

John Wesley Dobbs

1882 - 1961

The Visionary of Sweet Auburn

John Wesley Dobbs played a significant role in Atlanta's African American community during the first half of the 20th century. A civic and political activist, Dobbs gained Atlanta notoriety as one of several distinguished black citizens who negotiated with city leaders on behalf of Atlanta's black residents and his beloved Auburn Avenue neighborhood. His activism would earn Dobbs the title of unofficial "Mayor" of Auburn Avenue.



John Wesley Dobbs

John Wesley Dobbs was a firm believer in using the power of the ballot to overcome segregation, working tirelessly for racial equality through black suffrage. In the 1930s and 40s, Dobbs co-founded the *Atlanta Civic and Political League*, the *Atlanta Negro Voters League* and the *All Citizens Registration Committee*, each with the goal of mobilizing the voting power of Atlanta's black citizens. Though not as well-known as many civil rights leaders, the voter registration drives Dobbs began in 1936 laid the groundwork for much of what was to come. His civic activism, decades before the civil rights movement of the 1960s, is credited for helping to build Atlanta's Black middle class.

Early Years

Born in Marietta, GA in 1882, Dobbs grew up in poverty. His mother and father separated when he was two years old and, to support her family, Dobb's mother, Minnie took work in the home of a white family in Savanna, GA. Promising to return, she left John Wesley and his older sister, Willie, in the care of their Kennesaw, GA. grandparents and an extended family of aunts, uncles and cousins. Life in post-reconstruction rural Georgia was not easy for blacks and at his impressionable age Dobbs was, no doubt, exposed to the kind of racial prejudice common in the rural South during the Jim Crow era.

Dobbs' mother returned to Kennesaw several times to visit her children and, when John Wesley was 9-years old, she returned to bring her children back to Savannah. This afforded Dobbs an opportunity that was unique among black boys from rural Georgia. . .the chance for a formal education. While in school in Savannah, Dobbs worked several jobs to earn money for clothing and school supplies, which exposed him to the businesses and neighborhoods of middle-class black Savannah.

The Atlanta Years

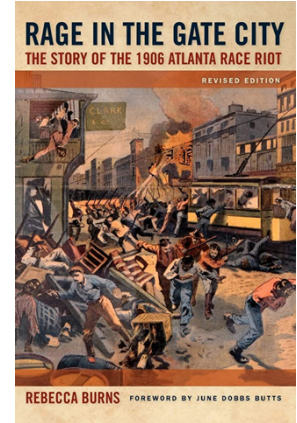
By the 1890s, Atlanta had surpassed Savannah as Georgia's most economically progressive city for blacks. John Wesley's mother, Minnie, made the decision to move her little family to Atlanta. In 1897 at the age of 15, John Wesley Dobbs entered Atlanta Baptist Seminary, (later renamed Morehouse College).

The Atlanta Years (cont.)

It was during this time that Dobbs was exposed to the concepts of self-respect, confidence, and individual responsibility. Concepts that would frame his belief in fighting racism no matter the personal costs.

Adulthood and Family Life

After two years of study, family financial needs would motivate Dobbs to leave school, take the Civil Service exam and find employment with the U.S. Railway Mail Service, where he would work as a Postal Clerk for the next three decades. At that time, the U.S. Mail Service was one of the few institutions in America that had an integrated workforce, and Dobbs would ultimately be promoted to a supervisory role over both black and white employees. As part of his job, he would also receive a government issued firearm, a right that very few blacks enjoyed in the Jim Crow South. This “perk” would serve Dobbs well during Atlanta’s [1906 Race Riot](#) when he would be forced to defend his home from marauding whites intent on harming any black Atlantans they could find.



*Rage in the Gate City,
Rebecca Burns*

In 1906, Dobbs married Irene Ophelia Thompson and, although raised as a staunch Baptist, Dobbs would join his new wife and her family as a member of Atlanta’s *First Congregational Church*. Five years later, Dobbs was initiated into the [Prince Hall Masons](#), an honor that may have been promoted by some of the influential members of First Congregational. Dobbs would maintain a life-long relationship with the Freemasons, serving from 1932 until his death in 1961 as the society’s *Grand Master*.



*John Wesley Dobbs, his wife and 6-
daughters*

Together, John Wesley and Irene raised six, very accomplished children, all females. Over their years in Atlanta, the Dobbs family would accumulate significant social status and respect. The best-selling book by former AJC reporter Gary Pomerantz titled *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn* profiled the Dobbs family as one of Atlanta’s two most influential families. John Wesley Dobbs passed away August 30, 1961, the same week that the Atlanta Public School System was desegregated.

Notable Milestones in the Life of John Wesley Dobbs

1932 – Dobbs is elected as the Grand Master of the *Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge, Free and Accepted Masons of Georgia*.” He would hold this highest position of Atlanta’s Prince Hall district until his death in 1961.

During his tenure as Grand Master, Dobbs could frequently be seen walking in his trademark 3-piece suit along Auburn Avenue accompanied by an entourage of Masons.



The Grand Master

Frequently, he would stop to engage local citizens in conversation. To Atlanta he was John Wesley Dobbs, but to Auburn Avenue, he was simply *The Grand*.

1936 - Dobbs speaks at Big Bethel Church, laying out his plan to awaken the political conscience of Atlanta's black community by creating the *Atlanta Civic and Political League* with the goal of registering 10,000 voters. At that time, less than 600 blacks were registered to vote in Atlanta. Over the next decade, 20,000 blacks would be registered to vote in Atlanta elections.

1946 – the outlawing of Georgia's "White Only" political primary opens the electoral system to Black political participation. Putting aside years of political animosity, Republican John Wesley Dobbs and Democrat A.T. Walden formed the *Atlanta Negro Voters League (ANVL)* with the goal of uniting Atlanta's Black voters. At the same time the *All Citizens Registration Committee* was formed. Both organizations, working together over the next 51-days, would gather 18,000 votes, enough to convince Mayor Hartsfield of the power of Atlanta's Black voters.

1948 – Fulfilling a promise made to Dobbs, Mayor William Hartsfield appoints Atlanta's first Black police officers. The following year, Hartsfield installs streetlamps along Auburn Avenue. Dobbs would continue his work toward racial equality, constantly pressing Mayor Hartsfield to fulfill



Atlanta's 1st Black Police Officers

other promises made to the Black Community. In the 1950s, with the emergence of a younger generation of Black leaders, Dobbs' influence began to wane. His health declining, Dobbs suffered a stroke on August 21, 1961, and died nine days later, the same week Atlanta City Schools were desegregated.

In January of 1994, Dobbs' grandson, Atlanta's Mayor Maynard Jackson, changed the name of Houston Street to *John Wesley Dobbs Avenue*. Two years later, the City would install for the 1996 Olympics, a monument titled *Through His Eyes*. The interactive, larger-than-life

sculpture of Dobbs' head invites visitors to look through Dobbs' visionary eyes up toward what was once the commercial and cultural hub for Atlanta's African American community and a symbol of Black entrepreneurship and economic success when opportunities for African Americans were limited due to segregation and discrimination.

The legacy of John Wesley Dobbs is cemented in Atlanta's history. He will be remembered as a caring and devoted family of high moral standing, a man who placed a top priority on self-reliance, education and economic advancement as motivators of progress for Atlanta's African Americans. His staunch belief in community leadership, civil rights activism and Black suffrage brought about significant and lasting change for Atlanta's African Americans.



Through His Eyes, Auburn Avenue

Takeaways:

John Wesley Dobbs was a civic and political activist in Atlanta, Georgia

J.W. Dobbs was keenly interested in using the power of the vote to bring about social change

J.W. Dobbs was the Grand Master of Atlanta's *Prince Hall Masons* for almost 30-years

He was an influential representative of Atlanta's Black community

He was one of a handful of Pastors and businessmen who had the ear of Mayor Hartsfield.

J.W. Dobbs fought tirelessly for black civil rights and his beloved Auburn Avenue

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