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William Chase Arrington
Armstrong State University

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Practicing "Whiteness":

Jim Crow and Savannah Playgrounds System in the Early 20th Century

William Chase Arrington

Armstrong State University

Jim Crow segregation in the South acted as a system to fill the void left by the demise of the long-lasting institution of slavery. Several decades after the end of Reconstruction, as historian Michael Klarman has observed, the "inclination of southern whites to subordinate blacks was a necessary, but not a sufficient, cause of the worsening of race relations in the 1890s."¹ Southern whites subordinated former African-American slaves by disenfranchising them, and by segregating public accommodations into "separate, but equal" facilities. However, the southern white leaders fostering Jim Crow segregation showed no real concern with providing equal accommodations for African Americans. This practice showed that these public facilities were in fact not equal, just separate. Jim Crow segregation influenced the city of Savannah as seen in the case of the installation of a playground system in the early 20th century.

The need for Savannah's first playgrounds emerged during the Progressive Era as reformers involved with the Progressive movement lobbied for the improvement of health among children in the nation. Jacob Riis and Jane Addams advocated for increased public health and more leisure activities for children, which led to the formation of the Playground Association of

¹ Michael J. Klarman, "The Jim Crow Era," in *Brown v. Board of Education and the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4.

America in 1906.² This association aimed to provide supervised recreational facilities for children, ensuring that they could play in a safe environment. Progressives involved with this movement strongly endorsed the beneficial function of play in the life of a child, suggesting that in their play-life, “[t]he child develops his health, his muscles, his emotions, his will, his quickness of judgment, and executive tendency and the intellect is stimulated into action as in no other way.”³ After the formation of the Playground Association, many officials throughout the northern and southern United States began implementing playgrounds in their respective cities. The playground also began to be viewed as “[a]n important factor in race development.”⁴ However, this outlook was primarily held by officials in northern cities, such as Philadelphia or Boston. In a 1928 study, thirty-three of forty northern cities that were studied contained no segregated playgrounds and only seven cities housed playgrounds with “[s]ome segregation.”⁵ The story of southern playgrounds, however, highlights a much different experience as shown in the case of Savannah.

Examining the installation of playgrounds in Savannah advances historian Whittington Johnson’s theory of “Neighbors, but not friends” when describing the city of Savannah and its racial relations amongst white and black citizens.⁶ Relationships prior to the Civil War between white and black citizens of Savannah have been described by later historians as less tense than those of other southern cities. In the words of Johnson, the “[t]wo groups coexisted in a

² James Marten, *Childhood and Child Welfare in the Progressive Era* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2005), 173.

³ Henry S. Curtis, “Public Provision and Responsibility for Playgrounds,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 35, No. 2 (March 1910): 123, accessed March 27, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1011258?seq=6>

⁴ Otto T. Mallery, “The Social Significance of Play,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 35, No. 2 (March 1910): 152, accessed March 23, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1011262>

⁵ Forrester B. Washington, “Recreational Facilities for the Negro,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 140 (November 1928): 274, accessed March 28, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1016856?seq=3>

⁶ Whittington B. Johnson, “Neighbors, but Not Friends,” in *Black Savannah, 1788-1864* (University of Arkansas Press, 1999), 133.

somewhat uneasy, but tolerable, situation.”⁷ Whites and blacks lived in the same city, but only white citizens received the right to vote. Although municipal playgrounds were implemented fifty years later, examining Savannah’s racial relations during the Antebellum Era assists in understanding the citizens’ objectives. White and black citizens engaged in a somewhat humane manner with one another, but white citizens did not promote the development of black facilities. On October 3, 1914, the Savannah Tribune published an article titled “The Negro in Savannah.” The article read: “[t]he whites are proud of their Negro population and there is no racial tension.”⁸ The Savannah Tribune is an African-American newspaper, which makes the above quotation much more intriguing. The fact that white citizens were “proud of their Negro population” suggested that Savannah’s citizens saw the black population as subordinate to themselves. Although there may have been “no racial tension” between white and black Savannahians, the white population did not view the black population as an equal group of people. This psychological attitude of paternalism on the part of white citizens towards their black counterparts is noticeable when analyzing the implementation of the municipal playgrounds.

In 1913 Savannah’s progressive-minded mayor, Richard James Davant, advocated for the improved development of city facilities including public playgrounds.⁹ Following the first mention of municipal playgrounds, specific areas were allocated for playgrounds to be built. The playgrounds would be located in the following areas: Franklin Playground in Franklin Square, Davant Playground beside Colonial Park, Forsyth Playground in Forsyth Park, Wells Playground in Wells Square, and Anderson Playground in the schoolyard of the East Anderson Street

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ “The Negro in Savannah,” *Savannah Tribune* (Savannah, GA), October 3, 1914, microfilm.

⁹ 5600PC-010 *Park & Tree Commission-Minutes: November 3, 1913*, City of Savannah Research Library & Municipal Archives, Savannah, Georgia.

School.¹⁰ The Playground Commission had to meet with the Park & Tree Commission to ask for permission to utilize these areas for playgrounds. Although no reasons are mentioned in the document for the selection of these specific areas, the Playground Commission decided to build the playgrounds in the locations specified. In fact, four of these first five playgrounds were built in overwhelmingly white districts of the city.

Data derived from the Thirteenth Census of the United States of America (1910) indicates the racial demographics surrounding the areas of Savannah's playgrounds. Forsyth Playground was located in the northern extension of Forsyth Park, which was situated in District 0048 of Savannah's Militia District 2. This district housed 92% white residents.¹¹ Wells Playground was located in the now defunct Wells Square, which was situated in District 0057 of Savannah Ward 2. This ward contained 97% white residents. Davant Playground adjoined Colonial Park Cemetery, and was located in District 0061 of the Savannah Ward 3 district. This tract contained 62% white residents. Anderson Playground was located in the schoolyard of the East Anderson Street School, which was situated in District 0076 of Savannah Ward 4. This district contained 66% white residents. The locations of these playgrounds appeared to have been the most accessible for white children, being that the districts surrounding the four playgrounds were primarily white. The construction of playground facilities in these areas helped to keep the black children away, mainly because there were not very many black families that lived in these districts. Franklin Playground is the only one of the playgrounds located in an area that was not primarily white. This playground was located in Franklin Square, which was

¹⁰ "Second Annual Message to City Council of Hon. Richard J. Davant Mayor Together with the Reports of the City Officers," (City of Savannah, 1914), 329. Retrieved from <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/savannahmayor/pdf/1914.pdf>

¹¹ For all information regarding Savannah playgrounds, see: *Thirteenth Census of the United States: Color or Race, Chatham County, Georgia* [Savannah Militia District 2: District 0048 (Forsyth), Savannah Ward 2: District 0057 (Wells), Savannah Ward 3: District 0061 (Davant), Savannah Ward 4: District 0076 (Anderson), and Savannah Ward 1: District 0034 (Franklin)] Census Data (1910). Retrieved from <http://search.ancestrylibrary.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=7884>

contained by District 0034 of Savannah Ward 1. This tract contained only 13% white residents, with 87% of the district containing black residents.¹² The city of Savannah implemented a playground in this district because of its dense population. However, the attendance of children playing in Franklin Playground in 1914 was 15,588, which was more than 2,000 fewer than the second-least visited Davant Playground.¹³ The lower attendance in this playground measured against the higher attendance rates in the others suggests that all Savannah playgrounds (including Franklin Playground) were facilities built solely for white children. The lower attendance in Franklin resulted from the small percentage of white families that lived in this district.

Nonetheless, Franklin Playground served as a recreational area for children for almost four years. However, in April 1918, the Savannah Recreation Commission asked for and received permission from the Park and Tree Commission to utilize Liberty Square for a playground instead of Franklin Square. This movement of facilities surfaced because “[f]ranklin Square is wholly unfit for a playground.”¹⁴ Although the Superintendent of Recreation did not specifically describe Franklin Square as being unfit for racial reasons, he did mention that the committee wanted to move the playground out of that square for over a year. The Recreation Commission saw no use in hosting an all-white playground in a primarily black neighborhood, so they labeled this area as unfit for a playground. As a result of this reasoning, the Recreation

¹² *Thirteenth Census of the United States*, Chatham County, Georgia Census Data (1910). Retrieved from <http://search.ancestrylibrary.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=7884>

¹³ “Second Annual Message to City Council of Hon. Richard J. Davant,” (City of Savannah, 1914), 332.

¹⁴ *5600PC-012: Park & Tree Commission-Correspondence 1916-1920: April 5, 1918*, City of Savannah Research Library & Municipal Archives, Savannah, Georgia.

Commission moved the playground to Liberty Square, which was home to a larger amount of white residents.¹⁵

The original five playgrounds were described as having improved the public health and overall well-being of Savannah's children during the year of 1914.¹⁶ However, the era's reports did not mention that only white children were benefiting from the playgrounds. In 1915, a report was presented by the chief of police regarding the amount (and ethnicity rates) of arrests of Savannah citizens for 1914 and 1915. The arrest records were as follows: white boys decreased by 59; white girls decreased by one; "[n]egro" boys increased by 150; "[n]egro" girls increased by 68.¹⁷ Arrests of white boys decreased by 71%, while the arrests of black boys increased by 68%. Arrests of white girls decreased by 9%, while arrests of black girls increased by 52%. The police chief stated his belief that the large decrease of the arrests of white boys was due largely to the work of the playgrounds.¹⁸ These statistics suggest that while white children were safe and chaperoned in the playgrounds, black children remained outside the safety net provided by the playgrounds and were therefore getting into trouble. The significant decrease in arrests of white boys, coinciding with the significant increase in arrests of black boys highlights the benefits that white children received from having a safe place to play. Before playgrounds were built, most children would have their fun by playing in the street and engaging in mischievous activities. Because they were not allowed in the playgrounds, black children excluded from that alternative option continued in these activities.

¹⁵ Liberty Playground was located in Savannah District 0061 in the 1920 U.S. Census and housed 86.6% white residents, see *Fourteenth Census of the United States: Color or Race, Chatham County, Georgia* [Savannah: District 0061] Census Data (1920). Retrieved from <http://search.ancestrylibrary.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=6061>

¹⁶ Henry S. Curtis, "Public Provision and Responsibility for Playgrounds," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 35, No. 2 (March 1910): 122-123, accessed March 27, 2014 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1011258?seq=6>

¹⁷ "Annual Message to City Council of Hon. Wallace J. Pierpoint Mayor Together with the Reports of the City Officers of the City of Savannah, Georgia," (City of Savannah, 1915), 350. Retrieved from <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/savannahmayor/djvu/1915/index.djvu>

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 350.

The first five playgrounds promoted many different improvements in the lives of white children in Savannah and no note was made to provide playgrounds for black children until the end of 1915. The mayor's annual report at the end of 1915 highlighted that the city planned to appropriate \$1,200 for two black playgrounds to be built in 1916.¹⁹ Not only had the city of Savannah segregated the municipal playgrounds for white use only, it also failed to designate any facility whatsoever for black children to play until two years after the original playgrounds were built. The city of Savannah Playground Commission agreed to appropriate only \$1,200 to \$1,400 for two black playgrounds in 1916. This is significantly lower than the money that was allotted for the other playgrounds that were constructed in 1914. Around \$1,300 per playground was utilized to build Anderson, Davant, Forsyth, Franklin, and Wells. Only \$600-\$700 per playground was set aside to build the two black playgrounds. Furthermore, other future extensions were mentioned in the annual report at the end of 1915. A new playground in Washington and Green Squares was to be allotted \$2,000, and to build the East Side Playground \$4,000 would be provided.²⁰ A significantly larger sum of money was provided for the addition of three more white playgrounds in comparison to the funds allotted for black playgrounds. The leadership of Savannah acted somewhat progressively by planning to build playgrounds for black children, yet in doing so, they still did not provide these playgrounds with as much money as they did for those designed for use by white children. Jim Crow segregation overshadowed Savannah's attempt at progressivism, and highlighted the way in which white citizens aimed to further subordinate blacks by creating separate, but unequal playgrounds.

¹⁹ "Annual Message to City Council of Hon. Wallace J. Pierpoint Mayor Together with the Reports of the City Officers of the City of Savannah, Georgia," (City of Savannah, 1915), 353. Retrieved from <http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/savannahmayor/djvu/1915/index.djvu>

²⁰ "Annual Message of Wallace J. Pierpoint," 350.

The South had grown accustomed to the institution of slavery and its appalling ideology aimed towards African-Americans. After slavery was abolished and certain individuals made attempts to integrate African-Americans into white society, the South (as a whole) further promoted the subordination of its black citizens. The ideology of Jim Crow segregation rose, and provided the means for some southerners to continue their belief that black citizens should not be allowed to live in, and enjoy the benefits of white society. In the southern city of Savannah, the system of Jim Crow segregation was utilized for many public services, one of which being municipal playgrounds. The story of Savannah playgrounds is distinct, however, in that for the first two years of operation, there was not a practice of separate, but equal. Instead, Savannah leaders built playgrounds solely for white children, with no mention of the black children of the city. This system provided a way for Savannah to continue their subordination of African-American citizens, by initially building playgrounds for white children only. Then, years later, officials created separate playgrounds for black children that were superficially “equal.” Savannah officials offered less money for the construction of black playgrounds, a decision that shows the white citizens in power felt no urgency to terminate their long-lasting subordination and unequal practices towards African-American citizens.

About the author

William Chase Arrington graduated from Armstrong State University with a B.A. in History in May 2014. He is currently attending Walter F. George School of Law at Mercer University.