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Today in the City of Birmingham and the surrounding areas residents face many of the same issues they had in the past: losing residents to surrounding suburbs. There is a lack of cooperation between the suburbs and the City of Birmingham. Birmingham lacks leadership in its city government, as well as cooperation with nearby suburban governments. Through the years, many have suggested to consolidate localities, combining Birmingham with the surrounding metropolitan area. These, and other forms of consolidation have been attempted by Birmingham in the past, but failed to get off the ground. One of the more prominent and recent attempts was the “One Great City” movement. Before any similar plan should be considered again, the failure of “One Great City” movement must be examined.

To understand why “One Great City” failed, the history of Birmingham and its previous consolidation movements must be analyzed and put into context. Birmingham was founded in 1871, named in honor of the industrial town of Birmingham, England, due to the plentiful supply of coal and iron ore in Jones Valley. Because of this abundance of raw material, industry in Birmingham grew very rapidly in its early years. By 1893, a ring of suburbs filled Jones Valley and the City of Birmingham sought to annex these towns to increase tax revenues. However, the land to be annexed included steel plants. The steel industry intentionally located some of its plants outside the city limits to avoid taxation, which annexation would force them to pay. While the steel industry opposed the idea, the measure still passed. But the steel industry refused to give up, and through heavy lobbying they
pressed the county into revoking the annexation, becoming one of the first of many failed annexation attempts.2

The next round of annexation attempts, the Greater Birmingham Movement, occurred in 1899 and in 1903, and failed due to continual lobbying from the steel industry. A third attempt arose in 1907, which was voted on and passed, only to be later rejected by the courts because of several errors in the text of the bill. The bill was finally passed in 1909 after making the corrections, but not without modification by steel lobbyists to exclude their plants. When the bill went into effect on January 1, 1910, Birmingham's population increased by nearly 100,000, literally overnight.3

Through the years, Birmingham saw other consolidation attempts come and go, especially during the Depression and after World War II. The Depression hurt the heart of Birmingham's economy: steel production. Birmingham also failed to attract new business and experienced the beginning of white flight. All of these events caused economic issues to spring to the forefront of political debate.4 The consolidation of Birmingham and its surrounding suburbs as the solution surfaced again during the 1930s. Plans for consolidation varied between the annexation of surrounding neighborhoods to creating a city-county government for Jefferson County.

Proponents of consolidation felt that the current form of government, consisting of many separate city governments in one metropolitan area, "was adopted in years gone by when there were no automobiles or good highways, when every settlement was a political unit unto itself, isolated...."4 Since every city in the metropolitan area was its own political unit, great redundancies occurred in each government.5 By merging positions such as tax collector, tax assessor, and judges with surrounding suburbs, it was estimated that anywhere between 30 and 50 percent of the budget could be saved.6,7 Reducing metropolitan government to its cheapest and most efficient size might allow everyone to pay off bonded debt without new taxes.7 Along with the financial benefit, supporters ultimately hoped that consolidation would make local government "large enough in scope to keep pace with the cultural, social, and business development of [the] metropolitan area..."8

Even with such optimistic outcomes and predictions for
consolidation, the movement had its detractors and difficulties. One opponent was W.A. Pritchard, an Alderman for Tarrant City. He asked Governor Bibb Graves if Tarrant would be forced to consolidate, citing it was “out of debt and doesn’t want to be party to a consolidation.” Graves replied that Tarrant could and would be forced to consolidate against its will, an action Pritchard claimed was “unfair.” The annexation of unwilling communities remained a key topic in all subsequent consolidation movements.

Local self-government also remained an issue connected with consolidation. If a merger was approved and the excess government positions removed, then self-government would be lost. That is, “people in the outlying communities are closer to their municipal government” than to a large consolidated government. The status quo allowed people more power, but a centralized government would eliminate any local say. There would be strangers legislating over locals.

Ultimately, none of these movements succeeded. The movements in the Depression years were never able to gather enough support to move beyond discussion. There were two movements in the immediate post war years of ‘48 and ‘49. The ‘48 initiative was defeated because of suburban concerns as to Birmingham’s true motives.

If the opposition by suburbia was not enough to halt consolidation, the steel industry once again used its heavy hand in Birmingham politics to avoid taxes. The opinions of people in the Birmingham metro area spread state wide, and when consolidation was put to a statewide vote, it failed.

The role of the steel industry in the ‘48 initiative, and later in the ‘49 initiative, was not confined to lobbying. The need for diversification and new business in Birmingham can be partially attributed to Tennessee Coal and Iron (TCI) and U.S. Steel (USS). George Blanks, an examiner for the Birmingham Office of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, told Mayor Cooper Green that General Motors had wanted to build a plant near Birmingham, and that Ford had wanted to build within city limits, but TCI and USS refused to sell steel to either of them. There was a precedent in these actions in the instance of the Rheem Manufacturing Company, which was forced to close because they were not provided with enough steel. In addition, a spokesman for the two
steel companies said in a 1947 interview that "[w]e are here to make steel... we are not here to build a city" and that "[i]f Birmingham wants [new plants that use steel], it's Birmingham's business to go out and get them." TCI and USS had enormous power in Birmingham.

The '49 consolidation initiative failed at its overall goals because the citizens were mostly against it. However, it did partially succeed, becoming the first successful annexation in 39 years. The original goal was for the annexation of Birmingham's surrounding suburbs and unincorporated land. When voted upon, the proposal to merge the suburbs was rejected, but the annexation of unincorporated land was approved. It also attracted steel plants, a concrete plant, and 6,500 new citizens.

Another important merger movement occurred before "One Great City," providing as much precedent and backing as all previous movements combined. It began in 1964, when Mayor Albert Boutwell invited six cities that bordered Birmingham to meet and discuss annexation. Birmingham City Councilman Alan Drennen, Jr., said that each person and community "must choose it and when you will merge with Birmingham. Your decision will be of your own making." The issue of self-determination for communities became the main issue. After Mayor Boutwell's plea went out, Homewood, Mountain Brook, Fairfield, Tarrant, Midfield, and Irondale all responded by signing petitions calling for elections regarding annexation by November 3. None of these six cities voted for annexation.

Thad Long, a lawyer hired to work for the Birmingham-Mountain Brook Merger Commission and later for "One Great City," set precedents for any future Alabama mergers. Mountain Brook asked to become part of Birmingham but wanted to keep their school system, fire protection, and police protection. Any law Long drafted had to be carefully structured. For example, if Mountain Brook raised taxes to fund its school system, the entire City of Birmingham would be forced to pay the taxes. These unique requests were made by Mountain Brook because they felt "afraid that everybody would ignore them." They were concerned about losing their local self-government. In 1947, Mountain Brook's Mayor Charles Zukoski proposed that any consolidation should retain some form of local control.
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The proponents of the Mountain Brook merger hoped Birmingham would regain some of the wealthy upper class that it had lost, as well as leaders, both of which could contribute to the stability of Birmingham and the metropolitan area. Opponents felt that Mountain Brook was perfect as it was. By merging with Birmingham they saw no benefit or assurance of improvement. They also saw a deteriorating Birmingham with increasing crime, poverty, and, for some, racial conflicts, and were afraid they would incur the same problems. Despite apprehension about the merger with Birmingham, everyone expected it to happen. Cities like Mountain Brook attempted to make the best out of the inevitable by trying to retain some parts of their old city.

This all changed when Homewood's vote for merger was overturned by the courts for failure to officially notify residents adequately ahead of the merger vote. Mountain Brook and the entire metropolitan area realized that annexation may not be inevitable after all. When Homewood voted again, this time with adequate notification, the opposition turned out and the merger initiative failed. This caused the other cities voting on annexation to also reject the proposal. Within this background of numerous failed consolidations, interference from the steel industry, and a lack of motivation of the people and leaders, the "One Great City" movement began.

"One Great City" first emerged when attorney David Vann, along with other members of the Young Men's Business Club (YMBC), took on the idea of a consolidated Birmingham government. They saw the multiplicity of governments in the metro area and how suburban residents "don't have any voice in the city of Birmingham, but pay taxes to the City of Birmingham." Vann believed that consolidation "[could] give [them] a voice... a council representative, a vote on who's the mayor." The YMBC traveled around the metro area giving speeches, promoting the idea of "One Great City." They flew to Washington, D.C., to consult with the Civil Rights Division to see if their plans met with their approval, and they did. The YMBC created a poll, and the results showed that 65% of Birmingham residents, between 50%-60% of people north of Birmingham, and more than 50% of people at the Bessemer cut-off supported consolidation.

While Vann and the YMBC helped create public awareness for
"One Great City," the movement did not begin making headway until two local businessmen, James White and William Smith, became involved. They approached the head of Long's firm to have a lawyer to draft the bills necessary for "One Great City."\(^{37}\) They also approached David Herring about lobbying the legislature in favor of consolidation, as he was the Jefferson County Chairman of the Democratic Party.\(^{38}\) White and Smith thought it important to get the *Birmingham News* on their side, so they went to Vice President Vincent Townsend and received his approval and support of "One Great City." While much publicity was given to Vann and the YMBC, Long and Herring made it clear that the "Young Business Men's Club was not even involved..." and "it never really appeared [that] they were one of the players."\(^{39}\)

The "One Great City" bill, which Long drafted, was constructed to avoid a vote by each city, as it would most likely fail in some areas and prevent a united metropolitan Birmingham.\(^{40}\) To provide each community some form of local control, former cities would be made into towns. These towns would keep their school systems, which were established prior to consolidation, and also have a form of city council, which could control local zoning and other local functions. The consolidated city government would be a mayor-council government comprised of 19 councilmen. Two councilmen would be voted on from each of the nine districts. It would be headed by a council president, elected by all districts.\(^{41}\) The hope was that with a consolidated government, along with local governments the "best of both worlds" could be achieved.\(^{42}\)

Once the "One Great City" bill and its accompanying amendments were completed, they had to be approved by the state legislature, followed by a statewide vote. A majority of statewide voters was required for passage of the merger.\(^{43}\) Some of the more important items specified that the consolidated city would collect any taxes, which "levied but not collected" by the cities. All city employees would have the right to become consolidated city employees with the same "grade" and seniority as before. Also, the consolidated city would take on all city debt except for school debt.\(^{44}\)

The "One Great City" bill faced major opposition from the Jefferson County Mayors Association, which was accused of opposing the plan because they would lose their jobs. This was not the case, according
to the head of the Jefferson County Mayors Association, Mountain Brook Mayor Allen Rushton. According to him, “the mayors of Jefferson County are not opposing the plan out of fear of losing their jobs, but out of fear of creating a big, unmanageable, unresponsive, expensive and bureaucratic government.”

The mayors of suburban cities were the most vocal critics of the merger during the entire campaign. They sent packets of information to every resident of their city urging them to let the legislature know that they did not support a merger. This lead to the eventual failure of the “One Great City” bill. The vote was 5 to 3.

The ultimate reasons why “One Great City” failed are large in number. David Herring, whose job was to promote “One Great City” to the legislature, believed that the movement failed because of politics. He thought that schools “were the big bug-aboo,” and “[p]eople were frightened even though we... got David to stand on his head to make sure that it was legally written where schools stayed the same....” Furthermore, U.S. Steel “didn’t want the government over them” but ultimately admitted “I don’t really know.”

Thad Long believed, “[t]he majority of voters were not buying the fact that you could ever really achieve this Utopian concept of an effective metro government and still have the kind of local autonomy which would make life a pleasant thing to live....” People were afraid of “one clumsy, large, amalgamated metro government which will be unresponsive.” He also mentioned that for many, there were petty reasons for opposing a merger. For example, in Mountain Brook, garbage was picked up behind the house. However, if they merged with Birmingham, they would have to place their garbage on the curb for pickup.

David Vann believed that “One Great City” failed because of the mayors and city councils of the cities that were proposed for annexation. He thought the political battles turned the public away. He blamed this on government corruption. However, he went on to say that elected officials cannot be depended upon for consolidation, but rather, “you really have to have a good citizens movement... people that will volunteer to spend time.” Furthermore, the citizenry must have a sense that they are making improvements in order to undergo such a drastic changes to their lives.
The closest reason for the failure of the “One Great City” movement was because, as David Vann said, people needed to believe they were benefiting from such a drastic change, and the people of metropolitan Birmingham did not. The wealthy and affluent were fleeing Birmingham, and eventually the city would face a “crisis of leadership.” This bleak version of Birmingham’s future would leave almost a vacuum in the center of the suburbs. Thus the message truly was the importance of sacrifice for the “good of the community.” Long’s statement is an apparent allusion to a quote made in 1940 by Welden Cooper, of the University of Alabama, who said, “if Birmingham’s experience parallels that of other large cities, it will soon find itself losing population to the communities around its fringe with a consequent decline in leadership and resources which eventually will have fateful repercussions in its political life.”

In conclusion, from the moment the “One Great City” movement began, it already faced an opponent more challenging than any opponents to consolidation within the legislature. The adversary was the history and legacy of Birmingham itself: the numerous failed attempts at consolidation, the death grip the steel industry held on the city for so long, and the large number of entrenched suburbs. “One Great City” had to face and overcome all of these challenges. However, the movement could not pass the final obstacle—the political apathy and sedentary nature of the majority of people in metropolitan Birmingham; this is why the movement failed. Not until the people are aroused will another “One Great City” movement or any other consolidation movement succeed.

2 Marvin Y. Whiting, “One Great City,” (Birmingham, AL: Birmingham Public Library, 1997),
3 Whiting, 2.
4 “Governmental Reform Seen Needed to Offset Cut in Taxes,” Birmingham Post-Herald, 8 August 1934.
6 Ralph E. Hurst, “Merger of City, County Seen As Step to Economy,” Birmingham
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News, 12 February 1932.
9 Habert Baughn, "City County Consolidation Held Unfair," Birmingham Post-Herald, 6 December 1934.
10 Ibid.
12 "Merger of City and County Topic," Birmingham News, 31 August 1934.
13 Whiting, One Great City, 5.
14 Ibid.
15 Connerly, Most Segregated City, 171.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid
19 Whiting, One Great City, 5.
20 Thad Long, interviewed by Jim Baggett, 10 January 1996, Birmingham, AL, tape recording.
21 Lou Isaacson, "Boutwell to talk merger to mayors," 1 May 1964.
23 Thad Long, interviewed by Jim Baggett, 10 January 1996, Birmingham, AL, tape recording.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
27 Thad Long, interviewed by Jim Baggett, 10 January 1996, Birmingham, AL, tape recording.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Whiting, One Great City, 7.
32 Whiting, One Great City, 24.
33 David Vann, interviewed by Jim Baggett, 8 January 1996, Birmingham, AL, tape recording.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Thad Long, interviewed by Jim Baggett, 10 January 1996, Birmingham, AL, tape recording.
38 David Herring, interviewed by Jim Baggett, 29 November 1995, Birmingham, AL, tape recording.
39 Ibid.
40 Thad Long, interviewed by Jim Baggett, 10 January 1996, Birmingham, AL, tape recording.

41 Whiting, One Great City, 36-37.

42 Thad Long, interviewed by Jim Baggett, 10 January 1996, Birmingham, AL, tape recording.

43 Whiting, One Great City, 38.

44 Whiting, One Great City, 40-41.


46 Whiting, One Great City, 56.

47 David Herring, interviewed by Jim Baggett, 29 November 1995, Birmingham, AL, tape recording.

48 Ibid.

49 Thad Long, interviewed by Jim Baggett, 10 January 1996, Birmingham, AL, tape recording.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

52 David Vann, interviewed by Jim Baggett, 8 January 1996, Birmingham, AL, tape recording.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Thad Long, interviewed by Jim Baggett, 10 January 1996, Birmingham, AL, tape recording.

56 Ibid.

57 Whiting, One Great City, 5.