

McCool invests in a little piece of heaven

Plein Air designed to feel like old-fashioned hometown neighborhood

BY MARK H. STOWERS
The Oxford Enterprise

Most folks want to live in heaven one day. Entrepreneur Campbell McCool thinks he already does – and he's got room for friends – out in Taylor.

The New Orleans native came to Oxford back in the early 1980s to matriculate at Ole Miss. Then, like most graduates, he set out to make his mark in the world – he accomplished that by starting a successful public relations and advertising business in Atlanta, then selling it.

He came "home" to Oxford back in 2003 and worked for the University but longed for something more than a desk at his alma mater.

"I missed the entrepreneurial life," he says.

Looking around the area and noting the wealth of opportunities available, McCool dove into real estate development in Oxford – without any practical knowledge of the industry.

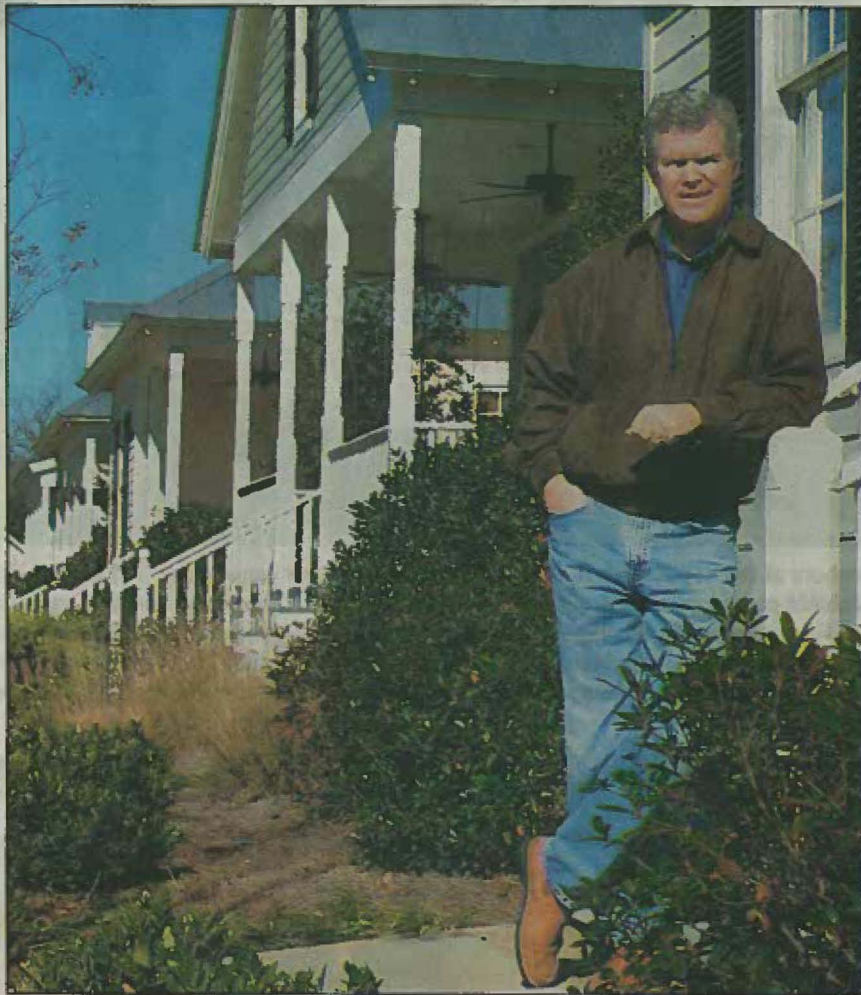
"I had a few investments but mainly a personal interest," he says. "I was a real estate merchant."

Armed with a few good ideas and great timing, McCool created condo developments aimed at the second-home crowd keen on having a second home in Oxford. But after making his mark in that field, he turned south towards Taylor for his next project: Plein Air.

"It's a prototypical new-urbanist style project," he explains. "It's a recognized style of development that emphasizes walkability, common green space over large individual yards, sidewalks, a de-emphasis on cars, emphasis on front porches – kind of an old-fashioned neighborhood."

McCool had bought a home in Taylor in the late 1990s and envisioned a neighborhood similar to his own childhood haunts in New Orleans.

"We had a corner grocery store, I could walk to school," he says. "People really had a community feel



IN PLEIN AIR: Developer Campbell McCool says his homes will 'stand the test of time.'

with their neighbors. Parents would come home after work and stand around in the front yard while the kids threw the football. So that type of atmosphere always appealed to me."

As he started to "tinker" with his idea, he knew the essential ingredient lay hidden in an artsy community surrounded by an abandoned cotton field.

"For the past 25 years, Taylor has had an artistic bent to it," he says. "When I was in school, I loved hanging out in Taylor. There's a really cool vibe to it, predominantly driven by the arts. So those two energies came together – my interest in a new urbanist concept and my affinity for Taylor and the arts – and I thought, 'What if we built a new urbanist-style community that really focused around the arts?' And that

was the genesis for Plein Air."

Using the French expression for "open air," used to describe painters who work out in the open, Plein Air is adjacent to downtown Taylor.

"It's about a 65-acre former cotton field right on Main Street in Taylor," he says. "We did the whole master plan and we spent a lot of time on that."

McCool starting building the infrastructure and was working from scratch with no planning commission or zoning ordinances. He says he could have taken full advantage of that and built almost anything. But he didn't.

"I worked with the town of Taylor and their aldermen," he says. "Voluntarily, I said 'I want to seek your approval on this.' And they got the Lafayette County planners involved and we had a number of

town hall meetings."

With a great deal of personal expense on the front end of the project, McCool's "forward thinking" helped Taylor and Lafayette County lay groundwork for future development across the city and county.

"Now Taylor has implemented zoning, and it's smart, forward thinking," McCool says. "And now we've laid out the whole 65 acres to figure out what it would look like with 200 homes (when fully built out), 12-14 commercial buildings. That took a lot of time and money, but now it's time to execute that plan."

The recession has slowed down that plan for the past couple of years, but McCool terms it a "temporary situation." And with Baptist Memorial Hospital planning a \$200 million facility headed toward Oxford, temporary may be shorter than imagined. McCool has adjusted by taking his time on the building process but has continued to work on infrastructure to keep the plan on track.

The long-term plan is for a 10- to 15-year build-out for the development, and there currently are three homes available. Owners don't do any yard work – McCool's staff covers all that. Current owners run the gamut from doctors to students to teachers both young and old, married and single – Plein Air has broad appeal.

"We sell houses, not lots," McCool stresses. The average size of a house ranges from 1,800 to 2,200 square feet with three bedrooms and 2 ½ bathrooms, high ceilings, fireplaces and wood floors. But there is also an impressive Southern Living "idea house" that encompasses 3,100 square feet with four bedrooms, four and a half baths and three porches. The community could see 200 customized homes when finished.

"We don't have just three or four floor plans," he says. "We work with eight different architects. We want the homes to stand the test of time."

Lillian Adams/The Oxford Enterprise