

Renewing Birmingham: Federal Funding and the Promise of Change, 1929–1979. By Christopher MacGregor Scribner. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002. xii + 188 pp. Index, notes, bibliography. Cloth, \$40.00. ISBN 0-820-32328-4.

Reviewed by Harvey K. Newman

One of the great municipal rivalries of the last century was the struggle between Birmingham and Atlanta for dominance in the Southeast. The young Georgia city was proud of the rail lines and commerce that led to its nickname, “The Gateway City of the South.” Its even younger rival, Birmingham, grew so rapidly during the early years of the twentieth century that it was dubbed “The Magic City.” Yet, by the 1960s, the divergent paths chosen by local leaders in the two cities led to quite different outcomes. A climate of racial moderation championed by officials like Mayor William B. Hartsfield, who proclaimed Atlanta “the city too busy to hate,” encouraged investment, thereby enabling business leaders to celebrate their success in becoming a place of national importance. In contrast, Birmingham, which had grown so magically as an industrial city, languished as the steel mills closed, blue-collar employment declined, and racial conflict between civil rights demonstrators and police made front-page news across the country.

Christopher MacGregor Scribner tells the story of the many decisions made by the local business and political figures who determined the economic fortunes of this Alabama city. He argues that a major factor in achieving change in Birmingham was federal aid for urban renewal and hospital construction, which helped to bring fiscal as well as social transformation to the city. Scribner suggests that Birmingham now has more in common with cities in the rest of the nation.

My personal experience with Birmingham began with frequent visits to the city, starting in the 1950s. I saw its steel mills and the soot in the air that turned one daytime visit into night, forcing the city to turn on its street lights in mid-afternoon. Birmingham, whose heavy industry dominated the local economy in the same way that the huge statue of Vulcan, the Roman god of iron and steel, towered above its skyline, was like no other place I had seen in the South. When I returned for a closer look near the end of the 1970s, the statue of Vulcan had begun to fall into disrepair and the last steel mill had closed. The University of Alabama at Birmingham had replaced steel manufacturing as the city’s largest employer, and hospitals of various kinds dominated the landscape. *Renewing Birmingham* helps to explain how this transformation occurred.

Scribner provides considerable detail on Alabama policymakers’ decisions to construct hospitals and expand the state’s medical school, using federal grant-in-aid financing. Less

persuasive is his effort to link social reform in Birmingham with the federal health-care funding programs. Readers interested in the transformation of Birmingham would be better served by Edward LaMonte's *Politics and Welfare in Birmingham, 1900–1975* (1995). For example, LaMonte examines more comprehensively the impact of other federal policies, such as the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, whose requirement for local citizen participation led to the creation of one of the city's first interracial groups. On the other hand, two aspects of Scribner's work are commendable: his thorough examination of the impact of federal health-care policies on the city's economic transformation, and his frequent comparisons of the economic decisions made in Birmingham with those of its rival in Georgia.

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