

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, Hickman M. Johnson 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, Mississippi, 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.

Lucian O. Johnson  
Interviewee's Signature

3-7-42

Interviewee's Date of Birth

3-19-84

Date Agreement Signed

OH 78.21

Oral History Number Assigned

JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY

JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

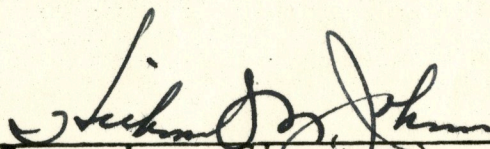
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I, Dr. Hickman M. Johnson, have read the above and, in view of the historical and scholarly value of this information, and in return for a final typed copy of the transcript, I knowingly and voluntarily permit Jackson State University, Jackson, the 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 know, recognized, or contemplated, to Jackson State University, Jackson, Mississippi.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Interviewee (Signature)

June 23, 1978

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

*W*

JACKSON STATE COLLEGE

Jackson, Mississippi

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEWER AGREEMENT

I, Ada S. Anderson, in view of the historical and scholarly value of the information contained in the interview with Rev. Hickman M. Johnson, knowingly and voluntarily permit Jackson State College, Jackson the full use of this information, and hereby grant and assign to Jackson State College, Jackson all rights of every kind whatever pertaining to this information, whether or not such rights are now known, recognized or contemplated.

Ada S. Anderson  
Interviewer (signature)

O. H. 78.21  
Interview number

6/25/78  
Date

INTERVIEWEE: Rev. Hickman Johnson  
INTERVIEWER: Ada S. Anderson  
DATE OF INTERVIEW: June 23, 1978  
O.H. 78.21

Anderson: Rev. Johnson, we would like to know if you are originally from Jackson?

Johnson: No, I am not. I am from Tennessee. I grew up in Memphis and I came to Mississippi in 1967.

Anderson: Can you tell us something about yourself in general?

Johnson: I did my undergraduate work in chemistry at Tennessee State and my graduate work at Morehouse School of Religion, DITC in Atlanta and Mississippi. I have done some additional studying at Jackson State University in Business Administration. I was formerly Chaplain at Tougaloo College. I have taught college at Mississippi Valley State. I am the Regional Director of OIC of America, responsible for the OIC's work with the eight southeastern states. I have been a candidate for public office. In 1975, I was elected to the Mississippi State Legislature. This year I will be completing my tenth year as pastor of the Farish Street Baptist Church.

Anderson: What was your impression of Farish Street upon your arrival here in 1967?

Johnson: I came to know Farish Street Church in 1968. I came here as Chaplain of Tougaloo College in 1967. Farish Street Church historically has been a congregation of activist. It had a strong social consciousness. This was the Farish Street Church I came to know. Long before the struggles of the 1960's the congregation had been very actively engaged in Civil Rights. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People could always meet here at this church. Some of its life members and founders and supporters were members of this congregation, such as John W. Dixon, Carsie Hall and some others. ¶ During the 1960s the church became a rest stop for the Freedom Riders. In fact, we had received several bomb threats. It has been a very active organization. As I previously mentioned, it had a strong sense of social consciousness. It also had a strong commitment to education because of its close association with Jackson State. Mr. Reddix, who was President of Jackson State was chairman of our Trustee Board, I guess, for almost as long as he was the President of the University. Teachers and deans were active members of our church. Fortunately, for the congregation we had very good leaders. ¶ In its eighty-five year history the church has only been served by six pastors, all of whom

Johnson: were well trained for their day and time. Rev. Greer, who served two terms had formerly served as President of a Baptist College. Then my predecessor, Dr. Whitney, was actively involved in the Civil Rights struggle. In fact, he was bitten by one of the dogs and our church registered a stern protest. I have had my own involvements as an extension of this church's ministry and political, social and economic spheres. That gives you something about the church and its leadership.

Anderson: ✓ What about the status (fo) the businesses as you perceived ✓ them in 1967-68?

Johnson: Businesses along Farish Street?

Anderson: Yes.

Johnson: Well, I think, they are in a serious decline. In fact, I am of the opinion that if there is not a massive revitalization effort undertaken, we are going to lose Farish Street as a center for Black commercial development. Again, historically Farish Street has been as famous as Bill Street or Auburn Avenue or some of the other famous streets that were the center of Black life and entertainment. There was a time when we had at least eight to ten lawyers located in offices on Farish Street. The same is said about doctors. *A* We have lost the Black professionals who maintain offices and worked out of Farish Street. We have seen in recent weeks some Black businesses removed such as Sander's Botique. If there is no reversal of the trend the present trend, then I am of the opinion that Farish Street as a center for black economic development will be lost.

Anderson: Have you any idea as to what accounts for these changes that have taken place recently?

Johnson: Yes, just deterioration of the neighborhood. When property owners don't repair property and when you have crime, vice and prostitution, it tends to discourage new investments. You tend to discourage persons from entering the area to ✓ shop and work. That is the real reason--the lack of capital ✓ investment to not only to reverse the rate of deterioration, but to reverse the trend. Some of the lawyers who moved into the Deposit Guaranty Building and the Capitol Towers building moved there because of the depressed social environment. The prostitute intimidated their customers. They felt powerless in a sense to criticize the prostitutes because they were in business. You don't make angry

Johnson: potential customers, plus they need lawyers once they get in trouble. So, the simplest thing to do is just to move out of the area. ~~Yet~~, The lawyers who have moved out into Capitol Towers and Deposit Guaranty and some of the other buildings downtown have not been able to change their clientele. In other words, ninety, if not one hundred percent of their clients are still Black. So, blacks now have to enter what was a white environment. I don't suggest that we should not have intergrated places of business, on the contrary. But if we are going to preserve our own neighborhood revitalization must be geared to people who live in those neighborhoods. If we are going to have any meaningful neighborhood changes and lasting changes, then person who live, work and who own businesses and property must themsleves reinvest and do things to improve these neighborhoods.

Anderson: In your opinion what is your congregations' attitude toward the vices--things such as prostitution that is going on in this general area?

Johnson: Well, the attitude of our conregation is one of abhorrence. We think not only is it damaging to the quality of life we think that it cannot be tolerated. In fact, it was just last summer that our church undertook to do something about it because they were soliciting business from our church steps. That was part of our reasoning but also we found that women from our congregation were also being approached by men. If you are a black female and if ninety percent of the customers are white how does he know that you are not a prostitute when all he sees is a black face? So, you may likely be approached. ~~It~~ We did something <sup>prostitution</sup> about it. We circulated petitions and gathered 3,000 signatures and presneted them to the City Council. We stated that we wanted the laws aginist prostitution enforced, not only enforced with reference to the women but to the procuror as well so that the john himself should be arrested. Again, well over ninety or ninety-five percent of these clients were white men who were once again guilty of exploiting Black womanhood. Not to mention that where you have prostitution you have some of the other vices such as dope traffic and gambling. I am of the opinion that some of the young girls were as young as thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, or maybe sixteen and eighteen. Although some say that all the girls on the streets are over eighteen but that is not true. Some of the girls are as young as sixteen. Maybe the majority of those on the streets are above eighteen years old, some are women. That doesn't make it right nor does it make it any more acceptable to the community. I don't think we can

Johnson: afford that, not as Black people--we are not to moralistic, you can be very pragmatic and say, "what is the future of black womanhood?" Someone said, "you can't police morality." All laws are moral laws and tend to have a moral base so, that argument is as fallacious as anything that I might imagine. ~~But~~, when you ask what is the future of black womanhood, what is the future of Blacks, where are black men going? Where is the community going? Is this the way we want the Black community to be? If this is what we want the Black community to represent, then let's throw out all of the goals, aspirations, hopes, and expectation. Let all black young boys become pimps and all black girls become prostitutes. Sure you respect the rights and freedom of an individual to do whatever they choose to do, but I do not have some responsibility for my brother and for my community as a whole. I think we do have a responsibility. If not, then why? Why have teachers, ministers and why have the churches and the YMCA's and the YWCA and the other positives influences why do they tend to counteract with those negative influences which are in the community? Anyway, that is a very serious problem. I think, our church has tried to address it. We took a stance when no one else would. It was an unpopular stance, too. We felt that the community had to be made aware of the severity of this problem. It is not something to laugh at or treat trifely. It is a ridiculous problem because it affects the future. Anything which has a direct affect on the future of people, that is always serious. Our church has had that kind of consiousness about what responsibility, not only in reference to prostitution and some of the other social ill, but neighborhood revitalization, preservation, economic development, and providing training and jobs for the community. ~~I~~ mentioned my involvement with the OIC, I was the founder and I also have been involved with the Jackson OIC for more than six years. I always viewed it as an extension of the ministry of this church. So, we took young people who were school dropouts and high school graduates as well who did not have a skill, who were unemployed or underemployed and trained them and provided them with a skill. I think the church as a community based organization has a real good oportunity for doing something, in terms of helping our people find jobs and teaching them some kind of skills.

Anderson: You mentioned that you circulated a petition.

Johnson: Yes.

Anderson: You took the petition to the City Council? Can you share with us the attitude of the City Council toward the petition?

Johnson: A lot of the city administration was not aware of some of the problems. I don't know if I can say what was the attitude of the City Council. I know what our attitude was. One response to our petition was that the police department instituted its walking patrol. Maybe, that was already planned, I don't know. But the acting chief being sheriff at the time said that this was in response to the problems in the Farish Street area. The walking patrols have helped some, but again the girls can be in the streets with a lookout and as soon as they see the policeman walking, he may be two or three blocks away, they would just go inside and after he leaves they would come back out. So, that's part of the answer. ~~I~~ I think the answer to prostitution, the portions we have seen here is to have strict enforcement and conviction with jail sentences. The Courts are not giving jail sentences in most cases. Girls were paying \$250.00 fines and they were back on the streets again. You need to arrest the johns. Some people view that with a bit of consentation because they say it borders on entrapment, but in major cities where prostitution has been a problem there have been police decoys. Arrest some of the men and that will stop it, at least you will get it off the streets.

Anderson: What about urban renewal? In your opinion what effect will that have upon the Farish Street area?

Johnson: ~~Well~~, urban renewal is not proceeding as rapidly as some of us would like. In fact, the renewal effort has been frustrated by a very recent court decision which invalidates the 1971 referendum for downtown a redevelopment. In Mississippi municipalities were prohibited from undertaking urban renewal projects, as well as housing projects without first getting an approved referendum from the voters. The voter in 1971 rejected a housing referendum, but did approve a downtown redevelopment referendum. The referendum boundaries did include, does include, whatever the case may be, the midtown. Midtown is where Farish Street is located. The urban renewal effort has not proceeded with as much speed as some of us had hoped. ~~In fact,~~ the city had nothing planned north of Hamilton Street, that's where we are north of Hamilton. The Federal Building is located three blocks south. The city redevelopment is suppose to build a parking garage but the Supremet Court ruled against the Circuit Court in favor of the defendant. If they over turn the Circuit Court's ruling we will be able to proceed with some of the plans that we have. For instance, a one hundred fifty unit housing project which has been proposed for midtown, fifty units for the elderly and a hundred units for multi-families. We need new housing. The housing



- Johnson: conditions are seriously depressed. I am convinced that renewal must begin with the people themselves of the local communities not only as a part of self-determination, but we are the ones who have vested interest in the neighborhood. ~~4~~ One of the reasons that we decided to stay here on Farish Street was because we had a commitment to this area. We completed this addition which cost in excess of a quarter of a million dollars just over a year ago. Well, it was because we felt we had a commitment to stay here in the midtown on Farish Street. I would not like to pick up and move. We realize that less than 1% of our membership comes from the area. 99% of our members drive in from north and west . . .
- Anderson: Rev. Johnson, just before we were interrupted we were talking about the nature of the membership of your church.
- Johnson: Yes, as I said less than 1% of our membership comes from the area. I don't see that as a problem. People have the right to worship or to eat wherever you want to eat. You have people who drive all across town to eat at a certain restaurant, it is the same. We try to serve the neighborhood however, we do that through the ministry we have and through our commitment to neighborhood changes.
- Anderson: I believe we were talking about the rights of people to belong to whatever religious denomination or what church they so desired.
- Johnson: Yes, in other words, because the neighborhood churches have just about gone the same way as the neighborhood schools. Neighborhood schools don't serve where they are located, do they? Well, that's the same way with churches.
- Anderson: Can I ask you the question about the social classes in general that make up the congregation?
- Johnson: We are all Blacks, all poor. I don't know any black person that's rich. Let me go into that.
- Anderson: Okay.
- Johnson: ~~No,~~ sometimes we make a great deal about classes. The black lower class, the black middle class, the black upper class, all of that to me is a bunch of nonsense. I think, we need to understand that, that kind of stratification places serious harm to the black community. ~~4~~ Now we are black, all of us are black and we have the same problems, same need, same aspirations, and we have to understand that we have the same problems as blacks. We are in this boat together and either we are going to all get across to the other side

Johnson: or we are going to run around. So, that is a concern of mine. Sometimes we as a church are placed into a certain category. Oh, they are, (were) the big-shots. That is a bunch of nonsense. The groups of black people here are just like any other black who is concerned about the same kinds of problem, the same needs, the same kind of aspirations . . . (laughter)

Anderson: As I was coming from Farish Street, I believe, at the corner of Amite and North Farish, I noticed that they are doing some road construction in that particular area. In your opinion is that going to have an effect on this area?

Johnson: Well, that's a part of what we were calling Town Creek Tube. Sure it is going to have some effect. It is part of the city's urban renewal effort. What they are trying to is to reroute Town Creek and to tube Town Creek to minimize flooding in the downtown area. So, that is what they are doing. It is going to help the area. There is some flooding still on Farish Street. We think that when Town Creek is completed then there is going to be work up stream to clean and widen the channel. We are going to minimize the flooding in the downtown as well as midtown and up stream.

Anderson: Rev. Johnson, it has certainly been nice interviewing you this morning. I think you have shedded a lot of light for me. I am sure this information will be very helpful.

Johnson: That you madame.