

The Atlanta Journal

"Covers Dixie Like the Dew"

Since 1883

Jack Tarver, President

• Jack Spalding, Editor

EDITORIALS

20

SEPTEMBER 21, 1966

OUR UNDERGROUND CITY

Will Ghost Streets of Atlanta Live Again?

By REESE CLEGHORN

ATLANTA'S name was changed in 1844 from Terminus to Marthasville. But you may still take a train to Terminus. In fact, you may walk to it.

The center of Terminus exists under the Central Avenue Viaduct in Atlanta. It is a stone marker a couple of feet high, with the chiseled notation "W & A R.R., O O." This is the Zero Mile Post, and it was put into the ground in 1842 as the first of a series of mile posts marking the route of a new railroad between Atlanta and Chattanooga.

But this was not Atlanta. It was Terminus, because this was the end of the line, and the city was nothing much then except the end of the new railroad line.



IT WOULD BE difficult to find anything that means as much in Atlanta's history as this marker. It designated the termination that gave us the city's first name. And on it are the initials that gave us the word "Atlanta," derived from the name of the state-owned Western & Atlantic Railroad.

In December of 1842 crowds came to see the first locomotive move over the tracks, and that may have been the real beginning of Atlanta, because the city grew first as a transportation center.

In the dim light under the viaduct, and near the tracks, within a fenced enclosure, you may see the Zero Mile Post where it all started.

THIS IS ONE PART of Underground Atlanta. There is much more, because this is a city that was built in layers. Now our new Civic Design Commission has begun a serious inquiry into possibilities of bringing to life the old city underneath.

So far this is just an idea. The commission wants to determine the feasibility for use of Underground Atlanta as an entertainment area. This may depend upon the willingness of the property owners and the interest of the public.

Under Alabama Street is an older Alabama Street, an older city. At least two and perhaps four blocks of it, with original street-level store fronts, livery stables and saloons, might be reclaimed, along with some of the side streets.

THIS AREA, like a number of other segments of the older city under other streets and viaducts, can be easily reached and, in fact, is still in use. On many of these dead streets

trucks roll daily, delivering to underground entrances of buildings that rise over the older structures. Many of the old stores are now storage places. On some parts of the underground streets, light shines through; other parts are dark.

When the first Broad Street overpass was constructed in 1852, part of the older Atlanta was submerged. When the Spring Street overpass was finished in 1922, Underground Atlanta grew again. This building-over process is still being regularly repeated.

Walk along the older Alabama Street and at No. 38 you may see a gilded inscription indicating the Lowry Bank, which was founded in 1861.

At No. 44 on this old Alabama Street, in the 1870s, the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce was busy, no doubt with an early Forward Atlanta program. At No. 69 people were more relaxed: This was Paul Hentschel's Saloon.

ACROSS FROM Mr. Lowry's private bank, ornamental posts stand alongside the stone arch marking the entrance to one of the meat packers of Packinghouse Row.

(Gisell Sieburth wrote about these and other buildings whose history she had traced, in the Journal-Constitution Magazine last December.)

Can the dark rooms behind ornate old Victorian-style posts be turned into new restaurants, with some old-style furnishings? Can there be restoration of painted glass now removed, and refurbishing of cast-iron fronts? Will Paul Hentschel's Saloon swing again?

That is what is on the minds of some of those now contemplating this germ of an idea. They think there may be a chance to convert several underground blocks into a popular center of restaurants, galleries, night spots and shops, all in the style of the old Atlanta.

THERE IS ROOM for an impressive entranceway at one point on the present Alabama Street, where stairs and planted landings might lead the visitors into the old city. Could there be a horse-and-buggy shuttle service waiting below, to take people on the original cobblestone streets, under gas lights, to their destinations?

A committee of the Civic Design Commission wants to find out. Paul Muldawer, an architect who is a member of the committee, believes all this may be feasible—if there is public response to the idea. He hopes to hear.

"Every city needs something people will point to as truly unique," he said, "and for Atlanta this could be it."