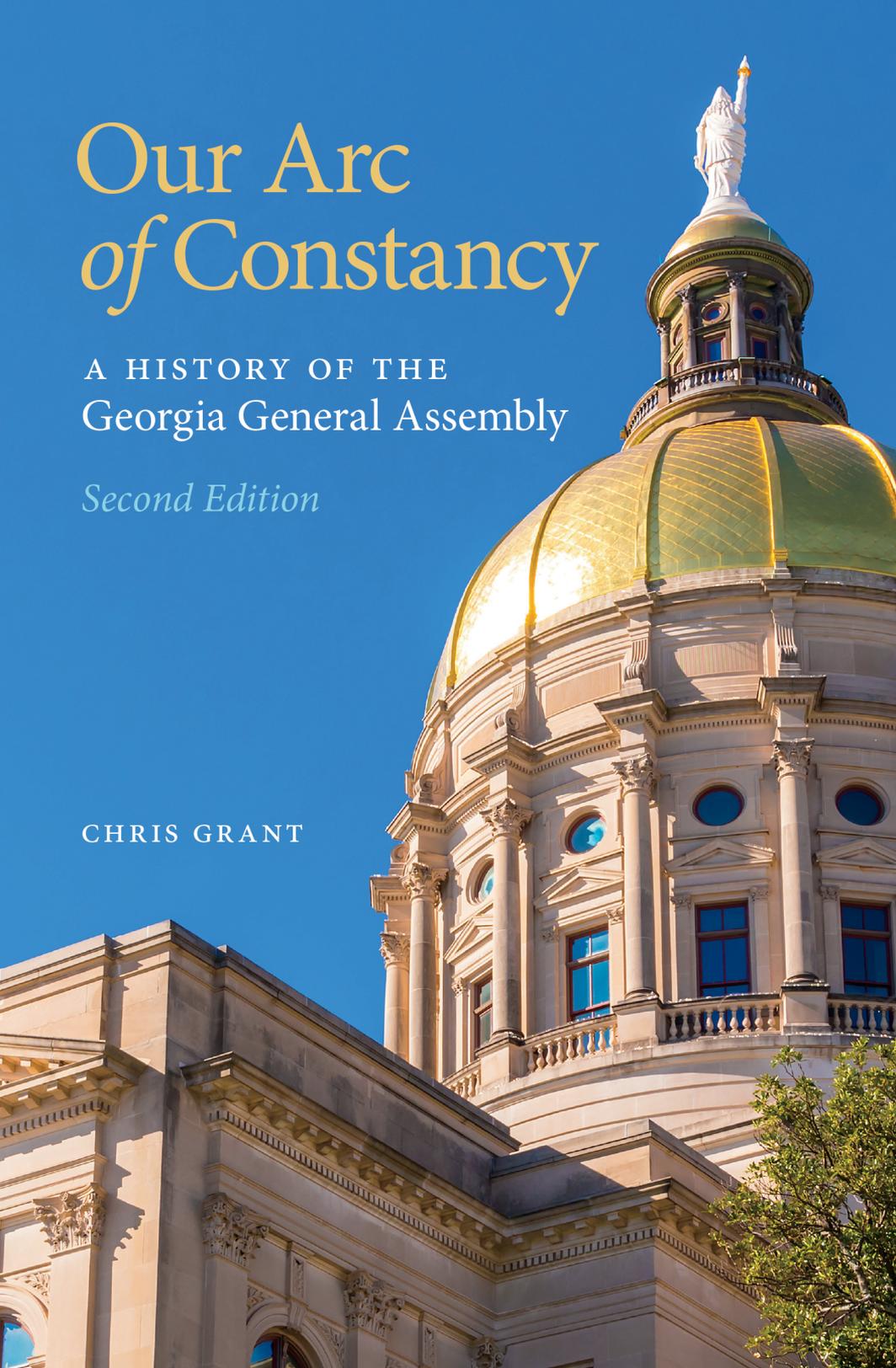


Our Arc of Constancy

A HISTORY OF THE
Georgia General Assembly

Second Edition

CHRIS GRANT



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A HISTORY OF THE
Georgia General Assembly

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SECOND EDITION

With links to the New Georgia Encyclopedia

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House of Representatives

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My Fellow Georgians,

In 1732, King George II signed the charter establishing the Colony of Georgia and its governing board. Known as Trustees, Georgia's original leaders espoused a motto "Non sibi sed aliis." Translated from Latin, it means "Not for self, but for others."

In the intervening span of more than 285 years, much about us as a people and as a state has changed. However, at its core, the central tenet of our government and our General Assembly remains a call to service embodied in that same motto, "Not for self, but for others."

As Speaker of the House, I get the honor and privilege of serving not only the residents of my House District in North Georgia, but also all of the members of the Georgia House of Representatives. Along with my fellow constitutional officers, we strive to meet the needs of a state government serving now more than 10 million residents. It is an awesome responsibility and one which we take very seriously.

As our state continues to evolve – as we grow together – it is as important as ever to be mindful of our rich history and the work of those who came before us. While progress is sometimes slower than we would like, we remain committed to seeing our state and those who serve in its government work together for the common good.

As you read this booklet, I hope that you will be inspired to learn more about our collective past and join with us in working toward a brighter tomorrow.

May God continue to bless our great State of Georgia and the United States of America.

Sincerely,

David Ralston

History of the Assembly

In 1732 James Oglethorpe founded the colony of Georgia intent on fostering an environment in which community and equality could thrive and prosperity would soon follow. Today, Oglethorpe's dream is alive and well, and the state of Georgia is managed by more than 200 legislators representing more than 10 million Georgians. Every year, from every corner of the state, the people's representatives come together under a golden dome in Atlanta to address the state's common concerns. These individuals meeting in "general assembly" form the core of the state's decision-making apparatus. They deliberate rules and standards for people living between the [Okefenokee Swamp](#) on the [Coastal Plain](#) and Brasstown Bald on the [Appalachian spine](#). Members are Democrats and Republicans and, from time to time, even Independents. Some are conservative, and some are liberal. Women and men, blacks and whites, people of Asian descent, Hispanics and Latinos, and descendants from Native Americans all make their voices heard. Although they come to [Atlanta](#) with a variety of backgrounds, the common thread that binds them together is that they have come to do the people's business. When they convene and deliberate, they become our [General Assembly](#).

Oglethorpe's Vision

The colony of Georgia was chartered in 1732 and settled in 1733, thanks to the efforts of British Member of Parliament [James Oglethorpe](#). The reform-minded Oglethorpe believed that even though a person might have difficulties in life, he or she could still make a positive contribution to society. Oglethorpe envisioned Georgia as a colony in which England's "worthy poor" might have a second chance. The first settlers

of Georgia—farmers, laborers, tradespeople, and merchants, among others—arrived ready to help build a new and unique environment. The first colonists were granted their passage across the Atlantic and land upon which to build new lives, yet they lacked the right of self-governance. Instead, the colony of Georgia, proprietary in nature, was governed from England by Oglethorpe and a group of like-minded men called Trustees, whose motto was “Not for self, but for others” (*Non sibi sed aliis*). In their concern for the moral welfare of Georgia’s citizens, the Trustees prohibited slavery as well as rum and other hard alcohol in the colony. Within twenty years, however, colonists’ concerns for economic welfare would ensure the revocation of these prohibitions and prompt the emergence of representative government in Georgia.

The First Era: Establishment, Independence, and Relocation (1751–1803)

Georgia, the last of the thirteen colonies to be founded, was profoundly different from the others. While the colony’s original infrastructure prevented Trustees from profiting from the colony financially, it also prevented citizens from prospering in ways residents of other colonies had. The demands of early Georgians for rights similar to those of other colonists, in addition to inefficient management, led the Trustees to return the charter to the crown in July 1752. It was not until 1755 that a new representative government was finally organized.

This new representative government, organized into two chambers (the Council and the Commons), primarily concerned itself with two issues: property and security. Georgia, still in its infancy, had vast tracts of land unclaimed by white settlers, for which the appropriation of deeds was essential. But while deeds protected the white settlers’ property rights, they offered no security against threats in the colony’s hinterlands to the south, west, and north—i.e., the Spanish, the Creek, and the Cherokee, respectively.

While these threats were certainly not to be taken lightly, they ultimately paled in comparison with the threat posed by England once the Revolutionary War began. In 1775 a representative government

was established as a unicameral body independent of the crown. The Provincial Congress ratified Georgia's first constitution in 1777, and in 1778 it began meeting in Augusta, due to the British presence in Savannah. When the British eventually overtook Augusta, the assembly moved its deliberations northwest to Wilkes County.

After the war, Georgia's government continued to evolve. In 1785 the capital officially moved to Augusta, and in 1789, with the ratification of Georgia's second constitution, the legislature returned to its original bicameral form. It divided power between an upper and a lower house, which would be known as the Senate and the House of Representatives, respectively.

Before the close of this first era, the state capital would move once again, in 1796, to Louisville, reflecting the growth of the population along Georgia's western frontier. Given the population boom and the state's newfound financial resources, legislators eventually concluded that it would be best to design a new city, conceptualized as the state's capital from its beginning, on the Oconee River near the geographic center of the state. Accordingly, in 1803 the General Assembly appointed a commission to select an appropriate site at the head of the Oconee. They called the town they built there Milledgeville.

The Second Era: Life in Milledgeville, War, and Reconstruction (1803–1868)

In 1807 fifteen wagons left Louisville carrying Georgia's treasury and public records to the new capital in Milledgeville. This era of government in Georgia would be fraught with racial, socioeconomic, ideological, regional, and national strife.

When the government was seated in Milledgeville, the legislative process largely consisted of debates between two newly emerged political factions, which were organized more around competing personalities than solid platforms. Still, ideological and socioeconomic differences between the factions do emerge when one considers the supporters of the two most popular figures, John Clark and George Troup, each of whom represented a distinctly regional constituency. Clark supported the rights of the less affluent frontiersmen, while

~ *Georgia's Other Legislature*

The [Cherokee Nation](#) once encompassed parts of Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Alabama, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia. Cherokee territory contracted as European settlers gradually laid claim to their lands, so that by the 1820s only a fraction of the once vast territory—the majority of which was in north Georgia—remained under tribal control. In the early 1800s the Cherokee had an elected representative body known as the National Council. In 1827 the Cherokee adopted a constitution affirming New Echota, in present-day Calhoun County, as their nation's capital. Legislative powers were vested in the General Council of the Cherokee Nation, which was broken into two chambers, the Council and the Committee. The Cherokee divided their nation into eight districts, and each district elected two members to the Council and three to the Committee. The Cherokee Constitution also established an executive known as the Chief and an independent justice system.

The Cherokee government did not last long in New Echota, as the state of Georgia pressed for removal of all Cherokees from the state. With the passing of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the right of the Cherokee to self-govern was abolished, leading ultimately to their forced removal to Indian Territory during 1838–39, an event known as the [Trail of Tears](#).

As the state developed, many members of the General Assembly would claim some Native American ancestry, but no one who has served has been a full member of a recognized tribe.

Troup advocated for the interests of the aristocratic coastal planters. Clark, Troup, and their followers were aligned on one issue, however—[Indian removal](#)—and pushed for federal intervention. By 1827 the Creeks had ceded all land claims in Georgia, and by 1838 the Cherokees were forcibly removed with the federal government's help, in a tragic event known as the Trail of Tears.

The period that followed this tumultuous time would prove even more catastrophic to the state. More than a decade before the Civil

War began, many radical white southerners regarded secession from the Union as a viable solution to sectional difficulties, including the controversy over whether the federal government would permit slavery in the territories ceded by Mexico to the United States after the Mexican-American War. Would slavery be permitted or outlawed in the region? As Georgia and other southern states faced off against the North, politics within Georgia became more divisive, too.

The election of President Abraham Lincoln, who supported the prohibition of slavery in the territories, reignited secession furor and pulled Georgia further in to the national schism. Across the South, state conventions met to determine the issue. On January 19, 1861, Georgia voted to secede from the Union. The General Assembly would spend its remaining years in Milledgeville as a wartime assembly desperately seeking funds to provision Georgia's troops and trying to find ways to defend its constituents. Upon Union general William T. Sherman's March to the Sea campaign in 1864, the General Assembly fled Milledgeville. Although Union troops did not burn the capitol, it was ransacked, nevertheless. In Sherman's wake, with the General Assembly left in disarray, an occupational military government ruled Georgia.

After the war, Reconstruction introduced a series of legal requirements with which states had to comply in order to be readmitted to the Union. Georgia's legislature acted quickly, calling a constitutional convention that abolished slavery and granted African Americans legal status as citizens, annulled secession, and forgave war debts. With the blessing of President Andrew Johnson, the General Assembly resumed business on December 4, 1865. However, when the assembly rejected the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which guaranteed black men full political rights, military rule returned to Georgia and was headquartered in Atlanta.

With the constitutional convention of 1867, held in Atlanta instead of Milledgeville, Georgian political life once again began to move forward. In addition to designating Atlanta as the new state capital, the new constitution granted African American men the right to vote. This major change in suffrage would be reflected in the next election, and its reverberations would be felt for decades to come.

The Third Era: Rapid Enfranchisement and Gradual Disfranchisement (1868–1917)

The year 1868 was significant for the General Assembly: in addition to meeting in Atlanta for the first time, the assembly included Republicans and African Americans. The story of the first [African American legislators](#)—twenty-nine in the House of Representatives and three in the Senate, all of them Republicans—and their brief political careers is representative of the General Assembly’s third era. Despite the ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment, by the end of 1868 the assembly had enacted a measure barring political participation by anyone less than seven-eighths white. Whites immediately expelled all but four of the African American legislators, prompting the federal government to briefly revive military rule. The assembly reinstated the expelled legislators in 1870, but their influence would be short-lived.

The end of [Reconstruction](#) in Georgia in 1871, and the election of a Democratic majority in both houses marked the beginning of the gradual disfranchisement of African Americans in Georgia. In the 1880s the General Assembly began passing “Jim Crow” laws—measures codifying segregation—which, for instance, banned intermarriage and required the segregation of black and white passengers on trains. For the next hundred years, many of the actions of the General Assembly would largely be focused on issues related to race. By the start of the twentieth century, it had generally deprived African Americans of voting rights, equal access to education, and the freedoms of travel and accommodation.

Jim Crow ensured that political power remained in the hands of white men, but the emergence of the [Populist Party](#) in the 1890s raised the question of *which* group of white men would hold that power. The Populist movement emphasized agrarian concerns and reforms, and first took hold in rural areas of the state where Democratic policies were becoming unpopular. In an attempt to overcome their Democratic rivals at the polls, Populists appealed to African Americans for support, although they never advocated racial equality. Populism never

truly took hold in Georgia, but it nevertheless affected the state's political scene. Populist attempts to elicit support from African Americans had enraged Democrats, and in 1900 the party instituted white-only primaries. Since the Republican Party had ceased to exist in most of Georgia, whoever won the Democratic primary essentially won the election.

The spirit of reform, first engendered by the Populists, blossomed again in the first decades of the twentieth century. These new reformers, the Progressives, aligned themselves with Democrats and focused on economic, social, and moral improvements. Progressivism was an urban movement, and in Georgia, Progressives emphasized the development of infrastructure, such as roads and railroads, and sought to attract industry to the state. Education, too, was an important issue, and although the General Assembly engaged in heated debates about the expenditures such educational reforms would inevitably entail, the founding of the Georgia Institute of Technology and the Georgia Normal and Industrial College (which became Georgia College and State University and is now called Georgia College) can be traced to Progressive initiatives. The prohibition of alcohol, another hallmark of Progressivism, became law in Georgia in 1908—eleven years before the ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment outlawed alcohol nationwide. Though associated with the Progressive Era, sweeping change was by no means exclusive to this time period. Indeed, Progressive-style reforms—namely economic development and the incentivizing of urban growth—persisted into the fourth era of the General Assembly, creating tensions that would help determine its legislative agenda.

The Fourth Era: The Phoenix Begins Its Rise (1917–1967)

How far did the phoenix, a mythical bird known to rise from its own ashes, travel once it began its ascent? In 1917 members of the General Assembly were white males without exception, and power in both chambers resided in the hands of rural landowners. Three years later, the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified, officially granting women the right to vote, and the first women were elected to the General

Assembly in 1923. Before the end of this era, both African Americans and Republicans would return to the legislature, and rural hegemony would begin to wane. Although most Georgians resisted this evolution, developments in commerce and technology proved to be inextricably intertwined with progress, and federal intervention rendered resistance futile. Georgia's culture would change with or without the assent of its legislators.

The growth of cities in the early twentieth century brought tension between urban and rural areas to the forefront of Georgia's political scene. In the past, the assembly sought to limit urban influence in state politics by capping the apportionment of elected officials in urban areas. The state constitution of 1877 had granted urban counties the most representatives; town counties had fewer representatives, and rural counties had the least. Most counties, however, were rural, and during this period more counties were subsequently created in order to maintain rural dominance. The idea was that together, the rural counties could easily outvote the urban counties. The Neill Primary Act of 1917, which allocated votes by county in party primary elections, further codified this system of malapportionment. The county unit system, as it was established by the act, allowed rural counties to dominate elections, since the candidate who won a county's popular vote also won its unit vote. Thus, the county unit system protected legal segregation and other aspects of white supremacy by diluting the influence of more liberal urban voters and of African Americans, who were concentrated in cities. Though reaffirmed by Georgia's constitution of 1945, the entire system of malapportionment was struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1962 for violating the "one person, one vote" principle implied in the Fourteenth Amendment. This would not be the last time a Supreme Court decision affected Georgia during this period.

The burgeoning civil rights movement and impending federal intervention triggered a reaction by legislators, who chose a course of massive resistance to integration by passing a series of measures designed to prevent Georgia's schools from being desegregated. In 1951 the General Assembly voted to deny state funds to desegregated schools, and in 1953 it passed legislation that allowed state funds to be

~ *Rule of the Rustics*

In his 1949 seminal work *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, the noted political scientist V. O. Key Jr. entitled the chapter on Georgia “Rule of the Rustics.” His focus was on the [county unit system](#), a unique method of allocating seats in the General Assembly and electing statewide officials that was used between 1917 and 1962. Under this system, counties were assigned representation and weight in electing statewide officers based on their populations. The eight largest counties, known as city counties, were allocated three members in the House of Representatives, one senator in the Senate, and six votes to award in electing statewide officers. The next largest twenty-four counties in terms of population received two state representatives, a senator they shared with a rural county, and four votes for electing statewide officers. Each of the remaining 127 rural counties was allocated one state representative, a senator it shared with two other rural counties, and two votes for electing statewide officers. In terms of statewide races, then, it was just as advantageous to win three rural counties with a combined population of less than 5,000 as it was to win [Fulton County](#), the population of which was nearly twenty times larger.

This system meant that if all the rural counties voted together, with 254 votes they would control all statewide offices. When bills came to a vote in the General Assembly, the 127 rural members had an advantage over the 72 members elected from city and town counties. Due to the tradition of rotation among assigned counties for senators, most senators served very short terms and generally ceded authority to the House of Representatives on most legislative matters.

Despite the disproportionate influence of rural voters in selecting both legislators and statewide officials, the General Assembly was responsive to the needs and concerns of the Atlanta business community. This fueled the economic growth that allowed Georgia to emerge in the post-World War II era as more prosperous than any other Deep South state.

used as private school tuition. Private schools, then, could discriminate as they saw fit and served as a viable alternative to desegregated public schools. Next, legislators voted to remove schools from under the state's jurisdiction. The U.S. Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling in 1954 declared that segregated schools were *not* equal, which only intensified the General Assembly's pro-segregation efforts. The legislature went so far as to declare the *Brown* decision void in the state of Georgia. Finally, due to the many state laws prohibiting the desegregation of schools, the assembly's only option to avoid desegregation was to close public schools altogether. Atlanta businessmen, however, persuaded the legislature that such an outrageous action would hurt the state's economic interests. Eventually, the assembly charged communities with charting their own paths to desegregating schools, signaling the failure of massive resistance. The desegregation of public schools would be a landmark victory for the civil rights movement and foreshadow the reintroduction of African Americans into the General Assembly with the election of Leroy Johnson in 1962.

While changing times and federal intervention required the General Assembly to comply with federal demands, unprecedented crises twice required the assembly to determine the state's governor. In 1947 Governor Eugene Talmadge was elected to a record fourth term but died before taking the oath of office. The 1945 constitution dictated that the General Assembly choose the new governor from the next two highest vote recipients in the preceding general election. Much contention erupted, however, when ballots suddenly appeared making Herman Talmadge, the late governor-elect's son, a contender. Herman Talmadge, with strong ties to rural legislators, was chosen by the General Assembly to be governor. Nevertheless, the outgoing governor, Ellis Arnall, refused to vacate the office, and the lieutenant governor-elect, Melvin E. Thompson, contended that he was the rightful governor. The embarrassing episode became known as the "Three Governors Controversy." Eventually, the Georgia Supreme Court invalidated the General Assembly's decision, and Thompson was sworn in as governor for a two-year term until a special election could be organized.

Another controversy involved African American civil rights activist Julian Bond, who was elected to the assembly in 1965 but was denied his seat because of his outspoken objection to the Vietnam War. Eventually, the U.S. Supreme Court weighed in on the matter and declared in late 1966 that the denial by the General Assembly was unconstitutional. Bond was sworn in to the House of Representatives in January 1967.

In 1966 the General Assembly was again called upon to choose the governor. In this case, the leading vote-recipient in the general election had not netted a majority due to the write-in candidacy of Ellis Arnall. The candidate with the greatest plurality was Republican Bo Callaway, but partisanship triumphed in the end, and the Democratic-held legislature chose the segregationist Lester Maddox as governor. The selection of Maddox closed one of the General Assembly's most tumultuous periods. The era had, however, seen tremendous progress. Because it resolved so many contentious issues—desegregation, controversies over executive leadership, and urban and rural tensions—the General Assembly would be free to flourish in the future.

The Fifth Era: Professionalism and Progress (1967–2003)

Marked by a growing diversity and professionalism, the fifth era of the General Assembly witnessed the fulfillment of promises made during its fourth era. The crisis surrounding the governorship in 1966 offered the General Assembly the opportunity to assert itself as coequal with the executive branch of the government. Accordingly, the legislature began to organize itself and conduct business on its own standards rather than relying on the governor's agenda, as it had in the past. Within the General Assembly, the Senate, too, became stronger in the years following the dissolution of the county unit system. The place of a representative and deliberative legislature was further strengthened with the constitution of 1982, the tenth in the state's history. This new document reflected a desire for clarity and flexibility: gone were many of the antiquated mechanisms of selection and process characteristic of its predecessors. At the same time, legislators moved offices from the basement of the capitol to a new building located across the street.

After the early 1990s, legislators had their own offices and small professional staffs.

The fifth era made changes to membership—engendered by the election of women, African Americans, and Republicans—more evident as these previously marginalized groups became established (or reestablished) in the legislature. A shifting culture made the election of women to the General Assembly more likely, and the increasing number of women in both houses transformed female legislators from novelties to powerful forces; several women, in fact, served as committee chairs during this period. Thanks to the reapportionment of districts that made representation more equitable for all races, this period also saw a rapid increase in African American legislators elected to both the House and the Senate. Republican caucuses in both chambers went from nonexistent to nearing majority status. Republicans brought defined and loyal opposition to the legislature that ensured all bills thorough scrutiny and debate. With this new-found diversity, the legislature became stronger, more professional, and more capable of making optimal policy decisions for the state.

The Sixth Era: A New Majority Party (2003–present)

Much like 1868, the year 2003 saw the ascendancy of the Republican Party in the General Assembly. The 2002 election had netted Republicans the governorship for the first time in 130 years. Additionally, Republicans had picked up two seats in the state Senate. In the weeks between the November election and the start of the General Assembly in January, four senators-elect changed their party affiliations from Democrat to Republican, giving the GOP its first majority in either chamber of the General Assembly in more than a hundred years. Republican dominance continued, and in 2004 Republicans secured control of the House of Representatives, too.

The rise of the Republican majority was the result of several concurrent factors. Republicans had won a majority of the state's seats in the U.S. House of Representatives since 1994, and state politics ultimately reflected this trend. Some of the general statewide shift toward the Republican Party can be traced to national Democratic Party support

~ *Hispanics and Latinos in the General Assembly*

As the General Assembly came into session in 2003, for the first time ever it included a contingent of Hispanics and Latinos. Three Hispanic and Latino legislators were elected in 2002: Sam Zamarripa (Democrat) to the Senate and David Casas (Republican) and Pedro “Pete” Marin (Democrat) to the House of Representatives. All of them represented districts in the Atlanta metro area. In 2007 Marin and Casas were joined in the House by Tony Sellier (Republican), who was elected from rural [Peach County](#) in 2006. Brenda Lopez (Democrat) became the first Latina elected to the House in 2016, and in 2017 Deborah Gonzalez (Democrat) became the second.

With a variety of backgrounds and political inclinations, Georgia’s Hispanic and Latino representatives are as ethnically and ideologically diverse as the larger Hispanic and Latino population throughout the state. Given that 9 percent of the Georgia population self-identified as Latino in the 2010 census and that the Latino population has experienced rapid growth (it nearly doubled between 2000 and 2010), one can expect to see more Hispanic representation in the General Assembly in the years to come.

of federal civil rights policies since the 1960s. This support made many conservative white Democrats in Georgia unhappy, and they suddenly proved amenable to affiliating themselves with a Republican Party that was growing more socially conservative. Some Georgia voters also found the Republican stances on lower taxes and increased expenditure on national security compelling. The fact that almost 20 percent of the state’s population had moved to Georgia from other states and nations may also have encouraged Republican triumphs at the ballot box, as many new Georgians were already Republicans. A shift in voting patterns also helped catalyze the Republicans’ rise in Georgia. Until the latter part of the twentieth century, the General Assembly had been dominated by rural legislators as a result of the county unit system. The demise of the county unit system and the

resulting electoral influence of suburban areas meant that for a party to win state elections consistently, it must engineer a coalition of both rural and suburban interests. Republicans successfully pulled together rural and suburban concerns to create a new governing majority.

This era also introduced more minorities to the General Assembly. In 2003 the first Latinos—Democrats and Republicans—were elected to the state legislature. In 2010 the first Asian American was elected. By 2015 Georgians had elected four openly gay and lesbian members. Georgia now boasts the most diverse population of all the southern states, a fact reflected by the growing diversity in the General Assembly.

Along with bringing welcome diversity, however, the fifth era has also brought many new challenges. Beyond simply learning how to work under a new party's leadership, the assembly has struggled with constrained budgets in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the bursting of the 2007 housing bubble, and the economic recession of 2008, which especially harmed such industries as travel, construction, and technology. Yet through the deliberative process, the General Assembly has found the means to weather the hard times and provide leadership so that Georgia might rebound once again.

Biographies of Notable Legislators

LYMAN HALL (1724–1790)

Dates of Service: 1775–76, 1783, 1785

Chamber: Provincial Assembly and First General Assembly

Elected from: St. John's Parish (present-day Liberty County)

A minister and physician by training, Hall was a passionate advocate for liberty. He served in the Provincial Assembly and was one of three Georgians to sign the Declaration of Independence. From 1783 to 1784 Hall served as governor of Georgia, during which time he worked with the General Assembly to charter the University of Georgia. Hall County is named after him.

ALEXANDER STEPHENS (1812–1883)

Dates of Service: 1836–43

Chamber: House of Representatives and Senate

Elected from: Taliaferro County

A lawyer from Crawfordville, Stephens served five years in the Georgia House of Representatives and two in the Senate before being elected to Congress. While in the assembly, Stephens focused on building more railroads in Georgia and improving public education. From Congress, Stephens went on to serve as vice president of the Confederacy, even though he originally spoke out against secession. Stephens was then reelected to Congress, serving nine years. He was elected governor of Georgia in 1882 but died four months after his election.

TUNIS CAMPBELL SR. (1812–1891)

Dates of Service: 1868, 1871–72

Chamber: Senate

Elected from: McIntosh County

Originally from New Jersey, Campbell was an ordained minister who came to Georgia during the Civil War to organize political, social, and educational opportunities for former slaves. He was one of three African American senators elected to the General Assembly in 1868. After the assembly's expulsion of African Americans, Campbell traveled north to advocate for federal intervention on behalf of freedpeople.

VIOLA ROSS NAPIER (1881–1962)

Dates of Service: 1923–27

Chamber: House of Representatives

Elected from: Bibb County

Napier was one of the first two women elected to the House of Representatives, in 1922. She was active in the suffrage movement and had previously practiced law—one of a few women in Georgia to do so at that time. As a member of the General Assembly, Napier was an advocate for the rights of children and people with disabilities.

JIMMY CARTER (b. 1924)

Dates of Service: 1963–67

Chamber: Senate

Elected from: Sumter County

While Carter may be better known as a one-time governor of Georgia, former president of the United States, and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, he also served in the General Assembly. Always interested in education reform, Carter was an early supporter of school integration. In the Senate he chaired the Education Committee and worked to secure a statewide increase in education funding.

LEROY JOHNSON (b. 1928)

Dates of Service: 1963–75

Chamber: Senate

Elected from: Fulton County

A graduate of Morehouse College and an attorney, Johnson was an advisor to civil rights leaders prior to his election to the General Assembly. Johnson was the first African American legislator to serve since the end of the Reconstruction era. He served six terms in the Senate and eventually became chairman of the Judiciary Committee.

GRACE TOWNS HAMILTON (1907–1992)

Dates of Service: 1966–84

Chamber: House of Representatives

Elected from: Fulton County

Hamilton was the first African American woman elected to the General Assembly, and one of the first eight African Americans elected to the House of Representatives since Reconstruction. As a legislator, Hamilton used her position as a trailblazer to ensure similar opportunities for other members of her race, and for twenty years she led the fight for reapportionment.

JULIAN BOND (1940–2015)

Dates of Service: 1967–87

Chamber: House of Representatives and Senate

Elected from: Fulton County

Before joining the General Assembly, Bond distinguished himself as a civil rights activist, especially as one of the organizers of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Bond's objection to the Vietnam War led the assembly to deny him his seat until a 1966 U.S. Supreme Court ruling determined that the legislature's actions were unconstitutional. Bond later became chair of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

PAUL COVERDELL (1939–2000)

Dates of Service: 1970–89

Chamber: Senate

Elected from: Cobb County

Coverdell was an immensely well-liked and well-respected member of the Georgia Senate. During his nearly twenty years in office, he witnessed the Republican caucus grow from a tiny minority into a well-financed legislative party. He initiated a friendship with George H. W. Bush in the 1970s that would flourish as the years went on, eventually serving in Bush's administration as Peace Corps director. In 1992 Coverdell was elected to the U.S. Senate. He died in office from a brain aneurysm in 2000.

HOSEA WILLIAMS (1926–2000)

Dates of Service: 1975–85

Chamber: Senate

Elected from: DeKalb County

Williams's service in the Georgia Senate followed years of work in the civil rights movement. He led sit-ins and marches and was largely responsible for the desegregation of a wide variety of public spaces, facilities, and institutions in Savannah. In 1963 he helped lead the famous "Bloody Sunday" march in Alabama. Williams actively served his community through his commitment to social justice until the end of his life.

DOROTHY FELTON (1929–2008)

Dates of Service: 1975–2001

Chamber: House of Representatives

Elected from: Fulton County

As the first Republican woman elected to the General Assembly, Felton worked for the vulnerable, including youth and the elderly. Felton was a devoted servant to her district in Sandy Springs and worked toward its eventual incorporation as a municipality. At the time of her retirement, she had served thirteen terms—more than any other Republican or any other woman in either chamber.

Quick Facts

Organization

The political party is the primary means of organizing each chamber of the General Assembly. The majority party in each chamber controls the organizational process, independent of the governor or the other chamber of the General Assembly.

The presiding officer of the state House of Representatives is called the Speaker of the House. The Speaker is elected by House members. A Speaker *pro tempore* is also elected to serve as presiding officer in the absence of the Speaker.

The presiding officer of the state Senate is called the President of the Senate. This is a constitutional duty of the [lieutenant governor](#), who is elected by a popular vote of the citizens of Georgia for a four-year term. The Senate also elects a President *pro tempore* who serves as the presiding officer in the absence of the lieutenant governor.

Each chamber has party leaders, a majority leader and a minority leader. They are assisted by “whips,” who encourage party unity on key votes.

Chamber parties also have caucuses to discuss legislative matters within the parties. These caucuses elect their own officers.

Administration floor leaders (also known as governor’s floor leaders) are selected by the governor to pursue gubernatorial interests in the legislative chambers.

All committees have chairs appointed by the presiding officers of their respective chambers and confirmed by a vote of the chamber’s membership.

Legislators have offices in the Coverdell Legislative Office Building, across the street from the capitol. Generally, legislators are housed in a suite of four and share a secretary.

The General Assembly employs about 500 full-time professional staff, administrative assistants, analysts, and organizational staff. The [Georgia General Assembly](#) is ranked 16th in the United States in terms of numbers of full-time staff.

Calendar

According to the state's constitution, each new session of the General Assembly must begin on the second Monday of January, but there is not a requirement about when the second and successive legislative days must occur.

Legislators officially meet for forty "legislative days." Since legislative days are not required to be consecutive, the legislature can spread out its work over a number of weeks. In most years, the session concludes around the end of March. Days that committees, but not the full chambers, meet do not count as legislative days.

Day thirty of the General Assembly's forty-day session is known as Crossover Day. It is the last day for legislation to pass in its chamber of origin and "cross over" to the other chamber for consideration.

At the end of day forty, the Speaker of the House shouts "*sine die*" ("without day") to mark the conclusion of the session.

The governor may call the General Assembly into "special session." A special session may also be called if 60 percent of members sign a petition and present it to the governor.

Members of the General Assembly work year-round on legislative business, spending much of their time on committee work, although members of the assembly hold part-time positions.

Processes

There are 236 members of the Georgia General Assembly: 56 Senators and 180 House members. The Georgia Constitution of 1983 stipulates that there must be at least 180 House members and not more than 56 Senators. Only the assemblies of New Hampshire (424) and Pennsylvania (253) are larger.

Regular elections for members occur in even-numbered years. If a vacancy occurs, the governor calls for a special election to replace the member. There are no appointments to the General Assembly; all members must be elected to serve.

Members of both houses serve two-year terms. Georgia is tied with eleven other states for having the shortest terms for the members of its state legislature. The longest terms are four-year terms for both houses, and only five states (Alabama, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, and North Dakota) have them. The law in thirty-three states stipulates a four-year term for senators and a two year-term for members of the lower house.

As of 2017, the salary for members of both houses is \$17,342, plus a *per diem* of \$173 and compensation for some additional expenses. In comparison with other states' legislators, members in Georgia are on the low end of the compensation scale.

Opportunities

All committees and many legislators have additional aides, often university interns. Members select their own aides, and students enrolled at any public or private Georgia university may apply to be an intern through the state's internship program.

Pages, or messengers, serve for a day in either the House or the Senate. A page must be at least twelve years old and may apply through either chamber's program.

Trivia

Soon after the legislature was finally assembled in 1755, the building designated for its use collapsed. While no one was hurt, reports indicate that some legislators made rather narrow escapes.

Early legislator [Button Gwinnett](#) was a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Within a year of signing, he died in a [duel](#).

When General William T. Sherman arrived in Milledgeville, he burned many buildings. The statehouse was spared the flames but was

nevertheless ransacked by federal troops, who held a mock session of the Georgia legislature during which they “repealed” Georgia’s secession ordinance.

During the July 1907 House of Representatives debate over Prohibition, two legislators engaged in a fistfight. The chamber was subsequently closed for a week to let tempers subside.

The dome of the state capitol building is covered in gold leaf mined near Dahlonega, Georgia, site of the first U.S. gold rush in 1828.

Timeline

OGLETHORPE'S VISION

- 1732 King George II signs the charter establishing the colony of Georgia and its governing Board of Trustees.
- 1733 James Oglethorpe and the first colonists arrive in Savannah.

FIRST ERA

- 1751 Sixteen popularly chosen representatives meet in Savannah to advise the Trustees.
- 1752 The Trustees of the colonies surrender their charter to the king of England, but they continue to have decision-making powers until a colonial government is established in 1755.
- 1754 The crown-appointed Council meets for the first time.
- 1755 The colonial legislature, which meets in Savannah, is completed with the addition of a lower house, the Commons. Members of the Commons are directly elected by eligible Georgians.
- 1775 Georgians establish a provincial legislature independent of the crown.
The Revolutionary War begins. Due to British incursions during the course of the war, the legislature will change locations, moving from Savannah to Augusta to Wilkes County.
- 1777 Georgia's first constitution is ratified, providing for a unicameral legislative body that will be known as the General Assembly.
- 1783 The Revolutionary War ends.
- 1785 The capital officially moves to Augusta.
- 1789 Georgia's second constitution is ratified, dividing legislative power between the Senate and the House of Representatives.

- 1796 The capital moves from Augusta to Louisville, reflecting the growth of the population along the western frontier.
- 1798 Georgia's third constitution is ratified, providing for the popular election of the governor.

SECOND ERA

- 1807 The capital moves from Louisville to Milledgeville.
- 1822 In accordance with a constitutional amendment, the General Assembly cedes the right to elect a governor to the eligible electorate.
- 1838 Urged by the state of Georgia, federal troops forcibly remove the Cherokee Indians from their ancestral homeland in the Southeast.
- 1861 Georgia secedes from the Union.
The seceded Southern states ratify the Confederate Constitution.
Georgia's fourth constitution, the first state constitution to be submitted to the people for approval, is ratified.
The Civil War begins.
- 1864 As William T. Sherman approaches, the General Assembly flees Milledgeville. When Union forces arrive, they ransack the capitol.
The federal government places Georgia under military rule.
- 1865 The Civil War ends.
The General Assembly reconvenes with the blessing of President Andrew Johnson.
Georgia's fifth constitution is ratified, repealing the Ordinance of Secession and abolishing slavery.
- 1866 The General Assembly rejects the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, denying African Americans full political rights.
Military rule returns to Georgia as a result.

THIRD ERA

- 1868 The capital moves from Milledgeville to Atlanta.
Newly elected African American legislators join the General Assembly for the first time. Legislators ratify the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

- Georgia's sixth constitution is ratified, directing the assembly to provide for free general education to all Georgia children.
- 1877 Georgia's seventh constitution is ratified, placing new restrictions on legislative power.
- 1889 Legislators move into the current capitol building in Atlanta.
- 1891 Georgia passes its first Jim Crow law, mandating racial segregation.
- 1908 The Georgia Assembly enacts statewide prohibition of alcohol. More than a decade will elapse before nationwide prohibition is codified with the ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

FOURTH ERA

- 1917 The Neill Primary Act formalizes the county unit system, a method of allotting votes by county, employed to minimize the political influence of voters in urban areas.
- 1922 Two years after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, Viola Ross Napier and Bessie Kempton become the first women to take seats in the General Assembly.
- 1935 Georgia repeals its own statewide prohibition, two years after the ratification of the Twenty-first Amendment ends national prohibition.
- 1945 Georgia's eighth constitution is ratified, providing for the office of lieutenant governor and authorizing jury service for women.
- 1947 When governor-elect Eugene Talmadge dies before taking the oath of office, the General Assembly selects his son, Herman Talmadge, as governor.
- 1962 A U.S. Supreme Court decision abolishes the county unit system, arguing that it violates the principle of "one person-one vote" implied in the Fourteenth Amendment.
- Leroy Johnson, elected to the Senate, becomes the first African American to serve in the General Assembly in fifty years.
- 1966 The General Assembly chooses Lester Maddox as governor after no candidate in the general election nets a majority.

FIFTH ERA

- 1971 [Jimmy Carter](#) declares “the time for racial segregation is over” in his inaugural address as Georgia’s governor and sets an agenda of moderated progressivism and reorganization for the General Assembly, leading to Georgia’s emergence as the economic engine of the Deep South states.
- 1976 Georgia’s ninth constitution is ratified.
Former state Senator Jimmy Carter is elected President of the United States.
- 1982 Georgia’s tenth constitution is ratified, eliminating the authorization of local amendments.
- 1985 The General Assembly passes the [Quality Based Education Act](#), changing the funding formula for the state’s schools and augmenting funding in impoverished areas.
- 1986 [Calvin Smyre](#) becomes the first African American leader of the House since Reconstruction when he is appointed floor leader under [Governor Joe Frank Harris](#).
- 1991 [Zell Miller](#) completes his fourth four-year term as lieutenant governor, ending his sixteen years as leader of the Senate—the longest tenure of any leader in Georgia Senate history.
The House and Senate pass legislation that will lead to the creation of the Georgia lottery, which will fund the [HOPE scholarship](#), universal free pre-kindergarten, and educational technology enhancements in all Georgia schools.
- 1996 Atlanta hosts the [Centennial Summer Olympic Games](#), focusing world attention on the emergence of Georgia as a regional leader.
- 2001 Karla Drenner becomes the first openly LGBT member of the General Assembly.
- 2002 [Tom Murphy](#) is defeated in his bid for reelection, leaving the Georgia House of Representatives after having served almost thirty years as Speaker—the longest any person has served as a presiding officer of any state or national legislative body in U.S. history.

SIXTH ERA

- 2003 For the first time in more than one hundred years, Republicans hold the majority of seats in the Georgia Senate.
- Senator Sam Zamarippa and Representatives David Casas and Pedro Marin become the first Hispanic and Latino members of the General Assembly.
- 2005 For the first time in more than one hundred years, Republicans hold the majority of seats in the Georgia House of Representatives, giving the GOP control of both General Assembly chambers.
- Glenn Richardson becomes the first Republican Speaker of the Georgia House of Representatives since Reconstruction.
- The Legislative Office Building is renamed to honor [Paul Coverdell](#), a former member of the Georgia Senate who went on to serve in the U.S. Senate.
- 2010 Representative Stacey Y. Abrams becomes the first woman to lead a party (Democratic) in the General Assembly.
- 2011 B. J. Pak becomes the first Asian American member of the Georgia House of Representatives.

Additional Resources

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- Engstrom, Richard N., Arnold Fleischmann, and Robert M. Howard. *Politics in Georgia*. 3rd ed. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017.
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