



# The Man Segregation Built

*The Fall and Rise of a New Black  
Leadership in Jackson*

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**>FOREFRONT**



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**It was a hot night in 2006 when Frank Melton, then mayor of Jackson, Miss., directed his bodyguards and a group of young men to sledgehammer a duplex home in a run-down section of the city he governed.** With his posse, Melton, who had reportedly been drinking scotch from a 16-ounce water bottle that night, tore holes in the walls of what he would label a “crack house.” The group broke windows, destroyed furniture and a TV, and poured paint over the kitchen sink. They handcuffed Evans Welch, the unemployed, schizophrenic black man who lived there, and after a failed search for drugs charged him with possession of an illegal pipe.

Welch’s apartment lay in Virden Addition, a dilapidated residential section of West Jackson bordered by railroad tracks and defunct factories. Welch’s elderly mother paid his \$160 rent. She said drug dealers sometimes took advantage of her mentally ill son. Within days of his arrest, Welch was released for lack of evidence.

The trouble, however, was just beginning for Frank Melton. The state charged the mayor with five felony counts — including burglary, directing a minor to commit a felony and malicious mischief. Federal agents began investigating him for civil rights violations.

Melton, a millionaire African-American TV executive and gun-strapped former head of the Mississippi Bureau of Narcotics, had won election the previous year by capitalizing on the deep inequalities that permeate Mississippi’s capitol, which is 80 percent African-American. The state as a whole has a higher proportion of African Americans than any other in the nation and is also America’s poorest, with a **23 percent poverty rate**. By promising to take aggressive action against blight and criminals, and making bombastic promises of interracial and metropolitan cooperation, Melton was able to attract a wide gamut of support anchored by funding from the city’s entrenched white economic elite and the votes of Jackson’s black majority. His tough-cop act appealed to both whites uncomfortable with black poverty and to the poor themselves. His rhetoric also appealed to divisions within the African-American community — to members of the black middle class who associate social problems with the hip-hop generation and to inner-city residents fed up with crime.

But once elected in 2005, Melton, the city’s second black mayor, failed his supporters in every way. Grandstanding, bizarre crusades, continual lawsuits, cronyism and all-around administrative incompetence characterized his troubled term. In 2009, he lost reelection days before he was scheduled to be federally tried for charges stemming from the botched raid. As the polls closed, Melton — who had just turned 60 — suffered a fatal heart attack.



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His disastrous mayorship and dramatic death proved a strange and painful detour in Jackson's path from white majority rule to black political enfranchisement. Like many cities in the U.S. — and especially the Deep South — Jackson has struggled in its transition from a segregation-era, white-dominated power structure to a more equitable and representative system. Named after Southern, slave-owning President Andrew Jackson, the Mississippi capital lags a decade or two behind larger cities in the region like Atlanta, New Orleans and Memphis. White flight and the transfer of political power to black leaders happened later in Jackson than in those peer cities, as did cycles of suburban growth and downtown reinvestment.

Jackson's story is unusually dramatic and troubling. But cities nationwide struggle with black political and economic enfranchisement: The story of Frank Melton's rise and fall illuminates subtle crosscurrents in America's urban race politics that hold implications for cities from Oakland to Newark, N.J.

Jackson's recent mayoral politics also have a circular quality: Melton's predecessor was Harvey Johnson, Jr., a details-obsessed city planner who became the city's first black mayor in 1997, a full 30 years after Cleveland voters elected the first black mayor in the country and 24 years after Atlanta's Maynard Jackson became the first African American to lead a large southern city. When Johnson was first elected, the

appointment of black department heads was still controversial and the transfer of power is widely considered to have quickened the departure of whites to the suburbs. By the time Melton defeated Johnson in 2005, City Hall had become a far more integrated place, with blacks holding key positions and benefiting from contracts that previously had been the domain of the white business class.

In 2009, after years of seeing these gains threatened by Melton's antics, a chastened electorate put Johnson back in office. Picking up the pieces of those lost years has forced different factions of the city's polity to work together: Slowly, Jackson's city government, and investors and contractors of both races, are gaining traction for projects that hold the potential to reinvigorate the city, from downtown to Virden Addition. Population loss is slowing. The suburbs continue to grow and remain the first choice of families and professionals. But young artists, families and professionals of both races are more willing to move to Jackson itself than they would have been in the '90s — and critically, the trend appears likely to endure.

More importantly, a new generation of black leaders is coming of age. Brad "Kamikaze" Franklin, a hip-hop artist and entrepreneur now in his late-30s, was drawn to Frank Melton because the mayor claimed he would improve opportunities for young black men from troubled backgrounds. In a recent interview, Franklin called his support for Melton "a colossal mistake of Godzilla-like proportions."

But thanks to Melton's administration, Franklin got access to powerful people he might not have otherwise encountered. David Watkins, a white real estate developer, made a point of mentoring Franklin and seeking his advice about plans to redevelop Farish Street, the city's historic black shopping corridor. "These are the kind of connections that have to be made to build up the younger generation," Franklin said. Not that building those connections are easy — Franklin recounts incidents wherein older leaders have condescended to him and peers criticized him for working with a developer. Yet he considers the distrust natural, even healthy, as different classes, races and generations in Jackson learn how to share power. Indeed, for all of its persistent problems, Jackson may provide a vision of an inclusive, sound and progressive urban future.

## THE HUB OF MISSISSIPPI

Jackson, the largest city in Mississippi, is a long, narrow, sprawling state capitol built along the movement of the Pearl River, railroad lines and interstates. Historic neighborhoods bear the marks of segregation. Posh, sleepy and historically white



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*Instead of using  
his office at City  
Hall, Melton  
worked out of his  
mansion where he  
kept a red phone  
in his bedroom.  
In homage to  
the mayor in the  
Batman TV series,  
Melton called it his  
“murder hotline.”*  
.....

Belhaven (setting of *The Help*) sits near the river, the capitol and two colleges — one Presbyterian, the other Methodist. Farish Street, the historic black main street during segregation, lies west of the white marble rotunda of the state capital, and abuts the rough industrial land near the railroad tracks.

The neighborhoods of West Jackson grew in the 1940s and ‘50s as the country’s wartime economic boom created jobs at factories, warehouses and an Air Force base, attracting new migrants that needed affordable housing close to their industrial workplaces. For instance, in the 1900s Virden Addition (home to the duplex besieged by Melton and his followers) was a rural settlement populated by the descendants of former slaves. It was developed with housing for blacks, who worked at the area’s furniture and fertilizer factories, and annexed by the city in the mid-20th century.

Yet the post-war boom that began to drag rural Mississippi’s economy into an urban and industrialized 20th century also made segregation harder to maintain. Whites became more militant in their subjugation of the city’s increasing black population. To this day, Jackson’s past is never far off — a few blocks from the duplex that Melton sledge-hammered, children play at a rundown community center named for Medgar Evers, the prominent NAACP Field Secretary assassinated in 1963 by a white supremacist.

Mississippi remains profoundly rural and segregated. At an April reception for the Hinds County Black Legislators at the Penguin, a swank, newish restaurant near Jackson State, middle-aged black leaders and professionals swapped stories about the terrible agricultural jobs they worked as young people. Kenneth Jones, a 46-year-old state senator, reminisced about being his town’s “slop boy,” charged with collecting table scraps to feed hogs.

The economic exclusion of African Americans lives on in Jackson’s wealth gap: More than half of all black households in Jackson make less than \$30,000 a year, 2007 American Community Survey data shows. Meanwhile, **fewer than 10 percent** of

African-American households make more than \$75,000, while **nearly a third** of white households do. And according to 2010 Census data, though whites make up less than a fifth of the city's population, they own almost two thirds of its businesses. Wealth in the city today is synonymous less with Belhaven than Northeast Jackson, a stronghold of Republicanism, private religious high schools and gated subdivisions on the fringe of the city, east of I-55.

Though segregation in Mississippi was the most virulent in the South and racism remains a palpable part of Jackson's recent history, the forces that continue to shape inequality bear a distinctly post-Civil Rights Act feel. Like virtually all American cities with large black populations, Jackson remains caught in a feedback loop: Massive suburban flight drains urban jobs, depletes the tax base and reinforces housing and employment discrimination, thus perpetuating the diminished opportunities and lack of capital which lock many blacks into poverty, and further incentivizing those with resources to quit the city for the suburbs. Jackson is distinctive for going through this process late: Population loss to the suburbs was not a major force until the 1980s and '90s, decades after the trend hollowed urban cores in other parts of the country.

The late urban exodus can be explained in part because after public school desegregation, many white parents sent their children to private (yet tax-subsidized) academies instead of fleeing to suburban school districts, and in part because annexation enabled the city to absorb potential suburbs and thus osmosize the surrounding white population to stave off a black population majority, a trend common in the South. But by the 1980s, factors such as rampant fear of urban crime and the tense transfer of power to black leadership drew many wealthy and middle-class families, particularly whites, to the suburbs. The drain happened relatively quickly: Between 1980 and the present, Jackson's overall population shrank from 202,893 to 173,514, and whites went from making up 52 percent of the city's population to less than 20 percent. During the 1990s alone, nearly 35,000 white residents moved out of the city — an average of almost 100 a day over the 10-year span (by contrast, the city lost half as many in the 2000s). But while African Americans made up more than half of the voting age population by 1990, City Hall remained disproportionately white despite civil rights lawsuits and widespread discontent in the black community. Between the late '80s and the mid-'90s, the city's majority-white police department was shaken by a spate of police brutality lawsuits. Crime reached an all-time high in 1995.

Jackson's decline fed the expanding metro area, where population has swelled from 320,425 in 1980 to 589,600 today, nearly a quarter of the state's overall population of 2.4 million. The metro area's population remains almost evenly split between

whites and blacks. (One of the reasons questions of social segregation and economic inclusion remain so salient in Mississippi is that, at 37 percent of the state population, a proportion that is rising, African Americans are barely a minority.) Though Jackson's economy remains bulwarked by the state capitol, six colleges and several hospitals including University Medical Center, the state's second largest employer, Jackson has increasingly become a commuter city. A large number of businesses and even some state agencies have pivoted away from Jackson to surrounding bedroom communities which, alongside loss of middle- and upper middle-class residents, has caused homeownership to plummet, eroded the city's tax base and accelerated crime and blight. Though Jackson has lost African-American professionals to suburbs such as blue-collar Byram, middle-class Clinton and posh Madison, the lion's share of suburban flight has been white. Unlike rust belt cities such as Cleveland and Detroit, which at this point are losing net population of all races, Jackson's number of African-American residents has leveled off but is still rising.

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## THE VIGILANTE MAYOR

Frank Melton arrived in Jackson in 1984. He built his career and persona around the anxieties and pain that attended Jackson's troubled demographic shift. Melton had moved from Texas to become CEO of WLBT, then the nation's largest black-owned TV station — though after union-busting, Melton would sell it to a publically traded company in 2000.

He fast became known for his criticisms of black social dysfunction, which alternately took the form of demagoguery, effusive philanthropy and tough-cop posturing. He solidified connections to influential Jacksonians of both races through personal notes and needy late-night phone calls. Through his own brand of television editorials called "The Bottom Line," he became a visible public figure, railing against prisons, the Jackson Police Department, welfare and what he called the black "entitlement mentality." Melton also paid for inner-city billboards plastered with the mug shots of purported drug dealers and gang leaders. His rants about crime spoke directly to the pain and helplessness of the many Jackson residents who live in fear of it. (Throughout all this, Melton's wife, a well-regarded pediatrician, and his two biological children lived in East Texas, where he sometimes commuted on his private jet.)

The most prominent thing about Frank Melton was his desire to act as self-styled guardian of the city's troubled young men — and the way his effusive charisma inspired powerful people to abet him. Dale Danks, mayor of Jackson from 1977 to 1989, recalls



Melton showing up at City Hall in the late '80s. Nationwide crime rates were spiking, and Melton offered Danks his assistance in catching gang leaders. At Melton's office in the WLBT headquarters, Danks, the police and Melton held a meeting with a dozen young men who had been pegged as drug dealers, offering them jobs. Youth court judges began appointing Melton custody of troubled young men. Melton took a frenzied interest in their lives, riding along with police so he could reach out to young drug dealers, and buying a double-gated estate with a swimming pool and fishing hole for his "sons."

Tuxedo-clad, his young, street-wise charges sometimes accompanied him to upscale gatherings. Rumors about Melton's relationships with these young men circulated throughout his time in Jackson — but equally powerful was the praise lavished on his advocacy of a group everyone else seemed to wish would go away. With the philanthropic foundation he set up through his TV station, he paid for college scholarships for his mentees and for the funerals of shooting victims. His bravado got him appointed to the State Board of Education in 1992 — he promised to sweepingly reform education but didn't show up to many meetings — and then as head of the Mississippi Bureau of Narcotics from 2002 to 2004. During his 14-month stint he set up unconstitutional roadblocks near the State Capitol to search cars for drugs. Meanwhile, the agency's actual drug arrests languished.

While Melton harshly criticized the city's problems and brandished swashbuckling solutions, complex shifts occurred in Jackson's public life, including the turbulence that accompanied the election of Harvey Johnson, Jr. as its first black mayor. In a cruel irony, the massive departure of whites and black professionals that decimated Jackson's tax base and drained the city's economic opportunities also gave blacks a political majority for the first time. After a 1997 election starkly drawn on racial lines, Johnson — a taciturn, stubborn urban planner — presided over a contentious shift in power, increasing black leadership in city agencies and hiring black contractors. He acted to stabilize Jackson, slowly bringing down the crime rate, courting federal grant money, laying the groundwork for projects downtown and in West Jackson, and balancing the budget without firing city employees. But he was often cut by a double-edged sword: White powerbrokers were vexed by his intransigence and support for minority contracting, while African-American leaders were leery of his support for downtown development projects, which had often had an exclusionary history. Johnson drew criticism from all quarters for his painstaking (some would say glacial) pace in making changes.

The demographic shift that swept Johnson and other black leaders into office also accelerated white flight and suburban growth. South Jackson, a blue-collar clutch of suburban-style cul-de-sacs, was annexed to Jackson in the late '70s when it was 98 percent white; it gradually integrated during the '90s and tipped over into having a black majority around 2001, when it elected its first black city council representative. The departure of white residents to the suburbs accelerated. As of the most recent census, the area is 96 percent black.

The flight of businesses, finance and law firms to the suburbs was also palpable. Socrates Garrett, the founder and head of Garrett Enterprises, is one of a number of African-American business contractors who flourished following Johnson's election. Speaking in his office on Livingston Road, an industrial part of West Jackson, he recalls Johnson's first two terms as a period of "divide and struggle over everything . . . The majority community was not ready for the transition of power to the African-American community," Garrett said. "They took their business with them and tried to create what was in Jackson in other communities." As the city "became blacker and blacker," Garrett said, Jackson's traditional white powerbrokers slowly came to terms with the fact that the city would have a black mayor, but realized they needed "a different kind of black mayor" who would listen to their needs.

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*"The leadership of the downtown banks is not gonna change overnight — so how do you figure out a way to work with the people who have the resources for the folks in the community who need it?"*

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By 2005, Melton had become the candidate of choice for Jackson's Republican business establishment — and the city's poor and lower middle-class black voter base. In media editorials with racist overtones, Johnson was branded as plodding, uppity and divisive, while Melton's urban bona fides and admiration for the suburbs were applauded. Melton is a "remarkable uniter," a prominent white real estate developer, Leland Speed, *told the Jackson Free Press in 2005*. "We haven't seen anything like this [in Jackson] . . . This is our moment of hope." Melton's embrace by major funders like Speed was not surprising in the South, where electoral gains often go to candidates black enough to appeal to a majority-minority voter base, but pro-business enough

to appeal to the Chamber of Commerce bloc of business, finance and real estate elites. For instance, former New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin, a wealthy former media executive like Melton, won his first election with the joint backing of the city's old-fashioned white business elite and black voters, despite scant political experience and policy positions that weren't always in the interests of either group.



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Of course, most political leaders in black cities throughout the country walk a similarly fine line in appealing to their constituents and mainstream, moneyed suburban whites: Cory Booker, the charismatic, crusading and profoundly competent black mayor of Newark lived in the city's projects to combat the notion that he was too "white" and suburban to understand black Newark — but he recently drew criticism over his ties to white-collar private equity firms for campaign funding. The appeal of Melton's mix of self-made wealth and his sheriff act were amplified in Mississippi, where support for free enterprise and guns is deeply woven into the culture. (A recent discussion of the Trayvon Martin shooting on a black, progressive radio show in Jackson revolved around proper use of firearms.)

Indeed, by emphasizing blight and crime fighting, Melton discovered a lingua franca that spoke to conservative blacks and upper middle-class whites uneasy with inner-city poverty as well as to the poor themselves. At a breakfast fundraiser

attended by wealthy white female philanthropists in Northeast Jackson, including Leland Speed's wife, Melton blamed the city's tense relationship with the suburbs on Johnson's separatism. When a woman said Melton's ideas "sounded like a lifesaver" but asked where he would get the funding, he brandished non-existent promises from Republican senators Trent Lott and Thad Cochran to give Jackson a multi-million dollar federal grant. He described his work with young men in the inner city as "rewarding and painful," promising that as mayor he would corral young people into church and volunteer programs and lamenting the "kids I've had to bury." (These quotes and descriptions come from [2005 coverage by the Jackson Free Press](#).) A month later, he echoed the line to hip-hop artists at a forum at a club on Farish Street, organized by Brad "Kamikaze" Franklin: "I'm not going to bury any more kids...I'm going to send them to college," Melton said, [according to the Jackson Free Press](#). When a rapper asked Melton what he would do to bring businesses back to West Jackson and Metrocenter, a huge semi-abandoned shopping mall often treated as a totem of the city's loss of retail, Melton brushed it off: "I've been in business for 35 years...I can connect you with the people who can help you as long as you will do the right thing."

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Melton's wealth, tough talk and street credibility earned his mayoral campaign an unusually varied coalition of supporters: Members of Jackson's black establishment dissatisfied with Johnson; white downtown developers who'd felt their hands tied by Johnson's micro-management; community members who admired Melton's straight talk and philanthropy; Reaganite suburban whites attracted by Melton's bootstraps rhetoric; white progressives enamored of his professed awareness of inner-city problems and promises of interracial and metropolitan cooperation.

There was an Emperor's-New-Clothes quality to Melton, whose unlikely candidacy was woven from the fears and needs of his varied supporters. And, as in a fairy tale, the spell quickly shattered. In 2005, he trounced Johnson in the competitive Democratic primary and his Republican opponent Rick Whitlow in the general election (Whitlow complained Republicans had voted for Melton over him). On his inauguration night, Melton vowed to drive "thugs" out of Jackson, actually naming young, local drug dealers in his inaugural address. That night, he took the stage at a victory celebration on Farish Street and flashed an (expired) brass-colored law enforcement badge. "Batman Returns," he declared with a winsome smile to the cheering majority African-American crowd (a moment caught [on video](#) by a *Jackson Free Press* photographer). Melton left the stage, donned black SWAT-style fatigues and strapped a semiautomatic handgun to the front holster of his bulletproof vest. Melton spent the first night of his mayorship on a seedy stretch of Highway 80 in West Jackson, lecturing teenagers

out past curfew at gas station convenience stores, knocking on the doors of low-rent motels, and conducting impromptu traffic stops and car searches.

Throughout the next four years, Melton continued to use his position for erratic, highly personal crime fighting. He went on escapades that were benign — stopping a school bus in the middle of the highway, stepping inside, announcing himself as mayor and asking for hugs — and dangerous, like the morning he climbed onto a bulldozer to demolish abandoned houses that hadn't had their gas lines disconnected. Police were expected to abet his random traffic stops in West Jackson and accompany him on continual raids of adult bookstores, bars, strip clubs and private residences, such as Evans Welch's duplex. Instead of using his office at City Hall, Melton worked out of his mansion where he kept a red phone in his bedroom. In homage to the mayor in the Batman TV series, Melton called it his "murder hotline." He fired the city's eight crime prevention specialists. He promoted the two policemen who served as his submachine-gun-toting bodyguards ahead of other department members. Detectives were often expected to report to Melton rather than the chief. He called on-duty officers to transport his young mentees to a barbeque at his estate.

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The attrition of disaffected police was so severe that in 2007 Jackson lost a Department of Justice grant contingent on maintaining a police corps of at least 450. The overtime worked by remaining officers strained an increasingly fraught city budget. After strenuously trying to avoid releasing public records, statistics showed that despite his tough-cop posturing, crime had risen during Melton's tenure. Attorney General Jim Hood began investigating Melton, who had no valid law enforcement credentials, for carrying guns at a church, a public park and a college campus.

Melton's brash, mercurial personality took a toll on city government. He hired political supporters and former cronies from his television station and the Mississippi Bureau of Narcotics at exorbitant salaries, while replacing city employees with temporary workers. He rolled back minority service contracts and fired employees who had supported Johnson. He fired the city's Washington, D.C.-based lobbying firm and hired a 28-year-old lawyer who flew between D.C. and Jackson on Melton's private jet. Grants applications and renewals lingered on his desk, losing the city tens of thousands, if not millions, of dollars. The city council dipped into Jackson's reserve fund to cover growing budget shortfalls.

As Melton got deeper into legal troubles — the trial for the duplex raid was the most visible in a growing list of lawsuits — his support crumbled. Minnie Rhodes, whose husband had built the duplex in 1962, confided her disillusion to the *Jackson Free Press*, which broke the story of the raid. "When [Melton] was on [the] 'Bottom



Line, I'd stay up late, even if I had to get up next morning, just to hear him. I was one of his biggest fans, and when he was elected mayor of the city of Jackson, I just jumped up and down," she said. "But I've watched him closely, and to me he's just getting deeper and deeper and deeper into having no respect for the law." He won his state trial — defense attorneys successfully labeled the duplex a "crack house" and argued for his well-intentioned crime fighting — but was indicted on federal civil rights charges for the same raid. The city of Jackson's most visible appearance on the national stage during that period was **an interview** Melton gave on Fox News, where he reenacted punching glass out of a window frame with a large stick.

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*Melton's wife, a well-regarded pediatrician, and his two biological children lived in Tyler, Texas, where he sometimes commuted on his private jet.*

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Prominent supporters began to step back, recant or resign outright, leaving Melton surrounded by yes-men and opportunists. Brad "Kamikaze" Franklin had been appointed by the mayor to the city's historic preservation commission, but as Melton's "megalomania" became more evident, he began to keep his distance from City Hall. The night before the 2009 election, Melton called Franklin, wanting to know what had happened to his idea about redeveloping the long-underused Alamo Theatre. The activist had the depressing feeling that Melton was making a last-ditch effort to show former supporters that he was trying to improve Jackson. Franklin recalls Election Day itself as dark and gloomy. Melton was due to start his federal trial the following week and one of his bodyguards had agreed to testify against him. A weird feeling of suspense hung in the air, Franklin remembers. Many were nervous about what would happen if Melton won a second term; some of his unqualified hires to city government were afraid of what would happen if he lost. Melton didn't make the run-off, however — and didn't live to find out he had lost. As the polls closed, he went in to cardiac arrest at his Northeast Jackson mansion. He died less than two days later.

Melton left a sense of waste in his wake. After his death, then-City Council Representative Leslie McLemore served as interim mayor for the last two months of Melton's term. McLemore, a veteran of the civil rights movement, had served on

the council for a decade and is now the director of the Fannie Lou Hamer Institute at Jackson State. He places the rise of Frank Melton in the larger history of contested power in Jackson. When asked about Melton's broad base of support, McLemore becomes quiet for the first time over the course of a two-hour interview. "You see, part of Melton's prototype is really what we need," he says. "The leadership of the downtown banks is not gonna change overnight — so how do you figure out a way to work with the people who have the resources for the folks in the community who need it? [Melton] had the respect amongst white people. He just didn't have sense enough to use that leverage...He was a failure as a mayor. And the city of Jackson deserves better than a damn failure."

## PICKING UP THE PIECES

In the autumn of 2009, Harvey Johnson, Jr. was reelected by a sobered electorate, newly appreciative of his steadiness and competence. In his current term, Johnson has become more visible in the city's poorest neighborhoods: He wears suits less frequently, makes a point of appearing at the city's rodeo and takes the parishioners of inner-city churches on bus tours where he shows off the new development downtown. Johnson, expected to run for a fourth term in November, is consistently tight-lipped about his predecessor, declining to go into detail about how he reconstituted the city's shredded budget after Melton's disastrous term. Instead, the achievements Johnson touts remain subtle. In a recent interview at City Hall, he stresses accomplishments such as receiving federal block grants, making frugal budgeting choices (in 2011 sales tax revenue declined, but was still 4 percent higher than what the city had conservatively planned for), and getting the police department corps up to 500 officers from the 420 it had shrunk to under Melton's tenure.

Harvey Johnson remains focused on the long-term work of stabilizing the city's tax base through projects downtown, around Jackson State and in a development of hospitals and clinics in West Jackson called the Medical Mall. Some of the projects he began when he was first mayor, such as the city's convention complex, opened their doors during Melton's term. Others, such as a \$70 million investment for a state civil rights museum, have only recently been approved. When asked about the tension that existed during his prior administration, he responds obliquely, conceding that in his current term "the trust level is higher than it was previously" and pointing to support from developers for his new "Jobs for Jacksonians" initiative, which incentivizes hiring city residents. During his two terms from 1997-2005, he notes that

# MILESTONES FOR BLACK AMERICAN MAYORS



**1868**

**PIERRE CALISTE LANDRY**

First African American  
elected mayor of a U.S. town:  
Donaldsonville, La.



**1967**

**CARL B. STOKES**

First African American elected  
mayor of a large U.S. city:  
Cleveland, Ohio



**1973**

**MAYNARD JACKSON**

First African American elected  
mayor of a major Southern city:  
Atlanta, Ga.



**1997**

**HARVEY JOHNSON, JR.**

First African American elected  
mayor of Jackson, Miss.

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there was “close scrutiny by those no longer in power” but said that he continues to work to be recognized as “mayor for everybody...although we were interrupted for four years, we’re still on that road. It takes time.” Those final three words might sum up his attitude as a public servant.

But the city has gone through a palpable maturation process since Johnson was first mayor. Ben Allen, president of [Downtown Jackson Partners](#), which manages a 66-block Business Improvement District, exemplifies the shift. Allen served on Jackson’s city council from 1997 until 2007 when Melton, who he had voted for, “damn near killed me” (after a series of contentious council meetings, Allen literally suffered a near-heart attack). He represented Northeast Jackson, the city’s whitest, most Republican district — which is changing too, going from being 9 percent black in the 1990s to 40 percent black today, though the richest parts of the ward remain predominantly white, with most African Americans moving into homes under \$80,000. When Allen, a white Republican, was first elected to council, he gained a reputation for clashing with Johnson and black council members over matters such as a resolution condemning the state flag of Mississippi, which includes the confederate stars and bars. But over time, Allen says, the divisiveness of the period cooled into a realization of the necessity of working together. Though he used to host a conservative radio show where topics included Jackson’s rampant crime, he now regularly decries sensationalism of it. He recalls Johnson’s work to increase black participation in the leadership of city agencies and projects as “painful” for many white leaders but the “right thing to do.” By the end of his term on council, Allen’s proudest accomplishment was getting his fiscally conservative ward, where there isn’t a public middle or high school, to vote with the rest of the city for a bond increase to fund the Jackson’s struggling public school district, which is 97 percent black.

Allen is currently spearheading an initiative intended to help clear the city of derelict properties. Though in its early stages, the project — being done in partnership with other community groups and the city government—is the most pragmatic blight-fighting program Jackson has tried and could result in significant lessening of the red tape that slows demolition of abandoned property. In a March meeting, 15 lawyers and leaders met in a closed conference room at the Downtown Jackson Partners’ office to discuss the blight initiative. While six African Americans participated, they mostly represented community initiatives or the city government. The most powerful stakeholders in attendance were white and male. Participants like Leland Speed and Jim Rosenblatt, Dean of Mississippi College of Law, dominated the discussion — but genuinely solicited feedback from Angela Woodard, a paralegal for the city, and

Primus Wheeler, executive director of the **Medical Mall Foundation** in West Jackson, both black. The meeting could be taken as a depressing reminder that a white, male old guard still disproportionately controls the city's assets — or as a sign that, however haltingly and imperfectly, that old guard is working to be diverse and to find common solutions for problems like the omnipresence of blighted properties.

Skepticism about development remains deeply embedded in Jackson's black community, but given Mississippi's substantial black population and the conscious efforts of many local leaders, Jackson may actually succeed in revitalizing the city in a way that helps foment the black middle class. When it was formed in the 1990s, Downtown Jackson Partners had a nostalgic tinge and its leadership was totally white; now its PowerPoints proclaim "Proud of Our Progress." Though Downtown Jackson Partners' board is still **dominated by the city's deep-rooted white economic elite**, the group has made conscious efforts to include black leaders and be aggressive in its outreach and delivery of public information. Allen acknowledges that Jackson is "behind times" when it comes to race, but says he sees signs of real change. The burgeoning commitment of investors and retail (Whole Foods will open a store in Northeast Jackson in 2013) is thanks in part to the nationwide trend of a new generation of young professionals attracted to living in cities over suburbs — but in Jackson, a third of the residents moving into new, upscale downtown residential developments are black. State and city incentives for minority contracting are helping local building professionals and are attracting national African-American contractors who have Mississippi ties.

This is part of a regional trend demographers refer to as the "**Reverse Great Migration**," wherein blacks are relocating to the South in the largest numbers seen since African-American forbearers in the last century left the region for opportunities in industrializing north. Though much depends on Mississippi's stalled economy, shifting demographics and increasing opportunities for the area's homegrown black business community could ultimately mean big things for Jackson, as they have for Atlanta, increasingly a hub for black business and entertainment.

In the meantime, Allen helps organize field trips for Downtown Jackson Partners' board to study the successes of other cities, such as Birmingham's medical district and Little Rock's River Market. The former councilman points to comparably sized cities like Chattanooga, Tenn., where, after years of losing residents to the suburbs, population is again on the upswing. Slowly, state legislators and suburban leaders are tuning into the need to bulwark Jackson for the good of the metro area as a whole. City leaders of both races agree that though Jackson is struggling to shore up its economic base, it will not become another Gary, Ind.



## A NEW JACKSON

As Jackson moves forward, it is possible that the gimcrack interracial cooperation that surrounded Frank Melton will evolve into genuine cohesion. Donna Ladd, who co-founded the *Jackson Free Press* in 2002, covered Melton's term extensively. She describes her coverage of Melton as "years of heartache." Over time, she says, she began to view the former mayor as "the man segregation built" — a personification of all the unaddressed, lingering problems that assail Jackson, especially the demonization of young black men. In her view, Melton's failure as mayor and his dramatic death shrank the city's belief that one figure could "save us all from each other" and helped his erstwhile supporters face the necessity of coming together for the slow, hard work of improving Jackson.

It's work that Ladd is deeply engaged in — the *Free Press* conducts award-winning investigations done by a consciously interracial staff and boasts a similarly diverse readership. The newspaper continually advocates for a pro-Jackson, urbanist ethos. Ladd also presides over *BOOM Jackson*, a glossy magazine that emphasizes entrepreneurship and profiles progressive, urban movers and shakers of both races. The *Free Press* is based in Fondren, an area north of downtown and the universities. Fifteen years ago, it was a fraying residential neighborhood that exemplified the toll taken on central Jackson by middle class flight. Gradually, though, the neighborhood is regaining residents and businesses, as progressive middle-class families and young, urban-minded Millennials rediscover its trees-shaded streets

Donna Ladd, who is white, grew up in rural Neshoba County. She was three years old in 1964 when Klu Klux Klan members from the area lynched three civil rights workers — James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner — traveling through the county. "I know what my state is capable of," Ladd says. But just as Mississippi's history tells an outsize story of the racism that afflicts the nation, Ladd believes Jackson will emerge as the testing ground for a more inclusive future. Mississippi lags behind the rest of the U.S. on nearly every measure of quality of life one can name — education, obesity, poverty, teen pregnancy.

But the Reverse Great Migration is likely to have profound long-term effects on the political map in Mississippi and the South as a whole. For the first time since the Great Migration took the state's blacks from rural towns to Northern cities in the 1940s, Mississippi's African-American population began to rise in the 1980s. In 2010, Mississippi's population was 37 percent African-American, census data shows, and demographic trends indicate that proportion will continue to grow over the next



few generations. (By comparison, the U.S. as a whole was 12.6 percent black in 2010, according to the Census.) Though state governance in Mississippi is still dominated by white leaders often skeptical of Jackson, one can envision a scenario where, in coming decades, the governorship and state legislature will have a black majority, in line with the state population. As the largest metro area in Mississippi, Jackson is likely to be the seedbed of these future state and national leaders. And given the national scale of the Reverse Great Migration and plateauing **national birth rates among whites**, what happens in Mississippi matters not just for the state, but for the country.

The first task of a new generation of African-American leaders is improving civic life in Jackson. Brad “Kamikaze” Franklin is acutely aware of his status as a young black leader conversant with the city’s problems yet connected to many different circles of power. Despite the disastrous course of Frank Melton’s term, association with Melton connected Franklin to powerful people such as David Watkins, the white developer in charge of the \$100 million redevelopment of Farish Street, Melton’s old stomping grounds. Watkins’ vision is for an entertainment district in the style of Beale Street in Memphis.

During Franklin’s two years working with Watkins on communications for the project, he dealt with disparaging remarks from older black and white leaders who looked askance at his diamond earring and involvement in the city’s hip-hop scene. Gentrification-averse black peers accused Franklin of allowing himself to be used as

a token. Sitting in a coffee shop in Fondren, where he lives, Franklin explains that he views both sides of criticism as part of a healthy discomfort as the city's old guard of both races opens up to the younger generation — and the younger generation learns how to wield power.

Franklin views the ascendance of this new generation as an inevitable part of the city's evolution as it moves past the moribund habits and racial disputes of the past. This November, June Hardwick, a 36-year-old lawyer and former public defender, is likely to become the first black city council representative for the ward that includes Belhaven. Jonathan Lee, the 34-year-old head of Mississippi Products, a Jackson-based medical supply company, and a former chair of the Jackson Chamber of Commerce, is attuned to his generation's responsibility for the city's future. Lee helps host the popular Friday salons at Koinonia, a coffee shop near Jackson State, which on any given Friday morning is packed with an interracial and intergenerational crowd of prominent Jacksonians debating policy or the day's headlines. Lee is eloquent on Mississippi's legacy of racism and on Jackson's continued problems — from black skepticism of the suburbs and a fraught relationship with the legislature to the persistent wealth gap between blacks and whites. But since he was a teenager, Lee says, he has seen Jackson go from being a dying city to one that has a chance of coming back.

It is common for young black leaders to praise Harvey Johnson's competence in stabilizing the fragile city, especially after Melton, but to also assert that in coming years, leaders will need a stronger vision for the city and a greater willingness to form creative, diverse partnerships. Developing this will take time; if there is anything to be learned from Jackson's first two black mayors, it is that real change requires leadership that is insistent and strong as well as patient. Brad Franklin often reflects on how the city will be different when his two children reach adulthood. He isn't sure if his 15-year-old son will enjoy a revived Farish Street or neighborhoods where different colors and creeds coexist — but he is certain his 2-year-old daughter will. ➤



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ingrid Norton** is a writer based in New Orleans and obsessed with cities. Her work has appeared in publications including *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Dissent*, *GOOD*, and *The Los Angeles Review of Books*. She's written on topics from the precipitous growth of Austin to arson and urban divestment in Detroit. Areas of interest include cities in literature, the criminal justice system, the developing world, immigration patterns, port cities, poverty, America's sun and rust belts, race, and urban history. She can be contacted at [www.ingridnorton.com](http://www.ingridnorton.com).

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## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

**Alex Lukas** was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1981 and raised in nearby Cambridge. With a wide range of artistic influences, Lukas creates both highly detailed drawings and intricate Xeroxed 'zines. His drawings have been exhibited in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, San Francisco, London, Stockholm and Copenhagen as well as in the pages of *Megawords*, *Swindle Quarterly*, *Proximity Magazine*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Village Voice*, *Philadelphia Weekly*, *Dwell*, *Juxtapoz*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Boston Phoenix*, *Art New England* and *The New York Times Book Review*. Lukas' imprint, Cantab Publishing, has released over 35 small books and 'zines since its inception in 2001. He has lectured at The Maryland Institute College of Art, The University of Kansas and The Rhode Island School of Design. His work was also recently acquired by the West Collection as part of the 2011 West Prize.