

Ronald H. Bayor. *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. xvi + 334 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-4898-2.



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[The contents of this review are the opinions of the reviewer and do not reflect the views of the National Park Service or the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site.]

Race, Atlanta, and Elephants

A joke circulating during the 1970s told of students from several universities that were given grants to do some kind of study of the elephant. The White American student wrote "The Economic Possibilities of the Elephant," the African-American student wrote "The Elephant and Race Relations." The joke was intended to poke fun at the fact that, by the 1970s, African-Americans were obsessed with relating everything to racial issues. However, for African-Americans from the Southern United States, everything *was* related to racial issues.

Race in the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta by Professor Ronald H. Bayor is an extended commentary on just how race affected everything.

It is also a commentary on how, in the South, race was like an elephant in the room that nobody talked about, taking space, touching everything, never dealt with. As Professor Bayor summarizes: "Race was a prime factor in the shaping of Atlanta's institutional and physical development.... Its impact was wide-ranging and touched all aspects of city life -- politics, housing, street and highway patterns, neighborhood formation, annexation, employment, basic city services, park and recreation space, health care, mass transit development, and schooling. ... Therefore, Atlanta is very much the product of a past that emphasized racial issues" (pp. 255-256).

Race is not the only factor shaping the city. Bayor points to class divisions, even divisions within the African-American community as a factor. He includes economic conditions and political realities. However, even these were affected by race, "For a city so concerned with economic growth, its white leaders were amazingly short-

sighted to allow the city's significant black population to endure low wages, inadequate training, and persistent discrimination" (p. 93).

The book is divided into four parts. Part one, "Beginnings" and chapter one gives the background to the conditions in Atlanta in the twentieth century. Part two, "Shaping the City" has chapters on politics, city building and the economy. Each chapter has information that shows how amazingly deep the effects of race could reach. As an example: Atlanta is known for its convoluted road pattern. Streets in Atlanta can change names after crossing another street, wind in complicated patterns, or simply dead-end at some point only to pick up miles away. Chapter three, "City Building and Racial Patterns" demonstrates how much of this came about because Atlantans living in White residential areas wanted to keep African-American Atlantans from buying property in their communities so much that they did not even want street access from an African-American community into their area.

Part three "City Service and City Institutions" shows how everything from playground location to firefighter and police hiring was affected by race. The two chapters on the Atlanta public school system and the fight over desegregation are a good short summary of what is still an ongoing problem in the city. Part four, "The Role of Race" and its chapter "On Race and Cities" summarizes how race affected Atlanta to the present with the results of actions. He also suggests other cities that can be studied for the effects of race, including but not limited to Boston, Chicago, and Kansas City, Missouri.

Professor Bayor uses oral histories and memoirs from individuals involved in the issues he discusses as well as the usual archival sources. Extensive quotation from these sources and from newspaper accounts of events gives some of the personal reaction to events as well as the chronicle of them. The bibliography and notes will make

it easy for researchers to follow up on the issues discussed.

The one problem with this book is more a possibility than a complaint. Because one area I study is race relations in Atlanta, I had no trouble following Professor Bayor's discussion; I am familiar with the outlines of all the issues in the book. However because the events and participants in these issues cover the entire twentieth century, someone not already knowledgeable of the history of the city may have trouble following the discussion. This book is packed with information. This is not a major complaint.

The reason I study race relations in Atlanta is that we talk about how growing up in Atlanta helped shape Dr. King. Of course we also talk about the Civil Rights Movement. One of the major new interpretive thrusts here at the Martin Luther King National Historic Site is explaining why the Civil Rights Movement was necessary. The Movement led by Dr. King was so successful that the obvious problems of segregation are gone. An entire generation has grown up without having to deal with it. This book will become a resource at the park to help our Rangers develop programs that use examples from Atlanta that explain what the effects of segregation were, how they affected Dr. King, and why African-Americans had to end it.

Beyond use as a reference for the Historic Site, this book would be useful for any study not just of race or segregation, but for the effects of both race and segregation. As *Race in the Shaping of Twentieth Century Atlanta* shows, the elephant is still in the room.

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