

HERITAGE TOURISM PLAN FOR OXFORD, MISSISSIPPI 2007-2009

CONTENTS:

- Overview of Heritage Tourism
- Review of Planning Process
- Summary of Local Historic Resources
- Documentation of Local Historic Resources
- Executive Summary: A Strategy for Oxford's Heritage Tourism Program
- Strategic Plan 2007, July – December
- Strategic Plan 2008
- Strategic Plan 2009

OVERVIEW OF HERITAGE TOURISM

As reported in the July/August 2007 issue of *Preservation*, published by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, 81% of U.S. tourists have been categorized by the Travel Industry Association as “cultural heritage travelers.” The National Trust has been advocating the concept of heritage tourism since 1989 “to demonstrate that preserving historic sites and buildings could be economically viable.” As the two leading proponents of heritage tourism, the Trust and the National Park Service have gathered success stories, developed voluminous “how to” materials, and created grant opportunities for cities, towns, and regions aiming to attract the growing numbers of travelers who seek out historically and/or culturally rich destinations.

But heritage tourism can accomplish more than just boost local economies. Efforts made to preserve, develop, maintain, and promote historic sites and cultural opportunities for the benefit of visitors will inherently benefit the community. Beyond increasing civic pride, the tangible contributions of an ongoing heritage tourism program can encourage locals to learn more about their historical and cultural resources, to appreciate more the uniqueness of their community, and to get involved in preserving and promoting these assets.

Oxford has long had a cultural draw that reaches around the world in the home and hometown environment of one of America’s greatest writers. In addition, travelers who made their way into northern Mississippi have long admired Oxford as a “quintessential” Southern town with a picture-perfect Square and all the hospitable charms known to the South. But the historical roots, figures, and stories of Oxford have been largely known only to its residents with deep roots in the community. Past efforts to capture that history for a more general audience have been fragmented, incomplete, and not widely distributed.

Now, however, two interrelated events in the recent history of Oxford have brought it to the point where heritage tourism can take off: In the face of continuous growth and development that was showing signs of stress on both the historic core of Oxford and the town’s boundaries, a local effort launched more than ten years ago (the Oxford-Lafayette County Heritage Foundation/OLCHF) resolved to save irreplaceable

pieces of Oxford's past. Without that initial preservation effort, Oxford would not be as poised as it is today to create a viable heritage tourism program.

REVIEW OF PLANNING PROCESS

In May 2006, Bobby King Associates, an advertising and public relations firm based in Tupelo, presented "A Report on Cultural and Heritage Tourism in the LOU Community," as commissioned by the Oxford Tourism Council. It was the result of several months of research, which tapped the knowledge of local leaders, the experience of tourism professionals, and the responses of visitors to Oxford. On page 22, the report concluded that *"there appears to be an opportunity at hand to develop a program which will carefully nurture and grow the cultural and heritage product while expanding the audience."*

Following one of the report's recommendations, the author of this Heritage Tourism Plan was contracted in November 2006 to develop a heritage tourism program for the Oxford Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB). As a first step, the application for Oxford to become a Preserve America Community was submitted to the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation in late 2006, with the designation announced in February 2007. In the first quarter of 2007, initial efforts were made to check and confirm the accuracy of Oxford's historical tours in conjunction with completing revisions to the Walking Tours brochure, which were begun in 2006. Likewise, information compiled in the "Inventory of Historic and Cultural Resources in the LOU Community" (prepared in 2006 and available on the CVB website) was coordinated with information contained in Oxford's revised Walking Tours brochure. These two products represent foundational work to organize and package Oxford's heritage resources for the education and enjoyment of the general public.

SUMMARY OF LOCAL HISTORIC RESOURCES

The Oxford Courthouse Square Historic District, as identified on the National Register of Historic Places since 1980, and the University of Mississippi campus are the two distinct places with concentrations of historic buildings in Oxford, each with a story to tell that is integral to Oxford's entire history. Apart from the Square and the campus, random buildings, mostly houses, tell additional stories that illuminate Oxford's history. Most prominent among the survivors of Oxford's past are:

- the frontier house Isom Place;
- the antebellum properties Cedar Oaks, Ammadelle, the Augustus Baldwin Longstreet House, the Neilson-Culley House, and St. Peter's Episcopal Church;
- St. Peter's cemetery, the final resting place of many of Oxford's historic personages;
- the home of 19th-century statesman L.Q.C. Lamar;
- the home of 20th-century author William Faulkner (Rowan Oak);
- the architecturally notable houses Ammadelle, Fiddler's Folly, and the Roberts-Neilson House;
- the architecturally notable public buildings Oxford City Hall and the Lafayette County Courthouse; and

- the architecturally notable Lyceum, Barnard Observatory, Ventress Hall, and Ole Miss-Oxford Depot on the University of Mississippi campus.

Among Oxford and Lafayette County's historic resources, 11 are listed on the National Register of Historic Places, with three being elevated as National Historic Landmarks. In addition, 19 are designated Mississippi Landmarks.

As noted, the Square and the Ole Miss campus are distinct entities in which each historic structure can be interpreted individually *and* as part of the whole. But Oxford's residential neighborhoods also hold the potential of being interpreted as a whole. Three preservation districts are currently in place, with the promise of a fourth (South Lamar) in the near future. Of these, the North Lamar and South Lamar historic neighborhoods, which are most intact and most walker-friendly, should be studied for more global interpretation in the future.

DOCUMENTATION OF LOCAL HISTORIC RESOURCES

For each property listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the National Park Service makes available the NR application, which is an excellent starting point for documentation. This author has sometimes found information that does not agree with local sources, but, in general, the applications are considered authoritative. In addition, "A Report on the Architectural and Historical Survey of Oxford/Lafayette County, Mississippi" was prepared for the City of Oxford and the Oxford Preservation Commission in August 2000 by Hopkins & Associates, Preservation Consultants, from Memphis, Tennessee. This report included inventory forms on each historic resource surveyed, totaling in the hundreds. The summary information of the report along with the individual forms serve as expert documentation, which is both general and specific in nature. Currently, Hopkins & Associates is preparing a National Register application for a North Lamar Historic District. They have indicated that they are making efforts to align their past documentation on North Lamar properties with local sources.

Local sources for documentation are largely amassed within the Skipwith Collection of the Skipwith Historical and Genealogical Society, which is housed in the Kerin Coffey-Magnovitz Room of the Oxford-Lafayette County Public Library. In addition, Chancery Court records can be searched with sufficient time and guidance. The Department of Archives and Special Collections located on the third floor of the John D. Williams Library at the University of Mississippi holds primary documents on several prominent historical Oxonians, including Jacob Thompson, L.Q.C. Lamar, and William Faulkner.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: A STRATEGY FOR OXFORD'S HERITAGE TOURISM PROGRAM

The Oxford Square is certainly the focal point of any visitor's trip to Oxford. Comments in the guest registers at City Hall and at the Skipwith Cottage most often refer to the Square's attractiveness ("lovely," "beautiful," "charming") and the fact that it is thriving. (The friendly hospitality experienced is the second most frequent comment.) Many who sign the register say they have come to "see" Oxford and tour Rowan Oak. Obviously Oxford's reputation is a drawing card in and of itself, as is Rowan Oak for Faulkner fans.

The self-guiding Walking Tours brochure and the audiotape walking tour, once revised, have appeal for heritage travelers. (It remains to discover how many actually use the Walking Tours brochure to acquaint themselves with Oxford.) Beyond walking or driving tours, however, the only well-developed heritage tourism attractions are properties of the University of Mississippi, that being Rowan Oak and the University Museum. Based on our offerings at present, a heritage tourist can “see it all” in one day. If they arrive during any of our many special events, they may opt to include a festival, concert, or conference to lengthen their stay.

More bona fide historical and cultural places need to be developed for Oxford “to carefully nurture and grow” its stature as a heritage tourism destination. Current prospects that hold the most promise for telling Oxford’s story are Cedar Oaks, the LQC Lamar House, and the Burns-Belfry building. All three are Mississippi Landmarks. Cedar Oaks has a long history in Oxford for hosting tours and receptions, but it has had limited exposure to Oxford’s visitors and remains a “by reservation only” tour home. Both the Lamar House and the Burns-Belfry are being restored under the stewardship of the Oxford-Lafayette County Heritage Foundation, with their ultimate uses yet to be determined. In addition, the transformation of Oxford’s old power plant, also a Mississippi Landmark, into the Powerhouse Community Arts Center by the Yoknapatawpha Arts Council has potential value for Oxford’s heritage tourism product.

For all these prospects, Oxford’s heritage tourism program needs to forge working relationships with their managing entities that should result in shared collaboration and mutual benefits for all organizations. In each case, creating new opportunities for the heritage tourist will be the planned outcome.

Ideally, as a desirable outcome of developing Oxford’s heritage tourism, Oxford will draw enough attention for nomination to *the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s “Distinctive Destinations” program*. Each year a dozen communities of all sizes are named to this prestigious list. Oxford’s leadership in developing heritage tourism within the Mississippi Hills Heritage Area and within the state should raise its visibility and position itself for consideration in this elite group of places.

STRATEGIC PLAN 2007, July - December

During the first half of 2007, the online Inventory of Heritage Sites and Resources was made more user-friendly and checked for accuracy, Oxford was designated a Preserve America Community, the Oxford Walking Tours brochure went through extensive revisions, a guided walking tours event to benefit the community was successfully held, and working relationships with the Oxford-Lafayette County Heritage Foundation and the Cedar Oaks organization were initiated and fostered. These endeavors provide the foundation for efforts in the remainder of 2007, aimed at accomplishing these goals:

1. Support planning for the transformation of the restored L.Q.C. Lamar House into a visitor attraction. *Strategic basis:* Oxford can boast having been home to two renowned Americans, one in literature and one in government. Already touted as a writers’ town with the leading attraction being the home of William Faulkner, Oxford now has the opportunity to draw visitors interested in the politics of the South during the years leading up to the Civil War and immediately afterwards. Having served in all three

branches of the U.S. Government and also served the Confederacy, the story of L.Q.C. Lamar is one waiting to be told. His inclusion in JFK's *Profiles in Courage* sets that story apart from many others in Lamar's time. Objectives for 2007 are:

- Encourage initial planning efforts to coincide with completing the application for a Preserve America Community grant.
- Help OLCHF form an interdisciplinary team that will develop plans for research, interpretation, training, and marketing of the house.
- Facilitate team meetings aimed at deciding which planning project will be funded by a Preserve America Community grant, where the matching funds will come from, and what public-private partnership will be involved.
- Review scrapbook on the house kept by former owner Adeline Houston.
- Establish if Lamar letters in UM's Special Collections contain any information about the house.
- Complete the Preserve America Community grant application by mid-December.

2. Develop a proposal for creating and offering guided walking tours as a feature of the Oxford heritage tourism program. *Strategic basis:* Many historic towns have developed self-guided walking tours. A smaller number provide guided walking tours, most of which can be found in major cities. Since Oxford attracts visitors on a year-round basis that includes many special-events weekends, a well-developed guides program may be justifiable in support of such events, as well as contributing to Oxford's heritage tourism status. *In addition,* experience in training, scheduling, and compensating guides can easily transfer to providing guides (docents) for house tours. Objectives for 2007 are:

- Write scripts for Oxford's developed walking tours, starting with Courthouse Square and North Lamar.
- Continue to contact homeowners in search of information to add to our walking tours database and to recruit for future "porch talks."
- Consult with University faculty in relevant areas regarding possible involvement of students as guides.
- Explore other sources for recruiting guides.
- Develop scenarios for offering guided tours with some regularity on a cost-efficient basis.
- Design a training program and initiate an exploratory effort.
- Update the audiotape tour of the Square originally written and produced by Kent Moorehead of "Forever Young Productions."

3. Sponsor a "Share Your Heritage" Workshop presented by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. *Strategic basis:* Oxford has the potential to be a gateway community for day trips within Northern Mississippi or for lengthier explorations of the Delta. Hosting a NTHP workshop would help establish Oxford's leadership in the emerging Mississippi Hills Heritage Area while benefiting Oxford's own heritage program.

- Review workshop possibilities with NTHP staff and work to select and customize best options.

- Visit with Joe & Merrill Willis at their Yoknapatawpha Heritage Foundation museum as possible participants.
- Design, promote, and conduct a “Share Your Heritage” program for local and regional participation.

4. Encourage OLCHE/ODA to apply for a “Save Our History” grant to benefit the Burns-Belfry project. *Strategic basis:* It has yet to be determined precisely how the restored Burns-Belfry building will function in the community. When its extensive restoration work, which is not yet fully funded, is complete, plans call for it to be developed as an African-American museum and cultural center, either in whole or part. As such, research into the history of the local African-American community will be required. The History Channel’s “Save Our History” grants are aimed at promoting research projects within the schools that ultimately benefit the community at large. Such a project could be invaluable in providing groundwork for the development of the Burns-Belfry while creating pride and excitement among the students, their families, and the Oxford-Lafayette community. Ultimately, African-American exhibits incorporated into the Burns-Belfry cultural center would be a drawing card for visitors to Oxford interested in African-American heritage.

- Promote and participate in a team effort to initiate African-American history research in local schools.
- Monitor progress of the research and help identify a project for completion of a “Save Our History” grant application in 2008.

5. Learn about heritage tourists coming to Oxford. *Strategic basis:* Being able to describe heritage tourists who are already traveling to Oxford will benefit all efforts to develop and promote Oxford’s desirability for attracting more.

- Conduct informal research by asking visitors at City Hall and the Skipwith Cottage to complete a questionnaire about their travel planning and preferences. Track responses over several months.
- Find out how many visitors plan to take a self-guided walking tour.
- Plan to undertake more formal research in conjunction with the University of Mississippi that places interviewers at Rowan Oak and possibly other places.

6. Collaborate with Cedar Oaks management to open and promote the antebellum house for regular tours. *Strategic basis:* The fascinating story of Cedar Oaks covers both the early chapters of Oxford and its dramatic transition into modern times. In a continuing struggle to maintain the structure, its caretakers have spent most of their efforts raising money. The potential of Cedar Oaks as a house museum is considerable but will require concerted efforts to develop that potential. As such, it will add substantially to Oxford’s heritage tourism offerings.

- Assist Cedar Oaks management in developing a cost-efficient plan to provide paid docents for house tours on weekends.
- Participate in the selection and training of docents as part of an integrated plan for Oxford’s heritage tourism.

- Explore grant and other funding opportunities to restore architectural features and to furnish in keeping with the historical period of the house's original owners.

STRATEGIC PLAN 2008

1. Continue to support planning and development of interpretation and marketing for the L.Q.C. Lamar House. Objectives for 2008 include:

- Decide if there's any further planning work for the interpretation team
- Assist OLCHF in executing plans for exhibits creation and installation.
- Collaborate with OLCHF on marketing decisions.

2. Continue developing the guided walking tours program and events.

- Write script for South Lamar, including contiguous portion of University Avenue.
- Research information on the North and South Lamar areas to create more global interpretation of those neighborhoods.
- Consult with high schools regarding student guides for special events.
- Plan community guided walk tours event(s) for the spring.
- Consider marketing walking tour event(s) outside the community.

3. Conduct follow-up sessions for "Share Your Heritage" Workshop held in the fall 2007 or winter 2008.

- Implement plans made during workshop.
- Maintain contact with participants from other towns.
- Continue to draw upon expertise of the workshop leaders.

4. Organize a team to complete a "Save Our History" grant application.

- Continue monitoring progress of the African-American history research *possibly* initiated in the fall of 2007 to benefit the Burns-Belfry.
- If progress warrants, work with a team of teachers and OLCHF board members to identify an appropriate project for the grant application.
- If insufficient progress has been made, explore other educational projects that the grant application might benefit.
- Once the project is agreed upon, assist in the preparation of a "Save Our History" grant application. (The 2007 deadline was June 1.)

5. Complete research project to learn about Oxford's heritage tourists.

- Continue planning and/or execution of research *possibly* accomplished in conjunction with the University of Mississippi in fall 2007.
- Complete project and draw conclusions relevant for developing Oxford's heritage tourism program.

6. Continue collaboration with Cedar Oaks.

- Continue or begin weekend house tours with ongoing assessment.
- Work with Cedar Oaks management to create a plan for the restoration of architectural features and interior furnishings consistent with the house's interpretive period.
- Determine ways to draw visitors to Cedar Oaks.

7. Explore the Powerhouse Community Arts Center as a heritage tourism feature.

- Initiate discussion with the Yoknapatawpha Arts Council (YAC) leadership on how to make the arts center an appealing stop for heritage tourists.
- Cooperate with YAC on ways to attract and involve heritage tourists in Oxford's art offerings.

8. Organize an effort to improve the local historic information base.

- Create a team to assess local sources for Oxford's historical record.
- Define what kind of authoritative information is needed.
- Explore possibilities for upgrading the information base.
- Work with schools to develop community oral history projects.
- Determine viability of promoting the Skipwith Collection for wider use.
- Implement a plan to meet the team's goals.

9. Encourage property owners in the Courthouse Square Historic District to display National Register of Historic Places plaques.

- Investigate sources that produce NR plaques.
- Compile ordering information to include in a letter encouraging the purchase and display of NR plaques.
- Consider appropriate ways to follow up with property owners.

10. Design a marketing plan aimed at heritage travelers.

- Research publications that appeal to heritage travelers.
- Discover what publications are read by Oxford's heritage travelers and if any of them influence their travel decisions.
- Create a tagline and write advertising copy that promotes Oxford's heritage assets.
- Explore additional ways to deliver Oxford's heritage tourism message.

11. Propose a Mississippi itinerary for the National Park Service's "Discover Our Shared Heritage Travel Itinerary Series." *Note: These online itineraries highlight places listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Recently, NPS added a feature to encourage heritage tourists to visit Preserve America Communities.*

- Study a sampling of the existing 43 itineraries.
- Sketch a few possible itineraries for Mississippi that incorporate Oxford.
- Contact NPS about proposing new itineraries.

STRATEGIC PLAN 2009**1. Continue to support interpretation and marketing of the L.Q.C. Lamar House.**

- Assist OLCHF in any remaining interpretation needs.
- Continue collaboration with OLCHF on creating and implementing a marketing strategy.
- After first few months of operation, begin visitation study.

2. Continue development of guided walking tours.

- Assess and revise to make improvements in the tours.
- Assess and revise to improve training of guides.
- Plan guided tours event(s) that offer something “new.”

3. Continue involvement in the Burns-Belfry project.

- Support interpretation decisions and planning.
- Support fund-raising efforts for interpretation needs.

4. Continue collaboration with Cedar Oaks.

- Participate in efforts to create a “model” house museum for interpreting the 19th-century history of Oxford.
- Enhance marketing for Cedar Oaks, making it part of a three-house “package” for tourists.

5. Assess marketing plan aimed at heritage travelers.

- Evaluate success with media advertising.
- Consider revisions to advertising copy.
- Look for new ways to deliver Oxford’s heritage tourism message.

6. Position Oxford as a “gateway” to other Mississippi communities.

- Study the concept of attracting visitors to Oxford as a launching point or as a base for visiting other places in North Mississippi or the Delta.
- Encourage day trips from Oxford to lengthen stays in Oxford.

7. Explore ways to encourage use of Oxford’s heritage in the local schools.

- Identify role of Mississippi history in curriculums.
- Propose ideas to incorporate in lesson plans.
- Investigate partnership possibilities.

Prepared by: Darlene P. Copp,
Heritage Tourism Consultant
July 10, 2007