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A Question of Progress and Welfare:

The Jitney Bus Phenomenon in Atlanta, 1915-1925

BY JULIAN C. CHAMBLISS

On January 31, 1915, the *New York Times* announced that "one of the most astonishing businesses . . . this country has seen . . . has taken the West by storm and extended eastward."¹ This new business—the result of lower automobile prices, limited regulation, and consumer demand—created the first automobile passenger service that could challenge the dominance of the streetcars in American streets. According to the *Times*, the jitney's slogan, "Take You Anywhere and Stop at Any Corner," explained the jitney's appeal to urban residents.² After years of monopolistic streetcar service, jitneys, privately owned automobiles modified for passenger service, were a competitive alternative with quicker service and greater comfort for the same price. From 1915 to 1925, controlling access to public streets in Atlanta became a crucial debate framing a prolonged struggle to regulate jitneys on the city's streets. Supporters and enemies pushed the city council to regulate jitneys, and jitney operators struggled to defend their business against unfair regulation. This regional struggle reflected national trends as the rise of the automobile and changing transportation habit transformed the American city.

Without question, pricing and convenience made the jitney a success, but the scope of the phenomenon and the reaction to it reflected the effect of lowered transportation costs and better consumer access. Jitneys began in Los Angeles in 1914 and spread to the rest of the country by 1915. By March 1915, thousands of jitneys operated in the southern and western United States. They did not exist in a standardized form. "Jitney" described a variety of motor vehicles, bound together into

the category "jitney" by their five-cent fare. The term "jitney" itself was slang for a nickel, and by this definition any motorized vehicle carrying passengers for the aforementioned fare qualified as a jitney.³

The jitney's effect was immediate and devastating for transportation officials in several cities. Municipal leaders, taken by surprise by the new invention, were forced to find their own means to deal with the jitney's intrusion city by city. As Charles M. Talbert, director of streets in St. Louis, explained at an Executive Committee meeting of the Safety First Federation in April 1915, "We have tried to regulate them but for one reason or another they have had their own way."⁴ The threat from jitneys was multiform: they cut into the profit margin of established streetcar service; they were not regulated; and they increased the traffic on streets already crowded by men, animals, and machines. Not surprisingly, streetcar companies led the way to challenge the spread of these vehicles, joined by realty associations, taxicab companies, civic associations, accident attorneys, and safety societies that believed greater regulation was needed for these newcomers to the city's streets.⁵ Reacting to this threat, the Georgia Railway and Power Company attacked jitney operators in Atlanta by attempting to impose tough regulations.

In some ways, the struggle in Atlanta mirrored national trends as the automobile emerged as the major innovation on American streets after 1900. Between 1900 and 1906, the number of automobiles on American streets increased from six thousand to one hundred thousand. By 1913, one million cars were registered in the United States as automobile prices dropped and middle-class America embraced a new car culture. By 1927, one in every five people owned a car and federal and state funds were invested to expand the nation's road and highway system.⁶ The conflict between the jitney and the streetcar provides a means to understand how long-standing racial and class ideas in

Atlanta were challenged by urbanization, and to what extent these demands affected the social mores that defined southern life in the city.

Recent scholarship has recast the Progressive Era as a time of expansive political participation that challenged traditional power structures as new groups and different perspectives were drawn into an expanding public sphere. Ordinary citizens joined civic associations, reform organizations championed greater public accountability, minorities sought greater inclusion, women challenged gender restrictions, and labor increasingly demanded a larger share of the profits generated by the new industrial order. The jitney's success offered another example of how public dissatisfaction with the status quo could be channeled into mass action. Regardless of criticism, the jitney was perceived as a tool for the common man that challenged elite interests.⁷ Atlantans believed their city was a fertile ground for jitney experimentation because citizens in Atlanta were at the forefront of a southern debate about the challenge offered by industrial progress and urban growth. Businessmen argued for a New South that joined northern contemporaries as an economic and cultural equal. Yet, many Southerners still clung to tradition, advocating agrarian ideals as the core of the southern experience and rejecting the possibility of becoming "wage-slaves" in the city.⁸ The pursuit of urbanization and industrial growth challenged this agrarian vision and pushed southerners to embrace new ideas about work, property, and individualism. This commitment to change emerged as a rallying point for supporters who used it to argue in favor of jitney service and to highlight the tension among urban economic classes. This discussion was not limited to southern cities. As one automobile executive in New York City explained, "When the street car interests attempt through political influence to deprive

the public of the convenience and pleasure of the jitney they are going to have to reckon with the people themselves."⁹

Many southern cities grappled with the jitney service question. In Galveston, city officials and streetcar executives feared the competitive pressure from jitney service.¹⁰ In Houston, the public service commissioner crafted regulations that required driver identification, accident bond, full vehicle description, restrictive routes, a license fee based on vehicle capacity, and constraints on where and when the vehicle could stop on city streets—this last an attempt to prevent jitney drivers from darting in and out of traffic and from blocking intersections. In addition, Houston's regulations reflected passenger safety concerns seen in reports from other cities, such as Los Angeles. Both cities required lights in vehicles and forced jitneys to travel "well worn" paths to prevent unprincipled drivers from taking young women to "undesirable" parts of the city.¹¹ In Baltimore, where a portion of the streetcar's revenues were used to support the city's park system, the city struggled to balance public demand against the revenue loss to its public parks. In Atlanta, the jitney phenomenon became a focal point of debates about race and class. The jitney's appeal remained strong because supporters believed it represented a real challenge to the power of the streetcar service in the city.¹²

By the turn of the century, the streetcar system in Atlanta had evolved into a consolidated system under the leadership of Joel Hurt. More than any other person, Hurt made the streetcar work in Atlanta. Prior to the founding of Atlanta Consolidated in 1891, more than ten streetcar companies operated in the city. All of these companies were financial failures even with support from northern investors, yet Hurt's venture succeeded by combining technical expertise with a grand design to create a city-wide streetcar system.¹³ Hurt helped to create a smooth transition

from his Atlanta Consolidated Street Railway Company to the Georgia Railway & Electric Company. Georgia Railway & Electric evolved into the Georgia Railway and Power Company (GRPC), the key utility provider for the city. The incorporation of the Georgia Railway and Power Company (GRPC) marked the fulfillment of Hurt's vision of the city's infrastructure. The merger of the failed streetcar lines, under the management of Hurt's Atlanta Consolidated, was both an economic success for the company and a boost to civic development.

The unification ended an era of uncertainty and ushered in the electrification of the city. Atlanta's leaders aimed to modernize and, like other American cities, awarded the utility monopoly to one firm, GRPC. The rapid expansion of the streetcar system between 1850 and 1900 led to massive ridership with more than two billion passengers by the turn of the century. Corporate consolidation and electrification furthered streetcar's reach, but growth did not come without criticism about overcrowding, ruinous fares, and little comfort. Such critics were common place, but the automobile's emergence highlighted the streetcar's crowded conditions, slow pace, and rigid service in congested downtown streets.¹⁴ Even with these limitations, the challenge of improving or replacing streetcar lines made them a permanent fixture in the minds of many urban residents. While large northern cities turned to elevated trains and subways to improve mass transit options, Southerners remained committed to the streetcar, in part because the urban congestion seemed minor in comparison to their northern counterparts. By 1916, however, city officials in Atlanta had begun to consider ways to address the problem of congestion on downtown streets. Mayor James G. Woodward responded in October 1916 by appointing a commission to investigate possible solutions. The Plaza-Terminal Commission

relied heavily on outside experts and studied national trends in order to build support for a comprehensive approach for street redevelopment. As V. H. Kriegshaber, president of the chamber of commerce, explained in 1916, officials pursued technical expertise that had "national reputation" so that their recommendation would have the weight to challenge the status quo.¹⁵

Perhaps no institution on the city street represented the status quo more than the streetcar. The city's agreement with GRPC made the company responsible for maintaining the streets along with providing electrical power. Although it was a corporation, GRPC contributed a percentage of its profits to the municipal budget, creating a close connection between the corporation and the municipality.¹⁶ The company provided valuable services to Atlanta's business community and derived great influence from its position. The streetcar was a symbol of Atlanta's growth, stimulating commercial activities in the central business district while linking employees and employers. By law, the streetcar company provided Atlanta's African-American citizens with streetcar service on "separate but equal" terms. The streetcar service was free of competitors and supported by the regulatory authorities, yet the company often complained about operational costs and the need to loosen regulations.¹⁷ In light of these regulatory struggles, the jitney phenomenon offered the general public a tool responsive to their long-stated concerns, challenging elite interests even as it improved basic transportation options.¹⁸

The streetcar company and its supporters saw its contribution to Atlanta's economic and social status as crucial to the city image and as symbolic of the community's dedication to nurturing a good business environment. In a 1926 address to Atlanta's business community, Preston Arkwright, the president of GRPC, proclaimed, "You have left it to the politicians to run

the government, and the politicians to be influenced by the loudest noise as representing the most votes, and the rules governing practical business to be formulated by theorists. It is your right, and your privilege, and your duty to take part in public affairs."¹⁹ These words illustrated the frustration businessmen felt as they attempted to shape public policy. While northern businessmen were often characterized as profit-motivated societal aggressors, civic activism in southern cities gave economic elites a regional pride that motivated them to defend the South's economic and social independence, even as the elites strove to create the appearance of new southern society free of racism's taint.

When the GRPC assessed its future, company officials had reason to believe that their prestige and profit would continue for decades to come. As Atlanta's mass transit franchise holder, GRPC enjoyed increasing profits and ridership throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century.²⁰ A close examination of automobile registrations in Atlanta, however, illustrates that, like the rest of the United States, Atlantans could not deny the automobile's appeal. In 1915, there were between six thousand and eight thousand cars registered in Fulton County; there were ten thousand by 1917, and twelve thousand by 1918.²¹ By 1920, Fulton County had twenty thousand registered cars.²² These figures in Atlanta came as automobile prices dropped, and cities around the United States noted greater rider dissatisfaction with streetcar service.²³ Regardless, Preston Arkwright remained confident, as he explained at a meeting of the Atlanta Automobile Association in 1922. He said, "There is not an individual man, woman, or child who isn't cherishing the hope that some day they will be able to own and operate an automobile of their own. This day will never come of course, because the great

majority of people will never be able to afford the ownership of an automobile, or owning one, could afford to operate it."²⁴

In spite of such sentiments, an appealing car culture was growing, and jitneys were an outgrowth of that phenomenon. For Southerners, automobile accessibility was seen as a major marker of progress. Southern boosters believed the automobile could help the South by reducing isolation. Throughout the Progressive Era, Southerners adopted road building campaigns and advocated for automobile sales in the hope that commercial goods and investment capital would flow to the South.²⁵ Jitney services helped to popularize auto use, providing the first exposure to car culture for many Southerners. The struggle then was not simply streetcar versus jitney, but the whole lifestyle and power structure surrounding both.

On February 10, 1915, Atlanta businessman George W. Hanson met with Birmingham businessman George Kelly to discuss bringing jitney service to Atlanta. Hanson, owner of Oakland Motor Sales, spoke enthusiastically to the press about the benefits of jitney service: "I am in accord with any movement that is beneficial to the city's progress and welfare, and I really believe that the jitney bus would be one of the most popular and beneficial innovations Atlanta could possess."²⁶ Hanson promised that between twenty and fifty jitneys would be in operation in the coming weeks. The jitney's primary riders in Atlanta, like other southern cities, were middle- to lower-income whites. While other transportation options, such as taxis, had existed prior to the jitney, none provided the potential for mass ridership at a competitive price.²⁷

By March, city council member Jesse B. Lee, a GRPC supporter, proposed an ordinance that would make it harder for jitneys to operate on city streets. Lee's ordinance required jitney

bus drivers to take out a ten-thousand-dollar indemnity bond in case of traffic accidents and to pay one hundred dollars for a license.²⁸ Both the bond and the license fee were the highest for any motor vehicle operating on Atlanta's streets at that time. Prior to this ordinance's introduction, it seems clear that jitneys expected to operate under laws governing other vehicles for hire. The GRPC argued that jitneys unfairly competed against them and advocated for the new legislation. Indeed, Preston Arkwright helped to draft Lee's ordinance and lobbied for its adoption in city council meetings.²⁹ He also volunteered the GRPC's lawyers to serve as the city's legal counsel against the jitneys. The GRPC further pressured the city by insisting that jitneys damaged the streets and thus forced the company to raise fares as it spent more money on street maintenance.³⁰ Atlanta's streetcar officials were not alone in their complaints about jitney service. Across the United States, streetcar companies and real-estate interests protested that "prosperity and extension of the streetcar service go hand in hand."³¹ Due to this sentiment and an ongoing debate between Atlanta officials and the GRPC about its street management, the company found support against the jitney on the city council. For their part, jitney operators and their supporters believed their efforts benefited the community and actively sought to cast their enterprise as a service to the city. In a speech to Atlanta's grammar school teachers in April 1915, Lindsey Hopskins, president of the Cadillac Company, commented on the jitney phenomenon: "Progress, in its constant march to better things, has never taken into account things existing or established and has never hesitated to tear down the foundation of established institutions."³² Hopskins dismissed the GRPC's charges of lost revenue and suggested competition would lead to improved streets and better streetcar service.³³

For Atlanta's jitney supporters, any regulation linked to the GRPC could not be tolerated. In their estimation, the GRPC's only goal was to run the jitneys out of business. The jitney operators considered themselves victims of the company's monopoly, and they organized the Jitney Bus Association to fight the city's regulation efforts. The association hired a lawyer and sued the city, arguing that the ordinance placed an undue burden upon jitney operators by requiring a liability bond. As jitney operators fought the city ordinance, they also faced a second threat. The GRPC petitioned the Georgia State Railroad Commission to declare jitney buses to be common carriers, sparking fears among jitney operators that, if classified as such, they would be forced to carry African-American passengers. Thus the GRPC worked to restrict the jitney operators by crafting new vehicle licensing rules, while also working to classify jitney vehicles in a way that would leave their operators open to suspicion of racial impropriety.

Jitney operators insisted that the streetcar company misinformed the public about their revenues, their impact, and their intent. According to J. T. Hazelton, president of the Jitney Bus Association, "the report was that our daily receipts were about 15.00 dollars. This is far wrong, as I can speak from experience I took in 13.00 dollars on one day, but it was hard work and a record day."³⁴ The GRPC continued to stress fiscal pressure created by jitneys, arguing that the vehicles unfairly utilized public streets without paying for upkeep. While the jitney operators argued that they were not against regulation, the operators wanted to be assured that they would not be driven out of business, which would "rob the public of a special convenience."³⁵ Even with their formidable power, neither the municipal authority nor the economic clout of the GRPC could match the automobile's appeal in the public's eyes. Atlanta's city council went so far as to

state publicly that the intention of the ordinance was to promote safety, not to restrict automobile use. Council member S.W. Freeman proposed to alter the Lee-Arkwright jitney ordinance to provide regulation that did not overburden jitney operators. Freeman's ordinance called for a five-thousand-dollar bond and license fee on a sliding scale. His ordinance also required jitneys to have established routes, limited stops within the downtown area, and driver registration with photo identification.³⁶

The pro-jitney and anti-jitney forces waged a battle for public support. The official legal debate around the jitney focused on the need for regulation, yet the propaganda on both sides used rhetoric designed to convey a struggle over class and race. The jitney operators played on the public's dislike of and confusion about the GRPC's monopoly. They pushed to have their struggle against the GRPC take place in public view by holding open rallies and urging supporters to attend city council meetings when the jitney ordinance was on the agenda. Jitney operators represented technological progress and consumer choice, positions to which they constantly returned in print and at rallies. By casting themselves as champions of the public's right to choose, their natural allies were working-class people marginalized in an increasingly industrialized southern economy. Economic conditions served to bolster the jitney appeal in other cities as well. Thousand of workers struggled to survive because of a severe depression between 1913 and 1914. As a result, many people looked to the automobile as a means of employment for the first time. In cities with high rates of unemployment, the jitney phenomenon offered ready-made employment opportunities as hundreds of men converted automobiles into jitneys and used that income to support struggling families.³⁷

In contrast, the GRPC used concerns about race mixing to underscore the danger the jitney posed to public safety in Atlanta. In response, jitney operators condemned GRPC's "dirty tricks" campaign in full-page advertisements. Jitney operators explained that the streetcar company's anti-jitney campaign diminished the city and its people. The jitney operators asked, "Are "jitneys" buses to be sacrificed for the benefits of the trolley company without any regard for the wishes of the public? We [the jitney operators] don't think so."³⁸ The jitney operators urged citizens not to let the city council undermine the automobile industry in the city. This action, they suggested, was the real crime. Jitney operators were, in their minds, not fighting to operate jitneys; rather, they were working to preserve small industry and competition, and jitney operators felt that they were as "patriotic and as loyal to Atlanta as any group," but they had to fight for the right to compete on the city's streets. Thus, they cast themselves as the common man's protectors and emphasized that the streetcar company's ultimate goal was to take away choice from Atlanta's citizens. They reminded residents that "you, who are not in the "Jitney" business, the motor car business or the trolley business have a right to decide on how you shall spend you nickel for a ride. Is YOUR side the big side or is the trolley company's?"³⁹

The jitney operators claimed the right to make a living by using their property to sell a service. They stressed that they could and should charge whatever the market would support and that customers had the right to expect to "barter and trade and ride for a nickel or a dollar."⁴⁰ Jitney operators championed their status as common men, but rejected the label of common carrier. They argued that the efforts to classify jitneys as common carriers were another attempt by the streetcar company to undermine their business. The tactic, according to the jitney

operators, was intended to deny them the ability to separate the races. While it is unlikely white jitney operators would have solicited black riders, the streetcar company was still using the specter of race mixing to destroy their business. This fear was not unjustified; streetcar companies had struggled with the legal challenges to their segregation policies for years. African-American leaders, such as Booker T. Washington, advocated boycotting streetcar service in response to segregation in the 1890s, and the court challenges to segregation policies remained a real concern.⁴¹

Pro-jitney forces used rhetoric that reassured the public that jitney operators would uphold southern values, while promising both freedom of choice and value for their riders. Race was an important tool in this argument. The GRPC's campaign emphasized the danger of unrestricted interaction between races, justifying regulation by manipulating fears that the jitanies would expose white women to inappropriate interaction with African Americans.⁴² While it was unlikely white jitney operators would allow such action, the possibility that African Americans could legally force such an arrangement existed, if the common carrier classification was assigned. Indeed, race was an important issue for jitney operators. In Houston, community leaders organized "Jim Crow" jitanies for African-Americans riders, ensuring segregation on the city's jitanies in 1915.⁴³ Yet, by 1917, jitney regulations in Jacksonville, Florida, required operators to provide both black and white sections because they were required by law to stop for all passengers regardless of race.⁴⁴

The fears associated with cross-racial encounters on the jitney also help to explain why the African-American community in Atlanta failed to support jitney operators in their struggle.

While jitneys were an exciting innovation, the streetcar provided the best opportunity for transportation access. An editorial in Atlanta's African-American newspaper, *The Atlanta Independent*, argued in part that "they [jitneys] are not a public utility, but a private proposition for personal gain, and in no way contribute to the welfare of the city."⁴⁵ The African-American community did not define the city welfare, and instead African-American leaders argued that "they [the streetcar company] want our trade and money has no color line."⁴⁶ African-American support for the jitney would have been counterproductive, especially in the wake of a 1906 race riot stoked by unsubstantiated rumors of African-American threats to white women. To undermine fears of miscegenation, the jitney operators swore not to provide service to African Americans, whatever the jitney's legal status.⁴⁷ The Jitney Bus Association's lawyer, Thomas Felder, attempted to distance jitneys from the miscegenation concern by arguing that jitneys were not common carriers. Instead, he suggested that jitney operators were free to restrict vehicle access on their own accord. On April 19, 1915, the county courts ruled that the city's ordinance was not prohibitory, but the jitney operators appealed the ruling. The Jitney Bus Association filed suits in federal court in *Hazelton et al v. City of Atlanta*.⁴⁸ For the next four years, the jitneys operated within the city, pending a decision by the courts. Even as the question of carrier classification made its way through the courts, the jitney still faced a struggle over vehicle designation and regulation by the state.

The state railroad commission began its hearings on jitney regulations on May 12, 1915.⁴⁹ At the hearing Attorney Felder reversed his previous statements and admitted that jitneys were common carriers; however, he insisted they were not the type that needed to be regulated by the

commission. Instead, he insisted jitneys were private automobiles that could establish their own ridership as independent operators.⁵⁰ Felder pointed out that jitney regulation followed the state's existing motor vehicle laws. These laws required operators simply to register with the city and to obtain a business license. Felder argued that, if the city allowed a new and broader interpretation of common carrier for the jitney, then "everything that hauls passengers or freight for hire[,] . . . taxicabs, hacks, drays, furniture cans, delivery wagons, are all common carriers."⁵¹ Felder urged the commission to dismiss the city's petition. The commission refused, and in June handed down a ruling that classified jitneys as common carriers.⁵² In spite of this victory, the city council continued to debate how to regulate jitneys as council members attempted to reconcile public support for jitney service with pressure from the GRPC.

In December 1918, council member W. H. Johnson offered a proposal to repeal the jitney ordinance and replace it with a more lenient code. Johnson believed that the original ordinance was intended to kill competition. He offered the new ordinance, he said, as a friend to ordinary people. Johnson's ordinance allowed the jitney to operate with minimal regulation. The city council adopted a revised ordinance by a vote of 15–9.⁵³ By April 1919, the city was free to enforce its jitney regulation after the U.S. Supreme Court refused to rule on the jitney operators' lawsuit. A revised jitney ordinance went into full effect. The new ordinance required a license fee of fifty dollars for seven passenger cars and a fee of seventy-five dollars for cars that carried more than twelve people. The new ordinance allowed the jitney and the streetcar to compete against each other without restriction. After winning state and federal court cases for four years, the streetcar company failed to stop the jitney from operating.⁵⁴ Like their counterparts across

the nation, Atlanta's jitney operators hoped their collective action could forestall crushing regulation indefinitely. Indeed, organized jitney operators in Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey all had similar success in resisting attempts at regulation.⁵⁵

The disposition of Atlanta's court case reflected the overall uncertainty about the legality of automobile regulation in America. The Supreme Court's decision not to rule on Atlanta's case allowed municipal authorities to devise their own solutions based on specific circumstances. Similar efforts to remove jitneys occurred in other southern cities. In Alabama, the Birmingham Railway, Light, and Power Company (BRLP) also attacked jitney service. The BRLP was successful in its campaign in part because it sought and received the endorsement of every major business and organization in the city. Only one group, organized labor, chose to support jitneys. The *Birmingham Labor Advocate* endorsed the automobile over all other forms of motor transportation, saying, "The gas method is cleaner, as safe, is more rapid, and better method than the old way of packing them [streetcar passengers] in like sardines."⁵⁶ Such support from labor was not found in Atlanta; indeed, the Atlanta Federation of Trades supported the streetcar and called for the elimination of jitneys.⁵⁷

Notwithstanding the failure of Atlanta labor interests to support the jitney, it is clear that the municipal government's relationship with the GRPC was not conflict-free. No longer a walking city, mass transit played an important, functional role in Atlanta's commercial life beyond simple symbolism. The revenue generated by the streetcar line for the city could not be easily replaced.⁵⁸ The city government's decision to support the streetcar recognized the GRPC's strong economic role. Nonetheless, the relationship was not an easy one. While the company

was supposed to be a partner to the city, at crucial moments it asserted a privileged position that vexed the residents and official alike. In 1922, Preston Arkwright appeared before the city council's street committee, protesting regulations that required the streetcar company to remove defective manhole covers from the streets. The street committee deferred the ordinance to the city attorney after Arkwright asserted that it was not in the committee's power to write such an ordinance.⁵⁹ The streetcar company also claimed illegal confiscation of property when the city pressed for students and teachers to ride at half fare. Arkwright wrote to the Atlanta Education Committee that "public education is a high public service, but the expense of this education should be borne by the general public, and it is inequitable and unjust to expect or demand that any one member of the public should bear this expense for the benefit of the whole public."⁶⁰ When education officials pointed out that the streetcar company was preventing children from going to school, Arkwright replied, "They can walk."⁶¹

Streetcar patrons often complained about streetcar service. The jitney operators' rhetoric attempted to use this resentment against the streetcar company. Jitney operators resented "any attempt to throttle small industry, prevent competition to trolley cars and deal a blow at the automobile."⁶² Mayor James L. Key's administration identified the GRPC as a threat. Key advocated the municipal ownership of public utilities, including the streetcar line. While there was support for the existing franchise agreement, advocates for municipal control looked to Key's administration for change.⁶³ The depth of the GRPC's dislike of Key became clear in the mayoralty race in 1924, when Key accused the GRPC of lobbying against him in the mayor's race. Speaking at a political rally, Key condemned the streetcar company, accusing them of

buying their way into the city: "They say the power company does not meddle in politics, but I want to tell you here and now that they will spend enough money in this campaign trying to defeat me." Key accused the GRPC of "carrying on a policy of polluting and corrupting" that ignored the city's needs in favor their own economic health.⁶⁴ Later in 1924, after Key's administration was out of office, the GRPC petitioned the city for help against the jitney.

The GRPC continued to argue that it suffered from economic hardship and wanted the jitney stopped. The city council commissioned a report on the city's transportation system from John A. Beeler, a nationally known consulting engineer. Beeler studied Atlanta's transportation network for a year. His final report recommended the elimination of the jitney, along with the adoption of a plan to build new streets, a new viaduct, a motor coach line, and new sidewalks. Each of these recommendations was designed to increase the flow of traffic to and from Atlanta's downtown business district.⁶⁵ Lawyers representing the jitney attacked Beeler's objectivity. His previous studies of other urban areas favored mass transit over automobiles. Jitney advocate and attorney Marion Jackson argued that Beeler's twenty-five years with Denver Railway biased him in favor of the streetcar.⁶⁶ Beeler's reputation, however, proved beyond reproach. The city council pointed to his experience in New York City, Richmond, New Orleans, Houston, and Washington as proof of his expertise and dismissed the possibility of bias.⁶⁷ It was difficult for jitney supporters to prove that Beeler's plan was solely an attempt to remove the jitney from Atlanta streets.

During this period, Atlanta developed an ambitious urban renewal plan. Transportation was part of the larger effort to modernize and expand the city. Several nationally known experts

consulted on these projects, and, once the projects were completed, the city planned an advertisement campaign to highlight the new Atlanta. Beeler's report, paid for by the GRPC, merely reflected a growing call by real-estate interests and city-planning advocates for better municipal growth management.⁶⁸ Reckless driving and traffic problems caused the death rate from automobile accidents to increase from eight per one hundred thousand in 1915 to 14.1 per one hundred thousand in 1919. As a result, a yearly road safety campaign was underway, and a redesigned street plan seemed likely.⁶⁹ Moreover, growing automobile availability undermined the jitney's symbolic importance.⁷⁰ With improved roads and the availability of cheaper automobiles, Atlanta's streets, like other U.S. cities, were increasingly dominated by cars. While cars may have seemed exotic in 1915, they were increasingly a fixture on American streets that was attainable for a large percentage of the population.

From the city's standpoint, both economic and political factors pushed it to support the streetcar. The GRPC was the single largest taxpayer in the city. Beyond that, the law required the company to pay 2 percent of its gross income to the city and to bear the cost of paving and repaving the streets. If the streetcar went out of business, a major source of revenue would be lost. Alderman J. L. McLendon, chairperson of the city council's Traction Committee, stated, "As city officials, of course, our interest lies in what is best for the city, and for that reason, we recommend that jitneys be abolished. Their elimination not only would permit the power company to realize a fair return on its investment, but it would greatly relieve present traffic conditions."⁷¹ This recommendation reflected a fiscal logic that supported keeping existing income sources over raising taxes.

In January 1925, the final version of the municipal ordinance governing the operation of jitneys in Atlanta was passed by the city council. This ordinance forced all jitneys with a seating capacity of twenty passengers or fewer to operate outside the municipal area, except in special sections within the city limits. The ordinance also prohibited jitney operation on streets where streetcars operated or on streets parallel to or within two blocks of a streetcar. This effectively ended jitney service in Atlanta. Municipal authorities preserved a large source of tax revenue by protecting the streetcar. The final jitney ordinance barred only jitneys with fewer than twenty seats, which was an important distinction, because by this time the streetcar company had begun to use buses to supplement the rail system. The jitney ordinance allowed the streetcar company to retain a dominant position as mass transit provider in the city. While this decision seems strange when viewed from the national perspective on transportation, Atlanta's streetcar line continued to have a place on city streets.⁷²

Atlanta's struggles to reconcile streetcar service with the public's demands offer another view of the impact of the automobile on city streets. Yet these struggles also emphasize that urbanization's effect could not be separated from private concerns and special interests. Southerners brought communal baggage to their consideration of civic improvement. They resented northern sentiments about southern backwardness and lack of cosmopolitan development. Yet Southerners expressly rejected anything they perceived as going too far to modify the southern way of life. Therefore, while modernization was a regional goal, change that was contrary to the status quo could and would be rejected. From the standpoint of Atlanta's municipal leaders, men who were charged with promoting economic welfare and maintaining

social norms, the streetcar was a key actor in the urban landscape. Indeed, GRPC's pronouncement that it could not operate effectively led to the city's decision to act against jitney service.⁷³ Alderman J. L. McLendon made clear that "if one or the other is to go, common sense shows that it must be the Jitney."⁷⁴

When Atlanta banned jitneys, the city gave streetcars room to operate in the central business district. The Atlanta City Council explained the decision to eliminate jitneys as sound economic policy and beneficial to the city. Indeed, urban planners consulted by Atlanta sought to balance municipal interests through a rational planning process. This scientific city planning did not remove the political, economic, and cultural concerns associated with managing urban space; instead, it legitimized pro-growth policy decisions.⁷⁵ The protracted legal battle over the jitney emphasized the shift away from the electric streetcar and the struggle to create publicly owned utilities toward a view of American streets centered on the car. The jitney operators' appeal to the working class offered the car as a solution to public dissatisfaction with mass transit.⁷⁶ The jitney highlighted this conflict, as car advocates forced Atlanta residents to reconsider their relation to city streets. The irony of the city council choosing the streetcar franchise over private enterprise highlights how much the established public-private partnership shaped Atlanta's development. In promoting the streetcar, city leadership showed a bias against working-class white citizens and African Americans and continued a pattern of lapsed services that failed to pave streets, deliver suitable fire protection, or provide sanitation service to the city's poorest areas.⁷⁷ The jitney debate laid bare the schism between classes and focused attention on which citizens actually benefited from Atlanta's focus on urban development. The jitney's elimination

from Atlanta's streets did not halt the streetcar franchise's decline. The GRPC began its own bus line, and the end of Atlanta's streetcar service matched the pattern of decline for streetcars across the United States.

Atlanta's experience managing the transformation of its streets highlights how urbanization triggered rapid and often unexpected individual and institutional changes. The jitney offered new opportunities that different groups within the city attempted to use to improve their stake in society. While broader issues of car culture clearly predicted the success of the automobile on U.S. streets, the emergence of race and class language as central issues for pro-jitney and anti-jitney forces offers another example of New South urbanism's challenge to tradition and how competing interests in southern cities faced these challenges while building their vision of a modern southern city.

1. "Jitney Bus Is Taking Many Cities By Storm," *New York Times*, January 31, 1915, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

2. Ibid.

3. The origins of the term "jitney" are not known. While it is generally agreed that the word referred to a nickel, that is where consensus ends. Suggestions of possible Irish, French, or Russian origins for the word were offered in 1914 and 1915. Despite contests and rewards offered by newspapers, the origins of the word remain unknown. For etymological discussion,

see: "The Jitneys," *Literary Digest* 50 (February 1915): 203; "The Wandering Jitney," *Literary Digest* 50 (April 1915): 774; "Origins of the Word 'Jitney,'" *Jitney Bus*, May 1915, 41.

4. "Tell of the Perils of the 'Jitney' Bus," *New York Times*, April 9, 1915, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

5. "Jitney Bus Wins Favor Quickly," *New York Times*, March 21, 1915, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

6. Kenneth T. Jackson and Stanley K. Schultz, "The Dilemmas of Metropolitan America," in *Cities in American History*, ed. by Kenneth T. Jackson and Stanley K. Schultz (New York, 1972), 421–422.

7. Carlos A. Schwantes, "The West Adapts the Automobile: Technology, Unemployment, and the Jitney Phenomenon of 1914–1917," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 3 (July 1985): 311.

8. Frank O. Immler, "Some of the Benefits of Organization and Co-operation," *Southern Cultivator*, May 1, 1905, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

9. "Jitney Bus Wins Favor Quickly," *New York Times*, March 21, 1915, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

10. "Find 'Jitney' Buses Hard to Regulate," *New York Times*, February 14, 1915, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

11. "Jitney Bus Wins Favor Quickly," *New York Times*, March 21, 1915, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

12. "Supports Jitney's Right to Place," *New York Times*, June 13, 1915, <http://www.proquest.com/>.

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13. Jean Martin, "Mule to MARTA Volume I," *Atlanta Historical Bulletin* 19 (Winter 1975): 30.
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 16. "Unregulated Jitney Competition Decreases Traffic In Atlanta," *Electric Railway Journal* 65 (January/June 1925): 791.
 17. Delos F. Wilcox, *Municipal Franchises: A Description of the Terms and Conditions upon Which Private Corporations Enjoy Special Privileges in the Streets of American Cities, Volume Two: Transportation Franchises Taxation and Control of Public Utilities* (New York, 1911), 3–32.
 18. Schwantes, "The West Adapts the Automobile," 311.
 19. Preston S. Arkwright, "Cooperation in Government as Well as Industry the Need of Modern Business," in *Addresses by Preston S. Arkwright: Published for the Information of the Employees of Georgia Railway and Power Company* (Atlanta, 1926), 88.
 20. Howard L. Preston, *Automobile Age Atlanta: The Making of a Southern Metropolis 1900–1935* (Athens, Ga., 1979), 50.
 21. There were 6,130 cars registered. Officials claimed that there were more than 8,000 cars in Fulton County, but their owners were slow to register even after the passage of an auto tag law.

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22. "Over 8,000 Autos Are Without Tags," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 2, 1915, 1.
23. Claude S. Fischer and Glenn R. Carroll, "Telephone and Automobile Diffusion in the United States, 1902–1937," *American Journal of Sociology* 93 (March 1988): 1171–75.
24. Arkwright, *Addresses*, 233.
25. Howard Lawrence Preston, *Dirt Roads to Dixie: Accessibility and Modernization in the South, 1885–1935* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1991).
26. "Jitney Bus Company Advocated By Hanson," *Atlanta Constitution*, February 10, 1915, 1.
27. Howard L. Preston, *Automobile Age Atlanta: The Making of a Southern Metropolis 1900–1935* (Athens, Ga., 1979).
28. "Consider Jitney Bus," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 5, 1915, 1.
29. "Fifth Ward Starts Jitney Bus Probe," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 13, 1915, 7.
30. "Committee Seeks Full Statistic on the Jitney Bus," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 9, 1915, 1.
31. "Jitney Bus Wins Favor Quickly," *New York Times*, March 21, 1915, <http://www.proquest.com/>.
32. "Square Deal for Jitney Urged by Lindsey Hopskins," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 18, 1915, 1.
33. "The Jitney Buses Are Needed in Atlanta Says Hanson," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 13, 1915, 7.

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34. "Fight Coming Today Over Jitney Buses," *Atlanta Constitution*, April 5, 1915, 1.
35. Ibid.
36. "Freeman Will Offer New Jitney Bus Law," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 25, 1915, 7.
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38. "Jitneys," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 11, 1915, 7.
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40. Ibid.
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