

A Tale of Two Stadiums: Cobb County and Professional Sports, 1957-2017

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Cobb County has attempted twice to construct a baseball stadium for a professional team; only one attempt was successful. The first attempt came in the 1950s, before the City of Atlanta had attracted the Milwaukee Braves to Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium. The second attempt – and the one we are doubtless most familiar with – culminated in the construction of SunTrust Park (now Truist Park) and the historic relocation of the Atlanta Braves from Atlanta’s urban core. The similarities between the two plans are striking: Cobb County leadership played an active role in both, both proposals covered very similar parts of the county, and both occurred during an important period of changes in Cobb County’s demographics. These projects were inherently efforts of boosterism, and as such, county leaders made detailed statements to the press about how these projects would benefit Cobb County and Atlanta. Their statements offer revealing insights into key moments of Atlanta suburban history.

Before examining the public conversations around these stadium plans, I would like to offer some background information about these projects. In particular, more background information about the 1950s effort to attract professional sports to Cobb County will be shared, both because it is less familiar (if not unknown) to many and because I have researched it more extensively.

Despite the similarities of these projects, there is no line of continuity between them. No evidence has come to light that the county government, Atlanta Braves management, or developers involved in the 2010s deal to build a stadium in Cobb County were aware of the 1950s efforts.

When a stadium was first proposed in 1957, Cobb County was in the middle of what is now termed White Flight.¹ In 1940, the county was 83% white; 91% in 1950 and would reach a peak of 96% in 1970. In the 1980s, this trend was reversed and Cobb became more diverse, so by the 2010

1. Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 58-77

census – the last census before the SunTrust Park plans – the county was only 56% white. By the next census, the county was majority-minority for the first time in its history.²

In the 1950s, Atlanta had no Major League Baseball team, though the Southern Association's Atlanta Crackers were popular. Civic boosters in Atlanta recognized that bringing an MLB team to the city would increase its visibility nationwide and promote the city as a shining example of the New South. Standing in the way was William B. Hartsfield, Atlanta's mayor, who was not much of a baseball fan and believed that stadium building should be privately financed, not government-built.³ Stepping into this void was Herbert C. McCollum, the sole member of the Cobb County commission and county executive. McCollum, a former umpire, recognized the economic value of a baseball stadium and believed the government should play a more active role in its construction.⁴ Starting in 1957, McCollum began pushing for a stadium in Cobb County. The project received strong newspaper support, both in Atlanta and in Cobb County. Another major boost came when Mayor Hartsfield announced his support for the plan. Due to the amount of land needed, Hartsfield saw building a stadium downtown as “a recognized impossibility... If Cobb County can develop this stadium, they will have the cooperation and best wishes of the City of Atlanta.”⁵

The first newspaper reports described the land as being “100 acres of Georgia Power-owned property on the north side of the Chattahoochee River bank.”⁶ Later reports stated that it was “just

2. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau – more detailed citations needed.

3. Clayton Trutor, *Loserville: How Professional Sports Remade Atlanta – and How Atlanta Remade Professional Sports* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021), 21; Furman Bisher, *Miracle in Atlanta: The Atlanta Braves Story* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1966), 8.

4. Andrew J. Bramlett, “‘Cobb Out Front in Bid for Stadium’: Professional Baseball and the Rise of Suburbia, 1957-1962,” *Atlanta Studies*, October 20, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.18737/atls20251020>.

5. Bob Christian, “Mayor Backs Cobb in Stadium Plans,” *Atlanta Journal*, Jan. 30, 1959.

6. Horace Crowe, “Big Stadium Talk Premature --- McCollum,” *Marietta Daily Journal*, Aug. 16, 1957.

east of Plant Atkinson,” while a 1959 article said the site was “inside the proposed perimeter road around Atlanta... about halfway between the present Four Lane [U.S. 41, or Cobb Parkway] and the proposed U.S. Highway 75 [I-75].”⁷ In late 1959, county officials announced they were looking at a site closer to Interstate 75 to capitalize on highway traffic.⁸ A map from August of that year shows a location similar to the later description.⁹ This map would place the stadium in the Vinings area, around two miles south of where Truist Park would eventually be built.

The idea of building the stadium for both baseball and football was discussed, but there was a feeling that the two might be in conflict with each other.¹⁰ Baseball was clearly the priority of the two sports. Unfortunately for the county, they were focused on attracting teams from a proposed new baseball league within the MLB, the Continental League, along with a new franchise of the American Football League, rather than the NFL. The Continental League did not form, and the AFL decided not to field a team in Atlanta. This, combined with the election of Ivan Allen Jr. as Atlanta’s mayor and his pro-stadium stance, led to the end of the Cobb County project. After Allen’s election in 1961, the idea was essentially dead.¹¹

With a leader at the helm who recognized the importance of professional sports and who sought to use the power of municipal government to bring that dream to life, it became much less likely that a suburban county would usurp Atlanta and build a major stadium. In 1964, ground was

7. Horace Crowe, “Louisville Gets AAA Franchise,” *Marietta Daily Journal*, Nov. 9, 1958; Horace Crowe, “Talk on County Stadium ‘Speculation’ – McCollum,” *Marietta Daily Journal*, Jan. 30, 1959.

8. Jim Minter, “Cobb Stadium Waits on Franchise and Franchise Waits on Stadium,” *Atlanta Journal*, May 12, 1959.

9. Jim Minter, “Prominent Atlantan Offers Site for ‘Big League’ Stadium,” *Atlanta Journal*, Aug. 6, 1959.

10. Al Thomy, “Marietta Officials Propose 75,000-Seat Baseball Park,” *Atlanta Constitution*, Aug. 16, 1957.

11. Bramlett, “Cobb Out Front.”

broken on what would eventually become the Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium.¹² It opened in April 1965, and Atlanta was granted an expansion NFL franchise two months later. The Braves moved from Milwaukee, playing their first Atlanta season in 1966. Allen called this stadium “the real symbol of the new Atlanta – the single structure that signified our arrival as a national city... visible and literal proof that Atlanta was a big-league city.”¹³

It is this period of Atlanta sports that has received greater scholarly attention, perhaps most notably from Clayton Trutor in his book *Loserville*. The same stories of boosterism and development that historians have identified in Allen’s administration can be seen a decade earlier in Cobb County, albeit with a less successful project.

On November 11, 2013, shockwaves were sent through the Atlanta sports community when the Braves announced their intention to move to Cobb County.¹⁴ After months of negotiations with the city about improving the area around the Braves’ home of Turner Field, the team decided to move just across the county line to Cobb. Public opinion was notably divided about the move, and is perhaps best characterized by *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* sports reporters’ Mark Bradley’s headline the next morning: “Atlanta loses, Cobb prevails.”¹⁵ The Cobb County Board of Commissioners approved the stadium in a 4-1 vote later that month, and construction began in September 2014.¹⁶ The brand new SunTrust Park opened in 2017.

It is important to examine the criticism of the stadium, both from academics and from the general public. Historian Kevin Kruse told *Sports Illustrated* in 2019 that he viewed the “movement

12. Trutor, *Loserville*, 57.

13. Ivan Allen, Jr. and Paul Hemphill, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971), 152-153.

14. “Timeline,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 12, 2013.

15. Mark Bradley, “Atlanta Loses; Cobb Prevails,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 12, 2013.

16. Jon Gillooly, “BOC says yes to Braves,” *Marietta Daily Journal*, November 27, 2013; Ricky Leroux, “Wave of future,” *Marietta Daily Journal*, September 17, 2014.

of the stadium as the culmination of white flight.”¹⁷ Concerns were expressed in the county that the deal to build the stadium had been arranged in secret and was already essentially finished by the time the public was made aware of the plan. The lack of light rail connections between Atlanta and the new stadium has made it harder for residents inside the I-285 perimeter to easily reach the stadium using public transportation, though Cobb County remains famously resistant to MARTA.¹⁸ Lastly, it is worth noting that Lisa Cupid, who cast the lone dissenting vote against the project in November 2013, was elected the chair of the Cobb County Board of Commissioners in 2020. Opposition to the stadium, which has been a major economic driver for the county, has not had significant political consequences. There are also continuing debates about the stadium’s economic impact on the county and community. The stadium was expected to cost taxpayers “millions” each year, though just yesterday the Marietta Daily Journal reported that the project is now generating surplus revenue for the county.¹⁹ It remains unclear whether or not the stadium has tangible impacts on local businesses, with one recent study finding “no economically meaningful impact on the hotel market” due to the Braves move to Cobb, with the authors adding that “predictions that the ballpark’s relocation to Cobb County would generate 100,000 or even 300,000 additional room nights per year have proven to be grossly incorrect.”²⁰

As these overviews suggest, the stadium plans have been closely tied to important issues as Cobb County grows and develops as an Atlanta suburb. Development, suburban sprawl, public

17. Brian Burnsed, “Two Playoff Teams, Two New Stadiums and One Great Divide,” *Sports Illustrated*, Oct. 4, 2019, <https://www.si.com/mlb/2019/10/04/atlanta-braves-united-fanbases>.

18. Timothy Kellison, “Enduring and Emergent Public Opinion in Relation to a Suburban Stadium District: The Case of Truist Park–Battery Atlanta.” *Journal of Global Sport Management* 8, no. 4 (2023): 674–94. doi:10.1080/24704067.2021.1886685.

19. Isabelle Manders, “Officials: Truist, Battery generating surplus revenue,” *Marietta Daily Journal*, May 13, 2026.

20. John Charles Bradbury and Frank Stephenson, “The impact of MLB team relocation on hotel demand,” *Tourism Economics*, in press: 13.
https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=5364728 and
<https://doi.org/10.1177/13548166251405295>.

transportation, sports, and government involvement in sports venues have all been an important part of this public conversation. Though rarely addressed directly by supporters, race has been an important piece of the puzzle for critics of Truist Park. As already mentioned, county leadership has played an important role in these discussions and has made numerous statements to the press. An analysis of these comments offers a unique window into the relationship between suburban leadership and Atlanta.

One important note is suburban secession. As noted, Cobb County has not approved MARTA's expansion into the county, fearing it will tie the suburbs too closely to the city. Historically, these fears have been racial in nature, though they are often expressed as fears about crime.²¹ However, even as White Flight was beginning to affect Cobb County, Herbert McCollum in the 1950s still saw the county as tied to Atlanta. When discussing the stadium, he spoke not just about bringing professional sports to his county but about Atlanta as a whole. For instance, in 1959, McCollum said he hoped to talk to “any group interested in bringing major league baseball to Atlanta,” and did not differentiate between Atlanta and his county.²² At the same time, this spirit can be seen in Atlanta leaders' positive reaction. William B. Hartsfield endorsed Cobb's plan, saying the county has “the cooperation and the best wishes of the city of Atlanta.”²³

In contrast, the 2013 announcement of the Braves' move was seen as a loss for Atlanta and a win for Cobb, and more like a zero-sum game between two competing regions. The front page of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* the next day read “How Cobb Scored the Braves.”²⁴ Initial public reactions express similar sentiments. The *AJC* noted that the Cobb residents they interviewed were largely enthusiastic about the announcement, though traffic remained an important concern. At the

21. Kruse, *White Flight*, 249.

22. “Cobb Interested in Third Major Loop,” *Marietta Daily Journal*, Aug. 2, 1959.

23. Bob Christian, “Mayor Backs Cobb in Stadium Plans,” *Atlanta Journal*, Jan. 30, 1959.

24. Dan Klepal and David Wickert, “How Cobb Scored the Braves,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 12, 2013.

same time, residents from inside Atlanta saw it as a loss for downtown, with state representative “Able” Mable Thomas expressing concern about the move’s impact on the Turner Field area.²⁵

Both of these stadiums were proposed during a period of racial transformation. In the case of the 1950s plan, race was not discussed in connection with the stadium. In fact, it is almost surprising that race was not discussed more. This stadium plan was sandwiched between the desegregation of Atlanta’s golf courses in 1955 and public schools in 1961, so one would expect that desegregation would be an important talking point when discussing the construction of a major public venue.²⁶ In 1978, McCollum recalled that part of the reason that Civil Rights was a smaller issue in Cobb County was the overwhelming white population of the county. He told Dr. Tom Scott, a professor at what was then Kennesaw College, that “We didn’t have any trouble at all. No way. We never did have a bit of trouble. We never did have a lay-in or sit-in or whatever they called it. We just didn’t have that.”²⁷ He said that any Civil Rights problems “more or less took care of itself in Cobb.”²⁸ At the same time, White Flight was an important part of the county’s political landscape. The stadium was just a small piece in a larger puzzle of county-supported projects initiated by McCollum. During his time in office, a major county-supported country club opened near Kennesaw, close to a new airport that was named for McCollum. The county privatized the country club in 1962, saying it could not sell homes only to whites (though it is also possible this excuse was a cover for a corruption scandal).²⁹ At the same time, private developers were opening up new subdivisions across the county, appealing to white Atlantans leaving the city. One striking example is Tara Park, a Kennesaw neighborhood

25. “News draws mixed reviews,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, November 12, 2013.

26. See Kruse, *White Flight*.

27. Herbert C. McCollum, interview by Dr. Thomas A. Scott, Sept. 5, 1978, transcript, Kennesaw College Oral History Project, F292 .C6 K44 1978B, Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA.

28. McCollum.

29. Thomas A. Scott, *Cobb County, Georgia and the Origins of the Suburban South: A Twentieth-Century History* (Marietta: Cobb Landmarks & Historical Society, 2003), 301-303.

opened in 1964, where every street was named after a character or place in *Gone with the Wind*.

Though race may not have been an overt part of the stadium plan, it was certainly in the background.

Race was also never mentioned by Truist Park supporters, but it has been mentioned by its critics. For instance, Mike Boyce, the chairman of the Cobb County Board of Commissioners when the stadium opened, said that fans could visit the new stadium at any time “knowing you’re going to be safe, no matter where you parked your car.”³⁰ This echoes very similar fears about MARTA’s expansion into Cobb County, which have been rhetorically framed as crime-based but are widely understood as race-based. Researcher Jacob Hindin found in 2020 that the crowds at Truist Park are perceived as whiter and more affluent than those at Turner Field.³¹ Not to belabor the point, but when the Braves announced their move in 2013, they released a map showing the locations of their season ticket holders and how the new Cobb stadium would bring the team closer to its fans. Commenters have noted that the map corresponds to whiter and more conservative parts of the Atlanta metropolitan area.³² The map’s most in-depth examination and critique came from Andy Walter, in an article published by *Atlanta Studies*.³³

By this point, it should be no surprise that sports and stadiums can be revealing windows into a city’s politics, culture, and relationships. What the Cobb County stadium shows is the complex interplay between the urban core and the suburban landscape surrounding it. Critically, because the stadium project was proposed twice roughly in the same area, this shows how the relationship has evolved over time. The spirit of regionalism that led in the 1950s gave way to a zero-sum game in the 2010s. It shows that prior to White Flight, the relationship between Atlanta and the suburbs was

30. Burnsed, “Two Playoff Teams.”

31. Jacob M. Hindin, “The Politics, Process and Performance of Emerging Urban/Sport Developments: A Case Study of SunTrust Park and the Battery Atlanta,” Ph.D. diss. (Florida State University, 2020), 267-270.

32. Burnsed, “Two Playoff Teams.”

33. Andy Walter, “Mapping Braves Country,” *Atlanta Studies*, September 9, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.18737/atls20150909>.

fundamentally different, and it is a refreshing reminder that Atlanta as a region has been able to think holistically, and can do so again.