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September 26, 2009

Community Assessment: Jackson, Mississippi

Factor 1: Defining the Community

Mississippi's capitol city, Jackson is the most densely populated urban center in the state. As a whole, because of population, average education levels, and economic infrastructure, the city has more capacity for exchange, trade and forming economic bonds than anywhere else in the state. Due to Jackson's proximity to the coast, Jackson has potential to trade with Central America; due to its central locale on land, it sits at the crossroads of four major cities that lie within a three hour travel radius from the city: New Orleans, Memphis, Dallas-Ft. Worth, and Birmingham. Thus, its realistic trade area in terms of its overall trade potential is good. Even so, it ranks 132nd among largest American cities with a population of 173,861 (2008 Census). So while it does boast its status as the state's most "booming" economic hub, that hub is relatively small.

Economically, the boundaries of my school district's community, which I will define as the city of Jackson with a focus on the South end, can be divided into three parts. West and South Jackson are its lower-income parts, and North Jackson is the higher income area. Ridgeland, Clinton, Brandon and Pearl surround Jackson, and they represent the middle class (Pearl being the "bottom" rung, according to an interview with a Jackson native).

Jackson's most vital economic links are formed through its largest employers, which forms linkages between Jackson and the corporations' headquarter cities. For example, Northrop Grumman, Nissan North America, Tyson Foods, and Furniture Brands International are top employers in the state, according to the 2008 Mississippi Blue Book, and these companies' headquarters connect Mississippi with L.A., San Diego, London, and cities in TX, MI, AZ, AR and NC. Significant businesses based and headquartered locally in Jackson include: Irby Electric (owned by a highly philanthropic family) and Bomgaar (a multi-million-dollar computer company and software designer, headquartered in Jackson with branch offices in Paris).

In the global economy, Jackson is not "on the map," as it is a "little guy" regionally, and no doubt stacks up littler still beyond the confines of the region. Furthermore, companies with a presence in this city do not typically headquarter here (with the exception of Irby Electric, Bomgaar, Trustmark Corporation, Cal-Maine Foods, and a few others); rather, they see Jackson as a favorable place to plant an industrial branch to attract affordable, stable labor (workers would be happy to settle in Jackson, presumably, because of its comparably low cost of living).

Factor 2: Geography

The geography of Jackson, in terms of topology, is fairly flat, with some rolling hills. It is land-locked with a few nearby rivers, the Pearl and the Mississippi. Jackson sits 50 miles east of the Mississippi River, which affords opportunities to distributors to send materials to northern states by barge, namely timber and cotton (raw materials).

Located at 32 degrees latitude and 90 degrees longitude, Jackson's climate is subtropical, meaning it is humid year round, summers are hot, and winters are mild.

The square footage of the city is three times that of Manhattan (about 110 square miles). In one-third the space, New York City crams in nearly 50 times as many people as Jackson. Needless to say, Jackson's population density is low. There is a high supply of land in less demand, making land comparatively cheap for a city. Residents enjoy breathing room and space, and Jackson is a green city, thanks to the 7,000 crapemyrtle trees planted there along its "neutral

grounds.”¹ Consequently, however, Jackson’s geography paired with its demographics means that its environmental sustainability looks bleak: Jackson ranks 87th in the country for its per capita carbon emissions from transportation and residential energy use (2005), as its inhabitants spit out nearly 4 million metric tons of carbon waste (versus L.A.’s mere 1.33 tons, a city 57 times bigger than Jackson).² Jackson lacks environmental – and thus, economic – sustainability because it is not taking the initiative to create public transportation alternatives or incentives for new houses to be “built green.”

Factor 3: Basic Demographics

A city of 173, 861, Jackson is small for a capitol city (Census, 2008). And it’s not getting any bigger: the population is declining by about 4% per year.³ The population peaked in 1980 at about 202,000, but since then has been decreasing. In terms of age composition, Jackson, about a third are under 18 years old, a third are 25-44, with the other groups falling lower: 18-24 (12%), 45-64 (19%), and 65+ (11%). These demographics are telling in that the two larger portions of the population are likely children and parents. It is somewhat unexpected that the college-age bracket (18-24) is so small, since Jackson is a hotbed of universities (see factor 13).⁴

Racially, Jackson is about 70-30, black: white. The next largest segment of the population is Hispanic, comprising about 1%. Economically, about 20% of families (23% of individuals) fall below the poverty line. Average income per capita in the city is \$17,166; \$36,003 is the median per family. Socially, single parenthood is a somewhat strong trend, prevailing in 27% of households (half of these are female head of households). Interestingly, what makes a family in Jackson is not quite as traditional as one might expect of the Bible Belt: married couples, single mothers, and non-families exist in about equal amounts (33-33-33).⁵ Another interesting counter-Bible belt trend is that Jackson ranks 10th nationally for homosexuality among the black population.⁶

Educationally, the demographics of Jackson are most interesting, stunning and staggering. Though indubitable that Jackson houses the highest number of educated individuals in the state (and at the highest levels of academic attainment) – Hinds County has the fourth highest ranking for percentage of persons 25 years old or more with a Bachelor’s: 27.2%, and it has the 5th highest ranking, 80.4% for persons with a high school diploma⁷), – there is still significant slack in academic achievement and opportunity among school-aged youth. Part of the difficulty lies in combating generational disadvantages: about 40% of female heads of household have a high school education or less. The other part of the difficulty lies in institutional inequalities in public versus private and urban versus suburban schooling. The majority of the youth bear the burden of being educationally shortchanged, while they simultaneously reproduce the low achievement levels themselves. Comparatively, this population (Jackson youth) has less access to quality education and community engagement than teens in neighboring suburban or district schools, such as Lawrence County or Brookhaven. Causes for demographic inequalities in education will be further discussed under Factor 10.

Factor 4: Economic Elements

The major sources of employment in Jackson are mostly industrial, governmental and clerical: Jackson is a central producer of processed foods, metal products and electric equipment; its public schools alone employ 4,921; office and administrative support jobs are the leading source of employment in the state. Mississippi employed 1,128,980 people in 2006; approximately 17% of these being clerical and 12% being production jobs (the two leading sources).⁸ With University of Mississippi Medical Center on the North side of Jackson,

healthcare is another large sector of employment; Jackson employs approximately 25% of the state's healthcare employees. Though employment opportunities are diversified insofar as there are jobs requiring varying levels of training or education in the city (compared to the rural parts of the state), the availability of jobs is currently decreasing by about 4% per year. Unemployment stands almost on par with the national average (8.5%),⁹ but as a state, Mississippi ranks in the top ten states for high unemployment rates.

Thus, sectors and industrial groups in Jackson are expected to decline in the future, because prominent and wealthy entrepreneurs are moving away; over the past three decades, the population decrease has been attributable to higher-income families leaving for the suburbs with the influx of lower wage-earners into the city. The Jackson native I interviewed illustrated this ex-burb migration trend with the story behind the three current Jackson-area malls. At first, the Metro Mall in South Jackson was all the buzz; when that became ghettoized, North Park became the hopping mall. Now that the North edge of Jackson attracts "unsavory" (lower-class) customers, a mall far removed in Madison is the hotspot. This one example demonstrates how people who have resources to invest are not investing them in the city of Jackson; they're now putting their dollars elsewhere.

In the past 11 years, from 1990 to 2001, Hinds County lost 30% of its manufacturing jobs (curiously, neighboring Rankin County gained 19.3%). This represents a loss of 4,200 jobs, at a rate three times higher than the state average loss. Between 1988 and 1998, Hinds County lost 28 manufacturing establishments, while Rankin County gained 27.¹⁰ Therefore, facilities for manufacturing must have either been closed or relocated out of Jackson. Also, this data suggest a downward trend in manufacturing jobs available, so that primarily these types of workers find themselves unemployed in Jackson. A further confirmation of downward trends in manufacturing compared to the rest of the state is the fact that Jackson has nonmember status to any industrial development organization.

Average wage rates in Jackson fall far below national averages. For example, teachers in Mississippi are the fourth lowest-paid in the nation (average annual salary of \$31,900). Manufacturers earn the third-lowest hourly wage in the nation, \$12.14 (after South Dakota and South Carolina).

Locally owned businesses, in terms of size, markets and ownership, are mostly small ventures, such as art galleries, hole-in-the-wall ethnic food places, upscale boutiques, targeted at the hipsters of Belhaven (college and post-college aged). In other words, Jackson is not much of a powerhouse for founding businesses that flourish and branch out nationwide. As an illustration, in 2000, 607 new businesses were "born," and in the same year, 593 "died," for a net gain of 14 businesses.¹¹ Of the more major corporations that are Mississippi-owned, only one is based in Jackson: Trustmark Bank (Peavey Electronics is based in Meridian, Sanderson Farms in Laurel, Corinthian, Inc. in Corinth).¹²

Factor 5: Physical Infrastructure

The infrastructure of Jackson was envisioned first by Peter Van Dorn and Abraham DeFrance (the Superintendent of Public Buildings in Washington, D.C.), who were appointed by the state legislature in 1821 to lay out the city. The city itself was gridded on the checkerboard plan, as per Thomas Jefferson's suggestion, meaning every alternating block was devoted to parks or green space. Though the concept is orderly, when viewed from above, "it is an unconsolidated city of breadth and space."¹³ In other words, the infrastructure is not optimally efficient and organized, but is rather the product of an intentional vision to keep the city space "lite."

As for city utilities, the Jackson City Landfill is located about eight miles south of the city and the City of Jackson Water Sewer Division and O.B. Curtis Water Plant is located about eight miles northwest of the center of the city, near the Ross R. Barnett Reservoir in Ridgeland. Jackson belongs to and is headquarters of Pearl River Basin Water Development District, so its capacity for water use and treatment is plausibly the best in the district.

As for roads, the highway system is well-developed and intricate, with eight state, interstate and U.S. highways altogether. Major highways are, for the most part, well maintained. Upkeep and repaving is continual. The condition of internal side-and residential roads and bridges within the city, however, is poor – notably Fortification Street, Woodrow Wilson and Riverside Drive in Belhaven. Arguably, the bumpiness of the latter contributed to the deaths of three teens that were speeding on Riverside in spring 2009. The Jackson Evers International Airport links the city with the world, but as it is such a small airport that utilizes small jets, travel to even major U.S. cities like New York requires a layover with most airline carriers. Trains are a popular alternative and are in higher demand than flying among Jacksonians needing or wanting to travel. Amtrak offers regular, frequent outbound trains to Chicago for \$200 round trip; this is a heavily drawn-on route (an explanation for this is that there seems to be a preponderance of familial connections between Jackson and Chicago residents). The Amtrak and Greyhound station is in downtown on Amite Street, making it more accessible and convenient than the airport, which is in Flowood.

Factor 6: Cultural and Recreational Resources

Jackson is incontrovertibly the best place in the state for cultural and recreational opportunities. While those with a taste for the rich culture of “higher” urban life may complain that the entertainment district lags and the array of date destinations is limited, there are places to go and things to do so long as the resident is familiar with the crannies of the city, or nearby spots, where they are to be found. Most of the upscale venues for entertainment and culture lie outside of city bounds; unlike other capitol cities, downtown is not the epicenter for high-class attractions. Cause for this is likely connected to the economic decline of Jackson and the displacement of monetary resources that occurred with white-flight to the suburbs from the 80’s to today, as recreation industries require disposable income.

First, for arts, culture and entertainment: While there are no movie theaters within the city limits itself (moviegoers must drive out to Clinton, Pearl or Ridgeland) – and this is a change from Eudora Welty’s younger days in the city (the early and mid 1900’s), when there used to be plenty of theater options within walking distance from Belhaven¹⁴ - there is a small theater venue on Fortification Street, numerous dramatic and dance performances and concerts put on by the city’s two liberal arts colleges (Millsaps and Belhaven), Blues bars and festivals downtown, the annual fair and rodeo in the Jackson Coliseum, and an annual art show and live music event showcasing local talents in Fondren. Jackson has no professional sports teams to boast, but does have a minor league baseball team, the Braves, in nearby Pearl; JSU has the Tigers. Both have their own stadiums. For dining, Jackson has all the mainstream chain-restaurant amenities, but it also boasts some great independent ethnic cuisine: Southern, Mediterranean, BBQ, Mexican, Indian, Chinese, and Jamaican are some of its offerings – and, true to the low cost of living in Jackson, dining out is relatively inexpensive for a city.

Educationally enriching cultural resources in the city include the Eudora Welty House, the Medgar Evers House, the Art, History and Natural Science Museums, the Jackson Zoo, and a small but well-diffused library system branched throughout the metro area. The Jackson-Hinds public libraries have 15 branches, and the central library, the Eudora Welty Library, recently re-

opened after a year being closed and having lost much of its contents to a fire. The Internet catalogue of library materials, however, is a perfect example of how the average Mississippian lives as the average American did more than 15 years ago.¹⁵ Finding the right book is an unnecessarily inefficient and laborious (and sometimes, after it all, somewhat fruitless) process, whether one searches for materials from home or within the library itself. The library does, however, assisting the average Jackson citizen with keeping up with the times by imparting Internet access to many, many residents without it at their homes.

As is true for many facets of Jackson, the downtown library is petite and underdeveloped in comparison to the typical U.S. capitol city's downtown library. As is also true for many facets of Jackson, the better, more up-to-date libraries are to be found outside of the city's limits – in Ridgeland, for example. Interestingly, library branch quality varies significantly within the Jackson library system depending on location, as the library with the most new books is located on Old Canton Road around an area regarded as safer with nicer housing. So there are inequalities of immediate cultural resources and access based on mere proximity factors within the city, apart from issues of government funding. This reflects the fact that Jackson, like most cities, has the extremes of better and worse institutions, literally side by side.

There is a little bit of room for “generativity” of *new* cultural and recreational resources in Jackson, as the existence of 11 Community Development Centers in the metro area provide a place for clubs and interest groups to meet and host events. Examples of Community Centers include: Battlefield Community Center, Champion Gymnasium, Grove Park Community Center, Jayne Avenue Community Center, Leavell Woods Community Center, Vergy P. Middleton Community Center, and the Mary C. Jones Community Center.¹⁶

Second, Jackson has ample recreational resources: there are 54 public parks throughout the city, featuring tennis courts, playgrounds, swimming pools, golf courses, picnic grounds, and jogging and walking paths.¹⁷ Thanks to its foundational checkerboard planning grid, Jackson has 2,300 square feet of space set aside for the express purpose of recreation or enjoyment, such as the Mynelle Botanic Gardens. For the athletically inclined, Jackson is well-equipped, as it has many private gyms to choose from, both YMCA and hospital-sponsored.

Factor 7: The Power Structure

There are several frameworks through which to see and evaluate power structures and dynamics in the social systems. For the purpose of this community assessment, I will apply Marx's view of power in society, as it provides some clarity, even if the theory may oversimplify. Marx divided society into two halves: those who own the modes of production, and those who operate and work under it. He points out that there is a mismatch between the economic and social relationship between owner and laborer. This is where conflict is born.

Theory informs how to interpret power and how do things get done in Jackson, in that accomplishing things in the community revolves around having connections. I have witnessed a highly-qualified teacher apply to JPS schools, most of which are critical-needs status, but never manage to make his way in, because the bureaucracy is highly congested with JSU grads (locals or natives) who likely know someone or another within the system. This example illustrates that Jackson's bureaucracy, while it does get massive amounts of work done and keep the city from falling apart, disables optimal functioning because it precludes new owner-laborer relations in favor of familiar relations, even when those do not benefit or serve society best.

The influential individuals who control the modes of production (both the materials and the terms of relationship with laborers) include the mayor, city councilmen, principals at public high schools, school board members (especially involved parents, whose children often belong to APAC, the honors program), and commercial and residential developers.

Jackson's form of government is the common Mayor-Council form. The current Mayor is Harvey Johnson, Jr. (D), the first African-American mayor of Jackson, and the second to hold three terms. He returned to office in 2009 after a four-year break. Every four years, the mayor is elected by winning the majority of seven territorial wards. Assisting the mayor, there is one councilperson per ward; they are: Jeff Weill (R), Chokwe Lumumba (D), Kenneth Stokes (D), Frank Bluntson (D), Charles Tillman (D), Tony Yarber (D), and Margaret Barrett-Simon (D).

Influential institutions in Jackson include big-box industries (i.e., Wal Mart), as they dominate the consumer landscape; and businesses like Entergy, which have formed co-operations between conflicting parts of the economy (i.e., between owner and laborer, in an effort to assist in class mobility), by sponsoring the Scholars program at Wingfield High School. Furthermore, key groups with notable influence are churches, as they congregate in patterns that imitate the mode of production – i.e., people of the same class, working or middle or upper, tend to associate together. This furthers the split between the two factions. Indeed, as a marker of voluntary association, church is a powerful reinforcer of social trends.

Factor 8: Role of Governmental Agencies

The various governments within the city work in the community by holding meetings. Politically, decisions concerning the maintenance of Jackson and conflict resolution are made weekly at City Council meetings. Gatekeepers in the political process, as discussed above, involve having personal connections to streamline past very rigid bureaucratic protocol. The key people pulling the strings backstage are business leaders who have the initiate and social capital (networks) to gain Mayor Johnson's alliance in his the Small Business Development Grant Program. In the September 22, 2009 council meeting minutes, for example, Fanatics Sports Bar & Grill and the ANGS Group were two such pro-active businesses that entered into a partnership with the government with the common goal of developing downtown economically.¹⁸ Mayor Johnson is known for his focus on urban renewal and restoration, and the program is one way he does so (besides his prior Farish Street revitalization and convention center building projects).

The more specific departments of government that care for specialized areas of Jackson's social, infrastructural and economic life operate under the oversight of the mayor and councilmen. The only other areas of governance that are delegated outside of the council are to the School Board, which is a 5-person group appointed by mayor. Its responsibility is to implement programs and reforms, and oversee and comply with regulations in administering public education.

Factor 9: History

The essential elements shaping Jackson's history begin with Jackson's status as the heart of Mississippi. Truly, "all that has happened in Mississippi since 1822 has centered in Jackson," especially in a governmental sense.¹⁹ The most outstanding events marking its history include its being the stage and host political visits, conflicts, and resolutions that were consequential on a national level; the Siege of Jackson towards the conclusion of the Civil War; its endurance through Reconstruction; its thriving through the Great Depression; its establishment of institutions enabling Blacks to become increasingly upwardly-mobile; and Civil Rights.

A significant symbol of Jackson's history can be summed up in its statehouse. Situated at the city's center, it was the topic of much contention after its construction in 1821. The earliest

Legislatures met in it. Jackson was in its earliest stages of gaining an identity for itself, having been renamed in honor of President Andrew Jackson. Jackson's next major step forward toward becoming a booming metropolis was becoming a railroad center between New Orleans and Tennessee, which put Jackson "on the map" (so to speak).

The senate tried multiple times to get the statehouse moved to Clinton, Port Gibson and Vicksburg, but the motion failed marginally every time. By 1850, "Jackson was so well established" that no bill could make the capitol building's foundations budge.²⁰ It hosted a visit from President Jackson, Henry Clay, and witnessed the Secession Convention; later on, Jackson was the place where Jefferson Davis made his last public appearance and was the setting for the writing and institution of the State Constitution in 1890.

Jackson further proved herself to be a significant place during the Civil War. The Confederate capital of Mississippi, the city remained the seat of the government until General Johnston faced a double-loss, first in at the Siege of Vicksburg, then at the Siege of Jackson, on July 9, 1865. A week later on July 16, Union General Sherman took possession of the city, saw all its records destroyed, its streets gutted by fire, and the city's transformation into "Chimneyville." Jackson struggled to pick herself up as the South underwent Reconstruction; it lagged far behind other towns in the state.

A combination of events brought life back to the city. Three colleges were founded or relocated to the city – all of them Black colleges (Tougaloo, Jackson College, and Campbell College) – and more railroads were laid, leading to a lumber boom. By 1900, Jackson doubled in population and tripled in business; by 1930, the city's industries boomed with the resplendence of and easy access to cheap fuel, whereas before that the city had relied heavily on government jobs for sources of employment. Jackson defied national trends during the Great Depression, growing at a pace economically that even L.A. could not top.²¹

From the 1950s to the 1980s, Jackson found itself in a place of economic stasis and "discontent with [Reagan's] No-Longer-New-Deal increased. The values of the Depression era declined, and acquisitive individualism took precedence." But by local Jacksonite and Millsap Professor Robert McElvaine's estimation, as unemployment spiked in the early 80's recession, the former consumeristic and indifferent attitude dissipated and the New Deal paradigm became re-popularized. McElvaine proffers that the New Deal and its pro-employment platform is alive and well in Jackson 50 years later.

Fast forward to today: is this mentality of pro-government interventionism still alive and well? Since the influx of industry was formerly important to Jackson's economic (and thus cultural and physical vitality), and is now in decline, it seems that current values and perspectives of the average city dweller may be tending back toward 'acquisitive individualism' (which I think is evidenced by the white-flight-to-the-suburbs migration trend from the 80s to now). On the other hand, a culture of underachievement also lies latent in segments of Jackson's population, and I have a hunch that this has always been so through the decades; urban populations characteristically have that duality of haves and have-nots, go-getters and no-getters. Thus, presently there is a thick strand of stagnancy economically speaking, to accompany the 'acquisitive individualism.' This is what James Cobb identifies as the " 'business climate vs. living climate' conflict" " – that to maintain the former, Mississippi must undermine the latter."²²

The contradictions of the city and of Jackson vary – they are not only economical or class-related. The major inconsistency that persists with race today in Jackson is that it was a hotspot of Civil Rights Activism, but today, de facto segregation in educational, social and residential realms is still a reality. So while the ethos of integration remains a strong vibe of Jackson, the status quo and rule of thumb of comfortable distance between races still seems to be in place. Jackson is a city of progress, of striving to rectify past inequalities and insufficiencies

that the nation-at-large mocks, but at the same time, some things have not changed, and residents do not typically foresee them changing in any major way.

Factor 10: Community Barriers

A helpful, if pessimistic, introduction to this section might be Robert Alotta's statement in his article "Mississippi's State of Mind-1985:" that Mississippi's state of mind is an "archaic approach to life in general: an inability to confront issues, research the causes, and try to find positive solutions."²³ In this section, I will discuss three major types of barriers that exist in Jackson's social life: barriers in education, crime, and religion.

First and foremost, inequalities and insufficiencies in education present Jackson with its most formidable barrier, that barrier which is the catalyst of teams of other barrier-makers (along class lines, race lines, gender lines): education. Alotta identifies several facades that Mississippi relies on to legitimize their belief in education, but their unwillingness to raise the bar: low standardized test scores are required for college entrance; a lack of direction from the Board of Trustees; parents who abrogate their responsibility to educate in their homes; an undue amount of attention diverted to sports; an over-commitment of limited funds for education given over to Jackson's bureaucracy; and a lack of business involvement in universities. Another part of the barrier to advancing educational equality in the city is the fact that Mississippi is ranked as the fourth lowest-paying state to teachers, after Oklahoma and North and South Dakota (average salary of \$31,900).²⁴ In sum, the most serious barrier to progress in Jackson is its change-adverse mentality. Schools are not run like actual schools, because the standards are not up to the nation's par.

Historically, Jackson Public Schools have performed poorly on state tests compared to suburban and surrounding districts. Not only that, but JPS schools offer less extra curricular activities to its students than these surrounding schools; for example, while Forest Hill High School (in South Jackson) has 19 activities, Lawrence County (55 miles north) has 42. Both Lawrence County and Brookhaven scored a "6" on the Greatschools.net rating scale, versus Forest Hill and Wingfield High Schools' 3 and 1, respectively.²⁵ These scores provide an overview of the school's test performance, teacher quality, school culture, diversity of student body, and special programs. (As an aside on diversity, unlike the JPS schools, these schools are racially integrated – for example, Brookhaven has a 59% black, 39% white breakdown.)

A second significant barrier is both the physical and sociological separation between safe and unsafe parts of the city. Where violent crime is high, there is little racial integration residentially, little community revitalization or development efforts, little educational attainment, and little economic exchange or input from "outside" the area. In other words, areas with high levels of crime become isolated areas of concentrated poverty, and remains persistently unsafe. According to the FBI, violent crime rates in Jackson skyrocketed, up 9% from last year – whereas there was about a 2% decrease nationwide in violent crime.²⁶ Other data shows that Jackson is ranked the 14th most dangerous city in the U.S., and that its property and violent crime levels "tend to be much higher than Mississippi's average level."²⁷

A third barrier alive and well in Jackson is racial disintegration in churches. A cursory ethnographic exploration of typical ratios of races that attend churches will yield the finding that almost all religious participation is racially stratified in the city, as it is across the state. Organizations like Mission Mississippi, which is based in Jackson, are dedicated to working towards racial reconciliation in churches. Religious barriers, just like educational and crime barriers, reinforce economic inequalities and perpetuate racially-stratified poverty.²⁸ In fact, as sociologists Emerson and Smith point out, ironically, even though evangelical congregations typically think of themselves as trying to help ameliorate the problem of segregation in society,

the way they structure churches and rationalize their personal inter-racial involvements actually contributes to what the authors term “the race problem in America.”

Factor 11: Values

To determine a thing as subjective and nebulous as the most meaningful values to Jacksonians, I did a survey of the book From Behind the Magnolia Curtain: Voices of Mississippi. Repeating themes I discovered in the anthology of essays were: the value of government intervention, conservatism, patriotism, a streak of liberalism (such as concern for women’s rights ahead of the times nationally), a sense of belonging centered around race (i.e., the Good Ole Boy System, or benevolence in order to maintain power and class), and an attitude of anti-change (alternatively phrased, a commitment to preservation of historical narratives). These values manifest themselves in a propensity to censor offensive ideas or material; textbook and curriculum requirements and choices on the part of public schools (i.e., Mississippi history is a mandatory course, with a pre-selected book); social awkwardness in cross-racial, every social interactions (and the unwillingness of white men especially to confront racism, as Peter Shillingsburg accounts in his personal article “How Many Wrongs Before Equality?”), conflict within some bi-racial public schools (such as Holly Springs Middle School, where there was a lock down during the Presidential Election last year after a white student threatened to harm black students).

Drawing from personal experiences and observations in my neighborhood and at my workplace, Jacksonians also value quality time with people. Rushed or task-driven people are less likely to bond with natives. On the topic of quality time, Jacksonians typically devote Sundays, and enormous amounts of time besides, to spending time with extended family. Large families of aunts, uncles and cousins gather regularly. Friendship and fellowship among coworkers is also valued; in my workplace, mass emails to JPS employees are titled “JPS Family News,” implying the relationship between teachers. In other words, Jacksonians favor warming the boldness of bureaucratic organizations.

Religiousness is valued by Jacksonians as well, as a culture of religious expectations and acceptance is aptly symbolized by voicemail messages that frequently include greetings of “God Bless You.” Non-Christian established religions, as well as atheism, are viewed as unusual. Currently, Madison is disallowing the building of a mosque. There is also a statewide mandate to post the words, “God Bless America” in all classrooms.

Factor 12: Uniqueness

Jackson is full of surprises: a great variety of delicious, affordable, truly diverse dining; a scintillating group of young talent in the APAC program within a struggling public school system with high failure and drop-out rates; a lively 20’s artsy-hipster subculture; and instances of traditional and persistent racial barriers being contested, challenged and reduced despite the seemingly unbeatable trends of racial separation in neighborhoods, voluntary organizations and schools. Thus, Jackson’s main source of uniqueness is its inconsistency with tradition and internal contradictions. Its dissonance is a pleasant surprise, because such surprises as these evidence a struggle against a deleterious status quo. Jackson is a model example and site of what Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal identified as “The American Dilemma:” that, by our ethos, we Americans claim to want and to represent equality, but in the way we defend and participate in our class-based systems as they are, we covertly perpetuate inequality. Jackson is a striving city that is not done yet. It is under construction, dare I say incomplete, sociologically. But Jackson is in progress. It is not standing completely still.

Along the same lines, the combination that is Jackson makes it especially distinctive. It stands out immediately from the rest of the state in its being urban, and thus more fast-paced, more aesthetics-driven, and more socially advanced and developed in its division of labor and bureaucracy than its rural counterparts. But it also stands out amongst other cities in the nation because it brings resources together that don't coexist in other cities: the charm of open space and trees, along with the captivating power of a city skyline; a dynamic group of colleges concentrated in one area (leading to a proliferation of intellectual resources, both print and human, and producing a more educated population); a history of being home to historic, talented and famous figures (and thus holding some secret appeal of inspiration to aspiring artists); high arts to patronize, or if you prefer, Friday Night football to follow, as it is the town's highest highlight and concern of the week; humble home-cooking to choose from and, at the same time, urbane, cutesy city-dweller amenities easily accessible too.

Factor 13: Schools, Colleges and Universities

Jackson is home to the largest public school district in the state: 8 high schools, 10 middle schools, 38 elementary schools, 59 schools total. Select schools carry pre-K classes, the IB program and the rigorous, highly selective APAC honors track. Career Development and JROTC are offered at all high schools, so vo-tech and the military are viable and encouraged post-high school pathways. Its student demographic is 97.5% black. The notable private schools in Jackson are Jackson Prep, St. Andrew's Episcopal, Hillcrest Christian Academy, and The Veritas School.

True to Jackson's character, it has an array of colleges to choose from. It has two small liberal arts colleges, Belhaven and Millsaps. Nearby is UMC, University of Mississippi's medical school. Slightly south, Jackson has a large public university, Jackson State (JSU). Hinds Community College, Mississippi College (which also has a Law School), and a historically all-black college, Tougaloo, lie just outside of Jackson's city limits. Two Seminaries, Reformed Theological and Wesley Biblical, round out the city's intellectual clime. With such strong academic institutions, which all create their own special draw to the city, Jackson is indubitably the intellectual center and destination in the state.

Endnotes

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