

PROGRESS AND POWER: THE ELECTRIFICATION OF THE URBAN AMERICAN
SOUTH, 1880-1920

By

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To Mikilena

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This project seeks to understand the visions of the future and of progress southerners pursued through electrification in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. By comparing the motives and experiences of boosters in the post-Reconstruction South, this project seeks to understand how and why people championed electrification and how electrification reshaped the political, racial, and cultural fabric of the urban South. The examination of Richmond and Atlanta's experiences—two of the largest cities in the region—will draw parallels and unveil differences with the experience of other American and European cities. Understanding southerners' visions of progress, how different groups used electricity to attain those visions, and the unpredictable results will, I contend, change how we understand this period of Southern history and the history of technology more broadly.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines how boosterish city leaders attempted to use electricity to remake the urban South between 1880 and 1920. During this forty-year period, municipal officials in Atlanta, Georgia and Richmond, Virginia believed electricity was progress incarnate (progress being the technology, infrastructure, industry, and wealth generated by late-nineteenth-century capitalism) and a necessary instrument for regional recovery. They pursued it vigorously. In the end, however, electricity did not magically transform these two cities as its leaders hoped; Atlanta and Richmond did not rise to the stature of cities like New York or Chicago by 1920. Nevertheless, the boosters' pursuit of electrification changed these cities, transforming elements of urban life while exacerbating existing socioeconomic and racial inequalities—in introducing this emerging technological system, boosters pushed aside older systems, operated publicly-owned power plants, designed municipal grids, determined who they were and were not for, and, bowing to public pressure, weakened electric trolley companies' dominance over mass transit. The story of the electrification of Atlanta and Richmond, one that focuses on the convergence of emerging technologies, municipal politics, growing cities, and urban boosterism, offers a distinctly different narrative of the turn-of-the-century South.¹

By examining the electrification of Atlanta and Richmond this dissertation describes the maturation of the postbellum southern city. This study demonstrates that in this period, southern cities were steered by small and powerful groups of boosterish

¹ Much of the existing scholarship focuses on politics, economics, gender, and race and, while deserving work, it often fails to acknowledge the tremendous technological changes sweeping across the United States in this period.

businessmen and politicians. This dissertation refers to these elite white men as "boosters," a term historians of the United States and of the American South use to describe passionate urban promoters in the nineteenth century. In Atlanta and Richmond these boosters were, with important exceptions, remarkably uniform in their purpose and agenda. They believed in a future-oriented path of urban growth, economic development, and the adoption of emerging technological systems—all to attain progress and create a "New South" in their cities.² The dissertation reaffirms that the "New South" mantra espoused by these boosters was ultimately hollow—cities were changing in this period, but electrification did not spur tremendous growth and development.³ Indeed, the story of southern urban electrification also suggests that change, even dramatic technological change, failed to alter social, economic, and racial realities and inequalities and that, in fact, it aggravated them.

This dissertation additionally describes how the process of electrification helped create the contemporary urban South.⁴ It demonstrates that the calls for progress and the urge southern boosters felt to keep pace with other American municipalities prompted these city leaders to passionately pursue electrification. Electrification, in turn, altered the cityscape, charged municipal politics, and prompted important

² I use "progress" and "New South" somewhat interchangeably since, to city officials, progress was the path to a "New South" and a "New South" would be a place of progress. Either way, city leaders were seeking northern capital and investment, factories, businesses, commerce, and the accoutrements of late-nineteenth-century industrial capitalism.

³ By a "New South," southern boosters meant one dominated by northern-style industry, commerce, and urban spaces, not staple agriculture and rural life. In the dissertation, my argument about the influence of this New South creed stands somewhat apart from the scholarly consensus. City leaders in Richmond and Atlanta, this study contends, held a future-oriented, progress-laden vision of the southern city and in this sense they were not attempting, as many scholars argue of postbellum southern leaders, to resurrect the Old South and the antebellum political, economic, and racial order.

⁴ By "contemporary urban South," I refer to the infrastructure and accompanying political, economic, social, and policy issues that would dominate twentieth and twenty-first century cities.

questions about urban growth and development. The southern city of 1920 had a different look and feel than that of 1880 and its leaders, after having introduced and planned the electrification of their cities, faced new policy issues as a result of the electrification of urban infrastructure. Electrification did not bring about a New South, but it did alter the southern city.

The process of electrification itself is a particularly useful lens through which we can view urban policy trends and their consequences in the turn-of-the-century South. Electric light and traction systems were *the* urban technological innovations of the late nineteenth century. To introduce, install, and expand electric grids in growing cities presented a tremendous challenge. In Atlanta and Richmond, as in all cities around the Earth in this period, electrification prompted continuous and fervent debate about how the process should unfold, whether government or private individuals should orchestrate it, and how public policy should shape its use. By studying the adoption of this technological system, we have a greater understanding of how elite southerners purposefully shaped the introduction of modern urban infrastructure—municipally-designed electric street light systems and trolley lines, government-backed utility companies, and city services designed to promote growth and development, not the betterment of the city's poor and discriminated citizenry.

The call of the New South and the fear of stagnation drove—more than anything else—city leaders to electrify their communities. Ideas, then, were crucial to the booster program of electrification. As historian of nineteenth-century urbanization, Peter C. Baldwin, observes, "ideas have a powerful role in shaping cities, a role comparable to—perhaps even exceeding—the effects of technology." Indeed, this study is also the story

of an idea, the booster idea that a New South could be built by improving urban infrastructure and by introducing emerging and promising technological systems. To boosterish city officials, mayors, city councilmen, municipal employees, entrepreneurs, newspaper editors, and others who agreed that Atlanta and Richmond required dramatic development to keep pace with northern and western metropolises, the idea of electrification—the idea that a new technological system would magically transform the urban landscape—was irresistible. Their belief in the power of electricity spurred a chain of events from the introduction of electricity to the establishment of city grids to the regulation of electric companies. Accordingly, this dissertation focuses on the boosters' idea of progress through electricity and its consequences.⁵

As a result, this is not a study of city residents, of people adjusting to the new technological systems or to the policies city officials developed. In this period, electricity was primarily used by municipalities to light streets, businesses to light shops and factories, traction companies to power trolleys, and the owners of large buildings to illuminate upscale property. Some affluent individuals electrified their homes, but the average person in southern cities would not see electricity in their dwelling until after the First World War. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, electrification was primarily a matter of municipal policy. This dissertation therefore examines those elected city leaders, entrepreneurs, and other municipal powerbrokers who directed the course of urban electrification.

⁵ I am particularly influenced by Elliott West and his observation about the power of imagination: "Through imagination humans thus gain enormous manipulative influence over their surroundings. They can perceive a new effective environment from the current one." Moreover, West argues that part of imagining a new world is not being able "to imagine anything close to the full consequences of changing things." Elliott West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, & the Rush to Colorado* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), xx-xxi. Peter C. Baldwin, *Domesticating the Street: The Reform of Public Space in Hartford, 1850-1930* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999), 7.

The examination of urban electrification in this period of southern history is appealing in part because it has yet to be thoroughly analyzed. Several excellent studies of the electrification of the South focus on the mid-twentieth century, when the New Deal and the Rural Electrification Administration brought electricity to rural areas of the region.⁶ Studies of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century southern cities generally offer anecdotal and cursory descriptions of electrification. Historians of the American South have suggested that it helped shape urban expansion, factory work, mill life, race relations, mass consumerism, culture, the creation of suburbs, and other prominent features of the postbellum South, but fail to offer sustained analyses. More often than not, historians merely note it as one of many changes to the postbellum urban landscape. Indeed, at the conclusion of *Origins of the New South*, C. Vann Woodward—who had only mentioned the word electricity once in his masterpiece—suggested it was a subject of importance and in need of study. With only a few notable exceptions, Woodward's observation remains true to this day.⁷

⁶ These studies are often larger examinations of the electrification of rural America. See D. Clayton Brown, *Electricity for Rural America: The Fight for the REA* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980); Preston J. Hubbard, *Origins of the TVA: The Muscle Shoals Controversy, 1920-1932* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1961); Ronald C. Tobey, *Technology as Freedom: The New Deal and the Electrical Modernization of the American Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

⁷ Harold L. Platt probably examines the question of municipal electrification more thoroughly than any other historian of the American South in the last thirty years. Nevertheless, he does so within a larger examination of city building and does not, accordingly, thoroughly examine the subject. Harold L. Platt, *City Building in the New South: The Growth of Public Services in Houston, Texas, 1830-1910* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983).

Studies of the American South that offer brief examinations of electrification include: Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction*, 15th Anniversary ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); David L. Carlton, *Mill and Town in South Carolina, 1880-1920* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982); James C. Cobb, *Industrialization and Southern Society, 1877-1984* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984); Don H. Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1860-1910* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Robert F. Durden, *Electrifying the Piedmont Carolinas: The Duke Power Company, 1904-1997* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2001); Flaming, *Creating the Modern South*; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, et al., *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987); Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors*

This study also adds to our understanding of the postbellum southern city and of New South boosterism. This study emphasizes how a small and powerful group of boosterish politicians and businessmen—individuals determined to dramatically improve, develop, and grow their communities' industrial base, financial state, and infrastructure—were able to direct the course of electrification in Atlanta and Richmond, largely determining how the process would unfold and who it would benefit, designing urban infrastructure and directing municipal services. As this dissertation demonstrates, these policy decisions held implications for private business, the southern cityscape, the lives of city residents, and the future of the city and of city services. Historians of postbellum southern cities often argue that city leaders were largely ineffective in promoting growth and development and describe the course of postbellum urban history as a series of failed dreams driven by powerful regional liabilities, inflated rhetoric, institutionalized racism, and marginal change. While these characterizations are largely accurate, this study argues that insufficient attention has been paid to policymakers, policies, and their consequences. "The unrealistic expectations of the men of the New South creed," Lawrence H. Larsen observes, "obscured urban accomplishments."⁸ By examining the introduction of this technological system over a period of forty years we gain a richer understanding of who in the postbellum South managed urban growth and

After the Civil War (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*; Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Holland Thompson, *The New South: A Chronicle of Social and Industrial Evolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1919).

⁸ Lawrence H. Larsen, *The Urban South: A History* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 94.

development, what the consequences of their actions were, and how cities and cities services evolved.⁹

In addition, this dissertation contributes to our understanding of the process of electrification and technological adoption more broadly. Existing scholarship that examines late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century electrification generally centers on major cities in the American North and Europe—the financial and industrial powerhouses of the world. While there are several excellent studies of electrification in Asia, South America, and peripheral nations in the western world, much of what we know about electrification in poor, rural, and comparatively agrarian regions in this period is either incomplete or anecdotal. Most narrowly examine electrification as a part of larger studies of industrial development, technological maturation, and turn-of-the-century urbanization—few focus on the degree to which politics and policies determined the course of electricity's growth. Few offer a sense of contingency when recounting the rise of this technology. The urban areas of the American South, this dissertation

⁹ To be clear, I am not championing the New South creed or the boosters who espoused it. Rather, I argue that a focus on elite policymakers and their policies in one area of urban development (electrification) offers much to our understanding of the shaping of postbellum southern cities. For excellent histories of postbellum southern cities, see Harold L. Platt, *City Building in the New South*; Lawrence H. Larsen, *The Rise of the Urban South* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1985); Howard N. Rabinowitz, "Continuity and Change: Southern Urban Development, 1860-1900," in *The City in Southern History: The Growth of Urban Civilization in the South*, ed. by Blaine A. Brownell and David R. Goldfield (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1977); Don H. Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1860-1910* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990); David R. Goldfield, *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers: Southern City and Region, 1607-1980* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1982); Michael B. Chesson, *Richmond after the War, 1865-1890* (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1981); James M. Russell, *Atlanta, 1847-1890: City Building in the Old South and the New* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1988).

More recent examinations of southern cities examine race, gender, and culture, focusing not on those who directed municipal policy, but on those had to live with it. See, Louis M. Kyriakoudes, *The Social Origins of the Urban South: Race, Gender, and Migration in Nashville and Middle Tennessee, 1890-1930* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2003); Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Blair L.M. Kelley, *Right to Ride: Streetcar Boycotts and African American Citizenship in the Era of Plessy v. Ferguson* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

contends, offer a unique political, economic, and racial environment within which to trace the process of electrification. By examining the urban South, we better understand how peripheral areas of the western world experienced electrification and how this emerging technology came to power the present-day world. Southern city leaders, this dissertation argues, passionately pursued electrification, understood it to be a symbolic achievement, and proactively directed the course of electrification throughout this period.¹⁰

To understand the process of electrification of the urban South and why and how boosters directed that process, this study focuses on Richmond, Virginia and Atlanta, Georgia, two archetypal yet distinct municipalities within the American South. The question of how representative these cities and their leaders are is an important one. Though Atlanta and Richmond were in certain respects unique, their examination nevertheless reveals challenges common to the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century southern city and to the process of electrification. Atlanta and Richmond, two of the largest cities in the region between 1880 and 1920, had some of the first electric streetcar and electric light systems in the United States and debates over their expansion, applicable Jim Crow laws, and public ownership of utilities charged these cities' politics in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Unlike other southern

¹⁰ For excellent studies of electrification that largely examine the process through the lens of corporate growth, technological maturation, and/or larger studies of turn-of-the-century urban development, see Thomas P. Hughes, *Network of Power: Electrification in Western Society, 1880-1930* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983; Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking about Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); David E. Nye, *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997); Harold C. Passer, *The Electrical Manufacturers: A Study in Competition, Entrepreneurship, Technical Change, and Economic Growth, 1875-1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953); Harold L. Platt, *The Electric City: Energy and the Growth of the Chicago Area, 1880-1930* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991).

cities, both municipalities were the capitals of their respective states, both were important players in the national economy, and both had large sections of their urban landscape destroyed during the Civil War. The cities' distinctions make them useful sites to examine the intersection of postbellum boosterism and electrification. Yet, like their colleagues across the region, officials in both cities were obsessed with development and growth after the war and grappled with the issue of electrification. City leaders faced municipal issues and policy debates that occurred in every major southern (and American, for that matter) community in this period. Atlanta and Richmond, then, offer unique histories that nevertheless allude to larger regional trends.

The dissertation follows an episodic and roughly chronological approach. The second chapter examines the histories of Atlanta and Richmond and the perspective local boosters had of the cities' prospects in the 1880s. Believing that the histories of Atlanta and Richmond portended futures of development and growth, but burdened by regional liabilities and shaky economies, city leaders adopted the New South program, believing they should promote industry, infrastructure, growth and expansion to encourage northern capital and investment. Accordingly, this chapter explains why boosterish city officials turned to electricity as an engine of progress.

The third chapter focuses on Atlanta in the 1880s, examining why and how city leaders rapidly adopted an electric street light system. Boosters, believing electricity to be a prerequisite of postbellum urban development across the United States, pushed aside the municipal gas light system and adopted the expensive, unproven, and unreliable electric light. Most American cities adopted electric light because of its practical potential to create more and better light. Atlanta's leaders, on the other hand,

valued electric light's practical potential, but were more impressed with the symbolism of installing it.

The fourth chapter examines the debate between city leaders in Richmond over whether their city should own and operate a municipal electric light plant, a debate that ran from the late 1880s to the 1910s. The debate divided boosters over whether electric light was a service the city should provide or a product companies should sell. In Richmond, those who saw electric light as a service won and the city erected a municipal plant in the early twentieth century. The episode in Richmond demonstrates that southern urban leaders were wary of private utility companies, yearned to protect existing public monopolies, and wished to ensure the continued development of urban areas. Controlling public power was, to Richmond's boosters, a means to ensure these goals.

The fifth chapter focuses on the erection of an electric light grid and trolley network, and electric light's effects on white perceptions of African Americans in Atlanta between the 1880s and 1910s. City leaders and entrepreneurs designated where street lights would be placed and through which neighborhoods trolleys would pass. City leaders, obsessed with development, growth, and (in the case of trolley managers) profits, designed systems that privileged wealthy whites and largely neglected poor whites and African Americans. In addition, electric light exacerbated white fears of African Americans and prompted city officials to understand light as an arm of policing blacks.

The sixth chapter examines Richmond's electric trolley system in the 1910s and how the trolley company attempted to stifle the growth of the jitney—a taxicab, bus

hybrid automobile—that threatened its domination over mass transportation. The Virginia Railway and Power Company, which city leaders had helped expand, sought city leaders' help in eradicating the jitney and, simultaneously, in easing the company's regulated rate structure. Bowing to pressure from elite residents, city leaders—unlike most in the United States—protected the jitney and refused to acquiesce to the corporation's requested rate adjustment. In this episode, city residents, the local electric company, and municipal leaders interacted and together shaped the future of urban transportation.

By examining why and how boosterish urban leaders in Atlanta and Richmond pursued the electrification of their cities, we have a richer understanding of the process by which southern cities developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This study additionally improves our understanding of turn-of-the-century southern urban boosterism and of the practical influence of the call for a New South. Lastly, by examining the process of electrification in southern cities, this dissertation expands our understanding of electrification more broadly and of the process of technological adoption.

CHAPTER 2

PURSUING PROGRESS: NEW SOUTH CITIES AND THE PROMISE OF ELECTRICITY

Between 1880 and 1890, booster politicians and entrepreneurs in Atlanta and Richmond introduced electricity to their cities—an emerging technological system emblematic of the progress southern city leaders so passionately pursued in the decades following the crisis of defeat and Reconstruction. For decades, since the antebellum period, boosters in Atlanta and Richmond—like those in most American communities—had sought economic development, industrial expansion, and urban growth. After enduring the destruction of much of their cities in the wake of the Civil War, however, municipal leaders, faced with smoldering homes and factories, an impoverished region, and the booming success of northern cities and the North more generally, judged their region and their communities to be falling behind. Consequently, boosters in the hills of northern Georgia and on the James River in Virginia vigorously pursued urban development in the form of electrification. They hoped to use electricity to invigorate their struggling, if growing, economies, to improve the living conditions of the urban populace, to fuel the transportation facilities of their communities, and—perhaps most importantly—to demonstrate to themselves and to the world that the South was a place of progress. In the view of city leaders, entrepreneurs, and others who helped introduce this new technological system to these southern cities, electricity, once it came, would magically transform their communities into budding metropolises and that industrial and urban expansion would proceed apace. To these elite white men in the 1880s, electricity was the symbol of the progress they so fervently desired.

This chapter examines why and how boosters chose to pursue electrification as part of their larger campaign for urban progress. To late-nineteenth-century southern

boosters—elite city planners, businessmen, politicians—those who dominated the direction of urban life and yearned for their communities' unceasing development, "progress" meant many things. Progress was keeping up with the times, with the North, with Europe. Progress meant factories, urban expansion, transportation facilities, and ultimately, prosperity. To the boosters of Richmond and Atlanta, progress meant change, newness, cutting-edge technology; it meant leading the way. It represented everything the South was not, but what its booster leaders hoped it *could* be in this period. These cities' boosters were, like many of their urban contemporaries in the North and West, obsessed with the idea of progress; newspaper editors, in particular, constantly used this term when discussing the South's future. It was as much an emotional and psychological attainment as it was a physical one. For the purposes of this study, however, the progress boosters called for was, in its simplest form, economic expansion and regional recovery. If Richmond and Atlanta were to be great cities and its citizens a great people, boosters understood, then they would have to seek and attain "progress" in the form of urban development.

Electricity, many city leaders believed, was progress incarnate. From the time it appeared in the late 1870s, practical commercial electric light and current fascinated Americans. Yet, at the same time, electricity was controversial, exorbitantly expensive, and an unproven and unreliable form of energy. Nevertheless, to many southern municipal leaders, electricity was emblematic of northern economic and municipal success. It had an ethereal and magical quality that permitted observers to believe that with this new power source people could do anything. The technology, recently

harnessed by northern inventors and entrepreneurs, was seen as yet another tool to help the South regain what power it had lost during the Civil War and Reconstruction.¹

This chapter argues that the boosters of Atlanta and Richmond, emerging from the chaos of war and the consequences of defeat, followed the New South course in the 1880s, searching for some engine of progress to raise their cities and turned to electricity as one such engine. These municipal leaders looked to many sources of change: cotton factories, railroads, promising inventions, municipal improvements—the list was almost endless. From the perspective of these men, the South was dangerously behind the North and any promising avenue of development needed to be vigorously pursued. Yet none captured the imagination of southern urban boosters the way electric lights and wires did. Dazzling displays in their cities and across the country demonstrated the promise and potential of this still-experimental technological system. Electrification, these city builders hoped, would transform their cities as inventors and entrepreneurs were promising across the globe. Electricity, they hoped, would mean progress.²

¹ As I explain in my introduction, the literature on the electrification of southern cities is sparse. Most historians of the American South who examine electrification—as with most historians who examine electrification generally—examine it within the larger contexts of technological maturation, corporate growth, and/or turn-of-the century urban transformations. This dissertation examines why and how city leaders orchestrated electrification, shaping the southern cityscape and municipal policies. See Harold L. Platt, *City Building in the New South: The Growth of Public Services in Houston, Texas, 1830-1910* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983); Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction*, 15th Anniversary ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Thomas P. Hughes, *Network of Power: Electrification in Western Society, 1880-1930* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983; Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking about Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); David E. Nye, *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997); Harold C. Passer, *The Electrical Manufacturers: A Study in Competition, Entrepreneurship, Technical Change, and Economic Growth, 1875-1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953).

² Southern urban leaders looked to many solutions to their postbellum problems—electricity was just one of them. Yet, as this dissertation will demonstrate, electricity was not only crucially important to these leaders' vision of the future, but by examining how and why southern urban areas electrified, we gain a

Old South, New South

The municipalities these booster politicians and businessmen directed, Richmond and Atlanta, were two different, yet similar cities as they entered the 1880s. Despite their different histories, their leaders' held similar, almost identical, boosterish ideas about urban development. Both had been devastated by the Civil War—unlike most American and even Southern cities—and both were, by the late-nineteenth century, capitals of their respective states. Both cities were centers of agricultural trade, both were centers of—or prominent stops for—railroad traffic, and both capitals had burgeoning, if small-scale industry. Yet, Richmond was a city with a significantly older history, with more connections to northern industry and commerce, and was, in many respects, a city of the Old South—it had been *the* Confederate capital. Atlanta, on the other hand, owed its wealth primarily to its position as a railroad hub and center for the cotton trade, and was not even a half-century old when the 1880s dawned. Additionally, Atlanta was, as its boosters repeatedly and unfailingly declared, *the* preeminent "New South" city, a city that had emerged from the flames of war with the future as its goal. It had experienced rapid growth in the years following the war. Despite divergent histories and positions within the region, both cities faced stark challenges as Reconstruction ended, challenges that spurred passionate boosterism.

In both cities there was some continuity in booster activity between antebellum and postbellum years. Generations of city leaders in Atlanta and Richmond, from each city's founding, had pushed for growth and expansion as their descendants would rabidly do in the late nineteenth century. The genesis of the postbellum booster zeal,

nuanced understanding of the urban south in this period and how boosters designed and implemented infrastructural change.

then, had roots in each city's history—Atlanta and Richmond each had a long history of boosterism and development.

Richmond: The Old South City

Richmond was a comparatively-old city. From the mid-eighteenth century to the 1880s, local politicians pushed for urban improvements, industrial expansion, and a variety of transportation facilities to service the community. Over nearly a century and a half, Richmond developed as an impressive center of manufacturing. Accordingly, from the perspective of local boosters, Richmond's history—despite the war and the turbulent postbellum economy—portended a bright future.

Richmond was established in 1733 when William Byrd II, a wealthy Virginian who represented the colony in England, inherited the land from his father and founded the small trading village along the uppermost landing of the James River.³ The Virginia General Assembly incorporated the community in 1742. In 1775, on the eve of the American Revolution, the community had roughly 600 residents and was little more than an inconsequential trading post. In 1780, Virginia moved its capitol to Richmond and the city quickly came under repeated attack during the Revolutionary War. After the conflict, the town—now the capital of the largest state within the United States—began growing, thanks in part to its advantageous location along the James, which gave it access to the Atlantic, and its position along the primary stage route running up and down the east coast. It was a trade hub. In 1783, a Hessian surgeon named Johann David Schöpf visited Richmond and noted that the budding community had a small

³ Maurice Duke and Daniel P. Jordan, eds., *A Richmonder Reader, 1733-1983* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 3-5; Virginicus Dabney, *Richmond: The Story of a City* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1976), 12; William Byrd, *A Journey to the Land of Eden and Other Papers*, ed. by Mark Van Doren (New York: Vanguard, 1928), 275.

number of homes, one newspaper, a church, and many fine horses. Another visitor, a French nobleman named La Rochefoucault-Liancourt, reported in 1796 that the town had grown to a population of 6,000. The nobleman noted that much of the business in Richmond consisted of locals trading wheat, Indian corn, and tobacco with each other and that little trade with Europe took place—nearby Norfolk commanded that business. Richmond's business and political leaders were, however, pursuing economic development.⁴

Indeed, Richmond's history of booster activity was an old one as was its pursuit of development. In the late eighteenth century as the city's role as trading center expanded, city boosters championed the construction of a canal. The waterfalls along the James effectively blocked trade to the West and urban boosters believed a canal would invigorate and ensure the community's development. A combination of public and private investment sponsored construction of a waterway westward. Though the original project intended for the canal to run all the way to the Kanawha River, in what is today West Virginia, by 1800 a short, 7-mile canal allowed small boats to travel to the west around the falls and for farmers and other locals to bring goods and produce to the markets in Richmond. Though the canal did not achieve its hoped-for goal of opening up the West to Richmond's trade, it demonstrated the extent to which its city leaders sought development.⁵

In the early nineteenth century, Richmond continued to grow. By 1810 the population neared 10,000, almost forty percent of whom were slaves. The city was no

⁴ Duke and Jordan, 3-11, 12-17, 23-28.

⁵ Eventually, by the 1840s, entrepreneurs would extend the canal to Lynchburg, Virginia. Hoffman, 18-19.

longer the sleepy trading post in years past—the nearby falls provided for industrial waterpower. Entrepreneurs opened several mills and a tobacco warehouse. A theater opened as did several houses of worship and hotels. Planters and industrialists gambled on horse races and hosted cotton balls. A visitor to the city, George William Bagby, who made several trips to Richmond in the 1830s, remembered being impressed with "the vast metropolis" that the city had become. When Charles Dickens visited the city in 1842, he was impressed with the hotels and noted the large tobacco manufacturers staffed with slaves. He described "pretty villas and cheerful houses" along with dilapidated tenements across the municipality. A Scottish traveler, Alexander MacKay, throwing off local boosters' comparisons of Richmond's visage to Windsor Castle and its likeness (in terms of the hills on which it rested) to that of ancient Rome, described several years later the cotton factories, iron and steel works, and impressive flour mills within the city. He also noted the promising deposits of coal and iron ore within close proximity. In addition, Richmond was, he wrote, "one of the first tobacco markets of the country." Richmond may have been a city of the Old South, complete with slaves and slave owners, driven by tobacco, but it was also, its boosters understood, the most important industrial center in the antebellum South.⁶

By the mid-nineteenth century, the population had risen to roughly 40,000. By the late 1850s, five railroads entered and left Richmond and more were being built—boosters believed that railroads were now the key to economic and urban development. The Tredegar works was one of the largest manufacturers of iron in the entire United

⁶ MacKay wrote that Richmonders spoke of their hills as "if the number of hills on which the capital rested was an essential element of Roman greatness." Duke and Jordan, 33-43, 51, 78-82, 87-92; Samuel Mordecai, *Richmond in By-Gone Days*, The Leisure Class in America, ed. Leon Stein (New York: Arno Press, 1975), 18-20, 177-180; Steven J. Hoffman, *Race, Class and Power in the Building of Richmond, 1870-1920* (Jefferson (NC): McFarland & Company, 2004, 2.

States. The city's seven flour mills produced thousands of barrels of flour every year. Fifty tobacco factories made the city on the James the largest tobacco manufacturing center on the globe. Richmond College opened. A horse-drawn street railway began operating along the streets and gas lamps lighted the way for those traveling at night. Boosters pushed for more industry and transportation facilities. The city was a significant trading and importing center, especially in South-American coffee, hosted numerous industries such as foundries, and was a steadily-expanding urban area. The Civil War, however, would interrupt that growth and development.⁷

During the Civil War, Richmond served as the Confederate capital. Given its status as the rebel capital and its proximity to Union lines, the city was in constant danger of attack. In April 1865, after numerous campaigns across Virginia and around Richmond, the Confederacy was finally defeated and the Union army entered Richmond. The retreating forces of the South destroyed all but one of the bridges across the James; the Confederacy did not want to leave anything of military value in Richmond. One confederate soldier, Clement Sulivane, described Richmond as the arsenals went up in flames: "the two cities, Richmond and Manchester, were like a blaze of day amid the surrounding darkness." Explosions rocked the city and nearly a thousand buildings were destroyed, laying waste to entire blocks, while soldiers burned cotton and tobacco. One African American pastor, upon returning to the city later that month, described the community as being nothing more than "smoke and ashes."⁸

⁷ Mary Newton Stanard, *Richmond: Its People and Its Story*(Philadelphia: L. B. Lippincott Company, 1923), 155; Dabney, 137; Hoffman, 3-4.

⁸ Manchester was a small community across from Richmond on the other bank of the James River. Duke and Jordan, 120-135; Hoffman, 4.

After the war, Richmond's boosters faced the challenge of rebuilding. The postbellum period would be marked by modest growth and development and a shaky, though strengthening, economy. Banks quickly reopened and the tobacco trade resumed. Within five years, nearly forty tobacco factories operated in the former Confederate capital. The railroad lines in and out of Richmond, which had been destroyed by the Union army, began operating months after the war's conclusion. Freed African Americans opened small businesses such as barbershops, restaurants, and retail shops. Others became contractors, hack men, and undertakers, among other low-end occupations. The city's newspapers, many of which's presses had been destroyed in the fires, slowly resumed publishing.⁹

The national financial downturn of 1873 rocked the city. The bankruptcy of several northern railroad lines that were themselves indebted to the Tredegar Iron Works threw that Richmond fixture into receivership. Several mills, banks, and manufacturers closed and many city residents lost their jobs. The tobacco trade eased the city through the turbulent economy while flour milling profited—though it did not regain its prewar status and steadily declined as the century progressed—and new ironworks, including a locomotive factory, were constructed—though the city's iron industry failed to convert to steel forging.

By the late 1870s and early 1880s, Richmond was once-again prospering by the standards of the region. As an important manufacturing center, the city was more like its northern counterparts than most southern municipalities. By 1880, the city's population had risen to just over 63,000 and suburbs and adjoining towns circled the

⁹ Dabney, 199-215.

community. City boosters, politicians, industrialists, and merchants organized various associations to support the city's economic growth and urban expansion—boosterism swelled in the years following defeat. Richmond's Board of Trade, which had existed since the 1850s, continued to lobby for the business interests of the community.

Richmond's Chamber of Commerce opened in 1867. The rosters of the chamber and another organization, the Commercial Club, included many important industrial, mercantile, and political leaders in the city—in the 1880s, as in years past, the political and business communities within the city were tightly entwined and focused on growth. As the decade ended, nearby coal mining flourished and railroad traffic picked up, improving the local economy, though the recessions of the postwar period continued to slow growth. The year 1886 was a bad one for Richmond manufacturers. Labor disputes rocked the city, as they had many American communities. Two flour businesses failed, one by fire, the other by bankruptcy.¹⁰ In addition, as was the case across the South, both capital and labor were in short supply. The president of the chamber of commerce, while optimistic, declared that Richmond manufacturing "seems to suffer." "[T]he growth and prosperity of our city," he informed the chamber in 1885, "is retarded."¹¹ In Richmond, the postbellum economy was a story of success and decline, boom and bust.¹²

¹⁰ "A Growing City," *Richmond Dispatch*, Jan. 1, 1887.

¹¹ "Chamber of Commerce," *Richmond Dispatch*, June 10, 1887; Hoffman, 57; Richmond Chamber of Commerce, "Reports of the Chamber of Commerce of Richmond, VA" (Richmond: WM. Ellis Jones, 1884), 8-9, in Manuscripts, Virginia Historical Society; Richmond Chamber of Commerce, " Reports of the Chamber of Commerce of Richmond, VA" (Richmond: WM. Ellis Jones, 1885), 15, in Manuscripts, Virginia Historical Society.

¹² Michael B. Chesson, *Richmond After the War, 1865-1890* (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1981), 171; Dabney, 220-27; Hoffman, 2, 9.

Indeed, by early 1887, as electric lights and power began appearing across the city, Richmond was a booming southern city struggling, and largely failing, to equal the status and industrial might of northern communities. Nevertheless, by the 1880s it enjoyed a robust economy for the ailing region. Editors of the *Richmond Dispatch*, the chief Democratic organ, conceded that while the city did not make "tremendous leaps," her growth, they wrote with hope, "was steady and solid."¹³ The former Confederate citadel and capital—now only the capital of the state of Virginia—Richmond was a city of roughly eighty-five thousand people. Six railroad lines came into the city while a port carried trade to centers of commerce such as New York, Philadelphia, and beyond. The city contained all manner of businesses, having numerous leather workshops, bakeries, blacksmiths, brick factories, iron works, and barrel, wagon, cigar, cigarette, clothing, and drug makers. It was a notable jobbing center in groceries, alcohol, boots and shoes, dry goods, and many other consumer products. The city contained over 700 manufacturers by 1883. Gas lamps increasingly lit the city. There was tangible evidence that the City on the James, as it was known, was growing and developing in size, population, industrial plant, and trade.

If the city's economic status was uncertain in the 1870s and 1880s, it was even less so for its African American community. Richmond's black population made up the majority of the municipality's unskilled workers. Black Richmonders worked as laborers, deliverymen, waiters, servants, maids, and laundresses. In the words of Steven Hoffman, they "consistently performed the lowest paid and least skilled jobs in the city." Those black workers who were employed in better-paid skilled positions constituted a

¹³ "A Growing City," *Richmond Dispatch*, Jan. 1, 1887.

small minority. For those in power in Richmond, the African American situation and the situation of poor whites was not paramount.¹⁴

Despite the shaky economy, Richmond's municipal leaders fervently declared that Richmond's best days were ahead. The city was unquestionably the leading metropolis of the Upper South and one of the largest manufacturing and jobbing centers in the region. The Chamber of Commerce offered bullish appraisals of the City on the James and its prospects. "[T]here is no place in the South," the chamber reported in 1885, "which has more successfully fought and overcome difficulties that were a heritage of the war or built up a more solid foundation for future prosperity than has Richmond." As the city entered the last decades of the nineteenth century, its boosterish leaders—like those who looked to canals, factories, or railroads in decades past—sought something, anything, to help their community pursue and achieve the progress northern cities were achieving. The story was similar 500 miles to the southwest.¹⁵

Atlanta: The New South City

Like Richmond's boosters, Atlanta's had always pushed for urban development and did so with passion in the uncertain postbellum years. Since its founding Atlanta grew and developed at a pace unseen in Richmond. Indeed, Atlanta's postbellum experience by the 1880s was primarily one of rapid development. Accordingly, though their city histories differed, the boosters of Atlanta—like those in Richmond—saw encouraging signs from their city's history. The location that would become Atlanta was

¹⁴ Hoffman, 64-68.

¹⁵ Hoffman, 22-27; Commercial Club, "Constitution, by-laws and rules, officers and members, Richmond, 1881," in Manuscripts, Virginia Historical Society; Chamber of Commerce, 1885, 4.

situated in a hilly part of the Georgia piedmont, about 1,000 feet above sea level, in the southern-most foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. In the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries—when Richmond was already a state capital—much of northwestern Georgia had been a home to the Cherokee Indians. By the fourth decade of the century, white settlers moved into the area, searching for land and gold.

Though electric light would alter life in the late-nineteenth century, it was another technological system, the railroad that was responsible for the city's birth. Development of the area and of the community truly began when the state of Georgia sponsored the construction of a railroad from Savannah, Georgia to Chattanooga, Tennessee, a line that ran through the future metropolis. The construction of the railroad brought workers, managers, and other settlers, along with the railroad itself and hotels, inns, and country stores. The community, founded in 1837, numbered only in the dozens in the early 1840s when Dickens toured Richmond. Since one of the proposed railroads was to end in the midst of the community, the town was known as Terminus.¹⁶

Development quickened. The small town had had no churches, until a small log cabin, dedicated for worship, was erected in 1845. In the same year a small-circulation weekly newspaper, *The Democrat*, began publishing and the town opened a school. A sawmill began operating, as did a coffin builder. One resident, N. A. McLendon, described the appearance of the community in the late 1840s: "a small country village in the heart of an almost impenetrable wilderness, surrounded by huge forest trees and thick undergrowth." Nevertheless, the railroad brought business and residents and the

¹⁶ Thomas H. Martin, *Atlanta and its Builders: A Comprehensive History of the Gate City of the South*, vol. 1 (Atlanta: Century Memorial Publishing Company, 1902), 2-3; The Pioneer Citizens' Society of Atlanta, *Pioneer Citizens' History of Atlanta, 1833-1902* (Atlanta: Pioneer Citizens' Society of Atlanta, 1902), 14-18.

town's transportation facilities attracted nearby farmers, who increasingly traveled to Marthasville to sell their cotton. In 1847, the town's name was changed to Atlanta, and in 1848, the community held its first elections for mayor and town council.¹⁷

In 1850, Atlanta's population hit roughly 2,500—Richmond's was 16 times that by then—and urban development, spurred by local boosters, continued throughout the decade. As the population steadily increased, the town built more streets, and more people bought lots, erected homes, and established businesses as more railroads and trains passed through the area. Residents opened a carriage manufacturer, a furniture store, a tin-ware emporium, a leather tanner, and a machine shop. A cooper, hatter, and book-binder opened their doors. By the late 1850s, one Atlantan rolled cigars, another distilled whiskey, and still another brewed beer. Though they had difficulty raising capital, industrialists founded a rolling mill in 1858. The city installed gas lamps along several streets and maintained roads' surfaces. Numerous companies and individuals published newspapers. A bank opened. The city hosted state-wide fairs. By the beginning of the Civil War, Atlanta was a rapidly-developing community, if not a large or important one.¹⁸

The Civil War left its mark on Atlanta more famously than it did on any other American community. At the time of the war, the city's population closed in on 11,000. The town, primarily a railroad junction, served as a supply depot for the Confederate war effort while also housing several industries. Atlanta's destruction is what is remembered, however. In 1864, General William Tecumseh Sherman and the Union

¹⁷ Pioneer Citizens' Society, 17, 22-3, 25-6, 218.

¹⁸ Pioneer Citizens' Society, 115-9.

Army captured Atlanta. In November, the Union army famously burned the city before departing, destroying hundreds of homes, railroad shops, depots, churches, a female college, factories, and foundries. Only 400 of Atlanta's 4,500 buildings survived. The town had been virtually wiped off the map.¹⁹

After the war, Atlantans quickly rebuilt their community. Residents began returning in the fall of 1864 and flooded back by the spring of 1865. Soon new wood and brick structures lined the streets. By the late 1860s, Atlanta's merchants were expanding their businesses at a pace unseen in antebellum days. By 1870, the population had risen to nearly 22,000. The construction of elegant and spacious hotels like the Kimball House in 1871 attracted merchants from across the country. The decline of the old system of selling cotton, dominated by factors, benefited Atlanta as its position as a railroad hub allowed it to dominate the cotton market as its railroad network expanded across the region. In 1868, the state of Georgia moved its capital to Atlanta.²⁰

Atlanta in the 1880s was—from the perspective of its booster politicians and businessmen—a booming, bustling, rapidly-expanding town of nearly forty thousand—almost double the population of 1870 and quadruple that of 1860. It was now the 49th largest city in the United States—by the end of the decade the population would approach 90,000 and Atlanta would become the 42nd largest city in America. Politically, a mayor, city council, and aldermen governed this New South boomtown.

¹⁹ Atlanta City Council and Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, *Hand Book of the City of Atlanta: A Comprehensive Review of the City's Commercial, Industrial, and Residential Conditions* (Atlanta: Southern Industrial Publishing Company, 1898), 5; Pioneer Citizens' Society, 71; Dennis Joseph Pfennig, "Evan and Clark Howell of the 'Atlanta Constitution': The Partnership (1889-1897)" (PhD diss., University of Georgia, 1975), 19.

²⁰ Russell, 117-122.

Atlanta, the Gate City as it was known, contained a waterworks, several colleges for men and women (for whites and blacks), a streetcar system, companies of hacks for hire, several commodity markets, theaters, and opera houses.²¹ Several suburbs, among them Reynoldsville, Red Row, Miles City, West End, Edgewood, and Kirkwood surrounded the community. Five major railways (more were being built) went in and out of the city, connecting Atlanta to the agricultural regions of the South and commercial centers of the North.²²

Economically, the city was booming—when compared with much of the South—though, as in Richmond, the panic of 1873 and years of depression slowed its postwar surge. During the depression, several banks failed, hundreds of firms went bankrupt, and property values stagnated. Nevertheless, in 1880 the city contained 196 manufacturing establishments—capitalized, almost entirely, by locals—with almost 4,000 workers. Indeed, while, industrially, Atlanta ranked seventy-ninth among American cities, it was ahead of every southern city except New Orleans, Nashville, and Richmond—the *Constitution* called Atlanta the "Philadelphia of the South." Numerous industries survived or prospered, particularly building construction. The city profited

²¹ Atlanta was called the "gate city," because in the late 1850s, railroad officials marked the completion of a railroad line from the Mississippi to Charleston. To inaugurate the line, promoters carried a barrel of water (mimicking canal celebrations) from Memphis to Charleston, stopping along the way in Atlanta. They then traveled on to Charleston, bringing Atlanta's mayor with them. At a banquet in Charleston, the promoters, being so impressed with Atlanta, dubbed it the "gate city" of the South in a toast. Russell, 24.

²² James Michael Russell, *Atlanta, 1847-1890: City Building in the Old South and the New* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1988), 117; Howard N. Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 8; Russell, *Atlanta*, 14-15; Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 6; Don H. Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1860-1910* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 33; Russell, 121-22; "Atlanta," *Atlanta Constitution*, Oct. 5, 1881; Pfennig, 20.

from the postbellum transformation of the cotton trade.²³ While the city lacked waterpower, a traditional source of kinetic energy for manufacturing and one that Richmond celebrated, businessmen operated a chemical works, rolling mill, flouring mills, candy, cracker, furniture, watch and ice factories, patent medicine manufactures, breweries, railroad shops, and a cotton mill. Commercial businesses predominated. Prominent dry good merchants, including M. Rich & Brother, Keely Company, Chamberlin, Johnson, DuBose & Company, and John Ryan's Sons sold their wares along Whitehall Street.²⁴

In the 1880s, Atlanta was full of promoters who, like their brothers in Richmond, proclaimed—with enthusiasm bordering on fanaticism—that Atlanta would soon rise to become a center of manufacturing not merely in the South, but in the nation. They lived in affluent suburbs like West End and along Washington Street, Capitol Avenue, and Pryor and Peachtree streets. Ostensibly they rallied around the common good, instead of individual aggrandizement, believing that a larger city was a better city, that they and their community had the power to shape their destiny, and that romantic notions about the past and quaint small-scale hamlets were the stuff of losers. Boosters went about organizing local expositions and founding business organizations and social clubs, such as the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, the Board of Trade, the Atlanta Mechanics' Institute, the Atlanta Agricultural and Industrial Association, the German Manufacturing

²³ Rabinowitz, in Brownell and Goldfield, 97.

²⁴ Howard Rabinowitz notes that the city had ten banks in 1872, when it had had none in 1865; Howard N. Rabinowitz, "Southern Urban Development, 1860-1900" in *The City in Southern History*, ed. Blaine A. Brownell and David R. Goldfield (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1977), 96; Rabinowitz, in Brownell and Goldfield, 97; "Atlanta," *Atlanta Constitution*, Oct. 5, 1881; Russell, 128-30, 131; Wade H. Wright, *History of the Georgia Power Company, 1855-1956* (Atlanta: Georgia Power Company, 1957), 18; "Atlanta," *Constitution*, Oct. 5, 1881.

Association, the Piedmont Driving Club, the Capital City Club, the Commercial Club, and the Atlanta Manufacturers' Organization. The Atlanta Manufacturers' Association, in particular, which many industrialists and merchants joined, became an effective lobbying organization, pressuring the city government to enact industry-friendly ordinances. The chamber brought together businessmen to discuss and dictate the city's future internal improvements, transportation systems, manufactures, taxes, real estate, etc. Additionally, capitalists and politicians, boosters all, had succeeded in recent years in acquiring a United States customs house, public funds for subsidizing new railroad lines, and attracting state fairs. In 1881, the city hosted a Cotton Exposition. As in Richmond, there were strong ties between the political, industrial, and mercantile interests within the city.²⁵

Regardless of the trumpeting of boosters, however, the realities of the postbellum South and of a depression meant that the quality of life in Atlanta in the early 1880s depended entirely upon one's wealth, status, and race. "The capitalist zeal that impressed outsiders," Tera W. Hunter writes, "offered few benefits to the average person."²⁶ After the war, the city elite's emphasis on commerce meant that freedpeople remained impoverished, often in substandard housing. Only 3 percent of blacks worked white-collar jobs, and more than 80 percent of all unskilled workers in the city were black. The industrial and commercial boom largely failed to benefit poor whites, with much of the profits drifting back to the wealthy. Because of the depression and high municipal debt in the 1870s, municipal services declined. Property values stagnated.

²⁵ Wright, 17; Doyle, 136-37; Russell, 130-32; Doyle, 136, 139.

²⁶ Hunter, 22.

In 1880, the city had only paved three miles of its streets—all of them downtown—benefiting, if anyone, successful white merchants. The outpouring of thousands of individual privies permeated many of the unpaved streets. The city had less than twenty miles of water pipes, leaving great swaths of the community at risk of fire damage. Businessmen and city leaders designed gas and water mains to serve rich whites, while blacks and the poor lacked potable water for drinking and bathing, and would until the second decade of the twentieth century. Street railways serviced affluent neighborhoods and suburbs.²⁷ Atlanta's spectacular growth was raising the quality of life for all Atlantans, but not equally.

By the 1880s, Richmond and Atlanta were growing cities, emerging from wartime destruction and defeat. Both cities were among the top 5 largest southern cities by population and were among only three cities (the other was Nashville) to see appreciable urban growth in the decade and a half following Appomattox.²⁸ City leaders could look back at each city's history and see indications that they were both industrializing, if slowly, that they both played important roles in regional and national trade, if minor ones, and that each city was steadily expanding in terms of population and urban area. Yet by the standards set by the North, by financial and industrial behemoths like Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, and, especially New York, Atlanta and Richmond were minnows and their boosters knew it. Indeed, despite the undeniable

²⁷ Hunter, 22-35. Though Atlanta's black men and women were not, William Harris argues, worse off than those in other American cities, North and South. William Harris, "Work and the Family in Black Atlanta, 1880," *Journal of Social History* 9, no. 3 (1976); Russell, 156; Hunter, 44, 45, 46; The city would be alerted of its risk of fire damage when the water system proved insufficient to stop the burning of the Kimball House in 1883; Rabinowitz, in Brownell and Goldfield, 104; Rabinowitz, in Brownell and Goldfield, 104; "Atlanta," *Atlanta Constitution*, Oct. 5, 1881.

²⁸ In 1880, the top five in order of population were New Orleans, Richmond, Charleston, Nashville, and Atlanta. Russell, 117.

growth each city experienced in the years following the Civil War, the rate of urban growth was steady from antebellum to postbellum years—these cities were not dramatically developing like some northern and western metropolises (like Chicago). What is more, large and powerful economic, political, and cultural forces were sweeping the South and carrying Atlanta and Richmond with them. Leaders in each city, like southern leaders more generally, sensed that their cities and their region were falling behind.²⁹

Progress

From the perspective of boosters, the postbellum South needed sustained growth and development to match that of the North and West. In 1889, Henry Grady, booster extraordinaire and editor of the *Atlanta Constitution* spoke to the Bay State Club of Boston. In his speech, Grady included a story about a southern funeral, one that instantly articulated the perspective of southern city builders and boosters in the 1880s:

I attended a funeral once in Pickens county in my State. . . . They buried him in the midst of a marble quarry: they cut through solid marble to make his grave; and yet a little tombstone they put above him was from Vermont. They buried him in the heart of a pine forest, and yet the pine coffin was imported from Cincinnati. They buried him within touch of an iron mine, and yet the nails in his coffin and the iron in the shovel that dug his grave were imported from Pittsburgh. They buried him by the side of the best sheep-grazing country on the earth, and yet the wool in the coffin bands and the coffin bands themselves were brought from the North. The South didn't furnish a thing on earth for that funeral but the corpse and the hole in the ground.³⁰

Though Grady was making a rhetorical point, his story reflected truth. The specific observation may have been that the South did not produce goods while having ample

²⁹ Christopher Silver, *Twentieth-Century Richmond: Planning, Politics, and Race* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 19.

³⁰ Joel Chandler Harris, ed., *Life of Henry W. Grady Including His Writings and Speeches* (New York: Cassell Publishing Company, 1890), 204-205.

resources, but the larger message suggested to his listeners that to live in the postbellum South was to live in a place both perceptually and actually backward. Fellow boosters in Atlanta and Richmond understood.

Indeed, by almost any measure, the South—both its urban and rural areas—was a place of injustice, political corruption, institutionalized racism, and poverty when compared to the North. By 1880, southern politicians had gutted education—though there was little to gut—and with it, any investment in human capital, persistent nutritional and parasitic afflictions like pellagra and hookworm infected thousands, and legal and extralegal measures on the part of whites restrained southern blacks from becoming citizens. For southern urban boosters, however, it was the economic and aesthetic elements of the region's visage that mattered, not the racial or political inequalities. On that score, the message behind Henry Grady's rhetorical funeral was largely accurate.³¹

The economy, the indicator southern boosters looked to for signs of regional advancement, stubbornly refused to improve *dramatically* in the decades following the war—for most of the late nineteenth century, the regional economy—like that of Atlanta and Richmond—oscillated between periods of boom and bust. The South, despite booster dreams, was primarily an agricultural economy, reaping or extracting raw materials from the earth and, in turn, buying expensive manufactured goods from the North or elsewhere. Staple crop agriculture, dominated by King Cotton, stubbornly continued its reign despite the cotton market's postbellum stagnation. There appeared little opportunity for anyone, white or black, to advance or prosper in the southern

³¹ Morton Rothstein, "The New South and the International Economy," *Agricultural History* 57, no. 4 (Oct., 1983): 385-402.

countryside. Poverty was rampant. Southern cities had some industrial facilities, but most were undercapitalized or modest operations; there were few heavy industries like forges. What industrial expansion there was relied upon northern investment—indeed, much of the capital invested in the region came from northern backers. The southern labor market was alienated from the national economy, limiting growth—the southern states were, in Gavin Wright's words, "a low-wage region in a high-wage country."³² Historians and social scientists have even likened the American South's relationship with the rest of the United States to that of poor, culturally-stagnant agricultural areas in Germany, Russia, and Eastern Europe—lands of peasants and serfs—and their more prosperous, politically-powerful, and sophisticated metropoles.³²

Indeed, the rural nature of the South presented an important challenge to boosters' vision of urban development. The postbellum South was a rural region within a rural nation—the section defined rural. The South had fewer cities and they were uniformly smaller than those in other parts of the country. Southern cities were also more like their rural counterparts. Physically, cities like Atlanta and Richmond, in their architecture and landscape, had more of a country atmosphere than northern metropolises. Much of the relationship between city and country in the South was based on the old plantation-style economy—southern cities had been designed in

³² Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 147-149; Arthur Schlesinger, *The Rise of the City, 1878-1898* (New York: Macmillan, 1933), 2-3; Joseph J. Persky, *The Burden of Dependency: Colonial Themes in Southern Economic Thought* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 97-104; Woodward, 157-8; David F. Good, "Uneven Development in the Nineteenth Century: A Comparison of the Habsburg Empire and the United States," *Journal of Economic History* 46, no. 1 (Mar., 1986): 137-51; Gavin Wright, "Cotton Competition and the Post-Bellum Recovery of the American South," *Journal of Economic History* 34 (Sept., 1974): 610-35; Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 7-12; Raymond H. Pulley, *Old Virginia Restored: An Interpretation of the Progressive Impulse, 1870-1930* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1968), 25.

service to that system—though even that important role was changing in the decades after Appomattox. The nature of staple agriculture and the expansion of southern railroad systems allowed for small towns and country merchants to localize the agricultural market, steering it away from cities. Between 1865 and 1880, urbanization lagged in the region; the percentage of southerners living in cities rose from 9.6 percent to 12.2 percent, while in the Northeast, in 1880, 50.8 percent of the population lived in urban areas.³³

Lastly, but significantly, southerners held a pervasive sense, bordering on a psychological trauma, that they were inferior to the North. The war had much to do with that. The South had been soundly beaten, as had its soldiers and its cities. The southern landscape itself, especially in Virginia and Georgia, had been a casualty of the Civil War as once-fertile fields and once-prosperous factories were laid barren. Atlanta and Richmond has been gutted. Reconstruction had further embarrassed and enraged white southerners. Then there was the northern and western experience in the years since the war. While southern per capita income declined, northern and western incomes rose. Northerners and Westerners were patenting inventions and investing earnings in industry. Northern and Western literacy rates were well above those in southern states. New York, incomparable to almost any American city, let alone southern ones, handled more and more of the nation's financial transactions while the vast majority of imports and exports moving in and out of the United States passed through that city's docks. It was also the largest manufacturing center in the country

³³ David Goldfield argues that "urbanization came to a virtual halt" in the South from 1865-1880. David Goldfield, *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers: Southern City and Region, 1607-1980* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 86; Carl N. Degler, *Place over Time: The Continuity of Southern Distinctiveness* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 113-126

and still growing. Chicago, one of the largest cities in the country, saw growth that southern cities, including burgeoning Atlanta, could only have dreamed. Chicago's population, already over 400,000 in 1875, quadrupled over the next fifteen years, nearing 2 million by 1890. It led the nation in numerous industries and its industrial workers skyrocketed in numbers. This was growth, development, and its accoutrements unseen below the Mason-Dixon Line. Faced with a staggering economy, war-time desolation, lingering bitterness against their foe, and unshakable evidence that that former enemy was outpacing them, southern urban leaders wanted more for their communities and themselves. Looking back over their cities' histories, they believed that the South, the urban South at least, could be improved.³⁴

As Richmond and Atlanta evidenced, the southern city did offer hope to boosters eager to find some. Across the United States in this period, modern cities with modern infrastructure were emerging, as were distinctive urban cultures—even in the South. In southern towns and cities, business-minded people strove for profits, development, and change. A middle class, first appearing in the antebellum era, enlarged and played a significant role in postbellum urban life and culture and emphatically supported industrialization and urbanization. Many boosters believed that with just a little northern capital—there was little capital within the section—able-minded southerners could transform their communities. Nevertheless, each city competed against others within the region for factories, railroads, and investment. The task for these cities was difficult; the southern economy was not alluring, especially compared with that of the rapidly-

³⁴ David R. Goldfield, "The Urban South: A Regional Framework," *American Historical Review* 86, no. 5 (Dec., 1981), 1013-6; Richard Franklin Bensel, *The Political Economy of American Industrialization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 20, 77-79; Jeffrey S. Adler, *First in Violence, Deepest in Dirt: Homicide in Chicago, 1875-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 9-10.

developing West. As historian of the American South, Lawrence Larsen writes, southern leaders "had little to sell potential outside investors except dreams."³⁵

Yet southern leaders held on to those dreams. Central to the hopes of the booster class was the idea that the South of the 1880s was a "New South," a different South. Southern writers had been using the term since the late 1860s to describe what they hoped the region would become after its defeat in the Civil War: states freed from the plantation system of agriculture, farms freed from staple crops and farmers of debt peonage, cities growing and booming, industries churning and producing goods for markets. This "New South" would be inexorably tied to the financial and industrial centers of the North. If achieved, boosters declared, the goals of the New South would mean tangible progress for the region. To the boosterish city leaders of Atlanta and Richmond, who understood the position the South was in within the nation and who knew their own cities' antebellum and postbellum records of growth and development, the call for a "New South" was powerful.³⁶

Atlanta's Henry Grady, though disheartened by the South's status, nonetheless articulated the hope and agenda many urban boosters shared. Grady, born in 1850, worked as a newspaper reporter and editor. In 1880, he acquired a quarter share in the *Constitution* and was the managing editor there for the next decade, before his death in 1889. Grady, becoming famous when he delivered a speech courting northern

³⁵ Numerous historians including Lawrence Larsen, Jonathan Daniel Wells, and Don Doyle argue that urban life and culture was changing in this period. Lawrence H. Larsen, *The Urban South: A History* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 69, 73, 78; Jonathan Daniel Wells, *The Origins of the Southern Middle Class, 1800-1861* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2004), 231-33; Rothstein, 394.

³⁶ Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 55-80; Paul M. Gaston, *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 3-11; Woodward, 153.

industrialists and capital in New York in 1886, regularly praised the "New South." In numerous speeches he gave in the 1880s, Grady offered vague details about the section's improvements in banking, agriculture, and industry since the Civil War, but primarily spoke of the future. He did not offer concrete plans of how precisely the South would rise up to become the dominant, economically-powerful, and opulent region he spoke of, but he invited hope and investors. In 1886, in the speech that brought him nationwide fame, he declared that the South was "stirred with the breadth of a new life." "She is thrilling," Grady boomed, "with the consciousness of growing power and prosperity." Speaking in Texas in 1887, Grady went further, articulating his vision of a prosperous South in some unknown, but near future. "I see a South," he envisioned, "the home of fifty millions of people, who rise up every day to call from blessed cities, vast hives of industry and thrift." Not everyone was included in this booster path to prosperity. Part and parcel of Grady's vision of a "New South" was a white-dominated South, a South in which industrious white men lead the region into its bright future. Development, prosperity, and regional progress were *the* priorities. He concluded:

As I look the vision grows, the splendor deepens, the horizon falls back, the skies open their everlasting gates, and the glory of the Almighty God streams through as He looks down on His people who have given themselves unto Him and leads them from one triumph to another until they have reached a glory unspeaking, and the whirling stars, as in their courses through Arcturus they run to the milky way, shall not look down on a better people or happier land.

The booster vaguely called for industrial and urban expansion and modernization, without details or a clear agenda. What is more, Grady's words hardly reflected reality or any reasonable projections of the region's near future, but for those who shared his

views, goals, and dreams, they evinced a worldview and vocabulary common to urban boosters in Virginia and Georgia.³⁷

The *Atlanta Constitution* touted the "New South" and pushed for regional and municipal progress. Declaring that since the conclusion of the war, the South had been "engaged in experiments," the editors of the *Constitution* called for continued development and projected optimism. Citing everything from population statistics to word-of-mouth, the *Constitution* was confident, as its editor Grady was, that Atlanta would soon be opulent. The South had, the paper reported, "a wealth of opportunities for enterprise and industry which is unparalleled." The *Southern World*, published in Atlanta, pointing to the success of southern towns, believed that innumerable communities were growing rapidly throughout the section, demonstrating the South's potential as a manufacturing center. In Atlanta, newspapers pointed to any indication of growth—as small as the construction of a house and the words of industrialists or as large as new factories—to demonstrate how the South was changing (Figure 1-1).³⁸

Richmond's editors similarly trumpeted a "New South" and promoted optimism about the section's future. The *Richmond State* declared that no one could deny the existence of a New South. The editor continued, arguing that while the people who lived in the New South might be the same as those who lived in the Old, "in respect to mining, manufacturing, and other industrial development there is a New South."

³⁷ Grady's "New South" platform also had much to say about race relations in the postbellum South, but white boosters views and plans for African Americans will detailed in upcoming chapters. It nevertheless bears repeating that city boosters were not concerned with raising the quality of life for their city's least successful. Henry Grady, *The New South: Writings and Speeches of Henry Grady*, ed. by Mills Lane (Savannah: Beehive Press, 1971), 11, 40-41; Pfennig, 8-10, 14-17.

³⁸ "Atlanta," *Constitution*, Oct. 5, 1881; "The Great South," *Constitution*, Feb. 4, 1887; "The Work Shop," *Southern World*, Sept. 1, 1882.

Industry was improving, changing. The Richmond *Dispatch*, declared, without evidence or statistics, that the city "shows an exceedingly gratifying condition of business." The daily predicted that the City on the James would experience a boom shortly. As in Atlanta, editors in Richmond talked up their city and predicted great things, even if there was not much to applaud and few indicators of mammoth growth.³⁹

Richmond's chamber of commerce reflected the feelings of merchants, industrialists, and politicians (in many cases these were the same people) in both Atlanta and Richmond in regards to its city's future. In its annual reports in the early- and mid-1880s, the chamber acknowledged the economic difficulties Richmond faced, but still exuded boundless optimism, citing the city's manufacturing sector, tobacco trade, railroad connections, and population growth. In 1884, as the city suffered through a depression, the president of the chamber, R. E. Blankenship, believed that the city would undoubtedly see a windfall of profits within the next year. One year later, the chamber's annual report, offering little evidence of municipal progress over the previous year, continued to project optimism:

With these buildings [public buildings, not yet built], with a nice up-town hotel (which is not to be doubted will before long be forthcoming), with her smoothly paved and well graded streets and ample parks, with her healthful location and system of drainage and central position for business enterprise, it seems quite certain that Richmond has a pleasing future before her.

To believe in the promise of the "New South" was to have faith.⁴⁰

Accordingly, Richmond and Atlanta, their politicians, business leaders, and boosters faced tremendous challenges, but did so believing in the "New South." What

³⁹ "South—Old and New," *State*, Feb. 8, 1888; "Richmond's Business Outlook," *Dispatch*, Mar. 17, 1885.

⁴⁰ Richmond Chamber of Commerce, 1884,4-18; Richmond Chamber of Commerce, 1885, 4.

forms of progress did Atlantans and Richmonders turn to in the 1880s to make this dreamed of "New South" a reality? Overwhelmingly, to these leaders, progress appeared in the form of urban, industrial, and transportation expansion and growth—the forms of progress to which antebellum boosters would have turned. Richmond and Atlanta's boosters pursued numerous avenues of urban development during the 1880s—if they believed a municipal improvement or industrial asset would help their cities achieve progress, invite northern capital, or tangibly improve their city's visage, they championed it.

Aesthetics mattered to boosters' vision of the future. As a consequence, urban politicians focused on street maintenance, since most streets in most cities remained unpaved and those that were paved—given the state of asphalt technologies—required constant attention. Horse and animal excrement, along with their carcasses, further harassed efforts to keep streets passable, clean, and sanitary. In Atlanta in particular, the *Constitution*, with Grady at the helm, condemned the city's streets, many of which were mired with mud. The streets were, the paper declared, "a disgrace." Along some boulevards, the paper noted, people could not cross the thoroughfare without stepping in knee-deep mud. Along other streets, horse- or mule-drawn wagons were oftentimes unable to move at all. The streets were so bad that a candidate for mayor in 1883 campaigned pledging to pave every street in the Gate City. The president of the Richmond chamber of commerce declared in the same year that that city's water department had failed to clean both sewers and gutters, causing "distressing sickness." The costs of paving were worth every penny, the editor of the Richmond *Dispatch* maintained, since good roads raised land prices and improved city property. Both cities

prioritized street improvements—curbing, sidewalks, gutters, sewers, sprinkling, and paving—in their annual budgets in the 1880s. Boosters understood that streets reflected the status of their city.⁴¹

Others street-related problems included lighting, public safety, and water. As the use of gas, gasoline, and oil lamps expanded in both cities, the newspapers and city councils called for more and better light across each cityscape.⁴² Richmond's chamber of commerce, along with many municipal residents, constantly complained about the poor quality of light the city's gas department provided. Artificial light was tied directly to urban progress. In Atlanta, because of the city's growth and increased risk of fire, which gas lamps only heightened, the city organized a paid fire department in 1882. Institutional growth, like police and fire departments, was understood to reflect the growth and development of cities. In addition, the quality and abundance of fresh water was a priority as the 1880s unfolded. The city governments of both Atlanta and Richmond debated and planned the development and expansion of city water works.⁴³

Probably the most discussed facet of urban progress, on the part of newspapers, chambers of commerce, and city councils, was industrial expansion. Newspapers in

⁴¹ Franklin M. Garrett, *Atlanta and Environs: A Chronicle of Its People and Events*, vol. II (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1954), 53; Richmond Chamber of Commerce, 17; "Good Roads," *Dispatch*, Apr. 12, 1885.

⁴² There is a large literature on southern urban development (and, more broadly, urban development) in the late-nineteenth century. See Platt, *City Building in the New South*; Ayers, *The Promise of the New South*; Don H. Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South*; David Goldfield, *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers*; Lawrence H. Larsen, *The Urban South*. Joel A. Tarr and Gabriel Dupuy, eds., *Technology and the Rise of the Networked City in Europe and America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988); Leo F. Schnore, ed., *The New Urban History: Quantitative Explorations by American Historians* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975). Sam B. Warner, Jr., *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston 1870-1900* (New York: Atheneum, 1976).

⁴³ Garrett, 15-17; "City Water," *Dispatch*, Sept. 16, 1886; "Sewage and Pure Water," *Dispatch*, Sept. 26, 1886.

both cities continually championed industrial development, industrial education, and lauded any new factory or business. The Richmond *Dispatch*, for example, pointed to successful cotton mills within the region and repeatedly argued for the establishment of an industrial school. With such a facility, the paper contended, Richmond would be able to compete with New England and the North in the manufacture of fabrics. If the South continued on its course, building industries and attracting manufacturers, capital would eagerly come south, the editor predicted. "[U]nbounded prosperity," he trumpeted, "is assured."⁴⁴

Besides street maintenance, municipal upgrades, and factories, boosters championed two other engines of progress: transportation and urban and suburban property development. Boosters believed that more railroads would profit their cities and that real estate sales would yield high returns for local investors. Newspapers in both cities frequently editorialized on the ever-expanding values of property in and around Atlanta and Richmond. Land companies, whose purpose was to buy large tracts of land in presumed suburbs circling each community and then sell it off by lots at a high profit, sprung up in the decade. By the late 1880s, newspapers like Atlanta's *Constitution* declared, proudly, that "the era of home building has begun in earnest." Paralleling the growth of suburbs and urban expansion more broadly, politicians and boosters pushed for expanded mass transit systems. In the 1880s, in both Atlanta and Richmond, the city governments continually approved street railway companies' applications for expanded routes. Newspaper editors championed the expansion of

⁴⁴ "Southern Cotton-Mills," *Dispatch*, Apr. 5, 1885; "Southern Progress," *Dispatch*, May 24, 1885; "Southern Industrial Progress," *Dispatch*, July 25, 1885.

railroad lines in and out of each city and predicted huge windfalls that would accompany an improved rail network.⁴⁵

Railroads, however, were one aspect of urban development that boosters realized were yielding progressively-fewer benefits. By the 1880s, railroads were no longer the once-imagined drivers of southern economic redemption. Civic and business leaders in Richmond and Atlanta had championed the continued construction of railroad lines in the 1860s and 1870s. As the railroad industry in the South changed in the years following the section's defeat, however—as predominantly northern owners steered these lines for their profit and not for the good of southern urban development—boosters no longer conceptualized railroads as agents of municipal progress. Richmonders and Atlantans still wanted railways, but like canals, they were no longer seen as the tools of southern cities and boosters. In Richmond, the chamber of commerce reported that railroads and their restructured rates were actually hurting the city's iron industry in the mid-1880s. There was no local control over the iron horse.⁴⁶

C. Vann Woodward wrote that by the 1880s, "the South had come to believe . . . in Progress," that the changes coming to the region were not imposed from the North, but instigated by southerners.⁴⁷ So was the spirit and situation among white city leaders in Atlanta and Richmond. During the 1880s, progress was on the minds and lips of Richmond and Atlanta's booster class. Municipal boosters believed that railroads, factories, expansive suburbs, improved gas lighting, paved roads, sewer systems, and

⁴⁵ "More Home Building," *Constitution*, Apr. 7, 1889.

⁴⁶ Larsen, 83-87; Pulley, 26; Hoffman, 33-35; Russell, 132-136; Richmond Chamber of Commerce, 1885, 6.

⁴⁷ C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1951), 124.

renovated curbs, sidewalks, and other city improvements—development that made their communities more hospitable to outside investment—would help transform their cities into models of northern-style progress. Consequently, municipal leaders encouraged or paid for their development and installation.

Yet, despite these efforts, the economies of Atlanta and Richmond continued to struggle. While the cities were undeniably growing and developing, the sought-for dramatic improvements that Henry Grady and others spoke of were not forthcoming—these cities were not Chicagos. The booster initiatives that one could well have seen in antebellum days were insufficient. Southern cities might be able to afford sidewalks and street improvements, but they could not magically conjure up factories, northern capital, and economic prosperity. Boosters continued to champion these improvements, but they looked for more to help their growing cities.

Simultaneously, another instrument of municipal advancement appeared. In the midst of this economic uncertainty and race for "New South" city-building, entrepreneurs in the North were demonstrating the commercial and municipal potential of a new and extremely different kind of power source. A power source that, its inventors, investors, and admirers' promised, would change everything.

The Promise of Electricity

Electricity, with its incredibly-bright lights and its mysteriously nature, was not the most prominent or heralded form of industrial, urban, and transportation progress. As described, southern urban leaders pointed to many areas of urban life that needed improvement. In addition, electricity was not like cotton factories, railroads, or sewer systems—electricity was new, ethereal, and untested. Practical, commercially-feasible electricity was still emerging as a power source as the 1880s evolved. Indeed, Henry

Grady, the iconic New South spokesman, never once mentioned the promise of electricity and its applications in the southern United States in all of his speeches.

Development that featured factories, railroads, or streets was, on the other hand, decades old and, in the minds of local officials, a proven instrument of growth.

Yet, to those who monitored the progress of Thomas Edison, George Westinghouse, Charles Van Depoele, Charles Brush, and other inventors and entrepreneurs—and municipal leaders throughout the United States were watching—it was clear that electricity offered something factories, railroads, and other industrial and urban improvements could not. Electricity had the potential to transform every facet of material life. This new power source offered new possibilities for the conversion of power into light, heat, and motion and had the potential—given its wide range of applications and its ability to be transmitted over long distances—to alter industrial production and labor output. Electricity also offered a dramatic flair. What captured people's imaginations, investor's assets, and municipal leader's drawing boards was not just the projected savings and efficiency of electric lights versus gas and oil lamps, though that certainly played a role, but the spectacles they delivered, the sheer magnificence they displayed, and the sensational responses electric lights produced.

Electric power had been in development for centuries. In the 1600s, an English doctor, William Gilbert, chief physician to Queen Elizabeth I, experimented with static electricity—replicating experiments the ancient Greeks had conducted millennia earlier—learning electric current could be generated by rubbing hard materials like glass and amber. In the 1700s, English, French, German, and Italian inventors and scientists learned much about electricity's conductivity and experimented with electric current and

rudimentary batteries. Benjamin Franklin, colonial inventor and entrepreneur, discovered that lightning was merely a massive bolt of electricity—a significant step forward in peoples' understandings of the mysterious force. Interest expanded and experimentation accelerated. In the nineteenth century, experimental electric lights appeared. Sir Humphry Davy, an Englishman, performed a sensational demonstration in front of a crowd in 1809. Davy held up two large charcoal sticks, and with the help of a giant battery, created a bright electric arc between them. Development of a commercially-feasible electric light stalled for the next several decades as the profitable electric telegraph appeared and as gas lighting predominated. In the 1870s, however, across the globe, inventors patented numerous fixtures that made Davy's flashy experiments a practical utility.⁴⁸

Arc lights, the first form of commercially-feasible electric light and the direct descendant of Davy's charcoal rods, initially caught Americans' attention. Arc lights were not like incandescent bulbs or modern fluorescents. Arc lights crackled, sparked, hummed, hissed, emitted intense bluish-white light, and were painful to look at up close.⁴⁹ Accordingly, officials had to place them high above the streets on elevated towers. The light was so bright that it actually changed how humans used their eyes. Under all forms of artificial illumination preceding electric light, humans used their retinal rods—this is how the eye sees in the dark. Under electric light (produced by arc lamps),

⁴⁸ Jill Jonnes, *Empires of Light: Edison, Tesla, Westinghouse, and the Race to Electrify the World* (New York: Random House, 2003), 17-49.

⁴⁹ An "arc" light is made when an arc of electricity crosses between two carbon electrodes. The temperature of the arc can rise above a thousand degrees Celsius. They are still used today, but only for high intensity illumination along some highways and in industrial settings. They are gradually being replaced by xenon arc lamps, which are commonly used in automobile headlights, movie projectors, and search lights.

however, people use their retinal cones—how the eye sees in *daylight*. Humans, Americans, and boosterish southerner leaders had never seen anything like it.⁵⁰

In 1880, inventor turned entrepreneur Charles Brush installed four arc lamps on top of a courthouse in Wabash, Indiana. When he turned the lights on one rainy night in March, the people of Wabash stood watching in silent awe at the mysterious and intensely bright illumination. Arc lamps, produced and installed by the Brush Electric Company, soon appeared in cities such as Cleveland, Denver, Minneapolis, Detroit, and San Jose. Peoples' initial reactions were uniformly similar to those in Wabash. Yet, while the work of Brush and others demonstrated the promise of electricity, Thomas Edison's work at Menlo Park, New Jersey and New York City, in particular, attracted world-wide attention and prompted city leaders everywhere to inquire after electric power and light.⁵¹

In 1882, Edison opened the first central power facility, Pearl Street Station in New York. The public's fascination with Edison had begun with his work with the incandescent electric bulb years earlier in his laboratory at Menlo Park. There Edison and his gaggle of inventors both improved on existing electric illuminants and also put on electric light displays for the public. Thousands came from New York and elsewhere to watch his demonstrations and newspapers widely reported his exploits. Edison quickly became the most famous inventor in the United States. Edison's goal, however, was to introduce electric power supply to cities, industries, and the public at large. Edison chose 257 Pearl Street, in New York's financial district, as the place to

⁵⁰ Jane Brox, *Brilliant: The Evolution of Artificial Light* (New York: Mariner Books, 2010), 104.

⁵¹ Jane Brox, *Brilliant: The Evolution of Artificial Light* (New York: Mariner, 2010), 105-6.

demonstrate the great potential of electric light and power. When Edison turned the system on in 1882, electric power supplied light to offices, restaurants, and shops; wires supplied light to 1,626 lamps. People were astounded by how steady the light was, how little heat it produced, and how it improved upon existing gas lighting. By October 1883, 11,555 lamps were connected to the Pearl Street Station. Edison's financial backers and the *New York Times* electrified their buildings. Additionally, Edison engineers built a similar central station in London, England. Soon entrepreneurs across Europe would apply for Edison franchises. Electric light and power quickly, though methodically, expanded across the globe. Edison himself predicted that electric light would practically supplant all other forms of artificial illumination by 1890.⁵²

Southern boosters, like boosters, investors, and entrepreneurs across the globe, quickly realized electricity's potential. The introduction of electric technologies in Atlanta and Richmond was initially small-scale, experimental, and dominated by individual entrepreneurs—as in the North. Electric lights first appeared in Atlanta in October 1880. The Gate City Guards, a local militia, hosted a fair for the public. During the fair, five or six electric lights, shining varying yet brilliant beams on the crowd, were displayed. In the same month, a circus visited the city featuring an electric light and motor. Electric lights first appeared in Richmond in 1881. Andrew Pizzini, a confectioner and city councilman scarred by a Union saber during the Civil War, set up a small electric dynamo (generator) in a vacant lot next to his home. He installed arc lamps across Main and Broad streets for the upcoming Yorktown Centennial. When Richmonders

⁵² Thomas P. Hughes, *Networks of Power: Electrification in Western Society, 1880-1930* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 18-46; Trachtenberg, 68; Harold C. Passer, *The Electrical Manufacturers: A Study in Competition, Entrepreneurship, Technical Change, and Economic Growth, 1875-1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 84-92; Jonnes, 62-85; *Constitution*, Jan. 10, 1884, 4.

delighted in the lights, Pizzini quickly applied for and was given a Brush Electric franchise. Richmond's city government approved plans to electrify several streets. In the same year, the Atlanta city government authorized a similar company to begin stringing wires and installing lamps along that city's streets. The electric light—usually the first public electric technological system debuted—caught boosters' attention.⁵³

The success of Pearl Street Station and the successes of Pizzini and others in Atlanta and Richmond further demonstrated the promise of electricity in urban environments to southern urban leaders. In the Gate City of the South and the City on the James, boosterish newspaper editors quickly called for the electrification of their communities. Electricity sparked invigorated dreams of a New South. The *Constitution*, under Grady, was an unquestionable advocate. "The electric light will soon pour its rays down on Atlanta," the editor proclaimed in early 1882. "The manifest advantages of the light need scarcely be mentioned," the daily continued, "especially if it comes into at all general use, as it should." "It can hardly fail," the paper envisioned, "to be of great benefit to the city." Electric light was easier to use than gas, the paper advertised: "lights by simply turning a screw, and is estimated to cost about one third the cost of gas." The editor later predicted that every "house will have it, and the streets and byways will be rendered safe and pleasant." One organizer of Atlanta's Brush Electric franchise, when interviewed by a *Constitution* reporter, tallied off innumerable benefits of the new light source. "It is, in fact," he explained to the eager reporter, "artificial daylight, and when its pure radiance has supplanted the sickly glare of gas in our shops,

⁵³ Carlton Norris McKenney, "Andrew Pizzini, Jr.: Electric Street Light-Railway Promoter," *Richmond Quarterly* 3, no. 4 (Spring 1981), 39-40; "The Electric Light," *State*, Feb. 3, 1886; Garrett, 10; "The Great Circus Senation," *Sunny South*, Sept. 18, 1880; Common Council Records, Vol. 21, p. 410, in Richmond City Records, Richmond Public Library.

offices and drawing-rooms, we shall virtually be living in a longer day." He went on to declare that both Atlanta's laborers (working in well-lit factories) and investors (profiting from ample returns) would benefit from electricity. Newspapers in both cities offered numerous columns to entrepreneurs so they could explain the many benefits of the new technology to their readers. While, in the initial phase of electrification, both politicians and editors showed some concern about electricity's cost and safety, the avalanche of positive press overwhelmed any criticism. "Progress has its perils," the *Constitution* declared in response to a lineman's death in New York, "but we must have progress all the same." As the dailies' editors proffered their admiration for the technology, city councilmen in both cities made contracts with private companies for electric street lights.⁵⁴

As electricity slowly appeared across Atlanta and Richmond, boosterish newspaper editors trumpeted the great promise it held for southern cities. When electric lights began appearing along streets and in merchant shops in late 1883, the *Constitution* bemoaned how, for years, Atlanta had been poorly illuminated at night, especially in comparison to other cities its size within the United States. With electric street lights, however, "the bands of darkness will be broken, and a flood tide of beautiful white light will be emitted from the handsome brass lamps now being distributed over the city." "A well lighted city," the editor boomed, "is a pride to any section." The light, the paper suggested, would improve both the level of light at night while also beautifying the city's streets. In addition, the editor of the *Constitution*

⁵⁴ In the case of Richmond, they gave a contract to one of their own, Pizzini. Common Council Records, 680; *Constitution*, Mar. 22, 1882, 4; "250 Electric Lights," *Constitution*, Apr. 23, 1884; "The Brilliant Blaze," *Constitution*, Aug. 23, 1882; "The Electric Light," *Constitution*, Feb. 18, 1886; "The Perils of Progress," *Constitution*, Oct. 17, 1889.

repeatedly pushed for local investors to support the infant electric companies. Once incandescents arrived in the mid-1880s, the editor championed them. Incandescent electric light "for residences, stores, churches, hotels and buildings" was, the staff of the *Constitution* wrote, "so agreeable, beautiful, safe, convenient and necessary as to almost require that a city with the enterprise and needs of Atlanta, shall have it forthwith." Electrification was part and parcel, then, of New South city-building.⁵⁵

In 1887, when electric traction promised the introduction of electric trolleys in Richmond—when practically no other city on the earth had them—the Richmond *State* declared the public would "hail the enterprise with delight" and that the electrified transportation system would inspire "a most desirable sort of boom" for the city. The paper's editors even suggested that a successful electric trolley line might inspire the construction of an electric-trolley manufacturing facility in Richmond, supplying the innovative technology for cities across the country. When the electric line was completed in the late 1880s, the newspaper proudly and accurately hailed it and Richmond as leading the world in electric propulsion. The line was, the paper described, an advertisement for Richmond. But electricity had even more potential. Writing of the need for reliable and abundant street light, especially electric light, the daily articulated electricity's place within the booster campaign for urban improvement. "Well-graded and well-paved streets," the editor wrote, "a good sewerage system, an efficient fire department, good schools, and an abundance of light are demanded by the people of every wide-awake city." The editor argued repeatedly, over the course of years, that dark streets did not impress visitors—meaning northern investors.

⁵⁵ "The Electric Light To-Night," *Constitution*, Dec. 14, 1883; "United States Electric Light Company," *Constitution*, May 25, 1884; "The Electric Light in Atlanta," *Constitution*, June 1, 1884.

"Richmond must," he boomed, "change her provincial ways." Electric lights were the key. By 1886, when the city installed electric lights, the editors of the *State* declared the lights to be incomprehensibly beautiful. From the perspective of the *State*, electric technologies, in the earliest years of their introduction and use, were undeniably helping Richmond boosters in their pursuit of progress.⁵⁶

Quickly, the cities' initial uses of the mysterious power source were advertised. In 1881, during an exposition in Atlanta, hotels advertised their use of electric lights and bells and other "modern improvements." The *Constitution*, in describing Atlanta during the exposition, carefully noted that the city's cotton mill featured electric light. In 1888, a booster pamphlet for Richmond, published by the chamber of commerce, labeled Richmond the "Electric City." While dutifully describing the city's other industrial and municipal progress, it proudly noted its ascent up the electric pyramid. Richmond was, the bulletin trumpeted and boasted, the "place for the first experiments in and the first invention of electric-heating apparatuses." Citing the use of electricity to power streetcars, to drive manufacturing machines, to provide lighting, and to convey goods on and off ships in the port, the chamber celebrated the City on the James' use of the emerging technological system. Not just New York or other northern towns made innovative advances in electric technologies, the chamber insinuated. Boosters let it be known to potential investors that Atlanta and Richmond were pursuing electrification.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ By pursuing progress, I am referring to their pursuit of northern capital, industrial development, and urban growth in competition with other American cities. "Street-Cars and Electricity," *State*, June 3, 1887; "Street Cars," *State*, June 27, 1887; "More and Better Light," *State*, Jan. 12, 1888; "Light," *State*, Jan. 26, 1886.

⁵⁷ W. D. Chesterman, *Richmond, VA: An Outline of its Attractions and Industries* (Richmond: WM. Ellis Jones, 1888), 4, in Manuscripts, Virginia Historical Society; "Exposition Hotel," *Constitution*, Aug. 21, 1881; "Atlanta," *Constitution*, Oct. 5, 1881.

By the late 1880s, politicians in both cities came out in strong support of the experimental technological systems, further demonstrating their place within the "New South" program of progressive city-building. For example, while at a banquet hosted by the Georgia Electric Light Company, Mayor Pro Tem Charles Collier of Atlanta said that he was more than pleased with the electric lights. "It," he trumpeted, "beats the gas to death." Aldermen Haas and Howell, councilmen Boynton, Woodward, Nelson, Morris, Rice, and Amorous, and the captain of the fire department—every elected and appointed official present—eagerly concurred. Woodward, chairman of the city's committee on light, future mayor, and ardent advocate of electrification, whistled happily and sang an old tune, belting out: "Oh, I'm so glad." Similar dinners with similarly-impressed city councilmen took place in Richmond. In the City on the James, the city council, disregarding the appearance of corruption, granted Andrew Pizzini, their fellow city councilman who had initially introduced electric lights years earlier, "permission to erect and maintain poles and wires in the City of Richmond." By the late 1880s, the mayor of Richmond, J. Taylor Ellyson, was so impressed with electric light that he pleaded with the council to construct a municipally-owned electric plant. Booster politicians had found an instrument of progress, much like how their predecessors had once turned to canals and railroads, a tool they could control through contracts, ordinances, and perhaps public ownership and one that they believed would be a symbol of southern urban progress.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ "Let there be Light," *Constitution*, Nov. 9, 1888; City Council Records, 680-81; J. Taylor Ellyson, *Annual Message and Accompanying Documents of the Mayor of Richmond to the City Council for the Fiscal Year Ending December 31st, 1888* (Richmond: Everett Waddey, 1889), 9, in Richmond City Records, Richmond Public Library.

By the mid-to-late 1880s, entrepreneurs, backed by city government, in both Atlanta and Richmond made plans to introduce electric light and trolleys to southern streets. As will be described in subsequent chapters, these efforts of individual entrepreneurs and city governments were not without setbacks and the electrification of Atlanta and Richmond was, during the 1880s, far from certain. Many politicians and residents opposed it and the technological system remained controversial, costly, and unproven. Nevertheless, the boosters of the City on the James and the Gate City of the South, like their contemporaries across the western world, understood that electric technologies, whatever their manifold risks, were worth pursuing. Electricity was not the only, or even the most important, facet of the booster program for municipal progress, but by the mid-1880s it was at the vanguard. Boosters, especially newspaper editors like Grady, lobbied for electrification, ginned up investors and support for local and franchise electric companies, and advertised the use of electricity in Atlanta and Richmond, thereby advertising the progress their cities were pursuing. By the late 1880s, as electric lights and streetcars appeared across these cities, boosters knew that had found a potent tool—its actual usefulness not yet proven—for southern urban growth and development.

Summary

Atlanta and Richmond, like many American communities, had been expanding and encouraging industrial and economic development for decades. Yet the economic realities of the postbellum South prompted dramatic calls for progress. Both the City on the James and the Gate City of the South had seen whole blocks, factories, churches, and innumerable homes destroyed in the last years of the war. Unlike most American and even Southern cities, the Civil War had ravaged their cityscapes, business districts,

and industrial capacity. Afterwards, their role in the regional economy and their position within the nation changed as the section stagnated politically, culturally, and economically. Both the economies of these cities and of the South suffered through moderate booms and severe busts. Each city expanded, both in terms of manufacturing base, commercial activity, urban area, and population, but when compared to northern and western cities, their expansion was unremarkable. Boosters in Atlanta and Richmond, businessmen, politicians, community leaders, worked tirelessly in the 1880s—mostly writing and speaking—to make the dreams of a "New South" a reality. They believed that with the right tools, the right municipal improvements, and the right city atmosphere, northern capital and, with it, prosperity would undoubtedly come.

Accordingly, the introduction of electricity on a global stage came at a key moment in southern history, and in the histories of Atlanta and Richmond. Electricity emerged as a mysterious technology, complete with both amazingly-bright sparks and eerily-invisible current that had the potential to power factories, streetcars, street lights—practically anything that required energy. This force, which so dramatically and publicly illuminated small towns like Wabash, Indiana and large swaths of New York City, immediately attracted southern boosters. To most lay observers, electricity was a magical power source that prompted dreams of innumerable applications—a perfect complement to dreams of a "New South." For boosters who were passionate about charging their cities' economies, desirous of a "New South," and champions of anything that could help their communities achieve progress, electricity was a logical addition to any program of city-building. Electricity represented much more than sidewalks,

gutters, and factories. This technological system held the promise, if dreamlike, of completely reworking the southern urban landscape. Therefore, as future chapters will demonstrate in detail, southern urban boosters pursued electrification wholeheartedly, wiring their cities and planning its use, all the while trying to transform their once-shattered cities in beaming metropolises.

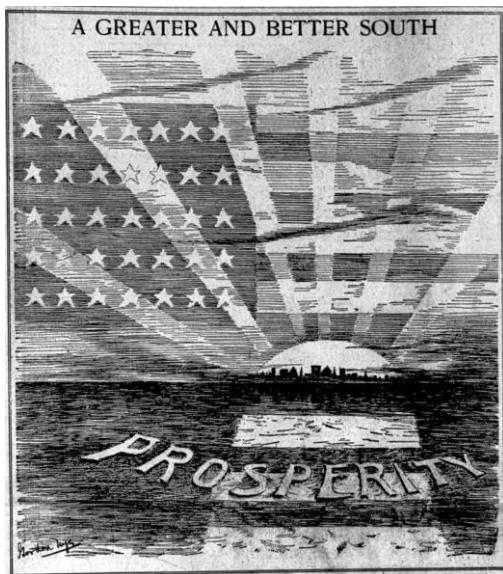


Figure 2-1. Boosterish editorial cartoons like this one from the *Atlanta Georgian* were common (Source: *Atlanta Georgian*, Oct. 30, 1907.)

CHAPTER 3

DRIVING ELECTRIFICATION: STREET LIGHT IN ATLANTA, 1880-1890

If you walked the streets of Atlanta at dusk in 1895, you would have encountered an electrified cityscape. Along the downtown streets, arc lights, crackling and occasionally shooting out sparks, loomed above passersby on elevated towers providing bright light at key intersections. As one walked away from the downtown and towards the residential districts, incandescent street lamps provided a soft glow. Occasionally one would see an old weak gas lamp, seemingly out of place, flickering and dim. Electrified trolleys would pass you, glowing with light, fully loaded with passengers. Though most residents of the Gate City enjoyed the electric services, these modern marvels were not universally popular. Residents and city officials constantly complained about the lights and the trolley service. Yet, these emerging technological systems dominated the night.

If you journeyed to Atlanta just ten years earlier, in 1885, the city would have looked and felt entirely different. Gasoline, oil, and gas lamps lined the streets, emitting vapors, smoke, strong smells, and comparatively dim light. If you visited on a night when the moon was out, there would be no artificial light at all—the city would not light the lamps since they could not compete with or improve upon the lunar illumination, such was their weakness. Travelers could climb aboard mule- or horse-cars, as they slowly traversed the city. Both the light and the streetcar services were popular, though. In 1885, only ten years before electricity dominated, animal power and combustion drove urban illumination and transportation, as they had since ancient times. People were used to their services. As early as 1890, though, electricity—power derived not

from animals or the burning of fuel, but from charged electrons and atoms—was the energy of choice for the street light and mass transportation systems.

The electrification of cities like Atlanta was, for practical reasons, surprising. Atlanta did not have to switch over to electricity in the 1880s. In fact, the reasons offered by some city officials against electrification were more numerous and convincing than those in favor of it. Gas and gasoline lights functioned, people made use of them, they were popular, and the system was expanding. Gas and gasoline were also relatively cheap. In terms of practicality, electricity appeared to many city councilmen and citizens as a waste of money and resources. It was new and unproven. City leaders could have waited as private shops and residences electrified, as companies harnessed its motive power, and as electric rates dropped. Though a company would erect the poles, string the wires, and generate the electricity required for the new system, the city would have to pay for it and attend to any problems it caused. It was true, Atlantans knew, that electric lights were brighter, that gas was occasionally dangerous, and that it required a lot of manpower to light and extinguish the lamps each night and day, but why, critics of electrification asked, experiment with an emerging and expensive technology when the existing system served its municipal purpose (of providing light at major intersections and along major thoroughfares)?

Moreover, given what we know about the post-Reconstruction South, the electrification of southern cities should have been different. The post-Reconstruction South was impoverished, largely agricultural, and, by important cultural and societal standards, lagging behind the American North and West. The urban South should not have been, by this reckoning, erecting electric grids as quickly as other American and

European metropolises.¹ Additionally, from the perspective of boosterish politicians, businessmen, and newspaper editors the effort was enormously expensive for an impoverished region and a political class allergic to taxes and spending.

This chapter argues that the transition from gas light to electric light was a battle of technological systems and of the political dimensions of technology in post-Reconstruction Atlanta. The conflict between competing technological systems was not—as we might imagine—a process of individuals or businesses choosing their preference, of companies winning public approval, or of society accepting a new technology. Unlike the electrification of streetcars, which private companies determined, the city's elected leaders—driven by dreams of a New South—decided the issue of light. The competition between gas and electric light in Atlanta demonstrates not only the process by which technological systems were adopted or discarded in post-Reconstruction cities but also the vision of the future municipal leaders held. Southern boosters did not adopt electric light, as most people in the twenty-first century might expect, because the technology was obviously superior to gas light (though it had clear benefits). To Atlanta's municipal leaders, it was more than just a new way of lighting streets. As the 1880s unfolded across the country, electric light rapidly became an implicit requirement for urban development and a symbol of the times. For those urban boosters following the gospel of progress—a philosophy arguing that the South had to rise quickly to match the status of the North—electrification was a necessity. Accordingly, while on the level of practicality, electrification was questionable—as its

¹ In fact, Atlanta was, compared to the urban United States as a whole, electrifying its street lights quickly. In 1890, for example, less than twenty percent of urban street lights were electric in the United States. Peter C. Baldwin, *In the Watches of the Night: Life in the Nocturnal City, 1820-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 158.

critics continually harped—by the philosophy of southern boosters, the electrification of southern cities like Atlanta was necessary.

Following the gospel of progress, Atlanta electrified in a matter of a few years. The path of electrification was not linear—as will be shown, city leaders often found fault with the experimental light and continued to develop gas light. Indeed, supporters of electric light had to overcome longtime political, financial, and personal bonds between the gas company and the city council. As explained above, however, the booster zeal for "progress" made the rapid electrification of southern cities like Atlanta almost inevitable. All across the United States and Europe, cities were switching to electricity in the 1880s. It was becoming the artificial light of choice in the most powerful cities on earth. That Atlanta electrified so quickly, at such a high cost, demonstrates the significance city leaders assigned to the emerging technological system and, perhaps more importantly, to what it represented. Navigating through the realities of southern municipal politics of the period, Atlanta's boosterish city leaders, who wanted to make their city attractive to capital and industry, introduced electricity, deflected powerful defenses of existing technological systems such as gas light, and determined, at least on the level of public service, which technological systems were appropriate to rising southern cities. Indeed, under the supervision of a few dozen men, electric light replaced gas as gas had once toppled privately supplied oil lamps. Many American city leaders in this period adopted electric light because of its practical potential to create more and better light. Atlanta's leaders, on the other hand, were more impressed with the symbolism of installing it.²

² The current historiography suggests that many, if not most, communities adopted electric light because their city leaders understood it to be a practical benefit. Scholars do point out that smaller communities in

Gas: A Municipal Investment

The process of lighting Atlanta had begun before the Civil War. In the early 1850s, as the population crept above 2,500, Atlanta began experimenting with street lighting.³ While other cities in Georgia like Athens, Augusta, Macon, and Savannah had gas works, at first residents of the Gate City independently supplied oil or whale oil to dim lamps downtown. Merchants, prominent residents, or other Atlantans installed lamps at various street corners or above shops and the same individuals bought oil, poured it into the lamps, and ignited the oil when they wanted light. The process was unorganized, haphazard, and required individual investment and effort.⁴

In 1855, with the support of the city council, a Philadelphia engineer, William Henne, designed a coal gas lighting system for the city. Dealing directly with the city council, Henne founded the Atlanta Gas Light Company, built a gas works, laid three miles of pipes, and erected 50 street lamps for the city. The project cost roughly \$50,000 with the city investing \$20,000 as a stockholder (initially owning forty percent of the business). Importantly, the city council granted the company an exclusive franchise to light the city for fifty years. The mayor and Georgia legislature approved. Prominent

the North and West, like Atlanta, chased electric light because of its symbolic power. In addition, most histories of electric light emphasize, at least implicitly, its popular appeal. This chapter demonstrates that in Atlanta, and likely, many Southern and American cities, politicians and business leaders adopted the technology even as residents were pleased with existing lighting technologies. Mark H. Rose, *Cities of Light and Heat: Domesticating Gas and Electricity in Urban America* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 21-38; Harold L. Platt, *City Building in the New South: The Growth of Public Services in Houston, Texas, 1830-1910* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), 93; Joy J. Jackson, *New Orleans in the Gilded Age: Politics and Urban Progress, 1880-1896* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1969), 165-7; Harold L. Platt, *The Electric City: Energy and the Growth of the Chicago Area, 1880-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 15-58; Arthur Schlesinger, *The Rise of the City, 1878-1898* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1933), 98-102; David E. Nye, *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology, 1880-1940* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997), 6.

³ Wright, 1.

⁴ James H. Tate, *Keeper of the Flame: The Story of the Atlanta Gas Light Company, 1856-1985* (Atlanta: The Atlanta Gas Light Company, 1985), 3-4.

Atlantans made investments. From the beginning, then, the Atlanta Gas Light Company (gas company) was an amalgamation of private and public interests.⁵

Like all communities' leaders, Atlanta's wanted street light. Indeed, city governments' desire for and authority over street light (such as it could be generated and maintained) was as old as the city itself. From the seventeenth century forward, technology allowed for progressively better and more consistent light. In the nineteenth century, city governments erected torches, oil lamps, gas lamps, and other devices to protect against criminal activity, to promote longer hours of commerce, and to aid pedestrian travel across sometimes-treacherous streets, to aid police and city officials discharge their duties. To mid-nineteenth century leaders, it was seen as an essential part of properly managing a budding metropolis.⁶

Atlanta's gas company symbolically began operating its street lamps on Christmas Day, 1855. The gas company installed their street lamps throughout the town and quickly found a market for gas light in private homes. The lamps operated half an hour after sunset until one hour before sunrise—though if the moon was out, the relatively dim lamps were, as mentioned earlier, often unused. Citizens, approving of the new illuminant, continually petitioned the city for the construction of more gas street lamps. By the end of 1856, the gas company was paying a dividend to its stockholders and the city government was profiting financially and politically from the popular light source. In 1858, the people of Atlanta elected Julius Hayden, president of the Atlanta Gas Light Company, to the city council. This was, James Tate, historian of the gas

⁵ Tate, 4-5; Wright, 1-3.

⁶ Jane Brox, *Brilliant: The Evolution of Artificial Light* (New York: Mariner Books, 2010), 20-36; Platt, *The Electric City*, 12-13.

company writes, "the beginning of a longtime, close relationship between the Council and the Company."⁷ Public light was then, even before the Civil War, the province of politics and business.

The intimate relationship between business and government did not survive, however. After the war—during which, gas supplies and customers dwindled as prices rose—the city council became more aggressive, investigating as to whether it should have, as a large stockholder, formal power to determine the company's officers.⁸ Nothing came of the investigation, but by the early 1870s, the once cozy relationship between the prosperous company and the municipal government fell apart. In 1872, the city council inquired about chartering a new gas business. By May 1873, as a financial panic struck the nation, the city council, flush with valuable stock, labeled the gas company a monopoly, condemned the prices it charged the city to extend its lines, and announced its intention to sell its entire portfolio of stock—though it did not, ultimately. As the depression deepened and as the gas company suffered, the city, trying to reduce its costs, stopped lighting numerous gas lamps—to the chagrin of the public. The council also compelled the company to reduce its rates in 1878, threatening to stop using its gas. The city reduced the rate again in 1880. In 1882, the city's finance committee recommended the city sell its stock in the company, though the council did

⁷ Tate, 22, 6-9.

⁸ Tate, 10-20. The war itself interrupted service and led to the first rise in rates. After Sherman sacked the city in 1864, an unknown person or group of persons set fire to the gas works, destroying it. The company reorganized itself in 1866 and quickly rebuilt the works and lines, commencing operations again in 1867.

not. In 1883, however, the city sold a thousand shares.⁹ By the early 1880s, then, the managers of the gas company, though heading a popular and profitable business that was a fixture of city services, felt threatened. The city council, on the other hand, dissatisfied with the company, was primed for another public lighting contender to emerge.

Enter Electricity

It was at this point that electricity arrived. In October 1880, a local military company held a fair for northern and southern militias underneath a large tent. The nightly fair featured five or six erratic electric lights—likely the first in Atlanta. In the same month, a circus visited the Gate City, complete with a pair of hippopotami and "the only genuine" electric light. In the same year, the Mayor, James W. English, built a new home equipped with a telephone and electric light, one of the first houses in Atlanta to be wired. These experimental and novelty lights and wires impressed the public.¹⁰

Entrepreneurs took action. In 1881, the city council authorized a local company to erect wooden poles along Atlanta's streets for the purpose of stringing wires for electric lights.¹¹ Nothing came of this company's permit, however—no lights yet lined Atlanta's streets. In 1882, Atlantans, some of whom were future city councilmen, made a serious attempt to organize a franchise of the Brush Electric Company, but failed.¹²

⁹ Tate, 20-24; Volume 9, page 420, Atlanta City Council Minutes, City of Atlanta Records, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center; Atlanta Gas Light Company Records, Box 2, Folder 5; Vol. 9, p. 31, Atlanta City Council Minutes.; Vol. 9, p. 269, Atlanta City Council Minutes.

¹⁰ Garrett, 10, 15; "The Great Circus Sensation," *Sunny South*, Sept. 18, 1880, 4.

¹¹ Tate, 26; Vol. 9, p. 563, Atlanta City Council Minutes.

¹² Wright, 14-15. The Brush Electric Company was a manufacturer of arc lamps, a predecessor to the incandescent bulb; "Light and Labor," *Atlanta Constitution*, Aug. 19, 1882, 1; "The Brilliant Blaze," *Atlanta Constitution*, Aug. 23, 1882, 7.

Though businessmen across the country realized that electric lights were brighter than gas lamps, that electric light would spark fewer fires than gas, and that electric current traveled through easily strung overhead wires—as opposed to expensive underground pipes as was the case with gas—local capital was not yet impressed. Older established investors were not yet prepared to risk their fortunes on this experimental street lighting system.¹³

Nevertheless, numerous entrepreneurs and boosters became convinced of the technology's financial potential and hoped, by establishing an electric light business, that they would help ensure Atlanta did not lag behind other cities. They were young. Among them were some of Atlanta's most prominent individuals, such as W.H. Venable, W.A. Robinson, Martin F. Amorous, A.J. Orme, J.C. McBurney, A.C. Peters, A.E. Thornton, and W.H. Wimberly. Amorous, Orme, Thornton, and Wimberly, for example, were some of the initial organizers of the prestigious Capital City Club, an organization where young and prominent merchants, industrialists, financiers, boosters, exposition enthusiasts, members of the chamber of commerce, and politicians gathered. Many of them would go on to become members of the city council.¹⁴

In late 1883, backed by these youthful elite, the city of Atlanta and the State of Georgia authorized the Georgia Electric Light Company of Atlanta (electric company) to begin operations.¹⁵ In the early years of the company's existence, it relied almost

¹³ Rose, 21; Nye, 30-31.

¹⁴ James C. Bryant, *Capital City Club: The First One Hundred Years, 1883-1983* (Atlanta: Capital City Club, 1991), 3-12. Over the years other members would include H.I. Kimball, Henry Grady, Julius L. Brown son of Georgia's wartime Governor.

¹⁵ The first electric light plant in Atlanta was located at Spring and Marietta streets. "Let us Have Light," *Atlanta Constitution*, Nov. 29, 1883, 7.

entirely on its contract to provide streetlights for the city—by this period, conversely, the gas company profited from numerous individual consumers. The city council gave the electric company permission to erect poles and wires, historian of Georgia Power, Wade H. Wright writes, to ensure that Atlanta would not lag behind other cities.¹⁶ Indeed, the city council's motivation to electrify in the early 1880s was driven by fears of falling behind. "Electricity," historian David Nye writes, "was the sign of Edison's genius, the wonder of the age, the hallmark of progress."¹⁷ It was for an urban booster, an attainable symbol of progress. They had to merely install the wires and fixtures, and flip a switch. Understanding the booster perspective on electric light is crucial to understanding why and how Atlanta's politicians supported electrification.

Boosterish Atlantans feared falling behind because, by the early-to-mid 1880s, electric lights were appearing in cities across the United States and Europe. In the early 1880s, arc lights sold prodigiously in Great Britain—manufacturers could not produce them fast enough.¹⁸ Thomas Edison, famous improver of the incandescent electric light bulb, was so successful that by 1886 he had sold over 300,000 lamps.¹⁹ Investors in France, Germany, Holland, Scandinavia, and towns across North America scrambled to acquire Edison franchises or open their own electric light businesses.²⁰ Electric light stations appeared in towns all over the country, from Pennsylvania to Wyoming.²¹ By 1882, even the Southern cities of Nashville, New Orleans, and Savannah had acquired

¹⁶ Wright, 21-23.

¹⁷ Nye, *Electrifying* 1.

¹⁸ Bowers, 82-83.

¹⁹ Bowers, 109.

²⁰ Bowers, 109-110.

²¹ Nye, *Electrifying*, 3.

electric light.²² For a city like Atlanta, trying to attract visitors, businesses, residents, and investment, electrification seemed necessary to its booster class.

There were also clear benefits to electric light. Electric arc lights, the first to be used along streets, were significantly brighter than gas lamps. Each electric light would have been anywhere from a few dozen to several hundreds of times stronger than each gas lamp. In addition, unlike gas light, which was achieved by combustion and was, coming from a combustible source, a common source of urban fires and explosions, electric lights emitted less heat and were comparatively safer. Electric light did not produce smoke or odors, as gas light did. Electric light was also versatile. Gas lamps required expensive underground pipes to supply the coal gas to the posts, whereas electric lights merely required wires and poles. You could install electric lights almost anywhere quickly and cheaply—expanding the existing gas line infrastructure was costly and time consuming. Incandescent bulbs, once they entered the street lighting market in the mid- to late-1880s, demonstrated the further promise of electric illumination, as these lights burned longer and were gentle on the eyes. These practical benefits, however, paled in comparison to the symbolism of achieving electric illumination—to boosters, *this* was the goal.²³

Choosing an Illuminant

As in many cities, however, the growth of electric lighting in Atlanta was slow and unsteady, due chiefly to the expense and newness of the technology and the vibrancy

²² "In the Southern States," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 21, 1882, 2; "Down in Dixie," *Atlanta Constitution*, Oct. 14, 1881, 1; "Roundabout in Georgia," *Atlanta Constitution*, Feb. 20, 1880.

²³ Nye, 2, 31; Paul W. Keating, *Lamps for a Brighter America: A History of the General Electric Lamp Business* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1954, 16-7).

of gas.²⁴ Initially, the Board of Aldermen refused to contract with the electric company. Those who opposed electrification pointed to Atlanta's financial ties to the gas company. As partial shareholders in that business, many were concerned that electric lights would harm the gas company, accordingly lowering dividends and the steady income the city received each year. By the early 1880s, in fact, the city received nearly \$10,000 per year from its investment in gas.²⁵

Quickly, however, boosterish pro-electric light city councilmen overcame opponents' opposition by securing the gas company's municipal contract. In April 1884, the city contracted with the electric company for 6 lights at \$20 per light per month, provided that any dislodged gas lamps be used elsewhere in the city, thereby protecting the city's investment in gas.²⁶ The arc lamps were monstrously expensive—each gas lamp cost \$1.66 per month, nearly twelve-times less than each electric. Yet, city officials and newspaper reporters noted that Atlanta's government and its residents liked the bright electric light.

In the fall, the municipality ordered 22 more.²⁷ In 1885, as the electric company installed these 22 arc lights, the city discarded 84 gas lamps and installed an electric light in its council chambers.²⁸ The city council was, as a whole, pushing for

²⁴ Indeed, electricity's success was uncertain: "Only in retrospect, with much historical simplification, as well as a leaden, reductive dose of Whiggery, does electric light seem inevitably poised in 1900 to become the dominant twentieth-century illuminant." Chris Otter, *The Victorian Eye: A Political History of Light and Vision in Britain, 1800-1910* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 174; Platt, *The Electric City*, 3.

²⁵ "Lights and Sewers," *Atlanta Constitution*, Oct. 9, 1884, 4.

²⁶ Vol. 9, p. 372, Atlanta City Council Records.

²⁷ Vol. 9, p. 471, Atlanta City Council Records.

²⁸ Vol. 9, p. 600, Atlanta City Council Records.

electrification and for specific reasons. In its published annual report that year, the committee of lamps and gas hoped that their city would not "lag behind other cities of less prominence," by neglecting electric light.²⁹ The committee laid out a plan for electric lights at the center of the city, gas lights radiating beyond them, and gasoline lamps out at the periphery of the city—three complimentary rings of illumination. At the end of that year, however, Mayor George Hillyer reported that the electric light, while adding to the "public comfort," represented a substantial increase in expenses—electric light now cost the city over \$3,000 dollars a year.³⁰ Hillyer suggested removing the lights until the price dropped.³¹ Indeed, in 1886, each electric light cost nearly as much to operate in one night as a gasoline lamp cost in a month.³² The city's lighting expenditures had almost doubled in four years, going from \$10,759.82 in 1881 to \$19,000 in 1885.³³ In the end, however, the city did not remove the lights.

In 1886, the company added only three more arc electric lights. Though the company could rely—given the city council's turn towards electric light—on its government contract, its future was uncertain: personnel changed frequently, inexperienced managers ran the business, and organizers had difficulty raising capital. Many officers worked at reduced salaries. The city government favored electric light and wanted to expand its use—city councilmen were now personally offering resolutions

²⁹ Vol. 9, p. 540, Atlanta City Council Records.

³⁰ This value would be over \$70,000 in 2010 dollars, in terms of real price, but as much as \$3,760,000 in 2010 in terms of the monetary value in relation to the power of the economy. MeasuringWorth, <http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/relativevalue.php>.

³¹ Garrett, 87.

³² Vol. 11, p. 18, Atlanta City Council Minutes.

³³ Volume 9, page 665, Atlanta City Council Minutes; Vol. 10, Jan. 4, 1886, Atlanta City Council Minutes.

for new electric lights—but it still awarded contracts to install electric lights to the lowest bidder. In the mid-1880s, the electric company teetered on the edge of insolvency.³⁴

As the council gradually pressed for electrification, electric lights, either generated privately or supplied by the electric company, slowly appeared across the Gate City. By the late fall of 1881, a private generator supplied power to electric lights on the union railroad depot. In 1882, a local cotton mill installed electric lights. Buildings and residences began installing generators. The home of the *Atlanta Constitution*, prominent newspaper and booster mouthpiece, was the first non-residential building in the city with electric lights. Soon after, the electric company began illuminating the Markham House hotel and De Give's Opera House. Over the summer of 1884, the company exhibited its lights to the rich along Peachtree and Marietta streets. With the approval of the city, the company placed its first electric streetlights in front of several merchant shops, drawing crowds. Additionally, a bank, commercial building, skating rink and hotels, merchant shops, restaurants, and drug stores contracted with the company for light. The company planned to operate the lights all night, every night.³⁵ Yet, this represented a fraction of the businesses and homes that used gas light.

Peoples' initial reactions to electric light were mixed. Across the United States and Europe, many investors, city planners, and consumers doubted electric light could,

³⁴ Tate, 26; Wright, 22, 23; "Let There Be Light," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 3, 1887, 7; Vol. 11, p. 21, Atlanta City Council Minutes.

³⁵"Electric Light," *Atlanta Constitution*, Dec. 13, 1881, 4; "Our Industrial Enterprises," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 11, 1882, 7; Dennis Joseph Pfenning, "Evan and Clark Howell of the *Atlanta Constitution*: The Partnership (1889-1897)" (PhD diss., University of Georgia, 1975), 11; "Phenomenal Success," *Atlanta Constitution*, Oct. 13, 1883, 4; "The New Constitution Building," *Southern World*, July 15, 1884, 328; "To Shine To-Night," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 26, 1884, 8; "Let us Have Light," *Atlanta Constitution*, Nov. 29, 1883, 7.

would, or should replace gas. Indeed, some found the artificial light uninteresting or worse.³⁶ For example, in 1881, as entrepreneurs conspicuously exhibited electric light at the International Exposition of Electricity in Paris, Robert Louis Stevenson published an essay entitled "A plea for gas lamps." He acknowledged the power of electric light: "A sedate electrician somewhere in a back office touches a spring - and behold! from one end to another of the city, from east to west, from the Alexandra to the Crystal Palace, there is light!" Nevertheless, Stevenson, speaking for many, was skeptical. "A new sort of urban star now shines out nightly," he wrote, "horrible, unearthly, obnoxious to the human eye; a lamp for a nightmare! Such a light as this should shine only on murders and public crime, or along the corridors of lunatic asylums, a horror to heighten horror."³⁷ For others, it was not horrifying, just unimpressive. Numerous communities in England, for instance, rejected electricity in favor of existing gas systems.³⁸

Stevenson's reaction was more negative and impassioned than most. Many people reacted to electric light with silent awe. On occasion, when cities or businesses debuted electric light, people flocked to glimpse the technology.³⁹ "Often only nature itself, grandest of all spectacles," Carolyn Marvin writes, "could provide a standard for comparison."⁴⁰ The rich like J. Pierpont Morgan, installed generators in their homes and threw elaborate parties celebrating the novel luxury. When, in December 1880, the

³⁶ Otter, 177. In the South, in Houston, Texas, the public's admiration for electric light turned into disappointment as the city could not afford the light and numerous charter customers cancelled their contracts; Platt, *City Building in the New South*, 93-95.

³⁷ Robert Louis Stevenson, "A Plea for Gas Lamps," *Virginibus Puerisque* (1881).

³⁸ Otter, 177-78.

³⁹ Rose, 1.

⁴⁰ Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communications in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 164.

Brush Electric Light Company illuminated Broadway in Manhattan with its arc lights, holiday shoppers along the streets stopped what they were doing to cheer and clap.⁴¹

In rural Illinois, the introduction of electric light in a small town convinced rural farmers that the community was on fire.⁴²

At first, the citizens of Atlanta neither regarded the electric light with enthusiasm nor the disgust of Stevenson; many were merely curious or indifferent. Many doubted, even up to 1890, that it should replace gas and oil lamps. The editor of the *Sunny South* thought it unlikely they would be popular with young people. The city government too, as previously described, was first unimpressed. Others criticized the venture. The *Atlanta Constitution*, uncertain of the technological system in the early 1880s, vacillated between labeling electric lights "fanciful" and a "great benefit." Curious people from across Georgia wrote into the paper asking simple questions about the history of the electric light. Atlantans watched with interest as linemen climbed to dizzying heights to install overhead wires and as the *Constitution* building glowed with new electric lights. In the early years, many may have reacted with the kind of silent fascination an editor of the *Constitution* did in 1882. Standing under an electric light at a railroad car shed, he became transfixed as moths flew to the light, and then, in his words, "go off into sparks and float away on the people below."⁴³ When the company slung white wires across poles in 1883, people watched with interest. Large crowds reportedly gathered anytime electric lights appeared across the city. Others were fascinated how insects gravitated

⁴¹ Jill Jonnes, *Empires of Light: Edison, Tesla, Westinghouse, and the Race to Electrify the World* (New York: Random House, 2003), 1-11, 74-75.

⁴² Marvin, 164.

⁴³ "City News," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 18, 1882, 7.

toward the glowing orbs. It was unlike anything they had seen before. By 1884, the *Constitution* reported that the "prejudice against the new illuminator" was "rapidly disappearing." To Atlantans in the early 1880s, electricity was a curiosity and a spectacle, not yet—in their minds—a useful utility.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, as the electric company began stringing lights, as affluent individuals and businesses installed generators, and as the public observed in the early 1880s, the gas company rebounded from its troubles of the 1870s. Indeed, though the city continued to reduce the company's rates, gas-based illumination was expanding. In fact, the company was at its pinnacle. As it negotiated a new gas rate of \$23 per lamp per year, the city relit all of its lamps in 1880—the gas company's mains now covered nine miles in circumference. In the same year, the city council freed its committee of lamps and gas to approve new gas posts at its discretion.⁴⁵ In the same year, as it continued to supply private businesses, homes, and public streets, the gas company opened a new market when it introduced gas for cooking. Indeed, gas use was steadily expanding and consumer demand increasing. City residents like Dr. H. H. Tucker of

⁴⁴ Practically the only people who regularly and uniformly praised electric light were local industrialists who used it in their plants. "Wit and Anecdote," *Sunny South*, Jan. 24, 1880, 3; Wright, 15-16; *Atlanta Constitution*, Sept. 20, 1884, 4; *Atlanta Constitution*, March 22, 1882, 4. Telegraph operators, on the other hand, strongly supported the introduction of another electric technology; "Anniversary Ball," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 17, 1883, 9; "Echoes from the People," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 10, 1884, 4; "At a Dizzy Height," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 23, 1884, 8; "The News in the City," *Atlanta Constitution*, Oct. 15, 1884, 1; "Through the City," *Atlanta Constitution*, Dec. 8, 1883, 7; "Sidewalk Sunbeams," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 30, 1884, 7; "Electric Light Bugs," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 30, 1887, 4; *Atlanta Constitution*, Jan. 10, 1884, 4.

⁴⁵ In 1881, the city council and gas company negotiated a new rate of \$20 per light per year; Volume 9, page 421, Atlanta City Council Minutes.

Capital Avenue were consuming thousands of cubic feet of gas per month and would continue to do so well into the 1890s.⁴⁶

By 1883, the gas company was supplying the city with gas for 448 lamps and the city projected an annual increase of 25 to 30 lamps.⁴⁷ The chairman of the Committee of Lamps and Gas reported that, in his opinion, "the city needs more light on its streets and new [gas] lamps should be erected as fast as the means of the city will authorize."⁴⁸ Elected officials remained staunchly in support of gas light. In 1885, even as the city removed 84 gas lamps and installed electric lights, they installed twenty new gas posts.⁴⁹ Individual Atlantans also made use of hundreds of gasoline and oil lamps. People began petitioning the city for electric lights, but even in the late 1880s and early 1890s, numerous Atlantans regularly petitioned the city government for gas lamps on their street corners and the city government continued to oblige. John H. Mecaslin, who had been a director and officer for the gas company, sat on the city council. Electric light may have been the dream of boosters, but gas was the practical illuminant of choice for city residents. In the early to mid-1880s then, the gas and electric street lighting systems complimented each other.⁵⁰

Indeed, entrepreneurs and investors continued to judge gas light as profitable. In 1883, another gas light company proposed to begin operations in the Gate City. With

⁴⁶ Tucker Family Bills, Box 1, Folder 6, Atlanta History Center; Atlanta Gas Light Company Records, Box 2, Folder 5, Atlanta History Center.

⁴⁷ Volume 10, page 283, Atlanta City Council Minutes.

⁴⁸ Volume 10, page 65, Atlanta City Council Minutes.

⁴⁹ Garrett, 87.

⁵⁰ Wright, 19, 15; Tate, 35, 8; "Let there be Light," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 5, 1887, 8; "Let There Be Light," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 3, 1887, 7.

three councilmen directly tied to the existing gas company, the city denied the upstart.⁵¹ By 1884, however, the city granted the rival permission. In supporting the new gas franchise, the chairman of the gas committee expressed the hope that competition between the companies would benefit the consumer.⁵² With a new gas company and the electric light company, the gas company's considerable political power was waning.⁵³

Yet, as mentioned earlier, people continued to petition for gas lamps along city streets. Many petitions were like that of Robert L. Rogers, who in February 1881, asked for gas lamps at the corners of Wheat and Calhoun streets and one on Wheat street between Collins and Calhoun streets.⁵⁴ Between 1880 and 1884, Atlantans asked the city council for at least 36 lamps, with nearly twenty different petitions.⁵⁵ The city erected scores of lamps all over the community, in front of private homes, churches, and businesses. In addition, members of the council pressed for gas and gasoline lamps themselves.⁵⁶ Until the late 1880s, the city continually approved new gas and gasoline lamps with little, if any, debate.

In addition, gasoline and oil lamps, maintained by the city and supplied by various businesses, continued to expand across the Gate City. The city council, though not particularly fond of oil and gasoline light, continued to praise it primarily because

⁵¹ Volume 10, page 153, Atlanta City Council Minutes.

⁵² Volume 10, page 283, Atlanta City Council Minutes.

⁵³ Tate, 25-27; Wright, 1-3.

⁵⁴ Volume 9, page 496, Atlanta City Council Minutes.

⁵⁵ Volumes 9 and 10, Atlanta City Council Minutes.

⁵⁶ Vol. 11, p. 21, Atlanta City Council Minutes.

each oil lamp cost the city, on average, forty-five cents per month.⁵⁷ In March of 1883, the city contracted with the Sun Burner Gasoline Lamp Company for fifty more gasoline lamps.⁵⁸

Both residents and the city complained about the gas and gasoline services. In the early 1880s, the city council reported, citizens complained about shoddy service, filthy poles, and lamps frequently unlit.⁵⁹ The gas committee condemned the oil lamps, stating that they were "very ungainly sights, greasy, black, dirty objects, opaque nearly."⁶⁰ What is more, the gas committee declared, criminals were pretending to be lamplighters plying their trade, as they traveled across Atlanta at night. People became so concerned about imposter lamplighters that, in 1883, the city issued badges to its lamplighters for easy identification.⁶¹ In 1884, the gas committee reported the gasoline company was neither properly lighting nor cleaning its lamps.⁶² By the mid-to-late 1880s, however, the gas company had addressed many of these concerns and, the gas committee reported, the city was pleased with their services.⁶³

Yet, by the mid-to-late 1880s, gas, oil, and gasoline lamps plateaued. By 1886, a disturbing trend—for the gas company—was apparent: the city was denying more and more lamps and approving more and more electric lights. In early 1886, the city had

⁵⁷ Volume 9, page 665, Atlanta City Council Minutes.

⁵⁸ Volume 10, page 136, Atlanta City Council Minutes.

⁵⁹ Volume 10, page 283, Atlanta City Council Minutes.

⁶⁰ Volume 10, page 283, Atlanta City Council Minutes.

⁶¹ Volume 10, page 283, Atlanta City Council Minutes.

⁶² Vol. 10, p. 400, Atlanta City Council Minutes.

⁶³ Vol. 9, p. 540, Atlanta City Council Minutes.

less gas lamps than in 1883.⁶⁴ By 1887, the city was removing gasoline lamps as a matter of policy.⁶⁵ In the next year, the gas company renegotiated with the city and settled on a new rate of \$18 dollars per light per year—a nearly 22% price reduction in 7 years.⁶⁶ The city was still installing gasoline and gas lamps—and dozens of them—but the effect of electric lights was palpable (Table 3-1). Municipal leaders gradually moved from a position of having complimentary or even competing street light systems to one of determining which would dominate public lighting.

The gas and electric utilities struggled for public opinion and patronage. The gas company responded to the growing strength of electric light with ads. Indeed, it advertised itself forcefully, claiming its product was cheap and safe, and making note of its deep connections to the city and to its taxpayers. "The city of Atlanta," one ad declared, "owns one-third of the Atlanta Gas Light Company's stock, and all dividends arising from it go into the pockets of every tax-payer, and by giving us your patronage you add to the city's income, as also to your own." "Remember," the ad concluded, "we give you the best and safest light." Even the boosterish, usually pro-electric-light *Constitution* acknowledged that gas was significantly cheaper than electric light. Since the arrival of electric light, the editor reported, gas had become "wonderfully cheap." "This fact," the booster daily continued, "retards the progress of electric light, especially in private dwellings."⁶⁷ Either the ads, years of service, or quality of the light produced

⁶⁴ Vol. 10, Jan. 4, 1886, Atlanta City Council Minutes.

⁶⁵ Vol. 11, p. 312, Atlanta City Council Minutes; Vol. 11, p. 175, Atlanta City Council Minutes.

⁶⁶ Vol. 11, p. 524, Atlanta City Council Minutes.

⁶⁷ "The Electric Light," *Atlanta Constitution*, Feb. 18, 1886, 4.

seemed to work—Atlantans continued to petition the city council for gas lamps in front of their property.⁶⁸

The electric company, bolstered by its sturdy government contract, began waging a war for consumers as soon as it received its charter. Its officers had declared early on that it was the company's "intention to prepare for a fight against gas." It placed ads in newspapers like the *Constitution*, hoping to attract private contracts. The electric company had help. For example, in 1884, someone calling himself "Electrician" wrote a letter to the *Constitution* blasting gas service. Obviously supportive of electric lighting—his pen name indicating as much—the writer argued that gas was dangerous. "There is not a hospital throughout the length and breadth of the land," Electrician cried, "but will raise its feverish voice against gas and many cot contains sad evidence of its deadly influence." Gas and its dangers were in fact regularly reported in local newspapers. Additionally, more and more, citizens petitioned the city council for the new light source.⁶⁹

Boosters—excluding ones financially connected to the gas companies—defended, praised, and lobbied for electric lights. In particular, the *Constitution*, Atlanta's main booster mouthpiece under Henry Grady, lauded the technology and its connections with the ever-unattainable booster idea of progress. Gas lamps had been in Atlanta for over thirty years, but electric lights, the paper argued in 1889, were already essential. When, in the late 1880s, reports surfaced from across the country that electric lines were killing workers, an editorial appeared defending electricity and

⁶⁸ "The Sale Restricted," *Atlanta Constitution*, Sept. 6, 1887, 8; *Atlanta Constitution*, July 27, 1884, 9.

⁶⁹ "Electric Light," *Constitution*, Jan. 12, 1884; Electrician, "A Defence of Gas," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 25, 1884, 9; "The Electric Light," *Atlanta Constitution*, Feb. 18, 1886, 4.

electric light. "Progress has its perils," the editor cautioned, "but we must have progress all the same." "We are not going to give up our electric improvements," the editor roared, "simply because they kill a few people every year . . . We tolerate their drawbacks because they have become necessities." In years to come, the boosterish daily called for electric lights to illuminate the state capitol building and to safeguard hack drivers from accidents caused by darkness. In addition, as will be described in detail, the paper began calling for electric lights *just* to combat crime.⁷⁰ Even as the booster sheet acknowledged the immense expense of electric light, it simultaneously praised it, declaring it would make gas light "only a memory." While electrification would undoubtedly hurt the local gas company, the editor wrote, it "would nevertheless be of great benefit to the city." As Atlantans began incorporating electric light into their lives, the financial and political strength of the city supported the technological system.⁷¹

The electric lights, wires, and poles altered the landscape of Atlanta—as they did anywhere electricity appeared. Besides accepting the presence of electric light on their streets, city residents had to accept its side effects. When glass globes broke or fell off street poles, sparks fell down onto the streets.⁷² From time to time, linemen accidentally

⁷⁰ The connections between electric light and policing in Atlanta will be detailed in chapter 4.

⁷¹ "The Perils of Progress," *Constitution*, Oct. 17, 1889, 6; "A Light on the Capitol," *Constitution*, Nov. 12, 1890, 4; "Light on the Railroad," *Constitution*, Aug. 17, 1886, 7; "Constitutionals," *Constitution*, Jan. 17, 1886, 6; "The Electric Light," *Constitution*, Feb. 8, 1886, 4; "Lights and Sewers," *Constitution*, Oct. 9, 1884.

⁷² "Pavement Paragraphs," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 27, 1886, 8.

crossed wires giving workers powerful shocks.⁷³ Pedestrians had to learn to avoid frequently downed and death-dealing wires.⁷⁴

In the early years, especially, as city leaders pushed electric light forward while petitions for gas increased, complaints abounded. The service was irregular, especially after storms, leaving sections of Atlanta dark at night for hours.⁷⁵ Theories abounded that electric light was harmful. Electric light, newspapers reported, hurt human eyes.⁷⁶ Society pages declared that electric light would be good for brunettes and bad for blondes.⁷⁷ Some thought it would cause freckles and tanning of the skin.⁷⁸ Residents became concerned about the effects of electric light on plant life. Trees, local arborculturalists declared, needed sleep too. The complaints continued into the late 1880s. A. L. Greene, chairman of the city's gas committee, remarked in 1887 that theoretically each electric light should have been able to displace 7 gas lamps within Atlanta, but that was not the case "with the lights now furnished by the electric light company." The lights were, he said, "miserable" and "poor."⁷⁹

⁷³ "Shocked by Electricity," *Atlanta Constitution*, Jan. 11, 1885, 3.

⁷⁴ "Electric Dangers," *Atlanta Constitution*, Oct. 16, 1890, 4; "An Electric Light Down," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 15, 1889, 5.

⁷⁵ "Sidewalk Notes," *Atlanta Constitution*, No. 12, 1885, 7; "Notes About Town," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 1, 1885, 11; "Through the City," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 1, 1888, 12; "Why is It?," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 2, 1889, 18; "A Terrific Hail Storm," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 25, 1889, 4; ""The Lights Go Out," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 13, 1887, 8; "Through the City," *Atlanta Constitution*, Sept. 19, 1888, 8; "Put Out the Light," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 23, 1887, 7. A fire in the electric machinery building left Atlanta without light in October, 1889. "Electric Light Burned Out," *Atlanta Constitution*, Oct. 24, 1889, 1.

⁷⁶ *Atlanta Constitution*, March 11, 1882, 3.

⁷⁷ "For Ladies Only," *Sunny South*, Nov. 19, 1881, 8.

⁷⁸ "Items of News," *Sunny South*, May 28, 1881, 2.

⁷⁹ "Trees Need Sleep," *Atlanta Constitution*, Oct. 20, 1889, 10; "The Electric Light," *Constitution*, Feb. 6, 1887.

The electric light also caused problems. The wires of the electric company interfered with the operations of the telephone lines.⁸⁰ Citizens bitterly and continually complained about the city trimming and or killing large shade trees to accommodate wires.⁸¹ Authorities blamed the bulbs and wires for fires.⁸² Even the *Constitution* declared that, "death dealing wires" hung over Atlantans' heads.⁸³ To some the light was abhorrent. One reporter called the light "ghastly."⁸⁴ One resident likened the electric hum emanating from the wires to an "infernal buzz-saw."⁸⁵ "I look often upon this big artificially lighted city," one insomniac lamented, "and long for one dark, star lighted night, as a homesick child longs for her mother."⁸⁶

Older residents of the city evaluated the effects of the light and other forms of "progress." Mrs. Willis Carlisle, for example, who had moved to Atlanta when it was still called Terminus, twenty years before the Civil War, thought that something had been lost with the introduction of electric light and other improvements. Peachtree Street, she wrote, covered in asphalt, lined with electric lights, was nothing compared to when the street had been a "quiet little country road" complete with wagon ruts.⁸⁷ For many, electric light was unwelcome.

⁸⁰ "The Telephone Talks," *Atlanta Constitution*, Nov. 2, 1889, 8.

⁸¹ W.P. Patillo, "A Strong Plea for the Shade Trees," *Atlanta Constitution*, Feb. 5, 1890, 9; "The Shade Trees and the Wires," *Atlanta Constitution*, Jan. 9, 1889, 4.

⁸² "Snook's Fire," *Atlanta Constitution*, Jan. 1, 1884, 4.

⁸³ "Dangerous Wires," *Atlanta Constitution*, Nov. 17, 1889, 20.

⁸⁴ "Constitutionals," *Atlanta Constitution*, Dec. 11, 1885, 4.

⁸⁵ "It Certainly Does Hum," *Atlanta Constitution*, Nov. 25, 1888, 18.

⁸⁶ "Walks and Talks," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 10, 1888, 4.

⁸⁷ The Pioneer Citizens' Society of Atlanta, *Pioneer Citizens' History of Atlanta, 1833-1902* (Atlanta: Pioneer Citizens' Society of Atlanta, 1902), 227.

Nevertheless, Atlantans, in particular the wealthy, increasingly enjoyed the service and created uses for electric light that went beyond their original purpose. As electric lights appeared across the city, Atlantans incorporated it into their lives. Numerous residents petitioned the municipal government for electric lights along their streets.⁸⁸ Land company organizers designed new suburbs specifically featuring the technological system.⁸⁹ At least one wealthy couple used electric light to illuminate their wedding in a local Episcopal church.⁹⁰ Rich young women decorated themselves with small electric lights powered by batteries.⁹¹ H.I. Kimball, booster extraordinaire, outfitted his famous hotel with electric lights.⁹² The *Constitution* in the early years described the effects of electric light, expressing in words what many Atlantans must have thought. "The Kimball," a reporter wrote, "reached up into the clouds, and a thousand windows brilliantly lighted, threw their beams out into the darkness." Electric light, the reporter mused, forced darkness out of the streets.⁹³

Though the public's increasing acceptance of the light undoubtedly assisted its municipal ascent, the public's experience with electric light was not as important as what a handful of men—the city councilmen—thought of it and of gas. As the public began investing new meaning in the light, the history of electric lighting in Atlanta took a crucial turn in 1887. In his annual report, the chairman of the gas committee declared the new

⁸⁸ "The Sale Restricted," *Atlanta Constitution*, Sept. 6, 1887, 8.

⁸⁹ "Mr. Kimball's Projected Suburb," *Atlanta Constitution*, Oct. 21, 1883, 8.

⁹⁰ "Thompson-Mims," *Atlanta Constitution*, Aug. 8, 1884, 5.

⁹¹ "From Our Notebook," *Atlanta Constitution*, Dec. 18, 1889, 4.

⁹² "A Blaze of Beauty," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 27, 1888, 15.

⁹³ "A Brilliant Scene," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 1, 1885, 1.

policy of the city. "I had," he wrote, "some doubts or misgivings as to how the electric lights would succeed. The city began using them over a year ago as a mere experiment." Experiment no more, he declared. "[T]hey have worked well and given satisfaction," he wrote, "and as long as the city can afford it, they should be continued." He went on to declare that some were too eager to extend the lights all over the city. That, he wrote, would be "extravagant."⁹⁴ Yet, the council and city had made a key decision.

Just in the nick of time, it turned out. In that year, the electric company notified the city that, without a substantial new contract with the city, their business would fail.⁹⁵ The illumination of private homes, factories, and businesses could not alone drive the company and support its liabilities. The company did not fall into bankruptcy, however. By the end of 1887, electric street lighting surged and the city, eager to spend the capital invested, liquidated its holdings in the gas company. Control of the gas company passed from the South to the North and to the United Gas Improvement Company of Philadelphia. From this point forward, the collusion of interests between the municipality and the gas company ended.⁹⁶ Increasingly, electric light dominated public space.

As the city disposed of its interests in the gas company, its leaders—believing in the practical and symbol significance of electricity—increasingly supported the electric

⁹⁴ Vol. 11, p. 175, Atlanta City Council Minutes.

⁹⁵ A great many electric light and power businesses in many American cities and towns failed in the 1880s. In fact, failure was the norm. What is conspicuous about the Atlanta experience, however, is how this electric company, supported by the city, did not fail. "The Electric Light," *Atlanta Constitution*, Feb. 6, 1887, 12.

⁹⁶ The proceeds from the stock sale went to found the Georgia Institute of Technology, known today as Georgia Tech. Wright 3; Tate, 34.

light and the electric light company. In 1887, the Board of Aldermen ordered forty more electric lights.⁹⁷ In 1888, Martin Amorous—one of the initial investors in the electric company and member of the Capital City Club—won a seat on the city council.⁹⁸ In the same year, the city operated 422 gaslights at \$20 per light, 128 gasoline lights for \$23.95 per light, and 41 electric lights for the incredibly expensive price of \$144 per light.⁹⁹ The Board of Aldermen, at the behest of the city's gas committee, authorized 100 more electric lights and a three-year contract with the electric company.¹⁰⁰ The electric company wined and dined members of the city government at their headquarters, offering them information, fine food, and elaborate demonstrations.¹⁰¹ With the gas company fading and the electric company accruing political power, the council, months later, considered directing the electric company to install 400 new lights across the city. No longer would the electric company teeter financially.¹⁰²

In late 1888, the gas interest in the city attempted, using the last of its political strength, to stifle the growth of electric light. Councilman Mecaslin, who had been in city government for decades and who, as previously mentioned, worked for the gas company, made a case against electric light wrapped in rhetoric about free enterprise, democratic choice, and fiscal responsibility. Speaking to a city council meeting in

⁹⁷ "The Contract Ratified," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 25, 1887, 5.

⁹⁸ Bryant, 4.

⁹⁹ "No More Black List," *Atlanta Constitution*, Feb. 7, 1888, 4. Electric light as an illuminator did have a significant advantage. The 422 gas lamps put off 6,752 candle-power. The 41 electric lights offered 82,000. Eventually, as the technology matured and the scale of electric light installation expanded enormously, it became economical.

¹⁰⁰ "The Aldermanic Board," *Atlanta Constitution*, Feb. 10, 1888, 5.

¹⁰¹ "Let There Be Light," *Atlanta Constitution*, Nov. 9, 1888, 7.

¹⁰² "The City Council," *Atlanta Constitution*, Nov. 20, 1888, 3.

October, he argued that the rapid conversion to electric light was killing competition and that keeping gas and electric light companies vying against one another would result in cheaper prices for the city. He went on to contend that the city council was ignoring its constituents. Atlantans were happy with the present lighting arrangement, he maintained, and electricity was hopelessly expensive. What is more, he argued, the new electric system was not clearly better than the existing gas lighting system. Several days earlier, he pointed out, sections of the city with electric lights had been in complete darkness at night. Blackouts, indeed, were regular. He maintained that the city would be wasting money if it pursued electrification. "It is not necessary," he concluded, "to have it." No one responded to his appeal, and the city council voted to install new electric lights and discard gas lamps.¹⁰³ Boosters had made their choice.

At the same meeting, the electric company proposed to reduce its rates and pay for every gas lamp it replaced if the city government, in return, offered the company a three-year contract and ordered 500 incandescent lights. The city committees on finance and on gas and lamps thought the city should agree to the terms. The committees recommended that the city replace its system of gas lamps across the city with electric lights.¹⁰⁴ "Gas and gasoline," the city's committee of lamps and gas reported in late 1888, "will give way entirely to electric lights. Every street corner will have an electric light."¹⁰⁵ The electric lights, the city council reported, aided both

¹⁰³ "A Loud and Long Talk," *Atlanta Constitution*, Oct. 16, 1888, 3.

¹⁰⁴ "A Loud and Long Talk," *Atlanta Constitution*, Oct. 16, 1888, 3.

¹⁰⁵ Vol. 11, p. 882, Atlanta City Council Minutes.

pedestrians trying to cross city streets and the police and fire departments to discharge their duties.¹⁰⁶

By 1889, the district superintendent of the local telephone company described the growth of electric light, compared to telephone usage, as "immense."¹⁰⁷ In that year, the city council passed numerous ordinances on behalf of the company, making it illegal for others to interfere with their wires or damage their assets—particularly the glass globes.¹⁰⁸ Even though gas remained popular, the city council declared it was "old."¹⁰⁹ In December, the city council formally decided to switch from a gas and gasoline lighting system to an electric one, entering into a new contract with the electric company.¹¹⁰ Meanwhile, the electric company began providing free electric light to the city council chambers and to the police station. In February 1890, the gas committee was renamed the "Committee on Electric Lights, Street Railroads, and other Electrical Street Obstructions," more commonly known as the "electric" committee to city officials. As the 1890s dawned and as the city's lighting budget more than quadrupled since 1880, electric light was, as gas had been since the 1850s, the dominant street lighting system.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ Vol. 12, p. 501-502, Atlanta City Council Minutes.

¹⁰⁷ "The Telephone Talks," *Atlanta Constitution*, Nov. 26, 1889, 8.

¹⁰⁸ "The Electric Wires," *Atlanta Constitution*, Dec. 18, 1889, 6.

¹⁰⁹ "Out and In," *Atlanta Constitution*, Jan. 8, 1889, 2.

¹¹⁰ Garrett, 182-183.

¹¹¹ "The Old Council Meets," *Atlanta Constitution*, Jan. 8, 1889, 1; Rapidly, the city council began installing electric lights. "The Streets to be Renumbered," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 8, 1890, 7; Garrett, 183; Vol. 12, p. 501, Atlanta City Council Minutes.

Indeed, the public use of gas light had been severely curtailed in Atlanta. In a matter of a few years, between 1884 and 1890, gas light had become, almost instantaneously, seemingly antiquated and passé. As the years went by in the "New South," a sole relic and symbol of antebellum light remained in Atlanta—underlining its impotency in the face of electric light. A solitary gas lamppost, holding within it the "eternal flame of the Confederacy," continued to burn in the Gate City well into the twentieth century, a symbol old technology, old patriotism, and outmoded infrastructure.¹¹² Residents still used gas, especially for cooking and heating, but it would never recover its monopoly on street light.¹¹³

Comparative Electrification: Streetcars

A brief comparison of the electrification of illumination to the electrification of transportation demonstrates the speed and passion with which Atlanta's city government pursued electric illumination. Indeed, the electrification of Atlanta's street lights was in sharp contrast to the electrification of its streetcar systems. In the 1880s, entrepreneurs introduced both the electric street light system and electric trolley to Atlanta. While these systems constituted two different services—electric light was a municipally-supplied utility and the trolley was a profit-driven service—both required the support of city government and in both cases the same clique of boosterish city councilmen supported their ventures. In the case of electric trolleys, unlike the electric light system, businessmen gradually electrified trolley lines and modified existing

¹¹² Perry W. Buffington and Kim Underwood, *Archival Atlanta: electric street dummies, the great Stonehenge explosion, nerve tonics, and bovine laws : forgotten facts and well-kept secrets from our city's past* (Atlanta: Peachtree Publishers, 1996), 33-34.

¹¹³ On its success with cooking, see Atlanta City Council and Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, *Handbook of the City of Atlanta* (Atlanta: Southern Industrial Publishing Company, 1898), 60.

technological systems with an eye towards profits and the practicality of electric traction, not towards attaining municipal progress. The city council, though pressing for the electrification of transportation, did not drive mule- and horse-drawn streetcars off the thoroughfares, instead it promoted competition between numerous companies and mass transportation systems. Private electrification was slower, purposeful, and conservative.

When electric street lights appeared across downtown Atlanta in the mid- to late-1880s, Atlanta's street railway companies, driven by animal power, had been operating for decades. There were many competing companies. In 1866, the Atlanta Street Railroad Company and the Atlanta City Street Railway Company began operations. In 1872, the West End and Atlanta Railroad Company started up. Seven years later, the Gate City Street Railroad Company debuted its own mule-drawn cars, followed several years later by steam-driven cars called dummies. In the 1880s, three more companies began providing Atlantans with mass transportation: the Fulton County Street Railroad Company, the Metropolitan Street Railroad Company, and the Atlanta & Edgewood Street Railroad Company. As the city rapidly expanded in the years after the war, entrepreneurs vied for a growing market of mass transit passengers. Much like gas, these mule-, horse-, and steam-drawn streetcars were popular.¹¹⁴

In late 1884, as electricity increasingly appeared in southern towns and cities, the state of Georgia paved the way for the electrification of transportation. It first amended the Atlanta Street Railroad Company's charter. The state would allow the company to

¹¹⁴ City of Atlanta, *Charters of Street Railway Companies and of Corporations Whose Franchises Have Been Acquired by Georgia Railway & Electric Company Also Charters of Georgia Railway & Electric Company, Atlanta Gas Light Company and Gate City Gas Light Company* (Atlanta: Blosser Press, 1906), iii, in Atlanta City Records, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center.

use "any motive power for its cars that its officers may deem desirable and best for its interests," provided that, if the company should choose to use anything other than horses (the only other options would be steam or electricity) the business would first "obtain the consent" of the city. E. C. Peters, manager of the company, stated in the same year that the streetcar business was considering using electricity as a motive power source. In 1887, the legislature similarly granted the Metropolitan Street Railroad Company leave to use electricity, as long as Atlanta approved. Atlanta's city government, accordingly, held the power to approve electrified streetcars replacing the older technology of horse-, mule-, and steam-driven cars. Gradually other companies sought and were granted permission from the state. The companies that did receive charter amendments held off for years before making use of electric power, however.¹¹⁵

By the late 1880s, the street railway companies began asking the city council for formal permission to electrify their lines and the city council, eagerly pursuing the electrification of street lighting, approved. Companies around the world in such diverse places such as Berlin, Germany, Montgomery, Alabama, Richmond, Virginia, and several other towns and cities had already experimented with electric traction, demonstrating its potential, if not its profitability. Atlanta's companies moved to experiment with the power source. In 1889, the mayor, John Glenn, immediately approved the Thomson Houston Electric Company's (a large national electric corporation) erection of electric poles along Highland Avenue on the behalf of the Fulton County Street Railroad Company. A year later, the Atlanta Street Railroad Company requested permission to electrify their lines. The city council approved the companies'

¹¹⁵ City of Atlanta, 7, 14; "Street Car Facilities," *Constitution*, Oct. 2, 1884.

plans. The *Constitution* declared with booster gusto in late 1889, that in "less than six months from now people will be forgetting what a horse car or a dummy looks like." In addition, articles appeared in the booster daily prematurely lamenting the loss of the steady and reliable streetcar mule. Construction, however, was slow and limited—the capital investment required for electric poles, wires, dynamos, and cars was sufficient to instill caution in any profit-seeking enterprise.¹¹⁶

The Edgewood Street Railway Company was the first to actually electrify their cars. By the early summer of 1889, the company was completing its work on the electric line. In late August the company began operating the first electric streetcar service in the state. Yellow-painted streetcars with golden trimming and orange shades, complete with oak seats, rubber steps, and interior electric lights, moved up and down Edgewood Avenue and out to Inman Park. An officer of the Metropolitan Company, which operated steam dummies, was said to remark, "I guess it'll do." In the same year the city council granted the Metropolitan company permission to electrify—though it did not yet electrify its lines. Soon the Fulton County Railroad Company opened the second electric line in the city, providing electric transportation across several prominent thoroughfares. Gradually as 1890 came to a close, the electric street railways in Atlanta petitioned the city council for permission to extend their lines. In the same year, the city granted the West End and Atlanta Railroad Company permission to electrify as it slowly

¹¹⁶ Vol. 12, p. 65, 488-89, Atlanta City Council Minutes; Mayor's Letter Book, 1889-1892, p. 62, Atlanta City Records, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center; Garrett, 191; "The Dummy Must Go," *Constitution*, Nov. 30, 1889.

moved toward introducing the technology. The *Constitution* reported that city residents were eager for expanded electric-car service.¹¹⁷

The experiment of electrification was benefiting these businesses and they were willing to further test its benefits, but several of the streetcar companies in Atlanta did not yet see the benefit of switching from reliable horses, mules, and dummy steam engines. In 1890, for example, the Atlanta Street Railway Company, which now controlled—through a series of buyouts and mergers—all of the horse-car lines within the city, continued to debut new horse-driven lines with "first-class horses." The company was actively considering electrification, but continued to invest in animal power. As Atlantans expressed their preference by choosing to ride the electric lines or the older cars, the system expanded accordingly. As the 1890s dawned, it was not yet clear whether electric trolleys would dominate mass transit in the Gate City. The systems complimented and competed with each other.¹¹⁸

The electrification of Atlanta's street railway system was different from the electrification of its public street lights. The expansion of the electric street railway system was driven by the market and manager's and owner's estimates of profitability and predicted returns on investment. Street car companies considered electrification, investigated its merits, and monitored the successes and failures of other street railway companies in other municipalities for years before choosing to electrify. Several did not or would not for years, sticking with their proven and profitable enterprises. These managers and owners were not concerned with debuting electric trolleys because they

¹¹⁷ "How They Will Run," *Constitution*, June 1, 1889; "The First Car," *Constitution*, Aug. 23, 1889; "In and About Atlanta," *Constitution*, June 4, 1889; "The Electric Street Car Wires," *Constitution*, July 26, 1889; "The City Council," *Constitution*, Apr. 8, 1890.

¹¹⁸ "A New Schedule," *Constitution*, Mar. 19, 1890.

might represent progress and symbolize Atlanta's development—when and if they did pursue electrification, they did so if and when they believed the technology was going to benefit their business. In addition, unlike the change to street illumination—in which one monopoly, electricity, replaced another, gas—changes to street railway services existed within a realm of competition.

There was one similarity between mass transportation and street lighting, however. Atlanta's street lights were contracted to various companies, who illuminated various streets and street lights. The electric light company had a franchise over a majority of the city's streets by 1890, but the gas, gasoline, and oil companies still maintained smaller franchises over several peripheral areas. In an analogous situation, the streetcar companies, of which there were many, had city-approved franchises over various streets. In the case of streetcars, however, the city was content to allow the companies—and technological systems—to compete against one another to improve service. In the case of street lighting, though, the city was eager—chasing the symbolism of electric lighting—to replace a former monopoly over light with a new one. This is precisely what councilman Mecaslin and a minority of the city council hoped to avoid. Accordingly, the electrification of street lights and streetcars followed different paths, with different results for city residents.¹¹⁹

The process by which businessmen introduced electric trolleys to Atlanta demonstrates the speed and passion with which the city government adopted electric lights. Owners and managers of the streetcar companies understood that electricity was costly, controversial, and unproven (like the lighting system, trolleys were prone to

¹¹⁹ It is worth noting that electric streetcars were much more profitable than electric light in this period and would be until the third decade of the twentieth century.

almost constant breakdowns). Furthermore they understood that it had not suddenly made older mass transit systems obsolete. Unlike Atlanta's city council, which, in pursuing electrification, had declared gas, gasoline, and oil lamps to be antiquated and did not wish to maintain competing or complimentary lighting systems, the managers of the streetcar companies proceeded cautiously.

Summary

The comparative electrification of street lights and streetcars tells us much about the process of electrification and the priorities of Atlanta's city government. Besides factories, merchant shops, and the occasional house, the most prominent sites of electrification in the 1880s were indisputably street lights and street railways. In Atlanta as in most Southern and American cities, this is where people were first exposed to electricity as a public service and private utility. In both cases, the city of Atlanta pushed electrification, but in different ways and with different results. In the case of streetcars, the city could only approve or deny each company's request for permission to use electric power. The city, eager to see electric cars on its streets, approved the requests. Yet the pace by which electric streetcars appeared on Atlanta's streets was slow. By 1890, only one year after the initial electric trolley appeared, and five or more years after the state nudged the companies towards electrification, there were few electric lines in the Gate City—horse- and mule-cars would continue to work and profit well into the 1890s. In the case of electric street lighting, however, the action of the city had been similarly swift, but more decisive. By 1890, there were few, if any, gas, gasoline, or oil lamps left in Atlanta and city leaders, at tremendous expense, were expanding the electric light system throughout the city, despite continual problems. Any remaining gas, gasoline, or oil lamps illuminated peripheral areas. Unlike the private

electrification of trolleys, which proceeded cautiously, the electrification of public lighting was rapid and comprehensive.

Even in the 1890s, gas was cheaper than electric light.¹²⁰ While electric lights now appeared on streets, exposition grounds, theaters, merchant shops, and other public spaces and businesses, the technology had thus far largely failed to infiltrate private homes—the largest market.¹²¹ Gas continued to dominate that sphere of illumination. The boosterish city council, whose members saw a promising new technological system that communities were adopting across the Western world, had transformed the landscape of utility service in Atlanta, but electric light could not outbid gas in the marketplace. Electric light represented progress; to many boosters cost was a secondary concern.

The rapid electrification of street lighting in Atlanta in the 1880s tells us much about the state of southern cities in this period and the ideas driving its leaders. Gas light was still popular and profitable in 1890. Atlantans liked gas street lamps and used gas light in their homes. The technology was relatively cheap, efficient, and did its job: it reliably illuminated streets. Electric lights, while very bright, were enormously expensive, rarely functioned properly in the 1880s, and rampant problems lead to regular blackouts throughout the Gate City. Councilman Mecaslin's criticisms were, on the whole, accurate. Yet the city council pursued electric street lights, worrying that if they did not, they would fall behind other municipalities. Gas did not lose out in the

¹²⁰ Though if you calculate the price by candlepower, as opposed to cost per light—as supporters did—electricity was a bargain.

¹²¹ Though, as discussed, a handful of wealthy Atlantans had installed it—the prohibitive costs made it was an elite consumer luxury.

public sphere in Atlanta because it was an inferior technology; it failed because the idea of electricity was irresistible to city leaders.

The story of urban electrification is often understood as one of city leaders adopting electric light because of its practical benefits in their larger pursuit of more and better light to complement late-nineteenth century urban growth and development. The process by which southern cities electrified is largely unexplored. What the story of Atlanta unveils is that for the leaders of this postbellum southern city (as was likely the case in many southern communities) electricity was seen as a practical utility but also, significantly, as a symbol of progress and, accordingly, as a symbolic achievement. For that reason, despite both the rampant problems with the technological system and its tremendous costs, Atlanta's city council introduced it across its thoroughfares.

Table 3-1. Lights in Atlanta by type and by year

PUBLIC LIGHT IN ATLANTA	Gasoline/Oil Lamps	Gas Lamps	Electric Lights	Costs/Appropriations
1881	50 (Oil)	403	-	\$10,759.82
1882	51 (Oil)	426	-	\$11,751.62
1883	53 (Gasoline)	448	-	\$14,500
1884	Unavailable	Unavailable	Unavailable	\$16,000
1885	136 (Gasoline)	407	22	\$19,000
1886	118	437	26	Unknown
1887	126	434	41	\$22,000
1888	Unknown	Unknown	121	\$25,000
1889	-	-	593	\$34,000
1890	-	-	670	\$45,000

CHAPTER 4
WHO CONTROLS THE POWER? THE QUESTION OF MUNICIPAL OWNERSHIP,
RICHMOND 1885-1920

Before the late nineteenth century, the word "power," a noun, had long referred to strength and might, as in a soldier, or more commonly to mastery and lordship, as in legal or governmental authority. With the growing use and significance of electricity, however, the word's meaning changed. By 1898, dictionaries began referring to power as a verb, meaning to supply with energy. The two meanings, however, often converged in the minds of municipal leaders. In the last years of the nineteenth century, city governments across the United States and the American South grappled with the question of how to manage the expansion of electric power throughout their cities. The people and government of Richmond, in particular, debated the merits of owning their own power supply for nearly forty years. By examining the debate over municipal ownership, and the consequences of Richmond's decisions, we are better able to understand the contours of southern urban politics and policy-making at the turn of the twentieth century. In Richmond, after years of heated debate, city leaders determined electric light to be a public service and, in a story repeated across the United States and particularly the urban South, accordingly acquired municipal power over electric power.¹

Supporters of municipal ownership in Richmond tried several times between 1885 and 1909 to convince city leaders to construct a municipal electric plant—a facility that would generate electric power for street lights, parks, and the city's buildings and water works. Champions of municipal ownership changed their arguments as time

¹ This was a debate that occurred across the globe and throughout North America in this period. Christopher Armstrong & H.V. Nelles, *Monopoly's Moment: The Organization and Regulation of Canadian Utilities, 1830-1930* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

progressed, fitting circumstances. In the late 1880s and early 1890s, supporters of a city plant argued that private electric light companies—just then emerging—threatened the municipally-owned gas works and, accordingly, the city's monopoly on illumination. They also argued that the *city* should provide its residents with both gas and electric light service. In the first decade of the twentieth century, as Richmond expanded rapidly—incorporating neighboring communities—and as electricity no longer threatened the municipal gas works, city leaders called for an electric plant as a practical utility to support the extensive water system (to power the city's pumps) and to save money as electric street lighting costs mounted. When the city finally built a plant in 1910, the facility provided cheap electric power, but its construction spurred a rapid, massive, and costly expansion of the municipal electric grid that required city officers to defend it from political attacks. Despite this tremendous expansion, or perhaps because of it, by 1920, city leaders considered Richmond's electric plant a definitive success.

This chapter argues that the debate over public ownership, and Richmond's eventual acquisition of a municipal electric plant, demonstrates that as technological change—paralleling demographic and economic developments—transformed southern urban spaces in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, it also generated sharp political debate and questions of the scope of southern municipal government. Southern municipal leaders were, more than those in other sections, interested in pursuing public ownership of electric systems. As historian of the American South, Edward Ayers has noted, at the turn of the twentieth century the South contained only "11 percent of the nation's urban population," but it "claimed 18 percent of the

municipally owned power stations." Despite this observation, little is known about why and how southern city governments adopted public power in this period.²

As this chapter argues, the episode in Richmond demonstrates that southern urban leaders were wary of private utility companies, yearned to protect existing public monopolies, and were concerned about adopting policies to ensure their city's future. Controlling public power was a means to ensure these goals. The previous chapter has demonstrated that city leaders in Atlanta, pursuing their visions of electric progress, largely determined the success of electric companies in the 1880s. Similarly, in Richmond, city leaders wanted total control over the process of electrification of public spaces. The booster push for electrification and the erection of a grid necessitated a debate over the system's future and the municipality's role in shaping it. Richmond's city leaders, like those in thousands of municipalities across the United States in this period, determined that local government should control this power source (at least when it came to public light). Accordingly, to achieve the postbellum booster dream of filling their city with bright light, municipal officials, not wishing to rely on private companies, sought to control the means of electrification.

Electrification

In the mid-1880s, Richmond was one of the largest cities in the South, with a population of roughly 80,000. It was the tobacco capital of the country, with dozens of

² Many historians examine the municipal ownership of electric utilities through the prism of the expanding electric system nationally. Few examine it from the perspective of individual cities. Historians who do examine cities often focus on the popular examples of Detroit and Cleveland and their mayors who were outspoken advocates of public power. See Sharon Beder, *Power Play: The Fight to Control the World's Electricity* (New York: New Press, 2003); David Schap, *Municipal Ownership in the Electric Utility Industry: A Centennial View* (New York: Praeger, 1986); Richard Rudolph and Scott Ridley, *Power Struggle: The Hundred-Year War over Electricity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986). On southern municipalities pursuing public power, see Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 73; Bureau of the Census, *Central Electric Light and Power Stations, 1902* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1905), 106-107.

factories, a robust jobbing trade, a port on the James River, and beneficiary of numerous railroad lines.³ Streetcars, soon to be electrified, allowed people to commute from new suburbs. Electric lights first appeared in 1881 when Andrew Pizzini, a well-known confectioner and future city council member, strung up lamps on Main and Broad Streets for Richmond's centennial celebration of Cornwallis' surrender in the American Revolution.⁴ The city subsequently granted the Virginia Electric Light Company permission to string lights across Richmond's streets. By 1883, the city council chartered two more companies. A year later, in 1884, the city of Richmond began replacing gas lamps with electric lights, well before Atlanta.⁵ In 1888 the city could boast two hundred 1,200 candle-power arc lamps for street and commercial lighting.⁶ Despite the fast pace of electrification, early on in the process city leaders began debating how the expansion of the electric light system would proceed. As electric lights spread across the city, the city government looked to its experience with gas as guidance for the electrification of street lighting.

Gas Works

In the 1880s, Richmond's publicly-owned gas works was a proud fixture of city services and was a model for a municipally-owned electric plant. As described in the first chapter, Richmond had enjoyed gas service since before the Civil War. The city

³Howard N. Rabinowitz, 107-108.

⁴ William L. Maner, "Virginia Electric and Power's 50 Years," *Commonwealth* (July, 1959): 14; Carlton Norris McKenney, "Andrew Pizzini, Jr.: Electric Street Light-Railway Promoter," *Richmond Quarterly* 3, no. 4 (Spring 1981), 40.

⁵ Michael B. Chesson, *Richmond After the War, 1865-1890* (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1981), 177.

⁶ In the same year, Atlanta only had 122 electric lamps. Richmond Union Passenger Railway Company, *The Electric Street Railway System, as Operated by the Richmond Union Passenger Railway Co. of Richmond, Virginia* (Richmond: Whittet & Shepperson, 1889), 17.

owned and operated its own gas works, one of only five cities in the entire United States with a municipally-owned gas plant at the turn of the twentieth century.⁷ The works supplied gas to the cities' lamp posts, municipal buildings, court houses, police stations, fire companies, and to thousands of city residents (Figure 4-1).⁸ The works generated the city a perennial profit. The experience with the gas works convinced Richmond's city leaders that publicly-owned utilities put coin in the city's coffers, while simultaneously serving the public welfare. Indeed, in 1882, the superintendent of the gas works, John Knowles, argued, that "it was wise and prudent in our city to own her own gas works, becomes more apparent as time rolls on." He continued, arguing that "her ownership prevents opposition works or imposition, and it is now very generally admitted that one gas works can supply gas cheaper than two in the same city." In other words, the city should not allow a private company to erect a competing facility. Knowles concluded that "the profits made by the works go into the Treasury, and are equivalent to relieving the people of that amount of tax."⁹ Why allow private competition, he suggested, when a municipal gas works provided satisfactory service while providing a revenue stream for the city?

Putting its weight behind the public enterprise, the city expanded and improved the works in the 1880s, allowing the facility to generate large profits for the municipality. In addition, the city bragged that its publicly-owned works allowed it to have

⁷ Indeed, Richmond's publicly-owned gas works was an anomaly. The city also owned a water works, but for the purposes of analyzing Richmond's debate over an electric light plant, this section will analyze the city's experience with its gas works—as proponents of the electric works did. Samuel Mordecai, *Richmond in By-Gone Days* (New York: Arno Press, 1975), 305; Rabinowitz, 112-113.

⁸ John H. Knowles, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of the City Gas Works, Richmond, Virginia, for the Fiscal Year Ending January 31st, 1881* (Richmond: N.V. Randolph, City Printer, 1881), 6-7.

⁹ John H. Knowles, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of the City Gas Works, Richmond, Virginia, for the Fiscal Year Ending January 31st, 1882* (Richmond: N.V. Randolph, City Printer, 1882), 10.

competitive—even superior—gas rates when compared with banner cities like New York with their privately-owned utilities.¹⁰ Nevertheless, in the 1880s, various city leaders argued for the sale or lease of the gas works. In particular, in 1888, believing that the city might generate more revenue by renting the works to a private monopoly, the city council entertained bids for its lease. Ultimately, however, in the name of the public welfare, municipal leaders decided to retain control of the works.¹¹ The mayor, J. Taylor Ellyson, argued that the municipal ownership of the works was the long-established policy of the city. "It is wise," he wrote, "and should not be abandoned."¹² "A private monopoly is more to be dreaded than municipal control," Ellyson reasoned, "and private competition does not always bring cheaper gas." The Mayor argued that private competition often led to price fixing by "the combination or consolidation of rival interests."¹³ Private monopoly and competition, not municipal monopoly, were the fears of Mayor Ellyson and other city leaders.

The benefits of a municipally-owned facility were clear to city officials. Between 1867 and 1897, the works earned the city \$1,174, 855.29 over and above operating costs. In the 1880s and early 1890s, the works earned the city, on average, \$100,000.00 per year, anywhere between two and five percent of annual municipal

¹⁰ R.R. Nuckols, *A History of the Government of the City of Richmond, Virginia and A Sketch of Those Who Administer Its Affairs* (Richmond: Williams Printing Co., 1899), 46.

¹¹ Chesson, 179.

¹² J. Taylor Ellyson, *Annual Message and Accompanying Documents of the Mayor of Richmond to the City Council for the Fiscal Year Ending December 31st, 1888* (Richmond: Everett Waddey, City Printer, 1889), 8.

¹³ J. Taylor Ellyson, *Annual Message and Accompanying Documents of the Mayor of Richmond to the City Council for the Fiscal Year Ending December 31st, 1890* (Richmond: Everett Waddey, City Printer, 1889), 12.

expenditures.¹⁴ The strength of the illuminate steadily increased as the price fell to \$1.25 per one thousand cubic feet consumed. By the turn of the twentieth century, the municipally-owned gas works served seven thousand customers.¹⁵ While, in the early years, electric lights sparked numerous complaints from citizens, newspaper editors, and city councilmen, few complained of the quality of gas.¹⁶ Each year the city invested more into the works. By 1894, the works supplied coal- and water-gas for over 1,600 street lamps. The gas mains ran 69 miles beneath the city's streets and thousands of service pipes brought the gas to customers.¹⁷ The gas works was one of the city's principal investments and proudest accomplishments. As electric lights passed from a promising experiment to a practical illuminant, Richmonders looked to the works as a model for regulated electrification.

An Electric Works?

The question of municipal ownership of electric utilities was fiercely debated across the American South and the United States. In Houston, for example, residents and elected officials who became incensed at the failures of private companies to provide reliable services, deplored rising municipal deficits, and desired reform in an expanding metropolis, turned to municipal ownership.¹⁸ This was typical. As Mark

¹⁴ This is on average. For example, in 1893, the gas works earned the city \$71,868.11 and city paid \$2,423,689.00 in disbursements. This represents almost 3% of the annual budget.

¹⁵ Nuckols, 47-48.

¹⁶ WM. C. Adams, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of the City Gas Works, Richmond, Virginia, for the Fiscal Year Ending January 31st, 1890* (Richmond: C.N. Williams, City Printer, 1891), 8.

¹⁷ Ellyson, *Annual Message and Accompanying Documents of the Mayor of Richmond to the City Council for the Fiscal Year Ending December 31st, 1893* (Richmond: Everett Waddey, City Printer, 1894), 9-10.

¹⁸ Though, the political push toward municipal ownership failed in Houston. Harold L. Platt, *City Building in the New South: The Growth of Public Services in Houston, Texas, 1830-1910* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), 145-154.

Rose details, in Kansas City (Missouri) and Denver, city leaders fiercely debated the merits of owning their own utilities. Theodore Roosevelt, as governor of New York and as President, lobbied for public power.¹⁹ Outside the South, Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, St. Louis, and thousands of small cities and towns eventually adopted public power systems, while larger cities like New York, Chicago, Boston, and Philadelphia (and thousands of smaller communities) continued their contracts with private suppliers. In the South, by 1902, Nashville, Little Rock, Jacksonville, Galveston, and Fort Worth erected municipally owned electric light plants.²⁰ In Europe, cities quickly adopted public ownership.

As Harold Platt describes, the question of whether expanding cities should own their own power plants was a fundamental one in this period as it paralleled the rise of modern, late-nineteenth-century cities. In every city across the United States, expanding urban areas and populations demanded broad and reliable services that city budgets—though ballooning—could barely support. The convergence of expanding urban areas and emerging technologies demanded municipal action. As Richard Rudolph and Scott Ridley observe, as businesses and cities introduced electricity in the late nineteenth century, the question became whether they would treat electricity as a service to be regulated, like gas and water, or as a commodity to be developed by

¹⁹ Mark H. Rose, *Cities of Light and Heat: Domesticating Gas and Electricity in Urban America* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 36-40; David E. Nye, *Electrifying America: Social Meaning of a New Technology, 1880-1940* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 179-181.

²⁰ Howard N. Rabinowitz, "Continuity and Change: Southern Urban Development, 1860-1900," in *The City in Southern History: The Growth of Urban Civilization in the South*, ed. by Blaine A. Brownell and David R. Goldfield (Port Washington (NY): Kennikat Press, 1977), 110-111; Clyde Lyndon King, *The Regulation of Municipal Utilities* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1912), 37.

corporations.²¹ The question was hotly debated in cities across the United States; it was an explosive issue.²² Richmond's quandary was a common one.

Compared to Atlanta and most American cities, Richmond considered making electric power a public utility early on in the process of electrification. The first serious attempt at a publicly-owned and operated electric light plant began in the former Confederate capital in 1885.²³ The city entertained bids to construct the facility and as no local businesses offered, Richmond hired a Connecticut-based firm to build the plant. By 1886, the city's generator supplied electric light for major thoroughfares and public parks, competing with three privately owned electric light companies. The first experiment of municipal ownership fizzled quickly, however. In just a year or more—by the late 1880s—the city contracted with a private company, the Richmond Schuyler Electric-Light Company, for the city's electric illumination.

By the early 1890s, the city turned to a private monopoly. In the early years of electrification, the city was a tangled mess of wires—some criss-crossing above sidewalks and streets, while others ran below people's feet. City council members complained about the quality of light private companies, like the Richmond Schuyler Electric-Light Company, produced. In 1887, one city alderman went as far as to argue that the light produced by the Schuyler Company was weaker than a tallow candle.²⁴ New and franchise electric light companies sprung up, like the Thompson Houston

²¹ Richard Rudolph and Scott Ridley, *Power Struggle: The Hundred-Year War over Electricity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), xi.

²² David Schap, *Municipal Ownership in the Electric Utility Industry: A Centennial View* (New York: Praeger, 1986), v-vi.

²³ The city council agreed to construct a municipal electric light plant in early January 1885; Volume 3, page 167-9, Common Council Journal, Richmond City Records, Richmond Public Library.

²⁴ "Board of Aldermen," *Richmond Dispatch*, Jan. 11, 1887, 1.

Electric Light Company, gaining limited contracts with the city to illuminate various streets and districts.²⁵ Blackouts occurred regularly.²⁶ By 1890, confronted with competing companies, a public plant, wires scattered across the city, and ever-increasing demand, the city council turned toward a private monopoly over electric light, granting the newly chartered Richmond Railway and Electric Company exclusive control of electric street lights in the municipality.²⁷ Yet, with escalating demand, countless wires, and questions about the future of public lighting, Richmond's government and its employees continued to grope toward a coherent plan for electrification.

As city leaders began grappling with the question of how to regulate the course of electrification in the 1890s, Richmond was expanding steadily, but hampered by serious financial issues. In March 1891, Mayor Ellyson, in delivering his annual report, blustered about Richmond's many benefits, strengths, and numerous industrial, commercial, and demographic data pointing to evidence of progress—as any good booster mayor would—nevertheless, he stressed the city's perilous finances. Unwilling to raise taxes, he warned that nothing was more important in the coming years than the condition of Richmond's treasury.²⁸ Between 1891 and 1893, despite pressing needs, the city lowered operating expenditures. At the outset of the Panic of 1893, the city found itself at the threshold of its bonded debt and holding, in the mayor's words, an

²⁵ "New Electric-Light Company," *Richmond Dispatch*, July 29, 1887, 1; Vol. 3, p. 262-3, Common Council Journal.

²⁶ "Where was Richmond When the Lights Went Out?" *Richmond Dispatch*, Oct. 1, 1887, 1.

²⁷ Chesson, 178.

²⁸ Ellyson, *Annual Message and Accompanying Documents of the Mayor of Richmond to the City Council for the Fiscal Year Ending December 31st, 1890* (Richmond: Everett Waddey, City Printer, 1891), 10-11.

"already too large" floating debt.²⁹ In the next years, tax receipts would plunge. The turbulent economy of the 1890s would play a big part in hindering those who championed a publicly-owned electric power plant.

The First Attempts

Between the late 1880s and 1895, Mayor Ellyson, Superintendent of the Gas Works, William C. Adams, several prominent members of the city council, and the *Richmond Dispatch* pushed for a municipally-owned electric plant. They argued that the plant would save the city money, that the community should not rely on a private company, and that, ultimately, like gas light, electric light was a public service the city should provide. Simultaneously, Richmond's preeminent electric entrepreneur, Andrew Pizzini, the city engineer, the city council's finance committee, and the *Richmond Times* opposed the plant. They argued that private companies should sell electricity to the city, like they did to private customers (as a commodity), that the erection and maintenance of a plant would cost a considerable sum when the city's finances were already perilous, and that the city should not be in the business of managing a electricity-generating facility. Though all agreed on the need to electrify, southern city leaders held differing views on the proper way to spur the growth and development of the electric system. In the end, due chiefly to financial restrictions, opponents held off the municipal plant.

In his annual report in March 1890, Mayor Ellyson, who previously had championed the continued public-ownership of the gas works, argued for a new

²⁹ Ellyson, *Annual Message and Accompanying Documents of the Mayor of Richmond to the City Council for the Fiscal Year Ending December 31st, 1892* (Richmond: Everett Waddey, City Printer, 1893), 6.

municipally-owned electric light plant.³⁰ "Both economy and sound public policy," he wrote in 1889, "require this."³¹ Ellyson was the first serious politician in Richmond to call for an electric light works. Forty-one years old at the beginning of his three terms of mayor (1888-1894), Ellyson was a Civil War veteran and, for twenty years, a reporter for the *Dispatch*, a Democratic daily which his father owned. He was a Democrat and former common council president, who ardently believed in the benefits of public ownership. During his tenure, he continually argued for a municipal electric light plant to save the gas works and to provide good light service to the public.

By the late 1880s, the city council also considered a plant.³² Indeed, at least a few city council men agreed with Ellyson. One member, L. L. Bass, went as far as to argue for a complete municipal monopoly on all electric light and power in the former Confederate capitol.³³ The city council, understanding—as Ellyson and others argued and would argue—that electric light companies threatened the profitability of the municipal gas works, nevertheless decided in 1889 to forego a municipal facility. The chair of the city council's Light Committee, William Gunn, argued that instead the city should remodel the gas works. With an improved works, Gunn contended, the city could sell its gas for less and "the Electric Company," he told his colleagues, "will have to sell their light in competition and will be compelled to make it better and cheaper." Gunn did not believe the cost of an electric plant, estimated at roughly \$100,000, was

³⁰ At this point, city leaders in both Richmond and Atlanta were calling for electric plants specifically for illumination.

³¹ Ellyson, *Annual Message . . . 1888*, 9.

³² "Electric Light and Finance," *Richmond Dispatch*, April 25, 1889, 1.

³³ "Our City Fathers," *Richmond Dispatch*, Jan. 13, 1889, 8.

worth it. To Gunn, more Richmonders were interested in cheap gas than in cheap electric light.³⁴ The next year, the city council, again concerned for the gas works and its electric competitors, considered lowering the price of gas in the city. One city councilmen, J. Taylor Stratton hoped lower rates would persuade people who had switched to electric light to switch back to gas and boost consumption, even if the lower rates hurt the finances of the city in the short term. "Something must be done," he told the council, "or electricity will diminish more than reduction in price the city's receipts from gas."³⁵ In the late 1890s, then, gas dominated the question of electrification.

In 1891 the contract with the Richmond Schuyler Electric-Light Company was to end and Ellyson believed the time was right to consider an electric light works. To Ellyson, the point was that electric light was an artificial illuminate like gas light and if the purpose of the gas works was to supply the public with artificial light, "it is," he contended, "just as important that we should furnish the electric."³⁶ It was, he argued, a public necessity and a service municipal government should provide. In the same year, the superintendent of the gas works offered another reason the city should consider an electric light plant. The works, William C. Adams reported, was losing revenue as a direct result of the expansion of private electric light companies. The fears of Ellyson

³⁴ At this point in the history of electric light—with almost all street lamps illuminated with gas and few residences supplied with electric current—Gunn was undoubtedly right. "Gas, Rich and Cheap," *Richmond Dispatch*, May 30, 1889, 1.

³⁵ "The Charge for Gas," *Richmond Dispatch*, Jan. 19, 1890, 8.

³⁶ Ellyson, *Annual Message and Accompanying Documents of the Mayor of Richmond to the City Council for the Fiscal Year Ending December 31st, 1889* (Richmond: Everett Waddey, City Printer, 1890), 15.

and city council members that electricity would threaten the city's gas system were real.³⁷

Indeed, the existence of private, profit-seeking electric light companies directly challenged the publicly-owned gas works. Though residents continued to use gas for light and, increasingly, for cooking, and despite the comparatively high cost of electric illumination, merchants and industrialists began converting to electric light rapidly as the 1890s dawned. Though Richmonders were consuming more gas than ever, the growth in consumption—which had climbed steeply in the 1880s—slowed (Figure 4-2). Indeed, as the new electric light spread across the city, the gas works felt mounting pressure to expand services while keeping gas prices low.³⁸ As a result, as the 1890s unfolded, the works' profits fell (Figure 4-3). Calling the electric light a "very formidable competitor," Adams complained about the works' "antiquated" machinery, alerting the mayor that without a municipal electric light plant or substantial investment in the gas works, the existing works would become a liability to the city.³⁹ As the panic of 1893 and subsequent depression made itself known in Richmond, the gas works profits fell well short of expectations.

With the municipal works at risk, Mayor Ellyson continued his campaign for a municipal electric plant. "Without" an electric light plant, Ellyson wrote in early 1891,

³⁷ WM. C. Adams, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of the City Gas Works, Richmond, Virginia, for the Fiscal Year Ending January 31st, 1890* (Richmond: C.N. Williams, City Printer, 1891), 8.

³⁸ Ellyson, 8-9.

³⁹ Adams, *Annual Report of the Superintendent of the City Gas Works, Richmond, Virginia, for the Fiscal Year Ending January 31st, 1891* (Richmond: C.N. Williams, City Printer, 1892), 8-9.

"the city cannot long continue to operate her gas works with profit."⁴⁰ Indeed, the concern for the works' profitability seemed to be the principal motivation behind the push for a municipal electric light plant in the early 1890s. Nevertheless, in attempting to convince the city council, Ellyson voiced other concerns. The mayor did not believe relying on companies was the right path. Already having expressed reservations about a private monopoly over gas, Ellyson argued that private monopoly or even private competition would invariably lead to high utility prices.

Adams, superintendent of the gas works and Ellyson's confederate in the cause for municipal ownership, continued his own call for an electric light plant. Adams noted in his annual report that many of the cities' "large consumers" were converting from gas to electric light. What's more, the superintendent reported to the mayor, many shopkeepers now outright preferred the new source of artificial light. "The gas-works are the property of the tax-payers," he contended, "and if they [the public] should prefer the electric light to gas, I can see no good reason for keeping them from having it." Acknowledging that building an electric light plant would be expensive, the superintendent argued that if the city could not afford one, then "every facility should be furnished our citizens to get cheap electric light." As the head of the gas department, Adams saw the writing on the wall. "The [electric] light has come to stay," he warned city government, "and all gas men had just as wall [sic] reconcile themselves to this fact and act accordingly."⁴¹ Ellyson and Adams delivered their arguments, hoping to convince the city council not to sign a new contract with a private supplier in 1891.

⁴⁰ Ellyson, *Annual Message and Accompanying Documents of the Mayor of Richmond to the City Council for the Fiscal Year Ending December 31st, 1890* (Richmond: Everett Waddey, City Printer, 1891), 12.

⁴¹ Adams, *Annual Report . . . 1890*, 8.

In the spring and summer of 1890, the city council once-again considered the plant.⁴² The *Dispatch* reported, perhaps influenced by its connection to the pro-ownership mayor, that many people in Richmond believed—looking to the works as an example—that an electric works would be a benefit, a "matter of economy." The head of the city council committee for electric light, W. Deane Courtney came out in strong support, arguing that delay was costing the city money. Courtney made the case, however, that with an electric plant, the city would save money for lighting and that a plant could sell current to customers—like the gas works—earning profits for the city.⁴³ The Committee on Electric Light, which Courtney chaired, estimated a plant could be built for only \$75,000.⁴⁴ The *Dispatch* came out strongly supporting the endeavor, citing anonymous experts who argued that numerous cities throughout the country had adopted both electric and gas works with success and that the municipality would be making a grave mistake if it refused.⁴⁵ The city council voted in support of the plant.⁴⁶ The city council's finance committee, however, argued that given the city's finances—the city was forced to stop lighting sixteen lights that year to cut costs—the appropriation required for a plant was out of the question for at least several years.⁴⁷ Even the pro-plant *Dispatch* noted that the city's streets (sidewalks, sewers, paving)

⁴² Twenty two councilmen voted for in favor of exploring the option, only two opposed it. Volume 4, page 651-2, Common Council Journal, Richmond City Records, Richmond Public Library.

⁴³ "Electric-Light Plant," *Dispatch*, July 22, 1890, 1.

⁴⁴ Vol. 4, p. 663, Common Council Journal.

⁴⁵ "Lights for the City," *Dispatch*, Sept. 20, 1890, 1.

⁴⁶ "A City Electric Plant," *Dispatch*, Feb. 4, 1891, 2.

⁴⁷ In the previous year, 1890, the city was almost forced to take down lights. "Lights for the City," *Dispatch*, Aug. 23, 1890, 1; "Lights Come Down," *Dispatch*, Aug. 31, 1890, 1; "Sixteen Lights Out," *Dispatch*, Nov. 1, 1890, 1; Vol. 4, p. 739, Common Council Journal.

were far and away the priority for appropriations. The arguments made by proponents of the plant had convinced a majority of city councilmen; the city's finances were the only significant argument against the plant.⁴⁸

In 1891, the city council considered a new contract with the Schuyler electric company, now represented in Richmond by Andrew Pizzini, neglecting Ellyson's call for a public electric light works.⁴⁹ The contract, Ellyson argued, would cost the taxpayers more than the cost of constructing the municipal facility.⁵⁰ Restating his and Adams' previous arguments, he concluded that every, "reason that urges us to continue municipal control of our gas works applies with equal force to the city's ownership of an electric light plant."⁵¹ While the debate heated up, the city council appropriated thousands of dollars to expand the existing privately-supplied electric street light system.

In January and February, as the city council voted funds for a plant—proponents of the plant continued to believe in its feasibility despite financial pressures—and as the aldermen mulled over their decision, the *Dispatch* went on an editorial offensive championing the proposed facility.⁵² The *Dispatch* reported that new electric companies were driving electric rates down in Richmond and that these low rates would likely mean the loss of hundreds of municipal gas customers. If Richmond "wishes to make the gas-

⁴⁸ "Gas- and Electric-Light," *Dispatch*, Jan. 15, 1891, 2.

⁴⁹ Pizzini had been president of the city's common council.

⁵⁰ Ellyson, *Annual Message and Accompanying Documents of the Mayor of Richmond to the City Council for the Fiscal Year Ending December 31st, 1891* (Richmond: Everett Waddey, City Printer, 1892), 10-11.

⁵¹ Ellyson, *Annual Report . . . 1891*, 11.

⁵² The city council's vote was heavily in favor, 22 to 6. Common Council Journal, Dec. 1 1890 to Apr. 19, 1894, p. 43.

works self-sustaining," the paper editorialized, the city "cannot afford to allow its best customers to be taken away by electric companies." "Under municipal control," the editor continued, "electric-light will be sold at a rate that will not ruin the gas-works." The editor argued that gas and electric rates needed to be equalized and municipal ownership was necessary to that end.⁵³ With an electric plant, the paper trumpeted, these concerns would be moot and Richmond would be receiving profits from the electric light.⁵⁴ The issue, the paper concluded, "involves millions to the city and millions to the citizens."⁵⁵ The *Dispatch* was emphatic.

Yet, the efforts of Ellyson, Adams, Courtney, and the *Dispatch* failed. In January, Pizzini, representing the electric company, argued forcefully to the city council that a city plant would not provide as cheap light as the company currently charged. Moreover, he predicted that the city's estimates for a plant were too low; the costs of the plant would continually rise.⁵⁶ Indeed, others predicted that the plant would cost three times as much as the city council's appropriation of \$75,000. In what likely turned the tide away from municipal ownership, the city engineer, Colonel Cutshaw, said the city should own a plant, but that now was not the time. The estimated appropriation of \$75,000 was unrealistic, he stated. In fact, he told the council members, the plant would cost *at least* twice that amount. He recommended that the city upgrade the gas works instead.⁵⁷ At

⁵³ "A City Electric-Plant," *Dispatch*, Feb. 4, 1891, 2.

⁵⁴ "Electric Light—Again," *Dispatch*, Jan. 16, 1891, 2.

⁵⁵ "The Electric-Plant," *Dispatch*, Feb. 6, 1891, 2.

⁵⁶ "Money for a Plant," *Dispatch*, Jan. 28, 1891, 1.

⁵⁷ "Will Cost Too Much," *Dispatch*, Feb. 17, 1891, 1.

the same time, the electric company made the city an offer for a ten-year contract at frozen rates.⁵⁸

By March 1891 the city aldermen had rejected the call for an electric plant and by 1892, contracted with the Richmond Power and Electric-Light Company to supply electric light for the city's streets, buildings, and parks for at least two years. The council did, however, authorize the construction of a water-gas plant, aiding the gas works losing struggle against electric light.⁵⁹

Unlike the *Dispatch*, whose editors were bitterly disappointed, the *Richmond Times* had come out strongly opposed to the plant and now lauded the city council's decision.⁶⁰ "The *Times* opposes the city having an electric plant at all," the editor roared in response to the *Dispatch*'s challenging editorials, "Let us buy our electricity from an electric company as private citizens buy theirs." The *Times* argued that those who championed the electric plant for the sake of saving both money and the gas works were mistaken. The daily pointed out that private customers consumed two-thirds of the gas produced—electric street lights would not cripple the works. What is more, since the city paid itself for the gas it consumed, as electric street lights gradually replaced gas lamps, the costs of gas lamps would lessen as the costs of electric lights increased. In other words, the *Times* argued, a plant was not necessary to reduce costs. In addition, the *Times* argued that the estimated costs of the plant were, in all likelihood, flawed. Champions of the plant believed the city could built the facility for \$125,000

⁵⁸ "Will Give Cheap Light," *Dispatch*, March 13, 1891, 1.

⁵⁹ "Light from Private Hands," *Dispatch*, March 19, 1891, 2. Ellyson, *Annual Message and Accompanying Documents of the Mayor of Richmond to the City Council for the Fiscal Year Ending December 31st, 1892* (Richmond: Everett Waddey, City Printer, 1893), 4-5.

⁶⁰ The *Times* and *Dispatch* traded several heated editorials in the late winter and spring of 1892.

(one of many estimates) but the city had estimated it could build a new city hall (which the city was building at the time) for \$500,000 and now projected it would cost upwards of \$1.4 million. The editor estimated the plant would cost not less than \$500,000. What is more, the paper argued, when the cost for building the plant, lighting the streets, and paying off the bonds for both were taken into account, the city would pay at least 20% more per year than it currently paid the power company—just as the city's finances were perilous and its credit rating low. A plant would mean higher taxes. The decision not to build a plant would save the taxpayers considerable sums.⁶¹

In addition, the *Times* approached the issue of electric power from a fundamentally different perspective. If the debate across the United States was whether electricity was a public service or a private commodity, as Rudolph and Ridley describe, the *Dispatch* (along with Mayor Ellyson, Superintendent Adams, and Chairman Courtney) believed it was a service like the gas works. The *Times*, on the other hand, argued that manufacturing "or generating . . . electricity is as much a subject of private enterprise and business as managing hotels and manufacturing tobacco." The *Times* did not think city government existed to manage a business and doubted that "politics" would lead to the efficient and economic construction and management of the facility.⁶² Indeed, they pointed to the arguments of Pizzini, who stated that a public plant would mean the end of private ones. "The present company," the former confectioner argued,

⁶¹ The *Times* estimated the costs could climb to be 79% higher per year than their contracted price. "An Electric Plant," *Times*, Mar. 16, 1892, 4; "That Electric Plant Again," *Times*, Mar. 18, 1892, 4; *Times*, Mar. 19, 1892, 4; "An Electric Light Plant," *Times*, Apr. 13, 1892, 4.

⁶² "More About the Electric Plant," *Times*, Mar. 22, 1892, 4; "The Dispatch and an Electric Plant," *Times*, Apr. 16, 1892, 4.

"will have to go out of business or sell out to the city" if a public plant were erected.⁶³

The *Times* looked forward to the development of electricity by local companies.

Between 1892 and 1895, the city council continued to debate the merits of owning its own plant, but the facility was never built. The *Dispatch* along with Mayor Ellsyon continued their perennial calls for the electric works, while the *Times* opposed the project and championed a contract with a private company.⁶⁴ In particular, the *Dispatch* made regular arguments, citing various professors and municipal experts, that only cities should own "natural monopolies," like electric systems. "Let us have electric lights," the editor exorcised, "'of the people, by the people, for the people.'"⁶⁵ In early 1892, the city council voted—again—to construct a municipal plant and the Board of Aldermen, concerned about the city's finances and its mounting debt, tabled the measure.⁶⁶ As the city spent over a million dollars on a new city hall, opponents of the electric plant argued that the community could not afford the facility.⁶⁷ Indeed, by July 1894, even the pro- plant *Dispatch* argued that the city's finances precluded the possibility of an electric works.⁶⁸ Members of the council tried again in the same year.⁶⁹ By early 1895, the city council voted down a resolution to build a plant and the

⁶³ Andrew Pizzini, "A City Electric Plant," *Times*, Apr. 19, 1892, 4.

⁶⁴ no title, *Dispatch*, Mar. 20, 1892, 2.

⁶⁵ "Our Electric Plant," *Dispatch*, Apr. 12, 1892, 2.

⁶⁶ "Our Own Plant," *Dispatch*, Mar. 9, 1892, 2; "Laid on the Table," *Dispatch*, Apr. 12, 1892, 1.

⁶⁷ "The Electric Plant," *Dispatch*, Mar. 17, 1892, 2.

⁶⁸ The editor blamed the large municipal debt. "City Electric-Light Plant," *Dispatch*, July 24, 1894, 4.

⁶⁹ The vote for the plant was overwhelming. Common Council Journal: May 7, 1894 to Nov. 17, 1896, p. 75.

proposition remained in limbo for years.⁷⁰ In the mean time, the city made a contract for light with the Richmond Railway and Electric Company.⁷¹ Richmond would not have a city electric plant in the nineteenth century.

A decade after the introduction of electric light, efforts to erect a municipal plant had failed in Richmond. Opponents of the plant, like the *Times* and those who watched over the city's finances, saw electric light as a privately-sold product, not a service, and imagined the plant as a money-gobbling behemoth. The mayor, city councilmen, *Dispatch*, and superintendent of the gas works had all supported the plant because, primarily, private electric illumination threatened the profitability, and even survival, of the city's gas works. They also supported the plant because, as the argument went, an electric works would supposedly save the city money and, as the city already provided its citizens lighting, electric illumination was required to complete this municipal service. Indeed all their arguments came down to supporting the public monopoly on light. As the city left the nineteenth century behind, however, this concern dissipated.

Gas Works Rebounding

As Richmond entered the twentieth century, the position of the gas works—despite its difficulties in the 1890s—strengthened. By 1907, Richmonders were consuming more than twice as much gas as in the mid-1890s and the profits of the gas works doubled, even as the city lowered the rate to 90 cents per one thousand cubic feet consumed.⁷² The works now embodied several production plants, numerous

⁷⁰ "City Electric-Light Plant," *Dispatch*, Jan. 26, 1895, 2.

⁷¹ Common Council Journal: May 7, 1894 to Nov. 17, 1896, p. 619.

⁷² The rate had progressively fallen from \$2 per one thousand cubic feet consumed in 1880. D.C. Richardson, *Annual Message and Accompanying Documents of the Mayor of Richmond to the City*

storage facilities, over 100 miles of mains, and thousands of service pipes. Though electricity had defeated gas in the realm of public lighting (and in the realms of commercial and industrial lighting), gas remained the primary illuminate for Richmond's residences and its undisputed fuel of choice for cooking and heating. After its perilous financial condition in the late 1880s and 1890s, the works were now profitable, stable, and safe from competition (Figures 4-4, 4-5). The primary impetus for a municipal electric light plant in the 1880s and 1890s—the threat profitable electric light companies posed to the municipal works—was no longer a motivator. In fact, the profitability and success of the works—in spite of the threat of electricity—opened the door, again, for consideration of a municipal electric plant.

A Municipal Experiment

In August 1909, city leaders, who for more than twenty years had been calling for a city-owned electric light plant, got their wish.⁷³ Champions of the measure had been pushing it every year or two since the mid-1890s, but by this year two changes in Richmond spurred the final push toward municipal ownership. The first was the strengthening of the office of the mayor in relation to the city council. Before the turn of the twentieth century, the legislative and executive power of Richmond lay with the city council.⁷⁴ Throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century, however, city leaders and boosters attempted to streamline city government, boost its efficiency, and

Council for the Fiscal Year Ending December 31st, 1908 (Richmond: Clyde W. Saunders, City Printer, 1909), 12.

⁷³ In March 1908, the city council authorized E.W. Trafford to develop plans and specifications for the plant. Common Council Journal, April 8, 1907 to Oct. 5, 1908, p. 502.

⁷⁴ Richmond Chamber of Commerce, *Addresses at a Meeting Held in the Richmond Chamber of Commerce* (Richmond: J. L. Hill, 1895), 8.

grant the mayor more executive power and authority. By 1917, the Chamber of Commerce went as far as to reflect that the city council was "unnecessarily complicated and hence not well adapted to the city's needs."⁷⁵ By 1907, Mayor Carlton McCarthy and the *Times-Dispatch* began calling for an administrative board to oversee the business affairs of the city; by 1913, it had one. Accordingly, as Richmond emerged from the 1890s into the 1900s, the position of mayor became more powerful in comparison to the body of the city council. The mayor had expanded authority and independence to manage the city's departments and services (including electric light). The second development—dependent on the first—was the issue of fire protection and water service across the city.

As early as 1905, Mayor McCarthy began recommending that the old Pump Works be converted into an electric light plant (Figure 4-7). The impetus for the plant came from concern for Richmond's water works, pumping system, fire protection, and, ultimately, the expansion and development of the city. Indeed, in 1906, the city annexed nearby communities, nearly doubling its incorporated area, placing pressure on Richmond's government to provide dramatically expanded water services.⁷⁶ For several years, the city had been using electric current to power its water pumps to distribute water throughout the city to residents and fire hydrants. After purchasing a new pump house, McCarthy realized that the city had an opportunity. It was important, McCarthy wrote, that "the rights of the city to water power at the old pump house should be carefully guarded." If the city remodeled the old pump house into an electric plant,

⁷⁵ "Proposed Changes in City Government," *Richmond* 4, no. 5 (Nov., 1917), 4.

⁷⁶ Similar problems because of expansion plagued many American cities in this period. W. T. Dabney, "Greater Richmond," *Richmond* 1, no. 1 (July, 1914), 1; Schap, 20.

McCarthy argued, the city would have sufficient energy to power Richmond's water pumps and also electric current for illumination—demand for which had continually increased. What is more, Richmond's executive officers seemed eager to escape contracts with private suppliers and to completely manage the municipal electric light service. As the *Electrical World* reported years later, "[c]ontracts between cities and public service corporations have so often been the occasion of distrust and suspicion."⁷⁷ To proponents of public ownership, the opportunity seemed ripe and the benefits unquestionable. Yet, few seemed interested. The mayor complained that both the public and the city council were "indifferent" to this untapped power supply.⁷⁸

Between 1907 and early 1909, the city council's "indifference" gradually passed, as a special committee on water and electricity recommended the conversion of the old pump house.⁷⁹ In November 1907, the Committee on Water recommended the construction "to meet the urgent demand of the Water Department."⁸⁰ Numerous committees investigated the proposal as the consensus of city councilmen turned in favor of the facility. Aldermen W. T. Dabney introduced an ordinance in 1907 providing for the plant. E. W. Trafford, electrical and consulting engineer, developed plans and

⁷⁷ "An Improved Form of Street Lighting Contract," *Electrical World* 68, no. 10 (1916): 471.

⁷⁸ As early as 1891, the Dispatch suggested converting the old pump house into the municipal electric plant and by 1898 the city council was discussing the possibility; "Location of the Electric Plant," *Dispatch*, Jan. 30, 1891, 2; Common Council Journal, Dec. 7, 1896 to Sept. 7, 1899, p. 368. Carlton McCarthy, *Annual Message and Accompanying Documents of the Mayor of Richmond to the City Council for the Fiscal Year Ending December 31st, 1904* (Richmond: Clyde W. Saunders, 1906), 8-9; McCarthy, *Annual Message . . . 1905*, 3-4; McCarthy, *Annual Message . . . 1906* (Richmond: O. E. Flanhart Printing Company, 1907), 11-12.

⁷⁹ The Finance Committee began seriously studying funding for a plant as early as June 1907. Common Council Journal, April 8, 1907 to Oct. 5, 1908, p. 129. 29 votes for allocating funds for plans and preliminary engineering, 4 votes against. Common Council Journal, Nov. 2, 1908 to May 9, 1910, p. 84-5.

⁸⁰ Common Council Journal, April 8, 1907 to Oct. 5, 1908, p. 322.

specifications for the proposed facility. In turn, the electric company offered to supply Richmond with electric light and pumping at a cost as low as could be supplied by the hypothetical plant, but the city council quickly rejected the offer.⁸¹

The debate in the late 1900s was not as heated as in the 1880s and 1890s, but the proposed plant remained controversial; as in the 1880s and early 1890s, it once more became the paramount political issue in Richmond. The arguments offered by both the supporters and the opponents of the electric works mirrored earlier opinions. Opponents argued that building a plant—now estimated to cost over \$300,000—would increase the city's debt and was unnecessary given the electric company's offer.⁸² Indeed, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (the two papers having merged in 1903) opposed the construction of the facility and championed the company's offer. "Are they willing," the editor asked of the plant's supporters, "that the city go into debt to erect a plant of this character and operate it when a company with ample facilities stands ready to enter into a contract to furnish all necessary electrical power at precisely what it would cost the city to make it?"⁸³ The editor could not understand the thinking of the plant's supporters.⁸⁴

Proponents of the plant now argued that it was not the gas works that needed saving, but the city's water works. Private electric companies threatened this monopoly too—and more. Proponents were wary of the electric company. The sub-chair of the city council's finance committee, H. R. Pollard, argued that the city could not rely on a

⁸¹ "Defeat No. 1," *Times-Dispatch*, Jan. 8, 1907, 4.

⁸² "Electric Plant Matter Deferred," *Times-Dispatch*, Jan. 8, 1907, 3.

⁸³ "Defeat No. 1," *Times-Dispatch*, Jan. 8, 1907, 4.

⁸⁴ "The Proposed Electrical Plant," *Times-Dispatch*, Feb. 4, 1907, 4.

private company to supply electric power to the city's pumps.⁸⁵ What is more, Mayor McCarthy and Pollard argued that the city needed to take advantage of its water power because the electric company controlled most of the small islands on the James River while owning a dam along it, and the men worried that if the city abandoned its pump house, the company would control all the water power on the river and the city would be forever compelled to rely on the company for its power needs.⁸⁶ Indeed, in March 1907, the power company attempted to buy Belle Island and to build on it a water-powered electric plant. Experts agreed that it would seriously limit the generating-potential of the old pump house, which was located nearby. McCarthy, in apoplectic language, railed against the company and its dominion over Richmond's water supply. The water power was the people's he insisted. In the early 1900s, proponents of a city plant, no longer concerned about the gas works, feared the unchecked power of the emerging electric company.⁸⁷

After numerous meetings and council votes for and against, McCarthy, Dabney, Pollard, and long-time advocates of municipal ownership won. In March 1908, the city council considered letting the voters decide whether their city should have a municipal electric power plant—an option many city governments followed—but quickly shied away from the democratic option—perhaps fearing the result—and instead moved

⁸⁵ "Mr. Pollard's View," *Times-Dispatch*, Jan. 10, 1907, 4.

⁸⁶ "The Mayor and the Council," *Times-Dispatch*, Mar. 2, 1907, 4.

⁸⁷ Virginia's courts had ruled that the electric company could not act in such a way (building or expanding dams) to totally preclude the city from the use of its pump works and adjoining dam to produce electricity (in other words, the court declared that the company could not violate the city's right to make use of the river), but it did not specify how much space around the city's facilities were guarded. McCarthy and others worried that the electric company massive facilities and dams would, despite the courts' rulings, reduce the water power for the city. "Belle Isle as Plant and Park," *Times-Dispatch*, Mar. 7, 1907, 1, 12.

forward with the project.⁸⁸ By May 1909, the city council and aldermen approved the plans and appointed Trafford to supervise the construction of the facility.⁸⁹ The council, planning for the future, decided the plant and distributing system's first priority was to erect ornamental lights along Broad Street, the city's business district.⁹⁰ Simultaneously, the city awarded a final contract to the Richmond Passenger and Power Company for an additional 854 arc lights, at \$54.75 per year, per light to expire in mid-1910.⁹¹

As the city was moving toward owning its own plant, the local electric company was consolidating its position and was less interested in opposing a municipal plant than Pizzini had been twenty years earlier—despite the concerns McCarthy and others had of the company. In 1901, the Virginia Passenger and Power Company was organized, comprising Richmond's electric streetcar companies and power plants.⁹² In 1909, several streetcar companies organized to become the Virginia Railway and Power Company, principally owned by financier Jay Gould's son (eventually become the present-day Virginia Electric and Power Company, more commonly known as VEPCO). At the outset, the power company primarily operated streetcars in Richmond and nearby Petersburg, though by 1911 it expanded to include electric, gas, and streetcar service in

⁸⁸ Common Council Journal, April 8, 1907 to Oct. 5, 1908, p. 474, 583.

⁸⁹ Plus an additional \$1,000 for the plans. Common Council Journal, Nov. 2, 1908 to May 9, 1910, p. 224-225.

⁹⁰ Common Council Journal, Nov. 2, 1908 to May 9, 1910, p. 714.

⁹¹ Common Council Journal, Nov. 2, 1908 to May 9, 1910, p. 187.

⁹² Erwin H. Will, *The Past—Interesting, The Present—Intriguing, The Future—Bright: A Story of Virginia Electric and Power Company* (New York: Newcomen Society, 1965), 12.

Norfolk, Virginia.⁹³ While the numerous electric companies in the 1880s and 1890s were highly localized and prone to bankruptcy, the Virginia Railway and Power Company was large, extensive, profitable, and well capitalized. What is more, whereas the first electric companies had relied on public service contracts, the Virginia Railway and Power Company profited from commercial and private services and, especially, streetcar fares. As McCarthy lead Richmond to a public power plant, then, the public service corporation, profitable and growing steadily, was instead focused on other areas of electric business.

In 1909, less than two months after the formation of the Virginia Railway and Power Company, the city council formalized its decision to convert the old Pump Works, which had operated for over three-quarters of a century, into the Municipal Electric Plant.⁹⁴ Construction began in late 1910, just as the city incorporated the neighboring community of Manchester and the population of the city approached 130,000.⁹⁵ The mayor, D.C. Richardson, estimated—in his published annual report—that the plant would be a financial benefit to the city, as the costs of lighting the city began rising (Figure 4-8) and as the city eased out of its financial problems of the 1880s and 1890s.⁹⁶ At the same time, the municipal gas works was setting record-breaking profits.

⁹³ A. H. Herrmann, "The Goal Was Public Goodwill for the Power Company," *Commonwealth* (Nov., 1957): 37-8, 54.

⁹⁴ Unlike in the 1890s, this Plant was not just for electric light, but also for power.

⁹⁵ Richardson, *Annual Message and Accompanying Documents of the Mayor of Richmond to the City Council for the Fiscal Year Ending December 31st, 1910* (Richmond: Clyde W. Saunders, City Printer, 1911), 3.

⁹⁶ Richardson, *Annual Message and Accompanying Documents of the Mayor of Richmond to the City Council for the Fiscal Year Ending December 31st, 1909* (Richmond: Clyde W. Saunders, City Printer, 1910), 11.

Though the profitability of the gas works suggested that a municipal electric plant had the potential to be a huge income generator for the city (Figure 4-9), the city designed and operated the plant to solely be operated at a loss for the taxpayers. The Richmond Electric Plant would supply electric current to the city's water works, street lamps, buildings, and parks, but, unlike the gas works, the city would not—by ordinance—sell its current to private residences, merchants, or factories.⁹⁷ Indeed, as will be detailed, the city continued to buy electricity from private companies for years. In the 1890s, Mayor Ellyson and others called for a municipal electric plant to save the gas works and to provide both gas and electric light to the public. As the 1910s dawned, Richmond's leaders offered different reasoning for municipal ownership. As the construction began on the electric plant, the power company's profitability remained intact.

By 1911, as the electric plant began operating, it supplied electric current to almost eighty ornamental electric lamps along Broad Street, between Twelfth Street and Jefferson Avenue—a tiny fraction of the lights private corporations used to illuminate the city—and, primarily, electric power for the city's water works.⁹⁸ The city planned for the plant to eventually supply an electric light service for all of the city's streets, parks, and municipal buildings. In the first years of the plant and distributing system, however, the

⁹⁷ Perhaps this is why the power company did not, as in the 1880s and 1890s, feel threatened. City of Richmond, *The Charter and the General Ordinances of the City of Richmond* (Richmond: Capitol Printing Company, 1910), 288, in Manuscripts, Virginia Historical Society.

⁹⁸ In this year, as Richmond's municipal plant began operations, 1,622 municipal electrical systems existed across the United States. Schap, 9.

city relied on month-to-month contracts with the Virginia Railway and Power Company for light.⁹⁹

By 1912, the plant was fully operational (Figure 4-10). For an estimated \$76,000 per year the plant would generate as much electricity for illumination that previously, according to the new Mayor George Ainslie, would have cost the city as much as \$120,000 (according to old contracted rates). The plant still provided ornamental lighting along Broad Street (the principal merchant district), generated roughly 1,700 kilowatts of electric power, and supplied illumination to nearly 3,300 arc and incandescent lights throughout the city.¹⁰⁰ The head of the facility, E. W. Trafford stated, with verbiage befitting a booster, that "it is remarked that there is probably no street in any city in the country better lighted than Broad street . . . where the entire cost of lighting is borne by the municipality."¹⁰¹ The city council began appropriating money to expand the electrical distribution system to Richmond's parks.¹⁰²

Despite such optimism, the municipal electric plant did not reduce electric light expenses—reflecting opponents' fears. In 1914, as costs mounted, the chief engineer lamented that his department received less than one-sixth of the appropriations he deemed necessary. Nevertheless, he reported that, when compared to 1910—the last year the city contracted with a private company for street light—the city had three times as many candle-power hours (2,260,000,000 versus 750,000,000) with an increase of

⁹⁹ This decision was unanimous. Common Council Journal, Nov. 2, 1908 to May 9, 1910, p. 747-8.

¹⁰⁰ George Ainslie, *Annual Message and Accompanying Documents of the Mayor of Richmond to the City Council for the Fiscal Year Ending December 31st, 1912* (Richmond: Clyde W. Saunders, City Printer, 1913), 25-26; E.W. Trafford, *Annual Report of the Electric Plant of the City of Richmond , VA. for the Year Ending December 31, 1912* (Richmond: Clyde W. Saunders, City Printer, 1913), 3-7, 8.

¹⁰¹ Trafford, 4.

¹⁰² Common Council Journal, Nov.6, 1911 to May 5, 1913, p. 124.

only twenty-five percent in cost.¹⁰³ Municipal street lighting cost the city fifty cents per capita, or roughly two percent of Richmond's revenue.

The engineer, reporting to the mayor, argued for the continued expansion of the electric street light system—but for different reasons. While his predecessors in the gas works, the mayoralty, and the city council argued for an electric plant to save the gas works, to save the water works, to provide municipally-generated gas *and* electric light service, or to forestall the advance of a feared corporation, Trafford argued for more light for safety and comfort.¹⁰⁴ "It is as much a part of the City's duty," Trafford trumpeted, "to light its streets as to police them."¹⁰⁵ Electric light was no longer municipal business because it would save a city monopoly or because the public was due choice in illumination or because the water works needed power, electric light was necessary, Trafford was arguing, because it protected the populace. It was, he maintained, the duty of the city to supply it and to expand the system. In addition, the chief engineer recommended that the city begin eliminating all gas lamps—which, at this point, only represented 7 percent of street and alley illumination—in favor of electric ones. Now that the city had another horse in the race for public illumination—the electric plant—the gas work's tenuous hold on a sliver of street lighting would be eliminated.

¹⁰³ As will be shown, city officials had difficulty making comparisons between the contracted electric light system and the municipal light system, primarily because of the rapidly-changing technology. The Plant's superintendent thought it best to use candle-power hours (the number of hours lights operated, taking into account their brightness). Trafford, *Annual Report of the Electric Plant of the City of Richmond, VA. for the Year Ending December 31, 1913* (Richmond: Clyde W. Saunders, City Printer, 1914), 4.

¹⁰⁴ This desire for light for safety correlates with the calls for light in Atlanta to deter crime. Similarly, in that city, political leaders first called for electric light as an alternative to gas, but progressively understood electric light as a progressive instrument. See chapter 3.

¹⁰⁵ Trafford, *Annual Report . . . 1913*, 5.

By 1915, as Richmond continued to expand and annex neighboring communities, the costs of the municipal plant—and the inability of the city to approach, let alone match, the plant's funding targets—required Trafford to offer the city a defense of the plant and of its cost to the city. What is more, while in the early years of the plant, the mayor and superintendent had heralded the savings it was garnering the city, now as the weight of the electric works hit the city's accounts, tactics changed. While continually pointing to the financial benefits of the plant in previous years—as had the mayors—Trafford was forced to offer explanations for burgeoning costs. Though the facility relied on two sources of energy—water power and steam power—electricity was cheapest only when the nearby James River supplied the vast majority of the power to its generators. Throughout 1914, however, the James only offered 73 percent of the power for the Plant.¹⁰⁶ In addition, wage rates had increased as had the charges for renting poles over streets.¹⁰⁷

Trafford argued that the plant continued to save the city money, but now declared that the, "real usefulness of the electric plant is not, however, to be expressed in the amount of money for which a similar quantity of purchased service could be secured." No, he argued, the real benefit of the plant was what its establishment facilitated. The city would never, the engineer argued, have paid for such an expansive electric system had it not invested so much in the construction of the plant. The facility gave Richmond its newly extensive electric street lighting system and *that*, he maintained, was the plant's value.¹⁰⁸ He acknowledged that the facility's costs were likely to steadily

¹⁰⁶ In 1913, the James supplied 94% of the Plant's power.

¹⁰⁷ The city rented the use of many poles from the local electric company.

¹⁰⁸ Trafford, *Annual Report . . . 1914*, 4.

increase as the system expanded, but he argued the costs were worth it: as Richmond invested in its plant, it was providing for the convenience of its citizens and, most importantly, investing in the municipality's future. Perhaps fearing that the city's Treasury, its officers, and councilmen would not accept "the future" as a practical benefit, Trafford once more argued that the facility was a boon, financially. In 1911, he lectured, just as the plant was beginning operations, the city contracted for 888 lights, producing 220,000 candle power, for nearly \$50,000 per year. During 1915, on the other hand, the city operated 3,355 lights, producing 764,106 candle power for a little more than \$75,000 (nearly twice as much as before the electric works). Trafford acknowledged that electric lighting technology was changing so rapidly that it was difficult, if not impossible, to compare the plant's costs to those of old contracted prices, but nevertheless trumpeted the plant's financial success.¹⁰⁹ To boosters like Trafford, the plant was saving the city money (in a roundabout way), providing needed services, ensuring safety and security, and was a necessary instrument for necessary urban development.

Plant in War

As the First World War enveloped the United States, many city leaders considered the Richmond Municipal Electric Plant a success. The city was expanding its electric light system continuously, erecting new poles, stringing new lights, and converting its older arc and incandescent lamps to brighter, cheaper, and more efficient incandescent lamps. The city turned down private offers for electricity. Indeed, in 1916, the Virginia Railway and Power Company—designated as Richmond's public service

¹⁰⁹ Trafford, 1915, 4.

corporation of choice by the state of Virginia—offered to sell the city electricity for one-half cent, or five mills, per kilowatt hour.¹¹⁰ The city—which received electricity for 3.84 mills per kilowatt hour in 1916—rejected the offer and, instead, installed another generator in its plant. Despite the precipitous expansion of the city's electric system and concomitant financial burdens, the electric plant was delivering what its champions had long promised: cheap electric light.

Indeed, in the same year—now five years after the establishment of the electric works—Superintendent Trafford conducted a study of Richmond's municipal plant and the city's electric grid in comparison with other American cities. While opponents of the plant called the municipal system an experiment, Trafford confidently called it an undeniable success, with "thoroughly satisfactory results." In 1916, he reported, Richmond had four times as many lights with more candle power, for only one-and-a-half times the cost as under the old contract light system. While opponents argued that Richmond would have been able to negotiate lower rates from private suppliers, Trafford pointed to the experience of neighboring cities. Rates provided by the Virginia Railway and Power Company—the same company that supplied electricity to Richmond, its residents, merchants, and industries—in nearby Norfolk had remained static over the last five years and were projected to remain the same over the next ten. In 1910, Richmond had paid \$54.75 per light and was now paying only \$37.26. Since the state of Virginia regulated rates and since the Virginia Railway and Power Company

¹¹⁰ A mill is equivalent to 1/10 of a cent. It should be noted, as we compare rates by the city and the company, that the Virginia Railway and Power Company had very competitive rates. In 1917, Richmond's chamber of commerce reported that its rates for industrial power (factories) were less than those offered in (the American South) Birmingham, Knoxville, Chattanooga, Louisville, Nashville, Charlotte, New Orleans, Little Rock, and Memphis. Coleman Wortham, "The President's Annual Report," *Richmond* 3, no. 7 (Feb., 1917), 3.

supplied electric current to both cities at the same commercial rate, Trafford was confident Richmond was reaping considerable savings from the plant.¹¹¹ He projected that were Norfolk to have the same lighting system as in Richmond, it would cost Norfolk nearly \$50,000 more than what Richmond paid. What is more, comparing Richmond to statistics compiled by the *Electrical World*, the superintendent determined that the city's cost per light per year was significantly lower than the average cost in the United States.¹¹² Indeed, examining the data more closely, it is clear that, with exceptions made for small municipalities, Richmond's cost per light was well below any city supplied by a private company.¹¹³ While acknowledging that lighting practices vary significantly from city to city, Trafford, in comparing Richmond to twenty-five similarly-sized cities, found that Richmond paid 43.7 cents per capita for its electric light system, while the average of the twenty five cities was 68.2 cents per capita. Indeed, even Atlanta, Trafford reported, paid 86 cents per capita, almost twice as much as Richmond.¹¹⁴ Public ownership was saving Richmond money.

¹¹¹ Responding to unnamed critics, who argued that the city was missing out on taxes that they would have gained from a contract with a private corporation, Trafford argued that electricity from the city plant was so cheap, that even with tax revenue, a private contract would cost more than the existing municipal system.

¹¹² According to the *Electrical World*, the average cost of an arc light in the United States in 1916 was \$60.69 per light, per year and the average cost of a 600 candle power incandescent lamp was \$59.93. Richmond's arc lights cost \$39.77 per year and its 600 candle power incandescent lamps cost \$29.65. Norfolk's arc and incandescent lamp costs were \$58.00 for both types.

¹¹³ "Street Lighting Statistics for Cities Over 25,000 Population, Showing Types of Lamps and Rates for Service," *Electrical World* 68, no. 10 (1916): 476-78.

¹¹⁴ Trafford did report that Atlanta's 86 cents per capita did garner it 8.2 candle power per capita, whereas Richmond's 43.7 cents garnered it 6.05, but as Trafford himself noted, given the different lighting practices of different cities, comparing them by per capita candle power is difficult if not spurious. E. W. Trafford, *Annual Report of the Electric Department of the City of Richmond, VA. For the Year Ending December 31, 1916* (Richmond: Richmond Press Inc., 1917), 4-13.

Nevertheless, problems continued to hamper the operation of the municipal plant and electric grid. By 1916, 1917, and 1918 the city's unwillingness to continually increase appropriations for the Electric Department—the offices of the Electric Plant and that of the City Electrician had been consolidated—meant that it was unable to offer, in the words of that department's report, sufficient services. In 1917, the plant and distribution system ran a deficit.¹¹⁵ In addition, even as the electric light system expanded, much of the city's residential areas—nearly nine square miles—remained dark. The city government believed it was, in fact, at legal risk from the lack of light. "In fact," Trafford warned, "the question of the sufficiency of all street lighting generally is in doubt."¹¹⁶ The existing plant could not support the gigantic expansion of the electric light system that its construction had spurred.

The war further hampered the development of the plant and grid. Overnight, the federal government placed restrictions on electric light usage and cannibalized electric generating facilities, including Richmond's. The price of coal doubled, copper skyrocketed, and carbon for arc lamps became difficult to obtain, while, simultaneously, below-average temperatures reduced the water power of the James. In addition, the city council directed the Electric Department to finally remove the city's remaining gas lamps, but made no expenditure for electric lamps to replace them. By May 1918, Trafford reported to the mayor that the city council was offering the bare minimum in expenditures necessary to operate the plant and grid at minimal levels—to cut costs, the department went as far as to remove all arc lamps in favor of cheaper

¹¹⁵ Common Council Journal, June 4, 1917 to Aug. 28, 1918, p. 112.

¹¹⁶ Trafford, 1915, 5.

incandescents.¹¹⁷ Over the next several years, as the city folded the gas, water, and electric departments into a single Department of Public Utilities, the plant operated at minimal expenses and the department and city council chose not to expand the municipal grid in any appreciable way (Figure 4-11).

Yet, by the turn of the 1920s, the municipal electric systems showed signs of stability and even maturity. It was, Trafford—the new head of the Public Utilities Department—reported, "the tug horse" of his department. The city operated over 4,300 lamps at a cost of \$18.79 per light—by far the most electric lights at the lowest cost the city had ever known. By 1918 and 1919, though the city was buying electricity to power the power plant, Richmond's city council unanimously decided to sell electricity to private consumers.¹¹⁸ In 1919, given the war effort, the plant sold the surplus to the United States government in lieu of the war.¹¹⁹ Even with severely restricted budgets, it seemed likely that, as Richmond and its electric plant entered the third decade of the twentieth century, the plant might one day make a profit—a boon policymakers had not anticipated.

While the city struggled to manage the sprawling municipal electric grid, what had happened to the private electric companies? Engineer Trafford reported to the mayor in 1915 that the Virginia Railway and Power Company's rates for electricity for public buildings were very competitive. Nevertheless, the city council approved a

¹¹⁷ Administrative Board, *Electrical Department* (Richmond: William Byrd Press, 1918), 5.

¹¹⁸ Common Council Journal, June 4, 1917 to Aug. 28, 1918, p. 230, 233.

¹¹⁹ E. W. Trafford, *Annual Report of the Electric Department of the City of Richmond, VA. For the Year Ending December 31, 1918* (Richmond: William Byrd Press, 1919), 3.

recommendation Trafford made to cancel all existing contracts with the Virginia Railway and Power Company for street lighting. By 1920, the municipal plant provided municipal lighting and the power company supplied electricity for everyone else. The electric company generated, with several power plants, tens of thousands of kilowatts for Richmond's residents—significantly more than the municipal plant could hope to achieve—and had strung almost 1,600 miles of wire across the city.¹²⁰ The Virginia Railway and Power Company controlled the electric power and light for private residences, businesses, factories, and the electric streetcar service in Richmond. Neither the Virginia Railway and Power Company threatened the public plant, nor did the plant threaten the survival of the company.

Summary

The debates over municipal ownership and the experience of operating a publicly-owned electric light plant in Richmond demonstrate much about turn-of-the-century southern urban policy-making, its consequences, and the process of electrification. As soon as electricity appeared in the 1880s, Boosterish policymakers understood the technological system to be central to future urban development, but held profoundly different views of the proper role of government in expanding the system. To many city leaders control over electrification was crucial to urban growth and progress. Between the late 1880s and the early 1900s, various city leaders pushed for public ownership. In the 1880s and 1890s, when faced with the emerging yet popular electric light, the mayor, prominent city councilmen, and city employees tried to protect the city's

¹²⁰ Richmond Railway and Power Company, *Eleventh Annual Report of the Virginia Railway and Power Company and Leased and Operated Companies Year Ended June 30, 1920*, 8-9, in Manuscripts, Virginia Historical Society.

monopoly on illumination (the gas works) and its role providing that service by championing a municipal electric plant. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Mayor McCarthy pursued a plant for the practical reason of securing energy for the city's dramatically-expanding water system and to ensure that the municipality, not corporations, provided electric light service. In both periods opponents argued that the city's finances precluded the expense of a plant and that electricity was a commodity to be sold by companies, not a service to be managed by the city. Indeed, the most fundamental argument between proponents and opponents was whether electric light was a service for municipalities to supply or a product for companies to sell. Though few characterized their arguments for or against in such language—more often city leaders spoke practically, not philosophically—at base level this was the question around which the larger question of municipal ownership revolved. In Richmond it is clear that those who envisaged electric light as a service like gas or water won.

When the city actually built a plant in 1910, the plant spurred the dramatic expansion of the electric street light system and raised costs. City officials, undoubtedly pleased at the expanded street light system (though displeased it could not be properly funded), now defended the municipal plant and grid, making the new argument that electric light was necessary for residents' convenience, safety, and security—the grid *needed* to expand. By 1920, the electric plant, supported by a mammoth and increasingly expensive distribution system, supplied cheap electric light to the city.

Between 1885 and 1920, both sides in the debate over public ownership made strong arguments. The proponents of the plant argued erroneously (at least in hindsight), that the electric companies and, indeed, electricity itself, constituted a mortal

danger to the city's monopolies on gas and water. They further argued that a municipal plant would save Richmond money, as opponents contended that the city could not afford the facility. This issue is more complex. Once the facility was built, it did generate cheap electricity, but its creation spawned a huge expansion of the municipal electric grid, increasing costs exponentially as the grid steadily expanded. Costs rose, but with it came more and better light. Whether the city benefited financially from the plant seemed to depend on the eye of the beholder.

Like thousands of cities across the United States and the American South in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Richmond acquired a municipally-owned electric plant. Regardless of whether the city benefited from the plant and the expanded municipal grid, the municipality had achieved the goal of generations of the city's leaders: managing the municipality's electric street light service from the production of electricity to its transmission to electric lights. Richmond's city leaders believed they needed power over electricity to ensure their city's progress. To southern urban leaders, turn-of-the-century city building required a vigorous municipal approach to electrification, to orchestrate the expansion of the electrical system to parallel the physical expansion of the city and other development and technological change. By 1920, with a plant and extensive distributing system, Richmond's city leaders had power over power.



Figure 4-1. Richmond in 1881. The Gas Works is circled in red (Source: The Gas Works, located along the James River, east of downtown, is circled in red. *Map of the city of Richmond, VA: a souvenir of the Yorktown Centennial, October 18th, 1881* (Richmond: 1881), Manuscripts, Virginia Historical Society.)

Richmond Gas Works, Gas Consumed 1881-1899

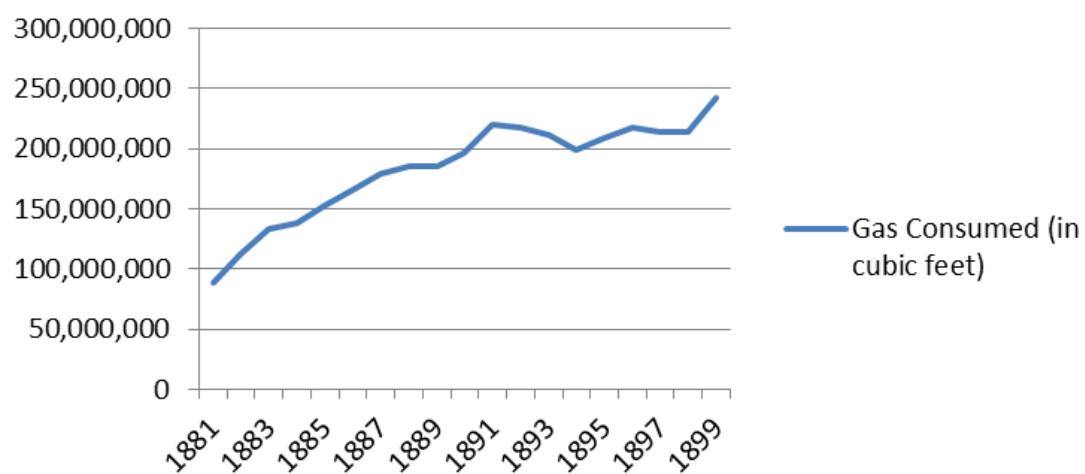


Figure 4-2. Gas Consumed in Richmond, 1881-1899 (Source: This data comes from the Gas Works annual reports.)

Richmond Gas Works, Profits for 1880-1899

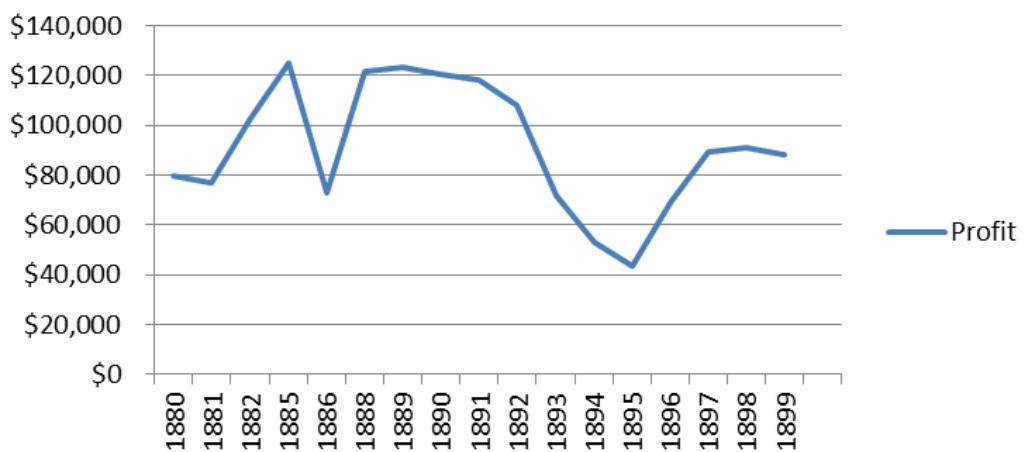


Figure 4-3. Richmond Municipal Gas Works Profits, by year, 1880-1899.

Gas Works, Profits for 1900-1912

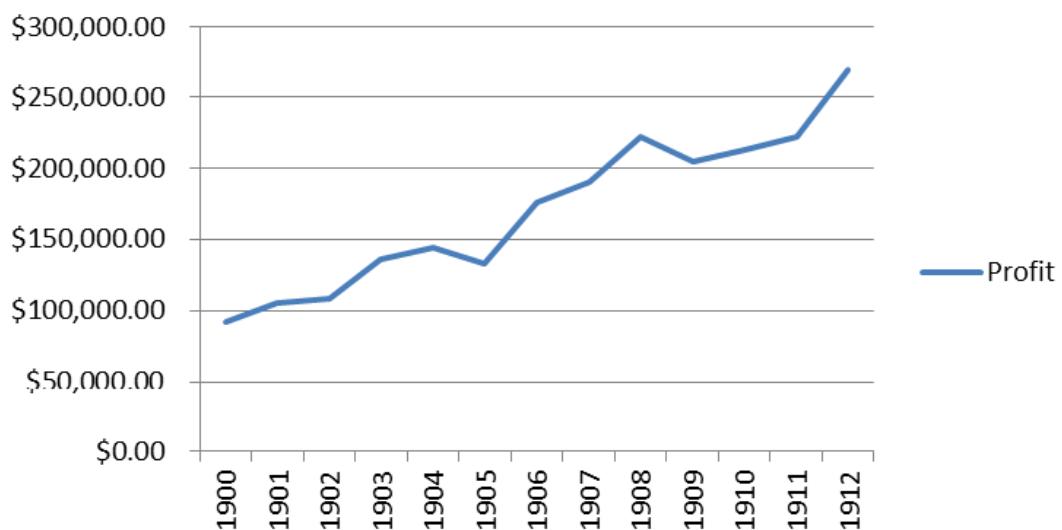


Figure 4-4. Richmond Municipal Gas Works Profits, 1900-1912.

Gas Consumed in Richmond, 1900-1912

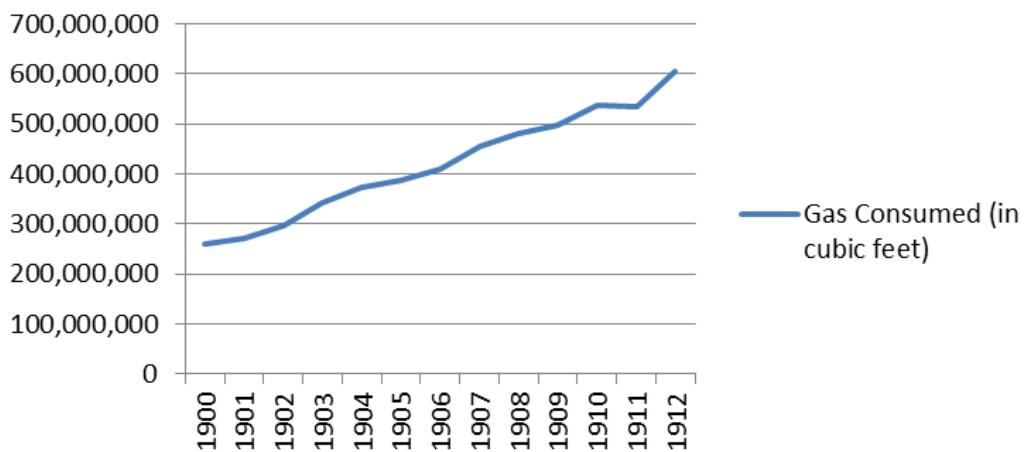


Figure 4-5. Gas Consumed in Richmond, 1900-1912.

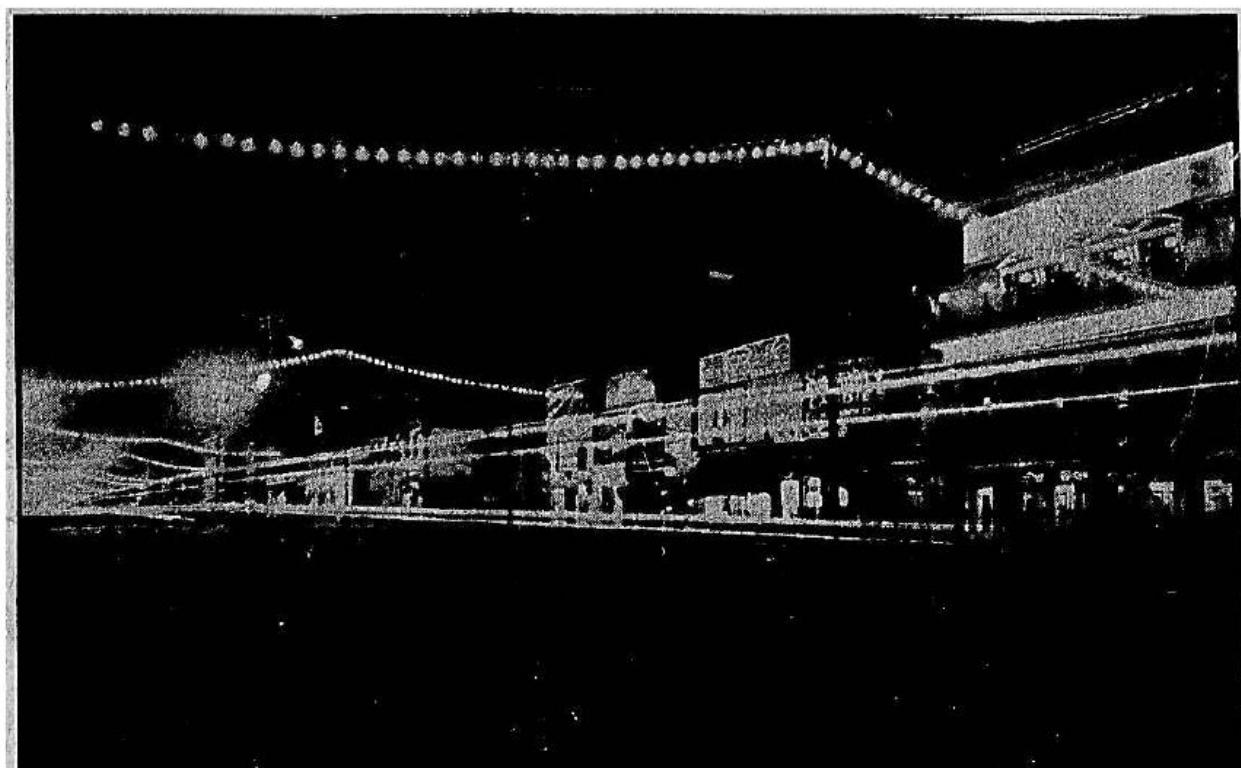


Figure 4-6. Broad Street at Night as Illuminated by the Passenger and Power Company, June 1907 (Source: "Scene on Broad Street Showing Illumination," *Times-Dispatch*, June 18, 1907, 1.)

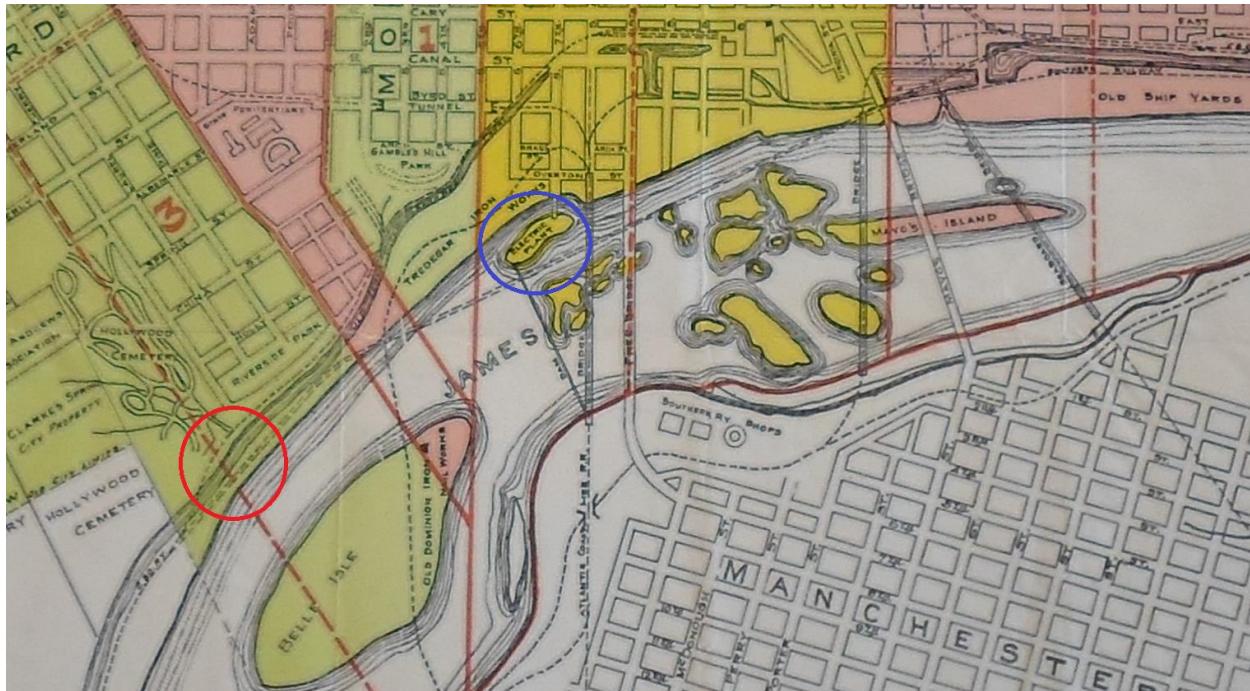


Figure 4-7. Richmond in 1907, showing the private electric plant (blue) and the old pump house (red) (Source: This map of Richmond, commissioned by the city, shows where the power company's electric plant is located, circled in blue. The red circle indicates the approximate location of the future municipal plant, which was located at the site of the city's old pump house. The gas works, circled in the earlier map, is outside the boundaries of this map, to the right (east). *Map of the city of Richmond, Va., showing present corporation lines as established Dec. 6, 1906, also old ward boundaries* (Richmond: Clyde W. Saunders, 1907), Manuscripts, Virginia Historical Society.

Municipal Electric Light Costs

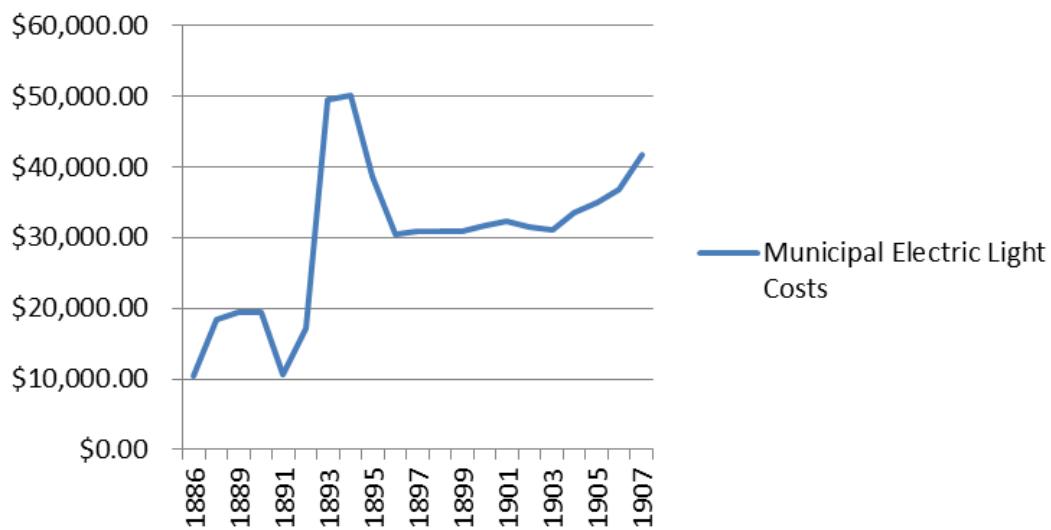


Figure 4-8. Richmond Municipal Electric Light Costs, 1886-1907.

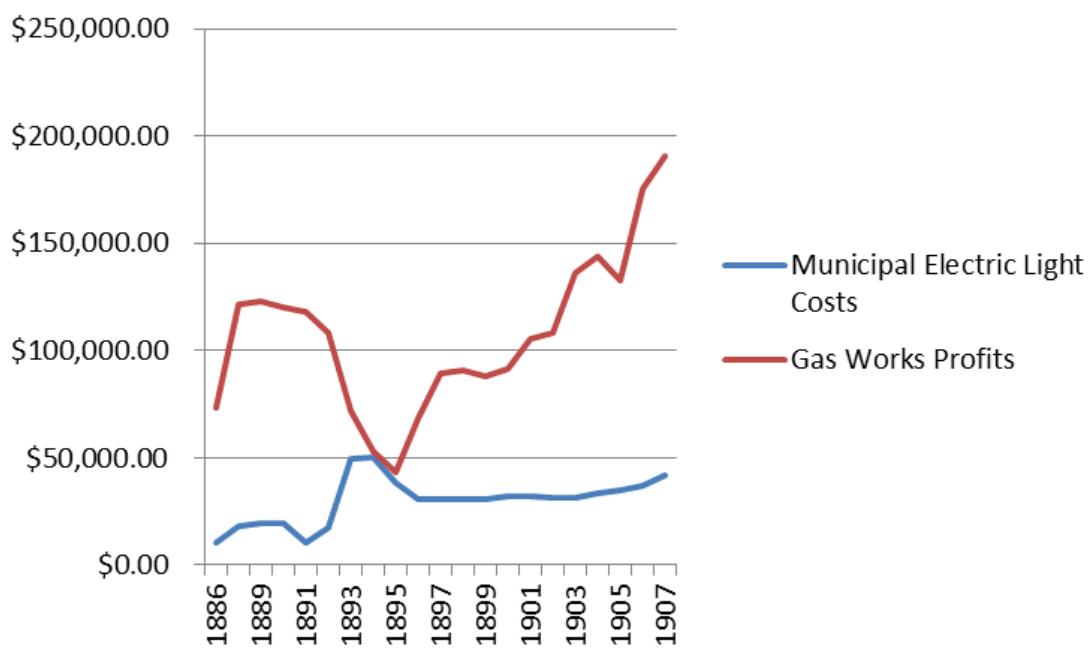


Figure 4-9. Municipal Electric Light Costs Compared with the Gas Works' Profits, 1886-1907.

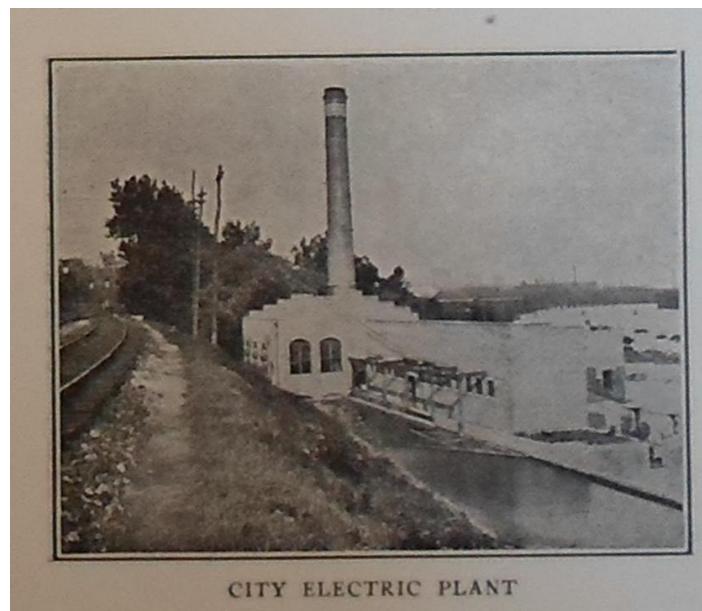


Figure 4-10. Richmond's Electric Plant in 1911 (Source: The American Association for Highway Improvement, First Good Roads Congress Under Auspices of The American Association for Highway Improvement, Jefferson Hotel, Richmond Virginia (1911), 35, in Manuscripts, Virginia Historical Society.)

Richmond Electric Light Expenditures, 1905-1920

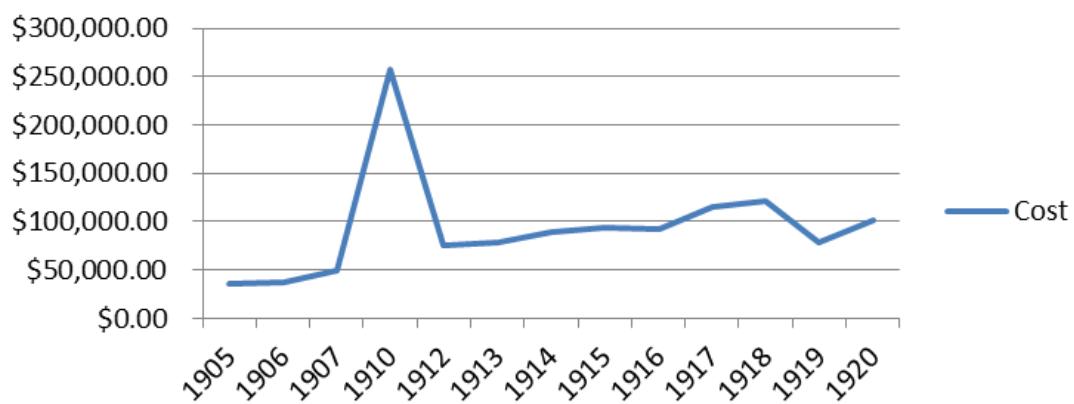


Figure 4-11. Richmond Electric Light Costs, 1905-1920.

CHAPTER 5

WHITE LIGHT: DESIGNING THE GRID IN ATLANTA, 1885-1910

Boosters had sought electric lights and trolleys hoping that the technologies would spark urban growth and development in the American South. As the electric technological systems gradually appeared and became fixtures in southern cities, however, they spurred new political and social issues. Electric systems, like other municipal services, required urban planning and design. As cities like Atlanta and Richmond gradually electrified and pursued the municipal ownership of electric light plants, boosterish city leaders simultaneously designed the electrification of their cityscapes, determining what electric power should be used for and for whom within each city it should serve. In Atlanta, the booster agenda of constructing electric light and trolley systems to benefit the business interest within the city resulted in systems that privileged middle and upper class whites.

Indeed, the city council initially placed electric lights in the wealthiest, and—given the economic and racial realities of the postbellum urban South—accordingly whitest, parts of the Gate City: merchant districts and upscale residential areas. This was typical in American cities.¹ In the early years, white merchants were among the first subscribers to the electric company and the city authorized the electrification of their shops. By the second decade of the twentieth century, the city would help prominent

¹ Peter Baldwin (among others) argues that the typical American city was divided into zones of light and dark in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and that the darker areas were often slums or places where the poor lived. Baldwin, however, primarily examines cities in the northeast where, he notes, cities were overwhelmingly white. The consequences of light distribution in those cities, accordingly, exacerbated class distinctions, not primarily racial divisions. This chapter examines how, in Atlanta, city officials designed similar systems that privileged wealthy whites and overlooked poor whites and African Americans. In both Atlanta and the average northeastern city, city leaders were designing the city without their poorer residents' interests in mind. Peter C. Baldwin, *In the Watches of the Night: Life in the Nocturnal City, 1820-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 18-19, 160.

merchants construct an electrified "Great White Way" in downtown Atlanta. As electricity spread, white residents increasingly petitioned the city for electric lights along their streets and the city obliged as African American neighborhoods remained largely unlit. Electric trolley service, designed by both street railway companies and municipal leaders, initially passed through downtown areas and out to upscale suburban parks—by the turn of the century the mass transit system would be segregated. As Atlanta entered the 1900s, city leaders began seeing electricity in a different light: no longer just an illuminant or power source, but a tool to improve public safety and deter crime. Consequently, since city leaders equated crime with the African American community, Atlanta and its police used electric light to police black crime while newspapers, enhancing existing stereotypes, sensationalized the imagery of bright electric light and black criminals. Electrification, then, was designed for the purposes of city leaders and the white population: to develop the municipality, serve economic interests, and maintain safety and security.²

This chapter argues that Atlanta's electric companies and municipal government served the needs and desires of the rich, merchant class, and middle class while neglecting poor white and African American neighborhoods.³ This chapter will also describe what the side effects were: white perceptions of the electric night and its connections to black crime, dark African American neighborhoods and bright white-

² Historians have documented how city leaders, for millennia, had designed urban light systems with combating crime as a primary goal. Indeed, Peter Baldwin argues that modern police forces developed alongside the advent of improved lighting in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Historians of the American South have not, however, thoroughly examined the correlation between electric light and white policing of African Americans in this period of southern history. The result, though not surprising, demonstrates the role technological change played in evolving race relations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Baldwin, *In the Watches of the Night*, 7, 15.

³ Historians of the American South have largely failed to examine the design and construction of municipal electric grids and their relationship to class and race. That is the focus of this chapter.

owned boulevards, segregated electric trolley service, and the construction of a an electrified downtown for prominent merchants. The creation of an unequal municipal electric grid in Atlanta in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries displays the exclusivity of the boosters' agenda. Boosters, like their contemporaries across the United States, were interested in using the electric grid to develop the city; the needs of the poor and African Americans were comparatively unimportant. This chapter demonstrates how the emergence of new technological systems may have been felt by all in the turn-of-the-century urban South (as all city residents made use of street light, for example), but it was not designed for the benefit of all.

Light for Whites

At the turn of the twentieth century in the Gate City, many middle- and upper-class whites would have lived within an electrified cityscape. Middle-class whites bought goods in electrified merchant shops, underneath huge electric signs. Wealthy whites, who lived within walking distance of downtown, strolled along upscale boulevards beaming with electric street lights that clearly illuminated every inch of every street. Electric light was not only for the wealthy; most white Atlantans lived close to electric street lights.⁴ The same was not the case for the majority of Atlanta's African American population. The booster dream of illuminating Atlanta did not include the poor or black—like other municipal services, such as water, sewer systems, fire protection, and street maintenance, public electric lights were designed for prominent whites. Indeed, in 1900, W.E.B. DuBois described the *dark* slums within which many blacks

⁴ James Michael Russell, *Atlanta: City Building in the Old South and the New, 1847-1890* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 222.

lived in the city.⁵ Even in 1907, *almost twenty-five years* after the city of Atlanta began introducing electric lights, residents of Brownsville, a middle-class African American community in South Atlanta, complained that they lacked both running water and electric light.⁶ For more than a generation, city leaders designed the electric street light system to serve whites.

Why did city leaders design the electric grid this way? Boosterish municipal leaders who had pushed for electrification to promote urban growth and development understood that, in the 1880s and 1890s especially, electrification was part of Atlanta's pursuit of municipal progress. Atlanta's city government treated electric street lights as it treated other city services: the goal was to benefit local businesses, industries, and to promote Atlanta and invite outside investment. That was why electric lights were installed in the first place. Accordingly, as Atlanta's city council received residents' petitions and mulled over where to install new and extraordinarily-expensive electric street lights, the priority of the city's image and economic progress dictated the electrification agenda.⁷ For electric light companies, like any other business, the goals were profits and survival—the companies installed lights where the city dictated and when and where residents, merchants, and industrialists ordered them.⁸

⁵ Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction*, 15th Anniversary ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 76.

⁶ "Negro Suburb Would be City," *Atlanta Georgian and News*, Mar. 5, 1907, 1.

⁷ This was not, in of itself, unusual for the planned electrification of cityscapes. As David Nye describes, cities often illuminated merchant districts and downtowns well before expanding electric street lights outward across the city. See David Nye, *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology, 1880-1940*(Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 29-84.

⁸ David R. Goldfield, *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers: Southern City and Region, 1607-1980* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 92; Ronald H. Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 9.

Merchants and Lights

The first Atlantans to enter into contracts with the electric company were prominent merchants and industrialists. This was the case for several reasons. The most important reason was that electric light was extremely expensive until the second and third decades of the twentieth century—only the most successful and financially-powerful Atlantans could afford installing it and paying electric bills. In addition, merchants throughout the United States understood—partially because of electricity's extreme expense—the new lights to be sensational and crowd-pleasing. Merchants believed they would increase sales and boost business. As a result, the electric companies targeted merchants. What is more, in the 1880s and 1890s in particular, when electric light remained an unproven and sometimes dangerous technology, anytime the electric company wanted to install wires or posts, it had to receive the sanction of the city, and Atlanta's city council wanted electric lights downtown.

Accordingly, in the early 1880s, the owners of the Kimball and Markham Houses (hotels) installed electric light. Simultaneously the managers of the various railroad sheds and depots and nearby cotton factories and mills installed electric lights. By 1883, the *Constitution* moved into a newly-electrified building. De Give's Opera House boasted electric light, as did P. H. Snook's furniture store and the Gate City National Bank. By the mid-1880s, numerous downtown office buildings advertised electrified-suites. Merchants, like Andrew J. Miller, a proprietor of furniture, carpets, and upholstery, began advertising that their stores were equipped with electric light. More and more shops, factories, and buildings debuted electric light as Atlanta entered the 1890s, including the large Century, Equitable, and Empire buildings. By the turn of the twentieth century, when the vast majority of Atlantans did not have electricity in their

homes, many downtown merchants had illuminated shops—most downtown buildings had electric light and power. By 1901, the owner of the Lyceum Theater erected, with the city council's permission, a large electric sign above Edgewood Avenue, from his building to a pole across the street. Quickly other merchants followed the Lyceum's example, erecting, with the city's sanction, signs across streets, above sidewalks, or on top of their stores. At night, downtown Atlanta would have glowed from the electric signs and lights both inside and outside shops—compared to the rest of Atlanta in the late nineteenth century, downtown was a beacon of electric light.⁹

Atlanta's boosters exploited the emerging technological system. In the early twentieth century, the city council supported local merchants' use of electric light by helping construct an electrified downtown. Across the country, cities were turning their centers into glowing emporiums called "great white ways." In late 1909, Atlanta's downtown merchants, chamber of commerce, and city government co-sponsored the Gate City's own "great white way," to run in November of that year between a horse show and the National Automobile Show. The city council understood the venture to be a gigantic advertisement for Atlanta—the city was expecting thousands of visitors during the automobile show—and unanimously supported its erection. Downtown, along Peachtree and Whitehall Streets, from Ellis to Mitchell and along Mitchell from Whitehall to the Terminal Depot and on Marietta from Peachtree to Forsyth (Figure 5-7), the city and merchants paid for over one hundred "flaming" arc lamps, glowing in one

⁹ "The Electric Light Company," *Constitution*, July 14, 1881; "Our Industrial Enterprises," *Constitution*, Apr. 11, 1882; "The New Constitution Building," *Constitution*, Oct. 7, 1883; "Let us Have Light," *Constitution*, Nov. 29, 1883; "The Electric Light To-Night," *Constitution*, Dec. 14, 1883; "The Gate City National Bank," *Constitution*, Dec. 30, 1883; "For Rent or Lease," *Constitution*, July 8, 1884; "The Merry, Merry Skate," *Constitution*, Oct. 20, 1886; "Andrew J. Miller's," *Constitution*, Nov. 14, 1886; "Sign Can Now Be Erected," *Constitution*, Sept. 13, 1901.

periodical's account like "golden noonday." An additional one thousand incandescent lights arranged in patterns and on streamers were placed at street corners and along storefronts, creating, in the words of the *Constitution*, a "long streak of white (Figure 5-1)." Businesses added to the sights. The George Muse Clothing Company, for example, installed electrical musical chimes below a large illuminated clock next to the company's large electric sign. The Capital City Laundry introduced a massive thirty-by-fifty foot sign housing nearly 800 lights. Merchants hoped that the electric light displays would pique consumer curiosity and boost patronage (Figure 5-2). The system was so successful that the city and merchants decided to leave it up until the New Year.¹⁰

Atlanta's "great white way" was lauded by newspapers and the city council. For Gate City boosters, electric light displays were central—even in the 1900s—to plans of achieving progress for downtown Atlanta and advertising the city. The *Southern Electrician*, based in Atlanta, called the city's Great White Way a positive step toward beautifying the city and attracting outsiders. "Business men," the trade magazine editorialized, "have realized that in order to have their portion of the trade the thoroughfare leading to their place of business must be brilliantly lighted and that it must be made attractive as a promenade for shoppers." The exotic lighting system was a "profitable investment" for the municipality, the periodical predicted; property values were likely to rise considerably. Merchants, who had hoped the lights would increase sales, realized these dreams. Soon nearby storeowners demanded similar electric light displays to be erected along their shops.

¹⁰ "Atlanta's Great White Way," *Southern Electrician* 8, no. 5 (Nov., 1909): 169; "Atlanta's Great White Way," *Southern Electrician* 8, no. 6 (Dec., 1909): 213; "Electrical Chimes On Great White Way," *Constitution*, Oct. 27, 1909; "Great White Way as Bright as Day," *Constitution*, Nov. 4, 1909; "Fitting Climax for White Way," *Constitution*, Nov. 7, 1909.

In 1910, the Great White Way became a permanent fixture of downtown Atlanta. In that year, owners and renters along Peachtree and Whitehall streets invested \$15,000 into an enlarged illumination system and gave it to the municipality to administer thereafter. The *Constitution* declared that the city's Great White Way would be "one of the greatest advertisements the city has ever had" and would be "a source of pride to every taxpayer in Atlanta."¹¹

When it appeared that some property holders along Peachtree Street would block the Great White Way's erection in the late summer of 1910, Atlanta's city government stepped in. Mayor Robert Maddox, who had visited the "great white ways" in New York, Chicago, and other northern and western cities, called for unanimous support for the project. "A well-lighted business district," Maddox argued, "not only advertises the city to the world, but it means more business to the merchants and others located therein." To achieve the progress other American cities were attaining, the mayor argued, Atlanta needed a Great White Way. "More people," he continued, "walk the streets in the evenings and a city properly illuminated gets three more hours of activity in its business section out of every 24 hours." The Great White Way, then, was part and parcel of the booster community's plans for downtown Atlanta's continued development.¹²

When the improved Great White Way was finished in late 1910, the city celebrated its erection with a parade, complete with floats, automobiles, marching militias, and speeches. On December 15, 1910, the city turned on the system for the

¹¹ "Great White Way Now Certainty," *Constitution*, Aug. 16, 1910, 1.

¹² "'Great White Way' Now Up to Council," *Constitution*, Aug. 7, 1910; "Great White Way Now Certainty," *Constitution*, Aug. 16, 1910; "Lighting Plans at Crucial Stage," *Constitution*, Sept. 4, 1910.

first time as tens of thousands of Atlantans and visitors watched along the streets. Every shop and business remained open to profit from the festival atmosphere. The *Constitution* reported that it was the largest crowd ever assembled in the city. The light itself was reportedly stunning. The daily reported that the streets were "transformed as if by some magic hand into a perfect blaze of dazzling light."¹³

What had already been the most illuminated section of Atlanta was now bright, dazzling, and dramatic. Downtown merchants in Atlanta had been the first to install electric wires and erect electric lights inside and outside their shops and had benefited from the support of Atlanta's city government. By the early twentieth century, these same merchants began debuting gigantic electric signs. By the second decade of the century, a joint venture by the city and downtown shopkeepers resulted in thousands of lights, in various patterns and colors, lining the Gate City's most prosperous streets—merchants outside of this area would not benefit from the spectacle. Atlanta's city government believed bright light was central to urban development. The city's installation of residential street lights followed similar patterns and was supported by the same booster philosophy of progress and development.

Residential Street Lights

As downtown Atlanta glowed with electric lights from merchant shops as early as the early 1880s—and glowed more and more as both merchants and the city added electric light—electric street lights replaced gas, gasoline, and oil lamps in front of residences and businesses beyond the city center. Gradually electric lights expanded from downtown, first at major intersections, soon followed by street lights along white-

¹³ "Bathed in Light, City Celebrates Great White Way," *Constitution*, Dec. 16, 1910.

collar white homes on streets radiating from downtown. By the 1890s, electric arc and incandescent street lights could be found along most predominantly-white streets, offering bright light for pedestrians, wagon and horse traffic, small shopkeepers, and homeowners, while many predominantly-black streets and neighborhoods remained dark. As the city entered the twentieth century, more and more electric lights were installed across Atlanta and, gradually, more black Atlantans received more and better light, but the city's emerging electric street lighting grid was designed by and for white Atlanta.

Any analysis of where the city council and electric company placed electric lights in relation to residences must be preceded with a brief description of Atlanta's population distribution (Figure 5-3). In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Atlanta was not a strictly-segregated city in terms of residential areas.¹⁴ Atlanta was relatively compact compared to many American cities—in 1903, for example, its 11-square-mile area was thirty times smaller than New York City and roughly the size Boston had been in 1850. The municipality remained a "walking city." Wealthy whites who lived along upscale boulevards like Peachtree Street were within a block or two of working-class homes. Indeed, whites and blacks, the poor and wealthy, lived close to one another in this budding southern metropolis. Nevertheless, there were discernible patterns. White-collar whites were likely to live near the city center along specific boulevards, while working-class whites lived closer to industrial sites and the railroads. African Americans along with lower-class whites were more likely to live in peripheral

¹⁴ Whites attempted in the 1910s to segregate the city by law, but the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that laws segregating people based on property ownership violated the fourteenth amendment. Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 104.

areas, a half-mile or more from Atlanta's center. Africans Americans, like whites, lived throughout the Gate City, but gravitated toward the eastern, western, and southern periphery, the first, third, and fourth wards, and to slums in those low-lying areas. The growth of the city, the construction of suburbs, and the expansion of trolley services from the 1880s through the early twentieth century would change the layout and population of the city—segregated neighborhoods would become more distinct as time went by and wealthy whites would gravitate to upscale suburbs—but the municipality remained a small, heterogeneous community, with distinct neighborhoods throughout this period.¹⁵

As the city converted from gas to electric light in the late 1880s, gas lamps illuminated many of the city's streets (Figure 5-4). As Map 2 indicates, between 1882 and 1888, the city of Atlanta erected dozens of new gas, gasoline, and oil lamps and almost all of them were placed outside downtown, away from the thickest concentrations of white-collar whites—these areas had been the gas street lighting priority in decades past. Upscale white areas were already well illuminated. As the lighting system expanded, however, it was not expanding for the benefit of Atlanta's black population and of the poorest whites. In particular, the new street lights failed to illuminate the densest black centers of population along creeks in the northeast, southeast, and western periphery.

¹⁵ Russell, 215-222; Howard L. Preston, *Automobile Age Atlanta: The Making of a Southern Metropolis, 1900-1935* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1979), 9-15; Timothy J. Crimmins, "Introduction to 'The Gate City'" in *Atlanta in 1890: "The Gate City": The Original 1890 Edition with a New Introduction and Annotations*, edited by the Atlanta Historical Society (Atlanta: Mercer University Press, 1986), xi; Joseph F. Thompson and Robert Isbell, *Atlanta: A City of Neighborhoods* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994); John Dittmer, *Black Georgia in the Progressive Era, 1900-1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 12-14; Atlanta City Council and the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, *Hand Book of the City of Atlanta: A Comprehensive Review of the City's Commercial, Industrial, and Residential Conditions* (Atlanta: Southern Industrial Publishing Company, 1898), 86.

The city placed the gas, gasoline, and oil lamps according to its boosterish ideas about urban development. In other words, city leaders, in planning street lighting, sought to benefit the city's business interests, downtown, and prominent neighborhoods. The city council's committee on gas lamps had the responsibility to approve and suggest locations for new lamps and more often than not the city council approved the committee's recommendations. The city erected street lights close to industrial sites along the railroad tracks, northwest of downtown and near the Atlanta Cotton Factory on Marietta. The new lights benefited Atlanta's middle-class white population. To the west of downtown, along Mangum and Hayne Streets, the city erected over a dozen street lights along the homes of white dry goods and produce merchants, undertakers, liquor sellers, watch makers, grocers, police officers, tailors, and carpenters. Towards the southwest of downtown, along Rawson, McDaniel, and Garnett Streets, the city council erected lamps in neighborhoods of white clerks, clothiers, shoe salesmen, carpenters, railroad workers, painters, mattress makers, salesmen, newspaper employees, and jewelers. In the northwest, a half-mile or less from the center of Atlanta, the city erected street lamps, mostly gasoline, along Simpson Street—where an eclectic group of white foundry workers, mill employees, lawyers, railroad workers, clerks, and farmers lived. Some African American families lived there, among them nurses and millers, but not many. Many of the African Americans who lived along these streets were in-house servants, cooks, or laundresses.¹⁶

The city did illuminate several African Americans corners and boulevards in the 1880s. Hilliard Street, east of downtown Atlanta was a predominantly African American

¹⁶ U.S. Census of Population and Housing, Fulton County, Georgia.

neighborhood. The city erected a gasoline and gas lamp along the street. Nearby on Irwin Street, where many black laborers lived, the city council installed a gas lamp. New lights were erected along the prominent African American merchant thoroughfare, Wheat Street. This street was one of black Atlanta's cultural centers, with several prominent churches, fraternal societies, offices, nightclubs, and stores located along it. Along Wheat, where black barbers, butchers, grocers, hotel employees, butlers, and others lived, the city installed several street lights.¹⁷

Despite several lights along a handful of predominantly-black streets, many African American areas remained unlit. Along Fort Street, located almost a mile east of downtown, (running north-south) where many African Americans lived, including day laborers, washer women, and other mostly-lower class blacks, the city failed to place any gas, gasoline, or oil lamps in this period. Similarly, along North Butler Street, one block to the west of Fort, where African American wood cutters, draymen, washer women, laborers and several carpenters lived, the city did not erect one street light. On the other hand, one block west of North Butler, the city installed half-a-dozen street lamps along the predominantly-white North Calhoun Street. Martin Street, southeast of downtown, which was built alongside a low-lying creek—a mostly African American street—hosted no new lights during the 1880s. Terry Street, near Martin, where black washer women, draymen, preachers, day laborers, brick layers, blacksmiths, and wood haulers lived, remained dark in the 1880s. Those whites who lived along these streets

¹⁷ U.S. Census of Population and Housing, Fulton County, Georgia; Bayor, 6.

were almost exclusively working-class or unskilled laborers. Much of Atlanta's black and poor white population received no artificial illumination into the 1890s.¹⁸

The city council's erection of electric street lights in the 1880s and 1890s followed similar patterns. The city council targeted wealthy residential areas first. As was the case with approving the electrification of downtown merchant shops, the city council approved street lights in front of wealthy homes as part of the larger booster program of development, growth, and advertising Atlanta—by lighting these streets, it was lighting the homes of factory managers, bankers, politicians, preachers, shopkeepers, lawyers, and other politically-, socially-, and financially-powerful people. As the city council pivoted from gas lighting to electric lighting in the late 1880s, city planners developed a plan to erect electric lights. As early as the mid-1880s, the committee on lamps and gas, whose members were advocates of electrification, laid out Atlanta's emerging street lighting plan: "in the center by electric lights, a radius still further out by gas, and still further by gasoline lamps." This plan—as the city councilmen would have known—matched the population distribution of white-collar whites, working-class whites, and African Americans, giving wealthy whites the best light and blacks, the worst.¹⁹

In the first years of electric street lighting, white Atlantans petitioned the city council for electric arc and incandescent lights to be placed in front of their property and businesses. The first streets and street corners to host electric light were almost exclusively downtown. After first placing approximately 20 electric lights in the city center—probably along Alabama, Marietta, Peachtree, Whitehall, Pryor, and Decatur

¹⁸ African American newspapers did not campaign for lights in the period and the city council did not wrestle with the issue. U.S. Census of Population and Housing, Fulton County, Georgia (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880).

¹⁹ Vol. 10, p. 540, Atlanta City Council Minutes; Russell, 218-21.

Streets—the city erected more downtown as the 1880s progressed.²⁰ As Figure 5-5 demonstrates, in the first years of electrification—before the city council decided to switch from gas, gasoline, and oil street lights to electric ones—the city council placed electric lights at downtown railroad intersections, the union and freight depots, prominent merchant corners and office buildings, and in the streets surrounding the State Capitol Building and the county court house. The city also placed an electric arc light at the intersection of Peachtree and West Peachtree, two of most upscale residential boulevards in the Gate City (Figure 5-6). The *Constitution* reported that couples enjoyed "promenading" along the opulent, electrically-illuminated streets and watching the erection of electric light poles.²¹ Atlanta's city leaders placed the new, exciting, and ultra-bright lights in the most upscale, wealthiest, politically-important, and white area of Atlanta.²²

By the late 1880s, as Atlanta's city council decided to switch from gas, gasoline, and oil lamps to electric street lights, the committee of lamps and gas declared that the electric lights were "thoroughly distributed over the entire city." This was not, strictly-speaking, accurate. Residents of Atlanta's peripheral areas, where many African American and blue-collar whites lived, had also petitioned the city council for electric

²⁰ Newspaper reports, anecdotal evidence, and general city records indicate that the city's first electric street lights were located along the downtown sections of these streets. City records that definitely prove this do not or no longer exist, however. "Electricity on the Streets," *Constitution*, Nov. 18, 1884.

²¹ "Through the City," *Constitution*, Dec. 26, 1883.

²² My analysis of Atlanta's street lighting is based on city council records, city annual reports, newspapers and other primary sources. The records in which Atlanta pinpointed where every single street light existed and where each new street light was to be constructed no longer exist. The city council, however, recorded when they approved new streets lights and where, generally, these new lights were to be located (oftentimes noting on which street). My analysis, accordingly, is based on partial and incomplete information. Nevertheless, coupled with the mayor's and committee's annual reports and detailed newspaper reporting, I am able to reconstruct with a reasonable degree of certainty where the city erected many (if not all) of Atlanta's electric street lights in the 1880s, 1890s, and early 1900s.

street lights in the 1880s, but with far less to show for it (Figure 5-5). Indeed, the city simultaneously reported in 1888 that Atlanta's existing electric street lights were thus far placed "throughout the business part of the city and on all of the main streets leading from the center." Nevertheless, in the same year, the city council's lamp and gas committee declared in its annual report that soon, unlike most American cities, "[e]very street crossing will have an electric light." That was the publicly-declared plan.²³

In pursuit of that goal, between the late 1880s and the mid-1890s, the city council erected hundreds of electric lights across the Gate City (Figure 5-7).²⁴ The city erected lights along most major streets and at many of the important intersections, replacing the gas, gasoline, and oil lights that had long illuminated the city. The priorities that had dictated the expansion of the gas street lighting system and the early electric lighting system, however, continued to dominate where lights were placed. Indeed, the city council's electric light committee, concerned about the high cost of each light, was focused on placing electric lights where they would most benefit the municipality. "The indiscriminate placing of large arc lights," the committee argued in 1890, "would be of no public good." By 1895, electric lights—now the street lighting technology of choice in the Gate City—illuminated more African American homes, shops, and streets, but compared to the expansion of the grid along white-dominated merchant districts and residential areas, the increase was marginal. The electric light committee made it clear that there were priorities. When you consider that Atlanta is "91 square miles," the electric light committee reported, "the difficulty of lighting a great" city such as Atlanta

²³ Franklin M. Garrett, *Atlanta and Environs: A Chronicle of Its People and Events*, Vol. II (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1954), 182-3.

²⁴ As with the other maps, this map of erected electric street lights is based on partial information. It is sufficient, however, to demonstrate the priorities of the city council.

"may be imagined." The electric street light grid, like the maze of gas pipes and posts before it, was one that served the needs, desires, and dreams of white Atlanta. For boosters, light was primarily a tool for developing and advertising the city, not for improving residents' lives.²⁵

Between 1888, when the city of Atlanta converted to electric street lights, and 1895, the year of the Cotton States and International Exposition, lights were placed around Atlanta and increasingly in the suburbs in the western periphery towards the upscale community of West End, to the east near upscale Inman Park, and to the northeast towards Ponce de Leon and the Exposition Park. Most lights, however, were placed along upper- and middle-class white neighborhoods and businesses. North of downtown, electric lights were placed along North Avenue and Pine and Venable Streets, where white blacksmiths, cooks, restaurant workers, police captains, clerks, painters, lawyers, ministers, and a deputy United States Marshall lived. Along West Peachtree, where successful white retail merchants, grocers, railroad managers, clerks, and others lived, the city erected numerous electric street lights. To the west of downtown, along Haynes, Davis, and Vine Streets, white molders, painters, tailors, teachers, grocers, policemen, barbers, cotton dealers, butchers, railroad conductors, stokers, and printers enjoyed ample light at night. To the southwest, incandescent and arc lights provided illumination for white bookkeepers, carpenters, clerks, and grocers along Walker Street. To the east, toward Inman Park, along East Harris Street, white teachers, printers, laborers, railroad engineers, preachers, bakers, doctors, and

²⁵ Vol. 12, p. 502, Atlanta City Council Minutes.

dentists—along with a smattering of black day laborers—received new electric light posts and overhead arc lamps.

South-southwest of downtown—one of the whitest parts of Atlanta in this period—the city erected a large number of electric lights. They were put up along Whitehall Street, where white telegraph operators, guano merchants, bookkeepers, teachers, lawyers, grocers, retired planters, ministers, traveling salesmen, tea merchants, druggists, millers, liquor dealers, sawyers, electricians, and clerks of all kinds lived and worked. Lights were also placed along McDaniel Street, where the city council had previously prioritized the erection of gas lamps for middle-class clerks and others. Along Windsor Street, new lamps provided light for commuting bookkeepers and dry goods merchants. Lawyers, merchants, railroad watchmen, and others who lived along Pullium Street resided under bright light.²⁶

Lights were also placed along the homes of working-class and poor white Atlantans. Along North Avenue (running east-west), about a mile north of downtown, street lights were placed near the front doors of saw mill workers, carpenters, laborers, shoe shop employees, and brick masons. Along East Fair Street, which ran east-west from downtown, white laborers and plasterers returned home to bright lights over their stoops. Many black workers who lived along these streets, who lived under similar material circumstances as their white neighbors, would have also benefited from the bright light.²⁷

²⁶ U.S. Census of Population and Housing, Fulton County, Georgia, 1880.

²⁷ U.S. Census of Population and Housing, Fulton County, Georgia, 1880.

Lights were not placed along many poor white and African American streets, but several saw increased illumination. Along Rawson Street, south of downtown, electric lights were placed at street corners in a mixed white, black, and biracial neighborhood that included African Americans servants, brick masons, washerwomen, carpenters, white auctioneers and butchers, and biracial draymen—though the city erected more electric lights in the whitest end of the street. South of Rawson, along Richardson, the city placed electric lights along the homes of comparatively poor white washerwomen and cooks and wealthier physicians and teachers while also arranging lights near the residences of black domestic servants, draymen, carpenters, and coachmen. Wheat Street, where as previously described many African Americans businesses and cultural institutions existed, saw new electric street lights at intersections. Numerous black families who lived along predominantly-white streets also enjoyed electric street lights.

Many black streets and neighborhoods remained dark. The city council did not choose to illuminate many of the predominantly-black streets south-southeast of downtown Atlanta. Terry Street, which had seen no new gas, gasoline, or oil lamps in the 1880s, failed to receive any incandescent or arc lights in the early 1890s. Nearby Richmond Street similarly saw no electric lights. Such was the case for those who lived on the majority-black Valentine, Jenkins, and King Streets. To the east of downtown, along Pratt, Fillmore, and Bell Streets, majority-black populations remained dark at night. Werner Street, which hosted poor white and black laborers, also failed to receive any light in the 1880s and 1890s. In the African American community of Summerhill, south-southeast of downtown—built on the grounds of an old refuse dump—residents lacked street lights, water and sewerage systems, and paved streets. Decatur Street,

home to many African American businesses, remained comparatively dark as white-owned business districts beamed.²⁸

Gradually, as the electric grid expanded and as the city entered the twentieth century, electric lights appeared all across Atlanta. Thomas Martin, early historian of Atlanta, declared that by the turn of the twentieth century, "practically all Atlanta's streets" were "lighted by electricity." Yet, it was not as complete in some areas as it was in others. In 1897, the city electrician reported that many "places that need lights and should have them" were "entirely without any." Lights were gradually covering most streets, most street corners, and most neighborhoods regardless of the race, income, or employment of their residents, though the earlier trends continued—most light was in mostly white residential areas, industrial sites, and the financial center of the city. After a burst of electric light erection in the 1880s and early 1890s, the city slowed the rate of electric light installation in the late 1890s and early 1900s—in 1898, the city actually removed more lights than it installed. By the late 1890s, the city of Atlanta was gradually incorporating black areas into the grid, but as the city was growing, lights and whites were beginning to move farther from the center of the community, especially to the wealthy community of West End. Electric streetcars and urban growth were spurring suburbanization, as in many American cities. By the turn of the twentieth century, most new electric lights were erected in white-dominated suburbs and upscale peripheral areas.²⁹

²⁸ Thomas Mashburn Deaton, "Atlanta During the Progressive Era," (PhD diss., University of Georgia, 1969), 171-76.

²⁹ City records become problematic in the early twentieth century onward in regards to lighting. Thomas H. Martin, *Atlanta and Its Builders: A Comprehensive History of the Gate City of the South*, vol. 2 (Atlanta: Century Memorial Publishing Company, 1902), 96; Vol. 16, p. 736, Atlanta City Council Minutes; Vol. 17, p. 711, Atlanta City Council Minutes.

As historian of Atlanta, James Michael Russell argues, the expansion of city services in Atlanta generally followed the movement of white-collar whites. Indeed, electric street lighting followed the lead of white Atlantans—who dominated the city's politics, finances, and industrial base. The city prioritized the erection of electric street lights along white streets, around factories and important merchant shops, at key intersections and railroad crossings, and near important municipal and state buildings. Nevertheless, as the years went by, city leaders slowly began introducing electric lights in black areas, in particular black merchant districts. As was the case with gas, gasoline, and oil lighting before, the city was interested in providing street light in African American areas. City leaders did not want to provide light solely for the convenience of African Americans, however. As will be demonstrated toward the end of this chapter, white city leaders, focused on public safety and crime, had specific reasons for wanting bright lights in African American neighborhoods.³⁰

Streetcars

Like Atlanta's expansive electric street lighting system, Atlantans of all races and economic classes had access to electric trolleys in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Like the electric street lighting system, however, the degree to which one had access to electric trolleys would largely depend upon one's race. As Atlanta's street railway companies progressively electrified, company managers and city councilmen initially designed the new electric mass transit lines to serve the white population. By the 1890s, like the horse-car lines before it, the electric trolleys served the needs and wants of all Atlantans—electric streetcars traveled throughout the Gate

³⁰ Russell, 222.

City. The trolley system—orchestrated by profit-seeking managers—quickly extended into several black neighborhoods, though more car lines passed through white streets. In addition, the service would eventually become unequal as politicians instituted segregated trolley service.

Atlanta's electric trolleys, appearing in 1889 and slowing expanding service in the early 1890s, primarily allowed city residents to travel in and out of the central business district (Figure 5-8). The first electric line, the Edgewood Street Railroad Company, traveled from downtown Atlanta, up the newly-built Edgewood Avenue out to Inman Park. The city, in helping the street railway company construct a line to Inman Park, destroyed African American homes along Foster Street—what the *Constitution* called "a conglomeration of ugly buildings and uglier shanties"—in order to make way for the creation of Edgewood Avenue. Inman Park, on the east side of Atlanta, was a planned suburban community, complete with gently-winding streets, subdivided lots, tree-lined boulevards and an enclosed park with a small lake. Unlike much of Atlanta, its streets were paved and the homes were served by sewers, gas mains, and water lines. Joel Hurt, owner of the Edgewood line and principal investor in Inman Park (owned by the East Atlanta Land Company), designed the new electric trolley line to shuttle prosperous Atlantans from this upscale suburb to downtown and back. Hurt, who would control all of the mass transportation properties within the Gate City by the late 1890s, sought increased profits and the expansion of the electric streetcar system while simultaneously spurring suburbanization through land sales.³¹

³¹ Bayor, 7-8; "A Beautiful Place," *Constitution*, Feb. 23, 1890.

The second electric line, also opening in 1889, operated by the Fulton County Railroad Company, ran what was known as the "Nine-Mile Circle," beginning at Broad and Marietta streets downtown. The line ran out Broad to Peachtree to Houston, out Houston and Highland to Boulevard and up Boulevard and back. It brought people out to Piedmont Park and became a favorite of white picnic groups and Sunday adventurers. By 1891, another electric line traveled from downtown out to Ponce de Leon Springs and back—transportation targeting suburbanites and the well-to-do who wanted to get out of the city on weekends. In 1892, another company planned to lay tracks for an electric line out to the suburb of East Lake. Though anyone could ride the Edgewood, Fulton, Ponce de Leon, or East Lake lines, it was clear that the city and the trolley company initially targeted wealthy suburbanites for electric traction.³²

As streetcar services expanded in the 1890s and early 1900s, electric trolleys became available to much of Atlanta's population. In 1890, electric, dummy, and horse-drawn streetcar lines traveled over 45 miles of line. In 1897, streetcars rolled over approximately 75 miles of track. By 1900, electric cars traveled over 132 miles of line within Atlanta. Almost 13 million people traveled on the electric trolleys every year. The companies' lines reached out from Atlanta's center in every direction, reaching every suburb and numerous neighborhoods.

In support of these lines, the city council, beginning in the early 1890s, had put its weight behind electric transportation. In late 1891, the electric light and street railways

³² Preston, 9; Don H. Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1860-1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 190-96; Russell, 216; Wade H. Wright, *History of the Georgia Power Company, 1855-1956* (Atlanta: Georgia Power, 1957), 28; Harlee Branch, Jr., *Georgia and the Georgia Power Company: A Century of Free Enterprise!* (New York: Newcomen Society, 1957), 13, in Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center; Garrett, 191; "In and About Atlanta," *Constitution*, June 4, 1889; "Some Changes," *Constitution*, July 3, 1891; "Atlanta Environed by Thriving Suburbs," *Constitution*, Sept. 4, 1892.

committee (by this period, the gas lamp committee had evolved into this encompassing electric one) began denying ordinances for steam-powered streetcars and pushing for trolleys to aid the development of the city. "The electric car lines now traversing almost every section of the city," the committee reported, "are a great public convenience, and tend to the enhancement of values of all city property, as well as suburban, and should be encouraged." The city council eagerly approved new electric lines. Like electric lights, the city council had the power to decide where each company would lay trolley lines. The city councilmen placed lights where they believed they would aid urban development, the electric company proposed running lines (which the city council approved) where they believed they would maximize ridership and revenues. Consequently, in the early 1890s, electric streetcars appeared downtown and along Peachtree, West Peachtree, and other primarily white and white-collar neighborhoods.³³

From the beginning, African Americans had access to the electric trolleys. The last horse-car line, which operated along Wheat Street (soon to be renamed Auburn Avenue)—Atlanta's most prominent African American merchant district—converted to electricity in 1894. As early as 1890, though, an electric line transported Atlantans up and down Wheat. Electric trolleys also traveled up and down Decatur Avenue, a prominent African American street along which middle-class black Atlantans operated numerous shops and businesses. By the mid 1890s, other lines traveled across other primarily-black boulevards such as Peters and Fair Streets—the trolley companies targeted the middle and upper class within the African American community. The

³³ Letter from Charles Collier to Daniel Reynolds, p. 431-2, Letters and Communications of the Mayor, 1897, Atlanta City Records, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center; "Peachtree Cars," *Constitution*, Apr. 19, 1892.

majority of electric trolley service was, however, concentrated in downtown Atlanta, along prominent white residences, businesses, and industries.

What is more, as Map 5 demonstrates, the electric lines may have expanded greatly over a five-year period, but poor African American populations in the western and especially southeastern periphery had little access to the trolley lines. Streets that had yet to see an electric light, like Terry, Pratt, Fillmore, and Bell, did not have ready access to electric mass transportation. In contrast, for those residents who lived along upscale white-dominated streets that had numerous electric lights, such as McDaniel, Whitehall, and Peachtree, the latest transit system passed in front of their doorstep. Street Railway companies did not want (apparently seeing little profit to be had from running lines through poor areas), and Atlanta's city council did not demand or request, electric trolley lines running through the city's black neighborhoods. Nevertheless, by the turn of the twentieth century, Atlantans, black and white, had access to the electric trolley system and could ride it even if it did not run past their home or their workplace. As the first decade of the twentieth century unfolded, streetcar service would continue to expand, but companies (along with the city council) would continue to prioritize service for the wealthy, white-collar residents, white workers, and suburbanites.³⁴

As electric trolley service expanded, however, it became segregated. Before the 1890s, white and black Atlantans could ride the streetcars as equals. African Americans could legally sit wherever they wanted. As electric street railways expanded and as streetcar service became increasingly integral to urban life, however, the state of

³⁴ Martin, 487; City of Atlanta, *Charters of Street Railway Companies and of Corporations Whose Franchises Have Been Acquired by Georgia Railway & Electric Company Also Charters of Georgia Railway & Electric Company, Atlanta Gas Light Company and Gate City Gas Light Company* (Atlanta: Blosser Press, 1906), 171, 186, in Atlanta City Records, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center.

Georgia and Atlanta moved to end the legal equality. In 1891, the Georgia General Assembly passed a law permitting companies and cities to segregate street railway services. The law was not mandatory, but several of Atlanta's streetcar companies chose to enforce it. Though it would be years before every street railway company in Atlanta completely segregated services, from this point forward blacks were often compelled to sit in the rear of each electric trolley. White policemen, streetcar conductors, and passengers monitored African American riders to ensure acquiescence.³⁵

As the years went by segregation increasingly became the norm for mass transportation in the Gate City. In 1896, in what the *Constitution* termed "one of the most important decisions rendered" in the city's police court, a municipal judge ruled that African Americans had to henceforth sit in the rear of streetcars in Atlanta. Earlier that year a black man named W. F. Turner was ejected from an Atlanta Street Railway trolley—a company that had adopted the policy of segregation months earlier—when he refused to move after sitting towards the front of the car next to several white women. Turner was charged with disorderly conductor, found guilty, fined \$25.75, and the judge decreed that trolley segregation was legal. Nevertheless, Atlanta's largest and most extensive electric street railway business, the Consolidated Street Railway Company, continued its policy of letting blacks and whites sit anywhere in their cars.³⁶

From the 1890s through the early 1900s, African Americans in Atlanta resisted the streetcar companies that implemented the optional law. Between 1892 and 1906,

³⁵ Hunter, 99.

³⁶ "Blacks in the Rear," *Constitution*, July 26, 1896.

black Atlantans repeatedly boycotted segregated lines. The companies, fearing the loss of black customers, repeatedly capitulated in the 1890s, allowing whites and blacks to sit anywhere within the trolleys. The *Georgian*, with the race-baiting John Temple Graves as editor, vociferously argued for segregated trolleys. "It is nothing short of outrageous," Graves declared, "that refined women should be subjected to the indignity of having to ride in close proximity with the negroes." Papers like the *News* and the *Georgian* went as far as to press for separate cars for blacks, to be hauled behind each main car. Atlanta's city government resisted officially segregating trolley cars longer than most. Between 1900 and 1908, however, boosterish city officials—who, as white southerners, understood progress to not only mean electricity but also a racially segregated society—gradually instituted Jim Crow segregation, forcing streetcar companies to segregate their trolleys.³⁷

Yet the companies, prizing profits over progress, still resisted segregation. The Atlanta Traction company, despite the city law, allowed blacks to ride wherever they chose in the middle third of their cars—the rear was reserved for smokers. The Georgia Railway and Electric Company, which by this period controlled electric power and traction in Atlanta, opposed segregation as late as 1906, citing the mammoth expense the company would face were it to artificially separate riders. In that year, however, the company acceded to the municipality and instituted Jim Crow cars. By the second

³⁷ The municipality passed an ordinance in 1900 enforcing segregation on streetcars, but it was rarely enforced and the companies, which were adamantly opposed to the law, initially ignored it. "The Trial Cars Must Come," *Georgian*, Sept. 8, 1906.

decade of the twentieth century, Atlanta's electric trolley system was an edifice of Jim Crow.³⁸

Many African Americans in Atlanta, and indeed across the urban South, chose to walk, ride bicycles, hitch rides on wagons, or otherwise travel across the city, instead of ride the segregated electric cars. Those blacks who did ride the trolleys were compelled to make use of the unequal accommodations mandated by municipal law. By the 1910s, efforts within the African American community to boycott the trolley lines weakened as more and more black Atlantans used the cars. Blacks entered from a separate rear door and sat in the back. If the black section was fully occupied, they would be forced to stand even as white seats remained empty. If they were seated and whites needed somewhere to sit, the conductor would force them to cede their seats to the white riders and stand. Oftentimes whites took up every seat. African Americans felt degraded and humiliated. "The treatment accorded colored passengers on the street cars," the black *Atlanta Independent* editorialized, "is little less than shameful." In the words of historian of black Atlanta, Tera Hunter, Jim Crow electric cars "deprived them [African Americans] of their personal dignity and their rights as consumers." Accordingly, while anyone *could* ride the new electric streetcars, the new electric trolley service was the realm, both actually and symbolically, of white Atlantans.³⁹

³⁸ Hunter, 99; Jennifer Roback, "The Political Economy of Segregation: The Case of Segregated Streetcars," *Journal of Economic History* 46, no. 4 (Dec., 1986): 905; Charles Crowe, "Racial Violence and Social Reform—Origins of the Atlanta Riot of 1906," *Journal of Negro History* 53, no. 3 (Jul., 1968): 245-6.

³⁹ Leon F. Litwack, "Jim Crow Blues," *OAH Magazine of History* 18, no. 2 (Jan., 2004): 10; Hunter, 99; August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, "The Boycott Movement Against Jim Crow Streetcars in the South, 1900-1906," *Journal of American History* 55, no. 4 (Mar., 1969): 762-3; Robert Cassanello, "Avoiding 'Jim Crow': Negotiating Separate But Equal on Florida's Railroads and Streetcars and the Progressive Era Origins of the Modern Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of Urban History* 34, no. 3 (Mar., 2008): 449; "Separate Whites and Negroes," *Constitution*, Aug. 26, 1900; "Negroes on the Cars," *Independent*, May 25, 1907.

Like most city services, mass transportation—provided by private companies and regulated and designed by city government—demonstrated the second-class status of urban African Americans. Within two years of entrepreneurs introducing electric streetcars to the Gate City, companies began segregating their cars. Within a decade and a half, segregation would be city law. Like electric street lights, most electric trolleys ran through predominantly-white areas, neglecting African American neighborhoods. The distribution of and access to electric technological systems was profoundly unequal.

Black Crime and Electric Light

As segregated trolleys passed through the Gate City, electric light became an instrument of white prejudice and fear. As the city erected more and more electric lights in the 1890s and early-twentieth century and as electric lights slowly infiltrated most white and black neighborhoods, the focus of policymakers and the media evolved. In erecting hundreds of arc and incandescent lights, progressive city leaders hoped that by banishing darkness and creating an electrified nightscape, they could increase safety and deter crime. Whereas in the 1880s and early 1890s, municipal leaders and newspaper editors had pushed for electric light primarily to aid Atlanta's pursuit of urban progress, by the turn of the twentieth century, these boosters lauded the crime-fighting power of electric light. By the first decade of the twentieth century, the city of Atlanta erected electric lights as a policing tool.

For most of Atlanta's residents, rich and poor, white and black, there was much to like about the new electric night. People began making use of their city at night as never before. Nevertheless, the combination of electric light's novelty, intense luminosity, and the unfamiliar urban images it produced, bred new fears. In particular,

electric light exacerbated white fears of African Americans. Newspaper reports portrayed African American men as a serious nocturnal threat, emerging from the darkness into well-lighted streets to attack or rob their victims. Consequently, to deter crime—though city leaders never called it black crime—and ensure safety—though they never called it safety *for* whites—Atlanta's leaders erected more and more electric streetlights as the city entered the twentieth century. During a time when southern municipalities and state governments were disfranchising and separating blacks from whites in the public sphere, white progressive city leaders, building off haunting electric imagery, used electric light to *police* African Americans.

To that end, numerous entrepreneurs, boosters, and elected officials—the architects of the electric light system in Atlanta—became convinced that electric light would prevent crime and guarantee the safety of the public. While these same individuals initially called for electrification to ensure that Atlanta would not lag behind other American cities, the architects of the electric light system came to see this technology as a progressive policing tool to combat darkness and the criminal activity that came with it.⁴⁰ The *Atlanta Constitution*, in fact, called for electric lights solely to combat crime. "Just about the best policemen we have are the . . . electric lights," the editor wrote in 1886, "[c]rime is impossible in the radius of their brilliance."⁴¹ Indeed, one of Atlanta's police officers remarked, when commenting on a series of robberies committed by African Americans, that "evil loves darkness rather than light."⁴² Indeed,

⁴⁰ Volume 12, page 502, Atlanta City Council Minutes, City of Atlanta Records, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center.

⁴¹ "Constitutionals," *Atlanta Constitution*, Jan. 17, 1886, 6.

⁴² "How the Partial Eclipse Here Disturbed the Superstitious and other Denizens of Dark Town," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 29, 1900, 5.

even criminals seemed to agree. In 1889, for example, before attempting to rob a home in Atlanta, burglars smashed a nearby electric street light.⁴³ City leaders were convinced. As the city of Atlanta converted to electric streetlights, city leaders increasingly saw their street lights as an arm of the police.

As electric lights spread across Atlanta, stories appeared in the city's newspapers sensationalizing black crime committed under electric light. In years past, Atlanta's papers had reported crime under the glow of gas light, but the arc and incandescent lamps produced dramatically different imagery.⁴⁴ Newspapers portrayed African Americans, especially men, as criminals lurking in the darkness, using light to their advantage, evading it, or entering the light just long enough to commit crime.

As scholars have demonstrated, whites in late-nineteenth century southern cities saw blacks as a criminal class that jeopardized their safety and security. In the period when electricity appeared on southern city streets, whites were adopting radicalized visions of African Americans, seeing them increasingly as retrogressing bestial brutes.⁴⁵ Electric illumination built on and expanded these perceptions. Newspapers offered

⁴³ "Knocked Out the Light," *Constitution*, Feb. 23, 1889.

⁴⁴ The images produced by gas light lacked many of the dramatic imagery that electric light produced. In addition, gas lighting rarely played an important role in reporters' stories; "A Lively Encounter," *Atlanta Constitution*, Nov. 6, 1879, 1.

⁴⁵ Howard N. Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 44; Stewart E. Tolnay and E.M. Beck, "Lethal Social Control in the South: Lynchings and Executions Between 1880 and 1930," in *Inequality, Crime, and Social Control*, eds. George S. Bridges and Martha A. Myers (San Francisco: Westview Press, 1994), 176-177, 191-192; Martha A. Myers, "The New South's 'New' Black Criminal: Rape and Punishment in Georgia, 1870-1940," in *Ethnicity, Race, and Crime: Perspectives across Time and Place*, ed. Darnell F. Hawkins (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 145-146; Lawrence H. Larsen, *The Urban South: A History* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 90-91; William A. Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1992), 59; Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 111-119; George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 256-282.

damning imagery of criminalized African Americans operating with impunity despite electric light. The electric night became, thanks to newspaper accounts and police reports, an urban theater within which white policemen and victims assumed the role of protagonists and nameless blacks became antagonists operating under beams of light. For whites, then, the electric lights offered new and disturbing imagery of African Americans. A few examples demonstrate the kind of stories white Atlantans digested.

In February 1900, a white farmer from outside of Atlanta named George Garner came to the city to purchase goods for his farm. On the night of February 26, as he was about to leave the city, an African American man he met at a saloon offered to give him a tour of the city under the electric lights. The farmer accepted the appealing invitation. Taking the farmer through a dark alley, absent any electric light, the black man hit the white farmer with a rock and stole his money.⁴⁶ In this instance, reporters depicted the African American criminal as cunning, taking advantage of both the appeal of electric light and the cover of darkness.

Many of the supposed victims of illuminated black crime were white women. In these reports, the electric light added a special element of terror to the encounters. In 1899, two black robbers attacked a young white woman named Sadie Lycett as she returned home from shopping. It was dark the *Constitution* reported, but as she stepped off a streetcar, the electric light shined on two black men approaching. They robbed her and ran off, but because of the electric light, she remembered their looks.⁴⁷ In November 1900, another woman, Ola Smith, after supposedly assaulted by a well-

⁴⁶ "He Was Assaulted and Then Robbed," *Atlanta Constitution*, Feb. 27, 1900, 5.

⁴⁷ "Lady Robbed on the Street," *Atlanta Constitution*, Dec. 21, 1899, 4.

dressed black man, declared that the electric light made the assailant's image "indelibly impressed" upon her mind.⁴⁸ After walking from Atlanta to the suburb of West End, she turned a corner to her home and there, in terrorizing language, "beheld the negro standing under the electric light" waiting for her. He then attacked.⁴⁹ In 1891, almost a decade earlier a "villainous negro" also described as "a tall savage looking creature" slashed the throat of Miss Margaret McClure. He then walked away as a crowd formed, stopping at the next corner "under the electric light, and after looking back at the scene of his fiendish work for a moment or so, disappeared" into the darkness.⁵⁰

Indeed, newspaper reporters used the imagery of the electric light to create dramatic images of black crime. In early January 1897, a black man named Bunk Boswell robbed a fully lighted hardware store, in full view of a crowd. As the clerks were preparing to close the shop, they noticed a black man standing outside, gazing in on them. After about thirty minutes, the black man, Boswell, entered the store, which, according to the *Constitution* was "as light as day" because of electric light, and began smashing display cases and stealing goods. After taking the goods, Boswell fled. As a large crowd on the sidewalks watched, Boswell led several clerks and policemen on a chase into the electric night. Police never caught him.⁵¹

Occasionally, the newspapers reported white criminals operating in the new electric night, but reporters told these stories differently. When one white robber held up a man in January 1896, the *Constitution* called him bold because he acted

⁴⁸ "Negro Man Attacks Young White Woman," *Atlanta Constitution*, Nov. 15, 1900, 5

⁴⁹ "Negro Man Attacks Young White Woman," *Atlanta Constitution*, Nov. 15, 1900, 5

⁵⁰ "A Lady's Throat Cut," *Atlanta Constitution*, Feb. 25, 1891, 2.

⁵¹ "Negro Robs A Store," *Atlanta Constitution*, Jan. 2, 1897, 10.

underneath a streetlight. The vandal, calmly taking a gold watch, ran off into the darkness.⁵² The reporter did not portray the white robber as bestial or menacing. In another instance, the *Constitution* gave voice to an African American contractor, C.H. Knight, who said three white men had beaten and robbed him. The reporter, though, simply described the white men without offering damning imagery or adjectives.⁵³ When, in 1889, one white man used electric light to hunt down and kill another, a reporter for the *Constitution* wrote about the event as if it were almost excusable, offering logical reasoning for the killer's behavior.⁵⁴ White crime had none of the dark and horrific imagery, bestial descriptions, vulgar sensationalism, or fear-inducing connotations that reporters gave illuminated black crime.

Certain instances seemed to demonstrate the crime-fighting value of electric streetlights, with implications for progressive policymaking. The lamps, as previously described, helped victims identify their supposed assailants. In 1888, policemen walking down a street saw three black men throwing dice under a bright light and immediately arrested them for gambling.⁵⁵ They credited the light for the arrest. In 1895, a black man and woman robbed a white man who was standing under an electric light. The police, reporting on the crime, could not believe that the robbers would be so bold to act while illuminated. After taking his money and cutting him with a knife, the black couple led the white man on a chase through Atlanta's illuminated streets. The lights allowed the white man to identify the black woman, but when they entered a dark

⁵² "Robbed This Morning," *Atlanta Constitution*, Jan. 24, 1896, 9.

⁵³ "Cut with Knives," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 23, 1888, 5.

⁵⁴ "W.J. Pelot Killed," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 17, 1889, 1.

⁵⁵ "Bold Gamblers," *Atlanta Constitution*, Aug. 14, 1888, 8.

unlit alley, he stopped his pursuit. Without the electric light, he said, he would not dare enter the "dark place."⁵⁶ Had there been light, he would have been able to pursue and possibly apprehend the robbers, he maintained.

A dramatic event further highlighted electric light's significance in 1906. During the Atlanta race riots—sparked by white newspapers' allegations of blacks raping white women—rumor spread in "Darktown," a tough African-American slum, that a white mob would invade the community to assault residents and destroy homes in the early-morning hours of September 23. Tellingly, in preparation for the white mob, African American men shot down all of the electric lights in the community, believing the lack of light would deter the invaders. A young Walter White, future civil rights activist and head of the NAACP, vividly remembered blacks smashing the street light near his house at the corner of Houston and Piedmont. "Numerous lights," the white *Atlanta Georgian* reported, "have been demolished . . . since the outbreak of the riots." The paper lauded the police when they arrested six African Americans for shooting down the lights. To destroy street lights, infrastructure that represented progress and ensured safety in the minds of city leaders, was unthinkable. For both whites and blacks then, the city's electric light system was recognized as an arm of white policing.⁵⁷

These examples demonstrate that, as a new electric night emerged in Atlanta, police, white victims, and newspaper reporters and editors portrayed the electric night as teeming with dangerous African Americans—certainly reflecting, but further shaping

⁵⁶ "Bold Footpads," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 22, 1895, 7.

⁵⁷ "Negroes Arrested for Shooting Lights," *Atlanta Georgian and News*, Sept. 27 1906, 9; Dittmer, 124-27; Rebecca Burns, *Rage in the Gate City: The Story of the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot* (Cincinnati: Emmis Books, 2006), 159; Walter White, *A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White* (New York: Viking Press, 1948), 11.

white impressions of black Atlantans. As this was happening, the policy of using electric light to police the city *intensified*. The city council, police, and newspaper editors were convinced of the technology's power to ensure public safety and stop crime—crime that was overwhelmingly identified as being committed by African Americans.⁵⁸ The city, white petitioners and city officials declared, needed more lights to police them.

Street light had been associated with the prevention of crime for millennia. City leaders accordingly understood the incomparably-bright electric lights to be a significant policing tool. Indeed, as electric lights first appeared on Atlanta's streets in the early 1880s, the city council's committee of lamps and gas declared that there "can be no better protection against crime . . . than well lighted streets." In 1890, the city's electric light committee, reflecting on the state of street lighting thus far, argued that bright electric lights along major thoroughfares facilitated the police department's discharge of its appointed duties. The city council and city officers would continue to push for electric lights for safety and security. In 1898, the city electrician petitioned the city council to expand the grid. The city needed more street lights, he reported, not so people could make use of the electric night, but for the sake of "police protection." By the turn of the twentieth century, the police began urging the city council directly for more electric lamps. In 1905, a blackout led the mayor, J.G. Woodward—longtime chair of the gas and electric light committees—to enunciate this need. The threat of crime was

⁵⁸ Eugene J. Watts, "The Police in Atlanta, 1890-1905," *Journal of Southern History* 39, no. 2 (May, 1973), 172-3.

sufficiently high that, without electric light, he wrote, it was dangerous for "pedestrians, and especially ladies, to attempt to get to their homes" at night without it.⁵⁹

By 1910, the year the city completed work on the Great White Way, the number of electric lights in the city was in the thousands. Police patrolled the electric streetlights every night, monitoring them. White Atlantans continually petitioned for lights, citing public safety, and had been for years. For example, when, a decade earlier, in 1898, the city considered removing electric lights from alleys, local residents and merchants objected, arguing that electric light was necessary to prevent crime and death at the hands of outlaws. The chairman of the Police Board argued that light in alleyways was not needed in order to benefit private property or individuals, but to prevent crime.⁶⁰ In 1900, residents specifically called for light to combat robbers. Criminals, residents declared, made use of dark sections to prey upon pedestrians.⁶¹ These petitions did not identify criminals as African Americans, but given the imagery the electric lights created, the passion with which whites petitioned for lights, and the white southerners' proclivity to equate crime with African Americans, the connection seems clear. In 1900, the city council allowed two companies to establish a series of electric burglar alarms throughout the city.⁶² Soon papers like the *Atlanta Georgian and News* would treat their readers to sensational stories of whites, alerted by these electric alarms, shooting supposed black trespassers.⁶³ By 1910, the police force equipped officers with electric

⁵⁹ Vol. 10, p. 65, Atlanta City Council Minutes; Vol. 16, p. 712, 642, Atlanta City Council Minutes; Mayor Urges Better Service," *Constitution*, July 19, 1905, 9; Vol. 12, p. 501, Atlanta City Council Minutes.

⁶⁰ "Change Ordered in Light Report," *Constitution*, Sept. 28, 1898, 7.

⁶¹ "At Mercy of Highwaymen," *Constitution*, July 4, 1900, 12.

⁶² "Burglars Must Stop Work," *Constitution*, May 22, 1900, 3.

⁶³ "Trail of Blood is left by Thief," *Atlanta Georgian and News*, Sept. 3, 1908, 3.

flashlights, which led, the police declared, to numerous arrests of criminals who would have otherwise escaped. What is more, the *Constitution* argued, as it described an officer, who was using a flashlight, kill a black burglar, the lights helped save the lives of policemen—who were white.⁶⁴ More white light, leaders hoped, would erase the darkness and black criminals with it.

The construction of a system of electric lights in Atlanta, Georgia at the turn of the twentieth century at least partially for the purpose of policing black crime adds to our understanding of the history of technology and of the American South. This story demonstrates how progressive leaders used technology, specifically electric light, as a weapon in the Jim Crow South. Electric light fueled white fears, as reporters, policemen, and victims created terrorizing imagery of threatening blacks prowling the streets under bright lights, adding to the already-radicalized views white southerners held of blacks and strengthening the case for more electric lights to stop crime. At a time when, across the American South, political leaders were disfranchising blacks and erecting a sophisticated system of segregation and at a time when whites in Atlanta had paved streets and potable water while most African Americans did not, Atlanta's leaders were using white light to monitor and police blacks in the progressive cause of safety.

Summary

By the onset of the First World War, the city council was erecting electric street lights throughout Atlanta and electric trolleys were bringing passengers to practically any part of the city. Yet, electricity was not designed for all. In Atlanta, bright electric lights lined white-dominated streets, hovered over white-owned shops, and initially,

⁶⁴ "Electric Flashlights Great Aid to Police," *Atlanta Constitution*, Nov. 25, 1910, 4; "Policeman Shoots Negro Burglar Dead," *Atlanta Georgian and News*, Nov. 24, 1910, 7.

electric streetcars transporting primarily white passengers from their suburban homes to their offices and jobs downtown. The formation of the grid further resulted in comparatively-dark African American neighborhoods, in segregated trolley service, and in the expanded-perception of African Americans as vicious criminals haunting the night and a need for electric light to police them. A spectacular light system illuminated downtown streets and prominent merchant shops. The technological system then, which boosters promised would change urban life (for whites, the people they spoke for and of), exacerbated existing inequalities in Atlanta.

It is difficult to determine whether the designed expansion of Atlanta's electric grid was based on racial and social considerations, practical, common sense evaluations of urban growth and development (from the perspective of white boosters, entrepreneurs, and municipal politicians), or some mix of the two. The electric companies sought profits and the city council sought municipal development—neither publicly sought to distribute electric technologies unequally among the races. Indeed, the preponderance of evidence suggests that, in fact, the boosterish city council was not thinking primarily of race when designing the municipal grid, it was thinking of maximizing growth and development. Nevertheless, it is clear that whatever the motivations of company managers, municipal boosters, local media, or city planners, the expansion of Atlanta's electric grid resulted in the unequal distribution of electric technologies.

When historians of the American South describe Jim Crow and segregation, oftentimes we point to transportation, politics, and life, describing the big picture and analyzing big, important issues, invoking civil rights and concepts of citizenship.

Smaller issues, like access to emerging technologies, is less examined and its impact less understood. In a period when cities were changing rapidly, access to electricity was a key element of the urban experience, especially in cities like Atlanta that rapidly electrified. While everyone in Atlanta could walk underneath electrically-lighted streets and make use of electric technologies, Jim Crow still put its mark on the technology. Perhaps nothing better represents the stark differences between white policies and black life than well-illuminated white streets, comparatively-dim black neighborhoods, and segregated electric car services. At a time when bars, barber shops, railroad cars, theatres, lectures, concerts, elevators, parks, and athletic events were segregated by law, the availability and use of electric light and power further accentuated the difference between white and black life in this southern urban community.



Figure 5-1. A photograph of the nightly glow of Atlanta's "great white way" at the corner of Broad and Peachtree (Source: To the left and right of the photo, you can make out electric signs for merchant shops. "Atlanta's Great White Way," *Southern Electrician* 8, no. 6 (Dec., 1909): 212.)



Figure 5-2. Great White Way and the electric sign above Jacobs' Pharmacy (Source: "Atlanta's Great White Way," *Southern Electrician* 8, no. 6 (Dec., 1909): 213.)

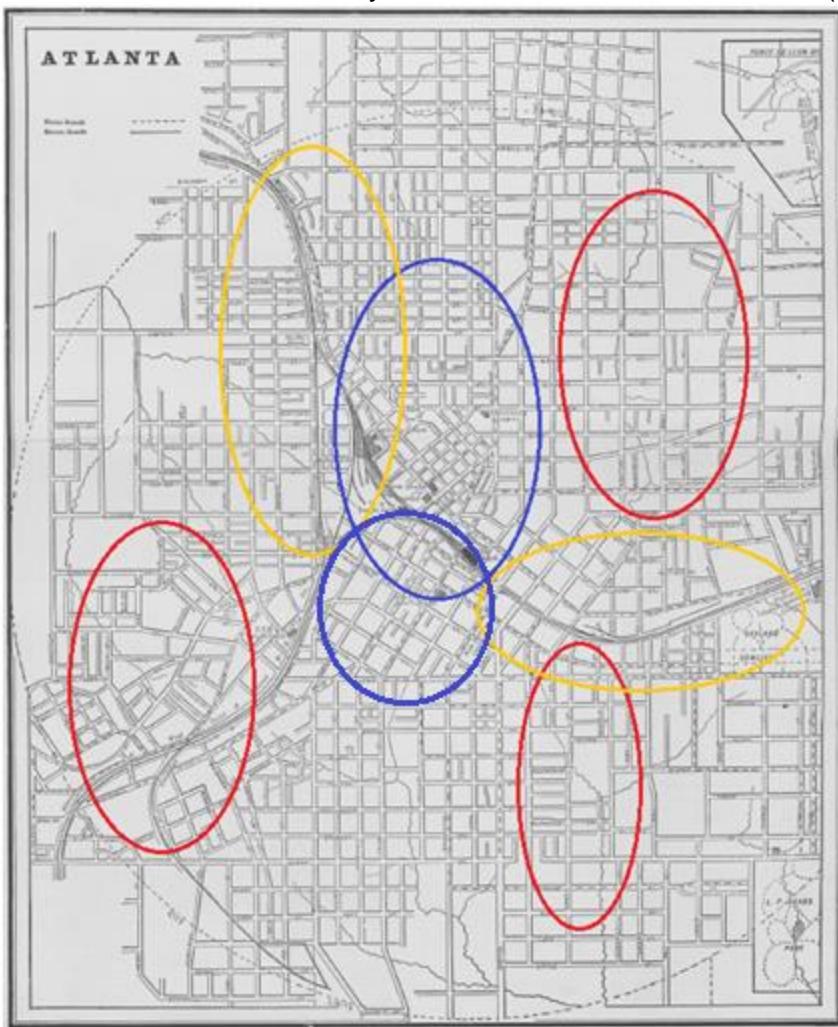


Figure 5-3. Predominant Black (red), white-collar white (blue), and working-class white (yellow) areas. The circles represent general concentrations by race and socioeconomic status in the late-nineteenth century. Blacks and whites of all classes lived *throughout* Atlanta. Nevertheless, upper-class whites generally

lived downtown and along a few key streets, working-class whites predominantly lived around the railroad and nearby industrial sites, and African Americans generally lived toward the periphery along low-lying creeks. (Source: Information based on Russell, 218-221. The map is Atlanta, 1891 (Albany (NY): Jonathan Sheppard Books, 1895) in Norton Library, University of Colorado at Boulder.)

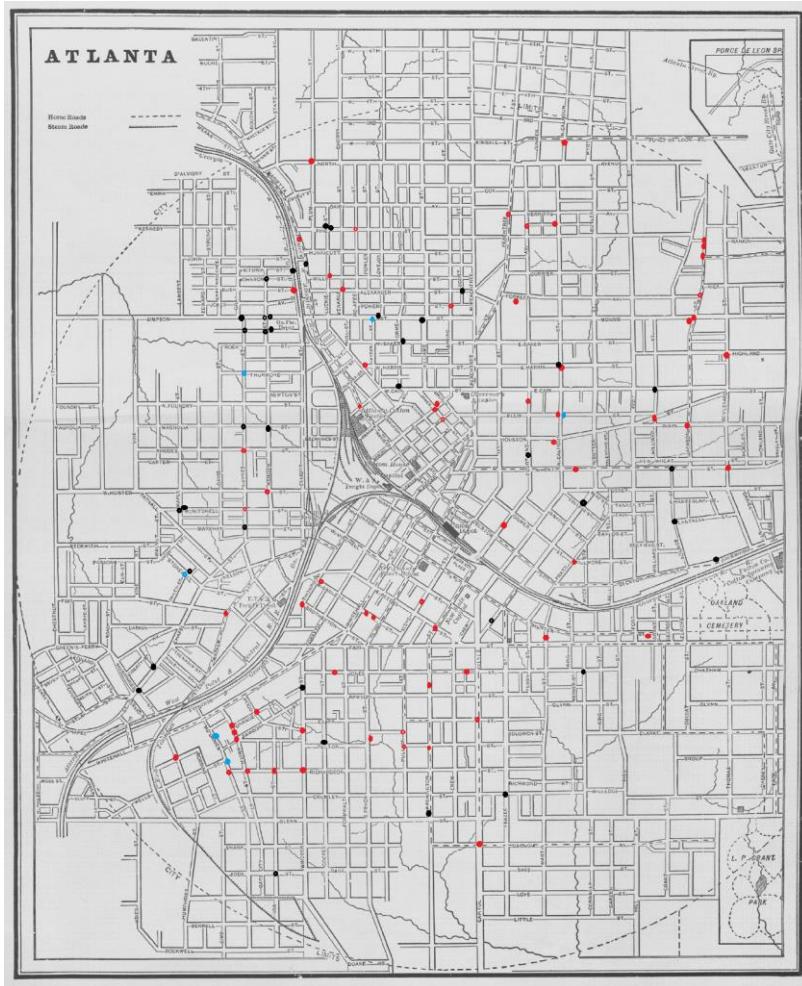


Figure 5-4. Gas (red), Gasoline (black), and Oil (blue) street lamps erected in Atlanta between 1882-1888. The dots represent definite sites of new gas, gasoline, and oil lamps. Because of incomplete records, it is likely that several other lamps appeared across Atlanta in this period. (Source: Vols. 10-11, City Council Minutes, Atlanta City Records, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center. Map: Atlanta, 1891.)

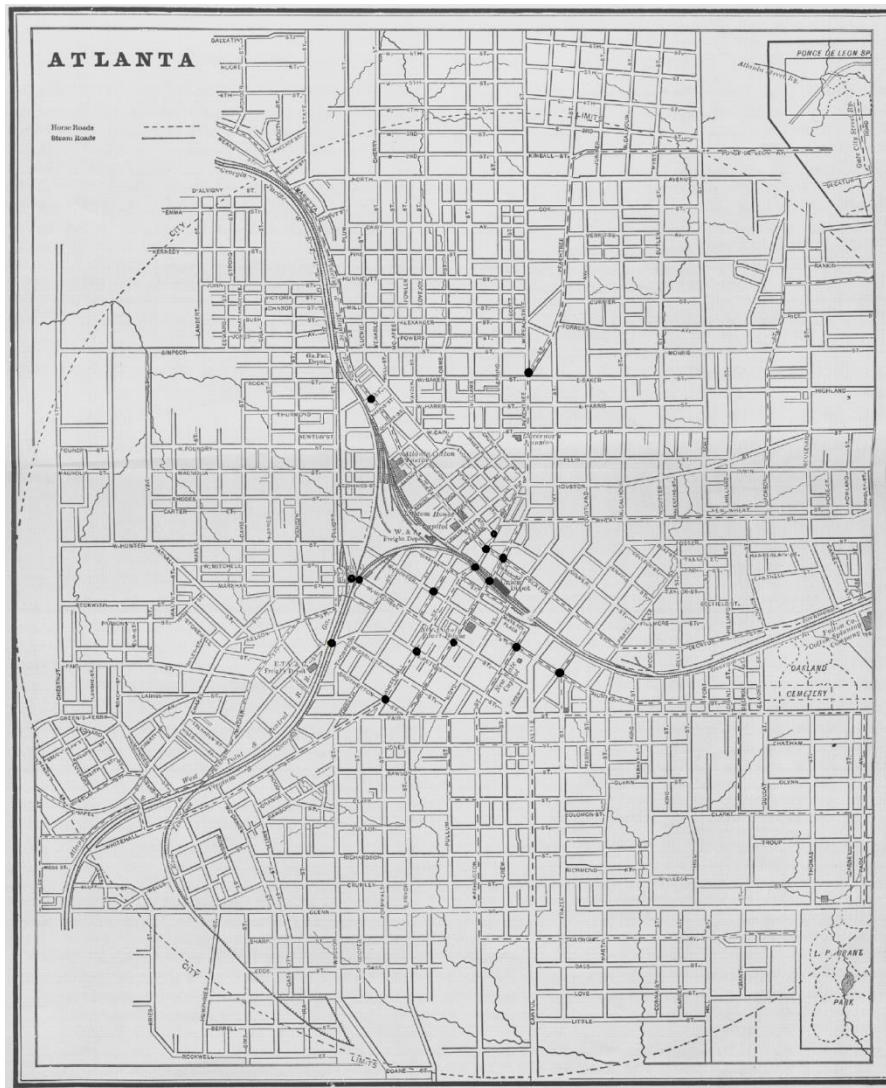


Figure 5-5. Electric Street Lights (black dots), Erected Between 1882 and 1887. The map does not show about 20 lights that were placed downtown, between Mitchell and Walton and Peachtree and Marietta. As the case with my mapping of gas, gasoline, and oil lamps, this map represents incomplete data. Nevertheless, it is clear from the official records and this map which represents them, what the lighting priorities were of the city council. Each dot represents at least one electric light, in many cases more than one were erected at each site. (Source: Vols. 10-11, City Council Minutes, Atlanta City Records, Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center; *Constitution*.)

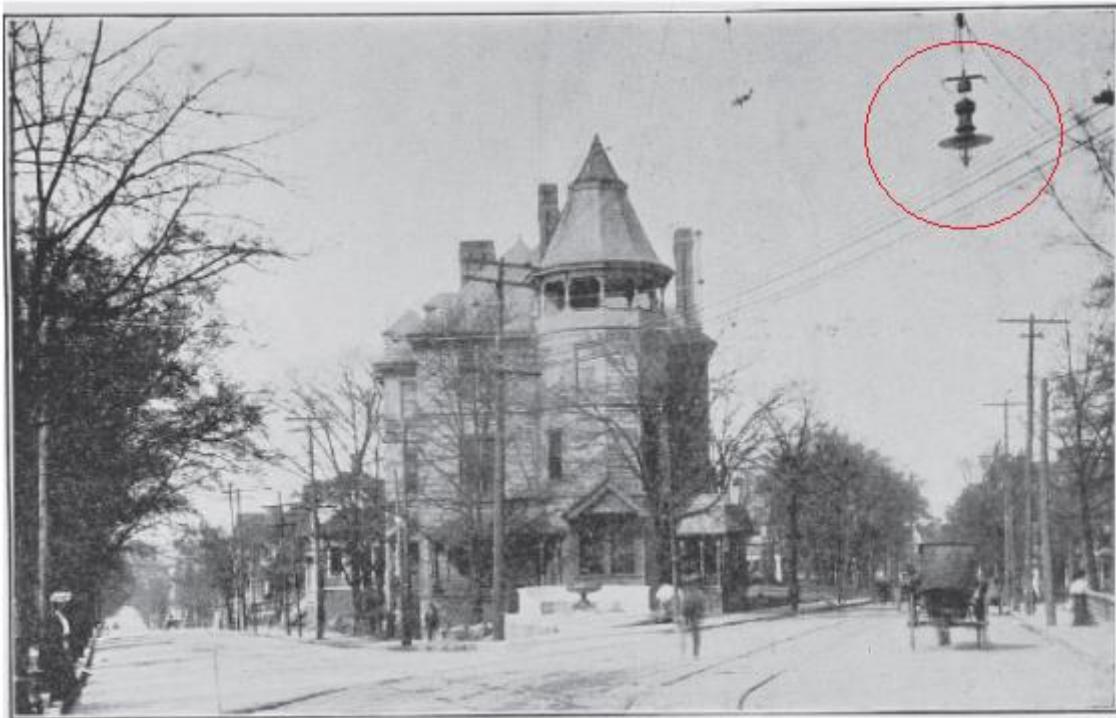


Figure 5-6. Arc Street Light at junction of Peachtree and West Peachtree Streets. The arc light is in the top-right corner of the photograph, dangling from overhead wires. Most of Atlanta's early arc street lights would have looked like this one. (Source: Martin, 7.)

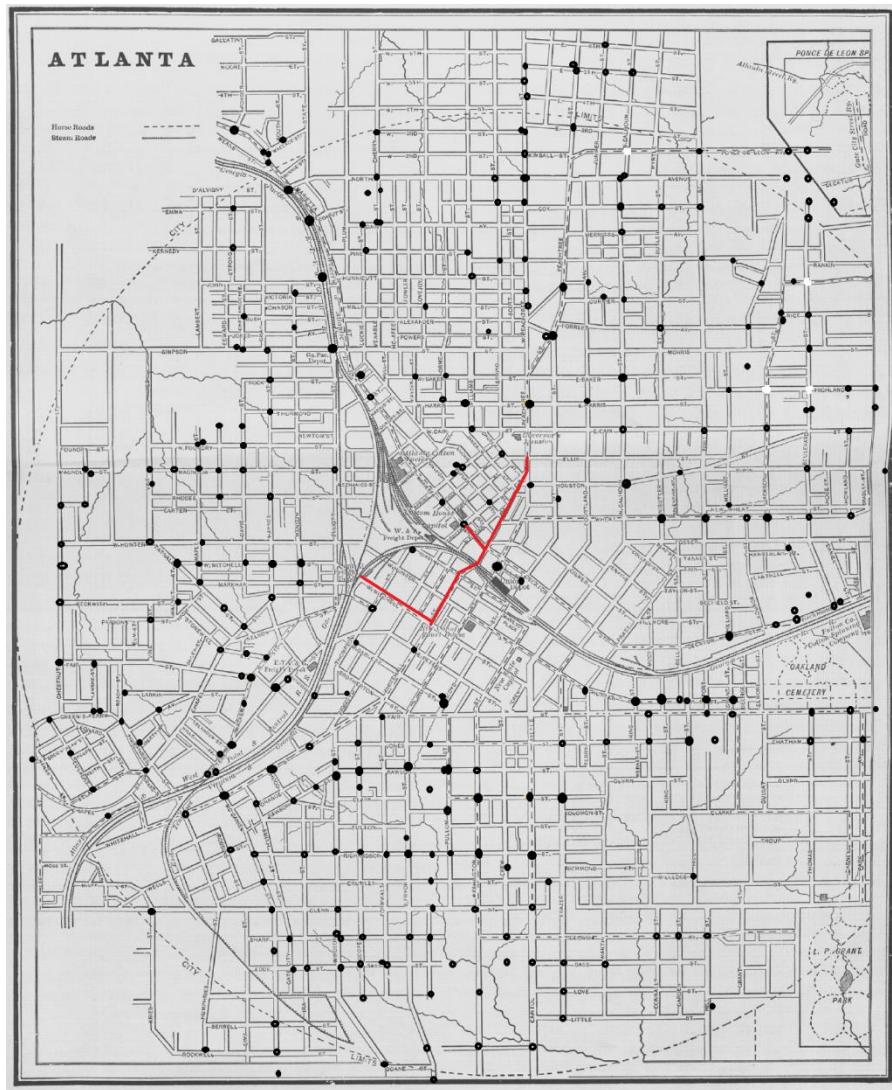


Figure 5-7. Electric street lights erected between 1888-1895. The red lines represent the future location of the Great White Way. (Source: Vols. 11-15, Atlanta City Council Minutes.)



Figure 5-8. Electric car lines in the Fall of 1889. The black line represents the Edgewood Street Railway Company while the blue represents the Fulton County Railroad Company. The Edgewood line ran from Peachtree to Inman Park (an upscale suburb) and the Fulton line ran from Marietta and Broad to Piedmont Park (the site of the Piedmont Exposition in 1887 and the Cotton States and International Exposition in 1895). (Source: Map of Atlanta, 1889 (Atlanta: H.G. Saunders, 1889) in Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center.)

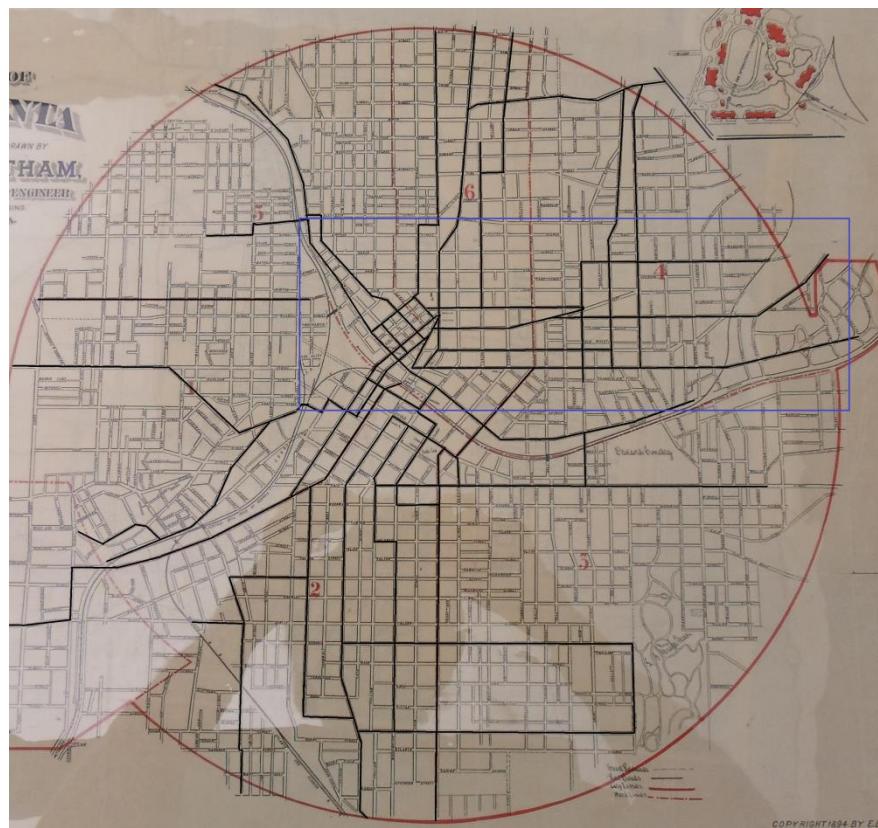


Figure 5-9. Electric Trolley Lines in Atlanta, 1894. The electric lines are marked in black. The blue box indicates the area covered in Figure 4-8. (Source: Map of Atlanta, 1894 (Atlanta: E. B. Latham, 1894), in Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center.)

CHAPTER 6
JITNEYS, RATES, AND REGULATION: THE DEFENSE OF THE STREETCAR
DOMINION, RICHMOND 1910-1920

By the 1900s, the electric trolley was a fixture of American streets. It was *the* significant transportation innovation at the turn of the twentieth century and was, to its owners, highly profitable. Accordingly, in Richmond and Atlanta, as in other American cities, the streetcar companies jealously guarded their grip on mass transportation as the 1900s unfolded. In Richmond, in particular, after inheriting one of the first successful electric streetcar lines in the world, the Virginia Railway and Power Company engineered a massive public relations campaign to defend the transportation system from the threat of the jitney automobile and the city's regulated rate structure. Boosterish city leaders, who were interested in developing Richmond and its transportation facilities, maneuvered between the interests of the electric company, their own concerns about electric corporations, the promise and popularity of the jitney, and the future of their city's electric transportation system. By examining the conflict over Richmond's streetcar line, we are better able to understand the relationship between power companies, municipal governments, and trolley riders in the urban South during the first decades of the twentieth century. In Richmond, city leaders, pressured by elite residents, allowed the jitney service to survive at the expense of the electric company and trolley system.¹

While Richmond's city government strove to control and expand the municipal electric light system along its streets (Chapter 4), the Virginia Railway and Power Company similarly attempted to secure its position as Richmond's preeminent provider

¹ For purposes of clarity, I will be referring to automobiles as automobiles or motor cars, any reference to a "car" refers to a streetcar.

of urban transportation against competing technologies, businesses, and municipal regulations. This chapter focuses on the company and trolley system's experience. After initial difficulties, the electric streetcar service had become a staple of Richmond's cityscape, steadily expanding its track, service, and profits in the 1890s and 1900s. By the mid-1910s, however, the electric company found itself in the same place horse- and mule-car companies had been in the late nineteenth century, when the electric trolley, backed by city government, business leaders, and eager patrons, had threatened the existence of these older car lines. This time the jitney automobile, a popular, exciting, and relatively cheap gasoline-driven taxi and bus hybrid, captured the attention and dollars of Richmonders—materially threatening the electric company's decades-long monopoly on mass transit. Simultaneously, the city council yearned to increase the electric company's taxes without appreciably raising its regulated rate structure. The electric company used all of its power and a thorough public relations offensive to attempt to kill its automotive competitor and to convince municipal officials to raise fare rates for its passengers. The company, both profitable and powerful by the 1910s, depended on the policies of municipal leaders.

The city council, the other major player, found itself caught between competing interests. This chapter demonstrates what happened when the booster program of electrification and the infrastructure it introduced were challenged by emerging technologies. Boosterish officials were interested in defending the electric trolley system their predecessors had helped establish—it paid the city a large amount in taxes, helped develop and expand the municipality, and was, as this dissertation has demonstrated, central to city leaders' ideas about progress—but were simultaneously

pressured by pro-jitney elites, concerned about trolley-based tax revenue, and wary of corporate power. In particular, the agitation of elite residents—middle and upper class white professionals, prominent state legislators, and other socially-, economically-, and politically-prominent individuals—swayed municipal officials. Accordingly, city leaders, navigating through municipal politics and their own conflicting goals, permitted the jitney to travel along Richmond's streets and increased trolley riders' fares, though only slightly.

This chapter argues that the maturation of the electric traction system and its confrontation by the jitney challenged city leaders' adopted course of the electrification of urban transportation. The electric company, not surprisingly, attempted to defend its profitable dominion over urban mass transportation. City leaders, who chose not to buy electricity from the company for Richmond's electric street light system (Chapter 4), nevertheless defended the company and the electric traction system their boosterish predecessors had pursued. In this episode, however, elite white residents held the trump card—demonstrating their influence and where power resided in the southern city in this period—compelling elected officials to allow the jitney automobile to survive and prosper at the expense of the electric company and the city's infrastructure.² Unlike most city leaders across the United States who—at the behest of traction companies—outlawed the jitney or regulated it out of existence, Richmond's permitted it. Richmond's story was a unique one. Boosterish officials' bowed to public pressure and acquiesced

² To emphasize, municipal leaders understood that the jitney meant fewer profits for the company, less tax income for the city, and threatened the continued expansion of the trolley system.

to the emergence of a new and popular transportation technology, the automobile, shaping, in turn, municipal policies and Richmond's twentieth-century cityscape.³

The Trolley's Beginnings in Richmond

By the first decades of the twentieth century, Richmond, more than any other American city, was known for its electric street railway—its line had been pioneering on a global scale. None other than Thomas Edison credited Richmond's electric line with proving electric streetcar systems were practical and with prompting other cities to acquire them.⁴ Indeed, Richmond's electric trolley provided the industry with an economy of scale. The trolley had a long and tumultuous history in the former Confederate capital, however.

Richmond had had horse-drawn streetcars and omnibuses since before the Civil War.⁵ From 1860 until the late 1880s, horses or mules pulled passengers at a slow pace along tracks through the streets of the city. A reporter for the *Richmond State*, a

³ There is a large literature on the narrative of the decline of the streetcar and the ascendance of the automobile. Few of these studies, however, examine the transformation from the perspective of the streetcar company and few specifically evaluate the specific role the jitney played. Most describe the change in mass transit as the emergence and popularity of the automobile, without detailing the lengths to which the traction companies fought for their monopolies. Historians often place this transitional period in the 1920s, when motor buses as we know them emerged and the federal government recognized them on the census. This chapter demonstrates that in Richmond, the local traction company understood the jitney to be a threat years earlier. For excellent studies of the decline of the street railway and the ascendance of the automobile, see Mark S. Foster, *From Streetcar to Superhighway: American City Planners and Urban Transportation, 1900-1940* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981); Scott L. Bottles, *Los Angeles and the Automobile: The Making of the Modern City* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987); Clay McShane, *Down the Asphalt Path: The Automobile and the American City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Howard L. Preston, *Automobile Age Atlanta: The Making of a Southern Metropolis, 1900-1935* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1979) 45-73; Blaine A. Brownell, "A Symbol of Modernity: Attitudes Toward the Automobile in Southern Cities in the 1920s," *American Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (Mar., 1972); Ross D. Eckert and George W. Hilton, "The Jitneys," *Journal of Law and Economics* 15, no. 2 (Oct., 1972); Carlos A. Schwantes, "The West Adapts the Automobile: Technology, Unemployment, and the Jitney Phenomenon of 1914-1917," *Western Historical Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (Jul., 1985).

⁴ "Edison Furnishes Proof," *Richmond* 1, no. 5 (Nov., 1914), 7.

⁵ Virginicus Dabney, *Richmond: The Story of a City* (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1976), 205.

daily, offered descriptions of a typical day's service. In the morning, people paid 5 cents, boarded the cars, and headed to work or to run errands, cramming in next to each other, while small boys caused mischief pulling the break line. The reporter concluded caustically that the ride was its most pleasant when he was the car's only occupant.⁶ The service was risky financially—the founding company went bankrupt in 1881 and the succeeding company failed to profit—the hard work prevented the horses from working more than a couple years each, and the manure they produced—over two hundred animals depositing over ten pounds per day—made a mess of the city's streets.⁷ The company's grip on transportation was not nearly as secure as that of gas companies over artificial illumination.

In the late 1880s, a newly formed streetcar company, the Richmond Union Passenger Railway Company, emerged. A group of New York investors arrived in the city in the winter of 1886-1887, led by Maurice B. Flynn, searching for a factory site. Upon arriving, Flynn realized the city had only one horse- and mule-car line. Seeing an opportunity, Flynn launched the Union Passenger Railway and hired the electrical-engineer turned electric streetcar builder, Frank Julian Sprague, to develop the electric road.⁸ Andrew Pizzini, former confectioner and Richmond's electrical entrepreneur par excellence became the general manager of the enterprise. In January 1887, the company proposed to construct a streetcar system significantly larger than the existing

⁶ "Street-Car Scenes," *State*, Jan. 10, 1886.

⁷ Carlton Norris McKenney, *Rails in Richmond* (Glendale (CA): Interurban Press, 1986), 15-16; Robert L. Scribner and W. Edwin Hemphill, "Richmond's Electric Streetcar System," *Virginia Cavalcade* VIII, no. 2 (Autumn, 1958), 21.

⁸ Frederick Dalzell, *Engineering Invention: Frank J. Sprague and the U.S. Electrical Industry* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 80.

line.⁹ It also proposed to operate the first electric streetcar in Richmond, arguing that electricity would allow the cars to move at a constant rate up and down grades, would get horses off the streets, and that electric power would allow the cars to stop and move in reverse almost instantaneously. Lastly, to quash any concern and to foster booster appetites, the company pointed out that several cities across the country were adopting electric traction.¹⁰

The existing streetcar company, the Richmond City Railway, using horses and mules for motive power, was not about to lose its monopoly, however. To this company, and surely to its employees, electricity represented a threat to its long-established business. Consequently, when the electric line proposed its routes to the city government in early 1887, the City Railway asked for new routes that would box in their competitor. In fact, the counsel for the Union Passenger Railway, Captain John A. Coke, announced that if the common council approved the City Railway's proposed expansion, the electric line would be sandwiched between two parallel tracks of the City Railway, unable to operate.¹¹ The council was in favor of the new electric line, however, and instructed the Union Passenger Railway to move forward with their plans.

In the late spring of 1887, the electric line applied for and the city council, after some initial concerns about the danger of electric traction, granted a franchise to

⁹ "Street Railways," *Richmond Dispatch*, Jan. 18, 1887; Richmond Union Passenger Railway Company, 15.

¹⁰ Carlton Norris McKenney, "Andrew Pizzini, Jr.: Electric Street Light-Railway Promoter," *Richmond Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (Spring, 1981), 40-41.

¹¹ "Street Railway," *Richmond Dispatch*, Mar. 11, 1887.

operate electric streetcars across an eleven-and-one-half-mile line around the city.¹² It hired the New York firm of T.M. Harris & Company to build the track, though almost all of the labor—around one hundred men—would be from Richmond.¹³ The company broke ground at the corner of Twelfth and Franklin Streets on May 25. In June, as workers laid track, it purchased a three-story building for the electric plant, at the corner of Canal and Seventh streets.¹⁴ Three boilers turning out over three-hundred horsepower (soon the company's generators would churn out over six-hundred horsepower) would generate electricity, which after traveling through overhead wires strung between poles eighteen-feet above the street, would power the line (Figure 6-1).¹⁵

Richmond's mayor, common councilmen, and aldermen were integral to the establishment of the electric railway. The role of the city was in fact crucial, since councilmen and aldermen decided which streetcar company had which franchise over which section of streets. The municipal government had then—as had the city government in Atlanta had when they decided whether the electric light would succeed or fail (Chapter 3)—the power to decide which private business succeeded and could limit that success.¹⁶ Since they operated on public roads, horse- and mule-car

¹² "New City Railway," *Richmond Dispatch*, May 22, 1887; "The Sprague Railway at Richmond, Va.," *Electrical World*, June 4, 1887; "Street-cars and Electricity," *State*, June 3, 1887; "Local Matters," *State*, June 6, 1887.

¹³ "New City Railway," *Richmond Dispatch*, May 22, 1887.

¹⁴ "Street-Car Lines," *Richmond Dispatch*, June 19, 1887.

¹⁵ "The Electric Cars," *Richmond Dispatch*, July 30, 1887; "The Electric Cars," *Richmond Dispatch*, June 2, 1887; "Railways on Streets," *Richmond Dispatch*, June 19, 1888.

¹⁶ "Horse-car Lines," *Richmond Dispatch*, Feb. 5, 1887.

companies had also required the blessings of the city.¹⁷ On allowing the Union Passenger Railway to electrify Richmond's city government was wholly agreed.

As numerous historians have described, the Union Passenger Railway had significant trouble commencing the operation of its electric car line.¹⁸ The route selected by the company included sharp turns, steep grades, and unpaved streets; the route taxed horse- and mule-cars beyond their limits. The route almost taxed the company and Sprague, the electric trolley line builder, past theirs. The story often told is of one lone man, Sprague, who, against all odds, engineered and invented his way to the successful operation of the largest electric railway system in the world, in a city many experts considered inhospitable to electric traction. To Richmonders in 1887 and 1888, however, the perception would not have been of such heroic scenes. Readers of the Democratic daily and passersby would likely have an image of a struggling, perhaps incompetent company. The *Dispatch* reported innumerable tests, countless delays, and predictably optimistic excuses. At first, the company planned to open service in early September 1887.¹⁹ It did not. The company then had hoped to open in time for the fall fair; it did not.²⁰ A spokesman for the railway announced it would open in late October; it did not.²¹ The company then declared November, then December, then January.²²

¹⁷ Often street-car companies required a charter from the city and then subsequent ordinances allowing them to expand or substantively change their route. "The City Railway Company Accepts," *Richmond Dispatch*, Apr. 5, 1887.

¹⁸ Dalzell, 80-90; Harold C. Passer, *The Electrical Manufacturers: A Study in Competition, Entrepreneurship, Technical Change, and Economic Growth, 1875-1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 242-245.

¹⁹ "The Electric Line," *Richmond Dispatch*, Aug. 5, 1887; "The Electric Car Line," *Richmond Dispatch*, July 8, 1887.

²⁰ "The Electric Line," *Richmond Dispatch*, Oct. 14, 1887.

²¹ "New Street-Cars," *Richmond Dispatch*, Oct. 21, 1887.

Richmonders, the company later disclosed, seriously doubted that the line would ever succeed.²³

Finally, in early February 1888, numerous electric cars operated along the route and by the fall of 1888, the system was fully operational.²⁴ From an engineering, entrepreneurial, and industrial perspective, the completion of an electric railway of this scale over such a challenging cityscape demonstrated the universal potential of electric streetcars. This was now the longest electric street railway in the world and the only operating successfully over steep hills and sharp curves.²⁵ Forty operators, all from Richmond, clad in gray suits, operated the forty trolleys over eleven-and-a-half miles of track that went from Twenty-Ninth and P Streets to the New Reservoir.²⁶ The trip across the line took about an hour.²⁷ For five cents any Richmonder could ride.²⁸ Each car—lighted and heated by electricity—measured sixteen feet in length and could accommodate twenty-two riders, while the open-air summer cars could comfortably seat fifty (Figure 6-2).²⁹ New sounds filled the streets as operators sounded the cars' gongs,

²² "New Street-Cars," *Richmond Dispatch*, Oct. 21, 1887; "Our Streetcar Service," *Richmond Dispatch*, Oct. 5, 1887; "Running of Electric-Cars," *Richmond Dispatch*, Dec. 31, 1887; "Electric Streetcar Railway," *Richmond Dispatch*, Nov. 27, 1887.

²³ Richmond Union Passenger Railway Company, 19.

²⁴ Dalzell, 88; Passer, 245; "An Electric Railway in Richmond," *Washington Post*, Feb. 3, 1888; "Richmond's Electric Cars," *Atlanta Constitution*, Feb. 5, 1888; Harold C. Passer, "Frank Julian Sprague: Father of Electric Traction, 1857-1934," in *Men in Business: Essays in the History of Entrepreneurship*, edited by William Miller (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), 225.

²⁵ W. D. Chesterman, *Richmond, VA: An Outline of Its Attractions and Industries* (Richmond: WM. Ellis Jones, 1888), 12.

²⁶ "Tried by Moonlights," *Richmond Dispatch*, Dec. 28, 1887.

²⁷ "Electric Matters," *Richmond Dispatch*, Jan. 6, 1888.

²⁸ "New Street-Cars," *Richmond Dispatch*, Oct. 21, 1887.

²⁹ "The Electric Cars," *Richmond Dispatch*, June 2, 1887.

similar to those used on fire engines, when entering intersections.³⁰ The electric line, the *Dispatch* wrote, would aid business across the city and bring distant parts of the city into closer "communication."³¹ "Nothing," the *Dispatch* wrote proudly, "adds more to or is considered better evidence of the development and progress of a city than a first-rate streetcar service."³² The *State* declared that the company, the city, and its people were all to be congratulated.³³ Richmond's boosters were ecstatic; for an instant, everyone in the country was looking to Richmond as an example of progress.³⁴

Success

Richmond's electric cars were popular. In its first three months of operation, the electric line averaged forty thousand passengers a week and the company was earning over four-hundred dollars a day.³⁵ On March 20, the *Dispatch* reported that the line could not support even half of those who wanted to ride between four and seven PM.³⁶ In April, over nine-thousand people rode the line, in May, twelve-thousand.³⁷ On June 19, 1888 the cars transported over thirteen-thousand people. On that day, the *Dispatch* reported, the cars were full from early morning until eleven-thirty at night. People signaling the cars tried in vain, the reporter wrote, since almost every car was full. Both

³⁰ "Electric Matters," *Richmond Dispatch*, Jan. 6, 1888.

³¹ "The Electric Line," *Richmond Dispatch*, Aug. 5, 1887.

³² "Street-Railways," *Richmond Dispatch*, Mar. 11, 1888.

³³ "Electricity in Richmond," *State*, Feb. 2, 1888.

³⁴ Frank Sprague, "Some Facts about Electric Traction," *Street Railway Journal* 4, no. 6 (1888): 153-54.

³⁵ Dalzell, 90; "Railways on Streets," *Richmond Dispatch*, June 19, 1888.

³⁶ "Personals and Briefs," *Richmond Dispatch*, Mar. 20, 1888.

³⁷ "The Electric Cars," *Richmond Dispatch*, Apr. 17, 1888; "The Electric Line," *Richmond Dispatch*, May 8, 1888.

the company and the public were frustrated.³⁸ On July 4, over eighteen-thousand people rode.³⁹ The large crowds of people wanting to ride and overcrowding the cars were responsible for many mechanical problems; the popularity of the technology almost led to its downfall in this southern city. By late October, the full complement of forty cars operated.⁴⁰ In less than two years, "[f]aces lit up with pleasure" when electric cars appeared on Main Street.⁴¹ The cars were so popular, people tried to ride them illegally. In March 1888, the city arrested two men, William Bolling and Martin E. Jones, for possessing and trying to use stolen trolley tickets.⁴² Richmonders were eager to ride the useful and alluring cars.

The electric line fundamentally changed transportation and movement across the city and boosters trumpeted the change. The *Dispatch*, writing with booster zeal and inspired by dreams of municipal progress, wrote that before the electric line, "[c]ommunication between the eastern and western sections was difficult and the people as a mass were strangers to each other." "The Electric road," they went on breathlessly, "altered all that. Its line struck out to isolated localities and united their peoples with the business centres, and made all the members of our great community neighbors and friends."⁴³ "Since the electric railway has been in operation," the *Street Railway Journal* reported, "there has been a phenomenal increase in the amount of

³⁸ "Railways on Streets," *Richmond Dispatch*, June 19, 1888.

³⁹ "Wednesday's Car Service," *Richmond Dispatch*, July 6, 1888.

⁴⁰ "Cross-Town Car Line," *Richmond Dispatch*, Oct. 21, 1888.

⁴¹ "To Run on Main St," *Richmond Dispatch*, June 24, 1890.

⁴² "Arrested for Stealing Street-Car Tickets," *Richmond Dispatch*, Mar. 1, 1888.

⁴³ "Richmond in 1888," *Richmond Dispatch*, Jan. 1, 1889.

travel and the entire city seems to have assumed an air of activity such as it did not know before.⁴⁴ While the City Railway had not traveled close to any of the railroad depots, the electric line stopped close to several of the stations, allowing easy access to trains, and accordingly, the world outside Richmond.⁴⁵ The value of property close to the line increased.⁴⁶ People traveled to work faster.⁴⁷ Streetcar riders were accustomed to horse- and mule-cars that took time to slow down and stop. When one car struck and killed the biracial sailor Thomas Smith, however, passengers were genuinely, if not appropriately, surprised how fast the motorman was able to respond and halt the vehicle.⁴⁸ People used cars for events, for special travel, and for other community occasions. In July 1888, the East-End Baptist Sunday School group made an excursion to the new reservoir for a picnic. The church charted five electric trolleys to take them there. "The picnic," the *Dispatch* reported, "was one of the most pleasant of the season."⁴⁹ Businesses used the electric cars as opportunities for advertising. Hume, Minor, and Company advertised their shop for pianos and organs, declaring that Richmonders could take electric cars from all parts of the city directly to their shop where they would find the best products at the lowest prices.⁵⁰ Within a few years, several different electric streetcar companies, taking advantage of the new line's

⁴⁴ *Street Railway Journal* 4, no. 6 (1888): 156.

⁴⁵ "Depots and Street Railways," *Richmond Dispatch*, July 30, 1887.

⁴⁶ "Local Matters," *Richmond Critic*, Apr. 16, 1888, 1.

⁴⁷ "Street Railways," *Richmond Dispatch*, Mar. 11, 1888.

⁴⁸ "Killed by the Car," *Richmond Dispatch*, Oct. 4, 1890.

⁴⁹ "Pic-nic on the Electric Cars," *Richmond Dispatch*, July 13, 1888.

⁵⁰ "The Electric Cars Now Running," *Richmond Dispatch*, Jan. 6, 1888.

popularity, began operating in the former Confederate capital. By 1901, electric trolleys replaced all former mule- and horse-car lines within the city.

By the turn of the twentieth century, then, the electric streetcar dominated mass transportation in Richmond. The electric line had taken years to build and perfect, had faced the intransigence and hostility of an older, established mass transportation monopoly, had beat it, and had reaped large profits as it expanded across Richmond and its suburbs. In part because it represented improved service, in part because it was new and thrilling, the electric trolley was popular and headline-grabbing. City leaders had supported the technological system and, by granting extensive franchises, secured its rise and expansion. As the electric trolley companies invested in infrastructure, bought more and better cars, steadily laid track across Richmond, while transporting more people over more miles, company managers saw growing profits and city officials saw the system as both a practical and symbolic municipal achievement.

Mass Transportation Monopoly

By the turn of the twentieth century, the electric cars were no longer new to Richmonders and were an ordinary, everyday, reliable means of transportation. They had lost the luster of the late 1880s, but now operated over a formidable transportation system. In 1902, Richmond had at least 43 miles of track that transported roughly 20 million passengers per year.⁵¹ By 1915, Richmond had nearly 70 miles of streetcar track and the electric company served 27 square miles (Figure 6-5). The Virginia Railway and Power Company operated a half dozen different street railway franchises across Richmond. It controlled every streetcar line in the city except for one and was

⁵¹ United States Census Office, *Street and Electric Railways* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1903), 70, 170.

the principal electric-energy and urban mass transportation supplier for Richmond, Petersburg, Norfolk, and the Tidewater area.⁵²

To achieve this virtual monopoly on southern Virginia's municipal, suburban, interurban, and mass transit systems, the corporate history of the electric railway had been one of consolidation. In 1890 the Richmond Railway and Electric Company acquired the line from the pioneering Richmond Union Passenger Railway. Ten years later, the Richmond Passenger and Power Company acquired the property of the Richmond Railway and Electric Company along with five other electric streetcar companies. In 1909, this company merged with two others, the Richmond Traction Company and the Virginia Passenger and Power Company, to become the Virginia Railway and Power Company (V. R. & P.), the predecessor of today's Virginia Electric and Power Company, more commonly known as VEPCO.⁵³ While this conglomerate sold electricity to private residences, factories, merchants, and municipalities, until the 1920s, the chief concern of this corporation's operations was transportation and streetcars.⁵⁴ Indeed, in 1910, for example, the company earned \$614,000 from selling electricity and \$1,444,000 from its streetcar services.⁵⁵

The mammoth electric company moved to buttress its position. Thomas S. Wheelwright, former executive at Richmond's Old Dominion Iron and Nail Works, member of the board of directors of the local Chamber of Commerce, and director of

⁵² The other was the Richmond and Rappahannock River Railway. "The New Street Railway Franchise," *Richmond* 1, no. 6 (Dec., 1914), 4.

⁵³ Virginia Electric and Power Company, "A brief sketch of the high spots in the history of urban transportation in Richmond, Virginia, 1860 to 1937," (Richmond: Public Information Department, 1937), 10, Manuscripts, Virginia Historical Society.

⁵⁴ In the early 1920s, the focus would turn from transportation to power and light.

⁵⁵ Heidi Tyline King, *Dominion's First Century* (HasBrouck Heights (NJ): CorporateHistory.net, 2010), 13.

several of Richmond's banks, became president of the extensive electric company in 1912. As president, Wheelwright engineered a massive public-relations campaign, including the publication and distribution of a service bulletin called *Public Service News*, whose motto was "Safety First" and "Efficient Service." The company placed the bulletin in boxes in all of its cars for the hundreds of thousands of passengers who rode each day to read and/or take for free. The bi-monthly offered its readers advice on how to properly ride the trolleys and how to avoid accidents on the streetcars, how to read electric meters, letters from grateful and, occasionally, irate customers, humorous jokes, ads for electric products, various articles about employees, the company's work for charities and social causes, and thinly-veiled attacks on competitors (Figure 6-7). The bulletin would be the company's principal mouthpiece as Wheelwright and the company struggled to maintain their dominion over public transit when an unforeseen and popular competitor appeared.⁵⁶

The Jitney

Back in the 1880s, electric streetcars had had to compete against mule- and horse-cars before they could survive and profit (much as electric light had had to compete against gas). By the 1890s electric trolleys emerged as the principal mode of mass transportation and, accordingly, through the 1900s, they prospered. By the 1910s, however, "a new type of competitor," the Virginia Electric and Power Company reported retrospectively, "was then in the making and was rapidly developing—the automobile."⁵⁷

⁵⁶ The company printed, as of late 1916, 25,000 copies every two weeks.

⁵⁷ Jitneys continue to operate in much of the world today, but are illegal in the United States. Virginia Electric and Power Company, 10-11.

In Los Angeles in 1914, a pioneering entrepreneur named L. P. Draper picked up a pedestrian in his Ford Model T, drove the passenger a short distance through the California city, and accepted a nickel as payment. Draper, understanding Los Angeles' ordinances, determined that he only needed a chauffeur's license for this activity to be legal. Automobile owners and drivers quickly imitated Draper—by 1915, 62,000 such services operated across the country. The jitney was born. By late February 1915, the *Times-Dispatch* reported excitedly that the jitney had arrived in Richmond. By March 1915, over fifty jitney autos operated in the former Confederate capital.⁵⁸

The jitney—often an oversized automobile licensed to carry passengers that also doubled as a delivery vehicle—was, Richmond's electric company described, "a serious menace" to the electric trolley's domination of public transportation in Richmond.⁵⁹ The jitney drivers charged roughly the same fee as the trolleys, operated at the streetcar company's peak operating hours (rush hours), and were not confined to predetermined routes, though they primarily operated on Richmond's paved streets.⁶⁰ These motor cars principally operated in the heart of Richmond or in the upscale West End, but, unfettered by tracks, they allowed people to travel from any point to any other point in the city. They usually, though, followed the lines of the trolley company, picking up, dropping off, and picking up new passengers much faster than the trolley could hope to achieve. Unlike the street car line, no large corporation operated the jitneys; many were driven by independent drivers from humble backgrounds or by bands of men sharing a

⁵⁸ Before the car service sprung up, one nickname—predominantly used in the American West—for a nickel was a "jitney." Eckert and Hilton, 294-95; "Behold! The Jitney is Here!" *Times-Dispatch*, Feb. 26, 1915, 6.

⁵⁹ The license only cost ten dollars. McKenney, 37; Virginia Electric and Power Company, 10.

⁶⁰ The jitneys often had the capacity for four passengers. McKenney, 37.

vehicle and its profits.⁶¹ In fact, as the jitney appeared across the country in 1914, a year ravaged by depression as war raged in Europe, unemployed car owners turned to their vehicles for survival.⁶² In 1917, even as the electric company carried roughly 45 million passengers a year on its street railway, Wheelwright reported that the jitney had plagued their company's account books for three years, "materially" impairing "their earnings."⁶³ Jitney drivers not only stole passengers, they also wore away pavement abutting the electric company's tracks—pavement the electric company was required, by ordinance, to repair at its expense. The electric company considered the jitney to be a serious threat.

To combat the jitney, the Virginia Railway and Power Company opened a major public relations offensive in the mid-1910s. In particular, the company used its public service bulletin to attack the competing technology. The ferocity of the company's attack and the arguments it used demonstrate much about the Virginia Railway and Power Company, changing urban transportation, and the threat of emerging technologies to entrenched political and economic interests. From 1915 to 1920, the company's *Public Service News* used logic, intimidation, humor, and vitriol to subvert the jitney.

Many of the company's attacks on the jitney were practical arguments. For example, the Virginia Railway and Power Company argued that the jitney was less dependable than the streetcar system. Jitney buses, the company noted, failed to

⁶¹ In Los Angeles in 1914, during a economic downturn, automobile owners subsidized their transportation costs by offering rides to pedestrians. There were, though, several jitney businesses operating in Richmond. Bottles, 49; "Struck by a Jitney Bus," *Times-Dispatch*, Apr. 5, 1915, 3.

⁶² "Says Jitney Business is Result of Unemployment," *Times-Dispatch*, Apr. 12, 1915.

⁶³ "Wheelwright Discusses Railway Plight," *Richmond* 4, no. 1 (July, 1917), 8.

operate in bad weather, when the trolley continued to run. Indeed, during a particularly bad snow storm the day before Easter in 1915, the company reported that while the jitneys (along with horse-drawn vehicles and private automobiles) had retreated to their garages, "the street cars alone, propelled by an unfailing energy and protected by a vigilant service, operated swiftly and sturdily over clean-swept tracks and kept the human stream in motion."⁶⁴ "When the sun comes out," the electric company begged its riders, "and the trees begin to bud and jitneys flock again in pursuit of the profitable short haul, remember the street car that hauled you through snow and sleet."⁶⁵ Streetcars were reliable, the bulletin contended, automobiles were not.

Repeatedly the company reached out to the public, arguing that the jitney was hurting the company, the city, and the people. The jitney needed municipal regulation, the *Public Service News* argued feigning impartiality, "in a spirit of fairness and for protection to the public."⁶⁶ As the jitney presently existed, the electric company maintained, it paid almost nothing to the city's coffers, was involved in numerous accidents, was unreliable, did nothing to further Richmond's progress, and, the company vaguely reasoned, left women and children, "exposed to possible embarrassment or insult" (Figure 6-8).⁶⁷ The streetcar, on the other hand, was safe, sanitary, built by master craftsmen, and operated night and day.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ "The Easter Blizzard," *Public Service News*, Apr. 15, 1915, 2.

⁶⁵ "Fair Weather Friends and Common Carriers," *Public Service News*, Mar. 9, 1916, 8.

⁶⁶ "The Jitney Bus," *Public Service News*, Apr. 15, 1915, 4.

⁶⁷ "Street Railway and the Jitney," *Public Service News*, Apr. 15, 1915, 5.

⁶⁸ "If They Could Talk," *Public Service News*, Apr. 6, 1916, 8.

The argument was made that city officials should regulate the jitney for its own self interest. The company pointed to the number of automobile-related accidents, calling the machines "modern but perilous."⁶⁹ The bulletin argued, in order to save the "life and limb" of Richmond's residents, that instead of cheap \$10 licenses that the city now charged the jitney owners, the city should require indemnity bonds in excess of \$5,000 for each jitney.⁷⁰ In addition, the electric company pointed to the city's finances. The jitney's effect on the electric company's revenue, *Public Service News* maintained, meant less tax income for the city. "The injustice to the company's stockholders and to the public," the bulletin cried, "was obvious."⁷¹ The Virginia Railway and Power Company paid over \$100,000 in taxes per year to the city—enough to pay for Richmond's hospital, Juvenile Court, and aid to the impoverished. This amount was more than double what telegraph and telephone companies, private automobiles, hacks, and horse-drawn wagons paid the city treasury.⁷² If the jitney crippled the electric trolley, what would the city do without this necessary income, the company asked officials.

While the company deployed serious arguments against the jitney, most of its broadsides rested on sensational arguments aimed at persuading riders. While supporters of the for-hire motor cars argued that the vehicles were the poor man's taxicab, the Virginia Railway and Electric Company cited the expense regular jitney riders faced. In fact, the company attacked the jitney as the "toy of the well-to-do." The

⁶⁹ "Modern but Perilous!" *Public Service News*, Nov. 11, 1920.

⁷⁰ "The Jitney in Other Cities," *Public Service News*, May 13, 1915, 8.

⁷¹ "April Shows Sharp Decrease in Transportation Earnings," *Public Service News*, May 13, 1915, 5.

⁷² "City Collected \$134,307.84," *Public Service News*, Apr. 15, 1915, 8.

jitneys principally operated along Laurel, Belvidere, and Franklin Streets and Floyd, Grove, and Monument Avenues, passing the most exclusive clubs, churches, and palatial homes. The jitney was not a friend of the poor man, the *Public Service News* declared. "The jitney thrives," the editor declared, "on **GIVING** as little and **GETTING** as much as possible." Returning to the issue of taxes, the company's mouthpiece argued that motor cars' effect on the roads cost the city money, money that all Richmonders, whether rich or poor, paid in taxes. "**SHOULD ALL THE PEOPLE**, the paper half asked, half roared, **CONTRIBUTE THIS SUM FOR THE EXCLUSIVE BENEFIT OF THE WELL-TO-DO?**"⁷³ The *Public Service News* frothed; such was the threat of the gasoline-propelled motor car.

If suggesting that the jitney divided Richmond along class lines did not convince enough riders, the Virginia Railway and Electric Company argued that these motor cars threatened the city's future, playing to booster sympathies. The streetcar was central to Richmond's municipal development and expansion, the company maintained, and the jitney threatened that progress. If the jitneys continued to profit at the expense of the company, the *Public Service News* insisted, the company would be forced to cease operating its suburban lines—the most expensive segments of its system—permanently stranding commuters.⁷⁴ Had the jitney arrived earlier, at the turn of the twentieth century, the trolley business articulated, what was now lush parks would remain farms and fields of corn (the company argued that its trolley system had been integral to the creation of the city's suburbs). Now the streetcar allowed everyone and their children to

⁷³ Bold and uppercase in original. "The Poor Man's Taxi," *Public Service News*, June 10, 1915, supplement.

⁷⁴ "The Jitney Bus," *Public Service News*, Apr. 15, 1915, 4.

travel to school or work and back. Richmond *needed* the streetcar company, the company insisted, its future and Richmond's were inexorably linked.

The company cited all sorts of news, facts, figures, and claims, substantiated and otherwise, to demonstrate the evil of the jitney and its uncertain future. It cited traffic fatalities in London, England, editorials from newspapers in Connecticut, public officials in Cleveland, Ohio. It pointed to studies that suggested that automobiles caused nearly 98% of all collisions between streetcars and automobiles in Detroit, Michigan. It announced new, unheard of numbers of automobile accidents in downtown Richmond. It claimed that the jitney somehow promoted immorality, without offering evidence or clarification. The company's bulletin writers claimed that unscrupulous jitney drivers—and the bulletin allowed for no other—steered their vehicles into heavy traffic to increase fares. In 1916, the *Public Service News* announced when jitney businesses across the country failed without, of course, reporting successes. The bi-weekly printed the words of Thomas Edison, who maintained that the "day of the jitney auto will be brief, and street railways have little cause to fear." The Wizard of Menlo Park compared the jitney craze to the earlier bicycle fad. The jitney taxi would not last, he predicted.⁷⁵

The company used every means to attack this competing form of transportation. Frequently the bulletin cracked jokes about the jitney that lightheartedly suggested its threat to the city and its residents. For example, in May, 1915, it printed:

Teacher—What is a pedestrian?
Pupil—A man who gets run over by a jitney.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ "Edison Says Jitney will be Shortlived," *Public Service News*, Feb. 10, 1916, 5.

⁷⁶ "One on the Jitney," *Public Service News*, May 12, 1915, 3, in Manuscripts, Virginia Historical Society.

Often jokes came from the mouth of the cartoonish "Conductor Joe," a staple in the bulletin, offering wisdom, wisecracks, and bad puns (Figure 6-9). Conductor Joe critiqued the automobile regularly, often harshly. "Dodging automobiles," Joe announced, "is the most practical form of eugenics I know of."⁷⁷ The automobiles were noisy, Joe complained. The streetcar was much safer, the cartoon assured his readers, "the street car is one of the few places in the downtown streets where you feel perfectly safe."⁷⁸ Other jokes listed in the company's semi-monthly poked fun at the jitney's appearance and performance.

Frequently the bulletin offered poems to critique the jitney experience. In one, entitled, "Too Much," written by the staff of the *Times-Dispatch*, the jitney, its uncertain route, and unprofessional drivers were lampooned:

Little Miss Whitney
Sat in a Jitney,
Going, just then, her way;
But she couldn't stand
The cigarette brand
The chauffeur thought au fait
Little Miss Whitney
Jumped out that Jitney
And walked on home that day.⁷⁹

The electric company prided itself on the fact that smoking was forbidden in its cars.

Another poem critiqued how uncomfortable riding in an automobile could be:

If the "jitneys" jar and jingle like
The "jitney" jingles jar,
You can't blame a single human for
Preferring the trolley car.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ "Conductor Joe Says," *Public Service News*, Oct. 11, 1915, 3.

⁷⁸ "Conductor Joe Says," *Public Service News*, Oct. 21, 1915, 3.

⁷⁹ "On the Ohm Trail," *Public Service News*, May 12, 1915, 7.

To stress the threat of the jitney to life and limb, the bulletin posted bible verses from Job about men being cut down, substituting the jitney as that which did the cutting.⁸¹

Another poem entitled "Jitney Jumpers" stressed the danger of the jitneys to pedestrians:

Two kinds of jitney jumpers,
One who with a jit
Jumps into a jitney car
And rides about a bit,

The other using "shank's mare,"
Whenever he see's fit,
Has got to do the jumping act
To keep from being hit.⁸²

The bulletin published poems, in slang, to convince poor workers that the trolley was the most reliable form of transportation:

Go way gal, you live too far back,
You can't ride in no Jitney hack.
'Sides, you can't git in jitney do's
'Awearin' all of yo' workin' clo's.
Jes' stick close to the 'lectric track,
Hit'll carry you way, and bring
you back.
And den, when the jitney is gon to
rest
De 'lectric line will still be best.⁸³

⁸⁰ "Maybe Vers Libre," *Public Service News*, Mar. 23, 1916, 7.

⁸¹ "He cometh forth as a flower in the morning, but before night he is liable to be cut down by a jitney and hustled to the hospital or the cemetery." "The Jitney Peril," *Public Service News*, Mar. 23, 1916, 7.

⁸² "Shank's mare" is an Americanized form of an old Scottish term (shank's nag) for walking. "Jitney Jumpers," *Public Service News*, June 10, 1915, 4.

⁸³ "Jasper on Jitneys," *Public Service News*, July 8, 1915, 7.

In addition to the attacks and vitriol, the company's bulletin frequently illustrated the benefits of the streetcar service, distinguishing their company from the jitneys they savaged. Every issue included grateful letters to the editor detailing the care with which the company's employees handled passengers or accidents. The editors frequently described how the streetcar operators looked out for women and children. Articles outlined the ordinances ruling the trolley service and detailed how passengers should board, pay, and exit the cars. On days after big events, like state fairs, the bulletin trumpeted if there had been no accidents on the line despite the heavy loads. The editors continually, unendingly, repeated the company's mantra of "safety first" and detailed the tens of thousands of safety checks the company made on its cars and track every day. The bulletin pointed to the electric company's across-the-board raises and pension plans for its trolley conductors as evidence of its goodwill and civic virtue. By the way the *Public Service News* described it, the electric streetcars of the Virginia Railway and Electric Company were the safest, most efficient, most reliable, and most economical means of transportation—not just mass transportation—in all of Richmond. The electric company was trying to convince every rider in Richmond—and elected officials—that their dominion over mass transportation was both beneficial and necessary.

Accordingly, the electric company wanted the city or state to cripple this competing form of transportation and to support its monopoly. The *Public Service News* pushed for higher taxes and indemnity bonds on jitneys, demanded that the city regulate their hours, schedules, and routes through Richmond, and offered Richmonders every logical, financial, municipal, and progressive reason it could muster

to ride the streetcars instead. Indeed, the editors argued, since the jitneys and streetcars both offered transportation, both should bear equal levels of taxation and regulation.⁸⁴ Was it fair, the company's bulletin asked, that this progressive streetcar service should pay \$23.25 per trolley seat in taxes per year, when the prowling jitney only paid \$2 per seat?⁸⁵ They rarely mentioned, though, the size, scale, and power of the Virginia Railway and Electric Company in comparison to that of each individual jitney driver.

Speaking primarily to policymakers, the electric company went as far as to argue that competition in service and price was not necessarily in the best interests of the public. The electric company compared the jitney to a hypothetical competitor to the city's monopoly on gas. It asked its riders to consider what would happen if the city, after investing millions of dollars into its municipal gas system, found itself in competition with a renegade gas company—an interesting image to be sure—delivering gas to the city's customers without paying for necessary infrastructure and repairs to city streets? The answer, the company argued and trolley riders knew, was that the city would restrain the competitor. Why should the jitney be allowed to compete and steal profits from the street car after the Virginia Railway and Electric Company had invested so much in Richmond?⁸⁶ Relying on one of the tenets of progressivism, that the government needed to rationalize the economy by limiting competition—especially competition in public services and infrastructure—the sheet grumbled that the jitney

⁸⁴ "Fair Weather Friends and Common Carriers," *Public Service News*, March 9, 1916, 8.

⁸⁵ "Wages, Earnings and Jitney Competition," *Public Service News*, Feb. 10, 1916, 8; "Do You Believe in Tax Equalization," *Public Service News*, Feb. 24, 1916, 8.

⁸⁶ "Suppose the City Had a 'Jitney' Gas Competitor," *Public Service News*, Mar. 23, 1916, 8.

represented "unfair competition."⁸⁷ Duplication of a service, like transportation or gas, the editor lectured, was nothing short of a waste.⁸⁸ There was no need for the jitney.

The Richmond Chamber of Commerce also took the side of the electric company and reissued the company's arguments in the Chamber's semi-monthly sheet, *Richmond*. It noted that in 1917, the city granted at least 100 jitney licenses and even though this would raise \$1000 (\$10 per license) for the city's coffers, the city would likely lose upwards of \$10,000 from taxes as the streetcar company's profits fell. In addition, as the editor of the Chamber's monthly magazine noted, the jitneys were causing roughly \$10,000 worth of damage to the roadways each year. More jitney traffic and business, the Chamber advised, would require more paved roads in Richmond, requiring more municipal expenditures—all for a means of public transportation that did not provide the city income.⁸⁹

Perhaps conceding the popularity of jitneys and, more broadly, automobiles, the company began operating its own jitneys to combat independent jitney drivers.⁹⁰ The company had made the argument that while the jitney was the bane of Richmond—in every way, shape, and form—it was possible that under wise management and municipal regulation that the jitney could be a boon to the former Confederate capital. The jitney was an experiment, the *Public Service News*'s editor argued. If this

⁸⁷ Harold L. Platt, *The Electric City: Energy and the Growth of the Chicago Area, 1880-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 41; Bottles, 51.

⁸⁸ "Fair Weather Friends and Common Carriers," *Public Service News*, March 9, 1916, 8; "It Isn't Hard to Prove to Business Men," *Public Service News*, Sept. 7, 1916, 8.

⁸⁹ Of course, in hindsight, this argument tends to ignore that private automobiles would require more paved roads regardless of the needs of jitneys. "The Proposed Street Car Fare Increase," *Richmond* 3, no. 11 (June, 1917), 7, 11.

⁹⁰ McKenney, 37; "Street Car to Wed the Jitney," *Times-Dispatch*, Apr. 6, 1915, 6.

experiment was not profitable, then the jitney had no business operating on Richmond's roads. If it was profitable, *Public Service News* coolly concluded, perhaps the Virginia Railway and Power Company would eventually operate its own jitneys to the benefit of the municipality. Making good on its rhetoric, by the end of 1915 the company, observing its motor car competitors' success, gambled that the jitney service would in fact be profitable and began deploying its own motor cars, called "Bricoes" or "one-eyed" jitneys operated by the new General Motor Corporation of Richmond.⁹¹

By early 1916, however, the company abandoned the enterprise at a loss of roughly \$30,000, declaring the jitney bus to be unprofitable and, consequently, the jitney frenzy to be assuredly over. It even printed a humorous, if tragic poem, entitled "My Jitney, 'Tis of Thee," bidding farewell to the jitney and its independent drivers:

My jitney, 'tis of thee,
Short cut to poverty—
 Of thee I chant;
I blew a pile of dough
On you two years ago,
Now you refuse to go,
 Or simply can't.

Thy motor has the grip,
Thy spark plug has the pip,
 And woe is thine;
I, too, have dreadful chills,
 And many other ills,
Trying to pay my bills,
Since thou wert mine.⁹²

Yet, the *Public Service News*'s editors, undeterred by the "fact" of the jitney's demise, continued haranguing the automobile and bus for years, belying the company's

⁹¹ McKenney, 37; "Street Car Men Head New Jitney Bus Company," *Times-Dispatch*, Apr. 14, 1915.

⁹² "My Jitney, 'Tis of Thee," *Public Service News*, Oct. 26, 1916, 7.

own proclamation that the gasoline-driven technology was doomed.⁹³ The jitney was nothing less than a parasite, the Virginia Railway and Electric Company, bellowed, a creature living off the streetcar. The editor's language almost became hysterical. How could a city survive, they asked, relying on unregulated, unreliable, unclean jitneys to transport the public? No intelligent person, they continued, could support the jitney at the expense of the trolley. "This," the *Public Service News* roared, "is conserving the flea at the expense of the dog and may to those who admire fleas seem an admirable process."⁹⁴ The bulletin continued its calls for municipal or state regulation of its gasoline competitor.

Despite the electric company's rhetoric, or perhaps more accurately, as the bulletin's rhetoric reflected, many Richmonders liked the jitney. To begin with, its profitability and use was such that it threatened the Virginia Railway and Electric Company's dominion over public transportation and created the public relations offensive in the first place. Many people were using it. In addition, the *Public Service News*'s attacks demonstrate much about who used and defended the jitney. As described earlier, the bulletin went to great lengths to deride the common term for the jitney as the "poor man's taxi." The *Public Service News* attacked this term repeatedly over a period of years, evidently failing to dislodge it from the public's mind. To the public, it was the poor man's taxi. The jitney was flexible, picking people up anywhere and dropping them off at any point—from the curb in front of your home to the door at your place of work—and doing so faster than the trolley. They were comfortable and

⁹³ "Has the Jitney Bus Stood the Acid Test?" *Public Service News*, Apr. 20, 1916, 8.

⁹⁴ "Conserving a Parasite," *Public Service News*, May 4, 1916, 8.

less crowded than the streetcar. Those who lived in the city, who were the last to board trolleys as they came in from the suburbs, preferred the jitney. In addition, the editors of the company newsletter felt compelled to respond to those "with a sane outlook on business matters" who defended these automobiles. Many of Richmond's businessmen, the company's bulletin bemoaned, rooted for the entrepreneurial jitney drivers and enjoyed the service. Others hated the trolley and the noise it created and wanted it nowhere near their homes.⁹⁵ For African Americans, the jitney held special appeal. Relegated to the back of streetcars by law, the jitney allowed them unrestricted and unregulated movement and freedom.⁹⁶ Despite the wide ranging claims and arguments of the electric company, people used the jitney auto and considered it a cheap form of mass transportation as the pillars of the business community blessed it.

The jitney, more accurately the automobile, also attracted considerable attention as the electric trolley had a generation earlier. Poor people who watched as the automobile developed were now able for a small fee to ride in the gasoline-driven motor cars, to enjoy, in the begrudging words of the electric company's editors, the "hurly-burly of excitement" and the "near joy-ride sensation."⁹⁷ The motor car also strongly appealed to the middle class who, as a group, had been the streetcar's chief consumer.⁹⁸ People had climbed over each other in the late 1880s to ride the electric cars, now they did the same to ride in and on the jitneys.

⁹⁵ "The Trackless Trolley," *Public Service News*, Nov. 11, 1920, 2.

⁹⁶ Brownell, 35-36.

⁹⁷ "Has the Jitney Bus Stood the Acid Test?" *Public Service News*, Apr. 20, 1916, 8.

⁹⁸ David E. Nye, *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology, 1880-1940*(Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 133.

Though it often supported the Virginia Railway and Power Company, the *Times-Dispatch* championed the so-called poor man's taxi, calling it the "picturesque invader of the transportation field and provider of the automobile thrill." The daily regularly complained about rush-hour congestion on the streetcars, specifically of rampant strap-hanging, and believed, at its debut, that the jitney would help alleviate this problem. In addition, as the jitney spread across Richmond the paper argued it was performing an important service. "The jitney," the editor wrote, "once and for all has exploded the idea that automobiles cannot carry passengers except at high rates." Nevertheless, the paper had reservations. The *Times-Dispatch* acknowledged the electric company's argument about bonds, arguing that were jitney riders to be injured because of the negligence of the driver, they often would be unable to recover damages from the humble operator. Alternatively, if one were injured on or by a trolley, the daily continued, one could sue and expect to recoup damages from the deep pockets of the electric company. In addition, the editorial board, though championing the jitney as a practical and affordable form of urban transportation, did not want it to kill the streetcar company. Indeed, the *Times-Dispatch* hoped the city would regulate both the trolley and the jitney, in order to keep both operating and prevent either from killing its competitor. "In the end," the editor trumpeted, "the public will benefit . . . the established transportation companies [the trolley companies] have learned that the people must and will have the quickest and most direct service possible."⁹⁹

⁹⁹ "Behold! The Jitney is Here!" *Times-Dispatch*, Feb. 26, 1915, 6; "A Fly in the Jitney Ointment," *Times-Dispatch*, Mar. 17, 1915, 6; "Jitney Regulation," *Times Dispatch*, Mar. 31, 1915, 6; "Argue Regulation for Jitney Bus Lines," *Times-Dispatch*, Apr. 2, 1915;

Richmond's city government, hemmed in by the electric company on one side and the jitney-riding public on the other, wavered between regulating the jitneys and allowing them to prosper. Indeed, for a brief period it implemented the regulations requested by the electric company, but it never crippled them as the electric company hoped and as other cities across the South and country were ensuring. The public, in the end, forced the politicians' hands.

In the spring and summer of 1915, as the electric company's public campaign flared, city councilmen introduced resolutions to regulate the jitneys.¹⁰⁰ The city attorney, H. M. Pollard, argued—despite the protests of the Virginia Railway and Power Company—that the jitney was not comparable to the streetcar or other transportation utilities and could not, therefore, be granted or denied a franchise over Richmond's streets. The city's lawyer did, however, recommend the city charge substantial licensing fees (\$100 per jitney) and require, as the electric company and the *Times-Dispatch* argued, a surety bond (\$10,000) to cover damages passengers suffered. At the time, the city required taxis have bonds of only \$300. An ordinance was drawn up incorporating Pollard's recommendations.¹⁰¹

Councilmen weighed the jitney's effect on the trolley line's tax revenue and determined that, within its first few months of operation, the jitney was costing the city treasury roughly \$100 a day. Despite this, the city councilmen—many of whom openly supported or patronized the jitney autos—were reluctant to cripple the upstart. Representatives of the jitneys argued that the bond requirements being debated were

¹⁰⁰ Common Council Journal, May 3, 1915 to May 16, 1917, Richmond City Records, Richmond Public Library, 149.

¹⁰¹ Other cities regulated the rate, the lighting and heating inside the vehicles, the routes they could operate along , and their schedules.

prohibitory and would decimate every jitney service within Richmond's city limits. Citizens suggested that instead of requiring bonds, the city instead more rigidly enforce the speed limit, crack down on reckless driving, and regulate the jitneys' routes. By late May, 1915, though the city council had leaned toward not requiring the bond, the city leaders eventually drafted an ordinance requiring one and stipulating the jitney auto's itineraries—accordingly protecting the trolley's franchise. Jitney operators were aghast.¹⁰²

Consequently, the real debate over the jitney commenced that summer. The city council held public meetings to discuss their pending decision. The representative of the trolley company argued that the city council's proposed ordinance did not go far enough and pushed for a high tax on the jitney. Jitney owners, like Don Leavy, son of a former alderman—who had a primary occupation, occasionally drove a jitney, and hired a chauffeur to drive it at other times—argued that the electric company was trying to quash competition. Aldermen themselves argued over the ordinance. Aldermen English, in particular, declared in one meeting in June that the purpose of the proposed resolution was "to lay such a burden on the jitney that it will not be able to live." Politically, city government was divided between those who supported the electric company and the municipal trolley system and those who championed the independent jitney and the promise of the automobile. Accordingly, the city council put the decision off for weeks.¹⁰³

¹⁰² "Jitneys Need Not Secure Franchise," *Times-Dispatch*, Mar. 27, 1915, 1; "City May Regulate Jitney Bus Operation," *Times-Dispatch*, Mar. 31, 1915; "Argue Regulation for Jitney Bus Lines," *Times-Dispatch*, Apr. 2, 1915; "Suggests Solution of Jitney Bus Problems," *Times-Dispatch*, May 18, 1915; "Sensible Jitney Regulation," *Times-Dispatch*, May 20, 1915, 6; "Public Hearing on Jitney Regulation," *Times-Dispatch*, June 4, 1915.

¹⁰³ "Votes to Require Jitneys to Give \$5,000 Indemnity," *Times-Dispatch*, June 5, 1915.

By late June and early July, the city council, convinced by the arguments of the trolley company, overwhelmingly approved an amended ordinance and the mayor signed it into law. City leaders had concluded that the jitney did threaten the city's tax revenues and the continued expansion of its electric trolley system. The final resolution, however, was not the fatal blow for which the electric company had lobbied. According to the approved law, the city regulated three prescribed routes for the jitneys (for which drivers would need a special license), increased taxes on the vehicles, mandated an indemnity bond (reduced to \$1,000), and required such things as tests for drivers and mechanisms that limited the speed of the jitneys. The common council, though, axed provisions requiring lighted domes and permitted jitneys flexibility in their routes as long as they charged higher fares. While their decision supported the electric company, officials had tempered the company's recommendations, allowing for limited jitney automobile service within Richmond. Nevertheless, most jitney drivers, the *Times-Dispatch* reported, would be unable to afford the surety bond and would be, accordingly, unable to operate. Jitney owners also publicly asked why the city did not require of horse-drawn hacks and taxicabs the same licenses and bonds it asked of the jitneys. Consequently, jitney drivers, joining together, prepared to defend their livelihoods against the attacks of the city and the company.¹⁰⁴

After city leaders finalized the resolution, jitney owners banded together to fight the ordinance in the courtroom and across the city's streets. They would, they declared, fight "to the finish." No jitney owners applied for the newly-required operating licenses

¹⁰⁴ "Aldermen to Consider Jitney Regulation," *Times-Dispatch*, June 28, 1915; "Council Concurs in Jitney Bus Ordinance," *Times-Dispatch*, July 7, 1915; "Aldermen Concur in Jitney Bus Ordinance," *Times-Dispatch*, July 14, 1915; "Jitney Owners Plan Attack on Ordinance," *Times-Dispatch*, July 23, 1915.

and they orchestrated a strike set for July 28. If successful, the jitney operators would be arrested and then ask for an injunction against the city. On the 28th, they enacted their plan and police arrested two of the jitney association's drivers, while the jitneys and trolleys of the electric company, now unchallenged, took up the increased traffic.¹⁰⁵

Now the drama headed to the courts.

The jitney owners had reason to be confident in the courtroom. Earlier, in the late spring of 1915, just as the electric company debuted its own jitneys, the company simultaneously asked the local court for an injunction preventing the independent jitneys from operating without a franchise. The judge quickly denied the company's petition (Figure 6-10).¹⁰⁶

After the strike and the arrests, the jitney drivers sued the city arguing that the regulations were "unduly harsh and oppressive." Counsel for the drivers also targeted the Virginia Railway and Electric Company, arguing the corporation had attempted to stifle competition by "court orders: by the organization of a company operating cars to compete with the independent machines [the company's "Briscoes" or "One-Eyed" jitneys], and for its efforts to secure the passage of the ordinance." The next day, July 29, the judge granted the drivers an injunction against the city. In August, the city's attorney and the counsel for the drivers battled. City officials denied that the power company had exercised inappropriate influence; the ordinance was, the city's attorney assured, for the "public welfare." What the city's attorney did not articulate, however, was the extent to which the interests of the company and of city leaders were entwined.

¹⁰⁵ "Fight to Finish on Jitney Ordinance," *Times-Dispatch*, July 27, 1915.

¹⁰⁶ "Court Refuses to Restraine Jitneys," *Times-Dispatch*, Apr. 20, 1915, 1.

On August 9, the judge sided with the city and removed the injunction. The owners then appealed to the Virginia Supreme Court and waited, as the electric company dominated mass transit.¹⁰⁷

Events accelerated. The electric company, unopposed in its command of mass transportation, halted its jitney operations, declaring them unprofitable. Now its focus—and the public's sole option—would be on trolleys, as before. The jitney owners and their counsel, stymied in the court room, sponsored mass meetings across Richmond in an attempt to gin up public support—they received it. At one meeting at a local high school in West End (a affluent suburb), over one thousand elite whites, including the head of the local Daughters of the Confederacy, signed petitions asking the city council to repeal the ordinance. Speakers argued that the city was taxing its people to death, others that the electric company was wrestling democracy away from the people.

Edwin P. Cox, Speaker of the Virginia House of Delegates, declared that the discontinuance of the jitney service, was "caused by the street railway company . . . I believe in corporations, but I do not believe that they have a right to go before the Council and fight against any rights of ours. We are here fighting for the proper privileges of the people." Cheers followed. City councilmen, shook out of complacency by the court cases, strike, and the unexpectedly-popular mass meetings (especially those held by elite residents), quickly repealed the ordinance on September 20, less than a week after the raucous meeting. By early October, the city drafted a new

¹⁰⁷ "Restraints City from Enforcing Jitney Law," *Times-Dispatch*, July 29, 1915; "City Asserts Legality of Jitney Ordinance," *Times-Dispatch*, Aug. 8, 1915.

ordinance without a surety bond, special license, and designated routes. Unlike in most major cities in the United States, the independent jitney owner survived in Richmond.¹⁰⁸

In the summer of 1916, an officer of the city gave the jitney further legitimacy. The city's police justice, having previously ruled that the electric streetcar was a necessity, ruled now that the jitney was a "necessity" in Richmond allowing them to operate on Sundays.¹⁰⁹ By January 1917, despite the electric company's continued protestations to its riders and its petitions to the city council, Richmond's jitneys continued to operate with little regulation and taxation. While most large cities across the South and the country banned the jitney—as Atlanta would in 1925—or used regulations to severely curtail their operations, Richmond allowed the gasoline competitor to survive.¹¹⁰

Why did the Richmond's leaders allow the jitney to survive when the electric company and Chamber of Commerce adamantly opposed it? While the city council never articulated why it ultimately permitted the jitney, its logic is understandable. To begin with, though progressive city leaders agreed with the electric company about unfair competition, they did so up until a point; they wanted to foster competition in municipal transportation service as they had when they permitted the electric street railway in the late 1880s. Richmond's city council—dominated by the middle class—

¹⁰⁸ "Mass-Meeting Planned by Jitney Sympathizers," *Times-Dispatch*, Aug. 13, 1915; "Street-Car Company Quits Jitney Business," *Times-Dispatch*, Sept. 14, 1915; "Call for Repeal of Jitney Law," *Times-Dispatch*, Sept. 15, 1915; "Council Adopts New Jitney Bus Ordinance," *Times-Dispatch*, Oct. 5, 1915.

¹⁰⁹ "Can the Jitney Be A 'Necessity' Without Being Also A Common Carrier," *Public Service News*, July 13, 1916, 8.

¹¹⁰ In Atlanta, the power company achieved what the Virginia Railway and Electric Company had only hoped for. The city effectively banned the jitney by prohibiting any carrier from transporting less than 17 passengers. The public did not vote on the ordinance and the jitney companies withered. Preston, 59-61.

was, during this period, promoting automobile service throughout the city; the jitney was part of the motor car landscape and many of the councilmen's constituents enjoyed its services.¹¹¹ Accordingly, their initial ordinance severely limited jitney services, but did not annihilate it. Additionally, the jitney appeared in Richmond, as it did across the country, in the midst of a recession caused by the opening of the First World War in Europe. Richmond's government was besieged by unemployed, underemployed, and socially-conscious citizens who wanted the city's residents protected from the economic downturn. By allowing the jitney to operate, its drivers, many of whom were unemployed or teetering financially, would survive and not burden the municipality. Lastly and most importantly, mass meetings, petitions, and public outrage convinced elected officials to protect this tremendously-popular form of mass transit. Though permitting the jitney's survival might harm the electric company, the city's revenue, and the continued expansion of the electric trolley system, persuasive reasons compelled Richmond's leaders to ignore the electric company's pleas and their own electrification agenda.

Perhaps realizing the inevitable and perhaps understanding the public's appreciation for automobiles and the intransigence of the city council, in late 1919, the electric company floated the idea of providing the paved sections of Richmond with trackless trolleys, streetcar buses with rubber tires that still received electric power from an overhead wire. By 1920, they planned its adoption. The trolley, complete with rubber tires, would adapt.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Christopher Silver, *Twentieth-Century Richmond: Planning, Politics, and Race* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 42.

¹¹² "Electricity vs. Gasoline," *Public Service News*, Nov. 13, 1919, 4.

While the immediate threat of the independent jitney may have passed (as the electric company adapted), the company had had a dire warning—similar to the one the gas companies and horse-car lines had received in the 1880s—that a new and popular technology threatened theirs. Like traction companies across the United States, the company had used logic, reason, humor, intimidation, and poetry to convince Richmonders of the evils of the jitney and the benefits of the trolley. It had attempted to persuade the city council. Yet, by the early 1920s, while the trolley survived, the jitney only grew in popularity and use.¹¹³

The Fare

At the same time the company was fighting off the threat of the emerging technology of the automobile, city leaders wanted more tax revenue from the conglomerate; the electric company's profits and transportation system were, from the company's perspective, dually threatened. In 1917, as the city treasury ran a record deficit—no doubt exacerbated by the expanding municipal electric grid—the city council considered increasing the fare the company could charge its customers to a flat 5 cents, while increasing the tax on its earnings to 10%—city officials wished to benefit from the system's success.¹¹⁴ Twenty years earlier a nickel fare allowed someone to ride roughly two miles along the line; in 1917 a nickel bought a rider a distance of at least twelve miles (for comparison, at the time, 6 cents bought a loaf of bread). The company, by ordinance, could not charge a rider extra for transfers; one-third of their passengers transferred two or three times per ride for no additional fee. In 1917,

¹¹³ Eventually, by the 1920s and the widespread use of the motor bus, the jitney would decline.

¹¹⁴ Prior to this proposed increase, the company was taxed on a sliding scale. Based on the company's profits in any given year, the company could be charged anywhere from 3.5 to 10%. "The Matter of Modification of the Street Railway Franchises in Richmond," *Times-Dispatch*, Jan. 11, 1910.

statistically, each rider paid the company 3.1 cents, which was also the average in the late 1890s. Laborers and students only paid 2.5 cents per ride, while the costs for the company to carry each passenger were greater than 3 cents. In that same period, the prices for materials used by the company had increased anywhere between 25 and 200 per cent and wages had increased. Accordingly, though the change to a flat fare of 5 cents would increase the company's earnings, President Wheelwright nevertheless opposed the proposition since the modest increase coupled with the tax increase would cancel out any increased earnings.¹¹⁵ Wheelwright and the company focused on changing Richmond's fare structure.

The *Public Service News* churned out another public relations campaign aimed at city officials. While the company wanted stringent regulations over jitneys, it paradoxically called for the laws of supply and demand to govern the fare they charged trolley riders. Calling the fare "as necessary to its [the street railway's] life as the very air is to human existence," the bulletin called for an increased and more flexible, less regulated, rate.¹¹⁶ It was bad enough that Richmonders regularly deposited a variety of Mexican centavos, Greek leptas, Russian kopecks, along with hundreds of plug nickels and dimes—each worth less than the customary fee—to evade the fare, while criminals sold innumerable counterfeit tickets.¹¹⁷ The jitney, in addition, was pruning off of the company's earnings by siphoning off its most profitable customers—those who rode the trolley for a short distance between stops downtown. "**Richmond now has the lowest**

¹¹⁵ "The Proposed Street Car Fare Increase," *Richmond* 3, no. 11 (June, 1917), 7, 11; "Wheelwright Discusses Railway Plight," *Richmond* 4, no. 1 (July, 1917), 8.

¹¹⁶ "Consider the Car Fare," *Public Service News*, Jan. 27, 1916, 1.

¹¹⁷ "Consider the Car Fare," *Public Service News*, Jan. 27, 1916, 1-2; "Warning!" *Public Service News*, Aug. 10, 1916, 5.

fare and the longest ride," the *Public Service News* fumed, "**of any city in the United States.**"¹¹⁸

The company repeatedly compared itself to a housekeeper going to the market with a fixed amount of money only to find prices rising fast. Without a comparable rise in fares, the company's bulletin warned and threatened, the streetcar service in Richmond would consequently suffer as the housekeeper would. The company painted itself as a friendly, reliable, service provider unfairly treated by the city. In 1918, it pointed to the fact that because of the First World War and the increased costs of service, several streetcar systems had gone bankrupt in the previous year, hinting that it might well be the fate of Richmond's line if the city government did not acquiesce to its demands.

Unlike its confident and authoritative campaign against the jitney, in its fight for the increased fare, the company painted a pitiable picture of its situation. "Fair" is the word the *Public Service News* used most frequently when discussing the issue of fares. Was it fair, the editors asked its riders, that the company was forced to offer such low prices? Would it not be fair, to the company, the city, and the people, if the trolleys were allowed to charge a higher rate that would, consequently, provide the city increased tax income and expanded transportation services to its people? "Which shall it be in Richmond," the bulletin asked, "inferior service or a slight increase in the fare?"¹¹⁹ Every issue of the bulletin included the line, "The Car Fare of Twenty Years Ago Is Not Fair Today!" at the bottom of the one of the pages. Several hundred of the

¹¹⁸ Emphasis in the original. "Richmond Needs the 5c. Standard Fare," *Public Service News*, May 24, 1917, 4.

¹¹⁹ "Smaller Packages or Increased Price," *Public Service News*, Apr. 18, 1918, 4.

electric company's employees even petitioned the city council for the increased streetcar rate.¹²⁰

Though the public relations campaign the bulletin pursued portrayed the electric company as a victim, Wheelwright separately went on an offensive. In 1917, two years after the political clash over jitneys, he argued for a simultaneous blow to the existing rate structure and to the jitney curse. His proposal to the city, in hindsight, was shocking. The president advised the city council that the electric trolley paid taxes to the city for the lease of the municipalities' streets for the purposes of operating a transportation business. The jitneys, Wheelwright noted, used the same space that the electric company was paying to use. "It therefore appears only just and fair to both parties to the contract [the city and the electric company]," Wheelwright declared, "that the unexpected tenant [the jitney] be required to occupy other quarters." In other words, Wheelwright argued that the city should forbid the jitneys from operating on streets where the company had a franchise. Jitney autos would, if Wheelwright got his way, be unable to operate across much of Richmond. If the city obliged, the company would happily pay the increased tax rate of 10% and continue the cheaper tickets for students, Wheelwright concluded. Even the horse-car companies in the 1880s had not requested the city council cripple the emerging competition like Wheelwright did.¹²¹ The city council, perhaps not surprisingly—given the public's earlier reaction to the restraint of jitney service—failed to adopt Wheelwright's measure.

¹²⁰ Whether the employees did this of their own free will as concerned employees or whether it was a publicity campaign ginned up by the company's executives is unclear.

¹²¹ "Wheelwright Discusses Railway Plight," *Richmond* 4, no. 1 (July, 1917), 8.

Once again the Chamber of Commerce championed the interests of the Virginia Railway and Power Company and came out against the city's initial proposal. The Chamber's support is perhaps not surprising given its ties to Wheelwright and the power company's ties to Richmond's business elite, but the editors of its magazine were especially impassioned. The Chamber predicted that, given war restrictions and inflated prices, the increase in fare rates would not offset the large increase in taxes. In other words, the Chamber believed the proposed changes would ruin the Virginia Railway and Power Company. In other cities, the body noted, rates were increasing to 6 or 7 cents—city leaders, the Chamber argued, unlike most in the United States, were not allowing the trolley company to adjust to inflation and other financial pressures.¹²² In the next year, 1918, the president of the Chamber of Commerce, John C. Easley, went as far as to write a letter to each member of the city council, pushing for an increase in the fare. Easley argued that a majority of cities were allowing their street railway companies to increase fares and that, in some cases, the federal government was stepping in and increasing fare rates because of the intransigence of city governments. Noting that the company's earnings had fallen farther—it lost \$500,000 in revenues over the previous year—the existing fare structure, Easley warned, would mean a concomitant reduction in services, affecting all Richmonders.¹²³ By late 1918, the company asked for a six-cent fare.

An increased fare, the *Richmond* declared, is "justified by conditions apparent to any unprejudiced and thinking mind." Indeed, by December the Chamber could report

¹²² "The Proposed Street Car Fare Increase," *Richmond* 3, no. 11 (June, 1917), 7.

¹²³ "Urges Increased Street-Car Fare," *Richmond* 5, no. 2 (Aug., 1918), 5.

that the cost of some materials necessary to the streetcar service had risen an astronomical 400% while many of its employees had been pressed into military service. As a result, the company was unable, or unwilling, to expand services or even to maintain its past level of service. The streetcars were increasingly delayed, *Richmond* reported, and, as a result, wage earner passengers were losing precious work time. The danger to the power company's transportation franchises was real. Unless city leaders allowed the company to increase fares, the monthly argued, the company would soon approach bankruptcy and the system, ruination.¹²⁴

The American entry into the First World War distracted both the electric company and the city of Richmond from the issues of jitney regulation, streetcar fares, and corporate taxes.¹²⁵ In late 1917, after the electric company petitioned for a straight 5-cent fare, the council adjourned without deciding the issue. By September 1918, the company asked for a 6-cent fare, yet the city government refused to increase it. By early 1919, the company reported that service across their electric car line had deteriorated substantially.¹²⁶ Responding to the company's calls for higher fares, riders complained that while the company's costs had risen, so too had residents' cost of living as the value of the dollar deflated. As with the jitney, city officials would face an irate public if they raised riders' rates.¹²⁷

Finally, in the late winter of 1919, months after the Allies defeated the Central Powers, the city council agreed to a straight 5-cent fare, though the company would be

¹²⁴ "Five Cent Fare Is Just," *Richmond* 5, no. 6 (Dec., 1918), 7, 13.

¹²⁵ The war harmed the street railway industry in many American cities. Platt, 218.

¹²⁶ "Thank You," *Public Service News*, Feb. 13, 1919, 1.

¹²⁷ "Answer to Correspondents," *Public Service News*, June 17, 1920, 2.

compelled to continue selling cheap tickets to students and workers and would have to honor free transfers along its line.¹²⁸ The fare change would result in a \$200,000 annual increase in profits, the company predicted. With former employees returning to work as they returned from the war in Europe and with an increased fare to cushion the company's profits, the company was technically sound. It did, however, continue to push for and petition the city for higher fares, perhaps as much as 7, 8, or 10 cents.¹²⁹ In July 1920, with the backing of the Chamber of Commerce, the Rotary Club, the Retail Merchants' Association, and the Kiwanis Club, the city council approved a fare of 6 cents. The company and its publication, however, continued calling for a more flexible and competitive rate. Though the fare question remained open and the jitney remained, the company no longer predicted ruination.¹³⁰

Summary

Richmond's transportation arena was significantly different in 1920 than it had been in 1880 or even 1910. By the late 1910s, the streets were clogged with horses, wagons, private motor cars, jitney autos, and electric streetcars as new ordinances imperfectly regulated traffic. The streetcars of the Virginia Railway and Electric Company, still the workhorse of the city's mass transit system, travelled over 2,000 miles each day, transporting tens of thousands of people. Complaints against the streetcar company mounted as Richmond entered the 1920s; in particular, the *Public Service News* was forced to regularly defend delayed streetcars, blaming pedestrians,

¹²⁸ Common Council Journal, Sept. 3, 1918 to Feb. 24, 1922, p. 82-83.

¹²⁹ As soon as September, 1919, the company was petitioning the city council for higher rates. Common Council Journal, Sept. 3, 1918, to Feb. 24, 1922, p. 197.

¹³⁰ "Some Daily Queries," *Public Service News*, Feb. 27, 1919, 4; "Why You are Concerned," *Public Service News*, Apr. 10, 1919, 4; "A Flexible Car Fare," *Public Service News*, Dec. 23, 1920, 4.

automobiles, and the unnaturally low fare the city forced on the trolleys for problems along the line. It was clear that the once-reliable and exemplary service was deteriorating.¹³¹

Both the independent jitney and the trolleys of the Virginia Railway and Electric Company survived and even prospered, but urban transportation in Richmond was changing. Just as the gas companies had failed to kill the electric light companies in the late nineteenth century, so too the electric streetcar company failed to eradicate the modern bus and taxi. Additionally, despite the protests, editorial broadsides, and gasping warnings of imminent collapse, the streetcar system survived the onslaught of the jitney. The electric company, unlike the horse- and mule-car companies of the nineteenth century, survived by adopting the emerging technology (or a hybrid, in the case of the Trackless Trolley). By the 1920s, the electric company profitably operated both electric streetcar lines and, increasingly, motor buses throughout the city and its suburbs. The electric company's publicity campaign had failed to destroy a popular mode of transportation, but it succeeded in defending its monopoly and propping up the electric streetcar, if for only a few more years. As the electric company entered the 1920s, its focus moved away from transportation and centered on electric power and light as more and more people relied upon or purchased automobiles and as buses slowly replaced both jitneys and trolleys in the City on the James.

The story of electric trolleys in 1910s Richmond tells us much about emerging technologies, municipal regulation, corporate survival, and mass transit consumers in the early-twentieth-century urban South. The Virginia Railway and Electric Company

¹³¹ Foster, 49.

had attempted to persuade riders and city officials to block the rise of the jitney and to support changes to its regulated rate structure. In the end, despite its monopoly on mass transportation and its allies with the Chamber of Commerce and Richmond's city government, its publicity and lobbying campaign was ineffective. City leaders, initially defending the company and trolley system, bowed to public pressure as elite Richmonders championed the popular jitney. In addition, city leaders, facing shrinking budgets and mounting municipal costs during the First World War (in particular, the city's electric light plant and grid), sought increased tax revenue from the electric company by easing its rate structure. Elected officials barely increased trolley fares, however, fearing the public's wrath over high rates. As this episode demonstrates, city residents, the local electric company, and municipal leaders interacted and together shaped the future of urban transportation in Richmond.

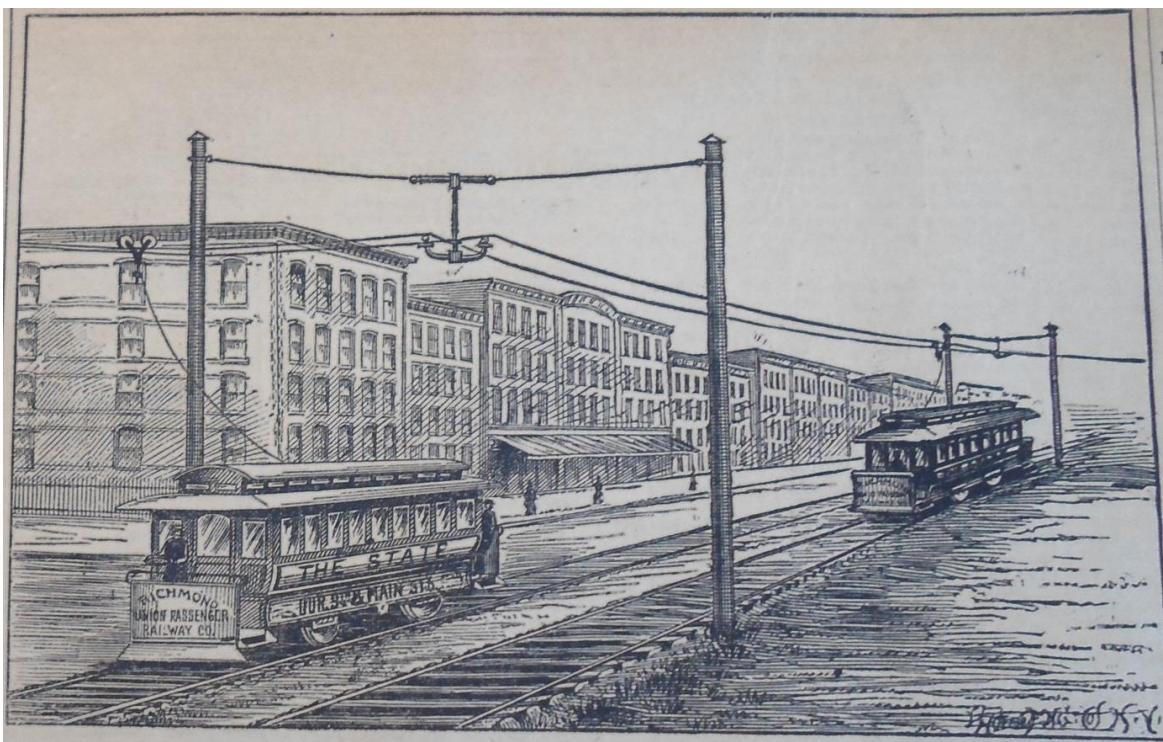


Figure 6-1. The Proposed Electric Line as Envisaged in 1887, Illustrated (Source: "The New Electric Line," *State*, July 22, 1887.)

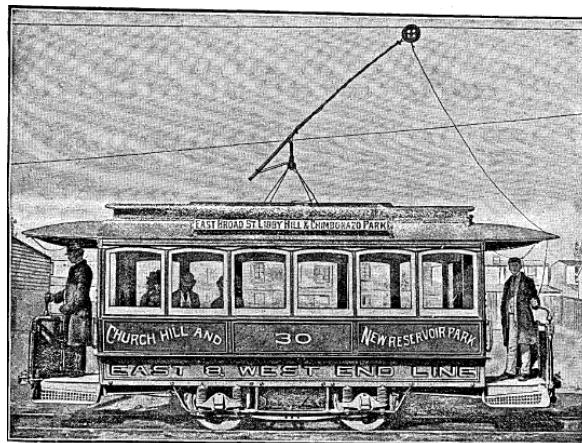


Figure 6-2. Richmond Electric Street Car in 1889, Illustration (Source: Richmond Union Passenger Railway Company, *The Electric Street Railway System, as Operated by the Richmond Union Passenger Railway Co. of Richmond, Virginia* (Richmond: Whittet & Shepperson, 1889), 19.)



Figure 6-3. Electric Streetcar climbing over uneven tracks and unpaved streets, photograph, 1880s (Source: William L. Johnson, Jr., "The Richmond Trolleys: History Rode on Bumpy Rails," *Commonwealth* XXX, no. 4 (April, 1963), 25.)

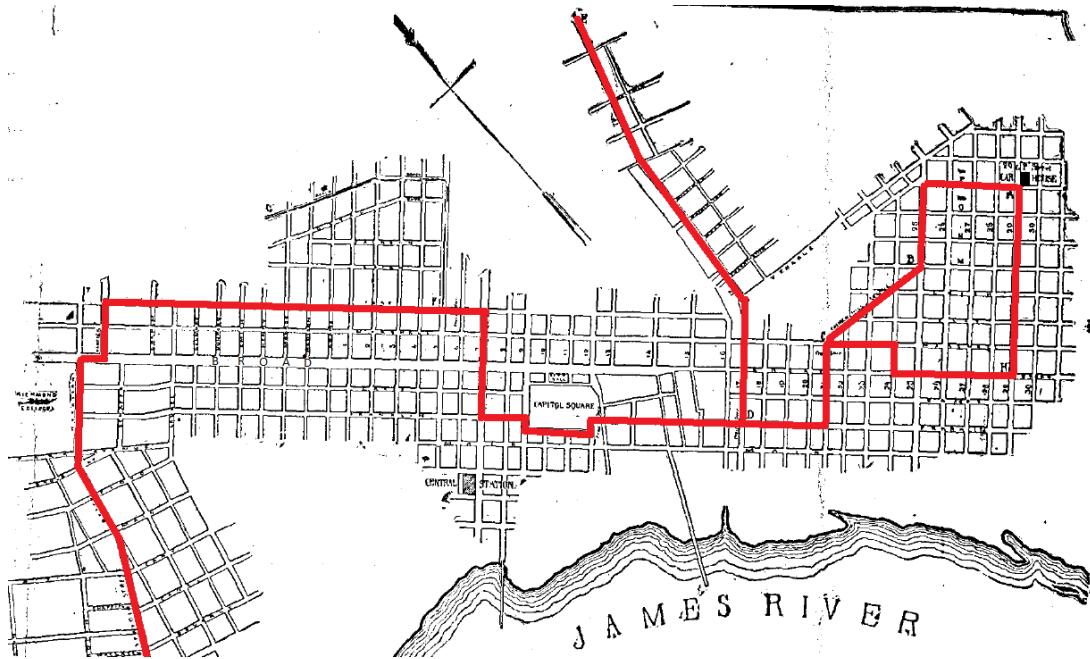


Figure 6-4. Route of Richmond Union Passenger Railway Co. in June 1888. The line is highlighted in red. (Source: Richmond Union Passenger Railway Company, 25.)

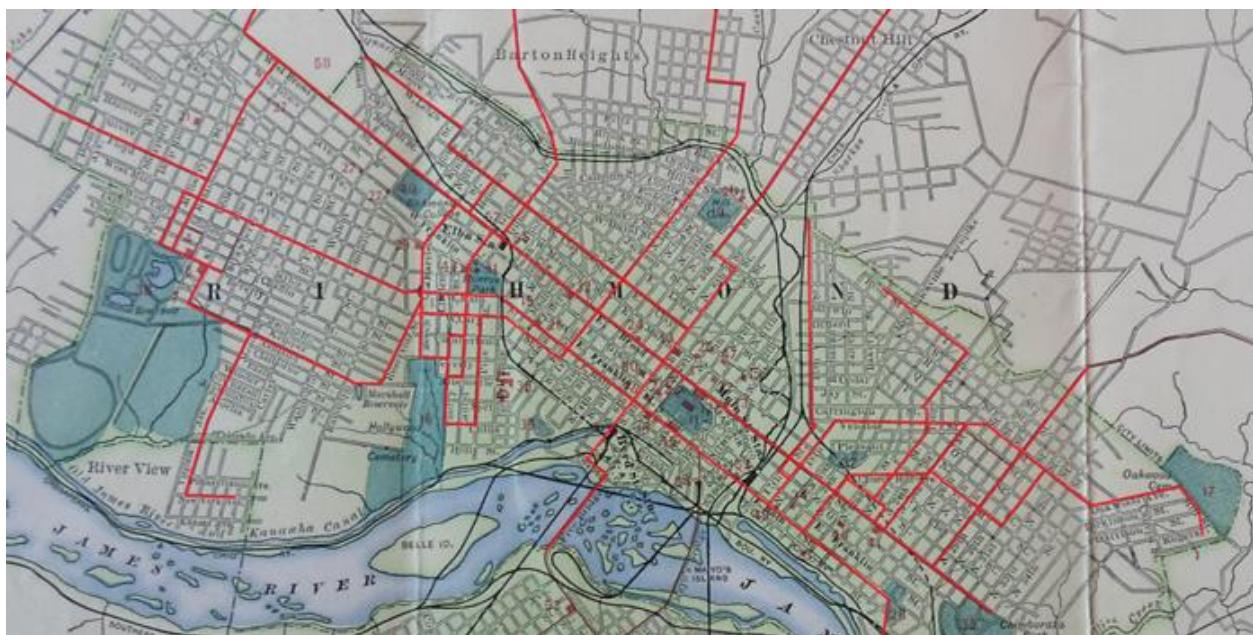


Figure 6-5. Electric Streetcar Lines in 1907. The streetcar routes have been highlighted red--the line had seen tremendous expansion since the late 1880s. (Source: Tri-City System, *Trolley Rides in Cities and Country* (pamphlet), Manuscripts, Virginia Historical Society.)



Figure 6-6. Richmond Streetcar at Broad Street and Eighth in 1915.



Figure 6-7. Cover of the *Public Service News*, September 16, 1915.

STREET RAILWAY AND THE JITNEY	
A timely parallel showing the relative services performed in Richmond by the so-called jitney busses and by the Virginia Railway and Power Company.	
THE COMPANY	THE JITNEY
LIMITS OF SERVICE.	
Serves entire city and much suburban territory.	Serves only part of congested section where traffic is heavy.
RATES OF FARE.	
Average fare in Richmond 3.3 cents. Universal transfers.	Straight fare of 5 cents and no transfers.
LENGTH OF HAUL.	
Between city limits and beyond.	Average haul less than two miles.
TAXES PAID TO CITY.	
Paid \$134,000 to city last year for use of streets alone.	Pays only nominal automobile license tax.
STREET PAVING.	
Paves between its tracks and two feet outside, constantly repairing and replacing old paving, and sprinkles large portions of the streets.	Contributes nothing to the city's paving, although its tires tear it up.
CONTRIBUTES TO CITY'S PROGRESS.	
By extending its lines into new territory and making possible suburban development.	Contributes nothing to city's growth since it operates only in thickly settled districts where profits grow.
ACCOUNTABILITY.	
Rates, schedules and service under immediate control of city council.	Rates, service and schedules under no control by city or state governments.
RESPONSIBILITY.	
Having large permanent investment is responsible for damages resulting from accidents, etc.	Having only negligible investment and no financial standing, is irresponsible.
LIABILITY OF ACCIDENT.	
Carries 150,000 passengers a day in Richmond and vicinity with comparatively few accidents during year.	Police and ambulance records show high accident ratio resulting from jitney operation with increase probable.
RELIABILITY.	
Operates in all kinds of weather, spends large sums of money to keep routes open, maintains fixed schedules at all hours, runs "owl" cars without franchise obligation to do so.	Operates only when business is profitable, does nothing to keep routes open, conforms to no fixed schedule. There are no "owl" jitneys.
QUALITY OF SERVICE.	
Cars are lighted and heated; women, children and citizens generally are protected by police powers of platform men.	Cars are unlighted and open to the weather, and women and children are exposed to possible embarrassment or insult.

Figure 6-8. The *Public Service News* compares the technologies and services (Source: "Street Railway and the Jitney," *Public Service News*, Apr. 15, 1915, 5.)

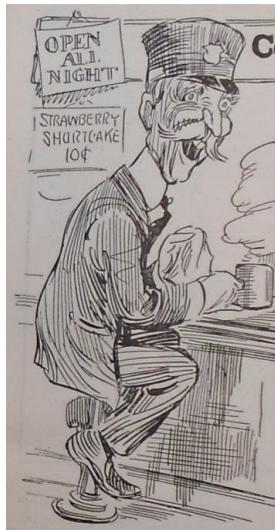


Figure 6-9. Conductor Joe (Source: *Public Service News*, Oct. 21, 1915, 3.)



Figure 6-10. The streetcar company's injunction against the jitney is denied (Source: "Injunction Denied," *Times-Dispatch*, Apr. 20, 1915, 5.)

CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION

To those residents of Atlanta and Richmond in 1920 who remembered city leaders in the 1880s trumpeting the promise of electrification, it would have been clear that the technological system had not transformed the southern city as boosters had hoped. Electrification, in of itself, had not prompted the kind of changes—the progress—municipal leaders had sought: factories, investment, capital, business, and urban growth and development. Boosters across the American South in the 1880s, adhering to the idea that electrification would be of immeasurable benefit, had declared that the technological system was an implicit requirement of late-nineteenth century urbanization and was a key to raising their cities to the status of northern and western metropolises. Accordingly, as this dissertation has described, city leaders introduced electricity across their municipalities, but, despite their boosterish dreams, it did not magically transform these cities. Lights and trolleys, wires and generators, and grids and plants did not bring forth a New South in postbellum southern cities.

Yet, despite its failure to usher in miraculous transformations, electrification had changed the southern city and presented new challenges in a new century. Municipal leaders' push to electrify created a new southern urban landscape, filled with new lights and streetcar lines. In the early years of electrification, between 1880 and 1920, the introduction of electricity required, as this dissertation has described, city leaders to resolve important policy issues. By the twentieth century, officials in Atlanta and Richmond, along with other southern (and American) city leaders, would face expanding, yet deteriorating trolley services and the task of designing and paying for the expansion and maintenance of municipal electric light and power grids. Municipal

leaders would continue to face questions of where new electric street lights should be placed, whom within the city and/or what economic or social interest they should serve, and what their role was in fighting nocturnal crime. In addition, as new and exciting automobiles—and buses—increasingly congested city streets, important questions would arise about the future of trolley systems. The introduction of electricity to Atlanta and Richmond between 1880 and 1920, the first part of a longer story of electrification, prompted questions and issues that new generations of urban southern leaders would face as the twentieth century unfolded.

The story of the electrification of Atlanta and Richmond has offered a distinctly different narrative of the turn-of-the-century South. By emphasizing the role of boosterish city leaders, this dissertation has stressed that policymakers and policy shaped, to a great extent, the course of southern urban life and the development of the southern cityscape in this period. The existing portrayal of southern city leaders is largely one of failure, inactivity, and passive leadership, except in the realm of race relations where we see municipal officials as architects of segregation and Jim Crow. We do not understand southern city leaders to be like their contemporaries in the North and West, dynamically designing the growth and development of metropolises. To a great extent, the picture we have of southern cities is of gradually changing cities in which outside forces—industrial capitalism, technology, and innovation coming from the North and West—are driving said change. According to this perspective, southern urban leaders (and the southern city)—like the region as a whole—were the recipients of change, not its drivers—they responded to change, they did not actively shape its course. Perhaps this understanding of municipal officials has much to do with the

economic and social realities of the region in this period—the South of 1880-1920 was not a dynamic, rapidly growing center of innovation and development. In addition, as described, much of what southern leaders publicly hoped and planned for never came to fruition. They did not build a New South from the ashes of the Old.¹

Nevertheless, this dissertation has demonstrated that southern boosterish city leaders were both drivers of urban change and architects of contemporary infrastructure and policy. They imagined a different cityscape and worked to make it a reality. By determining how electricity would replace gas light and horsecars, by debating the merits of public ownership, by erecting municipal grids, by designing the electric light and trolley grids, by shaping the use of electric light to fight crime, and by designing mass transportation policy in the face of competing public and corporate pressure, city leaders helped shape the contemporary urban South and presented twentieth-century officials with infrastructure—and accompanying issues—that would continue to challenge policymakers for decades.

This dissertation has emphasized how powerful the idea of progress was to southern urban leaders and, consequently, to their cities. The idea of progress, of bringing capital, factories, wealth, and prosperity to these municipalities, drove boosters

¹ Howard Rabinowitz nicely articulates the general consensus on postbellum southern urban development: "During the late nineteenth century northern cities were radically transformed. The wrenching experience of Civil War and Reconstruction might have similarly affected their southern counterparts. Instead, continuity . . . was more noteworthy than change." Howard N. Rabinowitz, "Continuity and Change: Southern Urban Development, 1860-1900," in *The City in Southern History: The Growth of Urban Civilization in the South*, ed. Blaine A. Brownell and David R. Goldfield (Port Washington (NY): Kennikat Press, 1977), 92. See David R. Goldfield, *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers: Southern City and Region, 1607-1980* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1982), 80-103.

Don H. Doyle argues, however, that southern urban leaders, "shaped the world in which most southerners live today." This dissertation agrees with Doyle that, despite the usual emphasis on the failures of the urban South and its leaders, these people were actively changing the southern cityscape and urban life. Don H. Doyle, *New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1860-1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), xiv.

to pursue electrification. In turn, the process of electrification prompted the contentious issues and urban changes described. A commonly-held and pervasive idea—referred to as either the pursuit of "progress" or of a "New South"—this study contended, propelled urban change in this period of southern history.

Accordingly, this project reshapes our understanding of the New South creed. When scholars describe the mantra of the New South that dominated southern white rhetoric in the last decades of the nineteenth century (and would continue well into the twentieth), they often emphasize its connection to the antebellum South and the Lost Cause, arguing that white leaders longed for the power they had wielded before the Civil War, especially in the realm of race relations. The call for a "New South," scholars suggest, amounted to unrealistic rhetoric that shielded white southerners' agenda of reestablishing their political, economic, and racial order after Reconstruction. Similarly, scholars often argue that the "New South" simply amounted to, in David Goldfield's words, a "rhetorical collection of propaganda, myth, and reverie." While nostalgia for the past certainly played a role, this dissertation has demonstrated that for those policymakers who electrified their cities, the pursuit of progress and of the future played a more important role. This study reveals that officials' obsession with progress through electricity shows that these men were pursuing a positive vision of the future and of the southern city. Indeed, while booster rhetoric was oftentimes frivolous, these city men, many of whom were young industrialists, businessmen, and professionals, genuinely sought progress and the development of "New South" cities. They were interested in building new communities, filled with new industries, jobs, infrastructure, and ways of life. What is more, the ideas driving the New South creed had driven these men to

electrify their cities—they moved beyond rhetoric to enact policy. To students of southern history, understanding southern urban leaders' obsession with progress alters how we understand postbellum urban transformations, especially in terms of race relations. It suggests, for example, that the unequal distribution of technological systems along race and class lines was, in part, a product of progress-minded policymakers who were chiefly concerned with growth and development, not racial segregation and differentiation. In the realm of electrification, inequality was a consequence of policy, not a goal.²

This project has also added to our understanding of the process of turn-of-the-century electrification generally. Atlanta and Richmond were, by no means, the first American or even Southern cities to electrify. Cities were electrifying across the United States; all grappled with the process of introducing these systems. In addition, in many respects the leaders of these two cities designed the electrification of their communities in the same ways other city officials did—in particular, as described in the dissertation, other American city leaders similarly ignored lower classes when designing grids. Despite these similarities, however, several examples demonstrate how southern city leaders approached electrification differently. First, policymakers in Atlanta and Richmond, as repeatedly argued, pursued electrification as part of a larger pursuit of

² C. Vann Woodward observed that the part and parcel of call of the "New South" was the invention and romanticization of the "Old South." "The deeper the involvements and commitments to the New Order," he wrote, "the louder the protests of loyalty to the Old." C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1951), 154-58. Others come to similar conclusions. See Paul M. Gaston, *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970); Goldfield, 118.

Lawrence H. Larsen, like many scholars, primarily points to the unrealistic and illusory rhetoric of the "New South." Lawrence H. Larsen, *The Urban South: A History* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990); Joseph J. Persky, *The Burden of Dependency: Colonial Themes in Southern Economic Thought* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 98-104; Wayne Mixon, *Southern Writers and the New South Movement, 1865-1913* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

progress. To these officials it was a symbolic achievement. The passion with which they pursued the technological systems and the rhetoric they used was unlike that in many northern and western metropolises where city leaders, though impressed with the spectacle of electricity, largely adopted the technological system because of its practical benefits and potential. Second, city leaders in the South—like those in Richmond—were more likely than others in the United States to acquire public power plants, to seek public power over electrification. Third, southern city officials in Richmond, unlike in most American municipalities, challenged a traction company's dominance over public transportation, allowing—at the insistence of elite residents—the jitney automobile to prosper to the detriment of the electric trolley system. While these do not amount to the description of a fundamentally-southern approach to electrification, they do demonstrate that in Atlanta and Richmond, and likely in many southern cities, southern policymakers—unlike their contemporaries who dispassionately adopted the technological systems and generally deferred to private utility companies—were willing and often eager to hold the reigns of electrification and shape its application to southern urban growth and development.

This dissertation has argued that examining the process of electrification by boosterish city leaders in Atlanta and Richmond demonstrates why and how the postbellum southern city was changing at the turn of the twentieth century. It has emphasized how important the idea of the New South and the idea of electrification were to boosterish officials anxious for urban development and growth. The idea that electricity would bring with it the transformation of the southern city pushed municipal leaders to electrify their cities, to confront existing monopolies, to erect municipal plants,

to design grids, to defend electric corporations. The consequences of these policies—the establishment of expensive street lighting systems, of expanded municipal services, of lighting systems and trolley lines that privileged upper-class whites and ignored the poor and black, of confrontations between the public, electric companies, and city governments over urban transportation—though not what boosters had dreamed of in the 1880s, had nevertheless reshaped southern cities. By examining this story, we have a clearer understanding of southern municipal policymaking, turn-of-the-century southern cities, the process of electrification, and the simultaneous construction of the contemporary city and of contemporary urban infrastructure.

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