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Climbing the Crystal Stair:
Annie T. Wise's Success as an Immigrant
in Atlanta's Public School System (1872-1925)¹

by

Arlene G. Rotter

Annie Teitlebaum Wise was a prominent figure in the early years of Atlanta's public school system. Born in Eperies, Hungary, on March 26, 1866, Annie was the daughter of Maurice and Mary Pollak Teitlebaum.² The family immigrated to Atlanta, Georgia, in 1871, where Annie's father secured work as a bookkeeper for the Atlanta City Brew Company.³ In November 1872 Annie Teitlebaum entered the Walker Street School unable to speak a word of English.⁴ She learned quickly, however, completed grammar school, and attended Girls' High School. In 1885 Mrs. Wise began teaching as a supernumerary at the Walker Street School. Over the next forty years she had an exemplary career as teacher and administrator for the Atlanta Public School System.⁵ Little has been written about Annie Teitlebaum Wise to date, but the accolades she earned depict the ways in which a child of immigrants became a successful figure in Atlanta's educational arena. Delineating her accomplishments provides a means of analyzing the degree of social and political success afforded one of Atlanta's first female Jewish immigrant high school graduates.

The Historical Setting

Although Jewish immigrants resided in the South since colonial times, in 1850 only twenty-six Jews lived in Atlanta, comprising one percent of the total 2,572 inhabitants and seventeen percent of the city's foreign-born population.⁶ A decade later Atlanta's population grew by 270 percent, but the Jewish population

within the city limits only doubled. Many of Atlanta's foreign-born residents settled in the South after initially arriving in northern ports. Those who moved took advantage of advertisements they read and stories they heard indicating that those willing to take a risk could develop lucrative businesses in Atlanta and other southern towns. Almost all Jews who chose Atlanta were of German descent. They were young adults seeking a means of making money as proprietors of small businesses.⁷ Even though the Jewish community comprised a small percentage of the total population throughout the nineteenth century, Jews tended to settle in certain wards of the city in a pattern that has been described by historians as "ethnic clustering."⁸ From antebellum days to the late nineteenth century, many German Jewish arrivals in Atlanta found economic success as proprietors of dry goods businesses. By the 1880s Russian Jewish immigrants entered the city, escaping the pogroms rampaging their homeland. They soon outnumbered the central European group, but they took decades to achieve the degree of economic success experienced by the German Jews.⁹

Although some Jewish immigrants left Europe to escape anti-semitism, not all were welcome in Georgia. In Decatur, a city adjacent to Atlanta, school leaders created a policy designed to control access to public education. From Decatur's public school inception in 1902 until 1932, schools were in session from Tuesdays through Saturdays. Compulsory Saturday attendance made this city an unfavorable residence for Jews who would not have allowed their children to attend school on the Sabbath.

The Rittenbaums were the only family recorded as residents of Decatur during this time, and they lived incognito as Greeks.¹⁰ The Rittenbaum girls reminisced that their Jewish ancestry remained a secret throughout their years in Decatur's public schools. Historian Tom Keating wrote that the unfavorable attitude towards Jews remained in Decatur for years.¹¹ Decatur's history depicts how school policy impacted the immigrants' entrance to or exclusion from educational and economic opportunities. Some of the Jews living in Atlanta, however, had a different experience.

Annie Teitlebaum Wise

*(From James B. Nevin,
Prominent Women
of Georgia,
courtesy Georgia State
University Library.)*

Historian Mark K. Bauman investigated the political and economic influence of Atlanta's Jewish immigrants during the latter half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century.¹² He corroborated Steven Hertzberg's findings that a small group of central European Jews came to Atlanta prior to the Civil War, established businesses, amassed assets, and became politically active.¹³ Several were appointed to Atlanta's board of education, such as David Mayer who served from the inception of the board in 1869 until his death in 1890.¹⁴ Mayer has been credited with protecting the needs of Jewish students. For example, he fought to allow these children to be excused from school for Jewish holidays, a practice that continued in Atlanta's public schools until Mayer's demise. After he died other Jewish men filled his spot on the board of education, but none of them was as influential as Mayer had been.¹⁵ Bauman explained that the small cluster of central European Jews gained power by assimilating enough to develop liaisons with influential white leaders while simultaneously developing ethnocentric Jewish organizations. He and other researchers have depicted how Jewish men attained

wealth and power in Atlanta, but little has been published illuminating the role immigrant women played in shaping the city's growth.

Public Education and Atlanta's Immigrant Jewish Women

Some studies have examined the connection between female upward mobility and educational opportunities. Historian John Rury found that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American high schools predominantly served white, middle class, native-born individuals and excluded most others.¹⁶ Almost thirty years ago Timothy James Crimmins wrote a dissertation refuting the theory some educators expounded that, since its opening in 1872, Atlanta's public school system functioned as an enabler for upward social mobility for all children living within the city.¹⁷ Like Rury, Crimmins found that the schools served as a means by which children of the white upper-middle class and wealthy elite furthered their academic endeavors, while lower class children failed to attend. Furthermore an extremely disproportionate number of immigrant children attended the public schools. Crimmins wrote, "The surprising element in the composition of Girls' High in 1881 was its large ethnic concentration: one quarter of the girls had an immigrant parent, a fraction which was double their proportion of the city's white population."¹⁸ Left unanswered by Crimmins is the degree to which the female immigrant students were able to succeed socially, politically, and economically once they graduated high school. Excelling academically in an educational system is one major step up "the crystal stair" but not the final one. Conversely, determining the graduate's accomplishments might reveal the degree of success afforded such an individual beyond the institutional setting. Many female immigrants may have completed a high-school education, but how many achieved success in their later endeavors?

Children of central European Jews living in Atlanta comprised a high percentage of foreign-born students or those of immigrant parents attending Boys' High School and Girls' High School in the late 1800s and early 1900s. In some years they accounted for more than twenty percent of the graduating classes.¹⁹

Hertzberg suggested that the preponderance of Jewish students in the schools illustrates the commitment their parents made to public education, believing that a good education was the key to rapid advancement in the host culture and to ultimate success. Traditionally many Jews have held a high regard for learning. Selma Berrol wrote, however, that in the urban North a love of learning alone did not assure that immigrant parents would support educational endeavors for their children. The economic status of the family and the degree to which the children were needed to support business endeavors also influenced school attendance and matriculation.²⁰ Hertzberg reported that in 1850 ten percent of the Jewish families living in Atlanta had gained economic stability as proprietors of dry-goods stores and other businesses that served the needs of Atlanta's populace.²¹ Their successors continued to develop the family businesses that served the needs of Atlanta's residents before and after the Civil War.

*Josephine Joel Heyman: Exemplar of the
German Jewish Female Experience in Atlanta*

The biography of Josephine Joel Heyman (1901–1993) exemplifies the achievements of a daughter of affluent German Jews in Atlanta. The Joel family moved from the south side of town, where many Jews lived, to the north side where most of their neighbors were Christian. As a result Josephine grew up with Christian and Jewish friends. Jo attended Tenth Street School and Girls' High School. Her diary depicts mixed encounters with her gentile schoolmates, but she never hid her Judaism as the Rittenbaum girls did in Decatur. Bauman described the Joel family's reaction to the Leo Frank case, which fueled an outbreak of anti-semitism in Atlanta. Frank was an Atlanta Jewish businessman who was convicted of murdering a thirteen-year-old female employee in 1913. He was given a death sentence that was later commuted to life in prison. Bauman wrote, "Fearful of rioting, the women and children of the Joel family were sent to Birmingham at the time of the commutation."²² In 1915 Frank was lynched by an angry mob.

When the incident died down, the Joel family returned to Atlanta, and Josephine continued her education. Teenaged Josephine struggled with her wish to marry and become a proper Jewish wife, and with her subsequent desire to utilize her Smith College degree to enter a career worthy of her intellect. She decided on matrimony and had a long, presumably happy marriage. Her somewhat tumultuous relationships with her Christian classmates at college influenced her to become active in the Temple, as the Hebrew Benevolent Congregation was known, and its sisterhood after graduation. Although she did not work, Jo did become involved in Jewish organizations as well as civil rights groups. According to Bauman, "As her diaries and letters illustrate, Jo experienced what sociologists call conflicts of marginality. German, Jewish, southern, female, and affluent, Josephine Joel fit into each of these circles, yet none of them fully defined her."²³

The diary of Josephine Joel Heyman illustrates many of the dilemmas surrounding life choices of Jewish daughters of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century central-European immigrants. First, their foreign and religious status hindered their ability to attain high social status. Second, prejudice against their gender limited their monetary and political potential regardless of their educational feats. Women in the late 1800s and early twentieth century did not often hold prominent positions outside the home. Crimmins depicted limited goals for typical upper middle-class girls attending high school in nineteenth-century Atlanta: they were trained for traditional vocations in education or secretarial/bookkeeping positions. Others believed they would acquire an education fitting them to become wives of prominent businessmen. Immigrant female attendees had the same aspirations. Those who went to school had the advantages of the non-immigrant girls: they were affluent, white, and came from influential families residing in Atlanta. Many of their parents and perhaps grandparents had built lucrative businesses and gained political clout. The children of these predominantly central-European Jews found an educational niche at Girls' High School.

*Josephine Joel Heyman, Confirmation picture.
(Courtesy the Ida Pearle and Joseph Cuba Archives,
The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, Atlanta.)*

Annie Teitlebaum Wise: A Hungarian Jew's Atlanta Education

Unlike Josephine Joel Heyman, Wise was not from Germany, but was born in Hungary. As Hertzberg has written, most of the Hungarian and Russian Jews residing in the South in the late nineteenth century initially had difficulty reaching the economic success of the German Jews. Wise was an exception, perhaps because her family arrived prior to the large flux of Russians and Hungarians who settled in Atlanta after the civil unrest in their indigenous countries beginning in 1881. When Annie's family arrived, the small number of non-German Jewish immigrants were

not a threat to the German descendants because they could be assimilated quickly into American culture.

The Teitlebaums moved into a section of town where more affluent people resided, rather than into a neighborhood that had a large concentration of immigrants. They did not live in the North before moving south. For unknown reasons, this family chose Atlanta as its new home. In November 1872 Annie entered the Walker Street School.²⁴ Before becoming principal of Boys' High School and Superintendent of Atlanta's Public Schools, William F. Slaton was a private tutor, who took Teitlebaum under his wing, teaching her English and acclimating her to American culture.²⁵ Apparently Slaton was a good teacher and Annie an excellent student. Annie was isolated in a class of non-speakers of English but learned quickly. By June 1873 the youngster spoke English so proficiently that she led her classmates in an exam that tested their language skills. She excelled throughout her elementary education, and twice while attending Walker she was promoted two grade levels within a single year.²⁶ Like Josephine Joel Heyman, Annie attended Girls' High School where she also excelled academically. "She not only led in literary pursuits, but had a marvelous social ability that made her the leader on the playground, in the Literary Society, and in all the social activities of the school."²⁷ Members of the Slaton family helped both girls succeed. Jo received mentoring from Mattie Slaton, W. F. Slaton's daughter, who was a French teacher at Girls' High and who, according to Heyman, favored Jewish students.²⁸

After completing Girls' High School in the early 1880s, Annie Teitlebaum attended several universities, thus illustrating academic opportunities available to graduates of Atlanta's public secondary institutions. Like Heyman, Annie's immigrant status did not curtail her ability to acquire higher education. After becoming a teacher and assistant principal in the business department at Girls' High School in 1894, she attended the Sorbonne in Paris during summer vacations. She also took two English courses at Columbia University during the 1901 summer session.²⁹

Wise also achieved entrance into institutions of higher education once only available to males. In 1917, dissatisfied with her previous college experiences, which she believed did not sufficiently enable her to improve her technological and business education teaching abilities, Annie enrolled in a commercial education program at Georgia Tech.

At the university level, progressive educational leaders were developing plans to introduce commercial programs into their institutions. This occurred during Kenneth Matheson's presidency at Georgia Tech when a night school was opened on March 2, 1908. Five years later the School of Commerce provided two programs. The first was designed to meet the needs of businessmen who wished to continue their education after work when classes were offered between six and eight p.m. The second provided engineering students with commercial training in business affairs through courses that were conducted during the day.

By 1916 the board of trustees had created a bachelor of science degree in commerce for graduates of the day program. Graduates of the night program earned a bachelor of commercial studies degree by attending courses for two years and completing two years of practical business training. Given Georgia Tech's reluctance to provide purely vocational coursework, enrollees in these four-year programs were also mandated to take Spanish, mathematics, and engineering courses. In the fall of 1917 female students were admitted to the evening school. Annie T. Wise took advantage of this program, and in 1919 she became the first female graduate of that institution, receiving a bachelor of commercial studies degree from the School of Commerce.³⁰ The following year Wise became the first female instructor at Georgia Tech. No other woman held a faculty position at Tech until 1960.³¹

Wise's decision to receive a degree from Georgia Tech was self-motivated. In 1915 the rules of the board of education were altered to require certification of all principals and teachers working in Atlanta public schools. However, the new legislation was not made retroactive to educators already occupying positions in the school system. Nonetheless Annie Wise "declared that she would fill no position for which she was not qualified by the most

rigid rules the board could adopt."³² Wise continued taking courses throughout her professional career.

Wise's academic accomplishments epitomize the upward climb in social status available to Girls' High School graduates as described by Crimmins. Her biography also confirms Bauman's depiction of the ways in which social connections outside the Jewish immigrant society enabled one to excel. Her relationship with Slaton afforded her initial academic success, and association with members of the Slaton family continued during much of her professional career.³³

Wise's Career

Wise's professional accomplishments, too, exemplify the success that many Jewish women attending Girls' High School achieved.³⁴ In 1885, after her graduation from Girls' High, she became a supernumerary at the Walker Street School. As a single woman, Annie Teitlebaum taught first and third grades at Walker Street during the next two years. Her experience was not unusual. Hertzberg reported that by 1896 single Jewish women graduates of Girls' High School taught in seven of Atlanta's seventeen public schools.³⁵ During the same period, a higher proportion of women served in administrative positions than ever before. From 1887 to 1890, she did not teach in any of Atlanta's schools, but in 1891 she reappeared in the personnel directory as Annie T. Wise, an assistant at the Night School. Not only was Annie married, but she also had a son, Leonard Wise.³⁶

In 1892, when Wise began her administrative career at Girls' High, thirteen out of sixteen schools served Atlanta's white children. In 1910 when the business education section of Girls' High School became a separate institution (English Commercial High School), Annie Wise was hired as its principal, a position she held until she resigned due to ill health in 1925.³⁷

The fact that a woman aspired to the position of principal is also not unusual for the time period. Jackie M. Blount wrote that the early twentieth century represented a time in which women held a significant percentage of teaching jobs and many acquired leadership roles.³⁸ However female administrators did not have

*Girl's High School,
Atlanta, 1895.
(Courtesy the
Atlanta History
Center.)*

the autonomy of their male counterparts. At the time women began filling these positions, the status of school superintendents also rose. Predominantly male, the superintendents kept reign over female administrators, removing many of the decision-making powers held by their male counterparts.³⁹ Furthermore many teachers and administrators were hand-selected by male superintendents who hired educators that they knew and trusted to carry out their objectives. Annie was hired by her mentor, William F. Slaton, and worked for him and later his son, William M. Slaton, who became superintendent of Atlanta Public Schools after his father retired from that office. Wise climbed the crystal stair to a high educational position, but one with limitations in autonomy.

Annie Wise moved up the administrative ranks and displayed exemplary organization and implementation skills. As the department of business began to develop at Girls' High School, Wise was appointed head of the stenography, bookkeeping, and business practice division.⁴⁰ After her appointment as principal of

English Commercial High School, she continued to demonstrate her acumen. "Her ability to adapt herself to any situation and to control and direct the affairs of an institution stamped her as an administrative leader," according to a memorial resolution adopted by the school board.⁴¹

Wise developed a curriculum that incorporated academic courses with business classes. Students were required to take English, foreign language, math, and science as well as electives in sales merchandising, commercial law, accounting, and office practices. In 1922 the curriculum received Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) accreditation during her tenure as principal.⁴² The Atlanta Board of Education credited Wise with making Commercial High School a world-class institution for business education. She was considered a leading figure in the shaping of Atlanta's public school system in having had the insight to develop a vocational technology curriculum that fostered achievement in traditional academic courses as well as commercial ones. However her curriculum was not out of line with the wishes of the Atlanta Board of Education, which advocated the combination of classical and vocational coursework for students. This mixture reflected the same progressive educational philosophy that guided the leaders of Georgia Tech in developing curriculum for the night program Annie attended.

Although the superintendent and his council heavily monitored her role as administrator, Wise demonstrated her influence over the board of education on at least two occasions. In 1910 English Commercial High School separated from Girls' High School when space was rented in the deanery of St. Phillips Church at 16 Washington Street. By 1912 the school housed over three hundred students. The board added space by renting rooms at an adjacent office in the Episcopal Diocese. However the enrollment continued to increase until it was necessary to move the school to a larger facility. The school was transferred to the abandoned Crew Street Elementary School. At a board meeting in 1912, Annie complained of inadequate facilities at Crew Street and requested a new building to house English Commercial High School. Three years later, the board was still discussing the

crowded conditions. At the June 19, 1915, meeting, a board member presented a motion to build an annex to the Crew Street School for English Commercial High and make the school coeducational. Mayor Woodward was against the annexation but favored erecting a new structure to house male and female high school students. He thought that an addition would require spending money to help a few students, while a new building could serve many boys and girls. Annie Wise and her colleague, Miss Jessie Muse, principal of Girls' High, addressed the board, adamantly opposed to creating a coed institution. Wise said:

There are psychological and medical reasons which I might mention. To bring boys and girls of that age together would be a fatal mistake. It would be disastrous, besides the psychological reasons, the course of study in the two schools is so different that they could not be taught together.⁴³

A board member questioned whether girls between the ages of eight and fourteen could fall in love, and Wise answered, "Yes." Muse and Wise successfully derailed the all-male board of education and the influence of Mayor Woodward, and stopped the unification of boys' and girls' commercial education in Atlanta. However, Wise's success was only temporary. In November 1915 the school was moved to 232 Pryor Street where the Boys' High School business department was added to the institution and the name was changed to Commercial High School. Annie T. Wise was appointed principal of the new facility, the first coeducational high school in Atlanta.⁴⁴

The struggle to keep Commercial High an independent school exemplifies another time Wise influenced the board. In 1922 the Atlanta Board of Education looked for ways of conserving finances to support its ever-growing system. A survey of its schools recommended that Girls' High School and Commercial High School unify. Wise and the Commercial High School's Alumni Association, an organization that Wise founded, successfully blocked the move. The agendas for the two schools were markedly different, and Commercial High wanted to keep its reputation as a training ground for future businessmen and women.⁴⁵

As alumnus Joseph Cuba observed, Annie had a vision of Atlanta as “rapidly becoming the office and distributing center of the south.” Accordingly, Commercial High School served as an institution that could train “office assistants and future executives.” Cuba credited Wise with sensing “a growing need for business workers,” and thus “dedicated her life to commercial education.”⁴⁶ In addition, Wise demonstrated her interest in promoting business education by teaching commercial courses at the Southern Shorthand and Business University (located on Whitehall Street in southwest Atlanta, 1890–1925) and the Eastman School of Commerce.⁴⁷

Fulfilling the need to promote business education in Atlanta directly impacted immigrants like Wise. Louis Geffen reported:

Many of our contemporaries and many of the children of Jewish immigrant families went to this Commercial High School. And they were able at this school to get business training, shorthand, typing, some accounting. . . .And as a result, they developed a knack for business and for commercial enterprise, many of them. And then they broadened on top of that. They developed their commercial acumen, and built up very fine businesses in the community here.⁴⁸

Wise also found ways to help those who had not attended regular day school. In 1916 the city’s three night schools, Boys’ Night School, Girls’ Night School, and Capitol Avenue Night School, were consolidated as Central Night School and housed at Commercial High. Capitol Avenue Night School had begun as the Jewish Alliance Night School.⁴⁹ Combining the night educational institutions and housing them at Commercial High School placed Jewish children directly under Wise’s supervision. Under her leadership the program was expanded to offer courses for illiterates and former school dropouts. Graduates received regular high school diplomas. The University System of Georgia accredited the night school, enabling graduates to attend state institutions of higher education.⁵⁰

Although Wise demonstrated an interest in helping other immigrants, none of the records depict her stand on segregation or equal educational opportunities for African Americans.⁵¹ She

grew up in and most likely accepted a racially divided school system in which children of immigrants received educational opportunities afforded to children of the white elite.⁵²

Wise and the Professional Organizations

Wise's activities with several educational organizations reveal some of the issues she addressed. As previously noted she initiated the Commercial High Alumni Association, which at one time was one of the largest in Georgia. The main goal for the association was to sponsor economically disadvantaged students in danger of dropping out but who demonstrated potential to complete their secondary education. The organization asked educators to identify such students. The association gave monetary awards to those selected to defray some of the school textbook and supply fees.

From 1907 to 1925, Wise was a member of the Atlanta Public School Teacher's Association (APSTA).⁵³ In 1919 APSTA became Local 89 of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). It remained one of AFT's strongest and largest affiliates for over thirty years. More than ninety percent of Atlanta's public school teachers belonged to the organization that practiced "bread and butter unionism" by focusing on economic issues: raising salaries and improving working conditions.⁵⁴

One of the organization's greatest battles developed during the school board presidency of Robert Guinn (1914-1918). Guinn, an opponent of the Slaton faction in Atlanta politics, replaced William M. Slaton as superintendent. In an attempt to cut operating costs of a struggling Atlanta school system, Guinn called for the implementation of summer schools, a twelve-month rather than a ten-month salary schedule for teachers, and double sessions for students. Teachers were outraged, seeing Guinn's measures as a way to run year-round schools without compensating them with additional pay. Newman wrote, "Teachers suspected that they were paying for Guinn's progressive reforms out of their own pockets."⁵⁵ In June 1915 Guinn further alienated educators by implementing a merit pay system, which replaced seniority salary schedules with pay scales based on

teacher evaluations in four areas: "scholarship, preparation, experience, and efficiency."⁵⁶ A committee comprised of the superintendent, community members, and administrators classified teachers into six categories to determine salary schedules.

In May 1918, Boys' High School Principal Dykes, a member of APSTA, denounced Guinn in an interview published in the *Atlanta Constitution*. Mayor James L. Key, a Guinn supporter, appointed a Committee of Five from the city council to investigate the allegations. From June 12 to June 24, 1918, the committee heard from fifty-two witnesses, including Annie T. Wise. As a result of the investigation, Guinn resigned during the sessions. The Committee of Five issued a report favorable to the demands of the teachers that included eliminating merit pay, replacing Superintendent Warlaw who had been handpicked by Guinn, reducing the city council from seven members to five, and increasing teachers' salaries. The city council agreed to all suggestions except to firing Warlaw and changing the council's structure. In October 1918, Warlaw resigned.

In January 1919, members of APSTA became incensed when they had not received their promised raises. At a February 1919 meeting, APSTA realized that they needed help to fight for their issues. APSTA President Phillips appointed a committee to investigate the efficacy of the organization joining the American Federation of Teachers. She balanced the three-member group by selecting pro-labor, anti-labor, and neutral representatives. Wise represented the pro-labor camp and was appointed chairperson of the committee. Newman stated that Annie Wise was respected as principal of Commercial High and for giving strong testimony against Guinn in 1918. Charlotte Stopfer represented the neutral party and Mary C. Barker was the anti-labor committee member. Newman stated that Wise wished to gather information on AFT for a presentation to APSTA scheduled in May. The data compiled by the threesome was so powerful, that Barker, who would become president of Local 89 in 1921 and president of AFT in 1925, changed her stance and became pro-labor.⁵⁷ On May 12, 1919, Wise introduced L. V. Lampson, vice president of AFT responsible for organizing locals nationally, to APSTA. Following Lampson's

convincing speech, Annie read a letter from the absent Mayor Key, expressing his support for the teachers' organization joining the union. Key received strong labor support during his most recent campaign for mayor and wished to sustain union advocacy. Members of the group passed a motion to join the union and APSTA became Local 89 of AFT with only two dissenting votes.⁵⁸

Atlanta's teachers' union denied membership to black teachers. In May 1921 Wise served as chairperson of a special committee appointed to look into plans for salary changes that would eventually lead to pay raises for black and white teachers. The white educators feared that raises for black teachers would be achieved by taking money from the white school budgets during summer meetings of the board of education. To appease Wise's committee and APSTA, the board of education promised to send out teachers' contracts by June 10, 1921, so that educators could see their salaries were in place before any other budget changes were made. APSTA, therefore, did not get involved in racial issues *per se*, but did favor an inequitable salary system in support of its members' monetary advancement. In October 1921, Annie Wise was elected vice president of APSTA. She continued to play an active role in the organization, serving on the publicity committee that was responsible for writing articles depicting union viewpoints on educational issues for major newspapers and for disseminating information to organization members.⁵⁹

APSTA and the Commercial High School Alumni Association were typical educational political organizations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that were quite conservative in nature. They served primarily as adjuncts of the board of education rather than opponents of it, and they did not want to challenge the boards that had the power to hire and fire educators. Organizations such as APSTA concentrated on the economic issues and avoided confrontations regarding political reform and educational policy.⁶⁰ Furthermore the alumni association at Commercial High was not involved in controversial political movements. Instead it focused on supporting the education of needy students. Politically, therefore, Annie Wise achieved

leadership roles in organizations limited in their ability to promote radical changes in the status quo.

Wise's Social Achievements

Socially the Jewish immigrant's ability to penetrate elite private clubs was practically nonexistent, but Wise may have been an exception to the rule. Hertzberg reported that although Jews were associated with most of Atlanta's charities, they were barred from belonging to Christian organizations such as the YMCA. Aaron Haas helped initiate the Gentlemen's Driving Club in 1887 (which became the Piedmont Driving Club in 1895). However no Jews have been members since Haas's involvement. The Commerce Club began in 1892 with two hundred members, ten of whom were Jewish. The latter organization, affiliated with the Chamber of Commerce, included a token number of Jewish businessmen who played crucial roles in the development of Atlanta.⁶¹

Annie Wise may have fared better than most Jews at infiltrating social organizations. She successfully bridged the cultural gap between affluent Jews and Christians. Wise was a member of the Atlanta Woman's Club and the Alliance Francaise of Paris. The Alliance promoted French culture in various cities throughout the world. In 1923 J. Pierrepont Morgan's daughter, Anne, appointed Wise as a "good will delegate" to France, representing the United States contingency of the Alliance.⁶² On January 10, 1924, *Daily Woman's Magazine* reported that Annie Wise attended a social event hosted by Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Elsas who introduced a musical protégé, Margaretta Morris of Athens, to Atlanta society.⁶³

Atlanta's Jewish women often became involved in groups associated with synagogues. As previously mentioned, Josephine Joel Heyman was active in the Temple and its sisterhood. Although Annie's mother joined the Temple, there are no records indicating Annie became a member. It appears Wise may have refrained from religious associations and dedicated her life to educational pursuits where she helped many children of diverse backgrounds.

Wise's Accomplishments and Her Milieu

Left unanswered is how this Hungarian immigrant Jewish woman rose up the educational ladder to an administrative position at a time when most European Jews did not succeed and when antisemitic sentiments pervaded the South. She was principal of Commercial High School during the Leo Frank case, yet her Jewish background did not keep Wise from either maintaining her position or successfully acquiring better accommodations for the school. Her successes in many ways parallel those of Victor H. Kriegshaber, a Jewish citizen who played an important role in the development of the city after David Mayer died. At the time of the Frank episode, Kriegshaber became president of the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce. Bauman wrote that Kriegshaber's election might have been a way of conciliating prominent Jewish businessmen who were unnerved by Frank's lynching and the antisemitic reverberations that ensued.⁶⁴ Moreover Wise and Kriegshaber may have been successful because they were highly capable and presented an image similar to those of non-Jewish prominent individuals who also held positions in education or politics. They represented a Jewish presence while also depicting the philosophies of those in power. They succeeded because they were dedicated, hardworking, and shared New South values.

Other Jewish individuals were not as fortunate as Wise or Kriegshaber. Rhoda Kaufman was born to German immigrant parents in Columbus, Georgia, in 1888. Like Wise, Kaufman received a good education, which in the latter's case included a degree in English from Vanderbilt University. At the time Wise was developing her educational career, Kaufman ascended the ranks as a social worker to become the executive director of Georgia's Department of Public Welfare. However, pressure from the Ku Klux Klan led to Kaufman's resignation in the late 1920s. Kaufman used the time to acquire a graduate degree from Emory University. Eventually she worked with the National Conference of Social Work under the Hoover Administration. The Klan did not completely ruin Kaufman's career, but it successfully curtailed her position in the state.⁶⁵

Wise's connections to the Slatons and other prominent gentiles might have helped her ward off antisemitic sentiments. Moreover Wise sustained her position even after Slaton lost his position as superintendent. In 1921 she prevailed as school administrator and vice president of APSTA at a time when Carl F. Hutcheson and Walter A. Sims, who both had close connections with the Ku Klux Klan, held seats on Atlanta's board of education.⁶⁶ Her expertise at creating an outstanding educational institution was lauded in Atlanta's newspapers and held credence with important community members who believed the educator's abilities outweighed her ethnic or religious background.

Wise's Elusive Personal History

Annie Wise died at the home of her sister in Birmingham, Alabama, where she had resided since her retirement from the Atlanta Public School System. Upon her death on May 12, 1929, Annie was buried at West View Cemetery in a Jewish ceremony presided over by Rabbi David Marx of the Temple. Pallbearers included prominent members of the school board, such as H. Reid Hunter, as well as Superintendent Willis A. Sutton. Additional school board members along with administrators from various schools and members of the Commercial High School Alumni Association served as honorary escorts.⁶⁷ After her death the Alumni Association of Commercial High School honored her with the creation of an Annie T. Wise Cup, an award presented to deserving, needy students attending the school.⁶⁸ Demonstrating that she was loved by educators in general, on March 26, 1930 (the anniversary of her birth), a memorial service was held for her at the First Christian Church in Atlanta. Sutton spoke at the commemoration. He stated, "She received much from her city and her state, but she gave more. Thousands loved her, but she loved tens of thousands."⁶⁹ Funeral and commemorative services for Wise illustrate that even in death she was honored in both Jewish and gentile circles.

Wise's elusive history did not end with her interment. On December 12, 1930, family members had her body exhumed from

West View and reinterred at Crest Lawn Memorial Park in Atlanta. She rests in a family mausoleum next to Morris Teitlebaum (who died June 30, 1918), Mrs. Mary Teitlebaum (who died March 27, 1925), Dr. Eugene Jacobs (who died January 1, 1932), and her sister, Ethel T. Jacobs, who died in 1934. According to Crest Lawn Cemetery records, Dr. Eugene Jacobs, Annie's brother-in-law, bought the mausoleum on November 7, 1929. A year later he had the bodies of Morris, Mary, and Annie moved to the family crypt. Annie's death certificate reveals that her husband was Sam Wise.⁷⁰ However he is not mentioned in any of her obituaries, nor was any space provided in the mausoleum for his remains. Furthermore no future provisions were made for Annie's son, Leonard, or for her brothers and their families. The circumstances surrounding Annie T. Wise's burial, her exhumation, and reinterment remain a mystery. She served Atlanta's public school system for over thirty years, yet little is known about the personal life of one of Atlanta's first immigrants to attend and succeed in the public school system.

Annie T. Wise surmounted gender, immigrant, and religious barriers to become a successful student, teacher, and administrator. Amazingly the achievements of this prominent figure in some of Georgia's first public educational institutions have remained virtually hidden from public view. Yet her determination, achievements, and professional longevity offer insight into the state of the public school system in Atlanta from its inception into the twentieth century.

Current Applications for Wise's Story

Immigrants still inundate Atlanta's public school system and those throughout the United States at phenomenal rates. The non-English speakers of today still struggle with desires to sustain their ethnic origins while assimilating into American culture. Determining appropriate ways to educate these students confound boards of education not only in Atlanta but also throughout the nation. Analyzing their degree of success has become paramount among educational researchers. Like Annie T. Wise and her peers, today's children of immigrants face diverse reactions.

Some politicians welcome their presence in American schools, and others fear too much money is being spent on these “foreigners” who require unending time and effort of America’s teaching force. Those who succeed often have strong mentors within the system, such as Wise had with the Slaton family.

Studying the history of Annie T. Wise and those who assisted her educational and professional goals adds insight into one of the best ways to help today’s immigrant students trying to achieve in the public school system. Her Commercial High School curriculum offered a comprehensive, diverse course load featuring academic and vocational classes. Wise improved Atlanta’s public educational system and overcame personal roadblocks to a successful career. She is a figure worthy of investigation and can offer insight into how a Jewish female immigrant climbed the crystal stair, succeeded in her endeavors, and helped Atlanta’s public school system develop an outstanding educational program.

NOTES

¹ The author thanks Sandra Berman, archivist, William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum; Cathy E. Loving, historian/archivist, Atlanta Public Schools; and Laurel Bowen, archivist, Pullen Library, Georgia State University, for their help in finding elusive primary sources, and Wayne Urban and Mark Bauman who provided nurturing and inspiration to stick with this project. The author dedicates this article to the memory of her father, Melvin A. Greitzer, a child of Jewish immigrants, who knew the power of a good education.

² Certificate of Death for Annie Teitlebaum Wise, File Number 13488, Alabama Bureau of Vital Statistics.

³ Maurice Teitlebaum is listed in the Atlanta, Georgia Directories, 1889–1890, as a bookkeeper for Atlanta City Brew Company. The family resided at 184 South Forsyth Street. Mary Teitlebaum became a member of the Temple in 1892. The Temple Records (1892), MSS 59, at the Ida Pearle and Joseph Cuba Community Archives and Genealogy Center of the William Bremen Jewish Heritage Museum (hereafter cited as Cuba Archives).

⁴ The Walker Street School opened on Wednesday, February 21, 1872. Henry Reid Hunter, *The Development of the Public Secondary Schools in Atlanta, 1845–1937* (Atlanta, 1974), 18; “Mrs. Annie Wise, Beloved Teacher, Taken by Death,” unidentified obituary, Janice Rothschild [Blumberg] scrapbook, Wise 138-L, Atlanta Public School Archives, (hereafter cited as “Wise, Beloved Teacher” and Wise 138-L, respectively).

⁵ Walter Bell, *Personnel Directory 1870–1900, Atlanta Public Schools* (Atlanta, 1973).

⁶ Steven Hertzberg, *Strangers Within the Gate City: The Jews of Atlanta 1845–1915* (Philadelphia, 1978), 14.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁸ Ronald H. Bayor, “Ethnic Residential Patterns in Atlanta, 1880–1940,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 64 (Winter 1979): 435–446.

⁹ Mark Bauman, “Factionalism and Ethnic Politics in Atlanta: The German Jews from the Civil War through the Progressive Era,” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 82, (Fall, 1998), 534; Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: The Metropolitan Experience 1876–1980*, (New York, 1989), 138–140.

¹⁰ Tom Keating, *Saturday School: How One Town Kept Out the “Jewish” 1902–1932*, (Bloomington, IN, 1999), 29.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹² Bauman, “Factionalism and Ethnic Politics in Atlanta.”

¹³ Hertzberg, *Strangers Within the Gate City*, 14.

¹⁴ The Board of Alderman elected members of Atlanta’s Board of Education on December 10, 1869. David Mayer was a member of this group with his first term expiring in December 1873. The schools, however, did not open until 1872. Hunter, *Development of the Public Secondary Schools of Atlanta*, 15. Hertzberg, *Strangers Within the Gate City*, 18–25. Bell, *Personnel Directory 1870–1900*.

¹⁵ Serving consecutive terms, Aaron Haas, Jacob Elsas, Joseph Hirsch, and Oscar Pappenheimer replaced Mayer. In 1899 Pappenheimer proved to be less influential than Mayer and was unable to block the school board’s decision to disallow religious absences. When Pappenheimer’s term expired in 1904, no seat went to another Jew until 1913, when Walter Rich was appointed for a three-year term. Hertzberg, *Strangers Within the Gate City*, 164.

¹⁶ John L Rury, *Education and Women’s Work: Female Schooling and the Division of Labor in Urban America, 1870–1930* (Albany, NY, 1991), 60.

¹⁷ The term *crystal stair* was used by Crimmins to refer to the fact that the public school system in Atlanta did not give equal opportunity to all. It was especially difficult for anyone who was not privileged, white, and middle-class to rise in the system. Timothy James Crimmins, “The Crystal Stair: A Study of the Effects of Class, Race, and Ethnicity on Secondary Education in Atlanta, 1872–1925,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Emory University, 1972).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, ii.

¹⁹ Hertzberg, *Strangers Within the Gate City*, 163.

²⁰ Selma Cantor Berrol, *Growing Up American: Immigrant Children in America, Then and Now* (New York, 1995), 33.

²¹ Some prominent Jews of the decade included Jacob Haas, Henry Levi, Herman Haas, M. Oppenheimer, Simon Frankfurt, David Mayer, and Mark and Isaac Greenbaum. Hertzberg, *Strangers Within the Gate City*, 18.

²² Mark K. Bauman, “The Youthful Musings of a Jewish Community Activist: Josephine Joel Heyman,” *Atlanta History*, 39: 2, (Summer, 1995), 48.

²³ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁴ The Walker Street School opened on Wednesday, February 21, 1872. Hunter, *Development of the Public Secondary Schools in Atlanta*, 18; “Wise, Beloved Teacher.”

²⁵ “Wise, Beloved Teacher.” William F. Slaton taught at the Sam Bailey Institute and worked as a private tutor before the Atlanta Public School system hired him in 1874. Slaton

was the principal at Boys' High School beginning in 1874. Biography of W. F. Slaton, Atlanta Public School Archives.

²⁶ Exhibit "C," Resolutions in Memory of Mrs. Annie T. Wise, Adopted by the Board of Education, Atlanta Georgia, July 9, 1929 (Biography, Wise 138-L) (hereafter cited as Exhibit "C").

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Bauman, "Youthful Musings," 48.

²⁹ One of the unidentified newspaper reports stated that Wise attended Georgia Tech first and then went to the Sorbonne and Columbia University. However, Exhibit "C" clarifies that she attended Georgia Tech after going to the other institutions, so that she could strengthen her technological teaching skills. See Wise 138-L. The transcripts department of Columbia University confirmed that Annie T. Wise was registered for two English courses during the summer of 1901. They found no other records indicating she took more courses at their institution. Teachers College at Columbia University, records of the registrar, could find no records indicating Wise ever received a teaching degree from the college. However, their microfiche dates back only to 1900. Both her obituaries and her biography state that she held a degree from Columbia University. See "Wise, Beloved Teacher"; James Nevin, ed., *Prominent Women of Georgia* (Atlanta, 1928), 121.

³⁰ Wise received a degree from the School of Commerce at Georgia Tech according to a biography created by the Alumni Society of Commercial High School. Nevin, *Prominent Women of Georgia*.

³¹ Robert C. McMath, Jr., Ronald H. Bayor, James E. Brittain, Lawrence Foster, August W. Giebehaus, and Germaine E. Reed, *Engineering the New South: Georgia Tech, 1885-1985* (Athens, GA, 1985), 124. The General Assembly gave permission for coed evening courses in the school of commerce at Georgia Tech through a legislative act in 1917. A newspaper article appeared in *The Atlanta Constitution*, April 6, 1979, "Knew Mrs. Wise?" written by Associate Dean of Georgia Tech, Richard D. Teach. He requested any information regarding Annie T. Wise and questioned how she enrolled at Georgia Tech in 1915, two years before women were admitted into the university. What he failed to discover is that Annie was a student in the evening program. She began taking courses in 1917, after women were admitted into the program and completed the four-year degree under the two-year coursework/two-year practical business experience program. Since she was already an acting principal of Commercial High School, she more than met the two-year practical experience requirement.

³² Exhibit "C".

³³ Annie T. Wise attended school under William F. Slaton, was a teacher and principal while Slaton and his son William M. Slaton were superintendents of the Atlanta school system, and was a co-worker of Mattie Slaton at Girls' High School. Hunter, *Development of the Public Secondary Schools of Atlanta*, 27; Hertzberg, *Strangers Within the Gate City*, 164; Bauman, "Factionalism and Ethnic Politics in Atlanta," 548.

³⁴ According to Urban and Wagoner, "Girls were admitted to the common school without prejudice, where they sat alongside boys and pursued the same curriculum without apparent incident . . . This view of the common school as a 'nurturing' institution allowed women to become an increasingly important presence in its teaching force," Wayne J. Urban and Jennings L. Wagoner Jr., *American Education: A History*, 2nd ed., (Boston, 2000), 116.

³⁵ Hertzberg, *Strangers Within the Gate City*, 91-97.

³⁶ "Wise, Beloved Teacher."

³⁷ At the time Annie Wise became a supernumerary at Walker Street School in 1885, two out of the nine schools for white students in Atlanta had female principals. One, Miss S. McKinley at Girls' High, was single and the other, Mrs. Echols at Calhoun Street School, was either married, divorced, or widowed. Five of the thirteen female administrators in 1892 were either married, divorced or widowed. Bell, *Personnel Directory 1870-1900*.

³⁸ Blount wrote, "Many women administrators either refused to marry or assumed their duties once their marriage ended." She used Chicago Superintendent of Schools, Ella Flaggy Young, as an example. Jackie M. Blount, *Destined to Rule the Schools: Women and the Superintendency, 1873-1995* (Albany, NY, 1998), 94; Hertzberg, *Strangers Within the Gate City*, 36.

³⁹ Hertzberg, *Strangers Within the Gate City*, 36-38.

⁴⁰ Exhibit "C"

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² William Douglas, "Memories of Commercial High Grow Dearer and Fonder," *The Atlanta Journal/The Atlanta Constitution*, Sunday, January 29, 1984, 12-F.

⁴³ "Education Board Evenly Divided on Co-Education," *Atlanta Constitution*, June 19, 1915.

⁴⁴ Hunter, *Development of the Public Secondary Schools of Atlanta*, 28.

⁴⁵ In 1922 Superintendent Sutton called in two experts, George D. Strayer and N. L. Engelhardt, both from Columbia University's Teachers College, to make recommendations for a building program for Atlanta's overcrowded schools. George D. Strayer and N. L. Engelhardt, *Survey of the Public School System of Atlanta, Georgia*, 2 vols., (Atlanta, 1922). Opposition by the Commercial High School Alumni and administration is reported in Hunter, *Development of the Public Secondary Schools of Atlanta*, 187.

⁴⁶ Cuba Archives.

⁴⁷ Nevin, *Prominent Women of Georgia*. No other information could be found regarding the Eastman school.

⁴⁸ Louis Geffen was the son of Rabbi Tobias Geffen, spiritual leader of Atlanta's Orthodox congregation Shearith Israel. He was an Emory University graduate and an attorney as well as a member of the Atlanta Board of Education, 1935-1938. Oral history of Louis Geffen in Clifford M. Kuhn, Harlon E. Joye, and E. Bernard West, *Living Atlanta: An Oral History of the City, 1914-1948* (Athens, GA, 1990), 255.

⁴⁹ In 1913 the name of the Jewish Alliance Night School was changed to Capitol Avenue Night School. Hunter, *Development of the Public Secondary Schools of Atlanta*, 60.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Wise may have had similar racial beliefs as Heyman. Josephine Joel Heyman wrote in her diary that when questioned by a history instructor about equal rights, Jo responded that she believed in democracy but did not believe the Negro ought to be enfranchised because that would be breaking with southern tradition. Heyman supported black rights in later decades. Bauman, "Youthful Musings," 55.

⁵² White teachers in general wished to preserve racial segregation. Cremin, *A History of the Atlanta Public School Association*, 4.

⁵³ The Atlanta Public School Teacher's Association began in 1905. APSTA became the Atlanta Education Association (AEA) in 1967. Wise may have been a member of APSTA since its inception. However, 1907 was the earliest date recorded in which she paid dues.

Atlanta Education Association Records, 1905-1971, Minutes of APSTA Meetings, 1906-1911, Box 103-I-3, Georgia State University Libraries, Pullen Archives (hereafter cited as *Atlanta Education Association Records*).

⁵⁴ Joseph Whitworth Newman, "A History of the Atlanta Public School Teacher's Association, Local 89 of the American Federation of Teachers, 1919-1956," (Ph.D. dissertation, Georgia State University, 1978), 10.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵⁶ *Atlanta Education Association Records, 1905-1971*.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Wayne J. Urban, *Why Teachers Organized* (Detroit, 1982).

⁶¹ Hertzberg, *Strangers Within the Gate City*, 168-172.

⁶² Nevin, *Prominent Women of Georgia; Daily Woman's Magazine, Atlanta Constitution*, January 10, 1924.

⁶³ *Daily Woman's Magazine, Atlanta Constitution*, January 10, 1924.

⁶⁴ Bauman, "Victor H. Kriegshaber, Community Builder," *American Jewish History*, 79 (Autumn, 1989), 94-110.

⁶⁵ Patricia E. Smith, "Rhoda Kaufman: A Southern Progressive's Career, 1913-1956," *Atlanta Historical Bulletin* 18 (Spring-Summer, 1973), 43-50.

⁶⁶ Newman, "History of the Atlanta Public School Teacher's Association," 83-85.

⁶⁷ Exhibit "C"

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Certificate of Death for Annie Teitlebaum Wise, File Number 13488, Alabama Bureau of Vital Statistics.