

In The Beginning There Was...

By Nina & Jake Elsas, The Patch Works Art And History Center

...what, exactly??? Deciding where history begins is a real toughie.

The conceit of a “beginning” has been redetermined countless times to conveniently mean whatever an opportunistic person wants it to mean. For the sake of accuracy, we *could* go all the way back to paintings on cave walls, but there ain’t no time for that. This article is the quintessential community-newspaper blurb.



First paragraph, and it’s already too long. Besides, rehashing millennia of humans gallivanting around the planet is not in our wheelhouse. We at *The Patch Works* aren’t philosophers, theologians, anthropologists, archeologists, sociologists, astrologists, whateverologists or – for that matter – trained historians (except Nina... right... she is). But

we do love a good yarn. And we love our neighborhood. And we’ve spent many years studying a very specific time, a very specific place, and a very specific story: the 1800s.

Atlanta; and the Epic Tale of Cabbagetown.

So... DISCLAIMER ALERT! Although there is certainly much more to the ancient history of this tiny anachronistic oasis surrounded by a quickly-modernizing Southeast Atlanta, we’re gonna make it easy on all of us by taking this extremely opportunistic and convenient stance: *“In the beginning, there was the Zero Mile Post.”* For without this Zero Mile Post, there’d be no Cabbagetown. And although maaaybe it’s a tad harder to prove: without Cabbagetown, there’d be no modern-day Atlanta (amazingly, we at The Patch Works aren’t entirely omniscient either).

Nonetheless, for the sake of this article, we will start the story with the founding of Atlanta, because for over 150 years, Atlanta and Cabbagetown – for better or for worse – have been intrinsically linked. Where one goes, the other will surely follow. So, without further ado, let’s talk about this here Zero Mile Post... In 1837, after more than a year of hemming and hawing over the best location (Decatur anyone? No? How about Buckhead? Meh. Whatever. This is fine.), Colonel Stephen Harriman Long of the US Army Corps of Engineers ceremoniously whacked a stake into the Georgia red clay (about four blocks northwest of today’s Five Points), indicating the precise and immutable spot where the Western and Atlantic Railroad intended to build the definitive “end of the line,” an inspired undertaking that would link the Port of Savannah to the Midwest.

Shortly thereafter, the original stake was unceremoniously tossed out and replaced by an unremarkably plain stone marker, profoundly foretelling a city’s endless devotion to tossing things out. This marker was dubbed... the Zero Mile Post. The Zero Mile Post’s ilk was typically plopped every mile alongside train tracks to keep engineers abreast of their location, but this one was different: this marker represented a commitment to actualizing a critical railroad

hub for the region. With this commitment in mind, a small outpost grew around the marker. The nascent community became known as Thrasherville, named after a Mr. John Thrasher – of Norcross fame – who built some homes and ran a nearby General Store. Clearly, Thrasherville was destined to become Georgia’s numero uno, gleaming metropolis, a vision that inspired local leaders to name, in Mr. Thrasher’s honor, both a bird and an NHL team after him (not).

In 1842, however, something completely unexpected happened: the Zero Mile Post somehow moved. It snuck away, just a few scant blocks to the southeast, but that short distance left the dream of a mighty Thrasherville but a distant memory (just like pro hockey in Atlanta). Soon, the next glorious incarnation of this railroad-centric city emerged and became known as...Terminus!

Well, that lasted about a year. Because why not live in Marthasville instead??? In 1843, Georgia’s beloved Governor Wilson Lumpkin apparently believed that his daughter’s first name would conjure up vivid images of muscular freight trains thundering across the American landscape. Peeps working for the Georgia Railroad, however, for some strange reason seemed to disagree with the Gov, and two years later, in 1845, we’re... Atlanta.

Dodged THAT bullet. Good thing Martha’s middle name was Atalanta, right? Or maybe it was because the railroad was Western-ATLANTIC (dropping the “ic”). Frankly, Atlanta’s naming will forever be shrouded in mystery, with those on one side positively proclaiming it was from Lady Lumpkin, and the other side swearing it was from the choo-choo.

Regardless, all this drama occurred before even one train had passed this way. In turn, this irritating inability to settle on an idea – this relentless discontent – seems to dwell in the very soul of Atlanta. When it laid its tracks, the city simultaneously laid a bad habit of routine purging.

In any event, we have set the stage; our immortal Atlanta has arisen. Next month, we will address the next phase on our journey to Cabbagetown: *Atlanta gets torched.*

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