

GEORGIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY



# GEORGIA BUSINESS HISTORY INITIATIVE

*Sharing the Stories of the Businesses that Built Georgia*



METRO  
ATLANTA  
CHAMBER





**"It's Atlanta" Again...  
"Best Location for Business"**



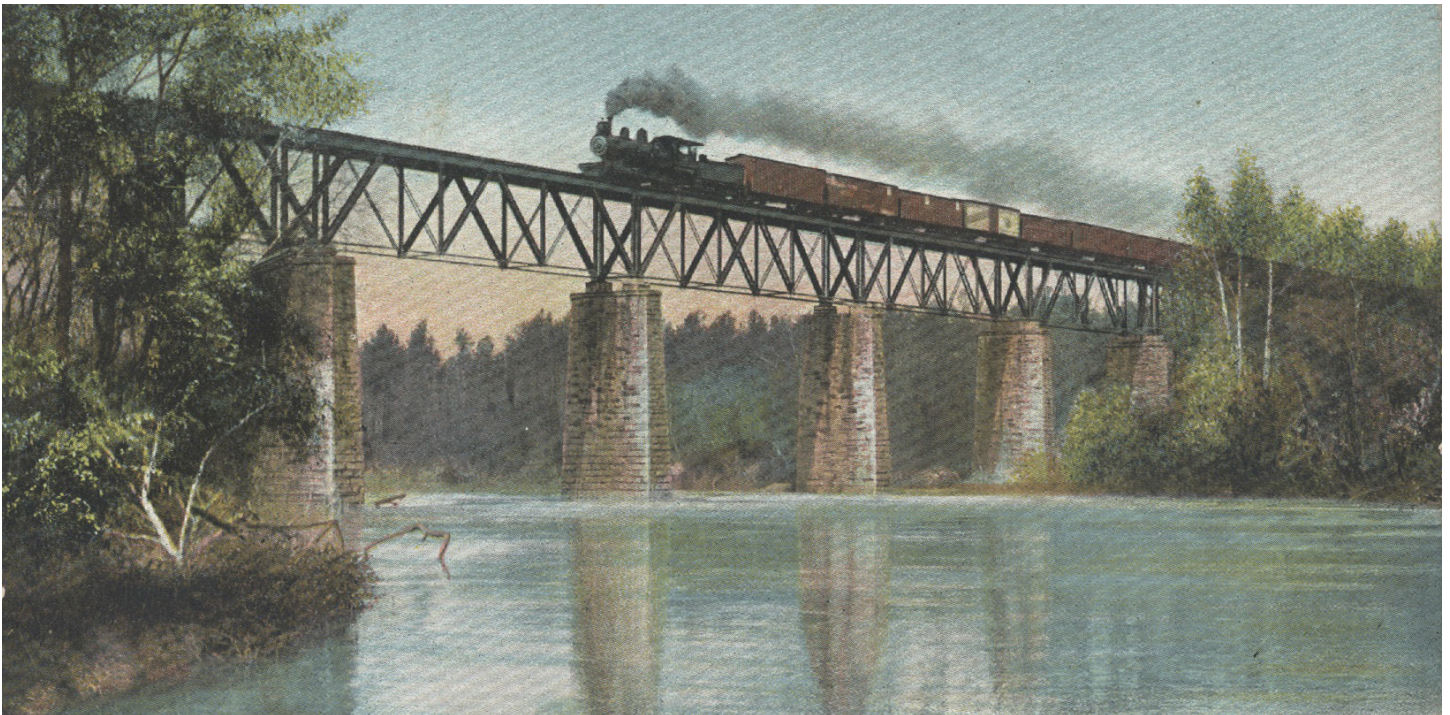
**METRO  
ATLANTA**  
C H A M B E R



A CASE STUDY  
IN GEORGIA'S  
BUSINESS HISTORY



**T**he Metro Atlanta Chamber (MAC) was founded as the “Mercantile Association” in 1860 with the intent to fight railroad freight discrimination against the city of Atlanta. Operating as the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce from the Reconstruction era through the late 20th century, the term “Metro” was added in 1989 to better describe its scope as representative of an the eighteen-county region around Atlanta. For over 150 years the Chamber has been the voice of Atlanta’s business community, working to improve and drive the reputation of Metro Atlanta as a region equipped to be a global competitor.



*Western & Atlantic R. R. Bridge over the Chattahoochee River, near Atlanta, Ga. From the Georgia Historical Society Collection of Postcards.*

## 19TH CENTURY

In 1837, officials from the Western and Atlantic Railroad, a state-sponsored project, chose the site of what would become Atlanta to mark the end of a rail line meant to connect the region to a larger rail network via Chattanooga. The site was chosen because it was just east of the Chattahoochee River and it is important because the railroad created Atlanta and the Chamber was created to help the city combat discriminatory railroad practices.

In the era following the Civil War, the “New South” philosophy was promoted to aid in reconciliation with the North and aimed at diversifying the economy of the

## CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

A chamber of commerce is an organization made up of local businesses working to achieve shared goals. Often the goal is to promote economic growth in the local community in order to attract customers, investors, and other businesses. The economic health of a city is important to its business leaders, but so is the social and civic wellbeing of the region. Members of a chamber of commerce work with city officials to encourage the formation of laws, policies, and programs that encourage a safe, healthy, and prosperous community.



## RAILROADS IN GEORGIA

The first railroad in Georgia was established in 1832 and by the mid 19th century Georgia had more miles of railroad track than any other southern state.

Railroads quickly became essential to Georgia's economy, linking urban areas to agricultural resources and vice versa.

By the end of the 19th century, fifteen rail lines passed through the city, bringing over 150 trains each day. Railroads connected Atlanta to markets across the country, increasing wholesale and retail trade after the Civil War.

In 1904 the Atlanta Freight Bureau was created by the Chamber to continue to advocate on behalf of the city for lower railroad shipping rates. Railroads continued to be an important economic and political tool for the region throughout the early 20th century.

region. The vision called for bringing more industry to the area, lessening its dependence on agriculture, and creating better educational opportunities.

In 1895 the Chamber helped promote the New South on an international stage. The Chamber lobbied Congress to award Atlanta the 1895 Cotton States and International Exposition. The Exposition hosted approximately 800,000 people with exhibits from six states and highlighted industries in agriculture, forestry, manufacturing, railroads, transportation, and electricity. The event promoted the region's industrial capabilities in order to secure investment from Northern capitalists and international investors. The 1895 Exposition helped highlight Atlanta's "rise from the ashes" and established it as the leading city of the New South.



## BOOKER T. WASHINGTON AT THE 1895 COTTON STATES EXPOSITION

Race relations in the New South era were characterized by segregation due to Jim Crow laws and the landmark 1896 Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

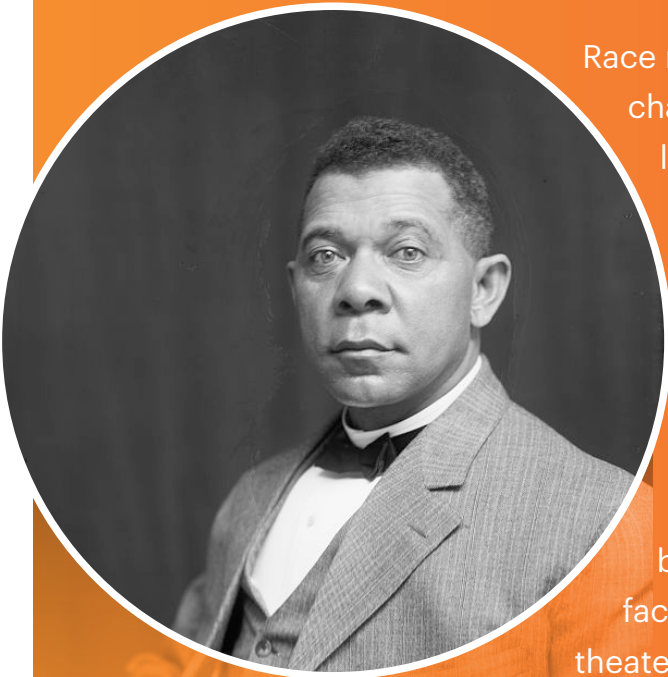
Jim Crow laws restricted many citizenship rights for African Americans in the South.

The *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision expanded the legality of Jim Crow laws by legalizing racial segregation. The court adopted the “separate but equal” doctrine, meaning that as long as facilities such as schools, public transportation, theaters, or hospitals were equal for both races they could be separate.

The 1895 Cotton States and International Exposition was notable for its social impact. With a rise in black colleges and new economic opportunities for African Americans, Atlanta began to see a rise in African-American entrepreneurs.

A “Negro Building” intended to highlight the economic accomplishments of African Americans was added to the fair, although the Exposition was segregated.

Booker T. Washington, a notable African-American educator, delivered an address at the opening ceremonies. His famous but controversial speech—“The Atlanta Compromise”—urged African Americans to focus on economic improvement rather than political and social rights. His ideas were supported by New-South advocates but rejected by many African-American leaders.



# 20TH CENTURY

In the early 20th century, the Chamber led efforts to improve the city of Atlanta by investigating conditions of public schools and the state of public health. The city lacked adequate sewage facilities and water systems, conditions that created a hazardous environment. A lack of paved roads and underequipped schools led the Chamber to secure a \$3 million bond from the City that funded improvements in water and sewage systems, Grady Hospital, and public schools.

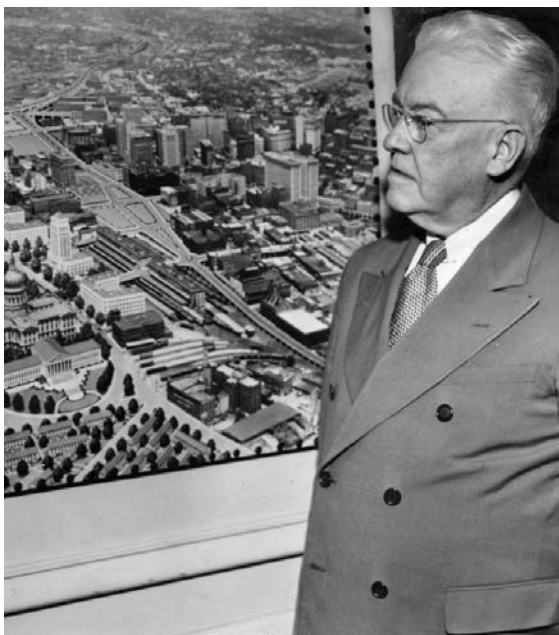
Atlanta was also an early investor in aviation and commercial air travel. The Atlanta Chamber was heavily involved in the development of Atlanta's air transport industry. The Chamber in partnership with the City Council encouraged the city to purchase Candler Field in the 1920s. This move made Atlanta the third city in the country— after New York and Chicago—to offer regular daily flights.

The Chamber also led efforts to secure federal funding for an airfield in Marietta, Georgia, just north of Atlanta. First named Rickenbacker Field, it serves as Dobbins Air Force Base today. The Chamber also helped bring an aircraft factory to the region during World War II. Known then as the Bell Bomber Plant, today that factory is the Lockheed Martin Aircraft plant.



Candler Field Airport, Atlanta, Ga. From the Georgia Historical Society Collection of Postcards.

From 1926-1929 the Chamber launched an advertising campaign, led by Ivan Allen, Sr., president of the Chamber. The Forward Atlanta Movement attracted more than 750 companies to Atlanta that brought over \$30 million and tens of thousands of jobs to the area.



Top: ForwardAtlanta logo. Bottom: Ivan Allen Sr. next to an image of downtown Atlanta 1947. GSU Digital Collections.



## AIR TRANSPORTATION

In 1925, business and civic leaders in Atlanta moved to purchase a plot of land south of the city known as Candler Field, becoming Atlanta's first airport.

The Chamber helped recruit major airlines to Atlanta, including becoming the home of Delta Air Lines in 1941.

In 1971, Candler Field was renamed Hartsfield International Airport after William B. Hartsfield—former city council member and mayor of Atlanta—who was a lifelong supporter of aviation and instrumental in the airport's initial opening.

Atlanta's first Black mayor, Maynard Jackson—and the first African-American mayor of a major Southern city—helped to expand Hartsfield International Airport throughout his tenure.

Renamed Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport in 2003, the airport today provides approximately 500,000 jobs in the metro Atlanta area and national and international air routes for passengers and cargo transport.

Top: Candler Field Airport. From the Georgia Historical Society Collection of Postcards.



The interstate highway system was first conceived in the 1930s in order to increase economic development. Under the 31-point initiative known as “Keep Atlanta Ahead,” the Chamber aided in the expansion of Atlanta that included a \$40 million project to create an interstate highway system.

The “Keep Atlanta Ahead” campaign also led to changes in education, fire prevention, public health, urban housing, and global trade. During this time more than 90 new industries came to the city and the Chamber was integral to an 81-square-mile expansion of city limits that went into effect in 1952. The Chamber helped expand access to higher education through efforts to fund expansion in universities such as Georgia Tech and Emory University.

The 1960s were a time of social change for the South, and the Chamber attempted to navigate the issues by supporting the city in



Reynolds Interstate Highway Committee Highway Lighthouse, c.1930. Metro Atlanta Chamber.



## INTERSTATE HIGHWAY SYSTEM

Interstate highways are a critical means of transporting commercial cargo, defense transportation, and people between cities and states.

Today three major interstates—I-75, I-85, and I-20—intersect Atlanta, funneling people and cargo into and out of the city. Interstate highways connect deep-water ports along the coast of Georgia to highways adjacent to airports such as Hartsfield-Jackson International, efficient highway routes to multiple states, or extensive rail lines that extend across the country.

efforts towards peaceful racial integration. Many Georgia residents supported closing public schools over the issue of school desegregation.

The Atlanta Chamber was the only major business association in the state to show support publicly for maintaining “open schools.” The Chamber issued a resolution to the Georgia General Assembly supporting legislation that would end school segregation. Almost 1,000 signatures were collected in support of the Chamber’s resolution.

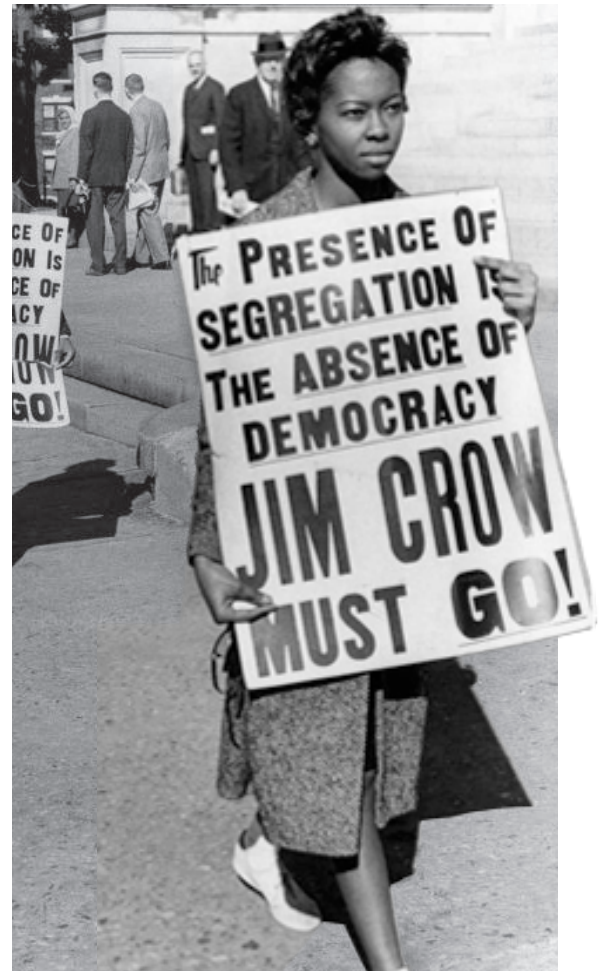
## GEORGIA’S RESPONSE TO SCHOOL DESEGREGATION

In the landmark Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the Court found racial segregation in schools to be unconstitutional under the 14th Amendment and struck down the constitutionality of racial segregation in public schools.

Georgia’s response to school desegregation was largely known as a policy of “massive resistance.” The Georgia General Assembly maintained strong opposition to forced integration of public schools by the federal government.

In 1960, Governor Ernest Vandiver appointed John Sibley—a segregationist lawyer—to convene ten hearings across the state to allow citizens of Georgia to give their input regarding school desegregation.

The Sibley Commission found that 60 percent of Georgians claimed to support closing public schools rather than integrating. Despite the findings of the Sibley Commission, many Georgians supported not closing public schools and, fearing a showdown with the Federal government as had happened at the University of Georgia, Atlanta began desegregating public schools in 1961.



Picketing the Georgia Capitol building, Atlanta 1962. GSU Digital Collections.

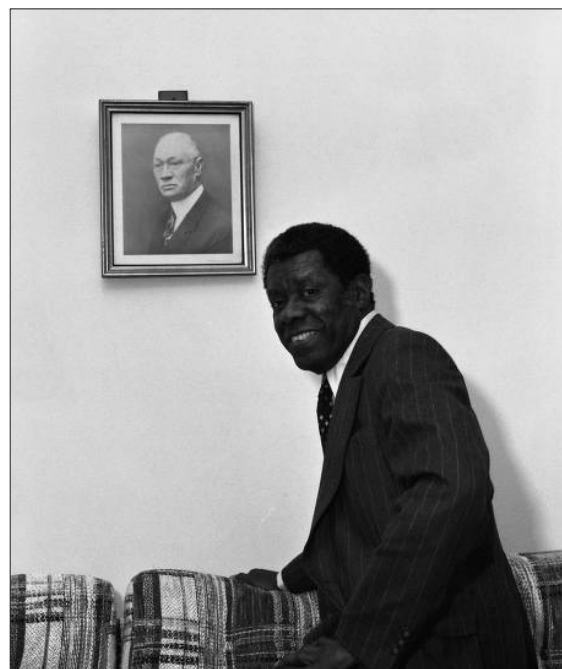
The Atlanta Chamber also took steps to encourage integration within Atlanta’s business community. Ivan Allen, Jr.—Chamber president and later mayor of Atlanta—was the catalyst for the Chamber’s desegregation efforts in the 1960s.

Prior to his leadership, the business community in the city was largely either silent or opposed to desegregation of the region’s businesses. Under his leadership, White business leaders came to support efforts to desegregate Atlanta’s businesses voluntarily.

The Chamber called for businesses to peacefully comply with Civil Rights legislation as peaceful integration supported a better business climate; however it did not directly call for the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964 that banned discrimination on the basis of race and gender in hiring, firing, and being promoted for a job. The Chamber’s goal was to uphold a reputation that Atlanta was a “city too busy to hate.”

In the 1970s, the Chamber sponsored and staffed an effort meant to attract minority business to the state. Minority Business Atlanta published vendor guidelines nationally and worked to increase commerce for minority businesses. In 1977, the Chamber elected its first African-American president, Jesse Hill, Jr. He was the first African American to lead a major metropolitan chamber of commerce.

The 1970s were characterized by promoting Atlanta as an international city. The Chamber led efforts to attract foreign business, expand international airport routes, and recruit industries in technology, manufacturing, and research, adding more than 25,000 jobs annually.



*Top: Ivan Allen, Jr. Bottom: Atlanta Chamber of Commerce chairman Jesse Hill, 1977. GSU Digital Collections*

The Chamber helped to secure funding to build Atlanta staples such as the World Congress Center—which brought the city the Georgia Dome in 1992 and Mercedes-Benz Stadium in 2017. The Chamber also helped establish legislation that would eventually create the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) that serves a five-county area around the city.

By the 1980s, the Chamber helped advance efforts to make Atlanta the “sports capital of the world” by establishing the Atlanta Sports Council. The Council has recruited and promoted such sporting events as the 1996 Olympic Games, NCAA Final Four basketball games in men’s and women’s divisions, the Peach Bowl—a top-tier bowl game—and all-star games or championship series for MLB, NBA, the NHL, and SEC football.



Top: MARTA at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport. GSU Digital Collections. Bottom: Centennial Park, 1996. Metro Atlanta Chamber.



It's Atlanta! banner at the 1996 Olympic Games. Metro Atlanta Chamber.

## 1996 OLYMPIC GAMES

The Chamber supported the bid for the 1996 Olympic Games by contributing seed money to the privately funded venture. The Chamber helped raise funds to construct Centennial Olympic Park, and the Atlanta Sports Council was a leader in preparing the city to host the 1996 Games.

The Olympics helped give Atlanta international recognition and led to an economic revival of the downtown area. The city proved it could host major, international events and earned international economic status.



*Metro Atlanta Chamber annual meeting, 2018.*

## 21ST CENTURY

The Chamber has continued to produce Forward Atlanta campaigns through the 21st century that have helped raise funds from the business community in Atlanta in order to address issues that go beyond the operating expenses of the Chamber, such as revitalizing infrastructure, attracting international trade, and sporting events.

Currently, the Chamber promotes ChooseATL—a program meant to attract young talent to the city by promoting Atlanta’s lifestyle and culture.

The Metro Atlanta Chamber has a long and unique history that plays a central role in the story of Atlanta and the state of Georgia. Through the lens of the Chamber one can explore economic, social, and cultural transformations over time and how the Chamber helped to bring about change in the region. Through improving transportation systems, promoting the city through advertising, influencing social and cultural dynamics, and shaping the city’s infrastructure, the Chamber has propelled and supported Atlanta’s continuing reputation as an economic, social, and cultural competitor.

# GEORGIA STANDARDS OF EXCELLENCE

## 8TH GRADE GEORGIA STUDIES

**SS8H7 Evaluate key political, social, and economic changes that occurred in Georgia during the New South Era.**

**SS8H11 Evaluate the role of Georgia in the modern civil rights movement.**

**SS8H12 Explain the importance of developments in Georgia since the late 20th century.**

**SS8E1 Explain how the four transportation systems (road, air, water, and rail) of Georgia contribute to the development and growth of the state's economy.**

**SS8E2 Evaluate the influence of Georgia-based businesses on the State's economic growth and development.**



*Image, this page: Crowds at the Olympic Stadium. Courtesy of Ed Jackson. Inside cover images (clockwise from top left): Choose ATL event; Atlanta Chamber of Commerce building at 67 N. Pryor Street; Forward Atlanta clipping, circa 1924; 1987 ad in Fortune 500; Centennial Olympic Park during construction, 1996 (GSU Digital Collections); 1994 Atlanta to host Superbowl clipping; Plane flying over MARTA station (GSU Digital Collections); 1977 artist's conception of the interior of the Marta Five Points Station. Back cover photo: MAC event at Braves game. All images from Metro Atlanta Chamber unless otherwise noted.*

