

## A.G. Gaston

Demopolis, Alabama ' Fairfield ' Birmingham, Alabama

### In Sixty Seconds

**Origins.** Arthur George Gaston was born July 4, 1892, in Demopolis, Alabama, the grandson of formerly enslaved people. His grandmother raised him. He had limited formal schooling and attended Tuskegee Institute briefly before joining the Army in 1917. He served in France with the 367th Infantry Regiment, one of the Black units known as the Buffalo Soldiers.

**Work.** He returned to Alabama after the war and began a burial-insurance cooperative among Black miners in Westfield. That cooperative became the Booker T. Washington Insurance Company in 1923. From that base he built Smith and Gaston Funeral Homes, Citizens Federal Savings Bank (1957), the Booker T. Washington Business College (1939), and the A.G. Gaston Motel. By the 1990s the combined enterprise was valued above \$130 million.

**Impact.** In 1963 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. ran the Birmingham Campaign out of Room 30 at the Gaston Motel. When King was jailed on Good Friday of that year, Gaston drew \$160,000 from Citizens Federal Savings to post his bail and the bail of the other arrested demonstrators. The campaign's financing passed through Gaston's institutions. He did not take public credit.

**Legacy.** The A.G. Gaston Boys and Girls Clubs operate in Birmingham. The Gaston Motel was designated part of the Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument by President Obama in 2017. Booker T. Washington Insurance operated under Gaston family leadership into the 2000s. His 1968 autobiography, *Green Power*, is on reading lists at historically Black business schools.

### The Network

#### Minnie L. Gardner Gaston

Second wife and business partner. Educator and co-architect of the Booker T. Washington Business College. Partnered with him on the 1954 to 1957 charter application for Citizens Federal Savings Bank and ran the college's curriculum into the 1970s.

#### Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth

Birmingham civil-rights organizer. Co-founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the figure who invited Dr. King to Birmingham. Worked directly with Gaston on the logistics of housing the 1963 campaign at the Gaston Motel.

#### Booker T. Washington

Model and namesake. Founder of Tuskegee Institute and author of *Up From Slavery*. Gaston attended Tuskegee briefly and named three of his major institutions, the insurance company, the business college, and the burial society, after Washington.

#### Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Guest and beneficiary. Stayed at the Gaston Motel through the 1963 Birmingham Campaign. Wrote Letter from Birmingham Jail during the eight days he spent in custody after Gaston's \$160,000 bail posting freed the other arrested demonstrators.

### For Discussion

1. Gaston funded the 1963 Birmingham Campaign from Citizens Federal Savings and ran it out of the A.G. Gaston Motel. What is the specific relationship between Black capital and civil-rights organizing that his involvement demonstrates, and where is that relationship most visible in the contemporary Black-led philanthropic landscape?
2. Alabama banking regulators slow-walked Citizens Federal's charter application for three years. What forms of regulatory delay have historically served as tools of economic exclusion, and what kinds of delays operate in comparable ways against Black-owned financial institutions today?
3. Gaston's empire began with a fifty-cent-a-month burial cooperative among coal miners in 1920. The same cooperative became a one-hundred-thirty-million-dollar enterprise within a single lifetime. What conditions turn a mutual-aid pool into a full-scale financial holding company, and what has kept more recent mutual-aid pools from making the same transition?
4. Gaston lived to one hundred and three. His institutional legacy persisted through four decades of civil-rights change. What advantages accrue to a founder whose working life spans three generations of the movement he funded, and what is lost when the founder is not around to steward the institution through later transitions?
5. The A.G. Gaston Motel was bombed by Klansmen on May 11, 1963, and Gaston rebuilt. When a founder's infrastructure itself becomes a target of the movement it finances, what risk-management practices distinguish those who rebuild from those who retreat?



## Primary Sources

1. Gaston, A.G. *Green Power: The Successful Way of A.G. Gaston*. Southern University Press, 1968.
2. Jenkins, Carol, and Elizabeth Gardner Hines. *Black Titan: A.G. Gaston and the Making of a Black American Millionaire*. One World / Ballantine, 2004.
3. Birmingham Civil Rights Institute. A.G. Gaston collection and oral-history archive. Birmingham, Alabama.
4. National Park Service. Birmingham Civil Rights National Monument documentation, A.G. Gaston Motel dossier, 2017 designation.
5. Southern Poverty Law Center. Gaston Motel historical file, Civil Rights Memorial archive.

