In January 2017, a series of meetings at the West Point/Clay County MS Library with the Strong-Davis family resulted in this Brief. The Strong-Davis family is/are an African-American family of farmers, business entrepreneurs, professionals, soldiers, and community visionaries that can trace their origin in the area back to 1837 when their ancestors migrated from Mount Vernon, Virginia as Freemen in the service of the Lee, Davis, Young and Strong families’ plantation operations in the former Colfax County, MS, now Clay County MS. The plantations were the site of the current Waverly and the Strong Hill communities. In the 1870s, an inheritance of 2,000 acres, effectively established the Strong Hill Community.\footnote{1}

The initial meeting with family members took place in the West Point Bryan Public Library’s Lucille Miller Local History Room. Five members of the extended Strong-Davis family were present with another calling in to attend via speaker phone. One family member was in town from Chicago, while Curtis Strong, who set up the meeting, called from North Carolina to participate. In this tight knit group, family decisions are discussed and made as a point of solidarity. Though family members have left for educational and career opportunities including Motown music, medicine (doctors and dentists), lawyers, engineers, college professors, athletes, schools teachers, military officers, etc., in locales as far ranging as Detroit MI, Chicago IL, Houston TX, Nashville TN, as well as military posts around the world, for many West Point’s Strong Hill remains home.

Retired after 20 years in the US Army and another 10 years as in the Civil Service, Curtis Strong has come home and set his sights on bringing the Strong Hill story to the public. The Strong Family farming and business operations date back to the 1870s when Chas Davis, George Washington, “GW”, Davis owned and operated a dairy farm, a poultry and egg operation, a cotton gin, a grist mill, and grew and sold vegetables, as well as apples, pears, peaches and pecans from the family fields and orchards in their country store. The brothers owned over 20 transitional homes, which housed family members. Today, family members continue to operate a pecan growing enterprise. Discussions are underway to establish a tree farm to produce both short- and long-term growth wood products. The Strong Family is in the process of establishing a community garden to address local hunger, and sponsors and prepares an annual Thanksgiving Dinner for hungry families and individuals. The Strong Family has opted to pursue agri-tourism over small farm crop production as the expense and risk of small farming outweighs the revenue opportunities.\footnote{2}

The Family has researched and developed a business plan to pursue agri-tourism in the form of seasonal festivals. The festivals will be modeled upon those
In addition to his entrepreneurial passion for family farm holdings, Strong is committed to community service, particularly activities like community gardens that provide opportunities for younger and older residents to work together. In August 2016, The Strong Companies was a host for the North Carolina Triangle Children Business Fair at Park West Village Shopping Center in Raleigh NC. The Fair allowed young entrepreneurs, ages 6 to 14 to showcase arts and crafts ranging from jewelry to photographer. Through intergenerational mentoring Strong hopes to inspire young people to become involved in small business as a means of making a living. Tentatively, the Family plans to host the Golden Triangle Mississippi Children Business Fair together with their aforementioned semi-annual agri-tourism project.\(^5\)

Since his retirement, Mr. Strong’s military service commodity supply has been invaluable in helping MS small food business owners get their goods into Army commissaries around the world.

The Gladney-Miller Family—Winston County MS

In Winston County MS, Frank Taylor’s family—the Gladney-Miller Family—can trace their landholdings back to January 21, 1877, when his great, great grandparents, Jack and Anna Miller, purchased their first 40 acres of land. The following year they purchased another 40 acres, and continued to acquire land to assemble 220 acres. Initially the land was planted with vegetables and cotton, as well as raising some livestock.

The family kept a small herd of cows as “an insurance policy”, as African-American families didn’t have access to credit in times of need. In lean times, a cow could be sold for cash to cover emergency expenses. The family continued to farm the land until the early 1960s when
failing health determined a change of direction from produce and commodities to tree farming.⁵

In 2012, approximately 120 acres of trees were extracted and replanted with saplings. Another 20 acres were scheduled harvested in 2017. Additional income is received from the annual rental of a portion of the land to a hunting club; rental of a portion of the land as pasture; and hay production. The Taylor-Gladney-Miller land is no longer planted in crops.⁶

For the Taylor-Gladney-Miller, crop farming has become too expensive to go it alone. As president of the Winston County Self Help Cooperative (WCSHC), an organization of local farmers that works together and pools resources to help one another, Taylor has been involved in helping area farmers identify resources and agencies that support African-American farmers in their efforts to generate revenue.⁷

According to the organization’s website, “WCSHC’s membership consists of 56 vibrant members from three surrounding counties.” The Cooperative collaborates with USDA agency & non-profit organizations that provide relevant information to small farmers seeking to make a living from agricultural pursuits. Workshops have provided members with financial advice and assistance for major land purchases. With assistance from the local health department, private nurses, and Walmart, seminars have helped raise awareness chronic health conditions prevalent in the African-American community including hypertension, diabetes, and other health issues. The Co-op has sponsored homebuyer and foreclosure workshops, resulting in assistance for 25 families participating in home-ownership and post purchase education involving taxes, insurance and unexpected expenses. The WCSHC Youth Organization’s garden project is “a crown jewel”, providing fresh vegetables and first-hand knowledge of sustainable farming practices.⁸

The Co-op’s Heifer Project helps get farmers into the livestock business by giving the small farmer five (5) heifers to start the operation. At the end of three years, the farmer gives five new heifers back to the organization to be given to another farmer starting a business. The Co-op purchases cattle feed in bulk. Co-op members growing hay sell to the other members at a reduced rate before selling the surplus on the open market at the market rate. Another recent project is the bulk purchase of cabbage plants to furnish starters for members interested in growing a winter crop.⁹

In January at the MS Minority Farmers Alliance 3rd Annual Save Rural America Conference, Mr. Taylor was received a humanitarian award for his “unending passion and selfless dedication to saving rural America.”¹⁰

Working Together for the Common Good

Both the Strong-Davis and Taylor-Gladney-Miller Families have long been involved in community development through a variety of community-based organizations to assist small African-American farmers in providing income and food for their families. A faded photo album in West Point’s Local History Room, chronicles the achievements of local African-American businessmen, community leaders, ladies groups, and educational and religious organizations to address access to financing, education, mentoring, housing, and local food.
In 1971, long before the current Buy Local-Eat Local trend swept the country, the African-American West Point Self Help Cooperative (WPSHC) had been selected as one of five community organizations by the Ball Corporation, at the time based in Muncie IN, to be the site of a community-based canning facility—built and equipped with state of the art canning machinery—offering free access and assistance to families interested in preserving food for the fallow winter months. Other services initiated and offered by WPSHC included:

- An Information Center was tasked as a “grassroots community organization to promote lasting improvement and leadership development”
- A Welfare Assistance Program informed potential recipients about available public assistance programs, the application process, and individual rights
- Emergency Home & Family Assistance provided timely assistance including money, food, clothing, volunteers, and temporary housing to members
- Youth & Recreation Programs offered recreation, education and training to local youth
- The Credit Union, as a member-based Savings & Loan, provided affordable interest loans to members that were unavailable when local banks did not extend credit to the black community
- Educational Assistance/On-the Job Training and Adult Education Programs allowed workers to obtain experience in a variety of industries.

The Woodcraft Craft Cooperative produced wooden jewelry, novelty items, and educational equipment sold to retail and wholesale outlets
- The Community Cannery allowed families to preserve fruits, vegetables and meats to provide food throughout the year
- The Daycare Center allowed parents to work, as well as providing medical services to member families

The West Point Self Help Cooperative was established as a membership organization serving the black community. Its charter stated that the “organization must be involved with the economic, political, social, medical, educational, and housing needs and hopes of the black people” including direct service programs when there were no other available alternatives.

Even today, as communities continue to address local hunger, the Winston County Self Help Cooperative hosts summer canning seminars to teach canning and preservation techniques.
Remembering Northeast Mississippi’s Community Canneries

After several dead ends tracking down information on the Northeast Mississippi community canneries (circa 1970s), a serendipitous email to Susan McGukin, Lee County Extension Associate, resulted in locating not only people who remembered the Tupelo Cannery, but were actively involved in its operation. McGukin’s email to her Master Gardeners Club elicited response from: former LIFT, Inc. executive director, Mr. Richard Johnson, who wrote the grant for the Cannery; Mrs. Jane Mapp Hardin, former nutritionist and program director; and current (and long-time) LIFT, Inc. executive director, Mrs. Dorothy Leasy, who began her social work career, upon graduating from Alcorn State University, as the floor coordinator for the facility.

In the recent meeting at the Lee County Extension office, the three colleagues reminisced about the Cannery’s heyday, and its purpose within the community. Mr. Johnson clarified that there were other canneries in Pontotoc and Monroe Counties, as well as Tupelo, all of which were funded by federal grants. He didn’t recall Ball Corporation involvement. (Phone calls and emails to Ball’s Corporate Communications Department regarding its involvement in community canneries have gone unanswered.) Johnson recalled that the Tupelo Cannery served two purposes—helping thwart hunger by assisting families to preserve their summer bounty of vegetables and fruits for the winter, and bringing together members of the black and white communities in the early days of desegregation.

There’s a certain genius in bringing together the women of these communities. Johnson observed that “Women tend to be more accepting of difference and the prospect of change.” The act of preparing to feed families, particularly the children, involved no controversy. Other proposed desegregation activities including establishing Head Start Programs were met with dissent; however, the Tupelo Cannery operated with a sense of unity and purpose—families growing and preparing food for the winter.

“The Cannery was very successful at bringing people of different backgrounds together. Industry approached us to provide value-added products. Back in the day, the Adkins Pickle Company would have bought every cucumber we could have grown and canned. In the years since, as Master Gardeners, we’ve tried community gardens to address local hunger, but participation drops to nothing in Mississippi’s hot summer months. We just can’t get people interested in harvesting produce in that kind of heat,” stated Johnson.

As a dietician and nutritionist, Mrs. Hardin coordinated demonstration activities regarding food safety from the preparation of the produce through the canning process. If it could be canned and readied for winter, it was. Fruits, vegetables, and meats were all processed for later use. Following her tenure at the cannery, Hardin went to work for Three Rivers Planning Development District in a similar role, while raising her four children. When Johnson lauded Mrs. Hardin’s contributions, she waved off the compliments, saying she didn’t remember “all of that”.

Mrs. Leasy remembers that the Tupelo Cannery was heavily utilized, as it met an important need for the local community—providing families with food for the winter months. “We were so much more self-sufficient when I was a child. My parents had come up during the Great Depression and World War II. They’d seen hardship, and knew hard work and having food was a remedy. We grew our own vegetables, fruit and nuts. Fruit grew in our orchards, and berries grew wild. It seemed like the roadsides were lined with pecan trees.

“We had laying hens for eggs, bought a young pig or two to butcher and process for meat. We had cows that produced enough milk for us, as well as surplus to sell. The truck would come for the milk early in the morning—and we wanted it there on time for pick up, or we had to churn it into butter.

“Being from Beldon, out in Lee County rather than Tupelo, we were considered ‘country’ and ‘poor’ by townsfolk. We were self-sufficient, and never hungry. We had a warm, comfortable home and plenty to eat. Being considered country and poor was enough to make many young black people abandon self-sufficiency. We promised ourselves we weren’t going to work in gardens, pick cotton, etc. We were going to be different than our parents and all those who came before us.

“The Cannery was a last vestige of that self-sufficiency. Today, the work ethic and knowledge to achieve that level of food stability is gone. Nobody knows how to do those things anymore. We didn’t know how rich we were, and that’s a loss.” Both Johnson and Hardin shook their heads in agreement as Leasy related her story.

“What’s this renewed interest in the Cannery?” asked Johnson. “Is there an opportunity to bring community canneries back online to address Mississippi’s hunger issues? I think the equipment from the Cannery is still in storage in one of the surrounding counties.” Mr. Johnson’s questions are especially relevant today given Mississippi’s issues with food insecurity and the revival of interest in truck farming as a source of income.

Are community canneries a part of the solution, and a viable component of local food-based economic development?

Mr. Richard Johnson, Mrs. Jane Mapp Hardin, and Mrs. Dorothy Leasy were interviewed Monday, November 20, 2017 by Claudette Jones at the Lee County Extension Office in Tupelo, Mississippi.
The Unlimited Community Agricultural Cooperative (UCAC)—Oktibbeha County MS

Oktibbeha County’s Orlando Trainer is a busy man. He’s the President of the Oktibbeha County MS Board of Supervisors; County Supervisor for District Two; a farmer; and the President of the Unlimited Community Agricultural Cooperative (UCAC), a primarily local African-American farmers’ organization with the mission to “promote the growth and future well-being of our community”.

UCAC is in the process of developing and launching a recruitment and outreach program to expand its diversity and attract the ethnically diverse mix of younger farmers and female farmers cropping up in the area. Recently, working with a business consultant provided by Mississippi Minority Farmers Alliance, Inc. (MMFA), UCAC has met weekly to work on crafting a strategic plan to address: governance; administrative, physical, and technical capacity; and financial issues and options. The Cooperative offers education seminars featuring speakers from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), the State of Mississippi, MMFA, and other organizations mentoring agricultural producers.

In January 2017, UCAC hosted an afternoon seminar focused on the business and financial issues faced by Mississippi’s small farmers. Among the speakers were representatives from the Mississippi State Extension Service, Mississippi Forestry Commission, the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service, Farm Service Agency, and the Mississippi State University Small Business Development Center. The Mississippi Extension Service provides all of the organizations training and access to its repository of invaluable information on Mississippi farming practices, procedures, and governance.

The Cooperative keeps abreast of contemporary farming practices, participating in regional and national initiatives considered and reviewed by the Southern Sustainable Agricultural Working Group and The Progressive Farmer. With approximately 20 members, the Cooperative and hopes to boost membership through outreach to younger farmers.

Working in tandem with other cooperatives, workshops on topics ranging from cultivating shiitake mushrooms to best management practices for tree farms are offered to members and the general public.

In February 2017, UCAC and Alcorn State University presented a one-half day short course, Shiitake Mushroom Cultivation on Logs for hobby mushroom growers, taught by Dr. Frank Mrema, Forester/Mycology Specialist at Alcorn State University, School of Agriculture and Applied Sciences. As a hands-on workshop, participants were asked to bring five freshly cut (within a month) hard-wood logs harvested from oak, sweet gum or maple trees free of decay, sized three to four feet long, and five to six inches in diameter. Instruction included both demonstrations and reading materials to inform participants about the process to inoculate/seed the logs with shiitake mushroom spores, as well as care during the cultivation period. Shiitake inoculated logs require shade until mushrooms are produced.

Saving Rural America

All of the families, cooperatives and individuals discussed herein are dedicated to preserving, securing, and sustaining the agricultural lifestyle defined by the family farm. Farming has never been an easy way to make a living. Farming has become more complicated in the last 60 years as agri-business principles have forced small farmers to think beyond growing and selling a crop to a buyer, putting food on the table, and paying the mortgage.

There’s crop rotation and crop insurance, subsidies, bridge loans, contract farming, the commodities market, free range, pesticide free and/or organic, no plow, permaculture, etc.—a dizzying array of choices influencing operations. Or it may be the realization after doing a cost-benefit analysis for operating a working farm—that not being a farmer may be a better option. That’s a hard pill to swallow for an individual or family that has spent a lifetime (or a few generations) growing crops, raising cattle, or operating a dairy. For most farmers, there is no better life, no matter how many hours, days, or weeks it takes to bring in a crop, turn a profit, or in some
years, break even. In Mississippi, farms make families and families make communities. In Mississippi, farms make families and families make communities. Farming is a lifelong commitment. For the Strong-Davis and Taylor-Gladney-Miller families, their connection to the land predates any venture or experience most of us can trace within our lifetimes or family trees. As such, these families are role models and resources for younger farmers interested in the smaller agricultural endeavors described in the Brief, *Food Glorious Food*.

Love of the land tends to keep people in place. Settling down promotes growth and economic stability. In Mississippi, there are 33,316 family farms, making up 88.5 percent of all farms.\(^{15}\) The count for Corporate farms is 1,463 or 3.9 percent. Partnerships account for 2,871 or 7.6 percent of the total farms.\(^{16}\)

Mississippi agriculture is a 7.6 billion-dollar industry. As the State’s leading industry, agriculture, directly or indirectly, provides employment for approximately 29 percent of the Mississippi’s workers. Agriculture is central to the economic livelihood of all 82 counties, occupying 10.8 million acres across the State. The average size farm is 294 acres, with smaller farms varying in size from 10 to approximately 180 acres.\(^{17}\)

It’s those small farms that are showing so much promise for local economic development, as well as keeping Mississippi’s young people here as local food producers, taxpayers, and rooted residents. It’s a trifecta of blessings: the sale of local food recycles local dollars through the local economy; Mississippi retains one of its most valuable resources—young entrepreneurs; and through local initiatives, including Farmers Markets embracing EBT payment options, local food is made available to all.

**REFERENCES**

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
9 Taylor, Frank.
11 WCSHC History.
13 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
Elected to the United States Senate in 1947 with the promise to “plow a straight furrow to the end of the row,” John C. Stennis recognized the need for an organization to assist governments with a wide range of issues and to better equip citizens to participate in the political process. In 1976, Senator Stennis set the mission parameters and ushered in the development of a policy research and assistance institute which was to bear his name as an acknowledgment of his service to the people of Mississippi.

Created as a service and research arm of Mississippi State University, the John C. Stennis Institute of Government was established on February 9, 1976. Announcing its formation during a two-day Forum on Politics honoring U.S. Senators John Stennis and Margaret Chase Smith, MSU President William L. Giles outlined the Institute’s mission and goals.

According to Giles, the Institute would seek to integrate research, service, and teaching activities to improve government in the state, as well as promote the training of students who seek careers in public service.

Decades later, the Stennis Institute of Government has remained true to that initial charge. By providing meaningful, applied research to both local and state units of Mississippi government, the Institute brings a wealth of experience and knowledge to bear on real-world issues. Through its executive development programs, training opportunities, and technical assistance programs, the Institute provides support for today’s policy-makers from the courthouse to the classroom. And, by playing an active role in the development of tomorrow’s governmental leaders, the Institute is working to ensure that Mississippi’s future remains strong.

Like the majority of public servants in the State, the staff of the Institute are generalists, bringing the wide range of their experiences and talents to bear on a diverse range of issues. From political analysis and commentary to economic development activities, the topics delineated on any list of ongoing Institute projects clearly illustrate this diversity. Likewise, projects range in size and scope from specific work with Mississippi’s smallest towns to federally-funded grants with multi-state application.

Mission

The John C. Stennis Institute of Government performs a threefold mission:
(1) to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of Mississippi state and local governments through basic and applied research, training, technical assistance, and service;
(2) to provide technical assistance and research for both rural development in Mississippi and regional activities in the Southeast; and
(3) to promote civic education and citizen involvement in the political process.