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Emory University's *Changing Atlanta* Exhibit: Documenting Local History through Archives

By W. Michael Camp

A current major theme in the promotion of archives is outreach to users beyond academia. Another important goal for most repositories is acquiring new collection material. By presenting the activities of archives in a visually stimulating way, exhibits of archival material are a useful way to both promote archival awareness and encourage placing of papers and records with archives. Events related to exhibits are a further way to promote the mission of the archive. This

article discusses the *Changing Atlanta* exhibit displayed at Emory University as a case study to demonstrate how exhibits can spur greater public engagement with archives and archival materials. The

exhibit used archival collections to illuminate the stories of individuals and groups who participated in the city of Atlanta's expansion in the 20th century. This article will discuss the historical content of the exhibit itself, along with the opportunities for outreach generated by the exhibit.

Changing Atlanta, 1950–1999: The Challenges of a Growing Southern Metropolis was on display in the Schatten Gallery of the Robert W. Woodruff Library at Emory University from March 22–June 19, 2016. It examined the perspectives and experiences of four distinct entities who affected—and were affected by—Atlanta's rapid and massive growth in the second half of the 20th century, as well as the city's emergence on the national and international stages. Created using the

materials of four recently processed or in-process collections held at Emory's Rose Library, the exhibit was also designed with the goal of promoting the value of archival materials to nontraditional users. The exhibit moved chronologically from the 1950s through the 1990s, documenting the human experiences found within the large-scale processes of Atlanta's geographic and economic change. It was curated by three historians and two

archivists, which allowed the exhibit both to promote the value of archival collections and to put documents into the context of broader city histories. Two historians and two archivists each curated one



of the four sections of the exhibit, based on the collection each had recently processed. I was one of these historian-curators, and at the time was a doctoral student in Emory's Department of History specializing in US political history. The third historian, a subject librarian at Emory University, provided comments and editing for the entire project, which provided someone sufficiently distanced from the day-to-day construction of the exhibit to be able to provide helpful input and tie all of the disparate parts together. The Rose Library's outreach archivist worked with the curators on digitization of material as well as sharpening the argument of each of the individual sections. Planning and executing the exhibit involved collaborations among several library units, including special collections staff, the library's exhibit team, development staff, and events staff.

The exhibit began as part of a dissertation completion fellowship project for the other historian-curator, a Department of History doctoral student specializing in the emergence of the Republican Party in the 20th-century Southeast. As part of his fellowship project, arranging and describing the papers of Atlanta tax lawyer Randolph Thrower, the fellow proposed holding a small exhibit using items found in the papers. Because the academic field of history is moving toward a greater focus on public history, the fellow wanted to gain experience in this field. During preliminary discussions with Woodruff Library's exhibit team in fall 2015, we found that a large exhibit area was open for use in the spring semester, and we decided to expand the scope of the exhibit to include four collections broadly covering Atlanta history in the second half of the 20th century. We decided to use the exhibit to tell some of the more local and personal stories embedded within this large-scale narrative of Atlanta's growth and expansion.

Historical Context

Owing significantly to new initiatives in federal government policy, Atlanta's growth and development in the 20th century followed many of the same patterns as other cities in the Sunbelt South. The creation of the Federal Housing Administration during the New Deal, which provided subsidized home loans in order to help restart America's construction industry, catalyzed Americans to buy single-family homes in unprecedented numbers and led to construction of suburban neighborhoods farther and farther from city centers (Hyman, 2011, pp. 56–66). During and after World War II, Sunbelt legislators steered huge amounts of defense and technology dollars to their states; in the case of Atlanta, the Dobbins Air Reserve Base in Marietta was established in 1941, providing stable employment to a number of Atlantans. In 1947, the anti-union Taft-Hartley Act allowed states to ban the "closed shop," which required that laborers join unions as a condition of employment in factories.

Southeastern and southwestern states quickly established "open shop" conditions, luring manufacturers who preferred an environment less advantageous for organized labor. Americans from the Northeast and Midwest began migrating to the Southeast in order to take advantage of these new economic opportunities (Lichtenstein, 2002, p. 117).

Though long considered by many elite analysts—especially Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Dealers—to be a backward and undeveloped region that was holding back the trajectory of the broader American economy, the stage was now set for the Southeast to undergo rapid change and economic growth. It eventually caught up with and even surpassed the economic productivity of other US regions (Phillips, 2007, pp. 78–80). Atlanta was especially affected because of its central location in the region and its status as a transportation hub. Beginning with the creation of Eisenhower's interstate highway system in 1956, the ensuing decades witnessed the construction of I-75, I-85, I-285, and I-20 in and through the Atlanta area. The Atlanta airport, named after former Atlanta mayors William Hartsfield and Maynard Jackson, eventually became one of the busiest in the world. Local boosters worked especially hard to make sure that state and regional planning would be favorable to the city's fortunes, with the city's population and volume of economic activity both exploding (Allen, 1996, pp. 139–190). Coca-Cola, a homegrown company founded and headquartered near downtown, became one of the world's most powerful corporations, bringing national and international attention to the city (Pendergrast, 2013, pp. 143–200).

However, while these processes unfolded, Atlantans also had to grapple with the long and tragic histories of racial inequality and violence endemic to the region. Civil rights protesters and Black Power advocates put pressure on city leadership to bring the city into alignment with the nation's moves toward greater racial equality (Brown-Nagin, 2011, pp. 1–16). Some

Atlanta residents also questioned the virtue and necessity of untrammelled growth, urging greater examination and consideration of what development and expansion would mean for the city's long-term prospects and its most vulnerable residents. These debates shaped the city's political development to the end of the 20th century and generated a voluminous amount of rich historical material for researchers.

Exhibit Content

Changing Atlanta provided a window into these geographic, economic, social, and political changes. The four main sections displayed archival materials that illuminated these stories. The four main collections highlighted were the

Randolph Thrower papers, the John Sibley papers, the Community Council of the Atlanta Area records, and the Druid Hills Civic Association records. The first two sections documented stories of how Atlanta emerged as a modern city in the 1950s and 1960s by casting aside unfair political methods and bringing the city into line with national expectations on race relations. The latter two examined how Atlanta's subsequent growth affected two very different constituencies, urban minorities and suburban whites. All four sections mixed textual documents like brochures and correspondence with larger visual items such as campaign posters and fliers promoting neighborhood events,

providing a balance of historical information and aesthetic appeal. Emory holds the papers of a number of other local leaders and organizations that we could have featured in the exhibit, but we decided to limit the exhibit to recently processed and in-process collections in order to highlight the activities of archives themselves. We also decided to de-emphasize the well-known figures of Atlanta history, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., in favor of other individuals and organizations whose papers were recently opened for research. This focus allowed us to show exhibit visitors the wide diversity of subjects available for archival investigation.

An accompanying timeline at the exhibit entrance traced some of the most significant

moments and milestones in Atlanta's development, including the growth of the metropolitan population from 1 million in 1960 to 4 million in 2000, as well as the 1996 Olympic Games, which signaled the city's emergence as an international destination. The timeline, along with a short title panel, helped tie the four disparate parts of the exhibit into a coherent whole by showing how each fit into a broader narrative of growth, development, and diversification.

The first section of the exhibit examined the 1956 congressional campaign of Atlanta tax lawyer Randolph Thrower. Thrower, best known for being forced by Richard Nixon in 1971 from his position as IRS



chief for refusing to persecute Nixon's political enemies, ran for Congress as a Republican on the platform of doing away with Georgia's "county unit" system. The county unit system, which assigned electoral victories in Georgia primaries on the basis of numbers of counties won—not popular votes obtained—led to severe overrepresentation for very conservative rural areas. Racial demagogues like the notorious Eugene Talmadge, who resisted the progressive economic policies of the New Deal on the grounds that they would improve the economic standing of African Americans, dominated state politics in the first half of the 20th century. Thrower's congressional campaign, while ultimately unsuccessful, marshaled public opinion against the county unit system, which was eventually ruled unconstitutional by the US Supreme Court in 1963. The demise of the county unit system then permitted urban areas, especially Atlanta, to emerge as major political centers in the state. Thrower's campaign also helped begin to break the corrupt and decadent one-party Democratic rule that had dominated Georgia politics for decades, and was therefore an important turning point for Atlanta's role in state politics. On display were campaign brochures and correspondence with campaign supporters, among other documents. This section of the exhibit also included an interactive audio recreation of Thrower's 1956 campaign song,



entitled "Throw in with Thrower" (sung to the tune of "Pop Goes the Weasel"), along with an interactive map displaying the dramatic changes in political representation wrought by the abolition of the county unit system. These materials were generated with the help of the

Emory Center for Digital Scholarship. This section also included a voting booth on loan from the Atlanta History Center. The voting booth displayed the set of candidates that would have been on the ballot in Georgia in 1948 and showed

exhibit-goers that they were all Democrats, providing a dramatic visual representation of how one-party rule allowed Democrats to dominate state politics until the 1950s.

The second section focused on the Sibley Commission, headed by lawyer John Sibley of Atlanta, who was also a prominent confidant to Coca-Cola CEO Robert Woodruff. The Commission, created to bring Georgia in line with the 1954



Brown v Board of Education decision, was established after a 1959 US District Court ruling declaring continued segregation in Georgia public schools unconstitutional. Because the *Brown* decision only

prohibited state laws that mandated segregation, Sibley came up with two possible options for the state to pursue in order to preserve segregation as best as possible: to continue massive resistance by closing public schools altogether, or to create a "local option"

that would permit individual school districts to decide whether or not to desegregate. Sibley and the commission held a series of contentious hearings across the state in spring 1960. Though 60% of witnesses at the hearings favored massive resistance and closing public schools, Sibley and other Atlanta elites knew that continued negative coverage from the national press would hurt the city's prospects for continued economic advancement, and tried to end massive resistance by any possible means. Sibley recommended the local option to the state legislature, which passed the plan into law in January 1961. Atlanta-area schools were soon desegregated, but other areas of the state were not. Though the Commission's action helped stave off the

violence that had accompanied desegregation efforts in other southern states, the local option also meant that serious statewide efforts toward desegregation in Georgia would not emerge until later in the 1960s. On display were pieces of correspondence from Georgia constituents expressing alarm and anger at integration, which allowed visitors—especially younger ones—to grasp the intensity of racial tension in the 1960s, along with planning documents from the commission itself.

This section of the exhibit also included a 1960s-era desk on loan from Atlanta Public Schools. Some of the photographs in this section featured white and African American students sitting at similar desks during the era of desegregation, and the physical desk allowed exhibit visitors to get a closer look at this artifact in person.



The exhibit's third section covered the Community Council of the Atlanta Area (CCAA). The organization, formed in May 1960, provided technical information to individuals, civic groups, and human services agencies to help residents cope with rapid changes in the character of urban life. The Council worked on issues such as poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, daycare, employment and housing, recreation, and aging. It executed research and information dissemination services that culminated in the establishment of a public reference library. Of

special concern to the CCAA was the transient hippie community centered on 10th and 11th Streets in Midtown, which often clashed with the police. Although the Council disbanded in 1974, other community

groups adopted some its essential functions and continued to serve urban residents in the Atlanta area. On display were planning memoranda from Executive Director Duane W. Beck, handbooks, and research reports, among other materials. This section also included a recreation of *The Great Speckled Bird*, a counterculture newspaper published in Atlanta from 1968 to 1976, which was generated from past issues of the newspaper that are now held at Georgia State University. It contained several articles about events in Midtown Atlanta in the 1960s and 1970s, providing exhibit visitors a glimpse of the counterculture viewpoint about contemporary events of the period. The final section, the section I curated, examined the activities of the Druid Hills Civic Association (DHCA). Founded in 1938, the DHCA handles a variety of issues related to daily neighborhood life. It became especially active in the mid-1960s, opposing a state government plan to extend the Stone Mountain Freeway into

downtown Atlanta, which would have cut through Druid Hills and a number of other historic in-town neighborhoods, such as Candler Park and Poncey-Highland. Though the state government condemned large portions of land in Poncey-Highland and cleared houses in preparation for construction, neighborhood opposition, along with federal environmental regulations, stopped the project before it could be completed. The plan lay dormant for years before it was resurrected in the early 1980s, when Jimmy Carter desired freeway access to his presidential library in Poncey-Highland. Though the Presidential Parkway through Poncey-Highland was eventually built, neighborhood opposition stopped the road from crossing Moreland Avenue and entering Candler Park and Druid Hills. As part of their protest, neighborhood residents camped out in public parks along the major thoroughfare of Ponce de Leon Avenue. On display were pieces of correspondence from neighborhood residents opposing highway development as well as handbills promoting protest events in neighborhood parks. This section of the exhibit included a re-creation of a large anti-freeway sign created by the organization CAUTION (Coalition Against Unnecessary Thoroughfares In Our Neighborhood), another neighborhood opposition group. The sign was an exact replica in terms of size and color (bright orange) and

allowed exhibit visitors to grasp the intensity of anti-freeway opposition.

There was also an interactive table explaining the archival process and displaying archival tools, such as acid-free boxes, micro-spatulas, and plastic clips. Displayed here were the

finding aids for the four collections featured in the exhibit, which gave visitors a sense of the extent of the collections and the diversity of materials contained within them. We found that having both archivists and historians working

on the exhibit was of substantial benefit. The archivists focused on promoting holdings and explaining the purpose of archives and the daily

work that goes on in them, and the historians were equipped to place the individual documents and narratives into broader historical trajectories, as well as create the Atlanta timeline. The result was an exhibit that

informed the public both about the process of archiving as well as how archival holdings can illuminate the broader narratives of the past.

Outreach

In addition to the interactive materials available in each section of the exhibit, there were other opportunities for visitors to interact with the exhibit. Attendees could leave post-it notes on two facing walls commenting on changes that they themselves had witnessed during their



time in the city; several visitors commented on increased traffic and other transportation problems, but others spoke positively about the city's cultural life and its recommitment to redeveloping neighborhoods and green space near downtown Atlanta. Attendees could also take home a series of commemorative postcards to provide a lasting connection to the archive, each of which featured images from the collections on display. Like many exhibits, there was also a guestbook for visitors to leave comments. One said that, "as a new resident of the Atlanta area, I truly enjoyed learning about the city's history." A resident of Druid Hills said, "thanks for including the neighborhood" in the exhibit. The exhibit also seemed to inspire one student to think critically and productively about the city, as she noted that "you can't stop change, but you can decide what kind of change it will be."

Several undergraduate students left their email addresses in the guestbook and asked for further information on employment or internship opportunities at the Rose Library, providing clear evidence that the exhibit had had a positive effect on their engagement with archives. Outreach strategies were not specifically targeted at undergraduate students, but because the exhibit was installed in a section of the library that receives voluminous foot traffic, many undergraduates had the chance to stop and view it. Unfortunately, a course on African American history in Atlanta was offered in the Department of History in fall 2015, and it ended before the exhibit opened, but there will certainly be future opportunities to link exhibits on local history with courses on local history, such as encouraging instructors to have the class visit the exhibit—perhaps with a guided tour—as part of a class section, or having students complete an assignment outside of class time that requires them to view the exhibit. From my own experience teaching undergraduate history courses, I have found students have often thought very little about where the narratives in their textbooks come from, and analyzing primary documents helps

illuminate this process. Exhibits are an excellent way to undertake this activity in greater detail and depth. Students who have recently moved to the area to attend college have often never thought about the histories that shaped the current environment in which they find themselves, and this exhibit gave them the chance to do so.

In order to promote the exhibit to the larger Atlanta community, the curators participated in a panel discussion at Emory University in April 2016, discussing the exhibit planning and putting its content into broader historical context. We initially planned to have a separate event for each of the four sections, but quickly realized that trying to execute four events in quick succession would be overwhelming, and decided to have one large event instead. The event was held in a room directly adjacent to the exhibit display, and approximately 100 people attended, many of whom had been invited. We worked with the library's development staff, which compiled a list of invitees, to plan and execute the event. There was also news coverage in local cultural affairs publications, such as Atlanta's *Creative Loafing* magazine, that attracted attendees, and we sent out an email invitation to graduate students in the Department of History. The chair of the Department of History, also the dissertation advisor for two of the history graduate students curating the exhibit, introduced the panel. Moderating the panel discussion was a recent Emory History Department doctoral graduate who had written his dissertation on Atlanta's metropolitanization from 1950–2000.

Event attendees included longtime Atlanta residents who had participated in some of the history highlighted in the exhibit, including the CCAA's activism and the fight against the Stone Mountain Freeway. The discussion highlighted some additional historical information on Randolph Thrower and the Community Council of the Atlanta Area, and an evaluation of how the activities of the Sibley Commission fit into

the longer trajectory of racial change in Atlanta. After the discussion, the curators spoke with attendees in the exhibit gallery itself as they browsed the displays. Randolph Thrower's son attended by invitation and was pleased to see that his father's campaign song from a half century before had been recorded and brought back to life. Residents of the Druid Hills neighborhood were especially excited to see the section of the exhibit on their community, and several said that they hoped that their materials might end up in a similar exhibit someday. About a month later, the curators also presented material on exhibit planning and content to a scholarly audience at the Atlanta Studies Symposium at Georgia State University.

At a separate event held at the Rose Library immediately before the public panel, the curators spoke to invited Druid Hills residents and members of the Georgia state legislature about the value of historical material and the importance of archival preservation. Given my own subject matter expertise in American environmental history, I highlighted the fact that the DHCA records contain documents related to the legal settlement that stopped freeway incursion into the neighborhood. The settlement turned on the accuracy of the Georgia Department of Transportation's production of an environmental impact statement, a necessary step in government construction projects that had been mandated by the National Environmental Policy Act in 1969. The DHCA's activism in contesting the environmental impact statement, I explained, represents an important case study for environmental historians assessing the impact of environmental legislation in the 20th century. That was only one small example pulled from the 60 linear feet of the DHCA records, I explained, and there were many dozens of other connections to broader historical narratives that I saw while processing the collection. I encouraged the audience to think about what valuable historical materials might be in their attics or basements, in need of a safer permanent environment. Many of the

attendees did not know about the opportunities to place their papers with local archives, and the curator of the Rose Library's Atlanta collections was present to provide more information, hand out business cards, and establish contacts. Several attendees indeed expressed their interest in placing their own personal papers with the Rose Library. Because one of the major issues in dealing with potential donors is building trust, being able to show them a professional production created with related records assured them that their materials would be treated with care and respect.

One issue we encountered was that potential donors insisted that we, the exhibit curators, be the ones to handle the processing of their papers should they be donated. Because two of us were graduate students in the Department of History and would not be at the institution permanently, we could not make that promise. Staff should be prepared to assure potential donors that all archivists will handle their materials competently and respectfully, and should be prepared to have potential donors meet with permanent staff at a later date as a follow-up.

We also found that exhibit visitors sometimes had very strong opinions about some of our interpretations of the events in question, especially those in which they had personally participated. For example, we tried to present the controversies over freeway development from a neutral point of view, having sympathy both for the state's attempts to ease traffic flow and locals' desire to protect their neighborhoods from destruction. Some Druid Hills residents, however, insisted on seeing their position as the only reasonable one, and referred to the Georgia Department of Transportation with words such as "evil." We were able to use this potential point of conflict as an opportunity to encourage Druid Hills residents to donate their records to the repository in order to have their side of the

story told as comprehensively as possible by future scholars.

Conclusion

Taken together, the exhibit and related events were a successful outreach initiative to the local community. Exhibit attendees learned about what archives are and how they operate, and event attendees learned about the content of the Rose Library's collections. As we found, attendees were excited to learn about the "hidden histories" embedded within the areas where they lived and worked. Since many

archives collect materials related to local history, similar exhibits and events could be done at a wide range of other repositories, based on collection holdings. Every city and community has its own history, and local archives often hold the papers and records of individuals and groups who participated in that broader narrative. The opportunities for future exhibits are vast.

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