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Foreword

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Sara Mitchell Parsons's wonderful autobiographical memoir tells at least two notably important stories. First, it describes how she, following her 1961 election to the Atlanta Board of Education, became one of the South's first white elected officials who openly advocated racial equality at a time when almost every other white public officeholder either demagogically championed racial segregation or quietly tolerated it. Second, and just as significant, it relates how both before and after her election to public office, she broke free from the deeply rooted societal expectation that a white upper-class suburban housewife was supposed to live her life simply as a meek appendage of her husband and instead became an outspokenly independent political voice who defied and then divorced herself from the traditional gender-role strictures within which she had been raised. One can read this memoir as a poignant account of how one southern white churchgoer rather quickly enlisted on behalf of black civil rights and educational equality once southern reality forced her to confront those questions. But one should also read this autobiography as an early and important feminist account of self-realization and self-development at a time when the "women's movement" had not yet joined the "civil rights movement" in America's political lexicon of the 1960s.¹

The historical literature on white southerners who dissented from their region's racial orthodoxy prior to the mid-1960s is relatively copious and sometimes overdrawn,² but Sara Mitchell Parsons's here-

tofore little-known story underscores how she came to be a voice of dissent largely on her own within the local precincts of Atlanta and without benefit of the wider political or academic experiences that helped radicalize other southerners who spoke out in defiance of local conventions, such as Virginia Foster Durr,³ J. Waties Waring,⁴ Myles Horton,⁵ James A. Dombrowski,⁶ and Lillian Smith.⁷ Atlanta in the 1950s may have had a decidedly more moderate political climate on issues of race than most southern cities, in part because of both long-time mayor William B. Hartsfield⁸ and influential police chief Herbert T. Jenkins,⁹ but only a small number of aging politicians and local historians can readily recall how the notorious segregationist Lester Maddox¹⁰ was the number one opponent both in Hartsfield's final 1957 reelection race and in the September 1961 run-off that vaulted Ivan Allen, Jr., into office as Hartsfield's anointed successor.¹¹

That same September 1961 run-off also marked Sara Mitchell's election to the Atlanta school board, but—as this memoir shows—her own evolution as a political freethinker and incipient feminist who no longer acquiesced to her husband's old-fashioned presumption of wifely subservience had begun several years earlier with active involvement in the League of Women Voters. A series of league experiences brought her face-to-face with racial and educational realities that otherwise would not have penetrated the upper-class social world of a suburban Buckhead housewife, and from there the “new” Sara's path toward a surprising emergence as a successful political candidate and an outspoken public figure proceeded rapidly apace. Our historiography of black southern civil rights activism has (finally) come to acknowledge and sometimes highlight the disproportionately important roles that black *women* played in many of the movement's most crucial episodes,¹² but the more mainstream histories of the South during those years have yet to illuminate fully the similar impact that *white* female political activism on the part of women such as Sara Mitchell, Eliza Paschall, Frances Pauley, and Helen Bullard had on cities like Atlanta.¹³ Both autobiographies and a long list of broader political histories provide wide-ranging accounts of Atlanta public life in

the 1960s,¹⁴ but none of these volumes either comprehensively or even partially surveys the extent to which women emerged as new players on the city's public stage. Existing scholarship already attests to how the involvement of younger women in “movement” organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) helped pave the way for the women's movement of the late 1960s,¹⁵ but the ways in which the movement's presence also encouraged other women like Sara Mitchell to step forward with a new commitment to activism and self-determination have not yet been fully plumbed. *From Southern Wrongs to Civil Rights* ought to assist significantly in sparking such an appreciation.

Sara Mitchell does not appear as a major character in any of the existing historical surveys of 1960s Atlanta, but the microfilmed editions of the city's two principal daily newspapers of that decade, the *Atlanta Constitution* and the *Atlanta Journal*, are replete with stories about her vocal presence on the city's public stage. Early in her initial 1961 school board campaign against two other serious candidates, one *Constitution* editor spent an entire column telling prospective voters that Mitchell's “completely honest manner” already marked her as a most unusual political competitor, for “this kind of honesty is seldom seen.” What's more, the columnist's endorsement hardly stopped there, for he also felt moved to tell readers that “you couldn't vote for a prettier politician than Sara Mitchell.”¹⁶ A personal profile authored by a female reporter one day later paid less attention to Mitchell's looks and more to her feelings about campaigning: “It's not fun but I'm not sorry.”¹⁷ After Mitchell led the field in the first primary but then faced a run-off against businessman Dan MacIntyre III,¹⁸ the *Constitution* ran a front page, “above the fold” election day editorial endorsing both mayoral favorite Ivan Allen and Mitchell.¹⁹ Mitchell defeated MacIntyre handily, by a margin of 54,567 to 36,127,²⁰ perhaps in part because of the *Constitution*'s ardent support, and even before officially taking office on January 1, 1962, Mitchell began making headlines with calls for new priorities in city schools.²¹

Once in office, Mitchell's commitment to make personal visits to

each and every school in the entire system drew press attention,²² as did her campaign to reduce the extent of resources the system devoted to high school athletics.²³ Local columnists praised her outspokenness as “courageous,”²⁴ but when Mitchell began publicly denouncing the system’s second-class treatment of schools that were still all-black, the Atlanta newspapers accorded her comments front-page headlines.²⁵

Mitchell drew even greater public attention when she extended her criticisms of white racial practices to Atlanta’s churches. “They practice so many sins they can’t preach the truth,” and “There is no leadership when it is most needed,” she told an Atlanta audience. She also emphasized that any worries about her prospects for reelection in 1965 did not enter into her thinking: “I would rather say what I want to say in four years, than stay eight or 12 years and say nothing.”²⁶

Mitchell’s targeting of such sacred cows as high school football, segregated schools, and pusillanimous churches earned her a full-blown portrait in the joint Sunday editions of the Atlanta newspapers. “I said what I thought,” Mitchell declared, explaining that she was “shocked and surprised” at how her comments about white churches looked when set down in print in the Atlanta papers. “I made no blanket indictment of churches,” and no one should think she was irreligious. “If I’m rash or radical today, it is because I learned rashness and radicalism in the Methodist Church.” Mitchell further acknowledged, however, that her earlier encounter with the question of whether to abolish segregation within the League of Women voters—a story she recounts in detail in this memoir—had proven especially influential: “The experience convinced me I had to take a position on real and present decisions.”²⁷

Mitchell’s outspokenness continued apace both before and after her 1965 reelection to a second four-year term on the school board.²⁸ Local groups honored Mitchell for what one citation described as her belief “that every child deserves equality of educational opportunity to fulfill his fullest potential as a person and citizen,”²⁹ and by the mid

1960s Mitchell’s interests had expanded to encompass the wider economic agenda of antipoverty initiatives.³⁰ Even after more than six years in office Mitchell was still publicly lambasting city school administrators as racially “paternalistic,”³¹ and only her late 1968 decision to marry California-based Tom Parsons removed her from Atlanta political life and the front pages of Atlanta’s newspapers.³²

Sara Mitchell Parsons will tell you all about those rich and eventful years in this winsome and sometimes impressive story. And even today, at more than eighty-five years of age, Sara Parsons remains an undaunted and outspoken voice. As she’ll recount, she and Tom returned to Atlanta in 1986 after eighteen years in northern California, and her regular letters to the editor in the Atlanta newspapers show that Sara’s lost none of her spark notwithstanding the passage of three decades’ time.³³ Her willingness to speak out bluntly about the obstacles thwarting high-quality public education has not changed, as one 1999 letter readily revealed:

The current barrage of criticism of public school teachers and administrators is counterproductive and unfair. The growing problems they face in today’s classrooms are overwhelming. Among them are overcrowded classrooms, understaffing, too many extracurricular activities, too little time for basic education, too many students with too much on their minds besides getting an education, and too many indifferent, uncaring parents.³⁴

As you’ll see, Sara Mitchell Parsons’s presence has been a gift to Atlanta that should not be forgotten, just as this book is a gift to those of us who welcome a fuller understanding of how the 1960s helped liberate a wide range of Americans of all races and genders.

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Prize-winning biography of Martin Luther King, Jr., and *Liberty and Sexuality: The Right to Privacy and the Making of Roe v. Wade*.

Notes

1. See generally Flora Davis, *Moving the Mountain: The Women's Movement in America Since 1960* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991). The movement's landmark book appeared only in 1963. See Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1963); also see Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of The Feminine Mystique* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), and Judith Adler Hennessee, *Betty Friedan: Her Life* (New York: Random House, 1999).

2. See for example John Egerton, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), and my somewhat critical review of it, "A Day Late?" *Southern Changes* 17 (Spring 1995): 20–22. Also note Morton Sosna, *In Search of the Silent South: Southern Liberals and the Race Issue* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).

3. See Hollinger F. Barnard, ed., *Outside the Magic Circle: The Autobiography of Virginia Foster Durr* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1985), and John A. Salmond, *The Conscience of a Lawyer: Clifford J. Durr and American Civil Liberties, 1899–1975* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990). Also note Sarah Hart Brown, *Standing Against Dragons: Three Southern Lawyers in an Era of Fear* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998).

4. See Tinsley E. Yarbrough, *A Passion for Justice: J. Waties Waring and Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

5. See Myles Horton, *The Long Haul: An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), Aimee Isgrig Horton, *The Highlander Folk School* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing, 1989), John M. Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School, 1932–1962* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988), and Frank Adams, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire: The Idea of Highlander* (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, 1975).

6. See Frank Adams, *James A. Dombrowski: An American Heretic, 1897–1983* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), Irwin Klibaner, *Conscience of a Troubled South: The Southern Conference Educational Fund, 1946–1966*

(Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing, 1989), and Anthony P. Dunbar, *Against the Grain: Southern Radicals and Prophets, 1929–1959* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1981).

7. See Anne C. Loveland, *Lillian Smith: A Southerner Confronting the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), and Margaret Rose Gladney, ed., *How Am I to Be Heard? Letters of Lillian Smith* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

8. Unfortunately the only biography is Harold Martin, *William Berry Hartsfield: Mayor of Atlanta* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1978).

9. See Herbert T. Jenkins, *Keeping the Peace: A Police Chief Looks at His Job* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), Herbert T. Jenkins, *Forty Years on the Force: 1932–1972* (Atlanta: Center for Research in Social Change, Emory University, 1973), and Herbert T. Jenkins, *Presidents, Politics and Policing* (Atlanta: Center for Research in Social Change, Emory University, 1980).

10. Maddox, of course, was subsequently elected governor of Georgia in 1966. See Lester Maddox, *Speaking Out: The Autobiography of Lester Garfield Maddox* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), and Bruce Galphin, *The Riddle of Lester Maddox* (Atlanta: Camelot Publishing, 1968).

11. See Gary M. Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn* (New York: Scribner, 1996), pp. 217, 287–300. See also Ivan Allen, Jr., with Paul Hemphill, *Mayor: Notes on the Sixties* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971).

12. See especially David J. Garrow, ed., *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of JoAnn Gibson Robinson* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987), Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), and Vicki L. Crawford et al., *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941–1965* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1990). Also note Lorraine Nelson Spritzer and Jean B. Bergmark, *Grace Towns Hamilton and the Politics of Southern Change* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), Cynthia Griggs Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry: The Liberation of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), Linda O. McMurry, *To Keep the Waters Troubled: The Life of Ida B. Wells* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), and Chana Kai Lee, *For*

Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

13. See Eliza K. Paschall, *It Must Have Rained* (Atlanta: Center for Research in Social Change, Emory University, 1975), Kathryn L. Nasstrom, *Everybody's Grandmother and Nobody's Fool: Frances Freeborn Pauley and the Struggle for Social Justice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), and, on Helen Bullard, Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*. Also note Kathryn L. Nasstrom, "Beginnings and Endings: Life Stories and the Periodization of the Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of American History* 86 (September 1999): 700-711.

14. Autobiographically, in addition to Ivan Allen's *Mayor* and Herbert Jenkins's books cited in note 9 above, see Morris B. Abram, *The Day Is Short* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982).

Some of the earliest studies of modern Atlanta political life are nowadays too infrequently cited. See Floyd Hunter, *Community Power Structure: A Study of Decision Makers* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953), M. Kent Jennings, *Community Influentials: The Elites of Atlanta* (New York: Free Press, 1964), and especially Floyd Hunter, *Community Power Succession: Atlanta's Policy-Makers Revisited* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

The four most important subsequent books on the city are Clarence N. Stone, *Regime Politics: Governing Atlanta, 1946-1988* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989), Ronald H. Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth Century Atlanta* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), Gary Pomerantz's *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn*, cited above, and Charles Rutheiser's wonderfully insightful and provocative *Imagineering Atlanta: The Politics of Place in the City of Dreams* (New York: Verso, 1996). Also note Clarence N. Stone, *Economic Growth and Neighborhood Discontent: System Bias in the Urban Renewal Program of Atlanta* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976), Clifford M. Kuhn et al., *Living Atlanta: An Oral History of the City, 1914-1948* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), and Frederick Allen, *Atlanta Rising: The Invention of an International City, 1940-1990* (Atlanta: Longstreet Press, 1996).

The best starting points for Atlanta's specifically "civil rights" history in the 1960s are the essays by Jack L. Walker, Vincent D. Fort, and others reprinted in David J. Garrow, ed., *Atlanta, Georgia, 1960-1961: Sit-Ins and Stu-*

dent Activism (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1989), David A. Harmon, *Beneath the Image of the Civil Rights Movement and Race Relations: Atlanta, Georgia, 1946-1981* (New York: Garland, 1996), which includes a superb bibliography of little-known articles and theses dealing with Atlanta, and Kathryn L. Nasstrom, "Down to Now: Memory, Narrative, and Women's Leadership in the Civil Rights Movement in Atlanta, Georgia," *Gender & History* 11 (April 1999): 113-144. Also note Kathryn L. Nasstrom, "Women, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Politics of Historical Memory in Atlanta, 1946-1973" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1993), and Melissa Fay Greene, *The Temple Bombing* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996). For subsequent developments, see Tamar Jacoby, *Someone Else's House* (New York: Free Press, 1998), pp. 357-529. Two biographies of important Atlantans are Janice Rothschild Blumberg, *One Voice: Rabbi Jacob M. Rothschild and the Troubled South* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985), and Barbara B. Clowse, *Ralph McGill: A Biography* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998).

15. See especially Sara M. Evans, *Personal Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979).

16. Eddie Barker, "Advice to New Politician May Pay Off in September," *Atlanta Constitution*, 22 August 1961, p. 5.

17. Jean Rooney, "A Lot of Soul-Searching Went Into Her Decision," *Atlanta Constitution*, 23 August 1961, p. 17 ("I did plenty of soul-searching before I made up my mind").

18. Charles Moore, "3 Out of 4 Returned to School Unit," *Atlanta Constitution*, 14 September 1961, pp. 1, 8. Also see Doris Lockerman, "Women Politicos Fought With Dignity and Purpose," *Atlanta Constitution*, 13 September 1961, p. 20, and Doris Lockerman, "She's Been Running Scared and Polite," *Atlanta Constitution*, 21 September 1961, p. 20.

19. "An Editorial," *Atlanta Constitution*, 22 September 1961, p. 1.

20. Jack Strong, "Mitchell Gets School Board Seat," *Atlanta Constitution*, 23 September 1961, pp. 1, 8, "Mrs. Mitchell Gets School Post," *Atlanta Journal*, 23 September 1961, p. 3.

21. See "Public Held At Fault for Poor Schools," *Atlanta Constitution*, 13 December 1961, p. 9. Also see Margaret Turner, "Female 'Bill Watchers' Keep Eye on Law Making," *Atlanta Journal*, 28 December 1961, p. 33.

22. See Pat Watters, "A Visit to the Fourth Grade Tells A Bit of What Their

Life Is Like," *Atlanta Journal*, 11 December 1962, p. 28. Also note Sara Perry Mitchell, "Answers Given to Critics of U.N. Week Recently Observed in the City Schools," *Atlanta Constitution*, 6 December 1962, p. 4.

23. See Sara Mitchell, as told to Andrew Sparks, "Is High School Football Worth the Cost?" *Atlanta Journal Constitution Magazine*, 24 March 1963, pp. 10-11, 16.

24. See Pat Watters, "These Are Simplest, Most Basic Requirements for a Good School," *Atlanta Journal*, 26 March 1963, p. 18. Also note Doris Lockerman, "Is Education Trying to Do Too Much with Too Little?" *Atlanta Constitution*, 7 February 1963, p. 22.

25. John Heritage, "Mrs. Mitchell Rips Negro School Setup," *Atlanta Constitution*, 9 July 1963, pp. 1, 7. Also see Paul Valentine, "School Panel Official Hits Cost of Keeping Segregation," *Atlanta Journal*, 9 July 1963, p. 2. For accounts of Atlanta's excruciatingly slow progress with school desegregation during the 1960s, see Henry Mark Huie, "Factors Influencing the Desegregation Process in the Atlanta School System, 1954-1967" (Unpublished Ed.D. dissertation, University of Georgia, 1967), Susan M. McGrath, "Great Expectations: The History of School Desegregation in Atlanta and Boston, 1954-1990" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Emory University, 1992), and Paul E. Mertz, "'Mind Changing Time All Over Georgia': HOPE, Inc., and School Desegregation, 1958-1961," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 77 (Spring 1993): 41-61.

26. See "Racial Solutions Held Church Job," *Atlanta Journal*, 16 July 1963, pp. 1, 4, and "Mrs. Mitchell Raps Church Racial Bias," *Atlanta Constitution*, 17 July 1963, p. 6. Also note Doris Lockerman, "Woman Educator Soon Will Learn Price of Integrity," *Atlanta Constitution*, 18 July 1963, p. 23.

27. Frank Daniel, "Convictions Involve Her in Controversy," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, 11 August 1963, p. C1.

28. See Walter Rugaber, "Increase Seen In Integration of Schools," *Atlanta Journal*, 7 April 1964, p. 2, Sara Mitchell, "School Board Member Against Ward System," *Atlanta Journal*, 22 December 1964, p. 22, and Doris Lockerman, "Mrs. Mitchell Says School Board Isn't Doing Its Key Job," *Atlanta Constitution*, 28 July 1964, p. 13.

29. See Marion Gaines, "12 Good Neighbors of Year Honored by Christians, Jews," *Atlanta Constitution*, 23 February 1965, p. 16.

30. See Celestine Sibley, "First Battle in War on Poverty Is Learning Names of Weapons," *Atlanta Constitution*, 14 May 1965, p. 5.

31. See Paul Ryan, "Mrs. Mitchell Says School Data Withheld," *Atlanta Constitution*, 18 October 1968, p. 8.

32. See "City School Board Loses Its 'Loner,'" *Atlanta Constitution*, 31 December 1968, p. 39. The story characterized Mitchell as "often a loner on the nine-member board."

33. See Sara Mitchell Parsons, "Shortage at Home," *Atlanta Journal*, 4 March 1998, p. A17, and Sara Mitchell Parsons, "King Family is Simply Seeking Justice," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, 20 September 1998, p. R8.

34. Sara Mitchell Parsons, "School Vouchers No Solution," *Atlanta Journal*, 27 May 1999, p. A27.