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Birmingham in Transition: The Mayoral Campaign of 1917

By William Watt

Birmingham, Birmingham,
Greatest city in Alabam'
You can travel across this entire land
Ain't no place like Birmingham
— Randy Newman

“**M**y friends, here is a red-hand letter that I received this afternoon, postmarked Washington, D.C. It says: ‘Our spies have their eyes on you and all the other half-breeds and Jews in your city.’ George Ward, running for re-election as President of the Birmingham City Commission, uttered this ominous threat in a speech on the night of September 18, 1917. Speaking to an enthusiastic group of supporters in the old Jefferson Theatre, Ward railed against the “narrow-minded ruthless menace that is appearing on the horizon in American politics.” He described this “ruthless menace” as a “secret political society, called the T.A.’s (True Americans), which is now operating under the guise of religion, but is being used to further the schemes of politicians.” The True Americans, this “secret political society”, was a cabal of patriotic, largely Protestant, zealots that operated in the shadows of early twentieth century American politics. They were noted for their fervent, wrapped-in-the-flag devotion to what they interpreted as “the American way of life” and their rabid anti-Catholic rhetoric. Their support of Ward’s chief opponent in the race, Dr. N. A. Barrett of East Lake, along with the subsequent demographic changes that were taking place in Birmingham at the time, helped to create a defining moment in the Magic City’s volatile political history.¹

George B. Ward was mayor of Birmingham from 1905 until 1909, serving consecutive two-year terms. During his tenure he established himself as a moderate reformer and an honest, progressive businessman with a

social conscience. For example, he sought to improve (though not integrate) the deplorable conditions in the city's Negro schools. In a note attached to an appropriation request for \$100,000 for the betterment of black schools he wrote:

I wish to say here that in my opinion the city authorities are not doing their duty to the colored population nor pursuing a wise or just course in holding colored schools down practically to a worse condition than they were fifteen years ago. . . . There will doubtless be discussions of this question for years to come but the sweep of the tide is towards elevation and better conditions through education and its force will ultimately prevail.²

Ward also fired a jail warden for abusing a black prisoner and, later, as President of the City Commission, he was instrumental in opening the first public park for Negroes in Birmingham.

According to urban historian Raymond A. Mohl, social reformers such as Ward refused to impose the constraints of middle-class morality on their urban constituents. This put them in direct opposition to moral reformers that were motivated by a devout protestant pietism. But, as Mohl points out, these purity reformers were basically split into two camps over issues such as prohibition. Pietists were defined by their rigid stance of moral absolutism. They represented a strict Calvinist tradition that viewed the world in black and white terms. From their perspective, there was little room for interpretation. On the other side of the equation were the ritualists. They accepted the world as it was and espoused the belief that moral conduct was dictated through individual conscience.³

The pietists largely consisted of Anglo-Saxon, Protestant groups and a few Protestant immigration denominations. Catholics, Christian Orthodox, Jewish immigrants, and a minority of Protestants (German Lutherans, for instance) comprised the ritualists. As Birmingham continued to grow in the early twentieth century, suburban pietists and urban ritualists became enmeshed in a bitter power struggle for control of municipal government.⁴

Throughout his tenure as mayor and, later as president of the city commission, George Ward proved to be a moderate on the issue of prohibition. He sought, through high license fees and districting efforts, to confine saloons to designated areas. But, as we shall see, it was his moderate stance on prohibition, coupled with a Birmingham electorate that was changing with each suburb annexed, that would ultimately lead to his political demise.⁵

Prohibited by law to serve a third term as mayor, George Ward decided to run for the office of sheriff in Jefferson County. He was soundly defeated and promptly announced his retirement from politics. Meanwhile, the city of Birmingham was growing at an accelerated pace. In 1900 Birmingham covered an area of 11.4 square miles and had a population of 38,415. In 1910, as a result of the Greater Birmingham annexation movement, the Magic City comprised an area of 48.3 square miles and boasted a population numbering 132,685. Birmingham was experiencing phenomenal growth, but it came with a hefty price tag. The addition of these suburban communities presented an enormous financial burden to the fledgling city government. Moreover, hordes of white, evangelical Protestants joined the fray and were poised to stake their claim in municipal affairs.⁶

Indeed, they wasted no time in seeking to change the city's government. From its inception, the core of political power in Birmingham had always resided in its board of alderman (city council), not the mayor. The board, not surprisingly, was primarily composed of representatives from the downtown area, or Old Birmingham. These men represented various ethnic groups, diverse religious affiliations (Catholic, Jewish, Lutheran, etc.), labor interests and, most vexing to the new suburbanites the most, the downtown saloon owners and anti-prohibitionists. Ascertaining that the mayor-aldermen form of government diluted their influence, they initiated the move to a city commission. The Alabama legislature approved a plan, a vote was taken, the board of aldermen was abolished and it was replaced with a full-time, salaried three-member city commission. The Protestant activists in the suburbs were exultant because these commissioners, headed by a president, would be elected at-large, giving them an opportunity to seize

control of city government. The governor appointed the first city commission, forcing Protestants to wait until the election of 1913 to flex their collective political muscle.⁷

The election of George B. Ward as the city's first popularly elected city commission president in 1913 revealed a new political balance created by annexation and the commission system. His opponents were Clement R. Wood, a Socialist attorney, and Vassar L. Allen, a leader of the ardently prohibitionist Law and Order League. Wood came in second, despite his anti-capitalist rhetoric, and managed to capture 22.2 percent of the vote. He ran best in small outlying suburbs such as East Birmingham and Wylam, where he received over half the votes. Allen, the prohibitionist, was right on his heels in third with 22.0 percent. He fared best in the suburbs, portending a sign of things to come. Ward, running as the moderate between two extremes, won easily- garnering a 55.9 percent majority. He snared a whopping seventy percent of the Old Birmingham vote and won a 42.8 percent majority in all the suburbs combined, although he ran behind Wood in the industrial suburbs. On the surface, the election of moderate social reformer George Ward to the presidency of the city commission appeared to be a victory for the liberals and progressives of Old Birmingham, but it was actually the beginning of the end concerning the prominence of progressive politics in Birmingham.⁸

In 1915 prohibitionists won a major victory when the Alabama legislature enforced prohibition statewide. Thus, Birmingham's restricted saloon district, enacted during Ward's second term as mayor, was forced to close. That same year the Alabama legislature expanded Birmingham's city commission to five members, allowing the suburbs to capture one of the new positions. This now gave them a total of two positions on the city commission. Their strength and their numbers were growing and they now set their collective sights on the next opportunity - the election of 1917.⁹

In the June 10 edition of the *American Citizen*, a paper distributed by the True American Party, there appeared an article entitled "Great Victory in Alabama." Referring to recent statewide elections it read, "On May 9th, in the Democratic primary election, the patriotic forces swept

the boards absolutely clear, leaving neither pope nor pro-pope to hold office during the ensuing four-year term. The people were so enraged at the subject of the papal monarchy, that they hurled out even those otherwise high-class officeholders who had nothing against their records other than the fact of having a few little \$75.00 Romish clerk-spies in their employ.” The paper was distributed, free of charge, throughout the Birmingham area. Anti-Catholic rhetoric was becoming more prevalent, emanating from the suburbs, and permeating every aspect of city government.¹⁰

Like many cities that had experienced rapid growth during that time, Birmingham suffered from a chronic shortage of revenue. Ward had attempted to increase the tax rate, but a constitutional amendment that would have permitted Birmingham to increase its tax rate was voted down. Soured by this defeat, Ward announced that he would not be seeking re-election. A citizen’s committee, quite possibly fearing the growth of suburban political clout convinced him to reconsider his decision. He relented and began the fight of his political life. His chief opponent was Dr. N. A. Barrett, a physician, and the former mayor of East Lake.¹¹

Dr. Barrett’s name had surfaced before, in 1915, in a letter to the editor of the *Birmingham Age-Herald*. The query concerned a local prohibition movement that was attempting to force movie theatres to close on Sunday. The leader of this zealous movement was Ward’s opponent, Dr. N.A. Barrett. The letter defiantly states, “There is an absurd fanaticism and religious mania abroad in this town. I would not say a word against the church people or the ministers. I have the utmost respect for them and their beliefs. But they are doing themselves as much damage in some respects here in Birmingham as they are doing others. It is all right to play golf on Sunday and go to church, they advertise. But what about the working man, I ask, who, instead of golf, if he had a chance, would go to a vaudeville theatre, a motion picture show, or something of the kind? The churches cater to the rich man and say it is alright for him to play his Sunday golf because he is their main supporter.”¹²

From the outset, the campaign and subsequent election of 1917 was a vicious affair. The newspapers quickly joined the fray - The *Birmingham*

News endorsed Ward and the *Birmingham Age-Herald* backed Dr. Barrett. Ward immediately went on the offensive, accusing Barrett of being supported by an anti-Catholic contingent, the True American Party. In typed notes for a campaign speech, he cited numerous accounts of virulent anti-Catholic persecution in the area. He wrote, "Had a young lady employed by South Side Company discharged because she was a Catholic. They are causing a man that has been with a firm for 25 years trouble because his wife is a Catholic. They demanded that a young lady stenographer be discharged because she is a Catholic. They asked that a man quit buying groceries from a Catholic, and made a similar demand with a reference to a bakery. They asked that Martin Eagan (the city's police chief at the time) be fired because he was a Catholic. They asked that a young man employed by a machinery house be discharged because he is a Catholic. This boy is supporting a widowed mother with his wages." The instances recounted by Ward were damning, but were the practitioners of these anti-Catholic tactics ardent supporters of Barrett? If so, did the doctor from East Lake embrace their support and, furthermore, was he an active participant in the True American movement?¹³

An editorial, appearing in the *Birmingham News* on September 20, 1917, offered proof that the True Americans were conducting an extensive direct mail campaign throughout the city. The paper's editor even remarked that he had "in his possession a lot of printed literature about 'The Secret Order' with application blanks for membership." In addition, he states, "This literature sets out in contrast 'Rome's Platform' and 'Our Platform', and that platform is identical with that proclaimed by Dr. Barrett."¹⁴

Barrett denied the charges that he was in league with the True American Party, but his denials were anything but convincing. Speaking to a throng of suburban supporters in West End, he admitted that he believed in the "principles of the True Americans, but that he had never heard of them and didn't know there was any such society." In addition, Barrett's campaign literature often incorporated the phrase "true American" and vague, emotionally charged, patriotic appeals were central in their proposed platform. They promoted "complete separation of church and state" and,

yet, wanted “the Bible in every public school.” Pamphlets distributed by Barrett supporters pleaded for the “restriction of immigration” that, oddly enough, was not a function of city government and for “the election to office of Patriots only - men imbued with True American Ideals.” Finally, they demanded, “Respect for Old Glory as the Highest Emblem of Authority in the Land.” If the True Americans didn’t support Barrett, he was certainly speaking their language.¹⁵

Barrett’s backers, if not Barrett himself, attempted to portray Ward as being pro-Catholic, a tool of the Pope. Ward flatly denied any such notion, stating unequivocally, “I am not a Catholic. I am a member of a Protestant church. I do not believe in Roman Catholicism. If that church has ever or should ever, in an organized society, attempt to dominate the political policies of this country or of this community, I should oppose it to the uttermost.”¹⁶

Anti-Catholic sentiment was evidenced everywhere, especially in advertisements and editorials that appeared in the *Birmingham Age-Herald*. One small advertisement that appeared at the bottom of a column on the front page featured a headline that blared, “Why True Americans Vote Only For True Americans.” It stated that, “The Sensational Pamphlet will be sent free by mail for 1 cent per copy.” It then listed the address of an O.T. Dozier, 2020 ½, First Avenue, and was listed as a paid political advertisement by Dozier.¹⁷

A two-column advertisement that appeared on the front page of the October 7 edition of the *Birmingham Age-Herald* declared in bold print that the “Anti-Catholic Movement (was) Not Based on Religious Differences and Has Nothing to do with religious Beliefs.” S. L. Irwin of Pratt City paid for the advertisement/opinion piece declaring, “THERE IS NO RELIGIOUS ISSUE, so far as the so-called T.A.’s or other anti-Catholic organizations are concerned. . . I desire to call the attention of the public to the fact that the Roman Catholic Church is an enemy to our American conception of national life. . .”¹⁸ The ad continued,

If Mr. Barrett is receiving the support of a secret society which has for its purpose the preservation of our American

institutions, such as free speech, free press, public school, the open Bible and the free circulation of the same: while on the other hand Mr. Ward is receiving the active support of a secret anti-Protestant society which has for its purpose the destruction of all these things and privileges, what, say you, should all patriotic citizens do on election day?¹⁹

Upon investigation, the *Birmingham Age-Herald's* zealous endorsement of Dr. N. A. Barrett's candidacy is intriguing, to say the least. In the September 9, 1917 edition of the *Birmingham Age-Herald* they stated in an editorial that, "The Age-Herald believes that the voters should choose Dr. Barrett. . . The people of this city are not satisfied with the way in which their business has been conducted at the city hall. They want a change. They want a man with new vision, new energy, and new purposes. They want a man who has none of the entanglements that always cling to the man who has spent many years in municipal life."²⁰

Curiously, that is not what they had to say one year earlier about the performance of George Ward as head of the city commission. On May 14, 1916 they declared, "Follow the leadership of George Ward. He is not only conservative but he has the good sense enough to see a good proposition and to recognize it when he sees it. He is not a dreamer. He is a practical business man." Why such an about-face in 1917? Ward openly accused the paper of being in collusion with the Baptists, charging that the paper was giving the Baptists free publicity in their editorial pieces. Referring to an earlier controversy between a Baptist preacher and a Father Coyle, he speculated during one campaign appearance that the paper was trying to "patch up matters and shut off a suit by this good brother Baptist preacher for \$50,000."²¹

In a final rally before more than two thousand supporters at the Jefferson Theatre Ward unveiled final proof of his opponent's involvement with the True Americans. Films, secretly recorded from a parked automobile, showed Barrett and a numerous array of prominent citizens entering the local headquarters of the True Americans. Election Day was rapidly approaching and George Ward confidently asserted, in an advertisement

appearing in the *Birmingham News*, that "The Barrett Boom Has Collapsed - Political

Freedom Has Triumphed." He further stated, "I confidently announce to the people of Birmingham my re-election by a clear majority." He predicted that when the votes were finally tabulated he would have 4,300 to Barrett's 3,000. He was close to predicting the correct vote totals. Ward simply picked the wrong candidate to win.²²

George Ward was defeated for the office of city commission president on October 8, 1917. N. A. Barrett received 4,306 votes and George Ward collected 3,215. An analysis of the vote totals revealed, not surprisingly, that Ward's strength lay with the downtown business community. He received 59 percent of the Old Birmingham vote. Barrett, meanwhile, amassed 66 percent of the suburban vote to claim victory. Once in office, Nathaniel Barrett wasted no time in rewarding his anti-Catholic constituents by firing the only city official that professed to be a Catholic, the police chief, Martin Eagan. The new commission president replaced Eagan with Thomas J. Shirley, a member of the Ku Klux Klan.²³

In less than a decade Birmingham's newly annexed, largely Protestant, suburbs had seized control of municipal government. They had secured the office of commission president and, in addition, had managed to capture four of the five positions available on the city commission. As Birmingham continued to grow, they became more firmly entrenched and would not relinquish their power for decades to come. The course was set. Birmingham was witnessing the launch of a new era - an era of intolerance.²⁴

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