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NEH Report
August 31, 2019

I joined the 2019 NEH Summer Institute on Jewish History in the U.S. South with an extensive background in southern literary and cultural studies, but with little knowledge of Jewish history, in the South or elsewhere. Consequently, I learned a lot from the institute, and found that it helped me reframe and rethink some of my current work. In particular, examining the complex history of Jewish merchants and industrialists following the Civil War sheds new light on a project I've been working on for some time, a cultural history of Atlanta's Cabbagetown neighborhood.

Cabbagetown is unique among Atlanta neighborhoods as a historically Appalachian mill village in a predominantly black city. Workers at the mill for its nearly 100-year history comprised mostly emigrants from north Georgia mountains. Fiddlin' John Carson is among the most famous of them, having recorded one of the earliest commercially successful "hillbilly" records in 1923, after decades of success as an "old time" fiddler. Celebration of Carson and the supposed "bluegrass" (sic) tradition he represents are at core of neighborhood's self-conception and mythology (see for example the annual Chomp and Stomp festival).¹ In an unlikely turn of events, Carson has been a hot topic of conversation in Atlanta in 2019, as developers plan to tear down the building at 152 Nassau St where he made his seminal recordings. In what sounds like a metaphor but is an actual fact, that site would house the dumpsters and grease traps for a Jimmy Buffet Margaritaville resort.²

This mythology of Cabbagetown as Appalachian enclave obscures other more complex histories. How, for example, do we account for the half-dozen African American congregations who populate the neighborhood's churches on Sundays? Who are the Russian families that we find in the 1940 census?

For a truer and more accurate history of the neighborhood we need to consider narratives that complicate or speak back to the overriding Appalachian myth. We should, for example, begin at the beginning, with the mill's founder, Jacob Elsas. How might considering the foundational role of this German-Jewish-American transplant from the North help us reframe the genesis and history of the neighborhood? Likewise, what happens when we seriously consider Carson's role in inflaming and celebrating the lynching of Leo Frank, another Jewish transplant from the North in 1915?

I envision a project (which may take the form of an article, a book chapter, a website, and/or a lesson plan) that uses Elsas, Carson, and Frank to frame the history of the neighborhood in a way that considers relationships between Jewish capitalists and protestant workers, the vernacular culture that Carson has come to represent and the resurgent white supremacy and anti-semitism that contributed to the murder of Frank. The project's chronological frame spans from 1881 (the founding of the mill) to 1915 (the murder of Leo Frank, reestablishment of the KKK).

Major figures include Jacob Elsas, Leo Frank, Mary Phagan (a 13-year-old factory worker whom Frank was convicted of murdering), and John Carson, a longtime Cabbagetown resident and

author of “Little Mary Phagan,” a song that bemoaned Phagan’s murder and celebrated the lynching of Frank. (Carson wrote the song following Frank’s murder in 1915 and was still performing it a decade later; his daughter Rosa Lee (aka Moonshine Kate) recorded it in 1925.³)

The history of Cabbagetown begins in 1881 with the construction of the mill. Jacob Elsas was a German Jewish immigrant and civil war veteran (he fought on the winning side). How significant are these demographic facts? Earlier vocabulary would identify him as a carpetbagger (he came to Atlanta via Cincinnati, bringing northern capital to an industrializing South). He arrives after Reconstruction. One premise at work here is that Reconstruction reestablishes and solidifies white supremacy; as the Frank case will suggest later, Jews are perhaps marginally white under this new order (especially if we consider the KKK’s attitude towards Jews). I hope to identify when idea of Cabbagetown as Appalachian begin? (This will entail a deep dive into archival sources). What is significance of this “Scots-Irish” labor force working under Jewish capital? How might we understand the regional and ethnic (even “racial”) overdeterminations of this relationship? How does the adversarial relationship between labor and capital inform the ethnic narrative, and vice versa?

Below is a “to do” list of sorts, a map of directions for future research:

- * Get details of labor strikes (where did the African American workers live?). Sources: books but also contemporary newspaper articles (AJC, etc.)
- * Look up census records for 1890, 1900, 1910. What are actual demographics? How granular is this info? Get Atlanta City directory; collate info with Sanborn maps
- * Where did Elsas live? Was he observant? Did he go to synagogue? If so, where? Check out tomb in Oakland Cemetery. What is the relationship of his grave to old and new Jewish sections? Who else is buried there?
- * Compare Elsas with Frank

Frank was born in Texas, comes to Atlanta from New York. To what extent are his history and Elsas’s analogous? Both are Jewish men of some means who come to Atlanta post-reconstruction (Frank in 1908), serve in ownership or supervisory capacities at factories (Fulton Bag and Cotton for Elsas; National Pencil for Frank). How common were Jewish owners and supervisors in Atlanta at the time? How prevalent was anti-semitism?

Carson: Carson was in fact from north GA (around Blue Ridge). Mythology depicts him as Appalachian primitive, but he in fact lived and worked in industry in Atlanta for decades. This image is in part self-promotion. Carson and his children worked in the Fulton mill and lived in Factory Town (as Cabbagetown was then known). How representative is Carson of the workforce of the mill? Research 1914 strike. Check city directory for concrete evidence of his having lived on Powell St.

“Little Mary Phagan” is well known. How to consider it in novel and productive way? The ballad takes the form of English broadside. It is important that it is pre-commercial. Carson kick-

starts hillbilly music industry in 1923, but he writes the ballad a decade earlier. Obviously the song responds to real events (e.g., murder of Phagan and arrest of Frank), but it also helps construct and revise narrative about these events. (What sources are there for different iterations of song? Verify account that Carson rewrites it to accuse Governor of receiving bribe from “New York bank” (i.e., Jews). Moonshine Kate (Carson’s daughter) records the song in 1925; why does it maintain its currency a decade after the events described?)

Archival sources to consult:

Breman museum (Elsas papers)
Georgia State University special collections
Georgia Tech special collections
Emory special collections
Atlanta City Directories
Sanborn maps

Bibliography

- Michael R. Cohen, *Cotton Capitalists : American Jewish Entrepreneurship in the Reconstruction Era*, The Goldstein-Goren Series in American Jewish History (New York University Press, 2017).
- Gary M. Fink, *The Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills Strike of 1914-1915 : Espionage, Labor Conflict, and New South Industrial Relations*, Cornell Studies in Industrial and Labor Relations: No. 28 (ILR Press, 1993).
- Steven Hertzberg, *Strangers within the Gate City : The Jews of Atlanta, 1845-1915*, 1st ed. (Jewish Publication Society of America, 1978).
- Clifford Kuhn, *Contesting the New South Order: The 1914-1915 Strike at Atlanta’s Fulton Mills*, accessed June 12, 2019, <https://www.uncpress.org/book/9780807849736/contesting-the-new-south-order>.

¹ “Chomp & Stomp – Atlanta Area Festival,” accessed September 2, 2019, <https://chompandstomp.com/>.

² “152 Nassau Street,” *Historic Atlanta* (blog), December 26, 2018, <https://www.historicatlanta.org/152-nassau/>.

³ “Summary of Little Mary Phagan,” accessed September 2, 2019, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/littlemary/summary.html>.