

## Building Capital for Legitimacy: J.B. Blayton's Path to Success in Segregated Atlanta

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### Abstract

In the first part of the twentieth century, the Black community in Atlanta, Georgia, operated in an environment of suppressed capital. That environment, along with other factors, contributed to low legitimacy for Black entrepreneurs. However, we still read success stories like that of Jesse Bee Blayton (known as J.B.). Blayton was an outsider in Atlanta who, within a decade, became one of its most successful Black entrepreneurs, respected by the white and Black communities alike. This article examines how Blayton accumulated cultural, social, economic, and symbolic capital to earn the legitimacy that was necessary for his eventual success. This capital was accumulated within the white and Black communities, depending on the type of capital. Each form of capital also contributed to different strategies of earning legitimacy.

**Keywords:** entrepreneurship; Black business; legitimacy; race.

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## Introduction

In 1922, Jesse Bee Blayton arrived with his wife and young son in Atlanta, Georgia to take up a position with Standard Life Insurance. Then, as now, Atlanta was known as a city with a vibrant Black community having at least two distinct business areas, a selection of Black colleges, and a significant social network. Blayton, however, was an outsider with no familial connections to the city, and he had not attended the prestigious local Black colleges. Yet when he died suddenly more than half a century later, Blayton was celebrated as one of Atlanta's top Black business leaders and entrepreneurs by both white and Black newspapers in the newly integrated city (Atlanta Constitution 1977a; Atlanta Daily World 1977a; Atlanta Journal 1977).

Over his career, he was an accountant, a professor at Atlanta University and a respected community leader. Blayton was also a serial entrepreneur, helping to found or operate eleven different businesses throughout his life, from banking to education to entertainment.<sup>1</sup> In the 1920s, he was the first Black person to obtain a Certified Public Accountant (CPA) designation in the Deep South and to head the Atlanta Negro Chamber of Commerce. In the 1950s, Blayton was the first Black person to own a radio station and he headed the Atlanta Urban League. By the 1970s, he was the first Black director of the Atlanta Housing Authority. He was the auditor for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and acted as the expert witness in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s tax evasion trial in Alabama. By observing his career, we see how he accumulated the various forms of capital necessary to achieve legitimacy in both the white and Black communities.

What makes Blayton's accomplishments so noteworthy is that he achieved this in a segregated community. Like most southern cities, Atlanta was highly segregated in all aspects of public life through most of the twentieth century until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 eliminated Jim Crow laws. This segregation had intensified after the 1906 Atlanta Race Massacre, when many decided the way to prevent future incidents was to minimize casual interactions between the races (Keith Hollingsworth 2024). Therefore, Blayton operated in what Ivan Light and Léopaul Dana (2013, 607) refer to as an environment of suppressed social capital by a malevolent dominant majority. In actuality, all forms of capital would have been suppressed by this majority, and all Black entrepreneurs would have faced similar obstacles. Blayton, therefore, is unique only in the extent and range of his success and the degree he needed to build capital. Otherwise, he represents many of his peers and his efforts are indicative of theirs.

Studying his overall career reveals the actions many Black entrepreneurs took in this era of suppressed capital to achieve legitimacy. It reflects a dance between satisfying the immediate community and the dominant white community that often held sway over the resources. This article studies the various ways that Blayton accomplished this throughout his career and is divided as follows. The next section describes the literature surrounding capital, legitimacy, and the segregated community. The following section gives J.B. Blayton's biography. A discussion of the various forms of capital accumulated by Blayton is in the fourth section along with why each granted him legitimacy in his marketplace. The final section describes the conclusions.

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<sup>1</sup> Blayton, J.B., Sr. 1954. "Sworn Statement of J.B. Blayton, Sr.". Paul E.X. Brown WERD Records, Archives Division, Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture and History, Atlanta-Fulton Public Library System (hereafter "Brown Records").

## Literature Review

Mark Suchman (1995) wrote the seminal article that consolidated most of the prevailing legitimacy theory into a coherent whole in the mid-1990s. His definition of legitimacy was “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are [desirable], proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman 1995, 574). Legitimacy suggests that a new organization or venture “belongs” or fits within the social construct of its time period. To be legitimate, an organization must be accepted by the majority of evaluators within its social sphere. David L. Deephouse, Jonathan Bundy, Leigh Plunkett Tost, and Suchman (2017, 12) state: “Legitimacy matters because it has consequences for organizations. Primary among these consequences, particularly for organizational scholars, is that legitimacy has a clear effect on social and economic exchange: most stakeholders will only engage with legitimate organizations”. Suchman defined three types of legitimacy: pragmatic, moral and cognitive (Suchman 1995, 572). This article considers mainly cognitive legitimacy, referring to a mental acceptance of appropriateness compared to practical legitimacy (seeing an expected benefit) or moral legitimacy (the right thing to do).

Why is legitimacy so important for a Black entrepreneur? Because, in general, Black people are not granted legitimacy in business in the same way as entrepreneurs of the majority community (Hollingsworth 2020). Currently, few people would articulate the idea that Black people are unable to function in business, although issues of legitimacy still exist (Michael N. Ogbolu, Robert P. Singh, and Anthony Wilbon 2015; Olufunmilola Ojediran, Allan Discua Cruz, and Alistair Anderson 2022). However, as Daniel Wadhwani and Christina Lubinski (2017) point out so well in their discussion of temporality, Black entrepreneurs must be viewed in the context of their segregated environment with all the uncertainty that was present at that time. In the period after the Civil War and during the early part of the twentieth century, it was not assumed that Black men and women were fully capable of running a business.

Notably, W.E.B. Du Bois, at the “Negro in Business” Conference in Atlanta in 1899, asserted: “Naturally business, of all vocations, was the furthest removed from slavery” (Du Bois 1899, 5). As late as the early twentieth century, President William Howard Taft told a group of Black college graduates in North Carolina: “Your race is adopted to be a race of farmers first, and all the time” (Charlotte Evening Chronicle 1909, 10). Later, Taft defended his decision not to appoint Black people to political positions by saying: “There is no constitutional right in anyone to hold office. The question is one of fitness. A one-legged man would hardly be selected as a mail carrier, and although we would deplore his misfortune, nevertheless we would not seek to neutralize it by giving him a place that he could not fill” (Henry F. Pringle 1939, 390). The comparison of blackness to a disability makes President Taft’s perception plain, even though he was referring to a political office in this instance.

Unfortunately, this belief that Black people were not capable of running a business or pursuing a profession was strong in both the white and Black communities. Algernon B. Jackson, a noted Black physician, issued “A Criticism of the Negro Professional” in late 1932 at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in Atlanta. He said, “Throughout the entire South, much to my surprise I have found that Negroes best prepared to pay colored professional men for thorough service patronize white professionals instead” (Jackson 1933, 50-51). Jackson’s quote is an example of trying to grant moral legitimacy to Black businesses. He clearly believes it is the moral thing to do. Du Bois would also state this at the “Negro in Business” Conference when one of the resolutions passed was “The mass of Negroes must learn to patronize business enterprises conducted by their own race, even at some slight disadvantage” (Du Bois 1899, 50).

At the association’s annual meeting in 1932, Charles C. Spaulding, the noted president of North Carolina Mutual, the largest Black business in existence at that time, said:

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With or without reason the colored man begins with the presumption of guilt hovering above him. Without proof his customers will believe him guilty of unsanitation, of courtesy, of unprogressiveness, of depleted stock, of inferior goods, of slightly higher prices than his white competitor. The burden from the outset is upon him to prove his innocence. The story is told of an old colored woman who refused to trade with the colored grocer across the street. On one occasion, when pinned down for her reasons, she said that the colored grocer's sugar was not as sweet as that she purchased elsewhere. It is the task of the Negro merchant or business man to convince his fold that his sugar comes out of the same barrel as that of his white competitor. (Spaulding 1933, 69-70)

Spaulding's comment is a great example of cognitive legitimacy in action (Hollingsworth 2020; Suchman 1995).

Given the complete lack of business training for Black citizens after the Civil War, Black business people most likely did struggle to operate a good business. They would be at a competitive disadvantage to white businesses that had more training, more networks, more resources, and a longer tradition. This is shown in Du Bois's clause "even at some slight disadvantage". The anecdote from Spaulding demonstrates though that a strong cognitive bias was at play that did not depend on actual service or products. It was simply *assumed* Black businesses were inferior. The quotes from Du Bois and Jackson show the efforts made to encourage support of Black businesses by Black leaders as a moral requirement.

### ***Types of Capital***

A "forms of capital" perspective on entrepreneurship, based upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1986), allows us to study the actions and resources available to an individual to build up the legitimacy necessary to be successful. Bourdieu (1986) wrote of four types of capital (economic, social, cultural, and symbolic) that are also described well by Ojediran et al. (2022). *Economic capital* is the one most commonly discussed, as it represents the money, assets, or wealth that an individual has. The more easily that an asset can be converted to money, the more an asset belongs in the economic capital classification. *Cultural capital* is defined as long-lasting dispositions of the body reflecting the implicit and explicit culture surrounding a person. It is embodied by style, taste, and mannerisms. Cultural capital is institutionalized by educational attainment. This capital is connected to an individual and requires time to develop (although the amount of culture capital accrued is not connected to the amount of time required to achieve it). An example of cultural capital in this context is the historical business tradition that is considered part and parcel of the middleman minority or ethnic enclaves. Though it is learned from the society and culture that produces an individual, that individual still must acquire that knowledge through effort and time. It is not simply transferred as money would be. *Social capital* refers to the actual or potential resources available to individuals through their networks of mutual acquaintances or their connections. Cultural capital is developed within an individual by effort. Social capital is granted from without by the social milieu that encompasses an individual. You can inherit economic or social capital immediately, but cultural capital must be developed (although privileged persons will require less time to acquire it). The final form of capital is symbolic. *Symbolic capital* is "understood as the prestige, status and positive reputation individuals possess in the eyes of others" (Natalia Vershina and Peter Rodgers 2020, 591). All of the other three forms of capital can create symbolic capital for a person. A person who drives a custom-made Maserati, possesses an Ivy League PhD, and gets invited to Davos would have symbolic capital.

The various forms of capital can all grant overall legitimacy, and in this discussion, cognitive legitimacy. The mass of people who grant this cognitive legitimacy would assume

that possessors of the different types of capital “deserve” their success. Even today, we assume that wealthy people (economic capital) possess expertise within and beyond the areas in which they accumulated their wealth. Multiple men and women have run for political office based on their wealth as evidence that they know how to manage an organization. Educational attainment, the institutionalized form of cultural capital, is required for many positions, and we have systems that rank the colleges to grant even more legitimacy based on the source of one’s degree. Social capital is demonstrated through the common adage that “it’s not what you know but who you know”. An entire group of entrepreneurs called “influencers”, whose sole form of capital is the large number of followers they have attracted through social media, has arisen in recent years. Finally, symbolic capital reflects how this knowledge is often transmitted to the public. The Forbes list of the world’s wealthiest people, often further broken down by industry, demonstrates how we keep track of who has the most economic capital.

It should be clear from history how the Black community in the segregated South would have operated in an environment of suppressed capital. The suppression hypothesis postulates that a dominant social capital system can actually suppress the entrepreneurship of a minority group by blocking the smaller group from the necessary resources (Light and Dana 2013, 607). Light and Dana (2013, 609) discuss how the dominant social capital of the Old South suppressed Black entrepreneurship: “African Americans had social capital, centered in the churches, but they lacked business skills, industrial information, financial capital, and bridging ties to the White people who had these resources of entrepreneurship, which they passed back and forth among themselves through bonding social capital”. While their work examines the social capital realm, in actuality, as their comment suggests, all forms of capital were suppressed. Lack of credit from the white financial structure prevented the accumulation of economic capital, and even if achieved, economic capital could be seized or destroyed at the whim of the white community (the best example would be the 1921 Tulsa massacre when the Black business district was destroyed overnight by a white mob). Black people were prevented from attending essentially every higher education institution in the South except those created specifically for them, and these institutions generally suffered from much less financial support. Northern institutions would admit Black students, but the numbers were low and given the state of primary and secondary education for Black students in the South, very few would qualify. Black people were banned from white organizations that were established to create the social bonds used to build businesses. Very few if any Chambers of Commerce in the South would have Black members. No clubs, like the Capital City Club or the Piedmont Driving Club of Atlanta, would accept Black people. Finally, even Black accomplishments were not necessarily reported in the media or granted their proper due. For example, when Hattie McDaniel won the first Academy Award granted to a Black person (a huge symbolic win for her performance in *Gone with the Wind*), she was not allowed to sit at the dinner with the other guests but had to sit at a rear table in another room (which reduced the symbolism of the moment, implying she was good but not good enough) (Edward Mapp 2008, 2).

Given all the constraints, how did J.B. Blayton, an outsider in Atlanta from a nonprivileged background, achieve his level of success? Blayton’s actions reflect what many Black entrepreneurs did in this era of suppressed social capital, taking advantage of both the immediate minority community and the limited opportunities offered by the dominant majority one. Blayton is emblematic of the Black community’s adage of “making a way out of no way”.

### **J.B. Blayton's Life and Activities**

Jesse Bee Blayton and his twin brother, Benjamin, were the second and third of eight children born to Lustus and Mattie Blayton on December 6, 1897 in the Indian Territory (later to become Oklahoma).<sup>2</sup> His father, although a minister, could not read, and his mother taught in the local school, even though her own education ended at the fourth grade.<sup>3</sup> In 1915, he began attending the nearby Colored Agricultural and Normal University (now Langston University, also in Oklahoma). Although he attended on a state scholarship, he worked as a janitor at the college to pay his sister's tuition. Blayton's own formal education was interrupted by World War One when he enlisted in 1917 in the Regular Army, which allowed him to transfer into the National Army serving in the 183rd Brigade, the noted African American Brigade. He saw combat at Metz, the Argonne Forest, and Pont-à-Mousson, and was slightly wounded in the Argonne. Blayton served throughout the war and was honorably discharged in 1919, having reached the rank of sergeant major, the highest rank below officer level, at a relatively young age.<sup>4</sup> Returning to Oklahoma, he married Ms. Willa Mae Daniels in 1920, and they had their first child in 1922. At some point the newly married couple ran a store together.

It was in the army that he first learned about accounting and decided to pursue it as a career (John W. Seder and Berkeley G. Burrell 1971, 125). After finishing Langston in 1920, Blayton concurrently attended the International Accountant's Society of Chicago courses for accounting and the Walton School of Commerce. Later, in the early 1930s, while engaging in several business activities, teaching college, and raising a family (a son and a daughter), he simultaneously enrolled in the University of Chicago's Graduate School of Business (taking courses in economic thought, advanced accounting theory, personnel administration, finance and research) and the American Extension School of Law, from which he would receive his LLB in 1936.<sup>5</sup>

When J.B. Blayton arrived in Atlanta in 1922 to take the job as an assistant auditor at Standard Life Insurance Company, there scarcely could have been a better place to be employed in Atlanta. Although Atlanta Life Insurance is more well known today, Standard Life, founded by Heman Perry, dwarfed it in 1922, both in size and scope. In addition, many of the most successful Black men in the city were associated with Standard Life such as Dr. John Hope (President of Morehouse College) (Alexa Benson Henderson 1987, 42). Blayton made contacts in this environment that served him well the rest of his life. He also received a strong practical education in accounting, auditing, and finance. At its peak, Standard Life Insurance and the Service Enterprises were valued at \$11 million and employed 2,500 people, the vast majority of whom were Black.<sup>6</sup>

However, Perry's vision extended beyond his reach, and the company went into receivership in 1924. The failure of Standard Life did not mean the end of Blayton's employment. In September 1925, he remained with the company but under the new management. At the same time, he was recruited by Dr. Hope to begin teaching accounting at Morehouse College, later moving to Atlanta University in 1929 when the Atlanta University Center was formed.

### ***Accounting***

In 1928, J.B. Blayton attained a momentous distinction that would form the basis of his next entrepreneurial venture: he passed the CPA examination and was awarded his certificate by

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<sup>2</sup> US Census 1900, 1910 accessed through Ancestry.com.

<sup>3</sup> Blayton, J.B., Sr. 1954. "Sworn Statement of J.B. Blayton, Sr.". Brown Records.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> For a thorough discussion of Standard Life Insurance and Heman Perry, see Henderson (1987).

the state of Georgia, becoming the first Black to earn that appellation in the Deep South and only the fourth in the nation (Theresa A. Hammond 2002, 147).<sup>7</sup> Blayton took the exam thirteen times over a three-year period from 1925 to 1928, paying \$25 per test (\$460 in 2025 dollars after adjusting for inflation).<sup>8</sup> For context, between 1925 and 1936, 61.1 percent of white-collar Black men in the South Atlantic region reported making less than \$200 per month and 48.2 percent reported making less than \$100 per month (US Office of the Advisor on Negro Affairs 1938, 121).

Whether the necessity of multiple attempts was due to racism, his inadequate training, or his own lack of knowledge is not known.<sup>9</sup> However, his perseverance and his dedication to this task is clear.<sup>10</sup> By 1950, there were fewer than twenty Black CPAs in the country, and it took until the mid-1960s to achieve the first one hundred, so Black CPAs remained a rarity for many years (Hammond 2002). The CPA credential allowed him to start J.B. Blayton & Co., an accounting firm that formed the foundation for many of Blayton's other business ventures. He maintained this business for the remainder of his life.

Over the years, Blayton's accounting business would expand to cover the entire Southeast. He would eventually have branches in Charlotte and Durham, North Carolina, as well as Dayton, Ohio. Blayton became the official auditor of several well-known Black institutions, such as the National Baptist Convention, fraternal orders, and churches. He was the national treasurer (Grand Keeper of Finance) of the Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Inc., one of the first and largest Black fraternal organizations, from 1933 to 1970 (Kyle S. Yeldell 2021, 93-94). He kept the books for the SCLC for many years, and his employees tracked all donations given to the organization (Willieboyd McNeil Saddler 2006, 84-85).

Blayton also performed a very important role when Dr. King was put on trial for income tax evasion in Alabama. Blayton's auditing work alongside clever detective work by Dr. King's lawyers clearly demonstrated his innocence. It was Blayton, with his auditing background, who proved that not only had Dr. King paid all his taxes, but he had overpaid. The thoroughness of his work demonstrated Dr. King's integrity and led to his acquittal in a Birmingham courtroom. It is hard to overstate the magnitude of this accomplishment: a Black auditor was able to verify the records of a Black preacher to a white Alabama jury at a time when the outcome of the trial was very much in doubt (Taylor Branch 1988, 309).

### ***Banking, Housing, and Finance***

During the busy autumn of 1925, Blayton made his first foray into a financier role. The lack of capital for financing was one of the greatest impediments for Black homeownership in Atlanta at this time, as most white banks would not loan money to Black people or only at prohibitive interest rates. Heman Perry had attempted to address this problem with Citizens Trust Bank, but in 1925, the bank was barely functioning. In September 1925, Blayton and eleven partners would incorporate the Atlanta Mutual Building Loan and Savings Association by investing \$100 each (Saddler 2006).

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<sup>7</sup> For most of his life, Blayton was considered the first Black CPA in the US. Only later research by Hammond (2002) showed otherwise.

<sup>8</sup> Georgia State Board Examiners of Public Accountants. n.d. *Minutes of Meetings*. State Examining Boards, Georgia Secretary of State, Minute Book no. 1. Georgia Archives, Morrow, GA.

<sup>9</sup> The Georgia State Board of Accountancy minutes from each quarter detail who paid to take the CPA exam, who passed the previous exam, and who still needed to retake which portion. So, for example, one can find that Blayton struggled to pass the Practical Accounting portion of the exam. The minutes do not, however, report the actual scores on the exam.

<sup>10</sup> Blayton's numerous attempts to pass the exam were probably not common knowledge. It is never referenced in articles about him nor is there any evidence that he spoke of it.

This founding is the first time we see Blayton using business as a means of bringing improvement to his community. This association and others like it would be a strong force in the national Black community for years to come:

The formation and growth of savings and loan associations owned and operated by non-whites is one of the most significant factors in the American Economy. Colored savings and loan associations have stimulated and encouraged thrift and home ownership among the non-white people of the United States. They have provided mortgage financing assistance to colored home owners not otherwise available. In certain communities they have broken mortgage interest rate restrictions imposed on minority group borrowers by white institutions. They have changed the policy of certain lending institutions with respect to financial assistance for qualified non-white home purchasers. (Emmer M. Lancaster 1965)

Atlanta Mutual Building Loan and Savings Association was the second Black association in the country to be accepted as a member of the Federal Home Loan Bank System, being admitted on January 31, 1933 (Lancaster 1965). It was then renamed the Mutual Federal Savings and Loan Association of Atlanta. Following its reorganization in 1937 by John Whittaker, the registrar of Atlanta University, it went on to finance over \$1 million in home purchases by 1949 (Lancaster 1965). Blayton would serve as director for over thirty years and become president in the late 1950s. The Association existed until 2000 when it was subsumed by Citizens Trust (FDIC 2000).

In late 1932 through early 1933, Blayton entered a partnership with Lorimer D. Milton and Clayton R. Yates. At this time, they were three of Atlanta's most successful Black businessmen, and each had a primary occupation and interest. Though Milton and Yates jointly owned a chain of pharmacies,<sup>11</sup> Yates was the primary manager of the stores and the source of their growth. Milton served as president of Citizens Trust Bank, which was his primary concern. Blayton's interest lay in accounting, and his focus was on his CPA firm and accounting classes at the university.

The partnership began when Milton convinced Blayton and Yates to join him to buy Citizens Trust Bank. Yates would serve as chairman of the board, Milton as president, and Blayton as vice president and cashier. At that time, the bank only had assets of \$189,000, and the new owners immediately wrote off \$60,000 (Robert J. Alexander 1951, 456). Blayton later remarked that they bought the bank primarily with their pens, as they signed promissory notes guaranteeing the loans (Seder and Burrell 1971, 128). However, their timing in buying this bank in the depths of the Great Depression turned out to be impeccable. Writing off the debt and putting the bank on sound financial footing positioned Citizens Trust to be one of the only banks still open in the days leading up to Roosevelt's inauguration when so many other Atlanta banks had closed. In fact, the bank was licensed to reopen the first day after the mandatory bank holiday that marked the run on the banks at the time of the inauguration (Alexander 1951, 456). From that day forward, Citizens Trust would grow to be the primary bank for the Black community.

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<sup>11</sup> In 1923, he and Milton bought a controlling interest in Gate City Drug Store, a remnant of the Service Pharmacy that was part of Heman Perry's Service Enterprises, and renamed it Yates and Milton Drug Store. It was a huge success and a focal point for the Black community. The owners made sure to keep the same inventory as the competing white stores. In addition, the drugstore accepted payments for utility bills and offered postal services. Within one year, they had expanded to a second location. Later, they would control a chain of four drugstores across the city. It was one of the only businesses that Blayton did not participate in with his partners (John N. Ingham and Lynne B. Feldman 1994, 82).

The bank grew strong from the support of Black churches. According to Dr. William Holmes Borders, pastor of the prestigious Wheat Street Baptist Church:

The preachers made Citizens Trust Bank. They put in deposits that Monday morning [sic]. Around 11 o'clock, the lobby would be full of nothing but preachers. And the people, seeing their preacher deposit God's money from the churches into Citizens Trust, put their money into it, and helped put it over in a great way. (Ingham and Feldman 1994, 85)

As Deephouse et al. (2017, 12) note, individuals only engage with legitimate organizations, so these deposits were a powerful signal. Borders also commented that the three men who had majority control of the bank were all involved in the various churches. Blayton, for example, was a deacon in Ebenezer Baptist Church. Though almost all Black businessmen dealt with Citizens Trust, fully 30 percent by value of the accounts were held by whites, as noted by articles about the bank (Alexander 1951, 457).

To manage all of their assets, Blayton, Milton, and Yates started BLAMIYA Inc. in 1934 to be a holding company. (BLAMIYA is a composite of the three last names: Blayton, Milton, and Yates.) One of its main functions was to offer loans that were too big or too risky for Citizens Trust Bank (Alexander 1951, 457). BLAMIYA Inc. soon entered two new business arenas. In 1938, the group started the Top Hat Club on Auburn Avenue. It was considered one of the finest Black nightclubs in the country, hosting performers such as Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, and Cab Calloway. Often, Friday night would be for Black crowds and Saturday would have the same performers for white crowds (Ingham and Feldman 1994, 89). BLAMIYA Inc. sold the Top Hat Club in 1949, but it would live on as the Royal Peacock and hosted many of the great Black stars of the 1950s and 1960s. It eventually became the first integrated club in Atlanta (W.L. Callaway 1988, 10-11). In addition, BLAMIYA Inc. started the Brown Boy Bottling Co. in 1949, for which few records exist. This soft drink company would operate regularly until 1953. According to Blayton, "It was never a profitable venture and was closed down in 1953 with no loss to creditors".<sup>12</sup>

### ***Radio and Other Ventures***

J.B. Blayton's next burst of entrepreneurial ventures occurred at the end of World War Two. In 1947, he incorporated the Midway Television Institute of Georgia Inc. This was simply a technical school to teach Black men how to repair and service televisions and radios. Blayton's purpose in creating the school was to provide employment opportunities for returning Black servicemen.<sup>13</sup> In that same year, Blayton's wife, Willa M. Blayton, founded the Blayton School of Accounting, later the Blayton Business School (Atlanta Daily World 1947; 1955).<sup>14</sup> Blayton was heavily involved though his wife served as directress and managed operations. His daughter Doris (born after Blayton's arrival in Atlanta) taught accounting and law at the school.<sup>15</sup> This would have been a continuation of the Blayton Business Laboratories that Frank Adair (the second Black CPA in Georgia) attended in the early 1930s (Hollingsworth 2012). Very few records exist of these schools, mainly newspaper advertisements, but they were well-known in Atlanta. In essence, they operated like technical schools providing the workforce for many of Atlanta's Black businesses.

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<sup>12</sup> Blayton, J.B., Sr. 1954. "Sworn Statement of J.B. Blayton, Sr.", 4-5, Brown Records.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Daniels Blayton, Willa Mae. 1954. "Sworn Statement of Mrs. Willa Mae Daniels Blayton.", 2. Brown Records.

<sup>15</sup> Blayton, Doris A. 1954. "Sworn Statement of Doris Ada Blayton", 1-2. Brown Records.

In 1949, Blayton formed Radio Atlanta Inc. and purchased a white-owned station that was losing money. This purchase made him the first Black owner of a radio station. He renamed it WERD, in honor of Dr. Charles Drew (WERD being "Drew" spelled in reverse).<sup>16</sup> WERD boasted only 1000 watts and could only be on the air from sunrise to sunset. Yet it covered fourteen counties and almost immediately had a huge impact. When Blayton bought the station, it was \$18,000 in the red but recouped that amount in the first six months (Pittsburgh Courier 1961). Several well-known Black disc jockeys were associated with WERD, such as "Jockey Jack" Gibson and "Alley Pat" Patrick. When Blayton decided to buy the radio station, he struggled to get other investors interested. Eventually, he would only have two additional investors, including one of his brothers, a doctor in Virginia. His gamble paid off: WERD would turn out to be one of his most profitable ventures (Saddler 2006, 53).

As with all Blayton's business ventures, the impact made by the radio station extended beyond the profits. WERD was the only station that catered to the Black community. Black artists traveling through Atlanta would stop by and do interviews. Though it was inspirational to be able to hear music performed for a Black audience, music was only a small portion of its programming and impact. Instead, it was the opportunity to hear community announcements, news, and advertisements specifically for Black audiences that gave the station its cachet. For many years, the station occupied the same building as the SCLC, with the SCLC occupying the bottom floor. It is reported that when Dr. King needed to make an announcement, he would knock on the ceiling, and a microphone would be let down for him to let the community know of upcoming events.

WERD was so successful that in 1954, Blayton would purchase KREL in Baytown, Texas. He would only keep that station for four years, but he maintained his Atlanta station and its profitability until he sold it and retired in 1968. His son would serve as the general manager until that time.<sup>17</sup> Blayton's success in this venture would have him inducted posthumously into the Museum of Broadcasting's Radio Hall of Fame in 1994.

### **Death**

On September 13, 1977, J.B. Blayton Sr. died of a heart attack walking home from the barber shop (Atlanta Daily World 1977b). His funeral was held on September 17, 1977, at Ebenezer Baptist Church, and he was buried in Southview Cemetery among Atlanta's Black elite. One of the officiating ministers was the Rev. Martin Luther King Sr. Dr. Benjamin Mays, a former longtime president of Morehouse, was among those giving a eulogy (Atlanta Daily World 1977d). On September 20, the *Atlanta Daily World* published a long description of his funeral and the remarks given by his various eulogists (Atlanta Daily World 1977d).

The Atlanta Black paper published front page stories on his death and funeral (Atlanta Daily World 1977a, 1977b, 1977d). His obituary appeared in Friday's edition of the *Atlanta Constitution* and the *Atlanta Journal*, the city's two major white newspapers (Atlanta Constitution 1977b, Atlanta Journal 1977). In all of the newspapers, he was noted as the first Black CPA, the first president of the Atlanta Negro Chamber of Commerce, and the first Black person to serve on the Atlanta Housing Authority's governing board as well as his multiple entrepreneurial endeavors.

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<sup>16</sup> Dr. Charles Drew, who died in 1950, was the Black surgeon who invented the means of storing blood in blood banks to be available for transfusions. There is no known connection between the two, although Blayton's twin brother lived in Washington, DC where Drew lived and practiced. Blayton may simply have admired him.

<sup>17</sup> Blayton, J.B., Jr. 1954. "Sworn Statement of J.B. Blayton, Jr.", 2. Brown Records.

## Discussion

Reflecting on Blayton's career, we observe the many ways he built capital to achieve legitimacy. All these actions may not have been intentional (solely to build his businesses) but that does not mean those actions did not contribute to this accumulation of capital.

### ***Cultural Capital***

Bourdieu (1986, 243) specifically lists educational attainment as the institutionalized form of cultural capital. It is earned by the individual, although privileged people more easily access it. Blayton achieved this capital with his degrees from Langston and the Walton School of Commerce. It is particularly noteworthy given that neither of his parents were educated. Later, he would enroll in extra classes, both in business and law. Though he would not achieve a master's or practice law (there is no evidence he took the bar exam), the classes would still represent the collection of cultural capital through education.

His service in the Army would also bestow cultural capital. First, any skills learned during that time would represent the investment of his own energy and time. Second, Blayton learned about accounting in the army and decided to pursue it as his main vocation (Seder and Burrell 1971, 125). Third, his sergeant major rank would also demonstrate cultural capital, showing leadership skill. That rank would also follow him his entire life, as education and veteran status would, and be listed in his obituary (Atlanta Daily World, 1977c). The military then represents another way information and education are passed to citizens.

Blayton also achieved cultural capital through his pursuit and achievement of the CPA designation. Once again, this is an institutionalized manner in which knowledge is validated, similar to an educational degree. In terms of legitimacy, all these achievements demonstrate use of the authorization strategy (Hollingsworth 2020, 388). Each actor here serves, in essence, as a regulatory body. An individual can only achieve a degree, honorable discharge, military rank or CPA designation after performing a set of actions according to agreed-upon standards. Each demonstrates that an individual has been authorized to display that information to the world and, in some cases, to act in a certain way (i.e., perform an audit).

In addition, most of this cultural capital was achieved within the white community. Though he served in a segregated military unit, the military at large is a white institution. Only his original college degree came from a Black institution. In this time of suppressed capital, very few Black institutions had the power to grant cultural capital. Blayton's determined pursuit of the CPA (thirteen attempts over three years) demonstrates the lengths many Black entrepreneurs would have to traverse to achieve such distinction from a hostile white community. In Blayton's time, one assumes the capital achieved from a Black college would not carry the same weight as that achieved from a white institution, such as Hope and Milton being Brown University graduates.

### ***Social Capital***

If most of the cultural capital came from the white community, then most of Blayton's social capital would be rooted in the Black community. In this time of suppressed capital, bonds within the community represent the highest value. The collection of social capital fits within the legitimacy framework as a form of endorsement. Each social network that accepted Blayton had, in essence, endorsed him as one of their own, as worthy. Blayton would have to build these networks from nothing. He was not from Atlanta. He had not married into an Atlanta family (as L.D. Milton did when he married the granddaughter of an Atlanta undertaker who

had been in business since the 1880s).<sup>18</sup> His degree was not from the local colleges that were the backbone of so many of the city's social networks.

Blayton, however, did become part of these social networks.<sup>19</sup> One of the most important networks was the church. Blayton was a deacon at Ebenezer Baptist Church (one of the city's larger Black churches, although not considered one of the elite Black churches at the time he joined). The church's endorsement was pivotal to some of his business successes, as noted earlier in the comment by Rev. Borders about the churches supporting Citizens Trust Bank (Ingham and Feldman 1994, 85).<sup>20</sup> In the Black community, it has been posited that the church and other social organizations grant legitimacy at the same level as the government, media and legal actors mentioned in the literature (Hollingsworth 2020, 385-386). Black communities had incentives to distrust all three of the normal actors (media, government, and legal) granting legitimacy. But they would trust their own institutions built within their own communities.

Though he did not attend the Atlanta colleges, he tapped into that network by teaching at Morehouse College and Atlanta University for forty-five years at the request of Dr. Hope. He would know Dr. Hope through another social network: those connected to Standard Life Insurance, where Blayton worked, as Dr. Hope served on its board of directors. At its peak, Standard Life had 2500 employees and through its related Service Company, operated a printing press, a bank, a real estate firm, and a drugstore, among other ventures. Blayton met Milton and Yates at Standard Life when all three were employed there in the early 1920s.

After Blayton achieved the CPA, he became the auditor for several of the largest Black organizations in the country. Blayton, therefore, was a member of one of the larger churches (and audited the national organization), worked at the largest corporation in the city, taught at two of its most prestigious colleges, and was a well-known member of one of the major fraternal organizations. Each of these granted him social capital in his first decade in Atlanta. Each would represent an endorsement of him as an individual and a businessman from a significant social organization within the Black community.

How important is this social and cultural capital? When Blayton, Milton, and Yates purchased Citizens Trust Bank in 1932, Blayton admitted that they did so essentially with their pens (Seder and Burrell 1971, 128). These three would buy the bank based primarily on the strength of their reputation. Certainly, there was a sense that the three had economic capital in reserve if needed. But the purchase went through because of who they were.

As his businesses grew, so did his access to the social networks of the city, to the point that he would be considered one of the network's hubs. His audit work for the SCLC (which was business for which he was paid, not voluntary) connected him to the Civil Rights movement. His testimony in Dr. King's well-reported Alabama trial would again raise his profile in this arena. (Blayton was never vocal on these political matters but gave support behind the scenes.) He and his partners opened the Top Hat Club, which connected him to the entertainment world. His purchase of WERD gave him access to information from across the city.

Another form of social capital that he achieved in later years was his participation in community service. Black entrepreneurs often feel a special burden to serve the community (Leon C. Prieto and Simone T.A. Phipps 2019). Blayton utilized his business skills in his service to the community. He was a big proponent of improved housing, serving with the National Urban League and testifying to the Civil Rights Commission.

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<sup>18</sup> Both Milton and Yates married into Atlanta's Black elite (August Meier and David Lewis 1959, 136).

<sup>19</sup> Meier and Lewis (1959) detail how the elite Black social class expanded in the mid-twentieth century to include this new class of entrepreneurs that were moving into the city.

<sup>20</sup> Nothing said here is meant to minimize Blayton's personal faith. Commenting that membership in the church gave him social capital does not assume he strategically joined the church for that reason.

All of this social capital came from within the segregated Black community. He was tapping into many elements that were central to the Black identity: the Black church, the pride in Black educational institutions, the fight for equal rights. However, some of his social capital came from the white community. In reality, one of the strongest forms of endorsement for a minority community comes from the majority community (Hollingsworth 2020, 386). Blayton would trumpet the fact that his businesses had white customers as further proof of his success. Alexander (1951, 457) spoke of the number of white customers who supported Citizens Trust Bank. Seder and Burrell (1971, 128), in their interview with Blayton, mentioned this same support. That this information shows up repeatedly in discussions of his business shows that this factor carried weight. As integration occurred, his social networks would expand to the white community as he became the first Black member of the Atlanta Housing Authority's governing board (Atlanta Constitution 1977b, 1977c).

### ***Economic Capital***

As Blayton became more successful, the wealth he accumulated became the economic capital that opened even more doors. In the early 1930s, he and his partners (Milton and Yates) started BLAMIYA Inc., which was essentially an investment firm that made loans too risky or too large for Citizens Trust Bank. After his initial investors backed out, he purchased WERD on his own with a small investment from his brother. Brian Ward (2004, 160) writes that the previous owner of WERD singled him out as a prospective buyer in part due to his wealth.

In many ways, Blayton prioritized economic capital. A firm believer in Booker T. Washington's philosophy of self-help, he believed the road to success for the Black community was through the development of strong Black economic institutions and the main impediment to that success was the lack of capital that Black people had to invest (Ward 2004, 161). He would close Brown Boy Bottling Company when it was not profitable. His economic calculation was demonstrated clearly when he decided to sell WERD. His networks pressed him to sell the station to Black people to keep the station in the Black community, but in the end he took the best offer from a white man (Carolyn Davis 2018):

To some observers, this action was an act of racial treachery. Yet Blayton was just adhering to his longstanding principle that thrift and sensible business practices were crucial to black progress. He had always sought to reconcile racial and economic, communal and personal agendas. Often these imperatives coincided. When they did not, Blayton invariably favored hard-nosed commercial calculation and the pursuit of enlightened self-interest over what he considered a self-defeating racial sentimentalism. (Ward 2004, 312)

Toward the end of his life, his interviewers asked if he was a millionaire, but he demurred and did not answer (Seder and Burrell 1971, 129). Most likely he was, but what is important in this context is that the interviewers gave him status based on that wealth.

### ***Symbolic Capital***

Symbolic capital represents how many other forms of capital are broadcast to the public. Blayton having the title "Carnegie Professor of Accounting" at Atlanta University was a signal, for example. But the symbolic capital that stands out so often in a suppressed community like the Black community at this time and place would be those who achieve in spite of the suppression. For example, consider the value placed upon J.B. Blayton for being the *first* Black CPA in the United States (as he was noted to be in his times). He was the *first* Black director of the Atlanta Housing Authority. He was also the *first* Black person to own a radio station.

Citizens Trust Bank was the *first* Black bank admitted to the Federal Reserve System (Ingham and Feldman 1994, 84).

This symbolism shows up repeatedly. When Milton was interviewed later in life about the contributions of Citizens Trust Bank, he said: "Citizens Trust helped the first black in Atlanta get a service station franchise, the first black liquor store owner to get his bond, the first black general insurance agent to get connected with a major insurance company" (Ingham and Feldman 1994, 86).

Sadly, it is still common to see this appellation granted today. Recently, Montgomery, Alabama, elected its first Black mayor in two hundred years (Rick Rojas 2019). Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson was the first Black woman appointed to the US Supreme Court. This designation still grants legitimacy, as it reflects success. Its continued use, however, is indicative of the success necessary to break through previously held societal boundaries and the failure of the majority community to erase those boundaries.

Symbolic capital demonstrates the use of the *storytelling and mythmaking* strategy of legitimization. Each time this designation is applied, it taps into the narrative of overcoming barriers, of facing resistance, a common narrative in the Black community (Hollingsworth 2020, 389-392). A comparative study of the manner in which historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and primarily white institutions (PWIs) tell their college histories shows that the majority of HBCUs use some narrative that tells of overcoming and resilience. Their histories are full of stories of beginnings in church basements or one-room buildings. Special significance is given to the first Black president or the first alumnus president in a way that is not present in PWI histories, even though many of them also started very small (Hollingsworth 2021).

### Conclusion

J.B. Blayton arrived in Atlanta as an outsider. Yet within a decade, he was a major player in the Black community and eventually the city. He accomplished this status by acquiring all forms of capital, which in turn gave him the legitimacy to operate his businesses. He performed a delicate dance between the white and Black communities in achieving this capital. The cultural capital he accumulated from his efforts to earn an education and to get credentials (CPA) demonstrated he had the authorization to do business in the city. That authorization often came from the white culture, which at the time was acting as a suppressing agent. He tapped into the most important networks of the Black community to achieve his social capital. He was connected to the Black church, Black fraternal organizations, Black educational institutions, Black civil rights groups, and Black businesses. Later, due to his economic capital and repeated success, he would access white social networks such as the Atlanta Housing Authority. Finally, his life told a story filled with symbolism as the first Black person to achieve success in multiple business endeavors. Though there would be some overlap between the white and Black business communities, the world of Jim Crow segregation in the South at that time made those overlaps minimal.

The world of today, however, is integrated. Yet we can still see elements that demonstrate the majority community practices suppressive techniques that can harm the Black community. Only 40 percent of Black students graduate college in 6 years compared to 64 percent of whites and are therefore less likely earn that cultural capital (USDOE 2017). In 2023, the Supreme Court effectively ended race-conscious admissions, programs designed to reverse the decades where Black people were denied access to the cultural capital achieved through elite institutions (SFFA v. Harvard 2023). Black students who can tell a story of overcoming and resilience are often given priority on scholarships and opportunities, and the Supreme Court decision detailed that minority students could tell this story, emphasizing that legitimacy is granted through narrative. Likewise, after the Supreme Court decision, the

Small Business Administration paused its program that funneled investments to minority entrepreneurs and required new applicants to verify through narrative how their minority status has been an obstacle (Whiteford, Taylor & Preston LLP 2023).

Though Black people can access many white social networks, the experiences can often be alienating, as they often reflect only a small percentage of the membership. Black families still face obstacles in purchasing housing:

Relative to comparable white applicants, and controlling for geographic factors, blacks were 2.8 times more likely to be denied for a loan, and Latinos were two times more likely. When they were approved, blacks and Latinos were 2.4 times more likely to receive a subprime loan than white applicants. (Bloomberg 2013)

This helps keep average Black wealth at one tenth of average white wealth, decreasing access to economic capital. Therefore, even without legalized segregation, Black entrepreneurs still operate at a disadvantage. Michael Harriot, a Black author and columnist at The Grio, recently tweeted:

So I decided to go back an entire year and look up the education of every person on *Meet the Press*, even the politicians. Some never went to college. Some had bachelor's degrees. But for an ENTIRE YEAR, EVERY SINGLE BLACK PERSON on MTP had a Master's degree or a PhD except 1. (Harriot 2019)

From Harriot's perspective, this is a clear anecdotal example that Black men and women need a stronger credential (authorization) than their white counterparts. A Black investment banker speaking at Morehouse College, when asked why he possessed both a J.D. and MBA, stated "Because I'm Black". The saying in the Black community that "as a black person in white America, you've got to work twice as hard to get half as far" (C.D. DeSante 2013, 342) also reflects this perspective of the extra effort required by Black America to be granted legitimacy.

Blayton's history can be an example to the Black community of methods used to achieve this capital and legitimacy by using a combination of opportunities within both communities. It demonstrates tapping into the Black community for the foundation while seizing the opportunities given in other spaces. Black entrepreneurs today are still encouraged to pursue the legitimization strategies of *authorization*, *endorsement*, and *storytelling/mythmaking*. Blayton's persistence in achieving the CPA designation along with working with the social networks available to him are just two of the strategies that can still be used.

However, instead of putting this burden on the Black community to achieve legitimacy, it should be more important for the majority community to examine the story of Blayton and ask, "How can these suppressing tactics be changed?". This question is beyond the scope of this article but should be explored. It is common to take the examples of Blayton, Madame C. J. Walker, Alonzo Herndon and others to assume that their success means that success for all Black people is possible. But most analysis, historical or otherwise, would caution against using the outliers to make large assumptions about the population. Instead, outliers are studied to clarify the differences. Further research should explore how the Black population as a whole achieved the various forms of capital and how that translates to the current.

Considering what Blayton accomplished in this capital-suppressed environment, one is called to wonder what he could have achieved if granted the full opportunities available to others at that time. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the white community to advocate for fuller access to the forms of capital necessary to completely engage the potential within our society.

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