

Black Economic Resourcefulness during Jim Crow Segregation in Jackson, Mississippi

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Abstract: *Frank Figgers is a long-time activist in the Mississippi movement. Figgers worked with the Jackson Human Rights Project after graduating from Tougaloo College in 1971 and helped to develop the Georgetown Liberation School which later came to be known as the "Black and Proud Liberation School" and finally known as the "Black and Proud Elementary School." He currently serves as a Strategy Consultant for One Voice, an organization committed to enhancing civic engagement in the formation of public policy through leadership development, research support, training, and technical assistance for advocacy groups, associations, and community-based organizations. Capitalism has created an economic situation where survival within it is imperative. Similar to the Greenwood, Tulsa, Oklahoma community discussed in Kwame-Osagyefo Kalimara's interview, Figgers explains how Black enterprise in the Farish Street district and on Lynch Street provided the Black community with medical, retail, culinary, and entertainment resources. Black economic wealth also helped to fund Black freedom movements by resourcing civil rights organizations. Figgers also discusses the tactics of the white community in Mississippi to suppress Black political power, under-resourced public education, and maintain inferior housing opportunities for Black residents.*

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You may know that there were two Jacksons as there were two Mississippis, and they were separate and unequal. You refer to that as segregation, similar to the way that apartheid was in South Africa, and various other parts of Africa, for that matter. So the part of Mississippi I was in was Black. Everybody paid taxes, but the distribution of the goods and services derived from taxes. The benefits were more in the white community and very much less in the Black community. That in itself created resourcefulness, if you will, in the Black community; not being part of the other community, that just kind of compressed us to operate among ourselves and carve out of that the best life we could during that period. So that was economic. But it wasn't economic in the sense of capitalist economics, even though it was in the overarching capitalistic framework. What I mean by that... it was benevolent, it was caring and sharing, it was built on something like that. Sure, there were stores. In fact, my uncle had a little store, a little convenience store in the fifties and

early sixties where people came in and purchased goods, but there were all sorts of businesses. And one area of Jackson where businesses were compressed together was the Farish Street area, and because of the proximity to downtown made it somewhat of an excursion to go, was this big downtown and then this street or community of businesses, doctors, lawyers, film parlors, churches, as well as clothing stores, grocery stores, entertainment, movie theaters, restaurants, clubs, if you will—all of those things dedicated to maintaining the life of the Black community on Farish Street. But I have to say in the fifties when I was coming up, Farish Street was one of those areas, Lynch Street was another, where businesses were compressed together. There were houses also. In another area of town, Bailey Avenue, another section of town, maybe not as plentiful and compact as businesses on Farish and Lynch street, but it was still a place where people could come and unwind and entertain and acquire some of what they need to maintain life.

Now it was caring and sharing in this way: perhaps you didn't have enough resources and you might receive credit until such time as you did, or you may have been some type of crafts person and you could trade your craft products if you were a furniture maker or repair or small engine repair person you could trade that with some of the vendors in that area for what you needed from them, and then you could trade with each other, and it was completely normal for people who lived in outlying areas who had farms and such to bring in sweet potatoes, beans, greens, corns, and potatoes... bring it in and provide it for people in these segregated neighborhoods. I believe it was like that in every community. People talk about Black Wall Street in Oklahoma, but I think everywhere it was like that. Now how successful and the extent of the success and how that success was leveraged as well as the temperament of people sometimes didn't like that and they would do mean or vindictive things to suppress that, but that's what it was kind of like. Anything as I remember, most anything you needed, you could get on Farish Street. My first dental office was on Farish Street. My first eye—I've always had some issues with my eyes—but my first eye examination was a Black doctor on Farish Street. Our regular doctor's office was on Farish Street for my mother and father, for me, for other members of my family. When I was married, he was still there. My wife and I went to Dr. A.B. Britton, and his son started practicing, and his office was on Farish Street, and my wife and I continued. When we had our daughter, he became her doctor. The son moved to Lynch Street and set up an office there outside of his father's office, and my wife and daughter moved on Lynch Street with him until he left Jackson, but that's kind of an idea.

The first time I remember going to a sit down restaurant--because living in a segregated community you could see stuff that you know by law that you couldn't participate in—but my first memory of a sit down restaurant where waiters and servers were dressed uniformly was on Farish Street, a place called Steven's Kitchen. The gentleman was an entrepreneur, and he opened up a sit down full service on Farish Street. The building is still there. The cornerstone is still there, and it attracted a lot of people. The housing/hospitality industry right off Farish Street... the first time, well, the only time I saw Mary Wells, The Supremes, The Miracles, they were staying at this Black hotel on Church Street called the Edward Lee hotel because it was segregated. It wasn't just segregated for the people that lived here. It was segregated for everybody. So. when the entertainers from Motown or wherever they came from came to this area to perform, that's where they stayed. Now there was a hotel right off Farish Street, but there was one right off Lynch Street, the Sumner hotel, so, I would imagine a lot of people stayed at Sumner hotel. In fact, my wife's sister, when she and

her husband married, their honeymoon was spent at the Sumner hotel. These places kind of house living, you know, a standard of living for black people. What's significant about that was that the progress that black people have made over the years was oftentimes and in a lot of ways fueled by this economic development within these areas.

Now I give you maybe two quick examples: entertainers. When they came to Jackson Mississippi [whites] wanted to keep living the way it always had been. And so people that had a tendency to resist the way life had always been, you might say, blackballed. So in some areas where they would normally be able to perform, like, for instance, College Park Auditorium, that was a state-owned facility, but they were barred from that for their ideas and belief and resistance to the way life was. So, they would say in these Black hotels and then perform in the Masonic Temple. And they would perform in the Masonic Temple and a portion of their proceeds or revenues would go to benefit the NAACP or the Regional Council of Negro Leadership or the Mississippi Religious Leadership Conference. They participated in the advancement struggle. Another example was in 1963, Tougaloo College students came to Farish Street to Woolworth's, a segregated lunch counter, so they were met with hostility.

Woolworth was on Capitol Street. Jackson is laid out like this: Capitol Street separates North from South. Farish Street separates East from West. And so the part of Farish Street from Capitol Street all the way to Fortification was this Black area. The Farish Street Historic District today consists of about 120 acres of land that was a part of a vibrant black community in the 50s and 60s. Now Woolworth's, you could go up to Woolworth's. Even though it was segregated, it was a business. It would take your money. But people were only janitors. Had people who kept the floors and stuff, they aren't cashiers and clerks. Woolworth's—I had to explain this week—was a store like Walmart is now, where anybody can go and buy stuff maybe at an economical price. So, Black people would go to Woolworth's, and they had a food court, a lunch counter, but you couldn't sit there. In fact, though they did have a section though maybe 12 or 15 seats reserved for Black people, they called it the colored section, but these students in resistance to that segregation defied that and came and sat in the white section. Now when they sat there it wasn't like an impromptu action. It was a planned action, and one of the things Medgar Evers, who was a Field Secretary of the NAACP, and knowing that this was going to happen but not really knowing what the outcome was going to be whether they were going to be arrested or what so he took it upon himself, he and others, to raise money if they went to jail to get the children out of jail. One of the ways he did that was through property bonds. So, people who owned land, they might own land, they could put it up as a property bond without having to exchange cash to get children out of jail, and that's what he'd arranged for a number of people to do that. So, when they sat in, he had made these arrangements in advance, and though that particular day they didn't go to jail, by that weekend, 3000 young people had gone to jail, so much so that they'd overfilled the jails and they'd made makeshift jails, concentration camps, which they put at the fairground in the livestock pens.

Information moved a lot of ways, primarily by word of mouth, in social circles where people gathered in barber shops, beauty shops, stores, corners and you know just where people sat and relaxed in churches, information moved. So, beyond just newspapers and there were black newspapers that actually told stories...

...so there were, but you have to understand, too, while they did tell a story, the demand side of Black newspapers... segregation carried with it, people talk often about the educational aspects, so Blacks received a great education, but it was substandard to what white children were receiving.

Great education coming from people that cared, that was interested in the development of a people and understood the importance of transferred information to them in a way that they could digest it, understand it, and act on it in a forward-moving manner. So, that's what I mean great. Substandard in this way: the textbooks that they may have used may have been ten years out of date. They were oftentimes left over from the textbooks that the children in the white schools had already used and a textbook has a lifespan of maybe three years, so when they are out of date and nothing else could be done, they passed them over to the Black community. That's one substandard way. Substandard facilities where classroom size in Black schools was much larger and multi-grated in some instances where first or second grade, or first through fifth grade might've sat in one room. When I first went to school I went to a school that was in the back of a church and kindergarten, first, second, and third grades were all in the same room on MLK, what we call MLK now. And it hurt me so bad just this fall they tore down that building. It had been abandoned for years, for forty years nobody lived in it. I just never dawned on me it'd be torn down.... But substandard. The teachers cared. They knew what needed to take place. They were concerned about people learning. But what they had to work with, the tools, the equipment, the supports were not there. The other challenge here is, Mississippi was maintaining two systems. Neither system, both systems, the white system of education and the black system of education, left Mississippi on the bottom. The white students weren't getting all of it either, even though they were getting better than Black students, they still weren't getting, because Mississippi never put emphasis on education for rank and file people. I think it's always been the focus of the elite. I think Central High School and the building still exists today, that may have been the elite school for white children for many years. And while they may have had other highs schools, that was the one where they pooled their resources. It was in the shadow of the state capitol, the shadow of downtown, so you might say it was a magnet school. But even then, they were at the bottom. They were at the bottom of all of the other states, and that's the point I'm making there.

People understand that about segregation, the education system, the denial of the right to vote, but segregation also carried an economic factor. Of these neighborhoods like Farish Street, if you measure a lot on Farish Street today, it's probably about 30-35 feet wide, but just beyond Farish Street Historic District today, another lot where white people live might be 40 to 60 feet wide, you see. That area was carved out so that since this was downtown people in downtown needed a labor force, then these people had jobs to go to the state capitol, to the state office building as maid and cooks and washers, clothes washers, and ironers for the established white community. But it wasn't just that... let's say we're in the Bailey Avenue area, that was a... I think there were probably 40 factories like places of employment, like the furniture factory was the largest, the fertilizer factory, the branding shoot, where livestock was bought and sold and branded, but there were about 40 places of employment within a 3-mile radius that employed some 19,000 people, predominately Black, because they are low wage and classified as unskilled. If you look at it, it required a lot of skill to do that work. But they did employ whites, and a lot of times whites were the supervisors or overseers, or if they were the workers, this is how segregation as blacks might make 30 cents an hour, whites made 45 to 60 cents an hour, and that's the way it was across the board. They

always need an abundance of labor. And the resourcefulness of the community that received these low wages was indicated in what they were able to carve out a life for themselves and their posterity. And they took that you might say lemon and made lemonade, and still at the same time resisted a system like that, so it had an economic aspect. So, 40 places, maybe 19,000 people were employed directly or indirectly by that, so these neighborhoods sprang up around where their proximity to these places, these low-wage places... Virden Addition, Shady Oak, both of those neighborhoods were... a lot of the time you say you need an anchor in a neighborhood. It may have been land that wasn't useful for farming but it allowed blacks to settle there. But the neighborhood itself became populated by people who worked in those various places. I live in Georgetown, but I'm not gonna say we didn't have a clock in our house. But the blowing of the whistle that signaled when workers go to work, we always knew it was six thirty because the whistle blew and in 30 minutes it was gonna blow again it would be 7 o'clock...in a sense we governed our lives in the afternoon, in the evening, we governed our lives by the blowing of the whistle. Or since they were close to train tracks, we knew the sound of the train or the whistle that it blows. But moreover, the switching, you hear trains when they bump into each other, the disconnect... that's the 4:10, the 2:12, sometimes life was defined by that. But here you have people that are relegated to low-wage opportunities. And these corporations are there, drew people in, anchoring people in, and then you got on the other side these speculators that are building houses on smaller lots, a little bit less of a quality. Then you've got another level where you've got people that are providing rent space, smaller still, sometimes three hundred square feet, four hundred square feet of floor space, you may have a family of 4 living there in that amount of space. Then sometimes I think they even allow for the factory people worked out, either the factory itself owned the houses that people were renting or somebody associated with the factory was owning the houses that people were renting. So, they reaped a portion of the economic aspect of segregation, and our people just became more and more resourceful and more resilient but also resistant to that.

Let's say in 1950 the state of Mississippi was spending \$15—well, it wasn't that much—\$8 on a white child for education. They were probably only spending \$2 on a black child for education. So the facilities also were not because you can get more with \$8 than you can with \$2 so that's reflected in \$2—the facility, the pay for teachers, everything. So, that was Mississippi's policy. I'm kind of thinking that leading into everybody knew at one time that things were going to change. So, what Mississippi's position was that what we'll do to keep things separate. We'll begin to put more money into the public education for blacks by building facilities, but they won't be, still, what the facilities are for whites, but at least they'll be better. And they would think that they wouldn't want to come and integrate. I don't really think, when you just describe it as integration, I really don't think that that's the best word that captures. I think what our people wanted in terms of education was equity in education. We wanted to remove the disparity that existed. It was glaring and open and out there for everybody to see. So, just moving to Central High School and that was all right, you know, that was necessary, but then to just have that interaction, you know, was really not... we wanted equity. It was the same thing with college and university education. As per the Ayers case, there were two systems, separate and unequal, but it came from the same state government, the resources did, this man filed suit, and it took him 30 years to even come to a meager settlement. Not a real settlement, but just a meager settlement over there.

At one time, Jackson was 70% white and 30% Black, and maybe by the late 50s, early 60s it became maybe 60% white and 40% black. How did I get that is... I guess I'm relying on my memory. One of the solutions... see, Mississippi fought separate but equal from before 1954 on. So into the late sixties, they were still debating on how they would handle this Supreme Court decree. They said okay, we'll take seventy percent of the white teachers based on the population and put 70% in the white schools, and 30% of the black teachers, and put 30% in the white schools and operate like that. They tried schemes like that. They never did work. That's where I get the 70/30, 60/40 from, from that. But then probably by the late seventies, the population began to really shift. Communities started developing in Rankin County across the river. Communities began to develop in South Jackson that wasn't inside the city limits of Jackson.

I remember when it was a mayor and seven city council persons. I remember when it was a mayor and two city council persons, commissioners, I think they called them, and they were all elected at large--

That means that everybody voted for two councilmen. They didn't represent a particular area. They represented the entire City of Jackson. That changed in the mid-80s, early to mid-80s. But the city limits of Jackson, I remember, I've seen maps, where the city limits of Jackson ended at Fortification Street. But I remember... I heard my parents talk about when the city limits of Jackson ended at 5 points, where those 5 streets come together by the medical mall, Woodrow Wilson, Medgar Evers, Livingstone Road, and Gordon Street. All five of those streets come together. So city limits ended there. But I also remember when city limits of Jackson ended at for sure where... it was kind of a unique drawing... I remember when it ended at Sunset and Medgar Evers, and then Northside Drive and Medgar Evers. So, anything that was on the northwest and northeast of Northside Drive and Medgar Evers was out of the city limits. And so then in the south, I remember when city limits ended probably just below McDowell Road.

In the west side, city limits ended at Highway 80. When Jackson State, when it moved from Natchez it moved from where Millsaps is, and when it moved from Millsaps to there, it was still the Gowdy community. So, where 80 intersects with Met street I remember when it wasn't in the city of Jackson. But these communities develop outside and people begin to move further to the new and left these houses. I worked at Sherwin Williams in Pearl on Highway 80 and it would amaze me that I would run into people that were like I could say we're homeboys, we were neighbors, but they were white, but there wasn't a lot of interactions....

I would think that as people saw what potentials of the city were, they began to annex areas like Presidential Hills. When it was developed and built, it was not in the city limits of Jackson, so Presidential Hills into the limits of Jackson now. And they took all of the lands on both sides of Medgar Evers Boulevard are inside city limits. The east side of Medgar Evers wasn't inside the city limits but it was a historically black neighborhood of Jackson... so people began to see how cities grow and develop and they began to take in what they could and maybe to prevent other smaller places, Clinton, from taking Presidential Hills, because it does sit close to the border. Clinton could've had it, but I don't think Clinton really wanted it, because it was developed by people coming out of Jackson.