Religious Leaders in the Aftermath of Atlanta’s 1906 Race Riot

BY HARVEY K. NEWMAN AND GLENDA CRUNK

In advance of the centennial of the 1906 Atlanta race riot, both scholarly and popular writers focused attention on the causes and results of the tragedy. These new publications provide a great deal of insight into the conditions within the city’s African-American community preceding the disturbance, the deeply held prejudice and fears of white Atlanta residents, the socio-economic conditions in the city leading to the conflict, the incidents that occurred during the four-day riot, and the impact of the event on the city and nation.1 While mention is made in these works of the role of the city’s clergy, there has not been a study focused specifically on the actions of Atlanta’s religious leaders in the aftermath of the riot. These individuals—both black and white—stepped forward in the days and weeks following the violence to provide guidance within their segregated communities. The clergy also sought a measure of cooperation between the races that would prevent further trouble. Within the context of the time and place, the clergy

1Some of the best books on the topic include Allison Dorsey, To Build Our Lives Together: Community Formation in Black Atlanta, 1875-1906 (Athens, Ga., 2004); Mark Bauerlein, Ne-grophobia: A Race Riot in Atlanta, 1906 (San Francisco, Calif., 2001); Gregory L. Mixon, The Atlanta Riot: Race, Class, and Violence in a New South City (Gainesville, Fla., 2005); Rebecca Burns, Rage in the Gate City: The Story of the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot (Cincinnati, 2006); and David Fort Godshalk, Veiled Visions: The 1906 Atlanta Race Riot and the Reshaping of American Race Relations (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2005).

MR. NEWMAN is a professor in the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies at Georgia State University and MS. CRUNK is a graduate student.

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attempted to address the causes. In an era and a region where many regarded the role of the clergy as spiritual, the leaders of various congregations joined to influence public policies at the local and state levels. The patterns worked out by the city’s religious leaders continued to shape their role in Atlanta for much of the twentieth century.

During the summer of 1906, residents found themselves in the midst of a fierce political campaign to determine who would be the next governor of Georgia. Both candidates in the Democratic primary made the disenfranchisement of African-American voters the major issue in the campaign. Against this backdrop, rival newspapers competed with sensational headlines in an effort to boost circulation, mostly by running lurid stories about black men allegedly assaulting white women. In August, this “Negrophobia” reached a fever pitch with the lynching of an African-American male in Atlanta, ostensibly for the rape of a fourteen-year-old white girl. On Saturday evening, September 22, the papers stirred white fears by reporting four attempted assaults “made by brutal Negroes on defenseless white women.” The hysteria turned physical later that night, as mobs of armed whites attacked any blacks who happened to be in the downtown area. Exactly how many were killed and wounded during the initial night of violence is uncertain. The city coroner issued only ten death certificates for black victims, but estimates from other sources range from twenty to forty-seven African-American deaths, one hundred fifty critically injured, and countless others who fled the city.2

On Sunday morning, a relative calm spread over Atlanta. As white churches held their worship services, only a few ministers mentioned the mayhem of the previous evening while the “vast majority of the preachers remained silent.” Meanwhile, their black counterparts helped care for the wounded and provided comfort for the members of their congregations. One white religious leader who was never at a loss for words was the Reverend Sam P. Jones, a nationally known evangelist whose newspaper columns and sermons made him an influential person in Georgia. Speaking at a revival meeting in Cartersville, Jones’s remarks were

1Atlanta Constitution, August 1, September 23, 1906; Bauerlin, Negrophobia, 218-19; Mixon, Atlanta Riot, 1, 110.
reported in the newspapers on Monday morning: “Of course, you may say that the bloodshed in Atlanta last night was inevitable, but whiskey, yes, whiskey, was behind it. I want to see those disgraceful Decatur Street dives of debauchery and sin obliterated. . . . Liquor was behind all those atrocious deeds committed by the blacks in and around Atlanta and if you fellows will go to work and eliminate political chicanery and work in the interest of prohibition and accomplish the destruction of the liquor traffic I will personally account for every rape committed thereafter.” Jones expressed no doubt about the guilt of the African Americans involved, and for him the only solution was to restrict liquor sales by closing the black saloons on Decatur Street. His views on race and religion reflected what many whites in Atlanta believed. They regarded African Americans as an inferior race whose members needed to be kept from the evil influences of drinking. These Atlanta residents felt that blacks were to blame for causing the riot. Their religious leaders joined with elected public officials in seeking to restore order and keep the peace by closing the Decatur Street dives.

Jones did not address the violence of whites in their attacks against African Americans. According to historian Darren E. Grem, Jones disapproved of mob violence, including lynching, as it was “outside the system of courts ordained by God to exercise His justice.” Jones had a mass following in Atlanta as a result of his revival preaching and sermons published in the newspaper, but he was not a local pastor. He was a traveling evangelist whose visits to Atlanta for revival meetings in 1896 and 1897 were considered major events in the city’s religious history. Jones represented a theological perspective that was comfortable for most of Atlanta’s faith leaders. As an evangelist, he saw religion in terms of an individual’s choice, a voluntary decision to reject personal sins such as drinking, gambling, prostitution, theater-going, and the observance of Sunday as the Sabbath. The believer embraced a vision of personal piety, which his biographer Kathleen Minnix suggested had much in common with the fundamentalism that emerged in

1Atlanta Constitution, September 24, 1906.
American Protestantism two decades after Jones’s death in mid-October 1906. This emphasis on individual sin and salvation was a continuation of the kind of camp meeting revivalism and biblical primitivism characteristic of the Baptists and Methodists churches that dominated the religious life of Atlanta and most areas of the South. The success of evangelism among both blacks and whites meant that the religious leaders of the two races shared a theological perspective based on individualism at odds with a movement known as social gospel that saw sin and salvation in terms of a more collective process reflective of society as a whole. In the aftermath of the riot, the few black and white ministers in Atlanta who were identified with the social gospel movement joined with their more evangelistic colleagues in looking for solutions to the causes of the uprising.

The reconstruction in the days following the riot was both an effort to impose law and order and to repair the damage to Atlanta’s reputation as a beacon of the New South. White ministers of all theological positions united in their belief in the superiority of the white race and the need for racial segregation. In the effort to resuscitate Atlanta’s image, black ministers emerged as the backbone of African-American leadership, but they also contributed to a growing class division in the black community. Many of the African-American ministers joined in the campaign to close the Decatur Street dives where working-class black patrons were described as “vicious rounders, loafers and grossly ignorant” criminals who took lessons in “bestiality, criminality, and deviltry and have their unbridled passions stirred by mean liquor.” In their minds, black criminals were the product of the bad influence of idleness and alcohol—both plentiful on Decatur Street—in con-

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5See Martha Tovell Nesbitt, “The Social Gospel in Atlanta, 1900-1920” (Ph.D. diss., Georgia State University, 1975), 154-56; and Ralph E. Luker, *The Social Gospel in Black and White: American Racial Reform, 1883-1912* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1991), 1-7. Luker defined the term social gospel as a reform effort by Christians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to address the social problems of the age that they saw as functions of urban and industrial growth. He argued that the kind of inter-racial cooperation between blacks and whites that emerged in the aftermath of the 1906 Atlanta race riot was an expression of the social gospel movement.
trast to the preachers, teachers, and editors who were considered community leaders. In the days following the turmoil, white and black ministers provided leadership for their segregated communities. Many took a public role to influence local officials to close the Decatur Street bars and promote prohibition.

At the time of the riot, the real issue was, and had long been, how to control the African Americans who had poured into the city after the Civil War. In 1860, African Americans comprised only 20 percent of Atlanta’s population, but by 1866 the figure stood at 45 percent. Whites viewed this increase with alarm as the older means of social control by slavery or city ordinances no longer applied. White public officials searched for new measures that would enforce segregation. After Reconstruction, separation of the races was enforced by custom, but during the last decade of the nine-
teenth century, new legal patterns of discrimination were put in place to segregate whites from blacks. In 1892, Georgia passed a law requiring separate seating on trains. Four years later, the U.S. Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* made the doctrine of “separate but equal” the law of the land. White churches played their part in this pattern. Antebellum congregations that had slaves as members became segregated after the Civil War; blacks left to form their own churches and denominational affiliations.

Local ordinances followed, prohibiting African Americans from using the city’s parks, the zoo in Grant Park, and the public library. Bars and restaurants were also strictly segregated (though the rules were not enforced on Decatur Street). These businesses had to display a sign indicating which customers would be served. Jim Crow laws were part of a caste system designed to keep blacks in an inferior place in society. This system included voting restrictions, segregated and substandard schools, and was

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*Atlanta Independent*, September 22, 1906.


kept in place by powerful all-white businesses, churches, and political institutions. Prior to the riot, places like Auburn Avenue and Decatur Street had residential and commercial areas occupied by members of both races who lived and worked in close proximity. Even Peachtree Street was the location of a barber shop owned by one of the city’s African-American entrepreneurs, Alonzo Herndon. The most flagrant, though, was Decatur Street, where drinking, prostitution, gambling, and other vices flourished and some of the establishments were owned by whites who served black customers. The proximity of whites and blacks in a section of a city such as Atlanta has been described as a kind of “borderland” where all kinds of social divisions involving race, gender, and class were blurred. Seen within the context of the region as a whole, the relationships between blacks and whites in Atlanta formed part of a “precarious balancing act” that depended on continual redefinition within the Jim Crow era. Historian Leon F. Litwack described the challenges faced by ministers: on the one hand, they needed to please their congregations, but on the other, they also had to operate within the limits of relations between the races that constantly shifted. For white and black clergy, the challenges of leadership were somewhat different, but after the riot, Atlanta’s religious leaders played an important part in the redefinition of race relations.

After the mayhem of September 1906, as black Atlantans counted the dead and injured and surveyed the damage done to their businesses and homes, local white clergy supported Sam Jones and echoed his calls for shutting down saloons catering to African Americans. In the logic of white supremacy, the borderland area where whites and blacks mixed became the target of a campaign to close the “Decatur Street Dives” that were regarded as responsible for the wave of crime. The newspapers joined this crusade with the Atlanta Journal describing in lurid details the area

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15Litwack, Trouble in Mind, 389.
as a “stinking place with barrooms, restaurants serving beer and liquor to Negroes, and dives where people sleep for 10 cents a night.” The editor called upon the leaders to “CLOSE UP THE HELL BROTHELS ON DECATUR STREET” in order to help reduce the assaults by blacks on white women. The editorial added: “Religion, law, morality, sentiment, and decency demand the cessation (of the assaults) at once.” This policy proposal gained the endorsement of “the best negroes in Atlanta.” One of these was H. H. Proctor, pastor of First Congregational Church, who was described by the Journal’s editor as “an enlightened negro minister.”

Proctor was not alone among the city’s African-American clergy in calling for the closing of the Decatur Street bars. At a meeting of Baptist ministers before the riot, six pastors called on the city to shut down the saloons in the area. In what would become a familiar theme, the ministers drew a distinction between the leaders of the city’s black community, the “preachers, teachers, and editors” and the uneducated “who were the unchurched and unreached members of the race.” The six ministers were the Reverends Peter James Bryant of Wheat Street Baptist, E. R. Carter of Friendship Baptist, E. P. Johnson of Reed Street Baptist, H. R. Harrison of Frazier Street Baptist, W. W. Floyd of Zion Hill Baptist, and A. P. Dunbar of Mt. Olive Baptist Church.

Other African-American ministers remained busy in the aftermath of the chaos with the pastoral duties of their office. For example, the Atlanta Independent reported that Dr. John A. Rush assisted by the Reverend William Fountain officiated at the funeral of Frank Smith, a Western Union messenger stoned to death by the mob of “poor white crackers” on Saturday night. The funeral service on Monday, September 24, was held at the Central Avenue Methodist Church where Rush was pastor. The African-American newspaper laid the blame for the death on the city’s low-income white residents.

On the day of the funeral, Atlanta’s white ministers began to make their voices heard. A meeting of Methodist preachers con-

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"Atlanta Independent, September 22, 1906.
"Ibid., September 29, 1906.
demned the rioting and passed a unanimous resolution saying: “The crime and violence that were responsible for the rioting which occurred here Saturday night were denounced; sympathy for the innocent women who have fallen victims to negroes was expressed; the excesses of the mob were deplored; and the tardy action of the civil authorities in attempting to restrain rioters was regretted.” 19

White Baptist ministers also met on Monday and expressed their concern over the rioting in the city. The Baptists appointed a committee of six that included the Reverends W. W. Landrum of First Baptist; John E. White of Second Baptist; John F. Purser of West End Baptist; Julius W. Millard of Ponce de Leon Avenue Baptist; Virgil Norcross of Western Heights Baptist; and W. W. Cowan of Immanuel Baptist Church. Their task was to investigate the causes of the violence and “to suggest if possible the adoption of measures to prevent their reoccurrence.” 20 For the Baptist pastors, the answer to the causes of the riots was the same as for the evangelist Sam Jones—prohibition. The following week the Baptist newspaper, the Christian Index, reported in all capital letters, “THE CLOSING OF ALL LIQUOR-SELLING ESTABLISHMENTS, IN OUR STATE WILL DO MORE THAN ANY OTHER ONE THING TO DIMINISH CRIME IN THE STATE. . . . So long as the white people allow liquor to be sold to Negroes, for the sake of the revenue it brings, they will be responsible, in part at least, for the crimes that liquor-besotted Negroes commit.” The call for prohibition to remove liquor from the hands of “Negroes” was repeated in subsequent weeks in Georgia’s Baptist newspaper. 21

Baptist leaders also took the message to local decision makers. Speaking at a city council meeting on Tuesday evening, September 25, John White urged that the Decatur Street bars be closed because they were “[b]lots upon the civilization of Atlanta, Breeders of vice and crime.” In a newspaper editorial, White justified the proposal by suggesting that African Americans in the South were as irresponsible with alcohol as American Indians out west. White concluded with the familiar paternalistic caveat that discrimina-

19Atlanta Journal, September 24, 1906.
20Ibid.
21Christian Index, September 27, October 4, 11, 1906.
tion against blacks was actually for their own protection and for the public good.22

White’s racial views were considered among the more moderate of those held by Atlanta’s white clergy. Unlike White, conservatives such as Dr. A. R. Holderby of the Moore Memorial Presbyterian Church appeared to support lynching. The day after the riot, Holderby assessed its causes when he wrote:

The riot was greatly to be deplored, but I am not at all surprised at it. In fact, I was satisfied it was coming. Such a thing shows the weakness of the law and where the law does not protect the people will take it in their own hands and see that crime is punished properly. One thing is sure and certain, and that is that the people of the south will protect their wives and daughters and sisters, regardless of the consequences and at all hazards. I am of course sorry it occurred, as is every law-abiding citizen, but we have all been looking for it unless conditions changed. Raping must cease. A stop must be put to it. We will not stand for it any longer, be results what they may. . . . The law is entirely inadequate. Our courts are too slow. Some means must be devised for remedying such a state of affairs. I do not preach against lynching, and never will as long as raping continues and the law is in its present state. It would be foolish to preach against it. I preach against crime and not against lynching as a result of raping. Lynching will continue a long as raping does.23

Holderby later expressed regret for the extreme views published in the immediate aftermath of the riot. The next week, he made a “correction” in order to clarify his remarks about lynching. Holderby stated that he did not mention the strife in his sermon on the morning after the episode began because “the people were very nervous and excited, and that I thought it would do no good to preach against mob law or Lynch law under the present condition of affairs, that as long as assaults were made upon our defenseless women the mob law would prevail, and that we would have to strike at the cause of the trouble before we could put a stop to the mob.” Once quiet had returned to the city, Holderby wished to “preach against mob law or Lynch law as I believe all mob law is contrary to the law of God.”24

22Atlanta Constitution, September 26, 28, 1906.
23Ibid., September 24, 1906.
24Atlanta Journal, October 1, 1906.
Several other white ministers expressed their concern over the adverse effects of the rioting on city businesses. These ministers urged Christians who stood for order and decency to pray that some good could come out of the turmoil. The mayor responded by ordering all saloons in the city closed until they could reapply for a business license. Each bar would be reviewed by a special committee that would examine the “character of the business transacted by every licensed bar room in Atlanta.” No one missed the point of the mayor’s order since it did not apply to hotel cafes that served only white customers. The editor of the Constitution made the intent of the policy perfectly clear: “Under no conditions should licenses be granted to saloons catering wholly or in part to Negroes,” adding that it was the duty of white Atlantans to keep liquor away from “inferior races.”

The city council hastily approved the reopening of bars and restaurants that catered to white customers, but thirty-six saloons serving blacks in the area of Decatur Street had their licenses denied and closed permanently. In the entire city, only eighteen restaurants and taverns for African Americans reopened. During the deliberations that led to the closing of these establishments, African-American church leaders were by no means silent. Attending the public hearings were several prominent black ministers including E. R. Carter, Bishop Lucius H. Holsey of the Butler Street Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, John Rush, and Jim Reeves, chaplain of the city stockade. Speaking for the group, Rush reminded the audience that black dives were not the only culprits in causing the riot. White establishments were just as evil and these dives also nurtured criminals and served a degenerate white clientele that was just as prone to criminal behavior as poor African Americans. The presence of the black ministers at the hearings was an exercise of their leadership within their community. While most of the violence had been caused by whites in an effort to assert their superiority over blacks, these African-American church leaders willingly accepted that some blame lay on lower-class members of their race as well as lower-class whites. Such reasoning did not change the city council’s decision, however, and white-owned

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"Atlanta Constitution, September 28, 1906.
Ibid., October 3-6, 1906; Atlanta Journal, September 25, 1906."
businesses continued to reopen while many black-owned businesses remained closed. In the city where most African Americans were poor, the ministers emerged from the riot as the most prominent spokesmen for their race.

Most economic activity remained paralyzed in the days following the violence. Ray Stannard Baker, a national journalist, described Atlanta after the turmoil: “Factories were closed, railroad cars were left unloaded in the yards, the streetcar system was crippled, and there was no cab-service ... hundreds of servants deserted their places, the bank clearings slumped by hundreds of thousands of dollars, the state fair, then just opening, was a failure.”

Equally devastating to city leaders was the unfavorable national publicity resulting from the turmoil. A large convention of the National Association of Retail Druggists was to begin in Atlanta on October 1, with more than two thousand delegates expected for the first meeting of the organization ever held in the region. The push to restore law and order led to the formation of a Committee of Ten, made up of white business leaders who effectively took control of the city. One of its first acts was to organize a meeting with African-American leaders. Included among them were Proctor, E. P. Johnson, E. R. Carter, John Rush, and Lucius Holsey, as well as Benjamin J. Davis, editor of the Atlanta Independent, the city's leading African-American newspaper. Baker called this the “first important occasion in the South upon which an attempt was made to get the two races together for any serious consideration of their differences.” While this may have been an exaggeration of the importance of the meeting, Baker was probably correct in his assessment of the novelty of the event within the city.

The men who represented the African-American community were all prominent black ministers. There were twenty-four National Baptist congregations in the city in 1906 reporting a membership of approximately twelve thousand. While there were twenty-eight African Methodist Episcopal Churches in Atlanta,

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their congregations reported only fifty-five hundred.29 Status differences among African-American congregations had also emerged by the time of the race riot. According to a 1903 survey conducted by Atlanta University students of Professor W. E. B. DuBois, more than half of the Baptist churches in Atlanta were “very small, with very small memberships, and very ignorant or illiterate pastors.”30 In contrast, the pastors of older “first churches,” such as Friendship Baptist, Wheat Baptist, and Bethel African Methodist Episcopal, were known for their educational attainment and the relatively higher economic status of their membership. E. R. Carter was typical of these church leaders and notable for his 1894 book, The Black Side, that highlighted the achievements of Atlanta’s African-American business leaders, educators, and ministers.31 The wealthiest black church in the city, however, was Proctor’s First Congregational. Educated at Fisk University and Yale Divinity School, Proctor was the first African-American pastor of the congregation founded in 1867 by the white representatives of the American Missionary Association. This group had come south after the end of the Civil War to teach former slaves (the school eventually became Atlanta University). In 1903, Proctor’s congregation numbered almost five hundred, had no debt, and owned more valuable real estate than any other African-American church in the city. First Congregational Church’s members were described as business and professional men and their wives, whose pastor led worship services noted for their lack of emotionalism and appeal to the intellect.32

The leaders of the most prominent African-American churches played three critical roles that helped to define their position in the community in the decades that followed the riot. First, they were the leading spokesmen for their race and proved willing to put aside denominational differences with their fellow pastors. Historian Andrew James Reisinger summarized the ideals of four of the city’s leading African-American pastors as follows:

32DuBois, ed., The Negro Church, 73.
Henry Hugh Proctor was the pastor of First Congregational Church in 1906. He emerged in the aftermath of the race riot as a leader and spokesman for African Americans in the city. Courtesy of William B. Matthews Collection, Archives Division, Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture and History, Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System.
E. R. Carter was generally anxious to promote interracial cooperation; Henry McNeal Turner was a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church and a promoter of blacks returning to Africa; Lucius Holsey advocated ideas of racial separation; and Proctor was a friend of Booker T. Washington.\textsuperscript{35}

Second, even though the four leaders represented differing denominations and ideological points of view, when faced with the magnitude of the crisis, they put aside their differences in order to provide leadership for the African-American community and promoted policy changes that would contribute to reducing violence in the future. The major change advocated by the black pastors was the promotion of temperance and closing down the lower-class saloons in the Decatur Street area in an effort to prevent further trouble.

Finally, in their role as community leaders the pastors of the elite black churches participated in an interracial dialogue with white civic leaders. Historian David Fort Godshalk suggested that this interracial cooperation to close the saloons isolated the black ministers from other African Americans in the city thus weakening the racial solidarity that might have achieved more important goals for all black residents. Godshalk regarded the continuing participation of black elites, including pastors, and white business leaders during the negotiated settlements of the civil rights era as part of the pattern established by Proctor and other leading pastors following the riot.\textsuperscript{34} In contrast, historian Allison Dorsey saw the leadership of the pastors as part of the process of community formation among the city’s African Americans that would continue in the face of segregation and white repression. She described the role of the black pastors as contributing to racial uplift and solidarity as more significant in the long run than the efforts to reach across lines of power and race.\textsuperscript{35}

The turmoil did provide an opportunity for dialogue between blacks and whites. As the Committee of Ten white civic leaders as-

\textsuperscript{34}Andrew James Reisinger, "Clerical Trailblazers: A Study of the Cooperation of Atlanta’s African American Clergy in the Era of the 1906 Atlanta Race Riot" (Honors thesis, Georgia State University, 1999), 30-34; and Paul Harvey, Freedom’s Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2005), 60-67.

\textsuperscript{35}Godshalk, Veiled Visions, 161, 269.

\textsuperscript{35}Dorsey, To Build Our Lives Together, 170.
sumed control of the city, they reached out to prominent blacks in an effort to promote law and order. Among the ten African-American leaders who met with their white counterparts, five were ministers. This shows something of the relative status of the clergy in their respective communities.

While white ministers supported the civic leaders who formed the Committee of Ten, it is important that the businessmen and professionals who comprised the spokesmen for the white community did not include any pastors. White ministers shared the views of most white civic leaders but were not numbered among the most powerful of the city’s white elite. It is not a coincidence that the clergy shared the views of prosperous business leaders. The majority of Atlanta’s white preachers were born in the region, educated at universities such as Emory, Mercer, or Oglethorpe, and occupied an economic status in total estate and property holdings that was below other local professionals and business owners but well above skilled laborers.36

The Committee of Ten and its African-American counterpart developed a proposal to improve communication between the races. The plan came to fruition in the creation of the Atlanta Civic League, which eventually included one thousand five hundred white members, and the Colored Co-operative Civic League, which consisted of an equal number of blacks. This expanded group of white leaders in the Civic League did boast of several prominent members of the clergy such as Episcopal minister Cary B. Wilmer. The executive committee of the black Civic League included Proctor, E. R. Carter, Peter James Bryant, Henry McNeal Turner, Lucius Holsey, and Richard T. Weatherby, secretary of the black YMCA. In the weeks following the riot, these groups kept discussions going between whites and blacks in an effort to promote order and prevent further outbreaks of violence.37

Another important biracial meeting occurred on September 30, 1906, at the Wheat Street Baptist Church with pastor Peter Bryant serving as host. According to the Atlanta Independent, one of the speakers at the event was “Dr. [David] Marks (Marx), pastor of

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37Reisinger, “Clerical Trailblazers,” 66-70; Godshalk, Veiled Visions, 136-37, 140-44; and Baker, Following the Color Line, 18-22.
the Jewish Synagogue, who advised the colored people to take fresh courage and outline the fearful disaster which visited our city during the past week.” Marx added that Atlanta’s residents should forget the hell to come and strive to prevent such hells as were seen on the city’s streets on September 22.48 The city’s major African-American newspaper was the only source to report the involvement of Marx, who was the leader of Atlanta’s oldest synagogue (a Reform congregation comprised primarily of Jews of German ancestry that was officially named the Hebrew Benevolent Congregation, but known as the Temple).

Jews in Atlanta occupied a small niche in the city’s population. Immigrants seldom came to Atlanta, and as a consequence, the city never had more than 5 percent foreign-born in the early twentieth century. In the period following the Civil War, the presence of a small number of mostly German-born Jews in Atlanta was regarded as an indication of the city’s growing prosperity, and the white gentile majority had tended to show little hostility toward them during the nineteenth century.49

Marx was selected to lead the Temple in 1896, when he became the first American-born rabbi of the congregation. For the next fifty-two years he served as the “ambassador to the Gentiles,” moving the largely German Jews of the Temple into the Reform tradition with its emphasis on assimilation into local culture.40 To accomplish this, Marx stripped the Temple of vestiges of “foreignism,” held Sunday services, cultivated close relationships with Protestant clergy in Atlanta, and frequently lectured to church and civic groups. But by 1906, a majority of Jews in Atlanta belonged to one of the three Orthodox synagogues composed largely of recently arrived Russian immigrants. Marx had few ties to these congregations, preferring to promote acceptance by the gentile community.41

48Atlanta Independent, October 6, 1906.
40Janice Rothschild Blumberg, "Jacob M. Rothschild: His Legacy Twenty Years After" in Mark K. Bauman and Berkley Kalin, eds., The Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights, 1880s to 1990s (Tuscaloosa, Ala. 1997), 263.
41Special Reports, Religious Bodies: 1906, Table 7, 412; Steven Hertzberg, Strangers within the Gate City (Philadelphia, 1978), 185-89.
Many of the Russian Jews came to Atlanta as impoverished refugees and entered the retail business at the lowest and most stigmatized level. They owned businesses and lived along Decatur Street, often sharing occupancy of two-story buildings with African Americans. Most of the gentile white majority in Atlanta did not approve of this residential integration, providing more reason to look down on the Decatur Street area. The relationships between the Russian Jews and their African-American clientele and neighbors were complex. In spite of the persecution suffered by both groups, often the attitude of Russians toward blacks included an increasing hostility. Yet many Russian Jews in Atlanta were different from most gentile whites in their treatment of African Americans as customers and in their willingness to be a part of life along Decatur Street. In the aftermath of the race riot, many of the Decatur Street dives run by Russian Jews became targeted for closing in an effort to punish the white proprietors of restaurants and bars serving a black clientele. Other African-American establishments in the area also contributed to the disreputable image of Decatur Street.

In his appearance before the biracial gathering at Wheat Street Baptist Church, Marx joined his white Protestant colleagues in addressing the blacks in the audience with an appeal for calm and the re-establishment of order. Marx’s apparent acceptance by the gentile white ministers in 1906 would not prevent violence against a member of his own congregation, however, when antisemitism flared in Atlanta seven years later during the trial and subsequent lynching of Leo Frank.

Another outcome of the meeting at the Wheat Street Baptist Church was the formation of the Christian Civic League, a group that believed worship and the practice of fundamental Christian principals would bring about positive race relations. In practice,

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“Hertzberg, Strangers within the Gate City, 191. For additional discussion of relations between Jews and African Americans in Atlanta, see Mark K. Bauman, “Factionalism and Ethnic Politics in Atlanta: The German Jews from the Civil War through the Progressive Era,” GHQ 82 (Fall 1998): 550-51. This theme is also addressed on a regional level by David R. Goldfield, “Jews, Blacks, and Southern Whites” in Region, Race, and Cities: Interpreting the Urban South (Baton Rouge, La., 1997), 145-62.

“The city council seriously considered a proposal to improve the image of Decatur Street by renaming it East Main. Many older residents defended the original name even while expressing distaste for the reputation of the area. See Newman, “Decatur Street,” 8.
the Christian Civic League promoted weekly prayer meetings at the black YMCA and monthly lectures on the need for obedience to the law as a way of bringing communal harmony. Even the racist editor of the *Georgian*, John Templeton Graves, whose newspaper’s sensationalism had helped precipitate the riot, praised the accomplishments of the Civic League and the Christian League, saying the organizations were “working from the highest possible motives and applying the soundest practical principles to one of the most hopeful experiments, and the heart of the South and of the republic cordially wishes them success.”

Only one white minister in Atlanta, Cary B. Wilmer, rector of the newly formed St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, willingly admitted in print that members of his race had to shoulder at least some of the blame for the recent violence. He told the *Atlanta Constitution*: “Before we can successfully control the negro, we must learn to control ourselves; before we can Christianize the negro, we must repent of our sins.” His assumption that whites needed to “control the negro” reflected a longstanding objective of most whites in Atlanta since the end of the Civil War. Even religious institutions participated in the rigid segregation of the city’s social structure. He stood alone in acknowledging the actions of the whites and urged residents to work to prevent future violence and to live more Christian lives. Editor Benjamin Davis reprinted Wilmer’s letter to the *Constitution* in its entirety on the front page of the *Atlanta Independent*. Unlike his white Baptist and Methodist counterparts, Wilmer did not call for prohibition. While Wilmer acknowledged the familiar arguments connecting liquor and crime, he added, “it is quite possible to be led astray and make a scapegoat of liquor as if that were the sole or even the chief cause of the late riot.” Instead, Wilmer saw the cause within the human heart and “not inside a jug.”

Meanwhile, agreeing with his white counterparts that African Americans should be blamed for the violence, black ministers such as Proctor appealed to white elites and the entire city for financial support so that his church could provide uplift for those

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*Bauerlein, Negrophobia, 271.*

*Atlanta Constitution*, October 4, 1906.

*Atlanta Independent*, October 6, 1906.
Cary B. Wilmer was the pastor of St. Luke's Episcopal Church at the time of the race riot. He was among the most moderate of white clergy in Atlanta and was willing to admit that whites had some blame for the violence. Courtesy of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Atlanta.
who had been tainted by the bad influences of alcohol and saloons. Proctor outlined his strategy: “For ten years, I had sat on my porch near the church and seen the people of my race go by the church down to the dive, into the prison, up to the gallows. I asked myself why it was that the people passed by my church and went to the dive. The answer was simple. My church was locked and barred and dark, while the dive was wide open, illuminated, and attractive. Then I said: ‘God helping me, I will open my church and make it as attractive as the dive.’” 47

His plan required money, and Proctor raised ten thousand dollars from his congregation, two thousand five hundred dollars from other black churches, and twenty-five thousand dollars from whites in Atlanta. Using his connection to Booker T. Washington, Proctor also solicited funding in other parts of the country for the construction of a new building for First Congregational Church. The model was the “industrial church,” a structure centered around a gymnasium, Sunday school facilities, a library and reading room, as well as a kitchen, showers, and lavatories. Proctor also directed the building of a home for poor black working girls located next door to the church and parsonage. Church-sponsored programs were not merely for recreation, but also included an employment bureau and a prison ministry for men “at the very bottom” of society. White congregations such as Trinity Methodist Church had used this model as a way of reaching out to poor and working-class white women in Atlanta as early as 1882, but their activities had been limited to sewing instruction and evangelism. Proctor’s vision of a more comprehensive role for his church and his energetic fundraising in the months following the riot enabled the church to dedicate its new building in 1909 with a speech by Washington. 48

There were limits to white generosity when it came to ameliorating poverty and addressing the inadequate schools in Atlanta’s black community, however. First and foremost, the entire premise that blacks should be blamed for white mob violence was deeply flawed, but black leaders were in no position to criticize white At-

lantans in public. Consequently, any genuine attempts to reach the root of the real problem—unrestrained and unpunished violence against African Americans—were simply not possible in the context of the Jim Crow South. Moreover, white and black elites pointed their fingers at ignorant lower-class blacks, yet no whites supported public policies that would improve educational or employment opportunities for African Americans. Blacks who paid local taxes were not provided with a public high school until 1924, although the first two public high schools for whites had opened in 1872. Likewise, African Americans could not use the public library, and all black citizens endured segregation in most public places. The appeal for charity in the aftermath of the riot lay on the widely held paternalistic ideal of noblesse oblige.

The purpose of the riot, like other forms of southern white violence against African Americans during this period, was to keep blacks in “their place.” By this measure, it was successful. To take just one example, in 1890 Auburn Avenue had been a racially mixed area that included five black-owned businesses; by 1907, that number had increased to twenty-nine. After the riot, more than two-thirds of all black businesses in Atlanta relocated to predominantly African-American areas like Sweet Auburn. In fact, from 1907 until the passage of civil rights legislation in 1964, black commercial activity in Atlanta was concentrated in the areas of Auburn Avenue and Decatur Street on the east side of downtown and on the west side near the campuses of the institutions that would eventually make up the Atlanta University Center.

The major policy reform effort in the post-riot period was the statewide prohibition law passed by the Georgia General Assembly in 1907. Most members of the clergy of both races gave it their support. Among white ministers, Len G. Broughton, pastor of the Baptist Tabernacle, revived the Anti-Saloon League in order to press the state legislature to vote for prohibition. Among black clergy, Proctor organized efforts within the African-American community to back the legislation. When the law took effect on New Year’s Day 1908, one hundred thirty-two businesses in Atlanta

*Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot, 125.*
had to close, including twenty-five whiskey saloons and six beer parlors serving African Americans. The legislation was clearly aimed at the Decatur Street establishments that had allegedly contributed to black moral degradation. Many Baptist and Methodist ministers of both races led their congregations in New Year’s Eve celebrations to welcome the new prohibition law.

As in many other aspects of life in Atlanta, race and class deeply influenced Georgia’s prohibition law. Elite whites and African Americans agreed that restricting the sale of alcohol would diminish disorderly and criminal behavior—among the poor of both races. Whites especially failed to acknowledge the hypocrisy in their own brand of alcohol consumption, which usually took place in unregulated private clubs. Not surprisingly, after prohibition, these white clubs remained open and were soon joined by illegal bars operating as “locker clubs” in the upstairs of office and commercial buildings. For blacks and lower-class whites, a few saloons continued to sell soft drinks and “near beer,” which had an alcohol content of less than 3 percent and was regarded as non-in-toxicating. Moonshine whiskey was also made and sold to both blacks and whites throughout the city. Even though most saloons closed, ministers’ attempts to reduce alcohol sales failed; the practice simply went underground, and the net effect was to reduce tax revenues available to Atlanta and to turn citizens and business owners into evaders, if not breakers, of the law.51

Just as many black and white clergy supported prohibition, they also shared the desire to work with Atlanta’s business and political leaders to restore the capital’s image. Civic leaders had worked hard to portray Atlanta as modern and progressive, striving to be like New York City and Chicago. But business had slumped dramatically in the aftermath of the violence. For its part, the Atlanta Constitution tried to reassure its readers that the riot had been the work of a “mob of irresponsibles”—not the industrious, upstanding citizens of Atlanta. Prospective businessmen visiting the city heard promises that “the lawlessness of the comparatively few did not in any way represent the enterprising

and progressive ‘Atlanta Spirit.’” Part of this spirit required that Atlantans move quickly to put the incident behind them.

On Sunday, December 9, 1906, the Christian League and the Business Men’s Gospel Union declared the observance of Law and Order Day. On that day and the second Sunday of every month in the following year, ministers were urged to preach on civic duty and lawfulness. As one newspaper described it: “The day will be a remarkable one in the history of the Atlanta churches. The 180 sermons upon the same subject, delivered with special earnestness, will of necessity be powerful in their effect.” At Friendship Baptist Church, the city’s oldest African-American Baptist church, an estimated crowd of more than twelve hundred filled the sanctuary to hear Booker T. Washington and former governor William Northern, a promoter of the white Christian Civic League, as well as the pastor of the church, E. R. Carter, a prominent member of the Colored Civic League.

Events like these fostered a sense of cooperation between races that would come to define the Atlanta approach to white-black relations. The interracial dialogue, for the most part, would be conducted from segregated organizations, but it did help give Atlanta the appearance, in the words of one of its later mayors, William B. Hartsfield, of a “city too busy to hate.” Clearly, the harsh reality of white supremacy that insisted upon segregation for another sixty years gave lie to such slogans. Yet the city’s boosters, coupled with some genuine (if sporadic and grudging) reform efforts over the years, saw to it that Atlanta maintained a veneer of racial cooperation.

Few rioters were ever convicted of a crime; Atlantans were too eager to put the episode behind them and move on. The race riot of 1906 received little attention from historians and eventually it faded from memory almost entirely. Yet, there are a number of lessons imbedded in the event, including the role played by ministers.

First, the 1906 riot in Atlanta was but one of a number of similar racially motivated riots across the country. All were repressive

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52 Atlanta Constitution, September 30, 1906.
53 Atlanta Evening News, December 9, 1906.
54 Bauerlein, Negrophobia, 257.
violence designed to assert the supremacy of whites over blacks by keeping African Americans segregated in society. In Atlanta, and elsewhere, part of that legacy of violence was the physical separation of African Americans into neighborhoods and commercial areas such as Auburn Avenue and Decatur Street. The legacy became more than physical patterns of separate neighborhoods for whites and blacks. One observer noted in 2006: “Every city that has had racial violence like this is still affected by it. You see it in the patterns of segregation, in the attitudes, in the fears people feel on both sides. Something like this riot slips out of memory, and people assume things have always been the way they are. But there are reasons.” The 1906 race riot defined relationships between races based on prejudice and fear, two emotions that are difficult to overcome.

The role of Atlanta’s religious leaders in the aftermath of the riot is also an important part of the legacy. As the Constitution described the Sunday services at many of the city’s white churches on the morning after the violence began, most ministers remained silent on the subject. In the days that followed, many white preachers used their voices to promote order in support of Atlanta’s more powerful economic leaders. In this role as communicators, the white ministers articulated a widely held belief that religion, especially Christianity, could reduce problems of disorder and bring stability to the city based on a vision of the supremacy of their race.

The white clergy did not agree on how that could be achieved. Some of the more extreme urged lynching and illegal violence to keep blacks in their place. Most used their voices to restore order through public policies that would close saloons selling alcohol to African Americans and promoted passage of prohibition laws. While a few pastors argued that the clergy should stay out of politics, most supported the city’s civic elite, who were usually members of their congregations. They condemned the rioting for its adverse effects on business, but took no notice of its cause—white racism. For the next fifty years after the riot, most white clergy would remain supporters of the racial status quo that kept African Americans in their separate and unequal place in Atlanta. As

skilled orators the city’s white preachers helped to mold the segregated society that denied full rights of citizenship, educational and economic opportunity, and dignity to Atlanta’s African-American residents. While not always at the center of the civic elite, the white clergy were by no means apolitical. They used their talent to support segregation and what they regarded as moral crusades such as prohibition, anti-gambling legislation, and restrictions on other vices.

Within what E. R. Carter described as the “Black Side of Atlanta,” African-American ministers continued their roles as leaders in an increasingly segregated social structure. The position of pastor in a twentieth-century black church might not convey wealth, but it provided the minister with a high status position within the community. As they had in the days after the riot, many black ministers served several roles in the city. First, they were powerful leaders within the black community who would provide the racial uplift needed by those at the bottom of society who would benefit from the spiritual and physical assistance provided within the churches. H. H. Proctor was an example of this kind of leader whose church provided the black community with access to books, employment training, and a wide array of other necessities such as a drinking fountain. With other African-American churches, First Congregational also provided an “instrument for reforming the race.” For former slaves, the churches were places where men and women could learn proper moral values, becoming sober, industrious citizens.

Black clergy provided more than uplift within their segregated community. They also remained as spokesmen for their race in the variety of organizations formed before the First World War. From the group that met with the Committee of Ten to the Coloured Co-operative Civic League and the Christian Civic League, African-American pastors were prominent leaders of the black community in negotiations with whites to restore order and promote communication between the races. Such conversations con-

57Dorsey, To Build Our Lives Together, 74.
tinued through other organizations such as the Commission on Interracial Cooperation and the Christian Council.58

Scholars such as David Godshalk and Allison Dorsey, who see different meaning in the outcome of the 1906 race riot, agree that the dialogue between the races took place within a “mantle of paternalism” that black leaders willingly accepted. Both concur that the roles of the pastors were part of a separation of the city’s black community into an elite group that was willing to negotiate with white civic leaders on less than terms of equality. For Dorsey, however, the black leaders, including the ministers, became an important part of the process of racial uplift that would improve the social, economic, and civic lives of African Americans in the city. In the face of white racism, these leaders were part of the solidarity of the black community.59

The leadership experience of black pastors contributed to the unique ability of Atlanta to resolve much of its interracial strife in subsequent years without violence. The process of interracial communication that followed the riot had important consequences. The cooperation of the black and white Committees of Ten led to policy changes resulting in the immediate closing of many of the establishments along Decatur Street and in the successful temperance campaign the following year. Thus, two critical roles of the black clergy in the years after the race riot were active leadership in politics and the promotion of interracial communication. The aftermath of the riot helped black and white clergy solidify the different roles they would play in Atlanta throughout much of the twentieth century. Understanding this aspect of the legacy of that event may help all those who seek to provide civic leadership in the future.