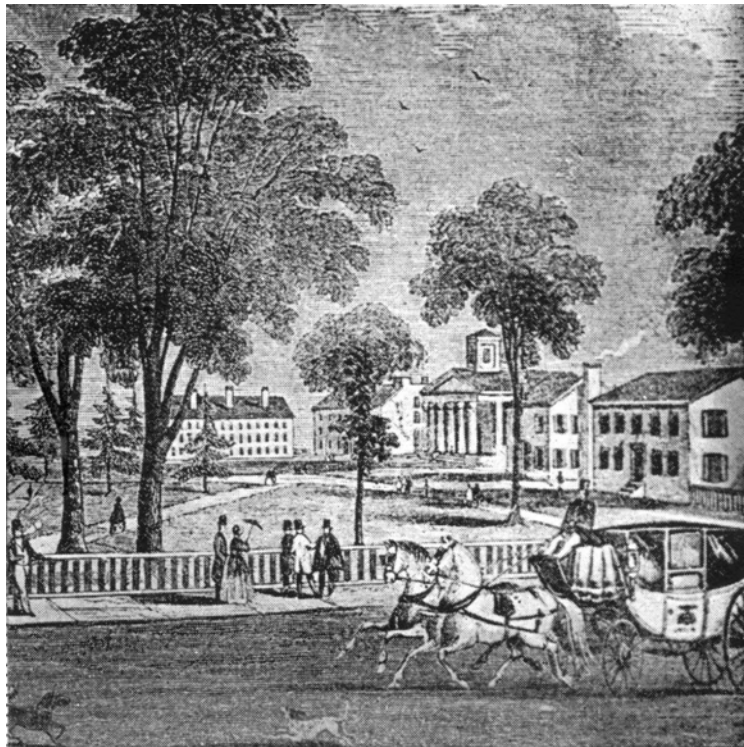


# Athens Historian

Volume 7

Fall 2002



FRANKLIN COLLEGE, IN ATHENS, GEORGIA

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**Athens Historical Society**  
Athens

## **A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ATHENS HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

Excerpted from a history by  
Susan Frances Barrow Tate

On October 11, 1959, at an informal organizational meeting the Athens Historical Society was born. This meeting was held in the Athens Regional Library, then located on the corner of Hancock and College Avenues. The founders of the Society were Sarah Maret, Director of the Athens Regional Library; John E. Talmadge, Professor of English, University of Georgia; Porter Kellam, Director of the University of Georgia Libraries; Kenneth Coleman, Professor of History, University of Georgia; Richard N. Fickett III; Marion West Marshall; Harry Hodgson, Sr.; John W. Bonner, Special Collections Librarian, University of Georgia Library; Susan Frances Barrow Tate, Library Assistant, University of Georgia Library; and Robert E. Gibson. Temporary committees were formed to plan a general organization meeting to be held October 29, 1959. At this meeting, held in the auditorium of the Chamber of Commerce building, a constitution was approved, aims and/or purposes of the society were formulated, and committees were appointed.

The purposes and aims of the Athens Historical Society expressed in the current constitution are:

1. To discover, collect and preserve all materials, especially original and source materials, pertaining to the history of or in any manner illustrative of Athens, Clarke County, adjacent counties, and related areas.
2. To disseminate this knowledge for the enlightenment of our citizenry through preparing, editing and publishing historical materials, descriptive and illustrative of Athens and related areas through programs or historical papers.
3. To promote historical research.
4. To promote preservation and perpetuation of historic sites and places.
5. To bring together those interested in the history of these areas.
6. To promote and stimulate public interest in and appreciation of the history of Athens and related areas and to develop in every way an understanding of their historic past.
7. Notwithstanding any provision of these articles, this organization shall not carry on any activities not permitted to be carried on by an organization exempt from federal income tax under Section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 or the corresponding provision of any future United States Internal Revenue law.

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# ATHENS HISTORIAN

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# ATHENS HISTORIAN

## **The Jewish Community in Athens, Georgia The First Hundred Years**

by Steven S. Bush <sup>1</sup>

### **THE EARLY YEARS**

Jewish families have lived in Athens since before the Civil War. In the earliest years, the first Jews to settle in this area were peddlers and merchants. Then, from the late 1800s to the mid-1900s, our members were concentrated in the business community. In the past fifty years, there has been a steady trend toward academia, with many of our members affiliated with the University of Georgia and the number and influence of our business-related members diminishing.

There are records that indicate that at least two Jews lived in Athens prior to the Civil War. The first was Moses Myers, who was born in Filehne, Germany (now part of Poland). Mr. Myers founded a dry goods business at 13 College Avenue and would later become the first president of Congregation Children of Israel. Gabriel Jacobs, who also was born in Filehne, arrived twenty-five years later, in 1858. During the Civil War, Mr. Jacobs manufactured military caps for the Confederacy. He would later be the congregation's first reader, or lay rabbi, and he also became its first religious school teacher.

Following the Civil War, a third man from Filehne, Casper Morris, took up residence in Athens after serving four years in the Confederate Army as a private in the 16<sup>th</sup> Georgia Regular Volunteers. It seems more than a coincidence that these three early Jewish inhabitants of Athens should have come from the same small town in Prussia. We can only imagine their family ties back in the Old Country.

At the end of the Civil War, a new firm appeared in Athens, owned by E.B. and J. Cohen from Charleston, South Carolina. In 1866, a sixteen-year-old peddler from Europe, Myer Stern, moved to Athens. Stern recounts how he was met on the road to Athens by a band of Ku Klux Klansmen, who ordered him to "lay down his stock" and bring them water from a spring, while they sat on their horses amused and

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's Note: Steven S. Bush, a native Athenian, and lifelong member of the Congregation Children of Israel presented this talk to the Athens Historical Society by Mr. Bush on January 20, 2002. A guided tour of the Synagogue followed the meeting. In preparing this talk, Mr. Bush relied a great deal on the work and research of Dr. Herb Segal's compilation of the history of the Jewish community in this area.

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laughing. This is the oldest recorded incident of anti-Semitism in Clarke County.

In 1865, a family who would subsequently influence not only the Jewish community, but all of Athens, arrived from Jefferson, Georgia. David and Teresa Michael moved to Athens with their daughter Rachel and two sons, Simon and Moses. We will learn more about the Michael family later.

By 1872, the Jewish community had grown to the point where a group of its leaders felt that they could conduct organized religious activities. So they petitioned the Superior Court of Clarke



*Congregation Children of Israel Synagogue stood on the northeast corner of Hancock and Jackson Streets until its demolition in 1965. Hajos, Photogravure of Athens, 1901.*

County that “a charter of incorporation be granted to them as officials and trustees of a House of Worship for the Congregation Children of Israel under the name and style of Kol Kadosh Beni Yisroale.” In August 1872, the petition for incorporation was signed, and in 1873 one of the first actions of the new congregations board was the purchase of a parcel of land at the corner of Hancock and Jackson Streets from Patman Lester. Five years later, in 1878, a second portion of land fronting sixty feet on Hancock Street and running through to Dougherty Street was obtained from the Brumby Estate. It was in 1884, twelve years after organization, that our congregation constructed the synagogue that it would occupy for the next eight-one years.

During this time, the congregation also made provisions for a Jewish burial site. In 1873, the first of three parcels of land adjoining the Oconee Hill Cemetery along the Oconee River was purchased from R.L. Bloomfield for use as a congregational cemetery. In 1913 a second parcel on the upper terrace was obtained from R.E. Kilpatrick. Much later, in 1947, a third portion of land was purchased from the Athens Manufacturing Company.

### YEARS OF GROWTH

By 1893, Athens had become a flourishing city with an opera house, electric lights, street cars, brick sidewalks and a population of

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15,000. The Jewish community was also growing. Businesses on East Broad Street had names such as Charles Morris and Charles Stern Clothiers; Max Joseph, Abe Joel & Company, F. Farbstine, Mendel Morris and J. Silverman Dry Goods, and Dorsey & Stern Furniture. Moses Myers had expanded his business to Moses Myers & Company, a prosperous three-story establishment with eight employees, including a junior partner, Phillip Stern.



*The original Michael Brothers Department Store, 1901 - from Hajos' Photogravure of Athens, Georgia*

Businesses on Clayton Street were G. Blumenthal Dry Goods, O'Farrell & Funkenstein Furniture, and Michael Brothers department store. On College Avenue, next to Myers & Company, was the dry goods business of Julius Cohen. Mr. Cohen was also the first Jewish elected public official; he served as Athens city councilman from the Third Ward. As an aside, I found this particularly interesting because, over eighty-five years later, I ran for the same Third Ward seat on the Athens City Council.

By 1900, the congregation, under President Charles Stern, had twenty-one member families and an annual budget of \$1350. The religious school numbered forty pupils in five classes and met three days a week. The Hebrew Ladies Benevolent Society functioned under the presidency of Mrs. George Blumenthal. Today, we know the Hebrew Ladies Benevolent Society as the Congregation Children of Israel Sisterhood.

In 1900, the city of Athens celebrated the turn of the century with a week-long carnival, which was presided over by Colonel Moses G. Michael. Moses, with his older brother Simon, had built the Michael Brothers business into one of the most prominent in Northeast Georgia, and in the late 1800s they built a classic, three-story building downtown, which burned in 1921. Neel Reid designed the new store

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that was built on the site in 1922, which has remained a downtown Athens landmark to this day.

In 1878, at the age of sixteen, Moses Michael (fondly known as “Mr. Buddy”) graduated first honors with a Bachelor of Engineering degree as the youngest graduate in the history of the University of Georgia. An active participant in business, political, and community affairs, Moses Michael served as president of the Athens Chamber of Commerce, and in 1904 he was elected to the Electoral College from the State of Georgia. He was treasurer of the Clarke County Board of Education and helped found the East Athens Night School. In addition to often acting as the congregation’s lay rabbi, he was superintendent of the congregation’s religious school for thirty years, truly a job deserving our praise and sympathy. Oh, what he must have endured from the children and their parents!



*Charles Stern home in 1901. Hajos.*

Mr. Michael was also a strong-minded individual. In 1914, after disagreeing with some of the procedures in the congregation’s religious service, he organized the “Russian Jewish Congregation” and acted as its lay rabbi. This new congregation rented the K.P. Hall on College Avenue as its place of worship. However, since there is no evidence of this splinter

congregation’s existence after 1916, and since Mr. Michael was Congregation Children of Israel’s president in 1920, we can assume that the dissident group was short-lived.

### THE WAR YEARS

During the years preceding World War I, the Athens Jewish community continued to grow. The congregation’s membership was at least thirty-eight families. The building was valued at \$25,000 plus \$12,000 in land. The annual budget was \$2500, of which \$1800 was the rabbi’s salary.

New businesses appearing on the scene included the Athens Savings Bank with Myer Stern as president and M.G. Michael as vice president, and the Commercial Bank, with Selig Bernstein as president. Selig’s sons, Moses and Jake Bernstein, had an interesting combination



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of businesses: they sold furniture and were also directors of a funeral home. There were also two Boley brothers, Sol and Sidney: Sol was a merchant, while Sidney was in the wholesale shoe business before he turned to real estate. Aaron “Big A” Cohen and Moe Levy had men’s clothing stores, while Dorsey & Funkenstein’s sold furniture; and of course, Jake Bernard “Picture Show” Joel owned the Palace movie theater on College Avenue.



*The “twin” homes of the Michael Brothers graced Prince Avenue between the UGA President’s Home and the Taylor-Grady House. Postcard from the new postcard history of Athens by Gary L. Doster.*

Listed among the lawyers of the time were Max Michael, son of Simon, and Jerome Michael, M.G.’s son. Jerome Michael would later become Athens’ city attorney and still later he served as an assistant attorney general of the United States.

Around 1915, most of the congregation lived in the area bounded by College Avenue, Pulaski Street, Hancock Street and Dougherty Street. In fact, at its peak period, twenty-seven Jewish families could be counted as living in this area, all within walking distance to the synagogue.

At this time, among the landmark buildings in Athens was the home of Charles Stern at the corner of College and Hancock, which later housed the Athens Regional Library. Mr. Stern had a men’s shop at the location of the present George Dean Men’s Store. On the corner of Pulaski and Reese Streets was the Marks estate. On the other corner was the home of Mr. and Mrs. Myer Stern. Mrs. Stern was the sister of M.G. and Simon Michael. She later presented the Stern Community House, which was built adjoining the former Temple, as a memorial to her deceased husband, Myer.

It was early in this period that the Michael brothers moved from their family home on the corner of Hancock and Pulaski, and built twin mansions on Prince Avenue at Grady. These showplaces were connected by a *porte cochere* and were located between the Taylor-

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Grady House and the University President's Home, on the present sites of the Athens Water Business Office and an insurance agency.

These fine homes witnessed such social events as the marriage of Helen Michael to Percy Rich of Rich's Department Store fame. In 1912, Bert Michael, youngest son of Simon, died just before his graduation from the University. The Simon Michaels built another home at Five Points, which later their son Max would make his home. This house later became the Elks Club, then the DePass School of Dance for a number of years, and now is an insurance company office. Sol Boley and his wife Minnie moved into a house on Milledge Avenue and lived there many years before it became the B'nai Brith Hillel Foundation, now home of the UGA Jewish Student Center.

Another new name of the time was Milton Lesser, a young bachelor who arrived in Athens in 1912, and took up residence at Wolfe's Boarding House on Hancock Street. Mr. Lesser operated a men's clothing store at the corner of Clayton and Jackson Streets and was active in congregation affairs, becoming its president in 1941.

In 1915, my grandparents, Jacob and Anna Bush, moved to Athens with their three sons, Aaron, Alexander and Morris, and two daughters, Rose and Kelley. They lived in a house on the corner of North Church and Meigs Street. Jacob founded Bush Jewelers, which was located for fifty-six years at 165 East Clayton Street. The local chapter of B'nai Brith is named in his honor, the J. Bush Lodge of B'nai Brith. My father, Alexander, later served Congregation Children of Israel as its president from 1946 to 1948.

Following World War I, the congregation under President Myer Stern numbered forty-eight members. It was during the 1920s that Harry Loef arrived in Athens. Harry would later marry Sarah Gottleib and found the Loef Company, a scrap metal business located on the edge of downtown Athens. Their children, Teresa Blumberg and Freddy Loef, still live in Athens. Harry would become a generous supporter of the congregation and serve as its president.

In 1929, a young man from Augusta leased space in the basement of the Michael Brothers building as the manager of a shoe concession. A year later, the nineteen-year-old Henry Rosenthal opened a shoe store on Clayton Street with chairs borrowed from Abe Joel's movie theater. Henry would later become president of the congregation three different times, and he played an important role when the Temple was moved to its present location on Dudley Drive. It was Henry's skillful negotiations with the city government and the local Board of Education that made our new building possible.

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Jake Brandt Joel, son of Abe, after a brief stint in his father's business, entered the law profession and became active in state politics, serving five terms in the Georgia General Assembly as our elected representative.

In 1939, with Hitler's successful blackmail of the Western Powers and the slaughter of six million Jews on the horizon, a refugee of Nazi Germany, Dr. Sigmund Cohn, came to teach law at the University of Georgia. He would portend a new influence on the congregation, that of university faculty members. For despite the fact that Athens was the home of the University of Georgia, Dr. Cohn was its first Jewish faculty member since the University was founded in 1785. Today, this so-called "restricted policy" seems unbelievable, but for 150 years it was an unspoken rule at the University of Georgia not to hire Jewish faculty members. In fairness, at the time, many other American universities had the same policy, so in this matter, UGA was not unique.

During World War II, the Athens Jewish community endured its share of sacrifice. My uncle, Aaron Bush, a Naval officer, died during the war and is buried in the congregation's cemetery at Oconee Hill. Simon Michael II was killed in action; his family built the medical clinic bearing his name on Hancock Street behind City Hall.

After the war, new families began to appear on the congregation's membership rolls. The first of these were families who had come south to open new manufacturing plants in the small towns surrounding Athens during the 1940s and 1950s. Familiar names like Eric and Elsa Mendel; Eric served as the congregation's treasurer for over thirty-five years. Solomon "Sol" Abrams opened the Harlem Theater and became well known on WRFC radio in the 1950s as "Power Drive on the Hive of Jive."

### 1950 TO THE PRESENT

More new business and professional people arrived in the congregation, including Nathan and Annette Jay, who moved to Athens in 1948. Nathan owned Jay's Department Store in Commerce and became our congregation's president in 1960. David and Evelyn Abrams came here from Florence, South Carolina. They bought Milton Lesser's ladies' clothing store on Clayton Street. Evelyn would become the congregation's president in 1957, a first for a Jewish woman in the South and, at that time, only the second woman president of a synagogue in the United States. Dr. Israel Berger, a radiologist, formerly of Savannah, settled here with his family in the 1950s and served as congregation president in 1959.

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But in the late 1950s and 1960s, a major change in the makeup of the congregation's membership began. Expansion of the University and the creation of new government research facilities opened the way for an influx of new faculty members at the University of Georgia and new employment opportunities for professionals. Among these newcomers were Jews who came to live in the South for the first time. By 1970 these new professionals and faculty members would make up almost half of the active congregation.

In 1965, the local government planned an urban renewal project for the area around our downtown synagogue. The government claimed our beautiful building as part of the parking lot for the current Federal Building, and the Jewish community was required to move to our present home on Dudley Drive. The historic original Athens synagogue was demolished in 1965. The current synagogue was dedicated in October of 1968.

By 1973, the membership of Congregation Children of Israel totaled seventy-eight families, many of whom are still members today. On March 18, 1973, the congregation celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a week-end of festivities.

As to more recent developments, in October 1995 the congregation broke ground on the Carol Bush Education Center. This center, which opened in 1996, has had a tremendous impact on the growth of Congregation Children of Israel. In 1993, our membership was 110 families and the religious school had 52 students; today we have over 140 member families and 75 students.

Today, as in years past, the members of the Jewish community take an active part in every aspect of the life of Athens-Clarke County. As citizens of this great city, state and country, we are justly proud to have played a significant role in the history of Athens for over 150 years.

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## The Sams Family of Athens

by Mike Cheatham <sup>1</sup>

In the second decade of the twentieth century, the boll weevil visited its destruction upon King Cotton, the South's preeminent cash crop. It was this pestilential invader from south of the border, according to legend, that drove Walter A. Sams, one of eleven children, from his farm and ancestral home in Fayette County, Georgia.

Sams' first cousin, Fayetteville, Georgia-based physician and author Ferrol Sams, viewed his kinsman's abandonment with contempt – at least if one extrapolates from a supposedly fictional account in Ferrol's first novel, *Run with the Horsemen*. "A cousin had surrendered to the boll weevil," he wrote, "and moved out of the county and bought Coca-Cola stock." Then comes the judgment, "He was rich, but there was the unspoken disdain for him because he left the land." Ferrol Sams, like so many agrarian Southerners of that time, actually felt that "without the land, there would be no family."<sup>2</sup>

In fact, Walter Sams was just as devoted as his cousin to family, tradition, and land – he just took a different direction. Sams was a born trader in much the same way as Asa G. Candler and Robert W. Woodruff. Like Candler, he would become a pharmacist, selling and reselling his Marietta shop numerous times, always at a neat profit. In between, he would buy and sell Coca-Cola franchises until, in the words of Coca-Cola Company historian Franklin Garrett, he "finally found one he liked." That would be in Athens, Georgia.<sup>3</sup>

Once settled in Athens (thanks to the aid of previous Athens bottler C. Veazey Rainwater), Sams reestablished his ties to the land, staking out a large-acreage operation in Clarke County. He would at times close down the bottling plant and take employees to his place to bale hay. "What a character he was," observes Millard Epps, a thirty-four-year veteran of the business. Grandson Walter A. "Corky" Sams III (who ended up running the franchise before its 1985 sale, with first cousin

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's Note: Reprinted with permission from "Your Friendly Neighbor" *The Story of Georgia's Coca-Cola Bottling Families* (Mercer University Press, Macon, GA, 1999), published on the centennial of the opening of the first Coca-Cola bottling plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

<sup>2</sup> Ferrol Sams, *Run with the Horsemen* (Atlanta: Peachtree Publishers, 1982) 1-5.

<sup>3</sup> Walter A. Sams III, interview by author, Athens, Georgia, 18 March 1998; biography of Walter A Sams, The Coca-Cola Archives, Atlanta, Georgia.

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Albert “Buddy” Sams), recalls his grandfather’s automobile cow horn. The elder Sams delighted in taking grandkids to the acreage and chasing after the cattle, sounding the horn, and laughing all the while. Though he never made any money on it, Sams adored his farm; it was sold to the University of Georgia School of Agriculture after his death.<sup>4</sup>

It was Otis Landrum who ran the farm for Sams. Recalls Landrum’s grandson, Rick Dawson, “Mr. Sams was a dedicated practitioner of modern farming methods at a time when much of our farm land was all but exhausted and abandoned during the Great Depression. It was just about farmed out – eroded and incapable of producing a decent yield.” Continues Dawson, “He listened to every idea for improving the soil my granddad offered, and he encouraged the Ag school and soil conservation people to experiment with him in the public interest. I guess you could say he was a kind of visionary, and the present property bears witness to the fact that his dream pretty much came true.”<sup>5</sup>

The ubiquitous evangel of a post-reconstruction New South was Henry W. Grady, an Athens native and famed editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*. He encouraged young Southerners to compete with their counterparts from the North in the lists of commerce and industry. Mark Twain took note of this new breed of Southerner, calling them “brisk men, energetic of movement and speech; the dollar their god, how to get it their religion.” Even the fiery populist and U.S. Senator from Georgia, Tom Watson, exhorted: “Let the young South arise in their might and compete with the (Yankees) in everything ... Get rich! If you have to, be mean!”<sup>6</sup>

Sams sought redemption of the South – and his own fortune – by taking a path that took him away from his family homeplace. “They tell the story about the time he had bought the [Coca-Cola Bottling] territory in Muscogee, Oklahoma,” remembers Jim Newland, husband of Sams’s granddaughter Dorothy. “He had told the family to move out there, but [on the train to Oklahoma] he became friendly with a fellow

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<sup>4</sup> Sams biography; Millard Epps, interview by author, Athens, Georgia, 8 April 1998; Sams interview.

<sup>5</sup> Rick Dawson, interview by author, Athens, Georgia, 29 April 1998.

<sup>6</sup> *Encyclopedia of Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979) 1102; Sams interview; Frances Taliaferro Thomas, *A Portrait of Historic Athens and Clarke County* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992) 40, 170-171, 217, 219, 256; Mark Twain, as quoted by Mark Pendergrast in *For God, Country and Coca-Cola* (New York: Scribner’s, 1993) 15; C. Vann Woodward, *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel* (Savannah GA: Beehive Press, 1973) 100-101.

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who was from somewhere in Mississippi. The man owned a champion racehorse, and before he and the owner got off, Mr. Sams had swapped the franchise for the horse,” Newland chuckles. So what did Sams do? “He intercepted the family somewhere en route in Little Rock, Arkansas, and took ‘em back to Georgia.” Back on his home state’s soil, Walter Sams bought into the Athens bottling operation.<sup>7</sup>

The Athens territory stretched over fifteen northeast Georgia counties, anchored by Cornelia to the north and Atlanta to the south. Leesburg and Lakeland, Florida, franchises, and a catering and vending subsidiary, Vend, Inc., later expanded the reach of Sams’s Coca-Cola bottling interests. (The University of Georgia’s Sanford Stadium became an exclusive Sams outlet. Not only was it a high-volume, high-visibility venue, but product availability helped secure students from all over the state as loyal Coca-Cola drinkers.)<sup>8</sup>

Sams’s net worth enjoyed a healthy boost, as did the estimation of his ability as a resourceful and able businessman. Having married Alla Dobbs, he acquired a powerful and influential kinsman in one Burney Dobbs, owner of a thriving coal and building materials concern, and controller of the town’s savings and loan institution. Dobbs maintained an ownership position in the soft drink company. Walter and Alla Sams had two sons, Albert and Walter Jr., both of whom were active contributors to the building of the franchise. Albert came into the family business in 1927, Walter Jr. in 1930. Albert was united in marriage to Miss Anita Burke; Walter Jr. married the daughter of University of Georgia professor Milton Jarnagin, Miss Agnes Jarnagin. The brothers were in turn joined in the business by their offspring, Albert Jr. and Walter III.<sup>9</sup>

Albert Sams took a lead in many preservation activities in Athens and was involved in the programs of the Rotary Club of Athens, serving as president of that civic organization. Walter Jr. was president of the Coca-Cola Bottlers of Georgia, and top officer of the local chamber of commerce and Community Chest, as well as an elder at the First Presbyterian Church. Together, the brothers were effective in keeping the competition at bay, according to Jim Wimberly, regional manager of The Coca-Cola Company in Atlanta. One example of Albert’s salesmanship: upon learning that a customer had replaced a Coke cooler with a competitive box at an outlet, Albert would drive up and approach

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<sup>7</sup> James L. Newland, interview by author, Athens, Georgia, 20 March 1998; Sams biography; Franklin M. Garrett, *The Coca-Cola Bottler*, April 1959, 123.

<sup>8</sup> Albert B. Sams Jr., interview by author, Athens, Georgia, 11 November 1995.

<sup>9</sup> Sams biography; The Coca-Cola Company Archives.

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the offending customer with an expression of abject mortification. “My old friend,” Albert Sams would appeal, “what have I or any of my family ever done to make you do a terrible thing like this?” This kind of extremely “personal” service almost always brought reversal of the offending behavior and restoration of the product to its rightful place.<sup>10</sup>

### **From Agriculture to Industry**

Born in 1880, Walter Sams witnessed and participated in the South’s transition from an agrarian to an industrial society. In Sams’s youth, cotton mills sprang up in profusion along Georgia’s “fall line,” where abundant water – essential to the mills’ operation – cascaded down from the mountains toward the coastal plain. The drive toward industrialization was on; every town wanted its own cotton mill. Even so, as historian C. Vann Woodward establishes in *Origins of the New South: 1877 - 1913*, the economy of postwar Georgia – and the South as a whole – essentially was a colonial one. Yankee overseers with textile industry experience were usually required to get the new cotton mills launched. But one of the first major textile plants in Georgia – Whitehall Mill – was begun in the late 1830s with exceptional homegrown leadership. At the helm of this enterprise was John White of Athens. The local financier, banker and manufacturer built a Victorian Romanesque residence, White Hall, near the mill. It was deeded in 1936 to the University of Georgia, just as the Sams’s farm later would pass to the University.

By 1924, Walter Sams was living at 593 Hill Street in a residential suburb known as Cobbham, in honor of the reigning family of Athens, the Cobbs. Patriarch Howell Cobb held a great many important positions: speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, President Buchanan’s secretary of the treasury, governor of Georgia, and a major-general in the Civil War. General T.R.R. Cobb had left his mark as well, before falling in the Battle of Fredericksburg in 1863.<sup>11</sup> In the precincts of this historic presence, Sams was on his way as a civic and business leader.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Warren Grice and E. Merton Coulter, *Georgia Through Two Centuries* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1965) 251-252; Albert B. Sams Jr., interview by author, Athens, Georgia, February 1995.

<sup>11</sup> John F. Stegeman, *These Men She Gave: A Civil War History of Athens, Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1964) 71-78.

<sup>12</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971) 291-320; Louis deVorse Jr., “Early Water-Powered Industries in Athens and Clarke County,” *Papers of the Athens Historical*



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The Coca-Cola plant first was located in 1906 at the corner of Hancock and Hull Streets in Athens's central business district, moving to a nearby site on Washington Street in 1916. By May 1928, according to the trade publication *Bottler's Gazette*, Sams was president of the firm and had opened a new facility on Prince Avenue in an area fronting the Cobbham district (and diagonally across the street from the General T.R.R. Cobb House). With capacity production of 2,000 cases a day, the plant operated twelve trucks and employed thirty men. Historian Franklin M. Garrett wrote that occupancy actually was taken in 1927, and after five expansions an entire block was absorbed, including the historic Camak House.<sup>13</sup>

A strong supporting staff performed in the interests of the Sams enterprise. On a warm spring day in 1998 five of these cast members – with almost 200 years of combined experience – gathered to talk about the good old days. The host, Corky Sams, served up Coca-Cola in the eight-ounce package, the one most closely resembling the old six-and-one-half ounce container. The old timers remember what hard work went into running a bottling operation. Cecil “Deacon” Jones worked on the sales side of the business and recalls having only two annual holidays, Christmas Day and Thanksgiving, with no provisions for overtime pay. The consuming public stayed thirsty around the clock, it was reasoned, and Athens Coca-Cola had a mission of supplying the product at any special event, at virtually any time. Plant superintendent Frank Fowler, who took pride in seeing that product was available to deliver, was “on the floor” at all times.<sup>14</sup>

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*Society, Volume II* (Athens, 1979); and Frances Taliaferro Thomas, *A Portrait of Historic Athens and Clarke County* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> *Bottler's Gazette*, 15 May 1928, 163; Thomas, 51-56, 258. For a description of the plant and its architecture, see David Charles Cullison, Jr., “J.W. Barnett: The Influence of the Architect and City Engineer on the Physical Development of Athens, Georgia,” (master's thesis, University of Georgia, 1995). The Prince Avenue plant is now owned and operated by Coca-Cola Enterprises as a distribution center. And the Athens law firm of Winburn, Lewis and Barrow now owns the Camak House, having restored it to its original glory. Traditionally among the leaders in advancing Athens's historic preservation, members of the Sams family had sought listing of the Camak property on the National Register of Historic Places. Local government recognized such achievements by designating a major artery in the county Walter Sams Road. See Thomas, 258, and Patrick Neal, “Camak House: Victory for Preservation,” *Athens Magazine*, April 1996, 72-81.

<sup>14</sup> William C. Fowler, interview by author, Athens, Georgia, 2 April 1998; Walter A. Sams III, interview by author, Athens, Georgia, 8 April 1998; Frank Fowler Family Scrapbook, Athens, Georgia.

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Jones tells of one Christmas Day during the Depression when employees went in to claim their customary holiday bonus, allowing them to provide a decent Christmas to their families. This particular year had been a tough one. Times were bad, and Jones, among others, feared that Sams might not be able to come up with the money this time. Walter Sams called together his employees: “Well, you all know what a tough year it has been, but I’m happy to tell you I went to the bank and borrowed some money. Your bonus will be in the envelope on Millard’s desk. Merry Christmas to all of you and yours!”<sup>15</sup>

Millard Epps was the man who checked-in the drivers. On a hot summer’s day some of them might not check in until 9 or 10 P.M. For drivers whose busy routes made them even later, it was convenient that Epps lived close by. Many a night drivers would proceed directly to Epps’s house and then take him back to the plant for check-in. Deacon Jones jokes that some drivers were fond of gambling for small stakes during the day, often finding themselves without the bottler’s money. But, thanks to a tolerant attitude by management, arrangements were made for the drivers to replace the funds at a later date.<sup>16</sup>

Students at the University were big consumers of Coca-Cola, but at times their playfulness could cause problems, recalls Epps and Garland Kittle, former head of the bottler’s sign shop. Upon those rare occasions when snow fell in Clarke County, the familiar red discs advertising Coke were targets for vandalism; it seems they were ideal for sledding. Problems arose, as well, when coolers would “jackpot.” Nickels would come tumbling out of the machine to the delight of consumers, who predictably failed to turn over the windfall to the route salesman affected by the loss.<sup>17</sup>

Sometimes this playfulness was far less costly. Many customers can recall playing a game known as “Faraway.” At the base of each returnable glass bottle was a Coca-Cola point of origin, such as Bemidji, Minnesota; Montgomery, Alabama; or Baltimore, Maryland. As Coke drinkers would gather around the cooler, one would peer upward and call out: “Laredo, Texas!” Others would sing out their own bottling plant locations. Those whose bottle was from farthest off would win the modest pool of change wagered. It was such a modest transgression – and one so common to the community – that preachers

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<sup>15</sup> Cecil Jones, interview by author, Athens, Georgia, 9 April 1998.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Garland Kittle, interview by author, Athens, Georgia, 8 April 1998.

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never even seemed to condemn the practice in their Sunday hellfire-and-damnation sermons.<sup>18</sup>

Said to be “close with his money” and focused on servicing the market in superior fashion, Walter Sams and his family were sometimes called paternalistic – but usually only by critics who failed to fathom their love for the business and for their employees.

### **Budwine**

While The Coca-Cola Bottling Company of Athens was wed to its premier product, in the early years Walter Sams also held local bottling rights for a product known as “Budwine.” (It had at one time been known as “Bludwine,” perhaps to suggest some kind of health-promoting properties.) Franchising rights for Budwine were held by the Costa family of Athens, local restaurant and soda fountain entrepreneurs. As an alliance with the Costas was thought to be an advantageous one, and for a good many years “Budwine” was quite popular.

In the early part of the century soft drink brands were almost as numerous as the patent medicine remedies. As the end of the millennium approached, however, most have disappeared from the scene as Coca-Cola and its principal rival – each with dozens of products sold under their auspices – have combined to control some eighty percent of the soft drink and refreshment market.

Workers were often given jobs that kept them around far beyond their productive years, some staying on until their eighties. They were members of the family in a very real sense. Frank Fowler was one such member, with a fifty-seven-year career as production manager with the plant. Fowler was also a self-taught inventor and innovator of the first order. By the time he retired, Fowler held fifty-three separate patents, most of these developed during his tenure with the company. Yet the Samses never claimed any ownership in the patents and encouraged Fowler’s inventiveness. Frank’s son, Willie Fowler of Fowler Products, Inc., in Athens, comments, “In today’s business environment you just wouldn’t find that kind of helpful attitude on the part of the ownership.”<sup>19</sup> But, after all, the Coca-Cola plant benefitted vastly from Fowler’s improvements. Fowler’s skills as machinist, electrician, and welder saved the company thousands of dollars in replacement parts, time, and maintenance over the course of his long career.

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<sup>18</sup> Fowler interview.

<sup>19</sup> Fowler scrapbook.

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Once Fowler recognized a need, he would plot possible solutions as he walked the short distance from his home on Prince Avenue to the plant. There he would sit down and invent equipment to do the job. His inventions included:

- Automatic bottle mixing machine
- Alarm for CO<sub>2</sub> gas pressure
- Bottle case printing machine
- Bottle washer
- Coin changer for vending machines
- Case rebanding machine
- Bottle code dater
- Automatic reclaimed crown reforming machine (during the material shortages of World War II)<sup>20</sup>

Some of Fowler's creations had application to businesses other than bottling. These included an automatic ice cream carton sealer, an automatic cracker sandwich making machine, and a "safti-vator" (a fire escape developed in the wake of Atlanta's 1946 Winecoff Hotel fire in which 119 guests perished), a fishing reel, an orange juice dispenser, and a rotary rheostat for wireless telegraphy.<sup>21</sup>

At some point in his career, the Samses and Fowler realized this talent for innovation deserved a range wider than was afforded by the plant or even the bottling industry as a whole. So it was with the family's encouragement that Hugh Fowler, another of Frank's sons, in 1952 formed a new company, Fowler Products. Frank Fowler retained his employment with the Sams family, with the understanding that he could bring his ideas and designs to the new firm with no interference.<sup>22</sup>

Operating in a low-key fashion, it's easy to overlook Fowler Products as an anachronism. The company is still headed by a Fowler – Frank's younger son, Willie (although for a few years in the 1980s the company was owned by a Baltimore concern), and the company still produces the same seemingly simple products and services – bottle fillers, juice cappers, remanufactured production machinery, and the like. But when you call the switchboard nowadays, you'll get a message in both English and Spanish; the company's success at devising better ways of meeting new needs has ensured its position as a corporation with global reach. The most striking applications of the Fowler know-how have been felt in the packaging field. Walk into the company's headquarters and you'll see photographs of sealers and capping

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Fowler interview.

<sup>22</sup> Fowler scrapbook.

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provided for products such as Mott's Apple Juice, Quaker Oats, and Kool-Aid, and for firms such as Baxter Laboratories, Merck and Eastman Kodak.<sup>23</sup>

Walter Sams, who bought into the Coca-Cola business in 1922 using proceeds from the sale of a racehorse, typified the kind of entrepreneur and civic leader who contributed so much to the communities in his franchise territories. From farm to pharmacy to the Coca-Cola business – and back and forth several times – Sams built a respected and long-lived family of enterprises.

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<sup>23</sup> Fowler interview.

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## **A Passion for Science: Joseph LeConte of Georgia**

by Lester D. Stephens <sup>1</sup>

The LeConte name has a secure place in history. Three college buildings bear the name of the LeConte brothers, John and Joseph – one at the University of Georgia, another on the campus of the University of South Carolina, and a third at the University of California at Berkeley. A mountain in the Smokies is named for John, and several landmarks in the High Sierras honor Joseph. The name of Joseph LeConte is also associated with a fossil snail, a fossil rodent, and a glacier and a ferryboat in Alaska. Joseph once had a bird named after him, but, as it later turned out, *Picus lecontei* was an abnormal woodpecker with the wrong number of toes. That is ironic in a way, for Joseph made a number of contributions to ornithology. Two birds carry the LeConte name, but honor his cousin John Lawrence LeConte, who was noted mainly for his research on beetles. The LeConte name is also affixed to a turtle, a violet, and a pear, though each is associated with either Joseph's famous naturalist uncle, John Eatton LeConte, or his father, Louis LeConte. Other things have been named for Joseph LeConte, including schools in California and at least three city streets, one of which is located here in Athens. Certainly, then, the LeConte name indicates accomplishments worthy of note, but this paper focuses upon one member of that notable family, Joseph, though it also refers to John, as he was also an esteemed scientist and as his career was intertwined with that of his brother for forty years.

Joseph LeConte was Georgia's foremost scientist during the nineteenth century. Interested in a wide range of subjects, including medicine, physiology, vision, ornithology, botany, and geology, he gained greatest recognition as a proponent of the theory of evolution – especially for his efforts to reconcile the theory with Christian beliefs—and for his work in geology, for which he attained international acclaim. In addition, LeConte delved into the topics of

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's Note: This paper is based on Lester D. Stephens' book, *Joseph LeConte: Gentle Prophet of Evolution* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), and on numerous journal articles and scholarly encyclopedia articles on Joseph LeConte and on the LeConte family published by Lester D. Stephens. This talk was presented to the Athens Historical Society by the author, on Sunday, March 24, 2002.

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philosophy, religion, education, the arts, literature, and social organization. During his lifetime, he published seven books: *Science and Religion*; *Evolution*; *Elements of Geology*; *A Compend of Geology*, *Ramblings in the High Sierra*; *Sight*; and *Comparative Physiology*. His *Elements of Geology* was revised three times by him and once more after his death by a former student, and it was a leading college textbook for four decades. Two other works appeared after the death of Joseph: his *Autobiography* and *'Ware Sherman*.

LeConte also published around 200 articles, many of which were substantial academic contributions. Like some scholars of his time, however, LeConte penned a number of comments on a wide range of ordinary subjects. In fact, in an age of increasing specialization, he remained a sort of Renaissance man. Clearly, however, Joseph LeConte was a prolific writer, and through his articles and books he exerted a marked influence upon the American mind.

Joseph was the sixth of seven children born to Louis LeConte and his wife Ann Quarterman. A descendant of a French Huguenot, Louis was the son of John Eatton LeConte, who had purchased land in Liberty County, Georgia, and eventually turned the 3356-acre tract into a plantation called *Woodmanston*.

In 1810, Louis took charge of the property and, through the labor of numerous slaves, developed it into a productive cotton and rice estate. Educated at Columbia College, in New York, he briefly attended the College of Physicians and Surgeons in the same city. A man of versatile talent, inquiring mind, and generous spirit, Louis there achieved recognition for his work in chemistry, mathematics, and natural history. Among his special interests was the study of plants, and he developed a large botanical garden at Woodmanston, which attracted international attention. Although he never published any of his discoveries, Louis liberally shared them with others. His brother, the second John Eatton LeConte, was a noted naturalist who frequently visited Woodmanston for the study of local flora and fauna and published original descriptions of several species that inhabit Georgia.

Born on February 26, 1823, Joseph, like his siblings, was educated mostly at home, but he did attend a local school operated for a brief time by young Alexander H. Stephens. At the age of fifteen, Joseph followed in the footsteps of his older brothers William and John by enrolling at the University of Georgia. He was accompanied by his brother Louis, two years his senior. Serious and dedicated students, both excelled in their studies. Joseph was named a junior orator in 1840, and a senior orator in 1841. Ranking third in his class, he

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graduated with honors at the age of eighteen. Two years later, he followed his brother John by studying medicine at the College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York. Although he found the lectures dry and uninspiring, Joseph was a diligent student of medicine. He was especially interested in physiology, a subject he continued to study throughout his lifetime, receiving the M.D. degree in 1845, after voluntarily completing a second year of study.

Uncertain about his future, LeConte spent the next few months traveling about Georgia, and, often in the company of his cousin William Louis Jones, collected numerous species of birds, which he later donated to the U.S. National Museum. Meanwhile, he became engaged to Caroline Elizabeth Nisbet, of Midway, a small town in Liberty County, not far from Woodmanston. They were married 30 January 1847, but the young physician continued his leisurely life as a naturalist until late in that year when he finally decided to begin the practice of medicine in the city of Macon. The life of a physician proved to be intellectually unrewarding for LeConte, however, and he soon began to think of preparing himself for a career in science.

By 1850, LeConte had set his sights on a program in the Lawrence Scientific School, which had been established at Harvard College three years earlier. Thus, when his cousin Jones announced that he planned to enroll there and invited Joseph to accompany him, he jumped at the

chance. The prospects were exciting, for in 1847 the renowned Swiss naturalist Louis Agassiz had accepted a professorship there. In the fall of 1850, LeConte moved with his wife and infant daughter to Cambridge, Massachusetts, in order to pursue his goal, where he received the best scientific training available at the time and discovered his first real scholarly love in the study of geology and zoology.

During the winter of 1851, LeConte accepted Agassiz's invitation to join a research expedition to the Florida Keys to study the coral reefs that figure so prominently in the geological structure of the Florida peninsula



*Dr. Joseph LeConte, about 1875*



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and the string of small islands extending from Biscayne Bay to the Dry Tortugas. LeConte's discoveries aided Agassiz in developing a theory of coral formation, and in 1856 LeConte presented a paper at a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in which he expanded upon the subject as a hypothetical explanation of the geological development of the peninsula of Florida. The paper was later published in the proceedings of the AAAS and in the *American Journal of Science*. This was, in LeConte's words, his "first really scientific paper."

Upon completing his work with the Agassiz expedition, LeConte returned to Harvard to complete his studies. Persuaded by his mentor to write a thesis and earn the B.S. degree, LeConte agreed to remain in Cambridge until the summer of 1851. His thesis, a comparison of marine invertebrates characterized by radial symmetry, reflected Agassiz's commitment to the comparative study of scientific subjects, an influence later evident in LeConte's own scientific studies and in his philosophical treatises on evolution and religion.

In October 1851, LeConte returned to Georgia, where he hoped to obtain an appointment to the faculty of his alma mater. When he learned that his cousin Jones intended to apply for the position, however, he settled instead for the chair of science at Oglethorpe College, then located in the community of Midway, near the state capital of Milledgeville. A Presbyterian school strong in the classics, Oglethorpe offered little promise for an ambitious young scientist, but the small college provided LeConte with access to a "first-rate microscope." The assignment included "mechanics, physics, chemistry, geology, and botany," but LeConte later claimed that the diverse preparations afforded him an opportunity for "excellent training" that "kept alive" his "interest in all departments of science."

His tenure at Oglethorpe proved to be brief, however, for Jones resigned after only one year at the University of Georgia in protest against the policies of its president, Alonzo Church. Jones was neither the first nor the last highly qualified faculty member to leave because of disagreement with Church, and LeConte's brother John, who had been the professor of physics at the University since 1846, warned Joseph that he would likely encounter difficulty with the president. But Joseph, a man of mild disposition and even temperament, thought he could manage. He therefore applied for the position, and the University's board of trustees quickly approved his appointment. Unfortunately for LeConte, and perhaps for his students, he was also assigned to teach French. Despite his French ancestry, LeConte could

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barely speak the language, though he could read and write it with some facility. He desired the appointment so much, however, that he agreed to teach the subject, and took some quick tutoring in the language.

LeConte assumed his new position in January 1853, and in short order established himself as an excellent teacher. Within six months a French teacher had been hired, and LeConte was thus freed to devote his efforts to the natural sciences. Zoology was not included among his subjects, however, so he turned his attention more and more toward geology. LeConte soon found Church's policies oppressive, and by 1855 he was embroiled in a serious controversy with the University president. A classicist and minister, Church irritated the LeContes because of his paternalistic attitude toward the all-male student body. Believing it was necessary to monitor students, he required each faculty member to make a round of the dormitory to assure that the young men were engaged in study at designated evening hours. John LeConte often shirked his monitoring duties, claiming he was too busy, but the main reason was that he objected to the practice. Joseph also disliked the policy and eventually ceased to carry out his assignment. Late in the summer of 1855, John suddenly resigned to take a position as a lecturer at the College of Physicians and moved back to New York.

Soon the newspapers began to carry charges that Church was driving out some of the best professors in the University. Church responded with strong accusations against John LeConte, and a hot war of words ensued. Joseph was also involved; Church charged him with insubordination. In reality, the conflict involved much more than just policing students; it also reflected Church's suspicious attitude toward science. He even accused John LeConte of "leading our young men to infidelity" because the scientist advocated the geological conception of the earth's antiquity. This was a few years before Charles Darwin published his theory of evolution, of course, but the LeContes had already accepted the notion that the earth had existed for hundreds of thousands of years before the creation of the first humans.

As the conflict increased, the trustees decided they had to take action. Because LeConte was a popular teacher, however, they were reluctant to dismiss him. Moreover, other faculty members were just as strongly displeased with Church. Nor would the trustees fire Church who had been associated with the University for more than three decades. Church, later described by the normally uncritical Joseph LeConte as "a bigoted, dogmatic, and imperious old man," decided to end the controversy by announcing his resignation in October 1856. Perplexed, the trustees eventually called for dismissal of the entire

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faculty, with a view toward “reorganizing” the college. Then, they dallied until early December, when they finally reappointed Church and instructed him to hire a new faculty. The unbending president reappointed only one of the original faculty and replaced all of the others, including Joseph LeConte.

Meanwhile, in the fall of 1856, after only a little over a year in New York, John LeConte accepted the position of physics professor at South Carolina College (later renamed the University of South Carolina). The chair of geology and chemistry became vacant shortly thereafter, and in December, while the University of Georgia trustees were pondering their dilemma, Joseph applied for the position in South Carolina. Successful, he joined his brother in Columbia, South Carolina, in January 1857, thus ending a chapter in the history of the University of Georgia and beginning a new chapter for the LeConte brothers and for South Carolina College.

Ties with Georgia did not end with the move to South Carolina, however, for both LeContes still owned property in Liberty County. They each had inherited more than 400 acres of land from their father’s estate and owned around sixty slaves. Through an overseer, the LeConte brothers continued to operate their plantations until the end of the Civil War. Unlike John, Joseph made frequent visits to his Georgia estate to check on its operations and to look after the welfare of his slaves, whom he called his “second family.” After he became an avowed evolutionist in the early 1870s, LeConte took the position that blacks were a distinct variety within the human species and that they had not evolved as far on the scale of organic and social evolution as had Western-world white people. It is perhaps a testimony to his paternalism, however, that his former slaves stole little from his plantation after the war, while his brother John, a somewhat aloof man who seems never to have visited his estate after he left the Low Country in the 1840s, lost much to his old charges. It is likewise a matter of note that Joseph never entertained the possibility of manumitting his slaves. He later claimed that he never wished to own slaves but was morally bound to take care of them. In fact, as he stated, the plantation was not immensely profitable and he could have made more money by selling it and investing the capital in some other venture. Yet he declined, he said, because of his sense of responsibility to his slaves.

Unlike many other Southern plantation owners, the LeConte brothers generally sought to avoid the political questions facing the South during the 1850s. Indeed, even when the movement for secession increased in 1861, they remained fairly passive on political matters.

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During the war, however, both aided the Confederacy. In later reflections, Joseph maintained that the Southern states had legally seceded and therefore constituted a separate nation. Thus, although he was not originally a secessionist, he, like his brother, ardently supported the Southern cause once war had been declared.

As the Civil War directly disrupted Southern life, South Carolina College had to shut its doors. During the early months of the conflict, Joseph utilized much of his time in writing, mainly on philosophical and literary topics. Eventually, however, he served as a chemist for the Confederate government, first in its Medical Department and then in its Niter and Mining Bureau, of which his brother John was a local superintendent. Toward the end of the war, Joseph was caught up in a series of harrowing experiences, and his journal of those adventures, published as *Ware Sherman*, still provides exciting reading today.

When General Sherman's troops began to move into southern Georgia late in 1864 and early 1865, LeConte set out for Liberty County to rescue his daughter Sallie, who had gone to visit his older, widowed sister and her two daughters, as well as to give instructions to his slaves. Since his plantation was now behind enemy lines, LeConte literally had to brave swamps, cross a flooded river, and evade hostile forces. After numerous close calls, he achieved his goal and returned to Columbia, but only in time to flee again from the advancing Union army. The LeConte brothers were ordered to remove laboratory equipment from the hapless city, and Joseph also decided to cart away his manuscripts. Fate dealt cruelly with him, however, for while he escaped, his wagon was captured, pilfered, and burned. Back in Columbia, ironically, his house and books were spared, although a considerable portion of the city was destroyed. John and his younger son were forced to surrender, but after a long march into North Carolina they were released.

During the months immediately following the end of the war, Joseph LeConte devoted his energies to the sustenance of his family. He bore his burden fairly well, but as things returned to a semblance of normality, he became depressed over the loss of his manuscripts, which included most of the text of a chemistry book he was co-authoring with his brother John, who also lost all of his papers. Having been cut off from recent advances in the field of geology and unable to afford the cost of fieldwork, LeConte turned his attention elsewhere. Among the few scientific journals he could obtain during the time were several foreign publications that contained some articles on physiological optics. Those articles stimulated him to write a series of papers on

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human vision, published between 1868-1875, which ultimately resulted in the production of the book entitled *Sight*. The first book of its kind in the United States, *Sight* gained favorable recognition immediately and remained the best American book on the subject for two decades. It might have continued even longer had LeConte been able to keep up with advances in the field.

Although LeConte devoted his energies to his work on vision, he became discontented with political affairs in South Carolina. Especially incensed when blacks were appointed to the college's board of trustees and perturbed over the increasing utilitarian orientation of higher education in the State, he and his brother began to seek employment elsewhere. Ostracized by schools in the North and fearful of similar conditions in other Southern colleges, they felt hopeless. Finally, through the efforts of Louis Agassiz and Smithsonian Institution Secretary Joseph Henry, they acquired positions at the newly-established University of California. Thus, in late 1868, John and his family left by ship for the Golden State, and in 1869 Joseph and his family departed for the West Coast via the newly-completed transcontinental railroad.

Joseph LeConte was forty-six years old at the time, and he found himself once again beginning a new career. His discouragement gave way ultimately to a vigor as vital as that of the young state and new college of which he became a part. As he said later, he published many times more during the last thirty years of his life than he produced altogether in the early years of his career. An ardent camper and outdoorsman, he traveled eleven times into the Sierras, both for pleasure and for geological research.

The transformation of Joseph LeConte was more than a geographic transformation: it was also a transformation of mind. Although he remained quite conservative in many ways, LeConte was open to scientific ideas. Thus, just before he reached the age of fifty, he became an enthusiastic evolutionist. True, he had been, in his own words, a "reluctant evolutionist" for many years, but some time around 1872 or 1873, he finally accepted fully the theory of evolution, and soon thereafter began to write articles and present addresses on the subject. His book *Evolution and Its Relation to Religious Thought*, published in 1888 and revised in 1891, was extremely successful, and won for LeConte a place among the most noted of American evolutionists.

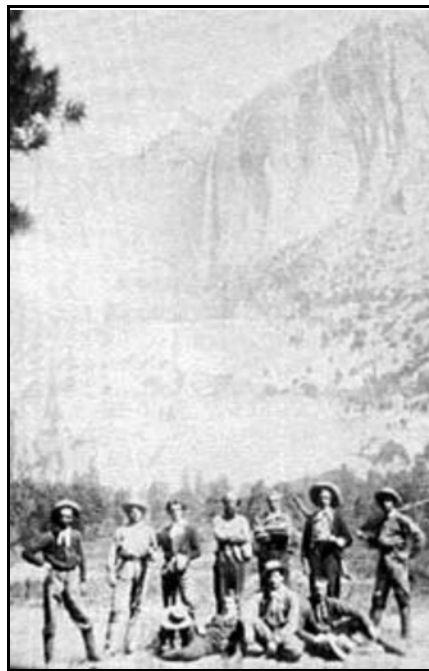
During his thirty-one years at the University of California, Joseph LeConte endeared himself to a host of students and scholars and received numerous honors, including election as president of the

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American Association for the Advancement of Science and of the American Geological Society. He was also elected to membership in the prestigious National Academy of Sciences. LeConte made several original contributions to the field of geology and had a significant impact upon the worlds of science and ideas. He synthesized many research findings, produced original explanations on such subjects as mountain formation and the nature of the earth's crust, and articulated the major ideas of evolutionary theory and geological knowledge into works that influenced three generations of students. In addition, LeConte contributed to the growth and development of one of America's leading universities.

Unquestionably, LeConte was an influential teacher. From his earliest days as a professor of science, his students praised him as a lecturer, and, as he grew older, the gentle man was venerated by his students. The philosopher Josiah Royce recalled that the first public lecture he had heard from the lips of LeConte so deeply impressed him that he decided to enroll in one of his courses. Before he had completed his degree program, Royce had taken five additional courses with LeConte. To Royce, LeConte was the ideal teacher and thinker: "His wealth of knowledge, his instinct for order and lucidity of reflection have, indeed, always remained my hopelessly distant ideal."

Other former students also praised LeConte. For example, S.B. Christy, who later became a colleague of LeConte, viewed him as a master teacher, and recalled



*Photo: Great Yosemite Falls [with the ten members of the party in the foreground: Phelps, Bolton, Perkins, Prof. LeConte, Soulé, Linderman, Comb, Stone, Hawkins, Pomroy.] From the Sierra Club's webpage on LeConte.*

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how, as a student, he had daily observed the “agile figure [of LeConte] eagerly stepping off for a brisk morning stroll of half an hour,” then going to his study at nine o’clock, where he “shut himself up alone . . . and paced slowly up and down, reviewing those beloved notes of his.” At eleven o’clock, LeConte “appeared before his class, full of the inspiration of his great theme.” Other students were equally impressed: “We leave [his] lecture-room with a feeling that we have been in the presence of something high and worthy,” they wrote in the student yearbook for 1892.

One of the last students to study with the famous teacher was Ralph Fisher, who, as President of the Associated Students of the University of California, delivered a memorial tribute to LeConte in 1901. “One of the marks of his greatness,” said Fisher, “lay in the fascinating simplicity with which he explained the most difficult subjects in the class-room.” Young Fisher also lauded LeConte for his exemplary devotion to truth, the contagious “earnestness” of his convictions, and the “faithfulness” of his lecture preparations, and he closed with a tribute to LeConte’s “love for humanity” and “his Christ-like humility.” During the 1890s, Joseph LeConte was honored every year on his birthday by his students, who decorated his lectern with flowers and wreaths.

LeConte also enjoyed a reputation as a teacher in a broader sense, a reputation that extended beyond his classroom lectures. This was especially notable in his excursions to the mountainous regions of the West Coast. As John Muir recalled his initial meeting with LeConte, he was “at once drawn to him by the charm of his manners, as to a fine lake or mountain.” In Muir’s opinion, LeConte “stood alone on this side of the continent, and his influence no man can measure. He carried his students in his heart, and was the idol of the University.” Frank Soulé, LeConte’s colleague and friend for thirty years and the man who was with LeConte on both the first and last of his trips into the High Sierras, reiterated Muir’s judgment of LeConte, and recalled that “he quoted poetry by the volume, and . . . was full of anecdote seasoned by wit and humor of a high order. . . .”

Joseph LeConte was also a devoted husband and a loving father of four daughters and a son. His first daughter, Emma, was a remarkable woman who wrote a fascinating journal of the fall of Columbia, South Carolina, to federal forces in February 1865, and penned other interesting accounts. Her Civil War journal has been published as *When the World Ended*. Joseph Nisbet “Little Joe” LeConte, the youngest of the children, became a professor of mechanical and hydraulic

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engineering at the University of California, an expert photographer, and a long-time officer of the Sierra Club, of which his father was a founding member.

In July 1901, ten years after the death of his beloved brother John, Joseph LeConte took his eleventh trip into the Sierras. Then seventy-eight years of age, he chose to remain in Yosemite Valley and forego the usual, arduous adventures of climbing mountains, hiking the rugged trails, and swimming in the frigid waters of the Merced River. While other members of the party were roaming about to view the beauties of Bridal Veil Fall, Inspiration Point, and other natural wonders, LeConte experienced a heart attack, and by the next morning was dead. His body was borne back to Oakland, and there the old teacher and scientist was laid to rest. Praised in many eulogies and tributes, “the gentle prophet of evolution,” as one San Francisco newspaperman had called him, had undoubtedly touched the lives of hundreds of people, great and small. Constantly searching for truth, he had refused to be deterred by personal obstacles. Life for him was a continuing challenge, and he never tired of his quest for answers. Indeed, as one of his many admirers once said, life for LeConte was “fun,” and his zest for living and thinking had a contagious effect upon three generations of students. Possessing a passion for science and a remarkable zeal for learning and teaching, Joseph LeConte was one of Georgia’s greatest figures, and residents of this state have just cause to take pride in the accomplishments and the influence of this native son.



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### **The Atlanta Life Insurance Company <sup>1</sup>**

*John H. Roberson, listed as J.H. "Robertson" in Mrs. Grace McCune's interview manuscript, was the manager of the Athens office of the Atlanta Life Insurance Company, called the "Capital City Insurance Company" in the interview. Atlanta Life was founded by Alonzo Franklin Herndon, a former slave, and today Atlanta Life has assets of more than \$200 million and operates in seventeen states. The Athens office was in the Samaritan Building, two doors down from the Morton Building. The Samaritan Building was torn down for a parking lot.*

*John Roberson was not listed in the 1938 Athens City Directory, but he was in the 1940 directory, living at 760 North Chase Street. He was also in the 1942 directory, but not in later directories. I have not found any information about his other residence locations or when he died.*

The young Negress, who sat at her desk in the reception room of the Atlanta Life Insurance Company's local office, was industriously thumbing through a sheaf of papers when I entered. She stood up at once when she saw me, and when I expressed a desire to talk with the manager of the office, she said, "Just have a seat, and I'll see if he is busy."

As she left me to open a door marked "PRIVATE," I noticed her straightened hair, combed back from her face and arranged in a smooth coil on the back of her head. Her neatly fitted frock was made on the tailored lines of appropriate office costuming for women. She returned promptly, saying, "Mr. Roberson will see you now."

She led the way, and on entering the small private office I saw a young Negro man dressed in an impeccably tailored and freshly pressed dark blue business suit.

"I'm J.H. Roberson," he greeted me, standing beside his desk, "What can I do for you?"

He laughed when I asked him to relate some of his experiences and problems in his occupation as an insurance man.

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's Note: Reprinted with permission from *Athens Memories, The WPA Federal Writers' Project Interviews*, edited by Al Hester and published by The Green Berry Press, Athens, GA, 2001. The WPA interviewer was Mrs. Grace McCune.

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“We do have a good many problems,” he admitted, “And our experiences might fill a good many books. But first, won’t you have a seat?”

“Tell me about your early life,” I asked.

“Well,” he said, “I was born in a small town in South Georgia, in 1905. The folks down there may not consider it so small – they even have a daily paper there – but after spending so many years in Atlanta and Athens, and visiting other larger cities, I came to realize that I am from a small town. My father worked at sawmills and consequently was away from home much of the time, for when one lot of timber was cut, the sawmill had to be moved to another tract.

“One of my earliest recollections is my determination to earn money. I wanted to have my own money and to be independent. I hardly know just how old I was when I began work as a boot-black. It’s really surprising how many nickels and dimes a small boy can earn blacking shoes.

“During my grammar school days, I was on the lookout for any little chore by which I could earn money between school hours. After finishing grammar school in Moultrie, I began high school studies at Americus Institute in Americus, Georgia, but after one school year I went to Morehouse College, in Atlanta, where I completed high school, and I remained there until I graduated from college.

“About twenty percent of the students at Morehouse did part-time work to earn some of their expenses. I was one of that group, and I also began the fall term every year with quite a tidy sum saved from wages and tips paid me at summer resorts during the vacation period.

“I waited on tables, did bellboy service, or most anything that came to hand at summer hotels. When I finished college, my plans were already definite. I wanted to go in the insurance business, for I could think of no other field that offered as promising opportunities to a young man of my race.

“I didn’t step out of college into a high-salaried executive job. My first work was the humblest that this business has to offer. I was an agent’s helper. That means I made the rounds with the agent to keep up with the literature that was distributed for advertising and selling insurance. I wasn’t allowed to do any collecting, and neither could I try to sell any insurance until I was promoted to the job of assistant agent.

“Even then I was given long and careful training by the agent before I was permitted to discuss any matter of collection or selling with a policyholder or a sales prospect. It takes someone who is plenty interested in insurance to stick through the long training period.

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"I can tell you it was hard on me during my first experience in trying to keep up the quota required of all agents and their assistants. There were days when it seemed impossible to make even a small increase in the volume of sales and collections. I would have given up by then, but I very well knew it was only by means of bringing in more business than the other agents that I could hope for promotion, and I was firmly determined to get it.

"The agent with me knew I was doing my very best and that I wanted, more than anything else in the world, to make good at insurance work, so he did everything in his power to encourage and assist me. It was his kindness and understanding that enabled me to successfully pass through the trying period of training.

"When dark came, the other agents would call it a day, and they would go out for an evening of pleasure and frolicking around at dances and shows, but I worked right on. That was my time for contacting those of our people who couldn't be reached in the daytime because of their jobs. It was this night work that enabled me to pile up a higher total of insurance sold than the others in my district, and eight years ago it won me my place as manager.

"Now we have a regular training school for young men of twenty-one and over who want to enter the insurance business. We take twenty or thirty of them and start training the group. They don't have to have college education for this work, for we teach them according to our own ideas. Do you know that the best executives in the insurance business are men that never finished high school? Some of the top-notchers never even finished grammar school.

"Education is a great thing, but that old school of experience beats 'em all, because that's where you have to work for yourself. That's one school that will make you put out all there is in you.

"We start our agents off with small salaries, plus a commission on all business above a certain quota. That's an incentive to work because they realize that the amount of their earnings depends on their own efforts and resourcefulness, and they usually dig in and get the business.

"After an agent is appointed and his territory assigned he becomes responsible for the business in that definite area; not for just one type of policy, but for all the different kinds of insurance that we write. All the special problems that arise in that particular territory – and believe me, there are plenty of problems coming up all the time in any territory – the agent is expected to settle by himself as far as possible. It seems as if a week never passes that some policyholder doesn't let a policy

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lapse for one reason or another. The agent who keeps in sufficiently close touch with his policyholders to be able to persuade them to let no insurance lapse is considered exceedingly good and is in sure line for promotion. Sometimes the lapses will total more than the new business, and that's when we get discouraged and feel like giving up.

"Of course, we investigate every risk as well as we can before we write the insurance, and then do more investigating before we pay any claim that appears to be in the least doubtful, but even at that we do get caught sometimes.

"Things aren't always as they appear on the surface and it's not possible to accurately judge the physical condition by casual inspection of outward appearances. People who want to collect on sick benefit claims will swear to anything that they think they can get by with.

When they want to get a policy written, they'll swear they have

never had to see a doctor, at least not for the last five or ten years. All the time, they're just planning to cash in on some disease already present in their bodies and which they may be able to conceal from us long enough to get the insurance written and in effect.



*The Athens office of Atlanta Life Insurance was in the Good Samaritan Building, near the Morton Theater on Washington Street. From A Postcard History of Athens, Georgia.*

"We've learned that there are almost as many speculators as there are honest people.

This is especially so on the sick and accident policies. Some of our policies carry sick benefits that run as high as twenty-five dollars a week, and persons have tried to collect as soon as the policy was in force. Then again we have had some that have carried these policies for years, and have never put in for the first claim.

"I'll never forget the time when a woman who held one of our sick and accident policies, paying five dollars a week in the event she was

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confined to bed, tried to swindle us. We paid the first week's claim without hesitation after I had personally visited the home and found her in bed, apparently very ill.

"When the claim for the second week came in, I made my formal visit of investigation at an hour when she did not expect me. I suspected there was some reason for the excessive delay in permitting me to enter the home. I noticed the cover pulled up closely about her neck on that sweltering July day – probably to conceal the fact that she had gotten into bed fully dressed. I remained by the bedside administering simple remedies and sympathizing with the patient until the limit of her endurance was reached.

"That was after I had awkwardly mixed up quantities of freshly ironed clothes with piles of un-ironed garments and accidentally dropped them on the floor and trampled on them. I directed the neighbor woman to apply hot water bottles to the feet of the patient and mustard plasters to her chest.

"She rose up out of bed, fully clothed, even to her shoes, and said she did not want that five dollars a week if she had to go through all that to get it. But you know, I don't believe she ever did suspect anything other than that I was just extremely solicitous about her.

"That story spread through the district and it gave me a good reputation for looking after the sick people who hold insurance with me. If anyone else in that district ever tried to swindle me in a sick benefit claim, I never did find it out.

"Now don't get the idea that we're reluctant about paying just claims. We very readily pay all just and honest claims, but because the great number of speculators who are always ready to take any and every advantage of us, we must at all times be very careful in our investigations of claims.

"The worst feature of it all is that these speculators sometimes find doctors low enough to help them in their efforts to swindle life insurance companies. However, I'm happy to say that this doesn't happen very often.

"We always learn when these cases do show up, that the policyholder has promised to divide the benefits with the doctor, when and if the claim is paid. I don't think they ever gain by this practice in the long run, for if they win once, they invariably keep on trying to work the same gag, and sooner or later it makes a lot of trouble for them, if not a jail term.

"Are all of your insurance payments weekly?" I asked.

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"In town, yes; or that is, most of it is paid by the week in town. It can be paid by the month by special arrangement. Out in communities where we don't keep an agent all the time, we send a representative once a month to make collections.

"It's counted a serious matter to risk loss of money by letting insurance lapse. Perhaps our greatest collection problem in rural communities lies in the frequency with which our policyholders move from one farm to another, and we've never been able to make them understand the importance of notifying us whenever they plan to move.

"Some of them move about so much. They will stay probably a year on one farm and then get dissatisfied for some reason. Usually they think they haven't been treated right, didn't get enough pay, or the people they rented from didn't advance them enough during the year to get by with their bills until the crop was sold.

"Sometimes it's the illness or death of the main breadwinner in a family that's the reason for the move, but they scarcely ever stay in one place over a year or two at the most, for they're always thinking they can do better at some other place.

"Sometimes they move into a county where they're not known, and it's a problem to locate them then. I've known it to take several months to locate one policyholder. They just don't cooperate with the agent. After all that work in locating them, when we ask, 'Why didn't you let us know where you had moved?' we get this answer, 'I just never thought about it.'"

He laughed and continued, "But you know that's about the truth of the matter – they just don't think; that's one great fault of my people.

"I don't know if you know this or not, but one of the greatest mistakes our people make is when they let a policy lapse, they'll sometimes just drop that one and take out a new policy with another agent. I've known this to happen many times, and I've occasionally known them to die before the new policy is in force.

"If they had only kept the old policy in effect by keeping it paid up, they would have received its value. It's hard to make them understand this.

"People with high incomes don't need insurance like those who work on small, uncertain salaries. I really don't know just what my people would do in some emergencies without insurance, for it's one thing on which they can depend.

"Take the washwomen, cooks, maids and all the others that work for two and three dollars a week. What do they have to depend on? Their earnings are not even enough for the necessities of living, and if

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sickness should come, they couldn't get a doctor to come unless he knew he would get his money, and that's the same in case of death.

"They'd have to lay out until enough money was raised to pay burial expenses. But if they have a good insurance policy they can get the doctor to come, and if they should pass on, the doctor, as well as the undertaker, would get his money.

"Yes, a good policy is something they can depend on, and if they can possibly get the money to keep it in force, they won't knowingly let it lapse.

"Another feature of insurance which has brought up many questions and caused some lawsuits is the minor-child beneficiary. Of course, we can't turn the money over to a child, and sure as the world when the uncles and aunts of the beneficiary learn that the child has money coming from insurance, they all fall out about who is to be the guardian.

"Each one of them will want the child as long as they expect it to receive money. In most of these instances we have turned the money over to a court, whose duty it was to appoint a guardian for the child and its money.

"Today we refuse to write policies that name children as beneficiaries unless the policyholder specifies a guardian in the application for the policy.

"As to the matter of production, we divide the business area into districts, and in each district we set up a local office in some central town. The personnel of the local office include manager, assistant manager, cashier, clerk, inspectors, supervisors and agents. Each supervisor has from four to six agents working under him.

"While we understand that not every prospect called on will take out insurance, we do expect our agents to land at least three out of every ten they call on. Each agent has his prospect book, and in this is kept the names of all the people he calls on, the date of each call, and a notice of when he expects to see each prospect again. Sometimes it takes weeks for the agent to make just one trip to each of his prospects, but whether they want him or not, he hunts them up and calls regularly, just as a matter of persistence.

"Do you know that in the end these regular calls usually win out for the agent?

"Few people on the outside realize the valuable services we render to morticians. You know the collection end of their business is bound to be difficult, for they are compelled to bury the deceased even if they never get anything for their services and merchandise.

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“As a usual thing, people are inclined to request expensive funerals for their relatives, whether they can pay the bills or not. We encourage the proprietors of undertaking establishments to call us as soon as they are notified of a death, so that we can let them know whether or not the deceased has insurance with us.

“Most other insurance companies extend the same courtesies. When they know in advance how much cash will be available, the morticians are enabled to make a more sensible deal with the family. They can show only what they know can be paid for.

“It’s an established fact that unless they get at least a substantial part of the cost before the interment, it will be difficult for them to collect at all. After they have rendered services to the best of their ability, furnished burial robes and casket, and used their hearse, automobiles and other equipment, there is little that they can do toward collection after the body is underground.

“They had better get a claim on what insurance exists before they even start to work on the corpse.

“We don’t have very much time for recreation, and there’s very little in that way to do here, but our agents usually go in for whatever amusements are popular in their territories, for it’s a good policy to mix with the local people. That helps business.

“Personally, I have very little time for recreation. I do enjoy swimming and billiards, also a good game of tennis in the late afternoons, and I think we all like a good picture show. I visit all the churches very often and attend their different entertainments, for, as I told you, I consider it a good policy to mix with people. Though I’m a Baptist myself, our policyholders belong to different churches, and it makes them feel better to know that we want to be with them.

“I married an Alabama girl soon after I came here to work as a manager. I have no children, and just a short time ago – it seems like ages – I lost my wife. Since she passed away, I’m left without any family.

“I get lonesome, for we were so happy, but I know that I’ll have to go on some way and I’m trying to take it as she would have me to. I’m glad I stay so busy that I don’t have time to brood and worry so much.

“There are so many problems of our people, and many have tried to find their own solutions. The white folks are working on these things now, and I hope and believe that at some time in the near future there will be a better understanding between the races.

“The South is the home of the Negro, and our people are beginning to realize it more and more in every way. Of course, some of them, in



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fact a great many, have gone North and have made a success of their work at the better salaries paid there. But after all, that doesn't mean so much, for it takes all they can make to live up there.

"Housing conditions can be blamed for many of the problems of my race. Our agents have found that these conditions are worse in small towns and rural areas than in the more thickly settled sections. Rain comes in through leaky roofs and they can't keep the cold out. Continued exposure to cold, wet and unsanitary living quarters brings out a notable increase in pulmonary disorders. Pneumonia flourishes in areas where these conditions prevail. In fact, the majority of our sick claims are based on this disease.

"As a general thing, there is a trend toward improvement of housing conditions throughout the section of the country that I frequent. Our people are beginning to take advantage of the plans offered by various government bureaus for financing improvements of houses. Marked improvement in rural areas is coming from the aid and encouragement now given to tenant farmers toward purchase of farms and building of farm houses.

"Our company sponsors lectures and assemblies for teaching improvement of health by means of diet. We began this several years ago when an amazing number of sick benefit claims, based on varying degrees of prostration accompanied by a peculiar roughening of the skin, came in from a section of South Georgia.

"We investigated and found this malady to be pellagra. Our workers in that territory concentrated their efforts on convincing the sufferers of the benefits to be gained by properly varied diets to such an extent that we think more cures were effected by the change of food habits than by medicines.

"By means of county agents, nursing projects, and other facilities, the government has done splendid service in teaching the essentials of proper diet to the people of your race and mine.

"It would probably be hard for you to believe what we found to be the main obstacle in our efforts to help pellagra victims in the area I've just mentioned," he remarked.

"Go ahead and tell about it," I urged. "It should be known."

"Well," he continued, lowering his voice until I had to lean forward to catch the words that followed, "In this area, almost every landlord would forbid the tenant to plant a garden for his own use, saying, 'I want you to put all of your time on your crop, so I'll plant a garden big enough to feed every family on this plantation. You plant your crop on every foot of land I've rented you.'

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“So the tenant had no garden, no potato patch, no watermelon patch, no chickens, and no hogs or cows. Sure enough, the landlord would plant a grand garden, but everything the tenant used from his was charged to his account at a price that enabled the landlord to make an excellent profit. It usually left the tenant in debt to his landlord at the end of the year if he used anything from that garden.

“So the poor tenant learned to do without vegetables, milk and fresh meats. He lived chiefly on cornbread, syrup and fatback, and consequently became susceptible to pellagra.

“Some of our people in certain sections still find themselves hampered by restrictions like that, and so they keep moving from place to place. They’re trying to get away from such things.

“Most of us can remember a time when people of my race had few opportunities for higher education. Now we have excellent high schools and colleges, as well as much improved facilities for grade school education. If young people of my race want to be educated, there is nothing to prevent them from going ahead and getting whatever training they desire.

“I’m proud of these educational institutions, for they have been the means of giving us better preparation for our work. Even the cooks need to know how to read and write, and the same knowledge enables the maid to answer your telephone more intelligently and take down the messages that come for you in your absence.

“Nursemaids give better service in the care of your children when they are trained for their work. In fact, there is no line of work – no matter how humble the service – that cannot be improved by even a little education.

“The relationship between our people and the white folks in the South is on a sounder basis than in the North. I know that many thoughtless things have been done, and some of them have been terrible in their effects on the harmony of the races.

“These things have made hardships for the rest of us. We are working in cooperation with the good white people to prevent such things from recurring, and it will all be straightened out eventually. It takes lots of time to solve problems concerning the human race, and much more time to work out those solutions sufficiently to see improvement.

“Only the Negroes who have means can make money and progress in the North. The ones that have nothing can’t get along. I know how many couldn’t live in the North. Eventually they’ll all want to come back to the South where the majority of them were born. The South is

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their home. Here they have their own friends, relatives, churches, and schools. If they can just learn to get ahead, then they'll be on the road to greater advantages.

"I know many that sold their farms and moved to the North because they thought they couldn't make a go of it on the farm. They didn't know how to do much of anything except to raise cotton and corn. And there's no excuse for the farmer not to make a good living if he's willing to work. The government has all these farm projects and agents willing to teach them what to plant and how to cultivate the ground to the best advantage.

"They are learning that cotton is not the reliable money crop they once thought it was. They know there are many other crops that will bring in more money, without the work and risk of one-crop farming.

"They are getting along better, having more to eat and wear than ever before on the farms. The government has already been a blessing to the farms, yet many of them can't, or rather just won't, admit it.

"It isn't just teaching to till the soil that counts. The agents are showing them how they can make money raising cattle for the market as well as for their own use. In this way they no longer have to depend on one crop for cash, and that keeps them from getting discouraged so easily.

"What political party do I belong to?"

An honestly puzzled expression came over his face that was quickly followed by another expansive smile, as he confessed, "I don't know. I was reared in a family of Republicans without knowing very much more about that party than the story that President Lincoln was a member of it and that he became a martyr soon after he signed the document that sealed our emancipation.

"It seemed natural to us that there was no better way for Negroes to pay tribute to the man who gave us our freedom than to vote his way, and there was no other party that seemed as much interested in our welfare as the Republicans did.

"Since the present Mr. Roosevelt was first elected, his remarkable achievements have made me do some serious thinking. I'm reluctant to vote against the old party, but I cannot ignore the fact that my people have had more consideration from the present administration than from any in the past.

"Please don't ask how I'll vote in 1940. I really don't know. I admire our President," he said.

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“You’ve probably heard of our Mr. Herndon, the remarkable man who founded our company,” he said, looking up at a large framed photograph.<sup>2</sup>

“Everyone has heard of him, and I can very well remember seeing him – for I passed his barber shop in Atlanta almost every day, about thirty years ago,” I replied, “But I’d like to hear his story from you.”

“Well,” Roberson continued, “He was born a slave, in Monroe County, Georgia. After freedom came, he went to Atlanta and started to work for a barber. That he made a success of his work is shown by the large business he built up.

“His best customers were among his white friends. Before 1900, his barber shop had more than twenty chairs in it, and that shop is still going today, long after his death. A list of his patrons would sound like a roll call of Atlanta’s most prominent and important businessmen.

“It may be that his daily contact with successful businessmen had something to do with his own success. His ambition to do something to enable the members of our race to prepare for the financial crises so often brought about by sickness, accidents and by death, led him to organize his first little accident and sick benefit company.

“It’s probable that the purity and unselfishness of his motives in starting his insurance business were factors that led Providence to permit it to prosper. In 1905 he was able to buy out several other companies, organize a great business, and put up a \$5,000 cash bond in accordance with a law enacted that year by the State Legislature for the protection of insurance beneficiaries.

“Prior to that time, there had been several small companies doing business in accident and sick benefit insurance that carried death benefits of from twenty to thirty dollars, and not one of these little organizations was able to raise the cash bond. Mr. Herndon’s purchase of these small companies and merging them with his original insurance business was the beginning of the Atlanta Life Insurance Company, and our home offices are still in Atlanta.

“Our little mutual company, that before the merger in 1905 paid sick benefits of from two to three dollars a week, has grown and improved until we have more than 300,000 policyholders, and we’re now one of the largest insurance organizations among our people. We write any kind of insurance now, from sick, accident, straight life, and paid-up, to endowment. In fact, this is an industrial as well as an

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<sup>2</sup> Alonzo Franklin Herndon

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ordinary life insurance company, and we're more than proud of our business.

"Our records show that in 1939 we paid out more than \$800,000 to our paid-up policyholders and to beneficiaries in general. This, of course, includes loans on policies, sick and accident benefits, dividends, and final payments after the death of the insured.

"After making these payments totaling considerably more than \$750,000, we still had a surplus of more than \$980,000 on hand. At the beginning of this year, we raised the amount of capital stock from \$100,000 to \$500,000.

"Our 104 employees include our managers, clerks, inspectors, and field agents. That'll give you some idea of how our business has grown."

There was a proud and satisfied look on his face when he asked, "Now, do you like our new home?"

As I looked about, he continued, "We've just recently moved into these offices. We'd simply outgrown the old place and just had to have more room."

The modern offices were well furnished and equipped. Venetian blinds shaded the windows facing the street, and the walls and woodwork were immaculate in their fresh coats of light tan paint.

"You have every reason to be proud of these lovely offices," I assured him, "And they have the advantage of being centrally located and convenient for your workers and clients."

"Thank you," he answered, "Now I think I've just about covered everything of interest about my insurance experience. I don't have to explain that practically my whole scheme of living is bounded by insurance now. There is no other business that I know of that brings the worker in such close contact with the great mass of our race as does insurance, and through it we are able to have insight into the most personal problems.

"While a child is still very young, some insurance man is going to be there to see about writing a policy on its life. An insurance man will investigate practically every condition that affects the health and welfare of his policyholder throughout his life, and when he has died, the insurance man comes around again to make settlement.

"Everything that the insurance man does to improve health conditions and to take care of his policyholder is actually an economy for he is lessening the payments of sickness and death claims. But I still maintain that our Mr. Herndon founded this business for the purpose of helping the people of his race.

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“I’m hoping that you’ll find at least a part of the information I’ve given you usable. If in the future there are questions that arise in regard to our race, I hope that you will let us try to help you compile the information needed.”

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## **The Ridge Runner A History of the North-East Georgia Railroad**

by George M. Kozelnicky <sup>1</sup>

The railroad came to America in the decade of the 1830s. Compared to wagons on dirt roads or the canal boats that had served as the nation's earlier transportation network, the railroad seemed almost miraculous. Steel rails on fixed roadbeds with steam engines, rather than horses or sails pulling the cars, quickly proved their worth. The first operating road with a steam engine was in Maryland and by the end of the decade the first in the South, from Charleston to Augusta, was running on a somewhat regular schedule.

### **Pre-Charter Times**

In 1841, the Georgia railroad was completed from Augusta, Georgia, to the village of Athens. Unfortunately, because of political and financial maneuvers by Augusta citizens and the state legislature in Milledgeville, the original direction of that railroad was altered from a terminus in Athens to one actually called *Terminus*, now named Atlanta. So the railroad into Athens became just a lowly branch line and was maintained for many years with wooden rails and sleepers, powered by horses and mules. The poor condition of that railroad lasted well into the Civil War years, engendering much bitter resentment.

A meeting was called in the summer of 1847 by some businessmen of Habersham County to consider the building of a railroad from Clarkesville, Georgia, to the terminus of the branch of the Georgia Railroad at Athens.<sup>2</sup> Many visionaries of that time felt there was a need to connect by railroad the young nation's river ports on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers with the ports on the southern Atlantic seacoast, Charleston, South Carolina, and Savannah and Brunswick, Georgia. The city of Athens, because of its railroad, was the focus of many of these ideas. The South Carolina statesman, John C. Calhoun, had suggested in 1835 that the railroad terminating in Athens be utilized as a segment of a proposed railroad system that was to extend from

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<sup>1</sup> Published privately by the author in 1999 and 2001, reprinted here with permission. The author's spelling of the railroad company has been retained - most newspaper advertisements call it the *Northeastern Railroad of Georgia*.

<sup>2</sup> *Southern Banner* newspaper, July 20, 1847, Athens, GA.

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Charleston to the Mississippi River via Rabun Gap, near the village of Clayton in northern Georgia.<sup>3</sup>

In 1857, individuals in upper South Carolina were looking in a different direction and had applied to their legislature to charter a railroad to pass through Anderson Courthouse (now Anderson), Greenville, Spartanburg, and north to Charlotte, North Carolina. These persons encouraged counterparts in Georgia to meet “their” railroad with one from Georgia at the Savannah River. The Georgia Air-Line Rail Road, connecting Atlanta with the South Carolina cities, resulted from this action.

Times were not good for the promotion and building of railroads due to financial “panics.” In addition, the politics of the nation were approaching fracture, and the Civil War erupted, putting a stop to any railroad expansion in the South.

Neither was the Reconstruction Era conducive to the development of railroads. After the war, about four years elapsed before anything happened railroad-wise in Northeast Georgia. The citizens of Athens may have stirred old memories for the *Southern Banner* on May 21, 1869, published the actions of a special committee of the Georgia Railroad investigating the possibility of uniting the West with the Atlantic coast. Evidently, Athens was again reaching out, and the Georgia Railroad was not to be left out. The committee felt strongly that the proposed railroad from Athens to Clayton/Rabun Gap be built - “its building would be feasible since it would follow the ridge dividing the Oconee and Broad Rivers without crossing a major stream and the largest obstacle would be the crossing of the Tallulah Gorge.”<sup>4</sup> The city of Charleston and the yet-to-be built Blue Ridge Railroad were influencing factors in the minds of the directors of the Georgia Railroad. Reluctantly, that railroad did agree to have a survey made.

The Blue Ridge Railroad was chartered in 1852 under the auspices of the city of Charleston in its efforts to secure western trade. The road was surveyed from Anderson Courthouse, through Rabun Gap in North Georgia, to the North Carolina and Tennessee state lines. Tunnels were bored in the mountains of South Carolina and Georgia, and the masonry work is in evidence in many places in those mountains today. However, only a small portion (from Anderson Courthouse to Walhalla, South

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<sup>3</sup> Coit, Margaret L. *John C. Calhoun - American Portrait*. Houghton Mifflin Co., 1950. pp. 408-409.

<sup>4</sup> *Southern Banner*, May 21, 1869.



## ATHENS HISTORIAN

Carolina) was ever utilized as a railroad. The railroad was envisioned as a segment in a number of anticipated “trunk-line” roads.<sup>5</sup>

The *Southern Banner* of July 16, 1869, reported that the survey (Georgia Railroad) had commenced and that the first stake had been driven a short distance “below” the depot (in Athens). This was an affront to the citizens of Athens because the Georgia Railroad depot was on Carr’s Hill, and “below” (in railroad jargon) meant towards Winterville and Union Point, not through Athens.

Three months later, Athens took matters into its own hands by calling a Railroad Convention for October 2, 1869, at 10:30 a.m. in the Athens Town Hall. The Athens City Council called the event to consider the building of a railroad to Clayton, or to extend the Georgia Railroad to the Georgia Air-Line Rail Road. Surrounding counties were invited to send delegates. The motivation behind the meeting was the recalcitrance of the Georgia Railroad.<sup>6</sup>

Many counties sent delegates, and Augusta was represented. The Georgia Railroad was represented by its president, Judge John P. King. A seven-member committee presented an agenda for the meeting, which encompassed the following points:

- A. The building of the railroad (by the Georgia Railroad).
- B. The obtaining of rights-of-way.
- C. Financing by the counties through which the road was to pass and by the Georgia Railroad and Banking Company.
- D. Appointment of a committee to cooperate with the Georgia Railroad in the matter.

The results of the deliberations were not fruitful; Judge King would not commit his railroad to anything. This meeting could be known as the “Pope Barrow - Judge King Debate.” The judge’s main emphasis was that Athens had maintained a “coolness” toward the Georgia Railroad. Pope Barrow’s rebuttal was that Athens had long suffered from the Georgia Railroad’s unfair tariffs and charges on a railroad branch that was poorly maintained, but which perhaps produced the major part of that railroad’s revenue.

Veterans of the Civil War participated in this meeting. Newspaper articles mentioned the following: David C. Barrow, Captain Pope Barrow (aforementioned), Col. M.C. Fulton, Marcellus Stanley, a Col. Thurmond, General Wright, Col. B.C. Yancey, and others.

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<sup>5</sup> *Southern Banner*, Dec. 2, 1852, from the *Charleston Standard*.

<sup>6</sup> *Southern Banner*, Oct. 8, 1869.

## ATHENS HISTORIAN

In the April 22, 1870 issue of the *Southern Banner*, reference is made to a letter of April 11, 1870, from the Athens committee to the directors of the Georgia Railroad asking, "What is the Georgia Railroad going to do about the matter?" Apparently, the Port Royal Road (connecting Augusta with Port Royal, South Carolina) was anticipating building from Augusta to Clayton, and this prompted the inquiry. At this time the construction of the Georgia Air-Line Rail Road from Atlanta to the Carolinas was causing the citizens of Athens considerable concern. This would mean that Athens would lose traffic and business to Atlanta. Did the Georgia Railroad consider the Air-Line only a "chimera?" Did it not realize that the Air-Line was a *fait accompli*? How about the plans already in the works for the Macon and Knoxville Railroad and for the Augusta and Hartwell Railroad? And still the Georgia Railroad was sitting on its hands! The reply of the Georgia Directors was "that whenever they are assured that a Road from Knoxville to Rabun Gap will be built, they hold themselves pledged to build a Road from Athens to Rabun Gap."<sup>7</sup>

The *Southern Banner* of July 8, 1870, opens an item as follows: "There appears to be a feeble prospect that the North Eastern Railroad will be extended in time to benefit the present generation." The citizens of Athens and northeastern Georgia were becoming increasingly frustrated. They felt that the Georgia Railroad was reneging on its pledge. Why not feel frustrated? After all, railroads had been and were being built all over the state of Georgia and some were being backed liberally by the state.

### The First Decade

However, by November 1870, a new charter had been obtained from the state. And it was not solely for the extension of a branch railroad, but for a new and independent company; one stretching from Athens to Rabun Gap! The charter required that twenty miles of road be completed by private capital, after which state bonds of \$15,000 per mile could be issued. The new charter authorized the City of Athens to subscribe for \$200,000.

The incorporators of the new railroad met in late November of 1870 and elected John H. Newton as chairman.<sup>8</sup> Noted Athenian Robert L. Bloomfield moved that the charter of the North-East Georgia Railroad Company be accepted and the motion was unanimously adopted.

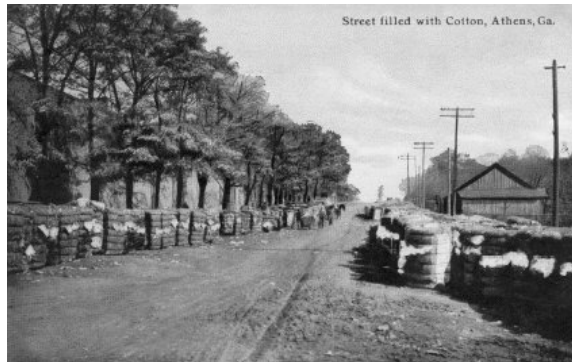
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<sup>7</sup> *Southern Banner*, Apr. 22, 1870.

<sup>8</sup> *Southern Banner*, Nov. 23, 1870.

## ATHENS HISTORIAN

At last, Athens had the railroad it desired! The railroad's executive committee members were: Col. D.C. Barrow, H. Beusse, S. Marks, Rufus L. Moss, J.D. Pittard, and Dr. W. Willingham. The executive committee ruled that when \$100,000 of individual stock had been taken, in compliance with the charter, a meeting for permanent organization would be called by President Newton. The executive committee also appointed commissioners to open books of subscription for stock of the North-East Georgia Railroad Company. Commissioners were appointed to Banks, Clarke, Franklin, Greene, Hall, Habersham, Jackson, Oglethorpe, Rabun, Richmond, and White Counties. The Commissioners in Clarke County were: Howell Cobb, Alexander S.



*Cotton brought wealth into the city, thanks to the new railroad. From the new book, A Postcard History of Athens, Georgia, by Gary Doster.*

Erwin, Rufus L. Moss, A. Franklin Pope, Ferdinand Phinzy, W.L. Talmadge, and S.P. Thurmond. Thus the North-East Georgia Railroad Company became a reality on November 25, 1870. Commissioner Alexander S. Erwin reported to the corporation that finally the

Blue Ridge Railroad had actively resumed work.<sup>9</sup>

Now that it appeared that a railroad could be built, many newspaper pages were filled with advice on how it should be built. Track gauge was a popular subject. Gauge, the distance between the rails and between wheel flanges, on the Georgia Railroad as built was five feet, six inches (5'6"). In the 1870s, gauges in the United States ranged from one foot to six feet. The most prevalent gauge was the standard - four feet, eight-and-one-half inches (4'8½"), to which all railroads changed in May of 1886.

On May 26, 1871, a meeting was held in Harmony Grove (now Commerce) in Jackson County, at which potential routes for the North-

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<sup>9</sup> *Southern Banner*, Nov. 25, 1870.

## ATHENS HISTORIAN

East Georgia Railroad were considered.<sup>10</sup> Representatives from Banks, Clarke, Jackson and Madison Counties were present. Friendly rivalry arose between the advocates of an Athens-Jefferson route versus an Athens-Harmony Grove-Homer route.

Athens had long yearned for this railroad, and the interest was intense. The city had looked to the Georgia Railroad, but obtained help only from the Georgia Legislature. And so, on 14 June 1871, Athens closed its businesses to attend to railroad business at Deupree Hall. Reports revealed that stock subscriptions were proceeding, with some stock being purchased with goods such as lumber, cross-ties, and labor. At the meeting, Bloomfield explained why the North-East Georgia was needed by this region. He explained that at present a bale of goods could be shipped from Augusta to Philadelphia for \$1.75. However, the same bale shipped from Athens to the same destination was \$4.90. The disparity needed to be eliminated! Beyond that, the operating expense of the Athens branch of the Georgia Railroad was smaller in proportion to length than any other segment of the road. Mr. Grant, an engineer, in his report revealed that the new railroad could be built for \$15,000 per mile.

Subscriptions by now had reached the required \$100,000 and thus Chairman Newton declared the organization permanent and called for the election of a Board of Directors. Elected to the Board were: R.L. Bloomfield, Howell Cobb, William Stanhope Erwin, W.B.J. Hardeman, Y.L.G. Harris, J.D. Long, Garnett McMillen, Rufus L. Moss, John H. Newton, John W. Nicholson, James D. Philips, Ferdinand Phinizy, J.E. Randolph, S.P. Thurmond, J.T. Turnbull, John White, and Willis Willingham. The first officers of the North-East Georgia Railroad elected by the first board of directors were President Col. Campbell Wallace, Vice President R.L. Bloomfield, Treasurer Rufus L. Moss, and Secretary and Bookkeeper J.A. Crawford.

After the June 14<sup>th</sup> meeting, the board of directors elected W.W. Thomas to the position of chief engineer. Mr. Thomas left Athens on 10 August to examine the two proposed routes for the railroad from Athens to Poplar Springs (a possible junction point on the Georgia Air-Line Rail Road) in Hall County. He returned shortly thereafter, organized a group of assistants, and embarked on a careful and accurate survey of both routes.

The next stockholders meeting was held on October 18, 1871, in Deupree Hall. Col. Campbell Wallace had declined the presidency so

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<sup>10</sup> *Souther Banner*, June 2, 1871.

## ATHENS HISTORIAN

Vice President Bloomfield chaired the meeting and presented the reports.<sup>11</sup> These revealed the following:

- A. All conditional stock was to be refunded.
- B. The question of route was to be resolved by the board of directors.
- C. A newly-elected board differed from the first in only one position.
- D. The treasurer's report showed a balance of \$1,586.62 after receipts of \$4,074 and expenses of \$2,487.38. All bills had been paid promptly.
- E. Treasurer Moss is "due the esteem of the stockholders" for services rendered without wages. Officers are not compensated, except for the secretary, whose salary is \$50 a month.
- F. The entire line from Athens to the Air-Line was surveyed by chief engineer W.W. Thomas. The estimated cost of the Jefferson route was \$860,688.43. The cost of the Harmony Grove route via Newton's Bridge was \$736,571.82.
- G. Stock pledges are valued at \$230,000, with an additional \$50,000 to \$60,000 possible, an amount adequate to build.
- H. R.L. Bloomfield had visited the offices of the Louisville and Nashville Rail Road and was told that the L and N was only waiting for an outlet through Georgia or Carolina to finish its \$3 million line to Knoxville.
- I. A letter was received from J.W. Harrison, President of the Blue Ridge Rail Road, indicating "Be at Clayton next year. Gauge not determined."

The engineer's report described only two possible routes to follow from Athens to the Air-Line. The Jefferson route was to the west of the Oconee River (the north branch), the Harmony Grove route to the east of the river. Both ridges were well adapted for the laying of a first class railroad, each having an elevation of 200 feet above the stream. The length of the Jefferson line was 39.48 miles with an estimated cost of \$850,633.43.<sup>12</sup> Cost per mile was \$21,800.61, and the cost of grading was \$10,234 per mile. The maximum grade is 66 feet per mile, the sharpest curve has a radius of 1,146 feet. The major obstacle on this line is the bridge over the Oconee (in its upper reaches), having

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<sup>11</sup> *Southern Banner*, Oct. 18, 1871.

<sup>12</sup> *Author's note*: The discrepancy of \$10,055 may well be due to the reporting and typesetting methods of newsprint of that day.

## ATHENS HISTORIAN

converging grades of 66 feet per mile to a bridge 63 feet above the water.

The Harmony Grove route was 37 miles long with an estimated cost of \$736,571.82. Cost per mile was \$19,907.34, and the cost of grading per mile was \$8,412.94. As with the western route, the maximum grade is 66 feet per mile. The sharpest curve has a radius of 1,910 feet. The engineer favored the Harmony Grove route because of the better alignment and no heavy southern grade, saving 2.48 miles in distance and a savings of \$1,895.81 per mile. Mr. Thomas's aides in this surveys were Capt. J. Calder Turner, first assistant, and Mr. E.F. Hunt, second assistant.

On March 21, 1872, the directors of the North-East Georgia Railroad decided permanently on the Harmony Grove line.<sup>13</sup> Engineer W.W. Thomas, for an unexplained reason, had been replaced by first assistant Capt. J. Calder Turner by June of 1872. This gentleman re-surveyed the upper portion of the line, shortening the distance to the Air-Line by a mile and a half over previous surveys.<sup>14</sup>

Engineer Turner, on July 8, 1872, placed an ad in the newspapers soliciting bids from contractors for grading and masonry on the road between Athens and the junction with the Air-Line (Poplar Springs), in whole or in part, the company reserving the right to reject any or all bids.<sup>15</sup>

The *Southern Banner* editorial of July 12, 1872, also noted that the president and directors of the new company were capable men, worthy of being custodians of the funds of others, and showed great faith in the enterprise by subscribing \$50,000 in stock themselves. The policy of the board was not to commence operations until at least \$250,000 had been subscribed and that only \$228,000 in *bona fide* stock had been secured. It was not the intention of the board to avail itself of the state aid of \$15,000 per mile unless absolutely necessary. The editorial revealed that the board had elected Dr. J.A. Hunnicutt in place of Mr. R.L. Bloomfield, who had resigned, and Judge Jeff Jennings in place of Dr. Willingham, who had died.<sup>16</sup>

The second annual convention of the new railroad was held on October 16, 1872, in Athens. Stockholders not present could be represented by proxy. All reports of the committees were of a flattering

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<sup>13</sup> *Southern Banner*, March 22, 1872.

<sup>14</sup> *Southern Banner*, June 14, 1872.

<sup>15</sup> *Southern Banner*, July 12, 1872.

<sup>16</sup> *Southern Banner*, July 12, 1872.

## ATHENS HISTORIAN

nature and showed the company to be in good condition. A new election produced seventeen directors as follows: H. Beusse, George W. Center, Howell Cobb, Alexander S. Erwin, W.B.J. Hardeman, Y.L.G. Harris, C.W. Hood, J.A. Hunnicutt, Jefferson Jennings, Garnet McMillan, Rufus L. Moss, John H. Newton, J.W. Nicholson, Ferdinand Phinizy, J.D. Phillips, J.D. Pittard, and J.T. Turnbull. Chief Engineer Turner announced the retaining of the firm of Messrs. Grant, Alexander and Company to perform the grading and masonry work for the first 38½ miles of the railroad and was contractually bound to finish the work by 31 December 1873. The firm was using 150 men, of whom 100 were convicts. This force was to be increased by 100 more convicts.

Engineer Turner reported that except for a few persons, he had secured deeds for rights-of-way for the entire line of the road. He further stated that he had secured deeds for depot lots at both ends of the road. At the junction with the Air-Line, twenty-five and twenty-one acre lots had been procured for maintenance and depot purposes. The business committee had purchased in Athens a depot lot of 6½ acres from the widow of Gen. Thomas R.R. Cobb.<sup>17</sup>

The land at Poplar Springs was obtained from Joseph H. and Dunstan E. Banks. The brothers “deeded a generous amount of land for the railroad” to be used for the main and principle depot.<sup>18</sup>

Engineer Turner reminded the stockholders that the charter called for a railroad to be built by the most practical means from Athens to the Blue Ridge Railroad at or near the town of Clayton in Rabun County, and that what had been initiated in the last months was but a single step towards that goal. The stockholders needed to be doing something on what was yet necessary to complete the railroad farther north. The company had a jump on those who were contemplating reaching the Blue Ridge Road. Turner also pointed out that the matter of connecting the depots of the Georgia Railroad and the North-East Georgia Railroad (in Athens) was being examined by Judge Mitchell Terrapin. It was also revealed that the Board had decided on laying the broad gauge (five feet).

The *Northeast Georgian* of March 13, 1873, reported good progress with grading work, necessitating moving the convicts camp five miles further to start another section. The hands were “breaking

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<sup>17</sup> *Northeast Georgian*, Nov. 1, 1872.

<sup>18</sup> Terrell, Mrs. Roy A. and Mary Scales. *The Annals of Lula*, Apr. 22, 1976, a publication of historical information extracted from the manual, *Lula Community Development Concept Plan*, on file in the Athens-Clarke County Library.

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dirt” about twelve miles from Athens, making rapid progress, and “the worst of the road is finished.”<sup>19</sup> By mid-May, thirteen miles had been graded.<sup>20</sup>

President John W. Nicholson and director Alexander S. Erwin attended the Chicago-South Atlantic Railroad Convention. This convention deliberated on the feasibility of two routes from Chicago to the Atlantic coast. One of these routes was the French Broad and Asheville line through the Carolinas to the port of Charleston. The other was the Blue Ridge and Rabun Gap line that provided access to the ports of Brunswick and Savannah in Georgia, and Port Royal and Charleston in South Carolina. The delegates explained the superiority of the Rabun Gap line, which offered access to four ports rather than just one.<sup>21</sup>

The third annual meeting of the North-East Georgia Railroad Company took place in Athens on October 15, 1873. At this time, thirty-three miles of railroad had been graded, leaving only five miles to complete the railroad to the Air-Line juncture. The work had been done at a cost of only \$3,000 per mile, \$2,000 less than anticipated. The Company was pleased not to have had to rely on aid provided by the state (at the completion of twenty miles). Stable trestles rather than bridges would be built at three locations, and it was now time to consider where and how to obtain iron rails. This should be done soon so as to hold in place what had already been graded. In the election, Thomas A. Burke was elected a new member of the board of directors, all other incumbents remaining. The books of the company had been open for some time for purchase of stock for building the extension beyond the Air-Line.<sup>22</sup>

Surveying of the extension route to Clayton was initiated in early 1874 by the engineering department; one going north and the other returning south on a different tangent.<sup>23</sup>

Not everyone was happy with developments on the railroad. The *Northeast Georgian* of July 1, 1874, carried a chastisement of the board, accusing it of not keeping the public adequately informed of its

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<sup>19</sup> *Northeast Georgian*, Apr. 25, 1873.

<sup>20</sup> *Northeast Georgian*, May 23, 1873.

<sup>21</sup> *Northeast Georgian*, Oct. 18, 1873.

<sup>22</sup> *Northeast Georgian*, Oct. 18, 1873. 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Convention, Oct. 15, 1873 - Thomas A. Burke elected as a new director, all others remaining.

<sup>23</sup> *Northeast Georgian*, Jan. 10, 1874.



## ATHENS HISTORIAN

actions. The editorial was especially critical of the location of the Athens depot: "Why was not the Broad Street location chosen?"

In 1874, Poplar Springs became Lula. Here was now a well-constructed brick depot and nearby a "wye" for turning trains, and land had been cleared for the railroad shops.

The directors called a meeting for December 19, 1874 in which the chief engineer was instructed to begin grading work on the extension because of the need to be doubly energetic in the face of other competing enterprises. On the lower segment (below Lula), ten miles of track had already been laid.<sup>24</sup>

The line of the lower segment had not been completed to the junction with the Air-Line by mid-summer of 1875. The public was concerned and the newspapers exhorted the Directors to do something, even if they had to sell or get a new board of directors.<sup>25</sup>

Then early in 1876, things began to move. The railroad had a superintendent who had just finished the line into Harmony Grove. He was director Rufus L. Moss. The work was being done with a "hired" locomotive from the Atlanta and West Point Railroad. A locomotive was on order, but had not yet arrived.<sup>26</sup> Sixteen cars had been purchased and by mid-July 1876, track had been laid to within seven and one-half miles of Athens, at a place called Matthews. Now travelers could cover the short distance to Matthews by horse and buggy, board a train, and be on their way. On the first excursion, patrons were headed to Alabama, Atlanta, and Virginia, in a new car purchased from the Delaware Car Works, and pulled by the "hired" West Point locomotive. The second locomotive had been purchased from Baldwin Locomotive Works of Eddystone, Pennsylvania, and was named the *R.L. Moss*.<sup>27</sup> One week later, the paper reported the completion of the North-East Georgia Railroad from Lula to Athens.<sup>28</sup>

In late 1876, the State of Georgia wanted to know if the North-East Georgia Railroad had been built according to the provisions of its charter and called for an inspection. Governor J.M. Smith commissioned three renowned railroad men to conduct the inspection. One of them walked the entire distance of the line to verify its length. The commission reported that "the management of the North-East

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<sup>24</sup> *Northeast Georgian*, Dec. 23, 1874.

<sup>25</sup> *Northeast Georgian*, June 23, 1875.

<sup>26</sup> *Athens Georgian*, May 16, 1876.

<sup>27</sup> *Athens Georgian*, July 18, 1876.

<sup>28</sup> *Athens Georgian*, July 25, 1876.

## ATHENS HISTORIAN

Georgia Railroad have complied in every essential particular with the law, and they may now look with renewed hope for the so much needed state aid." On to Rabun Gap!<sup>29</sup>

There was little support for its railroad by the Athens public at this time and the editor of the *Athens Georgian* denounced this apathy: "Can our merchants not see that if patronage does not maintain the road, it either must suspend operations or it falls into the hands of some other corporation?" "The city of Athens is the largest stock-holder in the North-East Georgia, owning \$100,000 in shares and paying \$29,680 in interest on them."<sup>30</sup>

How could this lack of support be damaging to Athens? In a number of ways, but most especially by the road falling into the hands of a corporation not amicable to Athens. A member of the board of directors of the Georgia Railroad had even told a director of the North-East that his road was waiting to get possession of the North-East Georgia. It was only a matter of time until the Georgia would take over. And rather than spend \$100,000 to bridge the Oconee River in Athens to bring about a connection, the Georgia would drop back to Winterville and take the same ridge on which the North-East was now situated that would effectively eliminate Athens from any railroad access. And, the editor added, had not the directors of the North-East suggested to the Georgia that the North-East would meet the Georgia at its Carr's Hill depot? Worse yet, was this proposal not met with indifference, derision, and rejection? "Look well to the interest of your North-East Railroad, citizens! Further, it is your interest, and our interest, and the interest of every citizen of our community, to give all possible aid and assistance to this road, thereby guarding it as our true, common interest, against the designs of those who feel a greater interest in another direction than they do in the growth and prosperity of our city, or the happiness, comfort, and well-being of its citizens."<sup>31</sup>

To be sure, discrimination did exist. Now it was not just the Georgia Railroad, but also the Air-Line, now the Atlanta and Charlotte Air-Line Railroad, which drew the ire of the editor. The two railroads

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<sup>29</sup> *Athens Georgian*, Dec. 19, 1876.

<sup>30</sup> 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention, Oct. 1876 - A.K. Childs was elected president, C.J. Johnson secretary-treasurer; directors were Henry Beusse, T.A. Burke, Howell Cobb, Alexander S. Erwin, W.A. Erwin, Dr. W.B.J. Hardeman, C.W. Hood, Dr. J.A. Hunnicutt, Dr. H.A. Lowrence, Rufus L. Moss, John H. Newton, John W. Nicholson, Reuben Nickerson, Ferdinand Phinizy, R.K. Reaves, C.G. Talmadge, and John White. New superintendent was J.M. Edwards. *Athens Georgian*, October 24, 1876.

<sup>31</sup> *Athens Georgian*, Apr. 10, 1877.

## ATHENS HISTORIAN

were discriminating against Athens by charging its merchants local rates for all shipments. Ever since its inception, the Georgia Railroad had done so in spite of the fact that the Athens branch was the “most valuable and best paying portion of the road.” Athens “should now be entitled to as much favor and as many privileges as Atlanta or Augusta.” And now the Air-Line had joined the Georgia in this unfair practice, even suggesting that every merchant ordering freight originating in the North or West do so over the Air-Line road so as to “receive them over our own North-East Railroad.”<sup>32</sup>

In 1877 complications arose with state aid that involved two governors, the state Supreme Court, and an attorney general. Prior to and at the time of the granting of the North-East Railroad charter, the state’s constitution granted the credit of the State to such railroad corporations as might avail themselves and comply with provisions of the charter. The aid was granted to the North-East Georgia in 1870 upon the issuing of the charter and the railroad complied with the provisions, but opted not to rely at that time on state monies or guarantees. The railroad, with \$275,000 in stock, built the thirty-nine miles from Athens to Lula without state assistance.

| Northeastern Railroad.   |                      |
|--|----------------------|
| Change of Schedule.  |                      |
| SUPERINTENDENT'S OFFICE,<br>Athens, Ga., Sept. 29, 1877.   |                      |
| ON and after Monday, October 1st, 1877, trains on the<br>Northeastern Railroad will run as follows. All trains<br>daily except Sunday: |                      |
| MORNING TRAIN.   |                      |
| Leave Athens.....  | 2.35 a. m.           |
| Arrive at Lula.....  | 4.50 a. m.           |
| Arrive at Atlanta (via Air Line R. R.)....   | 8.35 a. m.           |
| Leave Lula.....  | 6.45 a. m.           |
| Arrive at Athens.....  | 8.15 a. m.           |
| EVENING TRAIN.   |                      |
| Leave Athens.....  | 4.00 p. m.           |
| Arrive at Lula.....  | 6.30 p. m.           |
| Leave Atlanta (via Air Line R. R.)....   | 4.00 p. m.           |
| Leave Lula.....  | 7.15 p. m.           |
| Arrive at Athens.....  | 9.30 p. m.           |
| Close connection at Lula with passenger trains on Air<br>Line Railroad.  |                      |
| Oct. 9   | J. M. EDWARDS, Supt. |

*Northeastern Railroad Schedule,  
Fall 1877*

By March 1877, the North-East Georgia’s published timetable boasted two trains, a morning and an evening, carrying both freight and passengers, running between Athens and Lula with one engine handling both. The morning train left Athens at 4:45 a.m. and arrived in Lula two hours later. The train then left Lula at 7:30 a.m. and was back in Athens by 10:00 a.m. The evening train left Athens at 5:00 p.m. and reached Lula at 7:30 p.m. It left Lula at 8.20 p.m. and arrived in Athens at 10:20 p.m. The morning train arrived in Lula in time to meet the Atlanta-bound Air-Line train carrying passengers headed for points beyond Atlanta, such as Macon, Montgomery, Columbus, Georgia, and New Orleans. Northbound passengers took the evening train and connected with the Air-Line train headed for places like Charlotte, Richmond, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. Superintendent J.R.

<sup>32</sup> *Athens Georgian*, June 12, 1877.

## ATHENS HISTORIAN

Edwards was responsible for the time tables well into 1878, followed by H.R. Bernard in the 1880s.<sup>33</sup>

In June 1878, the *Southern Banner* reported on a fruitful trip by Capt. R. Nickerson of the Athens Foundry and the North-East Georgia Railroad. While in Philadelphia, he purchased for the railroad from the Baldwin Locomotive Works a new locomotive, a duplicate of the *R.L. Moss*. This new engine was named the *John W. Nicholson*, in honor of the first president of the railroad. The *Banner* article also reported that for the business year ending on May 1, 1878, the railroad cleared about \$16,000, a handsome showing for the company.<sup>34</sup> President A.K. Childs was cited for the information that all of the second mortgage bonds had been sold.<sup>35</sup>

Railroad Superintendent J.M. Edwards published the 1878 Summer Excursion schedule with destinations of Gainesville, Sulphur Springs, Mt. Airy, and Toccoa in Georgia, Greenville and Spartanburg in South Carolina, and Tryon Mountain, Flat Rock, Hendersonville, Asheville, and Warm Springs in North Carolina.<sup>36</sup> In October 1879, the railroad operated double trains for three days to handle the traffic bound for the Atlanta Fair.<sup>37</sup>

### The Second Decade

The Tenth Convention of the North-East Georgia took place in October of 1880, where John W. Nicholson was elected president.<sup>38</sup> It

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<sup>33</sup> *Athens Georgian*, March 13, 1877.

<sup>34</sup> *Southern Banner*, June 25, 1878.

<sup>35</sup> 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention, Oct. 16, 1878 - profit for the past year \$23,000. Directors same as 1876; superintendent James M. Edwards, treasurer Rufus L. Moss, secretary Thomas A. Burke. *Southern Banner*, Oct. 22, 1878.

<sup>36</sup> *Southern Banner*, July 9, 1878.

<sup>37</sup> *Southern Banner*, Oct. 21, 1879. 9<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention, Oct. 19, 1879 - 1508 ½ shares represented, net profit for the year was \$21,915.17; A.K. Childs was re-elected as president. Directors were Henry Beusse, R.L. Bloomfield, Thomas A. Burke, Howell Cobb, Julius Cohen, George E. Deadwyler, W.A. Erwin, James Hampton, W.B.J. Hardeman, C.W. Hood, J.A. Hunnicutt, H.A. Lowrance, Rufus L. Moss, John H. Newton, Reuben Nickerson, C.G. Talmadge, and John White.

<sup>38</sup> 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention, Oct. 1880 - Elected officials were John W. Nicholson president, H.A. Lowrance secretary, Rufus L. Moss treasurer, H.R. Bernard auditor and general bookkeeper, and Lyman Wells superintendent. Directors were Henry Beusse, R.L. Bloomfield, A.K. Childs, Howell Cobb, Julius Cohen, George E. Deadwyler, Jonathan Hampton, W.B.J. Hardeman, C.W. Hood, J.A. Hunnicutt, H.A. Lowrance, Reuben Nickerson, R.K. Reaves, C.G. Talmadge, W.B. Thomas, John White and G.H. Yancey. *Southern Weekly Banner*, Oct. 26, 1880.

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was reported that the general condition of the railroad was good, with plans to extend the railroad twenty-five miles to Clarkesville as soon as enough *bona fide* stock was obtained. Net earnings for twelve months were \$19,682.63. Cross ties would have to be replaced on the lower segment. A new passenger coach was expensive, costing \$3,900.<sup>39</sup>

A significant event occurred in early April of 1881. The *Southern Weekly Banner* of April 5<sup>th</sup> criticized a recent article published in the *Augusta Chronicle* that urged the Georgia Railroad to purchase the North-East Georgia for the benefit of the Georgia Railroad (and the city of Augusta). The Atlanta and Charlotte Air-Line was then under the control of the Richmond and Danville Railroad, an extension of the West Point conglomerate of Virginia, which had a proposal for the Athens city council to consider: to transfer the city-owned North-East Georgia Railroad stock to the Richmond and Danville in exchange for its building of the extension to Clarkesville.<sup>40</sup>

The *Southern Banner* of May 3, 1881, reported on meetings which finalized the matter with the Richmond and Danville. The meetings between Mr. George D. Thomas, lawyer for the Richmond and Danville, and Capt. H.H. Carlton, lawyer for the city of Athens, took place in both Atlanta and Athens, and required special trains and surreptitious deadlines. By and large, Athens officials were in favor of the deal, and a contract was agreed upon, but could not be finalized in Atlanta. This had to be done formally, in Athens, before Sunday, and it was already Saturday evening. A special train took the parties back to Athens, but a derailment of the train's tender three miles south of Lula caused a lengthy delay. The tender was re-railed and the train "bowled" into Athens with time left before midnight. The parties repaired to the council chambers where a huge crowd of citizens was waiting. "The Council was called to order. The contract was read, assented to, and the Mayor was authorized to sign it for the City. This was done, the seal was attached, and the trade was 'consummated.' The crowd of citizens cheered! The whole business was transacted and the end was reached just eight minutes to twelve o'clock, by correct time."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *Southern Weekly Banner*, Nov. 16, 1880.

<sup>40</sup> *Southern Weekly Banner*, Apr. 12, 1881.

<sup>41</sup> *Southern Banner*, May 3, 1881. Athens officials involved with the negotiations with the Richmond and Danville Railroad were Capt. H.H. Carlton, lawyer for the City of Athens, Mayor Henry Beusse, and Aldermen D.M. Hemerick, R.H. Lampkin, George H. Palmer, J.E. Talmadge, and W.L. Wood. Representing the R & D railroad was Mr. George D. Thomas; the North-East Georgia Railroad was represented by C.W.

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The salient points of the contract were that the Richmond and West Point Terminal Company, through its “skeleton,” the Richmond and Danville, would build the extension all the way to Clayton, in stages, through Clarkesville and Tallulah Falls, by a certain date. The agreement also allowed the use of twelve miles of Atlanta and Charlotte Air-Line Railroad trackage from Lula to a point south of Clarkesville, which was called Rabun Gap Junction and later renamed Cornelia.

Some citizens of Athens apparently complained that the contract had not been presented to the general public for ratification as they thought it would be, but Carlton assured the public that the stock had not been “given away.” In fact, the contract called for Athens to remain a stockholder, with the stock placed in perpetual and irrevocable proxy to the Richmond and Danville Company, instead of appointing members of the North-East Georgia board as trustees. Then, when the proceedings broke down because of the Richmond and Danville’s reluctance to pay dividends, a telegram to the Mayor of Athens brought back this response: “Close the trade, dividends or no dividends.”<sup>42</sup> To most people it wasn’t whether the trade was good or bad. The question, as raised by a citizen in the newspaper, was: “Did the Mayor and Council have the right to deal with the property of the city without reference to the people?” The question remains moot to this day.

Not as much was written about the extension during the years that the Richmond and Danville was building to Clarkesville and Tallulah Falls. The newspapers found it more newsworthy to write of the establishment of businesses by Athens citizens in Clarkesville and Tallulah Falls. By 1881, the area became a summer resort visited by tourists from all over the United States. The Richmond and Danville did use the services of the North-East Georgia’s chief engineer, J.D. Turner, to survey the line, and in mid-August, this gentleman was seeking the best route through the main feature of “Switzerland of America,” the Tallulah Gorge, and beyond.<sup>43</sup>

The timetable for the North-East Georgia Railroad listed Clarkesville as a destination in September 1881, and Tallulah Falls appears as a stop by the July 2, 1882, timetable. Thus, it was apparent that the Richmond and Danville had adhered to its part of the contract as to time of completion of the road to those places.

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Baldwin, Julius Cohen, A.H. Hodgson, H.A. Lowrance, Rufus L. Moss, W.D. O’Farrell, C.G. Talmadge, W.B. Thomas and superintendent Lyman Wells.

<sup>42</sup> *Southern Banner*, May 10, 1881.

<sup>43</sup> *Southern Banner*, Aug. 23, 1881.

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The North-East Georgia never did cross Tallulah Gorge. Leaving Athens, the railroad passed through Center, Nicholson, Harmony Grove (now Commerce), Maysville, Gillsville, Lula, Rabun Gap Junction (now Cornelia), Demorest, Clarkesville, Hollywood, Turnerville, and Tallulah Falls.<sup>44</sup> The distance from Athens to Lula was thirty-nine miles, from Lula to Rabun Gap Junction (Cornelia) twelve miles and from Cornelia to Tallulah Falls twenty-one miles, a total of seventy-two miles of track.

In October of 1883, the railroad was placed in the hands of a receiver because of an attempt to sell the road. It was said that the “present owners” were not in good faith maintaining the property.<sup>45</sup> By the end of the month, however, the matter had been resolved to the satisfaction of all litigants, and the Richmond and Danville was still in control. By the fall of 1886, conditions on the North-East Georgia Railroad had deteriorated, and in



*The North-East Georgia Railroad route from Athens to Rabun Gap. Detail from Railroad & County Map of Georgia, Grant's Atlas 1886, courtesy of Hargrett Rare Book & Manuscript Library/University of Georgia Libraries. Used with permission.*

<sup>44</sup> Kollock, John. *These Green Hills*. Lakemont, GA: Copple House Books, 1976. pp. 50-52.)

<sup>45</sup> *Athens Banner Watchman*, Oct. 9 and 10, 1883.

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February of 1887 the first train wreck occurred at Nicholson, affecting the northbound freight.<sup>46</sup>

The citizens of Athens were becoming anxious and suggested that the city should take steps immediately to recover its railroad.<sup>47</sup> The Richmond and Danville had not kept faith in carrying out its contracts and a reliable company should take the North-East Georgia off the Richmond and Danville's hands. Lawyers for Richmond and Danville stated that there was no possible chance to disturb the existing relations, but other lawyers declared otherwise.<sup>48</sup> The Richmond and Danville sold twenty-one miles of the extension of the North-East Georgia Railroad from Rabun Gap Junction (Cornelia) to Tallulah Falls to Judge W.B. Thomas of Athens because "the extension was not making enough money to pay its operating expenses." This section became known briefly as the Tennessee, Carolina and Georgia Railroad, and finally as the Blue Ridge and Atlantic.<sup>49</sup>

### The Third Decade

Accidents continued to occur on the railroad. Car Inspector J.R. Miles was injured badly near the North-East Georgia depot in Athens. A frightful wreck of the southbound freight occurred on February 16, 1891, near Nicholson, due to spread of rails.<sup>50</sup> In February, three road accidents happened in one week!<sup>51</sup> A fourth wreck occurred at the Oconee River, necessitating the rowing of passengers, probably in a skiff, across the stream and transferring them to a freight car to reach Athens.<sup>52</sup>

Finally, the Richmond and Danville saw the light - its road master admitted that its ward was in miserable condition and promised new steel rails. The line and bridges would be repaired and rebuilt.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Athens Banner Watchman*, Sept. 28, 1886; March 1, 1887.

<sup>47</sup> *Athens Banner Watchman*, March 8, 1887.

<sup>48</sup> 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention, Oct. 1888 - Pope Barrow was elected president, R.K. Reaves vice president; directors were Henry Beusse, T.J. Carr, A.K. Childs, Julius Cohen, George E. Deadwyler, James S. Hamilton, E.R. Hodgson, Hugh T. Inman, John H. Inman, T.M. Logan, Reuben Nickerson, J.M. Orr, R.K. Reaves, George S. Scott, C.G. Talmadge, James White, G.M. Yancey. *Athens Banner Watchman*, Oct. 23, 1888.

<sup>49</sup> *Athens Banner Watchman*, Aug. 9, 1887, quoting the *Atlanta Constitution*.

<sup>50</sup> *Athens Weekly Banner*, Feb. 17, 1891.

<sup>51</sup> *Athens Weekly Banner*, Feb. 24, 1891.

<sup>52</sup> *Athens Weekly Banner*, Mar. 10, 1891.

<sup>53</sup> *Athens Weekly Banner*, Mar. 23, 1891.



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In the fall of 1893, the Richmond and Danville defaulted on the payment of interest on the North-East Georgia bonds, due November 1, because presumed small earnings did not warrant further ownership and operation of the North-East Georgia. This made the state of Georgia liable, since it had endorsed the bonds to the sum of \$260,000. In addition there had been issues put on by the Richmond and Danville of \$315,000, not endorsed by the state, a matter which was under litigation in state court, so Governor Northen seized the property.<sup>54</sup> The state now had two railroads to run and named Athenian R.K. Reaves as its agent to operate the North-East Georgia.<sup>55</sup> State agent Reaves did a such a commendable job that in five months under his management it had earned not only its operating expenses, but also the interest on the bonds!<sup>56</sup>

In early 1895, it was speculated that Governor Atkinson would advertise the North-East Georgia for sale since the state did not care to operate the road and two-thirds of the road's bonds had been turned in by stockholders.<sup>57</sup> There appear to have been three potential buyers, the Southern Railway, the marble men of Pickens County, and the Seaboard Railroad, but on the day of the sale, April 16, 1895, there were no buyers.<sup>58</sup> A new date for the sale was set for October, with a local group rumored to be formed to prevent an undesirable take-over.<sup>59</sup>

Then, when October 1895 passed without a sale or lease, February 14, 1896, became the day assigned for the opening of bids for the North-East Georgia. The Athens paper said that it was "odds of a toothpick to a lumber yard" that there would be no bids to open, and this proved to be correct.<sup>60</sup>

On April 4, 1896, the state again advertised the lease of the North-East Georgia and ultimately a bid of \$18,000 was accepted from a syndicate called Richards and Company, beating out the bid of Athenians A.H. and E.R. Hodgson.<sup>61</sup> On May 15, Capt. Smith of the

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<sup>54</sup> *Athens Weekly Banner*, Nov. 14, 1893.

<sup>55</sup> *Athens Weekly Banner*, Nov. 28, 1893.

<sup>56</sup> *Athens Weekly Banner*, June 9, 1894.

<sup>57</sup> *Southern Weekly Banner*, Mar. 1, 1895.

<sup>58</sup> *Southern Weekly Banner*, Apr. 5, 1895.

<sup>59</sup> *Athens Weekly Banner*, July 12, 1895.

<sup>60</sup> *Athens Weekly Banner*, Feb. 14, 1896.

<sup>61</sup> *Athens Weekly Banner*, Apr. 24, 1896.

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Atlanta and West Point Railroad was to make an inventory of the leased property prior to turning it over to Mr. E.A. Richards on June 1<sup>st</sup>.<sup>62</sup>

Mr. Richards and his syndicate had huge plans: the North-East Georgia would be a link in a road from Chattanooga, Tennessee, to Augusta, Georgia.<sup>63</sup> They took possession on June 4<sup>th</sup>, but by early October, Mr. Richards was in some trouble.<sup>64</sup> This resulted in the temporary appointment of a receiver, Martin H. Dooly, when one of Mr. Richards' partners wasn't satisfied with arrangements of appointments and fiscal matters.<sup>65</sup> Mr. Richards had named his leased railroad the Tennessee, Georgia and Atlanta Railway Company and called a stockholders meeting for October 10, 1896.<sup>66</sup> The temporary receiver was dismissed, and the legislature again considered the sale of the North-East Georgia.<sup>67</sup> The road found itself again in receivership. The *Weekly Banner* reported that "The lessee, Mr. Richards, has not paid notes due the States Savings Bank and funds from the North-East Georgia are being diverted to New York for inappropriate purposes."<sup>68</sup>

In May 1897, the road was back in the hands of the state, with R.K. Reaves again acting as agent. Governor Atkinson set the day of sale as June 21<sup>st</sup>, to the highest bidder, \$287,000 being the minimum price.<sup>69</sup> Sadly, there was not a single bidder for the North-East Georgia on the selling date of June 21<sup>st</sup>. In the meantime, lessee Richards was in arrears on unpaid rent, and his bondsmen were being pressed for the \$8,000, with the matter likely to end up in the courts.<sup>70</sup>

State agent Reaves managed the road efficiently, with business increasing to a net of about \$18,000, so that the state was not losing money on the road.<sup>71</sup> Things were good enough for the road to buy a locomotive which it received on October 7<sup>th</sup> and reportedly it was a beauty.<sup>72</sup> Best of all, on January 7, 1898, the *Athens Weekly Banner*

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<sup>62</sup> *Athens Weekly Banner*, May 8, 1896.

<sup>63</sup> *Athens Weekly Banner*, May 15, 1896.

<sup>64</sup> *Athens Weekly Banner*, June 5, 1896.

<sup>65</sup> *Athens Weekly Banner*, Oct. 2, 1896.

<sup>66</sup> *Athens Weekly Banner*, Oct. 9, 1896.

<sup>67</sup> *Athens Weekly Banner*, Dec. 11, 1896.

<sup>68</sup> *Athens Weekly Banner*, Apr. 30, 1897.

<sup>69</sup> *Athens Weekly Banner*, May 21, 1897.

<sup>70</sup> *Athens Weekly Banner*, July 9, 1897.

<sup>71</sup> *Athens Weekly Banner*, Sept. 17, 1897.

<sup>72</sup> *Athens Weekly Banner*, Oct. 8, 1897.

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reported that “the last dollar’s worth of the North-East Georgia Railroad bond issue had been paid off.”

Then, in March of 1899, the North-East underwent a general overhaul in which trestles and equipment were upgraded. It seems that the state did not do a bad piece of business when it “swung on to the North-Eastern,” and that running rights over the former Air-Line (now Southern Railway) remained the same because the North-East sold weekend excursions to Tallulah Falls for some years.<sup>73</sup> This would have entailed using Southern Railway rails from Lula to Cornelia and Blue Ridge and Atlantic rails to Tallulah Falls. The fare was \$2.00.<sup>74</sup>

Governor Candler attempted to sell the road for the third time.<sup>75</sup> This time it worked! The buyer, Capt. James W. English, paid \$307,000 on behalf of the Southern Railway, again outbidding the Athens group led by A.H. Hodgson.<sup>76</sup> When the sale was completed, Governor Candler wrote state agent R.K. Reaves, ordering him to deliver the North-East Georgia Railroad to the Southern Railway on October 31, 1899. Thus the North-East Georgia Railroad went out of existence. It would be known for many years as the Athens Southern, a charter having been applied for under that name. The Southern Railway was delighted with its purchase.

### Epilogue

The railroad since that October 1899 date has been a good civic and business citizen in spite of bad management at times by prior owners. Many Athens citizens still comment on the excellent work it did during World Wars I and II. The



*Postcard view of the Seaboard Depot in Athens from the early 1900s, courtesy of Gary Doster's new book, A Postcard History of Athens, Georgia.*

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<sup>73</sup> *Athens Weekly Banner*, Mar. 3, 1899.

<sup>74</sup> *Athens Daily Banner*, July 22, 1899.

<sup>75</sup> *Athens Daily Banner*, Oct. 3, 1899.

<sup>76</sup> *Athens Weekly Banner*, Nov. 3, 1899, two items.

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present owner is the Norfolk Southern railway, which also owns the trackage of the old Macon and Northern Railroad stretching southward out of Athens toward Madison, Georgia.

There are no passenger trains on this railroad today, but at least two steam-powered excursions have run on it in the recent past. Those rails, on one special day, June 25, 1994, hosted hundreds of National Railway Historical Society conventioners from Atlanta on a special train of sixteen coaches. The train arrived in Lula and switched onto the trackage of the “old” North-East Georgia and traveled through Maysville, Gillsville, Commerce, Nicholson, Center, and onto a siding in Athens where the diesel electric locomotives ran by the train and recoupled for the return trip to Lula and Atlanta.<sup>77</sup>

The railroad exists today as the Athens branch (freight only) of the Norfolk Southern Railway and is an important business entity for the region, serving businesses along the line from Lula to Bishop.

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<sup>77</sup> *National Railway Bulletin*, Vol. 60, #1, 1995. Philadelphia, Pa.

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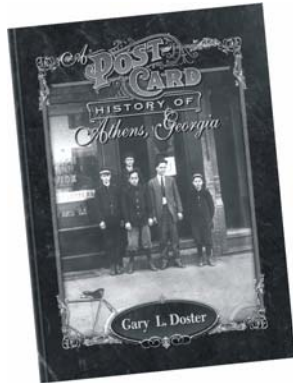
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