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GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

Taking a look back at some of the 'ghosts of Northeast Florida sports'

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LANGUISHING LANDING

Politics, downtown's shifting momentum cloud riverfront attraction's future

By Christopher Hong
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Not much has changed since Toney Sleiman, the bulldog real-estate mogul who's made a fortune covering the city in strip malls, bought The Jacksonville Landing nearly 15 years ago.

The roof is still orange. Hooters waitresses still serve baskets of wings. The exodus of businesses and patrons continues, and virtually nothing remains here to show that downtown once had a bustling mall that sold more than fried chicken parts and pitchers of beer.

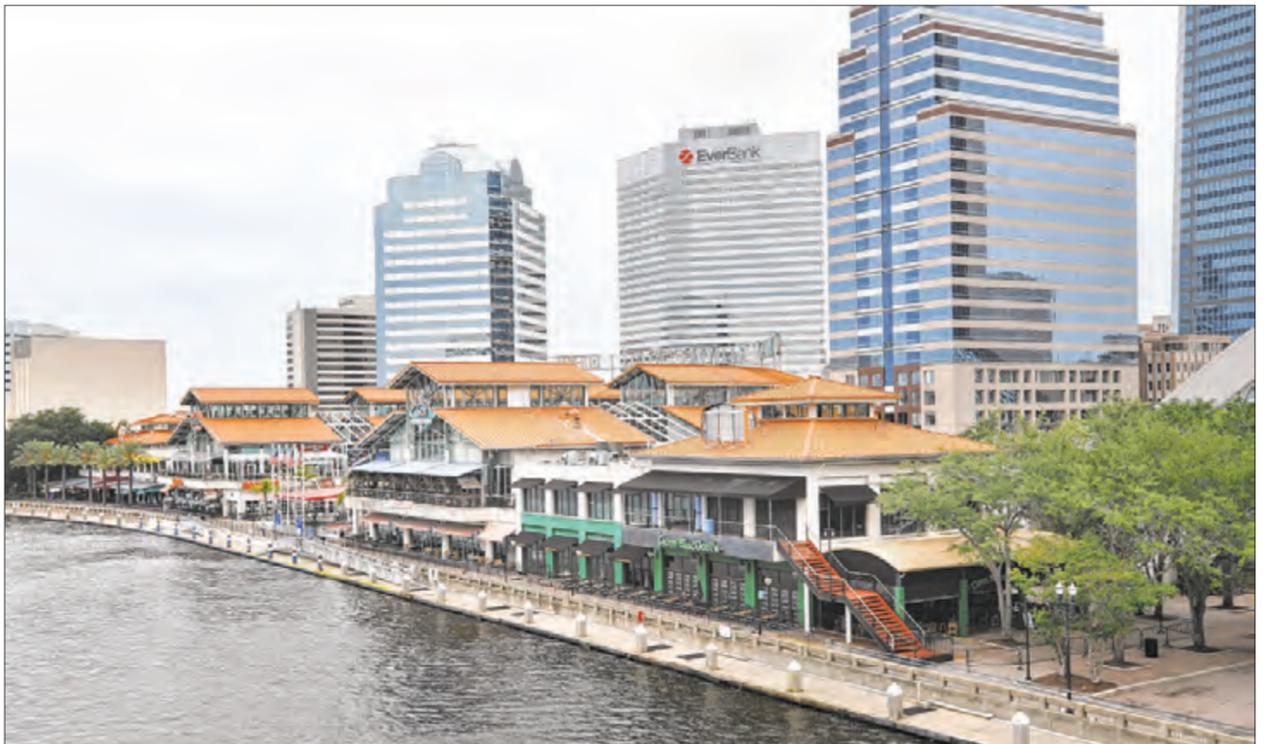
Great cities have great downtowns. Since the Landing opened in 1987, the riverfront mall has been intertwined in Jacksonville's perpetual campaign to convince the world — or maybe just itself — that it was one. Fix the Landing, and you'll fix downtown. Or is it the other way around? Nobody has quite figured it out yet.

These days, the city's fortunes are no longer so closely tied to the Landing, which is stuck in a brewing political fight and on the wrong end of the swinging momentum behind downtown revitalization.

Sleiman is locked in a standoff with Mayor Lenny Curry over who should fix the Landing. Sleiman said he will not rebuild it unless the city, which leases him the property, helps him do it. Such an effort would likely cost taxpayers millions of dollars.

Curry says Sleiman and his family company, Sleiman Enterprises, have mismanaged the Landing. He said the city won't get involved in its redevelopment until the Sleimans agree to give up their ownership.

As that battle unfolds, the focal point of downtown is



Outdoor seating along the St. Johns River fails to attract many people to The Jacksonville Landing. (Will Dickey/Florida Times-Union)

moving east from the Landing toward EverBank Field. On the adjacent riverbank, Jaguars owner Shad Khan has ambitious plans to build a landscape-changing development that includes a marina, hotel, restaurants and bars.

The biggest push to revitalize downtown in more than a decade could soon begin, with or without the Landing. If Curry and Sleiman don't back down — and neither seem to be the type who would — will the Landing suffer through another lost decade?

THE LANDING'S DILEMMA

Sleiman's voicemail greeting begins with him reciting

LANDING continues on A-4



A lone patron walks through The Jacksonville Landing on Tuesday evening. Real estate mogul Toney Sleiman purchased The Landing almost 15 years ago.

State attorney drops woman's murder charge going back six years

Six years ago, Callie Adams shot her husband after an argument led to him beating her. The State Attorney's Office decided to charge her with murder. Current State Attorney Melissa Nelson just dropped the charge. (Bob Mack/Florida Times-Union)



Ex-Marine claimed self-defense when she shot her husband

By Andrew Pantazi
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On a windless, humid night six years ago, Rodney and Callie Adams walked out of a nightclub bitter at one another. He'd had at least seven drinks to her two and he was angry.

At the car, she would later tell police, he ripped off her wig, tore her shirt, choked her and slapped her. She reached for her gun inside the car, she would later explain, and told her husband

to back off. She put the car in reverse, but he jumped in the backseat and started punching her in the head.

Callie Adams grabbed her gun again and fired. The first bullet went through the sunroof. The second hit her husband in the chest. As she dialed 911 and started CPR, he died.

Starting that night in July 2011, she would argue she acted in self-defense. She said she loved Rodney Adams. But she said he beat her and he wouldn't stop.

When police picked her up, her clothes were torn, her wig was ripped off and she was bruised. Prosecutors charged her with murder anyway.

Then a few months ago, her attorneys wrote to Jacksonville's new state attorney, Melissa Nelson reviewed the evidence and even drove to South Carolina to meet Rodney Adams' family. On May 31, she wrote an extensive report

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Weather
Stormy afternoon
Forecast on A-2

91 Today's high

75 Monday morning's low

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LANDING

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President Donald Trump's trademark slogan in his own trademark Jacksonville accent. He's been waiting years for the city to help him make the Landing great again.

He didn't respond to multiple requests to discuss Curry's intentions to force him out of the Landing. A longtime attorney for the Sleimans, Mitch Legler, spoke on the family's behalf Friday. He broached the subject with a cool-headed attitude, saying the Sleimans are also frustrated with the Landing's recent struggles but "pointed no blame in any direction."

"We want this to work," Legler said. "The Sleimans are willing to compromise and work with other people, maybe somebody the mayor would like to see in there. The strong preference is not to walk away from what they've worked so hard to make work."

Despite Legler's apparent intent to diffuse the situation, Sleiman is no stranger to fighting City Hall.

He is an outsider to the city's political power structure. Many in that relationship-centric world have long doubted whether Sleiman, a builder of suburban chain stores and restaurants, has the vision necessary to build a development worthy of such a prime location.

Sleiman didn't create the mess that is the Landing. By the time he bought it in 2003, Banana Republic, Victoria's Secret and Sharper Image were gone. It was struggling then — although it's in worse shape today, at least in terms of occupancy.

Shortly after buying the Landing, Sleiman revealed a grand, three-part plan to transform it. He envisioned building a marina, office space, condos and a hotel. He'd buy the land underneath from the city, as well as an adjacent lot where he'd build a parking garage. The estimated price was as much as \$250 million and called for a wealth of city incentives, including a \$21 million loan.

The plan was soon sidetracked by disagreements over how much the city would pay. That sparked Sleiman's years-long crusade with the city — and particularly former Mayor John Peyton — over its unwillingness to help him rebuild the Landing and an unfulfilled promise to provide parking. The Landing



The Jacksonville Landing looks abandoned Tuesday evening. Mayor Lenny Curry and owner Toney Sleiman are at odds on how the property should be redeveloped. (Will Dickey/Florida Times-Union)

"We want this to work. The Sleimans are willing to compromise and work with other people, maybe somebody the mayor would like to see in there."

Mitch Legler

Attorney for the Sleiman family

slipped deeper into irrelevancy.

Sleiman's days in the wilderness appeared to be over when Alvin Brown took over the mayor's office. Sleiman originally backed Brown's opponent, Mike Hogan, but he eventually joined Team Brown and became one of the most vocal supporters of his reelection campaign.

Brown called for the city to pay \$11.8 million to tear down the Landing and build a new mixed-use complex and riverfront park. The plan seemed to be the most promising prospect to fix the Landing since Sleiman bought it. Then it began to sink alongside Brown's political fortunes.

City and business leaders — many of whom opposed Brown — threw cold water on the idea. Some said it was half-baked, others complained it required too much from the city. The plan lost momentum and was all but forgotten by the time Curry defeated Brown and took office in 2015.

Later that year, the city sued the Landing's owners over a long-disputed purchase of a nearby parking lot. The lawsuit, set to go to a jury trial next year, put on hold any discussions of the city redeveloping the Landing until it was settled.

Then — seemingly out of nowhere — Sleiman sent a letter to local news organizations two weeks ago. He wrote that he stands ready to rebuild the Landing, but his hands are tied by "politics and external forces that don't want progress."

In an interview shortly after his letter went public, Sleiman said he's paid engineers and architects more than \$1 million to create plans to rebuild the Landing. City officials continue to ignore him, he said. If the city doesn't act soon, Sleiman said he'll move forward with his backup plan.

He'll give the buildings a makeover with his own money. He'll round up tenants from across the city, give them longterm leases — which would prevent a

redevelopment from happening — and "run it like a shopping center."

Only time will tell whether that's his true intention or a bargaining tactic to force the city's hand. For what it's worth, Curry's Chief Administrative Officer Sam Mousa described it as bullying.

The letter certainly grabbed Curry's attention.

A week after Sleiman went public, Curry told the Times-Union's editorial board he intends for the city to take the Landing away from the Sleiman family.

Curry said he's made "soft offers" during a private meeting to buy them out, but the Sleimans said they aren't interested in selling. He also hinted the city could have legal remedies to expedite the process. He said the Landing's lease has certain stipulations that it remains dedicated to retail businesses, and city officials are researching whether the Landing is in compliance.

It's unclear whether Curry's claim has any merit. In the meantime, Sleiman's lease allows him to stay at the Landing until 2056. He hasn't given any indication, at least publicly, that he's interested in moving out.

With the battle lines drawn, the situation has the potential to sputter into a stalemate, especially con-

sidering Curry and Sleiman both have reputations as stubborn negotiators.

When asked if selling the Landing was completely off the table, Legler laughed before explaining that he's never believed in absolute ultimatums.

"At some point, anything is possible. But the Sleimans are indeed very passionate about the Landing and think they've shown that with all their efforts," he said.

Curry has so far demonstrated an unwillingness to compromise once he publicly takes a position on an issue. His position on the Landing is that Sleiman is part of the problem, and that he'll focus on "making deals" in other parts of downtown until Sleiman agrees to his terms.

That isn't a bluff.

The city is finalizing a deal with Khan to redevelop the old Shipyards property, which it owns, next to EverBank Field. Khan envisions investing more than \$500 million in private money to create an all-encompassing "live-work-play" development. The city already partnered with Khan to build an amphitheater next to the football stadium.

Bay Street, which connects downtown to the sports complex, is coming to life. Breweries and restaurants are popping up,

and more are on the way. Three long-vacant buildings that overlook the river on the loneliest stretch of that road near the jail — Berkman Plaza II and the old courthouse and City Hall buildings — could soon be sold to developers, according to city officials.

Across the river, developer Peter Rummell plans to build a mixed-use development on 29 acres of waterfront land.

Further into downtown's core, the city is on the cusp of pledging \$9.8 million to redevelop the Laura Street trio, a group of historic buildings just a few blocks north of the Landing.

The Landing remains in limbo.

Sleiman has watched tenants leave and neighboring businesses close. Earlier this year, a 16-year-old died and a 13-year-old was wounded during a gunfight that unfolded outside the Landing. For years, downtown and the Landing have shared the same problems. Now, Sleiman is watching downtown move on without him.

"How would you feel if you spent a \$1.5 million on plans and nothing happens? We've been neglected," Sleiman said in a recent interview. "It's dark. The biggest complaint I get from visitors are the streets are screwed up. I'll say it, it's f---d up."

CHARGE

Continued from A-1

detailing all the evidence that persuaded her to drop Callie Adams' charges.

In short, Nelson wrote, no evidence indicated Adams committed murder and substantial, physical evidence suggested she was defending herself.

On May 31, after six years of waiting, Callie Adams was finally free.

"It's bittersweet," Callie Adams said. "Somebody lost their life. I always think about Rodney in a fond way. I try not to think about the bad. He meant the world to me. He really, truly did. I still cry. I still have times where I don't sleep. It's something that I'll deal with forever."

She said she still regularly sees a psychiatrist, and her family and church have supported her for the last six years. She said she's grateful Nelson looked at the case with fresh eyes.

"It's mind-boggling," her attorney, Rhonda Peoples-Waters, said, "because we've been living it for so long to realize how much it means to her, and to the whole community, to see how different Melissa Nelson's approach is from the prior administration."

CHANGE IN PROSECUTION STYLE

Nelson's decision to drop the murder charges against Adams is the latest example of how she has sought to emphasize changes in the way prosecutors handle cases with questionable evidence. She took over the office in January and since then, in a separate murder-arson case, a prosecutor admitted the evidence was weak and asked a judge to

release the defendant while prosecutors await more forensic analysis. And in another case, two protesters, who were arrested after a rally turned violent, had their charges dropped for insufficient evidence.

"The evidence is clear to us that Rodney Adams initiated the conflict, he escalated the conflict and he prevented her from escaping the conflict," Nelson said in an interview Wednesday. "I believe this is the right outcome."

NRA lobbyist Marion Hammer, a powerful force in Florida politics who endorsed Nelson in her election bid last year, said Adams never should've been charged with murder in the first place. "That's the kind of flawed logic you get out of a state attorney who is more concerned about convictions than justice. The fact that a new state attorney would investigate it and drop the charges shows the correctness of (that) decision."

Nelson's predecessor Angela Corey, who recently retired after a short stint at the Clay County Sheriff's Office, could not be reached for comment. Corey was unapologetic about her tough-on-crime stance on prosecution, often saying she vigorously sought justice for victims.

Corey's prosecutors initially defended their decisions to charge Adams, saying she acted out of anger, not fear.

Those prosecutors said Adams told a psychologist she "accidentally" killed her husband. That, prosecutors said, was inconsistent with arguing she acted in self-defense.

Prosecutors also said Adams' 911 call was proof she killed her husband out of

anger. "He jumped on me," Adams told a dispatcher. "He jumped on me and I shot him. He shouldn't have jumped on me. I'm tired of it. I'm tired of being beaten."

Nelson's report argued none of Corey's prosecutors' arguments mattered. Adams could've been angry and still acting in self-defense. And if there's a difference between "accidentally" killing and killing in self-defense, that difference doesn't prove Adams killed her husband out of hatred, ill will, spite or evil intent.

"Importantly, there is no evidence of a motive — other than fear — to kill her husband," Nelson added. "There is no evidence of jealousy or infidelity. To the contrary, the defendant has admitted that she loved Adams and, by all accounts, on the particular night in question, they had enjoyed a fine night together."

There was no evidence, Nelson wrote, that contradicted Adams' claims she tried to de-escalate the conflict and tried to retreat. Instead, "the physical evidence actually corroborates the defendant's claim of self-defense."

"This evidence supports the defendant's claims that Adams initiated the conflict, escalated the conflict and prevented the defendant from escaping the conflict."

'SHE LOVED HIM AND HE LOVED HER'

Callie and Rodney Adams were married 19 years. Rodney had a job weighing freight trucks and Callie spent 22 years in the Marines, climbing the ranks until she was a step away from master sergeant. They had two daughters,

one grown and out of the house, and the other still in high school.

It was on July 22, 2011, that Callie and Rodney went to the SoHos nightclub in Arlington. She later said she'd had two drinks and blood-alcohol testing showed he'd had seven or eight. Just before midnight, she later testified, he became upset with her, saying he'd been looking for her. She said she'd been in the bathroom. They were leaving, he told her.

After the shooting, police found her scratched and bruised. Inside the vehicle, they found beads ripped off her shirt and parts of her wig.

After she was arrested, both of their daughters said they'd witnessed his past abuse. Two friends testified about a time Rodney was choking Callie and had to be pulled off her. The week of the shooting, Rodney Adams' mother gave a sworn affidavit that said she got calls every year about abuse in the house.

"I am certain Callie responded in self-defense. I do not desire for Callie to be prosecuted. She loved him and he loved her."

But none of that evidence was enough. During one hearing a week after the shooting, prosecutor Jeff Moody pointed out Adams' mother lived in South Carolina and wasn't actually at the nightclub. "Would it be fair to say that even though we think we know people," he asked, "we don't always know what they're capable of?" Later, Rodney Adams' mother and brothers would support the prosecution.

Callie Adams had a \$250,000 bond and had to pay \$372 a month for an ankle monitor. She was only ever allowed to go to work

and home. Her mother bought her groceries. She couldn't visit her daughter at college.

She hired two attorneys: defense attorney Peoples-Waters and gun-rights activist Eric Friday, who specializes in self-defense cases. She hired a forensic psychologist, a toxicologist and a crime-scene reconstruction expert. She had to pay for her transcripts. Honorably discharged from the Marines, she started working as an assistant at a law firm.

DID RACE PLAY A ROLE?

Although Adams' case didn't draw much attention, it bears a striking resemblance to that of Marissa Alexander. Adams, 46, and Alexander, 36, are both black women who legally owned guns and said they faced abuse at the hands of their husbands. Alexander shot in the direction of her husband, but didn't hit him. Adams shot her husband once in the chest. Both faced prosecution during former State Attorney Corey's tenure. Both women say race played a factor.

"I think that part of that idea in Angela Corey's mind, and in others in our community, comes about from the perception that has been portrayed upon African-American women, that we can take much more and the standard is higher, in terms of the abuse that African-American women are expected to take," said Peoples-Waters, who also is black. "It's a perception we have to deal with."

Marissa Alexander's case rallied activists who said her self-defense claims were unsuccessful in part because of her race. She was convicted of aggravated assault and sen-

tenced to 20 years in prison just months after the 2012 shooting death of Trayvon Martin. Alexander's conviction and sentence were later overturned and she eventually reached a plea deal for three years, which she has since served.

This year, Alexander testified in support for changing the state's Stand Your Ground law to shift the burden of proof from defendants to prosecutors. Before, Alexander and Adams had to prove they acted in self-defense at a hearing. Now prosecutors will have to prove defendants didn't act in self-defense. Peoples-Waters said prosecutors and the culture at large have ignored the Second Amendment rights of minorities or expected black women to accept higher levels of abuse than white women. That makes it harder for black defendants to prove they acted in self-defense. "I truly believe, had that been a white female, we probably would not have seen that arrest occur."

Philip Smith, the president of the National African American Gun Association, agreed. "There's a definite difference. When African-Americans have guns ... we don't have that benefit of the doubt."

About 60 percent of his organization's more than 20,000 members are black women, he said. "A lot of women in our community are single moms, and they want to be able to protect themselves and their babies at home."

Adams said she doesn't think she'll ever own a gun again. "That's how I feel right now. Five years from now, you never know how you'll feel."

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