Throughout much of the late nineteenth and twentieth century, North Carolina enjoyed a reputation for being among the most politically progressive states in the American South. It was among the last southern states to descend into Jim Crow and during the civil rights movement it avoided the sorts of clashes that engulfed cities like Birmingham and Little Rock. Its largest city became a national model for school desegregation in the 1970s, and Charlotte schoolchildren were famously invited to Boston to help with Northern urban desegregation efforts. In 2008, it was one of only three southern states to cast its electoral votes for Barack Obama. At the same time, North Carolina remains a right-to-work stronghold with the lowest rate of union membership in the nation. Moreover, North Carolina is currently one of five Sunbelt states that bans public-sector collective bargaining and one of only two states that has passed right-to-work legislation and a ban on public sector bargaining. My project attempts to reconcile this apparent contradiction by examining the ways in which progressive racial politics and anti-unionism were contested in North Carolina’s largest city. Eventually becoming the nation’s second-largest banking center by assets after New York, Charlotte is perfectly situated to shed light on a strain of pro-business, anti-labor politics that has been instrumental in reshaping the American political landscape.

In recent years, historians have become increasingly interested in the relationship between business, labor, and the state in the second half of the twentieth century. Much of this scholarship focuses on the 1970s, arguing that we can locate the origins of our current economic and political predicament in this decade. Notable among these recent studies are Judith Stein’s expansive survey of American domestic and foreign trade policies and Jefferson Cowie’s sweeping examination of organized labor’s decline. My dissertation project looks at how these larger postwar economic transformations unfolded on the local level, focusing on the changing relationship between local labor unions, civil rights activists, municipal officials, and the downtown business elite. In order to frame Charlotte’s economic transformations, this project also engages debates about the emergence and political influence of the “Sunbelt.” A term popularized by Republican strategist Kevin Phillips in his 1969 bestseller *The Emerging Republican Majority*, the Sunbelt is generally considered to be the region stretching from North Carolina to California, and which witnessed explosive economic and population growth in the decades following the Second World War. Over the past three decades a vibrant and diverse body of scholarship on the Sunbelt has made a persuasive case for the numerous ways in which the region has fundamentally reshaped American culture, politics, and religion. Yet the role of labor unions, and especially public employee unionism in the Sunbelt, has been understudied. A few notable exceptions (although they do not focus on public employees) include Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, “Counter-Organizing the Sunbelt: Right-to-Work Campaigns and Anti-Union Conservatism, 1943-1958,” *Pacific Historical Review* 78 (February 2009): 81-118; Kim Phillips-Fein, “As Great an Issue as Slavery or Abolition: Economic Populism, the Conservative Movement, and the Right-to-Work Campaigns of 1988,” *Journal of Policy History* 23, no. 4 (2011): 492-512.

In order for Charlotte to become a national center of finance, its civic boosters argued that the city must embrace the politics of racial moderation. Civil rights and black politics are therefore central to the story of Charlotte’s economic and political development. This project, then, also engages the now extensive body of scholarship on the African American civil rights movement. While earlier generations of historians focused on southern struggles in an era bookended by the landmark 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education* and the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, scholars in the past decade have challenged and expanded both the chronological and geographical boundaries of this narrative. In so doing, they have greatly enriched our understanding of black political activism and resistance throughout the twentieth century.
I trace the evolution of Charlotte’s “biracial coalition around economic growth” which, on the one hand, enabled the election of candidates like Charlotte’s first black mayor, Harvey Gantt, yet, on the other hand, had often devastating consequences for working class African Americans. This dissertation thus brings the burgeoning literature on political economy in the 1970s into dialogue with the more developed body of work on civil rights activism to explore the ways in which the larger economic transformations of this era shaped and constrained black political activism.

### I. Organized Labor and Business Boosterism in the North Carolina Piedmont

North Carolina’s economic predicament was decades in the making. In the late nineteenth century, New England textile mills began migrating south in search of cheap labor. The region of central North Carolina and northern South Carolina known as the “Piedmont” emerged as an ideal fit for textile production. The Carolina Piedmont contained flat expanses of land suitable for constructing large factories, abundant rivers to provide hydroelectric power, and an almost entirely non-unionized labor force willing to work for substantially less than their northern counterparts. In textile mills, this labor force was composed largely of women and children. By the turn of the twentieth century, the Piedmont had become the state’s industrial and economic center and by 1920, North Carolina had supplanted all of New England as the nation’s largest textile producer. According to historian Thomas Hanchett, North Carolina’s “leaders (and many ordinary folks) felt that cheap labor was the only way that [the state] could compete with more advanced and more capitalized regions. The alternative to low wages was not higher wages, in their minds, but instead a non-industrialized wasteland.”

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8 The Piedmont contains many of the region’s smaller mill towns as well as larger cities including Charlotte, Winston-Salem, Raleigh, and Durham in North Carolina and Green-ville, Columbia and Spartanburg in South Carolina.

9 Thomas Hanchett is author of the most comprehensive scholarly work on late nineteenth and twentieth century Charlotte, entitled Sorting Out the New South City. Race, Class, and Urban Development in Charlotte, 1875-1975 (Chapel Hill, 1998). Quote comes from correspondence with Hanchett, 6 February 2013.
across international borders and oceans, the Carolina Piedmont was America’s Mexico.10

By the middle of the twentieth century, Charlotte had emerged as a city steadfast in its opposition to organized labor. This path, however, was not inevitable. Instead, the first decades of the twentieth century were marked by workers’ repeated attempts to gain union recognition, increase wages and benefits, and improve overall working conditions. The first set of contests occurred in 1919 when Charlotte’s millworkers and streetcar drivers went on strike in response to post-World War I cuts in hours and wages. Like cities across the nation, Charlotte witnessed significant labor unrest during the economic recession following the war.11 Then in 1934, Piedmont laborers joined more than 400,000 textile workers across the nation in a general strike, the largest single-industry strike to date. Largely self-organized, the General Strike of 1934 was marked by repeated incidents of violent repression of unionists. In the Carolina Piedmont, the violence and intimidation culminated at the Chiquola Mill in Honea Path, South Carolina, on September 6, 1934, when factory guards shot and killed seven factory workers and injured twenty more.12 Despite the unionists’ overwhelming defeat, such conflicts nevertheless undermined the message of North Carolina’s industrialists who traveled the nation proudly marketing their low-wage, non-unionized, and purportedly docile workforce. Duke Power advertised, “The birth rate of the Carolinas is the highest in the United States. Already a second generation of textile workers has come along, and in many older textile centers a third generation has grown up.” Another industrialist boasted of “willing labor, unhampered by any artificial restrictions on output.”13

In 1947, North Carolina joined ten other Sunbelt states in passing so-called “right-to-work” legislation that created a new series of obstacles for organized labor. Such legislation emerged as the result of section 14b of the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act, which allowed individual states to pass legislation banning the “union shop” — whereby unions and employers were prohibited from making union membership a requirement for employment. Under right-to-work laws, workers who were not union members could still take advantage of union-negotiated wages, contracts, and benefits, therefore creating what unions called a “free-rider” problem. If people could reap the benefits of membership without paying the dues, it became doubly challenging for labor organizers to convince workers to join unions...
in states already hostile towards organized labor. Within a decade of these laws being passed, the percentage of the workforce that belonged to unions in “right-to-work” states decreased dramatically.14

At the same time that workers in the Carolina Piedmont struggled to overcome this legacy of defeat, this period of unprecedented economic growth in the Carolina Piedmont enabled the consolidation of power in the hands of a confident and paternalistic merchant and manufacturing class. Charlotte’s bankers, manufacturers, real estate developers, and businessmen had never been better off. The Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond had recently opened a branch in Charlotte, making it the region’s financial center, and the city’s economy witnessed continued growth throughout the post-World War II era. Manufacturing, wholesaling, transportation, and banking provided a diversified economic base for the city, which meant that the textile industry’s decline after the Second World War did not hurt Charlotte’s economy to the same degree that it did other textile-heavy cities.15

North Carolina’s elected officials and businessmen joined Governor Luther Hodges, the self-described “businessman in the statehouse,” in scouring the nation in pursuit of new industry to recruit to the Tar Heel State.16 Hodges relished the title of “industry hunter” as he restructured the state’s tax code to be more business-friendly and used venues like the Wall Street Journal, where he took out a full-page advertisement, to promote his achievement.17 Unsatisfied with the promotion of his achievements in print advertisements alone, Hodges recruited a team of the state’s most successful salesmen to travel with him to New York to publicize the state’s economic advantages and its people who “are anxious to work and interested in their jobs.” Hodges extended his marketing tour to Cleveland, Philadelphia, and Chicago, hoping business leaders would understand North Carolinians’ “anxious[ness] to work” as a code referring to the fact that the state was not burdened with strong unions with the capacity to hamper productivity or profits.18

15 Hanchett, Sorting Out the New South City, 225-6.
16 This was, in fact, the title of Hodges’ autobiography, Businessman in the Statehouse: Six Years as Governor of North Carolina (Chapel Hill, 1962).
17 Hodges, Businessman in the Statehouse, 29.
18 Ibid, 61.
It would not be an overstatement to say that Charlotte’s leaders, like their counterparts in Raleigh, spent much of the twentieth century obsessed with the city’s national image. Civic boosters worked tirelessly to move the city out of Atlanta’s shadow and distinguish it from other similar sounding southern cities like Charleston, South Carolina, or Charlottesville, Virginia. Lacking Atlanta’s size, Charleston’s historic charm and Charlottesville’s college town advantages, Charlotte’s leaders set out to put their city on the map by transforming it from regional trading hub into an international center of finance. So great were their efforts that one visiting journalist famously observed, “Charlotte ... may edge out Dallas and Atlanta as home to the purest strain ever discovered of the Southern booster gene.” This particular brand of civic promotion resulted from and, in turn, fostered deep ties between business and city government.

As in other Sunbelt cities, Charlotte’s business leaders have historically dominated local politics. Between 1935 and 1979, every mayor of Charlotte, with only one exception, had been either the president or owner of his own business. Many of these men came directly from the Chamber of Commerce boardroom. Serving as the chairman of Charlotte’s Chamber of Commerce virtually guaranteed a mayoral candidate’s win, as was the case for Stanford Brookshire and John Belk, Charlotte’s longest serving mayors in the twentieth century. Many in the city were proud of the Chamber’s prominent role in city politics. Not least among these were the editors of the city’s morning and evening newspapers, the *Charlotte Observer* and *Charlotte News*. “Some towns are run by one man, some by a handful of men,” boasted the *Observer* in 1960, “Not Charlotte ... Charlotte is run, primarily and well, by the Chamber of Commerce ... We are pleased to acknowledge its bossism and to wish it continued health.” By the early 1970s, the Charlotte Chamber of Commerce had adopted perhaps the bluntest slogan imaginable: “Charlotte: A Good Place to Make Money.”

The business community’s influence in Charlotte, however, had more serious implications than such Chamber of Commerce slogans. In striving to create the political and economic climate most hospitable to business, Charlotte’s leaders were also creating a city unabashedly hostile towards organized labor. The backlash against organized labor in Charlotte in the late 1950s was consistent with larger national trends. Much of this backlash occurred in response to the recession of 1957 and 1958, the most severe economic downturn of the post-World War II era. Kim Phillips-Fein explains how unions
came under attack during this period. “In the newly austere economic climate,” explains Phillips-Fein, “corporations were more eager than they had been to find ways to cut their costs.” In other words, labor costs were first on the proposed chopping block and unions stood squarely in the way.

In mid-century Charlotte, the tensions between business and labor played out most dramatically over the rights of public workers to unionize. These confrontations culminated in an effective Chamber of Commerce-led campaign to persuade the Charlotte city council to ban municipal employees’ unions. At the center of this campaign were the Chamber of Commerce’s concerns over police and firefighters unions. In December of 1958, the Chamber’s Board of Directors passed a resolution calling on city council to forbid police officers and all other municipal employees from unionizing. The Chamber of Commerce worried that a police union would jeopardize one of its most vital instruments of labor control, arguing that union membership created a conflict of interest for the city’s law enforcement officers. A unionized police force might sympathize with the strikers they would be ordered to disperse, intimidate, or arrest. Observer Columnist Joe Doster best articulated this hypothetical scenario when he asked, “Would a policeman walk a beat to maintain peaceful picketing during duty hours and then join the strikers to walk the picket line at night?” These concerns were misleading, however, given that the police union had a no-strike clause written into its charter.

The influence business organizations wielded over labor legislation in North Carolina was not lost on the state’s union leaders. During the 1958 North Carolina AFL-CIO Convention, William M. “Millard” Barbee, president of the North Carolina AFL-CIO, blamed the 1958 recession on the compounded effects of 1947 Taft-Hartley Act on the national level and right-to-work legislation on the state level. He charged that the past decade’s anti-labor legislation was responsible for the state’s continually declining per capita income. Other speakers indicted business lobbying groups such as the Chamber of Commerce.

and the National Association of Manufacturers. Chicago AFL-CIO Regional Director Eugene Moats stressed the vulnerable position of Charlotte’s workers given that the city was both home to a particularly powerful Chamber of Commerce and was the headquarters of the National Textile Manufacturers Association. “I think I can say without hesitation,” declared Moats, who had experience organizing unions across the nation, “that ... the city of Charlotte ... is the seat of more vicious anti-union propaganda than any other city of the United States of America.”

Despite the protests and critiques of North Carolina’s labor leader, the Chamber was successful in getting a municipal union ban passed, and thus solidified a power dynamic in Charlotte politics that flowed directly from the Chamber’s boardroom to city council and on to the mayor — a dynamic that had disastrous consequences for both the city’s unionized and non-unionized workers. The Chamber’s actions, moreover, had political implications that extended beyond the local level. Attempts to organize city workers and the ensuing Charlotte municipal employee ban, along with a prolonged textile strike elsewhere in the state, prompted the North Carolina General Assembly to pass legislation in 1959 prohibiting all public employees from collective bargaining and banning police and firefighters from unionizing entirely. Although the latter portion of the legislation was overturned a decade later on constitutional grounds, the public-employee collective-bargaining ban has remained intact for more than five decades, fundamentally shaping and constraining the options for workers throughout the state of North Carolina for the remainder of the twentieth century.

In the second half of the twentieth century, public employees would become the face of the American labor movement. From the early 1960s to the early 1990s, public-employee union density increased from just below 13 percent to almost 40 percent while private-sector union density dropped from more than 33 percent to less than 12 percent over roughly the same period. By 1996, almost 40 percent of union members were public employees, despite representing a much smaller sector of the American workforce. Between 1955 and the early 1970s, public-employee union rosters grew from about 400,000 to over 4 million, enabling the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) to become among the AFL-CIO’s largest affiliates. The demographic composition of the public-employee workforce also changed dramatically during this period and unions responded accordingly. Labor historian Robert Zieger explains how AFSCME, “long a genteel lobbying agent for small groups of


technical and professional workers ... now functioned as a sort of ‘gray-collar’ industrial union, recruiting thousands of custodians, sanitation men, laborers, and clerical workers.” 28 African Americans and women also became a larger part of the public workforce — a workforce that increasingly eschewed the title of “public servant” in favor of “government worker” for obvious historical reasons.29

Despite government workers’ importance to the labor movement in the second half of the twentieth century, recent scholarship on the business-led assault against organized labor in this period has largely ignored public-employee unions — an oversight especially pronounced in literature on the Sunbelt.30 Nevertheless, public-employee unions and the campaigns waged against them can offer new insights into the changing relationship between business, labor and the state in the mid-twentieth century. In his study of labor relations in the public sector, sociologist Paul Johnston argues that “public workers are, through their movements and their unions, state builders, thus we need a theory of the state ... that includes the world of public work and the social movements of those who toil there.”31 If we are to recognize public employees as state builders, then, it is useful to conceptualize the campaigns of business interest groups against public-employee unions as not just attacks against organized labor, but also as attempts to undermine the state. Or, as was the case in Charlotte (and later, the state of North Carolina), business interest groups (such as the Chamber of Commerce) effectively used one arm of the state (city council/the North Carolina legislature) to undermine another (city/state workers). North Carolina’s businessmen, having waged an effective decades-long assault on private sector unions across the state, saw public-sector unions as the last major impediment to their control over local and state government. At the same time, attacks on public-employee unions often became synonymous with attacks on the state itself and the role of government in providing services like police and fire protection, ambulance service, garbage pickup, street cleaning, and other arguably essential services.

Although it was primarily white and male workers who filled Charlotte’s union halls during the first half of the twentieth century, mid-twentieth century Charlotte’s contests over organized labor would also have important implications for African American and female workers (and especially African American women), for whom public jobs became integral to economic mobility in the following decades.32 Though fewer than 15 percent of African American women worked

28 Zieger, American Workers, American Unions, 163-4.
29 Ibid, 164.
31 Paul Johnston, Success While Others Fail: Social Movement Unionism and the Public Workplace (Ithaca, 1994), 9, 215-316.
32 Some black Charlotteans worked for the sanitation and streets department, but these were among the lowest paid positions in the city. Most of Charlotte’s city jobs and their unions remained segregated into the 1960s. There are, however, a number of studies on interracial unionism (and the challenges therein) elsewhere in the South. See especially Michael K. Honey, Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers (Urbana, 1993); William P. Jones, Tribe of Black Ulysses: African American Lumber Workers in the Jim Crow South (Urbana, 2005); Robert Korstad, Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South (Chapel Hill, 2003), and Robert Samuel Smith, Race, Labor, & Civil Rights: Griggs Versus Duke Power and the Struggle for Equal Employment Opportunity (Baton Rouge, 2008).
in government-related jobs in 1950, this number almost tripled to 43 percent by 2000, with public jobs paying significantly higher wages and salaries than the private sector. Additionally, the size of a city’s black public workforce has been shown to correlate with lower poverty rates (that is, higher numbers of African Americans in city government correspond with the increased effectiveness of public assistance programs in addressing black poverty). Some scholars have even argued that African American public employment, more than federal anti-poverty programs, “proved the most powerful vehicles for African American economic mobility and the most effective anti-poverty legacy of the Great Society.”

Just over a year after the North Carolina AFL-CIO assembled in downtown Charlotte to discuss strategies for bolstering the state’s unions, another group congregated downtown to discuss the role of organized labor in the city. But unlike the union leaders a year before, however, these were area businessmen who had assembled to hear a lecture by New York attorney and labor-relations consultant Benjamin Werne. Emboldened by its recent legislative victory, Charlotte’s business community was now moving to the offensive and recruiting national experts to advise them on methods of combating unions and their organizers. Despite Southerners’ oft-heard pronouncements against northern meddling in the southern workplace, Charlotte’s business community welcomed such influence if it helped them thwart organized labor.

Benjamin Werne did not disappoint. A rapt audience listened for more than two hours as he recounted experiences working in New York, one of the most heavily unionized cities (and states) in the nation. Painting a somber picture of a business’s future once its workers unionized, Werne offered a variety of maneuvers for avoiding, obstructing, and defeating organized labor. He warned against the dangers of shortsightedness, asking his audience, “Do [you] want to be crippled for a short period of time,” he asked rhetorically, “or crippled for the rest of [your] life [by a union]?” To this end, employers should devise delay tactics, such as demanding a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) hearing (which often took months or years to settle) if they got word that workers were attempting to organize. Such strategies would slow a union’s momentum and, hopefully, cause workers to distrust labor organizers and their promises. Should workers vote for union representation, Werne reassured his audience, all was not lost. Business owners should then focus on limiting...
union effectiveness by being flexible and adaptable. This strategy would allow management to avoid the appearance of yielding to union demands. In other words, management should “always leave a crack in the door for face value.” Werne concluded by shifting from the pragmatic to moralistic. He cautioned, “When you say you can’t pay 10 cents and then finally agree to pay it, you’re telling your employees in language that they can’t forget that you can’t be counted on to tell the truth.”

Werne’s recruitment of Charlotte was consistent with larger national developments. The late 1950s witnessed a boom in the anti-labor consulting business, one that would continue to grow in the decades that followed. The National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) and major national corporations like Sears, Roebuck & Co. began holding management-training sessions on anti-labor strategies. Resistance to and obstruction of organized labor also began encroaching more explicitly into the political sphere. Business leaders called on one another to run for political office as a way to stave off the power of labor unions. In February 1960, none other than actor turned General Electric spokesman Ronald Reagan, with political aspirations of his own, brought this message to the Charlotte Chamber of Commerce. In a talk entitled “Business, Ballots, and Bureaus,” Reagan emphasized “the modern importance of business in politics and government.” Reagan’s audience, however, hardly needed instructions on becoming more involved in policymaking. The Chamber of Commerce’s swift and successful crusade to outlaw municipal unions exemplifies the effectiveness with which business leaders had convinced elected officials that what was good for business was good for Charlotte.

II. Civil Rights and the Politics of Economic Development

In 1964, Charlotte writer Harry Golden declared that “[Charlotteans] would elect Martin [Luther] King or Malcolm X mayor if somehow one of them could give them a guarantee of no labor unions and no minimum wage for laundry workers.” Born Herschel Goldhirsch to Austro-Hungarian Jewish parents and raised in New York’s Lower East Side, Golden moved to Charlotte in 1941 to work for the American Federation of Labor’s Charlotte Labor Journal and the Charlotte Observer. According to one study of Golden, “while the Bible Belt accepted him, he always smacked of the Borscht Belt, exuding the stereotypical characteristics of a Yiddish-speaking, sidewalks-of-New York, diamond in the rough kibitzer whose political sentiments were

37 Pat Watters, Charlotte (Atlanta, 1964), 76.
An outsider uninterested in assimilating into Charlotte’s racially segregated, anti-union, Protestant culture, Golden instead dedicated himself highlighting the cruelty and absurdity of Jim Crow in everyday life through his one-man newspaper operation, The Carolina Israelite. A midcentury Jonathan Swift, Golden used the newspaper to advance outlandish proposals for undermining the segregationist regime. The most famous of these proposals was Golden’s 1956 “Vertical Negro Plan.” White Charlotteans, noted Golden, like the vast majority of white southerners, were content to stand among African Americans at grocery stores, in movie theaters ticket lines, and at bus stops, yet they insisted that seated venues like schools, buses, and churches, be segregated by race. Golden, in turn, proposed removing seats from students’ desks as a speedy route to compliance with Brown v. Board “since no one in the South pays the slightest attention to a vertical negro.”

Despite Golden’s humorous tone, however, his many “modest proposals” were intended to draw attention to the more serious reality of racial injustice while also embarrassing local boosters sensitive to their city’s reputation, and embarrass local boosters he did. While Golden’s role in accelerating desegregation in Charlotte should not be overstated, in the years that followed Charlotte’s business and civic leaders, responding to black pressure and out of fear of looking like a backwater Southern town (as Golden’s barbs were intended to suggest), took a proactive role in desegregating the city’s public establishments. Yet, as Golden recognized, the city leaders’ receptiveness to civil rights demands did not extend to organized labor. And while Charlotte avoided the sorts of public civil rights clashes that engulfed other southern cities during the 1960s (and northern industries looking to relocate or expand south rewarded the city accordingly), the city spent the better part of the 1960s battling its municipal workers over their rights to organize and bargain collectively. Charlotte’s labor clashes, however, rarely captured national attention and have drawn little scholarly attention since, despite the interesting questions they raise. For example, to what degree, if any, did Charlotte’s moderate to progressive position on civil rights served to stave off, to varying degrees, labor radicalism? In turn, with labor neutralized and little possibility of the sorts of substantive civil rights/labor alliances that occurring in other parts of the country, did Charlotte’s business and civic leadership take a proactive stance on desegregation because they did not see it, over the long term, posing any fundamental challenge to the economic order in Charlotte?


In order to explore the tensions between racial and economic liberalism in Charlotte that would eventually come to epitomize politics in the Sunbelt South, this project first looks at local electoral politics and coalition building in the 1950s and 1960s. It traces the ways in which both black and white elected officials united with the city’s business elite in repeated efforts to thwart labor activism, and, often at the same time, promote racially progressive positions. Specifically, it follows two episodes in Charlotte’s evolution. First, I examine the biracial pro-labor coalition that formed around Charlotte’s first female mayoral candidate, white city councilwoman Martha Evans, who was ultimately defeated by Chamber of Commerce chairman Stanford Brookshire in 1961. I then consider the 1964 campaign and subsequent political career of Fred Alexander, Charlotte’s first African American city councilman and outspoken opponent of organized labor.

Charlotte’s first city councilwoman, Martha Evans, offers an example of political roads not taken — she represented a vision of local politics that was inclusive, democratic, and supported by political coalitions built along economic lines. Although the city’s at-large election system favored candidates endorsed (and usually bankrolled) by Charlotte’s business community, a coalition of white working class and African American voters secured Evans’s election in 1955 (and her reelection in 1957). In 1959 Evans ran for the highest office in the city, challenging incumbent mayor James Smith, again with support from the same coalition of voters who boosted Evans twice to city. Although Evans campaign was ultimately unable to overcome her well-funded opponent, she nonetheless received 47 percent of the vote, carrying most African American precincts and many working-class white ones. According to one scholar, “her tally was especially impressive because she ‘did little advertising and hired no poll workers,’ the latter being a frequent euphemism for individuals who received gas money or other financial compensation for mobilizing white working class and black voters, by whatever means necessary.”

Undeterred by her first loss, Evan ran for mayor again in 1961, this time challenging sitting Chamber of Commerce president and the business elite’s preferred candidate, Stanford Brookshire. Taking a lesson from her loss to the well-funded Smith to inform her campaign strategy against Brookshire, Evans attempted to use her campaign’s economic handicap to her advantage. One campaign flyer, for example, circulated across the city told voters, “If you want a mayor who represents ALL THE PEOPLE, not just people with money,.

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40 Smith, _Boom for Whom?_ , 35.
you will vote on Tuesday for Martha W. Evans.\textsuperscript{41} Evans’s underdog rhetoric, however, proved insufficient to defeat Brookshire and she again lost to the candidate with deeper pockets, but again carried the African American and working class white vote.\textsuperscript{42} Despite her loss, however, some local observers credited Evans’s candidacy with pushing Brookshire to become more progressive on civil rights over the course of his campaign in order to attract potential Evans voters.

Ignoring the role Evans might have played in his shifting political stance on desegregation, Brookshire told one visiting journalist that a combination of “social consciousness, civic pride, and economic considerations” had moved him, along with the Chamber of Commerce, to spearhead local desegregation efforts.\textsuperscript{43} For years, black Charlotteans pressured the city to integrate its hotels, restaurants, swimming pools, and other public spaces, yet 1963 turned out to be a watershed year for civil rights in Charlotte when increased black political pressure at the local level combined with escalating civil rights clashes across the South. According to one study, such pressure “moved Brookshire to do ‘voluntarily’ what he knew was inevitable.”\textsuperscript{44} Fearing Charlotte might go the way of Birmingham or Little Rock, the Chamber of Commerce unanimously passed a resolution recommending “all businesses in this community catering to the general public be opened immediately to all customers without regard to race, creed, or color.”\textsuperscript{45} Brookshire’s successor, Chamber president and local banker John Edward Burnside, convinced a group of local hotel and restaurant owners to integrate their businesses, thereby setting a precedent which other city establishments could follow. Of all the arguments he made, Burnside’s economic argument proved most persuasive to this audience of Sunbelt businessmen. According to one business owner in attendance, “[t]he vivid reminder of the years that Little Rock went without a single new industry coming to town after its racial difficulties in 1957 was the most effective point made.” An executive for Eastern Airlines confirmed that his company had chosen Charlotte over other southern cities to build a six-million-dollar computer center because of “the admirable way race relations had been handled.”\textsuperscript{46} In an article entitled “Credit and the Development of the South,” published in the University of Virginia Newsletter, Preston T. Holmes, the Vice President of State-Planters Bank of Commerce and Trust in Richmond wrote that “[t]he manner in which [desegregation] is handled will have a tremendous effect on the ability of the South to attract new industry and to encourage existing industries to expand their present facilities. North Carolina,
with legal compliance with the [*Brown v. Board*] and little social unrest, had a new plant investment in 1958 totaling $253 million, while Arkansas, with its massive resistance and unsettled conditions, had only $25.4 million in 1958 compared with $44.9 in 1957 and $131 million in 1956.”47 Indeed, Charlotte’s recent economic growth was likely the most important determining factor in Brookshire and the business community’s decision to openly support desegregation efforts. With Charlotte finally becoming the city its boosters had long envisioned, local leaders were eager to stave off anything that might compromise Charlotte’s burgeoning status.

With business and city leaders showing increased support for civil rights initiatives, African Americans also found new openings for formal participation in local politics. In 1965, Charlotte voters elected funeral home director Frederick Douglass Alexander to the city council, making him the first African American elected to a city office since Reconstruction. For many black Charlotteans, Alexander’s election proved a first step in bringing home the gains of the recent Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965. Alexander’s victory, however, was not without controversy. In order to win an at-large election in a city with a black minority, Alexander’s camp determined that his supporters would need to cast “single shot” votes. In other words, rather than voting for a full slate of seven candidates, as voters had traditionally done, supporters would cast a lone vote for Alexander and leave the remainder of the ballot empty. Although the strategy was successful, it enraged Charlotte’s old guard, which included the other councilmembers, numerous city officials, as well as the *Charlotte News* and *Observer*. Alexander had “pushed his way” in, the *Observer* contended, and, in so doing, had manipulated the democratic process.48 Alexander countered this claim, reminding critics that his strategy was entirely legal; not to mention the fact that claims about “the democratic process” were disingenuous given the many barriers still in place to African American voting. Alexander maintained that had a white candidate used the same strategy, it would have been praised as “smart politics.”49 In reviewing post-election poll numbers, moreover, the Alexander campaign was able to show decisively that the single-shot strategy was the only tactic sure to get Alexander, or any other black candidate for that matter, elected in a white-majority city.50

Despite Alexander’s controversial entrée into city politics, he proved to be a fairly moderate city councilman. In many ways, Alexander


was an archetypal first black elected official in a southern city. The first-born son of Zechariah Alexander, a district manager for North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company (one of the nation’s largest African American-owned businesses at the time) turned prominent funeral home director, Fred Alexander was afforded countless opportunities unavailable to most black Charlotteans. Alexander attended high school in Charlotte but headed north for college, to Philadelphia’s Lincoln University. Alexander’s elite education and affluent family background shaped his faith in the educated black middle class. Upon graduation from college, Alexander returned to Charlotte intent on improving opportunities for black Charlotteans and focused his energy on registering black voters and lobbying for the city to hire more black employees. Some black activists in the city, such as local dentist and community activist Reginald Hawkins, criticized Alexander’s moderation, arguing that he did not sufficiently advocate for African Americans from his seat on city council and ignored the interests of working class blacks in favor of capitulating to Charlotte’s business leaders.51

Alexander’s pro-business outlook and cordial relationship with Charlotte’s business community translated into a general hostility toward organized labor. On frequent occasions, Alexander argued that “labor unions offer little to nothing in the struggle for Negro rights in the South, not even membership.”52 Indeed, Alexander had a point. African Americans had reason to be skeptical of organized labor given their historic exclusion from trade unions across the nation. “You can’t get anywhere dealing with the poor white man,” Alexander maintained. “He’s just like the Negro — struggling.”53

Although some prominent black leaders like Alexander were hostile towards organized labor, alliances between civil rights and labor activists were being formed in cities across the south. One place these alliances became most evident was in civil rights-era public worker activism. Public workers in the 1960s declared an unprecedented number of strikes. In 1967 alone, the nation witnessed 250 public-employee strikes, a fourfold increase over the previous one-year record.54 A few strikes, such as the New York and Memphis sanitation strikes of 1968, the Charleston hospital workers strike in 1969, and the wildcat postal workers strike in 1970 — carried out by 180,000 postal workers nationwide, two-thirds of whom were black — were particularly effective in capturing national attention and casting light on the difficult, dangerous, and often demeaning work carried out by

51 Smith, Boom for Whom? 39-41, this description also draws on Penninger, “The Emergence of Black Political Power.”
52 Pat Watters, Charlotte (Atlanta, 1964), 37.
53 Ibid, 34. For more on black workers and unionism in the South, see Honey, Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights.
54 Zieger, American Workers, American Unions 165.
many of the nation’s public employees. One of the most prominent examples of this coalition was the 1968 sanitation workers strike in Memphis — it was the Memphis strikers whom Martin Luther King, Jr. had come to support before he was assassinated.

In Charlotte, similar connections were also being forged between civil rights and labor activists. Inspired by recent civil rights activism, in 1969 the city’s firefighters decided to file a lawsuit in federal district court to challenge the state’s ban on public-employee unions. Frustrated with stagnant wages, outdated equipment and inadequate grievance procedures, the city’s firefighters had formed the Firefighters Assembly in the two years prior. Yet without the ability to bargain collectively on behalf of the firefighters, the Assembly was little more than a fraternal organization.55 “Well, the law said we could not belong to a labor union,” stated Atkins, “and in the sixties, at that time there was big movements, Martin Luther King and all those other people. I thought to myself, ‘They can’t get me for freedom of assembly.’”56 So, Charlotte’s still all-white fire department hired one of the state’s best civil rights lawyers, African American attorney Julius Chambers, as lead counsel. Bill Brawley, president of the Assembly and the Charlotte Labor Council, explained that hiring Chambers served two interrelated strategic functions. First, it bought the firefighters time. With the fire department being entirely white, they knew an anti-discrimination lawsuit was imminent. According to Brawley, “We would have been sued had it not been for the fact that the best civil rights lawyer in the state, who would probably have handled the suit, was representing the firefighters, and he wouldn’t take those cases because of the conflict.” Second, Chambers’s hiring sent an antagonistic message to city officials. Julius Chambers established himself as a formidable opponent in the courtroom as the plaintiff’s attorney in the landmark *Swann v. Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools* decision concerning school desegregation. In short, the city of Charlotte had already faced Chambers in courtroom and lost and was not eager to do so again. According to Brawley, some white firefighters objected to hiring Chambers, especially in light of the *Swann* case, but Brawley said his response to such complaints was always the same: “Hell, that’s why we hired him! He wins.”58 The court ultimately ruled in partial favor of the firefighters and declared unconstitutional the portion of NC 95-98 prohibiting the state’s firefighters and police officers from unionizing, on the grounds that it violated their right to free assembly, while leaving intact the ban on public employee unions.59

57 The fire department hired its first African American firefighter not long after they hired Chambers.
Conclusion

My dissertation project includes an examination of economic growth and black politics in Charlotte in the 1970s and early 1980s. In contrast to the post-World War II economic boom, which saw both employment and wages on the rise along with a mild redistribution of wealth throughout the late 1960s, the 1970s ushered in what historian Judith Stein has called “the Age of the Inequality.” American workers throughout this decade witnessed many of the gains of the previous era collapse as record levels of high inflation and unemployment led to a period of growing economic inequality. For the first time since the 1930s, “Americans ended [the decade] poorer than they began.”60 Within this national context, my project also explores the trajectory of black politics in this emerging Sunbelt city in the wake of the civil rights legislation of 1964 and 1965. Why were some former activists folded into city government while others pursued the ideologies of self-help and black capitalism outside of electoral politics? How did this growing inequality shape the lives of working class African Americans living in a city in the midst of substantial economic growth? My project is particularly attentive to the ways in which electoral alliances between the city’s black political leadership and the business elite evolved in the 1970s and early 1980s, culminating in the 1983 election of architect and former city councilman Harvey Gantt, Charlotte’s first African American mayor. As the first large city in the South with a white majority to elect a black mayor, Gantt’s election reinforced Charlotte’s reputation for progressive Sunbelt politics.

The final part of my project traces the ascendancy of Charlotte’s banking sector through the 1990s. While Charlotte’s boosters always dreamed that the city would grow to national significance, it was not until a particularly aggressive set of bank executives used North Carolina’s liberal banking laws, passed in the 1960s and 1970s, to take advantage of national cross-state banking deregulation in the 1980s that this dream had the potential to become reality. This section explores the relationship between business and politics on the local level in this new era of deregulation, drawing on a promising collection of oral histories with NationsBank executives. I will conclude by considering the social and political implications of African American reverse migration to Charlotte, one of the important demographic consequences of the city’s massive economic growth.

60 Stein, Pivotal Decade, x-xiv.
Epilogue

In September 2012, Charlotte was chosen to host the Democratic National Convention. As was to be expected, a variety of speakers addressed the convention and, like its Republican counterpart, the convention serves as an opportunity for speakers to rally the so-called base of the Democratic Party. First Lady Michelle Obama, San Antonio mayor Julian Castro, former President Bill Clinton, and a host of Democratic Party celebrities as well as rising stars all made their case for President Obama’s reelection. Vice President Joe Biden told the audience of loyal Democrats, as he announced numerous times on the campaign trail, “Bin Laden is Dead, General Motors is alive.” United Auto Workers President Bob King also addressed the convention, saying, “The auto industry has added a quarter of a million jobs and is thriving once again. These are good middle class jobs — jobs making things for an economy built to last.” Importantly, however, King failed to mention that many of these jobs are at foreign-owned plants throughout the American South such as Toyota and Volkswagen, which do not employ union labor.

As cameras panned across the seemingly diverse crowd of delegates and party members, organized labor beyond the United Auto Workers was one group not visibly present in large numbers. In fact, when the Democratic National Committee announced that they had chosen Charlotte as the site for the 2012 Convention, UNITE HERE, the nation’s largest hotel workers’ union, threatened a boycott due to the fact that none of the city’s hotels are unionized. 61 There was such union dissatisfaction with the DNC’s decision that a number of unions and labor activists held an alternate conference at a nearby church. Rick Sloan, communications director for the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers, told the press, “Going to a right-to-work state and starting a convention on Labor Day for the Democrats? Wow. That’s quite the equation.” 62

Julia Gunn is a Ph.D. candidate in history at the University of Pennsylvania and was the 2012–2013 Doctoral Fellow in African American History at the GHI. Her work has also been supported by a Joel Williamson Visiting Scholar Grant at the Southern Historical Collection at UNC Chapel Hill and an Archie K. Davis Fellowship from the North Caroliniana Society.

