

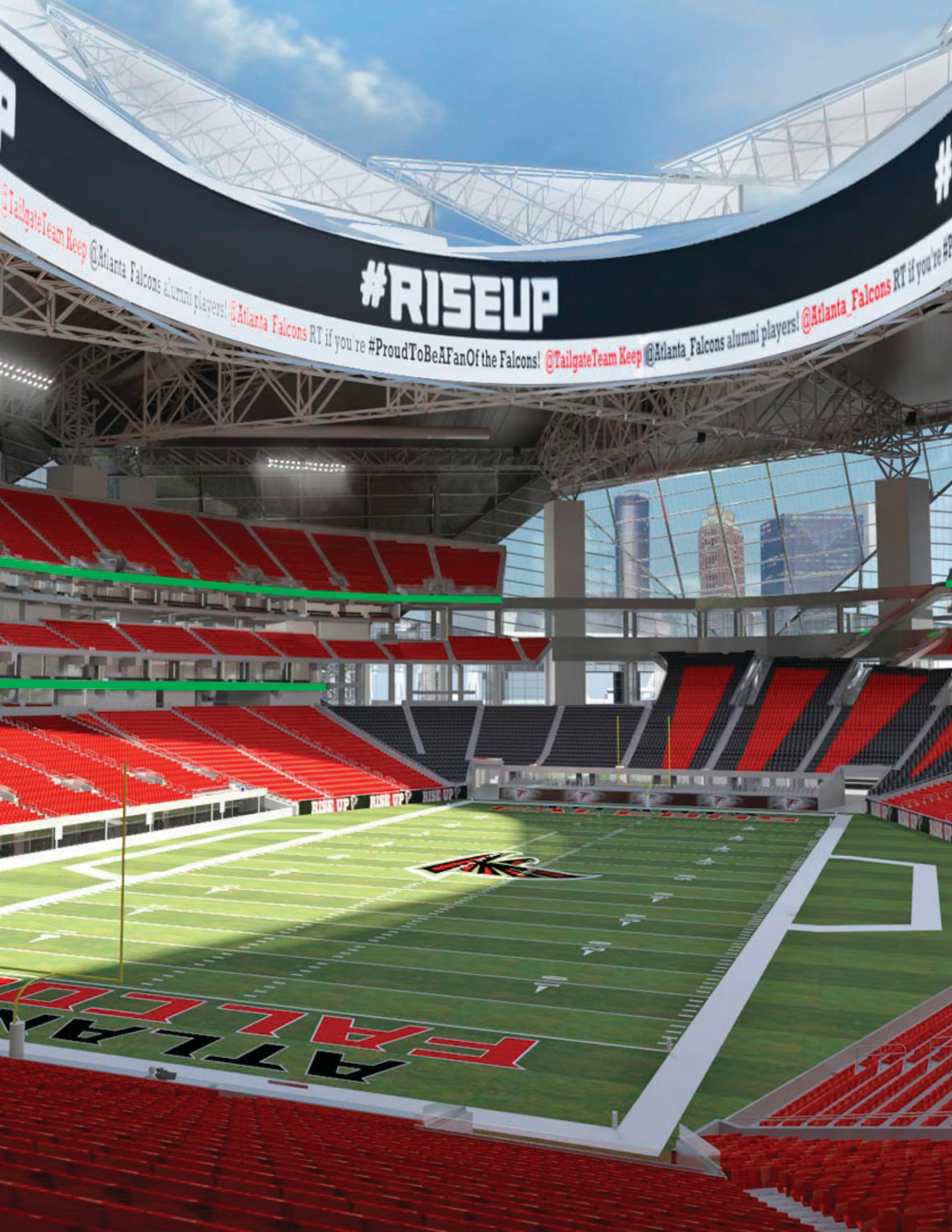


GEORGIA BUSINESS HISTORY INITIATIVE

Sharing the Stories of the Businesses that Built Georgia



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#RISEUP

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RISE UP? RISE UP? RISE UP?

ATLANTA



RUSSELL®

H.J. RUSSELL & COMPANY

A PROFILE IN GEORGIA'S BUSINESS HISTORY

H.J. Russell & Company's three-pronged focus has been entrepreneurship, empowerment, and excellence since its inception. These principles have led to great success and will continue to guide the company in its commitment to its associates and the communities in which they live and work far into the future.

H.J. RUSSELL & COMPANY



Origins & Purpose

"I'm going to be what I want to be."

– Herman J. Russell, Sr.

Mercedes-Benz Stadium. Coca-Cola Headquarters. Georgia Pacific Tower. To many, these iconic Atlanta buildings are synonymous with H.J. Russell & Company. Since 1952, H.J. Russell has been involved in constructing the **tangible** and **intangible** legacy of Atlanta.



Iconic Atlanta buildings in the H.J. Russell & Company portfolio: Mercedes-Benz Stadium, Georgia-Pacific Tower, and Coca-Cola Company Headquarters.

With an **entrepreneurial** spirit from the very beginning, an ambitious Herman Jerome Russell opened his first business at the age of eight. Although he had been denied a permit for his shoeshine stand, he opened it anyway and quickly expanded to handyman services and newspaper delivery. By the time he was in high school, H.J. had earned the \$125 needed to purchase a vacant lot in his neighborhood and over time, he used leftover materials from his father's construction sites to build a duplex. From the profits he earned from his various businesses he was able to pay his tuition to Tuskegee Institute.

As a teen, and after graduating from Tuskegee Institute, Russell worked for his father at Rogers Russell Plastering Company. Learning the ins and outs of the plastering trade from his father, and earning a degree in building construction, Russell was well poised to dive into the industry upon his graduation in 1953. While still working with his father, Russell also started his own business, the H.J. Russell Plastering Company. In 1957, with the death of his father, Russell assumed ownership of his business, which became part of the empire he was building.



Top: Herman J. Russell. Left: Herman Russell in an industrial arts class.



Major Events that Shaped the Company

The 1960s were a time of significant change in the United States, and a time for H.J. Russell Plastering Company to really take off. With the new federal legislation around fair housing and the creation of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), H. J. Russell was in the perfect position to take advantage of every opportunity for H. J. Russell Plastering to develop work.

The first major project under Russell's leadership was a twelve-unit residential building on South Avenue in Atlanta. From there, the company continued to grow its **portfolio** of affordable housing, making it one of the largest builders of HUD housing in the region.

"In the struggle to create an open society...he was an economic generator. He produced jobs.

~ Noel Khalil, Founder & CEO of Columbia Residential

Over time, Russell expanded his business from purely residential, to commercial, and later into specialties like fireproofing. As he expanded, more jobs were created, helping to increase economic success for everyone involved.

Coming on the heels of civil rights legislation and desegregation, opportunities for partnering with white-owned construction companies for large-scale projects added to the success of Russell's growing businesses. These **joint ventures** opened doors and created long-lasting business and personal relationships which were beneficial to all involved.

Top: On August 10, 1965, President Johnson signed legislation that established the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Bottom: H.J. Russell sits in his home with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Ralph David Abernathy, and Andrew Young.



What was [Executive Order 11063](#)? What was happening in the United States that made this order necessary?

The Department of Housing and Urban Development was initiated in 1965 as part of President Johnson's "War on Poverty." What is the purpose of HUD and how could builders like H.J. Russell & Company assist in its mission?

"Anger is not a helpful emotion."

~ Vernon Jordan

As Russell was building his construction business, he was simultaneously helping to tear down the walls of prejudice and segregation. Although you would rarely see his face on the front lines, Russell provided the advice and capital that moved the Civil Rights Movement forward. Instead of being angry about injustice, Russell used his perspective and skills as an entrepreneur to create a different outcome.



During the 1960s and 1970s, growth and diversification were the standard, and Russell added H.J. Russell and Company, H.J. Russell Construction company, Paradise Management Inc., DD International, and Southeast Land Development Company to his existing businesses, Rogers Russell Plastering Company, and the H.J. Russell Plastering Company.

Having been invited to membership in the Metro-Atlanta Chamber of Commerce in 1963 when the community didn't really know who he was, Russell would serve as president of the organization in the 1970s, reflecting his achievements and influence.

Russell was seen as a visionary leader with a strong work ethic. He was a member of the Atlanta Action Forum — a group of business leaders who met monthly to discuss issues that needed resolution to improve the quality of life for everyone in Atlanta. Another avenue for addressing large scale issues was the Atlanta Covenant. This coalition of leaders saw the importance of working together, economically and politically, to advance Atlanta, both at home and on the national stage. These relationships solidified both personal and professional alliances that would last for decades.

As the decade rolled on, Russell began to **diversify** beyond the world of construction. Russell founded a beverage distribution company, a television station in Macon, and an airport concession business. He also became the first African American to share ownership in major sports franchises — the Atlanta Flames (NHL) and the Atlanta Hawks (NBA).

Top: Herman Russell and Robert Holder of Holder Construction.



What is a Joint Venture?

A joint venture is when several businesses come together to accomplish a specific task or purpose. In the construction industry, this might mean that companies with different strengths work on the same project, each one doing what they do best. H.J. Russell & Company worked with Holder Construction, and later, C.D. Moody Construction Company on several projects, including the National Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta. Investigate what the construction companies involved contributed to the project. Given their history, why do you think the Russell family wanted to be involved with this project?

To learn more join ventures generally, and this one specifically, investigate the following resources:

[Strategic Alliances vs. Joint Ventures, Simple Understanding, YouTube](#)

[H.J. Russell & Company](#)

[National Center for Civil and Human Rights press release, 2011](#)



The company's portfolio included residential, commercial, educational, and recreational projects. Some of the most well-known projects were the Georgia Dome and the Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport.

These large-scale projects paved the way for H.J. Russell and Company to enter into a new joint venture opportunity — building Centennial Olympic Stadium for the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games. The Atlanta Stadium Design Team began construction in July 1993. The new stadium opened in May 1996, ready to host the opening and closing ceremonies and various athletic events of the Centennial Olympic Games in July and August.

The 1990s also saw H.J. Russell consolidate all the construction businesses under the H.J. Russell and Company name, while bringing his three children into management roles within the company as he prepared to retire in 1996.



Top: Georgia Dome, Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, and Centennial Olympic Stadium.
Bottom: Olympic Rings at Centennial Olympic Park. Wikipedia / User Gatorfan252525.

Primary Source Investigation

1996 marked 100 years since the modern Olympic games were held in Athens, Greece, in 1896. These games were inspired by the ancient Olympics, which began in Greece in 776 B.C. Read ["The First Modern Olympic Games" by Badhan Sen](#). Choose one of the sports mentioned, research it, and compare and contrast it to the modern version.



H. Jerome Russell, Michael Russell, and Donata Russell Ross grew up working across all aspects of the business and were well-versed in the trade before stepping into leadership positions. Under their leadership, the company has continued to prosper and grow, making an impact beyond the borders of Georgia.

H.J. Russell's legacy is not only reflected in his family and the company he built, but in the Russell Innovation Center for Entrepreneurship (RICE), which embodies his ideal of "success rooted in service." Russell saw challenges as opportunities for improvement and innovation, which he proved through his business ventures, his role in the Civil Rights Movement, and in raising up future leaders. Through this organization, Russell's desire to inspire and prepare future entrepreneurs is realized on a daily basis.



"You got to really ask yourself, 'What [do] I want to do in life?' You need to equip yourself for it. You need to work hard at it. Get a good education. Work Hard. Burn the midnight oil. Be honest [with] yourself and others. Also, keep in mind that you have an obligation to give back to society. That is very important. And [you've] got to love what you do. You got to love it. That's the best high that you can get when it comes from your heart and soul. If you do those things, I have no doubt about it, that you are going to reach your goal."

~ Herman J. Russell

To learn more about H. J. Russell, investigate these resources:

[Building Atlanta: The Story of Herman J. Russell Documentary](#)

[H.J. Russell & Company builds generational success in Atlanta](#), Atlanta First News, 2021

Russell Innovation Center for Entrepreneurship Big IDEAS Program

Creating a Sustainable Business

- Inspire: curiosity to concept
- Develop: concept to company
- Execute: company to customers
- Accelerate: customers to capacity & capital
- Scale: exponential growth

Do you have an entrepreneurial idea? Investigate the RICE Big IDEAS program to see how you can bring your ideas to life.

Case Study:

RUSSELL AND CITIZENS TRUST BANK

Big IDEAS, created by the Russell Center, describes a simple cycle for developing a product that lasts. You start by Inspiring action by clearly naming the problem. Then you Develop a product that meets a real need. Next, you Execute by testing whether it truly fits the market. After that, you Accelerate with smart, steady growth, and Scale so the impact reaches more people. Then you repeat the cycle because each round of development helps you understand the problem better, improve the solution, and make what worked the first-time work even better the next time.



Long before anyone put that cycle into a framework, Atlanta's Sweet Auburn lived it.

Black Atlantans faced a complex mix of social, legal, and financial challenges at the turn of the twentieth century. After *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), segregation wasn't just custom, it was legally cemented into the structure of American life. For African Americans seeking to establish a business or purchase a home, financing posed a formidable obstacle. One could have ambition, skill, and community support but still have no practical way to borrow money, secure a mortgage, or build generational stability.

But the leaders of Atlanta's African-American community understood something foundational: progress doesn't run on ability or hope alone. It runs on capital.

So, they started where sustainable growth always starts, by identifying the problem. The need was obvious and urgent: without a trusted financial institution, Black businesses would struggle to expand and Black families would struggle to own homes. That single obstacle threatened to keep an entire community permanently stuck in place.

Then came the “Develop” step, though they wouldn’t have called it that. Heman E. Perry, James A. Robinson, Thomas J. Ferguson, W.H. King, and H.L. Dugas, remembered as “the Fervent Five,” joined forces to create a direct solution: Citizens Trust Bank, the first Black-owned and operated bank in metro Atlanta. Their mission was both practical and deeply personal: to promote financial stability and make homeownership possible. Their message captured the point in one line, “bank where you feel at home.”

Next, they executed: the bank didn’t exist as a symbol; it existed as a tool. It provided loans, backed entrepreneurs, and opened doors that had been shut tight. In other words, it proved product-market fit the only way that mattered, by meeting the community’s needs in real time, with real money, for real people.

And then Sweet Auburn accelerated.

With financing finally within reach, homes went up—more than 200 new homes over time, forming a two-mile stretch of opportunity where African-American families could live,

build, and thrive. Businesses clustered near those homes, and customers flowed through those doors because the neighborhood itself was invested in their success. Wealth circulated locally: families supported shops, shops hired neighbors, neighbors bought homes, and homeownership anchored the whole ecosystem.

That’s how Sweet Auburn scaled, not through a single breakthrough, but through a repeating cycle of problem-solving and refinement. Each new business created new needs. Each new household created new demand. Each success revealed the next challenge, and the community responded again.

At the center of it all, like the keystone in an arch, stood Citizens Trust Bank, an economic backstop that made growth possible in a place determined to grow anyway. Sweet Auburn became the epicenter of African-American business and ingenuity in Atlanta not because the obstacles disappeared, but because a community built a system strong enough to outlast them.



Part 1: Story-to-Framework Mapping [10–15 minutes]

Directions: In groups, students reread the narrative and prove where each Big IDEAS phase shows up. Have them fill this chart:

INSPIRE (Identify the problem):	
What was the core problem in Sweet Auburn?	
What evidence from the narrative supports it?	
DEVELOP (Build a solution):	
What "product" or solution did leaders create?	
What needs did it meet?	
EXECUTE (Test/validate):	
How did they know the solution worked?	
What changed because of it?	
ACCELERATE (Strategic growth):	
What signs show that growth sped up? (homes, businesses, wealth cycles)	
SCALE (Expand impact):	
How did the impact spread beyond one person/business?	

Quick share-out: Each group shares one phase + evidence quote/paraphrase.

Part 2: Community Problem Sprint [20–25 minutes]

Directions: Students choose a present-day “community problem” (school, neighborhood, or city). They then design a Big IDEAS action plan inspired by Sweet Auburn. Pick *ONE* problem (or let groups choose their own):

- Lack of affordable after-school options
- Food insecurity / limited access to healthy food
- Transportation gaps (getting to jobs/activities)
- Local small businesses struggling
- Limited access to tutoring, childcare, or healthcare info
- Housing instability (rent, evictions, repairs)

The Big IDEAS Plan (students complete all five)

INSPIRE: Define the problem in one sentence + who it affects most.

DEVELOP: Design a solution (a service, tool, program, or institution).

EXECUTE: How will you test it in 2 weeks with limited resources? (pilot plan)

ACCELERATE: What partnerships or strategies help it grow? (schools, churches, nonprofits, local government, businesses)

SCALE: What would expansion look like in 6 months? What must stay true so it doesn't lose trust?

Sweet Auburn connection requirement:

Students must include one “economic backstop” idea—something that makes the plan financially stable (funding model, microgrants, membership, sponsorships, sliding-scale fees, etc.), similar to the role Citizens Trust Bank played.

Part 3: Pitch + Feedback [10 minutes]

Each group gives a 60-second pitch:

- Problem
- Solution
- Pilot test
- Growth plan
- Scaling vision

Vocabulary

All definitions from Merriam-Webster online dictionary, unless otherwise noted.

Bank Holiday: A period when banks in general are closed, often by government action.

Capital stock: Outstanding shares of a joint stock company.

Diversify: To increase the variety of the products.

Entrepreneurial: Having to do with the creation and development of economic ventures.

Fervent: Exhibiting or marked by a great intensity of feeling.

Intangible: Not tangible; something that cannot be perceived by touch.

Joint venture: A business arrangement in which two or more parties pool their resources for the purpose of accomplishing a specific task. (Investopedia)

Mutual aid society: An organization that provides benefits or other help to its members when they are afflicted by such things as death, sickness, disability, old age or unemployment. (Collins Dictionary online)

Portfolio: A collection of work compiled over a period of time.

Synonymous: Alike in meaning or significance.

Tangible: Capable of being perceived, especially by the sense of touch.

Thrift: Careful management, especially of money.

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The Georgia Historical Society is the premier independent statewide educational and research institution responsible for collecting, examining, and teaching Georgia and American history. Founded in 1839, the Georgia Historical Society is the oldest continuously operating historical society in the South and one of most prestigious in the nation.

Making the past relevant to the present is at the core of our mission. Through our award-winning public programs, publications, teacher training, and research services, we aim to use the power of our shared history to offer all Americans new and deeper perspectives on the past and present.

What We Believe

We believe in the value of history.

We believe that public knowledge of our past is fundamental to our future.

We believe our shared history is what binds us together as Americans.



Each year the Georgia Historical Society selects iconic companies in our state to be honored through the Georgia Business History Initiative.

By showcasing these companies, GHS seeks to teach Georgia students, citizens, and tourists alike about the pivotal role of Georgia's leading businesses in the economic, cultural, and social development of Georgia and the United States.

Georgia Standards of Excellence

Information Processing Skills K-12: SSIPS1-3, 6-7, 10, 11

Social Studies: SS8H8, 11, 12; SS8E2-3; SSEMI1-3; SSEMA2

Personal Finance and Economics: SSEMI1a

