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Historic marker placed on Court Square in honor of Gov. Arnall

BY [WINSTON SKINNER](#)

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A new historical marker chronicling the accomplishments of Ellis Gibbs Arnall has been dedicated in ceremonies that included about 100 family, friends and admirers.

Arnall, who died in 1992, was born in Newnan and served as Georgia's governor from 1943-1947. Generally, the Georgia Historical Society approves markers only recognizing people who have been dead 25 years. An exception is made in the effort to place markers about governors in their hometowns.

The GHS placed a marker -- facing east and west -- on the Court Square last year -- honoring Newnan's other governor, William Yates Atkinson, who served from 1894-1898. Arnall's marker, which faces north-south, is just steps away.

Atkinson's marker "was placed last year when this beautifully renovated 1904 courthouse was officially dedicated and reopened," said Elizabeth Beers, who coordinated the governor's marker project for the Newnan-Coweta Historical Society. Beers led the ceremonies Sunday afternoon on the north side of the courthouse.

"I believe Gainesville is the only other city to also have had two" governors, Beers said.

Arnall's marker was unveiled by Beers, Will Handley of the Georgia Historical Society and Jammie Williams, a Democrat running for Georgia Senate Seat 28.

Beers referred to Arnall as "my good friend and mentor." She described him as "very successful and learned" but also "a very affable, down to earth person and a friend to all."

Arnall "did have a great sense of humor," Beers said. "He quipped one time in a talk here some time ago that while other politicians had a highway, a building, a bridge or something large named for them, he had a parking lot in Newnan named for him."

The parking lot along Perry Street remains, but has been joined by a middle school and a segment of Interstate 85 in Coweta County. A statue of the progressive political leader has also been placed on the grounds of the Georgia Capitol in Atlanta.

Dr. Joel Richardson, pastor of Central Baptist Church, gave the invocation and shared thoughts about the governor. Marc Peterzell, who practiced law with Arnall in the Atlanta firm of Arnall, Golden and Gregory, also spoke as did Will Hanley of the Georgia Historical Society.

Beers read comments from State Rep. Lynn Smith, and Newnan Mayor Keith Brady read a statement from the governor's son.

Richardson recalled meeting Arnall after moving to Newnan in 1984. "In the latter years of his life, he was still very much the governor," he said.

Richardson said Arnall was a true statesman and not a politician. "His faith was not paraded, but it undergirded every decision he made," he said. "He sacrificed everything because of what he believed in."

Peterzell recalled Arnall's arguing the freight rate case before the U.S. Supreme Court -- "the only time a sitting governor has made an argument before the Supreme Court." Peterzell noted Atlanta historian and attorney Stephens Mitchell, whose sister wrote "Gone With the Wind," listed the freight rate case and the boll weevil -- which forced farmers to abandon a one-crop system -- as the two major events that led to "the industrialization of the South."

Peterzell recounted high points of Arnall's law career after leaving the governorship. In the 1940s, Arnall began representing the Motion Picture Producers Association where he was often involved in negotiations with the Screen Actors Guild. At that time, the SAG was "headed by a young actor named Ronald Reagan, then a Democrat," Peterzell said.

The former governor and two partners founded Arnall Golden and Gregory on Feb. 1, 1949.

"Even though his home was in Newnan, he drove to Atlanta every day," Peterzell said. "He got lots of traffic tickets."

Peterzell said Arnall "was actively involved" in the firm for the remainder of his life. His "primary areas" of practice were entertainment, food and insurance, Peterzell said.

Peterzell enjoyed "listening to his stories," he said. "There were many of them -- some true, some maybe true."

He also spoke of Arnall's magnetic personality. "Many times, I've seen Ellis enter a room of people, most of whom did not know him. They would turn toward Ellis and look at him," Peterzell said.

The governor "loved his extended family," Beers said. She related that Emeline Loughlin told her "whoever he was with -- he always told them that they were his favorite cousin." Beers added, "You thought you were his favorite friend when he was with you."

Children of two of the governor's first cousins were in the audience Sunday. Susie Mann Thomasson and her husband, Dr. James J. Thomasson, came with their children and grandchildren. Guy Arnall, his wife, Carolyn, and Hamilton Arnall and his wife, Susan, were also present.

Other local cousins attending were Billy and Linda Arnall and Georgia and Bob Shapiro. Carol Hunt, a relative of the governor's Alabama-born mother, also attended.

Carol Toole, who lives in the house where Arnall was born, and Rhodes Shell, who lives in the home where the governor lived for most of his adult life, were present. The Shapiros own the governor's grandparents' home, located a short walk from the house where he was born.

Williams was among a contingent of about 20 Coweta County Democrats at the event. The local party's annual fundraiser is named in honor of Atkinson and Arnall, who were both progressive Democrats who championed prison reform, election reform, education and economic development.

The marker was nominated by the Newnan-Coweta Historical Society and the Coweta County Genealogical Society. The GHS provides half the funding for each marker. Arnall's son, Atlanta attorney Alvan Arnall, provided the funds to complete the project.

David Heck "wrote the narratives for the Atkinson and Arnall markers," Beers said. "When I don't know, I ask David."

The narratives on the GHS markers are generally limited to 100 words -- "enough to spark interest," Handley said. He praised Beers for her knowledge and persistence and said she was "the best kind of advocate."

Handley said the markers are more than just "a plaque on a stick in the ground." The goal is "getting people engaged in their community," he said, expressing hope that the marker's presence might encourage young Cowetans to learn more about the heritage of their community and such prominent citizens as Ellis Arnall.

Handley, who also attended the Atkinson marker ceremony last year, remarked, "It's great to be back here again in the shadow of the historic courthouse to honor Gov. Arnall."

The outdoor ceremony took place amid the mid-afternoon sounds of downtown Newnan -- trucks changing gears, motorcycles whizzing past. There was a moment of levity when a cow on a trailer let out a loud "moo," temporarily interrupting the proceedings.

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GOVERNOR'S SON SENDS REMARKS FOR CEREMONY

Alvan Arnall, son of Gov. Ellis Arnall, was unable to attend Sunday's ceremonies honoring his father.

He sent remarks, which were read by Newnan Mayor Keith Brady. Alvan Arnall's statement follows:

"I regret that health issues have prevented me from attending this historical dedication. However, on behalf of the citizens Coweta County and the extended Amall family, I want to thank the Newnan-Coweta Historical Society, the Coweta County Genealogical Society and especially Elizabeth Beers for not only following through on all the documentation needed, but also arranging for this historic marker to be put in place some years earlier than normally required. Of course, this could not have been done without the full cooperation of the Georgia Historical Society.

"My father loved Newnan and Coweta County. Except for four years in the Governor's Mansion, he lived here from birth until shortly after my mother died. He was elected to The Georgia Legislature in 1932, the year after he finished law school. I assume the Democratic primary, which was the de facto general election, was held in September or early October. This gave him time to visit all of the house members in their home counties in his campaign for Speaker of the House. He certainly did not lack legislative experience. After all, as a very young boy, he had served as a page for his Grandfather Ellis in the Alabama legislature.

"In any event, at the end of the day, he assessed that his chances of defeating Ed Rivers, another former governor, for Speaker were questionable. So rather than just end up another house member, he ran for the next highest position. Speaker Pro Tern, which he won on the first ballot against two veteran house members. It was Ed Rivers, who later as governor, appointed my father Attorney General of Georgia after the two of them persuaded the sitting attorney general that he should resign and pursue some other endeavor that they convinced him was too good to pass up. It was as attorney general that my father ran against and defeated Gene Talmadge in the 1942 governor's race. He took office as the youngest governor in the country at age 35.

“His many accomplishments as governor, particularly the freight rate case that he personally argued and won before the United States Supreme Court making the South competitive in bringing in new industry following World War II, more than support Coweta County having this historic marker being dedicated today.”

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