

JACKSON Y. W. C. A.  
and  
MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT of ARCHIVES and HISTORY  
and  
JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
THE FARISH STREET HISTORIC DISTRICT

BUSINESSMAN IN THE HISTORIC DISTRICT

O. H. 81.45

DR. DAVID WHITE

Interviewed  
by

Alferdteen Harrison

on

September 15, 1981

JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY

JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW AGREEMENT

You have been asked for information to be used in connection with the Oral History Program at Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi. The purpose of this program is to gather and preserve information for historical and scholarly use.

A tape recording of your interview will be made by the interviewer, and a typescript of the tape will be made and submitted to you for editing. The final retyped and edited transcript, together with the tape of the interview will then be placed in the oral history collection at Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi. Other institutions or persons may obtain a copy. These materials may be used for purposes of research, for instructional use, for publication, or for other related purposes.

I, Dr. David White have read the above and, in view of the historical and scholarly value of this information, and in return for a final typed copy of the transcript, I knowingly and voluntarily permit Jackson State University, Jackson, the full use of this information. I hereby grant and assign all my rights of every kind whatever pertaining to this information, whether or not such rights are now known, recognized, or contemplated, to Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi.

Dr. D. W. White  
Interviewee (Signature)

12-9-82  
Date

ORAL HISTORY AGREEMENT  
FARISH STREET HISTORIC DISTRICT PROJECT

I agree that this magnetic tape recording of my voice made during an interview with Alferdeen Harrison (interviewer) and a transcript made therefrom, may be catalogued and deposited in the Jackson State University library (and some designated place in the Farish Street Historical District) with the records of the Farish Street Historic District Humanities project. The tape recording and transcript may be made available for research use in the preparation of the final products of the NEH Humanities Project in 1983 and after 1983 for research by scholars. Any title or literary rights to this material are hereby relinquished to Jackson State University.

D. D. W. White  
Oral Author (interviewee) Signature

Alferdeen Harrison  
Oral Recorder (interviewer) Signature

9-15-81  
date  
9-15-81  
date  
81.45  
Tape number

ORAL HISTORY AGREEMENT  
FARISH STREET HISTORIC DISTRICT PROJECT

I agree that this magnetic tape recording of my voice made during an interview with David W. White and a transcript made there-  
*otomatory*  
(interviewer)

from, may be catalogued and deposited in the Jackson State University library (and some designated place in the Farish Street Historical District) with the records of the Farish Street Historic District Humanities project. The tape recording and transcript may be made available for research use in the preparation of the final products of the NEH Humanities Project in 1983 and after 1983 for research by scholars. Any title or literary rights to this material are hereby relinquished to Jackson State University.

David W White

Oral Author (interviewee) Signature

9-29-81  
date

Mary Street, Lena Johnson, A. Harrison

Oral Recorder (interviewer) Signature

9-29-81  
date

+ John Hoshu - 2nd Day of Pre-Farish  
Street Festival activities - at Marino  
Branch V.W.C.A.

O.H. 81.67  
Tape number

## INTRODUCTION

Dr. David White was born in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. His early education was there until high school, which he attended school in Topeka, Kansas. After high school, he worked and attended Talladega where he graduated in 1941. He was inducted into the armed forces and served in the Pacific. After service, he started school and majored in pre-med. His main interest was in writing. He opened up his own Optometry practice in Jackson on October 17, 1951.

Dr. White describes the way Farish Street was before intergration and the how it was afterwards. He describes the black businesses as being properous before intergration, but afterwards the blacks had a tendency to stray to the white businesses. He talks about his involvement with the NAACP and its input into the District.

INTERVIEWEE: Dr. David White  
INTERVIEWER: Alferdteen Harrison  
DATE OF INTERVIEW: September 15, 1981  
O. H. 81.45

Harrison: Today we have with us Dr. David White, who is an Optomertist, an eye doctor. He works next door to the Marino Branch YWCA. He is going to be talking with us tonight primarily about his recollections in the Farish Street Historical District. We are going to start out with him gradually talking about himself and then working up to his coming to Jackson. Dr. White, are you comfortable?

White: Yes, I am quite comfortable.

Harrison: Could you tell me a little about yourself?

White: Where do you want me to start?

Harrison: Whatever you think is important.

White: I have to start with when I was born. I was born in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, which is about ninety miles south of Jackson. My early education was there. I stayed there in school until I was in high school. Then I went to Topeka, Kansas where I finished high school. They had the third or fifth best rated high school in the country. I was quite fortunate in being able to go there.

I worked some and I went to Talladega, where I graduated in 1941. I was inducted into the Armed Forces where I served in the Pacific. I came out of the Pacific and began everything all over again. I changed my major and went into pre-med. I finished my pre-med work, but my main interest had been in the undergraduate work I had received at Talladega in writing. I doggily pursued some type of professional work and I went to Optometry School and finished in the 1950s.

Harrison: Where was the Optometry School?

White: The school was in Chicago, Illinois. I came back to Mississippi to practice. I opened here on October 17, 1951. I thereby became the first Negro Optometrist, a Negro in any-way connected with eye work in the state of Mississippi, which is a little history in itself.

Harrison: It certainly is. Was your first office on Farish Street?

White: My first office was right here where it is now. I wrote a little story. I don't know whether you'll like to hear it or not.

Harrison: Yes, we would.

White: I've often been asked whether I had a big opening. I had very little money to open with, let alone having a big opening. It so happened that I was able to say that I had a big opening quite truthfully because the first person who came into my office and bought something was the largest man in volume in the city. He was called "Big Moore." He was an undertaker in Jackson. It was really important, his coming in there. He bought a dollar and a half temple.

The owner of the building was the wealthiest Negro in the state, Dr. Redmond. He told me that when I took in my first money, my full rent would begin. It was half rent until then. By this man buying this dollar and a half temple not only opened me up, but my rent was dated from October 17, 1951.

Mr. Redmond passed not too many years ago. Mr. Moore and I had a gentleman's agreement that whoever passed first would tell this little story at his funeral, so I related this at Mr. Moore's funeral.

Harrison: About the big opening?

White: Yes, about the opening. He was the one that opened up the first Negro Optometrist in Mississippi.

Harrison: What was the general response by black people of your coming here as an Optometrist?

White: Most blacks didn't know what an Optometrist was. When I would tell them that at the various churches I would attend, they would say, "Here is a new man in the field for Negroes, an Optometrist." Then they would want to know what an Optometrist was. I would say that he just examines the eyes for errors and makes glasses. I became known through the churches largely because that was the medium I felt was best. I had worked in the armed forces as a chaplain's assistant. That is why I felt closer in working in the church to get known.

Harrison: Who were some of your other customers, or did you call them patients?

White: Yes, we called them patients. I had a round robin. There weren't going to be any, it seemed for awhile. Mr. Moore had come in and spent a dollar and half, but it was long

White: before anyone came in for a refraction, a examination of the eyes. I thought I was going to have to leave before ever examining anyone's eyes. They were afraid to expect the same thing from a Negro as they would a white man and I am not even going to get a chance to try, I thought.

There was a man selling peanuts on the street and he is still doing so today. His name is James Lofton. I said, "Lofton you might need some glasses. He came by one night. I thought, I am going to have a patient, I am going to examine somebody's eyes in Jackson.

I helped him into the office and put him the chair. I examined his eyes and made him a pair of glasses and gave them to him. I said now I have done my first refraction. That't the way I began.

It so happen, that the lady who is in charge of the "Y" now was in charge when I came here. It was on the south side of the Redmond's building, rather than the north side as it is located now. She, Mrs. Mosley, and I would eat at a restaurant that was located across the street.

We didn't have any Negro lawyers after they were discouraged from practicing here.

Harrison: Do you know when that was?

White: No, I don't. Attorney Redmond's son was one of the later ones who was discouraged from practicing here. He moved to St. Louis. I understand that Lawyer Moon, he passed, was one of the later lawyers. Then there was a gap. After this gap, the first lawyer was Attorney Young and Attorney Jones. Jones was the son of the founder of Piney Woods. They came to practice at about the same time I came to practice Optometry. They were given a reception at the Eat and Beat It Cafe.

Harrison: Where is it located?

White: The Eat and Beat It Cafe is located where the present YWCA is located. I never will forget that night they had this reception. They had nice cooks. We enjoyed eating together. This was sort of like a social get together every afternoon. On the south end and near Capitol Street were larger restaurants, but they weren't catered to by the same group.

Harrison: What do you mean?

White: In the 100 block there was very dynamic situation which is



White: hard to visualize today. It had its drawbacks as well as the good points. You had the roughest and toughest that would be going on in the state happening there in the 100 block. It was opened to whatever the whites wanted to do. It is where Capitol Street hits Farish. This was before integration.

Harrison: Was Eat and Beat It Cafe a place where only the professional people went?

White: No, that just happened to be the place that someone selected to have this dinner for Attorney Young and Attorney Jones. It was by no means the only place. There were three other places on this end.

Harrison: Which one of these catered to doctors and lawyers?

White: All of them. The group I was speaking of went to Dotty's Grill because we liked the cooking. The Home Dining Room with Mr. and Mrs. Dan Robinson was as cordial as any other place in Jackson.

Harrison: Would you describe it?

White: The Home Dining Room was on the corner of Hamilton and Farish Street. Before I came to Jackson, I understand it was a very lovely place in decor, but it had somewhat gone down at the time I came.

Mrs. Robinson and her husband ran the place, but she was the driving force. If you came in, she was as nice to one as to the other. She would see that you got a nice tasty meal.

Farish Street was a cultural place. It is hard for you to understand it now because you just don't see the things happening on Farish Street that happened during that time. There was many shows that came to Jackson. Some were stage shows. Those people would only come to Farish Street for their entertainment while they were in town. Show people are really something else for entertainment and even to look at. The way they dressed represented a different culture that we are not accustomed to in maybe a small town such as Jackson at that time.

The Minstrel Show would always be tented on Hamilton and Mill Street, on the north side. It was called the "green." Silas Green from New Orleans was one, and Rabbit Foot was another one.

Harrison: Is that the name of a person?

White: Those are the names of the shows. They were excellent shows being shown all over the South and even in the North in big cities. They had others like the Georgia Minstrel and the Florida Blossom, but they weren't quite as good as these two.

Shepherd's was a nice Place. Not only was Mr. Shepherd cordial, but his wife was what Jackson called a society woman. You would meet quite a few society people there. After the big dances in the morning people would come to Shepherd's to eat.

Harrison: Did any of them have a speciality, I am wondering what gave them their decor?

White: I am not familiar with the Eat and Beat It Cafe. I don't recall what they had to eat there. The other three restaurants gave a pretty fair menu of food, not just soul food.

Harrison: Was there any kind of entertainment at these restaurants?

White: They all had some type of music.

Harrison: Was it live music?

White: No, just like we have today, a machine would play. I don't recall any live musicians playing at any of the places. The Home Dining Room was possibly the only place that was big enough to have that type of thing.

Harrison: Was the Home Dining Room larger than it is now?

White: It was considerably larger than the one they have now. That building was torn down and this building took the name of the older one but there was different owners.

There was a theatre here. We had three theatres on this street. Mr. Redmond had three buildings on that block. One was three stories; one was two stories, the other one was one story. The professionals had their businesses on the second floor of this building. The McCoy Building was also in that block. Half of the 100 block was owned by Negroes. That in itself is a record. I don't think there is another city in the whole United States that Negroes own half a block.

Harrison: What are the names of those theatres?

White: The Booker T. Washington Theatre was on the east side of Farish Street in the 100 block.

Harrison: Is that building still there?

White: No, that whole block has been destroyed.

Harrison: That's right, on the corner of Farish and Capitol?

White: No, in the middle of the block between Capitol and Amite on the east side. Around the corner right off Farish Street right off Amite was the Amite Theatre. I think it was the best of the four theatres that we had. I think it is still there.

Harrison: Which building is that?

White: It is used as a club. It is on the south side of Amite Street between Mill and Farish. That was the second theatre and possibly the best attended theatre at one time.

The Alamo was the latest theatre we had. I think it opened just before I came. When I first came here both the Amite and the Alamo were under the same management. We had a Negro who was well known socially at that time. He was in charge of the theatre. His name was Leroy Johnson. The owner was Hebrew.

Luckett: The owner of the Alamo Theatre was the same as the owner of the Booker T. Washington Theatre. He was a layman, a Jew. He was also the builder of the theatre on Amite Street.

White: The fourth theatre was located between Hamilton and Church Street. It was the first, I think, to go. It was on the south side, east side of Farish Street. It was during the time I was here that it turned into a church.

Harrison: Was it the Ritz?

White: It could have been the Ritz.

Harrison: You have talked about the restaurants, theatres, how about the other businesses on Farish Street?

White: When I opened, Sanders was in this area.

Harrison: Which Sanders is this?

White: Mrs. Thelma Sanders. Mrs. Sanders had a hat shop right next door to my office when I opened. She soon acquired a little

White: more prominent location on the corner of Hamilton and Farish with a corner exposure.

Harrison: What other kind of recreational opportunities were there for teenagers?

White: As far back as I can remember the "Y's" were there.

There was a Dr. Atwood here who practiced medicine. He did not have an office in the sense that we think of a practicing physician of having an office. There was a drugstore on the east side of the street owned by whites. Dr. Atwood received his calls at the back of the drugstore. In earlier years he had been quite prominent. He came from a prominent family.

There was an Atwood who was a lawyer. I am not sure if that was his father who owned a drugstore in Hattiesburg. I understand he was from Jackson so I figured that he was from a prominent family at one time. Dr. Atwood passed during my early years here.

Harrison: I think you've given us a beautiful description of the way things were when you came years ago. What kind of changes have you observed?

White: The changes are regrettable because they are the changes that have occurred in many cities not only with Negroes but with whites. The city with its merchantile business had moved to shopping centers and the core of the city if left in smaller cities such as Jackson and others of its size to the professional and office buildings that kind of followed Farish Street as well as Capitol.

The people that lived in this area, homes were either torn down or they moved away. You had less people living and traveling into this area. It isn't alive as it once was. You had two-way traffic on Farish Street that helped a great deal for the bussle of Farish Street. With the business melting away to the center of town Farish Street somewhat went away as to be expected.

The other thing that mattered a great deal, I don't know whether it is considered first or second in thinking, is desegregation. The Negroes had to eat in Negro places and patronize Negro places to a certain degree.

Medgar Evers first office opening of the NAACP was upstairs in the building where I am located. Much of the Civil Rights followed in the years to come. It was bad and good. I say bad because it was little order there and good because of the results that came out of it. Finally the Civil Rights Act

- White: went into effect and the upstairs turned into a school by which some of the Civil Rights people earned a little by making candles and other things. When the funding of those were lost the upstairs was changed again and it is back to professional use.
- Harrison: Tell me a little bit more about the school. You said they made candles, what else happened in the school?
- White: As I said these were projects funded by, I don't know what agent funded these little schools, but they were integrated. The instructors went to different parts of the state to teach people who were displaced from the farm a way in which they could make their homes more attractive and live in spite of not having much money. They taught them to make their own clothes and make things more lovely around them.
- Harrison: It was primarily for adults?
- White: Yes, it was for adults and people who were displaced largely from farm life.
- Harrison: That was the purpose of the school?
- White: Yes.
- Harrison: We've talked about the Redmond building completely, could you talk a little bit more about the people who lived on Farish Street? You mentioned there were a lot of nice homes.
- White: Some of these places were rental places. Where were you located now, was about four houses that were rented. I am sure that one of the Hebrews owned this property. Many of the people lived in these homes because it was a good place to make money.
- I think it hadn't been too long that they had sold drinks without licenses. This was a good place to sell. You would come in right off the street. This was the kind of thing that happened on a busy street. Don't think because they did this made it so bad because many of the people did things in regularity. They kept fairly nice places in spite of not having legitimate license for selling whiskey and drinks. I enjoyed them as personalities.
- Harrison: Are any of those persons alive?
- White: Many of them have passed. On this street you had Marion Henderson who owned this two-story home which has been in photography. You probably have some of the history on her home.

Harrison: Where, which one?

White: It's south of here.

Harrison: Between the pink and white house?

White: Yes, between Hamilton and Griffin Street, was owned by Marion Henderson. She was a very smart woman. She was a Notary Public. Her father owned the whole section of homes behind her. She did Burr Brown's bookwork.

Her husband was also a prominent character in the city. He was one of the major baseball players in the South. He trained people in baseball. After he and Mrs. Henderson divorced he continued to train them. He had a park near Tougaloo for that purpose.

Mrs. Henderson was an associate of Henrietta Stephen. She had a sister who lived in Chicago who took over this place when she died.

Harrison: You mentioned Burr Brown, what do you know about him?

White: He owned those houses which comprised what we might call an alley. It ran along beside Marion Henderson's home. Marion was Burr Brown's bookkeeper. I understand that before Burr Brown's wife passed she sold the property.

\*Lockett: I never knew his mother.

White: Have you ever heard of the woman that he married?

Lockett: Yes.

White: There was a Mrs. Hill who owned the corner of Griffith and Farish. I think the property is still in her heir's hands. The Hill family were close friends of my people for many years.

Harrison: What Hill was that?

White: It wasn't Jim Hill. It is the ones that are on Griffith and Farish Street.

Adele Crammer left here and went to Cincinnati. She brought out a lot of history of Farish Street. I don't know too much about the Crystal Palace because they had stop having dances when I came here in 1951. Steven's Rose Room was a real nice place.

Harrison: Did they have live entertainment?

White: Yes, Mrs. Stevenson had a band there on weekends and a section there each night.

Harrison: Where was this located?

White: It is located on Sunset Boulevard.

Harrison: So, it wasn't on Farish Street?

White: No, Steven's Kitchen is on Farish Street. Farish Street was the center of entertainment. If you want to know more about Farish Street, Mr. Luckett can tell you more than I can.

There are quite a few prominent homes in the area such as Mrs. Barnes home and Mrs. Well's home where the YWCA is located. It has been featured in our review of Farish Street. There was another home that they were considering restoring, but it burned and cannot be restored to its prominence.

Harrison: Who owned that home that burned?

White: It was Mrs. Mozetha Scott's home. It was the same Scott's who owns this building.

Harrison: Yes, that's right.

White: What did he do?

Harrison: They were newspaper publishers. Are there any other homes on Farish Street you wish to tell us about?

White: Where the Dotty Grill is now, once was a prominent restaurant. It belonged to the Eubanks.

Harrison: I want to thank you for sharing your time with us this evening. I wonder if you have any objections to us using the material that you have shared with us for scholarly purposes?

White: If it can be of any service to you, then go right ahead.

White, David  
O.H. 81.45

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