

VARUN VEDULA AND JACOB BRACHEY

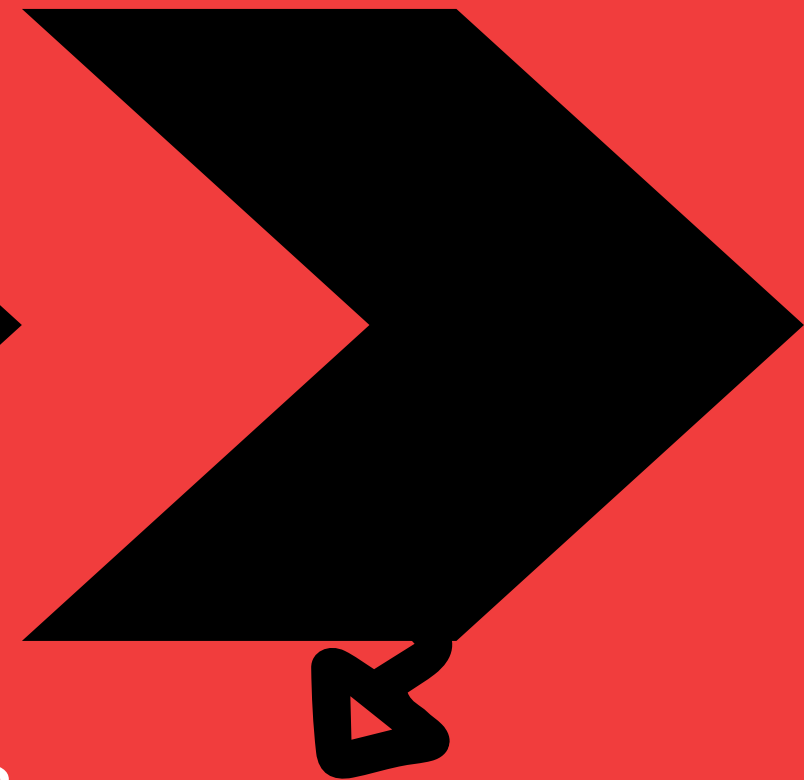
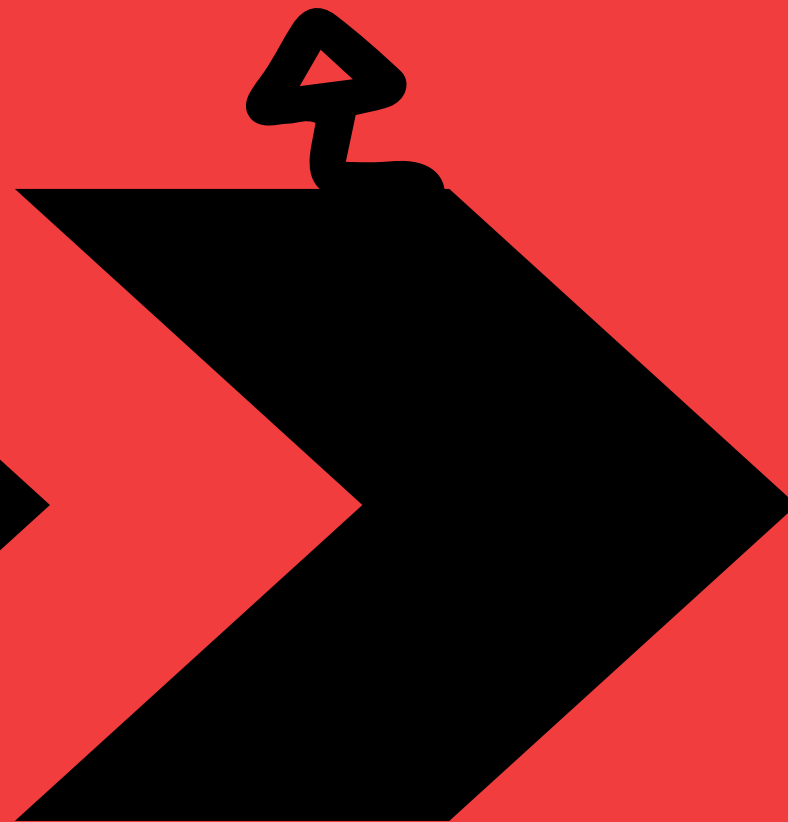
ATLANTA BRAVES: THE UNTOLD BEGINNINGS

A MULTIMODAL ESSAY ON THE TRUTH BEHIND THE ATLANTA BRAVES

TIMELINE

Stadium construction begins
April 1964

Stadium construction finishes
April 1965



Milwaukee Braves plan to
move to Atlanta
1964

Hank Aaron expresses his concern
with Atlanta's racism
October 1964

The Atlanta Braves play their first
game in the National League
1966

INTRODUCTION

The 1960s was a complicated time period for Atlanta. The city experienced profound growth through both significant expansion of infrastructure and improvements in its racial inequalities. Under Mayor Ivan Allen, Jr.'s guidance, Atlanta ended many aspects of segregation that prevented the African American community from finding the same levels of success as the white population. However, Atlanta still had major flaws, especially in the city's racial inequity, and needed a way to continue to progress forward. In an attempt to unite people of different backgrounds, give the city pride, and solidify Atlanta's role as a major U.S. city, Ivan Allen, Jr. worked to bring a new feature to the city: a major league sports team. As he puts it in his memoir *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, Allen believes that this development will make Atlanta "a major league city." Based upon Allen's writings and the image on the left from the Ivan Allen Digital Archive showing Allen's celebratory persona while throwing out the first pitch at the inaugural Atlanta Braves game on April 12, 1966, one might assume that Allen's goals were perfectly achieved. However, while the Braves and the newly constructed Atlanta Stadium did become a proud symbol for the city, the process of bringing the Braves to Atlanta exposed serious underlying issues about race, discrimination, and civic identity in Allen's capital of the New South.



PLAY BALL—Atlanta's Mayor Ivan Allan tosses out first ball with assist from Governor Carl Sanders.

A newspaper clipping from the *Atlanta Journal* featuring a picture of Allen at the Braves' first game

MILWAUKEE → ATLANTA

In the early 1960s, Atlanta was quickly growing and changing into the South's largest city. However, despite significant economic growth and improvements in infrastructure, Atlanta's social scene remained disjointed, segregated, and inequitable. Allen sought to bring Atlantans together; he aimed to do this through the introduction of a major league baseball team. Cities like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles were boosting their economies and uniting their respective cities with one of America's favorite pastimes. Allen took notice and began looking for a team willing to move to Atlanta. After a long search and thorough negotiations with major league team owners, the Milwaukee Braves agreed to become the Atlanta Braves. This transition was successful for Atlanta. In *Mayor*, Allen writes, "major-league sports became another profitable 'industry' for us: by the end of the decade it was bringing in a total of \$18 million a year in new money" (153). The majority of the city quickly fell in love with the team. At the opening game, the stadium was full of fans who gave the Braves a wonderful welcome to Atlanta.

ATLANTA IS BIG LEAGUE IN EVERY WAY.

JACK C. DELIUS

GENERAL MANAGER

CITY OF ATLANTA PARKS AND RECREATION

One of many telegrams sent from Atlantans to William C. Bartholomay, the Chairman of the Board of the Milwaukee Braves, in an attempt to convince the Braves to come to Atlanta

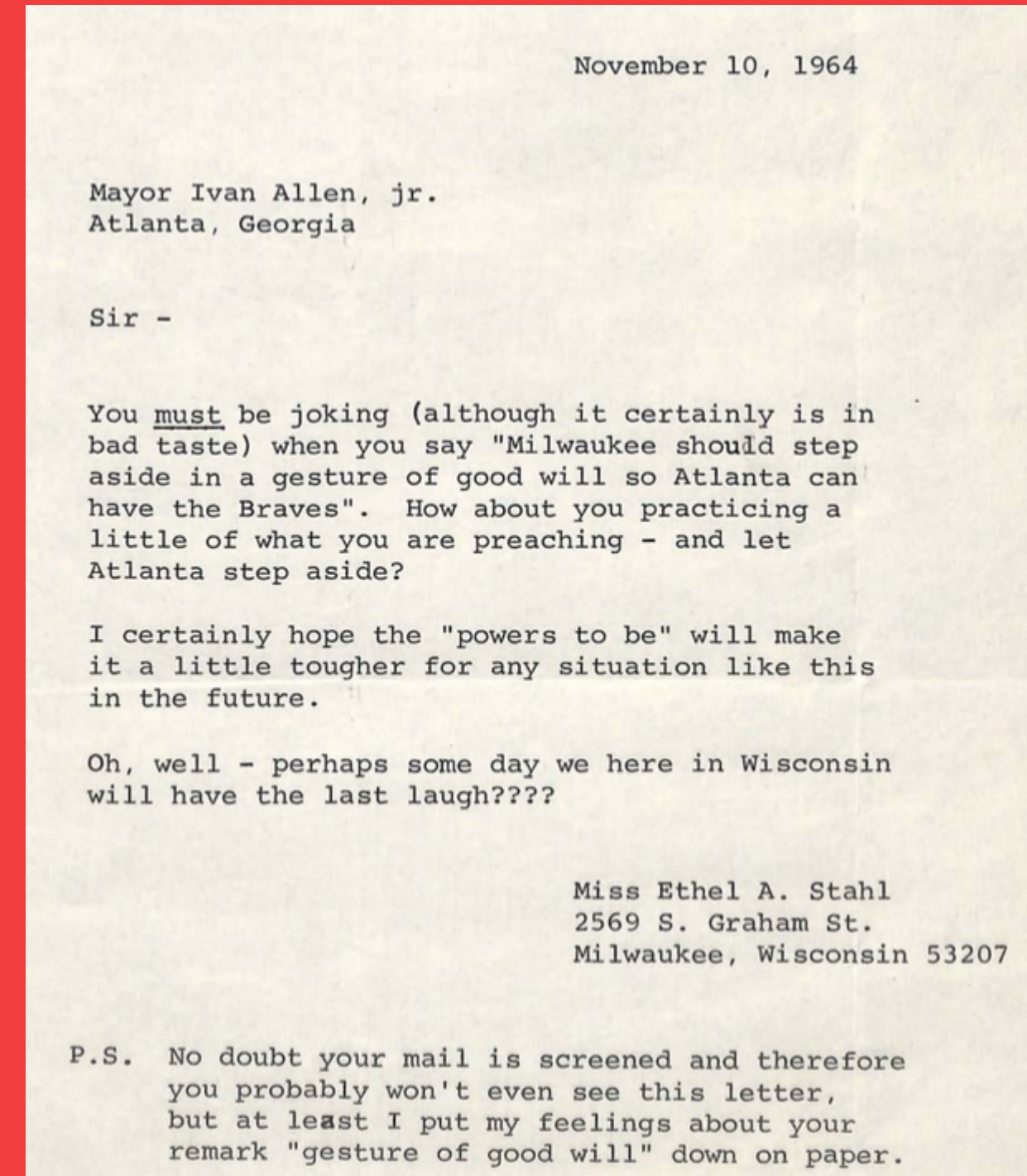
MILWAUKEE



ATLANTA

Nevertheless, moving the Braves from Milwaukee to Atlanta was no easy task. Documents within the Ivan Allen Digital Archive reveal that Milwaukee was not happy to lose their team. In the letter from the archive shown to the right, an angry Milwaukeean called out Atlanta on its hypocrisy, stating that just like Atlanta wanted Milwaukee to “step aside in a gesture of good will,” Atlanta should do the same for Milwaukee. Milwaukeeans criticized Atlanta for their inconsideration for anything other than themselves. Atlanta fought back too, for in one of Allen’s speeches documented in his archive, he said that “whatever money Milwaukee wants to spend to attempt to break our contract will be matched by Atlanta in offsetting such attempts.” This quarrel between cities cost Atlanta thousands of dollars in taxpayer money and quickly led to threats of lawsuits by Milwaukee to keep the Braves.

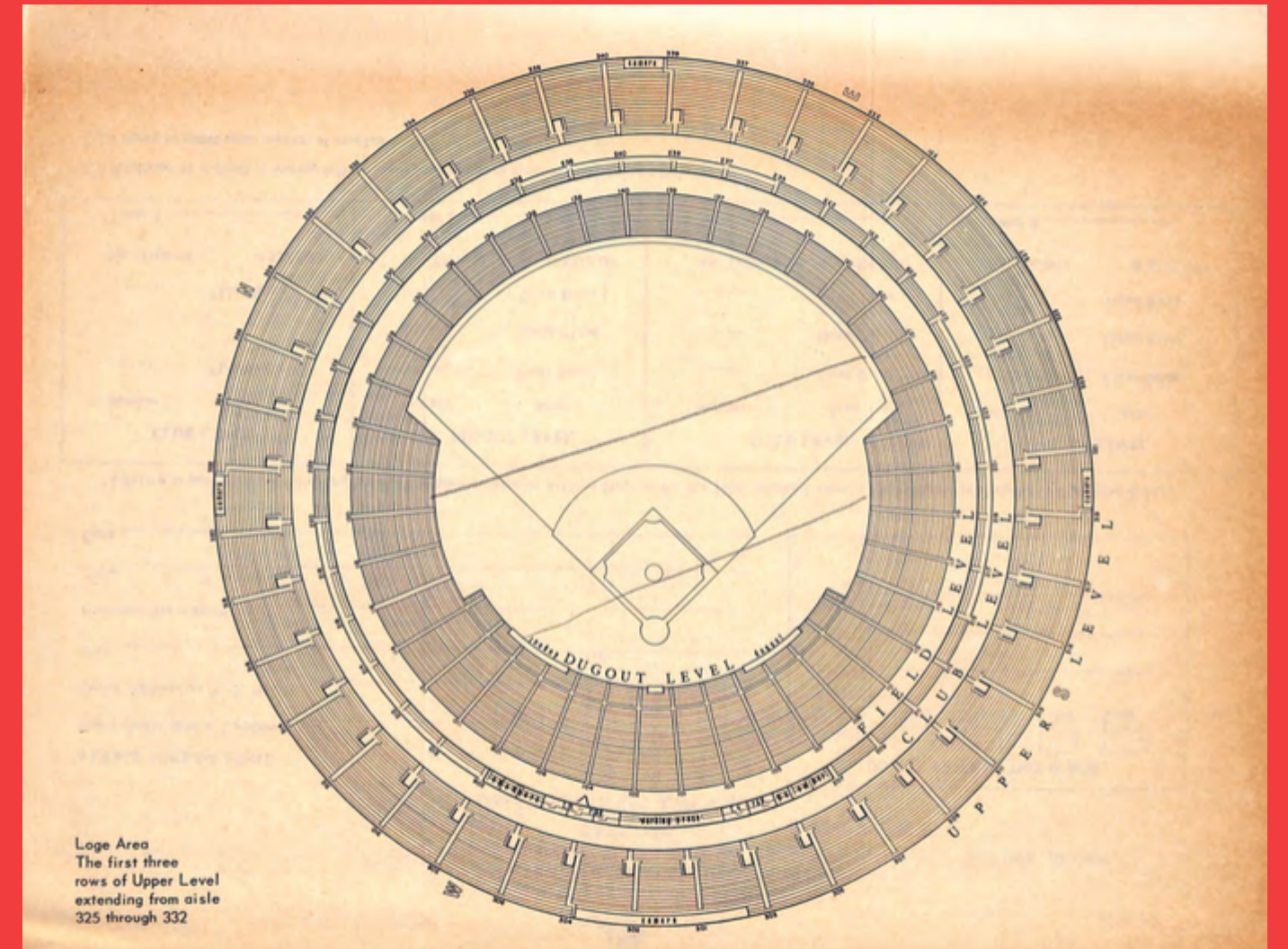
Clearly, the transition from Milwaukee to Atlanta was not smooth for the Braves. One would think that Allen would go into great detail in his memoir of this long, complex process of securing the new team for his city. However, Allen only briefly discusses this major issue and even seems to blame Milwaukee for the hassle of securing a team. Allen writes that “the city of Milwaukee suddenly cared about their Braves” (160) as if the city had not cared for their team in the first place. He then proceeds to complain about the “legal hassle” and “legal fees” that Atlanta had to endure in order to procure the Braves (160). In his memoir, Allen builds the misleading narrative that Atlanta deserved the Braves and, despite annoyances from the protesting city of Milwaukee, eventually got the team, strengthening Atlanta and the whole Major League. The Ivan Allen Digital Archive complicates this narrative by showing that many Milwaukeeans were distraught to lose their city’s baseball team and that the deal caused months of legal tension between the cities. Although Allen touted this transaction as one of his greatest accomplishments, it was in many ways a source of conflict and distress for both cities.



This letter from 1964 exemplifies the anger that many Milwaukeeans felt toward Mayor Allen and Atlanta

THE ATLANTA STADIUM

Before Mayor Allen could convince any major league team to even consider Atlanta as a potential home, he first had to find a location where this theoretical team could play. After searching for an adequate spot for a stadium and failing on three different occasions, Allen set his focus on a new site positioned directly next to the connection of three interstate highways, a perfect location to flaunt Atlanta's new landmark. As Allen puts it in his memoir, this area "was being cleared of its decaying slum houses" (155) and was not immediately needed by the city. This new location received great praise; according to Allen, Charlie Finley, the owner of the Athletics baseball team, described the lot as "the greatest site for a stadium that I've ever seen" (156). Encouraged by this positive reception, Allen enlisted the help of a local banker and political friend named Mills Lane to direct architects to develop the plans for the stadium. Once Atlanta came to an agreement with Milwaukee to transfer the Braves organization to the South, construction of the new Atlanta Stadium began.



Planned layout for the new stadium

In his memoir, Allen celebrates the construction process of the new stadium, which he describes as the second "largest construction project that had ever been undertaken in Atlanta." Allen boasts that the stadium was cost-effectively built in just a year even though a structure of its size would often take "two or even three years" to complete. He writes that the "magnificent structure was slowly rising out of the ground, like another phoenix from the ashes" (159). Through this simile, Allen implies that the stadium embodied the growth of Atlanta, which is often associated with the symbolic phoenix. Just like the whole city of Atlanta metaphorically rose from the ashes after being burnt down during the Civil War, the stadium was rising from the underdeveloped "slums" of Atlanta to show the city's growth. By the time construction was finished, Allen proudly felt that the new structure "was visible and literal proof that Atlanta was a big league city" (152-153). The new stadium was everything that Allen dreamed, and he had achieved his major league goals.

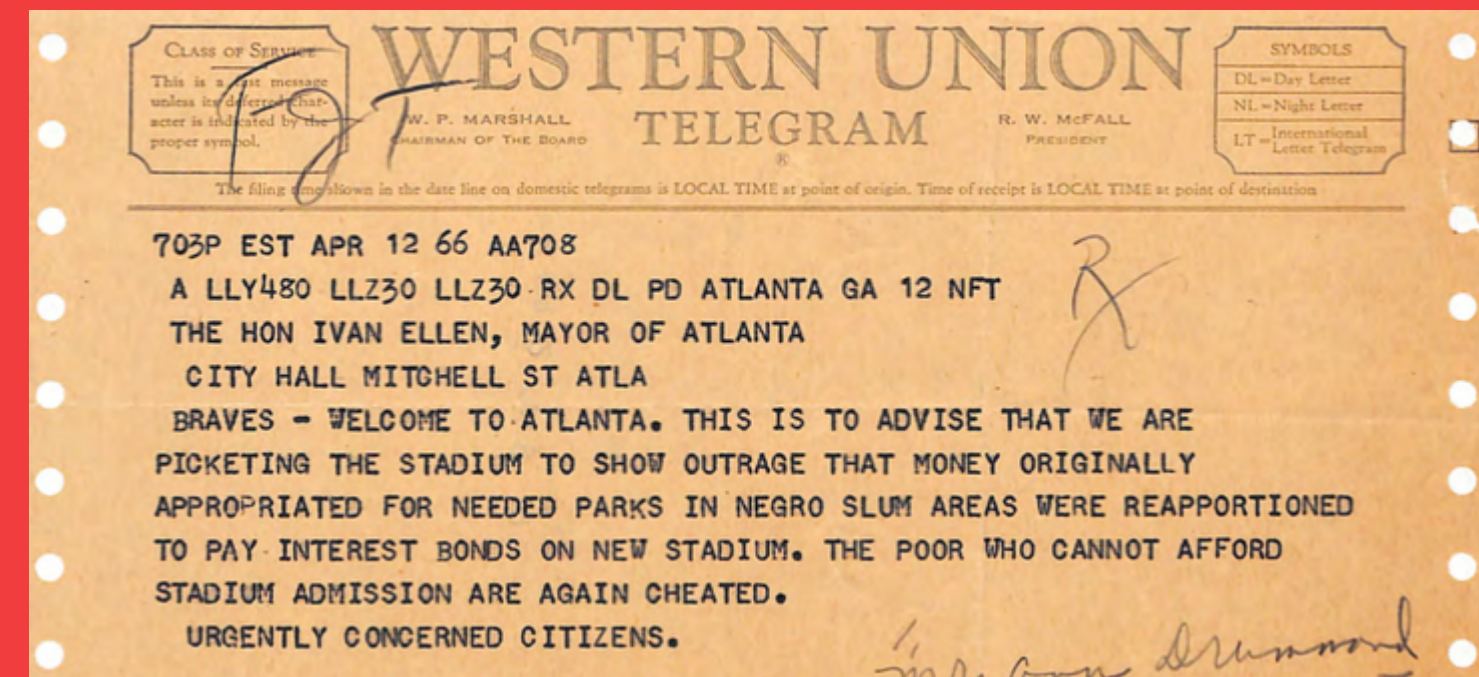
THE ATLANTA STADIUM



Aerial view of the Atlanta Stadium during its construction early in 1965

Investigation into the Ivan Allen Digital Archive reveals that Allen's glorified portrayal of the stadium and its construction as perfect and unproblematic does not show the full story. Although many people did appreciate the introduction of the Braves and a large stadium to Atlanta, many others did not. While Allen casually mentions that the site of the stadium had been a run-down neighborhood as if it is a side note, the residents of this neighborhood completely lost the area that they called their homes. Furthermore, as the picture shows, the stadium bordered the edges of neighborhoods quite closely. Due to the new project, those now living in the shadow of the stadium experienced noise pollution, crowds, and a loss of autonomy in the community. However, Allen does not seem to consider that some people may not want a giant stadium right outside their backyard.

To extend the problem, many people felt that the massive amount of money spent to build the stadium should have been used to improve the community instead. The authors of the telegram on the right are irate because the government was supposed to spend the stadium money on "needed parks in Negro slum areas." These "urgently concerned citizens" felt that the stadium was simply another instance of the government ignoring "the poor who cannot afford stadium admission" anyway. Not only are these underprivileged communities losing funds for new parks, but they cannot even enjoy the benefits of the stadium because they cannot afford tickets to the games. After seeing different perspectives in the Ivan Allen Digital Archive, it is safe to say that plenty of Atlantans were not so ecstatic about Mayor Allen's proud project of the Atlanta Stadium, an idea that complicates Allen's narrative in his memoir.

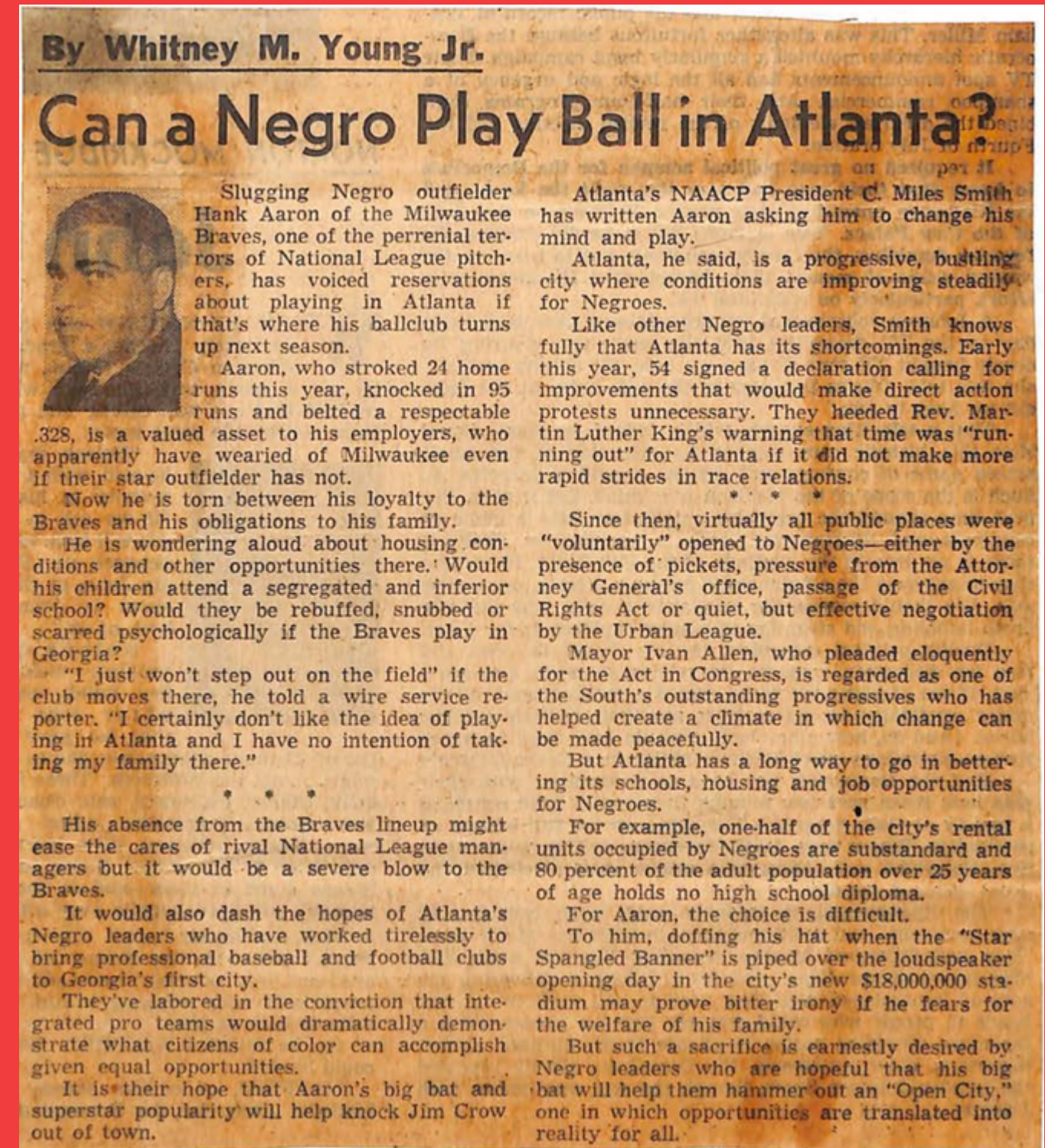


Telegram informing Mayor Allen that the authors plan to protest against the stadium

HANK AARON

As any baseball fanatic would probably know, Hank Aaron was one of the great icons of the Braves. He played for them for 21 seasons, led Milwaukee in a world series victory in 1957, and held many records, including the most career home runs, a record he held for 33 years. As a star player, he was an icon of the Braves organization. When Atlanta took hold of the team, most Atlantans were excited to have a star like Aaron on their new local team, and the revenue from his presence alone contributed heavily to the Braves' financial success in Atlanta. Everything seemed great for Atlanta, the Braves, and their fans. However, perhaps the one who was least excited for the move was Hank Aaron himself.

When news got to Aaron about the Braves' move to Atlanta, he was reluctant to accept this southern city as his new home. Despite Atlanta's significant racial progress, Aaron still viewed the South as a segregated, racist place; he worried that Atlanta would not be safe for him or his family. The newspaper article on the right described Aaron's reluctance and reported that Aaron stated, "I certainly don't like the idea of playing in Atlanta and I have no intention of taking my family there." Although Aaron later denied saying this, these fears were justified.



A 1964 newspaper article by Whitney M. Young, Jr. from the *New York World Telegram* that discusses Hank Aaron's apprehension to play in Atlanta

HANK AARON

Mr. Hank Aaron
Milwaukee Braves
Milwaukee Wisconsin

Dear Mr. Aaron:

Having been born and raised in the South, I can understand your fears and apprehensions relative to your moving to the south with the Braves Baseball Team.

But as a Senator from the State of Georgia, and the first of our group to serve in the Senate in 92 years and as one who has watched Atlanta and Georgia progress in the last decade, I can assure you that your fears today may not be well founded. Georgia has made more progress in the last five years in the area of human relations than any other southern state. Atlanta has moved in the same span of time from a segregated city to a desegregated city. The business community, the city administration as well as Negro and White leadership have joined forces to keep Atlanta moving forward.

It is far from my intentions to convey to you that we have reached the ultimate in human relations in Atlanta. Frankly, I do not know of any city in this country where the ultimate has been reached. It is not my intentions to infer that there is no room for improvement. To the contrary, we have a long way to go as is true in most cities throughout the country including Milwaukee before achieving a society completely free of prejudice and discrimination. However, we have come a long way in the city of Atlanta. Our public facilities have been desegregated, the golf courses, swimming pools, libraries, transportation facilities, hotels, motels, restaurants, the present ball park and the ball park under construction will be completely desegregated.

The important thing about Atlanta is that there is a spirit and an atmosphere of change, there is a spirit of growth and a determination on the part of Negroes and Whites, who have pledged a continued perpetuation of this atmosphere.

In my official capacity, as a State Senator, I want to welcome you to our city. As a southerner and as a great admirer of yours, my wife and I want to extend to you and to your family the hospitality of our home and our friendship as you resolve in your own mind the question of returning to the south.

With kind personal regards, I remain

Yours truly,

Leroy R. Johnson
Senator, 38th District

LRJ:pw

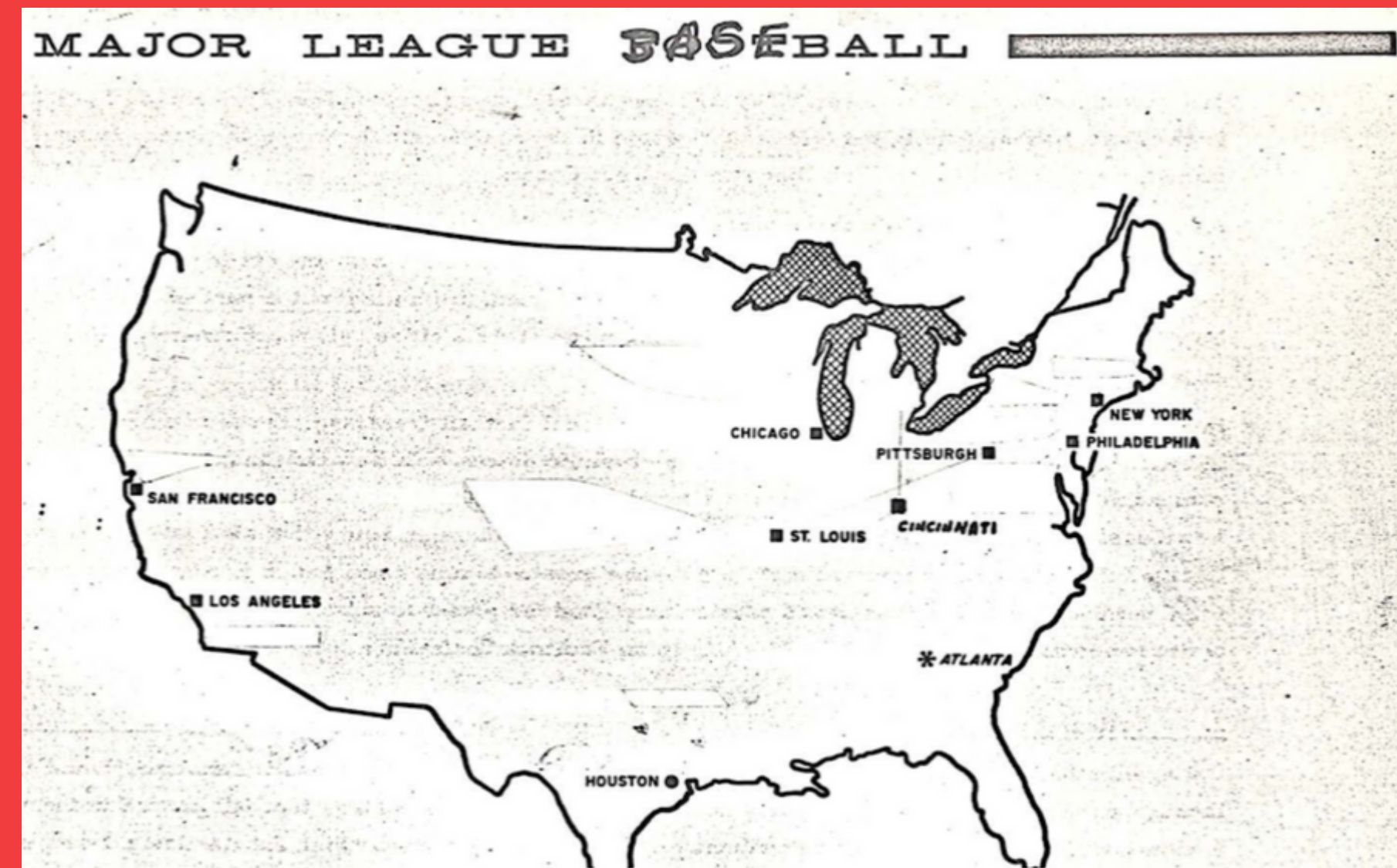
Although Atlanta was improving, the South was still full of racists who would not accept a famous African American embodying a team in Atlanta. In fact, the previous baseball team in the area was the Atlanta Crackers, which was a fully white team. Integrated baseball was a new concept to many whites in Atlanta, and, as one would expect, there was some racist resistance from the city. According to the journal article “Fields of Play: The Mediums through Which Black Athletes Engaged in Sports in Jim Crow Georgia” by Hasan Kwame Jeffries, as Hank Aaron approached Babe Ruth’s home-run record, he “was inundated with letters threatening his life and the lives of his wife and children” (272). Clearly, Atlanta was still not an ideal home for a black baseball star and his family.

While the introduction of the Braves was supposed to show Atlanta’s arrival as a leading national city, the plan partially backfired as this Hank Aaron controversy exposed Atlanta’s continual racial tension. In his memoir, Mayor Allen does not even mention Aaron or the surrounding tension as the Braves moved to Atlanta. Allen wants to develop the idea that his master plan of bringing a major league team to the city worked perfectly, so he stays away from this issue entirely. On the other hand, documents from the Ivan Allen Digital Archive as well as secondary sources show that this change uncovered the racial tensions that still negatively affected black citizens in Atlanta.

A letter to Hank Aaron on October 24, 1964 from Leroy Johnson, an African American Georgia Senator, asking Aaron to keep an open mind about Atlanta

CONCLUSION

The Braves' move to Atlanta in 1966 marked a large development for the city not only by bringing people together under a common love of baseball, but also by firmly establishing Atlanta among the other leading cities in the United States. The map to the right shows the significance of having a major league baseball team, as only the biggest and most important cities of the time held major league teams. However, the Ivan Allen Digital Archive provides many diverse perspectives to the Braves situation that oppose Mayor Allen's descriptions in his memoir. In his own book, Allen typically focuses simply on the positives of each situation regarding the Braves and conveys that the introduction of the Braves completely fulfilled the goals that he held for this transition. On the other hand, the documents in the Archive tended to imply that for every positive outcome from the new sports team, there was usually some issue caused by the introduction of the Braves. Nonetheless, Allen tended to ignore these problems and differing opinions and write mainly about the glories of the Atlanta Braves team and its supporters. While the addition of the Braves to Atlanta did impact the city positively in the long run, this development in the city did not transpire as smoothly and perfectly as Allen would have his readers believe since many Atlantans were actually harmed by the large project that was meant to make Atlanta into a truly major league city.



A map showing the distribution of Major League Baseball teams across the nation

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Unless otherwise noted, all documents and images used courtesy of the Ivan Allen Digital Archive, Georgia Institute of Technology.

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