



A view of Atlanta's skyline.

Atlanta

by Tina Gianoulis

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2006 glbtq, Inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Bustling, brash, and vigorous, the city of Atlanta has been a symbol of opportunity and growth in the evolving "New South" for over a hundred years. Though many residents of the city share the conservative values associated with the Southern states, modern Atlanta has a pronounced progressive side as well, as evidenced by its large and active queer population.

In the three and a half decades since the Stonewall rebellion of 1969, queer presence in Atlanta has developed from an almost invisible enclave to one of the largest gay communities in the nation.

Modern Atlanta, often called the Gate City of the South, has a population of almost 420,000, but the metropolitan area has a population in excess of 4,500,000, making it the ninth largest metropolitan area in the United States.

History

Unlike many cities, which spring up naturally on traveled trade routes or sheltered harbors, the city of Atlanta was planned and developed as the industrial revolution swept through the southern U.S. Long before white settlers took over the lands of north central Georgia, Creek and Cherokee Indians had lived in a settlement on the Chattahoochee River called Standing Peachtree. When the native people were forced out and marched west on the Trail of Tears, their village was replaced by a U.S. Army garrison called Fort Peachtree.

In 1836, as the development of the steam locomotive led to the creation of a railroad network throughout the new nation, the Western and Atlantic Railroad of the State of Georgia began to seek out a location for the terminus of its new line. They chose a spot on the Piedmont plateau near old Fort Peachtree and named the new town Terminus. Later renamed Marthasville (after the Georgia governor's daughter), then Atlanta, the new railroad town thrived. Within thirty years of its founding, its population had grown to almost 10,000.

In 1864, as the bloody fighting of the Civil War drew to its end, the town was burned almost to the ground, but it was quickly rebuilt, and by 1870 had grown to over 22,000 residents. Over half of these were African Americans, and, though Atlanta has had its share of racial tension, the city has long been home to a thriving and prosperous Black community, including several respected historically Black colleges and universities.

A dynamic railroad boomtown like the early Atlanta no doubt attracted a variety of non-conforming rebels. Though there were certainly gay residents in Atlanta before Stonewall, there is little evidence of their lives or community.

In 2005, gay activist Wesley Chenault curated a collection of the city's early gay history called *The Unspoken Past: Atlanta Lesbian and Gay History, 1940-1970*, at the Atlanta History Center. A compilation of

personal letters and photographs with oral histories, the exhibit documents the largely underground culture of pre-Stonewall gay men and lesbians in a conservative society. For these early queers, socializing at private parties, softball games, or a table at a local straight restaurant was a radical act of courage.

Post-Stonewall Atlanta

After the gay liberation movement began, Atlanta's gay men and lesbians quickly became more visible. The movement of affluent whites to the suburbs created affordable city neighborhoods where working-class people of color, students, and gay men and lesbians began to congregate. By the early 1970s, recognizable gay neighborhoods had formed in the city's Midtown, Little Five Points, and Candler Park districts.

Atlanta's first Gay Pride march, organized by the Georgia Gay Liberation Front in 1971, attracted several dozen marchers. The next year, Mayor Sam Massell appointed gay activist and journalist Charlie St. John to his Community Relations Commission. (St. John, who organized the first gay pride march, was summarily fired from his job at the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* for his activism.) Also in 1972, a congregation of the Metropolitan Community Church was formed.

As gay men and lesbians began to socialize more openly in a number of drag clubs, bars, and bathhouses, they also began to organize politically. The mid-1970s saw the founding of the city's first gay newspaper, the *Atlanta Barb*, and the opening of the gay bookstore Christopher's Kind and of the feminist bookstore Charis Books. The Gay Center opened in 1976.

By 1976, over 1,000 people attended Atlanta's Gay Pride celebration. In 1977, First Tuesday, a gay political organization, was founded. In 1978, 4,000 queers marched on the Southern Baptist Convention, then meeting in Atlanta, to protest the presence of anti-gay agitator Anita Bryant.

In 1970, feminist activists, including many lesbians, established the Atlanta Women's Liberation Center. Many of the lesbians working with the center felt both marginalized by straight feminists and alienated by gay men, and in 1972, some of these women formed the Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance (ALFA).

ALFA remained a major force in the Atlanta lesbian community for over two decades, organizing around issues of sexism, classism, racism, and other social issues. They also fielded the first openly lesbian softball team, the ALFA Omegas, in 1974, and published a newsletter, *Atalanta*, each month until the group disbanded in 1994.

The 1980s and 1990s

Atlanta's gay community continued to grow and organize during the 1980s. Gay Pride officially became Lesbian, Gay, and Transgendered Pride in 1980. In 1981, the Atlanta Gay Men's Chorus was founded, and in 1983, lesbians organized the first Dyke March. After refusing to sign a proclamation recognizing Gay Pride for several years, in 1984 Mayor Andrew Young finally issued a proclamation for "Gay and Lesbian Civil Rights Day."

In 1985, many queer organizations joined forces in the Metropolitan Atlanta Council of Lesbian and Gay Organizations. The decade also saw the introduction of more gay publications, with *ETC Magazine* in 1985 and the still-extant *Southern Voice*, which began publication in 1988.

In the 1980s, Atlanta was the source of a significant legal battle that resulted in a crushing defeat for the national glbtq community. In 1982, Michael Hardwick and a partner were arrested in Hardwick's Atlanta home for engaging in consensual oral sex and charged with sodomy. Although the local district attorney decided not to pursue the case, Hardwick and his attorneys challenged the constitutionality of the Georgia

statute. In 1986, in *Bowers v. Hardwick*, the United States Supreme Court, on a 5-4 vote, upheld the Georgia statute, dismissing the claim of a constitutional right to homosexual sex as "facetious." Although the Georgia statute was itself overruled by the Georgia Supreme Court in 1998 in a case involving heterosexual conduct, *Bowers v. Hardwick* remained intact until it was repudiated by the United States Supreme Court in 2003 in *Lawrence v. Texas*.

In the 1980s, AIDS decimated the Atlanta gay male community, including the activist leadership. On one occasion, even the annual Gay Pride parade was canceled.

Gay visibility in Atlanta increased dramatically during the 1990s. While previous Gay Pride parades had drawn crowds of up to five thousand, in 1991, 20,000 people attended. In 1992, the number of celebrants increased to 40,000, and a year later, more than 100,000 people attended Gay Pride.

In 1997, Cathy Woolard became the first open lesbian to be elected to the Atlanta city council.

Atlanta also began to take its place in the larger queer movement, as the city hosted the National Lesbian Conference in April 1991. Nevertheless, the city has not yet emerged as a leader in the struggle for equality, which is somewhat surprising given its status as a major American media center.

The 1996 Summer Olympics brought thousands of visitors to Atlanta, and lesbian and gay activists began organizing as early as 1992 to use the public stage created by the games to protest Georgia's sodomy law and promote gay issues such as hate crime legislation and domestic partnership. A Gay and Lesbian Visitors Center welcomed queers from all over the world to the games and the city. An anti-gay resolution passed by neighboring Cobb County led to a boycott of the county by the Olympics Committee.

In 1998, gays hosted their own international sporting event, when the Hotlanta Softball League sponsored the Lesbian and Gay World Series.

In 2001, Cathy Woolard was elected president of the Atlanta city council.

Racial Divisions

Many in Atlanta pride themselves on their city's tolerance, dubbing it "the city too busy to hate." However, as elsewhere in U.S. society, there are deep racial divisions in Atlanta's queer community. Many gay and lesbian African Americans feel that their concerns are ignored by the white gay and lesbian community, while many white members of the glbtq community fear the homophobia of the politically powerful Black clergy in a predominantly African-American city.

A positive step toward bridging some of those divisions was taken at a January 2006 Black Church Summit organized in Atlanta by the National Black Justice Coalition. This historic event brought together members of the African-American clergy and gay and lesbian activists in order to strategize ways to fight homophobia within the Black spiritual community.

Preserving History

While constantly growing and changing, Atlanta's queer community also places a high value on its history. When the Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance disbanded in 1994, the group carefully preserved its archives so that future queer activists could learn about the growth of lesbian organizing in their city.

The Atlanta Lesbian and Gay History Thing was founded in 1991 by a group of activists including lesbian historian Maria Helena Dolan. Until its demise in the late 1990s, the History Thing worked closely with the

Atlanta History Center to collect and preserve documents and memorabilia from the early days of queer activism in Atlanta, Georgia, and the Southeast.

Contemporary Atlanta

Although something of an island in an intolerant state, Atlanta enjoys a reputation as a notably gay-friendly city, with a diverse glbtq population and a plethora of businesses and services that target glbtq residents and visitors.

The city has adopted non-discrimination laws and domestic partner benefits. However, there is some question as to whether some of these laws can withstand constitutional challenge, especially if attacked by an anti-gay state legislature and state voters who overwhelmingly adopted a constitutional amendment barring same-sex marriage (recently affirmed by the state supreme court). For example, in 2005 the city abandoned its attempt to enforce its non-discrimination statute against the Druid Hills Golf Club when the state legislature passed a bill prohibiting local governments from fining private organizations for not offering marital benefits to same-sex couples.

Mayor Shirley Franklin, Atlanta's first African-American female mayor, has been a vocal supporter of the glbtq community. The Atlanta Convention and Visitors Bureau has implemented a gay tourism campaign as both a statement of the city's support of the gay and lesbian community and an attempt to attract gay and lesbian visitors.

The glbtq community played a significant role in the gentrification of the Midtown area of Atlanta in the 1990s; this area is now the center of the visible gay community, an oasis of gay bars, restaurants, and coffehouses, a part of town where gay couples can freely hold hands without fear of harassment.

While many gay men live in the Midtown area of the city, a neighboring town, Decatur, has attracted many lesbian residents.

Bibliography

Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance Archives. Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University. microformguides.gale.com/Data/Download/9023000C.rtf

Atlanta Pride Committee, Inc. "A Brief History of Pride in Atlanta and The Atlanta Pride Committee, Inc." <http://new.atlantapride.org/history/>

Barbarow, Jaclyn. "An 'Unspoken' Generation." *Southern Voice* (July 16, 2004): <http://www.southernvoice.com/2004/7-16/locallife/feature/unspoken.cfm>

Dolan, Maria Helena. "You Can't be a People Unless You Have a History." *The Body: The Complete AIDS/HIV Resource* (September/October 2004): <http://www.thebody.org/asp/septoct04/history.html>

Feaster, Felicia. "A Gay Old Time." *Creative Loafing Atlanta* (June 8, 2005): http://atlanta.creative loafing.com/2005-06-08/arts_feature2.html

Fullbright, Leslie. "Meeting of Minds in Atlanta." *San Francisco Chronicle* (January 19, 2006): <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/c/a/2006/01/19/MNGK3GPM6L1.DTL>

Lee, Ryan, and Dyana Bagby. "Gay Atlanta in Black and White." *Southern Voice* (March 24, 2006): <http://www.sovo.com/2006/3-24/news/localnews/gayatl.cfm>

McAuley, Jordan, and Matt Burhalter. *AtlantaBoy: An Insiders Guide to Gay Atlanta*. Atlanta: Mega Niche Media, 2005.

About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.