

A statue of William Faulkner sits outside Oxford's City Hall.



DOING IT BY THE BOOK

Oxford Capitalizes on Its Literary Past and Present

By Stephen Greene

As Abraham Lincoln is to Springfield, Ill., as Mark Twain is to Hannibal, Mo., William Faulkner is to Oxford, Miss.

The man some call America's greatest novelist closely identified himself and several of his most famous works with his "postage stamp of native soil." More than four decades after his death, Oxford continues to repay Faulkner for his admiration and loyalty by embracing him and, in a sense, defining itself by his legacy.

About 20,000 visitors each year stroll through Rowan Oak, the estate of Faulkner. Last year, the 161-year-old home reopened to the public following a two-year, \$1.3 million renovation. It's estimated that 80 percent of visitors to Rowan Oak come from out of town and spend about \$1.6 million here annually.

For Oxford, the renovation is "another arrow in our quiver," says one local official.

"It's unusual for a writer of Faulkner's caliber to live in his hometown and also to write about it," says Bill Griffith, curator of Rowan Oak, where Faulkner wrote some of his most heralded novels, including *As I Lay Dying* and *Absalom, Absalom!*

Thanks to its solid literary foundation, the presence of the University of Mississippi (a.k.a. Ole Miss) and a thriving, well-preserved town square, Oxford attracts visitors and new residents. They are not only chasing intellectual pursuits but are looking for a place that embodies Old South nostalgia. Their interest in Oxford has resulted in a 72-percent jump in assessed property values in all of Lafayette County since 1999, according to the local economic development foundation. That's the highest increase in the state.

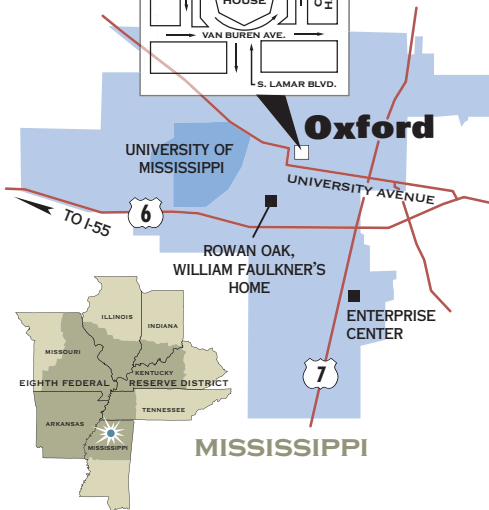
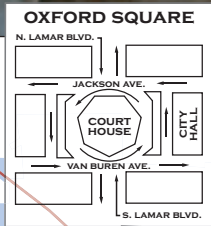
Keeping It Low Key

It's a little ironic, Griffith admits, that Faulkner's home draws so many visitors. "One thing Faulkner treasured more than anything was his privacy," Griffith says. "I don't think he'd approve of us opening up his house, showing people around and telling stories. However, we keep it as low key as we can. We do not sell anything

and we never will sell anything here at his house."

Out of respect for the man who, according to legend, dug potholes in his driveway to keep away gawkers, no road signs direct people to Rowan Oak, which is nestled off a winding side road just southeast of the Ole Miss main campus. The university bought the estate from Faulkner's daughter in 1973. With the renovation complete, Griffith can turn more of his attention to raising money for a Faulkner museum, which would be housed in a new \$12 million expansion of the school's museum complex.

Not far from Rowan Oak's serenity is the town square—the hub of Oxford's sound and fury. Around the historic courthouse are coffee shops, eclectic restaurants, an art gallery, an



Oxford, Miss.

BY THE NUMBERS

PopulationOxford: 12,761 (2003)
Lafayette County: 40,745 (2004)

Labor Force.....Lafayette County: 19,940 (Feb. 2005)

Unemployment RateLafayette County: 4.8 (Feb. 2005)

Per Capita

Personal IncomeLafayette County: \$23,927 (2003)

Top Five Employers

University of Mississippi2,500
North Mississippi Regional Center1,100
Baptist Memorial Hospital1,000
Whirlpool Corp.509
City of Oxford264



Square Books is a prime reason for the square's heavy traffic.

old-fashioned department store, specialty boutiques and a bookstore called Square Books, which was instrumental in the square's renaissance when Richard Howorth opened it 25 years ago.

Howorth still owns Square Books today, but spends most of his time on his other job—mayor of Oxford. He leaves the day-to-day operations of the business to general manager Lyn Roberts.

"Richard was really the first person to take one of the buildings in the square and renovate it," explains Roberts. "He added some vibrancy



Ole Miss has been an Oxford institution since the university opened its doors in 1848.

to the area. I don't think Square Books can take 100 percent of the credit, but it has helped make the square a destination for people."

Recently, the bookstore opened two spinoffs in the square: Square Books Jr., selling children's books, and Off Square Books, which sells discounted books. The latter is where the company hosts most of its 150 events each year, including numerous book signings. Ole Miss Law School graduate John Grisham, who owns a home in Oxford, appears at Square Books when he releases a new book.

Because of the square's success, a sort of economic "man bites dog" story has emerged here. The Oxford Mall, which opened on the

west side of town in the early 1980s, now sits mostly vacant. Malls and big box stores have wounded most main streets, but the square remains king in Oxford.

"The square is what drives it all," says Hugh Stump, executive director of the Oxford Convention and Visitors Bureau. "You'd be hard-pressed to find 10 towns in the country that have as bustling a square for the size of the town."

And no incentives from taxpayers were ever offered to attract businesses to the square, according to the economic development foundation.

The mall isn't without hope, however. On one side, a movie theater complex is under construction; it will connect to the few stores that remain. The other side of the property has been bought by the university, which plans to base its Innovation and Outreach Center there.

The state's flagship university, Ole Miss has a weighty presence in Oxford. It's not only the largest employer, but its student population is about equal to the number of permanent residents in the city. Besides the mall project, the university is planning other major construction: a new law school building and an expansion of the journalism department.

Graduation isn't the end of some students' involvement with Oxford. Well-to-do Ole Miss alumni are buying houses or condos here, even though they aren't full-time residents. As a result, home prices are jumping. Homes close to the square go on the market for as high as \$400,000. This is forcing full-time residents to move to outlying parts of the county to find affordable real estate. One telling statistic is that only one of Oxford's nearly 60 police officers lives within the city limits.

"That shows the disparity in the real estate market when people who provide city services can't even live in the city," Stump says.

Adds Max Hipp, executive director of the Oxford-Lafayette County Economic Development Foundation: "Affordable housing is a problem. It's very hard for a young couple to start out and make a go of it inside the city limits. Homes are very expensive."

It's a big-town side effect that is challenging this small town community. Roberts calls Oxford a "crossroads" community: "It is still a small town, but because of the university and what our store offers, people have access to a lot of things that are cosmopolitan."

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TURNING THE PAGE: OXFORD TRIES TO SHIFT FOCUS TO HIGH-TECH JOBS

Beyond its literary side, Oxford is trying to hold on to its manufacturing sector and make a name for itself in the sciences.

Surrounding Lafayette County lost 800 manufacturing jobs in 2002 and 2003 when Georgia Pacific and Toro-Lawnboy moved jobs offshore. Max Hipp of the local economic development foundation says that the county has recovered most of these losses through expansions at the Whirlpool and Caterpillar plants.

To foster the comeback, the county granted financial incentives and crafted favorable lease arrangements to companies looking to stay and expand. The Mississippi Development Authority also has provided incentives, financial assistance and job training. With help from the development authority, the county was able to buy the 200,000-square-foot former Emerson Electric building in the Lafayette County Industrial Park. The building will be leased to Winchester Ammunition, which plans to bring 150 jobs and a \$3.5 million payroll to the area.

Hipp realizes that future business growth probably will emerge from new technologies.

"Like so many other communities, we would like to be able to focus on high tech," he says. "We know that there is a shift from basic manufacturing."

Hipp would like to see more companies like BioDerm Sciences Inc. come to Oxford. A producer of wound-healing creams and sprays, BioDerm recently set up shop in the Oxford Enterprise Center, a city-owned business incubator. BioDerm President Greg Perkins expects the company by 2007 to employ between 50 and 60 technical personnel, earning an average salary of \$60,000.

Before choosing Oxford, the company had a relationship with researchers at the university's School of Pharmacy and at the university's National Center for Natural Products Research.

The local economy can always benefit from leveraging the research strengths of the university, says Alice Clark, vice chancellor of Research and Sponsored Programs at Ole Miss. "We've long held that research universities can be an economic engine, and (BioDerm) is an example of how that can happen," Clark says.

LOOKING TO RETIRE? OXFORD WANTS YOU

About 50 articles and web sites since 1992 have mentioned Oxford as a good place to retire. This pleases Christy Knapp, who heads the Oxford-Lafayette County Retiree Attraction Program.

"People who retire to Oxford come because of the cultural amenities, especially what the university offers," Knapp says. "They want a smaller, quaint town where there are a lot of things to do."

Knapp says she markets to the "young old," or people 55 to 65. When residents who make Oxford their primary residence turn 65, however, they become eligible for some attractive benefits, including:

- four hours of free classes per semester at Ole Miss;
- a property tax exemption for the first \$75,000 of their home's true value; and
- no state income tax on certified retirement income, e.g., Social Security, pensions, 401(k).

What Oxford lacks are retirement communities where seniors can enjoy a variety of services under one roof. Knapp says she has begun to have conversations with interested developers.