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Farish Street Oral History Project

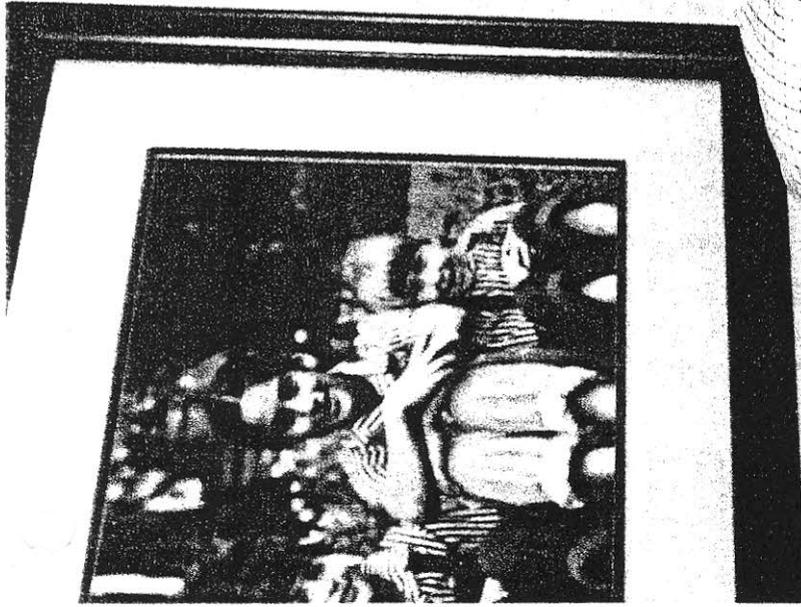
Interviewee: Nejam, Abdallah Waddell

Interviewer: Cotellis, Beatrice

Title: An interview with Abdallah Waddell Nejam, August 18,  
1999 / interviewed by Beatrice Cotellis



A. Waddell Nejam, August 18, 1999  
Family owned business on Farish Street



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**FARISH STREET HISTORIC DISTRICT NEIGHBORHOOD FOUNDATION, INC.**

**Oral History Interview**

**Funded by Mississippi Humanities Council**

Interviewee: A. Waddell Nejam

Interviewer: Bea Cotellis

Date: August 18, 1999

Cotellis: This is Bea Cotellis interviewing today Waddell Nejam. We're going to be talking about the history of his family and about Farish Street. This interview was funded by the Mississippi Humanities Council. So now, why don't you tell me your full name and when you were born.

Nejam: O.k., my full name is...I go by A. Waddell Nejam, the "A" stands for Abdallah, and I was born November 15, 1952.

Cotellis: O.k., what were you telling me before about your names and what they mean.

Nejam: Well, Abdallah in arabic means servant of God and Waddell in arabic is "wadia" which means humble and Nejam is star and those are the arabic meanings of our name.

Cotellis: O.k., when did your family come to Jackson?

Nejam: My mother's father came to Jackson in 1896, he was fourteen years old, and my father's dad he came to Jackson in 1924. They were about the same age, they moved to North Carolina when my mother's parents came to Jackson. First they settled in North Carolina then moved to Jackson.

Cotellis: Where did they come here from?

Nejam: O.k., they came from Lebanon and I think they had a short stop in Massachusetts and when he came here he was fourteen years old...

Cotellis: Who?

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**Oral History Interview Page 2**

**A. Waddell Nejam**

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Nejam: My grandfather on my mother's side. He started A. Joseph and Company which the original side of A. Joseph and Company is where the King Edward Hotel was. Then that was in 1904.

Cotellis: They started that company in 1904?

Nejam: They started in 1904 which they sold wholesale produce within the South and they first started with horse and buggy then they moved the second A. Joseph and Company going west underneath the viaduct there where it used to be the Smith Shoe Shop and that was the second.. and that's when they built the King Edward Hotel. My dad went in business and had a small general merchandise store on Farish Street and he started in 1936 and they closed the store in 1963.

Cotellis: So what do you remember about the store on Farish Street; you were young?

Nejam: I remember mostly, you know, it was a lot of people on the sidewalks especially on the weekends and it was just a lot of happiness back then and we had uh...as you turned off of Capitol Street you had a large store which was King and Taylor which Mr. Swartz owned, and he's still living here in Jackson. Then we had....there was a shoe store that was run by Mr. Ades, Moses Ades, and Thomas Grady Inn was another colored store and then my dad had a general store, it was called the Leader Store, and then across the street on that block of Farish Street they had the Booker T. Grill they had Hunt and Whitaker and that was in the first block off of Capital Street.

Cotellis: So your father's store was right there across from the Booker T.?

Nejam: Yeah, it was.

Cotellis: What else do you remember about the atmosphere on the street you said everyone was happy there were a lot of people on the weekend. Do you remember anything else?

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Nejam: I just remember, you know, Jackson was a friendly place and it had a family atmosphere. You know, I kind of grew up where wouldn't nobody met a stranger. Once you met a person that you felt comfortable with them then you try and let them be your extended family and that was kind of how I was brought up, you know, whenever you meet somebody and if you're doing business with them you treat them like your family member.

Cotellis: Well the General Merchandise store that your father owned, what kind of things did he sell?

Nejam: Well he sold lady's and men's clothing and he got out uh... in 1924 on, they also had rental property since the turn of the century and in 1963 my dad tore down his rental houses and he helped with this program which was called 235 J Program where Mr. Tom Scott, who was the head of (inaudible), promoted where they could...individuals could own their own homes. So he tore down a lot of the lower income rental duplexes and I always wanted to be in the apartment business since...oh that was kind of...I already knew what I wanted to do and so I started acquiring property while I was in college and I was blessed enough to have a scholarship and my parents supported me, so I worked through college so I took the money that I was working and saving and invested into the rental properties here in the Belhaven, I started in the Belhaven Heights area back in 1972 and 1973.

Cotellis: What can you remember about your grandparents' business, you said it started as a horse and buggy business.

Nejam: Well, you know, I can't remember because I was quite young..

Cotellis: ...things they told you...

Nejam: Well what they told me, you know, my grandfather came here with 7 cents in his pocket...came to Jackson and they sold produce on horse and buggy and then they ended up with a fleet of trucks and they were one of

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the leading wholesale producers and it was, you know, strictly back at the turn of the century where you could start at the bottom of the ladder and then come up, you know, and my mother's father was the Joseph family. They lived on Gallatin Street and which is on the corner of Gallatin and Capitol Street. Which is a lot of old town families established there. My father's family lived on South State Street. They moved here when my dad was fourteen from North Carolina and they were in the general merchandise business there. He ended up.. I don't know why he came to Jackson but he wanted... there was a small community of Lebanese families here and he wanted to move here and he kept the store he had that he uses as his first store on my father's side was his first Roses 5 and 10 cents store which is in Edenton, North Carolina.

Cotellis: That was in North Carolina?

Nejam: Yeah. Also, when he got here he came into the rental housing business. Both grandfathers were in the same business, along with being in the produce business on the Joseph side of the family had rental property also.

Cotellis: You said there was a Lebanese community here in Jackson?

Nejam: Yeah, there was uh...I would say...I don't know exactly how many families there were but there were several families that settled here in Jackson. My mom's dad was one of the first ones when he came here in 1896 and started his business in 1904, it was only 10,000 people when he came here into Jackson, when he first came into the Jackson area.

Cotellis: So did the other Lebanese families have businesses downtown or just...

Nejam: Well, they did. The Thomas family which is S.N. Thomas Wholesale sold...wholesale business, they were not...they didn't start until, you know, until the twenties.

Cotellis: Where was that business located?

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- Nejam: That was business is off of the corner of President adjacent to the fire station there which is still there today they got it for sale. They were one of the leading wholesale distributorship, and my mom married Ernest Thomas which was the oldest Thomas brothers. That family was run by four brothers and a dad.
- Cotellis: Well, I guess we ought to get back to Farish Street. What other things can you remember, did you ever remember any music?
- Nejam: I did, you know, they always, uh..there was music played in our store back then, as you walked down Farish Street and plus I remember...
- Cotellis: Live music?
- Nejam: There wasn't live music we used mostly recordings but I also remember going down and passing the old Alamo Theater and we used to all go...there was Seal Lily right off of Farish Street where we used to get ice cream and the further you went north on Farish Street there were houses there, you had got out of the business districts, there were furniture stores and funeral homes and there was a residential community right there on Farish Street.
- Cotellis: Well, besides Seal Lily, let's see you were pretty young when your family had the business, what other businesses do you remember back then?
- Nejam: All I remember is, Hunt and Whitaker which was more...they sold hunting equipment plus they had a type of a pawn shop and there was uh the Booker T. Grill was there. Also, as you were going north on Farish Street and the corner of Amite, they used to have...it was similar to your left there similar to the Krystal burger there on your left and then adjacent across the street there was a large department store that was owned by a more of an upscale department store for that area of town that was owned by Raymond McClinton who married one of the McRae's daughters who was Sam McRae's daughter, and they had a large store

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on the corner of Farish and Amite. Then you had several furniture stores and then you had the Big Apple Inn which I think has been there over 60 years and uh with the Lee family they served hot tamales down there.

Cotellis: So, did you eat the hot tamales?

Nejam: I sure did, still do.

Cotellis: Oh, you do? What did they taste like?

Nejam: The same as..I think his grandfather still comes in and makes them, and uh Geno is the third generation, runs the store, you know, him and his dad had a split shift and they still serve the same tamales as they did 60 years ago.

Cotellis: Booker T. Grill, you keep mentioning, where was that located?

Nejam: It was directly after you turned on off of Capitol Street on Farish Street it would be on your west side. It was directly across the street from our store. It was a grill where they served hamburgers and mostly fried chicken. I remember eating...going over there getting my lunch when I was at the store five or six years old, we go across there and get fried chicken and we'd always get the chicken and they served you fried chicken and just white bread along with it.

Cotellis: You said you had music in the store but did you remember hearing any live music on Farish Street?

Nejam: Not really, but you know, we did have music that was played down there. There was also a grocery store on Farish Street also I think the Syke family which is a Lebanese family, they had a store down there years back.

Cotellis: Where was that?

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Nejam: It was probably, you know, it was in the middle of the block, as you go north close to where the Big Apple Inn is.

Cotellis: Did you ever go to any of the theaters? The ones that were down on Farish Street?

Nejam: No, I've been into the Alamo Theater, but I never did actually, close to our store I went to the Paramount which is right around the block from the store and they had Walgreens which was across the street from the Paramount and we also had other theaters. We had Lamar Theater which is on Lamar Street and we had the old Century Theater as you get closer to the old capitol, and also downtown Jackson we had the Jitney Jungle which was in the middle of the block and you had the Emporium...

Cotellis: In the middle of what block?

Nejam: In the middle of Capitol Street there, and as I remember being a little boy then also on the corner adjacent to the governor's mansion you had Emporium which was the upscale clothing store and then across the street was Kennington's. Now back west, before you get to Farish Street, McRae's that was their first store which is adjacent to the Mayflower Cafe which is an old Greek family that started that. There was four Greek families that started that in the early ....

Cotellis: They're still there?

Nejam: They're still there. Mr. Mike Kountouris is probably 85 and him and his son, Jerry, run it now.

Cotellis: What do you remember about the Civil Rights Movement? You said something to me earlier.

Neaim: Well, I remember being in '63, let's see, uh this is '99 so uh that would be 36...I was about 10 years old. I remember the Civil Rights Movement

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marching down Farish Street, and I remember when being a little boy there with Medgar Evers which is very instrumental. I remember Lena Horne that came down the street, I just remember the marching back in that time. You know, it was really in the late '50's it was just a real different Mississippi. I had an African American lady which raised me since I was born that's been with our family...she couldn't even sit at Walgreens to get a hamburger back then, I mean we had to get the hamburgers and take them back to the store and eat. I remember riding on the bus with her, I had to sit in the back of the bus, uh we had to sit in the back of the bus, you know, coming up and my family had discrimination being foreigners and being Catholic uh they wasn't totally accepted, you know, they all had a kind of hard time getting established here.

Cotellis: You did?

Neaim: Yeah.

Cotellis: You said you were a young boy when the Civil Rights Movement...

Nejam: I was probably 10, 10 years old.

Cotellis: What about your father?

Nejam: My dad was real active in the Civil Rights Movement. My dad did...

Cotellis: What was his name, by the way?

Nejam: Waddell Nejam. We just reversed our middle names. His name was Waddell Abdallah Nejam and mine was Abdallah Waddell Nejam. It was kind of what they did in Lebanon, they used to reverse the two sons name, but my dad sold his business in the Black neighborhoods which he had the store which was predominately was Black shoppers and our houses were then...and he was always interested in trying to better the life of the African American neighborhood and he was uh...Charlie Horne who

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is a friend of our families, Charlie is uh I think is an administrator with Benney Thompson, I just remember being a little boy, Charlie was real close friends with my dad. Charlie has been in Jackson probably 45 years and uh I just remember, you know, my dad was older than him, he'd get us to talk to dad about how, you know, trying to improve the life and all.

Cotellis: Well, I thank you for giving me the interview today, oh I probably should ask when your families' businesses closed, I should probably ask that.

Nejam: A. Joseph and Company was started in 1904 uh closed in 19...was sold out in 1995, so it had a pretty long run there, over 85 years. 1904 then it was run by uh...my grandfather's nephew who was Bill Joseph, who did a real good job, and they had a fleet of trucks that went all over the country at the end, and they ended up moving their store out to where the Farmers' Market is. Now my dad's store uh closed on Farish Street in 1963, and uh he closed his store and then he started developing, tearing down a lot of the lower rent houses trying to bring into effect your 235 J Program for people to own their own homes over there off of Bailey Avenue, Bell and Pleasant Street, Avenue.

Cotellis: Do you remember anything else you want to add about what you remember about the Farish Street Neighborhood?

Nejam: I just remember, you know, it was real busy on Saturdays, you know, everybody got their checks on Friday and uh, you know, people was just uh, Farish Street was kind of like a village, I would say, you know, it was just you didn't have any strangers there and uh not only just to shop, they would stay and visit with you, you know, and I went to the store on Farish Street every since I was old enough to go and I remember sitting down, you know, when they came in to buy, a customer would come in and buy a pair of shoes, and would sit there and talk to my mother and my dad for over an hour, and we had a little coca cola machine there and we'd always serve cokes and uh, you know, you became a real friend of your customer.

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Cotellis: Were all of the stores sort of like that on Farish Street?

Nejam: Yeah, the stores were uh on that first part of the block where all Lebanese, second generation Lebanese, you know, my mother and dad were both born here in America uh but most of those stores when you turned off of Capitol were Lebanese. The Thomas family had a store...my uncle, Lee Nassar had a store which was called Lee's and we had this store, the Leader store, and then Mitchell Thomas had a store so you had four stores right there, and then on the corner the big store which was owned by Mr. Swartz uh had the King and Taylor which was a large department store.

Cotellis: Well, thank you so much...

Nejam: Well, I appreciate you all being interested in interviewing me, because I love Jackson and plan to stay here, we can't move.

Cotellis: (laughs) Well thank you a lot.

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### **Abdallah Waddell Nejam**

Meaning of his name	1
Always wanted to be in the apartment business	3
Invested in rental property in the Belhaven area back in 1972 and 1973	3
Used to go to the old Alamo Theater	5,7
Used to get ice cream from Seal Lily	5
Went to the Paramount	7
African American women raised him (could not sit at Walgreens to eat)	8
Father's name was opposite his	8
Was friends with the customers at the store	8

### **A. Waddell Nejam's Mother and Father**

Mother's father came to Jackson in 1896	1,4
Father's dad came to Jackson in 1924	1,4
Came from Lebanon	1
Mother's father started A. Joseph and Company in 1904 (King Edward Hotel)	2
His dad had a small general merchandise store on Farish Street (1936-1963)	2,9
His dad started 235 J Program where people could own their own property	3,9
His mother lived on Gallatin	4
His dad lived on South State Street	4
Dad's family moved to Jackson from North Carolina when he was 14	1,4
Father was real active in the Civil Rights Movement	8
Father's name was opposite his	8
Father tried to improve the life of the black community	8

### **A Waddell Nejam's Maternal Grandfather**

Started A. Joseph and Company in 1904 (At present location of King Edward Hotel)	2
Came to Jackson with 7 cents in his pocket	3
Sold produce on horse and buggy (were the leading wholesale producers)	3,4
Lived on Gallatin Street	4
Had rental property	4

### **A. Waddell Nejam's Paternal Grandfather**

Came to Jackson in 1924	1
Was in the General Merchandise business	4
Owned a store in Edenton, North Carolina called Roses 5 and 10 cents	4
Got into the rental business when he came to Jackson	4

### **Civil Rights Movement**

Medger Evers was very instrumental	8
Lena Horne	8
Foreigners got discriminated against	8
Waddell's dad was real active in the Civil Rights Movement	8

### **Farish Street**

Was a lot of people on the sidewalks during the weekends	2,9
Mr. Swartz owned King and Taylor, a large store off of Capitol Street	2
Mr. Moses Ades owned a shoe store	2
Thomas Grady Inn	2
Booker T.	2,5,6
Hunt and Whitaker	2,5
Used to go to the old Alamo Theater	5,7
Used to get ice cream from Seal Lily	5
Outside of the business district were the furniture stores, funeral homes, & a residential community	5,6
Big Apple Inn (Lee family)	6,7
Grocery Store (Saik family)	6,7
Went to the Paramount	7
Was like village	9

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Waddell's mother's family stayed on Gallatin	4
A lot of old town families were established there	4
<b>Jackson, MS</b>	
Friendly place with a family atmosphere	3
Everybody treated each other like family	3
<b>Joseph and Company (At present location of King Edward Hotel)</b>	
Maternal grandfather started it in 1904 (was sold in 1995)	2,9
Sold wholesale produce within the south	2
First store started with horse and buggy	2
Second store was at the former Smith Shoe Shop	2
Bill Joseph ran the store	9
Had a fleet of trucks	3,9
<b>Leader General Merchandise Store</b>	
Leader Store was on Farish Street and owned by father	2
Was across the street from Booker T. Grill	2
Lady's and Men's clothing were sold	3
Waddell's paternal grandfather was in the General Merchandise business	4
Music played in their store (recordings)	5,6
Had predominantly black shoppers	8
<b>Lebanese Community</b>	
Several families settled here in Jackson	4
Maternal grandfather was one of the first ones when he came in 1896	4
The Lebanese had businesses downtown	4
The Thomas family (S.N. Thomas Wholesale)	4
Most of the stores off Capitol Street were Lebanese stores	10
<b>Mayflower Cafe</b>	
Owned by Kountouris, a Greek family	7
<b>McRae's</b>	
Raymond Clinton	5,6
Adjacent to Mayflower Cafe	7
<b>South State Street</b>	
Waddell's Father's family lived there	4
<b>Theaters</b>	
Alamo Theater	5,7
Century Theater	7
Lamar Theater	7
Paramount Theater	7
<b>The Thomas Family (S.N. Thomas Wholesale)</b>	
Store is still around today (for sale)	5
One of the leading wholesale distributorship	5
Waddell's mom married Ernest Thomas (the oldest of the Thomas brothers)	5
Family was run by 4 brothers and a dad	5