



Upcoming Conference News

Fun Facts About Atlanta: Welcome to Atlanta!

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Welcome to Atlanta!

This month, we'll take a look at something you've probably all seen, or soon will, in all its multi-concourse glory. It's the world's busiest airport, which is entirely fitting and worthy of a town founded on transportation. Like it or hate it, you may wonder how it came to be and why it's named what it is. It's a good story.

The Atlanta airport was created of necessity. In the 1920s, it was widely believed that among Atlanta, Chattanooga, and Birmingham, the city that moved first to establish air mail and air travel would become the South's leading city. The question was how to establish an air field without spending a lot of money.

The solution came from a young alderman named William Berry Hartsfield. You see, back in 1903, Asa Candler, of Coca-Cola fame and fortune, had purchased 300 acres in Hapeville, Georgia, on which he built a two-mile paved oval automobile racetrack. Atlanta's first automobile show occurred there in 1909, as did Atlanta's first air show. But over time, receipts had dropped, Candler's love for hot-rodding had cooled somewhat, and Hartsfield saw an opportunity. He encouraged the city to lease the Candler Speedway and build a hangar: Candler Field was born. In 1936, Hartsfield was elected mayor of Atlanta, a position he held, off and on, until 1961, and which he maintained in 1946 with the help of African American civic leader John Wesley Dobbs.

John Wesley Dobbs was born into poverty on a farm outside Marietta, Georgia. His mother moved to Savannah in order to work for a white family, and after a while, he and his siblings joined her there. He attended school in Savannah, and at fifteen, he returned to Atlanta to attend Atlanta Baptist College, now Morehouse College. Due to his mother's health, though, he had to drop out after a year. He never completed college, but in truth, Dobbs never stopped learning. He read constantly, and he did well enough on the Civil Service exam to get a job in the post office, a job he held for thirty-two years. He joined the Masons in 1911, and in 1932 he was elected grand master of the Prince Hall Lodge, which earned him the nickname "The Grand." He was also known as "The Mayor of Auburn Avenue" when that street was the heart of black business and culture in Atlanta. He encouraged his children and his people to see themselves as equals and not to take part in segregated activities. He strongly believed that the future lay in political action. When Georgia's whites-only Democratic primary was ruled unconstitutional, Dobbs got his chance to act.

With Judge A.T. Walden, he co-founded the Atlanta Negro Voters League and offered to support Mayor Hartsfield's re-election, if Hartsfield would agree to a few changes in town. Specifically, Dobbs wanted improvements to African American neighborhoods, like new schools and streetlights, and more significantly, he wanted the city to hire African Americans to the police force. Hartsfield got re-elected, and in 1948, Atlanta's first eight African American police officers reported for duty. They couldn't arrest white people, and they had to use the Butler Street YMCA as their locker room, but real change was only a matter of time.

In August of 1961, Dobbs suffered a stroke, dying nine days later, on the very day Atlanta schools were desegregated. Hartsfield continued to support the Atlanta Municipal Airport until he died in 1971. A week later, the city council chose to honor him by naming the airport for him. In 1973, thanks in great deal to Dobbs' organization and activism, his grandson, Maynard Jackson, became the first African American mayor of a major southern city. Jackson oversaw the expansion of Hartsfield International and ensured that African American contractors and vendors wouldn't be left out. When he died of a heart attack in 2003, he too would be honored for his contributions. Hartsfield gave us an airport, and Jackson gave us one of the world's biggest and busiest. And now you know why our airport is where it is and why it has such a long name.