Can the Center Hold? Grappling with the decline of a small-city downtown in Meridian, Mississippi

Meredith Leigh Wilson
Clemson University, mlwilson42@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Meridian, Mississippi, is a poster child for the Post-War Era decline of America’s downtowns. The center city has been in steady decline since the rise of automobile culture and the opening of Meridian’s first suburban mall in the 1970s. This study analyzes how a historic preservation ethic may better inform the economic development of a downtown with an emphasis on establishing best practices for other small American cities. In focusing on a small, southern city, this paper fortifies a weak area in the study of preservation best practices related to downtown revitalization, which has focused on larger cities outside the Mid-South region. It examines the preservation policies within Meridian’s 2004 Downtown Redevelopment Plan, 2009 Comprehensive Plan, and other official city planning documents. It gauges the importance placed on preservation in city planning, as well as to what degree preservation policies are actually carried out.

Meridian’s revitalization efforts focus on large development projects devoted to entertainment and tourism: the restoration of the Grand Opera House, the upcoming redevelopment of an abandoned Art Deco office building into a hotel, and the construction of the MAEE, slated to open in 2017. This study examines the current success of these and other projects and gauges how successfully they encourage sustainable development of the downtown core. Specifically, the study will suggest how historic preservation, incremental development, and diverse services and functions can improve downtown revitalization efforts in Meridian and comparable cities.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my thesis committee and advisor, thank you for your valuable guidance and support. To Carter Hudgins, thank you for always having an open door and time to listen to my newest half-baked thesis idea. Your encouragement to “follow my heart” will always be appreciated. To Amalia Leifeste, thank you for your meticulous feedback and probing questions whenever I was able to get something to you for review. And to Barry Stiefel, thank you for always taking the time to meet with me and for encouraging me to begin writing as soon as possible.

Thanks are also due to Christopher Alexander, Randall Gaither, and Karen Rooney for taking the time to talk with me about your experience and knowledge of downtown revitalization in Meridian, MS. I would also like to thank Charlotte Walker, for always being kind and happy to help. And finally, thank you to Jennifer Baughn for giving me access to the MDAH’s records on Meridian’s preservation policies and districts.

My acknowledgements would not be complete without a special thank you to Haley Schriber for always listening to my many moments of thesis panic, to Jean Stoll for all the pep talks and cinnamon rolls, to Rachel Walling for always hanging in there with me to the very end, and to Meghan White for reminding us all that George is always most important. I would also like to thank my parents - my mother for dragging me into every house museum south (and some north) of the Mason-Dixon and sparking my love for history and my father for always reminding me, in the words of Garrison Keillor, to be well, do good work, and keep in touch.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.¹

- William Butler Yeats, “The Second Coming”

Introduction

Interstate 20 cuts a slender path through the Gulf States, from Kent, Texas, to Florence, South Carolina. It winds through desert and prairie, piney woods and bayous, often skirting fields of peanuts, soybeans, and cotton. Atlanta sprouts up in the east, concentric circles of suburban sprawl, growing in height and density until suddenly the Georgia Statehouse looms ahead, its golden dome startling against a backdrop of concrete and steel. Next heading west comes Birmingham and Tuscaloosa. Just over the Alabama border, the interstate forks at a small Mississippi city called Meridian, with a population of just over 40,000.² You can follow the wisdom of the inimitable Yogi Berra and continue onward. Interstate 59 will take you to New Orleans, while Interstate 20 will eventually wind its way to Dallas, by way of Shreveport.

most probably take no notice of the sixteen-story Art Deco “skyscraper” rising up a mile north of the interstate, though it dwarfs any structure they will see until they hit Jackson. For the few who do notice, it must strike them as being a little out of place. What does a Jazz Age sky-scraper have to do with the sixth largest city in a state known for sprawling plantations and King Cotton? Downtown Meridian is surprisingly urban, with its Grand Opera House and multi-story warehouses and department stores. Multiple old railroad hotels, including the elegant Sullivanesque Lamar Hotel (1927), dot the cityscape.³

Unfortunately, much of this historic building stock has fallen into disrepair and disuse during the postwar era. With the rise of automobile culture and resulting suburban sprawl, Meridian’s historic downtown has become increasingly irrelevant to modern lifeways. Automobile-centric shopping centers along I-20 have replaced the centrally located department stores of the early twentieth century. Likewise, housing developments have sprawled ever farther from the city center with the rise of automobile culture and the loss of reliable public transit.

Since the late 1970s, the City of Meridian has attempted to combat the decline of its historic downtown. The year 1979 saw the creation of Meridian’s first HPC and Architectural Review Board and the designation of Meridian’s first two historic districts, both of them within the downtown area. However, the most successful period of revitalization and preservation in Meridian’s downtown arguably did not begin until more than a decade later, with the election the preservation minded Mayor John Robert Smith in 1993. Downtown revitalization truly picked up speed with the long-awaited restoration and reopening of Meridian’s 1889 Grand Opera House as the Mississippi State University-Riley Center for the Performing Arts (MSU-

Meridian has faced significant challenges to its downtown revitalization. The sheer size of the historic buildings in downtown Meridian, which were constructed during Meridian’s Golden Era as a railroad boomtown, can render their renovation and reuse economically daunting. Notably, the Great Recession of 2007 seriously retarded Meridian’s downtown revitalization efforts. Unsupportive city leaders and flaws within the city’s HPC have also threatened preservation efforts, and in some cases continue to do so.

This study examines Meridian’s recent and ongoing preservation and revitalization efforts within the downtown district. In particular, the study focuses on the period from 2003, when Meridian redrew the boundaries of its downtown historic district, until the present day. It gauges the degree to which preservation principles guide the city’s ongoing plans for the development of the historic downtown, and makes recommendations for how Meridian can improve its preservation practice.

An analysis of downtown revitalization and preservation efforts in Meridian, Mississippi reveals the major challenges facing stand-alone small cities: a lack of sufficient resources and professional preservation expertise to effectively carry out preservation policies and an over-reliance on large, signature developments to catalyze downtown revitalization. Ultimately, this study finds that downtown revitalization efforts in Meridian and comparable small cities must focus on small-scale, incremental development of a variety of uses and attractions that are in keeping with their existing building fabric if they hope to ensure sustainable, long-term development of their city center.
Methodology

This study is divided into six chapters. The first is an examination of the current literature on the decline and subsequent revitalization of historic downtowns in the United States. It also includes a specific discussion of these trends in small- and mid-size cities. The second chapter contains a brief overview of Meridian's growth as a railroad center, its decline in the postwar era, and its early attempts at preserving and revitalizing its historic downtown. Chapter Three examines Meridian's preservation and revitalization planning and initiatives since 2003, the year the city reformulated its Historic Preservation Ordinance. Chapter Four analyzes the success or failure of these initiatives and determines the degree to which preservation is or is not a priority in Meridian's downtown planning. The final chapter makes recommendations for how Meridian and comparable small cities can improve their downtown preservation and revitalization efforts.

For Chapters Two and Three, City planning documents, unofficial reports, and city ordinances provide the bulk of information on Meridian's downtown preservation and revitalization policies, plans, and practice. These include Meridian's Historic Preservation Ordinance, a 2004 Urban Land Institute report, the 2009 Comprehensive Plan for the City of Meridian, and various city-issued Annual Reports. The author also conducted interviews with individuals involved in downtown preservation and development. These individuals were: Christopher Alexander, the public relations specialist for Threefoot Preservation Society, a local nonprofit, nonprofessional preservation group; Randall Gaither, senior city planner and liaison between the City Planning and the HPC; and Karen Rooney, the Executive Director of Meridian Main Street. These interviews are transcribed in the
Appendix A of this study. Information was also taken from articles in *The Meridian Star*, the HPC minutes, and the vertical files on Meridian’s historic districts located at the MDAH in Jackson, Mississippi. Secondary Sources, such as Laura Nan Fairley and James T. Dawson’s *Paths to the Past: An Overview History of Lauderdale County, Mississippi* and Lamb, J. Parker, David S. Price, and David H. Bridges’ *Railroads of Meridian* provided information on the general history of the City of Meridian.

Chapter Four evaluates Meridian’s recent and ongoing downtown revitalization efforts alongside comparable initiatives in the Southeast United States using both case study and statistical analysis. To analyze the construction of the MAEE (MAEE) in downtown Meridian, the study looked at case studies of the Georgia Music Hall of Fame in Macon, Georgia, the Ohr-O’Keefe Museum of Art in Biloxi, the Delta Blues Museum in Clarksdale, and the Lynn Meadows Discovery Center in Gulfport, Mississippi.

The study also compiled financial data from thirteen purpose-built museums and thirteen museums in pre-existing structures in Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee. Financial information was taken from 990 IRS tax forms for the year 2012 and 2013, the two years for which the all of the twenty-six surveyed museums had forms posted. The study then analyzed this data to determine the relative success and failure of purpose-built museums and those in pre-existing structures. This information was used to make an educated guess as to whether or not the MAEE will be a fruitful venture for Meridian’s downtown.

The remainder of the chapter analyzes the organization and operation of the existing HPC, and the effectiveness of Meridian’s Historic Preservation Ordinance.

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4 Financial information was also gathered for Florida, but it was determined that this data was not in keeping with the results from the other six states. It was decided that, given Florida’s stronger economy and more robust tourism industry when compared to the other states in the study, Florida’s data would not be included in the museum study in this paper. However, the data for Florida can be found in Appendix B.
It also examines the how successful the city has been at revitalizing the most at-risk subdivision within Meridian’s Downtown Historic District, the African-American Business District. The study uses city documents, HPC meeting minutes, contemporary news media, and interviews with interested parties to the success or failure of these various aspects of Meridian’s downtown revitalization. The independently determined the number of contributing properties lost since the two distinct National Register designations in 1979 and 2006 by personally surveying the area for extant structures.

Finally, this study makes recommendations for how Meridian, and other comparable small cities, can use preservation principles to improve downtown revitalization efforts. The study finds that, in the case of Meridian, there is an urgent need for a more professional level of preservation expertise among the city’s HPC. It is also imperative that the city begin to focus more on small-scale, multi-purpose development rather than large developments centered around arts and entertainment. Meridian must also pay particular attention to the preservation and revitalization of at-risk zones at the edges of the Downtown Historic District. It is likely that other cities of comparable face many of the same challenges as Meridian, specifically the lack of professional preservation expertise. It is therefore recommended that small to mid-size cities place particular emphasis upon establishing close relationship with local and state preservation groups that may offer access to grant funds and preservation professionals, all while favoring small-scale, place-specific development rather than large new-build projects.
CHAPTER TWO

URBAN DECLINE IN AMERICA, HISTORIC PRESERVATION AS SOLUTION

Just listen to the music of the traffic in the city
Linger on the sidewalk where the neon signs are pretty
How can you lose?
The lights are much brighter there
You can forget all your troubles, forget all your cares

- Petula Clark, “Downtown”

The Decline of Urban America

In 1964, as Petula Clark’s single “Downtown” was soaring to the top of the international charts, the downtowns of cities across the United States had already begun their decades long descent. At its peak in the 1920s, the American downtown was the center of urban activities, where residents went to work, shop, eat, and play. Clark’s popular song depicts downtown in the same way, a place where there are “some little places to go to where they never close.” However, by most accounts, this in no way represented the majority of America’s downtowns, or at least would not remain an apt description for much longer. By 1964, the American downtown was already well on its way to becoming something very different from Clark’s optimistic refrain that “everything is waiting for you downtown.”

It was initially the increased industrialization and intermixing of land

3 Hatch.
4 Hatch.
uses downtown and the health concerns they excited that drove people to the peripheries. Only wealthier citizens could afford real estate at the fringes, and downtown was gradually left to heavy industry, the poor, and recent immigrants. Over the years downtowns became increasingly associated with the darker side of human existence: crime, poverty, and urban blight. The process accelerated with the automobile’s resounding conquest of the American landscape. The passage of the Interstate Highway Act of 1956 and development-friendly federal tax policies encouraged more and more downtown residents to make the move to the suburbs. Shops and businesses soon followed, and the opening of many a suburban shopping center spelled the end of a vibrant and bustling city center.

Once the process of decline had started, it continued in a cycle, the downtown's shabby appearance becoming a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy. Vacant buildings, deteriorating storefronts, and neglected streets further deterred people from coming downtown, instilling the belief that there was something inherently wrong with the center cities of yesteryear. The federal highways and economic pressure for suburban development had pushed the American downtown to its breaking point, and no one seemed to know exactly how to address the problem.

Public and private attempts to reverse the pattern of urban decline often exacerbated the issues plaguing downtown. The federal government’s Urban Renewal Program of the 1940s and 1950s is perhaps the most notorious. It was responsible for razing 404,000 low- and middle-income urban housing units across

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America, replacing only about 10 percent. According to Roberta Brandes Gratz, an urban critic and award-winning journalist, this process, touted as a solution to urban blight, only succeeded in “segregating and ghettoizing our cities in new ways.” The movement destroyed the built fabric of communities without creating anything that might replace its loss. Even when the program did replace demolished structures, the new modern housing developments ignored the social and cultural forces that nurtured the organic growth of traditional neighborhoods. Rather than improve urban life, these projects destroyed the community values that were an integral part of the historic buildings they replaced. Ultimately they only succeeded in replacing one form of urban blight with another.

Scholars and professionals in the field of urban revitalization seem to be in complete agreement over origins of the decay of America’s. However, the question remains of whether any of this matters at all. If urban decline is just a necessary byproduct of economic progress and population growth, why should anyone care? Why should anyone worry about revitalizing downtowns if the suburbs can offer all the same services and amenities? The rub is that the suburbs are in no way a comparable, or even responsible, replacement for the traditional downtown. Urban sprawl is not only unsustainable in an environmental sense, gobbling up vast tracts of land. It is also economically unsustainable. It requires expending large sums to build new roads and utility lines, whereas this infrastructure is already present in existing, and often underused, areas in the center city. Perhaps the most glaring fault of suburbanization is the loss of the community spirit and specific cultural heritage that exists in downtowns and that keeps the

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urban landscape from devolving into a never ending expanse of asphalt and Wal-Mart\textsuperscript{TM} Supercenters. The preservation of the historic integrity of downtowns can restore this lost sense of place, all while making economic and environmental sense.

**Historic Preservation as a Solution**

**Economics**

Perhaps the most immediate economic benefit of downtown revitalization is that it allows cities to forego the significant costs associated with developing land at their outer boundaries. Urban sprawl requires cities to invest large sums of public moneys into building new infrastructures, which can place a substantial financial burden on public coffers. A 2015 study in the academic journal *Land Use Development* examined the relationship between urban sprawl and municipal debt in Spain during the world-wide economic recession of the mid-2000s. The study found that urban sprawl and the ensuing “overprovision of infrastructures and service for urbanization, financed through large public investments,” contributed to public deficits of Spanish cities.\(^{10}\) Choosing to locate new development within the downtown core can also save private developers money. In Meridian, Mississippi, the board of the MAEE (discussed at length in chapter four) chose to construct the new museum downtown rather “because constructing the museum downtown was deemed less expensive” than near Bonita Lakes Reservoir at the outskirts of town.\(^ {11}\) Reusing existing infrastructure is simply good business sense. It reduces a city’s cost of upkeep and eliminates unnecessary waste.

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Even within the city core, the rehabilitation of existing structures will typically cost less than new construction. The rehabilitation of a historic structure will cost anywhere from 12 percent less to 9 percent less than new construction on a vacant lot. When the comparison comes down to rehabilitating an existing structure or razing that same structure to make way for a new building, rehabilitation is anywhere from 3 to 16 percent cheaper. Rehabilitation is also generally faster than new build, sometimes reducing construction time by up to 18 percent. Historic preservation also creates more jobs and keeps more money in the local economy than new construction. A $1 million rehabilitation project will create on average 5 to 9 more construction jobs and 4.7 more jobs in other sectors than a $1 million construction project. The rehabilitation project will also increase local household incomes by $107,000 more, increase retail sales by $34,000 more, and be more beneficial for local real estate companies, lending institutions, personal service vendors, and eating and drinking establishments. The direct economic benefits of historic preservation are undoubtedly significant.

Rehabilitation of existing structures within the city center continue to have positive economic returns beyond its initial financial savings. Overall, rehabilitation of historic structures creates more jobs and injects more money into the government and local economy than new construction. A 1998 study by researchers at Rutgers University found that on average, the rehabilitation of historic structures created more jobs, generated more income, and contributed more dollars to the Gross Domestic Product, Gross State Product, and state and local taxes per $1 million of investment than new construction projects. Moreover, residential historic

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rehabilitation created more jobs and contributed more to state and local taxes than did book publishing, pharmaceutical production, or electronic component production. In May of 2014, Preservation Green Lab, a division of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, published “Older, Small, Better,” a study on the economic effect older, smaller buildings have on economic development and urban vitality. The study concluded that city blocks made up of older, smaller buildings have more businesses, more jobs, more creative jobs, and more jobs in small businesses per square foot than blocks made up primarily of newer, larger buildings.

Perhaps most significantly, the study found that older, smaller buildings also provide excellent spaces for start-up businesses and non-chain businesses. In Seattle and San Francisco, older, mixed-vintage streets harbored more new businesses (defined as those dating to 2012) on both a per square foot basis and as a proportion of the total number of businesses than areas with larger, new buildings. Similarly, areas with older, smaller buildings in Seattle, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C., contained higher percentages of non-chain restaurants and retailers. According to the study, the high concentration of new and non-chain businesses is perhaps the greatest economic strength of areas with older, smaller businesses. The study cites research by Civic Economics, which concluded that money spent at local retailers recirculates in the local economy at a much higher rate than money spent in national chain stores. This data has profound implications for the development of historic city centers. It shows that traditional

14 “Older, Smaller, Better: Measuring how the character of buildings and blocks influences urban vitality” (Seattle: Preservation Green Lab, May 2014), 31-32.
downtowns contribute to a community’s healthy economic development in a way that new, large developments simply cannot replicate.

As manufacturing has been increasingly outsourced to other countries, American cities have grown to rely more on service and knowledge industries, both of which need not be tied to particular geographic locations. Industries that rely merely on people and man-made infrastructure can flourish anywhere. These businesses are therefore more likely to consider the *livability* of a prospective town than its geographic location. Instead of looking for access to a specific geological resource or trade route, these companies are looking for places where their employees will enjoy living. A healthy downtown has a lot to do with a city’s perceived livability and can be a large part of what attracts new businesses to the area. In particular the historic structures downtown can give cities a competitive edge by distinguishing them from rival cities.¹⁶ Historic and cultural heritage are becoming increasingly necessary for communities that wish to be economically competitive. This trend is likely to continue as businesses, even small businesses in small communities, become ever more involved in international trade and the global economy.

According to Rypkema, increased globalization in business and industry will make it increasingly more necessary for towns to distinguish themselves from their neighbors. Cultural globalization - which Rypkema distinguishes from economic globalization - will tend to make one city look very much like the other, a process Rypkema also refers to as Disneyfication or McDonaldization. If left unchecked, cultural globalization would eventually create a homogenous expanse of look-alike cities and towns. Rypkema argues that cities must emphasize what makes them

culturally unique to compete in this ever-shrinking world. Moreover, Rypkema asserts that most of these cultural assets are found in historic downtowns. Cities that cultivate and enhance their unique, historic downtowns will ensure themselves a competitive edge. Those that do not will be far more likely to fade into the background.¹⁷ Historic downtowns are an invaluable cultural and economic resources, one that cities cannot afford to ignore if they wish to remain competitive in the twenty-first century.

Finally, economic growth in existing centers is more stable and sustained than the development seen in the suburbs. Many of the first generation suburban shopping malls that drew people and businesses away from downtowns failed themselves within a few decades. As of 1997 there were nearly 5 billion square feet of retail space in the United States, or about 19 square feet per American citizen. In 1960, there had been only 4 square feet per American. However, of these 5 billion square feet, nearly half a billion lie vacant, adding up to about 4000 abandoned shopping centers across the country.¹⁸ The problem with equating economic development with new construction is that no project, no matter how well planned, is in itself an end. It is merely a temporary stage in a never ending cycle. Even those communities built to mimic existing cities, to combine the uses and forms of traditional downtowns, do not always fare well. Roberta Brandes Gratz describes the quick deterioration of two such “edge cities” that have crumbled “in less time than any traditional downtown ever began a slide downward.” She argues that these artificial cities have failed because it is impossible to mimic the organic development

of a traditional city, to “formularize the urban fabric, not recognizing its essential evolutionary and innovative nature, and plop it down as a shopping center and residential development in the middle of massive sprawl." Suburban shopping centers and artificial cities simply cannot be as economically sound as traditional downtowns if they cannot even last as long.

Environment

The economic and environmental sustainability of downtown revitalization go hand in hand. As cities abandon each successive ring of suburban development in favor the newer, and presumably the better, they destroy large swaths of undeveloped land. And for what - the next big thing, which will fade into obsolescence as soon as the next bigger thing comes along, with no end in sight? In 1945, the average small town in America had a trade area of about 15 miles, a number that quickly shot up to 50 square miles with the rise of automobile culture and urban sprawl. Today thousands of shopping malls lie abandoned, and yet new ones are being built every day.

Additionally, demolition and new construction send massive quantities of materials to the landfill. In 2006, the six northeastern states, plus New York and New Jersey, alone produced 12,065,582 tons of waste from construction and demolition, or about 0.19 to 0.42 tons per person. What is worse, the vast majority of this waste ended up in landfills; only about 10 percent was recycled for another use. Reducing construction and demolition waste has multiple benefits:

19 Gratz, v.
20 Walzer and Kline, 250.
it decreases the amount of waste that enters landfills, allows for the construction of fewer disposal facilities, reduces methane gas emission, and offsets the need to consume more virgin resources.\textsuperscript{22} The reuse of existing structures is undoubtedly more environmentally responsible than unchecked new development sprawling increasingly farther away from the city center.

Unmitigated suburban sprawl is not a sustainable pattern of growth for any city. It flies in the face of common sense, of the moderation and economy that centuries of human experience have found build stable, resilient communities. Perhaps what is most incriminating, it is a selfish practice, trading the hard work of past generations and the prosperity of future generations for immediate, and fleeting, monetary gain. Rypkema may have said it best:

To make a new brick today to build a building on a site where there is already a building standing steals from two generations. It steals from the generation that built the brick originally by throwing away their asset before its work is done and it steals from a future generation by using increasingly scarce natural resources today when they should have been saved for tomorrow. I would suggest that we have already consumed enough of somebody else’s assets - it’s time for us to make better use of our own.\textsuperscript{23}

In this passage, Rypkema also begins to allude to another important asset that is lost when the existing built environment is demolished unnecessarily - the community’s inheritance from the past, an invaluable part of a community’s cultural identity.

\textbf{Culture}

Perhaps the least quantifiable, though certainly not the least significant, of the benefits of downtown revitalization is the preservation of a community’s


\textsuperscript{23} Rypkema, “Preservation Under (Development) Pressure, 273.
cultural identity and sense of place. Burayidi writes, “Show me a community with a strong Historic Preservation Ordinance and I will show you a community with a strong cultural heritage!” Historic buildings ground a community, give it a sense of place, and distinguish them from a thousand other towns. The LiveCom Awards, the international awards for livable communities, even include “Heritage Management” among their criteria for determining winning communities. More than that, historic downtowns put a greater emphasis on the public realm, providing an important community gathering space that is lost in automobile-centric suburbia. The reliance on automobiles destroys the sense of local community and alienates neighbor from neighbor. Garages now dominate the facade of many suburban homes, “replacing the socially integrating value of front stoop and streetside activity.” Typical suburban sprawl creates communities of people who can have as little to do with one another possible, who need only interact meaningfully with their family, friends, and coworkers, hiding the rest of the world behind garage doors and impact-resistant windshields.

The lack of public space in suburban development is a significant defect indeed. Communities need public places to gather in times of good fortune, and perhaps more significantly, in times of tragedy. Donovan D. Rypkema writes of the days following September 11, 2001: “We didn’t gather inside the private space of department stores or hotel lobbies. We gathered on the street, we gathered in parks, we gathered in public squares.” Suburban developments and shopping malls do not offer an adequate substitute for these public spaces in historic downtowns. Even those developments that attempt to mimic traditional Main Streets or town squares

24 Burayidi (2013), 118.
25 Allison and Peters, 15.
26 Gratz (1994), xxvi.
27 Rypkema (2003), 9.
only do so half-heartedly. Private property owners retain the right to monitor the speech and behavior of their customers.\(^2^8\) The abandonment of historic downtowns makes neither economic nor environmental sense. On top of that it breaks down the social and cultural ties that make up a healthy community.

**Meridian, Mississippi**

Meridian, Mississippi, is a shining example, if such a term can be used, of the American center city in decline. Following a meteoric rise as a railroad town in the late-Nineteenth and early-Twentieth centuries, Meridian fell into sharp decline following the Second World War. Like countless other communities across the American landscape, Meridian all but abandoned its traditional city center in the second half of the twentieth century. As automobile culture flourished, residents and businesses left downtown in droves in favor of suburban housing developments and shopping centers near the newly completed interstate highway.

Within the past four decades, the City of Meridian has made efforts, some successful and others misguided, to turn the tide and reestablish the downtown core. An examination of Meridian’s pattern of urban decline, as well as its successes and failures in the pursuit of downtown revitalization, help shed light on the specific challenges facing the small-city downtown in the United States. It is also hoped that an evaluation of Meridian’s historic preservation practices alongside those of other comparable cities will be able to improve Meridian’s ongoing and future revitalization efforts.

\(^2^8\) Elizabeth Anderson, “Consumer sovereignty or citizen disenfranchisement? The question of economic value in relations to public space,” in M. Benedikt (Ed.), *Center 10: Architecture and design in America*, (Austin: School of Architecture, University of Texas at Austin, 1997), 38.
CHAPTER THREE
A HISTORY OF MERIDIAN AND ITS EARLY PRESERVATION MOVEMENT
1860-1997

“Meridian. The sound of it opens the windows of a room like the first four notes of a hymn. Few people can say the names of their home towns with such sly affection. Perhaps because they don’t have home towns, just places where they were born. But these girls soak up the juice of their home towns, and it never leaves them. They are thin brown girls who have looked long at hollyhocks in the backyards of Meridian, Mobile, Aiken, and Baton Rouge.”


The Queen City: Meridian on the Rise (1860 – 1930)¹

Meridian is a strange place, a peculiar mix of singularity and sameness. It is an oddity within the state of Mississippi, a place conceived from the very beginning as an urban commercial center in a region dominated by the rural courthouse-square town. On the other hand, it is a carbon copy of countless other railroad boomtowns that sprung up across the United States at the end of the Nineteenth century. In so many ways it is unique, even bizarre. It is both the birthplace of Jimmie Rogers, the Father of Country Music, and the final resting place of Kelly Mitchell, Queen of the Gypsies.² Then again, it is a stereotype, indicative in so many ways.

¹ Meridian was named the “Queen City” in 1883, when the locomotive for the Queen and Crescent line made a four-minute stop in Meridian to procure a new engine and engineer. The Queen and Crescent Line was in a competition with the L&N line to see who could make the trip from Cincinnati, OH, to New Orleans, LA, fastest. The Queen and Crescent won the race, thereby earning the contested government mail contract.

ways of the “typical” southern city. In her novel *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison treats it as no matter of importance whether the faceless Geraldine – a caricature of the “proper” southern African-American woman – hailed from Mobile or Aiken or Meridian.³

When the Mobile & Ohio railroad first came to Lauderdale County in the 1850s, the village of Old Marion was the principal town and county seat. In April of 1854, with the M&O tracks just ten miles away from the burgeoning village, Constantine “Con” Rea, editor of the Lauderdale Republican, proclaimed, “Our little town feels the impetus. MARION is becoming a city!”⁴ However, the line ultimately bypassed the little town, slicing through a stretch of forested land a few miles to the west. In 1859, the Vicksburg, Jackson, and Brandon railroad intersected with the M&O line at Sowashee Station, the location of present day Meridian. Eventually the inhabitants of Old Marion followed the railroad, with its promise of trade and prosperity, west.⁵ Meridian was born, and Old Marion sank into oblivion.

On February 10, 1860, the Mississippi legislature issued a charter for the City of Meridian. Four years later, almost to the day, the forces of Union General William Tecumseh Sherman burned the village to the ground, leaving only a handful of structures standing.⁶ By the 1880s, Meridian was back on its feet and energetically promoting itself as a hub of trade and manufacturing to rival the various urban

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³ “One such girl from Mobile, or Meridian, or Aiken who did not sweat in her armpits nor between her thighs, who smelled of wood and vanilla, who had made soufflés in the Home Economics Department, moved with her husband, Louis to Lorain, Ohio. Her name was Geraldine. There she built her next, ironed shirts, potted bleeding hearts, played with her cat, and birthed Louis Junior.”

⁴ Laura Nan Fairley and James T. Dawson, *Paths to the Past: An Overview History of Lauderdale County, Mississippi*, Meridian, MS: Lauderdale County Department of Archives and history, 1988, 50.

⁵ Fairley and Dawson, 51-52.

⁶ Fairley and Dawson, 62.
centers of the New South. The 1882-1883 City Directory dubs Meridian “One of the Great Railroad Centres of the South,” and “the youngest, liveliest, and most enterprising city in the state of Mississippi.” In a mere twenty years, Meridian had made a complete turnaround from a war-torn village to a flourishing city. However, as rapid as Meridian’s rise was, it certainly was not singular. Meridian followed the same trajectory as countless other American communities at the end of the nineteenth century. The same city directory states that though “the growth of Meridian has indeed been wonderful and of such a character as to remind one of Alladin [sic] and his lamp... in the present fast age such rapid and complete transformations from forest to city are no uncommon occurrences.”

Around 1890 Meridian entered a its “Golden Age,” a time of expansion and economic prosperity that would last until the stock market crash of 1929. In 1891 Meridian’s population numbered 11,000. By 1900 it had increased to 14,050. That year the city also boasted 119 industries and was the intersection of five different railroads, making it the industrial center of Mississippi. In 1906 the city constructed the Union Passenger Station, an Old Spanish Mission style building that fronted three city blocks and cost $250,000 to build in 1906, or nearly $6.7 million in today’s dollars. By 1907 Meridian was the largest city in the state, a place it would hold until 1930. The stock market crash of 1929 dealt a serious blow to Meridian’s economy, allowing Jackson, the state capitol, to surpass it. Meridian’s decline would only accelerate in coming years, as the waning significance of the American railroad system of the mid-twentieth century spelled the end of Meridian’s Golden Era.

7 Meridian City Directory 1882-1883, Lauderdale County of Department and Archives, 11.
8 Meridian City Directory 1882-1883, 11.
9 Fairley and Dawson, 91 and 101.
Downtown Meridian Fades (1930 – 1979)

As Meridian’s rise was indicative of the typical American railroad town, its decline followed a pattern repeated in countless other American cities in the Post-War Era. With the rise of the federal highway system and automobile culture, Meridian’s dependency on the railroad, and its own railroad-centric downtown, waned. By the 1950s, Meridian’s passenger train service was in significant decline, the city’s train depot falling “silent for hours on end.” In 1960, Meridian’s Union Station (1906) was razed, signaling the end not only of the city’s “passenger train era” but also of the vibrancy of the central business district.  

Without the depot as an anchor, downtown Meridian became increasingly less relevant. Examining the Sanborn Fire Insurance maps for Meridian from 1912 and 1950, it is clear that Meridian was sprawling northward, residential neighborhoods moving ever farther from the downtown core. Between 1912 and 1950, the Meridian’s north-south axis had grown from 1.5 miles to 2.3. In August of 1960, the 126,000 square-foot Broadmoor Mart Shopping Center, the first strip shopping center in the state of Mississippi, opened three miles north of the downtown. In the 1970s, Meridian’s first enclosed shopping mall, Village Fair Mall, opened just south of downtown across the Twenty-second Avenue Bridge. By the 1990s, this shopping mall was already in decline.

1987, the City began the process of applying for a $58 million Urban Development Action Grant (UDAG) for the construction of a 3,000 square-foot regional shopping mall “just south of downtown Meridian,” presumably near the

location of the existing Village Fair Mall. The City argued that the new development would “increase Meridian’s dominance as a retail trade center, provide jobs and expand the local tax base.” The City asserted that this peripheral development would not harm the downtown core, pointing to Meridian Main Street’s (MMS) efforts to encourage the growth of downtown businesses.

However, in 1997 the proposed mall opened two miles east of downtown, rather than just south of the Twenty-second Avenue Bridge. Bonita Lakes Mall, as

**Fig. 2.1 and Fig. 2.2 - Comparison of Sanborn Maps from 1912 and 1950 shows the City of Meridian sprawling northward, away from the traditional railroad-centric downtown. Photos courtesy of Digital Sanborn Maps.**


13 In 1987, at least ten downtown businesses completed façade renovations using façade improvement grants available through MMS. Eleven new businesses also opened in the downtown area. MMS also drafted a comprehensive streetscape plan and oversaw programming intended to attract visitors to the downtown core. “Fiscal Year 1987 Annual Report.”
it was called, offered 750,000 square feet of retail space and placed significant pressure on the already waning Village Fair Mall, which closed a mere two years later. With the closing of Village Fair Mall, the center of Meridian’s retail businesses moved ever farther away from the city center, and Meridian’s historic downtown sank further into disuse.

In 2007, a mere decade later, a new strip shopping center, Meridian Crossroads, opened 500 feet west of Bonita Lakes Mall. It is likely no coincidence that two years after the Crossroads opened its doors, the Wall Street Journal included Bonita Lakes on a list of eighty-four “dead malls” around the country. According to the Wall Street Journal report, Bonita Lakes Mall had sales of $242 per square foot, an amount that put it in danger of failing. With the development of the newer, and ostensibly better, Meridian Crossroads, Bonita Lakes Mall was rapidly becoming obsolete.

In 2015, the Meridian City Council approved a $20 million-dollar tax increment financing issue to finance the Phase II of the Meridian Crossroads Shopping Center. This proposed expansion will increase the shopping center area to

For now, Meridian Crossroads is the golden child, the hip new thing that will solve all of the City’s economic ills. However, the pattern of suburban commercial development in Meridian strongly suggests that one day the shining Crossroads will lie dark and shuttered.

The white flight endemic to countless American communities during and following the Civil Rights Era added to the socio-economic forces chiseling away at Meridian’s historic downtown. Since Barbara Henson first began serving as a City Councilwoman in 1989, she has seen her ward transform from about 35 percent African American to majority African American. Since 2000, the City of Meridian’s diversity index score decreased from 52 to 51, where the diversity index score is the probability of choosing two people at random who are of different racial identities. During this time period, Meridian’s African-American population increased by 7 percent, while its white population decreased by nearly 10 percent. According to Henson, this had been the pattern since the early 1980s:

The county schools became the darlings of everyone’s eye... Everybody in the city now wants to go to the county. When people get enough money, they’ll but a piece of land in the county, get a trailer and then build on the land. That’s been going on for, I would say, 30 years. 

As of 2014, Meridian’s population was 61.6 percent African American, 35.7 percent White, and 1.7 percent Hispanic or Latino.

Fig. 2.4 - Distribution of major shopping centers in Meridian, Mississippi, relative to downtown, represented by a black star at the intersection of Front Street and Twenty-second Avenue. Image created by author using a Google Maps underlay.
As customers fled the city center in favor of peripheral shopping malls, downtown businesses made attempts to recreate the feeling and appearance of new shopping developments with “modernizations” to their own properties. Prior to 1947, Mississippi architect Christopher Columbus Risher was hired to re-skin the Vise Building at 2120 Fourth Street in the new International Style. Risher also added a fourth story to the 1905 building.\(^{18}\) In the 1960s, the owners of the Marks-Rothenberg Department Store and Grand Opera House tried the same tactic and clad their nineteenth-century corner building in metal and glass siding, with a “space needle” jutting out and up from the Twenty-Second Avenue façade.\(^{19}\) This method of

Fig. 2.5 (Left) - South facade of the Vise Building, 2003, courtesy of Mississippi Department of Archivesa and History
Fig. 2.6 (Right) - East facade of the Vise Building, 2015. Photo by author.

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“modernization” has proven itself ineffective in revitalizing center-city commercial zone. An attempt at preservation-minded revitalization did not begin in earnest until the late 1970s.

Preservation Comes for the Queen City (1976-1999)

In 1976, Meridian joined the countrywide Bicentennial fervor and discovered a renewed zeal for the past. That year Bicentennial Meridian published a pamphlet entitled “A Plan for Downtown Meridian.” It opened with a passage yearning for the glory of yesteryear:

The true wealth of Meridian’s Central Business District (CBD) may be in a largely unrecognized resource – its historical heritage recorded in stone and masonry. With resources now available, the slumbering structures written off as decaying images of the past can return to an active role in restoring the CBD to the bustling, people-oriented heart of the city it was at the turn of the century.20

Fig. 2.7 - Marks-Rothenberg Department Store (1889) with 1960s cladding, courtesy of Meridian Historic Preservation Commission.

Fig. 2.8 - MSU-Riley Center (formerly Marks-Rothenberg Department Store) with cladding removed, 2015. Photo by author.

20“A Plan For Downtown Meridian,” (Meridian Museum of Art, June 1976), MDAH, Meridian
The pamphlet details Meridian’s then ongoing efforts towards downtown revitalization: a $15,000 city grant for the creation of a detailed analysis and model of the downtown core, a $35,000 Community Development Grant (CDG) for the removal of architectural barriers to the elderly and handicapped, and research at the MDAH (MDAH) intended to lay groundwork for a future application for National Register status.21 Within two years of Bicentennial Meridian’s call to arms, the Meridian HPC formed and began the process of establishing Meridian’s first historic district in the downtown area.

The Historic Preservation Commission Created

The City of Meridian first established the HPC (HPC) in August of 1978, pursuant to Section 39-13-5 of the Mississippi Code of 1972. This piece of legislation entrusted local county and municipal governments to safeguard the historic properties within their jurisdiction. Specifically it states, “Before it may designate one or more historic districts, or simultaneously with such designation, the governing body of any county or municipality, individually or jointly, shall establish a HPC to preserve, promote and develop the historic resources of such county or municipality.”22 Also in 1979, the City of Meridian established the Architectural Review Board (ARB), which would operate alongside the HPC until 2006, when the city did away with the ARB as a part of significant changes to the Historic Preservation Ordinance.23

21 “A Plan for Downtown Meridian.”
22 “Historic Preservation Commissions; powers and duties; composition; terms of office; officers; minutes of meetings,” Miss. Code Ann. § 39-13-5, Mississippi Code of 1972, Lexis Nexis
A second ordinance establishing the first of Meridian's historic districts soon followed. Ordinance 3548, enacted in January of 1979, created a historic preservation district bounded by 6th Street on the north, 21st Avenue on the east, 25th Avenue on the west, and the railroad tracks on the south. Later that year, Ordinance 3558 altered the downtown historic preservation district, splitting it into two separate areas called the Urban Center Historic District and the Depot District.24

The Meridian Multiple Resource Area, added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1979, included the Urban Center Historic District and the Depot Historic District in addition to a collection of scattered individual properties. Overall, the Resource Area included 164 structures of varying architectural styles, most of them originally intended for commercial use. The Urban Center Historic District was the larger of the two, encompassing approximately twenty-three acres of land and 126 structures. These were principally commercial row buildings in the Italianate style. The National Register application notes that overall these buildings were in poor condition and many of them lay vacant, though some rehabilitation efforts were then underway.25

The Depot District was much smaller by comparison, containing only twelve contributing structures on four city blocks. Most of these buildings were associated with the railroad, including the Union Station Express Depot (c.1906) and Passenger Station (c. 1906). The nomination also included twenty-six individual commercial, residential, ecclesiastical, and civic buildings, among them City Hall, the Temple Theater, the Scottish Rite Cathedral, and the Dixie Gas Station.26

24 Gaither, "Meridian Historic Preservation Ordinance – CHRONOLOGY."
26 Jody Cook.
Multiple Resource Area designation would remain in place until 2006, when the HPC combined and enlarged the two smaller districts into a single larger district.

**Meridian Area Strategic Plan: Blueprint for Tomorrow (1987)**

The Meridian Area Strategic Plan was the first of a series of city initiatives that focused at least in part on the revitalization of downtown Meridian. In Spring of 1987, fifty-seven Meridian residents came together to form the Meridian Area Strategic Planning Council. The Council formulated the Meridian Area Strategic Plan, a document they envisioned as a “blueprint for tomorrow.” The Council intended the Plan to address the most important areas of Meridian and Lauderdale County’s
future development. The Plan necessarily had a wide scope. It offered strategies to reach six broad goals: economic vitality, quality environment, progressive government, cultural and recreational opportunities, excellence in education, and human relations throughout the greater Meridian Area.27

It is important to note that downtown revitalization was not the main focus of the Meridian Area Strategic Plan. However, the Plan did put forward a few initiatives devoted to the preservation and revitalization of the downtown area. Specific goals for downtown development were to increase both ground level and upper floor downtown occupancy to 90 percent by 1990 and to “complete the historical redevelopment of the downtown Meridian area by 1992.” To accomplish this, the Plan directed the City to expand existing downtown redevelopment programs and incentives and to increase off-street parking in the downtown area. The Council also envisioned that establishing a new “downtown mall” would encourage new retail activity in the center city. The Council therefore urged the city to apply for a UDAG grant for that purpose. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the City of Meridian was eventually successful in obtaining a UDAG grant and opening the new mall.28 However, the new indoor mall ultimately opened two miles east of the downtown, rather than just south of the Twenty-second Avenue Bridge as originally planned.

Downtown redevelopment was clearly not a priority of the Plan. Of fifty-one specific initiatives, only four were directly related to downtown revitalization. Since the Council met to consider the future of all of Lauderdale County rather than just Meridian, this is neither surprising nor unreasonable. It is also important to note that, while there were only four initiatives focused on downtown, there were no other initiatives inherently at odds with downtown revitalization. However,

27 “The Meridian Area Strategic Plan” (The City of Meridian, 1987), MDAH, Meridian Vertical Files.
28 “The Meridian Area Strategic Plan.”
the strategies outlined for the redevelopment of downtown were ultimately far too vague to affect any real change. The recommendation that the City complete the revitalization of downtown in only eight years shows a certain naiveté concerning the revitalization process. The redevelopment of any downtown will never be “complete.” It is a never-ending process, constantly balancing the preservation of the past with whatever new cultural, social, or economic developments of the future.

As part of a separate undertaking from the Meridian Area Strategic Plan, the City of Meridian also made significant changes to the downtown streetscape in 1987. That year the City chose to convert many downtown street to one-way traffic. The City hoped that the new system would create “smoother traffic flow.” Unfortunately, the change did just what it was intended to do. It expedited the passage of traffic through the center city, so that downtown became a route rather than a destination. Research has shown that one-way street patterns ease traffic flow at the expense of pedestrian safety and experience and business storefront visibility. Ultimately the one-way streets were so detrimental to downtown Meridian that a 2004 Urban Land Institute report directed the City to return the streets to their original two-way orientation. As of March of 2016, the City still has not complied with this recommendation.

**Architectural Guidelines (1987)**

In 1987, the City of Meridian issued Architectural Guidelines for new construction and alterations to existing structures within the City’s historic preservation districts. These Guidelines were intended for use in all of the nine historic districts then existing in the City of Meridian. These included seven “Neighborhood Districts” – West End, East End, Mid-Town, Merrehope, Poplar Springs, Highlands, and Highland Park – and two “Commercial Districts” – Urban Center and Depot. The Guidelines were “recommended” for use in the seven neighborhood districts but took the “form of an ordinance” for the two commercial districts. The City intended the Guidelines to act as a supplement to the regulations for alterations and new construction in Meridian’s existing preservation ordinance. The Guidelines professed to “focus on what is special about Meridian” in order to “improve the quality of the visual environment” and “protect the high quality fabric of the city.” Overall the Guidelines were intended to educate owners, architect, designers, developers, and contractors about the sort of new construction and exterior alterations that would be acceptable within the historic preservation districts.

The Architectural Guidelines were a typical form-based code. Regulations focused on height, scale, mass, and materials. The Guidelines did not encourage any one architectural style. Rather they encouraged diversity in design, granted new construction and exterior alterations were in keeping with the overall character of the neighborhood. The Guidelines categorized materials as “Generally Accepted” or “Generally Not Accepted” and design practices as either “Required” or “Encouraged.” Required design practices carried the weight of an ordinance in the Urban Center.

Historic District and the Depot District, but not in the residential districts, where they were treated more like suggestions. “Encouraged” regulations were not strictly enforced in any of the districts. Rather, they informed property owners about what design choices would or would not receive quick approval. Similarly, even required design practices are not specifically prescriptive. Rather, they “require” that owners, architects, designers, developers, and contractors consider elements like appropriate height, scale, and mass for designs within the historic districts.

Meridian’s Architectural Guidelines of 1987 show a wish to enforce some level of quality control in new construction and exterior alterations within the downtown historic district without fostering an ahistorical homogeneity. The simple form-based code required that property owners at least consider the historical character of the district. However, they do not encourage any one architectural style, thereby creating a false sense of history within the district. In form and content,

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the Guidelines are indiscernible from countless other architectural guidelines adopted by preservation commissions around the country. In that way, Meridian’s Architectural Guidelines lie well within the established theory and practice of historic preservation in the United States.

**Mayor John Robert Smith and the Union Station Multi-Modal Transportation Center (1993 – 1997)**

In 1993, Meridian Mayor John Robert Smith spearheaded an initiative to reconstruct Meridian’s Union Station. Smith had just been elected for his first term as mayor. He would serve four successive terms from 1993 to 2009 before deciding not to run for a fifth term. Downtown revitalization was one of the major goals of Smith’s four terms. The Union Station Multi-Modal Transportation Center (MMTC) was the first of several downtown development projects during Smith’s sixteen years as mayor.

In August of 1906, the Meridian Terminal Company – an agency consisting of officer from the Mobile & Ohio, the Southern, the Alabama and Vicksburg, the New Orleans, and the Northeastern rail lines - completed the construction of a $250,000

35 “Form-based codes regulate the key aspects of urban form, such as the height of buildings, how close structures are to the street, and windows and doors on walls facing streets and other public spaces. They also govern the streets themselves so that the streets and buildings work together to create a desirable public realm—adding value to every property in the process.”

37 Joyce Peters and Josh Kelly, “Meridian’s Union Station Multi-Modal Transportation Center: A Historic Strength Becomes the Driver for Smart Growth and Downtown Revitalization,” (Institute for Sustainable Communities) 2, n2.
Spanish-revival passenger depot to replace an existing structure. The new Union Station served Meridian for the next sixty years, the structure’s survival tied closely to the fate of America’s railroads. During the Post-War era, passenger rail service fell off significantly. In 1966, all but the eastern wing of Meridian’s Union Station was demolished.38 The steady decline of Meridian’s downtown was closely connected to the loss of Union Station. Almost thirty years later, Mayor John Robert Smith saw the return of the Union Station passenger station as a necessary part of Meridian’s downtown revitalization.

Plans to reconstruct the Union Station passenger depot began in earnest in 1990. In the late 1980s, the City of Meridian had considered developing the historic depot area into a community green space called Heritage Park. This development would have also included a railroad history museum. By 1990, the Heritage Park plan had expanded to include a multi-modal transit center and space for a farmer’s market. In June of 1991, The Mississippi Department of Transportation (MDOT) approved an Federal Railroad Administration grant of $35,000 for the purpose of completing a feasibility study. In October of that year, the City of Meridian established the Multi-Modal Transit Study Committee to oversee the project and tasked it with conducting a feasibility study.39 With a $35,000 grand from the Federal Railroad Administrator, the Committee hired RBA Group of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to perform the study.40 RBA Group completed the study in October of 1992, finding that the multi-modal transit center would be economically viable.41

38 “Union Station Multi-Model Transportation Center," pamphlet (Meridian) in the MDAH Archives, Meridian Vertical files, Jackson, Mississippi. No date.
39 City of Meridian, "Application to Mississippi Department of Transportation for Transportation Enhancement Program of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Enhancement Act for the Construction of the Meridian Multi-Modal Transportation Center," (December 29, 1992) MDAH, Jackson, Mississippi, Meridian Vertical Files.
40 Peters and Kelly, 2.
41 City of Meridian, Application to Mississippi Department of Transportation," 2.
Within the same year, the City of Meridian applied for an Intermodal Surface Transportation Enhancement Act (ISTEA) grant through MDOT. The application was ultimately successful.

From the project’s inception, the City presented the development as a boon to the preservation and revitalization of Meridian’s central business district. A City-issued pamphlet that the project, then in the planning stages, would “promote history preservation and be a catalysts to Meridian’s downtown revitalization efforts.” And the new development did have a preservation bent to it, as it involved the rehabilitation of two historic railroad structures - the surviving east wing of the 1906 Union Station and the Railway Express Agency (REA) building. According

42 City of Meridian, “Application to Mississippi Department of Transportation,” 2.
43 “Union Station Multi-Modal Transportation Center,” Meridian, Jackson, MS, MDAH, Meridian vertical files.
to the 1992 proposal, the east wing of the 1906 Union Station would continue to operate as the Amtrak railroad station, and the REA building would house the Railroad History Museum. A 3,300-square-foot addition would contain the rest of the proposed services: the main waiting area, ticket and freight area, hospitality center, vending area, and security. All rehabilitation would be done according to the Secretary of the Interior’s Standards, and the new structure would be “compatible in massing and color with the existing structures but (would) not reproduce the exact detailing of the original.”

Also from the very beginning, the City envisioned the depot as a multipurpose development. In the 1992 ISTEA grant application, the City laid out the following functions for the new development. “The center would potentially serve as a terminal for Amtrak, intrastate and interstate bus operations, the local public transportation system, and local taxi operations including a shuttle operation to the Meridian Regional Airport.” The MMTC complex would also house the Railroad History Museum and a farmer’s market. As completed in 1997, the complex acts as “a central transfer point among several modes of transportation including Amtrak, Norfolk Southern rail corridor, Greyhound Lines Inc.” In addition to a transportation hub, the MMTC functions as a conference and convention center, with 3000 square feet of meeting space. It also houses the Union Station Railroad Museum, the East Mississippi Business Development Corporation, a gift shop, and area restaurants.

The City of Meridian needed $6.5 million for the rehabilitation of the two existing structures and the construction of the new terminal building. The City received the majority of these funds, $5.1 million, from federal and state grants.
through the MDOT. These grants included the first ISTEA that the state awarded for a historic reconstruction project.\textsuperscript{47} The City put forward $1.3 million, while Amtrak donated $430,000, hoping the project “would serve as a model for other small cities along Amtrak routes.”\textsuperscript{48} Funding for the Railroad History Museum did not come through until 2000, when the Riley Foundation – a local non-profit organization – donated $25,000 to hire a designer to produce a plan for the space.\textsuperscript{49}

The City of Meridian hopes that the $6.5 million investment would stimulate further development in the downtown area, specifically in those blocks immediately surrounding the MMTC, which Mayor John Robert Smith describes as a “run down

\textsuperscript{47} Peter and Kelly, 3.
\textsuperscript{48} Peter and Kelly, 3.
\textsuperscript{49} Jimmy Andrews, “Designer hired for Union Station museum,” in \textit{The Meridian Star}, (March 11, 2000), MDAH.
inner-city neighborhood." To date, the MMTC has been credited with catalyzing $135 million worth of public and private investments throughout the downtown historic district. An article published in *Building on the Past – Traveling to the Future: A Preservationist’s Guide to the Federal Transportation Enhancement Provision*, credited the MMTC with leveraging $10 million in private investments throughout the Depot District. These included new office and retail space, a data processing/computer training center, apartments, and a restaurant. The article claims that “the district is on its way to becoming a 24-hour neighborhood, with additional apartment construction on Front Street and condominium projects in construction two blocks away.”

Another case study, published in 2012, claims that the MMTC “catalyzed 135 million in public-private sector investment around the facility and within 3-4 blocks of downtown.” Specifically, the MMTC with leveraged support for the restoration and reopening of Meridian’s Grand Opera House in 2006 and the development of the MAEE, which was then in the planning stage. The article also credits the MMTC with encouraging more scall-scale redevelopment throughout the downtown area, including new shops, restaurants, boutiques, condominiums, and apartments.

Moving Forward

Meridian’s burgeoning revitalization efforts in the last decades of the twenty-first century show either an unwillingness or an inability to fully commit to preservation-minded redevelopment of the downtown core. Bicentennial Meridian’s call-to-arms, the Historic Preservation Ordinance, and the listing of multiple historic districts on the National Register demonstrate a genuine desire to preserve and revitalize existing districts and neighborhoods. However, the Meridian Area Strategic Planning Council’s continued emphasis on suburban development show at best an incomplete knowledge, and at worst a willful disregard, of the forces driving the deterioration of the center city. At the turn of the Twenty-first century, Meridian would make efforts to streamline and clarify its preservation policies and departments. The decades old plan to restore and reopen Meridian’s Grand Opera House (1889) would also come to fruition. However, many of the same problems – such as an emphasis on suburban development and the lack of professional preservation expertise – would continue to plague Meridian’s downtown revitalization.
CHAPTER FOUR

DESCRIPTION OF MERIDIAN’S PRESERVATION POLICIES AND ONGOING DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION EFFORTS, 1999-2016

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, preservation and revitalization in downtown Meridian rode the momentum of the Multi-Modal Transportation Center. Beginning in 1999, the city resurveyed the downtown, ultimately scrapping the existing historic districts in favor of a single larger district. In 2004, newly hired city planner Randall Gaither embarked on a mission to simplify and clarify Meridian’s Historic Preservation Ordinance and to rework the organization of the HPC and ARB. Also in 2004, the city brought in an advisory panel from the Urban Land Institute to create a downtown redevelopment plan for the city, a document that would influence much of Meridian’s future downtown projects. All of these initiatives combined to create a far simpler and more focused approach to development downtown.

The reopening of the Grand Opera House as the MSU-Riley Center for the Performing Arts in 2006 was arguably the high point in the preservation of Meridian’s downtown. From that point onward, Meridian began to position itself as an “arts and entertainment center” and panned accordingly. It was ultimately this development that led to Meridian’s largest ongoing downtown development projects: the rehabilitation of the historic Threefoot Building as a luxury hotel and the construction of the MAEE. To further support Meridian’s “entertainment district,” there are also plans, in varying stages of completion, to place several smaller cultural attractions around the downtown area. All in all, the development of entertainment venues comprehends the largest and most visible of Meridian’s
ongoing development initiatives. Smaller projects included improvements to the streetscape and introduction of more green space.


A team from the MDAH traveled to Meridian in October of 1999 to reevaluate Meridian's two downtown historic districts. The team completed an architectural survey to determine whether there were enough contributing buildings in the surrounding area to justify combining the two existing districts into a single larger district. The MDAH survey identified thirty-nine contributing structures in the blocks between and just north of the Urban Center and Depot Historic Districts. Most of these properties lay to the north of the districts, with only eleven contributing properties occupying the blocks in between the two.¹

The survey concluded that the City of Meridian should, at the very least, create a new district encompassing the two existing districts, an additional sixteen city blocks to the north, and four additional blocks between the two districts. This larger district would contain an additional seventy-seven structures: thirty-six contributing, thirty non-contributing, and eleven previously listed on the National Register of Historic Places but not as part of the two original district. The survey also outlined an even larger potential district, which contained two additional contributing structures and six more non-contributing. Perhaps most interestingly, both of these two proposed districts excluded a six-block area between the existing districts. The MDAH survey found that this area only contained vacant lots and non-contributing structures and would therefore detract from the overall district.²

2 Deborah Wise Okaley, “Report of Site Visit to meridian, Lauderdale County, 20 October 1999.”
How the larger of the two districts would have fared is of little consequence, for the smaller of the two had no success at all. When the City’s Planning Division finally resurveyed the city center in 2003, they established a much more contracted downtown historic district. Current City Planner Randall Gaither, who oversaw the reevaluation of Meridian’s HPC and historic districts, stated that the Planning Commission did attempt to designate a more expansive historic district. However, the plan did not receive adequate support from the community and local
The new Meridian Downtown Historic District occupied roughly twenty-five city blocks running east to west from Eighteenth Avenue to Twenty-Sixth Avenue and north to south from Sixth Street to Front Street. The expanded boundaries

**Meridian Downtown Historic District (2006)**
included an additional twenty-two contributing, nineteen non-contributing buildings and structures, and four properties that had been independently listed on the National Register before the 2006 designation. However, between the initial architectural survey in 1979 and the 2003 resurvey, the Urban Center District alone lost about twenty-two contributing structures and four non-contributing structures either to demolition or acts of God. In total the larger district designated in 2006 contained 152 contributing and non-contributing structures, eighteen more than the two smaller districts designated in 1979.¹
An Arts and Entertainment District

Meridian began to market downtown as an arts and entertainment destination in earnest in 2003. The city’s annual report for that year announced that Mississippi State University and the Riley Foundation would complete their then ongoing renovation of the former Grand Opera House in 2005. The report also estimated the completion of the Arts District Parking Garage in 2004. The city touted both projects as “catalysts for other development, including an upscale hotel and other support businesses.”

Since then, Meridian’s downtown revitalization efforts have revolved around establishing Meridian as an entertainment destination. Following the renovation and reopening of the Grand Opera House, attention turned toward redeveloping the historic Threefoot Building as a luxury hotel and constructing a multi-million dollar MAEE within the downtown district. The former demonstrates a respect for preservation principles, while the latter exhibits none at all.

The MSU-Riley Center for Education and Performing Arts

Meridian’s Grand Opera House first opened on December 17, 1890, and from 1890 to 1920, served as the premier theater venue in town. However, the theater struggled throughout the 1920s. Newer theaters offered more seating and more comfortable accommodations, and the Grand Opera House simply could not compete with purpose-built “movie palaces” when it came to showing the new moving pictures. To make matters worse, in 1923 a fire in an adjacent building resulted in significant fire and water damage within the Grand Opera House, though

the theater’s state-of-the-art sprinkler system saved it from total loss. After a lengthy renovation, the Grand Opera House reopened under the direction of the Saenger Amusement Company out of Shreveport, Louisiana.\(^5\) This partnership would eventually mean the end of the Grand Opera House.

In 1927 the Meridian chapter of the Hamasa Shriners opened the Temple Theater, a combination stage-theater and movie palace, less than a quarter mile from the Grand Opera House. They leased the building to the Saenger Amusement Company, which soon sent word to Marks Rothenberg that it would no longer be paying its lease on the Grand Opera House because the building was unsafe. The Marks Rothenberg Company took Saenger to court. Time and again, the courts sided with the Rothenberg Company, but Saenger continued to appeal. The suits continued in federal court as late as 1952, and the Rothenberg Company never saw any of its settlement money.\(^6\) The barrage of lawsuits, paired with the venue’s increasing obsolescence, took a devastating toll. The Grand Opera House, first closing its door in 1927, lay empty for almost eighty years.

City leaders first proposed restoring the Grand Opera House in 1965.\(^7\) However, the City does not appear to have taken any serious action at that time. The first practical step toward restoration did not come until 1979. That year the

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6 Mitchell, 55-60.

7 Mitchell, 79.
Meridian chamber of commerce oversaw the establishment the Historic Meridian Foundation (HMF), a private non-profit devoted to the restoration of the Grand Opera House. In 1987, a group of Meridian investors purchased both the Grand Opera House and the Marks-Rothenberg Department Store. The group intended to operate the store and use the profits to restore the Opera House. The store never became a financial success, and in December of 1987 the investors transferred the Grand Opera House to the HMF. Within the next year, the investors also donated the store to the Opera House Galleria, Ltd., a corporation created to manage the building at a profit for the benefit of the HMF. The store closed three years later.

Both the Meridian Redevelopment Authority (MRA) and the MDAH were closely involved with the entire process. After HMF acquired the Grand Opera House in 1987, the MRA donated money for the stabilization of the building’s south façade. Likewise, the MDAH provided a grant for a feasibility study. Per a suggestion of the feasibility study, HMF changed its name to the Grand Opera House of Mississippi,

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8 Mitchell, 81.
9 Mitchell, 82-83.
Inc., to better reflect the organization’s mission. In 1988, small grants from the MDAH and the Meridian Development Authority paid for workmen to seal the building and make basic repairs to the façade and roof. In 1991, the MDAH designated the Grand Opera House a Mississippi Historic Landmark.

The HMF received lukewarm support from the state government. In 1993, the state legislature declared the Grand Opera House the state theater and allotted $150,000 for restoration. However, the then governor, Kirk Fordice, tied up the funds for years in what Dennis J. Mitchell called, “an illegal line-item veto.” The HMF also faced challenges from the City of Meridian itself. Sometime during the late 1990s, the Grand Opera House corporation successfully combatted the city’s threat to condemn and demolish the building because of neglect.

It was ultimately the Riley Foundation, a private nonprofit, and Mississippi State University that saved the Grand Opera House. In 1999, the Riley Foundation donated $200,000 toward the building’s stabilization. The next year, MSU agreed to take ownership of the property after two years of discussions with The Grand Opera House of Mississippi board and the Riley Foundation. The Riley Foundation agreed to donate $10 million for MSU to put toward the restoration. Funding also came through in federal grants from the Save America’s Treasures program, the Department of Commerce, the Economic Development Administration, and Housing and Urban Development. MSU finally took control of the building on September 11, 2001.

10 Mitchell, 83.
11 Mitchell, 85.
12 Mitchell, 102.
13 Mitchell, 88.
14 Mitchell, 90.
15 Mitchell, 90.
16 Mitchell, 93.
17 Mitchell 93
In late fall of 2001, MSU hired Martinez & Johnson Architecture of Washington, D.C., to conduct the restoration of the Opera House. Another architecture firm, Pryor & Morrow Architects of Columbus, Mississippi, handled the renovation of the Marks-Rothenberg Department Store into a state-of-the-art conference center. Pryor & Morrow 3D laser scanned the interior and exterior of the department store in order to document the overall structure, its condition, and decorative surfaces. These images were later informed the repair and reconstruction of interior and exterior finishes. However, Pryor and Morrow concluded that the original wood-frame structure would be unable to support the loads expected within the new conference enter. They therefore decided to gut the interior of the building and retain the exterior facades. They then inserted a modern steel frame and replicated many of the interior finishes. By contrast, Martinez & Johnson made an effort to retain the historic interiors in the Opera House. Partnering with Jeff Greene of EverGreene Painting Studios and T. K. McClintock of Studio TKM in Massachusetts, conserved interior finishes in good conditions and fabricated exact reproductions of finishes too damaged to save.

The MSU-Riley Center opened for the winter season in 2006. This first

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18 Mitchell, 97.
19 Mitchell, 103
season the center exceeded its expected ticket sales. Halfway through the season, they had sold seventy-five percent of their capacity for the whole season, twenty-five percent above what they had expected at that stage. More than a third of the audience came from outside a 100-mile radius.\textsuperscript{22} Over the next several years, the performing arts center continued to exceed expectations. In 2006, the MSU-Riley Center had estimated that it would draw between 40,000 and 60,000 additional visitors to Meridian every year.\textsuperscript{23} In 2013, it drew more than 71,000 and injected almost $4 million into the local economy.\textsuperscript{24} In November of that year, it was also one of 150 convention centers that received the ConventionSouth’s Readers’ Choice Award for the best meeting sites in the south.\textsuperscript{25} The success of the MSU-

Riley center has encouraged further development initiatives in the downtown core, specifically the Threefoot Building hotel conversion and the construction of the MAEE.

**Threefoot Building**

In 1929, Louie, L. M., and Sam Threefoot, the third generation of the prominent German-Jewish family to do business in Meridian, opened the Threefoot Building. At fifteen stories, the building was by far Meridian’s tallest building. The skyscraper was a showcase for Art Deco detailing and glazed terracotta tiles. In 1931, the Atlantic Tile Company used photos of the newly completed Threefoot Building in its advertisement in *Southern Architect and Building News*. Throughout the Twentieth century, the Threefoot Building functioned as an office and commercial building. However, with the decline of Meridian’s downtown in the postwar years, the Threefoot Building lost more and more tenants. By the 2000, the building was abandoned.²⁶

The 2004 Urban Land Institute report suggested redeveloping the Threefoot Building as a luxury hotel. Specifically, the proposed hotel would cater to the MSU-Riley Center, offering superior accommodations for conference and performance attendees as well as the performers themselves. The Threefoot Building hotel would be the only luxury hotel in the City of Meridian and in fact the only hotel in the downtown area. However, given local demand for hotel rooms, this hotel would only be a viable financial venture if performances and conferences at the MSU-Riley Center were successful in increasing the number of overnight visitors to the city.

According to a MSU study, conferences and performances at the MSU-Riley Center would only produce enough demand to warrant an additional sixty-seven hotel rooms in the Meridian area at a 70 percent occupancy rate. MSU-Riley Center hotel demand would need to increase by 50 percent in order to support a new 100-27 ULI, 9.
room hotel, and 201 percent to justify a new 200-room hotel. The ULI panel cautioned that the current market would be unable to support a 200-room hotel. The panel advised that developers target hotel completion for 2008, and then only if there were sufficient market demand. In order to make the hotel project more economically feasible, the report suggested that major demand sources – namely the Riley Center, the three local hospitals, and the city – guarantee hotel room nights. Even with these precautions, the ULI report did not go so far as to ensure that development of the Threefoot Building hotel would be economically feasible within the immediate future.28

In 2006, the city purchased the Threefoot building for $1.2 million from a private owner and entered into a preliminary agreement with Historic Restorations Inc. (HRI) of New Orleans, a development firm specializing in adaptive reuse projects. The firm planned to leverage substantial funds from the Gulf Opportunity Zone legislation, a federal program intended to stimulate financial recovery in the Gulf States following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. They also planned to take advantage of rural development funds and both state and federal Historic Tax Credits. HRI also expressed interest in rehabilitating other buildings in the

28 ULI, 11-13.
downtown area, including the Newberry, Kress, and Bellsouth Buildings. The following year, the Meridian City Council voted to begin the pre-application process for a $12 million loan from the First National Capital Bank of Lousiana for the development of the Threefoot Building. At the time, the project seemed to be running smoothly, with 2008 Meridian Star article announcing, “Threefoot project work may begin in three months.” However, the project soon ran into major difficulties.

In August of 2008, there were challenges to an independent study’s conclusion that the new hotel would have on average a 64 percent occupancy rate. Suzy Johnson, director of the Lauderdale County Tourism Commission, doubted that the hotel would be able to maintain that high of an occupancy rate. A similar challenge came from Abdul Lala, the president of Lala Enterprises – a local hotel development firm – and owner of six hotels in the Meridian area. Lala doubted that the hotel would be able to attract enough guests to support itself. Lala took further issue with the rehabilitation’s projected price tag of $45 million, boasting that he was then building seven hotels across Mississippi and Alabama, none of which would cost more than $17 million.

Soon thereafter, Lala proposed his own alternative to the Threefoot Building hotel development. A December 2008 email from Ken P’Pool, Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer, to various members of the MDAH staff expressed concern over Lala’s challenges to the Threefoot project. According to P’Pool, Lala had recently

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made his own proposal for developing a downtown hotel, which would involve demolishing several historic structures to make way for “a modern structure more appropriate to a strip development than a historic urban area.” P’Pool also stated that Meridian Mayor John Robert Smith had suspicions that Lala had no intention of actually constructing a hotel downtown, a suspicion P’Pool seemed to share. Rather, Smith believed that Lala merely intended to draw enough City Council support to delay the hotel until the Golf Opportunity Zone tax credits expired. According to Smith, Lala’s end goal was simply to kill the project and therefore eliminate competition for his six Meridian hotels. However, by December 22, Lala had withdrawn his proposal, choosing instead to support HRI’s development.

In January of 2009, the Meridian City Council finally approved HRI’s Threefoot development plan. At the time, HRI expected to begin work by April of that year. However, the project still received limited support from the city. The plan

33 Ken P’Pool, email to MDAH staff, Dec. 2, 2008 (Threefoot Building property file, Meridian vertical files, MDAH, Jackson, MS).
34 Ken P’Pool, email to MDAH staff, Dec. 2, 2008.
barely passed the City Council, with only two of five members of the City Council voted against the project. Councilman George Thomas voted against the project, not because he was not interested in saving the Threefoot Building, because he believed the city could not afford to invest $14 million in the project. He stated that he would support if HRI had asked the city to back $7 million or less. Councilwoman Barbara Henson voted against the project on the same grounds. Even though the project had received enough support to go forward, it is clear that it was lacking in unanimous support, which would eventually be its downfall.

The project lost its most ardent champion in Mayor John Robert Smith when he chose not to pursue a fifth term in 2008. Cheri Barry replaced Smith as mayor in July of 2009 and killed the Threefoot rehabilitation project within six months, stating that the project had too many problems to justify continuing it. In 2010 Barry brought in an outside consultant, Watkins Development of Jackson, to help with Meridian’s downtown development. Barry had already worked with Watkins Development on a project that involved removing the police department from its historic downtown location to a refurbished Cowboy Maloney’s just south of downtown. In December of that year, Barry and Watkins Development presented three development initiatives: the Charles L. Young Sr. Freedom Park, a Meridian Public Safety Facility, and a “downtown convention hotel located in the Threefoot Block to serve the MSU-Riley Center.” The hotel development plan involved razing the Threefoot Building and adjacent Trustmark Bank building and constructing a

new hotel from the ground up.\textsuperscript{40} By 2014, the Watkins Development plan had shifted toward rehabilitating rather than replacing the Threefoot Building. In August of that year, the firm embarked on a study of the infrastructure below the building. At the time, David Watkins, the firm’s CEO, stated that he was 99 percent sure the firm would be able save the building.\textsuperscript{41}

Despite Watkins Development’s promises to assist with Meridian’s downtown development, little seems to have gone forward in the first two years. In February of 2012, the City Council voted to decrease the developer’s monthly salary from $10,000 to $1, since there had been no headway on that project.\textsuperscript{42} Watkins Development’s activities in Meridian eventually came under the scrutiny of Mississippi’s Secretary of State. In 2014, David Watkins was slapped with more than $600,000 in restitution and penalties for illegally transferring funds from a bond issue for converting a Belk’s department store in Jackson, Mississippi, into City of

Jackson office space, to the Meridian Police Department project in Meridian.\textsuperscript{43}

In 2015, the City entered into yet another deal to develop the Threefoot Building as a hotel. On September 15, the City Council approved the sale of the Threefoot Building to Ascent Hospitality Management, who planned to develop the building into a 120-room Courtyard by Marriott. The company’s president, John Tampa, estimated that renovations would take between fourteen and eighteen months and cost upwards of $14 million. According to the agreement with the City Council, Ascent Hospitality Management would purchase the building for $10,000 and begin renovations no later than twelve months after the final sale. The company would also lease eighty parking spots in the city-owned Entertainment District parking garage for ten years at the rate of $2,000 a month, with a 2 percent annual increase. In return, the city would waive all property tax (except taxes for school district purposes), make utilities available with no tap fees, and improve sidewalks, lighting, and landscaping surrounding the building.\textsuperscript{44} Ascent Hospitality Management officially took possession of the building on January 7, 2016. At that time, Tampa announced that the renovated building would provide 120 hotel rooms, a restaurant, and a Starbucks cafe.\textsuperscript{45} As of March 2016, the Threefoot hotel project was still underway, with Tampa estimating that the renovation would begin in fall of that year.\textsuperscript{46} Provided everything goes to plan, the Threefoot hotel should open in the spring of 2018.

\textsuperscript{46} “MOVING AHEAD: Threefoot Building deal finalized,” \textit{The Meridian Star}, Mar. 4, 2016,
Mississippi Arts and Entertainment Experience

In 2001 the Mississippi State Legislature enacted Bill number 2666, which established a “Southern Arts and Entertainment Center... to be housed in a facility located within the corporate limits of Meridian, Mississippi.” 47 Legislators described the proposed center as a combination museum and performance venue that would showcase Mississippi’s contribution to music, literature, and the arts. The 2001 bill further specified that the center would include a conference center, a performing arts center, an amphitheater, and an “artists’ village.” 48

Directors of the MAEE originally considered Bonita Lakes Reservoir, near the newly opened Bonita Lakes Shopping Mall, the site for the $69.4 million development. 49 However, by 2007, there was talk of relocating the center to a property within the downtown historic district, since it had proven difficult to secure necessary funding for the massive development proposed for Bonita Lakes.

In December of 2007, the former Kress Department Store building (1937) adjacent to the newly opened MSU-Riley Center for Education and the Performing Arts was earmarked as a possible site for the MAEE. 50

In July of 2010, the MAEE board acquired two properties within the Downtown Historic District. Tommy Dulaney, president of the MAEE board, stated

47 Senate Bill No. 2666 (Mississippi Legislature Regular Session, 2001).  
48 Senate Bill No. 2666 (Mississippi Legislature Regular Session, 2001). 
that it would be far less expensive to construct the project downtown, where there were existing utility lines and infrastructure, than the original location near Bonita Lakes Reservoir. The board purchased the first of the two properties, the former Montana’s restaurant building, for $300,000.\textsuperscript{51}

The building, a c. 1885 two-story brick warehouse, sat at 100 22\textsuperscript{nd} Avenue along the main southern entry to the downtown district.\textsuperscript{52} Manny and Melanie Mitchell donated the adjacent Hotel Meridian (ca. 1907) property to the MAEE. Melanie was and remains a member of the MAEE board and its building committee. At the time, the board was undecided as to whether they would maintain and repurpose the existing buildings or demolish them and start with a clean site.\textsuperscript{53}

By August of 2011, a MAEE spokesperson announced that the board had

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decided to demolish the existing buildings.\textsuperscript{54} Demolition began in October of 2011.\textsuperscript{55} The bare site then lay unused for another five years as the MAEE board scrambled to finalize construction plans and secure adequate funding. In February of 2013, the MAEE board unveiled plans for a 58,461-square-foot museum that will cost an estimated $44 million.\textsuperscript{56} However, the groundbreaking did not occur until October of 2015. After the groundbreaking, the MAEE began calling itself the MAEE (MAEE).\textsuperscript{57} The project is slated for completion in 2017, in time for Mississippi’s bicentennial.\textsuperscript{58}


The MAEE differs from the other ongoing revitalization initiatives in that it essentially ignores the existing fabric and traditional uses of the historic downtown. Whereas the MSU-Riley Center and upcoming Threefoot hotel development involve rehabilitating existing buildings, the MAEE has already resulted in the destruction of several historic structures. The MAEE also does not fulfill a traditional use in the downtown district, as does the reconstructed Union Station Multi-Modal Transportation Center. The MAEE therefore attempts use a generic model of the large cultural facility to encourage development of the downtown area. In doing so, it foregoes many of the economic and environmental benefits (discussed in chapter two) of rehabilitating existing structures. It also ignores the unique, place-specific characteristics that differentiate the downtown core from the suburbs.

The MAEE is not the final cultural development planned for downtown Meridian. The ULI report of 2004 suggested placing multiple, smaller cultural attractions through the historic district to “anchor” the peripheries of the district. In the twelve years following the ULI report, some of these projects came to fruitions while other remained in the planning stages.

Fig. 3.18 - Hotel Meridian site after demolition, 2016, courtesy of Claire Lee
Museums

The ULI panel foresaw that the MSU-Riley Center alone would be insufficient to establish the City of Meridian as an entertainment center and spur a complete revitalization of the downtown core. To supplement the cultural attraction of the Center, the panel therefore suggested the City scatter various museums throughout the downtown area. Museums discussed in the report included a Children’s Museum, the Cohn Sheehan Design Center, the Institute of Southern Jewish Culture, the Mississippi Industrial Heritage Museum (MIHM), and the Hartley Peavey Museum. The panel also suggested the city relocate Jimmie Rodgers Museum from Highland Park, a historic streetcar pleasure park a little over a mile northwest of City Hall, to an unspecified vacant lot on Front Street near the railroad tracks. Of these
suggestions, only one has been successful prior to March of 2016: the Industrial Heritage Museum. Two others, the Cohn Sheehan Design Center and the Institute of Southern Jewish Culture, are no longer on the table. As of the completion of this study, a small group of Meridian citizens were trying to garner support for the construction of a Children’s Museum within the downtown area. There also continues to be some support for the relocation of the Jimmie Rodgers Museum, though that attraction continues to operate in Highland Park.

In the absence of the traditional anchors for a downtown - residential and retail - the ULI report proposed that the city use cultural attractions to draw people to the downtown area. In contrast to the MAEE, these museums would be on a smaller scale and located within existing structures. Though these cultural attractions do not fit within the traditional functions of a historic downtown, they do preserve historic building fabric. These attractions would therefore help preserve existing structures that could one day, if need be, go on to a different use. However, most of these museums have not come to be.

The MIHM, located in the old Soulé Steam Feed Works buildings, incorporated in 2003, therefore predating the ULI Report. In 2004, the Mississippi legislature designated the MIHM the Official State Historical Industrial Museum. The museum if dedicated to preserving and restoring the historic buildings of the Soulé Steam Feed Works, which date from the 1890s to the 1920s, and educating the public about Mississippi’s industrial heritage. Overall, the museum is a financial success. Financial information was available for the museum from 2010 to 2014.

During that period, the museum experienced a net loss only in 2010. It operated in the black for the remaining year, making a profit of $45,611 in 2014.61

The report destined the children’s museum for the vacant Bell South building, which was already under City ownership; the MIHM for the former Soulé Steam Feed Works building; and the Peavey Museum for the “underutilized Peavey facility at the east end of 4th Street.” Additionally, the panel suggested renaming Front Street for Jimmie Rodgers “as a way to amplify the importance of the district and Rodgers’ legacy.”

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Further supports for the Arts and Entertainment District included a cultural City Walk and City-issued plaques identifying significant structures in the downtown area. The ULI panel conceptualized that the City Walk would be similar to the City of Boston’s “Freedom Trail.” Markers and signs would guide tourists along the trail through the city and point out sites and structures of cultural, historical, or architectural significance. Maps of the City Walk would be available at local hotels and restaurants as well as the proposed Business and Tourism Welcome Center. The panel also suggested that the City of Meridian combine and expand the two existing downtown historic districts to enhance the historic character of the downtown core.

The development of various entertainment attractions in downtown Meridian reveals a mixed adherence to preservation ideals as part of the revitalization process. Many of these developments - such as the MSU-Riley Center, the Threefoot Building hotel project, and the Mississippi Industrial Heritage Museum - respect the historic building fabric of the downtown district. With these exception of the Threefoot Building - which is itself an anomaly in the Meridian cityscape - these attractions also occupy buildings that fit well within the established patterns of scale in downtown Meridian. Both are far more modest in size than the proposed MAEE, which respects neither established forms nor existing structures in the historic city center. These contradictory projects reveal a certain lack of direction and focus in Meridian's downtown planning and revitalization efforts. The ULI Report undoubtedly employs preservation principles in its suggestions, and both the City and private developers appear at different times to prioritize preservation-minded development. However, this support appears to be inconsistent and fleeting, perhaps nowhere as noticeably as in the revitalization, or lack thereof, of the African-American Business District.
The African-American Historic Business District

In addressing the preservation and revitalization of the African American Historic Business District, the ULI report gave much needed support to an undervalued area within Downtown Meridian. The African-American Business District occupies the northwest corner of the downtown area, bounded roughly by Twenty-sixth and Twenty-third Avenues east-west and by Fourth and Sixth Streets south-north. Beginning at the turn of the Twentieth century, the district was

Fredie Carmichael, “Parts of downtown could get face-lift once study complete,” in The Meridian Star (September 19, 2003), MDAH.
became the center of African-American commercial life, an area that offered goods and services white establishments often denied African Americans. Like much of downtown Meridian, the African-American Business District was in a state of significant decay.

The ULI report presented a two-phase redevelopment of the African-American Business District to address the area’s “instability and physical blight.” First it encouraged the City of Meridian to work with property owners within the district and the Meridian Redevelopment Authority to oversee the process. The first phase of the redevelopment involved improving the streetscapes within the district. This included the replacement of sidewalks, the installation of decorative lighting, and the removal of unused over-head power lines, all funded through a Capital Improvements Program.63

In phase two, the ULI panel urged the City to adopt the Stennis Institutes draft downtown strategic development plan for Meridian. This plan proposed the rehabilitation of several buildings within the district. Specifically the Stennis Institute report called for the restoration of the Cohn Sheehan building and the stabilization of the Fielder & Brooks Pharmacy building, which served as the headquarters for the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), a major Civil Rights Movement organization in Mississippi. The Stennis Institute plan also recommended the design and construction of a Freedom Summer memorial within the district. To these recommendations, the ULI report added the reuse of the E. F. Young Hotel, another significant Civil Rights landmark, and other commercial buildings along Fifth Street.64

Both the Stennis Institute and the ULI reports leaned heavily on preservation principles in their plans for revitalizing the African-American Business District.
Each recognized the district as significant to the overall culture and identity of the downtown core. They also recognized that the African-American Business District was at a greater risk of decay than any other portion of the downtown historic district. However, the City of Meridian was not ultimately successful in carrying out the plans as laid out by the ULI and Stennis Institute reports. To date, the City has only completed Phase I.

Work for Phase I did not begin until October of 2012, when the City of Meridian received a $1.2 million-dollar MDOT Transportation Enhancement Program grant to fund improvements to Fifth Street in the African-American Business District.65 The city received further funding from the Hurricane Katrina Community Development Block Grant. The proposed project involved improving drainage and sewer systems, moving overhead utility lines undergrounds, and making the streetscape more aesthetically pleasing. Ground was broken in January of 2015, with plans of completing the work by June. However, the project ran into multiple delays. According to project engineer Tim Bryan, unseasonably wet weather and faulty dirt complicated proceedings.66 Work on Fifth Street finally wrapped up in October. The second phase of the streetscape project, work on Twenty-Second Avenue, began that month, with plans of completing in March of 2016.67

There have been no successful attempts to move forward with the second phase of the ULI reports plan for revitalizing the African-American Business

District. In 2004, the City of Meridian did make a good faith effort to rehabilitate one of the three buildings mentioned in the ULI and Stennis Institute reports. In May of that year, the city council, at the urging of Mayor John Robert Smith, voted to give $25,000 to the Meridian Redevelopment Authority for use in the revitalization of the African-American Business District. The MRA announced that it would use the money, in addition to a $122,000 grant from another source, to purchase and renovate the Cohn Sheehan Building. However, in September of that same year, high winds from Hurricane Ivan destroyed the dilapidated building. Following

the demolition of the COFO Building in 2014, the E. F. Young is the only remaining building of those earmarked for restoration.\textsuperscript{70} While these properties were privately owned and therefore not the direct responsibility of the City, the City is responsible for policing building neglect and demolition within the downtown historic district. Also in the mid-2000s, the City, under the direction of then Mayor John Robert Smith, did attempt to strengthen the HPC and streamline the Historic Preservation Ordinance. However, the changes to this government body do not appear to have rendered it much more effective.

**Historic Preservation Commission: New and Improved?**

At the same time that these projects were going forward, The City of Meridian updated and clarified its Historic Preservation Ordinance, which had been in existence since 1978. According to current City Planner Randall Gaither, that in its first iteration, which lasted from 1978 until 2006, Meridian's HPC was largely ineffective. Gaither gathered from others who had been around at the time, that during the 1970s and 1980s, the Commission was overzealous and undereducated, a combination that garnered the displeasure of the general public. Gradually the Commission lost much of its influence. By the early 2000s, they appear to have had very little say in development projects downtown. According to Gaither, MSU did not even present their plans for the Riley Center to the Commission. Instead, they worked directly with the MDAH.\textsuperscript{71}

Gaither accepted the position as City Planner in Meridian in 2004, and

\textsuperscript{70} Jerry Mitchell, “COFO building, torn down without permit, has asbestos,” *The Meridian Star*, 13 May 2014, Fielder and Brooks Drug Store file, Meridian vertical files, MDAH, Jackson, MS.

\textsuperscript{71} Randall Gaither (Meridian Senior City Planner), in discussion with the author, December 2015.
worked closely with Mayor Smith. In 2004, Ordinance 4257 was passed, which consolidated the Urban Center District and the Depot District and included an additional area between the two into the Meridian Downtown Historic District. Two years later, Gaither oversaw an overhaul of the Historic Preservation Ordinance. The amendments to the ordinance did away with Meridian’s Architectural Review Board - instead assigning all of its rights and powers to the new HPC - and made the ordinance’s language “more user friendly.” The revisions to Meridian’s Historic Preservation Ordinance do appear to have had some success. At the very least, developers no longer bypass the Commission. It was the HPC that approved the demolition of Hotel Meridian in 2011, and approved the designs for the proposed MAEE.

The HPC is intended to be the defender of historic preservation in the City of Meridian. The commission is made up of seven Meridian residents appointed by City who serve staggered terms not exceeding six years in duration. Commission members are eligible for reappointment. The Commission is responsible for advising the city as to the designation of historical preservation districts, historic landmarks, and landmark sites, and recommending additional ordinances. The Commission also has the authority to conduct surveys of historic properties and to “promote and conduct an educational and interpretive program on historic properties within its jurisdiction.”

The Commission is responsible for monitoring new construction and exterior alterations to existing structures within designated historic districts. Property

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73 Randall Gaither.
74 Meridian HPC - Created, Meridian, MS Code of Ordinances (2006), Chapter 17, Article III, Section 33.
75 Historic Preservation – Authorization, Meridian, MS Code of Ordinances (2006), Chapter 17, Article III, Section 34.

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owners within historic districts must apply for a certificate of appropriateness (COA) before building a new structure or making exterior alterations to an existing structure. The Commission reserves the right to deny a COA to projects that are of an inappropriate style or scale, undermine the architectural or historical integrity of an existing structure, or cause irreparable damage to an existing structure.76

The Meridian Historic Preservation Ordinance also outlines the design guidelines for new construction and exterior alterations. New construction must be “visually compatible” with the surrounding built environment. The design guidelines further specify that the “design, scale, gross volume, arrangement, site plan, texture, material, and exterior architectural features of new construction” must be “in harmony with its surroundings.” The guidelines have no requirements that are more specific than these. Rather, the design guidelines encourage the use of diverse styles in new construction, upholding one of the Historic Preservation Ordinances main objectives – to blend traditional and modern styles within the historic district. The criteria for alterations to existing structures are nearly identical, except that the guidelines require that alterations be in keeping with the style of the building.77

The Historic Preservation Ordinance also gives criteria for the issuance of a COA for the demolition of an existing structure within any of the historic districts. In determining the appropriateness of a demolition, the Commission must consider the historical and architectural significance of the building, its unique or additive contribution to the *tout ensemble* of the historic district, the difficulty or

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76 *Certificates of appropriateness [COA] – Approval Required, Meridian, MS Code of Ordinances* (2006), Chapter 17, Article III, Section 50.
impossibility of replicating the structure, and the future use of the site.\textsuperscript{78}

Though in theory the HPC is intended to protect Meridian’s historic building stock, in reality it falls somewhat short. As a whole, the Commission appears to have come a long way since its days of being bypassed by developers. However, Gaither himself admits that there are still serious flaws in the operations of the Commission. He expressed concerns that members of the current Commission are far too likely to treat the appointment as a “routine deal” and too easily convinced that it is economically infeasible to preserve or rehabilitate an historic structure.

It is clear that Meridian is now at a critical juncture in its downtown revitalization. Since the slump during the 2007 recession, development downtown has picked up. The MAEE is the largest and most visible result of this renewed interest in the downtown core, but other downtown revitalization initiatives are also growing in picking up speed. The road improvements in the African-American Business District, as well as the reformulation of the HPC and ordinance, signal a turning point in Meridian’s downtown development. It remains to be seen whether these new developments and initiatives will be beneficial or detrimental to Meridian’s downtown revitalization.

\textsuperscript{78} Certificates of appropriateness [COA] – Criteria for Issuance, Meridian, MS Code of Ordinances (2006), Chapter 17, Article III, Section 52.
CHAPTER FIVE

ANALYSIS OF MERIDIAN’S CURRENT PRESERVATION POLICIES AND ONGOING DOWNTOWN REVITALIZATION

The 2000s have seen a distinct shift in Meridian’s approach to downtown revitalization. This shift was due in large part to the reworking of the HPC, the designation of the new Downtown Historic District, and the plan to market Meridian as a regional arts and entertainment center. These initiatives have achieved mixed success, and in particular the focus on entertainment venues detracts from more sustainable forms of downtown growth. Some of these initiatives have succeeded, or at least attempted, to focus on preserving Meridian’s historic building fabric, while others have ignored that fabric entirely.

Since 2003, Meridian’s official downtown revitalization initiatives have revolved around positioning Meridian as an arts and entertainment center. This trend began with the restoration of the Grand Opera House, figured prominently in the 2004 ULI Report, and continues to snowball with the construction of the MAEE and the proposed Threefoot Building hotel. The restoration of the Grand Opera House and renovation of the Marks-Rothenberg Department Store building have undoubtedly been a boon to downtown revitalization. However, on its own this approach cannot, and will not, secure the future of downtown Meridian, as it necessarily excludes the traditional anchors for downtowns: residential spaces, retail, and civic functions.

This focus on arts and entertainment has also led to the least preservation-minded development in downtown Meridian in recent years: the demolition of Hotel Meridian and multiple historic warehouses to make way for the MAEE. Worse still, the proposed MAEE follows the same model as thousands of large, expensive cultural facilities constructed through the United States during the late 1990s and
early 2000s, many of which went belly up in the 2007-2009 recession. The MAEE also seems to have drawn attention away from the smaller cultural anchors the ULI Report suggested positioning throughout the district, much to the detriment of the African-American Business District.

The African-American Business District has not received the attention that both the ULI Report and the City’s own 2009 Comprehensive Plan seemed to promise. Not only is this area significant culturally and historically to the Downtown Historic District; it is also important geographically. Given its position at the northwest edge of the Downtown Historic District, the maintenance of the African-American Business District is crucial to maintaining the integrity of the northwest quadrant of the Meridian’s historic downtown. However, the African-American Business District may very well be the least intact portion of the downtown district. In recent years it has lost some of its most significant structures to demolition-by-neglect and acts of God.

In addition to Meridian’s policy mistakes and oversights, there are serious flaws in the organization and operation of its HPC. HPC members have been accused of everything from corruption and nepotism to fecklessness. The HPC also appears to practice insufficient enforcement of the demolition-by-neglect ordinance, which has already caused the loss of significant structures of the downtown area. Whether this stems from ignorance, apathy, or a lack of public support, it is a serious failing in Meridian’s ongoing preservation and revitalization efforts in the downtown area.
The MSU-Riley Center

The MSU-Riley Center for Education and the Performing Arts appears to have had a hand in driving development and investment in downtown Meridian. In 2006, before the opening of the MSU-Riley Center, it was anticipated that the center would draw from 40,000 to 60,000 people to downtown Meridian each year.\textsuperscript{1} The Riley Center exceeded these expectation. Halfway through its first season, the venue had sold 75\% of its capacity for the entire season.\textsuperscript{2} By 2013, the Riley Center was drawing 71,000 guests annually, 11,000 more than the highest predicted number of annual attendees. And in 2012, these visitors injected nearly $4 million into the local economy.\textsuperscript{3} Following the success of the MSU-Riley Center, Mississippi State University also chose to locate its School of Kinesiology on the same block, in the

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\caption{Fig. 4.1 (left) Newberry Building lunch counter, c. 1960, courtesy of Meridian HPC. Fig. 4.2 (right) Lobby of MSU School of Kinesiology, 2015, courtesy of Mississippi State University.}
\end{figure}

adjacent Newberry Building.

The MSU-Riley Center development made use of preservation principles, if imperfectly. The project involved a complete, world-class renovation of Meridian’s historic Grand Opera House, while also refitting the facility with modern technology. On the other hand, the developers did remove all interior fabric from the historic Marks-Rothenberg Department Store building, as discussed in Chapter Three. Only the facade of the original building remains. A similar treatment was used in the adjacent historic Newberry Building, which now houses the MSU Kinesiology School. Images below show the original and current appearance of the interior of the Newberry Building. However, these developments did at least maintain the facades and significant structural fabric, whereas the MAEE has already brought about the destruction of several historic structures in downtown Meridian.

Mississippi Arts and Entertainment Experience

The MAEE, slated for completion in 2017, fits into a larger pattern of communities building large, expensive cultural facilities as engines of urban revitalization. From 1994 to 2008, there was a significant spike in the construction of such facilities throughout the United States, with the average costing around $21 million. The communities involved envisioned most of these projects as a boost to heritage tourism and urban revitalization. Ultimately, many of these massive facilities failed, resulting in “a cultural landscape awash with arts organizations struggling to stay afloat.”

Many of these failures occurred because the number of visitors and overall revenue were lower than projected, while expenses and

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overhead went over given estimates. Of the performing arts centers constructed during this period, 91% went over their initial construction budget, 54% had lower revenues and 59% had higher expenses than expected. Museums fared even worse. As a large, multi-million dollar museum and performance venue hybrid, it is likely that the MAEE will face some significant obstacles to attaining economic stability.

The failure of the Georgia Music Hall of Fame in Macon, Georgia, and the ongoing financial difficulties of the Ohr-O’keefe Museum of Art in Biloxi, Mississippi, demonstrate the substantial risks associated with large, purpose-built cultural facilities in small and midsize cities. The Georgia Music Hall of Fame, in purpose and planning, was remarkably similar to the proposed MAEE. First opening in 1996, the Georgia Music Hall of Fame was never self-sustaining and closed after only fifteen years in operation. The Ohr-O’Keefe museum, though it differs from the MAEE in its purpose and mission, is similar in scale. Since it first opened in 2010, the museum has floundered financially and has faced the threat of closure at least once.

In contrast, the Delta Blues Museum in Clarksdale and the Lynn Meadows Discovery Center in Gulfport, Mississippi, are both successful museums in repurposed historic structures of relatively modest size. The Delta Blues Museum has occupied multiple small, pre-existing structures since its founding in 1979, and it continues to draw substantial crowds from around the world. Similarly, the Lynn Meadows Discovery Center makes its home in a repurposed 1915 school building. The center successfully weathered Hurricane Katrina, even though the structure suffered significant damage, and appears to be financially stable today.

5 Woronkowicz, Building Better Arts Facilities, 108 and 137.
6 Woronkowicz, 111-112.
The Georgia Music Hall of Fame – Macon, Georgia

The proposed MAEE is strikingly similar to the failed Georgia Music Hall of Fame in Macon, Georgia. As was the case with the MAEE, an act of the state legislature initially created and funded the Georgia Music Hall of Fame. The Hall of Fame also faced similar difficulties during its planning stages, with interested parties debating whether a suburban shopping development or Macon’s historic downtown should be the site of the project. Completed in 1996, the Georgia Music Hall of Fame was not in operation for fifteen years before closing its doors in June of 2011. Like the MAEE project, the Georgia Music Hall of Fame was intended to stimulate the local economy and revitalize Macon’s historic downtown. However, the Hall of Fame drew barely one-sixth of the paid visitors necessary to break even and never achieved economic self-sufficiency.

The Georgia state legislature first awarded the proposed music hall of fame to Macon in 1989. In the seven years that followed, interested parties debated whether
the hall of fame should be located in downtown Macon or at Victorian Village, a new commercial development near Interstate 75. Eventually the City of Macon settled on a downtown location and acquired four acres of land, which they then donated to the State of Georgia. In 1991 Davidson-Peterson Associates of Maine completed a feasibility study of the proposed development. The study found that the museum would attract between 130,000 and 150,000 visitors a year and be self-sustaining within its second or third year.\(^7\)

The Music Hall of Fame never attained this level of success. In its eleven years of operation, the museum drew on average 27,000 paid visitors annually and never drew more than 33,000 in any given year. The State also gradually cut public funding over the next eleven years from $840,000 in its first year to $350,000 in its final. The operating costs for the 42,000-square-foot building were substantial, and in 2011 the State of Georgia made the decision to close the museum permanently.\(^8\) NewTown Macon, a private local development firm, offered to provide $800,000 in funds to keep the museum afloat. However, these funds were not enough to save the Hall of Fame from economic failure. After the museum closed, NewTown Macon turned its attention toward restoring the old Capricorn Records studio in downtown Macon and opening it as a music museum and working music studio.\(^9\) With a failed large-scale, new-build development behind it, local developers moved forward with rehabilitating and reusing and more modestly-sized historic structure.

\(^8\) Ramati, “Music hall doomed almost from start.”
Like the Georgia Music Hall of Fame, the Ohr-O’Keefe Museum of Art in Biloxi, Mississippi, is a large, multi-million-dollar, purpose-built museum that has struggled financially. Though still in operation, the Ohr-O’Keefe Museum of Art in Biloxi, Mississippi, has yet to attain financial stability. The Ohr-O’Keefe Museums suffered extreme economic hardships in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, but many of its financial troubles stem from operating costs that were higher than expected. High insurance costs, construction costs, and expensive upkeep have contributed in significant difficulty in making ends meet.

Today the Ohr-O’Keefe Museum of Art displays a permanent collection of the works of George E. Ohr, the “Mad Potter of Biloxi”. Born in 1857 in Biloxi, Mississippi, to German-born parents, Ohr became a significant figure in the modernist movement in American art pottery. In 1989, the Mississippi Museum of Art placed pieces of Ohr Pottery in a new satellite branch in Biloxi. The satellite branch closed four years later, and the newly created George E. Ohr Arts and Cultural Center opened in the same location. In 1997, the center’s Board of Trustees began plans for expansion.  

At the time, the Ohr collections were sharing space with the Biloxi library.

In 1998 Jeremiah O’Keefe, a former mayor of Biloxi, donated $1 million toward the new museum facility. That same year, O’Keefe, along with consultants Jeanne Nathan and Robert Tannen and the center’s then-director Margie Gowdy, visited Frank Gehry’s California studio. Gehry agreed to design the collection’s new

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home. Gehry’s initial design included a single, large museum structure. However, Gehry eventually designed five smaller stand-alone structures or “pods.” The complex would also include the four-story City of Biloxi Center for Ceramics, which would feature a permanent exhibit of African-American ceramics. The initial estimate for construction costs was about $15 million. Construction began in 2004.

By 2005, the price tag on the new facility had doubled to about $30 million. In August of that year, Hurricane Katrina’s storm surge dropped a three-story casino barge on the unfinished museum, destroying the City of Biloxi Center for Ceramics. O’Keefe hoped that the Board of Trustees would elect to use the $17 million insurance pay out to rebuild the museum on a new site further inland. However, other members of the board voted him down, and construction went forward at the original site. Inflated construction prices following as a result of Hurricane Katrina set the museum further back. Its insurance costs also increased substantially and would only cover the art collection if the museum packed it up and moved twenty-five miles inland in case of another hurricane. Three of the five planned pod structures finally opened in November of 2010.

Hurricane Katrina, was unable to provide the level of support it had promised. The museum had cost $45 million to build, three times higher than the $15 million originally proposed. The museum was all but out of cash. A *New York Times* article quoted Larry Clark, president of the museum’s board, “We’ll need some intervention within a matter of weeks or we will be totally without funds.”

The Ohr-O’Keefe Museum of Art was certainly contending with extraordinary challenges. However, this instance effectively demonstrates how massive cultural development projects struggle to weather unforeseen downturns, whether they be financial downturns or natural catastrophes. With massive construction costs and operating expenses, such facilities must draw substantial crowds to remain financially viable. With such a slim margin of error, lower than projected visitor turnout or increasing overhead expenses can tip the delicate balance, spelling disaster for the institution. Admittedly, the Ohr-O’Keefe Museum of Art experienced extreme and unusual challenges in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. However, the museum also underestimated its operating expenses, a financial misstep that

existed independently of the natural disaster. It is also true that the Lynn Meadows Discovery Center, a children’s museum located in a 1915 school building, fared better in the wake of the storm.

**Delta Blues Museum – Clarksdale, Mississippi**

In contrast to the Georgia Music Hall of Fame and the Ohr-O'Keefe Museum, the Delta Blues Museum in Clarksdale, Mississippi, demonstrates how the reuse of an historic structure can be a boon to a heritage museum. In constant operation for over thirty years, the Delta Blues Museum is the second oldest music museum in the United States, after the Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville, Tennessee.

The Delta Blues Museum is a shining example of how incremental growth and the reuse of existing structures can be a successful and sustainable non-profit business model. First founded in 1979 by Clarksdale’s Carnegie Public Library, the
museum originally occupied a single room in the Myrtle Hall Elementary School. In the beginning, the museum only drew about one visitor a month, and its collection was so small that library director Sid Graves took the exhibits home every night for security. In 1981, the museum moved to the Carnegie Public Library at 114 Delta Avenue, and attendance grew. Eventually the museum expanded into its own wing of the library in 1996, before finally reorganizing as a stand-alone museum and moved into its own building in 1999. This was not a massive, newly constructed facility with all the bells and whistles, and their associated price tag. Rather the museum chose to rehabilitate the historic Clarksdale freight depot.²⁰

Built in 1918 for the Yazoo and Mississippi Valley Railroad, the freight depot is itself an asset to the museum.²¹ When asked about the significance of the building, Maie Smith, the museum’s group tour manager, described the close link between the museum’s mission and the preservation of the historic structure:

Yeah, [preserving the freight depot] was important because a long time ago blues musicians, when they travelled, they didn't have money. So they rode the freight train, or they worked on the railroad - they'd catch that train and they'd ride into Memphis, and if they wanted to go to St. Louis, they'd catch another train if that train wasn't going to St. Louis. Because they were on there with the cargo, because they couldn't afford to buy a ticket... So it seemed like the perfect home for the Delta Blues Museum, since we are preserving, perpetuating and informing people about the blues - why not put it at ground zero?22

The 5,000 square-foot space houses both permanent and traveling exhibits.

Thirteen years after opening, the museum expanded, constructing the Muddy Waters Wing in 2012. That year the museum drew 25,000 visitors, a significant number given Clarksdale's population is a little over 17,000.23 In 2013, the museum was one of ten recipients of the National Medal for Museum and Library Service, an award that recognizes museums' service to their local communities.24 As of 2014, the museum's annual Juke Join Festival drew attendees from about thirty countries and fifty states.25

Statistical Analysis of Purpose-Built Museums and Museums in Existing Buildings

A survey of twenty-six museums in Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee demonstrates that museums in adapted historic structures fare somewhat better than purpose built museum. The survey focused on museums with annual budgets between $1 million and $10 million. This range was chosen for two reasons. First of all, the Georgia Music Hall of Fame in Macon, Georgia, a museum of identical purpose and similar scale to the MAEE, had an annual operating budget of $1.8 million. As the MAEE will be more than 16,000 square feet larger, it is unlikely it will have an annual budget lower than that of the Georgia Music Hall of Fame. Second, a 2012 study of American museums set of museums with budgets between $1 million and $10 million in their own category, between mid-sized museums with budgets of $500,000 to $1 million and the largest museums with budgets in excess of $10 million.26 Museums were chosen from museums with 990 tax forms available on Guidestar.com. Only those with program service revenue and occupancy expenses listed were used. Financial data was taken for the years 2012 and 2013, as these were the two years for which all of the surveyed museums had 990 tax forms posted.

Overall, museums in adaptively-reused, pre-existing structures appeared to perform somewhat better than their purpose-built counterparts. In 2012, purpose-built museums had on average a budget surplus of $7,398. The average budget surplus for museums in repurposed structures was $320,322, more than 4000% higher. That year 62 percent of the purpose-built museums surveyed actually operated at a loss, compared to only 50 percent of the museums in pre-existing buildings. The following year, museums in pre-existing structures continued to

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<th>Museum Name</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Year of Construction</th>
<th>Square footage (ft²)</th>
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<td>Barber Vintage</td>
<td>Leeds, AL</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>229,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motorsports Museum</td>
<td>Mobile, AL</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>95,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile Museum of Art</td>
<td>Mobile, AL</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>95,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Museum of Arts and Sciences</td>
<td>Macon, GA</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>55,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi Museum of Art</td>
<td>Jackson, MS</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>54,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knoxville Museum of Art</td>
<td>Knoxville, TN</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>53,200</td>
</tr>
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<td>Huntsville Museum of Art</td>
<td>Huntsville, AL.</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>46,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adventure Science Center</td>
<td>Nashville, TN</td>
<td>1974</td>
<td>44,000</td>
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<td>Creative Discovery Museum</td>
<td>Chattanooga, TN</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>43,000</td>
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<td>Mississippi Children's Museum</td>
<td>Jackson, MS</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art</td>
<td>Biloxi, MS</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discovery Center at Murfreesboro</td>
<td>Murfreesboro,TN</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>18,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atlanta Children's Museum</td>
<td>Atlanta, GA</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>17,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flint RiverQuarium</td>
<td>Albany, GA</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.1: Surveyed Purpose-Built Museums

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Museum Name</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Year of Construction</th>
<th>Square footage (ft²)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>McWane Science Center</td>
<td>Birmingham, AL</td>
<td>1887</td>
<td>180,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gulf Coast Exploreum Science Center</td>
<td>Mobile, AL</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>65,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children's Museum of Memphis</td>
<td>Memphis, TN</td>
<td>1941</td>
<td>54,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Civil Rights</td>
<td>Memphis, TN</td>
<td>c. 1960</td>
<td>52,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum</td>
<td>Atlanta, GA</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customs House Museum and Cultural Center</td>
<td>Clarksville, TN</td>
<td>1898</td>
<td>35,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheekwood Botanical Garden &amp; Museum of Art</td>
<td>Nashville, TN</td>
<td>1933</td>
<td>30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana Children's Longue Vue House and Gardens</td>
<td>New Orleans, LA</td>
<td>19th c.</td>
<td>30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynn Meadows Discovery Center</td>
<td>Gulfport, MS</td>
<td>1916</td>
<td>15,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burritt Museum</td>
<td>Huntsville, AL.</td>
<td>1936</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dixon Gallery and Gardens</td>
<td>Memphis, TN</td>
<td>1942</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2: Surveyed Museums in Existing Buildings
out-perform their purpose-built counterparts, though not as dramatically. In 2013, museums in pre-existing structures had an average budget surplus of $150,464, only 43.1% more than that of purpose-built museums at $105,176.

It also appears to be more cost effective per square foot of space to operate a museum in a historic building. Upon first examination, this does not immediately seem to be the case. On average, during the year 2012, museums in historic structures had occupancy expenses ($462,460) that were 47% higher than those of purpose-built museums ($314,505). However, when these expenses are calculated relative to square feet, it becomes apparent that the historic buildings are actually more affordable. To ensure a balanced comparison between buildings, those museums with extensive gardens or outdoor exhibits were not included in this analysis. Those museums were the Barber Vintage Motorsports Museums (830 acres), the Discovery Center at Murfree Spring (20 acres), Burritt Museums (167 acres), Cheekwood Botanical Gardens and Museum of Art (55 acres), Dixon Gallery and Garden (17 acres), and Longue Vue House and Gardens (8 acres). This analysis necessarily excluded those buildings for which square footage was unknown. Disregarding these facilities, purpose-built museums cost on average $6.98 per square foot to operate in 2012, and $6.31 per square foot in 2013. Museums in historic buildings cost 7.2 percent less to operate in 2012 and 14.7 percent less in 2013, at $6.48 per square foot and $5.38 per square foot, respectively.

There is no guarantee that the MAEE will fail financially. However, the non-profit has chosen to saddle themselves with the costs of an expensive new building and substantial overhead. The MAEE is expected to draw from 125,000 to 150,000 visitors a year, more than three times the size of Meridian’s population.27

Table 4.3 - 2012 Net Income for Purpose-Built Museums

Table 4.4 - 2012 Net Income for Museums in Existing Structures
Table 4.5 - 2013 Net Income for Purpose-Built Museums

Table 4.6 - 2012 Net Income for Museums in Existing Structures
attraction does not draw this volume, it is possible it will find itself in serious financial straits. After all, the Georgia Music Hall of Fame was expected to attract from 130,000 to 150,000 paid visitors a year but in reality only drew 27,000 on average. And if the museum does fail, it leaves behind it a massive, specialized structure that will be difficult to put to a new use. Even if the museum flourishes, Meridian will have lost a significant piece of its early railroad history. If the museum fails, it will have lost this for no purpose.

The African-American Business District

Preservation and promotion of the African-American Business District has figured prominently in many of Meridian’s planning documents. Both the Stennis Institute and Urban Land Institute reports prioritized the revitalization of the African-American Business District in their plans for downtown Meridian. The City of Meridian has had mixed success with pursuing these initiatives. As discussed in Chapter Three, the road improvements in the African-American Business District are well underway. However, the rehabilitation of select buildings has not occurred.

The African-American Business District is currently in an advanced state of delapidation, having lost much of its historical integrity since that area was first included in the Meridian Multiple Resource Area National Register designation in 1979. The intersection of Twenty-Fifth Avenue and Fifth Street, the heart of the African-American Business District, is in particularly bad condition. The 1979 National Register designation listed fifty-five contributing structures within the boundaries of the African-American Business District. As of March of 2016, only twenty-one of these structures are extant, a loss of 62 percent in thirty-seven years.
or one building about every eighteen months. Buildings in the African-American Business District were lost at almost twice the rate of all of the structures in both the Urban Center Historic District and the Depot District. Only 33 percent of the structures throughout these districts were lost between 1979 and 2016.

When the two downtown districts combined and expanded in 2006, the rest of the 2500 blocks of Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Street, which were partially excluded in the 1979 designation, were included. This brought the count of contributing structures within the African-American Business District up to thirty-eight. However, as of March of 2016, twenty
Fig. 4.9 and Fig. 4.10 - Only two buildings remain on the north side of the 2400 block of Fifth Street, the E. F. Young Hotel (Left) and a two story commercial building at 2404 Fifth Street (Right). Photos by author.

Fig. 4.11 - Only one building (not pictured) remains on the east side of the 500 block of 24th Avenue.
of these buildings are still in existence, a loss of 47 percent over ten years or almost two buildings a year. The following images show the extent of the loss of historical integrity within the African-American Business District.28

**Historic Preservation Commission**

There appear to be long-standing concerns about the efficacy of Meridian’s preservation ordinance and its HPC. In a 2008 email to MDAH staff, Ken P’Pool wrote, “Meridian’s preservation ordinance is one of the older and weaker of our local ordinances.”29 Similarly, Randall Gaither, Meridian Senior City Planner, stated that by the time he came to Meridian in 2004, the HPC had lost much of its influence. According to Gaither, the entities involved with the development of the MSU-Riley Center actually bypassed the HPC. He stated that these entities never gave a presentation to the HPC, instead working directly with MDAH.

Gaither oversaw several changes to Meridian’s preservation ordinance in hopes of clarifying the duties of the HPC and strengthening HPC control over development in historic districts. Gaither’s initiative seems to have been at least partially successful, given the HPC is currently involved with Meridian’s largest ongoing downtown development project, the construction of the MAEE. However, it is clear that certain weaknesses remain in the HPC.

The main allegations leveled at Meridian’s HPC are that the organization is too complacent when it comes to enforcing the preservation ordinance and that many of the individual commissioners are not genuinely concerned with the

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29 Ken P’Pool email.
preservation of Meridian's historic building fabric. Gaither himself has expressed his concern that the current Commission is too easily convinced that preservation of historic structures is economically infeasible. In particular, Gaither feels that the HPC fails to enforce the demolition-by-neglect ordinance in many cases.  

Christopher Alexander, the Public Relations specialist has questioned the appropriateness of some of the appointments to the HPC. Alexander expressed concern that commissioners are chosen based on their status in the community rather than their individual merit. He also stated that not all of the commissioners are genuinely concerned with the preservation of Meridian's historic building stock. Alexander also expressed concerns that the Commission was unlikely to change in the near future because, as he stated, "the majority people on (the) Commission are some of the strongest financial bakers for the city of Meridian."

It is clear that there is a disconnection between two of the most significant preservation organizations in the City of Meridian. The Threefoot Preservation Society has been closely involved with the maintenance and promotion of the Threefoot Building. According to Christopher Alexander, Mayor Percy Bland has also requested that they assist in the upcoming restoration of the historic Meridian Police Station. It is concerning that these two organizations appear to be at odds with one another.

30 Randall Gaither (Meridian Senior City Planner), in discussion with the author, December 2015.
31 Christopher Alexander (Threefoot Preservation Society), in discussion with the author, October 2015.
32 Christopher Alexander (Threefoot Preservation Society), in discussion with the author, October 2015.
33 Christopher Alexander (Threefoot Preservation Society), in discussion with the author, October 2015.
According to Senior City Planner Randall Gaither, demolition-by-neglect is one of the most pressing threats to the historic building stock of downtown Meridian. Under Meridian’s current Historic Preservation Ordinance, the HPC may fine those found guilty of the demolition-by-neglect of structures within a historic district up to $500 a day for every day the individual is found in violation. The ordinance also authorizes the HPC to make necessary repairs to any property undergoing demolition-by-neglect and to make cost of those repairs “a lien against the property in accordance with MS Law section 21-19-11.”

According to Gaither, the current HPC lacks both the inclination and the public support to follow through with the daily fines. Once owners found guilty of demolition-by-neglect refuse to pay fines, the HPC’s last resort is to have local law enforcement arrest the offenders, pursuant to section 1-9 of the municipal code. However, the incarceration of persons for neglecting building maintenance is not often palatable to the general public:

> It’s a very tenuous political position because you are saying this guy needs to go to jail for the fact he didn’t paint his windows or replace the glass in his windows or put a new roof on, and meanwhile you got guys who are killing people and robbing people... And you know the people are just not going to put those two things together.

While public opinion may never get fully behind prosecuting demolition-by-neglect, a few changes to the HPC’s existing procedures may help save a larger percentage of at-risk structures.

The recent demolition of the Fielder and Brooks Pharmacy, more popularly

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35 Randall Gaither (Meridian Senior City Planner), in discussion with the author, December 2015.
known as the COFO Building, serves as an interesting case study of Meridian's enforcement of its demolition-by-neglect ordinance. Constructed around 1879 as a commercial building, the COFO Building was purchased by two African-American doctors in 1940 and was the first pharmacy to serve Meridian's African-American community. During the 1960s, the Meridian area Council of Federated Organizations, an influential Civil Rights group, used the second floor of the pharmacy as their headquarters. New York native Michael Schwerner organized voter registrations and other Civil Rights activities from the COFO Building. During the Freedom Summer of 1964, Schwerner and two other activists, James Chaney and Andrew Goodman, were murdered while investigating the burning of an African-American church in rural Neshoba County.  

In May of 2011, local Civil Rights activist Roscoe Jones Sr., applied to the MDAH for a Mississippi Civil Rights Historical Sites Grant to fund the preservation of the COFO Building. Jones proposed using the existing building as a Civil Rights museum and community center devoted to educating local youth about race relations and community service. Jones estimated that the project would cost $265,000. That summer MDAH approved Jones’ application and awarded $210,000 toward the buildings renovation. The next year the National Trust for Historic Preservation awarded Main Street Meridian $2,307 from the David K. Thorne Intervention Fund. Main Street Meridian used the funds to hire a structural engineer to determine the feasibility of restoring the building as a museum and community center.

36 “Fact Sheet for Fielder and Brooks Drug Store/COFO offices,” Historic Resources Inventory (2011), Meridian vertical files, MDAH (MDAH), Jackson, MS.
37 Roscoe Jones, Sr., “Mississippi Civil Rights Application Sites Grant Application Form: Fielder/Brooks Drug Store COFO Center Restoration, Meridian,” 6 May 2011, Fielder and Brooks Drug Store Property File, Meridian Vertical Files, MDAH, Jackson, MS.
38 “Grant to preserve historic building,” The Meridian Star, 17 January 2012, Fielder and Brooks Drug Store Property File, Meridian vertical files, MDAH, Jackson, MS.
that the building was too structurally unsound to make renovation feasible. Water damage, the result of a collapsed roof, and the loss of adjacent row buildings had undermined the COFO building’s structural integrity. Watson recommended razing the existing building and reusing as much historic material as possible in creating an aesthetically identical reconstruction.\footnote{Mark Watson, “The Freedom Summer Center Fielder & Brooks Drug Store, Meridian, Mississippi,” 26 February 2012, Fielder and Brooks Drug Store file, Meridian vertical files, MDAH, Jackson, MS}

It does not seem that there are any plans to follow Watson’s recommendation of reconstruction with recycled material. The COFO Building was demolished without a demolition permit in May of 2014. After demolition had already begun, it was found that material in the roofing and flooring contained asbestos. At that point, the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality stepped in to ensure the proper disposal of hazardous materials.\footnote{Jerry Mitchell, “COFO building, torn down without permit, has asbestos,” \textit{The Meridian Star}, 13 May 2014, Fielder and Brooks Drug Store file, Meridian vertical files, MDAH, Jackson, MS}

Based on this sequence of events, it appears that the COFO Building may have already been beyond saving by the time MDAH awarded the funds for its renovation. However, whether the building had already lost all structural integrity or additional deterioration between May 2011 and February 2012 sealed the building’s fate, it
Fig. 4.16 - Old Citizens Bank Building, December 2015. Photo by author.

Fig. 4.17 - Structural crack in east exterior wall, near northeast corner of building, December 2015. Photo by author.

Fig. 4.18 - Interior conditions of first floor of Old Citizens Bank Building, December 2015. Photo by author.
is clear that the Meridian HPC’s lax enforcement of the demolition-by-neglect ordinance was at fault. Had the commission taken action sooner, it is probable that the building could have been rehabilitated with funds from both the Mississippi Department of Archives and the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Meridian must reformulate its demolition-by-neglect ordinance using more precise language. The HPC must then commit to using whatever powers at its disposal to enforce the new ordinance. A clause allowing protections for property owners under financial duress will ensure that the HPC does not overstep its bounds. As the case of the COFO Building illustrates, it will be possible for the HPC to work with property owners in securing grants from public and private institutions in at least some instances.

In discussions with the author, Randall Gaither named multiple buildings that have been the victims of demolition by neglect. Among them were a number of warehouses on Front Street, and the Grand Avenue Hotel (date). Gaither also expressed concern that the old Citizen’s National Bank Building was “headed in that direction.” As recently as January of 2014, the owner of the old Citizen’s National Bank Building, at 2214 4th Street, presented a plan for rehabilitation to the HPC for approval. The owner proposed a “renovation inside and out for reuse as mixed commercial (ground floor) and residential (second floor) use.” At the time the

*Fig. 4.15 - Old Citizens Bank Building, January 17, 2014, courtesy of Meridian HPC.*

41 Randall Gaither (Meridian Senior City Planner), in discussion with the author, December 2015.
building was described as “good structurally” with a “fair appearance.” However, according to Gaither’s account, it is likely the building already had serious structural problems:

You know we’d tell (the owner), “Your bricks are falling off.” Well, he’d hire a guy and he’d go put four or five bricks back in... but never did much in the way of a long-term solution. The new guy comes in. He’s flush with cash at the time because of a death in the family. It’s a great deal, and he goes in there... But even though he had some construction experience from an observation standpoint, he didn’t have any practical kind of general contractor perspective. A lot of the things that he did were detrimental things, so he took it in the other direction, in my opinion. What we have is the result of a series of bad decisions and underfunded attempts - That’s just the way it is.

More than two years after the application for a certificate of approval for the rehabilitation, the building is still empty. It appears that deconstruction of the building interior left it vulnerable to weathering. Part of the roof has caved in, and it seems likely that the building will soon be torn down. The current owner has plans to maintain and reuse the front façade. The structure will now be another glaring example of how the weak enforcement of the demolition-by-neglect ordinance is destroying much of Meridian’s historic building stock.

The State of Things

Since the end of the Twentieth century, the City of Meridian has placed a greater focus on downtown revitalization than at any other period in its history.

42 “COA-14-06,” Jan. 17, 2014, 1, (Meridian Historic Preservation Minutes, Department of Community Development, Meridian, MS).
43 Randall Gaither (Meridian Senior City Planner), in discussion with the author; December 2015.
44 Karen Rooney (Executive Director Meridian Main Street), in discussion with the author; October 2015.
This movement began in earnest under the leadership of Mayor John Roberts Smith with the development of the Multi-Modal Transportation Center and the MSU-Riley Center, the reformulation of the HPC and ordinance, and the first attempt to rehabilitate the Threefoot Building. The downtown revitalization slowed in the years following Mayor Smith’s leaving office, a period that coincided with the Great Recession.

With the improvement of the local economy and the election of a more preservation-minded mayor, Meridian’s downtown revitalization seems to be gaining speed. However, many ongoing projects and practices are actually detrimental to the redevelopment of downtown. The obsession with establishing an entertainment district in downtown Meridian is often at odds with the historic building stock. Specifically, the MAEE draws from a model for large cultural facilities that is not financially sound. Disregard for the African-American Business District has led to significant deterioration to that area and detracts from the successful development of other parts of the downtown area. Finally, deep-seated flaws in the operation of the HPC, particularly as that pertains to the enforcement of Meridian’s demolition-by-neglect ordinance, are a threat to the integrity of the entire Downtown Historic Preservation District. If Meridian is to encourage sustainable, long-term development in downtown, it must mitigate these bad practices. Overall, downtown Meridian could greatly benefit from a more preservation-minded approach to future and ongoing revitalization efforts.
CHAPTER SIX
RECOMMENDATIONS

The most pressing concerns for Meridian’s ongoing downtown revitalization efforts are the failure to enforce the demolition-by-neglect ordinance, flaws in the operation of the HPC, the neglect of the African-American Business District, and the MAEE. The city can mitigate these threats by working more closely with local and state preservation organizations and consciously favoring small, preservation-minded development over costly, large new construction in the downtown core.

**Mississippi Arts and Entertainment Experience**

The MAEE is a risky venture, and one that does not capitalize on the existing building stock of Meridian’s historic downtown. The development is advertised as a catalyst for downtown revitalization, but it ignores the very qualities that make historic downtowns assets to thriving communities: their economic and environmental sustainability and their unique sense of place. The MAEE has already resulted in the destruction of a significant portion of Meridian’s historic building stock. Hotel Meridian, a mere stone’s throw from the railroad tracks, sprang up with the rails just as the city had. It was an important reminder of Meridian’s past and a significant element of Meridian’s skyline.

Moreover, this study has shown that large-scale cultural attractions are financially risky. Regardless of whether they were in purpose-built or pre-existing buildings, around 50 percent of large museums (defined as those with operating budgets between $1 million and $10 million) operated with a budget deficit in 2012.
and 2013. Purpose-built museums performed somewhat worse than museums in adaptively reused, pre-existing buildings. This data directly contradicts the belief that a large, purpose-built cultural facility will catalyze downtown revitalization in Meridian, Mississippi, or in any other comparable city.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Museum types</th>
<th>Percent operating with a budget deficit in 2012</th>
<th>Percent operating with a budget deficit in 2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose-built museums</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Museums in pre-existing structures</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose-built museums and museums in pre-existing structures</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.1: Percent of all museum studied operating with a budget deficit in 2012 and 2013

In future, the City of Meridian would do well to focus on placing cultural facilities in existing buildings in the downtown district, as has been done successfully with the MSU-Riley Center. The 2004 Urban Land Institute report recommended that Meridian locate five of six proposed museums in existing buildings within the downtown area. The report suggested placing a Children’s Museum in the vacant Bell South Building, the Cohn Sheehan Design Center in the Cohn Sheehan Building, the Institute of Southern Jewish Culture in the former Kress Department Store Building, the Mississippi Industrial Heritage Museum in the Soulé Steam Feed Works building, and the Peavey Museum in the underutilized Peavey facility at the east end of 4th Street.¹

There are currently plans underway to site a Children’s Museum in downtown Meridian. A group of local citizens is seeking $1 million from the city to finance a children’s museum. The project is budgeted at $12 million. It is currently

¹ ULI, 27-28.
unclear whether the group plans to repurpose an existing structure or build anew.² The Bellsouth Building, which the ULI Report recommended, is not an option. Developers are currently restoring that structure as a 27-unit luxury apartment building.³ It is recommended that the city encourage the placement of the children’s museum in another existing building. This will be both more economically and more environmentally sustainable. It will also make the most of Meridian’s significant stock of historic structures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Museum Name</th>
<th>Square footage</th>
<th>2012 deficit/surplus ($)</th>
<th>2013 deficit/surplus ($)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adventure Science Center</td>
<td>44,000</td>
<td>-1,160,991</td>
<td>-508,455</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atlanta Children’s Museum</td>
<td>17,000</td>
<td>882,379</td>
<td>637,960</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barber Vintage Motorsports Museum</td>
<td>229,000</td>
<td>-807,774</td>
<td>-815,817</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative Discovery Museum</td>
<td>43,000</td>
<td>-325,150</td>
<td>-140,818</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discovery Center at Murfreesboro Spring</td>
<td>18,000</td>
<td>-195,535</td>
<td>-7,119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flint River Aquarium</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>-208,943</td>
<td>97,268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huntsville Museum of Art</td>
<td>46,000</td>
<td>3,155</td>
<td>-81,390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knoxville Museum of Art</td>
<td>53,200</td>
<td>1,012,711</td>
<td>4,184,118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi Children’s Museum</td>
<td>40,000</td>
<td>-799,812</td>
<td>187,168</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mississippi Museum of Art</td>
<td>54,000</td>
<td>-100,791</td>
<td>-1,035,082</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile Museum of Art</td>
<td>95,000</td>
<td>1,025,987</td>
<td>615,010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Museum of Arts and Sciences</td>
<td>55,000</td>
<td>-4,919</td>
<td>31,907</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Orleans Museum of Art</td>
<td>135,000</td>
<td>-611,261</td>
<td>715,906</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ohr-O’Keefe Museum of Art</td>
<td>25,000</td>
<td>1,474,515</td>
<td>-2,405,187</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.2: Budget surpluses and deficits for purpose-built museums in 2012 and 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Museum Name</th>
<th>Square footage</th>
<th>2012 deficit/surplus ($)</th>
<th>2013 deficit/surplus ($)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Burritt Museum</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>-358,868</td>
<td>25,780</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheekwood Botanical Garden and Museum of Art</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>1,849,411</td>
<td>-769,946</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s Museum of Memphis</td>
<td>54,000</td>
<td>741,907</td>
<td>399,446</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customs House Museum and Cultural Center</td>
<td>&gt;35,000</td>
<td>430,824</td>
<td>-95,535</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dixon Gallery and Gardens</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>10,291</td>
<td>-371,408</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gulf Coast Explore Science Center</td>
<td>65,000</td>
<td>-589,214</td>
<td>-793,430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longue Vue House and Gardens</td>
<td>22,000</td>
<td>-1,019,070</td>
<td>-851,545</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana Children’s Museum</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>-275,289</td>
<td>1,403,416</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynn Meadows Discovery Center</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>-210,707</td>
<td>58,372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McWane Science Center</td>
<td>180,000</td>
<td>-2,292,912</td>
<td>1,305,661</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Civil Rights Museum</td>
<td>52,000</td>
<td>5,198,592</td>
<td>1,462,854</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum</td>
<td>50,000</td>
<td>358,895</td>
<td>31,907</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.3: Budget surpluses and deficits for museums in pre-existing structures in 2012 and 2013

The African-American Business District

The City of Meridian needs to pay particular attention to the African-American Business District in coming years. Not only is the district of cultural significance to the city; it is also an important buffer zone of the Downtown Historic District, and therefore its maintenance is necessary to keeping deterioration and encroaching development at bay.

Preserving Existing Structures

The African-American Business District has already lost much of its historic integrity. Entire blocks have been razed, and many existing structures are in advanced stages of deterioration. It is therefore imperative that the city make a serious effort to stabilize existing structures and encourage rehabilitation. The HPC must be particularly sensitive to applications...
for demolition in this neighborhood. Demolitions must only be allowed in the case of immediate threats to public safety, and the demolition-by-neglect ordinance must be enforced. The city should work closely with the MDAH, Meridian Main Street, and the Threefoot Preservation Society to source available funding and grants for development in the area.

The city should make rehabilitation of the E. F. Young Hotel a priority. This building is the only one remaining of the three structures that both the Stennis Institute and the ULI reports earmarked for rehabilitation. The former hotel could be adapted to provide either commercial, retail, or residential space. It could also be the site of a Civil Rights museum and community center, a use originally proposed for the COFO Building. Such a development would preserve the history of the district in addition to providing a social and cultural hub for the existing community. Such an attraction would also fit into existing Civil Rights group tours offered or promoted by organizations like Teaching Tolerance and Tripline. These tours already frequent Birmingham and Selma in Alabama, and Philadelphia and Jackson in Mississippi. Since Meridian is en route from Birmingham and Selman to Jackson, such an attraction would undoubtedly receive visitors from these established group tours. This smaller-scale cultural development would be a viable alternative to the large, purpose-built museum development model the MAEE follows. It would do a far better job of preserving and promoting local history and architectural heritage and would likely prove to be more economically sustainable.

Infill Development

The city must also encourage and require the construction of high quality

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and contextually sensitive infill development in this district. This development should be in keeping with the height, scale, and mass of existing structures. New infill should also be made of quality materials using a high-standard of building construction. It may be tempting for the city and private owners to retain the vacant lots as surface parking. However, this is not a use that will attract people to the area. Rather, new mixed-use development should be located in this area as an alternative to demolishing existing structures in other parts of the Downtown Historic District to make room for new construction.

**Historic Preservation Commission**

The majority of the problems with the HPC appear to stem from the fact that its members are either unfamiliar with or not interested in preservation principles as they relate to economic revitalization. There is also a disconnect between the HPC and significant local preservation and community development organizations that further weakens the HPC. According to Randall Gaither, the developers of the MSU-Riley Center actually bypassed the Meridian HPC during the planning process and worked solely with the MDAH instead.\(^5\) This demonstrates not only a lack of trust between the two organizations but also the inability of the HPC to enforce its own ordinances, which require all development or construction within the historic districts to go through the HPC for approval.

The City of Meridian should require members of the HPC to attend regular training sessions on the basic historic preservation practices, including preservation theory, law, and economics. These sessions should be done through a partnership with Main Street Meridian, an organization that already sponsors workshops for

\(^5\) Randall Gaither (Meridian Senior City Planner), in discussion with the author, December 2015.
local business owners in the Downtown Historic District, the Threefoot Preservation Society and the MDAH. The suggested collaboration will not only strengthen and inform the HPC; it will also assist in rebuilding relationships between these key preservation organizations. It will also help in sourcing funding for downtown revitalization, as both the MDAH and Meridian Main Street provide funding for preservation and community development projects.

**Demolition-By-Neglect**

The City of Meridian must codify and enforce a much stronger demolition-by-neglect ordinance if it hopes to capitalize on its historic building stock. The first step in this process will be to reformulate ordinance using more precise language. Next the HPC will need to work with state and local preservation groups to source funding for assisting property owners with stabilization and rehabilitation of at risk structures.

Meridian’s existing demolition-by-neglect ordinance is notably vague. It defines demolition-by-neglect as “improper maintenance or lack of maintenance of any property in a historic district, or any historic landmark or landmark site, which results in substantial deterioration of such a property and threatens its continued stability and preservation.” This vague definition leaves too much room for interpretation. By contrast, more successful demolition-b-neglect ordinances in Raleigh, North Carolina; Detroit, Michigan; and Washington, D.C. use much more specific language. Each of these ordinance list the various structural members, finishes, and enclosures that must be maintained in good order. The inclusion of this list removes any subjectivity from a ruling of demolition-by-neglect, thereby

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strengthening the ordinance itself.\footnote{7 Megan Corbett Richardson, \textit{Demolition by Neglect: An Examination of Charleston’s Ordinances}, Masters Thesis, Clemson University, College of Charleston, May 2008. 80-88.}

The HPC must then commit to using whatever powers at its disposal to enforce the new ordinance. A clause allowing protections for property owners under financial duress will ensure that the HPC does not overstep its bounds. As the case of the COFO Building illustrates, it will be possible for the HPC to work with property owners in securing grants from public and private institutions in at least some instances.

Municipal demolition-by-neglect ordinances typically combine, to use a beleaguered metaphor, a variety of sticks and carrots. They include penalties for those guilty of demolition through willful inaction, as well as some form of economic relief for those without the financial resources to maintain their property. In Raleigh, North Carolina, the HPC works with property owners in economic distress to find a way to finance the preservation of at-risk structures. This financial assistant may take the form of tax relief, loans or grants from the city or county, or relaxation of the building regulations set forward by the demolition by neglect ordinance. The commission may also acquire the property through purchase or eminent domain.\footnote{8 Megan Corbett Richardson, \textit{Demolition by Neglect: An Examination of Charleston’s Ordinances}, 81-82.}

Since the enforcement of penalties is “politically tenuous,” Meridian would do well to utilize more economic incentives to encourage preservation of at-risk structures. This could include tax relief or a loan from a city fund set aside for the preservation of historic structures. Both Main Street Meridian and the MDAH currently offer funds for bricks-and-mortar preservation in downtown Meridian. In future, the HPC could work with property owners in sourcing these and other
outside funds.

HPCs and architectural review boards have their work cut out for them when it comes to enforcing demolition by neglect ordinances. Clauses meant to protect property owners under financial duress can be convenient loopholes for individuals who lack the conviction but not the funds to maintain their buildings. Local preservation commissions can strengthen their hand by cultivating close ties with other local and state preservation organizations who may have greater knowledge of or access to public and private preservation funds. If preservation commissions in small and midsize cities can provide funds that negate property owners’ claims of economic hardship, they can strictly enforce demolition by neglect ordinances without fear of community backlash.

Deincentivizing Urban Sprawl

One of the most effective ways for Meridian to encourage revitalization of the center city is to deincentivize suburban development. As recently as 2015, the City of Meridian approved a $20-million TIF package for the expansion of the suburban Meridian Crossroads Shopping Center.\(^9\) Meridian cannot expect a complete revitalization of the downtown area as long as it continues to encourage and finance development at the city’s periphery. Currently there is no natural barrier to Meridian’s outward expansion. The nearest city of equal or greater size - Jackson, Mississippi - is more than ninety miles away. On all sides, Meridian is surrounded by gently rolling fields and pine forests; no geographical feature impedes outward growth. It will therefore be necessary for the City of Meridian to impose a political boundary on suburban development. Dozens of American cities, most notably Portland, Oregon, have successfully implemented urban growth boundaries to control

\(^9\) Jeff Byrd, “New retail shops, restaurants proposed at Meridian Crossroads.”
urban sprawl. Since the first such area was established in Lexington, Kentucky, in 1958, more than 100 cities and counties in the United States have adopted their own urban growth boundaries. Three states - Oregon, Tennessee, and Washington - have even passed statewide legislation mandating the creation of urban growth boundaries.\(^{10}\)

The use of urban growth boundaries may be particularly beneficial to free-standing, small cities like Meridian, where there are no near neighboring cities to limit urban sprawl. Restrictions on outward growth may not seem as urgently needed in small, stand-alone cities as it they may seem in much more densely populated area. However, by limiting outward expansion, small cities can put more of their resources toward creating thriving urban centers, which this study has shown are necessary components of healthy economic development.

Conclusions

Meridian, Mississippi, for years struggling with the decline of its city center, is now at an interesting crossroads. It has both the will and the energy to move forward with downtown revitalization. However, the city is grappling with the best way to take on that revitalization. Some of its initiatives, such as the MAEE, fly in the face of those characteristics that make downtowns sustainable and viable places to live. The city is also struggling to carry out its existing preservation policies and initiatives, such as its demolition-by-neglect ordinance and the revitalization of the African-American Business District. Most of these problems stem from a dearth of professional preservation expertise within the city, most glaringly visible in the HPC.

itself, and insufficient funds for assisting property owners with the stabilization and rehabilitation of historic structures.

Meridian’s struggles with downtown decline and revitalization can better inform comparable small-cities hoping to launch their own downtown revitalization campaigns. The most important first step for such cities is to nurture strong relationships with local and state preservation organizations. These organizations can offer preservation and community development expertise, as well as access to and knowledge of available grants and funding, that smaller cities often lack. City governments must also recognize that their demolition-by-neglect ordinance is their most important tool against deterioration and blight in the downtown district, and they must treat it accordingly. Demolition-by-neglect ordinances must be carefully worded and exact in their definitions of what constitutes demolition-by-neglect to minimize subjectivity in prosecuting offenders. Most importantly, city officials must be willing to carry out the penalties specified within the ordinance. This is where strong relationships with outside preservation organizations can be of use, as access to outside support, and most importantly grants and other funds, can help city officials lessen public backlash against demolition-by-neglect ordinances. Next, city’s must be especially diligent in maintaining at-risk zones along the boudaries of the downtown district. City officials and planning commissions must identify these zones and expend additional time and funds mitigating urban blight and encouraging appropriate redevelopment in these areas. Finally, small cities must eschew large-scale, new-build developments in the city center in favor of smaller, more sustainable projects that capitalize on the downtown’s existing arhitectecutural resources.

Meridian’s historic downtown has suffered significant losses and setbacks
since Meridian’s preservation movement first began in 1979. Large swathes of entire blocks have been lost to demolition and acts of God. The city has struggled with how best to enforce its demolition-by-neglect ordinance and has yet to work out all of the kinks in the operation of the HPC. And some projects, such as the construction of the MAEE, are entirely at odds with the historic identity of Meridian’s downtown. However, the city has also had successes in purchasing and stabilizing historic structures, such as the Threefoot Building, until private investors are positioned to take on their rehabilitation. The restoration of the former Grand Opera House has been a boon to downtown development, and ongoing improvements to the downtown streetscape demonstrate Meridian’s continued investment in revitalizing the downtown.

As Meridian moves forward, it must be particularly vigilant about maintaining close ties with local and state preservation and community development organizations in order to supplement its limited access to development funds and preservation and community development expertise. It must also make a conscious effort to favor small, incremental development that compliments existing cultural resources rather than importing generic models for large, signature developments that have a record of economic failure. Ultimately, the example of Meridian, Mississippi, demonstrates that small cities must focus on development that is place-specific - in other words, development that capitalizes on the existing building stock and the community’s unique historic identity. This development must be incremental and in keeping with the more modest scale of the city’s older buildings. Finally, small cities must work closely with other local and state preservation and community development agencies that have better access to funds and professional expertise in these fields. As these cities focus their resources
on sustainable, place-specific development of their historic downtowns, they will nurture and stronger and more vibrant urban community.
APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

INTERVIEWS
INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTOPHER ALEXANDER
Public Relations Specialist for Threefoot Preservation Society
October 2015

Meredith Wilson: So I guess I’ll just tell you a little bit about what I’m doing, and
what I kind of need some help looking into

Christopher Alexander: Definitely

Wilson: I’m looking okay lets see I’ve gotta get used to telling people my thesis topic
um so our program um we’re a historic preservation program but we’re focusing more
not so much on the though we do do some conservation work a lot more on the laws
and theory behind historic preservation. And so my thesis is going to be looking at
because Meridian is currently going through a downtown revitalization I’m looking at
what role Historic preservation is play in that, whether it’s a priority or not and how
the city works with non-profits and individuals and um with and um I’m particularly
looking at trying to kind of establish a pattern for other small American cities to use
because a lot of the current research is on larger cities and not in the South. They tend
to be in the midwest and northeast.

Alexander: That’s very good. I think it’s important. That’s a very good thing to work
on.

Wilson: So yeah so I was just I mean I’d just like to find out what you think about
how Meridian’s doing. Your experience working with the Threefoot Preservation
Society. Do you feel they’re involved in that?

Alexander: We are pretty much involved in any endeavor to revitalize any part of
Meridian, whether it be downtown, whether it be, you know, in north Meridian, south
Meridian, wherever. But as you said, the main focus at this time is downtown. And we
are absolutely supportive of that. Even before I came on board with the preservation
society they were petitioning the current mayor - or not the current mayor - the
former mayor at that time
Wilson: Cheri Barry?

Alexander: Yeah. They were petitioning her to do some things to encourage 
revitalization of downtown, because we had buildings being torn down left and right. And um - most of those are now parking lots nobody uses. So we worked very hard to try to get her on board with us and it was something that she was not interested in. her hopes for the three-foot building was either to have it torn down or to, or for it to become some sort of medical complex like a medical tower, and that kind of thing. Within probably the last fifteen years Meridian has become such a medical hub that we have enough, you know, medical things and so, we had no support from her. However, Percy Bland, who is now mayor, has been behind us 200% in anything that we have done. For that we have been absolutely grateful. We actually, our plan, now that the Threefoot Buidling has sold, we want to move to the former police station, and um the significance of that is that Chris Risher was the architect. So I believe that the building was just, like within a month or two, put on the - I don't think it's on the national register - but is recognized by the Department of Archives and history in Jackson as a historical landmark. And so it can no longer be torn down, which was kind of discussed for a brief period of time and, so to - that's going to be our next project. And then once we're done there, we're going to come here (Temple Theater) and work. This is a great buidling, it's close to a hundred years old so there are lots of things that need to be maintained, there are things that need to be preserved, and unfortunately there are things that need to be replaced. What really excites us as far as Threefoot Preservation Society, is that the Temple Theater was given a grant and in effect in response to that, they're now replacing these side doors. They're able to, you know, get weatherization and for the first time in a very long time even the security is going to be better because the doors, the locks were broken and, because the Temple is a non profit, it was difficult to replace things like that, because you don't always have that money coming in. But overall the society is very supportive of anything that is going to revitalize downtown and help the downtown business area to grow. I will say, I probably would have fixed 22nd avenue and 23rd avenue before I initiated a revitalization program, simply because in that strip that where you’re on the 23rd and you’re passing city, or you’re at City Hall, you can’t go through there. You know, you come out at the Hulett Buidling, from that point to the Hulett Buidling you can't go through, and several of those businesses have had to close because customers cannot get to them. The contractor that is in charge of that job, he, from what I understand, he made some, not necessarily mistakes, but his planning and scheduling were off, and so that’s why it’s taken such a long time. But even with that said, other parts of the downtown area are definitely growing. Tim Allred, who is with Heritage Building and Allred Investments, he has done some significantly important things in the downtown area. He has bought many of the buildings that are old, and he has renovated them, and we have the Harvest Grill, we have A. L. Tech computers (sp?). And we have other buildings that he is renovating, and within just a very short period of time, those buildings will without any kind of doubt, be rented, and they will have occupants. So, we are seeing a lot growth downtown. in order to get that, we've had, in my opinion, and many of my colleagues’ opinion, the support that we get from the mayoral
administration is probably the first and probably the most important step in getting us where we're going. Beyond that is, we have business owners that are 100% behind what is going on. Like, Charlie at Weidman's and the man that owns Harvest Grill, the people that own Jean's Restaurant on Front Street. What's really awesome is there is not a convenient store downtown. There is a younger guy, he's probably late twenties, early thirties, who is going to put a kind of a strip convenience store - it's not going to have gas, but it's going to be a convenience store, where if you live or you work downtown, you will be able to walk or drive to that area on Front Street, right across from where they're building the arts and entertainment center. So that's a great thing. Another great thing that we're seeing, is people are wanting to live downtown again.

We're seeing buildings being converted into apartment buildings. And these people are coming and they're renting them and that is so important for any downtown area. To you know encourage people to come live downtown. Because the truth is we have many businesses downtown that close really early. They may close at five or six. And the reason for that is because the offices are closing at five or six. Some of these newer buildings, these newer tenants are staying open later, because they have people who are going to come and frequent them after those hours, simply because they are living downtown. I guess a week or two ago I was talking to a guy who's renting an apartment across the street from the train station, and he rides a bicycle. He doesn't have a car, and he said that basically everything that he needs to take care of or whether he you know whether it be food or just really any kind of need there's a place downtown now where he can get that taken care of, other than going to WalMart and he calls Meridian Cab. Which is a great thing in itself. The cab service, they have become an important part of the downtown scene because you have so many people, even, and this is why I'm glad that the Threefoot sold to be a hotel, you have people that are coming to the Riley Center, or even to the Temple, you whatever venue or whatever; downtown, and when they're doing that, they're using the cab service. So the Meridian Cab, they're fleet is grown, and you are seeing them more now than probably within the last two or three years. They're all over downtown and the manager and I, we're friends, and we talk about, they're definitely growing. So getting people to live downtown, I think is an intricate part of getting the whole revitalization project off the ground. The businesses are an important part, and the getting the people to actually live there and let it be more than a nine to five arena is important, it's absolutely important. And then having the restaurants downtown, that's important. Not just for the people who are working there or living there, but people who maybe ordinarily don't come downtown, they're coming downtown now to eat at Harvest Grill or they're coming to eat at, there's um, I think it's maybe Thai or something, that's downtown. People are coming to eat at those places, and when they get here they're seeing these other places that are there and that's peeking their interest, so if they're not able to go then, they come back and they you know go to the A L Tech computer store, or they go to the Liberty Shop, or you know just whatever the case may be. So those things combined are important to the revitalization downtown, and I think that's why its really working, is because those elements are working together to bring people downtown. And the bottom line is you have to have that traffic downtown, the people downtown, in order for it to flourish. Without that, it would just continue to be a dead scene other than the few offices that have stayed there. That's definitely important. As the Threefoot Preservation Society, we are absolutely, 100% behind everything that's going on, other than that whole road work
situation because you have to go around the world to get from downtown over the 22nd avenue bridge. So yeah, we’re totally in support of anything that is going to bring downtown back to what it once was. That’s, that is our - we’re not changing our name. We’re keeping Threefoot, because of the Threefoot family. Initially it was called the Threefoot because of the building, but we’re keeping it because of the Threefoot family. Through working on the Threefoot Building we have developed a very cordial relationship with the Threefoot family. We are very good friends with two daughters of one of the Threefoot brothers, with their grandchildren. So it’s - to us the Threefoot name has become a very important thing. To some people it seems kind of stupid to keep that name - most of them are relating that name to the Threefoot Building, but we will remain the Threefoot Preservation Society. And we will continue to work on buildings downtown. There will always be some building that needs attention. So, that’s - I guess that’s my thought on our support.

Wilson: So I guess - Y’all’s next project with the Meridian Police Department, I guess that’s all happened very recently

Alexander: It has. We actually... I guess the Threefoot Building, the sell of it was approved at the last city council meeting in September, which I think was that last Tuesday, or maybe the Tuesday before that, so it’s been you know fairly recent. We actually met with Mayor Bland the afternoon of the city council meeting, and he at that point told us that the building had sold, and he introduced the gentleman that bought it and that kind of thing. After Mayor Bland left, Bunky Partridge, who is the director of community planning and development and the accountant over at that department, Randall Gaker? came in and they asked us to work on the police station, or on the old police station. They have plans for that building. Because we certainly were looking for another project, that kind of opened the door for us to get in there. It’s something that we were definitely interested in. But yes it is a very recent decision. I think we made the official announcement maybe two weeks ago. We really haven’t gotten any kind of feedback from that announcement, but typically our feedback comes when the citizens are actually able to come see what we’ve done. Such as the Threefoot Building, for that first six months of the preservation of the first floor, most people had the thought that, well, you known, they’re wasting their time in that building. It’s falling in, and, you know, blah. But then we had the birthday party, the first, and they came and they saw what we were doing and they were, you know, absolutely in awe that we actually were accomplishing something in that building, and then we had the second birthday party and more was cleared out. And then the last birthday party we had the same thing going on. They came in, and by that time we were through with the first floor. We were able to show them that entire first floor, and so, we’ll... I would anticipate and project that we will get our feedback regarding our working on the Risher building when people are actually able to see what we have done. There’s a lot of work that has to be done on that building. It’s mainly the reason the police station moved. But even still, even though there is work to be done on it, it’s nothing
so serious that it can’t be done. It’s just going to take a little time. Fortunately, we hadn’t, we had very little financial support from the city on the Threefoot Building. Anything that we purchased such as paint or supplies to repair or the food for the birthday parties, whatever the case may have been, we had to collect money for that by ourselves through fundraisers or grants or that kind of thing. With the Risher building, we will have the financial support of the city, simply because it is something that they plan to utilize within the future. So that’s something that we’re very excited about, because we’ve never had the ability to say, okay, we need this much paint and you know we’re going to get this purchase ordered together and get it to city hall and you know within a week we have what we need. That’s going to be, you know, kind of like going into a candy store with you know with a sweet tooth. So, we’re definitely looking forward to that. And I anticipate that in the end it’ll be a, it’ll be a good thing, definitely.

Wilson: So, as far as the work y’all were doing on the Threefoot Building, is that

more basic maintenance and stabilizing...

Alexander: Yes, it was. It was repairing, not necessarily aesthetic things. It was more repairing maybe where a wire had burned, or a door needed to be repaired, or the windows, some of the windows on the second floor wouldn’t open. Or, you know, wouldn’t close. So we were basically stabilizing the building to keep weather out as much as possible, to keep animals out, to also keep, you know, the homeless people and the - I don’t want to call them vagrants - but you know the ones that were coming in stealing stuff, stealing brass parts and copper and things like that. So our work on that was definitely more of stabilization and repair. Some thing we were able to preserve and kind of get it to a point to where it looked very much like it did when the building was operative. But beyond that, actually when we made it to the second floor, I honestly thought, we had walked into a landfill. I mean it was kind of like these businesses just one day left, and left everything there. And over time people had gotten in the building and strewn things around, and there was trash, and I just told them, there’s no way that we’re ever going to get all this taken care of out here. We got - the naval base has a program called SHIPmates, and SHIP means something, I have it written down at home, but I couldn’t tell you right now what it means. But we had ten of the cadets from the naval base and they worked with us for one day, and wow, they did some exceptional work on removing debris and garbage and that kind of thing. So with the help of various organizations and also with our volunteers - we have a rather large group. The problem is this Saturday this group may come, and then this Saturday half of this group shows up and then there’s the other part of the group. So we were all never able to get together as one, and so it was kind of like whoever showed up, that’s who worked, and if you have a larger crowd, well you do more work. And many people would say they wanted to join just because they wanted to see the Threefoot Building, and they would come one or two times, see what they saw, and
they wouldn’t come back. Overall, our goal of maintenance, repair, and stabilization was achieved up to the point where it sold.

Wilson: It’s wonderful y’all were able to do that. So at the Meridian Police department, will - because you will have more financial backing, do you know if you’re going to be able to maybe bring in some conservation specialists or will it basically be just getting to a point where the city can use it again?

Alexander: That’s a very good question. I do know, on the Threefoot Building, we had a conservation specialist come in and he kind of explained what we could do on the first floor. Basically from the second floor upward, on that building, it’s pretty much a blank canvas. Different offices would come in and build walls and that kind of thing. But the first floor cannot be changed, like the elevator doors and those kinds of things. And so the conservation specialists from the Department of Archives and History came and they you know explained, or you know he explained to us what could and could not be done and that kind of thing, which was great. I’m hoping that we’ll be able to get the same thing for the Risher building. Because it’s just been put on the Mississippi registry with the department of archives and history, I’m unsure exactly what the process would be but at some point I do anticipate that we will have a specialist come in. We - Our first part will be to get the roof repaired, because it leaks significantly. There are tiles that have gotten so wet that they’ve just crumbled and they’re on the floor now. Once we get that done, I would say that we will contact the department of archives and history and have them send someone to kind of tell us what we can and cannot do within the building. So yeah, at some point, I think I can say with pretty good certainty that someone will come and kind of get everything lined up and you know guide us in what can and cannot be done.

Wilson: It’s great that they’re actually looking at some mid-century buildings, because even in Charleston they - there’s such this focus on the 1700s and 1800s, a lot of later things get lost.

Alexander: That’s exactly right. I agree with that. And in Meridian, it’s kind of like, we do have a historic commission, but it’s a - it is a complete political um thing, and I know two people that are on it that you know actually are concerned about the historic buildings in Meridian. The rest of the people, depending on who your friend is and you know how much money is coming into your business, we may tear this building down so that my friend can put a parking lot here, can put a snow cone stand, or just whatever. We had a very large problem among the African American
community when they - and I can never pronounce it correctly - the Cofo building? Something - it was a black organization during the sixties, during the Civil Right movement. And I cannot remember the correct name of it, however - like, Medgar Evers met in the building and things like that. And one of the judges in town, Velverde Young, she owns, or owned the building, and she’s African American. The African American community was very upset with her and her family. Her brother is - I can’t remember his name - He’s the congressman for Northern Mississippi. Benny Thompson is his name I think. He and Vel kind of took over everything from the family once they graduated from college, but she allowed the building to be torn down, and many of the people within the African American community - it was the Cofo building. It was C-O-F-O. They were very upset that she allowed the building to be torn down. They did have someone from archives and history, and they also had an engineer come in and tell them, “This building is stable enough to remain, it just needs you know a significant amount of work to keep it at that place.” And she didn’t necessarily want to spend the money to do that, and so the building was torn down I guess about six months ago. That in my opinion was a building that should have been kept, simply because it was such an important part of the history of Meridian. Many people when they think of Mississippi and the Civil Right movement in Philadelphia and Neshoba County, and lots of things that happened there. However, meridian had just as much happening in it, and honestly the people that were involved in the killing of um Emmett -

Wilson: Emmett Till?

Alexander: Emmett Till, and the other two, Andrew Swanner I think and the other guy - Many of those people were from Meridian, and so Meridian had an effect on the Civil Rights movement that is much deeper than many people realize. And then so it was important that that building be kept and it did - it really disappointed lots of people that the preser- or not the preservation - that the historic commission did not step in and get you know an emergency injunction to keep it until they could kind of review the reasoning behind it. It would have taken a judicial order to - for the building to remain, but at that point, um, if the judge is the one that owns it, then, I mean, there’s not a whole lot that you can do. Except just kind of watch it be torn down, and then go home, and move on. So it was an important part of history here. There is a program at the train station. I think it’s in March, or it may be in May, that um there are african americans who portray beginning before the Civil War up to the sixties, kind of what their role was here in meridian. And how initially they were the servants and thing slike that, and how many African Americans from Meridian fought in the Civil War, all the way up to 19 - I think they go all the way up to 1969, somewhere around there, maybe 71 - the year that integration took place. And that’s important to the city of Meridian, simply because, again it’s role in the Civil Rights movement. So yeah that’s probably my thought on the whole historic commission. It’s not necessarily there for - to preserve buildings, or to make sure they remain. It’s more there to keep a building or tear it down depending on who the owner is. Which
is not good. For the purpose of revitalization, it just probably shouldn't take place in that manner.

Wilson: So are you concerned that if Percy Bland is no longer mayor, you don't have that support that - there’s not permanent way to ensure support...

Alexander: Certainly. I am. And I am not the only person that is concerned with that. Cheri goes to my church, and she's told many of us that plans to run for mayor again. Percy - Many of the things that he promised in his campaign, he was not able to deliver once he got in office. Which happens. I mean, really, that happens often, because whether you're running for mayor or for president, you have that whole system of checks and balances where - like you have the city council, and if you’re mayor and you submit these proposals, and the city council votes them down, there’s not a lot that you can do, unless it goes to you know a ballot and citizens vote for it. So there are some things that percy has not been able to do that he promised in his campaign, and that's angered lots of people, whether you know it be black or white. My concern is if he’s not reelected and if Cheri is elected, we will no longer have mayoral support - not just as the Threefoot Preservation Society. We will not have mayoral support as individuals who are concerned about the revitalization and the maintaining of what we have in Meridian. That - that is definitely a concern. We are at a good place. We have growth and I simply don't want an administration to come in that’s going to hinder that and halt it, because if that happens the growth is going to go away. If you don’t have mayoral support, people won't come. We had the individual ready to buy the Threefoot Building from HRI in Jackson - the same people that bought the King Edward Hotel. And you know it’s a magnificent place now. They were going to do something very similar with the Threefoot Building. Because Mayor Berry wasn’t in support of it, David Watkins finally pulled out. He’s the owner of the company, or the president. The city had to pay him a million dollars back because that was the amount that he had paid to - not necessarily a deposit - but to secure his company as the company that would gain proprietorship once the building was sold, and that kind of thing. So it not only cost us a building and sense of having the Threefoot renovated and utilized, it cost the city a significant amount of money. I don't want to see that happen again. I don't think any level-minded citizen would want to see that happen again. Because when HRI backed out, many people backed out as far as considering opening a business downtown. So definitely maintaining a supportive administration at the mayoral level is very important. And so we certainly want to see that continue.

Wilson: Do you foresee - or do you - do you foresee somehow the city making changes to the way the commission is run, that maybe there will be these -
Alexander: That is a loaded question.

Wilson: Just that if there were some way to - that historic preservation were more integrated into Meridian’s policies, that it wouldn’t change...

Alexander: If that were the case, if the city would take over that commission, I think we would see some positive change, but as long as it remains something that the - that that organization get to choose their members, nothing good is going to come from it, unless they replace 90% of who have on staff - or not on staff, but you know on that commission, I don’t foresee change with it, simply because the majority people on that commission are some of the strongest financial backers for the city of Meridian. So I don’t see that. I don’t foresee any change, unless the city steps in and starts to maintain and operate that commission. We have talked to Mayor Bland about it. It’s something that the city knows is kind of corrupt, but it’s also something that the city wants to avoid, because they don’t want to have to deal with the politics of restructuring the historic commission. They just want to kind of leave it alone, leave it to itself, and hope it kind of fixes itself. So that’s where we stand with that.

Wilson: Do y’all work at all with Main Street Meridian?

Alexander: We do. We do. In fact some of their members have worked with us, not necessarily on a permanent basis, but they’ve come and they’ve done work with us on just a given Saturday. We do work with them. However, they’re goal is not so much preservation of buildings and you know maintaining. They’re goal is more focused on the activities that are going to take place. You know keeping the downtown area active. And so that’s their contribution to the revitalization movement is to keep things moving, to keep activities available for people, and to make sure those activities take place downtown, so that people do come downtown. So we do work with them, we just - we don’t many opportunities to work with them simply because our goals are just a little different. But we are supportive of the organization. We’re supportive of the tourism, of Lauderdale County Tourism. Again, the goals are different there, and there aren’t many occasions where we’re able to work together, but when those occasions come and when they take place, we do utilize them and do what we can to make sure that we’re supportive and that they know that we’re supportive.

Wilson: Going back to the Cofo Building. I’ve been looking at some of Meridian’s
planning documents, and they brought in - the Urban Land Institute came in 2004 or
nine and they talked about the city making the concerted effort to do something with
the African-American Business District. Do you feel that that's a priority in Meridian?

Alexander: That's absolutely a priority. Which is why they're reconstructing 5th

street, and primarily the area that they're reconstructing is in the African American
district, where the African American businesses were. Whether you are - as an
individual, whether you are supportive of the African American community or you're
not or you know wherever a person stands, that business district was a it was a very
important of Meridian, and it remains an important part of Meridian. Granted there
aren't many businesses there now. The work to preserve it and encourage businesses
to come back to that area - Yes it is absolutely important to the revitalization of
downtown, because it is part of downtown. And it’s important to make sure that,

if we’re going to entail (sic) the whole spectrum of the history of Meridian, that we
maintain what that district was, what it remains, and it’s important that we maintain
the building within the area, because those buildings - things took place in those
buildings, that while the physical presence is no longer there, the struggle and the
emotional presence will remain there forever. So yes I think that the revitalization
of that part of downtown is as much a priority as the revitalization of any part of
downtown. I don’t think that it should be overlooked. I don’t think that it should
swept under the rug. I think the business that - I think the business that takes place
with the buildings down there is so important. So yeah, that’s a huge priority.

Wilson: Do you think that city planning - that that is a priority for city planning?

Alexander: It is, it is. Honestly, I think the destruction of the Cofo building ignited

that interest as far as the city planning goes. Before that there was very little talk of
that part of town. Since then, it’s been an active topic. There has been an active chain
of communication and discussion about that part of town. So it is a priority from the
mayor’s office to city planning the city government as a whole is absolutely supportive
of making sure that that part of Meridian is given the attention that it deserves. Just
like any other part is given attention.

Wilson: What impact do you see the MAEE -

Alexander: That’s a good question. That’s a very good question. I would preface it

by saying that there is a significant number of Meridian’s citizens who think that
this building will never come to fruition just because it’s taken so long to even get
a groundbreaking. With that said, I think the reason it took so long is because the developers and those who are backing and supporting it wanted to get most of their financial support in place. That’s been done. I think given that you know granted that it does get built, I think it will have a huge impact on Meridian. The - I’ve seen the plan for it, the departments and the exhibits are going to be permanently there and then those exhibits that they’re hoping to bring in are going to be something that people from I know from around the state and most likely around the country are going to want to come and they’re going to want to see. I think some of the programs that the it as a not only a museum but as a venue some of those programs that they’re hoping to offer I think are going to be very beneficial for the city. I am very excited about the possibility of it being here. I was very excited about the groundbreaking because that actually kind of solidified that some people yes this is actually going to take place. I hope they don’t take two more years before they start putting something there, because that’s just gonna break down any support that people may have, and the fact that it is going to be here. But once it’s here I think that it is going to have an impact on Meridian. I think this crazy one way street is gonna have to go away, or we’re gonna have a traffic that we’re not going to be able to manage. And I think we’re gonna have to probably, in fact it’s not just my thought, the major has a commission that is studying along with a company from Jackson that professionally studies, they’re studying the infrastructure and the streets of Meridian to determine what streets need to become two way what streets need a red light you know where maybe relights need to be removed, and that kind of thing. So it’s with great anticipation that not only me as a citizen or as a member of the Threefoot Preservation Society but it’s a great point of interest for even the governmental side of Meridian. So there’s anticipation that’s very positively wrought. I think that once this building is built and it’s open that it’s going bring some really good things to Meridian. I do believe that with no doubt once it’s here we will see benefits from it. I absolutely believe that.
Meredith Wilson: What is your involvement with the preservation commission?

Randall Gaither: I serve by ordinance as the recording secretary to the commission.

Part of that function and probably the most important part of that function is the gatekeeper to the agenda for the commission. I also in that regard kind of serve as an instigator of things that come to mind or that I’ve been asked to - by the administration - to communicate with them. To get them going on, or perform as the situation arises. As part of our procedure here in meridian - and I believe this is pretty much standard everywhere that deals with any planning type topic - we also produce staff reports, facts, put the facts of the case in some sort of organized form for presentation to the commissioners. Try to establish some continuity for decision making over time. And so... after the commission has taken an actions, then it’s my duty to see that the minutes are properly put together so that I can submit them back to the commission for their approval of the minutes, and it goes into record and then on to where it goes after that. There’s also typically some follow up work that’s required administratively which I oversee and shepherd. That is, for example, if a application for a COA is approved by them, or approved with conditions, then I put that in a written format. I have the applicants sign that document that document then goes to the building department for their inspection function, so that sort of closes the circle. Once it’s been inspected and blessed, that completes the circle for the review and approval process. And generally that’s the way those things operate.

Wilson: In your opinion how important do you think preserving the built fabric in the city’s plans for the revitalization of downtown?

Gaither: Well, I’m a little biased. I think it’s very important to have policies, procedures, and cultural behaviors that do keep - to the degree reasonable - the older things among us. I just think it adds to the usability of the downtown, it adds to the flavor of the downtown, which to me oughta translate into money and economic activity and all of that good stuff. So, to me it’s real crucial for making the downtown be what it should be. Now there are places that don’t have much of that, they either had one and it was scraped off and replaced in the 70s, or never had one to start with to speak of. The smaller the town, typically the smaller that area is, and in many places that I have visited and been through, it’s four buildings on a corner with the court house int he middle and that’s the extent of that opportunity, if you want to
call it that. But still important. Typically the court house building, or in the case of a city the size of Meridian, the courthouse and the city hall, governmental buildings are - they’re sort of corner stones for the culture of the community. And to keep those viable, active, and to use them as a display of the craftsmanship of the past, I think it just helps the feel of the place.

Wilson: What do you feel works for Meridian's current way of preserving the downtown, specifically with the HPC?

Gaither: What's works is what's successful and what has been given another fifty years of life. In the HP game - at least in my opinion - there's a fifty year - the half century is a magic mark if you will. And this starts at the federal level - fifty years old and older is a criteria for inclusion as a contributing resource. And so forth so. To the degree that we can come into a building and give it - through renovation or adaptive reuse or a combination thereof - another projected 50 years worth of life, that's the measure of success. What works is - I’ll divide it into two categories. You have the public sector taking community's money and recycling into the reinvestment. As I mentioned the city halls, the county courthouses. There's a few other buildings. In Meridian's case, we had a mayor from roughly 92 to roughly 2008, about 16 years worth of a guy who was born and raised in a house three blocks over, was very attuned to preserving the old and focused in that manner. As a result of that - and of course the support behind him - at the voting booth and all those organizations that give money and whatnot - the city began to collect these artifacts, if you will. And we probably have - in the city structure - almost a dozen. Or had. Had at one time a dozen. The county, in a similar fashion, for a little bit different kind of a reason, has done a similar thing with a smaller number by purchasing them or acquiring them some way or another. Now that's to me creates the public sector involvement base, where your investment is coming through the tax dollar. Many of those functions... on the county side of it, are used to house and consolidate their activities, and provide some expansion area for the things they’ve done over the last twenty, thirty years, and continue to do. A lot of that was opportunistic - approximate to the courthouse, therefore, this building’s for sale, we’ll make a deal and blah blah blah. In the city side of things, we haven’t used those resources for inhouse function to the great degree, and what we have done is maybe invest a little bit in them, but mostly hold them in minimal maintenance kind of a mode, until some other player can step up and finish the process of this fifty year new life. The MSU-Riley Center is a classic example of that. The entire block was and the investments in it were supported by the city structure, through the other public tax dollars of Mississippi State University, and through the Riley Center Foundation folks, who played an integral part in providing the ownership basis for some of the things that Mississippi State (University) couldn't do legally and things of that nature. So that was kind of a partnership that is now has redone the entire block that’s there. And I think that's to date the crowning jewel of our preservation activites. It's finished as a group, kind of a collection, not without
loss. But that one really stands out as the success story. Not a quick fix. Efforts to preserve the Opera House and the Marks-Rothenburg store buildings probably started from the time that Marks-Rothenburg ceased to be a store. Which was in the late 60s early 70s, sometime in there. The Opera House closed in probably 1930 thereabouts as a performance venue. And was dabbled around as a movie house for a few years, and finally just ceased functioning and was boarded up, I don’t know, from World War II until somewhere around 1995, the era when - as the folks that grew up with it as a sort of a functioning community center if you will, began to appreciate its architectural character and its history and all this and enough of them over that period of time got involved trying to do something to keep it from being demolished. And that was 25 or 30 years worth of this grassroots kind of build up of importance if you will culminating in the administration, the elected officials embracing it and then taking positive action to partner with MSU and the Riley Foundation to achieve that. That’s the big one, on the heels of positive community response to that, embarked on the renovation of the City Hall, another big chunk of change in the public world. And even before that one - even before the Riley Center deal was struck, we had gone to the Union Station, the old Train Depot, and secured the grants and whatnot and improved, or upgraded that facility to preserve that which was left of the old guy, and add a new complementary element to it as a way of preserving that sort of function in the community, and partnering with Amtrak and Greyhound (inaudible) to make it have a use (inaudible). That’s one, that whole public involvement, then the expectation is with that commitment of public dollars, the adjacent and abutting private dollars will go, oh okay, that looks pretty good, that’s got a reason to be, I can do something with my building. And the - at least in Meridian’s case - that private money lately has been pretty hard to come by. I think in the 80s, when our program started here, there was much more optimism, there was a few - maybe two or three - key money people, private, that embraced wholly the concept of HP. They embraced the use of the tax credits as tools to facilitate it, and sort of that first ten or fifteen years there was a lot of private sector contribution, even before the city jumped in and started doing the Union Station project and the Riley Center project and the City Hall project. In that time period, the city/county accumulated some of these artifacts, but they didn’t do much with them as far as renovation, rejuvenation. But at least some of the private sector did step up - that was the decade of the 90s. The condominiums in the Rosenbaum block, there’s one example. Several of the buildings on Front Street northside, were picked up by those two or three individuals and rehabilitated, to sort of keep that character at least liven it up for another, let’s say 15 years. Because a lot of that work was just fix the window frames, new paint, keep the air on and people in them, which, to me that’s, as I tell my Commission, lights on, people in the building. Those are the two keys. And then the roof. If you got those three, then you done good. And, you know, whatever it takes to get those three. If you need to take an old sign off, put another sign up that says Subway, you know, okay, bite the bullet, the building is still there. It’s being used. It’s being used in the same fashion - by and large - as it was in 1902. Etc. etc. so. That’s just the way that works. So if you have that public participation, if you got the private side participation, then you hope that it gets momentum. It sort of finishes itself off, just in time for the next cycle to start. Because you gotta go back through and redo it every fifty years. And some things more often than that. 18:40
Wilson: So do you feel that Meridian has lost some of that momentum since John Robert Smith's time as mayor or - I mean, I guess that was about the same time as the recession started.

Gaither: It was. The two things happened together. So, yeah, I would have to say that some of that momentum was lost, because of both factors. You know, having a champion is important to keep the team up, you know, like the coach, that kind of thing. But the players have to have ability too. You don’t win if you don’t have good players. In this case, players with big wallets, or at least big hearts. If not the wallet, you gotta have the heart. It helps to have both. Many things did slow down as a result of both of those factors, and now it has gone through the dip, and because of the work associated with the MAEE, and probably forty or fifty million dollars secured - through state subsidies or commitments, city/county subsidies or commitments, and mostly private donors’ commitments to that facility, even though it’s not going to be historic, it is essentially a museum, so its function is to keep and to reinterpret and represent things that have happened in the past to people of the future. So the theme of it is right in terms of HP, or it’s a fit in terms of HP, even though the building is gone. All the buildings that were on the site are gone, and the building that’s going up will be brand new. Once again, as I told the Commission when we approved that new building, our hope is that the architectural character of the new buildings, and its function in our community, its purpose, is once built and operational, 50 years down it will be looked at as a wonderful example of historic architecture. So, we don’t know if that’s the case, that’s we look at and we say that’s what we hope. It looks like it’s a good candidate? Let’s go for it. Spend the money. 21:36

Wilson: I know that - I’ve been doing some research, looking to some of the Annual Reports from the City, and I did see - the Urban Land Institute did the study in 2004 I think - and they recommended using tax increment financing, and I noticed that that had been in place at some point. Is that still in place?

Gaither: Still in place. Still a tool that can be used. It has not been used downtown.

We have used it in the suburbs more. Part of the reason for that is - you know a TIF first off the cycle of money is the sales tax, so if you’re not a project that gets sales tax, it’s useless, so what that lends itself to just by that very core nature of a TIF, which is basically its infrastructure payback over time using a scrape off or percentage of the income tax revenue. So we’re at 8%, it goes to the state. They swipe off their large share and we get 2% back of that money. Of that 2%, x percent of that 2% can be used to pay off the TIF bonds. So that cycle has to be there, it has to sustain itself through probably something like ten years I think is probably an average for the payback on
those bonds for the street, the drainage, water/sewer lines that went into the project. There are some other things that get bonded in with that that are - landscaping and street lighting are some things that can go in there in terms of what we're paying for through absence of tax dollars coming back and it's earmarked for that project. That being said, it's a lot easier when you're in a suburban environment to put quantities on those numbers. First you got an individual, isolated project, so you know your boundaries. You got a service need (inaudible) that's identified upfront by the engineer of the project, so you got dollar figures. And you've got a process that tracks, monitors, whatever you wanna call it, the cost of that. So all those quantities are easy to find, easy to come by, and you're dealing with one person or one corporation for that deal. You get into downtown, it ain't that way. The whole premise for TIFs begins to fall apart because you don't have unified players, you possibly have some income stream, but mostly, you look at the downtown arena, you got City Hall, you got city stuff, you got county stuff, you have arts and entertainment, that kind of stuff. Things that are not income generating, per se, beyond just subsistence. So you don't have that sales tax. With the restaurants and the clothes stores, and those kinds of things, that's what would be needed to support a TIF situation and those have been, although there's been several that continue to exist in spite of the flight to suburbia and the mall and the new shopping center this, new shopping center that if the consumer dollars, they're not in a position where they're big generators of sales tax. They do their share. They do a good job with all that part of it, but taken all together as a group within what I would call the downtown area, it's not that much money coming back to us to support it. There's also PIDs - Public Improvement Districts, and some other kinds of funding mechanisms (inaudible) that are always on - they're there. They're tools that are laying in the tool box. The problem with some of those is, getting the consensus from again, not one player, not two players, but twenty players as to how we're gonna spend this money. How much, and particularly at what rate are we gonna pay it back, for those improvements, much like aTIF, but the funding mechanisms is different, and the way to install it is different. But again until the management of the private sector money is consolidated enough where you've one or at most maybe two real decision makers, it just stays fragmented, and never - it takes a lot of work to get twenty people all together and say alright we need x dollars of yours a year, and we're gonna give you a street, or we'll gonna give you a pipe, or, you know, all that kind of stuff. "Aw man, you know, we don't really need it that bad. We're doing alright. The water turns on, commode flushes, you know people come and they park in front of the store. It's all cool." And that kind of a deferred maintenance, if you will, to the infrastructure, as well as to the buildings. The owners of the buildings do the same thing. They go, "Well, you know, I was gonna repoint the masonry this year, but, I kinda got some other things to do, blah blah blah, and I was gonna kinda fix the wooden windows, but I have to do something else." You know, roof, and on and on and on. So you do that 30 years worth of "I was going to but I didn't," here comes the water through the roof, you know. Game's over, pretty much, at that point. 29:12

Wilson: There's the building that abuts Dumont Plaza, and I was talking to – I
interviewed Karen Rooney over at Main Street Meridian, and she was talking about, that someone was gonna renovate that, but when they got in there, they figured out that it's just - It's got some structural...

Gaither: Well, they all have structural issues. That one in particular had a known structural issue for many many years, before this current owner bought it. And when we had badgered the previous owner to do this, that, and the other to try and fix it, but again neither one of those two characters had the umph to really go in and hire a true professional and spend that up front money that you need to spend to get good advice on how to fix that - or can it be fixed within your budget. Now they had a budget that was pretty small, so they didn't even have the budget to - in my opinion - hire the professional and pay them to do the level of report and investigative work that at the end you get something that says, "This is what I recommend you do." Now, once you get that, and that's $20,000 let's say, then you gotta do some of that stuff. Okay, so, I can see the fact that if you're not - if you can't cover the twenty, and you can't cover something after that, then why do you spend the twenty at the beginning? That's kind of the way that decision making works. And that's where the heart comes in, in my opinion. You got something, you got it cheap, you don't have a you know an unlimited budget, but you have enough heart to stay the course and bite those little bullets as they come along. The first 20,000, that's gonna take everything I and the wife have, you know, but you bit it off because you're committed to it, and you do what it takes to finish that job, and you get to the end and you go "Holy crap." And you know, but at that point there's almost always a next step that a person can take. Even if that report generates a need to reach out to other investors or donors, to help you with (inaudible) And to a degree, that's what was practiced on that building. But the previous owner, who got it for a song back in a time in his life when he was a little bit more - had a little bit more of an expendable cash and a little bit more of a need for tax write offs, which a lot of these things, it's all they are, for ten years it's just something to write off your taxes, shuffle the money around, and maybe you go down there every other Saturday and play around with something. The first 20,000, that's gonna take everything I and the wife have, you know, but you bit it off because you're committed to it, and you do what it takes to finish that job, and you get to the end and you go "Holy crap." And you know, but at that point there's almost always a next step that a person can take. Even if that report generates a need to reach out to other investors or donors, to help you with (inaudible) And to a degree, that's what was practiced on that building. But the previous owner, who got it for a song back in a time in his life when he was a little bit more - had a little bit more of an expendable cash and a little bit more of a need for tax write offs, which a lot of these things, it's all they are, for ten years it's just something to write off your taxes, shuffle the money around, and maybe you go down there every other Saturday and play around with something. Tinker with it. He just, he never got to that threshold in terms of - You know we'd tell him, "Your bricks are falling off." Well, he'd hire a guy and he'd go put four or five bricks back in. But that big crack on the corner. They looked at it, they studied it, you know they did the eye ball kind of approach to it. But never did much in the way of a long term solution. The new guy comes in. He's flush with cash at the time because of a death in the family. It's a great deal, and he goes in there. And he does the right thing at the beginning. he gets an architect to take a look and advise him. Over the course of events, he got other experts in various things to look at it and give him advice. Never in the 20,000 dollar range of a full report, but you know, a little bit of this and a little bit of that. But even though he had some construction experience from an observation standpoint, he didn't have any practical kind of general contractor perspective. A lot of the things that he did were detrimental things, so he took it in the other direction, in my opinion. What we have is the result of a series of bad decisions and underfunded attempts - That's just the way it is. Our best hope now is that some other fool will step up that has a little bit more heart.
Wilson: Have there been structures that have been lost in recent years that you feel it was maybe avoidable or maybe has been a particular loss?

Gaither: Well, yeah, um, and avoidable again gets back into the argument on, um if you look back on what was left when we - let's just say the HP law was reenacted in Mississippi, I believe it was 78, thereabouts. There had already been severe losses by that time, architecturally. Just look at the old pictures and then look at the report that was done and picked out twenty-six or twenty-seven of those what was left at that time, and there's lots of stuff missing that the old pictures show. Like, wow, that was there, you know blah blah blah. So tremendous loss up to that point. Just benchmark that, and then the HP movement caught on even in Meridian and statewide Mississippi. Legislation got inacted, so fort and so on. The tax credit program fired up a little bit after that. Probably the first really knock down that stung that I've been - that's been reported to me - was Carpenter's Hall. It was a block, two blocks down. The irony of that particular loss was that it occurred as a result of a need derived from the renovation of the rothenberg building. Rosenbam buildings, excuse me. So you save one, and you lose one. Was it absolutely necessary? Certainly the ownership and their restoration architects felt so. Once that building came down and I believe one of lesser character next door to it - it's now their parking area. Covered parking for the condominiums that were built on the second and third floor. But it does support that function. Those people ain't gonna pay that high price unless they have some covered parking off street you know where all their goods are safe, so. Was it necessary, probably. I wasn't even hear at the time. Just heard the stories, and read the tales. And I'm sure that they looked at that, that we have a record between the 78 inaction and that building, there were others that were, maybe of less character or whatever that went by the wayside. The Dumont Building being one of them, it's on the opposite end of the same block we talked about. It had a lot of features...

(interruption)

I'm not sure when the Sears building came down. That would be another building in that time period. In the 80s we had the Citizens Bank - took it's old bank down and build on the same site what you see now on that corner. So, to me the older one had a more romantic character to it, because it was older. Probably had better craftsmanship, because it was older. But it didn't - it was built at a time where the technology was different in terms of mechanical, electrical, how people operate. So, is that necessary or needed to keep the bank function downtown - probably. Could they have lived with it by spending that money and keeping the view of the older building, maybe. It's just - to make that sort of adaptive reuse decisions takes a lot more thinking and it takes the heart to say "we're gonna do this. Now what does it
take to do that. And can I afford it.” As opposed to, “Let’s just start from scratch. It’ll be a lot easier. We don’t want to think about it. Turn over a clean site to an architect. Architects love clean sites.” You know. They don’t want to mess with all that unknown of “where is the electric, where’s the plumbing. What kind of shape is it in?” (inaudible) “If we get the new stuff, it’s easy!”

Now, jumping forward to Carpenter Hall, which was a 98, 97 time frame, and a big loss of that character. Since then, we have lost, first off, the old - Front Street, there’s a gap by what is now Rhythm and Brews, those are some fairly well-appointed, and very old, warehouse buildings in that gap. Those have been lost. That was instigated by a lengthy period of what we’ll call demolition by neglect. Repeated efforts on the part of the Commission to abate or correct that kind of neglect. The roof collapsed on one of them. Then they were put up for sale at auction - the both of them. They were purchased for a minimum amount of money and flipped to an entrepreneurial kind of guy, who had some experience in renovation but really had no - that was the driving force. The driving force was I got it cheap and it’s downtown. So, it’s a good place for a bar. A sports bar, in particular. So in the process of all that, and the building that’s now sitting there and occupied and in use for that bar - we still lost the top floor of it, because they had removed it before we could stop them. So it’s not the same building as it was - we just managed to preserve a little bit of its flavor.

Down the street on Front on the corner, the intersection where you come over the bridge, there’s now another bar - The Brickhaus - that courtyard for the Brickhaus was the Grand Avenue Hotel. How it got that name, I’m not really sure. Because Grand Avenue never came through there. But anyway. That was a very old and very substantially built structure, and it had a lot of potential. The long term owner of that - same kind of story. Plodded over 15 years, issued summons and subpoenas to abate the demolition by neglect of that structure. Never could get him to do that. He dodged and ducked and all of that kind of stuff. All that time period, and finally just sold it cheap to the next-door neighbor, and after that it got to the point where the mantra of everybody was, “You can’t save this. Too much money to save it.” (inaudible) but to make it habitable again, or to make it useful again, it was going to take a lot of dollars.

Okay, across the street, where the Arts and Entertainment Center is going to go - had a series of what were 6 or 7 quote unquote historic resources on that block that were taken out for the arts and entertainment center. The mantra there was, “They’re just not right.” The Meridian Hotel was one of them, the Southern Pipe Company buildings, and the Southern Pipe Company warehouse facility, which had been - in 96 a million dollars had been spent to renovate and convert it into a restaurant. It had these massive old beans from old growth Mississippi forest, and all that kind of stuff. A lot of neat neat things. But the Arts and Entertainment folks said, the spaces are not suitable. You can’t wire it right, it won’t accommodate what we want to accommodate, so it all has to come down.

One of the more significant - not from an architectural standpoint perhaps - but from a cultural standpoint, is the COFO building. The Brooks-Fielder Pharmacy building. On the corner of … Avenue and 5th Street. Where the Civil Rights guys had a headquarters in Meridian. And where they operated out of and took off and left one night, went to Philadelphia, and got killed and all that story. That building had been
in neglect for a good 20 years, and it finally got to the point where the roof fell in, then the walls started moving, and all that. And even though they had secured a couple hundred thousand dollars from the MDAH to redo it as a sort of a learning center kind of a thing. That project never happened. It never - it was mismanaged or not managed or whatever you wanna call that, but that money was never spent and never got to that point of moving forward before the roof collapsed and the movement of the walls started. So it had to be taken off. That’s another that was lost... That one had less of the economic sort of spin to it, “Yeah, we gotta do this because it just won’t fit,” as it did from just nobody there with the ability to move forward day to day toward keeping it. And it got to the point where we - where the Commission was presented with a report from a qualified structural person that it’s a high hazard building. The walls could go at any minute. So at that point as a commissioner, as a mayor, and all, and everybody, you say, I guess we’re gonna have to cut our losses here.

Those are kinda highlights that come to mind of losses that occurred in recent times. And that one that we kinda started with - the old Citizen’s Bank beside Dumont Plaza - it’s in that direction. It’s headed in that direction. Can freefall be stopped? It’s gonna take somebody, somebody with a lot of heart and wallet to step up and do it. Some people that have the thought, “Oh, that’d be nice,” - it takes a little bit more - you gotta get beyond that. You gotta get a step up and get some dedication. And the resources.

Wilson: What do you think the City of Meridian could improve or change about how they deal with preservation within the downtown area?

Gaither: Well, there’s always room for improvement. I’ve often thought that the use of the tool of demolition by neglect was not really performed in as precise a manner as it coulda, shoulda, woulda been. I’m a plodder, so. My view, if you file on a demolition by neglect to an owner, you got to have the guts to go through the process and know what you want to be the end of it, in very specific terms. And I think what the ordinance says is something like, once found in demolition by neglect, an owner can be fined up to something on the order of $100 dollars a day for each recurrence thereof. Now, a $100 a day is pretty good stink, and it doesn’t take many days at that rate to get you to the point where you can probably start thinking about a new roof, which is 90% of what needs to be done first on most of these old buildings. But you’ve gotta stay the course, over that whole time frame. You’ve got to be somewhat insensitive to, “Oh, you’re fining me - I’m out of it. I’m just going to walk off. Leave it, not paying taxes, I’m not paying anything. I’m just gonna walk.” Alright, now how are you gonna deal with that. It’s very difficult to reach out and say well, if you ain’t gonna pay the fine, you’re gonna stay in jail to some of these guys that are players down here. Hard to keep the political wheel going. It’s a very tenuous political position because you are saying this guy needs to go to jail for the fact he didn’t paint his windows or replace the glass in his windows or put a new roof on, and meanwhile you got guys who are killing people and robbing people and all of that kind of stuff, you going to
the same direction. And you know the people are just not gonna put those two things together. So I think if we could’ve re- ever had the political inclination to reinvent the tool a little bit, and treat it more like a traffic violation, or a clean community ordinance violation, or some of those sort of nuisances, then that would’ve been an easier thing to sustain. But again it takes a lot of time, energy, and resource to get that stuff in place, while we're fighting other things time-wise and staff-wise, political decision-wise, council budget-wise, you know, all the associated bells and whistles. I've always thought that would’ve been a worthwhile effort to enhance historic preservation in downtown Meridian. (inaudible)

Wilson: What do you find very exciting going forward with preservation and revitalization downtown?

Gaither: Exciting... Well, I'll jump back to the cultural excitement of the day, and that's the Arts and Entertainment Center. A potential expenditure of about $50 million on a piece of property in the downtown area. Just like the Riley Center's expenditure and to a less degree but a little bit the roughly 20 million on the City Hall renovation after that, that investment is causing “the buzz” in generally the whole of downtown, because I think there’s a lot of anticipation that it by “the one” that breaks that threshold of sort of hanging on, and being okay as opposed to being thriving. Right now we got a lot - it’s not built, but it’s pretty close to funded is our cultural understanding or the general understanding of people and therefore there’s a lot more impetus for folks to try to reinvest and do the little things. Replace broken glass, repaint the windows, caulk em, recaulk em, and so forth like that. Address paint, and clean off the mold, and - just those cosmetic things that are pretty cheap generally. And that can lead to then replacing the roof (inaudible) and then that lead to leasing or finding a tenant that thinks they might have a chance at making the business work because of the tourists that are gonna come in, you know all those related things. And to me, it might get that engine going enough to where it reproduces and is sustainable. That was the hope when the Riely Center and the Opera House renovation occurred, in the last decade. And to a degree it worked. There was some reinvestment and that sort of change in the dynamic of downtown and then what it looks and feels like. And it just didn’t spread very far. And it didn’t drive the rents up enough, and stuff like that. It just didn’t get to that threshold of creating the economic demand that it needed - that was needed to keep rolling, so to speak. So here’s another that latches itself onto it and other things that have happened over 20 years or so downtown, that maybe it’s the one that's gonna do it. And we'll see.

I think that maybe possibly another thing is - as painful as it's been - is the reconstruction of our streets. At least 3 of them - 5th Street project that's been under construction for the last year and that's now quote unquote complete. The 6th Street, which we tore up last month, and then finally a couple blocks worth of 22nd Avenue. Again that is that demonstration of public investment in the infrastructure that one would hope would lead to a positive rent stream and a positive occupancy stream
and all those things that it takes to really support and assist revitalization and the preservation of downtown. That just goes back to straight real estate, whether it’s old or new. If the neighborhood don’t look good, then you’re gonna have a hard time selling it or leasing it. So if you spend another hundred million, get everything just right, it’d be perfect.

Wilson: Actually - I’ve noticed that - looking at the map for the historic preservation district, the Threefoot building and the Temple Theater, they’re actually just kind of outside of it. Has there ever been any thought to expand that?

Gaither: Yeah - kicked that around ever since I’ve - I started here in January 2004. And I sort of began to work with the Commission just a few months later. If you look at - somewhere around here I have a map of what we call the individually listed resources - which are included in our preservation program by reference. There are probably 20 or 30. Some very scattered downtown, but most very concentrated on downtown and just outside the district. The difference being the individually listed - which almost all are created in the late 80s - are self supporting in terms of the determination of their architectural quality and at the time that the time that the nomination was submitted, whoever owned them was supportive of their nomination. That maybe not so much the case anymore as the ownerships have changed. The downtown district was originally set up in the 80s as two different districts. The area around Union Station and the area around the Riley Center and 5th Street kind of area. Both of which went to some degree to Front Street. They were separated by some of the newer stuff that had just been built in the 70s. The Citizens Bank is one of them, the Regions Bank is another one. That sort of business corridor through there did not, was not put in the district initially. The Dumont Building had already gone down by then, so there was no building to turn in. The only two you had, was the Grand Hotel - which I’ve talked about has been demolished - and the Bank Plus Building and then the Weidman’s Block, those were of period and of age. Even where the Subway is now, the Vice Building was not quite of age when the original survey was done. It was not 50 years old at that point. Or what was visible was not. Turns out there’s a layer below that that was covered up that would have - had folks kind of realized that. But anyway, so you have the two districts. The two districts and then the scattered individuals was the situation when I got here. So the first year or two, I said, “There’s no reason why we should have two different districts, two different names. it’s all downtown. Let’s just do a resurvey and create one consolidated district and include as many of the individuals as we can.” Started getting a little pushback on the expansion, part of it from - the infill part was not so much controversial, so that’s what we ended up with through that exercise. What would make sense to me, particularly if we had more community support for the idea of it, to take that at least out to about 10th street. That would take in another half a dozen or so of the individually listed resources and put them into a context (inaudible). But that hasn’t happened either. And probably won’t on my watch, so. There has to be a community
accepted reason to do these things and to accept this regulatory constraint. And I think in the HP program it was hoped that a combination of tax incentives, some of the other justifications like energy efficiency and conservation, marketability, some of those carrots when placed with an effective stick, would be the solution that would work for a designated place. It doesn’t seem to have here have - again just that threshold, doesn’t seem to have ever gotten to that threshold point where it all makes sense to everybody and everybody’s good with that. I’m not sure exactly why - lack of money is I think - or the lack of heart to spend the money is a big part, as best I can tell. Folks that got the money, they’d just as soon take it to the coast. Or something like that. Rather than reinvest down here. 1:06:02

Wilson: This is just - something I’ve been trying to figure out. I’ve looked at the ordinances online, and it says 2006 for the preservation ordinance, I think. But is that a later date when it was edited.

Gaither: That was the revision I talked about. We not only restudied and revised the district but we also rewrote the ordinance that preceded that version that was published back then. The way that worked is when the state passed the enabling legislation in 78 or thereabouts, and created or augmented or gave Archives and History - I’m not sure exactly when Archives came to be - the jurisdiction over that legislation, one of the first thing Archives did was create a state model ordinance. So it was - actually at one point it was enacted as law I believe or at least by reference, I can’t remember exactly - but it was I don’t know probably 28 pages, legal sheet, printed. And covered a lot of ground and - but it was way too much legal stuff, in my opinion, and so shortly after I got here, began to look at that presentation of it and what was adopted and codified and with the goal of - just like our zoning ordinance, did the same thing. Read it. What do we need, what do we don’t need, what has been working, what hasn’t been working. How can an investor read this and understand it. What kind of language does it take to get the point across, and all of that kind of stuff. And at the same time we had gotten a grant from Archives to resurvey both the downtown districts and an area around the districts. Reclassify the buildings, so forth and so on, which we adopted along with the revised and modified ordinance. So those things happened together, to reset the clock if you will. You know I’m not sure that any of that was of great consequence, but I think it makes more sense to most folks now than what it was back then. First ten years of the Commission’s existence, and the ordinance, the ... enabling ordinance’s existence, you had, from what I’m told, a Commission that was very dedicated to keeping everything just so, you know. And to me they had that big bulky ordinance with a lot of legal stuff in it which if they read it they couldn’t understand it because of the way, the convoluted nature of it. But they had their heart and position and what they brought to the table when they were put on the commission, and a lot of that was you know by golly you’re gonna do it the way we want you to do it sort of stuff. More by the book, if you will, and some things of that nature which sort of created a bad taste in a lot of people’s mouths. Those
who were money players. By the time I got here, that group was dying out and going away and there was sort of a gap in there which a lot of the decision, the preservation decisions were being made outside the purview of the Commission. The Riley Center project, for example. It was - Archives and History was involved. The local commission never got a presentation. They were just bypassed by all parties involved. And they didn’t see that as a problem. Because Archives and History - the great state gods. They’re taking care of us on that, so - but as a resulted of that, it shifted from a group of 9 folks who were perhaps overly committed to - overly committed and yet under-educated, to those who are just sort of, “It’s a routine deal. I’ll accept the appointment, you know. Pretty much everything’s okay, blah blah blah blah blah.” Or, “I’m easily convinced that that’s not economically feasible, okay, tear it down.” That kind of vote.

Wilson: So when was the Meridian’s first ordinance and commission established?

Gaither: 86. 84, 85, or 86, one of those.

Wilson: And is that original ordinance online?

Gaither: Probably not online.
Karen Rooney: Historic preservation is an absolutely vital component of a downtown revitalization. That said. It is. A perfect example, the Threefoot Building. There was a very well respected economic development consultant who came and was talking to us about various things, and he pointed out the Threefoot Building, and he said, that’s the tombstone of Meridian. I was like, well, thank you, appreciate it. But he was right, because it’s the tallest structure, it is the icon, and it looks horrible. So it brings down everything around it. So he’s right. So a building like that can either be a catalyst for something great, or it can be the tombstone. But it is not neutral. You know what I’m saying. It’s not like it’ll be benign. Because it’s not. It’s one or the other. And you know that from the comments people make about it. They’re very passionate, one way or the other. “That thing needs to get torn down. - No it’s the most beautiful building ever.” You know, it’s extremes. And now that it has a purchaser and hopefully that will go forward, that is fabulous news, because that block that it’s in has been completely redone, but that Threefoot’s still sitting there. You know, an eyesore. So, that is going to bring downtown to a definite other level. That being said, I think probably the sticking point with historic preservation, are historic preservationists. Here’s a real good case in point. The MSU-Riley Center of Performing Arts. They followed everything to do with the historic preservationists in Jackson and history and archives and all that good stuff. Windows. This is a huge huge idiotic ridiculous sticking point. Because they insisted that all those windows be wood. Guess what happens when you have wood windows? They gotta be painted. They rot. They have to be painted. They rot. They have to be painted. It’s very expensive. And unnecessary. You can get vinyl clad that from the fifth floor you’ll never see. You know what I’m saying? So I think sometimes they can get way too caught up in their ivory tower and not really think about practicality. Because MSU-Riley Center is not a museum. It’s a building that’s used every day. The Threefoot will not be a museum. But I know doggone well that developer is going to have the fight of his life over those windows. You know, and it’s like why? They’re basically shooting themselves in the foot. Because what ends up happening, a lot of people will forego historic tax credits because they just don’t want to deal with the preservation group, the history and archives. That’s shooting yourself in the foot. It’s stupid. It’s like, this isn’t a museum, you know. It’s just crazy. But anyway. That’s probably a big issue. Another big issue is we just lost our state historic tax credit. Yes we did. You can thank Mr. Tate Reeves for that.

Meredith Wilson: I just did a law paper on Mississippi and I didn’t realize that.

Rooney: Yeah, it just happened in May I think.
Well, matter of fact, that will affect the Threefoot Building, if they don’t get it back. That’s a very big deal. Because actually our state tax credit was known as generous, and as a good catalyst, and so without it, people will just go other places to develop old buildings. Because a lot of times these developers aren’t from the town that they’re... Meridian doesn’t have somebody who can take on the Threefoot Building. That’s money that’s coming from outside. And he’s looking - this is not an altruistic venture - I mean, he wants to - this is money proposition. And that’s okay, you know. So he’s gonna go where this is going to make sense financially. And so if we don’t have a state tax credit, he’ll go to Louisiana. They have plenty of historic buildings there. You know what I’m saying? Anyway, so, we don’t have a tax credit, so that’s a problem.

Wilson: As far as Main Street Meridian, what has sort of been y’all’s focus in working in downtown Meridian

Rooney: Well, that’s a broad question. We follow the four point program - You’re familiar with the four point program?

Meredith: Yes

Rooney: We follow that. So we have - I think probably it would be easier for me to just send a document that tells you all of it, because it’s so much, because we have a full program for structuring, design, promotion, the whole thing. So, we do everything from Mardi Gras to Christmas to Candy Crawl at Halloween, Art Crawl, for promotion. But then we also have a concerted effort of working with the media to make sure that downtown is promoted. In addition to that, we work with developers, building owners, businesses, to try to get them either - for example, the Hulet Building was sold recently, and I worked with the new purchaser of that building for a year before he bought it, providing him with information (inaudible) giving him ideas about what on earth you can do with 78,000 square feet. That kind of thing. And so finally coming up with a plan. And then once he gets going then we’ll help him promote that business. So there’s a lot of stuff we do behind the scenes. You know, get things up and going. And then once they’re there, then we help promote them. So, we do that in addition to our own events. And we have been doing thing with - we have a whole series of seminars for entrepreneurs to help them get off the ground. We just had
one about two weeks ago called Just Manage It. And I brought in speakers from the
Coast and from Jackson to do a report that gave the psychographic buying habits and
demographic information for the meridian area - of actually a sixty mile radius and
highlighted the leakage reports, opportunities, things that we're buying that we're not
buying here. That sort of stuff. And also talked about you know your online presence.
We talked about unique businesses that are elsewhere but not here. You know, just
one of those sorts of things. And that's just one of the entrepreneur seminars we do.
And we do those because our mission is to fill up empty spaces. That is ultimately our
mission - a very brief way of saying it. So we try to do everything we can, whether that
is encouraging an entrepreneur to get going, provide them with the resources that we
are familiar with, to helping people who already own buildings to get them occupied.
Then we work with design, those big giant flower pots that are all over the place,
those belong to Main Street. And work with the city for a tree planting program. We
work with them - we've got all this downtown construction, you know. That's been
quite fun. But necessary. You know, that's part of historic preservation too, you know.
You have to make sure the place looks nice. So Main Street does all of that. So we're
very much involved in it. Now we are not the - gonna be out on the front lines of the
historic preservation - we're gonna have to walk a fine line with that. Because in the
end we have to be practical. I love historic buildings. I'm from New Orleans. I love
that stuff. And it gives a city incredible character and it creates a place that people
want to stay. As a matter of fact, there was an interesting study - they had looked at
- it was a Whole Foods Market that was built in New York, in one of the boroughs or
something, but anyway. It's this whole big block long steel and glass building. And
they filmed people walking by, and they said it was interesting the body language,
because as they walked by the block-long steel and glass modern building, they would
kind of do this, scurry you know. And they got to the end, and there's something more
interesting, more cafes, or more human scale, then they lingered and looked about.
And as someone in modern development, I want people to linger and look about, not
scurry. So I thought it was an interesting aside.

Wilson: I think that's great. I am in a historic preservation program, but I wouldn't
consider myself one of those really hard core people. It has to make sense. It has to be
helpful.

Rooney: Like the Riley Center. They painted those windows this summer. The Riley
Center is a non-profit. It's probably fifty, sixty thousand dollars to paint those things.
That could be used for something better than painting a window that's five stories
up and that you would never know was vinyl or wood, you know what I'm saying?
So that kind of stuff, they just go overboard. And I know another thing at the Riley
Center. They have this big conference room. And they put in the historic lights and
everything, wainscoting, and they made them keep this giant post in the middle of the
floor because originally the building - it had held the building up. But that was not
necessary anymore. And that giant square column in the middle of the floor - it's not
attractive, it’s not this beautiful corinthian column or anything, it’s just a square box. Blocks your view, it’s completely in the way. It makes no sense. To me it takes away from the work. But they - archives and history - felt like that had to be there. Why? This is not a museum. That’s kind of how we look at things.

Wilson: What do you think is the biggest problem facing downtown Meridian improving over the next few years?

Rooney: Well, I could turn that around and say that we have been improving...

[interuption]... I could turn it around and say that we have actually improved a lot over the last two years. It’s been like mega growth in the last two years. I would say what impedes this downtown - as well as most southern downtowns - is inherited property, because the owners don’t live here, don’t care. They will not sell, nor will they fix it up. They’re under the misguided idea that if they hold onto it it’s going to be more valuable over time. That is an incorrect assumption. The armor building right now is going to have to be torn down because it’s - the roof caved in and rotten everything else out underneath of it. The building’s not worth more. It’s worth a lot less now. So I would say for most downtowns, that’s a huge, huge problem, inherited property. Or people that buy a property and just sit on it. They won’t do anything with it. They don’t maintain it either. And that’s probably our biggest issue. Then another one is that these big old buildings are very very expensive. Not the initial purchase price, but just to do something with them. If they run into an issue, it may become a situation where it’s not economically feasible.

[woman enters – Michelle]

Michelle has been, well she’s a business owner downtown, but she’s also been involved in Main Street for like... forever. Since the beginning. Matter of fact, she’s doing a program with Main Street where – she sells insurance, and so it’s an affinity program, so when people get a quote that are connected within Main Street, then it’s a good participation for Main Street... (interruption)... but anyway, So historic preservation is important, it’s exceedingly important, because without the unique buildings, then you don’t have anything, then you’re a Target, you know. But at the same time it has to be reasonable, and you know when you talked about what are the obstacles, inherited property, and just the cost. That’s why that tax credit is important. But on the same token, History and Archives has to be reasonable in the application of it. So, there you go. That’s the biggest obstacles. But we’ve had in the last two years, an incredible number of buildings that have been _ehabbed. I don’t know how often you come back. How long have you been gone?
That's kind of like the biggest obstacles, but on the other hand that whole idea of the millennial being so excited about downtowns, walkability, you know that whole green thing, is actually a huge bonus for downtowns. One of the big investors is a young guy – Mitch Marshall, he and his wife – you ought to talk to them. Mitch and Kristin Marshall. Mitch is – both of them are architects for LPK, which is a local firm. She is on the historic preservation council in Meridian. And they have bought 4 buildings downtown. And they're not sitting on them. They're actually going forward. But I would talk with them.

Wilson: I've been looking at some planning documents for downtown Meridian, and I was reading the 2009 Comprehensive Plan, and there was this one section that talked about doing work downtown, but this other section was encouraging growth along I-20. Do you think that those can be done at the same time?

Rooney: No. Well, okay, here's the thing. Look at the population. How many people do we have here? How many people did we have ten years ago? It's about the same. There's not the population growth. So if you don't have a population growth, and you're adding retail on top of retail on top of retail, those numbers don't add up. So I don't think you can do - and actually what we're seeing is happening is that you did have all of your retail downtown, and then it moved to Village Fair Mall, and then it moved to Bonita. It didn't stay in three places.

Michelle: ...

Rooney: Yeah, now it's coming out of Bonita to the Crossroads. So I mean it's just, we can support one. We're starting to see a little of retail returning to downtown. That's been hard to do. Because you really have to have enough of it to make it a destination, and so we have some coming back. We have a lot of businesses coming downtown, but not a lot of retail. And we're trying to get that, because that makes it a little more exciting. And the big thing we need is residential. Because there is a demand, there is an absolute demand for residential downtown here. The little bit that we have has waiting lists. And there was a study that we did back in 2010 indicating a demand for residential downtown, then it was very high. And that was before you and the national push for living downtown. Or before it became so (inaudible). And so I would think now that those numbers all the way back in 2010, are even moreso. So we don't have a whole heck of a lot of obstacles right now. We
really don’t. We’re just - those malls are crumbling down. I’d say we’re doing pretty good.

Michelle: …

Rooney: See, what did I say?

[interruption]

Rooney: But anyway. Does that help? Does that the kind of information that you needed?

Wilson: Yeah. That is helpful.

Rooney: Okay, well good. Um I do, I’ve got to meet with her, but if you need anything else, call me, or email, if you have specific questions, and I’ll send you some information. But I think Main Street and Main Street Meridian would be a great project for you, because there’s been so much growth in the past two years, and there’s so much more coming. That I know that is coming down the pike. The old police station is going to be redone.

Wilson: I was just talking to the Threefoot Preservation Society about that.

Rooney: So that’s another one. So we’ve got the Threefoot Building, the Bell South Building that’s gonna be apartments. Do you know where the Bell South Building is?

Wilson: Is that the one that has the front kind of torn off right now?

Rooney: No. The Bell South Buidling is the one right next to the parking garage,
okay, and so it - well, it faces the dough boy, anyway that’s going to be apartments, so that’s exciting news. So the Threefoot will be a hotel. That will be apartments. And they'll all get to fight over the same parking garage.

Michelle: ...

Rooney: They’re - Well, the plan is now, they were going to tear it down, the old police station. They were going to tear it down. And a preservation group out of Jackson fought really hard against that, and so then they decided that they would actually get it put on the list to - what is it? Now I”m blanking.

Wilson: The Mississippi Landmarks.

Rooney: Yeah, yeah. Alright, so, it’s going to be a landmark, so that way they can get money to fix it. It’s gonna be like a police museum? What are you doing? It’s got jail cells in it, you know, what are you going to with this? They’re gonna move community development in there. So you know all the people that are in the bottom of the parking garage? They’re gonna move over there.

Michelle: ...

Rooney: Well now they’re looking at making that like retail or whatever. So that’ll be good. Another big project. Another big preservation project, so, t’s going. It’s definitely going. I mean we’ve got, I think someone made an offer on the Armor buidling.

Michelle: ...

Rooney: It’s going to be torn down.

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Rooney: They bought it and he's going to make a private club out of it again.

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Rooney: I think instead of focusing on one building, I think it’s better to focus on an area. Because you know a building does not stand by itself. Especially in a downtown, they all touch each other. And so I think it’s actually going to be better for you to do it as a whole. It’s actually a very exciting time in Meridian right now. Lots of cool things are happening. We just had ... to reel festival saturday. And there was a movie - it was all independent movies - and there was one shot inside the Hulett building, in the back side of the Hulett building, because it’s really industrial looking back there, so it made a very cool background for the movie. And so that’s kind of neat you know. And even though it’s sad about the Armour Building, I mean it is. But hopefully something wonderful will go up in its place. Because it was the victim of somebody holding on to it too long. I’m hoping that same fate does not befall the Baum building.

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Rooney: It is beautiful, and it hasn’t been messed with inside. You know what I mean? It hasn’t had some horrendous 1970s update, you know. And - have you ever been in the inside of that?

Wilson: I haven't

Rooney: It’s really neat. It’s pretty extraordinary actually. The ceilings are just incredible. Fourteen feet, giant windows. It’s just awesome. Unfortunately the person that bought it - he’s bought several buildings. He has enough money to buy them, but
he doesn’t have enough money to do anything with them. So they just sit there. He’s the same one that bought that gorgeous Victorian that’s on 23rd - Grinder’s, you know. That beautiful. Same guy. And once he bought it, nothing happened. Unfortunately. Because that’s a beautiful building that I would love for something to be done with. But on the other hand, we’ve got some great stuff coming. We’ve got the MAEE coming, and that’s huge, huge, big old catalyst right here. And you know, as far as readapting and reusing buildings, that MSU-Riley Center brings in 60,000 people a year. You ought to talk to Dennis Sancovic. He runs it. And he loves talking about that Riley Center.

Wilson: I guess another thing - when I was talking to Threefoot Preservation Society, kind of a concern he had - he felt that currently the mayor is supportive of things going on downtown, but that if the mayor changes and becomes someone different - that it’s very dependent on who the mayor is, what gets focused on.

Rooney: I think that’s not exactly accurate. I can say if you have a very strong main street program, you have focus on the downtown, irregardless of the mayor. So I think it’s just that we have strong downtown program now. And so - the Threefoot was a victim of timing. There was all kind of stuff that went wrong with that. But anyway, that’s history. Now we have somebody that wants to buy it. The economy’s looking better. We have very high occupancy rate in hotel’s here. So I think kind of the stars are aligning.

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Wilson: What do you think, going forward, what really needs to be the focus of planning for downtown?

Rooney: I’ve got to think about that. We have to have more retail and residential. That’s two - that needs to be a focus. And two-way traffic, parking. Those are big issues. But two-way traffic is a huge deal that needs to happen. It’s all one-way, and what happens when there’s construction? You can’t get around, as you found out. The two-way streets is a big deal. The thing is, the city can do all kind of things to improve infrastructure, Main Street can do all kind of things to promote, but int he end you have got to have people willing to take a risk and invest. Without that, you don’t have anything. This Mr. Tampa, that’s doing the Threefoot. He’s a smart man. He’s done this kind of thing before. So it’s an educated guess that he’s going to do well with this
buidling. But in the end, he’s got to take the risk. Put up the millions of dollars to see this through. So without that, without investors, you can do all kind of stuff. And even local guys like Mitchell Marshall, Mitchell and Kristin Marshall that I told you about. They’re investing, in a smaller scale, smaller buildlings. But it’s still a lot of money. It’s a lot of money to take that on. And it’s a big risk, because like he says, I’m gambling my future. And that’s no exaggeration. It’s true. The guy whose building is falling down - all that money that he put into purchasing the building and the demo and everything that he’s doing, plus he put a new roof on it. Those are all costs he’s not going to get back. That was a risk. But anyway, so that’s what’s needed, you have to have investors. Hopefully they know what they’re doing. That’s all I can come up with right now.

Wilson: Do you think anything needs to change on the city level, as far as the preservation commission or the planning commission, or do those seem to be working pretty well?

Rooney: Again, they need to realize it’s not museums. There has been big progress made in the planning department in the last year. There’s been a cultural change going from being an obstacle to trying to help find a way, and there’s a difference. If you tell me, “I want to do this with this building,” and I know that to do that is not to code, well instead of just telling you no, which was before, instead it’s like, “That’s not, but you could do this and still be within code and get it approved.” That’s much helpful, because if all you do is tell me no, that doesn’t give me anything to work with. That’s a cultural shift that has occurred in the last year that’s exceedingly helpful in getting things moved along. Matter of fact, Wayne Williams who has Meridian Underground Music, he’s doubling his store space right now and I mean, he bought that building and I’m telling you he had a building permit with a week. (inaudible) The city has not been anything that has been impeding his progress. They’ve been very helpful. They’ve been there when they said they were going to be there. All that sort of stuff. So that is a big cultural shift working in our favor.

Wilson: Are there any cities that y’all use as a model?

Rooney: I don’t think you can. The reason why is because every city is so unique.

Meridian is very unique amongst Main Streets in Mississippi because Meridian - you know, most Main Streets are your courthouse on the square variety. You know, Ole Miss, okay. The buildings are small. Two story, maybe three. Much more manageable actually for a single investor to go in and fix up. Meridian was never a small town. It was built as a city. That’s why we have such large buildings. You talk about the Mountain Hardware building, the Hulett, the Pigford. They’re giant. And then the
Threefoot. You've got very large buildings. Actually the Riley Center, that was an old department store at one time. Four stories high. So Meridian's very very different from that aspect. So a lot of the things that work in these other courthouse on the square type towns don't work here. The buildings are just too large. And when they get that large, they get very expensive. The costs are exponential. So that's an issue. Most of those big one are going to be bought by people that are not from Meridian. So it’s a matter of attracting. So no we don’t have any model cities, to answer your question. I wish I did. It would help.

Wilson: That’s what - One of the reasons I’m looking at doing this for my thesis is because all the case studies I’ve seen have been...

Rooney: Court house on the square...

Wilson: Well, Mississippi I haven’t really even seen any that have focused on – you know it’s been like they’ve done transportation studies, but they haven’t done anything specialized about downtown development.

Rooney: You know the Mississippi Main Street association is actually quite large. There’s 51 of them. There’s 51 main streets in the association. And they’re all pretty active. I mean some of them are teeny tiny, you know, and some of them are very large. Tupelo’s pretty big, and Biloxi, you know the coast, pretty big. They have larger budgets, you know, that kind of thing. But you know it’s funny. Tupelo’s downtown - there’s hardly anything here. I mean there really isn't much there, you know. I don't know what they - We have a whole lot more to offer here. I was actually really surprised, because everybody’s like, “Oh Tupelo, Tupelo,” and I go there and I’m like, where’s the downtown? I don’t see it. I mean, you have nothing here. But on the other extreme you have places like Water Valley, outside of the Ole Miss area, and that’s an amazing little town. It’s like the little town that could. But then that required people investing and just taking a risk. That’s what’s gonna save downtowns. People just taking a risk. And then having a nice Main Street program, that helps. Because we get a lot, a lot of promotion. We had last year 42 articles in the newspaper. 35 interviews on WTOK. Numerous interviews on radio stations. And it’s everything from the mundane, we’re promoting Candy Crawl or Earth’s Bounty, to we’re doing things like highlighting all the development that’s going on so that creates a buzz, creates excitement. Even if you have no intentions of going to the Candy Crawl, but you know something is going on downtown. There’s a craft beef festival going on downtown, there’s candy crawl going on downtown, there’s a music festival, or there’s just all these buildings are being invested in, you know all this stuff is happening, so it creates that excitement, which feeds upon itself. Then people are like, “I want to get
in on it.” And now we’ve actually got speculators, so we’ll see how that turns out. So that’s kinda what’s happening in your hometown.

Wilson: I know there’s been a lot of people - like a lot of people are always kind of questioning if the MAEE is gonna finally be built - but they did do a groundbreaking.

Rooney: Yep, and that was exciting. We had. That was huge. We almost had 500 people attend, but the weather was horrible. So I mean that was a great thing. But no it’s coming. Yates construction has already moved in. They’re already downtown. Everything is getting started. So it is on it’s way. Now of course that had a bunch of controversies surrounding, because they tore down a bunch of historic buildings, and what they want to build is extremely modern. I think it’s going to be awesome looking myself. I don’t have any problem with mixing it because again it’s not a museum. We’re not a museum town. Well, an excellent example, is where our beautiful City Hall, the white marble mausoleum, right across from it is the police station, which was obviously a modernist building, so you’ve got like one extreme to the next right next to each other, but that is the history of this town. It wasn’t all built in 1914. Anyway, so now we’ll have the 2017 model coming in. I think it’ll be exciting. Now are you related to Liz Wilson?

Wilson: No. My parents are Rhonda and Jimmy Wilson. They work up at Anderson’s.

Rooney: I didn't know if you were related - I mean, that’s her married name. Liz

Michelle: ...

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Wilson: Well, Mississippi I haven’t really even seen any that have focused on – you know it’s been like they’ve done transportation studies, but they haven’t done anything specialized about downtown development.

Rooney: You know the Mississippi Main Street association is actually quite large.

There’s 51 of them. There’s 51 main streets in the association. And they’re all pretty active. I mean some of them are teeny tiny, you know, and some of them are very large. Tupelo’s pretty big, and Biloxi, you know the coast, pretty big. They have larger budgets, you know, that kind of thing. But you know it’s funny. Tupelo’s downtown - there’s hardly anything here. I mean there really isn’t much there, you know. I don’t know what they - We have a whole lot more to offer here. I was actually really surprised, because everybody’s like, “Oh Tupelo, Tupelo,” and I go there and I’m like, where’s the downtown? I don’t see it. I mean, you have nothing here. But on the other extreme you have places like Water Valley, outside of the Ole Miss area, and that’s an amazing little town. It’s like the little town that could. But then that required people investing and just taking a risk. That’s what’s gonna save downtowns. People just taking a risk. And then having a nice Main Street program, that helps. Because we get a lot, a lot of promotion. We had last year 42 articles in the newspaper. 35 interviews on W TOK. Numerous interviews on radio stations. And it’s everything from the mundane, we’re promoting Candy Crawl or Earth’s Bounty, to we’re doing things like highlighting all the development that’s going on so that creates a buzz, creates excitement. Even if you have no intentions of going to the Candy Crawl, but you know something is going on downtown. There’s a craft beef festival going on downtown, there’s candy crawl going on downtown, there’s a music festival, or there’s just all these buildings are being invested in, you know all this stuff is happening, so it creates that excitement, which feeds upon itself. Then people are like, “I want to get
in on it." And now we've actually got speculators, so we'll see how that turns out. So that's kinda what's happening in your hometown.

Wilson: I know there's been a lot of people - like a lot of people are always kind of questioning if the MAEE is gonna finally be built - but they did do a groundbreaking.

Rooney: Yep, and that was exciting. We had. That was huge. We almost had 500 people attend, but the weather was horrible. So I mean that was a great thing. But no it's coming. Yates construction has already moved in. They're already downtown. Everything is getting started. So it is on it's way. Now of course that had a bunch of controversies surrounding, because they tore down a bunch of historic buidlings, and what they want to build is extremely modern. I think it's going to be awesome looking myself. I don't have any problem with mixing it because again it's not a museum. We're not a museum town. Well, an excellent example, is where our beautiful City Hall, the white marble mausoleum, right across from it is the police station, which was obviously a modernist building, so you've got like one extreme to the next right next to each other, but that is the history of this town. It wasn't all built in 1914. Anyway, so now we'll have the 2017 model coming in. I think it'll be exciting. Now are you related to Liz Wilson?

Wilson: No. My parents are Rhonda and Jimmy Wilson. They work up at Anderson's.

Rooney: I didn't know if you were related - I mean, that's her married name. Liz Wilson.
APPENDIX B

MUSEUM DATA
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Museum Name</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Bailing Year</th>
<th>Purpose Built</th>
<th>Year of Construction</th>
<th>Square footage</th>
<th>Acres</th>
<th>2012 Total Expenses</th>
<th>2012 Total Revenues</th>
<th>2012 Program Service Revenues</th>
<th>Occupancy Expenses</th>
<th>Deficit/ Surplus (in)</th>
<th>Deficit/ Surplus as a percentage of OE</th>
<th>OE as a percentage of TE</th>
<th>2013 Total Expenses</th>
<th>2013 Total Revenues</th>
<th>2013 Program Service Revenues</th>
<th>Occupancy Expenses</th>
<th>Deficit/ Surplus (in)</th>
<th>Deficit/ Surplus as a percentage of OE</th>
<th>OE as a percentage of TE</th>
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<td>2010</td>
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<td>79.90%</td>
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<td>1,869,393</td>
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<td>9.06%</td>
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<td>Biloxi, MS</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Leeds (Birmingham), AL</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>1998</td>
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<td>1993</td>
<td>135,000</td>
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<td>17,000</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>2,922,890</td>
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<td>11.00%</td>
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<td>3,134,122</td>
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<td>Macon, GA</td>
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<td>1980-1984</td>
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<td>n/a</td>
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<td>271,774</td>
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<td>11.70%</td>
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<td>Flint RiverQuarium</td>
<td>Albany, GA</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1997/2004</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>832,447</td>
<td>200,275</td>
<td>273,652</td>
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<td>26.30%</td>
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<td>n/a</td>
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<td>5.10%</td>
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<td>Adventure Science Center</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Creative Discovery Museum</td>
<td>Chattanooga, TN</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>43,000</td>
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<td>2,913,773</td>
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<td>3,100,010</td>
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<td>Discovery Center at Murfree Spring</td>
<td>Murfreeboro, TN</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2006</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>1,041,044</td>
<td>851,569</td>
<td>462,143</td>
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<td>477,128</td>
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<td>3,293,052</td>
<td>3,306,650</td>
<td>878,293</td>
<td>314,505</td>
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<td>10.99%</td>
<td>3,527,574</td>
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<td>929,891</td>
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Data for Purpose-Built Museums
### Data for Museums in Existing Structures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Museum Name</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Ruling Year</th>
<th>Purpose Built</th>
<th>Year of Construction</th>
<th>Square footage</th>
<th>Acres</th>
<th>2012 Total Expenses</th>
<th>2012 Total Revenue</th>
<th>Occupancy Expenses</th>
<th>PSR as a percentage of OE</th>
<th>OE as a Percentage of TE</th>
<th>2013 Total Expenses</th>
<th>2013 Total Revenue</th>
<th>Occupancy Expenses</th>
<th>PSR as a percentage of OE</th>
<th>OE as a Percentage of TE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lynn Meadows Discovery Center</td>
<td>Gulfport, MS</td>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1916</td>
<td>15,000</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1,207,005</td>
<td>996,378</td>
<td>593,090</td>
<td>79,467</td>
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<td>6.60%</td>
<td>1,223,051</td>
<td>1,282,424</td>
<td>521,879</td>
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<tr>
<td>McWane Science Center</td>
<td>Birmingham, AL</td>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1887</td>
<td>180,000</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>7,982,222</td>
<td>5,689,310</td>
<td>2,343,977</td>
<td>1,353,731</td>
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<td>174.20%</td>
<td>17.00%</td>
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<td>8,014,675</td>
<td>2,198,742</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gulf Coast Exploreum Science Center</td>
<td>Mobile, AL</td>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>65,000</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>2,774,388</td>
<td>2,185,174</td>
<td>633,864</td>
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<td>6.00%</td>
<td>3,384,838</td>
<td>2,591,400</td>
<td>730,119</td>
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<td>Burritt Museum</td>
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<td>Alabama</td>
<td>1905</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1936</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>1,611,363</td>
<td>1,252,295</td>
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<td>512,795</td>
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<td>31.00%</td>
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<td>1,430,947</td>
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<td>Louisiana Children's Museum</td>
<td>New Orleans, LA</td>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>19th, G.</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>n/a</td>
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<td>Longue Vie House and Garden</td>
<td>New Orleans, LA</td>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1942</td>
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<td>1,749,088</td>
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<td>213,875</td>
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<td>The William Brennan Jewish Heritage Museum</td>
<td>Atlanta, GA</td>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>50,000</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1,542,281</td>
<td>1,391,176</td>
<td>1,018,195</td>
<td>182,130</td>
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<td>1,565,353</td>
<td>261,529</td>
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<td>Cheekwood Botanical Garden and Museum of Art</td>
<td>Nashville, TN</td>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>1962</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1933</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>6,885,903</td>
<td>3,735,314</td>
<td>2,465,428</td>
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<td>Memphis, TN</td>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>before 1968</td>
<td>52,000</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>3,972,062</td>
<td>9,170,654</td>
<td>1,937,415</td>
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<td>5,128,851</td>
<td>6,591,705</td>
<td>2,895,210</td>
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<td>Memphis, TN</td>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1941</td>
<td>54,000</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2,210,819</td>
<td>2,952,726</td>
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<td>234,935</td>
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<td>10.60%</td>
<td>2,486,999</td>
<td>2,086,445</td>
<td>933,442</td>
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<tr>
<td>Customs House Museum and Cultural Center</td>
<td>Clarksville, TN</td>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>1903</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1898</td>
<td>&gt;35,000</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>1,080,947</td>
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<td>121,219</td>
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<td>1,489,312</td>
<td>1,393,773</td>
<td>48,643</td>
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**Average:**

|              |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |                |
|--------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| 3,053,551    | 3,373,072     | 961,271        | 462,460        | 320,322        | 279.73%        | 14.44%         | 3,506,667      | 3,657,071      | 1,089,061      | 446,264        | 150,464        | 280.33%        | 12.63%         |
### 2012 Occupancy Expense for Purpose-Built Museums by Square-footage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Museum</th>
<th>2012 Occupancy Expenses Per Square Foot (Dollars)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knoxville Museum of Art</td>
<td>2.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Museum of Arts and Sciences</td>
<td>3.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile Museum of Art</td>
<td>3.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohr-O’Keefe Museum of Art</td>
<td>4.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative Discovery Center</td>
<td>4.83</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discovery Center at Murfree Spring</td>
<td>5.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi Children’s Museum</td>
<td>7.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi Museum of Art</td>
<td>8.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adventure Science Center</td>
<td>8.77</td>
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<tr>
<td>Huntsville Museum of Art</td>
<td>9.15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Atlanta Children’s Museum</td>
<td>18.85</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### 2013 Occupancy Expense for Purpose-Built Museums by Square-footage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Museum</th>
<th>2012 Occupancy Expenses Per Square Foot (Dollars)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi Museum of Art</td>
<td>2.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knoxville Museum of Art</td>
<td>3.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile Museum of Art</td>
<td>3.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Museum of Arts and Sciences</td>
<td>3.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discovery Center at Murfree Spring</td>
<td>4.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative Discovery Center</td>
<td>4.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohr-O’Keefe Museum of Art</td>
<td>5.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi Children’s Museum</td>
<td>6.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adventure Science Center</td>
<td>8.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huntsville Museum of Art</td>
<td>10.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atlanta Children’s Museum</td>
<td>17.79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2012 Occupancy Expense for Museums in Existing Buildings by Square-footage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Museum</th>
<th>2012 Occupancy Expenses Per Square Foot (Dollars)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gulf Coast Exploreum Science Center</td>
<td>2.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s Museum of Memphis</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyny Meadows Discovery Center</td>
<td>5.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana Children’s Museum</td>
<td>6.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McWane Science Center</td>
<td>7.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Civil Rights Museum</td>
<td>13.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2013 Occupancy Expense for Museums in Existing Buildings by Square-footage

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<tr>
<td>Gulf Coast Exploreum Science Center</td>
<td>3.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s Museum of Memphis</td>
<td>4.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyny Meadows Discovery Center</td>
<td>4.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana Children’s Museum</td>
<td>6.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Civil Rights Museum</td>
<td>6.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McWane Science Center</td>
<td>6.86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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“Union Station Multi-Modal Transportation Center.” Mississippi Department of Archives and History.


