



# THE ATLANTA STADIUM: A HOME RUN OR A RUN FROM HOME

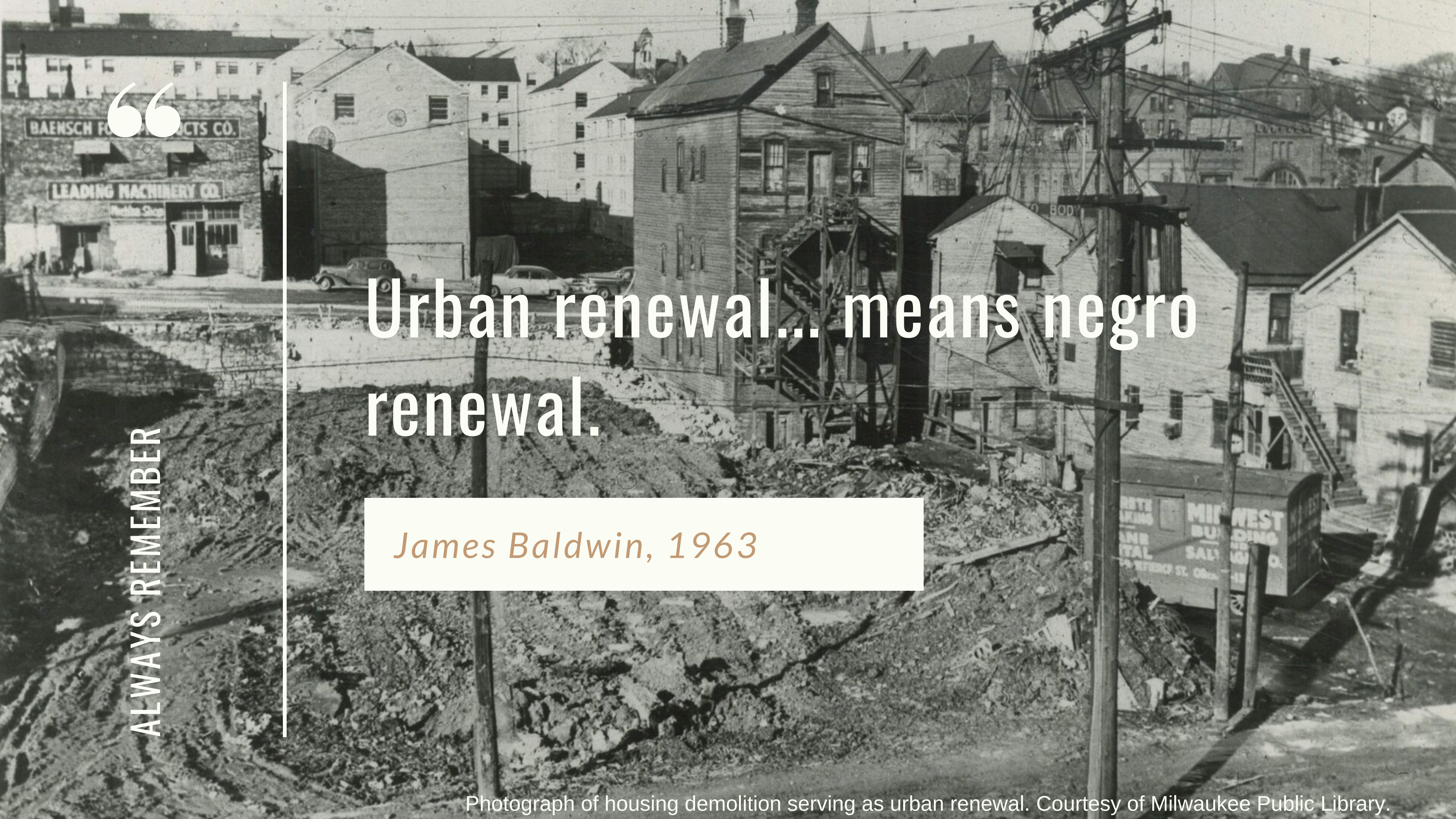
*A multimodal essay on gentrification and  
displacement of black residents in 1960s Atlanta*

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## WHAT IS URBAN RENEWAL?

Urban renewal is a process in which the infrastructure of a city is modernized. It often precipitates the mass-scale gentrification of residential areas in a city, especially within slums and other run-down, oft-forgotten urban locales inhabited by the impoverished. The City of Atlanta's efforts towards urban renewal during the 1960s constituted a major overhaul of Atlanta infrastructure, restructuring and expanding the interstate system as well as developing housing projects. One key reason why Atlanta was so invested in funding urban renewal projects was to corroborate the slogan put forth by Mayor Hartsfield in the 50s: "The City Too Busy to Hate". As Mayor Ivan Allen, Jr. boasts in his memoir, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties*, "The metropolitan area ranked only twenty-first nationally... we ranked in the top ten in most important growth categories over the 10-year period: downtown construction... Hotel and motel space tripled" (Allen 146).





Urban renewal... means negro  
renewal.

*James Baldwin, 1963*

ALWAYS REMEMBER

Photograph of housing demolition serving as urban renewal. Courtesy of Milwaukee Public Library.

# TIMELINE OF RELEVANT EVENTS

When Allen campaigned on the construction of a major sports stadium during his initial mayoral run in 1961, it's unlikely that many Atlantans thought that by 1965 an entire 47-acre area directly southeast of downtown Atlanta would be the site of an \$18 million dollar stadium. But like the urban renewal projects that cleared the "slums" that the stadium would be built on, the commandeered land directly displaced thousands of residents, hastening disruption to the community and ultimately contributing to the turmoil of Summerhill Riot.

1945

1962

1965

1966

First federally funded urban renewal projects in Atlanta

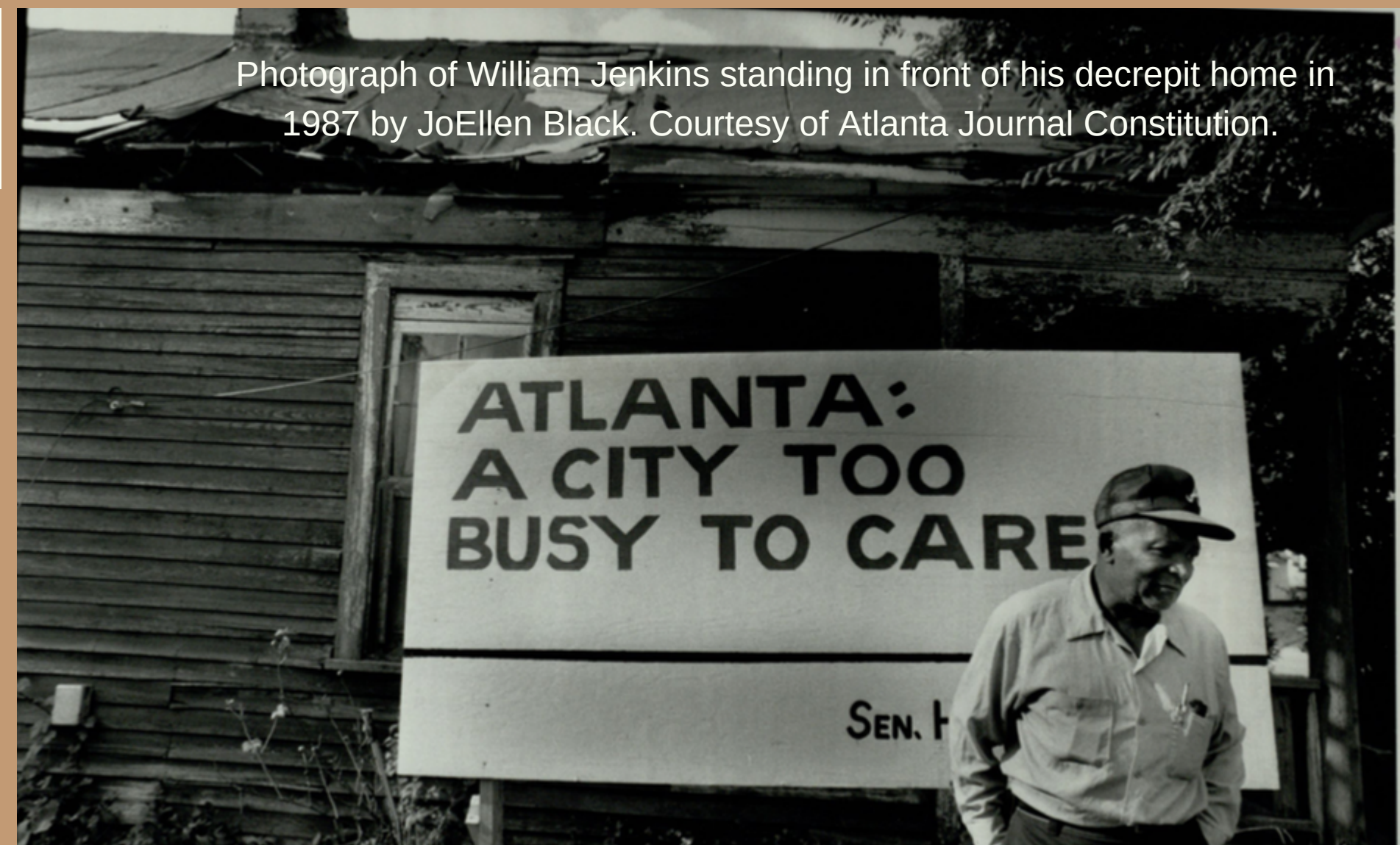
Ivan Allen Jr. elected as mayor of Atlanta

Atlanta Fulton County Stadium is built

Summerhill Riot

## THE CITY TOO BUSY TO CARE

Allen was obsessed with the idea that the government should be handled pragmatically, and one of the most prominent focal points of his administration was to sell the aforementioned idea that Atlanta was a city “too busy” to care, primarily through his Forward Atlanta Plan. “As such, the urban progressives thought that by ameliorating the physical environment they could also eliminate social problems, ensure a stable and orderly society, limit social and economic turmoil, and improve the behavior and morals of slum residents” (Bayor 286). The underlying concept of urban renewal allows for the notion that because Atlanta was taken up with economic development and revitalization, therefore it must have been progressive in granting civil rights. Allen was adamant in presenting the city to the rest of the nation in this manner. By highlighting how ceaselessly “busy” Atlanta is, he trumpets the “unprecedented” amount of growth Atlanta has experienced: in terms of the economy, employment level, major league sporting franchises, and numerous other salient indicators of urban prosperity. Allen desires above all to promote Atlanta’s image; in a sense we can think of him as touting Atlanta as an up-and-coming champ, eager to take on any challenger to her commercial success. And the best, most effective way for him to do so was to implement (federally funded) urban renewal of the city.



Photograph of William Jenkins standing in front of his decrepit home in 1987 by JoEllen Black. Courtesy of Atlanta Journal Constitution.

## DISSATISFACTION

However, Allen's paternal and business-like approach towards rearing the city was not always appreciated by the citizens. Though Allen explains in Mayor that "citizens are not always as well-versed on these (monetary) subjects as him" (Allen 70), the letters below taken from the Archive illustrate the dissatisfaction of these citizens in a less-than-flowery fashion.

### Money Grubber:

Remember this, don't ever forget, we are all  
in this together. There's no way out.  
We sink or swim together.

Lane Mills.

(Box 16, Folder 6, Page 33)

### Money Changers' Tool:

The worst of all these who are with us always--  
the ones actuated by mammonism, devotees to the  
acquisition of wealth: worldliness personified,  
spirit of avarice.

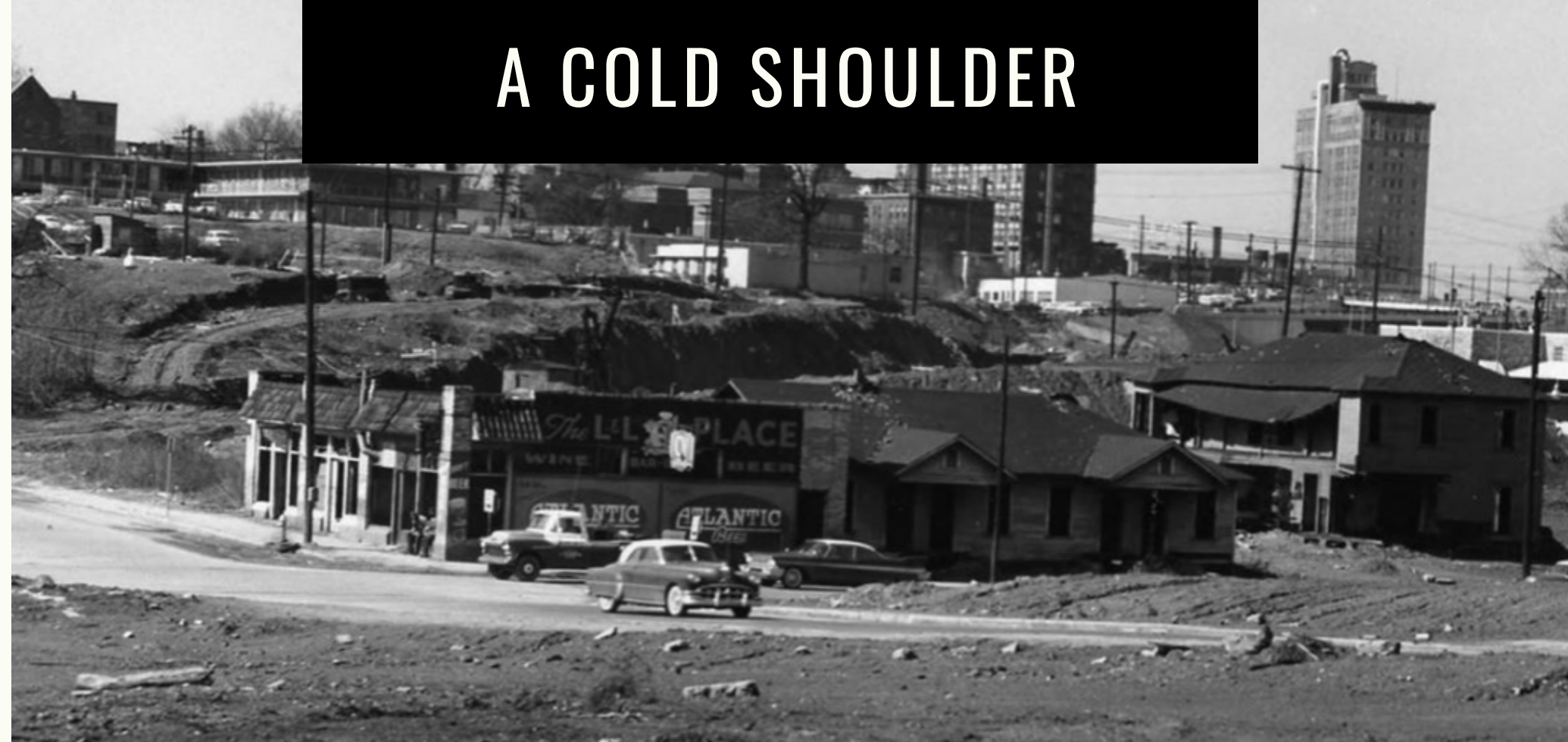
Mr. Grimm

(Box 16, Folder 6, Page 37)

## URBAN CORRUPTION

For Allen, urban renewal was paramount because the razing of large, urban, often residential areas and seizing of generations-old buildings from the impoverished created more room for metropolitan development, amounting to projects such as skyscrapers, transportation systems, and entertainment centers. Thus, it comes as no surprise that urban renewal was often abused by the rich and powerful: stripping the poor of their homes without their consent. The consistent lack of community input regarding such initiatives illustrated the disconnect between black Atlantans and what Mayor Allen describes in his memoir, *Mayor*, as the “white power structure.” Interestingly enough, certain concerned citizens wrote to Mayor Allen to voice their qualms regarding the allocation of funds towards the stadium rather than more pressing causes. In April 1967, both Mrs. H Eugene Williams and Mrs. Charles Cody Brown sent letters requesting him to hold off on further expenditures for the stadium, particularly for a proposed 4 million dollar addition to the stadium that would include the construction of a domed roof. While these women first praise his “wisdom” and “compassion”, they plead with him to instead invest in schools, parks, police, and other public services in poorer areas of the city (Box 18 Folder 12 Pages 3-5). In response to these citizens Allen assures them that such an undertaking was merely a suggestion put forth by the architects. He makes clever use of semantics to imply that the Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium was not a City of Atlanta project, rather one funded by Stadium Authority bonds (Box 18 Folder 12 Page 32-33). Such an opinion seems contradictory in light of readings from *Mayor*, where Allen describes the Stadium Authority as his creation, being made up of hand-picked members of their self-declared “white power structure”. In stark contrast to the above responses, which were standard and lacking in enthusiasm, Allen is full of pep and excitement when writing to constituents who perceived his stadium in a positive light. This dichotomy is illustrated further in this same folder of the Archive, where Allen, bristling with delight, extends an invitation as a guest of honor and a sponsorship of the stadium to these citizens who shower the stadium with praise (Box 18 Folder 12 Pages 52-53).

## A COLD SHOULDER



View of Buttermilk Bottoms, an African-American neighborhood bulldozed to create urban projects, by Jerry Huff, 1960. Courtesy of Georgia State University.

With this correspondence in mind, it is important to recognize there was little to no consideration allotted for the black community when business and government leaders made decisions that affected the city. One incident was chronicled in a letter from Allen to the mayor of Pittsburgh where Allen writes: “I think you will be interested to observe that this splendid new hotel represents a \$12,000,000 example of redevelopment by private enterprise in one of our urban renewal projects” (Box 14, Folder 4, p.136). After demolishing the houses in the name of urban renewal and displacing hundreds of African Americans, Allen set into motion the construction of an expensive luxury hotel that few in the nearby black community would ever step foot in. A journal article from the *Urban Lawyer* states: “Given that the public pays for new stadiums, it should have input into if and how they are built. Constructing a new stadium impacts numerous parties, including the state or local government, the team, fans, local businesses, local residents, and taxpayers” (Mecham 1088). Since the construction of the stadium is funded by taxpayer money, the black community should have been given input on the decision to build it, yet they were barely an afterthought in the eyes of city planners. This incident marks a clear example of the abuse of urban renewal by the white power structure at the expense of the black community.



## Turner Field Area

1949



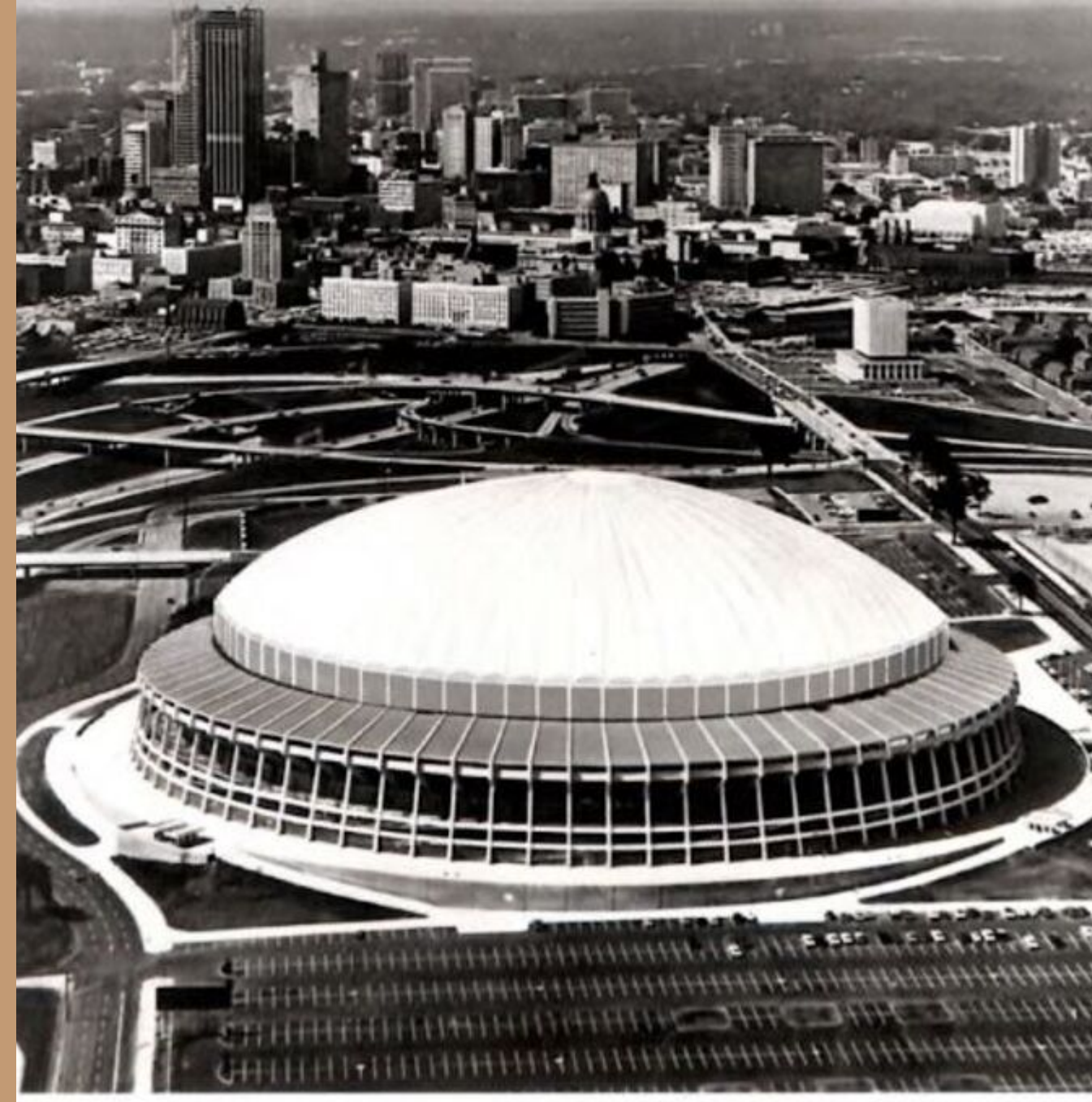
2013



The above image compares the original plot of residential land that was used for the Atlanta Stadium with its current functions as an immense parking lot. Image courtesy of Georgia State University.

# THE ATLANTA STADIUM

The following excerpt from an article written for *The Nation* sums up rather succinctly the fact of the matter: “The mayor negotiated in secrecy; only once... stadium construction was ready to begin did he go public. The Board of Aldermen held a single open meeting... for around 400 citizens. When that vote went well, Allen and his supporters were thrilled” (Judt). It reports further that Arthur Montgomery, chair of the Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium Authority, proudly stated immediately after, “I feel that this proves the mandate of the people; I see no obstacles now.” In Mayor, Allen spends quite a good bit of time laying the foundation to illustrate his transition from naive Southern boy to champion of the Negro. Yet it is precisely in the chapters where he discusses the Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium (among others) where he unintentionally, but overtly, characterizes his own ineptitude or apathy towards the black Atlantan. He cunningly spins the tale of the Braves’ taxing trek from Wisconsin to Georgia, eagerly sharing with the reader any and every pitfall the Stadium Authority might have encountered. However, he conveniently leaves out any mention of the hardships African-Americans suffered at his behest, by way of this stadium construction.



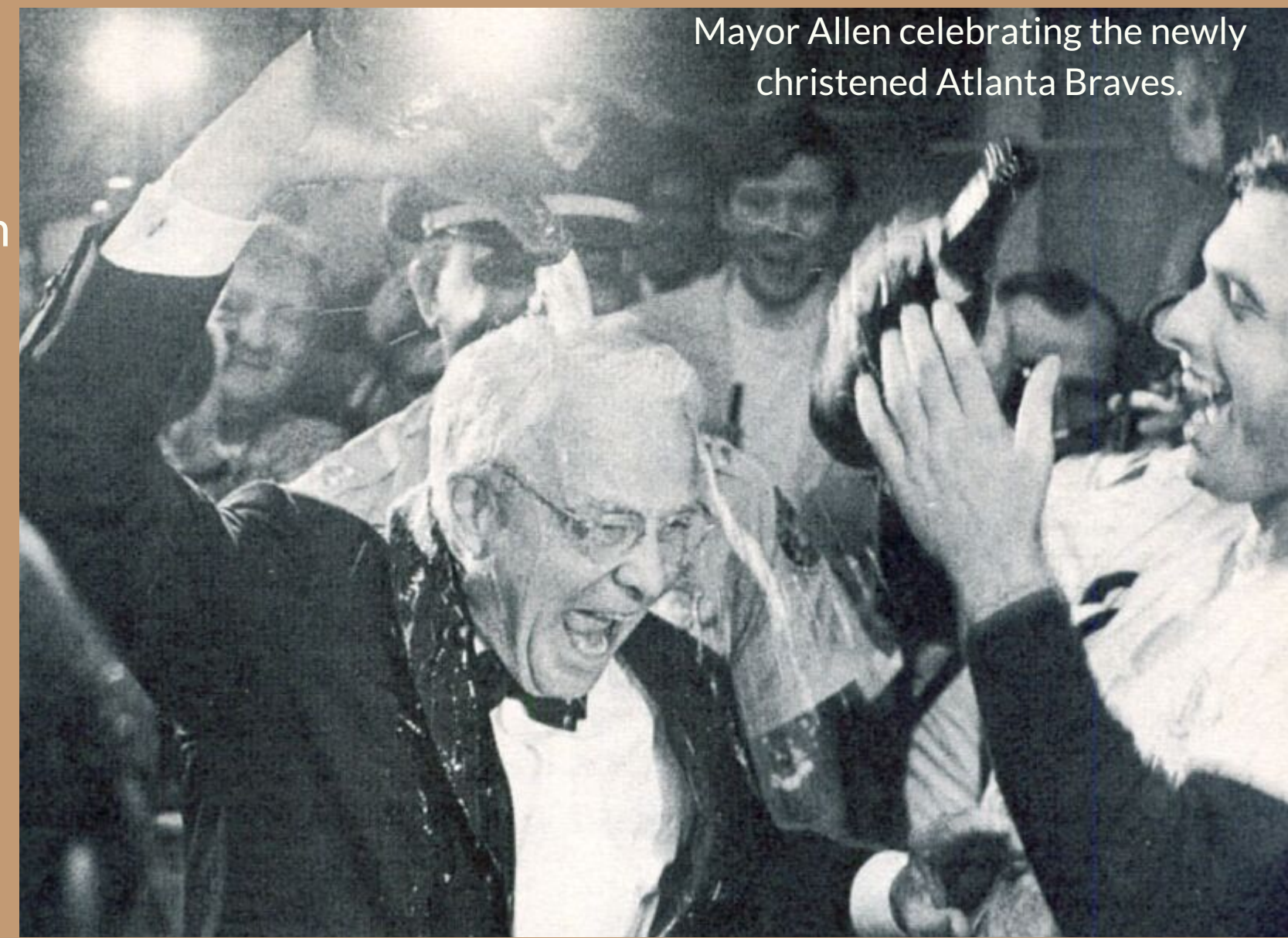
Photograph of the completed Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium, 1967. (Box 18, Folder 12, Page 7)

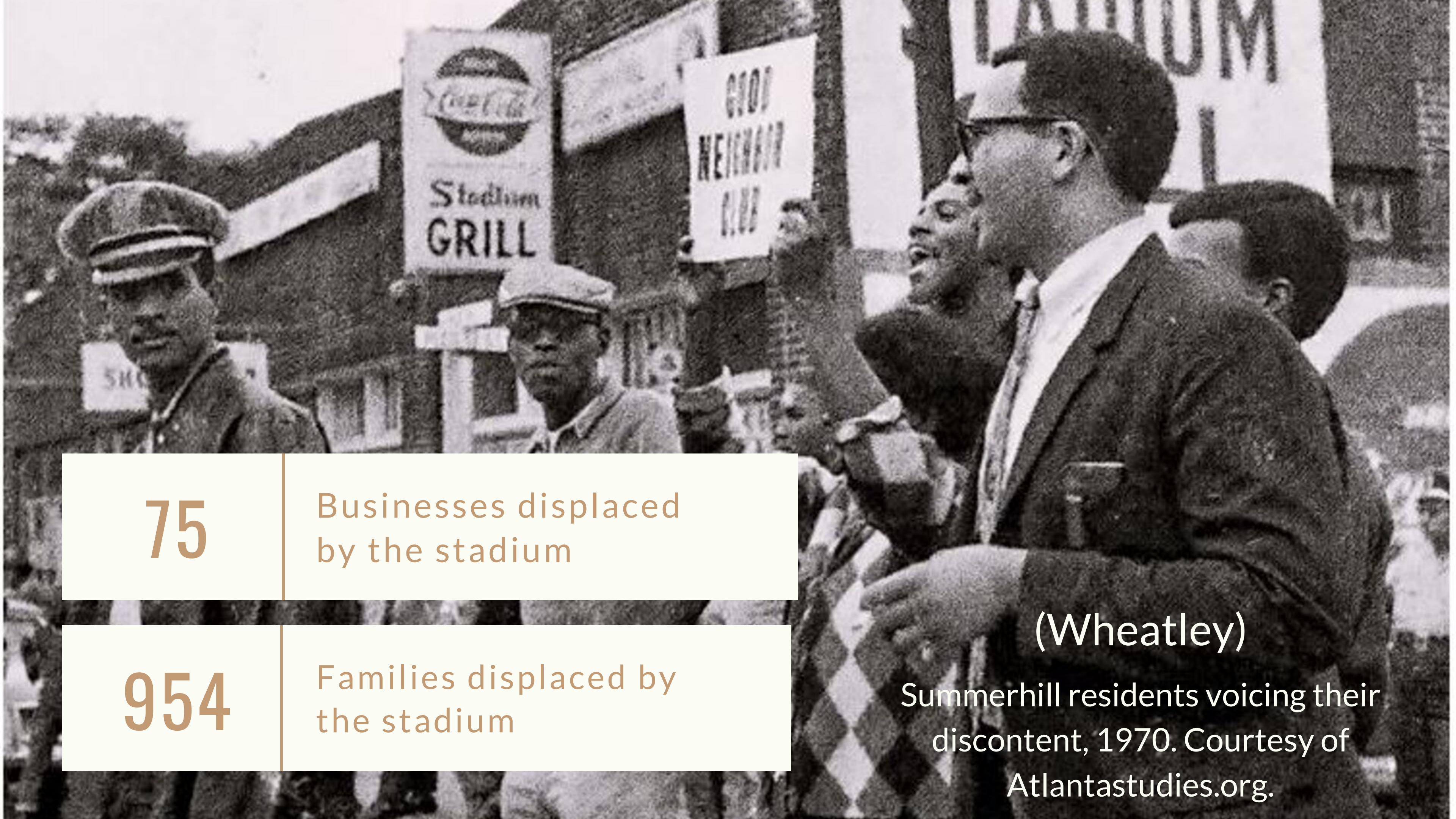
## A HOME RUN OR A RUN FROM HOME?

Even though the Community Council of Atlanta presented Mayor Allen with a report detailing the “social blight” endemic to the communities surrounding the stadium, Allen fails to even mention the issue to us, much less put forth plans to combat it. This stark discrepancy causes the rationally-minded investigator of history to question the impression he has developed so far. How could it be possible that a veritable hero for black people, at least as far as white Southern politicians go, who by virtue of his policy proposals and unwavering morals judiciously fights for the black man’s rights, to have somehow forgotten how the black man was entangled in his business plans. As stated above, it cannot be that he simply was

not privy to the black Atlantan’s struggle, as he often remarked himself to be in his youth (so before he was 36 years of age). Allen’s subordinates spelled out to him in no uncertain terms that “clearance and relocation, without careful consideration of the effect on neighborhoods, has a snowballing effect in the destruction of the surrounding area.” With this information, it is nearly impossible to reconcile the image Allen tries to portray of himself, and the cold, hard truth of the situation. In fact, it is quite shocking to read such a report Mayor Allen was undoubtedly presented with: that “this deterioration has been accentuated through clearance by reducing the available low-income housing units...and has most rapidly affected the areas closest to the stadium”. Especially considering that the authors of the study found “greater concern for these neighborhoods and a readiness to defend its character,...and evidence of neighborhood identification and civic pride”, it is downright callous that Allen took no action to alleviate the condition of such residents. Instead of raising the more than a third of black residents in the vicinity of the stadium out of destitution (referring to families earning less than \$2,000 annually), his campaign to modernize the city was contingent upon simply pushing these people out of sight.

Mayor Allen celebrating the newly christened Atlanta Braves.





75

Businesses displaced  
by the stadium

954

Families displaced by  
the stadium

(Wheatley)

Summerhill residents voicing their  
discontent, 1970. Courtesy of  
[Atlantastudies.org](http://Atlantastudies.org).

## SUMMERHILL RIOT

“The lives of most Blacks in 1960s Atlanta continued to be constrained by the racial discrimination, segregation, violence, and systematic economic and political marginalization engendered by the apartheid policies of the post-Reconstruction US...The adjacent mixed-income neighborhoods of Summerhill and Peoplestown had been disfigured by urban renewal condemnations which ushered in the construction of new freeways” (Grady-Willis 329). The effects of urban renewal and consequently, the building of the Atlanta Stadium ties into the Summerhill Riot. Migrants began to pour out of their communities and settle in Summerhill and the adjacent communities because their homes were being seized and torn down to provide ample land for the stadium. Yet Allen fails to realize that



Ivan Allen in the center of the Summerhill Riot, 1966.

the reason these people were forced to move was because of his decisions promoting urban renewal. Allen indirectly contributed to the factors culminating in the Summerhill Riot because urban renewal displaced so many residents and forcibly lowered their standard of living such that they had no other option than to move into the Summerhill neighborhood. The building of the Atlanta Stadium is only one of the many examples of the lasting divide between blacks and whites in Atlanta and exposes a continued pattern of gentrification and blacks being forced out of their homes.

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