

Civil War & Beyond

After the War

In the post-Civil War era, the city also became known as a center of undergraduate education for freed slaves. Funds from the Athens Freedman's Bureau built the Knox School in 1867, while later the Methodist School and Jeruel Academy also opened to educate freed slaves. All three schools offered primary, intermediate, industrial, and nurses' training. African-Americans also had a strong presence through the press during this time with three black newspapers - the Athens Blade, the Athens Clipper, and the Progressive Era - in a time when it was rare for a southern town to have even one.

Athens was eventually chartered as a city on August 24, 1872, with a mayor-council form of government. Captain Henry Beusse was the first mayor of Athens, and the citizens elected two representatives from each of four wards to serve on the commission.

As the post-Civil War population began to rise, so did city improvements. The first police force of three officers was established in 1881. Bell Telephone installed lines for thirty-five subscribers in 1882, and in 1885 a street-paving program began to replace dirt streets with brick, granite, and in some cases wood. However, Athens did not provide public schools until fall 1886, more than a decade after the more rural Clarke County. The entire area did boast more than thirty private day schools of varying sizes by as early as 1869.

In 1888, Athens saw its first passenger street railway cars powered by mules. Broad, College, Clayton, Lumpkin, Hancock, Pulaski, Prince, and Milledge streets had rails laid for the cars. After a few years, E.G. Harris bought the streetcar line and extended and electrified the rails. A new residential development north of Prince Avenue was purchased and lots were sold for houses in Athens' first streetcar subdivision along Boulevard.

The 20th Century

In the early 1900s, the corner of Washington and Hull streets became known as the "hot corner" for the black community. The Morton Building, as well as the Samaritan Building and Union Hall, housed black lawyers, dentists, doctors, and other professionals. There were also pool rooms, lodge halls, barbershops, insurance companies, and two undertakers. The two-story opera house in the Morton Building, known for its amazing acoustics, hosted such popular black entertainers as Louis Armstrong, Cab Calloway, and Duke Ellington. Movies and other celebrations were also held in the theatre.

A new City Hall was constructed for the city in 1904 on the highest point in the downtown business district. Soon after, in 1908, the Southern Mutual Insurance Company completed the city's first skyscraper, a seven-story building that was the largest ferro concrete building in the South.

By 1923, Athens was establishing itself as a leader in the cotton industry. The Chamber of Commerce reported that in that year, Athens was the second largest cotton manufacturer in the state, and the city stayed as such through 1950. Five rail lines came into town, and Athens also became an important center for wholesale grocers.

During World War II, Athens was named as one of only five naval preflight schools in the nation. Thousands of young military men filled the city while the navy helped build several new buildings and recreational facilities on campus and gave the airport its first paved runways.

Learn more about Athens in the late 20th century and the present.