

The Contested Gate City:
Southern Progressivism's Roots in Atlanta's Local Politics, 1885–1889

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As Atlanta boomed in population and stature toward the end of the 19th century, one period of municipal politics stands out for its democratic involvement. For a few years, beginning in 1884, Atlanta's voters questioned the growth and values of a city whose development New South Boosters and Conservative Democrats guided. They wrestled with prohibition, municipal services, monopoly control, education, and the role of black Atlantans in public life. The debate largely ended in 1889 when reformist Democrats regained dominance through mass support of an essentially Booster 'citizen's ticket.' Yet, the brief period of contestation was neither a simple 'political reawakening' nor a period driven by only the question of prohibition, as previous historians assumed.

The years between 1884 and 1889 constituted a debate over Atlanta's meaning, values, and boundaries. The elections raised the question of what defined 'progress.' Atlantans' concerns, rooted in local and regional conditions, contained the seeds of many elements of later Southern Progressive thought. Furthermore, the closure of intense democratic debate with the exclusion of black voters from politics in 1889 was not a simple defeat of reformers' efforts. The city's white voters had agreed to deny the 'other half' a significant vote through a compromise with the dominant Boosters who were already enacting many of the 'progressive' reforms which the 1888 People's Ticket, in particular, had demanded. Thus, Southern Progressivism's logic of reform and its essential conservatism were already at play in both this period of public debate and its end, in the logic of Boosterism and its challengers. Through a close reading of municipal politics' coverage in Atlanta's main paper, *The Constitution*, I will add to the existing literature on both New South Atlanta and Southern Progressivism by uncovering how, in a particular place, the 20th century movement's roots were varied, conflicting, and contingent upon an array of loyalties.

The complaints of the late 1880s in Atlanta were a response to the economic and social tumult that characterized the South after Reconstruction. Blacks and whites, rich and poor navigated this evolving economic and social environment together as these forces swept them away from an old agrarian order and into a region increasingly characterized by manufacturers, merchants, and the middle class.¹ As trade moved more on trains than ships, Atlanta, whose railroad lines fanned out like spokes on a wheel, found itself at a node of Southern trade. The “shifting patterns of trade and industry in the New South favored...[Atlanta’s] dynamic economic growth.” As a result of the city’s expanding economy and opportunities, Atlanta doubled in population over the 1880s.²

However, without inventive, energetic men to take advantage of such changes, Atlanta may have remained little more than a crossroads. The city’s men of industry and politics were well-organized and capable. They were famous for an industriousness and business mentality known, at times admiringly, at times disparagingly, as ‘The Atlanta Spirit’. Through their strong Chamber of Commerce, the business community fought for more railroads, more favorable state and city governance, and more manufacturing.³ Each of these efforts was part of the Booster’s more Northern vision of the New South. For the rising middle class who preached this future, acquiescence to Northern businessmen’s desires was central to the growth of the region. The South would become increasingly urbanized as more factories moved to its cities for its cheap labor: those poor whites and blacks who had not become the dangerous working class that they

¹ C. Vann Woodward, *The Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), ix; Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), Ch. 5 “The Industrial Evolution.”

² Don H. Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1860-1910* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), xvi, 136-158.

³ Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South*, 136-158.

had in the North. Economic ties would heal the wounds of war and bring the nation back together.⁴

Hand in hand with the Booster vision was the new Democratic order. Its goals were relatively clear. First, Southern Democrats wanted to remove Northern Republicans from Southern governments and policy making, which they did by the 1870s. Second, they wanted to ensure that blacks lost their political voice. However, the quest for disfranchisement of blacks led to such corruption that even Democratic leaders were concerned with moral decay. They started reform campaigns to clean up the party from within.⁵

In Atlanta, it was corruption of this kind that sparked a period of political resistance to the status quo. Even as the city's services had been crippled after years of municipal fiscal austerity beginning in 1873, the citizens of Atlanta had been politically inactive in the face of Democratic hegemony, choosing not to fight for control of a relatively weak government. Political activity began in 1884 with accusations that the commissioner of streets and sewers was corrupt. Another public official was accused of profiteering shortly thereafter. Although both were acquitted, newspaper editors and businessmen came to believe that the events necessitated reform in local politics. Thus, the 'best people' of the city started "a nonpartisan 'Citizens' ticket' for the mayoralty, aldermanic board, and city council that was chosen in a series of mass meetings." All but one of their candidates were defeated by the conservative establishment, but a period of democratic involvement had begun. Yet each of the campaigns began with more than complaints about governance. Concerns stemmed from the conditions of the city itself and the direction of its development.⁶

⁴ Woodward, *The Origins of the New South*, Ch. 6, "The Divided Mind of the New South."

⁵ Woodward, *The Origins of the New South*, Ch. 3, "The Legacy of Reconstruction."

⁶ James Michael Russell, *Atlanta 1847-1890: City Building in the Old South and the New* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 199-207, quotes on 208 and 209.

The campaign in 1885 for prohibition had its roots in the city's reputation and the effect of liquor on citizens' lives. Atlanta had garnered a reputation in Georgia for 'bawdiness' and the 'sinful delights' it could provide the farmers of the surrounding countryside as they came into town with their produce.⁷ The grease on the wheels of those delights was liquor. In a place that had doubled in size due to Protestants of both races, the bulk of the opposition came from religious opposition to the corrupting drink. Many black community leaders saw alcohol as a conservative force, an "evil reducing living standards, stifling saving and investment, and degrading the race in the eyes of white Georgians."⁸ When religious voices and community leaders came into contact with the voices of business and the working class, the lines of opposition to prohibition became more complex. No single demographic category was a clear predictor of an Atlantan's position on prohibition. The resulting debates were a strange microcosm of other issues surrounding Atlanta's meaning. What values did Atlanta represent: social interdependence or individual liberty? Which Booster ideals would drive the city: moral, symbolic leadership or business acumen? While the prohibitionists' values would triumph in 1885, they were defeated in 1887, when prohibition was repealed.

The questions raised in the period were the ones that would come in the early 20th century during the height of Southern Progressivism. The movement, as historian of Southern Progressivism Dewey Grantham writes, was a 'wave' of reforms spanning issues from alcohol and regulations to education and social services. It arose from Southern developments in the late 19th century such as industrialization, urbanization, and a growing middle class. As a result, it had a distinctly Southern character shaped by one-party politics and the 'race question.' One of

⁷ Harold E. Davis, *Henry Grady's New South: Atlanta, A Brave and Beautiful City* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1990), 55

⁸ John Hammond Moore, "The Negro and Prohibition in Atlanta, 1885-1887," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, LXIX (1970), 38-57, 38.

the lynchpins of the movement, due to its widespread support, was Prohibition. It was this issue that played itself out from 1885 to 1887 in an early expression of the desires that would begin to take hold more widely over a decade later. Like their followers in the next century, Prohibitionist Atlantans would advocate the active use of the state to control morality. They believed ‘the negro’ could be reformed by outlawing liquor. Corruption in both politics and individuals stemmed from alcohol. They desired freedom from temptation; their opponents wanted freedom of trade and personal choice. They viewed prohibition as a largely ethical issue while their opponents viewed it, in large part, as a matter of business. By 1885, many of the key conflicts that arose in the 1900s during the Southern Prohibition debate had already played out in Atlanta’s municipal politics. In connecting these two periods thematically, I will extend the analysis of such historians of Southern Progressivism as Dewey Grantham further into the 19th century to explore one case of its local roots.⁹

While the roots of prohibition as a ‘progressive’ force came to the surface from 1885 to 1887, another range of ‘progressive’ concerns appeared in 1888. They arose from the inequalities and shortcomings of Atlanta’s industrial growth under single-party rule. The city offered opportunity for the entrepreneurial middle class while allowing often squalid living conditions for the poor.¹⁰ Even though Atlanta experienced overall growth in the 1880s, the working class was crippled by “periodic downturns, layoffs, and reductions in already low wages.”¹¹ Many of these were the same laborers still frustrated by their experience with prohibition. In 1888 a ticket that challenged the Atlanta establishment arose from these tensions. It questioned the city’s allegiance to the North, Atlanta’s unity, and the distribution of municipal services in critiques

⁹ Dewey W. Grantham, *Southern Progressivism: The Reconciliation of Progress and Tradition* (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1983), xv–xxii, 160–61.

¹⁰ Clifford M. Kuhn, *Contesting the New South Order: The 1914-1915 Strike at Atlanta’s Fulton Mills* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 18.

¹¹ Kuhn, *Contesting the New South Order*, 19.

related to the platform of the Knights of Labor, whose Atlanta branch constituted a large portion of the campaign's supporters. The ticket drew in the vote of many black Atlantans who had been excluded from any representation on the conservative municipal ticket. The result was an anti-conservative campaign that expressed, many years early, the Progressive concerns for education, social progress, and treatment of monopolies. Like Southern Progressives, the People's Ticket called for reigning in monopolist control of railroads while extending the critique to the city's press. They advocated the fair use of funds to support education, a recurring theme in the South's redemption. They would critique the city's distribution of such municipal services as the waterworks, foreshadowing later Progressive concern for extending utilities. The logic of the 1888 campaign, then, embodied some of Progressivism's core of ideas as it appealed to white and black laborers.

The following year the elite of Atlanta reasserted their control over the political process through a 'Citizen's Ticket.' They organized a mass meeting and unified white voters under the banner of 'Atlanta' in response, at least partially, to the race antagonism of the previous years. In 1889, the elites who organized the ticket finally excluded the black population entirely from the political bargaining process. Yet, even this impulse was not completely alien to the later Progressive spirit. Just as racism was the limit to Progressivism in the next century, it would spell the end of Atlanta's intense engagement with municipal politics in the late 1880s. However, the elites who organized this end through an all-white ticket would be some of the same men to lead Georgia through its Progressive reforms in later years. At the close of the 1880s, they were already instituting many of the municipal reforms that would later characterize Progressivism, illuminating the close ties between the 20th century impulse and the Boosterism of the late 19th century. The end of a democratic spirit in the city, then, was not the end of the 'progressive'

reform but a mutation of it. In fact, these men constituted not only an intellectual link but a connection of actual actors, such as Hoke Smith, one organizer of the all-white ticket and a Progressives' governor in 1906. In extracting the 'progressive' ideas from these elections, my paper will expand upon and challenge the existing literature on both the period and Southern Progressivism.

In his book *Highbrows, Hillbillies & Hellfire: Public Entertainment in Atlanta, 1880-1930*, Steve Goodson argues that the city was caught between two different forces. It was "a Deep South city aspiring to the vitality and swagger of its northern counterparts while clinging tenaciously to old ways and priorities, a city with one eye on the future and the other ever on the past." He sees these forces at play in the way Atlantans approached theater, burlesque, vaudeville, the movies, and music. His work was an inspiration to my thinking about the divided Atlanta population, torn by conflicting values. I will argue in concurrence with him that these political movements were largely motivated by disagreements with the direction Atlanta was developing, but I will revise his position to take 'progressive' ideas into account. The prohibition campaign, for example, was not simply anxiety about a growing city. It was also an early form of the Progressive impulse that was intertwined with the Booster impulse which created the city's growth itself.¹²

By analyzing closely the debate over a finite set of issues, I will add to the existing literature a detailed account of what 'progress' would mean within a specific context. For instance, their opponents characterized the Prohibitionists as 'fanatics' who "even oppose baseball, theaters, card playing, dancing, and what not. The right of personal liberty should be jealously guarded... Therefore beware of this fanatical wave that is now sweeping on towards

¹² Steve Goodson, *Highbrows, Hillbillies, & Hellfire: Public Entertainment in Atlanta, 1880-1930* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002), 1.

us.” On the other side, Prohibitionists asked that the “anti-Prohibitionist citizens...take a walk past the cluster of whiskey dens on Decatur Street...and see the crowd of loafing, bloated, hang-dog looking Negroes who stand around these places...” Thus, Atlantans debated the type of freedom their city would offer. Would people be ‘free’ to drink as they pleased or ‘free’ from a vice that would keep them in poverty? Prohibition, like each of the debates of the period, was a question of how the future Atlanta would be shaped. While the religious voice was that of later Progressivism, their opposition advocated a ‘progress’ based on a different set of values.¹³

Similarly, no single social group constituted the source of Progressivism in Atlanta. To use another example, Henry Grady, a key figure in Atlanta’s Booster efforts and the editor of the conservative *Constitution*, was a great champion of the New South’s entrepreneurial spirit and rising middle class. He advocated prohibition, that central piece of the 20th century’s Southern Progressivism. Yet, he held to one of the most defining pieces of plantation thought, paternalism toward blacks. Grady pushed for much of the municipal reform and economic investment that advanced Atlanta, much like later Progressives, while opposing calls for other reforms in 1888. Thus, an Atlantan of the 1880s could oppose what would later be considered ‘progressive’ in one form while supporting it in another since they were pulled by a complex array of social forces in the context of each municipal election.

In exploring this theme through the contestation of order in local politics, I will expand upon the work of Don H. Doyle. In his book on New South cities, Doyle describes the Atlanta business community’s promotion and development of the city to show what ‘The Atlanta Spirit’ meant to the men involved. I will build on his work by exploring how the Spirit expressed itself in local politics, how it was something that was contested and evolving rather than monolithic or stagnant, and how it was neither clearly progressive nor clearly conservative. The men who held

¹³ Moore, “The Negro and Prohibition in Atlanta, 1885-1887,” 39-41, quotes on 40 and 41.

this Booster impulse were opposed to, supportive of, or divided on ‘progressive’ causes at various points.

Additionally, this paper will expand upon three works which focus on the analysis of this period’s politics. James Michael Russell’s *Atlanta 1847-1890*, John Hammond Moore’s essay “The Negro and Prohibition in Atlanta, 1885-1887,” and Alton Hornsby Jr.’s *Black Power in Dixie*, each describe important pieces of the city’s municipal conflicts. Russell details many of the events in my story but does not analyze the voters’ platforms on the basis of competing strains of thought. Moore and Hornsby emphasize the role of black voters in the period. By looking more closely at the debates of each municipal election, I will develop a more nuanced account of the particularities of Atlanta’s varied minds in the late 1880s. The use of black voters for political gain will have a context deeper than is possible without the consideration of each of the minor issues that came up when a candidate spoke.

Finally, by drawing out connections to later Progressivism, I will extend Dewey Grantham’s *Southern Progressivism* further into the 19th century to find the deeper roots of the movement. While his account of the various strains of reform mostly begins with the period of success in the 20th century, I will trace ‘progressive’ demands associated with regulation, prohibition, education, social justice, and efficiency into the 1880s by looking at one instance of outpouring in Atlanta politics. In examining those roots’ diverse sources, I will show how the often self-contradicting nature of ‘progressive’ reform at the local level was the result of multiple, complex political priorities. Similarly, I will stress the continuity of thought between the periods more heavily than Grantham. While the 1888 calls for reform only foreshadow certain elements of Progressivism, revealing their some of their logic, the period of prohibition and the New South Boosters’ work are themselves directly ‘progressive.’ While the 1888

campaign rose and fell, Atlanta's WCTU and Chamber of Commerce lived on until the period when they would be called properly Progressive. Thus, the investigation of Atlanta's politics with an eye to conflicting ideas will reveal both how they influenced the later Progressive movement and how tangled the movement's roots were in the case of Atlanta.

1885–1887: The Prohibition Experiment

The prohibition issue crept up on Atlanta slowly. Over the course of the early 1880s, the local option movement spread across the rural counties of the state until 90 were at least partially dry by 1884. Then, an 1885 state-wide local option law pushed through by “proponents of higher licenses, WCTU folk, and vocal church leaders” allowed “any county to hold an election on prohibition on petition of one-tenth of the voters. Under this law the first prohibition referendum was held in Atlanta and Fulton County on November 25, 1885.”¹⁴ In the days leading up to the election, the streets were filled with mass meetings of both ‘wets’ and ‘drys’. The debate on their tongues was Atlanta's set of values.

They were contained in the speeches, editorials, letters, and articles which blanketed the pages of the *Atlanta Constitution* as voters considered the implications prohibition held for their city. It was a moment of democratic debate: The values of the community were at stake in its decision on one issue. At the heart of prohibition was a struggle to define the narrative of Atlanta. Contained in those narratives were competing visions of the individual within society. The prohibitionists contended that Atlanta's prosperity came from its ability to lead on moral questions. The individual and the state needed to be saved from bad business and the evil of liquor. The state's role was to save its individual members from their own shortcomings, ones

¹⁴ Moore, “The Negro and Prohibition in Atlanta, 1885-1887,” 38; Franklin M. Garrett, *Atlanta and Environs: A Chronicle of Its People and Events, Vol. II* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1954), 95.

that would rot the social fabric if left unchecked. These impulses were the same as the ones that would later drive prohibition in the Progressive Era. In opposition to the bill, the anti-prohibitionists believed that Atlanta's prosperity came from its business. The individual merely needed to be left alone. It was not the role of the state to aid the individual but to allow the individual and society to prosper through business. In turn, these opposing narratives ensured that every related issue—crime, poverty, taxes, and on—was cast in a different light. This did not mean, however, that the anti-prohibitionists were purely 'anti-progressive.' The progressive ideas contained in their thinking were simply expressed in other efforts, such as business, as we will see in 1889. It was the first of the elections of 1880s Atlanta to involve so much of the public in a debate over the city's future, values, and greatness.

All this was contained in the discussion of a product with a variety of uses and social functions. Alcohol had long been a medicine and continued to be in the late 19th century, as several anti-prohibitionists argued. For the wealthy, it was a crucial aspect of hosting guests. Henry Grady, one of the strongest voices for Atlanta's continued Prohibition in 1887 and a man who never drank, made sure that "champagne and cigars were always available in his home...for those who cared for them."¹⁵ In the working classes, on the other hand, the saloon was "a place of kindness, free lunch, treating, loans, warmth in hard times, simple sociability."¹⁶ It served, then, different purposes in the lives of the upper classes from those of the lower classes. Alcohol was a strong thread in the cultural fabric of Atlanta, but the fabric itself was changing.

By the mid-1880s the growth of Atlanta and the working class had brought with it a modern leisure culture including theater, concert saloons, dime museums, burlesque, vaudeville,

¹⁵ Raymond B. Nixon, *Henry W. Grady: Spokesman of the New South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1943), 20.

¹⁶ Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877–1920* (New York, HarperCollins Publishers, 2009), 197.

and sports such as baseball, each of which included alcohol.¹⁷ Drinking had become intertwined with a range of cultural changes which drew people from the surrounding area and led to a “divided public opinion: the fears harbored by many Atlantans that their city was being morally polluted from beyond, the uncertainty felt by some citizens over just what was and was not immoral, and the conviction held by others that the material seen as offensive by some was actually harmless.”¹⁸ Alcohol was no longer simply medicine, bodily and social. It was becoming a lubricant to the industrializing city. Yet, the growth of the city itself, liquor included, was part of a larger debate over the place of ‘Northern values’ in Atlanta. As Steve Goodson argues, the South was a Protestant, racially divided, largely rural region experiencing the pains of industrialization and many of its accompanying cultural developments. The process left many Atlantans divided and, as in the case of entertainment, “at times longing for the latest amusements, at other times dreading or rejecting them.”¹⁹ Would they accept or reject the Boosters’ promotion of “European-derived culture as a means of escaping the South’s reputation for backward provincialism and as a tool for winning the respect and acceptance of their more established peers in New York and Boston?”²⁰ As a piece of this logic of development, alcohol garnered both strong opposition and strong loyalties.

While no absolute lines had been drawn across society, certain groups of people exhibited clear tendencies to support or oppose alcohol’s sale. Prohibition tended to have more women on its side. At one meeting on November 20, “the public hall of the county courthouse was filled to overflowing...with ‘men only,’ to hear speeches” in defense of drink.²¹ The speaker at an opposing rally a few days later noted that “it was the source of great pleasure to the committee

¹⁷ Goodson, *Highbrows, Hillbillies, & Hellfire*, 51.

¹⁸ Goodson, *Highbrows, Hillbillies, & Hellfire*, 14-15.

¹⁹ Goodson, *Highbrows, Hillbillies, & Hellfire*, 6.

²⁰ Goodson, *Highbrows, Hillbillies, & Hellfire*, 6.

²¹ “For the Sale,” *Atlanta Constitution*, November 20, 1885, 7.

that so many ladies and gentlemen” came to the meeting.²² Indeed, the issue was one of the first to bring women into the public sphere through organizations such as the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, organized in Atlanta for the first time in 1880.²³ Many of the women involved in the prohibition movement had made the move from a role in the church to the broader community.

Not surprisingly, then, the speaker at the rally with so many women was a pastor. As Dewey Grantham writes, “the movement was rooted in southern Protestantism. Most advocates of prohibition were churchgoing people.”²⁴ It was the issue that brought the adherents of a ‘theologically individualistic’ version of Christianity into contact with social problems. “Prohibition became their bridge between the old and the new, between those who wanted to reform individuals and those who wanted to reform society.”²⁵ Some preachers had made opposition to liquor the key issue in their sermons. Sam Jones was one of the most famous of these Southern itinerant preachers. After drink “brought the young man down,” Jones “promised to abstain for the rest of his life” and “turned to the church for strength.”²⁶ From then on alcohol pervaded his message.

One of the most important parts of his intended audience was the business community and the rising middle class. Yet, they were not entirely on his side when it came to the question of prohibition. Some of them, such as J.W. Rankin, W.A. Moore, and H.I. Kimball, one of the most prominent businessmen in Atlanta and the driving force behind many of the city’s most ambitious projects, believed that a dry Atlanta would be a prosperous Atlanta.²⁷ Henry Grady, a

²² “For Prohibition,” AC, November 24, 1885, 3.

²³ Moore, “The Negro and Prohibition in Atlanta, 1885-1887,” 39.

²⁴ Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 173.

²⁵ Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 173.

²⁶ Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 173.

²⁷ “For Prohibition,” AC, November 24, 1885, 3; “Mr. W.A. Moore’s Views,” AC, November 27, 1885.

man who had much control over Atlanta politics but was still financially upper-middle class, believed that his success was attributable to remaining a ‘teetotaler’ throughout his life.²⁸ Thus, his view of alcohol was based upon a belief in industriousness and a belief in the possibility that the rising middle class could lead Atlanta.²⁹ On the other hand, many men in trade, construction, and, of course, the liquor business believed that the law would do substantial economic damage to the city, opposing prohibition on those grounds.³⁰ The factor that pushed them to one side or another was often whether they were workers or their bosses. “The [Prohibition] movement...attracted support as a means of ensuring greater industrial efficiency and more rapid economic progress.”³¹ Whether or not a factory owner’s workers would show up on time and sober would depend on their drinking habits, so they stood to gain from the ban of alcohol from the city. Yet, as the example of Grady shows, division could be due to such complicating factors as the work ethic or, as the Methodist and Baptist opposition to loyalty demonstrates, religious beliefs. In some cases, then, prohibition questioned an Atlantan’s higher loyalties, social and spiritual, beyond their economic position.

The workers themselves were similarly divided in their opposition to prohibition. While the pastors in favor of passing the law argued that it would help them break free of liquor’s chains, many of the working class men saw the law as blatantly classist. The basis of their complaints were twofold. First, “it is unjust to a poor man who cannot lay in big stocks of liquors. A rich man can keep liquors on hand for emergencies, but the poor man can’t get 15 cents worth for his sick wife or child.”³² In effect, the law would constrain the poor while leaving the rich with privileged access. Second, the taxes lost would hurt the working man significantly

²⁸ Nixon, *Henry W. Grady*, 112.

²⁹ Russell, *Atlanta, 1847–1890*, 161–62.

³⁰ “The Empty Houses, Which Owe Their Existence to the Prohibition Law,” *AC*, November 20, 1887.

³¹ Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 174.

³² “For the Sale,” *Atlanta Constitution*, November 20, 1885, 7.

more. They “asked where the \$75,000 was to come from for the public schools if whiskey was voted out.”³³ It was them who depended on such public services, not the wealthy. Third, barrooms were one of the working class’s main leisure spaces. However, for many working class men, drinking also meant sin. Hence, Sam Jones drew large crowds of railroad workers with a anti-liquor, pro family message.³⁴ Their opposition, then, was not absolute but conditional. It depended on the seriousness of their religious commitment more than simply their class loyalties.

The most heavily pursued vote, though, was that of the black man. “He was courted, bribed, feted, and marched to the polls by both wets and dries.”³⁵ Both prohibitionists and their opposition saw them as instrumental to Atlanta’s decision. “The white ribboners,” WCTU members who wore a white ribbon to symbolize their purity, “frequently charged that saloon operators and city machines relied upon black votes to defeat local and state prohibition campaigns.”³⁶ When prohibition was voted into law in 1885, then, the WCTU and the Young Men’s Prohibition Club would credit black voters for choosing the right side.³⁷ Furthermore, blacks were a large reason for the reform itself. “Alcohol, many whites assumed, demoralized and debauched black men, reduced their efficiency as workers, and fueled their secret lust for white women.”³⁸ Prohibition had the power to reform and control. On the other hand, anti-prohibitionists claimed that their opponents wanted to put black “back in slavery” and “end public education.”³⁹ Thus, they were important to white prohibitionists both at the moral and political levels while they represented a healthy portion of the regulars at barrooms.

³³ “Anti’s Grand Rally,” *AC*, Nov. 20, 1885, 5.

³⁴ Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 176.

³⁵ Moore, “The Negro and Prohibition in Atlanta, 1885-1887,” 38.

³⁶ Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 176; “Women’s Christian Temperance Union: Early History,” Women’s Christian Temperance Union, <http://www.wctu.org/earlyhistory.html>.

³⁷ Moore, “The Negro and Prohibition in Atlanta, 1885-1887,” quote on 38, 42-43.

³⁸ Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 176.

³⁹ Moore, “The Negro and Prohibition in Atlanta, 1885-1887,” 40-41.

In the face of these forces, the black community was divided over the issue. Their preachers were the chief force behind black support of prohibition.⁴⁰ They urged support of the measure for much the same issues as their white counterparts: Prohibition would put an end to the corruption and decay of the family. As a black newspaper editor from Augusta, Richard Wright, would say, it was a chance “for all the best colored men to stand up and assert their manhood, to rise above all bribes and low motives and to vote as their consciences told them was right.”⁴¹ That is, black leaders often cast the issue as a moral stand, an opportunity to prove themselves worth of their vote. The implication of Wright’s argument was that a vote against prohibition would be seen, as the prohibitionists claimed, as succumbing to bribery at the polls and debasing themselves. From a strategic standpoint, black politicians saw the power of their vote and used it to gain favor on either side. Black voters “had supported prohibition...for promises to repeal certain laws and to grant offices to blacks.”⁴² Later, in 1886, black politicians would try to gain representation by switching alliance to the anti-prohibitionists.⁴³ Thus, a black voters alliance was a balance between his commitment to the church and the political power his vote held in such a close election.

Thus, the issue split Atlantans into camps. In one, women, preachers, some blacks, and some businessmen wanted to end the sale. In the anti-prohibitionist camp were working class men, some blacks, and certain portions of the business community. Each camp issued an alternative set of ideas about alcohol’s place in society, the meaning of Atlanta, and what forces would lead to greater prosperity. Further, the ideas were not necessarily consistent on either side of the debate. That is, there were multiple ideas in support of or opposition to prohibition, each

⁴⁰ Moore, “The Negro and Prohibition in Atlanta, 1885-1887,” 45.

⁴¹ “Prohibition Meetings,” *AC*, Nov. 20, 1885, 5.

⁴² Alton Hornsby Jr., *Black Power in Dixie: A Political History of African Americans in Atlanta* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2009), 20.

⁴³ Hornsby, *Black Power in Dixie*, 20.

with its own values and priorities, each reflecting a different idea of what would constitute ‘progress.’

The cornerstone of the prohibitionist’s narrative was corruption. Liquor destroyed the individual, the society, and the state itself. They seized the spirit of the times, denounced the corrupt local offices, and blamed it on ‘demon rum.’ “Our municipal government,” they said, “has not been and is not now free from the political influence of the liquor men.”⁴⁴ Similarly, Sam Jones “attacked local officials for their lassitude, especially those who drank.”⁴⁵ It was a critique of the civic elite and the Democratic establishment. Just a year before, a scandal in which the commissioner of streets and sewers had been “accused of profiteering in the sale of lumber to the fire department’s Engine House No. 1” touched off a reform movement intending to “prevent rings and cliques from taking the city’s affairs into their own hands.”⁴⁶ Further, on the state level, a clique of influential men known as ‘The Triumvirate’ controlled much of state affairs. Thus, prohibitionists targeted a select group of privileged men ran both Georgia and the city.

They were also men who had the money to visit the theater when it often cost enough to exclude the participation of many Atlantans.⁴⁷ Thus, Jones would go on to condemn Atlanta ‘society’ whose “requirements seemed to be only the ability to drink, play cards, go to the theater, and dance.”⁴⁸ Criticism of the standing government and its corollary, Atlanta ‘society,’ then, was a critique of the upper classes. These were circumstances unique to Atlanta in the sense that the prohibitionists’ arguments referred to recent events there. Yet, these particulars made up part of a pattern. Corruption was, in fact, a theme across the South, a region controlled almost

⁴⁴ “Prohibition Points,” *AC*, Nov. 20, 1885, 5.

⁴⁵ Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 174.

⁴⁶ Russell, *Atlanta 1847-1890*, 208, 209.

⁴⁷ Goodson, *Highbrows, Hillbillies, & Hellfire*, 20-21.

⁴⁸ Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 174.

entirely by the Democratic Party.⁴⁹ Not only, then, was it implied that corruption in government would end if they could only destroy the liquor business. It was also a part of the prohibitionist critique that liquor was one of the leading forces in the decay of the upper class. Liquor was the barrier to the effective governance of Georgia.

At other times, the argument worked on a simpler plane. It was “only a question of barrooms. The opposition are for barrooms. We are against barrooms... We think the effect of barrooms on the morals, health, happiness and prosperity of the community is bad and only bad.”⁵⁰ They asked that the opposition “just own that you are in favor of barrooms. Everybody knows that is the only issue, and candor is a virtue.”⁵¹ This was a case in which society was being eaten from the bottom. Here, prohibitionists downplayed the medicinal use of alcohol in favor of a clear argument.

They saw in it the link between the individual and society. Without barrooms, men who ruined their lives with liquor would not tear apart families and bring poverty to the city. The drinks that “cost considerably over \$100 a year” explained “why there are so many women in rags and so many hungry, starving children in this country...the money that should clothe and feed them *and* make them comfortable and happy goes for whisky.”⁵² Hence, the social problems that plagued the cities of the South in the late 19th century were the simple result of individuals who chose to give their money to the barrooms. Poverty was not, in this argument, a matter of accounting for complex social forces, such as depressed wages caused by a large labor force and few jobs. It was a simple equation of alcohol meeting the weakness of man. It was an individual problem. Sam Jones would use this narrative of a ‘fall’ effectively in many of his sermons. As he

⁴⁹ Woodward, *The Origins of the New South*, 51–54.

⁵⁰ “Prohibition Points,” AC, Nov. 20, 1885, 5.

⁵¹ “Prohibition Points,” AC, Nov. 20, 1885, 5.

⁵² “For Prohibition,” AC, Nov. 24, 1885, 3.

asked in his sermon, “A New Creature in Christ,” “did you ever hear of man getting drunk on his knees? ...your trouble is, you have not been on your knees enough.”⁵³ His “lacerating language proved strangely comforting and appealing to many Southerners who heard the preacher tell people to blame no one but themselves for their troubles.”⁵⁴

Yet, the next step was not to leave to the choice to the individual but to place it in the hands of the government. It would be immoral to do otherwise. “Nobody defends the drunkenness,” one prohibitionist argued, “but I say it is a poor philosophy and a miserable humanity which would condemn the drunkard and forgive the drunkard maker.”⁵⁵ Thus, they recognized that this societal ill was contingent upon the social structure itself. They hoped to change that structure to eliminate the possibility of temptation. The law would be their tool. Speaking of the opposition, he went on to say “there are some people who treat with scorn the man who stands on one side of the counter and drinks whiskey while they hold as respectable the shrewd and calculating fellow who stands on the other side of the counter and deals it out.”⁵⁶ Hence, they went beyond the condemnation of the acceptance of whiskey to condemn the men who met the demand for it. The anti-prohibitionist was not just irresponsible; he was malicious. Even a prohibitionist movement this early had the distinctively Progressive edge that was suspicious of the adverse effects of unrestrained business. Atlanta’s voters bore the collective responsibility of punishing where the market could not. It was a line of argument that ran counter to the logic of Boosterism whose creed, as historian of Atlanta, Franklin Garrett, summarized, was the “glorification of the capitalist and his way of life; political, economic and cultural unity

⁵³ Samuel Porter Jones, *Sam Jones’ Own Book: A Series of Sermons* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 370.

⁵⁴ Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 174.

⁵⁵ “For Prohibition,” *AC*, Nov. 24, 1885, 3.

⁵⁶ “For Prohibition,” *AC*, Nov. 24, 1885, 3.

between the South and the East.”⁵⁷ Here, the Progressive and the Booster were at odds in what they wished to glorify. While the concrete benefits of economics were often at the center of Boosterism, morality and the uplift of society through individual conversion was the core of the prohibitionist strain of Progressivism.

Still, they could not stop with an argument largely grounded in ethical and social progress, convincing as it was to many. They had to fight in the terms of the business community as well. Prohibition had to be an economically wise decision to maintain its moral legitimacy. It would not ruin business. They had testimony after testimony on their side. Perhaps, as one businessman argued, the effects would be negligible. Mr. W.A. Moore observed that business would simply transfer to other sectors.⁵⁸ Prohibition would have no great effect.

Others, however, went further. They claimed that the city’s image would markedly improve and, with that, Atlanta would improve. This was clearly expressed in the testimony of J.W. Rankin after the 1885 prohibitionist win. “Every dollar of my property is in Atlanta and I consider it worth more twenty-five per cent more today than it was worth yesterday.”⁵⁹ The material reality had not changed, but “the people of the north and west are looking at us and they tell me they consider [sobriety] a most important thing for the solid prosperity of the city... I know a Chicago man who is coming here to invest a hundred thousand dollars because we have gone for prohibition. I do not look for any depression that is even temporary.”⁶⁰ Although a loss of actual goods traded was certainly coming, it would be made up for by the way outsiders perceived Atlanta after its ethical decision.

⁵⁷ Garrett, *Atlanta and Environs*, 204.

⁵⁸ “Mr. W. A. Moore’s Views,” *AC*, Nov. 27, 1885, 7.

⁵⁹ “The Day After,” *AC*, Nov. 27, 1885, 7.

⁶⁰ “The Day After,” *AC*, Nov. 27, 1885, 7.

It was a dual strategy, perhaps. On the one hand, the industrious rising middle class's spokesman, Henry Grady, credited his success to abstaining from alcohol.⁶¹ This industriousness gave Northern businessmen faith in the city. One visitor to the city remarked on the "excitement" of a banquet hall filled with Atlanta's business leaders who had each "forgotten his wife, his home, his father, his mother, his sweetheart. Atlanta was the all in all."⁶² Their rejection of alcohol would be a symbolic rejection of all things unproductive, a publicity move for the South's 'best advertised' city.⁶³ It would be yet another way to distinguish the city, already becoming known for its "brisk men, energetic of movement and speech," from other Southern cities, such as Charleston, whose "conservative ways became more firmly entrenched and efforts at community enterprise suffered repeated and demoralizing failures."⁶⁴ On the other hand, prohibition could have tried to shake their reputation beginning in the 1860s as a 'lawless' place.⁶⁵ Its burgeoning theaters drew 'tough customers' while farmers came from "isolated rural districts into the city by the thousands" for their entertainment industry including 45 saloons by 1876.⁶⁶ This was a terrible name for Atlanta to have for clergymen who believed that the "occupied a crucial position of leadership in the South, that it was a 'city set upon a hill.'"

Atlanta's "vocal, well-organized, and assertive group of ministers" carried an especially heavy burden in the face of skyrocketing membership to churches. They were afraid of congregants who were "frequently less committed to the church and its doctrines than an earlier generation of churchgoers had been."⁶⁷ For them, then, prohibition would be a demonstration of their dedication to leading their congregations and the leading city of the region. It would be a

⁶¹ Nixon, *Henry W. Grady*, 20.

⁶² Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South*, 136.

⁶³ Russell, *Atlanta, 1847-1890*, 240.

⁶⁴ Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South*, xiii-xiv.

⁶⁵ Goodson, *Highbrows, Hillbillies & Hellfire*, 34.

⁶⁶ Russell, *Atlanta, 1847-1890*, 124.

⁶⁷ Goodson, *Highbrows, Hillbillies & Hellfire*, 22-23.

message to their members of their intent and to the region of what the city symbolized. Thus, prohibition could mean different things for different groups, each of them symbolic, each of them demonstrating leadership and rejecting negative images of the Southern city.

It was the same set of diverse allegiances that would make prohibition so popular among diverse groups of Southern Progressives in the 20th century. As historian of Dewey Grantham writes, “prohibition proved remarkably versatile in its effects upon southern sensibilities and yearnings, bringing together such varying tendencies as...the puritanism of the evangelical churches...the need to ‘purify’ the political process...and the economic argument that the saloon ‘breeds disorder and crime and demoralizes the labor system.’”⁶⁸ It could mean many different things for many different reformers through its meaning, its means of implementation, and the problems of the South it fought. In sum, “prohibition tied together most of the reform strands of the progressive era and offered a simple, moral solution to disturbing social ills.”⁶⁹

H.I. Kimball expressed a similar opinion as he weighed in on a debate at the center of the public discussion of prohibition. Many Atlantans wondered what would happen to the Kimball House, “a symbol of the Gate City’s aspirations” and “the most lavish hotel in the entire South.”⁷⁰ It had been built to house businessmen as they visited the city, especially during the showcasing of Atlanta during the 1881 International Cotton Exposition, the Piedmont Exposition of 1887, and the Cotton States and International Exposition of 1895. He contended that “the people of Atlanta did not believe when they saw with pride that superb structure rising that it was but a gorgeous setting for a barroom. The hotel does not depend on the bar.”⁷¹ It was an appeal to

⁶⁸ Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 160–61.

⁶⁹ Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 177.

⁷⁰ Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South*, 38. The Kimball House was featured in several Constitution articles over the course of the Prohibition debates: “The Kimball House and Prohibition,” *AC*, Nov. 22, 1885, 9; “The Kimball House Company,” *AC*, Nov. 23, 1885, 3.

⁷¹ “For Prohibition,” *AC*, Nov. 24, 1885, 3.

beauty, grandeur, and the feeling that the city could not depend on an immoral business. His argument was not, for example, a careful account of the hotel's finances. Their concern was the message prohibition would send rather than the actual constraints it could impose on business directly.

Here, the issue represents one of the clearest connections between Boosterism and the early Progressivism of the Prohibition movement in Atlanta. Both were obsessed with image and believed that prosperity would flow from it. The decision to go dry could demonstrate the Booster's commitment to the "political, economic and cultural unity between the South and the East."⁷² Much of the Northeast had tried Prohibition. This move would demonstrate Atlanta's solidarity and fortitude. Atlanta was an ethical leader of the South. It was not dependent upon alcohol, the climate, exemption from epidemics and disease, railroads, or the "brave, energetic men and...noble, virtuous women". It was great because "Atlanta don't wait on other cities...she will come forward and declare that in this contest she was brave enough, pure enough and grand enough to stand on the side of the right."⁷³ This was the core of the issue for prohibitionists. It was not a matter of calculating all the ways that the city could be hurt in lost tax revenue or crippled distilleries. Instead, it was the belief that Atlanta would prosper through its moral leadership. Prohibition was a message. Messaging for the North was at the center of what the Boosters did.

Similarly, internal unity of will was key to the Booster's vision for what they called a "New South." Thus, the organization gained in the fight should not be used to divide the city. The harmony of Atlanta was key for the prohibitionists since Northern investor confidence was thought to spring from the image of a prosperous Atlanta. As an editorial in the *Constitution*

⁷² Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 111.

⁷³ "For Prohibition," *AC*, Nov. 24, 1885, 3.

declared the day after the election, “Prohibition has been carried. To attempt to carry the prohibition organization into politics will be to uselessly increase the irritation that every good citizen should try to allay. Atlanta needs a hearty union of all her people now, and the prohibitionists should be the last ones to keep them apart.”⁷⁴ As will be explored more thoroughly in the following sections, division meant a variety of things for Democrats. Party division would challenge the Democratic rule, allowing a possible means by which Republican interests could take hold. Then, two things could go wrong. Black could make legitimate political demands without being ignored, and Boosters would not be able to remain unified in voice as they appealed to the North for investment. This division was a crucial point to the prohibitionists whose heavy push on the issue had left the city divided. “Now that victory has come let us...address ourselves earnestly to the task of restoring harmony and demonstrating as far as we can that prohibition is best for all our people and for the business interests of our city.”⁷⁵ They wanted unity after they had won the issue that had divided the city. The “rigid subordination of class conflict in the South to the maintenance of a status quo of a business man’s regime,” a critical part of the Booster creed, meant stability.⁷⁶ Stability brought investment, and investment brought the uplift of the South. Stability, therefore, was paramount.

This idea of Atlanta as a regional moral exemplar had its expression in a series of articles in the conservative *Constitution*. If you had opened the paper to page ten on November 22, 1885, you would have seen a series of letters from other Georgia towns which had gone dry, each testifying that it had been the correct decision. Each argued that the measure had been the cause of economic growth. Pierce County pointed to its “increase of over 60 per cent” in “total taxable

⁷⁴ “A Serious Mistake,” *AC*, Nov. 27, 1885, 4.

⁷⁵ “Prohibition Points,” *AC*, Nov. 27, 1885, 5.

⁷⁶ Garrett, *Atlanta and Environs*, 204.

property” since 1879.⁷⁷ Hartwell contended that “the morals and social habits of the people have been most remarkably improved. The religious sentiment among the people has grown in strength and influence. The farm houses in our county bear the marks of improvement, and everybody is by common consent united and striving for the interest and progress of the county. The trade of our town has improved and is growing better every day.”⁷⁸ Similarly, after singing the praises of their town’s prosperity, Forsyth declared that “prohibition has been a good thing...educationally, morally and financially.”⁷⁹ Each of these letters to the editor ended with a series of names, each that of a prominent member of their respective communities in a show of support for prohibition. They thus emphasized, first and foremost, the financial benefit of the decision. Once the dam of prohibition had been breeched, a flood of economic prosperity could rush forth.

In addition, they emphasized the growth of Christianity and social progress through the “familiar Protestant hope of mass conversion.”⁸⁰ As Reverend George Herron would put it a decade later, the nation could only be saved by “a religious revival such as the world has never known, that shall enthrone Christ in our national ideals, and give men the common will and the power to put the Christ life into social practice”⁸¹ Here, however, prohibition was not caused by a mass conversion but led to it. Alcohol was the barrier, then, to the salvation of society. If a few Christians could pass prohibition, the mass conversion and purification of society would follow. With this conversion would come, as the men of Hartwell promised, unity. Atlanta could overcome its divisions if only prohibition was implemented.

⁷⁷ Left out was that the dates had coincided with the end of a depression.

⁷⁸ “Prohibition in Hartwell,” AC, Nov. 22, 1885, 10.

⁷⁹ “Prohibition in Hartwell,” AC, Nov. 22, 1885, 10.

⁸⁰ Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 196.

⁸¹ Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 196.

Some neighbors even offered more than their encouragement and tales of their experience. A group of businessmen from Flovilla wrote to the *Constitution* contending that Atlanta would be better for business without alcohol. “We unhesitatingly say we prefer to purchase goods in a city where no liquor is sold, and we believe that it will be to some extent harmful to the business interest of Atlanta to vote for the sale of whisky.”⁸² Similarly, 50 of Macon’s ‘best citizens’ declared their “love and admiration for the enterprise, heroism and perseverance now being displayed for humanity.”⁸³ This message from the prohibitionists of that city and each of the others, then, was the moral encouragement the pastors and WTCU members in Atlanta had been waiting to hear.

In their mind, it was a question of the way Atlanta would be perceived by the rest of the South in this Booster-styled early Progressivism. Liquor was an evil that had to be eliminated. Once the law was passed, the problems it caused would be cured. It was not only acceptable, but noble, to use the power of the government to enforce morals in the quickly growing city. The weak individual and the easily corrupted government had to be protected from liquor. The answer to personal weakness and societal decay was to take the temptation away from the individual by an act of the collective.

This was the narrative that would triumph in 1885. Liquor was banned, except for domestic wines, in 1885 by a narrow majority of 216. The law went into effect on July 1, 1886. It came up for another vote in December of 1886 but was not overturned. Then, “the city went wet by 817 votes, the county by 305” on November 26, 1887.

⁸² “And Still they Come,” *AC*, Nov. 23, 1885, 3.

⁸³ “The News in Macon,” *AC*, Nov. 20, 1885, 2.

This change in tides was due to a few changes that had taken place over the course of that year. First, “Atlanta’s economy, admit it or not, had been adversely affected by prohibition.”⁸⁴ The city budget of \$674,252 for 1886 had been “exceeded by some \$14,000, nearly all of it (\$12,000) representing income from wine-room licenses.”⁸⁵ As the anti-prohibitionists would cry time and again, the loss of trade resulting from prohibition was the real effect of the decision. Second, the law was impossible to enforce. Many bars either continued serving liquor in open defiance of the law or simply moved their operations behind boarded up windows.⁸⁶ Druggists and local wineries, who could continue to operate even under the law, were flooded with customers.⁸⁷ The economic and practical realities were approaching those narratives of the anti-prohibitionists. Finally, black voters had experienced betrayal on two fronts. They had been promised political support as a result of their alliance with the prohibitionists. The promises had not been honored.⁸⁸ “Then, as soon as all-Negro bars were shut tight, the Kimball House, Big Bonanza, and others re-opened for white trade only.”⁸⁹ Thus, the black voters whose support allowed the prohibitionists a slim majority in 1885 had been lost when anti-prohibitionist claims that the law would be used to ‘enslave’ blacks looked more true than the political and moral promises of the prohibitionists. A majority of Atlanta’s citizens had accepted the prohibitionists’ narrative in 1885, but by 1887 they had rejected it. What, then, was the narrative the anti-prohibitionists offered?

Their general position was a balance between easy moral opposition to drunkenness, the practical influence of the state, and a conception of the individual and his business as free to

⁸⁴ Moore, “The Negro and Prohibition in Atlanta, 1885-1887,” 48.

⁸⁵ Moore, “The Negro and Prohibition in Atlanta, 1885-1887,” 49.

⁸⁶ Moore, “The Negro and Prohibition in Atlanta, 1885-1887,” 45–47.

⁸⁷ Moore, “The Negro and Prohibition in Atlanta, 1885-1887,” 45.

⁸⁸ Hornsby, *Black Power in Dixie*, 20.

⁸⁹ Moore, “The Negro and Prohibition in Atlanta, 1885-1887,” 45.

continue without undue interference. Alcohol, they said, may be an evil, but it was a ‘necessary one’. The individual may be weak, but that was a problem the individual would need to solve. It was not a cause for government intervention. Moreover, the government could not do anything to stop the problems that alcohol caused because it would not be able to stop alcohol. The forces that demanded it would remain. Thus, their narrative shied from the abstract, focused on the concrete, and rejected the notion that the government should intervene in individual affairs.

Central to their argument were the effects the decision would have on business. Barrooms could not be considered separately from “the wholesale liquor houses and all other places where beers, liquors and wines are sold, except domestic wines... [The prohibitionist] votes to close up the brewery.”⁹⁰ An entire sector of the economy would shut down. The lost business would echo through the economy as a whole. “Men will lose employment: hackmen, draymen, hotel waiters, clerks, and others employed, because of the travel induced by the sale of liquors here failing to longer stop here.”⁹¹ It would hurt real estate, they said. “It wipes out property that is now held in accordance with law” while “the comptroller-general’s report shows that in the prohibition counties the value of town property has decreased.”⁹² It would even hurt doctors, based, as their business was, on the medicinal use of alcohol. “If a man’s child should be dying, and the doctor thought nothing would save him but brandy...he could not get it to the dying child.”⁹³ Thus, their fears were grounded in the interconnected nature of Atlanta’s economy, which was based upon trade. Liquor was an important piece of that trade.

The anti-prohibitionists often took care to separate this concern from their position on alcohol more generally. As one of the editors of the *Atlanta Constitution*, Evan P. Howell, put it

⁹⁰ “For the Sale,” *AC*, Nov. 20, 1885, 7.

⁹¹ “W. A. Pledger to the Colored People,” *AC*, Nov. 24, 1885, 4.

⁹² “For the Sale,” *AC*, Nov. 20, 1885, 7.

⁹³ “For the Sale,” *AC*, Nov. 20, 1885, 7.

in a speech in 1887 when prohibition was up for repeal, “I do not object to anything that is necessary to restrain liquor, but when they tell me we are going to destroy a trade and that it shall not exist, they are attempting to do an impossibility and a thing they cannot accomplish, because it has never been accomplished anywhere else.”⁹⁴

Their position was not a moral one in the sense that it prioritized the position on alcohol itself. Instead, it focused on the effects the measure would have in practice. They predicted that it would be impossible to enforce. “Chattanooga, and Macon, and Augusta, and Savannah are not going dry. Whiskey will be in easy reach.... Why, the police could not begin to keep up with the dives where it will be sold.”⁹⁵ Then, after over a year of the law, they pointed out how it had not been enforceable. In his 1887 speech, Howell listed city after city that had shipped liquor to Atlanta, noting the amounts from each.⁹⁶

Thus, they had an alternative explanation for why surrounding cities would applaud the adoption of prohibition in Atlanta. “It tickles me to death to see the papers in other cities,” Howell said, “writing about prohibition in Atlanta, printing long articles about the necessity of it here. Why do they not try it down there? You know they want it here because it is helping them.”⁹⁷ After all, Georgia’s other cities had a longstanding hatred for Atlanta. First, “everyone knew that Atlantans had no regard for proper ancestry [...and that for Atlanta] the road to status lay through an open door through which any white man of capability could pass if lucky, shrewd, and ambitious.”⁹⁸ The men of Atlanta accepted the cutthroat business mentality of the North. They were different from other cities in the region. “Atlantans hurried. They pushed and

⁹⁴ “E.P. Howell’s Speech,” *AC*, Nov. 20, 1887, 10.

⁹⁵ “For the Sale,” *AC*, Nov. 20, 1885, 7.

⁹⁶ “E.P. Howell’s Speech,” *AC*, Nov. 20, 1887, 10.

⁹⁷ “E.P. Howell’s Speech,” *AC*, Nov. 20, 1887, 10.

⁹⁸ Davis, *Henry Grady’s New South*, 55.

shoved.”⁹⁹ Furthermore, their politicians had ruthlessly promoted the city in competition with other Georgia cities and towns.¹⁰⁰ The feud between Macon and Atlanta over the location of the capitol, for instance, was so strong that Macon tried to obtain it as late as 1925, almost half a century after it had been moved.¹⁰¹ E.P. Howell, a man intimately involved with the business community of Atlanta and the competition for the control of Georgia’s economy, worried about the relative decline of the city in the state and region. His competitive business mindset was the mode of Boosterism that governed his view of Prohibition.

Perhaps even more important to the anti-prohibitionists, though, was their different idea of the relationship of the individual to society. As Howell said:

We must grow up a self-reliant people. Is a man calculated to be self-reliant who says ‘I will or I will not take a drink of whiskey,’ as one who has to be nestled and cradled, and has to lean up alongside of a prohibitory statute? [Great cheering.] The freedom of this country rests in the intelligence of its citizens. It rests in the education of its citizens to use self-denial, and laws which are recalculated to weaken that sense of self-reliance should be avoided.¹⁰²

Howell had connected the greatness of not only Atlanta, but of the country, to the American’s ability to take care of himself. Society constrained the individual. This stood in clear opposition to the prohibitionist’s argument that the individual needed protection from the predatory liquor man.

Perhaps the most revealing expression of this view was a story told by a German immigrant on the eve of the 1885 vote. He “had a few years ago visited his old home in Germany. He explained what a glorious country this was—a man could do as he pleased and eat and drink what he pleased and it was nobody’s business.”¹⁰³ It had changed. He said that “if a

⁹⁹ Davis, *Henry Grady’s New South*, 55.

¹⁰⁰ Davis, *Henry Grady’s New South*, 55–94.

¹⁰¹ Davis, *Henry Grady’s New South*, 60.

¹⁰² “For the Sale,” *AC*, Nov. 20, 1885, 7.

¹⁰³ “For the Sale,” *AC*, Nov. 20, 1885, 7.

man is not a prohibitionist hardly any name is too hard for him. Now he would hang his head to talk to his German friends about liberty in America.”¹⁰⁴ He was living proof that Europe was moving toward a society in which the mob overran the individual. The image was connected to such events as the Paris Commune and the socialist revolts in Europe.¹⁰⁵ Was this not the force that was threatening Atlanta in prohibition? It was a mob rule, a bullying by the majority. As Howell put it, “they want to take care of somebody else. I do not want them to take care of me. If I suffer any ill consequences about what I eat or drink, I do not have to be accountable to my neighbor for it; I have got to be accountable to my God and myself.”¹⁰⁶ Thus, the debate over prohibition was simultaneously a debate over what responsibility a person had to his fellow citizens. How could Atlanta best be his brother’s keeper: by leaving him to defend himself or by shepherding him past temptation? Only the Progressive feeling given life by the Social Gospel would push the conservative Southerner to the latter.

Similarly, the two sides held implicitly differing views of what constituted a democratic discourse. The undemocratic citizen was the emotional one. “The substantially emotional nature of the crowd, uncontrolled by the rationality commonly considered a primary characteristic of the democratic citizen” was Howell’s enemy as he criticized Henry Grady’s style of oratory.¹⁰⁷ Grady “may be more eloquent upon sentiment than I am, but if I do not come closer to the argument upon this question and the facts involved than he does, I will give up the question. [The prohibitionists] deal in sentiment; they discuss doctrines that are not in issue now.”¹⁰⁸ The prohibitionists were sentimental. They had not grappled with the facts. By implication, then, they

¹⁰⁴ “For the Sale,” *AC*, Nov. 20, 1885, 7.

¹⁰⁵ Daria Frezza, *The Leader and the Crowd: Democracy in American Public Discourse, 1880-1941*, trans. Martha King (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 21.

¹⁰⁶ “E.P. Howell’s Speech,” *AC*, Nov. 20, 1887, 10.

¹⁰⁷ Frezza, *The Leader and the Crowd: Democracy in American Public Discourse, 1880-1941*, 17.

¹⁰⁸ “E.P. Howell’s Speech,” *AC*, Nov. 20, 1887, 10.

were undemocratic, from their emotional approach to their willingness to legislate the individual's morality. They relied more on message than on the reality created. Thus, when Atlantans debated prohibition, they spoke of more than the presence of a drink. They spoke of the society and the individual, of what made and would make Atlanta great, and of how democracy itself would function in their growing city.

The experiment with Prohibition in Atlanta from 1886 to 1887 came out of a renewed public interest in politics. Atlantans had moved quickly from concern with corruption to the social issue that would later become the heart of Southern Progressivism. The debate took many of the same forms as that later period and constituted an earlier 'Progressivism' in its own right. Yet, it was, due to its location in Atlanta, a debate unique to a city. On either side of the debate were different elements of the New South Booster's concerns. The Prohibitionists emphasized message, morality, and leadership. Atlanta would prosper through the image it projected. Their opponents tended to emphasize the practical business side of the law's effects, seeing trade as key to Atlanta's success. Each was a piece of the Booster vision of Atlanta's future, making the debate between alternative 'Boosterisms.' More fundamentally, though, it was a debate over the role of the state in the future of Atlanta. The Prohibitionists fought the encroaching 'demon rum' by advocating the use of the state. Their opponents championed the individual's freedom from constraints by the majority. That year, then, constituted a testing of an alternate set of values for Atlanta. After they were found impracticable, however, they were rejected. Still, it was not the final rejection for the period of 'Progressive' values more generally. In 1888, the municipal elections saw a candidate in Walter Brown who would bring an alternate set of issues to the people of Atlanta in his bid for mayor.

1888: A Failed Challenge to Conservative Rule

In Jackson Lears's summary of Progressive Reform as an expression of desire for 'revitalization,' he notes that Progressives "wanted to use government to change people's behavior in unprecedented ways: to end class conflict, to control big business, to segregate society, or to sober it up."¹⁰⁹ Each of these movements was present in each year of the political reawakening of the late 1880s in Atlanta. The fight for prohibition, for example, also included the themes of regulation and education. Race relations were a problem that ran through both periods but would, by the 1889 election, be 'resolved' except for the blacks' brief attempt at political independence from whites in 1890. Yet, if the prohibition question dominated municipal politics from 1885 to 1887, 1888 saw the shift to other Progressive values.

The shift occurred in response to Democratic hegemony and the conditions of the city they ran. After the previous years of division over prohibition, Henry Grady urged those not included in the Conservative agenda "to put aside questions about representation or 'any of these little side issues'" and "work with conservative men for the good of the whole city."¹¹⁰ This was the platform upon which the conservatives would run, and win, the race. Leave the prohibition issue behind for the sake of unity, Boosterism, and the implicit exclusion of black voters. Their mayoral candidate was a prominent judge named John T. Glenn. He promised that "the prohibition question is to be left absolutely and entirely out of city government."¹¹¹ The resulting idea was that he could be elected by a 'unified' people "on the platform, 'Atlanta'."¹¹² That is, along with Henry Grady and the others who called for unity after the defeat of Prohibition in 1887, the conservatives built their campaign upon a unified white population. Prohibition had

¹⁰⁹ Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877–1920* (New York, HarperCollins Publishers, 2009), 195-6.

¹¹⁰ Russell, *Atlanta 1847-1890*, 211.

¹¹¹ "An Even Thousand," *AC*, Dec. 7, 1888, 4.

¹¹² "The Triumph of Conservatism," Dec. 6, 1888, 4.

been *the* issue which divided them. When divided, they had to court black voters to secure a majority. Without that division, they would have no need to include black voters at all. Indeed, the conservatives made no effort to offer anything to black Atlantans on their 1888 ticket.¹¹³ Thus, they could move on from political division to secure the Booster goal of investment in the city. As Glenn said, “the idea is to make the next two years an era in the history of manufactories—a general awakening. The old Atlanta has been asleep. Let’s wake it up.”¹¹⁴ It was the same idea that would come to full fruition in 1889: Exclude the black population to eliminate class and social differences among whites so that the Booster agenda could proceed unchallenged in municipal governance.

Debate over this vision for Atlanta came into the open when “the leading businessmen put together a conservative ticket that was equally balanced between wets and dries” while excluding completely both blacks and white manual laborers.¹¹⁵ Many black voters were angry at their exclusion and already skeptical of ‘good government’ tickets after having been betrayed before. In opposition to the conservative ticket, the Mutual Aid Brotherhood, white anti-prohibitionists, and reform-minded conservatives created a people’s ticket to bring together working-class white and black voters.¹¹⁶ Thus, the anti-conservative campaign contained groups with a wide range of grievances against the Atlanta establishment. Although the campaign was eventually defeated at the polls, it was one of the most significant runs against the conservatives that had been tried.

¹¹³ Alton Hornsby Jr., *Black Power in Dixie: A Political History of African Americans in Atlanta* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2009), 21–22.

¹¹⁴ “An Even Thousand,” *AC*, Dec. 7, 1888, 4.

¹¹⁵ Russell, *Atlanta 1847-1890*, 211.

¹¹⁶ Russell, *Atlanta 1847-1890*, 212.

One of those groups, the Mutual Aid Brotherhood, was the political arm of the Knights of Labor, who were at the height of their power in Atlanta with around 4,000 members.¹¹⁷ In Atlanta much of their political organization, through the Mutual Aid Brotherhood, had come in the previous three years. As was explained when disbanding only a few days after the 1888 city elections, the M.A.B. felt that “there was nothing left to do as an organization” since it “had been created for the purpose of defeating prohibition,” which the voters “had swept away.”¹¹⁸ However, before it disbanded, the strong organization developed in those years was used to organize white working-class and formerly anti-prohibitionist voters behind the anti-conservative ticket lest men who would call for prohibition again be elected and reinstate it. Across the South, though, the Knights were busy organizing local chapters of men and women, black and white under a banner of opposition to concentrated power and support for a range of other social issues.¹¹⁹ Their fifty thousand members “agitated for bureaus of labor statistics, consumers’ cooperatives, the eight-hour day, the abolition of convict labor,” and so on.¹²⁰ They had a large black membership in the South and espoused an ‘egalitarian ideology.’¹²¹ As we will see in the case of Atlanta, the Mutual Aid Brotherhood was an organization in which one set of ‘progressive’ ideas, such as social justice and education, could align against another ‘progressive’ issue, prohibition. Thus, once organized, they would press for much more than the decisive end to their opponents, the prohibitionists, rule of the city.

They allied with a group of dissatisfied conservatives whose concerns sprang from prohibition but also encompassed other issues. At the meeting in which the conservative ticket was approved on October 9, prominent conservative John B. Goodwin stood to denounce its

¹¹⁷ “The Anti-Conservatives,” *AC*, Oct. 30, 1888, 5.

¹¹⁸ “The M.A.B.’s Disband,” *AC*, Dec. 13, 1888, 4.

¹¹⁹ Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 216.

¹²⁰ Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 216.

¹²¹ Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 234.

organization. Goodwin's chief complaint was the overrepresentation of prohibitionists on the nominating committee, but he also took issue with the exclusion of black voters.¹²² He declared that he believed "the colored people should be allowed representation on the committees. They are a large percentage of our population...if a compromise ticket is presented it should be, indeed, a compromise ticket, and one on which all elements can unite."¹²³

What, then, compelled people to vote against the men who dominated city politics? The day after his loss, Walter Brown, the leader of the people's ticket and their mayoral candidate, summarized his campaign simply. The fiery Atlanta lawyer said he ran "on one leading idea and issue, and that was the people against the monopolies... I do not think it wise that the head of our railroads and municipal government should be virtually controlled by parties not citizens."¹²⁴ Yet, he did not mean this in the most literal sense. The arguments employed during his campaign followed several lines, but each of them fed back into the idea of equality in opposition to elite control, whether in business or in governance. It was a critique of the entire machine that seemed to control the future of Atlanta. In each of Brown's speeches, he touched on several central themes of Southern Progressivism: regulation, social justice, education, and modernization. Though not fully developed in those years, his position was close to that of later successful Progressives of Georgia such as Hoke Smith in 1905.¹²⁵ Thus, his run was, like the experiment with prohibition, a blossoming of Progressivism before the end of winter. Also like prohibitionists, the campaign both shared and challenged elements of the dominant Boosterism of Henry Grady's Atlanta.

¹²² "Heartily Indorsed [sic]," *AC*, Oct. 9, 1888, 4.

¹²³ "Heartily Indorsed [sic]," *AC*, Oct. 9, 1888, 4.

¹²⁴ "An Even Thousand," *AC*, Dec. 7, 1888, 4.

¹²⁵ "In Georgia a spirited anti-railroad movement came to a climax in the campaign of 1905-1906 that swept Hoke Smith into the governorship... Many of the reforms the Smith administration achieved were concerned with the regulation of corporations." (Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 145.)

The first of these challenges was to the monopoly held by businessmen over their employees. Brown lamented that “John Inman owns every railroad in Atlanta.”¹²⁶ “When a man that works for the East Tennessee happens to stay a few minutes late [...and] Mr. Inman says, ‘Get out of here,’” he would be blacklisted from every railroad company.¹²⁷ The man would be forced to leave Atlanta without a place for his skills in the city. The issue for the Brown campaign was monopoly’s effect on workers’ rights. It must have touched a chord with workers both black and white in that era of migration caused by few jobs and an economically lagging region. Moreover, the wealthy were using that power to obstruct the political process. One man, John McGuirk, was on the citizen’s ticket with Brown, but he worked for John Inman. “I will not say that he was made to get off, but this audience can find out why he got off,” said Mr. Brown.¹²⁸ Similarly, Mr. Gentry, another man on the ticket, worked for Hoke Smith. While Brown would not “say that he asked Mr. Gentry to come off” the ticket, when Mr. Gentry gave Brown “his reasons for desiring to leave the ticket they were satisfactory.”¹²⁹ Thus, with both business and politics controlled by the same men, the city’s good governance was in peril.

This kind of centralized power was one of the Knights of Labor’s chief concerns. The South was experiencing rapid industrialization in the 1880s, and Atlanta, with its textile mills and railroads, was no exception. Southern workers organized in the face of industry’s growth to “improve their economic and social status” against an “unyielding managerial opposition.”¹³⁰ Although the workers’ experience in the South as tenants and slaves had accustomed them to “the paternalism and power” of their bosses, their educational and cooperative efforts as well as their use of strikes and boycotts were intended to ‘restructure’ industrial society, a direct affront

¹²⁶ “The Brown Meeting,” *AC*, Nov. 15, 1888, 5.

¹²⁷ “The Brown Meeting,” *AC*, Nov. 15, 1888, 5.

¹²⁸ “The Anti-Conservatives,” *AC*, Oct. 30, 1888, 5.

¹²⁹ “The Anti-Conservatives,” *AC*, Oct. 30, 1888, 5.

¹³⁰ Melton Alonza McLaurin, *The Knights of Labor in the South* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1978), 5.

to centralized, hierarchical power itself.¹³¹ Furthermore, they were not unique in their concern that monopolies and railroads were becoming dangerous forces. It was a worry that extended from laborers to the agrarian Populists, from Republicans to the 20th century's Progressives.¹³² Thus, hatred of this kind of power was a thread that ran through the late 19th century.

Just as monopoly was a corrupting force in business and politics, monopoly over information 'corrupted' discourse. Both *The Constitution* and *The Journal*, the city's two main papers, were opposed to Brown and, as Brown saw it, misrepresenting his campaign.¹³³ They both misconstrued the number of men who backed his ticket and purposefully omitted many of his critiques from their coverage of his speeches.¹³⁴ These omissions and contortions were, he charged, the result of the papers representing the money of Atlanta.¹³⁵ To fight the papers that were thwarting democracy, Brown's campaign had to "tell it from mouth to mouth."¹³⁶ "When the press is unwilling to give both sides in any community, that community is in danger."¹³⁷ Thus, the intellectual community of Atlanta was being shaped by the ideas distributed by the papers, which represented the interests of business and the Boosters. In the face of such a threat to freedom of thought, the recourse was to forming community through collective action. It was just as important to resist ideological hegemony as it was to resist political or commercial hegemony.

This anti-monopoly impulse was one that would arise two decades later in the heat of the Southern Progressive movement. In the early years of the twentieth century, as historian Dewey Grantham writes, Progressives wished to use state regulation in "the interest of an orderly and

¹³¹ McLaurin, *The Knights of Labor in the South*, 33, 52, 113–129.

¹³² Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, Ch. 9, "Southern Populism," Ch. 14, "Southern Progressivism."

¹³³ "The Anti-Conservatives," *AC*, Oct. 30, 1888, 5.

¹³⁴ "The Brown Meeting," *AC*, Nov. 15, 1888, 5.

¹³⁵ "The Anti-Conservatives," *AC*, Oct. 30, 1888, 5.

¹³⁶ "The Anti-Conservatives," *AC*, Oct. 30, 1888, 5.

¹³⁷ "The Anti-Conservatives," *AC*, Oct. 30, 1888, 5.

cohesive community.”¹³⁸ Its expression came in the form of antitrust feeling and the desire for strict regulation of railroads. Many middle-class people were concerned about the social and economic effects of urbanization and wished to control particular vocations and professions. The use of the state was built upon the “assumption that human beings were malleable and could be improved if their social environments were modified.”¹³⁹ Yet, while the anti-railroad movement of the early twentieth century is often seen as largely a product of the agrarian revolt, the Populists, and the insurgent Democrats, it was present in this Atlanta municipal campaign before these movements gained traction in the city. The key, as in the case of Brown’s campaign, was the “perception that privileged business corrupts politics.”¹⁴⁰ Each of the movements shared a common concern that arose when faced with real conditions.

Thus, the thematic connections between later Progressivism and Brown’s anti-monopolist arguments concerning railroads, newspapers, and the corruption of the political process are clear. He advocated the use of the state in the interest of social cohesion and wished to control the conduct of a profession, as with his opposition to control of railroads by one man. He was concerned with the control over local politics which business exerted, as in his experience with several candidates who could not run for office freely due to pressure from business. He recognized human malleability in his worry that political views were skewed by the narrowly controlled Atlanta press. The difference, perhaps, was in the exact focus of critique. Whereas the Progressive opposition to railroads that would occur in later years would target “discrimination, rebates, stockjobbing and stock watering, favoritism, and overcharging,” this period of opposition focused on the effect monopoly had on the railroad workers themselves.¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 111.

¹³⁹ Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 111.

¹⁴⁰ Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 155.

¹⁴¹ Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 381.

Similarly, Brown railed on the distribution of municipal funds for its disproportionate favoring of the rich. One issue was the waterworks. “They were built by the people of Atlanta who pay taxes. You helped to build them.”¹⁴² Unfortunately, he said, “a water pipe runs beyond city limits on Peachtree to supply with water the palatial homes of men who are fighting me.”¹⁴³ His rhetoric, then, harnessed the power of geography to embody the difference between the laborers and their employers. Only the most successful Atlantans could live on Peachtree Street, so the street became a symbol of the ruling elite.¹⁴⁴ The remainder lived in housing provided by the factory that employed them or in mixed-race neighborhoods. Furthermore, in a city where precious tax revenue was a crucial issue to every voter, “Every workingman [at Brown’s rally was] paying taxes to put water in those rich homes outside the city.”¹⁴⁵ Thus, their efforts were not only going outside the city in an era when the municipal was often more important than the state or nation, they were paying for the luxuries of men who could afford to develop utilities on their own. The critique called into question the priorities of men who, at every turn, rallied people under the name ‘Atlanta.’ What were the true boundaries of their loyalty: Atlanta or the limits of wealthy development, the city or their section?

The city had not developed services in the poorer sections of town. Welfare services expanded in the direction of upper and middle class whites over the course of the decade.¹⁴⁶ Street maintenance and illumination favored the business district. City officers argued against the extension of lights into the surrounding neighborhoods, where working class whites and blacks lived, that the “indiscriminate placing of the large arc lights...would be of no public good.”¹⁴⁷

¹⁴² “The Anti-Conservatives,” *AC*, Oct. 30, 1888, 5.

¹⁴³ “The Anti-Conservatives,” *AC*, Oct. 30, 1888, 5.

¹⁴⁴ When Henry Grady became the editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, one of his first investments was in a house on Peachtree.

¹⁴⁵ “The Anti-Conservatives,” *AC*, Oct. 30, 1888, 5.

¹⁴⁶ Russell, *Atlanta 1847-1890*, 222.

¹⁴⁷ Quoted in Russell, *Atlanta 1847-1890*, 222.

This heavily populated area, then, was constituted as a ‘nonpublic’ group as opposed to the ‘public’ business buildings. It reflected the logic of privileging Peachtree Street that Brown denounced and which, as historian James Russell has written, was the reality of development. Water lines outside the business district followed white residences, and only Peachtree Street and the street which led to the reservoir did they extend beyond official city limits.¹⁴⁸ The majority of Atlantans did not yet have access to safe drinking water but were still drinking from the “31 old-styled cisterns kept filled with water by our efficient fire department.”¹⁴⁹ Perhaps the most obvious example of this contrast in services, though, was the sewage system. In this case, harm was distributed unequally instead of services. Several lines emptied into streams “running through a densely populated Negro neighborhood,” polluting their drinking water, and leading to some of the highest death rates from typhoid until 1911.¹⁵⁰ In public services, the poorest bore the brunt of the burden and reaped the least of the benefits.

Brown’s campaign and the state of affairs in late 1880s Atlanta, then, reflected the dynamics of municipal reform campaigns of the Progressive era “directed at entrenched political organizations identified with corruption, vice, and inadequate services.”¹⁵¹ In those later years many of the conditions were the same as in Grady’s Atlanta. Services were unevenly distributed, developing first in upper class sections of town, in response to the rapid expansion of Southern cities.¹⁵² As with Brown’s campaign, “Municipal reform [in the early 20th century], for many urban dwellers, was primarily a matter of an organized campaign against immorality.”¹⁵³ Both Brown’s and later Progressives’ campaigns “mirrored the persistence of traditional values and

¹⁴⁸ Russell, *Atlanta 1847-1890*, 222.

¹⁴⁹ Garrett, *Atlanta and Environs*, 183.

¹⁵⁰ Russell, *Atlanta 1847-1890*, 228. In fairness, however, these conditions were denounced as early as 1889 by a Board of Health report as “a constant menace to the health of the city.” (Russell, *Atlanta 1847-1890*, 228)

¹⁵¹ Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 281.

¹⁵² Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 277–80.

¹⁵³ 289.

the determination to prescribe ‘proper’ standards.”¹⁵⁴ Also like Brown, these later efforts often “revolved around the struggle between a ‘reform ticket,’ usually identified with ‘advanced municipal ideas,’ and ‘the officeholding organization ticket’,” the two of which battled over “proposals for better public services, more economical and efficient administration, and more stringent control of special services and organized vice.”¹⁵⁵ Thus, in its efforts to redress concrete grievances, Brown’s campaign and its context was similar in both general structure and content to later contests to modernize the city in the South.

The wealthy, on the other hand, had begun to develop their separate parts of town in the style of the Northern cities they tried so hard to emulate. In the North, suburbs such as Llewellyn Park in New Jersey and Riverside outside Chicago led the way in housing the wealthy beyond reach of the many. Like so many Northern trends the Atlanta elite would imitate, they followed with the development of Peters Park in the early 1880s and Inman Park at the end of the decade. They could live in their own private communities away from the city where they could raise a family and live in carefully groomed nature.¹⁵⁶

In the context of increasing privilege for the elite who ran the conservative Democrats, the attempt to cut back funding for public education left the anti-conservative voters particularly affronted. At a meeting early in the campaign on October 30, around 7 o’clock a crowd filled the basement of a building until only standing room was left. Brown declared that he was “in favor of free school books” because “all other public schools have free books.”¹⁵⁷ The shoddy conditions and funding of public schools had become one of the grievances of black Georgians at

¹⁵⁴ 289.

¹⁵⁵ Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 287.

¹⁵⁶ LeeAnn Lands, *The Culture of Property: Race, Class, and Housing Landscapes in Atlanta, 1880–1950* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2009), 41–46.

¹⁵⁷ “The Brown Meeting,” *AC*, Nov. 14, 1888; “The Anti-Conservatives,” *AC*, Oct. 30, 1888, 5. The books issue was also discussed in “Local Politics,” *AC*, Nov. 3, 1888; “The Brown Meeting,” *AC*, Nov. 15, 1888; “A Brown Meeting,” *AC*, Dec. 2, 1888, 14.

a meeting in Macon in 1888. Public school ran three months of the year instead of the mandated six, their teachers were only partially funded, and whites seemed generally unconcerned with black education.¹⁵⁸ These cuts and limits occurred as many city funds were spent to promote the city to visitors. One of the public spaces developed largely for outsiders was Piedmont Park, the location of many exposition events. At one meeting, Brown “dwelt at some length upon the \$15,000 which, he said, was illegally held by the Piedmont Park association, of which Mr. Glenn was a stockholder, and said this was the reason why the city had no money to buy school books.”¹⁵⁹ Whether or not this accusation was true, it revealed the connections that poor Atlantans must have made. ‘The conservatives are spending our tax dollars on a park for Northerners while we don’t even have books to teach our kids.’¹⁶⁰

It reflected a later trend in Progressive thought: the return among both blacks and whites to education as the hope for regeneration and, among blacks, more equal conditions in the South generally. As historian Dewey Grantham summarizes, the Progressives “believed with an almost childlike faith, would contribute directly to individual prosperity and well-being, to the economic development of the South, to a literate citizenry, to a more democratic society, and to the freeing of men and women from the bonds of prejudice and superstition.”¹⁶¹ In the first two decades after 1900, they made enormous gains in expenditure on education, the length of the school term, teachers’ salaries, and cutting illiteracy rates.¹⁶² Similar advancements were made in higher education, which, like in the North, aspired to broaden curricula, secularize, and become

¹⁵⁸ Davis, *Henry Grady’s New South*, 140.

¹⁵⁹ “A Brown Meeting,” *AC*, Dec. 2, 1888, 14.

¹⁶⁰ This feeling that the use of city funds was inegalitarian had its corollary in the feeling that the garnering of those funds was unfair. Another issue mentioned, though not often, was the “iniquitous street tax.” (“The Brown Meeting,” *AC*, Nov. 15, 1888) Streets, like other public services, had been paved in the business district and out to wealthy parts of town but not in the poorer communities. The result was that the poorer parts of town were often inaccessible by wagon, especially when it rained.

¹⁶¹ Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 257.

¹⁶² Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 257.

universities rather than simply colleges.¹⁶³ Yet, although they often bettered blacks' educational opportunities, there was a tendency toward pushing 'practical education' upon them in the attempt to "save the whites and not the blacks."¹⁶⁴ Then, even as educational opportunities in the South expanded generally, the gap between funding for white and black schools grew while public support for black industrial education slipped.¹⁶⁵ Schools became both the hope for the South's progress and a clear expression of the limits imposed by the region's racism.

The demands of Brown and the anti-conservatives did not express all the complexities of this later movement, if only due to the short life of a single campaign. However, it contained the logic of the later movement. As Progressive Walter Hines Page would later declare after he "indicted the state [of North Carolina] for its illiteracy," "the people needed a public school system 'generously maintained by both State and local taxation.'"¹⁶⁶ Just as the debate over Prohibition included in it a view of the individual in relationship to society, "The campaigns for education provoked discussion and controversy over the proper role of the state" and "the meaning of democracy."¹⁶⁷ Brown's demands shared this central view. He emphasized the importance of books, an important weapon in the fight against illiteracy. He wanted an educational system in the city that was well-supported rather than undermined as other city objectives were well-funded. It was a piece of a campaign that emphasized responsibility to citizens, especially the least privileged. Thus, the kernel of Progressive support for education was present in his campaign.

Yet, Brown's conservative opponents claimed that these were not real demands at all. They took issue with his use of the momentum and organization gained by the anti-

¹⁶³ Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 268.

¹⁶⁴ Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 259–60.

¹⁶⁵ Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 261–64.

¹⁶⁶ 250.

¹⁶⁷ 246.

prohibitionists in the last election. The ticket had begun, after all, with an anti-prohibitionist conservative who broke with his party to ensure that municipal politics would not be controlled by prohibitionists alone. In response, *The Constitution* smeared the anti-conservative ticket's nominating committee of seventy as "the committee from the saloon men."¹⁶⁸

To some extent, these claims were well-grounded; much of their anger was a response to the ugly years of prohibition. As one speaker at a Brown rally cried, "The leaders of [the conservatives] are the ones that three years ago put Atlanta at a disadvantage, and on a retrograde motion, so far as her business and commerce was concerned."¹⁶⁹ He had reiterated the argument advanced across the board by anti-prohibitionists the previous year. Prohibition was anti-business, or retrograde, as they said, because it hurt trade and production of alcohol, both of which had ripple effects through the economy. Yet, in this election, the anti-prohibitionist sentiment was tied to a larger, Knights of Labor-oriented interpretation of Atlanta politics as against hegemony. "The greatest objection to this conservative movement is that it is an attempt to browbeat the people. It is worse than prohibition itself. It is the attempt of a few people to take charge of Atlanta."¹⁷⁰ This attempt to unite, at least partially, behind the anger of anti-prohibitionists led to two negative responses.

First, a splinter group of working class whites formed a 'People's Ticket.' For those Mutual Aid Brotherhood members, prohibition was the main issue. Since they had been told to ignore the issue by both parties, they decided to form a new Mutual Aid Brotherhood to agitate the 'prohibition question' themselves. Their ticket was all-white or, as they claimed, "the good people of Atlanta" were "on their side." 'Good' at this time, naturally, was a euphemism for 'white.' Thus, their ticket was also response to the inclusion of black interests in the anti-

¹⁶⁸ "The Full Ticket," *AC*, Oct. 23, 1888.

¹⁶⁹ "The Anti-Conservatives," *AC*, Oct. 30, 1888, 5.

¹⁷⁰ "The Anti-Conservatives," *AC*, Oct. 30, 1888, 5.

conservative ticket. Brown's use of anti-prohibitionist rhetoric and his courting of black voters were double-edged swords which cleaved both some voters from the conservative ticket while cutting other voters from his own. Although it carried so little of the vote that *The Constitution* made no mention of it the day after the election, it was yet another factor that weakened the Brown ticket.¹⁷¹

Second, the conservatives said, they had piggybacked that larger conclusion and the support for the ticket generally on the anger still felt at the decision to go dry. Brown was "simply a personal candidate. His endeavor to put himself in the attitude of a candidate of the anti-prohibitionists is entirely gratuitous on his part."¹⁷² His rhetoric was, after all, in direct opposition to conservatives such as Henry Grady who continually requested that Atlanta move on from the question in favor of 'unity.' Those who saw him as a personal candidate, then, would be more inclined to vote for a 'real' party. Indeed, there was something suspicious about one of Atlanta's prominent lawyers at the head of a campaign formed on John Goodwin's anti-prohibitionist break from the conservatives, including the Knights of Labor's Mutual Aid Brotherhood, and catering to the demands of black voters. This did not mean, however, that it was a personal campaign. Instead, it was a complex alliance of anti-establishment interests: dissatisfied conservatives who wished to reform their party, workers who fought for alcohol and various Knights of Labor reforms, and blacks who wanted inclusion in governance. There were a range of issues to oppose in an Atlanta dominated by the Democrats. Thus, the anti-conservatives could seem, in their speeches, like little more than an appeal to whomever would vote for them. This, however, would ignore their real grievances they aired, rooted in the concrete condition of Atlanta.

¹⁷¹ "Prohibition M.A.B.," *AC*, Nov. 11, 1888, 18; Hornsby, *Black Power in Dixie*, 22; "It is Mayor Glenn," *AC*, Dec. 6, 1888, 5.

¹⁷² "Local Politics," *AC*, Oct. 17, 1888, 4.

Brown would respond to this line of argument by characterizing it as a smoke screen. The conservatives pulled the wool over the voters' eyes with the collective desire for the undivided collective. "When you ask them how they stand on the liquor law, they reply, 'Atlanta;' how about Piedmont park? 'Atlanta;' in favor of abolishing street tax? 'Atlanta;' in favor of taking liquor tax or other city funds and buying school books for the children? 'Atlanta.'"¹⁷³ They could not be pinned to concrete positions on issues, Brown claimed, because they were more focused on rhetoric, the center of the Booster method. Indeed, Grady's oratorical style was full of grand ideas and phrases but lacked, often, the detail required to understand the mechanics of his positions.¹⁷⁴ However, this was only the manner of presenting a set of political aims which were very real and quite specific.

Yet, the conservatives' allegiance was neither to Atlanta nor to their party but to the North and its money, Brown would say. His opponent, Mr. Glenn, was the "brother to a man of influence on Wall street" and the leader of "a New York ticket—a Wall Street ticket."¹⁷⁵ His personal ties were a damning indictment of Boosterism and its attempt to create wealth in the South through Northern investment. It was not so much a set of actual alternatives which Brown offered. Indeed, the men of the Mutual Aid Brotherhood were employed in the factories of such native northerners as Jacob Elsas.¹⁷⁶ It was a rhetorical strategy that cast a wary eye to a party that had cast out Republicans and 'redeemed' the South while one of its key voices, Henry Grady, travelled to Boston to appeal to Northern investors. The anti-conservatives thus played on the same cultural loyalties that allowed one of the members of the 'Atlanta Ring,' John Gordon,

¹⁷³ "The Anti-Conservatives," *AC*, Oct. 30, 1888, 5.

¹⁷⁴ See Henry Grady's "The New South" speech. As his biographer, Harold Davis, wrote about Grady's famous speech, "Grady, as he was often accused of doing, had let facts fend for themselves." (Davis, *Henry Grady's New South*, 178)

¹⁷⁵ "The Brown Meeting," *AC*, Nov. 20, 1888, 5.

¹⁷⁶ Kuhn, *Contesting the New South Order*, 9.

to advance to such prominence partially by the scar on his face from the Civil War and campaigning alongside Jefferson Davis.¹⁷⁷ Among many in the South, the ‘progress’ that Northern investment and big cities brought were an object of suspicion if not hatred.¹⁷⁸ Animositities lingered in that defeated land. As an opponent to the New South project, Robert Dabney, said, “to become like your conquerors...would be a deadly mistake.”¹⁷⁹ This way of thinking would carry into the next century as Progressives envisaged as a common enemy the plutocracy of the Northeast, together with its agents, banks, insurance companies, public utilities, oil companies, pipelines, and railroads.”¹⁸⁰ The line that divided the acceptance of the North from continued fear and loyalty to the South could make the prophets of progress a separate species from the men whose city they shaped.

This sense of ‘otherness’ was present in each of Brown’s critiques. As much as it was connected to opposing views of the North, though, it was embodied more immediately in material conditions. While the civic elite lived a paved street with the first streetcar line, blacks and poor white lived alongside one another in rental houses next to sewage dumped within the city limits.¹⁸¹ These men were entirely ‘other’ to many of Atlanta’s poor blacks. The feeling was no coincidence. In addition to the differences in living conditions and control over the city, its impetus could be found in the conservative campaign, which made a point of distancing itself from blacks in order to draw white workers from Brown. Tom Glenn had labeled Brown’s campaign as ‘the nigger ticket.’¹⁸² At the same time, Glenn’s ticket neither included any blacks nor made any pretension that it wanted to appeal to black voters.¹⁸³ Not a single black was

¹⁷⁷ Davis, *Henry Grady’s New South*, 64, 80.

¹⁷⁸ Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 142–174, “The Divided Mind of the New South.”

¹⁷⁹ Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 174.

¹⁸⁰ Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 371.

¹⁸¹ Lands, *The Culture of Property*, 20–21.

¹⁸² “The Brown Meeting,” *AC*, Nov. 15, 1888, 5.

¹⁸³ Hornsby, *Black Power in Dixie*, 21.

allowed to influence the nomination of candidates.¹⁸⁴ As a result, black leaders considered reactivating the Republican Party in Atlanta. They were unsure of their chances of representation on the anti-conservative ticket. They knew they would not receive it on the conservative one. Some favored a straight Republican ticket while others wanted to wait to see what Brown decided to do.¹⁸⁵

Thus, in response to the conservative ticket's actions and the attempted revitalization of the Republican ticket, Brown courted black voters by offering them representation and demonizing his opponents for their political and personal treatment of Atlanta's black population. The conservative ticket was full of men who discriminated against blacks. Mr. Brotherton "kicks people out of his store" while another, Jim Anderson, was a judge that gave unfair sentences to blacks.¹⁸⁶ An unfair sentence in those days meant time in a chain gang. Thus, Glenn's ticket was linked to Georgia's increasingly notorious convict-lease system. For Atlanta's poorer blacks, the conservatives were represented as apparatuses of a state structured against them. Similarly, Glenn himself was denounced for his "severe...treatment of prisoners in court" and his vote against blacks being able to teach in black schools.¹⁸⁷ In addition to these compounded grievances against individuals, "it was the conservative meeting in this ward slammed the door in the face of the colored men seeking representation."¹⁸⁸

Brown, on the other hand, entertained black demands of representation in the county courthouse, the police department, and the fire department.¹⁸⁹ Unfortunately for his campaign, he acquiesced to few of their demands. The anti-conservative platform called for a black fire

¹⁸⁴ Hornsby, *Black Power in Dixie*, 21.

¹⁸⁵ "Nothing Settled," *AC*, Oct. 19, 1888, 5; Hornsby, *Black Power in Dixie*, 21–22.

¹⁸⁶ "The Brown Meeting," *AC*, Nov. 15, 1888, 5.

¹⁸⁷ "A Brown Meeting," *AC*, Dec. 2, 1888, 14; "The Brown Meeting," *AC*, Nov. 15, 1888, 5.

¹⁸⁸ "The Brown Meeting," *AC*, Nov. 14, 1888, 1.

¹⁸⁹ "The Local Fight," *AC*, Oct. 24, 1888, 4.

company and segregated schools but put no black men on their slate.¹⁹⁰ It was the same problem the Knights of Labor had across the South. While they wanted to align themselves with black laborers in their common economic interest, ultimately, they failed to overcome racial differences and the prejudices of the white working class.¹⁹¹ Moreover, black voters had been promised much in the previous years for their allegiance to one ticket or another while they received nothing in return. Thus, many blacks felt that the ticket had not given what they needed for their support. The sincerity of the anti-conservatives was in question along with the possibility of any real representation in the end.

Additionally, certain aspects of Brown's campaign unintentionally alienated potential black allies. First, the call to cut off water to Atlantans on Peachtree implied also cutting off water to the all-black Clark University. Second, his class-conscious campaign only leveraged the arguments of prominent white Republicans who argued that blacks should prove that they were deserving of enfranchisement by voting with the 'best' of the people. Additionally, given that "black Atlanta already contained a sizable middle-class and upper-income community, it was not difficult for many black politicians to see an affinity with the 'better element' of whites."¹⁹² Black Atlantans controlled almost 300 firms or organizations and owned between nine and twelve million dollars worth of property.¹⁹³ The Brown ticket, on the other hand, were "the hardest crowd" one momentary supporter "had ever seen."¹⁹⁴ A ticket organized largely on the support of the working class had serious shortcomings when compared to the democrats, whose ranks included successful men such as newspaper editors, judges, and factory owners. The Brown

¹⁹⁰ Hornsby, *Black Power in Dixie*, 21–22.

¹⁹¹ McLaurin, *The Knights of Labor in the South*, 131–32.

¹⁹² Hornsby, *Black Power in Dixie*, 22.

¹⁹³ Davis, *Henry Grady's New South*, 137.

¹⁹⁴ Russell, *Atlanta, 1847–1890*, 213.

ticket met in basements in each ward of the city. The conservatives met in city hall.¹⁹⁵ While “he did not like to vote for democrats...the conservative ticket was the best thing in sight.”¹⁹⁶ Thus, Brown’s class critiques would divide Atlanta’s black voters rather than unify them against the conservatives.

It reflected the divide in the black community over how to proceed that ran through the Progressive era. Most followed Booker T. Washington’s strategies of accommodation, acquiescence, practical training over the humanities, equality through the market, and the general platform of the Atlanta Compromise: “the trading of black political activity and integration for black economic progress.”¹⁹⁷ However, the nature of the Compromise meant that the returns would become contested. While disfranchisement and segregation were real and immediate, economic development for blacks was an uncertain, lengthy process.¹⁹⁸ A minority of the black leadership came to view the strategy as inadequate for achieving more complete progress. As a conference for equal rights in 1906 would summarize, “We do not deny that some of us are not yet fit for the ballot; but we do affirm that the majority of us are fit—fit by our growing intelligence, our ownership of property, and our conservative law-abiding tendencies.”¹⁹⁹ Thus, the acquiescence of the majority to Southern values and the progress of many blacks proved that they should have real political demands met immediately. The declaration went on to proclaim that “in any case certainly disfranchisement and oppression will not increase our fitness, nor will they settle the race problem.”²⁰⁰ In other words, acquiescence to white demands that blacks remain subordinate would not get them anywhere. Blacks were left to choose between unlikely

¹⁹⁵ “Heartily Endorsed,” *AC*, Oct. 9, 1888, 4

¹⁹⁶ *AC*, Nov. 28, 1888.

¹⁹⁷ Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 233–35; Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 322–25, quote from 325.

¹⁹⁸ Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 325.

¹⁹⁹ Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 243.

²⁰⁰ Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 243.

political progress with the promise of greater racial animosities, on the one hand, and sacrificed political demands with the possibility for economic advancement through white's paternalistic governance, on the other.

Atlanta's black voters were stuck in a very similar bind in 1888. Many black leaders encouraged their base to vote for the city's 'best men' in the attempt to appeal to their better sense even as the conservatives offered them nothing. Others voted for Walter Brown as a candidate that voiced their grievances even though he represented the largely hostile white working class. As Edward Ayers summarizes, "thousands of blacks had adopted Washington's strategy before they had even heard of him." The divisions that would later arise across the region were already represented in 1888 Atlanta as black men who focused on "business, property accumulation, and education" advocated something approximating the abandonment of political hope.²⁰¹ From the perspective of the more successful blacks, "politics was not so much an instrument of democracy as a weapon of those who would set the races against one another."²⁰²

The resulting failure to gain more blacks' support was one of the key factors in Brown's lost mayoral bid. The scene at a Republican meeting late in the campaign was telling. The Republicans had decided not to run their own straight ticket, but the assembly of 180 ended with the almost unanimous adoption of a motion that they endorse the conservatives.²⁰³ While many blacks voted with Brown as the candidate that at least offered them something, much of their would-be support went to Glenn and the conservative ticket. Which would be their strategy for progress: toil under a paternalistic structure or demanding more equal treatment directly and immediately?

²⁰¹ Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 326.

²⁰² Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*, 326.

²⁰³ "A Republican Meeting," *AC*, Nov. 27, 1888, 8.

However, Walter Brown and the anti-conservative ticket lost across the board to the conservatives and John Glenn for a number of reasons. Each of them was a different form of division. Black voters were divided between voting for the ‘respectable’ Atlantans, who controlled government and investment, and the poorer anti-conservatives, who offered them some control but had little experience in exercising power. Religious affiliation and class loyalties were additional divisions among black Atlantans. Brown’s attempts to draw in black voters allowed the conservatives to play off many white Atlantans’ racial prejudices. Similarly, his attempt to leverage the anti-prohibitionist sentiments of the previous years backfired by pushing away prohibitionist elements of the working class. On the conservative side, Glenn was able to use a simple, but effective, narrative of unity for the sake of Atlanta. Voters knew what they were getting with the conservatives, a callous but competent elite, whereas their opposition was a collection of tough workers meeting in basements. The inequalities present in the city and highlighted in the Brown campaign could not convince enough voters to further divide Atlanta, vote across race lines, or believe that the anti-conservatives actually had the solutions.

The contribution of the prohibitionist Mutual Aid Brotherhood to the defeat of Brown’s anti-prohibitionist ticket highlights an important piece of the development of Progressive thought in this period. The embrace of one set of Progressive reforms did not necessitate the advocacy of all reforms that would later be seen as Progressive. As Grantham notes, many reformers “were narrowly concerned with one or two issues to the exclusion of broader progressive objectives.”²⁰⁴ The issues were not seen as a ‘package’ of views. Instead, a prohibitionist stance could dictate opposition to Brown’s set of reforms under the circumstances of city politics. The key, however, was that the ideas were coming to the political surface. Regulation, Prohibition, social justice, and education, all cornerstones of the Southern Progressive movement, has been central topics of

²⁰⁴ Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 112.

public debate by 1888. Another impulse would bring this flowering of discourse to a close: white unity against black political power. This conservative force would silence the Progressive voices of the late 1880s just as it would limit the reforms in the early years of the next century.

1889: Consolidated Interests and Excluded Black Voters

The elections of 1889 eliminated the political power of Atlanta's black voters as whites accepted a *détente*. For the conservatives, a white political truce allowed a return to black political exclusion, a key piece of Booster thought. Conservatives could proceed with New South development of Atlanta uninterrupted by 'little side issues,' as Grady would say. They could achieve stability by ending ward politics through what, we will see, was the proven method of mass meetings. Against a united white vote, blacks could not use their influence among factions. Whites accepted that many of their demands would not be met under this new consensus after Brown's campaign failed, Prohibition had become a mostly dead issue, and Boosters had made much recent progress in developing the city. It was a situation that paralleled the later years of Progressivism 'for whites only,' as C. Vann Woodward would call it. Just as Southern Progressivism would later find its limits in racism, the end of the late 1880s democratic debate would come as whites could no longer stand divided against the threatening 'black vote.' This end, however, was not the final blow to 'progressive' reform. Many Booster projects of the day, done both in government and outside it, reflected reforms which became widespread in the 20th century.

Conservatives had two clear reasons to work toward stability through the exclusion of black voters. First, it allowed them to put blacks in their proper societal place. Although Grady's views of blacks were not radical for his time, he understood them as an inferior race and was

unashamed to say so. Ideally, black Atlantans would work hard, outside the political process, without calling the attention of Northern investors whose ire Grady avoided and whose investment the city needed. As Grady would argue time and again to Northern and Southern white audiences, whites would give blacks the “justice in the fullness the strong should give to the weak.” Paternalism was central to Grady and the Boosters’ ‘benevolence’ in which black Atlantans occupied a clearly subordinated position.²⁰⁵

Second, stability meant that conservatives could pursue the Booster agenda unchallenged. They could ignore more easily the various concerns that had come to the surface over the previous years when those groups had no official voice in municipal government. Conservatives wanted to deepen ties to the North to develop Atlanta into a city based on a Northern model. The religious fear of a ‘Northern’ city of temptation that had political expression in the Prohibition years could be ignored. The working class fear of too-powerful Northern industry, Northern investment, and monopoly control of Atlanta’s railroads would no longer threaten hegemony. Similarly, Boosters did not believe it was the time to pursue social equality in the way the Mutual Aid Brotherhood demanded in 1888. Without their political representation, there would be little organized challenge to the uneven development of municipal services. Grady and the conservative business elite of Atlanta would be free to develop industry and trade without the interference of Atlanta’s government but, instead, with its aid.

Conservatives knew from Georgia’s experience during Reconstruction that white dominance of municipal politics lay in the structure of votes themselves. When blacks were enfranchised in 1868 and Republicans came to control legislature, they knew that general assembly tickets would undermine the ability of black voters to get their candidates on the ballot. Black voters controlled only the Third and Fourth Wards of the city at the time. Only with the

²⁰⁵ Davis, *Henry Grady’s New South*, 133–150.

city's voters geographically divided by wards could black voters expect any representation in the state legislature. In response, as soon as Democrats gained control of the legislature in 1871, they immediately reinstated the 'at-large' system. It remained in place for another forty years. Even strong minority candidates such as Augustus Thompson could not expect to carry the city as a whole. He easily won his ward but lost the election with only 21% of the votes. Blacks simply did not have enough voters to carry their own candidates for state offices against the white majority. Thus, the idea of a unified Atlanta had a different meaning than could be understood simply by reading the newspapers of the day.²⁰⁶

Although *The Constitution* contained few explicit acknowledgements of the goal to remove black voters from city politics, the campaign of 1889 was the municipal corollary to the electoral changes made at the state level in 1871. The method by which Atlanta's elite would drown out black voices was familiar from previous years. The period of political reawakening had begun in 1884 with a series of mass meetings "to interest the best people of all classes in good municipal government and prevent rings and cliques from taking the city's affairs into their own hands."²⁰⁷ The desire to reform governance motivated the reformers in 1884 without including a clear attempt to totally excluded black voters, but the technique was the same. "The meetings were carefully staged... The organizers tried to keep power in the hands of chairmen and nominating committees and away from the ordinary voters who attended the mass meetings."²⁰⁸ While maintaining the appearance of public involvement, the actual nomination of men for governance was left to the business and civic elite.

The same method was used in 1889. As a *Constitution* editorial asked, "How shall we get the best men? ...can it best be done by a mass meeting of the people which shall select

²⁰⁶ Hornsby, *Black Power in Dixie*, 16–19.

²⁰⁷ Russell, *Atlanta 1847-1890*, 208-9.

²⁰⁸ Russell, *Atlanta 1847-1890*, 209.

committees from every ward that shall, after deliberation, decide how fit and proper candidates can be chosen?”²⁰⁹ This was the means by which the elite had discovered they could push for efficiency of governance without the uncertainty of candidates, such as Walter Brown, who had independent popular support. The method “has worked well in the past. It will work well in the future. It lifts politics out of the hands of the few in the ward and puts it in the hands of the many throughout the city.”²¹⁰ That is, it lifted decisions out of the local wards, where black voters had majorities, into the municipal, where they did not. “If any principle is settled in Atlanta,” the editorial claimed, “it is that ward politics shall not rule the city.”²¹¹ Popular support had been, and would be, channeled into the reforms that could be approved by the ‘best men’ of Atlanta. It was participation without turmoil and without the necessity of recognizing black interests. The politics of reform were rooted in the very organization of the city itself, its social geography.

The process of consolidating popular momentum began with a mass petition that was published in *The Constitution* on November 13, 1889. It was “the largest call ever made in Atlanta for a public meeting.”²¹² The call had the support of the conservative mayor, John Glenn, and such high members of the business elite as the President of the Chamber of Commerce.²¹³ The meeting took place the following day. “Two thousand people, representing every nook and corner of the city, were present.”²¹⁴ Ninety men were chosen to represent the six wards. They established “that ward politicians can never hope to control this city again,” “that every man who aspires to be councilman or alderman must have enough strength and enough merits to command not only the support of this own ward, but of the entire city,” and “that hasty and irregular

²⁰⁹ “Atlanta and the Citizen’s Meeting,” *AC*, Nov. 13, 1889, 4.

²¹⁰ “Atlanta and the Citizen’s Meeting,” *AC*, Nov. 13, 1889, 4.

²¹¹ “Atlanta and the Citizen’s Meeting,” *AC*, Nov. 13, 1889, 4.

²¹² “Atlanta and the Citizen’s Meeting,” *AC*, Nov. 13, 1889, 4.

²¹³ “Call a Mass Meeting,” *AC*, Nov. 12, 1889, 5.

²¹⁴ “One Hundred Citizens,” *AC*, Nov. 15, 1889, 4.

meetings, called in the wards without authority, will not count when the people get together to make up a ticket for the great city of Atlanta.”²¹⁵ Any force that could take governance or control of the elected officials from the hands of a centralized group of men was considered off the table. After the meeting, the paper congratulated “the city and its people on the happy termination of what promised to be a campaign of confusion and disorder.”²¹⁶

The possibility of Republican opposition was eliminated when the majority outvoted Walter Brown’s resolution.²¹⁷ He wished to have a primary to allow ward election of Republican and independent candidates rather than a nominating convention. Although he was not a Republican himself, Brown had run a successful campaign the previous year, challenging the conservative establishment, by aligning himself with Republicans and other dissenting groups. It was in his interest to fight for the continuation of ward politics. At the same time, he was fighting for what would become a cornerstone of later Progressive politics. Progressive movements across the South often made it one of their first demands since “in the one-party system nomination meant election. The adoption of the primary was in part the fulfillment of the implied pledge of the disenfranchisers that once the Negro was removed from political life the white men would be given more voice in the selection of their rulers.”²¹⁸ Similarly, in Atlanta’s case, without two parties from which to choose and with only a single ticket determined at a mass meeting, a vote casted was little more than a procedural formality. The establishment could only be reformed if they could be pressured. The direct primary was the tool by which the voter’s power could be leveraged.

²¹⁵ “The Mass Meeting and Its Work,” *AC*, Nov. 15, 1889, 4.

²¹⁶ “The Mass Meeting and Its Work,” *AC*, Nov. 15, 1889, 4.

²¹⁷ “The Meeting at Work,” *AC*, Nov. 15, 1889, 4.

²¹⁸ Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 372.

Yet, since black voters had not been disfranchised in 1889, the other men present seemed to have reasoned, the direct primary was “exactly what [they wanted] to avoid.” The conservative civic elite of Atlanta who had led the mass meeting argued that “a division of that sort can serve no good purpose... We are all citizens of Atlanta and should work together for the common good. We are one family. A primary can do no possible good.”²¹⁹ They had the strength of almost the entire two thousand behind them. So many of Atlanta’s white voters had decided that unity was preferable to the close races of the previous years. Brown’s failed resolution was the last of the opposition at the meeting. His attempt to carry reform into the following year was crushed under the weight of the white electorate. The direct primary could not take hold until more than a decade had passed and the black threat was long gone.

The days running up to the election passed rather uneventfully. The committee’s ticket was ratified with no opponents at another large meeting on the evening of November 20.²²⁰ Then, on December 4, the straight ticket was elected without any real opposition.²²¹ Election day was so uneventful that the story did not even make the front page. The first ward was representative of the day’s tone. “The votes came in slowly until 10 o’clock, when a little spurt was taken, and for a while it looked as though a fairly full vote might be cast. The enthusiasm soon died out, however, and a dull monotony of one vote every fifteen or twenty minutes marked the rest of the day.”²²² The results were in the air long before the 4th of December. Beginning with the mass meeting which offered black voters nothing, Atlanta’s whites had decided to

²¹⁹ “The Meeting at Work,” *AC*, Nov. 15, 1889, 4.

²²⁰ “The Ticket Ratified,” *AC*, Nov. 21, 1889, 5.

²²¹ “The Ticket Goes Through,” *AC*, Dec. 5, 1889, 3.

²²² “The Ticket Goes Through,” *AC*, Dec. 5, 1889, 3.

consolidate interests to blacks' exclusion. Prohibition and Brown's class conscious campaign would be the last of contentious elections to threaten the single party city.²²³

The result of this reinstatement of clear Democratic party dominance was a drop in black democratic participation. After no blacks had been appointed to the citizens' ticket's committee, none of them even attended any factions' meetings. The closest thing to representation for black voters was a Republican candidate from the Fourth ward who was soundly defeated at the polls. "It was clear that neither militancy, brokering, nor accommodation had had the effect on the political status of blacks that their leaders desired—a return to public office—and it seemed that much of their unofficial influence had also been lost." Black voter registration had dwindled to just 12 percent of the total possible voters.²²⁴

Yet, why did so many white voters quickly abandon their effort to take control of Atlanta's development from the few? First, the election of the previous year had made clear the difficulties of an alliance between working class whites and blacks. The people's ticket had been defeated, in part, because "blacks had voted heavily in favor of the conservatives."²²⁵ Not only did they distrust the working class, but blacks also experienced a betrayal after the high promises of Brown's campaign. They "had requested but were denied pledges to appoint four blacks...to the police force, four blacks to the Board of Education, two Negro clerks in the county courthouse, and a black candidate for city council."²²⁶ Even in 1888, under a serious challenge to the conservatives, whites were unwilling to commit themselves to a real compromise with blacks. As a result, partially, many black voters went conservative. There were not enough men, white or black, willing to work across race lines. Yet, without this alliance, a challenge to the

²²³ Russell, *Atlanta 1847-1890*, 213.

²²⁴ Hornsby, *Black Power in Dixie*, 23–24, quote on 24.

²²⁵ Russell, *Atlanta 1847-1890*, 212.

²²⁶ Russell, *Atlanta 1847-1890*, 213.

conservative Democratic rule was all but impossible. The election of 1888 had been a demonstration of Atlanta's priorities. It had shown where allegiances lay.

The central division of white voters over the issue of prohibition was a related reason for the absence of a party in resistance to Democrats. One of the prohibitionists' greatest strengths was the support of many of Atlanta's leading men. Prominent Atlantans such as H.I. Kimball and Grady had been advocates that could influence the voters of the city. By this time, such men had moved on and urged the rest of the city to join them. To them, the issue had been proven dead in 1888 when the only ticket to advocate a return to the dry years was so completely routed at the polls as to merit no mention in *The Constitution's* coverage of the election results. Without that key issue on the table, many white Atlantans had no cohesive force to take them to the polls.

Third, the elections took place during a period of increased racial antagonism. Georgia's blacks had begun meetings to air their grievances. An 1888 meeting was called in response to an 1887 law passed to cut off funding from Atlanta University after a handful of white students began attending the formerly all-black institution. Their treatment on trains had worsened in recent years. They had become nine tenths of the laborers in Georgia's increasingly infamous convict-lease system which had either the explicit or implicit approval of even such 'moderates' as Henry Grady. Lynchings were on the rise. Georgia's blacks began to respond to this hostility with hostility, which was covered in newspapers as accounts of riots. Additionally, 1889 was a year of several high-profile cases of hostility toward blacks. For example, during the summer, a gathering of over eight thousand burned effigies of a prominent Republican and the postmaster who had hired a black man to work alongside a white woman at the Atlanta post office. Each of

these developments indicated that many whites were becoming more hostile toward blacks and, thus, even more unlikely to work alongside them for political reform.²²⁷

Finally, the elite had achieved a great deal in previous years. They had brought Atlanta to a place of prominence in not only the South but the nation through expositions in 1881 and 1887. Men such as Jacob Elsas, the owner of the Fulton Cotton Mills, had developed the Georgia Institute of Technology so that Atlanta could avoid “selling [its] old raw materials at \$5 a ton to states that have trained engineers who fabricate it and sell it back to [Atlanta] at \$75 to \$100 a ton.”²²⁸ In 1889 the new Capitol building had been finished, the first streetcar line had become active, Western Union’s Atlanta operation became “the most important telegraph office in the South,” and a new zoo was inaugurated in L.P. Grant Park.²²⁹ Thus, the results of the Atlanta Boosters’ efforts were becoming increasingly tangible. It was the opposite side of the coin regarding wealth inequality. Municipal services favored the rich. Atlanta was a substantially better city for them. Yet, Atlanta was also a better city for everyone.

As a result of these factors, many Atlantans had arrived at a moment of consensus based on the idea of a city run by its ‘best men.’ As an 1889 editorial in the Constitution said, “*All men who know Atlanta will agree that never in the history of the city was it so important that her very best men should be brought to the front as it is today... To put her future in the hands of inefficient or incompetent men is a blunder that will amount to a crime.*”²³⁰ Without a real way to enact the changes that many Atlantans desired, with the success of Boosters in making their city better in many ways, and with the rise in hostility toward the black population among them, the dominant party was able to reclaim control. They were even able to do it with widespread

²²⁷ Davis, *Henry Grady’s New South*, 140–54.

²²⁸ Kuhn, *Contesting the New South Order*, 15.

²²⁹ Garrett, *Atlanta and Environs*, quote on 192, 184–197.

²³⁰ “Atlanta and the Citizen’s Meeting,” AC, Nov. 13, 1889, 4.

support among whites who would otherwise have opposed them. The exclusion of blacks resembled the later ‘contradiction’ in Progressivism of later years.

As C. Vann Woodward would observe, “Southern progressivism generally was progressivism for white men only...”²³¹ Just as California Progressives could advocate the ‘proscription of Japanese’ or Northern Progressives could simultaneously be imperialists, Southern Progressives could combine political and economic reforms alongside white supremacy.²³² A prime example of this impetus was Hoke Smith, a leader in the creation of a citizen’s ticket.²³³ He would later go on to become one of the central figures in Georgia Progressivism as governor overseeing a range of reforms.²³⁴ All the while, he saw no problem with black exclusion from politics from 1889 to his ascendancy through a ‘strong reform movement’ in 1906.²³⁵ While Atlanta’s civic elite valued reform, they could not shed the values of their region: moderation, social order, the gradual rather than the extreme.²³⁶ “The progressives were intent upon the reconciliation of progress and tradition.”²³⁷ Thus, the intertwining of New South and Southern Progressive ideology was present even in the political triumph of the conservative Boosters. It demonstrates the complex claims to ‘progress’ which were at play in late 19th century Atlanta.

That is, although anti-conservative Brown’s call for a more egalitarian Atlanta had died, many of the ‘progressive’ themes of his demands were still alive in the work of the civic elite. These men were organized through the Chamber of Commerce, political alliances, and social

²³¹ Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 373.

²³² Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 373.

²³³ “The Ticket Ratified,” *AC*, Nov. 21, 1889, 5. When the ticket was ratified, he was at center stage. Following a joke that the ticket could never be rejected and, so, the option should be stricken from the meeting agenda, he responded, “‘Oh, that’s all right...the ticket is here for ratification only.’ Nearly everybody laughed.”

²³⁴ Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 375–76.

²³⁵ Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 375–76.

²³⁶ Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 34.

²³⁷ Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 34.

networks. Many of their efforts began in the Boosterism of the 1880s but bleed into the Progressive Era. These men constituted, then, not only intellectual ties to the Progressives but also personal ties. A few examples of their work demonstrates the links in efforts and thought. One of their most important tasks was to lobby against railroad discrimination, an Atlanta problem beginning in the 1870s and a central problem for Progressives.²³⁸ They worked to bring industry to the South like the later Progressives who “assumed that social distress could be ameliorated or prevented through economic development.”²³⁹ The Boosters achieved a major victory for their city when Georgia decided on Atlanta for the location of a new technological institute, just as “the development of the university was closely associated with the southern progressives’ longing for economic progress, industrialization, and ‘material uplifting.’”²⁴⁰ Thus, an important piece of both Boosterism and Progressivism was the New South creed of industry and economic growth. To the extent that this element of thought was present in each, the connection between the two periods is strong.

Although this paper, then, has examined the relationship of political dynamics and rhetorics to later Progressivism, large elements of ‘progressive’ ideas would be ignored if the business community were not accounted for. The defeat of ‘progressive’ ideas in the democratic process may have been wrongly seen as the defeat of those ideas more generally. However, many progressive ideas continued into the next century in spite of these defeats. They were carried with the very people, often, who developed them earlier, under the umbrella of Boosterism. Blacks could be marginalized, prohibition could be stomped out, and cries for egalitarian reform could be silenced by the end of the 1880s, but ‘progressive’ ideas would remain. Progressivism did not necessarily mean egalitarian reform but reform of a more uneven,

²³⁸ Davis, *New Men, New Cities, New South*, 144; Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 150–55.

²³⁹ Davis, *New Men, New Cities, New South*, 148–51; Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 275.

²⁴⁰ Grantham, *Southern Progressivism*, 271.

somewhat 'conservative' nature. Moreover, Southern Progressivism and 'progress' were not one force. Instead, they were a multitude of demands, many of which emanated from diverse sources and many of which were in conflict with one another.

Conclusion

As Atlantans in the late 1880s participated in municipal politics, they debated far more than who would represent them in city hall. The future of their city was at stake. In doing so, they revealed how complex lines of allegiance could lead to positions that simultaneously held both 'progressive' and 'conservative' beliefs. It has revealed how Southern Progressivism's reformist and conservative tendencies had already expressed themselves in both this period of public debate and its end. The lines that separated one group of reformers from their opponents were often not simple matters of belief in one idea or an array of beliefs. They were the result of political priorities which had their origins in both the particulars of Atlanta's politics and the broader developments of the New South.

Atlantans tried to define the boundaries of their city—social, geographical, political, and moral. The city's social boundaries extended, according to the anti-conservatives in 1888, north to Wall Street through ties between Boosters and Northern investors. Its geographical boundaries ran along railways through trade and from the city's center out along Peachtree beyond the municipal borders. Its political boundaries included, by the end of 1889, white but not black voters while its heart remained the civic elite. Its moral boundaries included, excluded, and then included again the entire business of alcohol.

In delineating these boundaries, social actors and ideologies came intertwined with one another, with at times synergistic and at times antagonistic effects. Booster and Progressive

impulses could be said to neither wholly support nor wholly oppose one another. Between 1885 and 1887, the Booster impulse of city promotion and unity would both lend its support to prohibition while its financial sense pressed against it.. The importance of business to the Booster could throw its weight toward the image of Atlanta as a leader or against potentially crippled trade. Then, from 1888 to 1889, the Atlanta Booster's would call for 'unity' would consistently oppose pluralism in municipal politics and the participation of blacks. Yet, it would also advocate some measure of reform to the conservative party through a mass meeting. These men would still work for the economic development of their city. Similarly, the anti-conservative campaign of 1888 would champion broad anti-monopolistic reforms and the funding of public schools while it fought that central piece of later Progressivism, prohibition.

By unravelling the complex allegiances municipal politics in the case of Atlanta, we can better understand Southern Progressivism's roots in the particulars of a local context. Although we can generalize that Prohibition, for instance, had its origins in movements across the South in the late 19th century. We cannot understand what made it fail or succeed without looking into the unusual particulars of each place the impulse arose. Without examining sequence of events that led from a prohibition experiment to a broader call for reform, it is difficult to see how reform itself could gain momentum. If we had not seen the racial animosities built up over several years, we could not understand how the eventual exclusion of black voters was a process of multiple betrayals and attempted to regain power.

In this way, these years in Atlanta reveal the interconnected, contradictory elements of reform in the New South. Southern Progressivism would be similarly conflicted, allowing the suppression of black voices while regulating railroads, battling the conditions of industrializing cities while inviting industry, championing democratic participation along with the technocrat.

Each of their positions was a solution to a particular problem. Each of the solutions came from a variety of sources. The examination of Atlanta's politics in the late 1880s reveals the roots of these later conflicts in values and interests, twisted as they often were.

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