunity. Blacks and white ethnocultural groups constituted a nascent political force in Savannah, and their potential would be unlocked through the upheavals of the Civil War.

Civil War and Reconstruction, 1861-1871

The Civil War radically changed the fortunes of Savannah and its inhabitants. The Forest City avoided the physical destruction that befell so many other southern cities, but it did not escape the upending of its economy and social structure. For approximately one hundred years Savannah had revolved around the institution of slavery, and with its destruction white Savannah's world had lost its moorings. White elites in particular would not adjust easily to change, and used the machinery of Savannah's municipal government to reinstitute a racial caste system. At the same time, the city's black inhabitants, and freed men and women throughout the

²³ Ibid., 41; Shoemaker, "Strangers and Citizens: The Irish Immigrant Community of Savannah, 1837-1861." Weaver, "Foreigners in Ante-Bellum Savannah." For general information related to the Irish and Politics in the South, see Gleeson, *The Irish in the South, 1815-1877*; Kieran Quinlan, *Strange Kin: Ireland and the American South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005).

lowcountry, sought to exercise their freedom, and for the first time define their own life and labors. The Civil War and Reconstruction remade Savannah, but few could predict what the city's new social and political landscape would look like.²⁴

When the crises of the 1850s culminated with Lincoln's election in the fall of 1860, Savannah's white population eagerly joined the wave of secession that swept the South. Chatham County, encompassing Savannah, elected three stalwart disunionists to Georgia's secession convention in January of 1861, and later that month that body officially passed the ordinance of secession. The decision was met with celebration in Savannah as white men and women cheered the Rebel cause. Young men across class lines rushed to enlist, vowing to repel northern invaders and protect the southern way of life. Irish and Germans, Jews, Protestants and Catholics, all joined the war effort, many of whom are already part of militia groups or fire companies for the city. Many did have reservations about the war, and its effect on Savannah's economy, but these were most often private reflections obscured by outward patriotism.²⁵ One local politician summed up the sentiment, proclaiming "We are ready for war ... It is a practical question with us, not only as to existence and prosperity, but whether we are to [be] disfranchised of our liberties and subjugated to domination of the Black Race."²⁶

²⁴ Much of the information for this section will be drawn from Jacqueline Jones, *Saving Savannah*. This comprehensive scholarly work follows Savannah throughout the Civil War and Reconstruction, with a particular emphasis on black men and women throughout the lowcountry. Jones provides far more information than can be summarized here, but her narrative of Savannah's experience of the war, and the way in which the city government sought to reinstitute its power after the war, are the aspects most relevant to this dissertation.

²⁵ Jones, *Saving Savannah*; Fraser, *Savannah in the Old South*, 319-320. For general information on why men enlisted, see James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). And for more information about secession see Charles B Dew, *Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001).

²⁶ Quote by Richard Arnold, future mayor of Savannah, in Russell and Hines, *Savannah: A History of Her People Since 1733*, 103.

Georgia joined the Confederate States of America (CSA) in February of 1861, and from the start there were tensions between the CSA, Georgia's governor and Savannah's local politicians. For the first part of the war Georgia's governor, Joseph Brown, constantly sought to assert his state's autonomy, particularly when it came to allocating armed volunteers. Even before the secession ordinance officially passed, Brown ordered the seizure of Fort Pulaski, the federal fortification seventeen miles from the city on the Savannah River. This spirit of unilateralism was characteristic of Brown throughout the war. One of Jefferson Davis' biographers asserted that "Brown demonstrated an amazing capacity for tenacious obstructionism and perverse obstinacy," which created friction between Georgia and the CSA leadership. This conflict in turn hindered the development of a cohesive defensive strategy for Savannah.²⁷

A thriving commercial center in a strategic area of Georgia's coastline, Savannah was of military importance to Georgia and the Confederacy as a whole, and thus a likely target for federal troops. Brown's seizure of Fort Pulaski, as well as Fort Jackson even closer to Savannah, were intelligent maneuvers, securing the Savannah River as a Confederate waterway. Savannah then became a haven for blockade runners and the movement of military supplies and people. As long as rail lines remained intact Savannah could transport goods into the southern interior. Soldiers also began building defensive fortifications around the city, aided by enslaved labor. More than three hundred black men were sent from plantations in Chatham, Bryan and Liberty counties to construct Savannah's protective barrier. Even with these efforts, city residents rarely felt that enough was being done to protect the city, and Governor Brown, city officials and the

²⁷ William J Cooper, Jr., *Jefferson Davis, American* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 371; Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 129.

Confederate military continued to argue over the number of troops that should be garrisoned in the area.²⁸

Savannah's white inhabitants felt especially insecure in early November of 1861, as Union troops invaded nearby Hilton Head and Tybee Islands. Many with the means to do so fled the city, and those with slaves sought to "refugee" them into other parts of the South, away from the reach of federal troops. Governor Brown eventually ceded control of the city's security to the Confederate Army, and more troops arrived just as residents either left or prepared for the worst. Confidence was shattered once more when the troops at Fort Pulaski surrendered their post, giving the Union complete control of the Savannah River. To prevent Confederate troops and blockade runners from using the waterway, Union forces sank old ships filled with stones in the river, dubbed the Union's "stone fleet." With its water access denied, Savannah's strategic importance dwindled, and its defense became less of a priority for the Rebel army. Confederate officials soon began moving more troops from Savannah to Augusta, infuriating white residents who felt Savannah was being abandoned.²⁹

With the enemy near, Savannah officials continued to focus on protecting the city. By the summer of 1862 approximately 1,500 enslaved men labored on the fortifications in or around Savannah. Yet the city's isolation made living conditions increasingly intolerable, for shortages and crushing inflation made even the most basic supplies difficult to obtain. Eventually the city began handing out supplies to destitute inhabitants, seeking to preempt the bread riots that swept other southern cities in the spring of 1863. Coinciding with the mounting misery of Savannahians, army desertions grew more numerous. Deserters were either tired of life as

²⁸ Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 144; Fraser, *Savannah in the Old South*, 321.

²⁹ Ibid., 325-331; Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 146-147.

soldiers, or returned home to help their families survive the rest of the war. Many yeoman farmers and workingmen started to wonder why they were fighting, and if the wealthy slave-owners that had instigated the conflict were bearing an equal part of the burden. By summer of 1863 life in Savannah grew even more desperate, as rampant disease and scant resources haunted the city.³⁰

The tensions caused by wartime not only fell disproportionately on the poor, but also exacerbated underlying ethnic and religious tensions. Jews in particular came under scrutiny. Many Jews were employed as peddlers and storeowners, and were therefore targeted when speculation and spiraling inflation hit Georgians hard. Savannahian George Mercer denounced Jews as “the worst people we have among us; their exemption from military duty, their natural avarice, and their want of principle in this contest, render them particularly obnoxious; they are all growing rich, while the brave soldier gets poorer and his family starve.”³¹ Mercer’s claim that Jews did not serve in the Confederacy is erroneous, for many served as soldiers, and in Jefferson Davis’ cabinet. The city of Thomasville, Georgia took their prejudice to the extreme and expelled Jews from their midst. Savannah’s Jewish community responded to the outrage with a proclamation, arguing “this wholesale slander, persecution, and denunciation of a people, many of whom are pouring out their blood on the battle fields of their country in defense of civil and religious liberty,” was inexcusable.³²

³⁰ Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 158-186. For information on conditions on the confederate homefront see Gary Gallagher, *The Confederate War: How Popular Will, Nationalism and Military Strategy Could Not Stave Off Defeat* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997); Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

³¹ George Mercer as quoted in Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 145.

³² Rubin, *Third to None: The Saga of Savannah Jewry, 1733-1983*, 137-138. For information on Jewish service in the Confederacy, see Robert N. Rosen, *The Jewish Confederates* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2000). A well-known example of anti-Semitism during the Civil War is Ulysses S. Grant’s expulsion of Jews from Kentucky, Tennessee and Mississippi with General Order #11. The measure was rescinded, but like Mercer,

Divisions within white Savannah were growing, but the primary source of social upheaval was the black population. Black inhabitants fervently hoped that the conflict would finally bring about their freedom, which manifested in an increasing sense of restlessness and a breakdown in deferential manners that had governed pre-war interracial interactions. The number of African Americans brought before Savannah's mayor's court increased by 400% during the war, while incarcerations increased by half.³³ These numbers not only suggest greater assertiveness, and anticipation of freedom among the black population, but also the attempts of local government to maintain the city's caste system, seemingly with little success. Planters likewise ran aground of their own propaganda, confronted with the reality that black men and women were not the docile, contented and grateful "children" they had thought. Whites with plantations in the areas surrounding Savannah constantly complained that their slaves became increasingly resistant to plantation discipline. Women who tended plantations and households while men were at war reported that slaves did not do as they were told, and were more concerned for their own affairs than that of their masters. Owners also had to negotiate more than usual with enslaved men and women, particularly when they sought to "refugee" slaves inland and away from the reach of federal troops. Such moves separated black families, and required black men and women to abandon homes, gardens, livestock and other possessions accumulated over time to supplement their lives as human chattel. Families put up such resistance to refugeeing that many masters made arrangements to pay their slaves for tangible losses, as way to convince them to move and not escape when faced with removal.³⁴

Grant accused the Jews of speculation. Jonathan D Sarna, *When General Grant Expelled the Jews* (New York: Schocken Books, 2012).

³³ Fraser, *Savannah in the Old South*, 328.

³⁴ Jones, *Saving Savannah*.

Throughout the war “the whole lowcountry region was like a giant sieve,” in which blacks drained from Confederate territory to Union lines.³⁵ Since the beginning of the war slaves flocked to Union held territory, but not until Lincoln announced the Emancipation Proclamation was it clear that a United States victory would indeed mean freedom for Georgia’s enslaved population. Congress’s decision in July of 1862 to enlist black troops in the army reinforced the expectation that black men would become full citizens. Eventually 3,500 black Georgians would enlist to fight in the Union army.³⁶

Savannah residents had long expected a coastal attack, but in the end Federal troops came from the interior of Georgia. General William Tecumseh Sherman and his troops had been marching through the Georgia heartland as part of a military campaign meant to bisect the Confederacy and “make Georgia howl!”³⁷ After seizing Atlanta on September 2, Sherman’s troops followed the Central of Georgia railway line to Savannah, taking provisions from the countryside and destroying infrastructure along the way. The railroad that had once fueled Savannah’s prewar prosperity was now reduced to twisted railroad ties, or “Sherman hairpins,” and decimated depots and equipment. Once it became clear that Sherman’s force was indeed moving on Savannah, Colonel Hardee and the remaining Confederate troops in the city made arrangements to retreat. Constructing an impressive length of pontoon bridges, the troops escaped under cover of night to Hutchinson Island and then into South Carolina. With Sherman approaching and Confederate troops retreating, it was clear to city officials that it was up to them to prevent the city’s certain destruction at the hands of Yankee barbarians. City officials sent a

³⁵ Ibid., 147.

³⁶ James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 500; Jones, *Saving Savannah: The City and the Civil War*, 154; Johnson, *Black Savannah*, 155-182.

³⁷ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 808.

delegation to Sherman's troops to surrender, and so Union forces marched into Savannah without loss of life. The United States flag then flew over the City Exchange.³⁸

While city officials' decision to surrender was prudent, in truth Savannah had little that Sherman's troops planned to destroy. The Confederate soldiers had dumped what extra ammunition they had into the river as they retreated, and the city had "no functional railroad hub, no critical factories or arsenals," and had been reduced through shortages, disease and war to a shadow of its former thriving self.³⁹ Sherman, in residence at an ornate mansion in the center of town, sought to keep order in the city and respect the Rebel population. Sherman let the municipal government resume some of its responsibilities, and encouraged residents to go about their business as best they could. Union occupation was thus less traumatic than it could have been, but whites, especially the former landed elite, felt a deep sense of foreboding. The sight of freedpeople moving about the city's public spaces and cheering military exercises of Union soldiers foretold of changes to come.⁴⁰

The most immediate sign of the new world order were the freedpeople that flooded into Savannah from the interior of Georgia and South Carolina. Exercising their right to mobility, while seeking lost family members, rations and new economic opportunities, Savannah's streets and parks filled with black men, women and children. Savannah's white residents already felt keenly the shame of defeat and emancipation, and the growing number of blacks flowing into the city did not ease their alarm. While African Americans always had a visible presence in Savannah, they were now laying claim to urban space in new ways. Freedpeople moved into parks and areas normally ceded to elite whites, and they were not abiding by deferential

³⁸ Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 197-207; Fraser, *Savannah in the Old South*, 338-339.

³⁹ Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 208.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

traditions of interracial interaction from pre-war years. It was clear to elites that they no longer had control of the black population or their city. Many whites feared revenge from their former chattel, and this paranoia manifested itself in the constant belief that a riot was imminent.⁴¹

While there were no major riots in Savannah, racial animosity did bubble up into violence. Fights on the streets between white and black individuals sometimes escalated into group conflicts, as nearby onlookers jumped into the fray. Once such incident occurred in July of 1866, when an argument led to a brawl in which shots were fired and one black man was killed. One of the white assailants was arrested to prevent a full-scale melee, but he was eventually acquitted.⁴² With tensions running high, a small tussle had the potential to escalate into a much greater conflict, as evidenced by numerous violent conflicts between whites and blacks throughout the South at this time. Most conflicts seemed to arise over access to public space, and the “behavior” of freed slaves. Whites saw black assertions of equality as evidence as dangerous insolence and disrespect for white superiority. In response city officials closed parks and other public facilities to prevent freedmen from using them. With the hierarchy of the slave system now gone, the proximity of whites and blacks throughout Savannah started to elicit more concern from whites. In response, Savannah’s white elites looked for ways to reconstitute its traditional authority.⁴³

⁴¹ Jones, *Saving Savannah*. For information about movement of blacks after slavery, and their experiences in southern cities, see Howard N Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Leon F Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980). For discussion of the breakdown of customs of deference and battles over public space, see Jane Elizabeth Dailey, *Before Jim Crow: The Politics of Race in Postemancipation Virginia*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

⁴² Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 263.

⁴³ Robert Eugene Perdue, *The Negro in Savannah, 1865-1900* (New York: Exposition Press, 1973), 11-14.

Savannah's municipal government became the means through which whites kept freedpeople's aspirations in check. The Union military's decision to allow the city government to maintain responsibility for policing black inhabitants was detrimental to the struggle for black self-determination during Reconstruction. Had the Union army stepped in, or had the local Freedmen's Bureau been more effective, the city's black community would have had a better foundation on which to assert their rights after the war. Georgia new state constitution, drafted in 1865, excluded African Americans from the electorate, and prevented black voters from participating in Savannah's subsequent city election. With the same pre-war electorate, Savannah returned the same cadre of Confederate supporters to office. Frustrated by political exclusion, and generally disappointed in the fruits of Union victory, Savannah's black community continued to assert their new free status on city streets. City government responded with large numbers of arrests and prosecutions of black inhabitants on trumped up charges with harsh punishments. Adding to threat of incarceration, city government passed new ordinances to restrict black behavior and thwart further assertions of citizenship rights.⁴⁴

The unfettered autonomy of Savannah's city government was, however, interrupted by Radical Reconstruction. The United States Congress was angry over the South's recalcitrance, and forced southern states to rewrite their constitutions to include the Fifteenth Amendment. In the summer of 1867, over 3,000 blacks and 2,240 whites registered to vote in Savannah. The greater number of registered black voters was due both to the enthusiasm of freedmen, and restrictions preventing some ex-Confederates from voting.⁴⁵ In 1868, Georgia chose 37 black delegates to attend the state constitutional convention, which was made up of 169 people. The

⁴⁴ Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 239-264. For more information on the Freedmen's Bureau in Georgia, see Paul A. Cimbala, *Under the Guardianship of the Nation: The Freedmen's Bureau and the Reconstruction of Georgia, 1865-1870* (Atlanta, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1997).

⁴⁵ Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 288.

first state election after the new constitution was drafted, voters chose 29 black men to serve in the legislature.⁴⁶ In addition, Republicans won a close but clear majority in Chatham County, due completely to the support of black voters. However, not long after this historic new congress convened, white Democrats and Republicans cooperated to expel the black representatives. They claimed that the new state constitution did not directly allow black men to hold office, even if it accepted their right to vote. The federal government eventually forced the state legislature to readmit these black members, and once again rewrite its constitution and be readmitted to the Union for a third time. However, the tide had already turned against black voters, and by 1870 fraud and intimidation greatly reduced the state's black electorate. By 1871 the Democrats had unencumbered control of the state legislature, and Georgia was "redeemed."⁴⁷

Throughout this tumultuous period of Radical Reconstruction municipal elections in Savannah were suspended by order of the U.S. Army as part of military occupation. Local officials welcomed this respite, for they would rather have no elections than run the risk of having freedmen voted in. With local politics in a holding pattern, incumbent officials used the time to devise new ways to insulate city government from the black electorate. The city had functioned with at-large elections before the war, meaning that the city would vote as a whole for twelve aldermen that joined the mayor to make up city council. However, with the prospect of black voters and office seekers looming, the incumbent city government devised a new means of choosing candidates for office. The solution was to divide the city into districts, which would then appoint delegates to a committee that would choose municipal candidates. Adding a layer

⁴⁶ Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 293, 309.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 318-322, 342. For general works on Reconstruction, see Eric Foner, *Reconstruction, 1863-1877: America's Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988); Michael W. Fitzgerald, *Splendid Failure: Postwar Reconstruction in the American South*, (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2007); George C Rable, *But There Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007).

between the voter and the actual candidates would act as an informal primary that could be used to filter out black politicians. The city also added its own poll tax, which it could legally require as long as the money went towards education. The tax was not only prohibitive for many voters, both white and black, but the funds raised went specifically towards white schools in the city.⁴⁸ When city elections were finally held, black residents continued to push for their right to vote. In response city officials fraudulently turned away black voters when they came to register, and used intimidation tactics to discourage them from even attempting to cast their votes. Since black voters were prevented from exercising their full electoral strength, the new city government was entirely white, and represented a conservative faction decidedly against black citizenship rights. Even so, there were some signs of change in Savannah's city government. All twelve newly elected aldermen were new to city government, including two immigrants, one Irish and one German.⁴⁹

By the end of Reconstruction Savannah was deeply changed, but in many ways still clinging to the past. Black residents were freed from slavery, and continued to push for political rights despite numerous obstacles. Whites in turn were demoralized by the war, and even as they successfully prevented blacks from enjoying their full measure of freedom, the door to political and social equality had been opened, and could not be shut so easily. Neither blacks nor whites were satisfied with Savannah in 1871, but both looked expectantly to the future.

⁴⁸ Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 337-339, 357.

⁴⁹ Jones, *Saving Savannah*, 338. For more information about urban politics in southern cities during Reconstruction, see Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South*, 259-281.



Scene in the Negro Quarter—Savannah, Ga.

*Scene in the Negro quarter, Savannah, Georgia*⁵⁰

⁵⁰ George Barker, *Scene in the Negro Quarter, Savannah, Ga*, 1886, Library of Congress, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2009631318/>.

The New South Emergent, 1871-1890

Following Reconstruction Savannah's municipal government looked for ways to restart the city's economy and recapture its antebellum prosperity.⁵¹ While the Forest City survived the Civil War physically intact, its commercial life-lines had been destroyed. The railroads to and from the port lay in ruins, and war-related debris in the river and harbor hampered trade. Many Savannahians were worried that the city would never regain its pre-war economic status, a fear that was justified as upstart cities like Atlanta gobbled up Savannah's previous markets.⁵² In response Savannah's city government sold bonds to finance various improvement projects meant to revive the city's commercial capabilities. These included dredges to remove obstructions from Savannah's harbor, drainage projects, street paving, and an overhaul of the dilapidated city market. However, simultaneously pursuing multiple costly improvement projects overextended the city's economy, and in 1877 the city defaulted on its debt. Savannah managed to avoid going bankrupt, a fate many other cities were unable to circumvent, but it remained insolvent until 1885. In order to avoid similar financial disasters in the future, city leaders vowed to take a more methodical approach to municipal administration and development.⁵³

Savannah was also increasingly influenced by the New South movement, which emphasized industrialization and modernization. The movement originated with business-minded politicians in 1880s Atlanta. Their chief spokesman, newspaper editor, Henry Grady,

⁵¹ Since commerce at the port had depended on crops produced by slave labor, economic revival was largely intertwined with the countryside. Throughout Reconstruction landowners and former slaves clashed over land and what free black labor would look like in the South. Conflicts specifically in Savannah's hinterlands are discussed in Jones, *Saving Savannah*.

⁵² For information how trade and supply lines changed after the Civil War, see Nelson, *Iron Confederacies: Southern Railways, Klan Violence, and Reconstruction*.

⁵³ Lisa Denmark, "'At the Midnight Hour': Economic Dilemmas and Harsh Realities in Post-Civil War Savannah," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 90, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 350–390. See also Lisa Louise Denmark, "At the Midnight Hour: Optimism and Disillusionment in Savannah, 1865-1880" (Dissertation, University of South Carolina, 2004).

believed that the South needed to move beyond staple agriculture, and build up its industrial capabilities if it ever wanted to regain its pre-war wealth. To achieve this end the South would need investment from the North, but after the turmoil of Reconstruction and the bankruptcy crises of the 1870s, the South had to prove its worth. In particular northern investors would hesitate to provide capital if southern cities did not have efficient and reliable transportation, available labor, and effective municipal management. The North had grown leaps and bounds at the end of the nineteenth century, and the South sought to show it was catching up. Thus for many businessmen in the late-nineteenth century South, urban development and economic prosperity were two sides of the same coin.⁵⁴

Leading the movement to modernize southern cities, and thus improve its commercial and industrial prospects, was a new class of businessmen that had risen since the war. Before the Civil War wealth and political power had been concentrated in the hands of a small and fairly homogenous elite, who perpetuated their fortune through property and family connection. With the end of slavery and the destruction of plantations and resources during the war, landed property was no longer synonymous with affluence in the South. Some planters were able to make their land profitable with tenant labor, but many foundered and could not regain their prewar prominence. In addition, as the region began to recover economically, patterns of commerce changed, and a new group of savvy, landless businessmen were profiting off of the new order. Many of these men had risen from poor beginnings with little formal education, and a large portion were also foreign-born and from religious or ethnic minorities. German Jews and

⁵⁴ For general information on the New South Movement and urban development, see Paul M. Gaston, *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970); Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South*; Edward L Ayers, *Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Steven J Hoffman, *Race, Class and Power in the Building of Richmond, 1870-1920* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2004). Connections between the New South Movement and urban boosterism will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

Irish Catholics were particularly well represented in this new group, having come to the United States as young men before the Civil War. These men were rarely involved in the trade of cotton, leaving that area to those plantation owners and their decedents still seeking to make a living off of cotton. Instead many made their money on the wholesale trade, infrastructure investment or other business ventures. Many historians have argued that there was an intractable divide between the old planter class and those advocating new means of economic growth, but in many southern cities these groups were able to cooperate to encourage development.⁵⁵

This growing business class joined with “real estate agents, insurance brokers, bankers, contractors, and a variety of other people – attorneys, journalists, doctors, teachers, clergymen, and city officials” to form a new commercial-civic elite in the South.⁵⁶ These men played a formative role in southern cities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, creating and joining, political and social organizations that would steer urban economic development. Occupied not only with the task of reinvigorating the South’s economy, the commercial-civic elite played a formative role in the growth and modernization of southern cities. From within groups like the Chamber of Commerce and Board of Trade, these men advocated for a business-oriented reform agenda, calling “for expanded public services, increased industrial development and a reliance upon trained experts and experienced leaders in government and business.”⁵⁷

Guided by the principle that what was good for business was also good for the community, the

⁵⁵ For discussion of “new men” who thrived in the New South, and their relationships with the pre-war planter elite, see Don Harrison Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South*; Paul D. Escott, *Many Excellent People: Power and Privilege in North Carolina, 1850-1900* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985); Dwight Billings, *Planters and the Making of a New South: Class, Politics and Development in North Carolina, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979); James Cobb, “Beyond Planters and Industrialists,” *The Journal of Southern History* 54, no. 1 (1988): 45–68.

⁵⁶ Blaine A. Brownell, “The Urban South Comes of Age, 1900-1940,” in *The City in Southern History: The Growth of Urban Civilization in the South*, ed. Blaine A Brownell and David R Goldfield (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1977), 142.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

commercial-civic elite sought political positions that would allow them to enact policies and projects that would simultaneously boost the city's economy as well as their own interests. While today such overlap between public good and private gain might be seen as a conflict of interest, in the late nineteenth century this was seen as a natural mutuality of goals.⁵⁸

However, not all cities welcomed this new force of change. These "new men" were able to flourish in Atlanta and Nashville, cities that grew after the Civil War, because those urban cultures were more focused on innovation and rewarded successful men regardless of their background or religious affiliation. However, self-made men had a much harder time in cities that had thrived before the war, such as Charleston and Mobile. Those port cities had resisted the entrepreneurial energy of the commercial-civic elite, clinging to old ways, resisting modernization and stifling growth. In addition, while these cities were home to ethnic and religious minorities before the war, just like in Savannah, traditional elites in Charleston and Mobile were not keen on letting men of humble beginnings and diverse background participate in the city's political and social life.⁵⁹

Savannah, however, complicates this characterization of Old South cities as economically stagnant and insular. By the late 1880s Savannah's economy was still not at its prewar strength, but the port did regain much of its cotton trade. The export of naval stores, including lumber, turpentine and rosin, also constituted a growing portion of Savannah's commerce. Thanks to these products, as well as a lively trade naval in wholesale goods, by the turn of the century

⁵⁸ Brownell, "The Urban South Comes of Age, 1900-1940," 123-158; Hoffman, *Race, Class and Power in the Building of Richmond, 1870-1920*; Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South*.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

Savannah's exports exceeded those of all other south Atlantic seaports *combined*.⁶⁰ German Jews, Irish Catholics and other men outside of the traditional elite played a large role in this development, and were well integrated into Savannah's city government, commercial and civic societies, and social organizations, just as they were in Atlanta. Savannah was thus an Old South city with clear New South aspirations.

While the push to modernize was deeply intertwined with the New South ethos, Savannah's emphasis on municipal reform and improvements responded to tangible needs of city residents. At the end of the nineteenth century Savannah was in the midst of a transformative population boom. In 1880 Savannah had approximately 30,000 residents, but within thirty years the population would more than double.⁶¹ The territorial size of the city also increased in 1883 when areas to the south and west of the municipal boundaries were incorporated. Throughout the 1870s and 1880s Savannah was engaged in various improvement projects, but the expanding population and geographical boundaries of the city compounded urban problems and complicated municipal efforts. Savannah residents struggled with poor sanitation, crowded housing, muddy unpaved streets, and poorly regulated public transportation. The police force was also far too small to serve the city, and the fire department often proved unable to prevent substantial property losses when a blaze broke out. A cosmopolitan urban space with a thriving port, Savannah residents wanted to live in a modern city – one where the city's streets were

⁶⁰ Sullivan, Buddy, "Savannah," *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, The Georgia Humanities Council and the University of Georgia Press, 2011, <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-1056&hl=y>; W.G. Cooper, "Georgia's Manufactures," *Harper's Weekly*, October 10, 1903, accessed from HarpWeek 2000 edition.

⁶¹ Supplement for Georgia, *1910 (Thirteenth) Census*, Census Statistics (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Interior), <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/decennial/1910.html>.

clean, paved and safe. Calls for new innovations and improvements would gain significant political traction.⁶²

Savannah's municipal government was sympathetic to the demands of its residents, but unequipped to handle the scope and organization of needed improvements. The city administration lacked the knowledge, manpower and money necessary to create and execute a comprehensive plan. For example, street paving proceeded sporadically. Residents had to petition city council to have particular streets opened and paved, and local workers were constantly changing materials – depending on the price of contracts and because of general disagreement about which substance would hold up best under increased traffic. In 1890 electric streetcars replaced horse drawn cars, and while this innovation made city transportation faster and more far-reaching, streetcars also created new safety concerns and conflicts over city property. The city government initiated crucial drainage and sanitation projects, but these projects did not make steady headway and hemorrhaged city funds. In the midst of these calls for services related to public health and welfare, residents also demanded greater attention to the city's parks and squares, and advocated planting shade trees throughout the city. Savannahians did not just want their city to be habitable, but beautiful and pleasing to visitors and residents alike.⁶³

The procedures of city government often compounded the problem of city administration and frustrated Savannah residents. Meetings of the main council body occurred every two weeks,

⁶² David J Goldberg, "The Administration of Herman Myers as Mayor of Savannah, Georgia, 1895-1897 and 1899-1907" (Masters Thesis, University of North Carolina, 1978). Frustration with municipal management can be seen in editorials in the *Savannah Morning News* and *Savannah Press*, which consistently called for better public services, safety measures, beautification projects, etc.

⁶³ Ibid. For general information on urban development in the late nineteenth century and the expansion of municipal services, see Eric H Monkkenon, *America Becomes Urban: The Development of U.S. Cities and Towns, 1780-1980* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988); Jon C. Teaford, *The Unheralded Triumph: City Government in America, 1870-1900* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984).

typically on Wednesday evenings. Petitions and issues were read before the council and then referred to an appropriate sub-committee, who would make necessary investigations and then return with a recommendation to the entire council in a subsequent meeting. Savannah residents needed permission from council to make repairs on homes or to move residences. Also, because the city lacked a plan for urban improvements, residents often had to petition council to pave dirt roads leading to their homes or businesses, to build sewage and drainage, to place streetlights on common sidewalks and to regulate dangerous railroad crossings. Residents also appealed to council concerning double taxation, and the placement of new streetcar lines.⁶⁴

Issues with municipal administration concerned all residents of Savannah, especially since the geography of race, class and ethnicity influenced the allocation of social services and city improvements. Half of Savannah's residents were African American, and within the white population there were sizable ethnic communities. As was the case before the Civil War, the majority of these ethnics were Irish and German, while Eastern Europeans and Italians constituted a small presence. Since 1860 the number of foreign born in Savannah had decreased significantly, but this is not to suggest that Savannah's lost its ethnic networks and political organization. The children of Irish and German immigrants who had come to Savannah mid-century might have been native-born, but they still identified with their parents' ethnic and religious groups.⁶⁵

As in previous years, ethnic and racial groups tended to cluster in certain areas of the city, making it simple for government officials to favor some groups and not others by choosing which streets to pave first, or which sewers to build last. In general commercial-civic elites

⁶⁴ City Council Minute Books, 5600CL-005, Savannah Municipal Archives/Live Oak Public Library; Committee Report Registers, 5600CL-140, Savannah Municipal Archives, Savannah, Ga.

⁶⁵ Goldberg, "The Administration of Herman Myers."

clamored to pave the center-city business districts first, since these were necessary arteries of trade and commerce in the city. However, in Savannah's low-income neighborhoods were predominantly on the fringes of the city, making them even less likely to reap the benefits of modernization projects. In addition, poorer populations in the city were unable to navigate city government because of insufficient time and resources, so they could not petition council or come to meetings to advocate for their communities as wealthier residents did. African Americans in particular entered few petitions to city government, and when they did names of individuals were rarely recorded.⁶⁶

The city's physical and social geography also shaped political representation. The Republican Party ceased to play a part in local elections after Reconstruction, so factions of the Democratic Party courted voters and vied for control of municipal politics. White ethnics represented approximately 30% of eligible voters, and living in ethnic enclaves they amplified their influence. The predominantly Irish section of the city, or the Old Fort slum, encompassed two of the twenty voting precincts established for the city election. Germans did not dominate one particular ward in the city, but they lived in clusters that could sometimes swing a few precincts. Savannah's black population increasingly dominated the areas of Yamacraw and West Savannah, but incomplete residential segregation meant there were African American residents in numerous precincts throughout the city. The black community was represented by a disproportionately low number of registered voters due to discrimination and intimidation, constituting approximately 15% of men registered for the 1895 city election.⁶⁷ Despite their small numbers, factions courted black voters, which lent them continued political relevancy. In

⁶⁶ Ibid. City Council Minute Books, 5600CL-005, Savannah Municipal Archives/Live Oak Public Library, Savannah, Georgia; Committee Report Registers, 5600CL-140, Savannah Municipal Archives, Savannah, Georgia.

⁶⁷ Goldberg, "The Administration of Herman Myers," 18-19.

precinct's where a small margin of votes could decide an election's outcome, these black voters became even more important. As a product of these dynamics, all of Savannah's racial and ethnic communities wielded power in local politics, and looked to elected officials to foster development.

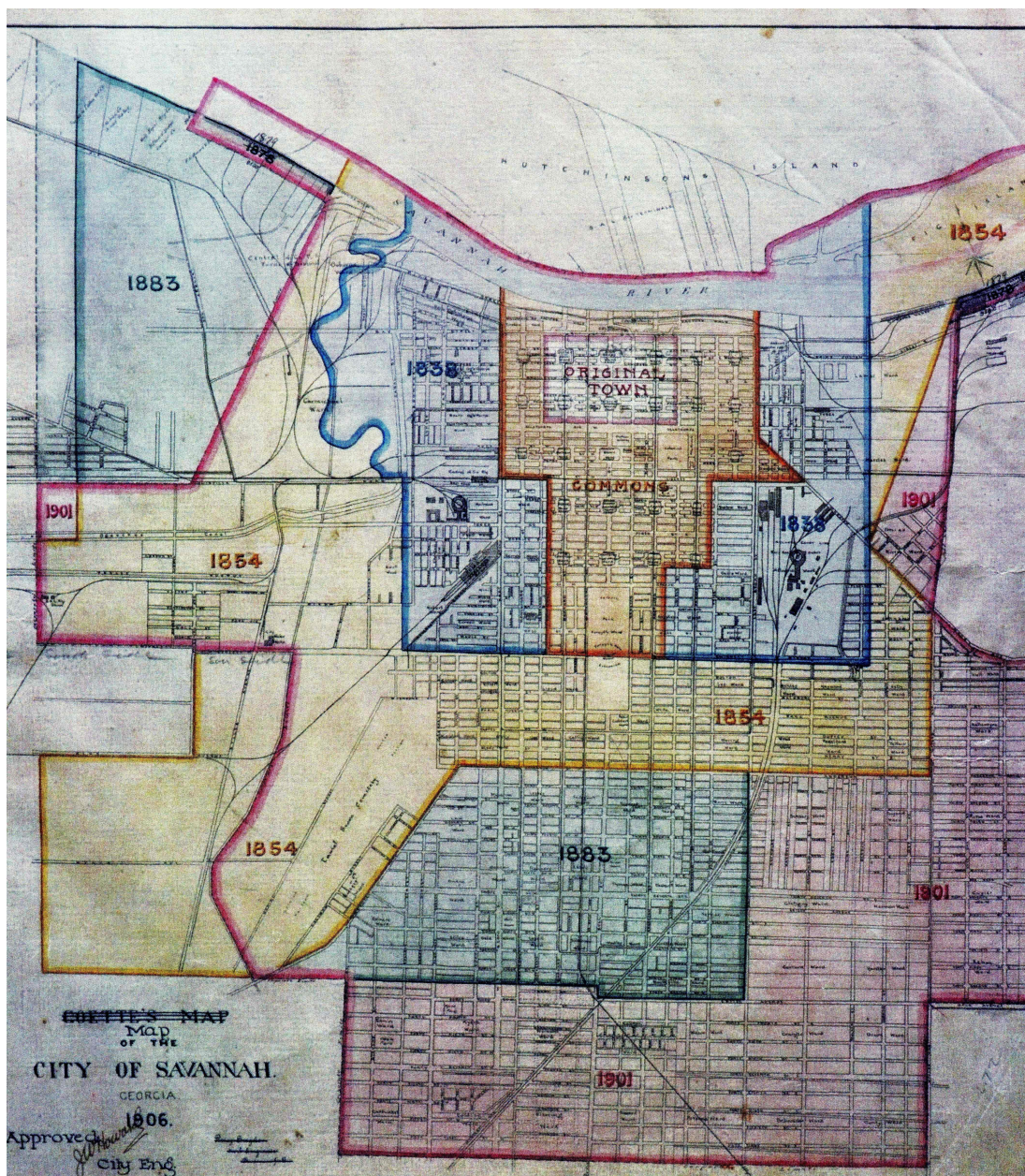
Conclusion

In 1895 George Mercer addressed the Hibernian Society, Savannah's leading charitable Irish-Catholic organization, about the need for a stronger sense of "municipal public spirit." He enumerated the crucial "ingredients of a great and prosperous city," including "location upon a natural waterway or important artery of trade," industrial development, efficient city government, good schools and strong religious institutions. Mercer argued that Savannah indeed exemplified many of these fine qualities, but was not all the way there - yet. The city needed a "bold, aggressive, liberal and homogenous municipal public spirit – a spirit that will always solidify for great public ends," and which cannot be "suppressed or divided by social distinctions, religious differences, or political cabals." Savannah needed to nurture a "liberal and united municipal spirit," and everyone needed to come together to achieve "these great ends."⁶⁸

By the 1890s Savannah voters across race, class and ethnic lines were electing men from the commercial-civil elite to municipal office. The business focus of these self-made men, and their emphasis on modernization and economic development, appealed to the needs and desires of a majority of city residents. Even the city's African American population, still struggling to realize the promises of Reconstruction, supported this new class of businessmen. Outside of the former planter class, many focused more on economic growth than racial subjugation, and

⁶⁸ "Savannah: Col. Mercer Pleads for Municipal Public Spirit." *Atlanta Constitution*, May 26, 1895. Included in Mercer Family Papers, Collection 553, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Ga.

presented a vision of Savannah that emphasized personal merit rather than exclusive white supremacy. While these men argued for many of the same ideals, and were all Democrats, men of the commercial-civic elite were not of one mind about how to achieve positive change. Divisions within the commercial-civic elite, and Savannah voters as a whole, would nurture a vibrant factional political culture within the city's Democratic Party. As will be explored in the next chapter, the entrance of commercial-civil elites created new space for diversity in Savannah's political environment, and precipitated a political realignment that gave both white and black residents reason to hope for a better future.



Map of the City of Savannah, 1906⁶⁹

This map shows additions to Savannah's municipal boundaries. Municipalities often chose to annex surrounding areas in order to raise their tax base and fund city improvements.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ "Map of the City Savannah," City Engineer's Office, 1906, Courtesy of the Savannah Municipal Archives.

⁷⁰ Howard Rabinowitz, "Continuity and Change: Southern Urban Development, 1860-1890," in *The City in Southern History*, 92-122, 115.

CHAPTER 2:

“STRANGE COMINATIONS”: FACTIONAL POLITICS

Herman Myers must have been filled with a hearty sense of satisfaction when his political supporters informed him that they had secured his nomination for city mayor. Gathering at his quarters at the De Soto Hotel, Myers and his acolytes no doubt celebrated their victory in the tumultuous political meeting that had electrified Savannah earlier that evening. Imbued with the certainty that their faction was most deserving of political office, these men had waged an internal war within their political organization, and won. The “battle royal” between Myers and other political hopefuls had captivated the city for most of November of 1894, and many foresaw that the struggle was only beginning. In the weeks that followed, partisan animosities would flourish and new alliances would be formed, but Myers would emerge victorious.¹

Myers began the election season as an established but not stand-out political candidate, but then political circumstances propelled him to prominence. Savannah residents had become

¹ *Savannah Morning News*, November 10, 1894. The majority of source material on local factional political conflicts is drawn from Savannah’s two daily newspapers, the *Savannah Morning News*, and the *Savannah Press*, the later being printed in the evening and every day except Sunday. Colonel J.H.Estill was the editor of the *Morning News*. Born in 1840, Estill moved to Savannah in 1851 and worked on the staff of several local newspapers until he served in the Confederacy during the Civil War. Lauded as a “self-made man,” Estill eventually took over the *News and Herald* and turned it into the *Morning News*. He grew the business into a sizable printing house, which usually won the contracts for local government printing. Estill was an investor in local railroad companies, owned the *Macon Telegraph* in addition to his own publication, and was president of the Chatham Real Estate and Improvement Company as well as the Board of Public Education. Estill’s political affiliations are unclear, though by the end of Myers’ career he was allied at least in business ventures with some of Myers and the Citizens’ Club’s political opponents. Pleasant A. Stovall edited the *Press*, establishing the paper in Savannah in the early 1890s. He was born in Augusta, Georgia, just a few years before the Civil War began, and after college worked in the *Augusta Chronicle* before starting his own publication. He served in the Georgia State House of Representative, was a trustee of public schools in Chatham County, and was described as “eloquent and masterful in debate.” The *Press* did not show outward bias, and vividly covered the city’s political affairs. Stovall’s club affiliation throughout this period is unknown, but that he was elected to the state legislature between 1902 and 1904 suggests he might have been allied with the Citizens’ Club. Charles C Jones, O. F Vedder, and Frank Weldon, *History of Savannah, Ga.; from Its Settlement to the Close of the Eighteenth Century* (Syracuse, NY: D. Mason & Co., 1890), 564-566; Walter Campbell, “Profit, Prejudice, and Protest: Utility Competition and the General of Jim Crow Streetcars in Savannah, 1905-1907,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 70, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 197–231; Thomas W. Loyless, *Georgia’s Public Men: 1902-1904* (Atlanta, GA: The Byrd Printing Company, n.d.), 115.

increasingly dissatisfied with the current city administration, and Myers and his political faction promised to usher in a new, more prosperous future. A successful businessman and long-time alderman, Myers appeared to be an ideal candidate for the mayoral office. However, Myers was also a German Jewish immigrant, which might prove problematic for the city's Protestant, native-born majority. Myers worked to bring his message of reform to Savannah's electorate, and after a hard fought political battle, Myers became Savannah's new mayor. In 1895 Savannah voters chose a new vision for their city over prejudice and nativism.

Frustration with municipal government and the slow pace of modernization precipitated a factional realignment in Savannah that allowed a new group of commercial-civic elites to take control of city affairs. Ethnocultural political alliances animated this shift, not only helping politicians from diverse backgrounds gain power, but also creating space for politicians more open to creative reform. As described in Chapter 1, the growing population of Savannah produced greater urban problems and new urgency for municipal reform. Spearheading this movement to reorganize municipal bureaucracy was a new class of businessmen and professionals, eager to shape Savannah into a modern, New South city. While racial, religious and ethnic prejudices were alive and well in Savannah, this new commercial-class encouraged ethnocultural participation in local politics. Myers and his faction's emphasis on bureaucratic efficiency and economic progress marked a new and exciting phase in Savannah's development. However, not all of Savannah's politicians and residents supported Myers' approach to government, and ensuing conflicts over progressive reforms will be discussed in the next chapter.

Herman Myers' biography and entrance into city politics is the place to begin this discussion, and will help situate Myers as a prominent representative of ethnocultural minorities

within Savannah's commercial-civic elite. Second, Savannah's factional political culture is examined, and the issues and alliances that motivated local conflict. Then, Herman Myers rise to the forefront of the Citizens' Club will be analyzed, followed by explanation of the 1895 municipal election.

Herman Myers: Becoming a "City Father"

*"The name of Myers has figured with gratifying prominence in the life of Savannah... as bankers, manufacturers, merchants and citizens of the highest type. The Myers brothers have ever been known as men who did things and their imprint is upon many splendid enterprises."*²

Herman Myers was born in January of 1847 in the town of Illereichen in Bavaria, Germany. In August of 1856, when Herman was nine years old, he traveled to Le Havre, France, where he joined his mother and four siblings on the ship *Elnor*, bound for New York. After entering the United States, the Myers family soon traveled to join their head of household, Samuel (Sigmund) Myers. Although many new arrivals from Germany remained in New York or the northeast, the Myers family headed south to the Allegheny mountains in western Virginia, where Samuel had settled.³

The Myers family was part of a large wave of German migration to the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, which peaked with over 200,000 new arrivals in 1854. Samuel Myers was most likely prompted to move his family for many of the same push and pull factors that lured other Germans, including poor economic prospects, the failure of revolutionary movements in the German states, improvements in transatlantic travel and stories of opportunity

² William Harden, *A History of Savannah and South Georgia*, vol. 1 (Chicago and New York: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1913).

³ Ancestry.com, *New York Passenger Lists, 1820-1957* [database on-line], Microfilm Roll: M237_165, Line: 2, List Number: 813, (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010); "Herman Myers Passes Away After Lingering Illness. Succumbs to a Complication of Diseases," *Savannah Morning News*, March 25, 1909, 4.

in America. Jewish residents made up over half of Illereichen's population prior to out-migration, but anti-Semitic policies enforcing population quotas and limits on political and economic involvement encouraged Jews to leave. For these reasons, a large number of Bavarian Jews joined the ranks of migrants who left their homes for better opportunities in the United States.⁴

The majority of non-Jewish German migrants who came to United States arrived as whole families, and were often farmers in their home country. Most Bavarian Jews, however, usually sent male relatives first, and in Virginia most were employed as peddlers, merchants, artisans, or jewelers. Samuel Myers followed this pattern. He established himself as a tanner in Virginia before sending for his family, and once they arrived he trained his son in this trade. Samuel was part of a large network of Jews from Illeriechen, and the neighboring Bavarian town of Altenstadt. These native connections provided Myers' family with a support system in times of hardship, and these networks would remain throughout Myers' lifetime.⁵

Biographical accounts suggest that once settled in the United States, Herman went to public school and worked with his father. However, Samuel died in 1861 when Herman was only 14 years old.⁶ With his father gone and the Civil War raging, Herman moved with his family to

⁴ Myron Berman, *Shabbat in Shockoe: Richmond's Jewry, 1769-1976* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1979), 134-138. Hasia Diner points out that Bavarians made up the largest portion of migrants in this period, but there were also sizable numbers of "Polish, Bohemian, Moravian, Slovakian, French, or even Russian and Lithuanian Jews." Therefore, there was some ethnic diversity within the migration of "German" Jews, though native-born Americans often saw little differentiation, and many Jews accepted German Jewish identity even if they hailed from other locales. Hasia Diner, *A Time for Gathering: The Second Migration, 1820-1888* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 49, 36-59.

⁵ Ibid. Berman, *Shabbat in Shockoe*, 134-138; "Herman Myers Passes Away After Lingerin Illness."

⁶ In the 1860 census Herman Myers was listed in the household of Henry Guggenheimer in Greenville, Tennessee. Two men with the same surname traveled with the Myers family on the *Elnor* four years prior. Myers was the only member of his family listed with the Guggenhiemers, and while there is no evidence explaining his residence there, it is likely that Myers lived away from his family for financial reasons. This is probably also where Myers learned to be a businessman, since Henry Guggenheimer was a merchant. Ancestry.com, *1860 United States Federal Census* [database on-line], 1860, District 10, Greene, Tennessee, Roll: M653_1252, (Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2009).

Lynchburg, Virginia. The city in the western Virginia probably provided more economic opportunities for the family than life in the countryside. In Lynchburg Herman grew into adulthood. The oldest son in his family, Herman probably worked with his two brothers to support his widowed mother and sisters. Myers did not serve in the Civil War, but he joined the social world of men by becoming a Mason, and by leaving home to seek his fortune. He remained in Lynchburg until 1867, and then the three Myers brothers, Herman, Sigo and Fred, moved to Savannah, Georgia. While Myers never explained his reasons for moving to the port city, he probably traveled in search of financial gain. Savannah was endeavoring to revive its economy during Reconstruction, and opportunities abounded for those with ambition and a knack for business and finance.⁷

Myers was twenty years old when he arrived in Savannah and he quickly demonstrated his entrepreneurial talent. During his first year there the young entrepreneur used his previous training to establish a tannery business. This business was successful enough to help Myers start a cigar and tobacco company with his brothers. By the end of the 1880s, Myers and his brothers had branches of their El Modelo Cigar Company in Richmond, Virginia, Tampa and Jacksonville, Florida, as well as Havana, Cuba. Soon after getting the cigar company off the ground, Myers expanded into wool textiles and a wholesale grocery business. As described in the last chapter, the wholesale trade was a German Jewish niche, and Myers probably worked within a network of Jewish merchants. Beyond these connections, Myers had a clear talent for making money. His primary business, the Savannah Grocery Company, became one of the leading wholesale concerns in the city, with a large edifice near the river and commercial heart of the

⁷ Harden, *A History of Savannah and South Georgia*; “Herman Myers Passes Away After Lingered Illness.” For information on Freemasonry in antebellum Virginia, see Ami Pflugrad-Jackisch, *Brothers of a Vow: Secret Fraternal Orders and the Transformation of White Male Culture in Antebellum Virginia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010).

city. Building on these enterprises Myers entered the world of finance by organizing the National Bank of Savannah in 1885, acting as president of the institution for over twenty years. Additionally, Myers directed the Oglethorpe Savings and Trust Company and Savannah Fire and Marine Insurance Company, and invested in various local railroad and streetcar companies. The breadth and depth of Myers' commercial and financial endeavors assured his reputation as a particularly talented businessman. His standing as a man of administrative skill then helped him enter local politics, and made him a popular and useful member of Savannah's city council.⁸

In 1885, less than a year after he organized the National Bank, Myers was elected a city alderman, and then was re-elected consecutively for ten years in this role. Throughout his tenure he served on the Finance Committee, was chair for two years, and served on a host of other committees, including the Police Committee, Sanitary Board, and special committee on Railroads. Myers built a record as an active and effective alderman, focused on the city's financial health. He was living in the city during municipal debt crises of the 1870s and early 1880s, when the city teetered on the precipice of bankruptcy, and he and other politicians subsequently struggled to keep the city out of debt. Although he did not support strict enforcement of liquor laws, which was a hot-button topic in the Georgia, he otherwise avoided controversial topics.⁹ He even remained an alderman when different factions were in power, attesting to his popularity among voters, and his ability to work with different factional groups within Savannah's Democratic Party.

⁸ Harden, *A History of Savannah and South Georgia*; "Herman Myers Passes Away After Lingered Illness"; "A Great Meeting: One Thousand Men Cheer the Myers Ticket," *Savannah Press*, January 15, 1895.

⁹ Many businessmen did not support restrictions on liquor licenses on the grounds that restrictive measures would deprive the city of funds. Myers in particular had deep connections to the liquor trade. Not only did he own a wholesale outfit, the Savannah Grocery Company, which would have sold spirits, but he also served as president of the Liquor Dealer's Association. In addition, his brother and business partner in numerous ventures, Sigo Myers, was president of Big Springs Distilling Company. "The Candidates. Mr. Myers and Dr. Duncan Compared," *Savannah Press*, January 11, 1895; *Savannah, Georgia*, City Directories of the United States, Bull Street Library, Savannah, Ga.



*Savannah Grocery Company, circa 1893*¹⁰

The large structure on Bay Street would have been well known to all Savannah residents. On the side of the building is an advertisement for the El Modelo Cigar Company, one of Myers' first successful enterprises.



*View of the National Bank of Savannah from the Northeast Corner of Johnson Square, circa 1885.*¹¹

This picture shows that the streets in front of Myers' bank were not yet paved.

¹⁰ *Artwork of Savannah*, (Chicago: W. H. Parish Publishing Co, 1893), Courtesy of the Lane Library, Armstrong Atlantic State, Savannah, Georgia, <http://www.library.armstrong.edu/artwork/artw00.html>.

¹¹ #444, William E. Wilson Photographs, Col # 01375, Box 1, Album 1 Savannah, 1884-1891, Courtesy of the Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia.

Myers had made a name for himself as a wealthy businessman and an effective politician by the 1890s. He was a fixture in city council as an alderman, and he had accumulated a sizable personal fortune. This was particularly showcased by the 43-year-old Myers' lavish wedding in April of 1890 to Miss Nellie May Deitsh. This event requires further exploration, for the circumstances of this marriage, and its scandalous dissolution a short time later, provide crucial insights into Myers' character. Given the dearth of sources reflecting his personal life, this is an important juncture to better understand the man behind Myers' public persona. Nellie May was the daughter of one of Myers' business associates from the Savannah Grocery Company. She was Jewish and from Virginia, and most likely part of his Bavarian Jewish network. The match was therefore appropriate, but Nellie May was twenty years younger than Myers. Observers undoubtedly commented on the age difference, which would not have been quite so unusual if Myers was a widower, but this was his first marriage. Despite any gossip Nellie May's age may have caused Savannah's wealthy elite, she became a social sensation.¹²

Herman and Nellie May's wedding was thought to be the grandest event of the spring social season, described in detail in the *Savannah Morning News*. The nuptials were held at Temple Mickve Israel, and the Deitsh's rabbi from Richmond joined Savannah's rabbi, Isaac Mendes, in officiating the ceremony. The wedding reception was held at the De Soto hotel, the most fashionable establishment in Savannah. The celebration took over a whole wing of the De Soto, and was attended by approximately 400 people. The bridal party wore the latest fashions from Paris, while the bride herself donned "rare and costly jewels" given to her by the groom. The current mayor of Savannah and other aldermen were among the guests, as were some of the

¹² In the Gilded Age politically prominent men with solid reputations were able to pursue such marriages without a public backlash. Grover Cleveland married a woman 27 years his junior in the White House in 1886, and while surprising, the match was accepted by the American people, and Cleveland was subsequently reelected, if not until 1893.

most prominent businessmen in the city. According to the newspaper, “such an array of costly bridal presents are rarely seen on such occasions, and their value runs into the thousands.”¹³ Myers had become a man of importance, for no lowly citizen could have amassed such a distinguished collection of guests and gifts.

Unfortunately Mr. and Mrs. Myers were not the toast of Savannah’s social scene for very long. While vacationing on Tybee Island, a popular resort area near Savannah (and where Myers had investments in hotel property), the couple split over an alleged impropriety. No detailed explanation of the events in Tybee remains, but whatever transpired set in motion a scandalous divorce between the newlyweds. Nellie May had once enjoyed a “large circle of admiring acquaintances,” but as rumors circulated that Myers was going to divorce his young wife on the grounds of infidelity, Nellie’s life in Savannah collapsed.¹⁴ Nellie May soon left the South for New York, and her father resigned from his job at the Savannah Grocery Company. From New York Nellie May then filed for divorce, alleging “harsh conduct and language by Myers, charges of infidelity and unchastity, and that he has persecuted his wife by placing her under the surveillance of a detective and circulating base and false charges against her character.”¹⁵ In addition to the damaging allegations against Myers, the divorce bill demanded a substantial alimony payment.

On August 15, 1891, the superior court of Savannah was packed for the divorce proceeding where the court was to decide if Myers owned alimony. Nellie May did not return to Savannah for the hearing, but Myers was present, along with his council. Nellie May’s father,

¹³ “The Myers-Deitsh Nuptials the Event of the Spring Wedding Season,” *Savannah Morning News*, April 16, 1890.

¹⁴ “Too Luxurious: That Was What Was the Matter with Mr. and Mrs. Myers,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, August 14, 1891.

¹⁵ “She Wants Alimony,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, August 13, 1891, 2.

Maurice Deitsh, took the stand. He testified that he had known Myers for twenty-three years, and until recent events, considered him a friend as well as a coworker. When Myers married his daughter, Deitsh asserted that the couple “lived in the very best of style,” “both at the DeSoto and Hotel Tybee.” Deitsh maintained Mr. and Mrs. Myers “entertained often” and lived far more “luxuriously than Mr. Deitsh and his wife.” He then testified that when the marriage went awry Dietsh had given his daughter a “schedule of her husband’s wealth,” based on Dietsh’s knowledge as Myers’ business associate. This “schedule” of Myers’ assets then became the subject of much back and forth between Myers’ lawyer, William Garrard, and Deitsh. Enumerated were nearly all of Myers’ properties, investments and businesses, as well as anecdotal conversations about how Myers spent his money. According to Dietsh, Myers was a man who “spends money liberally when he thinks it will benefit his own interests, of course, his individual interests,” casting Myers as a self-interested rather than generous. Finally Dietsh noted that upon leaving the city after the Tybee incident, Nellie May “was in a high state of nervousness...so much so that her physician said it was dangerous for her to leave the city,” and when she did leave she “appeared to be greatly troubled.” According to Dietsh’s testimony, Myers was a selfish man, who not only turned his back on a longstanding relationship with a colleague, but also bullied his young wife.¹⁶

In response to this unflattering testimony, Myers’ lawyer read a statement on his behalf. Myers’ denied all the charges against him, explaining that in July he thought his wife had left for Atlantic City, but was “shocked...to learn that serious and damaging reports were in circulation in the community” about her. In response “he patiently investigated the matter, and is now in possession of evidence proving his wife false to her marital vows, on the strength of which he

¹⁶ “Enough to Live On. Mrs. Herman Myers Gets \$250 A Month Alimony,” *Savannah Morning News*, August 16, 1891; “Too Luxurious: That Was What Was the Matter with Mr. and Mrs. Myers.”

charges her with adultery, which he said he will prove at the proper time.” He then denied Dietsh’s claims as to his worth, and “charged Mrs. Myers with extravagance,” and that he tried to impress upon her the need to be “more economical,” especially since Myers recently had some poor investments. Debates then ensued between the respective side’s council about how much Nellie May should be awarded, and if she should be supported in “that position in life with which her husband had familiarized her.” Myers argued that the lifestyle that he had wanted his wife to enjoy was not nearly as lavish as Deitsh intimated, and clearly did not want to pay Nellie May a large sum. In the end Judge Falligant required Myers to pay \$1,000 for his wife’s lawyers and \$250 until the final divorce bill was decided.¹⁷ The amount of the final divorce settlement, and what Nellie May did after it was settled, is not presently known. However, the tragic suicide of Maurice Deitsh some years later suggests that the family’s life after Savannah was probably not as glamorous as it had been in the spring of 1890.¹⁸

This scandal does raise questions about Myers character and reputation, and informs historical interpretation of his public persona. The alimony proceedings drew a great number of spectators, and newspaper coverage of the legal drama both in the *Savannah Morning News* and the *Atlanta Constitution* attest to Myers prominence. Myers would later be described as “modest and gentle in disposition,” and possessing of a “through democracy of manner and attitude toward his fellowmen” that endeared him to political supporters.¹⁹ However, Nellie May’s charges of poor treatment from Myers, coupled with the entrepreneur’s hardscrabble ascent from poverty, suggests he had a calculating, even ruthless, edge to his personality. Such a

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ “Sues for Total Divorce: Mrs. Herman Myers Wants to be Nellie Deitsch Again,” *Savannah Morning News*, August 13, 1891. The suicide of Maurice Deitsh mentioned by Aaron Myers, in discussion with author, September 2010.

¹⁹ “Herman Myers Passes Away After Lingerin Illness.”

sensationally public divorce was rare in the Gilded Age, and probably the talk of Savannah society for some time. But then, the scandal was effectively erased from Savannah's public memory. Historians who have studied Myers' career in Savannah were unaware of the marriage or divorce.²⁰ A main reason for this erasure is that the scandal, while shedding some light on Myers' personal life, did not have any discernable effect on his political career. While no doubt embarrassing, Myers' marital debacle was never used against him in political campaigns, and he was elected mayor just a few years after Nellie May's dramatic departure. It is probably overly optimistic to assume that this incident was of *no* consequence to Myers' contemporaries, especially among the city's elite, who valued propriety and probably looked down on Myers' Nouveau Riche wedding celebration to begin with. The lawyers on both sides of the case, as well as the judge, were also leading politicians in Savannah and would work with Myers in the coming decades. In the end the divorce might have influenced Myers' reception in certain social circles, but his public marital discord in no way negatively impacted his political career. In the eyes of Savannah voters, his success in business, and his skills as a politician and administrator, far outweighed any personality flaws that might have plagued his personal life.

Myers' scandal did not appear to diminish his place in Jewish social circles either. He periodically cropped up in Jewish newspapers of the region throughout the 1890s and early 1900s. Two secular Jewish publications, the *Jewish South*, published in Richmond, and the *Jewish Sentiment and Echo*, published out of Atlanta, featured articles from Savannah

²⁰ David Goldberg makes no mention of the marriage in his extensive masters thesis, and Savannah's municipal archivist also did not know about the incident. In addition, Julius Edel, a descendent of Myers' who has devoted considerable energy to perserving his legacy, had no knowledge of the marriage. Mr. Edel was only aware of Myers' second wife, Virginia Guckenheimer, whom he married in 1906. Guckenheimer had been married to another Savannah businessman and politician, but had been widowed for over a decade. While age-wise this was a more evenly matched couple, this marriage also caused some scandal. Myers did not tell anyone that he was getting married, and only sent word about the nuptials after he had left town, and he and his wife embarked on a planned five-week vacation. David J Goldberg, "The Administration of Herman Myers as Mayor of Savannah, Georgia, 1895-1897 and 1899-1907" (Masters Thesis, University of North Carolina, 1978).

correspondents that covered the social happenings of the Jewish community. Mention of Myers in these publications suggests that he was considered by coreligionists to be a prominent representative of the Jewish community. Most entries related to Myers detailed his political exploits, but on at least one occasion he hosted a “most elaborate and elegant” card party at the De Soto, and presented guests with gifts of “solid silver or cut glass” to the men and women present.²¹ Myers also participated in charitable institutions. Savannah’s chapter of the Jewish fraternal organization, the Independent Order of B’nai B’rith, was founded before the Civil War. In 1887 the organization hosted a large picnic at the Hermitage, a famous plantation in Savannah’s environs, in order to raise money for a Jewish orphan’s home. The orphanage, later constructed in Atlanta, was supported by B’nai B’rith donations. Savannah’s B’nai B’rith lodge was dissolved at the end of 1898, but Myers and other Savannah men continued to fund the Jewish orphans home, and work with Atlanta’s B’nai B’rith lodge to manage the institution.²²

Myers joined in Jewish religious life, but not with the same level of commitment he pursued secular activities. Jews had been residing in Savannah since it was settled in the 18th century, and they remained a very small minority. In 1880 Savannah had a Jewish population of 685, almost twice as many as there had been two decades earlier, but they still represented less

²¹ *Jewish Sentiment and Echo*, February 25, 1898, 8.

²² Saul Jacob Rubin, *Third to None: The Saga of Savannah Jewry, 1733-1983* (Savannah: S.J. Rubin, 1983), 188. Papers of the Jewish Educational Loan Fund, 1883-1991 (formerly known as the Hebrew Orphan’s Asylum), Cuba Archives, William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, Atlanta, Georgia. Myers made small, regular donations to the Hebrew Orphan’s Asylum even after the B’nai B’rith lodge closed, and a sizable donation was made upon Myers’ death. The orphan’s home took in children from Savannah and Atlanta, but also from other states both North and South. While B’nai B’rith dissolved, there were other fraternal organizations for Jewish men and women. These included the Harmonie Club, Young Ladies Hebrew Benevolent Society, The Little Helpers (who raised money for the Hebrew Orphan’s Home), the Hebrah Gemiluth Hesed Society, and Young Men’s Hebrew Association, among others. For information on communal life in Savannah, see Rubin, *Third to None*, 186-189, 220-224; Hebrah Gemiluth Hesed Society, Savannah Jewish Archives, JMS 022, Box 1, Georgia Historical Society, Atlanta, Georgia. For general information on B’nai B’rith see Deborah Dash Moore, *B’nai B’rith and the Challenge of Ethnic Leadership* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981).

than one percent of the population.²³ Southern society placed a heavy emphasis on participation in religious institutions, and by the late-nineteenth century Savannah Jews were altering their religious traditions to emulate aspects of Protestant religious culture. Mickve Israel did not join the Union of American Hebrew Congregations until 1904, but the congregation had been moving slowly towards Reform Judaism since the 1870s.²⁴ Part of the appeal of Reform Judaism for Savannah Jewry was aesthetic similarity to the religious worship of white Christians. Emblematic of Mickve Israel's desire to blend in with other religious institutions in Savannah was the construction of a new temple built in 1878 in "pure neo-Gothic" style – the same architectural style of a Presbyterian Church that stood only 60 feet away. Myers had served as part of Mickve Israel's building committee, and was charged with using his northern business connections to get subscriptions to support the new temple. However, other than purchasing a pew in the new synagogue, he had minimal involvement in the congregation.²⁵ His membership in a religious institution was an important social convention, and mark of respectability in southern society, but Myers showed little interest in leadership positions in the temple. He was content to be part of the cultural community without rigorous religious observance.

While Myers did mix in Jewish circles, he could not have succeeded financially or politically without fruitful relationships with people outside his religious enclave. After his divorce Myers lived in a permanent apartment at the De Soto Hotel. The De Soto was not only a major hub of Savannah's social world, and the primary stop over for any visitors of consequence,

²³ Greenberg, "Creating Ethnic, Class and Southern Identity," 64.

²⁴ Mickve Israel served as Savannah's only synagogue until 1861, when B'nai Berith Jacob was founded by a faction desirous of more Orthodox religious observance. Institutional records for B'nai Berith Jacob have not survived, so it is hard to estimate how the two congregations' membership compared. Rubin, *Third to None*, 146-150. However, discussion of Mickve Israel in Savannah papers suggests it was viewed by the local community as the prominent religious institution of local Jews. This was also due in part to popularity of Mickve Israel's rabbi, Isaac Mendes, a talented orator who was well regarded in Protestant as well as Jewish circles.

²⁵ Rubin, *Third to None*, 166-189.

but it was also in the center of the city, close to Myers' business offices. Living at the De Soto put the businessman in the thick of anything noteworthy happening in the city. He also likely spent considerable time socializing with his colleagues in business and politics. Myers was certainly a member of the Commercial Club, which in October of 1894 secured a richly furnished space off Monterey Square for club members to gather.²⁶ Myers was also part of fraternal organizations, like the Masons, that helped him develop relationships among Savannah's socially connected. In addition, nearly all of his business partners within Savannah were white Christians. William Garrard (his divorce lawyer) and George Baldwin, were two such prominent colleagues who also involved themselves in politics.²⁷

Throughout his career as an alderman Myers was well regarded, but in the fall of 1894, factional divisions in Savannah went through a period of realignment that would present Myers the opportunity to maneuver for more influence. Georgia and Savannah had been solidly Democratic since Reconstruction, but nonetheless Savannah nurtured a dynamic political atmosphere as numerous factions of the Democratic Party vied for control of municipal and state politics. A "faction" is a political organization or coalition that functions within an established political party. Additionally, historian Michael Perman describes factions as "loose coalitions or groups within political parties that form for temporary purposes around matters of limited scope and significance, often little more than how to get or hold onto office." Indeed, within the Democratically dominated South of the late nineteenth century, "faction prevailed and was the

²⁶ *Savannah Morning News*, November 3, 1893, 8; *Ibid.*, October 30, 1894.

²⁷ These individuals are mentioned in connection with Myers in various documents in the George Johnson Baldwin Papers, Southern Historical Collection, #850, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

form that political activity assumed... factions rose and fell, formed and dissolved.”²⁸ In this way Savannah serves as an energetic example of urban politics throughout the South.

In the election season of 1894 factions broke and realigned around points of frustration with city administration, and disagreements over what constituted effective reform. Political clubs worked to put their candidates in office, and a fierce partisan spirit reigned in Savannah for the months preceding the municipal election, inspiring great interest among city residents. While “reform” was the watchword issue of the mayoral candidates, and some divisions were based on earnest political differences, ethnic and religious divisions in the city’s social landscape shaped political alliances. Networks of ethnocultural affiliation were the mechanism by which politics functioned, and so clashes between the factions as they organized for the election revealed the degree to which ethnic, racial and religious ties colored factional lines. The shift described in the last chapter, of a new ethnically diverse commercial-civic elite rising in politics, laid the foundation for this change. Within this divisive climate Myers would excel, and eventually become mayor of Savannah.

²⁸ My definition of factions is based on Perman’s description in *Pursuit of Unity*, as well as the definition of political factions described in *Southern Politics: In State and Nation*, by V.O. Key, and *City Politics*, by Edward C. Banfield and James Q. Wilson. Key uses the term faction to “mean any combination, clique, or grouping of voters and political leaders who unite at a particular time in support of a candidate,” an association that could be ephemeral or enduring. Banfield and Wilson outline four analytical categories of factions: The Machine, The Personal Following, The Interest Grouping, and The Club. However, the authors point out these designations are not mutually exclusive, and elements of all these types of factions were present in Savannah in the 1890s. Perman also elaborates that there were three common permutations of factionalism in the South: a dominant faction, bifactionalism or multifactionalism. Savannah in 1894 is best described as bifactional – while there were other political groups, and factions often broke and reformed, there were usually only two dominant factions at a given moment. V.O. Key Jr., *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, Carville ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1949), 16; Edward C. Banfield and James Q. Wilson, *City Politics*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963); Michael Perman, *Pursuit of Unity: A Political History of the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 189-191.

Club Politics

In the fall of 1894, there were two prominent factions in Savannah politics. The more powerful of the two was the Tammany Club – inspired by the political organization of the same name in New York, but of no direct linkage. The current city mayor, John J. McDonough, and the majority of city council, were Tammany men. This cadre had dominated city politics for the preceding four years. The Tammany club was most associated with the Irish ethnic population in Savannah, but also included many native white elites, such as Peter Meldrim and Fleming G. Du Bignon, both prominent lawyers, orators and politicians. Tammanyites generally supported commerce and urban improvements, but by the summer of 1894 Savannah residents were questioning if McDonough's Tammany administration could govern effectively.

The Tammany Club faced obstacles stemming from economic issues at both the national and local level. Tammany was unfortunate to be in power during the Panic of 1893, an economic collapse that generated unrest among farmers and laborers. The People's Party had made headway in nearby Georgia counties, but never threatened Democratic dominance in Chatham County. Even so, Populist successes, and high black voter turnout in 1892 (the highest since Reconstruction), sent Savannah Democrats into a frightened tailspin that heightened internal party conflict.²⁹ Frustration increased when McDonough was unable to negotiate a speedy end to an interracial longshoremen's strike in Savannah, which significantly slowed commerce at port, further crippling a weak economy and angering many businessmen. McDonough's supposed ineptness prompted many within the city's commercial elite to question Tammany stewardship. The slowed pace of city improvements, which was in part due to the

²⁹ Georgia's upcountry counties where Populism did flourish are discussed in Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Omar H Ali, *In the Lion's Mouth: Black Populism in the New South, 1886-1900*, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2010).

financial constraints of the panic, only furthered the impression that Tammany was not living up to residents' expectations.³⁰

Under such pressure the Tammany coalition began to fracture. Members of the club were unhappy with the conduct of their comrades in the city government, and soon the club broke into "administration" and "anti-administration" factions. The anti-administration Tammanyites claimed that the administration faction was no longer responding to the needs and desires of the club, and instead working to perpetuate their own power and influence. The particular governing tactics of municipal officers also began to upset many formerly sympathetic residents. Critics charged that the police were selective in their enforcement of laws, and in particular ordinances preventing the sale of liquor on Sundays. Friends of the administration would go about their business unmolested, while policeman (who got their jobs through Tammany patronage) would use the "spy" system to entrap enemies of the administration.³¹

Dissatisfaction with the Tammany Club helped to bolster their rival faction, the Citizens' Club. Herman Myers had been a founding member of the club and exemplified many of their values. The Citizens' Club was established in the early 1880s and styled itself as the more "progressive" faction in city politics, which in this case meant they supported improvements and better city services. The Club did not espouse a progressive social agenda, focusing on bureaucratic efficiency and economic development.³² Whether the Citizens' Club lived up to its

³⁰ For more information about the strikes by longshoremen in the South see Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class and Politics, 1863-1923* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

³¹ Goldberg, "The Administration of Herman Myers"; For articles on longshoremen's strike and McDonough's response, see *Savannah Press* and *Savannah Morning News*, September 7-9, 1894.

³² In the 1890s progressive politicians and reformers were engaged in campaigns for bureaucratic efficiency, qualified civil service, and "pure" politics. Many of the large social issues associated with the national Progressive Movement, such as prohibition and business regulation, gained momentum after 1900 and will be discussed in Chapter 5. For information on these trends, see Charles Calhoun, "The Political Culture: Public Life and the Conduct of Politics," in *The Gilded Age: Perspectives on the Origins of Modern America*, ed. Charles Calhoun, 2nd ed. (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2007), 239-264; Michael E McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics:*

own ideals of a progressive organization is subject to debate. As historian David Goldberg has pointed out, both clubs had a rather nebulous notion of what it meant to be “progressive,” and had overlapping platforms since they were both part of the Democratic Party. Tammanyites agreed that city services were important, but were more inclined to maintain the status quo than pursue reforms that might help them achieve their goals more effectively. In contrast, Citizens’ Club members were on average younger than their Tammany counterparts, and more invested in the city’s commercial economy. They were as a whole more open to change, and advocated for new measures that would make the city run more smoothly.³³

In the early 1890s the men of the Citizens’ Club consistently argued for reforms that would encourage a more fiscally responsible municipal bureaucracy, fair elections, and non-partisan, merit-based city employment. This agenda was in line with other progressive politicians in the late nineteenth century, but evidence suggests (and certainly the club’s critics argued) the Citizens’ Club did not abandon nepotism as a political tool. Nineteenth-century politics, particularly in the South where Democrats sought to engineer one party rule, regularly used fraud, as well as violence and intimidation to bring about desired electoral outcomes. The degree to which the Citizens’ Club’s was as “progressive” as it asserted will be examined in the next chapter.

By the summer of 1894 the Citizens’ Club had begun actively criticizing the Tammany Club administration, framing their critique as a battle against privilege and corruption. A Citizen’s Club publication, called *The Daily Dispatch*, railed against the Tammany “Tiger,” an outfit of “unscrupulous men” who “have endeavored in every manner imaginable to lick its way

The American North, 1865-1928 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Jon C. Teaford, *The Unheralded Triumph: City Government in America, 1870-1900* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984).

³³ Goldberg, “The Administration of Herman Myers.”

to favor.”³⁴ Full of “bribers and ringsters,” Tammany worked to trick the people of Savannah into supporting measures that would undermine their rights and needs. At a Citizens’ Club rally, Dr. Falligant, a well-known Savannah orator (and Judge in Myers’ alimony case), took aim at a prominent Tammany man by the name of Peter Meldrim. Falligant argued that Meldrim,

“thinks his side ought to have all the offices, and that when ‘taxes’ ... ‘eat into the poor man’s wages’ the people ought to come to him and his side for divine guidance! How many watered railroad bonds and watered railroad stocks, having no foundation in capital honestly invested, have Peter’s associates in the so-called better element floated on a green and gullible public, and cut down the time and wages of their employees to save money ... Peter should walk ... see the suffering faces of laboring men and women whose sorrows lie at the door of the watering stock members ‘of the better element.’”³⁵

Falligant’s speech charges that Meldrim, and by extension the Tammany Club, was trying to swindle the people of Savannah to satisfy his faction’s selfish aims. This argument was particularly resonant after the recent economic panic. In reality the Tammany men were probably no more corrupt or callous than their Citizens’ Club counterparts. Myers and his associates in the Citizens’ Club were certainly fellow investors in the railroad stocks and bonds that Falligant denounced, and part of the commercial-civic elite making a living off of the “green and gullible public.” Yet as Mark Summers argues, charging one’s opponents with corruption was part of the lexicon of nineteenth century politics, and that “outrage made-to-order was indispensable” in any narrow political contest.³⁶ The factual grounding of these charges is in some sense irrelevant. Even if politicians conceded some exaggeration, they most likely did not see the hypocrisy of their charges. Rhetoric aside, the Tammany Club had indeed entrenched itself in city

³⁴ There are only a few extant issues of the *Daily Dispatch*, but they demonstrate a clear anti-Tammany, pro-Citizens’ Club stance. Given the issues were short and made up solely of local political news, the *Dispatch* was likely a Citizens’ Club circular.

³⁵ *The Daily Dispatch*, June 12, 1894.

³⁶ Mark Wahlgren Summers, “Party Games: The Art of Stealing Elections in the Late-Nineteenth-Century United States” *The Journal of American History* 88, no. 2 (2001).

government, making it vulnerable to charges of being a political “ring.” Based on what happened to the original Tammany Club in New York, and growing emphasis on Civil Service Reform and pure politics throughout the country, charges of “boss” and “ring” rule were worrisome.

The waning influence of the Tammany faction was further demonstrated when the Citizens’ Club candidates for the state Senate and House of Representatives won their races in the fall of 1894.³⁷ Following this reversal, the Tammany Club went on the offensive, charging that the Citizens’ Club was a group of reckless upstarts, threatening the very fabric of life in Savannah. Only a few weeks after the state election, a controversy over local legislation showcased how the Tammany Club sought to undermine the Citizens’ Club reform agenda – and isolate and embarrass Myers as the leading Citizens’ Club member on city council. However, these efforts merely signaled Tammany’s defeat, and opened the door for factional realignment. Additionally, the controversy in city council would situate Myers as a warrior for the Citizens Club and a viable candidate for city mayor.

Myers and Alderman Screven were the only two Citizens Club men on a council dominated by pro-administration Tammany politicians.³⁸ On October 17, 1894, Alderman Charlton, who was a leading Irish-Catholic Tammany man, introduced a controversial ordinance to Savannah’s city council. The ordinance changed the date of the election of city officers by the council to the next week, a full three months before city officers were typically appointed. On the surface, the so-called “Charlton Ordinance” reflected a simple grab for power by McDonough’s administration faction. They wanted to ensure that they could control the city officers for the

³⁷ The Citizens’ Club candidates were: W.W. Osborne for State Senate First District; For House of Representatives, Thomas Screven, T.D. Rockwell, J.J. Doolan. *Savannah Morning News*, October 4, 1894.

³⁸ That Myers and Screven were serving in a Tammany-dominated council suggests that those who voted in the previous election had split factional tickets. In Savannah’s at large municipal elections, the twelve men who received the most votes became alderman, meaning popular men from different tickets might be elected to the same council.

next two years, even if the Citizen's Club prevailed in the upcoming mayoral election. With their own officers installed, any Citizen's Club-run government would have a difficult time bringing about administrative change, and more importantly, Tammany lines of patronage would remain intact. However, as it stood prior to passing the ordinance, appointments of city officers were already held several weeks before the incoming council took office, calling into question the administration's motivation behind the new ordinance.

The administration's decision relates to the previous state elections, and the harsh reality that the Citizens' Club was gaining momentum. One of the items on the platform of the newly elected Citizens' Club Senator for the First District, W.W. Osborne, was to pass a state bill that would allow the incoming city council in Savannah to choose its officers rather than the outgoing administration. On October 12th the *Savannah Press* published an article entitled, "Want the Offices: Citizens' Club moving on The City Exchange," which detailed the past practices of electing city officers. According to the piece, most Savannahians believed that the election of city officers by the outgoing city council was fixed by state law, a measure that had been passed during Reconstruction to protect against "negro domination" in Savannah city affairs. However, the *Press* uncovered that city elections were actually fixed by city ordinance, and therefore could be changed at any time by city council.³⁹ The *Press* anticipated that a bill to secure a new time for choosing city officers would be put to a vote soon by Senator Osborne, well before the election of a new mayor and city council in Savannah. The *Press* prophesized that it was unlikely that "any strong fight will be made against the bill," since "the three representatives and the

³⁹ "Want City Offices: Citizens' Club Moving on the City Exchange," *The Savannah Press*, October 12, 1894. Prior to 1872 the election of mayor and alderman had taken place before appointing city officers, allowing the new council to choose its lieutenants. However, in 1872 the election of the mayor and alderman was moved later, to the third Tuesday in January, while the time of choosing city officers was left to occur at the first regular meeting of the council in the beginning of January. Given that this change was made shortly after Georgia was "redeemed" by Democrats, the *Press* was likely correct in its explanation that the change was made to prevent black men from gaining city office.

senator being a unit for it and the Citizens' Club backing it as a body" would make attempts to defeat the bill "fruitless." When asked why the Citizens' Club wanted to pass a state bill rather than change the election by ordinance, a prominent member responded that they needed to make sure change happened before the current city administration had an opportunity to entrench itself. Certainly this was great news for Myers, who had aspirations for a new Citizens' Club administration without Tammany officers. The Citizens' Club's rationale for changing the time of the election was to break up the patronage lines and purge ineffectual employees in office, and create opportunity for new men to enter politics.⁴⁰

McDonough's administration was not to be so easily usurped. The Tammany "tiger" was "crouching in its lair, getting ready to spring."⁴¹ The revelation that municipal law, not state law, presently regulated the election of officers inspired creative opposition. In a surprise move, Alderman Charlton introduced his ordinance to move up the time of choosing city officers, which had numerous benefits for the Tammany faction. First, the state legislature was not meeting for a few weeks, and there was no possible way Senator Osborne could have proposed and passed his bill before the newly appointed time for electing officers. Second, debate about the ordinance, both in city council and in the media, provided the administration faction with an opportunity to publicly criticize the Citizens' Club and cast doubt on its intentions. Charlton and his political allies maintained that Osborne's new bill changing the election of city officers was not about "reform" or hiring more effective employees, but an opportunity to open up offices for Citizens' Club cronies. Making the elections of officers after the city election would allow the incoming council to reward their political supporters, where the present system, claimed

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ "Set All Talking. Politics Gets Hot All of the Sudden," *Savannah Press*, October 6, 1894.

Charlton, divorced the election of officers from “politics,” and allowed for experienced men to continue in their posts. In short, Charlton refused to be “legislated” out of the ability to elect officers, and argued that using state power to change the time of Savannah elections was a breach of local autonomy. Mobilizing a “home rule” argument, Charlton argued to keep Savannah’s city affairs outside the reach of state lawmakers, and cast the Citizens’ Club as a radical and corrupt political interest group.⁴²

Charlton’s ordinance caused a major stir within the Forest City. The introduction of the ordinance itself only had a small audience; its proposal was kept secret so no one knew to attend the city council meeting. The tenor of the meeting was “business as usual,” and new ordinances were being read without incident when the recorder began to read Charlton’s proposal. The majority of the city council was in sympathy with the administration and therefore cheered its reading. Herman Myers and Thomas Screven were blindsided by the new measure. Since the ordinance was only in its first reading and could not be debated or passed until next council meeting, Myers and Screven could do little except storm out at the close of the meeting, to the sounds of administration men cheering and congratulating Alderman Charlton on his accomplishment. The next day Citizens’ Club members were “hurrying and scurrying” about, “surprised startled, amazed and dumbfounded at the sharp political stroke of Alderman Charlton.”⁴³ However, they likely did not know that their momentary victory would help propel Myers’ political aspirations.

⁴² Articles in the *Savannah Press* and *Savannah Morning News*, October 17 to 25, 1894. Debates about “purifying” municipal politics did not typically focus on when officers were elected, but on political machines and interest groups. At-large elections were a common reform meant to break up patronage connections between bosses and wards, but Savannah already had that electoral system in place. Other common solutions were to create commissions with officials appointed by the governor or state lawmaker, thus taking city offices completely out of the hands of local politicians.

⁴³ “To Abolish them. Cant the New Ordinance be Overcome?” *Savannah Press*, October 18, 1894; Articles in the *Savannah Press* and *Savannah Morning News*, October 17 to 25, 1894.

Both in the press and at the next council meeting, Myers led a campaign against the Charlton Ordinance. Myers focused on the practical aspects of city administration, and argued that changing the time of the election was a mistake. His arguments were briefer and less eloquently framed than Charlton's, but even if he had made a more convincing plea, the measure would have prevailed, along with the partisan spirit that animated it. That is why Myers, in a desperate political maneuver, put a motion to reconsider just a moment before Mayor McDonough was to sign the ordinance into law. A bureaucratic loophole would require the measure to be held over to the following week. However, when Myers attempted to do the same for the second half of the ordinance, the Mayor signed the measure anyway, claiming that Myers did not make his motion before the mayor's pen went to paper. Outraged by what he interpreted as disrespectful and "unjustifiable" treatment, Myers stormed out of the council meeting. In his absence the rest of the council voted to pass the first ordinance anyway, and subsequently proceeded with choosing officers. Later Myers unequivocally condemned the administration's actions as "illegal and revolutionary. It places the issue squarely before the people. The present administration is evidently determined to perpetuate itself in office regardless of law, if possible."⁴⁴

The unexpected change in the election of city officers elicited great interest from residents, many of whom saw this as an opportunity to get a municipal post. Applications for different positions flooded into city council. Black office seekers also vied for city positions even though the Tammany administration had not granted any positions to African Americans in the past. The local black newspaper, *The Savannah Tribune*, emphasized the great need for a black city physician, but the council did not elect the able black candidate. In the end the

⁴⁴ Ibid.; "Says It Is Good. Alderman Charlton Stands By the Election," *Savannah Press*, October 25, 1894.

administration faction reelected all but a few officers, frustrating office seekers and substantiating Citizens' Club claims that the faction was merely seeking to sustain itself. The Tammany Club may have aspired to entrench itself in power through the Charlton Ordinance, but in the end it only served to further undermine public support for their faction.⁴⁵

Myers and the Citizen Club rode a wave of righteous indignation after the controversy, but their faction's unity was short-lived. In November of 1894 the Club was unable to come to an agreement over which candidate to nominate for city mayor, and a number of club members bolted from the organization. The result was a flurry of activity as new factions were forged from the schism. Between the different political organizations in the city, four strong candidates for mayor remained in the field. Previously inconceivable alliances were suddenly being forged as political aspirants maneuvered for power. Discussion of these developments spilled from buildings onto street corners for weeks as politically interested residents speculated how new associations and enmities would play out in the January election. As one observer noted, "the fact that politics brings about strange combinations has been abundantly proven" by the city's current situation, and the candidates might do well to "box the compass, take their bearings, and wonder where they are at."⁴⁶

Herman Myers emerged from the Charlton Ordinance controversy as a warrior of the Citizens' Club and an advocate of fair politics. He was already a fixture in Savannah's political and economic landscape, a quintessential "city father," or formative figure in the political and economic development of the city. The Charlton Ordinance only increased his claim to the

⁴⁵ *The Savannah Tribune*, October 27, 1894; "The City Offices," *Savannah Morning News*, October 24, 1894.

⁴⁶ "It is Unique, The Present Local Situation in Politics," *The Savannah Press*, November 28, 1894. To "box the compass" is to go through all 32 points and realign a compass. While Savannah's newspapers were the only gauge of local interest in club politics, historians suggest that in the late-nineteenth century even people that could not or chose not to vote were still interested in political happenings. Edward L Ayers, *Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 35-41.

Citizens' Club ticket, and he would push to make sure he was nominated for mayor. Myers never had prominent lineage to buttress his aspirations, but he worked his way into local government and business circles through hard work and force of will. His mayoral candidacy would test his skills and resolve, but his victory would vindicate his efforts.

Securing the Nomination

"The mayoralty race in Savannah is getting down, condensed and simplified. It gets hotter as it narrows down." Savannah Press, November 27, 1894

Herman Myers' strong stance in city council over the Charlton Ordinance increased his chances of becoming the Citizens' Club mayoral candidate. Myers' role in the conflict was "being worked for all it is worth by his supporters," and as the *Savannah Morning News* remarked, he was "the favorite candidate of the anti-administration people for mayor just now."⁴⁷ Yet Myers was by no means the singular choice in field. There were actually three other viable candidates for the city's highest office. The incumbent mayor, John J. McDonough, was a probable Tammany candidate, while within the Citizens' Club there were three major players: Herman Myers, Major John Schwarz and Dr. William Duncan.

While Myers' political influence was growing, Major John Schwarz was the more experienced candidate. Schwarz had already been mayor from 1889 until 1891, when McDonough defeated him when he ran for re-election. As McDonough reached the end of his second term, and Savannah's political winds began to shift once again, Schwarz sensed the possibility of political redemption. As the *Press* remarked, Schwarz's friends "believe that the office of mayor belongs to him for a second term, and that a reelection is necessary for what he

⁴⁷ "Both Sides Are Talking," *Savannah Morning News*, October 28, 1894.

considers a vindication of his first administration.”⁴⁸ The former appeared to be the Citizens’ Club’s foremost candidate heading into the fall of 1894. Yet Myers was gaining momentum in the wake of the Charlton Ordinance dispute, which in turn made Schwarz and his advocates especially eager to secure the Club’s nomination for their candidate. The battle between Schwarz and Myers for the Citizen’s club ticket would eventually rip the club in two. And while personal animosity and political competition were major factors in Savannah’s electoral drama, the politicians’ ethnocultural affiliations were a significant factor determining the strength of their candidacy.

Schwarz was a German Catholic immigrant, and like Myers he worked his way to prominence in Savannah. Born in Bavaria, Germany, Schwarz emigrated to New York in the mid-1850s. He stayed in the northeast for a few years and then moved to Savannah. At the time he was in his late teens, and he began working as a baker; a trade he had learned in his native country. Shortly after his arrival in the South Schwarz opened up his own bakery shop. When the Civil War began, the 21-year-old enlisted in the Confederate Army. He was part of a group of volunteer soldiers who took possession of Fort Pulaski immediately after secession, and then served in the Georgia infantry, eventually putting his civilian skills to use running the Confederate steam bakery in Savannah. Once the Civil War ended Schwarz resumed his bakery business, but he remained active with Georgia’s volunteer militia and eventually rose to the rank of major. Schwarz also began his political career as an alderman in 1869, becoming one of the first German immigrant members of Savannah’s city council.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ *Savannah Press*, October 10, 1894.

⁴⁹ “Maj. John Schwarz,” *Chatham Sketches, Memoirs of Georgia*, Vol. I-II (Atlanta, GA: The Southern Historical Association, 1895); Jacqueline Jones, *Saving Savannah: The City and the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 338.

While Schwarz was not as influential a businessman as Myers, he was enterprising enough to secure a firm place within the city's commercial class. His bakery business provided him enough capital to invest in one of the city's first streetcar companies, and he helped organize the National Bank of Savannah (along with Myers). Schwarz's investment in local infrastructure and finance helped connect him to a relatively small circle of privileged men whose names were consistently intertwined with local politics. Like many of these men, Schwarz served as a city alderman almost continuously from 1869 to 1889, and finally in 1889 he was rewarded for his long career of public service with a term as Savannah mayor.⁵⁰

While he was popular enough to be elected mayor, Schwarz was unpredictable and garrulous; much different than Myers, who maintained a direct and controlled manner even in the most contentious political meetings. One of Schwarz's supporters dubbed him "Honest John," a nickname meant to cast Schwarz as a truthful candidate in a sea of corrupt politicians.⁵¹ But more often John Schwarz was too honest and too emotional for his own political good. The *Press* noted that Schwarz could be "fiery when he starts" an impassioned speech, becoming red in the face and shaking his fist at his detractors. Schwarz also had a particularly open relationship with the local press, and was eager to share his opinions about local politics. Schwarz embraced a style of campaigning that was uncommon among Savannah politicians. Myers and the other candidates rarely engaged directly with the press, and instead let their supporters do their politicking for them.⁵²

⁵⁰ "Maj. John Schwarz," *Chatham Sketches*.

⁵¹ *The Savannah Press*, October 5, 1894.

⁵² "Some Plain Talk," *Savannah Press*, November 12, 1894; "Who is on Top?" *Savannah Press*, November 13, 1894.

Although Schwarz's antics were at times divisive, his social connections endeared him to a large portion of Savannah's residents – particularly to the city's German and Catholic communities. Schwarz was a member of numerous fraternal organizations, including the Masons, Odd Fellows and Knights of Pythias. His military service was commendable, and common reference to him as "the major" spoke to the affection and respect his military involvement had earned him. Schwarz also participated in ethnic and religious organizations. He was president of Savannah's Scheutzen Society (a German rifle club) for eight years, foreman of the Germania Fire Company, and a "consistent" member of the Roman Catholic Church. His church affiliations connected him to the Irish community, strengthening his appeal among ethnic voters.⁵³

Discussion of who would run for city mayor followed immediately on the heels of the state elections at the beginning of October 1894. Herman Myers, and another political hopeful, Dr. William Duncan, were seen as possible contenders for the Citizens' Club nomination, but Schwarz was the leading candidate. Schwarz's nomination was expected in the Club meeting on October 8th, but when the day arrived it was clear that a decision was far from imminent. Schwarz's supporters demanded that he be nominated immediately, while others, including president of the Club, Senator Osborne, moved to postpone the procedure. When it was decided the nomination would be tabled until early November, club-member James McBride led Schwarz's section in a vocal departure from the meeting. McBride's walkout not only signaled the beginning of the Citizens' Club's split over Schwarz and Myers' candidacies, but also a trend of Irish opposition to Myers mayoral bid.⁵⁴

⁵³ "Maj. John Schwarz," *Chatham Sketches*.

⁵⁴ *Savannah Morning News* and *Savannah Press*, October 8-9, 1894.

Protest by “McBride’s 400” (more accurately described as McBride’s 76 according to *Savannah Morning News*) was only the first act in a long drama that would unfold in the local media regarding the Citizens’ Club and its candidates. Charges that Myers had “fixed” the Citizens Club meeting were repeated and followed by speculation and insults on both sides.⁵⁵ These discussions were briefly overshadowed by the Charlton Ordinance controversy in mid-October, but conflict resumed with vigor by the end of month. As the *Morning News* rightly observed, “all is not serene within the ranks of the Citizens’ Club... The Myers and Schwarz people are at daggers points,” as tensions surrounding the mayoral nomination increased. Schwarz and his proponents were demanding that the Citizens’ Club nominate someone before the upcoming county elections, and they accused Club leaders of postponing the nomination in order to foil Schwarz’s bid. With his characteristic bluster, Schwarz spoke freely to the public, styling himself as a crusader against corruption and a victim of political conspiracies. Myers, on the other hand, engaged only minimally with the press. This is not to say that Myers was uninvolved, for he was likely working with supporters behind the scenes. The *Morning News* opined, “it is the general talk among Citizens Club people that Maj. Schwarz is to be shelved, and, in fact, many claim that this has already been brought about.”⁵⁶

⁵⁵ There were several recurring controversies related to Schwarz’s failed bid for the Citizens’ Club nomination. First, Citizens’ Club leaders were asking that whoever was chosen as the mayoral candidate produce money for their campaign – common figures were \$6,000 to \$10,000. The papers suggested that Myers agreed to produce this, while Schwarz refused, which was why Club leaders were trying to sabotage the Major’s candidacy. Yet even the *Press* acknowledged on October 6th that the idea that Myers “bought” his nomination was merely a rumor, and probably designed to injury Myers’ candidacy. The second controversy swirled around Waring Russell, a local politician who apparently coveted the position of country treasurer and was trying to secure his own office by striking a deal with whomever was to become mayor. Russell had served in the position of Country Treasurer for many years, with a political career that reached back to the Civil War, and he was described by one newspaper article as a political “boss.” And lastly, both sides were constantly quarreling over the Citizens’ Club member roles. Each side accused the other of trying to cook the books and pack the club with their supporters. *Ibid.*; “Local Politics. How the Savannah Fight Is Viewed From Abroad,” *Savannah Morning News*, December 26, 1894; Goldberg, “The Administration of Herman Myers,” 5-6.

⁵⁶ *Savannah Morning News*, October 28, 1894.

As the county elections came and went in early November, the Citizens' Club's urgency to nominate a mayoral candidate increased. A meeting was held at the Odd Fellow's Hall on November 13th, with over 1,000 club members present, but after hours of raucous wrangling the club still did not have a candidate they could agree on. A few days after the meeting Schwarz recognized he was losing and decided to withdraw his candidacy. According the *Press*, Schwarz's campaign style had backfired, and some supporters moved to the Myers camp out of distaste. There might have been some additions to Myers' base as a result of Schwarz's withdrawal, but the majority of the Major's former supporters remained entrenched against Myers and wanted to unite behind another candidate. Throughout October Dr. William Duncan had been periodically named as a viable "compromise" candidate for the Club. Although Schwarz had taken himself out of the race, "Maj. Schwarz and his friends" decided to dedicate "their numbers and influence to Dr. Duncan. Dr. Duncan, in other words, takes the place of Maj. Schwarz and the candidates before the club will be he and Mr. Herman Myers."⁵⁷ With entrenched opposition to Myers' candidacy, the conflict was far from over.

When a Citizens' Club meeting was set for November 21st, Savannah residents expected an electric political conflict. As predicted, the Citizens' Club fractured in a sensational fashion. Myers and Duncan were not present at the meeting, which was typical at the time, and instead trusted their advisors to work on their behalf. The meeting of over 1,000 men at the Odd Fellows Hall began with rousing speeches meant to unify the club. Senator Osborne spoke passionately against Alderman Charlton, Mayor McDonough and all things Tammany. However, the spirit of solidarity soon gave way when a prominent club member suggested that Myers withdraw his candidacy as Schwarz had done, and allow the club to come together behind William Duncan.

⁵⁷ "He Comes Down," *Savannah Press*, November 16, 1894; "Who is on Top," *Savannah Press*, November 13, 1894; "Can't Stand 'Em," *Savannah Press*, November 15, 1894.

This ignited yelling and fierce debating, eventually resulting in Duncan's supporters exiting the meeting. The remainder then moved to nominate Herman Myers as the official candidate of the Citizens' Club. This was quickly done, and Myers' jubilant backers spilled out onto the street and rushed to inform him at the De Soto Hotel.⁵⁸

Myers had emerged victorious. He graciously accepted the nomination, affirming that with an "able board of aldermen," he could give Savannah "a clean, non-partisan, and economical administration."⁵⁹ However, his adversaries quickly went about reorganizing. These men soon formed a new faction called the People's Party (though of no relation to the Populists) and nominated Duncan as their mayoral candidate. The group was made up of disaffected members of the Citizens' Club, but also a large number of former Tammany members. As previously discussed, Tammany had come under intense criticism and was politically obsolete. But the "tigers" of the Tammany faction no doubt watched the Citizens' Club meltdown eagerly, thrilled by the new vulnerability of their opponents. They just needed to reenter politics under a new guise, free from associations with the Tammany Club. The People's Party provided them a new point of entry. Early in the campaign season the press had noted that Duncan had "strong friends" among Tammany supporters, and was an ideal candidate for a composite faction. The People's Party thus brought together former opponents, uniting strange bedfellows.⁶⁰

As the People's Party took shape, William Duncan resigned from the Citizens' Club, and shortly thereafter was chosen as the mayoral candidate for the new faction. Duncan had a distinguished record of service in the Confederate Army, and a medical practice that brought him in contact with a large number of Savannahians. He was born and raised in Savannah, educated

⁵⁸ "The Club Split," *Savannah Press*, November 22, 1894.

⁵⁹ "Myers Accepts," *Savannah Morning News*, November 27, 1894.

⁶⁰ "It is Unique, The Present Local Situation in Politics," *The Savannah Press*, November 28, 1894.

in some of Chatham County's best institutions, and also a devout Protestant. Duncan had nowhere near the political record that Myers had, but he was a well-regarded professional in Savannah's community. Only subtle differences separated the candidates political philosophies, which is not surprising given that until recently they were part of the same reform coalition. Rather, what separated the candidates was their experience and religious and cultural background. Myers was a self-made man and ethnocultural minority, while Duncan was a Savannah native, and a member of the city's Protestant majority. These topics became the main focus of election, and personal religious, ethnic and racial affiliations and alliances would only increase in importance as the election neared.

Tammany's quick realignment was also urged by the decision of incumbent mayor, John McDonough, not to run for a third term. In October there was speculation that he would indeed make another bid, and that he could easily beat Schwarz if the two were to run against each other again. McDonough still had friends, and a fair amount of popularity, despite his faction's problems. The local papers also mused that "it would give Mayor McDonough a great deal of pleasure to oppose Alderman Myers for the mayoralty," since Myers had been a vocal thorn in the side of his administration.⁶¹ The prospect that Myers and McDonough might be running against each other for mayor set the local papers atwitter, and the press openly discussed the saliency of religious and ethnic affiliations should this scenario come to pass.

Like his opponents, John J. McDonough was part of Savannah's business elite, and known for being "connected with many enterprises of a progressive character." Yet he was also the son of Irish born parents, and as such was a prominent member of the city's Irish ethnic

⁶¹ "Both Sides Are Talking," *Savannah Morning News*, October 28, 1894.

community, as well as a member of the Roman Catholic Church.⁶² If McDonough did indeed run against Herman Myers, Savannah voters would be choosing between a Jewish and a Catholic candidate for mayor. The *Savannah Morning News* noted that “while there has been no public expression of it,” many have asserted, “that they would not vote for a Catholic for office, and as many more have declared that they would not vote for a Hebrew.” However, without “what is known in politics as an ‘American’ candidate” on the political field, these voters would have to “exercise their better judgment” and vote for the most qualified candidate.⁶³ The *Morning News* and the *Press* condemned underlying prejudice against Catholic and “Hebrew” citizens, asserting both minorities were indeed worthy of public office, and had served faithfully in the past. Even so, the article reveals that such attitudes were prevalent enough to warrant comment.

In this context an “American” candidate meant someone like Duncan, whose formal nomination for mayor was announced several months after the preceding article. Duncan was native-born and Protestant, and therefore representative of the two-thirds of Savannah’s electorate who shared his religion and country of origin. In 1890 approximately 44% of Savannah’s 43,000 plus residents were directly affiliated with a religious congregation, and of those only 1% were Jewish and 8% were Roman Catholic.⁶⁴ The numbers were gathered from leaders of religious institutions, and as such may not reflect whether the rest of the population had emotional or cultural ties to a particular religion, even if they were not avid members of a congregation. These numbers show that Catholics made up a larger minority than Jews, but not

⁶² Charles C. Jones Jr., O.F. Vedder and Frank Weldom, *History of Savannah, GA: From Its Settlement to the Close of the Eighteenth Century* (Syracuse: D. Mason & Co. Publishers, 1890), 8.

⁶³ “To Meet To-Morrow Night: The Mayor’s Name Favorably Received by the Administration Supporters,” *Savannah Morning News*, November 26, 1894.

⁶⁴ Figures taken from the 1890 religious census of the city, quoted in Lawrence H. Larson, *The Rise of the Urban South* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1985), 52.

as much as one might guess given that between McDonough and Schwarz's administrations, the city had been under the control of a Catholic mayor from 1889 to 1895. Savannah voters therefore clearly had a history of voting for religious minorities, but as the above article denouncing discrimination makes plain, acceptance was not automatic and religious affiliation could be a political liability.

In addition, the saliency of ethnicity and religious affiliation was ever changing. Often the local press differentiated between candidates by singing the praises of the "innate" characteristics of that individuals' particular "race." Even as Major John Schwarz was being sidelined by the Citizens' Club, the *Savannah Press* remarked that "there is no more prosperous or law abiding people in Savannah than the German citizen," and "one of the most popular representatives of this class is Maj. John Schwarz."⁶⁵ Likewise,

"As a rule he [the German] is hardworking, thrifty, and conservative. He attends strictly to business, accumulates money which he invests in real estate, pays his taxes, settles his debts dollar for dollar, and is devoted to the city of his adoption... The German resident of Savannah is never an agitator... He lives well, obeys the laws of his new country, and if he asks for a liberal construction of Sunday or sumptuary restrictions he never becomes offensive in his habits and never interferes with his fellow-citizens."⁶⁶

While this passage acknowledges German residents' less enthusiastic support of Sunday liquor laws, this excerpt paints them as model citizens, and contributing members to Savannah society. The tone of the passage was complimentary, but by singling out Germans for praise, the *Savannah Press* betrays an assumption of difference from southern-born whites. Yet such difference could also be an asset, a way to win over minority voting populations with the capability to swing electoral outcomes. As a German citizen, Schwarz could earn support of his ethnic enclave, and as a Catholic, he would also endear himself to a broader religious

⁶⁵ "A Popular Citizen," *Savannah Press*, November 17, 1894.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

community, including those beyond his ethnic group. However, the ways in which these various identities overlapped could be variable, and did not work the same way for all candidates and ethnocultural groups.

While Herman Myers and Schwarz were both from Bavaria, Myers was always labeled first as the “Hebrew” politician. By all accounts Myers was an exemplar “hardworking, thrifty, and conservative” German, as described above, but his religious identity set him apart and overshadowed his German ethnic background. This substantiates the idea that despite one’s country of origin, Jews were believed to have their own “racial” characteristics. In this context racial language could be a positive as well as a negative descriptor, as the South oscillated between trends of philo and anti-Semitism in the nineteenth century. On one hand Jews were viewed as entrepreneurial, ambitious and practical, and great assets for cities working to build their economy and financial connections. Jews in turn used racial language to assert their distinctive identity and positive contributions to American society. However, Jews were also regarded as innately greedy, selfish and untrustworthy, a clannish people taking advantage of others. While some southerners adhered to the later notion, especially in times of economic crisis, overall Jews had been able to situate themselves among the region’s white population. Benefiting from discrimination against African Americans, Jews found that as long as they did not challenge the South’s racial hierarchy, white southerners were accepting of Jewish participation in society. Myers had found such acceptance in Savannah, but he was still defined by his Jewish identity, which could have unpredictable political implications.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Leonard Rogoff, “Is the Jew White?: The Racial Place of the Southern Jew,” in *Dixie Diaspora: An Anthology of Southern Jewish History*, ed. Mark K Bauman (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006): 390–426; Eric L Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Steven Hertzberg, *Strangers Within the Gate City: The Jews of Atlanta, 1845-1915* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1978); David R Goldfield, *Region, Race, and Cities : Interpreting the Urban South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997).

Dr. William Duncan did not have the same sort of vulnerabilities. In discussing Duncan's biography, the *Savannah Press* remarked that he was of "Scotch-Irish descent and the finest traits of these two strong races are traceable in his character."⁶⁸ As a Protestant and a native of Savannah, Duncan was a more comfortable candidate for those who were bothered by the prospect of a foreign-born Jew taking control of the city. Nativist sentiment had deep roots in Savannah, and for some the economic and political crises of the early 1890s only enhanced suspicion of immigrants. Yet Duncan's qualifications were not as impressive or as well suited to the needs of the city as those of Herman Myers. Duncan was a successful physician, but he could not boast Myers' business credentials, which was crucial in this election. As a *Savannah Press* contributor noted, "the spirit that demands a business management of the vast and varied affairs of the city government is infections. It is in the air."⁶⁹

Myers reputation as "one of the ablest businessmen in Savannah" was therefore central to his mayoral campaign.⁷⁰ The Citizens' Club argued that in order for city government to function properly, the bureaucracy needed to be streamlined and modeled after a successful, private corporation. As a thriving entrepreneur and financier, who also had experience with in city government, Myers was the ideal candidate to usher the Citizens' Club's vision into practice. In an article on December 10th, the *Savannah Press* printed a side-by-side comparison of the candidates opinions on several key issues, such as "economy in government," Sunday laws, public health, and development of the suburbs recently incorporated into the city. The candidates held nearly identical opinions on the issues. Both affirmed the importance of smart economic management of government, and the need for more improvements to streets, sewages lines, etc.

⁶⁸ "Politics Hot," *Savannah Press*, November 29, 1894.

⁶⁹ "A Critical Time," *Savannah Press*, January 16, 1895.

⁷⁰ "Local Politics. How the Savannah Fight Is Viewed From Abroad."

They also argued that the newly acquired southern section of the city should be supplied with more services as soon as possible, and that all Sunday laws should be strictly enforced. However, in the comparison Myers' overall approach to city government came across more clearly. He maintained that if elected, he would administer "all departments thoroughly and economically, yet liberally and progressively," and make sure the "great corporation" of Savannah would work for "the benefit of all citizens." And based on Myers aldermanic and business career, he was committed to these goals "in theory, and, as is wellknown [*sic*], in practice."⁷¹

The Municipal Election of 1895

As the municipal elections neared, affiliations based on race, religion and ethnicity were often openly discussed. Savannah voters worked to support whichever candidate most resembled their background and beliefs, which sometimes led to brawls in registration lines or other incidents of partisan conflict. Although the black community was excluded from the antics surrounding the mayoral nominations, once Myers and Duncan were selected they too took sides.

Each candidate's ethnic and religious affiliations became especially clear in December of 1894, as Savannah residents began paying their poll taxes and registering for the city election. Lines at the tax collector's office became prohibitively long, and residents only had four days in December in which they could bring their tax receipts and register for the election. Soon fights broke out between Myers and Duncan supporters. On December 6, the *Press* wrote that a "big wholesale fight seemed to be imminent" at the tax collector's office. A group of Duncan enthusiasts, from the Irish "Old Fort" neighborhood in Savannah, "were pulling negroes out of line" who were present in support of Herman Myers. Mr. Henry Dresson, "one of Savannah's

⁷¹ "How Mayoralty Candidates Stand; Their Views on Some Questions of the Hour Compared." *Savannah Press*, December 10, 1894.

best-known German citizens,” went to the *Savannah Press* to complain about Duncan’s Irish supporters forcing Myers’ men from the registration line. Dresson recounted that a crowd of Myers supporters, “a number of white and colored” men, arrived to line up at the courthouse at 4 o’clock in the morning. However, at 6:30 Duncan’s men “began pulling our men out of place.”⁷² The local press also reported anecdotes of African Americans being prevented from registering, though the articles were more satisfied than critical of the situation. Although the disorder did not escalate into a full-scale melee, sensational headlines like “Nearly a Riot...Knives Pulled,” and “It Gets Worse...Pistols Drawn,” were splashed across the pages of the local newspapers until registration closed on December 15.⁷³ These accounts not only attest to the deep partisan political sentiment in Savannah, but demonstrated the ethnic, religious and racial divisions and alliances that undergirded local politics.

As one would expect, Savannah’s ethnic and racial groups supported the candidate they felt could best represent their needs and desires. Once the contest was officially between Myers and Duncan, Myers acquired a strong group of German and African American backers. German voters supported Myers because he was part of their ethnic community. Most German were Protestant, and therefore Duncan better represented their religious interests, but with Myers they shared a common language and culture that overshadowed Myers’ religious difference. Savannah’s black community endorsed Myers in hopes that a change in the political ruling party would give black residents greater representation in local government. Sol C. Johnson, editor of the black newspaper, *The Savannah Tribune*, wrote that he had “carefully studied the question

⁷² “The Tax Pen. Hard Lines of Men Who Want to Vote.” *Savannah Press*, December 6, 1894.

⁷³ “Nearly a Riot. Knives Drawn,” *Savannah Press*, December 8, 1894. “It Gets Worse. Pistols Drawn,” *Savannah Press*, December 11, 1894. Before the last day of registration, an article quoted that to date 3,477 whites had registered and 599 blacks. “Now 4, 076,” *Savannah Press*, December 12, 1894.

and the only hope seen to better the condition of our people is to have Mr. Myers for Mayor.”⁷⁴

Myers’ record as an alderman substantiated this claim, since he was instrumental in making much needed improvements to Savannah’s black cemetery, and in general was amenable to requests from the black residents. With Myers, the black community might finally get a black city physician, and other offices they desired.⁷⁵

While blacks and Germans on the whole supported Myers, Savannah’s Jewish population did not support him en masse, which was a trend common within in the southern Jewish community. Even though southern Jews saw themselves as a distinct ethnic population, and often articulated their Jewishness in racialized terms, they vehemently rejected the notion of organizing as a political bloc.⁷⁶ The *Jewish South*, a newspaper printed in Atlanta, repeatedly asserted that there was no such thing as a Jewish “vote,” and that Jews did not and should not act “together either as a political body or as a social subdivision of society. Each Israelite decides for himself” his political affiliation. The Jewish community’s aversion to political organizing likely stemmed from realistic recognition that their small numbers prevented the formation of an effective bloc, even if filled with men of influence. They were also guided by fear of reprisals and the concern Jews would be left with few friends they could depend on. The *Jewish South* argued that combining “politically as Jews for the accomplishment of certain offices” set “a

⁷⁴ *The Savannah Tribune*, January 19, 1894

⁷⁵ Myers’ Jewish identity might have also induced Johnson to expect better treatment from his administration. Some historians have argued that Jews were more sympathetic towards black southerners because of their own historical experience of persecution. However, Jews living in the South never challenged white supremacy or the South’s racial hierarchy; a reflection of concern for their own acceptance, and as well as their own prejudiced views. For more information about Jewish-black relations in the South, and particularly economic relationships that tended to link the two groups, see Clive Webb, “A Tangled Web: Black-Jewish Relations in the Twentieth-Century South,” in *Jewish Roots in Southern Soil: A New History* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2006); David R Goldfield, *Region, Race, and Cities : Interpreting the Urban South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997).

⁷⁶ Jonathan Sarna defines Jewishness (Yiddishkeit) as a sense of Jewish peoplehood based on various “common denominators,” including shared history and values, that unite all Jews despite religious differences, Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 166.

dangerous precedent,” and was akin to the tactics of those who might organize politically on the basis of anti-Semitic attitudes. In keeping with this perspective, there was no attempt to organize Savannah’s Jewish voters into one faction, and they were split between Myers and Duncan’s camps. Yet when Myers eventually won, his political success was celebrated in the southern Jewish press as a measure of the advancement of Jews everywhere in the South. Thus while Myers could not expect to control a Jewish voting bloc, if he succeeded in his political endeavors he was lauded as an example of Jewish progress in the open-minded South.⁷⁷

Meanwhile, Duncan had the solid support of the city’s Irish voters. This loyalty, however, likely stemmed from the dislike of common enemies rather than love of Duncan and his proposed policies. The Irish had a contentious relationship with Savannah’s black residents, and with the city’s German community, giving Irish voters two strong reasons to support Myers’ opponent. Duncan’s “Scotch-Irish” background helped solidified his support from the Fort, since they at least shared some similar heritage. They also had reason to expect Duncan would be friendlier to their patronage requests, and provide offices previously procured through the Tammany Club. On the eve of the election, Duncan’s side predicted for the *Savannah Press* they would win at least two-thirds of the Irish vote, and 1,000 to Myers’ 600 of the “so called American class” of voters.⁷⁸ While the People’s Party had reason to embellish expected numbers, their expectation of appealing more to Irish and “native” voters is in keeping with the ethnic divisions described in newspaper coverage.

⁷⁷ *Jewish South*, December 29, 1893. “There is No Jewish Vote,” *Jewish South*, August 3, 1896. For information about factional politics among Jews in Atlanta, see Hertzberg, *Strangers Within the Gate City*; Mark K. Bauman, “Factionalism and Ethnic Politics in Atlanta: German Jews from the Civil War Through the Progressive Era,” in *Politics and Religion in the White South*, ed. Glenn Feldman, Religion in the South (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 35–56.

⁷⁸ “Whooose Victory? Tomorrow the Battle of Ballots Is On,” *Savannah Press*, January 21, 1895.

Although “native” white men were the largest constituency within city politics, and not all voters were part of political clubs, it is significant that most accounts of registration-related brawls identified blacks and white ethnics in support of the two specific factions. While their participation might have been exaggerated, Savannah’s ethnic and racial groups clearly made their presence felt in the political process. This also reinforces the saliency of ethnocultural affiliations as a defining feature of the city’s factional political culture, particularly when the actual issues between factions were themselves not divisive.

The purposeful use of ethnocultural ties to shore up political support was clearly demonstrated when each ticket chose their alderman. Savannah had “at-large” elections for city aldermen, meaning alderman were voted for by the public as a whole, not by a particular ward. The *Savannah Press* remarked that a competitive aldermanic ticket for the election would ideally have “two businessmen, two workingmen, two German-Americans, two Irish-Americans, with probably a professional man or two.”⁷⁹ Such a ticket would hopefully reach across ethnic and class lines (Myers may have been one such “token” candidate in previous years). The aldermen for each ticket were announced after registration for the election closed, so even as men pushed and shoved outside the tax collector’s office, they could only speculate which alderman their faction would choose to nominate. Once the aldermen were announced, another stage of politicking would commence in the city, as political workers on each side would try to sway any indecisive or independent voters, while also seeking votes to “purchase.” The concept of a balanced ticket not only supports the idea that ethnic and class groups would and organized for their political benefit, but that candidates and factions were sensitive to the fact that the city’s political power was divided among diverse ethnocultural populations.

⁷⁹ “Aldermanic Tickets,” *Savannah Press*, October 22, 1894. Goldberg, “The Administration of Herman Myers.”

Conspicuously absent from proposals for a balanced ticket for city government were African American candidates. One newspaper article had suggested that black voters were “in the cold in this election,” and would represent the smallest proportion of the city’s electorate to date.⁸⁰ This is not surprising given the political trends of the 1890s, but the recorded conflicts involving black men at the tax collector’s office belies such pronouncements of their irrelevance. As discussed in Chapter 1, the black community still held the balance of political power in many voting precincts, and thus represented an important political enclave. The *Savannah Morning News* had conceded earlier in the 1894 election season that black voters “will cut considerable figure in the city election.”⁸¹ Mentions of black men present and addressing the Citizens’ Club meetings also suggests that while they were not represented in the leadership of the organization, they were involved in some club activities.⁸²

More so than any other ethnocultural group, black voters sought to assert their power as a voting bloc. *The Savannah Tribune*, complained that “every class of citizen is represented in the city government except the Negro, yet his vote is larger than the Irish, German and Jew combined. This is a point to be considered and actions upon it must be taken.”⁸³ This statement is a bit exaggerated, since while African Americans constituted a little over half of the city’s populations, they only accounted for about 15% of the registered vote, while the Irish and German ethnic vote made up about a quarter of total voters.⁸⁴ Yet the *Tribune* still urged black voters to register and organize so that they could be “in a position to cast a practically solid vote

⁸⁰ “Where Are We At?” *Savannah Press*, December 5, 1894.

⁸¹ “Can They Be Abolished?” *The Savannah Morning News*, October 20, 1894.

⁸² “A Great Meeting. One Thousand Men Cheer Myers Ticket,” *Savannah Press*, January 15, 1895.

⁸³ *Savannah Tribune*, October 27, 1894

⁸⁴ Goldberg, “The Administration of Herman Myers,” 19.

for one of the tickets to be named.” This way the black community could “obtain some political recognition in city affairs, which they have never received in the past.” While the constraints of a white supremacist political system continued to prevent black Savannahians from being represented as they should have been, they still had an important role in city elections.

Duncan’s campaign never publically employed anti-Semitic rhetoric, but there were several ways Myers’ opponents cast doubt on his fitness for office. One newspaper editorial pointed out that “no one can deny that Dr. Duncan has not received a much more thorough and higher education than the opposing candidate, and is much more likely to fill the head of office in a more dignified and intelligent manner.”⁸⁵ In addition, just days before the election Duncan’s faction charged that Myers was not actually a naturalized citizen. Myers had gotten wind of the plan beforehand and took an oath of allegiance before the Duncan men could make their accusations, even though he insisted he was naturalized in Virginia when he was a young man. This was obviously a last ditch effort by Duncan’s camp to garner support after realizing they would likely be defeated. The tactic was soundly denounced in the local press.⁸⁶

This attempt to stir up anti-immigrant sentiments angered many in Savannah, and especially those who had been stressing the need for voters to look beyond ethnic or religious aversions when choosing a candidate. One such person affirmed that Myers had been in the city many years, and was a bona fide “Georgian and a Savannahian.”⁸⁷ A speech made by a

⁸⁵ “Business Men. Fine Financial Material on the Duncan Ticket,” *Savannah Press*, January 18, 1895.

⁸⁶ According to Naturalization Records Myers went to the superior court January 21, 1895. What is also interesting is that the press termed this anti-immigrant prejudice as “A.P.Aism” – or the American Protective Association. The APA was an anti-immigrant organization, but it targeted Catholics more so than Jews, and many German protestants belonged. This is also significant because in the next chapter, we will see that charges of APA affiliation were used to damage the Citizens’ Club and Myers’ reelection bid. Index to Naturalization Records, 1792-1908, Live Oak Public Library, Savannah, Georgia. “Down with A.P.A.-ism: “Liberty” Objects to Quite Efforts to Arouse Such a Spirit Here.” *Savannah Press*, January 21, 1895. “A Citizen in the Best Sense.” *Savannah Press*, January 22, 1895. Goldberg, “The Administration of Herman Myers.”

⁸⁷ “A Citizen in the Best Sense,” *Savannah Press*, January 22, 1895.

prominent local figure, Dr. Falligant, at a Citizens' Club meeting in early December embodies the optimism within arguments to sideline prejudice. Falligant declared that he shared "no sympathy with that egoistic spirit" that claimed that "true American citizenship" was reserved only for native-born Americans. He counseled his listeners to:

"recognize how divine providence bids you stop your angry contentions, study what is best for your city and your family, and try to discover in you brother man those good qualities which will do away with the prejudice of religion or cast, soften your animosities...where you find ability you are likely to find usefulness...where you find enterprise you will likely observe prosperity as its handmaid, and where you find the genuine article of American manhood you won't care whether it is in an American or foreigner, a Protestant, a Catholic, or a Jew."

With this speech Falligant implored Savannah voters to consider personal merit, not ethnic or religious affiliation, when choosing their mayoral candidate. Indeed, if the goal was to bring prosperity to Savannah, voters needed to cast their net wide, and open the door to ethnocultural minorities.

In the midst of last minute rallies hosted by the clubs, Savannah voters went to the polls on Tuesday, January 22, and elected Herman Myers mayor of Savannah. He earned 2,584 votes to Duncan's 1,925 – a comfortable majority of 655 ballots. The Citizens' Club itself also emerged victorious, with all of its candidates for alderman elected. The Citizens' Club was now the prominent faction in Savannah. Their push for a political realignment had succeeded.⁸⁸

Conclusion

Savannah voters made a choice when they elected Herman Myers as mayor of the Forest City. Duncan was white, native-born, a Confederate veteran and a physician – he had the racial and social pedigree one would expect of a mayor of an Old South city like Savannah. Myers had

⁸⁸ "Myers the Next Mayor: The Entire Citizens' Club Ticket Elected," *The Savannah Morning News*, January 23, 1895; "Looks Like Myers: Myers People Appear Most Confident," *Savannah Press*, January 22, 1895.

more experience in local government, and his successful business career attested to his administrative skills, but he was a German Jewish immigrant in a social context of prevalent nativism and anti-Semitism. In electing Myers, Savannah chose the more capable candidate, despite his ethnocultural affiliations.

This choice to elect Myers was in part a product of the city's factional politics and cultural divisions. While politicians vied for control, and argued over seemingly trivial issues, ethnocultural alliances shaped political factions. What better way to ensure that the needs of your community would be met than to elect a candidate that shared your interests? That voters would look to elect a candidate similar to themselves is not a new revelation, nor is the idea that urban politics in the late nineteenth century employed ethnic, racial and religious ties as means of political organization. Yet what is significant is that this happened in the South in the 1890s, when white supremacy usually trumped democracy whenever there was conflict.

Lastly, Myers successful mayoral bid reveals yet another choice made by Savannah voters. Rather than preserving the status quo, city residents opted for change and reform. Myers and the Citizens' Club pledged to make the city more efficient and prosperous, and they worked to live up to their promises. However, not all Savannah residents agreed with Myers progressive agenda, which is the topic of the next chapter.



*Herman Myers pictured in "Official Souvenir Programme, Laying of Cornerstone, New City Hall, Savannah, Georgia, August 11th, 1904."*⁸⁹

⁸⁹ "Official Souvenir Programme, Laying of Cornerstone, New City Hall, Savannah, Georgia, August 11th, 1904." (Savannah: Daily Record Print, 1904), Courtesy of Live Oak Public Library, Savannah, Georgia.

CHAPTER 3:

WITH “THE INTEREST OF THE CITY AT HEART”¹: THE POLITICS OF REFORM

When Herman Myers was sworn in as mayor of Savannah in 1895, he wasted little time pursuing the agenda he had advertised during his campaign. He brought his entrepreneurial energy to city government and worked effectively with the city’s business community to attract investment and open new lines of trade. He instituted structural reforms to the city’s bureaucracy, creating commissions and reshaping city departments to complete improvements at a faster pace and fairer price. He also skillfully worked to remain aloof from political or social conflicts that might derail Savannah’s road to greatness. By the end of his first term, Myers had much to be proud of, and believed wholeheartedly that by making Savannah the most streamlined, most prosperous, and most modern version of itself, he had served the best interest of all Savannah residents.

Yet what Myers and many of his supporters believed would be a triumphal reelection in 1897 ended in defeat. A rival faction waged an acrimonious campaign against Myers’ administration, casting his reforms as examples of nefarious manipulation and gross mismanagement, and questioning the integrity of the Citizens’ Club on several fronts. Myers and his faction subsequently lost the election by 233 votes out of the 4,807 cast.² The new ruling faction, calling itself the Liberal Club, declared the election a referendum of Myers’ policies, but the deeper meaning of the election was far more complex. The election had inspired immense partisan activity, and both sides engaged in flagrant vote-buying and fraud, calling into question

¹ *Savannah Tribune*, January 28, 1899.

² “Meldrim Is Mayor,” *Savannah Morning News*, January 27, 1897.

whether the outcome was a genuine measure of Savannah voters' displeasure with Myers. After this loss, Myers' and his faction would go on to serve another eight years in office. Myers was elected in 1899, and ran unopposed in 1901, 1903 and 1905. Myers' unqualified support suggests that Savannah residents felt he did possess the qualities of an effective administrator. So was Myers' loss in 1897 a causality of murky Gilded Age politics, or evidence of displeasure with Myers' actions as Savannah's chief executive?

The rhetoric swirling in Myers' 1897 reelection campaign was indicative of limits placed on progressive reform in Savannah. Criticism of Myers' policies pointed to issues with who Myers chose to appoint to new municipal offices, and who was excluded. Businessmen who had never before served in government peopled Myers' administration, while many career politicians entrenched in previous governments were dismissed. Myers also went against tradition and appointed an African American to a municipal office. To a sizable portion of Savannah's electorate, Myers' energetic overhaul of city government was tantamount to radicalism and had to be checked. Ultimately Savannah's electorate would see the virtues of some of Myers' measures, but in his subsequent terms Myers would not enact the same sorts of sweeping changes to city government he had in 1895 and 1896. Therefore, reform was not halted in Savannah, but it was checked and refocused.

Beginning with discussion of trends in municipal reform and political rhetoric in the late nineteenth century, this chapter situates in context Herman Myers' first term as city mayor, and his approach to reform. A portrait of Peter Meldrim, leader of the opposing Liberal Club faction, follows with analysis of criticism directed at Myers' administration. The perspective of Savannah's black community is also developed through discussion of Sol C. Johnson and his newspaper, the *Savannah Tribune*. The black community saw the promise of Myers'

administration, but charges of electoral fraud, and the victory of Meldrim's faction, stifled further advancement of black interests in municipal affairs. In conclusion, this chapter will discuss the partisan political activities surrounding the 1897 municipal election, and analyze the reasons for Myers' defeat.

On being "progressive, and yet conservative"³: The Boundaries of Reform

During the election of 1895 the *Savannah Press* ran a series of editorials giving opinions on whether or not Myers and the Citizens' Club should be awarded stewardship of the city. A printed back-and-forth ensued between a contributor under the pseudonym, "Progress," who endorsed Herman Myers, and "Georgia," who did not believe Myers was an ideal candidate for the mayoral office. "Georgia," rejected the fundamental claim of "Progress," that Myers' business career made him especially qualified and prepared to administer an efficient city government.⁴ "Progress" argued that if voters really wanted Savannah to "improve and grow and keep pace with the strides of other cities," they needed to support Myers, whose record in private business and public service demonstrated dedication "to the policy of progress, to the policy of development, to the policy of a business administration for the sole benefit of Savannah and its people." This slogan was repeated by another editorial contributor, "Citizen," who advised everyone to "vote for the progress of Savannah" by voting for the Citizens' Club.⁵

Association between businessmen and movements for efficient municipal government was common throughout the country in the late nineteenth century. The commercial-civic elite

³ "Mr. Herman Myers," *Savannah Press*, November 22, 1894.

⁴ "The Candidates. Mr. Myers and Dr. Duncan Compared," *Savannah Press*, January 11, 1895.

⁵ "Unity of Action. It Is Need For Savannah's Good," *Savannah Press*, January 18, 1895; "For Progress, and for Savannah's Advancement," *Savannah Press*, January 21, 1895.

wanted urban governments to reorganize, to streamline decision-making processes and provide more efficient city services. Urban improvements such as street paving, electrification, harbor deepening, etc., were important to fostering commerce, but modernization was expensive and required careful fiscal management. Many businessmen believed that to succeed in this new era, especially as populations grew and demands on government increased, city governments had to be run like private corporations. And who better to run these civic corporations than the men who excelled in private enterprise? Although the South was less urbanized than the North, the same impulse swept through southern cities in this period. Businessmen began entering city politics in greater numbers, serving as mayors, aldermen and other city officials, and ensuring a harmony of purpose between government and commercial interests. However, businessmen with political aspirations had to convince urban electorates that their reforms were motivated by concern for the greater good, and not out of self-interest.⁶

Myers' campaign rhetoric was in keeping with the above arguments, and placed great emphasis on economic development as a necessary ingredient for the health of the city and its residents overall. The descriptors "reform" and "progressive" were ubiquitous in political debate, and were associated with "efficient" and "business-like" city administration. These terms described an approach to municipal administration that emphasized economic growth, administrative techniques used in private corporations, and continued urban modernization. Using "business methods" would provide goods and services at prudent costs while stimulating

⁶ Dewey W. Grantham, *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983), 275-318; Blaine A. Brownell and David R. Goldfield, *The City in Southern History: the Growth of Urban Civilization in the South*, (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1977); Don Harrison Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1860-1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); James Weinstein, "Organized Business and the City Commission and Manager Movements," *Journal of Southern History* 28, no. 2 (May 1962): 166-182. For discussion of trends in municipal reform and leadership outside the South, see Jon C. Teafor, *The Unheralded Triumph: City Government in America, 1870-1900* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984).

expansion. These activities would fill the city's coffers, continue to make Savannah a competitive, modern city, and serve the best interests of all residents.

These money-oriented arguments in favor of municipal reorganization were intimately tied with widespread concern about political corruption and governmental mismanagement. In the late nineteenth century middle-class reformers became increasingly disgusted with the hold of political machines on local government, and the graft and ineptitude associated with these organizations. Throughout the 1870s and 1880s cities had adjusted to growing numbers through the creation of city departments to oversee street paving, public health, police forces, etc. Municipal departments were usually separate bodies from city council, but the mayor and aldermen were in charge of budgets and personnel. As party bosses and machines took over the machinery of municipal government, the spoils system ruled city departments, and unqualified or dishonest men were put in charge of managing departments as political gifts. Reformers pushed for "good government" through new legislation and regulation that would professionalize civil service and insulate city government from partisan politics. Civil service reform and other efforts to "purify" politics at both the local and national level set the tone for political discourse in the 1890s, and became intertwined with arguments for efficiency expressed by business leaders. Those in favor of this came to emphasize the mutually supporting goals of honest, non-partisan, *and* efficient government.⁷

However, campaigns to "purify" politics in the South were less about deposing political machines than about entrenching white supremacy at the state and local level. The Democratic

⁷ Teafor, *The Unheralded Triumph*, 66-80; Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 275-318; Edward L. Ayers, *Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 51. For general discussion of Gilded Age political culture, see Michael E McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North, 1865-1928* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Charles Calhoun, "The Political Culture: Public Life and the Conduct of Politics," in *The Gilded Age: Perspectives on the Origins of Modern America*, ed. Charles Calhoun, 2nd ed. (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2007), 239-264.

Party had successfully redeemed the South, but white political elites were frightened by the fickle nature of southern voters. Elites believed that through the common practice of doling out liquor or cash at the polls, voters could be easily induced to follow upstart political parties that might challenge Democratic dominance. The People's Party in the early 1890s was case and point for this argument. Dismissing the deeper socio-economic reasons the Populists enjoyed bi-racial support from farmers and workers, white Democrats believed these successes were due to "buying" ignorant or "floating" voters. It was commonly repeated by white Democrats that black voters were particularly "purchasable," causing unnecessary political turmoil. Southern states therefore instituted measures that would cleanse the political process, often including the Australian, or secret ballot, and more stringent voter qualifications. White politicians employed these approaches in conjunction with the arsenal of fraud and intimidation tactics used prevent African Americans from voting. Disfranchisement of black voters eventually became the cause célèbre for southern electoral "reformers."⁸

Measuring the real level of political corruption in the Gilded Age, however, is difficult for historians. Partisan loyalties and inducements were not mutually exclusive; a voter could take money or other perks for a vote they were already planning to cast for a particular party. Whether black voters were more "purchasable" is also hard to measure. By the end of the nineteenth century, political parties in the South were not making any meaningful effort to address African American concerns, so in the absence of clear partisan loyalties, blacks were assumed to be

⁸ Michael Perman, *Struggle for Mastery: Disfranchisement in the South, 1888-1908* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

swing votes. This made black voters very much in demand in close elections, but also led to frequent accusations of them being “bought” for political parties.⁹

Politics was a dirty business in the Gilded Age, and bad habits were hard to eliminate. The use of spoils, or government patronage, was deeply entrenched in American political culture, as were deep partisan loyalties. While the South experienced the same problems as the North, as a rule the South was less friendly to reform. Conservatism was necessary to keep the Democratic party in power, and maintain white supremacy in politics. Therefore, to succeed politically as a reform candidate in Savannah in the 1890s, one had to straddle the line between change and tradition.¹⁰ In the midst of the nomination battles of 1894, Myers was touted as being exactly this blend, someone who was “progressive, and yet conservative.”¹¹ History would show that Myers’ administration was progressive in his approach to city administration, but was he conservative enough for Savannah’s electorate?

Herman Myers’ First Term

From a historical perspective, and measured by his stated goals, Herman Myers’ first term as mayor was a success. Myers reorganized city government to emulate other modern cities, provided much needed improvements and services, and looked for ways to strengthen Savannah’s economy. Myers’ administration maintained that the changes they inaugurated were in the interest of reform, but detractors argued that these new policies fostered corruption under a

⁹ Calhoun, “The Political Culture: Public Life and the Conduct of Politics”; Perman, *Struggle for Mastery*. For information on methods of electoral fraud, see Mark Wahlgren Summers, *Party Games: Getting, Keeping, and Using Power in Gilded Age Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

¹⁰ Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*.

¹¹ “Mr. Herman Myers,” *Savannah Press*, November 22, 1894.

new guise. The debate over the virtues and flaws of this new municipal order dominated local political discussion throughout his first mayoral term.¹²

Myers had campaigned on the promise to institute a business-minded approach to city government. As a longtime alderman he knew the weaknesses of the municipal bureaucracy, and that city council “was burdened with more detail work than it could properly attend to.” Myers argued that as a result city government did not have “that degree of supervision as would appear to be necessary where large amounts of public funds were expended annually,” and that “there was no concentration of responsibility,” resulting in a lack of “supervision and control so vitally necessary.”¹³ In other words, the system of government in Savannah was outdated, and not equipped to keep up with the city’s growing population. Structural reform was needed to ensure efficient management, and Myers felt that city commissions would provide much needed energy and oversight.

The creation of commissions had not been a stated goal of the Citizens’ Club before Myers took office. This reform developed after Myers and his council spent a few months in office. Rather than creating the commissions through city ordinance, Myers worked with his Citizens’ Club colleagues in the State Assembly to pass legislation establishing the commissions.

¹⁴ Going into effect in January of 1896 were Fire, Water, Police, and Tax Assessors and

¹² David J Goldberg, “The Administration of Herman Myers as Mayor of Savannah, Georgia, 1895-1897 and 1899-1907” (Masters Thesis, University of North Carolina, 1978).

¹³ “Upheld the Commissions. Mayor Myers Answers Attacks on His Administration,” *Savannah Morning News*, May 5, 1896.

¹⁴ The decision to create the commissions through the state legislature is likely due to Myers’ experience during the Charlton Ordinance controversy, explained in the previous chapter. City ordinances could be changed on the whim of city council, which changed every two years. If passed by the state legislature the commissions would be harder to abolish (though as they would find not impossible). In addition, following the Charlton Ordinance controversy the Citizens’ Club legislators had abolished various city offices in order to allow Myers to choose his own lieutenants. Legislative Records, House and Senate, Bills and Resolutions, 1756-2010, 37-1-1, Georgia Archives, Atlanta, Ga; Georgia Legislative Documents, 1799-1999, Georgia Archives/Digital Library of Georgia, <http://cdm.sos.state.ga.us/cdm4/legdocs.php>.

Receivers commissions, each made of three board members, a Park and Tree Commission, run by five board members, as well as a single commissioner of Public Works – an officer that would oversee a number of small departments devoted to city improvements such as sanitation, street paving, etc. Commission members would eventually serve staggered six-year terms. The longer, overlapping terms guaranteed that at least some experienced officers would always be in city government, so new administrations would not have to reinvent the wheel after each election. Mostly autonomous, the commissions worked alongside city council rather than as subcommittees. City council could decide the budgets of the commissions, but the aldermen had no involvement in how the money was spent, or in choosing employees that would do the work. Myers predicted that “the proper and systematic management of these departments will show a great saving of public monies and accomplish much better and more far-reaching results,” removing the “cobwebs of past administrations” and bringing new energy to city government.¹⁵

Savannah’s commissions resembled structural innovations made in urban centers throughout the country in the 1890s, but were still relatively modest and not as far-reaching as those instituted in other cities. As discussed in the previous section, many large municipalities had created departments to oversee some of the city’s administrative duties, and were organized like Myers’ commissions, with budgets and leaders approved by council. However, many good-government advocates felt this still left city departments vulnerable to the spoils system and partisan politics, and sought to divorce important administrative functions from the local political culture.¹⁶ Some new measures required the governor or state legislature to appoint individuals to

¹⁵ Ibid.; “Annual Report for Herman Myers, Mayor of the City of Savannah,” (1895), *Annual Reports of the Mayor of Savannah*, Digital Library of Georgia, <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/savannahmayor/>; Goldberg, “The Administration of Herman Myers.”

¹⁶ One reform employed by good government reformers to break up the power of city bosses was at-large elections for city council, or the election of aldermen without direct correlation to any particular ward. Savannah had instituted at-large elections before the Civil War, but not as a reform – rather a tactic used by Savannah elites to

certain positions, and/or set the budgets of city departments, placing a layer of protection between local partisan politics and city management. Areas where it was particularly attractive to create such commissions were for the police department and sinking fund (city debt), removing arms and money from local party control. These tactics were also used in cities to combat budgetary crises, with the state appointing officers to get cities back on track after bankruptcy. Myers' proposed innovations were moderate in that they still allowed budgetary control of departments, but did separate council from direct involvement in the city's administrative responsibilities.¹⁷

Savannah's business community was particularly prominent in the reorganization of city government. All but two of the newly appointed commissioners were leading businessmen in Savannah. The theory behind applying business methods to Savannah supposed these men had already learned the principles of efficiency and frugality when working for themselves, and thus had the skill-set that the Citizens' Club leaders were looking for; even though few had experience in city government. Evidence suggests that the commissions did help Myers' administration achieve many stated aims, improving city services and Savannah's built environment. The Water Commission built a new electric plant and laid over 10,000 feet of new water mains. The Tax Assessors and Receivers helped raise city revenues by collecting more personal property tax, while also lowering the tax rate slightly after reassessment. The Commissioner of Public Works paved more streets, renumbered the city's houses with the Bull

perpetuate their power in government. As a result of the at-large elections, Savannah did not have the same machine organization as many other cities, but still had to contend with partisan conflict and the spoils system.

¹⁷ Teaford, *The Unheralded Triumph: City Government in America, 1870-1900*, 66-80; William O Scroggs, "Commission Government in the South," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 38, no. 3, Commission Government in American Cities (November 1911): 12-27. Even stronger forms of commission government, also known as city-manager government, were instituted in many cities after 1900, based on the "Galveston Plan." See Rice, "The Galveston Plan of City Government by Commission: The Birth of a Progressive Idea." Also Teaford, *The Unheralded Triumph: City Government in America, 1870-1900*. 66-80.

street as the prime meridian of the city, and coordinated improvements to the city's sewage system. With these changes Savannah was prospering. From 1896 to 1897 Savannah's bank clearances increased from \$124,756,337 to \$127,777,401, which were higher than that of Atlanta.¹⁸

In addition, the commissions helped gather all sorts of information on the city. The city's finances and health statistics were calculated as they had been previously, but more data was gathered on improvements and other aspects of city life. Harry Willink, the Commissioner of Public Works, was instrumental in this process, and believed gathering and sorting information was crucial to the work of the departments under his supervision. The accumulation of empirical data was a new development common in the late nineteenth century, accompanying the growth of social science research and its incorporation into governance. In one instance a member of the Park and Tree Commissions conducted a full census of the city's trees, recording the number and kinds of trees in the city and where they were located. The results of this study were published in the local newspaper and commented upon as a step forward in keeping Savannah's verdant appearance and nickname as the Forest City. That same commission also reorganized park and tree laborers into groups that specialized in flowers versus trees, and decided to outfit laborers in brown uniforms. All these measures were in step with progressive reforms already instituted throughout the country, and streamlined city government in beneficial ways.¹⁹

Myers' reforms were in keeping with the Citizens' Club's electoral platform, and the mayor and his faction defended their structural decisions to critics. They argued that the

¹⁸ Goldberg, "The Administration of Herman Myers," 40.

¹⁹ "Census of Shade Trees. Eleven Thousand Trees of 40 Varieties in the City," *Savannah Morning News*, January 4, 1897. For information on the scientific collection of information, and use of such data for reform movements, see Teaford, *The Unheralded Triumph: City Government in America, 1870-1900*; Eric H Monkkenon, *America Becomes Urban: The Development of U.S. Cities and Towns, 1780-1980* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988); Joan Waugh, *The Unsentimental Reformer: The Life of Josephine Shaw Lowell* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997); William H Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

staggered six year terms of the commissions not only guaranteed that there were always some experienced men in city offices, but it insulated these offices from the vagaries of a volatile political system. Myers' maintained his decision to replace some city officers and employees, like his decisions to appoint largely businessmen to the commissions, was not about partisan politics. Rather, Myers was trying to institute new business-methods to city administration, and needed able administrators with those desired skills rather than career politicians. Lastly, the autonomy of the commissions was an additional blessing, for it allowed commissioners to make decisions without having to go through multiple meetings of city council. This, the Citizens' Club argued, made the city run more smoothly and efficiently, and allowed for oversight and coordination not previously possible.

Despite positive aims and methods that had gained traction in other cities, Myers' administration sparked a dedicated opposition movement. The replacement of many city officers once the new Citizens' Club administration came into office had a galvanizing effect on the opposition. Following the Charlton Ordinance controversy described in the last chapter, in which the outgoing administration packed city offices, representative T.D. Rockwell introduced a bill in the state legislature that would give Myers the power to decide if he would like to replace city officers. The bill passed, and after some debate Myers replaced men in thirteen out of twenty-six jobs, including a police chief who had been in that office for thirty years. This was followed by additional heavy turnover in the fire and police department, representing forty-one and twenty-five percent, respectively.²⁰ Myers did not just change how government ran, but also who was at the helm. And for the ones that had been a part of the previous ruling faction, this was a hard pill to swallow. This was especially the case for former Tammany Club member, Peter Meldrim.

²⁰ Goldberg, "The Administration of Herman Myers," 42-34.

“A true and noble son of his city”²¹: Peter Meldrim and the Liberal Club

“He belongs to Old Savannah, and there the sentiment and confidence of the Georgia bar hang about his sturdy little figure as thickly as the Georgia moss upon the oaks.”²²

Peter Wiltberger Meldrim was a Savannah lawyer and politician, and a devoted son of Savannah. He was born in 1848 to the steward of the Pulaski House, a local hotel, and was raised with a strong sense of his Irish heritage. His mother was born in Ireland and emigrated to the United States with her parents, while his father was born in New York to an Irish couple that had already made the United States their permanent home. A bright and tenacious young man, Meldrim excelled in school at the Chatham Academy and matriculated to the University of Georgia at age 15, in the midst of the Civil War. Meldrim’s studies were soon interrupted as Sherman began his 1864 campaign through Georgia, forcing the school to close and the 16-year-old Meldrim to return to Savannah. Upon his return Meldrim worked as a clerk for the Confederate Commissary, and then joined the home guard in manning the city’s defenses. Once Savannah surrendered and the war ended Meldrim returned to the University of Georgia, completing a bachelor’s degree in 1868, a law degree in 1869, and a masters degree in 1871.²³

²¹ “City Council Regrets Loss: Death of Gen. Meldrim,” *Savannah Morning News*, December 14, 1933.

²² James Grafton Rogers, *American Bar Leaders: Biographies of the Presidents of the American Bar Association, 1878-1928* (The American Bar Association. Chicago, IL, 1932), Meldrim Family Papers, Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia.

²³ Rogers. *American Bar Leaders*; “Notable Career Comes to an End: Judge Peter Meldrim Has Passed Away,” *Savannah Morning News*, December 14, 1933; J.E. Hays, *Georgia Official and Statistical Register, 1933-1935-1937*, Digital Library of Georgia, Atlanta, Ga.: State of Georgia, n.d., <http://statregister.galileo.usg.edu/statregister/index.html>.



*Peter Wiltberger Meldrim*²⁴

²⁴ O'Hara, Arthur. *The Story of a Century: The Hibernian Society of Savannah Georgia, 1812-1912* (Savannah, Ga.: Braid & Hutton, 1912).

Following the war Meldrim was not wealthy, but he was educated, ambitious, and could boast faithful service to his home state. He began his legal practice in Savannah, traveling on horseback throughout the region to wherever his services were needed. He became known as one of Chatham County's leading criminal lawyers, but also was adept at civil cases. Joining with another successful lawyer, William Garrard, Meldrim established one of the most well-regarded legal firms in the state. His reputation as an effective jurist then led to a bid for state senator for the first district, and he served two terms in the Georgia assembly, from 1880 to 1883. At the time of Meldrim's senatorial stint he met and married his wife, Francis Pamela Casey. Casey was known to be "a famous beauty and belle."²⁵ Her father had also been a state senator, was a plantation owner, and had been a delegate at Georgia's Secession convention. With this match Meldrim not only gained a beautiful and established mate, but also married into Georgia's landed elite. The plantation class no longer had a monopoly on wealth, but they maintained a great deal of aristocratic prestige, and the social power prestige confers. The marriage was also the epitome of cooperation between the landed class and the new class of businessmen and professionals that rose in prominence after the war. With his new wife and blossoming career, the steward's son had become one of Savannah's leading men.²⁶

Meldrim's status as a member of Savannah's elite was confirmed when he and his young family moved into the fashionable Green House on Madison Square in Savannah. Built in the 1850s by a cotton merchant and shipper, Charles Green, the Gothic Revival house was one of the most elaborate in the city. The wrap around porch featured intricate ironwork, while the interior featured ornate moldings, silver plated doorknobs, a domed skylight over the main staircase, and

²⁵ "Scrapbook of Caroline L. Meldrim," Sophie Meldrim Shonnard, St. John's Episcopal Church, Savannah, 1971.

²⁶ "Notable Career Comes to an End"; Hays, *Georgia Official and Statistical Register*.

three sets of doors at the entrance of the house. The home had served as General Sherman's headquarters while he occupied Savannah, chosen both for its central location in the city and its lavish design. Meldrim, his wife and five children moved into the Green House in 1892 and lived there for the duration of Meldrim's life.²⁷

Not content to sit on his laurels, Meldrim also took an active role in his community. A leader in the Jasper Monument Association, Meldrim helped to erect a bronze statue to commemorate the local Revolutionary War hero, Sergeant William Jasper. He also was president of the Hibernian Society, an Irish fraternal association, from 1887 to 1912. The Hibernian Society advocated the "the maintenance of a filial attachment for the Mother Country; the aid of distressed Irishmen and their descendants," culminating in "the cultivation of good fellowship, and the practice of charity."²⁸ The organization was made up primarily of Catholics, but Meldrim was Episcopalian, an example of Protestants of Irish descent who also took part in the organization. The prominent jurist was also active in the volunteer militia, having risen from a lieutenant in the Georgia Hussars to major of the First Battalion First Regiment Georgia Cavalry.²⁹

²⁷ "Green Meldrim House," St. John's Episcopal Church, http://www.stjohnssav.org/green_meldrim/history/.

²⁸ O'Hara, *The Story of a Century: The Hibernian Society of Savannah Georgia*.

²⁹ "The Jasper Monument in Madison Square," *City of Savannah Park and Tree Department*, n.d. <http://www.ci.savannah.ga.us/cityweb/p&tweb.nsf/0/e2b84f79abdcdd5985256c5a004a73cd?OpenDocument>; "Scrapbook of Caroline L. Meldrim"; "Meldrim Is Mayor," *Savannah Morning News*, January 27, 1897.



*Picture of Meldrim's children, Jane, Francis, Caroline, Sophie and Ralph, with Peggy Monroe, circa 1890s.*³⁰



*Green-Meldrim House*³¹

³⁰ Courtesy of St. John's Episcopal Church, Green-Meldrim House, Savannah, Georgia.

³¹ *Artwork of Savannah*, (Chicago: W. H. Parish Publishing Co, 1893), Courtesy of the Lane Library, Armstrong Atlantic State, Savannah, Georgia, <http://www.library.armstrong.edu/artwork/artw00.html>.

While Meldrim's politics were in line with conservative Democrats of his time, his support for the education of black southerners represented a more liberal point of view compared with many of his colleagues. After Reconstruction, southern whites were not in agreement over how to handle the education of African Americans, and were concerned that education would push black southerners to challenge white hegemony. Meldrim was of a moderate camp that believed African Americans should be educated, but not in the same way as whites, or in the same schools. Rather, black southerners should be given a separate industrial education. Advocates of this specialized education for blacks argued that under the proper supervision of the "best white people of the community and with the right kind of teachers, realistic goals, and appreciation of limits, black schools could be geared to a productive and stable labor force."³² In line with this philosophy Meldrim helped establish the Georgia State Industrial College (GSIC) in 1891, and was a member of the board of trustees until 1925. His service to the school was commemorated in the naming of one the school's main building's Meldrim Hall.³³

Meldrim and the college's board appointed African American educator, Richard R. Wright, as president of the institution. This made GSIC unique, since most other comparable schools had white presidents at that time. However, the white board of the school retained control over school policies, and the chair of that board was Peter Meldrim. Richard Wright's son, who attended GSIC in its early years, included several recollections of Peter Meldrim in his memoir. Among them is a speech Meldrim gave at the commencement of a black industrial school:

³² Leon F Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 90.

³³ The Faculty and Student Body of the Georgia State Industrial College, "Resolutions on the Death of the Late Judge Peter W. Meldrim," May 19, 1934, Meldrim Family Papers. Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Ga.; Clyde Hall, *One Hundred Years of Educating at Savannah State College, 1890-1990* (Peoria, Illinois: Versa Press, Inc, 1991).

“I believe in education for you people,” he declared. “The state of Georgia needs intelligent Negroes [which he pronounced as “Niggras”] but I do not believe in educating you people to want things you can never get. We must educate the Negro to be the best possible Negro and not a bad imitation of a white man.” The applause that greeted these remarks reflected the feeling of the mostly black audience that the speaker, in supporting black schools, was far in advance of local white opinion.³⁴

Meldrim thus advocated a limited vision of black education, one still grounded on the premise of white superiority and black inferiority, but still a progressive view of black education among white southerners.³⁵ Though as would become clear during Meldrim’s bid for mayor in 1897, he did not expect this kindness towards African Americans to be left unrewarded. Meldrim, like his peers, expected deference from blacks, and trust that the “better class” of whites knew what was best for black southerners.

Meldrim had been a venerable force in Savannah politics for some time, but the Citizens’ Club electoral victories in the fall of 1894, culminating in Myers winning the mayoral office in January of 1895, propelled Meldrim to political action. As mentioned in the last chapter, the Citizens’ Club had attacked Meldrim in the *Daily Dispatch*, criticizing his aristocratic, Tammany sympathies, but his distaste for Citizens’ Club politics ran deeper than bruised pride. Meldrim took issue with Myers’ approach to city administration, the reforms he instituted, and the men he brought into office.

The Liberal Club Offensive: Commissions and the American Protective Association

Following Myers’ 1895 victory his detractors searched for a new means of political organization. The Tammany Club had disbanded prior to the 1895 municipal election with its

³⁴ Richard R. Wright Jr., *87 Years Behind the Black Curtain: An Autobiography* (Philadelphia: Rare Book Company, 1965), 35.

³⁵ Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow*.

reputation tarnished. The People's Party had been hastily established to support William Duncan, but just as quickly disintegrated upon defeat. From the fall of 1895 into the winter of 1896, the remnants of these former factions would coalesce into the Liberal Club. Anchored by a cadre of experienced politicians, including Peter Meldrim, the Liberal Club proved to be a formidable obstacle. The new organization focused attacks on Myers' administration and the Citizens' Club on two particular issues – the city commissions and the American Protective Association.

First, the Liberal Club criticized claims that the commissions were progressive, efficient reforms. They protested the long terms for commission members, claiming they did not depoliticize government, but constituted a new means of nefarious political entrenchment. In their minds this was substantiated by the fact that the commissions were outside the control of the city council. The council allocated the budget for the various commissions, but this was the council's only means of oversight. In addition, Myers appointed to the commissions a large group of businessmen, most of whom had no government experience. The mayor argued that while these men had not served in public office, their private endeavors had taught them business methods, which would make the effective administrators. Despite this defense the Liberal Club men called foul, denouncing these appointments as gifts to political supporters, and thus the epitome spoils system politics. One Liberal Club member asserted that "a man cannot get anything out of this administration who will not pledge himself on the Bible to vote the Citizens Club ticket," while another asserted that any criminals aligned "with the crowd at present in control of politics" could evade the law, and only enemies of the faction were punished "to the fullest extent of the law."³⁶ They then followed this claim with protest for the high salaries of the new positions. Liberals argued that monetary inducements were not a means of attracting

³⁶ "A.P.A.ism Roundly Scored. Liberal Club Speakers Declare It a Citizens Club Issue," *Savannah Morning News*, May 1, 1896.

qualified men, as the administration claimed, but a form of political graft. Meldrim would go on to claim that the current administration hired “men who were not needed at high salaries,” which was not a “good business policy,” but a waste of city funds.³⁷

In response to these accusations the Citizens’ Club defended the progressive motives of these reforms, and charged that it was not the salaries of the commissions that bothered the Liberal men, but the fact that the Citizens’ Club had brought new people into city government. The Citizens’ Club maintained the “Liberalites” were not genuinely concerned about the qualifications of those in office, but upset that they no longer had a hold on city government. In various speeches Citizens’ Club members claimed that “Peter the Great” and the Liberals were “after the jobs and thirst for revenge,” following a policy of “rule or ruin,” while the Citizens’ Club supported a “business administration by business men, not by court house lawyers.”³⁸ In a campaign speech Myers said that “these professional orators... ‘statesmen’ and ‘philanthropists’” did not oppose the commissions when they were passed by the legislature, but only once Myers “erred in not appointing some of these able citizens and police court orators on these different commissions.” He continued, “I have yet to see in print, or hear from their orators, one word of explanation of their position, except that they object to the personnel of these commissions.”³⁹ Liberalites had in fact criticized the “administration for discharging from its employ men who

³⁷ Ibid.; “Southsiders for Meldrim. The Entire Liberal Aldermanic Ticket Endorsed,” *Savannah Morning News*, January 24, 1897; Goldberg, “The Administration of Herman Myers,” 65-66. Similar attacks were launched against commission reforms in Galveston, Texas, though those commissions were more radical in their reorganization of city government. Galveston is also an interesting comparison because they had their own Citizens’ Club, which emerged from the city’s Good Government Club, and represented a similar coalition of businessmen and professionals looking to reform municipal affairs. Rice, “The Galveston Plan of City Government by Commission: The Birth of a Progressive Idea.”

³⁸ “Upheld the Commissions”; “First District Citizens. The Administration Forces Organize at Turner Hall,” *Savannah Morning News*, May 9, 1896; “Citizenites’ Big Rally. Administration Orators Turn Themselves Loose,” *Savannah Morning News*, January 16, 1897.

³⁹ “Citizens Club’s Big Rally. It Turned Out With Torches, Brass Bands and Red Lights,” *Savannah Morning News*, January 23, 1897.

had given faithful service” in order to appoint new men to office. However, they claimed this was not a self-serving criticism, but evidence that the Citizens’ Club sought to pack government with its own partisans.⁴⁰ Whether or not this was indeed the case, the constant questioning of Citizens’ Club motives for the commissions, the centerpiece reform of Myers’ administration, put the incumbent faction on the defensive.

Rhetoric against the commissions weakened the administration’s reputation, but the Liberal Club found another issue to use against their opponents. They accused the Citizens’ Club of close ties to the American Protective Association, a national anti-Catholic organization whose adherents were motivated by xenophobic hatred of Catholic immigrants and the belief that Catholicism’s dedication to a foreign ecclesiastical power threatened to undermine American society. The organization was founded in 1887, but gained new life during the economic crisis of 1893, with a membership approaching 6 million nationwide in 1894. While the A.P.A. failed to find much of a foothold in the South compared with large immigrant-filled cities of the North, the organization did find a substantial following in Georgia, Tennessee, Kentucky and Texas. The A.P.A. had a public set of objectives and principles, but member lists were kept private and to join one had to take a secret oath to uphold the principles of Protestantism. In Savannah there was a chapter of the American Protective Association, and estimates placed its membership at 2,000, though this figure cannot be confirmed and was probably exaggerated.⁴¹

The Liberal Club accused their opponents of ties to the A.P.A. to damage the Citizens’ Club’s reputation, especially among Irish voters. As explained in Chapter 2, there were

⁴⁰ “A.P.A.ism Roundly Scored.”

⁴¹ “A.P.A. Councils to Disband,” *Savannah Morning News*, October 15, 1896; Les Wallace, *The Rhetoric of Anti-Catholicism : The American Protective Association, 1887-1911* (New York: Garland Pub., 1990); Donald Louis Kinzer, *An Episode in Anti-Catholicism: The American Protective Association* (Seattle,: University of Washington Press, 1964); John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925*, 8th ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 80-87.

significant populations of German and Irish ethnics in the city, representing 25% of men eligible to vote in 1900. Ethnic groups tended to cluster in certain residential areas, so the Irish dominated several voting precincts. By sabotaging the Citizens' Club's reputation among Irish voters, which was tenuous to begin with, the Liberal Club was working to secure several crucial precincts. The accusations of A.P.A. support had a generally chilling effect on the Citizens' Club's reputation. Liberal Club members could accuse politicians of "A.P.A.ism," but no denial could ever be definitively trusted since it was a secret organization. One Liberalite blatantly stated "that the man who votes the Citizens Club ticket will vote the A.P.A. ticket."⁴² The Liberal Club cast the Citizens' Club as motivated by ulterior and proscriptive motives, and run by men who did not have best interests of Savannahians at heart.

Charges of A.P.A. affiliation began after an anti-Catholic speaker nearly caused a riot in Savannah in February of 1895, just a month after Myers was sworn into office. A former priest came with his wife to the city to give a series of talks about the dangers of Catholicism and the need for American Protestants to wake up and protect their country. In the midst of the ex-priest's first talk at the Masonic hall, a mob formed and began to throw bricks and stones at the windows of the building. When the police were unable to control the crowd, Myers and the police chief agreed to call the city's militia units into action. They rang the city's clock, "Big Duke," eleven times, and soon the city's various militia units were roused from their evening's activities, armed and awaiting orders. Peter Meldrim was the first uniformed officer on the scene, but his "pleasant" attempts to talk down the crowd were unsuccessful. According to the *Savannah Morning News*, those laying siege to the masonic hall were "200 hoodlums, chiefly from the Old Fort and Yamacraw," the Irish sections of town, and were at least "nominally

⁴² "A.P.A.ism Roundly Scored."

Catholic.” After some tense moments the militia units were able to push back the crowd, empty the hall of the 300 or 400 people who had come to hear the speech (including approximately 100 women), and escort the ex-priest and his wife safely to the Pulaski Hotel.⁴³

The *Savannah Morning News* applauded Myers, the police chief and the militia units for their response to the incident, and harshly criticized the “hoodlum element” that had come to attack the inflammatory speaker. One editorial argued that the incident reflected poorly on the city, gave the otherwise insignificant ex-priest much desired publicity, and “the pleasure of knowing that he has created more excitement and bad feeling in Savannah than has existed since reconstruction days.”⁴⁴ In addition, the newspaper upheld the right of freedom of speech, and asserted that the city’s public opinion favored arrest of those who had caused the violence. However, the “hoodlums” that had gathered outside no doubt were unhappy the city deprived them of their target, and had yelled accusations of A.P.A. sympathies at the militia units. The actions of city government also likely touched on raw nerves left over from the election the previous month. Many of these men were likely supporters of the ousted Tammany Club, if not the faction’s ward heelers or previous spoilsmen, now out of a job. Thus even though Myers’ actions were roundly praised by the press and those favoring law and order, those involved in the near-riot would likely not forget Myers’ rapid use of the city militia against them.⁴⁵

While Myers was a target for some Irish-Catholic anger, the city’s Jewish community emerged as allies of the Catholics in this instance, highlighting their longstanding opposition to the A.P.A. Most Jews argued that the A.P.A.’s growth set a dangerous precedent for those

⁴³ “Troops Avert Riot: Ex-Priest Slattery Saved From a Mob,” *Savannah Morning News*, February 27, 1895; “Slattery Seeks Protection: The Mayor Assures Him That He Will Be Protected,” *Savannah Morning News*, February 28, 1895. Black militia units reported for duty as well, though they were not deployed.

⁴⁴ “Slattery Seeks Protection”; “The Slattery Disturbance,” *Savannah Morning News*, February 28, 1895.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*; “Troops Avert Riot: Ex-Priest Slattery Saved From a Mob.”

prejudiced against religious minorities, and freedom to practice religion was a right American Jews valued. Isaac P. Mendes, well known local speaker and rabbi of Savannah's Mickve Israel congregation, denounced the A.P.A. as a "narrow, mean, demagogical" political movement that could not coexist with the American constitution. Mendes also pointed out that Jews had to stand with Catholics in fighting organizations like the A.P.A., since if the A.P.A. were to succeed in rooting out Catholicism, "the Jew might naturally expect a similar attack on upon his religious freedom."⁴⁶ It is likely for this reason that the Young Men's Hebrew Association, who had the lease on the hall where the ex-priest was supposed to speak once again, cancelled the orator's contract. The YMHA cited the "incendiary" nature of the ex-priest's talks as reason for revoking the contract, though their dislike of his proscriptive politics (and the prospect of further property damage) likely played a large role in their decision. Thus while Savannah's Jewish and Catholic communities were not always harmonious, on the issue of the A.P.A. they were in agreement.⁴⁷

The near-riot was not itself a direct catalyst of A.P.A. accusations against the Citizens' Club, but the incident speaks to the emotion that such charges could evoke from Irish Catholic residents. As such, Myers and the Citizens' Club could not afford accusations of A.P.A. affiliation to go unchallenged, especially since Myers' political principles were in stark conflict with the prejudiced organization. In a speech given on May 30, 1896, at a Citizens' Club rally, Myers charged the Liberals with stirring up ill will among voters without any regard to "that degree of honor which governs the assertions and utterances of every honest man." Although he does not mention the A.P.A. specifically, Myers announced:

⁴⁶ "It Will Die Soon. Rabbi Mendes on the A.P.A. Movement," *Savannah Press*, October 12, 1894.

⁴⁷ "Slattery Seeks Protection." The article remarks that the ex-priest and his wife did go on to give their planned speeches at the Odd Fellows Hall. The space was secured by a group of women from Savannah who had come to call on the couple at the Pulaski House. Women's prominence in the initial lecture at the Masonic Hall, and their great lengths to find a secondary location for the speakers, suggests that A.P.A. politics were not just the domain of men.

A great deal of rot has been uttered by Liberal Club leaders about “isms,” and for no other purpose than to disturb the friendly and pleasant relations existing among our people. I would say to these would-be disturbers of harmony that I know nothing about “isms,” but I believe in free speech, freedom of worship, freedom from oppression and in strict accordance with the constitution and laws of this country.⁴⁸

This affirmation of the basic constitutional rights of citizens, chief among them freedom of speech and religion, were no doubt influenced by Myers’ identity as a German Jewish immigrant. Myers’ very presence in the United States and in Savannah politics was due to those constitutional rights. This speech is also indicative of Myers’ attitude towards inflammatory political rhetoric, which he dismissed merely as “rot.” Even though the Liberals had “indulged in personal attacks and thrown out innuendoes,” Myers proclaimed that such statements “self-respect will not permit an honorable man to notice, but which he must spurn with silent contempt.” Myers was obviously unable to remain entirely silent in the face of specious accusations, but such sentiment does reflect an attitude dismissive of social conflict; a stance that goes against the grain of southern politics. In the midst of his speech, Myers chastised the Liberals for not “dispassionately and truthfully explaining the issues that are to be presented for arbitration,” and instead drumming up conflict.⁴⁹ A no-nonsense businessman to the core, Myers wanted to dispense with the political antics, and focus on the tasks at hand. However, the game of politics in the 1890s, particularly in the South, was often about the rhetoric and conflict that Myers sought to avoid.

Despite Myers’ attempt to steer political debate away from “venomous and vicious attacks” on his administration, the commissions and the A.P.A. remained the main issues of the

⁴⁸ “Upheld the Commissions.”

⁴⁹ Ibid.

1896-1897 election season.⁵⁰ Leading up to the election, neither the Liberal Club nor the Citizens' Club enjoyed the support of a majority of white voters. This was in part due to the ethnocultural nature of factional alliances described in the last chapter, but also ambiguous sentiment concerning Myers' administrative reforms. In the absence of a white majority, black voters were needed to break the tie between the factions, and each club actively courted African American support. In pursuing this constituency, and a victory in a close vote, fraud became a major factor in the election. African Americans were commonly labeled as "purchasable" voters by the white press, but Savannah's black community had a strong political tradition, and saw that there was much at stake with this election. According to Sol C. Johnson, African American editor of the *Savannah Tribune*, Myers had represented the best hope for Savannah's black community in many years, and should be returned to office.

Sol C. Johnson and the *Savannah Tribune*

Solomon Charles Johnson was born in South Carolina shortly after the Civil War. His father, John H. Johnson, a "carpenter and millwright," took his family from the countryside to live in Savannah, probably in search of better economic prospects.⁵¹ While a student at the West Broad Street Elementary School, Johnson worked as a newsboy for the *Savannah Morning News*. After completing only a primary education, Johnson went to work at a newspaper called the *Savannah Echo*, first as a delivery boy and then as an apprentice, or "printer's devil." When

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Charles Hoskins, *Yet With a Steady Beat: Biographies of Early Black Savannah* (Savannah: Gullah Press, 2001).

the *Echo* failed, as was the fate of many black newspapers in this period, Johnson went to work at the *Savannah Tribune*.⁵²

John H. Deveaux, Louis B. Toomer and Louis M. Pleasant, had organized the *Tribune* 1875. These three were prominent black members of Savannah's Republican Party during its short-lived prominence immediately after the Civil War. By the early 1870s Democrats had removed any possibility of effective Republican organization in the state, but these politicians still stayed loyal to the Party. They participated in national conventions, and cast their ballots for Republicans in national elections. For their support many were the beneficiaries of federal patronage positions, the Republican Party's only means of garnering support while the machinery of state and local government remained in the hands of the Democrats. Toomer, Pleasant, and Deveaux, therefore, founded the *Tribune* as publication that would serve as a voice of remaining black Republicans, and the rising class of black businessmen and professionals building a life for themselves in Savannah.⁵³

Deveaux was the first editor of the publication, which was originally titled the *Colored Tribune*. The paper was forced to shut down for a few years when the paper's white printers refused to publish it, but in 1886 Deveaux revived the paper as the *Savannah Tribune*. This time the editor and his small staff wrote and printed the newspaper themselves, an all-black enterprise outside of the reach of whites. Johnson must have done impressive work at the *Tribune* in its first few years, for when Deveaux went take a coveted Republican patronage position as the collector

⁵² Ibid.; Jeffrey Alan Turner, "Agitation and Accommodation in a Southern Black Newspaper: The Savannah Tribune, 1886-1915"(University of Georgia, 1993); "Sol C. Johnson, Grand Secretary – Georgia," 1923, Williamson Masonic Collection, The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture; John M. Matthews, "Black Newspapermen and the Black Community of Georgia, 1890-1930," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* LXVIII, no. 3 (1984): 356-382. Sources conflict on Sol. C Johnson's date of birth as 1866 vs. 1869.

⁵³ Jacqueline Jones, *Saving Savannah: The City and the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 380, 392; Robert Eugene Perdue, *The Negro in Savannah, 1865-1900* (New York: Exposition Press, 1973), 53-69, 131-133.

of Brunswick in 1889, he left Johnson in charge as editor of the *Tribune*. Johnson was 21 years old at the time, and recently married.⁵⁴

Described as “a man of few words, tall and stately, with a very impressive personality,” Johnson emerged as a prominent member of his community. He engaged in numerous efforts to better the lives of Savannah’s black community through education, business, religion and politics. Johnson was a “staunch Congregationalist,” serving as trustee of his church and as superintendent of its Sunday school, and was elected Grand Secretary of his chapter of the Prince Hall Masons in 1895.⁵⁵ He held administrative positions on the boards of several local businesses, including the Wage Earners’ Bank and Guaranty Mutual Life and Health Insurance Company.⁵⁶ Johnson was also a trustee of the Georgia State Industrial College. His direct involvement with the school waned when his relationship with that institution’s president became strained, but he continued to support the school’s activities in the *Tribune*. Johnson was well regarded, but he also had strong convictions and sometimes clashed with other leaders. Making an enemy of Johnson was unfortunate, for he utilized the *Tribune* as a platform for his opinions, and to denounce, sometimes rather harshly, those he disagreed with.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Turner. “Agitation and Accommodation”; Charles Hoskins, *The Trouble They Seen: Profiles in the Life of Col. John H. Deveaux* (Savannah, GA, 1989); John M. Matthews, “Black Newspapermen and the Black Community of Georgia”; Marriage License Records, Probate Court, Savannah, Georgia. For more information on black newspapermen, see Henry Lewis Suggs, *The Black Press in the South, 1865-1979* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983).

⁵⁵ “Sol C. Johnson, Grand Secretary – Georgia”; Hoskins, *Yet with a Steady Beat*, 288.

⁵⁶ Frank Lincoln Mather, *Who's Who of the Colored Race: A General Biographical Dictionary of Men and Women of African Descent*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Memento, 1915), 157.

⁵⁷ Charles Elmore, *Richard R. Wright, Sr. At GSIC, 1891-1921: A Protean Force for the Social Uplift and Higher Education of Black Americans* (Savannah: C.J. Elmore, 1996). For conflicts over racial uplift ideology, see Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).



*Sol C. Johnson in his Tribune Office*⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Courtesy of Savannah Tribune, Inc.

In the *Tribune* Johnson commented on the range of issues facing the black community of Savannah. The topics he wrote about, as well as his proposed solutions to social ills, reflected Johnson's middle class sensibility and belief that education and hard work would solve the black community's problems. Generally Johnson endorsed the philosophy of racial uplift advanced by Booker T. Washington, but Johnson's racial ideology cannot be easily categorized. Johnson's editorials in the *Tribune* drew on many different leaders and intellectuals, criticized many others (not even Washington was immune), and represented a view of racial politics deeply influenced by his local context. One historian aptly described Johnson as a pragmatist, employing tactics of agitation or accommodation, as he deemed necessary for the issue or situation.⁵⁹

Johnson often shared his opinions on what constituted proper behavior within the black community, revealing his perspective on class and gender. He expected black men and women to adhere to white middle-class definitions of manhood and womanhood – men were expected to be reasoned and enterprising, women nurturing and pious, and both educated and industrious. These norms not only resonated within the national culture and Protestant work ethic, but reflected one way that African Americans might gain respect (and political power) from whites.⁶⁰ Johnson thus scolded the supposed “immoral” behavior among lower class blacks, and reminded his readers that every black individual, man or woman, was always acting as a representative of the race. Short statements dispensing a wide range of advice and complaints dotted the *Tribune's* pages. For instance, Johnson opined, “the accumulation of property and the education of your children should be the two main ambitions of every colored parent,” or “too many of our young

⁵⁹ Jeffery Alan Turner, “Agitation and Accommodation,” 63.

⁶⁰ For information on black middle-class views of gender, see Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920*, 63-63.

men are too fastidious in the selection of an occupation, is the cause of the non success of them.”⁶¹ Despite harsh words for members of his own race, Johnson also did not shy away from criticizing white politicians, local and national. He railed against lynching violence happening throughout the state, calling those who justified lynching hypocrites and fools.

The portrait of black Savannah that emerges from the *Tribune* reflects Johnson’s own somewhat rigid perspective, but remains a valuable source for understanding the problems that faced Savannah’s black community. Johnson decried the unhealthy and densely populated black wards of the city, as well as employment discrimination that led to greater poverty. Despite many obstacles a new professional class did emerge in Savannah in the 1880s, with black doctors, dentists, lawyers and businessmen. Internal community tensions existed between rising middle class professionals and the majority of working-class blacks, but the issues of disenfranchisement, segregation and discrimination transcended class difference. This was particularly true in the case of protesting segregation of public transportation, which will be further explored in Chapter 5.⁶²

The *Tribune* did not just lament the problems facing the black community of Savannah, but also celebrated the community’s strengths. Most emphasized was Savannah’s vibrant and diverse religious life. The *Tribune* often reprinted stirring sermons by local and national black preachers, and did not shy away from emphasizing Christian values. Local churches provided a forum not only for religious worship, but hosted fundraisers, athletic events, social mixers and political meetings. Almost all the black politicians in Savannah during Reconstruction and afterwards had been active church leaders, and had developed their oratory and leadership skills

⁶¹ *The Savannah Tribune*, May 13 and May 27, 1893.

⁶² Perdue, *The Negro in Savannah*.

within their congregations. Additionally, church buildings doubled as sites for political meetings, and church congregations mobilized to protest political issues – therefore the church and Savannah’s political culture were deeply connected. Each issue of the *Tribune* had room dedicated to announcing and reporting on church events. The paper did not privilege any one denomination, but covered newsworthy events at the First, Second and Third African Baptist, Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E), United Methodist Episcopal, First Congregational and St. Benedict the Moor Catholic Church, to name a few. Savannah’s religious culture was rich and influenced all other aspects of black life in Savannah.⁶³

The *Tribune* started as a Republican mouthpiece, but later it became the official publication of the Masons of the State of Georgia, devoting a great deal of ink to the happenings of local fraternal organizations. Typically a four-page folio, though ranging up to eight pages in the early twentieth century, several columns served as a local newsletter, announcing events, accomplishments and lifecycle markers of residents. Editorials were also printed, though few were included that expressly disagreed with Johnson’s opinions. The *Tribune* also remained faithful to its mission as a mouthpiece of the Republican Party, even as the GOP in Georgia declined and left the *Tribune* with little to report but national Party news. Even though Republicans were not a figure in local contests, Johnson discussed local elections, constantly imploring his readers to pay their taxes, register to vote, and make intelligent, informed decisions about who to vote for. Johnson chastised those who let their votes be bought with lies, liquor or money - “Some men have not the back bone to abide by their convictions. They are not fit to be

⁶³ Perdue, *The Negro in Savannah*; For information on black church life in Savannah, and discussion of churches as sites of political and social organization, see Adele Oltman, *Sacred Mission, Worldly Ambition: Black Christian Nationalism in the Age of Jim Crow* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2008); John M. Giggie, *After Redemption: Jim Crow and the Transformation of African American Religion in the Delta, 1875-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

in the garb of man.”⁶⁴ These reminders in part substantiate white claims that black voters could sometimes be bought for the right price, but Johnson also assured any skeptics that the majority of “colored voters will be guided solely from the standpoint of principle.”⁶⁵

Johnson had used the *Savannah Tribune* to endorse Herman Myers in 1895, and did the same when Myers ran for reelection in 1897.⁶⁶ However, this endorsement was conferred only shortly before the election, and after considering what each faction had to offer the black community. In early December of 1896, Johnson proclaimed that “the independent colored voters want to know what they are to expect by the success of either of the warring factions over the city election.”⁶⁷ By late January the *Tribune* counseled that Myers’ administration “recognized” African-Americans “more than any other since the day of freedoms dawn.” Myers’ administration had indeed followed through on several key issues. The administration had the “courage and the sense of justice” to appoint a black city physician, and employ more black men “in the city public works than ever before in its history.” There were still many problems that needed to be addressed, including inadequate public school facilities for black children, but Myers and his aldermen had been more receptive to the needs of black residents than previous

⁶⁴ *Savannah Tribune*, November 3, 1894.

⁶⁵ *Savannah Tribune*, October 20, 1894; Charles Hoskins, *The Trouble They Seen: Profiles in the Life of Col. John H. Deveaux* (Savannah, GA, 1989).

⁶⁶ John H. Deveaux acted as editor to the *Tribune* between patronage positions from the end of 1896 to early 1897. Jeffery Alan Turner, “Agitation and Accommodation,” 20. Therefore, it is possible that Deveaux was behind the articles endorsing Myers, but statements made in these pieces were consistent with those Johnson made when endorsing Myers in 1895. It is also unlikely that Johnson abandoned his duties when Deveaux returned to town, so I credit these articles to Johnson as well.

⁶⁷ *Savannah Tribune*, December 5, 1896.

administrations. Johnson cajoled his readers, “if you would have any future city administration to respect the colored people you will vote for the Herman Myers ticket.”⁶⁸

The Election of 1897

*“The local political war is on... a lively fight will be kept up.”*⁶⁹

Savannah’s election in 1897 was an exercise in electioneering, in which primary issues quickly became obscured by torchlight parades and rampant accusations of vote-buying. In the end the Liberal Club would prove victorious, but the vote was not an automatic barometer of public opinion. Rather, the election shows both the character of municipal elections in Savannah, and the limitations of reform action in Savannah’s political culture.

The Liberal Club hammered the Citizens’ Club with criticism of the commissions and charges of A.P.A. sympathy for many months before the city election. Myers and the Citizens’ Club discounted these claims, secure in the belief they were carrying out the reform mandate they were given in the 1894 and 1895 state and local elections. This confidence was soon challenged in the legislative election in October of 1896. Liberal Club challengers defeated their Citizens’ Club counterparts by comfortable margins. The newly elected state representatives for Chatham County were John J. McDonough, the Tammany mayor who preceded Myers, William Duncan, Myers’ 1895 mayoral opponent, and Peter Meldrim. The ghosts of administrations past

⁶⁸ *Savannah Tribune*, January 23, 1897. One of the last acts of Myers city council was to grant land to the city’s black militia to build an armory. Johnson saw this act as a fitting end to a friendly city administration, but it was likely a politically motivated act on the part of the Citizens’ Club to earn black votes. “To Put Down More Paving. Granite Block For Bryan and Farm Streets,” *Savannah Morning News*, January 19, 1897. “Myers Leads the Citizens. Seven of the Present Alderman Renominated,” *Savannah Morning News*, January 20, 1897.

⁶⁹ *Savannah Press*, January 21, 1897.

and fierce critics of Myers' administration had been elected to the state legislature, a bad omen for the Citizens' Club come January.⁷⁰

There were various explanations for this electoral outcome given by the local press. The *Savannah Morning News* identified the A.P.A. controversy as the primary "cause of the Waterloo."⁷¹ The Liberalites accepted this argument, but primarily framed the vote as a referendum of the commissions. Now installed in the state legislature, the Liberals proclaimed they had the mandate to roll back these reforms. Rumors suggested the new legislators would seek to repeal all the commissions except for the Park and Tree Commission.⁷² The Citizens' Club, however, refuted the notion that the victory was a rejection of administration policies. They argued that the Liberal victory was the result of more effective political organization, and their ability to capture the black vote, which "Citizenites" dismissed as largely "purchasable." The Liberal Club had camped out all night at the voting sites, making sure their supporters were first in line, and then used a horde of "heelers," or political workers, to bring voters to the polls. The Citizens' Club thus admitted they were "out-generalled," but argued this was merely a sign of the Liberal Club's talent for electioneering, and *not* a rejection of new reforms. Regardless, this setback was a warning for the Citizens' Club. They had used their victory in the state

⁷⁰ "By Five Hundred Majority. The Average of the Liberals' Winning Ticket," *Savannah Morning News*, October 9, 1896; "The Handsome Majorities By Which the Liberal Club Ticket Has Been Successful in Chatham County," *Savannah Press*, October 8, 1896.

⁷¹ "By Five Hundred Majority."

⁷² In an interview Meldrim explained that he would seek to repeal those commissions created for the purpose of opening offices, which included all *except* the Park and Tree Commission, which had to date "done a great deal of good." However, Meldrim did say he and his colleagues would seek to amend the Park and Tree Commission, giving that body the power to "employ their own hands and make their own expenditures" without approval from the Commissioner of Public Works. Thus Meldrim wanted to abolish the Commissioner of Public Works position, returning the control of the department to "the chairman of the streets and lanes committee, who is subject to the control of the mayor and council," rather than to an officer who was appointed for six years and beyond the control of city aldermen. "Policy of the Liberals. Interesting Interview with President Meldrim," *Savannah Press*, October 9, 1896.

elections in 1894 to build momentum for the subsequent municipal race, which they won. As the municipal election of 1897 neared, both sides sought to get their message out, build support and motivate registered voters to go the polls.⁷³

In 1895 election city candidates were announced before registration for the city election ended, but in 1897 the factions' tickets were finalized just a week before the election, and several weeks after registration had closed. The final registration count stood at 5,584 qualified voters.⁷⁴ Myers and Meldrim had been the expected candidates for mayor, but voters had no way of knowing the full slate of aldermen for each ticket. While the exact cast of characters had yet to be decided, each club's campaign talking-points had been in play for months. The Liberal club accused their opponents of municipal corruption and mismanagement, largely based on the issue of commissions. The Citizens Club stood for two years more of the same policies, which they argued ensured continued progress through efficient administration.⁷⁵

When the tickets were announced the week before the election, these rhetorical flourishes were raised to a fever pitch. Each faction followed their nominating procedures, which predictably led to Meldrim and Myers at the helm of each ticket. Along with Meldrim the Liberal ticket had two former members of McDonough's Tammany administration, including Walter G. Charlton, whom Myers feuded with over city ordinances (see Chapter 2). In addition was a candidate who had served on the council of the mayor preceding McDonough, and the rest were

⁷³ "The Handsome Majorities"; "No Sleep for the Heelers. Crowds Surround the Court House at Midnight," *Savannah Morning News*, October 7, 1896; "Causes of the Victory. Several, But the Anti- A.P.A. Most Talked Of," *Savannah Morning News*, October 9, 1896.

⁷⁴ "The City Registration. Nearly 6,000 Citizens Qualified to Vote For Mayor and Aldermen," *Savannah Press*, December 21, 1896.

⁷⁵ The A.P.A. was no longer a political flashpoint by the time of the election. The organization's chapter in Savannah had supposedly disbanded shortly after the election of state representatives in October of 1895. However, a great deal of damage had already been done to the Citizens' Club's reputation, and those who truly despised the A.P.A. likely did not forget its supposed affiliation with the Citizenites. "A.P.A. Councils to Disband."

first time aldermanic candidates. The Citizens' Club named Myers, as well as seven out of the twelve men currently serving as city aldermen. Along with choosing aldermen, each faction picked a symbol to appear on the ballot above the names of the candidates. The Citizens' Club chose the American flag, and the Liberal Club, a star. The Liberal Club symbol was unveiled at the party meeting where the aldermen were announced. "A star formed of iron pipe," alight with "numerous gas jets" was displayed to the sound of cheers and a band playing Dixie.⁷⁶

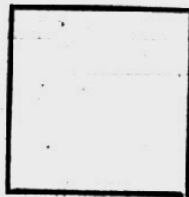
Parades and meetings dominated Savannah life leading up to the election, which speaks to widespread participation in the local political culture and to the spectacular theatrics used to garner votes. Both of the factions announced their tickets for mayor and alderman on the same night, January 19, 1897. The Liberal club ratified their candidates in the Masonic hall, and after announcing the aldermanic candidates, and delivering several rousing speeches, marched with a brass band to Peter Meldrim's residence (by convention the candidates were not present at the nomination meetings). The major stepped out onto his ornate porch to address his admirers, men crowding around his house and in a line that stretched along several blocks. To even the observer "used to the enthusiastic demonstrations for which Savannah politics is noted," it was an exhilarating scene.⁷⁷ Meldrim's remarks were succinct yet sentimental, reminding voters that he was a native of Savannah who would work faithfully on behalf of the city he loved. He also asserted that the "better class" of the white and black populations of the city were behind the Liberal cause, "and with the blessings of God Almighty," they would "redeem" their city.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ "Meldrim Leads the Liberals. The Liberal Aldermanic Nominations Ratified." *Savannah Morning News*, January 20, 1897; "Myers Leads the Citizens. Seven of the Present Alderman Renominated," *Savannah Morning News*, January 20, 1897.

⁷⁷ "Meldrim Leads the Liberals."

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Meldrim thus situated himself as a “native” candidate, and used the rhetoric of redemption, suggesting that Myers’ administration was a dark time for the city.

Ballot No. _____		Precinct No. _____	
Ballot No. _____ Precinct No. _____			
	CITIZENS TICKET.	LIBERAL CLUB TICKET.	
	For Mayor: HERMAN MYERS.	For Mayor: P. W. MELDRIM.	For Mayor:
	For Aldermen: WILLIAM GARRARD, GEORGE W. TIEDEMAN, H. H. BACON, JOSEPH HULL, THOMAS SCREVEN, L. A. FALLIGANT, ADOLPH M. LEFFLER, JACOB PAULSEN, CHRIS. P. GRAY, W. T. LEOPOLD, JOHN JUCHTER, GEORGE A. HUDSON.	For Aldermen: W. G. CHARLTON, JOHN W. SMITH, WILLIAM W. OWENS, ARTHUR WEIL, S. KROUSKOFF, ROBERT M. HULL, S. P. HAMILTON, W. F. REID, THOMAS S. WYLLY, JR., T. J. DAVIS, THOMAS O'DONNELL, A. S. GUCKENHEIMER.	For Aldermen:
THE OFFICIAL TICKET FOR MAYOR AND ALDERMEN.			

1897 Ballot for Savannah Mayor and Aldermen⁷⁹

Each faction had to register their tickets with the city, which would print the official ballots. Voters could either choose a straight ticket, by circling one of the symbols/columns, or split their ticket by writing in the names of their desired candidates on the right. Voting was conducted in private booths, and then the voter folded the ballot and submitted it to a box to maintain secret voting. The factions were also required by law to choose a symbol for their ticket, in this case the Liberal Club chose a star and the Citizens’ Club an American Flag.

⁷⁹ *Savannah Morning News*, January 24, 1897.

The Citizens' Club likewise approved their ticket in a large meeting in the Odd Fellows hall, and a crowd accompanied by another band paraded to Myers' residence at the De Soto Hotel. On the way the crowd passed Meldrim's gathering in Madison Square, and while there were some shouts exchanged no violence ensued. Upon their arrival at the hotel a small group was sent to get Myers, who then came out on one of the De Soto's balconies. When he appeared cheering persisted for a few minutes before he could address the crowd. In a very short statement he thanked everyone for the honor of his nomination, admitting that while he did not want to run, requests from friends and calls to defend his policies convinced him to accept. He promised to continue to stand by his former promises for an "honest administration," acting in the "interest of the city and each individual citizen." Myers closed by saying he was "not an orator" and that he would address everyone more formally at the next Citizens' Club meeting. He thanked the crowd once more before disappearing back into the De Soto.⁸⁰ Myers' response to his adoring supporters demonstrates, unlike Meldrim, he did not have a gift for extemporaneous speeches or sentimental pleas. However, other party orators, and Myers subsequent prepared speech, would better stir the emotions of his supporters, and rally the political troops for a tough battle.

Between 1,000 and 2,000 people turned out for each of the above rallies, and Savannah was buzzing with political activity in the remaining days before the city election. Precinct level meetings were held continuously, speakers shuffling from one gathering to the next. Particular energy was focused on organizing the black community. Both the Liberals and the Citizens established black political clubs in precincts throughout the city. *The Savannah Morning News* coverage of these meetings noted they were addressed by both black and white speakers, though

⁸⁰ "Myers Leads the Citizens."

white party workers were typically “on hand to see that the meeting takes the right direction.”⁸¹ Black voters were also in attendance at political rallies and the full meetings of each faction. Though relegated to the galleries of the various meeting halls, newspaper accounts suggest African Americans were just as vocal in their cheers and exclamations during speeches as white partisans. One “leading colored advocate” of the Citizens’ Club, R.N. Rutledge, was given time to address the meeting and “express the appreciation of the colored voters” of the current administration.⁸² While the *Morning News* mocked Rutledge’s speech, writing he “was rather high flown in his metaphors,” this still shows that black Savannahians seized a place at the table and a voice in the political sphere.⁸³

Motivating this courtship of black political action was a transparent attempt to win votes, and the Liberal and Citizens’ Clubs used the same paternalistic appeals. Each pledged to be the “best friend” of the black community, and charged that their opponents were disingenuous. Since the Myers had actually appointed a black city physician, and done some other “favors” for the black community, there was more reason to believe that the Citizens’ Club might follow through on some of their promises. Despite this record the Liberals charged that any appointments or rewards the Citizens’ Club now promised would not be honored. They followed this charge not with the promise of delivering offices themselves, but with the paternalistic platitude that they would work in the best interests of the black community, who should defer to their better judgment. Meldrim invoked this argument when he addressed black and white supporters from

⁸¹ “Preparing to Name Candidates. Liberal and Citizens Clubs to Meet This Week,” *Savannah Morning News*, January 6, 1897.

⁸² “Citizenites’ Big Rally,” *Savannah Morning News*, January 16, 1897.

⁸³ Ibid.; “The Two Tickets Filed. The Work of Preparing the Election Booths to Begin Today,” *Savannah Morning News*, January 21, 1897; “Colored Voters Rally. Meetings Held in Nearly Every Voting Precinct,” *Savannah Morning News*, January 21, 1897; “Colored Clubs Organized. Several in the Interest of the Liberal Movement,” *Savannah Morning News*, January 12, 1897; “Campaign Clubs Active. Precinct Meetings, White and Colored, Held Every Night,” *Savannah Morning News*, January 14, 1897.

his porch, but added an intimidating caveat. Speaking specifically to African Americans in the crowd, Meldrim reminded them that “in season and out of season I have spoken, not only at home, but on the floors of our Georgia legislature, in your behalf.”⁸⁴ He was specifically referring to efforts relating to the establishment of the Georgia State Industrial College, and the cause of black education. The *Savannah Morning News* further paraphrased: “Maj. Meldrim said that if the negroes do not vote to uphold those who have helped them, and those who have worked for them in different causes, they need not come to him when they want help in their cause of education.”⁸⁵ Meldrim thus leveraged his support of the Georgia State Industrial College and black education for votes for his faction. Meldrim was convinced he knew what was best for the black community and expected loyalty for his past advocacy.

The Citizens’ Club appeared more willing to play political ball with African Americans, but they made no great concessions and generally espoused the same paternalistic arguments as their opponents. One of the alderman on the Citizens’ Club ticket, Joseph Hull, stood up at a meeting to give his opinion of the issue of “negro supremacy,” a charge the Liberals had launched at their opponents to damage their reputation. The *Morning News* said that when Hull addressed the crowd “cold chills circulated down the backs of the leaders,” but that “Mr. Hull handled the question very nicely.” He said he would have preferred to have a white primary, and thus exclude African Americans from the nominating process, but since that was not an option,

Mr. Hull said he wished the colored people to understand that the best friends they had ever had were the people who had formerly owned them, and that the people who now courted and caressed them were ready to kick them in the back as soon as they had gotten their votes.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ “Meldrim Leads the Liberals.”

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ “Myers Leads the Citizens.”

Thus while the Citizens' made some effort to appease black voters, many in their midst echoed the Liberals' point of view, that city politics and government were a white domain. Such paternalistic perspectives were common and would abound in campaigns by Georgia Progressives for black disenfranchisement, which will be further explored in Chapter 5.

Johnson's comments in the *Savannah Tribune* demonstrate that African Americans in Savannah were well aware that political promises that were made were not often kept, a lesson learned by decades of experience. Johnson warned readers to beware of "the political knave and slanderer. Beware of the tales he brings you."⁸⁷ He also urged black voters to register despite attempts by officials to turn away eligible candidates, a reminder that whites simultaneously courted black votes while trying to eliminate as many as possible. The *Tribune*, however, did not only point to whites as false friends, but questioned the motives of black politicians as well. On December 5th Johnson wondered, "Many colored men are organizing clubs for the city election. Are they looking for boodle, or are they working for principle?" He also opined that "Voters having manhood and ability would feign attending meetings where whisky and beer are served by way of inducement," one of many pleas in the *Tribune* for black voters to avoid attempts to buy their votes.⁸⁸

Despite the treatment of the black electorate, and occasional lack of conviction among some voters, Johnson remained optimistic about the prospect of Myers' return to political office. He not only suggested that the "independent thoughtful voter will put his mark on the emblem which means Herman Myers for Mayor for two years," but affirmed that Myers was the black community's best hope for political inclusion. Johnson wrote,

⁸⁷ *Savannah Tribune*, December 12, 1896.

⁸⁸ *Savannah Tribune*, December 5, 12, 1896, January 23, 1897.

that all other administrations since 1868, nearly thirty years, that our people have been promised this and that as political force in our politics, but in not a single instance was any promise kept by the men elected. It remained for Herman Myers as a leader of city affairs to keep the pledges if any were made to our race...No colored man who reflects before he votes will vote against Herman Myers next Tuesday.⁸⁹

Johnson believed that Myers had done the most for the city's black community since Reconstruction, and that if reelected Myers would continue to serve the needs of the black community.

The clubs also sought to shore up support from Savannah's white ethnic communities, though ethnocultural lines had already been drawn and deepened since the previous city election. German ethnics were largely considered to be allies of the Citizens' Club, and Irish ethnics the Liberal Club. Nevertheless, the Citizens' tried to increase support among the Irish by placing members of their community as aldermen on their ticket. Finding Irish candidates willing to go on the Citizens' ticket was no easy feat, but faction leaders eventually recruited Christopher Gray, a newcomer to city politics. The Germania Club publically pledged support for the Citizens Club and nominated candidates from their organization for alderman. The Liberal Club, on the other hand, had Meldrim, who was perhaps the most famous member of Savannah's ethnic Irish community. As president of the Hibernian Society, Meldrim garnered particular respect, since the organization helped provide charity to the Irish poor in addition to hosting splashy social events. There is no account of the Liberal Club trying to court German support, but at least one of their candidates, A.S. Guckenheimer, was German and Jewish.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ *Savannah Tribune*, January 23, 1897.

⁹⁰ "An Irish-American Move. A Scheme to Strengthen the Citizens Aldermanic Ticket," *Savannah Morning News*, January 18, 1897. Leading up to the election the Citizens' Club made numerous estimates about the racial and ethnic breakdown of its supporters. In one article the Citizens' Club's president claimed that they would get a majority of the white vote in the election, and split the black vote, if not gain a majority of that group as well. President Cann also argued that the success of the Club depended on "what is termed the American vote," of which the Citizens' Club expected to capture at least 1,750 of the 2,500 registered, and then "the German and Jewish vote of 750," who gave the Citizens "almost unanimous support." They also anticipated winning over "a much larger support from the

Jews remained one of the smallest ethnocultural communities in Savannah, and were visibly split between factions. In fact, while Herman Myers led the Citizens' Club ticket, A.S. Guckenheimer, as well as Arthur Weil, offered a Jewish presence on the Liberals aldermanic slate. Even so, the *Morning News* conceded the Citizens' could count on German and Jewish support.⁹¹ This likely had to do with the fact that a large number of Jews were German ethnics, rather than evidence of Jews voting for a particular faction. As discussed in Chapter 2, southern Jews were anxious not to organize politically as a voting bloc. They feared being targeted by a prejudiced group like the American Protective Association. Rather, Jews supported those candidates that they felt would support their interests. Guckenheimer and Weil's presence on the Liberal ticket showed not just that some German ethnics crossed the aisle to support the Liberals, but that Jews felt comfortable within both political organizations.⁹²

Despite the deep divisions in Savannah's political landscape, the purported goals of each faction were remarkably similar. Both espoused good-government rhetoric and pledged an economical, progressive administration that would promote the growth of the city.⁹³ At a massive Citizens' Club rally just four days before the election, Myers addressed "all lovers of an honest and progressive government for Savannah," thanking those who remained supportive of his efforts in striving "for a more economical, for a more progressive, for a more business-like

thinking conservative Irish-Americans than Liberal Club leaders give us credit for." How exactly he arrived at the numbers of Jews, Germans and "Americans" is unclear, and estimates of support from these groups should be regarded skeptically, since it would have been in the Citizens' Club's interest to portray confidence no matter the reality. However, what this article does suggest is the degree to which the factions were specifically calculating which racial, ethnic and religious groups gave them support. "President Cann's Estimate. The Outlook as Seen by the Citizens' Club's President," *Savannah Morning News*, January 25, 1897.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Mark K. Bauman, "Factionalism and Ethnic Politics in Atlanta: German Jews from the Civil War Through the Progressive Era," in *Politics and Religion in the White South*, ed. Glenn Feldman, Religion in the South (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 35–56.

⁹³ Such vagueness was a feature of Gilded Age politics, reflecting less a lack of principles than a need to win over public support, and not alienate voters. Calhoun, "The Political Culture: Public Life and the Conduct of Politics."

administration of the city's affairs." He likewise defended his decisions as mayor, that those "reform policies ... have been for the interests of Savannah; for its advancement of business; for its up-building along all lines... Public improvements, progress, and prosperity, all depend on their continuance."⁹⁴ Subsequently Meldrim announced the aspirations of the Liberal club, which stood "devoted to the interest, the upbuilding and the welfare of Savannah," striving for "progress." He qualified this with a dig at the Citizens' Club, asserting that his side was not for "the progress which creates offices to fill them, and to reward men for partisans services, and pay them out of the public treasury, but the progress which means the uplifting and upbuilding of Savannah."⁹⁵ Meldrim's invocation of the same rhetoric as Myers demonstrates that the Liberals had few qualms with the administration's stated goals, but the road it had taken to achieve those goals.

On the eve of the election the city was rife with partisan activity, but this competitive energy did not descend into violence like the registration brawls of 1894. Mass demonstrations were held on behalf of each faction and drew big crowds. First came the Citizens' Club rally on January 22. An estimated 2,000 "voters and non-voters, men and boys" turned out for a meeting at the Odd Fellows hall, followed by a torchlight parade. In the hall Myers formally addressed the Club, reiterating his goals and policies. He criticized the Liberal Club for creating partisan discord by encouraging "bigotry and ignorance," and argued that his opponents' efforts were "mere shams, to secure positions for themselves and their friends." Other speakers followed Myers, including J.P. Figg, who charged that the Liberalites were "narrow and proscriptive," despite their use of the APA against the Citizens. He labeled state representatives Meldrim,

⁹⁴ "Citizens Club's Big Rally. It Turned Out With Torches, Brass Bands and Red Lights." *Savannah Morning News*, January 23, 1897.

⁹⁵ "Look For Good Majorities. Political Prognostications Made by Leading Liberalites." *Savannah Morning News*, January 26, 1897.

McDonough and Duncan “Three Old Cronies,” and local Liberalites were “demagogues, and said it was the duty of the Citizens’ Club to relegate them to the rear.”⁹⁶

After the speeches Club members poured out of the Odd Fellows hall and joined with men congregating outside the meeting, described by the *Savannah Morning News* as made up largely of African Americans. Accompanied by three bands and holding flags and signs, the group paraded throughout Savannah. They even went through the “Old Fort,” or Irish section of town, where despite some yelling “the inhabitants there treated it with chilling indifference.” The parade also went by the De Soto, where a gathering of ladies were watching, and by Meldrim’s house. According to the *Morning News* the black voters held the majority of the signs, including statements like, “Neither Threats Nor Love Can Win Us,” “We Know our True Friends,” and “We are laboring men and 90 cents a day don’t pay Tammany’s record.” Such signs suggest black voters believed in the Citizens’ Club’s record and promises for the future. It was midnight before the last of the partisans retired.⁹⁷

A few days later on the night before the election the Liberal Club sought to top the Citizens’ Club demonstration. Estimates placed 2,300 to 2,500 participants at the event.⁹⁸ With at least five brass bands, and holding torchlights and signs, the Liberal Club coordinated a march from four corners of Savannah the evening of January 25, the day before the election.

Converging on the intersection of Bull and Broughton street, the crowd was compared to “the

⁹⁶ “Citizens Club’s Big Rally.”

⁹⁷ “Parade of the Torchlights. A Lively March With Transparencies and Music,” *Savannah Morning News*, January 23, 1897.

⁹⁸ One Citizens’ Club leader, along “with a colored leader, carefully reviewed” the Liberal Club rally and reported on its ethnic and racial breakdown to the *Morning News*. They said they observed, “906 Irish-Americans... 5 Germans, 150 Americans, and about 300 to 350 colored voters,” as well as a number of Jews, but the exact number is illegible. Based on these estimates the Citizens’ Club said they felt assured of their victory, believing that they would have a majority of 300 white votes, and would be able to split the black vote. The veracity of these numbers is impossible to verify, but suggests at least the perception that the Liberals had uncontested support from Irish ethnics, and possible a majority of black voters, with little support from German ethnics. “The Citizens’ Club Side. Leaders Express Confidence in the Result and Work All Night,” *Savannah Morning News*, January 26, 1897.

gathering of the hosts of Israel on the banks of the Red Sea, preparatory to crossing over on their way to the promised land.” From there the group was led on another march by “100 prominent businessmen.” The Liberals also had signs, some of which read, “Yamacraw and the Old Fort Will Vote the Same Way Tomorrow,” and “Yamacraw Stands By Her Son,” and “Meldrim Never Voted Before He Was A Citizen.” Yamacraw was a mixed black and Irish slum, so the sign suggests that both African American and Irish voters were supporting Meldrim, which was no small feat given the historic animosity between the two groups. However, the last sign refers to the controversy over Myers’ citizenship status from the last election, showing that despite the A.P.A. flap, the Liberals did not consistently advocate for acceptance of immigrants. Finally the Liberal procession gathered at the De Soto, where Meldrim arrived on horse-back from his home to address them.⁹⁹

With a star made up multicolor light bulbs as a backdrop, Meldrim addressed the crowd, predicting that “the star of the Liberal Club” would “shine victorious” the next day. He reminded the crowd that the Liberal Club stood for progress, and was “composed of men who have the welfare of the city at heart.” He pledged to deal “Justly with all men, whatever may be their nationality their creed, or their color,” and invoked “the pulpit and the press in striving to put the affairs of our city into the control of those who have most at stake, and who love the old home best.” Meldrim simultaneously advocated openness and tolerance, while arguing that government should be in the hands of those with “the most at stake,” and who love it “best.” In other words, the better class of white elites turned out of office by the Citizens’ Club.

Meldrim was followed by other speakers repeating the mantra that the Citizens’ Club “had prostituted the city exchange to political purposes.” One Liberal Club member spoke to the

⁹⁹ “Liberals Sure of Victory. Thousands of Enthusiasts Join in the Demonstration,” *Savannah Morning News*, January 26, 1897.

crowd as “a Savannahian,” who preferred his Savannah birth and American nativity” over “the combined salaries of the mayor, the president of the Savannah Grocery Company, and the commissioner of public works combined.”¹⁰⁰ This speaker heralded “native” status, implying these men had more true and selfless motives, and thus by implication suggesting that foreigners had less scrupulous motives. Then the Liberals went on the last battle of their crusade against the commissions, at once touting Meldrim as a native Savannahian beyond lures of political prizes, and a champion for fair administration, and of course, “progress.”

By the time the city election came both sides had ratcheted up enthusiasm to its highest possible level. Each faction worked to get their people to the polls, and while there were reports of some conflict and scattered shenanigans, there were no major incidents of violence. Early in the day Citizens’ Club defeat was looking likely, and by the end of the day it was clear that the Liberal Club prediction had come true. The Liberals proved victorious “from Yamacraw to the Old Fort” and across the rest of the city.¹⁰¹ The straight Liberal Club ticket was elected with 2,515 votes, a majority of 233 out of the 4,807 ballots cast.¹⁰²

Was the 1897 municipal election a rejection of Myers and the Citizens’ Club approach to urban reform? Or did the Liberal Club’s superior organization just drum up more votes? It is hard to sort fact from fiction, to square the rhetoric of reform from what happened on the ground. According to the *Savannah Morning News*, the white vote of the city had been split between factions, and it was the black voters that tipped the scales in favor of the Liberal Club. The article relented that both black and white voters proved to be “purchasable” the day of the election, but implied that the black voters had only a “scattering of respectability,” and their ill-gotten votes

¹⁰⁰ “Look For Good Majorities.”

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² “Meldrim Is Mayor,” *Savannah Morning News*, January 27, 1897.

were what pushed the Liberals to victory. The factions reportedly spent between \$10,000 and \$15,000 each on the election, and lucky voters could get beer and between \$10 and \$25 for their vote – a small fortune to workingmen who earned less than a dollar a day. Longtime Savannah residents commented that in this particular election “the negro was king,” and they had not seen “so much drunkenness, rowdyism and open vote buying” in a long time. While both sides engaged in this practice, the Liberal Club was better at it – a fact they did not deny. The Citizens Club lacked workers for the “rough and ready work at the polls,” the heelers who spent Election Day “dragging voters in from every quarter.” Each faction claimed such behavior was necessary in order to defeat the other, and the Citizens Club did not protest its loss, realizing they had been bested and that “the other people had gotten the most votes in the box,” and that was all. The contest over, everyone expected the bitterness of the election to fade into the background, and for the new administration to prepare to take office.¹⁰³

Conclusion

While corruption was a factor, the election did demonstrate that Savannahians were ambivalent about Myers and his reforms. For the Liberals and their supporters, Myers changed too much, too fast, and a significant number of Savannah voters agreed with them. However, underlying the Liberal Club critique of the commissions were issues with who made up these new municipal bodies. The Citizens’ Club argued that career politicians were upset that they were not brought to the table when Myers crafted his reforms, and that they wanted back into the City Exchange. This is supported by the Liberal’s use of inflammatory rhetoric, and subsequent attempts to pack their new administration with supporters. The Liberal Club ended up seeing at

¹⁰³ Ibid.

least some of the wisdom of the commissions, only abolishing a few, which they replaced with similar bodies with more city council oversight. Meldrim also followed in Myers footsteps by appointing another black city physician. However, this gesture was followed by a city ordinance requiring that physicians only treat patients of their own race, which diminished the significance of the office to the black community.¹⁰⁴

Peter Meldrim's term as city mayor was a return to the status quo, and as was the case with the preceding Tammany faction, dissatisfaction mounted among Savannah residents. Under Meldrim urban improvements continued, but the efficiency and energy of his administration was lacking. Meldrim did not run for mayor in 1899, and Myers and the Citizens' Club were returned to office. This would be the first of four consecutive terms in which Myers was reelected. The last three of those terms he would run unopposed, pointing to a spirit of consensus that was sorely lacking in 1897.

Myers' future successes attest to various lessons learned in the midst of defeat. Myers and advocates of structural municipal reform discovered that Savannah voters did not always trust rapid and unilateral change. Commissions had not been a specified feature of Myers' campaign in 1895, and while he worked with members of his faction to create these bodies, he had little regard for how a large number of the city's elites would take to the changes. Myers also underestimated the strength and determination of his detractors, and made the decision early in his administration to dispense with those who got in his way in favor of those who agreed with his policies. A *Savannah Morning News* editorial argued that it was indeed Myers' appointment of political supporters that sealed his downfall, stimulating "opposition that he would not

¹⁰⁴ *Savannah Morning News*, May 30, 1896. Goldberg, "The Administration of Herman Myers," 98.

otherwise have had.”¹⁰⁵ Supporters of good-government reforms would no doubt have looked down on Myers’ decision to appoint friends and supporters, but these men were part of the commercial-civic elite driving structural reform throughout the country. They fit the mold as qualified, business-minded office holders, and performed their duties in Savannah well. Myers thus did not elicit “opposition that he would not otherwise have had” just by appointing allies, but by eschewing those who had been entrenched in government in favor of a new group of politicians.

Myers’ attempts to dismiss the “rot” of politicking also contributed to his temporary downfall. Unlike Meldrim, Myers had no great talent for oration or flowery language, giving speeches and reports that were concise and purposeful rather than meant to stir emotion. Myers’ administrative style helped him excel in his private business endeavors, but fell flat when emotional or contentious social issues dominated the political field. Myers nevertheless worked to try and stay above the “rot,” which worked well for his subsequent terms when efforts to build the city’s economy trumped all other local conflicts. However, Myers was not always able to dodge volatile social issues, as was the case with the A.P.A. controversy. Thus while his businesses-minded approach could be an asset, it could also be a political weakness.

Myers also took note that even small “favors” directed at the black community produced resistance from whites, and did not ensure a reliable base of black electoral support. Despite the *Tribune*’s accolades for Myers, newspaper accounts suggest the majority of black voters supported Meldrim at the polls. These voters could have been convinced to endorse Meldrim because of his support for the Georgia State Industrial College and black education overall, or by fraudulent inducements, as the local paper charged. Johnson’s accolades may have swayed some

¹⁰⁵ “The New Administration,” *Savannah Morning News*, February 2, 1897.

black voters in Myers' favor, but the incumbent mayor also never made any direct pleas or promises to the black community, and did not have a definable "stance" on black rights that either blacks or whites could point to. Meldrim's appeals to the black community might have been paternalistic, but they gave black voters a clear idea of where he stood, which cannot be said for Myers. Evidence from future administrations suggest Myers would work to maintain some basic protections for black citizens, but he made no more appointments of black men to city council, and certainly did not extend himself to the black population in future years.

Sol C. Johnson was dejected over Myers' loss, and mourned an administration friendly to the interests of black Savannah. The editor wrote that despite "soreness over defeat," citizens should unite to give "generous and hearty support" to the new mayor and his government. Part of this plea may have related to political conflict within the black community, since other editorial comments in the *Tribune* suggest that Johnson's support of Myers may have earned him some enemies. However, Johnson's comments suggest sincere personal disappointment. Given the nature of political conflict in this election, he aptly lamented, "to the victors belong the spoils."¹⁰⁶ Johnson would later be vindicated in his trepidation. Savannah would soon enter a new, exciting phase in urban development, but Myers had learned the limitations of reform. Blacks' place in the new urban order would be tenuous and increasingly relegated to the sidelines.

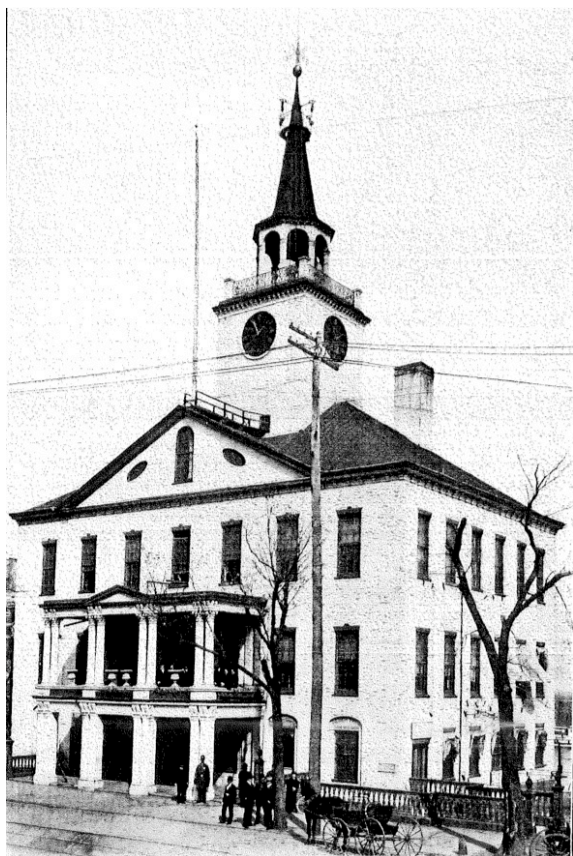
¹⁰⁶ *The Savannah Tribune*, January 23, 30, 1897. In his January 30 issue, Johnson wrote, "The Tribune has lost just three subscribers because it supported Mr. Herman Myers and his ticket in the recent election." However, this comment appears to be facetious rather than factual, since the next editorial comment is, "The newspaper press cannot be intimidated by the boycott," suggesting that he had indeed been in conflict with some of his readers over his political stance. Johnson then effectively accuses these readers of being overly sensitive, writing "the Morning News and Daily Press favored the election of Mayor Meldrim. Dollars to dime they will not be boycotted by Mr. Myers' friends."

CHAPTER 4:

“SAVANNAH, A CITY OF OPPORTUNITIES”?

On August 11, 1904, city officials, residents and special guests gathered to dedicate the corner stone of Savannah’s new City Hall. Thousands of people crowded around the construction site, craning their necks from rooftops, windows and any available perch in the vicinity to see the ceremony. United States Senator from Georgia, Alexander S. Clay, gave a speech, and the Grand Master of the Georgia Masons blessed the site where the City Exchange once stood. Built in 1799, the City Exchange served as the center of Savannah’s government for over a century. However, by 1900 Savannah’s municipal bureaucracy had outgrown the space and desperately needed new quarters. City council scoured the city for locations, but none were as suitable as the intersection of Bull and Bay streets, where the City Exchange stood. In a controversial move city council decided to demolish the Exchange. The city mourned the loss of the historic structure, with its well-worn portico and church-like steeple, but residents eagerly welcomed the new City Hall. One local newspaper editorial enthusiastically remarked that from the dome of the new building “the observer will be able to look down upon a thriving, bustling, prosperous modern” Savannah.¹ The new City Hall would mark Savannah’s grand entrance into the twentieth century.

¹ “Spanning a Century,” *Savannah Morning News*, August 11, 1904. The Georgia Society of Colonial Dames of America waged a campaign to save the City Exchange on account of its historical importance. They petitioned City Council in April of 1903, and presented their views in Savannah newspapers, but they did not succeed. Luciana M. Spracher, “April 16, 1903 Colonial Dames Fight to Save City Exchange,” *City of Savannah, Georgia, Research Library and Municipal Archives*, 2004, <http://www.ci.savannah.ga.us/cityweb/RLibCat.nsf/d43ec6d7aedfa02a85256edf004a3860/00cb9d031ace0db785256ee6005e1220?OpenDocument>; Luciana M. Spracher, “April 29, 1903 Colonial Dames Petition City Council,” *City of Savannah, Georgia, Research Library and Municipal Archives*, 2004, <http://www.savannahga.gov/cityweb/RLibCat.nsf/d43ec6d7aedfa02a85256edf004a3860/07bf89977f5c4fde85256ee6005ed900?OpenDocument>.



*The Old City Exchange*²



*Sketch of the New City Hall*³

Joining Savannah residents in this momentous event were delegates of the League of Georgia Municipalities, in town for their annual convention. The timing, of course, was no

² Thomas Gamble, "The Old and the New: Sketch of the Old City Exchange (1799-1904) and the New City Hall, Savannah, Georgia," (Braid & Hutton, Savannah, Ga., 1905).

³ Gamble, Thomas and Savannah (Ga.) City Council, *Savannah, A City of Opportunities*, Digitized Version from Internet Archive (Savannah, Ga.: The Savannah Morning News, 1904), <http://www.archive.org/details/savannah00sava>. The caption for the drawing provides the optimistic estimate that the building would be finished in 1904, but it actually was not completed until December of 1905.

coincidence. Savannah had lobbied for the meeting, negotiating reduced railroad rates and advertising throughout the state. Officials from forty-nine Georgia cities and towns came to Savannah for lectures on municipal governance, and to enjoy the city's sites. Excursions planned by city council included an automobile tour, a steamboat ride, entertainment at the casino at Thunderbolt, and grandest of them all, the dedication of City Hall's corner stone. All these activities highlighted Savannah's most modern attributes, natural beauty and civic pride. Between 12,000 and 20,000 observers came out to the corner stone ceremony and the parade that followed. The parade itself engaged 2,000 men, including army regulars, local militia groups, civilian organizations, and masonic orders, all marching to honor Savannah's important milestone.⁴

The intersection of the League of Georgia Municipalities convention and the dedication of the corner stone of City Hall marked a culmination of efforts by city boosters to transform Savannah into a modern and prosperous city. Herman Myers was the primary steward of this transformation, using his five terms in the mayoral office to ensure city government energetically pursued economic development without sacrificing fiscal responsibility. Under Myers' leadership city boosters and government officials built up tourism, established new commercial ties, and enticed industrial investment. Thanks in large part to these efforts, Savannah became the leading port in the South Atlantic by the early twentieth century, with bank clearances exceeding those of Atlanta and every other Georgia city. The new City Hall was emblematic of the mixture of vision and shrewd planning that Myers brought to city affairs. A grand, gold-

⁴ "Thousands Assembled For Corner Stone Laying. Interesting and Impressive Ceremony Witnessed From Tops of Buildings, Windows and Street," *Savannah Morning News*, August 12, 1904; "Splendid Parade Started at Park," *Savannah Morning News*, August 12, 1904.

domed homage to the city's prosperous future, the building was paid for in three years without raising taxes.

However, as Myers and residents celebrated their new City Hall, racial tensions were building. Savannah's black community was not being given an equal stake in the city's prosperity, despite their integral role in the urban economy. In keeping with trends throughout the region, black leaders focused on economic development as a means of improving the lives of black southerners. Booker T. Washington and others argued that economic prosperity would give African Americans a seat at the table, and show whites they should not, and could not, be ignored. While the black community did have some success in building businesses and institutions that would promote growth, they were increasingly excluded from Herman Myers and city boosters' vision of Savannah. Tensions over promises unfulfilled were beginning to bubble to the surface, and conflict over the place of black residents in the city's new modern landscape would soon come.

Three themes present within Savannah's booster culture will frame the following discussion of the city's modern transformation. The first is how Reconciliation and myths about the South shaped Savannah's tourist industry, and its unique identity as a city that was both historic and modern. Myers and his administration's aggressive endeavors to promote the city's economic progress constituted a particularly important facet of Savannah's development. Booster pamphlets designed to court investment and shape Savannah's image as a prosperous urban center will form the source base for this discussion, and the League of Georgia Municipalities convention will be analyzed in this context. African American's integral place in Savannah's economy, and efforts to build institutions that would foster future growth will also be explored, in part through the frame of the philosophies of economic uplift espoused by Sol C.

Johnson in the *Savannah Tribune*. However, the vision of the future the black community was working towards was to become increasingly incompatible with Savannah's political realities.

In Search of the “Picturesque”: Southern Tourism in the Late-Nineteenth Century

In the 1870s and 1880s people from the northern United States began visiting the South in greater numbers than ever before. Innovations in commercial transportation, and repairs to crucial railroads destroyed during the Civil War, made travel to the South increasingly accessible for middle-class and wealthy Americans. The growing acceptance of vacations and leisure activities in Gilded Age culture also sent northerners in search of new experiences and locales. Southern cities were happy to oblige, and seized the opportunity to reap the benefits of northerners' wanderlust. Cities worked to advertise themselves, and new accommodations and tours produced a growing commercial travel industry in the South.⁵

Yet how did a region recently viewed as enemy territory become a popular tourist destination? The answer lies in the culture of reunion, new myths about southern history, and energetic promotion by southern cities. By the end of Reconstruction northerners' dedication to the goals and benefits of Reconstruction policies had waned, eroded by continued southern intransigence. As illustrated by the Compromise of 1877, in exchange for political leadership of the country Republicans ceded control of southern states to white Democrats and pulled out Union troops who were enforcing Reconstruction dictates. In exchange for some semblance of harmony, the North retreated from the protection of black citizenship rights, allowing southern whites to solve their own “race problem” – a move that was devastating to the fragile freedom

⁵ Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Thomas J. Schlereth, *Victorian America: Transformations in Everyday Life*, Everyday Life in America Series (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991).

African Americans had seized after the war. With this abandonment of black southerners, North and South could unite once more. The North opted for white reconciliation on southern terms, thus supporting the well-known adage that ‘the North won the war, but the (white) South won the peace.’⁶

Accompanying reunion of North and South was a romantic culture that promoted new myths about the South while obscuring past realities. Despite a few notable dissenters, many northerners’ moral outrage at the slave system was replaced by the South’s sentimental narrative of the Old South and the “Lost Cause”.⁷ Gaining traction in the 1880s and especially popular through the early 1900s, new organizations formed to commemorate the southern past, such as the United Confederate Veterans, and the Sons and Daughters of the Confederacy. These groups advanced the Lost Cause ideology, which maintained that the Civil War was an honorable conflict in which northern intruders with superior resources defeated a valiant Confederate force that was nobly fighting to protect the southern way of life. In this story the Old South was a chivalrous, romantic society where happy, obedient slaves served their white masters. The white South’s tragic defeat was then magnified by the horrors of emancipation and Reconstruction, until white southerners were able to redeem their state governments. This narrative of history presupposed white supremacy and the need for racial hierarchy, but did not advocate renewed

⁶ For a general overview of Reconstruction, see Eric Foner, *Reconstruction, 1863-1877: America’s Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988); Michael W. Fitzgerald, *Splendid Failure: Postwar Reconstruction in the American South*, (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2007). For information on the violence associated with Reconstruction, see George C Rable, *But There Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007). For the northern perspective on Reconstruction, see Heather Cox Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction : Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1865-1901* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

⁷ The term the “Lost Cause” comes from an 1866 book by Edward S. Pollard of the same name, which maintained that the South had the constitutional right to secede. The term then became associated with the broader ideology described above. One notable critic of the Lost Cause myth was Albion Tourg  e, but his voice was drowned out by a torrent of Lost Cause writers, like Thomas Dixon. Mark Elliott, *Color-Blind Justice: Albion Tourgee and the Quest for Racial Equality from the Civil War to Plessy V. Ferguson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

hostilities. Rather, it was a vision of history that reaffirmed southern strength and honor as a way of moving forward in a time of great change.⁸

White southerners created these myths to cope with the humiliation of defeat, but the reasons northerners also adopted these notions lies in the culture of the Gilded Age. Historians argue that northerners' amnesia was not just about apathy or fatigue, but fueled by ambivalence about the tensions of industrial society and the costs of the free labor system. In contrast to chaotic urban centers of the North, romantic depictions of the South and its past made the region appear as a refuge from the strain of urban life, a relic of a time when life was simple and ordered. This view glossed over the horrors of slavery and instead idolized the life of aristocratic leisure that plantation owners once enjoyed. Thus the class and the culture once demonized and antithetical to democracy and northern values became a romantic ideal, and one middle-class and wealthy tourists wanted to experience when they visited the South.

Health resorts were the first destinations in the South to become popular among northern tourists. Wealthy northerners had been in the practice of going to southern resorts to escape harsh winters before the Civil War, but by the 1870s such locales became more widely accessible. Surprisingly, southern cities that had once been breeding-grounds for yellow fever and other disastrous diseases soon became famous for healthful living. Tireless advertising was needed to help change existing perceptions, but southern cities did improve their conditions through better

⁸ For discussion of the culture and memory of reunion and reconciliation see David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001); Alice Fahs and Joan Waugh, eds., *The Memory of the Civil War in American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). For discussion specifically of the Lost Cause and memory in the South, see Foster Gaines, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South, 1865-1913* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005); Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998). For discussion of commemoration among black southerners, see Kathleen Ann Clark, *Defining Moments: African American Commemoration and Political Culture in the South, 1863-1913* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, 2005).

sanitation and drainage projects. Savannah had once been the epicenter of numerous Yellow Fever epidemics, but the city focused a great deal of energy on health improvements, and touted its artesian wells and port quarantine facilities as evidence of its good condition. While southern cities improved in health, northern cities contended with their own hazards, with contagious diseases and new nervous ailments attributed to overstimulation. Indeed, “the image of southern healthfulness was a powerful one,” and helped spur southern tourism.⁹

In addition to reasons related to health, northerners began traveling to the South in order to enact their romantic visions of the region. Visitors from New York and New England wanted to go on tours that where they could see plantation ruins and other “vestiges of the slave system” and the Confederacy, believing these scenes to be “touching and charming” (and not politically charged). Visitors wanted to travel back in time and see a world apart from the Gilded Age industrial city, and live the stories of Thomas Nelson Page, one of the South’s foremost writers of romantic Old South fiction. For this reason, southern cities that appeared too “northern” (meaning modern), were less appealing for they were no longer “authentically” southern. One tourist was glad to find that Savannah was actually very “southern,” specifically praising “the statues of distinguished heroes of the ‘Lost Cause.’”¹⁰ Any war-time hatred this tourist may have once harbored towards the South was now replaced with a romantic appreciation of the region’s quaint monuments.

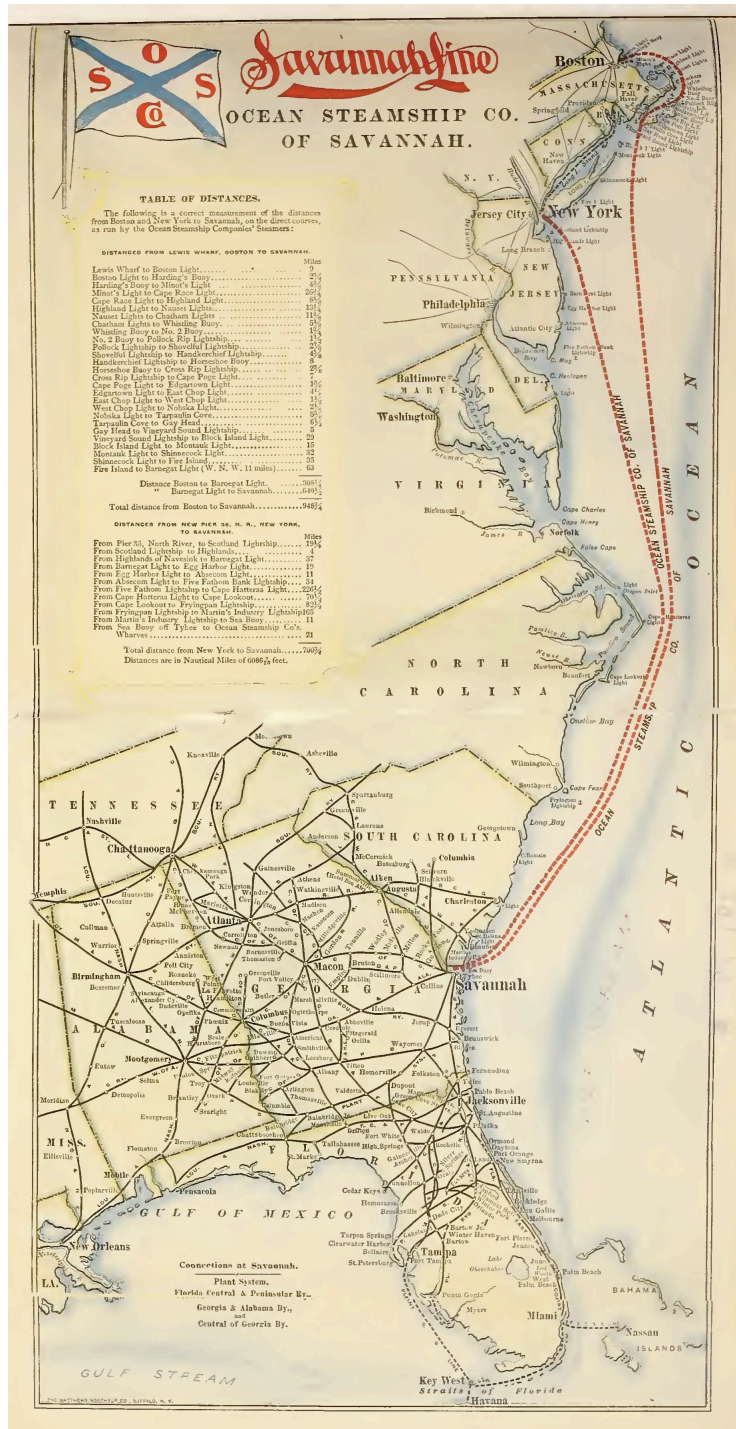
Savannah emerged at the heart of the southern travel industry, not only for its “authentic” qualities, but because of its location. In the late-nineteenth century, tours along Florida’s St.

⁹ Silber, *The Romance of Reunion*, 68; Edward L. Ayers, *Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 61. For specific discussion of health improvements’ relationship to boosterism, see Steven J Hoffman, *Race, Class and Power in the Building of Richmond, 1870-1920* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2004).

¹⁰ Silber, *The Romance of Reunion*, 77; Trent A Watts, “Imagining a White South: Narratives of (B)Order and Community, 1890-1920” (Dissertation, University of Chicago, 2000), 234-272.

John's River became especially popular and well known among northern vacationers. However, to get to Florida most northern tourists traveled from New York or Boston by train or steamship to Savannah, the major center for rail and water transport in the region. From Savannah visitors then travelled to their ultimate destination, and back again on their return. Thanks to Florida, Savannah and other cities along this popular tourist route gained popularity and revenue. Yet Savannah was not content to be merely a stop-over town, but aspired to be a tourist destination on its own. This is seen in building projects and events put on by the city to bring in tourists. For instance, the De Soto Hotel in Savannah was built to compete with the Ponce de Leon Hotel in St. Augustine, Florida, and eventually became one of most well-known and luxurious hotels in the South (and where Herman Myers had a permanent residence). Savannah also put on May Day celebrations, and marked holidays with parades that might entice visitors from the countryside and farther afield.¹¹

¹¹ Silber, *The Romance of Reunion*, 69-92; Timothy Daiss, *Rebels, Saints, and Sinners: Savannah's Rich History and Colorful Personalities* (Pelican Publishing, 2002); David J Goldberg, "The Administration of Herman Myers as Mayor of Savannah, Georgia, 1895-1897 and 1899-1907," (Masters Thesis, University of North Carolina, 1978), 118-120.



Map of Savannah Line, Ocean and Steamship Company of Savannah¹²

¹² E.H. Hinton, *A Sketch of Savannah, Historical and Topographical*, Digitized Version on Internet Archive (Buffalo, N.Y.: Matthews-Northrup Co., Issued by the Ocean Steamship Co. of Savannah, 1899), <http://www.archive.org/details/sketchofsavannah00buff>, 30.

As mentioned above, tourists did not just want to see old sites, but longed for experiences that matched the imagined, romantic South of their dreams. This usually meant seeking contact with black southerners, who were seen as a quintessential element of the South's unique regional culture. The term most often used to describe African Americans was "picturesque," a word also ascribed to plantation homes and abandoned slave markets (suggesting black southerners in the northern view were comparable to scenery). One of the more "authentic" experiences a northern tourist might seek, at least during the 1870s, was a service at a black church.¹³ Savannah, as mentioned in Chapter 1, had the oldest independent black church in the South and a particularly vibrant religious culture. Therefore, Savannah had the market cornered when it came to black religious encounters.

Savannah boosters encouraged northern tourists' desire to interact with African Americans. In 1881 J.H. Estill, a local businessman and owner of the *Savannah Morning News*, published *A Guide to Strangers Visiting Savannah for Business, Health or Pleasure*. The book offers a brief history of Savannah, a list of "all that is worth seeing," as well as a suggested route for viewing those sites. The whole book is eighty-six-pages, but the introduction is a succinct page and half, in which the author explained that his goal was to aid "unenlightened" visitors, and "make their stay pleasant by relieving the *ennui* of having no special sight-seeing to follow up." Estill then briefly summarized the types of sites visitors should aim to see, including,

the cotton presses and warehouses, rice mills, and nurseries of plants and flowers; and if they be philanthropists, or interested in politics, should attend a service of a church for the colored people, as a study of them, in religious congregation, offers an excellent opportunity for judging of the degree of civilization, intelligence and Christian influence

¹³ Nina Silber argues that the use of "picturesque" to describe black southerners was an effort by white northerners to "sentimentalize the 'negro problem' and that "in the eyes of the northern traveler blacks became less of a problem and more of a 'picturesque' element of the southern scene." Silber, *The Romance of Reunion*, 78.

the race has attained under the training of its former proprietors, and since its emancipation from slavery.¹⁴

Estill highlighted the black church experience, acknowledging that it was indeed a draw for visitors to the city, just like cotton presses or other distinctive southern aspects of the city's landscape. However, he framed the black churches very particularly and politically, citing black religious activity as evidence of the beneficial influence of slavery, and not as a testament to African American independence or resilience. This perspective was in keeping with the southern white view of the "race problem," and arguments that Reconstruction was a failed experiment in black independence. Estill's writing implied that upon visiting black churches northerners would understand their error. The author additionally assured readers in the same paternalistic tone that "white visitors are welcomed... at all the colored churches in Savannah, with courtesy and hospitality." White boosters acceded to northern desires to experience black southern life, while also working to exploit that experience for their own political aims.¹⁵

In the 1890s tourist literature continued to entice visitors with descriptions of Savannah's "southern" qualities, but also sought to inform readers of the city's modern conveniences. This is seen in *A Sketch of Savannah*, published in 1899 by E.H. Hinton, Traffic Manager of the Savannah Line of the Ocean Steamship Company of Savannah. This promotional pamphlet offered thirty-four photos in twenty-four pages, using Savannah's urban beauty to its best effect. Hinton worked to blend nostalgia for the city's past with the present moment. The author proclaimed that visitors would find that with every step "comes some reminder of the past side by side with some striking evidence of the progress of the present."¹⁶ This blend of old and new

¹⁴ J.H. Estill, *A Guide To Strangers Visiting Savannah for Business, Health or Pleasure*, (Savannah, Ga.: J.H. Estill, 1881), Digitized Version from Internet Archive, <http://www.archive.org/details/guidetostrangers00esti>, xiii-iv.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ E.H. Hinton, *A Sketch of Savannah*, 4.

would have been especially appealing to northerners who sought both authenticity and the comforts of modern living. Tourists might have wanted to visit rustic ruins, such as the Hermitage Plantation in Savannah, but then they wanted to return to elegant hotel parlors and stroll in clean parks. The ability to balance the Old and New Souths made Savannah unique among its sister cities. Most other locales could only boast one identity or the other. Atlanta was the beacon of the New South, but it lacked a historic urban landscape. On the other hand Natchez, Mississippi was truly a place “where the Old South lives again,” but only because the city had advanced little from its prewar state.¹⁷ Savannah, which survived the war intact and sought to move forward into the New South, could reasonably boast its history *and* modernity, or the best of both worlds.

Hinton also emphasized that Savannah had a progressive attitude, not the spiteful, backwards, conservatism that northerners associated with the South during Reconstruction. Hinton’s promotional prose began with observations of the port and Bay street, and then moved through the city’s most famous structures, sites and statues showcasing its history and assets. A large portion of the city’s monuments were devoted to Revolutionary War heroes, and as such that war is most prominent in the guide’s narrative. The city’s experience of the Civil War was also addressed, but in a way that would appeal to northern readers. Hinton remarked,

the spirit of the old South is closely interwoven with the spirit of the new, and Phoenix-like, from the ashes of the former has sprung the perfect structure of the latter, untainted by one spark of the old bitterness, yet inspired by renewed effort of the old high motives...which must still serve as the torch-bearer for the progress of the coming generation.¹⁸

¹⁷ Hale, *Making Whiteness*, 146.

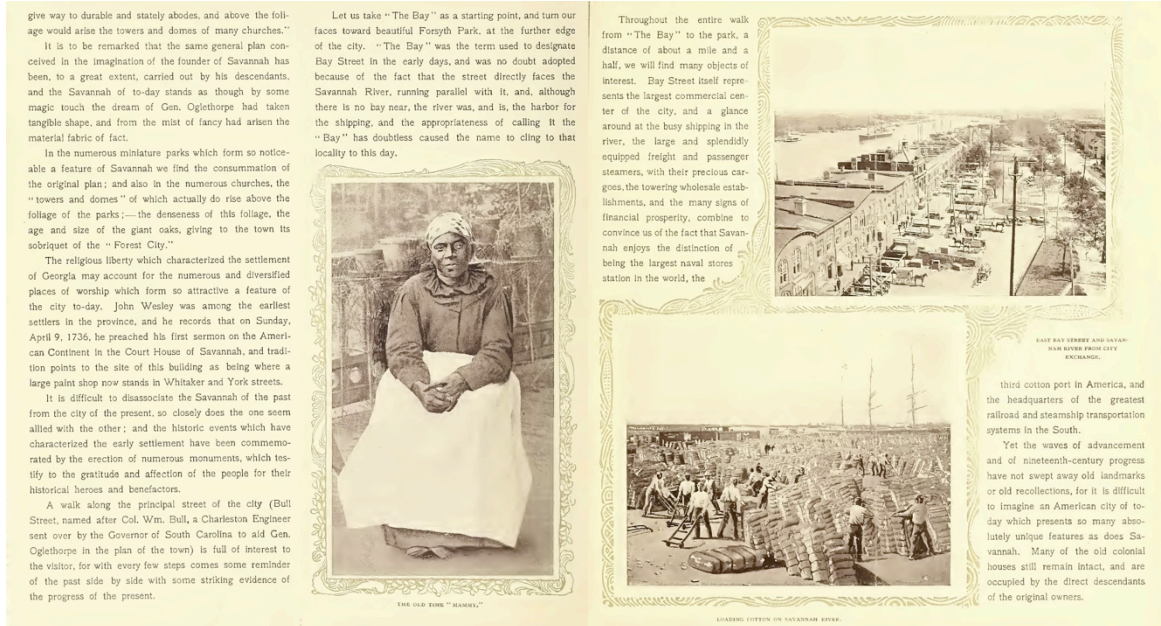
¹⁸ Hinton, *A Sketch of Savannah*, 11.

Hinton cast the city's past as inextricably linked with the present, and a connection that was productive rather than burdensome. Thus the message to tourists was you could experience an authentic South, but one that was friendly and progressive, not reactionary.

In *A Sketch of Savannah*, African Americans were once again presented as a feature of Savannah's southern landscape, but unlike Estill's pamphlet where black residents were pushed to the forefront for political reasons, Hinton treated them as nostalgic scenery that should be viewed but not interacted with. Other than remarking on the city's one black hospital, Hinton's only other mention of black Savannahians was in a description of Forsyth Park. He wrote that when the weather was nice, the park was "filled at all hours with the daintiest of white-clad babies and their attendant 'mammies,' with turbaned heads and ample laps – relics of a type which is fast fading away."¹⁹ While showcasing the role of black women in the domestic care of white children, he also suggested that these mammies must be seen before they disappear.²⁰ Tourists must take advantage of a fleeting opportunity to see the Old South in action. To highlight this point, a picture of "the old time 'mammy'" was the only photo of an individual prominently showcased in the pamphlet. Hinton thus used African Americans as set-pieces in his tourist theatre.

¹⁹ Ibid., 16.

²⁰ For information on "mammy" myths and their role in politics and culture see Micki McElya, *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).



Two pages from "Sketch of Savannah," 1889²¹

These pages show "the old time 'mammy'" mentioned above.

²¹ Hinton, *A Sketch of Savannah*, 4.

Savannah's success with commercial tourism is evident in her enduring nickname as the Hostess City, but visions of the nostalgic Old South were not just for profit. Various historians have noted that this imagined past served an important function in the promotion of the New South Creed. Romantic idealization preserved the South's sectional identity even as the southern landscape changed drastically. As historian Grace Elizabeth Hale writes, "Old South nostalgia" was the "funhouse mirror of the New South," grounding whites even as they doggedly sought to emulate northern industrial progress.²²

Defining Savannah's Advantages

In 1894 Joseph Winfried Spenceley, a correspondent of the *Boston Times*, took an extended trip to Savannah. Staying in a lovely boarding house off of Forsyth Park, Spenceley lived out his southern fantasy. In series of published musings, titled "Breezes from the South," Spenceley described Savannah to his northern readers. He marveled at the slow pace of life, the heat during the day, and the "negroes [that] roll by, showing their white teeth and jolly natures," their demeanor almost "contagious." He remarked on the city's lovely forests and varied trees, its beautiful flowers and "the most excellent food and typical Southern dishes." It was not too long before he was invited to mix in the local social scene, drinking and dancing with local elites. He was taken by one such host on a plantation tour, which prompted him to imagine a "a happy, contented life 'mid the joyous revelry of Nature...truly, this Southern life that I've dreamed of I'm now a figure in!"²³

²² Hale, *Making Whiteness*, 53; Paul M. Gaston, *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970).

²³ HM 30987, John Winifred Spenceley, "Diaries of a Trip from Boston to Savannah in 1891 and 1894, Vol.2", n.d., Huntington Library and Archives. Included clippings from the *Boston Times*, 8th, 15th, 22nd of April 1894.

While Spenceley's trip portrayed mostly a moonlight and magnolias story, he did recount one experience that diverted from his imagined southern sojourn. Spenceley related that after "reading up the history of this old city (1733) I learned that some Jews came here soon after it was settled. There are many here now. The signs over the stores make one think of New York City." Probably strolling down Broughton street, where names like Levy and Cohen showed on storefront signs, Spenceley further noted: "It's funny to see two Jews (their features strongly marked), coming down the street, and as you pass to catch their vernacular. The Hebrew is entirely lost and the soft, Southern vernacular noticeable and pleasing."²⁴ Spenceley was not just surprised that Jewish businesses thrived in the southern port town, but that the men he identified as Jews spoke with southern accents. Spenceley's travel account at once shows the fantasy tourists sought to experience, as well as the realities of life in Savannah that compromised that vision. Spenceley had expected to see black faces in the streets, but not Savannah's diversity or business ethos.

The Savannah that Spenceley experienced was more focused on economic development than ever before, largely thanks to the New South booster spirit. As outlined in Chapter 1, the New South movement originated with Henry Grady and a cadre of business-minded leaders in 1880s Atlanta. They believed that the South needed northern investment to prosper, but knew the region was tainted by the violence of Reconstruction and the perceived backwardness of the southern economy. Grady and his colleagues thus went on a mission, using speaking tours, print media, and events like the Cotton Exposition of 1881, to convince the North that investment in the South was worth the risk. Other cities then followed suit, and the idea that city governments should actively court investment became a central part of progressive municipal administration

²⁴ Ibid.

in the South. Savannah city government followed this trend, eschewing the image of the city as a quaint and historic town, choosing instead to highlight a Savannah that had numerous commercial and financial strengths, and that would be a safe and lucrative investment for those with capital.²⁵

Herman Myers was proactive in promoting the city's economic growth when he was first elected in 1895, and particularly determined to entice manufacturing to Savannah. An organization calling itself the Citizens Industrial Committee (CIC) formed only a month after Myers took office, and quickly became an important force in helping Myers achieve his business-oriented goals. Myers not only cooperated personally with the CIC, as both mayor and a businessman himself, but by March the organization had an allocation of \$1,500 from the city to help begin its work. The CIC's efforts included sending delegations to national companies looking for new manufacturing locations, and organizing exhibits for the 1895 Cotton Exposition in Atlanta, including an entire "Savannah Day" at the fair. The CIC also advertised in industrial publications, and sent pamphlets detailing Savannah's impressive commercial strengths to banks throughout the East and Mid-West.²⁶ The pamphlet *The City of Savannah, Georgia, its Advantages, Resources and Business Facilities*, printed in March of 1895, was likely a representative example of such booster publications.

²⁵ Gaston, *The New South Creed*; Stephen Prince, "A Rebel Yell for Yankee Doodle: Selling the New South at the 1881 Atlanta International Cotton Exposition," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 92, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 340–371; Stephen V. Ward, *Selling Places: The Marketing and Promotion of Towns and Cities, 1850-2000* (London: E & FN Spon, an imprint of Routledge, 1998).

²⁶ Goldberg, "The Administration of Herman Myers," 29-32. Chambers of Commerce and other business groups like the CIC played a leading role in advertising cities to potential investors, and worked closely with city government on numerous issues they believed would promote commerce. Gaston, *The New South Creed*, 73-75.

COTTON.

Limited space makes it impossible to give more than a brief sketch of the development of the Cotton business of the port during the past twenty-three years.

From the season 1858-59, in which Savannah received only 265,000 bales, the annual receipts have been increasing, varying from year to year, according to the extent of the crop, until the season of 1890-91, when they passed the 1,000,000 bale mark.

While the receipts for the past two seasons have shown a falling off, due in 1891-92 to a short crop in this section, and in 1892-93, to a crop of 2,322,960 bales less than the previous year, the city has more than held its position in proportion of receipts to the total crop.

The "net" receipts at Savannah for the year ending August 31st, 1891, were 969,430 bales, with an approximate value of \$38,929,631, in comparison with 791,211 bales and a value of \$31,508,765 in 1890, an increase of 178,219 bales, or 22.52 per cent.

The total cotton crop of the United States for the year ending August 31st, 1891, amounted to 7,527,211 bales, an increase of 810,063 bales as compared with the previous year.

Of this Savannah received 12.88 per cent., as compared with 11.78 per cent. in 1892-93.

SEA ISLAND COTTON CROP.

The total Sea Island crop during the past season was 61,622 bags, against 45,422 bags the previous year; an increase of 15,620 bags. Of this amount Savannah received 54,259 bags, or 88.87 per cent., as compared with 78.08 per cent. in 1892-93; making her still rank first as a Sea Island Cotton market.

Of the 54,259 bags, Savannah's receipts in the season of 1893-94, Georgia furnished 72.23 per cent., Florida 27.65 per cent., and South Carolina 60.12 per cent., as compared with Georgia 76.93 per cent., Florida 19.23 per cent., and South Carolina 3.84 per cent. in 1892-93.

EXPORTS IN DETAIL.

SEASON.	1893-94.		1892-93.		1891-92.	
	Up-land.	Sea Island.	Up-land.	Sea Island.	Up-land.	Sea Island.
Charleston	16,658		17,131		67,230	26
Baltimore	92,079	2,916	96,421	122	115,837	831
New York	107,788	24,006	106,629	23,874	228,101	22,304
Boston	52,711	5,406	85,941	5,825	1,917	2,249
Philadelphia	9,510		7,117		8,866	
Brunswick	1,303		130			
New Orleans			21			
Total Coastwise	421,436	27,135	394,856	29,821	495,354	29,432
Reshipped to Interior	330	2	295		192	
Local consumption and burnt	2,778	68	1,916	24	2,317	10
Cork for orders—Total Channel						
Liverpool—Total Great Britain	88,809	22,912	50,921	5,780	159,779	15,817
Havre	31,101	1,546	24,300	327	29,316	881
London						
Rosen						
Total France	31,101	1,546	24,300	327	29,316	
Norfolk	1,700		1,700		8,441	
Reval	6,909	280	11,358		32,300	
Brussels	111,290		94,035		115,077	
Amsterdam	65,501		1,040		6,092	
Genoa	82,652		87,101		29,175	
Barcelona	5,336		2,691		8,000	
Gothenburg					3,300	
Malaga	1,322		4,100		2,750	
Odessa	1,000		1,600		1,300	
Nyborg						
St. Petersburg	27,210	510	4,800		2,100	
Stockholm					1,600	
Göteborg			1,200			
Salerno			5,100			
Catania			600		200	
Lisbon			1,500		1,510	
Passages			1,500		2,100	
Ghent	2,750				5,075	
Total Continent	371,104	790	279,280		391,239	
Grand Total	918,268	54,846	726,388	36,162	988,888	47,160

Two pages from "City of Savannah, Georgia, Advantages, Resources and Business Facilities," 1895²⁷

These pages show the data heavy design of the pamphlet, which contained no images.

²⁷ The City of Savannah, Georgia, Its Advantages, Resources, and Business Facilities, 35-36.

As the above title would suggest, the publication was a digest of the city's various "advantages."²⁸ The first few pages listed information that any potential resident would want to know, including the location of the city, facts about its school system, climate and sanitation services. Sections followed on aspects of the city related to commerce, including the harbor, shipping, railroad systems, as well as the city's major exports: cotton, naval stores, and lumber. Sections discussing truck farming and rice cultivation were also included, followed by a section on manufactures. Various informational charts were showcased this information, but no photos or drawings of the city. Thus while some of the pamphlet might have been of interest to tourists, *Advantages* was directed at a business audience with an eye towards economic development.

Savannah's emphasis on manufacturing was in keeping with New South boosterism, for this was an area in which the economy of the post-war South was particularly deficient. In one of his most famous speeches Henry Grady described a southern funeral in which everything the deceased was buried with was manufactured in the North. Grady lamented, "the South didn't furnish a thing on earth for that funeral but the corpse and the hole in the ground," despite the region's rich natural resources.²⁹ Some cities, like Birmingham, Alabama eventually became manufacturing centers, but Savannah was struggling in this respect. There were few establishments to enumerate in the manufactures section of *Advantages*. Rather, space was devoted to the conditions Savannah offered that would support manufacturing, such as cheap labor, geography, and natural resources. In the true spirit of the New South, the publication

²⁸ The publication is not directly attributed to Savannah's city government, but it was produced by the city's contracted printer, and is not credited to any particular individual or company. Therefore, I am making the reasonable assumption that the publication originated from Savannah's city council and municipal government. *The City of Savannah, Georgia, Its Advantages, Resources, and Business Facilities*, Digital Version from Internet Archive. (Savannah: The Morning News Print, 1895), <http://www.archive.org/details/cityofsavannah00sava>.

²⁹ Henry Grady, *The New South, and Other Addresses*, (New York: Maynard, Merrill & co, 1904). For further analysis of Grady's funeral analogy, see Gaston, *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking*, 70.

outlined a list of manufacturing establishments the authors felt would be most prudent for the city:

What are specially wanted now, and which should do well, are -
One or more cotton and knitting mills.
A factory to manufacture box stuff, etc., for shipment of vegetables.
Cigar factories.
A factory for canning vegetables.
A sugary refinery.
A pickling factory.
A brick factory – good clay being plentiful; and other industries which go to make a large city.³⁰

After this wish-list the pamphlet surmised, “the only thing needed to make Savannah a great manufacturing center is ‘capital’ and that will come as soon as her many advantages become know to investors.” And of course the pamphlet sought to serve that very purpose. After identifying the goods and services the city could provide, the authors presented facts on the topics of banking, finance and real estate, which highlighted the city’s fiscal health through numerous lists and charts. The last two sections of the pamphlet outlined the wholesale trade, and a short list of “facts about Savannah.” For example, the pamphlet informed that “Savannah has never had a bank failure,” and that the city had the “finest artesian water supply in the South.”³¹

Many of the goals outlined in *Advantages* came to pass under Myers’ tenure from 1895 to 1897. Companies producing railroad cars, cigars, boxes and crates, as well as cotton de-linting plant, established factories in the city. Savannah never became a full-blown manufacturing center, but these new industries helped support commerce at the city’s port, which remained Savannah’s fiscal lifeblood. Savannah was doing well, with bank clearances higher than those of

³⁰*The City of Savannah, Georgia, Its Advantages, Resources, and Business Facilities*, 29.

³¹ Ibid, 14. The publication’s emphasis on the *potential* for development that would follow investment was typical of the rhetoric of the New South creed and boosters throughout the South. Gaston, *The New South Creed*; Ayers, *Promise of the New South*, 61-62.

Atlanta and Birmingham. Myers encouraged the formation of the Savannah Freight Bureau to further increase commerce. Under the direction of Captain D.G. Purse, the Freight Bureau worked to make sure Savannah received fair transportation rates, and pursued other avenues on behalf of all the businesses of the city. With Myers support, Purse and the Freight Bureau worked out an agreement to have a direct steamship line between Savannah and Manchester, England. Service began in 1897, after which the city's export trade doubled. Myers also worked with these citizen organizations to pursue tax exemptions and interest rate reductions, but these efforts were ultimately unsuccessful. Yet Myers had clearly harnessed the entrepreneurial energy of the city. The *Savannah Morning News* ran a two-month "Industrial Series," suggesting that local newspapers were behind Myers efforts, and that the publication's readers might want to know about the 106 factories, 2,382 employees and 24 industries then manufacturing in Savannah.³²

Savannah's commercial growth slowed when Myers lost his bid for reelection in 1897. Peter Meldrim did not cooperate with the city's businessmen as Myers had, and the CIC and Freight Bureau withered without energy and municipal backing. Proactive commercial promotion was no longer a priority. But when Myers returned to office in 1899, and in subsequent terms, he reasserted his economic focus. Two areas in which he was particularly successful were in securing a reduction in fire insurance rates, saving \$500,000 for the city, and in securing funds for improvements to the port and its harbor.³³

One of Myers' most important contributions to the economy of Savannah was stimulating the reinvigoration of Savannah's Chamber of Commerce. The city had various groups organized around specialized business interests, including the Board of Trade, and Cotton Exchange, but

³² Goldberg, "The Administration of Herman Myers," 31-32.

³³ Ibid., 127.

the Chamber of Commerce represented unified commercial interests, and as such was well situated to advocate for the city's collective fiscal health. With strong municipal support the Chamber of Commerce worked to get more favorable railroad rates, and to have a sub-treasury in Savannah, though the later was not achieved until after Myers left office. The issue of railroad rates was not just about freight and competing with other commercial ports, but also about offering reduced winter tourist rates like other destinations in Florida and throughout the South. This goal was tied to Myers efforts to get a convention center built in Savannah, which failed several times after disappointing subscription drives. Even without a convention center Savannah remained a popular location for such meetings, earning yet another title as "the Convention City By the Sea."³⁴

One convention in which the city government was directly involved was the 1904 meeting of the Georgia League of Municipalities. The League represented an effort to collect and distribute information on city administration. Delegations from Georgia cities met to present papers and discuss a range of questions related to city governance and pressing social and economic obstacles cities faced. Forty-nine cities and towns participated, constituting a convention of over sixty people, not including Savannah's city council. While the annual meeting highlighted many of Georgia's municipalities, Savannah used the convention as an opportunity to show off its modern assets, and by extension the effectiveness of its city administration. In the meeting Savannah simultaneously presented itself as an authority on conservative fiscal management *and* as a proactive economic force. In his welcome address to League members Myers asserted that the primary goal of the meeting was to:

³⁴ Goldberg, "The Administration of Herman Myers,"; W.G. Cooper, "Georgia's Manufactures," *Harper's Weekly*, October 10, 1903, HarpWeek 2000 edition, 1633-1634.

get the fruits of the experience of each other; here we can learn the lessons of experience without paying the cost that others have paid; here we can reap the consolidated wisdom of years of past effort at a minimum of expense...we can secure the services of men who have thought, and experimented, and succeeded, and by their advice avoid the pitfalls through which they have come to absolute knowledge.³⁵

Myers statement fits squarely within trends in urban governance in this period. The more information they could learn about their cities and others approaches, the more urban officials could perfect municipal administration. Myers fiscal frame of reference is also clear in his language. He framed mistakes in municipal administration in terms of their “cost,” and that by sharing information and learning best practices at “a minimum” of expense, the city leaders would prevent “paying the cost that others have paid.”³⁶

Alderman James Dixon, the only Savannah representative to formally speak besides Myers, worked to reinforce Savannah’s reputation as a master of effective fiscal management. Other speeches at the convention covered the regulation of alcohol, public charities, city courts, and other political or social topics. However, Dixon’s paper was entitled “Expenditures of Municipal Revenues.” In this speech Dixon explained that through research he had calculated how much the city needed to spend on each individual per year – the number he came up with was \$7. Dixon argued that city’s paying more than that needed to review their spending habits.

The councilman reasoned:

Assuming that all expenditures are honestly and economically made, the public funds should be scientifically apportioned so as to serve the dual purposes of... Maintaining the government, that is, providing for the conduct of the regular departments for the protection of health, life, and property... [and] Providing such improvements as will keep

³⁵ “Senator Clay Was Given Ovation by League. First Session of the Municipal League Was Both Interesting and Instructive,” *Savannah Morning News*, August 11, 1904.

³⁶ Ibid.; Eric H Monkkenon, *America Becomes Urban: The Development of U.S. Cities and Towns, 1780-1980* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988); Jon C. Teafor, *The Unheralded Triumph: City Government in America, 1870-1900* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984).

the municipality abreast, or if possible, ahead of others in the march of progress. Including in this category street paving, sewage, parks and squares, and all other adjuncts of civilized urban life that tends to promote comfort, convenience, health and general business interests.³⁷

Dixon therefore argued that municipal funds should be used to maintain departments and their services, but should also be applied to projects that promote future growth and keep the city ahead in the “march of progress.” Savannah government therefore worked to be both fiscally responsible and forward thinking, embracing a proactive approach to municipal administration. Myers and Dixon had grounds for advocating their approach to their colleagues, for Savannah was excelling in commerce and modernization where many other Georgia cities were struggling.

During the League convention, city council produced a publication entitled, *Savannah, A City of Opportunities*. Like the earlier tourist pamphlets it highlighted Savannah’s balance of Old and New, emphasizing its future prospects. The beginning of the pamphlet reads,

Savannah, Georgia is a city to live in for health, for pleasure, or for business purposes. It is the city of opportunities. It has a noble historic past, a past full of romance and sentiment but it does not live in the past.³⁸

The pamphlet worked to present a historic city, a resort city, and a commercial city with unlimited possibilities. The pamphlet went on to explain that the city was precious to “the patriot, the historian” and to those who appreciated “the achievements and lessons of bygone generations.” However, the city also “keeps footstep with the spirit of the age,” and “throbs in unison with the great business heart of the world.”³⁹ Following these grand pronouncements, the publication offered information on “Savannah’s progress in recent years,” including the increase in population, taxable values, manufacturing establishments, extensive electric railway system,

³⁷ “Senator Clay Was Given Ovation by League.”

³⁸ Gamble, *Savannah, A City of Opportunities*, 3.

³⁹ Ibid.

paved roads, and suburban expansion. Savannah therefore was “a city where trade, commerce, manufactures, are charmingly intermingled with the highest culture,” and perfect for any man who wanted to pursue his fortunes while making sure his family has “the advantages of a home in a community where the higher things of life are not neglected.”⁴⁰

The organization and design of the pamphlet brought together strains of earlier promotional literature discussed above. Many sections of the pamphlet, and a handful of charts, are reminiscent of *Savannah, Georgia, Its Advantages, Resources and Business Facilities* from a decade earlier. Yet there were also sixty-three images in the sixty-page pamphlet. These included photos of important buildings, streets and landmarks, views of factories and commercial spaces, people at work and at play, as well as sketches of buildings that were not yet constructed, including City Hall and the new National Bank of Savannah Building (of which Myers was director). Rather than treating tourist or business promotion as discrete tasks, *Savannah, A City of Opportunities* brought them together into one promotional profile. The pamphlet would not only provide the hard facts of interest to any business man, but used images and descriptions of Savannah’s assets to capture the imagination of whomever came across the pamphlet.

Authored and printed under the auspices of Savannah’s city government, it follows that the municipality received a great deal of praise in *Savannah, A City of Opportunities*. The city government was said to be “thoroughly organized...with all the departments pertaining to a modern city well equipped...and maintained at all times in first class condition.” Statistics on these departments were given, as was the pronouncement that one-fourth of city expenditures, besides interest on municipal debt or money for the sinking fund, went to “permanent public

⁴⁰ Ibid.

betterments.”⁴¹ The steady pace of building and improvements were listed as well. Savannah’s city government had come along way, emerging from the political contests of 1890s with a strong and active municipal bureaucracy.

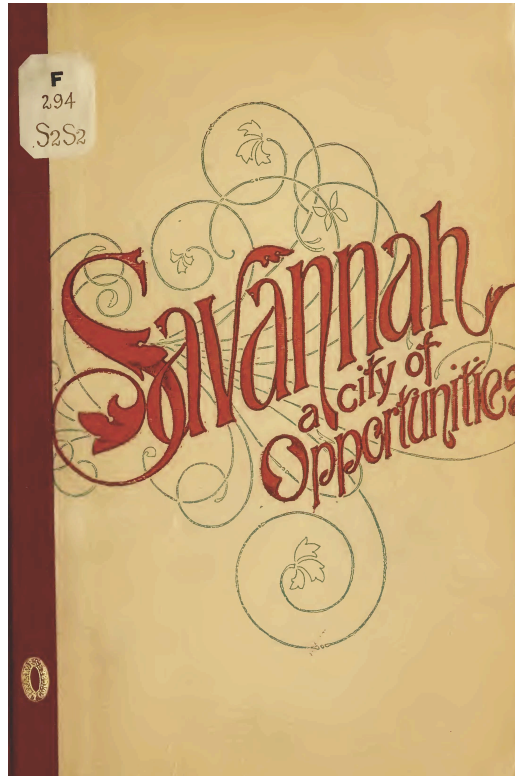
League delegates got to experience the success of Savannah’s forward thinking policies first hand during convention excursions. City council organized an automobile procession with over 100 “machines,” providing a tour of the city and tangible advertisement for the high quality of Savannah’s paved roads. Delegates were also treated to a demonstration of modern engines of the fire department, the envy of many other city governments. A steamboat tour showed off the city’s port and included a tour of its quarantine facilities. The most impressive event, however, was the laying of the corner stone of Savannah’s new, modern, City Hall.⁴²

City Hall was in essence a homage not just to Savannah’s modern self, but to Myers expert monetary administration and booster mentality. The new City Hall was designed by a local architect, and later built by a local company (though later some of Myers’ critics would take issue with these contracts). In addition, Myers was able to pay for the City Hall over the course of three years without raising city taxes. This was achieved through “belt-tightening” and the reduction of department budgets, but Myers did not injure city government or withhold city services.⁴³ In other words, Myers employed Dixon’s recommendation to provide for the present while working towards a grander future. Myers artful financing of City Hall remains a point of pride in Savannah even today.

⁴¹ Ibid., 39.

⁴² “Senator Clay Was Given Ovation by League”; “Half Holiday Proclaimed for Corner Stone Laying. League of Municipalities Will Convene Tomorrow,” *Savannah Morning News*, August 9, 1904; “Automobile Ride Feature of Municipal League Entertainment,” *Savannah Morning News*, August 9, 1904.

⁴³ Goldberg, “The Administration of Herman Myers,” 143.



Cover of "*Savannah, A City of Opportunities*," 1904⁴⁴

Officially produced by the city council, this pamphlet is credited to Thomas Gamble, Myers' Clerk of Council. It instructs readers that if they should have any questions, more information could be solicited from the Mayor, Chamber of Commerce, Board of Trade or Cotton Exchange. This pamphlet was likely distributed to delegates of the League of Georgia Municipalities convention and other visitors in town for the laying of the corner stone for the new City Hall.

⁴⁴ This cover is taken from the version of the pamphlet held by the Library of Congress and digitized on the Internet Archive. However, a copy held by the Georgia Historical Society has stamped on the front, "Compliments of De Soto Hotel, Savannah, Ga." This reinforces my argument that the pamphlet was distributed to League delegates, who were guests at the De Soto during the convention.

In his speech at the corner stone ceremony, Senator Alexander S. Clay, credited Savannah's "growth, progress and high Christian Civilization...to her most patriotic and worthy sons." He continued,

The character of your city government will always be measured by the character of your city officials. Wicked, corrupt and tyrannical rulers oppress the people and retard the growth and progress of cities and states. To be Mayor of a city like Savannah is a great honor. I am sure that your present Mayor has demonstrated by his remarkable record that he is in every way worthy of the honor which you have so often conferred upon him.⁴⁵

Echoing the rhetoric of municipal reform discussed in the previous chapter, Clay rightly praised Myers, the primary architect of Savannah's new, modern epoch – a transformation that would be nearly complete in December of 1905, when Savannah's city government moved into its new quarters. Yet there were many left out of the "city of opportunities" crafted by Myers' administration. Earlier pamphlets had acknowledged the city's ethnic diversity, but the 1904 publication did not. Omitting white ethnics, like the Irish and Germans, was unrepresentative, but scant mention of African Americans, who made up half of the city's population, was indicative of deepening divisions between the black and white communities of Savannah.

**"Not Failure, but low aim, is crime. Aim high"⁴⁶:
Economic Uplift in Black Savannah**

The only mention of African Americans in the 1895 *Advantages* pamphlet was on page twenty-three of the thirty-six-page publication, in a section on labor. The city government explained that "as a result of emancipation, the colored people have gathered around the larger cities, and labor in the vicinity of Savannah, therefore, is plentiful."⁴⁷ In the 1904 *Savannah, A*

⁴⁵ "Eloquent Address Delivered by United States Senator Clay," *Savannah Morning News*, August 12, 1904.

⁴⁶ *Savannah Tribune*, August 4, 1906.

⁴⁷ *The City of Savannah, Georgia, Its Advantages, Resources, and Business Facilities*, 23.

City of Opportunities, African Americans are also discussed in relation to labor, and specifically truck farming, the last section of the publication. Discussing the various crops grown and the number of farmers, the pamphlet asserts: “Negro labor is principally used. It is cheap, plentiful and satisfactory.”⁴⁸ Except for a brief enumeration of the city’s few black educational institutions, this is the only mention of blacks Savannahians in the publication. In discussing the health of the city, only white health statistics are given. Discussion of the public library, which had over 25,000 volumes, noted that it was free to all *white* residents. Placed above the section “Sports and Pleasure Resorts,” is a picture of white men and women, swimming arm and arm. The message was clear – the “City of Opportunities” was imagined exclusively for whites.⁴⁹

This whitewashed representation of Savannah highlights that African Americans were not represented in the city’s government, nor were they permitted to participate in the Chamber of Commerce or other business organizations in the city. Prevented from working with Savannah’s “City Fathers” to promote urban commercial interests, the black community turned inward, creating their own institutions to nurture enterprise and upward mobility. Sol C. Johnson had looked to Myers in his first few terms to enact a business administration that would benefit Savannah’s black community, but he would be disappointed. Myers had many accomplishments, described above, but few directly aided the city’s black population. As a result, black leaders worked from within to ensure that Savannah’s black community was a force in the city’s commercial renaissance.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Gamble, *Savannah, A City of Opportunities*, 57.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 12, 47.

⁵⁰ This inward focus on economic uplift was characteristic of black communities throughout the urban South. John Dittmer, *Black Georgia in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977). For information on the relationship between business aspirations and religious institutions in Savannah, see Adele Olman, *Sacred Mission, Worldly Ambition: Black Christian Nationalism in the Age of Jim Crow* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2008).

In both booster pamphlets described above, Savannah's black community was cast solely as a source of unskilled labor, and in the case of *A City of Opportunities*, specifically farm labor. This was in keeping with perceived labor hierarchies in the South, which often reserved factory work for whites, and farm labor for blacks. The small mentions of black labor also suggest an available, servile, population. There is no mention of labor unrest, violence or tension of any sort. Endeavoring to make Savannah attractive to capital, boosters would not want to highlight aspects that might scare potential investors. These pamphlets depictions, however, obscure the centrality of black labor to the city, and a rising class of black businessmen and professionals.

Black wage-earning labor was central to the Savannah's commercial economy, working to move goods and people to and from the city. The best examples are the longshoremen, which provided the very foundation of labor at the port. In the early twentieth century nearly 95% of unskilled black male laborers in Savannah worked as longshoremen.⁵¹ Thus black workers were ubiquitous along the city's wharves, unloading and loading ships and moving the city's goods along. The next largest employers were the railroad companies that converged in Savannah, and black men worked as brakemen, general laborers, or porters. The exact racial breakdown of factory work in Savannah's manufactures is unclear, but it was likely racially divided, with black workers relegated to the least appealing jobs. There were some skilled blacksmiths and carpenters within the black population, as there had been during slavery, but their numbers diminished as modern technology made their services obsolete.⁵²

Black wage-earning women had fewer occupational options than black men, the vast majority employed in domestic service as cooks, maids, laundresses and child-caretakers.

⁵¹ Dittmer, *Black Georgia in the Progressive Era*, 29.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 23-49.

Domestic work was not only particularly strenuous, but with the exception of laundry workers, black women labored in the homes of white families. Within white households black women were subject to unfair treatment from white women directing their labor, and vulnerable to sexual advances from white male employers. Women working as laundresses could take work into their own homes, or to communal workspaces, and therefore had more control over their working environment. However, overall domestic work was strenuous, poorly paid, and subject to the whims of white employers.⁵³

Although white employers held great power over their employees, black workers found myriad ways to control their labor. In the 1890s black longshoremen went on strike with their fellow white employees, but organized protest was not frequent given the difficulty of forming unions. Rather, black workers engaged in what historian Robin Kelley identifies as the “hidden transcript” of resistance, or “a hidden history of unorganized, every day conflict waged by African American working people.” These types of opposition included “theft, foot-dragging, the destruction of property – or more rarely, in open attacks on individuals, institutions, or symbols of domination.”⁵⁴ Quitting was also a means of protest. For instance, a black cook or maid could send a clear message to her employer by quitting on the eve of a dinner party or social event. However, overzealous vagrancy laws made unemployment dangerous, especially for black men. Through these tactics African Americans protested against poor working conditions, but rarely could black wage-earners accumulate enough savings to escape continued poverty. This was a recurring problem that black leaders in the South worked to address.

⁵³ Ibid. For discussion of black working-class women and domestic labor, see Tera W Hunter, *To “Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women”s Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997); Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1985).

⁵⁴ Robin D.G. Kelley, “‘We Are Not What We Seem’: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” *The Journal of American History* 80, no. 1 (June 1993): 75–112, 77.

By the end of the nineteenth-century black leaders and intellectuals believed that to overcome prevailing ignorance, poverty, and discrimination, black southerners needed to focus on better education and the principles of self-help. Such philosophies of racial “uplift” promoted the idea that through “industry, skill, and enterprise,” African Americans would “gain a place in American society commensurate with their numbers and weight in the economy.”⁵⁵ Intertwined with black middle-class notions of respectability, uplift ideology focused on the moral as well as physical well being of poor blacks. Acquiring wealth, adhering to middle-class norms of behavior, and demonstrating, diligence, restraint and intelligence, would allow African Americans to prove themselves worthy of recognition, and ultimately fair treatment, from middle and upper-class white southerners. Organizations focused on racial uplift proliferated at the turn of the century, particularly among black middle-class women. The black clubwomen’s movement focused on reform and outreach that would provide black men and women with the skills necessary for racial uplift. This sentiment is captured in the motto of the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs, “lifting as we climb.”⁵⁶

Booker T. Washington was an energetic proponent of economic development as principal a means of racial uplift. He believed that economic prosperity would not only improve the daily lives of African Americans, but also help pave the way for acceptance by southern whites. As Washington famously said in his speech at the Atlanta Cotton Exposition in 1895, “No race that

⁵⁵ Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 144.

⁵⁶ Ibid.; For information on uplift and self help, see Kevin K Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny After Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). For specific discussion of black clubwomen and uplift, see Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Joan Marie Johnson, *Southern Ladies, New Women: Race, Region and Clubwomen in South Carolina, 1890-1930* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004).

has anything to contribute to the markets of the world is long in any degree ostracized.”⁵⁷

Washington suggested that blacks place political rights secondary to economic endeavors, so central was his belief that economic progress was the key to black southerners’ overall progress.⁵⁸ While this would later prove to be a controversial stance, Washington believed it to be a pragmatic necessity within the hostile environment of the South. The National Negro Business League, which Washington founded in 1900, embodied this goal of economic development. One of Washington’s biographers explains that the leader “wanted a national black organization that gave priority to an economic approach to uplifting the race,” and “envisioned a group that would provide an institutional framework for black businessmen to share ideas and build morale.” Each year the League would hold a convention, where the primary topic would be “ways for a black person to succeed in a capitalist society.”⁵⁹

One of the strongest chapters of the National Negro Business League was in Savannah, which by the first decade of the twentieth century could boast a growing class of black businessmen and professionals. Physicians and dentists represented the pinnacle of professional achievement, while hackmen and draymen were a common occupation for less educated black men to work as independent businessmen. Black groceries, pharmacies and mortuaries also proliferated, catering to Savannah’s growing urban black population. Savannah had the first black-owned hotel in the state, which was no small matter given the Jim Crow restrictions of

⁵⁷ Booker T. Washington, “Booker T. Washington Delivers the 1895 Atlanta Compromise Speech,” in *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, ed. Louis R. Harlan, vol. 3 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 583–587, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/39/>.

⁵⁸ While Booker T. Washington publicly stated that African Americans should not force political rights or social equality, behind the scenes Washington did work to support legal challenges to segregation and discrimination. For a comprehensive discussion of Washington, his beliefs and activities, see Robert J. Norrell, *Up from History: The Life of Booker T. Washington*, 1st ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 229; Michael Boston, *The Business Strategy of Booker T. Washington : Its Development and Implementation* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2010).

hotel accommodations in the South. Sol C. Johnson was also representative of the entrepreneurial spirit in Savannah, eventually becoming full owner of the *Savannah Tribune* in 1909, and the two-story building in which it resided. After 1900 Johnson not only worked as an editor, but as a notary and printer, and held administrative positions on the boards of the black run Wage Earners' Bank and Guaranty Aid and Relief Insurance Company.⁶⁰

Savannah businesses men found success in banking through the establishment of the Wage Earner's Bank in 1900. A speech given by Booker T. Washington in Savannah supposedly animated the venture, but the bank filled a major need in the black community for businesses capital. White banks did not look favorably on lending money to black entrepreneurs, and if they did give loans, they were saddled with exorbitant interest rates. The Wage Earner's Bank started with only \$102, but by 1920 had 18,000 depositors and at least a million dollars in assets. The bank folded during the Great Depression, but in its heyday, the bank provided much needed funds, and morale, to black businesses. Likewise, insurance companies provided financial safety-nets for black citizens. Black fraternal orders had served as mutual benefit societies since the Civil War, but after 1900 more professional insurance agencies were formed. Founded in January of 1906, the Guaranty Aid and Relief Society offered the "smallest premiums" and "largest sick and death benefits," and solicited agents who could help grow the company. Its board of directors included Sol C. Johnson, Richard R. Wright, John H. Devaux, and other local businessmen and professionals, and ads for the organization were printed each week in the *Tribune*.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Dittmer, *Black Georgia in the Progressive Era*, 39-49. "Sol C. Johnson, Grand Secretary-Georgia," 1923 Williamson Masonic Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, NY.

⁶¹ Ibid.; *Savannah Tribune*, January 27, 1906.

Sol C. Johnson placed great emphasis on black economic independence, a common theme in the editorial comments of the *Tribune*. In the newspaper Johnson used both encouragement and admonition to impress upon his readers the importance of frugality and supporting black business. In the *Tribune* Johnson covered the activities of the National Negro Business League, and included a directory of Savannah's black businesses for his readers. He made a clear connection between black enterprise and uplift. Yet the *Tribune* was also filled with complaints about people not saving their money, or patronizing white owned groceries rather than those owned by blacks. Johnson often attributed the small number of black businesses to laziness and not difficult circumstances, commenting: "The inactivity of our people in this city is becoming alarming. Enterprise is lacking and unity among some is cast to the winds. Let these be mended and more business enterprises established."⁶² On one hand this attitude is evidence of Johnson's class bias, and a level of disconnect with obstacles facing working-class black men and women. However, his exhortations also show the degree to which he felt black businesses were crucial to advancement overall, and that it was the community's responsibility to help such business succeed.

While financial issues were important, Johnson also constantly emphasized education as a necessary corollary to black progress. Savannah was woefully deficient in providing adequate public schools for black children. Johnson constantly agitated for new school facilities, pointing out in the fall of 1894 that the city administration's response "to the crying needs of our people" for schools was "slow, and there is no movement in sight that looks to rectifying the great evil that Savannah is perpetrating on itself and the children of the people who comprise its largest and

⁶² *Savannah Tribune*, December 22, 1894

most reliable element of labor.”⁶³ Over a decade later in 1906, Johnson was still calling attention to the 5,000 black children who could not find a place in a public school.⁶⁴ Yet Savannah did acquire one institution of higher learning, the Georgia State Industrial College for Colored Youth. The school offered a normal (teacher training) and classical education curriculum, as well as agricultural and industrial vocational training. Opened in 1891, GSIC was the product of an 1890 amendment to the Morrill Land-Grant Act, which necessitated that states looking for federal land-grant money must establish an educational institution for African Americans. The Georgia Assembly quickly created a new school under the University of Georgia system, but the legislation did not mandate a location. Black communities throughout Georgia lobbied to host the institution and Savannah’s black leaders argued their case effectively, winning the college for their city. GSIC became a point of pride for the city’s black inhabitants, and the graduation of each year’s class was a community celebration. Further discussion of GSIC’s leadership and educational philosophy demonstrates how principles of social and economic uplift were translated into action, while also highlighting divisions with Savannah’s black leadership class.⁶⁵

Land was secured for GSIC four and a half miles from Savannah, bounded to the north by the white suburban community of Thunderbolt, and to the east by marshland on the Wilmington River. In total the school owned 86 acres, 35 of which were set aside for the campus. The center of the school was a former plantation mansion converted for use as classrooms and a residence for teachers. The tuition for Georgia students was free, but board and

⁶³ *Savannah Tribune*, October 13, 1894.

⁶⁴ *Savannah Tribune*, February 3, 1906.

⁶⁵ Clyde Hall, *One Hundred Years of Educating at Savannah State College, 1890-1990* (Peoria, Illinois: Versa Press, Inc, 1991), 3-22; Richard Robert Wright, *A Brief Historical Sketch of Negro Education in Georgia* (Savannah, Ga: Robinson Printing House, 1894), De Renne Library, Hargrett Rare book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Ga, 38.

lodging cost \$6.25 a month. Those who could not afford the living costs worked on the school's farm, helped clear land on the campus and eventually built a carpentry shop and other necessary structures. Richard R. Wright, Sr., became the first president of the institution. The college started with forty-two students, including Wright's son, Richard R. Wright, Jr. Women were admitted to the institution for the 1898-1899 school year, though they were not allowed to board on the premises.⁶⁶

Richard Wright Sr. was a qualified candidate for the head position at GSIC. Wright was among the first six students to receive a baccalaureate degree from Atlanta University in 1876. Wright then went on to be the principal of two black high schools in Georgia, including Asa Ware High School in Augusta, which he founded. In addition to his duties as principal, Wright edited the *Augusta Sentinel*, and dabbled in Republican politics as a delegate to the National Republican convention in 1878. Wright was a man of many interests, but education was his main passion. At thirty-eight years old he was appointed president of GSIC, among the first African Americans to serve as president of a black institution of higher learning. GSIC's classroom professors were also Atlanta University graduates or highly educated.⁶⁷ These men became a vital leadership component within Savannah's black population, and would play a complex role in efforts to protest discrimination, described in the next chapter.

Wright was a strong leader, and he worked to shape GSIC into an institution that would serve a range of students, and by extension the black community of Georgia. At GSIC students could learn various trades, including "agriculture, wheelwrighting and mechanical drawing,

⁶⁶ Ibid.; Richard R. Wright Jr., *87 Years Behind the Black Curtain: An Autobiography* (Philadelphia: Rare Book Company, 1965); Hall, *One Hundred Years of Educating at Savannah State College*, 3-22.

⁶⁷ Ibid.; Charles Elmore, *Richard R. Wright, Sr. at GSIC, 1891-1921: A Protean Force for the Social Uplift and Higher Education of Black Americans* (Savannah: Atlantic Printing Company, 1996), 21-22.

blacksmithing, carpentry, shoemaking, bricklaying, and painting.”⁶⁸ The normal department also attracted many students, and Wright took seriously the responsibility of producing able teachers. Those in the higher learning track also continued with a trade, and were involved in the school’s farm or construction efforts. In addition, GSIC hosted annual conferences for farmers. Following in the mold of the Tuskegee Institute, Wright saw these meetings as a way to help provide rural farmers with information that would improve their quality of life both in the field and at home. The farmers’ conferences eventually lead to the organization of the Colored State Fair in Macon in 1906. It was not formally sponsored by GSIC, but Wright helped organize the event and the white commissioners of the college supported his efforts.⁶⁹

At times the white commissioners of GSIC obstructed Wright’s goal to maintain a school that was a blend of industrial and classical educational philosophies. Wright accepted the merits of industrial and agricultural education, but also believed that black southerners needed educated leaders, so the school should address both sides of the coin. However, the commissioners did not necessarily agree that higher learning was necessary for African Americans. The chair of the commission was Peter Meldrim, who as previously stated did not believe in giving blacks a “white man’s education,” preferring black southerners pursue occupations specifically suited to their proper “place” in society. Thus the board of commissioners needed to be convinced that courses such as Latin, Greek or higher math, were not a needless waste of money. Meldrim

⁶⁸ Wright Jr., *87 Years Behind the Black Curtain*, 33-34.

⁶⁹ Ibid. For information on the Tuskegee model of industrial education and farmer’s conferences see Norrell, *Up from History*.

eventually came to support Wright's educational agenda, but only after significant effort, and Wright never had unfettered control of GSIC's curriculum.⁷⁰

Wright also contended with uncooperative members of his staff, and clashed with other black leaders in Savannah. Wright Jr. noted that it took a few years for his father to assert himself and establish a solid curriculum and clear mission for the school. Even then Wright had his critics, which came to include Sol C. Johnson. The relationship between the two began to deteriorate in 1896, the result of a factional conflict within the Georgia Republican Party. Johnson, Wright and other prominent black men in Savannah continued to participate in GOP conventions, hoping to sway the Party in ways that would aid African Americans, and keep federal avenues of patronage open. In 1896 Wright defeated Louis M. Pleasant, one of the original founders of the *Tribune* and an ally of Johnson, for a spot at the convention. Johnson responded with a stinging editorial in the *Tribune*, which suggested Wright focus on his work at GSIC rather than Republican politics. From there the relationship between the two men continued to devolve. Wright brought two suits against Johnson for slander over editorial comments made in the *Tribune* in 1908 and 1909. Wright lost both suits, to which Johnson responded in the *Tribune*: "Now will the professor be good."⁷¹

While Republican politics might have started the feud between the men, there were likely other factors. Johnson was a self-made man with little formal education, while Wright was well educated, and likely garnered much respect for that academic training, and his role at GSIC. Much like Herman Myers and Peter Meldrim, it seems Wright and Johnson shared many of the same goals, but had difficulty cooperating to achieve those goals. While the feud between the

⁷⁰ Elmore, *Richard R. Wright, Sr. at GSIC*; Hall, *One Hundred Years of Educating at Savannah State College*, 3-22.

⁷¹ Elmore, *Richard R. Wright, Sr. at GSIC*, 45-46. *Wright v. Johnson, et al.*, #1703, Court of Appeals, Georgia, 1909.

two leaders was indicative of divisions among Savannah's black elite, Johnson and the black community remained supportive of GSIC, and the promising black men and women it educated.

Johnson and Wright's visions of economic progress were framed in the language of racial uplift, but their efforts should be seen in dialogue with the New South booster spirit promoted in Savannah by Herman Myers and his faction. In 1894 Johnson based his support for Myers' candidacy for mayor on the argument that:

The colored man needs a business mayor just as much as his white brethren, because with a business man at the head of city affairs things will be prosperous in every branch of trade; and when things are prosperous the colored man will be able to secure work at living wages so as to clothe, feed and educate his family in a respectable manner.⁷²

Johnson saw Myers' business-minded approach to government, and his efforts to promote greater economic prosperity, as beneficial for black economic uplift. Along the same lines, in 1899 Sol Johnson reminded his readers on the eve of the city election, "we are interested in the continuous growth of the city in all of its departments." Thus Johnson did not see the growing "City of Opportunities" as the province only of white residents. Rather Johnson's calls for economic development point to his aspirations for the black community to join in Savannah's boom time, and stake a claim to the city's future.

Herman Myers did not actively aid the black community in their uplift efforts, but he also did not pursue restrictive legislation. Myers was focused on urban economic development, which had the potential to benefit all citizens. Evidence also suggests he sought to ensure that city government would respect blacks' basic rights. For instance, he admonished the president of the Georgia State Infirmary, the city's black hospital, over the fate of a black patient named Augustus Sheppard. Mr. Sheppard died after being hit over the head with a bottle, and the hospital staff buried him without investigating the incident. Myers informed the Infirmary

⁷² *Savannah Tribune*, January 19, 1894.

president that all “suspicious” cases must be investigated, regardless of the race of the victim. Given the context of prevalent violence against black men and women throughout the South, Myers’ letter demonstrated a respect for black welfare and protection that was rare among his contemporaries. Thus despite increasing inequality, Myers did endeavor to create a space where both blacks and whites felt they could pursue prosperity.⁷³

By the time Myers was reelected for his fifth term as mayor in 1905, Savannah was the “most important city in the South Atlantic.”⁷⁴ The city’s white boosters were courting tourists and investment, and building monuments to the city’s financial success, but they were also crafting an image of Savannah that was for whites only. Separately, leaders within the city’s black population worked to build institutions that fostered internal economic development, and educated men and women who would prove worthy of full inclusion in southern society. However, these parallel tracks were bound for collision as social tension in the city and the region reached a breaking point. Soon Johnson and Myers would see a Savannah emerge that was far more exclusive than either had imagined.

⁷³ Mr. Herman Myers to Mr. C.M. Gilbert, October 25, 1903, Mayor’s Office, Letter Books, 5600MY-010, Savannah Municipal Archives, Savannah, Georgia.

⁷⁴ W.G. Cooper, “Georgia’s Manufactures,” *Harper’s Weekly*, October 10, 1903, HarpWeek 2000 edition, 1633-1634.

CHAPTER 5:

“AGITATE IN A DIGNIFIED WAY FOR YOUR RIGHTS”¹: RACE, RELIGION AND PROGRESSIVE POLITICS

In September of 1906, Sol C. Johnson implored the readers of the *Savannah Tribune* to stay off the city’s streetcars. “Do not trample on your pride by being ‘jim crowed.’ Walk!” Johnson demanded.² Savannah’s city council was now enforcing segregation on all local conveyances. When a new segregation ordinance was first suggested, Savannah’s black residents called a mass meeting, and chose a delegation to take their grievances against the measure to city council. Johnson was a member of this delegation, which argued that the city’s previous progressive approach to the issue of racial separation had produced the “peace and harmony existing now between the races.” Enforcing segregation would only create strife and conflict, contrary to “the interest of the onward progress of the city.” The resolution reminded city officials that the fates of Savannah’s black and white citizens were intertwined, and so prejudiced legislation would negatively affect the city as a whole.³ City council paid no heed to these arguments, and in response black residents waged an eighteen-month boycott against the newly segregated streetcars.

White residents and politicians, however, saw the issue differently. While Johnson viewed integrated streetcars as a symbol of Savannah’s progressive spirit, white leaders saw fluid racial interaction as a thing of the past. An editorial in the *Savannah Morning News* asserted, “Savannah has been more conservative in this matter than any other Southern city.” Unlike other

¹ *Savannah Tribune*, January 6, 1906.

² *Savannah Tribune*, September 15, 1906.

³ *Savannah Tribune*, September 22, 1906.

urban centers in the region, Savannah had not mandated segregation in public transportation, allowing black and white passengers to sit where they pleased on local electric streetcars. However, by the fall of 1906, those “in favor of separating the races in the street cars” became so adamant “that the City Council feels it to be its duty to legislate in accordance with it.”⁴ Viewed as a modern solution to the South’s “race problem,” segregation was meant to reduce friction and bring order to southern society once and for all. Segregation may have been cast as a progressive measure by many white southerners, but the reasons Savannah’s city council passed the new ordinance was more complex than acquiescing to reform impulses.

At the time of Savannah’s conflict over streetcar segregation, politics in the city were in the midst of a realignment, in which the Citizens’ Club would lose control of local affairs. Statewide campaigns for Progressive Era reforms were changing the tenor of political debate in Georgia and the South, making race and religion increasingly contentious political issues. Savannah was not immune to this shift, which would spell disaster for the political community Herman Myers and the Citizens’ Club had built, as well as Sol C. Johnson and the black community’s desire to stave off Jim Crow segregation.

In order to establish the context of these major shifts in Savannah politics, this chapter begins with two sections exploring major political and social trends throughout Georgia and the South in the early twentieth century. The first covers particularly divisive Progressive campaigns for prohibition and constitutional disenfranchisement, and the second explores the development of segregation, both in the region and in Savannah. These shifts frame analysis of the Citizens’ Club’s political demise, and what motivated the city’s decision to segregate local streetcars. Concluding is discussion of the city’s streetcar boycott, and the end of Myers’ political career.

⁴ “Separating The Races In the Street Cars,” *Savannah Morning News*, August 31, 1906.

The Politics of Religion and Race and Progressive Reform

“Hoke Smith’s antics in Georgia in his hungry thirst for office is a disgrace...All through mid summer heat and dog-days he has been perspiring and sputtering against the Negro of the south as his only hope to succeed in getting office. God help the civilization and future of the Democratic white man if Hoke Smith represents their ideas.” -Savannah Tribune⁵

Hoke Smith’s first term as governor marked a high point for Progressive reform in Georgia, but his campaign to win the office marked one of the worst periods of racist rhetoric and violence in the state’s history. Smith’s first career was as a lawyer, but he gained prominence as the owner and publisher of the *Atlanta Journal*. Smith entered political office as the U.S. Secretary of the Interior for Grover Cleveland’s second administration, and then became active in state politics, eventually winning Georgia’s 1907 gubernatorial race.⁶ Smith’s campaign for governor galvanized reform movements then gaining traction in the state, rallying around the issues of business regulation (particularly of railroads), statewide prohibition of alcohol, and a disenfranchisement amendment meant to “purify” state politics by eliminating black voters from the electorate. Debates about these last two “reforms” were couched in the language of white supremacy. The political roiling caused by Smith’s campaign had consequences throughout the state, raising tensions and precipitating conflict and violence. In Atlanta a race riot sent shockwaves throughout the country, signaling what would later be referred to as the nadir of race relations in the South. In Savannah there were no riots, but excited political discourse swirling throughout the state permeated local political culture, and exacerbated racial tensions.

⁵ *Savannah Tribune*, August 26, 1905.

⁶ Dewey W Grantham, *Hoke Smith and the Politics of the New South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1958); Michael Perman, *Struggle for Mastery: Disfranchisement in the South, 1888-1908* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 283, 286-287; Duncan Maysilles, “Hoke Smith (1855-1931),” *New Georgia Encyclopedia* (Georgia Humanities Council and the University of Georgia Press, August 19, 2009), <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-2121&hl=y>.

What historians refer to as the Progressive Movement was not a singular political campaign, but a convergence of various reform movements targeting specific social and political issues of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As a result Progressive political coalitions were somewhat fluid, but all were largely motivated by middle-class reformers. Jane Addams, Carrie Nation and Theodore Roosevelt were among the leading lights of this political upheaval, typically associated with northern cities and national campaigns for reform. Progressives in the South shared many of the concerns of their northern peers, and yet the southern part of the movement had particular aspects. Like their counterparts in the North, southern reformers were concerned with the seeming chaos of industrial society, and believed it was government's role to ensure the physical and moral well being of its citizens. Through changing the physical environment Progressives expected to uplift society, an end achieved through movements for political reform, women's suffrage, business regulation, public health, and child labor and prison reform. However, in the South this desire to legislate behavior existed in tension with a general suspicion of government and heavy emphasis on "home rule." This fraught relationship between progressive goals and limited government at times hampered change, particular in the areas of child labor and prison reform. Even so, movements for "good government" reform in the late nineteenth century, described in previous chapters, flowered along with other Progressive causes in the twentieth.⁷

⁷ For works on Southern Progressivism, see Dewey W Grantham, *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983); William A Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Jack Temple Kirby, *Darkness at the Dawning: Race and Reform in the Progressive South* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1972); Ann-Marie Szymanski, "Beyond Parochialism: Southern Progressivism, Prohibition, and State-Building," *The Journal of Southern History* 69, no. 1 (February 2003): 107–136. Szymanski argues that Link, Grantham and other scholars have not given enough credit to the South for its own home-grown reform efforts, countering the common assumption that the South's Progressive Movement was merely an offshoot or emaciated version of Northern Progressive movements. For specific discussion of the Progressive movement for women's suffrage in Georgia and the South, see Elizabeth Taylor, "The Origin of the Woman Suffrage Movement in Georgia," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (June 1944): 63–79. Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, *New Women of the New South: The Leaders of*

Prohibition was the “most dynamic and passionately supported ‘reform’ in the South.”⁸ Stemming from anxiety about the corrupting influences of modern cities, and the gambling, prostitution and violence that persisted in urban vice districts, reformers sought to ban the consumption of alcohol, which they believed to be the root of various social ills. The Temperance Movement then became a primary issue among women reformers entering the public sphere, attracted to the cause by the plight of wives and children who suffered when men drank. Reformers argued that men who drank then gambled and caroused, squandering his family’s resources, keeping them in a cycle of poverty. The Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) became the foremost advocate of the prohibition of alcohol, and a Georgia chapter was established in 1883.⁹

The Georgia WCTU worked with Protestant churches and organizations, and later with the Anti-Saloon League, to make prohibition a centerpiece of Progressive reform in their state. The movement to prohibit alcohol began in earnest in the 1880s when the WCTU and its coalition, after repeated failed attempts, helped pass a local option bill in the state legislature in 1885. This allowed for individual counties, districts or municipalities, to vote on whether or not they would ban the sale of alcohol. By 1900, 100 of 137 counties in the state voted to become “dry” and ban liquor. Fulton County, encompassing Atlanta, voted for prohibition shortly after the local option bill was passed, but the same ban was later repealed in 1887. Fulton County then

the Woman Suffrage Movement in the Southern States (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African American Women in the Struggle for the Vote, 1850-1920*, (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1998). For discussion of the Progressive Movement nationally, see Michael E McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003). For discussion of the Progressive Era in a transnational perspective, see Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998).

⁸ Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 160.

⁹ Ibid., 160-177; J.J. Ansley, *History of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union: From Its Organization 1883 to 1907*, (Columbus, Ga.: Gilbert Printing Co., 1914).

reverted to join Chatham County as one of the few remaining “wet” counties after 1900. Pressure for a full state ban only increased after the turn of the century, and Hoke Smith made prohibition a cornerstone of his gubernatorial campaign. Once elected, Smith signed prohibition into law in August of 1907. Georgia was among the first states to approve a statewide ban on alcohol, and a wave of such laws then swept the South.¹⁰

Arguments in favor of prohibition, and vice campaigns generally, were deeply rooted in Christian ethics and supported by a Protestant religious “core” of organizations. Jews, however, were largely opposed to prohibition for both religious and economic reasons. Wine was integral to Jewish religious observance, and thus prohibition would constitute a violation of religious freedom. One Jewish newspaper warned that with prohibition “responsible and law-abiding” Jewish citizens would have to perform traditional Sabbath prayers “on the sly,” never safely and publically practicing their faith.¹¹ However, many Jews were also involved in the production and trade of liquor, and so their arguments against prohibition derived from their personal financial interests. While Jews made up only a fraction of those who opposed prohibition, they were often visible leaders in “wet” movements. As prohibition became an increasingly contentious issue after 1900, Jewish involvement in the liquor trade, and opposition to prohibition, evoked increasing anti-Semitism throughout the South.¹²

Many of the Jewish immigrants that came to the United States in the middle of the nineteenth century became storeowners or wholesale merchants, and alcohol was among the

¹⁰ Szymanski, “Beyond Parochialism”; Ansley, *History of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union*, 46-86; Marni Davis, ““On the Side of Liquor”: American Jews and the Politics of Alcohol, 1870-1936” (Dissertation, Emory University, 2006), 140-190.

¹¹ *Jewish Messenger* (New York), December 11, 1885, quoted in Steven Hertzberg, *Strangers Within the Gate City: The Jews of Atlanta, 1845-1915* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1978), 160-161.

¹² *Ibid.* For brief discussion of Jews and anti-vice campaigns, see Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism*, 121-122.

goods they provided for customers. Some Jewish businessmen then went on to manufacture spirits, using networks of coreligionists to distribute their goods. As a result of these deep connections to the liquor trade, Jewish businessmen typically opposed any regulation on the sale of alcohol, including high licenses for saloons or other city or state impediments. Publically, Jewish businessmen cited economic reasons not to restrict the sale of liquor, arguing that licenses and taxes generated from the trade were beneficial to municipalities. Emphasizing prohibition's negative effect on the fiscal health of cities, Jewish politicians framed the issue as one of economic and not moral policy.¹³

Herman Myers took this very stance, and throughout his political career consistently fought attempts to restrict the sale of alcohol in Savannah. While Myers support of liquor license fees as a means of municipal revenue was consistent with his business-oriented approach to government, it cannot be ignored that Myers had deep connections to the liquor trade. Not only did he own a wholesale outfit, the Savannah Grocery Company, which would have sold spirits, but he also served as president of the Liquor Dealer's Association. In addition, his brother and business partner in numerous ventures, Sigo Myers, was president of the Big Springs Distilling Company. Myers had deep connections to the liquor industry, and thus like many Jews, had great reason to oppose prohibition.¹⁴

Prohibitionists portrayed Jews as a powerful ethnocultural group standing in the way of a crucial moral reform. This was not only because of businessmen and politicians like Herman

¹³ For general information on Jews and the liquor trade, see Davis, "'On the Side of Liquor'."

¹⁴ Myers role as president of the Liquor Dealer's Association is mentioned in: "The Candidates. Mr. Myers and Dr. Duncan Compared," *Savannah Press*, January 11, 1895. Sigo Myers was listed as the president of the Big Springs Distilling Company in Savannah's city directory from 1904 to 1907. He also served in positions in the Savannah Grocery Company and National Bank of Savannah, his brothers' main business ventures in the city. City Directories of the United States, *Savannah, Georgia*, Bull Street Library, Savannah, Ga. For an example of Myers' stance against liquor regulation while an alderman, see *Savannah Morning News*, November 9-13, 1893.

Myers, who were involved in the manufacture and distribution of liquor, but also because Eastern European Jewish immigrants carved out a niche in the southern urban economy as saloon proprietors. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Eastern European Jews were part of a large wave of “new immigrants” who came to the United States from Southern and Eastern Europe. Compared with the North, the South received few of these new arrivals, but they still presented a threat to the region’s racial order.¹⁵ Concerned more with supporting their families than with white southerners’ obsession with racial hierarchy, many Jewish immigrant storeowners and saloon owners did not hesitate to serve, and even cater to, black clientele. This was seen as particularly dangerous in the context of the urban barroom. According to white racist logic, black men were unable to control their base urges when they were intoxicated, and would commit crimes, including the rape of white women. Since rape then led to lynching and racial violence, prohibition was not just a moral choice, but a paternalistic measure which would save black men from themselves, and then from white men seeking to punish them. Reformers argued that since black men drinking in barrooms “develop into criminals,” and are prone to raping white women, “white foreigners” who owned these saloons contributed to black criminality. White men selling liquor to black men were enabling dangerous behavior, and specifically putting white women at risk.¹⁶ One Atlanta minister cursed the “flat headed, flat

¹⁵ Chatham County had 66 Russian born immigrants counted in the census in 1890, but in 1900 there were 294, and in 1910, 664, which does not include American-born children of Russian immigrants. Atlanta had higher numbers, for in 1896 there were 487 immigrant Russians and their American-born children, in 1900 there were 900, and by 1910 there were 2,300. Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, “Historical Census Browser,” *University of Virginia*, 2004, <http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/collections/>; Hertzberg, *Strangers Within the Gate City*, 77.

¹⁶ Davis, ““On the Side of Liquor,”” 140-190. For information on the presumed connection between alcohol and black criminality in the eyes of white reformers, see Charles Crowe, “Racial Violence and Social Reform: Origins of the Atlanta Riot of 1906,” *The Journal of Negro History* 53, no. 3 (1968): 234–256. Crystal N Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009).

nosed, course [sic] haired, cross eyed slew footed Russian Jew whisky vendors,” who degraded themselves and southern society by serving alcohol to black men.¹⁷

As the above statement would suggest, Eastern European Jews were associated with negative stereotypes, based on their appearance as well as their perceived transgressions of proper social behavior. Fueling such grotesque characterizations was national rhetoric about the dangers of “new immigrants,” and accompanying “scientific” theories explaining racial difference not only between African Americans and whites, but also between groups previously perceived to be white. Throughout the late nineteenth century Jews had often been regarded as a distinct race, but one that was under the umbrella of white races. Jews themselves used racial language to express their cultural and religious difference from other whites, but in ways that reinforced Jews’ positive attributes and contributions to American society. Anti-Semitism was certainly present, but so was praise for the Jewish “race,” and admiration at the financial success many Jews had found in the United States. Jews were members of organizations with white Christians, including athletic clubs, masonic lodges, and commercial associations. Religious prejudice rarely served as a barrier to social or political participation. However, amidst “massive social transformations related to industrialization, urbanization, and immigration” at the turn of the century, Jews became a scapegoat for white anxieties, “and speculation grew about their place in the American racial order.”¹⁸

¹⁷ As quoted in Hertzberg, *Strangers Within the Gate City*, 162.

¹⁸ Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 11-19, 30-31. For information on nativist sentiment towards Jews in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, see John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 60-61, 92-94, 160-162. For more discussion of immigration and conceptions of race, see Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

In the South, increasing Jim Crow segregation served to intensify white unease about Jews' racial status. As scientific racists began "proving" the perceived racial inferiority of African Americans, some argued that Jews were closer to blacks than whites on the spectrum of racial theory. Jews had always exhibited cultural characteristics that set them apart from Christians, both white and black. However, Eastern European Jews, many of whom were Yiddish-speaking and Orthodox, seemed even more different. These Jews' "swarthy" complexion and physical characteristics, combined with longstanding stereotypes of Jews as usurious and clannish, started to set Jews "beyond the pale of whiteness."¹⁹ Indeed, Jews' upward mobility contributed to growing prejudice. Many Americans saw Jewish economic success as evidence of playing the capitalist system, and blamed them for the growing inequalities of modern industrial society. Just as Jewish businessmen fought prohibition, many also opposed the coinage of silver, which did not endear Jews as a group to rural white southerners. While some well-known figures, including Theodore Roosevelt and Thomas Dixon, maintained that Jews were descended from preferable Anglo-Saxons types, and had the potential to be useful citizens, anti-Semitism was growing. Jews were increasingly excluded from prestigious clubs and organizations, and unable to win votes to serve in political office as they had before. Jews found uneven acceptance at the turn of the century, and their claims to whiteness were increasingly tenuous.²⁰

Prohibition was an issue that highlighted Jewish difference in a time of escalating prejudice, but Progressive reform movements took the greatest toll on black southerners. Racist

¹⁹ Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, 31.

²⁰ Ibid.; Leonard Rogoff, "Is the Jew White?: The Racial Place of the Southern Jew," in *Dixie Diaspora: An Anthology of Southern Jewish History*, ed. Mark K Bauman (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 390–426.

arguments in favor of prohibition were linked not only to rhetoric about black criminality, but to campaigns for constitutional disenfranchisement. As discussed in previous chapters, white reformers blamed black voters in the South for political corruption, believing their votes easily bought with liquor and money. The lore continued that black voters were a primary impediment to passing temperance legislation, and only after removing the black electorate and “purifying” politics could reformers pass prohibition and necessary reforms. This was an erroneous claim on numerous levels. Not only was there no evidence to suggest that black voters were categorically against prohibition, but African Americans reformers had participated in temperance campaigns, sharing their white counterparts’ moral and religious beliefs about intoxicating beverages. Unfortunately the myth of black opposition to prohibition was a powerful one, and the argument persisted that only by removing the black vote could white progressives do what was “best” for the black population.²¹

Georgia was the first state in the former Confederacy to pass legislation to restrict their electorate, but was the last to ratify a comprehensive disenfranchisement amendment.²² Georgia Republicans engineered the first poll tax during their short-lived rule during Reconstruction, but they suspended it soon after realizing the diminishing effect the tax had on their electoral base. After Redemption Democrats then reinstituted the law, placing a \$1 poll tax on voting in 1871, and then six years later made the tax cumulative. As intended, this end-run around the Fifteenth

²¹ Crowe, “Racial Violence and Social Reform: Origins of the Atlanta Riot of 1906”; Edward L. Ayers, *Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 180-181.

²² Historian Michael Perman chronicles each of the former Confederate state’s journey to constitutional disenfranchisement, identifying similarities and differences between state campaigns. He found that after Reconstruction white Democrats secured electoral majorities through violence and fraud, and with the help of some restrictive state laws that allowed for the legal disqualification of voters. This phase of “voter manipulation” lasted roughly from the mid-1870s to the mid-1890s, and was followed by a culminating phase of “voter elimination,” which spanned from the 1890s into the first decade of the twentieth century. Michael Perman, *Struggle for Mastery: Disfranchisement in the South, 1888-1908* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

Amendment prevented many poor voters, particularly African Americans, from exercising the franchise. If a voter could not afford to pay the tax one year, the chances he would be able to pay the sum the following year, or several years after that, was very slim.²³

Poll taxes, while effective, were only one means of political trickery used by white Democrats to restrict the vote. Another was the institution of a whites-only primary. Eliminating black voters from Democratic primaries not only guaranteed that there would be no black candidates on the party ballot, but also that black voters had no say in the candidates that would be put up for election. As a rule black voters in the South avoided supporting Democrats, but in the absence of viable Republican candidates or fusion tickets, black voters would often choose to endorse a Democratic politician, particularly during factional splits like those described in Savannah. By maintaining a “lily white” primary, Democrats kept African Americans out of the political process, contributing to frustration and apathy among voters. The negative results of disenfranchising measures and frustration with one-party dominance are seen in the gradual drop in the state’s black voter turnout. In 1880 approximately 39% (already low compared with other states) of black men voted in the presidential election, and by 1888 only 19%.²⁴

Intimidation, fraud, and violence also played a major role in reducing the black electorate. Examples abound throughout Georgia and the South of Democrats stuffing ballot boxes, turning away legitimate black voters at registration and at the polls, and using violence to keep blacks from participating in politics. From 1882 to 1930, Georgia had the second highest

²³ Ibid., 281-298.

²⁴ Voter turnout numbers from J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880-1910* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 68; Perman, *Struggle for Mastery*. While the turnout rates were habitually low, Ali notes that “it has been estimated that more African Americans went to the polls in Georgia in the early 1890s than at any time since Reconstruction,” spurred to action by the People’s Party’s challenge to Democratic control of the state. Omar H Ali, *In the Lion’s Mouth: Black Populism in the New South, 1886-1900*, (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2010), 130. Ayers, *Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction*.

number of lynchings next to Mississippi, and significantly more lynchings than the third highest state, Louisiana.²⁵ Georgians committed some of the most brutal examples of lynching violence, including the infamous lynching of Sam Hose in 1899. Hose killed his white employer in self-defense, but then reports circulated that he not only murdered his boss in cold blood, but raped his victim's wife. Approximately 2,000 men and women converged on Newman, Georgia, in order to watch Hose's lynching, some arriving by way of excursion trains. After taking away Hose's clothes, numerous people stabled at his body while others cut off "his ears, fingers and genitals, and skinned his face."²⁶ Only then was he doused in kerosene and burned alive. Hose's lynching became a cause célèbre for anti-lynching activists, but the incident was also symbolic of the purpose of lynchings throughout the South. The goal of lynching and mob violence was to instill fear and force submission from African Americans, in the realm of politics and beyond.²⁷

According to Progressive politicians, disenfranchisement would help reduce such violence. Rebecca Felton, a prominent white reformer who supported progressive issues such as prohibition and women's suffrage, made a strong connection between political corruption, violence, and continued black voting. In 1897 Felton addressed the Agricultural Society's annual meeting on Tybee Island (just a short ways away from Savannah), about the need to protect poor white women on farms in the rural South. Her speech was based on the oft repeated rape myth,

²⁵ Perman, *Struggle for Mastery*, 37. From 1882 to 1930 white mobs in Mississippi lynched 462 African Americans, in Georgia 423, Louisiana 283. Stewart Emory Tolnay and E. M Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 37.

²⁶ Leon F Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 80-81.

²⁷ Tolnay and Beck, *A Festival of Violence*. Tolnay and Beck try to use statistical analysis to isolate specific causes of lynching, but their work does not suggest one clear cause. They do show that there was no discernable drop in violence after disenfranchisement, suggesting that black voting did not specifically cause violence, nor did its elimination relieve violence. For an account of Sam Hose's Lynching, see Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, 80-81. For more information on spectacle lynchings, see Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence on America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

that black men, released from the bonds of slavery could not control their lustful urges for white women, requiring lynching as a punishment and a deterrent. Addressing the white men present, Felton admonished,

“when you take the negro into your embrace on election day to control his vote and use liquor to befuddle his understanding ... when you honey snuggle him at the polls and make him familiar with dirty tricks in politics, so long will lynching’s prevail, because the cause will grow and increase with every election.”²⁸

Felton drew a direct link not only between liquor and corrupt politics, an argument marshaled in favor of prohibition, but also between corrupt politics and lynching violence. If white men could not reform their politics the violence would continue, and men would need to “Lynch, a thousand times a week if necessary” in order to protect their women. The southern press picked up on this last statement, in which Felton seemed to be defending lynching, and largely missed what one historian labels as “the wholesale indictment of Democratic politics and white men’s failures.”²⁹ Nonetheless, Felton’s speech highlights the interconnected nature of prohibition and arguments in favor of political reform through disenfranchisement.

Felton’s speech also served as a reminder that the threat of black electoral power remained as long as there was even a small margin of black voters. Although “negro domination” was a remote possibility in Georgia after Reconstruction, the term was used to ratchet up racial and political tensions, and Democrats’ fears of a third party challenge that harnessed the remaining strength of the black electorate (as the People’s Party worked to do). For this reason there was a wing of the Democratic Party in Georgia that was never content with merely an

²⁸ Felton’s speech quoted from Feimster, *Southern Horrors*, 127-128.

²⁹ Ibid. Felton was a leading advocate of women’s suffrage in Georgia. She was the first woman sworn into the Senate, though she only served for one day. Her appointment was a symbolic gesture supporting women’s suffrage. The then 87-year-old reformer was appointed to fill Tom Watson’s seat when he passed away before his senatorial term ended.

emaciated black electorate, and would only be satisfied with total white control of politics.³⁰ For a time these men represented a small contingent of the Party, as evidenced by the failure of disenfranchisement bills in the state legislature in 1899 and 1901. Yet as the North retreated from the protection of black rights, and other states throughout the South ratified constitutional voter restrictions, the pro-disenfranchisement faction grew stronger. Hoke Smith then used disenfranchisement as a primary wedge issue in his gubernatorial campaign.³¹

Hoke Smith's campaign for governor began in July of 1905, over a year before the Democratic Party primary for the office. He situated himself as the anti-establishment candidate, running against the "machine" choice for the nomination, experienced conservative politician Clark Howell (and editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, the rival of Smith's *Atlanta Journal*). Much of the campaign was waged in speeches and in print media, and the candidates crisscrossed the state giving speeches. As the only viable party running a candidate, the primary was the major political battle for the governor's office. Howell's platform represented the continuance of the status quo, and he maintained disenfranchisement was unnecessary. Smith, on the other hand, argued for change and reform, and earned support from diverse constituencies for his stance on railroad regulation, prohibition and promises to "purify" Georgia politics through black disenfranchisement.³²

³⁰ As other southern states amended their state constitutions with disenfranchisement measures voter turnout rates dropped so significantly across the region that Georgia, which previously had some of the lowest turnout rates, actually had one of the highest black registration rates in 1904. In 1904 28.3% of eligible black registered to vote. Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics*, 61.

³¹ Perman, *Struggle for Mastery, 1888-1908*, 281-298.

³² There are several historical accounts of Hoke Smith's campaign. See Grantham, *Hoke Smith and the Politics of the New South*; Charles Crowe's article, "Racial Violence and Social Reform: Origins of the Atlanta Riot of 1906," focuses specifically on Smith's racist rhetoric and his campaign's connection to the Atlanta Riot. Michael Perman also gives an account of Smith's campaign for the gubernatorial nomination, cited in the previous footnote.

Smith won the Democratic primary handily, but the vitriol he and supporters unleashed in the 1905-1906 campaign created an environment ripe for racial violence. One of the worst race riots in American history erupted in Atlanta just a month after the Democratic primary concluded. For weeks fabricated, sensationalized reports of assaults on white women by black “brutes” ratcheted up fear and animosity between blacks and whites in the Gate City. On Saturday, September 22, white mobs gathered in Atlanta’s Five Points district looking for conflict. By the time night fell, white mobs were destroying black businesses, attacking black passengers on city streetcars, and assaulting black men and women on the streets. Several bodies of black victims were piled at the foot of a statue of Henry Grady, a sad commentary on the shortcomings of the New South’s optimistic vision for southern progress. Police were called to put down the riot, but they either did little, or joined in the violence. On Sunday the state militia was called in and police patrolled the streets, but white mobs still sought to invade black neighborhoods. Atlanta’s black community armed themselves for protection, and in some cases prevented white vigilantes from storming their communities. But what blacks saw as self-defense, whites saw as a declaration of a race war. On Monday, the police and state militia invaded Brownsville, a middle-class African American neighborhood on the outskirts of the city. They then arrested 250 black men, confiscating their arms. Atlanta’s thriving black community was traumatized by the event, a violent episode that would loom large in the collective memories of African Americans in Georgia and throughout the country.³³

³³ There are various historical accounts of the Atlanta Riot and its aftermath, see David Fort Godshalk, *Veiled Visions: The 1906 Atlanta Race Riot and the Reshaping of American Race Relations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Gregory Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot: Race, Class and Violence in a New South City* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2005); Crowe, “Racial Violence and Social Reform: Origins of the Atlanta Riot of 1906.”

After the event white politicians and reformers tried to lay blame for the violence on the city's poor whites, and on the saloons and vice districts they had long been condemning. Thus the riot strengthened the prohibition movement, resulting in the closure of saloons throughout the city. However, accounts suggest that white men from all walks of life also participated in the violence. Even if Hoke Smith and other members of the "better element" of society did not get their hands dirty in the melee, they created an atmosphere that encouraged violence.³⁴ As historian Edward Ayers observed, "The Atlanta of 1906 was not the New South progressive white Southerners wanted to advertise, not the New South they wanted to live in, not the New South they wanted the new generation to inherit. But it was all those things nonetheless."³⁵ Disenfranchisement was meant to bring order to the chaos of southern politics and society, and settle the "race problem" so southerners could focus on other problems. However, the Atlanta Riot demonstrated that "reform" in Georgia was a dangerous business.

Jim Crow Ascendant

By the turn of the twentieth-century Segregation was also cast as a "reform" in the South, but the label was retroactive. Segregation had been making a slow crawl across the region for reasons that had little to do with Progressive politics, and everything to do with establishing a formal racial hierarchy in the wake of emancipation. Even so, white politicians and reformers soon argued that segregation was a reform that promised to alleviate racial tensions, separating the races to reduce friction and protect blacks from violence. Black southerners took little stock in this justification, knowing the root of segregation lay in the desire to manifest white

³⁴ Godshalk, *Veiled Visions*; Ray Stannard Baker, *Following the Color Line: American Negro Citizenship in the Progressive Era*, (New York: Harper Torchbooks, Harper & Row Publishers, 1964).

³⁵ Ayers, *Promise of the New South*, 437.

supremacy in every aspect of southern life. Throughout the South black communities protested segregation, particularly when it came to public transportation. Boycotts were a popular and effective means of protest against the segregation of urban conveyances, leveraging black purchasing power against transportation companies. However, after 1900 local governments began to legislate segregation in these spaces, and boycotts no longer held the same power to effect change. Savannah was among the last of more than twenty southern cities to boycott segregated streetcars, a “reform” Sol C. Johnson and the black community vehemently opposed.³⁶

Radical Republicans had designed the Civil Rights Act of 1875 to guarantee equal treatment in public accommodations. It was rarely enforced in Georgia cities, but the threat of federal intervention remained until the Supreme Court overturned the bill in the 1883 *Civil Rights Cases* decision. Southern politicians read the decision as a signal that the federal government would no longer demand that the South work towards social equality. This emboldened white politicians to pass more segregation laws, both at the state and local level. In many cases these laws affirmed customary (de facto) segregation that had existed since slavery, but in other cases it invented new separation. Either way the codification of racial separation was an affront to black citizens, and the rights the Fourteenth Amendment were supposed to guarantee.³⁷

³⁶ August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, “The Boycott Movement Against Jim Crow Streetcars in the South, 1900-1906,” *The Journal of American History* 55, no. 4 (1969): 756–775. For list of boycotts see Meier and Rudwick, 758-759. Blair L. M Kelley, *Right to Ride: Streetcar Boycotts and African American Citizenship in the Era of Plessy V. Ferguson*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Jennifer Roback, “The Political Economy of Segregation: The Case of Segregated Streetcars,” *The Journal of Economic History* 46, no. 4 (1986): 893–917.

³⁷ Historians have debated about the origins of segregation since C. Vann Woodward suggested that segregation was not an eternal feature of southern society, but a creation of political movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Since then historians have taken issue with or sought to refine the “Woodward Thesis,” a historiographical debate discussed in the introduction of this dissertation. However, historians have also connected campaigns for legal segregation to disenfranchisement. Constitutional disenfranchisement opened the door for

Segregation in the South originated in urban centers, where large populations of blacks and whites came into constant, daily contact. Public transportation in particular brought strangers across race, class and gender lines together in crowded areas. The widespread use of railroads and streetcars was a post-emancipation innovation, and thus developed when racial relations were contentious and changing. Rules for interracial contact were ill-defined and open to interpretation in these spaces, and could vary significantly from city to city. For this reason railroads and streetcars became “contested terrain” in the New South. As journalist Ray Stannard Baker observed in Atlanta, “the colour line is drawn, but neither race knows just where it is.” Conflict on public conveyances was common as whites and blacks mismatched expectations collided.³⁸

Railroads were the front lines of segregation protest starting in the 1880s. In the late nineteenth century railroad customers could by tickets for one of two levels of accommodations. There was the first class, or ladies car, a more comfortable place for “respectable” middle and upper-class passengers. The second-class cars, also known as the smoking cars, were dirtier, and more crowded, and had few rules enforcing public decorum. Stories abound of black men and women being threatened, assaulted, and tossed off of trains for perceived affronts to white racial superiority. For a time African American men and women were able to find redress in the courts for their unfair treatment. The fact that they had purchased first class tickets, but were then refused the accommodations for which they were paid, allowed them to win suits in court. Ida B. Wells, before her career as an anti-lynching advocate, was awarded money for her

segregation legislation, and the two movements were deeply intertwined. C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955); Perman, *Struggle for Mastery*; Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow*.

³⁸ Baker, *Following the Color Line*, 31. Ayers describes railroads as “contested terrain.” Ayers, *Promise of the New South*, 137; For more information about the culture of segregation in new commercial spaces, see Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

unceremonious treatment on one railroad. In this area of protest women often took the lead, for as females they could be in proximity to white women, unlike black men who always ran the risk of being lynched. While individual awards were given to those who won their cases, these suits had little bearing on the broader practice of railroad segregation. In addition, passengers' grounds for protest would evaporate after the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case.³⁹

In the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case, the Supreme Court upheld Louisiana's separate car law, arguing that segregated accommodations did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment. Numerous segregation laws were already on the books in the South, and now proponents of segregation were assured that the federal government would not only permit, but also defend, racial separation. It was a devastating defeat for black men and women throughout the country. Justice John Marshall Harlan, the sole justice dissenting in the *Plessy* decision, wrote that the "separate but equal" doctrine used to justify segregation was a farce, and that if these types of laws were to be "enacted in the several states of the Union, the effect would be in the highest degree mischievous," preventing "the full enjoyment of the blessings of freedom" and placing in "a condition of legal inferiority a large body of American citizens."⁴⁰ Harlan's comments proved prophetic.

At the center of conflicts over railroad segregation were middle-class black men and women. Laws providing for racial separation targeted first-class railroad cars, not second-class accommodations meant for the working classes. Whites in first-class cars interpreted black passengers seeking admittance as "uppity" and defiant, not respectful of their "proper place" in

³⁹ Ayers, *Promise of the New South*, 137-146. For explanation of Ida B. Wells' suit against a railroad company (which she won only to have the decision reversed), see Feimster, *Southern Horrors*, 59-60. See also Chapter 2, "The Color Line and the Ladies' Car: Segregation on Southern Rails before Plessy" in Kelley, *Right to Ride*.

⁴⁰ Supreme Court of the United States, "Transcript of Plessy V. Ferguson (1896)," Government, *100 Milestone Documents Form the National Archives*, <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=52>.

second-class accommodations. This was the case even when (or perhaps because) the men and women in question were examples of middle-class respectability and education. While the philosophies of uplift and respectability were in part predicated on the idea that adhering to white middle-class norms would lead to acceptance, and demonstrate black southerners were indeed deserving of equal treatment, controversies over railroad segregation proved white attitudes intractable. In short, white passengers in the first-class railroad cars did not appreciate being confronted with contradictions of their negative stereotypes of African Americans. Such attitudes were the foundation upon which the South's racial hierarchy rested.⁴¹

In keeping with this trend, Savannah's city government passed various segregation laws throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, sending a clear message of white superiority to its black residents. Some of these efforts were described in Chapter 1, as municipal authorities sought to prevent black men and women from using public spaces after emancipation, only to close them to everyone when efforts to prohibit only blacks failed. Savannah's cemeteries were known for their elegant statuary and picturesque landscapes, symbols of Savannah's long and prestigious history, but in 1888 they were formally segregated. In 1897 a new city ordinance required that doctors only treat patients of their own race. Peter Meldrim's city council passed the ordinance after acceding to pressure from the black community to approve a second black city physician. In the early-twentieth century white children had five playgrounds on which to play, and the black community had none. A public library was established within the Georgia Historical Society in Savannah in 1903, but was for whites only.

⁴¹ Ayers, *Promise of the New South*, 140-141. For words on respectability and uplift see Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny After Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

In fact, Myers' administration essentially rejected offers made by Andrew Carnegie to fund a separate public library, in part because of concerns that the northern philanthropist would require the admittance of African Americans. Jim Crow balconies were required at the Savannah Theatre, and eventually blacks and whites were required to use separate windows at the bank.⁴²

One area that was free from race-based restriction was the streetcar, even though Georgia was the first state legislature to pass a bill providing for segregated transportation. In 1891 Georgia passed a law requiring the separation of the races "as much as practicable" on Georgia railroads and streetcars. The language of the bill was purposely vague, ensuring that the state did not supersede the authority of local governments to regulate their own race relations. However, the law allowed many transportation companies to argue that segregation placed an undue financial burden on their business, exempting them from compliance. As a result, individual cities were left to decide how to enforce segregation.

Savannah had a legacy of controversy over segregation on the city's streetcars. Horse-drawn streetcars in Savannah were segregated when they were first introduced in 1869, but protest from black residents and fear of federal intervention convinced city officials and company owners to remove racial restrictions in 1872. In 1890, shortly before the state segregation bill passed, Savannah converted to electric streetcars. None of the lines had provisions for enforced racial separation. In 1899 one of the streetcar companies serving the

⁴² John Dittmer, *Black Georgia in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 16-20; Donald L. Grant, *The Way It Was in the South: The Black Experience in Georgia* (Secaucus, N.J.: Carol Pub. Group, 1993), 215-221; David J. Goldberg, "The Administration of Herman Myers as Mayor of Savannah, Georgia, 1895-1897 and 1899-1907," (Masters Thesis, University of North Carolina, 1978), 137-142. For information on creation and maintenance of Savannah's public library see: "Report of the Board of Managers of the Public Library of Savannah, Ga, 1903." (The Morning News Print, 1904), De Renne Library Rare Books, University of Georgia, Athens; "Annual Report of the Board of Managers of the Savannah Public Library, 1906" (Braid & Hutton, Savannah, Ga., 1907), De Renne Library Rare Books, University of Georgia. A few years after Savannah got its white public library, a small independent black library was established by the Colored Library Association. The institution had an all black board of trustees. David M. Battles, *The History of Public Library Access for African Americans in the South: Or, Leaving Behind the Plow* (Latham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2009) 34,55.

suburbs of Thunderbolt and Warsaw segregated its streetcars in compliance with demands from those municipalities. In response, the he black community boycotted the company. Financial losses then induced the streetcar company to negotiate with local officials and rescind the new regulations. A few years after this conflict the Savannah Electric Company bought all the local street railways, and the local Edison electric company, becoming the primary electric utility company in the city. The new company made no move to segregate its conveyances, hoping to avoid the cost of maintaining separate cars, and of alienating black passengers. However, black riders were still subject to harsh, discriminatory treatment on the city's streetcars, making the city's public transportation spaces a flashpoint of racial conflict.⁴³

The Savannah Electric Company hired only white conductors for the city's electric streetcars, as was common throughout southern cities. Conductors interfaced with streetcar passengers, and told the motormen driving the cars when to start and stop. White conductors were known to instruct drivers to pass by stops where black passengers were waiting, or skip stops black patrons requested. Sometimes they signaled to start cars before black men and women had fully boarded, or began moving before they had fully stepped off the car, resulting in injuries, both physical and emotional. Verbal conflicts between black passengers and white conductors could also turn violent. Cases of mistreatment were sometimes investigated, but any protest by black passengers, verbal or otherwise, could be cited as justifiable reason for hostile treatment. And even when Savannah Electric investigated cases, only complaints by white passengers resulted in a summary dismissal of a conductor who had behaved badly.⁴⁴

⁴³ Kelley, *Right to Ride*; Dittmer, *Black Georgia in the Progressive Era*, 17; Grant, *The Way It Was in the South: The Black Experience in Georgia*, 215-216. For general information on Savannah Electric Company, see Henry Eason, *The Savannah Electric and Power Company, 1866-1971* (Savannah, Georgia: Historic Services, Inc., 1971).

⁴⁴ Kelley, *Right to Ride*, 170-172.

Black streetcar riders also had to worry about abuse from white passengers, particularly because black patrons would likely receive punishment no matter who started an altercation. One example is provided in the memoir of Richard Wright, Jr., son of the president of the Georgia State Industrial College.⁴⁵ While in school at GSIC at the turn of the century, Wright recalled a streetcar conflict that nearly escalated into a lynching:

Once a colored college professor came into a street car on the outskirts of Savannah, came through the open door and sat down at the “colored” end of the car. An elderly white man yelled at him, “boy, shut that door.” The colored professor did not reply or move. The white man repeated his command, which the colored man still ignored, saying nothing. Thereupon the white man got up, walked the whole length of the car, and yelled, “Boy, didn’t you hear me!” raised his cane to strike the colored man, who sidestepped the blow, and caught the cane on his arm. The very angry elderly gentleman fell to the floor. The motorman stopped the car and came running after the colored man who jumped off of the car.⁴⁶

Following the incident the GSIC professor, Frank Cobb, came to Richard Wright Sr., who intervened with city police on the professor’s behalf. Wright spoke with Savannah’s sheriff, who agreed to control the mob that had been gathering in the city. Savannah’s sheriff kept his word, but the elderly white man in question had been a county judge. White residents felt the incident needed a response, and Peter Meldrim, perhaps because of his connection to GSIC, sought to negotiate an appropriate punishment. According to Wright, Meldrim “told my father and other Negro-Americans that Cobb must be tried and sentenced for at least a year on the chain gang.” Seeking to avoid such severe punishment, in court Cobb’s “white lawyer pleaded that the Negro

⁴⁵ Richard R. Wright, Jr. received the first baccalaureate degree awarded by GSIC in 1898. He then attended the University of Chicago, graduating from the Theological Seminary and with a master’s degree, and in 1911 would then become the first man to receive a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Pennsylvania. Wright then went on to become one of the most influential African Methodist Episcopal ministers of his time, rising to the level of Bishop. He also followed in his father’s footsteps, becoming president of Wilberforce University for six years. “Richard Robert Wright, Jr. President, 1932- 1936, 1941-1942,” *Wilberforce University*, n.d., http://www.wilberforce.edu/student_life/library_archives_wright.html.

⁴⁶ Richard R. Wright Jr., *87 Years Behind the Black Curtain: An Autobiography* (Philadelphia: Rare Book Company, 1965), 72.

was emotional and like a beast was not controlled by reason. Had he been a reasoning being, he would never have struck a white man (which of course he had not done). Now that he had come to his senses he was sorry.” In response the judge “lectured Cobb about respecting white people and fined him \$250.” Wright notes that Savannah’s black community celebrated the outcome, relieved that an educated and well-regarded member of their community had escaped both a lynching and the chain gang. However, Wright lamented the fact that the verdict had been decided by the white men involved before the trial even began, a grotesque performance meant to remind African Americans to stay in their rightful place.⁴⁷

This incident also sheds light on the class dimensions of racial tension in Savannah. At the time of Cobb’s incident, he was likely riding on the Thunderbolt and Isle of Hope railway. This streetcar line ran from downtown Savannah to the predominately white suburb of Thunderbolt, where GSIC was located. This was also the same line that was temporarily segregated in 1899. Sol C. Johnson had assumed that white complaints about black passengers, which were supposedly prompted the segregation measure, had to do with working-class blacks being rowdy on the cars. In the *Tribune*, Johnson reminded his readers to show “proper deportment in public places,” in order to show they are “worthy of inclusion.”⁴⁸ However, given the incident involving Cobb, and that GSIC students and professors would have frequented the Thunderbolt line, it was Savannah’s elite black community that likely provided the impetus for segregation.

Johnson and other black leaders were not standing idly by as segregation marched through Georgia. Johnson continued to condemn racial discrimination in the *Tribune*, but he also

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ *Tribune* quoted in Kelley, *Right to Ride*, 169.

came to support a new organization called the Men's Sunday Club. Starting on April 16th, 1905, the club met every Sunday at the masonic temple. The purpose of the organization was to discuss problems facing black southerners, and to think about solutions that would improve the lives of black men and women. Monroe Work, another GSIC professor who would go on to work at the Tuskegee Institute and receive national renown for his scholarship and activism, founded the organization and was its first president. Work had studied with W.E.B. Du Bois at the University of Chicago, and modeled the Sunday club after an organization he was a part of before he moved to the South. The membership of the club included the city's black businessmen, professionals and educated elite. These included Dr. S.P. Lloyd, Myers' appointment as the first black city physician, and other notables with degrees from Fisk and Atlanta University. Meetings sometimes drew several hundred attendants, especially when speakers like famous Atlanta minister, H.H. Procter, or W.E.B. Du Bois, came to town. And even though the name of the organization was the Men's Sunday Club, at least one "Ladies Day" showed that women were connected to the organization, and its efforts to promote racial solidarity and uplift.⁴⁹

Sol C. Johnson firmly endorsed the Club, as demonstrated by his dedication of space to weekly accountings of the group's activities in the *Savannah Tribune*. The editor also supported the organization's efforts in his editorial comments, and gave club-member E.W. Houston a running column, under the pseudonym "Nuf-Sed."⁵⁰ Through their meetings, and features in the *Tribune*, the Sunday Club worked to spread their ideas, as well as organize, and maybe even galvanize, Savannah's black community. Many of the issues addressed by the Sunday club, and

⁴⁹ Linda O. Hines and Allen W. Jones, "A Voice of Black Protest: The Savannah Men's Sunday Club, 1905-1911," *Phylon* 35, no. 2 (1974): 193-202. For information on Monroe Work, see Linda O. McMurry, *Recorder of the Black Experience: A Biography of Monroe Nathan Work* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985).

⁵⁰ Hines and Jones, "A Voice of Black Protest."

echoed in the *Tribune*, overlapped with those advocated by white reformers, but with particular emphasis on issues related to black progress. For instance, Johnson wrote:

We want the infamous policy shops put out of business; we want the loan offices that are robbing a class of our people out of their very existence by charging exorbitant interest, to be legislated against, and not the least, we want a school building, a modern one that will accommodate a part of the nearly five thousand colored boys and girls which are not in the public schools. We can get the school, we can have the loan offices legislated against and we can wipe out the policy shops by a united effort of our forces. These things The Tribune constantly agitates, but in this accomplishment, the people must take hold. Who will lead?"⁵¹

Johnson was thus asking for help to combat vice, and bring about business and education reform, which were all Progressive causes. His mission against discriminatory lending institutions reflects his emphasis on black business development. Johnson and the Sunday Club were thus influenced by statewide political debates, even as those discussions turned ugly, and blamed black southerners for the social ills currently plaguing Georgia.

By the summer of 1906 demands for the segregation of Savannah's streetcars were increasing. Cities and states throughout the South passed laws segregating public spaces and transportation, and Johnson no doubt watched carefully for signs that Savannah's city government would try to follow this trend. The Citizens' Club was at the helm of municipal government, and thus far had shown no interest in mandating segregation on the city's streetcars. However, the local political consensus the Citizens' Club had previously enjoyed was deteriorating. Indeed, conflict over streetcar segregation, and political pressure related to statewide Progressive campaigns, would spell the demise of the Citizens' Club and Herman Myers' illustrious political career.

⁵¹ *Savannah Tribune*, February 3, 1906.

Club Politics and Streetcar Segregation

In May of 1906, a political circular, *The Searchlight*, leveled serious charges against Myers' Citizens' Club administration. "Even a casual observer must notice the deplorable fact that the moral tone of the city of Savannah has been lowered considerably in the last half of the reign of the Citizens' Club bosses." Originally the Citizens' Club had no "experience in public graft," and was therefore "not so harmful to the community." But now a "political stench" emanated from the gilded City Hall. "Can it be that the community has fallen so low in its own estimation that it is unwilling to exert itself to shake off the incubus of boodlers and grafters!" *The Searchlight* suspected that Savannahians would indeed awaken, and support the Citizens' Clubs' new rival faction, the People's Democratic League.⁵²

Myers and the Citizens' Club had entered Savannah's political sphere as good-government reformers, but they were now charged with running an administration in which corrupt office seekers used government to perpetuate their own interests and power. In a letter published in the *Savannah Morning News* in December of 1905, businessman Jacob S. Collins informed Myers that his administration was out of touch with its constituency.⁵³ He did not place blame directly on Myers, but suggested his subordinates were involved in city government for their own gain, and not for the purpose of selfless service. They had, after all, been in office for a considerable number of years, providing ample opportunity for graft. Rumors had also been swirling about the contracts made to build and furnish City Hall, suggesting some were awarded based on connections to the administration and not based on low estimates. Collins public

⁵² "A Change Needed," *Searchlight*, May 12, 1906.

⁵³ Collins' opposition to the administration might have been connected to the fact he had been rejected for a city position by the Citizens' Club. Walter Campbell, "Profit, Prejudice, and Protest: Utility Competition and the General of Jim Crow Streetcars in Savannah, 1905-1907," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 70, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 197-231, 211.

critique the administration helped galvanize Myers' opposition. One long-time politician in Savannah charged Myers with bossism, and running the Citizens' Club like a "czar."⁵⁴

As was often the case, tensions between these factions grew when it was time to register voters, this time for the county Democratic primary. Enmity had been building over registration since January of 1906, but in February a series of letters between Myers and his critics about the management of registration were printed in the *Savannah Morning News*. The specific grievances expressed in the letters were that city officers were interfering with the registration of voters, which was contrary to their role as public servants and municipal employees. The letters asserted that city officers, and some plain-clothes policemen, were going to the Court House's registration office "for the purpose of intimidating and interfering with the persons who go there for the purpose of registering." This situation was "objectionable" to many "law-abiding citizens and taxpayers," and the letters called for Myers to fix the situation. After another angry letter Myers publicly responded that he did not want any problems at the Court House, and had requested officers be assigned to the building to keep order. Myers then asserted that no city employees were neglecting their duties, and that the police present were off duty, and entitled to do what they wished with their free time. He did, however, say that he was confident these individuals "would not be guilty of any breach of the peace or interfere with any citizens desiring to register."⁵⁵ While critics called foul, Myers maintained that all employees were doing their jobs and that he would not intervene.

Myers' placating response might have been sufficient had animosity not escalated into deadly violence. On February 9, six men fired more than forty gunshots in front of City Hall,

⁵⁴ Goldberg, "The Administration of Herman Myers," 189. Campbell, "Profit, Prejudice, and Protest."

⁵⁵ "Letter Between Mayor Myers and Collins and Cunningham; Correspondence in Regards to Courthouse Troubles," *Savannah Morning News*, February 10, 1906.

leaving one dead and four seriously wounded. Differing accounts of the incident make the details of the “affray” a bit murky, but partisan conflict lay at the center. The man killed was George “Babe” Dyer, who along with his brothers, Charles “Sapp” Dyer, and W.H. “Snatcher” Dyer, had arrived at City Hall to confront Richard McKenna about a registration-related conflict between them earlier that day.⁵⁶ The Dyers were People’s League heelers, while McKenna was the city’s plumbing inspector and an administration supporter. After McKenna exited a streetcar and began walking up the steps of City Hall, Babe Dyer approached him and hit him over the head with a club. Then Sapp Dyer joined in the beating. How the incident escalated from there is unclear. Pat Kearney, Jim Lane, James and Timothy McBride (father and son) then came to McKenna’s aid. These men were all city employees: a patrolman, the superintendent of the stables for mounted police, the Harbor Master and Clerk to the Harbor Master, respectively. Shots were fired by the Dyers and by McKenna’s party, and a detective also joined the fracas, shooting Sapp Dyer when he did not drop his pistol when ordered. An innocent bystander, Frank Nagle, was also wounded.⁵⁷

The Dyers began the scuffle, but it is unknown which party escalated the conflict into a deadly shootout. After this incident, however, trust in Myers’ administration eroded significantly. Questions about the original cause of the conflict, and the participation of city employees in the melee that ensued, threw doubt on the motives of the Citizens’ Club government. Campaigning on the issues of political corruption and “boss rule,” the People’s League merged with other members of the opposition to form the “People’s Democratic League.” The People’s Democratic League swept the county elections in June, and put the

⁵⁶ Just two days earlier, Babe and Snatcher Dyer got in a fistfight with a Citizens’ Club supporter outside of the registration office. “Factional Fight at Court House,” *Savannah Morning News*, February 8, 1906.

⁵⁷ “One Killed and Four Wounded in Affray in Front of City Hall,” *Savannah Morning News*, February 10, 1906.

Citizens' Club on notice – they were coming for City Hall. Following this defeat, city council began to investigate city departments. This newfound mission to route out corruption was meant to appease public suspicion of the administration, but ended up sounding the death knell of the Citizens' Club's political reign.⁵⁸

Investigations started with the city's cemetery keeper, and the clerk of council. Both were charged with skimming funds in one form or another. The keeper, who was black, was formally charged and sentenced to five years in jail. The clerk resigned before being examined and evaded formal prosecution. At that point a portion of the aldermen wanted to end all inquiries, but another faction within council, calling themselves the "Conservative Club," demanded that investigations continue. And continue they did. One justice of the peace, a friend of Myers, was accused of malpractice and fined for his actions, and James McBride, the Harbor Master, was also investigated, but no action was taken since his term was ending. The council also rejected Myers' nominee for a new plumbing inspector, suggesting that the council was coming to a parting of the ways with their faction's leader. However, the most damaging investigation was a long, drawn-out inquiry into the city's Police Department. This resulted in a very unflattering report on the lack of discipline and professionalism of the police force, yet no practical reforms could be agreed upon.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Campbell, "Profit, Prejudice, and Protest," Goldberg, "The Administration of Herman Myers," 196-203.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

THE PLATFORM OF THE PEOPLES DEMOCRATIC LEAGUE.

We advocate and will work for:

1. The suppression of bossism and its machinery.
2. The suppression of policy shops and gaming houses.
3. The elimination of all grafters from positions of every kind in the public service.
4. The protection of faithful public officers against dictation and intimidation in their offices by political bosses.
5. The election to public offices of worthy and capable men who will give us a clean administration and who shall have full latitude to their duty and be directly responsible to the people.
6. An impartial and fearless administration of the law and a square deal all around.

*Platform of the People's Democratic League*⁶⁰

This platform was printed in the club's political circular, *The Searchlight*, leading up to the county primaries.

⁶⁰ "The Platform of the People's Democratic League," *Searchlight*, May 12, 1906.

In addition, charges that Myers was too soft on vice began to elicit greater public condemnation, influenced by the growing debate about such issues at the state level. Myers had always enforced Sunday blue laws, but was never a proponent of either restricting or banning the sale or consumption of intoxicating liquors. This was due to his involvement in the manufacture and sale of alcohol, described previously, as well as his interest in maintaining sources of city revenue. Even as prohibition sentiment mounted, Myers continued to support the present local option law, which had allowed Chatham County to remain “wet.” However, Myers did adopt one anti-vice crusade against gambling. At first Myers dismissed the notion that Savannah had too many disruptive gambling establishments, but soon he directed the local police department in a crusade against “policy shops.” However, Myers was responding to complaints from business owners, and concern for Savannah’s reputation, rather than any particular moral concern.⁶¹

Myers’ unabated focus on business interests over moral reform became increasingly problematic, and his opponents connected his laxness on this issue with charges of corruption and mismanagement. Yet as is often the case in politics, not everything in this attack on Myers and the Citizens’ Club was what it seemed. Underneath the emphasis on Progressive Era reform, was a conflict over the Savannah Electric Company’s (SEC) utility monopoly in Savannah. The Savannah Lighting Company (SLC), a new utility venture, sought to break into the SEC’s market. They went about stealing SEC customers, and poaching their salesmen and investors, but an important part of their strategy was to dissolve the operating rights and other contracts SEC had with the city. What began as a business venture thus also became deeply intertwined with efforts to unseat the current city administration. Investors and employees of the SLC

⁶¹ Goldberg, “The Administration of Herman Myers,” 159-163. The Georgia WCTU had several conventions in Savannah in the 1880s and 1890s, and remarked on the chilly reception they received from city government, before and during Myers’ administration. Ansley, *History of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union*, 98, 153.

overlapped with the leadership of the People's Democratic League. And of all the individuals in the current city administration, Herman Myers was their greatest obstacle.⁶²

Myers not only declined to invest in SLC when asked, but he had a long history of working with the SEC. Myers played a formative role in the SEC's expansion, and by extension the growth of its northern management company, Stone & Webster. Myers had been a major stockholder in the Thunderbolt & Isle of Hope Railway, as well as other streetcar companies, and had supported their consolidation to form the SEC. He then provided personal financial backing, and encouraged investment among his bank's clients. Then as mayor Myers aided the SEC in securing "local charters, franchises, and operating rights," and "a five-year lighting contract with the city."⁶³ Myers also had a close business and professional relationship with George Johnson Baldwin, the SEC's president. Not only had the both been joint investors in a variety of ventures, including the SEC, but Baldwin had been one of Myers' originally appointees to the Park and Tree Commission when it was established in 1896.⁶⁴

Myers close personal and financial connections to the SEC explains why as mayor he had worked to thwart two attempts to segregate the city's streetcars. Segregation was not only expensive for companies to maintain, but particularly costly when black residents protested by boycotting. In the controversy previously mentioned in 1899, when black passengers boycotted the Thunderbolt & Isle of Hope Railway, Myers had played a formative role in pressuring the suburbs to rescind their directive. Then again in 1902, Myers and his city council, voted down a

⁶² Campbell, "Profit, Prejudice, and Protest"; Kelley, *Right to Ride*.

⁶³ Campbell, "Profit, Prejudice, and Protest," 202.

⁶⁴ Baldwin and Myers were also joint investors in the Muscogee Real Estate Company of Columbus Georgia, and frequently corresponded about other ventures and business associates. George Baldwin Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

streetcar segregation ordinance. Myers was therefore a staunch opponent of segregation on the city's streetcars, if primarily for financial reasons.⁶⁵

Racial tension was a constant feature of Savannah's streetcars, but it was political and financial concerns that motivated the movement to segregate. Anti-monopoly rhetoric was a feature of Progressive Era politics, but was not enough to enflame public sentiment. Those politicians working on behalf of the SLC saw segregation as a great tool to break the simultaneous monopoly of the Citizens' Club on local politics, and of the SEC on local utilities. Myers opponents cast segregation as a necessary reform, which Savannah alone had not instituted. They charged that Savannah was behind the times, because of SEC's mismanagement and refusal to attend to the needs of its white passengers, and due to the city's overall lax approach to social issues. By the same token, these politicians counted on rigorous black protest, specifically boycotts that would bankrupt the company and further tarnish the SEC's reputation.⁶⁶

The timing of the new segregation ordinance appeared to be of no special importance; just the eventual result of mounting tension over the streetcars; the result of local conflicts and the racist rhetoric of Hoke Smith's campaign. Only after the measure was introduced was there the violent stabbing of a white streetcar conductor by a black passenger. Alderman William Grayson (in cahoots with the SLC) proposed the segregation ordinance in the council's last meeting in August. This was also the last meeting Myers was supposed to attend before a five-week vacation from the city. Since the ordinance was in its first reading, no action on the

⁶⁵ Campbell, "Profit, Prejudice, and Protest" 202-203; Goldberg, "The Administration of Herman Myers," 176.

⁶⁶ These works acknowledge that in Savannah segregation was used as a pawn in conflicts between utility companies and political factions. Roback, "The Political Economy of Segregation"; Campbell, "Profit, Prejudice, and Protest"; Kelley, *Right to Ride*, 173.

measure could be taken until the next meeting two weeks later, when the mayor would be safely out of town. Myers had little clout with city council by this time anyway, but having a staunch friend of the SEC and opponent of streetcar segregation removed from the situation would have been a smart tactical decision, and likely motivated Grayson's timing. Myers had been scheduled to go on vacation to the Pacific Northwest and Canada, but after leaving Savannah made an unannounced trip to Norfolk to wed his second wife, Virginia Guckenheimer. Guckenheimer had once been married to a local Jewish businessmen and politician, but was a widow for more than a decade. The marriage was a surprise to the Savannah public, and Myers' extended vacation turned out to be a honeymoon. Why Myers chose to keep his impending nuptials a secret was never stated, but might have had to do with the increasingly divisive political climate in the city. Regardless of the reason, with Myers out of the way, segregation advocates would only have to contend with the city's black community.⁶⁷

Grayson's measure not only outlined that local streetcars would have to be segregated, but also delineated punishment for violation of the ordinance. Any white or black individual who violated the law, or tried to tamper with posted signs, would be arrested for disorderly conduct and punished with a fine of up to \$100, or up to thirty days in jail.⁶⁸ However, after some behind the scenes debate, and a consultation with the city attorney, city council decided *not* to pass a new ordinance, but a resolution affirming stricter adherence to the 1891 Georgia Separate Car law. While on the surface a small bureaucratic issue, the difference between

⁶⁷ For discussion of Alderman Grayson introducing the ordinance, see Campbell, "Profit, Prejudice, and Protest," 212-215. *Savannah Morning News* and *Savannah Press*, August 28 through September 1, 1906. Grayson presented the ordinance on August 29, and Myers left town on September 3. For information on Myers and Guckenheimer's nuptials see *Savannah Press*, September 4 and 5, 1906.

⁶⁸ "The Report of Hon. Herman Myers, Mayor, Together with the Reports of the City Officers," ed. Office of the Mayor (Savannah: Braid & Hutton, 1906). *Savannah Morning News* and *Savannah Press* articles, August 20-September 15, 1906.

passing an ordinance versus a resolution was indeed important. Since a resolution did not have the same petitioning and debate procedures as an ordinance, the change prevented a delegation of black leaders, including Sol C. Johnson, from protesting the measure before city government. They were permitted to attend the council meeting, but were not allowed to address the aldermen on the issue. Rebuffed from entering their grievances in council, Johnson and the city's black community brought their protest to the street, and chose to walk rather than ride on segregated streetcars.⁶⁹

Sol Johnson was quick to use the *Tribune* to organize opposition to the segregation ordinance, and the community responded with vigor. Church leaders, businessmen and political figures, along with men and women across class lines, all organized for united opposition to the ordinance. Although there were many opinions and much debate about how to proceed, these disparate groups were able to come together to organize a boycott that lasted eighteen months.⁷⁰

Savannah's streetcar boycott has been examined as an important case in the history of protest in the South, because of its timing, duration and organization. In 1969, historians August Meier and Elliott Rudwick published an article examining a wave of streetcar boycotts in the South, revealing a previously obscured legacy of protest against segregated transportation. Since Meier and Rudwick's foundational work, a few additional articles have examined aspects of southern streetcar boycotts. However, Blair L.M. Kelley's recent book, *Right to Ride: Streetcar Boycotts and African American Citizenship in the Era of Plessy v. Ferguson*, is the most comprehensive account to date. Looking at New Orleans, Richmond and Savannah, Kelley

⁶⁹ Blair L.M. Kelly provides extensive discussion of Savannah's streetcar boycott, including Johnson's role and the participation of church and social organizations. She also provides analysis of the boycott in Savannah alongside conflicts in other cities. Kelley, *Right to Ride*.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

chronicles the evolution of segregated transportation and protest through boycotts. In addition, *Right to Ride* examines the role of black community organizations, class divisions, and political circumstances in the organization of boycotts of segregated transportation. Kelley identifies Savannah as an example of the role church organizations played in challenging segregation, as well as a case where deep divisions among urban black leaders ultimately undermined community action.⁷¹

Black Savannah's boycott of segregated streetcars began as a well-planned effort. Black residents accounted for a little over half of the city's population, and typically equaled about a fourth of Savannah Electric's customers across all its different lines. At the start of the boycott, the percentage of black passengers dropped to 4%, demonstrating impressive community solidarity. Most black residents walked in protest, while black hackmen were also coordinated for those who needed to go longer distances. Once the boycott began the city doubled its police force, and they sought to intimidate blacks into abandoning their protest. The Atlanta Riot, which occurred just a few weeks after the boycott started, added to the climate of fear. When a group of black residents were set to meet about organizing their own transportation company, rumors circulated that whites were planning to attack the gathering. Thankfully this did not come to pass, and despite a great deal of fear and anxiety, black Savannah continued its boycott without any major episodes of violence. As Johnson noted, "'Lily White' street cars are among

⁷¹ Meier and Rudwick, "The Boycott Movement Against Jim Crow Streetcars in the South, 1900-1906"; Jennifer Roback, "The Political Economy of Segregation"; Campbell, "Profit, Prejudice, and Protest"; Kelley, *Right to Ride*. For information on protest of segregated streetcars in Jacksonville, Florida (which were also managed by Stone & Webster), and the role of black community organizations, see Paul Ortiz, *Emancipation Betrayed: The Hidden History of Black Organizing and White Violence in Florida from Reconstruction to the Bloody Election of 1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 119-124.

the popular sights these days, caused by the proud colored citizens who are determined not to be Jim Crowed.”⁷²

The boycott ultimately collapsed, in part because of divisions among Savannah’s black leaders. Johnson stayed dedicated to the cause, using the *Tribune*’s editorial pages to encourage those keeping up the boycott, and denounce those who gave up. Aside from Johnson, there were signs that not all members of Savannah’s black elite were whole-hearted supporters of the movement. For instance, the Men’s Sunday Club did not publically declare itself in support of the boycott, and the organization’s meetings dropped off when the boycott began. Though club members would participate in some boycott-related activities, it did not bode well that the city’s foremost organization advocating for black rights stayed silent. Unfortunately, the heavy presence of GSIC faculty may have explained the Club’s inaction. As state employees, working for an institution with a white managing board, they likely feared participation in the boycott might cost them their job. GSIC faculty also depended on the streetcar to go between Savannah and Thunderbolt, and it would have been a significant hardship to avoid this means of transportation. However, the decision of the Sunday Club men to avoid public support of the movement highlights a common theme within streetcar boycotts throughout the South. Elites might have been the most vocal advocates of protest, and often constitute the only extant voices of the boycott movements, but they were by no means unified, and it was often the working-class men and women who bore the brunt of the actual protest.⁷³

The GSIC men might have damaged the movement with their lack of enthusiasm, but there were others seeking to undermine the boycott. Two unscrupulous ministers actually worked

⁷² Kelley, *Right to Ride*; *Savannah Tribune*, September 22, 1906.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 179.

as agents for the Savannah Electric Company, and sought to break the community's to the boycott. The financial toll of the boycott on the Savannah electric company was enormous, and by the beginning of 1907 the company realized its survival depended on the boycott ending in the spring or summer at the latest. This made them all the more willing to pay bribes to those who might help end the standoff. These nefarious efforts probably only succeeded because of general fatigue among black protesters, who were discouraged by municipal government's intransigence and the hardship of foregoing convenient transportation. The boycott effectively ended in June of 1907, when the Baptist Minister's Union, a former supporter of the boycott, contracted with Savannah Electric for excursion trains to GSIC's graduation festivities.⁷⁴

The End of an Era

In the midst of the boycott, Herman Myers and the Citizens' Club were turned out of office. Myers chose not to run again, and instead one of Myers' longtime associates, William Garrard, led the Citizens' Club ticket. Yet as most local politicians anticipated, the People's Democratic League won by a comfortable margin. The new mayor, former alderman George W. Tiedeman, came into office promising to advance his faction's reform agenda, just as Myers' had done a decade earlier. The similarities between the Citizens' Club's demise, and that of its former Tammany rival, are numerous. However, Tiedeman and his new faction would find that the economic progress and political consensus that Myers' had achieved, if only for a time, would prove elusive.

Even though Myers chose not to run for mayor in 1907, his reputation had descended to an all time low, as is often the case after a long term in political office. The new administration

⁷⁴ Ibid., 185-193.

even contemplated removing the portrait of Myers that hung in the city council chamber. A group of Savannah citizens had given the painting to the city as a gift to commemorate Myers' formative role in the construction of City Hall. Before the administration could relocate the portrait, however, an unknown party vandalized the oil painting, carving an X across Myers' face. Council condemned the action, as did the local press, denouncing the "cowardly" and unseemly act. One overzealous local politician even asserted that "that the act was the most infamous piece of vandalism that has been perpetrated here since Sherman marched through Georgia." The act was certainly "intended to be an insult to the subject of the portrait," but such behavior was beyond what was acceptable even in Savannah's partisan environment.⁷⁵ The portrait was repaired, and still hangs in the council chamber today. The vandalism ironically ensured its preservation, for after the incident council saved face by keeping the portrait its place of honor. But this incident shows the degree to which Myers' reputation had fallen. Myers was once the symbol of energetic, progressive administration, but was now dismissed as part of an ineffectual, corrupt political machine.

Myers was in part the victim of political circumstances that often befell long-ruling politicians, but he also suffered for his business-minded approach to governance. Myers came into office focused on economic development and efficiency, policies he believed would help Savannah flourish. Under Myers' tenure Savannah became the leading port in the South Atlantic, and completed a period of rapid modernization, as City Hall and numerous improvement projects attested to. Throughout his political career, Myers' avoided political issues that divided Savannahians, believing that unity bred prosperity, and that partisan rhetoric meant to enflame

⁷⁵ "Mean Vandalism," *Savannah Morning News*, March 14, 1907. "Mutilation of Ex-Mayor's Picture Unsolved By Police," *Savannah Morning News*, March 14, 1907. "Picture of Former Mayor Herman Myers Mutilated as It Hung In Council Chamber", March 13, 1907.

the passions of voters was counter-productive. This philosophy not only nurtured a political culture friendly to white ethnocultural minorities, but steered clear of city policies focused on prejudice against any class of people, including African Americans. This is not to suggest Myers was an advocate of black citizenship rights, for he tacitly accepted white supremacy. However, his vision of a lawful and affluent city was not exclusive by design. This stance later ran afoul of political trends, as Progressive Era campaigns brought religious and racial difference front and center.

In addition, there is evidence to suggest that Myers' Jewish identity became a liability within Savannah's electorate. Anti-Semitism was increasing throughout the country and the region, exacerbated by Progressive Era reform movements. In the midst of the Citizen' Club's doomed effort to win the county primaries in 1906, George Baldwin wrote a letter to SEC's management company, Stone & Webster, about the city's political situation. Baldwin told his northern colleagues that one major problem Savannah citizens had with the current administration was that "a Jew is the mayor of our city."⁷⁶ Throughout Myers' political career, the local press and his political colleagues had maintained his right, and that of other ethnocultural minorities, to serve in politics without being subjected to religious or nativist prejudice. However, Baldwin's aside suggests that the attitudes of Savannah's white Protestant majority were changing.

Sol C. Johnson never expressed anti-Semitic feeling towards Myers, but when the Citizens' Club administration left office, he was pleased. Johnson enumerated the grievances the black community had against the Citizens' Club, including, reducing "the number of colored men who have heretofore been employed on the public works," defending "policemen who

⁷⁶ George Baldwin Papers, Savannah Electric Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

mistreated colored prisoners,” “the recorder whose sentences have been so unjust and cruel,” as well as treating “colored tax payers without the least consideration.” The Citizens’ Club “in fact did many things against us,” not the least of which was “the passage of the resolution enforcing the jim crow laws on the street cars.” For these reasons, Savannah’s black community gave nearly unanimous support to the People’s Democratic League. After the election, Johnson wrote that “it is felt that the incoming administration will do the proper thing by the colored citizens.”⁷⁷ Johnson’s assessment of the goals of the new city administration were overly optimistic, and no great improvements were seen. Yet Johnson’s celebration of the Citizens’ Club’s fall from power, a faction that he once heralded as the best hope for Savannah’s black community, shows how much times had changed.

Despite local conflict, Herman Myers’ outgoing mayoral report stayed true to his political principles. He enumerated his administration’s contributions, and made suggestions for future years. Myers’ foremost recommendation was to devote more money to improving and beautifying the city, which would please citizens, and yield future profits by attracting tourists and new residents. His part of the report then ended with “A Plea for Unity.” In this section Myers reminded residents that the port was the lifeblood of the city, and that encouraging economic development was a necessary ingredient to the city’s future prosperity. In closing, he offered his appeal for political harmony. Factional differences should be “submerged for the public good,” and for the welfare of a city that has “a glorious past and brilliant future.” No matter who was at the helm of Savannah’s city government, Myers asked that they receive “enthusiastic support of every man, woman and child who loves Savannah and whose aspiration is that Savannah shall never cease to stand as the true exponent of Southern progress, as well as

⁷⁷ *Savannah Tribune*, January 12, 1907.

Southern culture and Southern manhood and womanhood.”⁷⁸ Thus, as his tenure in office came to an end, Myers not only celebrated the Forest City’s rich history, but also affirmed his hope that Savannah would remain a leading city of the New South.

⁷⁸ “Report of Hon. Herman Myers, Mayor, Together with the Reports of City Officers of the City of Savannah, Georgia,” Annual Reports of the Mayor of Savannah (Digital Library of Georgia, 2002) <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/savannahmayor/mayor.php>, 23.

EPILOUGE



Myers' Funeral Cortege in Front of City Hall, 1909¹

On March 26, 1909, Savannah's elite gathered to mourn the loss of Herman Myers, one of city's most influential city fathers. Twenty-four hours prior to the funeral, Myers laid in state in City Hall. The building's imposing edifice was draped in American flags and funeral ribbons as thousands came to pay their respects. Myers' casket was then escorted through the streets of the Forest City to Temple Mickve Israel, where his memorial service was held. From a podium surrounded by ornate wreaths and bouquets of flowers, Rabbi George Solomon addressed the white, interfaith audience that filled the synagogue to its capacity. Listeners heard Solomon praise the "splendidly human character" of a man who had not only found great wealth and

¹ Myers Memorial Funeral Booklet, Courtesy of the Edel Family.

personal success, but a leader who embodied progress and integrity, leaving an indelible imprint on Savannah's history.²

After leaving city politics in 1907, Myers spent the next few years attending to his varied businesses and investments, and traveling with his wife, Virginia, and brother, Sigo. His health was poor due to a liver ailment, and his friends and family hoped some traveling would help improve his condition. On his trip, Myers decided to go to Germany. Visiting the place of his birth must have been a remarkable homecoming, and, perhaps, the journey had been a last wish rather than a healthful sojourn. Upon his return, friends observed his health was much improved, so much so that some of his colleagues urged him to run for the mayoral office once more. He entertained the idea of reviving his political career, but followed his physician's orders and declined. Myers health then took a bad turn in January of 1909, and he died in March in his residence at the De Soto Hotel.³

Myers would have been pleased with the public legacy his eulogizers crafted. The *Savannah Morning News* remarked that his political career was "characterized by Progressiveness" and "marked by the greatest permanent public improvements in the history of Savannah." Likewise, the *Savannah Press* noted, "Mr. Myers was always one of Savannah's foremost citizens in the effort to improve city conditions." Large portions of his obituaries were dedicated to enumerating the various businesses with which he was involved, and that he died very wealthy and with virtually no debt. There was some mention of political conflict during Myers career. A *Morning News* article noted that, while Myers won the mayoralty unopposed in for his last three terms, he had lost an election to Peter Meldrim in 1897. The paper credited "a

² William Raffel, "Herman Myers," *Bonaventure Historical Society* 6, no. 6 (2000).

³ "March 1909 Deaths," in *Birth, Marriage and Death Registers*, vol. 4, 5600HE-60.4 (Savannah Municipal Archives, 1907); "Hon. Herman Myers, Former Mayor, Died Early Last Night; Final Summons Came at Ten-Thirty; Funeral Tomorrow Afternoon," *Savannah Press*, March 25, 1909; "Herman Myers Passes Away After Lingered Illness. Succumbs to a Complication of Diseases," *Savannah Morning News*, March 25, 1909.

division in his party which temporarily alienated some of his former” allies, but that many of the same men later became “strong supporters.” Neither paper made any mention of the troubles Myers and his faction had encountered in 1905 and 1906, but such was not the stuff of polite tributes. Rather, the paper remarked that Myers was always “zealous, easily approached and thoroughly modest” in his demeanor, qualities that endeared him to his political supporters. Myers presided over the city of Savannah in an exciting and transformative time, and remains one of the most celebrated mayors in the city’s history.⁴

At the time of Myers’ death, Savannah had reached the end of a period of rapid modernization, which in part earned the city the honor of hosting an international grand prix automobile race. From 1908 to 1911, racing teams from around the world competed on twenty-five miles of Savannah’s paved roads for the Vanderbilt Cup. Drove of spectators flocked to the city, earning Savannah great notoriety, while highlighting just how far the city had come. Only two decades earlier, Savannah converted from horse-drawn streetcars to electric conveyances, and was now serving as the host city for the world’s most modern sport. However, Savannah’s overall population and economy were faltering in comparison to other southern cities. By the beginning of World War I, Savannah had dropped off the list of the South’s ten largest urban centers. While the port was still bustling, the trade in cotton and naval stores no longer produced economic growth, and the city’s booster spirit for new industry and development waned.⁵

World War I also marked the end of prominent ethnocultural participation in municipal government in the urban South. Racial violence and prevalent nativism discouraged migration to

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Preston Russell and Barbara Hines, *Savannah: A History of Her People Since 1733* (Savannah, Ga: Frederic C. Beil, 1992), 159-161; For population information on the South’s largest cities, see Don Harrison Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1860-1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 15-16.

the region, which became less tolerant of difference. Myers was among the last generation of a sizable number of Jewish men able to win broad support for political office. As outlined in the last chapter, the tide had largely turned against Jewish acceptance in politics and social organizations by the 1890s, as waves of immigrants and discomfort with the changes wrought by industrialization increased anti-Semitism. In addition, while racial discrimination against blacks had once served Jewish interests, allowing another group to suffer with outsider status while Jews enjoyed the benefits of whiteness, campaigns for segregation resulted in a more exclusive conception of the white race. Jews' vulnerability to white violence was painfully proven in the case of Leo Frank. Frank was a Jewish factory owner in Atlanta who was accused of raping and murdering a young girl in his employ. He was convicted in a highly sensationalized trial, and later lynched by a white mob in 1915. The anti-Semitic fervor unleashed by the case not only resulted in the revival of the Ku Klux Klan in Georgia, but also signaled to Jews in the South that they too were vulnerable to violence. In the coming decades, Jews would find less political and social acceptance in the South, as would Catholics and other groups viewed as outside the white Protestant majority.

While Jews experienced some measure of exclusion, they enjoyed a much greater degree of freedom than African Americans. The forces of disenfranchisement and segregation left black southerners locked in second-class status, a condition that bred further economic inequities. A pamphlet published by Savannah's Chamber of Commerce in 1912 described the crowded, unsanitary living conditions in the city's black neighborhoods. These areas still lacked paved

roads, sufficient drainage, or effective trash collection.⁶ Savannah's development had been uneven, and disparities only grew under Jim Crow.

Despite these limitations, Savannah's black community nurtured vibrant social and religious institutions that sustained black residents. The Forest City was also comparably free from violence throughout the Jim Crow era, with no lynchings or riots within a state known for racially motivated bloodshed. The most common explanation for Savannah's relatively calm racial situation was white elites' strong sense of paternalism, which made them less volatile in their dealings with the black community. This attitude in Savannah can be traced back to the eighteenth century, when white residents allowed for the establishment of Savannah's (and the South's) first independent black church, First African Baptist. Since that time, whites in Savannah let black residents run their own churches and community organizations. Based on the story of the preceding pages, this spirit of cooperation in part stemmed from the city's diverse population. Ethnocultural minorities helped create a distinctive political and cultural climate more tolerant of difference, and black residents exerted influence in local politics for longer than in many other municipalities. In addition, Johnson enjoyed space for outspoken criticism of white society, which was not possible in many other cities. Therefore, Savannah did not escape Jim Crow, but it did avoid some of the more barbaric aspects found in other southern cities.⁷

More than anyone, Sol C. Johnson had believed in Savannah's potential to serve as a shining example of southern racial cooperation at the turn of the twentieth century. The

⁶ Public Interests Committee, *The Physical Conditions Under Which the Colored People of Savannah Live* (Savannah Chamber of Commerce, May 1912), DER 1912 S32, De Renne Library Rare Books, University of Georgia.

⁷ For explanations of why Savannah was less violent, see W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Blair L. M. Kelley, *Right to Ride: Streetcar Boycotts and African American Citizenship in the Era of Plessy V. Ferguson*. For information on black religious and cultural life after the period of this study, see Adele Oltman, *Sacred Mission, Worldly Ambition: Black Christian Nationalism in the Age of Jim Crow* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2008).

frustration of this vision was particularly painful for the newspaper editor, who spent his life making passionate appeals for change. When Herman Myers died, there was no mention in the *Tribune* of the politician upon whom Johnson had once pinned his hopes. There is no way to know if the two ever met face to face (though it was likely given Johnson's support for the Citizens' Club), but Johnson did take the failure of Myers' administration to advance black interests very personally. Johnson's discouragement with the Jim Crow South showed in the evolution of the *Tribune*. In the 1890s and early 1900s, the *Tribune* covered international and national news, and followed political, social and economic developments throughout the South. Over time, however, the paper turned increasingly inward, until it was almost entirely dedicated to local events. The publication became a chronicle of the lives of black Savannahians rather than a mouthpiece for political agitation. Even so, Johnson continued to comment on the world around him, and pushed his readers not to be content with the status quo. In an editorial in 1912, Johnson wrote:

“Situated as we are, with prejudice, race discrimination and curtailment on every side, our people are now living in the most crucial period in their history. The lines are tightening on us every day. In politics, in business, in religion and every other avenue of activity we find that we are regarded as a separate and distinct people. We are being told in unmistakable terms and most frequently too, that we are not wanted here or there. The door is closed to us in many places. The so-called square deal has become a shadow in some instances, a memory in others.”⁸

While a bleak picture, and certainly reflective of black southerners' current situation, Johnson was not merely lamenting the state of affairs. Rather, it was the preface of a call to action. He fervently believed that “if we stand together we can survive the fierce competition and opposition of the day,” and move forward in “one grand army or progress. We must move either

⁸ *Savannah Tribune*, August 24, 1912.

forward or backward. We prefer the forward movement. Will you help?”⁹ Johnson felt keenly the constraints of Jim Crow, but maintained confident in the power of people to effect change.

Both Myers and Johnson believed in the possibility of progress, and the power of reform to move society forward into a better version of itself. Like Georgia’s utopian founders, Myers and Johnson envisioned a Savannah of unparalleled promise. The diversity of the city’s population helped create a political environment that valued ability over prejudice. Yet, as Savannah’s colonial architects also discovered, factional divisions and competing visions checked reform. Myers achieved many of his progressive goals, but for black residents the promise of his administration remained unfulfilled. Nonetheless, Savannah’s New South highlights contingent moments that deepen our understanding of southern political culture, and both the optimism and disappointment that animated the region’s history.

⁹ *Savannah Tribune*, August 24, 1912.

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