

LIFE BEFORE THE CHATTAHOOCHEE

Atlanta is, in many ways, an accidental city. It began as just a surveying footnote, and then it grew in a place where no one assumed a city could be. The land around Atlanta was a vast wilderness until 1838, when a major rail line sliced through the region's dense woods. The future city center began as a small clearing at the end of this line, a junction place where trains filled with coastal plantation cotton met Midwestern wheat-belt freight.

A decade before, Georgia governor William Schley had hired an engineer named Stephen Harriman Long to survey the northern part of the state for a railroad line to connect Georgia's plantation communities to the Tennessee River. Long immediately packed his bags and headed into the heart of Cherokee country, but he couldn't have picked a worse time to survey. His trip was timed after the Indian Removal Act but before the Trail of Tears, and the entire region was roiling with tension between the white settlers, the federal government, and the local Cherokee tribes. Aside from the rough crew of prospectors that still panned for gold in the hills around Dahlonega, few white people chose to travel through the wilderness of the Georgia piedmont.¹

Long himself didn't rough it in the wilderness for a lengthy time. Instead, he hired three principal assistants to lead separate survey brigades, and then he rode back home for a few months to "take care of his affairs." Each of his brigades consisted of a principal assistant, three surveyors, two chainmen to take measurements, two axmen to clear routes for the surveys, one commissary to bring food to the crew, one cook, and one active lad to run errands for the others.² These men did the bulk of the surveying work and then reported the results to Long.

In Long's official reports to the state legislature in 1837, there is no mention of the city-building capacity of the railroad's terminal point. In fact, there is no mention of the terminal point at all.³ Neither Long nor the state legislature seemed to care what happened at the end of the tracks. The state's only directive was that the terminal point needed to be the "most eligible for the running of branch roads" to Athens, Madison, Milledgeville, Forsyth, and Columbus.⁴ The final law specified that the official route would connect Chattanooga, then called Rossville, to Montgomery's ferry on the Chattahoochee, but it left the line's terminal point to be determined at a later date.⁵

Sometime in the fall of 1837, a crew of surveyors led by Albert Brisbane measured the slope, elevation, and soil quality of a site seven miles from the Chattahoochee River. Their measurements indicated that rail lines could be brought into the area from all sides. Without any fanfare, the crew drove a stake in the ground to mark it as the rail line's terminal point, Mile Marker Zero.⁶

In retrospect, this mundane surveying act of hammering a stake into the ground is the starting point of the city of Atlanta, the time when the city was first tied to a fixed geographic location. Everything that Atlanta is today—the Buckhead mansions, the skyscraper skyline, the bypasses of Spaghetti Junction—can all be traced back to this one stake in the ground.

In the summer of 1838, a crew of state workers descended upon the wilderness around Mile Marker Zero and began to cut down trees to clear the line. By 1845, fifty-two miles of rail had been graded and the track had been laid. The next year, access railroads from the cotton-producing town reached the end of the line. Four years later, in 1851, the first train ran from the Chattahoochee to Chattanooga, Tennessee, and the Western and Atlantic Railroad was complete.⁷

During the same time, the rail line's terminal point underwent its own transformation. Although originally referred to only as "Terminus" on engineering maps, the city incorporated as Marthasville in 1843. In 1845, after rail men complained that its name was too long to print on tickets, the town was renamed Atlanta, the feminine version of the mythical city Atlantis.

In light of how much the city has grown, it is amazing to think about just how arbitrarily the city was located and created. The fact that so much has grown up from one tiny little surveying stake might seem less absurd if the stake were marking a beneficial geophysical characteristic, like fertile soil or a salt lick or a mountain spring. That a massive city with millions of people could be founded upon soil whose only distinguishing characteristic was an

even, low grade slope is a testament to just how divorced from the natural world our human development had become.

Americans now build cities in the desert, drive cars through mountain-top tunnels, and build encampments on the South Pole, but at the time of Atlanta's creation, most of our nation's development still arose from some kind of relationship to the physical landscape. Military posts developed in naturally defensible areas, agrarian communities thrived in places with rich soils and ample sunlight, and cities formed along major waterways. Atlanta defied this convention, and, like any other entity at the forefront of a movement, the city encountered serious obstacles and setbacks as a result of its precociousness.

The land around Mile Marker Zero was dense with sourwood, gooseberry, and chinquapin shrubs underneath a canopy of scrubby oaks and pines.⁸ Around the site, there were only a few tiny streams. To the west and north, three of the Chattahoochee's tributaries—Peachtree Creek, Utoy Creek, and Nancy's Creek—flowed down from nearby ridges.⁹ To the east, the headwaters of the South River formed and flowed to the Ocmulgee River and the Atlantic Ocean.¹⁰ To the south, the Flint River began as just a trickle and then flowed through 350 miles of forest and plantation farmland before joining with the Chattahoochee River at the shared border among Georgia, Alabama, and the territory of Florida.

Today, the Chattahoochee River is an urban stream. It traverses through the rapidly expanding suburb of Dunwoody and across the city's unofficial barrier between suburbia and the inner city, "the Perimeter" of Interstate 285. It flows by industrial parks and high-rise condominiums, and underneath interstate overpasses and neighborhood thoroughfares. In aerial pictures of the city, a long tendril of hazy gray asphalt extends out from the Perimeter on either side of the river's banks.

The Chattahoochee, however, was not always so inextricably intertwined with Atlanta's urban landscape. The statistical metropolitan area of today's Atlanta encompasses over eight thousand square miles. Over the past 170 years, the city has grown beyond the Chattahoochee River, spreading west to the Tallapoosa River and north to the Coosa. It grew past the South River to cover the majority of the Ocmulgee basin and much of the Oconee basin beyond it. The city's homes, businesses, and stores have spread out into the countryside and blanketed millions of acres of forestland in urban development. Atlantans now drink water from the streams, rivers, and lakes of fifteen different counties and six major watersheds.¹¹

In the 1850s, however, the city limits extended to an area less than one half of 0.01 of a percent of Atlanta's present statistical boundary. Atlanta's original incorporation line circled a one-mile radius from the center of town at Peachtree and Marietta streets to a northern boundary at the present-day Ivan Allen Jr. Boulevard and a southern boundary around the Georgia State Capital. The farthest reaches of the city were still a full six miles removed from the Chattahoochee, and the distance between the two was blanketed by a thick, impermeable forest.

By today's standards, six miles is a trifling distance to travel and a minor infrastructural hurdle to overcome. Even in the crushing Atlanta traffic, I could drive the seven miles on Interstate 20 from the city center to the Chattahoochee in a half an hour or less. By now, the city of Atlanta has also laid down over 2,400 miles of water mains, which could cover the distance between the capital and the Chattahoochee four hundred times over. In fact, if stretched in a line, the city's pipes could extend across the country and tap into Portland, Oregon's water supply on the Columbia River.

At the time the city was founded, though, seven miles was a substantial distance. Even on the relatively even ground beside the train tracks, the trip to the riverbank and back would take about five hours on foot. Horseback riders could take a road to the ferry and back in about a half a day, but few ever made the trip unless they planned to travel. The city also didn't have any water mains, let alone thousands of miles of them.

Without modern water infrastructure or access to rapid transportation, Atlanta was unable to draw from the Chattahoochee's relatively abundant supply of water. Instead, the city found itself in the unusual position of supporting a substantial population without a reliable water source.

Atlanta's lack of a navigable waterway was a serious economic obstacle. At that time in the nineteenth century, railroad transportation was still an upstart industry. The old, established trading routes were on America's inland waterways, and many businesses used barges and steamboats exclusively to transport freight. Without an inland port, Atlanta would miss out on a lot of these commercial opportunities. And, in the absence of waterborne competition, the railroads also had a habit of price-gouging landlocked cities on freight rates.

In addition to transportation concerns, Atlanta's lack of water made the city more vulnerable to widespread fires. In the era before electricity, households and businesses used fireplaces, wood-burning stoves, and gas lamps for heating, cooking, and light. Accidents occurred regularly, and house fires were commonplace. Firefighters in cities along large waterways could draw

water directly from a river to fight large-scale blazes, but none of Atlanta's streams were large enough to combat a significant fire event.

It was incredibly rare for a city to develop away from a large body of water. Throughout the nineteenth century, only two American cities—Indianapolis and Denver—were able to grow to more than 100,000 residents without a navigable waterway. Both cities were anomalies: Indianapolis was created based on the false assumption that the White River would become navigable, and Denver was part of the Colorado gold rush boom. It seemed unfathomable to many that Atlanta would defy the odds and become the nation's third landlocked city.

At first, very few people believed that Atlanta would become a city of any size or importance. Stephen Harriman Long infamously wrote that the site was suitable only for a “tavern, a blacksmith's shop, a general store, and nothing else.”¹² Richard Peters, the future Atlanta streetcar magnate, wrote to a friend, “The place can never be much of a trading *city*, yet may be of some importance in a *small way*.”¹³ Land sales were also initially sluggish. The first land auction in 1842 drew only a handful of spectators, and by the end of three years, only three out of seventeen parcels had been sold.¹⁴

A handful of early settlers, however, remained irrationally optimistic. In the first few years of railroad development, the settlers cleared five acres for a public square and this became the center of town.¹⁵ The town's few residents also began to develop infrastructure to support the depot's scheduled train traffic. When the president of the Georgia Railroad stepped off the train for the first time, he almost fell into an open well that was being dug at the depot.¹⁶ Upon completion of the railroad in 1845, most of the remaining plots of land were purchased, and as many as two hundred people moved to the area.¹⁷

In terms of water infrastructure, antebellum Atlanta was like any other small city at the time. There was no municipal water supply or central reservoir for drinking water. Instead, early inhabitants hauled water in buckets from the nearby streams and creeks for drinking, cooking, and washing.¹⁸ To avoid the daily trips to the streams, some families built barrels next to their homes to collect rain, and many wealthier residents built cisterns or spring pumps.¹⁹

Before long, the settlement began to struggle in the absence of an abundant, centralized water supply. Denver and Indianapolis may have not had *navigable* rivers in town, but at least the cities had rivers large enough to meet the drinking water and fire protection needs of an urban populace. Atlanta's tiny streams were barely able to provide enough water for cooking and

drinking, with little left over for firefighting or any other use. As Atlanta began to slowly transform into a mercantile center, it became clear that major waterworks would be necessary to sustain the town's growth.

Although there had been grumblings about the water supply before, the town's first fire turned the area's limited water availability into a *cause célèbre*. One night in 1850, a robber set fire to two prominent businesses, including a large cotton warehouse, on opposite sides of town. While the undetected man cleaned out the railroad depot's money drawer, the rest of the town hastily formed a "bucket brigade" to put out the flames. Although the structures were saved, the warehouse lost much of its inventory.²⁰ After the flames had died down, the townspeople began to agitate for an official fire department, complete with a reliable water supply.

Before the town could get any municipal services, however, its government would need a major overhaul. At the time, Atlanta was a divided town. Many of the earliest inhabitants and visitors were old miners from Georgia's short-lived 1828 gold rush. Others were hardscrabble pioneers and wanderers, or out of work rail men who stuck around after the Western and Atlantic construction had ended. They were a rough crowd, and their presence single-handedly supported the thriving bars and brothels that sprung up in the shantytown on Murrel's Row. Under the influence of these first rowdy residents, Atlanta's municipal government had more of a Wild West approach to law and order. Peacekeepers tended to look the other way, and every man had to fend for himself.

On the other side of the tracks from Murrel's Row, however, a number of legitimate businesses had formed and were operating out of the area around the depot. By 1850, the town had enough business to support a handful of hotels, a courthouse, churches, and a small commercial district styled after New Orleans's downtown. As the town developed its own limited cultural attractions, more businessmen began to move their families to Atlanta as well. This new and growing commercial class needed a stable government to foster economic growth and wanted the town to take a more active role in fire protection and public safety.

The two sides of Atlanta—its underbelly and its commercial district—were practically at war. After the fire, Atlanta's merchants formed their own political party, aptly named the Moral Party, and advocated for a liquor tax to pay for firemen, wells, and other infrastructural projects. The liquor tax outraged the old-timers on Murrel's Row, who formed their own Rowdy Party to run against the Morals. The next mayoral race was turbulent. Moral Party

candidate John Norcross distributed fruits and candies to families during the day, and Rowdy Party candidate L. C. Simpson passed out free liquor in the bars at night.²¹

When Norcross won by a narrow margin, the Rowdies refused to concede quietly. A few weeks after the election, when a Rowdy man was convicted of assault, he brandished a knife and lunged at Norcross from across the courtroom. The new mayor also received death threats in the mail. In a particularly creative display of aggression, an enterprising group of Rowdies bought a cannon in nearby Decatur and dragged it in front of Norcross's general store one night. They didn't have any proper ammunition, but they packed the weapon with dirt and rocks from the road and repeatedly fired large sprays of debris onto the store's front. When Norcross came to open his store in the morning, its front was plastered in dirt, and the culprits had nailed a note to the porch warning that they'd buy real cannonballs the next time.²²

If the Rowdies truly believed they could frighten John Norcross, they didn't know the man very well. Norcross was a stern, no-nonsense Puritan from Orono, Maine, who had left the Down East wilderness to strike it rich. After a series of unsuccessful business ventures in North Carolina and Cuba, he had come to Marthasville and finally succeeded in running a lucrative general store and sawmill business. He was determined to hold onto his long-sought fortune, and the Rowdies' threats only strengthened his resolve to promote law and order in the town.²³

Amid the post-election mayhem, Norcross began to enact meaningful reforms. He collected taxes and enforced ordinances against cockfighting and prostitution.²⁴ During his first year in office, he and the six new councilmen also embarked on a number of infrastructural projects, including the creation of the town's first public watering holes. Although larger wells were initially planned, the town-funded crews dug three different five-by-five-foot wells at the street corners of Mitchell and Whitehall, Hunter and Whitehall, and Marietta and Peachtree streets. Each well was covered by a wooden plank and accompanied by a small wooden cistern. The crews also dug a larger fifteen-by-fifteen-foot reservoir behind the Holland House at the corner of Alabama and Whitehall streets.

The wells were a slight improvement over the town's bucket brigade, but they didn't provide much more than a symbolic protection from fire. Each well was supposed to protect an entire block of development, and yet with ten cubic feet of storage, the wells were only the size of a modern bathtub.

The reservoir was slightly larger, but it still didn't provide enough water to stop even a moderately sized house fire. All four sites were also concentrated in a four-block stretch of road, and many of the town's residences were too far away for the wells to be of any use.

After the wells and reservoir were constructed, fire continued to be a daily concern for Atlanta's residents. In his antebellum diary, Atlanta merchant Sam Richards constantly wrote that he worried about losing his store in a blaze. In the span of three years, his diary mentions at least eight different fires near the downtown business district. Every time the fire alarm rang, Richards would scan the sky to pinpoint the location of the blaze. One night, on December 9, 1863, Richards wrote: "I heard the alarm bell ringing and upon looking out of the window discovered a fire exactly in the direction of our store. I hastily dressed and ran down to the scene of action fully prepared to find our store in flames."²⁵ Although Richards didn't lose his store that night, his worst fears were realized less than a year later, when General William Tecumseh Sherman and his Union soldiers burned the entire commercial district to the ground.

In the years before Sherman's Atlanta campaign, when the threat of civil war had loomed over national politics but not yet exploded into armed conflict, the city had grown into a regional mercantile and shipping center. The Western and Atlantic became Georgia's predominate transportation network, and merchants like Richards had profited from the town's easy rail access. Along with the moderate growth, Atlantans had begun to develop the unchecked ambition and bravado that remains characteristic of the city today, and they believed themselves to be the best suited for the capital of the new Confederacy.

Although the town lost its initial capital bid to nearby Montgomery, Alabama, Atlanta was nevertheless able to profit substantially during the earliest stages of conflict. During the first years of battle, Atlanta's population doubled with rural refugees who had fled their homes to receive food and clothing at the impromptu aid distribution center near the railroad junction in town.²⁶ Atlanta's businessmen also profited from the war by manufacturing Confederate goods. The town made percussion caps, canteens, bullets, and other munitions, and then transported them on rail to embattled Confederate areas.²⁷

Because it was located at a pivotal railroad junction, Atlanta soon became, in the words of one historian, the "operational center of the Confederate universe."²⁸ The town's booming wartime business caught the attention of

Union generals, who began to view its destruction as a key strategic goal. In the summer of 1864, Sherman began his famous assault on the town. "We have been fighting Atlanta all the time in the past," said Sherman, referring to the town's manufactures. "Since they have been doing so much to destroy us, and our Government, we have to destroy them."²⁹

On August 24, after weeks of skirmishes on the edge of town, Sherman's artillery came within range of Atlanta's business district. The town's residents huddled in basements and bomb shelters, hoping to avoid the cannon fire.³⁰ A shell set fire to a cotton warehouse early in the morning, and firemen used all the cisterns' water in an attempt to contain the blaze.³¹ The town had just resupplied the cisterns when, four days later, enemy shells set fire to another two buildings on Alabama Street, and the firemen once again drained the town's supply. With no water left and mortar shells falling every day, Atlanta's remaining cotton warehouses were like giant piles of kindling, ready to ignite the entire commercial district.

On September 2, Sherman took control over the town and ordered all remaining civilians to leave. Union soldiers occupied the remaining buildings for more than two months until November 14, when Sherman directed his chief engineer, Colonel O. M. Poe, to burn Atlanta to the ground.³² Poe leveled the Georgia Train Depot with a battering ram and then set the entire commercial district on fire.³³

While Sherman watched from a hill with his military band playing, his army set fire to more than three thousand buildings across the town.³⁴ From his vantage point, Sherman later recalled, he could see Atlanta "smouldering in ruins, the black smoke rising high in air, and hanging like a pall over the ruined city."³⁵ The town's cisterns, which the departing Union soldiers had drained of water and filled with waste and dead animals, sat impotent and unused on the burning street corners.

When Atlantans returned to their homes, they arrived to a commercial district that had been reduced to twisted metal, broken bricks, and charred wood. Although some homes on the fringe of town remained intact, most of Atlanta's structures were not salvageable. "It was indeed a prospect to discourage all but the most determined," wrote historian Franklin Garrett. "Yet hope springs eternal, and with . . . visions of a greater city, coupled with the immediate necessity of earning a living, the returning citizens doffed their coats, rolled up their sleeves and went to work."³⁶

Atlanta recovered at a shockingly fast pace, considering the municipal government had only \$1.64 in reserves at the start of 1865.³⁷ With the help

of private enterprise and federal reconstruction efforts, Atlanta's businessmen and townspeople cleared the rubble, rebuilt roads, and managed to return nearly to a sense of normalcy by the end of the decade.

Chicago reporter Sidney Andrews described Atlanta's postwar construction boom:

From all this ruin and devastation a new city is springing up with marvelous rapidity. The narrow and irregular and numerous streets are alive from morning till night with drays and carts and handbarrows and wagons, with hauling teams and shouting men, with loads of lumber and hundreds of packed boxes, with mortar-makers and hod-carriers, with carpenters and masons, with rubbish removers and house-builders, with a never-ending throng of pushing and crowding and scrambling and eager and excited and enterprising men, all bent on building and trading and swift fortune-making.³⁸

As the plantation economies in Savannah and Macon slumped after the war, Atlanta's rapid development soon earned the town a reputation as the best place for business in the state.³⁹ The town rebranded itself as the "Gate City of Georgia" and enticed bankers, manufacturers, and wholesale distributors to relocate there.

Although Atlanta was undoubtedly on an upward projection after the war, its lack of available water continued to be a stumbling block. With the depredations of widespread fire freshly cemented in the town's collective consciousness, Atlanta's citizens called for the town to develop a large, functional reservoir that could provide enough water to fight large-scale fires in the commercial district. In the morass of Atlanta's post-Civil War politics, however, the municipal government seemed virtually incapable of embarking on any significant public works projects. If it were not for the efforts of one man, Anthony Murphy, the town would have likely gone another few decades without a reliable water supply.

Anthony Murphy was the son of Irish peasants. He was tall and lanky, with a shaggy mop of bright red hair and a plump, curled mustache that perched above his lips like two commas lying against one another. He'd immigrated to America at the age of nine and had worked as a machinist for most of his young adult life. Before the start of the Civil War, he left the hard labor of the Trenton, New Jersey, machine shops for a slightly better position with the Western and Atlantic Railroad. He worked hard and was promoted to woodshop foreman.

In 1862, Murphy became an accidental Civil War hero after he helped to stop a group of Union soldiers from hijacking a train.⁴⁰ The story received a great amount of press—the *Southern Confederacy* newspaper called it the “most thrilling railroad adventure that ever occurred on the American continent”⁴¹—and it turned Murphy into a local celebrity overnight.

After the war, he capitalized on his heroic reputation and ran a successful campaign for the Atlanta City Council. At the railroad, Murphy had overseen the fire crews, and he believed more than anyone else that Atlanta needed a newer, bigger water supply to fight fires. Once elected, he immediately began to research the town’s options for a new water source.

In October of 1866, Murphy unveiled his research results in an open report to the town council. He observed that the town’s existing cisterns rarely, if ever, had a sufficient supply of water for fighting fires. The town’s mules and horses drank them dry for most of the day, and the pumps could barely produce enough water to replenish the cisterns at night. Murphy proposed to supplement the existing supply with a large, million-gallon reservoir on the westernmost side of the town limits.⁴²

Murphy wasn’t the only one to notice the inadequacy of Atlanta’s water supply. Reconstruction-era businesses in Atlanta were getting gouged by fire insurance companies. Without a substantial reservoir, Atlanta’s insurance rates were high enough to discourage new businesses from moving there. Competitor cities referenced their rates in comparison to Atlanta’s in a bid to lure businesses away from the growing town.⁴³ Murphy’s commission estimated that the insurance savings and water rate revenue alone would offset the cost of a large reservoir project in town.⁴⁴

Although Murphy’s plan was popular with Atlanta residents, it took a while to gain traction with the city council. Murphy’s compatriots also wanted a larger water supply, but they wanted someone else to pay for it. Most of the council belonged to the Democratic Party, which at the time wished to privatize most governmental functions. Atlanta’s Democrats were firmly resistant to any large governmental expenditures and any projects that would raise taxes on the city’s struggling residents.

At first, it seemed like the Democrats were in luck. A month after Murphy’s proposal, and again in 1869, private water companies came forward with bids to create a for-profit reservoir and water supply. The first group, the Atlanta Canal and Waterworks Company, received a charter to build a canal from the Chattahoochee River into town, but it disbanded without starting the project. The second group, the similarly titled Atlanta Canal and Water

Company, proposed to build a reservoir on Utoy Creek, but confusion during contract negotiations led to litigation, and the company withdrew its offer.

After the second private water deal imploded, some Democratic councilmen began to relinquish their former zeal for privately run enterprise, and Murphy finally pieced together enough council votes to force a referendum on whether the city should create its own water works system.⁴⁵ The measure passed by an overwhelming majority public vote.⁴⁶

Despite the public support, progress on the waterworks project was slowed by political infighting. Democrats refused to attend city council meetings whenever the waterworks were being discussed.⁴⁷ One Democratic resident also brought a constitutional challenge to the project, claiming that the waterworks' authorizing legislation violated his due process rights. The state supreme court later dismissed his claim, but the litigation succeeded in delaying construction even further.

In 1873, the nation dipped into a recession after the railroad industry faltered and many banks failed.⁴⁸ City governments across the country slashed expenditures in anticipation of decreased tax revenue. Atlanta was particularly hard hit because its commerce was still intimately tied to the railroads. The city's budget plummeted from \$64 million in 1874 to a mere \$6 million by 1880.⁴⁹ Nearly all municipal services, including water, sewerage, and sanitation, received little to no funding for ten years.⁵⁰

Luckily for the city's Board of Water Commissioners, the city's waterworks were not entirely dependent on municipal expenditures.⁵¹ The board was financed by user fees and a \$300,000 municipal bond that had been issued at the time the board was created.⁵² Thanks to the existing bond, Atlanta's waterworks contractors were able to break ground at the beginning of 1874, just as the banking panic was causing other governmental functions to falter and shut down.

That year, 109 convicts from the Georgia State Prison began the long, laborious task of constructing a dam and digging a reservoir by hand.⁵³ Although Murphy's original plans had called for a different location, Atlanta's new reservoir was on the headwaters of the South River at Poole's Creek, where Lakewood Park is now located. The convict crew built a fifty-one-foot-tall dam that stretched 350 feet across the creek and held back a pool of water twenty-five feet deep at its lowest point. A separate crew also built a tower beside the reservoir that housed a water pump and a boiler to create steam power.⁵⁴ At the same time, another crew was hard at work digging trenches and burying water pipes alongside Atlanta's main streets. They

laid eight miles of cast-iron pipe throughout the business district and spaced seventy-five hydrants at even intervals alongside the roads.⁵⁵

When the pipes were finally connected to the pump and it was time to test the system, a crowd of people gathered at each hydrant, anxious to see the first drop of water flow from the city's pipes. They listened intently as the water pushed air out of the pipes, but soon the crowd began to grow impatient. "One elderly gentleman on Hunter Street, after listening profoundly for some time, gave his opinion that the whole thing was going to end in air," wrote an *Atlanta Constitution* editor. "There burst forth, something under a dozen gallons of thick yellow water, ruining said citizen's shirt . . . filling his pockets, and putting more mud in his ear than he can dig out in a fortnight."⁵⁶

The first tests were a success, and on September 11, 1875, the entire town gathered to celebrate the official opening of the municipal waterworks. The event was the biggest of the decade, and probably the biggest since the town had been formed. Representatives from the neighboring cities of Columbus, Macon, and Chattanooga were in attendance, as were all of Atlanta's political figures and bureaucrats. Hundreds of rural homesteaders from the surrounding countryside also came into town for the big show. People packed onto the downtown streets, and the town police force struggled to push the crowd back to the sidewalks and away from the hydrants. Other spectators jockeyed for a good vantage point from the windows of the downtown buildings.⁵⁷

The reservoir's main function—that of fire prevention—was on full display during the celebration. Atlanta had invited a number of different fire departments to participate in the town's celebratory hydrant tests. Around 2 p.m. that day, the firemen assembled in town, each one wearing the distinct uniform of their department. They gathered on Pryor Street while a big band played at the steps of a nearby hotel. The crews dispersed to six different hydrants, attached their long hoses to the hydrants' end, and waited for a signal. Then, all at once, the men turned on their hydrants and shot water over 150 feet into the air. A cool gust of wind blew the sprays onto the crowd, and everyone cheered as they ducked under awnings and ran down the street.

The crews conducted similar celebratory tests at hydrants along Peachtree and Marietta streets. Twice, the power of the water overwhelmed the firemen, and their grip slipped from the hoses. Both times, the streams shot directly on a few unlucky spectators and drenched them in an instant.

Later in the afternoon, one crew ran a complete reenactment of a staged fire. The group waited in their firehouse until an alarm bell sounded, and then they ran their hose car to a hydrant at the corner of Whitehall and

Garret streets, where they doused imaginary flames in buildings at the street corner. Other departments held a race down Decatur Street to see who could first spray the landmark Kimball House. By the end of the day, every nook and cranny of Atlanta's business district was dripping in reservoir water.

As the sun began to set, the town's dignitaries crowded into the municipal engineer's office to drink champagne and toast to Atlanta's success. "The meeting was entirely informal," wrote the *Atlanta Constitution*, "and there were no set speeches, but plenty of good stories."⁵⁸ It seemed to the men as though they had just bested the town's greatest foe. With a large reservoir and new hydrants, they were sure that they'd never see their town burned to the ground again.

But, even as the men celebrated, a new threat lurked underneath the surface of the town's sparkling reservoir. It was invisible to the human eye but every bit as devastating and deadly as a widespread fire. It would poison the town's residents and spark an outrage, and the response to its widespread depredations would forever shape Atlanta's urban infrastructural landscape. The threat was bacteria, and before long, every person in the town would learn its name.