

Black History Every Month

FARISH STREET SUNDOWN

By Barbara Harris

Jackson Advocate-News Service

Editor's Notes: The following is the most comprehensive history every compiled on the Farish Street Historic District. It includes years of research, interviews and eyewitness accounts of life in Jackson's historic African American business district. Unlike many Black business districts across the nation, the Farish Street District has maintained much of its original identity despite numerous failed attempts by developers to reconstruct its skyline.

The origin of the Farish Street Historical District can be traced back to the 1830s, according to all available documentation. But, most of the earliest accounts of life in Jackson's African American community were verbally passed on by its early residents to their offspring.

Research shows that as early as the 1830s, Jackson had a cotton mill that employed 45 Blacks, including children, who are believed to have been the first residents of the Farish Street area.

In 1838, the railroad purchased 140 slaves for \$159,000 to build a railroad from Jackson to Brandon. Members of those families also became residents of the Farish Street area, after being freed by the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863.



One of the few buildings still in tact in the Farish Street business district is located at 400-41 Farish Street. It houses hearses for Collins Funeral Home, as well as Classic Printing's operations

During the last 100 years of slavery in America, nearly all skilled labor on the plantation was performed by slaves. Consequently, many of the newly-freed slaves were largely craftsmen and tradesmen.

By the turn of the century, Jackson's Black population was made up of a large group of carpenters, plasterers, painters, brick masons, tanners, livery men, blacksmiths and shoemakers. Thus, most historians believe Farish Street began its growth into a thriving business district about 1890.

After Reconstruction, African Americans soon became aware that segregation would isolate them from the mainstream. The reality they had to face gave expression to their ideas and beliefs in human dignity, freedom to succeed or fail, religion, and personal and economic security -- things that were important to them.

Those beliefs and their application made Farish Street one of the nation's most economically-sound Black communities for over half a century. Even in 1915, the *Daily Clarion-Ledger* called Farish Street "A Growing, Bustling Business Thoroughfare."

In its heyday, the community was, for the most part, self-supporting. The main business district on Farish Street, which was lined with merchants, only stretched from Capitol Street to Hamilton Street in the early days.

The grocery stores of Rigby, Joseph, Peterson, Craft and Hall -- all clean, sanitary and well-stocked for large trade -- dotted the Farish Street landscape. According to one source, customers seemed to flock to C.A. Hall's Feed and Grocery because of its variety of produce and the friendly atmosphere that made news of community happenings easier to come by.

Enterprise Meat Market, White Star Market and Adams Meat Market took care of the butchering needs of patrons. Adams Meat Market specialized in center-cut pork chops at 15 cents per pound, according to newspaper articles.

Fisher's Bakery was the chief supplier of baked goods for the hotels and restaurants on Capitol and

There was the brisk business of Star Laundry and Model Laundry, which ran a full-scale operation and employed a large number of workers.

Trade was heavy at Heidelberg Furniture Store and Moore's Second-Hand Furniture Store. The essential services of three tailor shops, Fisher, Youngblood, and Prince & Magee, were available for the fashion-conscious. White Star Barbershop would provide that much-needed clip. And of course, H.M. Latham's Funeral Home was there if its services were required.

Farish Street also was once the home of Jackson State University (then Jackson College). In 1902, Jackson College moved from Millsaps College's present location to Benevolent Hall at the corner of Farish and Griffith streets, the former home of the *Jackson Advocate*.

The presence of hospitals, insurance companies, drug stores, funeral homes and other businesses was prominent on Farish Street.

There was once a hospital where People's Funeral Home now stands. Several members of the Mississippi Medical and Surgical

Association, founded in 1900, operated the facility. African American doctors were not allowed to practice in this state's hospitals.

Among those health care providers were Dr. D.W. Turner from Pike County; Dr. S.W. Miller and his wife, Dr. Lucille Miller, the first woman licensed to practice medicine in Mississippi. The Miller's son, Dr. William E. Miller, practiced medicine on Dalton Street for many years prior to his death in 1981. He also served as resident physician at JSU.

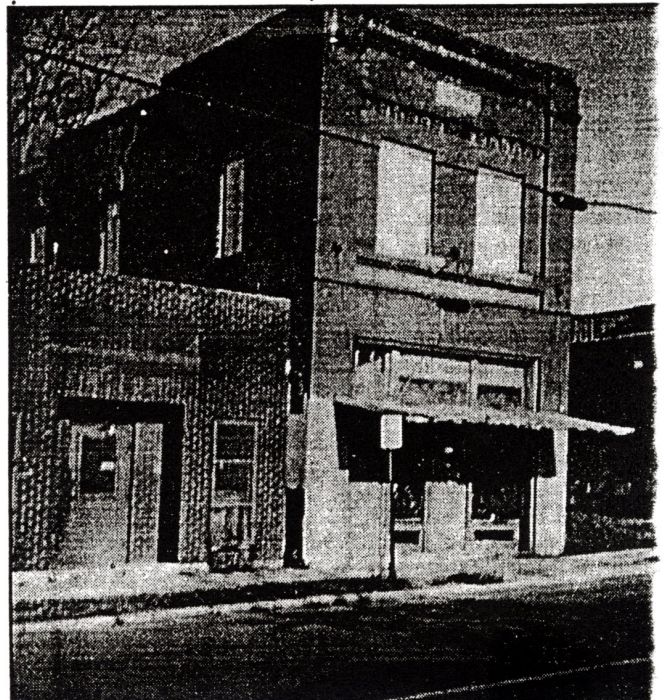
A number of other doctors maintained their offices on Farish Street. The late Dr. Christian, who over the years, both prescribed medication and filled his own prescriptions, encouraged citizens to take vitamins long before much attention was given to the efficacy of this practice.

Prior to his death in 1970, Dr. A.H. McCoy, a dentist for many years on Farish Street, was one of the city's leading citizens in the movement to extend civil rights to include African Americans. Consequently, Jackson's federal office building at Capitol and Farish, was named for the esteemed physician.

At the time, Dr. McCoy became the only African American to be so honored.

Page 2

Right: The W.A. Scott Building is one of the structures still remaining on Farish Street. The W.A. Scott home, where the family lived prior to their move to Atlanta, still stands in the 800 block of N. Farish. Below: This is one of the buildings which fell in recent years to a mysterious fire. At one time, it was a small hotel in the 300 block of N. Farish Street. The "Brown Circle" sign on a concrete marker still stands as a monument to building's past. It was one in a series of fires that destroyed or damaged several buildings on Farish Street, including the Alamo Theater; the building on the northeast corner of Farish and Griffith; and most recently, the Jackson Advocate's former headquarters at 300 N. Farish.



the atmosphere for those who visited his office, or peered through the windows to enjoy the oriental decor.

For 48 years, Dr. A.B. Britton Jr. has provided medical care for area residents, and helped improve health conditions of the entire Black community of Jackson and Mississippi. His office is located at 527 1/2 N. Farish Street. His son, Dr. A.B. Britton III, carries on his father's legacy today in his Jackson practice on Lynch Street.

Frazier Funeral Home, later Frazier-Collins and now Collins, established its mortuary and insurance business on Farish Street as did Peoples Funeral Home; they have become landmarks in the community. Latham Funeral Home moved to Lynch Street.

These establishments brought the community together in ceremonies or rites that differ little or none from today. They employed men as embalmers, and women who made shrouds and dressed the deceased, and worked as hairdressers.

Perhaps, the first drug store on Farish Street was opened by Dr. S.D. Redmond in 1890. Located at 120 N. Farish, it is said that on Sunday afternoons, when worship services were over and dinner dishes were washed, every young lady in the community who had a new dress to show off came to join the Sunday afternoon parade. Naturally, young men, free from their week of work, came too.

Drug stores were popular meeting places for old and young alike. They met for sodas, ice cream and banana splits, which could be purchased for 25 cents or less.

stores that contributed to the community down through the years.

At the corner of Pearl and Farish, there was Moore's Drugstore, owned by Dr. E.W. Moore and operated by his son, Judge Herman Moore. Fearing his son might come upon hard times, Dr. Moore taught him barbering.

Miller's Drugstore, owned by Drs. S.W. and Lucille Miller, was located in the 100 block of N. Farish Street.

Then, there was Gordon's Drug Store, named for a Dr. Gordon and owned by a group of Jackson and Jackson college professors. It was operated by Diamond Cox, one of the most dynamic personalities on the street. Though he could not read or write, Cox was able to keep an audience spellbound with his great gift for small talk.

For more than 45 years now, Harmon Drug Store at 540 N. Farish Street, has administered to the needs of the community. Its owner, Dr. George Harmon, has been a mainstay in the Farish Street business district his entire pharmaceutical career.

During the 1920s, small children in the neighborhood found satisfaction for their proverbial "sweet tooth" in Jones' Candy Kitchen. "Mr. Candy Kitchen Jones," as he was called, made his own candy, the smell of which was as tantalizing an advertisement as one could find anywhere.

The symbols of the "American Dream" -- home, savings accounts and any luxury items which gave status to the larger society -- were among those sought and achieved by the builders of Farish Street.

Perhaps the most important symbol was home ownership. The size and style of a home, in a sense, indicated the status of the family for which it was built. It was generally known that Black craftsmen -- carpenters, brick masons and plasterers -- having few or no white competitors, were a thriving breed.

Black contractors, some self-taught like George Thomas, lined the Farish Street District with homes, several of which were architecturally authentic, at least vernacularly. The Lemley home stood in the 200 block of Farish, the D.K. Johnson home in the 100 block and the W.A. Scott home in the 800 block.

See Farish Street Sundown, 2B

The Scott home, where he and his family lived before they moved to Atlanta and started the *Atlanta Daily World*, still stands; as does that of Dr. Barnes, who lived next door.

There were the Queen Ann L-shaped cottages, one of which still exists, that date back to the turn of the century. The cottages depicted decorative details, an elaborately gabled roof with an ornamental pin-wheel adorning the front pediment, diagonal beaded board and cut-out verge boards or circular borders. The slender, square porch posts were connected by latticed arches.

Most homes were one-story structures. The bungalow, with its low pitched roof or gabled front and bracketed eaves, was traditional.

The Creole cottage found in the District might feature a long, slanting roof running the length of the house. It was known to have had an undercut gallery or veran-

posts.

Then, there was the shotgun cottage, with its hip roof, undercut gallery, board and batten siding and square posts. Many of these structures still stand in the Farish Street area. Many of them are currently being restored for affordable housing.

Once a house was built, furnished and occupied, a "house party" was the traditional celebration. Each invited guest brought food, freshly baked bread, fried chicken, chitterlings, potato salad and liquid refreshments. The hostess provided a piano; if she could not play, one of the guests would oblige. The evening was spent singing, dancing, eating and exchanging small talk. These parties often carried a fee for refreshments.

Between 1914 and 1930, several banks had their rise and fall on Farish Street. The American Bank was owned by Dr. S.D. Redmond and Harry Fisher, a well-to-do businessman who owned a bakery, drugstore and dance hall.

At the northwest corner of South Farish and Pearl, Atwood and McKissack operated the Southern Bank on the first floor of a building they owned.

Both banks failed, the Southern Bank around 1916-17; the date of failure of the American Bank is not available.

On the second floor of the building where the Southern Bank was located, Atwood and McKissack established what was known as either the Negro Opera House or the American Opera Company. The facility was the site of community activities such as school plays and graduation exercises until it deteriorated about 1920.

Street had become a streetnesses owned by Africans, but it was also a screening place.

Black men and women worked as maids and seamstresses in nearly all of the street stores, but they could not eat in the stores there, they walked to Farish at lunch time. At one time letter carriers were Black; they would eat on Farish Street.

The King Edward, at the corner of Mill and Canal, had a large number of Black customers who walked to Farish Street for lunch, as did the red-headed workers at the Illinois Cotton across from the hotel.

Often the men worked in the restaurants and peeped even on their days off, with other men. There was no place to play golf, no organized sports activities those at the schools and on Farish Street, the men played pool, checkers a nos, and talked. There were physical activities for women.

With the men, the women were not so small, however. They talked about organizing banks, cultural centers. They spoke of the need for health clinics. They made decisions to open restaurants, feed the many workers, grocery stores, laundries and drug stores; and to have day dinner.

Both men and women were active in fraternal groups. There were two branches of Masons: the Elks and Knights of Pythias and Oddfellows; and their women's auxiliaries: Eastern Star, Heroines of Jericho and the Court of Calanthis.

Before the men built their own lodge halls, many of their meetings were held at Hill's Hall or Benevolent Hall on Farish Street. The lodges held their parades on Sundays; the streets were lined with spectators.

During the 1920s and 1930s, most of the cultural events were held in churches. By the 1930s, Harmonia Club, organized in 1923, celebrated a weeks of activities, usually at churches in and near the Farish Street area.

Mary Church Terrell Literary Club sponsored an annual Race Relations Day in February, held at Central United Methodist Church for many years. The program was formal and attracted both Black and white citizens.

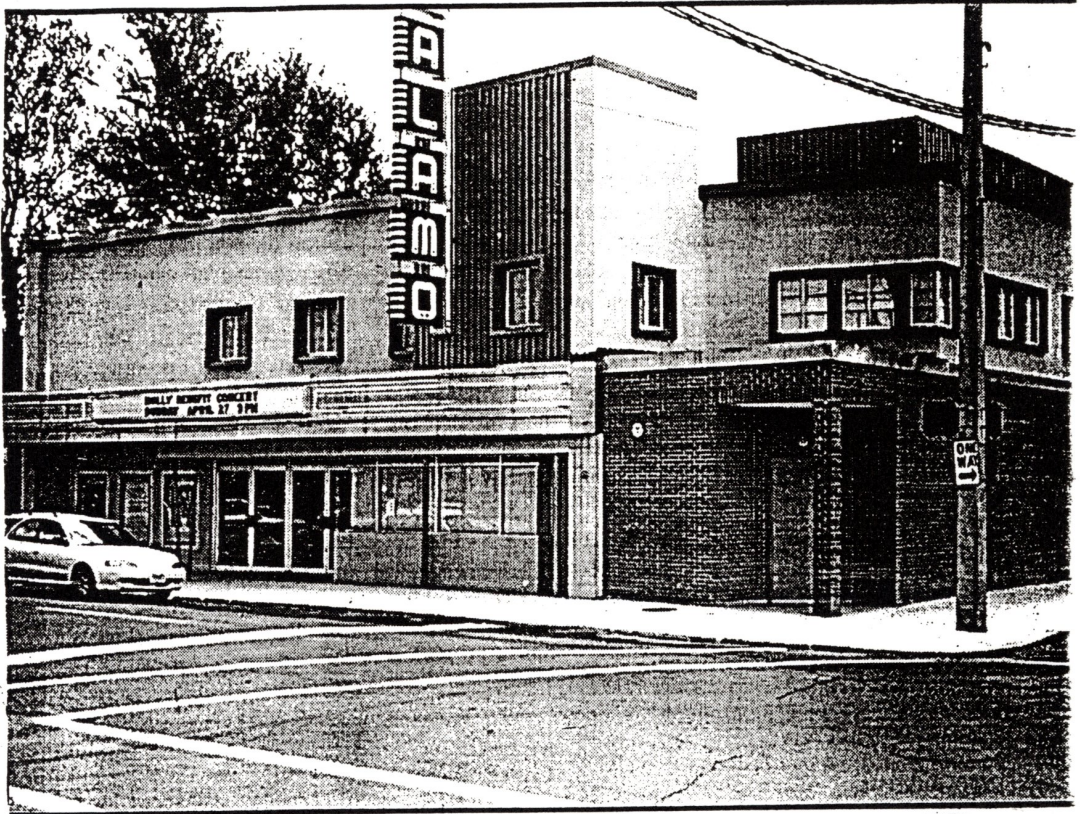
By the 1930s, a group of social clubs had been organized. The Cosmopolitan Club and the Paramount Club were men's organizations. They sponsored annual formal dances, usually at Hill's Hall or across the street at the Paramount Club.

A few years later, a group of young women organized the Gay Thirties and Les Royals, both of which sponsored elegant affairs at the new Crystal Palace, located above what is now Harmon's Drug Store. For the women of the time, there were bridge clubs, whist clubs, and among older women, sewing circles.

A very unique affair was started by Pearl and Chauncey Davis, a formal commencement for the graduates of Davis Beauty School. It was usually held at Farish Street Baptist Church.

The "big name" bands often stopped over in Jackson enroute to New Orleans or Memphis, because they could not stay in white hotels. By that time, the Farish Street area had its own hotels, including the Edward Lee Hotel on Church Street. There was also Summers Hotel on Pearl Street.

Among those musicians were...



Top: The Alamo Theater on the corner of N. Farish and Hamilton streets has been restored to its original glory. Now owned by Smith-Robertson Museum and Cultural Center on Bloom Street, the theater has since hosted several events, including the Jackson branch Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

visitor while he was with the Five Blind Boys. Some of the most popular dance bands included Doc Armalee, Duke Huddleston, Joe Dyson, Jimmie Lunceford and Cab Calloway.

These artists, along with blues greats B.B. King, Muddy Waters, Howling Wolf and Bo Diddley, all Mississippians, often played at the Crystal Palace. Generally, these performers could not pass up the "red carpet" treatment they received at the Crystal Palace or one of its forerunners.

When a personality like Louis Armstrong was billed, people came from all parts of the state to listen and dance to the music.

The Crystal Palace flourished during World War II. It became a USO Center, a home away from home for visiting servicemen. After the war, the Crystal Palace became an office building, and live music disappeared from the street until the implementation of the Farish Street Festival three decades later.

Whenever events occurred, such as dances at the Crystal Palace or the Silas Green Minstrel Show on a vacant lot or the Masons' parade, even people coming to town on Saturdays to do their shopping, enterprising women and girls up and down the street brought out their black kettles, built fires and sold hot fish sandwiches.

On Saturdays, when the rural people all came to town, Farish Street took on a festive air from early morning to late night. People sold produce, artifacts and homemade cookies, cakes and pies. Others would attract small groups by playing a banjo, guitar or harmonica; or by "hamboning."

There would be the smell of food in the air: barbecue, fried chicken, chitterlings.

The street was so narrow, there was barely room for cars to

2B ■ SEPT. 17 - 23, 1998

FARISH STREET SUNDOWN

page 5

pass, with traffic flowing in both directions. It was necessary to drive very slowly to avoid striking pedestrians who crossed back and forth at will. Some visitors just parked their cars and watched the crowd.

There were also four movie theaters in the neighborhood over the years to entertain Farish Street patrons. The Alamo, the Ritz and the Booker T. theaters were located on Farish Street, while the Amite was right around the corner on Amite Street.

The Booker T. Theater was noted for showing many of the Black films or "colored movies" of the time. The Alamo presented live stage shows as well as movies; and the Ritz featured the first showing for Black audiences of the Academy Award-winning movie, "Gone With the Wind."

Kiddie matinees were held on Saturdays; they were always sell-outs. As late as the 1960s, youngsters would catch the Saturday matinee at the Alamo free with a

Over the last couple of decades, the Alamo had fallen into disrepair before it was gutted by fire a few years ago. It has since been rebuilt under the direction of Smith-Robertson Museum on nearby Bloom Street.

The Farish Street District has also been the home of the Black Press for more than seven decades. *The Colored Veteran*, founded in 1927 by Percy Greene, was the voice of the National Association of Negro War Veterans, an organization formed to keep Black veterans apprised of when their membership in the American Legion, Disabled American Veterans and the Veterans of Foreign Wars, was unacceptable.

By 1938, that tabloid had evolved into the *Jackson Advocate*. The newspaper took on the task of advocating voter registration, participation in politics and the renunciation of discrimination and injustice.

For its critical stances on is-

tinued attacks, including several incidents of violence, vandalism and sabotage; most recently, the Jan. 26, 1998 firebombing of 300 N. Farish Street headquarters.

Yet, "The Voice of Black Mississippians," the state's oldest long-standing, always published member of the Black Press, has persevered for more than 60 years. After Percy Greene died in 1977, the newspaper was sold in 1978 to its current publisher, Charles T. Dale.

Although the *Advocate* has its origin on Farish Street, it had other homes in the District, including a longtime office on Hamilton Street. It moved to the Hill-Holly Building at 300 N. Farish Street in 1989. That building is listed on the National Register of Historical Places.

Temporary offices for the *Jackson Advocate* are being maintained at 309 N. Farish Street until further notice.

Another prominent newspaper of its time was the *African*

Willie Miller. The newspaper folded several years ago when it allegedly came under the control of unscrupulous right-wing politicians.

During the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, Farish Street fell to the same changes that affected virtually every Black business district in the nation.

The onset of World War II, the approach of old age and death of the District's most progressive citizens, and the shift of commerce and population to North and deep-West Jackson gradually changed Farish Street.

In place of builders and homeowners, renters sought inexpensive living quarters close to bus routes, jobs and downtown.

Despite the changes, however, a few of Farish Street's oldest institutions have held on. Interestingly enough, the churches have proved to be a staying force. As older members who built the churches passed on, their descendants took their places. Those descendants have attracted newcomers from the ranks of the business and professional world, many of whom are new to Jackson.

Central United Methodist Church and Farish Street Baptist Church maintain sizable congregations of community leaders. During social upheavals, such as the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, these churches often became meeting places for civic and political groups.

Booker T. Grill, Home Dining Room and the Crystal Palace, along with numerous other African American-owned businesses, have long since disappeared. On the other hand, Peaches' Cafe, the Big Apple Inn (Big John's), Dennis Brothers Shoe Shop, Smith Barber Shop, Collins Funeral Home, Dr. A.B. Britton Jr.'s office, Harmon's Drug Store, Boots Flower Shop and People's Funeral Home, among others, have weathered the storms and remained in the historic community.

Even new businesses have not given up hope on the Farish Street District. Newcomers include Classic Printing, Field's Cafe, Cameron's Upholstery Shop, E&M Florist, Romeo's Hair Force and the Birdland Lounge, among others.

Unlike other Black communities across the nation, the Farish Street Historic District, which was listed on the National Register of Historical Places in March 1980, stands out in both history and character.

Many areas, such as Beale Street in Memphis, have been torn down and reconstructed. But, at the time it was listed, Farish Street was still intact as a document to its past. Many of the old structures still adorn its skyline.

Until recent years, an insensitivity existed toward the historic worth and character of Black neighborhoods, both by its residents and by housing agencies. Funds allocated to such areas did not go to preservation, but into

"misguided" slum clearance schemes and the building of high-rise structures. Those actions tended to destroy the desire of the people to care about their own communities.

Perhaps the most recent of these schemes was thwarted when, for unrelated reasons, Gov. Kirk Fordice vetoed a highly-supported bill which would have given \$6 million in state funds to white developers to determine and direct the fate of Farish Street.

Members of the Farish Street community have long contended that political and economic agendas of city officials and local white businessmen have been the District's major downfall.

Also, in recent years, many of the structures in the Farish Street Historic District have been destroyed or damaged by mysterious fires. Farish Street merchants claim the fires were arsonous acts initiated by white developers to acquire property owned largely by African Americans.

Our thanks to the Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center at Jackson State University and to all who contributed to this history.