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“Progressive” Encounters

Early Movements for Civil Rights in Georgia: Hard Fought Encounters and Exchange

MORTALITY OF NEGROES IN FOUR SOUTHERN CITIES FOR SPECIFIED DISEASES.
(ARRANGED BY L. M. HERBESAW.)

POPULATION AND DISEASE.	Charleston, S. C.		Charleston, S. C.		Memphis, Tenn.		Memphis, Tenn.		Atlanta, Ga.		Richmond, Va.	
	1885.	1890.	1885.	1890.	1885.	1890.	1885.	1890.	1885.	1890.	1885.	1890.
Population	24,224	28,000	24,285	31,121	52,813	62,795	52,355	63,770	52,775	58,312	19,335	26,188
Consumption	30	194	45	243	80	115	67	139	81	145	50	38
Pneumonia	31	28	25	68	35	56	36	56	68	135	88	165
Total	70	222	70	311	115	171	103	195	149	280	138	203
Rate per 10,000	29.50	87.21	29.31	92.44	31.77	40.09	38.27	42.69	29.23	71.85	19.41	66.89
Cholera infantum	6	45	4	35	9	10	18	16	47	68	22	39
Convulsions	9	45	5	39	6	16	2	19	35	41	22	25
Still-born									68	147	64	138
Total	15	90	9	74	15	26	20	35	105	215	106	202
Rate per 10,000	6.11	29.15	3.94	18.54	2.81	6.07	3.54	7.84	20.14	68.20	18.23	65.31
Typhoid fever	18	15	14	30	22	16	17	12	35	32	7	5
Scarlet fever	2								14	34		
Malarial fever	8	22	11	24	9	39	15	42	4	5	9	28
Diarrhoea	14	30	8	15	4	16	5	10	8	18		
Diphtheria	2	1	5	2	2	1	4	4	4	3		
Total	45	64	38	71	38	42	41	64	56	59	20	11
Rate per 10,000	18.52	19.39	14.56	21.39	6.41	9.92	7.27	13.98	10.65	15.10	8.44	8.86
Serofula	5				2			1	2			
Syphilis	6	1	20	1	1	1	1	4	6	1	1	3
Total	8	1	26	1	3	2	2	5	8	11	1	4
Rate per 10,000	3.22	.87	7.68	.20	.70	.77	.77	1.30	.27	3.59	.16	.85

Table from the Report of the Third Atlanta Conference, Rare Pamphlet Collection, E185.6 D84 1898

The Savannah Men’s Sunday Club

In April 1905, a group of Savannah’s black elite established a dual-natured activist organization – one part civil activism, one part protest – called the Savannah Men’s Sunday Club. Professors of the Georgia State Industrial College for Colored Youth founded the club in order to discuss resolutions to local race issues that were steadily reflecting the Jim Crow and segregationist atmosphere pervading the South. Savannah’s “Talented Tenth” set out to educate the populace on matters concerning public health, education, and enfranchisement through lecture series, church preachings, and publications in the *Savannah Tribune*, the city’s African-American newspaper. They were also determined to bring their cause to the white citizens of Savannah through boycotts, demonstrations, and meetings with city officials.



Down in GA, James S. Silva Collection, 1888 - 1910s, VM2126. This picture was taken near Savannah and exemplifies the conditions that groups such as the Savannah Men's Sunday Club hoped to change.

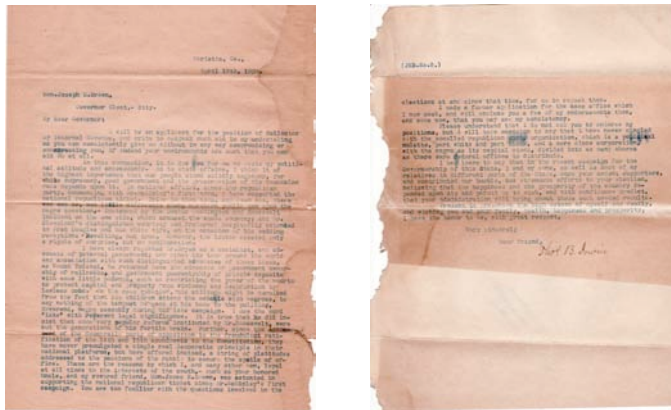
Savannah’s Sunday Club gave publicity to many of the state’s most promising black activists of the time such as W.E.B. du Bois and Henry Hugh Proctor. The most instrumental individual in the club’s founding was Monroe Nathan Work, a graduate of the University of Chicago’s masters program in

sociology, who brought with him a desire to educate both blacks and whites on the sub-standard quality of life plaguing African-Americans throughout the country.

The Niagara Movement in Georgia

During the organization of the Savannah Men's Sunday Club, W.E.B. Du Bois contacted Monroe Work and requested that he endorse what was to become known as the Niagara Movement. The movement provided an alternative to Booker T. Washington's accommodationist stance and challenged Jim Crow law and racial violence through open action.

Du Bois, politically active in Georgia since taking a position at Atlanta University in 1897, also recruited (among others) Henry Hugh Proctor, an Atlanta pastor, and William Jefferson White, the radical publisher of the Georgia Baptist in Augusta. Du Bois placed high regard on local "race men" to carry out the movement in their various communities and he obtained more active members from Georgia than from any other state. These men had all been politically active in the past, and their experiences, when pooled together, established a solid network of activism throughout Georgia. The movement proved short-lived, however, as the 1906 gubernatorial campaign became heated with racist rhetoric and eventually, racial violence.



Thomas Irwin to Governor-Elect Joseph Brown, 1909, Thomas B. Irwin Correspondence, 1889-1912, MS 418. This letter demonstrates some of the obstacles facing black Georgians in the age of "progressivism" and the need for the Niagara Movement.

The effectiveness of the Niagara Movement and the Savannah Men's Sunday Club diminished in 1906 after the bloody Atlanta race riot and the subsequent cementing of Jim Crow law in Georgia. Even in Savannah, where politicians were slow to adopt Jim Crow laws, the black community found themselves under new and intense pressure. Although black Savannahians boycotted the streetcar lines after their segregation in September 1906, costing the lines more than \$50,000, the resolve of Southern whites proved too strong. Many in the black community abandoned the Niagara movement after learning of the bloodshed in Atlanta. They also witnessed the arrests of friends and family members on bogus charges throughout Savannah as white police responded to a general fear of black activism.

The Sunday Club continued to be active until 1911, but due to a lack of unity and apathy among many black elites it was much less a protest organization and more dedicated to civic improvements and accommodationism. Even Monroe Work was of two minds. Similar to H.H. Proctor, he believed that W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington were "complementary opposites." After the failure of protest in Savannah, Work moved into the Booker T. Washington camp, accepting a position at the Tuskegee Institute in 1908. His duality found a voice in later writings through which Work gave two

purposes to black education, one part Du Bois, one part Washington.

Progressive Encounters with the Urban Environment

Since Oglethorpe laid out the original plans for Savannah, its satellite villages, and the defense posts, Georgia's environment continued to be manipulated, built-upon, and conquered by an ever-growing population. As has been shown, a variety of peoples shaped the landscape, much of it on the backs of slaves, and even more of it under the farmer's plow and industrial machinery of the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth. Each era had its disasters – tornadoes, hurricanes, fires, the boll weevil – but with each setback, Georgians regrouped and pressed ahead, with every generation considering itself “progressive.”



Although the term progressive might be a misnomer for the early twentieth century in light of the regressive social policies regarding race, the label seems fitting for city beautification and sanitation programs of the period. In this area at least, Georgia's leaders marched under the banner of Progressivism, and they were determined to rid the state of the trash piled high from years of reconstruction, reintegration, and experimentation. Improving public health became a high priority as did developing the aesthetic appearances of cities.

Marketing Savannah as a progressive city, a place where both agricultural and industrial interests could invest, became the foundation of many local reforms. With the strong possibility of putting a Southern Democrat in the White House and the Panama Canal creating new importance for the Savannah port, optimism marked the season.

John Nolen's Encounter with Savannah

In 1907, Boston landscape architect and city planner John Nolen began designing Savannah's Daffin Park at the request of the Savannah Park and Tree Commission. He had become acquainted with Savannah in 1906 when George J. Baldwin, a commission member, asked Nolen to provide some plans for the city of Savannah, and the architect found the southern city to be a unique urban environment due to its grid-style plan that included numerous parks and squares originally laid out by James Oglethorpe.



Daffin Pool, Edward Girard Collection, VM 1374

In this unique exchange between a man and a city, Nolen left behind a Beaux-Arts influenced park that continues to be enjoyed by the public today. The park's plan – a clean, open area, well-ordered and symmetrical, with ample space and facilities for exercise – fit the mood and general trend of the City Beautiful movement. But what Nolen took with him, the impact of the city on the architect, might be the most important aspect of this encounter and exchange. What Nolen saw in Savannah was exactly what the city officials wanted the nation to see: a beautiful city worth visiting and living in and, most importantly, a city with room for expansion and a place to invest.

Many of Nolen's publications following his experience in Savannah reflected his appreciation for the southern port city and for its founding father, James Oglethorpe. In one instance, while proposing new ideas for Madison, Wisconsin, Nolen provided a map of Savannah's Bull Street to help support his position on the use of open space and terminal points for Madison's State Street. City officials from across the United States sought Nolen's expert advice on city planning and landscape architecture until his death in 1937. Undoubtedly his respect for Savannah reached people who would otherwise never have considered Savannah as a model city. Early in its history, Nolen's Daffin Park seemed to symbolize this far-reaching impact of Savannah as it was used throughout the teens as an airfield for the latest in transportation technology, the airplane.

In 2007, Savannah celebrated the park's one hundred year anniversary, and Bruce Stephenson participated in the GHS lecture series with a presentation on Daffin Park, John Nolen, and the place of parks in U.S. urban history.

The Swat the Fly Campaign, 1912

In the early 1900s, children became the focus of many charitable societies, and children involved themselves in various new organizations such as the YMCA and YWCA, the newly formed Girl Guides established by Juliette Gordon Low, the Corn Clubs and the "Swat the Fly" Crusade.



Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts in Forsyth Park, 1914
GHS Photograph Collection 22:18

The "Swat the Fly" Crusade marked a union of sentiments common in Savannah during the spring of 1912 – the desire to keep children occupied and the need to promote public health. The campaign began on April 10 and officials opened it to anyone under seventeen years of age who wished to enter; no color lines were drawn. The Savannah Morning News conducted the program, basing it on similar events in other cities such as Atlanta. Children swarmed the office on April 8 to obtain their boxes into which they placed captured flies; he who turned in the most won \$10. The program's purposes lay in reducing the number of flies in the city, educating citizens to the dangers flies posed to public health, and how to prevent fly propagation. Various methods brought in flies by the hundreds of thousands. Stale beer proved successful, not only as a fly lure, but as a temperance lesson in the negative effects of alcohol. The Morning News noted that "assault and battery was common among the captured flies and disorderly conduct even among the most staid flies was the case without exception." Eventually young George DeLoach, who employed stale beer as one of many methods, won the prize with a total of 2,199,200 flies.



"Swat the Fly" contestant Johnny Moore. From the Savannah Morning News April 21, 1912, GHS microfilm collection.

Spring Cleaning in Georgia's Oldest City The Slums

The annihilation of so many flies and their potential offspring could do little in 1912 Savannah. As the public health crusade continued, city officials discovered such filth existing below Savannah's surface, in places like the slums and city market, that they called for immediate and strict enforcement of existing ordinances, passage of new ones, and ambitious sanitation programs. The Chamber of Commerce initiated a program to clean the slums and improve the "conditions that surrounded the poorer class of negroes of this city."

Professor Richard Wright, president of the Georgia State Industrial School for Colored Youth and long-time scholar/activist for the self-improvement and education of blacks, brought the sanitation issues to the Chamber's attention by sending them a letter describing the situation and included photographs to substantiate his claims. A city subcommittee was formed and the local Ministerial Association, superintendent of schools Otis Ashmore, and the Colored Civic Improvement League all joined in the crusade. Contests awarding cash and prizes were created to encourage participation in the cleanup and ministers and teachers pushed involvement in the churches and classrooms.

John Ihlder, field secretary of the National Housing Association from New York, came to advise city officials. He found many of housing areas to be overcrowded, breeding places for flies, and many homes to be damp and dark, some "practically built on quagmires." He attributed one of the deadliest aspects of the slums to the "habit among the lowly negroes to keep their blinds and windows closed," their homes almost never receiving the benefits of fresh air and sunshine. Ihlder stated that only education and missionary work would truly solve the problem.

The City Market

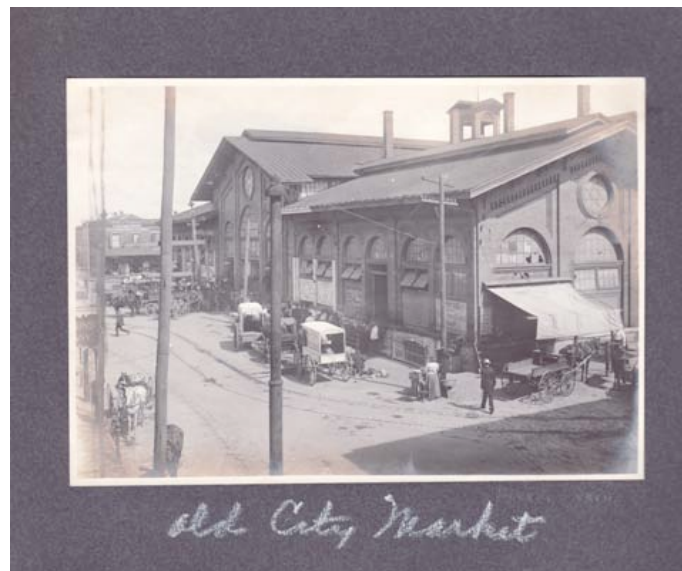
As slum cleanup took off with enthusiasm, Savannah's progressive leaders turned their attention toward edible product points-of-sale such as bakeries and the city market where produce and meat were sold. A city inspector was appointed to make frequent inspections of the meats in the city market. Meat packers had claimed that speculative butchers often purchased large quantities of meat

expecting a rise in prices. The meat then hung in “cooling rooms” in the market basement where the temperatures did not keep the meat fresh long. The basement was to soon become an eye-opening discovery comparative only to Upton Sinclair’s description of Chicago slaughter houses.



Untitled, James S. Silva Collection, 1888 - 1910s, VM2126

Throughout the month of June 1912, the city market dominated the local headlines. Dr. Craig Barrow, accompanied by a government expert familiar with the Chicago situation, found indescribable filth after inspecting the market’s basement. The smell overwhelmed the inspectors. Grime covered the floor; dim, gas lanterns illuminated damp, moldy walls and piles of trash. African-Americans had established restaurants there, some of them even taking up residence despite the awful conditions. Amid the dreadfulness, butchers prepared meats, poultry, and sausage for sale to the public. Store rooms housed vegetables. Flies and rats, though barely visible in the faint light, thrived in the squalor. Immediate attention was needed.



Old City Market, James S. Silva Collection, 1888-1910s, VM 2126

Mayor Tiedeman, apparently frustrated with the slow progress of City Council and the Chamber of Commerce, took action and immediately put the city’s scavenger corps to work. They did their job quickly and efficiently, removing wheelbarrow loads of filth and grime, washing the floors with fire hoses, and whitewashing the walls in a matter of days. By the end of June, stall operators in the market claimed a much-improved environment, especially in the reduction of flies present. A plan

was adopted to bring the market stalls and shacks operating in the nearby streets into the basement. City leaders liked the idea for its dual nature; it cleaned the streets of congestion and unsightly vendor stands while simultaneously putting the basement to good use. The walls of the basement were to be replaced by steel girders and beams creating an open-air environment. Store houses would remain in the four corners for the use of the retailers and market operators.