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Honors 3260 Research Proposal

### **Atlanta Life Insurance Company—Funding Change**

#### **Abstract**

This research will examine the Atlanta Life Insurance Company (ALIC) as a medium to stimulate positive change by leveraging their economic power during the Civil Rights Movement. The financial capital of the ALIC single-handedly elevated the movement by providing their economic, political, and social influence in the black community and in America. Their prowess in black leadership and economic autonomy has given way to one of the largest and successful black-owned businesses in America and through their experience the Modern Civil Rights Movement developed into one of the strongest movements in America today. The goal of this research is to seek answers to the following questions: how did the ALIC develop leaders and businesses in the African American community? How did the ALIC impact the cultural and economic identity of Atlanta?

## **Introduction**

The Atlanta Life Insurance Company (ALIC) is a prominent historically black-owned business in Atlanta. This company has provided insurance to the black community for many decades, fostered a family environment within the company and helped mold a black identity in the heart of the city of Atlanta. The ALIC's influence in Atlanta and America forged a promising future for the social, economic, and political independence for the black community. As the company exponentially grew since its founding, the ALIC challenged themselves to serve, stimulate growth, as well as uplift the community through social and educational opportunities. Founder Alonzo Herndon strongly valued education and for his community to thrive socially, economically, and politically. His investment in the community helped reshape the trajectory of black people's success in the city of Atlanta and as a result laid the foundation for Atlanta to become the Black Business Mecca of the world.

Today, Georgia State University Honors College is housed in the former ALIC headquarters building located at 100 Auburn Avenue. As a student in the Honors College, we have an earnest desire to find out more information about the African American narrative and their impact in the city of Atlanta, the "Civil Rights capital of America" (Bayor). Our goal is to examine how the ALIC developed leaders and other businesses in the African American community as well as how this company impacted the cultural and economic identity in Atlanta. As we seek to write the narrative of the ALIC and evoke the power and prestige of the black community in Atlanta, we hope to shine a positive light and provide tangible resources for the unequivocal success of this company. Today, the ALIC serves communities in seventeen states and is worth over two hundred million dollars. As one of the largest and successful black-owned

businesses in America during the twentieth century, the ALIC contributed their resources to fundamentally advance the Civil Rights Movement.

### **Content Summary**

The ALIC's impact in Atlanta has surpassed every expectation competitors, leaders, and disbelievers around the country has surmised. This narrative of a former slave who tirelessly worked to improve his livelihood and the peoples around him is a testament to the subjugation of African Americans during the late 19th and 20th centuries. Alonzo Herndon's investment in his community through education, compassion, and motivation has single-handedly laid the foundation for men and women of the black community to gain economic, political, and social power in Atlanta and beyond. His leadership in the Atlanta community has helped shape the progress of the city for many decades to follow after his passing. The foundation of this company is rooted in strong community relationships, community development with the goal to invest in the success of all African Americans. Our research has found that the investment of Alonzo Herndon and the ALIC has come to fruition by the advancement of African Americans' power in political, social, and economic sectors in Atlanta. As we seek to delineate the significance of this company, we will focus on (a) Norris Herndon's role in the company, (b) the development of leaders in Atlanta as a result of Alonzo Herndon's mission for the ALIC and the black community, as well as (c) the evolution of the ALIC's impact in the city Atlanta by shaping the cultural and economic identity.

### *Literature Review*

The review of literature will provide some background information on the primary and secondary sources used to construct this research project. The background information will also indicate how the sources will be used for the development of this research. Upon finding

information these sources helped shape our research question and assisted in the direction of our research goals.

John Ingham's novel, "African-American Business Leaders: A Biographical Dictionary," recounts the stories of the most influential yet most forgotten figures within African American history. He attributes much of the success of black economic independence to Jesse Hill and the influence that Alonzo Herndon and the Atlanta Life Insurance Company (ALIC) played in the development of the Modern Civil Rights Movement and the history of Atlanta. Within the Jim Crow Era, ALIC was a driving force for allowing African Americans to gain their own sense of identity within a world that never provided them with opportunities to excel and grow. Alonzo Herndon's unrecognized philanthropy to African American universities and the Modern Civil Rights Movement propelled a movement of economic prosperity for other black-owned insurance companies and gave rise to powerful figures such as Jesse Hill to further the legacy of the Herndon's. Ingham attributes Hill's lifelong dedication to obtaining economic security while preserving the legacy and tradition of the Herndon's as one of the primary reasons why the ALIC possesses a dominance in the upbringing of African American prosperity and independence. Ingham places significant emphasis on Hill due to his ability to propel the African American community and the ALIC into the modern era under his leadership. Thus it is important to analyze how Atlanta Life's dominance and participation in the community allowed for the rise of new leaders, such as Jesse Hill, and subsequently other businesses that further established an identity for the African American community.

Ronald H. Bayor's book "Race & The Shaping of Twentieth Century Atlanta," examines the various social nuances that shaped the city of Atlanta and the impact race had on the construct of the city; physically, economically, and socially. As the "Civil Rights capital of

America,” Atlanta has developed into the wealthiest destination for black elites during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Ironically, Bayor asserts that the “... city too busy to hate” was designed for the white and black communities to coexist along racial lines. The story of Atlanta in the black community has uniquely set the stage for black-owned businesses and communities to not only survive but thrive. Most notably, Alonzo F. Herndon founded one of the largest African American businesses in America today, The Atlanta Life Insurance Company (ALIC), noted by Bayor as one of the most prestigious black companies in America. Bayor infers that the intentional separation of whites and blacks in Atlanta has contributed to the success of the business infrastructure in the black community. Nevertheless, Bayor theorizes that the racial divides that separate the social, political, and business life of blacks and whites in Atlanta has profoundly undermined the progress of the black community in the late 20th century. This book will be used to understand the parallel idea of progress and destabilization of the black community in Atlanta after the Modern Civil Rights Movement and how the ALIC impacted the progress of Atlanta.

David Godshalk's book, "Veiled Visions: 1906 Atlanta Riot and the Reshaping of American Race Relations" discusses the power dynamic between the White elitist and African Americans who strived for economic and personal autonomy. The Race Riot placed a barrier between the two communities because there was a lack of trust and sense of security. As a result, there was an effort to establish a relationship between the two communities to restore the notoriety of Atlanta. Alonzo Herndon, one of the first black millionaires, was one of the many individuals behind the scenes that strived towards attaining economic freedom for African Americans. The ALIC was an outlet that granted him with the finances to invest into students, employees, and the African American community as a whole by allowing people to do what they

are best at doing. The ALIC expanded exponentially under the direction and leadership of Norris Herndon. He utilized some of the profits made from the ALIC to fund a vast majority of the civil rights movements.

## **Methodology**

The methods used for this research were ethical and meticulously analyzed to provide accurate information of the ALIC. As we conducted our research, we focused on the following questions: (1) How did the ALIC develop leaders and businesses in the African American community? (2) How did the ALIC impact the cultural and economic identity of Atlanta? Our research consisted of archival data and participant observation. As a group, we initially found that conducting research for specific information for our research questions were very challenging until we invested our time in the archival database provided by the Auburn Avenue Research Library and the Georgia State University Library, as well as speaking with the librarian and archivist to help assist us in finding information. Through participant observation, the group was able to participate in class discussions with Civil Rights leader Lonnie King, President of the Rich Foundation Tom Asher, Community activist Roslyn Pope, the Clement brothers and many others. By implementing a tour of Auburn Avenue to gain an understanding of the ALIC's geographic location and their impact during the 20th century was integral in constructing the cultural influences this company had on Atlanta and the company's influences that led to their success. The research methods used for this research project helped expand our understanding of the ALIC, the city of Atlanta, and the story of the black community during the Jim Crow era, the Civil Rights Movement, desegregation, and modern day society.

## **Chapters: The Impact and Influence of the ALIC**

The ALIC has effectively developed an identity of economic autonomy, black leadership, and social dominance in Atlanta. Their unconventional leadership in the community and business sector displays the many nuances that played an integral role in the company's success and significance around the country. The ALIC has pioneered in business ethics, community uplift, and continuous efficacy in producing leaders that positively impact those around them. This company's rich history has shed light on the significance of black leadership during the late 19th and 20th centuries as well as a testament to the foundational mission designed by founder Alonzo Herndon. As the ALIC impacted the Atlanta community, many leaders and businesses emerged.

#### *Chapter 1: Norris Herndon's Role in the Atlanta Life Insurance Company*

Norris B. Herndon played a significant role in developing leaders within the African-American community. On July 15, 1897, Norris B. Herndon was born, he is the son of founder Alonzo F. Herndon, and one of the first African American professors at Atlanta University, Adrienne E. McNeil. Norris was educated at Atlanta University and Harvard School of Business. He graduated from Atlanta University in 1919 with a Bachelor's degree and later achieved his Master's degree from Harvard School of Business in 1921. Promptly after graduating, Norris returned to Atlanta to work for the ALIC.

The ALIC was founded in 1905 by Norris's father, Alonzo Herndon. His father was the epitome of the concept of American Individualism, which is the idea that an individual can become successful and achieve personal autonomy because of their ambition and talent. Alonzo Herndon's ambition and determination is unmatched by anyone, his authentic story exemplifies the power of faith and perseverance. He was born a slave and worked as a tenant farmer after the

Emancipation of slavery, to becoming an affluent barber who owns a prominent insurance company as one of the first African American millionaires.

In 1927, Norris Herndon assumed the role as President of the ALIC, after the passing of his father and founder Alonzo Herndon. The company thrived under his leadership by grossing over \$54 million worth of assets from the \$1 million assets left by his father before he passed. Norris Herndon's generosity surpassed his father's investments in the community by discretely funding educational institutions, civil rights and advocacy organizations, and many unknown philanthropic donations to organizations. His impact in the black community helped promote the civil rights cause by providing funding to bail out protesters, design posters for marches, and any other financial obligations of the movement. Norris Herndon's investment in education also helped create a force of black educated men and women who were able to excel in their respective fields leveraging their power to make effective change for their community and African Americans as a whole.

Before Norris Herndon became the President of the ALIC and started working at his father's company, he initiated the Civil Rights Movement by founding the Niagara Movement along with other influential black men in 1905. This organization was founded in response to Booker T. Washington's speech about black peoples autonomy, by coexisting with white people separately. The goal of this organization, the Niagara Movement, was for black people to attain suffrage rights, ownership to land, and the right to go wherever they pleased. At an early age Norris Herndon was making inroads to positively make an impact in the black community, which is why his investment in the black community while President of the ALIC is no surprise. Continuing the legacy of his father and the ALIC, Norris Herndon created The Alonzo F. and Norris B. Herndon Foundation on November 22, 1950, to advance the personal, economic, and



political development of the black community by alleviating financial barriers. The foundation would donate to institutions such as the United Negro College Fund, Atlanta University, First Congregational Church, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); as well as maintained the Herndon Home Museum. Norris Herndon's significance in Atlanta's business, political, and social sectors helped elevate and validate the ALIC's power and prestige in the city of Atlanta.

### *Chapter 2: The Rise of Leaders from the Herndon Legacy*

Much of the progress within African American communities can be seen through the work of prominent black leaders that came after the passing of Alonzo Herndon. Distinguished figures known in Atlanta's history such as Jesse Hill, Jr., Ivan Allen, Jr., Maynard Jackson and Andrew Young carried on the Herndon legacy, by leveraging their leadership roles to propel the black community's business, social, and economic prosperity. The most notable leader that arose from the Herndon legacy was Jesse Hill, Jr., who served as the 3rd president of the ALIC. After graduating from the University of Michigan with a Masters, Hill came to Atlanta at a time when it was known for its growing African American entrepreneurship. With his knowledge and background in business Hill led the ALIC to unforeseen growth, while boosting the prosperity of the company and the black community in the city of Atlanta.

With this economic advantage, Hill was able to increase civil activism within the African American community. He would later be cited in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s letters as well as during the time of student sit-in movements and voter registration initiatives. Hill's civil activism and business leadership mirrored the legacy of the Herndon's through his work in desegregating college institutions and raising funds for civil rights initiatives. Hill's initiative to register as many eligible African American voters to participate in the electoral process, single-handedly

increased the black community's political power in the city of Atlanta. Hill fostered the growth and influence of African Americans through his many integral leadership roles in Atlanta, which significantly advanced the black community's agenda. As the first African American on the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce and many other distinguished Board of Directors positions, Hill invested his time and energy in bridging the gap between the black and white communities. His impact in Atlanta and around the world is insurmountable, Hill helped develop and influence the success of the first African American mayor of the city of Atlanta, Maynard Jackson as well as the success of the United Nations Ambassador Andrew Young. Hill never allowed anyone or anything to hinder his passion to make effective change in his community.

The ALIC development of leaders in the city of Atlanta created a domino effect, which effected anyone who came in contact with this company and its employees. Hill's mentoring of Maynard Jackson helped shape his platform to establish economic growth for the black community. His tenure influenced the expansion of the busiest airport in the world located in Atlanta as well as initiated the construction of the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA). Many of the individuals and companies influenced by the ALIC positively made an indelible impact in the city of Atlanta and the world, and through their leadership helped bring the 1996 Summer Olympic Games to the city of Atlanta. The ALIC's role in the impact of the black community in Atlanta resonates with the legacy of the Herndon's and commemorates the foundational mission of founder Alonzo Herndon and his story of triumph in the city of Atlanta.

### *Chapter 3: The Evolution of the Cultural and Economic Identity of the ALIC and Atlanta*

As the founder of the ALIC, Alonzo Herndon's company influenced the growth of African Americans cultural assimilation and economic success. Herndon's legacy is one that left its mark in the history of Atlanta's sociocultural advancement of African Americans during the

Civil Rights Movement. During the 20th century, black-owned businesses began to flourish because of the disadvantaged cultural and economic mandate initiated by segregation. Alonzo Herndon and many other black professionals quickly realized the power they each possessed and capitalized on the opportunity to create businesses for themselves. Alonzo Herndon and the ALIC used their economic autonomy to effect change in every sector of the black community through education, business development, political power, social status, and economic autonomy. As they sought to develop this machine of black autonomy across the city of Atlanta, black participants created a culture of black educated men and women, and as a result generated black wealth. This unforeseen black identity created a black elitist community that established companies, churches, educational institutions and power in the city of Atlanta.

The economic identity of the ALIC is autonomous, which has influenced many of the black businesses in Atlanta to strive for. The ALIC has helped stimulate economic growth in the black community by hiring graduates from Historically Black Colleges & Universities (HBCUs) and supplying each employee with the necessary training and education to continue to excel. The economic development of the businesses around the ALIC also benefited by their marketing assistance. Economic stability and black cultural identity simultaneously align with understanding the ALIC and other black businesses in Atlanta, which became the cornerstone to the upward mobility of the black community.

## **Conclusion**

The Atlanta Life Insurance Company has created a culture that focuses on the uplift of the black community through access to education, jobs, social status, and political power. This company's investment in the black community has developed strong, effective, and influential individuals in all sectors of the world. Alonzo Herndon's mission to sow the seeds into the black

community to create political, social, and economic autonomy has flourished into a community of black professionals who are displaying effective leadership in the city of Atlanta, around the country and the world. This company's impact, although not documented or readily available, has funded many organizations, protest, elections, and most notably the Civil Rights Movement. Leveraging their economic power to improve the developmental gap of the black community as a result to segregation, the ALIC was able to elevate the black community by investing in the success of all people. Their economic efficacy and effective leadership made it possible for the ALIC to maintain its assets and business during the many hardships in America, including desegregation where many black businesses declined or collapsed. Their business prowess single-handedly excelled the company during the desegregation period, as they strived to provide insurance and coverage for their policy holders, the ALIC reached unforeseen heights nearly doubling their profits and assets. The ALIC's impact in the Atlanta community is insurmountable to the story of African Americans during the 20th century. Their story, their history, their impact and influence in the black community and the Atlanta community should be written in the history books for all men and women to understand, spark interest and further develop others research, so that their story will not die away.

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