

Report prepared by staff of
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History of the Atlanta Prison Farm Site

Introduction

The site of the Atlanta Prison Farm is located in DeKalb County, in District 15, in portions of land lots 82 and 83. The land originally was home to Native Americans, including most recently the Muscogee people, before being auctioned off as part of the land lotteries held following the dispossession of Muscogee lands. After being farmed for decades under the ownership of private landowners, the City of Atlanta purchased the property in 1911, first for the purposes of creating a crematory, then a dairy farm and, later, for use as a prison farm.

Prison farms were common in the early 1900s, and some correctional facilities still make use of a similar practice today. In Georgia, the state built the Georgia State Prison Farm in Milledgeville in 1899, which stayed in operation until 1938.¹ Even around the site of what became the Atlanta Prison Farm (also referred to as the City Prison Farm or the Old Prison Farm), at least two federally-operated Prison Farms, also called Honor Farms, existed as well. These farms have at times been conflated with City's farm, including in previous reports and archival records². The Atlanta Stockade, a precursor to the Atlanta Prison Farm, also had its own farm and quarry. Prison Farms offered the means to offset the costs of housing and feeding inmates.

The Atlanta Prison Farm operated from the mid-1920s-mid-1990s. Today, a portion of the site is under construction for a new Atlanta Public Safety Training Center, while another portion of the site which contains the remains of some Prison Farm buildings resides on what the City of Atlanta is proposing as parkland. Atlanta History Center prepared this report to assist the Visioning, Memorializing, and Repurposing the former Atlanta Prison Farm Site subcommittee of the South River Forest and Public Safety Training Center Community Task Force. Sources consulted for this report include City of Atlanta records, many of which are housed at Atlanta History Center, and include City Council minutes, ordinances, committee/department annual reports, payroll records, letters, and other official correspondence; along with newspapers, web-based resources, including reports by other organizations, and

books.³ Primary sources have been consulted wherever possible due to the nature of research of the site up until this time, which has often included misconceptions or errors. This report is intended to be a general overview of the history of the land that became the Atlanta Prison Farm and is not comprehensive; further research may be conducted about any portion of the site's history. Recommendations for areas of further inquiry are provided at the conclusion of this report.

¹ "Prison Farms," The New South and the New Slavery - Stories of Life in Georgia, February 8, 2021, <https://georgia-exhibits.galileo.usg.edu/spotlight/convict-labor/feature/prison-farms>.

² One such example of the two different types of farms being conflated can be found in a report from 1999, which previously was regarded as authoritative but actually confuses multiple historical sites: Jillian Wooten "An Historical Analysis of the Atlanta Prison Farm," City Planning 6012, 1999 <https://dekalbhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/historical-analysis-of-honor-farm.pdf>

³ Reports consulted included "A Brief History of the Atlanta City Prison Farm" and "Brief Historical Timeline of the 'Prison Farm' land p2" both written by the Atlanta Community Press Collective and available on their website here: <https://atlprescollective.com/> as well as "Phase I Environmental Site Assessment" (April 22, 2021) and "A Cultural Resource Assessment Survey of the Atlanta Public Safety Training Center" (April 2022) by Terracon Consultants, Inc. available online at <https://atlantapolicfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Phase-I-Environmental-Site-Assessment.pdf> and <https://atlantapolicfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Amended-Cultural-Study.pdf>. All resources accessed in April and May, 2023.

Early History

Archaeological findings suggest that the earliest inhabitants of the Southern United States migrated to this region between 14,000 and 9,000 BCE, towards the conclusion of the last ice age. During this period, known as the Paleo Period, sea levels were approximately 400 feet lower than they are today, exposing the presently-submerged landmass known as Beringia. This land bridge connected present-day Asia and North America.⁴ These pioneering settlers crossed Beringia from Asia or travelled down the Pacific coast in boats, eventually settling in what is now California and Mexico. From these points, they traveled eastward to inhabit the Coastal Plains region, which was ice-free.⁵

These new inhabitants relied on megafauna for sustenance, but these large animals began to disappear around 10,700 BCE as a result of climate changes and perhaps some degree of overhunting of some species. This led to a shift in human settlement patterns away from the nomadic pursuit of large animals and towards more permanent settlements typically located near rivers.⁶

This period of adaptive settlement lasted for many centuries – from about 9,000 BCE to 1,500 BCE – a phase known as the Archaic Period. It is during this period that some of the earliest artifacts of Atlanta-area civilization can be found. Less than two miles south of the future site of the Atlanta Prison Farm, archaeologists have identified numerous late Archaic and early Woodland Period (3,000 BCE - 0 CE) soapstone quarries, workshops, and living areas. Soapstone, or steatite, is a soft metamorphic rock rich in talc that was used to craft bowls and other tools.⁷ These vessels were commonly traded with larger communities in the Mississippi Valley, which did not have direct access to natural soapstone deposits.⁸

Soapstone Ridge, a rock formation in southeast Atlanta vital to this production, is believed to span 25 square miles. However, only a few hundred acres have been thoroughly investigated by archaeologists. Despite no signs of Archaic settlements discovered on the Atlanta

Prison Farm's land so far, its close proximity to the numerous Soapstone Ridge production sites suggests a probable connection.⁹ Some evidence of soapstone bowl production does exist in an area just south of Constitution Road Southeast and north of I-285, in close proximity to the site.¹⁰

Around 1200 BCE, the Southern climate cooled, leading to increased flooding and storm surges. It was during this period that agriculture started to develop in the southeast, potentially due to an increase of weedy plants in the floodplains.¹¹ During this period, known as the Woodland Period (1200 BCE-1000 CE), people settled into permanent, small settlements in the floodplains. They continued to hunt and gather, but also farmed the land. This settlement pattern reflected an expanded expertise in exploiting many types of food resources within a limited geographic area – a few hours walk. Concentrated settlements together with the introduction of maize in the Middle Woodland Period (about 200 BCE), set the stage for the rise of the Mississippian Period of cultural development and expansion.¹²

⁴ Robbie Ethridge, "The American South to 1600: The Ancient Native South," in *A New History of the American South*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2023): 3-45, at 5.

⁵ Ethridge, "The American South to 1600," 6.

⁶ *Ibid*, 13.

⁷ Roy S Dickens, Jr. and Linda R Carnes, "Preliminary Investigations at Soapstone Ridge, Dekalb County, Georgia," in *Bulletin 20 of the 23rd Southeastern Archaeological Conference*, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, November 4-6, 1976 (Gainesville, 1983): 81-9, at 84.

⁸ Daniel Elliott, "The Live Oak Soapstone Quarry, Dekalb County, Georgia." *The Live Oak Soapstone Quarry*, Dekalb County, Georgia., 1986. 105.

⁹ Elliott, "The Live Oak Soapstone Quarry," 5.

¹⁰ Jim Langford, President, Etowah Museum, Inc. in discussion with Sheffield Hale, President & CEO Atlanta History Center, May 2023.

¹¹ Ethridge, "The American South to 1600," 16.

¹² *Ibid*, 17-20.

The most dramatic example of this new cultural shift occurred around 900 CE when small farming communities near St. Louis organized themselves into hierarchical theocratic societies led by elites and priests, a social system known as a “chiefdom.” They built one of the grandest cities in the world at the time, today known as Cahokia. Over the next three hundred years, Cahokia’s influence spread throughout the Midwest and South. In response, small Woodland villages in these regions underwent sociopolitical transformations and organized themselves into chiefdoms.

The principal towns of chiefdoms functioned as religious and political gathering points for the polities or allied groups of villages. A large or paramount chiefdom was the overarching structure composed of many polities held together by a complex governance system. The most prominent paramount chiefdom near the site of the Atlanta Prison Farm was Etowah, with its capital village founded slightly northwest of Atlanta around 1000 CE.¹³

The chiefdoms that arose during this time, including Coosa, are the ones that encountered Hernando DeSoto during his expeditions beginning in 1540 and Tristan DeLuna in 1560.¹⁴ These early Spanish expeditions introduced Old World diseases, which were a significant factor along with other disruptions that led to population decline. A majority of the Indigenous population, with some estimates ranging up to 90 percent, disappeared by the late 16th or early 17th centuries, and consequently, chiefdoms and their governance systems suffered dramatic reductions in complexity and power.¹⁵

Following the population collapse, the people of the Native South began to reorganize themselves into different kinds of societies, called coalescent societies, because they were all, to some degree, coalescences of disparate people from disparate regions. These are the Muscogee (Creeks), Cherokees, Catawbans, Choctaws, Chickasaws—those Native American nations with which many people today are more familiar.

The political consolidation of the remnant populations of Central Alabama and West Georgia are who is recognized today as the Muscogee people or the Creek Confederacy.¹⁶ Muscogee refers to the language once spoken by the majority of the populations in northwest,

central, and south Georgia.¹⁷ English settlers, arriving in the late 17th century, were the first to refer to the Muscogee people as Creek. The tribes were further subdivided into the Upper Creek and Lower Creek, delineated by the main rivers along which the tribes resided. Upper Creek populations lived along the Coosa and Tallapoosa river drainages, with the Lower Creek living along the Chattahoochee and Flint river systems.¹⁸

The Cherokees, likewise, began to consolidate as a unified political body around this time. They, too, divided their towns into districts—the Valley Towns, Middle Towns, Out Towns, Overhill Towns, and Lower Towns. Most Cherokees lived in North Carolina and eastern Tennessee, although some of the Lower Towns were located in northeast Georgia. In Northwest Georgia in the mid-17th century, the Cherokee began to migrate into the area previously occupied and abandoned by the Muscogean-speaking people of Etowah and Coosa. The Cherokee eventually located their capital towns of Ustanali and New Echota in this area, and they laid claim to land as far south as the Chattahoochee River and its intersection with Peachtree Creek – near the city limits of today’s Atlanta.

By the first half of the 18th century, the Muscogee and Cherokee were fully engaged with eastern settlers in commercial engagement including selling deer and other animal skins and providing services such as returning escaped enslaved people and livestock. In return, they received iron tools, guns, cloth, and other European-manufactured items.¹⁹ In Native American

¹³ Ibid, 28.

¹⁴ Ibid, 32-33.

¹⁵ Robbie Ethridge, *From Chicaza to Chickasaw: The European Invasion and the Transformation of the Mississippian World, 1540-1715* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 87.

¹⁶ Also spelled Mvskoke

¹⁷ Gregory A. Waselkow and John W. Cottier, “European Perceptions of Eastern Muskogean Ethnicity,” *Proceedings of the Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society*, Vol. 10 (1985): 23-45, at 5.

¹⁸ Michael D Green, *The Politics of Indian Removal: Creek Government and Society in Crisis* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 7.

¹⁹ Joshua Piker, “Colonists and Creeks: Rethinking the Pre-Revolutionary Southern Backcountry,” *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol 70, No. 3 (2004): 503-540, especially 512-516, 527.

²⁰ Piker, “Colonists and Creeks,” 28, 34.

Following the American Revolution, relations between the Muscogee and the United States government deteriorated further. The late 18th and early 19th centuries saw a series of treaties between the Muscogee people and the United States government, each treaty conceding more of the land that became Georgia to the control of the United States. In 1793, George Washington appointed Benjamin Hawkins, a North Carolina statesman, as U.S. Indian Agent to the Creeks.²¹ Hawkins's role was to encourage Western farming practices amongst the Muscogee so that they would more readily sell their vast hunting lands in what became Georgia to the United States.²²

United States demands for Muscogee and other Native territories throughout the early 19th century placed enormous pressure on Native leaders as well as the rank and file. In Muscogee country, these pressures erupted in a civil war, known as the Red Stick War of 1812-1813. Hawkins died soon after the Red Stick War, and subsequent United States and Georgia government officials preferred to deal with only pro-American Native American men, setting the stage for the rise of Muscogee men such as William McIntosh.²³

After the Red Stick War, Andrew Jackson forced the Muscogee to cede most of their land in present-day Alabama, and Georgia officials soon cast their eye over the remaining Muscogee lands, most of which lay east of the Chattahoochee River. Between 1818 and 1827, the state of Georgia and the US government pressured the Muscogee into several land cessions. In these negotiations, McIntosh falsely presented himself to US and Georgia officials as representative of the entirety of the Muscogee (Creek) people. The site of present-day Atlanta was included in the 1821 Treaty of Indian Springs, and these lands were subsequently sold to white settlers in a land lottery that same year.²⁴

When the Treaty of Indian Springs was signed on January 8, 1821, the Muscogee ceded more than four million acres of land.²⁵ The transaction marked the last time that the land, which would later host the city of Atlanta and, eventually, the Atlanta Prison Farm, was under Native control. McIntosh later spearheaded the 1825 Treaty of Indian Springs, which was the treaty ceding any remaining Creek lands to the US and agreeing to the removal of the Muscogee people to

present-day Oklahoma. Afterwards, Creek leaders executed McIntosh for his involvement in these treaties and the state of Georgia forcibly removed thousands of Muscogee people.

Similarly, the Cherokee faced increasing pressure to give up their lands in Georgia, Tennessee and North Carolina. Like the Muscogee, the Cherokee entered into several treaties that gradually reduced their holdings. The last of the major Cherokee treaties, the Treaty of New Echota, signed in 1835, established terms for the Cherokee Nation to cede its territory in the southeast and move west to the Indian Territory (Oklahoma). Although the treaty was not signed by the Principal Chief, John Ross, it was amended and ratified in 1836, and it became the legal basis for the forcible removal known as the Trail of Tears.

By 1840, the Cherokee, Muscogee, and most of the other remaining Native Americans in Georgia were forced at gunpoint to relocate their homes from Georgia to Oklahoma.

²¹ Grace M. Schwartzman and Susan K. Barnard, "A Trail of Broken Promises: Georgians and Muscogee/Creek Treaties, 1796-1826," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 75, No. 4 (1991): 697-718, at 697.

²² Green, *The Politics of Indian Removal*, 39.

²³ Robbie Ethridge, *Creek Country: The Creek Indians and Their World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003) 215-241; Green, *Politics of Indian Removal* 37-43, 59.

²⁴ Green, *The Politics of Indian Removal*, 58.

²⁵ Schwartzman and Barnard, "A Trail of Broken Promises," 708.

Land Ownership

After the forceable removal of the Muscogee people, the ownership of land on which the Atlanta Prison Farm would eventually be built can be traced by consulting federal, state, and county records. Those records include the United States Federal Census, Georgia Wills and Probate records, Georgia Land Lottery records, DeKalb County Tax Digests, Property Deeds, Marriage Records and Land Indentures.

Until 1805, Georgia used the headright land system to distribute its lands, in which white heads of household received an allotment of property. Generally, acreage allotment started with a base amount for each head of household, with households containing more dependents receiving more land.²⁶ This system changed in 1803 in response to land frauds and problems inherent to the headright system. The new system was the land lottery, implemented in 1805. There were eight confirmed land lotteries from the cessation of Muscogee and Cherokee land in Georgia from 1805 to 1833.²⁷ The first step in the process of a land lottery was to acquire a treaty that ceded land from Indigenous Nations.

The land lotteries between 1814-1819 were done in rapid succession.²⁸ Following the Treaty of Indian Springs in January 1821, on May 15, 1821, an act was passed to begin the disposal of the land. The Land Lottery of 1821 accounts for the division of the ceded land into five counties, from which present-day DeKalb County was created.²⁹

Under the land lottery system, original counties were divided into districts, and within each district are land lots of varying size. Because land lots within districts are not renumbered and do not move, one can trace the ownership of property in a particular land lot to the original land lottery. In the case of the land that would eventually become the Atlanta Prison Farm, it is helpful to trace the property backwards in time from its acquisition by the city of Atlanta on November 17, 1911.

On that date, the city of Atlanta purchased 248.7 acres in DeKalb County that was described as follows:

“Beginning at a point in land lot eighty three (83) where the south land lot line thereof is intersected by the center of Intrenchment Creek, and running thence northerly along the center of said creek to the north line of land lot eighty three (83) and extending thence west along the north line of land lot eighty three (83) and the north line of land lot eighty two thirty two hundred and twenty eight (3228) feet to the northwest corner of land lot eighty two (82) marked with an iron pin; thence south along west line of land lot eighty two (82) eighteen hundred and thirty five (1835) feet to corner of formerly the Ogden property; thence east twelve hundred and fourteen and six tenths (1214.6) feet to a stone corner; thence south nineteen hundred and eighty five (1985) feet to a stone corner on the south line of land lot eighty-two (82) being the center of Constitution Road and extending thence east along said south line of land lot (82) and along the center of Constitution Road twenty hundred and sixty (2060) feet to beginning point, containing two hundred and forty eight and seven tenths (248.7) acres.”³⁰

The description provided implies that most of the property lies in land lot 82, and a smaller portion in land lot 83 in District 15. In the 1821 Land Lottery, Uriah Brown of Baldwin County and Samuel Philbrick of Chatham County were the winners of land lots 82 and 83, respectively, in District 15.³¹

²⁶ Paul K. Graham, *Georgia Land Lottery Research*, (Atlanta, Ga.: Georgia Genealogical Society, 2010), 1.

²⁷ DeKalb History Center, “DeKalb County History”, accessed May 6, 2023.

²⁸ Farris W. Cadle, *Georgia Land Surveying History and Law*, (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 234.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 235.

³⁰ Land Indenture, DeKalb County, Georgia, Deed Book 69: 57-58.

³¹ Land Grant to Uriah Brown, October 3, 1822. DeKalb County records, Microfilm Collection, Drawer 285, Box 70, Georgia Archives. Land Grant to Samuel Philbrick, August 27, 1822. DeKalb County records, Microfilm Collection, Drawer 285, Box 70, Georgia Archives, Morrow, Ga.

Awardees in the 1821 lottery frequently lived far from the land awarded them; therefore, many grantees never lived on the property, but may have sold their right to purchase the property won in the lottery. In this case, we can find no evidence to suggest either man ever lived on these lots. Furthermore, many records held by DeKalb County that could help establish ownership between 1822 and 1842, including deeds and tax digests, were likely destroyed in 1842 by a fire at the DeKalb County courthouse.³²

However, tax digests from 1848-1850 confirm that William Morris owned land lots 82 and 83 in District 15. Tax digest records indicate that around 12 enslaved people were held on Morris's property, indicating that the land was likely farmed. On January 10, 1855, he and other family members sold those lots to George P. Key.³³ Key operated the property as a farm, and at one point had as many as 19 enslaved people working and living on the land—making his one of the farms with the most enslaved people in DeKalb county.³⁴ After the Civil War ended slavery, George Key and other family members owned land lots 82 and 83 until his death in 1883. After his death, the properties remained with sons William B. Key and Thomas T. Key.³⁵

In 1860, William married Susan F. (Frannie) Meriwether. They had a child, Eva. Born in 1872, Eva married Charles Couch in 1889 and became Eva Couch.³⁶



ABOVE Plat map of property sold to City of Atlanta showing location along Public Road (later Key Road) and consisting of 248.7 acres, Plat Book 1, 1911, DeKalb County Courthouse.

³² "A Tale of Two Fires," DeKalb History Center, May 29, 2018, <https://dekalbhistory.org/blog-posts/a-tale-of-two-fires/>.

³³ *DeKalb County Tax Commissioner, Tax Digests, 1848-1850, Georgia Archives*. Deeds and mortgages, 1842-1905, with grantee and grantor index, 1840-1910, DeKalb County Superior Court, Microform 1964, Salt Lake City, Utah: Filmed by the Genealogical Society of Utah, 1964. Accessed May 10, 2023.

³⁴ *DeKalb County Tax Commissioner, Tax Digests, 1848-1850, Georgia Archives*. Deeds and mortgages, 1842-1905, with grantee and grantor index, 1840-1910, DeKalb County Superior Court, Microform 1964, Salt Lake City, Utah: Filmed by the Genealogical Society of Utah, 1964. Accessed May 10, 2023.

³⁵ *DeKalb County Tax Commissioner, Tax Digests, 1857-1861, 1864-1868, 1873-1880, 1885-1899, Georgia Archives*.

³⁶ Ancestry.com. *DeKalb County, Georgia, U.S., Marriage Index, 1840-1908* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2014.; United States Federal Census Year: 1880; Census Place: Panthersville, DeKalb, Georgia; Roll: 143; Page: 382A; Enumeration District: 050; *Land Indenture, DeKalb County, Georgia, Deed Book 69: 57-58*

Transition to City Dairy and Prison Farm

The process of the property becoming a site for a city prison began in 1911. According to minutes of the Atlanta City Council, the city acquired acreage from Eva Couch on November 10, 1911, a site known as the “Key Plantation,” for the proposed purpose of constructing a crematory.³⁷ A survey of the property included with the deed labels the map “proposed location of new crematory on Key property” and includes the acreage as 248.7 total.³⁸ This land was later leased to an N.H. Maddox for the year 1912, in a meeting on December 18, 1911, and refers to the property being near “entrenchment,” which refers to the present-day Entrenchment Creek.³⁹

Later, in minutes from a May 17th, 1917, meeting, the city purchased from Maddox “the dairy herd, stock, buildings, equipment, etc. as per itemized list, for the sum of \$7,500.00.” At this time, the City began operating the property as a dairy farm for the benefit of city institutions.⁴⁰ Council minutes note that dairy produced at the farm would be distributed to city-run institutions, including the Battle Hill Sanatorium, which opened in 1911 for the treatment of patients with tuberculosis and was located near Westview Cemetery, Grady Hospital, and Contagious Hospital.⁴¹ The Committee on Dairy & Farm operated the property, and reports from the early 1920s from the Committee include the city prison on the list as another destination for dairy products distributed by the institution.

Dairy payroll records from 1917 reflect that workers were paid by the city to run the property mostly as a dairy farm. Paid positions included “dairyman” as well as truck drivers and another position simply listed as “forage.” Payroll records over the next several years include much the same, with expanding construction and other projects beginning around 1925, when the property would begin to be operated as a Prison Farm.⁴²

Until the mid-1920s, many people incarcerated by the City were held in the Atlanta Stockade. The property included a rock quarry and farm in addition to the concrete building where inmates were housed.⁴³ The city purchased the site in the 1860s for use as a cemetery,

but it was used as a prison instead. By the 1910s, the structure was recognized as insufficient, providing further motivation for city officials to identify a new site to house inmates.⁴⁴

The transition from city-run dairy farm to city-run prison farm began sometime in the early 1920s. In November of 1922, the Prison Committee of the City Council formally requested C.E. Kauffman, City Engineer, to “plan for a proper and adequate building [to] be built on the property known as the Dairy Farm, said building to be adequate to house all prisoners kept in the Stockade, except the venereal diseased patients.” The Prison Committee also requested that the Finance Committee provide funds for the project “at the earliest possible time.”⁴⁵

³⁷ Note that there is a slight discrepancy from these records and others indicating that the property was 248.7 acres. This might have been a typo in the Council minute books.

³⁸ Plat Book 1, 1911. Survey of Property Sold by Couch to City. DeKalb County Courthouse, Decatur, GA.

³⁹ City Council Minutes, Volume 23, Page 96, Line 5, December 18, 1911 & Page 205, Line 27, March 28th, 1912, Row 5, Section C, Shelf 6, City of Atlanta Records, Kenan Research Center at Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, GA.

⁴⁰ City Council Minutes, Volume 25, Page 726, Line 11, May 7, 1917, Row 5, Section C, Shelf 6, City of Atlanta Records, Kenan Research Center at Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, GA.

⁴¹ Press Huddleston, “255 Patients at Battle Hill ‘Happy Family of Afflicted People,’” *The Atlanta Constitution*, April 4, 1937.

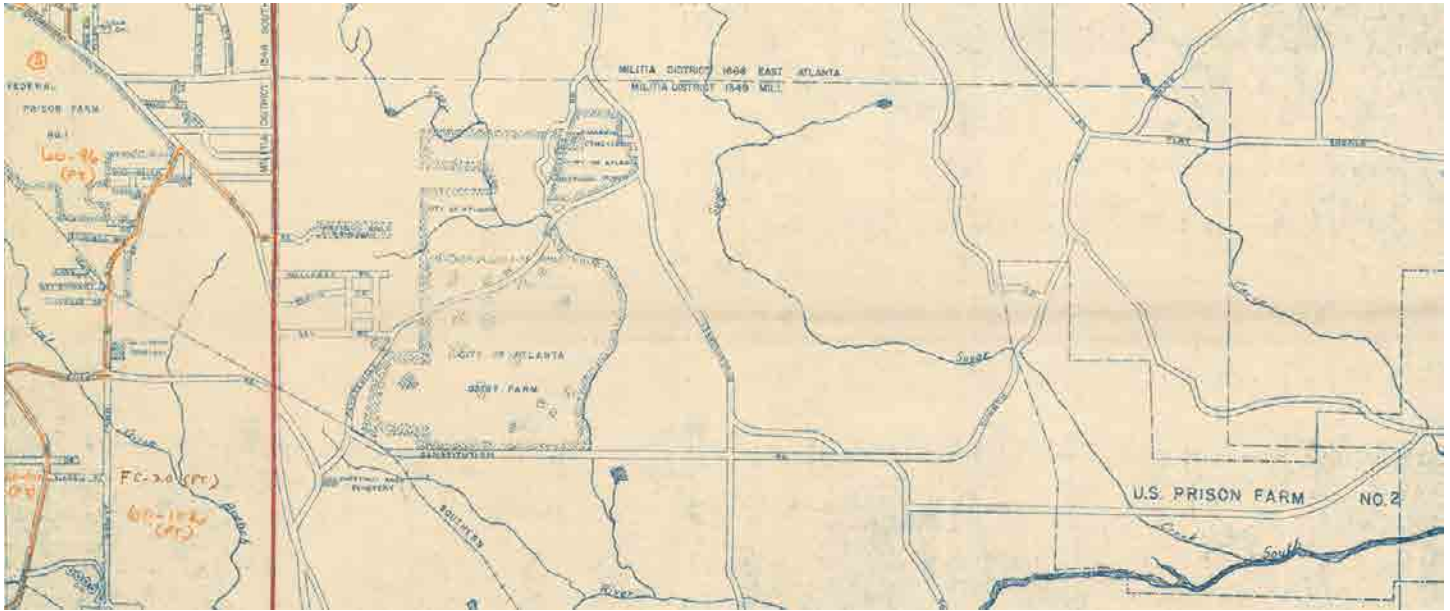
⁴² Dairy & Farm Payroll Vouchers, 1918-1928, row 8, section G, shelf 1, City of Atlanta Records, Kenan Research Center at Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, GA.

⁴³ Some prior references have been made to the Atlanta Prison Farm site being purchased for a cemetery. This is likely a result of confusing the existence of a farm associated with the City of Atlanta Stockade with the Dairy Farm (later Prison Farm) site. A note on nomenclature as well—this report uses the term “inmate” to describe a person incarcerated by any prison system (city, state, federal). During the 1920s, “prisoner” was a more commonly-used term and might appear in quotes from documents dating from the time.

⁴⁴ “The Atlanta Stockade,” *Historic Preservation: Property & District Information*, accessed May 2023, <https://www.atlantaga.gov/government/departments/city-planning/office-of-design/urban-design-commission/the-atlanta-stockade>.

⁴⁵ City Council Minutes, Volume 27, Page 761, Line 23, Nov 23, 1922, Row 8, Section A, Shelf 4, City of Atlanta Records, Kenan Research Center at Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, GA.

Transition to City Dairy and Prison Farm (1911–1926)



ABOVE 1949 Map showing City of Atlanta Dairy Farm close by to two Federal Prison Farms. From atlpm0428c, Planning Atlanta City Planning Maps Collection, Georgia State University Library.

In an annual report submitted by the City of Atlanta Prison Committee on December 31, 1922, the Committee reported that it hoped that the city budgeting process would “find the money to look forward to the transfer of the prison to a new location at the Dairy Farm” or another location, indicating that the transfer of inmates to the site had not yet occurred.⁴⁶ A report in 1923 from the Dairy & Farm Committee offers a recommendation that “the farm be maintained and support[ed] with a apportionment for another year in line with the recent ordinance adopted by Council and the proceeds of said farm be applied to the maintenance of the Prison Department under the directions of the Committee on Prison and the [Dept.] of Prison and the surplus [sic] vegetables and other crops raised on said Prison Farm may be used by Grady Hospital and Battle Hill.” This would also indicate that inmates had not yet been relocated to the site.⁴⁷

An October 1925 article in the *Atlanta Constitution* reported that female inmates from the Stockade, which was being emptied at this time, were relocated to the dairy farm.⁴⁸ In November of 1925, the Prison Committee hosted a barbecue at the site for hundreds of city, county, and state officials, as well as prominent Atlantans, with the site referred to as the “city dairy farm” by the *Atlanta Constitution*.⁴⁹ The women’s barracks had been constructed by this point, likely supported by the special

project money noted in the payroll records for the Dairy & Farm committee. Payroll records from the Dairy & Farm committee in 1926 show the first permanent addition of the position of “Guard,” providing the possibility that such positions were added due to an increase in the arrival of inmates who would need to be prevented from escaping—though guards might have been employed by other agencies as well.⁵⁰ A newspaper article from January 1926 reports that the City Prison “made money” during the preceding 11 months, referring to a dairy farm “adjoining the prison” in particular, likely referring to what eventually became known as the Atlanta Prison Farm.⁵¹

⁴⁶ 1922 Prison Committee annual report, December 31, 1922, Row 4, Section A, Shelf 5, City of Atlanta Records, Kenan Research Center at Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, GA.

⁴⁷ 1923 Dairy & Farm Committee report Row 4, Section A, Shelf 5, City of Atlanta Records, Kenan Research Center at Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Ga.

⁴⁸ “Stockade Building to be Converted into City School,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, October 17, 1925, 6.

⁴⁹ “Constitution Gets Barbecue Treat From City Farm,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, November 1, 1925, 5.

⁵⁰ Dairy & Farm pay vouchers, 1917-1918, payroll record from February 11, 1926; Prison Committee Payroll records do not differentiate workers on the Prison Farm vs. other facilities until the early 1930s, so it is difficult to tell if any guards were assigned to the Prison Farm before that time. Some of the same guards on the Dairy Farm payroll from 1926 appear as guards on the Prison Committee payrolls starting in 1932, suggesting that said guards on the Dairy Farm payroll were guarding inmates.

⁵¹ “City Prison Paid \$30,000 in 1925,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, January 6, 1926, 10.

Atlanta Prison Farm Operations

Though the exact date that inmate transfer to the farm began is difficult to pinpoint, the farm was nonetheless in operation using labor of incarcerated individuals by late 1925. From its origins as a dairy farm and agricultural farm, the site would grow to include other livestock products as well as other types of industry. The inmates who were assigned to serve their time on the farm were typically people convicted of minor crimes and served limited sentences.

In a report dating from 1934, the Superintendent of the farm reported several changes to the physical landscape. According to the letter, a two-acre lake had been added, along with a cold-storage plant and a mule and cattle barn. The Superintendent goes on to describe inmate work detail assignments for the entire prison system, which show sharp divisions along races and genders. At the time, the categories of inmates were called “colored men, white men, colored women, and white women.” Inmates could be assigned to construction, parks, sanitary department, garage, warehouse, house, hog, dairy, broiler, farm, kitchen, and laundry. The farming detail was almost entirely comprised of women of color and white men, whereas white women were solely assigned to the detail called “house.” The most common detail was construction, which included the majority of men of color along with white men. No men were assigned to kitchen or laundry, and no women were assigned to construction, parks, sanitary, garage, warehouse, hog, dairy, or broiler. The report also describes the number of inmates who were “punished,” though the exact nature of the punishment, the behavior or actions being punished, and the location the prison where the punishments took place, are not specified.⁵²

Eventually, the Atlanta Prison Farm would come to house both men and women, white and Black. A 1937 article in the *Atlanta Constitution* describes plans to expand the available housing at the farm, which would allow for the closure of the Hilliard Street Colored Men’s Prison and ease severe overcrowding at the Prison Farm site itself. It was reported that more than 175 white male inmates were being held in a space built for only 90, with the

rest of the men being sent back to the City Jail despite committing only minor offenses.⁵³ Overcrowding would continue to be a major problem for much of the Atlanta Prison Farm’s existence, which also contributed to issues such as health care access and disease.

The Atlanta Prison Farm would continue to house inmates who were assigned to short prison sentences, many due to alcohol use. A 1949 *Atlanta Constitution* article reports that approximately 90% of the inmate population were arrested due to alcohol use. Similar prison work details are also described, meaning that not all inmates worked on the Prison Farm itself even if they were housed there.⁵⁴ The 1950s continued to bring problems with overcrowding and disease, including an influenza outbreak in 1957 that necessitated commuting sentences to reduce the number of people present at the site for safety.⁵⁵

⁵² 1933 Annual Reports of City of Atlanta committees, City Prison Farm, January 1, 1934, Row 1, Section G, Shelf 4, City of Atlanta Records, Kenan Research Center at Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, GA.

⁵³ “Prison Renovation at Atlanta Farm is Sought by Lyle,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, June 13, 1937, 6.

Based on the status of current research, it is unclear when transfers of inmates of different races and genders were conducted.

⁵⁴ “Tchaikovsky Played for City Stockade,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 20, 1949, 1.

⁵⁵ A description of a venereal disease hospital being closed at the Prison Farm appears in a 1952 newspaper article, which also mentions issues of overcrowding. “VD Clinic Transfer Approved,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, May 30, 1952 p. 21. Another article in 1957 describes the influenza outbreak, “State Lists 1,000 Asian Flu Cases; City Frees Prisoners in Outbreak,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, October 17, 1957, 1.

Atlanta Prison Farm Operations

In the 1960s-1970s, the farm consisted of land for growing crops and pastures for raising cows and pens for hogs. Some buildings dated from back to the 1920s, while another new inmate sleeping quarters was constructed in the 1960s.⁵⁶ A report from 1966 describes the land consisting of around 100 acres for farming, with the remaining 243 acres divided between pastures, living facilities, prison administration buildings, and the dairy and hog raising facilities. Outside of the Key Road property, additional land was also leased and farmed under the jurisdiction of the Prison Department, including land in Henry and Fulton counties.⁵⁷ A 1965 Comprehensive Development report states that labor on the farm provided approximately 60% of the food supply required for correctional facilities, including the city jail.⁵⁸

Inmate work details continued to provide labor for projects outside of the prison farm, including the construction department, sanitary department, parks, golf courses, airport, garage and City Hall, boiler, prison and farm (including attending to cows and hogs), the mess division, yards, and house cleaning.⁵⁹ A 1965 series of articles in the *Atlanta Constitution*, in which reporter Dick Herbert feigned intoxication and purposefully got himself arrested to report on conditions in the prison, revealed inadequate food supply, overcrowded conditions, and a lack of adequate medical care. He also described a continuing practice of solitary confinement as punishment.⁶⁰



THIS PAGE Workers on the Atlanta Prison Farm, 1940s, Atlanta Journal-Constitution Photographic Archives, Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University Library; Hogs on the Atlanta Prison Farm in the 1980s, AJCP142-028d, Atlanta Journal-Constitution Photographic Archives, Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University Library. 1982.

Talk of reform at the Atlanta Prison Farm continued throughout much of its last decades of existence. Despite the years that had passed since its establishment, the type of inmate assigned to the Prison Farm had not changed much since the early days of its operation. As of December 31, 1969, there were 1,603 men and 96 women held at the prison farm, 85-90% of which were determined to be chronic alcoholics. Given this need for care and treatment, the mayoral administration of Sam Massell proposed that the site be governed by Fulton County and turned into an alcoholic treatment facility, given the population it was already housing. At that time, the City of Atlanta also had the highest rate of arrest for drunken behavior in the country. Ultimately, the proposal was not implemented in the proposed format, but other programs for alcoholic treatment were implemented at the prison.⁶¹



⁵⁶ Department of Planning letter to Dan Sweat (Chief Administrative Officer of the Mayor's Office), September 2, 1970, Row 14, Section F, Shelf 2, Box 6, Folder 13, Policy and Program Records, Mayor Sam Massell, 1967-1973, Kenan Research Center at Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, GA.

⁵⁷ 1966 Annual Report, Department of Prison & Farm, Row 14, Section E, Shelf 5, Box 12, Folder 24, Ivan Allen Papers, City of Atlanta Records, Kenan Research Center at Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, GA.

⁵⁸ [atlpp0228 48], Planning Atlanta Planning Publications Collection, Georgia State University Library. <https://digitalcollections.library.gsu.edu/digital/collection/PlanATL/id/59670/rec/1>

⁵⁹ 1969 Prison & Farm Department report, Row 14, Section F, Shelf 3, Box 10, Folder 13, Sam Massell Papers Prison, City of Atlanta Records, Kenan Research Center at Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, GA.

⁶⁰ Dick Herbert, "Six Days in Jail: The Night is Long, Lonely and Loud Where the Men Have No Tomorrows," *The Atlanta Constitution*, October 12, 1965, 1.

⁶¹ Department of Planning letter to Dan Sweat (Chief Administrative Officer of the Mayor's Office), September 2, 1970, Row 14, Section F, Shelf 2, Box 6, Folder 13, Policy and Program Records, Mayor Sam Massell, 1967-1973, Kenan Research Center at Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, GA.

Atlanta Prison Farm Operations



Mentions of Fulton County potentially taking over the facility continued into 1972, though the takeover never happened. In a February 1972 article, the farm is described as currently housing 392 inmates, 85% of whom were alcoholics.⁶² The sharp drop in the number of inmates was the result of 1970 findings of vast overcrowding, where more than 1,000 inmates were housed in a space suitable for around 400 people.⁶³ Due to the short sentences of people incarcerated at the farm, the actual number of inmates who would pass through in a given year was far higher. Numbers in the 1960s, such as 1965, exceeded 19,000 people.⁶⁴ By the 1970s, that number had decreased overall to a total of 16,757 in 1971 and 11,116 in 1972.⁶⁵

The 1980s Prison Farm continued much the same as the later years of the 1970s, though with a new rehabilitation program called the Public Inebriate Program. Though public drunkenness had been decriminalized by the State of Georgia in 1974, people could still be arrested for other illegal actions performed while drunk. The Public Inebriate Program incentivized such inmates to seek treatment in return for short sentences—though the success of the program was debated, and complaints persisted about conditions at the farm, culminating in lawsuits filed during the 1980s.⁶⁶ Debates about the future use of the site also continued, including a suggestion in the 1985 Comprehensive Development Report that the facility be re-developed as an industrial center.⁶⁷

ABOVE Last known map of Atlanta Prison Farm site while still in operation, attached to 1992 legislation, 92-R-0208.

In addition to its function as a Prison Farm, the site was also used by the City for other purposes over the years. Several zoo animals, including elephants Coca and Maude and gorilla Willie B., were buried on the property.⁶⁸ A landfill across Key Road from the Prison Farm administration buildings was in operation for decades, and the City also deposited the marble from the demolished Carnegie Library at the site. After the Prison Farm was closed, the land would continue to serve other purposes as described below.

⁶² Alex Coffin, "Reforms Begin At Prison Farm," *The Atlanta Constitution*, February 16, 1972, 14.

⁶³ Jim Gray, "Life On the Farm," *The Atlanta Constitution*, May 21, 1976, 8.

⁶⁴ 1966 Annual Report, Department of Prison & Farm.

⁶⁵ Department of Prison and Farm Annual Report, 1972, Atlanta Correctional Center, p. 21, City of Atlanta Prison Farm Subject File, Row 1, Section G, Shelf 4, Annual Reports, 1922-1974, Kenan Research Center at Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, GA.

⁶⁶ John Brady, "A last chance: But prison farm's unit for alcoholics isn't without critics," *The Atlanta Constitution*, October 23, 1982, 16.

⁶⁷ atlpp0236 23], Planning Atlanta Planning Publications Collection, Georgia State University Library. <https://digitalcollections.library.gsu.edu/digital/collection/PlanATL/id/32850/rec/26>

⁶⁸ "Coca" is the spelling used by *The Atlanta Constitution*; spellings found elsewhere include "Cocoa" and "Coco." Several news articles make reference to the burial site on the property. The more famous Willie B. in future decades appears to be a namesake of the original mentioned here. March 3, 1950, "Coca's 'Mercy Death' Brings Grief to Kids," *The Atlanta Constitution* p. 1; May 21, 1976, "Life on the Farm," *The Atlanta Constitution*, p. 8; "Statue of Willie B. Missing and the City Wants It Back," October 2, 1961, *The Atlanta Constitution*, p. 1.

Closure of the Atlanta Prison Farm and Uses of the Site Today

By the early 1990s, closure of the Atlanta Prison Farm seemed to be inevitable. The 230 cattle and 250 hogs that were raised at the Prison Farm were sold at a livestock auction in August 1990.⁶⁹ In 1992, the Atlanta City Council approved legislation to lease 200 acres of the Prison Farm site (now also called the Corrections Center in official documents). The land was leased by Henderson Associates for a cattle breeding program, though records do not reflect the lease being renewed past the initial year. At that point, the site is described as including a Corrections Center (presumably where inmates were housed), a Corrections Training Academy, a Police Bomb Bunker, gas house, auto house, and machine shop.⁷⁰

The City would go on to open the Atlanta City Detention Center (ACDC) in 1995 with 1,100 beds, soon to be expanded to 1,300 beds. The Atlanta Prison Farm appears to have been closed by this point, though the exact date of the closure continues to be difficult to identify.⁷¹ The area surrounding the Prison Farm would continue to serve as space for law enforcement functions, both for the City and other entities, such as the state Youth Detention Facility built on a portion of the former Atlanta Prison Farm land and now located adjacent to the City's property off Constitution Road. During the debate for the placement of the new facility, the Prison Farm was brought up as a possibility while it was still described as "closing" in 1994.⁷² The ultimate location for the Youth Detention Facility is still in use today and was deeded to the State of Georgia in 1995.⁷³ A newspaper article from 1995 about the Juvenile Facility location also mentions that much of the land that comprised the Prison Farm is "pastureland" and that the Atlanta Police Academy was also located on the site.⁷⁴

As the property continued to be mostly unused, community members and members of City and DeKalb county government began to identify the site as a potential location for public parks. In 2002, an *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* article reported that the Atlanta Prison Farm site was being considered as part of a larger public parks plan.⁷⁵ DeKalb County acquired the



ABOVE Photo of Prison Farm buildings taken in 2023, courtesy Atlanta History Center

adjacent property to the site sharing a border along Intrenchment Creek as a park for the county in 2003.⁷⁶

Though the site would be regularly identified by the City and community members as an area for future parkland or other uses, no major developments occurred on the property for the next several years.

⁶⁹ Alma E. Hill, "Prison farm, stock to be sold," *The Atlanta Constitution*, August 25, 1990, 35.

⁷⁰ Atlanta City Council, *Agreement/ With Henderson Associated*, Public Safety and Finance Committees. 92-R-0208, 1992. City of Atlanta Records, Kenan Research Center at Atlanta History Center. Records provide a list of building names, but do not provide detail about the exact use of each building and whether each was active at the time.

⁷¹ [atpp0236 23], Planning Atlanta Planning Publications Collection, Georgia State University Library. <https://www.atlantaga.gov/government/departments/corrections/about>

⁷² Mark Silk, "Location linked to deal that killed boot camp plans," *The Atlanta Constitution*, December 14, 1994, 34.

⁷³ Atlanta City Council, *A Resolution by Executive and Finance Committees authorizing the Mayor to execute a Quitclaim Deed Conveying to the State of Georgia 15 acres of land fronting on Constitution Road for the purpose of constructing a new Metro Regional Youth Detention Center; and for other purposes*. Executive and Finance Committees. 95-R-0466, 1995. City of Atlanta Records, Kenan Research Center at Atlanta History Center, Atlanta, Ga.

⁷⁴ Chris Grimes, "Battle Brewing over site for juvenile facility," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 9, 1995, 15.

⁷⁵ Maria Saporta, "Historic Prison Farm Could Rebloom as Park," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, December 23, 2002, C3.

⁷⁶ Stacy Shelton, "Green Deal for DeKalb," *The Atlanta Constitution*, May 13, 2003, B6

In 2017, the site was again identified as a potential area for a new City park or greenspace, this time referred to as the South River Forest.⁷⁷ In 2021, then-Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms announced plans to use the former Atlanta Prison Farm site as space for a new public safety training facility, citing the advantages of zoning and permitting in the area and the need to boost morale of public safety officials.⁷⁸ A September 2021 City Council vote approved preliminary plans for the training facility with the Atlanta Police Foundation.⁷⁹ At the time of writing, a significant portion of the 85 acres of the future training facility grounds have been cleared for construction. Protests against the facility continue while construction and planning is ongoing.

The Atlanta Prison Farm site is one reflective of much of the history of Atlanta and the surrounding area. Originally inhabited by Native Americans, including the Muscogee people, taken by land cessations, and a site of cultivation by enslaved labor prior to the end of the Civil War, it later saw cultivation for decades by inmates of the city's criminal justice system. Today, several buildings from the farm still exist and provide the opportunity for robust, place-based interpretation and learning. Both inmates and workers from the site are still alive and able to be interviewed to give first-hand accounts of the Atlanta Prison Farm. The opportunities for historical interpretation are numerous, and will no doubt enhance the knowledge of Atlantans and residents of the surrounding area.



ABOVE Photo of Prison Farm buildings taken in 2023, courtesy Atlanta History Center

⁷⁷ *The Atlanta City Design: Aspiring to the Beloved Community* (Atlanta, GA: City of Atlanta Department of City Planning, 2017), 330, <https://online.flowpaper.com/72b006f2/ACDSecondPrintFINAL180820/#page=353>.

⁷⁸ Wiborn P Nobles III, "Atlanta mayor touts plans to open new police training center," Atlanta Journal Constitution, April 1, 2021, <https://www.ajc.com/news/atlanta-news/atlanta-mayor-touts-plans-to-open-new-police-training-center/SD57ADXAEVEAXKCEQWG353JUJI/>.

⁷⁹ "Atlanta City Council Approves Ground Lease Agreement for Public Safety Training Center," Press Releases, August 9, 2021, <https://www.atlantaga.gov/Home/Components/News/News/13827/>.

Areas for Further Research

This report is not intended to be a comprehensive history of the Atlanta Prison Farm site or the Atlanta Prison Farm itself. To fully research and synthesize information on the many facets of this complex and lengthy history, much more time and resources would be needed. Possible areas of further research include:

1. A deeper exploration of the land that became the Atlanta Prison Farm before the city's purchase in 1911. This could include further research about the Native American populations who lived and/or used the land for thousands of years, more information about the Land Lottery system, and/or an exploration of the life and conditions of the people who lived and worked on the land from the 1821 Land Lottery until 1911, enslaved and free, and investigating labor sources between the Civil War's end when slavery was abolished and 1911.
2. At the time of writing, it is unclear when exactly inmates classified in different categories due to the segregation system at the time were relocated to the Atlanta Prison Farm. More work would need to be done to determine when both Black and white inmates, as well as men and women of each racial designation, were imprisoned at the site.
3. The Atlanta Prison system in general is another topic that could be further investigated. Possible avenues for research include the facilities throughout the years (including the Atlanta Stockade and Hilliard Street Prison), management of the system, conditions for inmates, and information about approaches to inmate punishment, such as the use of solitary confinement.
4. Conditions at the Atlanta Prison Farm and personal experiences with the site are another area that require further research. Since the Prison Farm was only closed in the 1990s, there are likely people who can be interviewed who were imprisoned or who worked at the facility. Oral histories providing first-hand accounts would be a valuable resource for future generations who are studying this history.
5. Site-based history of the existing buildings would be important to definitively identify which building served which purpose during the Atlanta Prison Farm's existence. Several buildings were repurposed throughout the years.

This report reflects the best research available at the time of writing. Additional research will no doubt reveal new information and might lead to corrections. All changes will be clearly noted.

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