

IMIRI DAVID AND BAYLOR REINI

The Atlanta Stadium

Box 14, Folder 3, Document 43

A SYMBOL OF HOPE TO SOME, **DESPAIR TO OTHERS**

Atlanta, aerial view, circa 1964



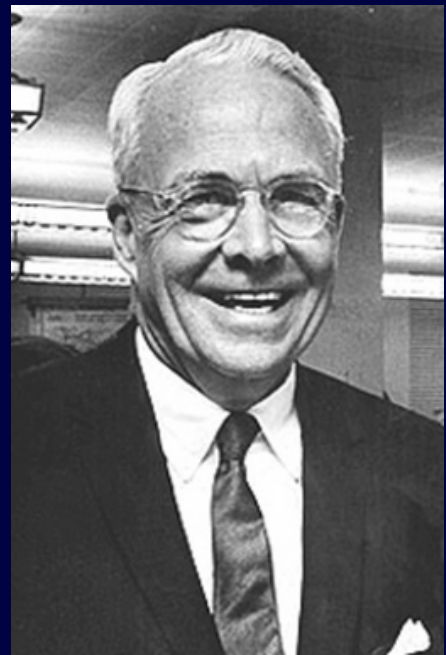
Background: Atlanta in the 1960s

At the beginning of the decade, black neighborhoods in the city of Atlanta made up one fifth of the residential area in Atlanta yet nearly half of the population. Poverty, new zoning ordinances, and expressways boxed in black neighborhoods and contributed to the segregation that persisted in Atlanta. Ivan Allen, Jr. was elected as mayor of Atlanta in 1962, and began transforming the city. Major infrastructure projects were central to Allen's vision for Atlanta, including a brand new stadium and highway system. All of these resulted in black neighborhoods being relocated, isolated, and demolished-but not without dissent and anger. This came to a head following the completion of the construction of the Atlanta Stadium in 1965, when turmoil erupted in the black neighborhood of Summerhill.

Timeline

1961

Ivan Allen Jr.
becomes
mayor of
Atlanta



1964

Construction
begins on
Atlanta
Stadium

1965

Stadium
opens to the
public



1966

The Braves and
the Falcons
begin to play
in Atlanta
Stadium

Atlanta 1970s



Atlanta 1960s



Urban Renewal

Urban Renewal is a federally-funded program for demolishing or rehabilitating urban neighborhoods, or the "worst slums" as Allen describes them, for the purpose of attracting not only business and civic infrastructure, but also more affluent families into the neighborhoods (155-156). Urban renewal often forces poorer communities out of their homes in order to make space for new infrastructure meant to benefit the whole city. By revitalizing the infrastructure of Atlanta, Mayor Allen believed the social and economic issues of the city would wash away as well. The Ivan Allen Digital Archives reveal that renters in Summerhill were subject to deteriorating living conditions. With the stadium construction, however, residents faced ultimatums from their landlords: move or be bulldozed (Grady-Willis).



“I had ridden over Washington-Rawson many times. At one time it had been one of Atlanta’s nice neighborhoods, with plenty of magnolias and beautiful old homes surrounded by stone walls, but it had deteriorated into one of our worst slums and now was being cleared under the urban renewal program.”

IVAN ALLEN JR.

MAYOR: NOTES ON THE SIXTIES, PG 155-156



Mayor Allen in the new Atlanta Stadium


Atlanta Stadium

One of Allen's initial mayoral campaign promises was a stadium that would help transform Atlanta, at least in Allen's eyes, into a "national" city. Allen figured that the amount of clout and commerce brought to Atlanta by professional sports would elevate the city's status and give all of Atlanta "baseball fever" (159). To this end, Mayor Allen and fellow booster Mills Lane began working to build the Atlanta Stadium in 1964.



Construction of Atlanta Stadium, 1964

Box 14, Folder 3, Document 43



“This magnificent structure was slowly rising out of the ground, **like another phoenix from the ashes**, and the construction of the stadium- right there at the interchange, for everybody to see-had baseball fever running high in Atlanta.”

IVAN ALLEN JR.

MAYOR: NOTES ON THE SIXTIES, PG 159

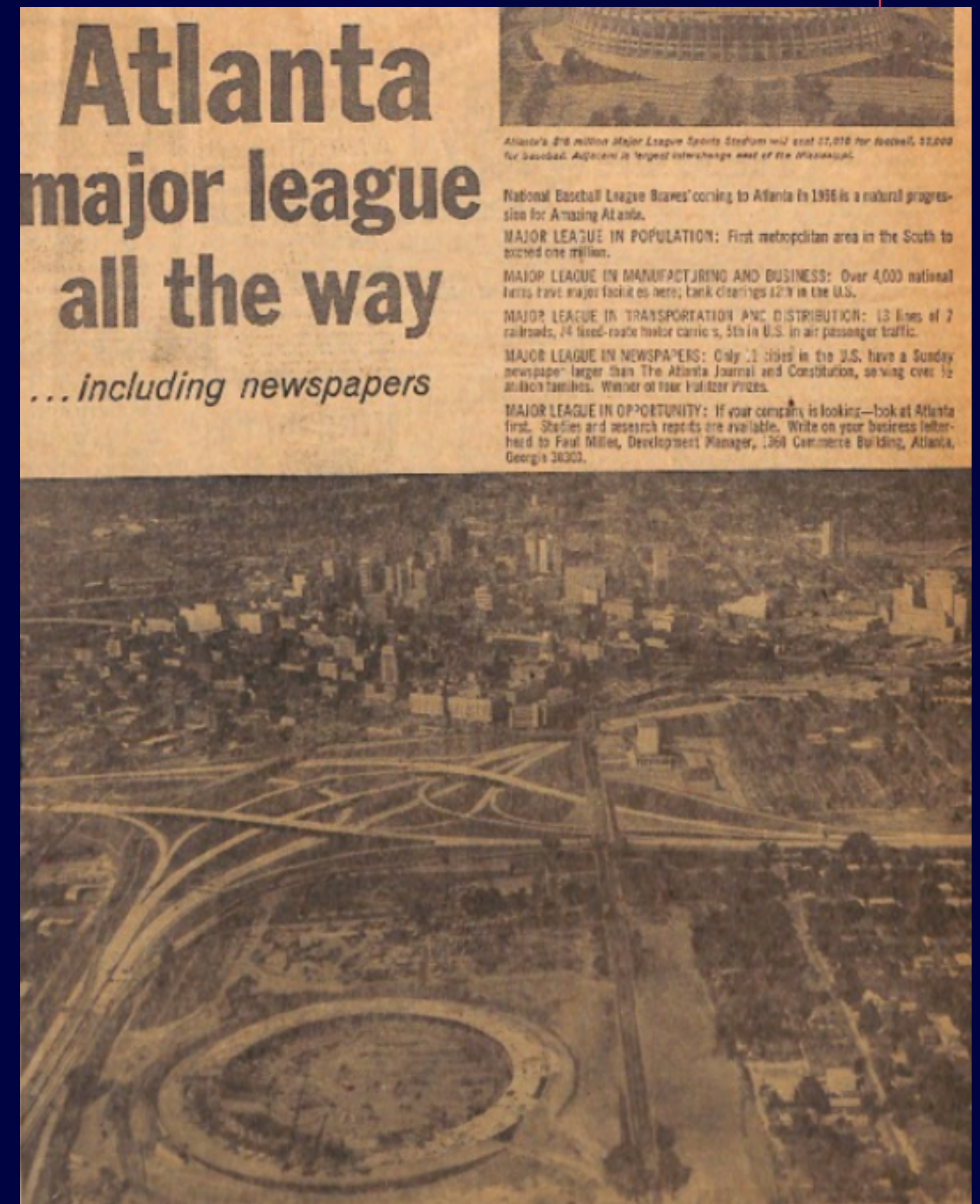
Allen: the Man that "Saved" Atlanta



Mayor Ivan Allen Jr.

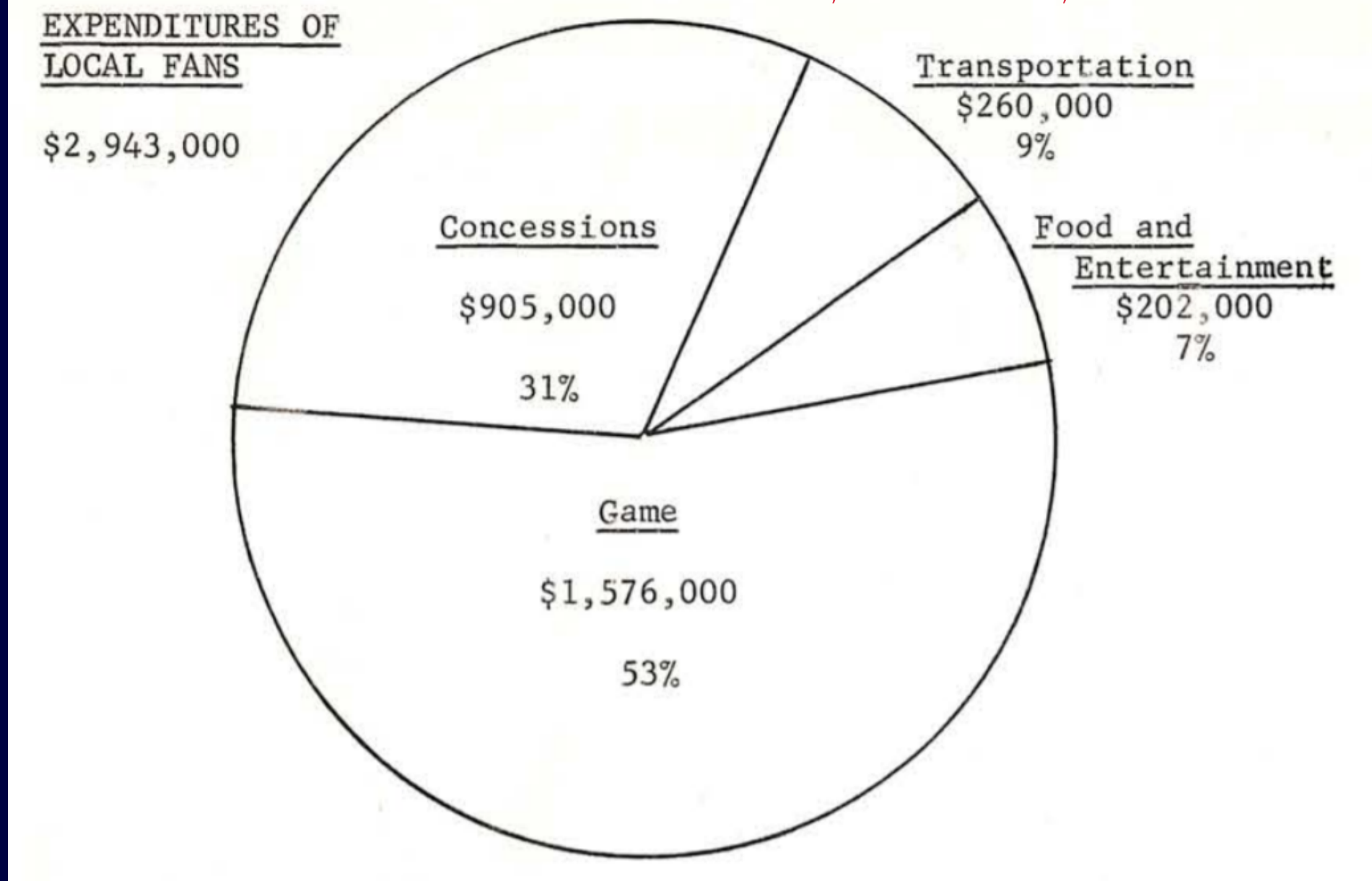
Allen was a self-proclaimed pragmatic man who gained community support by leading integration in Atlanta. He promoted integration because he was convinced Atlanta's future success could not happen under the current conditions. Allen believed that the construction of the stadium would help him accumulate strong support from the local community which would, in the long term, progress his political agenda. Furthermore, Allen viewed Atlanta Stadium as a possible national emblem and wrote to the White House asking for the President's support of the construction. Through his Six Point Forward Atlanta Program, Allen illustrated how he would revitalize Atlanta's infrastructure, business, sports, and overall presence as a major city. In his memoir, Allen celebrates how he successfully turned Atlanta into the sports center of the Southeast with the addition of the Braves, Falcons, and Chiefs. He repeatedly reiterates how "ambitious [the] idea [was] trying to build something of [that] magnitude in twelve months'." (Allen 159).

The wealthy business community overwhelmingly supported Allen's vision for Atlanta, as the stadium construction gentrified the city and thus benefited the upper-middle class population. One portion of the Ivan Allen Digital Archives includes statistics from a study completed by the Georgia Tech School of Industrial Management. The statistics show over 600,000 out-of-town fans came to support the Atlanta Braves, encompassing 41% of the viewership. 78% of the out-of-town fans came to Atlanta solely to the game. Together, the local economy expenditure of the Braves, including concessions, the game itself, lodging, and more, was \$9,254,000. Atlanta boomed across the country, with over 280,000 mentions in newspapers, Southeastern and national TV coverage, and regional radio coverage.



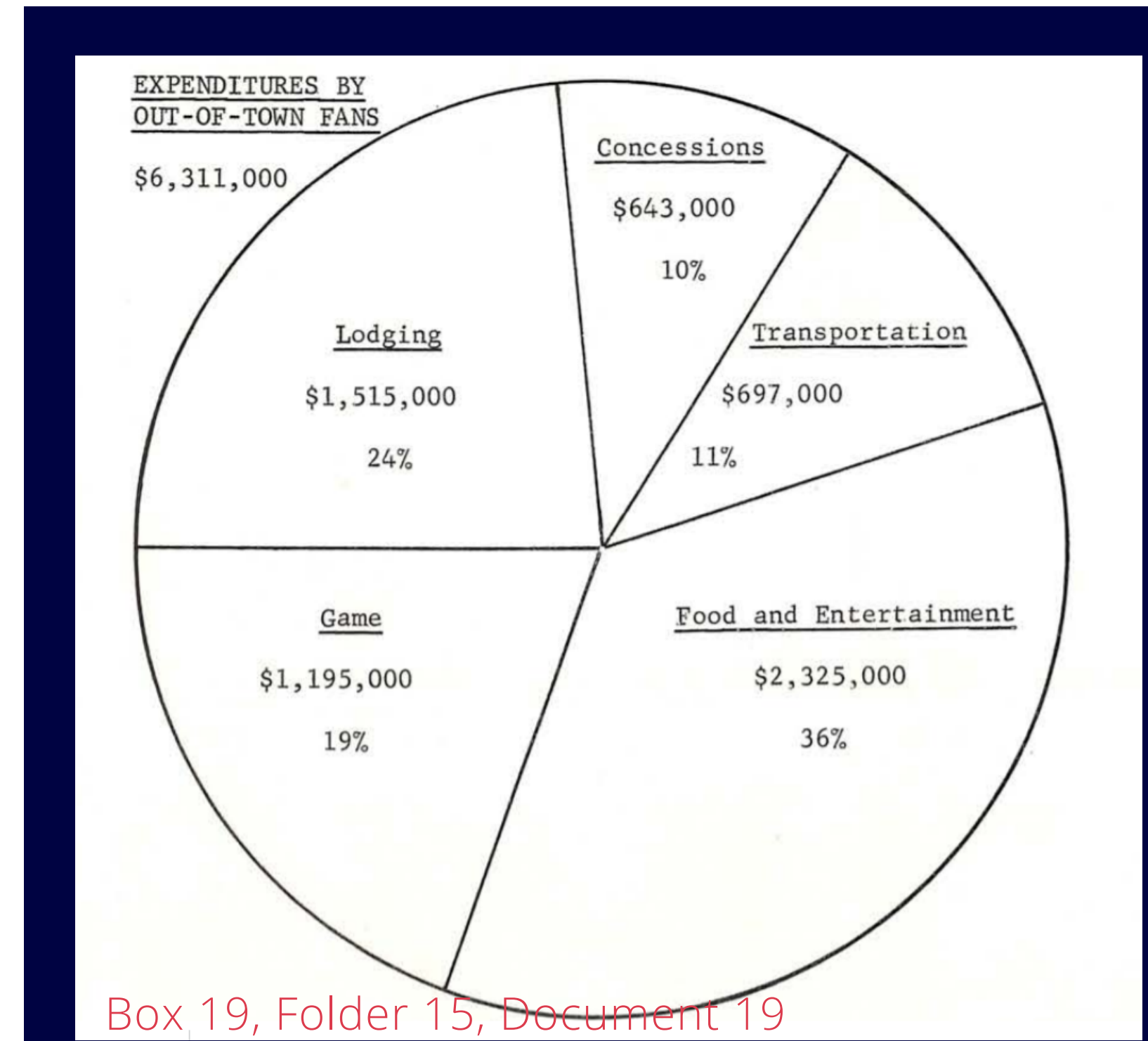
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Joint newspaper article, *Forward Atlanta and the Atlanta Journal*, 1964

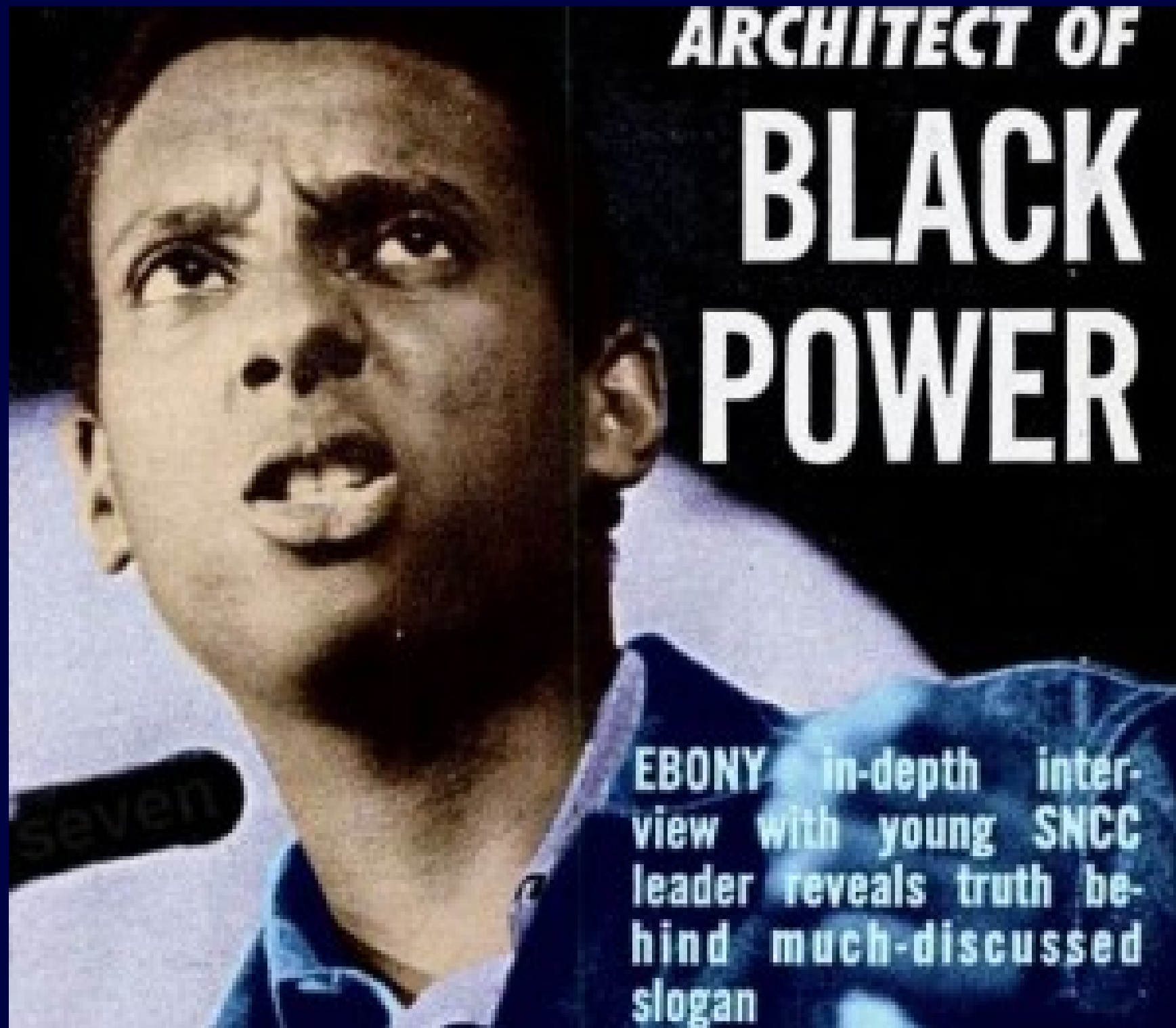


The Atlanta Braves Economic Impact

The Braves brought streams of revenue, commerce, and exposure to the city, all of which allowed Atlanta to propel forward as a major league city. However, Allen used statistics like these to justify the demolition of numerous black neighborhoods.



Opposition

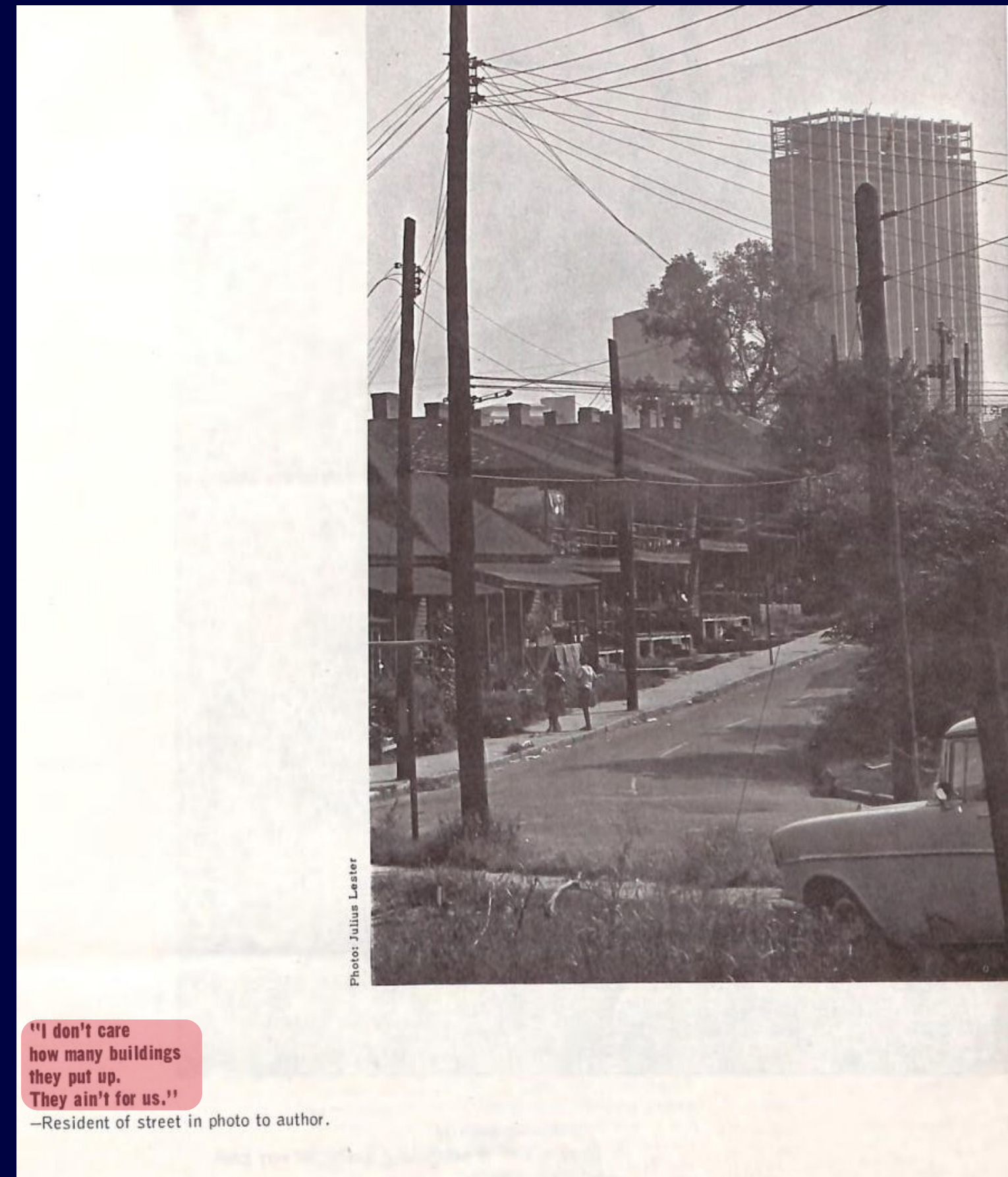


A profile by popular African-American magazine *Ebony* of Stokely Carmichael, the chairman of the **Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (1966-1967)**

Despite Allen's singular narrative of Atlanta Stadium as a beacon of progress for the city, the Ivan Allen Digital Archives reveal another story: a stark juxtaposition of the stadium's perception between Atlanta's business elite and the poor, black, and disenfranchised residents of Washington-Rawson and the surrounding areas. While Atlanta's boosters and magnates certainly appreciated the commerce and conversation the stadium brought, the residents of the surrounding area resented the disturbances created by construction, including forced relocation and neighborhood division. Most importantly, the stadium represented, despite Allen's promises of racial progress, the true priorities of the city officials.

Summerhill and Mechanicsville

When Allen mentions that Washington-Rawson was "cleared under the urban renewal program," he conveniently leaves out that this involved the sudden uprooting of the black community in that "slum." These disgruntled residents, who were already unsatisfied with their deficient living conditions, inadequate basic city services, and unjust treatment, suddenly found that they were being forcefully removed from their neighborhoods of Summerhill and Mechanicsville to make way for a baseball team.



An excerpt from Julius Lester's reflective essay for SNCC on the "Atlanta Rebellion," SNCC's in-house term for what was popularly known as the Summerhill Riot

“The telling blow to the Summerhill and Peoplestown neighborhoods came with the construction of the eighteen million-dollar Atlanta Stadium in 1965. Ethel Mae Matthews, a single working mother, was the first renter evicted. Without prior notice, her landlord provided “an ultimatum to get out or be bulldozed down right immediately at that time.” The bulldozer was already in the yard. **“I went to crying because I didn’t know what to do,”** she recalled.

GRADY-WILLIS, WINSTON A. “BLACK POWER IN THE SOUTH : URBAN PROTEST AND NEIGHBORHOOD ACTIVISM IN ATLANTA, GEORGIA, 1966-1969.”

Mrs. H. Eugene Williams
3378 Knollwood Drive N. W.
Atlanta, Georgia 30305

April 17, 1967

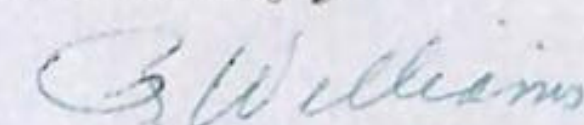
Mayor Ivan Allen
Atlanta, Georgia

Dear Sir;

Thank you for all the wonderful things you have done for our City.

I'm writing to ask that the City not build a \$4,000,000 roof for the Stadium until adequate street lights, street repairs, parks, police protection, etc. are given to the poorer sections of our City.

Yours truly,

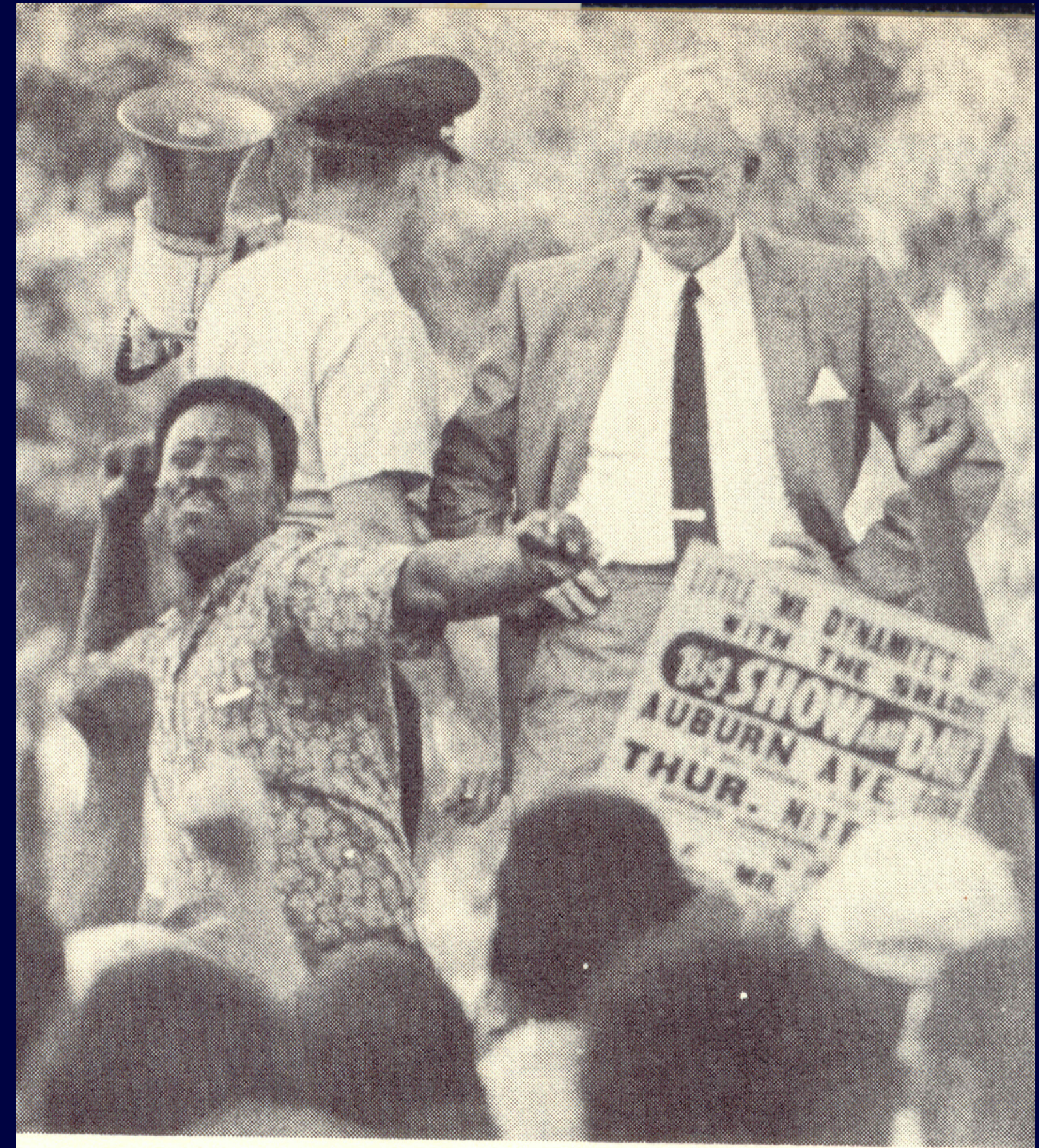


Letter from Atlanta resident to Mayor Allen, 1967¹³

Box 18, Folder 12, Document 3

Atlanta Rebellion

There is no better symbol of the frustration of the people of Summerhill than the so-called Summerhill Riot. While Allen and other major pundits were quick to characterize the event as a result of the malicious interference of Stokely Carmichael and SNCC, this may have been in fact the most convenient truth for Allen. According to SNCC and other African-American pundits, the riot was a result of the long-brewing frustrations with Allen and the Atlanta Stadium for which the residents had been callously set aside for. As the Council on Human Relations of Greater Atlanta put it: "The Atlanta Community-Negro and white-will be making a sad mistake if it writes off Tuesday's disturbances in the South Side as a plot of outside agitators, to be dealt with by replenishing the police department's supply of tear gas."



**"Ivan Allen, Jr. at riots in Summerhill (Atlanta),"
Ivan Allen, Jr. Digital Collection**

The Quality Of Leadership In Atlanta

REJECTING the easy and superficial course of outraged denunciation, Mayor Ivan Allen, Jr., of Atlanta is reacting sensibly and constructively to the recent racial disorders in his city.

While condemning Stokely Carmichael and his cohorts for their role in the rioting, the Mayor conceded that the substandard living conditions in the Negro area where the outbreak occurred would be a fertile field for agitation by anyone.

The city, he said, "must assume the responsibility of housing, education, and employment opportunities for many of these disadvantaged people, and in Atlanta we have accepted this as our responsibility." The

**Excerpt from the *Louisville Courier-Journal*
about the Summerhill Riot, 1966**

Box, 19, Folder 2, Document 2

Excerpt from Baylor, Ronald H. "The Civil Rights Movement as Urban Reform: Atlanta's Black Neighborhoods and a New 'Progressivism.'"

CIVIL RIGHTS AS URBAN REFORM

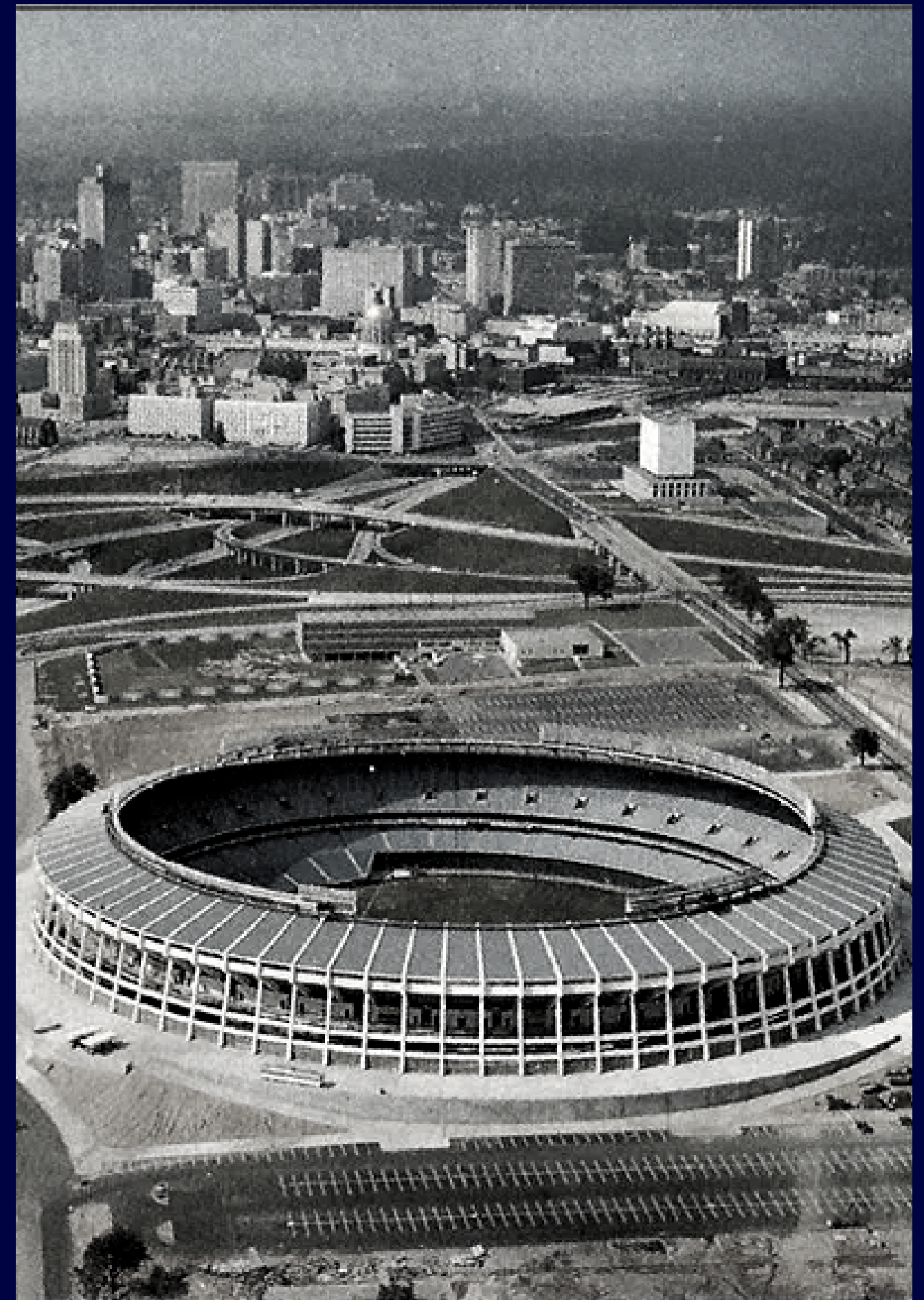
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Southside Atlanta residents resented the construction of Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium in their area, leading some to protest the intrusion of parking space for 4,000 cars into a neighborhood without parks for its children. *Aerial view of the stadium and surrounding neighborhoods (1966) courtesy of Atlanta History Center.*

Takeaway

The Atlanta Stadium was certainly everything Allen hoped for. The stadium's construction and the subsequent arrival of the Braves and Falcons brought massive amounts of money and clout to the city, transforming Atlanta into the major league city of the mayor's dreams. However, a price was paid for this clout: the black residents of the city were ignominiously pushed aside to make way for the stadium, and the following developments served to divide the community further. Instead of their problems being listened to and answered like Allen promised, the Summerhill and Mechanicsville residents saw their homes bulldozed in the name of commerce. In a sense, therefore, the happiness of black Atlantans was the price to be paid for the transformation of Atlanta into a major city. While this might not be surprising in other cities, there is a clear contradiction between the campaign of racial progress that Allen ran on and the results of his policies.



Works Cited

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